

Contents

<u>The Authors</u>	11	<u>Cap Bon</u>	100
		Hammamet	101
<u>Getting Started</u>	13	Nabeul	109
		Around Nabeul	114
<u>Itineraries</u>	17	Kélibia	114
		Kerkouane	117
<u>Snapshot</u>	23	El-Haouaria	119
		Soliman	120
		Korbous	121
<u>History</u>	24	<u>Northern Tunisia</u>	122
<u>The Culture</u>	36	Bizerte	123
		East Of Bizerte	130
<u>Arts & Architecture</u>	44	From Bizerte to Tabarka	132
		Tabarka	135
<u>Environment</u>	54	Ain Draham	139
		Around Ain Draham	142
<u>Food & Drink</u>	58	Béja	143
		Jendouba	143
		Bulla Regia	145
		Chemtou	147
		Ghardimao	149
<u>Tunis</u>	66	<u>Central West & the Tell</u>	150
History	67	South Of Tunis	151
Orientation	67	Dougga	156
Information	68	Teboursouk	159
Dangers & Annoyances	70	Le Kef	160
Sights & Activities	71	Around Le Kef	164
Walking Tour	77	Makthar (Mactaris)	165
Courses	79	Haidra (Ammædara)	167
Tunis for Children	79	Jugurtha's Table	177
Tours	80	Kasserine	177
Festivals & Events	80	Sbeitla (Sufetula)	180
Sleeping	80		
Eating	81	<u>The Central Coast & Kairouan</u>	184
Drinking	84	Sousse	185
Entertainment	84	Around Sousse	195
Shopping	85	Monastir	196
Getting There & Away	86	Kairouan	199
Getting Around	87	Around Kairouan	207
AROUND TUNIS	89	El-jem	207
La Goulette	89	Mahdia	209
Carthage	90	Sfax	213
Sidi Bou Saïd	96	Kerkennah Islands	220
La Marsa	98		
Gammarth	99		
Hammam Lif	99		

Gabès, Matmata & the Ksour **222**

Gabès	223
Matmata	227
Around Matmata	229
Tataouine	230
Around Tataouine	234
Medenine	238
Around Medenine	239

The Sahara **241**

Douz	243
Around Douz	249
South into the Sahara	250
Ksar Ghilane	251
Around Ksar Ghilane	252
Grand Sud	253

Tozeur & the Jerid **254**

Tozeur	255
Around Tozeur	261
Nefta	263
Gafsa	265
Around Gafsa	267

Jerba **269**

Houmt Souq	272
Erriadh (Hara Seghira)	277
Guellala	278
Guellala to Zone Touristique	279
Zone Touristique	280
Southeastern Coast	282

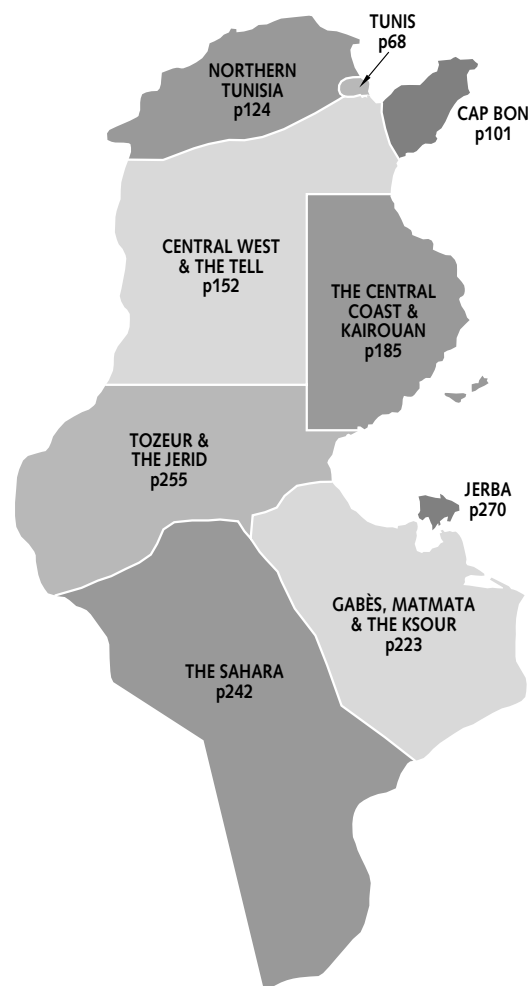
Directory **283**

Accommodation	283
Activities	285
Business Hours	287
Children	287
Climate Charts	288
Courses	288
Customs	288
Dangers & Annoyances	289
Discount Cards	290
Embassies & Consulates	290
Festivals & Events	291
Food & Drink	292

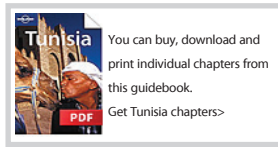
Gay & Lesbian Travellers	292
Holidays	292
Insurance	293
Internet Access	293
Legal Matters	293
Maps	294
Men Travellers	294
Money	294
Photography	295
Post	296
Shopping	296
Solo Travellers	298
Telephone & Fax	298
Time	299
Toilets	299
Tourist Information	299
Travellers with Disabilities	300
Visas	300
Women Travellers	300

Transport **302****Health** **314****Language** **319****Glossary** **331****Behind the Scenes** **334****Index** **337****World Time Zones** **342****Map Legend** **344**

Regional Map Contents



Getting Started



Tunisia is an easily accessible country to visit – bureaucratic obstacles are few – so your preparations will mostly involve deciding where to go and what to pack. This book's itineraries (p17) give some pointers about routes, and the top 10 lists in this chapter suggest some highlights. Reading – online or in old-fashioned book format – before your visit or while you're there always adds to a trip, so give the travel literature and websites suggested in this chapter a try, and look out for the other book and online recommendations in the History, Culture, Food & Drink and Arts & Architecture chapters.

WHEN TO GO

The best times to travel in northern and central Tunisia are from April to June, and from September to October. At these times, you're almost guaranteed sunny, but not too hot, days, the sea is warm enough to swim (though perhaps not in April and October), and high season prices and crowds have not yet arrived. The countryside is at its prettiest after the winter rains in early spring.

However, if your holidays are in July and August, you are assured brilliantly sunny days, and coastal towns are at their liveliest. The Tunisian tourist authorities also run a number of superb festivals at old Roman sites; see p291 for more details. The downside is that you'll be sharing the beaches with about two million northern European holidaymakers, prices will be higher and accommodation chock-a-block.

For desert trips, temperature is an essential consideration. The best times to travel are from late September to November and March to early May. November is just after the date harvest; prices are cheaper. Douz and Tozeur have desert festivals (see p292). In July and August, the soaring temperatures mean that exploring the Sahara is really only possible overnight. Not only is it baking hot, but you'll have to cope with the sandy sirocco – desert wind. The search for air-con and iced-lollies will be all-consuming.

See Climate Charts (p288) for more information.

DON'T LEAVE HOME WITHOUT...

Try to leave some room in your luggage for souvenirs, but there are some essential (and not-so-essential) items that you could consider:

- a Swiss Army knife with a bottle opener and corkscrew in case you buy alcohol from a supermarket
- a hat, sunglasses and sun lotion – essential on the beach and in the Sahara; extra-force sunscreen if travelling with kids (it's expensive here!)
- a small sewing kit – useful for emergency repairs
- a small cool pack – good for carrying drinks, essential if you're travelling with a baby and need to keep milk and/or food chilled
- for women travelling outside the main resorts, an extra beach cover-up, such as shorts and a T-shirt to wear in the water
- a small football – a great way to meet local kids (and their families)

Tampons are usually only found in resort supermarkets, but most other toiletries are widely available. Condoms are cheap and readily available at pharmacies.

In winter, Tunisia is surprisingly cold, and you should pack lots of warm clothes – many places don't have good heating. If you're looking for winter sun in February, it's not guaranteed; it might rain and it'll definitely be too cold for lying on the beach. However, there'll be few other travellers around and prices will be rock bottom.

For a detailed summary of the low, mid and high season periods in Tunisia, see p283.

COSTS & MONEY

Tunisia is an inexpensive country for Western visitors, particularly compared with Europe.

Scrimpers could get by on TD20 to TD25 a day, staying in hostels, eating at cheap local restaurants and travelling only every few days.

For a more comfortable stay, midrange travellers will need to spend a minimum of TD50 to TD60 daily, enough to get a comfortable room, travel around and eat and drink well. Allow some more cash on top so you can buy souvenirs.

At the upper end of the scale, if you're staying in top-end hotels, eating at the best restaurants, buying crafts, and taking safaris or having some spa treatments, TD200 to TD300 per day will keep you in comfort.

If you've already paid for a package at a resort, you'll only have to pay for things like meals outside the resort, excursions, souvenirs and the occasional taxi.

TRAVEL LITERATURE

There's little travel writing on Tunisia in English, but what there is often captures a particular epoch, provides fascinating cultural insights, and is hugely entertaining.

Ibn Khaldun was a prolific 15th-century traveller, whose North African travels – and long Tunisian visit – informed his remarkably accessible *The Muqaddimah*, peppered with sharp and sympathetic observations.

Daniel Bruun lived with the Berber people in Matmata during 1898, and his *The Cave Dwellers of Southern Tunisia: Recollections of a Sojourn with the Khalifa of Matmata* is a window on a forgotten world with its idiosyncratic portrait of Berber Tunisia before the tourists arrived.

Norman Douglas' *Fountains in the Sand* is a stiff-upper-lip, colonial account of a 1912 journey through southwestern Tunisia, entertaining enough despite his intolerance of all things Tunisian.

OK, so it's set in Morocco, but *The Sheltering Sky*, a gothic fiction about travels in the North African desert, is an evocative book to take on your travels. It describes North Africa pre-WWII, when its protagonists lose themselves in a sinister, alien, terrifyingly foreign world – it will certainly help to put any holiday blues you have into perspective.

Jolly-hockey-sticks, easy reading is *Among the Faithful*, by Dahriss Martin, offering a unique portrait of Kairouan by a young American woman who lived there in the 1920s.

Barnaby Rogerson's *A Traveller's History of North Africa* includes some good essays on Tunisian history, placed within the wider North African context.

Paul Theroux's *The Pillars of Hercules* contains a frustratingly brief chapter on Tunisia; he amusingly describes an encounter with a carpet tout, as well as visits to Sfax and the Kerkennah Islands.

Less grumpy than Theroux, Michael Palin's more entertaining than in-depth *Sahara* covers Jerba, Matmata, El-Jem, Sousse and Sidi Bou Saïd, and revisits some *Monty Python's Life of Brian* movie sets.

HOW MUCH?

Hamam from TD1.5
(basic scrub)

International newspapers
TD2-6

Bottle of Tunisian wine
from TD4 (supermarkets);
from TD9 (restaurants)

Entry ticket to ancient
sites TD3-6

TOP TENS

Architectural Treasures

- **Punic city of Kerkouane** (p117) – the best-preserved Punic site in the world
- **Roman Colosseum at El-Jem** (p208) – an astonishing monument to pleasure, rising from the plains
- **Roman city of Dougga** (p156) – perched on a hilltop, fascinating like no other Roman city
- **Ribat at Monastir** (p197) – film-directors' favourite and the best of Tunisia's fortresses
- **Great Mosque of Kairouan** (p202) – austere Aghlabid exterior and extravagant prayer hall
- **Village of Chenini** (p236) – crumbling hilltop Berber village built into the mountain
- **Ksar Ouled Soltane** (p237) – fantastical fortified Berber granary stores
- **Troglodyte houses, Matmata** (p228) – underground Berber houses in real-life *Star Wars* set
- **Medina at Sfax** (p215) – the medina least touched by tourism
- **Tunis' Ville Nouvelle** (p77) – elegant French-Tunisian fusion with neoclassical façades

Amazing Experiences

- **Saharan adventure** (p252) – trekking over a great sand sea
- **Beach Babylon** (p285) – catching some rays and splashing about in the Mediterranean
- **Scrub a dub dub** (p286) – getting squeaky clean in an ancient, atmospheric *hammam* (public bathhouse)
- **The call to prayer from Byrsa** (p90) – timing your visit so you can hear the plaintive wail of the muezzin while exploring the ruins at Carthage
- **Tunis' medina** (p71) – from the rich central souqs to the narrow whitewashed outskirts, it's another world
- **Sunset at Dougga** (p156) – watching the sunset from Tunisia's most spectacular Roman city
- **Jugurtha's Table** (p177) – walking up the hacked stone steps to this remote, plateau fortress
- **Midès Gorge** (p262) – trekking the amazing gorge between Midès and Tamerza
- **Chott el-Jerid** (p261) – taking the causeway across this sparkling, pancake-flat salt lake
- **Dancing in Tabarka** (p138) – making it to a music festival in this laid-back seaside town

Kids' Stuff

- **Tamerza's waterfalls** (p262) – swimming in the pools at this desert oasis
- **Camel rides!** (p286) – riding across desert dunes on camel-back
- **Star Wars sets** (p22) – finding the *Star Wars* locations and sets in the desert
- **Underground adventure** (p228) – exploring troglodyte houses and staying at one of Matmata's underground hotels in *Star Wars* country
- **Hot springs** (p251) – unforgettable paddling in Ksar Ghilane's desert springs
- **Beach bonanza** (p285) – some of the Mediterranean's best beaches
- **Seaside fun** (p286) – every kind of watery sport, from bouncy banana-boating to parasailing
- **El-Jem Colosseum** (p208) – the gory history and splendour of this mighty Roman stadium will fire young imaginations
- **Crocodiles!** (p281) – they pack the pond at Parc Djerba Explore
- **Chak Wak Park** (p256) – Tozeur's open-air museum, with crazy outdoor dioramas of dinosaurs and Noah's Ark

Desert Divers, by Sven Linqvist, is a recent book describing the author's Saharan travels and examining the stereotypes and prejudices of past literary tourists such as André Gide and Antoine de St-Exupery.

Robert D Kaplan's *Mediterranean Winter* is the tale of an off-season Mediterranean journey beginning in Tunisia, bringing alive historical characters and revisiting Kaplan's youth.

INTERNET RESOURCES

The internet is a great place to discover more about Tunisia, though information is closely monitored by the Tunisian government.

Access Tunisia (www.access-tunisia.com) Handy portal with excellent links.

Adventures of Tunisia (www.lexicorient.com/tunisia/) Comprehensive site with chatty information and photos for 140 Tunisian destinations.

Film Scouts (www.filmscouts.com/scripts/matinee.cfm?Film=eng-pat&File=locatns) Good summary of sites used in filming *The English Patient*, including those in Tunisia.

Lonely Planet (www.lonelyplanet.com) Succinct summaries, postcards from other travellers and the Thorn Tree forum.

Travel & Tourism Guide to Tunisia (www.tourismtunisia.com) Helpful Tunisian National Tourist Office website; includes festival dates, hotel details and destination summaries.

Tunis Post (www.tunispost.com) Portal to international news sites with uncensored Tunisia stories.

Tunisia Guide (www.tunisiaguide.com) US Tunisia Tourist Office website; includes cultural and travel information, and a list of tour operators.

Tunisia Online (www.tunisiaonline.com) Government-run site with good sections on the environment, women, history and tourism, and Tunisian news in English, French and Arabic.

Tunisia.com (www.tunisia.com) Useful guide with information on flights, tours, hotels, business, culture, shopping and property rental, and an online community.

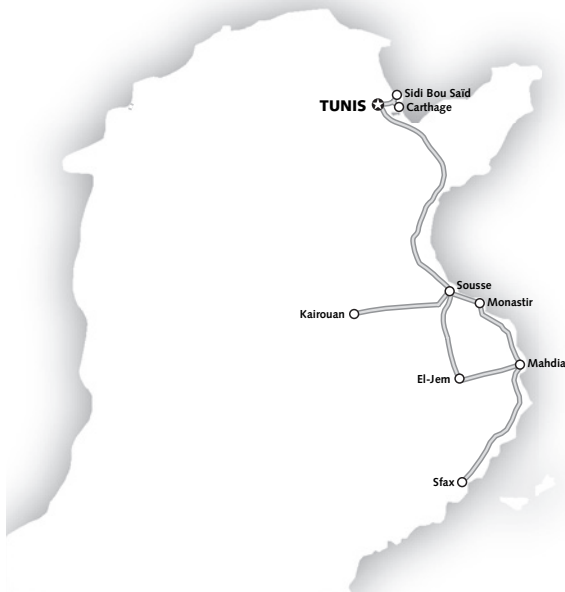
Itineraries

CLASSIC ROUTES

MOSQUES, MEDINAS & THE COLOSSEUM 12 Days / Tunis to Sfax

Start your stay in **Tunis** (p66), Tunisia's laid-back, cosmopolitan capital, with the exceptional **Bardo Museum** (p50) and Unesco World Heritage-listed **medina** (p71). It's also a good base for day trips to ancient **Carthage** (p90) and the enchanting whitewashed village of **Sidi Bou Saïd** (p96), which also has some charming places to stay. Allow three to four days for Tunis and its surrounds, then head south to **Sousse** (p185), where a buzzing Ville Nouvelle stretches along the popular beach, and the sandcastle medina contains some of Tunisia's finest architecture. From here you can visit **Monastir** (p196) with its superb *ribat* (fortified monastery; scene of much silliness in the *Life of Brian*) and mausoleum to Habib Bourguiba; the mystical holy city of **Kairouan** (p199); and the amazingly well preserved Roman colosseum towering over **El-Jem** (p208). It's worth staying at least overnight in atmospheric, seaside **Mahdia** (p209), the perfect antidote to busy resorts and towns. Further down the coast, **Sfax** (p213) has Tunisia's best-preserved medina, and provides an insight into what the other coastal towns must have been like pre-tourism.

This 300km route wends its way from Tunisia's largest city to its second largest, past an astounding array of architectural forms and fascinating ruins. It takes between 12 days and two weeks.



JERBA, BERBERS, SALT & THE SAHARA 10 Days / Jerba to Ong Jemal

Jerba (p269) is a desert island, but a very much inhabited one, with white-washed, defensive architecture – even the houses look like mini-forts (see the boxed text, p274) – and some good beaches, including **Sidi Mahres** (p280) on the east coast. The island's main town, **Houmt Souq** (p272) is a fascinating mix of covered souqs, good restaurants and vine-covered squares, and you can sleep here in enchanting restored *funduqs* (inns; p276).

From here you can launch off into the south. Amazing stops are the extraordinary underground Berber houses at **Matmata** (p227) and the picturesque Arab-Berber **ksour district** (p237) around Tataouine, with their unique architecture, alien enough to attract the makers of the *Star Wars* films to use them as locations. You could spend at least three or four days exploring these areas, which include the stunning abandoned Berber villages of **Chenini** and **Douiret** (p236) that seem to dissolve into the hilltops, and the alien-looking **Ksar Ouled Soltane** (p237), used to store Berber grain. Via 4WD, you can push south to **Ksar Ghilane** (p251) on the edge of the **Grand Erg Oriental** (p252): an endless sea of sand. Equally you could launch a Saharan expedition from the laid-back town of **Douz** (p243) or **Tozeur** (p255), with its distinctive brick-pattern architecture, both of which are set amid enormous palm groves. If travelling between them, you'll travel over a 2m-high causeway across the strange flat landscape of the **Chott el-Jerid** (p261) – an experience not to be missed. From Tozeur you can also take a trip to the *Star Wars* Mos Espa set at **Ong Jemal** (p263) or the oasis villages of **Tamerza**, **Midès** and **Chebika** (p261) close to the Algerian border.

It takes a week or two to travel the 540km from the sunny coast to the desert interior via Berber villages, oasis towns, salt lakes, and seas of sand dunes.

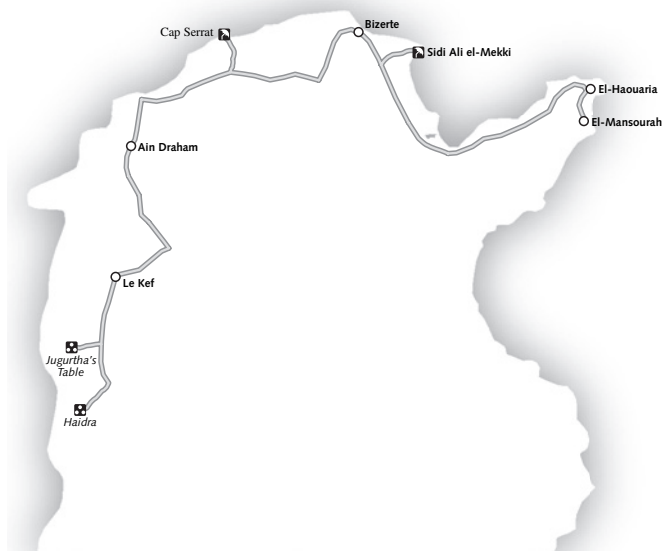


ROADS LESS TRAVELLED

CAP BON SECRETS & NORTHERN SURPRISES 10 Days / Kélibia to Haidra

Travelling off the beaten track in Tunisia is surprisingly easy. Relatively few foreign tourists travel outside the main resorts, and beyond these you can find rugged coastline, deserted beaches and lush mountains. You can even feel away from it all on Cap Bon, Tunisia's most touristed area: start your journey in **Kélibia** (p114), exploring the beaches at **El-Mansourah** (p115), before going to end-of-the-world **El-Haouaria** (p119) and taking some cobweb-clearing cliff walks. Next, go north to **Bizerte** (p123), a bustling port with an old-world feel, from where you can visit (preferably not at weekends) the largely empty beautiful beach at **Sidi Ali el-Mekki** (p132). Another great coastal stop is hidden-away **Cap Serrat** (p134), then travel up winding mountain roads to reach red-roofed **Ain Draham** (p139), deep in the forests of the Kroumirie Mountains, from where you can go trekking in the green, green hills or even indulge in a spa on the border with Algeria. Hilltop **Le Kef** (p160) is your next stop, a remote walled town with a defensive atmosphere. South into Tunisia's central plains, there are the spectacular natural fortress of **Jugurtha's Table** (p177), with stairs hacked up the side and views into Algeria, and the remote Roman site of **Haidra** (p167). Covering all these sites could stretch from one to two weeks depending how long you choose to laze on the beach or lose yourself in the hills.

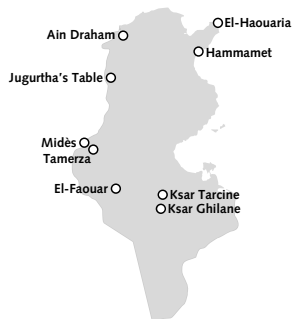
This route takes you away from the crowds to quiet beaches, forested mountains and remote archaeological sites. It will take a week or two and covers around 370km.



TAILORED TRIPS

ADVENTUROUS AGENDA

At first glance it seems like Tunisia's a place for relaxation, not exhilaration, but there's plenty of adventure potential here. Around **Ain Draham** (p139), in the north, you can trek into the Kroumirie Mountains among tall cork forests, for incredible views. Further south you can explore **Jugurtha's Table** (p177), a great flat-topped mountain, and climb the rough-hewn steps to the top. Your reward will be views over the surrounding plains and into Algeria. Further south still, take a dazzling hike along the spectacular gorge between **Midès** (p262) and **Tamerza** (p262), stopping for swims in the springs and feeling smug about what those in the 4WDs are missing. Next stop, the Sahara. At **El-Faouar** (p249), 30km south of Douz, you can go dune-skiing, then travel southeast another 100km or so to **Ksar Ghilane** (p251), to see a sea of endless dunes. From here you can venture to remote **Ksar Tarcine** (p252), a desolate outpost of the Roman Empire. Stop off in **Hammamet** (p101) for some high-velocity water sports (you can even dive WWII wrecks). Also recommended is the tip of Cap Bon for wild, windy cliff walks around end-of-the-world **El-Haouaria** (p119).



CRAFTY BUSINESS

Tunisian crafts are bright and beautiful – specialities include rugs, ceramics, basketware and brass. You can see them being created and buy them on this colourful itinerary.

Start your journey in **Nabeul** (p109), Tunisia's main ceramics centre to see pots and tiles being fired and painted, and wonder at the amazing choice at bargain prices in its coloured pottery shops. Visit a weaving cooperative at **Beni Khiair** (p114) and see huge looms being operated with practised skill. A few kilometres away is **Dar Chaabane** (p114), a centre for stone-carving, where you can watch this fascinating craft and commission yourself a couple of columns. In central Tunisia, don't miss **Kairouan** (p199), with Tunisia's finest selection of carpets and leatherware. The idyllic island of **Jerba** (p269) is another good place to buy a carpet if you're not already loaded up, and also to visit **Guellala** (p278) village, another great pottery centre, lined with workshops and galleries. If you still haven't tracked down that perfect rug, try **Tozeur** (p255), one of the main gateways to the desert, where brilliant designs brighten the sand-coloured architecture.



A reason to stop in **Ain Draham** (p139), besides the Alpine scenery, is to visit the local carpet cooperative. Further north is **Sejnane** (p134), with its distinctive naïve ceramic figures.

Any craft you wanted to buy on your journey but missed or didn't want to carry, you can find in **Tunis** (p85).

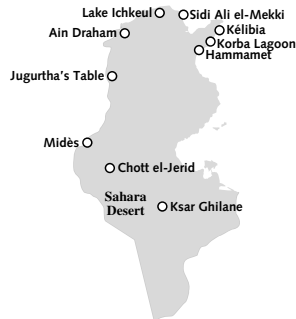
NATURAL SPLENDOUR

South is the **Sahara** (p241) of your dreams, undulating southwest into Algeria: silent, shifting gold. Best is to get as far as **Ksar Ghilane** (p251), with the huge, strangely blank dunes beyond. North of the desert lies **Chott el-Jerid** (p261) a great, sparkling salt lake, weirdly flat and projecting mirages, with an amazing 2m-high causeway across the centre. North of the *chott* (salt lake), don't miss the trek across the extraordinary **Midès** (p262) gorge.

Around the coast, take your pick of beaches – **Sidi Ali el-Mekki** (p132) is a perfect white-sand curve lapped by azure sea, **Kélibia** (p114) in Cap Bon wins the prize for softest sand and clearest blue water and **Hammamet** (p101) is justly famed for its long, golden, greenery-fringed curve.

Jugurtha's Table (p177) is a flat-topped mountain that rears up from the plains like an island, with hacked stone steps leading to views over Algerian peaks. Further north, the Kroumirie range rises and falls on an Alpine scale, blanketed in tall cork-oak forest in the area around **Ain Draham** (p139).

Near Bizerte is huge **Lake Ichkeul** (p132) with its buffalo and birdlife. Another wonderful place for birdlife is the **Korba Lagoon** (p114) in Cap Bon, which stretches 15km along a pearly-white stretch of sandy coast, and can turn pink with flamingos.



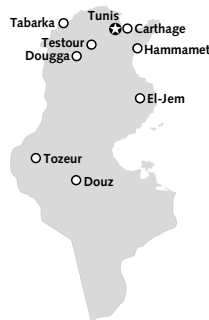
FOLLOWING THE FESTIVALS

Summer is the best time in Tunisia for music lovers, although you'd need to stick around for a couple of months to catch everything. Laid-back seaside Tabarka, in the north, is the hub of the music festival calendar – hosting most events in its charming little amphitheatre – with the world-renowned **Tabarka International Jazz Festival** (p138) in July.

By mid-July, the **El-Jem International Symphonic Music Festival** (p209) is under way, with classical music set in the glinting-gold sandstone Roman colosseum at El-Jem. Around the same time, there's no better place to watch classical drama than the Roman theatres of Carthage and Dougga during the **Carthage International Festival** (p95). It's followed soon after by the **Hammamet International Festival** (p101) with a mix of international film, music and theatre groups. Tabarka again takes centre stage in August and early September, with a **World Music Festival**, **Latin Music Festival** and **Rai Festival** (p138) showcasing the best of *raï* from Algeria, just across the border.

If you've missed all of this, Ramadan in October or November signals the **Medina Festival** (p80) in Tunis, with evening concerts in the evocative medina, which comes alive at this time of year. November is also the best time to visit the south when Douz hosts the **Sahara Festival** (p245), a local shindig that predates tourism, followed almost immediately by the **Oasis Festival** (p258) in Tozeur.

Precise dates change from year to year so check out the ONTT's website (www.tourism.tunisia.com/culture/festlist.html). For a fuller listing of festivals, see p291.



STAR WARS – A SPACESPOTTER'S GUIDE

Not only are many of the settings for *Star Wars* in the south instantly recognisable, but also plenty of sets are still in place. You could conceivably see all these sites in a week to 10 days.

Tozeur is a good starting point, and tour operators here can help you track down sights. Nearby **Ong Jemal** (p263) was Darth Maul's lookout in *The Phantom Menace*, where he tussled with Qui-Gon. Nearby **Mos Espa** (p263) is a remote desert set used for the prequel films. Also accessible from Tozeur, **Sidi Bouhlel** is known as Star Wars Canyon. It's where Jawas parked their sandcrawlers, R2D2 trundled plaintively along, Luke was attacked by Tusken raiders, and Ben and Luke overlooked Mos Eisley. West of Nefta, **Chott el-Jerid** (p261) saw Luke soulfully contemplating two suns from the edge of a crater. Around the fringes of the Chott, the desolate flats doubled as Junland Wastes populated by Krayt dragons and sand people. Ask at the Nefta tourist office (p264) for directions.

East, in Matmata, is the famous **Sidi Driss Hotel** (p229), which was used in four movies, including *Star Wars* – Luke tucked into blue milkshakes and tussled over the harvest with his Uncle Owen in the dining room. Anakin Skywalker's *Phantom Menace* slave quarters are in **Medenine** (p238), while the Mos Espa slave quarters were represented by the fabulous **Ksar Haddada** (p235). Here Qui-Gon discovered Anakin's parentage in *The Phantom Menace*. South of Tataouine, the extraordinary **Ksar Ouled Soltane** (p237) also provided (even more evocative) slave quarters.

A great *Star Wars* locations website is Star Wars Traveller (www.toysrus.com/travel/tunisia.html). The book *Tataouine Tours: On Location* by Jeremy Beckett goes into all these sites in detail.



Snapshot

Tunisia's position at the tip of Africa and the edge of the Mediterranean made it a coveted prize of the Carthaginians, Romans, Arabs, Turkish, and French. Its importance has not entirely dimmed; it's a highly significant spot – a moderate Islamic country at the hub of North Africa. The government since independence in 1956 has determinedly pursued a secular political agenda, while retaining its Islamic credentials to keep on side with its neighbours, as well as to maintain harmony within the country.

On the surface Tunisia feels Westernised, particularly in the towns, and especially when compared with its neighbours – Algeria, Libya and Morocco. But the influence is skin deep. The family is very strong here, and social mores enduringly traditional. People cast their eyes towards the West as a land of opportunity but at the same time recoil from it. You will find people eager to talk about the 'War on Terror' and its many ramifications, and it can be extremely worthwhile to discuss the assumptions people here have about the West, as well as the West's misconceptions about Islam. The Tunisian-on-the-street is horrified at the idea that Islam has been typecast as the enemy of Western democracy, and as saddened and disheartened by terrorism as people are in the West. However, not without some justification, people here see some policies in the West, particularly hostility against the Palestinians, Iraq and Afghanistan and support for Israel (especially in view of the latest events in Lebanon) as an attack on Islam.

This desire to talk about politics does not extend to local issues. Local people have learned not to be candid about their feelings regarding the government. Free speech may be enshrined in the constitution but it's not actually allowed, with a controlled press encouraged to practise self-censorship, and anyone who disagrees openly with the government liable to end up in prison. President Ben Ali won his fourth five-year term in power in 2004 with over 95% of the vote. The main opposition, the Democratic Progressive Party, withdrew before the election, stating that participation would have given the proceedings the semblance of democracy.

Some may say that freedom of speech is a small price to pay for the benefits this stable government brings. Ben Ali has continued along the tack of the great architect of independence, Habib Bourguiba, who ruled for an imperious but radical 30 years and set the country on its secular course, paying particular attention to establishing the status of women, enshrining their rights and ensuring equal treatment of men and women, which is unique in the Arab world. Islamic fundamentalism is kept at bay, there's free access to education up to university level, a free health service, and the economy is relatively strong. However, all is not rosy in the jasmine-scented Tunisian garden: unemployment is a problem, the gap between rich and poor notable, many people look abroad for their salvation, and the price being paid for tranquillity is freedom.

Nonetheless, Tunisians are justly proud of their country and its achievements, its peacefulness and relative prosperity – quality of life here for most people is streets ahead of the rest of North Africa – and its strong links with both Europe and America, and the rest of the Arab world.

FAST FACTS

Population: 10.175 million

Unemployment: 14.2%

Inflation: 2.1%

GDP per capita: US\$8300

Life expectancy: 77 years for women (up from 51 years in 1966); 73 years for men (around 10 years less than French women and men)

Main crops: olives, olive oil, grain, tomatoes, citrus fruit, dates and almonds

Wine production: 24,000 metric tonnes per year

Petrol and petroleum products: 25% of Tunisian exports

Birth rate: 15.52 births per 1000, almost twice that in Italy

The Punic Wars officially ended in 1985, when the mayors of Rome and Carthage signed a treaty, over 2000 years after hostilities ceased.

The Authors



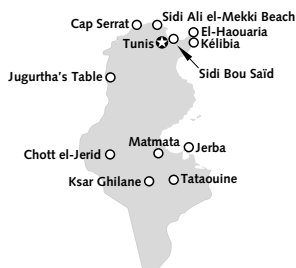
ABIGAIL HOLE

Coordinating Author, Tunis, Cap Bon

From London, Abigail first wrote on Tunisia for Lonely Planet's *Africa on a Shoestring*, spending months in Africa and also researching Mali, Mauritania and Egypt. Shortly afterwards, she returned to Tunisia to co-write the 3rd edition of Lonely Planet's *Tunisia*. She came back to coordinate this book and revisit Tunis and Cap Bon, but this time did the research with the help of her one-year-old son. She lives in Rome with her Italian partner.

My Favourite Trip

I'd start off in **Sidi Bou Said** (p96), commuting into Tunis to get lost in its **medina** (p71) and visit the incredible **Bardo Museum** (p50). Next I'd take a road trip around little-known spots along the Cap Bon and the North Coast – stopping at **Kélibia** (p114), **El-Haouaria** (p119) and balmy **Sidi Ali el-Mekki beach** (p132) near Bizerte, before camping out at **Cap Serrat** (p134). I'd make sure I got to climb **Jugurtha's Table** (p177), the ancient natural fortress with views over Algeria, before going further south. I'd explore the whitewashed fortresses of **Jerba** (p269), the underground houses of **Matmata** (p228), and the alien architecture around **Tataouine** (p230). From here I would head further south, deep into the desert from **Ksar Ghilane** (p251), before returning to cross the eerie causeway across **Chott el-Jerid** (p261).



MICHAEL GROSBERG

The Central Coast & Kairouan, Gabès, Matmata & the Ksour, The Sahara, Tozeur & the Jerid, Jerba

After a childhood spent stateside in the Washington, DC area and with a valuable philosophy degree in hand, Michael took a job doing something with developing a resort on an island in the Pacific after which he left for a long overland trip through Asia. He later made his way to South Africa where he did journalism and NGO work and found time to travel all over Africa. He returned to New York City for graduate school in comparative literature and, in an attempt to land a coveted fellowship – which he did not receive – to study in an exotic desert locale, he immersed himself in the literature of North Africa. He has taught literature and writing in several NYC colleges in addition to Lonely Planet assignments that have taken him around the world.

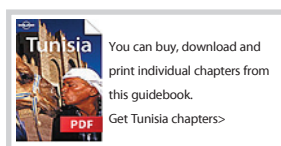


DANIEL ROBINSON History, Northern Tunisia, Central West & the Tell

Daniel's interest in the cultures and history of North Africa began in high school, when he spent two semesters living with Moroccan émigré families. It deepened when he did a Near Eastern Studies degree at Princeton and during the three years he lived in France, dining on couscous and *brîq* at every opportunity. Over the years, his travel writing – including Lonely Planet guides to France and Paris – has been published in nine languages. Daniel's favourite out-of-the-way bits of Tunisia include the Roman baths at Hammam Mellegue and the beach of Sidi Ali el-Mekki, but the high point of his research for this volume – conducted almost entirely by louage, bus and train – was Tabarka's spirited *Rai* festival.

CONTRIBUTING AUTHORS

Rafik Tlatli wrote the Food & Drink chapter, with Abigail Hole. Rafik is the hotelier of Hôtel Les Jasmins and also the head chef at Restaurant Slovénia in Nabeul. He has written *Saveurs de Tunisie*, *Delice de Tunisie* and many books of recipes, and has made regular radio and TV broadcasts on cooking in France, Italy and Russia as well as Tunisia. He is the founder and president of the National Association of Chefs in Cap Bon. Rafik has organised a master chef competition in Tunis for the past 14 years and an annual gastronomic conference in Tunis since 1998, and has also run seminars on Tunisian cuisine in countries ranging from Japan to Sweden.



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History

All the great empires of the Mediterranean basin have ruled Tunisia, leaving fascinating – and in many cases stunningly beautiful – vestiges that continue to captivate and astound visitors to this day.

Carthage: a History, by Serge Lancel, is a detailed but accessible history of the Punic state from its foundation to its ultimate destruction by Rome in 146 BC.

Tunisia was home to the mighty city-state of Carthage, which flourished for six centuries but was eventually brought to its knees by its arch-enemy, Rome. Eight centuries later, the country lay in the path of Islam’s conquering armies, who overwhelmed Tunisia’s Byzantine and Berber rulers and drew the country into the Arab sphere of influence. Over a thousand years later, after three centuries of at least nominal Ottoman rule, the French made Tunisia a protectorate. After gaining its independence in 1956, Tunisia was ruled for three decades by one of the Arab world’s great modernisers, Habib Bourguiba.

FIRST PEOPLES

About 200,000 years ago, Stone Age people eked out an existence using primitive stone tools near the southern oasis town of Kélibia. Back then, the Sahara was covered in forest, scrub and savannah grasses, a fact that anyone who’s ever been in Douz in mid-August will find almost impossible to imagine.

Some 8000 years ago, at the end of the last Ice Age, precipitation decreased and the Sahara began to dry out, effectively cutting Tunisia off from the rest of Africa. People began arriving from the east, the most significant of whom were the Capsians. Named after the city of Gafsa (ancient Capsa), near which finely sculpted stone and bone implements from this era have been found, they lived in southern Tunisia until about 4500 BC. Some mosaics from ancient Capsa can be seen in the museum in Gafsa (see p265).

The area covered by modern Tunisia is, apart from the Sahara, remarkably similar to that ruled by Carthage 2500 years ago.

Waves of migration from southern Europe continued until around 2500 BC. It is from these varied Neolithic peoples that the Berbers (see the boxed text, p233) are thought to have descended.

THE RISE & FALL OF CARTHAGE

The name that looms largest in Tunisian history is Carthage (in Phoenician, Kart-Hadasht; in Latin, Carthago). Now a well-heeled northern suburb of Tunis (see p90), this great trading city emerged to dominate the western Mediterranean in the 6th century BC.

The Phoenicians were first drawn to the Tunisian coast in their search for trading posts along the maritime route between their mother city of Tyre (now in southern Lebanon) and the silver mines of southern Spain. Their first settlement in Tunisia, founded in 1101 BC, was Utica (Utique; see p130), about 35km northwest of Tunis. Other early Phoenician ports along the North African coast included Hadrumetum (Sousse), Hippo Diarrhytus (Bizerte) and Thrabaka (Tabarka).

Carthage was founded in 814 BC by the Phoenician queen Elissa (Dido), whose story is told in the city’s elaborate foundation myth (see the boxed text, p91), a version of which appears in Virgil’s epic poem

TIMELINE 1101 BC

Phoenicians found first settlement in Tunisia at Utica

814 BC

City of Carthage founded by Phoenicians

The Aeneid. A response to the growing Greek presence in the region, Carthage was intended as the start of a more permanent Phoenician presence in Tunisia.

While Tyre suffered at the hands of the Assyrians in the 7th and 6th centuries BC, Carthage went from strength to strength. It soon grew into the great metropolis of the Phoenician world, its wealth and trading craft protected by a powerful navy. By the end of the 6th century BC, Carthage had become the main power in the western Mediterranean, controlling the North African coast from Tripolitania (western Libya) to the Atlantic, with colonies in the Balearic Islands, Corsica, Malta, Sardinia and Sicily.

During the 5th and 4th centuries BC, Carthage turned its attentions to expanding its land empire in Africa, carving out territory – similar in extent to modern-day Tunisia – that stretched from Tabarka in the north-west to Sfax in the southeast. This Carthaginian entity included the fertile lands of the Cap Bon Peninsula and the Medjerda Valley, which supplied Carthage with a large and exportable agricultural surplus.

It was inevitable that this regional primacy would lead to conflict with the other great powers of the Mediterranean: first Greece, and then Rome. Carthage fought numerous wars with the Greeks over Sicily, which is just 150km northeast of Carthage, most notably in 310 BC. By the time the Carthaginians finally took control of the island in the middle of the 3rd century BC, they found themselves squaring off against an even more formidable rival, the mighty Roman Empire.

The scene was thus set for the first of the three Punic Wars that would preoccupy the two powers for the next 100 years. (Phoenician civilisation in North Africa and its language, which was quite similar to Hebrew, came to be called ‘Punic’ because the Romans referred to the people of Carthage as ‘Poeni’, a version of Phoenician.) Rome launched the first war in 263 BC with a campaign to win control of Sicily. Roman successes on land and the supremacy of Carthage’s navy ensured a stalemate that dragged on for 20 years.

Rome finally achieved a breakthrough when its fledgling navy destroyed the Carthaginian fleet off Trapani (eastern Sicily) in 242 BC. Navyless and close to bankrupt, Carthage was forced to accept Roman terms and abandon Sicily; in 238 BC it was forced to give up Sardinia and Corsica, too. Trouble on the Carthaginian home front grew as unpaid mercenaries revolted, sparking a bitter conflict, the savagery of which inspired Gustave Flaubert’s over-the-top novel *Salammbô* (1862).

Carthage’s defeat in the Battle of Zama in 202 BC meant that it again had to relinquish overseas territories. Nevertheless, over the next 50 years it re-established itself as a commercial centre – despite losing much of its African territory to the Numidian king Massinissa, whose cavalry fought for the Romans alongside Scipio at Zama (see p26).

Carthage’s resurgence caused increasing unease in Rome. Whipped up by men such as Cato the Elder, the eminent statesman and writer, Rome launched the Third Punic War with the intention of settling the issue once and for all. In 149 BC, the Roman army again landed at Utica and laid siege to Carthage for three years. When the city finally fell in 146 BC, the Romans showed no mercy. Carthage was utterly destroyed

The cultivation of olives was introduced to Tunisia by the Phoenicians. Today, Tunisia’s 56 million olive trees cover 16,000 sq km – by area, that’s 19% of the world’s olive groves.

The award-winning Franco-Tunisian film *A Summer in La Goulette* (1996), set in 1967, is an entertaining portrayal of three friends – a Muslim, a Jew and a Catholic – and the generation gap facing their families.

263–242 BC

First Punic War between the Romans and the Carthaginians

218–202 BC

Second Punic War; the glory years and decline of the Carthaginian general Hannibal

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