

*Adina in hazy sunshine
off the Tunisian coast*

'Welcome to Algeria'

The Arab Spring may not have reached Algeria, but Tom Partridge and Susie Plume encountered plenty of old-fashioned hospitality



It was a hazy day when we headed out of Tabarka, Tunisia, with the Tunisian Navy wishing us well on the radio. Destination Algeria, with hard-won visa in hand. A destination not well travelled, a destination with a sad history of terrorism, a destination few have sailed to. The wind was up and the waters bumpy as *Adina*, our Hylas 46, creamed along the coast. We had our AIS on and were intent on calling Algeria Coastguard as soon as we were in their waters. They beat us to it.

Politely we answered their questions. Ten minutes later, two black RIBs appeared out of the haze speeding towards us with three men in each, carrying guns. We hadn't even had time to hoist the Algerian courtesy flag; they promptly told us to drop the Tunisian flag and get the Algerian one up. No questions asked, we did it. We explained we were tourists with a visa. No problem – off they went. Quite an introduction, this was going to be interesting.

Many hours later we arrived in Annaba. Entering the large shipping harbour, nobody answered us as we called on the radio. And no-one was around. We sat in the middle of a big harbour, a few cargo boats, no people but bizarrely a large dolphin gliding along. It was late afternoon, and it was all a bit strange. Eventually a pilot boat appeared. He boomed out 'follow me' on his loudspeaker and escorted us in.

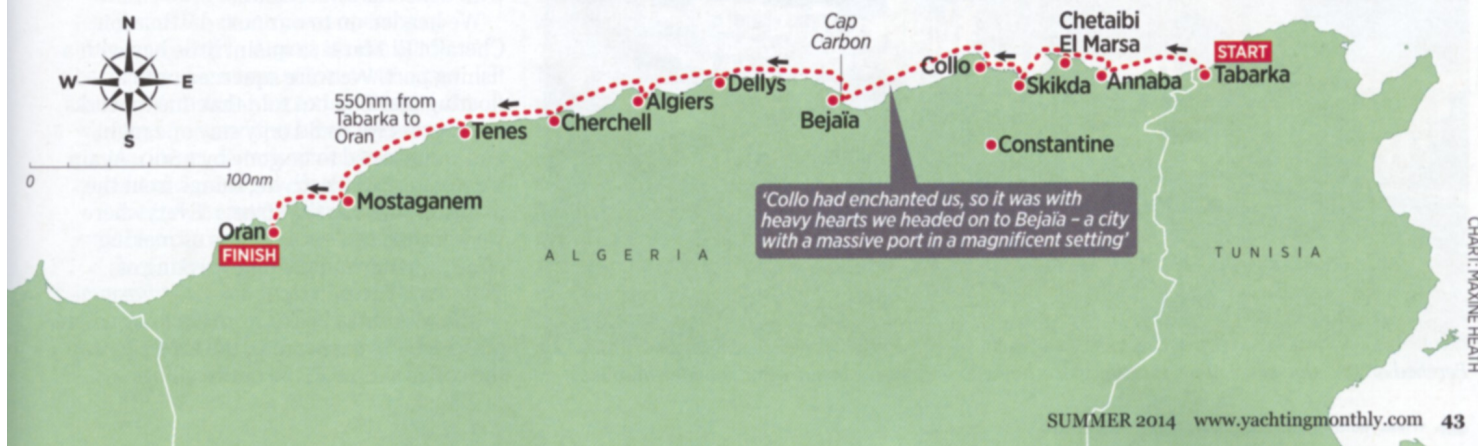
We moored outside the police station and behind a large navy ship and then started what would become a regular habit everywhere we went – the arrival of officials and their forms to be completed. You can expect visits from the Coastguard, some form of Police, Customs and the Harbourmaster. 80 per cent of the officials here are very friendly, efficient and simply curious. A standard introduction question is 'What are you doing here?' As soon as they knew we had a tourist visa, nothing seemed to be a problem, but you do need to



The Algerian coastline becomes mountainous east of Bejaïa

factor in time for all that paperwork.

We were well prepared and had written lists of our electronic equipment, and all our spirits on board, which we placed in one locker due to it being Ramadan and not wanting to cause any offence. It made us realise *Adina* is well stocked with alcohol, although only one or two officials took a peek at where they were stored which was a relief. I would hate to see all that good Lagavulin spirited away. Some would





Tom and Susie took safety advice from locals and the Coastguard about sailing the Algerian coast



The large harbour at Skikda dwarfed Adina but made a good base for a day trip to Constantine



Perched on the edge of a ravine, Constantine is home to impressive bridges and wonderful souks

ask to see around the boat, but we knew this was more out of curiosity and the need for a good old nose.

Funniest to us was how officials approached the boat. Most were polite and we invited them aboard, offering a seat in the cockpit. Others just came stomping on with dirty shoes, determined to sit below decks despite it being cooler outside.

On the first night, they asked us to stay put on board and not go into town. We got chatting to the police, telling them what we were doing. Friendly, they were concerned if we had everything we needed; we assured them we did. Twenty minutes later a policeman came over with two bowls of food. Where else in the world would that happen? We were touched.

Next day we headed out to explore on foot. Of course, by then there had been a change in watch and we had to show passports and explain all over again. The pilot book had said to expect armed guards

‘The harbourmaster drove us into town and insisted on giving us money to spend’

on trips to town but this is no longer the case. The police checked our visas and said: ‘No problem, off you go’.

A lot of Algeria still has colonial French buildings, which are admittedly run down and Algeria seems to suffer from a litter problem. We certainly attracted attention as we explored the streets but we confidently got stuck in and went to the market to get supplies. Like anywhere else, we favoured the stalls manned by women or older men, as kids the world over try to profit from you as a tourist. Stall owners were delighted to serve us and rather embarrassingly we were often served ahead of any locals waiting. In the streets every now and then a cry of ‘Welcome to Algeria’ would ring out.

Being Ramadan, coffee shops and restaurants were closed in the daytime but after final prayers everyone comes out. And the police had no problems with us going out at night, which gave us more confidence. While coffee shops are typically male territory, we easily sat together in the squares drinking coffee or mint tea, served with delicious sweet cakes.

We headed on to our next destination, Chetaibi El Marsa, a quaint little bay with a fishing port. We were squeezed onto a floating pontoon but told that due to works in progress we could only stay one night and would need to be gone by 0600. Again we went for walks, trying things from the assorted stalls on the streets. Everywhere we went we made sure it was us making effort, waving and giving a greeting of ‘Bonjour!’ Faces lit up.

Chetaibi had a charming little quay where plastic chairs came out in the evening from the coffee shop and the entire village

A beautiful walk on Cap Carbon was curtailed by a military zone



Susie buying honey in the souks of Constantine

seemed to come down to the waterfront, often bringing their own chairs to join in. How we wished we could have stayed there a bit longer.

The next destination was Skikda, another large harbour, but it gave us chance to see how large ships are manoeuvred. We shared a taxi inland to see the city of Constantine. Its famous bridges across the ravine were a fascinating sight and we got gloriously lost in the souks, buying nougat and a pot of honey for a mere 40p!

Next on the itinerary was Collo, another fishing port, perched in a beautiful bay. They separated fishing boats to squeeze us in and helped take our lines.

After the usual line of officials, we were ready to explore. This usually started around 1730 as before that it was just too hot. The harbourmaster drove us into town and insisted on giving us money to spend. Again, we were amazed by the kindness.

Abderrahmane, a local man fluent in English and well-educated, was concerned about the western views of Algeria and wanted us to know that Islamists believe in peace first and foremost. With a strikingly positive view on life, he was a part-time theatre comedian and artist who wanted to get a good job to provide for his beloved family. We met him again later for a coffee after he had attended prayers.

Back on Adina, we were getting used to the crowds she drew. Sailing boats ➔



Locals were thrilled to see foreigners visiting as tourists

'Is it safe to go there?'

Graham Hutt, author of *North Africa* pilot, published by RCC Pilotage Foundation and Imray, writes:

Since the Arab Spring and the fall of Libya – which pulled the rug from under our feet just as the country was opening up to yacht tourism – Algeria is once again becoming a new area of focus with many sailors interested in exploring. Despite dire warnings from some quarters and some past incidents, terrorism has never got anywhere close to the coast of Algeria.

It is a truly beautiful country and, as Tom and Susie discovered, very hospitable.

I have in the past found it almost impossible to even spend the minimum amount of money required to be converted from Euros to the local currency. And it is

illegal to take local currency out of the country. Local traders are so thrilled to see foreigners visiting as tourists that they often refuse payment for their services. When I last left the only marina in Algeria, Sidi Feruj, the harbourmaster insisted on a parting gift: fuelling up my yacht for whatever change I had in my pocket – less than a pound in local currency!

Obtaining a visa in advance is essential. This has to be obtained from your country of residence. It's not a quick process and it tends to be typically bureaucratic.

Algeria is a huge, well organised and wealthy country with plenty of oil. It does not need, or particularly want, tourists. However, once in possession of a visa, officials and locals show traditional Arab or Berber hospitality and honour their guests by doing anything to protect them. This includes giving them an escort ashore if necessary.

Inland tourism outside of the local provinces is still not easy except in a few areas, but the joy of experiencing the hospitality and friendship of the Algerian people makes the hassles and bureaucracy worthwhile. And, the more of us who go there, the easier it will become.

are a rarity and Abderrahmane told us many had not seen the English flag before. Some people just stood and looked while others piped up for a chat with us, wanting to know what we are doing. We even saw some young men bring their car and park it so *Adina* was in the background while they took pictures of each other.

In the evening our new-found friend walked us around again, finally depositing us on a beach where people had gathered. Chairs were bought for us, mint tea with cakes served and they wouldn't take a penny from us for it. That night we struggled to sleep because locals were still chatting at the back of the boat into the early hours of the morning.

The next day a man plucked up courage to ask us about the boat and we invited him aboard. A friend of his came along and he brought his daughter back later to see the boat. To thank us, he also brought a big plate of fabulous homemade biscuits. The

kindness just kept rolling in. The same day, the fuel man went to efforts to get us water for our tanks, so we decided it was time for Susie to make a cake and share it with some of these kind people.

Collo had enchanted us, so it was with heavy hearts we headed on. Destination Bjaia – a city with a massive port in a magnificent setting. We headed to Cap Carbon, a beautiful headland on stunning Algerian coastline. Walking up to the lighthouse we fell foul of the law, accidentally entering a military zone and having to apologise profusely and beat a hasty exit.

After this slight downer, we got online and found a response to a blog we had popped out in the sailing community asking for any advice from anyone who had sailed in Algeria. The email was from someone who had not been but told us it was unsafe, people were robbed and the Foreign Office advised against travel unless essential.

We had done our own research, understood the Foreign Office advice and where it specifically related to and had started the trip along Algeria in the knowledge of what we had found. However, we also knew we were now sailing along coast that was mountainous and possibly still home to terrorists. The email put us on edge but we kept taking advice from locals

LEFT: Abderrahmane, an all-round nice guy, was keen to educate us about Algeria



We were given lifts to the Algiers Monument to the Martyrs, also known as the Banana Skin

and the Coastguard called us up on the radio every day, often several times. Twice they advised us to stay three miles offshore. We followed their advice.

We headed into Dellys, in theory a potential trouble-spot, but the French we rafted up to in Bejaia said they had been there with no problems. The Coastguard escorted us in and there were more military than normal, but they were all friendly and told us they would look after us. I'm not sure putting a spotlight on *Adina* all night and lighting us up like a Christmas tree really was the best idea.

Onward we sailed to Algiers, the capital, halfway across this vast country. We moored in Algeria's only marina, which was full of motorboats and rafted up to a local sailing boat, whose kindly owner gave us his electricity and offered us his water supply.



Fishing boats in Dellys where the Coastguard escorted Adina to a berth



Fishing ports like Cherchell, where people were friendly and relaxed, were particular highlights



'The people of Algeria made it all worthwhile. They will live long in our memories'

Our planned day trip to Algiers happened to be on Eid Al Fitr, the celebration of the end of Ramadan.

Algiers is known as the white city and has vast potential as a tourist must-see. Alongside mosques and monuments, the French have left behind a lot of wonderful architecture as well as *boulangeries* and *patisseries* so there is plenty to see. All that is needed is some repair work mainly and a lick of paint to bring it all out.

We sat waiting for a bus to visit the imposing Monument to the Martyrs who died fighting for independence from the French. Before the bus arrived a man pulled up and offered us a lift there, and someone else gave us a lift on the return.

The forecast the next day was for wind but we were determined to make it to Cherchell. Our departure was delayed two hours by paperwork that hadn't been done by officials on our arrival. As a result, we had to fight wind and building waves in the shallow channel which is notorious for silting. We felt *Adina's* keel bump against a fortunately sandy bottom.

Our crossing to Cherchell was fast and we were soon in port. We hated mooring in windy conditions, as we knew the waiting officials, who happily want to take our lines, have no idea that sailing boats are not like fishing boats with big engines to ram themselves alongside. Susie became adept at telling them in French to get lines

on fast and pull us in.

We were keen to get to the city of Oran, which we had heard so much about, but it was three days' sailing away. We overnighted in Tenes and then headed to Mostaganem. Paperwork here was more painful than anywhere and we were shocked when an immigration official calmly asked for 'a present'. Whilst other parts of the African coast are renowned for this, we had not encountered it anywhere in Algeria. He went away empty-handed.

In the past, people have not been allowed out of the port but we were given a plain-clothed detective and a big muscular captain to accompany us for some sightseeing and food shopping. If anybody so much as dawdled near us, they were given a stern look.

Oran was our last stop. By now we were becoming jaded with all the paperwork and formalities so patience was essential. We hired a taxi to take us up to the Santa Cruz Fort overlooking the town. The driver was passionate about Oran and our tour was soon extended, showing us photographs of



Santa Cruz Fort gives stunning views over Oran, Tom and Susie's favourite city

days gone by and even, to our amazement, an old Spanish bullring. It was the perfect end to our three-week trip along the Algerian coast.

Algeria is certainly a place for the adventurous. It has some stunning sights and we would have liked to see more of the interior. Tourism is yet to be encouraged, and the official paperwork was a killjoy, but the people we met made it all worthwhile. They will live long in our memories. ▲

Tom Partridge and Susie Plume

Tom, 46, a change management consultant, began sailing in 2006, and is a Yachtmaster with over 20,000 sea miles under his keel. Susie is a 33-year-old brand director, a Day Skipper with over 15,000 sea miles.

They met through racing in the Solent, bought *Adina* together in May 2012 and spent a year preparing her for long-distance cruising. They left the UK in April 2013, spending the summer in the Med before crossing the Atlantic in November. They are now in the Pacific, where they plan to spend the next two sailing seasons.

