

THREE days before arriving in the Tunisian Sahara for a group experience called Healing in the Desert, I found out about the camel desert spider. According to the legend on the internet, these creatures grow to the size of a dinner plate, run at speeds of 25 miles per hour while making a screaming noise, and attack camels by jumping up to their stomachs from the ground, injecting an anaesthetic poison and slowly eating them alive.

I checked out the rumour on an urban legends website, which reassured me the spiders grow to the size of only a small saucer, can run at just 10 miles per hour and do so silently.

Apparently, they rely on stealth and the non-venomous bite of their powerful jaws to feed on small prey.

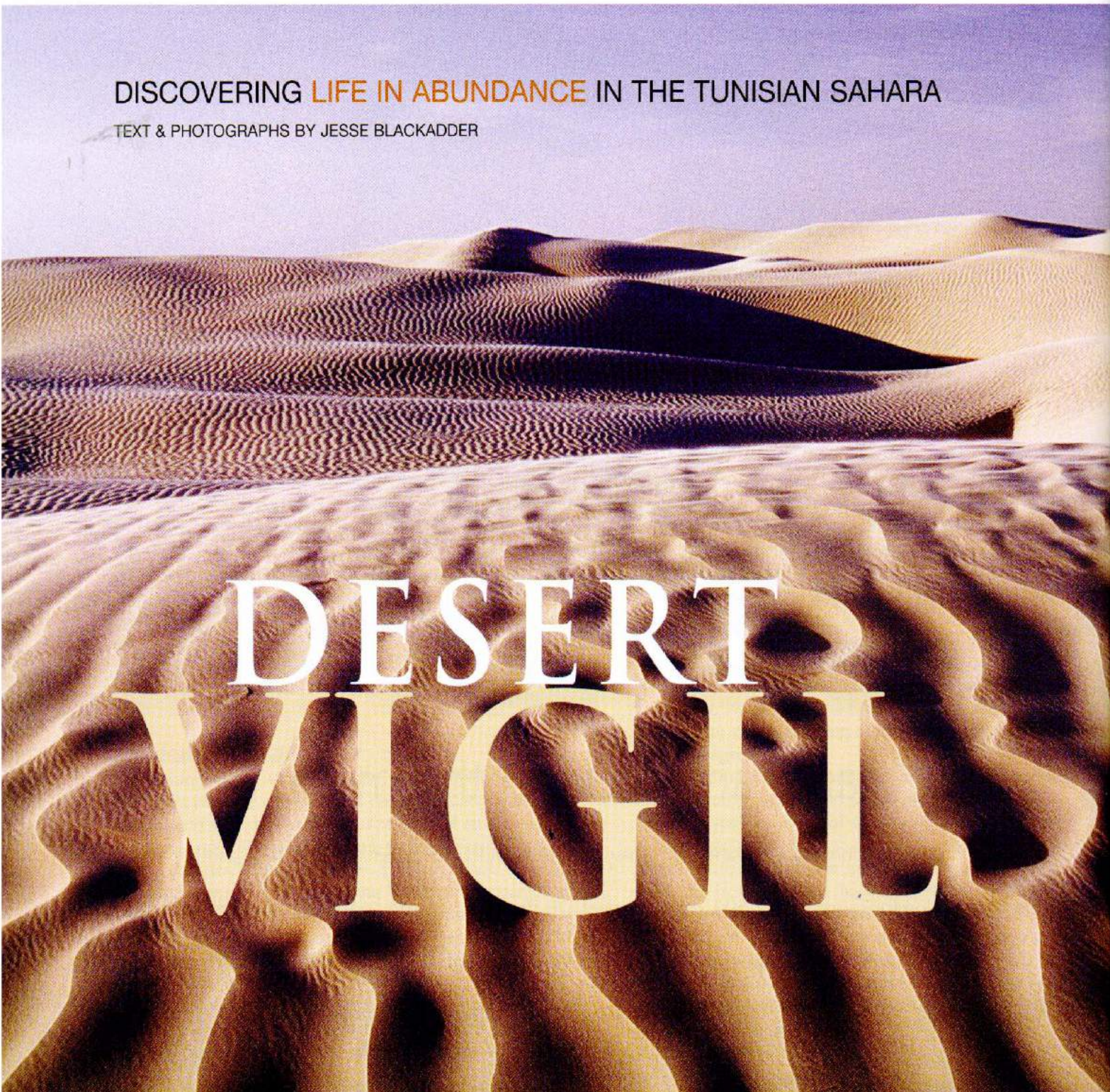
Unfortunately, it was too late to cancel setting off into the desert of central Tunisia with 22 English fellow seekers-of-wisdom, armed with only a swag, a duty-free bottle of Limoncello from Rome and some Aussie Bushman insect repellent.

Lesson number one: when going on a spiritual odyssey in the desert, do more homework than reading Paulo Coelho's *The Alchemist*. Perhaps if I'd recalled the opening scenes of the first *Star Wars* movie where R2-D2 and C-3PO trudge up

DISCOVERING **LIFE IN ABUNDANCE** IN THE TUNISIAN SAHARA

TEXT & PHOTOGRAPHS BY JESSE BLACKADDER

DESERT VIGIL



an endless series of sand dunes on Luke Skywalker's home planet (filmed in – yes, you guessed it – Tunisia), I would have remembered how much I hate sand, heat and flies. I was about to encounter all three – in abundance.

My next shock was realising I hadn't read the fine print about the nature of our journey. I'd imagined swaying through the desert on camelback, absorbing the space and silence from a position eight feet above ground level. However, as we made the short four-wheel-drive trip through the desert to meet the Bedouin guides, it dawned on me there'd be a lot more walking than riding. Our 19 camels had plenty to carry already, with our bags and an eight-day supply of food, and camel riding

have a cosmopolitan flavour, while smaller settlements are still relatively traditional.

There are endless possibilities for travelling in Tunisia, including stretching out on the beach at luxury Mediterranean resorts, exploring the remains of Carthage, one of the most important cities of the ancient world, or taking a camel trek from the desert oasis township of Douz, where we began our journey.

The word "bedouin" comes from the Arab word "bedu", which traditionally meant groups of people living a nomadic lifestyle, migrating with their herds to follow food and water supplies in desert areas. Modern Bedouins are more settled and urban than their nomadic ancestors, for a variety of economic, environmental and political reasons. Our guides in the desert, led by the charismatic Khalifa Omran Karous, are partly nomadic Bedouins who live in nearby villages in summer and return to nomadic patterns during the colder months. Leading tourist groups such as ours is an important economic activity supplementing traditional livelihoods.

According to our English group organiser, Alan Heeks, his experience of spirituality in the desert was transformed when in 2000 he met a group of Bedouins who were guiding Sufi retreat groups. Since 2001 he has taken a group into the desert each year, guided by the same Bedouins. Alan and his other English organisers run the group while the Bedouins manage the vital practicalities of desert survival and share music and dance.

"The Bedouins are profound teachers in their approach to life," says Alan. "Although their life is materially tough, they are happy, dignified people. As they sit in a circle in the chilly light before sunrise, they are chatting, lighting the fire, making the bread, tending the camels and singing. Their songs move seamlessly from praise of Allah through

to romantic ballads to children's play songs. The Bedouins' days really are a flowing dance uniting work, spirit, fellowship and recreation."

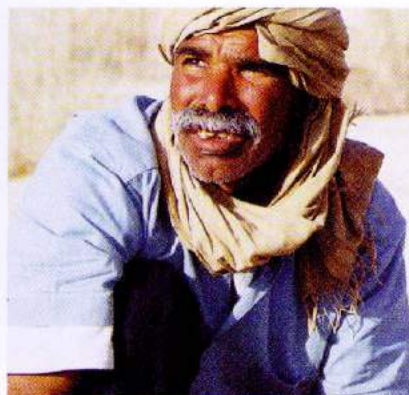
Although none of the Bedouins speaks English, some are fluent in French and an amazing amount can be communicated through song, gesture and laughter. The Bedouins leave us to our own devices during the day, simply calling "Attab!" to summon us for mealtimes, but at night after dinner they join us on blankets around the fire and generously share traditional singing and drumming.

Written in the sand

The first thing you notice about the Sahara is the heat. Although October is normally a mild time of year, we are treated to a spell of above-average temperatures reaching well into the thirties during the daytime. For the first few days, travel is restricted to mornings and afternoons, with a long siesta in the middle of the day in handkerchief-sized patches of shade.

The second thing you notice is the extraordinary silkiness of the sand. Because of some mystery of mineral composition, Sahara Desert sand stays relatively cool in the hot sun and it feels like walking in talcum powder. Most of us kick off our sandals and stride barefoot through the dunes.

On reaching our first evening's campsite, our leader swings



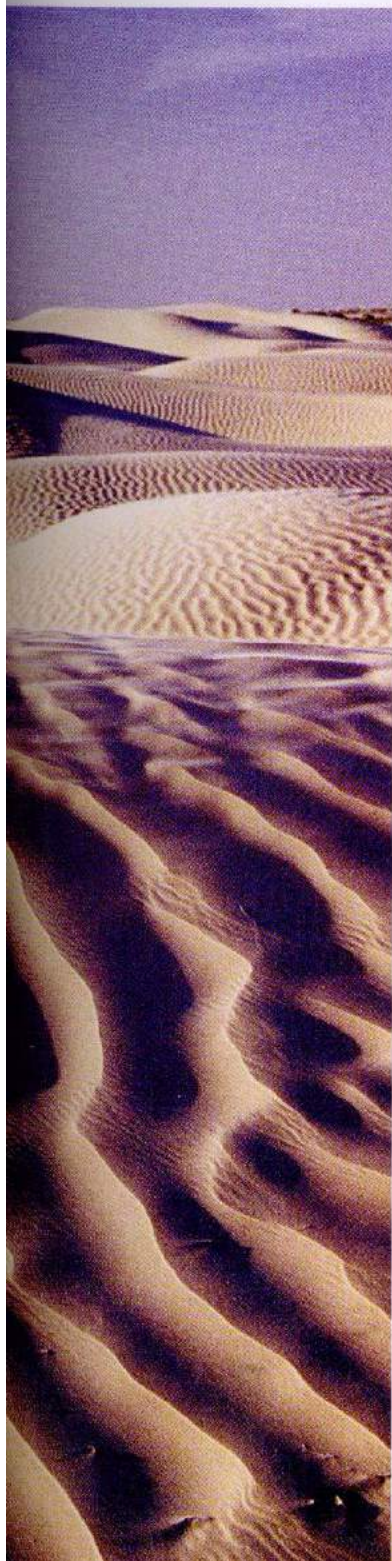
"THE BEDOUINS' DAYS REALLY ARE A FLOWING DANCE UNITING WORK, SPIRIT, FELLOWSHIP AND RECREATION." (ALAN HEEKS)

was a special treat rather than the primary mode of transport.

It was time to shoulder up the daypacks, tie up the headscarves, fill the water bottles and set out in the camels' footprints.

About Tunisia

Nestled unobtrusively in northern Africa between Algeria and Libya, just a skip across the Mediterranean from Italy, Tunisia spans seaside resorts, islands and parts of the vast Sahara Desert. Tunisia is small, friendly and welcoming of tourists. It's a modern Arab country where women and men mingle and young people wear revealing Western fashions. Large cities like the capital, Tunis,



out an arm and invites us to each choose a sleeping spot nearby. I spread out my swag and sleeping bag on top of a silky dune and fall asleep after dinner and singing with what feels like the entire universe spread out around me. Shooting stars are common and our trip is timed to begin a few days before the full moon, so the night is brilliant and silver.

At dawn I wake to find my sleeping bag surrounded by tracks. The sand is so fine that even a fly landing leaves a mark. I peer around the edge of the groundsheet and try to work out what creatures have come visiting in the dark – and, more importantly, are any of them still waiting under the swag? To the casual glance there isn't much life in the desert apart from flies, but the tracks in the morning tell another story: of beetles, ants, rats, scorpions, birds, lizards, hares and even jackals.

Water is life

After two days of climbing up and down sand dunes, I come to the next surprise. Our eight-day journey includes a four-day stop near a well. Two days of walking up and down sand dunes in the searing heat, accompanied by countless flies, are starting to take their toll on all of us (though my English companions are far more stoic than I am). As soon as I hear the word "well" I imagine an oasis of date palms, deep shade, a light breeze, tents and carpets, plus, of course, water.

It's a major disappointment when we stop at a nondescript patch of scrub and discover it will be our home for the next four days. On the horizon is a fence of dead palm fronds protecting the well, which needs to be kept free for other travellers, but there's not a live date palm in sight. While the Bedouins unload the camels and put up a traditional camel-hair tent for meals and rest, the rest of us spread out to try to find a patch of shade that will sustain us through four hot days.

My intense wish to be abducted by aliens abates after our afternoon expedition to the well. Men and women separate into two groups, timing our trips to allow the Bedouins to water the camels. At our appointed hour, the women set forth on the one-kilometre walk, wondering what we will find there.

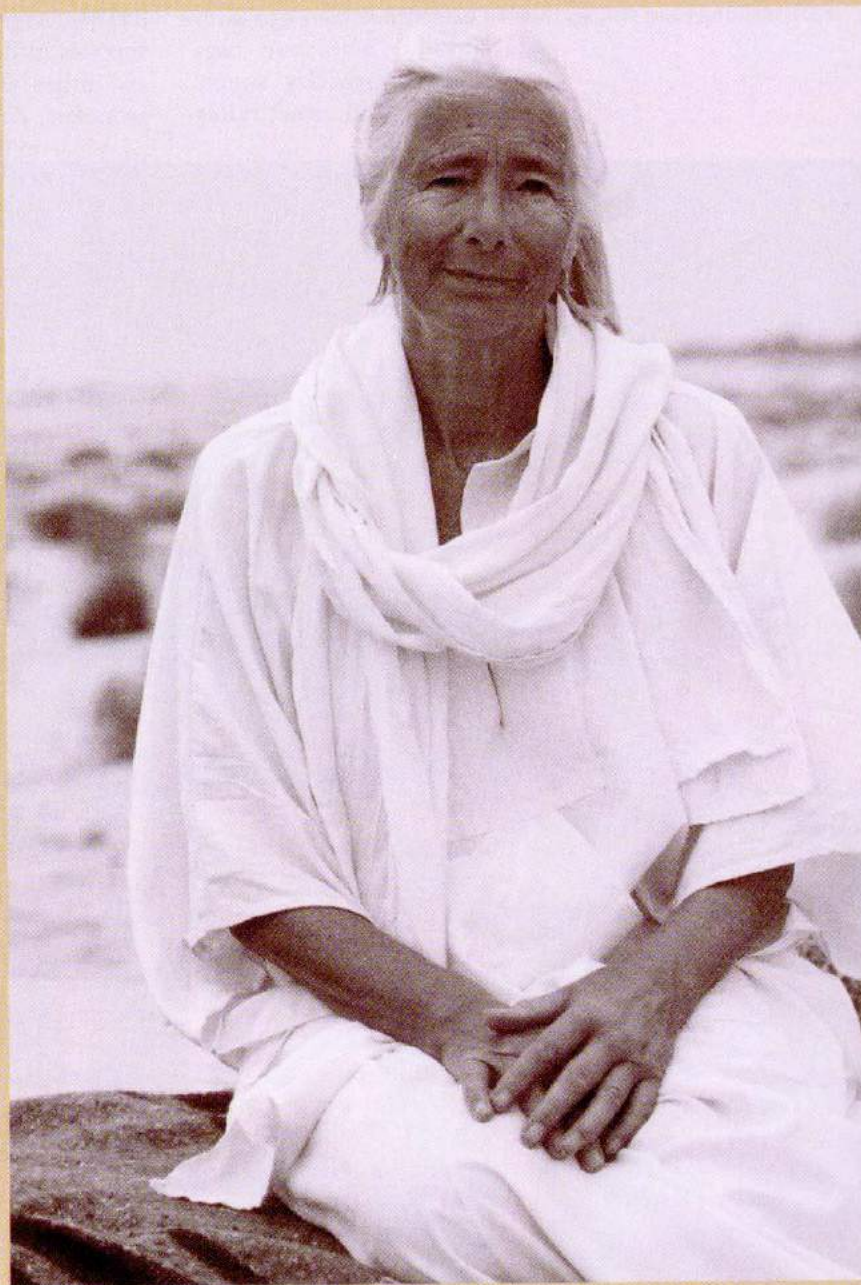
In the middle of the palm frond enclosure we come to a concrete well and camel trough. Nearby is a small shrine used by Muslim travellers and families, which is off-limits to us at the Bedouins' request.

We shuck our clothes, hop up on the concrete edge of the well, lower the bucket (made from an old inner tube) and draw up fresh water. The first cold splash on hot skin brings forth squeals of delight and within moments we are playing like children, splashing each other, drinking, soaping up, washing hair and sweaty bodies, and standing with eyes

closed for the invigorating rush of water pouring down from the bucket and being caught in the camel trough. Suddenly, the desert seems more bearable.

The vigil

One of the activities Alan and his co-leaders arrange is the opportunity for us to spend 24 hours alone in the desert. This period of solitude doesn't have the formal preparation of a traditional vision quest and is called a "vigil" instead

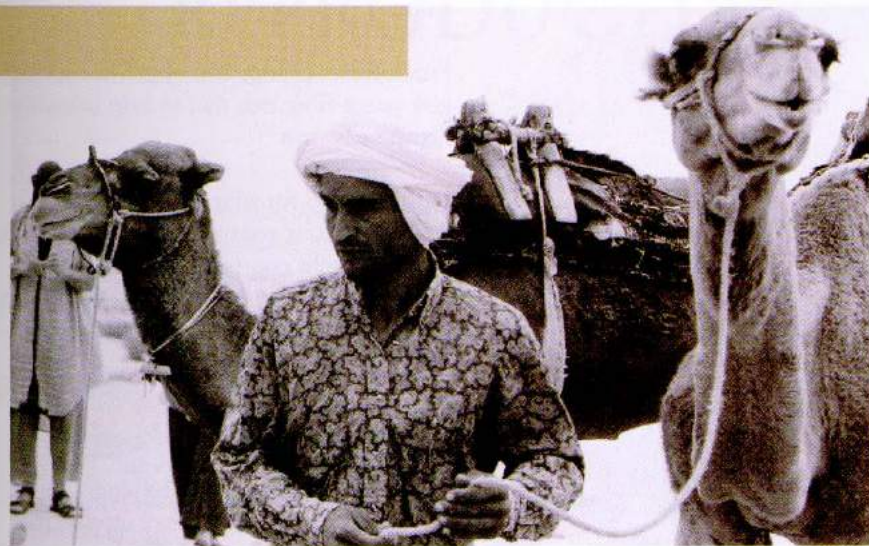


– a time for personal reflection and meditation. The group leaders and other members who are not on the vigil "hold" the energy of the group back at the camp, keeping a fire burning throughout the night, meditating and being available in case of emergencies like a sandstorm or scorpion stings.

After a silent breakfast around the campfire, those of us going on the vigil gather our water and food supplies (bread baked in the fire, dates and cheese), are blessed by the group and set off to the sites we've chosen the previous day. Most

are within a kilometre of the camp for safety reasons. It's surprising how far a kilometre can seem when you have to climb up and down sand dunes to get there.

My vigil site is by a thick bush in a stony hollow, with tall, rolling sand dunes just nearby, and it turns out to be the most comfortable place I find during my whole time in the desert, with enough shade and space to feel almost luxurious. Once alone, I seem to sink down and finally arrive in the desert.



It seems less like an adversary and more like a place where I can be quiet and listen to what my heart needs to say. I find myself standing high on a sand dune in the wind, eyes closed, facing west. I feel like I'm standing at the gate of my own heart, pounding a heavy knocker that echoes, "Awaken!"

I wonder if I'll experience an epiphany of some sort, or if some important message will be revealed to me that I can understand only deep in the Sahara Desert. But what I realise is simply this: all is well. There is nothing to prove or understand, no challenge to overcome. Just to be present at this moment in the soft sand of the Sahara. I can relax and enjoy the vigil.

I sleep in the shade of the bush during the heat of the day. I walk out onto the dunes in the afternoon; they are soft and creamy and curvaceous like a body and I want to open my arms and fall into their embrace. I run up and down the steep dunes, sinking to my knees in the sand. As the sun sets I lay out my swag on the top of a dune and watch the full moon rise hot and golden. I light a fire, wrap myself in a cloak and feel the talc-smooth sand under my fingers. I eat the heavy bread, dates and cheese and wash them down with water.

I know some of the people on the vigil intend to stay awake through the night, but I fall asleep early as the fire burns down, setting my internal clock to wake at 3am for the full-moon eclipse. I wake in time to see the final silver sliver of moon covered in shadow and the disc turning to a deep orange colour. In the dark of the eclipse, the stars burn brightly and two shooting stars fall. I fall asleep again until dawn and make my way back to the camp for breakfast and the blessing of those who have waited there.

Life in abundance

Back from the vigil, suddenly time in the desert seems to be moving quickly. Our journey home begins the next day and the evenings are now very precious. Sitting by the fire, surrounded by the silhouettes of camels in the moonlight, eating our spicy vegetable stew and joining in the Bedouin music until late into the night, I realise I will miss the desert when I leave.

The final morning dawns cool and grey and the desert is wide, soft and welcoming as we walk out. Being collected by four-wheel-drive vehicles feels surreal and within half an hour we are back in the bustling life of Douz, drinking cola, eating takeaway food, smelling diesel fumes and washing off the sand under the hotel shower.

But there's more to come. For our final night in Douz we are invited to Khalifa's home to meet the women of the Bedouins' family. On arrival we're greeted by a rush of women and girls of all ages. We stammer French greetings, take hands, kiss cheeks and giggle. The women seat us in circles of six, bring out low tables for each group and serve the vegetable and couscous stew Bedouin style – a large bowl of food in the centre and a spoon for each person. There are pomegranate seeds, fresh dates, tiny glasses of eye-wateringly strong tea and sweet lemon drink.

When we finish eating, a drum is produced and the music starts. Every woman there, no matter what her age, from the pre-pubescent girls to the grandmother with the tattooed face, plays with raw power, confidence and skill. Even the youngest can belly dance outrageously, with flicking hips and arms up. The place is oozing sensuality and we don't really know what to do with it except join in, dance, sweat, laugh and blow kisses back. In Australia I have never experienced a night like it. I couldn't have imagined that my first experience of the women in a Muslim household would be so vibrant and powerful.

Within another day we are flying our separate ways home and I'm still finding sand in my bags, clothes and shoes. The trip is over and, like most adventures, the discomfort disappears in memory. So what is my strongest recollection? Even in this place where there appears to be no life, there is life in abundance, writing its song on the desert floor.

PS: Although I found evidence of many creatures in the desert, the camel desert spider was not among them. Just as I was about to dismiss it as a myth, an older member of the party mused that he recalled them from when he was stationed in the Sinai. ☺

Resources

Tunisian National Tourist Office:
www.tourismtunisia.com

Alan Heeks takes a group to the Sahara Desert every October:
www.living-organically.com/healing-desert.htm

Neil Douglas-Klotz, *Desert Wisdom*, 1995