

Travel and Adventure: Tunisia - Where Jews and Muslims live in harmony

by Fyllis Hockman

Young boys study Hebrew in preparation for their bar mitzvah. A Jewish goldsmith designs jewelry in his shop. The rabbi reads from the Torah in the synagogue. All very common experiences in Jewish neighborhoods around the world, but ones you don't often, if ever, see in an Arab country.

Welcome to Tunisia, a modern, moderate Muslim country perched jauntily at the tip of North Africa, where more than 2,000 Jews thrive in the midst of their Muslim neighbors. And they've been doing so for more than 2,000 years.

The scene is the island of Djerba, just off the southeastern coast, where one of the holiest sites in Judaism outside the Wailing Wall is home to an annual pilgrimage of thousands of Jews. The Tunisian government not only welcomes the migration, but also protects the communities at the center and contributes to the upkeep of the synagogue at its heart.

That would be El Ghriba, itself not yet a century old, but more importantly built upon the location of the first synagogue erected after the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem in 586 B.C. by Nebuchadnezzar. Legend has it that those fleeing the temple's demise found haven in Djerba and rebuilt the synagogue using a piece of the original temple in its foundation.

On April 11, 2002, a 22-year-old suicide bomber killed 20 people at the site, ironically none of them Jews, and damaged a small part of the synagogue. Although Tunisians ascribed the attack to a lone, embittered Frenchman of Tunisian origin in order to minimize a tourism backlash, others reported an al-Qaida connection.

Immediately, Muslim and Jewish residents marched in solidarity to denounce the bombing and to rebuild the synagogue. When I asked why, I was repeatedly told that both Jews and Arabs think of themselves as Tunisians first, and that bond of citizenship overrides the influence of outside political forces and provides the secret to Djerba's interrelated community.

I queried Hyim Bittan, the grand rabbi of Tunisia, as to the biggest concern of Jews in Tunisia. Espousing what I considered a somewhat Pollyannaish approach to the reality of world politics, he replied, "We have nothing to worry about and we hope it will stay like this for all time."

BERBER VILLAGE - A visitor's modern business attire contrasts with the ancient ruins of a Berber village in Tunisia on the Mediterranean coast of North Africa. CNS Photo by Fyllis Hockman. **STUDY TIME** - In Tunisia, Jews and Muslims live together peacefully. Pictured are two Jewish Tunisian boys studying Hebrew. CNS Photo by Fyllis Hockman. That optimism was echoed by Nessim Bittan, owner of one of the oldest and most respected jewelry shops in Djerba and, just coincidentally, a brother of the grand rabbi. He also claims there has been no change in relations between the Arabs and Jews in Djerba in light of the current events of the past few years.

When asked the secret to these good relations, he responded, "We have been living together for so long and we know each other so well. We interact as friends and people regardless of the political situation. Our children play together. We have no problems between us. The only difference between us is where we pray."

And where they study. Jewish students often are educated through elementary school at yeshivas, schools of Jewish learning. Ironically, in the Tunisian public schools the Muslim children attend, it is forbidden to teach the Koran.

Symbolizing the Jewish-Arab harmony, displays at Bittan's jewelry store contain a Star of David next to a brooch adorned with the Hand of Fatima. Ten Commandments earrings sit alongside silver Berber necklaces, named for indigenous peoples who later converted to Islam. Adjacent to a Chai, a Hebrew symbol designating good luck, hangs an Arab image protecting against evil. You couldn't find a better metaphor for the island of Djerba.

The unusual relationship between the Arabs and the Jews is not the only cultural development that sets Tunisia apart from its Arab neighbors. Upon winning independence from France in 1956, Tunisia's first president, Habib Bourguiba - who dominated the country for 31 years - abolished the monarchy in favor of a secular government, banned polygamy, discouraged the wearing of burqas, which he felt enslaved women, made universal education mandatory - today 95 percent of the population reads and writes - established equal rights for women unmatched by any other Arab nation, and set the country on a path toward Westernization.

Rumor has it that President Dwight Eisenhower encouraged the French to grant Tunisian independence, for which Bourguiba was always grateful. I don't know if that explains their openness to Americans today, but we felt welcome everywhere.

Bourguiba's successor in 1987, Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, still in power today, has maintained and expanded his forward-thinking principles. Women occupy high-ranking positions in the government, universities and commercial enterprise; the support of Jewish institutions and opposition to Islamic fundamentalism continues; and his devotion to economic development is considered visionary.

Of course, despite the avowed emphasis on democratic principles, his 20-year reign, upon the heels of his predecessor's 31, speaks more to benevolent dictatorship. Still, the pragmatic policies followed over the past half-century are largely responsible for the social and political stability that prevail today.

"The lack of oil is a mixed blessing," pointed out Hammadi, our guide. "It has forced Tunisia to develop other means of economic development that put it far ahead of its oil-rich neighbors."

He described how much of Tunisia has become agriculturally self-sufficient, and that major irrigation projects are geared not only to meet current needs but those anticipated 20 years hence. There is enough water now to last many decades in the Sahara and factories in nearby towns can be easily expanded to accommodate future industries.

"Egypt, Morocco, Algeria, Libya need 50 years to reach Tunisia's level of development," said Hammadi with evident pride.

As appealing as tolerance, safety and economic enhancements are, they do not usually qualify as major attraction on a travel itinerary. One doesn't have to look far for those.

The beautiful but disparate terrain traverses modern towns, colorful villages and beckoning beaches. The surprising lushness of the north gives way further south to a barren brownness extending from roadside to mountaintop, occasionally broken up by small green tufts peeking out from the dry earth. The unending rocky configurations within the monotony of color create a countryside that one of my companions described as desolate, but I found riveting, ever-changing in its sameness.

Then come the sleek desert dunes of the south, often navigated by sullen-faced, sandy-hued camels, together conveying a sense of monochromatic mystery. This is "Lawrence of Arabia" country, the wind whipping the sand across the body. All I could think was how glad I was I didn't wear my contact lenses.

Historic mosques, engrossing museums and intriguing souks all beg for exploration. For me, the highlights remain the treasure-trove of ancient architectural relics: Berber ruins from the fifth century B.C. and walled Roman cities from the second century A.D., all so well-preserved that you can easily visualize the daily meanderings of their former inhabitants.

Even more fascinating is the kaleidoscopic culture that has been fashioned by the mixture of peoples who have passed through the area, each leaving behind their own traditions and influences - a melange of Berber, Phoenician, Roman, Jewish, Turkish, Arab and French - and the country's ability to blend those diverse societies into a uniquely Tunisian civilization.

IF YOU GO

Getting there: The most direct flights are via Air France to Paris from Los Angeles, New York and Washington, D.C., and Alitalia to Milan from New York and D.C. with connecting flights to Tunis.

Time to go: Weather is fairly temperate year-round, but the best times to visit are in the spring and fall.

Money exchange: \$1 U.S.-1.3 Tunisian dinar.

For more information, contact the Tunisian Tourism Office at 202-466-2546 or visit www.tourismtunisia.com.

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