

TRAVELLERS' CLUB MEETING 25th MARCH 2007
NORTH AFRICA

HIGHLIGHTS OF TUNISIA AND MOROCCO

As in previous years, Colin Sale vice-president of the Society, was our first speaker. Because of a postponement at short notice, the expected attendance was twenty-five; however, we were delighted to welcome fifty-five and managed to find extra chairs. Colin broke the attendance record yet again! On either side of Algeria, the largest nations of Islamic North Africa are Morocco (which has past Spanish links) on the west, and Tunisia (which has past French links) to the east. Colin has visited both Morocco and Tunisia as a sole traveler and twice leading Geographical Society Study Tours. We were provided with route maps, and the photos and commentary gave us a tour along a journey in each country.

Starting with **Morocco** (population about 30 million), we were told an anecdote from his first ever solo visit where the guide he had in the old city of Fes, a medical student, talked him into giving him a two-day lift to Marrakesh in his small rental car, and because he acceded to this request, Colin was invited home to join a big Saturday-night extended-family dinner. Following a meeting with him and friends after a football match, where the drink of the group's choice was crème-de-menthe (non-alcoholic ?) and lemonade in a typical men-only bar, they drove to his home, with Colin taking a cake (one only) as a contribution to the family dinner. How interesting it was to hear about the apartment in a housing estate, and the friend's very large family – with the three generations of males only (about 10) sitting on cushions on the floor in the living room to eat a dinner of many dishes with their fingers, including goat stew and crepes with honey, and a kitchen seen later with all the females seated on the floor eating their dinner after the all the males had been served, and believing the cake had been brought as a present for them (because Colin had given it to the mother).

Photos of the country included the great cities, the Rif and Atlas Mountains, fertile agricultural areas, the Sahara Desert, and coast. We visited: Casablanca, the largest city (population four million), with several remnants of former regimes, a City Hall, Royal Palace, and Christian Cathedral, but its great pride - the Hassan II Mosque, third largest mosque in the world, completed in 1993; Tetouan, the capital of former Spanish Morocco where one still hears Spanish spoken in the centre of a district that was a major destination for the Moslem Moors expelled from Spain at the time of Columbus; Rabat with its fortified medina, cavalry of Royal Guards, and memorial remains of a great mosque destroyed in the 1755 earthquake; Cork oak plantations and the mountain homes of drug smugglers who do their deals at the local markets – Colin had his car searched in case he was involved – yes, he does have that suspicious look about him; Fez, the oldest of the four great imperial cities, with its completely walled Old City established in AD 808, maze of more than 1000 narrow lanes housing 400,000, and where strangers are warned against venturing into this car-less area (ignored by Colin on his own, successfully – he says), its colourful communal water fonts still in use, its world famous leather industry with its pungent tannery and dyed goatskins hanging everywhere, and its renowned artisans continuing their traditional output of leather fashions, copper goods, carpets and ceramics;

Meknes, the 17th century imperial capital with city walls extending for 40 km, remnants of a palace with huge underground granaries and ruins of stables for 12,000 horses; Moulay Idris, the most holy Moslem place in Morocco, off limits to tourists; the ruins of the major Roman city of Volubilis from the 2nd and 3rd centuries surrounded by rich agricultural land; and the Atlas Mountains where the once-famous cedar forests have virtually disappeared with only a few trees remaining.

We proceeded eastwards over the mountains and southwards along the Atlas foothills and the edge of the Sahara following the *Valley 10,000 Kazbahs* (village forts), some favoured as movie set locations. From a resort hotel, we were taken on a sunset camel ride into the Sahara sand dunes where an irate camel threw Colin off his mount. Back over the mountains, we visited the walled city of Marrakesh, population one million, where donkey carts mingle with Mercedes sedans and a former palace which was the residence of a past prime minister and his harem is now a museum. At Tiznit, the southernmost point of the Moroccan route we saw argan nut oil plantations and goats climbing trees to obtain a feed. We called at the modern port city Agadir (rebuilt after 1960 earthquake), and saw a beautiful coastline with many beachside caravan parks popular with European holidaymakers. Northwards along the coast, we visited Essaouira, a fortified port city built by the Portuguese, becoming a hide-out for pirates and now a picturesque fishing port, and the walled city of El Jadida with its anti-pirate moat and underground cisterns built to store drinking water in times of siege. It was then back to Casablanca and departure from Morocco.

Tunis (population two million), adjacent to ancient Carthage is the capital of **Tunisia** (population 10 million), the former French colony, and the largest city since independence in 1956. We looked at some remnants of Carthage – the circular naval base, the 15 underground water tanks, a 55 km aqueduct, and the famous mosaics in the Bardo Museum in a former royal palace. Other points of interest were the tree-lined promenade in the center of the main street, the medina (old city) with its souqs (markets), Christian cathedral, another great Church dedicated to King Louis IX who died here in Tunis on the disastrous 8th Crusade. Colin then took us by light rail to the Mediterranean coast to Sidi Bou Said, and then through fertile countryside to Nabeul (famous for ceramics) and Hammamet (with 15th century walled Kazbah, medina and fishing fleet). Further along the coast, we visited a new “garden city” with marina for wealthy residents and tourists (on the Cote d’Azur of North Africa). We proceeded further along the coast to the walled port city of Sousse, and then to another former fortified coastal city, Monastir, which has a great Ribat (a fort and garrison for fighting Islamic monks), and the magnificent mausoleum of modern Tunisia’s first president. Turning inland, we visited El Gem which boasts the world’s best preserved Roman Colosseum (better than Rome’s, but not quite as large), and we travelled coastwards to Sfax, Tunisia’s second largest city, and more traditionally Islamic (women very noticeably absent from the streets). After Gabes, an irrigated oasis of 30,000 date palms by the sea, we turned inland again to the edge of the Sahara, to Medenine - a typical Berber fortified village, with only one gate, and unique communal grain storage buildings in case of siege, and to Matmata with cool underground dwellings excavated by the Troglodytes. In this southern part of Tunisia, Colin included shots of grain being ground into flour by hand, nearby nomads living in tents next to their flocks, a tourist resort hotel

providing camel rides into the desert (from here, we were taken on a sunset camel ride into the Sahara sand dunes where an irate camel threw Colin off his mount), the oasis city of Tozeur in its small fertile basin irrigated from a water tank fed by 152 springs, an oasis market at Douz selling everything from flour to livestock, and a newly purchased camel being driven away in a ute. Westward and northward on the road back to Tunis, we saw additional ancient Roman city ruins (Sbeitla and Douga), stunning modern mosques, and cultivated fields stretching towards the Algerian border.

Two beautiful Islamic countries in one afternoon – well done Colin!

Special thanks to Wendy Emery who stepped into the catering gap left by our absent tea-lady, to the members for their patience and co-operation during the afternoon tea crush and to others who lent a hand before and after a very successful meeting.

'Ela Taranto