

# When American Values Collide With Tunisian Society

SOUSSE, Tunisia – Not long after I moved to Tunisia, I planned a day trip with some students and colleagues to visit some of Tunisia’s excellent Roman ruins. Our group was to include a mix of Tunisians and Americans, men and women from their mid-twenties to their mid-fifties. The night before we were to go; however, I got a phone call from Mariem, a recent Tunisian college graduate. She told me she had to back out. Her parents would not let her go because there were men in our group.

I didn’t want to make Mariem feel worse than she already did, but it was hard to disguise my incredulity. What could be more wholesome than a visit to an archaeological site? Did her parents view me as a potential predator? And why on earth was a woman in her mid-twenties bound by her parents’ edicts on such matters anyway?

I was soon to learn that Mariem’s situation was the norm in Tunisia.

When people ask me what the biggest challenge of living in north Africa has been, I don’t have to think long and hard. It was easy to get used to Tunisia’s fussy bureaucracy and its restrictions on alcohol and pork. But I never got used to the way the society regulates relations between men and women.

The regulation comes through law, culture, and religion. Though we in the U.S. try to keep the sources of our shoulds and shouldn’ts conceptually separate, Tunisians generally do not. The limitations on their individual freedom are bound up into one

nearly universal system and are enforced by all against all.

A 30-year-old Tunisian student of mine who was dating an American man was subject to vicious gossip by her neighbors, who actually notified the woman’s parents of their daughter’s “immoral” behavior. Female Tunisian colleagues had to seek their parents’ permission to go out to dinner with their fellow teachers.

Several of my American colleagues incurred their landlords’ wrath merely by having members of the opposite sex over for dinner. If such couples spend the night together, they are threatened with eviction and criminal prosecution. Couples who want to check into a Tunisian hotel must be able to produce a marriage license.

Another colleague returned to America for a month. On her return, she was told by disapproving neighbors that her husband had been visited by another woman in her absence. That woman was her husband’s sister.

So while the international press was covering Tunisia’s successful elections, I was thinking about what democracy really means here. Tunisia now has political freedom. People post all kinds of caustic anti-government comments on Facebook. They voice their opinions joyously, loudly and emphatically.

Yet the country lacks personal freedom and privacy. Violate the norms regarding non-marital relationships and you face a storm of hostility – and you may have actu-

ally broken the law. Gossip and rumor are huge factors in the way people lead their lives. Everyone’s business is everyone’s business. It’s like high school, only worse.

Some younger people here chafe against the social limitations they face. I asked a class of 15-year-olds what one change they would make in Tunisian law if they were kings or queens for a day. One young woman said she would outlaw gossip. One of her male classmates said he would make it legal for him to kiss his girlfriend. A bright 29-year-old student in another class wrote in her journal, “I want to be able to go places without my parents’ permission.”

I didn’t move to Tunisia to offend my neighbors or to tell them they’re doing democracy wrong. I came to learn and discover things about myself.

One of the most important things I’ve learned is that while I’m willing to change many of my behaviors to adapt to a foreign culture, there are some fundamental American values I hold dear and cannot change. Freedom and privacy are pretty high up on that list. So is the notion of individual autonomy, the idea that even though you are part of a family, your life is yours to live when you reach adulthood. And so is the radical notion that women are actually people.

– James F. Trumm

You can read more about Jim’s experiences of living abroad at [www.jftrumm.com](http://www.jftrumm.com).

## ***New Courts At The Toledo Tennis Club***

***Crews put down the top layer of asphalt on the newly rebuilt top tier of tennis courts at the Toledo Tennis Club, 4330 Indian Rd.***

***The five new courts – which were dedicated in late June – replace ones that had become unplayable. Each new hard court includes two sets of lines, one set for a regulation court, and another set for players 10 and under.***

***The club also has a new pro and management team this year. Effective July 16, new memberships are half price for 2015. People do not need to be a club member to participate in the various clinics offered by the club. For information on clinics, rates, and membership, contact the tennis club at 419-536-6456.***



— Village Voice photo by Yarko Kuk