Elly’s December 2014 notes on a short trip to Tunisia

I arrived in Tunis, the capital of Tunisia, on an evening flight from Rome and had a wonderful introduction to the cosmopolitan nature of Tunisia sitting next to a woman who was originally from Cyprus, had studied in Russia, and had a family in Tunis (having met her Tunisian husband when a student). She had taken a niece, daughter, and granddaughter to visit Cyprus and Greece and the niece was so nice as to take me to my hotel.

The next day I looked around Tunis a bit and decided to go to Sfax (where the conference I was going to was) around 9:30 am. The trip ended up taking most of the day because the train was an hour late and then had to wait for other trains to pass it. It was worth the 16 Dinar and the people I met waiting: a mother and a ‘tres active’ (as the mother put it) daughter and some unrelated older people who were all drawn in by the daughter (and ran after her to make sure she didn’t disappear). The train station in Sfax is not complicated, a few platforms, a waiting room, and some vendors. On the train, I sat across the aisle from a few boys in their early twenties who were listening to Stromaj. It was loud but nobody objected. Hundreds of kilometers of olive trees, with an occasional shepherd and his/her sheep, some date palms, and grapes. Everyone is on the phone of course!

I walked around in Sfax a bit after I arrived and it is a quiet, unassuming, non-touristy city. The locals apologize constantly for this but it is in fact wonderful to see a real city and a real ‘souq’ with groceries and almost no souvenirs. With our conference we had a walk across the medina and one of the local suggested a rooftop hike and I did some of that. The French built a new city in the 19th century which is still referred to as the ‘Ville Nouvelle’. The better-known cities have elaborate beaches but Sfax’ old center is from the 9th century and one of the best preserved. Sfax was built on the site of two Roman towns and the building blocks of those Roman cities are the foundation of the medina. The country had of course been settled before the Romans by the Phoenicians around 1100 BCE and the Romans, in turn, were displaced by the Germanic Vandals in 439 but the latter were quickly pushed out by the Byzantine Empire which rules until 1574 when the country became part of the Ottoman Empire. The French took over in 1881 and Germany invaded it in 1942 but Tunisia finally achieved independence in 1956 after which some more changes happened of course. Berbers remain in the South and West.
The conference I attended was on Forensic Linguistics which is on language and the law. One aim of this field is to study authorship debates (of suicide notes, hate mail, disputed novels, etc), plagiarism issues, ambiguous legal documents, and (possibly fake) confessions. The second aim is to examine what goes on in the court room and before and after a case reaches court. Examples here include how police/courts question witnesses, how witnesses report events, and how lawyers and their clients interact. I had taught a class on this fall semester and have done some consulting for law firms. Attending this conference was a way to get more acquainted with the various issues and people.

The conference was organized under the aegis of the Ministry of Higher Education and had funding from Petroleum and Telecom companies. The latter see the field as helping Tunisians’ proficiency in English legal documents and attracting more foreign investment to Sfax. Tunisia is
rich in oil, phosphates, iron, zinc, and lead (although most of the country relies on agriculture). The conference had banners, TV interviews, and lots of publicity. That is good for a department and university and having this conference was a big deal and the guests were treated so well, a real pleasure to be here. We also got a lot of information on the changes since the Arab Spring and the new constitution and the tension between Tunisia being an Arab Islamic state and individual freedoms, such as religion and expression.

The last day we had a tour to the islands outside Sfax, the Kerkennah Islands, a little more than an hour on a ferry. The ferry transports building materials, sheep, groceries, and people. Many people living abroad apparently have (summer) houses - mansions really. There are amazingly beautiful hotels and Roman ruins. The various ports are lovely in their vivid colors and the debris left behind is fascinating. I brought back discarded fishing tools, nylon rope in various colors, and brightly painted pieces of wood. They made it to the US and I plan to put it all together!
Guidebooks warn about excessive taxi rates but I had one taxi driver who just said ‘pay me what you think it is worth’. Smart move on his part! There is a delightful local beer (Celtia) and I was told the Tunisian wines are excellent as well. Alcohol is easy to get in restaurants but, in a supermarket, you have to ask and, when I did, it was Friday so no beer. Smoking cigarettes is omnipresent, even on the train and in restaurants. Traffic is crazy but not as crazy as in other places I have been because there are fewer bikes and motorized bikes. Cats are everywhere but I didn’t see one dog.

All in all, Tunisia is a very interesting place, with friendly people (except some of the service personnel who seemed to have a pre-1989 Soviet attitude). I would love to explore the desert in the South and West. Perhaps the negative travel-advisories in effect for those areas at the time I went will be lifted in the future.