

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

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ACROSS NORTH AFRICA

Mr. Peter Martin
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Wheelock House
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Dear Peter,

Years ago I once rode across North Africa in the company of friends that ever since I have preferred to call casual acquaintances. They were a rather wild bunch and the trip was the kind you never tell your parents about until much, much later when you are financially independent. Most of that previous journey is a blur now. I never kept notes at the time, too preoccupied with an infamous case of Fundador brandy we purchased in Spain before setting sail for the Barbary coast. We finished the last bottle before we arrived in Algiers and by that time our camaraderie also had pretty much dissipated.

But I do distinctly remember some of the less than clean hotels we stayed at, where even in the sweltering summer heat you crawled into your sleeping bag - that way the bedbugs had one more barrier to overcome before feasting on your flesh. And even to me, just returned from a wilderness expedition in the Wyoming mountains, the sanitary conditions we encountered at the time seemed simply appalling. I cannot remember a single hot shower.

As Joan and I stood at the southermost tip of Europe near Gibraltar we realized little that on this trip also, after the relative luxury of French and Spanish hotel rooms, we were not to enjoy a hot shower again until we arrived in Tunis.

I mention the hot showers since they became somewhat of an obsession during our two week trip. As a result Joan and I have started our own rating system of hotels by now, graded exclusively by the availability of warm water and clean bathrooms. Our informal tally is at severe odds with the Michelin experts. Some hotels that warrant a four or five star in their green guide we quickly downgraded to no more than two star establishments. This of course is purely a cultural prejudice. Toilets and bathtubs that seem high class to a Michelin inspector often appear to even

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pedestrian Americans as decidedly unacceptable. Unless this appears to be some idiosyncratic quirk, let me quote Edmund Wilson, one of America's most eloquent man-of-letters of this century, in our defense. He once wrote - also traveling under duress - that the American bathroom is as much a contribution to civilization as the Gothic cathedral!

This rating system also had another unexpected advantage. Often when we couldn't remember the name of this-or-that hotel, a quick look at the rating chart brought back the necessary memories. Thus a certain establishment in Bouira, Algeria - "bathtub filthy beyond believe, toilet not fit for a Neanderthaler" - instantly conjured up the little pigsty in question.

There was so much fog in the Gulf of Algeciras the morning we left Europe that we could barely see Gibraltar as the ship started to make its way toward North Africa. The Barbary coast was seemingly not intent on giving us a warm welcome. The strait between Algeciras and Tangier was one continuous stretch of rough seas and icecold gales. Within minutes of leaving the European continent the boat was rolling and pitching. Trucks in the hold were safely anchored down with chains.

Not quite halfway through the two and a half hour trip the first serious cases of mal-de-mer appeared. Waiters scurried around with buckets of sand but to little avail. A large group of Moroccan peasant women were sitting on the ground in little circles, their white scarfs tightly drawn around faces that rested in agony on their knees. Only a small knot of Spanish truckdrivers was still moving across the ship, laughing at the misery around them. Soon the entire ship reeked of vomit. Luckily Joan and I had placed ourselves strategically in the middle of the ship, from where we could watch the tugging back and forth of the waves but were not subject to the stomach-gripping sensation each time the ship dipped into a new trough.

Our arrival in Tangier was delayed for almost three hours. The loading gate was opened but I knew by the agitated gesticulating of the truckdrivers who had gathered at the lip of the ship that docking was impossible. The ship, now anchored down, bobbed even more up and down. More people vomited and the waiters simply gave up trying to throw sand in the hallways. The captain decided to try docking in the second harbor. Here the waves proved less fearsome and within minutes we drove onto African soil.

As always there were the vendors of a thousand-and-one knickknacks. Plastic buckets, plastic sandals, plastic combs, matches, cigarettes, lighters, shoe polish - a whole cornucopia of local delights dazzled at our feet. Young boys volunteered to take us - "no charge sir, absolutely free!!" - to a number of hotels even the Rough Guide to North Africa (for obvious reasons I'm sure) forgot to mention. The customs examination was still before us, something I was not looking forward to. The douaniers, however, were all very friendly and very correct. Every package was carefully searched, but always in the presence of two officials. I was truly astonished, remembering the days when petty larceny was an accepted practice, almost a rite of passage for any traveler entering Morocco.

With all the baggage assembled on a cement bench beside the car, another official with a long thin metal probe examined every little nook and cranny of the Land Rover. "Any hashish?" he smiled, but we showed ourselves outraged by the very idea, which made him laugh even harder. There was a final moment's deliberation over some arabic clippings in one of the boxes but they were judged innocuous. Finally our luggage, the car and ourselves were all declared welcome to the Kingdom of Morocco. "Bienvenue," said the man with the metal probe, pointing the piece of metal toward the horizon, "Rabat, tout droit."

Even if we had intended to get to Rabat - and it is usually the last stop on any visitor's program in Morocco - the evening was upon us. We checked the map and the hotel directory and decided to head for Larrache. In the rapidly diminishing light we tried to make our way out of Tangier. It had been raining for days already and the roads were full of soft yellow mud that soon covered the entire car. Pedestrians in heavy woolen caftans were walking by the sides of the street as if oblivious to the weather. Even as we entered the countryside they were still walking in the heavy rain. Huge purple clouds were being blown in off the ocean, a few hundred yards to our right. Occasionally a shepherd materialized out of nowhere by the side of the road, covered by the everpresent woolen caftan.

It still rained when we reached Larrache, a small provincial city about fifty miles from Tangiers. The market place was filled with people milling around. The directory recommended a turn of the century hotel just outside the city center. It was a charming colonial affair, complete with the characteristically tiled bathroom. Here our daily rush for the warm water faucet originated. We found only tepid stuff in Larrache but the charm of the hotel made up for what remained my battle cry for the rest of the trip: "A hot bath tonight Joan, nothing less than a hot bath will do tonight!!"

The rain had stopped in the morning. The little town was still half asleep as we drove on toward Fes, Morocco's old imperial capital. Fields half covered with water stretched to the horizon. A shortcut before Meknes took us on a bad and winding one lane road where at one point we had to put the Land Rover into low gear to extricate ourselves from a particularly muddy stretch. The local people had put the same mud to a rather ingenious use, covering their haystacks and other perishables with a foot thick layer that protected the contents from the rain. Even the stables and huts had a protective covering of mud.

Fes with its multiple cities wrapped around several hills was as confusing as ever. We entered several roads into the old city, only to find ourselves every time before some obstacle that forced us to turn back. Here again the young children were a complete pest. Just to stop for ten seconds was enough to have them knocking at your door, ready to take you to this or that hotel or to a number of less honorable places. After what seemed to be fifteen different attempts we managed to locate the walls of the royal palace and followed them straight into the heart of the new city - Fez al-Gidida. The guidebook said we would not really experience the true Fes here, with its hustle and bustle and the noise of the early morning crowds.

That was just fine for Joan and I. For we had noticed that the better hotels were in the new part of Fes - maybe hot water? It was not to be true. Despite a certain mustiness in the rooms, the Grand Hotel was decent enough. But we were told that since this was still spring - i.e. non-tourist season - no hotel bothered to turn up the heat or heat up the water. We endured the two nights at the Grand Hotel stoically, but in revenge downgraded the place on our chart from a three star to a one star.

We were determined to spend as much of our time in the city as possible. Unfortunately it was raining once again. Joan argued passionately with a local salesman over the price of an umbrella - "Can you imagine, this guy wants as much for this thing as the vendors on Broadway!!" - and we hired a local guide to show us everything he could point out about Fes in about ten hours or less. It was a true calvary, trudging from medresa (religious school) to medresa, interrupted only by an occasional visit to a rug warehouse - the guide of course getting a cut of whatever we were meant to buy - or a pottery shop. In the narrow alleys we bumped into man and animal alike. A particularly badmannered jackass pushed me into the path of a veiled woman carrying her vegetables home. She uttered a few words in berber that, perhaps mercifully, I didn't understand.

Our dapper little guide meanwhile - complete with mudstained blue suit, crumpled tie, leaky umbrella, upturned trouser cuffs and balding head - seemed oblivious to the elements. He chatted happily about priceless architectural treasures I would gladly have traded for a cup a strong coffee and a pair of dry shoes. That afternoon my lifelong aversion to people who smile in the face of adversity increased significantly. At the great Karawouine mosque - "the largest in North Africa and certainly the most beautiful; look at that magnificent scrollwork" - worshippers were performing their ablutions in the icecold water while the rain continued. A hardy people these Moroccans!

Despite the beauty of the city we were longing for some sunshine. As we left early the next morning a dense fog slowed us down to thirty miles per hour. Joan and I were starting to grumble about the lousy weather we had had on the trip so far, working ourselves into a bilious mood. We were not looking forward to driving more than three hundred planned kilometers in this pea soup. The car slowly climbed into the Rif mountains, infamous at one time for its drug smugglers. Suddenly and completely unexpected we found ourselves out of the fog. As we continued to climb the valley wall we could see the cloud of dense fog below us, a huge saucer-like mass that hung suspended over Fes and the valley floor. It was a most eerie sight.

Now the sunshine was strong and brilliant. The rain had disappeared and, in patches and whiffs, a North African landscape as I remembered it stretched out before and below us. The fields were glistening with the morning dew and the intense green of freshly sown fields that gave way to a rusty and orangy color as we continued into the heart of the mountains. Joan kept a steady eye on the doorlocks and we vowed not to stop for any motorist who might happen to be accidentally stranded by the side of the road - we all know what happens to helpful Samaritans on backcountry roads in the Rif mountains! Soon we forgot our own precautions as the stark but

stunning landscape unfolded before us, and hopped in and out of the car to take pictures.

We filled the gastanks in Oujda, the last city before the Moroccan-Algerian border. It was here that during the early years of the Algerian war of independence the country's future top leadership - including Ahmed Ben Bella and Houari Boumedienne - gathered to draw up a common strategy against the french. Even now the people in Algeria still refer to them as the "Oujda clan." A couple of black market moneydealers attempted to interest us in some Algerian dinars. But I was too weary of entering Algeria with illegally acquired currency. A couple of years ago a friend was denied entry after a roll of dinars was found in his jacket and, not having a return visa for Morocco, found himself stranded several days in no-man's land.

In the nineteenth century Algeria was very much a choice location for well-to-do European travelers. A guidebook published at the time was entitled "Algiers, The Playground of the Rich." It was an in-between vacationing spot for British aristocracy on their way to India. Its warm climate and dry air attracted many suffering from what was then known as consumption. Even Karl Marx spent a few months here toward the end of his life, as did the more flamboyant Oscar Wilde.

The colonial hotels with their magnificent lobbies and high ceiled rooms still exist around Algiers and the other major cities. But the outbreak of the Algerian war of independence in 1954 brought tourism to a halt. When the war ended eight years later the socialist governments of Ben Bella and Boumedienne looked askance at attracting foreign visitors. Until very recently then, Algeria has not been eager to entertain tourists. It was only when the price of natural gas dropped in the 1980s that the country's leadership slowly changed its viewpoints. And only in the last three years has the government started to pump some money into what was formerly called a "bourgeois-oriented, unproductive" aspect of the economy.

Algeria still only attracts 200,000 visitors per year - compared to almost 1.5 million in neighboring Tunisia - and most of those travel to the Sahara. Nevertheless, the potential for tourism in the country is breathtaking: hundreds of miles of unspoiled beaches, rugged mountain ranges, the Tassili mountains with their thousands of prehistoric murals, and a spectacular desert with the incomparable Hoggar mountains in the south.

I must admit I've always felt admiration for the Algerians' sense of independence and their stand on tourism. To anyone sensitive to the local culture in North Africa and the Middle East it is clear that tourism is at best a double edged-sword. But as we were driving through the country I often wished Algeria had started on its recent tourist promotion campaign a bit earlier!! There is first of all the entry fee: a hefty \$210 that everyone - even if, like Joan and I, they are on a transit visa - has to pay. For those driving a car there is also obligatory insurance. Money is non-convertible and cannot be taken across the border. The message is to spend it. But the question is, on what?

We still had to pass customs' inspection. On all my trips into North Africa, nothing has ever been more of a pet peeve than these checks. A group of Senegalese students had their luggage examined in front of us at the customs building. They were all young, boisterous and antagonizing the elderly douanier. In revenge he proceeded to methodically examine their luggage. Especially some magazines and a rather large supply of whisky held his attention (visions of yesteryear!). The students complained bitterly about their right to have the magazines. "Would you let articles and books critical of Senegal into your country?" the customs official asked. He ended up confiscating the lot, as well as a number of liquor bottles that he lined up against the wall behind him.

I wondered what would happen to the two big boxes of books and notes I had in the Land Rover? For some reason, however, the old man was rather generous with us. He asked what we were doing in Algeria and seemed duly impressed with anyone willing to study North Africa. He pondered my namecard for a long time. I told him about my previous stay in Algeria and we chatted for quite a while about recent political events. By this time we were on friendly terms and the inspection of the luggage was almost perfunctorily. Even the computer and printer - normally a real obstacle - passed muster. We talked a while longer. Then his voice swelled up for peroration - "Allez-y! Bonne chance!!" - and we were cleared to continue our trip.

Tired and still slightly tense because of the whole customs procedure we entered Oran around nine at night. Between the border and the city the landscape had been a quick progression of deep valleys, their floors covered with crofts set amidst palmetto plains that looked at best of marginal value for raising anything. A quick check around the Grand Place revealed no vacancies and we 'resigned' ourselves in having to look for a more expensive place to stay. A police patrol we encountered told us how to get to the Ambassadeurs hotel. Then, concerned that we would get lost in the city's maze of alleys, escorted us to the hotel. We never found out if this impressed the management, but they did have a room. Although we balked at the price - a hefty \$110 - we were too tired to look further. And, of course, a five star hotel would have hot water...

We paid \$46 for a couple of steaks and two beers and headed off for our room. For a five star hotel the Ambassadeurs was not particularly impressive. Some of the hallways were filled with a dense smoke from the restaurant's kitchen. Pieces of the ceiling had come down, exposing some corroded pipes. The room was extremely hot and the heater couldn't be turned down. On the television a videotape of some old American movie was playing. At 11 p.m. the channel suddenly went dead. There was a trickle of hot water for almost one minute - unfortunately Joan had beat me to the shower - and then a torrential downpour of lukewarm and finally cold water. I stared glumly at the dead TV set.

We left early the next morning for a grueling day of driving that eventually brought us to Bouira. The roads were usually of good quality, two lane affairs that forced us to slow down at every little village and town we encountered. Then at the outskirts of every one of them a race would start among the passenger cars, trying to get ahead of local trucks

before the narrow roads made passing impossible. The road carefully skirted the mountains to our left and the desert to the right. For most of the day we drove through miles and miles of fertile fields, punctuated every few minutes by old colonial villas. Passing through this long stretch of productive farmland, we marveled at the fact that Algeria now imports more food than ever before. Here too the revolution's insistence on industrialization has left a deep scar, one that will prove much harder to heal than attracting tourists.

Just before Algiers we spotted what looked on the Michelin map like a shortcut from Blida to Bouira. I wanted to avoid Algiers at all costs, remembering the heavy traffic and the rather hectic driving patterns from previous visits. The road narrowed to one lane and we passed through a number of small villages with unlikely names like Ouled Yaich, Bou Kandoura, Mefta and Khemis El Khechna. At the latter the road became a dirt road. The map said "gorges" and, indeed, we climbed steadily into some rough hills that separated us from Lakhdaria, almost thirty kilometers away. From there we needed to get back on the road from Algiers.

Night was upon us and the road got rougher and rougher. On the right side of the Land Rover the distance between us and the fields grew steadily. The few lights we could see looked like pinpricks against the cobalt blue of the darkening sky. The road was cut up and full of rocks that had seemingly fallen from the hills to our left. Soon there were no more signs. We drove back and forth a while longer between the ruts in the road, hairpin turn after hairpin turn until there was a fork in the road... and no sign to indicate Lakhdaria.

We waited a few minutes. I already had visions of spending an uncomfortable night in the back of the Land Rover. Luckily another car came along from the other direction and the driver told us the road was impassable. We drove back north - almost dark now - across a sandy unimproved road and finally managed to make our way to the Lakhdaria bypass almost 45 minutes later. Ever since then, whenever something is impossible, Joan and I sarcastically call it "a road to Lakhdaria."

Driving at night in Algeria is rather dangerous, especially in mountainous areas. There are no lights on the roads, sharp curves are often unmarked and changes from three lanes to two lanes take place more often than not without warning. We usually tucked in behind a truck which although slower - particularly going up mountainsides - was much safer.

To our great surprise we found a motel at the fork of the Bouira-Constantine road. It looked new, perhaps one of the government's recent attempts to build an infrastructure for tourism? If so, it was an utter failure. It seemed to be entirely run by a number of teenagers who were impressed by the fact that we lived in New York City. Soon the entire staff knew, and we were looked upon as curiosities. Although we had few illusions about our room in this rather shabby place, we still were shocked to see what a \$40 room in Algeria will get the unsuspecting tourist. We didn't even try the hot water faucet, figuring that if the toilet didn't work there was little hope left. The room was cold, the blankets insufficient - how glad we were with the woolen pyjamas my mother had given us before we departed! Luckily it had been an exhausting day and we slept solidly.

DJV-12 ACROSS NORTH AFRICA

Breakfast - "c'est inclu, monsieur" - was little more than a few pieces of stale bread without butter, and tepid coffee served in chipped cups. For our pleasure the young man behind the counter in the icecold cafeteria put on a disko tape. The unfortunate machine blasted away while we tried to finish up as quickly as possible. Ahead of us were at least another four hundred miles of driving in order to reach Souk Ahras, the last town before the Tunisian border.

We were on the road by 6:30 a.m and by ten reached Setif, slightly over one hundred miles to the east. Setif is the birthplace of the Algerian revolution. It was in one of the mountain passes of the Aures mountains we were driving through that on a summer evening in 1954 a young French teacher and his wife were murdered by Algerian guerillas. This rather small event - there had been killings back and forth for quite a while - formed the catalyst for the bloody war of independence that followed. It was in the wake of the Setif incident that the french announced a number of measures that led to open fighting between the two sides. Just outside the city center we saw the memorial that the government erected in memory of that war. As many other official memorials and buildings throughout Algeria it is a rather ugly affair, in a modernist vein Joan and I refer to as "socialist architecture." This time it was a clump of concrete meant to represent a clenched hand.

We reached Souk Ahras in late afternoon. The road had been uniformly good and, except for a few detours around Constantine and Annaba, well indicated. Annaba is one of Algeria's three major industrial cities and from the road we could see the smoke and pollution from its steel plants. Souk Ahras is a rather mean and unfriendly mountain village. We filled the Land Rover up with gas, hoping to spend as many of the remaining dinars as possible. Yes, there was a hotel we were told. But after a short drive through the mudcaked roads Joan and I silently stared at each other. Without speaking we headed for the border, for the small village of Sakiet Sidi Youssef and for Tunisia.

It was perhaps the most lonesome stretch of road we encountered throughout our entire trip, almost forty kilometers across an inhospitable continuation of hills and barren fields. The road kept curving back and forth, the car's gears in fourth but most often in third, turning hairpin turn after hairpin turn again until we arrived on the valley floor. Then back up, careful not to ride too close to the precipice, gears down to second and even a few times to first. At last the road flattened out a bit. Some children were tending sheep and goats on meadows grudgingly given up by the landscape. An occasional car appeared out of nowhere, mostly taxis that, we assumed, shuttled people back and forth to the border.

Suddenly there was a small sign by the left side of the road and we had arrived once again at a customs building, in this case a rather imposing structure that, with its green tiles, stucco plastering and arched entry ways, looked like an imitation mosque. From where we were we could see the cupola of Sidi Youssef's mausoleum, a whitewashed small dome that stands out against the brilliant green of the spring crops on the surrounding hills. Sidi Youssef was a local saint whose tomb is still venerated by the local people. Sakiet Sidi Youssef, the little village

named after him is on the other side of the border, however. In the gathering darkness we could see a string of lights against one of the hills a kilometer away.

The customs check was again almost without any problems. Except that here, in this isolated post, we met what all travelers dread: a gouging douanier. With no one to check on his performance the young man 'asked' us for a number of items and finally pocketed some knick-knacks from our baggage. The performance was repeated a few minutes later by the Tunisian official who demanded a few toy cars we had brought along as presents for a friend. He put on a rather odious performance, complete with subtle threats and innuendoes in case we should fail to leave behind some of the desirables.

We had arrived in Tunisia. Up ahead loomed Sakiet Sidi Youssef. It is one of hundreds of small Tunisian villages hidden among fields and desert in this part of the country. But there is a bit more to this isolated village than to many others. Its closeness to the Algerian border and the rugged appearance of the land surrounding it made Sidi Youssef a favorite haunt for Algeria's guerrillas during the war of independence. As the war continued the little village became a reststop and a resupply center for the Algerians. The french never managed to patrol the border adequately, despite employing the then latest electronic technology.

On 8 February 1958 Sakiet Sidi Youssef was holding its weekly market. The marketplace was crowded by the local villagers and the influx of Algerians. Suddenly a small reconnaissance plane circled the village, followed a few minutes later by a number of B-52s that strafed it for a number of minutes. Amidst the chaos of animals, fruit, vegetables, poultry and people, a number of Algerians and Tunisians were killed. The incident was a slap in the face of president Bourguiba. He had promised his countrymen that the french would peacefully retire from the country. Now, two years after their independence, France had bombarded the country instead.

In the end the incident made little difference to the outcome of the franco-algerian war. Within four years France would be forced to grant its last North African territory independence. But in Tunisia it hastened their departure. President Bourguiba demanded the evacuation of the Bizerte base where the french had traditionally kept part of their navy. It led to a small crisis, one that the french also lost.

There was a small hotel in Sakiet Sidi Youssef, but Joan and I wanted to get away from that customs rapparee, as fast and as far as we could get that night. So we continued into Tunisia toward Le Kef, still boiling mad. There was of course little we could have done against either douanier. They were princelings in some isolated border post where they might as well have been king.

In the dark we followed an arrow-straight narrow road, bordered by rows of plane trees. It was perhaps the most peaceful stretch of road we drove on. And of course this feeling was heightened by the knowledge that we had safely arrived in Tunisia, that there were no more border guards to negotiate with, and the fact that Tunis lay only a hundred kilometers away,

DJV-12 ACROSS NORTH AFRICA

trifling in comparison to the distance we had traveled. Here and there a lone pedestrian was caught in our headlights, walking beneath the trees on the pitchdark road. Joan speculated they were smugglers who had made their way across the border illegally. A few minutes later her suspicion was confirmed. A police car, hidden below the foliage, turned on its lights. We stopped and a harsh command in Tunisian arabic was shouted through the window. It was only upon realizing that we were mere tourists that they apologetically waved us on.

The last of our hot waterless hotels was in Le Kef. Perhaps hotel is too grand a name for the run down stucco turn of the century contraption we were lodged in. Our room, its walls completely covered with carved-out arabesques and sporting a domed ceiling, looked like one of the tombs I visited so often in Cairo's City of the Dead. The place also looked rather unsafe, so we paid a toothless septuagenarian guard one dinar to look after the Land Rover for the night. He promised he would defend it with his life - or, as the hotel owner quipped, "whatever remains of it."

Our request for a restaurant was met by uncomprehending stares. "Restaurant?" the owner inquired, "at ten in the evening? In Le Kef?" We said anything would do - always the wrong thing to declare! - and soon found ourselves face to face with the town's sanitation chief who also acted as the village guide. We stumbled beside him through some dark alley and were led upstairs in what seemed to be the one and only cafe still open. The hallway smelled of stale beer and urine. A couple of drunks were attempting a fight on the cobblestones outside. But we did manage to get some food and icecold Celtia beer.

It was Joan's first introduction to merguez, the spicy lamb sausage that is served throughout North Africa. While we were eating our intrepid guard ducked into the room, looking for a last beer. "There goes the Land Rover" whispered Joan between bites of merguez. Despite the cold and the worn-out bed that sloped into a V-shaped trough, we slept rather well that night.

In the morning the car was still there, even though the guard had disappeared. We were glad to get out of the cavernous room and into the sunshine. Tunisia in its long history has witnessed innumerable invasions by foreign armies. The road to Tunis from Le Kef is littered with some of the remnants of one of them: a collection of some of the best preserved Roman ruins in the world. As we drove the final hundred kilometers to the capital we passed an exquisite triumphal arch in the middle of a field of grain near Dougga.

Our final stop before we entered the capital was at a remnant of the most recent invasion: a small British World War II cemetery. Ever since my childhood in Flanders, littered with hundreds of cemeteries from the "Great War," I have taken an almost morbid interest in war burial grounds. Anyone who has ever walked along the ridges of Passchendaele or Verdun will be hard pressed to forget the endless rows of graves. I once took an American friend on a tour through some of them on a windswept rainy afternoon when the Flanders earth turns to mud in a matter of hours. We sheltered ourselves against the rain under the Menin Gate in Ypres, the British memorial to fifty thousand unknown soldiers who lost their lives in one of the first great battles of the war - a collection of young soldiers from

DJV-12 ACROSS NORTH AFRICA

all over the British commonwealth that included Hindus from India as well as gurkas from Nepal. Later we almost got our car stuck in the mud outside Tyne Cot, the kind of mud that stopped whole divisions dead in their tracks and for a few hundred yards of which these same divisions fought for months.

There was no mud at the little hillside memorial near Tunis, only sunshine and miles of white marble tombstones. The geraniums along the rows of graves were already budding, mixed in with rose-red hibiscus and the crimson and vermilion of begonias. There is something macabre about these thousands of young soldiers who, as Kipling once wrote, all died "at the regulation age of twenty-two."

The gardener came up and offered us the official visitors' book to sign. These are usually filled with pathetic and often naive messages, often pleas for peace "that all this may not be in vain." But occasionally there is a more personal message, harder to forget. And after fumbling through a few pages I chanced upon an entry by someone in his mid-forties who had visited this little cemetery only a few weeks before. It was of a man who had not yet been born when his father was killed in North Africa in 1942. "Dad," it simply read, "I am sorry I never saw or knew you. Your son, John."

Joan was out in the surrounding fields where some bedouin women were weeding. They lined up for a picture, all in embroidered dresses. It was almost noon and getting warm. We drove on a few more kilometers. At the top of a particularly long hill the land slowly curved down, filled with orchards of blossoming apple trees and olive groves. Standing amidst thistles that scratched at our legs we could see the bay of Tunis, a blue concave dent in the Mediterranean, shimmering and iridescent in the sunlight. I could follow the outline of the shoreline beyond the city to Carthage and Sidi Bou Said. Within minutes we were driving through the city. It looked small in comparison to Cairo and we marveled at the discipline of the drivers.

We're staying at the St. Georges hotel. It fully deserves its two star rating. It has an excellent little restaurant and, oh yes, there is plenty of hot water.

All the best,



Received in Hanover 4/6/87