

Tunisia Beyond The Beach

Discover Tunis, Sidi Bou Said, Carthage and more...

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The dazzling colours of Tunisia...

Whatever the time of day or night, it's colour that leads you down winding alleyways and welcomes you through ornately decorated open doors.

Blue, white and gold are the predominant colours of the coast, and the beaches have drawn tourists to this south Mediterranean country for a century, to rest and unwind under the deep blue sea and sky.

But we take you beyond the coast and the sea, to places where personality and creativity shed light on the country and its culture. We take you to locations where you can almost touch the past and taste the future. We follow cats as they meander through the medina and camels as they pop up unexpectedly in the street.

We follow locals to their favourite bars and cafes, to find out what they like to eat and drink and do. And in an age of Instagram we follow the tourists to a steep coastal town where the selfie is elevated to an art form and capturing blue doors and windows is a mission. In this short guide to Tunis and the surrounding coast and countryside we explore the places where art is created, where food is made and shared, where history was born and continually changes, along with the people and the vibe.



*See that beautiful door?
Let's open it and explore...*



Welcome to Tunis

Two worlds sit side by side in the fascinating city of [Tunis](#): the medieval medina and the modern metropolis. The Tunisian capital's ninth-century medina is a UNESCO World Heritage site and is known as one of North Africa's most impressive examples of a medieval medina.

At one time the medina had 17 gates and was enclosed by around five miles of walls, but most were destroyed by the French during the colonial era. The medina's winding streets are home to covered souks selling handcrafted goods, workshops where artisans create traditional products, and grand residential buildings with colourful painted doors. Some of the historic buildings in the medina are now beautiful boutique hotels, making it an ideal base for exploring Tunis and the surrounding area.

Beyond the medina, the rest of the city has much to offer. [The Bardo Museum](#) is famous for its outstanding collection of Roman mosaics. Tree-lined Avenue Habib Bourguiba has a distinctly French feel, and its Théâtre Municipal is a classic Art Nouveau building. The vast 19th century Marché Central food market is the place to go for locally caught fish, spicy harissa, herbs and plants and of course for haggling and people-watching.

TIP

Vibrant Tunis is easy to reach from London, with direct daily three-hour flights by [Tunisair](#) making it a great option for a sunny city break.

Around Tunis

INSPIRING
Tunisia

There's plenty to do in the suburbs of Tunis, particularly to the east where the sea glistens and beckons visitors to relax in its turquoise hues.

The most popular area is Sidi Bou Said, an evocative town of blue and white which rivals any of the Greek islands in beauty. There are cafes, souvenir stalls and best of all the street sellers serving up hot bambalouni, the Tunisian doughnut that comes scalding hot and sprinkled in large sugar crystals. Down below the winding streets of the town expensive yachts bob harmoniously in the harbour making it the perfect place for a post dinner stroll. It may be touristy but there's something hypnotic about Sidi Bou Said.

The seaside town of La Marsa is much more down to earth and is the place for beachside promenades and coffee in the pretty little town centre. The cafes here are more rustic than Sidi Bou Said but packed full of charm and with friendly locals it's a great place to while away an hour or two.

Carthage, further down the coast, comes with the weight of history and doesn't disappoint. Walk across Roman mosaic tiled floors and weave around the bath houses where gladiators would have roamed. This is as atmospheric an historical site as they come.

Finally Gammarth is full of vibrancy and packed with fantastic hotels and restaurants. With beach side bars and happy hours in full swing it's the place to kick back and enjoy modern Tunisia's fun side.



Try this...

No visit to Tunis is complete without discovering some local culture – not just the country's impressive sights but its food, its music, its traditions. You'll stumble across plenty of authentic experiences as you explore but more than ever, Tunisians are introducing their cultural heritage to visitors with tours and activities.

Simply head to the 19th century Marché Central, the covered market just off Avenue de France, to soak up the sounds and smells as the city's inhabitants do their shopping: a musical chorus from the fishmongers touting their wares, the sight of glossy olives shining in oil or vibrant pink beans piled high, the scent of spices and the chat of friends catching up over mint tea.

There's more of that friendly gossip in a hammam too, the traditional bath houses where after relaxing in the steam, you're scrubbed until your skin squeaks, then massaged until you almost fall asleep.

TIP

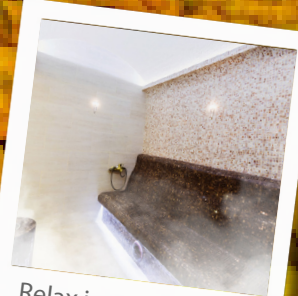
Enjoy the Sunday soundtrack – whether you're at an ancient temple or kicking back in a café or restaurant, Sunday is the time for family and music. Look out for musicians playing old favourites, spontaneous singing and bring your dancing shoes to join in with the locals.



The Medina and souks



Musicians performing



Relax in a Hammam



Dar Ben Gacem



Learn to cook



Arabic letters

TIP

Look out for the Arabic letters decorating the hotel's rooms, all designed in a striking historic Arabic font which owner Leila is on a mission to repopularise.

Boutique hotel Dar Ben Gacem, converted from a 17th century house in the heart of the medina, specializes in cultural experiences for its guests – visit the last bookbinder in the historic souks and make your own notebook as a souvenir, or try your hand at Arabic calligraphy for example.

And what's more essential to a country's heritage than its food? With cooking demos showcasing another side of Tunisian cuisine than the classic couscous and brik, you can hear tales of hunting down recipes from Tunisian grannies as well as ways to update them while chef and recipe-hunter Wajdi concocts some of the dishes to devour.

Tomato pasta gets a North African twist with coriander, fresh fish is 'cooked' with wild lemons and smoked rosewater, earthy ghee joins quinces and bsissa, a spiced nutty olive oil paste among the other ingredients.

Or wander through the twisting cobbled alleys of the medina itself with a local architect, discovering the secret corners only the locals know, and overdosing on the gloriously bright studded doors.

Eat this...



Tabouna bread



Couscous

With influences from France and Italy as well as the Middle East and its Berber heritage, Tunisian food is a delicious fusion of tastes and spices with a twist of its own to set it apart from other North African countries.

Couscous is by far the best-known traditional dish; you can expect to find plenty with fish as well as lamb or vegetables on almost every menu. But you'll also encounter baskets of bread galore including baguette or flatbreads, both the flaky pancake-thin mlawi as well as tabouna, made in minutes in a clay oven, fluffy inside its crisp crust.

Another staple, brik, is perfect as a snack or a starter, the classic savoury pastry triangle filled with egg but with tuna, meat and even carbonara versions popping up plus spicy harissa to give it a kick.

And in every kitchen, local olive oil: Tunisia is the fourth biggest producer and you'll still find ancient olive presses at the country's Roman sites. Head to one of the more modern producers for a tasting session – for the best experience, you need a blue glass to stop the colour influencing your judgement and to warm it as you swirl the glass to release the aroma.

Add chorba to your list too, a thick warming soup that's traditional at Ramadan, and kabkabou, a fish dish with tomato, capers and olives.

TIP

If you're looking for comfort food – or something filling for after happy hour in one of Tunis's bars – you need leblebi, a spiced chickpea soup sold in lots of street-side stalls.



Chorba soup



Brik



Makroudh



Sweet treats

Hit the streets for some of the most memorable tastes of Tunisia – with a bargain price tag. Stop for an addictively good bambalouni, a cross between a doughnut and a deep fried pastry rolled in sugar or sometimes drizzled with honey. The only question is whether you can wait for a freshly cooked one to cool before you take your first bite.

Snap up sweets in the souks as well. Makroudh is made from semolina filled with dates and nuts or almond paste, although you'll pass blocks and stacks of sticky nutty temptations on every corner.

For the ultimate Tunisian fast food, it has to be a fricassée sandwich – a fluffy doughnutty roll filled with tuna, olives, potatoes, boiled egg and harissa, made to your own perfect combination.

TIP

No celebration is complete without kaak warka, a crumbly bite-size ring-shaped pastry that's thought to have been brought to Tunisia from Andalucia centuries ago. Filled with almond paste flavoured by rose water, they're rolled, filled and tucked into a circle by hand, often by women working in groups.

See this...

If you'd like to immerse yourself in a country's history, the heritage sites around Tunis plug you directly into a time of gladiators, emperors, trading routes and wars. There's a lot to see, so leave time to explore

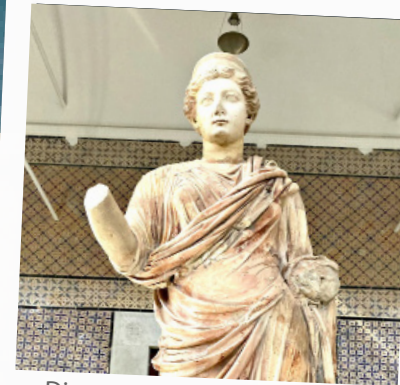
Carthage

The [UNESCO World Heritage Site](#) of Carthage is a must-see on any visit to Tunis and the surrounding area. The ruins, church and museum are scattered around a seaside suburb and it's worth investing at least a morning exploring the once powerful ancient city.

Information panels give you plenty of background on Punic and Roman history, but real connection comes as you weave in and out of the arches, stand under the iconic columns and trace the stone carvings with your fingers. Carthage was Rome's second city, and an important Mediterranean trading hub. There are more stories, statues and stones than you can take in, so we suggest concentrating on the Punic District and the remains of the Antonine Baths complex. Book a guided tour to help you understand the layout of the foundations, the role of the eight ton columns, and the atmosphere when packed with merchants, servants, acrobats and gladiators.

National Bardo Museum

The magnificent [National Bardo Museum](#) in Tunis is famous for its world-class collection of ancient Roman mosaics. The museum encompasses the grandly ornate 13th century palace of the Bey, the ruler of Tunisia, and a sleek, modern annexe, where the astonishingly intact mosaics are housed. At the Bardo you can learn about the different cultures which have shaped Tunisia through the centuries, from Berbers and Phoenicians to Romans, Arabs and Ottomans.



Discover Roman mosaics and exquisite pieces at The Bardo

Sidi Bou Said

White and blue are the colours of Sidi Bou Said, a startlingly pretty clifftop town and doors are the main draw. You'll find it impossible not to stop and photograph the ornate doors and doorways, and their novel handles and studs.

TIP

Visit the palace of Ennejma Ezzahra to see a weighty collection of musical instruments including the mizwad, made from a sheep's stomach and played at Tunisian gatherings.

El Jem

If there's one day trip you can't miss, it's visiting [El Jem](#), around two hours south of the Tunisian capital. It pulls in the tourists with a magnificent Roman amphitheatre, also called El Djem. But the crowds at this golden UNESCO World Heritage Site are nothing like they were in the past when the building seated 35,000 spectators and staged gladiator shows and chariot racing.



Drink this...

All that sunshine can make you thirsty. Tunisia's cafes and bars are a great way to cool down while meeting the locals and chilling for an hour or two. Here's how your day might go in drink stops:



Mint tea



Coffee and juice



Café culture

Mint tea elevenses

Mint tea is a must. It is best sipped somewhere good for the soul, but equally it's a quick pick-me-up in the medina or on a busy street. In Sidi Bou Said, it is best taken on the dramatically steep café terrace of [Cafe des Delices](#), sitting under a blue parasol, looking down onto one of the bluest bays in the world. It comes with almonds if you prefer a buttery taste. Either way it will be sweet. But not as sweet as the view.

And there can be few more chilled-out places to kick back with your mint tea than the cafes lining the waterfront at La Goulette. The port suburb of Tunis has its own small beach and tea rooms set on terraces above the waves. Take a promenade, eye up the street art and then watch the sun turn the water golden as it sets.

Morning coffee

A shot of coffee in Tunisia is guaranteed to kick start your day. It comes small and strong and won't take you very long to drink. Thanks in part to the Turks and the French, coffee has been a thing in Tunisia since the 16th century. Weekends are a good time to meet a local; in La Marsa we are warmly welcomed into historic Café Le Saf-Saf, where a white camel is a big tourist draw.

Lunchtime juice shot

A freshly squeezed juice will cool you down and set you up for the afternoon. We enjoy an especially good citron pressé just outside Tunis' French Gate, Bab El Bhar.



TIP

Attend a weekend barbecue at [Domaine Neferis](#) from mid-March, where an open bar is matched with local cheeses, beef and olives.

Afternoon wine tasting

As the afternoon sun creeps over the sky, head to one of the vineyards in the Grombalia countryside, around 20km from Tunis. A typical tour will give you a generous tasting session and an overview of how production impacts the flavours.

TIP

Don't forget to drink in the gorgeous Tunisian sunset. Take a glass outside and catch the liquid sun as it falls from the sky.

Evening cocktails

In this mostly Muslim country you can still party the night away at the beach front. Try cocktails in the nightclub complexes of [Ardjan Gammarth](#) and [ToBe Carthage](#). There are regular happy hours and a soundtrack of hip hop, garage or soul. You could also try the boukha spirit made out of figs.



Enjoying a bottle or two of Magon...



Cocktails at sunset

Buy this...

Tunisia is a vibrant country filled with beautiful souvenirs to take home and treasure. Whether you fancy bartering in the souks or visiting high-end galleries there's something for every budget. A new generation of Tunisians are taking the country to the forefront of the world's arts and crafts stage and none more so than famed glassblower Sadika Keskes. Sadika makes beautiful, colourful glass creations, having brought the art back to Tunisia, after this technique has been absent since the 14th century. These are souvenirs to truly treasure.



Beautiful glassware creations



Sadika Keskes' studio has many delights on offer

TIP

Look out for jewellery and basketware adorned by the Hand of Fatima, or Hamsa Hand, an emblem found all over Tunisia. Believed to protect its wearer, it is a symbol of the country.



The Hand of Fatima



Gorgeous pottery



Vibrant spices



Colourful hammam towels

In the covered markets in Tunis and Sidi Bou Said, striped hammam towels can be snapped up at bargain prices, alongside bagfuls of aromatic spices, bottles of perfumed oils, intricate jewellery and leatherware. Come with space in your case as Tunis is a city made for shopping!

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Book this...

Boutique hotels, luxury spas, quirky interiors - Tunisia has it all. Here are some accommodation options that really stand out. From gloriously large rooms and modern furnishings to first-class cuisine, you'd be hard-pressed not to find a hotel that suits...



Villa Didon

[Villa Didon](#) is within walking distance of some of the main sights of Carthage and from its terraces you can look down to the sparkling sea beyond. Set amongst beautiful trees including palms, olives, lavender and bougainvillea it is somewhere to relax away from the hustle and bustle of the historic sites nearby. The food here is outstanding and you can sit and enjoy meals on the terrace and watch the sun dance across the blue sky. There's also a spa here for even more relaxation.

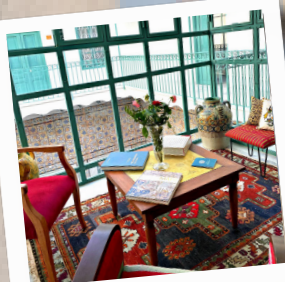


Dar El Jeld Hotel & Spa

[Dar El Jeld Hotel & Spa](#) is an elegantly plush and contemporary luxury boutique hotel in the heart of Tunis' historic medina. The hotel's 16 rooms are spacious, comfortable and very well-equipped, and all have separate lounge and bedroom areas. The rooftop terrace restaurant at Dar El Jeld offers views across the medina and is a great spot for breakfast or dinner. The excellent spa has a luxurious hammam and also offers massage and other treatments.

Palais Bayram

[Palais Bayram](#) is a grand eighteenth century house in the heart of Tunis medina. Formerly one of the city's last private palaces, and once the home of the Grand Mufti (one of the country's most senior religious figures) Palais Bayram has been transformed into a luxury boutique hotel. With splendidly ornate rooms, open courtyards and rooftop views across the medina this is a truly unique place to stay. The hotel has 17 rooms ranging from traditional suites to historic suites, with three Grand historic suites and a small hammam. Breakfast is a marvel of freshly made local delicacies over many courses, and will truly set you up for the day.



Dar Ben Gacem

[Dar Ben Gacem](#) is a beautifully restored seventeenth century building in the historic medina of Tunis, and it's now a boutique hotel as well as a social enterprise. The hotel's seven comfortable guest rooms are individually furnished, with work by local craftspeople and artists. Traditional homemade dishes are served in the cosy dining room, or on the roof terrace. The owner of Dar Ben Gacem is passionate about working with artisans to help to preserve and share Tunisia's cultural heritage. The hotel offers immersive experiences for guests, such as cooking with a local chef, bookbinding in a traditional workshop and tours of the medina.

Hotel Dar El Marsa

[Dar El Marsa](#) is a 'lifestyle' boutique hotel located on the corniche of La Marsa beach. All rooms have a sea view. Bag a room with a private balcony, perfect for watching the sun coming up over the bay. 29 rooms have a mini bar and coffee machine and to maximise relaxation there's a spa and outdoor swimming pool. The restaurant offers traditional Tunisian food options including madfouna and mint meat balls, and Couscous Borzguenea l'agneau et fruits secs – a lamb and couscous delight. You can eat inside or by the pool and if you are lucky you may catch some live music.



Tunisia Beyond The Beach

Tunisia INSPIRING

With so many fascinating secrets hidden in the winding alleys of the medina, with history coming to life under a North African sun, and with colourful glimpses of Tunisian life at every turn, why resist the temptation to open the door to Tunisia with a short break in the capital? And if the ebook has only whetted your appetite, you can discover more of the country's secrets here...

Plan your visit

[48 Hours in Tunis](#)

[A weekend in Tunisia](#)

[Five nights in northern Tunisia](#)

Where to stay...

[A review of Palais Bayram](#)

[A review of Dar El Jeld](#)

Don't miss...

[The Unmissable Foods of Tunisia](#)

[What to drink in Tunisia](#)

[Tunisian culture and heritage – and the people who make it so special](#)

[Discovering the souks of Tunis](#)

[The best souvenirs to buy in Tunisia](#)



FTC

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