

The Sahara

الصحراء



There's something undeniably moving about standing on top of a shifting sand dune and surveying the emptiness – what seems to be the end of the earth can be so beautiful. The novelty of finding sand so far from the ocean can spark anxious nightmares about global warming and yet for certain temperaments there's the temptation to simply walk off into the distance to see how far you can go before feeling like you're truly on an alien planet. *Lawrence of Arabia* fantasies aside, don't underestimate the inviting soft dunes of the Grand Erg Oriental, one of the Sahara's most expansive sand seas. It's an inhospitable place for all but the experienced and travel here should be done with the utmost precaution. It's a remarkable and breathtaking setting, as long as you travel with a guide or in a group, and could be the highlight of your trip.

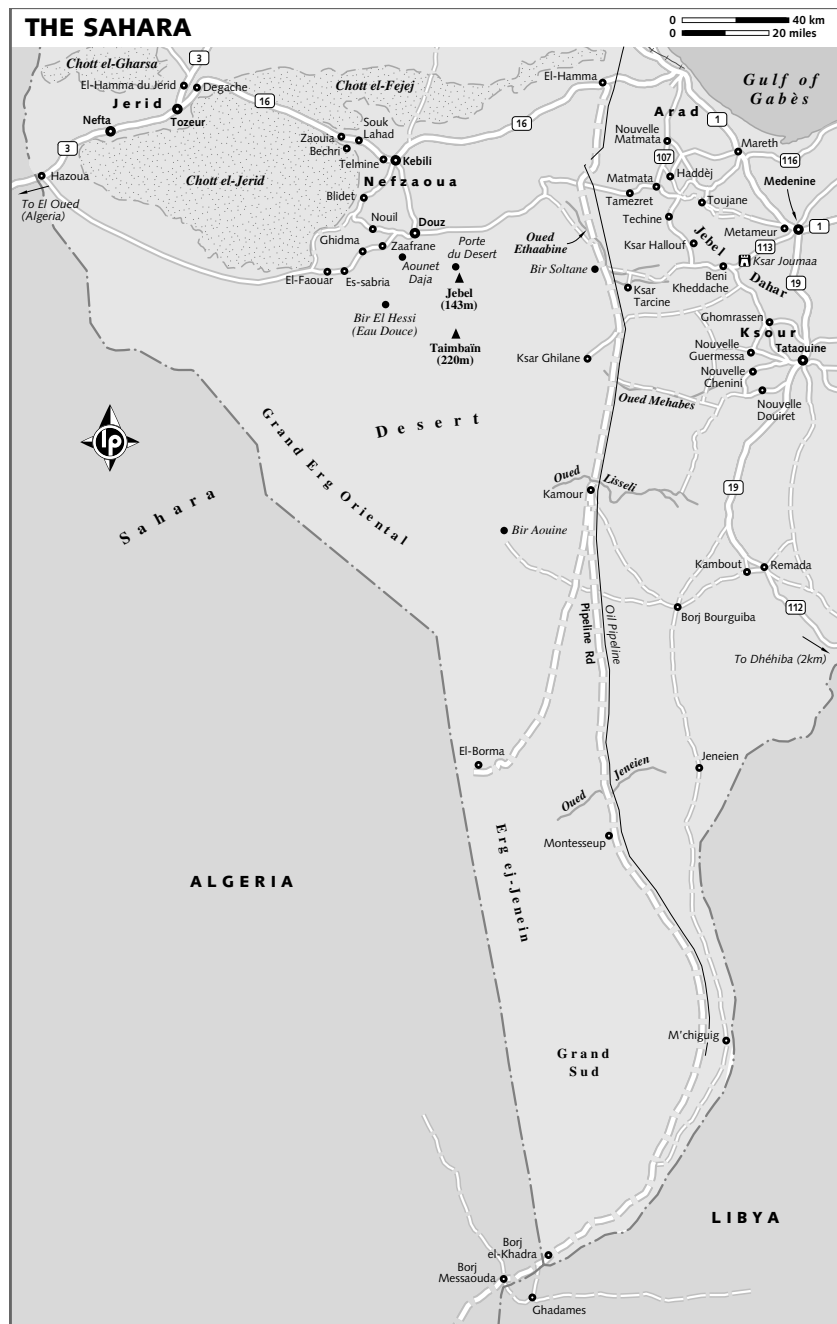
The *erg* (sand sea) begins 50km south of Douz and extends 500km southwest into neighbouring Algeria. All along the Sahara's northern perimeter are oasis towns huddled amid vast *palmeriaes* (palm groves), fed by underground water and producing the finest dates in Tunisia. Conveniently, Douz is the best of these oases from which to launch your desert expeditions.

The Sahara and its northern hinterland is the home of the Berbers. With the decline of the Roman Empire, tribes began to move in from the south at the end of the 4th century AD, bringing with them the first camels to be seen in Tunisia. The Berbers and their camels are still there and many continue to live a seminomadic existence in the south around Douz.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Take the camel by the hump on a **trek** (p248) through the otherworldly dunes of the Grand Erg Oriental for a Saharan experience
- Soak your tired bones in the **hot springs** (p251) at the oasis of Ksar Ghilane





History

Southern Tunisia was the southernmost point of Roman Africa, with towns such as Tozeur forming part of the Limes Tripolitanus – a defensive line that guarded the southwestern boundaries of Roman Africa. The Berbers were largely left to themselves, which is why strongholds of Berber culture and architecture have survived.

Although administered nominally by the occupying powers of the north, the region was largely the domain of Berber confederations, most notably the Nefzaoua (around Kebili) and Ouergherma (around Tataouine). The orientation of the south has also always been different, facing as much towards the arriving and departing trade caravans from across the desert as to the coast.

Climate

Spring and autumn are the best times to visit, although tour operators claim that the season lasts from late September to early May. Summer is the worst time as far as your comfort is concerned and camel treks are restricted to overnight excursions. Besides the high temperatures, it's also the season of the sirocco, a hot, southerly wind that can blow for days on end, filling the air (and lungs) with fine, desert sand.

Getting There & Away

The major southern towns are well connected to the rest of Tunisia by bus and louage. Trains connect Gabès to Tunis and coastal cities to the north.

Getting Around

Most tourists are ferried around the south as part of a 4WD tour arranged in advance. If you are an independent traveller, having your own vehicle makes getting around immeasurably easier and more convenient. Many of the places worth visiting in the south don't necessarily call for an all-day or overnight stop and some are infrequently served by public transport. The major towns and even most of the villages are connected by well-maintained sealed roads.

If car rental isn't an option, you'll have to rely on a mix of louage, bus, *camionnette* (pick-up truck used as a taxi), hitching and (for Ksar Ghilane, the area around Tataouine, and the mountain oases around Tozeur) organised 4WD tour; see the Douz

(p248), Tozeur (p260) and Gabès (p227) sections for details. There are no direct public transport connections between the towns of Douz, Matmata and Tataouine; you'll need to backtrack to Gabès to connect.

DOUZ

pop 28,000

Strictly modern and functional, the town of Douz acts like a curtain to the wonders just to the south. Driving through the compact narrow streets of the centre, you'll wonder what all the hype is about. Why journey to this remote outpost that appears abandoned during the intense midday summer heat? But as the sun sets and the streets cool, Douz comes alive, the cafés around the central souq fill up and as you pass through the intervening *palmeraie*, the sight of the Grand Erg Oriental reveals its magical self, a seeming mirage until you set foot on its sandy shore.

People here are naturally open and friendly, accustomed to the fact that the local economy is largely dependent on groups of foreigners turning giddy at the prospect of riding a camel. In addition to the Zone Touristique hotels, whose inflated prices are mostly justified by their desert-side locations, there are several hotels in the town centre that cater to independent travellers. Every Thursday, the souq is home to a colourful weekly market; it's worth arranging to be here just to see it. For good reason Douz is the most popular gateway to the Sahara.

Orientation

There are basically two parts to Douz. There's the compact and walkable town centre with restaurants, budget and midrange accommodation and banks laid out in a rough grid around the souq. And there's the Zone Touristique, which is found 3km southwest of the centre down *ave des Martyrs* and through the *palmeraie*. This is also the way to the desert and the start of the great dune.

Information

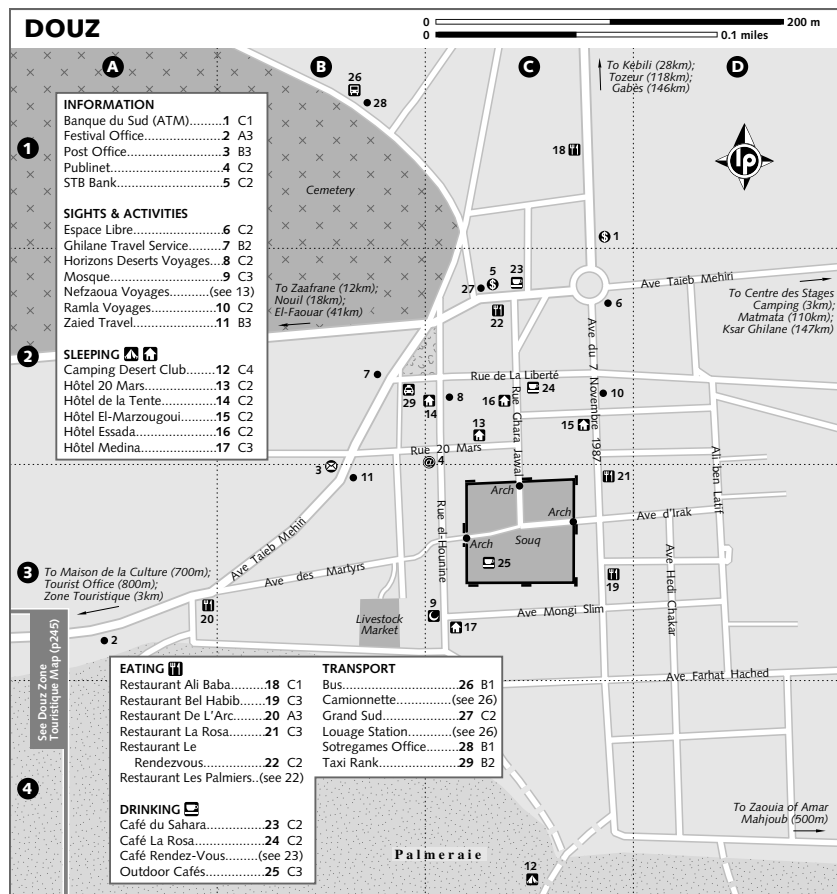
INTERNET ACCESS

Publinet (Map p244; cnr rue 20 Mars & rue el-Hounine; per hr TD2; ☎ 8am-10pm) Good connections.

MONEY

The post office has an exchange counter as do most hotels in the Zone Touristique.

دوز



Banque du Sud (Map p244; route de Kebili) ATM.
STB bank (Map p244; ave Taieb Mehiri) ATM.

POST

Post office (Map p244; ave Taieb Mehiri) Just west of the town centre.

TOURIST INFORMATION

ONTT tourist office (Map p245; ☎ 75 470 351; place des Martyrs; ☎ 8am-1pm & 3-5.45pm Sun-Thu, 8.30am-1.30pm Fri & Sat) Helpful in giving recommended prices for camel expeditions.

Sights & Activities

MUSÉE DU SAHARA

A visit to the small folk **museum** (Map p245; place des Martyrs; admission TD1.1; ☎ 7-11am & 4-7pm

Tue-Sun Jun-Aug, 9am-4.30pm Tue-Sat Sep-May) provides some perspective and context on the desert lifestyle. It has a good collection of regional costumes, a mock nomad tent and an interesting section explaining the tattoos worn by local women. There is also information on camel husbandry and a section on desert plants. It's definitely worth a visit although text is in Arabic and French.

PALMERIAE

Not that you're counting, but the *palmeriae* here is the largest of all the Tunisian desert oases, with almost half a million palm trees. A wonderfully productive place, it turns out a remarkable assortment of fruit and

vegetables – as well as prized *deglat ennou* (finger of light) dates.

The best way to explore it is to walk out along one of the two roads leading south through the *palmeriae* from the western end of ave des Martyrs. The roads link up at the Zone Touristique.

DESERT ACTIVITIES

Douz is the most convenient place to get a taste for the Sahara, though it's really only a taste. The Sahara desert proper starts 50km south of the Zone Touristique. Unless you're planning a longer excursion into the desert (see p248), the action centres around the **great dune**. It can't compare with the sand seas of the Grand Erg Oriental, but is a gentle introduction for those with limited time.

Pegase (Café de Dunes; ☎ 75 470 793; fax 75 470 835) is a one-stop shop that seems to have a monopoly on most of the tourist business around the great dune. You could probably arrange things on your own with any of the tour companies (see below), your hotel or one of the freelance guides who will likely introduce themselves to you around town or near the great dune. Most people arrive as part of a large group and everything is prearranged. Part of the fun of a camel trip into the dunes (if alone you should be able to negotiate a ride for around TD10 per hour) is being outfitted in a long Berber style tunic. A lap around a desert track on a **go-cart** is TD10 but for a much more exciting ride in the dunes it's a whopping TD60 for 30 minutes. To view the dunes from on high, though not too high, a 10-minute **flight** in a light plane is TD60.

Tours

Most people show up in Douz already part of a tour though it's also quite easy to arrange a trip into the desert through one of the companies with offices in town; the more people, the better the individual rates. Here's some officially recognised agencies: **Espace Libre** (Map p244; ☎ 75 470 620; www.libre-espace-voyages.com; cnr ave Taieb Mehiri & ave du 7 Novembre)

Ghilane Travel Services (Map p244; ☎ 75 470 692; gts@planet.tn; 38 ave Taieb Mehiri)

Horizons Deserts Voyages (Map p244; ☎ 75 471 688; www.horizons-deserts.com; 9 rue el-Hounine)

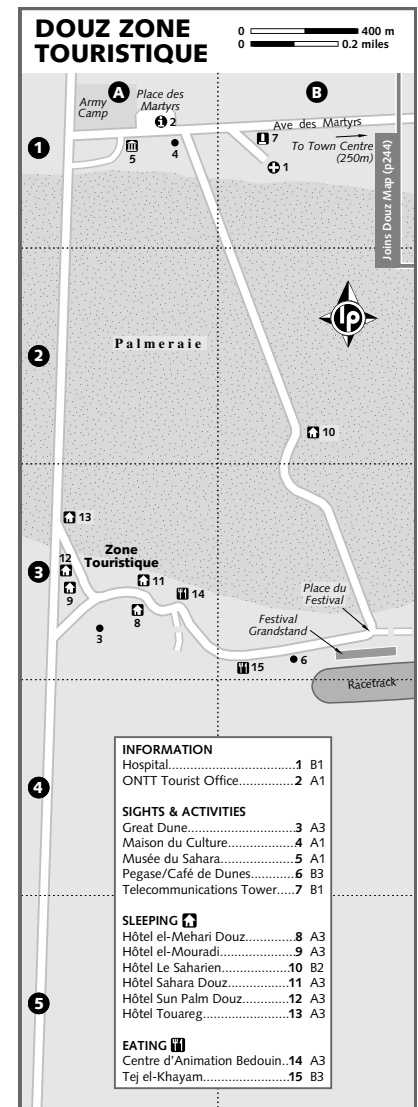
Nefzaoua Voyages (Map p244; ☎ 75 472 920; age.nefzaoua@planet.tn; Hotel 20 Mars, rue 20 Mars)

Ramla Voyages (Map p244; ☎ 75 472 805; www.ramla-voyages.com.tn; rue 7 Novembre)

Zaied Travel (Map p244; ☎ 75 455 118; www.zaied-travel.com; ave Taieb Mehiri)

Festivals & Events

Consider yourself lucky if you happen to be in Douz for the **Sahara Festival**, which is



normally held at the beginning of November – although the dates can be hard to track down. It's one of the few genuine festivals in the country, and draws large numbers of domestic visitors as well as foreign tourists.

Most of the action takes place around *placé du Festival* out near the Great Dune, where a large concrete grandstand has been erected to handle the big crowds who come to watch the displays of traditional desert sports, such as camel racing and hunting with greyhound-like Saluki dogs.

The festivities also include colourful parades and music in the town centre, and evening poetry readings and concerts at the *Maison du Culture*.

Sleeping

All of the budget and a couple of midrange places are in or around the town centre; the more upmarket hotels are in the Zone Touristique, 3.5km southwest of town, facing the desert on the edge of the enormous *palmeraie*. There's great value to be found in all categories, especially during the low season.

TOWN CENTRE

Camping Desert Club (Map p244; ☎ /fax 75 470 575; off ave du 7 Novembre; motorbike/car/campervan TD2/3/4, per person TD5) This is one of the better camp sites in the country, not only because of its setting among the palm trees south of the town centre, but also because it has excellent modern facilities. If you don't have a tent, you can sleep on a mattress inside a Berber tent. There is also an Italian-Tunisian restaurant. Showers are free, but expect to pay for electricity (TD1), water (TD2) and use of a washing machine (TD5). The gates are closed to cars between 11pm and 7am.

Hôtel Essada (Map p244; ☎ 75 472 955; rue Ghara Jawal; per person TD5) The rudimentary Essada should only be a last resort though if you have your own equipment you can pitch a tent or conceivably a mattress on the terrace for only TD3.

Hôtel de la Tente (Map p244; ☎ /fax 75 470 468; rue el-Hounine; s/d with toilet & shower TD10/20) A much better budget option is this small, friendly hotel. The rooms are basic but well kept and the management is friendly and helpful. Rooms with shared bathroom are cheaper.

Hôtel el-Marzougoui (Map p244; ☎ /fax 75 475 480; ave du 7 Novembre; s/d TD10/20) For this price, the fantastic views of town from the rooftop patio are a bargain though the small rooms with arched ceilings are about in line with the costs. Most of the rooms have private showers though bathrooms are shared, and plans call for some air-con rooms in the near future.

Hôtel 20 Mars (Map p244; ☎ 75 470 269; hotel20mars@planet.tn; rue 20 Mars; s/d with shower TD11/16, with shower & toilet TD15/20; ☎) A small centrally located hotel, 20 Mars feels more like a guesthouse because of its friendly, helpful staff and the interior courtyard, ideal for hanging out during the midday heat. But the place really shines because of the immaculate rooms – with their high ceilings and colourful tiles, they are more comfortable and better quality than most top end places around the region. Rates include breakfast and there are several air-con rooms for TD10 more. The Nefzaoua Voyages tour company is run out of here.

Hôtel Medina (Map p244; ☎ 75 470 010; rue el-Hounine; per person without/with bathroom & air-con TD20/30; ☎) Another excellent choice is the Medina whose flowering courtyard is even more appealing though the clean, modern rooms are more basic than those at the Hôtel 20 Mars.

ZONE TOURISTIQUE

All of the hotels in the Zone Touristique are typical of the complexes found throughout the country: all have bars, multiple restaurants and *hammams* (public bathhouses). Prices include breakfast and most people book half board. Reservations are recommended in the summer.

Hôtel Le Saharien (Map p245; ☎ 75 471 337; fax 75 470 470; hotoasis@gnet.tn; s/d with breakfast TD55/80; ☎) An enormous step down in quality from the other hotels out this way, Le Saharien does at least boast shady surroundings in the heart of the *palmeraie* on the road to *placé du Festival*. Everything, including the lobby and small pool area is ragged and there seems little attempt at upkeep.

Hôtel Mehari Douz (Map p245; ☎ 75 471 088; www.goldenyasmin.com; s/d TD75/110; ☎) Once you pass through the entrance of the imposing fortress façade, the Mehari Douz opens up onto a wonderfully light and bright large inner courtyard with two pools, one filled

with thermal therapeutic water. One of the original Zone Touristique hotels, it's still the classiest and the closest to the great dune. The small rooms are nothing spectacular but there is an intimate feel here absent from the others.

Hôtel el-Mouradi (Map p245; ☎ 75 470 303; info.douz@elmouradi.com; s/d TD80/144; ☎) More luxurious than its neighbour the Sun Palm, el-Mouradi boasts an enormous glitzy domed lobby and an aesthetic that's best described as faux palace. There's a large outdoor pool traversed by a bridge and an indoor pool, just in case the sun is too intense. A gym, *hammam* (public bathhouse) and several restaurants are part of the complex.

Hôtel Sun Palm Douz (Map p245; ☎ 75 470 123; www.goldenyasmin.com; s/d TD90/140; ☎) Part of the Golden Yasmin hotel chain, the Sun Palm looks like an imposing fort from the outside but a standard tourist class hotel inside. Rooms are disappointingly no frills, in stark contrast to the obvious attempt at lavishness evident in the lobby and restaurant. The pool area is nice and the *hammam* (TD5) a good post-desert treat.

The two other Zone Touristique hotels, **Hôtel Touareg** (Map p245; ☎ 75 470 057; www.hotel-touareg.com; ☎) and **Hôtel Sahara Douz** (Map p245; ☎ 75 470 864; saharadou@planet.tn; ☎) are unremarkable and offer singles/doubles for around TD70/100.

Eating

The majority of visitors are virtually sequestered to their hotel dining rooms, in part because most of the meals are already prepaid. All of the Zone Touristique hotels have at least one restaurant and while the furnishings and waiters' uniforms are usually high end, the food is usually voluminous if not especially spectacular. Expect to pay around TD15 for a buffet.

Restaurant Ali Baba (Map p244; route de Kebili; mains TD3.5) It's a little derelict looking and the backyard garden is cramped, still this traveller-friendly place about 100m north of the roundabout, is a pleasant spot for a quiet evening.

Restaurant Bel Habib (Map p244; ave du 7 Novembre 1987; mains TD4.5; ☎) On the ground floor of the cheapie hotel of the same name, the Bel Habib is comfortable and tourist friendly. The menu is no surprise: couscous, meat and chicken dishes.

Tej el-Khayem (Map p245; ☎ 75 472 446; Zone Touristique; mains TD10; ☎) Whether you eat indoors, in a Berber style tent or out on the sand, Tej el-Khayem serves up some of the best meals in Douz. The à la carte menu includes all the standards but if you order in advance and/or are part of a large group you can experiment with camel (TD12) or try the *coucha agneau* – a local speciality of meat cooked underground in *gargoulette* (pottery). Wine and beer are served and dancing and performances can be arranged in advance.

Centre d'Animation Bedouin (Map p245; ☎ 75 470 639; Zone Touristique) This place, just past the Hotel Sahara Douz near Tej el-Khayem also offers the chance to eat in a Berber tent, though one done up for tourists, and puts on 'traditional dance' shows, though it's generally only used for large groups who book in advance.

There are several other restaurants in town that are fairly indistinguishable from one another. All serve up couscous and meat dishes for around TD4.

Restaurant De l'Arc (Map p244; ave des Martyrs)

Restaurant La Rosa (Map p244; ave du 7 Novembre 1987)

Restaurant Le Rendezvous (Map p244; ☎ 75 470 802; ave Taieb Mehiri) Slightly nicer than the next door Les Palmiers.

Restaurant Les Palmiers (Map p244; ave Taieb Mehiri)

Drinking

The open-air cafés stay busy till late in the night, especially during the summer months when the plastic tables in and around the souq area buzz with conversation. Café les Arcades (Map p244) is in the southwest corner of the souq.

Café Rendez-Vous (Map p244) and Café du Sahara (Map p244), almost side-by-side on ave Taieb Mehiri, are also very popular. **Café La Rosa** (Map p244; Rue Ghara Jawal) has a quiet courtyard at the back.

Of course you can sip a tea, coffee or beer for that matter at most of the hotels out in the Zone Touristique, but it's also fun to hang out at the Café de Dunes (Map p245), part of the Pegase outdoor activity centre, and watch the bustle when groups arrive and the calm after the storm.

Beer and alcohol are served at the restaurants and bars of the Zone Touristique hotels.

Shopping

Not surprisingly, sand roses are commonly sold in the shops around town. Tourist versions of Saharan sandals (comfortable slip-on shoes made from camel skin) decorated with palm motifs etc are also widely available. All around the souq and surrounding streets, you'll find Berber rugs, sand roses, Touareg jewellery and a range of other pots and pieces.

Getting There & Away

BUS

SNTRI has two air-con services a day to Tunis. The 6am one is direct (TD24, eight hours) and the 10am one goes via Gabès (TD16, two hours) and Sfax (TD11, four hours). There are also two non air-con trips a day: one at 6am via Tozeur and another at 9pm via Gabès. There's also a 6am bus to Sfax via Gabès.

DESERT EXPEDITIONS

Camels are the Toyota Corollas of the desert: neither stylish nor luxurious, strictly functional vehicles to get you from one dune to the next. But to the average visitor who doesn't live in desert climes, there's something inherently romantic and exotic about these clumsy looking animals. The one humped Arabian camel or dromedary could be the illegitimate offspring of a crazy night between a giraffe, a horse and the Hunchback of Notre Dame, but this animal with a bad case of scoliosis is a cash cow for the tourist industry in Douz.

About as difficult as finding a taxi in New York City's Times Square, everyone from restaurant waiters to bank clerks has a friend with a camel ready to take you into the desert at a moment's notice. If you come in summer, only overnight excursions are possible since even this beast that can go a week without water can't take the heat.

The possibilities start with one-hour rides, available in the morning and late afternoon at the Pegase Centre in the Zone Touristique. You shouldn't have to pay more than TD10 for an hour-long circuit that gives you a taste of the serene and magical beauty of the desert; the large majority of people show up as part of a busload of other tourists who have prepaid for their camel experience. Camel riding newbies should definitely try out one of these short jaunts before signing on to something longer since the slow back and forth rocking motion doesn't exactly feel like an easy chair.

Overnight treks are equally easy to organise; longer treks generally require 24-hours notice. It's possible to even arrange trips of two to three weeks during the winter months. The biggest challenge is choosing between the range of treks on offer. The tourist office advises travellers to stay clear of the town's many unlicensed guides, pointing out that they are uninsured and unaccountable if problems arise. Some of the 10 registered tour companies are listed under Tours (p245).

In practice, many independent travellers end up using unlicensed guides operating through one of the hotels in town. Most charge TD35 for overnight treks or TD80 for two days and one night. You could try bargaining, but you run the risk of operators taking short cuts with food and water.

These treks leave Douz in the afternoon, and involve about four hours riding before pitching camp at sunset. Guides prepare an evening meal of damper bread, cooked in the ashes of a camp fire, and stew, before bedding down beneath the stars (blankets provided on request). An early breakfast of damper and jam is followed by the return ride, arriving in Douz mid-morning. Sometimes a visit to a village or Berber encampment is included.

The main complaint about these treks is that the desert immediately south of Douz isn't very interesting. The real desert, the Grand Erg Oriental, is a long way further south.

Longer expeditions can range as far as Ksar Ghilane (seven to 10 days). If you don't have that much time, most companies arrange overnight 4WD trips to Ksar Ghilane, leaving Douz around 4pm and arriving back mid-morning the following day. Count on around TD200 to TD250 per 4WD per day with one of the licenced operators.

You'll need to be properly equipped to go trekking. Essential items include a sensible hat that you can secure to your head, sunscreen and sunglasses. Long trousers are a good idea to prevent your legs getting chafed. Cameras and watches should be kept wrapped in a plastic bag to protect them from the very fine Saharan sand that gets into everything.

Regional company Sotregames has daily buses to Kebili (TD1.5, 30 minutes), Tozeur (TD7, two hours) and Gabès (TD5.7, three hours). Some of these have air-con. There are also three daily buses to Zaafrane (500 mills, 20 minutes, 7am, 2.30pm, 9pm), Sabria (TD1.5) and El-Faouar.

CAR & MOTORCYCLE

The road between Douz and Matmata, 110km to the east, is good. There are several small cafés – forlorn looking wooden shacks – along the way, but no petrol stations. The pipeline road to Ksar Ghilane intersects the Douz–Matmata road 66km east of Douz.

LOUAGE & CAMIONNETTE

There are regular departures to Kebili (TD1.8) and Gabès (TD7.5), but none to Tozeur or Matmata – change at Kebili or Gabès respectively. There are regular *camionnettes* to Zaafrane (600 mills) and the other oases south of Douz. There's also one a day to Tunis (TD23) though this is only for transport masochists.

Getting Around

BICYCLE

Bicycles can be rented from **Grand Sud** (Map p244; ☎ 75 590 177; ave Taieb Mehiri; per hr TD2.5, per day TD15).

TAXI

The best place to find taxis is on rue de la Liberté, near the corner with ave Taieb Mehiri. A trip from the centre of town to the Zone Touristique should cost around TD2.

AROUND DOUZ

A sealed road runs southwest from Douz through Zaafrane, Ghidma, Es-sabria and El-Faouar, a string of small oasis towns, which are bases for the region's semi-nomadic tribes who prefer life in the desert to the concrete-block settlements provided by the government. West beyond El-Faouar to Hazoua on the Algerian border is a desolate landscape, with the Chott el-Jerid on one side and the beginnings of the Grand Erg Oriental on the other. Be sure you have petrol and water if you come this way.

Zaafrane

The small, fly bitten town of Zaafrane, nothing more than a string of low slung pock-

marked concrete buildings, is redeemed by its location. It sits about 12km southwest of Douz on the edge of the desert like a port on the Mediterranean. Members of the Adhara tribe, who call the area home, have turned their desert skills into a commercial enterprise by ferrying tourists into the dunes. It's a less developed and busier departure point than Douz; most people turn up here as part of a large group so small crowds are usually part of the experience.

If you stay at **Hôtel Zaafrane** (☎ 75 450 020; fax 75 450 033; s/d with breakfast TD35/50; 🍽️ 🚿) you'll have a front row view of the fleet of camels parked across the road. Fortunately as the only hotel, restaurant and bar in town, the Zaafrane's simple and modern aesthetic is good value and you'll feel less anonymous here than at the *zone touristique* hotels in Douz.

Operating out of the hotel is **La Mer des Sables** (☎ 75 450 032; www.lamerdesables.com), Zaafrane's only indigenous tour company. The director, Ben Mna Ahmed, can arrange all manner of camel and 4WD trips in the south.

There are around three buses a day from Douz, as well as frequent *camionnettes* (600 mills). The flow of traffic dries up around 4pm and there's never anything much on Friday afternoons.

Beyond Zaafrane

The road continues from Zaafrane to **El-Faouar**, 41km southwest of Douz. This is the region's second-largest oasis, after Douz, with a population approaching 6000. It's also the source of the bulk of the 'sand roses' that are sold at souvenir stalls throughout the country. The best day to visit El-Faouar is Friday, when the market comes to town.

Hôtel Faouar (☎ 75 460 531; fax 75 460 576; s/d with half board TD50/80; 🍽️ 🚿) is a three-star place signposted to the left on the road into town from Zaafrane. It's a reasonably comfortable hotel with spacious but rustic rooms; you can also sleep in a Berber tent for TD30. As well as the standard swimming pool, it offers the chance to try the X game activity of dune skiing (TD10). The sand may look deceptively soft but it hurts if you fall.

There's a back road that loops north from Zaafrane to Kebili via the oasis villages of **Nouil** and **Blidet**. The turn-off is just west of

Zaafraane on the road to El-Faouar. Nouil is nothing much, but Blidet has a great setting on the edge of the Chott el-Jerid. Blidet can be reached by bus and *camionnette* from Kebili.

Campement Touristique Saharien (☎ 75 455 118; fax 75 455 014; per person half board TD12) outside of Nouil offers mattresses in nomad-style tents and bungalows or you can pitch your own tent. Meals can be provided.

Kebili

pop 19,000

It's a stretch to label any town on the edge of such a stark and forbidding landscape as ordinary, but Kebili, the main town and administrative centre of the Nefzaoua region, seems to fit the bill. Normally only a pit stop before or after crossing the Chott el-Jerid on the way between Douz and Tozeur, those who stay longer will be afforded the chance to experience what is essentially an oasis lifestyle, beating to rhythms both modern and timeless, undisturbed by passing visitors.

The abandoned town of **Ancienne Kebili** crumbles away in obscurity in the *palmeraie* to the south of the modern town. To get there, head south towards Douz on ave Bourguiba for about 10 minutes until you reach the **hot springs** on the left. The springs feed a *hammam* and pool complex. The houses may be collapsing, but the gardens are neatly tended. The **mosque** is still in use, and an ancient **koubba** (shrine) has been given a coat of blue paint.

Opposite the springs is a signposted track that winds through the *palmeraie* to the old town. In the modern centre, facilities include a post office, several banks and a well-stocked supermarket a few blocks west of ave Habib Bourguiba near the main bus and louage stations.

SLEEPING & EATING

Hôtel Kitam (☎ 75 491 338; fax 75 491 076; route de Gabès; s/d TD32/41; 🍽️) This is an acceptable, modern two-star hotel on the road into town.

Hôtel Les Dunes (☎ 75 785 364; fax 75 795 106; s/d TD64/94; 🍽️ 🚶) Another alternative before crossing the *chott* (salt lake or marsh) is Hôtel Les Dunes, near the village of Bechri 22km west of Kebili. The turn-off for the hotel is clearly signposted. Its most dis-

tinctive feature is a rather uninteresting tower that offers fantastic panoramic views when open. The Moorish inspired complex comes with a large pool area, forlorn disco and spacious rooms that were closed for improvements when we stopped by.

Hôtel de l'Oasis Dar Kebili (☎ 75 491 113; www.darhotels.com; s/d TD104/136; 🍽️ 🚶) This hotel is a rather overstuffed but comfortable option outside of the town centre. The staff's eagerness is either a sign of professionalism or that they're lonely for conversation. If entering Kebili on the Blvd de l'Environnement from Douz, take a right just before the hospital.

Hôtel Fort des Atruches (☎ 75 490 933; fax 75 491 111) Prices are similar at this nearby option. It was being renovated at the time of writing, but should reopen soon.

Restaurant Kheireddine (ave Bourguiba; mains TD2) This is one of the best places to soak up local atmosphere. It's near the louage stations. There are two entrances on parallel streets and in between a small outdoor courtyard. One side is a dining room with tablecloths and the other is a bustling café with outdoor tables and chairs.

Restaurant Bei Chabeen (ave Bourguiba; mains TD2.5) Look for the green-and-white awning diagonally opposite Kheireddine this place, for another popular indoor/outdoor café and restaurant.

There are a few other cheap eateries around the louage station.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

The bus station is no more than an office on the main street, near the junction with the Gabès–Tozeur road. There are frequent buses to Douz (TD1.3, 30 minutes) as well as regular departures for Tozeur and Gabès. The SNTRI office is 100m away on the opposite side of the dusty square.

Louages to Gabès (TD5.5) and Tozeur (TD4.6) leave from the street running between place de l'Indépendance and ave Habib Bourguiba, although those to Douz (TD1.5) leave from one block further south.

SOUTH INTO THE SAHARA

The country immediately south of Douz is flat and fairly featureless – low dunes interspersed with small *chotts*. The first point of interest is the evocative abandoned village of **Aounet Dajah**, about 15km

THUMBING IT IN THE DESERT

Hitchhiking in southern Tunisia isn't a matter of a philosophical or existential stand or youthful experiment but a matter of necessity. And picking up hitchhikers is an extension of the age old virtue of showing hospitality to strangers in need – like letting camels drink from your well since yours will be thirsty one day too. In a region where public transport is few and far between it's not entirely unusual to come upon Tunisians walking by the side of the road in the middle of nowhere, without a single home or settlement in sight. If there's space in your car it's entirely expected that you pull over and pick up the weary pedestrians. There's none of the taboo or risk of danger associated with hitchhiking in many parts of the Western world; that's not to say it's unreasonable to be cautious but that the practice has a different context here. Besides, more often than not your passengers will be police or National Guard officers looking for a lift to or from their remote post. And if you're driving solo, not only is it an opportunity for meeting Tunisians, but you'll likely feel more comfortable and less lonely with a companion. There's something about all that emptiness that makes every strange sound from your beat up Fiat sound like a sign of its impending breakdown.

southwest of Douz, which has all but disappeared beneath a large dune. A small domed marabout tomb at the crest is the only building that remains intact; elsewhere all that remains are the tops of old walls poking from the sand.

Officially, the desert begins at **La Porte du Desert**, about 20km south of Douz. This gleaming white crenellated arch is visible from miles around.

Four companies refer to this area as *jebel* (small mountain), which is the low hill nearby. It is the starting point for trips to **Taimbaïn** (pronounced Tembaine), 5km further south. Taimbaïn itself is a large, crescent-shaped outcrop of rock that offers magnificent views from its summit (220m). The main attraction is the journey through some magnificent dune country, crossing three great walls of gleaming white sand that the wind has thrown up like defensive ramparts around Taimbaïn.

KSAR GHILANE

قصر غلان

The sand dunes of the Grand Erg Oriental offer some of the country's most awe-inspiring landscapes. They have provided the backdrop for many films including *The English Patient* and it's easy to see how such a photogenic and surreal looking topography is perfect for the fantasy of cinema. The remote oasis of Ksar Ghilane, 138km southeast of Douz, has developed into the most visited outpost in the far south; as a consequence the pristine quality of the oasis has been impacted by the tourism industry that sustains it. But no matter how

many others you share the vistas with, the human presence feels like but a pinprick in the vast ocean of the desert.

The amazing *ksar* (fortified stronghold) here is the ancient Roman fort of Tisavar, once a desert outpost on the Limes Tripolitanus defensive line. It was modified and renamed by the local Berber tribespeople in the 16th century. The *ksar* now lies abandoned on a low hill about 2km west of a magical little oasis where hot springs feed a small swimming hole shaded by graceful tamarisk trees. There are impressive dunes between the oasis and Tisavar, particularly once you get among them, and of course they're especially wonderful at sunset and sunrise.

There are cafés around the swimming hole, but no shops or other facilities.

Accessible by overnight 4WD excursion from Tozeur or Douz, Ksar Ghilane is where you'll understand the power of the Sahara's lure.

Camel Rides

Locals charge around TD15 for the 1½-hour return journey from the oasis to the fort. Evening is the best time, when the setting sun produces some stunning plays of light and shadow across the dunes.

Sleeping & Eating

Camping is tolerated around the fringe of the oasis, but most visitors use one of the three camp sites. All offer beds in large nomad-style tents as well as providing areas for pitching tents. All also have

THE GREAT DESERT

The Sahara Desert stretches from the Atlantic to the Red Sea, covering, at last count, more than 9.065 million sq km, passing across 15 degrees of latitude in the process. This vast space is home to just over two million people and encompasses large parts of Mauritania, Morocco, Algeria, Libya, Tunisia, Mali, Niger, Chad, Egypt, Sudan and a small slice of Burkina Faso.

The Sahara is home to haunting mountain ranges, particularly in southern Algeria, Libya, northern Niger and Chad where the Sahara reaches its high point at Emi Koussi, 3415m above sea level. Most of the Sahara is a high plateau while the Qattara Depression of northwestern Egypt is its lowest point, 133m below sea level.

Contrary to popular myth, as little as one-ninth of the Sahara's surface is covered with sand. Some of the unimaginably beautiful sand seas nonetheless cover areas larger than many European countries and the Grand Erg Oriental, which straddles Algeria and southern Tunisia, is one of the largest and one of the most stunning.

In ancient times, the Sahara was the domain of camel caravans numbering up to 30,000 beasts and carrying salt (that once traded ounce for ounce with gold), gold and slaves from the heart of Africa to the northern coast and beyond. Tunisian oasis towns such as Gabès, Tozeur and Gafsa grew rich on the trade.

The Sahara is a place of myth and legend. You can get a taste of the silent gravitas of its many moods and the beauty of its diverse landscapes, but the Sahara rewards those who linger. As Antoine de Saint-Exupéry observed: 'If at first it is merely emptiness and silence, that is because it does not open itself to transient lovers'.

Above all, the Sahara is home to its once-nomadic people, primarily Berbers, Touareg and Tubu who alone understand the Sahara's lure. Nigerian Touareg Mano Dayak wrote that the desert could not be described, but could only be lived.

restaurants. There is one luxury four-star hotel.

Camping Ghilane (☎ 75 460 100; per person half board TD23) This camping ground is ideally located next to the hot springs on the northern edge of the oasis. A three-course evening meal costs an extra TD10.

Campement el Bibène (☎ 75 470 178; per person TD23) This place is located between the oasis and the barracks. It's also possible to camp *sauvage* in the dunes behind the hot springs; inform the National Guard here of your plans.

Camping Paradise (☎ 75 900 507; half board TD25) This place is run by Douz-based Mrazig Voyages and offers sleeping in either Bedouin tents or in more permanent military style tents in the middle of the *palmeraie*.

Hôtel Pansea (☎ 75 900 506; www.pansea.com/ksar.html; s/d TD100/163; 🍷 🍴) This is an extraordinary and fabulous place. Situated on the edge of Grand Erg Oriental, the internationally renowned Pansea has air-con linen tents with private bathrooms, a swimming pool, restaurant and a decided touch of class. This is one of the best places in the country for a splurge.

Getting There & Away

There's no public transport to Ksar Ghilane and previously this remote spot was only accessible by 4WD along the rough pipeline road that runs south from El-Hamma, on the Gabès-Kebili road, all the way to Borj el-Khadra. By late 2006 this road should be sealed all the way south to Ksar Ghilane from the turn-off. However, a 4WD vehicle is still your best bet in case parts of the road are covered with sand drifts.

If you have a 4WD, there are several other possibilities, including the roads from Beni Kheddache, Guermessa and Douiret (see The Ksour, p235).

AROUND KSAR GHILANE

There are a couple of interesting diversions off the pipeline road between Ksar Ghilane and the Douz–Matmata road.

Most popular is **Bir Soltane**, where a small stone dome surrounds an ancient well. Centuries of use has cut deep rope grooves into the well-head. The only other building here is the nearby National Guard post, which uses a windmill to draw its water. Bir Soltane is about 2km west of the pipeline road, reached by signposted tracks both north

and south of the **Café Bir Soltane**, 32km south of the Douz–Matmata road.

Hardly anyone heads out to **Ksar Tarcine**, about 12km southeast of Bir Soltane. This remote outpost began life as part of the Roman Limes Tripolitanus – when it was called Centenarium Tibubuci. As occurred with Ksar Ghilane, it was later modified by local Berber tribes and is now in ruins. It stands on a rise overlooking the broad bed of the Oued Ethaabine, which stretches away towards the Jebel Dahar range, silhouetted to the east. There's a well on the bank of the *oued* (river bed), as well as some cisterns.

Access is from the road to Beni Kheddache, which is signposted to the east off the pipeline road 500m south of the Café Bir Soltane. Keep going along here for 8km until you reach a small settlement with a well and a few struggling saplings. The turn-off to Ksar Tarcine is signposted to the south just beyond the settlement.

GRAND SUD

الجنوب الكبير

The desert south and west of Ksar Ghilane is remote Saharan country that brings many rewards for those who venture deep into this largely uninhabited area. Tunisia's southernmost settlement is **Borj el-Khadra**, 292km south of Kamour. The pipeline road to reach it curves around the edge

of the Grand Erg Oriental, across barren steppe country dotted with great outcrops of weathered rock and crisscrossed by the boulder-strewn beds of *oueds* that might flow only once in a hundred years. There's very little along the way save the odd military post. Borj el-Khadra itself comprises no more than a small military garrison and airfield. Sadly, it's impossible to continue to the legendary Libyan oasis of Ghadames, just across the border.

Dunes – seriously large ones – are the main reason tourists come to this part of the world. Some of the best examples are found between **Bir Aouine** and **El-Borma**, and this trek is popular with the tour operators in Douz.

This is border country and much of the area lies within a military zone so you need a permit to continue beyond **Kamour**, on the pipeline road 110km south of the Douz–Matmata road, and **Kambout**, about 10km east of Remada. Unless you're travelling as part of a group, you will need to apply in person to the governorate in Tataouine; ask about the current situation at the **syndicat d'initiative** (☎ 75 850 850) in Tataouine. The permit can take up to two days to process and it's essential you have a 4WD vehicle.

If you're heading for the Grand Sud, the best access is from Remada, 70km south of Tataouine.

DESERT HOTTIES

It's hard to believe anything can live in the Sahara as everything seems stacked against life – the heat, the lack of shade, the lack of food. One species of ant, the *Cataglyphis fortis* or Sahara ant found in Tunisia, however, has developed ingenious survival techniques, ones scientists hope to be able to fully understand one day in order to find adaptations for human purposes. These ants can be active with internal temperatures over 50°C and in ambient heat over 70°C. And while these ants don't wear big floppy hats or apply loads of Hawaiian Tropic sunscreen, they have their own methods of keeping cool. For one thing, they're fast, for ants, which means they can be back in their hole quicker and their relative speed also means things like sweating and their own internal cooling mechanisms work harder. They also have long legs that act like stilts and keep most of their body off the hot desert surface.

But equally fascinating to scientists is their ability to navigate, to find their way home after foraging for their meals of other dead insects that have generally succumbed to the heat. After all, there are few landmarks in the Sahara, especially for these creatures whose perspective is decidedly low to the ground. Initially, it was thought that they used the sun and light patterns like we may use the stars – a solar version of MapQuest. But only recently researchers have postulated that these ants also possess some ability to count or to at least keep track of the number of steps they have taken. Although this internal pedometer is not yet fully understood, experiments strongly suggest it helps explain how these ants are the homing pigeons of the desert.

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