

North Africa Travel Journal – Volume 6

Sunday, May 24, 2026 - Marrakech to Casablanca, Morocco

We left Marrakech this morning and headed back to Casablanca through the Atlas Mountains, North Africa's greatest mountain range. Along the way, we passed views of snow-capped peaks and small Berber villages nestled into the hillsides. The scenery was so dramatic that at times it looked like my computer screensaver.

We stopped in Imlil, a Berber village made up of twelve small hamlets, where we hiked with a local guide who told us about his family, village, and Berber culture.



We were then welcomed into the home of a local family. After some mint tea, we had a delicious lunch. At this point in the trip, I'm fairly certain refusing mint tea in Morocco would trigger some sort of diplomatic incident. We've also learned that no matter where you go, whether it's a luxury riad hotel, a desert camp, or a village home in the mountains, the hospitality

is always genuine, and the portions are always enormous.

We eventually made it to Casablanca and checked into our hotel at the airport in preparation for our early-morning flight to Tunisia tomorrow.



Old Gate into the Medina

Monday, May 25, 2026 - Tunis, Tunisia

In an attempt to get even further off the beaten path, we traded Morocco for Tunisia today, marking our fortieth wedding anniversary and beginning the second chapter of our North African adventure. We flew to Tunis, the capital of Tunisia, a city where continents

and centuries collide. Sitting on the edge of the Mediterranean, Tunis blends North African soul with French flair, Roman ruins with Islamic architecture, and the call to prayer with nonstop café chatter. With layers of Phoenician, Roman, Arab, and French history, the city has remained important for more than 3,000 years. We are attempting to see all of it in a day and a half. No problem.



Zaytouna Mosque

Upon landing, we dropped our bags at our hotel and immediately embarked on a walking tour of the ancient Medina of Tunis, a UNESCO World Heritage Site. It's a maze of souks, courtyards, narrow passageways, and carved wooden doors that feels worlds away from anything modern. We began at the Central Market, where colorful stalls overflowed with fresh produce, spices, seafood, and the constant buzz of daily commerce. Adding to the chaos, the Islamic world is preparing for a major holiday later this week during which families traditionally slaughter a lamb and feast together, so everyone seemed to be out securing a lamb. The sensory overload began immediately and never really let up.



Soon to be lamb chops on someone's dinner plate

We continued to Souk Blat, known for its aromatic medicinal herbs and natural remedies. This place is a hypochondriac's dream. Next, we admired the refined architecture of Palace Bach Hambah, a jewel of Ottoman-era elegance, before visiting the Medressa Souleymeniya, a former theological school reflecting the city's scholarly past.

We then visited the Zaytouna Mosque, with its graceful minaret and deep spiritual heritage, where Lori and Ann were required to wear modest cover-ups and ended up blending in far better than



Rich and me. At this point, our tour guide took a few minutes away from us to pray. Not sure if he does that every day or just needed to pray that he could get through the rest of the tour with *us*. We also prayed that it wouldn't be that long until our next meal.

And our prayers were answered. From the rooftop of Panorama Palace, we enjoyed sweeping views over the maze of alleyways below while drinking mint tea, Tunisian-style, and eating some sweets we bought in the market. Morocco isn't the only place that runs almost entirely on mint tea and haggling.



Souk El Berka

We then strolled through Souk El Berka, once a slave market and now a lively center for jewelry, before continuing to Souk Chechia, home to the famous handcrafted red felt hats. We ended the afternoon at La Kasba, the historic seat of government. Needless to say, we accomplished quite a lot on our first day in Tunis, although, after a while, all medinas begin to blur together into one giant maze of rugs, spices, cats, and scooters.

We also learned that the word "Mediterranean" comes from Latin words meaning "middle of the earth" ("medi" and "terra"), since ancient civilizations considered it the center of the known world. Judging by the number of empires that fought over it, they weren't alone.

Tuesday, May 26, 2026 – Tunis, Tunisia

We had another full day of sightseeing today to visit sites in the Tunis area that we didn't manage to squeeze in yesterday. We began by driving to and walking through the legendary ruins of Carthage, one of the most important cities of the ancient world.

Carthage rose to power as a wealthy maritime empire dominating Mediterranean trade with a formidable navy and daring leaders like Hannibal, whose military campaigns made Rome fear for its survival. But after three Punic Wars, Rome ultimately destroyed Carthage in 146 BCE, proving that, in the ancient world, being rich, powerful, and strategically located was both impressive and extremely dangerous.



Byrsa Hill

Today, Carthage sits quietly along the Mediterranean in what is now an upscale seaside suburb of Tunis, reminding us that even the greatest civilizations eventually become scenic archaeological sites surrounded by expensive real estate.

Ironically, most of the ruins at Carthage are not actually Carthaginian but Roman. The Romans destroyed Carthage so thoroughly that much of what we know about the Carthaginians comes from Roman historical accounts, which is the ancient equivalent of hearing only one side of the story. Rome later rebuilt a Roman city directly on top of the destroyed Carthaginian one, and those are the ruins we saw today.

At this point, a brief explanation about these travel journals. I originally started writing them simply as a way to keep track of our trips and help me remember what all my photos actually depict once we get home. I began sharing them with friends and family, who somehow seem to find them entertaining. Since I try not to turn these journals into graduate-level history courses, I've included some additional details about Carthage in a Notes section at the end for anyone interested in a deeper dive. It also helps me remember what exactly I was looking at while taking pictures of piles of ancient rocks. Basically, I write these journals for me, not you, but with you in mind.



The Carthage Amphitheater

During our visit, we saw Byrsa Hill, the Punic ports, the Amphitheater, and the Theater, sites that together tell the story of Carthage's rise, destruction, and Roman reinvention.



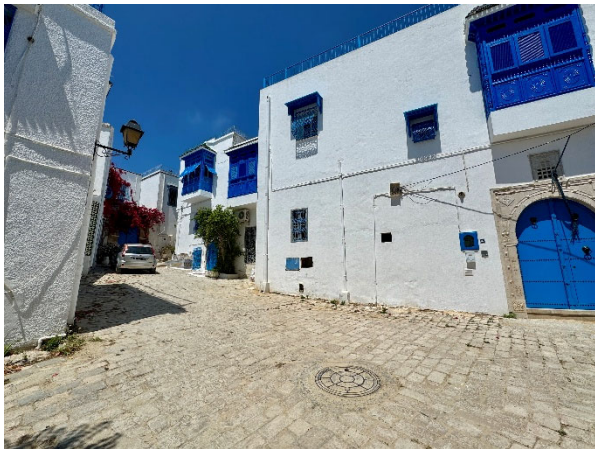
The Carthage Theater

After Carthage, we visited the blue-and-white cliffside village of Sidi Bou Saïd, where we had lunch and wandered through narrow cobbled streets lined with whitewashed walls and bright blue doors overlooking the Mediterranean. For a moment, I thought I was in Santorini, just with better mint tea and fewer honeymooners posing for Instagram photos.



Punic ports

We then visited the Bardo National Museum, home to the world's largest collection of Roman mosaics along with countless artifacts from Tunisia's long and layered history. By the end of the day, our brains were completely full of Phoenicians, Romans, mosaics, and mint tea.



Sidi Bou Saïd

In the short time we've been in Tunisia, we've been very impressed by what we've seen and heard here. Tunisia stands out among many Arab Muslim countries as one of the more secular, moderate, and Western-oriented societies in the region. It is known for comparatively progressive laws regarding women's rights, education, and personal freedoms, and is often viewed as culturally sophisticated and highly educated.

Examples frequently cited include the prominent role of women in government, the outlawing of polygamy, strong investment in education, and a generally more moderate public religious environment than in some neighboring countries. Tunisia also emphasizes tolerance toward Islam, Christianity, and Judaism, and is home to one of the world's oldest synagogues. What's not to like?

We completed our whirlwind tour of Tunis today and fly to our next destination tomorrow.

Thanks for following along. More to come.

Love,
Lori and Stephen

Carthage Notes:

Byrsa Hill was the historic heart of ancient Carthage. It was the original citadel of the Phoenician city founded in the 9th century BCE and later became the administrative and religious center under both Carthaginian and Roman rule. In antiquity, this hill held temples, government buildings, and elite residences. After Rome destroyed Carthage and rebuilt it as a Roman city, Byrsa remained the symbolic and strategic high point. It now provides the most panoramic views of the city.



Mosaics at The Bardo National Museum

The Punic ports were the beating heart of ancient Carthage and the reason Rome was so nervous. At its height, Carthage could deploy hundreds of ships, making it one of the Mediterranean's dominant maritime powers.

The Roman Amphitheater was one of the largest in Roman North Africa, built in the 1st or 2nd century AD when Carthage was a major city of the Roman Empire. Modeled after Rome's more famous Colosseum, it could reportedly hold around 30,000–40,000 spectators for gladiator contests, animal hunts, and public spectacles. Very little of the original structure survives today because much of the stone was reused over the centuries for other construction projects around Tunis.

The Roman Theater was built in the 2nd century AD for plays, music, and public ceremonies during the height of Roman Carthage. Unlike the nearby amphitheater, it focused on entertainment rather than gladiator combat. Parts of it have been reconstructed, and today it still hosts concerts and events.

Wednesday, May 27, 2026 - Djerba, Tunisia

Today we flew to Djerba, an island off Tunisia’s southern coast best known for its beaches and relaxed atmosphere, but also home to one of the oldest Jewish communities in the world.

According to local tradition, Jews first arrived here about 2,500 years ago after the destruction of the First Temple in Jerusalem. Many were Cohanim, descendants of Aaron the High Priest, who supposedly brought with them a stone from the Temple altar and placed it in the foundation of the Al Ghriba synagogue. Whether every detail is historically accurate or not, the Jewish presence here is undeniably ancient. At its peak, Djerba had thousands of Jewish residents, multiple synagogues, and religious schools. Today the community numbers only about 1,300 people, but it remains one of the few places in the Arab world where an indigenous Jewish community still lives openly and practices freely. In other words, Djerba is not exactly your typical beach destination.



Today also happened to be Eid al-Adha, the “Festival of Sacrifice,” one of the most important holidays in the Islamic world. It commemorates the willingness of the Prophet Ibrahim (Abraham) to sacrifice his son in obedience to God before God provided a ram as a substitute. Families attend morning prayers, sacrifice a sheep, goat, or cow, and then spend the day cooking enormous meals and visiting relatives. Judging by the number of sheep we saw tied up around town this week, everyone had been preparing for this for quite some time.



The downside for us was that nearly everything closed down for the holiday. The upside was that we got to witness a once-a-year cultural experience firsthand. One stop we made, not usually a tourist experience, was on a street corner where people were dropping off and picking up sheep heads and legs. After slaughtering your sheep, you can have some neighborhood kids burn off the hair from the head and legs with a blow

torch for the equivalent of about \$6, saving you a lot of time and effort. Very convenient when you’re ready to prepare your favorite sheep-head-and-leg recipe.

We began with a visit to Borj Ghazi Mustapha Fort, where we admired the exterior because the interior was closed (for the holiday). We then headed to the normally bustling medina of Houmt Souk, where we wandered through unusually empty streets lined with shuttered shops, some belonging to Jewish jewelers renowned for their handcrafted pieces. It felt a bit like walking through a movie set before the actors arrived.





We continued through the Jewish quarters of Hara Kebira (The Large Quarter) and Hara Seghira (The Small Quarter), where centuries-old buildings now sit alongside colorful street art and murals. Mostly everything there was closed too, but fortunately we managed to find an open Jewish-Tunisian restaurant serving brik, Tunisia's most famous street food.

Brik is essentially a paper-thin pastry wrapped around a partially cooked egg and deep-fried until golden and crisp. The challenge is eating one without hot egg yolk running down your hand or shirt. I failed on both counts.

We then raced over to Al Ghriba, one of the world's oldest synagogues and an important pilgrimage site for Jews around the world. Our driver suddenly transformed into a Formula One driver after hearing the synagogue was about to close. Unfortunately, we arrived approximately thirty seconds too late. So technically, we did visit the synagogue. We just didn't get inside it.

One interesting thing we learned is that the Tunisian police were quietly monitoring our movements throughout the day, in a good way. Every twenty minutes or so, they called our driver to check where we were and where we were headed next. Apparently, a group of Jewish American tourists visiting Djerba receives a certain level of discreet attention. Anything going wrong would quickly become an international incident and be terrible for tourism, so we unintentionally became one of Tunisia's more carefully supervised tour groups.



Thursday, May 28, 2026 – Djerba, Tunisia

Today we explored Djerba on our own, taking in its whitewashed villages, palm trees, and sea breezes. As far as we know, the police were not tracking our every movement. As far as we know.

We started at the Borj El Kebir (Ghazi Mustapha Fortress) again, which was

open today. Even though it's one of the island's most visited landmarks, because of the holiday we had it entirely to ourselves. We walked the ramparts for panoramic harbor views and learned about its Ottoman and Spanish history dating back to the 14th century.

We then walked over to the Houmt Souk Medina, where a handful of shops were open and spent some time chatting with a Jewish jeweler in his shop. Surprisingly, he didn't subject us to the usual hard-sell tactics on some of the pieces we looked at.

Uber is not in Tunisia, but there is a ride-sharing app called InDrive. The only difference between the two apps that on InDrive, in a region with no fixed prices, you have to negotiate the price with the driver before he accepts your request. The haggling over prices never stops here. We're such good bargainers that we ended up walking.



We had lunch at a nice restaurant overlooking the harbor before making our way back to the hotel to rest in the afternoon. At this point in the trip, even doing absolutely nothing for an afternoon felt culturally immersive.



For dinner, we took a taxi to the Small Jewish Quarter, also known as Djerba Hood. The neighborhood is a maze of narrow streets, many of them unpaved. Our taxi got us as far as the road would allow, and from there we continued on foot to a restaurant that consisted of two tables set up on the side of the “road.” It doesn’t get much more authentic than that. Fortunately, we had arranged for the driver to come back and get us after dinner; otherwise, we might still be wandering around Djerba looking for a ride home. It was a great experience.

Friday, May 29, 2026 – Djerba, Tunisia

Today we ventured farther into southern Tunisia, past salt lakes and sand dunes, to Tataouine, a small desert town known less for the town itself and more for what surrounds it: dramatic Berber villages and ancient fortified granaries called ksour (singular: ksar). These multi-level mud-brick storage complexes were once used to protect grain and valuables from raiders and the harsh desert climate. The region also inspired the fictional planet Tatooine in Star Wars, and several scenes from the films were shot nearby. Tataouine is where Tunisia feels truly desert: stark, beautiful, historic, and just a little bit otherworldly. So while it is firmly rooted in Berber history and Saharan culture, it also enjoys a measure of intergalactic fame.

We explored the mountaintop Berber village of Chenini, which clings to the rocky hillsides with houses carved into the mountainside and sweeping views stretching across the desert.



Chenini



Inside a hotel carved into the mountain

We ended the tour at Ksar Hadada, one of the best-preserved ksour in the region and another filming location recognizable to Star Wars fans.

Upon returning to the hotel, we decided that we wanted to attend Friday night services at a synagogue. So we quickly changed clothes, jumped into a taxi, and raced over to Al Ghriba, hoping there might be a service, since we had received a different answer from everyone we asked.

On the way, we passed another taxi that was broken down on the side of the road. After a brief conversation between our driver and the stranded driver, our driver handed him a pair of kindergarten scissors and we continued on our way. We’re still trying to figure out how that solved the problem, but apparently it was exactly what was needed.



Ksar Hadada



Unfortunately, Al Ghriba was closed. Undeterred, we proceeded to the next most likely synagogue to be holding services, according to ChatGPT. That synagogue, Synagogue Hakouhanim Hedegtiya, was unlocked but completely empty, so we went inside and took a few photos. We couldn't find anyone around, but we did "talk" to a man in a kippah across the street in two completely different languages, with neither side understanding a word the other was saying. Satisfied that we had at least visited a synagogue, we had the taxi take us back to the hotel for the night.

Tomorrow we fly home. We came to North Africa for the history and culture, and found both in abundance. Along the way we experienced Atlantic coastlines, Sahara dunes, Roman ruins, medieval medinas,

mountain villages, ancient synagogues, and enough mint tea to alter our blood chemistry. Morocco and Tunisia delivered spectacular scenery, fascinating history, remarkable hospitality, and more high-pressure sales pitches than we thought humanly possible. Somewhere between the rugs, pottery, leather goods, fossils, spices, and assorted treasures we absolutely did not plan to buy, our luggage somehow became much heavier.

Thanks for following along with us. We hope you enjoyed the journey as much as we did.

Love,
Lori and Stephen