

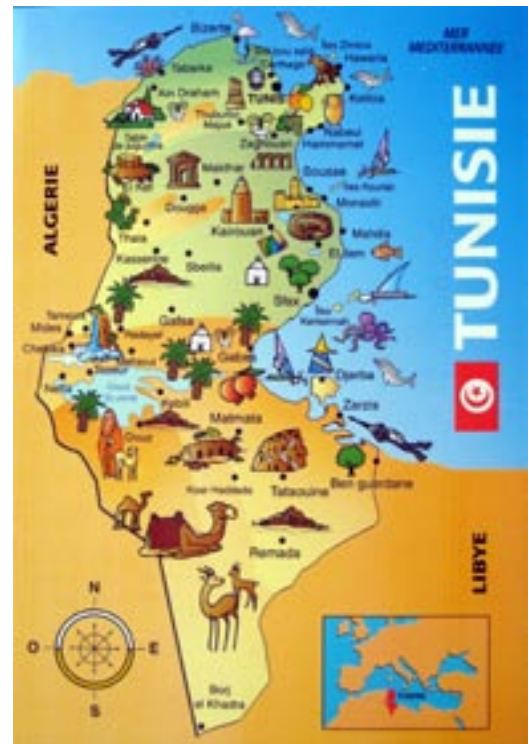
Tunisia:

Outposts of Empire, Medinas and lost Berber Oases

Tunisia offers the broadest and richest array of both cultural and historic attractions as well as variety of landscape and topography. When considered in the context of its North African neighbors, Egypt, Libya and Morocco (we would consider Algeria but for the fact that it is truly “out of bounds” for the traveler, but of late Libya seems in that category too!), it tends to get lesser billing and is less often visited. This makes for a memorable and enriching travel experience.



In terms of ancient sites, Tunisia possesses a greater number of well-preserved Roman cities in one region than anywhere else in the Roman world. Of course from the period prior to the Romans, one of the most legendary sites, the Phoenician City of Carthage, is on the coast near modern day Tunis. The cities of Dougga, Bulla Regia, Sbeitla and El Jem are vast evocative sites with well preserved standing structures, and unique building types, like the subterranean dwellings at Bull Regia and El Jem’s coliseum which is the third largest in the world. Unlike such sites in Italy and Greece, where preservation and safety concerns and the crowds have necessitated restrictions on where one can walk, the visitor is allowed to roam freely, climbing around and exploring at will the way some of us remember visiting the Acropolis or the Roman Forum in our youth!



North Africa was a key region in the formation and spread of Islamic culture, and most Tunisian cities were settled and established by the Muslims and offer a wealth of artifacts and monuments from medinas with their labyrinthine mazes of alleys to mosques to medrasas and tombs. The city of Kairouan, in the middle of the country is a holy city whose importance is considered on a par with Mecca, Medina, and Jerusalem, largely due to its mosque, which has been in continuous use since the eighth century, and parts of whose structure date from the tenth.

The native Berber population which preceded the influx of Phoenicians, Romans, Arabs, and French remains in the southern desert areas of the country and has always been free of the waves of colonizers who stuck to the coast. Their settlements can be seen in the desert communities of underground dwellings and mud villages that are throughout the southern regions of the country. They gave their name to the “Barbary Coast” which became in the sixteenth century the scene of struggles for domination between the Spaniards and Turks. Eventually the Ottoman Empire controlled the coastal settlements, but these became a base for piracy in the Mediterranean, providing the excuse for the French to take over in 1881.

Tunisia became a French colony along with Algeria and Morocco, and while the aims of the colonizers

were no different from the base commercial self-interest that governed much colonial occupation in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, the French went beyond others in also establishing a strong and lasting foundation of their much prized culture and system of order as it encompassed language, civil institutions, roads and infrastructure, education and food and drink. Unlike the vestiges left by the Italians and British in North Africa, there remains a strong presence of French culture in Tunisia. The benefits for the visitor are good food and wine, a population who is in large part francophone, and a country whose efficiency surpasses what we might expect for this part of the world.



In 1956 the leader Habib Bourguiba wins independence from France and is declared the first president to serve for life. As *the* national hero, his name and image are everywhere, and every Tunisian town boasts an Avenue, Place or Boulevard Bourguiba. Much of the credit for Tunisia's successful balancing act as a modern secular state in the Arab world can be given to him. In 1987 his prime minister, Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali, pushes him aside and assumes the presidency, and he holds that office to this day, routinely winning elections with over 90% of the vote! Tunisia has been free of the sort of extremist violence that has plagued nearby Algeria, and for this they are held up by the United States as a model for the region.

Our journey will incorporate all regions of the country, and we will be struck by the contrast between the verdant scenery in the northern coastal regions and the aridity of the desert further south. Our itinerary has been devised so that we will have a few extended stays in places we have chosen for their beauty and the quality of the hotels, and to minimize the strain of one-night stays (although one or two may be inevitable). Thus our odyssey will begin and end in Tunis, or ancient Carthage. We will make a series of day trips from there; then we will move to the far southern desert, and finally will return to Kairouan in the central north. The accommodations will range from a restored courtyard house (right), to a former fort, to a tented encampment, and a cluster of cottages in a garden. All meals, including local wine and beer, tips, entry fees, portage and transportation costs are included. You need only open your wallet for the many crafts you will be tempted to buy, for laundry and other personal items like telephone, fax, cocktails and room service in the hotels.



Itinerary

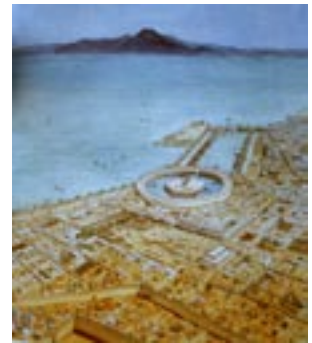
Day 1 Thursday, March 22 2007 Departure from Home Cities
Depart home cities and travel independently to Paris.

Day 2 Friday, March 23 Paris to Tunis

Meet the group and depart Paris on AF 1984 at 8:30am to Tunis, arriving at 11:00am, transfer to the nearby seaside town of Carthage and our Hotel Villa Didon. It is perched overlooking the ancient site of Carthage, the sea and the Cap Bon Peninsula in the distance. After lunch the afternoon is free to nap, or indulge in the spa for which this hotel is renowned! Our welcome dinner will be in the hotel's restaurant.

Day 3 Saturday, March 24 Tunis (Cathage)

Tunis is of course the site of the great ancient Punic capital, Carthage, destroyed by the Romans in 146 BC. The ruins remain in what has become a pleasant seaside suburb to the west of the city. Exploring its port, bath complex and other archæological remains will be our focus for the morning. After a break for lunch in the neighborhood we will visit the extensive Carthage museum in the afternoon, before returning to our hotel nearby.



Carthage, then (above and bottom) and now (below)





Day 4 Sunday, March 25 Tunis (Medina and Bardo Museum)

In the 7th century the focus of power shifted to the Moslems after the Arab conquest, and the center of Tunis became the Medina. Then in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century the focus shifted again under the French to the Ville Nouvelle just the east of the medina.

We will begin the day first thing in the Medina. It is a UNESCO World Heritage site and is among the most extensive and best preserved. We will visit the Zitouna Mosque (9th c.) with its great courtyard and prayer hall with 200 spolia columns salvaged from Carthage. After walking the labyrinth of narrow lanes, visiting a number of other mosques, medrasas and souqs, we will visit a nearby courtyard house, “Dar Belhadj” where a traditional Tunisian lunch of Brique, and Lamb Cous Cous has been arranged.

After lunch we will leave the Medina for the Bardo Museum located in a leafy district to the west, near the National Assembly. The building itself would merit a visit even without its extensive collections comprising an exhaustive survey of the art found throughout Tunisia. This first brief visit will provide a preview to the sites we will visit in the week ahead.

Day 5 Monday, March 26 Tunis (Day trip to Bulla Regia, Chemtou and Dougga)

Today we will make a day trip south (three hours by a good road) to a cluster of ancient Roman sites, including Bulla Regia, Chemtou and Dougga. Bulla Regia is a Roman site whose principal monuments date from the 2nd and 3rd centuries AD. Its principal and unique attraction is a series of underground courtyard houses, much like some we will later see in the south. These are thought to be influenced by the native tradition of building and living underground to avoid the extremes of heat and cold experienced in this



One of the typical houses with Mashrabiya window, Sidi Bou Said



Zitounia Mosque, Tunis; Views of the Medina, Tunis (below and top left)





desert climate. In addition to these houses, there is the usual civic complex of forum, theater, markets and baths. Nearby a short drive away is the site of Chemtou, famed as the source of much of the precious giallo antico marble gracing such familiar buildings as the Pantheon in Rome.

After a picnic lunch, the focus of today's exploration is the large and striking site of Dougga. The gently sloping verdant site offers beautiful views over the rolling plains to the south and ruins dotted with over twenty temples and one of the best preserved Roman capitols in Africa.



Day 6 Tuesday, March 27 Tunis to Ksar Ghilane via Djerba

Today we will leave Tunis by air early in the morning for a short flight south to the Island of Djerba, enroute to the desert and the *Grand Erg Oriental* (great eastern desert). Upon arrival, we will have time to visit Djerba's ancient synagogue of the Griba (oldest in Tunisia) and explore the island's picturesque lanes. Our destination, Ksar Ghilane is three hours away via a fleet of 4 x 4 vehicles. Along the way we will see a number of settlements,



Subterranean house at Bulla Regia

Overview (top left) Theater (lower left) and Capitolium (below), Dougga





of hilltowns constructed of mud bricks, and time permitting, we will visit a series of “Ksars” which are fortified complexes constructed from mud and earth for the storage of grain, oil and wine which represented the wealth at the time, and thus these structures were the safe houses of their time. They were not dwellings per se, and were often constructed at some distance from the towns.

Our destination is Ksar Ghilane, an oasis surrounded by shifting sand dunes deep in the *Grand Erg Oriental* where Pansea, a camp of linen tents has been set up. One reporter had this to say about it: “Nestled against the Grand Erg, this canvas property is identical to the set of the English Patient - about sixty tents that seem to have sprung up under a spell.” A special *rustic* dinner has been arranged for us *al fresco* in the fort.

Day 7 Wednesday, March 28 Ksar Ghilane to Tamerza



The Pansea camp Ksar Ghilane ((top left); Ksar Oud Sultane (above and below); Chenini (left below); and subterranean dwelling at Matmata (top right)





Tamerza (top left and above) and the tents we will stay in at the Pansea Hotel (below)

We will continue west in the desert passing the oasis town of Douz and Tozeur, with its distinct houses built of patterned brick. Here we will have lunch, after which we will continue on out into the desert to Oung Jemel, where there are sets both of the *English Patient* and *Star Wars*. We will reach Tamerza at day's end, where the Hotel Tamerza Palace will be our home for the next two nights. In 1969 torrential rains transformed the traditional mud brick villages into ruins, and one of these forms the view from our hotel, and we will visit two others tomorrow.

Day 8 Thursday, March 29 Tamerza

We will make an excursion this morning to the mountain oases of Chébika, and Mides and following lunch at the hotel will have the afternoon to catch our breath, read or walk in the town nearby.



Desert sands at sunset (left) and in the Medina (bleow)





The Capitolium (left), and triumphal arch, Sbeitla (above)

Day 9 Friday, March 30 Tamerza to Kairouan

We will leave the desert today for the journey to Kairouan, stopping enroute at the Roman site of Sbeitla (Sufetula). It is memorable for its triple temples joined together by walls and colonnades flanking a forum, and the beautiful golden stone which will glow in the afternoon sun.

We will arrive in the evening in Kairouan, which is a fascinating and atmospheric city. It is one of the holy cities of Islam, and its mosque (founded in 670 and dating from the 9th century) ranks with Mecca, Medina, and the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem as among the four holiest and important Muslim places of worship. We'll spend two nights here in the historic Hôtel la Kasbah which is a transformation of the former military garrison.

Day 10 Saturday, March 31 Kairouan



Great Mosque (left) and Medina (below), Kairouan





The medina will be mysterious and magical in the early morning hours, so we'll try to get up early enough to get there before the crowds. This is a rich urban setting with surrounding bastions pierced by ornate entry gates leading into narrow streets, with occasional squares marked by mosques, zaouias (mausolea) and palaces.

Our goal is the Great Mosque at the northeastern end of the quarter. This is the oldest place of prayer in the Moslem world and thus is the prototype for many other congregational mosques in North Africa. Its stocky square



Plan of the Medina, Kairouan (upper left); views of the great mosque (right) and a typical house (below right)





Colosseum, El Jem (left and above)

tiered minaret, large open courtyard, and a flat and wide columned (also Roman salvage) prayer hall came to be repeated in Egypt, Morocco and elsewhere. The central axis leading to the Mihrab is marked with wider bays and two domes.

After lunch we will drive the short distance to El Jem, where we will find the third largest amphitheater or colosseum in the Roman world. A recently discovered complex of Roman villas has been excavated and one of the finest and most extensive museums housing mosaics anywhere has been opened.

Day 11 Sunday, April 1 Kairouan to Tunis via Sousse

We will return to Tunis today via Sousse and the coast. Here, in addition to having a well preserved medina, its Great Mosque and Ribat (fortified garrison) are both unique examples of their respective building types. There is also a museum in the Kasbah above the medina with an excellent collection of mosaics.



Great Mosque (left and above) and Ribat (below), Sousse



We will continue northwards along the coast and after a brief technical (read restroom) stop in Nabeul (where we will also be able to admire and possibly buy the eponymous pottery ware) we will pass by the remains of the Roman aqueduct at Oudna. We will reach Sidi Bou Said in late afternoon, where the hotel Dar Said will be our home for the next two nights. It is a converted mansion, and its intimate courtyard setting has been voted one of the best small hotels in the world.

Sidi Bou Said is a whitewashed village on the sea not far from Tunis; it has attracted many artists and expatriates including Paul Klee and August Macke. The influence here from Andalusia in the sixteenth century is evident in the picturesque houses with ornate bay windows, tiled decoration and elaborate doorways. Dinner will be in the nearby Au Bon Vieux Temps restaurant just down the street from our hotel.

Day 12 Monday, April 2 Tunis (Sidi Bou Said)

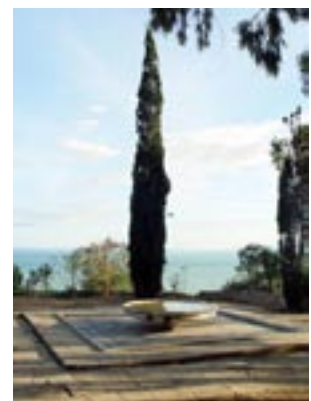
Our final day in Tunisia will be set aside for a return visit to the Medina for shopping and a visit to the Bardo to review objects from the ancient sites we have visited.

The rest of the day is free for relaxing in the courtyards or by the pool of our hotel or exploring the byways of picturesque Sidi Bou Said. We have arranged our farewell dinner at Dar Zarouk, a former grand mansion with many courtyards and now one of the most exclusive restaurants in Tunis, and will have a chance to show off the many local garments we have acquired!

Day 13 Tuesday, April 3 Tunis to Paris and on home

We will leave the hotel early in the morning for our 8:30 am flight to Paris affording same day connections home.

NOTE: DETAILS OF THIS ITINERARY SUBJECT TO CHANGE



Courtyard, Dar Said Hotel (top) garden at the Ehrlanger Villa, Sidi Bou Said (above) Berber carpets (left) and one of the halls of the Bardo Palace, now a museum.

