

Episode 98: Tunisia

Summary

Nick and Wendy talk about visiting the North African country of Tunisia. They talk about Tunisia's cultural heritage, taking a Roman bath, and accidentally stumbling onto a tourist resort.

Transcript

Nick: Today Wendy and I are talking about another one of the stand-alone trips that we've taken in Africa, this time to the country of Tunisia. And I guess the first thing to say is that Tunisia is in North Africa, which is very different from sub-Saharan Africa.

Wendy: Sure, yeah, it's very different. It's part of the Maghreb, as that region is called, which also includes Morocco and Algeria and Libya. Not sure if the Maghreb includes Egypt as well.

Nick: I don't think so.

Wendy: No, I don't think so, either.

Nick: But, yeah, it's completely different from what you think of as Africa, sub-Saharan Africa, with animals and with all of that. It's much more Middle Eastern, but it's also Mediterranean.

Wendy: Mmm-hmm.

Nick: And so it's got quite a few similarities even with southern Europe, even though the way that we tend to think of the world these days is to divide it into continents. And Europe and Africa are considered to be very different from each other. But if you think about the way that the Romans looked at their world, it was going outward from the Mediterranean. And so in their conception of it, a place like Tunisia was much more Roman to them, or much more civilised to them, than places in northern Europe or in England, for example.

Wendy: Right, and you can still see a lot of that ancient Roman heritage there in Tunisia today, which is what we did, for the most part, while we were there. A lot of our time was spent going to ancient Roman archeological sites.

Nick: Yeah, Tunisia is very small, umm, overall, especially compared with Algeria and Libya, which are its two neighbours, which are very large countries. But it has

this enormous cultural heritage for a very small country. And so it was the heartland¹ of the Carthaginian Empire that was eventually conquered by the Romans and then it became the heartland of the Roman province of Africa. So there are many, many, many Roman sites. And as we've talked about in a few different episodes lately in different places around the world, we tend to like to go to quite a few of these places if they're going to provide something different. And because we used to be tour guides in Rome, umm, we're interested in the Roman Empire and so there were many places - I think we went to 10 or 11 different Roman sites while we were in Tunisia.

Wendy: Yeah, probably something like that. And I think that our experience in Tunisia was very different from the typical tourist experience in Tunisia. Most of the foreign visitors who go there probably go to some kind of beach resort, umm, and, you know, just want to go relax and have a nice, relaxing beach holiday. Uhh, but we're not really beach people, that wasn't very interesting to us. We did end up at one beach resort and we really didn't like it very much.

Nick: Yeah, by accident, and we'll come to that later. But, yeah, we were super interested in these Roman sites. It is funny, though, the way that - or certainly I felt - the way that Tunisia presents itself in terms of its tourism is as this beach place, a place where you can get winter sun, and all of the posters and things like that really highlight that aspect of it. But it's got extraordinary cultural heritage - again for a very small country, there are lots of incredible sites there - and while we were at some of these sites, there was almost nobody else there.

Wendy: Yeah, and there was also quite a lack of tourism infrastructure around those sites as well. I remember that there were hardly any places to stay. We sometimes had a hard time finding a hotel or a guesthouse that was near the sites that we wanted to visit because that's just not where the tourism infrastructure was. It was all built up around the beach. And I remember there was actually one site that we ended up skipping² because we arrived at the hotel where we were planning to stay and it was full. It was a very small hotel, they only had about 10 or 12 rooms. And it was full. And there was nowhere else anywhere nearby where we could have stayed and so we actually didn't get a chance to see that particular site that we had come to see in that area.

Nick: Yeah, well, anyway, at least we saw a lot of other sites...

Wendy: We did!

Nick: ...while we were there. Umm, Dougga is probably the most famous of the Roman sites because it's really - for a ruin - it's a complete Roman city. And you don't often get that. You know, when you go to see Roman sites or other ruins, you often see some monumental buildings, maybe a bit apart from each other. But at

¹ heartland: central or core area

² skipping: missing, omitting, avoiding

this particular one at Dougga, you got to see all the streets and all of the residential buildings and everything, so you really got a great understanding - probably, maybe one of the best understandings that we've ever had - about how a Roman city is laid out³.

Wendy: Yeah.

Nick: And we walked around, I think, for the first about three hours, and we did not see a single person. And then as we were kind of on our way out, we saw a couple of other tourists.

Wendy: Yeah, so we really had these places pretty much to ourselves, which is quite a privilege.

Nick: For sure, and one of the ones that I really remember was that we went to a Roman bath complex. And that's nothing new, we've been to Roman bath complexes before, but this one was quite different, uhh, well, for a couple of reasons. Firstly, that usually when you go to a Roman bath complex or Roman bath ruins, the baths or the water is heated, or artificially heated, or was artificially heated by the Romans. And so they were very good at this. They had an entire system where they would have different rooms in their bathhouses with different water temperatures in the rooms and you had a certain, umm, procedure or a certain order of how you would go into each room as a Roman when you would go bathing. This one that we went to was a hot spring, so it didn't require artificial heating. So that's the first thing. And the second thing, which is obviously the most important, is that it's still in use.

Wendy: Right, so people still go there to have a bath, which is what we did. We did it separately because there are separate bathing facilities for men and women, so we each had our own experience and interacted with the local people in our own way. But I think, uhh, for both of us it was a very memorable experience.

Nick: Yeah, because it was kind of in the middle of nowhere⁴ and, you know, not many tourists seem to go there. But the local people who live in the villages around will go there if they want to have a bath. Umm, and so it was great. The room that I went into, the men's room, you had ... you could still see some decoration from the Roman period. There was a lion that had been sculpted onto the wall and you could still see that. And it's amazing that they've kept it functioning for this whole time and that the local people who live around there still get to use it.

Wendy: Yeah, I don't know if I remember decorations in the women's area, but I definitely remember interacting with the local women who were there. And they invited me over. For a while I was just watching them, and they were scrubbing⁵

³ laid out (phrasal verb: to lay out): planned, designed

⁴ in the middle of nowhere (fixed expression): not in a populated area

⁵ scrubbing: rubbing hard with a brush to remove dirt

each others' backs, you know, and washing each other. And then they invited me over to their circle and one of the women started scrubbing my back and rubbing me down, and, uhh, gave me a very thorough⁶ bath. It was quite vigorous⁷.

Nick: So for the first, I guess, week-and-a-half or so that we were in Tunisia, we were just going from site to site like this, and we just absolutely loved it. Umm, you know, it's a very Mediterranean climate, landscape, umm, in terms of food and everything, so it was right up our alley⁸. And then we started to go a little bit further south and further east to some other areas and then it, yeah, it became quite different. Because a lot of people like to go to the desert parts towards the south where something ... some scenes from Star Wars were filmed, and so that's very popular for foreign tourists to go and see that. But we didn't really care about that. And then we were interested in going to the east coast because there were some historic Muslim cities, umm, which were walled cities, or in some cases they had historical mosques or interesting markets or something like that, and that's something that we're really interested in. But these cities also happened to be, as you said at the beginning, resort towns as well. And so we sort of crashed into this resort lifestyle which we completely hadn't seen the first, uhh, couple of weeks that we were there. And suddenly that's where all the tourists were, were at these beaches.

Wendy: Yeah, and we ended up staying in one of these, you know, resort complexes, where everyone else who was there was on an all-inclusive package holiday that they'd already paid for where they had, you know, all of their buffet meals and all these activities and everything included. And we didn't want to stay at that kind of place but we couldn't find anywhere else. We were looking for another hotel and it seemed to be closed. So we just ended up at this place. And suddenly it was like we were on a cruise or we were just, I don't know, in this package holiday world that was so different from the world that we had been in before that, travelling around Tunisia.

Nick: Yeah, that was really funny. We stayed there for one night and then we couldn't handle it⁹ anymore. But ... and we went to see the castle or whatever it was that we had come to see and then we went off onto the next town. But I remember also, maybe it was that same town or another one, we were walking into, sort of, (the) old area of town but still near the beaches. And one of the vendors just started talking to us in Russian, because it's a popular place for Russians to go, and so they just assume that everybody who's there, uhh, is Russian and wants to buy souvenirs and stuff from them. And, so, yeah, we just sort of stumbled into this whole new world, and, uhh, we kind of missed the Tunisia that we'd come to know and love the first week or two weeks...

⁶ thorough: complete, detailed

⁷ vigorous: strong, energetic, forceful

⁸ right up our alley: well suited to us

⁹ couldn't handle it: couldn't deal with or accept it

Wendy: Mmm-hmm.

Nick: ...umm, when we went to this other area. But then we were able to, sort of, get back on track¹⁰ and we saw some of these historic towns as well. And, yeah, just overall for a small country, it packs a lot in, and, you know, you have a lot of different, umm, monuments from different eras and things like that. And so it's really an incredible country to go (to). It's very compact so you can see a lot of things in a short period of time.

Wendy: Yeah, and I'd say it's quite underrated, you know. These sites are really world class, but most people have never heard of them, and they're definitely worth checking out.

¹⁰ get back on track: continue as planned after a disruption or distraction

Comprehension Questions

1. Why was Nick and Wendy's experience in Tunisia different from most people's, according to Wendy?
2. What impressed Nick about the Roman ruins at Dougga?
3. What happened to Wendy at the Roman bath?

Exercises

Use the words and expressions in the footnotes of the transcript to fill in the gaps.

1. The boys were so dirty after playing in the mud that it took a lot of _____ in the shower before they were clean.
2. We wanted to go to the concert, but it rained so we ended up _____ it.
3. The midwest, including areas like Missouri, Indiana etc, is generally considered the _____ of the United States.
4. After the earthquake of 1755, the Baixa area of Lisbon was rebuilt and _____ in a grid pattern, replacing the destroyed, haphazard alleyways.
5. We both love classical music so a visit to Salzburg in Austria, where Mozart was born, was _____. We loved it!
6. Editors need to be very _____ with their work. They need to pick up even the tiniest mistakes and correct them.
7. He's having some problems with the law because he fell in with the wrong crowd. He needs to distance himself from those people and _____ in life.
8. We met this new couple who we like a lot but they live _____ so it's hard to arrange to see them.
9. She lived in London for a few years but in the end she _____ and so she moved back to the village where she was born.
10. Cross country skiing is one of the most _____ sports you can do because it's a full-body workout.

Discussion Questions

Discuss these questions with a partner or in the [English in 10 Minutes Listeners group on Facebook](#):

1. Have you ever been to Tunisia? If so, did you like it? If not, would you like to go? Why or why not?
2. Were you surprised at the way Nick and Wendy presented Tunisia? Why or why not?
3. Which Tunisian activity that Nick and Wendy mentioned would you rather do: bathe in a Roman bath, visit places where Star Wars was filmed, or spend time at a beach resort? Explain your choice.

Answers

Comprehension Questions

1. Because they spent most of their time visiting historical sites rather than going to the beach.
2. That the ruins presented a complete Roman city and it increased his understanding of how these cities are laid out.
3. Local women invited her to bathe with them and they scrubbed her quite vigorously.

Exercises

1. scrubbing
2. skipping
3. heartland
4. laid out
5. right up our alley
6. thorough
7. get back on track
8. in the middle of nowhere
9. couldn't handle it
10. vigorous