



The Red Lizard train



TUNISIA:

Having lived there during his studies four years ago, Mark Patterson rediscovers Tunisia.

On my first night in Tunisia in 2002, I ended up in the picturesque village of Sidi Bou Said on the Mediterranean coast. Everything seemed a blur, and I hailed a taxi with scant idea of where I was heading – I had only the village's name and a recommendation from a friend who had been. I spent the early evening walking the charming cobbled streets lost in colour – pristinely painted buildings, resplendent blue windows and doors, gentle azure skies and shimmering turquoise waters. I found a café spread open before the coast and felt more at home in my adopted country with every sip of mint tea that passed my lips. On my return in May this year, my first night was in Dar Said, a private house turned hotel which embodied everything that made me feel at home all those years ago – hospitality, style and setting – all the more extraordinary that on my many previous visits I had never seen it before.

Having begun to settle into North African life, I started to explore further afield, and I soon indulged my passion for all things Roman by visiting Tunisia's many ancient cities. The highlight was Dougga, whose allure lies in its hilltop location, its sumptuous verdant backdrop, and its quiet, uncrowded calm. Looking out from vantage points across all the ruins reaffirmed how beautiful the spot was, and my overwhelming emotion was gratitude for my guide. On my previous visit, I had made the journey there with a Hungarian who had prodigious skills in Arabic but little English of note. On this occasion, by contrast, it was captivating to stroll around the site with Hakim, who evoked the fabled brilliance of the Arab storyteller, recounting the story of Masinissa, the Numidian King whose allegiance to the Romans helped secure Dougga's prosperity and legacy.



Amphitheatre, El Jem

a grand return



The Theatre, Dougga

Fuelled by my desire to do things the Tunisian way, I got to grips with the country's rail system. The trains down from Tunis to Gabès were quite something, clattering along at a pace that made you wonder whether it was quicker to walk, and wall to wall with people. It was never a journey for the faint-hearted. Though it is often busy, the front cabin of the Red Lizard train, belonging to the Bey of Tunisia in the 19th century, and now refurbished to recall its former grandeur, proved a wonderful tonic to my recollection of Tunisian rail. The journey may last a mere ninety minutes, but the route endures in the memory, twisting up the mountains through tunnels and bridges across sweeping landscapes of spring waters, and culminating in a waving welcome from local children on their sallies to and from school.

From the train I took to the road, where the one thing I had been itching to do upon my return more than any other was to cross the Chott El Jerid, a huge salt lake in the south of Tunisia. Dry for all but a handful of weeks a year, the Chott can be navigated as travellers wind across the Saharan outskirts along a causeway. The views are breathtaking, and photography cannot do it justice. The road stretches out before you into mirage after mirage, and to the left and right lie gleaming salt crystals for miles upon end. Most peculiar and striking is where the water flows beside the causeway – a strong red one side, a greenish blue the other, both just metres apart, appearing almost like hot and cold taps. It had seemed like a reverie when I saw it first, rattling along in a shared taxi squashed beside numerous other passengers, feeling dozy and uncomfortable.

Had it all been a dream? Evidently not; this time we stopped our off-road vehicle and strode down to the waters to see it in all its glory.

Jerba, at the end of my route through the desert, was the island retreat for which I had been yearning. A more relaxed atmosphere and perfect beaches have always been a weakness of mine, and Jerba retains the natural beauty of an island made famous by the legend of Ulysses and the lotus-eaters. I got to know Jerba by cycling across the flat terrain, and without straying too far from the beaches there are numerous interesting stops, from the fort and souqs of Jerba's capital, Houmt Souq, to the potteries of Guellala and the ornately-decorated Ghriba Synagogue in Erriadh. It was just here that I discovered Dar Dhiafa, a charismatic hotel converted from four traditional houses that seemed a world away from anything – truly Jerba's best kept secret, and a wonderful place to unwind.



Chott El Jerid



Restaurant, Dar Dhiafa

For my final night on the island this time, I found myself back on the coast for a day by the sea – some things never change...

Mark Patterson
Tunisia Specialist

FACT FILE

A ten night trip to Tunisia including return flights and a permanent local guide and driver starts from £1,750 per person. For details please contact either Mark or Natalie on 01993 838 445.

