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How To Visit Another Planet For £300

What does £300 buy you these days? An electronic personal organiser? Tickets to a dozen Premiership football matches? What about a week's holiday on another planet? Paul Deegan travels to a galaxy far, far away.

Galapagos. Antarctica. Zangskar. Regular readers will know that over the past 12 months I've been privileged to enjoy some mind-blowing trips around the world. So it was time for a reality check. What would most people be prepared to spend on a week of independent travel? I asked family, friends and colleagues, and settled on the popular figure of £300. Using this amount of money, I decided to find out how far I could travel from the UK, and how much I could see, in one week.

In order to spice up my journey a little more, I laid down several criteria that I would have to meet. They were:

1. My destination had to lie outside Europe.
2. I could not use any of the low-cost airlines.
3. The country that I visited could not be one that I, or my travelling partner, had been to before. Nor could English be widely spoken by the local people.
4. I had to attempt to complete all the excursions that I wished to undertake, and not miss something out purely to save money.
5. I had to avoid staying in fly-blown, flea-riddled establishments.

I hoped that even when observing these somewhat artificial restrictions, it would still be possible to nail the entire trip for £300 from the moment I arrived at the departure airport to the point at which the aircraft landed back in the UK. What

follows is the story of the build-up to, and the outcome (financial and otherwise), of those seven days.

Pre-departure

Obviously the cornerstone of the adventure was going to be my choice of destination. Asia, Australia, South America and southern Africa were non-starters as the cost of the airline seat alone would have swallowed up my entire budget. Flights to North America were acceptably priced, but the language restriction I had placed on myself cancelled out the entire continent.

That left the Middle East, North Africa and a few islands such as Malta and the Canaries. My final choice would be largely determined by flight availability, and so a few weeks before departure I spent a long night and a bleary morning sifting through Teletext and various online websites in order to investigate flight options. Inevitably, every price I saw advertised had already evaporated by the time I called up the company concerned, and I began to doubt whether more than a single ticket had every been available for each of the quoted fares. I saw Tunisia flagged up for £104 on more than one occasion but in the end the lowest price I found was £169.50 (including all the dreaded taxes) with a company called Biggles. After I had handed my credit card details over, the assistant came back on the telephone to say that for some inexplicable reason there was an extra £5 tax and would that be OK? No it wasn't OK, but by then I had burnt up so many hours finding this fare that I surrendered and paid the sum total of £174.50. (I used a debit card; had I paid with a credit card an extra charge would have been levied.) I never did find out whether the additional charge was a genuine oversight on behalf of the assistant or a common 'sting' employed to extract additional revenue at the point of no return.

One ray of light from the booking came in the form of the carrier that Biggles had found me: a direct flight with British Airways – operated by GB Airways – from Gatwick to Tunis. (Whilst in Tunisia I was to meet two Americans who had flown on so-called student fares from London to Tunisia for a similar price as that which I had paid but via Frankfurt, so overall it would appear that I did find a good deal).

I had long been guilty of dismissing Tunisia as a bucket-and-spades brigade destination. However, as I began my research into the country, my eyes began to be opened to its rich heritage and geographical attractions. Over the centuries, Phoenicians, Romans, Turks, Arabs, French, Berbers, Ottomans and Vandals have all laid claim to this land, which today is the smallest country in North Africa.

Together with friend Peter Stewart, I travelled in April, on the cusp of the principal holiday season, but sufficiently early in the year to avoid the bulk of the tourist invasion and the searing temperatures of the summer months. I went with few preconceptions, a light rucksack and a guidebook. Peter brought his knowledge of the French language - a handy asset, as we were to discover.

Monday 15th April

It's a late afternoon flight to Tunis, the capital of Tunisia, made later by a one hour delay at Gatwick. By the time we land in North Africa, night has overtaken day. We're tired and simply cannot be bothered to hunt for a bus to take us into town. Instead we jump in a cab to our hotel in the centre of the city, and dine at a cafe a few blocks away. If I was hoping for culinary delights on this trip, I could be staring disappointment in the face: chicken and chips is all that can be found on the menu.

Budget (all figures quoted per person)

Return flight: £174.50

Accommodation: £7.50

Food: £2

Travel: £2.50

Other: £1.50

Total: £188

Amount remaining: £112

Tuesday 16th April

We've read great things about the coastal town of Sidi Bou Said. The French did much to preserve the character of this whitewashed settlement, with its distinctive blue doors and cobbled streets. However, there is no budget accommodation to

be found in Sidi Bou Said; even the unclassed Sidi Bou Fares Hotel is £12 a night per person. We call in advance to check availability, only to be told that the one remaining room is a three-bed affair, and that if we want it then we will need to pay the full asking price of £30. Ouch. The budget isn't looking good, but we want to go, so we go.

I had been warned that Sidi Bou Said is infested with tourists during the day. So we spend the morning in Tunis, and only arrive at the foot of the hill on which Sidi Bou Said is built in the late afternoon, just as the last coach-load of visitors returns to the capital city. As the vendors pack up their wares on the central street (tourists have been coming here for over 250 years and business in leather goods, watercolours and birdcages is brisk), we pick our way along an alleyway to the hotel. Many famous writers and artists have spent time in this town, and it is easy to see why: even today the streets are littered with aspiring artisans learning their trade.

Two hours later and a very apologetic hotel manager comes to our room and asks if we would mind moving into a double room as a family of four needed our triple. The promise of a £7.50 refund provides sufficient motivation to pack up our gear and carry it across the courtyard.

Accommodation: £11.25

Food: £4.10

Travel: £0.30

Total: £15.65

Amount remaining: £96.35

Wednesday 17th April

An early start from Sidi Bou Fares delivers us back in Tunis in time for the morning bus to the south of the country. The plan for today is simple. A look around the Roman amphitheatre which dominates the town of El Jem, then on to see the troglodyte settlements in Matmata. But as I am unloading our bags from the bowels of the dusty coach yards from the amphitheatre, Peter discovers that the next bus will not be leaving the town until 5pm; far too late a time to reach

Matmata before nightfall. So, abiding by the motto that 'Flexibility is the first principal of any expedition', we re-board the bus and sit on it for the remainder of the day as far as its terminus, the desert town of Tataouine in the far south of the country. Since we had been planning to visit Tataouine on the morrow, this is of no great inconvenience, but a full day on a bus is more tiring than one might imagine.

Originally a simple halt for camel trains which crossed this desolate stretch of land, Tataouine was built up by the French a little over 100 years ago. The town is now the heart of the region. In a welcome change from the relatively high cost of accommodation in Tunis and Sidi Bou Said, we find plenty of low-cost digs in Tataouine, and settle on the Hotel de la Station, above the Essour cafe. This is to prove a fortuitous choice, and we are given an early indication of this when the Abdenur (the hotel owner's youngest son and heir apparent) insists on personally introducing Peter to the staff of a nearby restaurant. For the first time on this trip, I am able to order couscous, which is something of a national dish.

Accommodation: £3.50

Food: £3.50

Travel: £7

Total: £14

Amount remaining: £82.35

Thursday 18th April

Tataouine gave its name to Luke Skywalker's home planet of Tatooine in the film Star Wars. Whilst Tataouine has a certain charm of its own, the real draw around here is the Berber settlements that can be found in the outlying areas. We cannot afford, and neither do we want, a formal sightseeing tour. So we ask the ever-present Abdenur if he has any suggestions.

Addenur speaks to his father, Ali, who offers to take us in his vehicle that very afternoon. Ali explains that certain heritage sites such as Cheneni are included on all the guided tours, so if we want to avoid other visitors, we would be better off heading further south, towards Ksour Ouled Soltane. Now any book to the region

will tell you that a *ksour* is the plural of *ksar*, and that a *ksar* is constructed from a series of *ghorfas*. A *ghorfa* is a fortified granary where Berber people used to store their grain. By building their *ghorfas* on four sides – to create a courtyard – and stacking them up to eight stories high, the courtyard could be used for weekly meetings of the local community, whilst the high walls produced a formidable obstacle to would-be invaders. What the guidebooks can't convey is the aesthetic attraction of the *ksours*. With rounded edges, not-quite-straight walls and arched doorways, the *ksours* that I visit remind me of the work of the renowned Spanish Architect, Antoni Gaudí. Unlike the derelict *ksours* in other villages such as Cheneni, *Ksour Ouled Soltane* is still used as a gathering place by the tourist-resistant local people.

The *ksour* at nearby Ezzahra is in nearly as good a state as the mint-condition *Ksour Ouled Soltane*, and we spend a happy half-hour in the company of several old men from the village. One man, dressed in a blue smock, white neckdress and *chechia* (red felt hat) boils tea in a tiny teapot upon a diminutive *canoun* (charcoal stove). The resulting brew is poured into two glasses - so small that they might have come from a doll's house - and passed to members of the group. After draining the contents, the recipients pass the now empty glasses back to the tea maker, who washes them in an old can filled with water. I can only manage a single glass of the hot, sickly-sweet fluid.

At the end of the afternoon, Ali drives us up to his house above Tataouine. We are ushered inside to meet his wife and two of his daughters (who all help out at the hotel part-time; it is a family business that has been going strong for 30 years) and to dine on a delicacy of these parts: sheep's jaw and tongue. Although I find the juicy meat disturbingly tasty, it takes some getting used to, with the teeth and jawbone sitting on the edge of my plate. The accompanying couscous is home-made and delicious, as is the flat bread. Replete, we thank our host profusely, before returning to his hotel.

If truth be told, Ali's hospitality is merely a generous extension of the genuinely warm welcome we have received throughout Tunisia. I realise somewhat guiltily that I have become somewhat hardened to people's advances, as my previous

experiences in other countries have led me to believe that most locals only approach tourists in order to sell or otherwise acquire something. However, in Tunisia, people go out of their way to say hello, and to offer advice if they think you are heading in the wrong direction. Most of all, they want to know if you are having a good time in their country, and to talk about Manchester United: a universal language in these parts.

Accommodation: £3.50

Food: £0.63

Travel: £12.50

Total: £16.63

Amount remaining: £65.72

Friday 19th April

Abdenur takes us to the *louage* station so that we can begin the next stage of our journey. Louages are estate cars or minibuses that travel between minor villages and major towns alike. A louage will only leave when it is full of paying passengers. During the mornings, louages depart every few minutes; from lunchtime onwards they become scarcer. Cheaper and faster than buses, louages are a popular way to get around.

Three louages and a couple of hours later, we enter the town of Matmata. The town is something of a centre for the troglodyte community; Berber people who prefer to live underground to escape the sometimes unbearable heat of the desert. The design of this type of accommodation is over four centuries old; the relatively soft sandstone allows pits around 30 feet in diameter and 20 feet deep to be excavated. The pit is used as a central courtyard, from which radiate various underground rooms in which the temperature remains comfortably cool and constant, whatever the weather. Today, many residents of Matmata live above ground, but only because the demand for housing has been such that it is now quicker to build a conventional house than to dig a pit dwelling, which takes several months to complete.

One of the most extensive former troglodyte homes has been converted into the Hotel Sidi Driss. But curiosity in the troglodyte way of life is only part of the reason why up to 800 people visit the hotel everyday. The main reason for this at times overwhelming number of sightseers is the fact that Luke Skywalker's desert home occupies one of the pits. Originally decorated for Star Wars in the mid 70s, the same pit was also filmed for the most recent movie and much of the set remains in place. Mercifully, all but a handful of the visitors have disappeared by 4pm, although during the summer all 100-plus beds in the Sidi Driss are usually occupied.

Accommodation: £6

Food: £3.88

Travel: £3.25

Other: £1.25

Total: £14.38

Amount remaining: £51.34

Saturday 20th April

On the road again; this time by louage to the desert oasis town of Nefta. It takes five changes of vehicle to travel from Matmata to Nefta and by the time we arrive, I am exhausted once again. En route, the scenery proves to be something of a distraction as we cross the vast salt flats of the Chott el Gharsa, with its attendant mirages and occasional hill made entirely from salt.

Nefta is something of a revelation; a sleepy town free of the bustle we've seen in many of the other towns we have passed through. From a vantage point high above the settlement, the oasis appears as dense barrier of green resisting the encroaching sand from the Sahara. Later, as I wander amongst the date palms, I come to appreciate the ecosystem that thrives beneath the slender leaves of the date palms. It is estimated that a single palm tree draws up to 500 litres of water up through its roots every day. The hotter the sun, the more water is required and the richer the harvest. According to local shopkeeper Kamel Souilah, a single tree in the prime of its life can produce more than a ton of dates.

Accommodation: £3.50

Food: £1.93

Travel: £4.50

Other: 0.25

Total: £10.18

Amount remaining: £41.16

Sunday 21st April

Before heading back to Tunis via Tozeur, there is one final village that I want to visit. Geographically part of Tunisia, I cannot not find it on any map. But I know it lies somewhere out in the desert, a half-hour drive on a rough track from Nefta. Local shopkeeper Kamel Souilah knows the exact location, and finds us a driver who is prepared to take Peter and myself there. For several kilometres we drive past dunes, grazing camels and the most enormous expanse of yellow that I have ever seen. Finally, a motley collection of sand-blasted, domed buildings come into view. They are completely deserted, save for a wizened caretaker driven half-mad by the desert heat. Standing between the constructions are strange-looking towers that looked as though they have come from another world. And in a way, they have. Whilst outwardly they looked as though they have been made from mud and stone, from the inside the chicken wire construction gives the game away. This is a glorified papier-mâché village, with doorways that lead nowhere and ill-fitting roofs. The village's name is Mos Espa, the town which features in the Star Wars episodes "The Phantom Menace" and "Attack Of The Clones".

Accommodation: £10

Food: £3

Travel £10.05

Total: £23.05

Amount remaining: £18.11

Monday 21st April

Today is the end of our Tunisian adventure. The bus back to Tunis arrives in sufficient time to allow me to enjoy a sweet *bonbalouini* (doughnut) in Sidi Bou Said, before I catch the evening flight to Gatwick. Not quite the same as leaving

Tatooine aboard the Millennium Falcon, but for £300 you can't have everything.
Or can you?

Food: £3.10

Travel: £15

Total: £18.10

Amount remaining: £0.01

Total cost of trip: £299.99

With thanks to Jeremy Beckett of Tataouine Tours for background information and maps of the Star Wars film set locations.

All You Need To Know

The Facts

Population: 9.5 million

Capital: Tunis

Currency: Dinar

Language: Arabic and French

Flights

In addition to holiday charter flights, a number of European airlines fly to Tunis via their hubs in cities such as Paris and Frankfurt. The most convenient (and sometimes the cheapest) flight is with British Airways from Heathrow or Gatwick.

Internal Travel

The principle railway line to Gabes via Sousse, El Jem and Sfax is less useful than one might imagine, thanks to the scarcity of services. Modern air-conditioned coaches link Tunis with all major towns. In between, louages and taxis provide transport to outlying settlements and between cities.

Money Matters

The currency is the Dinar, a 'soft' currency unavailable outside the country, and illegal to export. The exchange rate is set by the government. At the time of

writing, one Dinar was worth approximately 50p. If you find yourself with an excess of Dinars at the end of the trip, make sure that you keep your exchange papers from the banks or ATMs.

Paperwork

At the time of writing, no visas or other documentation beyond a passport were required by British citizens for entry into Tunisia. Some desert regions in the far south require a special permit to travel.

When To Go

Tunisia can be visited at any time of year, although the months of November to February attract relatively low temperatures and also rain. June, July and August can be unbearably hot: one local told me that in summer, the upper temperatures quoted on Tunisian television are several degrees below the real temperature in order not to scare the tourists: apparently, 41 degrees on a beach is acceptable to sun lovers, whereas the real temperature of 49 degrees is not. The months of March, April, September and October usually deliver warm weather and fewer tourists than the busy summer season.

Health

At the time of writing (May 2002) no particular inoculations were necessary for travellers heading to Tunisia, nor were there any particular diseases such as malaria to protect against. The biggest threat to your health comes from dehydration and sunburn. Even out of season, Tunisia can be ferociously hot. Covering up bare skin and wearing a sunhat as well as using a high factor sunblock is strongly recommended. Aim to drink several litres of water a day.

Accommodation

All standards of accommodation, from hostels to five star hotels are available in the major towns and cities. In the desert regions, some organisations offer camping bedu-style (it's not much cheaper if you bring your own tent to the site).

Activities

Tunisia is well-known for its beaches. Inland, and four wheel drive excursions into the desert to isolated oases such as Ksar Ghilane are very popular. The town of Douz is regarded as the gateway to the Sahara: single or multi-day camel treks are possible from here. The Roman remains at El Jem and Dougga are a big draw, as are the former Berber settlements in the south of the country, such as Ksar Haddada. The island of Jerba has its own distinctive architecture as well as some of the best beaches in the south of the country. Several films, including *The English Patient*, *Monty Python's Life of Brian*, *Star Wars* and *Raiders of Last Ark* were filmed in Tunisia: some companies offer dedicated tours to the places where these and other films were shot.

Desert travel

Overland travellers planning to head into the desert in their own vehicles should leave word of their route with the National Guard or the police. Vehicles should be equipped to carry a minimum of five litres of water per person. Travelling in a convoy provides mutual support in the event of a breakdown. Readers are strongly urged to read up on desert travel and survival techniques before starting a journey: the Sahara claims lives every year.

Know Before You Go

Tunisia is one of Africa's most politically-stable country. At the time of writing, the nation had experienced just one change of government in 44 years. For up-to-date advice, contact the Travel Advice Unit of the Foreign & Commonwealth Office. www.fco.gov.uk/travel. email: consular.fco@gtnet.gov.uk. tel: +44 (0)20 7008 0232/0233. BBC2 Ceefax p470 onwards.

Contact

Tourist Office of Tunisia, tel: 020 7224 5561.

The author found his flight through www.cheapflights.co.uk

Read On

Lonely Planet: Tunisia. Willett. £10.99. ISBN 1864501855

The Rough Guide To Tunisia. Morris & Jacobs. £10.99. ISBN 1858287480.

