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The Bridges of Constantine

NO, Constantine is not in Turkey, Greece or Italy. It is actually situated in the north-eastern part of Algeria and was the first Algerian city we had visited during our one-and-a-half month trip to Algeria and Tunisia between November and December 2012. I was deeply impressed by this city inhabited by a population of 450,000 people. Set on a plateau 640m above sea level around a deep ravine formed by the Rhumel River, the city's numerous bridges and viaducts spanning the chasm has given rise to its apt nickname of "City of Bridges".

Constantine has an extremely long history. It was first established by the Phoenicians and was ruled successively by Numidia, the Roman Empire, the Byzantine, the Arabs, Almohad & Hafsid, the Ottoman Empire and then the French. It got its present name when the city was rebuilt in 313 AD and was named after the Roman Emperor, Constantine the Great.

The gorges carved by the Rhumel River and its tributaries have almost vertical sides dropping more than 100m to the floor. Roads follow the contours and cut into the cliffs, and many buildings sit right on the edges of the sheer cliffs. Above all, the bridges that adorn the scene bring out the magnificence of the entire view. They are in fact a major pull factor for tourists. As a bridge engineer, I was so excited when I first caught sight of a suspension bridge flying across a deep ravine high above us when we first arrived there at dusk. I immediately requested our driver to stop the vehicle so we could capture some photographs.

Among the bridges in Constantine, the most conspicuous one would be the Sidi M'Cid Bridge, a suspension bridge which is 164m long, located at 175m above the gorge floor. It was opened in April 1912, linking the old Fort on one side and the hospital on the other. The bridge was repaired in year 2000. Views of the gorge, the old city and the valley from the bridge are incredible!

Aside from the Sidi M'Cid Bridge, some other notable bridges include the El Kantara Bridge, Mellah Slimane Bridge and Sidi Rached Bridge. The El Kantara Bridge is one of the oldest in the city, having Roman origins as an aqueduct. It was destroyed and rebuilt many times and took its present form in 1863. It is 128m long and rises 125m above the gorge.

Meanwhile, the Mellah Slimane Bridge is a suspension bridge for pedestrians, linking the railway station and the centre of the old town. Completed in 1925, this bridge is 125m long, 2.5m wide and rises 100m above the water. On the city side, the bridge is substantially lower than the street level, and a steep staircase and a lift bridge the vertical gap between the two.

The Sidi Rached Bridge took 5 years to construct. When it was opened in April 1912, it was the highest bridge in the world. This bridge, consisting of 27 arches, is 450m long and links the railway station with the old city. When it is viewed from a distance, the bridge projects a truly magnificent sight. ■

Ir. Chin Mee Poon is a retired civil engineer who derives a great deal of joy and satisfaction from travelling to different parts of the globe, capturing fascinating insights of the places and people he encounters and sharing his experiences with others through his photographs and writing.

