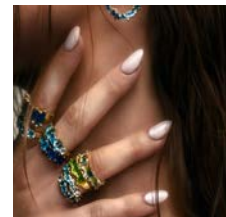


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Mysteries of Carthage and The Moors SWAN HELLENIC

| BY TRACY ELLEN BEARD

The SH Diana is the largest ship in the Swan Hellenic fleet. I recently cruised with this elegant and spacious vessel from Lisbon, Portugal, to Palermo, Sicily. The boat docked in Sevilla, Spain, and sailed along the Northern African Coasts, where I discovered the French influences in Algeria, explored Tunisia, and finished with delicious plates of pasta in Sicily.

THE BIRTH OF THE SH DIANA

One of my favorite joys in traveling is meeting new people. I spent several days with Carl-Gustaf Rotkirch and his family during my cruise. Carl was the CEO at DNY Finland Oy, Helsinki Shipyard Ltd. when the shipyard was restarted in May 2019. For about two years, Carl was responsible for building the operation back to its “former glory.”

In the fall of 2021, he shifted from the CEO to the Board director in connection with the delivery of the first ship, SH Minerva. Carl told me, “The SH Diana was delivered in April 2023 as the ‘big sister’ to two previous ships, the SH Minerva and the SH Vega. The older vessels arrived in 2012 and 2022.”

SWAN HELLENIC SHIPS ARE SPECIAL

Carl said, “The three luxury expedition ships, constructed and engineered for navigating the ice-covered waters of Antarctica and the Arctic, were also designed to meet and exceed the wants and needs of discerning world-traveling passengers. One of the pronounced distinctive features of the SH Diana is the ice-going capability that allows the ship to run without refueling and discharging gray and black water for up to 40 days. It has the most developed wastewater treatment and minimalized garbage discharge systems. The ships are equipped to operate on battery power in sensitive environments.”

During dinner one evening, Carl said, “The interiors, decorated to the highest standards, are Scandinavian in style, focusing on clean, simple lines, minimalism, and functionality without sacrificing beauty. The intention of

this décor is to encourage passengers to enjoy the scenery outside rather than the complex decoration inside. Tillberg Design of Sweden was the interior architect.”

The SH Diana is the fleet’s largest ship, offering spacious 5-star accommodations for 192 guests in 96 staterooms and suites, most with large balconies. A team of 140 staff members provides excellent service, and the SH Diana is taking passengers back to its Swan Hellenic roots by exploring the Mediterranean.

The Swan Dining Room features gourmet cuisines prepared by Michelin star-winning chefs. The Spa offers sensational massages, modern fitness equipment, a panoramic sauna, and a heated Jacuzzi. All cabins boast a flame effect fireplace, coffee and tea, a mini-bar, a couch, a flat-screen TV, a pillow menu, and bathrooms with glass-enclosed rain showers.

PORTS OF CALL Portimão, Portugal

After a quick overnight in Lisbon, Portugal, we set out for Portimão, Portugal. In the morning, I boarded a bus, then walked through the old part of town in Lagos, visited the fish market, and meandered the cobblestone streets. We then headed to Sagres, the most westerly village in the Algarve. Cape St. Vincent is a stoic place where the waves crash against the cliffs with incredible force. This area used to be called “the end of the known world.”

I joined the RHIB (rigid-hulled inflatable boat) boat tour to explore the Algarvian Coastline in the afternoon. We explored hidden beaches and mysterious caves as we traversed along the choppy sea. We watched children jump off the cliffs into the water, and we entered the Benagil Cave, considered one of the ten natural wonders of the world.

Seville, Spain

On the first day in Seville, I joined a private tour of the Real Alcazar of Sevilla in the evening. The property is one of Spain’s most

beautiful examples of Moorish architecture.

The following day, the temperatures were reported to reach 105 degrees by the afternoon, so I wandered over to the Mercado de Triana early in the morning. Unfortunately, it was closed, so I meandered through a beautiful tree-lined neighborhood nearby. Then, I headed over to the Santa Cruz neighborhood that I visited the day before on a tour. This area was much livelier. After making numerous lefts and rights throughout the colorful alleyways, I rested on a bench in Maria Luisa Park. By 11:00 a.m., the temperature was heating up, so I returned to the ship after my 4.5-mile trek. I spent the remainder of the day lounging by the pool, dining on a juicy cheeseburger at the pool grill, and then enjoying a relaxing massage at the Spa.

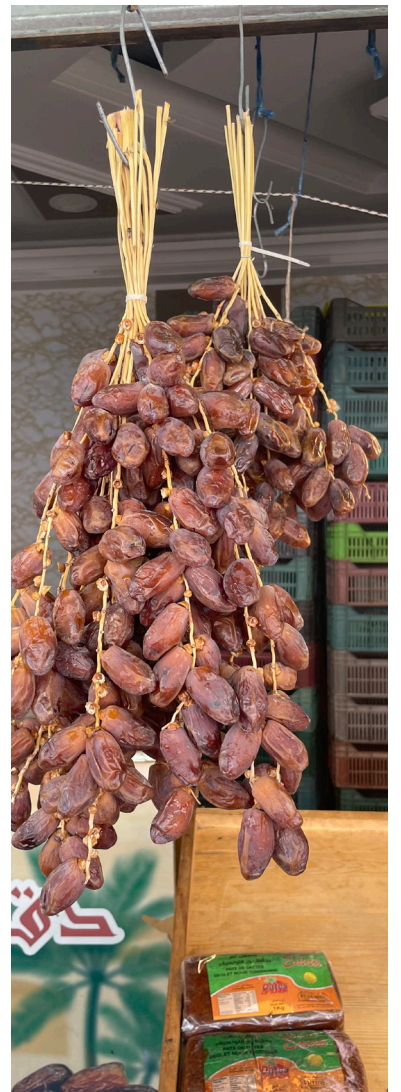
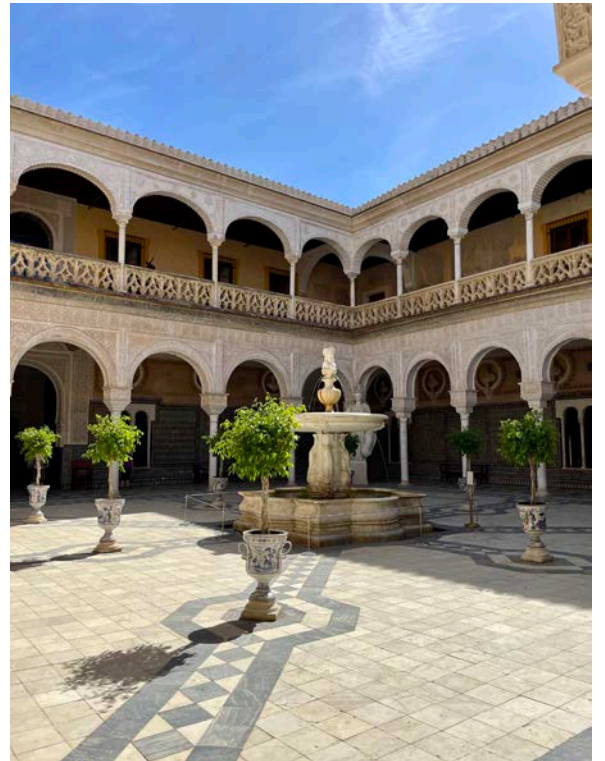
I attended the special Chef’s Dinner by Chef Clement Borja Marrero Vasquez that evening. Chef was born and raised in Gran Canaria. He has a Green Michelin star and a deep connection with the local island cuisine and the unique ingredients from his home. The Chef’s experience includes working in Mexico, Spain, and the United States. The food at his restaurant, MuXgo, highlights his creativity and commitment to his Km0 project in Las Palmas, which embodies a wholly sustainable and “closed circle” approach to promoting the sale and use of local food in Gran Canaria. The dinner menu was exceptional, especially the cod with papaya, and the wines paired with dinner were excellent.

Tangier, Morocco

The morning we arrived, I stood on the observation deck as we approached Tangier; it looked like a beautiful white city stretching outward from the bay. It was more modern in appearance than I expected. I signed up for the Natural Beauties and History of Tangier Tour and was excited to experience Morocco for the first time.

Tangier fulfilled my expectations. The city was exotic, mysterious, and lively. We visited the Hercules cave, which boasts two openings, one to sea and one to land. It is said





CRUISES

that the Phoenicians created the sea opening. It is in the shape of Africa when looked at from the sea. The cave is part man-made and part natural. After visiting the cave, we took the bus to the entrance to the casbah, where we walked through Tangier's oldest area, the medina or 'Old Town.'

Eventually, we arrived in the busiest part of the medina, the Grand Sooco or souk (an Arab marketplace or bazaar. Exotic smells, exciting shops, and lively salespeople filled the area. I loved walking around and inhaling the scent of fresh spices stored in large open bins throughout the shops. The souk is the center of things, and it is the link between the medina and the new city. The casbah area spread across the highest point of the medina and was a wonderful place to take photos. Originally, the casbah was the traditional residence of the sultan and his harem; now, it is one of Tangier's most fashionable residential areas. It is a quieter quarter than the other areas of the city.

Oran, Algeria

I found Oran to be a rather sad city marked by a highly turbulent past. There was plenty of architectural beauty with devastating demolition mixed in between. The people were friendly, and the sites were interesting. The city was like an open-air museum with Western military architecture interspersed with buildings influenced by the Arabs and Ottomans and modern buildings from the French colonial period.

Algiers, Algeria

Algiers was one of my preferred stops. We began with a panoramic tour of the city. We stopped at the Martyrs Memorial, a landmark dedicated to the heroes of Algeria's War for Independence that looks like three colossal palm leaves that shelter an eternal flame at the base. Then, we drove through the City Center to see La Grande Poste, built by the French in 1920. From there, we continued along the Parisian-style boulevards of the city's seafront.

The second part of the tour took place in the oldest part of town. We stopped near the King's Palace at the top of the casbah and walked down through a maze of narrow alleyways. This part of the trip was one of my favorites. I could imagine myself in an old James Bond movie with thieves and killers running through the marketplaces and hiding in the homes and alleys. We stopped at one of these ancient Moorish homes and enjoyed traditional mint tea, local biscuits, and treats.

Bejaia, Algeria

The bus drive through the mountainous,

coastal region of Kabylie was stunning. Hikers enjoyed dramatic views from the impressive Pic des Singes (Monkey Peak) and the antics of the local monkeys. We continued to Cap Carbon, where we walked through a 65-foot tunnel to view a lighthouse perched on a rocky outcrop above the sea. I thought Bejaia was the prettiest part of Algeria.

Annaba, Algeria

Exhausted from touring, I skipped the last tour of Algeria and spent the day lounging by the pool and enjoying another massage in the Spa.

La Goulette, Tunisia

Rejuvenated from my day off, I was thrilled to attend my private tour in Tunisia. We pulled into port and were greeted by a band, camels, and costumed ancient gladiators. I exited the ship and immediately took my first camel ride, an activity on my bucket list.

After going through customs, I met my driver, Mohammad, and my personal tour guide, Ali. The first stop was the medina; I wanted to immerse myself in the market. Ali walked me through this massive marketplace, which met all my expectations for an exotic Arabic market. Fresh dates hung on strings in the stalls, decorative lamps filled the shelves, and I knew if I rubbed one of these lamps, a genie would magically appear. Traditional clothing of all sizes hung on the walls and blew in the breeze.

The fish market, filled with shrimp, numerous types of fish, and octopus, smelled clean and of the ocean. As we wandered on, spices were piled high in buckets, cheeses were stacked inside glass enclosures, and chili peppers and vegetables overflowed on the tables. Ali bought me items to taste: a fresh date, several types of cookies, and an unfamiliar piece of fruit filled with seeds. We stopped at the oldest tea house in the city. Ali and I sat on cushions, sipped hot mint tea that he poured in a tall stream into our cups, and snacked on various cookies. This stop for tea checked off another activity on my bucket list.

After the medina, we headed for Sidi Bou Said, a stunning village with cobbled streets, old stone steps, and white-washed walls with ornate, curved window grills painted deep blue. Colorful arched doorways opened into small courtyards filled with geraniums and bougainvillea. The local shops sold handicrafts fashioned from olive wood, silver tea sets, and stuffed animals. I purchased a stuffed camel for my soon-to-arrive first grandchild. This toy will adorn his room, along with a photo of his adventurous granny riding on a camel.

On our return to the ship, we stopped to look at the extensive remains of the ancient Roman aqueducts.

Palermo, Sicily

The cruise ended in Palermo, but I chose to book a three-day stay at a boutique hotel to explore the city and savor Sicilian Italian cuisine. The food on the ship was delicious, but the pasta served in Sicily must be made in heaven.

The SH Diana is an opulent ship with a professional, warm, and friendly staff. Travelers on board were from all ends of the earth, and I had a fabulous time meeting new friends from Aruba, Budapest, Sweden, Zambia, and the United States. Swan Hellenic ships offer discerning travelers a well-appointed and beautiful place to dine and sleep while they discover exotic places around the world. ❖

