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Tunisia, Through the Eyes of Its Artists and Intellectuals

By NIKIL SAVAL NOV. 1, 2016

Believing in a hope that spans borders — cultural, historical and political.

Photo

and political.

Photo



Tunisia's multiethnic background and history of tolerance is on full view in the filmmaker Ahmed Bennis's house, packed with folk art from a variety of regions and eras. Alongside antique furniture and a wooden mask from Bali is a self-portrait of Bennis in his younger days. Credit Photographs by Joakim Eskildsen. Produced by Sulaika Zarrouk. Local production by Khadija Djellouli

TUNISIA IN THE MIDDLE of summer has a stubborn, marine insouciance about it. Everything in the capital city of Tunis seems defined by the endless coast, by the unutterable, swimming-pool warmth of the Mediterranean Sea. Moving inward from the idyllic beaches, the city's center maintains an Old World charm, split between the sinuous market quarter that is the medina, and a grid of avenues originally planned by the French in the late 1800s.

Just an hour southeast from the center, past the grittier southern suburbs where much Tunisian hip-hop comes from, past olive groves and vineyards, one reaches what could pass for a different continent altogether: the weekend

destination of Hammamet, full of old villas, long stretches of placid, perfect beach and Tunis's more licentious side, where D.J.s play their sets to drunken crowds through the dawn.

It can feel easy here to forget the seriousness of the events that have overtaken the country since January 2011, when it was the site of the first revolution in what became known as the "Arab Spring." Alongside the dismantling of its autocratic government, the subsequent adoption of a new constitution and the uneasy attempts to forge a new democracy, Tunisia has been the unnerved witness to a handful of disturbing terrorist attacks. The paradox of contemporary Tunisia is that it is a seaside tourist destination that, according to a 2015 report by the security-intelligence firm the Soufan Group, has seen, proportionally to its population, more of its people leave to join jihadists in Syria, Libya and Iraq than any other nation. (The Tunisian Ministry of the Interior has disputed the figures in this report.) Since 2011, Tunis has been both the epicenter of dramatic upheavals to the way of life in the Arab world, and a kind of respite from these convulsions. It is a country that has one foot in political fervor, and the other in a *dolce far niente* lifestyle that is often asserted with no small amount of pride by the people here. Sicily is about 90 miles away, a fact that is keenly apparent on the heavenly coast, though one is never far from a reminder that, merely five years ago, the streets of Tunis were crammed with revolutionary crowds.

Photo



Bennys's home, overlooking the coast. Credit Joakim Eskildsen

The filmmaker Ahmed Bennys is representative of Tunisia's historical reputation as a country exceedingly tolerant of multiethnic backgrounds, a country defined by a pastiche of cultural influences.

Photo

Photo



The beach of La Marsa can be seen just outside of the window, where more of Bennys's art is on display. Credit Joakim Eskildsen



Bennys in his home office, working on a new film project. His extensive collection of ancient artifacts was amassed while traveling the world as a cameraman for NBC News. Credit Joakim Eskildsen

The events of 2011 took everyone by surprise, giving voice to long-simmering resentments and an intense desire to construct a new way forward. In its ongoing struggle for democracy, Tunisia has since seen more protests — the country has a stubbornly high unemployment rate — but remains the most stable of the countries that went through the Arab Spring. The years following the protests have produced numerous frustrations and tragedies, but there has also been a revolution of a different sort, one more cultural in nature. Being there, I felt as if, cautiously, a vibrant community of artists and intellectuals centered along the coast were rebuilding Tunis in their own image. Possessed of broader avenues for communication and a closer relationship to the surrounding region, a new bohemian culture is rising in Tunisia as the country reconnects with its complicated past, staking out hope, albeit uncertainly, for a better future.

THE SEASIDE TOWN of La Marsa exudes the peculiar restless ease characteristic of Tunis. Here are its best galleries and bookshops — [Galerie El Marsa](#), [Mille Feuilles](#) — alongside a wide, balconied promenade that overlooks one of its most popular stretches of beach. In July, I met Ahmed Bennys, an 80-year-old filmmaker and cinematographer, at his house in La Marsa. Bennys is representative of Tunisia's historical reputation as a country exceedingly tolerant of multiethnic backgrounds, a country defined by a pastiche of cultural influences. Bennys's house, which fronted the beach — surf and children's cries and the smack of paddle balls floated in through the windows — seemed to be a monument to postrevolution Tunisia's reclaiming of its more cosmopolitan past. The house is deliriously crammed with folk art from all eras: local Tunisian paintings, Sicilian puppets procured from the medina, a wooden statuette of Barack Obama. Bennys himself is a remarkable figure, whose varied

background speaks to Tunisia's more inclusive history, a history that was suppressed under the authoritarian regime of Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali, who from 1987 until his ouster in 2011 ran a corrupt government in which political oppression was common. Bennys worked for many years as a cameraman for NBC News, which sent him around the world. He spoke of going to primary school with Spaniards, Italians and Jews. He reminded me many times that his mother's side of the family is from Dagestan; that he had relatives who saved Jews during the Nazi occupation of France; that the name "Bennys" is Moroccan. He strongly, and perhaps ironically, resembled a middle-aged Ezra Pound. "*C'était un mélange!*" he cried, when asked to describe the essence of Tunisia.

Photo



Tunisians enjoying the warmth of the sun in the coastal suburb of La Marsa on the Mediterranean Sea. Credit Joakim Eskildsen

This image of Tunisia-as-mélange, as a place accepting and friendly of all kinds of people, blossomed under a modernization program instituted by Habib Bourguiba, who came to power after the colony gained its independence from France, under which Tunisia was a protectorate from 1881 until 1956. The results of Bourguiba's enlightened platform included the passing of a then-radical women's-rights legislation, and a booming tourism industry, making Tunis an exotic bohemian center. This progress, however, was stalled under Ben Ali, whose regime prohibited access to YouTube, and human-rights groups' and opposition political movements' websites.

But the coast is the result of a mix of influences, a combination of old and new, with architectural remnants of previous eras blending with the kitsch left over from the height of Tunisian tourism. Occasionally these two totems converge, as in the home of Jellal Ben Abdallah, one of Tunisia's most famous artists and a contemporary of Bennis's, whom I visited in the suburb of Sidi Bou Said. His house is an effortlessly postmodern assemblage of *objets d'art* and neoclassicism: Archways from the 17th century have been built into the structure of the house, and column fragments form pedestals for photo frames, lamps and candelabras. The home recalls the putative heyday of Tunis's old intellectual community, when Bourguiba was in power. In the 1970s, Ben Abdallah told me, he hosted guests like the philosopher Michel Foucault at his house, as well as Aristotle and Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis.

Photo



Jellal Ben Abdallah, a painter of national repute, in his home and studio in the coastal suburb of Sidi Bou Said, on the Gulf of Tunis. Credit Joakim Eskildsen

Photo



The house, like Tunis itself, is a mix of ancient and modern touches, constructed around a series of 17th-century archways and column fragments. Credit Joakim Eskildsen

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Archways dating back to the 1600s have been built into the structure of Jellal Ben Abdallah's house, and column fragments form pedestals for photo frames, lamps and candelabras.

Photo



Ben Abdallah's living room, where he's hosted such figures as Michel Foucault and Jackie Kennedy Onassis, epitomizes the country's cosmopolitan and bohemian history. Credit Joakim Eskildsen

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BEFORE 2011, Tunisians who came of age during the isolationist regime of Ben Ali were unaware that their country was a tapestry of different cultures and backgrounds. For Amina Abdellatif, a curator and visual designer based in Tunis, life here leading up to the revolution was defined by the relative security of growing up in one of the suburbs along the coast, where most middle-class Tunisians had convened. Names associated with the coastal suburbs — Sidi Bou Said, Gammarth, Carthage — have long been bywords for privilege, where Ben Ali's autocracy was ameliorated by the amenities of beachside living. I met Abdellatif at a bar in the wealthy neighborhood of Gammarth, a frivolous and resort-y place, full of valet parking and dark, snaking driveways hidden behind gates. We were talking at a bar called Wax — one of a number of yuppie watering holes dotting the coast, of uncertain identity (the waitstaff all had T-shirt uniforms that blatantly copied the logo of the Golden State Warriors) and organized around a flimsy hipster pretext (the D.J. played vinyl). The neighborhood was close to my hotel, [Golden Tulip](#) — an expensively marbled labyrinth with an enormous outdoor pool, the kind of place I could imagine Hosni Mubarak's cronies used to stay on jaunts to Tunis. There was something ersatz about all these various trappings of luxury.

The revolution brought to the surface another Tunisia, one set apart from these emblems of wealth and conformity. Everyone remembers where they were when news of the protests spread. (For people on the coast, this realization largely confirmed Tunisia's contradictions: Abdellatif read on Twitter that her country's history was unraveling while at a party in Gammarth.) Now, a part of the country that had long been ignored was finally visible, a Tunisia comprising small towns overwhelmed by poverty and neglect. "After the revolution," Abdellatif told me, "we heard about towns that we didn't know existed; they were not even counted in the census. It was really hard for us to admit there was another, parallel Tunisia."

This revelation, however grim, has allowed the older, more progressive Tunisia of Bennys and Ben Abdallah to make a comeback. Abdellatif has become a kind of ambassador for Arab artists, posting about them on Instagram. When we spoke, she had just come from leading a branding workshop for disadvantaged Tunisian youth at [Maison de l'Image](#), the country's first independent visual-arts space, which opened in 2015 just off a boulevard that was filled with protesters in 2011. The gallery's founder, Wassim Ghozlan, runs seminars for students from Tunis's poorer suburbs.

Photo



The Hammamet home of Emmanuelle Boetsch has been converted into Tunisia's first artist's residence. Credit Joakim Eskildsen

A family property of the French psychoanalyst Emmanuelle Boetsch in Hammamet has become the site of Tunisia's first artist's residency. The grounds are bursting with bright vegetation and bougainvillea.

Photo

Photo



Boetsch decided to modify the house — for years, a family summer retreat — after the revolution.
Credit Joakim Eskildsen



The residence's honorary president, writer Moncef Guellaty, poses on the beach at the property. Credit Joakim Eskildsen

In Hammamet, a family property of the French psychoanalyst Emmanuelle Boetsch has become, with the help of the Tunisian writer Shiran Ben Abderrazak, the site of Tunisia's first artist's residency. The grounds are bursting with bright vegetation and bougainvillea, and contain — in almost a parody of the old Tunisian tolerance — a single-room home for a Muslim ascetic and a whitewashed chapel. For years, the house was a family summer retreat — a discreet stairway connects the first floor and a bedroom so Boetsch's grandfather, it is rumored, could conduct his serial love affairs — but Boetsch was driven to modify the house after the revolution, to make it a place where a newfound Tunisian freedom, propelled by the sweeping curiosity afforded a country in transition, could ferment.

Some of the new liberties sought by Tunisians stem from the country's impressive achievements in the 19th century, when, despite being under autocratic rule, it was one of the first nations to ban slavery (preceding the retrograde United States by nearly 20 years) and also established the first modern constitution in the Arab world. Following independence from France, Bourguiba's aggressive development program dragged Tunisia's economy into the 20th century, but it also sealed and buried its history; Tunis's Arab middle class was encouraged to move from the city's center to the rapidly developing suburbs, as if to escape it. By the time of Ben Ali's regime, when a perceived stagnation overtook the country, the pendular oscillation of progress and repression had settled entirely on the side of the latter — with the country's past under lock and key.

THE SCENT OF OLD can still be caught by following the Avenue Habib Bourguiba — a classically French parkway — which leads toward the medina, the city's medieval heart. Here the streets narrow practically to alleyways,

sharply zigzagging past boisterous markets selling everything from sneakers to spices to Tupperware, ledges and windowsills festooned with stray cats. The medina has an undeniably ancient feel, though this part of the city, too, has gone through changes. Improbably, it is on a side street here that Yves Marbrier, a French design consultant and former editor of *Vogue Décoration*, has made his vacation home since 2000, renovating the 16th-century courtyard residence of a jurist, choosing to live in comfortable walking distance from markets and sidewalk cafes, as many middle-class Tunisians no longer do. Renovated in severe minimalist style by the English designer John Pawson — the sinks and bathtubs are hard-edged, slate-gray marble, serene and threatening at once — its roof garden overlooks brick-tiled domes, jutting minarets and the snaking cylindrical roofs of the medina itself.

Photo



Yves Marbrier enjoys an afternoon tea in the minimalist dining room of his vacation home in the medina. Credit Joakim Eskildsen

The medina is the city's medieval heart; here the streets narrow practically to alleyways, sharply zigzagging past boisterous markets selling everything from sneakers to spices to Tupperware.

Photo

Photo



The view of the medina from Marbrier's roof. Credit Joakim Eskildsen



The 16th-century house was renovated in the early 2000s. Credit Joakim Eskildsen

Sitting just outside the medina, in the center of Tunis, is one of the more unexpected results of postrevolutionary liberties. For the last year, a team of restorers and preservationists has been working on the Qsar es-Said, a 19th-century palace that has been shuttered since the early 20th century, its existence then censored by Bourguiba. It will reopen in November, granting access to a trove of art and architectural history that practically no one from the country has ever seen. Over the last year, restoration work has been done on the Italianate-tiled palace and its collection of French-painted portraits of the Tunisian court; Tunisia's Rambourg Foundation engineered the country's first-ever partnership between the government and a charity of this kind to accomplish the fact. Before the revolution, such a move would have been impossible, given the blanket ban on investigating the country's history.

Photo



The 19th-century Qsar es-Said, a palace in the center of Tunis that is reopening after over a century of being closed off to the public, is home to a trove of treasures, including an ornate precolonial royal throne made of wood and gold leaf. Credit Joakim Eskildsen

I was led around the palace by Ridha Moumni, an exacting, fantastically knowledgeable art historian. Tunisian-born but trained in France and Italy, he would fall repeatedly into pools of despond when unveiling a restored painting only to find the slightest errant speck of paint in the wrong place. He showed me a constant stream of wonders: the marble table where the Treaty of Bardo, the pact establishing the French protectorate, was affirmed; a beautiful Swiss portrait of Giuseppe Raffo, a Tunis-born Italian who was an indispensable adviser to the Bey in the 19th century; a John James Audubon portrait of George Washington sent by the United States in 1865 on the occasion of the end of the American Civil War. The point was not simply the quality of the works, but the variety of the people seen in them. As Moumni continually reminded

me, this was the multiethnic Tunisia that Tunisians until recently had been forbidden to acknowledge or understand. The entire country — the laid-back beach, the besieged interior — seemed to converge here, at this source of Tunisian history.

Crowded with worldly ghosts, murmuring with the Mediterranean's many languages, redolent of the sea and its salt airs and ports and motley crews, the museum makes one confront, with a little fantasy, the deep-delved past that it had taken a massive political upheaval to unearth. I felt hope that the intervening years, of colonialism and autocracy, had been a parenthesis — that within this sealed and dusty royal palace was a future where much was possible.

Photo



On the road from Tunis to Hammamet, a popular weekend destination, which goes through rural farmland and vineyards. Credit Joakim Eskildsen