

A Short Guide to Towns Without a Past, Albert Camus

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The softness of Algiers is rather Italian. The cruel glare of Oran has something Spanish about it. Constantine, perched high on a rock above the Rummel Gorges, is reminiscent of Toledo. But Spain and Italy overflow with memories, with works of art and exemplary ruins. Toledo has had its El Greco and its Barrès. The cities I speak of, on the other hand, are towns without a past. Thus they are without tenderness or abandon. During the boredom of the siesta hours, their sadness is implacable and has no melancholy.

In the morning light, or in the natural luxury of the evenings, their delights are equally ungentle. These towns give nothing to the mind and everything to the passions. They are suited neither to wisdom nor to the delicacies of taste. A Barrès or anyone like him would be completely pulverized.

Travelers with a passion for other people's passions, oversensitive souls, aesthetes, and newlyweds have nothing to gain from going to Algiers. And, unless he had a divine call, a man would be ill-advised to retire and live there forever. Sometimes, in Paris, when people I respect ask me about Algeria, I feel like crying out: "Don't go there." Such joking has some truth in it. For I can see what they are expecting and know they will not find it.

And, at the same time, I know the attractions and the subtle power of this country, its insinuating hold on those who linger, how it immobilizes them first by ridding them of questions and finally by lulling them to sleep with its everyday life. At first the revelation of the light, so glaring that everything turns black and white, is almost suffocating. One gives way to it, settles down in it, and then realizes that this protracted splendor gives nothing to the soul and is merely an excessive delight.

Then one would like to return to the mind. But the men of this country—and this is their strength—seem to have more heart than mind. They can be your friends (and what friends!), but you can never tell them your secrets.

This might be considered dangerous here in Paris, where souls are poured out so extravagantly and where the water of secrets flows softly and endlessly along among the fountains, the statues, and the gardens.

This land most resembles Spain. With no traditions Spain would be merely a beautiful desert. And unless one happens to have been born there, there is only one race of men who can dream of withdrawing forever to the desert. Having been born in this desert, I can hardly think of describing it as a visitor.

Can one catalogue the charms of a woman one loves dearly? No, one loves her all of a piece, if I may use the expression, with one or two precise reasons for tenderness, like a favorite pout or a particular way of shaking the head. Such is my long standing liaison with Algeria, one that will doubtless never end and that keeps me from being completely lucid.

All anyone can do in such a case is to persevere and make a kind of abstract list of what he loves in the thing he loves. This is the kind of academic exercise I can attempt here on the subject of Algeria. First there is the beauty of the young people. The Arabs, of course, and then the others. The French of Algeria are a bastard race, made up of unexpected mixtures.

Spaniards and Alsatians, Italians, Maltese, Jews, and Greeks have met here. As in America, such raw intermingling has had happy results. As you walk through Algiers, look at the wrists of the women and the young men, and then think of the ones you see in the Paris métro.

The traveler who is still young will also notice that the women are beautiful.

The best place in Algiers to appreciate this is the terrace of the Café des Facultés, in the rue Michelet, on a Sunday morning in April. Groups of young women in sandals and light, brightly colored dresses walk up and down the street. You can admire them without inhibitions: that is what they come for. The Cintra bar, on the boulevard Galliéni in Oran, is also a good observatory. In Constantine, you can always stroll around the bandstand.

But since the sea is several hundred kilometers away, there is something missing in the people you meet there. In general, and because of this geographical location, Constantine offers fewer attractions, although the quality of its ennui is rather more delicate.

If the traveler arrives in summer, the first thing to do, obviously, is to go down to the beaches surrounding the towns. He will see the same young people, more dazzling because less clothed. The sun gives them the somnolent eyes of great beasts. In this respect, the beaches of Oran are the finest, for both nature and women are wilder there. As for the picturesque, Algiers offers an Arab town, Oran a Negro village and a Spanish district, and Constantine a Jewish quarter.

Algiers has a long necklace of boulevards along the sea; you must walk there at night. Oran has few trees, but the most beautiful stone in the world. Constantine has a suspension bridge where the thing to do is have your photograph taken. On very windy days, the bridge sways to and fro above the deep gorges of the Rummel, and you have the feeling of danger.

I recommend that the sensitive traveler, if he goes to Algiers, drink anisette under the archways around the harbor, go to La Pêcherie in the morning and eat freshly caught fish grilled on charcoal stoves; listen to Arab music in a little café on the rue de la Lyre whose name I've forgotten; sit on the ground, at six in the evening, at the foot of the statue of the due d'Orléans, in Government Square (not for the sake of the duke, but because there are people walking by, and it's pleasant there); have lunch at Padovani's, which is a kind of dance hall on stilts along the seashore, where the life is always easy; visit the Arab cemeteries, first to find calm and beauty there, then to appreciate at their true value the ignoble cities where we stack our dead; go and smoke a cigarette in the Casbah on the rue de Bouchers, in the midst of spleens, fivers, lungs, and intestines that drip blood on everything (the cigarette is necessary, these medieval practices have a strong smell).

As to the rest, you must be able to speak ill of Algiers when in Oran (insist on the commercial superiority of Oran's harbor), make fun of Oran when in Algiers (don't hesitate to accept the notion that Oranians "don't know how to live"), and, at every opportunity, humbly acknowledge the surpassing merit of Algiers in comparison to metropolitan France. Once these concessions have been made, you will be able to appreciate the real superiority of the Algerian over the Frenchman—that is to say, his limitless generosity and his natural hospitality.

And now perhaps I can stop being ironic. After all, the best way to speak of what one loves is to speak of it lightly. When Algeria is concerned, I am always afraid to pluck the inner cord it touches in me, whose blind and serious song I know so well. But at least I can say that it is my true country, and that anywhere in the world I recognize its sons and my brothers by the friendly laughter that fills me at the sight of them. Yes, what I love about the cities of Algeria is not separate from their inhabitants.

That is why I like it best there in the evening when the shops and offices pour into the still, dim streets a chattering crowd that runs right up to the boulevards facing the sea and starts to grow silent there, as night falls and the lights from the sky, from the lighthouses in the bay, and from the streetlamps merge together little by little into a single flickering glow. A whole people stands meditating on the seashore then, a thousand solitudes springing up from the crowd. Then the vast African nights begin, the royal exile, and the celebration of despair that awaits the solitary traveler.

No, you must certainly not go there if you have a lukewarm heart or if your soul is weak and weary! But for those who know what it is to be torn between yes and no, between noon and midnight, between revolt and love, and for those who love funeral pyres along the shore, a flame lies waiting in Algeria.

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