

The Central Coast & Kairouan



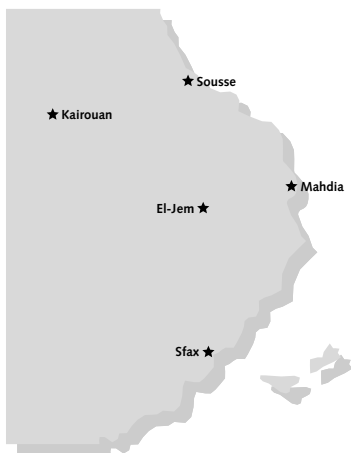
Considered by many to be the heartland of Tunisia and home to one of Islam's most important mosques, several of the country's largest beach resorts and its most impressive Roman monument, this region is hardly lacking in superlatives. Its diversity, from fortified ancient medinas to exclusive modern beach resorts, from religious conservatism to Western hedonism, from bastions of the tourist-industrial-complex to quiet, timeless villages, is belied by the short commute it takes to get from one to the other. This is the Tunisia of postcards and brochures, where architecture and landscapes unchanged for centuries meet facilities designed for the busloads of foreign visitors that fuel much of the economy.

The central coast's fortified medinas, which once protected these cities that became wealthy from the trade of the Mediterranean and the Sahara, house Tunisians going about everyday lives in what, to the average foreigner's eye, looks like an elaborate and exotic Hollywood set. Each is distinctive: Sfax's is the least touched by tourism, Mahdia's looks like a Greek fishing village and is by far the most inviting, Sousse's is a shopping paradise, and Monastir's the birthplace and final resting place for the country's independence leader, Habib Bourguiba.

It is also Tunisia's Islamic heartland, with Kairouan ranking only behind Mecca, Medina and Jerusalem as one of the holiest cities of Islam. The well-preserved colosseum of El-Jem rivals that of Rome's in terms of sheer size but may be an even more spectacular, and certainly more incongruous, sight. During the summer months the beach resorts along the Mediterranean become the holiday playground for what seems to be all of Europe.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Gawp at the sheer size of North Africa's most impressive Roman monument, El-Jem's awe-some **colosseum** (p203)
- Marvel at the colours, details, art and workmanship that went into creating the magnificent mosaics on display at El-Jem's **Archaeological Museum** (p204)
- Take in the sea air and wonderful light on a walk around Cap d'Afrique in **Mahdia** (p207)
- Listen for the call to prayer in the holy Islamic city of **Kairouan** (p195)
- Explore the bustling alleyways of the best medina in the country, to see how residents of these ancient cities live and work, in **Sfax** (p209)
- Become part of the vast parade taking a sunset stroll along the promenade of Sousse's **Boujafar Beach** (p187)



History

The Sahel, the large coastal bulge between the Gulf of Hammamet and the Gulf of Gabès, has always been a battleground for other people's wars. Sousse, the home base of Hannibal in the Carthaginian battles against the Romans, again found itself on the losing side when Pompey made it his headquarters in his doomed civil war against Julius Caesar (based at Monastir). It was finally destroyed by the first wave of Islamic armies that swept across North Africa in the 7th century. These Islamic armies founded the holy city of Kairouan and ushered in the reign of Islamic dynasties, the most productive of which were the Aghlabids (who left a splendid architectural legacy in all of the coastal towns) and the Cairo-based Fatimids (whose mark can still be seen in Mahdia).

Indigenous Berbers took umbrage at their traditional land being taken over by foreigners. Whether confronted with the Roman Empire from the north or the Islamic dynasties from the east, they fought them all, mounting rebellion after rebellion, one of which destroyed Kairouan. During another, they held out against vastly superior numbers in the colosseum of El-Jem.

In modern Tunisian history, Monastir is revered as the birthplace of the nation's founder, Habib Bourguiba.

Climate

Tunisia's central coast gets very hot in summer but you're never too far from a sea breeze. The further you go inland, the hotter it gets – Kairouan and El-Jem bake in summer, but can be quite cold in winter.

Getting There & Away

The new Enfidha airport, 40km north of Sousse, was due to open at the time of going to press. Transport options to get to/from the airport were unclear at the time of research but its proximity is bound to make it another gateway (along with Monastir's airport) to the central coast.

All the towns covered in this chapter are well connected to the rest of the country by bus, louage (shared taxi) and (apart from Kairouan) train, which is easily the most comfortable and convenient mode of travel.



Getting Around

Again, louage or train are the easiest ways to get around. There are no direct connections between Kairouan and El-Jem.

SOUSSE

pop 173,000

Sousse is Tunisia's third biggest city and its enduring popularity as a tourist destination is somewhat baffling: loud, brash and an odd mix of traditional and 1980s mass-tourism architecture, it's not exactly what most people would have in mind for their holiday. And yet the crowds keep flooding in. Sousse is at least as popular with foreigners as it is with Tunisians: witness summer evenings on Boujaffar Beach, when the entire town seems to be out for a stroll on the seafront.

The Ville Nouvelle is where you'll find the bulk of facilities designed for tourists: mini-malls, fast-food joints, restaurants with quadrilingual menus, souvenir shops. You'll have to head to the medina for something more authentic; it hasn't escaped the mad tourism circus completely, but you're guaranteed a bit of history and culture once

سوسة