

Cap Bon الوطى القبا



Cap Bon is Tunisia's tourism hot spot, pointing its crooked thumb towards Sicily, only 150km away. It has long had close links with Europe – geologists speculate that the land masses were once joined, split by the rising Mediterranean 30,000 years ago. Crowded with citrus trees and vineyards, the region is famous for its wine.

The action centres on Hammamet, a resort stretching along an amber-sanded beach that has attracted tourists since the 1920s. Then a jet-set playground, it's now a popular package destination, though clever planning restrictions have kept it a relatively attractive place to visit. Hotels have large capacities but don't tower over the bay, and are surrounded by greenery.

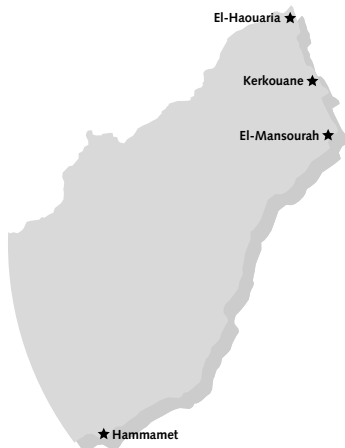
Venture away from Hammamet and the busy craft centre of Nabeul and you'll find Cap Bon a surprising adventure. Its other towns have a charming, nothing-much-to-do feel, and if you have your own transport and want to find a deserted beach, you're in luck.

Kélibia, a northern backwater, has a small, busy port, a mighty fortress and a dazzling beach, with only one hotel plonked on it so far. Nearby are the ruins of Punic Kerkouane, the most complete remains of the Carthaginian civilisation. The small town of El-Haouaria, at the peninsula's northern tip, feels even more remote, lying near coastal quarries that date back more than 2500 years and supplied stone for Rome's Colosseum.

The west is more rugged and difficult to get around. A dramatic road clinging to the rocky coast leads to faded spa-town Korbous, where a scalding hot spring spills directly into the sea.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Explore the mysteries of the ancient Punic civilisation at **Kerkouane** (p120)
- Discover the soft, white sands and azure waters near Kélibia at **El-Mansourah** (p118)
- Watch peregrine falcons swoop from the end-of-the-world cliffs near **El-Haouaria** (p122)
- Revel in sun, fun, sand and sea at **Hammamet** (p102)



History

Cap Bon was under Carthaginian control by the early 5th century BC, a lush agricultural region that kept the Punic capital in fruit and veg, and formed a key – if not very successful – part of its defence system, centred on fortified Aspis (Kélibia). The problem was that it was geographically vulnerable. Both Agathocles of Syracuse (in 310 BC) and the Roman general Regulus (in 256 BC) invaded through here during their respective assaults on Carthage, sacking Aspis en route. Kerkouane survived Agathocles, but was trashed by Regulus and abandoned forever.

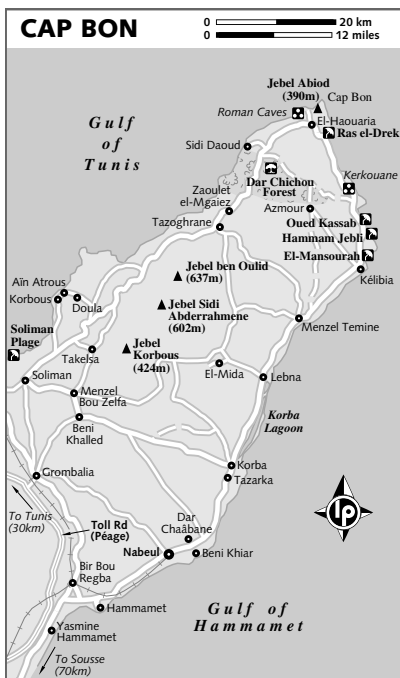
The Romans called the region Pulchri Promontorium – the ‘beautiful peninsula’ – and settled in. They took over Aspis, renaming it Clypea, and built the large town of Neapolis (Nabeul). The countryside is dotted with relics of other prosperous settlements. Clypea became a Byzantine stronghold that held out against the Arabs until the late 7th century AD, long after the rest of Tunisia had fallen.

After the Arab conquest, piracy and unrest slowly led to decline in the 14th century.

Cap Bon was constantly threatened from the sea, forcing many coastal communities to shift inland – you’ll notice that Nabeul and Kélibia are a few kilometres from the coast.

A wave of Andalusian immigrants, fleeing persecution by Christians in Spain, arrived during the 15th century, revitalising the area, which was also favoured by European settlers during the 19th century. The French developed the vast citrus groves around Beni Khaled and Menzel Bou Zelfa and the vineyards around Grombalia. The rustic ruins of old, red-tiled farmhouses and great agricultural buildings from the colonial era are a melancholy sight.

An exclusive kind of tourism took off in the 1920s, triggered largely by Romanian millionaire George Sebastian building his luxurious villa outside Hammamet. Less-glimmering visitors took over in 1943, when Axis forces retreated to Cap Bon and ran their campaign from the villa, until the surrender that ended the North African phase of WWII. Today it’s Tunisia’s biggest resort, a holiday playground. Even President Ben Ali has a holiday home here.



Climate

Cap Bon has a blessedly balmy climate, with cooling coastal breezes and endless blue days in summer, and temperate winters. That said, low-season prices are low for a reason – it does get chilly, and the sun doesn’t always shine.

Getting There & Away

The nearest airport is Tunis-Carthage. There are many buses and louages (shared-taxis) serving the region, with Hammamet and Korbus around an hour from the capital. Nabeul and Hammamet are also connected to Tunis by train.

Getting Around

Louages and buses connect the coastal towns. It’s more difficult to cross the Cap Bon peninsula – Soliman and Korbus are better reached from Tunis.

HAMMAMET

pop 63,000

With a soft curve of sandy beach, densely blue Mediterranean, little Noddy trains and all-inclusive hotels, Hammamet (‘the baths’ in Arabic) is Tunisia’s biggest resort.

حمامات