



AN OLDER WOMAN (above) was dressed both traditionally and colorfully. While cars and trucks are prevalent in cities, in rural areas beasts of burden, like the donkey (right) carry or pull much of the load. Men and women in traditional dress mix with those in western attire throughout the country.



MINARETS IN TUNISIA are square, like this one at the great mosque at Kairouan, or octagonal. It is from the minaret that the muezzin calls the faithful to prayer five times a day — in the old days with good lungs and today with loudspeakers.

TUNISIA

Land of Islam

Land of moderation

By CYNTHIA HAYNES

TUNISIA, North Africa — We were half a world away from home in an Islamic Arab country.

After a day of meeting officials, looking at 3,000-year old ruins and eating more than was good for us, our little group of travelers were gathered in the hotel lounge ready to review our day.

Our leader, Peter Wagner from Iowa, gave us an overview of the country and people we would be seeing and meeting.

Tunisia 101, he called it. He listed five principles the Tunisians live by:

1. Universal education.
2. Equality for women, equality for all.
3. Struggle against fundamentalism.
4. Commitment to dialogue instead of confrontation.
5. Moderation in all things.

Over the next week, we discovered the truth of his observations.

At a three-room elementary school, we saw boys and girls in the same classrooms, unusual in an Arab country. At a university, men and women worked side by side teaching and doing research.

Women have the vote and serve in schools, hospitals and the government. A black minority can be seen in working in all these fields and there are no laws limiting the access of non-Moslems to jobs or government positions.

When Tunisia gained its independence from France in 1956, President Habib Bourguiba took office. Over the next sev-

eral years, he instituted reforms which allowed for universal education and equality of women, including the abolition of polygamy.

Under his direction, Tunisian religious leaders looked at the Koran (Moslem Bible) and reinterpreted some parts, including the passage that said a man could have four wives if he treated them all equally and kept them all equally happy.

Since any sensible man knows he can't normally keep one wife happy, and it's virtually impossible to treat two people equally and keep them both happy, the religious leaders decided that that passage was just God's little joke. They agreed with the president on the abolition of polygamy.

The Tunisians have oral tradition that tells of the granddaughter of the Prophet sitting with men and reciting her poetry. She wore her hair in elaborate braids and women started to copy them. Since the men with her could see her hair, they say, she obviously did not have her head covered in their presence.

In the struggle for moderation and to keep fundamentalism out of the government and people's lives, the Tunisians outlawed political parties based on religion. The government embarked on a campaign to improve the standard of living for everyone with the belief that poverty breeds discontent — and fundamentalism thrives on discontent.

Although much of the country is rural, with an economy based on agriculture, the government has worked hard to bring edu-

cation, running water and electricity to virtually everyone. Power lines run through farm country, and television dishes sprout from mud-walled houses.

A moderate interpretation of Islam, social reform and equality have given the Tunisians we met a strong belief in their government.

While Tunisia doesn't have the same type of democracy we have in U.S. — they have had two presidents since 1957 and the current one, President Ben Ali, was elected with 99 percent of the vote — they appear to be happy with their progress and feel that they are able to operate on a world stage.

The country's biggest problem — unemployment, is a sad by-product of universal education.

There are too many well-educated young people and not enough non-agricultural jobs, officials say.

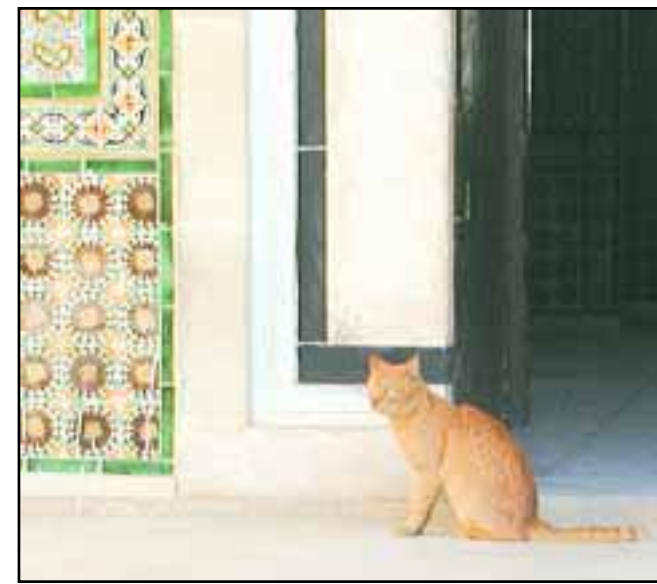
Unemployment is about 14 percent and Tunisia, like Kansas, exports too many of its best and brightest every year.

In just over 50 years of independence from France, Tunisia has come a long way. There are a lot of obstacles to overcome, including living with some not-so-nice neighbors, finding its place in the community of nations, working toward more democracy and the ever-present fight against extremism and poverty.

But, then again, Tunisians point out, in 1827, after 50 years of independence, the U.S. still had slavery and women couldn't vote.



SOUVENIR STANDS LOOK the same the world over. These vendors offered their wares to pilgrims outside the shrine of the Prophet's friend and barber in Kairouan.



A CAT KEPT the rodent population at bay inside a mosque courtyard in Kairouan.

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