

Jerba: An Island Oasis in Tunisia

By EDWARD IGINIO PLACIDI

JERBA, Tunisia—In his "Ulysses," Homer recounts for us the many voyages of Ulysses, including a visit to Jerba. It was an island of ecstasy for Ulysses, spending his days joyously eating "lotus flowers."

The lotus, however, does not exist . . . as a flower. Conjecture on Jerba has it that he relished the island's exquisite dates. In any case, ever since, Jerba has been known as "the land of the lotus eaters."

In the last two decades this 246-square-mile desert island in the Mediterranean off Tunisia's southern coast has blossomed. It is an island of verdant gardens, palm and olive groves, artisanry, palatial hotel complexes and white-sand beaches, colorful dress and abstract architecture. Houses and buildings seemingly are sculptured from the air.

Jerba has become a popular summer playland among Europeans. But, oddly enough, few Americans have discovered Jerba's existence, or have gone in search of the lotus flower.

The government built Jerba's first big hotel in 1960. Others quickly followed, built with private Tunisian and foreign capital. Now 16 hotel complexes line a palm-studded, white-sand strip on the northeast and east coasts.

They are "complexes," geared to providing everything you could want on a vacation by the sea, including equipment rentals for scuba diving, spear fishing and boating; swimming pools; live bands and nightclubs; horseback and camel riding, all under a warm African sun on clean beaches with calm, crystalline, shallow water.

Tranquillity and Tradition

Jerba is not only palms, sun and beaches but tranquillity and tradition, which Jerba's planners have striven to protect. The hotels have been designed in keeping with Jerba's existing architecture, including a white exterior and blending traditional motifs such as domes, arches, vaulted ceilings and abstract spatial relationships.

Jerba's horizon has not been violated by square, concrete high-rises. And all the hotel complexes are isolated in one coastal strip earmarked for tourist development.

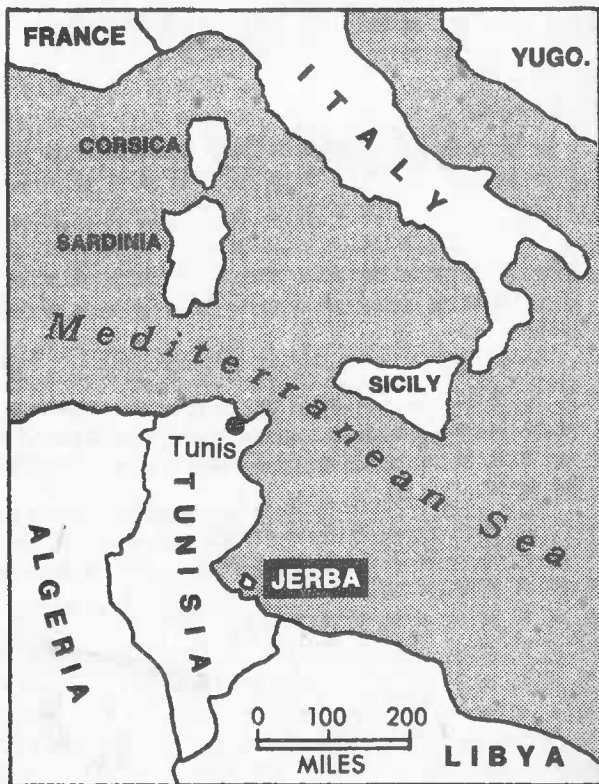
Throughout the sunny April to October season (the temperature is between 75 and 85) this coastal strip is a bustling and complete seaside playland, while a short distance away a peaceful, traditional life continues in Jerba's quiet gardens and villages.

Jerba's 80 miles of coastline harbors reefs and lagoons, marshes and rocky points, sand dunes and long stretches of white beach, with palms virtually omnipresent. Along much of the coast, looking away from the water the panorama resembles the fringes of a Saharan oasis. And on a short walk inland through the palms, Jerba conceals a lush, colorful and fertile oasis environment.

Throughout Jerba the land slopes gently up from the sea to a central plateau only several hundred feet high. Most of the plateau is gardens of fig, citrus, palm and olive trees, tall eucalyptus, rows of vegetables, cactus walls enclosing individual plots and abundant wild flowers.

On Jerba live Berbers, Bedouins, native Jerbans and a Jewish community. Each has its own traditional, colorful attire. However, there has been much blending as well as many residents adopting Western dress, especially in the villages.

Most of Jerba's country women working in their gardens



Times photo by Pat Lynch

wear multicolored, hand-woven, long skirts, blouses and scarves, some with tall straw hats for protection from the sun. Whether in Western dress or robes, most men wear a red, tapering cap called a "chechia," except for white-turbaned Bedouins.

Jerba's Jews are mostly concentrated in two villages, Hara Kbira and Hara Essghira. The 1,000-strong community is descended from members of the Kharejite sect that fled the terrors of Nebuchadnezzar the Babylonian 25 centuries ago and took refuge on Jerba. In 586 BC they built their synagogue, El Griba, meaning "the stranger." It is Africa's most important synagogue and services are conducted with an 800-year-old torah of sheepskin.

Famous Jewelers

Some of Jerba's Jews are jewelers renowned throughout Tunisia. On the narrow paths of Hara Kbira and Hara Essghira, where the doors, windows and wrought iron of the white-washed houses are trimmed in blue, their tiny jewelry shops display gold and silver styled in traditional Arab as well as Jewish motifs.

Although the Jewish colony is 2,500 years old, they were not the first to inhabit Jerba. In 2,000 BC Libyans colonized the island, followed by Phoenicians 1,300 years later.

In the 2nd Century BC Romans introduced pottery (a thriving industry today), built a 5-mile causeway connecting Jerba with the mainland (restored, paved and still in use) and planted the first olive trees (which now abound on the island). The Romans were followed by Arabs, Sicilians, Spaniards, Turks, the Pacha of Tripoli and the Beys of Tunis.

Houmt Souk, meaning "market city" in Arabic, is Jerba's commercial center (hotel buses travel the 12 miles be-

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tween the strip and Houmt Souk many times daily).

It is a small city of 12,000 on an island of 45,000 and 20 small villages, with eucalyptus-lined main avenues and a restored 15th-Century Spanish fortress guarding the port. The old center is mainly twisting, narrow streets where cars cannot go, passing under arches and leading into small squares cluttered with outdoor cafes where Jerbans are playing cards or dominoes and sipping coffee or tea.

The souk, or area of shops and stalls in a maze of covered, criss-crossing lanes, caters to the tourist trade. Jerba's handmade brass items, embroidered shirts and dresses, pottery, carpets, blankets, baskets and leather goods line the souk's lanes.

On an island of artisanry, carpet weaving is most important and is controlled by the National Office of Artisanry. Do not buy a carpet unless it bears a national office tag that assures you it is handmade with the highest quality wool. Carpets can be bought for about a third U.S. value and shopkeepers will send them C.O.D. with 25% down.

Bizarre Example

Three miles from Houmt Souk, on the road to Borj Jillij, is the best preserved "menzel" on Jerba. Uninhabited today, they were small, fortified villages centered around a mosque. They are the most bizarre example of the Jerban's abstract, artistic feeling for architecture, miniturrets, spires, square and arched doorways, vaulted ceilings and low-ceiling chambers, nooks and crannies, graced with airy quality.

Scattered around the island are numerous "zaouia." They are simple, domed, one-room, usually whitewashed shrines built above the graves of holy men.

On the southwest coast, surrounded by Jerba's only hills, is the pottery center of the island. Most of the shops of Guellala's 500 potters are open to visitors.

Guellala's streets, paths and environs are strewn with pieces of pottery. Many houses have pottery walls. Pottery is everywhere and everything in Guellala . . . almost. It is

also a fishing village, and Jerba is blessed with Tunisia's richest fishing grounds.

Jerba's waters are worked by the men from half-a-dozen fishing villages. Virtually all is for local consumption, so fresh fish is always available at the hotels and in Houmt Souk's small restaurants, where you eat well for under \$3.

Jerba's cuisine is French and continental with a Tunisian specialty or two thrown in, such as "couscous," a grain much like wheat prepared with vegetables, raisins, garbanzo beans, lamb or chicken and in a spicy sauce.

Served by Air Tunis

Air Tunis flies directly into Jerba from London, Paris, Lyon and Geneva.

Daily rates for room and board at the four-star Dar Jerba, Ulysses Palace, Jerba La Douce and Le Menzel hotels run \$20 to \$30 per person.

Among the best three-star hotels are the Meninx, Les Sirenes and the Tanit, at \$15 to \$25 daily per person for room and board. Two-star rated hotels drop to between \$12 and \$16, and one-star hotels \$7 to \$11.

In Houmt Souk, half a dozen small hotels each charge \$2.50 a day for lodging only without bath in the room. Also, there's a "marhala" in Houmt Souk—a former caravansary arranged into sleeping quarters with common shower and toilet facilities. It's simple, adequate and clean at \$2.50 per person per day.

Many hotels and travel agencies in Houmt Souk offer tours, although the best way to see Jerba is on your own. Distances are short and roads are good. Some hotels rent one-cylinder French Mobyettes and most rent bicycles.

Avis, Hertz and Eurocar have offices in Houmt Souk. Taxis and infrequent buses ply the island. Peugeot station wagons load up six passengers, travel an established line throughout the day and charge an inexpensive set price.

It is best to secure hotel and flight reservations well in advance through your travel agent. For further information contact the Tunisian National Tourist Office, 630 Fifth Ave., Room 863, New York 10020.