

Turning to Tunisia

Yachts seeking VAT exemption go to N. Africa after Malta opts to join the European Union

By Capt. John Cambell

One of the vagaries of European law allows many yachts to stay in the European Union without paying VAT, provided they leave European waters at least once every 18 months. It used to be that such vessels would visit Malta, often on their way to or from Greece. The visit would clear the VAT status for another 18 months and allow the boat to fill up with duty-free fuel.

Malta went and spoiled this easy option by, rather selfishly, joining the EU. The tax exiles had to seek another option for their day out of the EU, and Tunisia began to be visited by more yachts.

We had always used S&D Yachts (www.sdyachts.com) as our agents when visiting Malta, and had always taken duty-free fuel through its services. Mark at S&D helped found an agency in Tunisia and encouraged us to go to Bizerte in the northeast of the country to take duty-free fuel and to get us officially out of the EU, even if for only a day. The company he co-founded

is Best Marine (www.tunisiayachting.com) and it is the font of all knowledge for the northeastern parts of Tunisia.

Tunisia feels very foreign. I can do no better than quote a friend who described the country as "hot and dusty, with a hint of thievery in the air."

This feeling is certainly heightened by the behavior of the officials in Bizerte. They do their country a grave disservice by asking for "presents" at every turn.

It is a real shame, because Tunisia could and should be a destination in its own right. Most of the people are very friendly and it is certainly an interesting country.

We have been to Tunisia four times and visited three ports. Of the ports we have been to, Monastir in the southeast seems to be the most accustomed to yachts, and perhaps the easiest to visit. The marina has its own Web site at www.marinamonastir.com.

When we were there, we did our own clearance without the benefit of an



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East meets West in the streets of Tunisia.

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agent, and there were no real problems. All the offices for police/immigration and customs are right there in the marina and they are well used to yachts coming and going. There was some pressure here, too, for "presents", but it was nothing as aggressive as in Bizerte.

Town is outside the marina gates, and most supplies could be found within walking distance. The range of foodstuffs is limited; it would be hard to provision here for a fancy charter, but all staples can be found.

It is a popular place for cruising boats to over-winter and several that we talked with had done two- or three-day trips into the desert to visit an oasis. We never had the time to do this, but by all accounts it is worth doing.

The last time we were there, the marina did not accept credit cards. All bills had to be paid in cash. This is one benefit of using an agent; they will pay all the bills and allow you to settle with them by bank transfer.

Perhaps my favorite visit was to the little port of Kelibia, about 70 miles north of Monastir, on the Cap Bon peninsula. We were heading back to Spain from Turkey, and the wind was howling through the gap between Africa and Sicily, as it often does. We were getting cold, wet and tired, so when the autopilot began to complain, it was all the excuse we needed to seek shelter.

Kelibia is where we chose. It is a port of clearance, but not really a place that many yachts visit, which is a shame, as we liked it lot.

The tone for the visit was set by the policeman in charge of immigration. We had to visit his office to complete the paperwork and I feared we were going to reach an impasse when he said we had to pay the fees in the local currency of dinars. Of course we had none and he said he was unable to accept foreign currency of any type. I asked where the nearest bank could be found and he said it was several miles away in the town.

I told him that I would have to walk, since without local money I could not take a bus and there were no taxis. He said it was too far to walk, and with barely a momentary hesitation, he reached in his pocket and gave me a handful of dinars; more than enough for the bus there and a taxi back. We were really taken by this friendly gesture. Can you imagine an

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This little harbor is near the Medina, the oldest part of Bizerte.

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Call pilot station to say you don't want a pilot

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immigration officer in say, Miami, doing this for a Tunisian visitor?

Once we had changed the money and completed the paperwork, we set about exploring the area. We were able to rent a rather tired old pick-up truck for a day, and went off to visit the ruins of a large ancient city that is slowly being excavated. Just to the north of the port is a large fortress on the top of a hill, overlooking the town and port. It is worth the walk up the hill for the views.

The town has a remarkably sophisticated Web site at www.kelibia.net with a good collection of photographs, several of which show the layout of the port. It is in French, but it is easy enough to navigate to the picture section.

It might be hard to find a berth for a larger yacht, but smaller boats should have no problem and it is worth a visit in my opinion.

That brings us to Bizerte. This is the nearest port for the yachts coming from France or Italy who need to prove that they have ventured outside of the EU.

Unfortunately, the officials realize that is the usual purpose of the visit and seem intent on getting what they can out of the situation.

Bizerte is a big commercial harbor, and on approach it is advisable to call the pilot station on channel 16 or 12 to get permission to enter the port. However, make it plain that you do not want or need a pilot. It helps if you are working with an agent, as they will warn the port control of your arrival and will organize a berth for you. Smaller boats will be directed to the yacht club dock and you will moor

stern-to the dock. Be careful of the strong tides that run across the face of the dock. The current can make docking interesting when it is running strongly.

Larger vessels will usually be berthed on the tugboat quay, just inside the entrance of the river. It is a bit intimidating to be moored literally inches from the giant tugboats that work from there, but we have never had a problem and the tug captains we have watched are true experts in handling their vessels.

Occasionally big yachts will be berthed farther up the river, beyond the opening bridge, but there is usually room before the bridge. For any but the smallest of yachts, it is worth using an agent to organize the berth and clearance for you.

The town itself is quite interesting. There is a huge market area selling all kinds of herbs and spices as well as the more prosaic clothes and shoes. To venture into the oldest part of the city, the Medina, is to step back in time. Ali Baba and his 40 thieves spring to mind. There are narrow streets, dark alleyways, mosques, enigmatic doors and lots of cats.

Above the town is a large and well-preserved amphitheater, and just to the east of the port, a picturesque fishing boat harbor.

So why are we not more enthusiastic about visiting Bizerte? Put simply, it is the because of the attitude and greed of the police. They are paid by the government to do their job. I accept that their wages are low, but the agents pay them handsomely on our behalf for doing what they are already paid to

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do. Even this is not enough and they keep asking for "presents" and more "presents."

On our visit last year, despite having been paid by the agent, despite having had "presents" from us, a large, intimidating policeman wanted to sell us the clearance certificate proving to the tax man that we had visited. At this point I rebelled and refused to pay, so they refused to give us the clearance. The agent was most embarrassed and made us an official-looking berthing certificate, which more than satisfied the tax people when we returned to Italy.

Because we were so put off by the attitude of the police, we sailed away as soon as we got the certificate, rather than spend the planned day of R&R ashore. Hopefully one day soon, this particular policeman will lose his job and maybe the attitude of the others will improve to where it will become a pleasure to visit Bizerte.

Although we have not been ourselves, we have heard that Hammamet Marina is less hassle and the agent for Best Marine did say he could organize clearance there. The marina has a Web site at www.yasmine.com.tn.

Another possibility is the marina at Sid Bou Said. This is close to Tunis and also handy for visits to the ruins of Carthage. However, it gets crowded and it is usually hard to find a berth there. Be warned that the entrance is prone to silting, and there are tales of deeper draught yachts sheltering there from a gale, and finding that they cannot leave until the entrance has been dredged. The marina is limited to yachts up to about 35 meters in length. They can be contacted at port-sbs@gnet.tn.

So if you are looking for somewhere that feels foreign, or if you just need to get out of the EU to clear your tax situation, then consider a visit to Tunisia. Let's all hope that the police in Bizerte get their just desserts soon, so we can visit there and enjoy the experience, and until that happy day dawns, there are the other ports in Tunisia that are worth a visit.

Capt. John Campbell has been yacht captain for more than 20 years and a sailor all his life. He is currently in command of the 45m M/Y Timoneer. Comments on this story are welcome at editorial@the-triton.com.



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Port Everglades	04/09	→	Genoa	04/09
Port Everglades	05/09	→	Genoa	06/09
Port Everglades	06/09	→	Genoa	06/09
Port Everglades	08/09	→	Orbia	08/09
Port Everglades	04/09	→	Taranto	04/09
Port Everglades	04/09	→	Toulon	05/09
Port Everglades	06/09	→	Toulon	06/09

TO THE CARIBBEAN

Port Everglades	04/09	→	Martinique	04/09
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TO THE PACIFIC WEST COAST

Port Everglades	04/09	→	Coltito	04/09
Port Everglades	04/09	→	La Paz	05/09
Port Everglades	04/09	→	Vancouver	05/09

TO THE SOUTH PACIFIC

Port Everglades	06/09	→	Auckland	08/09
Port Everglades	06/09	→	Brisbane	07/09

VOYAGES FROM THE MEDITERRANEAN

Genoa	05/09	→	Port Everglades	05/09
Genoa	06/09	→	Port Everglades	06/09
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Toulon	05/09	→	Newport	05/09

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April - August, 2009

Toulon	07/09	→	Newport	08/09
Toulon	07/09	→	Port Everglades	07/09

TO THE CARIBBEAN

Taranto	04/09	→	Martinique	05/09
Toulon	05/09	→	St. Thomas	05/09

VOYAGES FROM THE CARIBBEAN

To the East Coast USA	05/09	→	Newport	05/09
St. Thomas	04/09	→	Port Everglades	04/09

TO THE MEDITERRANEAN

Martinique	04/09	→	Genoa	04/09
Martinique	05/09	→	Palma de Mallorca	06/09

TO THE PACIFIC WEST COAST

St. Thomas	04/09	→	Coltito	04/09
St. Thomas	04/09	→	La Paz	05/09
St. Thomas	04/09	→	Vancouver	05/09

VOYAGES FROM THE PACIFIC WEST COAST

To East Coast USA	06/09	→	Port Everglades	06/09
Vancouver	05/09	→	Port Everglades	06/09

ALONG THE PACIFIC WEST COAST

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Coltito	04/09	→	Vancouver	05/09
La Paz	05/09	→	Vancouver	05/09
Vancouver	05/09	→	Coltito	06/09

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TO THE PACIFIC WEST COAST

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Brisbane	08/09	→	Esanada	09/09
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Brisbane	08/09	→	Auckland	08/09
Brisbane	08/09	→	Papeete	08/09
Brisbane	08/09	→	Toulon	10/09

TO THE EAST COAST USA

Auckland	08/09	→	Port Everglades	09/09
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