

# Travel agencies will be able to enrich existing tourism products with culinary contributions in all their different guises

*The Culinary Route of Tunisia is the road of all those, professionals and enthusiasts, who take part and share their experiences and points of view. Faouzi Mejdoub, President of the Cultural and Alternative Tourism Commission at the Tunisian Federation of Travel and Tourism Agencies(FTAV), analyzes the changes taking place in the national tourism offering and the challenges of focusing on culinary delights.*



As a Tunisian tourism professional with a wealth of experience in Tunisia and abroad, how would you

define the current changes, particularly in terms of diversifying the offer?

To be able to talk concretely about changes, and especially about the scale of these changes, we need to go back in time to highlight what could effectively be called paradigm shifts.

In my opinion, the international tourism offer, as an economic activity, has essentially gone through two major stages: one that could be described as “passive”, and a second stage that could be described as “voluntary”, which itself has undergone a number of mutations to arrive at its current state.

To illustrate this point, and above all to highlight the paradigms that have accompanied it, we need to go back to the origins of the tourism movement around the 18th century: at that time, we could not speak of an active offer, in the sense of action undertaken by professionals to motivate travel for the sake of discovery or relaxation. By this we mean the travels of the young branch of the English aristocracy, who expatriated for a few months to Italy (essentially Rome and Florence), to live out their experience as young adults, far from the family home in England, in an environment bathed in a civilizational legacy, encompassing the periods of first Ancient Rome and later the Renaissance. This was the famous “Tour” of the English Aristocracy, which can easily be likened to a “Rite of Passage” rather than a response to a tourist offer: it’s this unstructured aspect that led me to choose the term “passive offer” to characterize this stage of the tourist activity.

The advent of tourism, which I have described as voluntary, will coincide with the popularization of tourism, which will cease to be elitist, aristocratic and initiatory, and become a non-exclusive response to a specific proposal for time management, in a given space, with appropriate logistics for mobility and accommodation, with the aim of relaxation and discovery, all within an economic dynamic.

This mutation between the two, which clearly marks the paradigm shift in the international tourism offer, was to materialize in the “Riviera” and “Deauville” phenomena at the beginning of the last century in France. In Tunisia, mainly with the advent of the French Protectorate at the end of the 19th century, the tourist offer remained rather limited to a small number of writers and artists, as well as civil servants of the French state, eager to exhume the historical traces of the Romans, Phoenicians or other disappeared civilizations, at the same time as a curious look at the nearby oriental world.

This tourism offer, at both destinations, is characterized by a focus on the pleasant meteorological element, as well as the appeal of the natural and archaeological environment. The main motivation for these travelers was to pay little heed to the people who lived and evolved in these geographical areas: the offer put forward ignored the human element of the region.

The visitors and travelers were among themselves, in a kind of virtual bubble, exposed to the fine weather, crossing the natural and historic spaces as spectators from elsewhere.

With hindsight, this type of tourist could now be described as a “spectator-tourist”, leading some to

say: "Tunisia is beautiful without Tunisians"; in fact, an unfortunate phrase applied in the same way to various Third World tourist countries, just by changing the name of the country and its nationals.

The fact remains that this type of show tourism is in keeping with the spirit of the offer proposed in tourist-sending markets, i.e. an offer that revolved around the inert side of the region or country: nature, archaeology, mild weather.

The 1960s and the wave of decolonization, accompanied by the UN's encouragement of these newly independent regimes to open up to tourism as an economic activity, a lever for development and a means of bringing peoples closer together, saw a certain evolution in the offer. If we add to this phenomenon the widespread introduction of paid vacations in the developed countries, the main emitters of tourists, as well as the material comfort in Europe resulting from the "trente glorieuses" (1945-1975), we end up with a new paradigm that makes tourism a vehicle for bringing together the new working class of the European zone and the natives of the newly independent countries.

This new offer will continue to emphasize the natural and cultural assets mentioned above, while introducing the human dimension of the country visited.

From the eighties onwards, the focus shifted more and more to the human element, highlighting its way of life, its beliefs, its historical heritage and its practices. The tourism offer penetrates the long-obscured sphere of the nationals of the areas visited: it highlights, in a positive way, their particularities and invites them to share, for the time of an experience, in the life of this local population. The new tourism offer no longer perceives the ethnic or cultural differences of different countries or regions through the filter of incompatibility and rejection, but rather as a phenomenon of tolerance and rapprochement, trivializing community differences and even turning them into a selling point. This goes as far as the refusal to reject particularisms, which are no longer perceived as an obstacle to contact and dialogue, but are credited to a world where there is no longer a dominant culture and where, on the contrary, differences are perceived as a universal reality entering into the logic of THE diversity, through the moral filter of tolerance.

How can Tunisia position itself internationally in these new markets? And more specifically with the culinary offer?

If we take the new tourism guidelines as our starting point, especially by highlighting the centrality of the local human element, and by giving this indigenous element its rightful place and importance in the field of tourism, while linking it to its natural, civilizational and historical environment, then we've just set the scene for the new tourism offering: an offering that significantly expands the classic tourism area and can be broken down into different dimensions.

- The "Authenticity and Sustainability" dimension can be illustrated in the field through mobilization to promote and encourage the local economy in the regions by involving women and young people who are not part of the classic commercial circuit, but who can improve their living conditions through trades, or offers of

products and services, derived from the tangible and intangible heritage of their region: in most cases this kind of practice already exists and is known to visitors, but the work to be done consists of framing the activity or practices (training; clearing opportunities.), and to regulate them (individualization of participants; good behavior; hygiene rules; notions of multiculturalism).

- The “Cultural” dimension is not absent from the promotion of Destination Tunisia, where the historical and archaeological element reminds us of the presence of this destination in the historical background common to the Mediterranean for over 2,000 years: its participation in universal history is undeniable and can, and must, be put to good use.
- The “Welcome and Affability” dimension of the Tunisian population, which is an integral part of its genetic code, shaped by its geographical position at the confluence of the two Mediterranean basins, and which has attracted and fixed so many arrivals and expeditions and bequeathed so many customs and practices, should not be overlooked either.
- The “polyglot” dimension of the local population, who speak at least one European language in addition to their mother tongue.
- The “Natural and Ecological” dimension is very much in evidence in this little corner of the world, surrounded by 1,200 km of Mediterranean Sea and opening onto the world’s largest hot desert.
- The “Proximity” dimension is also present in this offer, and the packages on offer, reasonable due to the currency parity, are also part of the motivation for visitors opting for this destination.
- The “Tunisia” dimension, which I finally incorporated after a few moments of hesitation, remains the “Brand” that must inspire confidence, biculturalism, the bridge between Europe and the East, longevity and tourism tradition (60 years+).
- The “organic” dimension should also be able to flesh out this destination’s offering, emphasizing the aspect of working the land, the quality of fertilizers, the absence or limitation of pesticides, the opposition to GMOs, etc. All of the above would be a prerequisite for anchoring this entire offering to the dynamics of the “culinary dimension”.

This ultimate dimension would be the material that assembles all the components seen above within a temporal and trans-civilizational axis, patiently constructed over several centuries, with successive additions from several ethnic groups and civilizations.

Stone by stone, the culinary temple has been patiently erected over the course of long centuries by

the primary and vital need for food expressed by peoples of different origins and beliefs, and affirmed over the centuries according to the surrounding natural environment, the nutritional or energy value sought, the use of locally available products, the prophylactic value, the mythological value, the mystical value, the curative value, the stimulating value, the euphoric value, and so on.

All the evolution that followed, starting with the vital need to feed oneself, bears traces of different economic contexts (periods of poverty, famine, changing tastes as populations intermingled, refinement, etc.).

This culinary offering is an eternal witness, in perpetual motion, to the genius of Man and his inventiveness. It is also a trace of his refinement, and justifies the use of the term "Art" in evoking the culinary.

What opportunities do these strategies offer Tunisian tourism professionals, and travel agencies in particular?

The geographical area of Tunisian tourism is increasing in size with the addition of this new incentive, the culinary offer. All Tunisian regions and towns are on an equal footing in this resource, which does not take into consideration whether or not there are remains on its territory, nor does it consider the degree of modernity as a barometer, nor the proximity of spectacular natural landscapes as a predominant element: rather, it's human genius, based on local ingredients and their right mix, that will be appreciated at its true value; it's the creation of added value from a heritage of past generations.

This extratemporal, multipart effort and its valorization can be brought to fruition by travel designers within travel agencies, who will have the leisure, in my opinion, not to wipe the slate clean on existing classic products (museums, archaeological sites, historic cities, outdoor products, adventure products, exceptional sites, etc.) but rather to enrich existing products with this culinary contribution in its various nutritive, adaptive, evolutionary, gustatory and finally experiential aspects.

By combining the components of its classic offer with the culinary offer, the travel agency can offer a product that only it can master from start to finish (as opposed to other social players who may have some experience limited to the culinary field, but are little or not equipped to deal with questions relating to a multi-dimensional product).

The right mix of immersive gustatory pleasure in an authentic setting, combined with the aesthetic or intellectual pleasure provided by the juxtaposition of one or more other components from the classic natural and cultural tourist repertoire, will make the final offer a work worthy of being proposed.

The travel agent with a keen artistic sense will be the conductor of this harmonious whole, combining tangible and intangible heritage.

How are you working within the FTAV to support agencies through these paradigm shifts?

It was the Commission du Tourisme Culturel et Alternatif (CTCA), which I chair, that took the initiative,

given its role and field of expertise, to take the necessary steps to inform the agencies of our corporation of the paradigm shifts, the new concepts, the conditions and expectations of backers, and the responses to be made.

At present, I'm at the stage of developing this strategy, taking advantage of the summer "truce" during which agencies give little importance to the work of investigation, training, experimentation, upgrading...

The output will be presented by myself, in person and by videoconference, next autumn, with an invitation to all travel agencies in our corporation.

For this work, we are working on several axes: a new demand, a new development niche, an effort to adapt the offer to this new trend, experiences to propose, jargon to master, the making of the finished product, appropriate communication, new suppliers to find, new forms of collaboration to imagine (new horizontal-type schemes).

At the same time as preparing the theoretical didactic component, my team and I will be scouting out sites, places, areas, partners and suppliers in the field, in order to flesh out the culinary offering for travel agencies. This process is already underway at a distance, through documentary research, contacts and facilitators, before moving into the field.

The last stage, which we'll try to coincide with the main event of the Culinary Route in the autumn (to be determined), should be the launch of the practical application of all this work seen above: five Eductours for travel agencies in the 5 FTAV regions (the *Fédérations Régionales des Agences de Voyages - FRAV*), one bus per region, preferably on dates that don't overlap, so that I can accompany them in the field, illustrating on site the theoretical notions seen earlier.

Needless to say, I can only offer my technical expertise and motivation...