



Soul of Tunisia



Right at the top of Africa, Tunisia is a tiny country with a treasure trove of diverse offerings.

BY Keri Harvey

PHOTOS: Haley Harvey and Keri Harvey

An old woman in a white cape and traditional babouche shoes sits warming herself in the afternoon sun. She's surrounded by the high stone walls of the Sousse medina, or old quarter, and above her flaps a Tunisian flag in bright red and white. She sits quietly amidst the bustle of shoppers and traders, one hand holding a tiny glass of mint tea, the other stroking a passing patchwork cat.

The scene epitomises what makes Tunisia quite unique in North Africa. Here, like nowhere else, the people have a calm gentleness wrapped in a deep respect and tolerance of each other and their surroundings. Everywhere old meets new, Africa meets Arabia and merges with Europe, and drawing all Tunisians together is their bright red flag with two moons and a star. In every town and village flags big and small adorn buildings and streets, displayed with pride as reminders of the mettle of Tunisians.

Beyond the medina walls, the modern city of Sousse and its busy harbour are a buzz of activity. Sophisticated shops and tall glass buildings are clear indicators that Tunisia is a happening place. This is no backwater African country. Even though Tunisia is an ancient place with a colourful history and many old-world traditions, these fit comfortably into modern Tunisian life and are no hindrance to progress.

Tunisians are 99% Muslim and this moral foundation is evident in daily life. But, importantly, the religion is not imposed and Islamic fundamentalism is outlawed – making Tunisia the safest country in Africa. There's also no polygamy and women have equal rights in all areas. Veils are a choice, crime is virtually non-existent, slums have been eradicated and everyone has food, shelter and education. It's difficult to grasp you are in Africa when Tunisia runs with First World efficiency and sophistication. But the Africanness is still there in the warmth of the people, the diverse



DON'T MISS:

The Bardo Museum, Tunis – the world's largest Roman mosaic collection (all over 3 000 years old).

El Jem's colosseum – better preserved than the one in Rome.

Carthage – once home to Hannibal, Carthage is a magnificent Roman site right on the coast near Tunis.

Dougga – a full Roman city and Tunisia's most extensive Roman site.

Matmata – the moonscape-looking town with crater-like pit dwellings.

Kairouan – one of Islam's holiest cities; four trips here is as good as going to Mecca. Also renowned for exquisite carpets.

Djerba – island linked to the mainland by ferry and causeway, and home to fort-like mosques and Berber pottery.

Bizerte – beautiful seaside town on the Mediterranean, with an old port, fort and numerous lighthouses.

Medinas – in Tunis, Sfax, Sousse and Kairouan – all sell uniquely Tunisian wares.

Douz – Sahara dunes and the camel market on Thursdays make this an evocative stop.

Desert canyons of Mides and Chebika – for breathtaking rock landscapes, palm trees and two waterfalls.



and magnificent landscape, tantalizing food and evocative music. In every way, Tunisia has soul.

With traditional malouf music playing softly on the radio, we leave seaside Sousse and head inland to El Jem, where a virtually intact colosseum dominates the centre of the town. It's hot and still here and, as we sit in the 30 000-seat stone amphitheatre, it's easy to imagine the shenanigans held when the Romans were in town. Circuses were prized entertainment for the masses, and rulers used these often-macabre shows to keep their people happy. Wild animals and gladiators perished here in the past, but today El Jem is far more genteel. Every year in July and August, the colosseum hosts the International Festival of Symphonic Music, showcasing traditional Arabic and European performances and attracting enthusiasts from all over.

As we cross by car ferry from the mainland to Djerba, the island is so flat that it appears to float on the sea. But once there we are astounded at its 360km² size, its magnificent fortified mosques and Jewish synagogue, where old men with long grey beards read aloud from the Torah all day. For lunch we enjoy an enormous Tunisian sandwich of tuna, olives, salad and fiery harissa paste in the shade of a date palm. With a seaside mosque as a backdrop, erudite master guide Abdel Azouzi tells us of the annual Jewish pilgrimage to Djerba, the ancient Berber pottery works, an offshore island where flamingoes gather November to March, that the traditional domed buildings provide natural climate control, and the quirks of the local Berber people. "Berber women are particularly fussy about being photographed. You have to ask them first, or they will cover their faces." And they did.

TRAVEL TIPS:

Currency: Tunisian Dinar (ITD = +- R5)

Best time to go: spring (March to May) and autumn (September to November). Mid year can be very hot in the desert and hot and humid along the coast; year end can be cold along the coast and in the north.

Visas: South African passport holders require a visa, which takes three to seven working days to process and costs R45.

Getting there: Air France flies from Johannesburg to Tunis (via Charles de Gaulle, Paris) 10 times a week, with four flights daily from Paris to Tunis. The connections are all effortless with no wasted time – and flying Business Class ensures you arrive refreshed to enjoy the rest of the day in Tunis. For schedules and reservations, call 0861 340 340; www.airfrance.co.za .

Special tourist activities:

spa (thalasso) holidays and golfing trips.

For more information:

Embassy of Tunisia, telephone 012 342 6282; see www.tourismtunisia.com; email tunisiainfo@icon.co.za

The author and photographer would like to thank the Embassy of Tunisia for generously hosting them in Tunisia.



FACT FILE:

Population: 10 million, with two million resident in the capital, Tunis.

Infrastructure: excellent roads and communications with cellphone signal right into the Sahara.

Siesta: shops close between 12.30pm and 3pm.

Main export: phosphates, textiles and olive oil.

Movies: The English Patient, Star Wars, Raiders of the Lost Ark, Life of Brian, and Jesus of Nazareth were all shot in Tunisia.

Northernmost tip of Africa: Cap Blanc

Over a Roman causeway washed by emerald green sea, we drive back onto the mainland, discussing music and literature with Abdel. Later that day, he buys a selection of local music for us to listen to as we head for Matmata. This is the moonscape area where Star Wars was filmed, and as we approach the town there seems to be very little town at all. Dwellings here are subterranean. “If you look carefully, you’ll see doorways into the mountains,” says Abdel. “These are the homes of the troglodytes. And when you look down on the homes from above, they look just like circles in the ground.”

A living legend of Matmata and the face on many postcards, octogenarian Mrs Fatima shows us around her underground home, where she’s lived all her life. Through the doorway in the rockface is an open courtyard, and all the rooms lead off it. It’s a double-storey home, so to speak, with the top level closest to ground level for food storage and the lower level used as living quarters – because it’s coolest there in the over-50°C temperatures of summer. Furniture in the home is fixed and carved from the sandstone, and rooms are adorned with the vibrant rugs of Berber weavers. Mrs Fatima is one of a few hundred Berbers still living in these curious cave dwellings, vehemently refusing to move into a modern house in the town.

On the edge of the Sahara, the camel market in Douz is a lively affair, and trade is swift under the date palms. Sheep and chickens also feature. By noon, business is done and men gather to smoke chichi water pipes and drink tea in the surrounding cafés. These cafés are a male tradition throughout Tunisia, and while women are perfectly welcome too they generally choose not to partake.

Across the ‘lake of death’ – a massive dry salt lake where camel caravans are said to disappear when they follow mirages – we head towards the desert town of Tozeur. It’s over 90km across the Chort el Jerid salt lake, and tiny bushes in the distance seem to grow in size to resemble mirage lines of camels. But the natural rock desert roses really do stand as tall as tables. By the time we reach Tozeur, with its ornate brickwork and story-telling carpets, we are officially completely enchanted with Tunisia.

Its special blend of old and new, and the careful distillation of the very best of influencing cultures and traditions, makes Tunisia both refreshing and unique. It’s full of soul, full of vibrancy, a place of calm. You could say it’s ‘Africa gone right’. 🌍





DID YOU KNOW?

Volkswagen driver and our very own Giniel de Villiers and co-driver Dirk von Zitzewitz finished the Tunisia Rally in second place in the Volkswagen Race Touareg 2. With sand, dunes, camel grass and extreme heat forming part of the challenge, this rally played a part in Volkswagen's preparation for Dakar 2007.