

Star HOLIDAY

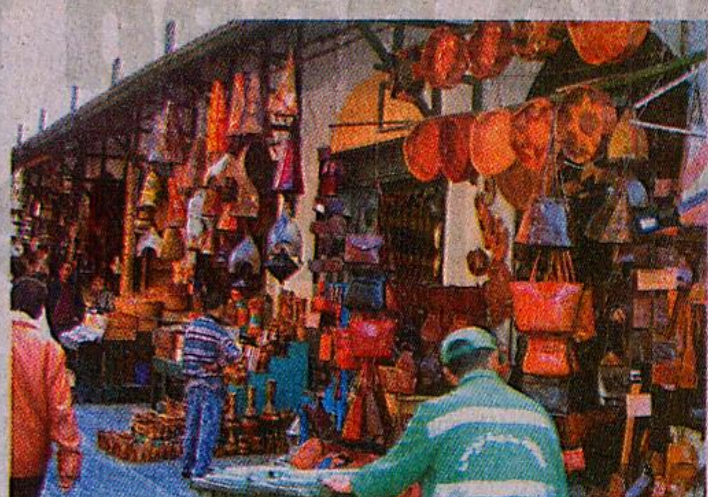
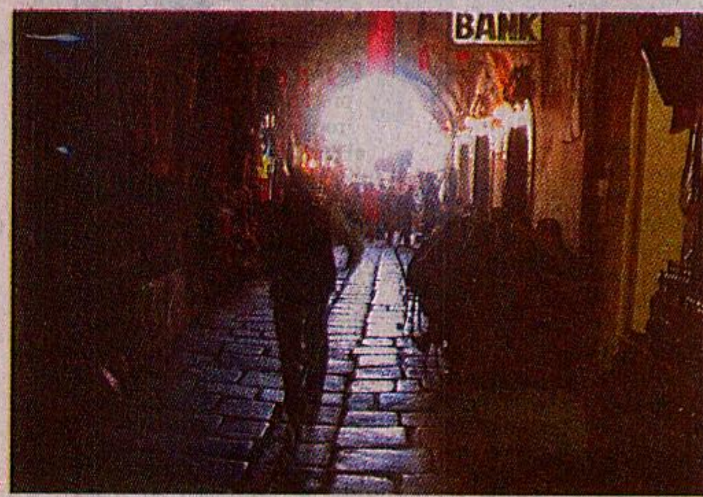
DHAKA SUNDAY JANUARY 9, 2005

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In an Intricate Ancient World

AFTER a while, as I was walking towards the boarding gate, the man came running with a broad grin. "It is 100%. Your luggage will go 100%." And it did.

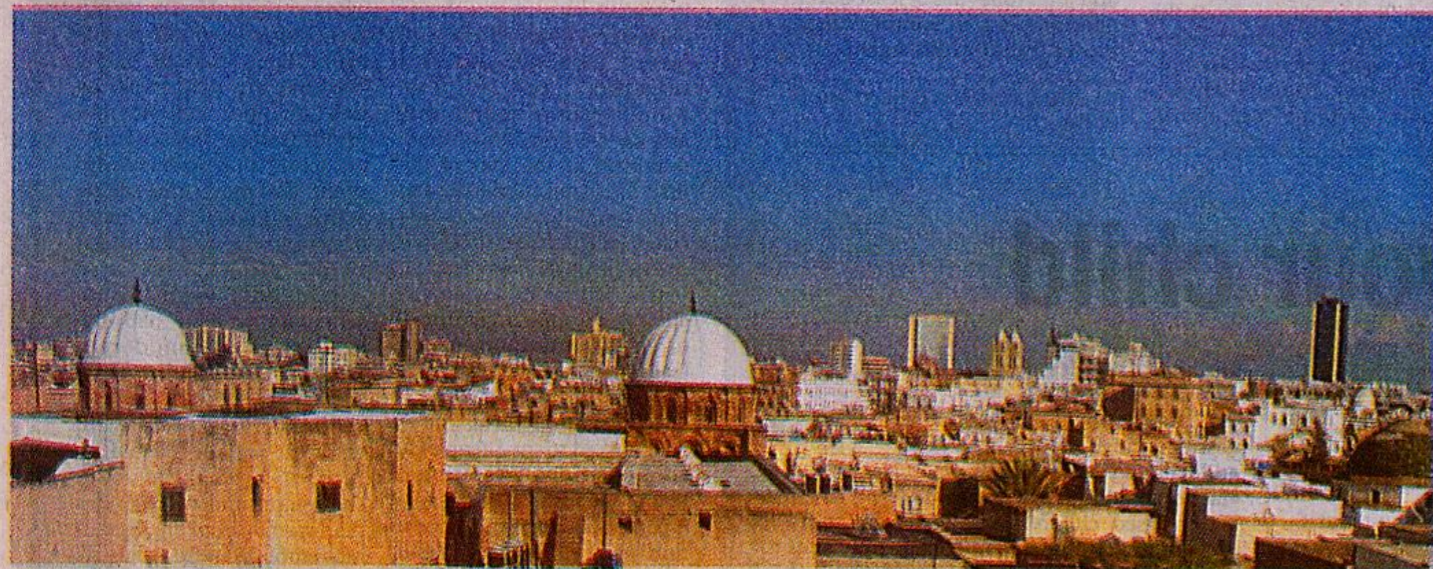
One moment I was in the vast openness of Tunis. A few steps, and I enter an intricate, near-subterranean world where life is bustling with its own vibrant rhythm. I am in the Medina, the thousand-year-old city, that was Tunis.

I have just stepped into Medina, the old town of Tunisia. And immediately I am yanked back in time through a subtle labyrinth of light and shadow. I

voices, craftsmen's tinkering on cobblestones, and smells of every kind, from incense to food, to atar, I discover a wonderful world. This was developed as a great hive of commercial centre. Book sellers, perfumers, jewellers, spice merchants they all gathered here and opened shops to cater to the Mediterranean travellers. They still are here, in their century-old fashion. I find this man, a merchant in spices, sitting by the entrance to one of the alleys, happily puffing a traditional tobacco pipe. Then there is the fezmaker.

Should I believe it? someone had warned to me to bargain from the bottom. But then I am not a great fan of Topics.

A few steps from him is a 20 feet by 30 feet shop with glass front. Inside, some 15 odd men sit silently. A small table before them with a small glass of coffee. Each one has a pipe in hand. Occasionally they puff on it and release the smoke slowly, relishing every bit of spiced tobacco. It seems they have nothing else to do in this world. Hours later, going by the same lane I saw the same bunch still sitting there doing the same



find myself in the 13th century when the Medina was founded on a narrow strip of land where once the great routes of Roman North Africa converged.

I imagine it still smells of the Roman time and it is not difficult to do so. I walk on the cobble stones through the narrow lanes and by lanes. The alleyways are covered with concrete canopy, heights seep in through skylights, adding the edge of a mysterious world to the complicated weblike town Mehitecture.

Through the din of a chorus of

I have seen this kind of topics in our textbooks in our childhood. I rake up my memory to remember whose portrait it was Allama Iqbal or what? -- Wearing this kind of topi, crimson with black strands coming out right from the middle of the cap. The fezmaker says something in French, proudly putting on his collection of topics.

"He says these are made of the best quality wool produced in Tunisia," explained the Buzillian Japanese girl I was walking with. "Each one costs \$50."

thing.

The silk sonk or market in the next lane was fascinating. Intricate designs of silver make the cloths glitter. Cart loads of the fabrics are brought in and unloaded. Merchants briskly check the products and sort them out, talking among themselves in deep arabic accents.

The spice merchants, it seems, have picked up every kind of species from around the world. The shoe sellers boast of the "finest camel leather you can ever imagine", and show one the

"very fine quality" by bending the shoes and holding them to the flames of cigarette lighter.

"You Muslim? You like to see the sultan's palace? Come with me," I find a pleasant Arab face, moustache and all.

"Follow me," he says to a hesitant me and starts walking.

And I follow him like a lamb through this mystic world. After walking for 20 minutes, and crossing empty number of lanes, I start regretting two things why I ever followed this man and why I did not buy a topi, for my head is almost numb from cold. Just as I thought enough of this endless walking, the man turned around with a smile "there it is."

I am in front of a big craft shop. Its inside dazzling with colours of every kind. From carpets to bronze plates, from leather masks to wooden pots, from arab robes to paintings are crammed inside. The floor is made of ceramic chips of iridescent colours. Age has eroded the chips, but still they speak of intricate designs.

Following a narrow staircase with more chip work I climb to the roof. A grand view is waiting there to greet me.

"This was the sultan's residence," the man tells me. "My family bought it from him."

The roof is surrounded by high walls with beautiful chip work. The scenes are very Arabic. A girl in veils dances and people sitting at her feet drink liquor. A girl plays tambourine, some one plays a guitar-like instrument. The sultan is on a hunting trip, killing tigers. The sultan sitting in the king's court. There is a huge tub in the middle. It was a fountain, I am told, where the

wives of the sultan used to bathe, and he had four wives.

"There the wives used to sit before bath," the man points to four concrete chairs in a row, all ornamental with ceramic chips. "Each wife had her own place."

I look out over the wall and get a wide view of Tunis sprawling over the horizon. On this winter afternoon, the sky looks exceptionally blue in this Mediterranean city. One thing striking about Tunis is it hardly has any high-rises. The buildings are two- or three-storey high. Like any Mediterranean city, they are painted white with marine blue windows and doors. Just behind the facade of the shops are the residential quarters of the Medina. It is a self-contained town within the town with madrassas, schools, hammams (bathing places) and what not.

Downstairs, we see the bedroom of the sultan. A sprawling bronze bed sits in the middle. "He needed space. He had four wives to accommodate," the man explains. "And the sultan had special liking for atar (perfume)," he continues as he leads me down. "Medina produces the best kind of atar in the world. You get all fragrances of exotic flowers."

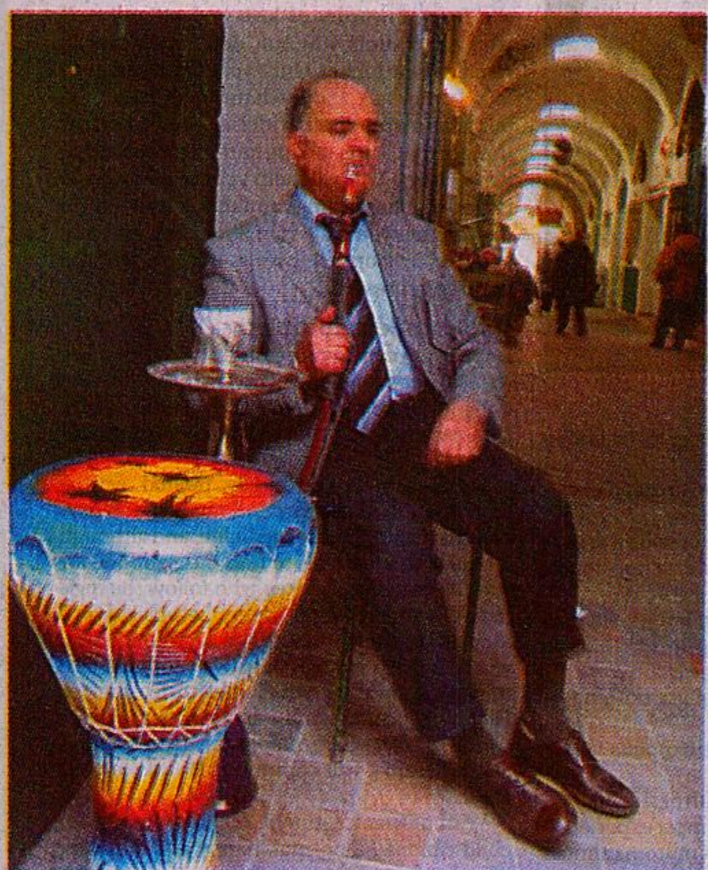
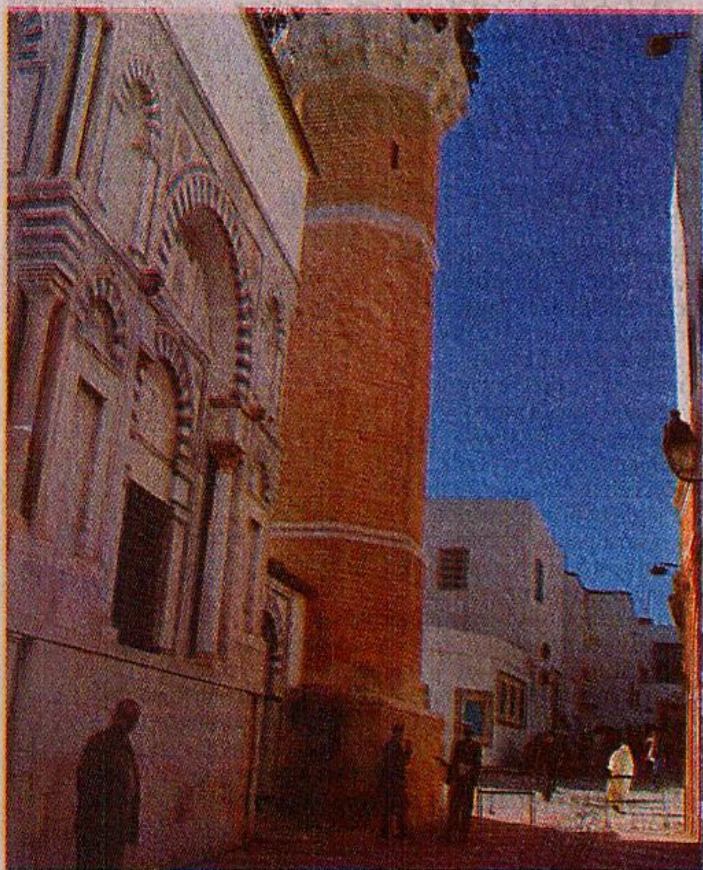
We walk down the narrow alleys through the recitals from the Quran wafting through the air. Carpets are being stacked in shops, cobblers fix shoes, some just laze by the lane sipping coffee. We walk in silence, feeling the atmosphere.

"This is the oldest atar shop," the man says. It is rather a small shop. On wooden designed racks are huge glass bottles holding liquids of different colours.

And he brings down the bottles, opens them one after another and keeps applying them one after another on my skin. I inhale the fragrance. They smell real good. "You Muslim? No alcohol." And then he lights a match to the liquid inside. They don't catch the fire as a proof to his statement. "And cheap." Then he quotes a price that is way beyond my wallet's worth.

So I say thank you and take to the road.

photo & story INAM AHMED



LET'S HIT THE ROAD

Want to be a partner on an adventure trip? It would be a coast-hugging journey on a car all the way from Dhaka down to Kanniyakumari, the farthest end of south India, and back following a different route. On the way we will be passing through deserts, forests, hills and of course, sun-kissed sea beaches. The experience will be later used for creative purpose. If you fit the bill and would like to know the details, then mail with your contact numbers to: parjatak@walla.com

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