

The Central Coast & Kairouan



Considered by many to be the heartland of Tunisia and home to one of Islam's most important mosques, several of the country's largest beach resorts and its most impressive Roman monument, this region is hardly lacking in superlatives. Its diversity, from fortified ancient medinas to exclusive modern beach resorts, from religious conservatism to western hedonism, from bastions of the tourist-industrial-complex to quiet, timeless villages, is belied by the short commute it takes to get from one to the other. This is the Tunisia of postcards and brochures, where architecture and landscapes unchanged for centuries meet facilities designed for the busloads of foreign visitors that fuel much of the economy.

The fortified medinas of the central coast, which once protected these cities that became wealthy from the trade of the Mediterranean and the Sahara, house Tunisians going about their everyday lives in what, to the average foreigner's eye, looks like an elaborate and exotic Hollywood set. Each is distinctive: Sfax's is the least touched by tourism, Mahdia's looks like a Greek fishing village and is by far the most inviting, Sousse's is a shopping Mecca and Monastir's the birthplace and final resting place for the country's independence leader, Habib Bourguiba.

It is also Tunisia's Islamic heartland, with Kairouan ranking only behind Mecca, Medina and Jerusalem as one of the holiest cities of Islam. The well preserved colosseum of El-Jem rivals that of Rome's in terms of sheer size but may be an even more spectacular, and certainly more incongruous, sight. During the summer months the beach resorts along the Mediterranean become the holiday playground for what seems to be all of Europe.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Become part of the vast parade taking a sunset stroll along the promenade of Sousse's **Boujaffar Beach** (p191)
- Be rendered speechless standing in the middle of North Africa's most impressive Roman monument, El-Jem's awesome **colosseum** (p208)
- Breathe in the sea air while wandering the shady cobblestone streets of the charming medina at **Mahdia** (p211)
- Listen for the call to prayer in the holy Islamic city of **Kairouan** (p199)
- Indulge in the cosmopolitan luxury at the beach resort of **Port el-Kantaoui** (p195)
- Explore the bustling alleyways of the best medina in the country, to see how residents of these ancient cities live and work, in **Sfax** (p215)



History

The Sahel, the large coastal bulge between the Gulf of Hammamet and the Gulf of Gabès, has always been a battleground for other people's wars. Sousse, the home base of Hannibal in the Carthaginian battles against the Romans, again found itself on the losing side when Pompey made it his headquarters in his doomed civil war against Julius Caesar (based at Monastir). It was finally destroyed by the first wave of Islamic armies that swept across North Africa in the 7th century. These Islamic armies founded the holy city of Kairouan and ushered in the reign of Islamic dynasties, the most productive of which were the Aghlabids (who left a splendid architectural legacy in all of the coastal towns) and the Cairo-based Fatimids (whose mark can still be seen in Mahdia).

For some reason, the indigenous Berbers took umbrage at their traditional land being taken over by foreigners. Whether confronted with the Roman Empire from the north or the Islamic dynasties from the east, they fought them all, mounting rebellion after rebellion, one of which destroyed Kairouan. During another, they held out against vastly superior numbers in the colosseum of El-Jem.

In modern Tunisian history, Monastir is revered as the birthplace of the nation's founder, Habib Bourguiba.

Climate

Tunisia's central coast gets very hot in summer but you're never too far from a sea breeze. The further you go inland, the hotter it gets – Kairouan and El-Jem bake in summer, but can be quite cold in winter.

Getting There & Away

All the towns covered in this chapter are well-connected to the rest of the country by bus, louage (shared taxi) and (apart from Kairouan) train, which is easily the most comfortable and convenient mode of travel. Many buses heading north or south originate elsewhere and are often full by the time they arrive here.

Getting Around

Again, louage or train are the easiest ways to get around. There are no direct connections between Kairouan and either El-Jem



or Mahdia, while visiting El-Jem at sunset requires some planning (see the boxed text, p208).

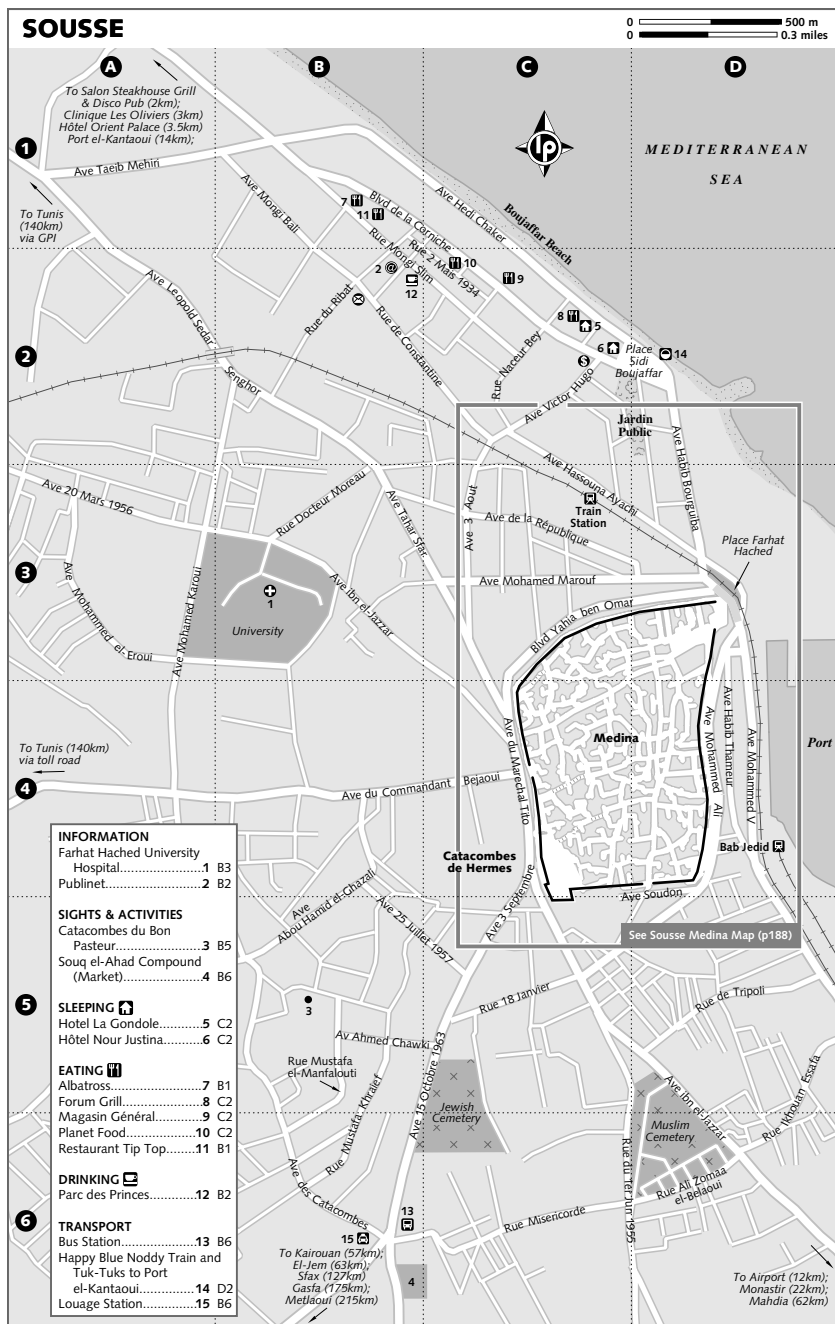
SOUSSE

pop 173,000

This raucous city – by Tunisian standards – doesn't make a great first impression. The city centre mix of modern high-rise buildings and derelict port do nothing to explain Sousse's popularity. However, once you're settled in and you've grabbed your beach towel, the seductive simplicity of the warm water, the soft sand and the ready availability of all manner of quick bites becomes apparent. Throw in a vibrant medina with several historical and religious sites and an enormous selection of hotels and it's easy to understand why Sousse is one of the country's most highly touted holiday destinations.

In the summer it feels like Europeans outnumber Tunisians. The dress code, especially for Tunisian women, is more liberal here than other parts of the country. During the day, the beach is packed with Tunisians and foreigners alike, but it's from

سوسة



early evening till late when Boujaffar Beach really comes alive and young people and families take part in a nightly ritual, essentially the equivalent of teenagers cruising up and down the strip.

The Ville Nouvelle streets are lined with hotels and restaurants. Inevitably shops in the medina cater more to tourists than to residents.

History

Founded in the 9th century BC as the Phoenician outpost of Hadrumète, Sousse fell under the sway of Carthage from the middle of the 6th century BC. The famous Carthaginian general Hannibal used the town as his base against the Romans in the final stages of the Second Punic War in 202 BC.

The town allied itself with Rome during the Third (and final) Punic War (see History, p24), but Hadrumète, as it became known, later chose the wrong side when it became Pompey's base during the Roman civil war, and suffered badly after his forces were defeated by Julius Caesar at the Battle of Thapsus in AD 46. Sousse's formidable defences proved of little use when it was levelled, wall and all, by Okba ibn Nafaa al-Fihri, falling to the Arabs in the late 7th century. Rebuilt as the Arab town of Soussa, it became the main port of the 9th-century Aghlabid dynasty based in Kairouan.

By the time the French arrived in 1881, it had declined to a modest settlement of just 8000 people.

Orientation

Life in Sousse revolves around two very different landscapes. The first is the medina, with its maze-like cobblestone streets containing many sights of historical and religious interest and a fair number of hotels. The second is Boujaffar Beach, running from just north of the port all of the way to Port el-Kantaoui and beyond. The pedestrian promenade that runs alongside ave Hedi Chaker and parallel to the beach is stop and go for much of the time during the summer months. Blvd de la Corniche is behind ave Hedi Chaker and is where many of the hotels, restaurants, banks and shops are found. Ave Habib Bourguiba connects the two different parts of Sousse to place Farhat Hached in the south and place Sidi Boujaffar in the north.

Information

INTERNET ACCESS

Publinet rue Remada (Map p188; 2nd fl, rue Remada; per hr TD2; ☎ 8am-midnight); Mongi Slim (Map p186; per hr TD2; ☎ 9.30am-midnight); ave Mohamed Maarouf (Map p188; per hr TD2; ☎ 8am-10pm Mon-Sat, noon-10pm Sun) The latter, near the post office is the largest and has the fastest connections.

MEDICAL SERVICES

Clinique Les Oliviers (☎ 73 242 711) North of town; it is more used to dealing with insurance forms.

Farhat Hached University Hospital (Map p186; ☎ 73 221 411; ave Ibn el-Jazzar) The city's main hospital, northwest of the medina.

MONEY

Almost all of Tunisia's banks have branches here; many are located along ave Habib Bourguiba and blvd de la Corniche and almost all have ATMs.

POST & TELEPHONE

There are quite a few Taxiphone offices around the city centre and along rue de la Corniche.

Main post office (Map p188; ave Mohamed Maarouf) Just up from place Farhat Hached.

TOURIST INFORMATION

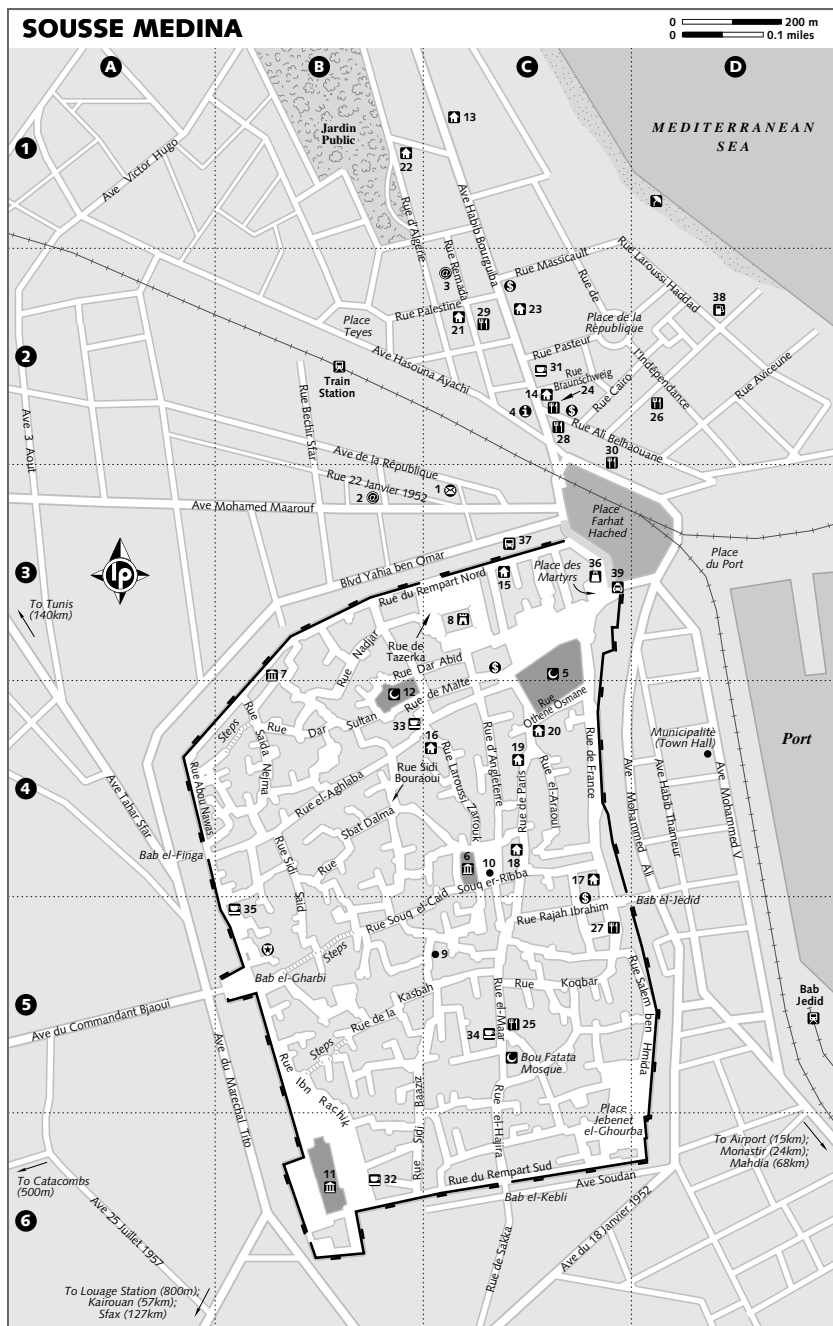
Tourist office (Map p188; ☎ 73 25 157; fax 73 224 262; 1 ave Habib Bourguiba; ☎ 7am-7pm Mon-Sat & 9am-noon Sun summer, 8.30am-1pm & 3-5.45pm Mon-Thu & 8.30am-1.30pm Fri & Sat winter) An unusually efficient branch, on the north side of place Farhat Hached. Has useful maps and a notice board with timetables for buses and trains and opening hours of local attractions. Staff speak a variety of languages, including English.

Sights & Activities

MEDINA

An attraction as stimulating as the beach is relaxing, Sousse's medina, outside the one in Tunis, probably has the most interesting combination of religious and historical monuments and lively commercial activity. Where one ends and the other begins is sometimes hard to discern.

The walls of Sousse's fine old medina stretch 2.25km at a height of 8m and are fortified with a series of solid square turrets. They were built by the Aghlabids in AD 859 on the foundations of the city's original Byzantine walls. Within the walls are 24 mosques (12 for men and 12 for women)



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GREAT MOSQUE

The **Great Mosque** (Map p188; admission TD1.1; ☎ 8am-2.30pm Sat-Thur, 8am-12.30pm Fri summer, 8am-2.30pm daily winter) is a typically austere Aghlabid affair. It was built, according to a Kufic (early Arabic) inscription in the courtyard, in AD 851 by a freed slave called Mudam, on the instructions of the Aghlabid ruler Abul Abbas. Mudam adapted an earlier kasbah (fort), which explains the mosque's turrets and crenellated wall, as well as its unusual location; the great mosque is usually sited in the centre of a medina. The mosque is also unusual in that it has no minaret; its proximity to the *ribat* (fortified Islamic monastery) meant that the latter's tower could be used to call the faithful to prayer. The structure underwent 17th-century modifications and 20th-century restoration.

Non-Muslims aren't allowed beyond the courtyard but from there you can see the grand barrel-vaulted prayer hall.

RIBAT

The **ribat** (Map p188; admission TD2.1, plus camera TD1; ☎ 8am-6pm summer, 8am-7pm winter) is northwest of the mosque and is the oldest monument in the medina, built in the final years of the 8th century AD.

The entrance is through a narrow arched doorway flanked by weathered columns salvaged from the ruins of Roman Hadrumetum. The small **antechamber** was the last line of the building's defences – from high above the columns, projectiles and boiling liquids were rained down on intruders. A vaulted passage opens out into a courtyard surrounded by porticos. The *ribat*, designed principally as a fort, was garrisoned by devout Islamic warriors who would divide their time between fighting and silent study of the Quran in the tiny, cell-like rooms built into the walls. The **prayer hall** on the first floor has an elegant vaulted ceiling and reflects this dual purpose with a simple *mihrab* (the prayer niche in the mosque wall that indicates the direction of Mecca, this is one of the oldest in North Africa) and fortified windows that were used by archers.

Scramble up the narrow 76-step spiral staircase of the *nador* (watch tower), which was added by the Aghlabids in AD 821, for unparalleled views over the medina up the

and a wealth of historical landmarks well worth seeking out.

The main entrance to the medina is at the northeastern corner at place des Martyrs. The area was created when Allied bombs blew away this section of the wall in 1943. Of the other gates, the most historically interesting is **Bab el-Finga** (*bab* means gate and *vinga* means blade in Arabic); the French set up their guillotine outside the gate.

hill to the kasbah and down into the courtyard of the Great Mosque.

ZAOUIA ZAKKAK

The splendid octagonal stone minaret belongs to the 17th-century **Zaouia Zakkak** (Map p188; cnr rue Dar Abid & rue de Tazerka), the medina's leading example of Ottoman architecture. Non-Muslims can do no more than admire from the street the minaret's wonderful blue-green stone and tile work, with its echoes of Andalusia.

SOFRA CISTERN

This great underground cistern (Map p188), once the medina's principle water supply, was created in the 11th century by enclosing a large Byzantine church. It's an eerie place with the columns of the church rising from the black waters. The entrance is on the northeastern side, but the battered old metal door is often locked.

SOUQ ER-RIBBA

This souq (market) is the closest Sousse comes to a medieval bazaar. The roof is unmistakably modern, yet the sales-pitch beneath it is age-old. Far from the tranquility of the southern medina, Souq er-Ribba (Map p188) forms the commercial heart of the medina. The place is a riot of colour, packed with haggling merchants, browsing tourists and barrow boys trying to squeeze through with their improbably overloaded carts. This is not the world's most evocative bazaar but worth exploring nonetheless.

KALAT EL-KOUBBA

The **Koubba** (a small domed tomb; Map p188; ☎ 73 229 574; rue Laroussi Zarrouk; admission TD2.1, plus camera/video TD1/3; ☎ 10am-1pm & 3-6pm summer, 10am-1pm & 4.30-7.30pm Sat-Thu winter) was an ancient *funduq* (caravanserai or inn) and the rooms surrounding the courtyard are now given over to mannequin displays of day-to-day life under the Ottomans. It's thought to have been built in the late 11th century AD. The most striking feature is the cupola with its remarkable zigzag ribbing; the fluted interior is also impressive.

SOUSSE ARCHAEOLOGICAL MUSEUM & KASBAH

Sousse's excellent archaeological museum (Map p188; ☎ 73 219 011; ave du Maréchal Tito; ad-

mission TD2.1, plus camera TD1; ☎ 9am-noon & 2-6pm Tue-Sun summer, 8am-noon & 3-7pm Tue-Sun winter) occupies the southern section of the kasbah.

One of the best collections of mosaics in the country is housed in the rooms around the kasbah's two main courtyards. The highlight is the room on the northern side of the entrance courtyard with exceptional exhibits, including the *Triumph of Bacchus*, which depicts the Roman god of wine riding in a chariot at the head of a parade of satyrs, as well as many superb fishing scenes. Other rooms contain a collection of funerary objects from a Punic grave beneath the museum and a resident artist demonstrating the patient and painstaking artistry of mosaic-making.

Standing at the high point of the medina, the kasbah was built onto the city walls in the 11th century. It incorporates the imposing square **Khalef tower**, built by the Aghlabids in AD 859 at the same time as the city walls, which superseded the *ribat* as the city's watchtower. It's now a lighthouse.

Note that there is no entrance from inside the medina walls.

MUSEUM DAR ESSID

This small, private museum (Map p188; ☎ 73 220 529; 65 rue du Remparts Nord; admission TD2, plus camera TD1; ☎ 10am-1pm & 3-6pm summer, 10am-7pm winter) is also not to be missed. In a quiet part of the medina, it occupies a beautiful old home, furnished in the style of a well-to-do 19th-century Sousse official and his family. The dimensions of the elaborately decorated, arched door are the first indication of the owner's status. It opens into a small anteroom for meeting strangers, and then into a tiled courtyard surrounded by the family rooms. A plaque in the courtyard reveals that the house was built in AD 928, making it one of the oldest in the medina. There's an extravagance reflected in the Andalusian tiled façades and items ranging from European antique furniture to traditional perfume bottles, from decorative plaster work to a 700-year-old wedding contract, and marble from Carrara in Italy. Check out the Roman lamp with the graphic depiction of a copulating couple; it's by the master bed to remind the husband to demonstrate his control and stamina until the lamp went out.

The upstairs area, reached by a heavily restored staircase, is the old servant's

quarters and there's a pleasant café with splendid panoramic views. It's a good place to catch the breeze.

CATACOMBS

The **catacombs** (Map p186; ave des Catacombes; admission TD1.1; ☎ 9am-noon & 2-6pm Tue-Sun summer, 8am-noon & 3-7pm winter) include an estimated 5.5km of tunnels containing the graves of more than 15,000 local Christians, mostly from the 4th and 5th centuries AD. The only section open to the public is about 100m of the Catacombes du Bon Pasteur, named after an engraving of the *bon pasteur* (good shepherd) found inside. Most of the graves have been bricked in; a few have glass fronts, revealing skeletal remains.

BOUJAFFAR BEACH

Sousse's **Boujaffar Beach** (Map p186), with its multikilometre stretch of high-rise hotels, cafés and restaurants, is the city's landmark. Named somewhat incongruously after a local Muslim holy man, the soft, sandy strip is a playground where families picnic, children frolic, foreigners sunbathe and the warm, calm waters of the Mediterranean is everyone's bathtub. Only a few small parts of the strip are claimed by beachfront hotels with chaise longues and parasols. Though these are usually not roped off, they are 'protected' by staff that generally looks kindly on foreigners while tending to treat rudely any Tunisians who wander through. Access to these areas is generally open to nonhotel guests for a small sum, however it's unlikely anyone will ask you for proof of residency. You'll find all sorts of water-sports equipment for hire along the beach. Don't leave valuables lying around unattended since petty theft is not unheard of.

In summer, the beachfront is packed with people sitting in the cooler evening air or strolling along the waterfront – a wonderful way to pass an evening.

MARKETS

Sousse's weekly market is held on Sunday in the **Souq el-Ahad compound** (Map p186) just south of the bus and louage stations. You'll find everything from handicrafts to livestock to souvenirs for the busloads of tourists.

There's another market (Hamman Sousse) *sans* tacky stuffed camels 5km northwest of the

city centre on Friday evenings and Saturday mornings.

Sleeping MEDINA

Hôtel Gabès (Map p188; ☎ 73 226 977; 12 rue de Paris; mattress on roof TD5, s/d TD9/15) If sleeping under the stars surrounded by an ancient medina sounds appealing, then the Gabès is for you. Otherwise the basic and ordinary rooms with shared facilities aren't much.

Hôtel el-Aghlaba (Map p188; ☎ 73 211 024; rue Laroussi Zarrouk; s/d/tr TD8/12/15) This medina cheapie should really only be considered as a last resort since the bare-bones rooms are reminiscent of prison cells and the bathroom facilities are shared.

Hôtel de Paris (Map p188; ☎ 73 220 564; fax 73 219 038; 15 rue du Rempart Nord; s/d TD14/22) The Paris has small and sparse rooms with shared facilities, which is a shame since the sunny terrace has excellent views of the medina. There's a good restaurant attached on the ground floor.

Hôtel Ezzouhour (Map p188; ☎ 73 228 729; 48 rue de Paris; d TD15) Duck into the entrance and up the stairway to the reception area of the Ezzouhour and you'll think you've entered the living room of a private villa. Walk up the stairs to the basic rooms and you'll think you've entered a 'short-time' hotel. Some of the rooms have showers but bathrooms are all shared.

Hôtel Emira (Map p188; ☎ 73 226 325; 52 rue de France; s/d TD22/30) Easily the best of the medina hotels, the quality of the rooms at the Emira rivals those of top-end places in terms of sheer appeal. Brightly painted and done up with gleaming blue tiles, even rooms have balconies, though views of nothing. Fans are available and breakfast is included.

Hôtel Medina (Map p188; ☎ 73 221 722; fax 73 221 794; 15 rue Othene Osmane; s/d TD30/45; ☎) On a shady corner opposite the Great Mosque, this hotel would be an excellent choice though on our visit the scowling manager made it less so. This is unfortunate since the motel-style rooms are large, bright and comfortable and even have fair-sized balconies. Fan rooms are cheaper.

CITY CENTRE & ZONE TOURISTIQUE

The beachfront north of Sousse has been entirely taken over by massive hotel complexes, virtual city-states unto themselves.

Most are booked out in summer, and don't quite know what to do with walk-in guests. Cheap deals can be found in winter. Prices include breakfast and almost all offer half-board and full-board rates. All of the following hotels are located in the city centre.

Hôtel Residence Monia (Map p188; ☎ /fax 73 210 469; rue Remada; s/d TD28/50; 🍷) On a small side street only a block from ave Habib Bourguiba, the Monia is likely the best option in this price range though you won't exactly feel you're on a beach holiday staying here. The rooms are clean and modern, if a little dark, but the friendly and personable staff makes up for any shortcomings. Breakfast is served in a pleasant little nook on the ground floor.

Hôtel Claridge (Map p188; ☎ 73 224 759; fax 73 227 277; 10 ave Habib Bourguiba; s/d TD30/45; 🍷) It's hard to know what to make of the Claridge, occupying one of the busiest intersections in the city only a block or two from both the medina and the beach. The large rooms have ornate high ceilings but fraying furniture, faux marble floors, little balconies with alleyway views and exposed showers in the rooms but shared toilets in the hallways.

Hotel Sousse Azur (Map p188; ☎ 73 227 760; fax 73 228 145; 5 rue Amilcar; s/d with TV TD43/64; 🍷) This hotel is good value in the winter when its rates drop substantially, otherwise the room rates are a bit high for a hotel several blocks from the beach. The rooms are a little stuffy and the high-school-cafeteria-style tile floors not the best choice, though it is professionally run and some of the rooms have balconies. The rooftop terraces have good views.

Hôtel Nour Justina (Map p186; ☎ 73 227 189; fax 73 225 993; 4 ave Hedi Chaker; s/d TD50/85; 🍷) Popular with Eastern European package tourists, the Nour Justina doesn't make a good first impression. The front-desk staff makes you feel like you're being hustled and the street-side pool seems like an afterthought. However, the large and nicely decorated rooms are worth the hassles. Ones with balconies and amazing sea views cost the same as others.

Hotel La Gondole (Map p186; ☎ 73 214 500; la.gondole@planet.tn; ave Hedi Chaker; r TD70/100; 🍷) A professionally run high-rise, La Gondole feels more like a business hotel than a beach resort with modern, comfortable

and well kept rooms. There's no pool and no sea views.

Hôtel Abou Nawas Boujaffar (Map p188; ☎ 73 226 030; www.abounawas.com; ave Habib Bourguiba; s/d TD100/146; 🍷 🍷) A *zone touristique*-style hotel in the centre of the city, the Abou Nawas, as the name indicates, is also directly on the beach. It's an enormous complex with a few restaurants and bars and a health centre.

Hotel Sousse Palace (Map p188; ☎ 73 219 220; www.soussepalace.com; ave Habib Bourguiba; s/d TD111/160; 🍷 🍷) Typical of four-star hotels in Tunisia, room décor receives little attention here compared to the time it must have taken to find the perfect red-leather swivel bar chairs to match the dull red carpet. The Sousse Palace does have more facilities than a cruise ship, and like a low-end Club Med, staff patrol the pool and private beach areas, usually for young foreign women, looking for participants for impromptu aerobics classes and volleyball games. Low season discounts (singles/doubles TD36/52) are a steal.

Hôtel Orient Palace (☎ 73 241 888; fax 73 243 345; s/d TD155/200; 🍷 🍷) The further north you go from the city centre, the bigger and generally more upmarket the hotels become, culminating in this five-star hotel, 4km north of town.

Eating

Most of the beachfront area restaurants cater to tourists and have English menus with inflated prices. It's almost impossible to stay away from all of these, and while the food is usually nothing special, they are pleasant enough. The further inland you go from the beach, the more likely you are to find a place that's strictly for locals.

RESTAURANTS

You'll find half a dozen restaurants with outdoor seating bunched together on the northern side of place Farhat Hached, all advertising very similar menus at similar prices (mains TD6). There are two good cheap basic eateries (meals TD4) on either side of Hôtel Residence Monia on rue Remada. There are several *gelaterias* along ave Habib Bourguiba, perfect but temporary antidotes for the summer heat.

Caracas (Map p188; rue Ali Belhaouane; mains TD4; 🍷) One of the better places to eat in the city centre, frequented by young and hip

Tunisians, Caracas is built to resemble some version of the Latin American city. Well, there are faux stone walls and colonial archways but it's a modern restaurant with TVs tuned to Arab language music videos. The eclectic menu has everything from pizza to deli sandwiches and Tunisian and western standards. The enormous chicken omelette (TD4) is a meal unto itself.

Forum Grill (Map p186; ☎ 73 228 399; ave Hedi Chaker; mains TD4.5-9) This is a beachfront tourist restaurant that is nevertheless not a bad option since the service is friendly and it has a large, eclectic menu.

Planet Food (Map p186; Blvd de la Corniche; mains TD5) For homesick Americans, this Planet Hollywood imitator should do the trick. From the movie posters to the headshots of famous actors to the TVs playing movies and videos, Planet Food is all American. However, it's Tunisians who mostly come here, young people on dates and families enjoying the enormous menu at cheaper prices than the tourist traps. Pizzas (TD5), hamburgers (TD1.9), fish, chicken, salads etc are served. Paella for two (TD18) is delicious. Until the kinks are worked out don't be surprised if the service is desultory.

Dodo Restaurant (Map p188; rue el-Maar; mains TD5) This, the most modern of the medina restaurants, is a bit of a surprise. Surrounded by the clutter of commerce, the Dodo is a little bit of a refuge though it is expensive by medina standards. Pizzas and Tunisian meat dishes are on the menu.

Restaurant Du Peuple (Map p188; rue de Rempart Nord; mains TD5) The owner of this little medina restaurant has the tourist trade cornered and rightly so. Hearty meat and couscous dishes are served off an assembly line, and

tea and watermelon come free with dessert. It's a bright and pleasant spot just inside the medina walls next to the Hôtel de Paris.

Restaurant Tip Top (Map p186; ☎ 73 226 158; 73 Blvd de la Corniche; mains TD8) Tip Top is your standard tourist restaurant though it seems to be more popular than others, possibly because its street-side touting waiters are more vocal. The seafood is good though expensive (TD15).

Albatross (Map p186; ☎ 73 228 430; Blvd de la Corniche; mains TD10) Just past Tip Top is the Albatross, another of the tourist-class restaurants that spend a great deal of attention on translating the menu and dressing the waiters in uniforms, and give at least a few nods in the direction of elegance, but that serve up unspectacular Tunisian and continental fare. Pizzas are good (TD5).

Restaurant Marmite (Map p188; ☎ 73 226 728; 8 rue Remada; mains TD12) Across from the Hôtel Residence Monia, this posh, at least as far as cost goes, restaurant serves up seafood and other Tunisian fare for around TD20 per person, plus wine. A *marmite*, by the way, in Tunisia is a large urn-shaped cooking pot.

Saloon Steakhouse Grill & Disco Pub (mains TD16) If you've ever wanted to eat on what appears to be the movie set for an American western in Tunisia, then this surreal restaurant around 2km from the Ville Nouvelle should not be missed. Hearty steaks are the deserved speciality though you have to pay extra for the custom sauces.

SELF-CATERING

The **Magasin Général** (Map p188; blvd Abdelhamid el-Kahdi) is the best supermarket with a good selection of Tunisian wine. There's another

JASMINE – IT'S A BOY THING

Sitting in any restaurant in Sousse can involve saying no to a seemingly endless stream of men selling jasmine. Any look around will tell you that the main buyers aren't tourists but other Tunisian men.

According to some locals, there's a strict delineation of how to wear your jasmine. If you wear it behind your left ear, you have a girlfriend and want to advertise that happy fact to the world. Wear it in the right ear and chances are that you don't have a girlfriend but would very much like one. Some men buy the jasmine as a gift for women. If they accept the gift, many women will wear it on their shirt or collar, although solely for decorative purposes, not to signify anything.

Of course not all Tunisians agree that the humble jasmine carries such weighty significance. The most common reason given to us by Tunisian men was the simple and unarguable 'because it smells nice'.

branch at rue de la Corniche. There is also a **Monoprix supermarket** (Map p188; cnr ave Habib Bourguiba & rue Ali Belhouane).

The main produce markets are in the medina, just inside the Bab el-Jedid.

Drinking

Coffeehouses or restaurants with outdoor street-side seating are chock-a-block along ave Habib Bourguiba. Most restaurants here serve alcohol, and the only habitable nightclubs are in the big hotels far out in the Zone Touristique.

Café Theatre Municipal (Map p188; ave Habib Bourguiba) This is one especially good café. Squeezed into the street corner next to the theatre, which at the time of research was undergoing renovations, it boasts one of the prime people watching spots in the city.

Parc des Princes (Map p186; rue Mongi Slim) This is a strictly Tunisian affair for soccer fanatics; TV's play important matches of the day.

There is a bunch of good coffeehouses in the medina including **Café Sidi Bouraoui** (Map p188; rue el-Aghlaba) and **Café Yasmine** (rue el-Maar). **Restaurant-Café Seles** (Map p188; rue Abou Nawas) is a cosy little spot with cushion benches, perfect for a drink or food. And **Café des Nomades** (Map p188; rue Ibn Rachik) is another small inviting spot like the Seles in the very southwestern corner of the medina below the kasbah.

Shopping

The Sousse medina is one of the most convenient places to shop in all of Tunisia. Besides an enormous array of traditional shops, and souvenir shops that operate on the barter system, there are many price-fixed centres scattered around the medina and along blvd de la Corniche in the Ville Nouvelle.

Soula Shopping Centre (Map p188; place des Martyrs; ☎ 8.30am-10pm) Placed at the entrance to the medina, this mega four-storey complex is probably the largest price-fixed centre in the country. Most credit cards are accepted.

Getting There & Away

AIR

Sousse is served by Monastir's airport 15km to the southeast, but only by international flights. There's a **Tunisair** office (Map p188; ☎ 73 227 955; 5 ave Habib Bourguiba).

BUS

Buses leave from the **bus stop** (Map p188; blvd Yahia ben Omar), just outside the medina, heading for Monastir (bus 52, TD0.85, 40 minutes, every 30 minutes), Mahdia (TD2.5, 1½ hours, every 45 minutes) and Port el-Kantaoui (bus 12 and 18, TD0.5, 20 minutes, every 30 minutes).

Buses to all other destinations depart from the new **bus station** (Map p186; Souq el-Ahad), 800m southwest of the medina.

Destination	Fare (per day)	Duration	Frequency
Douz	TD16.9	6½hr	2
El-Jem	TD3.2	1¼hr	8
Gabès	TD11.8	4¼hr	8
Hammamet	TD5	1½hr	2
Jerba	TD17	7hr	2
Kairouan	TD4.5	1½hr	2
Kebili	TD16.6	6hr	2
Nabeul	TD5.5	2hr	3
Sfax	TD7	2½hr	8
Tozeur	TD15.7	5¾hr	1
Tunis	TD7.4	2½hr	8

There are also local buses to Kairouan from the new bus station (TD3) every 30 minutes from 6am to 7pm.

SRTG Nabeul operates three services a day to Hammamet (TD3.8, 1½ hours) and Nabeul (TD4.4, two hours). These depart from the bus stop located just outside the medina.

LOUAGE

The **louage station** (Map p186; rue 1 Juin 1955) is about a kilometre south of the medina in a large warehouse-like space. Major destinations include El-Jem (TD3.3), Hammamet (TD4.8), Kairouan (TD4), Mahdia (TD3.4), Monastir (TD1.7), Sfax (TD6.3) and Tunis (TD7). Tickets can be purchased from the modern ticket office inside.

TRAIN & MÉTRO

The mainline station is conveniently central. There are 10 trains a day north to Tunis (TD8.6, 2¼ hours) and six to Nabeul (2nd/1st class TD3.4/4.5). There's only one convenient departure time (8.01am) for Sfax (1¼ hours) and Gabès (3¼ hours). The only train to Gafsa (5¾ hours) and Metlaoui (6¼ hours) departs at 11.23pm.

The métro, essentially decommissioned train cars, connects Sousse to the airport, Monastir (TD1, 40 minutes), Mahdia (TD3, 1¾ hours) and hotels in between. Trains depart from the Bab el-Jedid station near the southeastern corner of the medina every 45 minutes or so from 6am to 9pm.

Getting Around

TO/FROM THE AIRPORT

The airport is 15km south of town, TD8 by taxi from the town centre. You can also get there by métro (TD1, 20 minutes). From Sousse there are 20 métro departures between 6am and 9pm, whereas services from the airport start around 5am.

BUS

The local bus network operates from the **bus stop** (Blvd Yahia ben Omar) just north of the medina. Useful services include buses 8, 21 and 22, which all travel past the bus and louage stations at Souq el-Ahad (280 mills).

TAXI

There are lots of taxis, particularly in the main tourist areas; you'll struggle to run up a fare of more than TD3 around the city. There's a **taxi rank** (Map p188; place des Martyrs) at the entrance to the medina.

TRAIN & TUK-TUK

The easiest way to get from Sousse to Port el-Kantaoui is to take one of the 'Happy Noddy Trains' that run up and down the main road of the tourist strip. They go from the northern end of ave Habib Bourguiba to Port el-Kantaoui, 14km to the north. Trains are colour-coded (with a round-trip ticket you must return on the same 'colour' train) and leave every 15 minutes from 9am to 11pm in summer and to 6pm in winter. The fare is TD3.5/2.5 one way per adult/child and TD5/4 return. From the same point, five-wheel motorcycle 'tuk-tuks' (one way/return TD2/3) do the same journey quicker and cheaper although you may need to wait as they won't depart with less than five passengers.

AROUND SOUSSE

Port el-Kantaoui

عناء القطاوي

You may experience a feeling of dislocation walking around the Andalusian-style marina complex at Port el-Kantaoui. After all, it's a familiar yet strange combination

of the southern California mall, the Italian *piazza* and the Tunisian *zone touristique*. To say it's inauthentic and artificial is beside the point. It's meant to be and that's what Tunisians and others like about it. Grafted onto the coast 14km north of Sousse and advertised as 'the pleasure port of the Mediterranean', it's an expansive and classy custom-built village of hotels, restaurants and souvenir shops clustered around a large yachting harbour. Many visitors spend their entire holiday here without leaving. For those staying in Sousse, it's a convenient side trip. The beach north of the marina is nicer than Boujaffar Beach in Sousse and inevitably less crowded as most sunbathers here are guests of one of the luxury hotels. In addition, there are mock **pirate ships**, **glass-bottom boats**, **charter fishing trips**, **diving schools** (from TD20 per dive, around TD300 for a course), floating restaurants, banks, international newspapers, an **aromatic garden and zoo** (admission TD2.5), two quality 18-hole **golf courses** (around TD100 incl club hire), nightclubs and **amusement parks** (admission TD7 to TD12) for children and the young-at-heart. If the waters of the Mediterranean are too calm for you, it's only a short walk to the **Acqua Palace** (☎ 73 348 855; www.acquapalace.com; rue des Palmiers; adult/child TD12.5/7.5; ☎ 9.30am-6pm May-Oct), a nearby water park with slides and wave pools. Look for signs by the Happy Noddy Train stop across the road from the entrance to the marina complex.

The price for all this is high and hotels here cater to high-end package tour groups. Rates can be prohibitive (and, in summer, rooms unavailable) for the independent traveller though it's still worth a visit if you're in the area. The food spans the full range of European and local cuisine and the atmosphere is thoroughly multinational. Depending on your perspective, you'll feel like you've stumbled onto a movie set or found the last word in luxury.

SLEEPING & EATING

Hotels stretch for miles north of the marina area and the further you go the better, or at least less crowded, the beach tends to be. Most places are of higher quality than their counterparts in Sousse.

Hannibal Palace (☎ 73 348 577; fax 73 348 321; s/d TD141/196; ☎ ☎) This is the closest five-star

place to the marina (around 200m), one of the original Port el-Kantaoui hotels.

There are plenty of other options.

Hadstrubal (☎ 73 348 944; fax 73 348 969; s/d TD112/160; 🚗 🚗) Just south of Hannibal Palace, with a beachfront that tends to be quieter than the hotels on the northern side of the marina.

Les Maisons de la Mer (☎ 73 348 799; fax 73 348 961; 2/4/6 persons TD90/130/160; 🚗 🚗) For self-catering apartments.

Marhaba Palace (☎ 73 347 071; fax 73 347 077; s/d TD112/160; 🚗 🚗)

Meliá El Mouradi Palm Marina (☎ 73 246 900; info.palmmarina@elmouradi.com) A five-star north of the golf course.

Sol Club El Kantaoui (☎ 73 348 450; info.clubkantaooui@elmouradi.com) A four-star resort.

All of the hotels have their own restaurants, most have more than one, plus a bar and sometimes a disco. The marina complex itself is filled with restaurants and cafés; most are indistinguishable from one another and offer the same level of service and food. Some seem to justify their higher prices simply if they have tablecloths and fancier signs.

The choice of where to eat is more a question of price and ambience; wander around until one takes your fancy. Not everything is pricey, in fact there are several marina restaurants that serve sandwiches and mains for less than TD5. At the higher-end places expect to pay more than TD20 per person plus drinks. **Les Emirs** (☎ 73 240 865; marina) and **Misk Elili** (☎ 73 348 952) come recommended.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

There are ample transport options to/from Sousse – see p195 for details.

From Port el-Kantaoui, all buses, tuk-tuks and ‘noddy trains’ leave from the station around 150m west of the marina.

MONASTIR

pop 71,500

Possessing neither the cosmopolitanism of Sousse and Port el-Kantaoui, its neighbours to the north, nor the picturesque charm of Mahdia to the south, Monastir is a little like the disadvantaged stepchild of the central coast resorts. It does have an imposing well preserved *ribat*, the Mausoleum of Habib Bourguiba and a horseshoe-shaped municipi-

pal beach. The inevitable Zone Touristique is even less integrated into Monastir proper than in other coastal towns, however this also means Monastir retains its character and pace more so than other beach towns.

History

Monastir was founded as the Phoenician trading settlement of Rous, living then (as now) in the shadow of its larger and more illustrious neighbour, Hadrumète (Sousse).

It briefly took the limelight in AD 46 when Julius Caesar based himself here before defeating Sousse-based Pompey at the Battle of Thapsus, the decisive moment of the Roman civil war. It subsequently became the Roman town of Ruspina.

Two millennia later, Habib Bourguiba was born here and lived on the outskirts of town until his death in April 2000.

Information

INTERNET ACCESS

Publinet Pubinet La Gare (train station entrance; ☎ 8am-8pm; per hr TD2); ave Farhat Hached (☎ 8am-midnight; per hr TD2)

MONEY

There are branches of all the major banks on and around place du 3 Septembre 1934, including the **Banque du Tunisie** (place du 3 Septembre 1934), which has an ATM, as does the **STB** (place du Gouvernorat).

POST & TELEPHONE

There are Telephone offices all around the town centre.

Main post office (ave Habib Bourguiba) Just south of the medina.

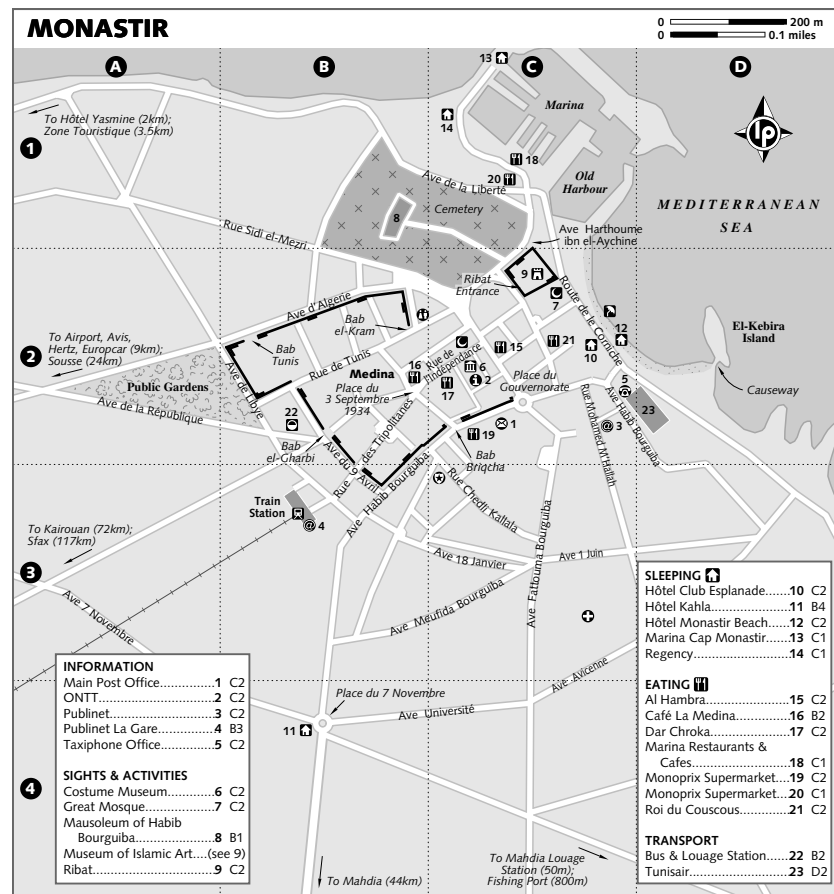
TOURIST INFORMATION

ONTT tourist office (☎ 73 461 960; rue de l'Indépendance; ☎ 8am-1pm & 3-5.45pm Mon-Thu, 8.30am-1.30pm Fri & Sat) Opposite the Bourguiba Mosque.

Sights & Activities

MEDINA

Monastir's medina was largely demolished after independence in an ill-considered rush to modernise the town in keeping with its status as the birthplace of the president. Thankfully the *ribat* (see opposite) survived, as did the **Great Mosque**. Built in the 9th century, it's a severe Aghlabid creation, apart from the graceful horseshoe arches at



INFORMATION	
Main Post Office.....	1 C2
ONTT.....	2 C2
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Great Mosque.....	7 C2
Mausoleum of Habib Bourguiba.....	8 B1
Museum of Islamic Art.....(see 9)	
Ribat.....	9 C2

SLEEPING	
Hôtel Club Esplanade.....	10 C2
Hôtel Kahla.....	11 B4
Hôtel Monastir Beach.....	12 C2
Marina Cap Monastir.....	13 C1
Regency.....	14 C1
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Al Hambra.....	15 C2
Café La Medina.....	16 B2
Dar Chroka.....	17 C2
Marina Restaurants & Cafes.....	18 C1
Monoprix Supermarket.....	19 C2
Monoprix Supermarket.....	20 C1
Roi du Couscous.....	21 C2
TRANSPORT	
Bus & Lounge Station.....	22 B2
Tunisair.....	23 D2

the northern end. The Roman columns supporting these arches and those of the prayer hall (closed to non-Muslims) were salvaged from the ruins of ancient Ruspina.

The **walls** in the western part of the medina remain largely intact and are dotted with some interesting old gates. The finest is **Bab el-Gharbi**, at the centre of the western wall. It was built by the Hafsids in the 15th century. **Bab Tunis**, in the northwestern corner, was built in 1780 while the main southern gate, **Bab Briqcha**, was built by the Ottomans at the end of the 17th century.

The **Costume Museum** (rue de l'Indépendance; admission TD1.1; ☎ 9am-1pm & 3-7pm Tue-Sat summer, 9am-4pm winter) is around the corner from the tourist office and worth a quick look.

RIBAT

Monastir's star attraction is its immaculately preserved **ribat complex** (admission TD2.1, plus camera TD1; ☎ 8am-7pm summer, 8.30am-5.30pm winter), regarded as the country's finest example of Islamic military architecture. Its seemingly chaotic design with labyrinthine passageways and staircases is a legacy of the *ribat*'s many periods of construction and renovation. The consequence is an evocative structure devoid of any uniformity.

The original *ribat*, known as the Ribat de Harthama, was built in AD 796. Its original scope would have occupied only the central courtyard and museum area. The oldest remaining sections (though heavily restored) include the *nador* and the area around its

base, all of which date from the 8th to 10th centuries.

The walls as they currently appear were begun by the Aghlabids at the end of the 9th century and completed in the 11th century. They contained built-in accommodation for defenders and the small courtyard behind the museum is known as the women's *ribat*, with its own prayer room and accommodation. The walls have been remodelled many times since, notably in the 17th century when the octagonal corner towers were added.

There are excellent views of the town and the coastline from the ramparts and the top of the *nador*; those suffering from vertigo should tread carefully.

The *ribat*'s prayer room houses a **Museum of Islamic Art** (☎ Tue-Sun). Apart from early Arab coins and pottery, the collection includes an interesting map of Monastir's medina before independence and early photos of the town.

And if it all looks familiar, that's because the complex is a great favourite of film directors in search of accessible Islamic architecture. Many scenes from *Monty Python's Life of Brian* were filmed here, including hundreds of Tunisian extras laughing at Biggus Dickus. Franco Zeffirelli also came here to shoot scenes for his *Life of Christ*, and Monastir again became Jerusalem in *Jesus of Nazareth*.

BEACHES

Backed not by palm trees, lush vegetation or mountains, the beach at Monastir nonetheless has a dramatic setting. After all, you emerge from the water confronted by the centuries-old *ribat*. During the summer months locals flock to the beach leaving little room to spread a towel. There's a smaller, quieter beach immediately south-east of El-Kebira Island.

The beaches west of town are dominated by the resort hotels of the Zone Touristique.

MAUSOLEUM OF HABIB BOURGUIBA

The **Mausoleum of Habib Bourguiba** (admission free; ☎ 2-4.30pm Mon-Thu, 9am-4.30pm Fri & Sat, to 6pm summer) and his family is a must-see. Reached via a long, paved walkway, the gold-and-green cupolas are superb as are the marble courtyard, green-tiled arches and elegant eastern

door. The mausoleum houses tombs of the family and a small display of items that belonged to the great man. If it's open, climb the small staircase on the southern side of the building to a 1st floor interior balcony from where you can appreciate the full extravagance of the mausoleum's interior.

Opening times can be erratic and shorts aren't permitted. If the main gate is closed, walk around the fence to the small gate on the northern side.

Sleeping

The *zone touristique* hotels are strung out along the beaches west of town all the way from Monastir to Skanes, 8km away. Like other resort hotels, Monastir's are self-contained complexes and provide little motivation for guests to leave.

Hôtel Monastir Beach (☎ 73 464 766; monastir.beach@yahoo.com; s/d with fan TD27/40, with air-con TD32/45; ☎) Bringing new meaning to the expression 'beachfront property,' this hotel is strung out in a shallow niche below the cornice. Every room has large French doors that open out onto the frenzied crowds only a few feet away. Age and the salt air have taken their toll on the furnishings but the rooms are large and provide an interesting alternative for beach-minded travellers priced out of the Zone Touristique.

Hôtel Yasmine (☎ 73 501 546; route de la Falaise; s/d TD40/60) This family-run pension 2km north of town has charming and simple rooms; some have private shower and toilet while others share the latter. Sea-view rooms have balconies.

Hôtel Club Esplanade (☎ 73 461 146; hotel.lac@planet.tn; route de la Corniche; s/d TD45/70; ☎) This is a three-storey complex whose brochure was made in another century; fortunately the rooms aren't as dated, though they're in need of attention. It is centrally located and sea-view rooms have balconies.

Marina Cap Monastir (☎ 73 462 305; marina@planet.tn; Marina complex; d TD106, 4-/6-/8-bed apartments TD115/133/172; ☎) The reception for this low-slung complex is all of the way in the back, past the yacht-filled harbour and all of the restaurants. The simple and modern rooms are good for groups or families though it's far from the luxury of Port el-Kantaoui.

Regency (☎ 73 460 033; Marina complex; s/d TD150/225; ☎) This luxury resort is so

exclusive that it's doubtful they even take walk-in guests. Everyone seems to have booked through a French travel agency. If you can find your way here, you'll be satisfied with modern and posh luxury and all the facilities you'd expect. It has a Club Med feel and is good for families. There's a small private beach in front of the resort.

Eating

Several of Monastir's best restaurants are clustered together out at the marina. They're all good and it's a matter of ambience and budget; most are not cheap.

Roi du Couscous (mains TD3.5) On the beach side of place du Gouvernorat, this locally popular restaurant, if not quite the king of couscous, is at least Monastir royalty.

Al Hembra (☎ 73 465 358; rue Sidi el-Mezri; mains TD5) The nicest place to eat in Monastir proper, Al Hembra is highly recommended. From the outdoor patio seating to the stylish indoor dining room, it has a European feel to it. The service is excellent and the menu includes large pasta dishes, pizza, salads, steaks and especially seafood.

Dar Chakra (off rue de l'Indépendance; mains TD5) Inside a quiet courtyard across from the tourism office and housed in an old mansion, Dar Chakra is an atmospheric place to eat. There are also tables set outside on the patio. The calamari and grilled fish are specialties.

Café La Medina (place du 3 Septembre 1934) This popular place on an interesting intersection in the middle of the medina is good for a drink, snack or full meal. The *briqs* (crispy pastries with a variety of different fillings; TD1.6) are a bargain and there's a choice of salads, pizzas and meat dishes.

Self-caterers can head to the Monoprix supermarket, next to the post office in the front of the marina complex, or the even nicer one outside one of the gates to the medina on ave Habib Bourguiba.

Getting There & Away

AIR

Monastir's airport handles a lot of international traffic, but no domestic flights. It's the primary gateway for charter flights handling tourists booked at resorts in *zone touristiques* up and down the coast.

There's a **Tunisair** (☎ 73 468 189; route de la Corniche) office in the Habib Complex.

BUS

The bus station is at the western edge of the medina. There are services to Sousse (TD1.3, 30 minutes) every 30 minutes and to Mahdia (TD1.8, one hour) hourly.

CAR

Avis (☎ 73 521 031), **Europcar** (☎ 73 520 799) and **Hertz** (☎ 73 521 300) are all based at Monastir's airport.

LOUAGE

Louages to Sousse (TD1.2), Kairouan (TD4.4) and Tunis (TD7.5) leave from next to the bus station. Louages to Mahdia leave from their own station on the southeastern side of town.

TRAIN

There are 16 trains a day (less often in winter) to Sousse (TD1, 30 minutes) and eight to Mahdia (TD1.7, one hour).

There's also one train a day to Tunis (2nd/1st class TD8.5/11, three hours).

Getting Around

TO/FROM THE AIRPORT

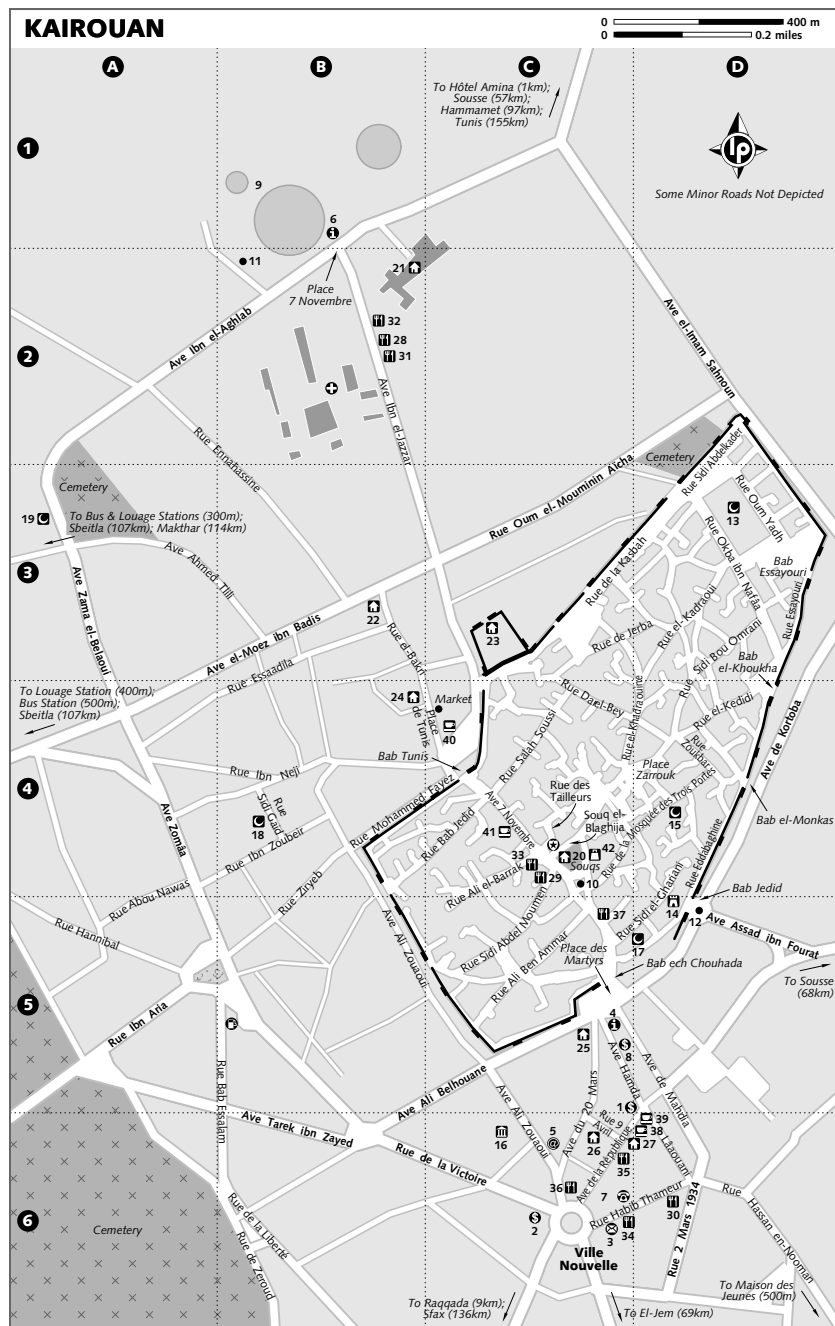
Monastir's **airport** (☎ 73 460 300) is at Skanes, 9km west of town on the road to Sousse. The trip costs about TD4.5 by taxi from the town centre. You can also get to the airport on any of the trains between Monastir and Sousse; L'Aéroport station is 200m from the airport terminal.

KAIROUAN

pop 118,000

Considered the fourth holiest site in Islam because of the presence of the Great Mosque, the oldest in North Africa, Kairouan feels far removed from the relative hedonism of the beach resorts to the east. Unlike many of the cities and towns in the region that cultivate tourism as an industry, Kairouan seems able to absorb the busloads of day-trippers and retain its conservative, low-key relationship to outsiders. Besides the religious significance, the medina is an interesting and beautiful place to wander, especially in the late afternoon when the sun creates shadows, highlighting the charming and ornate doors, and the blue-and-green window shutters and balconies. Kairouan has always been a place of travellers, whether here for trade or the purposes

القيروان



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BIAT.....	2 C6	Zaouia of Sidi Amor Abbada.....	18 B4	Restaurant de la Jeunesse.....	33 C4
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Entrance to Aghlabid Basins.....	11 B2	Gelateria Italiana.....	28 B2		
Giant Anchors.....	12 D5	Outdoor Patisserie Stalls.....	29 C4		
Great Mosque.....	13 D3	Pâtisserie Rabaoui Kairouan.....	30 D6		
Maison du Gouverneur.....	14 D5				
Mosque of the Three Doors.....	15 D4				

of pilgrimage, a city accustomed to strange people from far-off lands. There's something fundamentally Tunisian about the place – Islamic to its core and with deep roots in tradition, but adapted to the commercial necessities of the modern world.

History

It was in Kairouan that Islam gained its first foothold in the Maghreb. The original Arab settlement lasted only a few years before it was destroyed by a Berber rebellion. It was re-established in AD 694 by Hassan ibn Nooman and has been Islamic ever since.

The city's golden age began when it became the capital of the Aghlabid dynasty in AD 797. Although they preferred to rule from their palace at Raqqada, 9km south of Kairouan, it was the Aghlabids who endowed the city with its most important historic buildings, most notably the Great Mosque.

Kairouan fell to the Fatimids in AD 909, and declined after the capital was moved to Mahdia. Its fortunes hit rock bottom

when it was sacked in 1057 during the Hilarian invasions (p185). It never regained its position of political pre-eminence but it retained its significance as a seat of Islamic scholarship and a holy city of Islam.

Orientation

Life in Kairouan revolves around the medina at the centre of town and the Ville Nouvelle to the south. The two meet at the large open space (place des Martyrs) outside the medina's main southern gate, the Bab ech Chouhada. The medina's principal street, ave 7 Novembre, runs northwest from here to the main northern gate, Bab Tunis.

Information

INTERNET ACCESS

Publinet Hôtel el-Menema (per hr TD1.5; ☎ 8am-10pm);
ave Ali Zouaoui (per hr TD2; ☎ 8am-midnight)

MONEY

There are branches of all the major banks on the streets south of place des Martyrs.

THE FOUNDING OF KAIROUAN

The origins of many cities in North Africa (eg Ghadames in neighbouring Libya) centre on the chance discovery of wells. As a modern traveller on the barren plains of the Maghreb, you'll appreciate why such sites were chosen for cities. But Kairouan was different.

Kairouan was founded in AD 670 by the Arab general Okba ibn Nafaa al-Fihri and takes its name from the Arabic word *qayrawan*, meaning 'military camp'. According to legend, the site for the city was chosen after Okba's horse stumbled on a golden goblet that lay buried in the sands. The goblet turned out to be one that had mysteriously disappeared from Mecca some years previously. When it was picked up, water sprang from the ground – supplied, it was concluded, by the same source that supplied the holy well of Zem-Zem in Mecca. Legend has it that the well survives at Bir Barouta, in the heart of the medina (p203).

Banque du Tunisie (cnr aves de la République & Hamda Lâouani) ATM.

BIAT (rue de la Victoire) ATM.

UIB (ave Hamda Lâouani) Near place des Martyrs; ATM.

POST & TELEPHONE

Taxiphone offices are everywhere. The main post office is southwest of Bab ech Chouhada.

TOURIST INFORMATION

ONTT tourist office (☎ 77 231 897; Place des Martyrs; ☹ 8am-4pm) South of the medina. Transport schedules and not much else are available here.

Syndicat d'Initiative (cnr aves Ibn el-Jazzar & Ibn el-Aghlab; ☹ 8am-6pm summer, 8.30am-5.30pm winter) On the northern edge of town in front of the Aghlabid Basins. Some of the staff here speak English and can arrange tours with officially licensed guides. This is the place to purchase the all-in-one ticket for the sites around Kairouan.

Sights

MEDINA

Less commercial than other medinas in the country, Kairouan's feels even more like it ebbs and flows to a different rhythm from modern Tunisia. Most of it is given over to quiet residential streets whose rather derelict façades are set off by grand and

ornate doors, and windows, arches and shutters in bright blues and greens, more reminiscent of the Caribbean than of North Africa. It's possible to wander much of the medina without being confronted by a single souvenir-buying opportunity as virtually all of the commerce is restricted to the main north-south thoroughfare of ave 7 Novembre. Here you'll find several carpet shops selling high quality products and all the usual trinkets for sale to tourists.

The first walls of the medina were built towards the end of the 8th century, but those you'll see today date mainly from the 18th century. Of the numerous gates, the oldest is **Bab el-Khoukha**, which features a horseshoe arch supported by columns. It was built in 1706.

GREAT MOSQUE

The **Great Mosque** (☹ 8am-2pm Sat-Thu, to noon Fri), in the northeast corner of the medina, is North Africa's holiest Islamic site. It's also known as Sidi Okba Mosque, after the founder of Kairouan who built the first mosque here in AD 670. The original version was completely destroyed, and most of what stands today was built by the Aghlabids in the 9th century. Entry is with the multiple-site ticket (see left).

The exterior, with its buttressed walls, has a typically unadorned Aghlabid design. Impressions change once you step into the huge marble-paved courtyard, surrounded by an arched colonnade. The courtyard was designed for water catchment, and the paving slopes towards an intricately decorated central drainage hole that delivers the collected rainwater into the 9th-century cisterns below. The decorations were designed to filter dust from the water. The marble rims of the two wells both have deep rope-grooves worn by centuries of hauling water up from the depths.

The northwestern end of the courtyard is dominated by a square three-tiered minaret. The lowest level was built in AD 728. At its base, note the two Roman slabs (one upside down) bearing Latin inscriptions.

The prayer hall is at the southern end of the courtyard. The enormous, studded wooden doors here date from 1829; the carved panels above them are particularly fine. Non-Muslims are not allowed inside, but the doors are left open to allow

a glimpse of the interior. The 414 pillars that support the horseshoe arches and roof were, like those of the colonnade, originally Roman or Byzantine, salvaged from Carthage and Hadrumètum (Sousse), and no two are the same. At the far end of the hall, it's just possible to make out the precious 9th-century tiles behind the *mihrab* between two red marble columns. The tiles were imported from Baghdad along with the wood for the richly adorned *minbar* (pulpit) next to them.

Visitors must be appropriately dressed; robes are available at the entrance. Entry is via the main gate on rue Okba ibn Nafaa. The other eight gates are closed to non-Muslims.

For an overview of the Great Mosque, take in the view from the roof of a neighbouring carpet shop on rue Okba ibn Nafaa. The owners will cheekily claim that the view is included in the price of the entry ticket; so too is a period spent inspecting carpets.

ZAOUIA OF SIDI ABID EL-GHARIANI

Just inside the Bab ech Chouhada, the restored **Zaouia of Sidi Abid el-Ghariani** (rue Sidi el-Ghariani) dates from the 14th century and contains some fine woodcarving and stuccowork. The *zaouia* (complex surrounding the tomb of a saint) also houses the tomb of the Hafsîd sultan Moulay Hassan who ruled from 1525 to 1543. There are no official opening hours, but you're most likely to find it open in the morning. Entry is with the multiple-site ticket (see opposite).

MAISON DU GOUVERNEUR

This 18th-century residence of the former beys or pashas of Kairouan called the **Maison du Gouverneur** (admission free; ☹ 8am-5pm), signposted as 'Tapis-Sabra', is an exquisitely restored medina house and an extravagant counterpoint to the austerity of the Aghlabids. The interior is a sumptuous combination of cedar and teak, marble latticework, plaster moulding and elegant tiled arches adorning the entrance hall, harem and reception hall where the governor received official guests and held meetings. The house doubles, of course, as a carpet shop; after watching a woman demonstrate the painstaking art of carpet making (women make the carpets, men sell them), you'll be expected to view the carpets. If

you only experience the carpet ritual once in Kairouan, make it here.

BIR BAROUTA

The Bir Barouta, north of ave Ali Belhouane, was built by the Ottoman ruler Mohammed Bey in 1676 to surround the well that features in the city's foundation legend. Its waters are supposedly linked to the well of Zem-Zem in Mecca. The scene itself is a little staged for the uninitiated with a blinkered camel turning the wheel to draw water from the well for people to taste. That said, this is an important religious moment for most visitors, many of whom genuinely believe that the well is connected to Mecca. Entry is with the multiple-site ticket (see opposite).

MOSQUE OF THE THREE DOORS

250m northeast of the Bir Barouta, the **Mosque of the Three Doors** (rue de la Mosquée des Trois Portes), was founded in AD 866 by Mohammed bin Kairouan el-Maafri, a holy man from the Spanish city of Cordoba. The interior is closed to non-Muslims, but the main feature is the elaborate façade, with its strong Andalusian influences. The mosque's three arched doorways are topped by intricate friezes of Kufic script (two of which name the mosque's founder) interspersed with floral reliefs and crowned with a carved cornice. It's well worth a detour.

AGHLABID BASINS

These **cisterns** (ave Ibn el-Aghlab; ☹ 7.30am-6.30pm summer, 8.30am-6pm winter), built by the Aghlabids in the 9th century are more impressive because of their engineering sophistication than as sights in themselves. Water was delivered by aqueduct from the hills 36km west of Kairouan into the smaller settling basin and then into the enormous main holding basin, which was 5m deep and 128m in diameter. In the centre of the main pool was a pavilion where the rulers could come to relax on summer evenings. Most visitors do nothing more than peek at the cisterns from the rooftop of the *syndicat d'initiative* office nearby, but you can enter with the multiple-site ticket (see opposite).

ZAOUIA OF SIDI SAHAB

This extensive **zaouia** (ave Zama el Belaoui; ☹ 7.30am-6.30pm), about 1.5km northwest of the medina, houses the tomb of Abu Zama

ENTRY TICKETS & GUIDES

Most of the sites in Kairouan can be visited on a single ticket, which can be purchased at the Great Mosque, the *syndicat d'initiative* (tourist office) or the Zaouia of Sidi Sahab. The tickets (TD6) are valid for the Great Mosque, the Aghlabid Basins, the Zaouia of Sidi Sahab, the Zaouia of Sidi Amor Abbada, Bir Barouta, the Zaouia of Sidi Abid el-Ghariani and the Raqqada Islamic Art Museum (see p207). The ticket is valid only for one day and one entry per site. The camera permit (TD1) is valid at all of the sites mentioned.

If you want a guide to show you around, you can arrange one through the *syndicat d'initiative*. These guys carry accreditation, with photos, and they know their stuff. They charge TD15 for a tour of all the major sites. They all speak Arabic and French; some also speak English and/or German. Some of the accredited guides double as low-key lookouts for carpet shops.

el-Belaoui, a *sahab* (companion) of the Prophet Mohammed. He was known as the barber because he always carried three hairs from the Prophet's beard with him, and the *zaouia* is sometimes referred to as the Mosque of the Barber. While the original mausoleum dates back to the 7th century AD, most of what stands today was added at the end of the 17th century. The additions include a *funduq* to house pilgrims, a *medersa* (Quranic school) and a mosque.

Entry to the zaouia is with the multiple-site ticket (see p202). The entrance is along an unusually decorative marble passageway that leads to a stunning white central courtyard. Sidi Sahab's mausoleum is in the northwestern corner, topped by a cupola added in 1629. Non-Muslims are not permitted to enter. The small room on the opposite side of the courtyard contains the tomb of the architect of the Great Mosque.

ZAOUIA OF SIDI AMOR ABBADA

This *zaouia* (off rue Sidi Gaid; ☎ 7.30am-6.30pm), identifiable by its seven white cupolas, was built in 1860 around the tomb of Sidi Amor Abbada, a local blacksmith with a gift for prophecy. He specialised in the production of oversized things, like a set of giant anchors (now standing north of place des Martyrs) that were supposed to secure Kairouan to the earth. Entry is with the multiple-site ticket (see p202).

ONAT MUSEUM

The **ONAT Museum** (ave Ali Zouaoui; admission free; ☎ 7.30am-1.30pm summer, 8.30am-1pm & 3-5.45pm Mon-Sat, 8am-1pm Fri & Sat winter) houses a collection of rugs. It could be missed, although these are the people who accredit all carpets sold in Kairouan; if you plan to buy one, look here at the various styles.

Sleeping

The only place to stay in the medina is the **Hôtel Barouta** (off ave 7 Novembre), but it can't be recommended.

BUDGET

Maison des Jeunes (☎ 77 230 309; ave de Fes; dm TD5) There's little reason for the budget minded to stay here since the perfectly located Hôtel Sabra is only a few dinars more. The city's uninspiring youth hostel is about 1km southeast of the medina.

Hôtel Les Aghlabites (☎ 77 230 880; off place de Tunis; s/d TD8/16) Other than the atmosphere of staying in a converted *funduq*, this hotel, north of the medina, isn't an especially good choice though it's reasonably popular with Tunisians. Ask for a room off the central courtyard. Most of the rooms have shared bathrooms.

Hôtel Sabra (☎ 77 230 263; Place des Martyrs; per person TD10) Other than the Hôtel la Kasbah, this hostel-like dump has the best location in Kairouan opposite the Bab ech Chouhada, and the views from the rooftop (where you may be able to sleep in summer) are breathtaking. It's mostly big teen tours that stay here since all they need is a mattress and space to toss a backpack. Bathrooms are shared and the thin walls don't do much to dampen the street noise or that from your neighbours.

Hôtel el-Menema (☎ 77 225 003; fax 77 226 182; rue Moez Ibn Badis; r with/without bathroom TD20/10) For those who love cyberspace, el-Menema is attached to one of the Publinets in town; however it's less convenient to the medina than the hotels in the Ville Nouvelle. The only good thing that can be said about the old, decaying rooms is that they're large. Breakfast is included.

MIDRANGE

Tunisia Hôtel (☎ 77 231 775; fax 77 231 597; ave de la République; s/d TD20/40; ☎) There's not much to recommend this old, rather rundown hotel over the nearby Hôtel Splendid, which is only a few dinars more. The rooms are small and dark but they are clean and the front desk is friendly.

Hôtel Splendid (☎ 77 230 041; fax 77 230 829; rue 9 Avril; s/d TD28/41; ☎) Only a short walk from the main entrance to the medina and boasting newly painted and refurbished rooms, the Splendid is...well a splendid choice. There are high ceilings and modern bathrooms and a restaurant on the ground floor.

Hôtel Continental (☎ 77 232 006; fax 77 229 900; ave Ibn el-Aghlab; s/d TD33/46; ☎) It's a shame the lobby here feels a little like an airport terminal and the empty pool (plans are to fill it in the near future) is surrounded by minigolf-like felt since the spacious rooms are comfortable if a little strangely furnished. It's across the street from the Aghlabid Basins.

Hôtel Amina (☎ 77 225 555; hotel.amina@topnet.tn; ave Ibn el-Aghlab; s/d TD52/77; ☎) This large

whitewashed complex is inconveniently located several kilometres north of town. If you have your own vehicle it may be worth the commute since the nice rooms are better than most in this price range and have balconies overlooking the baking concrete of the pool area.

TOP END

Hôtel la Kasbah (☎ 77 237 301; kasbah.kairouan@goldenysmin.com; ave Ibn el-Jazzar; s/d TD103/160; ☎) This is no artificial Disney-like Aladdin hotel. Occupying the old kasbah in the northern section of the medina, this is the real thing, albeit generously reimagined and re-appointed. The rooms are quite possibly some of the nicest in the country, tastefully done up in fine textiles and linens and subdued tones. Rare for a tourist-class hotel of this calibre, the facilities are refined and elegant without the usual slapdash nods to the *Arabian Nights*. The pool in the central courtyard is heated.

Eating

PÂTISSERIES

Kairouan is famous for a date-filled semolina cake soaked in honey called *makhroud*, which can be found everywhere. Expect to pay 150 mills a piece.

Segni (ave 7 Novembre) This is the best place to sample *makhroud* and other local Tunisian specialities. Signed only in Arabic in the middle of the medina, Segni's interior is a wonderful example of a traditional medina shop.

Other places to try include the outdoor stalls just off the main thoroughfare near the arch, or the brightly lit and modern **Pâtisserie Rabaoui Kairouan** (rue Soukina bint el-Hassan).

RESTAURANTS

There is a cluster of restaurants in the streets south of the medina and several places serving good rotisserie chicken can be found around ave El Moez Ibn Badiss and ave Ibn el-Jazzar.

Gelateria Italiana (ave Ibn el-Jazzar; gelato TD1.3-2.4) Next door to Picolomondo, this place has a good selection of gelati.

Picolomondo (ave Ibn el-Jazzar; pizzas from TD2.5; ☎) A short walk from the Aghlabid Basins, Picolomondo is a modern restaurant with pizza and other Tunisian fare.

Pâtisserie Royal Opera (ave Ibn el-Jazzar; pizzas TD3.5) Next door to Gelateria Italiana is this pastry shop/takeout restaurant, or you can eat in at one of the standup tables.

Roi Roi du Couscous (ave Ali Zouaoui; mains around TD4) A raucous place by Tunisian standards, this restaurant-bar is filled with men, smoke and beer, even in the middle of the day. It's not exactly the cleanest place in town but big servings of couscous are served.

Restaurant de la Jeunesse (ave 7 Novembre; mains TD5) This is the place to get couscous in the heart of the medina. The restaurant is tourist-friendly though it's worth double checking your bill.

Restaurant Sabra (ave de la République; set meals TD7) Next to the Tunisia Hôtel, the Sabra serves good filling meals though don't order off the set menu, which is more expensive than simply ordering the same à la carte. Chicken or couscous by itself is TD3.

Restaurant Karawan (rue Soukina bint el-Hassan; set meals TD8) A clean, friendly family-run place, the Karawan serves the usual couscous and meat dishes, though the *tajines* (a Tunisian omelette) and *briqs* appetizers are particularly good.

SELF-CATERING

Lots of fruit is grown around Kairouan; you'll find whatever's in season at the stalls around place de Tunis, just north of the medina.

Drinking

There are plenty of outdoor places to enjoy a coffee, soft drink, mint tea or a *sheesha* (water pipe). Most popular in the evenings are the tables around place des Martyrs in front of the Hôtel Sabra. South of here near the intersection of ave Hamda Laouani and ave de la République are two good coffeehouses: Café Belhadj and Café Amar.

Just north of the medina in front of Bab Tunis is the Café Les Soirées de L'Orient.

Easily the best place to soak up the atmosphere in the medina is the **Turkish Coffee-house** (ave 7 Novembre).

If you're looking for bars with an all-male ambience, head to the main roundabout south of the medina on ave Ali Zouaoui, next to the Roi Roi du Couscous restaurant. For a beer in posh surrounds try the bar at the **Hôtel la Kasbah** (ave Ibn el-Jazzar).

JUST LOOK, NO BUY

Viewing vast numbers of carpets and *kilims* (woven rugs decorated with Berber motifs) is as much a part of the Kairouan experience as visiting the Great Mosque. However averse you might be to the idea, you're likely at some stage to find yourself in a carpet shop. Resistance is futile. The secret is to accept the hospitality, enjoy the ceremony and not feel in the least obliged to buy – easier said than done.

The process starts with a passing glance as you walk through one of the medina's lanes. You're invited inside and offered sweet tea or Turkish coffee while you sit around and discuss the fact that the salesman (they're all men and all very charming) has a brother or uncle living in your country and indeed, what providence, sold a carpet, a very beautiful carpet, from his private collection, to one of your countrymen just last week.

While you wait for your drinks, why not look, looking is free, just for the pleasure of your eyes. Choices are unfurled by a boy, while another brings tea and coffee that is too hot to drink quickly. You ask a price and are told in a conspiratorial whisper that, because you have not come as part of a group, you will be offered a 30% discount. You're an honoured guest in Tunisia and hospitality demands such things.

The ones you don't like are rolled up and stacked against a wall. The designs are explained and more young men arrive to hold the carpets at viewing level. They might even try to burn the carpet with a cigarette lighter to show its durability. Suddenly the room is filled with young men at your service. Carpets are expertly rolled into tiny bundles to show how easily they will fit in your bag for carrying home.

This is the point at which you might decide that carpet-buying is not for you. You say that you want to think about it. The salesman, possibly now casting furtive glances in the direction of the shop owner, is suddenly serious, knowing full well that the vast majority of tourists never return despite promises to do so, knowing even better that most visitors to Kairouan will be leaving on the next bus out of town. Prices drop. They might even do so dramatically. Looks of sadness will be exchanged that such beautiful carpets must be let go for such a price. As you walk out the door – you might be left to find your own way out as hospitality suddenly evaporates – you might well hear dark mutterings and grim curses directed towards you. More likely, you'll look over your shoulder and see the salesman deflated on a chair, like a child who has lost his toy.

If you do decide to stay, bargain and buy, most of what the salesmen say about their carpets is true (apart from the price) – they are a wonderful keepsake to remember your journey. Your carpet is wrapped before you can reconsider. You hand over your credit card. The salesman looks aggrieved one last time. Cash is not possible, madam? Credit cards involve too much paperwork, sir. You might be able to get a few dinars more off the price for breach of contract, offset by requests for tips for the boys.

You leave with your carpet under your arm and walk past all the other carpet dealers who'll tell you that you paid too much. You can't help but smile at the whole performance. Rest assured, the man who sold you the carpet is smiling too.

Shopping

Kairouan is the carpet capital of the country. If you're in the market for a carpet, this is a good place to do your shopping.

There are two basic types of carpet: knotted and woven. The traditional (pre-Islamic) carpet industry was based on the weaving of *mergoums* and *kilims*. *Mergoums* feature very bright, geometric designs, with bold use of reds, purples, blues and other vivid colours. *Kilims* use traditional Berber motifs on a woven background. Both

are reasonably cheap to buy. The Berber *guetiffa* is another type of knotted carpet: thick-pile and normally cream coloured, with Berber motifs.

The most well-known of the knotted carpets are the classical (Persian-style) Kairouan carpets. This style of carpet-making was first introduced to Tunisia by the Turks. Legend has it that the first knotted carpet to be made in Tunisia was by the daughter of the Turkish governor of Kairouan.

Knotted carpets are priced according to the number of knots per square metre. On the back of each carpet is a small certificate containing the dimensions and type of carpet. Official prices are:

Dimensions	Knots per sq m	Price per sq m
10x10	10,000	TD110-160
12x12	14,000	TD160-210
20x20	40,000	TD220-300
30x30	90,000	TD300-380
40x40	160,000	TD380-450
50x50	250,000	TD1400-1700
<i>kilims</i>	(usually silk)	TD170-220

To see carpets being made without the hard sell, the Centre des Traditions et des Métiers d'Art de Kairouan, just north of Bir Barouta on a side street leading to the souqs, was set up by ONAT to promote local Tunisian handicrafts. The rooms upstairs are specifically set up to demonstrate traditional techniques for weaving, embroidery and carpet making. The artisans are usually more than happy to show you how it's done.

Another option you might consider is to attend the carpet auctions where Berber women sell their traditional carpets to shop-owners. You may even be able to bid if you speak Arabic. It all takes place in the Souq el-Blaghija, with most of the action between 11am and 1pm on a Saturday. Needless to say, the carpet dealers will make you feel as unwelcome as possible, just in case you realise the extent of their profit margins.

Getting There & Around

The bus and louage stations are next to each other about 300m west of the Zaouia of Sidi Sahab. A taxi from the centre of town to place des Martyrs costs about TD1 on the meter but many taxi drivers ask three times that.

Note that for El-Jem, you'll have to go via Sousse.

BUS

Most of the services are operated by the national line, SNTRI, which has its own booking office in the terminal, together with an information board displaying destinations and departure times.

Destination	Fare (per day)	Duration	Frequency
Douz	TD18.7	7hr	1
Gabès	TD9.4	4¼hr	5
Gafsa	TD9.8	3hr	6
Jerba	TD15.1	5hr	2
Kélibia	TD7.2	3hr	1
Medenine	TD12.3	5¼hr	1
Nabeul	TD5	2¼hr	3
Nefta	TD13.8	7½hr	2
Sfax	TD5.8	3hr	3
Sousse	TD2.4	2½hr	16
Tozeur	TD13.7	4½hr	3
Tunis	TD7.8	3hr	hourly

Other destinations are served by regional companies with separate booking offices at the terminal. They include buses every 30 minutes (6.30am to 7.30pm) to Sousse (TD3, 1½ hours), three buses a day to Sfax (TD5.5, two hours) and two to Makthar (TD4.5, 1¾ hours).

LOUAGE

There are frequent departures to Sousse (TD3.5), Sfax (TD6.7) and Tunis (TD7.4), and occasional services to Makthar (TD4.8), Sbeitla (TD5.7) and Hammamet (TD4.5).

AROUND KAIROUAN

Raqqada Islamic Art Museum (☎ 9.30am-4.30pm Tue-Sun) occupies a former presidential palace at Raqqada, 9km south of Kairouan; take any transport heading to Sfax. Exhibits on display here include a model of the Great Mosque of Kairouan, a faithfully reproduced plaster copy of the *mihrab* and lots of calligraphy. There are ambitious plans for expansion, until which time it's probably not worth the effort. Entry is with the multiple-site ticket (see p202).

EL-JEM

pop 18,300

The ancient colosseum of El-Jem is a dramatic and impressive sight, both because of its awesome size and solidity in relation to the modern buildings surrounding it, and because, like all ruins, it's a sober reminder of the inevitable fleetingness of achievement. Built on a low plateau halfway between Sousse and Sfax, the colosseum is all the evidence you need to begin to grasp the scope of Roman civilization in Africa.

الج

History

E-Jem's colosseum was once the crowning glory of ancient Thysdrus, a thriving market town that grew up at the junction of the Sahel's lucrative trade routes during the 1st century AD and that derived its wealth from the olive oil produced in the area. Thysdrus, a town of sumptuous villas, reached the peak of its prosperity in the 2nd and 3rd centuries AD.

In the 17th century, the troops of Mohammed Bey blasted a hole in the western wall to flush out local tribesmen and the breach was widened during another rebellion in 1850.

Orientation & Information

Ave Habib Bourguiba runs from the colosseum to the train station on the southern edge of town. The post office and bank are just west of here on ave Fahdel ben Achour (the road to Sfax). The main thoroughfare into town from Sousse is ave Heidi Chaker, which turns into ave Taieb Mehiri just past the train station and continues northeast out of town on the way to Mahdia.

Sights

COLOSSEUM

This World Heritage-listed **colosseum** (admission TD6, plus camera TD1; ☎ 7am-7pm summer, 8am-5.30pm winter) was the third largest in the Roman world; it was 138m long by 114m wide, with three tiers of seating 30m high. Its seating capacity has been estimated at 30,000 – considerably more than the population of the town itself.

The colosseum is believed to have been built between AD 230 and 238, and is generally attributed to the African proconsul Gordian, a local landowner and patron. Stone for construction had to be hauled all the way from the quarries at Sullectum (modern Salakta), 30km away on the coast, and water was brought 15km by underground aqueduct from the hills northwest of town.

In AD 238, Gordian was declared emperor of Rome here during an ill-fated rebellion against the Emperor Maximus. Gordian reportedly committed suicide in the amphitheatre when it became obvious that the rebellion was doomed.

The colosseum later doubled as a last line of defence. The Berber princess Al-Kahina was besieged here by Arab forces at the end

of the 7th century. According to legend, the colosseum was linked by tunnel to the coastal town of Salakta, enabling Al-Kahina to torment her besiegers by waving fresh fish from the top of the walls (see the boxed text, p233).

When you enter the colosseum for the first time, you'll be struck by the indulgent grandeur of the Roman vision. The south side of the amphitheatre is the most intact, allowing a sense of how the seats swept down from the upper tiers to the marble-walled arena, beneath which ran arched corridors. To see how the colosseum must once have appeared, check out the artist's impression displayed just inside the entrance gate.

You can still climb up to the upper seating levels and gaze down on the arena. It's also possible to explore the two long underground passageways that were used to hold animals, gladiators and other unfortunates in their last moments before they were thrust into the arena to provide entertainment for the masses. It was here that many spent their last lonely minutes, listening to 30,000 people baying for their blood.

For a relatively uninterrupted view back towards the colosseum, take any of the streets behind the colosseum, heading north.

Admission is free for holders of an international student ID card.

SEEING THE COLOSSEUM AT SUNSET

The best time to see the colosseum is at sunset when the sun bathes the amphitheatre's interior in golden light. But for independent travellers this is more difficult than it should be.

One option is to charter a private taxi. As you'll need to pay for the driver to return home anyway, it can be a good idea to take a taxi from Mahdia (around TD35 return) or Sousse or Sfax (both around TD45).

The other option is to visit from Sfax and return on the 8.57pm train. If you're quick (and the train is late), you might also catch the 7.13pm train to Sousse. Check current departure times at the stations in Sousse and Sfax before setting out.

Either that or get up (very) early and catch a lounge from Mahdia or Sousse (they start filling from 6am) and content yourself with the almost-as-impressive sunrise.

MUSEUM

This **museum** (☎ 8am-7pm summer, 8am-5.30pm winter), 1km south of the amphitheatre on the road to Sfax, houses a small but exceptionally beautiful collection of mosaics. Highlights include a splendid array of scenes from the colosseum, a dramatic depiction of Dionysius astride a tiger and the delightful if quixotic Genius of the Year. The turnoff to the museum is at the intersection occupied by the Restaurant Le Bonheur. Admission is included in the colosseum ticket.

OTHER SITES

The colosseum was not the first amphitheatre to be built at Thysdrus. Opposite the museum and across the railway line to the east are the ruins of an earlier **amphitheatre**, dug into a low hill. There's also a second area of **Roman villas** to the north of the colosseum, though these will probably only be of interest to passionate amateur archaeologists. Look for signs posted off ave Farhat Hached, the road to Sousse or off ave Hedi Chaker, the road to Kairouan.

Festivals & Events

From mid-July until mid-August, the colosseum is transformed into a splendid floodlit venue for the **El-Jem International Symphonic Music Festival** (☎ 73 631 621; www.festivaleljem.com). You can buy tickets (TD10.5 to TD27) and find a programme at the tourist office in Sousse (p187). The tourist office in Tunis organises an evening bus to and from the colosseum (see p70 for contact details).

Sleeping & Eating

Hôtel Julius (s/d TD24/38) The only place to stay in El-Jem proper is next to the train station at this hotel, though there's not much to recommend it other than the fact that it's easy to find. There's an especially surly vibe and the downstairs bar isn't the most inviting. Rooms are window cooled and have thin carpeting and mismatched furniture.

Elyeses Chez Faruch (☎ 73 631 253; pizzas TD4) This is a nice, clean pizzeria.

Restaurant Le Bonheur (☎ 73 632 384; mains TD6; ☎) A short walk from the train station, this is the best and most tourist-oriented restaurant in town. The English menu offers a small selection of traditional dishes like spicy couscous with chicken (TD4).

Restaurant Le Bonheur 2 This place, owned by the nephew of the original Le Bonheur, is behind the colosseum and has a similar menu.

There are several cafés serving snacks and grilled meat in front of the colosseum entrance.

Getting There & Away

The lounge station is 500m west of the train station along ave Hedi Chaker. The most frequent departures are to Mahdia (TD1.9), but there are also semi-regular departures for Tunis (TD8.8), Sousse (TD3.3) and Sfax (TD3.3). For Kairouan, you'll need to change at Sousse. The last lounge has usually left the station by 7.15pm and often well before.

Buses leave from outside the train station. A lot of SNTRI buses pass through town, but they're often full. There are buses to Tunis (TD9.5, three hours, four daily), Sousse (TD3.1, 1¼ hours), Sfax (TD3, 1¼ hours) and Mahdia (TD2, one hour).

There are trains north to Sousse (TD4.4 in 1st class, one hour) and Tunis (TD11, three hours), and south to Sfax (TD4.2, one hour), but only a couple in each direction are at decent times and of any use to colosseum visitors.

MAHDIA

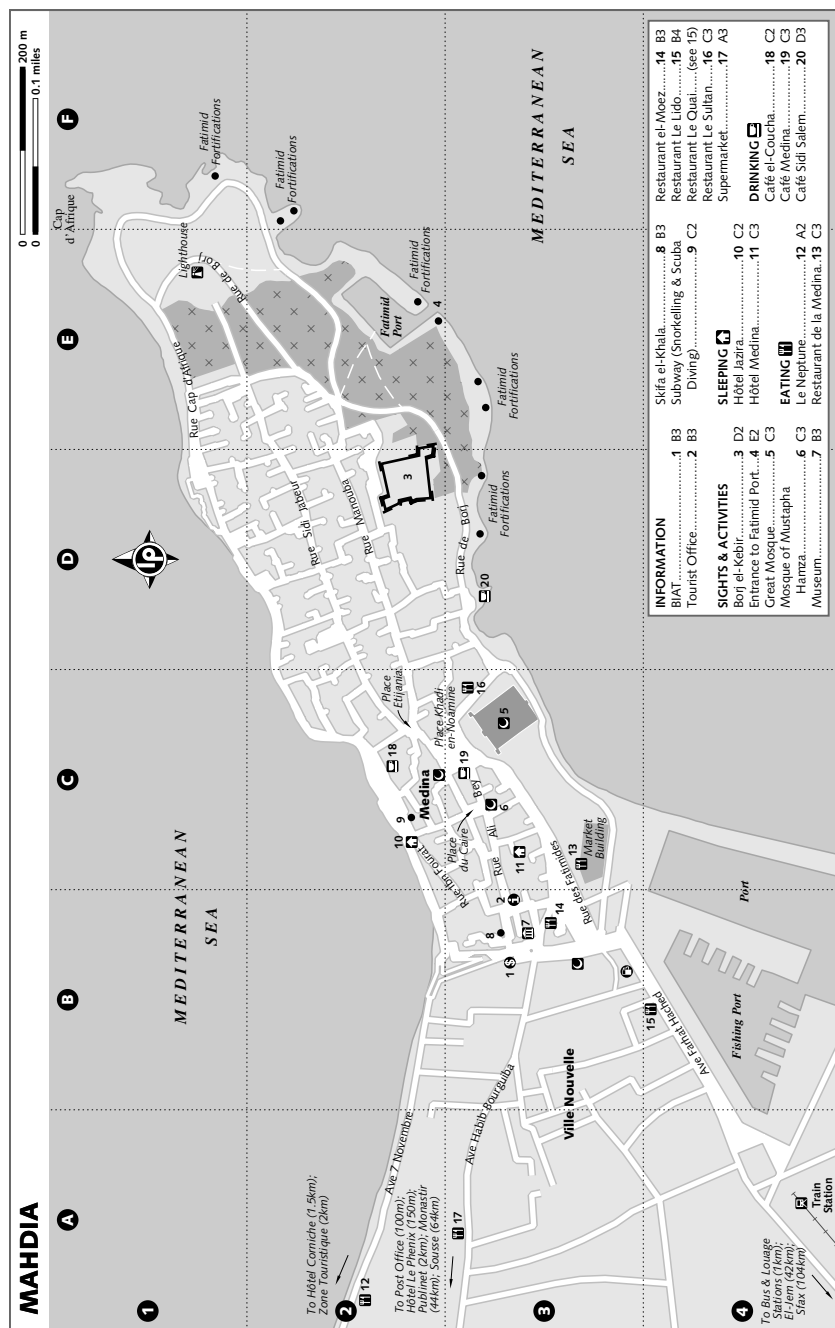
pop 46,000

Occupying a narrow peninsula jutting out into the Mediterranean, Mahdia is blessed with a spectacular setting and a wonderful old-world charm. More than any other of the central coast towns, the heart of Mahdia is refreshingly free of the heavy architectural imprint of modern tourism and is the most inviting place to slow down and settle into your own daily routine. A walk anywhere along Ave 7 Novembre or Rue du Borj, both of which hug the narrow peninsula, offers wonderful views of the shimmering Mediterranean. The large and very developed Zone Touristique stretches along the coast to the north of town.

History

Mahdia was founded as a port in AD 916 by the first Fatimid caliph, Obeid Allah, known as El-Mahdi, who used Mahdia's narrow rugged peninsula as a coastal base from which to plan his attack on his ultimate

المهدية



goal, Cairo, and as an easily defensible refuge for his minority Shiite followers.

The original Fatimid city was protected by a massive wall, up to 10m thick, which cut across the peninsula at its narrowest point, where the Skifa el-Kahla now stands. A smaller wall encircled the remainder of the peninsula. The area within these walls was a royal compound, reserved for the Mahdi and his entourage while his subjects lived outside the walls.

When the Fatimids abandoned Mahdia in AD 947, the inhabitants of Zawila moved inside the walls. The present medina was well established by the time the famous historian Ibn Khaldun visited in the 14th century and reported that Mahdia had become the wealthiest city on the Barbary Coast.

The medina remains a residential area, but the majority of the town's 30,000 inhabitants have reversed the trend of their ancestors and now live in the modern suburbs that spread west from Skifa el-Kahla.

Information

Friday is market day in Mahdia.

BIAT This bank with ATM is right outside the Skifa el-Kahla.

Post office (ave Habib Bourguiba) About 650m west of the medina.

Publinet (ave Habib Bourguiba; TD1.5 per hr; ☎ 8am-midnight;) West of the centre on the way to the Zone Touristique.

Tourist office (☎ 73 681 098; ☎ 8am-1pm & 3-5.45pm Mon-Thu, 8.30am-1.30pm Fri & Sat) There's a small office just inside the medina, through the Skifa el-Kahla. There was a reasonable range of brochures when we visited but even the exact location of the bus station was a mystery.

Sights & Activities

MEDINA

There's less commerce and more peaceful residential streets in Mahdia's medina than others in Tunisia, especially the closer you get to the lighthouse at Cap d'Afrique where the peninsula narrows and the sea is only steps away. The narrow, cobblestone streets are definitely photogenic.

SKIFA EL-KAHLA

The Skifa el-Kahla, a massive fortified gate and one of Tunisia's finest, is all that survives of the original Fatimid city. Entry is through a narrow, vaulted passageway,

almost 50m long, that was once protected by a series of gates – one of them a suitably oversized iron portcullis. On market day, the interior is lined with impromptu stalls; it's just possible to imagine you're entering an ancient town little changed in centuries. For the view from the top of the gate, you'll need to enter the museum adjacent to the Skifa.

MUSEUM

The **museum** (admission TD3; ☎ 9am-1pm & 4-7pm Tue-Sat Apr-mid-Sep, 9am-4pm Tue-Sat mid-Sep-Mar), just south of the Skifa el-Kahla, is small but excellent. The ground floor has three superb, expansive mosaics and nicely displayed marble statues dating from 3rd-century El-Jem. There are also oil lamps that once illuminated the corridors of the colosseum at El-Jem.

Upstairs are cedar panels adorned with Kufic script from the Great Mosque at Kairouan, as well as local costumes and coins from more recent Tunisian history.

Before leaving, don't forget to climb to the top of the Skifa el-Kahla for the best views over the medina.

PLACE DU CAIRE

The compact place du Caire is Mahdia at its best. The outdoor cafés under the generous shade of trees and vines are the perfect place to relax and contemplate the ornate arched doorway and octagonal minaret on the southern side of the square. They belong to the **Mosque of Mustapha Hamza**, built in 1772 when the square was the centre of the town's wealthy Turkish quarter. There are also some wonderful old Mahdia houses to admire.

GREAT MOSQUE

The Great Mosque stands on the southern side of place Khadi en-Noamine. What you see today is a modern replica of the original Fatimid mosque, built by Obeid Allah in AD 921, which was destroyed when retreating Spanish troops blew up the city walls in 1554. Non-Muslims are allowed into the courtyard outside prayer times.

BORJ EL-KEBIR

The **Borj el-Kebir** (admission TD1.1; ☎ 9am-1pm & 4-7pm Sat-Thu summer, 9am-4pm Sat-Thu winter) is a large fortress standing on the highest point

of the peninsula, rising above the medina with a brooding and unadorned severity. It was built in the 16th century on the ruins of an earlier Fatimid structure. There's not much to see inside, but the views from the ramparts are well worth the entry fee. It's also aesthetically pleasing, as much for its simplicity as the clear evidence of its original purpose.

FATIMID FORTIFICATIONS

Fragments of the original **Fatimid walls** dot the shoreline from near the Great Mosque all the way to Cap D'Afrique, and provide just enough hints to imagine a walled town protected from sea-borne invasion. The **Fatimid port** remains in evidence here, as do the crumbling pillars which once flanked the entrance and dominated the harbour's defences. If you're having difficulty imagining what it must have been like, the Borj el-Kebir contains an artist's representation of Mahdia in Fatimid times.

BEACHES

Mahdia's main beach is northwest of town and is fronted by the big hotels of the Zone Touristique; you can use the beach even if you're not staying at one of the hotels. Local kids make do with swimming off the rocks that run along rue Cap d'Afrique and families head to the beach that starts in town almost parallel to the Skifa.

The waters here are as clear and blue as anywhere in the Mediterranean. To take a closer look, head to **Subway** (☎ 73 696 492; subway@topnet.tn; rue Cap d'Afrique), which can arrange snorkelling (TD15 per hour) or diving (TD44 per dive). It caters to beginners (to whom it offer a 'baptism in the sea') and experienced divers (TD55 for a night dive).

Sleeping BUDGET

Hôtel Medina (☎ 73 694 664; fax 73 691 422; rue el-Kaem; s/d with shared bathroom TD10/20) A quiet oasis in the heart of the medina, this hotel is housed in a large converted home with a number of rooms surrounding a pleasant central courtyard. The simple rooms are kept spotless.

Hôtel Jazira (☎ 73 681 629; fax 73 680 274; 36 rue Ibn Fourat; s/d with shared bathroom TD14/24) The entrance to the Jazira, on a small alleyway

just around the corner from the road that skirts the seafront, is hard to find. However, it is well worth the search if you get one of the cosy rooms with sea views, otherwise the Hôtel Medina is probably a better choice. There's a rooftop 'patio' with excellent views.

Hôtel Corniche (☎ 73 694 201, fax 73 692 196; route de la Corniche; s/d TD16/32) Almost 2km northwest of the medina and just before the restaurant Neptune, the friendly Corniche is a budget beach hotel, which means you'll probably want to spend most of your time at the beach and not in the basic and plain rooms.

TOP END

With one exception, Mahdia's more expensive hotels are spread along the beaches in the Zone Touristique, which starts about 2.5km northwest of the medina. They're quite removed from the town and are designed to provide all that you need without leaving – beach, swimming pools, restaurants and high levels of comfort. As elsewhere in Tunisia, they're packed in summer and dead in winter.

Hôtel Le Phenix (☎ 73 690 101; ave Habib Bourguiba, s/d TD70/120; ☎ ☎ ☎) Within in walking distance of the beach and the medina this four-star boutique hotel is the only up-market choice in Mahdia proper and even a step above the *zone touristique* hotels in terms of service and room quality. With a stylish café, restaurant and lobby area and rooftop pool, Le Phenix would be equally at home in New York City's Soho as it is here.

Eating RESTAURANTS

Minimalls with cafés and restaurants, not to mention shops, line the road out in the Zone Touristique. The restaurant in the Hôtel Le Phenix is the best in the city centre.

Le Neptune (☎ 73 681 927; ave 7 Novembre; mains TD8, set menu TD15) Grilled seafood and seafood couscous are the in-house specialities at this restaurant just west of the medina on the corniche. The 2nd floor terrace has views of the medina jutting out into the Mediterranean.

Restaurant el-Moez (mains TD5) Between the Skifa el-Kahla and the markets, el-Moez is a no-frills place with large servings of daily

specials and fresh-caught grilled fish and calamari.

Restaurant de la Medina (mains TD5) At the rear of the market building by the port and next to the fish market, this restaurant features fish and more fish.

Restaurant Le Sultan (pizzas TD3.5; ☎) Another place to try is this air-con place just east of the Great Mosque.

Facing the port along ave Farhat Hached are **Restaurant Le Lido** (☎ 8am-midnight) and **Restaurant Le Quai** (Chez Farhat), which offer pleasant outdoor dining and alcohol, although the quality is nothing special; expect to pay TD14 per person plus drinks.

SELF-CATERING

The produce section of the market building is the best bet for self-caterers. The only **supermarket** (ave Habib Bourguiba) is about 400m west of the Skifa el-Kahla.

Drinking

There are few more pleasant spots on the coast for a morning or afternoon drink than in the shady place du Caire. The cafés there serve a limited range of pastries for breakfast. **Café Medina** (place Khadi en-Noamine) is equally lovely, while on the north side of the medina, head for the large and less atmospheric Café el-Coucha, which serves breakfast and croissants. The opening hours here are hard to predict.

Café Sidi Salem is a magical place overlooking the Mediterranean on the south side of the medina. Several levels of tables jut out into the water as if you were in the Greek Islands, and kids and families frolic in the water below. It's wonderful any time of the day for a drink or bite to eat and should not be missed.

Getting There & Away BUS

The bus station is next to the louage station, about 1km southwest of the train station. Most people prefer louages or the train.

There are regular departures to Sousse (TD3.1, 1½ hours) and El-Jem (TD2.4, one hour).

LOUAGE

The louage station, also 1km southwest of the train station, has noticeboards listing fares. Regular departures include Sousse

(TD2.9, 1½ hours), El-Jem (TD1.9, one hour), Monastir (TD2, 1¼ hours), Sfax (TD4.8, two hours) and Tunis (TD8.8, four hours). For Kairouan, change at Sousse.

TRAIN

The **train station** (ave Farhat Hached) is just west of the port. There are 16 trains a day to Monastir (TD2.5, one hour) and Sousse (TD3.3, 1¼ hours).

There's also a daily service to Tunis (1st/2nd class TD11.4/8.5, four hours).

Getting Around

A taxi from the louage station to the medina should cost no more than TD2.

SFAX

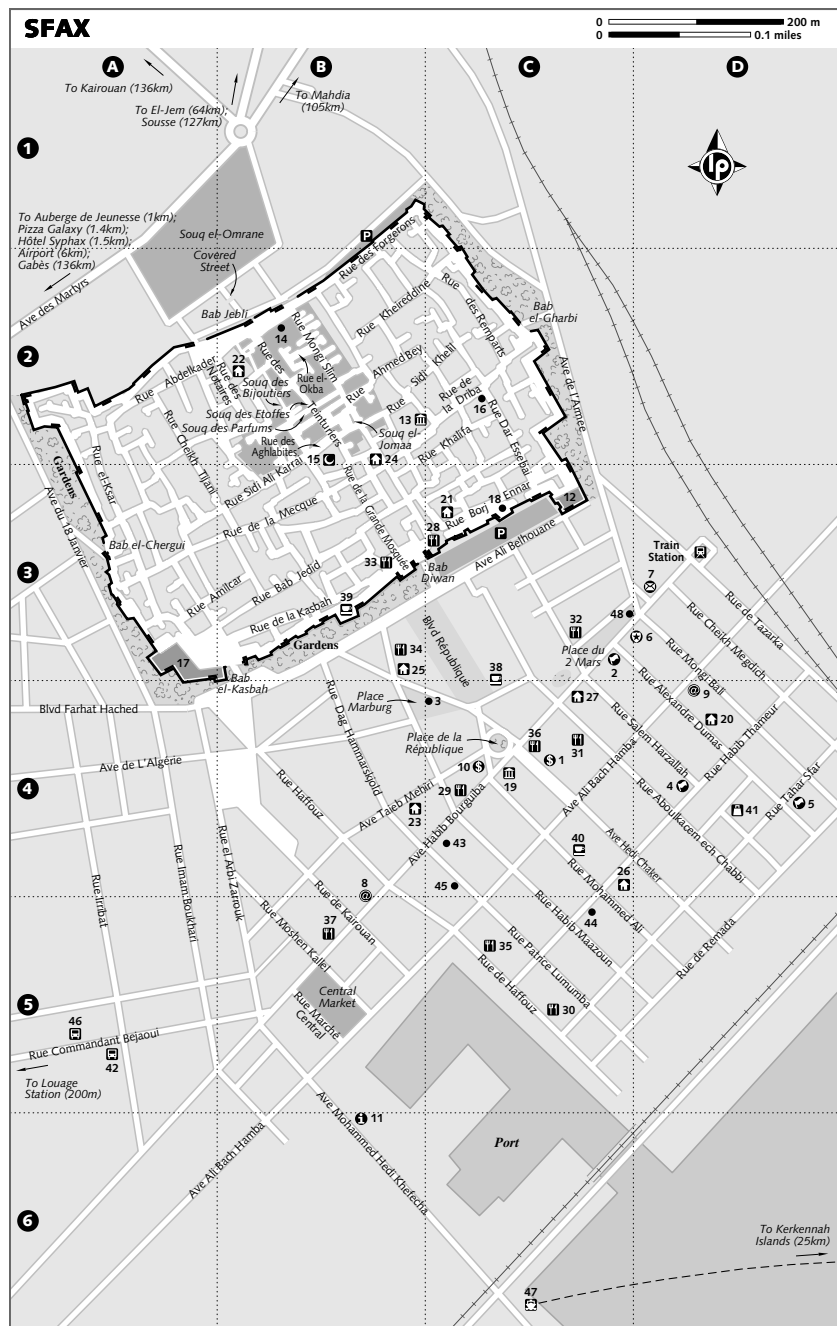
صفاقس
pop 281,000

Other Tunisians describe the residents of Sfax, the second largest city in the country as hard working, dull and thrifty. No doubt there's some truth to the stereotype, however a visit here is an opportunity to experience contemporary Tunisian life unmediated by the demands of tourism. An afternoon stroll through the medina, which outside of the one in Tunis is probably the most fascinating to explore, provides a look at how the modern and the ancient, the mercantile and the spiritual coexist in apparent harmony.

History

The coast around Sfax has been settled since Phoenician times, but none of the towns amounted to very much until Sfax was established by the Arabs at the beginning of the 8th century AD. The city's massive stone ramparts were built by the Aghlabids in the middle of the 9th century AD. They proved effective enough for the city to hold out against the Hilalian invasions in the 11th century (see p185), and Sfax emerged as the major city in the south of Tunisia. In the 14th century, it controlled a stretch of coastline reaching as far as Tripoli in Libya and it remained largely independent of the central government in Tunis until the beginning of the 17th century.

The French built the Ville Nouvelle in the 19th century and developed the port to handle the export of phosphate from the mines at Gafsa.



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Orientation

Modern Sfax is spread out over a large area though the centre is fairly compact. The train station and rail line marks the eastern edge of town and the port defines the southern border. Ave Habib Bourguiba, a primary thoroughfare, runs east to west through the central part of the Ville Nouvelle. Blvd République is a wide pedestrian boulevard that connects Bourguiba to the Bab Diwan entrance to the medina. North of the medina is an even newer section of the city that's going through a mini construction boom similar to those in Arabian Gulf States. Gleaming white towers are rising at a surprising pace.

Information

INTERNET ACCESS

Publinet ave Habib Bourguiba (2nd fl, ave Habib Bourguiba; per hr TD2; ☎ 8am-midnight); Ali Bach Hamba (7 ave Ali Bach Hamba; per hr TD2; ☎ 8am-10pm Mon-Sat, 9am-8pm Sun)

MEDIA

International newspapers are sold at the kiosk on the northern side of place Marburg.

MONEY

All the Tunisian banks here have branches either on ave Habib Bourguiba or ave Hedi Chaker.

BIAT (ave Hedi Chaker) ATM.

STB (place de la République) ATM.

POST

Post office (ave Habib Bourguiba) Occupies an entire block just west of the train station.

TOURIST INFORMATION

Tourist office (☎ 74 211 040; ave Mohammed Hedi Khelifa; ☎ 9am-1pm & 3-5.30pm Mon-Thu, 9am-1.30pm Fri & Sat) Out by the port. Bus, train and ferry timetables are available.

Sights & Activities

MEDINA

Apart from the imposing walls, the medina lacks the monumental grandeur of Sousse or Kairouan, but its considerable charm lies in the fact that it is remarkably untouched by tourism.

The main thoroughfares are narrow and crowded with stalls and local shoppers, while away to the northeast and southwest wind quiet, twisting lanes where you can admire the flourishes of iron balconies and window frames, ornate doors and the sound of artisans from an upstairs window.

If you need a bath, the **Hammam Sultan** (rue de la Driba; admission TD1.5; ☎ women noon-4pm, men 4pm-midnight) is near the Dar Jellouli Museum in the heart of the medina. It's a good earthy place for a scrub.

Any exploration of the medina is bound to start at the medina's main southern gate, the triple-arched **Bab Diwan**. This gate was added in 1306, and stands in the middle of the most impressive section of the ramparts.

THE LIFE OF THE MEDINA

Despite their chaotic appearance, medinas were laid out according to strict Islamic principles, thought to have originated in 8th-century Baghdad. Their layout is carefully adapted to the rigours of the climate. The deep, narrow streets keep the sun's rays from the centre during the day, and draw in the cool evening air during the night. Earth, stone and wood were used to absorb water, which then evaporates and cools the surrounding air.

Medinas also served a military purpose, surrounding the city with fortified, crenellated walls and towers (Sfax's are among the best preserved in Tunisia), elaborate *babs* or *skifas* (gates) designed to impress as much as to regulate entry to the city, and fortresses occupied by Islamic warriors.

Inside the walls, the heart of any medina was the city's main mosque, normally known as the Jami el-Kebir or Great Mosque. This should be located at the exact centre of the medina, as is the case in Sfax and Tunis. Radiating out from the Great Mosque were the souqs – still today the heartbeat of any medina. Closest to the mosque were purveyors of the 'noble trades': vendors of candles, incense and other objects used in the rites of worship. Next to them were the booksellers, venerated in Muslim cultures, and the vendors of leather goods. These were followed by the clothing and textile stalls, long the domain of the richest and most powerful merchants.

The hierarchy then descended through furnishings, domestic goods and utensils. Finally, on the city perimeter and away from the piety of the mosque, the caravans used to assemble and here were found the ironmongers, blacksmiths and the other craftsmen and vendors serving the caravan trade.

The *funduqs* or *caravanserais* (ancient hotels) were important features of any medina. Here, traders, nomads, pilgrims and scholars stayed while in town, usually on their route elsewhere (eg Kairouan or Mecca). Traditionally, an unadorned façade provided a doorway wide enough to allow camels or heavily laden beasts to enter. The central courtyard was open to the sky and surrounded by a number of stalls, bays or niches. The ground floor housed shops, warehouses, teahouses and stabling for the animals; the upper floor accommodated the travellers. The Funduq des Forgerons (opposite) in Sfax is an evocative example.

Apart from these buildings around which the public life of the city revolved, most of the medina was the domain of residential quarters. The Tunisian town house, known as the *dar* or interior-courtyard house, has remained largely unaltered for 3000 years. The principal feature is a central courtyard, around which are grouped suites of rooms in a symmetrical pattern. In the wealthier houses, service areas were often tacked on to one side. The courtyard was designed to keep the house light and cool as well as provide a space for communal family life. Rooms could be used interchangeably for eating, relaxing and sleeping. The hottest part of the day is spent in the cool of the courtyard, and at night, the roof terrace can be used as a sleeping area. The Dar Jellouli Museum (opposite) in Sfax is a fine example of just such a house.

The street façade is usually just a plain wall, and the only opening is the entrance door. Any other openings are small, grilled and above the line of vision of passers-by, reflecting the strict demarcation of public and private life in Islamic society.

To the north is the ornate eastern wall of the **Great Mosque** (closed to non-Muslims), founded by the Aghlabids in the middle of the 9th century AD. The eastern wall is the only section that's visible, as the other sides are hidden by souqs. The elaborate sandstone **minaret**, a smaller replica of the three-tiered square minaret at Kairouan, was added by the Fatimids in AD 988. It's best viewed from rue des Aghlabites, to the north of the mosque; take the stairs next to the entrance of the teahouse for the best view.

Further north you can discover the wonderful world of the **covered souqs**. The main souq heading north is the celebrated **Souq des Etoffes**, which was used as the setting for the Cairo markets in the film *The English Patient*.

Souq des Etoffes emerges on rue des Teinturiers, where the dyers once carried on their business. If you keep going until you hit rue Abdelkader, which runs inside the medina's northern wall, you'll get to the delightful **Bab Jebli**, one of the original Aghlabid gates.

Nearby, the **Funduq des Forgerons** no longer functions as a *funduq*, but still serves as a base for the city's *forgerons* (blacksmiths). It's like walking back a century in time, into a world of blackened faces, smoking fires, red-hot metal and constant hammering. Climb up to the 1st floor for views down into the courtyard. This is the most recognisable of the sites used for *The English Patient*.

The **Dar Jellouli Museum** (admission TD1.1, plus camera TD1; ☎ 9.30am-4.30pm Tue-Sun) is in a classic courtyard house, built by the wealthy Jellouli merchant family in the 17th century, and is filled with beautiful carved-wood panels, rich tile decoration and ornate stuccowork. The displays include traditional costumes and jewellery, but the building is the star attraction.

The **Borj Ennar** is a small fort added in the 17th century to protect the southeastern corner of the medina, and is now the headquarters of the Association de Sauvegarde de la Medina, the group responsible for preserving the medina. It has a good map of the medina showing all 69 mosques and all sites of historical interest.

West along rue Borj Ennar, the minaret on the left after 50m belongs to the **Mausoleum of Sidi Amar Kammoun**, built at the start of the 14th century. To the west is the **kasbah**. Built by the Aghlabids, it began life as a watchtower but was steadily expanded into a kasbah over the centuries.

VILLE NOUVELLE

South of the medina is the Ville Nouvelle, a fairly compact and walkable area where the majority of the restaurants, shops and hotels are located. It's a mix of sophisticated clothing boutiques, apartment buildings and government buildings that close fairly early in the evening.

The focal point is the **place de la République**, fronted by a number of superb French-era buildings at the junction of ave Hedi Chaker and ave Habib Bourguiba. The grand building on the southern side of the square is the **town hall**. As well as housing the city's bureaucrats, it's also the home of the **archaeological museum** (admission TD1.1, plus camera TD1; ☎ 8.30am-3pm summer, 8.30am-1pm & 3-6pm winter), housing some impressive finds from nearby Roman sites.

Other architectural highlights in the area include the fine **French consulate** (13 ave Habib Bourguiba) and the **police station** (11 ave Habib Bour-

guiba) – no photos are permitted at either place, though.

Sleeping MEDINA

The cheapest places are found in the medina. All budget places listed here have shared bathrooms unless stated.

Hôtel Medina (☎ 74 220 354; 53 rue Mongi Slim; d TD8) If you can find it, the Medina is only acceptable during the cooler months as there is no air-con nor fans and the small bare rooms get hot.

Hôtel Ennacer (☎ 74 211 037; 100 rue des Notaires; r TD20; ☎) By far the best of the medina budget hotels, the Ennacer is near Bab Jebli on the northern edge. Air-con is available in a few rooms for TD5 more, though most stay cool from natural breezes and all are kept immaculate. What makes it special, however, are the views from the rooftop – it's conceivable management will let you sleep on the roof in summer.

On a sliding scale downwards to the grim but very cheap end of the scale, there are some basic places just inside Bab Diwan. The least bleak among them include **Hôtel Besbes** (rue Borj Ennar) and **Hôtel el-Mokhtar** (rue Borj Ennar).

VILLE NOUVELLE

Budget

Auberge de Jeunesse (☎ 74 243 207; www.ibn-sina.org.tn; rte de l'Aéroport; dm TD6) A kilometre or so northwest of the medina is the spick and span Sfax youth hostel. Toilets are shared and there are separate showers for men and women.

Hôtel de la Paix (☎ 74 296 437; fax 74 298 463; 17 rue Alexandre Dumas; s/d TD12/18) The bottom of the barrel as far as accommodation in the Ville Nouvelle goes, La Paix is well located and cheap. And what else could you expect at this price? Top-floor rooms with shared bathroom are even cheaper.

Hôtel Alexander (☎ 74 221 613; 21 rue Alexandre Dumas; s/d TD15/25) What once could be called character, now is nothing more than old age at this four-storey hotel next to La Paix. The vestiges of what it was once can be seen in the high ceilings and balconies. Rooms with shared facilities are a few dinars cheaper.

Midrange

Hôtel Thyna (☎ 74 225 317; fax 74 225 773; 37 rue Habib Maazoun; s/d with breakfast & TV TD30/46; ☎) Only

a block or so from the southern entrance to the medina, the Thyna is both ideally located and excellent value. The attractively done lobby suggests a high-end boutique hotel but the rooms, while perfectly comfortable and kept immaculate, are more Ikea. There's a charming little café on the 3rd floor and you can store your bags there if you want to lighten your load when heading to the Kerkennah Islands.

Hôtel La Colisée (☎ 74 227 800; fax 74 299 350; 32 ave Taieb Mehiri; s/d TD31/40; 🏠) Formerly the top of the line as far as midrange accommodation in the city centre goes, this high-rise hotel has fallen far. Rooms here are large, especially the bathrooms, some of which have large bathtubs, but from the lobby to the hallways everything is dark.

Top End

Hôtel Syphax (☎ 74 243 333; fax 74 245 226; ave des Martyrs; s/d with breakfast TD75/90; 🏠 📺 📺) Formerly part of the Novotel chain, this hotel 2km west of the medina on the way to the airport is a rapidly fading, low-slung complex that does little to justify its out-of-the-way location. Staff are friendly and there is an outdoor pool, however there's little attention to detail or upkeep in the rooms or of the facilities.

Mercure Accor Hôtel (☎ 74 225 700; sfax@abouna was.com.tn; 15 ave Habib Bourguiba; s/d TD105/135; 🏠 📺 📺) Previously the Abou Nawas Sfax, the Mercure Accor is conveniently located only a few blocks from the train station right in the middle of town. However, its service is far from courteous and the rooms themselves are simply not worth the high price, though they do have balconies. There is a rooftop pool and several restaurants, though they may only open for groups and the food is unremarkable.

Les Oliviers (☎ 74 201 999; www.goldenyasmin.com; 25 ave Hedi Chaker; s/d TD130/170; 🏠 📺 📺) It's a bit of a surprising sight, this beautiful looking faux palace hotel, one of the classiest in the country, sitting across from a neglected patch of grass and surrounded by pot-holed and derelict looking buildings. The lobby and the rooms of Les Oliviers are as impressive as the façade, all mahogany and fine finishing and there's a sunny atrium that houses a pleasant café. Downstairs is a dark and atmospheric pub, the walls lined with posters of Hollywood and Arab film stars

and musicians. There's a business centre, though internet access is unreliable.

Eating

RESTAURANTS

There's a cluster of cheap restaurants on the right just inside the medina's Bab Diwan. Most are signed only in Arabic and are very popular, with locals chowing down on rotisserie chicken and couscous.

Sandro Pizzeria (sandwiches TD2) This place directly across the street from the place de la République is open later than most and serves excellent gyros – pick your filling – bursting at the seams. Pizza (TD3.5) is also available and you can eat in or take away.

Twings (ave Habib Bourguiba; mains TD3; 🏠) This is a US-style fast food joint with a wide selection of menu items from chicken wings and hamburgers to pitta sandwiches.

Restaurant Budaya (rue de la Kasbah; mains TD3; 🏠) This is another cheap medina eatery serving up rotisserie chicken, though the Budaya is slightly more modern and comfortable than the others and has air-con.

Restaurant Speciality Lebanese (rue de Haffouz; mains TD3; 🏠) Across from the port, this place serves up an excellent variety of pizzas in a comfortable 2nd-floor dining area.

Restaurant au Bec Fin (place du 2 Mars; mains TD4) Centrally located and popular with regular locals, this restaurant has a large, plain dining room and Tunisian fare to match.

Pizza Galaxy (ave des Martyrs; mains TD7; 🏠) Convenient only if you're staying at the Hôtel Syphax outside of town, Pizza Galaxy is a big, modern restaurant with a massive menu serving pizza, pasta and meat dishes.

La Perla (ave Habib Bourguiba; mains TD7) Conveniently located close to several of the hotels, La Perla is somewhat elegant in that there are tablecloths and silverware. Besides pasta, fish and meat dishes, alcohol is served.

Le Petit Navire (☎ 74 212 890; rue de Haffouz; mains TD7, set menu TD15) One of Sfax' more elegant restaurants, the high ceilinged, 2nd floor dining room at Petit Navire overlooks the harbour area. As you might expect, fish is the speciality here.

Restaurant Le Corail (☎ 74 227 301; 39 rue Habib Maazoun; mains TD13) Next to the Hôtel Thyna this place doesn't serve food of remarkably better quality than any of the less expensive options but you're paying for the waiters' uniforms and the slightly upscale décor.

SELF-CATERING

Monoprix supermarket (rue Aboulkacem ech Chabbi; ☎ 8.30am-9pm) This is a nice and modern supermarket in the centre of town.

Drinking

Café Maure Diwan (off rue de la Kasbah; ☎ 6am-midnight) This is a great atmospheric place to kick back and smoke a *sheesha* or kill a few hours with a coffee or the house speciality *thé au pignons et menthe* (mint tea with pine nuts; TD1). Cut into the medina wall between Bab Diwan and Bab el-Kasbah, Maure Diwan is a refuge from the heat, sun and claustrophobia of the medina streets.

Club My House (rue Mohammed Ali) From the outside, Club My House looks like it's part of a set for the film *Pirates of the Caribbean*. Inside, it's a two-storey modern hangout for the young and hip of Sfax. A huge flat-screen TV plays Arabic-language music videos, while friends and dates share milkshakes (TD2), ice cream, floats, coffee etc on comfy lounge chairs. Food is also served, such as crepes (TD2), *paninis* (TD2) and hamburgers (TD1.5).

Black In White Café (blvd République) This is a typical outdoor café patronized by regulars, young and old alike, along the pedestrian plaza near ave Habib Bourguiba.

Shopping

The shops in the **Souq des Etoffes** stock a range of Berber rugs, blankets and other handicrafts from the villages of the Gafsa region. Although the selection is somewhat more limited compared with Tunis, Sousse and Kairouan, shop owners here are less likely to adopt hard-sell techniques and more likely to start off with a price somewhere in the ballpark of what items reasonably cost.

ONAT (rue Salem Harzallah; ☎ 8am-1pm & 5-8pm Mon-Sat) This is a good crafts shop on the southern part of rue Salem Harzallah.

Getting There & Away

AIR

Tuninter (☎ 74 228 028; 4 ave de l'Armée) has two flights a week between Tunis and Sfax (one way/return TD58/113, 45 minutes).

BOAT

Soretrak (☎ 74 498 216, ave Mohammed Hedi Khfecha) ferries for the Kerkennah Islands leave from the southwestern corner of the port. There

are 11 crossings a day in summer, four in winter. Timetables are displayed at the port and at the tourist office. The trip costs 800 mills for passengers and TD4 for a car. The crossing takes about 1¼ hours in good weather and there can be long queues to take a vehicle across in summer. In summer, the last boat back from the islands leaves around 8.45pm. Grab a seat in the shade or else you'll be baking in the sun the entire trip. Food and snacks are sold on board.

BUS

All buses leave from the **bus station** (rue Commandant Bejaoui) southwest of the medina. SNTRI is on the north side of the road, while the depot for the local company Soretras is to the south.

SNTRI also operates a daily international bus service to Tripoli, in Libya (TD17.8, seven hours); ask at the SNTRI office for the latest departure times.

Destination	Fare (per day)	Duration	Frequency
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Douz	TD15	5 hrs	2
El-Jem	TD3	1¼ hrs	10
Gabès	TD6.3	2 hrs	10
Houmt Souq (Jerba)	TD14.5	5 hrs	3
Medenine	TD9.2	3 hrs	2
Sousse	TD6.1	2 hrs	10
Tataouine	TD11.7	4 hrs	2
Tunis	TD13.5	5 hrs	8

Soretras operates a busy intercity schedule, including hourly services to Mahdia (TD2.7) and three daily buses to Kairouan (TD5.5).

CAR

The main international rental-car companies with a presence in Tunisia are represented here, as is a slew of small local companies.

Avis (☎ 74 224 605; rue Tahar Sfar)

Europcar (☎ 74 226 680; 40 rue Tahar Sfar)

Hertz (☎ 74 228 626; 47 ave Habib Bourguiba)

Location 2000 (☎ 74 221 763; ave Habib Thameur)

Mattei (Ada; ☎ 74 296 404; 18 rue Patrice Lumumba)

LOUAGE

The **louage station** (cnr rues Commandant Bejaoui & de Mauriane) is a compound 200m west of the bus stations. There are departures to Gabès

(TD5.9), Sousse (TD5.9) and Tunis (TD10.9). Other destinations include El-Jem (TD3.2), Mahdia (TD4.8) and Jerba (TD11.2).

There are also louages to Tripoli (TD30). These vehicles are yellow and white, and often have Libyan markings.

TRAIN

There are three trains a day south to Gabès (three hours) and one late-night train to Gafsa (3½ hours) and Metlaoui (4¼ hours). Heading north, there are five trains daily to El-Jem (one hour), four to Sousse (two hours) and six to Tunis (3½ hours).

Destination	2nd class	1st class	Confort
El-Jem	TD3.1	TD4.1	TD4.4
Gabès	TD5.3	TD7.2	TD7.9
Gafsa	TD7	TD9.4	TD10.1
Sousse	TD4.9	TD6.5	TD6.9
Tunis	TD10.2	TD13.5	TD12.6

Getting Around

TO/FROM THE AIRPORT

The **airport** (☎ 74 241 740) is 6km from town on the Gafsa road at Thynea – TD3.5 by taxi.

KERKENNAH ISLANDS

جزر القرقنة

pop 16,000

To Tunisians born and raised here, this cluster of nine low-lying islands, 25km east of Sfax, evokes warm memories of peaceful evening strolls with family along the shore. To visitors, the flat, desolate landscape,

once valued as a place of exile, is less liable to provoke nostalgia though it is a chance for a beach holiday away from the mass tourism found elsewhere along the coast.

Tourism here means residents of Sfax gathering up the kids and heading out on the ferry for a Sunday picnic. So far, the islanders have resisted any large-scale development and prefer the timeless rhythms dictated by nature. Fishermen still use traditional traps made from palm fronds. Lines of fronds are stuck in the sea bed in a 'V' shape, and the fish are then driven into this large funnel to a small trap at the end.

Orientation

The two main islands, Île Gharbi and Île Chergui, are connected by a small causeway dating back to Roman times.

Most of the population lives on Chergui. The only place of any consequence is the small town of Remla, the administrative and service 'capital' of the islands.

Information

There's a branch of the UIBC bank in Remla with an ATM, on the road leading down to the sea next to the Hôtel el-Jazira, or change money at one of the hotels. Remla also has a hospital, post office and police station.

Sights & Activities

BORJ EL-HISSAR

Borj el-Hissar is an old fort on the coast, about 3km north of the hotels at Sidi Frej. It's

well worth the 40-minute walk; it's clearly signposted from near the Hôtel Le Grand. The small fort itself was built by the Spanish in the 16th century, but Roman ruins surround the fort. You get the feeling that you are stumbling across something previously undiscovered, with mosaics covered by sand and ruins disappearing into the sea.

BEACHES

The sea is very shallow – good for kids and adults who don't like to get their hair wet. You can walk out 100m before even your knees get wet. The best beach is at **Ras Bounouma**, northeast of Sidi Frej, but there's no public transport.

Sleeping & Eating

REMLA

Youth Hostel (☎ 74 481 148; per person TD5) Situated across the road from the beach, this place has clean and well-maintained facilities. Reservations in summer are recommended and camping is an option if you have your own equipment.

Hôtel el-Jazira (☎ 74 481 058; s/d TD14/22) The one and only hotel in Remla, opposite the bus station on the main street, has plain but clean rooms, a restaurant and the only bar in town. Breakfast is included.

The Restaurant La Sirène has a shady terrace overlooking the sea and does meals for around TD15, plus wine. The Dauphin, next to El-Jazira does basic Tunisian dishes.

SIDI FREJ

Appart Hôtel Aziz (☎ 74 259 933; s/d TD25/42; 🚿) Just up and across the road from the Club Residence, this hotel has no beachfront property and it won't exactly feel like an island holiday staying here. It can feel lonely here with no other guests for company. The rooms are big and come with stand-up fans.

Kerkennah Islands Club Residence (☎ 74 489 999; s/d TD35/50; 🚿 🚿) This large complex feels like an empty warehouse with large spaces given over to functions that seem to only rarely happen – there's even a small amphitheatre on the grounds. Accommodation is in simple whitewashed rondavels on a grassy lawn set back from the pool area. There's isn't much of a beach to speak of though you can conceivably enter the water from here. An extra TD5 gets you air-con.

Hôtel Cercina (☎ 74 489 953; hotel.cercina@planet.tn; s/d TD40/60) The first hotel you come to in Sidi Frej, the Cercina won't win any architectural awards for its Soviet-style concrete block aesthetic, but it's comfortable enough if you get a room with a sea view. Rooms in a newer annexe are more modern though most don't front the sea.

Grand Hotel (☎ 74 489 861; www.grand-hotel-kerkenah.com.tn; s/d TD60/90; 🚿 🚿) The inappropriately named Grand caters to both package-tour groups from Britain and Tunisians looking for a version of *zone touristique* hotels found elsewhere. It all feels a little down on its luck with a sad-sack looking lobby area and aging rooms. What it does have is the only good beach around, with water excellent for wading, and a nice pool area.

All of the hotels have restaurants and the food is generally unspectacular except for the local speciality, a thick, spicy octopus soup called *tchich*, and freshly caught fish. There's a pleasant restaurant and café on the main road just before the turnoff for the Hotel Cercina.

Getting There & Away

See p219 for details of ferries between Sfax and Sidi Youssef.

Getting Around

BICYCLE

The flat terrain is ideal for cycling although shady spots are few and far between. Most of the hotels rent out bicycles (TD2 per hour, TD10 per day).

BUS

There's a small network of buses connecting the villages of the islands and at least two or three meet each ferry; all go to Remla. One (with a 'hotel' sign in the window) goes via Sidi Frej (TD1). There are buses from Remla and the Sidi Frej junction to Sidi Youssef departing about an hour before the window in Remla.

The Remla bus station is opposite the Hôtel el-Jazira.

TAXI

Dozens of shared taxis also meet each ferry as it docks. These are much more convenient and quicker than the buses and only slightly more expensive (TD1.5).



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