



Photo: Guy Mansfield/Panos

For a few dollars more

Tom Parry regrets the effects of tourism in Tunisia

It's the tourists who put bread on my table," said Oebeli Kasad, the bubbly driver. He was the first person in Tunisia to openly admit the real impetus behind his sudden limitless generosity towards us. He confirmed our fleeting importance: "You people bring bread, not the president or the government."

Earlier, Oebeli had obstinately insisted on showing us the sights of the capital, even though I told him we had already been, twice. Our ten-minute taxi ride to the bus station became a guided excursion. But at least I knew where we stood. Despite his ebullient smile, this had nothing to do with kindness. I dug into my pockets for a ten-dinar note.

He took us past the presidential palace at Carthage, larger than whole villages in the interior. Behind the wrought-iron gates General Zine el Abidine Ben Ali, whose face stared grimly from a framed photograph in every pathetically under-stocked grocery, might be drinking mint tea with foreign diplomats. Oebeli pointed out the view towards Cap Bon, visible from the President's veranda. There would not be a better one in the whole country, he exclaimed. But there was no envy in his voice. It's hard to imagine revolution in subservient Tunisia.



Photo: Ace Stock

It is a country in which the state-owned newspapers print lists of newly approved food prices on the front page, while praising Ben Ali for his sound economic judgement. Here, too, democracy is a buzzword, yet the President won 99.5 per cent of the vote in the last elections after allowing a limited opposition for the first time.



Photo: Christine Osborne/Picture

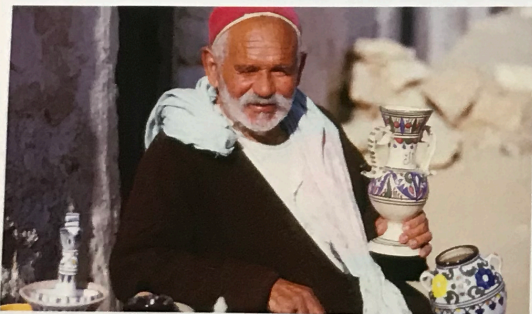


Photo: Peter Baker

In Tunisia, tourism blocks every artery into real life. No one wants empathy.

Tunisians I met proudly described their country as the most liberal in the Arab world. "We even have girl models on the television," one man said, as if that proved it. They were forever mentioning the contrast with more fundamentalist countries. But, scratching away the veneer, it was anything but liberal. Women never sit at cafés all day, nor sleep with men before marriage; men, conversely, can practise both, as often as possible, without breaching any ethical code. If it was as they described, why were so many stowaways still caught fleeing to Italy?

That evening, I realised just how strictly indoctrinated Tunisians are towards the unnumbered welfare of the tourist dollar. It was while walking past the College of Tourism Studies in Hammamet. Hammamet's beach was

carved up into user-friendly private plots for hotel guests, with security guards on the lookout for stray locals. Behind these hotels were luxuriant gardens, irrigated by precious water (in a place where the annual summer rainfall averages eleven millimetres). These gardens have a divisive impact as blunt as the dingo fence in Australia: behind it, hotel dwellers can pretend the distressing poverty isn't there. Just a mile away, after the second police checkpoint, mule-driven carts are the predominant mode of transport.

I thought of the road to El Kef, near the north-west border with Algeria, where lads listlessly selling prickly pears by the roadside suddenly became hitchhikers. Beside a nomadic camp, one guy stuck his thumb out and asked to be taken to his hometown, Zaghouan. Moments before, he had been lying under a tree. He claimed to be returning from work. But as we neared, he began suggesting two-day circuit itineraries we could drive, with him in the back of the car. "Voir la soirée Tunisienne," he exclaimed. We said no. Such was his disillusionment he trudged off between half-built brick blocks without saying thanks.

It happened four times. Curiously, people in the desert had little clue of distances to the next town, but they were more than willing to escort us five hundred kilometres across country with no idea how they would return. One such, Mohamed, came with us on the pretence of seeking an internet café. We quickly lost him in the souk on arrival. There was barely electricity, let alone internet access.

All along the coastal highway, golf courses and



Photo: Les Pulvis/Alamy



Photo: Lucien Wauters/PhotoDisc/Getty Images

hotel construction site cranes make a breakwater against the squal Mohamed could only transcend in his dreams. I could understand now why the Tunisians staying at four-star hotels never moved from the poolside during their vacation. Within the hotel confines, Hollywood aspirations were satisfied. One could be anywhere.

The ritual catwalk of gluttony in the self-service restaurant that night was nauseating. In all likelihood, few of the all-inclusive guests sitting down had any idea what Tunisia was like. In all likelihood, they had never seen a dinar. Their allotted tables were temporary homes for a fortnight. Perhaps they weren't aware of the paucity of ingredients in Zaghouan market as they took a third tour of the desert bench. In this last-ditch luxury blowout, I was as guilty as the rest of them, but at least I'd tried.

We apologised to the waiter for leaving food on our plates. I had hit on a sore point. "It's terrible, all this waste," he decried fervently. "The worst culprits are the Arabs?" Why? I queried, we're all just as bad. But he insisted it was only his compatriots who picked up piles of croissants they would never eat.

His attitude proved I could never leapfrog the fence into the real Tunisia. For him and Oebeli, it was justifiable to regard visitors as shameful hordes hotels could rip off with extortionate prices. That was taught at tourism schools. But when it was his alienated people gorging themselves on pastries, it became hard to stomach. In Tunisia, tourism blocks every artery into real life. No one wants empathy. ■

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