

# You, too, may want to stay forever

By Edward Iginio Placidi  
*Special to The Inquirer*

Homer's "Odyssey" tells that Ulysses and his crew sailed to the island of Jerba, where the people subsisted on the flowery fruit of the lotus tree. Welcomed with open arms, the Greeks feasted with their hosts and discovered the lotus flower's sweetly sinister effect: It made all who tasted it forget their homeland and desire only to dwell among the lotus trees forever. Ulysses had to drive his weeping companions to their ship and tie them to their oars in order to leave.

The lotus, however, does not exist on Jerba — at least not as a flower. Conjecture has it that Ulysses' men relished instead the island's exquisite dates. In any case, Jerba is even today sometimes called "the land of the lotus-eaters," and few visitors willingly rush away.

Jerba is a 246-square-mile, sun-drenched island oasis in the Mediterranean just off the Tunisian coast. In the last two decades, it has blossomed into a popular summer playland among Europeans who not only enjoy — inexpensively — every amenity of seaside resort life, but find undisturbed natural beauty, curious abstract architecture and little change in the singular age-old traditional life.

Shortly after Tunisia attained independence in 1956, the new government drew up its first five-year plan for the development of tourism. Jerba was slated to become one of the cornerstones in the building of a nationwide tourist trade that now caters to more than 1 million vacationers a year.

## Summer season

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

The hotels have been designed in keeping with Jerba's existing architecture. Most have white exteriors and carry out traditional motifs such as domes, arches and vaulted ceilings. All are isolated in one coastal strip earmarked for tourist development.

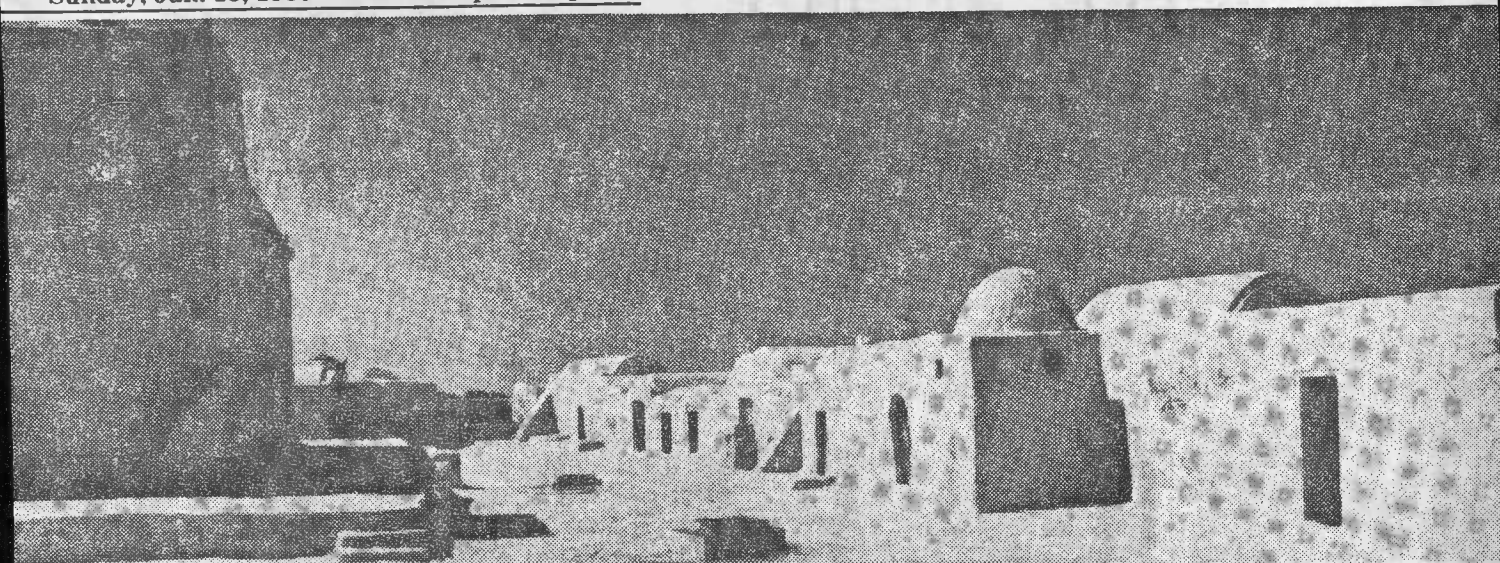
Throughout the sunny April-to-October season (the temperatures are between 75 and 85, the water calm and clear) this strip is filled with tourists. But a short distance away a peaceful traditional life continues in Jerba's quiet gardens and villages.

Jerba's 80 miles of coastline is made up of reefs and lagoons, marshes and rocky points, sand dunes and long stretches of white beach. Palm trees are everywhere, making the panorama resemble the fringes of a Saharan oasis.

Inland from the beaches, Jerba's terrain slopes gently upward to a central plateau a few hundred feet high. Most of the plateau is covered with gardens of fig, citrus, palms and olive trees, tall eucalyptus, rows of vegetables and abundant wildflowers.

The Berbers, Bedouins, native Jerbans and Jews on Jerba each have their own traditional and colorful style of dress. Women working in their gardens wear multi-colored, hand-woven, long skirts, blouses and scarves, some with tall straw hats for

(See JERBA on 12-F)



The 'menzel' were small, fortified villages that were centered on a mosque; they are uninhabited today

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## JERBA, from 1-F

protection from the sun. Whether in western dress or robes, all men but the white-turbaned Bedouins wear a red, tapering cap called a "chechia."

Jerba's Jews are 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. In 586 B.C., they built their synagogue — "El Griba," meaning "the stranger." Today it is one of the largest in Africa.

The Jewish community includes jewelers renowned throughout Tunisia. On the narrow paths of their villages, 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.

The Jews were not the first to inhabit Jerba. Libyans colonized the island 2,000 years before Christ, followed by Phoenicians 1,300 years later. In the second century before Christ, Romans introduced pottery (which is a thriving industry today), built a five-mile-long causeway connecting Jerba with the mainland (restored, paved and still in use) and planted the first olive trees (which now abound). 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. It is a city of 12,000 people with eucalyptus-lined main avenues and a restored 15th-century Spanish fortress guarding the port. In the old center, twisting streets — too narrow for cars — pass under arches and lead into small squares lined with outdoor cafes where Jerbans play cards or dominoes and sip coffee or tea.

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The souk, or market, 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 crisscrossed maze of lanes.

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 that it is handmade with the highest quality wool. Carpets can be purchased for about a third their U.S. value, and shopkeepers will send them C.O.D. with 25 percent down.

## Variety for tourists

Almost every corner of Jerba reveals something different to see or do on a different part of the island. On Tuesday afternoon there's a weekly music festival at Midoun. Many of the numerous potters' shops in Guelala are open to the public. The weaver's shops in Cedriyen and Sedouichek welcome curious tourists. Remnants of Punic, Roman, Arab and Spanish civilizations, and "zaouia," white-washed shrines built above the graves of holy men, dot the island.

Also, there are several "menzel" left. Uninhabited today, they were small fortified villages centered on mosques, and the most bizarre example of Jerba's architecture — a fusion of spires, mini-turrets, square and arched doorways, vaulted ceilings and low-ceilinged chambers. And don't miss Houmt Souk's Museum of Anthropology and Art, which tells Jerba's history with costumes, jewelry, artifacts and more.

Jerba's cuisine is mainly 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 in a spicy sauce. Jerba's waters are worked by the men from half a dozen fishing villages, so fresh fish is always available at the hotels and Houmt Souk's small restaurants, where you eat well for less than \$3.

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

Four-star hotels run \$20 to \$30 per person; for three stars the rate is \$15 to \$25, for two stars \$12 to \$16 and one star as inexpensive as \$7.

More information is available at the Tunisian National Tourist Office, 630 Fifth Ave., Room 863, New York, N.Y. 10020.