

Tunisia and tourism

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Help us. That was the cry I heard from an entire country. Tunisia is being killed by ISIS and nobody seems to care.

Tunisia is a tiny place with a big heart. It is significant that, whilst the Arab Spring started here, change was achieved with minimal loss of life. Tunisians tend to talk, not fight. They removed Ben Ali, the long term President whose rule had become increasingly corrupt and dictatorial over the 25 years since Bourguiba had controlled the country from 1956 when the country rose up, threw out the French occupiers and became an independent state.

Ben Alis regime was growing repressive as his family grew greedier and wealthier. But Tunisians managed to overthrow him with minimal bloodshed and have since tried to establish a democracy, which is not based on any one religion, in this mainly Muslim country. Their revolution towards the power and position of Muslim women has been remarkable. Despite overwhelming problems they are slowly but surely showing the way that Arab and Islamic countries can succeed with tolerant democracy.

Economically their main source of income is tourism. It has beautiful beaches, wonderful sights and good hotels.

Which is why tourism has been the main target for terrorists and Isis. Their attacks on the beautiful Bardo museum and the sun bathing Brits in Port El Kantaoui have decimated the industry. The Imperial Marhaba hotel has shut its doors. Many other once profitable hostelries have closed too; thousands have lost their jobs and are unemployed and penniless. Tragically this includes many of those who lined up as a human shield in front of the gunman.

But the nearby delightful harbour remains packed with yachts and shops.

Slim Ouahchi, 46, the owner of the best restaurant in Tunisia, Port El Kantaouis Le Mediterranee, says his clientele is 30% local and 70% tourists - but that 70% has all but disappeared. The food and service at his establishment continue to be first class. Wonderful fresh fish, caught that day, never frozen; enormous giant prawns, succulent lamb, fabulous Arab dishes and good wines and beers.

The assets of the country remain and this is a perfect time to experience the luxury hotels and fine dining. The Movenpick luxury chain has the biggest hotel in Sousse with a fantastic beach, excellent spa, terrific food and entertainment. The rooms are normally several hundred pounds a night each but currently are available at a fraction of that.

The Japanese Sendai restaurant gave me the finest plate of Sashimi Ive eaten in ages; Maguro Tuna (often hard to find), pink salmon, avocado rolls. Incredible Udon chicken noodles.

And La Villa provides delicious mushroom soup served with sour cream and fresh almonds as well as succulent steaks and imported wines.

Christiane Sayadi is a Belgian lady of 52 who married a Tunisian and has lived in the country for 27 years. This is a wonderful, friendly, beautiful place, she tells me. It is such a shame that Isis is winning by frightening tourists away. Yet it is as safe here as anywhere else.

Quite apart from sun, sea, sand and cuisine, the cultural aspects of this fascinating country, where once the world was ruled from Carthage (and, of course, Rome), there is the best preserved colosseum I have ever seen at El Djem, the beautiful blue and white town of Sidi Bou Said, desert paradises, the holy city of Kairouan, and a world of medinas and spices and magic.

So what can we ordinary Brits and friends of Tunisia do to help them conquer the evil terrorists? Well, everyone here points out that everywhere is now as dangerous as anywhere else - the streets of Paris, London, California, Russia and Norway are as liable to suffer the insanity of the lunatics as much as North Africa. I have to say, the security presence in Tunisia is extraordinary at the moment, with more guards and police and soldiers than you could imagine. The sooner pressure is brought on the Foreign Office to stress that Tunisia is now as safe as anywhere is essential. Likewise, airlines and travel firms must reopen their services and advertise deals.

But most important is the individual traveller. We need to hold our heads up and put our money where our hearts are. No, we shall not be intimidated by the freaks. Great places to visit and enjoy will still get our patronage. Especially when it makes such economic sense.