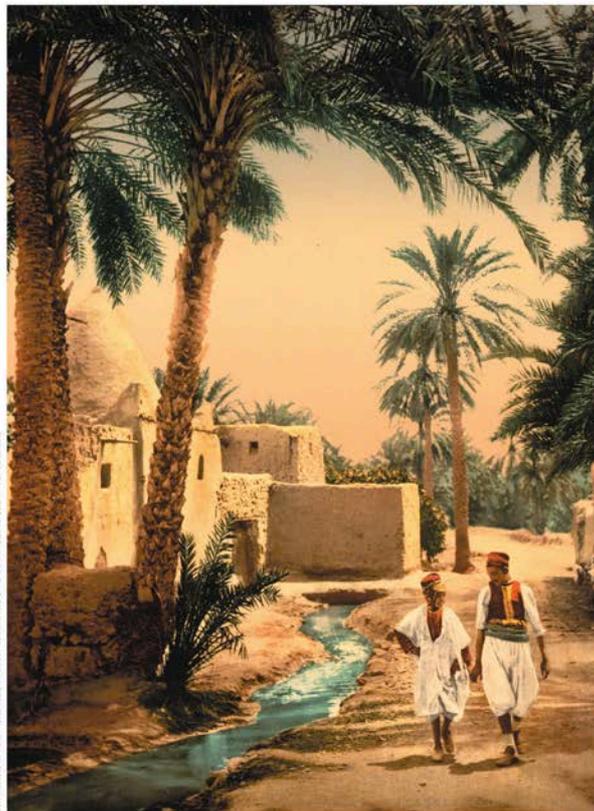


# MUSÉE MATISSE

Exhibition  
*BISKRA: DREAMS OF AN OASIS*



BISKRA, OASIS AU DÉSERT, HENRI MATISSE, MANUSCRIT DE DES JARDINS PHOTOGRAPHIÉS JARDIN, BRUNO DE COSSIORE.

## MUSÉE MATISSE **BISKRA : RÊVER D'UNE OASIS**

164, avenue des Arènes de Cimiez  
[www.musee-matisse.org](http://www.musee-matisse.org)

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MUSÉE MATISSE



VILLE DE NICE

## 1. INTRODUCTION

This exhibition stages the most famous Algerian oasis – Biskra – as the site of rich cultural, artistic and ecological exchange over a period of 170 years. Once world-famous as an exotic tourist destination, Biskra demands to be seen anew by a new generation.

Biskra is the capital of the Ziban, a region of rich oases (Zab) at the start of the Algerian Sahara, beyond the Aurès Mountains. Its warm winter climate, the presence of hot springs, and a steam-train connexion to Algiers from 1888 attracted European winter tourists. Novelists, painters, photographers and musicians found in this haven of greenery in the desert – albeit one made available to them by colonial conquest – a kind of Utopia that might catapult them beyond the humdrum of modern city life.

Resident photographers the Maure family fixed the town's image in photos and postcards. Painters of talent from Gustave Guillaumet (1862) to Henri Matisse (1906) and Maurice Denis (1920) painted the mud-brick villages and mosques of Vieux-Biskra, the date-palms and markets, the horsemen and Ouled-Naïl dancing-girls, preferring the premodern to the fact of colonialism: French soldiers and modern buildings. Many Biskrans worked with the foreign presence imposed on them, despite a history of regional insurrection (1844 - 1876) and the hard-fought war of Algerian Independence (1954 - 1962). Today Biskra is a modern regional capital of 300,000, but this exhibition explores ways in which Biskra can be remembered.

## 2. ARCHITECTURE AND URBANISM

Biskra was long a zone of contrast between the meandering mud-brick villages of the oasis and the grid of the modern French town built nearby. The oasis had been occupied since pre-Roman times; under Turkish rule seven small villages, each with a mosque, were scattered around a central Casbah in the vast date-palm groves. With the French occupation of 1844, a new fort for 500 soldiers became the kernel of a model colonial town. An initial hotel (Le Sahara, 1858), an Officer's Club, a small church, and public gardens in the French style followed.

After the train line from Batna reached Biskra in 1888, the number of tourists increased twenty-fold. In rapid succession, a Town Hall, a Casino and two large hotels were built: the Royal and the Palace, both in neo-Moorish style. The exhibition documents these key elements in Biskra's architectural heritage.

The footprint of Biskra-Ville was largely unchanged until the 1950s, when new residential and commercial zones were built. After the Algerian War of Independence most of the European population left. Biskra, capital of a province or Wilaya, experienced massive urban growth from the late 1960s, with the date-palm plantations overtaken by new housing estates. Today Biskra is a modern city based around Wilaya administration, the Mohamed Khider University, agriculture, trade and tourism.

### 3. TOURISM

In the heyday of luxury winter tourism around 1910 Biskra was known as the “Monte Carlo of the South”. It offered visitors mild winters, the novelty of desert life, and the therapeutic baths of Hammam Salahine. The official “season” lasted from 1 November to 1 May (in summer Biskra could attain temperatures of 50°).

English, German and American tourists outnumbered the French. Biskra had a following among European aristocrats, led by the Comte de Landon, whose famous botanical garden, maintained by an army of Biskri gardeners, was a favourite haunt of tourists (although it was closed to the locals). The Casino de Biskra offered gambling and a theatre for variety shows, including dances by the women of the Ouled-Nail people, with their regalia of silver Berber jewellery. Despite huge social divisions, many Biskris were employed in the tourist trade.

Camel-rides, excursions to the desert, a local race-track – with horses, running camels, and the great spectacle of the *fantasia* – were popular local and tourist events. After 1920 Biskra was a hub for desert tours in 6-wheel Citroëns run by the Transatlantique P/L between the Moroccan and Tunisian coasts.

Luxury tourism faltered after the centenary of French Algeria (1930) and the Wall Street Crash; it ceased altogether with World War II, when Biskra was occupied by Axis and then Allied forces. The next wave of tourism came after Independence (1962), with the national tourism focussed on the modern Hôtel les Ziban (1968). Today, tourism at Biskra is again on the rise, with the vast new tourist complex les Jardins du Ziban to open in late 2017.

### 4. PAINTING

Biskra was a destination for European painters just as were the villages of Barbizon, Pont-Aven or Skagen, although Biskra is not associated with a specific style. Eugène Fromentin was the first artist to visit in 1848 as a guest of the French army (the uprising and massacre at the nearby Zaatcha oasis took place the following year). The fame of Biskra as a place to study Bedouin and Chaouia ‘types’, luxurious vegetation and pastoral scenes in relative safety grew from the 1860s with Gustave Guillaumet and Frederick Bridgman (an American student of Gérôme).

After 1888 an avalanche of academic artists took the new train to the Ziban. The imagery of Biskra helped secure the reputations in Paris of Bompard, Lazerges, Noiré, and Caire-Tonnoir. Avant-gardists like the Fauve Matisse or the Futurist Henri Valensi travelled to Biskra in the new century.

After WWI artists who had been born in Algeria, like Yvonne Kleiss-Herzig, who specialised in ethnographic paintings, supplemented the ranks of scholarship-holders to Algiers, like Henri Clamens. The celebrity Oskar Kokoschka painted the desert panorama from the Col de Sfa in 1928. In the post-Independence period a young

Biskri like Tahar Ouamane would make his career in Algiers and return to Biskra as a muralist in the 1990s. Today artists from Slimane Bécha, a naïve realist concerned with Biskran heritage, to Noureddine Tabhera, with his tattoo-based abstractions, enliven the Biskra art scene as do many young photographers.

## 5. AVANT GARDE SENSIBILITY

The author and future Nobel laureate André Gide was the earliest of four avant-gardists whose sensibilities were enriched by Biskra. Seeking a cure for his pneumonia in 1892, Gide fell in love with the place and its people, visiting ten more times. His *L'Immoraliste* (1902) and other texts form the richest body of French writing on Biskra.

Also in Algeria for his health was the Belgian Henri Evenepoel, who painted in Blida and Tipasa in 1897-98. With his handheld Kodak camera, Evenepoel then brought a new informality to the photography of Biskra and Sidi Okba, filling an album with scenes of interaction between local people and his father Edmond.

Flush with funds from the sale of his *Bonheur de Vivre*, Henri Matisse spent a week in Biskra in April 1906. He visited Sidi Okba, witnessed the desert, a circumcision ceremony, and Ouled-Nail dance. Matisse's only Algerian painting, *Rue à Biskra*, was a small but highly-coloured Pointillist canvas. It precedes his famous *Nu bleu – Souvenir de Biskra*, his major figural work of 1907 painted back in Paris, but inspired by things seen at Biskra.

Béla Bartók was an established composer and ethnomusicologist when he visited Biskra in 1913. With his wife Marta he made 90 recordings of Arabic and Chaouia song and music on an Edison wax-cylinder phonograph. A sample of these recordings may be heard, along with Bartók's compositions inspired by Arab folk music, in the exhibition space.

## 6. PHOTOGRAPHY

Photography is as crucial to understanding historic Biskra as it is Paris or Berlin. The intensity of light and the fashion for so-called Oriental subjects drew practitioners there as early as 1850, as a daguerreotype of the mosque of Sidi Fedhal attests. A wealth of images appeared in 1856, when noted Parisian photographer J. -F. Moulin produced views of Old Biskra and portraits of the Sheik-el-Arab, Bou-Azziz Ben Gana, whose family ruled Biskra alongside the French for another century.

Conventional photography arrived with the first resident practitioner, Auguste Maure, a young settler who by 1870 had set up the studio "Photographie Saharienne". Maure did much to establish the iconography of Biskra, supplementing views for tourist albums with *cartes de visite* of soldiers and settlers. Jean Geiser and Alexandre Leroux of Algiers, and in particular cameramen working for Neurdein

frères of Paris, made glass-plate negatives that could be developed on paper, and sold for tourists to paste into albums. Picture-postcards began in 1895 and proliferated from 1905, providing a detailed picture of the oasis and its peoples.

Snapshot photography using a handheld Kodak is represented by the personal album of Henri Evenepoel. Another popular camera format, the stereoscope, was viewed using glass-plate or paper positives, and binocular readers to give a 3-D effect. The early colour photographs of family groups near Sidi Okba or children in the palm-gardens, are the 'autochromes' patented by Lumière. Aerial photography, which began with the first flights from Biskra aerodrome in 1912, was popularised in the 1950s postcards issued by CIM.

## 7. MUSIC

According to Béla Bartók, the great Hungarian composer, the music of Biskra and its region could be divided into 'Arab' café music, much like that of Cairo or Istanbul, and the more authentic rural music, which he recorded in 1913 using an Edison Phonograph. This music, using a narrow range of tones and half-tones, was based around drum and voice, accompanied by the *qasba* (flute with five or six holes), the *gazal* (a kind of cornet), or *mezoued* (sheepskin and horn bagpipes)). Five of Bartók's short recordings are presented here, as well as excerpts of his orchestral pieces of the 1920s inspired by the music of the Ziban.

The music of itinerant black performers in Biskra, probably *Gnawa* men, was celebrated by André Gide. They are the musicians who most often appear in early photographs, performing drum concerts with *derboukas* (conical ceramic drums) and large tambourines, but also singing to the accompaniment of single-string lutes, or leading the melody with a *mezoued*.

In the Ziban today there is a great variety of music, from contemporary *rai* and hip-hop styles popular with the younger generations, to a range of traditional musics: Chaouia song of the Aurès, Andalusian orchestral music, and *mezoued* and drum ensembles. A selection of these styles can be heard in the exhibition space.

## 8. CINEMA

Within a year of its invention in 1895, the crank-operated 'Cinématographe' of the Lumière Brothers had arrived in the bright sunlight of the Maghreb. Lumière 'operators' made dozens of short films (50 seconds each) in Tunis and Algiers. *Biskra: Une noce indigène*, shot by Félix Mesguich for Lumière in 1906, shows a parade of wedding palanquins on camel-back in front of the Biskra Casino. *Biskra : Enfants indigènes ramassant des pièces de monnaie*, a subject known from salon-paintings, was shot in a nearby market-place.

Imaginary filmic treatments of Biskra abounded. The Briton Robert S. Hichens' famous novel *The Garden of Allah* of 1904 was adapted to the stage in 1912, and silent film versions appeared in 1916 and 1927 (the latter shot by Rex Ingram in Nice and on location in Biskra). The third version, starring Marlene Dietrich and Charles Boyer, was shot in Arizona and Hollywood in 1936; it was only the second film made in Technicolor. Edith Maude Hull's novel *The Sheik* of 1919 was immediately adapted for the screen, starring the matinée idol Rudolph Valentino. The initial scenes are based on a fanciful version of the Biskra Casino: the oasis and the desert as dreamscapes for romance and loss of self.

Professor Roger Benjamin, Curator of the Exhibition