

Tunisia

Tunisia is one of Africa's easiest destinations, a place where tourists almost outnumber the locals in high summer, and flock here for the golden sandy beaches, non-stop sunshine, and exoticism on tap. It's a country where sand dunes peak like brushstrokes in the Sahara desert; the beautiful sun-bleached round houses of Jerba hide a multitude of ethnic groups, and the parched southern landscapes of the Sahara are contrasted with the sparkling water of the Mediterranean sea that frames Tunisia's northern and eastern shores. The quiet beaches of the northern coast are a secret from package tourists sizzling on the heaving sandy stretches of Hammamet and Monastir. *Star Wars* film sets are crammed with tourist groups. The country's capital, Tunis, is a gritty yet lively urban centre, where the walls of the medina get clogged by day visitors and shopkeepers keen to make a buck.

Tunisia also has some fascinating places to stay: a luxury, air-conditioned camp site in the middle of the desert, a revamped, stylish rural dwelling on Jerba island, or old merchants' inns with kaleidoscopic tiles and sunny courtyards. Though package tourism has brought jobs and relative prosperity to parts of the country, much of traditional local culture still grates uncomfortably against modern influences, so tread lightly and enjoy this diverse, fascinating country.

FAST FACTS

- **Area** 164,000 sq km
- **ATMs** In all large towns
- **Borders** Algeria, Libya
- **Budget** US\$30 per day
- **Capital** Tunis
- **Languages** Arabic, French
- **Money** Tunisian dinar US\$1 = TD1.3
- **Population** 9.8 million
- **Seasons** Cool (November to April), warm (May to October)
- **Telephone** Country code ☎ 216; international access code ☎ 00
- **Time** GTM/UTC + 1
- **Visa** US\$8 for Australians and South Africans, available at airport; US\$6.50 for others, need to apply in advance; unnecessary for Western Europeans, American, Canadian and Japanese citizens



HIGHLIGHTS

- **Sidi Bou Said** (p223) Explore this gorgeous Mediterranean town covered in bougainvillea.
- **Jerba** (p235) Experience ethnic diversity amid fascinating architecture and great beaches.
- **Grand Erg Oriental** (p234) Melt in sunsets and sighs from dreamy dunes, postcard-style.
- **Bardo Museum** (p220) Exercise the other side of your mind in this fascinating collection of Islamic art and Roman remains.
- **Best journey** (p232) Travel the road running in the middle of Chott el-Jerid, an endless, mirage-inducing salt lake.

CLIMATE & WHEN TO GO

Tunisia has a Mediterranean climate, with hot, dry summers and mild winters. Visiting is best in springtime, between mid-March and mid-May, with warm (but not scorching) temperatures and wild flowers covering the countryside. Summers are great for beach frolics, but this is Tunisia's high season, so expect prices to go up and crowds of northern Europeans on package holidays to take over the beaches. The desert is much too hot in summer, and the best time to visit Tunisia if you want to see the Saharan dunes is in late autumn. November is when date harvests have just finished and some of the music festivals begin, so this time is perfect for visiting the desert.

ITINERARIES

- **Three Days** If you're in the north, spend the day in beautiful Tunis suburb of Sidi Bou Saïd (p218) and go along the northern coast towards Tabarka (p223) for the day. Check out the castle and narrow streets of Le Kef (p224) before going back to Tunis (p218).
- **One Week** Jerba (p235) is the most amazing place in Tunisia, so spend at least three days here. Head back onto mainland Tunisia, get lost (though not literally) in the great expanse of the desert, visiting the incredible *ksour* (fortified Berber village) around Tataouine (p237) for a day, and go up towards Douz (p234), where you can organise a trip into the desert.
- **Two Weeks** Perfect for incorporating a bit of the north and a lot of the south. Starting with the north as described above, drive down to Kairouan (p228) from

HOW MUCH?

- **Cup of tea** US\$1
- **Newspaper** US\$1.50
- **Bowl of couscous** US\$2.50
- **Museum admission** US\$5
- **Hamam with massage** US\$4

Tunis and see one of Islam's most important towns. From here, head to Mahdia (p230) and enjoy its gorgeous harbour. Drive down to Jerba (p235), via Sousse (p227), stopping for a swim along the lovely beaches on the way. Stay for four to five days in Jerba, exploring its architecture and relaxing on the beaches. Then go to the Sahara, see the *ksour* at Tataouine (p237), ride a camel into the desert from Douz (p234) and see the enormous palmeraie at Tozeur (p232). Head back north along the east coast beaches.

HISTORY

Nature, luck and canny political stewardship have produced a calm, safe country, despite Tunisia having been the subject of fights between successive great civilisations. Its lush cultivated areas – once the breadbasket of Rome – still account for a reasonable portion of the economy, and its strategic position has long ensured it was dealt an economically viable hand.

Empires Strike Back

The Phoenicians marched into Tunisia around 1100 BC, establishing their capital, Carthage (just north of today's Tunis), as the main power in the western Mediterranean by the 6th century. The emerging Roman Empire was not happy with these events, and 128 years of Punic Wars ensued. The legendary general of Carthage, Hannibal, nearly conquered the Romans after his invasion of Italy in 216 BC, but the Romans finally won, razed Carthage, sold its population for slaves and then re-created it as a Roman city in 44 BC. Roman Tunisia boomed, creating the temple-decked city of Dougga and the extravagant El Jem colosseum.

The Roman decline and fall in the 5th century was followed by the rampaging Vandals,

