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[http://girlsoloinarabia.typepad.com/girl\\_solo\\_in\\_arabia/2006/06/the\\_haik\\_the\\_bu.html#Sfax](http://girlsoloinarabia.typepad.com/girl_solo_in_arabia/2006/06/the_haik_the_bu.html#Sfax))

SFAX

But back to the trip at hand and as Ibn B said

*“We came next to the town of Sfax.”*

The drive south was interesting; olive groves line both sides of the road as far as the eye can see, and the dress of the people becomes more traditional with many creamy white **haiks** (the all-enveloping robe worn by women that they partially hold in place with their teeth), and **burgundy-colored fezzes** and robes for the men. (It is a curiosity that the fez gets progressively darker the further south one travels, so from scarlet in Tunis it becomes magenta in Medinine.) It was a Friday and by mid-morning the men were already gathered outside in cafes chatting, tea and waterpipes at hand. Even in modern Tunisia where Tunisian women have rights most other Arab and Islamic countries can only dream about, cafes are still the domain of men. In Sousse, long used to foreigners and where local young women wear the latest, skimpiest fashions, two large cafes on the main street in the middle of the ‘tourist mile’ were full of men only – nary a single female among them. A quick glance showed that most of the men were local – the vacationers were in their all-inclusive hotels and the locals were doing what they had always done.



*This teeny mausoleum in the center of Sfax is the only item in the city that merits a mention by Ibn Battuta.*

Ibn B did have something to say about Sfax,

*“Outside this place there is the grave of the imam Abu’l Hasan al-Lakhmi, the Malikite jurist and author of the book called Al Tabsira fil Fiqh”*

(which means the ‘Exposition of Jurisprudence’).

The little domed mausoleum is still there; it does indeed lie just outside the old medina walls and is now dwarfed by a large, new mosque and a very busy street on one side and an enormous barrel-vaulted market place opposite it. Sfax is Tunisia's second city and being a commercial and industrial center it is not much frequented by tourists, and is in some ways the more interesting for it. Like Sousse, the medina walls are still virtually intact, unlike Sousse the souks cater to locals and not tourists. Souks in Tunisia are open on Friday but the 9th century Grand Mosque located in the middle of the medina was off-limits by noon for Friday prayers. Walking by I could hear the sermon and see through the windows that the mosque was full of the faithful. I walked from Bab Diwan which faces the modern center of Sfax, down Rue de La Mecque which is about four feet wide, to the former Kasbah which is now a Museum of Local Architecture. It is one of the most interesting museums I have come across with well-labeled explanations of the materials and techniques used in local buildings; *lrcha*, a clay mixed with straw which is moisture resistant, *soriyakh*, a marine silt mixed with lime which was used in septic tanks to prevent infiltration of such water into cisterns and water wells, and *chahba*, a mortar of lime, sand and olive wood ashes which was used in cistern construction. Sfax has no water supply in the form of rivers or streams and had to rely entirely on trapped rainwater. It was therefore imperative to find ways to store it without contamination.

Another section of the museum outlines the different religious buildings that existed in all medieval medinas across the Maghreb; each medina had a Grand Mosque or *Al Jami al-Kabir* for the weekly prayers, while each quarter had its own *masjid* or small mosque for the locals for their daily prayers, a *musalla*, which was little more than a prayer hall found in residential areas, a *zaouia* or retreat for sufi sheikhs with a prayer hall for students, and a *maqam* or mausoleum with a saint's tomb with a prayer hall and rooms for visitors. The only building that by definition always had a minaret was the mosque.

By now it was almost four in the afternoon and Tunisia was getting ready to play Ukraine in the **World Cup**. In a little alley off the Rue de la Kasbah was the Café Maure Diwan already packed with young men (and two women including me) strategically placed in front of two large televisions. I took my place with mint tea and waterpipe. The café looked out over the ancient medina walls and just before five, the muezzin rang out for prayers, it was a moment in time; the 7th century religious call to prayer, 9th century battlements and the 21st century competition of a game played the world over from Tunisia to Trinidad and Tobago – globalization indeed. Unfortunately Tunisia lost and were therefore out of the competition, but as everywhere there was furious discussion about the refereeing; the consensus here is that the referees have been anti-African and in fact that goal from a penalty awarded the Ukrainians was not in fact a foul as replays later showed. With so much at stake nowadays - can American-style instant replay be far behind?