

September 10, 2008

Our arrival in Malta on Sunday, August 3, marked our halfway point across the Mediterranean. This small island group, with a total area of just 122 square miles, consisted of three islands: Malta, Gozo, and Comino. Due to its excellent natural harbor and strategic location between Africa and Europe, Malta had seen many invaders and colonizers over the centuries, making it a fascinating historical place to visit. Between 3600 to 3000 BC, a prehistoric civilization left its mark on the islands in the megalith temples and amazing underground tombs that they built. In later years, other groups (in historical chronological time) arrived: the Phoenicians, the Romans, the Arabs, the Normans, the Knights of St. John, the French, and the British. The Maltese language is said to be a blend of Arabic and Phoenician; its sounds are foreign to any other language that we have ever heard. Like the British, the Maltese people drive on the left hand side of the road, and English is the second official language of the islands. In 1964, Malta became independent. In 2004, it joined the European Union.

During our stay in Malta, we moored at Msida Marina. On Monday we immediately tackled our fuel tank problem. First, Phil took up the floor boards, a major project. He assumed that the screws of the inspection plate hadn't been tightened by the people who had made the tank, causing the full tank to leak during our sail from Greece to Malta; upon checking, his deductions proved correct. Luckily it wasn't anything more, but the project did entail an entire day, and by the end of the project Phil was exhausted. At the marina, we had a view of both the Black Pearl Restaurant, originally a square-rigged ship used in the making of the film Popeye (not Pirates of the Caribbean, even though the ship has the same name) and of the walls of Valletta, the town created by the Knights of St. John in the 16th century.



In 1530, the Knights of St. John settled in Malta after being forced to leave Rhodes and made Vittoriosa (Birgu) their capital. In 1537, Jean Parisot de la Valletta, the Grand Master of the Order, started setting up fortifications around the harbor. The Ottoman Turks, in control of most of the Eastern Mediterranean, saw Malta as a stepping stone for their conquest of Europe from the south. The Turks attacked the Knights in May 1565, and the Knights, completely outnumbered, withstood the Turkish offensive in what became known as the Great Siege. The Turks retreated in September 1565, and the Knights became overnight heroes in Europe. Large sums of money started pouring into the Order. A new capital, named Valletta, was commissioned by Grand Master la Valletta across the harbor from Vittoriosa on the mostly uninhabited peninsula. This new planned city consisted of narrow streets laid out according to a grid pattern and tall buildings to help shade the streets during the hot summer. Enormous fortifications were also begun throughout the harbor in case of another attack on Malta by the Turks, such as the Great Ditch dug across the peninsula to protect the new city of Valletta from a land attack and massive curtain walls built around the perimeter of the city. Today, this 16th century baroque city, smaller than a square mile, is a World Heritage site.



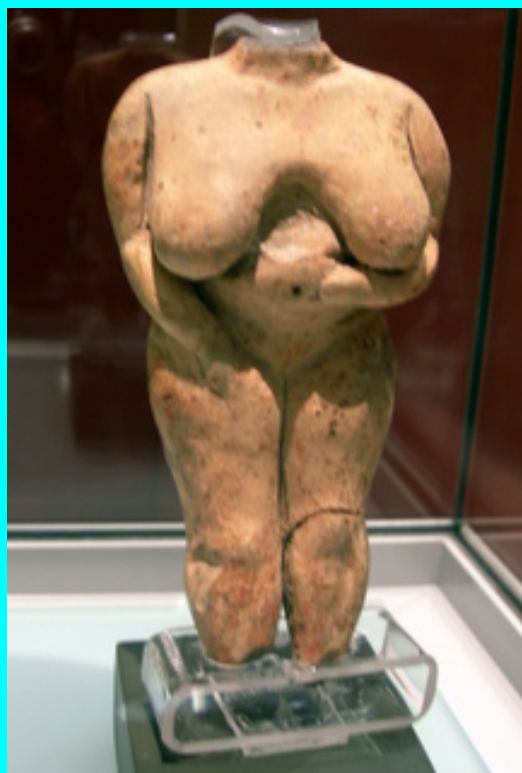
*French Wall**English Wall*

As for the Knights of St. John, they ruled for 268 years. Without the Turkish threat, the Knights strayed away from their religious vows and became weak, allowing Napoleon Bonaparte in 1798 to take Malta with barely a fight. Today, the remnant of the Order, now known as the Sovereign Military Order of Malta, has its headquarters in Rome and provides charitable aid to stricken regions around the world, especially medical aid.

On Thursday we explored Valletta, the capital of Malta and the historical 16th century city of the Knights of St. John. First, we visited the National Museum of Archeology which contained objects found at the prehistoric sites. Some of the items of interest were the spiral designed stone blocks used as decoration in some of the temples; the small 5000 year old figurines thought to be connected with some type of fertility worship (the small hole at the top of the “Fat Lady” statuette was believed to have allowed for the interchange of heads); and the special stones, about the size of cannon balls, thought to have been used to help move the megaliths (the large massive stone blocks). Even now, this prehistoric civilization presents the archeologists with more questions than answers.

*Sleeping Lady*

[Next Page](#)

*Venus**Fat Lady*

Next, we visited St. John's Co-Cathedral, the conventual church of the Knights of St. John for over 200 years. Its interior displayed a wealth of Maltese baroque with every part of the nave covered in rich ornamentation. The arched ceiling depicted events from the life of St. John the Baptist, the patron saint of the Order; each of the side chapels belonged to one of the nationalities comprising the Order; behind the altar stood a marble statue of the baptism of Christ by John the Baptist; and set into the inlaid marble floor were Knights' marble tombstones. Throughout the cathedral could be seen the Maltese Cross, the emblem of the Knights of St. John. Before leaving, we visited the Cathedral's museum containing Caravaggio's famous painting, the *Beheading of St. John the Baptist*.



[Next Page](#)

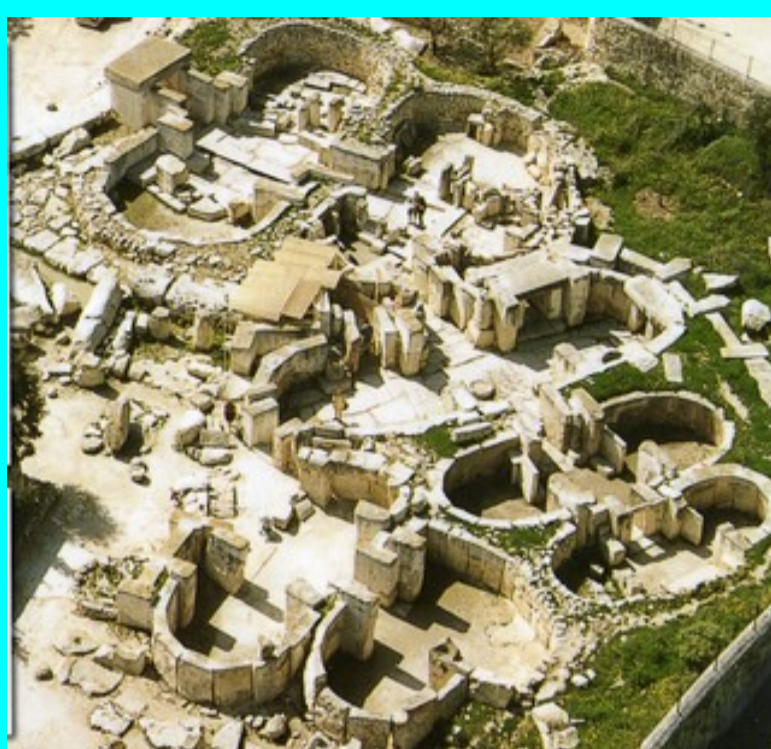
During our day in Valletta, we also visited the Armory Museum at the old Grand Master's Palace containing an excellent collection of armor and weapons, enjoyed the audiovisual presentation *The Malta Experience* presenting an excellent overview of Malta's history, and walked to the Upper Barrakka Gardens where we had an incredible view of Grand Harbor. In the center across the harbor was Vittoriosa, the original capital of the Knights of St. John upon their arrival in Malta in 1530. At its head was Fort St. Angelo, the main fortress at the time of the Great Siege. Due to the high humidity and heat in Malta at this time of year, being a tourist was tiring, and so after visiting the Barrakka Gardens we headed back to the boat, a couple of hours earlier than originally planned.



Vittoriosa and Fort St. Angelo

[Next Page](#)

On Friday we visited the prehistoric archeological sites near Valletta. The archeological site, the Hal Saflieni Hypogeum, was different from anything we had ever seen before. This World Heritage monument was an incredible underground necropolis consisting of halls, chambers, and passages carved out of limestone. It's thought that an estimated 7000 bodies were interred here. Most impressive, though, was the central chamber with its domed ceiling and smooth curved lines, so pleasing to the eye. It was a beautiful piece of architecture and predated the pyramids of Egypt by more than 500 years. A few blocks away from the Hypogeum were the Tarxien Temples. These megalithic temples, along with the other ones found in Malta, were considered the oldest freestanding stone structures in the world.



The Maltese people are Roman Catholic, and during the summer each village commemorates the feast day (usually a Sunday) of its patron saint with a festa. Each festa usually lasts five to seven days with the entire village decorated with festive banners, flags, and lights. The church itself is decorated with colorful lights, and its treasures, relics, and patron saint are proudly displayed. Saturday, the eve of the feast celebration, the main attraction is the fireworks. At 10 pm the aerial fireworks occur, and at 11 pm the ground fireworks occur, the pride of the festa. Sunday evening, after evening Mass, the life-size statue of the patron saint is paraded through the streets accompanied by the band, fireworks, and church bells. Originally these village feast days in Malta were simple, but now each village in Malta tries to outdo each other with decorations and fireworks, and so to attend one of these festas is quite an experience.

[Next Page](#)

Saturday evening, August 9, we attended the Festa of St. Lawrence in Vittoriosa, the original home of the Knights of St. John. The entrance into this old town was like walking into the Magic Kingdom at Disneyland, so beautiful and magical, lit up with lights and banners. Angel lampposts lined the main street and public square. The Church of St. Lawrence itself was decked out with colorful lights, and for almost an hour before the fireworks began, the church bells rang out. As this church had originally been the Order's conventual church before St. John's Co-Cathedral in Valletta, its interior displayed beautiful relics.



Statue of St. Lawrence

In all, we spent 9 days in Malta. Besides playing tourist, we spent time provisioning and buying needed boat parts, as Malta was known for its large selection of imported food products and well-stocked chandleries. With lots of history in Malta we easily could have stayed longer, but when we received the favorable weather window from Phil's brother, our weatherman, it was time to start our journey across the Western Mediterranean. We departed Malta at 4 am on Tuesday, August 12, bound for Monastir, Tunisia, 191 nautical miles away. We were suppose to have winds SE 10 to 15 knots soon after leaving Malta, but they never materialized until 17 hours later. Instead, we motored most of the day with little to no wind. Once the winds did arrive, we had a great sail the rest of the way to Monastir, sailing on a reach with slight seas. Only upon our approach to Monastir did the winds increase to 20 knots with seas 3 feet. We arrived in Tunisia Wednesday afternoon, 36 hours after departing Malta. After mooring the boat at Marina Cap Monastir, we were warmly welcomed into the country by the Tunisian officials.

Monastir, a beach town with a population of 72,000, was located along the eastern coastline of Tunisia. We chose Monastir as our port of entry due to its marina being near the center of town and its accessibility for inland tours into southern Tunisia. On our way into town we walked by two of Monastir's main sites: the Bourguiba Mausoleum and the ribat.

[Next Page](#)

The Bourguiba Mausoleum in Monastir was an impressive monument to view and visit. Inside were housed the tombs of the Bourguiba family and also a small display of items that had once belonged to Bourguiba. Habib Bourguiba, a native of Monastir, had led his country to independence from France in 1956 and afterwards had become its first president. He ruled for 30 years and set Tunisia on the path of becoming a westernized secular nation. He's best remembered for his broad legal and social changes, especially in regards to women's rights. He died in 2000 but, unlike Ataturk in Turkey, is not revered in Tunisia. Adjacent to the mausoleum was an Islamic cemetery.



[Next Page](#)

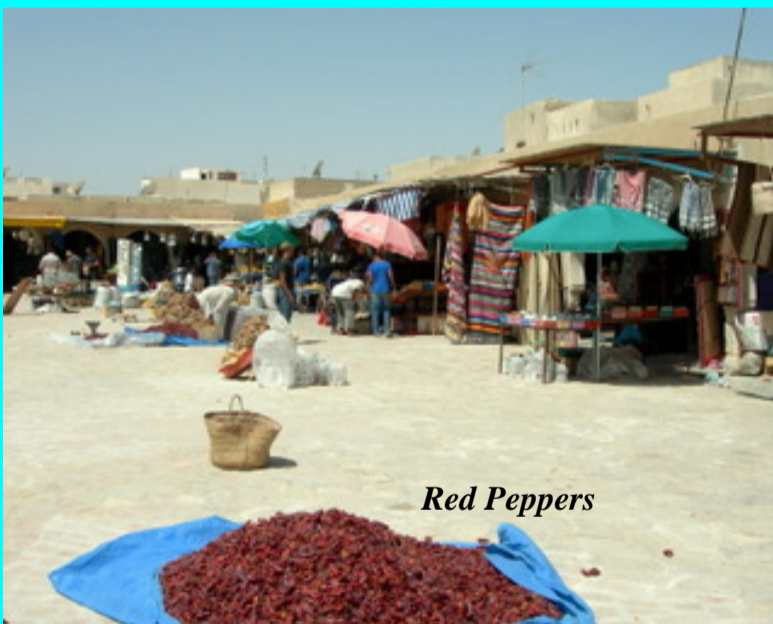
The ribat was a fortified Muslim monastery originally constructed around 800 AD during the Aghlabid dynasty and used to house Muslim monks responsible for guarding the coastline. Over the centuries Monastir's ribat has been renovated and expanded, reflecting different architectural styles, but its core, though restored, is typical 9th and 10th century architecture. Today, Monastir's ribat is considered the best of Tunisia's Islamic fortresses and has been used in many a film set. From on top the tower (the nador), we had excellent views of the Bourguiba Mausoleum and the Islamic cemetery adjacent to it (the white dome tombs signified the grave of a holy man), Marina Cap Monastir where *Kuhela* was moored, and the town beach.



[Next Page](#)



While in Monastir we took a 3 day guided tour into southern Tunisia in a 4X4. The first day, Sunday, August 17, we traveled south, stopping first at El Jem, the third largest coliseum in the Roman world, built around 230 AD. Looking at this amphitheater, it was certainly easy to appreciate the far-reaching impact of the Roman Empire. The area south of El Jem was covered with olive trees, and at times we saw phosphate mining. In Gabes, we stopped at their Sunday market. From Gabes to Matmata, the landscape became rugged and barren.



[Next Page](#)

Page 9

In southern Tunisia we experienced the indigenous Berber culture in the village of Matmata. The highlight of the day was seeing their traditional underground troglodyte dwellings. These houses were all similar with a tunneled entrance leading into a central courtyard, which itself had been dug out. Around the sides of the courtyard were the carved out rooms of the house. These underground troglodyte dwellings were well suited to the southern Tunisian terrain, providing the Berbers with cool temperatures during the summer and moderate temperatures during the winter. During our stay we visited two houses. The first one was being used now as a hotel and was similar to the hotel in Matmata that had been used as Luke Skywalker's childhood home in the *Star Wars* episodes. The second Berber house was one of the Berber homes in Matmata that had been set up for tourists. Inside, we saw a woman using the traditional method of grinding the grain to make the Berber bread. On her hands she had red henna to help protect against calluses.



[Next Page](#)

On our drive from Matmata to Douz, we drove past sheep and goats idling away the time during the midday heat. Here, in southern Tunisia, we'd often see herds of dromedaries (one-humped camels) unattended on the open ranges. Our arrival in Douz marked the most southern point on our tour; it also was one of the main access points into the Sahara Desert. After Douz, we drove to our hotel in the village of Souk Lahad.



Monday morning we continued our journey west. Early on, our route took us by some beautiful wind-sculpted dunes; the sand of these dunes was incredibly fine. Along this part of our drive, we often saw thatched fences put up as barriers to help contain the fine sand.



[Next Page](#)

Afterwards we passed through Chott el-Jerid, an immense salt lake that was dry most or all of the year. Its flat, desolate surface was used at times during the filming of Star Wars. Along the roadside, we'd often see piles of the wind-driven salt lying around, almost looking like snow. This dried-up lake was covered in a saline crust; just breaking the crust revealed the salt deposits underneath.



Bordering Chott el-Jerid was the oasis of Tozeur, known for its high-quality dates. Tozeur's enormous palm plantation was the second largest in Tunisia with at least 200,000 palm trees. While in Tozeur, we rode and walked through parts of the plantation, where giant palm trees provided a cool covering. At times, we felt like we were back in the South Pacific. Afterwards, we visited two other interesting sites -- the small Paradise Desert Zoo and the Dar Charait Museum -- before heading to our hotel in Nafta, an oasis town 14 miles west of Tozeur. That evening we drove out into the desert in the 4X4 to enjoy the sunset.



[Next Page](#)

Tuesday morning, we took a minor side road northwest to see the small mountain oases of Chebika, Mides, and Tamerza. No buses were allowed on this mountainous road to the oases, only 4X4's; so all tourists on tour buses had to first be transferred to 4X4's before visiting this area. At Chebika, we walked up to the hillside above for a great view of the oasis and the desert beyond; the barren, rocky hills surrounding the Chebika oasis added to the beauty of its setting. We then continued along the path down to the gorge below, passing by a spring forming a small waterfall and pool. From there, our drive took us near to the Algerian border. In 1969 after 22 days of heavy rain, the old village of Tamerza was abandoned after becoming flooded. Now, just the shell of the old village remained with only the village leader's home and mosque intact. The new Tamerza had been rebuilt a mile away.



[Next Page](#)



After our visit to the mountain oases, we rejoined the main road at Gafsa. From Gafsa, we drove north to Kairouan. Along the way we saw some camels sitting so contently in the back of a pickup truck. Unbeknownst to the camels, they were on their way to the slaughter house as camel meat was a Tunisian delicacy. In Kairouan, we stopped briefly to view the Great Mosque. As it was closed at the time, we viewed the mosque from above. Most of what stood today was built by the Aghlabids in the 9th century. The medina at Kairouan, due to the presence of the Great Mosque, was considered the 4th holiest site in Islam and North Africa's holiest Islamic site. Around Kairouan's medina were some attractive, ornate doors at the entrance to some of the Tunisian dwellings; the more elaborate and grand the door, the more wealthy was the owner. We arrived back in Monastir at 6 pm after a long day on the road, 300 miles in all, of which 125 miles were along the mountainous roads in southern Tunisia. Over the next couple of weeks we enjoyed re-watching all six of the *Star Wars* episodes. It was fun to see in the films the places where we had been on our trip.



[Next Page](#)



After Monastir, our next stop in Tunisia was Bizerte on Tunisia's northern coast. The sail from Monastir to Bizerte entailed two weather systems -- the sail north from Monastir to Cape Bon and the sail west from Cape Bon to Bizerte -- and at the center was Cape Bon, the major cape at the northeastern tip of Tunisia. Major capes were known to generate on occasion a vortex of wind, and this cape was no exception, making the possibility of the passage around difficult at times. Watching the weather sent by Phil's brother, early Saturday morning looked like the best time to travel around the cape. We departed Monastir just after noon on Friday, August 22, for the overnight sail to Bizerte, 142 nautical miles away. Upon departing the marina, we had a great sea view of Monastir's ribat. We had hoped to sail at least half the distance to Bizerte, but instead we ended up sailing only three hours before motoring the rest of the way due to little to no wind. Late Saturday afternoon, August 23, we dropped our anchor in the small harbor near the entrance to the old town of Bizerte.



[Next Page](#)

We certainly enjoyed our short time in Bizerte. Unlike Monastir, this town was not as touristic, which made it fun to explore and experience the Tunisian culture. With a population of around 114,000, Bizerte boasted one of the best natural harbors in the Mediterranean, created when Lake Bizerte was connected to the Mediterranean via canal. During the French occupation one of France's strategic naval bases was located in Bizerte, and so when the French gave Tunisia its independence in 1956 they held onto Bizerte. Only after some fierce fighting did the French finally withdraw in 1963.

The part of Bizerte that we especially liked was its charming old port, so picturesque with its small colorful fishing boats moored alongside. It was in this area that we traveled with our dinghy each day from our boat. Upon entering the old port, the high fortified walls of the 17th century Ottoman fortress (kasbah) still stood alongside its entrance, and close by were parts of the old medina. In Mediterranean towns during the hot summer months, most people stayed indoors during the middle of the day (usually between 1:30 and 5:30). Once it started to cool and shops reopened, everyone came out to purchase goods or just to socialize. This was especially true in Bizerte's old town; this area bustled with activity during the evening hours.



[Next Page](#)

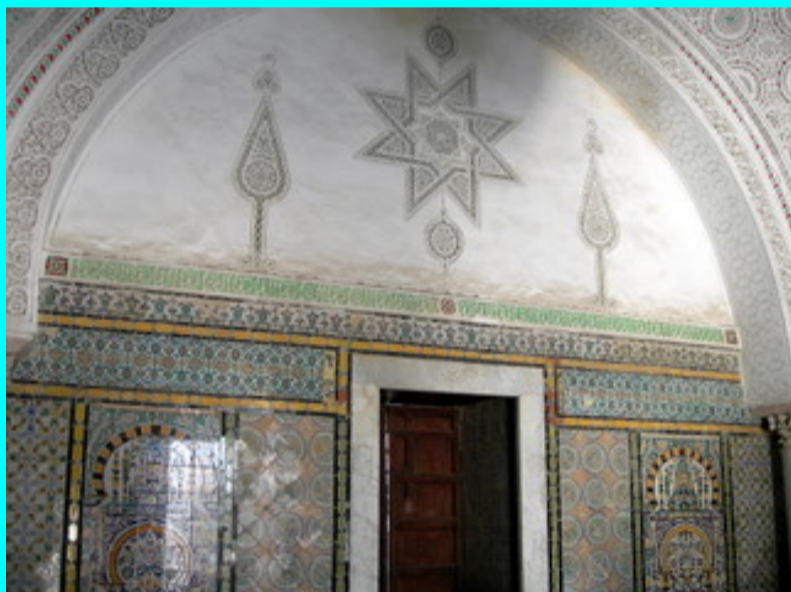
In Bizerte we ended up being on “borrowed” weather time. Tuesday, August 26, we had planned to spend the entire day in Tunis, the capital of Tunisia and one of its major “must see” towns. Upon looking at the weather that morning, our favorable weather window appeared to be closing in 5 days; we needed at least 4 to 5 days of good weather to sail west to mainland Spain. So instead of leaving Bizerte like we should have, we opted for just a few hours in Tunis rather than all day. We traveled to Tunis in a “louage” (long-distance shared taxi), a great form of public transportation in Tunisia at the same price as a bus. Unlike buses that traveled on fixed time schedules, louages traveled when full. Ours was an eight passenger van, and our wait was never more than 15 minutes. The drive itself was around 50 minutes. Due to our short time in Tunis, we decided to visit only the medina at Tunis and the main Punic archeological site at Carthage, both World Heritage sites, limiting our time at each site.

The medina (old town) at Tunis was interesting due to its model Islamic layout in which the main mosque (Great Mosque) was located in the center and its different souqs (trades) radiated out from it, all arranged hierarchically. The more noble or clean the souq, the nearer to the mosque the souq was located. The dirtier souqs were pushed out toward the edge of the medina. We entered through Bab (Gate) Jedid, built around the 13th century. Once inside, we were on the Street of the Blacksmiths, considered one of the dirtier trades. Afterwards, we walked toward the center of the medina along its narrow streets, designed to keep the town cool in the summer and



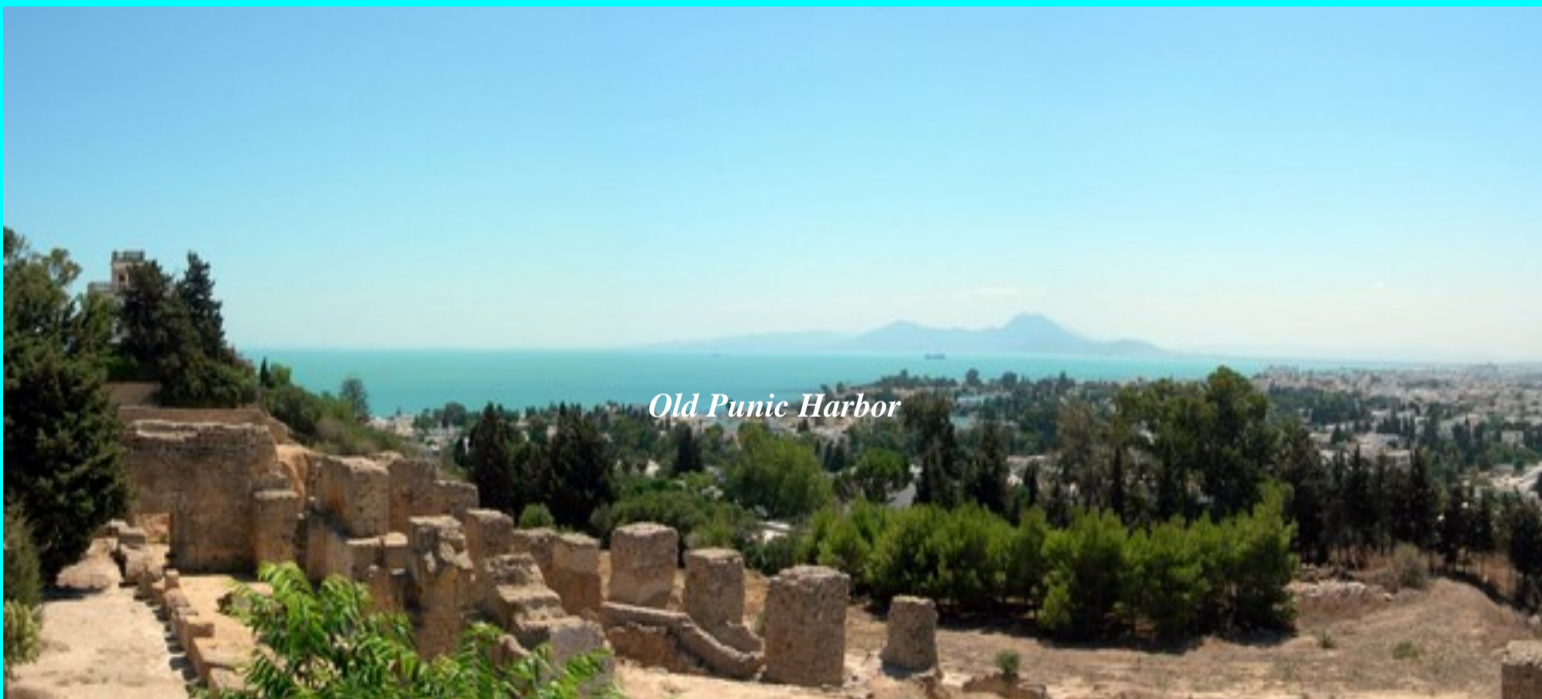
[Next Page](#)

In the medina, the residential areas were kept separate from the commercial areas. In one residential area we visited Tourbet el Bey, the mausoleum of the Husseinid princes, built in the second half of the 18th century. The main room contained tombs of important princes, and on top of each tomb was either a turban or fez depending on the prince's preferred headgear. One of the mausoleum's walls had a beautifully depicted Islamic "star of eight" symbolizing the eight doors of paradise, with a "tree of life" on each side. Next, we visited the Dar Ben Abdallah Museum, initially a wealthy Tunisian townhouse (dar), built in 1796. In a Tunisian townhouse, privacy was paramount. Only the outside door was visible from the street. The home itself was built around a central courtyard hidden from the street by a number of vestibules.



[Next Page](#)

After visiting the medina, we took a taxi to the present day Tunis suburb of Carthage to visit the Punic archeological site on Byrsa Hill, dating from the time of Hannibal around the 3rd century BC. Lots of imagination was needed at this site as only a small fragment of the original Punic residential quarter remained. A drawing in the adjacent museum made it easier to visualize both the Punic houses running down the side of Byrsa Hill to the waterfront and Carthage's two interconnecting harbors: its outside commercial harbor and inside naval harbor. Due to its powerful navy, Carthage was the main power in the western Mediterranean for almost 400 years until finally defeated by the Romans in 146 BC.



Returning to Bizerte late Tuesday afternoon, we still had work to do on the boat before we could depart Tunisia. Looking at the weather, it seemed plausible that we could stay one more day in Bizerte and still make the weather window, although we realized that we would be on the tail end of this easterly flow. So instead of checking out of Tunisia on Wednesday, we checked out around noon on Thursday, August 28. By mid-afternoon we were headed west.

[Next Page](#)

We traveled the old Punic trade route from Carthage to Cartagena. Our passage to Cartagena, Spain, took 4½ days, and for the first 2½ days we had great favorable currents, allowing us to make incredible time. We were sure that these same currents were used by Hannibal 2200 years ago. On Thursday, our first day out, we were able to sail for four hours before having to motor due to lack of wind. Early Friday afternoon, with the wind once more returning, we tried out our new cruising spinnaker for the first time. This new sail worked great in light airs, especially on a reach. We learned late that evening, though, that this sail didn't work well downwind in light airs due to its collapsing around the head stay; by the time we realized what was happening to ours, it had become wrapped 5 to 6 times. In total darkness, we spent about an hour motoring around in circles trying to undo the spinnaker from the head stay. Finally it became untangled and we were able to lower. Luckily, the sail wasn't damaged. Afterwards, we poled out our jib and continued sailing. During our first two nights on this passage we encountered quite a few ships.

We continued sailing wing-on-wing all day Saturday with winds NE 10 knots, although in the morning we did alter course 10 degrees further north to take advantage of an expected wind shift from the NW on Sunday. However, 12 hours later we changed back to our initial course due to a new weather report from Phil's brother showing instead winds from the SW on Sunday. Early Sunday with winds variable, we motored. When the new winds did materialize mid-morning, they were neither NW nor SW, but instead WNW at 15 knots. With this wind angle, we made little progress toward our destination during the daylight hours. By evening, though, the winds lessened allowing us to motor due west to the coast. Early Monday morning, just 100 nautical miles from Cartagena, the winds not only became westerly but we encountered 1 to 1½ knots countercurrent. With both wind and current against us, we continued motoring west as we had no other choice. As we approached the Spanish coast, the winds and seas became less. At 3 am, Tuesday, September 2, we anchored in a cove near Cartagena, Spain, and celebrated our accomplishment of 563 nautical miles with a glass of wine. We had certainly "paid" these last two days for those two extra days in Tunisia. Early Tuesday afternoon we moved over to the marina at Cartagena as we needed fresh food supplies.

We spent 5 days in Cartagena waiting for our next weather window to continue south around Cabo de Gata. This was our second visit to Cartagena; our first had been in June 2005. Some of the historical buildings that had been under renovation during our first visit were now done, and they definitely enhanced the beauty of Cartagena's historical district. If there was a downside to our visit, it was that we



[Next Page](#)

We departed Cartagena at 9:30 am on Sunday, September 7. From the weather sent by Phil's brother, very early Monday morning looked like the best time to travel around Cabo de Gata, the major cape at the southeastern tip of Spain. With light winds and a countercurrent of 1 to 1½ knots, we mostly motorsailed from Cartagena to Cabo de Gata. We passed around Cabo de Gata at 1:30 am, Monday. We really hadn't known what to expect with the seas as the winds had just changed from west to east, but the cape of the cat ended up being a "pussy cat."

Before leaving Cartagena, we really didn't know if we could make it all the way to Gibraltar, or whether we would have to stop after Cabo de Gata in the marina at Almerimar and wait for another weather window before continuing on to Gibraltar, as each area had its own weather and wind pattern. With continued light winds after passing around Cabo de Gata, we decided to continue on to Gibraltar. Except for a brief 2½ hour sail, we motored the entire distance. During the day we moved closer to the Spanish coastline to lessen the 1 to 1½ knot countercurrent that we were experiencing further out. After months of endless sun, the heavy cloud cover that day was depressing. During the night we had few ship contacts. Tuesday morning our visibility dropped down to 2 miles as we approached Gibraltar. At noon the fog lifted and we could finally see the Rock of Gibraltar. At 1 pm we rounded its southern point.



At this time we needed to decide whether to stay in Gibraltar and rest overnight or to continue on to Rota, the port we had chosen on the Atlantic side of Spain to prepare *Kuhela* for the sail to the Madeira and Canary Islands off the coast of Africa. As our weather window for both the Straits of Gibraltar and Rota would close if we delayed, we made the decision to continue. Every 6 hours the tidal flow changed in the Straits of Gibraltar. Our next time to start through the Straits was at 3 pm. Since there was nowhere nearby to anchor, we slowly motored across Gibraltar Bay toward the Straits reminiscing over our time in Europe and the Mediterranean. These last four years had been fantastic!

At 3 pm on Tuesday, September 9, we started through the Straits. As there was always a countercurrent in the Straits of Gibraltar when traveling from east to west due to water lost in the Mediterranean through evaporation, we hugged the northern coastline to minimize the effect. Although we had mixed feelings about leaving the Mediterranean, we were glad once more to be in the Atlantic Ocean where the winds were more consistent. At 4:30 am, Wednesday, we tied *Kuhela* up to the fuel dock at Rota. In all, we had traveled 319 miles from Cartagena to Rota in 67 hours and 2000 miles across the Mediterranean in 10 weeks, succeeding in our goal to be out of the Mediterranean within the first two weeks of September. We celebrated our accomplishment with a glass of wine.

[Back to Index](#)