

Algeria 2011/12

The following recounts two short business trips to Algeria.

Algiers 2011

On the drive from the airport to the hotel, I was aware of brilliant sunlight and rows of multi-storied buildings with colourful, patterned cloths hanging on the balconies. I thought they were rugs, but the car went very fast, and the images are smeared in my mind. There were no trees or vegetation on the way to the hotel.

On the hill behind the hotel was the Martyrs Memorial - an iconic concrete monument commemorating the Algerian war for independence. The monument was opened in 1982 on the 20th anniversary of Algeria's independence. It is fashioned in the shape of three standing palm leaves which shelter the "Eternal Flame" beneath. At the edge of each palm leaf stands a statue of a soldier, each representing a stage of Algeria's struggle.

The hotel was particularly opulent compared to the buildings we had just passed. On arriving, the car was searched at the hotel gate; both the trunk and bonnet were opened for inspection. We had to put all our bags and luggage through an X-ray conveyer at the hotel and walk through a scanner.

Although I thought the interiors of the hotel were very tasteful, I must say they decided to be edgy with the elevators. They featured lurid lights that changed colour with every floor and instead of *muzak*, they played dance music. I felt as though I was in my own private disco.

That evening I wanted to give Keeb a call and could not get through on my room phone, so I went down to the front desk and had the staff try to put through my call. When they realised they could not get through as well they offered me a laptop to e-mail him, but the keyboard was different to what I was used to as each key had three characters on it. When I failed to get into gmail, I was presented with a recovery page, but it was in French. I was tired, hungry and still had not got a hold of Keeb, so I went back to the front desk and the person behind the desk realized how distressed I was and just pulled out his personal mobile, asked me for the number, dialed and shoved it in my hand and said, "Talk to your husband". His phone broke in half when he handed it to me the first time and he calmly put it back together and made the call again. I was so grateful to him. I kept my call very short as I knew he would not want me to pay him back. I later wrote a very complimentary note to his manager and the manager emailed me to say they read my email out in their staff meeting.

That night at dinner our team leader regaled us with Algerian stories. She explained it is the Algerian custom to slaughter a goat before spudding a well. And to cover contingencies, the Algerians fly out a second goat. I shudder to think what could possibly happen to the primary goat to necessitate a back-up goat! She then described the 40 ft dunes out in the desert where they drill the wells, and I was heartily grateful I was only attending office-based meetings on this trip.

Algiers 2011 continued

The next day, on our way to our meeting we passed a wall with mosaics and there was also pretty, flower filled roundabout near it with flags flying the red crescent and star. The buildings in that part of town reminded one of my teammates of Lisbon.

The office we arrived at was called "Dallas" by the Algerians because it is a tall, glass-fronted building. Again, there was the X-ray conveyer belt and scanners on entering the building. They also took possession of our passports at the front desk. Having seen the movie "Unknown", I was uneasy, but nobody else seemed concerned.

Coming from a diverse tropical island, it is always interesting to experience other places. The people we interacted with at the office and those on the streets were all Arab-Berber, I did not see any other ethnicity in these places. The men all wore western business attire, and the women wore the full spectrum from very traditional to western wear.

That day was our 20th anniversary, I called Keeb and had a nice long chat. Because of the time difference, he was heading out to do a job while I was going to a late dinner with the team.

We had hamburgers that were very dry and bland. The next night I looked closely at the specials and picked out "mini hamburger à cheval, jus brun, frites maison" so to my horror I realized why the burgers were so dry, they were made from horse.

The next day I got to eat a traditional lunch in the office – it was called couscous but in addition to a bowl of couscous, we were served shanks of lamb on the side and a cinnamon flavoured sauce that was full of root veggies and was ladled over the couscous. That was the main course, it was preceded by salad and a serving of beef and mushrooms that was probably French. After the couscous and lamb they brought us knives and bowls of fruit for dessert - the peaches were delicious. I have never eaten that much for lunch in my life.

Our table was the only one in the cafeteria with a mixed group of people eating, all the others had either all male or all female occupants and were further subdivided into tables with women wearing traditional clothes and the western clothes wearers were at their own table.

I will say this, there was equality in the meetings when technical matters were discussed, and the women were just as prepared and professional as their male counterparts.

The Algiers airport holds the record for the most X-rays I have ever been through for one flight. Our bags were X-rayed at four different locations and then before getting on the plane, all hand luggage was manually searched.

So that was my short business trip to Algiers.

Algiers/Istanbul 2012

This was my second business trip to Algeria and since I had contracted a water borne stomach bug the last time, I was determined that this should not happen again. Thanks to my ingenious plan of taking masking tape on this trip I was successful. Here is what I did – I taped a big cross over the handles of the taps in the bathroom. That way I was very mindful of removing them to turn on the taps and did not accidentally wash my toothbrush in tap water like I did last time. Since I had got into the spirit of brushing my teeth entirely with bottled water, I soon used up the still water and moved on to sparkling water which proved to be quite exhilarating. While I am on the subject, my Scottish teammate announced at dinner that she forgot her toothpaste at home which she concluded was “A bit rubbish”. And since I was on her floor and there was no place in the hotel to get any toothpaste, she would turn up at my room door, toothbrush in hand to get a squirt of my toothpaste. You cannot get more team building spirit than that.

Another teammate, Gemma, came out in red, angry hives and was dispatched to the doctor who recommended she return to the UK immediately. Unfortunately, the air traffic controllers in France were on strike on Monday and she had to wait 7 hours to get out of the Algiers airport. We had spent that day in an all-day meeting and felt sorry for her stuck at the airport but at the time did not think we were also going to be affected the next day when we were scheduled to leave.

That night we were taken to the Martyrs Memorial - an iconic concrete monument commemorating the Algerian war for independence. Seeing it was a bit of an adventure as the security guards were trilling their whistles at us if we got too near. It is feared it could be a target as it is a secular monument.

After seeing the monument, we went to the Tandra restaurant at the top of the hill on which the monument sits. The restaurant's decor was quaint and there were rose petals strewn on the tables. The food was French and very good.

The next day was our day of departure and the air traffic controllers' strike in France was not resolved. This resulted in our flight to the UK being cancelled so late in the day that there were no options to get us back on a UK direct flight and most flights would have required an overnight layover. The rest of the team was fine as there were options to return via France, Spain or Italy. I was the problem because without a Schengen visa I would not have been able to leave the in-transit lounges to spend the night in a hotel. When my team leader asked where I could overnight, I told her I knew Turkey did not require me to have a visa. I checked online to confirm it and the really surprising part is that citizens of most countries including the UK have to pay for a visitor visa in their airport but not citizens of Trinidad and Tobago. In addition, we can stay in the country for 90 days. I have no idea why our countries are on such friendly terms. So, I was routed through Istanbul together with one other teammate. He was along so I would not have to travel alone, and I apologised to him, but he just said it was an adventure.

Algiers/Istanbul 2012 continued

Getting out of Algeria was interesting – we went through several scanners and at the last one the security guard said, “The scotch, you cannot have the scotch”. I knew I had no alcohol, so I just opened the case and he rummaged around and pulled out my precious masking tape, he waved it in my face and waggled his fingers to say no. He then pitched it forcefully into their bin. When I told Keeb about it later he immediately pointed out that the tape could be used to bind someone’s wrists. When I recovered from how easily he was able to think of that ominous scenario, I told Keeb I had been so pleased about avoiding the imbibition of tap water. So, he recommended taking a lot of Band Aids next time and daisy chain them to make the length I need for the taps. Genius, really.

Turkey must have the youngest population on the planet. The whole plane was literally full of young Turks. They all stared at Martin and me because we were the only non-Turks on the plane. Our flight attendants (mostly young men) all looked like they were 18 years old. I wondered where they were hiding all the women. I sat in my seat and when I put my arm on the arm rest my elbow encountered something squishy. I looked behind and I was mortified to find that my elbow was pressing *against the big toe of the elderly woman sitting behind me*. And although she was a rarity (a Turk who was female and mature), I was not tolerating that so I put my cushion on her foot and pushed hard so she would withdraw her foot from my armrest. The food on board was excellent and I was really impressed with the efficiency of the airport in Istanbul including getting our airport shuttle. The tiny bit of Istanbul I saw at night on the one-mile journey to our hotel was impressive and I really hoped to return on holiday one day.

We had a few hours of sleep and then were up really early to get our Turkish Airlines flight back. I have never seen a business lounge that equals theirs. It was divided into pods, one with a pool table in a library setting, one was a home theatre showing nature films, one contained a wall with nine TV screens and headphones so people could discretely watch what they want (no CNN blaring at us like in other airports) and there were chefs to serve the hot breakfasts. When we boarded our flight, we were amused by the safety briefing – they included members of the Manchester United team clowning around demonstrating what you should not be doing on the flight. I think it was a great idea because everyone watched the safety briefing. I had a tense moment when I thought I would have to watch “The Descendants” dubbed in Turkish. Everyone, included the women, had deep, slightly guttural voices but happily I found the English channel. Another disaster averted.

I got back to the UK without incident where I had an overwhelming urge to buy a lot of Band Aids.