

In Search of Luke Skywalker's Ghost



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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.

Gabes is a seaside town of 12,000 people in central Tunisia. My wife and I, together with a friend, found our way there early December 2012, not so much attracted by the town itself as using it as a gateway to more interesting sites to the south. One of these was Matmata, a village of 1,500 people noted for its underground troglodyte dwellings.

We came to Matmata, 45km south-west of Gabes, by louage (a van used as a shared taxi), a very popular form of transport in Tunisia. We checked into a hotel and after a short rest, we left to explore the village. About 35% of the villagers still live in traditional underground troglodyte houses which typically consist of a circular pit courtyard with access to several rooms dug into the wall of the courtyard. A few hotels in the village, including Hotel Sidi Driss, are similarly constructed but have several pit courtyards interconnected by tunnels.

Star Wars fans would remember that Hotel Sidi Driss was used by the filmmaker as the childhood home of Luke Skywalker in *Episode IV: A New Hope*. It was again used as a location in *Episode I: The Phantom Menace* and *Episode II: Attack of the Clones*. The hotel was not in operation during our visit but we managed to go in and take a look at the labyrinth of rooms and passage ways. We also looked into the pit courtyards of some private homes during our walk-about in the village.

Continuing our journey south, we came to Tataouine, a town of 65,000 people in southern Tunisia. The name should ring a bell to *Star Wars* fans as it was also the name of Luke Skywalker's desert home planet. However, the town does not have much to offer tourists and, like Gabes, is used as a gateway for the exploration of some interesting villages and ksour further south. A ksar (plural ksour) is a traditional fortified granary built by the local Berber people for the storage of and to protect their precious grain crops. It usually consists of many long, narrow, barrel-vaulted rooms, known as ghorfas, several stories high, built of stones and gypsum and finished with a mud render. Each ghorfa has a small door opening onto the courtyard. Ksour are usually constructed strategically on high ground for ease of defence against raiders.

The Berbers are the indigenous people of North Africa. Ethnically, they are not a single race but rather the resultant mixture of successive waves of immigration from the Near East, sub-



Saharan Africa and southern Europe. After centuries of cohabitation and inter-marriage, they have adopted a common language and culture. The arrival of the Arabs at the end of the 7th century resulted in the Berbers' converting to Islam and their being mostly assimilated.

With Tataouine as our base, we visited Old Chenini and Ksar Ouled Soltane. Instead of relying on public transport, we hired a camionnette (pick-up truck used as taxi) for convenience and flexibility.

Old Chenini is a very interesting hill village located 18km west of Tataouine. The houses are built on and into the steep slopes of two ridges. Our driver dropped us at the foot of the slope beside the main road and we scrambled up to the saddle between the two ridges where a beautiful white mosque perched elegantly. Views from up there were spectacular. Most of the houses were actually found on the back slopes of the ridges, and some of them were still occupied.

Our driver then brought us back to Tataouine and drove 22km south-east to Ksar Ouled Soltane. This old Berber granary on a hilltop looked new. It had been touched up to serve as the childhood home of Anakin Skywalker, Luke's father, when some of the scenes in *The Phantom Menace* were filmed here. The ksar consisted of two courtyards, each surrounded by pigeon-holes of barrel-vaulted stores stacked 4 stories high. Narrow and precarious steps led to the upper stores. The ksar, however, was no longer in use. A tiny mosque was located forlornly about a stone's throw away from the ksar.

I was attracted by these regions' unique landscape, architecture and inhabitants rather than by their *Star Wars* fame as I am not a fan of the *Star Wars* series. ■