

# Gabès, Matmata & the Ksour



Covering a good chunk of territory from the Gulf of Gabès to the Libyan border, this fairly remote region of southern Tunisia is a forbidding landscape of inhospitable desert, though not the sandy sort that inspires poetry and romantic fantasies. Recognisable to anyone who has travelled in the western part of the United States and to *Star Wars* fans, the land here ranges from scrub brush flats to low mountain escarpments, all of which looks like the ends of the earth.

The area receives few visitors, most on lightning-quick Land Rover 'safaris' of the underground troglodyte dwellings of Matmata and one or two of the ruined hilltop Berber villages around Tataouine. It's easy to find yourself staring at the empty fortress-like homes imagining what life would be like, so isolated not only by distance from other settlements but by the mere physical challenge of visiting the neighbours. Each of the villages has at least one *ksar* (the plural is *ksour*), the wonderfully idiosyncratic fortified stronghold that is the region's trademark. Gabès, the terminus of the rail line, is the de facto transport centre and, while its *palmeraie* (palm grove) is an attractive place in which to get lost, the city's industrial character holds few visitors in its thrall.

## HIGHLIGHTS

- Go underground, literally, visiting or even sleeping in a troglodyte dwelling in **Matmata** (p223)
- Hike to the top of one of the hilltop **ksour** (fortified strongholds; p232) south of Tataouine
- Fall asleep in a **ghorfa** (a distinctive structure once used to store grain) near Metameur (p234)



## History

The Ksour district, centred on the hills of the Jebel Dahar, has long been a stronghold of Berber culture – ever since the seminomadic Berber tribes that inhabited the Jeffara were driven into the hills by the Hlalian invasions of the 11th century. The villages around here are among the last places where the local Berber language, Chelha, can be heard. With the deaths of elderly speakers, the language too is dying out.

## Getting There & Away

Other than flying to Jerba and then crossing the Roman causeway or catching the ferry to the mainland, the quickest way to the region is to arrive in Gabès via the train.

There are no commercial flights from Tunis or elsewhere in the country.

## Getting Around

Most people zip around the region in a 4WD as part of a group tour. A rental vehicle allows you the luxury of choosing your itinerary. Public transport connects the towns in the region, though it's sometimes difficult to do more than two legs of a trip in one day.

## GABÈS

pop 11,700

For a seaside city at a major transport crossroads, Gabès does little to take advantage of its location, at least as far as tourism goes. The infrastructure of the busy port and

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