

# Tunis تونس



Maghrebi, Mediterranean and European: Tunis is at once complex, hybrid and cosmopolitan, yet remains curiously provincial, charmingly stuck in time.

The laid-back capital of Tunis also has two distinct urban-planning personalities. The new city, created by French colonials in the 19th century, is an orderly European grid, with wrought-iron balconies, cafes and patisseries bordering the boulevards. Its main drag, palm-lined ave Habib Bourguiba, is prime territory for promenading, coffee drinking, gossiping and idly watching the passing human traffic.

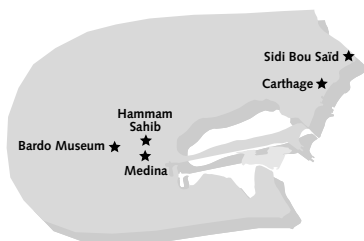
The 8th-century, quintessentially Arab medina is the city's historic and symbolic heart. Here you enter a tangled maze of narrow streets with giant keyhole-shaped doors, scattering cats, artisans' workshops and swarming souqs. All lanes, however twisted, eventually lead to the Great Mosque.

The city's most well-known attractions lie out of the centre: the ruins of once magnificent Carthage, set among the great white mansions of Tunis' contemporary upper classes; the astounding, enormous collection of Roman mosaics housed in the Bardo's Ottoman palace; and the cliff-top village of Sidi Bou Saïd that so inspired Paul Klee and August Macke.

However grittily urban Tunis might feel compared with the rest of the country, you are never far from the beach. The suburbs stretch endlessly out along deep-blue seafronts, where in summer everyone walks in search of a breeze.

## HIGHLIGHTS

- Get lost and shop till you drop in the **medina** (p69)
- See Baron d'Erlanger's fantastical mansion and sip tea at sunset in **Sidi Bou Saïd** (p96)
- Be amazed by the incredible Roman mosaics at the palatial **Bardo Museum** (p76)
- Imagine the glories of ancient **Carthage** (p89)
- Scrub, sweat and socialise at a stuck-in-time **Hammam Sahib** (boxed text, p74) in Halfaouine



## HISTORY

Tunis (ancient Tynes) features on 5th-century BC maps, and the Roman general Regulus camped in the Berber town in 255 BC during the First Punic War.

The Carthaginians and the Romans ruled from Byrsa Hill, on the coast to the east, but after ousting the Byzantines in AD 695, the victorious Arab Hassan bin Nooman decided to build at Tunis. Ever mindful of defensive possibilities, he sited the medina on a narrow band of high ground flanked by the Sebket Sejoumi (a salt lake) to the southwest and Lake Tunis to the east. A deep-water channel was dug across the lake to access the sea.

The city was born with the building of the Zaytouna (Great) Mosque (p69) in AD 732, but it was in the 9th century, when Aghlabid ruler Ibrahim ibn Ahmed II moved his court here, that it became the seat of power.

Tunis declined under the Fatimids, who chose Mahdia as their capital in the 10th century, and escaped the ravages of the 11th-century Hilalian invasion, emerging again as capital following the Almohad North African conquest in 1160.

The city flourished and trade boomed under the Hafids, who ruled from 1229 to 1574. The population more than tripled (to about 60,000). Souqs (markets), mosques, *medersas* (Quranic schools) and

the Zaytouna Mosque University were established.

Tunis suffered badly during Turkish-Spanish tussles, leading to the fall of the Hafids. Much of the city was destroyed and the population fled. Sinan Pasha finally secured the city for the Ottomans in 1574, and people began to return, including refugees fleeing religious persecution: Moorish Andalusians from Spain and Jews from Livorno in Italy. Many were fine artisans who played an important role in the city's reconstruction.

In the 19th century, the colonising French built their elegant Ville Nouvelle (new town) on land reclaimed from Lake Tunis, moving the city's focus. Today the medina, with its splendid restaurants and cultural centres, is the one getting all the attention.

## ORIENTATION

Ville Nouvelle's main east-west road is ave Habib Bourguiba, running from Lake Tunis to place de l'Indépendance, with the medina at its western end. A causeway at the eastern end carries road and rail traffic east across Lake Tunis to La Goulette, and then north along the coast to the suburbs of Carthage, Sidi Bou Saïd, La Marsa and Gammarth. The airport lies on the north side of the lake, as do the popular new suburbs of Berges du Lac and La Soukra.

### TUNIS IN...

#### Two Days

Head to the **Bardo Museum** (p76) in the morning, returning to the centre for lunch and to explore the **medina** (p69), before a promenade and reviving drink on ave Habib Bourguiba. Finish up at the extraordinary 18th-century medina restaurant **Dar el-Jeld** (p80). The next day, explore the ancient sites of **Carthage** (p89) and then relax in the whitewashed village of **Sidi Bou Saïd** (p96), drinking in the views and having dinner at one of its cliff-top restaurants.

#### Four Days

Spend a day wandering the **medina** (p69) and have dinner at **Chez Slah** (p82). Early next morning hit the **Bardo Museum** (p76) before the tour buses, then tram it to place de la République and wander ave de Paris and ave de la Liberté, taking in the magnificent, if dilapidated, 20th-century architecture, stopping for *briq* (sweet or savoury pastries) when necessary. Devote the third day to **Carthage** (p89), alternating the ancient sites with a bar or spa visit; either way put your feet up and enjoy the views from **Villa Didon** (p95) and then browse around the chic shops and cafes down the hill. Head up the coast to romantic **Sidi Bou Saïd** (p96) on your last day, then spend the afternoon either at the beach or the exquisite villa **Dar Ennejma Ezzahra** (p96) before having dinner on the sand at Le Marsa's **Le Golfe** (p99).