SPRING 2012

Cycling to the Sahara

1,279 miles from London to the desert, by bike, boat and (whisper it) train



David Charles

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Before you set off

In February 2012 I worked out that it is 1,279 miles from my house in London to the Saharan desert. Not far, eh? So I decided to cycle there.

This book collects the dispatches I wrote along the way, as I wrote them at the time, from the Newhaven ferry to a sand dune in southern Tunisia and back to Tunis in the turbulent spring after the revolution. They were first published on my blog, davidcharles.info. I have only tidied them up a little: some photographs from that era have been lost, and links that no longer work have been left out.

There are twenty-eight chapters. You can read them in order, as a journey, or dip in wherever the road looks interesting.

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Cycling to the Sahara

23 February 2012

It is 1,279 miles from my house in London to the Saharan desert. I know what you're thinking – not far, eh?

So I decided to cycle there.

I'm going to be doing all the usual live action twittering – @dcisbusy for that. Plus I'll be posting stories and photographs from the road up here whenever I can access an internet portal.

I'll (bike service permitting) be leaving tomorrow afternoon in time to catch the graveyard ferry from Newhaven to Dieppe in Normandy. It should look something like this:

But the beauty of cycling is in its unpredictability – starting now, as I nervously await the result of my bike service…

London (ish) to Paris (ish)

26 February 2012

No I haven't got a drinking problem (ish), it's just that I'm lazy and couldn't be bothered to cycle all the way through London.

So I started my journey on a train, astonishing rail workers and elderly ladies alike by saying I was going to France. In truth, I was going to Caterham. Then I was going to France. Via Newhaven and a ferry.

Of course, the important thing to remember when doing a London-Paris cycle ride is that the pizza shop in Newhaven is awful.

The above pizza hacked a destructive path through my intestines, stirring up all kinds of malodorous gusts for the rest of the day. That would be reason enough to catch a ferry from Portsmouth or Dover – but another reason is that the Newhaven-Dieppe 'overnight' ferry arrives bang in the dead of dark.

Due to some kind of arbitrary time-zone discrepancy between Britain and France, what I thought would be five hours of sleep turned out to be only four. So I effectively started cycling at three a.m., my time, after about two hours of ferry seat-sleep.

If you've never cycled through Seine-Maritime at 4 o'clock in the morning, then it looks a bit like this:

Ahh – only joking! It looks more like this:

But what I lost in sight-seeing, I gained in noise-hearing and smell-smelling. And thankfully there was almost zero traffic-trafficking –

breathful, blissful solitude.

There is an excellent cycle path that goes almost all the way from Dieppe through Seine-Maritime – *une avenue verte*, a green avenue – but you can't see green in the dark, so I didn't pick it up until Neufchâtel-en-Bray. Flat, quiet, green and with conversational information boards on the life-cycle of drinking water and the compostition of the solar system, this is a premium cycle path.

The same cannot be said of the D915. This is a main road from Dieppe to Paris. Don't use it unless you want to die.

So I took the D915 from Gournay-en-Bray to Sérifontaine, a chokey ride through 15km of car fumes. Up hill.

At about this time I decided to get cold. Really cold. Although the sun had apparently risen by half seven, I'd yet to see any of it. The clouds were heavy and mist blew in my face. My immune system must have been annoyed at my lack of sleep, nutrition (*pains aux raisins* don't count) and suitable clothing (sandals, really?) because it proceeded to evacuate litres of sneeze-goo from my nasal orifices.

On a side note: if you ever see a man on a bicycle sneezing, give him plenty of wobble room. The aftershock from one of my eruptions was enough to send me careering across the carriageway and, on the D915, that's not a healthy move.

Luckily, I made it to Gisors. It has a castle. I managed to take a photo, which was pretty heroic of me, considering how much snot was oozing from my face.

Yes I know it's a rubbish photo. Live with it.

Cycling along the minor roads of the Vexin region is rather pleasant. And my health seemed to pick up no end after the acquisition of a *pain aux amandes* in Seraincourt. It was still not sufficiently snotless to take any photographs of the beautiful church or château at Gadancourt. Are you grateful for that Gisors castle photo now?

So I managed to cross the Seine at about four p.m., after ten hours of cycling. I was expecting this to be a romantic, mythical moment, like Caesar crossing the Rubicon, but it turns out that the Seine is only romantic and mythical in Paris. In Les Mureaux it looks out over an industrial works and an indoor swimming pool.

But after a hundred miles of pedalling, you don't give a toss about romantic and mythical arrivals. That's why, to rendez-vous with my friend, I chose a local landmark: Lidl. She led me through the baffling twists of Parisian commuter belt sprawl to a real warm home, with a shower and a kitchen.

And that's what I love about cycling: the feeling of hot water on skin and raclette in stomach.

(Not) Cycling to the Sahara: Paris

3 March 2012

I never meant to go to Paris. I never really meant to stay in any one place for more than a day or two and I certainly never meant to do a lot of walking.

So that's why I spent four days in Paris, *à pied*.

My bicycle necessitated repairs, which was why I went to Pairs in the first place. The cycle shops in Vernouillet were closed on Mondays. So I caught a train to Paris-Saint-Lazare and cycled to a superior Parisien cycle shop. It was closed on Mondays.

With a Gallic shrug of the shoulders, I decided to have lunch.

What happened next is a little hard to explain, but it involves Shakespeare, a packet of karmic tissues and Cyrano de Bergerac. Anyway, it's a story probably best told over a carafe of Bordeaux, to get the real atmosphere. I can't pour wine over the internet (licensing laws, eh!), but one thing led to another, led to me spending three nights in Paris. Besides, all you want is my cinematoscopic photography in the city of light, isn't it?

Well, this is what I saw on my sightseeing tour:

Beautiful.

What was not beautiful was the unfortunate beast who occupied the lower bunk bed from mine at the hostel. He appeared to be a Brazilian musician, but I never actually exchanged words with him (except curses under my breath) because I never encountered him awake. He seemed only capable of sleep during the day; during the

night he preferred a symphony of coughing, choking, shaking, mumbling, sneezing, snoring, smacking lips, cracking fingers. Then finally his alarm goes off – evidentally not to wake himself up because he'd never been asleep. I felt sorry for him, really. Well, up to a point. I stayed there two nights, the third I spent on a couch in the deuxième – far more comfortable.

So that was Paris. What is beautiful is not the stone or the river or the people, but the company. Walking through cobbled streets alone only hurt my achilles. Sitting riverside alone in my ragged stinking clothes, surrounded by chic Parisiens, only brought on acute social anxiety. Staring up at marble and wrought iron only made me feel like all human endeavour is vanity. But when I offered my packet of karmic tissues to a sniffly girl in Shakespeare & Co. *then* Paris became Paris. But that is another story, like I said.

(Not) Cycling to the Sahara: Hamburg

6 March 2012

This is Hamburg.
I wasn't supposed to be here, really. Not until the Sunday before I left England. I then wasn't supposed to be here so early. Not until I had dallied in Paris too long to cycle to Bonn. Bonn, where I was supposed to collect a train to Hamburg. Instead, I dallied in Paris, ate croissants aux amandes, went to the theatre and drank vin rouge. It was all very Paris.

And the suddenly it wasn't very Paris, it was very Hamburg. By which I mean: ports, building sites, graffiti, squats, ships, cranes, burlesque life-drawing, wind-farms, compound nouns and absurd uses of the word 'super'.

Still, I was pleased to see that they do patisserie here and have duly invested heavily in baked goods. I was also pleased to see that they have shoe shops here and have duly invested in a pair. Of shoes, not shops. So Hamburg passed by in a glaze of eating (Pakistanisch, Portugiesisch, "Brunch"), walking (docks, Schulterblatt, Alstersee) and keeping my hair out of the wind. None of which is interesting to you, I'm sure.

So I won't say any more about Hamburg, except to invite you to suggest purposes for their tower:

(Not) Cycling to the Sahara: Trains

7 March 2012

Over the past few days, the universe has been telling me loud and clear: “You should be on a bicycle, not on a train.”

You see, I had the temerity to use trains to go and visit my friend in Hamburg. But the universe didn’t like this and so the universe made things very expensive. Then, when that didn’t halt my progress, the universe made things highly inconvenient. Then, when that didn’t stop my passage, the universe decided to get radical. The universe struck down the entirety of Northern France’s rail network. The universe brought on soldiers with machine guns. The universe threw bodies onto train lines.

But still I prevail.

Firstly, I have a strong recommendation for anyone wishing to travel in Europe using any mode of transport other than their own. Make a plan. Book in advance. Be boring, or else expect to pay for your spontaneity. It would seem that modern train fares encourage the sort of constrained thinking that also dogs aviation as a mode of transport: advanced planning and point-to-point travel. I can bear witness to this.

I only decided that I wanted to go direct to Hamburg from Paris last Wednesday. It was a spur of the moment sort of decision. I wanted to go that day because I wanted to see my friend and there’s only so much you can spend on patisseries in Paris. So I went to the train station: a train that day would cost me 200 euros. One way.

I left the train station and went to an internet café. I calculated forty-seven different ways of transporting myself and my bike from Paris to Hamburg and thence to Marseille by train (I had also decided that France on the whole was overpriced and underheated). The cheapest option, it transpired, was to buy an Interrail pass for 267 euros, not including mandatory train reservations, which cost extra.

So I returned to the Gare du Nord and engaged in proxy combat with a computer booking system through the exhausted mouse of an SNCF employee. I could not travel on an Interrail pass that day. There are limited places available, you see, for people with Interrail passes. Normally, my SNCF told me, you should book months in advance. She clicks her teeth at this, as if I have personally put her out with my spontaneity.

But to her credit, she locks horns once more with the binary code on the other side of the silicon and comes back with a new plan: I can go tomorrow, changing at Brussels and Cologne. She winces: it will take over ten hours. I don't care. Ten hours? I can swallow that. She leads me carefully through the itinerary and also books me onto trains back from Hamburg and to Marseille. I am now locked in to travel at specific times to specific places. Reservation supplements bring the total cost to well over 300 euros. I swallow it. She hands me my tickets. It would appear that I'm now French. She takes back the tickets and reprints me back into an Englishman.

I leave the poor SNCF employee shaking with effort (she actually closes her window) and roll my bike over to the information office. I make a half-hearted attempt to find out about how to transport

my bike on the TGV train to Marseille. The information dude thinks I just have to pay a supplement. So whatever. I leave my bike at a friend's place in the deuxieme and enjoy a last Parisian supper.

The universe has successfully made things expensive and inconvenient. These I can swallow. I even take it in good part when I confuse Hamburg-Hauptbahnhof and Hamburg-Altona, forcing my friend to travel across town, at risk of prosecution for fare evasion, to meet me. Over ten hours on a train, but aside from incipient piles, no permanent damage done. The trip back will be better: eight and a half hours and only the one change in Cologne.

Or so I thought. The universe was not done with me.

I caught the train from Hamburg to Cologne at about half eleven. At about half three I arrived in Cologne. At about half four I caught the train from Cologne direct to Paris. At about seven we made a scheduled stop in Brussels. We were about ten minutes late. I quietly accepted this fact.

Then we stayed stopped in Brussels.

An announcement declared that we would be here for at least an hour, due to an electrical fault. They made it sound like a light bulb had blown. In fact, the whole of the Northern France rail network was power-less. An hour and a half later, we still hadn't moved, although I had bought several packets of biscuits.

An announcement told us to consider postponing our travel plans. Nobody, they portentously announced, is travelling into France. An odd announcement, that. It didn't actually say that trains were *cancelled*, just that we might like to consider postponing. So I joined an exquisitely long queue of people trying

to get tickets changed, vaguely wondering what this would mean for my onward travel to Marseille the next morning.

I happily stood in the queue for about half an hour (as an Englishman, I know my place). A film crew was interviewing an excited gaggle of American girls in front of me. I was just getting to the part where I could almost see the doors of the ticket office, when a casual voice announced in French: "*Mesdames et messieurs. Le train pour Paris Gare du Nord partira a vingt-et-un-heure-quinze du quai six.*"

Quoi? I look at my phone. That's now! I don't wait to hear the message repeated in Dutch, German and English: I run for the platform. There are four trains-worth of passengers who want this train. The French-speakers are rather unfairly placed first in the stampede. Security guards try to stop us. The Thalys train people flap their hands to slow us down. We hit the escalator. A film crew (how had they got there?) was blocking it from surging up, so a few people try running up the down escalator. The security guards drag them off, so they start to walk up the down escalator, getting nowhere. A priest breathless behind me raises his hands to heaven – *Merci Thalys!*

The atmosphere on board is electric. The only electricity in Northern Europe, apparently. An announcement says that this is the Thalys service to Paris Gare du Nord and that we'll be travelling on *la route classique*, which sounds lovely. He'll tell us at Lille what time we'll get to Paris.

We arrive in Lille at quarter past ten, but we're last in the backed-up queue to France. The driver says we won't move for forty-five minutes. Then we move and the driver says we'll arrive in Paris at

00h45. This is shockingly late to stay at my friend's flat. She'll leave the key outside the door. Finally the announcement is that we'll arrive at 01h30. Each new delay is greeted with something approaching glorious hysteria. I think everyone is just glad to be going somewhere, sometime.

When we arrive (and we do, finally, arrive), Thalys are handing out water and a box that contains magical coffee that gets hot when you shake it. I think they're putting on taxis as well, but I'm glad to walk down Boulevard de Strasbourg to my friend's place, ignoring the prostitutes sheltering in phone booths. I'm looking forward to a few hours couch kip before my next train south to Marseille – this time with my bike – at ten the next morning.

Or so I thought. The universe has one last desperate trick up its sleeve.

I get to the station the next morning and ask the information people about how to buy a ticket for my bike. They say go to the ticket office. I queue for the ticket office, arriving with about fifteen minutes to spare before my train departs. Perfect.

Then: they don't take bikes unless they're in bags. Bags? The woman looks at me angrily, like I've personally put her out with my poor planning. Tsk. I go to the train anyway. Maybe they'll let me on after all. Maybe it's not busy. Maybe I'll get a kindly guard. Maybe.

No.

But I do get helped by a kindly passenger, who directs me to a local branch of Go Sport, where I can buy a body bag for my bike. This is when the universe decides to really go for it. I leave my bike chained up outside the station, against an innocent-looking wall. I

go for a pee. I come back and see three soldiers in full battle fatigue, nervously gripping semi-automatic rifles. One of them is looking at my bike. A couple of firemen stand around, smoking. I see the soldiers and think – oh that's funny, they're near my bike. I stand around, not wanting to get too close to men with guns. The soldiers storm past me into the station. I creep up to my bike. A fireman asks me if it's mine. I admit responsibility. The alert is called off. The soldiers let me go, mysteriously explaining that it is all part of the "terrorist plan". I hurry away to a boulangerie.

Then I cycle to the Go Sport shop. It is raining by this point, another part of the universe's plan. I will pay anything to get out of here. I need the south: it won't be raining in the south. Anyway, how much can a bag really cost? 10 euro? 20 euro?

Well, 75 euros, apparently. More than the cost of a ticket if you plan in advance, as I strongly recommend. I baulk at this robbery and try to cook up an alternative plan involving a friend's flatmate, a scooter and Montpellier. It comes to nothing and I have to buy the bag. It is 80 euros by the time I get it to the register. I swallow it. The assistant sweetly informs me that there are bags available for 100 and 200 euros. I took their last cheap bag. Lucky me. At least the ticket office at Gare de Lyon allow me to change my ticket for free.

The bag necessitated collapse of my bike into component parts: wheels, frame and handlebar, but into the bag it eventually went. I was all set, following rules and feeling sick about it. I buy a book to boost morale. The universe, despite bringing in the military, will not win. I shall get to Marseille.

But still the universe was not done with me. At this stage, though, even the universe knows when it is beaten. So all it could muster were fate's snide remarks, irony and mild inconvenience. The train was half-empty and could have accommodated an elephant, let alone a bike – with or without the world's most expensive bag (which, incidentally, already had a hole in it). At Aix-en-Provence we heard an announcement that a man was on the line (it was unclear if he knew he was there or not) and there would be a delay of around ten minutes. Ten minutes? Is that all you've got left, universe? Ha!

So in Marseille I did finally arrive. It was a stunning entrance, all sun and sandstone. I dragged my bags into the sunset and busily reassembled my bike. Wrongly. A kindly man in hip-hop shades pointed out that my fourchette was back to front as I replaced the handlebars. The universe is kindly. I then cycled down a hill, only to realise that the hostel I wanted to stay at was up the hill. I pushed my bike up the one-way hill and looked into the hostel: *complet*, full. I kept on walking past, winking at the universe. Then I stopped. I turned around. It won't hurt to ask. They'll be able to direct me to another hostel, I'm sure. I ask at the desk. They are not *complet*. In fact, when I arrive, I am the only person in my room.

It does fill up later with three others, including the mandatory snorer, a mild woman of middle age with the respiratory system of a Harley Davidson.

Universe: let's call it a draw, yeah?

(Not) Cycling to the Sahara: Marseille

8 March 2012

Marseille has been voted European Capital of Culture for 2013. Something to be proud of perhaps, but there are so many building works, road works, sewage works and promotional works going on that, by the time 2013 comes around, Marseille won't be Marseille any more.

Everything, from the great squares, to the ports, to the monuments, to the pavements are blocked with workmen. It feels like a city in transition, but by the time it has transited it might find it's lost itself on the way. I see superficial beautification, an emphasis on consumer chain shops and a whole bunch of unemployed men.

This is what the European Capital of Culture seems to bring to a city. It brought it to Liverpool in 2008 and now it is bringing it to Marseille. It seems to be a licence to throw money at a designated area of degradation, to turn it into something that it wasn't before. The award of "European Capital of Culture" seems to me to be a euphemism, a way of disguising slum-clearance as something to be proud of.

I'm exaggerating there, I'm sure, but both Marseille and Liverpool are port towns facing disquieting futures. As far as the European Capital of Culture is concerned, this future must be tourism and shopping. That is all our secondary cities are good for now. In time, that is all Europe will be good for: a provincial destination for

Chinese, Indian, Brazilian, Russian and Gulf tourists wanting a taste of exotic European history.

Marseille is probably better placed than Liverpool for that, given that it is a south-facing city. It will always have the sunshine and the sea air and that will always be popular, until such a time as climate change makes it redundant. On the other hand, Liverpool will always have The Beatles. Liverpool will always be the city where a time (the sixties), a technology (recorded music) and a sound (pop) coincided and froze. The Beatles were the first global pop band and, as any businessman knows, the most critical asset in market penetration and brand awareness is to be first. There will never be another Beatles, not until the end of this civilisation, and Liverpool will be cashing in their myths for a long while yet.

But the European Capital of Culture bestowed on Liverpool not just a new cash pride in their culture, it also bestowed a new city centre: Liverpool ONE. Liverpool ONE is a privately owned network of 169 shops and services straddling six streets in what was once the centre of the city. It opened in 2008, Liverpool's year as the European Capital of Culture. Socio-economic development is now one of the criteria for awarding that honour. It is transparently not solely about culture. Since when was economics cultural?

There is nothing I've seen in Marseille to match the monstrosity of the Liverpool One shopping centre, with its faux public spaces, its private branded security guards, its private branded litter bins and benches. But the Rue de la Republique has become a string of international chains, and not all of them pearls. I saw many shops you could buy from, but not too many you could live with.

I should say that I'm directing my criticisms, as the European Capital of Culture directs its blessings, at the city centre. The banlieue, the suburbs, will still put cleaners, cooks and captains on life support, to supply services for the centre. And of course there are still scousers living in post European Capital of Culture Liverpool, just as there will still be maghrebi men living in Marseille, lounging on car bonnets down the Rue des Petites Maries, waiting for house paint jobs, talking on mobile phones, taking a coffee, smoking a cigarette.

But these people aren't the people that the European Capital of Culture wants. The European Capital of Culture wants tourists, people who will spend money in idleness, all day, every day, to support the structures that support them. The European Capital of Culture wants – no, demands people like me.

The maghrebi men, just like the scousers, provide not always welcome local colour. One walks the quay, selling petits pains from a deep hessian sack. One plays the trumpet, his wife collecting pennies with bonjours. One manipulates a marionette to paint portraits. One cycles past screaming. Local colour.

(Not) Cycling to the Sahara: Boats

12 March 2012

Getting hit over the head by a palm tree is new for me on this trip. But one thing isn't: public transport delays. You read my earlier piece about trains, right? Okay, well do me a favour and read it again, but this time wherever you see the word "train" or "trains", insert the word "boat" or "boats". You can do this using the search and replace function in Word or OpenOffice.

Doing this will save me the bother of writing a whole new post about the universe's conspiracies to prevent me from getting to the Sahara. This time the universe decided to detonate a WWII bomb in the port of Marseille, which is frankly ridiculous, even by the universe's standards. This delayed us for a slightly enervating five hours. As if that wasn't enough, when we finally did make it (almost) to Tunis, an Italian cruiser had the temerity to be in port, delaying us for a further hour.

We finally arrived in Tunis at about 3.30pm, a full 31 hours after I arrived at the port of Marseille on Saturday morning. Still, I managed 9 patisseries on Saturday alone (5 croissants and 4 pain au chocolat), saving one pain au choc for Sunday breakfast, squeezed down between bouts of extreme nausea. I'm not sure why, but as soon as I got up that morning, I might as well have been on the Nemesis at Alton Towers. I remedied things by going back to sleep.

Aside from the tragedy/farce of my public transport difficulties, the journey itself was pretty good. Particularly after I found the bar, where they were showing the Six Nations rugby. I don't even

like rugby, but it was fun hearing Frenchmen swear every time Italy fumbled the ball in their match against Wales.

Unfortunately, this oasis of entertainment on an otherwise make-your-own-fun kind of boat was not long-lived. At half-time in the following Ireland-Scotland game suddenly the TV flashed to black. We look at each other, the guys sitting around watching. Then: disco lights snap on, tangoing drunkenly over the wooden dancefloor in front of us. Surely not? It's only five to seven – surely too early for a disco?

Nope. A man goes behind a desk and starts setting up what can only be a DJ booth. The men around me stay staring at the blank screen. Nothing happens. No one else is laughing. We sit, flat faced. We will be entertained now, for it is seven o'clock. We will be entertained.

A beat starts over the speakers. The DJ has glasses and a bald patch, wearing a terribly unfashionable Puma t-shirt. He pulls out some CDs and nervously tweaks the volume of the music. The disco lights, pink and green dazzle and tease a trio of white-haired grizzled Frenchmen with tiny espressos and firmly folded arms. Not impressed.

The waiter is the only one crossing the dancefloor. I wonder what people would make of it if I went up and danced? I suspect that I'm the only non-French or Tunisian here. I've seen a few other independent tourists with the French version of the same Lonely Planet guide I have. That's encouraging. It's not all Tunisians and televisions, although it seemed like it when we were loading up the boat. Everyone seemed to have a van or a car, creaking on its axles

under piles of households wares of all kinds. Blankets, televisions, fridges, bicycles, grandmothers – the lot, all tied down with string.

The DJ stops the record and slaps another one on abruptly. Kind of low key grind, slow steady beat. A deep voice sings something soothing in English. The DJ keeps himself busy, too scared to look up, knowing he's being observed in shock and horror by his audience. He feels the pressure, puts his arms hands down either side of his CDs and takes a heavy sigh.

It looked like it was going to be a good match too, 22-14 to Irish at half-time. But this is business time. The DJ claps on his headphones and twiddles.
'I want you just the way you are…' someone croons.

I decide to leave this entertainment and proceed to make my own fun, as instructed. I observe the following about my person:

I am from Cholsey, but…
I have lipsalve bought from Liverpool;
I have a book bought from Paris;
I have shoes bought from Hamburg;
I have a bottle of water bought from Koln;
I have a shirt bought from Bangkok;
I have a bicycle bought from London;
I have a plug converter bought from Cairo;
I have dates bought from Reading;
I have socks bought from Vernouillet;
I have croissants bought from Marseille;
…and I am in the Mediterranean.

Right. Not all fun you make yourself is strictly fun, is it?

Things did get progressively less dull with nightfall. I climbed up to the top deck, unrolled my sleeping bag and slept under the stars. It was fitful and a little cold at times, but at least it was peaceful.

In amongst the fun, there was a lot of sitting around and I had the opportunity to observe my ship-mates. Most of my companions were Tunisian men and it was quite fun watching them form conversational groupings here and there, including me sometimes whenever they needed some light entertainment.

There were women on board, but the two groups didn't really mix. At one stage, I found myself eavesdropping on four military men talking about Syria, Iran and Israel up on deck. All I could think was: shame no women are here to talk some sense into them. Everywhere I look it's the same: groups of men talking earnestly together. I like guy-talk as much as the next man, but I can't imagine talking politics without ever getting a female perspective. What a dull (and dangerous) way to see the world.

Anyway, we did eventually make it to Tunis (in your own time, Mr Italian cruiser) and the first thing a real Tunisian from Tunis said to me was (in French): "Nice set of wheels, guv."

At least I think that's what he said, because I was too busy sorting my pedals out after the port authorities had seen fit, not only to x-ray my baggage and metal detect myself, but also to x-ray my bicycle. I can tell you right now that bicycles are not supposed to go into x-ray machines and it was promptly chewed up and had to be surgically removed by a none-too-careful customs inspector. There was a cat prowling along the customs tables. I assume he was in charge.

Wheeling out of the arrivals lounge was fun, though. A rank of taxi drivers greeted me, seeing my blonde head bobbing across to them.

“Taxi…” they all shout, but the word fades in their throats as they see my bold stallion wheeling alongside me. Then: “Nice set of wheels, guv.”

(Not) Cycling to the Sahara: Marseille 2

12 March 2012

The town of Marseille is dishonest. That's how it seems to me. And I don't mean that as you might think. I don't mean it because a friend of mine got pick-pocketed twice within an hour of arriving here. That's ridiculous. That could happen anywhere. It certainly didn't happen to me. The tangle of streets around the Gare Saint Charles that seemed so dangerous to the Americans, Czechs and French in the hostel, to me seemed friendly, approachable.

The town is dishonest in another way – perhaps a better word would be *inauthentic*. It is dishonest, or inauthentic, because it is neither France nor the Maghreb. It cannot be France because it is home to too many migrants from the Maghreb, North Africa (70,000 in 2006 according to one source). And it cannot be the Maghreb because it is not their home, it is France.

Because of the current economic condition of France, there are too many young Maghrebi men on the streets, just waiting to go home. That's not a very restful state of mind and helps to create Marseille's frantic atmosphere. Many are resentful of their French hosts and the feeling is mutual. It is nearing election time and last week Sarkozy declared that there are too many foreigners in France.

While waiting for the ferry to take me to Tunisia, I spoke to a friendly Tunisian man (a tautology if ever there was one: they are all friendly). He told me that French attitudes towards resident

foreigners are going down. Scared by the prospect of the forthcoming elections, Sarkozy is blaming France's high unemployment and faltering economy on foreigners. Cheap and nasty political rhetoric.

But with Ben Ali gone in Tunisia, my friend can return to his country. He can take his business near the Swiss border, take his taxes and leave. Tunisia is the gateway to North Africa and is the beneficiary of a lot of investment after the revolution.

"I can say ciao to Sarkozy," my friend says, bitterly.

Others are not so lucky. Every evening while in Marseille I went to an Algerian kebab shop right next to the hostel. It was cheap, E2.50 for a merguez sandwich, and the proprietor was friendly, always smiling, always joking. But he was dishonest, of course. No, he never short-changed me, but he never knew when to speak Arabic and when to speak French. Overwhelmingly, to other guests, it was Arabic. But we were in France, so to me he spoke French. And his smile disappeared when he spoke of Algeria. His gap-tooth grin morphed into a snarl of fierce pride.

'Do you know Algeria?' he asked me.

'No,' I replied.

'Why not? It is a beautiful country, better than Morocco, better than Tunisia.' He looked angry. All I could do was smile and say that I hoped to go there soon.

Marseille is dishonest because, even as the exterior is given a fresh lick of paint for its parade as the European Capital of Culture in 2013, on the inside it is tearing itself apart. It is France's major link to North Africa, with all of the history, violence and despair which that entails. So how can it dare to reinvent itself as a tourist

destination? It is the crucible of too many Maghrebi dreams: of freedom from tyranny and of return. It is dishonest as a place where people both yearn to arrive and yearn to leave. It is better than oppression, dictatorships or civil war – and it is nothing. These contradictions pull strongly in two directions and you pull together or you pull apart, to make use of a cliche.

Marseille's football team is perhaps a symptom of this malaise. With so many North Africans, Marseille is the most tribally of supported teams in France. North Africans are simply more passionate about football than Frenchmen. But the team is a shambles. They have lost four games in a row, sit eighth in the league and last night were defeated by AC Ajaccio, a newly promoted team from Corsica. The feeling in the bar where I watched the match was anticipated deflation. A group from Lille sitting on the next table along covered their mouths to hide their laughter as the winning goal was bundled in via a deflection, a suspicion of handball and a static goalkeeper. The ball scarcely crept over the line. The bar rumbled threateningly.

Then there was a power cut. The bar cheered. Welcome distraction.

(Finally) Cycling to the Sahara!

13 March 2012

I have a few early observations about cycling in Tunisia, which I shall set down here as amusement for those wise enough never to do such a thing and as warning for those stupid enough to try.

1. There *are* some red lights that Tunisian drivers obey. This came as something of a shock, I must confess. Obviously, as in any country, this doesn't apply to taxi drivers.

2. The biggest risk for accidents comes from pedestrians. As the sacred cow in India, the Tunisian pedestrian is apt to wander into the road without warning, causing sharp braking all around. Other risks include taxis swerving kerbside to pick up passengers and the presence (in Tunis) of tram rails, neatly tyre-width sized for maximum danger.

3. There *are* other cyclists in Tunisia. But in this country, bicycles are mostly used for going the wrong way up one-way streets.

4. Despite this, I did notice that in Tunisia, one cycles on the right hand side of the road.

5. Tunisian sense of distance isn't highly developed. I asked a local:
"How far is the Olympic stadium?"
(The Olympic stadium at this point is at most 3km away – I checked on a map later.)
Answer: "10 kilometres."
In fairness to the chap telling me this, he probably understood:

6. If you are cycling without a map and without a compass, expect to ride at least three times the distance to your destination, probably up hill, certainly into a head wind. This applies not just in Tunisia.

7. Thanks to the relatively meagre state of Tunisia, alcohol-wise, there is very little to fear from smashed bottles of Heineken on the side of the road. However, thanks to the relatively meagre state of Tunisia's finances, there is plenty to fear in the form of pot-holes, unifinished road-works and mysteriously dumped piles of cement.

8. An important aspect of Tunisian driving etiquette is a sort of conversation undertaken by use of the car horn. Unfortunately, with just a bicycle bell, I'm only talking to myself.

9. A blonde, long-haired, white man on an apparently modern bicycle is an unusual sight in Tunisia. I'm not sure if they were admiring glances, looks and stares, but the general opinion was "w'allah!"

10. Other than these observations, cycling in Tunis is not unlike cycling in London. One needs ones wits and a healthy dose of good fortune to come back alive, but when one does, great celebrations are in order. Put celebrations on stand-by.

Beards and the Shabaab

14 March 2012

For the sake of my future security on this trip I think I need to grow a big manly beard. You know, the kind that big manly adventurers are wont to port.

This is not because I feel that I am deserving of the adventurer's big manly beard, nor in fact do I mean to suggest that I am currently engaged on a big manly beardy adventure. Far from it: the sun is shining and the roads are flat. No, the reason I am desirous of a big manly adventure beard is because today I was the subject of sexual advances from a shabaab on a moped who thought I was a woman.

Undeterred despite being disabused of this fact – had he not seen my leg hair? – the desperate youth went on to suggest that man-on-man sex was better anyway. I politely declined this further invitation, whereupon he stole my walkman from my top pocket. Slightly distressed, I appealed to his better nature, whereupon he stole the bag from my front basket and drove off.

I feel that none of this would have happened had I been sporting a big manly beard. This impudent youth would never have dared rob a real beard – a beard that spoke of death-match wrestles with grizzly bears, a beard that hinted at dark days hacking through tarantula-infested jungles, a beard that sung songs of violent tempests and nightmarish sandstorms overcome by sheer force of will and beardy fortitude.

In this moment of desolation, as I watched my camera, books, passport and typewriter disappear down a hill, I cursed my razor

and howled bloody vengeance on all fresh-faced highwaymen on mopeds.

Before I let this tale get too dramatic, I should point out that the shameful youth only drove a little way down the hill, before turning around and handing me back my bag and walkman. 'I'm just playing with you,' he said with a cackle. Playing or no, I think a beard would have helped avoid this unsettling occasion in the first place.

What helped me recover was the nice old man in a van who stopped up the road, turned around, checked that I was okay, then proceeded to tail me up the hill for a mile or so just to make sure.

So the truth is that Tunisians are still awesomely friendly. The problem comes when this awesome friendliness meets rambunctuous testosterone frustrations in the shabaab, who smile even as they torment you.

But what harm was done by this little escapade? None that I can see, only lessons. I learnt how vulnerable I really am on a bicycle. I learnt that perhaps I should tie down my bag to the basket. I learnt to appreciate how much I am relying on the unremmitting kindness, relentless patience and righteous morality of every person I meet, everywhere I go.

I also got a nice little story and isn't that the purpose of life, to collect nice little stories?

Two Coffee Cups

15 March 2012

I arrived in Hammamet exactly the way I expect to arrive in every single town that I come to: sweaty, tired and slightly bewildered.

On arrival in any town, therefore, primary goal number one is to find a hotel, where I can stable my bicycle for the night and give myself a thorough wash down. Quite often, I'll even pull up outside town to look at the guide book for my target hotel. It doesn't look cool to be head-in-book in a strange new town (for the importance of looking cool, see yesterday's shabaab story).

This is all preamble, to introduce you to primary goal number one: find a hotel. I shall now go onto demonstrate its tragic flaw, by means of the parable of the two coffee cups, a true story.

Arriving in Hammamet, sweaty, tired, slightly bewildered, I'm heading for the Dar al-Shabaab, the Maison des Jeunes, the Youth Hostel. Everything is going fine (except the bit where a shabaab gets down on his haunches to tinker with my brakes – I have no idea what that's about). Quite according to form, I zip straight past the youth hostel and cycle on for about a mile (up hill, into headwind) before realising. But eventually I do find the place and – it's full.

As I slink back to my bicycle and my uncool guide book, a young Tunisian woman of about eighteen approaches me and suggests I try the tourist information office: "They have a list of all the hotels and how much they cost," she tells me. "Thanks very much," I say, trying to look cool, "but I have a guide book."

She shrugs and crosses the road to a café, her mother now in tow. I note the address of another cheap hotel and start to wheel my bike into the road. Then the young woman approaches me again: "Would you like to join me and my mother at the café for a drink?" I obviously look uncertain, because she feels compelled to add: "Just to talk a little."

Now my immediate reaction is negative, standard social anxiety. I push against this snap-reaction: social anxiety is exactly the reason I should say yes – go where the danger is! But my brain wrestles back: No, primary goal number one, remember? So I say to the woman, in my blunt French: "I want to find a hotel." She says "Okay" and returns to the café. I last see her sitting down at the table, looking over at me.

It doesn't take me long to realise that I'm a chump and I really should have said yes and hang primary sodding goal number one. How many more times on this trip is a young Tunisian woman going to ask me to take a coffee with her and her mother? Never again, most likely. And it's only three thirty; I could just as easily have found a hotel at four thirty. And what's the worst that could have happened if I'd said yes? She and her mum might have ganged up and raped me? Seriously! Chump.

But anyway, I cycle on, find a hotel and take a shower. I'm wonderfully clean, but still a chump. So I hasten back to the café, thinking up words of schoolboy French to reintroduce myself. My excitement mounts as I draw closer, mind working up scenarios of hospitality and good humour.

But all in vain. By the time I get back to the café, only half an hour after leaving them, all that is left are two empty coffee cups.

I took a photo to remind myself: never leave two empty coffee cups, leave three.

Farmyard Animals

18 March 2012

Yesterday was supposed to be a short day. Starting early from Sousse, I should have arrived at my destination by about lunchtime with plenty of time to mosey around the Roman amphitheatre at El Jem.

But given the nature of this trip so far, I shouldn't have been surprised when I only arrived at my destination at 22.30, 70km from where I expected to be.

On the plus side, I did get a guided tour around a Tunisian farm, near Ghanada.

These chaps were fricking awesome. Hamdi picked me up of the side of the road and near dragged me in for a cup of tea. He introduced me to Ali (above, with his seven month old calf, his 'marriage') and Khaled, a young fella who worked for the Garde Nationale and drove a tractor.

They fed me yoghurt fresh from their cow (above), bread fresh from their oven and an enormous egg fresh from one of their geese (above) and we all watched the National Geographic channel together. Then we went on a tour with the camera around their thousand tree olive grove and inspected all the animals. Love this place!

Anyway, I apologise for the somewhat episodic nature of this post, but here is the news in brief:

Hammamet

Disasterous room. The shower instantly floods its feeble curtain, flows merrily into the bathroom, seeps under the door frame and out into the wider bedroom beyond. This seems to come as standard in Tunisian hotels, but this particular shower comes with a cold tap that you can't turn off. It turns ON all right, but not off. So I had to switch off at the mains, which means that I can't flush the toilet – unless I'm also having a shower.

Furthermore, the TV when switched on makes a whirring noise, gives off a sparking flash and then nothing. And only two lights work. Otherwise it's great. Oh and there are no windows, except onto a closed-in courtyard. And the muezzin sounds at about 5.30am. And I wake up freezing cold at midnight. Otherwise…

Traffic

There is an immense amount of heavy goods traffic in Tunisia. I don't understand it, but they seem to be building vast cities at every turn. However, I have found it is possible to enjoy choking in the dust of a truck or lorry – my favourite are the ones carrying huge bubls of fennel. The air is most delightfully fragrant in their wake. My least favourite has to be the ones stacked with crates of chickens. The stench of poultry excrement lingers most persistantly.

Cheering Crowds

I love cycling in Tunisia. People honk horns joyfully and give me the thumbs up or wave. One driver leapt out of his seat and started blowing kisses at me. Too many people stare sometimes, but there is a wonderful reflex in Tunisian people that, once greeted, they

must reciprocate. So all I do is wave or salaam and they return with a smile.

The Saha-who?!

In Haouria, I first told a Tunisian of my evil plan to cycle to the Sahara. A waiter asked me where I was going on my tour. I told him around the Cap Bon. He nodded. Then I added: 'I hope to cycle to the Sahara as well.' 'The Sahara?' he queried. 'Yes!' I replied. He just slapped his forehead and brought me a free plate of French fries.

Next time, I promise to introduce some characters, including Yasser the drunk from Gabes, Wa'el the drunk from Lebanon and Mohammed the drug-dealer from Sousse. Lovely chaps, all.

The Vanishings of Kasr el-Jem

19 March 2012

Was it an elaborate hoax, devised to ensnare gulled travellers? Or could it be a mirage in the minds of weary-sickened tourists? And yet The Internet insists it exists… The hoax runs deep.

I arrived in el jem very hot and sweaty (as expected). I cycled immediately to the only hotel in the town. According to my guide book, the only point in its favour was that it was easily found, being located directly next to the train station. This didn't bode well for a comfortable stay ("surly" was the epithet the guide book chose), but at least a stay I would have.

I did indeed easily find the train station. But of the hotel there was no sign. Even after three tours of the curious architectural sculpture that adorns the square in front of the majestic train station, I still couldn't find the damned surly hotel.

So I asked a local, who was just falling off his moped. He nodded and shook his head and waved his hand around, seeming to indicate a complicated set of cycling instructions. "No, no," I insist, "the hotel is near to the station!"

A friendly English speaker intervenes at this points and translates the terrible truth: the surly hotel has closed down. Its easy-to-find location was clearly not enough. "But happily," he goes on to translate, "there is another hotel a little way out of town, just two or three kilometres." Excellent news. "What's it called?" I ask. "Ksar el-Jem, the Palace of El-Jem." And the man gives me detailed instructions: head for the main road to Sousse (the one I had

studiously avoided on my way in), past the gas station and it's right there – two or three kilometres only.

And so I set off.

With bear cycling instinct, I find the road to Sousse first time. Borne on the same strong wind that I'd fought my way through to get here, I am highly gratified when I fly past a gas station after about 2 or 3 kilometers. But I see no hotel, palace or otherwise.

I stop and ask a group of people inspecting a broken down moped, a moto they call them. One of them claps me on the arm and points further down the road. "Hotel? Yes, yes. There is: two or three kilometres – on the left." I thank him and press onward. As I fly past the crossed out el-Jem sign, I decide that the first man must have meant two or three kilometres *out of town*.

I cycle on and on, seeing nothing remotely like a hotel. In fact, they appear to be farm buildings, wheat silos and the odd mechanics. I must say it doesn't look promising, as the dust scuds into my face from the barrelling rumble of construction lorries and the sun sinks its teeth into my neck.

Then I pass a huge billboard announcing: Hotel Club Kasr el-Jem, and showing off its keyhole swimming pool. Truth be praised! There's no indication on the billboard of where the Kasr is, but I must be on the right track. And so I faithfully persist in pedalling.

I end up cycling four miles without seeing a hotel. I stop and ask a soldier who's just climbed out of a coriander truck. He shakes my hand, happily, repeating after me: "El-Jem, el-Jem," while pointing

redundantly down the road back to the town. I guess he doesn't understand I mean *Kasr* el-Jem, the hotel.

I shout over at some workmen who had been wolf whistling at me. One of them saunters over, smiling sheepishly. I ask him for Kasr el-Jem. He seems to understand me, but still points back down the road. "Two or three kilometres. Yes," he says, firmly. Okay. This is possible, I have come a long way down this dusty road. So I start cycling back towards town. Perhaps the hotel was in the building where that billboard was. It looked like a wheat processing plant, but you never know…

So I stop at the billboard to ask some farm workers. "Buongiorno!" they shout back, confusedly. I ask them for the Kasr el-Jem hotel. "Yes, Kasr el-Jem – two or three kilometres," they say, pointing in the direction of el-Jem. Hmm. I'm beginning to get a little pissed off with this hotel, so I vow to ask every single person I see.

I stop at a café, just inside el-Jem city limits. "Kasr el-Jem? Yes!" he says, promisingly. He stops smoking a dead chicken on a barbeque, leads me onto the road and points back the way I've just come. "500 meters," he says. Well, I think, that's so specific that it must be right! "With a door like this," he adds, indicating a huge blue studded door ahead of us.

With my tail up and a close eye on my odometer, I cycle back out of town again. I stop at the first building I see with a huge blue studded door and wheel my bike inside the compound. It doesn't look promising, I have to say – motorbike and car parts litter the ground. Some are fixed up on the outer walls of the white pasted building. It could be décor?

So I shout over to a couple of men working on a car. One of them comes over. “Kasr el-Jem hotel?” I ask, in my best Arabic. He waves his hand back in the direction of town. “Two or three kilometres,” he says. I slap my cycle helmet in disbelief. “Impossible!” I refuse to accept his judgement and repeat myself in a kaleidoscope of every language I know: “Hotel Kasr el-Jem, nuzul Kasr el-Jem, l’hotel Kasr el-Jem!” But he is adamant, flapping his hands towards the town: “Yes, yes! Two or three kilometres!” I shake my head. He leads me to the road again and firmly shoves me in the direction of town. “Two or three kilometres!” I look at him hopelessly one last time. “On the left or on the right?” But he doesn’t understand: “No, straight on. Two or three kilometres.”

So I give up and have to cycle back past all the helpful people who tried to direct me to this damnedably mythical hotel.

On Killer Guard Dogs and Courage

20 March 2012

For those of you following closely my twitter feed (ahem), you will know that yesterday I took an unmarked country track from el-Jem to Sfax. This was a slightly risky move, I thought, because the track did not appear on my map and I had no idea where I was or – aside from a vague notion that south was good – where I was going.



A dangerous country track. But why?

But it transpires the risk is not from a danger so tame as getting lost, but from the fact that country tracks are the dominion of killer guard dogs, half-mad slavering demons of Baskerville proportions,

whose spine-chilling banshee-howl of a bark is only matched in ferocity by their bone-snapping sabre-toothed bite. That I am not writing this from some heavenly sanctuary is due only to the grace that these murderous predators are limited in speed to 20mph and I, adrenalin gland pumping, am capable of 21.4mph (into a headwind and uphill of course).

The danger posed by these hounds was manifest. However, there was another danger that I was entirely oblivious to: these country tracks are also hunting grounds for robbers and thieves. Bearing in mind that my only brush with petty crime so far has been two kids fooling around, I am less than credulous when a chap called Najjar flags me down from his motorbike and sternly warns me of this danger to which I have foolishly exposed myself.

"In future, take only the primary routes," he says. I try to explain that the primary routes are disgustingly overrun with trucks and lorries. But he nods furiously in agreement, "Yes, yes, more circulation, more traffic, good. No thieves." He doesn't seem to get the point that I'm after a pleasant ride, not a lung-choking coughing-fit.

But then he doesn't understand what the hell I'm doing on a bicycle in Tunisia right after the revolution in the first place. "You are very courageous," he says. "Despite all the problems, you are still trying to tour our country." This is the first I've heard of such problems. Even the FCO, that most wanton, craven, petty-fooling of travel advisors – even the FCO declare Tunisia to be safe for innocent holiday-makers. But Najjar disabuses me of this government fantasy: "After the revolution, there are many thieves and catastrophes."

So Najjar takes it upon himself to escort me to the safety of the main road, chugging alongside me as we cycle through these dangerous country villages full of wavey, smiley people. There aren't even any more killer dogs. "But why are there so many thieves after the revolution?" I ask. "Because the police are afraid of them," my bodyguard replies. "They are in confusion after the revolution. There are many problems now."

Najjar faithfully leads me to the main road, where the trucks thunder and the lorries roar. His duty discharged, Najjar bids me farewell and leaves me with 17km of main road to survive. I am secure in the knowledge that I face the mere threat of extinction by fumes or tyre treads. To be honest, I'd rather thieves and knaves. In fact, his very kindness and concern is exactly what makes me feel secure in my dealings with humanity here in Tunisia.



Main road. Safer? Nicer?

But what struck me most about this episode was that Najjar called me courageous (regardless of whether he meant it or not). I do not feel this courage. I was ignorant of these robber dangers (and, by the by, I don't believe a word of it, insha'allah) and ignorance of a danger doesn't amount to courage in the face of that danger.

What struck me was this: Aristotle tells us that a surfeit of a certain characteristic becomes its opposite (courage in excess is foolhardiness, for example), but perhaps a deficit of a characteristic can become its opposite too – in this case fearfulness or timidity of character appearing to look like courage!

I was acutely aware, the whole time Najjar was telling me how dangerous these roads were, that he could easily have knocked me

off my bike and robbed me blind himself. But instead of voicing my fears or telling him to sod off, I followed him and, in my fear, trusted him. Can this possibly be courage? Or is it the act of a weak will – a timid act, if not a cowardly one?

And yet despite this, if the definition of courage is to persist in the face of danger, then demonstrably I have courage in abundance. But this courage doesn't feel like courage to me (I wonder: does it to anyone? To Shackleton, to Napoleon, to Boudicea?). To me it feels like timidity of character combined with helpless faith in the good nature of others and a need to survive and to push onwards. If this be courage, then I do indeed take courage.

P.S.: Those of a dog-like disposition will be pleased to hear that not dogs were harmed in the making of this bike ride. Yet.

P.P.S.: Those of a dog-like disposition will not be so pleased to hear that dogs and heavy goods vehicles do not make good companions. After swearing vengeance on the next dog that attacked me, I saw only two more dogs: both dead on the side of the road, flies buzzing around their eyes. I can't say that I was heart-broken with pity.

Matmata Motobylette Man

25 March 2012

Story goes: I cycled to Matmata, a small town dug into the ground on the way to the Sahara. In the seventies, George Lucas sprinkled tourist-gold over the town by filming Star Wars there. Henceforth the town was cursed to be a place of pilgrimmage for cultic cinema-goers wishing to see the spot where a fictional character wasn't born.

For me, it was a nice spot to stop after a big day of cycling the day before. So I sat on a wall overlooking a green-coated wadi, watching the sun fall between two palm trees as the mosque gave the dusk call to prayer.

A young man barks up on a motobylette behind me. A motobylette is essentially a bicycle with a motor gaffa-taped on the back. He greets me. I flinch, instinctively.

I flinch because it is customary in Matmata for locals to tout tourists for business. It is all part of the curse. This business involves invading the privacy of various put-upon residents for the purpose of ogling their homes / Star Wars sets, ostensibly on Luke Skywalker's home planet of Tataouine. I hope this makes sense to some of you readers, because I had no idea what they were talking about.

The other business is desert touring. Everyone here seems to own a stable of camels, horses, 4x4s, quad bikes, motorbikes and numerous other conveyances to rent for the purpose of desert safari. These propositions are usually fairly swiftly dealt with.

“You want tour of desert?”
“No thanks, I’m going there alone.”
“Oh, you have 4×4?”
“No. I have a bicycle.”
“Ah, yes, okay – I put bicycle on car and into Sahara.”
“No, I’m cycling there myself.”
At which point the proposition usually founders.

Anyway, once the propositions are over, quite often these men just want to chat.

So the young man on the motobylette told me that he was from the Gdouma clan and that I was staying in the Gdouma clan area of Matmata. Apparently, the Gdouma clan are found only here in Matmata and in Senegal. And in Canada, but mainly in Matmata and Senegal.

Why? I ask. And so motobylette man tells me the story of the Gdouma clan.

A long time ago, a Gdouma man travelled to Matmata across the Sahara from Senegal. He fell in love with the beautiful Matmata women and stayed. He married and had children and his children had children and their children had children and so on. Over the years, the Gdouma skin grew whiter and whiter, until today they are indistinguishable from their neighbours. Now the motobylette man lives just 14km from where the first Gdouma man arrived all those years ago.

I ask him if he’ll ever go to Senegal, to visit his ancestors – he could take his motobylette. He objects, saying he’ll run out of gasoil – Tunisia is not a rich country, it has no gasoil. So sell the

motobylette and take a camel, I say. He laughs. I'm not joking. He says he'd rather go to Canada, but the government won't let him.

An old man rolls up at this point and sends motobylette man off to buy some bread. The old man sits down on the wall next to me.

A few minutes later, motobylette man returns. He failed to find bread for the old man. There's only one baker in town and he only bakes enough bread for the inhabitants of Matmata, about 2000 people. If it runs out, it runs out. At the moment there are a lot of Tunisian tourists here because of the holidays and they've eaten all the townspeople's bread! Part of the curse, again.

The old man gets up and goes off to the shop to buy flour so that his wife can make bread at home. You see, the man and the wife work together to make bread. The man buys the flour and the woman bakes, motobylette man tells me.

He's never seen Matmata so green, not in 14 years. Normally there is very little rain, but right now there is a dusting of green over everything. Shrubs sprouting everywhere. Purple and yellow flowers rooting and blooming – from nowhere, it looks like. Later, someone tells me that twenty days ago it even snowed in Matmata. I don't believe that, but the next morning, when I see the town hung with mist, I think perhaps it's true.

Motobylette man says there are few European tourists here at the moment, perhaps because of the economic crisis. And if there is crisis in Europe, he says, then in Tunisia there is death. And he laughs. He tells me that he is guide, but also not guide. I think he means he is an unlicensed guide. Most people here work with tourists in one way or another. You can see there is nothing else

here, motobylette man says: no agriculture, nothing. We must do better, he says. Then he invites me for a coffee or a tea, but for me it's dinner time.

As I go to my earthwork hotel, the old man walks past with his bag of flour.

To MP3 or not to MP3?

26 March 2012

Long-distance cycling will always, at some point, become an arduous task. Whether it's Tunisia's flat expanses of eye-watering desert or the hard shoulder of the A1, there will come moments when every turn of the pedals seems a pointless trial of will.

At these moments, it is tempting to push aside the present and to try to make time pass faster by plugging in your headphones and listening to something totally dislocated from now.

The juxtaposed sound of Bob Dylan crying about racial murder in Louisiana or spiral rhythms dropping from the decks of a DJ in Bristol can bring an odd comfort to cycling on a bleached-out main road in Tunisia, as trucks torment me with their dust-devil exhaust pipes, the sun soddens my shirt and the squeaky crank of my sand-choked chain drills into my brain.

But dislocating by MP3 is not all good. Music focuses the mind on the subject or the mood of the song. This is great if you are in trouble (I whole-heartedly believe that Nashville Skyline saved my life when I was cycling through northern France with a broken bike at 4am in the morning), but where would your thoughts take you if you were cycling in silence? What could you learn, what could you understand for yourself?

I haven't used my MP3 player the last two days – not even on the 136km main road from Sfax to Gabes. I preferred fantasy and my own thoughts. At the risk of sounding like I'm going insane, I have conversations. Not just with myself, but with my friends. These are

real conversations: they make me laugh. I wouldn't possibly laugh out loud if I was just making up these conversations on my own. No, my friends are there with me, telling jokes.

In Tunisia, it also feels rude to have headphones on, certainly when going through towns and villages. Every person you pass on the road expects and offers a greeting. It is hard to greet someone when you're listening to heavy metal and conversation is impossible.

I shall keep my MP3 player. If nothing else, it is good for blocking out the snoring coming from the hotel room next door. But I am certainly using it far less on the road. The birds are calling to me…

The Road to Ksar Ghilane

27 March 2012

Matmata: another man with a 4×4 offers me a desert Safari.
'No, thanks,' I reply. 'I'm cycling to Ksar Ghilane on my bicycle tomorrow.'
'Oh,' he says. 'You know the best way is down this road. More direct than the main route.'
'Really?' I ask.
'Yes, yes. Over the jebel, then – ' he makes a motion with his hand as if it's all down hill from there.
I'm slightly nervous as the road he indicates is not marked on my drawn-from-space road map. So I ask: 'Is it signed?'
'Yes, yes. It is direct to a roundabout, turn right and arrive Bir Soltane – after that Ksar Ghilane.'

So, always happy to avoid a main road, I vow to follow his advice.

The next day, it takes me approximately ten minutes to recognise the truth of Tolkein's aphorism that short cuts make long delays.

The "road" that led over the jebel was, well, I think even a 4×4 would have had trouble to be honest. I certainly didn't see any attempting it. To cross it on a fully-laded touring bicycle was nerve-shredding. As the front wheel stacked into deep road-scars, I'd wince as the back wheel crunched down with the full weight of my baggage. Every moment I expected to hear the crack of spokes snapping. Up hill was dragging slow, but the down hills were only more dangerous.

And – is it signed, my arse! Unless by "signs" he meant "old men on donkeys" of whom I encountered two, both appearing at critical moments. Once as I pondered turning back at the sight of miles and miles of up and down hills tracked only by treacherous washed-out roads, pot holes the size of meteor craters. And the other when I reached the "roundabout" of my guide's description. Is it signed? No it is not signed. At all. It's a T-junction with a choice of east or west. That's it.

But at least the road surface after the junction is better. If I could reach the road surface, that is. Unfortunately it is covered in an inch of sand, so the bike can only manage about ten metres of swerves before I have to dig the tyres out of the dune. Still, I'd rather swerves than the potential death of the pot holes.

This "road" to Ksar Ghilane is also guarded by ten dogs. Thankfully, they were only barkers, not chasers. I think they were gobsmacked to see a cyclist to be honest. Only one shepherd's dog put in a half-hearted chase.

I didn't get lost at any point on this "road", but I think that is only because to be lost you must have had some idea of where you were in the first place. I didn't see more than ten people all day – a few flocks of sheep and two camels – but not many people who could guide me.

When I saw a shepherd boy on a donkey, I dumped my bike at the side of the road and marched across the sand towards him. He climbed down off his donkey and started over to me. We met in the middle.
"You are alone?" he asked, after comfirming that this was indeed

the road to Bir Soltane. “Very difficult,” he added, somewhat unnecessarily.

The “road” surface was mainly spine-crunching stones about the size of a baby’s head. Every bounce and crack a brief panic at the idea of getting a puncture – or worse, that my wheel spokes would snap at the strain. The surface and the care that I took with it meant that I couldn’t exactly enjoy the view. After the mountains, it would be fair to say that there wasn’t much view to enjoy anyway.

Every now and then I’d cross a waterless wadi, turned into a sea of gravel. I’d need to push across, of course.

After “cycling” through this god-blasted land for 26.08 miles at an average speed of just 8.1mph, I finally reached the main road to Ksar Ghilane, where the 4x4s roar.

I’ve never been so glad to see a proper road in my life.

Ksar Ghilane (Moany)

28 March 2012

This should be some sort of triumphant Saharan-arrival post, but I forgot to take a photograph of me and my bicycle in the sand, so you'll just have to wait a while for that.

Instead, I'm going to moan on about the misery of petrol-based transport and overweight European men in tight shorts.

To which I think we can all say: yuk.

Ksar Ghilane is an oasis on the edge of the Grand Erg Oriental, one of the great sand seas of the Sahara. It is a miracle. It is also a tourist hot spot, being both easily accessible (if you don't cycle) and astonishingly beautiful.

I have been to Ksar Ghilane once before, in 2008. In four years it has developed a great deal. I don't remember seeing so many campsites or so many vehicles or so many petrolheads and tourists last time. Beer, bikinis, men in tight shorts, guts out. It's embarrassing, but it's also costly for the sustainability of the oasis. Water is tight and Europeans (me included) loooove water.

But despite the plentiful supply of Europeans, I feel more alone here in Ksar Ghilane than anywhere else I've been so far, for two reasons.

Firstly, all the other tourists are in big groups, roving gangs of Italians, Germans and Tunisians all trying to look cool. The employees aren't much better it seems to me, all sunglasses and crazy stubble beards.

Secondly, everyone else is into one thing and one thing only: pissing about on petrol machines. Quads or bikes or 4x4s. It's disgusting. Even people you might expect to have an appreciation for the sanctity of the desert. I spoke to one teacher whose eyes lit up recalling her morning on a quad bike. "It's addictive," she said. When I said I didn't like petrol meachines, she admitted that they did rather break the serenity. No shit.

I resent the noise of the engines, I resent the smell of the diesel, I resent the damage that you can see scarred into the sand. But these people are on holiday, the locals are earning a living and everyone is having fun. Unthinking or uncaring, I know not which.

And, to be fair, driving about on dunes is fun. It is right there, petrol fun: speed, beauty, excitement. It makes you laugh and cry out with thrilling excitement. And the buzz stays with you.

But there's not much more you can say for it than that. It's a thrill. It's not going to teach you much and it costs the environment, but it's a thrill.

Walking in the desert, by comparison, is a quieter sort of thrill. There is the thrill of being amongst the dunes. There is the thrill from the silence (while it lasts from the 4x4s and quads and bikes). There's the thrill from the emptiness and the magnitude. And it costs comparatively little.

Walking in the desert doesn't give you the exhausting, exhilarating thrill of quad bikes. It gives you a vibrating thrill of awe in the sublime joy of nature. You could get the thrill of quad biking on the Oxfordshire downs (and people do: swap sand for mud, sun for cloud and Tuareg for chavs – it's the same damn thing). The desert

does not add much to the quad-biking experience because desert beauty is quiet and difficult. Quads take that away. Walking, on the other hand, does not.

So I walked across the dunes to a ruined fort. Most people come out here in 4x4s, quad bikes or motorbikes. I remember driving here in a 4×4 myself in 2008, staggering round half asleep, scared my camera would stick up in the sand, taking photos through a plastic bag. It seems absurd, sad even. But I walked here this time. It only took about 45 minutes.

Not many others walk here. But why not?

Only when walking can you see the flowers close up, precious gifts of the spring. The sandfall trickle down the dunes, dispersed by your feet. Unexplained hard nodules of sand butting out into the wind. The trails of the scarab beetles and sand ants, propped up on huge stilt legs. The tracks of camels, occasional footprints. Sadly less than occasional tyre tracks. Dunes so big you disappear into them. The cool of the shade-side sand. The heat as your leg sinks into the dune slopes. The sun working on your imagination. The dunes like waves on the sea, making it impossible to tell how far you still have to go. The fort disappearing into the distance, seeming further away than ever.

Then suddenly it's there in front of you. And you see the 4x4s gunning their engines to drive up the steep sand slopes, so nobody even needs to walk up the last 25 metres.

Sermon over. Next time: Happy post.

Ksar Ghilane (Happy)

29 March 2012

So without further ado, and before you all start thinking that I'm having a miserable time worrying about the hideous environmental impact of tourism, here is the Ksar Ghilane happy post.

I'M IN THE FREAKING SAHARA!

Hurrah.

(Or, as some of you have noticed: I *was* in the Sahara. But because there is no internet in the middle of the world's greatest desert, these words, although conceived in the deepest Sahara, were not uploaded for your delectation until now.)

So I cycled all the way from my house in London (ahem) to the Sahara desert (ahem). Okay, so I only cycled from Caterham to Vernouillet and then from Tunis to the Sahara. But still.

Anyway, my point is that it really isn't far. If you count only miles in Tunisia then I'd be on about 500 miles. That's nothing! And it includes a totally unnecessary detour of about 80-120 miles around the Cap Bon. Theoretically, you could catch a train from London to Marseille (careful), hop on a boat (careful) and cycle to the Sahara in a week.

What I'm saying is: you should do this.

The Saharan desert is like nothing else on earth. Despite all the tourist petrol rubbish, it takes only a few steps out into the dunes, out into the great sand sea, to feel like the first annointed saint, the first man on the moon, the last man on earth.

Whatever. If you aren't interested, you aren't interested. I'll entertain you instead. By showing you some pictures of men riding on horses. Upside down.

You see, I appear to have landed in Ksar Ghilane at the time of the Spring Festival. I'm not convinced this is a good thing, especially when my afternoon siesta (= post-cycle wipeout) is interrupted by a loudspeaker turned up way past 11. Somewhat grumpily, then, I crawl out of my berber tent to learn what the fuss is about. But it would take a heart of iron not to be charmed by the sight of a six-week old baby in the arms of a tuareg horseman riding through the oasis. At 40mph.

Aside from the attractions of the desert (4x4s notwithstanding), the attractions of men showing off on horseback and the attractions of European men in tight shorts with their guts out, the oasis also boasts a hot spring. Despite its name, the hot spring is actually luke warm. It is also slightly mineral and very sandy.

When I ventured into the luke-warm shallows, the spring was populated by impertinent schoolboys from Douz. Impertinent only by English standards, I should add. All Tunisians are impertinent by English standards. Everyone here asks me if I'm alone. I thought one kid was saying hello. "Alo? Alo?" he said. "Hello!" I replied cheerily. "No, a-low!"

But the oasis is a small place – everyone *knows* that I am alone. There's only one long-haired, stripily-tanned Englishman in this place that I've seen. It's just that they can't believe it. They think there must be a story behind it. Perhaps my wife is ill. Perhaps she is following behind. Perhaps she is waiting for me in Douz. No. I am alone. Totally alone. Will be for the whole two months. And I'm on a

bicycle. Yes, a bicycle with pedals. No motor. Yes I am cycling on it. Through Tunisia, yes. And then back through France to London. Yes alone. Totally alone.

Ksar Hallouf

30 March 2012

Things I've learnt today: a prostitute in Medenine costs approximately 78 dinar per hour (about £33). That's 13 dinar for ten minutes, which is apparently all you need if you're a Tunisian teenager.

But before we come to that, I feel I should share with you some appellative angst. As you can see from the title of this post, I'm not really sure what to call my little bike ride now that I've *been* to the Sahara. I'm still cycling and I'm still in the desert – and I will be for some time yet, as I intend to pop over to Douz, which is known as the gateway to the Sahara. So how can I be cycling back from the Sahara if I'm yet to arrive at its gateway?

The day started brightly, with me being chased across a desert by a 4×4 containing a deluded campsite owner. He thought I hadn't paid for my tent. I had. Luckily, this simple assertion was enough to convince him and I continued on my way (into a headwind).

Deluded campsite owners aside, you'll be pleased to hear that my route out of the Ksar Ghilane was vastly more comfortable than my route in. I hereby recommend the route from Bir Soltane to Beni Khadeche. Only about 10 miles of it is bone-shaking track – and none of it was anywhere near as bad as the *best* of the Matmata to Bir Soltane version.

And after that: sublime. The road swerved through a valley dropped with mountains, lined with flowers, filling my nostrils with their sweetness. At this point, I should roll out a few evocative flower

names to tantilise your senses. But all I know is that there was a purple one and a yellow one and they smelt good.

The only point of anguish on the road was when my left sandal slipped from the pedal at about 10mph. The pedal continued its mechanically ordained trajectory, racing down and round to bite mercilessly deep into my achilles tendon. Blood bursts in abundance. Another scar for the collection. Like a Roman chariot with scythed wheels, my pedals have sharp metal spikes. I'm sure the manufacturers would argue that they are for extra grip, but I'm convinced the designer was a malicious sadist.

Shuddering to a eye-watering halt, I notice then that my front basket had torn through its moorings and was now dangling, like a ten-year-old's milk tooth, by a single strand.

But nothing can distract from the beauty of a good bike ride.

And so I made it in good time to Ksar Hallouf, a pretty little palmerie perched in a valley. To describe a *ksar* as a granary would be both factually inaccurate and a gross misrepresentation. A ksar is a fortified village, but it is true that often the distinctive architectural feature of the ksar are its granaries.

At Ksar Hallouf, the fortified part of town is up a gigantic mountain, far above the little palmerie where the townsfolk live now. I only mention this because I was led to believe that you could stay overnight in the granaries up there, so hauled my bike and all my possessions up this vertical cliff-face. When I got to the top, drenched in sweat, a guardian appeared to inform me that all the only accommodation was down below in the palmerie.

Back down in the palmerie, I stayed with Saada and Mahamad in their little pension, fancifully reconstructed ancient granaries. Mohamad is 20 and the seventh child of 3 brothers and 3 sisters. After lunch, he took me on a walk in the mountains above the oasis.

As we walked, we talked. Nothing was off the agenda: house prices, football, drugs and of course the prostitutes of Medenine. He'd only been to her once – it was too expensive. Not as expensive as the other option, though: getting married. A wedding costs 4,000 dinar and involves feeding about 300 guests. A cheap house for the newly weds would be about 10,000 dinar. He's going to have to wait ten years at least before getting married – and that means ten years before any regular sex. He listened with jealous wonder as I told him how it was in England.

Mahamad showed me where the berber shepherds sleep and where they keep water in underground gullies. He showed me two more ruined ksour (plural of ksar). Mahamad picked a bunch of herbs for tea and taught me all their names in Arabic. *Taught* might be a bit of a strong word, for it implies some sort of retention in the mind of the learner. He cropped me a strip of palm tree to use as a walking stick (in Arabic, a *legha* – I remembered that one). He also gave me a pair of flints used by berber shepherds to make fire and a porcupine spine.

Then he told me that the police have all the marijuana at the moment and asked me if I could bring him a girl from England next time.

I tried to explain that there's usually more to it than that.

Dinosaurs in the Rain

31 March 2012

If you're ever cycling from Ksar Hallouf to Tataouine, look out for dinosaurs. They can really nip your ankles.

If you're ever cycling from Tataouine to Jerba, look out for the rain. Seriously. I'm in the middle of a desert and it's been raining. All day.

If you're ever looking around the Roman ruins of Gightis, watch out for the "hands-on" guide. Uncomfortable invasion of personal space inappropriate in an underground Roman cistern.

And if you're ever on Jerba, look out for two clowns called Ali and Walid. They drink beer fast and they don't like to pay for it.

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So now I'm on Jerba. It was nice to get on a ferry to the island. Especially a FREE ferry. However, I was under the impression that I only had 10km to cycle across the island to Houmt Souk, Jerba's main town. So I was horrified when I found out it was 21km. Up hill, into a headwind, on ripped-up roads. The last 8km or so was drifted with sand too, so I had trucks blowing grit into my eyes, my mouth.

But finally I arrived: Paradise Island's Pearl of the Mediterranean. Me, I was totally underwhelmed. It looked pretty ugly. To be fair, though, I arrived through the bus station. No bus station is ever that nice. Not even in Paradise.

I am feeling the slave / master reflex a little in Jerba. I am holiday, I should be in total command of my time. But I worry that I should

be visiting all the souqs, the fish market, the beach, the synagogue, the fort… And suddenly I'm not the master at all, but a slave to my guidebook.

So instead I go for a tea and an omelette sandwich at a resolutely local cafe.

The cafe is frantic. People urgent, hands pressing an argument, flying prose. Flick of lighters, suck of cigarettes. Short coffees, sugar, go faster. Even the two old men sitting in front of me are apparently having a desperate, life and death conversation about the kind of fabric the cafe chairs are made of. I blame it on the dust. Dust makes everything a little chaotic.

The cafe just happens to be on the main road from Houmt Souk out to the Zone Touristique, where most of the European tourists stay. Lots of taxis are passing, filled with young men and women in revealing clothes, on their way back to the beach. The cafe has suddenly filled up, surrounding me claustrophobically. So I decide to join the young things out on the beach.

Or I try to. I take the road for 10km, but only get as far as a rocky shoreline, blown about with plastic bottles and old crushed cans of beer. Cardboard boxes stick into what ever thin strip of muddy sand there is. Somewhat underwhelming for Paradise, but the sun's starting to set so I should head back.

Then Ali comes up to me. He seems nice. Tells me the beach is another 10km away. He speaks some English so we chat for a bit about my bike trip. He likes the rips in my shirt sleeves – air-conditioning! Then he introduces me to his brother, Walid. Walid is

way more sketchy, he's erratic and seems convinced that I can speak German. I can not.

Ali and Walid invite me for a drink, a tea or coffee. I tell them I've got to get back to Houmt Souk before the sun sets. But I finally, fatefully, agree to a quick cup of tea.

They take me to a hotel bar, but we leave pretty quick. Ali tells me that they didn't serve tea. This seems unlikely, but fine.

So we go into another bar, where Ali and Walid have a long argument with the waiter, who seems to have some objection or other. Sensing something fishy, I walk out of the bar, back to my bike and – lo and behold! – the waiter has no more objection.

Ali spins a spurious story, saying he'd been trying to procure us an outside table, so I could watch my bike in safety. I ignore his lies and the waiter brings out two beers for the brothers and my tea. And the bill, which I think a little odd. Then the waiter asks for the money upfront. I ignore him. This was a mistake.

I drink my tea quickly, seeing the sun set. Ali downs his beer and suddenly looks very unwell and very drunk. The waiter brings out two more beers and another bill. He again asks for the money. I say I'll pay for a tea.

There then follows "a scene," in which I voluminously object to paying for the brothers' beer and they insist this is normal practice. The waiter, meanwhile, looks slightly upset.

Unfortunately, I only had a ten dinar note, so the waiter simply gave me change from 8.800 – the cost of the first two beers and the tea. Rather than cause more of "a scene," I decided to cut my losses there. I am always acutely aware that one vicious blow from

the back hand of an irate drunk could cause irreparable damage to my precious bicycle and would rather be down 6 dinar than a bicycle.

I did, however, give the waiter a stern talking to. He shrugged his shoulders and said that Ali had said we were friends. In fairness to the waiter, he did argue with Ali at the start and did ask for money up front.

As I left, Walid had the cheek to ask for a tip for the waiter. Ha!

But, don't be mistaken: this is not what Tunisia is like. This is resortland, this is where tourists mean money. And when the tourists don't show up, as they haven't been since the revolution last year, that means there aren't any jobs. And when there are no jobs, seems like a lot of kids want to drink beer – but can't afford their own supply. So what do they do?

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No, Tunisia is not like this. Tunisia is hot-faced kids working hands like magic wands over street stoves, serving up chapatti filled with salami, cheese, egg, onion, tuna to families and friends. That's what I love.

As a side note, being a David abroad has got harder. To people all over the globe, I used to be David Beckham and this time I've occasionally maintained my footballing greatness with David Villa, but overwhelmingly it's been David Cameron.What is sad is that they don't realise how grievous an insult this is.

Freewheelin' Jerba to Tozeur

1 April 2012

This is going to be one of those fun round-up posts that you all love. Mainly because I've got horribly behind on posting. You all think I'm in Jerba still don't you? Ha! Fools. You should be following me on twitter, then you'd know the dark truth.

Another reason why I'm going to save you all the hassle of reading words is because I went back to Matmata and I don't like to repeat myself. If you want, you can re-read my Matmata Motobylette Man post because I met him again. This time he even offered me a go on his motobylette! I declined gracefully. My legs were still vibrating from climbing the vertical cliff-face onto which Matmata apparently clings.

The very next day, I cycled from Matmata to Douz. The road was very straight, very long and rather dusty. I cycled straight past the main road turn-off for Ksar Ghilane – you know, the nice sealed road that I could have taken from Matmata instead of this one. Here I also met some soldiers, apparently confounded by my use of bicycle.

The main purpose of going to Douz, though, was to bring you this photo:

So there you have it: cycling to the Sahara.

What now?

Some more cycling? Okay then. This time heading north, up to Kebili and then across to Tozeur.

But before I bring you the star of today's show, let me share with you one of the road hazards of Tunisia: the Tunisian cyclist-death nodule. These are glass bubbles drilled into the road, just where a cyclist would want to cycle if they didn't want to get run over. They look like this:

But what is particularly cunning about the Tunisian cyclist-death nodule is their unpredictability. After three weeks of careful study, I can tell you that they appear and disappear with a disorder matched in complexity only by chaos theory. And of course, being glass, many of them are smashed, creating a nice cyclist-puncture-death hazard.

To give you a further glimpse of the fatal dangers I face in a desert, here's a picture of a dead donkey. I don't know what he died of, but there is an empty beer can resting right next to his rotting gullet. Was he desperately gasping for a last drink – any drink? Or was alcohol abuse the cause of death? We may never know.

But finally to today's star show: the Chott el-Jerid, otherwise known as the place where "Luke Skywalker contemplated the two moons in the first Star Wars movie". That's what my guide book says anyway. I have no idea what that means. To me, it is otherwise known as "that bloody great sea of salt," which I think is a much more apt description.

Seriously: as far as the eye can see: salt.

I know it is salt because I stuck my hand into the ground, grabbed myself a lump and tasted it. Salt. Here was more salt than you could imagine. Yes, even more than in a fish and chip shop.

Of course, the Tunisian's aren't stupid. They don't stick their hands in to mine this stuff, they have big salt grabbers to get it for them. And Tunisia is the world's 34th biggest salt producer. An entirely underwhelming statistic given the magnitude of this lake.

In some parts, the lake does actually have water in it. I'm told that this is because we are still in winter. In the summer, not much water hangs around here.

And so we arrive to the present moment. Consider yourself caught up with. For those of you following me on twitter, you will know what this lump of meat is:

The rest of you know what to do.

On Speed*

2 April 2012

After flying cross country – Jerba to Tozeur, three days, 15mph average – I was starting to think that I'd earned that kind of speed. My feet were spinning round like happy hamsters on the wheel, I was fit and strong and I was working hard. I *earned* that speed, dammit.

But the past two days of grinding, creaking roule has reminded me that for long-distance cyclists speed isn't earned; it's given. My muscles haven't been working any less hard in those two days, I swear, but somehow I've only managed to average a paltry 11mph.

In this way, cycling less represents driving or even walking as a mode of transport: it is more like sailing. All I can do is put my ship out on the ocean and make sure the sail is up. Everything else, everything else that dictates the *speed* I travel at, is out of my hands.

For a cyclist this means the wind speed and direction, it means the quality of the road surface and it means the topography through which you're cycling. All of these things have a greater impact on the speed of travel than how fast I pump my legs round.

For example, if I'm grinding along at 10mph into a headwind (as I have for the last two days), then sure I could pedal faster and sprint my speed up to 13mph, but as soon as I collapse back onto the saddle, I'll be back at 10mph, exhausted. But if the wind would only drop for a second – all of a sudden I'll be doing 15mph without even trying.

Same goes for hills. Uphill, sometimes I'm down as low as 6mph. Downhill on a good road can be well over 30mph. But if the road surface is bad, then there's no point risking a fast descent if the pay-off is a broken front fork – or worse. And so downhill can be slow too. Even a slightly less than perfect road can kill you for 2mph.

So speed isn't earned; it is given. And I'll be grateful for whatever I get.

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* Please note: I am not actually on speed. I am on levothyroxine. Quite enough.

Cemeteries of Civilisation

3 April 2012

A grave is sacrosanct. A graveyard, hundreds of individual lives marked by their death, even more so. But most sacred of all are the ruins of an ancient city. These ruins are also a graveyard, not of individual lives, but of an entire civilisation.



The cemetery of a civilisation. Sbeitla, Tunisia.

Graves and graveyards are for remembering. They're not just convenient places to put dead bodies, away from the living. A gravestone remembers a life after the body is decayed. For the survivors, it is a reminder of the person who lived.

After a couple of generations that gravestone no longer reminds anyone of the person who lived, but instead inspires an awe of brevity, how important each moment is and how irrelevant. It teaches us that there is something beyond ourselves, a future in which we are long forgotten. That is the power of just one gravestone.

An entire ruined city leaves behind a cemetery of civilisation. It reminds us that, not only will our individual lives decay and be forgotten, but our entire way of living will also decay and be forgotten.

In hundreds or thousands of years archaeologists and historians will pick over the bones and stones of our ruins. And it will take hours of scholarly argument for these archaeologists and historians to decide something so simple to us as how the twenty-first century toilet evacuated its waste. To us, it's almost natural to press down on a lever after we've taken a shit. But imagine the future philologist's delight when he discovers that the contemporary technical word was "*flush*".

So imagine the civilisation that's vanished here. Look at these Roman baths, look at the plumbing under the floor. Can you imagine how it worked?



Roman baths, showing the underfloor heating. Or so we're told.

Or can you recreate this Roman olive press? Would you even know it was a olive press if I hadn't told you (and if I hadn't been told)?



A what? Looks like a bird bath to me.

Can you imagine what the forum was like? Not that it was a market place, where people traded goods, but how people behaved here. What did Romans talk about?

The three temples that stand at the head – what went on there? Were people allowed to sit on the steps to watch the hubbub below? Did children play hide and seek among the columns? Or was Roman discipline so tight that they wouldn't dare?



The Forum. Home to a market and a civilisation.

Once you start interrogating the stones like this, it's endless. Were the roads smooth, or unevenly paved like today? Did they have problems with litter? Did the citizens greet each other in the street, like in modern Tunisia, or walk on by, heads held down like in London? Who was the best tailor in the city? The best butcher, baker, candle-stick-maker?

Where were the rough ends of town, where the footpads and cutpurses roamed? Did old men sit outside their doors and fall asleep in the sun? Were there rats? Or, intriguingly: did they build a museum to an even older civilisation?

These things would have been known and understood from birth by everyone who lived in this city. But we have no idea, no clue

whatsoever, we can only guess. Not only their houses and baths are destroyed, but their customs, their habits, their fashions are also gone, completely eviscerated, just as ours will be soon.

And this is why we keep ruins in their cemeteries, why we tend the stones and the paths, why we walk slow, to contemplate our long past and brief future.



Three arches we look through. Past, present and future.

Tunisia after the revolution

4 April 2012

The louage driver slaps my hand and gives me a toothy smile. “Ahh, 2011!” he says, then gives me directions to the giant hand-cart.

I’m in Sidi Bouzid. It’s a town in central Tunisia. A working town, like any other. It reminds me of Sfax, only smaller and with zero tourists and zero tourist appeal.

Except for one rather odd monument.

In 2010, a streetseller called Mohamed Bouazizi set himself on fire outside a government building in Sidi Bouzid. Whatever the truth of his grievance, it was enough to spark riots. These riots blossomed into revolution. And this revolution evolved, mutated and spread: most dramatically into Egypt, most violently into Libya and most notoriously in Syria, where civil war is still bleeding.

So this is the post you’ve all (probably) been waiting for: the revolution one. I’ve waited this long because I didn’t want to make any snap judgements and because I wanted to wait until I’d come to the place where it all began: Sidi Bouzid.

On the other hand, I could have waited forever to write this post because, frankly, there is no judgement I can make that won’t be so bereft of truth as to be called empty. I’m an outsider, I don’t know what Tunisia is really like after the revolution. I can only say what I see.

I did go to Tunisia while it was still under Ben Ali, in 2008, but that was also only for a month. You can’t get more than a vague sense of

a place in a month. So I'm comparing vague sense with vague sense in this post. Furthermore, I have a real problem collecting evidence. The evidence of my own eyes is almost totally without context and the evidence given by others, by Tunisians or by expats, is hard to filter.

These caveats given, I shall proceed with my judgement: what is Tunisia like after the revolution?

Tunisia post-revolution is a democracy. Under Ben Ali, it was also a democracy. The only difference is that now more than one political party is allowed. Ha.

Democratic elections were held comparatively quickly after the revolution, in October 2011, and the current government is dominated by the moderate Islamist party, Ennahda. Ennahda recently announced that the first clause of the Tunisian constitution should remain as it is: in other words, they will not be introducing Sharia (Islamic religious) law. The constitution still demands, however, that the president be a Muslim (a feature shared by 98% of the population).

That there was some doubt as to the future of Sharia law in Tunisia is something I have encountered on my trip. In Sousse, I ran into a Salafist rally held on the walls of the old medina. It was startling to see the infamous black and white flags of hardline Islamism flying over the moderate Tunisian skyline. And the locals seemed about as taken aback as I was, with many of them taking photos or film, like tourists.

These rallies have been held all over the country, including one of 10,000 in Tunis. But even so, I met a chap who told me that of the

10 million people in the country, perhaps as many as 9.5 million opposed the Salafis. At the rally in Sousse, there were about 200 people and about fifty of them were shouting themselves hoarse in support of the speakers. The women were segregated, although not especially effectively – I saw a slightly bewildered fat white man in a baseball cap emerge from the tightly packed women in full Islamic dress. The rally was bossed by heavyset men in smart cropped beards, many wearing khaki military waistcoats and jackboots. It's the kind of dress code I recognise from BNP rallies in the UK.

So the question of Sharia law has been answered for the moment, but for how long? The young man I spoke to in Sousse was utterly disbelieving that such a thing could *ever* happen in Tunisia. But the truth is that Islamist parties now have a legal platform on which to stand in Tunisia. Under Ben Ali, they were effectively silenced. It remains to be seen whether, allowed the freedom to campaign, they will be rejected or whether their calls for religious law will be heard sympathetically, as an effective alternative to Western political and economic domination.

Two anecdotal changes post-revolution are a reduction in litter collections (litter was already a huge problem in 2008, this makes things worse) and an increase in petty thieving – the 'catastrophes' my motocycle chaperone talked about. I myself have noticed two further changes regarding freedom of information: the newspapers are no longer filled with Ben Ali's fat face and the internet browser I'm currently using has hardcore porn saved as a bookmark.

One post-revolution change that I can certainly attest to is the massive drop in tourist numbers in Tunisia. I've met about a dozen

other tourists, hotels have been almost totally empty and, if it wasn't for the fact that I was here during Tunisian spring holidays, I'd have felt very alone at times.

There are hopes that this summer will see an increase of tourists compared to last year – but last year was a disaster. Tourism accounts for 7% of the Tunisian economy and in 2011 tourist numbers were down over 30%. That means 3,000 jobs lost. That means more people like Ali and Walid taking to hard drink.

In Sidi Bouzid, there are still streetsellers peddling their carts, there are still beggers outside the mosque, the cafes and streetsides are still packed with young men smoking and old men slapping down cards or dominoes, under- or un-employed. Mohamed Bouazizi's market still runs, selling post-revolutionary fruit – appetites ignore politics. And of course there's still the governor, the police and the Garde Nationale, but they're on our side now, aren't they?

Turning to more optimistic matters, I think there is an essay to be written about graffiti and freedom. There probably already has been. People graffiti when they are no longer scared and there is definitely more graffiti in Tunisia, post-revolution. Most of it is basic paintwork slogans, like 'EST' – a reference to Esperance Sportive de Tunis, one of the big football clubs here. But I have seen more political slogans, most memorably 'Fuck the police' (not, I presume, solely a reference to NWA) and 'Ben Ali a l'enfer' – 'Ben Ali go to hell'.

Around the revolutionary monument in Sidi Bouzid, there is more peaceful, commemorative graffiti. It has been left untouched, despite decorating the walls of the local police station and the

notorious government building outside which Mohamed Bouazizi set himself alight.

It should be said in conclusion, to echo my comments at the start of this post, that no conclusion, no judgement is final. Tunisia is still in the delicate phases of post-revolution. One point of note, though, is that these phases have been calmer than those in Libya or even in Egypt. Perhaps this is a sign that Tunisia has more to lose than these other countries. Perhaps it is a sign that, despite the oppressions of Ben Ali's government, in general things were not so bad.

For a country situated between Algeria and Libya on the continent of Africa, Tunisia is well-developed, well-educated and the people here have it better than many. Tunisia has a literacy rate of 88.9%, compared to Egypt's 66.4%. Tunisian GDP per capita is $4,200, while in Egypt it is only $2,700. Tunisia might not have the raw wealth of oil-rich Libya, but it does have a society worth preserving, seen in the friendly smiles of the people I pass on my bicycle.

The very least that can be said of the revolution is that power is no longer coalesced in one man, as it was in Ben Ali and in Habib Bourguiba before him. A servant to his country until the very end, Ben Ali fled the revolution for Saudi Arabia, charged with corruption, theft, money laundering and drug trafficking.

No doubt Tunisia is better off without him. But only a couple of days after my trip to Sidi Bouzid, I came face to face with the reality of protest in post-revolution Tunisia.

Tunis: Police Attack Peaceful Martyrs March

9 April 2012

I was walking around the central market in Tunis this morning, when I passed by a peaceful march. They carried banners proclaiming: “Never forget why they died – Freedom and Dignity”. The marchers were young and old, women, men and children, wearing smiles with their flags. So, being in full support of marches in general and this sort of march in particular, I joined them.

We marched on past the central market and across Habib Bourguiba – the main street in central Tunis. There, the police carefully chaperoned us across the road and to the headquarters of one of the unions, where we stopped.



A quiet gathering outside a union building in Tunis.

That, I thought, was that. The chanting stuttered and ceased. Some people left the crowd, which was only ever about 50-60 people, others stood around amiably, chatting and smoking, leaning on their signs, wrapped in their banners.

I asked one of the men what this was all about. He explained that today was Martyrs' Day in Tunisia and that these people were unhappy with progress after the revolution. That seemed fair enough and I was about to leave when a journalist tapped me on the shoulder. He added that the group intended to march down Habib Bourguiba street, but that protests there had recently been banned. This sounded more interesting.

Still, though, the protest didn't look like much. There were no angry young men – from their dress, I reckoned it was just a small group of liberal middle-class Tunisians. Then, without a signal, we started from the union building to Habib Bourguiba, in defiance of the police presence and the banning order.

But our fifteen minute pause at the union building seemed to be a tactic because, when we got back to Habib Bourguiba, the police didn't seem to be expecting us. No one stopped us until we got to the cathedral, where a hasty line of police barred our way. Our small, timid group was kettled and, as always in Tunisia, a crowd gathered to watch the events. I slipped outside the kettle, to look on with them.



The kettled protesters. Outside the cathedral in central Tunis.

The crowd around me grew and grew, curious Tunisians come to watch the action. Or so I thought. Then, suddenly, as if a sprint-race starter's pistol had sounded, a great chanting rose up from the crowd of bystanders. They turned as one and started to march towards the clock tower that marks the centre of Tunis. These were no bystanders – this was the march! I cackled with glee when I realised that our small, timid group of kettled friends were merely a decoy for the police.



Chanting, whistles, cheers. And police brutality. On Habib Bourguiba, Tunis.

And with whistles and chants and defiance, we marched on and on. The protesters broke through three lines of police, the first barred our way with linked arms, the second with riot shields and the third with batons and tear-gas canisters. Or at least, we broke

through until the tear gas was fired and the batons were beaten. Then we ran.

Men, women and children burst out around me, staggering under the clouds of gas, stampeding at the cracking of the batons on helmets and the canisters' explosions.

Down the street and around the corner, people hacked up poisoned phlegm into the gutters and damped their eyes with handkerchiefs. The shops and restaurants hurriedly pulled down their shutters, dragging customers and bystanders inside for shelter.

We could hear the shouts from the police, hear more gas canisters fired, hear more baton cracks. I saw a mini-van of plain-clothed thugs arrive with white cudgels to beat and maim, to disperse the crowds with fear. Police, all in black, wore balaclavas – to protect themselves from their own tear-gas, or to hide their identities?



Aftermath: Protesters, press, police.

Gradually, Habib Bourguiba cleared of protesters. All that was left were shopkeepers peering out behind shutters, dazed, angry civilians and bewildered tourists. The occasional running police, the occasional beating. But the real action had shifted to the side streets, where kids were throwing stones at police, getting tear-gas in return. The kids then flee, chased by the cops, hopelessly.



Kids throwing stones. Police throwing tear gas canisters. Place Barcelone, Tunis.

But what is the meaning of all this meaningless violence? What does this demonstration of freedom mean for the protesters? What does this demonstration of force mean for the police?

I spoke to one young Tunisian school-teacher who was frustrated with the protesters. He said that they had freedom now, but they didn't know how to use it. He said that people were asking for rights that were not important – like people with jobs asking for better jobs, or people with salaries asking for bigger salaries – when there are people without jobs, without money, without homes or food.

This young man said that Tunisia needed security and that the current government couldn't provide it. He stopped short of saying

that Ben Ali could, but it was implied. He looked forward to going to London, to get a job there.

But the marchers are not merely gluttons for freedom. That much was demonstrated by the very nature of the government's response to them. Some of these people had walked for six days from the town of Sidi Bouzid to commemorate the dead of the 2011 revolution.

Today was Martyrs' Day and any free country would accept and commemorate with the marchers the tragic loss of life under the old, despotic regime.

But instead they were met by a banning order that made their march illegal, then found their way blocked by lines of police and finally were brutally attacked with tear-gas and batons.

So much has changed in Tunisia? The next day, I tried to find out why this violence happened and what's next for Tunisia.

Tunis Martyrs' Day Violence: Why and What Next?

11 April 2012

Last Monday, I followed a protest in Tunis that was violently dispersed by police, using tear-gas and baton-beatings.

It is a delicate thing to comment on political protest in a country you have only been in for a month. But we all have eyes to see (except under tear-gas attack) and we all have brains to interpret for ourselves. My previous post demanded further explanation, so that is what I attempt here.

Since Monday, I have spoken to actual Tunisians, both in person and online, to find out more about the background to the protests and to ascertain how much support there is "on the street" for the protesters.

First, though, the official explanation for why the protest was broken up by the police. The government ruled a month ago that no protests were to be allowed on the main street in Tunis, Avenue Habib Bouguiba. The reason they gave for this ruling is that repeated protests and counter-protests (including one by radical Salafists in which they attacked the national theatre) were damaging commercial activity on the street and interrupting the flow of traffic down one of Tunis' main transport arteries.

It should also be added that protests are allowed in the rest of Tunis (so far as I have been told) – and, indeed, our little march was politely escorted by police through the city to the union building,

where it officially ended. That such a demonstration was permitted is certainly a step up from the days of Ben Ali.

So far, so reasonable.



Avenue Habib Bourguiba: nice, wide, pedestrian-protest-promenade…

(An obvious, although not necessarily relevant, counter-observation is that Habib Bourguiba is plenty wide enough to accommodate both traffic and protest. There is a vast promenade running down the centre, between the two vehicular lanes, that would be perfect for a leisurely march – were it not obstructed by barbed wire, soldiers and military vehicles…)



...Plus soldiers, tanks and a statue of Ibn Khaldoun.

That is the official line, but what did my proverbial man on his hypothetical street say?

To tell the truth, in all my conversations, interviews and casual chats, I am yet to meet a Tunisian who whole-heartedly backs the protesters (aside from the protesters themselves, naturally).

One man, when I asked him why the police attacked, said simply that the protests were forbidden. I pressed him further, asking him if it was political, but he waved an irritated hand at me and reiterated: it was forbidden. His closing of the topic reminded me of the political silence under Ben Ali. Not a good start to my information-gathering.

Others, thankfully, were happy to talk politics – and this freedom of speech is another genuine joy of post-revolutionary Tunisia.

One of my new Tunisian friends, a charismatic fruit-seller and fine art photographer, told me that he was sad to see photographs of the protests on my Facebook wall. He said they were ugly (I can't disagree). But he also disapproved of the protesters. He told me that they were friends of Ben Ali and that they had started the fight by throwing rocks at the police – so of course the police attacked back.

I did see people throwing rocks at the police, but they were kids – teenagers – certainly nobody who would ever have been in the pay of Ben Ali. And nor did they start the fighting. The first rocks I saw thrown were a good half hour after the protesters had been set upon with batons and tear-gas.

Others said that these protesters have no idea what freedom is, that they are drunk on the power of revolution, that stability and patience is needed now, not more chaos. Every time there is a protest, they say, it is followed by a counter-protest and then a counter-counter-protest and on and on and on.

Another very wisely pointed out that these protesters are giving the government just excuses *not* to change anything, *not* to make things more liberal, *not* to give the people more democracy. In other words: their confrontational stance is counter-productive. He told me too that there have now been demonstrations in support of the right to demonstrate on Habib Bourguiba – "A demonstration for the right to demonstrate! Pff!"

This man's frustration was palpable – and understandable, given the many economic challenges facing Tunisian society. Not least of which is the fact that, since the revolution, foreign tourists are going elsewhere, draining away the 7% of Tunisian GDP that tourism contributes.



Man on street, day after. Banner (approximately) reads: "Tunisia martyrs, living with their Lord." Excuse Arabic!

On reflection, it makes sense that the average man on the street would disapprove of the protesters. I have written before about Tunisia's relative social stability, compared to neighbours Algeria and Libya and their relative prosperity in comparison to Egypt and most of the rest of Africa. These combine to give Tunisians a sense that they have much to lose by disrupting life further. My school-

teacher friend told me that they have enough freedom for the moment. There are more important things than petty matters like more rights for actors: jobs, for example.

On top of that fear of loss, nearly 40% of Tunisians voted for the leading party Ennahda in the elections. It's natural that they would largely support the government over anti-government protesters. Then there are the people who are simply tired of the conflict, tired of the constant protests and counter-protests, tired of the disruptive strikes, tired of abnormality. Together these groups must make up over half of the population, so it's not unexpected that the average man on the street disapproves the protests.

Perhaps, then, the protesters should not have our sympathy. Perhaps their message is not shared by most of Tunisian society. Perhaps, even, the police were justified in using force to disperse the illegal demonstration – particularly as protests in London frequently face similar obstructions from both government and police (note: I have never been tear-gassed in London).

But against this conclusion, I would put that the protesters I marched alongside were a diverse group. They were not all angry young men. That was the reason I joined them in the first place, when they were just fifty or so people happily chanting and marching near the central market on Monday morning. They were young and old, women, men and children. I was particularly taken by a group from the Organisation for Women and Progress: I recognised myself in them and they won my sympathy.

I set against this conclusion also that I SAW plainsclothes thugs climb out of a van and start chasing and beating civilian protesters

with cudgels of wood. Ennahda strenuously denies that they had anything to do with these cavemen, but nevertheless it happened. So no matter what the man on the street says, no matter whether the protesters should or shouldn't be on Habib Bourguiba, no matter whether their protest is justified or not, even: the running battles that took place down side-streets, far from Habib Bourguiba – so reminiscent of the actions of Ben Ali – prove to me that there is something in the protesters' grievance.



A bad photo I took, forgive me. But those plainclothes men in that white A-Team van are about to produce white painted wooden cudgels, with which they are about beat any protester they catch. Note the police are blithely ignoring them, letting them get on with scaring the heck out of me.

Rumours abound concerning the violence. I have been told that some of the trouble-makers on Monday were ex-government (Ben Ali's government, that is) and some were from the Ennahda party. There are rumours too that there was an explosion at the Hotel Africa on Habib Bouguiba. Almost certainly we will never fully understand the sequence of events that ended in violence on Monday.

What we do know is that, since the broken protest in Tunis, there has been a wave of sympathetic protests in Kebilya, in Sousse, in Sidi Bouzid and in other towns across the country. What it will lead to, we shall discover in due course.

~

The above is all I learnt about the protests, talking to friends in Tunis and online. Now I shall give *my* impression of why the protest was attacked and dispersed using violent means.

My impression was that the protesters went one step too far. They had rolled over three police lines already, each progressively more aggressive – the first linking arms, the second with riot shields, the third unfortunately had tear-gas. The crowd was so large (thousands, according to some counts) and so optimistic that it could have carried on rolling through those lines all day, if the police hadn't used their weapons.

If the protest had been small – perhaps restricted to the fifty people I joined near the market – and if they had behaved in an acquiescent manner, instead of insisting on marching, then perhaps the police would have allowed us to remain in a kettle at the edge of Habib Bouguiba. Perhaps we could have stood on the

steps of the cathedral, a noisy – but static and merely symbolic – protest.



This kind of protest is allowed. Outside the union, not on Habib Bourguiba.

But the protesters pushed too far. The police couldn't keep rolling back and retreating – they had to counterstrike. And once the first shot had been fired, that was it. The tragic but inevitable outcome was running battles in the streets.

(A side note: I don't think you can ignore the part played by pride in the actions of both the police and the protesters. It reminded me of the Orwell story Shooting an Elephant. The police couldn't accept defeat, for pride in their position. The protesters, once committed, couldn't back down either.)

But supposing the police *had* let us march to the Ministry of Interior – what would have happened then? Perhaps nothing. Perhaps the crowd would have gathered there awhile, chanting, singing, making speeches. Then perhaps they would have dispersed of their own accord, their protest heard, their point made, the martyrs remembered.

But the police couldn't let that happen. They couldn't allow themselves to be defeated, even for the sake of injured civilians and widespread panic.

I am not naive, however. There is a strong chance that the protesters *wouldn't* have stopped peacefully at the Ministry of Interior. There is every chance that the protest would have escalated and swelled beyond control.

But perhaps therein lies the *real* reason why the protest was broken up with such force. Perhaps the government and the police fear a *second* revolution to follow the first, as happened in Russia and in France. This second revolution, of course, would not be patient with the current hierarchy.

I cannot say I support a second revolution or not: it is none of my business. But I believe one thing is certain: the actions of the police on Monday – and let's not forget the government, who provoked the violence by making the march illegal – have made a second uprising only *more* likely.

Repression does not breed acquiescence in the Tunisian people – you would have thought 2011 had shown that eloquently enough.



Sidi Bouzid's memorial to the 2011 Tunisian Revolution. Or the first Tunisian revolution?

Refuelling: The Food of Tunisia

27 April 2012

Tunisia is a wonderful country to cycle around, but it's an even better place to eat around. One of the beauties of long-distance cycle touring is the capacity to eat like a goat: grazing on anything and everything all the time. Hungry? You will be.



Lemons and garlic at Tunis central market

Two unique and inescapable ingredients distinguish Tunisian cooking from the rest of the Mediterranean.

1. A nose-snorting chilli paste called *Harissa*:



Harissa by the tin. Serve with olive oil and bread. For breakfast.

2. Tinned tuna:



Tuna in tins. With tuna, of course.

There is no reason at all that I can think of for why the Tunisians love tinned tuna so much. It's not like Tunisia is land-locked; there's 1,148km of Mediterranean coastline to fish in. And it's certainly not like the Tunisians don't know how to cook a fish (which I suspect is the reason why the English buy tinned tuna). I can vouch for that.



Fish.



Ex-fish.

But despite this oceanic bounty, the Tunisians will serve tinned tuna with every conceivable dish. If it can be served with, beside, on, in or under a dollop of tinned tuna, you can bet your last dinar that it will be.

I once asked for a green salad, expecting a plate of leaves. I got half a head of lettuce, a tin of tuna and an egg. In my country that's called a salad Nicoise. I wasn't complaining – I like tuna – but the menu in this restaurant also listed a salad Nicoise. What would THAT come with?

Tuna is so popular that it can take chefs by surprise when you ask for something without tuna. I ordered a ham sandwich in Tunis and

the chef (on auto-pilot) smeared it with a layer of tuna, before sheepishly scraping it off again.

These two ingredients, tuna and harissa, are so ubiquitous that you can assume they are present in every dish, unless otherwise stated. Needless to say, Tunisia is not an easy place to eat if you are a vegetarian who doesn't eat fish. Or if you have delicate bowels that can't take a dash of hot sauce.

Talking of vegetarianism, there is actually one reason I can think of for Tunisia's obsession with tinned tuna: it's cheap meat. In Tunisia, if you can afford meat, you eat meat. Being a Muslim country, it's usually chicken or lamb, occasionally beef, but you can also try your teeth on camel or (if not Muslim) wild boar.



Rotisserie chicken. Eaten in quarters, halves or wholes.



Rotisserie chicken, in close up.

The classic Tunisian meal is based around couscous. Couscous is semolina rolled with water and salt. It's made at home and it takes a day to make 50-100kg, then about three weeks to dry in the sun (hence why it's made in the summer). After that, it lasts for a year. In Tunisia, the couscous is small and fine; in Morocco they make bigger granules.

Couscous is prepared in a couscousiere, which is a two-tiered pot-steamer. In the bottom you cook your spicy meaty stew and in the top you put the couscous, together with carrots, onions, potatos, chick peas – or whatever you've got in the larder. The stew is made with lamb, merguez sausages, fish or camel and, as it bubbles away,

its meaty steam cooks the couscous and vegetables and infuses them with flavour.



Merguez couscous.



Camel couscous.

I can assure you that it is perfectly possible to get bored of steamed vegetables, but luckily couscous is not the only dish of the day in Tunisia. *Ojja* is almost like a curry, with garlic, peppers, onion and tomato, a bit like a Kashmiri rogan josh. It's never served with rice, but is mopped up with a French-style baguette.



Ojja. Plenty of chillies. Like a curry, but without rice.

Another speciality of Tunisia is the *tagine*. You probably already know what a tagine is, so I'll confuse you with a photograph:



Tunisian tagine: nothing like Moroccan tagine. More like a quiche. Super tasty.

Yes, this is a *Tunisian* tagine: absolutely nothing like the more famous Moroccan tagine. Thank goodness. This tagine is way nicer. It's almost like a quiche, with lots of lightly whisked egg. Often served cold. Yum.

Finally, I give you the *brik*. It is nothing like the English brick. Thank goodness. Instead it is a sort of deep-fried Cornish pasty, filled with whatever the chefs got in. Usually tuna, of course, but sometimes an unexpected burst of boiling fat will sear your tongue. It's often served as a starter and comes highly recommended – just don't watch them prepare it if you're trying to avoid oily fat.



Brik. With tuna (inside), of course.

Talking of deep frying, here are some more random deep-fried objects:



Assorted fried goods. With tomato and onion.

When Tunisians are not eating couscous, tuna or harissa, they are probably eating baked goods. These are usually a toothsome blend of French patisserie and Tunisian taste. This creates such delights as the Tunisian pizza:



Tunisian pizza! With tuna, of course.

The Tunisian pasty:



One Tunisian pasty for the road. With tuna, of course.

And the Tunisian deep-friend sandwich, known as a *fricasse*:



Fricasse. Super oily. With tuna, of course.

Galettes, a kind of pancake, are served up everywhere and stuffed with cheese, ham, egg, harissa, tomato, onion, chips, mechouia salad – and tuna, of course.



Preparing galettes on the side of the road. With tuna, of course.

Luckily, there ARE limits to the Tunisian use of tuna in baking. You can get decent French baguettes, pain au chocolats and croissants and pretty much every region has its own speciality sweets, all without tuna.

One sweet I didn't take a photograph of was the *Corne de Gazelle* of Tataouine, in the south of Tunisia. This is a baked hard cone of pastry (the horn of the gazelle), filled with nuts and seeds and then slathered in syrup. My teeth still hurt from the sugar-rush.



Sweets. Make sure you have sesame seeds, dates and loads of syrup.

Biscuits are popular and come in a variety of shapes, like stars and moons and hearts. They probably shouldn't be called biscuits, actually, because they are very soft – more like the cakey bits of Jaffa Cakes, which are famously NOT biscuits. Perhaps biscuits are taxed at a higher rate in Tunisia as well.

These "biscuits" do not, however, come in a variety of flavours. They are basically flour plus jam. The jam can nominally vary in flavour, but they all taste the same. I advise you to avoid anything purporting to be "chocolate" – it will only disappoint you. The "chocolate" is a brown substance finely sprayed onto the surface of the biscuit, so as to give the appearance of abundance, but it is nothing but appearance.



Lemony biscuits. Very floury and crumbly.

Beyond the colonial boulangerie influence, Tunisia has its own native baking tradition. Tunisian bread is flat and often flavoured with yummy things like cheese and olives. And tuna and harissa, obviously. In the country, it comes out of ovens like this one:



A bread oven at a farm.

And it looks like this, all lovely and warm like a jumper just out of the tumble-dryer:



Bread! From a campfire at Ksar Ghilane oasis.

Or like this, topped with cheese and impregnated with harissa:



The best bread in the world: impregnated with harissa.

When you enter a Tunisian restaurant, a basket of some sort of bread will be dumped on your table, accompanied by a saucer of harissa. Eat it: it's free. Quite often you'll get a plate or two of salads as well. In fact, by the time the main course comes around, you won't be hungry!

Tunisia does a good line in salads. Salad mechouia is a green splodge that tastes of burnt peppers. It can be very spicy, so dip before you add harissa yourself.



Salad mechouia – with tuna, of course.

And, being a Mediterranean country, Tunisia is abundant with fresh vegetables, ripe for the salading.



Tunisian tomato salad. Like an English tomato salad, except this one tastes of actual tomatoes.

But mostly you'll get a chopped salad buried under tuna and egg:



A salad. With tuna, of course.

A post on Tunisian cuisine would not be complete without mentioning drinks. Juices are blended at street stalls: lemon, orange, carrot… Whatever blends, gets drunk. Coffee is an Arab speciality, coming in tiny glasses and as black as your soul. The English word “coffee” comes from the Arabic, incidentally.

So does the word “sugar” and you’ll understand why if you ever take a tea with a Tunisian. Every meal is finished off with a glass of tea, with a twist of mint and an inch of sugar in the bottom.



Tea. Serve with an inch of sugar and a twist of mint.

Phew. I don't know about you, but I'm stuffed. I know I've missed out all kinds of dishes (e.g. Kamounia, a spicy meaty little number), but just like my cycle tour it's been only a brief taste of Tunisia.

Eating and cycling are made for each other. The one makes the other all the better and they find perfect harmony in Tunisia.

After the ride

Thank you for riding along.

The story didn't end in Tunis. Four years later I set off again, this time cycling towards Syria along the routes of migration, and later I spent many summers riding with Thighs of Steel. You can read all of it, free, at davidcharles.info/series.

Every Friday I send a short story about adventure, nature and being human to readers of my newsletter. If you enjoyed this book, I'd love you to join them: davidcharles.substack.com.

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