

## The Onset of Auto-tourism in Colonial Tunisia

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**Abstract:** This article relates the genesis of auto-tourism in Tunisia during the early colonial period and analyses the various stages it went through. The paper also explores the main features of this new travel/tourist activity and how it was introduced, represented, promoted and developed. This essay is a historical analysis of auto-tourism, a new socio-cultural phenomenon, which reached French colonial Tunisia in the late 19th and early 20th centuries and affected Tunisian society and culture in a variety of ways. The paper equally shows how the automobile contributed over time to the development of Tunisian tourism more generally. The history of tourism in North Africa is awaiting further case studies on the growth of auto-tourism, a highly neglected aspect in the historical literature, because of the significance of auto-tourism to the long-term socio-economic and cultural evolutions of the region.

**Keywords:** colonial Tunisia, auto-tourism, late 19th and early 20th centuries.

### ظهور سياحة السيارات في تونس تحت الاستعمار

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المستخلص: يتناول هذا المقال موضوع نشأة "سياحة السيارات" في تونس خلال الفترة الاستعمارية المبكرة ويدرس المراحل المختلفة التي مرت بها وكيفية ظهورها وتمثيلها والترويج لها وتطويرها. وهي دراسة تاريخية لسياحة السيارات، وهي ظاهرة اجتماعية وثقافية جديدة وصلت تونس تحت الاستعمار الفرنسي في أواخر القرن 19م وبدايات القرن 20م وأثرت على المجتمع التونسي وثقافته بطرق مختلفة. كما تظهر الورقة كيفية ومدى مساهمة هذا النوع من السياحة في تطوير القطاع السياحي في تونس بشكل عام. وتجدر الإشارة إلى أن تاريخ السياحة في شمال إفريقيا في حاجة ماسة إلى مزيد من دراسات الحالة أو دراسات بينية تتعلق بسياحة السيارات، وهو جانب مهمّش للغاية في الأدبيات، وذلك بسبب أهمية هذا النوع من السياحة في التطور الاقتصادي والاجتماعي والثقافي في المنطقة على المدى البعيد.

الكلمات المفتاحية: تونس تحت الاستعمار، سياحة السيارات، أواخر القرن التاسع عشر وأوائل القرن العشرين.

### Introduction

In addition to being a major instrument in French colonial rule in Tunisia, auto-tourism played a significant part in the development of Tourism in Tunisia more generally. Auto-tourism and colonialism went hand in hand. Auto-tourism allowed the French to thoroughly penetrate all the regions of Tunisia and led to the establishment and improvement of road and tourist infrastructures, which would over time help French colonial authorities encourage more French colonists to settle down in Tunisia and at the same time boost tourism in the regency on the short and long-terms.

### **Problem Statement**

This article addresses two major questions: how did auto-tourism develop in French colonial Tunisia? What were its short and long-term implications for the development of tourism more broadly?

### **Hypotheses:**

This study is based on two assumptions: the first is that tourism and colonialism interplayed with each other and the second that auto-tourism was a vital component of the expansion of tourism in colonial Tunisia and after.

### **Study Importance**

This is an extra study on the history of the development of one aspect of tourism in North Africa, which, despite the importance of the region in the international tourist networks since the late 19th century, has not yet had enough share of the extensive body of literature on tourism, and especially auto-tourism.

### **Methodology:**

This is a historical study of a socio-cultural phenomenon, which started in England in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century and known as the 'Grand Tour' and which eventually grew into a mass movement called 'mass tourism' with great short and long-term implications for European, American and later North African (and other) cultures, societies and economies.

This study is based on a variety of French and English primary source materials including the journals of automobile associations, automobile journals, travel accounts, guidebooks, in addition to the secondary literature. It covers the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, and more specifically the period extending between 1881 and 1940.

### **Study layout:**

This study consists of five parts: Part 1 deals with the advent of the automobile and the beginning of a new leisure and cultural form which was becoming increasingly popular then. Part 2 examines the setting up of an automobile infrastructure, which would lead to the development of transport and tourism. Part 3 discusses the role of an 'automobile literature' and how it helped the promotion and proliferation of auto-tourism. Part 4 shows how the appearance of various motor clubs and organizations in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century placed Tunisia (and North Africa more generally) into an international movement of automobile. The last part of the study is about motor sport and motor racing, which with the launching of the first Grand Prix in Tunisia, further promoted Tunisian auto-tourism and tourism.

## Part 1: The Onset

In *Impressions of the road from an automobile*, the famous French writer Marcel Proust, described the sights and sensations, that he experienced during a road trip in France with his driver and companion in these words, “*ce que l’automobile nous a rendu de plus précieux c’est cette admirable independence qui faisait partir (le voyageur) a l’heure qu’il voulait et s’arreter ou il lui plaisait*”. (Proust 1907: 1–3) The new culture of automobilism indeed thrived on the ideals of freedom and mobility as Proust depicted it. At the turn of the twentieth century, an “automotive revolution” was on the way. (Zuelow, 2016: 114) The automobile would soon achieve a central position in modern everyday life, not only as a means of transport and an essential artefact of mobility (Wagner 2013: 265), but also of transformation. The automobile helped generate new leisure and cultural forms, radically different road and other facilities structures, allowed more people to travel faster and further, and more importantly made the rich and later the less fortunate perceive the world and themselves differently. More to the central argument of this paper, the development of automobilism sparked the development of auto-tourism. Automobilism, which started to grow in the early twentieth century, was significantly constructed around tourism.

Yet, despite the centrality of automobilism to the future development of tourism in Tunisia and elsewhere, little has been written on auto-tourism and the literature on the issue remained negligible, diffuse and mostly written from a French colonial perspective and with French sources. Lassaad Dendani showed how the advent of automobilism triggered auto-tourism in Tunisia in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and after. Dandani focused on the role of advertisement and its contribution to the expansion of auto-tourism and later auto racing as new cultural forms. (Dendani, 2006: 75-83) Serge La Barbera dealt with one of the main aspects of auto-tourism and tourism infrastructures: the road, which was a vital instrument of colonization and tourism as well. The colonial road, according to La Barbera, was built for the automobile in the first place, which was a major element of industrial development and a symbol of modernity. (La Barbera, 2009: 73) Gordon Pirie’s work on driving tourism in pre-independence Africa showed how automobile clubs established in the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in colonial Africa encouraged motor touring by printing road reports, maps and travel narratives. (Pirie, 2013: 73)

When auto-tourism appeared in Tunisia in the late nineteenth century and after, Tunisia had already been a well-known tourist destination witnessing several forms of tourism. Tunisia was then a winter resort for a growing number of tourists (Manai, 2018: 55), a famous spa station (Jennings 2006: 155) and a country where the lovers of archaeology and ethnography have a great deal to explore and a country with lovely seaside towns. (Zytnicki & Kazdaghli, 2009: 5–14) Auto-tourism benefited from already well-established traditions, tourist forms and a decent infrastructure. The first cars started to circulate in Tunisia since the last nineteenth century. (Planchon, 1953: 51) Despite the small number of cars, not more than a few dozens, an 1897 Beylical decree established the first road code of the regency.

Car drivers, during this period, were subject to strict road regulations and were generally perceived as dangerous for public safety. Yet, this did not discourage the import of cars, especially French ones at a time when the French car industry was burgeoning. The number of imported cars kept increasing from a few dozens to 1.102 between 1900 and 1914 (Planchon, 1953: 53), then declined during the 1929-30 world economic crisis, and then rose again before it was entirely interrupted by the Second World War.

The advent of the new machine clearly provoked a real dynamic in the public transport sector. Similarly, it helped to modernize the forms of individual mobility, by allowing people to move more freely and comfortably. Soon, the car became a vital component of the daily life of the French colonizers, whose numbers were on the rise, and the Tunisian elite of the regency. Tunisian Tourism seem to have entered a new stage of its growth with the popularization of the automobile, its commercialization, and its integration in the tourist practices and habits.

## **Part 2: The automobile infrastructure**

After having been an instrument for transforming transport, the automobile soon turned into an engine for the development of transport. Since the early twentieth century, tourist trips and excursions multiplied and became visible practices. The impact of the automobile on tourism did not mean the appearance of various types of transport only. There were, of course, obstacles to such developments.

The lack of an adequate road infrastructure had somehow affected the pace of the growth of automobile excursions. The first tourist automobile excursions and tours were generally thought to be risky and even dangerous. The automotive pioneers faced many challenges: cars often broke down and were not yet largely reliable and the roadways assured frequent breakdowns. "We raced through Tebourba, " Lady Warren complained in 1922, "the road was really very bad, crowded with camels, donkeys, sheep, goats, and people, and full of holes – also very dusty". (Warren, 1922: 114) Francis Miltoun had the same impressions a few years earlier, "The roads of Algeria and Tunisia are marvelously good when they exist. The Arab roads and routes of old were simple trails, trodden in the herb-grown, sandy soil by the barefoot of men, or camels, or the hoofs of horses and mules. So narrow were these trails that two caravans could not pass each other". (Miltoun, 1908: 23) Moreover, drivers could not venture too far from towns and villages, because the early cars were slow and drivers had to make sure at the end of the journey that they could have food and accommodation somewhere. The automobile was not welcome only to those concerned with safety, especially with the advertisements of the early accidents, but also, and more importantly to the horse carriage owners, the railway companies, and the package tour companies, which considered the automobile as a major prospective competitor.

Yet, these obstacles and many others did not discourage automotive fans and enthusiasts to take the risks and reach the farthest and least safe areas of the regency such as the desert in the south, particularly that roads and routes became safer over time. The advent of French colonialism and the

presence of French troops all over the territory reinforced the feeling of safety among tourists. Writing about parts of the North of the Regency, Thomas Cook, the pioneer package tour organizer, wrote, "This once inaccessible region is now covered with good roads, is perfectly safe for travelers". (Cook, 1913: 360) Tourism accompanied colonialism and roads in French colonial Tunisia had a greater role than the automobile, for which they were built in the first place. Roads were furthermore a vital engine of industrial growth and a symbol of modernity. The French colonizers' willingness to demonstrate that they represented a technical civilization contributed to the popularization of the automobile. Road building helped the colonizers to control the Tunisian territory especially the remote areas in the north and the south. (La Barbera, 2009: 196) Between 1924 and 1945, the road network in Tunisia extended from 5600 km to 8000 km. This network was primarily built for the French armed forces with the aim of penetrating the most remote areas in the regency and facilitate access to the French settlers. This penetration indirectly generated a growing interest in auto-tourism. This network, nevertheless, was not built without pressures from the *Companie Generale Transatlantique* (or Transat) and the *Office Tunisien du Tourisme*, which were eager to develop tourist activities everywhere in Tunisia.

"It seems very likely, " Zuelow argues, " that empire worked as a sort of vector along which tourism could grow and expand". (Zuelow, 2016: 101) Empire and tourism were strongly related and empire managed to shape patterns of tourism development such as auto-tourism. Similarly, tourism helped building the empire, which, of course, suggests that the models of tourism which started to grow in Europe, the United States of America and then extended elsewhere, including colonies such as the regency of Tunisia, could be qualified as colonial modes of tourism. (Baranowski, 2015: 107)

If road infrastructures improved and became safer, automobiles also seem to have gradually adapted to the realities of the Regency namely that of the climate and the newly developed infrastructure. Most of the first made automobiles were convertible ones with caterpillar tracks capable of circulation in all terrains and in particular in the desert. Then, things started to change little by little and automobiles with compartments appeared and could now confront any climate including cold and any climatic change. Over time, the early automobile proved very resilient. Since the early twentieth century, already, some tourist experts were adamant about the contribution of the automobile to progress and to the development of tourism. One of them claimed that, "*l'automobilisme, a n'en pas douter, deviendra l'un des principaux piliers de l'edifice du progres qu'il s'agit d'elever sur nos rives africaines; il apparait comme le moteur puissant qui poussera la-bas le peuple des touristes*". (Dendani, 2006: 79-80)

### Part 3: Automobiles and 'automotive literature

With the automobile, there emerged a type of literary production favourable to the development of tourism and to the automobile as well. The origins of auto-tourism go back to the early twentieth century when a tourist activity became visible. (Dendani, 2006: 78) Many contemporary local newspapers

described this growing cultural form during winter, when Tunisia was mostly a popular winter resort for most tourists. *The Depeche Tunisienne*, a popular local newspaper, referred to this new kind of activity in these words, "lorsque le mouvement des hiverneurs atteint son plein, M. Peyrard, que l'on peut considerer ici (en Tunisie) comme le plus actif propagandiste de l'automobile, preparera quelques grandes excursions avec plusieurs voitures, et dont le but sera Sfax and Gabes". (*Depeche Tunisienne* 1908: 8 November) Since 1899, Peyrard made many exploration trips by car and could be considered as the first tourist having used this means of transport between the southern town of Gabes and Tunis the capital. (Automobile Club de Tunis, 1926: 26) This was how the South of the regency and the Sahara grew into privileged areas provoking a rush of the pioneering tourists. This period also witnessed the first so-called 'sand cruises'. The *Tunisie Illustree* (Illustrated Tunisia), a monthly magazine first published in 1911, played a vital role in advertising the early automobile excursions. De Mazieres, for example, published an article titled 'A Tour in the Tunisian South' in April 1910, 'Auto rambles in the South' in March 1911 and the 'Car in the Desert' in 1914. Similarly, there is a wealth of photos on these excursions, which confirms a growing auto-tourism literature.

As for tourist guides, these increasingly showed dedication to the automobile. Many of them were plainly called 'guides of auto-tourism', or were linked to the sphere of automobilism, an indication that a new form of tourism appeared. Like the nineteenth-century guides, many manuals focused on motor touring advised tourists on where to go, what to do and what is worth seeing. They listed accommodations, suggested routes, and advised on the best sites/sights. (Zuelow, 2016: 123) The early tourists were for sure in need for instructions, which the tourist guidebooks largely provided. The Michelin guides launched at the turn of the twentieth century, and which would soon acquire a world reputation, is a good illustrative example of the extent of the impact of these guides, which reached not only the automobile market, which was in its infancy, but the tourist sector as well. The Michelin guides told tourists where and what to eat. It was thanks to the Michelin guides, that the idea that it is in France that good cuisine was made, was originally constructed. The ranking system of restaurants put forward by the Michelin brothers and advertised in the guide, which kept improving, facilitated life for tourists visiting France and then other countries. A growing number of tourists would use the guide, travel by car and trust the choice made by Michelin. The *Guide Touristique de la Tunisie* (Tourist Guide of Tunisia), published in 1938 by the Automobile Club de Tunisie, is another example of the advent of a new culture, that of the automobile. This guide targeted those tourists who travelled by car. Marcel Gandolphe, the guide's author, and a prolific writer on colonial Tunisia, published one study entitled *La Tunisie Touristique* (Touristic Tunisia), in which he showed Tunisia's potential for developing auto-tourism. (Gandolphe, 1930: 7) One can also cite other works demonstrating Tunisia's capacity as a land of auto-tourism including *La Tunisie en Automobile* (Tunisia by Automobile), an album of the Auto-Palace itineraries, a car company.

Apart from local newspapers, tourist guides, the tourists' own accounts and testimonies, the annotations of administrative officers, and the synopsis of propaganda movies, the automobile found support in the publications of tourist and package tour companies. A whole range of organizations and bodies also served to promote tourism in the French colonies, strove to foster the French settlers' attachment to the colony and to show that colonialism was as equally beneficial to the metropole as to the colony. Among these organizations was the Touring Club de France (TCF) founded in 1891 with the aim of advertising all forms of tourism. There was clearly an interest in auto-tourism on the part of the club, which did everything to enlarge the space devoted to leisure. The club arranged and organized automobile trips and excursions; pressed for the building of new roads and routes; circulated guides and maps and forced hotel owners to respect sanitary standards. But most importantly, the Touring Club de France launched the so-called Initiative syndicates, with delegates working all over the regency. Since 1896, the TCF showed an interest in Tunisia. (Bacha, 2009: 160) The Club's guides were first published in 1897. The most popular of these was the one called *Grand Tourisme en Algérie et en Tunisie*, which in its 1910 edition proposed a tour in the Tunisian Sahara and oases. The guide starts with a section on the roads, which reads, "Algeria and Tunisia are covered by a network of well-built roads and most favourable for motorists [20, 000 kilometers]. They are maintained in excellent condition and are certainly more comfortable than the roads in many European states. They have no reason to envy similar roads in France." More particular to Tunisia, the *Guide Routier Tunisien* (Tunisian Road Guide) published nearly every year, followed the pace of the improvement of the road networks, and listed all the roads and routes all over the country with details on distances and the nature of roads. (Goussaud-Falgas, 2006: 149)

Over time, auto-tourism developed and reached its zenith. The automobile was associated to a very large tourist practice. According to Henry Hurenche, "quand on veut voyager, et bien entendu qu'on peut voyager a sa fantaisie, il faut aller en automobile: c'est la seulement que se trouvent reunies toutes les conditions qui assurent le charme du voyage..." (when we want to travel, and of course, we can travel as we fancy, we must use the automobile, only then can we ensure that all the conditions for a charming journey are there...). (Hurenche, 1919: 46) For that matter, auto-tourism started to attract the first investors after World War I. It was the *Companie Generale Transat antique* or French Line, as the famous French maritime company was also named, which launched a special event in order to encourage auto-tourism in North Africa. The French Line organized racing circuits in the late 1920s, which, not only helped the popularization of auto-tourism, but equally Tunisian and North African tourism. (Manai, 2018: 58)

#### **Part 4: Motor clubs and organizations**

The automobile clubs established in the first decade of the twentieth century in French colonial Africa were part of an international movement of automobilism, which, in a few years, saw automobile enthusiasts found the American Automobile Association (AAA) in the United States in 1902. Australia

soon followed suit. The Automobile Club de France was launched in 1903 and the International Automobile federation in 1904. It is interesting to note that South Africa had its own motor club association in 1901. (Pirie, 2013: 76) The movement would continue. These motor clubs and associations were the real actors in the proliferation and promotion of automobilism and auto-tourism. The automobile organizations, alongside the railway companies, shipping operators, and tour companies such as Thomas Cook's, had a significant contribution to the growth of socially and racially delineated domestic and cross-border tourism in the early decades of the twentieth century.

The American Automobile Association had its affiliated club in Tunisia since the beginning of the century and Tunisia was listed among the countries honoring customs documents and international permits. In Tunisia, tourists using their cars had to pay a ten-franc tax per day for a visit up to two months, a tax payable to the customs at the time of entry. (American Automobile Association, 1937: 23) The association was equally reputed for organizing motor itineraries in North Africa. One of the most popular tours was a comprehensive one in North Africa and the Near East countries beginning in Tangier and ending in Istanbul. The itinerary did not have a suggested time limit, but mentioned the road conditions and points of interest in the various countries along the way. "Included in the tour are the French provinces of Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia, the Italian provinces of Tripolitania and Cyrenaica, Egypt, Palestine, Syria, Iraq, Iran and Turkey". (American Automobile Association, 1937: 52)

In the same way, The *Comite d'Hivernage de Tunis et de la Tunisie* established in 1903 to promote winter tourism for French tourists and prospective settlers in particular could not afford at the time not to get involved in the propagation of auto-tourism and the contribution to this type of tourism, which was visibly becoming a vogue. The Committee used its *Livret-Guide* freely distributed to advertise for trips, excursions, and automobile racing. The committee also organized its own tours all over Tunisia combining train and car and increasingly involving the car as the major means of transport. The committee organized, for example, what it called 'long excursions', with cars having several seats for 20 to 25 francs a day. (*livret-Guide*, 1906, p.87) one could also spend one day in Bizerte, a seaside town north of the regency, by car for just 12 francs. (*Livret-Guide*, 1906: 73)

The Automobile Club of Tunis (A.C.T) played, of course, a pivotal role in the development of auto-tourism. It was after all the body in charge of promoting automobilism and auto-tourism. It was first established in 1912 under the name of the *Automobile Club Français de Tunisie* (The French Automobile Club of Tunisia), and then converted in 1925 to the A.C.T. (*Revue Automobile Club de la Tunisie*, 1926) The club would soon change tourist habits and place the car at the centre of tourist forms by organizing new activities imported from The United States and many European countries, where auto-tourism was already well developed. These activities included camping, picnics and long trips. The Automobile Club of Tunisia launched its own journal, the *Revue Automobile de la Tunisie* and organized many conferences to make auto-tourism a daily practice among the Regency inhabitants.



## Part 5: Motorsport

The appearance of motor racing and Grand Prix in Tunisia in the early twentieth century reflected the new message brought about by the automobile and which, was expressed in these car-sporting events. At the beginning, motor races complemented the automobile trips and excursions. All of them had the same spirit and objectives, that of discovering and enjoying space and sights/sites. In other terms, motor races were perceived as motives for the promotion of tourism as D'orgeval put it: "*Des raids automobiles de Tunis a Tripoli ont demontre recemment l'aisance des communications routieres entre la Regence et la colonie Italienne voisine. C'est un appoint de plus en faveur de l'essor du tourisme automobile en Afrique du Nord*". (D'orgeval, 1930: 53) Over time, the number of motor races increased such as the one organized on 3 April 1930, to celebrate the centenary of Algerian colonization or the Mediterranean Sahara Rally, organized in the same year by a wealthy French settler and his family. (*Comite de l'Afrique de Nord*, 1930: 9)

Tunisia was also affiliated to the famous Royal Automobile Club. The club agent in Tunis, Mr. Purnell, used to arrange sporting expeditions into the desert, when required and supply all information on the events. Tunisia imposed a custom duty of eight per cent ad valorem on cars entering the territory. If a car was introduced into Tunis by road from Algeria, the custom officials will usually allow the vehicle to enter free of duty if the owner explained his intention to tour the country for six months. (*Royal Automobile Club Year Book*, 1915: 74) It was, however, in June 1928 that motor sport was officially launched in Tunisia with the organization of the first Grand Prix. Similar races had already been organized in the regency. On 20 December 1925, the Course de Cote de Carthage was organized in collaboration with the *Auto Moto Club de Nice*, the Tunisian section. (Automobile Club de Tunis, 1926: 65)

## Conclusion:

In closing, it seems that the rise of Tunisian tourism was much boosted with the advent of the automobile. Colonial Tunisia played a favorable role in the promotion and thriving of auto-tourism in North Africa and elsewhere. Tunisian laws facilitated automobilism and Tunisian custom laws were flexible, especially with French tourists and settlers. Colonialism and auto-tourism surely intersected. Several factors, nevertheless, hampered such progress in its early stages like the lack of an adequate road and hotel infrastructure, which could have motivated more tourists to visit the French protectorate. In addition, the absence of car repair and maintenance centers as well as the sale of spare parts were factors, which to a certain extent slowed down auto-tourism. Yet, over time, Tunisia managed to overcome these handicaps and others and to emerge after two world wars and the end of French colonialism, a country of auto-tourism and tourism more generally.

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