



Northern Tunisia

Beloved by Tunisians but often overlooked by visitors from abroad, northern Tunisia may just be the country's most underappreciated region. Not only does it have some of Tunisia's finest and most secluded beaches, but it's also home to extensive forests, rugged hills that drop precipitously into the glinting blue Mediterranean, and rolling farmland that's magnificently lush in winter and golden in summer.

Bizerte, the region's main city, is endowed with a picturesque ancient port and a bustling – and largely untouristed – commercial centre. It's an excellent base for exploring Ichkeul National Park – one look at the lake and you'll understand why it's a Unesco World Heritage site – and some of the handful of Tunisian beaches that epitomise Mediterranean beauty, including Raf Raf and Cap Serrat.

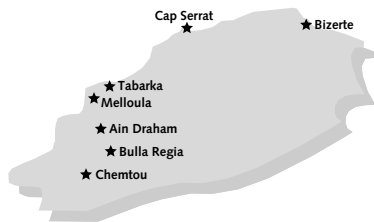
Tabarka, out near Algeria, is a scenic spot famed for its world-class summer music festivals, excellent scuba diving and mellow holiday feel.

Heading south from Tabarka along narrow, winding roads takes you into the Kroumirie Mountains, thick with cork oak and ideal for hiking (with a guide). The main town is Ain Draham, a friendly, one-time colonial hill station that's high enough to get snow in winter.

The region is also home to Tunisia's most intriguing Roman sites: the subterranean villas of Bulla Regia; the ancient Chemtou quarries, renowned for their unique yellow marble; and the ancient port of Utica (Utique), all bearing testimony to the ingenuity of these illustrious ancestors.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Live the good life in **Bizerte** (p127) with evening strolls, good food and great day trips
- Put your bags down for a few days and chill at **Cap Serrat** (p137), Tunisia's most unspoiled beach
- Enjoy top-flight international talent at Tabarka's brilliant **Jazz Festival** (p141)
- Discover the captivating beauty of **Melloula** (p143), on the Algerian border
- Ramble through the cork forests around **Ain Draham** (p143)
- Explore the exquisite underground Roman villas of **Bulla Regia** (p150) and the former imperial marble quarries of **Chemtou** (p152)



History

Northern Tunisia has been fought over for millennia not only because of its strategic ports but also because it's one of the country's richest agricultural regions.

It was first settled by European migrants between 6000 BC and 2500 BC, then the Phoenicians gained a foothold here when they established Utica in 1100 BC. During the Second Punic War (204 BC) the Roman general Scipio landed at Utica. The Romans gained power a century later but were content to let the Numidians rule. Over time, the Romans – with a main base at Vega (Béja) – rebuilt the earlier Punic settlements and made the most of the region's prodigious wheat-growing capacity – hence the glorious wealth of settlements such as Bulla Regia.

With the coming of the Arabs and Islam, the seat of power moved southwards to Kairouan. The Spanish and the Ottoman Turks played pass-the-parcel with the region's strategic centres in the 16th century, when piracy was rife.

In the 19th century, Tunisia's northern riches proved very attractive to the French.

During WWII, in the spring of 1943, the area became a battleground, as a number of military cemeteries testify.

Climate

Summers are hot and dry along the coast but up in the Kroumirie Mountains it's a few degrees cooler – that's why Ain Draham was such a popular hill station during the colonial period. In winter the mountains along the Algerian border can get surprisingly cold – in December and January there's often snow.

Getting There & Around

Tunis-Carthage International Airport is linked to Bizerte by bus (see p132). Tabarka's international airport is served by European charter flights.

Buses and louages (shared taxis) to every city and large town in the region leave from Tunis' northern (Bab Saadoun) bus station (p85). Trains link Tunis with Bizerte, Béja, Jendouba and Ghardimaou.

With a bit of patience, you can use public transport to get to and between virtually all the places mentioned in this chapter.

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