TOUR CODE

TN1

ADVENTURESABROAD

TUNISIA

Ancient Sites & Legendary Cities

10 days

Updated 06/01/2013

Day 1 ***Arrive in Tunis***

Arrival in Tunis.

Tunis, the capital of the country, is a bustling metropolis and the home of one-sixth of the country's population. Situated in the Gulf of Tunis on the Mediterranean Sea, the modern city extends along the coastal plains and to the surrounding hills. It is a city of many contrasts, with its modern office buildings, shopping malls and European cafes, the colonial French style of the Ville Nouvelle, and the dynamic Arab souks of Tunis' old Medina.

Overnight in Tunis. Meal plan: Dinner, if required.

Day 2 ***Tunis: Medina, Carthage & the Bardo Museum***

We begin the day with a walk through the old medina of Tunis, its narrow lanes crowded with markets, mosques, tombs and palaces. This was Tunis until the arrival of the French in the late 19th century, who subsequently built their quarters -- the Ville Nouvelle -- outside of the eastern gate, Bab el Bahr (the Sea Gate), which stands today in the middle of Place de la Victoire. On our walk, we pass through the various bustling souks of spices, carpets, clothing, gold, and the Souk des Chechias, the area of workshops where the traditional red hats of the Tunisians are still made by hand. En route we will see the Great Mosque of Tunis Jemaa Zitouna and the elegant Place du Gouvernement with its historic buildings, now all converted into government offices.

We emerge from the medina here to meet our bus and drive to the Bardo Museum. A former 17th century palace, the Bardo museum houses the largest and finest of ancient mosaics in the world. The mosaics were discovered in the wealthiest of Roman villas from various ancient sites across Tunisia. Rich Roman patrons commissioned such a vast array of subjects and themes, from scenes of gods & goddesses, to scenes of daily life (harvesting, fishing, hunting), zodiacs, seasons, to amphitheater games. From their exquisite details, we can understand how the North African school of mosaicists was the finest in the world, and whose masterpieces were exported all over the Roman Mediterranean. Besides these, there are also sculptural galleries, exhibits of Punic, Christian and Islamic artifacts, and a gallery dedicated to the 1st century BC shipwreck found off the coast of Mahdia in 1907, with its magnificent collection of bronzes.

We will begin with a visit to the ancient Carthaginian cemetery -- the Tophet, or sanctuary to Baal & Tanit. Roman propaganda, hostile to their enemy, stated that the Carthaginians ritually sacrificed their children here to the gods, though modern archaeological studies have found little evidence to support this. Our next stop is the Punic ports, once the foundation of Carthage's prosperity. Here we see the remains of what was once an sophisticated naval harbour, complete with ship sheds for dry-docking their warships, and a elaborate merchant harbor, for their fleets of cargo ships which engaged in trade throughout the Mediterranean.

From here we visit Byrsa hill -- the ancient acropolis and the first area to be settled by the Phoenicians. Crowning the hill is the 19th century Cathedral of St. Louis and the Carthage museum with finds excavated from the city. Our final stop is the Antonine Baths -- the monumental public baths of the city. In the 2nd century AD, these were the largest

baths in North Africa and the 3rd largest in the Roman world.

Overnight in Tunis. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 3 *Tunis - Dougga - Bulla Regia - Tabarka*

We leave Tunis early this morning and head south towards Dougga. Our first stop is the charming village of Testour, founded by refugees from Andalusia in the 17th century, who brought their sophisticated culture with them -- everything from agricultural techniques and products, to decorative tilework, fine architecture, music and poetry. The inhabitants of Testour even today remain proud of their Andalusian heritage, visible in their hospitality, dress, craftsmanship and music. We will see the Great Mosque with its tiled octagonal minaret -- the only one in Tunisia with a clock -- which recalls the church bell towers of Aragon & Castile.

We follow the Medjerda River valley to Dougga, the best preserved Roman city in Tunisia and a UNESCO World Heritage Site. The monumental Capitolium temple stands in the city's Forum, with a breathtaking view over the green rolling hills and plains below. The theaters, gymnasia, baths, shops, stone paved streets and lavish villas are all testimony to the golden age this North African city enjoyed during the Roman era.

After lunch we visit the Bulla Regia. This ancient site is famous for its unique subterranean villas, which belonged to the wealthiest of its inhabitants; we descend to see these luxurious villas and their splendid floor mosaics, still in situ.

Our drive to Tabarka takes us through the scenic Khroumirie Mountains, with the road climbing 900m (3,000 feet) through the cork and oak forests. We reach the charming alpine town of Ain Draham before descending to sea level to reach our destination, Tabarka.

Today, Tabarka is a charming Mediterranean resort, with an expansive beach and picturesque harbour. In antiquity, Tabarka was the port from which exotic African animals were shipped to various parts of the Roman Empire to supply the amphitheater games and triumphal processions. Also shipped from here was the precious Numidian Marble from the inland Chemtou quarries, coveted for its unusual golden and pink hues; this exotic marble can be seen in prestigious ancient monuments in Algeria, Italy, Greece, Turkey and the Levant. Since medieval times, red coral, African commodities and slaves were traded from here. We make a brief stop to see the Genoese fortress, and the strange sandstone formations on the port, locally known as "Les Aiguilles" (The Needles), with their spectacular hues of red, orange and yellow.

Overnight in Tabarka. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 4 *Tabarka - Kairouan*

This morning we head east towards Kairouan, travelling through the fertile valleys and rolling hills of the North. Since antiquity to the present, Tunisia is still referred to by other Maghreb countries by the epithet, "Tunisia the Green." This area is a favorite haven for storks, who build their nest on top of telephone towers, minarets and rooftops. We head toward into the Sahel, the transitional barren region between the fertile north and the Sahara desert to the south.

The Holy City of Kairouan is not only the spiritual center of Tunisia, it is the first Islamic city to be established in North Africa, and the 4th oldest Muslim city outside of Arabia. Founded as the capital of the region in 670 AD by the Arab general Oqba ibn Nafi, Kairouan soon acquired magnificent ramparts, mosques, palaces and hammams. Our first stop is the Aghlabid basins, enormous artificial reservoirs constructed in the 9th century to store water for Kairouan, as part of a monumental system in which water was brought by aqueducts to the city from 36km away.

Later this afternoon we will have a walking tour of old medina of Kairouan -- the entire medina is protected by UNESCO. Meandering through the lanes, we will stop to admire the beautiful traditional doors and architectural styles, the main monuments, markets, pastry shops and traditional workshops where weavers (men) still create textiles on hand looms.

Overnight in Kairouan. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 5 *Kairouan - Sbeitla - Tozeur*

We start the day with a visit to the Great Mosque of Kairouan, the oldest, largest and most important mosque in Tunisia. The lowest story of the towering minaret is thought to date to 730 AD, one century earlier than the structure of the present mosque. Inside we will see the colonnaded courtyard with its ancient wellheads and sundials, and the forest of columns of the prayer sanctuary. The hundreds of columns all differ from one another, in marble types, size, shape and capital designs, since most were taken from ancient Roman sites and reused in the mosque's construction.

Our final stop before leaving Kairouan is the Mausoleum of Sidi Sahab, also known as the Mosque of the Barber. The name Sahab means that he was one of the original Companions of the Prophet, and thus today, his tomb is one of the most important pilgrimage sites in all of the Maghreb. We stop to admire its beautifully decorated interior, with its ornate stucco, tile and woodwork.

We continue to the spectacular Roman city of Sufeitula -- modern Sbeitla. The Roman civic center is incredibly photogenic, due to the excellent state of preservation its 3 monumental temples dedicated to Juno, Jupiter and Minerva towering over the Forum. Sbeitla, like other North African cities, prospered in the 2nd and 3rd centuries AD under the Pax Romana. Upon entering the site, we will see olive press -- one of many in the city, since the inhabitants here became extremely wealthy from the trade of olives and olive oil. After visiting the forum and its temples, we will walk through Sbeitla's stone paved streets to see the public baths, the theater, and numerous Christian basilicas with their elaborate baptisteries covered in colourful mosaics.

After lunch, we head to the south of the country, via Gafsa, the capital of the region and where the earliest remains have been found of the sophisticated. Capsian culture, prehistoric ancestors of the modern day Berbers, dating to over 10,000 years ago when this area was a savannah. We arrive late afternoon to the fascinating oasis town of Tozeur. Since medieval times, it was the administrative and economic center of the region due to its oasis, strategic location between the Sahara and the north and west of the great lakes, and as an important trading center on the ancient caravan routes. Merchants from North and West Africa gathered in this thriving market center to trade goods such as wool, dates, gold, ivory and slaves. Some of the finest dates in the world are grown in the region, the deglat nour ("finger of light") and exported to the rest of the world. Medieval accounts note that over 1,000 camels left here per day, laden with dates alone!

We will take a brief walking tour through the old center to admire some of its 14th century architecture and their distinctive style of brickwork. The only place outside of Tozeur and Nefta where this ornamental use of bricks can be seen is in Iran, where it may have originated in the 8th century and was brought here by Arab invaders. You will have some free time to explore this fascinating town before we head to our hotel.

Overnight in Tozeur. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 6 *Tozeur - Degache - Douz - Matmata - Djerba*

We begin our day with a short drive to the nearby oasis of Degache. We will take a horse drawn carriage (caleche) into the oasis where we will learn about oasis farming and the date harvest. One of the oldest in the country, the Degache is

still a fully functioning oasis, where the 3 tiered system of agriculture can still be seen: Date Palms shelter a second tier of fruit trees, which in turn shelter vegetable and herb gardens, in order to make the most efficient use of these patches of fertile land in the middle of the desert. Here in the oasis we will see a staggering array of agricultural products: from date palms to citrus, apricot, banana and pomegranate trees, and beneath, vegetables, alfalfa, herbs and henna.

Our journey continues eastwards across Chott El Jerid, Tunisia's largest salt lake, extending over 5,000km2. The chott lies 30m below sea level, and is a remnant from over 1.5 million years ago when the area was flooded by the sea. Water on the surface of the salt floor reflects strange hues of pink and yellow, and the refraction of light on this depression often creates mirages.

Our next stop is Douz, the "Gateway of the Sahara", another ancient oasis town surround by vast expanses of sand dunes. Here you will have the opportunity to participate in optional adventure excursions (payable locally). You may choose to ride a camel or horse carriage or drive a dune buggy out to the sand dunes. Or, you may choose to take an "ultralight" airplane over the dunes and the palmeries of Douz. Your Tour Leader can provide you with detailed information regarding the various excursions, and assist with booking upon your arrival.

Leaving the Sahara behind, we embark on a scenic drive through the mountains to Matmata, where the inhabitants live in rock-hewn dwellings ("troglodytes" homes), some of which are over 400 years old. We will visit the pit dwelling of a local family who will happily show us around. We will also stop to see the cave home which appeared in the first Star Wars film (1977) and was later converted into Hotel Sidi Driss.

The final leg of our journey takes us to the legendary Island of Djerba, where we will spend the first of two nights.

Overnight in Djerba. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 7 *Djerba Touring*

We will spend the morning exploring the sites of this splendid island. Originally settled by the Phoenicians, the isle of Djerba is the mythical place where Odysseus encountered the Lotus Eaters during his journey back home from Troy. Phoenicians, Greeks, Romans, Vandals, Normans, Arabs, Spaniards, and Ottoman Turks -- all have come to Djerba and left their footprint. Historically Djerba has been known for its sponge fishing and agriculture -- here we can find olive trees which are over 1000 years old. The island today is one of Tunisia's most famous resorts, with its small villages, charming towns, and 125km of sandy beaches. Today's inhabitants have a society and culture distinct from Tunisians of the mainland. Here we find a mix of Arabs, Berbers, Andalusians and Jews, all who differ in their cultural traditions, names, dialect and style of dress.

Our first visit is the excellent ethnographic Museum of Patrimonie, which celebrates the island's peoples and traditions. Here we will see displays of marriage festivals and traditional wedding dresses from various parts of the country, traditional costumes of the island, circumcision ceremonies, household and agricultural implements, and displays of typical arts of weaving, calligraphy, jewelry and metalwork. We proceed to the center of Guellala, the pottery producing center of the island where we stop to see the kilns and workshops. Next is El Ghriba ("The Miracle") synagogue: one of the oldest synagogues and most important Jewish pilgrimage sites in the world. Djerba is home to one of the world's most ancient Jewish communities: tradition states that they arrived here after the First Destruction of the Temple by Nebuchadnezzar in 566 BC. This holy synagogue is fascinating for its historic and spiritual importance, as well as for its distinctive style of architecture (a marvelous blend of Jewish, Tunisian, Maghrebian and Sephardic elements). We proceed to the main town Houmt Souq, where first we shall stop to see the medieval fort, Borj el Kebir; this picturesque fort was the scene of a bloody conflict in 1560 between the forces of Dragut, the Barbary corsair, and Philip II of Spain. Dragut massacred the entire Spanish Armada and all of Philip's men who had retreated inside the fortress. The small white obelisk in front of the castle marks the place where the famous "Pyramid of Skulls" stood for over 300 years, erected by Dragut as a warning to potential invaders. In town, we will explore the fruit and vegetable markets, watch the action at the daily fish auctions, and wander the narrow lanes and souqs. You will have free time to explore more of this

charming town, perhaps do some shopping and have lunch at one of the many restaurants in the center.

The rest of the afternoon is at leisure. You may wish to stay in Houmt Souq, go to the beach, or relax by the hotel swimming pool (weather and season permitting, of course).

Overnight in Djerba. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 8 *Gabes - El Djem - Monastir - Sousse*

Early morning departure to catch the ferry to the mainland. Our drive takes us through one of the main olive growing regions of the country. Tunisia has over 65 million olive trees (6 for each inhabitant!) and is currently the 4th largest exporter of olive oil in the world. We follow the coast past the cities of Gabes and Sfax, before heading inland to El Djem (ancient Thysdrus). Our first visit is the excellent Archaeological Museum, with its splendid collection of floor mosaics from the villas of the wealthiest inhabitants of El Djem. Just behind the museum is the House of Africa, an opulent villa covering over 3000 sq m which was found in the center of town, dismantled and moved here in its entirety. The villa is named after one of its excellent fine floor mosaics depicting the Goddess of Africa (the only mosaic of its kind in the world).

The sudden appearance of the massive Roman Amphitheatre is an extraordinary sight. With a capacity of 30,000 spectators, it rises 3 stories above the surrounding plains -- though smaller than the Colosseum in Rome, it is in many ways more impressive due to its excellent state of preservation. It was built during the reigns of the (usurper) Emperors Gordion I and his son, Gordian II, both of whom reigned for only a few weeks before being defeated by the legions sent from Rome. Wild beast fights, gladiatorial combats, circuses and games were held here. We climb up to the upper tiers for excellent views of the arena and surrounding countryside, before descending to the basement to see the chambers where scenery, gladiators, prisoners and wild animals were kept. Wild animals were hoisted by a sophisticated (if not theatrical) system of elevators and pulleys into the arena to the delight of the spectators.

After lunch, our journey takes us to the beautiful coastal city of Monastir, the birth place of Tunisia's first president, Habib Bourguiba. Here we will see the Mausoleum where he and his family members are buried. We will also see the Ribat (fortress) of Monastir, which served as a watchtower, defensive fort, and sanctuary of prayer and study for Aghlabid holy warriors in the 9th century. It was just one of a chain of ribats/watchtowers built along the North African coast to defend against marauding Christians (others surviving examples are found in Sousse and Djerba). The ribat of Monastir has also been used as a set of many films, including Monty Python's Life of Brian. You may wish to climb the spiral staircase in the tower for excellent views over Monastir and the Mediterranean Sea.

A short drive leads us to our destination, the beautiful resort city of Sousse. After checking into our hotel, we will go for dinner to a local restaurant in the marina of Sousse, Port El Kantaoui.

Overnight in Sousse. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 9 *Sousse - Hammamet - Sidi Bou Said - Tunis*

This morning we visit old Sousse, where you will have some free time to explore the medina, perhaps enter the ribat here, or do some last minute shopping. We take the highway up the coast towards Hammamet -- Hammamet was a sleepy fishing town until the 1920's, when millionaire shipping magnate, George Sebastien, first built a luxurious villa here; it was subsequently visited by artists, writers and celebrities. Today it is a bustling seaside resort. We walk through the tiny walled medina to see its charming whitewashed houses, the 15th century mosque, and the medieval fortress overlooking the sea.

After lunch we head inland towards Tunis, stopping en route to see the surviving stretches of the Roman aqueduct which once supplied water to ancient Carthage over a distance of 132 km!

The final leg of our journey takes us Sidi Bou Said, the charming hilltop village, famous for its beautifully decorated blue and white architecture. Visited by the likes of Cervantes, Simone de Beaauvouir and Jean Foucault, Sidi Bou Said made an indelible impression on the works of Paul Klee, August Macke and Louis Moilliet who stayed here together in 1914. You will have some free time to explore this beautiful village overlooking the Mediterranean Sea, before we meet for sunset and our final farewell dinner.

Overnight in Tunis. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 10 *Departure*

Departure from Tunis.

BON VOYAGE! Meal plan: Breakfast.