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Beneath the Surface in Matmata

By Elizabeth Perego

When you are standing in a ten-foot-deep hole in a mountainside, you would not expect to be served a cup of tea rivaling any from a fancy coffee shop. Nor would you imagine finding yourself face to face with a television broadcasting hundreds of channels in every major world language. And you would almost certainly never believe that the cave that you were visiting was not the ultimate destination of some spelunking trip but, rather, the home of a family of five. Yet, this scene is exactly what awaited me when I visited the Amizagh cave dwellings in the foothills surrounding the Tunisian village of Matmata.

I came to Matmata as part of a 13-day trip around southern Tunisia with my two roommates who, like me, teach English at Amideast, an American nonprofit with offices in Tunis. We had initially decided to undertake this trip to explore parts of the country that have customs much different than those of the fast-paced, cosmopolitan capital where we work. While researching our trip, Matmata and the surrounding area particularly attracted us for two reasons. First, unlike the majority of Tunisians, who identify as Arab, the residents of this region are Amizagh. The Imazighen, more commonly known as the Berbers, were the original inhabitants of North Africa prior to the 7th century Arab invasion.



All photos by Elizabeth Perego

Today, their descendants mainly inhabit the mountainous regions of Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia. Second, hundreds of the Matmata Imazighen quite literally live in caves. Like other Imazighen in Morocco, Algeria, and other Tunisian regions, they face many threats to their traditional way of life, most of which stem from the pro-Arab policies of the government. However, for the Imazighen here, these challenges manifest themselves most clearly in the history of the pit dwellings. The inhabitants of the region around Matmata have been living in underground homes since the early 17th century, when the stealthily low-lying structures helped locals hide from invading enemies. Approximately 80

Beneath the Surface in Matmata

people continue to live in the pit homes today, despite increasing pressure for them to vacate.

Late in the morning, my roommates and I set out on a hike along the road leading from Matmata in the direction of Haddej, the former administrative center of the region and site of the best-preserved pit dwellings. We already had seen several cave homes in Matmata. These “troglodytes” generally consist of a series of low-ceilinged rooms (about five feet high) that have been carved out of the side of a hill or straight into the ground. These then give in to a large central courtyard about 15-20 feet deep. Some of the rooms are on the same level as the courtyard, while others hang suspended about six or seven feet above the courtyard.



Although the cave dwellings we visited in Matmata are certainly authentic, the situation in which they are most often seen is not. In the mid-1970s, director George Lucas used Matmata to film some of the scenes from the first, now-epic, *Star Wars* film. Hordes of tourists have been flooded the town ever since, hopping out of their jeeps to snap a couple of photos of the film set and to peek into a cave dwelling or two. While tourism has benefited the town economically, it also has had many negative effects for the town’s residents. Visitors haphazardly exploring the area frequently stumble upon the troglodyte dwellings, violating inhabitants’ privacy. It is also not difficult to imagine why, with people treating their houses like exhibits in a natural history museum rather than as their homes, local residents are so wary of tourists.



The ambiguous attitude of Matmatans towards foreign visitors does not mean that all inhabitants of the cave dwellings do not welcome outside influences into their lives. Upon reaching the valley that lies below Matmata, we see the side of a troglodyte upon which a large satellite dish is perched. Many of the pit dwellings that are still inhabited have electricity, allowing residents to enjoy 21st century amenities while living over ten feet underground. This makes for an incredible sight at night, when you can see the glow of lights emanating from the pits all along the mountainsides.

Finally, after about an hour of walking, we reach Haddej. The village resembles many others that we had seen over the last week while travelling along the northern edge of the Sahara. It is relatively small, with clusters of white buildings, including a mosque with a small minaret. We quickly realize as we approach, however, that more than a dozen pit dwellings surround us, many of which are abandoned and full of trash.

As recently as 40 years ago, the entire town of Matmata lay underground.

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Beneath the Surface in Matmata

We pause near one such pit when a young boy dressed in a dark blue sweatshirt and torn jeans came up to us. From looking at his patchy facial hair, one could guess that he is about 15 or 16-years-old, but his meager height seems to suggest otherwise. He introduces himself in broken French. His name is Tayib and he wants to know if we would like to see the village olive press. We accept his offer, even though we know we'll eventually have to give him some money in return for his services as a guide.



Our newfound guide leads us up a long dirt road. Empty cave homes lie on each side of it. During our walk, Tayib tells us a little more about himself. He is indeed 15-years-old and makes the 15 kilometer trek everyday to school in New Matmata. There, he informs us, he studies in French and Arabic, but not Amizagh, his native language. Since the independence of Tunisia from the French in 1956, the government has sought — in the best cases — to integrate the Imazighen through policies of “Arabization.” For this reason, the Amizagh language is neither taught in schools nor recognized as an official language of the country and is, like the pit dwellings, rapidly disappearing.

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When we get close to the top of the hill, Tayib turns off the path and takes us down to the central courtyard of a large troglodyte. We enter one of the rooms near the entrance of the cave and see an enormous stone slab above which a large log hangs. This is the olive press. The villagers used to rely on this communal press to produce olive oil. Nowadays locals opt for modern, more time efficient presses. Given the importance of olive oil to the local diet and economy, this machine was a quintessential asset to the area. Normally, one would expect that the government would undertake efforts to preserve the olive press. This has not been the case, however, despite numerous official initiatives in other towns that tourists visit more frequently.

After we are done examining the olive press and the cave, we begin our descent back to the bottom of the village. We bid Tayib farewell and start to head back in the direction of Matmata. As we turn off the road from Haddej, the call to prayer sounds from a nearby mosque, echoing across the mountains as a Nissan pickup truck blasting the newest hit from Akon whizzes past. This mix of sounds reminds us that the mind-blowing mix of the traditional with the modern is the norm here. However, having seen Matmata and its environs, it is not hard for us to imagine that the troglodytes around Matmata may one day be buried in the past.



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