

Northwest Algeria



It has rolling hills, fertile farmland, some glorious – and gloriously uncrowded – beaches, big ports, and towns embellished with reminders of the region’s glorious past, yet the northwest is the least visited region of northern Algeria.

Oran, the capital of the northwest, is Algeria’s most important port and naval base. Home to pirates and princes, fought over by the Spaniards and Ottomans, and rebuilt in grand style by French colonialists, Oran today is a lively Mediterranean city with a distinctive character that sets it apart from Algiers.

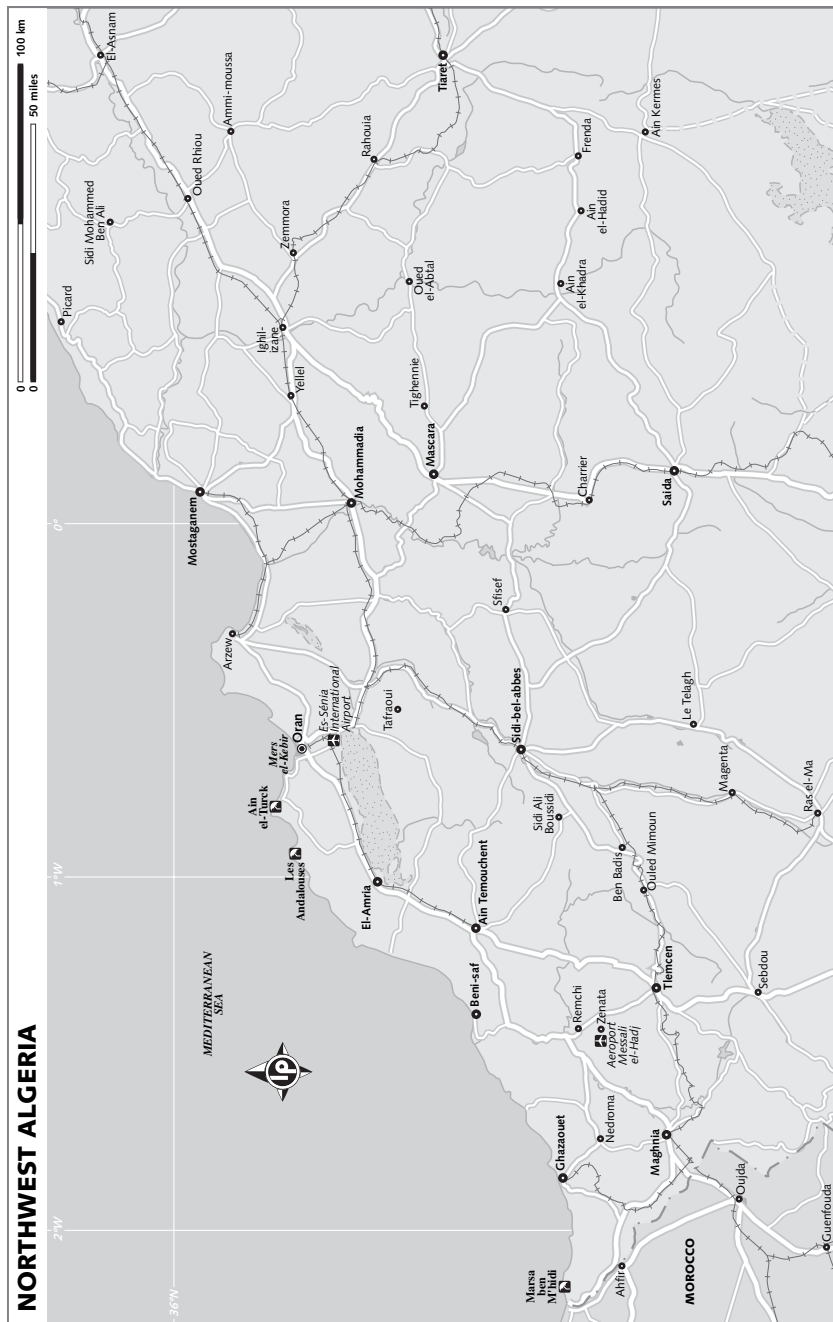
The northwest also contains some of Algeria’s richest farmland, particularly around Tlemcen, which in part explains why that town became the capital of the Maghreb, this part of northern Africa, in the 14th century. The region has also long been noted for its grapes and it was here that French colonists based their winemaking, a tradition that continues today – the best of Algeria’s considerable selection of cuvées come from around Tlemcen and the area south of Oran.

Outside of Oran the pace is slow and the sight of foreign visitors less expected. Tlemcen contains the best of the sights, both in town and on the heights above it. The coast from the Moroccan border to Oran has some of the Mediterranean’s most unspoiled beaches, with beautiful coves and large swaths of sand, although significant coastal developments are being planned as Algeria – and the northwest – gears up to attract more visitors.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Take in the royal view from the ruined sultan’s palace in Tlemcen and then visit the neighbouring tomb of the revered mystic **Sidi Boumediene** (p149)
- Be moved by the beat of rai in the place of its birth – if you can’t be there to join the crowds at the August festival, head to one of Oran’s nightclubs at **Ain el-Turck** (p145)
- Stretch out on the pristine **beaches** (p142) along the coast west of Oran – the further you head, the more likely you will have the place to yourself
- Have a quiet moment in the **Grand Mosque** (p148) of Tlemcen, one of the Maghreb’s most impressive religious buildings
- Stroll around the casbah and old town of **Oran** (p139) for a taste of its pirateering days





History

There's a strong Moroccan influence in the northwest, which is unsurprising considering its location up against the Moroccan border. Under Roman rule the northwest was farmed intensively, and the region's main town at the time, Pomaria (modern-day Tlemcen), was a stopover along the south Mediterranean coastal road. When Arab armies swept through the region in the 7th century during their conquest of North Africa and Spain, they were merely following the Roman – and pre-Roman – road. A few centuries later Berber armies arrived from the west and left a lasting Moroccan influence that can still be seen in the buildings of Tlemcen. Nineteenth-century French colonists, who had different priorities, recognised that the soil and location were ideal for vines and the area remains Algeria's centre of wine production.

Dangers & Annoyances

Northwest Algeria has seen less violence recently than the northeast. Nevertheless, at the time of writing several foreign governments continued to advise against travelling in the area west of the Massif de Ouarsenis, particularly around Relizane and Mascara, and the area south of Blida, especially near Medea.

ORAN وهران

☎ 041 / pop 1.5 million

Algeria's second city is a lively port with plenty of history and a lot of rhythm. Yet here, more than in Algiers, the consequences of the violence of the 1990s and the subsequent government neglect are plain to see, and every ship that sails north to Europe is watched by hundreds of people. Many of them long to make the journey to what they believe will be a better life, perhaps hoping to emulate Oran's most famous émigré, fashion designer Yves Saint Laurent. Albert Camus, who founded the city dull and dusty when he lived here in the 1940s, used it as the setting for his novel *The Plague*. But for all its problems, Oran is still fascinating, a city with a sense of its own history and culture, which has contributed much to the world, not least North Africa's liveliest music movement, *rai*.

History

Humans settled around the broad sweep of the Mers el-Kebir bay 100,000 years ago, but the story of Algeria's second city really starts when it became the port of Tlemcen. Andalusian traders started using the harbour in the 10th century. Spanish soldiers conquered it in 1509 and held it intermittently until 1792. The Spanish built fortifications that remain some of the city's most prominent landmarks today. The city was fought over by the Spaniards and Ottoman Turks throughout the 18th century and lost much of its importance in the process. Its prospects were made worse in 1790 when it was hit by an earthquake so large that tsunamis battered the Spanish coast. Oran's fortunes revived from 1831, when French colonists began to develop the port and to build a large naval base in the harbour of Mers el-Kebir. Under French control Oran became a *departement* of France and one of France's largest cities, a cosmopolitan place of whitewashed houses, broad avenues and grand civic buildings. At the outbreak of WWII the Mers el-Kebir naval base was home to a significant squadron of French battleships. When France surrendered to the Germans in 1940, British forces attacked the French fleet to stop it falling to the Germans, killing 1300 French sailors in the action. Almost half of Oran's population left after independence.

Orientation

The oldest part of town, the casbah, sits just above the old port, with its back to 400m high Djebel Murdjadjo and the Spanish-built fort of Santa Cruz. With each development the city has spread to the east and south, lining the bay. The colonial French city with its boulevards of whitewashed buildings sits above the more modern, eastern port. To the south of the French city, modern blocks spread far back into the interior. To the east the new Sheraton hotel, built on a rise overlooking the sea, serves as a useful marker. The place du 1 Novembre still serves as a focal point, while the *front de mer* (waterfront), known locally as the balcony, attracts crowds in the evening. The parallel streets of rue Mohamed Khemisti and rue Larbi ben M'hidi are the main shopping streets. Albert Camus lived at 65 rue Larbi ben M'hidi, above what is now Boutique Warda.