

History

All the great empires of the Mediterranean basin have ruled Tunisia, leaving fascinating – and in many cases stunningly beautiful – vestiges that continue to captivate and astound visitors to this day.

Tunisia was home to the mighty city-state of Carthage, which flourished for six centuries but was eventually brought to its knees by its arch-enemy, Rome. Eight centuries later, the country lay in the path of Islam's conquering armies, who overwhelmed Tunisia's Byzantine and Berber rulers and drew the country into the Arab sphere of influence. Over a thousand years later, after three centuries of at least nominal Ottoman rule, the French made Tunisia a protectorate. After gaining its independence in 1956, Tunisia was ruled for three decades by one of the Arab world's great modernisers, Habib Bourguiba.

FIRST PEOPLES

About 200,000 years ago, Stone Age people eked out an existence using primitive stone tools near the southern oasis town of Kélibia. Back then, the Sahara was covered in forest, scrub and savannah grasses, a fact that anyone who's ever been in Douz in mid-August will find almost impossible to imagine.

Some 8000 years ago, at the end of the last Ice Age, precipitation decreased and the Sahara began to dry out, effectively cutting Tunisia off from the rest of Africa. People began arriving from the east, the most significant of whom were the Capsians. Named after the city of Gafsa (ancient Capsa), near which finely sculpted stone and bone implements from this era have been found, they lived in southern Tunisia until about 4500 BC. Some mosaics from ancient Capsa can be seen in the museum in Gafsa (see p265).

Waves of migration from southern Europe continued until around 2500 BC. It is from these varied Neolithic peoples that the Berbers (see the boxed text, p233) are thought to have descended.

THE RISE & FALL OF CARTHAGE

The name that looms largest in Tunisian history is Carthage (in Phoenician, Kart-Hadasht; in Latin, Carthago). Now a well-heeled northern suburb of Tunis (see p90), this great trading city emerged to dominate the western Mediterranean in the 6th century BC.

The Phoenicians were first drawn to the Tunisian coast in their search for trading posts along the maritime route between their mother city of Tyre (now in southern Lebanon) and the silver mines of southern Spain. Their first settlement in Tunisia, founded in 1101 BC, was Utica (Utique; see p130), about 35km northwest of Tunis. Other early Phoenician ports along the North African coast included Hadrumetum (Sousse), Hippo Diarrhytus (Bizerte) and Thrabaka (Tabarka).

Carthage was founded in 814 BC by the Phoenician queen Elissa (Dido), whose story is told in the city's elaborate foundation myth (see the boxed text, p91), a version of which appears in Virgil's epic poem

The Aeneid. A response to the growing Greek presence in the region, Carthage was intended as the start of a more permanent Phoenician presence in Tunisia.

While Tyre suffered at the hands of the Assyrians in the 7th and 6th centuries BC, Carthage went from strength to strength. It soon grew into the great metropolis of the Phoenician world, its wealth and trading craft protected by a powerful navy. By the end of the 6th century BC, Carthage had become the main power in the western Mediterranean, controlling the North African coast from Tripolitania (western Libya) to the Atlantic, with colonies in the Balearic Islands, Corsica, Malta, Sardinia and Sicily.

During the 5th and 4th centuries BC, Carthage turned its attentions to expanding its land empire in Africa, carving out territory – similar in extent to modern-day Tunisia – that stretched from Tabarka in the northwest to Sfax in the southeast. This Carthaginian entity included the fertile lands of the Cap Bon Peninsula and the Medjerda Valley, which supplied Carthage with a large and exportable agricultural surplus.

It was inevitable that this regional primacy would lead to conflict with the other great powers of the Mediterranean: first Greece, and then Rome. Carthage fought numerous wars with the Greeks over Sicily, which is just 150km northeast of Carthage, most notably in 310 BC. By the time the Carthaginians finally took control of the island in the middle of the 3rd century BC, they found themselves squaring off against an even more formidable rival, the mighty Roman Empire.

The scene was thus set for the first of the three Punic Wars that would preoccupy the two powers for the next 100 years. (Phoenician civilisation in North Africa and its language, which was quite similar to Hebrew, came to be called 'Punic' because the Romans referred to the people of Carthage as 'Poeni', a version of Phoenician.) Rome launched the first war in 263 BC with a campaign to win control of Sicily. Roman successes on land and the supremacy of Carthage's navy ensured a stalemate that dragged on for 20 years.

Rome finally achieved a breakthrough when its fledgling navy destroyed the Carthaginian fleet off Trapani (eastern Sicily) in 242 BC. Navyless and close to bankrupt, Carthage was forced to accept Roman terms and abandon Sicily; in 238 BC it was forced to give up Sardinia and Corsica, too. Trouble on the Carthaginian home front grew as unpaid mercenaries revolted, sparking a bitter conflict, the savagery of which inspired Gustave Flaubert's over-the-top novel *Salammbô* (1862).

Carthage's defeat in the Battle of Zama in 202 BC meant that it again had to relinquish overseas territories. Nevertheless, over the next 50 years it re-established itself as a commercial centre – despite losing much of its African territory to the Numidian king Massinissa, whose cavalry fought for the Romans alongside Scipio at Zama (see p26).

Carthage's resurgence caused increasing unease in Rome. Whipped up by men such as Cato the Elder, the eminent statesman and writer, Rome launched the Third Punic War with the intention of settling the issue once and for all. In 149 BC, the Roman army again landed at Utica and laid siege to Carthage for three years. When the city finally fell in 146 BC, the Romans showed no mercy. Carthage was utterly destroyed

Carthage: a History, by Serge Lancel, is a detailed but accessible history of the Punic state from its foundation to its ultimate destruction by Rome in 146 BC.

The area covered by modern Tunisia is, apart from the Sahara, remarkably similar to that ruled by Carthage 2500 years ago.

The cultivation of olives was introduced to Tunisia by the Phoenicians. Today, Tunisia's 56 million olive trees cover 16,000 sq km – by area, that's 19% of the world's olive groves.

The award-winning Franco-Tunisian film *A Summer in La Goulette* (1996), set in 1967, is an entertaining portrayal of three friends – a Muslim, a Jew and a Catholic – and the generation gap facing their families.

TIMELINE 1101 BC

Phoenicians found first settlement in Tunisia at Utica

814 BC

City of Carthage founded by Phoenicians

263–242 BC

First Punic War between the Romans and the Carthaginians

218–202 BC

Second Punic War; the glory years and decline of the Carthaginian general Hannibal

HANNIBAL BARCA

Acclaimed by some as the finest military leader in history, the great Carthaginian general Hannibal Barca came within a whisker of erasing the emerging Roman Empire from the history books in the course of the Second Punic War (218–202 BC).

Hannibal, born in 247 BC, was the son of Hamilcar Barca, Carthage's leading general during the First Punic War. That conflict ended with Carthage's loss of Sicily, Sardinia and Corsica, leaving Hamilcar thirsting for revenge.

Frustrated by Carthage's powerful merchant lobby, which preferred trade to war, Hamilcar established an alternative power-base in Spain and made the nine-year-old Hannibal swear an oath of eternal enmity to Rome at the altar of Carthage's great Temple of Baal. This fabled structure was dedicated to Baal Hammon, the main Carthaginian deity, to whom the Carthaginians were notorious for sacrificing children.

Having taken control of Spain in 221 BC, Hannibal set off three years later at the head of an army said to have numbered 90,000 infantrymen backed by 12,000 cavalry and 37 elephants. Hannibal's journey took him across hostile Gaul (modern-day southern France) before an epic crossing of the Alps that saw him descend into the plains of northern Italy in the spring of 217 BC. Only 17 elephants survived the crossing, and his army had shrunk to just 23,000.

Hannibal's finest hour came the following year at the Battle of Cannae (216 BC), where Hannibal virtually annihilated a Roman army of 80,000 despite being vastly outnumbered. His tactic of employing a 'soft centre' to his line, which lured the Romans forward into a trap, makes this one of the most studied battles in history.

Despite his success on the battlefield, Hannibal was unable to break Rome. More than a decade of hide-and-seek followed as Rome sought to contain Hannibal without engaging him in battle. Finally Rome sent Scipio to retake Spain and attack Carthage in 204 BC, forcing the recall of Hannibal from Italy. The two generals faced off at the Battle of Zama (near Siliana) in 202 BC, resulting in Hannibal's only defeat and in Scipio earning the moniker Scipio Africanus.

After the war Hannibal moved briefly into Carthaginian politics before being forced by a plot to flee. He spent the last years of his life touting his skills as a military adviser around the eastern fringes of the Roman Empire before committing suicide in 183 BC when he was betrayed to the Romans.

and then ceremonially cursed, its agricultural lands symbolically sown with salt – so the story goes – to ensure that they would remain forever barren. The survivors were sold into slavery (p90).

The Carthaginians may have been great traders and merchants but they were also ruthless rulers who had oppressed and heavily taxed the indigenous Berber peoples around them. It is often claimed that the Berbers learnt advanced agricultural methods from the Carthaginians but, in fact, many were forced to flee into the desert and mountain hinterland. It is unlikely that many mourned Carthage's brutal demise.

ROME – FROM NEGLECT TO FULL CONTROL

With Carthage in ruins and Roman expansionary priorities lying elsewhere, Rome seemed at a loss as to what to do with its new acquisition. It was happy to leave most of the country to the Numidians (a Berber kingdom) and doubtless they, in turn, were happy to be left alone after centuries of Carthaginian oppression. Under Massinissa, the Numidians had established a kingdom that stretched from western Algeria to Libya.

146 BC

Carthage wiped off the map, sown with salt and cursed by the Romans

44 BC

Julius Caesar resettles Carthage as a Roman city

THE ORIGINS OF 'AFRICA'

Once the Romans had completed their destruction of Carthage, they looked around for a name for their newly acquired territory.

The search ended about 50km to the west of Carthage, in the band of low hills running north from the Medjerda River between the towns of Membressa (modern Mejez el-Bab) and Matar (Mateur). This was the homeland of the Afri, a tribe – apparently Berber – whose loyalty the Romans were keen to cultivate as part of their efforts to create a buffer against the Numidian kingdom further to the west.

The new province of Africa Terra (land of the Afri) occupied the northeastern third of modern Tunisia. As the boundaries of Roman rule were extended east and west along the continent's north coast, 'Africa' came to refer to an ever larger area. Eventually the name became synonymous with the entire 30-million-sq-km continent – only a small part of which was known to the Romans – spreading first among Europeans and later among the native peoples.

Its major towns included Sicca Veneria (Le Kef; p160), Thugga (Dougga; p156) and Vaga (Béja; p143). On Massinissa's death in 148 BC, Rome attempted to cut the kingdom down to size by dividing it up between his three sons.

This policy worked until the kingdom was reunited by Massinissa's grandson Jugurtha, an absolutely ruthless master of the arts of internecine warfare, whose massacre of some Roman traders sparked a war that lasted from 112 to 105 BC. According to some researchers, his mountain base was an impregnable mesa (flat-topped mountain) in far western Tunisia, known to this day as Jugurtha's Table (see p177). Jugurtha was eventually betrayed by his father-in-law, King Bocchus I of Mauretania, captured, paraded through the streets of Rome and then executed.

Rome decided to give the Numidians another chance, splitting their kingdom into a western half centred on Cirta Regia (in modern Algeria) and an eastern half based at Zama, near Siliana. The last of the Zama kings, Juba I, backed the wrong side in the Roman civil war – centred on the power struggle between Julius Caesar and Pompey – and was trounced by Julius Caesar at the Battle of Thapsus in 46 BC.

Rome was now firmly in control of its African outpost and Roman settlement began in earnest. Julius Caesar re-established Carthage as a Roman city in 44 BC and it became the capital of the expanded colony of Africa Proconsularis.

By the 1st century AD, the wheat-growing plains of the Medjerda Valley and the Tell Plateau were supplying more than 60% of the Roman Empire's grain requirements. Wealthy citizens donated the monumental public buildings – including baths, theatres and temples – that were a hallmark of the Roman cities of the region. The Berbers – and a number of Jewish communities – prospered and some Berbers were granted Roman citizenship, though it is not clear to what degree Roman civilisation supplanted the local Berber and Punic languages and cultures among the common people. After all, whereas Spain and France ended up speaking Latin-based languages, North Africa did not.

During this time, Roman Africa supplied the wild animals used in colosseum shows, as well as slaves, gold, ivory, olive oil, ostrich plumes

The 1959 constitution of the Republic of Tunisia states that the president must be a Muslim.

AD 439–533

Decline of Rome and occupation of North Africa by the Vandals

533–647

Tunisia comes under renescent Byzantine Empire

and *garum* (a fishpaste delicacy). The great Roman cities based on this prosperity – including Bulla Regia (p145), Dougga (p156), El-Jem (Thysdrus; p207), Haidra (p167), Sbeitla (Sufetula; p180) and Thuburbo Majus (p153) – are now among Tunisia's principal tourist attractions.

THE VANDALS & THE BYZANTINES

By the beginning of the 5th century AD, Roman power was in terminal decline and the Vandal king Gaiseric (or Genseric), who had been busy marauding in southern Spain, decided that Rome's North African colonies looked like easy pickings. He set off across the Straits of Gibraltar in AD 429, bringing about 80,000 men, women and children with him in one of history's most astonishing invasions. Within 10 years, the Vandals – who were avid Arian Christians – had fought their way across to Carthage, which they made the capital of a short-lived empire. The Vandals built no great monuments and left few cultural or archaeological traces (except for some churches) of their rule, which hastened North Africa's economic decline. Gaiseric, infamously, went on to plunder Rome in AD 455.

In the meantime, the Byzantine emperor Justinian, based in Constantinople (Istanbul), had revived the eastern half of the now-Christianised Roman Empire and had similar plans for its western territories. In two battles near Carthage, his general Flavius Belisarius defeated the Vandals in AD 533, ushering in 150 years of Byzantine rule. Like most occupiers before them, the Byzantines lived in a state of instability and constant siege, with Berber chieftains in control of the bulk of the country. They built with their customary zeal, however, and many of Tunisia's Roman sites feature 6th-century Byzantine churches and fortifications.

THE ARRIVAL OF ISLAM & THE ARABS

In the mid-7th century AD, the armies of the new religion of Islam (see p39) swept out of Arabia to permanently change the face of North Africa. Islam's green banner was flying over Egypt by AD 640 – just eight years after Mohammed's death – and soon after, Tripoli was in Muslim hands. The Arabs soon inflicted defeat on the Byzantines' Tunisian armies (see p180) but quickly withdrew with their spoils, allowing the Byzantines to hold on to their possessions.

It was not until nearly 30 years later that Islamic rule was secured. For three years, beginning in AD 669, Okba ibn Nafaa al-Fihri swept across North Africa, stopping on the way to establish Qayrawan (Kairouan; see p201), considered by many Sunni Muslims to be Islam's fourth holiest city (after Mecca, Medina and Jerusalem).

Most of the Berbers – up to this point mainly Christian but some also Jewish or pagan – adopted the religion of the invaders readily enough. However, they did not accept Arab rule, and in AD 683 the Arabs were forced to abandon North Africa after Okba was defeated and killed by a combined Berber-Byzantine army. The victors were led by the Berber chieftain Qusayla, who then established his own Islamic kingdom based at Kairouan.

The Arabs soon regrouped, retaking Kairouan in AD 689 and dislodging the Byzantines from Carthage in AD 698. However, they continued

to encounter spirited resistance from the Berbers, who had rallied behind the legendary princess Al-Kahina (see the boxed text, p233). She defeated the Arabs at Tébessa (Algeria) in AD 696, but was eventually cornered and killed after a legendary last stand at El-Jem in AD 701 (see p208). North Africa, with Kairouan as its capital, became a province of the rapidly expanding Islamic empire controlled by the Umayyad caliphs, based in Damascus.

Meanwhile, the tyrannical behaviour of Arab militia stationed in North Africa had pushed the Berbers to the brink of yet another rebellion. Further inflaming matters was the Berbers' affinity for the teachings of the Kharijites, a puritanical Islamic sect – divided into a variety of feuding factions – whose egalitarian beliefs contrasted sharply with the arrogant and worldly ways of the Umayyad elite, whom they continued to resist.

ISLAMIC DYNASTIES

Tunisia, like much of North Africa, was always too geographically distant from the great centres of Islamic power – such as Baghdad, Damascus, Cairo and Istanbul – to be ruled directly, a circumstance that resulted in a great deal of fighting between rival Muslim groups, both Berber and Arab, and gave rise to a succession of local Islamic dynasties.

In AD 797 Ibrahim ibn al-Aghlab was appointed by the Baghdad-based Abbasid dynasty – which overthrew the Umayyads in AD 750 – as governor of the province of Ifriqiyya (the Arabic name for Africa). With Kairouan as his capital, he soon established effective control of Tunisia, eastern Algeria and the Libyan province of Tripolitania. He was rewarded for these efforts by Harun al-Rashid – whose magnificent Baghdad court may have inspired *The Thousand and One Nights* – with an appointment as hereditary emir, thus establishing the successful Aghlabid dynasty, which ruled Tunisia – nominally as vassals of the Abbasids – for over a century. Arguably, the Aghlabids left the country with its most enduring Islamic architectural legacies. The Great Mosque in Kairouan (p202) and the *ribats* (forts) at Sousse (p189) and Monastir (p197) were all built during the Aghlabid period.

Next came the Fatimids (named after Fatima, Mohammed's daughter), a group of Berber Shiites from the Kabylie region of central Algeria on a mission from God, as they saw it, to depose the religiously illegitimate Abbasid caliphate and declare their leader, Obeid Allah, as caliph. Through alliances with disaffected Berber tribes, the Fatimids quickly conquered North Africa, defeating the Aghlabids in AD 909; a year later Obeid Allah was declared the 'true caliph' at Raqqada, south of Kairouan.

Anticipating reprisals, the Fatimids built a new capital, Mahdia (see p209), on a small, easily defended coastal headland and set about plotting the conquest of Egypt. In AD 969 they took control of the Nile Valley and founded another new capital, Cairo.

A new dynasty, the Zirids, arose in Ifriqiyya but pressure began to mount for a return to religious orthodoxy. In 1045 the Zirids caved in and officially returned to the Sunni mainstream, in open defiance of the Cairo-based Fatimids. The Fatimid reaction was devastating: the Bani Hilal and Bani Sulaim nomadic tribes of upper Egypt invaded the Maghreb en masse, and over the following century North Africa was slowly reduced to ruins. For a

Habib Bourguiba of Tunisia: The Tragedy of Longevity, by Derek Hopwood, is probably the best account of the Bourguiba years, with a thoughtful mix of analysis and criticism.

A History of the Arab Peoples, by Albert Hourani, is a sweeping and nuanced history of the Arab world and Islam.

time in the mid-1100s even the Normans – yes, those Vikings who invaded England in 1066 – held parts of the Tunisian coast.

The power vacuum was eventually filled by the puritanical Almohads, who came to power in Morocco at the beginning of the 12th century. They completed their conquest of North Africa with the capture of Mahdia in 1160 but their empire almost immediately began to crumble. The Maghreb split into three parts: Ifriqiyya (Tunisia) came under the Hafsid; Algeria came under the Banu Abd al-Wad; and Morocco came under the Merenids. Although borders have changed and rulers have come and gone, this division remains more or less intact today.

In 1270 the French King Louis IX, better known as Saint Louis, died at Tunis of the plague while leading the ill-fated Eighth Crusade – the crusaders chose Tunis as their first target with the hope of using it as a staging ground for an invasion of Egypt, to be followed by an assault on the Holy Land. His funeral was a solemn affair held at Notre Dame in Paris. Among the things named after Louis IX: L'Acropolium, Carthage's one-time cathedral (p93) and the US city of St Louis, Missouri.

THE OTTOMAN TURKS

While the Ottoman Turks and the Spanish fought for control of the Mediterranean – yet another regional conflict not of Tunisian making – local resistance came from Muslim corsairs, or pirates. The most famous were the Barbarossa brothers, Aruj and Khair ed-Din, who had established themselves on the island of Jerba. Aruj captured Algiers from the Spanish but was killed when they retook the city in 1518. Khair ed-Din turned for help to the Turks, who jumped at the chance to get involved. He was given the Turkish title of *beylerbey* (governor) and supplied with troops.

Tunis was to change hands four more times before Sinan Pasha finally claimed it for the Turks in 1574, forcing the last of the Hafsids into exile. Tunis then became a *sanjak* (province) of the Ottoman Empire. In 1598 Othman Dey seized power, downgrading the Ottoman pasha to a mere figurehead. Internecine warfare and endless power struggles persisted until the early 18th century, when Hussein ben Ali founded the Husseinite line of beys, who ruled Tunisia – at least in title – until the country became a republic in 1957.

The Arab world's first constitution (*destour*) was promulgated in Tunisia in 1861.

THE FRENCH PROTECTORATE

In the mid-1810s, Great Britain, the Netherlands, France and the far-off United States, tired of predations by pirates based in the Barbary States (Tripoli, Tunis and Algiers), dispatched naval vessels to North Africa, forcing Tunisia to ban piracy in 1816. In 1846 the Bey of Tunis abolished slavery, a Westernising reform that, like the end of highly profitable raids by Tunisian corsairs, exacted a heavy toll on his country's treasury, necessitating heavy borrowing – in the form of high-interest loans – from European banks. By 1869 the country was broke and control of its finances was handed over to an international commission, an ignominious state of affairs for this once-prosperous trading nation.

In 1881 the French sent 30,000 troops into Tunisia on the pretext of countering border raids by Tunisian tribesmen into French-occupied Algeria. They stayed. The bey remained as Tunisia's titular head but was forced to sign the Treaty of Kassar Said, which put real power in the hands of a French resident-general. The British, France's great colonial rivals, accepted French domination of Tunisia in exchange for French acquiescence in the British occupation of Cyprus.

The 1883 Convention of La Marsa established parallel justice systems, under which Europeans were judged under French law and local Tunisians under a modified form of Islamic law.

The French went about the business of land acquisition more discreetly than they did in neighbouring Algeria. In Tunisia, they managed to get their hands on the best fertile land without confiscating property from individuals. Rather, they took over large tracts of the Cap Bon Peninsula and the Medjerda Valley that had previously been controlled by the bey or used by nomads for grazing. The citrus groves of Cap Bon are a legacy of this time, as are the vineyards that provide the bulk of the country's wine grapes.

The south was too arid for agriculture and was largely ignored until the beginning of the 20th century, when phosphate was discovered in the hills west of Gafsa. The massive mining operation begun by the French remains an important export-earner for the Tunisian economy.

WORLD WAR II

After France's capitulation to Nazi Germany in June 1940, Tunisia's colonial government remained loyal to the collaborationist Vichy regime led by Marshall Philippe Pétain and, among other things, enacted anti-Jewish laws.

In November 1942, after British forces defeated Rommel at El Alamein (Egypt) and American forces landed in Morocco and Algeria, the Germans sent troops from Sicily to northern Tunisia in an attempt to turn back the Allied armies now advancing on the country from both the east and the west. Conditions for the Allies were difficult – their supply lines were long and the weather was cold and rainy – and they found themselves in a stalemate until February 1943 (see The Battle of Kasserine Pass boxed text on p178).

The Allies – mainly Americans and British – lost more than 15,000 men (see WWII Military Cemeteries boxed text on p144) before capturing Tunis and Bizerte – and more than 250,000 Axis POWs – in May 1943. The Allied victory put an end to Nazi plans to round up the country's entire Jewish community.

THE ROAD TO INDEPENDENCE

The first Tunisian nationalist political party, the Destour (Constitution) Party, was formed in 1920. Its demands for democratic government were supported by the bey but the French responded with troops and arrests and, for a while, managed to derail nationalist initiatives.

In 1934 a young, charismatic, Sorbonne-educated lawyer, Habib Bourguiba (1903–2000), broke away from the Destour Party, founding the Néo-Destour Party. Support for the new grouping quickly spread, but

The Sultan's Admiral, by Ernie Bradford, is a lively biography of the famous 16th-century pirate Khair ed-Din, who terrorised Christian shipping in the western Mediterranean and paved the way for the Ottoman conquest.

Tunisia has some of the world's most draconian internet censorship. Sites with political, human rights and erotic content are blocked and, in internet cafés, bandwidth is limited.

The Pillar of Salt, by Albert Memmi, is an autobiographical coming-of-age novel about a Tunisian-Jewish youth, powerfully drawn to French culture, growing up in Tunis before and during WWII.

12th–16th centuries

Hafsids rule Tunisia after demise of Moroccan Almohads

1574

Sinan Pasha claims Tunisia for the Turkish Ottoman Empire

1881–83

French military action and treaties hand effective control of Tunisia to the French resident-general

1920

Tunisia's first political party, the Destour, demands equal rights for Europeans and Tunisians

after the French turned their guns on demonstrators in Tunis on 9 April 1938, killing dozens of people, the party was banned and Bourguiba arrested and deported to France. French suppression merely increased the Néo-Destour's popular support.

Charles De Gaulle's Free French forces took control of Tunisia after the German defeat in 1943 and quickly implemented uncompromising antinationalist policies. The bey was deposed and Bourguiba, who had returned to Tunisia in 1943, fled to Cairo, from where he organised a successful propaganda campaign aimed at bringing the Néo-Destour's proindependence demands to international attention. By 1951 – the year neighbouring Libya received its independence – the French were ready to make concessions. A nationalist government was set up and Bourguiba was allowed to return but the French soon changed their minds – and exiled Bourguiba for a third time. Nationalist guerrilla violence followed and the country was soon in a state of disarray.

In July 1954, just two months after the defeat of French forces by Ho Chi Minh at Dien Bien Phu in Vietnam, French premier Pierre Mendès-France announced France's readiness for negotiations about Tunisian autonomy. In June 1955 an agreement was reached and Bourguiba – who had spent half of the previous two decades in detention – returned to Tunis to a hero's welcome.

Tunisia was formally granted full independence on 20 March 1956, with Bourguiba as prime minister. (Eighteen days earlier Morocco had also been granted independence.) Within a year, the last bey had been deposed, the country had been declared a republic and Bourguiba became Tunisia's first president.

TUNISIA UNDER BOURGUIBA

During his early years in power, Habib Bourguiba supported proindependence forces in Algeria. In 1958 French aircraft – in pursuit of Algerian rebels – bombed the Tunisian border village of Sakhiet Sidi Youssef (40km west of Le Kef), killing 62 civilians and creating international outrage.

In 1961 Bourguiba demanded that France evacuate its military enclave at Bizerte, the last bit of Tunisia still under French control. When Tunisian troops invaded the French base, French paratroops – flown in from Algeria – and aircraft launched a bloody retaliatory operation in which more than 1000 Tunisians died during 90 hours of fierce fighting. The French finally withdrew from Bizerte in 1963.

Bourguiba, whose principles were socialist and secular, was quick to introduce sweeping legal and social changes, adopting a policy of Westernisation in order to modernise Tunisia's economy and society. The results of his bold efforts to emancipate women (see p43), including the abolition of polygamy, are a prominent feature of Tunisian life to this day, and Tunisia became a showcase for successful postcolonial development.

Bourguiba regarded Islam as a force that was holding the country back and therefore sought to deprive religious leaders of their grass-roots role in shaping society, in part by closing religious schools and abolishing Sharia (Islamic law) courts. In addition, more than 60,000 hectares of

land that had financed mosques and religious institutions were confiscated. Not surprisingly, clerics vehemently opposed the changes and for a time resistance flared, particularly in Kairouan.

In 1975 the National Assembly made Bourguiba president-for-life.

The 1970s saw the gradual emergence of an Islamic opposition whose support increased dramatically following the use of the military to crush a general strike in January 1978, killing dozens of people. Under increasing pressure at home and abroad, Bourguiba called the first multiparty elections in 1981, though the Islamic opposition was not allowed to run and there were cries of foul play.

Anxious to preserve its power and desperate to avoid the upheaval and violence caused by Islamic militants in Algeria and Egypt, Bourguiba's government spent much of the '80s conducting a harsh and effective clampdown against the Islamist opposition. In very early 1984 the withdrawal of a bread subsidy sparked six days of rioting notable for slogans such as 'God is great' and 'down with America'; more than 70 people died. To ease tensions, the bread subsidies were reinstated and a number of jailed Islamist politicians freed.

While this epic struggle for the heart and soul of Tunisia was being slowly played out, Bourguiba's decades-long reign was stagnating and he was seen as being increasingly out of touch with the concerns and needs of the common people.

On 7 November 1987, Prime Minister Zine el-Abidine ben Ali, afraid that executing several Islamists convicted of plotting to overthrow the government – as demanded by Bourguiba – would spark a popular uprising, seized power in a bloodless palace coup. A team of doctors declared the 83-year-old president physically and mentally incapable of carrying out his duties.

Bourguiba died in 2000 at the age of 96, having lived out his last years in Monastir.

TUNISIA UNDER BEN ALI

Ben Ali has continued with most of his predecessor's policies, both domestic (secularist and politically repressive) and foreign (moderate and pro-Western).

In the early 1990s an alleged Islamist coup plot was uncovered and thousands of suspected fundamentalists were imprisoned; many others fled into exile. Human rights groups and, for a time, the French government led the way in calling for greater respect for human rights, and

BOURGUIBA LEGACY

No person did more than Habib Bourguiba to shape modern Tunisia. He will be remembered not only for having led his country to independence from France but also for creating a strong secular Tunisian identity, advancing women's rights, instituting bold reforms that in some cases ran counter to Sharia law, vastly increasing literacy and bringing Tunisians a standard of living that puts Tunisia near the top of the pile in the developing world.

The bronze door of Bourguiba's mausoleum in Monastir (see p198) is marked with the words: 'The Supreme Combatant, the Liberator of Women, the Builder of Modern Tunisia'.

President Ben Ali, who came to power in 1987, would have to rule until 2018 to match Habib Bourguiba's 31 years in office.

Modern Tunisia, by Andrew Borowiec, is one of the more readable modern histories of Tunisia, with a particular focus on its battle against Islamic fundamentalism.

In their attempts to silence Habib Bourguiba, the French both exiled him from Tunisia and sent him into internal exile in Tabarka, Remada and, for two years, the tiny Mediterranean island of Galite.

1934

Habib Bourguiba forms Néo-Destour Party and begins struggle for independence

May 1943

American and British forces end the Nazi occupation of Tunisia

20 March 1956

Tunisia granted independence from France

1957

Tunisia declared a republic, rule of the beys ended, Habib Bourguiba becomes president

at one point Tunisia seemed on the way to becoming something of a pariah state.

Since several bombings by Algerian Islamists in France in the mid-1990s and, even more so, since 9/11, the international pressure on Ben Ali has eased significantly, although his government has continued to restrict political parties, censor the press and the internet, limit religious freedoms and engage in the surveillance and harassment of intellectuals, opposition activists and journalists. Indeed, in some policy-wonk circles, Tunisia is now seen as something of a model of how a moderate, secular and relatively open Arab state can resist fundamentalism, if not democratically then at least effectively. In 2006 Ben Ali issued a statement critical of the wearing of headscarves by Tunisian women.

After eviscerating the Islamist opposition in the early 1990s, Ben Ali cleverly tried to appease the wider population. He headed off on a heavily publicised pilgrimage to Mecca to establish his own credentials as a good Muslim, and ordered that the Ramadan fast be observed in public. He also promised a multiparty political system, released political prisoners, abolished the State Security Court and limited police powers of detention. Political exiles were invited to return and many decided that it was safe to do so.

Ben Ali confirmed his hold on power in elections in 1989, 1994, 1999 and 2004. The 2004 poll left Ben Ali's Rassemblement Constitutionnel Démocratique (RCD) with 152 seats in the 189-seat Chamber of Deputies while the official opposition, the Mouvement des Démocrates Socialistes (MDS), won 14 seats. Four other parties shared the remaining 23 seats. Ben Ali retained the presidency with 94.5% of the vote, his lowest vote total ever.

Despite high unemployment, Tunisia's economy continues to be among the most successful in the developing world. Significant infrastructure investments have eased rural poverty and brought running water and electricity to even the remotest villages. In 1995 Tunisia became the first Arab state to be integrated into the European Economic Area, and agreements with Italy allow Tunisians to work in its agricultural sector. Overall, the economy is growing steadily, helping to cement Tunisia's reputation as relatively prosperous, stable and modern nation.

Tunisia's foreign policy has long been characterised by moderation and efforts to facilitate dialogue and reconciliation. For a decade starting in 1979, Tunisia served as the headquarters of the Arab League after the organisation quit Cairo to protest the 1978 peace treaty between Egypt and Israel. And in 1982 Tunisia welcomed Yasser Arafat and the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) after they were forced out of Beirut by the Israelis; the organisation was based at Hammam Plage, just south of Tunis, until mid-1994, when most of the PLO moved to the West Bank and Gaza under the terms of the Oslo Accords. Around the same time, Tunisia and Israel established low-level diplomatic relations, maintaining interest offices in Tel Aviv and Tunis until the outbreak of Palestinian-Israeli violence in October 2000. Even today, Israelis have no problem getting visas to visit Tunisia.

In April 2002 a suicide bombing at a historic synagogue in Jerba (see the boxed text, p278), blamed on Al-Qaeda, killed 21 people, causing

FROM TUNIS TO VIRGINIA TO WASHINGTON – & BACK TO VIRGINIA

Former United States Senator George Allen (Republican of Virginia), an unswerving Bush loyalist, was known for chewing tobacco, wearing cowboy boots, listening to country music and promoting a very conservative Christian social agenda. His amiable, down-home manner endeared him to conservative white voters, some of whom were, if not attracted, then certainly not deterred by his image as something of a redneck (his college nickname was 'Neck'), based in part on his affinity for the Confederate flag and his having opposed Virginia's Martin Luther King Day. Conservative Republicans were touting him as a presidential candidate for 2008.

Imagine his shock, then, when the senator, at age 53, after a full and rewarding life as a good ol' boy, discovered that he is, in fact, an African-American of sorts. More precisely, it turns out that he is half Tunisian and, more specifically, half Tunisian-Jewish. *Time* dubbed him 'the unlikely Semite in Christendom'.

Allen had known that his mother, Henriette (Ety), née Lumbroso, had been born in Tunisia but had been told that the family's background was European colonial, with roots in France, Italy and Spain. In fact, the Lumbrosos were prominent members of Tunis' ancient Jewish community and had lived in Tunisia for hundreds of years, tracing their roots back to Moorish Spain. Back in the early 1700s, one Lumbroso had even been the Chief Rabbi of Tunis.

During the Nazi occupation of Tunisia, Ety had seen her father, Felix, dragged from their home in the middle of the night and sent to a forced labour camp. This event so traumatised her that after the war, she and Allen's father – a famous American football coach – decided that the safest thing to do was to hide the family's Jewish background from absolutely everyone, including their children. Only at age 83 did Ety reveal the truth, a disclosure that might have had zero impact on Allen's political career had he handled it with tact and sensitivity, rather than losing his cool at a televised press conference and bragging about his mother's pork chops.

Combined with his on-camera use of a racial epithet a few weeks earlier, the way Allen responded to his outing as an African did significant damage to his reputation and saved the seemingly hopeless campaign of his Democratic rival in the November 2006 Congressional elections, Jim Webb. Webb's cliff-hanger victory – by just 7200 votes – secured the Democrats control of the Senate by 51 seats to 49.

widespread outrage in a country that is proud of its legacy of religious tolerance.

Tunisia expressed opposition to the US-led alliance in the 1991 Gulf War and was even less enthusiastic about the US-led overthrow of Saddam Hussein in 2003. The Tunisian 'street' is vehemently opposed to the occupation of Iraq and anti-American (or at least anti-Bush) positions figure prominently in the statements of Tunisian opposition groups.

Today there is no suggestion that the Tunisian government is anything other than in complete control. Politics is not a popular (or advisable) topic of conversation, but many Tunisians express what could be genuine admiration for Ben Ali's leadership. Not only are Tunisians proud of their country's reputation for stability and economic success in a volatile and largely impoverished region, but a glance west towards Algeria – still struggling with Islamist violence after 15 years of civil strife in which at least 150,000 people have died – or east to Libya – led for almost four decades by the erratic Muammar Gaddafi – provides ample evidence that things could be an awful lot worse.

The film *Indigènes* (2006) exposes France's ingratitude towards the 130,000 Tunisians, Algerians and Moroccans who fought to liberate France from Nazi rule during WWII.

Football-mad Tunisians were delighted when their country – hosts of the tournament – beat Morocco to win the African Cup of Nations title in 2004.

1981

Tunisia's first multiparty election

7 November 1987

Ben Ali ousts Habib Bourguiba in bloodless coup to become Tunisia's second president

2000

Death of Habib Bourguiba in Monastir

2004

Ben Ali re-elected president with 94.5% of the vote

The Culture

THE NATIONAL PSYCHE

Tunisians are proud of the achievements of their government and of their tolerant, hospitable society, but, then again, they're not really allowed to say what they think. Despite their pride, many people would leave if they could. In Europe they can maybe moonlight as a security guard or pick up work as a hospital porter before moving onto something better.

The exodus to Europe is mostly economic and to fulfil ambitions – like anyone choosing to work abroad. Tunisia offers its people an excellent education, but then jobs for graduates are scarce. European society, free from family strictures and tantalisingly close, tempts many graduates and those less-qualified away from treading water.

Tunisia is much freer than other Arabic Muslim societies. People have choices; this is obvious when you see a family walking along the street with two daughters dressed entirely differently – one in jeans and a T-shirt, the other in a long robe and veil. However, traditions are constraints below the surface. Women may dress in Western fashions, but they will still be expected to be virgins when they marry. People may have flooded to the cities but there is a village mentality here that resists the change.

Only 150km from Europe, here there's widespread admiration for the achievements of the West as well as condemnation for the perceived injustices done in the West's name elsewhere in the region. Tunisia shares with the Arab world a history of invasion and colonial meddling. Despite this, the country has a tradition of gracious hospitality that has its roots in the nomadic Bedouin traditions of refuge and hospitality, as well as in the verses of the Quran.

LIFESTYLE

Since independence in 1956, Tunisia's population has more than doubled and people have flooded to the cities. Over 60% of the population is urban. Society today divides between the cosmopolitan mores of big cities and rural, small-town traditions.

In some ways Tunisia resembles Italy, its near neighbour. The family is all important, and the individual is always subordinate to its interest. An inner sanctum is protected and supported by a morass of relatives. In Tunisia's recent past this was taken to the extent that an extended family would all live together in one house. Hence the size of upper-class family

Tunisia banned the *hejab* (women's headscarf) in schools and public administration in 1981, over 20 years before France did the same.

While 90.2% of Tunisian households possess a TV, only 35.6% have a telephone, 21% own a car and 16.5% are without running water.

RESPONSIBLE TRAVEL

- Most importantly – dress appropriately to show consideration for local culture. Women should keep their arms and legs covered and avoid exposing too much flesh.
- Couples should avoid demonstrations of affection in public – it's offensive to many local people to see people kiss or even hold hands in public.
- If you're staying in a resort, venture outside it to discover the real Tunisia – eat in a local restaurant, visit some sights, try a beach outside the tourist resorts, tussle over goods in the medina or take a louage (shared taxi) trip.
- Talk to local people about Islamic and Arabic culture and find out how people view the West – you might be able to dispel some preconceptions.

INSIDE A TUNISIAN WEDDING

'It's ludicrous how much it costs to hire a room for a wedding,' said Khaled dolefully, 'thousands of dinars for just a few hours. People invite everyone they know and everyone they don't. Families are broken by the expense. And then the marriage breaks up a few months later!' He laughed cynically. Not everyone has Khaled's pessimistic attitude to marriage, but everyone agrees it is expensive, convoluted and all inclusive. Marriages are the biggest excuse Tunisians have to party. If you visit in summer – wedding season – expect your sleep to be disturbed by processions of cars through the streets, horns blaring, and loud music continuing until the early hours. What you're hearing is the riotous joy of a Tunisian wedding.

Nowadays, in Tunisian towns and cities, people usually find their own partner. But in traditional families, parents search for prospective sons- and daughters-in-law when their children reach marriageable age. It is rumoured that mothers often go to the *hammam* (public bathhouse) on scouting expeditions for their sons, to find the most beautiful women, after which they conduct discreet research into the woman's family background, her job prospects and other aspects of eligibility. When the parents have made their choice (after having consulted their daughter in all but the most traditional rural families), the girl is asked for her agreement. Under Tunisian law, she has a right to refuse, which is respected by most families.

If the girl agrees, a meeting between the two families is arranged – as you might imagine, a somewhat formal and awkward occasion. If all goes well, contracts are exchanged and the legal formalities completed. Between then and the wedding, the couple is allowed a series of meetings. Again, they're not exactly intimate occasions as they're usually accompanied by family members; anything (from gossip to illicit acts) could be fatal to a woman's honour and hence her marriage prospects.

Weddings traditionally last three to seven days, for the duration of which the woman is secluded from public view with the women of her family.

On the first day of the wedding, the groom does the rounds with his male friends, buying gifts (clothes, jewellery, perfumes) for his wife. These are displayed in the satin quilted baskets you can see on sale in Tunisia's souqs. He then, with great ceremony, delivers these gifts to the eagerly awaiting women of the wife's family.

On day two the husband and wife remain with their families and enjoy an evening of feasting in the company of an all-male or all-female cast of family members. It is also on the second day that the man shaves off his beard (which he has been growing for a month) and the woman goes to the *hammam* and has all the hair from her body removed. Her hands and feet are decorated with henna.

On the last day, in the early evening, cars gather to begin the noisy procession of friends and family through the streets, announcing the joyful news. In the south, revellers traditionally passed through town on foot, alongside the bride astride a camel but concealed by a canopy.

And there is a party to end all parties in the expensively rented room. The couple are seated on glitzy thrones, the woman heavily made up (usually in fashionable 'Lebanese style'), sweating nervously under the lights and scrutiny of the crowds.

At the end of the night, the husband and wife retire to the man's house (nowadays usually a hotel), alone together for the first time, for one week's seclusion and consummation of the marriage. Thankfully, the older women no longer wait outside for the blood-stained sheet as proof of the woman's virginity.

As for Khaled, he is middle-aged and divorced. Would he do it again? 'Yes! But I would marry for love and have the party in my garden.'

homes, such as Dar Ben Abdullah in Tunis (p76) and Dar el-Annabi in Sidi Bou Saïd (p96). Today, with increased migration and emigration, this is less likely, but the pull of home is strong and those who have left will return for frequent visits.

The absence of government unemployment benefits also contributes to the enduring strength of family ties: the unemployed survive thanks

to familial support and often one working adult has to provide for four or five other adults. Social security does, however, provide old-age and disability pensions, free health care and education.

Tunisia is a deeply religious society – religion is part of daily life and pervades all significant ceremonies. When a baby is born to a Muslim family, the first words uttered to it are the call to prayer. A week later this is followed by a ceremony in which the baby's head is shaved and an animal sacrificed. The major event of a boy's childhood is circumcision, which normally takes place sometime between the ages of seven and 12. When a person dies, a burial service is held at the mosque and the body is then buried with the feet facing Mecca. Yet Tunisian life is balanced between the observance of Islam and secular values, and religion is a private affair.

POPULATION

After 14 centuries of intermarriage, the indigenous Berbers and later-on-the-scene Arabs are thoroughly entwined. You are most likely to find stronger evidences of Berber traditions in the south, along the northern fringe of the Sahara.

Muslims make up 98% of the population, the other 2% being Jews and Christians.

Government family-planning programmes have slowed the population growth rate to 1.6%, but Tunisia has a very young population, which places a great strain on social services, particularly with the pressure on jobs.

SPORT

Football is the sport closest to Tunisian hearts. The Tunisian national team, nicknamed 'the Carthage Eagles', is one of the strongest teams in Africa having qualified for the World Cup finals in 1978, 1998, 2002 and 2006 (though they haven't so far made it out of the first round). Tunisia hosted the 2004 African Cup of Nations and the country erupted in delight when they won the tournament (2–1 against old enemies Morocco). In 2006, they made it only to the quarterfinals.

Tunisian club teams are also among the best on the continent with Espérance Sportive de Tunisie (Tunis) and Etoile Sportif du Sahel (Sousse) regularly reaching the final of the continent-wide club competitions. These two clubs routinely dominate the domestic competition. The competition runs from early October until the end of March, with matches played on Saturday and Sunday afternoon starting at 3pm. You'll find fixtures and results in the local papers. For information on games in Tunis, see p84.

Tunisians are also proud of the Tunisian players plying their trade with clubs in the major European competitions. Their pride even encompasses any player of North African origins, such as Zinedine Zidane (whose background is Berber-Algerian).

MEDIA

If much of what you see, read or hear sounds like a presidential press release, that's because it is. Tunisian TV, radio and newspapers are all under government auspices.

For TV, there are only two (Arabic-language) channels, both controlled by a government intent on protecting itself from criticism and its citizens from anything vaguely corrupting. Most Tunisians get around the stultifying local programming by buying satellite dishes (often smuggled from Algeria).

Female literacy rose from 24% in 1966 to 77% in 2004.

The Tunisian divorce rate is 0.82 per 1000 people, less than a third of the UK rate (3.08 per 1000), but nearly four times that in Italy (0.27 per 1000).

They've never had it so good: life expectancy has risen from 51 years at the time of independence (1956) to 77 years today. Poverty now stands at 4%, compared with 22% of the population in 1975.

NO NEWS IS GOOD NEWS

There was a flurry of protest when Tunisia was chosen by the UN to host a World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) in 2005.

It was an ironic choice considering Tunisia's treatment of journalists who challenge the government. Zouhair Yahyaoui was imprisoned for 18 months in 2002 for 'spreading false news' (publishing articles criticising the government's actions, or suggesting that there is corruption at the top) – he had published articles satirising the government on his website, TunisZine. Released in November 2003, the dissident journalist died in 2005 at the premature age of 36.

Mohammed Abbou, a human rights lawyer, has been imprisoned since March 2005, sentenced to three and a half years in prison for his open criticism of the government online. When two journalists, Slim Boukhdar and Taoufik Al-Ayachi, went to try to interview his wife at her home, they were beaten by police.

The government has enshrined freedom of information in the constitution, and introduced press liberalisation measures in 2005. However, this is an area where actions speak louder than words. Reporters sans Frontiers (www.rsf.org) states 'Journalists and media are actively discouraged from being more independent by means of bureaucratic harassment, advertising boycotts and police violence.'

There's more variety to be found in newspapers (French and Arabic), but they're still heavily censored. The music radio stations are less potentially subversive (at least in the government's eyes) and therefore far more entertaining.

As for new media, numerous internet sites are blocked by the government, including some political sites and most pornography. See the boxed text, above for more on censorship.

And one tip: if you're watching Tunisian TV in Sousse and you see pictures of the president waving to crowds in Sousse, don't expect a handshake; chances are that it's file footage being shown to disguise his real location.

RELIGION

Tunisia is 98% Muslim, and Islam is the State religion, but the government has spent much of the last five decades cracking down hard on those who wish to mix religion with politics.

In addition to the more than 95% of Tunisians who are Sunni Muslim (the orthodox majority in Islam), there are small communities of Kharijites (a minority Muslim sect). Jews (see the boxed text, p278) and Christians make up the other 2%.

Islam

THE RISE OF ISLAM

'Islam' means submission. The call to submit to God's will was the essence of Allah's message conveyed through the Prophet Mohammed. The religion shares its roots with the other great monotheistic faiths that sprang from the harsh land of the Middle East – Judaism and Christianity – but it's considerably younger.

Mohammed was born into a trading family in the Arabian city of Mecca (in present-day Saudi Arabia) in AD 570. He began to receive revelations in AD 610 and later started imparting the content of Allah's message to the Meccans. He gathered quite a following against the idolaters of Mecca, and his movement especially appealed to the poor. The powerful families became increasingly outraged and, by AD 622, had made life sufficiently unpleasant for Mohammed and his followers; they

Tunisian Jews (www.harissa.com) Homepage of Tunisian Jewish community and diaspora – easy to negotiate and informative.

Islam: A Short History, by Karen Armstrong, provides a contemporary and sympathetic study of Islam from its birth to its modern struggle against misrepresentation.

fled to Medina (after which all Arabic walled cities are named), an oasis town some 300km to the north and now Islam's second holiest city. (This migration – the Hejira – marks the beginning of the Islamic calendar, year 1 AH or AD 622.) In Medina, Mohammed continued to preach.

By AD 632, Mohammed had revisited Mecca and many of the tribes in the surrounding area had sworn allegiance to him and the new faith. Mecca became the symbolic centre of the faith, containing as it did the Kaaba, which housed the black stone supposedly given to Ibrahim (Abraham) by the angel Jibril (Gabriel). Mohammed determined that Muslims should face Mecca when praying outside the city.

On Mohammed's death in AD 632, his followers quickly conquered the areas that make up modern Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, Israel and the Palestinian Territories. This was accomplished under Mohammed's four successors, the caliphs (or Companions of Mohammed).

Islam spread west, fanning out across North Africa. By the end of the 7th century, the Muslims had reached the Atlantic and thought themselves sufficiently in control of the Gezirat al-Maghreb (Island of the West, or North Africa beyond Egypt) to march on Spain in AD 710.

After Mohammed's death came the most serious split in the faith. Some followers felt that a relative of Mohammed's should be the new Caliph and chose Ali, a cousin, married to Mohammed's daughter Fatima. These broke away to become the Shiite branch, while the mainstream were called the Sunni, though divisions appeared within this group too, with varying ways of interpreting the Quran. Most Tunisians are Sunnis. There are also small other radical sects, such as the Ibadis based on Jerba (see the boxed text, p280). Another variation is Sufism (see the boxed text, p42), reaching the mystic parts that mainstream Islam does not reach.

THE QURAN

The holy book of Islam is the Quran – the word of Allah, revelations communicated to Mohammed in verse via the angel Jibril. Not only is it a fascinating and holy text, but also a masterpiece of Arabic literature – essential reading for anyone who wants to understand Islam from its source. It contains many references to the earlier prophets of Judaism and Christianity: Adam, Abraham, Noah, Moses and Jesus, a line that ends definitively with the greatest, the Prophet Mohammed.

In the past, young boys whose families could afford it were sent to Quranic schools where they would learn all 6200 verses by rote.

Tunisians are mostly Sunnis belonging to the Malekite school of Quranic interpretation, which is somewhat less rigid in its application and interpretation of the Quran than the other schools.

THE FIVE PILLARS OF ISLAM

To live a devout life, Muslims are expected to observe the Five Pillars of Islam:

Shahada This is the profession of faith, Islam's basic tenet: 'There is no God but Allah, and Mohammed is the Prophet of Allah' (*Allahu akbar, Ashhadu an la ilah ila Allah, Ashhadu an Mohammed rasul Allah*). You will hear this during the call to prayer and it is repeated at many other events, such as births and deaths. The first part has virtually become an exclamation, good for any time of life or situation.

Sala Sometimes written 'salat', this is the obligation of prayer, ideally five times a day – at sunset, after dark, at dawn, midday and in the afternoon – when muezzins (mosque officials) call the faithful to pray. Although Muslims can pray anywhere, it is considered best to do so together in a mosque.

Zakat Giving of alms to the poor is an essential part of the social teaching of Islam and you will often see Tunisians giving alms to beggars.

Sawm Ramadan, the ninth month of the Muslim calendar, commemorates the revelation of the Quran to Mohammed. In a demonstration of Muslims' renewal of faith, they are asked not to let anything pass their lips, and are expected to refrain from sex, from dawn to dusk for a month. For specific dates, see p291.

Haj The pinnacle of a devout Muslim's life is the pilgrimage to Mecca. Ideally, the pilgrim should go to Mecca in the last month of the year, Zuul Hijja, to join Muslims from all over the world.

THE CALL TO PRAYER

*Allahu akbar, Allahu akbar
Ashhadu an la ilah ila Allah
Ashhadu an Mohammed rasul Allah
Haya ala as-sala
Haya ala as-sala*

God is most great, God is most great
I testify that there is no God but God
I testify that Mohammed is God's Prophet
Come to prayer
Come to prayer

The first slivers of dawn are flickering on the horizon, and the deep quiet of a city asleep is pierced by the cries of the muezzin exhorting the faithful to the first of the day's prayers. Like church bells, the sound summons Muslims to enter a mosque to pray, or pray where they are if they cannot. The midday prayers on Friday, when the sheikh of the mosque delivers his weekly *khutba* (sermon) are considered the most important. The mosque also serves as a kind of community centre, and often groups of children or adults receive Quranic lessons here, while others pray quietly or simply shelter in the tranquil peace. For more about the mosque and its architecture, see p52.

ISLAMIC CUSTOMS

Muslims carry out certain rituals attached to prayer. First they must wash their hands, arms, feet, head and neck in running water; all mosques have an area set aside for this purpose. If they are not in a mosque and there is no water available, clean sand suffices; and where there is no sand, they must go through the motions of washing. Then they must face Mecca (all mosques are oriented so that the *mihrab*, or prayer niche, faces Mecca) and follow a set pattern of gestures.

In everyday life, Muslims are prohibited from drinking alcohol and eating pork (considered unclean).

ISLAMIC HOLIDAYS

The main Muslim religious holidays are tied to the lunar Hejira calendar, which is about 11 days shorter than the Gregorian (Western) calendar. This means that in Western terms the holidays fall at different times each year; see p291 for the dates of Islamic holidays.

Ras as-Sana New Year's day, celebrated on the first day of the Hejira calendar year, 1 Moharram.

Moulid an-Nabi A lesser feast celebrating the birth of the Prophet Mohammed on 12 Rabi' al-Awal. In the Maghreb this is generally known as *mouloud*.

Ramadan and Eid al-Fitr Most Muslims, though not all with equal rigour, take part in the fasting that characterises the month of Ramadan, a time when the faithful are called upon as a community to renew their relationship with God. Ramadan is the month in which the Quran was first revealed. From dawn to dusk, a Muslim is expected to refrain from eating, drinking, smoking and having sex. This can be a difficult discipline, and only people in good health are asked to participate. Pregnant women,

Banipal (www.banipal.co.uk) is a literary magazine in English publishing work by and articles about Arabic writers.

Islam Online (www.islamonline.net/English/index.shtml) offers world news from an Islamic perspective as well as interesting information about Islamic rituals and even an 'Ask a scholar' inquiry line.

SUFISM

Famed for whirling dervishes and extreme selfmutilation (pushing skewers into their cheeks, eating glass or walking on coals), Sufis have unusual ways of getting closer to God.

Ascetics wishing to achieve a mystical communion with God through spiritual development rather than through study of the Quran formed the Islamic order of Sufism. This offshoot fulfilled a need many people felt for a more mystical side to the Islamic religion. The name comes from *suf*, meaning 'wool', referring to the simple cord worn by the ascetics as a belt.

There are many hundreds of orders, and they tend to gather at the mosque or tomb of their holy man (or *wali*, a term loosely translated as holy man or saint) and follow a particular *tariq* (path), or way of worshipping. A particular aspect of Berber Sufism in North Africa is maraboutism – the worship of a holy man endowed with magical powers.

For orthodox Muslims, this kind of veneration is akin to idol worship, but Sufis don't see it that way. The *wali* is a friend of God and so an intermediary. The great *moussems* (pilgrimages to saints' tombs) are more a celebration of the triumph of the spirit than an act of worship. Despite the conflict with religious orthodoxy, the Sufi emergence was tolerated because they provided a link to local rites and superstitions, and were thus able to attract large numbers of people who had not otherwise embraced Islam.

children, and people engaged in exacting physical work, in *ihad*, or travelling are also considered exempt. Every evening during Ramadan is a celebration. *Iftar*, the breaking of the day's fast, is a time of animated activity, when the people of the local community gather not only to eat and drink but also to pray. Non-Muslims are not expected to participate, even if more pious Muslims suggest you do. Restaurants and cafés open during the day may be harder to find, and at any rate you should try to avoid openly flouting the fast. The end of Ramadan, or more accurately the first days of the following month of Shawwal, marks the Eid al-Fitr, the Festival of Breaking of the Fast (also known as the Eid as-Sagheer, the Small Feast), which generally lasts for four or five days, during which time everything grinds to a halt. It's not a good time to travel, but can be a great experience if you are invited to share in some of the festivities with a family. Ramadan is widely observed in Tunisia.

Haj and Eid al-Adha The fifth pillar of Islam, a sacred duty of all who can afford it, is to make the pilgrimage to Mecca – the haj. It can be done at any time, but at least one should be accomplished in Zuul Hijja, the 12th month of the Muslim year. The high point is the visit to the Kaaba, the stone of Ibrahim in the centre of the *haram*, the sacred area into which non-Muslims are forbidden to enter. The faithful, dressed in a white robe, circle the Kaaba seven times and kiss the black stone. The haj culminates in the ritual slaughter of a lamb (commemorating Ibrahim's sacrifice) at Mina. This marks the end of the pilgrimage and the beginning of the Eid al-Adha, or Feast of the Sacrifice (aka the Grand Feast, or Eid al-Kebir). Throughout the Muslim world the act of sacrifice is repeated, and the streets of towns and cities run with the blood of slaughtered sheep and goats.

CONTEMPORARY ISLAM

Tunisia is a liberal, tolerant society, and most Tunisians are quite relaxed about their faith.

Scientifically and philosophically, Arabic culture left that of the West far behind for many centuries: the reason Classical texts are available to us today is that they were translated into Arabic; the word Algebra comes from the Arabic; and famous Islamic universities, such as that at Zaytouna (see p71) in Tunis, were great centres of learning. However, the Enlightenment in the West had a far-reaching impact, and leaps in Western military and shipping technology led to a change in the balance of world power at the end of the 18th century.

North African colonialism meant that Islam occupied a historic position as the counterbalance to Western occupation, and is enduringly seen as the alternative to a society resting on Western values. Tunisia has successfully embraced some aspects of Westernisation – including

Ramadan was forbidden during the government of Habib Bourguiba.

its progressive treatment of women. But capitalism and urbanisation accentuate the familiar divisions seen here between the poor and dispossessed and the upwardly mobile middle classes. This may account for why Islam has seen some resurgence in recent years, particularly among poorer young people with few opportunities. The view of Islam as a counterculture is accentuated by the bigger global picture, in which international disputes based on economics and power are simplified as a clash of civilisations and religion gives people a reason to live in an environment with few choices.

The Tunisian government maintains a balancing act between promoting Islam (important for its regional status) and the adoption of occidental values (for economic and social reasons) and has been so far remarkably successful in negotiating this tightrope – in part assisted by a suppression of free speech and omnipresent police force, but perhaps also due to the nature of Tunisians themselves: magnanimous and moderate.

WOMEN IN TUNISIA

Conditions for women in Tunisia are better than just about anywhere in the Islamic world – to Western eyes, at least. One of the many titles that Habib Bourguiba, Tunisia's first president, awarded to himself during his reign was 'The Liberator of Women'. Many Tunisian women agree. Bourguiba, whose first wife was French, was a staunch supporter of women's rights. His 1956 Personal Status Code banned polygamy and ended divorce by renunciation. It also placed restrictions on the tradition of arranged marriages, setting a minimum marriage age of 17 for girls and giving them the right to refuse a proposed marriage. The code is regularly updated, most recently in 2005, when the President announced that the marrying age would be unified (to 18) and women's custodial right on divorce would be safeguarded.

Bourguiba regarded the *hejab* (the veil worn by Muslim women) as demeaning and called it an 'odious rag'. He banned it from schools as part of a campaign to phase it out. Many Tunisian women consider not wearing the *hejab* to be an expression of their liberty and you will see many women without. However, a resurgence of conservative elements has led to it being more prevalent, notably among young women.

Since 1956 there have been dramatic improvements in conditions for women across the country, not only in the standards of literacy, but also in terms of health – infant mortality is only 26 per thousand births, compared with 139 in 1966.

Yet Tunisia is also filled with men grumbling about how women are favoured and how dangerous it is – for the women, you understand – to give them such freedom. It is this attitude that indicates the real situation that many Tunisian women face. They live dual lives – encouraged to participate by relatively favourable legal and socioeconomic conditions, yet restricted by traditional family values. Away from cosmopolitan city centres or the beachside resort towns, the public social domain remains that of the man, while women largely remain in the home.

The Arabs, by Peter Mansfield, explores history and society in the Middle East, discussing the centuries-long struggle for dominance between Christendom and the Islamic world, with a chapter on each state.

Behind Closed Doors: Women's Oral Narratives in Tunisia, by Monia Hajajaj, fascinatingly lays bare the lives of Tunisian women from a local female perspective.

André Gide's The Immoralist starts off in Tunisia, where a man on his honeymoon discovers his preference for Arab boys.

Arts & Architecture

You may be pushed to name a Tunisian writer or poet and might never have seen a Tunisian film, but this is your chance to fill this gap – some fascinating books, poems and films have been produced by local artists, providing a striking insight into the country, so read on for recommendations. During your visit, you'll quickly become aware how much art pervades the everyday – decorative arts turn markets and buildings into a whirl of colour and traditional music provides a soundtrack to every taxi or louage trip. Tunisia also has a particularly magnificent architectural heritage, with the extraordinary Berber buildings in the south, and the remains of great civilisations from Roman to Islamic dotted right across the country.

ARTS

LITERATURE

Tunisia's national poet is Abu el-Kacem el-Chabbi (also spelled Abdulkacem Chebbi; 1909–34), whose rousing poem *Will to Live* is taught to every schoolchild. From Tozeur, he was educated at Tunis' Zaytouna Mosque. He died aged only 25, but his poetry had a huge impact. Combining the classical Arabic tradition with a landscape-inspired Romanticism, it expresses the stultifying sense of living under a colonial power. To read more, get his collected works *Songs of Life*.

His contemporary Ali Duaji (1909–49) wrote fascinating, urbane sketches of early 20th-century Tunisia, influenced by Twain, Camus and Flaubert. Good reads include *Bar-Hopping along the Mediterranean* – an amused, ironic view of colonial culture – and *Sleepless Nights*.

Most modern Tunisian writers live in Europe, where the financial rewards are greater and the dangers arising from offending the government fewer. Mustapha Tlili (1937–), based in New York, is most famous for *Lion Mountain* (1988), a character-packed examination of postcolonial mores and the impact of modernity on a remote, imaginary mountain village. You won't find this controversial text on sale in Tunisia. The internationally acclaimed Albert Memmi lives in Paris and writes in French about the identity crisis faced by North African Jews like himself. His books include *The Colonizer and the Colonized*, about the political, social and sexual impact of the French occupation of Tunisia. From a Bedouin family, Hassouna Mosbahi (shortlisted for the 2001 Caine Prize for African writing) lives in Germany, and his works include *Adieu Rosalie* and *Return to Tarshish*, both dealing with the tragedy of an exile lost between two worlds.

Sabiha Khemir's *Waiting in the Future for the Past to Come* is a series of connected stories about a small coastal town postindependence.

You should be able to track down most of the above in English translation. If you read French, you'll have access to still more works.

CINEMA

Tunisia is a familiar setting for international films, but also has a small, renowned local film industry. It's easier to see its art-house offerings abroad than when you visit the country – most cinemas show a mix of Hollywood blockbusters, Bollywood bonanzas and Egyptian slapstick.

Acclaimed directors include Ferid Boughedir, whose *Halfaouine* – a coming-of-age piece about sexuality and tradition in the 1960s in one of Tunis' most charismatic districts – featured at the Cannes Film Festival in 1990. His *A Summer in La Goulette* (1996) is a comedy set in 1967 Tunis where three daughters seek Muslim, Christian and Jewish boyfriends at the time of the Arab-Israeli war.

Female director Moufida Tlatli won a special prize at Cannes in 1994 for her film *Silence of the Palace*, about a 1950s upper-class home from the servants' point of view. Her 2001 *Season of Men* is about a Jerban woman bringing up an autistic son.

Nouri Bouzid is a controversial, interesting director: *L'Homme de Cendres* (Man of Ashes; 1986) deals with prostitution, child abuse and the relationship between Muslims and Jews; *Les Sabots en Or* (Gold Shoes) is about imprisonment and torture and was banned in Tunisia; the pertinent *Bezness* looked at sexual tourism (*bezness* is local slang for the beach-gigolo 'business') from the perspective of a young man desperate for a way out of Sousse; and *Une Fille de Bonne Famille* (A Girl of Good Family) examined marital breakdown.

Another film worth seeking out is *Keswa: Le Fil Perdu* (1999), directed by Kalthoum Bornaz, a renowned female director, whose satirical portrayal of a young Tunisian woman defying her family's wishes for an arranged marriage is both funny and thought-provoking.

The biennial Carthage International Film Festival (see p95) offers a good opportunity to view the latest work from regional directors. There's also a biennial short film festival in Kélibia (Cap Bon), which is a good chance to check out local talent.

MUSIC

Western music is based on the octave, which has 12 tones, and its instruments only allow for half tones. The structure of the Arabic scale differs. The octave can contain up to 17 tones, with traditional stringed instruments allowing quarter tones. Arabic music also tends to remain within a narrow range of notes, without jumping between octaves.

In Tunisia, traditional music takes the form of *malouf* (meaning 'normal'), a national institution introduced in the 15th century by Andalusian refugees. It combines instrumental pieces (which serve as preludes and breaks) and vocal works performed in a *nouba* – a nine-part sequence.

Traditionally, *malouf* was performed by small ensembles using a *rbab* (a kind of two-stringed violin), *oud* (lute) and *darbuka* (drum, usually made of terracotta and goatskin), with a solo vocalist. Today, ensembles are more likely to be composed of large instrumental and choral groups, playing both Western and traditional Arabic instruments.

Malouf was superseded by a new, lighter style of music introduced from Egypt in the mid-1920s, but underwent a revival in the 1930s when Baron d'Erlanger, a musicologist living in the Tunis suburb of Sidi Bou Saïd, founded the Rachidia Ensemble, which became the official centre for *malouf*. This is where most of Tunisia's leading musicians have trained and is still Tunisia's best place to hear classical music. At the baron's mansion you can also see his amazing collection of musical instruments (see p96).

After independence, *malouf* was adopted as a symbol of national identity. Since then, it has become institutionalised, with the government offering courses in *malouf* at the National Conservatory of Music in Tunis and an annual cycle of festivals and competitions culminating in the International Festival of Malouf held in July in Testour.

The *Tremor of Forgery*, by Patricia Highsmith, has been acclaimed by some as her best novel, a mysterious, gripping thriller, set against an edgy Tunisian backdrop.

Radio Tunis (www.radiotunis.com/music.html) is a great place for listening to Tunisian music and songs.

Tunisia: *Anthologie du Malouf* is a great all-round selection, available as five (for devotees) or one (for tourists) CD sets.

Stars of the scene include the all-female orchestra the El-Azifet Ensemble, Sonia M'Barek, and Lotfi Bouchnak (listen to *Live in Berlin* to hear some old-school *malouf*). *Oud* players who combine traditional *malouf* with jazz and other influences include Anouar Brahem (try his *Astrakan Café* or *Le Pas du Chat* CDs) and Dhafer Youssef (try *Electric Sufi*).

The main opportunity to hear traditional music in Tunisia is at festivals, which mostly take place in summer. Restaurants in Tunis featuring traditional music, though not necessarily *malouf*, are Dar el-Jeld (p82), Le Malouf (p83) and Lucullus (in La Goulette; p90).

During the summer, there are sometimes weekend free concerts on Ave Habib Bourguiba, as well as occasional classical music concerts at the Centre of Arabic and Mediterranean Music (it's better known as the Dar Ennejma Ezzahra; p96) in Sidi Bou Saïd and at L'Acropolium (p93) in Carthage. Tabarka also hosts some outstanding music festivals (see p135 and p291 for details). During the summer, festivals at Hammamet (p106) and Nabeul also star traditional musicians and singers.

Most of the music that forms Tunisia's soundtrack is classical Arabic or Arabic pop. You'll hear the omnipresent Umm Kulthoum – the rags-to-riches Egyptian diva whose passionate classicism forms a soundtrack for North Africa; love songs performed by some raven-haired songstress from Cairo; or Algerian dance music – *raï* – which is a special favourite of louage (shared-taxi) drivers – a good barometer of popular (male) taste.

Modern Tunisian pop favourites include Sabar Rbaï and Salma Echarfi, churning out catchy romantic hits. Traditional Arabic music is not that fashionable among young people, though if you get a group of them having a singsong and you wouldn't know it. Contemporary live music venues are few and far between. However, Western-style reggae, heavy metal and jazz groups – big hits with Tunisian youth – play regularly at Tunis' Théâtre l'Etoile du Nord (p84) – check the website for details. You'll also catch good live acts at Le Boeuf sur le Toit (p84), including Sunday jazz.

You can buy tapes (around TD1) at newspaper stands and supermarkets, which are a great way to get a flavour of Tunisian sounds.

DANCE

When Tunisian men dance to Arabic music, they hold their arms out stiffly at their sides, wiggle their hips, and never think shimmying around with other men makes them look sissy. Women move in a sensual, belly-dancing style that takes much skill to perfect. You're most likely to see dancing at a bar or restaurant where a band's playing, at a wedding or at a festival.

Traditional Berber dances date back to pre-Islamic times and can sometimes be seen at resort hotels. They include the dramatic Dance of the Vases, performed by dancers with – yes – vases balanced on their heads. This is a highlight of the Festival of the Ksour, held around Tataouine in November.

CALLIGRAPHY & PAINTING

Calligraphy is a historic and holy art form: it's believed that Arabic was revealed by Allah to the Prophet Mohammed in the form of the Quran.

Early calligraphers used an angular script called Kufic that was perfect for stone carving: the eastern wall and minaret of the Great Mosque in Sfax (p216), and above the entrance to the Mosque of the Three Doors in Kairouan (p203) are among the finest examples. Nja Mahdaoui is renowned among modern calligraphists for his free-flowing style.

For a taste of Tunisian music try *Mawkatash: Love Songs*, by Latifa, Tunisia's foremost diva; Ghalia Benali and Timnaa's seductive *Wild Harissa* showcasing an extraordinary voice, and Sonia M'Barek's *Takht*, a classic of modern *malouf*.

Music from Tunisia (www.focusmm.com/tunisia/tn_musmn.htm) contains a short summary of the main themes of Tunisian music and links to songs from musicians little known outside Tunisia.

Rachid Koreïchi is an Algerian, partly based in Tunis, who produces works featuring symbols and characters in various materials. You can see his huge embroidered works in cloth at luxury hotel Villa Didon (p96) in Carthage.

Painting as a figurative rather than decorative art form came to Tunisia with the French. Murals and ceiling paintings were particularly popular in the 15th and 19th centuries.

Contemporary painting ranges from the highly geometric forms of Hédi Turki to Western styles that aim to encapsulate daily life, including scenes of cafés, *hammams* (public bathhouses) and music and dance performances – figurative works that are unusual within the framework of an Islamic society. Works by Yahia Turki (widely considered to be the father of Tunisian painting) and Ammar Farhat fall into this last category. Art patron Baron Erlanger, who lived in Sidi Bou Saïd, was a keen amateur painter, and his impressive renditions of the everyday are on view at his mansion studio (p96).

In the 1940s, artists established the nationalist École de Tunis in order to counter French dominance, and this was responsible for popularising Tunisian life as artistic subject matter.

Under the French, the ambient lifestyle of Tunisia attracted European artists who were entranced by the North African light and architecture. Most famously, Tunisia inspired the Swiss and German expressionists Paul Klee and Auguste Macke, who visited the country together in 1914. It was a turning point for Klee, whose encounter with North African colour led to his move towards abstraction, with paintings such as *Hammamet with its Mosque*. Wonderful works by Macke – who tragically died in action during WW1 the following year – include *St Germain near Tunis*, *Tunisian Landscape* and *Turkish Café*.

Modern art galleries are mainly confined to Tunis and its suburbs, especially the artist's haven of Sidi Bou Saïd. The English-language weekly *Tunisia News* lists exhibitions. **Espace Diwan 9** (Map pp72-3; 9 rue Sidi ben Arous; ☎ 9am-8pm Mon-Sat, to 7pm Oct-Mar) in the Tunis medina, and **Librairie Claire Fontaine** (Map pp72-3; 14 rue d'Alger) have some excellent art books.

Calligraphy is a primary art form in Islamic cultures because representations of the human form are considered to be heresy.

AMAZING MOSAICS

Tunisia has the world's best collection of mosaics, at Tunis' Bardo Museum (p50). Its masterpieces form an extraordinary document of Roman interests, lifestyle and beliefs.

The ancient Greeks created the first mosaics, and the technique caught on in places influenced by Greek culture, becoming increasingly sophisticated. At Punic Kerkouane (p117) in Cap Bon, you can see mosaic used to create a simple white-on-red scatter pattern. But it was the Romans who took the art to dizzy heights, using it to decorate their private and public spaces, with elaborate pictures designed to show their wealth. Most mosaics are the type known as *opus tessellatum*, in which patterns are formed out of little squares called *tesserae* (from the Latin, meaning cubes or dice). The technique involved laying out a bed of mortar in which the *tesserae* were placed.

Tunisian Roman mosaics date mainly from the 2nd to 6th centuries AD. Those from the 3rd century onwards show a distinctive African style, as local artists assimilated and improved upon the art. African mosaics are characterised by large, dramatic, colourful compositions – in Italy the style tended towards black and white. As elsewhere in the empire, the mosaics depict realistic subjects, in this case amphitheatre games, hunting and everyday life on the African estates. The most elaborate mosaics were always in reception rooms, to impress visitors and clients.

Byzantines continued the art, but their mosaics were much more simple, naïve works.

Apart from the Bardo, there are beautiful mosaics on display at the museum in Sousse, at the El-Jem museum (p209), and in situ in Bulla Regia (p145).

Other places in Tunis worth investigating include **Galerie Yahia** (☎ 71 330 235; Palmarium, 4 rue de Grèce) and **Galerie Gorgi** (☎ 71 892 129; 23 Rue Jugurtha, Le Belvédère). The Palais Khereddine (p76) also often has impressive art exhibitions. In Hammamet you can see and buy the etchings of Baker Ben Fredj (p109).

CRAFTS

Wandering through Tunisian souqs, you will be dazzled by colour, busy patterns, rustic beauty and a share of tourist tat. Like Morocco (but resembling a less-virtuoso cousin) Tunisia has an impressive decorative tradition, with vibrant rugs, bright ceramics, finely worked brassware and heavy folk silver jewellery.

A holy man named Sidi Kacem Ezzilizi is credited with importing tile-making from Andalusia in the 15th century, and his tomb now forms a small Tunis museum (see p76) to the craft. In the 16th century, tilemakers and potters worked around the area close to Bab Souika in the Tunis medina. The Ottomans injected Turkish style, and you can see fine examples at Dar Othman (p76) and Ottoman-era mosques in the Tunis medina (p74). In the 19th century, Italianate was all the rage, as evident in grand mansions such as Tunis' Dar Ben Abdullah (p76).

Ceramics used to be a functional craft supplying local needs, but as times have changed, the pottery trade nowadays caters mainly for tourists. Nabeul is the largest centre, selling Andalusian-influenced, tourist-friendly designs, while Sejname in the north turns out a distinct Berber style, specialising in rustic figurines. For more information on contemporary ceramics and where to buy them, see Shopping in the Directory (p297).

Carpet-making is a centuries-old craft and one of the most beautiful. Knotted carpets are divided into *alloucha* or *zarbia* variations. *Alloucha* use natural colours – beige, black and white – with simple motifs. *Zarbia* are richly multicoloured. Woven carpets are known as *mergoum*, are brighter coloured and stem from the nomadic Berber tradition. Kairouan is the biggest carpet centre in the country; again, see Shopping (p297) for good places to buy.

ARCHITECTURE

With waves of invaders and immigrants stamping their styles and erecting monuments over the last 2500 years, Tunisia has an incredible array of architectural heritage.

Here are the world's most complete vestiges of the great ancient Punic civilisation. That said, not much is left, but the few remains are remarkable for their neat town planning and fastidious private bathrooms. There are also a few remnants of the Numidians, contemporary to the Carthaginians, most in Chemtou (p147), with a 21m-high Libyo-Punic mausoleum at Dougga (p156).

In contrast, Roman vestiges are typically prolific. The Romans were great engineers and many of their buildings remain remarkably intact, such as the city of Dougga (p156) in the north, and the great stadium of El-Jem (p208).

But most pervasive and formidable is the architecture of Islam, which ranges from the austere functionality of the early Aghlabids to the exuberant work of the later Andalusians and Ottomans. One of the pleasures of travelling in Tunisia is getting lost in its seemingly unplanned medinas (walled cities), each harbouring a great mosque at its centre.

In the south, the Berbers were responsible for some of the most astonishing forms of indigenous architecture anywhere. Weird enough to stand in for an alien world, they have become a favourite of the makers of the *Star Wars* movies. Also worth seeking out is the traditional relief brickwork found in Tozeur and Nefta, which uses protruding sand-coloured bricks to create intricate monochrome patterns.

Jerba's highly distinctive architecture reflects the island's long history as a stronghold of the fiercely autonomous Kharijite sect. The buildings, painted dazzling white, were all designed with defence in mind, and resemble fortresses regardless of their function. For more information on Jerban architecture, see the boxed text in the Jerba chapter (p274).

PUNIC – TOWN PLANNING & BATHTUBS

Before the discovery of Kerkouane (Cap Bon) in 1952, little was known about Punic architecture. Its cities were razed to the ground, then built upon, by their conquerors, so what little knowledge we had was gleaned from foundations like those at Carthage.

At Kerkouane you can see the Punic building technique *opus Africana* – rubble walls strengthened at intervals with stone slabs. This Punic technique was adapted by Roman and Byzantine builders – for example, at the Capitole in Dougga. The town's most remarkable feature is its unique, neat bathtubs. Almost every house has one, armchair-shaped and lined with red cement. Each has a well within easy reach and a drain for dirty water. These were people who obviously valued cleanliness (and privacy) highly.

All the houses have a similar layout – small-scale and arranged around a courtyard (the earliest surviving Tunisian courtyard homes), with a staircase leading to a roof terrace. Simple red-and-white mosaics decorate the floors – in one case adorned by a symbol of Tanit, a Punic god, seemingly to ward off the Evil Eye. Town planning was obviously highly developed, and it seems that Kerkouane would have been an idyllic place to live, with an amazing (but unfortunately vulnerable) setting beside the azure sea.

ROMAN – UNDERGROUND, OVERGROUND

Wherever they went, the Romans left great buildings and feats of engineering rearing up from the landscape. Here remain ruins of the Zaghouan to Tunis aqueduct, the El-Jem colosseum and impressive cities: Dougga, Thurburbo Majus, Carthage, Bulla Regia, Sbeitla, Haidra and Oudhna. Also fascinating are the mines where the famous Chemtou (p147) marble was extracted, prized all over the empire.

All Roman cities had a capitole, grand public baths and a forum – a focal square that was the centre of public life, surrounded by temples and civil buildings. Streets usually followed an orderly, oh-so-Roman grid.

Particularly remarkable are the lavish mosaics that decorated these buildings. The towns here were prosperous, and the agricultural magnates who inhabited them wanted to show their wealth. For more on mosaics, see the boxed text (p47).

Bulla Regia is a unique site. Always creative in using architecture to shape their environment, here the Romans built underground rooms to escape the summer heat and winter cold. They used hollow tubes to create overhead vaults that were sufficiently light (a similar technique can be seen in Rome, where amphorae were often embedded into upper walls to lighten the load). The site gives the rare opportunity to walk inside a complete Roman room.

Designs and Patterns from North African Carpets and Textiles, by Jacques Revault, is the essential companion for those thinking of buying a carpet in Tunisia and a handy weapon against the touts.

Virgil's epic *The Aeneid* is a beautiful work of literature, based around legends of Carthage and telling the love story of Queen Dido and Aeneas.

Roman temples weren't usually converted into churches with the coming of Christianity – they could not fit congregations, being only built to accommodate important people and priests.

BARDO MUSEUM

The **Bardo Museum** (☎ 71 513 650; admission TD6, camera TD1; 🕒 9.30am-4.30pm Tue-Sun mid-Sep-Mar, 9am-5pm Tue-Sun Apr & Jun-mid-Sep, closes early during Ramadan) is dominated by the superb mosaics that adorned Roman Africa's sumptuous villas. If you visit any of Tunisia's ancient sites, the Bardo will complete the picture – here is the art they once contained.

Not only is the collection extraordinary, but it's housed in one of Tunisia's finest palaces – the former official residence of the Husseinite beys, commissioned by the Hafsid sultan Al-Mustansir (1249–77). It was rebuilt in the late 17th century, steadily enlarged by a succession of Husseinites, and became a museum in 1888. There are plans afoot to revamp the Bardo, with a proposed extension of 8000 sq metres that will vastly increase its exhibition space and capacity for visitors and a complete overhaul of its presentation that will result in spectacular state-of-the-art displays, but at the time of going to press the possible timescale for these changes was still undecided.

Currently on the ground floor, highlights include the re-creation of the 40,000-year-old Hermaion d'El Guettar, a religious monument with a striking resemblance to a heap of rubble, probably the world's oldest spiritual monument. The next room houses the infamous 3rd-century BC stele from Carthage (see p95), showing a priest carrying a child, possibly to be sacrificed. Look out for the unusual 6th-century cruciform baptismal font from El-Kantara. Nearby are statues from Bulla Regia (p145), starring Apollo: huge, languorous and sensual, with how-does-it-stay-on drapery.

Moving up a floor, don't miss the Islamic Museum housed in an older section of the palace, with formal reception rooms furnished in the 19th-century Husseinite style.

Centrepiece of the 1st floor is a grand, colonnaded reception room with an icing-sugar ceiling and triumphant statuary from Roman Carthage (see p90), arranged around large floor mosaics from Oudhna (Uthina; see p151), including an industrious portrait of 3rd-century farm life.

Some of the finest mosaics are on this floor. Don't miss that from the Sousse villa of a wealthy horse breeder, covering nearly 140 sq metres, featuring a triumphant Neptune (the sea god was a popular theme in coastal towns). The nearby Lord Julius mosaic is famous for its depiction of life on a wealthy lord's estate. En route to the Dougga room you'll see a gigantic foot and head – belonging to a 7.5m-high statue of Jupiter from Thurburbo Majus (see p153).

In the Dougga room, there's a celebrated work depicting huge dark-skinned cyclops working Vulcan's forge, from the site baths. However, the highlight comes from seaside La Chebba: an exquisite piece depicting the Triumph of Neptune. It's so well preserved, it appears years rather than millennia old. Another hugely virtuosic piece depicts Ulysses. The wandering hero – with a real look of wonder on his face – is strapped to his shipmast so he might listen to the Sirens without being lured towards them. The dangerous creatures line up stage right, while the other sailors are looking away, their ears stopped with wax.

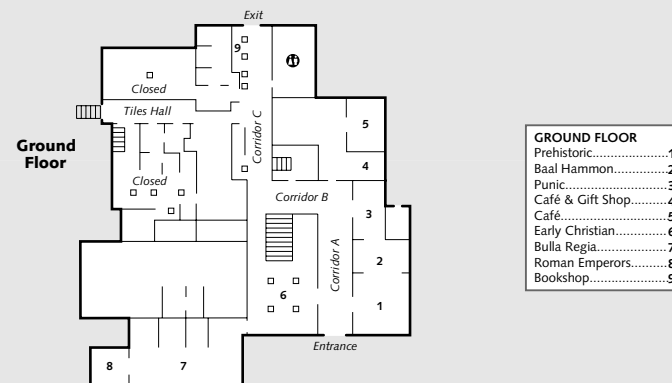
Also on the 1st floor is the palace concert room – room 13 – which feels as if you are inside a music box. Nearby is the bey's private apartment, elaborately tiled and stuccoed and now containing the only contemporary portrait of the poet Virgil, holding a copy of his *Aeneid*, and flanked by Muses – a nervous-looking Clio (history) and more-composed Melpomene (tragedy). Other 1st-floor highlights are the incredible Greek bronzes from a 1st-century BC shipwreck.

Moving up to the top floor, look out for an ancient bronze of a drunken Hercules looking decidedly unheroic, and an interesting mosaic, verging on the absurd, showing ostriches being used for hunting. But finest of the 2nd-floor exhibits are from the minor, yet wealthy Roman port of Acholla, 40km north of Sfax. These are some of Africa's oldest mosaics. Many of the pieces come from the Trajan Baths, and provide an idea of the overall scale of decoration.

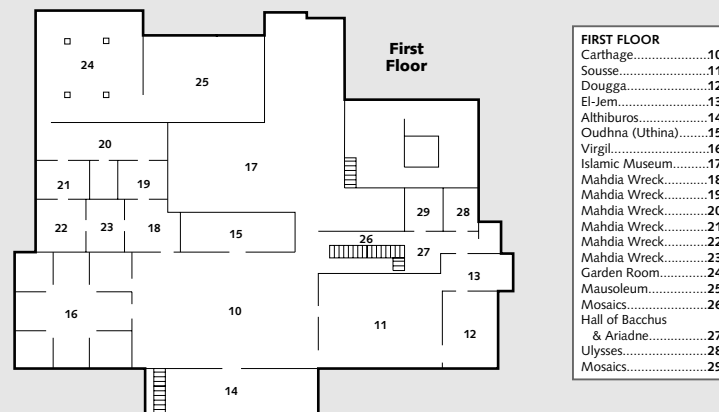
The Bardo is 4km west of central Tunis. You can get here by taxi – about TD4 from the centre, or by *métro léger* (Tunis' tram network) to Le Bardo station on line 4 (TD0.5). The entrance is on the northern side (rue Mongi Slim), while the station is on the museum's southern side (blvd du 20 Mars 1956).

To avoid the tour groups, it's best to arrive early, late or at lunchtime. In summer, start on the 2nd floor, as it gets hot in the afternoon. It'll take at least half a day to visit, and it's even worthwhile making two trips to avoid museum overkill. It's well worth looking at the collection in detail and the museum shop sells an excellent illustrated guide (€8) in various languages.

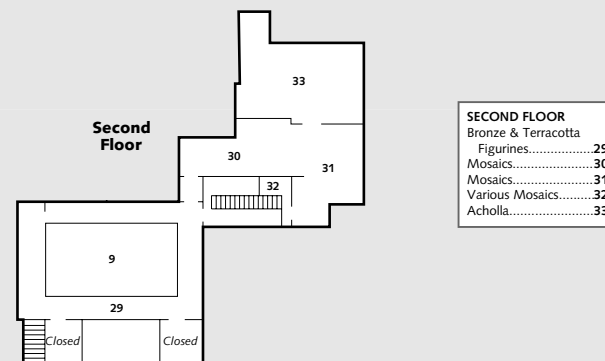
BARDO MUSEUM



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BERBER – TROGLODYTE & TOP OF THE WORLD

The bizarre, bewitching architecture of the southern Berber villages is one of Tunisia's highlights. Used as *Star Wars* locations, the buildings indeed look as if they were constructed by aliens.

The Matmata region bakes in summer and freezes in winter, and, following Roman practice, the Berber solution to existing in this tricky climate was to burrow underground. Their houses are all similar: the entrance is through a narrow tunnel, a central (usually circular) courtyard is dug about 6m deep into the irregular terrain, and rooms are tunnelled out from the sides – like living in a crater, lined with cosy caves. Larger houses have two or three connected courtyards. Underground living may appear claustrophobic, but the courtyards are open to the sky, high-ceilinged and airy.

The best examples to check out in Matmata (p228) are the three troglodyte hotels, the Marhala, the Sidi Driss and Les Berbères, although some of the rooms at Les Berbères were built by the more modern method of excavating with a hoe and backfilling over the roof.

The Berbers also built spectacular hilltop villages west of Tataouine (p235). Tribes forced to flee the plains made the area's natural caves homely, eventually converting them into houses. The best known is Chenini (p236), spilling over a peak 18km west of Tataouine. Nearby Douiret and Guermessa are much less visited but just as spectacular.

The Berbers are perhaps best known for their extraordinary multi-storey, podlike, hilltop granaries (*ksour*). For more information on these, see p237. Sadly, many *ksour* are falling into ruin. However, those at Metameur and Ksar Hallouf contain budget hotels – where you can stay the night, feeling like a Hobbit – while the *ksar* at Medenine houses a tourist market.

ISLAMIC – PRIVACY & DEFENCE

The Medina & Traditional Houses

Tunisia's twisting, ancient medinas may seem chaotic, but they're carefully constructed according to Islamic architectural principles. The deep narrow streets keep the sun's rays from the centre during the day and draw in cool air at night. Earth, stone and wood absorb water, which later evaporates and cools the air.

Domes rise above the inner-city tangle, indicating mosques, shrines and *hammams*. The main mosque stood at the centre, with souqs – arranged hierarchically – radiating away from it. Thick defensive walls and towers protected the city – good examples are in Sousse and Sfax.

The medina in Tunisia was dotted with *funduqs* (*caravanserai*s or inns). This is where traders, nomads, pilgrims and scholars stayed, usually on their way somewhere else (often a pilgrimage to Kairouan or Mecca). The plain doorway was wide and tall enough to allow a loaded animal to enter. Livestock were kept downstairs, which also housed tea-houses, shops and warehouses, while upstairs rooms were for travellers. Many of these *funduqs* have been converted into hotels, especially in Houmt Souq on Jerba (see p276).

The Tunisian townhouse is known as a *dar*. A central courtyard provides light, space and a living area that's cool in the heat of the day, with suites of surrounding rooms. At night, roof terraces could be used for sleeping. Wealthy dwellings were signalled by great keyhole-shaped doors decorated with black studs. But glance through any doorway – big or small – and you will see nothing, the interior hidden by a series of vestibules. This is an architecture designed to protect privacy.

Fish and Hand of Fatima symbols, often seen on doorways, are to ward off the bad luck brought by envious looks, otherwise known as the Evil Eye.

The Mosque

All mosques (*masjid*) follow the layout of the Prophet's house in Medina, which had an enclosed, oblong courtyard with huts (housing Mohammed's wives) along one side and a rough portico, or *zulla*, providing shade at one end for the poorer worshippers.

The courtyard has become the *sahn*, the portico the arcaded *riwaqs* and the houses the *haram* or prayer hall. The prayer hall is usually divided by aisles in order to segregate the sexes. A broad central aisle leads to the *mihrab*, a vaulted niche in the *qibla* wall. The *mihrab* is built to face Mecca, and so indicating the direction of prayer. It's also the site of the *minbar*, a pulpit from where the *khutba* (weekly sermon) is delivered.

The courtyards of many Tunisian mosques are open to all, but nowhere will non-Muslims be allowed into the prayer hall.

Almost every mosque (Sousse's Great Mosque is an unusual exception; see p189) has a minaret (from the word *menara*, meaning lighthouse) – the tower from where Muslims are called to prayer. Alongside many are elaborately decorated *medersas* (Quranic schools), residential colleges teaching theology and Muslim law. They comprise an open-air courtyard, with an ablutions fountain in the centre and a main prayer hall at the far end, surrounded by an upper gallery of student cells. The Medersa Bachia and Medersa Slimania in the Tunis medina (see p75) can both be visited by non-Muslims.

The many small whitewashed domes that you'll see all over Tunisia are *marabout* (Muslim holy men) tombs. A *zaouia* is a tomb complex, typically containing a prayer hall and accommodation for visitors. Some of the best are in Kairouan.

Military Architecture

Thick defensive walls guarded ancient Tunisian towns, also serving as barracks, granaries and arsenals. Towers dotted the perimeter, crenellated walls sheltered defenders, and there were few gates, all clanged shut at night. The best examples, in Sfax and Sousse, were both built by the Aghlabids in the 9th century.

The Islamic *bab* (gate) was flanked by two stone-block towers. Usually horseshoe arches, the gates were often beautifully decorated with geometric, flower-and-foilage or shell-inspired friezes. Favourites include those of Sfax, Kairouan and Monastir. Another form is the *skifa*, like Mahdia's Skifa el-Kahla (p211), which features a long, vaulted passageway protected by a series of gates.

In Tunisia, a kasbah refers to the main fortress guarding a medina, usually built astride the city's walls, or positioned in a commanding corner. None is as imposing as that towering over the remote town of Le Kef (p162).

A *borj* was a mini fort added to bolster a medina's defences at key points, such as the Borj Ennar in Sfax (p217), or a free-standing fort like Jerba's Borj Ghazi Mustapha (p274), while a *ribat* was a cross between a fort and a monastery, occupied by Islamic warriors, who divided their time between the somewhat disparate occupations of fighting and quiet contemplation of the Quran. Most have now disappeared, save the *ribats* of Sousse (p189) and Monastir (p197).

All medina buildings, domestic or religious, were based around courtyards, inspired by the Prophet Mohammed's house in Medina.

Environment

Tunisia was once lush and green, home to lions and elephants. As Europe shivered under an Ice Age snow blanket, the Sahel and the Sahara encompassed savannah, lakes, rivers and forests. Today's arid plains and sands are the result of desertification and deforestation, but Tunisia is nonetheless remarkably diverse, ranging from inky-green forested mountains to golden, shifting desert.

THE LAND

Tunisia looks small (164,150 sq km or 63,360 sq miles) hemmed in by Algeria and Libya, but is larger than England and Wales combined. It's only 150km from Europe – Sicily lies to the northeast. Tunisia measures 750km from north to south but only 150km from east to west.

It has an astonishing 1400km of Mediterranean coastline, alternating between jagged rocks and balmy beaches, which forms Tunisia's eastern and northern boundaries.

The Tunisian Dorsale is the main mountain range – the continuation of Morocco and Algeria's Atlas mountains. It runs from Tébessa in Algeria (northwest) to Zaghuan, south of Tunis, tapering off to form Cap Bon. Its – and Tunisia's – highest peak is Jebel Chambi (1544m). The Tell – rolling high plains – and the Oued Medjerda's lush valley lie to the north.

The Medjerda, rising in eastern Algeria, is the only permanent river, north of which lie the oak-forested Kroumirie Mountains.

South of the Dorsale range is a bald plain dropping down to *chotts* (salt lakes), eerie expanses shimmering with the ice-glow of salt. Beyond these, the land gives way to desert.

WILDLIFE Animals

Hannibal's elephants hailed from here: North African forest elephants that once roamed the land. Great cats, including lions and cheetahs, were also common – the Romans captured them to appear in their amphitheatres. Populations began to diminish when the Romans began clearing the forests to grow wheat.

These days, wild boar is the only plentiful large mammal left, but you're as likely to spot this shy creature as clock President Ben Ali at a Hammamet disco. Sightings of mongoose, porcupines and genets (an arboreal, catlike carnivore) are even rarer. All live in the northern forests. Jackals are more common and striped hyena are occasionally found in the south. Red squirrels nimble around woodland areas.

You'll see plenty of camels in the south. With their big flat feet and ability to store enough body fat to survive without nourishment for six months, camels are ideally suited to the desert. The desert harbours other well-adapted animals, such as gazelles – who gain all their fluids from plants – gerbils, hares, the cute squirrel-like suslik, and addax (impressively spiral-horned antelopes).

There's more chance of spotting snakes, including horned vipers, which rest beneath the sand's surface, awaiting their prey, and the desert varanid (lizard) – a distant, small cousin of Indonesia's Komodo dragon. Scorpions are also common. These measure around 6cm, huddle in the shade and wiggle their legs to keep cool. They only sting in self-defence, but some are fatally poisonous – if you do get stung, seek medical attention.

Sahara, by Marq de Villiers and Sheila Hirtle, markets itself as the biography of the world's greatest desert and doesn't do a bad job; little specifically on Tunisia but essential for desert heads.

Some critics think *Desert Wind* (Francis Kohler) – a documentary about 13 men discovering stuff about masculinity alongside their Swiss therapist in the Tunisian desert – is a load of hot air, but the setting is sublime.

Revel in Philippe Boursellier's exquisite Sahara shots in the hardback *Call of the Desert* the Sahara, a beautiful photographic extravaganza.

COOL FOR CATS

They scatter across medina lanes, explore rubbish heaps, and beg under restaurant tables. From battered and forlorn to well-kept domestic animals, cats have a special status here, evident from their sheer numbers.

The Prophet Mohammed had a special affection for felines as shown by several stories in the Hadith (a collection of his reported sayings). A touching tale describes how once, when Mohammed was summoned to prayer, a cat was asleep on his robe, and he cut off his sleeve rather than disturb it. Another cat warned him of danger so he escaped a snake bite, and a woman who starved a cat was said to be later tortured in hell.

Despite their preferential treatment, many Tunisian cats nevertheless suffer a great deal and it can be distressing to see. In Tunis if you see a cat (or other animal) needing help, call the **Société pour la Protection des Animaux** (☎ 71 390 167; www.protection-des-animaux.org; ave du 3 Août, 1009 El-Ouardia, Tunis) and you can take it to be treated (for a fee of TD5).

ENDANGERED SPECIES

It's (mostly European) hunters storming through the undergrowth as well as environmental degradation that have endangered Tunisian species. The animals that survived the bombast are now under government protection, including the addax, maned mouflon, oryx, ostrich, serval and fennec (a pretty, nocturnal desert fox with radarlike ears and furred soles to protect against scorching sands). Some of these had disappeared but have been reintroduced in special programmes. Sadly the monk seal has probably disappeared from the Cap Bon coast.

BIRDS

The number of resident bird species is comparatively small, but in spring and autumn, skies, cliffs, lakes and lagoons become thick with birds stopping off en route between Europe and sub-Saharan Africa. Having survived the Sahara, and the hunters' guns in Sicily and Malta, Tunisia provides a welcome respite.

Over two hundred species have been recorded here, including storks, hawks, eagles, colourful bee-eaters and rollers, and many wading birds and waterfowl. Flamingos turn Korba Lagoon pink during the nesting season over the winter.

In the desert oases you can see larks, as well as the aptly named trumpeter finch, while birds of prey gather around mountainous, forested areas and Cap Bon's sea cliffs.

See p286 for information about bird-watching sites.

Plants

Bougainvillea, introduced from Brazil in 1829, is everywhere, its brilliant papery colour (the flowers lie within the bright outer leaves) pouring over whitewashed walls. Jasmine fills the air with its delicious, almost edible scent; its blooms – the pinker ones have the stronger perfume – are used to create the posies – *mashmoum* – and garlands sold everywhere.

The Kroumirie Mountains are thick with evergreen holm and cork oak. Striking red fruit load the strawberry tree in November and December, hence its name, while in autumn it's covered in fragrant white flowers.

All-consuming eucalyptus, the fast-growing tree from Australia, spreads across the north.

Pockets of the Tell's ancient Aleppo pine forests remain, while further south, the *Acacia raddiana* forest of Bou Hedma National Park is what's left of Tunisia's savannah.

Scorpions may outlive us all: they can live in the desert heat, resist for a year without food or water, survive being frozen and have a strong resistance to nuclear radiation.

The fastest bird in the world is the peregrine falcon, which lives in Tunisia's rocky northern cliffs. It can fly at up to 300km/hr when swooping for its prey.

Tunisia Online (www.tunisiaonline.com/environment) is a government site with quite a detailed section on environmental programmes and links to organisations.

Ever since the Romans started clearing woodland for their fields, the environment has suffered degradation, with forests shrinking from 30% then to 2% today.

The website of the Sahara and Sahel Observatory, an organisation combating desertification in Africa is www.unesco.org/oss.

Olive trees fill the semi-arid Sahel region, cultivated since pre-Roman times. You'll also see knobbly cactuses loaded with spine-covered *Opuntia tomentosa* (prickly pear or Barbary fig).

The Jericho rose scuds around the desert, carried by the wind, its branches curled up in a tight ball enclosing its seeds. It opens only on contact with moisture. In the oases, towering date palms shelter a surprising variety of fruit trees.

NATIONAL PARKS

There are eight national parks and 18 natural reserves, covering around 6% of Tunisia's land area.

The only park with visitor facilities is Unesco-listed Ichkeul National Park (see p132), near Bizerte. The others are difficult to reach, and some double as military areas. A government and World Bank project since 2002 seeks to revamp park management, but it remains to be seen whether this will improve access.

Other national parks include the following:

Bou Hedma 85km east of Gafsa, last 16,000 hectares of acacia forest. Reintroduced addax, maned mouflon, oryx and ostrich.

Boukornine 18km south of Tunis at Hammam Lif, Boukornine (1900 hectares) surrounds Jebel Boukornine (576m). Persian cyclamens, wild boars, jackals, porcupines and the military.

Chambi (p179) 15km west of Kasserine, 6700 hectares of forest surround Jebel Chambi (1544m). Aleppo pine, cork oak and juniper; mountain gazelles, striped hyenas and 16 reptilian species.

El-Feija 20km northwest of Ghardimao, 2600 hectares of cork oak forest; 500 orchid species, Barbary deer, wild boar, jackal and (reintroduced) serval.

Orbata West of Gafsa, 3000 hectares include desert mountain habitat for mouflon sheep.

Sidi Toui Saharan 50km south of Ben Guerdane, 6300 hectares of arid plains and dunes; gazelle, jackal and successfully reintroduced fennec fox. Also reintroduced rare antelopes.

Zaghuan 60km south of Tunis, 2000 hectares; rare Saharan golden eagle.

ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES

Tunisia has been heavily farmed since Roman times, and forestry degradation has meant an attendant loss of biodiversity. The ecology of the high plains has been destroyed, and Tunisia loses around 23,000 arable hectares to erosion annually. Massive erosion gullies scar the Tell's wheat-growing regions, and much former agricultural land is suitable only for grazing. Rapid urbanisation has led to traffic, rubbish, water and sewage problems. However, to combat these problems, the government does have a national sustainable development strategy that includes environmental education and is much more developed in this area than most African countries. Practical effects are slow but it's a step in the right direction and 3% of GDP is devoted to environmental protection.

Water scarcity is a major issue, but your conservation can help combat this problem. The tourist industry's requirements have depleted artesian water levels and dried up springs. Dam construction ensures that most places in the north receive adequate supply, but in Jerba, supply pressures have damaged agriculture and made the water undrinkable.

There's a depressing amount of litter in the countryside. One author witnessed a train guard carefully sweep up the rubbish in all the train carriages and then just as carefully push it out of the gap between carriages onto the track. It's distressing for visitors to see the scale of the problem and the lack of concern or comprehension on the part of many residents. This is another area where the government is making big efforts to promote education and cleaning programmes, but progress is slow.

RESPONSIBLE TRAVEL

Tunisia has problems with water shortages in some areas and it is important to conserve water where you can. To avoid adding to plastic disposal, use purified, boiled or tap (many hotels have a drinkable water supply, but check first) water to refill mineral water bottles. Obviously, avoid adding to Tunisia's rubbish problem and burn litter or take it away with you if camping out in the desert. Also when camping, avoid the use of firewood (carry a small gas stove for cooking).

Check www.tunisiaonline.com/environment for information on ongoing environmental programmes and links to organisations. Becasse (www.becasse-ecologie.com) is an organisation offering green courses and nature trips.

Industrial pollution, with toxic waste pumped into the sea, has damaged the marine environment of the shallow Gulf of Gabès, where local fishing stocks (and fishermen's livelihoods) are under threat – a five-year World Bank-funded project, from 2005, aims to reverse the trend of degradation.

Food & Drink

Rafik Tlatli & Abigail Hole

Tunisia like it hot. Couscous packs a punch, *harissa* (chilli paste) is an appetiser and salads can be conversation stoppers.

This Mediterranean cuisine is packed with sun-focused flavours, and based around grains, vegetables, fruits, seafood, liquid-gold olive oil and garlic – local foodstuffs that you'll see celebrated in many Roman mosaics.

Centuries of immigrants colonised cooking as well as the country, bringing Roman, Arabic, Jewish, Turkish, Andalusian, French and Italian taste buds into the equation. The Berbers introduced couscous, the Maghreb staple. Combinations of meat, fruit and cinnamon derive from Persian cuisine, a Turkish import. However, the most obvious influence is French.

Tunisia's key position during the early spice trade brought cumin, caraway, saffron, mustard, cayenne, ginger, cinnamon, dried rosebuds, black pepper and sugar to the table.

STAPLES & SPECIALITIES

Breakfast (*ftoor is-sbah*) traditionally consists of milk, coffee, eggs, *assida* (a belly-filling pudding made with flour or semolina, oil and dates), fritters, *sohlob* (sorghum, sugar, cinnamon and ginger), or, in winter, *hsou* (spicy semolina and caper-based soup). The French influence, however, means that you'll more likely find people tucking into coffee and a deliciously authentic croissant or *pain au chocolat*.

For lunch (*ftour*) and dinner (*ashaa*), starters include soups, salads, vegetables, *tajine* (unlike its Moroccan namesake, an omelette with white beans or potatoes, breadcrumbs, chopped meat, cheese and egg) or fish, followed by a plain dish of couscous or pasta.

Harissa

Tunisian cooking revolves around *harissa*, a fire-red concoction made from crushed dried chilli, garlic, salt and caraway seeds. Served neat with a pool of olive oil – you dip your bread into the mix as an appetiser – it gives the mouth a tantalising jolt.

It was the Spanish who introduced hot peppers to Tunisia. The word *harissa* comes from the Arabic, meaning 'break into pieces', as the paste is traditionally made by pounding red chillies in a mortar. An old tale says that a man can judge his wife's affections by the spice in his food – if it's bland then love is dead.

Bread

Bread is eaten with every meal – ideally still warm from the local *boulangerie*. It's frequently a baguette (long crusty French loaf), but often, particularly in the countryside, it's *tabouna*. This traditional Berber bread is flat, round and heavy, subtly flavoured with *hab hlaoua* (aniseed), and named after the traditional clay-domed ovens in which it's baked. You can see such ovens among the 4th-century BC Punic ruins at Kerkouane (p117). The price of bread is subsidised and controlled – price rises in 1984 led to riots.

Starters

Kemia are small tasty dishes, usually served as appetisers. Besides such nibbles as nuts, olives, *poutargue* (mullet roe), dried fish, and spiced

TRAVEL YOUR TASTEBUDS

People often have a milk drink – *lben* – when eating couscous: an acquired taste that's worth a try.

Barbary figs (aka prickly pears) are the green cactus fruits you'll see piled high from October to December. Introduced by the Spanish in the 16th century, these are covered in fine spines that'll leave your hand like a cactus if you try to pick one up. Tip: get the vendor to peel it for you.

octopus, particular delights are the crushed vegetable dishes that tingle on the tongue, such as carrots, pumpkin or courgette, mixed with spices and *imalah* (pickled carrots and cauliflower).

Perhaps Tunisia's most prolific starter is the smoky-tasting *salade mechouia*, a delicious blend of roasted peppers, garlic and *harissa*. It's a coolly refreshing way to start a meal, mopped up with crusty white bread. *Salade Tunisienne* is another hit: comprising finely chopped tomatoes, onion and peppers, seasoned with lemon juice, olive oil and mint. *Omni houria* – cooked carrots mashed with garlic and olive oil – is also a quenching, lightly spiced taste, served cold. A winter favourite is *chorba*: a punchy, oily, tomato-based soup.

The *briq* is a Tunisian curiosity that's of Middle Eastern origin, a delicate deep-fried envelope of pastry that's usually filled with a satisfying slurr of egg (skilfully rendered so that the white is cooked and the yolk is runny). It might be stuffed with onions, parsley, potato, capers, tuna, egg, seafood, chicken or meat, though *brigs* can be stickily sweet too, filled with almond or sesame paste and drenched in honey.

Seafood

With 1400km of coastline, Tunisia has excellent fresh seafood, including sole, red mullet, mackerel, grouper, perch, octopus and squid. Favoured seasonings are garlic, saffron, cumin, paprika, turmeric or dried rosebuds (providing an aromatic, rose-tinged flavour), though often fish is simply grilled with lemon and olive oil, or baked or fried in olive oil. The traditional accompaniment for fried fish is *tastira*, a delicate mixture of chopped fried tomatoes and eggs, seasoned with caraway seeds, salt and olive oil.

Look out for *kabkabou*, an aromatic, tangy baked dish with saffron, preserved lemons, tomatoes and capers, and simple, tasty fish *brochettes* (kebabs), alternating between chunky fish and fresh vegetables.

Mussels, clams, calamari, prawns and oysters also feature widely, as well as crayfish and lobster (particularly around Tabarka), which are boiled and often served with a roux (white sauce made from butter and flour) and mayonnaise. Succulent large prawns are grilled, sautéed with garlic and parsley, or simmered in a *gargoulette* (clay cooking pot).

Meat

Merguez (spicy lamb or goat sausages) are hard to beat, but some cheap joints sell delicious roast chicken – best when piping hot, with a pile of chips. Around Ain Draham you can sometimes eat *marcassin* (wild boar piglet), though it's off-limits to Muslims and has been illegal in recent years. Camel meat is a southern novelty.

Particularly interesting are dishes combining meat, fruit and spices. Tunisians like *maraga*, a slow-cooked stew, normally lamb, in versions such as *koucha*, with chilli, tomatoes and potatoes, *klaya*, with paprika, or *kamounia*, cooked in cumin. You can find a similar cooking style in Provence, where dishes were brought back by French settlers in North Africa.

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Once the breadbasket of the Roman Empire, Tunisia's biggest import is now wheat.

The www.harissa.com website is dedicated to Tunisian Jews. It has weird syntax, but some good stuff on dishes and background on Judaism in Tunisia.

Mediterranean Cooking Revised Edition, by the expert Mediterranean cookery writer Paula Wolfert, pays particular attention to Tunisian specialities and traditions, laying emphasis on healthy but robust eating.

Tunisia is unusual in North Africa in that it often serves couscous with fish.

THE DEPENDABLE DATE

Until recently, life in the Sahara was almost entirely dependent on one remarkable plant: the date palm (*Phoenix dactylifera*).

So important was it to desert life that the traditional way of assessing the size of an oasis was in terms of the number of palms it could support, rather than the number of people.

A date palm can live to be over 100 years old, growing up to 24m high. The trees start producing fruit at around 20-30 years. The fruit supplies begin to decline at about 70 years, so they are normally cut down around then (at around 20m, before they reach their full potential height).

Nowadays palms are mainly used for their fruit, but in the past the trunk was used for building, or hollowed out to channel water. The branches are used for roofs and fences, while leaf fibres can be woven into mats and ropes and the woody fruiting stems make good brooms. Nothing went to waste. Even the date pits are used: in the old days they were roasted and ground to make an ersatz coffee; today they are ground up as animal fodder.

The date palm's very presence is an indicator of the desert's most precious resource, water. The tree is specific in its climatic requirements. There is an old Arab saying that it likes 'its feet in heaven and its head in hell', a reference to its need for sizzling summer temperatures and lots of water – about 500L a day in summer.

There are more than 100 varieties of date, finest of which is the *deglat ennour* (finger of light), so called because the flesh is almost translucent. It constitutes 50% of all plantings in Tunisia.

If you can, try to make it to Douz in October for the date harvest, when the abundant dates are at their succulent best.

Couscous

The national dish, couscous (semolina granules) is the pride of the Maghreb, eaten by rich and poor alike. There are more than 300 ways of serving up this grainy, soft cereal. It's the dish to eat at celebrations, usually communally, with people delving into a large single deep bowl, and this is when it's at its best.

Couscous is prepared by steaming wet grains in a *couscoussière*, a two-piece pot. The sieve-lined upper part holds the couscous, while the sauce (vegetables, chickpeas, beef, chicken, lamb or fish) cooks slowly underneath. The scented steam rises to cook the grains, which expand up to three times their original size.

Fruit, Nuts & Sweets

Tunisia has wonderful, sun-ripened fruit. The intense, subtle flavours are an extraordinary surprise to those accustomed to imported foodstuffs.

In May try juicy *bousa'a* – medlar-fruit – orange in colour and plum-like in taste. At the end of June look out for *boutabguia* (*pêche de vigne*). All peaches are mouth-wateringly good but this warm-yellow variety has an unusual compact texture. Grapes are finest at the end of August – try fragrant white muscats from around Kélibia, or *razzegoui*, a large white grape, shaded pink. Summer sees roadsides stacked with succulent *della* (melon).

Mishmish are extraordinarily delicate apricots; you might want to couple them with some crunchy, sweet *inzas bouguidma* (meaning 'bite-sized'; miniature pears). From September, blush-red pomegranates join the dessert menu; specify if you want them *sans sucre* (unsugared). Fresh almonds (*almandes*) appear in July and August (their pods are green and suedelike) – crack them open to find a gleaming pale kernel.

Tunisian cakes are sweet, nutty and delectable, including baklava – sticky filo pastry filled with nuts and honey, *samsa* – filo pastry and

Recette de Couscous, by Magali Morsy, includes couscous recipes from all over North Africa.

Romans didn't eat oranges. Citrus fruit trees were probably only introduced here from China in the early medieval period.

ground roast almonds, baked in lemon and rosewater syrup, and *bouza* – hazelnut cream with grilled sesame seeds. *Makhroud* – small date-stuffed, honey-soaked wheat cakes are a speciality of sugar-loving Kairouan.

DRINKS

Cafés deck every corner, crammed with men passing the time and shooting the breeze.

Drinks of choice include coffee: the best is thick and gritty *ahwa arbi* (Turkish coffee) fragrant with orange blossom or rosewater. Other versions, all benefiting from sugar to make them palatable, are *express* (espresso coffee), *café direct* (coffee with milk) or *capucin* (espresso with a dash of milk).

Thé à la menthe (mint tea) is the classic North African tippie, but here you'll also be offered *thé au pignon* – with pine nuts, or *thé à l'almande* – with almonds, which react with the hot tea to create a delectable buttery taste.

Most cafés sell refreshing *citronade* – lemon juice, water and sugar – and many offer delicious freshly squeezed orange juice. Look out for seasonal juices or milkshakes with fresh fruit – always specify if you want just a little sugar otherwise it'll be assumed that you want a lot. If *lait de poule* is offered, it's not 'chicken's milk' but a fruit milkshake with egg white.

Alcohol

Although Tunisia is a Muslim country, alcohol is remarkably easily available, with locals frequenting bars (mostly all-male preserves), though the annual tourist influx raises the number of consumers by an impressive 50%. Beer is popular. Celtia, the local brand, is a drinkable lager (particularly ice cold) – and also the cheapest. German Löwenbräu is also brewed locally. For information on wine, see the boxed text, below.

A popular aperitif is *boukha* – a gloopily sweet, aromatic spirit made from distilled figs, served at room temperature or chilled, and often mixed with Coke. Also popular are aniseed drinks such as Pastis – a French relic – and whisky, which has a snobbish appeal. Herb-based *Thibarine* is made from an ancient recipe in the Thibar region near Dougga. *Sarabi*, from Soukra (near Tunis), is as sweet as you'd expect a liqueur distilled from dates.

Laghmi, fermented palm sap, is found in the southern oases, and can be powerful – check the quality before surrendering your stomach.

WINE: THE ESSENTIALS

Tunisia has had some practice in wine-producing: Dionysus, god of wine, staggers all over Roman mosaics, and Magon, contemporary to the Phoenicians, wrote about techniques of production still used today. The French and the Italians planted the first industrial vineyards in the 19th century.

Tunisia's wines come from its northern vineyards – important regions are Nabeul, Cap Bon, Bizerte, Ben Arous and Zaghouan. The main grapes are Carignan, Grenache, Beldi and Cinsault. Wines are strong, mostly full-bodied reds – Magon Supérieur is recommended – and light, fruity rosés – Château Mornag is good. Among the whites, Blanc de Blanc is a safe bet. Kélibia (Cap Bon) produces a very drinkable musky, dry muscat.

You can buy wine in some supermarkets and many restaurants (though not the cheapest ones).

Déllice de Tunisie, edited by Rafik Tlati, is a French book that brings together specialities of 10 different regions, chosen by Tunisian chefs.

Saveur de Tunisie, by Rafik Tlatli, in French, supplies innovations in Tunisian cooking.

The website www.globalgourmet.com/destinations/tunisia features gastronomic morsels – both recipes and cultural.

The Great Book of Couscous: Classic Cuisines of Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia, by Copeland Marks, includes recipes, visits to markets and chefs' homes and comparisons of the North African cuisines.

CELEBRATIONS

Like most cultures, Tunisians celebrate with food, and you can measure the event's importance by the amount of scoff.

There are many special celebratory dishes, such as *zrir* (nut paste served in small glasses), which is served after childbirth to help revitalise the mother.

Marriage

Marriage is the ultimate feast. Hospitality is all important and families feel it their obligation to celebrate in style. Sometimes festivities last as long as seven days, with the culinary part kicking off on the fourth day, known as *Outia Sghira*, when a bull is slaughtered to provide meat for the following feasts. On *Outia Kbira*, the fifth day, guests eat meat and chickpea couscous followed by *baklava*. The sixth day sees a really big meal featuring *tajine*, *market ommalah* (meatball stew), *salade mechouia* and *klaya* (meat and paprika stew).

On the big day, lunch is pasta with meat sauce, and *mloukhia*, a dark-green, pungent stew with powdered corète (aka *mloukhia*; a herb) that has a unique, some might say slimy, taste, and is traditionally eaten for new starts. In the evening everyone eats couscous, followed by fruit, leaving room for *baklava* and other sweets.

Ramadan

The flipside of the Muslim holy month, with its daylight-hours fasting, is night-time no-holds-barred feasting.

Each night, people break their fast by drinking water and eating a date. Afterwards they tuck into some hearty *chorba* (oily spicy soup, made from meat or chicken and celeriac with pasta), an egg *brîq*, and then couscous or pasta.

Once the day's hunger has been sated, it's time to socialise until late, topping up on fruits, sweets and cakes, tea or coffee.

Before sunrise, people wake to eat *shour*, a light meal, and energise for the day by snaffling some *mesfouf*, a comforting milky couscous dessert, with dates, raisins, chopped almonds, sugar and cinnamon.

Eid al-Fitr

Eid al-Fitr – the lesser *eid* – marks the end of Ramadan. This small festival is big on cakes, such as *baklava*, *ghraïba* made from fine semolina, or *makhroud*.

For three days families visit each other bearing sweets. Children not only get to enjoy this sugar fest, but are dressed in brand-new clothes.

Eid al-Adha

Eid al-Adha is the greater *eid*, taking place 70 days after Eid al-Fitr. It's a bad time for sheep as each family slaughters an animal and serves it up for at least a week in dishes such as *m'rouzia*, a stew with raisins and chestnuts, or *daouara*, sausage made of sheep liver and lungs, parsley and mint.

Ras as-Sana

Ras as-Sana is the first day of the lunar or Hejira year, when people eat the verdant dish of *mloukhia* – because the year is green.

People in the Nabeul region prepare a special couscous dish, *kadid* (salted dried meat conserved since Eid al-Adha), decorated by a hard-boiled egg, chickpeas, sweets, dried fruit and a doll made from coloured sugar.

Moulid an-Nabi

Moulid an-Nabi commemorates the Prophet's birthday, and in the morning everyone tucks into *assida*: either the simple version made from fine semolina or flour, oil and honey, or the more refined, Ottoman-influenced sort, of pinenuts, cream, hazelnuts, pistachios and almonds. Again, it's sweet-toothed Kairouan that makes it the best.

WHERE TO EAT & DRINK

Eateries are firmly divided. Fast-food places serve hamburgers, chips and sandwiches. Up a level, basic local haunts don't usually serve alcohol and are either *gargottes* – offering sandwiches, chicken, fish, and couscous, or *rotisseries*, selling fried and roasted meats. *Meshoui* are popular roadside joints selling barbecued meat.

Restaurants touristiques are more formal, and not just for tourists, despite the name. They're assessed by the ONTT (national tourist office), marked with one to three forks, serve Tunisian and international specialities, and serve alcohol.

Cafés in Tunisia range from stand-up pâtisseries fit for a swallow of caffeine and a pastry to leisurely male-dominated gossip havens, where clientele play chess and dominoes and smoke *sheeshas* – tobacco water pipes. These contraptions cool the fragrant smoke, making for a gentle puff with attendant musical gurgle; you can have *mwassi* (honey-soaked) or *tufa* (apple-flavoured) tobacco. Some cafés have a mixed clientele, particularly in Tunis, and there are also a few all-women places tucked away.

Most bars are raucous, smoky all-male dives. For a more salubrious drink, in a place where women will feel comfortable, head for a reputable hotel bar, or a restaurant. Liquor stores and supermarkets sell alcohol, but put your bottles in bags when carrying them around in public.

Quick Eats

Tunisians have developed snacking into a fine art, with countless solutions for a hungry rumble.

Popular on winter mornings, particularly with labourers, is *lablabi*, a set-you-up-for-the-week chickpea, *harissa* and cumin soup. It's served in brown-glazed terracotta bowls (you'll see them stacked up where it's sold) filled with broken bread with the soup poured over the top. Sometimes egg and tuna are stirred in too.

Tunisian sandwiches are great. A favourite is the *casse-crôte*, a jaw-challenging half-baguette – usually you choose from a selection of *harissa*, *salade mechouia*, cucumber, tomato, egg, tuna and olives. The *chapatti* is a folded disc of bread, lightly fried to make it hot and crispy, filled with finely chopped, lightly spiced potatoes, tuna and egg.

TUNISIA'S TOP FIVE EATING SPOTS

- **Dar el-Jeld** (see p82) Exquisite traditional cuisine in a beautiful mansion.
- **Dar Bel Hadj** (see p82) Less well known than El-Jeld, this has delicious food in a similarly sublime setting.
- **Restaurant Slovénia** (see p113) Innovative Tunisian dishes and international influences.
- **Le Restô** (see p96) Blue-as-can-be Tunis Gulf views and international food with a Tunisian slant.
- **Le Petit Mousse** (see p129) Bizerte's finest, with French cuisine on a seaside terrace.

La Cuisine Tunisienne d'Ommok Sannafa, by Mohamed Kouki, is a French and Arabic classic on Tunisian cooking.

If you were writing a book called *101 Uses for Tinned Tuna*, this would be the place to research. Tuna loads sandwiches, pizzas and salads, is sprinkled on pasta and decks *harissa* as an hors d'oeuvre.

250 Recettes Classique de Cuisine Tunisienne, by Edmond Zeitoun, has mouthwatering Jewish-Tunisian recipes.

Another important part of life is the doughnut (*yoyo* or *beignet*), made of soft yielding dough dipped in oil and sugar or enveloped in honey. *Babalouni* or *shishi* are large doughnuts eaten in the afternoon – so don't try getting a big doughnut in the morning.

VEGETARIANS & VEGANS

Tunisians eat meat if they can afford it, and they find it strange that people might not through choice, while veganism is an unheard-of curiosity. But fruit, vegetables, grains and nuts are staples here, so you'll have no cause to go hungry. Your best bet will be starters: *salades Tunisienne* or *mechouia* are delicious and ubiquitous, though you'll have to ask that they hold the tuna and egg. The *briq* is often meat-free, and *Ojai* (fresh tomatoes and chillies blended into a spicy sauce; often prawns, *merguez* or brains are added with eggs stirred in at the last minute), *shashouka*, *lablabi* and *tajine* are other options if you check what's going into them – often a meat stock will be used. Vegans will find eating out difficult, and will have to self-cater most of the time.

EATING WITH KIDS

Tunisians adore children and you'll be fêted guests at any restaurant, though you might not feel comfortable at very upmarket ones. The climate means that you'll often be eating outside, which is ideal. There's rarely a children's menu, but kids can share dishes or choose from the starters. In the resorts you'll have tons of child-friendly choices as many restaurants serve chicken, crepes, pasta, pizzas, sandwiches and so on. Baby food and formula milk are available from pharmacies.

If you're spending the day sightseeing, it's a good idea to take a picnic, in case you can't find any suitable food along the way.

Travelling with young children, it's handy to stay somewhere with some kitchen facilities, so you can prepare some meals rather than constantly eating out. For additional information on travelling with children, see p287.

HABITS & CUSTOMS

Families often eat sitting around a *mida*, a round, low table, where food is served in a big communal dish. Men and women eat together here, unlike in some Arabic countries, but in some traditional families, women leave the table at the end of the meal and the men stay (Western women are regarded as honorary men). If the family is religious, meals start and end invoking Allah: first *bis millah*, and last *ilhamdulillah*.

When invited to a Tunisian home, you should bring a gift: something from your own country is ideal, but otherwise sweets from an upmarket Tunisian pâtisserie, fruit, nuts or flowers are also good.

DOS & DON'TS

- Do dress well when invited to someone's home.
- Don't pass things and eat with your left hand – it's reserved for less salubrious tasks like wiping your bottom.
- Do eat everything up, and don't refuse if someone offers you more.
- Do ask God's pardon if you burp: *Astakhfirou Allah*.
- Don't start eating before the father of the family.

The Momo Cookbook: A Gastronomic Journey Through North Africa, produced by the London restaurant Momo, has recipes, covers background to cookery culture and has delectable photography.

EAT YOUR WORDS

Useful Phrases

What do you recommend?

Not too spicy, please.

Could you please bring me some/more?

Thanks, that was delicious.

I don't eat meat, chicken or fish.

(I'm a vegetarian.)

I don't eat meat or dairy products.

(I'm a vegan.)

I have a wheat/nut allergy.

little sugar

without sugar

Food Glossary

SPECIALITIES

kammounia

keftaji

koucha

loup à la sfaxienne

mérou au citron

ragoût de gnaouia

shakshouka (also spelt *chakchouka*)

EATING OUT

ashaa

farsheeta

ftoor

ftoor is-sbah

dinner

fork

lunch

breakfast

shnuwwa tansahnee?

mush haar

bi-rabee zeednee shwayya?

barkallah oo feek, bneen barsha

ana ma naakulsh lham wala djaaj wala hoot

ana végétarien ma naakulsh lham wala haleeb oo

moushtakaatoo

ana andee hassaaseeya lil qamah/il boofroowa

shwayya sukur

bilaash sukur

meat stew with cumin

spicy ratatouille usually served with meatballs
lamb, potatoes and tomatoes, seasoned with
rosemary, mint, turmeric and capsicum, baked in
a clay pot

perch baked with tomatoes, onions, peppers,
garlic and capers

grouper poached in a sauce of lemon, *harissa* and
cumin

meat and vegetable stew, rich red in colour and
eaten with bread

peppers, onions and tomatoes combined with
scrambled eggs

il-fatoora

migharfa

muqlee

skeena

bill/check

spoon

fried

knife

BASICS

adham

batata maqliyya

beera

ghalla

khubz

maa ma'danee

eggs

chips

beer

fruit

bread

mineral water

rooz

shrab

sukur

zeet

zeetoon

zibda

rice

wine

sugar

oil

olives

butter

MEAT & SEAFOOD

'alloosh

brochette

crevettes

djaaj

espadon

hoot

langouste

lamb

kebab

prawns

chicken

swordfish

fish

crayfish

lham

loup de mer

mérou

mullet

pulpe

rouget

ton

meat

perch

grouper

mullet

octopus

red mullet

tuna

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