



International scene

Tunisian island

Ulysses' Jerba: It's a seaside

By Edward I. Placidi

JERBA, Tunisia — Homer recounts Ulysses' many voyages, including a visit to Jerba, an island of ecstasy for Ulysses, who spent his days consuming the legendary lotus.

The lotus, however, does not exist on Jerba as a flower. Conjecture here 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 — with verdant gardens, palm and olive groves, artisanry, palatial hotel complexes, white-sand beaches, colorful dress, and abstract architecture, the houses and buildings seemingly sculptured from the air — has blossomed as a popular summer playland for Europeans. Oddly enough, few Americans have discovered it.

SHORTLY AFTER independence in 1956, Tunisia's new government drew up the first five-year plan for tourism. Jerba was slated as a cornerstone of a nationwide tourist trade, which catered to a million vacationers in 1977.

playland today

The government built Jerba's first big hotel in 1960. Others, built with private Tunisian and foreign capital, followed quickly. Today, 16 hotel complexes line a palm-studded, white-sand strip on the northeast and east coasts, providing scuba, spear fishing, and boating equipment rental, swimming pools, live bands, nightclubs, horseback and camel riding, and clean beaches, with calm, crystalline, shallow water under a warm African sun.

But Jerba is more than palms, sun, and beaches. Planners have protected its tranquility and tradition, too. The hotels, in keeping with architecture, feature white exteriors and blend such traditional motifs as domes, arches, and vaulted ceilings with abstract spacial relationships. The horizon has not been violated by square, concrete high rises. And all hotels are isolated in one coastal strip earmarked for tourist development.

Between April and October, with the temperature a sunny 75 to 85, this coastal strip is a bustling seaside playland, while a short distance away a peaceful traditional life continues in quiet gardens and villages.

THE 80 MILES of coastline harbor reefs, lagoons, marshes, rocky points, sand dunes, and stretches of beach. Along much of the coast, a short walk inland through the palms reveals a colorful, fertile oasis.

The land slopes gently from the sea to a central plateau several hundred feet high, with gardens of fig, citrus, palm, and olive trees, tall eucalyptus, vegetables, cactus walls enclosing individual plots, and abundant wildflowers.



Houmt Souk (meaning "market city" in Arabic) is Jerba's commercial center. The souk, with its shops and stalls,

caters to the tourist trade. Jerba is a desert island in the Mediterranean off Tunisia's coast.

On this island oasis are Berbers, Bedouins, native Jerbans, and a Jewish community, each with its traditional colorful attire blending with Western dress, especially in the villages.

Most country women work their gardens in multicolored, handwoven, long skirts, blouses, and scarves. Some wear tall straw hats for protection from the sun. Whether in Western dress or robes, most men, except the white-turbaned Bedouins, wear *chechias*, red, tapering caps.

JERBA'S JEWS, numbering 1,000, are concentrated mostly in two villages, Hara Kbira and Hara Essghira. The community is descended from the Kharejite sect, which took refuge here from the terrors of Nebuchadnezzar, the Babylonian, 25 centuries ago. In 586 B.C., they built their synagogue, El Griba (the stranger), Africa's most important synagogue. Services are conducted with an 800-year-old Thora of sheepskin.

The Jews are renowned jewelers throughout Tunisia. On the narrow paths of these villages, with the doors, windows, and wrought iron of the white-washed houses trimmed in blue, their tiny jewelry shops display gold and silver in traditional Arab and Jewish motifs.

Although their colony is 2,500 years old, the Jews were not the first inhabitants. Libyans colonized 2,000 years before Christ, followed by Phoenicians 1,300 years later. In the 2d Century B.C., Romans introduced pottery, a thriving industry today; built between island and mainland a 5-mile-causeway, which, restored and paved, still is in use, and planted the first olive trees, descendants of which now abound. The Romans were followed by Arabs, Sicilians, Spaniards, Turks, the Pacha of Tripoli, and the Beys of Tunis.

HOUMT SOUK, Arabic for Market City, is the island's commercial center. Hotel buses travel the 12 miles between the strip and Houmt Souk many times daily.

45,000 and 20 small villages, has eucalyptus-lined main avenues and a restored 15th-Century Spanish fortress guarding the port. The old center has twisting narrow streets where cars cannot go, passing under arches and leading into small squares cluttered with outdoor cafes where Jerbans play cards or dominoes and sip coffee or tea.

The souk, or area of shops and stalls, caters to tourists. Handmade brass items, embroidered shirts and dresses,

pottery, carpets, blankets, baskets, and leather goods are jammed into a maze of covered, criss-crossing lanes.

On this island of artisanry, carpet weaving is most important, controlled by the National Office of Artisanry. Those who buy carpets should be sure each bears a National Office tag, which assures that it is handmade of the highest quality wool. Carpets may be purchased for about a third their cost in the United States, and shopkeepers will send them c.o.d. with 25 per cent down.

THREE MILES from Houmt Souk, on the road to Borj Jillij, is Jerba's best preserved *menzel*. Uninhabited today, these small, fortified villages centered around a mosque remain as bizarre examples of the Jerbans abstract, artistic feeling for architecture — spires,

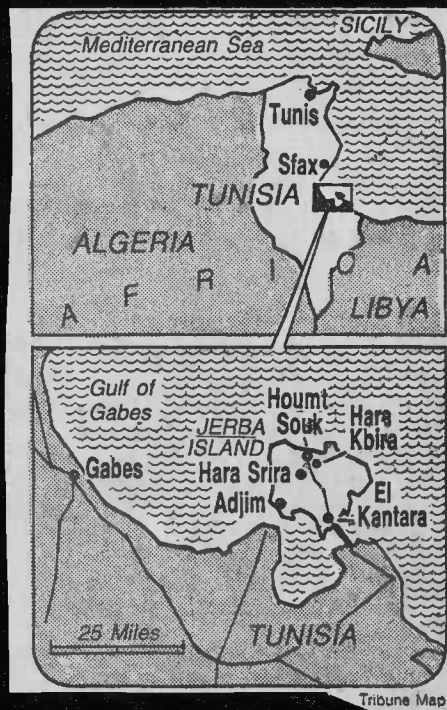
mini-turrets, square and arched doorways, vaulted ceilings and low-ceiling chambers, nooks and crannies, graced with the airy quality of a helium balloon that would float away if not anchored.

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

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

Guellala's streets, paths, and environs are strewn with pottery. Many houses have pottery walls. Pottery is everywhere and everything in Guellala — almost: It also is a fishing village.

JERBA'S WATERS, Tunisia's richest



fishing grounds, are worked by men from half a dozen fishing villages. Virtually all their catch is for local consumption, so fresh fish always is available at the hotels and in Houmt Souk's small restaurants, where one may eat well for less than \$3.

The island 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 served in a spicy sauce.

Air Tunis flies directly 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 \$22 to \$32 a person.

Among the best three-star hotels are

the Meninx, Les Sirenes, and the Tanit, at \$17 to \$27 daily a person for room and board.

Two-star hotels charge between \$13 and \$19, and one-star hotels, \$8 to \$12.

IN HOUMT SOUK, half a dozen small hotels each charge \$4 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 — simple, adequate, and clean at \$4 a person a day.

Many hotels and travel agencies in Houmt Souk offer tours, although the best way to see the island is on your own. Distances are short and roads are good. Some hotels rent one-cylinder French motorbikes, and most rent bicycles. Avis, Hertz, and Europcar have offices in Houmt Souk. Taxis and infrequent buses ply the island. Peugeot station wagons carry 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 a travel agent. Further information is available from the Tunisian National Tourist Office, 630 5th Av., Room 863, New York, N.Y. 10020.