

The Sahara

الصحراء



There's something undeniably moving about standing on top of a shifting sand dune and surveying the emptiness – what seems to be the end of the earth can be so beautiful. The novelty of finding sand so far from the ocean can spark anxious nightmares about global warming, yet for certain temperaments there's the temptation to simply walk off into the distance to see how far you can go before feeling like you're truly on an alien planet. *Lawrence of Arabia* fantasies aside, don't underestimate the inviting soft dunes of the Grand Erg Oriental, one of the Sahara's most expansive sand seas. It's an inhospitable place for all but the experienced – travel here should be done with the utmost precaution. But it's a remarkable and breathtaking setting, and as long as you travel with a guide or in a group, it could be the highlight of your trip.

The *erg* (sand sea) begins 50km south of Douz and extends 500km southwest into neighbouring Algeria. All along the Sahara's northern perimeter are oasis towns huddled amid vast *palmeraies* (palm groves) which are fed by underground water and produce the finest dates in Tunisia. Conveniently, Douz is the best of these oases from which to launch your desert expeditions.

The Sahara and its northern hinterland is the home of the Berbers. With the decline of the Roman Empire, tribes began to move in from the south at the end of the 4th century AD, bringing with them the first camels to be seen in Tunisia. The Berbers and their camels are still there and many continue to live a seminomadic existence in the south around Douz.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Take the camel by the hump on a **trek** (p242) through the otherworldly dunes of the Grand Erg Oriental for a Saharan experience
- Soak your tired bones in the **hot springs** (p247) at the oasis of Ksar Ghilane



