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Jerba

جربة

Though a small island, Jerba contains the ingredients of most people's idea of the ideal holiday vacation: soft, sandy beaches; warm Mediterranean waters; a warren of shops selling every imaginable handicraft; a maze of cobblestone streets and a history of ethnic and religious diversity more pronounced than in the rest of the country. To the classically inclined, the name Jerba conjures images of Homer's Land of the Lotus Eaters, an island so seductive that it's impossible to leave. Many visitors voluntarily sequester themselves at the McHotels along beautiful Sidi Mahres beach, but while the appeal of a luxury beach resort speaks for itself, the rest of Jerba shouldn't be missed.

The heart of the island is Houmt Souq, its largest town and one of Tunisia's most unique – so polished and charming it's like eye candy for those living in concrete jungles. It's chock-a-block with outdoor cafes, has enough carpets, souvenirs and crafts to satisfy the most demanding shopaholic and has a handful of ancient *funduqs* (inns), the town's architectural trademark, set around a central courtyard and converted into hotels.

Inland amongst crumbling homesteads you'll find one of the last remaining Jewish communities in North Africa, with their synagogue at Erriadh, as well as an equally unusual population of Ibadis (an offshoot of the Kharijite sect found only in Jerba). Jerba's postcard-perfect beaches are as good as advertised, but it's the interior, with its distinctive above- and below-ground mosques and small villages shaded by palm trees, that lingers in your memory after you have left.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Shop till you drop in **Houmt Souq** (p268)
- Soak up the sun at **Sidi Mahres beach** (p274)
- Visit the ancient Jewish community at the **El-Ghriba synagogue** (p272) in Erriadh

History

When Phoenicians arrived on the scene about 2700 years ago, Berber tribes were already well established on Jerba. Among them was the Gerbitani of Gerba (near modern Houmt Souq). The Phoenicians established settlements at Gightis, on the mainland, and Meninx (modern El-Kantara), on Jerba. The island was one of the first places to fall to the Arabs on their march into Tunisia but it later became a stronghold and refuge of the Kharijites in the wake of the Kharijite rebellion and subsequent Fatimid backlash that erupted across North Africa in AD 740. They belonged to the Ibadi sect of Kharijism (see the boxed text, p269) and were largely responsible for the more than 200 mosques on the island.

Jerba later became a home base for some of the Mediterranean's most renowned pirates, including the Barbarossa brothers and, later, their offsider Dragut, who became Dargouth Pasha, ruler of Tripoli. Dragut's renown was enhanced by a famous escape from the Spanish in 1551 when his fleet was trapped in the Gulf of Bou Grara; he escaped at night by hauling the ships across a breach in the causeway. Returning in 1560, he massacred Spanish forces the next year, leaving the Tower of Skulls near Houmt Souq.

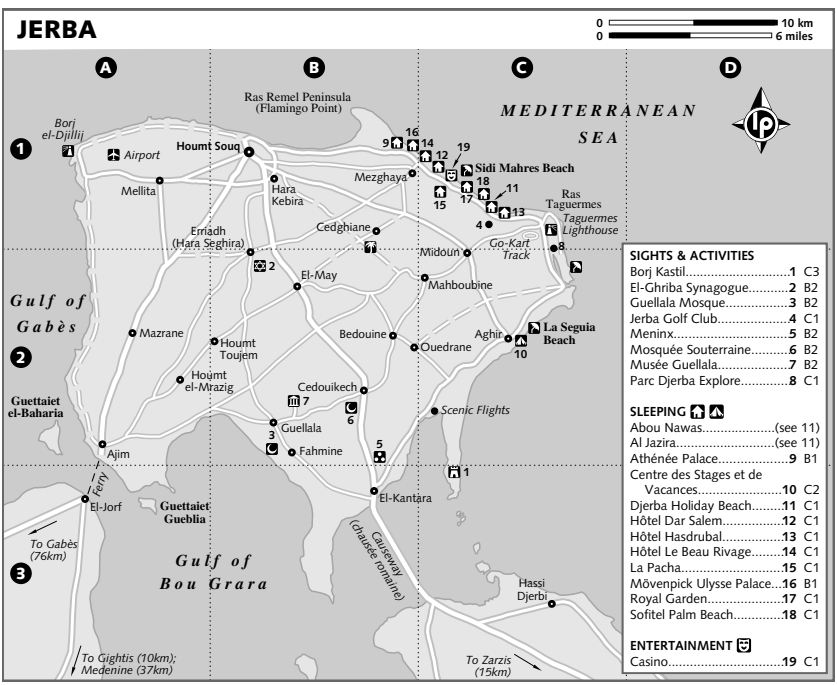
Climate

For sun worshippers Jerba is a great place to visit year-round, since even in the middle of winter temperatures rarely drop below 15°C. However, as in the rest of Tunisia, summers are hot, though a regular sea breeze cools things down along the coast.

Getting There & Away

AIR

Jerba's airport, near Mellita village in the northwest, handles a busy schedule of international flights, including a constant flow of charter flights from Europe (see p297). **Sevenair** (☎ 75 650 320; ave Habib Bourguiba) has an office in Houmt Souq and several flights a day to Tunis in summer.

BUS

The bus station is a block west of ave Habib Bourguiba at the southern edge of Houmt