

Tunisia

Tunisia is one of Africa's easiest destinations. Most visitors come here for the long, golden beaches, nonstop summer sunshine and Maghrebi exoticism on tap (package holidaymakers almost outnumber the locals in high summer), but, outside the high season and off the well-trodden routes, it's a surprisingly underrated and often tourist-free destination.

Once-gritty Tunis has refashioned itself as an ambitiously modern capital, though its traditional-Arab and French-colonial pasts still have a powerful, palpable presence. In the north, lakes teem with pink flamingos, surprising deep green forests rise up from a spectacularly beautiful coastline and gentle rolling plains are dotted with olive and citrus trees. On the island of Jerba, sun-bleached roundhouses, soft sand beaches and one of North Africa's last Jewish communities make a fascinating mix. In the south, the traditions of the indigenous Berbers persevere, and the ever-enchancing sands of the Sahara stretch deep into Africa.

Tunisia also has some interesting places to stay: luxury desert digs, revamped ancient inns on the island of Jerba and a growing number of fabulously restored medina town houses.

Economic and political prudence, as well as a commitment to education, has ensured relative prosperity in most parts of the country and, despite a government that keeps firm tabs on its citizens, the much-touted spirit of tolerance and traditional Arab hospitality are ever present. Make the most of it, and discover wonderfully distinct cultures and incredible extremes of landscape, even in just a few short days.

FAST FACTS

- **Area** 164,000 sq km
- **ATMs** In all large towns
- **Borders** Algeria, Libya
- **Budget** TD60 per day
- **Capital** Tunis
- **Languages** Arabic, French
- **Money** Tunisian dinar; US\$1 = TD1.3, €1 = TD1.9
- **Population** 10.3 million
- **Seasons** Cool (November to April), warm (May to October)
- **Telephone** Country code ☎ 216; international access code ☎ 00
- **Time** GMT/UTC +1 hour
- **Visa** Unnecessary for most EU, American, Canadian and Japanese citizens; TD40 for Australians and South Africans, available at airport; others need to apply in advance



HOW MUCH?

- **Cup of peppermint tea** US\$0.80
- **Fish couscous** US\$6 to US\$8
- **Museum/archeological site admission** US\$3 to US\$6
- **Hamam with massage** US\$4
- **Fouta (cotton beach sheet)** US\$3.50

LONELY PLANET INDEX

- **1L petrol** US\$1
- **1L bottled water** US\$0.25
- **Bottle of Celtia beer** US\$1.25
- **Jasmine nosegay** US\$0.85

HIGHLIGHTS

- **Sidi Bou Saïd** (p222) Explore this gorgeous bougainvillea-clad Mediterranean town with views of the intensely blue Gulf of Tunis.
- **Bardo Museum** (p218) Be overwhelmed by the splendour of Roman Africa, and the gorgeous Islamic decoration of the palace in which it's contained.
- **Jerba** (p235) Experience fascinating architecture, great beaches and unusual ethnic diversity.
- **Grand Erg Oriental** (p235) Melt in a Sahara sunset amid dreamy postcard-perfect dunes.
- **Road to Nowhere** (p233) Travel the causeway running across Chott el-Jerid, an endless, mirage-inducing salt lake.

CLIMATE & WHEN TO GO

Tunisia has a Mediterranean climate, with hot, dry summers and mild winters. Visit during springtime, between mid-March and mid-May, for mild to warm temperatures and wild flowers covering the countryside. Summer is great for beach frolics and music festivals, but, as it's Tunisia's high season, expect prices to go up and crowds of northern Europeans to descend on resort areas. The desert is also much too hot then – the Saharan dunes are best in late autumn, particularly in November after the date harvest.

ITINERARIES

- **Three Days** Beat the crowds to the Bardo (p218) first thing, then spend the rest of

the day in the beautiful Tunis suburb of Sidi Bou Saïd (p222), returning to Tunis for dinner in a grand medina restaurant (p221). Next day, head out along the northern coast towards Tabarka (p223). Explore the deep green forests around Ain Draham (p223) and the magnificent underground villas of Bulla Regia (p224) before sunbathing and scuba-diving your way along the coast to Tunis.

- **One Week** Enjoy a few days on Jerba (p235), spending mornings on the beach, middays snoozing and late afternoons exploring the interior. Then head inland to the extraordinary underground Berber houses at Matmata (p235), before heading back along the coast to Tunis, not missing the untouristed medina at Sfax (p231).
- **Two Weeks** Two weeks is a perfect amount of time for incorporating a bit of the north and a lot of the south. Start with Tunis and the north as described above, then drive to the Islamic holy city of Kairouan (p228). From there, head to Mahdia (p230) and enjoy its gorgeous harbour or to El-Jem (p230) for the Roman Empire's third-largest colosseum. Drive down to Jerba (p235) to relax on the island for a few days. Then head to the Sahara, taking in Tataouine and the picturesque *ksour* (castles) district (p238), continuing on to the laid-back Douz (p234). From there, join a tour to the sand sea of the Grand Erg Oriental (p235), or drive through the Chott el-Jerid (p233) to the enormous palmeraie of the oasis town of Tozeur (p233).

HISTORY

Tunisia's long history is a rich and storied one. Nature, luck and canny political stewardship have produced a calm, safe country, despite being the subject of a tug of war between successive great civilisations over the millennia.

Empires Strike Back

The Phoenicians set their sights on Tunisia around 800 BC, and their capital Carthage – today a suburb of Tunis – was the main power in the western Mediterranean by the 6th century BC. The burgeoning Roman Empire became uneasy with a nation of mercantile genius and mercenary strength on its doorstep and 128 years of conflict – including the three