

# Tozeur & the Jerid



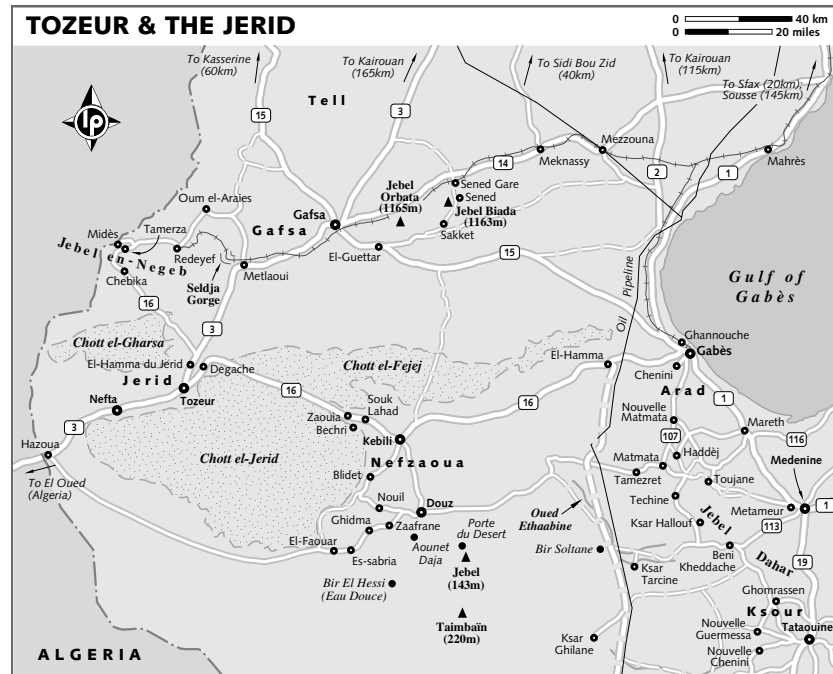
One of the more pleasant towns in the south is Tozeur and because of its location and facilities, it's the logical base from which to explore this diverse region. Only a short drive from the sophisticated comforts of Tozeur's Zone Touristique, its attractive, brick old town and its enormous *palmeraie* (palm grove) are several oases towns – Tamerza, Chebika and Midès. This area along the Algerian border is carved with small canyons and offers swimming and hiking opportunities.

The Jerid itself, which all of these towns occupy, is the narrow strip of land between the region's two major salt lakes, the Chott el-Jerid and the Chott el-Gharsa. It has long been one of the most important agricultural districts in Tunisia and the oases around here are famous for their high-quality dates. The harvest is in October, which is a good time to visit the area.

While cartographers tend to label the Chott el-Jerid as a lake, for most of the year this bone-dry depression looks more like the moon. It's easy to lose your focus driving along the causeway that bisects the Chott, to try to catch a glimpse of the gypsum crystals that form in small pools alongside the road or to stare off into the hazy distance; later you may swear you saw odd things in the heat, like a desert wookie, the species heretofore known only to *Star Wars* fans. There are several cafés along the way, though we use that term loosely since these are nothing more than wooden shacks with optimistic signs inviting weary travellers in for a drink.

## HIGHLIGHTS

- Catch some shade wandering through the manicured forests of Tozeur's **palmeraie** (p256)
- Don your hiking boots and navigate your way between Midès and Tamerza along the **gorge** (p262)
- Drive – don't walk or take a camel – across the mesmerizing flat expanse of **Chott el-Jerid** (p261) where just looking out the window will make you feel dehydrated



## TOZEUR

pop 35,500

For travellers in the south, Tozeur, boasting the widest range of hotels and restaurants, makes an excellent base for longer forays into the surrounding area. Bounded on one side by an enormous forest of palm trees and then the desolate Chott el-Jerid, the town itself feels simultaneously far-flung and welcoming. It's easy to spend a few days here occupied by the labyrinthine Ouled el-Hadef with its distinctive traditional brickwork and a few interesting and unique museums located in the town itself.

## History

The oasis at Tozeur has been inhabited since Caspian times (from 8000 BC; see p24). It developed into the small Roman town of Thuzuros, which lay within the *palmeraie* around the area now occupied by the district of Bled el-Hader. Tozeur's prosperity peaked during the age of the great trans-Saharan camel caravans, between the 14th and 19th centuries.

## توزر

## Orientation

Tozeur is easy to navigate. Most of the accommodation and many of the restaurants are on ave Abdulkacem Chebbi, which runs along the edge of the *palmeraie* on the southern side of town and continues into the Zone Touristique. Ave Farhat Hached skirts the northern edge of town and is your likely route into the city if coming from Kebili or Gafsa; it has several banks, cafés and restaurants. Ave Habib Bourguiba links the two primary roads and is lined with stalls and shops selling souvenirs and other goods.

## Information

### INTERNET ACCESS

**Publnet** (11 ave de 7 Novembre; per hr TD2; ☎ 24hr)  
Good connections.

### LAUNDRY

**Pressing** (ave Abdulkacem Chebbi) Next door to the Au Couer du Désert office.

### MEDIA

**Kiosk** (ave Habib Bourguiba) There's a kiosk with English-language and other international newspapers.

**MONEY**

You'll find branches of all the major Tunisian banks around the town centre. Those with ATMs include **STB** (ave Habib Bourguiba), **Banque du Sud** (ave Habib Bourguiba), **Arab Tunisien Bank** (ave Farhat Hached) and **BNA** (ave Farhat Hached).

**POST & TELEPHONE**

**Post office** (off place Ibn Chabbat) By the market.  
**Publitel office** (ave Farhat Hached) There are telephone offices all over town, including this (allegedly) 24-hour office opposite place Bab el-Hawa.

**TOURIST INFORMATION**

**ONTT office** (☎ 76 454 503; ave Abdulkacem Chebbi; ☎ 7.30am-1.30pm & 5-8pm Jul-Aug, 8.30am-1pm & 3.30-6pm Sun-Thu, 8.30am-1.30pm Fri & Sat Sep-Jun) Between the town centre and the Zone Touristique.  
**Syndicat d'initiative** (☎ 76 462 034; place Bab el-Hawa) Can provide times for bus and air departures and not much else.

**Sights & Activities****DAR CHARAÏT MUSEUM**

The **museum** (ave Abdulkacem Chebbi; admission TD3.4, plus camera TD1.7; ☎ 8am-midnight) is part of the impressive Dar Charaït complex. The building in which the museum is housed is an extravagant reproduction of an old palace and contains collections of pottery, jewellery, costumes and other antiques, as well as an art gallery. Scattered throughout the rooms off the splendid main courtyard is a series of replicas of scenes from Tunisian life, past and present. They include the bedroom of the last bey (provincial governor in the Ottoman Empire), a palace scene, a typical kitchen, a *hammam* (public bathhouse), wedding scenes and a Bedouin tent. The museum attendants, dressed as servants of the bey, set the tone for the museum.

The complex also includes attractions aimed at children. **Dar Zaman – 3000 years of Tunisian History** features scenes from the nation's long history using some good models. **La Medina – 1001 Nights** is a theme park full of cartoon characters. Both are open the same hours as the museum and each charges TD5 admission.

The whole complex is tastefully lit at night, which is a good time to visit.

**PALMERAIE**

Tozeur's *palmeraie* is the second largest in the country with at least 200,000 palm trees

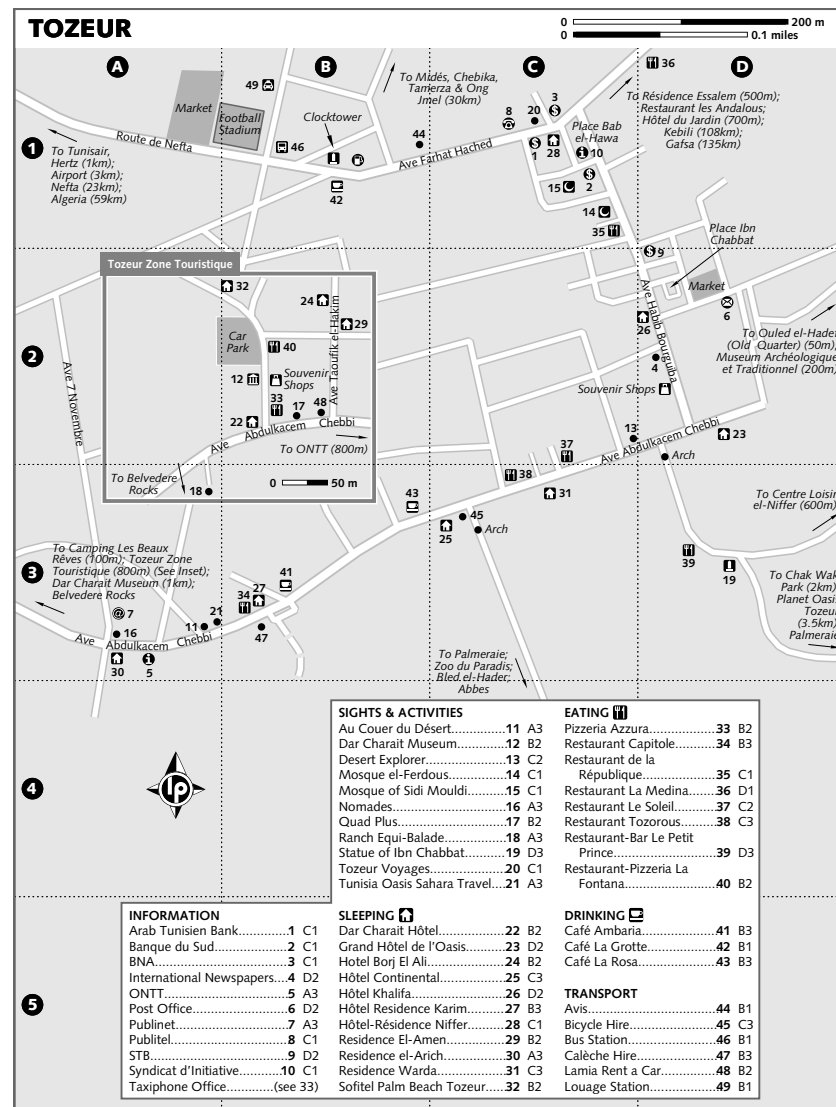
(locals claim twice that number) spread over an area of more than 10 sq km. It's a classic example of tiered oasis agriculture. The system is watered by more than 200 springs that produce almost 60 million litres of water a day, distributed around the various holdings under a complex system devised by the mathematician Ibn Chabbat in the 13th century AD.

The best way to explore the *palmeraie* is on foot. Take the road that runs south off ave Abdulkacem Chebbi next to the Hôtel Continental and follow the signs to the Zoo du Paradis. After about 500m the road passes the old quarter of **Bled el-Hader**, thought to be the site of ancient Thuzuros. The mosque in the main square dates from the 11th century, while the minaret stands on the square base of an old Roman tower.

Further on is the village of **Abbes**, where the tomb of *marabout* (holy man) Sidi Bou Lifa stands in the shade of an enormous jubube (Chinese date) tree. There are lots of paths leading off into the *palmeraie* along the irrigation canals. It's delightfully cool among all the vegetation.

Several kilometres southeast of the statue of Ibn Chabbat is the incongruous and trippy **Chak Wak Park** (admission TD15; ☎ 8am-11pm Mon-Fri, 9am-11pm Sat & Sun), an enormous testament to the vision of one passionate and wealthy man. The former mayor of Tozeur and the driving force behind the Dar Charaït museum has created what amounts to a three-dimensional liberal education on evolution, history and religion. Surrounded by high walls reminiscent of the *King Kong* films, inside is a circuit that takes you from dinosaur-sized replicas of dinosaurs to a replica of Noah's Ark with models of animals lining up two by two while a sound system pipes in rain effects. Even the biblical parting of the Red Sea is represented here with walls of papier-mâché ocean. Other exhibits are truly worthwhile including an excellent history of Hannibal and the Carthaginian wars in English, Italian, Spanish, French, Arabic and German and a building given over to the symbols and icons of the world's major religions.

If you want to see more of the oasis, you can hire bicycles from a number of places around town (see p261). Thus equipped, you can complete a loop through the *palmeraie* that emerges further west on ave



Abdulkacem Chebbi near the Grand Hôtel de l'Oasis.

**OULED EL-HADEF**

The town's delightful **old quarter** was built in the 14th century AD to house the el-Hadeif clan, which had grown rich on the proceeds of the caravan trade. The area is

a maze of narrow, covered alleys and small squares. It's famous for its amazing traditional brickwork, which uses protruding bricks to create intricate geometric patterns in relief. The style is found only here and in nearby Nefza.

The easiest entrance to the Ouled el-Hadeif is from ave de Kairouan. Follow

the signs pointing to the small **Museum Archéologique et Traditionnel** (admission TD1.1; ☎ 8am-noon & 3-6.30pm Tue-Sun), which occupies the old *koubba* (small domed tomb) of Sidi Bou Aissa. It houses a small collection of local finds, costumes and displays on local culture.

Like the medinas further north in Tunisia, wandering through the Ouled el-Hafed is a journey of discovery best made by getting lost. The most well-preserved sections are east of the museum, including the house of the former governor (Dar Bey).

Although outside the boundaries of the old town, the brick minarets of the Mosque of Sidi Mouldi and **Mosque el-Ferdous** (ave Habib Bourguiba) are very attractive.

### BELVEDERE ROCKS

A sandy track running south off the Route Touristique near the Dar Charait Museum leads to the Belvedere Rocks. Steps have been cut into the highest rock, giving access to a spectacular sunset view over the oasis and the *chott* (salt lake). It's a pleasant 20-minute walk. Too much landscaping has taken away somewhat from the beauty of the natural setting, but not entirely; look for the likeness of Abdulkacem Chebbi.

### ZOOS

Ironically, or cynically, named, the **Zoo du Paradis** (admission TD2; ☎ 8am-7pm), on the southern side of the *palmeriaie*, is anything but for the animals housed, if it can be called that, in tiny cages. The star is a Coca-Cola-drinking camel... The closing time isn't set in stone and paradise usually closes its pearly gates when it gets dark.

### HORSE-RIDING

**Ranch Equi-Balade** (☎ 76 452 613; fax 76 462 857; off ave Abdulkacem Chebbi), based on the road leading to the Belvedere Rocks just past the Dar Charait Hôtel, charges TD15 for a one-hour excursion or TD45 for a half-day trip.

### OFF-ROADING

**Quad Plus** (☎ 76 452 502; ave Abdulkacem Chebbi) rents all-terrain vehicles for fun out in the desert.

### Tours

There are dozens of travel agencies around town. Recommended agencies:

**Au Coeur du Désert** (☎ 76 453 570; aucoeur.dudes.ert@gnet.tn; ave Abdulkacem Chebbi)

**Desert Explorer** (☎ 76 460 950; fax 76 460 900; ave Abdulkacem Chebbi)

**Nomades** (☎ 76 453 423; 196 ave Abdulkacem Chebbi)

**Tozeur Voyages** (☎ 76 452 203; fax 76 452 038; 58 ave Farhat Hached)

**Tunisian Oasis Sahara Travel** (☎ 76 460 466; oasis.sahara@gnet.tn; ave Abdulkacem Chebbi)

For details of available excursions and prices on offer by these agencies, see p261.

### Festivals & Events

Whoever thought so much was going on in the desert? Every November (3rd to the 6th), Tozeur comes alive with storytelling, traditional music, dancing and, of course, camel racing in a celebration of desert culture called, somewhat ironically, the **Oasis Festival**.

### Sleeping

#### BUDGET

**Camping Les Beaux Rêves** (☎ 76 453 331; beauxreves.koi29.com; ave Abdulkacem Chebbi; per person tents/bungalows TD5/8, showers TD1.5) This is one of the more enchanting camping sites in the south. The whole area is shaded by trees – you can even set up a hammock to sleep on – and there's a stream running behind the grounds that backs onto the *palmeriaie*.

**Hôtel Khalifa** (☎ 76 454 858; ave Habib Bourguiba; s/d TD8/16) If it's a noisy central location you're after then the Khalifa is for you. If you're interested in comfort, service and cleanliness then you're better off elsewhere.

**Residence Essaïem** (☎ 76 462 881; ave de l'Environnement; s/d TD9/18) This small charming hotel, 150m east of the intersection of aves Farhat Hached and Habib Bourguiba, is good value. Clean and simple rooms have ceiling fans and the owners are friendly and accustomed to travellers. Cheaper rooms with shared bathroom are available.

**Hôtel-Résidence Niffer** (☎ 76 460 610; fax 76 461 900; place Bab el-Hawa; s/d TD13/20) Occupying one of the busiest intersections in Tozeur, this small pension has spacious but ordinary rooms. Breakfast is included.

**Hôtel Residence Karim** (☎ 76 454 574; 150 ave Abdulkacem Chebbi; s/d TD15/26; ☎) Travellers give this place high marks and we can see why – the Karim has bright and cheerful tiled rooms, shady courtyards and a rooftop terrace. Rooms minus air-con are TD4 less.

**Residence Warda** (☎ 76 452 597; fax 76 452 744; 29 ave Abdulkacem Chebbi; s/d TD18.5/28.5; ☎) A friendly and centrally located hotel accustomed to independent foreign travellers, the Warda has basic, clean rooms surrounding a small shady courtyard. Rooms with fan are a few dinars less.

### MIDRANGE

Tozeur easily has the best choice of mid-range accommodation in the south and for that matter much of the country.

**Residence el-Amen** (☎ 76 463 522; amentozeur@yahoo.fr; 10 ave Taoufik el-Hakim; s/d TD 20/34; ☎) Part of the poor man's *zone touristique*, the friendly el-Amen, on a side street off ave Abdulkacem Chebbi, has tiny, cute rooms painted in bright pinks and blues. For real quiet and privacy take one of the rooftop rooms with direct access to the patio and its excellent views.

**Residence el-Arich** (☎ 76 462 644; www.elarich.tozeur.8m.com; 93 ave Abdulkacem Chebbi; s/d TD21/36; ☎) With midrange prices and top-end quality rooms, the el-Arich is possibly the best value in Tozeur. Some of the upper floor rooms are more like suites with separate sitting rooms and foyers that lead to the bathroom and bedroom. The vistas from the rooftop lounge area are superb and there's a large outdoor garden out back.

**Hôtel du Jardin** (☎ 76 454 196; medmoncef@voila.fr; ave de l'Environnement; s/d TD31/41; ☎) You'll feel much further than only 1km from the town centre staying at this place set amid a grassy lawn and lush garden on the road from Kébili. The rooms are colourful and mostly well kept and there's an attractive restaurant attached.

**Hotel Borj El Ali** (☎ 76 462 650; ave Taoufik el-Hakim; s/d TD30/50; ☎) This new hotel across the street from the el-Amen is no doubt the realisation of a personal vision. The end result is a sort of Holiday Inn meets *Arabian Nights* – garish and functional furnishings collide to create an interesting effect. There are several nooks with beautifully tiled benches and other ornate touches throughout.

### TOP END

Tozeur's Zone Touristique is on steroids compared with other towns in the south. The massive, gated complexes line the road west of town, perched on a hill overlooking the Chott el-Jerid.

**Hôtel Continental** (☎ 76 461 526; fax 76 461 411; 79 ave Abdulkacem Chebbi; s/d TD43/70; ☎ ☎) In a large and somewhat bland building, the Continental is nothing more than a bottom-of-the-line *zone touristique* wannabe that knows its guests are there for only a night.

**Grand Hôtel de l'Oasis** (☎ 76 452 300; Place des Martyrs; s/d TD76/112; ☎ ☎ ☎) Occupying prime real estate at the intersection of aves Bourguiba and Abdulkacem Chebbi, the Grand has the amenities of a *zone touristique* hotel with a central location. The Grand eschews the gaudy trappings of the other hotels for more modern and functional décor. There's a large outdoor pool and restaurant.

**Sofitel Palm Beach Tozeur** (☎ 76 453 111; www.accorhotels.com; route Zone Touristique; s/d TD180/240; ☎ ☎) The five-star Palm Beach is not nearly as unique or elegant as the Dar Charait, but it has all the facilities and luxuries you'd expect.

**Dar Charait Hôtel** (☎ 76 454 888; www.darcharait.com.tn; route Zone Touristique; s/d TD195/270; ☎ ☎) The five-star Dar Charait is one of the few places where the opulent interior fulfils the promise of its palatial façade. It's worth the splurge if you have the extra dinars since you'll be treated like royalty and everything from the fabulously designed suites to the luxurious lobby lounge and restaurants is refined and tasteful. It's adjacent to the museum in the Zone Touristique.

### Eating

Compared with the dining scene in the rest of the southern part of the country, Tozeur's restaurants qualify as *haute cuisine*.

**Restaurant La Medina** (ave Farhat Hached; mains from TD2.8) A no-nonsense eatery 100m northeast of place Bab el-Hawa, the Medina is clean and friendly and the service prompt. Try the *ragout d'haricot* (bean stew; TD2.8).

**Restaurant Capitole** (☎ 76 462 631; 152 ave Abdulkacem Chebbi; mains from TD3) This small place is popular with Tunisian families but the service is slow and it's worth pre-ordering; the *metabgha* (Berber pizza; TD3) is available by pre-order only. Camel steak is also on the menu.

**Restaurant Tozorou** (ave Habib Bourguiba; mains TD3.5; ☎) This highly recommended restaurant serves up pizza (TD3), meat and



chicken dishes (TD6) in a brick-walled dining room complete with a working fountain in the centre.

**Restaurant Le Soleil** (☎ 76 454 220; 58 ave Abdulkacem Chebbi; mains from TD4) There's an extensive menu with a couple of vegetarian dishes. The service is attentive and it's a good place to try camel steak (TD6) because you generally don't have to pre-order it as in other restaurants. It also does pizzas (TD5 to TD7) and sandwiches (TD1.5 to TD2).

**Restaurant de la République** (☎ 76 452 354; 108 ave Habib Bourguiba; mains from TD4) Tucked away in an arcade next to the Mosque el-Ferdous, this is another good place with a pleasant eating area and decent food.

**Restaurant-Bar Le Petit Prince** (☎ 76 452 518; off ave Abdulkacem Chebbi; mains TD5-17) Dining under the palms, sipping a fine wine while listening to music is a special experience. This restaurant is tucked in behind a wall a short walk past the arch and serves quality French and Tunisian cuisine.

**Restaurant Les Andalous** (Hôtel du Jardin; mains TD7) Overlooking the garden of Hôtel du Jardin, this restaurant has high-end trappings and a better-than-average menu and, at least as important, wine and other alcohol is served.

**Pizzeria Azzura** (route Zone Touristique; pizzas from TD4) and **Restaurant-Pizzeria La Fontana** (pizzas TD2.5-8, pasta from TD3), a few doors north at the start of the Zone Touristique, serve pies of comparable quality.

**Planet Oasis Tozeur** (☎ 76 460 310; www.planet-oasis.com; meals TD35) Gorge on a buffet while watching a sound and light show at this place, deep in the middle of the *palmeraie*. These are only staged for large groups.

Handy for a snack and very much a part of the Tozeur experience are the dates available in the market. The best dates are harvested in October, but you'll usually find something on offer throughout summer. For reasonable quality, expect to pay TD3.5 per kilogram, although the best method is to taste before you buy.

## Drinking

Outdoor *sheesha* (water pipe) places and coffeehouses are everywhere. Beer and other alcohol is available at all of the Zone Touristique hotels.

**Café La Grotte** (ave Farhat Hached; ☎) A step up from the streetside cafés, La Grotte, à la its name, is fitted out to look like the inside of

a cave, albeit a cool, air-conditioned one. It tends to draw a younger crowd of men.

**Café La Rosa** (ave Abdulkacem Chebbi) This busy café spills over onto the street and can get rowdy in the evenings, but it's pleasant enough if you don't mind the choir of all-male voices.

**Café Ambaria** (ave Abdulkacem Chebbi) A cut above the rest in terms of décor and service, although again it's mostly all men. *Sheesha* cost TD1.5 and there's a real live coffee machine if you're craving an espresso or cappuccino.

**Centre Loisir el-Niffer** (☎ 9.30am-midnight) Set in the *palmeraie*, this is a great place for a *sheesha* (TD1 to TD2) under the palm trees, or a coffee or cool drink. There's a swimming pool (TD3) and a few courting couples and families sitting at the tables spread throughout the garden. To get here, take the road past the Restaurant-Bar Le Petit Prince and follow the signs (about 700m).

## Getting There & Away

### AIR

Tuninter runs five flights a week to Tunis (TD66/128 one way/return). The airport handles a growing number of international flights, mainly charters from Europe. The **Tunisair** (☎ 76 460 038) office, which sells Tuninter tickets, is out towards the airport along the Nefta road.

### BUS

There are five air-con SNTRI buses a day to Tunis (TD20.75, seven hours), travelling via Gafsa (TD5, 1½ hours) and Kairouan (TD13.7, 4½ hours). SNTRI also has a service to Sousse (TD14.6, 5¼ hours) in the morning.

Regional services include six buses a day to Gafsa (TD4), five to Nefta (TD1.1) and two to Tamerza (TD3). There are also daily buses to Douz (TD6.3, three hours) and Gabès (TD11, 4½ hours).

### CAR

There are half a dozen car-rental outlets in town. You'll find better deals at local agencies like **Lamia Rent a Car** (☎ 76 462 433), opposite La Palmeraie Hotel in the Zone Touristique.

International agencies include **Avis** (☎ 76 454 356; 96 ave Farhat Hached) and **Hertz** (☎ 76 460 214; route de Nefta), out towards the airport.

## CHOTT EL-JERID

The Chott el-Jerid is an immense salt lake covering an area of almost 5000 sq km, the bulk of which is south of the Kebili-Tozeur road and part of a system of salt lakes that stretches deep into Algeria from the Gulf of Gabès. It is a scene of desolation – dry for the greater part of the year, when the flat, flat surface stretching to the horizon becomes blistered and shimmers in the heat. It was here that Luke Skywalker contemplated the two moons in the first *Star Wars* movie. The Kebili-Tozeur road crosses the northern reaches of the *chott* on a 2m-high causeway – it's a trip not to be missed. At times, the wind-driven salt piles up into great drifts by the roadside, creating the impression that you're driving through a snowfield. Just one litre of water can yield as much as 1kg of salt. Mirages are common, and if you've picked a sunny day to cross you may see some deceptive optical effects.

## LOUAGE

The louage (shared taxi) station has regular departures to Nefta (TD1.7), Gafsa (TD5.1) and Kebili (TD5.3). There are also occasional louages to Tamerza (TD4.6) and Gabès (TD10).

## TRAIN

An overnight train departs Tunis at 8.50pm, arriving in Tozeur the next morning at 5.15; trains turn west after Sfax and pass through Graiba, Meknassy, Sned, Gafsa and Metlaoui before the end of the line in Tozeur.

## Getting Around

### TO/FROM THE AIRPORT

Tozeur's taxis don't have meters – the fare depends on your bargaining skills and how wealthy you look. Most charge around TD5 for the 4km trip, although some ask as much as TD10 late at night.

## BICYCLE

Bicycles can be rented from lots of places, including along ave Abdulkacem Chebbi and from the Taxiphone office opposite the Dar Charait complex at the Zone Touristique. Rates range from TD2 to TD5 per hour. Motor-scooters cost around TD10 per hour.

## CALÈCHE

*Calèches* (horse-drawn carriages) can be hired from opposite the Hôtel Residence Karim for TD10 per hour.

## AROUND TOZEUR

There are plenty of worthwhile excursions that can be made from Tozeur; see the table opposite. Almost all the hotels in Tozeur, as well as the tour agencies (see p258) can organise such trips. They include food

and some water, though always bring your own as well.

Destination	Duration	Cost (per person)
Tamerza (p262), Chebika (p262) & Midès (p262)	4 hrs	TD45
Nefta (p263) & Ong Jemal (p263)	3-4 hrs	TD45
Kebili (p250), Douz (p243) & La Porte du Désert	½ day	TD60
Lezard Rouge (p268)	½ day	TD40
Ksar Ghilane (p251), Douz & Matmata (p227)	2 days	TD120
Ksar Ghilane, Douz, & Tataouine (p230) & Matmata	3 days	TD150

The half-day excursions are best done in the afternoon, as in the morning most 4WD vehicles are booked out by the tour buses that roll into town. Also, if you're on your own, you may need to wait a day or two for enough other travellers to arrive to make the trip viable for the operators. And one final thing: no matter when you go, each site will be inundated with convoys of 4WD vehicles. It just comes with the territory in this part of the world.

## Mountain Oases

The allure, in part, of these beautiful, ancient Berber villages is the result of a natural disaster. After this region, near the Algerian border in the rugged Jebel en-Nebeg ranges, was hit by 22 days of torrential rain in 1969, the villages of Chebika, Tamerza and Midès were abandoned for hastily built run-of-the-mill settlements. The remaining ruined

houses still cling evocatively to the cliff faces. The three villages were once part of the Limes Tripolitanus defensive line developed by the Romans to keep out marauding Saharan tribes.

### CHEBIKA شبيكة

After passing through bleak and barren land and several camel-crossing signs, you reach this village, 59km north of Tozeur on the southern edge of the mountain range overlooking the Chott el-Gharsa. The *palmeraie* is visible for miles – a great slash of green set against the barren mountains. Up the hill, past the nondescript settlement of new Chebika and behind the *palmeraie*, next to a small spring-fed stream, is **old Chebika**. The best way to explore is to climb up through the deserted village to the narrow cleft in the rock from where there are great views over the oasis. On the other side of the rock, steps lead down into a pretty little **canyon** fed by a spring and with a tiny waterfall. The path follows the gorge back up to the town.

There's a cluster of souvenir shops and drink-and-snack stalls at the foot of old Chebika.

### TAMERZA تمغزة

The road from Chebika twists and turns up a steep mountainside before finally dropping down into the small valley where Tamerza, the largest of the villages, is located.

The shell of the **old walled town** is about 1km east of new Tamerza (a characterless modern sprawl). Strung out along a ridge on the southern bank of the Oued Horchane, this is one of the most photogenic old villages in Tunisia, set against the backdrop of the rugged mountain range and with the *palmeraie* to the west.

Tamerza's water comes from a spring that rises in the hills south of old Tamerza. The spring supplies water to the old town and then to an extensive *palmeraie*, which locals claim produces the finest dates in Tunisia.

If you're on a half-day trip, most of your time will be spent at one of the town's small **waterfalls** (bring your swimmers) and there's considerable novelty value to be swimming in such a barren landscape. Local children jump with reckless abandon into the 10m-high falls south of town.

On the main road is the **syndicat d'initiative** (☎ 76 485 288; ☎ 8am–1pm & 3–6pm), which can arrange guides for the hike along the gorge to Midès. A ballpark price is TD15 for the 2½-hour trip. If you're in town for the day, it should not be missed.

The **Hôtel Les Cascades** (☎ 76 485 322; s/d TD20/25) is beautifully placed at the edge of the *palmeraie*, near one of the smaller falls and the entrance to one of the gorges, but the palm-frond bungalows are dirty and falling apart and surely not worth the price.

The four-star **Hôtel Tamerza Palace** (☎ 76 485 322; www.tamerza-palace.com; route de Midès; s/d TD165/265; junior ste TD350; 3-course set menu TD15; 🍷 🍷) is also wonderfully situated overlooking the oasis and old village. The pool is especially nice but the rooms themselves are fairly ordinary. You can picnic in the palms and the hotel arranges all manner of 4WD excursions, from half-day to overnight, and guided hikes as well.

Tamerza has several restaurants, most of which cater to tour groups and serve set menus with couscous as the main dish. The tiny **Restaurant Chedli** (dishes TD7.5) and the **Restaurant Gelain** (dishes TD6.5) are both on the right side of the road leading down to the Hôtel Les Cascades.

Tamerza is the only one of the three oasis villages with public transport. There are two SNTRI buses a day from Tunis (TD22, seven hours), three buses a day from Gafsa (TD4.8, 2½ hours) and two from Tozeur (TD4.6, 1½ hours).

### MIDÈS ميداس

A good road connects this small oasis village to Tamerza only 6km away, however a more adventurous route between the two is the 4.5km hike that passes through some stunning scenery including some tight passages in one of the gorges (see above for more information). Only 1km from the Algerian border (the National Guard has a customs post on the road to the border), Midès is perched high above a dramatic gorge that was previously employed as the town's southern fortification. The gorge has been used as a setting for many movies, including *The English Patient*. If you have time it's worth walking down into the canyon; if not the views from above are stunning.

The two places at Midès calling themselves camping grounds were closed indefinitely at the time of research. Food and drinks are available at the cluster of souvenir stalls at the top of the canyon.

### Ong Jemal عنف الجمال

Ong Jemal (Neck of the Camel) is a popular place for watching the sunset out over the sand dunes. Visiting this remote spot, around 30km north of Nefta, is only possible as part of an organised tour from Tozeur.

The name derives from an unusual rock formation, shaped, not surprisingly, like the neck and head of a camel, overlooking the barren plains. Not far away is a line of sand dunes where *The English Patient* crew indulged in lots of billowing, sand-blown romantic stuff. Drivers of 4WDs love this spot for exhilarating descents of the dunes and it's a stunning place to watch the sunset.

Just over a hill to the west is **Mos Espa**, a very well preserved *Star Wars* set. This was Darth Maul's lookout in *The Phantom*

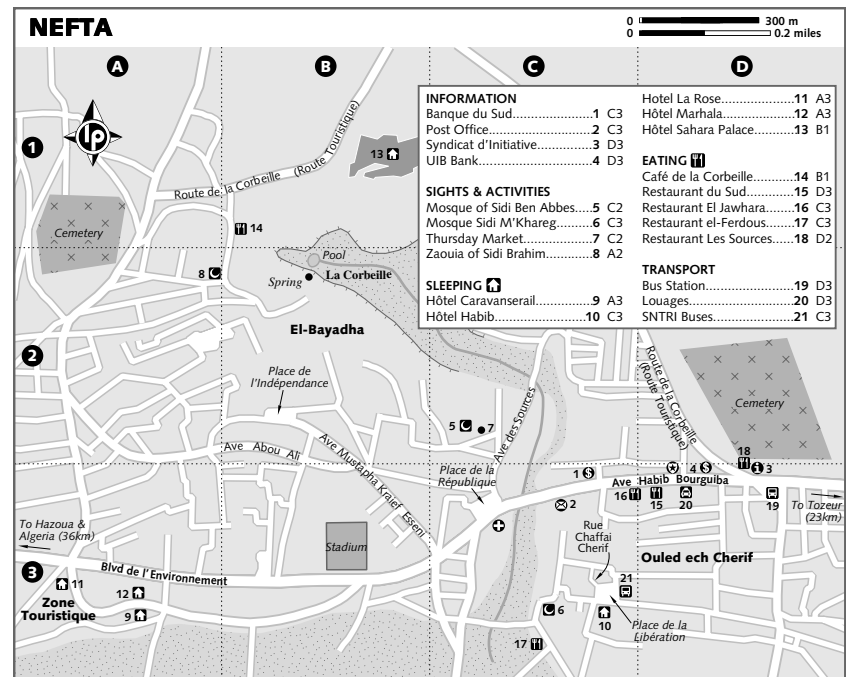
*Menace*, and the location for his and Qui-Gon's tussle, as well as lots of pod-race scenes. It's remarkably intact and one of the best *Star Wars* sites in the country. Film crews spent 4½ months here (including building the now-decaying road) for 12 minutes of footage.

### NEFTA نفطة

pop 22,000

Technically, it qualifies as an oasis. However, Nefta, an elongated and smaller version of Tozeur, 23km to the east, is too dusty and spread out to justify the images that word conjures up. There are fine examples of distinctive ornamental brickwork in the old town, which seems abandoned in the middle of the day. The greenery of the sunken *palmeraie*, unlike any other in the country, is best appreciated from the road above as a counterpoint to the barren Chott el-Jerid, which spreads out to the horizon beyond.

Nefta is also the home of Sufism in Tunisia, and there are a couple of important religious sites here.



## Orientation & Information

Nefta's main street, ave Habib Bourguiba, is also the main Tozeur–Algeria road. The route de la Corbeille does a loop around the *corbeille* (palm-filled gully) off ave Habib Bourguiba. The bulk of the *palmeraie* borders the southern edge of the town and the Chott el-Jerid to the south. Ave Habib Bourguiba turns into Blvd de l'Environnement west of the gorge and Place de la République; the small and unimpressive Zone Touristique is a little further west along here.

The small **syndicat d'initiative** (☎ 76 430 236) is on the right as you come into town from Tozeur, just before the ring-road junction and almost across from the Mobil station. Its primary function is to sell guide services (TD15 for a two-hour tour of Nefta, full day TD40 plus vehicle, four-hour camel rides TD24).

There's also a **post office** (ave Habib Bourguiba) and a branch of the **Banque du Sud** (ave Habib Bourguiba) and **UIB bank** (ave Habib Bourguiba).

## Sights & Activities

### LA CORBEILLE

La Corbeille (literally 'Basket'), the deep palm-filled gully that takes up much of the northern part of town and cuts the town in two, is the highlight of Nefta. It measures almost 1km across at its widest point and is about 40m deep. The best views are from the northwestern side. Take in the setting over a coffee at the Café de la Corbeille, which has a terrace overlooking the *corbeille*.

Below the cafés is a large spring-fed concrete **pool**, a popular swimming spot with local kids. The *corbeille* contracts to a narrow gorge that leads to the main *palmeraie* on the southern side of town.

### EL-BAYADHA

The cafés at the northwestern edge of the *corbeille* are a good starting point for a walk through the old El-Bayadha neighbourhood, which lies to the southwest. Many of the houses here were badly damaged by heavy rain in 1990, which also caused several landslides around the edge of the *corbeille*. Just about every other building in El-Bayadha seems to have some level of religious significance. The most important of them is the **Zaouia of Sidi Brahim**, where the Sufi saint and some of his followers are

buried. The *zaouia* (complex surrounding the tomb of a saint) is 100m south of the cafés. There's an open space opposite the **Mosque of Sidi Ben Abbes**, off ave des Sources at the eastern edge of El-Bayadha, where Nefta's **Thursday market** is staged.

### OULED ECH CHERIF

The best preserved of Nefta's old districts is the Ouled ech Cherif. To get there, follow the signs to the Hôtel Habib on the main road leading south next to the bus station. The layout is very similar to the Ouled el-Hadef in Tozeur, with winding, vaulted alleyways and some stunning examples of traditional brick designs. Check out the street that runs west off place de la Libération to the *palmeraie*, emerging next to the quarter's principal mosque, the **Mosque of Sidi M'Khareg**.

### Sleeping

None of the accommodation in Nefta measures up to Tozeur and there's little reason to spend the night here. There's a small cluster of big hotels in the Zone Touristique on the southwestern side of town.

**Hôtel Habib** (☎ 76 430 497; place de la Libération; r per person with breakfast TD7.5) Nothing much can be said in favour of the Habib other than the cheap price tag. Rooms are fairly little and dismal; most have showers though toilets are shared. It's south of ave Habib Bourguiba.

**Hotel La Rose** (☎ 76 430 696; fax 76 430 385; s/d TD40/60; ☎ ☎) This cookie-cutter *zone touristique* hotel boasts excellent views from some of the rooms with balconies.

**Hôtel Marhala** (☎ 76 430 027; hotelmarhala@voila.fr; s/d TD43/62; ☎ ☎) Directly across the street from the Hôtel Caravanserail in the Zone Touristique and catering to itinerant groups of tourists, the Marhala looks abandoned if you show up solo. In general, everything is old and fading though the simple rooms are good enough. There's a pool but it doesn't exactly invite sunbathing.

**Hôtel Caravanserail** (☎ 76 430 355; fax 76 430 344; s/d TD100/130; ☎ ☎) Saying the Caravanserail is a more luxurious and better maintained choice than the Marhala across the street is a fairly backhanded compliment. Unless you've already been booked through a pre-arranged tour, there's little to justify shelling out the dinars here. The rooms are large and modern and there's a pool and nightclub.

**Hôtel Sahara Palace** (☎ 76 432 005; www.sahara-palace.com.tn; s/d TD135/200; ☎ ☎) The best hotel in town, the Sahara Palace commands panoramic views directly over the *corbeille* from both the rooms and a terrace, a wonderful place for a sunset drink. Rooms here are clean and large and better looking than the more forlorn lobby area.

### Eating

The dining scene in Nefta is about what you'd expect in the desert.

**Restaurant Les Sources** (ave Habib Bourguiba; mains TD4; ☎) This is the only place worth noting. It's a small, modern restaurant geared to tourists, which isn't such a bad thing, though the English menu could use some variety. As it is, there are around five options of basic meat and chicken dishes.

There are a few basic eateries including **Restaurant El Jawhara** (ave Habib Bourguiba; mains TD3) and the next door **Restaurant du Sud** (ave Habib Bourguiba; mains TD2.5) on ave Habib Bourguiba and near the bus station, and around place de la Libération, plus hotel restaurants.

Although it looked closed at the time of our most recent visit, Restaurant el-Ferdous is a bar-restaurant in the *palmeraie*, crowded in the evenings.

### Getting There & Away

#### BUS

SNTRI has two daily buses to Tunis (TD20, seven hours) from the station on place de la Libération.

Regional services operate from the bus station on the southern side of ave Habib Bourguiba. There are five buses to Tozeur (TD1.7, 30 minutes) and six a day to Gafsa (TD5.8, three hours).

#### LOUAGE

Louages leave from outside the restaurants on ave Habib Bourguiba. You won't have to wait long for a ride to Tozeur (TD1.7).

### GAFSA

pop 84,700

The approach from the west is rather striking; the modern city of Gafsa lies below in a valley backed by a low range of mountains that glow orange in the sunset. However, from ground level the utilitarian buildings on the outskirts and the congested centre will disappoint all but the least demanding

traveller. Tour groups do breeze through, mostly though because it's on the way to Tozeur. Gafsa is historically significant as the site of Capsa (see p24), which was captured and destroyed by the Roman consul Marius in 107 BC as part of the campaign against the Numidian king Jugurtha. It went on to become an important Roman town.

### Information

All the major banks have branches around Jardin du 7 Novembre in the centre of town. Most have ATMs. There are plenty of Taxi-phone offices around the town centre.

**L'Univers de l'Internet** (ave Abdulkacem Chebbi; per hr TD2; ☎ 8.30am-11pm; ☎) Strangely enough, this is one of the largest and most modern internet centres in the country. Fast connections.

**Post office** (ave Habib Bourguiba) This is 150m north of the kasbah.

**Tourist office** (☎ 76 221 664; ☎ 8am-1pm & 3-5.45pm Mon-Thu, 8.30am-1.30pm Fri & Sat) There's a small office in the small square by the Roman Pools.

### Sights

The twin **Roman Pools** (Piscines Romaine; ave Habib Bourguiba; admission free) are Gafsa's main attraction and it's a pleasant spot although you've seen all there is to see after a few minutes. Apart from the entertainment provided by local children diving, and you're welcome to join them, note the Latin inscriptions just above water level in the eastern pool. The pools are located at the southern end of ave Habib Bourguiba.

Beside the entrance to the pools is a small **museum** (admission TD1.1; ☎ 7.30am-12.30pm & 3-7pm Tue-Sun Apr–mid-Sep, 9am-4.30pm mid-Sep–Mar), which houses, among other things, a couple of large mosaics from ancient Capsa.

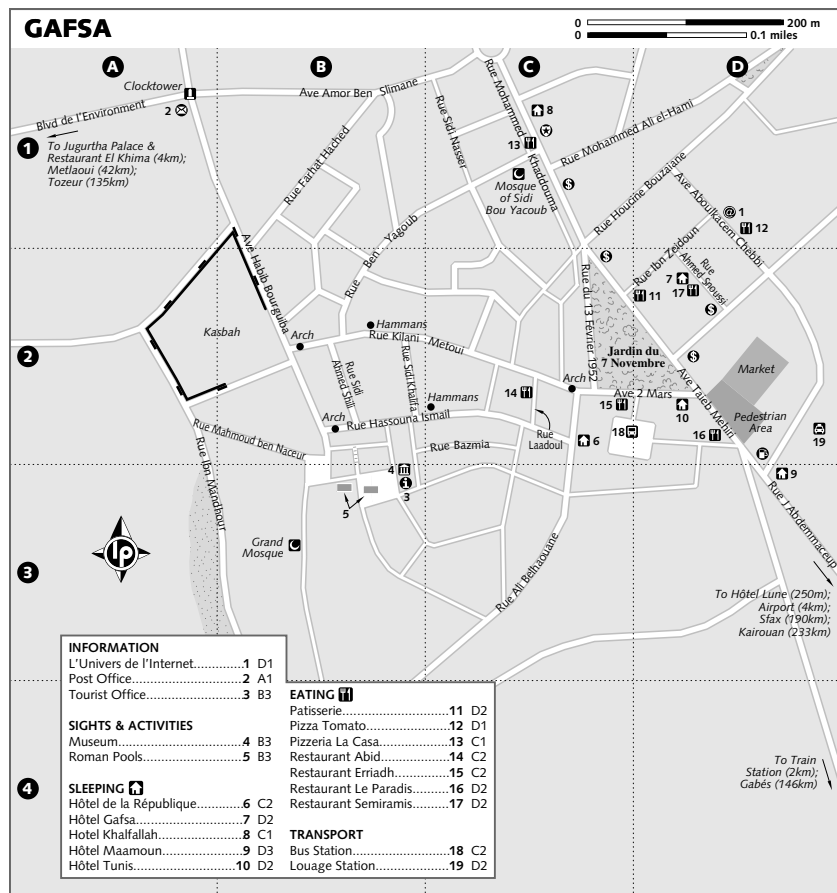
### Sleeping

The cheap hotels clustered around the bus station area are probably best avoided. In general, Gafsa has plenty of accommodation though none of it is particularly good.

### BUDGET

**Hôtel de la République** (☎ 76 221 807; rue Ali Belhaouane; s/d TD5.5/7) Not exactly a quiet spot, sandwiched between the street and bus station, this cheapie does have fairly spacious rooms, though they're a little worse-for-wear and only a few have private showers with intermittent hot water.





**Hôtel Tunis** (☎ 76 221 660; ave 2 Mars; s/d TD6/8) A small step up from the République, rooms here are smaller though in better shape. Look at several rooms before choosing one since some have small balconies while others don't even have windows to the outside. Use of the common shower is an extra TD1.5.

**Hotel Khalfallah** (ave Taieb Mehri; s/d TD10/20) The best of the cheapies, the friendly Khalfallah is OK so long as you don't need air-con and you're not a light sleeper. Some of the rooms get lots of street noise, though you could always take refuge in one of the bunker-sized bathtubs. A few rooms have balconies that open on to an alleyway.

#### MIDRANGE & TOP END

**Hôtel Lune** (☎ 76 220 218; fax 76 220 980; rue Jamel Abdennaceur; s/d TD24/36) A poor entry in the midrange category, the Lune has no air-con. Sure the rooms are spacious but so is the Kremlin; the incongruous ripped leather couches are an interesting touch. The hotel is located about 300m south of the town centre.

**Hôtel Gafsa** (☎ 76 224 000; fax 76 224 747; rue Ahmed Snoussi; s/d TD25/40; ☎) There's little to recommend this high-rise hotel except the friendly staff. If the elevator doesn't work, rest up for a long climb.

**Hôtel Maamoun** (☎ 76 224 441; fax 76 226 440; rue Jamel Abdennaceur; s/d TD40/80; ☎) The empty rooftop pool says it all. While it's possible

the Maamoun was once a tourist-class hotel, it's now a sad, aging relic that still hosts large groups, mostly young tourists, only because of lacklustre competition. The rooms themselves are OK though the air-con is old and the bathrooms in need of repair. It's well located just south of the main market square. Play hardball for a reduced rate and it won't seem like such a bad deal.

**Jugurtha Palace** (☎ 76 211 200; Sidi Ahmed Zarroug; s/d TD63/100; ☎) The best and most expensive place to stay in Gafsa, the Jugurtha covers a lot of property 4km west of town. Typical of this genre of hotel in Tunisia, the Jugurtha's royal ambitions translate into cheesy, grandiose furnishings in the rooms, though they're perfectly comfortable. It's kitsch galore in the lobby, lounge, bar and restaurant, and it can be hard to find your way around, what with all the mirrors and the dim lighting. There's a pool out back.

#### Eating

There are lots of small restaurants around the bus station, especially clustered on Rue Laadoul and on rue Mohammed Khadouma north of Jardin du 7 Novembre.

**Restaurant Abid** (rue Laadoul; mains TD3.5) This is a sparkling clean place in less than salubrious surroundings serving Tunisian fare. It's especially popular at lunch.

**Pizza Tomato** (rue Abdulkacem Chebbi; pizzas TD4) Next door to L'Univers de l'Internet, this is a small, modern place done up in Italian/Tunisian décor. A lot of pride goes into the authenticity of the large pizzas but they can taste kind of off. Meat toppings are scarce in the summer.

**Pizzeria La Casa** (rue Mohammed Khaddouma) This is a less ambitious place with no pretensions to authenticity.

Of the other cheapies, **Restaurant Erriadh** (ave 2 Mars) next to the bus station is good, while chicken is the (only) order of the day at **Restaurant Le Paradis** (ave Taieb Mehri). A couple of pâtisseries are dotted around the centre.

**Restaurant El Khima** (mains TD12) If you want to eat in over-the-top kitsch surroundings, try this place in the Jugurtha Palace west of town.

It's a bit of a dive but if you want to drink wine with your meal, try the **Restaurant Semiramis** (rue Ahmed Snoussi; mains TD4), below the

Hôtel Gafsa, or the restaurant at the **Hôtel Maamoun** (mains TD9), though service and food might be hard to muster if there's no large group chowing down on a fixed-price meal and it's equally hard to get the attention of a waiter if they are.

#### Getting There & Away

##### AIR

Tuninter flies to Tunis twice a week (TD99/122 one way/return). The airport is 4km east of town; taxis cost TD3.

##### BUS

The bus station in the centre of town has ticket windows for booking.

SNTRI runs at least five buses a day to Tunis (TD16, 5½ hours), most of which go via Kairouan (TD9.3, three hours).

The local company, Sotregafsa, drives an amazing collection of wrecks eight times a day to Tozeur (TD4.3, two hours) and Nefta (TD4.9, 2½ hours); it also has services to Gabès (TD6, 2½ hours, three daily), Kasserine (TD4.6, 1¼ hours, two daily) and Sfax (TD8.2, 3½ hours, three daily). There are also nine buses to Metlaoui (TD2, 45 minutes); three of these continue via Redeyef to Tamerza (TD4.1, 2½ hours).

##### LOUAGE

There are regular louage departures from just north of Taieb Mehiri, on the way south out of town, for Metlaoui (TD2.4) and Tozeur (TD4.9). Other possibilities include Tunis (TD16.3), Sfax (TD8.5), Sousse (TD13) and Gabès (TD7.1). There are occasional direct services to Kasserine (TD5.5), otherwise change at Feriana.

##### TRAIN

The station is 3km south of town and about TD2.5 by taxi. The only departures are a night train to Tunis (2nd/1st class TD18.6/13.9) and a morning service to Metlaoui at 5am.

#### AROUND GAFSA Metlaoui & the Seldja Gorge

متلوي و سالجة

When a town's *raison d'être* is phosphate mining, odds are it holds little appeal for the non-phosphate miner. Unfortunately that truism holds true for Metlaoui, a drab, utilitarian town 42km southwest of Gafsa.

It is the starting point for rides through the Seldja Gorge on the **Lezard Rouge** (Red Lizard) train.

Built in 1910, the Lezard Rouge was once used by the bey of Tunis for journeys between Tunis and his summer palace at Hammam Lif. It was given a complete refit by the national railway company SNCFT in 1995, and put back to work transporting tourists, if not in style at least in a modicum of comfort. Unfortunately the chairs and couches look like they were the same ones used in the time of the bey. The scenery, several gorges featuring weird and wonderful rock formations following the path carved out by the Oued Seldja, is dramatic enough to warrant the trip.

The two-hour return journey leaves Metlaoui at 10.30am on Monday, Friday and Sunday and at 10am on Tuesday and Thursday from 1 May to 30 September. However, you should definitely contact the **Bureau de Lezard Rouge** (☎ 76 241 469, fax 76 241 604; Metlaoui) or the tourist office in Tozeur (p256) to check that the train is running; reservations are highly recommended. The return fare is TD20. Tour companies in

Tozeur (p258) offer the trip on the Lezard Rouge as a half-day tour for TD40, which is good value and probably the best option.

The only acceptable lodging option in Metlaoui is the **Hôtel Seldja** (☎ 76 241 570; fax 76 241 486; s/d TD30/40; 📶), on the way out of town towards Gafsa. It's not exactly an uplifting place but rooms have air-con and satellite TV and there's a bar and restaurant.

All transport between Gafsa and Tozeur passes through Metlaoui and there are regular louages to Gafsa and Tozeur.

### East of Gafsa

There are half a dozen traditional Berber villages east of Gafsa, spread along the mountain range that runs south of the Gafsa–Sfax road. Most of them are very difficult to get to unless you have a 4WD. The most accessible is **Sened**, 10km south of modern Sened Gare and spread along the banks of a river in the hills below Jebel Biada (1163m). The houses are built of stone and are still in reasonable condition. People have lived around here for thousands of years – the escarpment behind the village is dotted with caves.