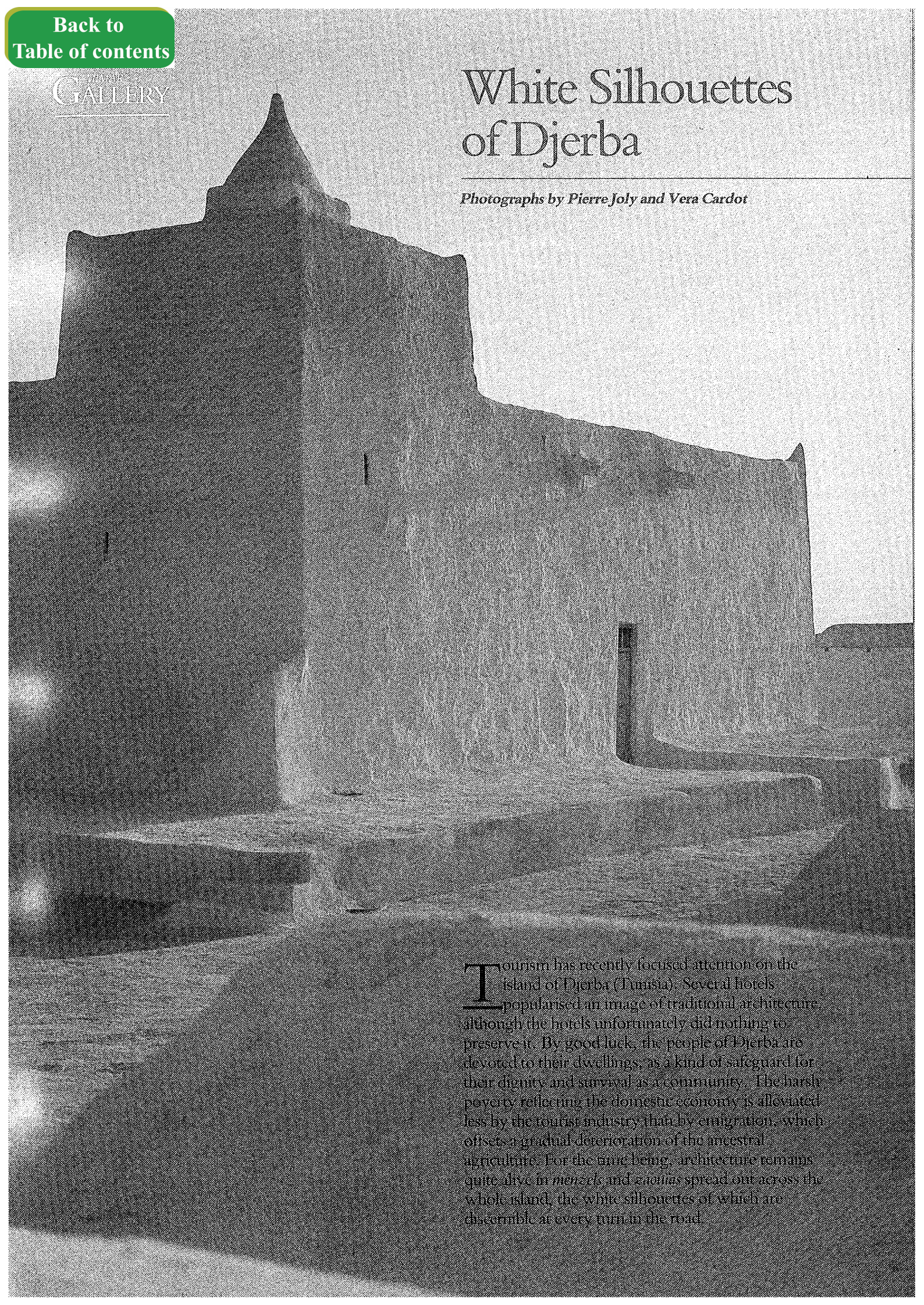
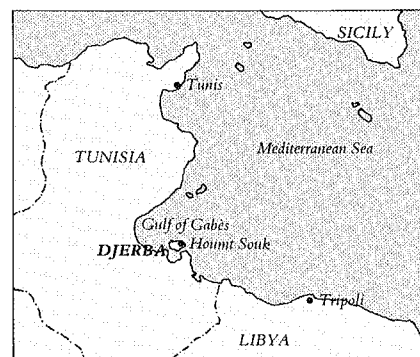


White Silhouettes of Djerba

Photographs by Pierre Joly and Vera Cardot



Tourism has recently focused attention on the island of Djerba (Tunisia). Several hotels popularised an image of traditional architecture, although the hotels unfortunately did nothing to preserve it. By good luck, the people of Djerba are devoted to their dwellings, as a kind of safeguard for their dignity and survival as a community. The harsh poverty reflecting the domestic economy is alleviated less by the tourist industry than by emigration, which offsets a gradual deterioration of the ancestral agriculture. For the time being, architecture remains quite alive in *menzels* and *zawayas* spread out across the whole island, the white silhouettes of which are discernible at every turn in the road.



The dwellings, like the mosques (said to be more than 300), are scattered throughout Djerba. Habitations are of an agricultural type, and since economic organisation is based entirely upon the family, where there is much inter-marriage within rather closed, tightly-knit communities, the typology of houses is easily reproduced. Traditionally, one's neighbours were undoubtedly one's relatives. Even today, in spite of the introduction of individual ownership of property

and the changes in relationships which have resulted therefrom, the proximity and even sometimes continuity of dwellings corresponds to parental linkages. The dispersion of religious buildings also reflects the ancient existence of closed communities where religion was a private, almost family affair.

Mosque of El May. In front of the prayer hall, which has high buttressing, there is the vault of the cistern that keeps the indispensable reservoir of water.

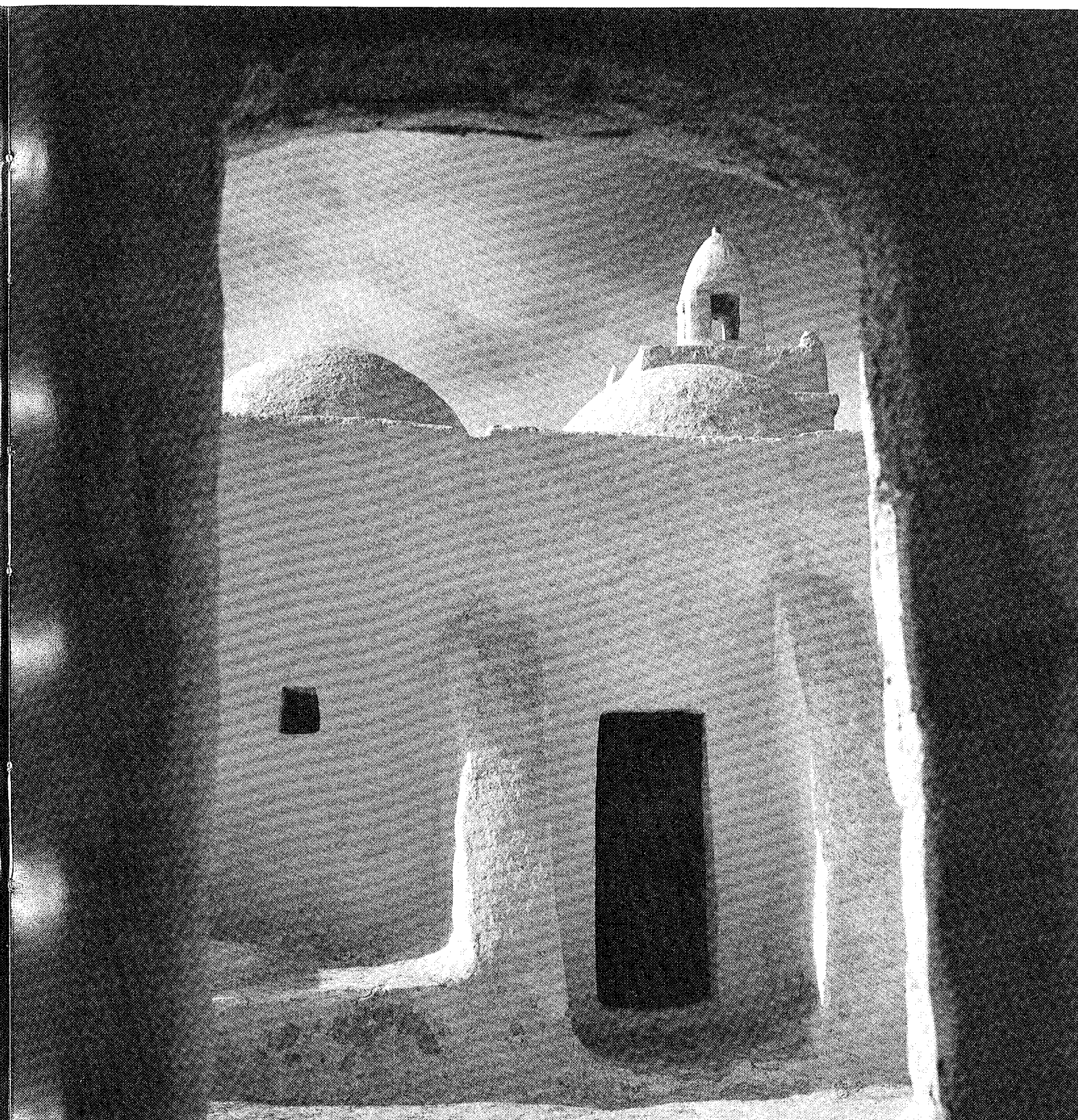
The *menzel* is a seemingly fortified house, including particularly towers at the angles which cause it to resemble a small chateau-fort. These are really only rooms for summer living, where sea breezes bring into them the evening coolness. The house is turned inward on itself, for intimate living and domestic economic activity. This architectural organisation is part of a social history which outsiders are barely allowed to perceive; the people of Djerba do not have a written history.

Their domestic organisation did not make this necessary. Since their society was geared to preserving an appearance of more or less equality among the essential elements — the families — there are few historical personalities who emerged. Without kings or heroes, who was there for history to be written about?

There is nevertheless little doubt that this architecture perpetuates a very ancient tradition. The dwellings of Greece were arranged in a similar fashion

and the *menzels* resemble the houses inhabited by the peasants of Crete and Attica many centuries before the Christian era. The resemblance in spatial arrangement, as well as mode of construction, is quite striking. For example, the construction of roof-terraces follows a very precise tech-

Prayer hall of a zaouïa near Cape Taguermess. There are nearly 300 of these on the island, it is said, each one of which answers the needs of a small community, jealous of its autonomy.



nique: beams are laid from one wall to another and covered with reeds, onto these is placed a layer of seaweed in strips, collected from the beaches and dried. Then comes a layer of clay flattened with care. The strange thing is that this technique persists elsewhere in the Mediterranean basin. The author has seen numerous examples, and one can even note that the kind of wood most generally employed for the rafters is a kind of thuya which the people of Djerba imported in

the past from Libya. The replication of certain techniques brings with it a permanence of architectural traditions.

The architecture of Djerba is essentially that by masons, of walls constructed of whatever was at hand, using earth and sand as binders, clay, and then whitewashed with lime on both faces. Roofs are either terraces, as mentioned previously, or in the form of vaults and cupolas. The seductive allure of these is difficult to define: the architecture is in-

deed quite tactile, in contrast with an architecture of purely visual relationships of form, which tends to become an architecture of decoration because we

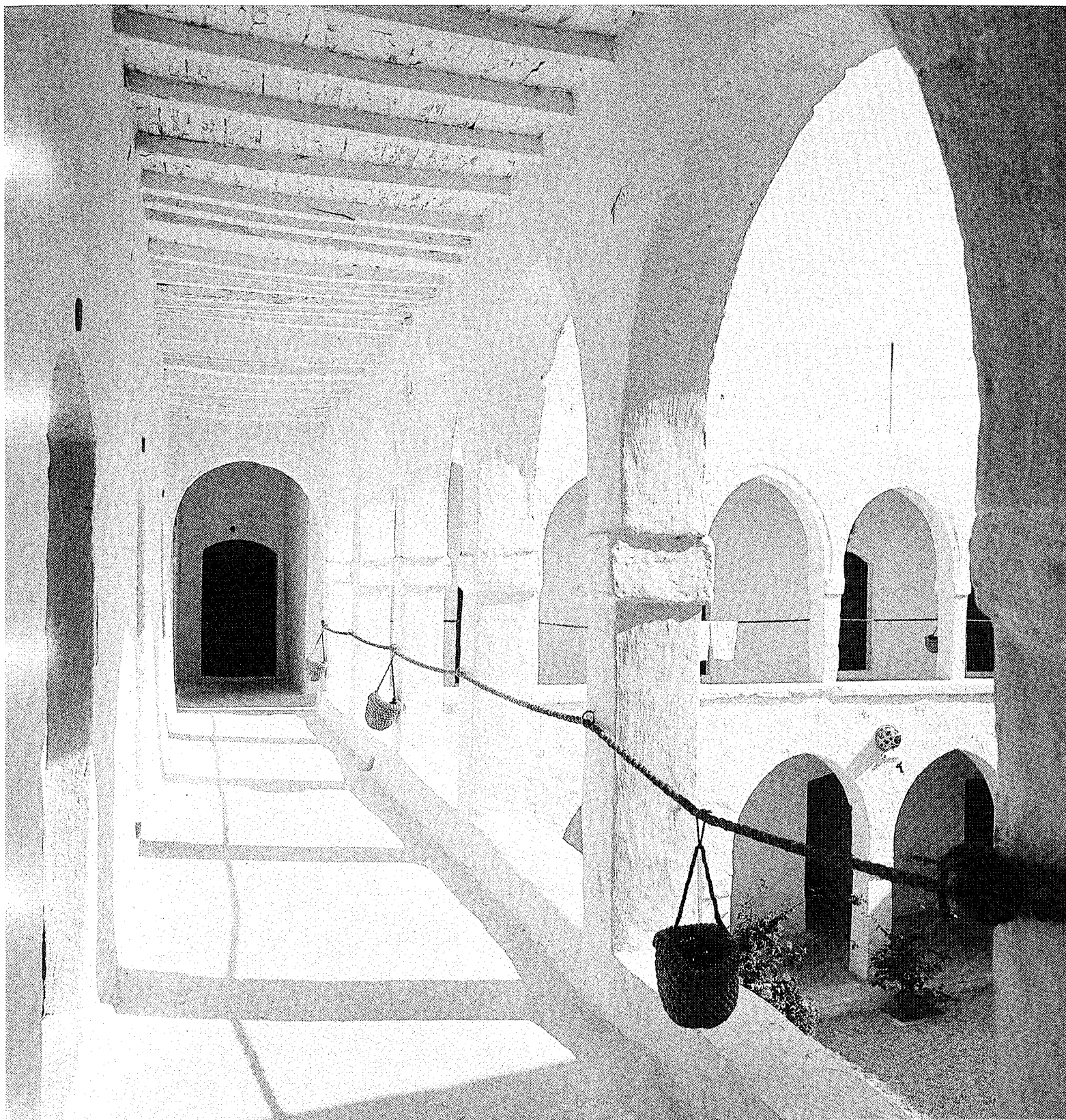
A menzel in the region of Mahboubine. The traditional house of a Djerba peasant is a dwelling with surprising dimensions. At each of the four corners, there are ghorfas which are rooms for enjoying the evening coolness of sea breezes. The small cupolas cover the doukkana where beds are made up in bad weather.



draw it and, through graphic design, the third dimension appears. Nothing of that here in Djerba: each plane, each line was moulded, almost caressed by men's hands. The unity here is in no way a visual unity; the unity of a single viewpoint would exhaust the diversity of the work of art. It is rather a unity of a succession of spaces apprehended as one passes through them, but impossible to seize in a single perception. You can have the rare experience, in visiting Djerba, of discover-

ing a different sensibility. The beauty is not one but manifold.

This once-abandoned fondouk near the main market of the island (Houmt Souk) has found a new use as a hotel, in keeping with its tradition. The touring club of Tunisia has turned it into a rather rustic but inexpensive lodge.



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Below: This surprising edifice, whose architecture of sloping vaults (carried by great arches on the interior, thereby opening up the space) reveals considerable knowhow in construction. It was previously a weaver's workshop, but may have had different functions even earlier. However, its destruction runs the risk of leaving us without an answer.

Below, right: The mosque of Sidi Yati, near Guelala. The prayer hall is covered by four cupolas on a square plan. From atop the cliffs, it dominates the Boughvara Sea separating Djerba and the African coast.

