

# Tunisia

Tunisia is one of Africa's easiest destinations, a place where tourists almost outnumber the locals in high summer, and flock here for the golden sandy beaches, non-stop sunshine, and exoticism on tap. It's a country where sand dunes peak like brushstrokes in the Sahara desert; the beautiful sun-bleached round houses of Jerba hide a multitude of ethnic groups, and the parched southern landscapes of the Sahara are contrasted with the sparkling water of the Mediterranean sea that frames Tunisia's northern and eastern shores. The quiet beaches of the northern coast are a secret from package tourists sizzling on the heaving sandy stretches of Hammamet and Monastir. *Star Wars* film sets are crammed with tourist groups. The country's capital, Tunis, is a gritty yet lively urban centre, where the walls of the medina get clogged by day visitors and shopkeepers keen to make a buck.

Tunisia also has some fascinating places to stay: a luxury, air-conditioned camp site in the middle of the desert, a revamped, stylish rural dwelling on Jerba island, or old merchants' inns with kaleidoscopic tiles and sunny courtyards. Though package tourism has brought jobs and relative prosperity to parts of the country, much of traditional local culture still grates uncomfortably against modern influences, so tread lightly and enjoy this diverse, fascinating country.

## FAST FACTS

- **Area** 164,000 sq km
- **ATMs** In all large towns
- **Borders** Algeria, Libya
- **Budget** US\$30 per day
- **Capital** Tunis
- **Languages** Arabic, French
- **Money** Tunisian dinar US\$1 = TD1.3
- **Population** 9.8 million
- **Seasons** Cool (November to April), warm (May to October)
- **Telephone** Country code ☎ 216; international access code ☎ 00
- **Time** GTM/UTC + 1
- **Visa** US\$8 for Australians and South Africans, available at airport; US\$6.50 for others, need to apply in advance; unnecessary for Western Europeans, American, Canadian and Japanese citizens



## HIGHLIGHTS

- **Sidi Bou Said** (p223) Explore this gorgeous Mediterranean town covered in bougainvillea.
- **Jerba** (p235) Experience ethnic diversity amid fascinating architecture and great beaches.
- **Grand Erg Oriental** (p234) Melt in sunsets and sighs from dreamy dunes, postcard-style.
- **Bardo Museum** (p220) Exercise the other side of your mind in this fascinating collection of Islamic art and Roman remains.
- **Best journey** (p232) Travel the road running in the middle of 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. Visiting is best in springtime, between mid-March and mid-May, with warm (but not scorching) temperatures and wild flowers covering the countryside. Summers are great for beach frolics, but this is Tunisia's high season, so expect prices to go up and crowds of northern Europeans on package holidays to take over the beaches. The desert is much too hot in summer, and the best time to visit Tunisia if you want to see the Saharan dunes is in late autumn. November is when date harvests have just finished and some of the music festivals begin, so this time is perfect for visiting the desert.

## ITINERARIES

- **Three Days** If you're in the north, spend the day in beautiful Tunis suburb of Sidi Bou Saïd (p218) and go along the northern coast towards Tabarka (p223) for the day. Check out the castle and narrow streets of Le Kef (p224) before going back to Tunis (p218).
- **One Week** Jerba (p235) is the most amazing place in Tunisia, so spend at least three days here. Head back onto mainland Tunisia, get lost (though not literally) in the great expanse of the desert, visiting the incredible *ksour* (fortified Berber village) around Tataouine (p237) for a day, and go up towards Douz (p234), where you can organise a trip into the desert.
- **Two Weeks** Perfect for incorporating a bit of the north and a lot of the south. Starting with the north as described above, drive down to Kairouan (p228) from

## HOW MUCH?

- **Cup of tea** US\$1
- **Newspaper** US\$1.50
- **Bowl of couscous** US\$2.50
- **Museum admission** US\$5
- **Hamam with massage** US\$4

Tunis and see one of Islam's most important towns. From here, head to Mahdia (p230) and enjoy its gorgeous harbour. Drive down to Jerba (p235), via Sousse (p227), stopping for a swim along the lovely beaches on the way. Stay for four to five days in Jerba, exploring its architecture and relaxing on the beaches. Then go to the Sahara, see the *ksour* at Tataouine (p237), ride a camel into the desert from Douz (p234) and see the enormous palmeraie at Tozeur (p232). Head back north along the east coast beaches.

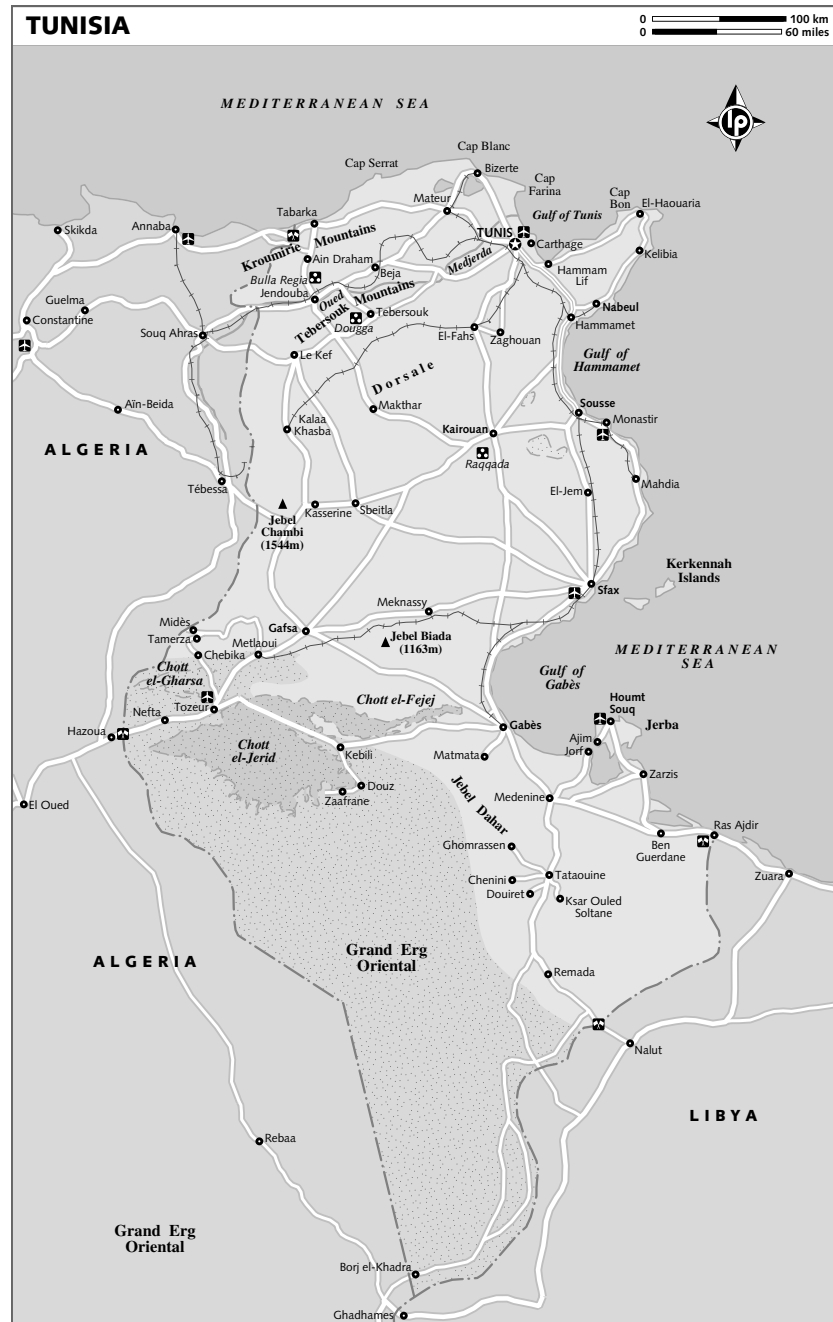
## HISTORY

Nature, luck and canny political stewardship have produced a calm, safe country, despite Tunisia having been the subject of fights between successive great civilisations. Its lush cultivated areas – once the breadbasket of Rome – still account for a reasonable portion of the economy, and its strategic position has long ensured it was dealt an economically viable hand.

## Empires Strike Back

The Phoenicians marched into Tunisia around 1100 BC, establishing their capital, Carthage (just north of today's Tunis), as the main power in the western Mediterranean by the 6th century. The emerging Roman Empire was not happy with these events, and 128 years of Punic Wars ensued. The legendary general of Carthage, Hannibal, nearly conquered the Romans after his invasion of Italy in 216 BC, but the Romans finally won, razed Carthage, sold its population for slaves and then re-created it as a Roman city in 44 BC. Roman Tunisia boomed, creating the temple-decked city of Dougga and the extravagant El Jem colosseum.

The Roman decline and fall in the 5th century was followed by the rampaging Vandals,



who saw their opportunity and captured Carthage in 439. Unhappy with the nihilistic rule of the Vandals, the local Berber population formed small kingdoms and rebelled, but both groups were conquered, and the Vandals ousted by the approaching Byzantines in 533.

In the 7th century the Arabs arrived from the east, bringing Islam with them. Despite continuous Berber belligerence, the Arabs ruled Tunisia until the 16th century, leaving behind the strongest ongoing cultural impact of all of Tunisia's invaders. Stuck between the Spanish Reconquistas and the powerful Ottoman empire, Tunisia became an outpost of the Ottomans until France began to gain ground in the region during the 19th century. Establishing their rule in 1881, the French proceeded to spend the next 50 years attempting to transform Tunisia into a European-style nation.

### Bourguiba & Ben

Tunisia became a republic in 1957, with Habib Bourguiba as the first president and the country's major reformist. He swore to eradicate poverty, and separate politics from religion, while 'righting all the wrongs done to women'. He introduced liberal laws, instituted a secular state, established women's rights, free education and the abolition of polygamy, and laid out the groundwork for the tolerant and economically savvy structure of today's Tunisia. However, he wasn't too keen to give up power, and reports of senility ended his rule with a bloodless coup in 1987.

Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali took over the steering wheel and continues down similar roads to Bourguiba, especially when it comes to handing over leadership. The dubiously overwhelming results at the 1989 and 1994 elections affirmed his stranglehold on presidency, peaking with a 99.44% majority in the 1999 and 2004 elections. Having been expected to retire in 2004, Ben Ali tweaked the constitution and allowed himself to run for another two terms. The main opposition group, the Democratic Progressive Party, pulled out in protest two days before the vote, calling its country's political system 'a masquerade of democracy'.

International criticism over suspicious election results, and alarm at the suppression of opposition and freedom of speech by the government, is dampened by the fact

that Tunisia is one of the most stable and moderate Arab states. It has developed close ties with both the USA and Germany, which supply the bulk of its foreign aid, and carefully developed a diverse economy resting mainly on agriculture, mining, energy and manufacturing. Tourism is another driving economic force, with thousands of Europeans thronging to Tunisian beaches and bringing in the much-needed euros. Global events affected Tunisia's popularity as a holiday resort, particularly when, in 2002, Jerba's oldest synagogue suffered a suicide bomber's attack in which 21 tourists died (Al-Qaida claimed responsibility). But things improved as security was stepped up, and the tourists returned to this welcoming and tolerant North African country.

### Tunisia Today

Tunisia's strong trade links with Europe make it more prosperous than its neighbours, and its relatively modern outlook on religion means that millions of European tourists keep coming back here. The Tunisian government, though flourishing in terms of economy and trade, has been criticised by human rights groups for clamping down on political dissent. Its strong stand against any form of religious fundamentalism was reasserted once again in October 2006, when the authorities launched a campaign against the wearing of headscarves – an echo of the monumental fuss over the same subject in Europe.

### CULTURE

Tunisia's ethnic and religious uniformity allows for a certain social ease, blanketed by the predominant Islam, which is relatively relaxed. Rural life has been centred on the family, the mosque and the *hammam* (bathhouse) for centuries, and strong ties between family members are of utmost importance. Many villagers have, however, left their rural set-up for education and careers in the cities, and a new class of individualistic, independent Tunisians is emerging. The disparity between the incomes earned in urban and rural communities is creating a gap between the rich and poor. This poses a challenge to the government battling with the aspiring middle classes on the one hand, the cluster of the opportunity-lacking educated, the poor, and the religiously fervent on the other.

Traditional Tunisian customs survive mainly in the countryside, where strangers will sometimes be invited into people's homes and shown the typical Arabic-African generosity: food will be shared, talk forthcoming and you'll get a unique insight into local life.

Gender segregation is strong in Tunisia, where men sit and chat in the cafés, and women visit each other at home. Evenings about town are particularly women-free. Things are more relaxed in Tunis, where couples intermingle and hold hands, though male presence in the streets is still overwhelming.

### PEOPLE

Almost 98% of Tunisia's population is Arab-Berber. Although Arabs and Berbers have mixed for 14 centuries, people living in the south of the country, along the fringe of the Sahara desert, claim a purely Berber heritage. Europeans and Jews make up the remaining 2%.

Islam is the official religion in Tunisia, and over 98% of the population are Sunni Muslims. Jews and Christians make up the remaining 2% of the population.

Tunisian society is quite liberal in its views of religion, though traditional values are still dominant.

### ARTS

Tunisia's national poet is Abu el-Kacem el-Chabbi; his poem *Will to Live* is taught to every school child. Not many authors have been translated into English, but Mustapha Tlili is one, and his novel *Lion Mountain* addresses the impact of progress and tourism on a remote village. Tunisian by birth, Albert Memmi lives in Paris and has written acclaimed works in French about the Jewish-North African immigrants' identity crisis.

During the colonial period, European artists were drawn to Tunisia, attracted by its exotic light, architecture and lifestyle. The most famous to be inspired here were Paul Klee and Auguste Macke, who visited in 1914 and produced many works inspired by what they saw.

Yahia Turki is considered the father of Tunisian figurative painting, and depicted scenes of daily life. After independence, artists such as Hédi Turki and Nja Mahdaoui began to explore the Islamic traditions of geometric decoration and calligraphy.

### ENVIRONMENT

It may be small, but Tunisia packs in a range of landscapes worthy of a continent, from its thickly forested northern mountains to crystallised salt lakes and silky dunes in the south.

The Kroumirie and Tebersouk Mountains in the north are the easternmost extent of the High Atlas Mountains, covered with dense forests where there's a chance of glimpsing wild boars, jackals, mongooses and genets. Their foothills dive down to the lavish, northern coastal plain. Further south, the country's main mountain range is the rugged, dry central Dorsale, which runs from Kasserine in the west and peters out into Cap Bon in the east. Between these ranges lies the lush Medjerda Valley, once the Roman larder, watered by the country's only permanent river, Oued Medjerda. Olives cover the east coast, particularly around Sfax. South of the Dorsale, a high plain falls away to a series of huge, glittering *chotts* (salt lakes) and the silent *erg* (sand sea).

Tunisia's environmental headaches include regional desertification and various forms of pollution: industrial pollution, sewage disposal and litter. Its trawler fleet has been accused of serious overfishing and seabed degradation in the Gulf of Gabès. In the south, the huge water requirements of the tourist industry have depleted artesian water levels and dried up springs, though dam construction in the north has ensured a steady supply to most places.

### FOOD & DRINK

Tunisians love spicy food, zinging everything with *harissa*, a fiery chilli paste added to snacks, stews and salads. There's lots of fresh produce here, and salads feature heavily. The most popular are *salade tunisienne*, a mix of tomato, onions, cucumber and lemon and olive oil dressing; and *salade mechuouia*, a smoky aubergine paste, delicious with fresh bread.

Couscous is ubiquitous. Apparently there are more than 300 ways of preparing the stuff, sweet as well as savoury. Generally couscous is served with lamb and vegetables, but Tunisians differ from their Arab neighbours in that they serve theirs with fish too, a thing unheard of in, say, Morocco.

You'll find fresh French loaves everywhere, and in some places *tabouna*, traditional flat Berber bread.

Tunisians love snacks too, and tuck into variations of *briq*, a deep-fried, thin pastry pocket that comes with a range of fillings (always including egg), excellent with shrimp, or *chappati*, a bread envelope filled with tuna, egg and *harissa*.

## TUNIS

☎ 71 / pop 702,000

Tunis is a good introduction to the opposing character of Tunisia's Western and Eastern influences, though it's by no means the country's most interesting city. The tangled streets of the medina are crammed with people selling, buying and carting goods around, enveloped in the scent of spices and sweat. Its chaos is infectious and you may end up bargaining to the last dinar with a shopkeeper, before flopping onto a pavement café, savouring your purchase. The medina's maze is contrasted by the straight lines of the Ville Nouvelle, centred on Ave Habib Bourguiba, a wide, tree-lined street where locals stroll in the evenings amid cafés that dot the sidewalks. Tunis' best attractions are outside of town: the wonderful Bardo Museum and mysterious ruins of the ancient Carthage are Tunisia's most comprehensive and fascinating archaeological and artistic sights. The evening hubbub is all strolling families and shy couples, while the younger and the hipper head out to the gorgeous Mediterranean suburb of Sidi Bou Saïd for night-time fun. Tunis is best enjoyed in a day, after which you can move on to smaller and better things.

### ORIENTATION

The airport is 8km northeast of the centre: a taxi costs around US\$8, or bus 35 (US\$1, half-hourly 6.30am to 5.30pm) heads to Ave Habib Bourguiba, the city's main thoroughfare, which runs east-west from Lake Tunis to Place de l'Indépendance. It is lined with cafés, banks, cinemas and restaurants, and is a favourite stretch to strut up and down in the evenings. The main north-south thoroughfare of the Ville Nouvelle is the street known as Ave de Carthage to the south of Ave Habib Bourguiba and as Ave de Paris to the north. Ave de Carthage runs east to Place Barcelone, hub of the Métro Léger network, and with the train station on its southern side.

The western extension of Ave Habib Bourguiba is Ave de France, which terminates in front of Bab Bhar (Porte de France), a huge arch, beyond which is the medina. The medina's two main streets lead off the western side of the square: Rue de la Kasbah, which leads to Place du Gouvernement at the other side of the medina; and Rue Jemaa Zitouna, which leads to the Zitouna mosque at its heart. At the eastern end of Ave Habib Bourguiba, a causeway carries road and light-rail traffic across to La Goulette, a port, and then north along the coast to the rich suburbs of Carthage, Sidi Bou Saïd and La Marsa.

Tunis has two bus stations. The one for northern destinations (Map p219, Gare Routière Nord de Bab Saadoun) is served by Métro Léger lines 3 and 4 (Bab Saadoun station), or you can take bus 3 to Ave Habib Bourguiba. *Louages* (shared taxis) from the north also arrive and leave from here. The other station is for international buses and the south (Map p219, Gare Routière Sud de Bab el-Alloua). *Louages* for Cap Bon leave from/arrive near here. It's a 10-minute walk north to Place Barcelone in the city centre, where the train station and numerous hotels are situated. Métro Léger line 1 runs from Tunis Marine to Ben Arous via Place Barcelone. Bab Alioua, one stop south of Gare Routière Sud.

### INFORMATION

#### Bookshops

There's a **second-hand bookshop** (Map p220; Rue d'Angleterre) with an English selection, where the owner will buy and exchange books.

### Internet Access

**Publinet** (per hr US\$1); 28 Ave Habib Bourguiba (Map p220); Ave de Madrid (Map p219)

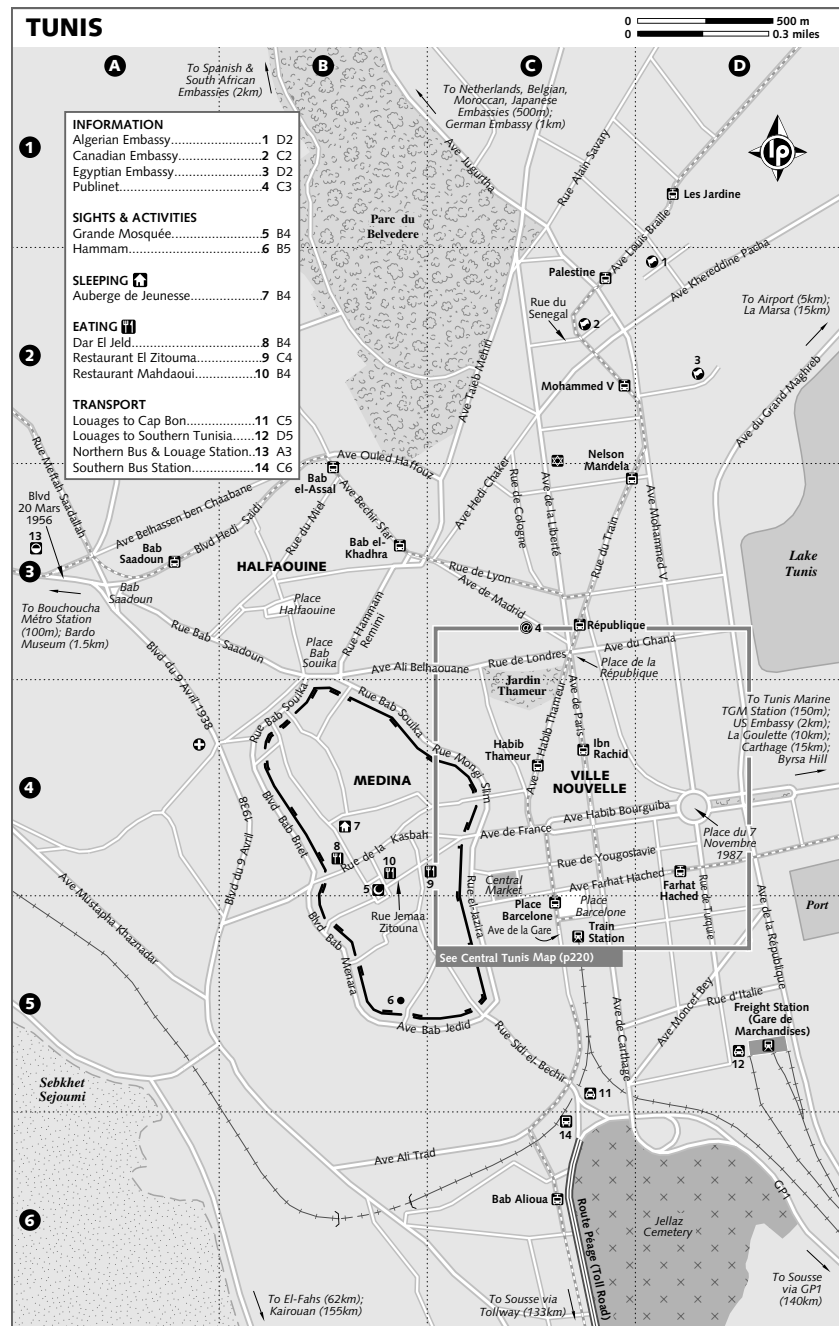
### Money

There are lots of banks with ATMs, mostly along Ave Habib Bourguiba. There's a branch of **Amex** (Map p220; ☎ 254 304; UIBC Bank, 156 Ave de la Liberté).

### Post & Telephone

The **main post office** (Map p220; Rue Charles de Gaulle) is open daily and has a poste-restante service.

Taxiphone offices dot the city centre. Two of the most convenient are on Rue Jamel Abdelnasser and Ave de Paris (Map p220).



## Tourist Offices

The **tourist office** (Map p220; ☎ 341 077; Place de l'Afrique; ☎ 8am-6pm Mon-Sat, 9am-noon Sun) has a map of Tunis, a road map of Tunisia and brochures on Carthage and the medina, all free. There's another branch at the train station, open the same hours. You'll be able to find someone who speaks English.

## SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

The ants' nest-like **medina** is a sprawling maze of tiny streets, alleyways, tunnel-like caves and tiny shops selling anything from shoes to *shisha* pipes. There are busy *souqs*, gorgeous, ancient doorways and tiled cafés. An atmospheric time to explore is the early morning, before the stalls are set up and people

are clustered around the coffee shops. If you go for a stroll at noon, expect tireless calls of 'just look, no buy', getting out of the way of heavily loaded cartwheels, and bargaining with hardened salesmen for jewellery, *chechias* (traditional red-felt caps) or stuffed camel toys. At the medina's heart lies the **Grande Mosquée** (Map p219; ☎ 8am-noon) – its forest of columns is scrounged from Roman Carthage. There is also a steam-filled, darkened **hammam** (Map p219; admission incl massage US\$4; ☎ men 5am-1pm, women 1-8pm).

The country's top museum is the **Bardo Museum** (☎ 513 650; Ave du 2 Mars; admission US\$5, camera US\$1; ☎ 9.30am-4.30pm Tue-Sun mid-Sep-Mar, 9am-5pm Apr-mid-Sep). This magnificent, must-see collection provides a taste of ancient life, housed

in a glorious palace. The many, incredibly well-preserved mosaics, with their images of gods feasting and farming, are stunning, and are some of Africa's oldest. It's 3km northwest of the city centre. The best way to get there is by Métro Léger line 4 (US\$0.50) to the Bardo stop. A taxi costs US\$4.

The remains of Punic and Roman **Carthage** lie northeast of the city centre and are easily reached by Tunis-Gouette-Marsa (TGM) suburban train from Tunis Marine station. Get off at Carthage Hannibal station and wander up to the top of **Byrsa Hill** for a fine view across the site. Once the city held 400,000 people and was surrounded by 13m-high walls. You'll have to use a bit of imagination, as the ruins are scant and scattered over a wide area; they include impressive Roman baths, houses, cisterns, basilicas and streets. The **Carthage Museum** (Map p220; admission to all sites US\$5, camera US\$1; ☎ 8.30am-5pm mid-Sep-Mar, 8am-7pm Apr-mid-Sep) gives an idea of the site's former glories, with such wonders as monumental statuary, mosaics and extraordinary everyday stuff such as razors and kohl pots. It's next to the 19th-century, deconsecrated, neo-Gothic monster of a **cathedral** (Map p220; admission US\$1.50; ☎ 8.30am-5pm mid-Sep-Mar, 8am-7pm Apr-mid-Sep) and the **Byrsa Quarter**, an excavated quarter of the Punic city, in the grounds of the museum.

## SLEEPING

There are lots of rock-bottom budget places in and around the medina, but if you pay a bit more you get a leap up in quality.

**Auberge de Jeunesse** (Map p219; ☎ 567 850, 25 Rue Es Saida Ajoula; dm incl breakfast US\$5) A wonderful building in the midst of the medina, where you get to see the 18th-century Dar Saida Ajoula palace. The rooms here are fairly basic: white walls and bunk beds, and there's a pretty, communal area with Arabic musical instruments. The welcome is friendly, though there are a few regulations that you may find irritating: it's closed from 10am to 2pm, there's a 10pm curfew and no showers can be had between 7.30pm and 9am.

**Hôtel Salammbô** (Map p220; ☎ 334 252, hotel.salammbô@gnet.tn; 6 Rue de Grèce; s/d with private bathroom US\$16/23, with shared bathroom US\$13/21) White walls, blue shutters and little balconies are the highlights here, combined with clumsy, stand-alone, air-conditioning units and friendly workers.

**Grand Hôtel de France** (Map p220; ☎ 326 244; hotelfrance.tunis@yahoo.fr; 8 Rue Mustapha M'barek; s/d with private bathroom US\$18/24, with shared bathroom US\$13/15; ☎) Faded elegance, wrought-iron banisters, coffin-like wooden lift, airy rooms with high ceilings, a funny mix of '50s and '70s furniture and friendly staff. The best rooms are those on the top floor, with a balcony and good views.

**Hôtel Maison Dorée** (Map p220; ☎ 240632; 3 Rue el-Koufa; s/d with private bathroom US\$25/30, with shared bathroom US\$21/23) Maison Dorée is charming; simple and spotless with an old-fashioned formality, shuttered balconies and comfortably 1950s furnishings.

**Hôtel Africa** (Map p220; ☎ 347 477; www.elmouradi.com; 50 Ave Habib Bourguiba; s/d from US\$100/150; ☎) A five-star skyscraper in the middle of Ave Habib Bourguiba, with all the plushness it promises and a fabulous top-floor bar. If you want to feel special in Tunis, this is the place.

## EATING

You can buy slightly addictive spicy tuna-filled *chappatis* (a mixture of egg and spicy harissa paste stuffed inside a wonderful, hot bread parcel, tuna optional) in the medina for US\$1.50, or dine like a sultan in one of the traditional restaurants.

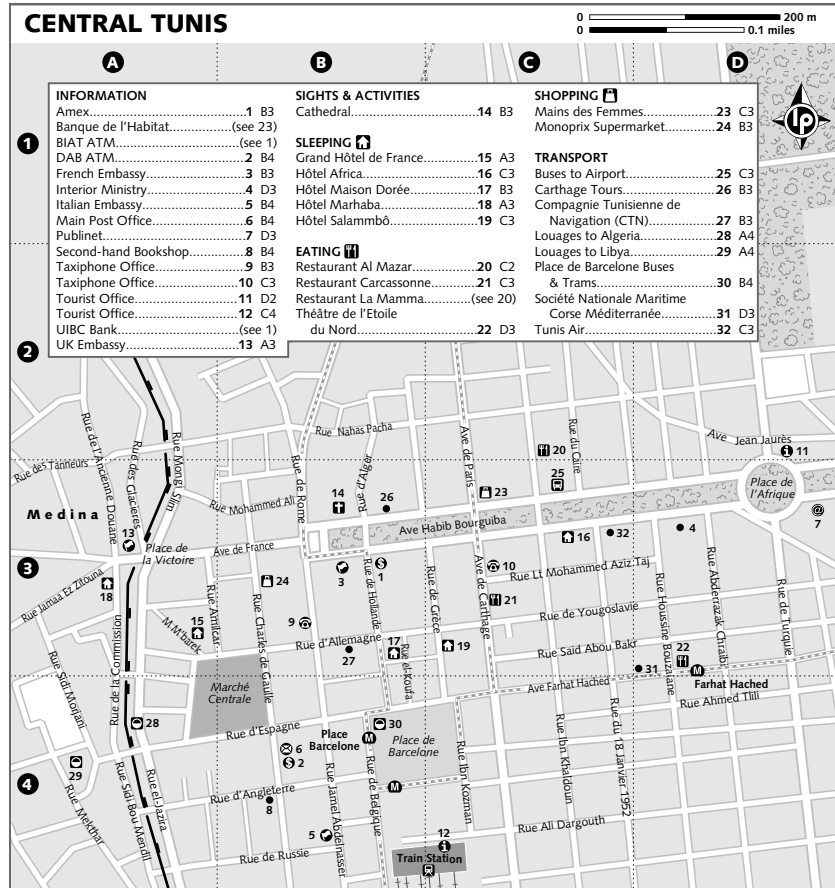
**Théâtre de l'Étoile du Nord** (Map p220; ☎ 256 242; www.etiledunord.org; 41 Ave Farhat Hached; sandwiches US\$3) This cool, spacious theatre-café-bar is the city's sole 'alternative hangout' frequented by both men and women. It's a refreshing place with good music and theatrical events.

**Restaurant Mahdaoui** (Map p219; 2 Rue Jemma Zitouna; dishes US\$3-5) An excellent place in the medina, in a tiled space with tables in the narrow, covered alley by the Grand Mosquée. The menu has the usual suspects of couscous with fish and chicken, *tajines* and kebabs.

**Restaurant El Zitouma** (Map p219; dishes US\$2.50) Around the corner from Restaurant Mahdaoui, and quieter, this is where to come if you want simple spaghetti with tomato sauce, though don't expect it to be *al dente*.

**Restaurant Carcassonne** (Map p220; 8 Ave de Carthage; 4-course menu US\$3.50) A great place if you want to eat plenty and spend little: there's a generous four-course menu, and it serves alcohol.

**Restaurant Al Mazar** (Map p220; ☎ 355 077; 11 Rue de Marseilles; most mains US\$4) A good atmosphere for a bar cunningly disguised as a restaurant. With paintings on the walls and big, globe light shades, you might think yourself in



Paris if it weren't for the drunken Tunisians singing. The food is excellent, with special mention going to the chocolate mousse (US\$2).

**Restaurant La Mamma** (Map p220; ☎ 241 256; Rue de Marseille; dishes US\$4-13) A red interior, plastic flowers, and dishes such as barbecued octopus, with occasional, retro-looking live musicians. It serves alcohol.

**Dar El Jeld** (Map p219; ☎ 560916; 5-10 Rue Dar El Jed; mains US\$14-20) Upon entering this immaculately restored, elaborate 18th-century tiled and stuccoed mansion, you will find a magnificent main dining room in a covered central courtyard, with intimate, alcove tables around the edge. Begin your meal with the mixed hors d'oeuvres, then sample the delicious traditional Tunisian dishes, such as *kabkabou* (fish with fresh tomatoes, capers and olives), on offer.

## SHOPPING

**Mains de Femmes** (Map p220; 47 Ave Habib Bourguiba) A co-operative that sells quality handicrafts at fixed prices; the profits are ploughed back into the rural communities that make them.

For perfume, tiles, *chechias*, cheap clothes, accessories and tons of glorious tat, head to the medina. Delicious (though not always entirely fresh) food can be found at and around Marché Centrale (Map p220) and near the Grand Hôtel de France. There are alluring delicatessens selling succulent olives, differing date varieties, *harissa* (spicy chilli paste) and cheeses. There's also a Monoprix supermarket (Ave Charles de Gaulle) where you can buy local wine.

## GETTING THERE & AWAY

### Air

Tuninter, the internal airline of **Tunis Air** (☎ 330 100; www.tunisair.com; 48 Ave Habib Bourguiba), flies from Tunis to/from Jerba, Sfax and Tozeur; each flight costs around US\$80, but cheaper deals are sometimes available.

### Boat

Ferries from Europe arrive at La Goulette, at the end of the causeway across Lake Tunis. The cheapest way to reach the city from here is by TGM suburban train. A private taxi from the port to Ave Habib Bourguiba shouldn't cost more than US\$5.

Tirrenia Navagazione, whose agent is **Carthage Tours** (Map p220; ☎ 344 066; www.carthage

tours.com.tn; 59 Ave Habib Bourguiba), runs boats between Tunis and Trapani (passenger/car from US\$50/100, Monday), Naples (US\$100/170, Sunday), and sometimes La Spezia in Italy. **Compagnie Tunisienne de Navigation** (CTN; Map p220; ☎ 322 802; www.ctn.com.tn; 122 Rue de Yougoslavie) runs services to/from Genoa (Italy; US\$150/250) and Marseilles (France; US\$180/380). **Société Nationale Maritime Corse Méditerranée** (SNCM; Map p220; ☎ 338 222; www.sncm.fr; 47 Farhat Hached) runs to/from Marseilles for similar prices as well as Bastia (Corsica; US\$170/370).

## Local Transport

Services to/from Tozeur (US\$16, seven hours, five daily), Tataouine (US\$19, 8½ hours, three daily), Matamata (US\$14, eight hours, one daily), Jerba (US\$17, eight hours, three daily), Sfax (US\$10, four hours, hourly), Sousse (US\$7, 2½ hours, hourly) and Tripoli (Libya; US\$25, 11½ hours, several weekly) are found at the southern bus station; *louages* to the same destinations (except Tripoli) leave regularly nearby. At the northern bus station, services go to/from Tabarka (US\$8, three hours, hourly), Ain Draham (US\$8, 4½ hours, four daily), Jendouba (US\$7, three hours, six daily) and Le Kef (US\$8, 3½ hours, hourly) via Tebersouk. *Louages* for eastern Algeria leave from Rue el-Jazira and to Tripoli US\$25, 10 hours) from Place Sidi Bou Mendil at the southeast corner of the medina.

## Train

The most popular route is the line from Tunis to Sousse (US\$7), Sfax (US\$9) and Jendouba (US\$5).

## GETTING AROUND

### Taxi

Private taxis are cheap. It's hard to run up a fare of more than US\$15. A short hop will cost less than US\$3, and a longer one, such as to the Bardo Museum, around US\$4.

## Train

The TGM rail system connects central Tunis with the northern beachside suburbs of La Goulette, Carthage, Sidi Bou Said and La Marsa (US\$1, 5am to midnight).

## Tram

The modern (Métro Léger) tram system has five routes running to various parts of the

city. The useful lines are 1 for the southern bus and *louage* stations, 2 for consulates on Ave de la Liberté, and 3 and 4 for the northern bus and *louage* stations. Line 4 also has a stop for the Bardo Museum. The main stations are Place Barcelone and Place de la République. Tram fares are usually around US\$1.

## AROUND TUNIS

It's not unfair to say that the best thing about Tunis is its proximity to the enchanting village of **Sidi Bou Saïd**, a few stops up the TGM line. Here, the narrow cobbled streets are lined with gleaming white houses and turquoise doors, drowned in bougainvillea and perfumed by the sea. Once the haven for Andalusian refugees (who are responsible for the gorgeous architecture), it's now mainly enjoyed by the rich youngsters from Tunis. The little village, perched high on a cliff overlooking the sea, has lovely hotels and at least one excellent restaurant. **Au Bon Vieux Temps** (☎ 774733; Rue Hedi Zarrouk; mains from US\$12) serves up an ultradelicious and romantic dinner, while you gaze out towards the sea and candles flicker in the breeze. A starter of traditional *brîq* with prawns followed by a main course consisting of 'Mediterranean Harmony' – fantastic seafood accompanied by a bowl of wild and white aromatic rice – are perfectly complemented by a fresh fruit selection and frosty white wine. It's advisable to book a table in advance. You'd be mad not to take up the opportunity to stay a night or two in Sidi Bou Saïd, enjoying its relaxed vibe. The village also hides one of the world's top 50 places to stay. **Hôtel Dar Saïd** (☎ 729 666; www.darsaid.com.tn; Rue Toumi; r from US\$160; 🏠 🍷), housed in a converted villa, features sweeping views of the sea and bay from its shady, flower-scented garden and pool. The rooms here are comfortable and decorated in colonial-style and the service is friendly but discreet.

## NORTHERN TUNISIA

Northern Tunisia is like rural Italy from the 1970s – a rolling, green, magnificently lush region, little explored by foreign visitors. With endless views of hazy valleys from its hills and wonderfully preserved Roman cities of Dougga and Bulla Regia, this is an area well worth visiting.

## TABARKA

☎ 78 / pop 13,600

Tabarka, a quiet coastal town with a tough old Genoese **fort** (closed to the public) backing a long curve of alluring white sand that stretches below, is locally known as 'music town', thanks to all the music festivals that take place here. In just a few months you can go from the sophisticated jazz festival to the sounds of Rai or Latin beats, when everyone gets down and dances all day. Tabarka is a 'Tunisians' resort, rarely visited by foreigners. It's therefore little developed, with an old-fashioned feel, and pavement cafés where men suck on *shishas* and watch the world go by.

The small town has a grid layout, bisected by the main street, Ave Habib Bourguiba. There are banks and ATMs along Ave Habib Bourguiba in the centre, a **post office** (Ave Hedi Chaker) and **Publinet** (Route Touristique), which charges US\$1 per hour.

## Sleeping & Eating

Tabarka has cheap, unremarkable accommodation, save for one option.

**Hôtel de Corail** (☎ 673 789; Rue Tazarka; s/d US\$8/13) Old-fashioned rooms with high ceilings and balconies. However, the bathrooms are a bit grubby, and there's no hot water.

**Hôtel Mammia** (☎ 671 058; 3 Rue de Tunis; s/d US\$9/15) Set around a tiled courtyard and run by an old man and his family, Mammia is clean though there aren't too many smiles bouncing around from the management.

**Hôtel Les Mimosas** (☎ 673 018; s/d US\$25/45; 🏠 🍷) An elegant hotel, slightly run-down though still full of charm. It's an old French villa with an Arabic twist of coloured glass, arched doorways and bright-yellow shutters. Sitting on a hill overlooking Tabarka and the sea, there is a good pool that can save lives in the summer heat. Helpfully, it also happens to be the top spot for evening drinks around the pool. The air-con doesn't work too well, however.

**Hôtel Novelty** (☎ 670176; 68 Ave Habib Bourguiba; set menu US\$8) Friendly staff and management, and decent food, especially the set menu offering the standards such as *brîq* and couscous. The best thing about it is the lovely seating outside, shaded by vine-covered trees.

**Café Andalou** (Ave Hedi Chaker) The classic male coffeehouse, with chairs and tables all over the pavement, smoke billowing over the worried

faces contemplating their next move at chequers or backgammon. The elaborately tiled interior is deliberately sprinkled with oddities such as spiky antlers.

### Getting There & Away

The SNTRI bus station is on Rue du Peuple and has services to/from Tunis (US\$7, three hours, six daily), Jendouba (US\$3, 1½ hours, five daily) and Le Kef (US\$5, three hours, two daily). *Louages* leave from Ave Habib Bourguiba for Ain Draham (US\$2), Jendouba (US\$3) and Tunis (US\$7).

### AIN DRAHAM

In the middle of the cork forest of the Kroumirie Mountains you'll find the village of Ain Draham, whose primary appeal lies in the hunting and hiking opportunities it affords and the welcome respite offered by the cooler, alpine temperatures during the summer heat. Here, among the alpine houses, gnarled men sit by the pavements, veiled women swish past you with their tomato-filled bags, and butchers' shops display stags' heads and other hunting trophies ready for the oven. Situated at an altitude of around 900m, Ain Draham usually has snow during winter. The road between here and Tabarka snakes through huge hills thick with trees, with vast views opening up.

Paragliding wild boar welcome you into the **Hôtel Beauséjour** (☎ 655 363; r per person US\$19; 3-course menu US\$12) hunting lodge, where the not-quite value for money, pretty basic rooms are housed in an adjacent building. Sipping a coffee or beer under the shady fig tree on the veranda is a delight. **Résidence Le Pins** (☎ 656 200; s/d US\$25/30) offers Granny's house-type rooms, a friendly owner and a place to shoot some pool, as well as sweeping views from the roof terrace.

There are regular buses to Jendouba (US\$2, one hour, seven daily) and Tabarka (US\$2, 45 minutes, 11 daily), Le Kef (US\$3, three hours, nine daily) and Tunis (US\$7, 4½ hours, four daily). Regular *louages* go to/from Tabarka and Jendouba, and occasionally Tunis.

### BULLA REGIA

This remarkably well-preserved **Roman city** (admission US\$2, camera US\$1; ☎ 7am-7pm Apr-Sep, 8.30am-5.30pm Oct-Mar) is famous for its extraordinary

underground villas. To escape the summer heat, the ever-inventive Romans retreated below the surface and created extensive, elegant homes for their moneyed inhabitants. The 'houses' are themed according to their mosaic subjects, and especially lovely examples can be seen at the oldest though simplest structure, the House of Fishing, which dates from the 2nd-century. The newer villas become increasingly more elaborate: most impressive is the House of the Hunt. Some of the stunning works have been moved to the Bardo Museum in Tunis, but lots remain in place. Used as flooring here, you can't but think what ideas the mosaics might give to Martha Stewart, if she were ever to visit. The most striking is found in the House of Amphitrite: Venus and centaurs, with attendant cherubs.

Bulla Regia is approximately 160km west of Tunis, 9km north of Jendouba, and may be easily visited on a day trip from Tunis, Le Kef or Tabarka. If you visit en route to somewhere, you can leave your luggage at the ticket office.

Trains to Jendouba are your best bet when travelling to/from Tunis, and there are also regular buses and *louages* to/from Le Kef and Tabarka. A taxi from Jendouba costs around US\$2, or shared taxis to/from the site cost US\$0.30.

### LE KEF (EL KEF)

☎ 78 / pop 46,000

High in the hills, Le Kef (el Kef, Arabic for 'rock') is topped by a storybook Byzantine kasbah. Skirted by fields dotted with figures in woolly hats and headscarves, the city is characterised by narrow, hilly, cobbled streets and blue-shuttered buildings, and is centred around a scoop of park. Not many travellers come out this way, so you should be able to savour the friendly atmosphere, and partake in the lazy coffee drinking without being disturbed by the package tour groups. The city centre, around Place de l'Indépendance, is a 10-minute walk uphill from the bus and *louage* station, or a US\$0.50 ride in a shared taxi.

There are several banks scattered throughout Place de l'Indépendance, and a busy **post office** is located nearby on Rue Hedi Chaker. For internet access head to **Publinet** (Place de l'Indépendance) which charges US\$1.50 per hour.

### Sights

The **kasbah** (admission free; ☎ 8am-5pm), frequently used as a film location, dominates the city from a spur running off Jebel Dyr. From here, there are great views looking out across the rolling blue-green landscape dotted with Tuscan trees. The structure that stands today is the latest in a long string of fortresses that have occupied the site since the 5th century BC. To get to the kasbah, follow the stone steps leading uphill through the old **medina** from Place de l'Indépendance. The road that flanks the kasbah leads to the well-laid-out **Musée des Arts et Traditions Populaires** (admission US\$1, camera US\$1; ☎ 9.30am-4.30pm mid-Sep-May, 9am-1pm & 4-7pm Apr-mid-Sep), situated in a beautiful, high-ceilinged, former *zaouia* (complex surrounding the tomb of a saint) dating from 1666. The museum concentrates on the culture of the region's Berber nomads, and exhibits include Berber tents. Below the kasbah sits the beautiful 17th-century **Mosque of Sidi Boumakhrouf**, with its white cupolas and a brilliantly tiled interior. Outside the mosque you'll find an enchanting stepped area, shadowed by a single tree and dotted with café chairs.

The **Synagogue Al Ghriba** (Rue Farhat Hached) is a curiosity – there are no Jews here now, and the restored synagogue pays tribute to a part of local culture that's disappeared. As well as the restored interior, there are fragments of newspapers and old manuscripts, like relics. The caretaker will let you in; you should tip him.

### Sleeping & Eating

All the hotels are on or around Place de l'Indépendance.

**Hôtel Le Source** (☎ 204 397; s/d US\$14/22) This place offers eccentric management and some attractive rooms with balconies (though the bathrooms are not always squeaky clean). Ask the owner to stay in the best room: it's an elaborately tiled place with an attached bathroom.

**Résidence Venus** (☎ 204 695; Rue Mouldi Khamesi; s/d incl breakfast US\$18/25) A smart place, nestled beneath the walls of the old kasbah; it's a small, family-run pension where the comfortable rooms come with heating and a good breakfast.

**Restaurant Bou Maklouf** (Rue Hedi Chaker; mains around US\$2) Diagonally opposite the post office, with a welcoming atmosphere and good

chicken and potatoes, and *lablabi* (chickpea soup).

**Restaurant Venus** (☎ 200355; Rue Farhat Hached; mains around US\$8) This is the town's best restaurant, and it serves alcohol.

### Getting There & Away

There are buses travelling to/from Tunis (US\$7, 3½ hours, hourly). To visit Dougga, take the Le Kef-Tunis bus and ask to be dropped off at the New Dougga turnout (US\$3, one hour).

### DOUGGA

Perched above the rolling, *Sound of Music* landscape of the Kalled Valley and Tebersouk Mountains lies the Roman city of **Dougga** (admission US\$2, camera US\$1; ☎ 8am-7pm Apr-Sep, 8.30am-5.30pm Oct-Mar). It's a wonderfully complete site, with the Roman comforts and culture around which life was centred: the baths, the theatre and temples (21 have been identified here). The city was built on the site of ancient Thugga, a Numidian settlement, which explains why the streets are so uncharacteristically tangled. The semi-circular sweep of the theatre, built in AD 188, accommodated more than 3500 spectators. Today, it allows the audience beautiful views, and is used to good effect during the **Dougga Festival** in July and August. The town is dominated by the imposing, hilltop **Capitol of Dougga** (AD 166), with 10m-high walls and six mighty, show-off columns supporting the portico. Nearby are the **Lician Baths** – their size is a further indication of the town's prosperity. A tunnel for the slaves, who kept the baths operating, is a reminder of how all this good life was maintained.

The site is located 110km southwest of Tunis; Tebersouk is the closest town. It's easy enough to visit the site on a day trip from Tunis or Le Kef – or en route between the two; you can leave your pack at a local business. Frequent buses or *louages* between Tunis and Le Kef all call at Tebersouk. At the bus stop you'll find locals asking US\$5 to transport you the remaining 7km to the site and pick you up at a time of your choice. Alternatively, if you're coming from Le Kef, you can get off the bus at the New Dougga turnout on the main road. From here it's a 3km walk to the ruins, but, again, locals will offer to take you there and pick you up later for US\$5.

## CENTRAL TUNISIA

As you move from the north into the south, the greenery dissipates and the landscape becomes unobstructed and parched. This part of Tunisia is among the most fascinating, with the vibrancy of Sousse, a Mediterranean city with a lovely beach and a tangled medina, the sparkling harbour at Mehdia, the incredible colosseum at El-Jem, and the fascinating architecture of the beach-fringed Jerba island.

### SOUSSE

☎ 73 / pop 155,900

Sousse is Tunisia's liveliest town, full of the daily bustle of visitors, students and locals who fill the streets all day long. The huge medina draws people in, spitting them out hours later sweaty and laden with shopping, but mostly happy. The medina stands in the centre, cordoned off from the rest of town by high, medieval fortifications that look like a sandcastle cake. Sousse also has one of the most attractive beaches, with sand so smooth and perfect you'll enjoy just rolling around in its softness, though it might take you a while to get it out of every crevice later.

### Orientation & Information

Everything of importance is close to the main square, Place Farhat Hached, on the northeast side of the medina. The **tourist office** (☎ 225 157; Place Farhat Hached; ☒ 8.30am-1pm & 3-5.45pm Sun-Thu, 8.30am-1.30pm Fri & Sat) is efficient and English is spoken. The **post office** (Ave de la République) is nearby. There are banks along Ave Habib Bourguiba. There's a **Publinet** (Ave Mohammed Maarouf) and a **Taxiphone office** (Place des Martyrs).

### Sights

The medina's pride and joy is the **ribat** (admission US\$2, camera US\$1) a monastery that reminds the visitor of a fortress, with beaten stone pillars and great views from the tower. Nearby is the wide, sunny courtyard of the **Grande Mosquée**. Both are in the northeast corner, near Place Farhat Hached.

The **kasbah** on top of the hill contains the **Musée de Source** (☎ 7322 7256; admission US\$3, camera US\$1; ☒ 9am-noon & 2-6pm Tue-Thu, 9am-6pm Fri-Sun). This collection is second only to the Bardo Museum in Tunis, and it displays some incredible Roman mosaics, beautifully restored and presented in buildings around courtyards,

providing a glimpse of the glory of Roman life. Subjects include a swirling-haired, sad-eyed Neptune, muscular gods and lots of fish. There's no access to the kasbah from inside the medina; access is from an entrance outside the medina walls.

The odd and creepy, walled-off **red-light district** in the northwestern corner of the medina is a surprise amid all the lively antiquities.

### Sleeping

The hotels vary from medina fleapits to seaside medium comfort, though none are outstanding.

**Hôtel Ezzouhour** (☎ 228 729; 48 Rue de Paris; s/d US\$6/15) Dirt cheap, but with clean, tiled rooms in alcove settings. It is at the core of the medina, so you can get your souvenirs at a moment's notice.

**Hôtel de Paris** (☎ 220 564; 15 Rue du Rempart Nord; s/d US\$10/15) A jolly, house-proud man welcomes you into this bright place just inside the medina's north wall, with sparkling clean rooms, a roof terrace and a wide patio.

**Hôtel Residence Monia** (☎ 210 469; Rue Remada; r per person US\$15; ☒) Best value in town with good clean rooms, balconies, a family atmosphere and a friendly smile.

**Hôtel Hadrumete** (☎ 226 291; Place Farhat Hached; s/d from US\$18/26) This fading '60s princess must have rocked Sousse when it first opened. African designs, a seaside-inspired copper staircase banister, bright rooms and an empty pool, now all dusty and forgotten.

### Eating

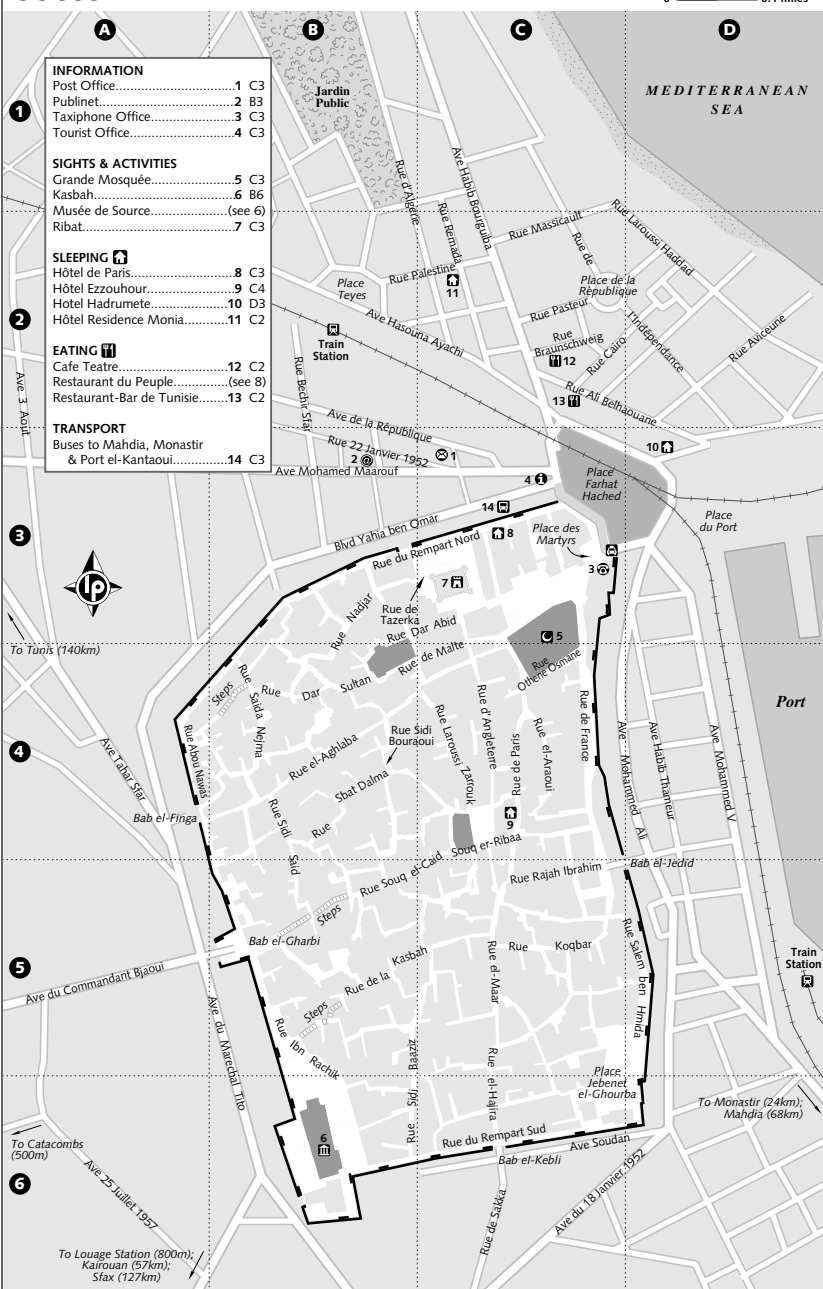
For quick snacks go to Rue Remada, between the train station and Ave Habib Bourguiba, or the medina, particularly along Rue de Paris.

**Café Teatro** (Rue Braunschweig; breakfast US\$2.50) Excellent for a breakfast of fresh croissants, coffee and huge glass of fresh orange juice on the pavement terrace, and people-watching on a quiet morning.

**Restaurant du Peuple** (☎ 226 182; Rue du Rempart Nord; set menu US\$4) Super-popular with travellers, who write their appreciative comments on napkins and hang them up on walls or press them under the glass table top. The five-course set menu is excellent value; the owner, Walid, is welcoming and friendly; and everything is sparkling clean. You can bring your own wine.

**Restaurant-Bar de Tunisie** (Rue Ali Belhaouane; dishes US\$3.50-7) Smart and popular, specialising in seafood, and it serves booze.

## SOUSSE





## Getting There & Away

The train stations are conveniently central, making train the best way to travel. The station for Sfax and Tunis is just northwest of Place Farhat Hached, whereas trains to Monastir and Mahdia (US\$2, 1½ hours, half-hourly), via the airport (20 minutes), leave from Bab Jedid station at the southern end of Ave Mohammed V. Watch out for pickpockets – several travellers have reported having stuff stolen here.

The bus and *louage* stations are at Souq el-Ahad, 1km southwest of the medina on the road to Kairouan. There are buses to/from El Jem (US\$3, one hour, three daily), Tataouine (US\$15, 6½ hours, one daily), Matmata (US\$11, 5½ hours, one daily), Jerba (US\$14, seven hours, one daily), Douz (US\$14, seven hours, one daily), Tunis (US\$6, 2½ hours, 10 daily), Nefta (US\$13, six hours, one daily) and Tripoli (Libya; US\$23, one Monday, Tuesday and Friday). There are *louages* to the same destinations for around the same fares, as well as to Kairouan (US\$3, 1½ hours), Gabès (US\$10, three hours) and Sfax (US\$6, 2½ hours).

## KAIROUAN

☎ 77 / pop 110,000

The walled city of Kairouan is one of Islam's most holy cities, where praising God and selling carpets are the most revered of occupations. If you haven't been lost in any of Tunisia's other medinas, the streets of Kairouan are sure to confound you. The crumbling, white-washed, blue- and green-edged houses, some hung with birdcages or marked by the hand of Fatima, are haunting and beautiful. It was here that Arabs established their first base when they arrived from the east in AD 670, and Kairouan became so important in the Islamic hierarchy that seven visitors to this tiny place equal one visit to Mecca.

Watch out for tiresome carpet touts and people offering 'professional guide services', as well as those telling you of a one-day carpet festival 'which will finish very soon'.

## Information

There's an **ONTT tourist office** (☎ 231 897, 231 797, 221 452, 230 452; Place des Martyrs; ☎ 8am–5.30pm Mon–Sat, 8am–noon Sun) and a **tourist office** (Ave Ibn el-Aghlab; ☎ 8am–6pm Apr–Sep, 8am–5.30pm Nov–Mar) near the Aghlabite Basins that sell combined tickets that allow you into most of the town's attractions (US\$3.50).

All the major banks are on the streets south of Place des Martyrs, and there's a **post office**

(Ave de la République). Travellers can check email at **Publinet** (Ave Zama el-Belaoui) for US\$1 per hour. It's open 24 hours.

## Sights

The 9th-century **Grande Mosquée** (Rue Okba ibn Nafâa; ☎ 8am–noon Tue–Sun, 8am–2pm Mon) surprises with its enormous courtyard and fills up a large area of the northeastern corner of the medina. The prayer hall, supported by around 400 pillars, is a cool shadowy space on the southern side – non-Muslims are not allowed in this part. If you're here on a Friday, take a look at the crowded courtyard in the afternoon, when everyone pours out after prayer.

Other sites in the medina include the **Mosque of the Three Doors** (closed to non-Muslims), also 9th century, with rare inscriptions in its façade; 14th-century **Zaouia Sidi Abid el-Ghariani** with fine stucco and woodwork; and depressing **Bir Barouta** where a blindfolded camel walks in a circle, drawing water from a well said to be connected to Mecca.

Northwest of the medina is the 17th-century **Zaouia Sidi Sahab** (☎ 7.30am–6pm), tiled in luminescent colours and known as the 'barber mosque', because it contains the mausoleum of one of the prophet's companions, Abu Zama el-Belaoui, who used to carry around three hairs from the Prophet's beard.

## Sleeping & Eating

**Hôtel Sabra** (☎ 230 263; Place des Martyrs; s/d US\$9/14) A good place to spend the night if you're counting your pennies, and you can get yourself a scrub at the hotel's *hammam*. Windows overlook the medina.

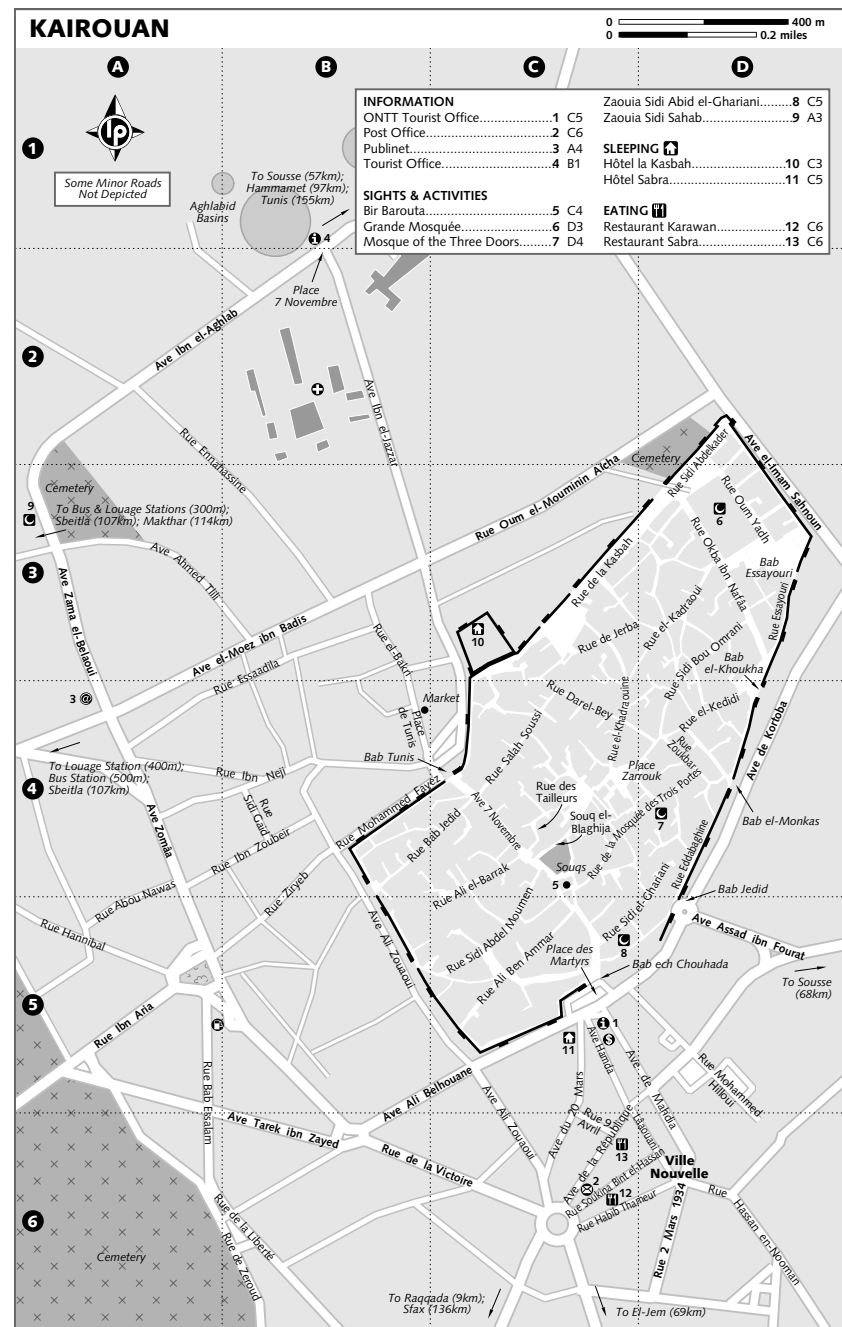
**Hôtel la Kasbah** (☎ 237 301; Ave Ibn el-Jazzar; s/d US\$45/67; ☎ ☎) The elegant interior is galaxies away from the dusty world outside.

**Restaurant Sabra** (☎ 235 095; Ave de la République; set menu US\$3) A popular local eatery with a set menu and a mad bird in a cage, this is the place for good food in friendly surroundings.

**Restaurant Karawan** (☎ 232 556; Rue Soukina Bint el-Hassan; set meal US\$5) Alternatively, try this spotless, airy restaurant with juicy salads, egg-dripping *brîqs* and fluffy couscous.

## Getting There & Away

The bus and *louage* stations are northwest of the medina on the road to Sbeitla, off Ave Zama el-Belaoui. Kairouan has good transport connections with the rest of Tunisia. Buses travel to Tunis (US\$6, three hours, hourly),



Jerba (US\$12, five hours, twice daily), Douz (US\$14, seven hours, once daily) and Tozeur (US\$11, 4½ hours, three times daily).

## MAHDIA

☎ 73 / pop 44,600

Mahdia is a sparkling Mediterranean port town, with an old-fashioned medina area that hasn't changed for decades. The town dates back to the 10th century, when it was the capital of the Fatimids, a Muslim dynasty ruled by Mahdi, which dominated North Africa from 909 to 1171. The medina is wonderfully free of tourists, and you can see fishermen getting ready for work on the marina. Mahdia is famous for silk-weaving, and there are workshops hidden away in the back streets. Some of the burly artisans spend half the week fishing, and the other half making silk scarves.

There is a small **tourist office** (☎ 681 098; Rue Aly Bey) just inside the medina. **Banque de Sud** (Ave Farhat Hached) changes money, as does **Banque de Tunisie** (off Rue des Fatimides).

The lovely central **Place du Caire** is filled with cafés, shaded by trees and vines, and borders the 18th-century **Mosque of Mustapha Hamza** (non-Muslims allowed in courtyard outside prayer times). Access to the old medina is through the massive **Skifa el-Kahla gate** (more of a tunnel), which is all that remains of the fortifications that protected ancient Mahdia. The unadorned **Grande Mosquée** (Place Khadi en-Noamine; ☎ non-Muslims allowed in courtyard outside prayer times) is a 20th-century replica of the mosque built by the Fatimids in the 10th century. The **Borj el-Kebir** (admission US\$1; ☎ 9am-noon & 2-6pm) is a large fortress; there's not much left to see, but the views are worth paying for.

Mahdia's **docks** were used as the seafront at Benghazi in *The English Patient*. There are two **bain maures** (hammams; ☎ men 4am-2pm & 7pm-midnight, women 2-7pm) in the centre.

There are two hotels inside the medina. **Hôtel el-Jazira** (☎ 681 629; 36 Rue Ibn Fourat; s/d US\$7/18) has a top location with rooms overlooking the sea. **Hôtel Médina** (☎ 694 664; Rue el Kaem; s/d US\$7/18) offers a family feel with clean rooms and a distinguished owner. Chicken and fish couscous, fresh salads, and hearty portions are available at **Restaurant el-Moez** (mains US\$1.50), while **Restaurant Le Lido** (☎ 681 339; Ave Farhat Hached; dishes US\$3-15) is a leap upmarket, with tablecloths. You can sit outside, and sip wine or beer.

The train station is 500m west of the town centre, beyond the port. There are regular

trains to Sousse (1st/2nd class US\$3/2) and one daily to Tunis (US\$9/6, four hours). The bus and *louage* station are about 800m further west on the road to Sfax. There are *louages* to Tunis (US\$7), Sousse (US\$2, one hour), Sfax (US\$4), Karaouan (US\$4) and El-Jem (US\$2, 30 minutes), and buses to Sfax (US\$4, 2½ hours) and Sousse (US\$2, 1½ hours, hourly).

## EL-JEM

☎ 73 / pop 19,500

El-Jem's only claim to fame is the huge honey-coloured **Roman Colosseum** (admission US\$4, camera US\$1; ☎ 7am-7pm Apr-mid-Sep, 7.30am-5.30pm mid-Sep-Mar), a mighty monument that makes the rest of the already-tiny town look minuscule. Built nearly 2000 years ago by olive-oil traders with money to burn, it showcased gladiatorial combat, executions and other such popular Roman entertainments, and it had state-of-the-art features including a movable floor. The town was once a kind of Roman Las Vegas, with lots of feasting and merry-making between the bloodletting. There are more than 20 El-Jem mosaics on Dionysian themes in the Bardo Museum in Tunis. Today, the town is not more than a few streets interlinked by cafés and antique shops, plus the inevitable souvenir touts.

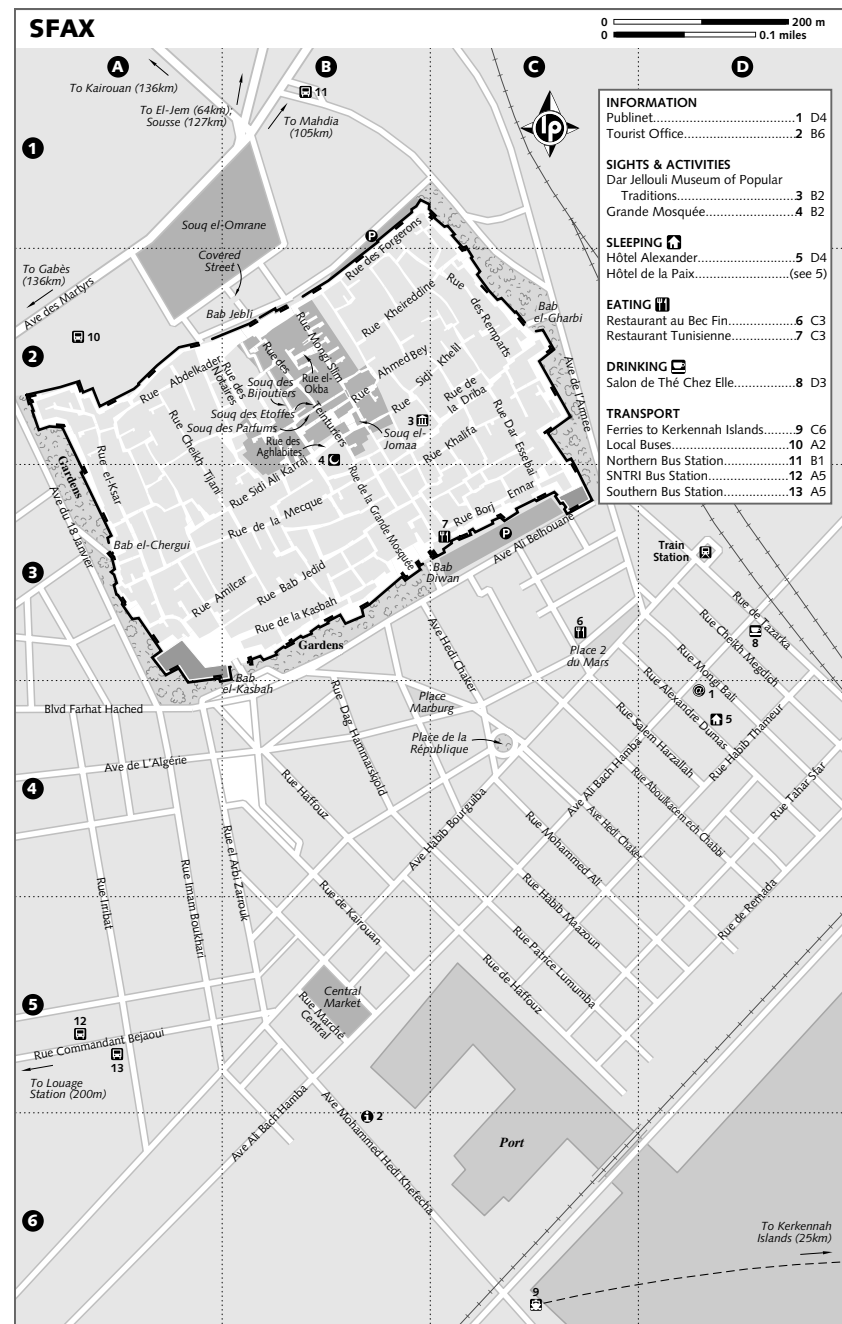
Admission to the colosseum also gets you into the **museum**, which is about 500m south of the train station on the road to Sfax. It houses some excavated villas of the former locals, and complete mosaics, including such subjects as the coy-looking *Genius of the Year*. Staying in El-Jem would prove a depressing experience, but you can eat at **Restaurant Le Bonheur** (☎ 630 306; dishes US\$3-6) where the ubiquitous couscous and *salade tunisienne* or *salade mechouia* are pretty yummy.

The *louage* station is near the museum and serves Sfax (US\$3, one hour), Sousse (US\$3, 1½ hours) and Mahdia (US\$2, 30 minutes). There are trains to/from Sfax (US\$3, one hour, three daily) via Sousse (US\$3, 30 minutes, three daily). You can leave your luggage at the train station for US\$1.50.

## SFAX

☎ 74 / pop 249,000

Most Tunisians will advise you to skip Sfax and carry on down to Jerba, but this second-largest city is worth stopping in for a couple of hours, en route to Jerba, if only to have a



lunch of delicious *ojja* (prawn stew with eggs and tomatoes), a Sfaxian speciality, and check out the town medina, a space untouched by tourism. Sfaxiens have the reputation of being hardworking business people, which, in Tunisia, doesn't bring them much popularity. The medina hasn't been prettified for visitors, but contains blacksmith workshops and butchers as it has for centuries. It dates from the 7th century and is surrounded by crenulated walls that could have been filched from a child's toy castle. Female travellers might find the atmosphere somewhat oppressive here, as local men are not so used to seeing foreign women.

The **tourist office** (☎ 497 041; Ave Mohammed Hedi Khefcha) is by the port. There are lots of banks around Ave Habib Bourguiba, several with ATMs. **Publinet** (Ave Ali Bach Hamba) charges US\$1.50 per hour. The old medina, used to represent Cairo in the film *The English Patient*, contains the major attractions. Highlights include the atmospheric old covered *souqs*, just north of the 9th-century **Grande Mosquée** (Rue de la Grande Mosquée; ☒ closed to non-Muslims), and the **Dar Jellouli Museum of Popular Traditions** (admission US\$1, camera US\$1; ☒ 9.30am-4.30pm Tue-Sun), housed in a beautiful 17th-century mansion with carved wooden panelling and ornate stucco, displaying jewellery, costumes and painted glass.

**Hôtel de la Paix** (☎ 296 437; 10 Rue Alexandre Dumas; s/d US\$13/16), in the Ville Nouvelle, has tired-looking rooms, but they do have balconies, while **Hôtel Alexander** (☎ 221 911; 16 Rue Alexandre Dumas; s/d US\$17/20) provides a classier option, with comfortable, shuttered rooms. **Restaurant Tunisienne** (Rue Borj Ennar; mains around US\$2) is perfect for flopping down after traipsing around the medina and get yourself some 'traditional' spaghetti, or a bowl of couscous. **Restaurant au Bec Fin** (Place 2 du Mars; mains US\$5) is the top place to try the shrimp *ojja*, seafood bathed in spicy tomato and egg sauce – it's divine. Unusual **Salon de Thé Chez Elle** (Ave Ali Bach Hamba; coffee US\$0.50) is an all-women café (at least in the downstairs room). It features dusty tinsel decorations, goldfish and local women smoking furiously.

Trains are the most convenient way to travel. The train station is at the eastern end of Ave Habib Bourguiba. There are trains north to El-Jem, Sousse (1st/2nd class US\$7/5, half-hourly) and Tunis (US\$11/9); south to Gabès (US\$7/6); and west to Metlaoui (US\$10/8).

The SNTRI bus station is on Rue Commandant Bejaoui. SNTRI has regular buses to Tunis (US\$10, four hours, nine daily) via Sousse (US\$6, two hours, nine daily), and also travels to Douz (two daily), Matmata (one daily), Jerba (US\$10, four hours, three daily) and Tataouine (US\$11, four hours, two daily). The *louage* station is 300m west of the bus station, and has services to all these destinations for around the same price, as well as to El-Jem (US\$3) and Tripoli (US\$22, seven hours).

Ferries to the Kerkennah Islands (US\$1, seven daily) leave from the docks on Ave Mohammed Hedi Khefcha.

## SOUTHERN TUNISIA

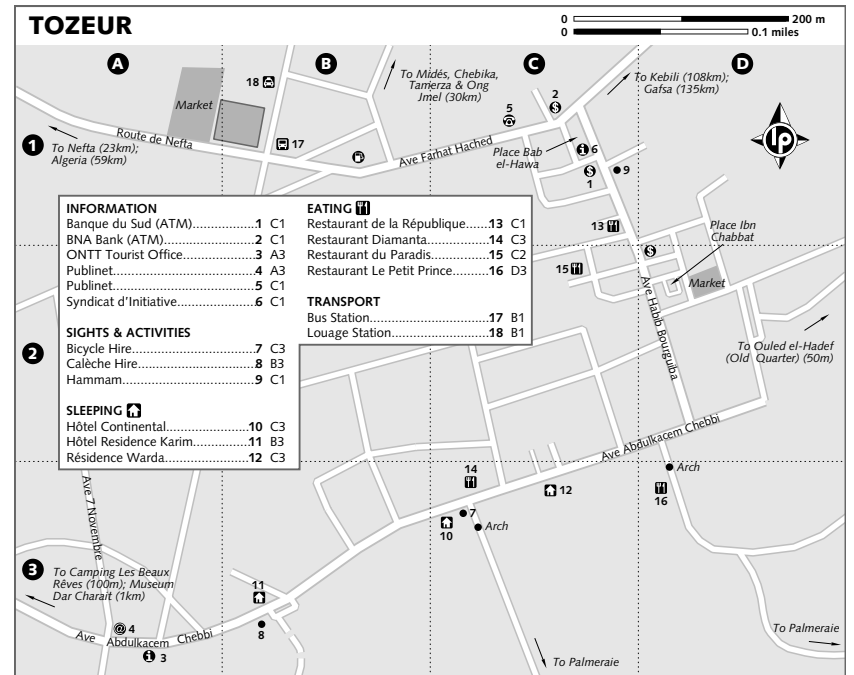
In the south you'll find the blinding heat and dust of the desert, with landscapes that stretch for miles with wonderful (or awful) nothingness. Life-giving palmeraies (palm groves) grow like tufts of hair mid-desert and promise autumn harvests of sweet dates. Salt lakes shimmer in the sun like mirages. Fortified towns stare from barren hilltops over scarred scrubland. Hot springs offer pampering dips deep in desert towns, and a luxury, desert camp site gives 'oasis' a whole new meaning. The isle of Jerba is a fascinating place to be. This is Tunisia's best.

### TOZEUR

☎ 76 / pop 33,500

Once you've passed the mesmerising landscape of the salt lake **Chott el-Jerid**, you start getting the glimpse of the enormous palmeraie that shields Tozeur. The salt lake is a snowy-white sheet, stretching for miles. If you step on the crackling surface, the salt sticks to your shoes, and the lake's water can still be seen underneath. This largest of Tunisia's salt lakes is dry for 10 months of the year and has a causeway running over it – it's an extraordinary sight, not to be missed. Tozeur town's old quarter is a small maze of fascinating and intricate brickwork houses, arches and walls.

There's an **ONTT tourist office** (☎ 450 088; ☒ 8am-noon & 3-6pm) located on Ave Abdulkacem Chebbi. Another tourist office is the **Syndicat d'Initiative** (☎ 462 034; Place Bab el-Hawa). There are several banks with ATMs on Ave Habib Bourguiba.



There are two Publinets at Ave Farhat Hached (open 24 hours) and at Ave Abdulkacem Chebbi, both charging US\$1.50 per hour for internet access.

### Sights & Activities

The town's small, labyrinthine old quarter, **Ouled el-Hadef**, has unique, striking architecture of patterned brickwork in sandy and dark-green shades. All the families living in the quarter come outside at dusk, and strolling at this time is lovely.

The enormous **palmeraie** (palm grove) is best explored by bicycle, which can be hired (US\$5 per hour) from west of Résidence Warda on Ave Abdulkacem Chebbi. You can take a *calèche* (carriage) ride around the palmeraie – they wait outside Résidence Warda. It should cost around US\$8 for half an hour.

The **Museum Dar Charait** (☎ 452 100; Ave Abdulkacem Chebbi; admission US\$2.50, camera US\$1, video US\$8; ☒ 8am-midnight), 1km from the town centre, has displays on arts and popular traditions, as well as some gloriously tacky tableaux that deal a bit with history and a lot with fantasy.

Excursions that can be made from Tozeur include a half-day trip via 4WD to **Ong Jmel**, a dramatic location used in both *Star Wars* and *The English Patient*, Nefza (see Top Ten *Star Wars* Locations box, p238), or the beautiful Berber villages of Midès, Chebika and Tamerza. Each half-day trip costs about US\$25 – all hotels arrange tours and they seem to have made an agreement about prices, because everyone charges the same.

There's a friendly **hammam** (admission US\$1; off Ave Habib Bourguiba; ☒ men noon-6pm, women 7-11pm).

### Sleeping & Eating

**Camping Les Beaux Rêves** (☎ 453 331; Ave Abdulkacem Chebbi; camp sites per person US\$4, dm US\$5, hot showers US\$1) At this lovely site, you can camp, or sleep in three-bed, thatched-hut bungalows.

**Hôtel Residence Karim** (☎ 454 574; 150 Ave Abdulkacem Chebbi; s/d US\$12/20, air-con US\$3; ☒) A good traditional place opposite the *calèche* waiting area, with bright tiled rooms and a roof terrace that has great views across the palmeraie. You can sit here and drink beer.

**Residence Warda** (☎ 452 597; 29 Ave Abdulkacem Chebbi; s/d with bathroom US\$14/23, with shared bathroom

US\$10/17) Friendly, neat and good-value place (breakfast is included), looking into a courtyard. The rooms facing the street are particularly good.

**Hôtel Continental** (☎ 461 411; Ave Abdylkacem Chebbi; s/d US\$35/55; 🍴 📺) The cheapest of the top-end options, with a lovely swimming pool shaded by palm trees. The rooms are large and comfortable.

**Restaurant du Paradis** (off Ave Habib Bourguiba; dishes US\$0.50-1.50) A tiny, quaint place, this restaurant is run by two elderly charmers, serving *chorba* and couscous.

**Restaurant Diamanta** (Ave Abdulkacem Chebbi; dishes US\$1-5) A husband and wife employ their son as the waiter, serving very good meals, particularly the *salade mechouia* and the vegetable couscous.

**Restaurant de la République** (off Ave Habib Bourguiba; dishes US\$1-5) Under an arched entrance off the main street, this is a good place for a simple couscous and salad, followed by a slice of juicy, fresh watermelon in high summer.

**Restaurant Le Petit Prince** (☎ 452 518; off Ave Abdulkacem Chebbi; mains around US\$8) Romance is high on the menu in the restaurant's palm-shaded courtyard, and food is a stylish serving of Tunisian and French specialties and plenty of booze.

## Getting There & Away

The bus and *louage* stations are near each other just north of the road to Nefta. There are buses travelling daily to/from Tunis (US\$16, seven hours, five daily), via Kairouan (US\$11, three hours) and Gafsa (US\$4, 1½ hours), Nefta (US\$2, 30 minutes, five daily), Douz (US\$6, 1½ hours, one daily) and Gabès (US\$9, 3½ hours, two daily). There are *louages* travelling to/from Nefta, Tunis and Gabès for the same prices, and to/from Kebili (US\$4, 1½ hours).

## DOUZ

☎ 75 / pop 27,400

Douz, an oasis at the edge of the Grand Erg Oriental, is best for its tours into the desert. The dunes are tall and smooth, fulfilling all fantasies of the mysterious and silent desert space. The town itself is not too exciting, with a busy central square, and fruit and carpets on sale. At its edge is an enormous palmeraie, where more than 400,000 trees slice into the fierce sunlight. As soon as you

enter, you'll be accosted by desert-epidemic touts. Make sure you get a professional guide from the tourist office, as unofficial guides are unreliable.

## Information

The **ONTT tourist office** (☎ 470351; Ave Mohammed V; 🕒 8.30am-1pm & 3-6pm) is near the palmeraie. **Société Tunisienne de Banque** (STB; Ave Taieb Mehiri) and **Banque de Sud** (Ave du 7 Novembre 1987) change cash and travellers cheques. **Publinet** (Rue el-Hounine) charges US\$1 per hour for internet access.

## Sights & Activities

Most people come to Douz to organise **camel trekking**. To appreciate the desert, it's best to take an overnight trip, which costs from US\$30 per day.

The desert immediately south of Douz is crowded and not very interesting. You'll find more interesting country around Zaafrane, 14km southwest of Douz, as well as lots of camels and similar prices. The giant dunes of the **Grand Erg Oriental** are situated some distance further south. If you want to reach the huge dunes, you will need to take a 4WD, at least for the first section. If you choose to hire a driver and 4WD for the whole day, the guide price is US\$180 per day or US\$220 for an overnight trip.

Everyone in town claims to be a camel-trekking guide, but it's safer to use an agency or your hotel, or to seek advice from the tourist office.

Try to visit in time for the famous **Thursday market**, where livestock, leather, pots n' pans and other goods are on sale, and where the last of Tunisia's nomadic camel-herders come to trade.

The **palmeraie**, the largest in the country, is a wonderful, cool place for a stroll.

The **Sahara Festival** usually takes place in November. This is very popular with Tunisians as well as foreign tourists, and has displays of traditional desert sports, colourful parades and music.

## Sleeping & Eating

**Desert Club** (☎ 470 575; Ave 7 Novembre; camp sites per person US\$3) An excellent, shady camp site inside the palmeraie, with professional service, hot water, laundry, a restaurant and bar.

**Hôtel 20 Mars** (☎ 470 269; Rue 20 Mars; s/d US\$18/23) Sunny rooms with arched brick ceilings, lots of small courtyards and friendly service. The

hotel also has an agency that organises desert trips.

**Hotel Pansea** (☎ 621 870; www.pansea.com/ksar.html; Ksar Ghilane; s/d US\$90/120; 🍴 📺) High-style travel magazines are crazy about this place and you can see why. Luxurious linen tents in the middle of a desert oasis, with their own bathrooms, air-conditioning and heating, a central swimming pool and a classy restaurant. It is located in Ksar Ghilane village, 138km south of Douz. Staying here is an experience to be cherished.

**Restaurant Ali Baba** (☎ 472 498; Ave du 7 Novembre 1987; mains around US\$3) Popular and friendly, with a Bedouin tent in the little garden for puffing on a hookah after a dinner of couscous.

**Restaurant La Rosa** (☎ 471 660; Ave du 7 Novembre 1987; dishes US\$3-4) A good, air-conditioned place with delicious vegetable couscous and juicy kebabs.

## Getting There & Away

There are regular local buses and *louages* running to Kebili (US\$2, 30 minutes) and Zaafrane (US\$0.50, five daily), and daily services to Tozeur (US\$6, 1½ hours) and Gabès (US\$5, three hours, two daily). SNTRI has air-conditioned services to Tunis (US\$17, nine hours, two daily), either via Tozeur or via Gabès and Sfax.

## MATMATA

☎ 75

If you want to get to the 'heart of *Star Wars*', Matmata's your place. It's not often you get the locals offering to show you the outer space, but this little village brims with such delights, having been the set of George Lucas' first *Star Wars* film and never living it down. The Berbers of Matmata tried to escape the incessant summer heat by burrowing underground and creating cave-houses. Their odd, otherworldly homes are set among sculpted sand hills, the colour of sawdust.

Matmata boasts dozens of troglodyte pit homes, which are all built along the same lines and generally feature a large central courtyard, usually circular, dug out of the soft sandstone, and rounded rooms that are tunnelled off the perimeter.

The most famous place to stay is **Hotel Sidi Driss** (☎ 240 005; s/d incl breakfast US\$12/24), the setting for the Lars family homestead in *Star Wars*, also used for *Attack of the Clones*. Though it's a major tour-group lunch date,

staying here is a rather depressing prospect, since the rooms are like prison cells. It's best to stop for lunch and carry on your way.

There are regular buses and *louages* to/from Gabès (US\$3, 45 minutes) and one SNTRI bus to Tunis (US\$16, eight hours).

## JERBA & HOUMT SOUQ

☎ 75

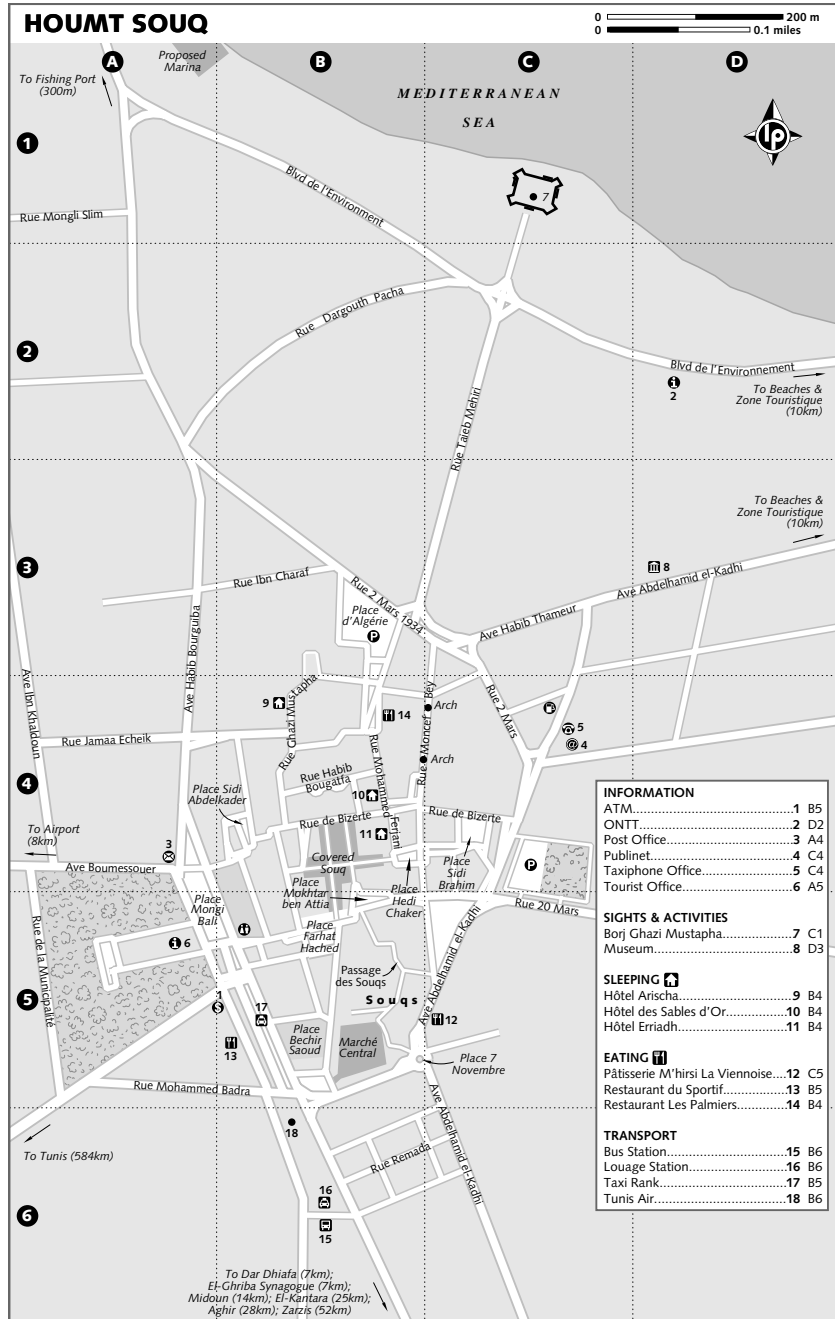
Jerba is an island with a harmonious mixture of Mediterranean brightness and sandy beaches, strong desert heat and lack of vegetation, and peculiar, beautiful, whitewashed domed-hut architecture. This extends to the island's ethnic mix: Berber culture is dominant here and local women are wrapped in cream-striped textiles, topped with straw hats. A Jewish community, once integral to the island's ethnic make-up, still remains on the island in small numbers, despite mass emigration to Israel. And the tourists, most of them on package holidays, splash around the island in seasonal waves, bringing precious employment and taking precious water resources.

The island is linked to the mainland by a causeway built in Roman times, and convenient 24-hour car ferries between Ajim (where Obi-Wan Kenobi had his house; see the Top Ten *Star Wars* Locations boxed text, p238) and Jorf. Jerba claims to be the Land of the Lotus Eaters described in Homer's *Odyssey*, where people lived 'drugged by the legendary honeyed fruit' – Ulysses had a lot of trouble prising his crew away.

Houmt Souq is the island's 'capital', standing in the middle of the north coast. It's a small town with a lovely central area, where a narrow tangle of souvenir *souqs* open onto lazy, café-lined squares. A highlight is staying in *funduqs*, the old merchant inns converted into charming hotels. There's a **tourist office** (☎ 650 915; off Ave Habib Bourguiba; 🕒 9am-1pm & 3-6pm Mon-Thu, 9am-1pm Fri & Sat) in the middle of town and an **ONTT** (Office National du Tourisme Tunisien; ☎ 650 016; 🕒 9am-1pm & 3-6pm Mon-Thu, 9am-1pm Fri & Sat) near the fort. There are also banks with ATMs and a **post office** (Ave Habib Bourguiba). **Publinet** (off Ave Abdelhamid el-Kadhi) charges US\$1.50 per hour for internet access. There's a **Taxiphone office** (Ave Abdelhamid el-Kadhi).

## Sights & Activities

The old fort, **Borj Ghazi Mustapha** (off Blvd de l'Environment), on the beach, 500m north of town,



looks like stuff from fairy tales. It dates from the 13th century, but was extended in the 16th. A massacre took place here in 1560, when the Ottomans captured the fort and stacked the skulls of their Spanish victims just west of it, leaving the menacing warning standing for about 300 years.

The **museum** (Ave Abdelhamid el-Kadhi) is housed in a beautiful, simple Zaouia of Sidi Zitouni – a former religious fraternity based around a marabout – with whitewashed domes, a cedar-wood painted ceiling and small courtyards. It has mementos from the Berber and Jewish communities. The busy **fishing port** is a nice place for a walk, about 500m north of town along Ave Habib Bourguiba.

Outside town, visit the oldest synagogue in North Africa, the **El-Ghriba Synagogue** (admission US\$1; ☎ 7.30am–6pm Sun–Fri) in the village of Erriadh, 7km south of Houmt Souq. Bring ID for the security checks outside.

## Sleeping & Eating

Houmt Souq has some wonderful places to stay, converted from *funduqs* – lodging houses for the camel caravans that stopped here in Ottoman times; the merchants stayed on the top floor while their animals were housed below.

**Hôtel des Sables d'Or** (☎ 650423; Rue Mohammed Ferjani; s/d US\$10/18) A pretty townhouse with charming, tiled rooms around a lovely inner courtyard.

**Hôtel Erriadh** (☎ 650756; 10 Rue Mohammed Ferjani; s/d US\$18/23; ☎) Popular, attractive, tiled *funduq*, where rooms look onto a courtyard and the service is friendly.

**Hôtel Arischa** (☎ 650384; 36 Rue Ghazi Mustapha; r per person US\$22; ☎) A gorgeous *funduq* with soft lilac rooms, stylish tiled showers, and a swimming pool in a courtyard full of blooming bougainvillea.

**Dar Dhiafa** (☎ 671 166; www.hoteldardhiafa.com; Erriadh village; r from US\$150; ☎) One of Tunisia's loveliest hotels, set in a collection of traditional Jerba houses, with courtyards, pools, traditional décor and scrumptious rooms.

**Restaurant du Sportif** (147 Ave Habib Bourguiba; dishes US\$1–4) Under a long, arched arcade, perfect for watching Houmt Souq go by while you bite into an egg *briq*.

**Restaurant Les Palmiers** (Place d'Algérie; dishes US\$3–5) Waiters with tilted straw hats serve you at this simple place with traditional food. A set menu has the usual *briq* and couscous,

but the seafood spaghetti is whisker-licking good.

**Pâtisserie M'Hirsi La Viennoise** (Ave Abdelhamid el-Kadhi) Good for breakfast and early-morning coffee on a sunny square.

## Getting There & Away

There's a **Tunis Air office** (Ave Habib Bourguiba) and the airport is to the northwest of the island. The bus and *louage* stations are at the southern end of the main street, Ave Habib Bourguiba. There are frequent buses to Gabès (US\$5, two hours), Sfax (US\$10, four hours), Tunis (US\$17, eight hours), Sousse (US\$14, seven hours) and Matmata (US\$6, seven hours). *Louages* head to the same destinations for around the same prices, as well as to Tataouine (US\$6, two hours).

## TATAOUINE

☎ 75 / pop 57,800

This is a gentle town, a slow-paced base for visiting the extraordinary *ksour* villages (fortified Berber villages) in the surrounding dry golden hills. Made up of stacked *ghorfas*, narrow barrel-vaulted rooms, their architecture is surreal and organic and you walk around expecting a hobbit to hobble outside. *Star Wars* location scouts loved the look so much they used the villages as film sets.

The best sites are quite a way from town, but can be easily reached by chartering a taxi (half-day excursion costs about US\$16), or local transport with luck, patience and a bit of timing. Don't miss the beautiful **Ksar Ouled Soltane**, 24km southeast of Tataouine, where the *ghorfas* rise a dizzying four storeys, reached by precarious fairy-tale staircases, and overlook desert-scrub hills. Equally impressive are the ancient hilltop villages of **Chenini** and **Douiret**, which spill across and merge with the rocky ochre slopes, southwest of Tataouine. Chenini's mysterious underground mosque contains 5m-long graves – apparently Christians hid from the Romans here and, sleeping, grew to an enormous height, only to die when they awoke 400 years later.

There's a **festival** at Ksar Ouled Soltane in April, which uses the courtyards for music, dance and other festivities.

Tiny **Hôtel Résidence Hamza** (☎ 863 506; Ave Hedi Chaker; s/d US\$12/13) has just four very clean, spartan rooms and friendly owners. Inside a walled compound, 3km southwest of town, is

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To Dar Dhiafa (7km);  
El-Ghriba Synagogue (7km);  
Midoun (14km); El-Kantara (25km);  
Aghir (28km); Zatzis (52km)

## TOP TEN STAR WARS LOCATIONS

Talk about a country with a CV to match any international film star's: Tunisia's sensuous desert curves hosted *The English Patient*, its impressive fortifications served as a Middle Eastern backdrop to *Monty Python's The Life of Brian*, but its most famous role was providing the fascinating architecture and wild desertscapes that gave the *Star Wars* canon such a powerful visual identity. The makers not only left bits of sets behind, but also a legacy of guided *Star Wars* tours. If you want to walk in the steps of R2-D2, try a hotel or agency tour in Tozeur, where most charge the same reasonable prices.

- Sidi Driss Hotel (Matmata) – The famous Sidi Driss was used for interior shots of the Lars family homestead in *Star Wars*. Bits of set are still in place here (it was used again in *The Phantom Menace* and *Attack of the Clones*), complete with writing in black marker pen on the back. A dining room is spangled with ceiling paintings – this is where Luke tucked into blue milkshake and went head to head over the harvest with his Uncle Owen.
- Ong Jemel (30km north of Tozeur) – This was Darth Maul's lookout in *The Phantom Menace* and the location for his and Qui-Gon's tussle, as well as lots of pod-race scenes. The road here was built by *The English Patient* crew, who indulged in a lot of billowing sand-blown romantic stuff in the area.
- Mos Espa (30km north of Tozeur) – Near Ong Jemel, Mos Espa village is a construct in the middle of the desert used for the prequel films; its battered sets echoing local Berber architecture.
- Sidi Bouhlel (east of Tozeur on the edge of Chott el-Jerid) – Nicknamed *Star Wars* Canyon, this has seen Jawas parking their sand-crawlers, R2-D2 trundling plaintively along, Luke attacked by Tusken Raiders, and Ben and Luke overlooking Mos Eisley. Scenes from *The Phantom Menace* and *Attack of the Clones* were filmed here too.
- Ksar Haddada (near Tataouine) – A location for the Mos Espa slave quarters, Ksar Haddada has stunningly weird architecture, and is where Qui-Gon learned the truth about Anakin's parentage in *The Phantom Menace*. Though the hotel is falling into ruin, it retains some brightly painted doors from the set.
- Ksar Ouled Soltane (near Tataouine) – Here are more slave quarters – these are perhaps the finest example of the curious moulded courtyard-centred buildings.
- La Grande Dune (near Nefta) – This stood in for the *Star Wars* Dune Sea, where C-3PO staggered past a Krayt dragon skeleton, and if you're lucky, you might pick up some fibre-glass bones.
- Chott el-Jerid (east of Nefta) – Here, in the first film, Luke contemplated two suns while standing soulfully at the edge of a crater, peering over these vast, dry salt flats. The landscape around its fringes doubled as Junland Wastes populated by Krayt dragons and sand people.
- Medenine (near Tataouine) – Anakin Skywalker's *Phantom Menace* slave-quarters home is off bustling Ave 7 Novembre.
- Ajim (Jerba) – Obi-Wan Kenobi's house exterior is about 3km out of town, while the freak-filled *Star Wars* Cantina scene was filmed in the centre (not, as many think, at the Sidi Driss).

stylish **Hôtel Sangho Tataouine** (☎ 860 124; off Route de Chenini; s/d US\$60/80; 🚻 🚿) where rooms are decked out in a traditional style with antiques and bric-a-brac. There's also a good restaurant onsite, or try **Restaurant Essendabad** (Rue 2 Mars; dishes US\$0.50-2) for a wholesome lunch of spicy *chorba* and Arabic flat bread. **Restaurant La Medina** (Rue 1 Juin 1955; mains around US\$2) serves simple

Tunisian food and has alfresco seating, perfect for hungry people-watchers.

Buses and *louages* leave from the centre of town. SNTRI buses go to Tunis (US\$19, 8½ hours) via Gabès (US\$6, two hours), Sfax (US\$11, four hours) and Sousse (US\$15, 6½ hours). Regular *louages* run to Tunis (US\$16, eight hours) and Gabès (US\$5, two hours).

You can reach Chenini, Douiret and sometimes Ksar Ouled Soltane via *camionnette* (pick-up; US\$2). These leave from near the Banque du Sud on Rue 2 Mars; however, these serve the destinations only in the mornings, so unless you start out early you could get stuck there.

## TUNISIA DIRECTORY

### ACCOMMODATION

Tunisia has few camp sites with good facilities, but you can pitch a tent anywhere if you have the landowner's permission. In many Tunisian towns, there is a *zone touristique* – a separate area with lots of larger hotels. These tend to be bland places, used by large package operators. The advantage of these zones is that it leaves Tunisia's historic centres free of major tourist developments and lessens the impact of the large numbers of tourists passing through.

Women are likely to feel uncomfortable in bottom-end budget places, which are used mainly by men and tend to have a seedy atmosphere. Tunisia's Auberges de Jeunesse are excellent and fine for women travelling alone, and cheap hotels outside the medina are usually better. Midrange options are usually decent, with air-conditioning, some with swimming pools. Top end hotels don't usually compare to four or five star Western hotels, but are good enough and cheap by Western standards.

### DANGERS & ANNOYANCES

Tunisia is a generally safe place to travel around, and aside from the 2002 suicide bomber attack (see p216), violence of this sort is extremely rare. Most travellers complain about sexual harassment (see Women Travellers, p240) and carpet touts, and you're well advised to keep an eye on your bag in crowded medinas.

### EMBASSIES & CONSULATES

The following embassies and consulates are in Tunis. The Canadian embassy handles consular affairs for the Australian government. **Algeria** (Map p219; 18 Rue du Niger, 1002 Tunis) **Belgium** (☎ 781 655; fax 792 797; 47 Rue du 1 Juin, 1002 Tunis) **Canada** (Map p219; ☎ 104 000; 3 Senegal St) **Egypt** (Map p219; ☎ 791 181; Ave Mohammed V)

**France** (Map p220; ☎ 245 700; Place de l'Indépendance, Ave Habib Bourguiba)

**Germany** (☎ 786 455; 1 Rue el Hamra)

**Italy** (Map p220; ☎ 321811; fax 324155; 37 Rue Jamel Abdelnaceur)

**Japan** (☎ 791 251; fax 786 625; 9 Rue Apollo XI, 1082 Mohrajene-Tunis)

**Morocco** (☎ 782 775; fax 787 103; Rue du 1 Juin, 1002 Tunis)

**Netherlands** (☎ 799 442; fax 785 557; 8 Rue de Meycen, 1002 Tunis)

**South Africa** (☎ 798 449; fax 791 742; 7 Rue Achart Nord, Hilton, 1002 Tunis)

**Spain** (☎ 782 217; fax 786 267; 22-24 Rue Dr Ernest Conseil, 1002 Tunis)

**UK** (Map p220; ☎ 340239; 5 Place de la Victoire)

**USA** (☎ 962 115; Zone Nord-Est de Berges du Lac)

Tunisia has embassies in Libya, Algeria, Egypt and Morocco.

### FESTIVALS & EVENTS

**Ksar Ouled Soltane Festival** (April) Music, dance and other festivities.

**Tabarka Rai Festival** (May & June) Algerian and Tunisian youngsters get together and dance alfresco.

**Tabarka Jazz Festival** (July) Outdoor concerts, sometimes with international stars.

**Carthage International Festival** (July & August) Music, dance and theatre.

**Dougga Festival** (July & August) Classical drama.

**Carthage International Film Festival** (October, odd years only, even years in Burkina Faso) Shows Middle-Eastern and African films.

**Douz Sahara Festival** (November) Camel racing, colourful parades and music.

### HOLIDAYS

As well as religious holidays listed in the Africa Directory chapter (p1106) the principal public holidays in Tunisia are as follows:

**1 January** New Year's Day

**20 March** Independence Day

**21 March** Youth Day

**9 April** Martyrs' Day

**1 May** Labour Day

**25 July** Republic Day

**3 August** Public Holiday

**13 August** Women's Day

**15 October** Evacuation Day

**7 November** Anniversary of Ben Ali's Accession

### INTERNET ACCESS

Public access to the internet is handled by Publinet, which operates offices in all the

main towns. Most charge around US\$1.50 per hour. You might find it difficult to get on to Hotmail and Yahoo, though Publi-net staff can sometimes suggest ways to get around this.

## MEDIA

Freedom of speech is guaranteed under the Constitution, but the government places strict restrictions on the media – print, broadcasting and the internet.

## MONEY

The unit of currency is the Tunisian dinar (TD), which is divided into 1000 millimes (mills). It's illegal to import or export dinars and they are not accepted in the duty-free shops at Tunis Airport.

You can re-exchange up to 30% of the amount you changed into dinar, up to a limit of TD100. You need bank receipts to prove you changed the money in the first place.

Major credit cards such as Visa, American Express and MasterCard are widely accepted at big shops, tourist hotels, car-rental agencies and banks. ATMs are found in major towns and resort areas. Cash advances are given in local currency only.

## POST & TELEPHONE

The Tunisian postal service is slow but reliable: allow a week to Europe and 10 days to North America, Asia and Oceania.

The telephone system is fairly modern and easy to operate. Few people have a phone at home, so there are lots of public telephones – known as Taxiphones. They accept 100-mill, 500-mill and one-dinar coins. An attempt to introduce card phones appears to have fizzled out.

All public telephones can be used for international direct dialling. Some places advertise themselves as International Taxiphones; all it means is that the meters accept only 500-mill and one-dinar coins.

## TOURIST INFORMATION

To get tourist information before you leave home, contact the government-run **Office National du Tourisme Tunisien** ([www.tourismintunisia.com](http://www.tourismintunisia.com)). Inside Tunisia, most tourist offices are not too efficient, though they are generally friendly and will offer glossy brochures and basic local information.

## VISAS

Nationals of most Western European countries can stay in Tunisia for up to three months without a visa – you just roll up at the port or airport and collect a stamp in your passport. Americans, Canadians, Germans and Japanese can stay up to four months. Other nationalities have to apply for a visa before travel.

Australians and South Africans travelling independently can get a three-month visa at the airport for US\$8. Other nationalities need to apply before they arrive; the visa costs US\$7 and takes three to four weeks in person or six weeks via post, and the length of stay is up to the embassy.

Israeli nationals are not allowed into the country, apart from on group trips organised from Israel.

## Visa Extensions

Extending a visa is a process to be avoided. Applications can be made only at the Interior Ministry on Ave Habib Bourguiba in Tunis. They cost US\$2 to US\$8 (payable only in *timbres fiscaux*, revenue stamps) and take up to 10 days to issue. You'll need two photos, and may need bank receipts and a *facture* (receipt) from your hotel, for starters. It'd be easier to leave the country and return to get another three-month stint.

## Visas for Onward Travel

If you're planning on travelling to Algeria (check travel warnings before you do so) or Libya (difficult) you should apply for visas in your home country.

## WOMEN TRAVELLERS

Prior to marriage, Tunisian men have little opportunity to hang out with women, and the expense of getting married means that, for many, this mixing of the sexes is being delayed still further. Foreign women exist outside the social structure, and are seen as an entirely separate and enticing species. Sexual harassment is par for the course, and the tidal waves of testosterone that you encounter in some places can be quite intimidating. Harassment usually takes the form of being stared at, subjected to slimy chat-up strategies and very occasional physical harassment – though this is not half as likely as in Egypt. You can try a few strategies to reduce your hassle quota: the first is by mod-

est dressing. In remote areas, a headscarf can be useful to indicate modesty. Probably the best policy is to ignore sexist remarks and sound effects – sunglasses are a good way of avoiding eye contact. It's advisable to sit next to other women on buses and *louages*, sit in the back seat of taxis, and avoid staying in cheap medina hotels. If someone does touch you, '*Harem alek*' (Arabic for 'Shame on you') is a useful phrase.

# TRANSPORT IN TUNISIA

## GETTING THERE & AWAY

### Air

There are regular flights, both scheduled and chartered, from Tunisia to destinations all over Europe, but no direct flights to the Americas, Asia or Oceania. **Tunis Air** (☎ 71-330 100; [www.tunisair.com](http://www.tunisair.com); 48 Ave Habib Bourguiba, Tunis) flies to most European destinations.

Other airlines flying to and from Tunisia:

**Air France** (☎ 71-355 422; [www.airfrance.com](http://www.airfrance.com); 1 Rue d'Athènes, Tunis) Hub: Paris

**Alitalia** (☎ 71-331 377; [www.alitalia.com](http://www.alitalia.com); 17 Ave Habib Thameur, Tunis) Hub: Rome

**British Airways** (☎ 71-330 046; [www.british-airways.com](http://www.british-airways.com); 17 Ave Habib Bourguiba, Tunis) Hub: London

**Lufthansa Airlines** (☎ 71-941 344; [www.lufthansa.com](http://www.lufthansa.com); Ave Ouled Haffouz, Tunis) Hub: Frankfurt

### Boat

Boats run from Tunis to Trapani, Naples, sometimes La Spezia, and Genoa in Italy. They also serve Marseilles (France) and Bastia (Corsica). See Getting There and Away under Tunis (p222) for more details.

### Land

#### ALGERIA

There are numerous border-crossing points, and *louages* travel between Tunis and various towns in eastern Algeria. For travellers, the southern border crossing between Nefta and El-Oued is the best bet, but check the current situation before heading for Algeria. You reach Nefta from Gafsa and Tozeur, and take a bus or *louage* from Nefta to the border post at Hazoua.

#### LIBYA

Visiting Libya is only an option as part of an organised tour, so transport options will finish at the border, where the tour opera-

## DEPARTURE TAX

There is no departure tax to be paid when leaving Tunisia. The tax is included in the price of your ticket.

tors meet travellers by prior arrangement. The coast road from Gabès to Tripoli runs via the border crossing at Ras Ajdir. *Louages* make the journey from Gabès, Medenine, Sfax, Sousse and Tunis to Tripoli (US\$25, 10 hours), and there are several weekly buses from the southern Tunis bus station to Tripoli (US\$25, 11½ hours).

## GETTING AROUND

### Air

Tuninter operates internal flights from Tunis to/from Jerba, Sfax and Tozeur. Tuninter tickets can be bought from its parent **Tunis Air** (☎ 71-330 100; [www.tunisair.com](http://www.tunisair.com); 48 Ave Habib Bourguiba, Tunis), or from any travel agent. **Tuninter** (☎ 701 717) also has a special reservations service.

### Boat

There is a 24-hour car ferry between Jorf, on the mainland, and Ajim on the island of Jerba (15 minutes, 800 mills per car). There are ferries from Sfax to the Kerkennah Islands, but not many reasons to go there.

### Hitching

Hitching is possible down the coast to the Libyan border and as far south as Tozeur, although you may be expected to pay the bus fare equivalent. Hitching in the north is easier away from the main tourist areas, and you'll seldom be expected to pay.

Although many people do hitch, bear in mind that it is not an entirely safe means of transport. Women should never hitch alone, and even in pairs it will be much more hassle than it could possibly be worth, and not necessarily safer.

### Local Transport

The national bus company, Société Nationale du Transport Interurban (SNTRI), has daily air-conditioned buses between Tunis and most towns. Advance booking is advisable, especially in summer and around important holidays. Sample one-way fares from Tunis include Sousse (US\$6) and Jerba (from US\$18 to US\$20).

Local buses are run by regional companies and go to all but the most remote villages.

*Louages* are large cars or minibuses. They are always white with a red stripe across the front and along the side, and they ply the same routes as the buses. They are usually cheaper and faster than buses and are quite safe. They leave when full – you rarely have to wait long for departure. Prepare to be cramped inside and avoid the back seat and the middle seat in the front (seriously lacking in head and leg room respectively).

All towns have metered private yellow taxis. These can either be hired privately or they operate on a collective basis – they collect four passengers for different destinations. If you take a shared taxi, your fare will be much cheaper.

### **Train**

The rail network isn't huge, but it's the best way to get to certain places. The best-serviced route is the line from Tunis to Sousse (US\$5) and Sfax (US\$8).