

# viva inside out

# Tunisia

## *mon amour*

*A magic carpet ride to Tunisia alerts  
BERWYN LEWIS to the real life behind the still  
lives in the Orientalism show.*



**SWEET SMELLS:** Antique scent flasks, for perfuming your body after a soothing soak in the hammam.

**I**N Tunisia, Orientalism is not only an art form, it is a way of life. It trickles through the predominantly Islamic society, a convergence of ancient Roman, Vandal, Arab, Ottoman and French cultures.

In the Ali Baba-style labyrinth of the 1000-year-old covered souk in the Medina of Tunis, the capital of Tunisia, little has changed. Female slaves, once sold in the Rue des Femmes, have been replaced with hand-woven Berber rugs, Phoenician-inspired glassware and jewellery.

As the Muezzin's call to evening prayer rises from a mosque, souk business gathers momentum. Pomegranates and olives are displayed alongside daggers, knives and slippers.

Exotic perfumes and spices — musk, amber, sandalwood and eau de l'orange — mingle with the sounds of silversmiths tapping out their wares.

The jasmine-sellers' bouquets of blossoms, worn behind the ear, appear to have slipped out of one of the paintings in the Orientalism collection.

Behind the whitewashed walls and colourful doorways of Sidi Bou Said, a suburb of Tunis with cobbled streets, courtyards were once the domain of harem women, snake charmers, scorpion sellers and prophets.

Cafes, now frequented by writers and artists, serve hubble-bubble pipes, mint tea flavoured with pistachio nuts and delicate Arabic pastries. Stalls are packed with Turkish delight, bird cages and fresh dates.

In Tunisia, Oriental perfumes are used for seduction, sensuality and ceremonies. Orange and geranium water are sprinkled on heads and hands for purification.

Orange water is used in coffee and on sweets when the Ramadan fast is broken and it is also used with grenadine and sugar and on Arabic pastries.

Tunisians regularly indulge in a ritual favoured by artists, the hammam (steam bath).

Naked bodies, all shapes, sizes and ages, caked in gritty mud, recline on slippery tiled benches in steamy mosaic-tiled rooms waiting to be pummelled by a masseur armed with a type of pot-scourer mitt.

In the noisy catacombs and cubicles, women and

small children perform ablutions, empty wooden buckets and ladles of water over streaming hair, apply henna and clunk around in prong-heeled shoes similar to those you can see in the Orientalism exhibition.

Remains of ancient hammams can be found at ruin sites such as Carthage and Sbeitla, the most southern tip of the ancient Roman Empire.

Original tile work, painstakingly recorded in the Orientalism exhibition, features fish, dolphins, cavorting Dionysian "mer-men," Neptune and sea nymphs.

At the five-star hotel, the Residence-Tunis, which overlooks the Mediterranean, one of the attractions is the Thalasso Centre hammam, an adobe-painted cavern adjacent to the ballroom-sized spa pool.

It is filled with heated water pumped from 1000m offshore. Overhead, a domed ceiling, featuring star and crescent moon casement windows, evokes images of a mosque, but only bodies are worshipped here.

In the outdoor pool, an expanse of turquoise and traditional adobe walls contrast with the 20th-century style cocktail and snack bars.

The guest rooms, inspired by 1001 Nights flirting with the French Foreign Legion, combine Romeo and Juliet love-nest decors featuring casement windows trailing with rose vines.

Down south, 450km from Tunis, across the Sahara with a guide and 4WD from Atlantis Voyages, the Hotel Tamerza rises out of the Sahara desert like an oasis.

As the setting sun scatters the pink clouds, a nomad riding a donkey picks his way down the steep foothills of the Atlas Mountains.

In the hotel restaurant traditional Oriental food is served — harissa (see G4 for recipe), mechouia and odja (salad with eggs, tuna and delicately flavoured olives), mouloukhia (a meat and bay leaf dish which takes eight hours to prepare) and pomegranate tart.

Despite armies of invaders, 20th-century influences and the passage of time, the Orientalism of Tunisia survives with its mystery and beauty intact.

• **Berwyn Lewis was the guest of British Airways and Atlantis Voyages in Tunisia.**



**FAMILY JEWELS:** Traditional silverware for sale in the souk.

PICTURES / BERWYN LEWIS