

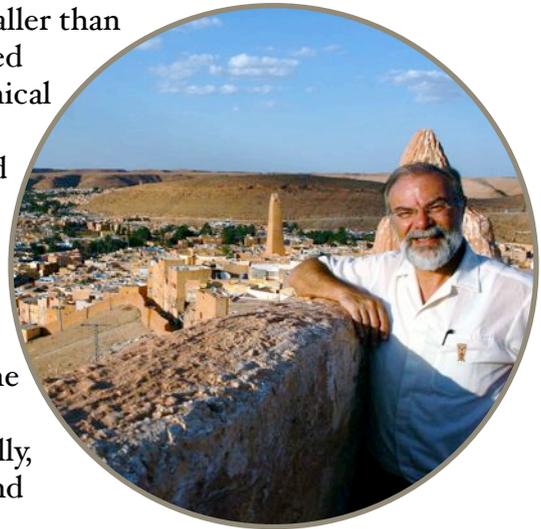
GEOGRAPHICAL SOCIETY OF NEW SOUTH WALES
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TUNISIA AND ALGERIA - Springs of the Arab Spring

Stephen Codrington

The final Travellers Club meeting for 2015 attracted a smaller than expected group of 30 very enthusiastic people, the reduced number arising because the date clashed with a Geographical Society study tour underway at the time to Japan. The topic was Algeria and Tunisia, two countries that for good reasons are visited by very few foreign travellers.

Stephen Codrington visited these two countries at an “interesting” time, just six months after the so-called ‘Arab Spring’. The Arab Spring began in Tunisia, and spread across North Africa (including Algeria) and into the Middle East, bringing hopes of more enlightened administrations that have subsequently, and often tragically, descended into anarchy, terrorism corruption, reprisals and conflict that continue today.



After providing some background to the Arab Spring and its aftermath, the talk outlined some of the challenges of visiting these two countries, including the somewhat tortuous processes of obtaining visas. Today, both countries are on DFAT’s orange “Reconsider your need to travel” list, with large areas on the red list (“Do not travel”) because of safety and security concerns. Vicarious travel, such as the audience was able to experience through Stephen’s talk, is probably the wisest way to visit both Tunisia and Algeria at the moment.

After comparing some key facts about Algeria and Tunisia, the talk began in earnest by

focussing on Tunisia, once regarded as an open country with a thriving tourism industry, but now an increasingly isolated and fragile nation.

Tunisia’s capital city, Tunis, has a population of 0.7 million people, and a long history dating back over 2,000 years. Indeed, the former capital of the Carthaginian Empire, Carthage, is a seaside suburb of Tunis. Unfortunately, very few remains exist of the Carthaginian period, and Tunis’ appearance today is

overwhelmingly that of a French colonial city, centred on the aptly named Avenue de France and Place de la Victoire.

Bab Bhar (also known as Porte de France) is a stone archway that separates the French colonial section of Tunis from the much older medina (Arab walled city). The medina comprises a maze of narrow laneways, centred on the Zaytouna (Great) Mosque that was built in 743AD.



The talk then proceeded to show several key places beyond Tunisia's capital city, at least within the areas that were considered 'safe' for travel. It was noted several times in the talk that although the places described were once considered to be tourism honeypots, Stephen and his son (with whom he was travelling) were the only foreign travellers present at most of the sites visited.

This was certainly the case at Dougga, a UNESCO World Heritage site from the 6th century BC that is commonly referred to as "the best preserved Roman small town in North Africa". Dougga is a 65 hectare archeological site with several truly notable remains such as the 3500 seat amphitheatre (built in 188AD) and the large temple dedicated to the god Jupiter, known as the Capitoile.



The city of Kairouan (also known as Al-Qayrawan or Kiwan) is another UNESCO World Heritage site. An Arab walled city that dates from about 670AD, Kairouan was once a centre of learning next only to Mecca and Medina. With a current population of about 200,000 people, Kairouan's rich history is

especially evident in the city's medina, with its colourful markets, narrow laneways, and especially the huge Grand Mosque. Built in 670AD, and having an area of 9000m², the Grand Mosque is the oldest place of Muslim worship in Africa, and the fourth holiest site in the Islamic world after mecca, Medina and Jerusalem.



To the south of Kairouan lies the smaller city of El-Jam (also known as El-Djem), with a population of about 50,000 people. In general, El-Jam is a fairly unremarkable city apart from the large building that

dominates its city centre. Built between 230 and 238AD, and having a seating capacity of 35,000 people, the amphitheatre (often referred to erroneously as a colosseum) was the third largest in the Roman Empire. El-Jam also has a small but very impressive museum that houses several superb Roman mosaics.

The last place described in Tunisia was the southern coastal city of Sfax (also known as Sifaks). With a population of 300,000 people, Sfax is Tunisia's second largest city. Although the city has a distinctive radial pattern of roads designed by the French, the main area of interest in Sfax is the old medina, which features covered markets, narrow laneways and (of course) a Grand Mosque.

All too soon, it was time to move on to Algeria, and the talk began in Algeria's capital, the Mediterranean port city of Algiers.



Algiers was by far the largest settlement described in this talk, and its population of 2.1 million revealed a range of social and infrastructure challenges. Unlike most of the cities seen in Tunisia, Algiers was overwhelmingly French - and specifically colonial French - in character. Despite the bitter conflict with France from 1954 to 1962 that led to Algeria's independence, Algiers has all the hallmarks of a somewhat decaying Parisian streetscape - once grand but now crumbling.

Having said that, there are some small areas where evidence can still be found of pre-colonial Arab influence, notably around the old port and in the Kasbah. Built on a steep hill overlooking the Mediterranean in the 16th to 18th centuries, the Kasbah was a citadel that



today accommodates 50,000 people in a small area with traditional houses, steep lanes and steps, mosques and souks. Known also for its poverty, political radicalism and high rates of crime, the Kasbah offered a not-always-comfortable insight into the everyday lives of many urban Algerians.

The city of Tipaza was situated 70 kilometres west of Algiers on the southern shore of the Mediterranean Sea.

Established by the Phoenicians in the 5th century BC, it became a Roman city from

the 1st century AD and an early centre of Christianity from the 3rd century. Sacked by the Vandals in the late 4th century, the city fell into disuse and was abandoned. Today, Tipaza is a small fishing town with very well preserved Roman and early Christian ruins. It was also the place where the French author, Albert Camus, penned some of his most miserable, tortured and depressing writings.

A totally different side of Algeria can be seen in the M'Zab Valley. The M'Zab is a UNESCO World Heritage site that was created in the 10th century by the Ibadites, a puritanical Muslim sect that adheres strictly to sharia in public and in private. Settlement in the area comprises five *ksour*, or fortified hilltop villages that are perfectly preserved: Ghardaïa, Beni Isguen, El-Atteuf, Melika and Bou Noura.

The largest of the *ksour* is Ghardaïa. Like all the *ksour* in the M'Zab Valley, Ghardaïa is inhabited by the Mozabites. Also known as the Tumzabt, the Mozabites are a Berber ethnic group that is unique to the M'Zab Valley. The appearance of the women is very distinctive as they go out totally covered in a loose white wrap with just a small gap for one eye. Like the other *ksour*, Ghardaïa's streets are unsuitable for cars, being steep, narrow laneways that wind like a labyrinth upwards towards the distinctively shaped mosque at the



summit. On the edge of the town is the distinctive cemetery where graves are marked by smashed pottery and a stone at the head and foot (and an extra stone in the middle in the case of a pregnant women).

Gahrdaïa also features a highly unusual irrigation and water distribution system. Rainwater is stored in large underground wells and then dispersed through an intricate system of overland canals that serve as laneways and pathways at most times of the year. During winter when the water is flowing, the nearby houses have to be abandoned.

El-Atteuf is a more conservative town than Ghardaïa, and it is a requirement that any visitors are accompanied by the town's sheriff. Women are not supposed to be seen or photographed in El-Atteuf, and as if to emphasise the point, the town's laneways have small alcoves built into the walls at periodic intervals so women can stand in them with their backs towards the laneway if a man approaches.

El-Atteuf houses one of the M'Zab Valley's architectural gems, the small Mosque of Sidi Brahim that was built in the mid-1300s. Its simple white structure with curved walls, simple arches and inclined pillars made from palm trunks apparently was a major inspiration and influence on the famous French architect, Le Corbusier.

Our fascinating look into the M'Zab Valley finished at Beni Isguen, without doubt the most conservative of all the area's settlements. Whereas photography of women is prohibited in the



other four *ksour*, photography of *all* people is forbidden in Beni Isguen. The surrounds of Beni Isguen comprise palmeries where a complex system of wells and irrigation canals allows date palms to flourish and goats to be raised. However, the highlight of Beni Isguen was a climb to the top of Borj Cheikh el-Hadj, an 18th century watchtower that provided stunning views of the town and its surrounds. An interesting feature of Beni Isguen (and also El-

Atteuf) is the sky blue paint used to surround many of the doors and windows of the town's red ochre buildings, an apparently effective way of repelling annoying insects such as flies and mosquitoes.

Questions from the audience included diverse aspects such as the history of the Sunni-Shi'ite split, trends in Middle eastern and North African terrorism, means of travel between Tunisia and Algeria, and some first-hand observations on travelling in the region. As the audience left the lecture room to enjoy afternoon tea, they were farewelled by some lovely Arab music, appropriately titled "A Journey Home".