

# Tunisia

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NAME:	Republic of Tunisia
CAPITAL:	Tunis
LANGUAGE:	Arabic & French
RELIGION:	Muslim
CURRENCY:	Dinar

## Getting Started

### When to Visit

**Tunisian** summers, especially in the desert, are incredibly hot and bordering on the edge of dangerous with daily highs of about 105°F (40°C) in the desert. The coasts, however are cooler, but still hot as they can easily be in the 85-100°F (30-40°C), but tend to be about 72-80°F (23-27°C) with a cooling breeze off the Mediterranean coast, however this location also tends to bring high humidity. Winters don't ever reach the opposite extreme, but desert nights can fall to near freezing. The coasts during the winter months tend to have daily lows of about 50°F (10°C) and rain is more common during this time. Desert winter days remain hot, but not to the extreme experienced in the summers. Temperatures in the spring and fall (autumn) tend to be in between, in the area of 60-70°F (15-20°C).

Most tourists (primarily from **Europe**) visit the coasts in the late fall, winter, and early spring, with peak months from November to March; this time also brings higher prices at coastal resorts and hotels. The desert is best visited during this time, but the coast can be visited year round, although winters bring rain and summers extreme heat.

A final point to consider before planning your travel is local holidays. Holidays can make travel either more attractive, such as for large festivals, or less attractive due to tourist site closings and more expensive transportation options, so make sure you look into this before booking your trip. One holiday to be aware of is Ramadan (ninth month of the Islamic calendar, which rotates every year compared to the Gregorian calendar) as this month tends to close shops, restaurants, and coffee shops.

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## Weather

Although weather can be generalized based upon years past, for more up to date weather patterns and predicted future weather patterns, visit weather websites like [weather.com](http://weather.com); many local news sources also have information for international weather forecasts.

## Tours & Cruises

If you're looking for a pre-arranged trip, that involves little effort on your part, then you should consider going on an organized tour or cruise. Organized tours and cruises vary from all expenses included to only daily tours and perhaps hotels included in the price, but all the options below will help you arrange all the details so you don't have to worry about finding the best deal or right hotel.

[Experience It Tours](#): A tour company focusing on North Africa, Experience It Tours rarely gets a poor review from travelers.

[Holland America Cruises](#): Cruises for all ages and families.

[Intrepid Travel](#): Boasts more "off the beaten track" destinations; do your research though since some tours are very adventurous and involves camping and local hotels.

[Kensington Tours](#): Only offers personal tours for you and your family/friends, which allows greater flexibility, but also means slightly higher prices.

## Guidebooks

If you are just traveling on business and have little free time or are already familiar with [Tunisia](#), you may not need anything more than this guide! However, if you need more detailed and up to date information, there are a couple guidebooks available for travel in Tunisia.

[Lonely Planet](#): Great maps and updated often with comprehensive housing information, restaurants, & transportation options. Backpackers and adventurers love these guidebooks.

[Rough Guides](#): Cover various aspects of travel from culture to getting by on the cheap.

# Culture

## Personality, Culture, & Identity

[Tunisia](#) has, in many ways, always been a bridge between [Africa](#) and [Europe](#) as they were historically skilled traders and sailors and in more recent history were the object of affection of numerous European powers. When the Phoenicians sailed the Mediterranean and founded the settlement of Carthage they surely had their choice of location, but chose the region of modern day Tunisia. Likewise, during European colonization of the 1800s the [Brits](#), [Italians](#), and [French](#) fought for control over the region and this came after the [Turks](#) and Spanish fought over the same land.

These [European](#) influences along with [Turkish](#) rule and the earlier Arab invasion have created [Tunisia](#) as it is today. There are aspects of Europeans and Arabs everywhere in Tunisia despite its small size. This past has kept Tunisia in contact with Europe, but also divided peoples and opinions as a result of these influences. While these differences do separate the people, their history has also taught them to cope with differences and communicate with others, making arguments more political than military in nature.

Many [Tunisians](#) view themselves as "Tunisian," but few people will agree with what that means as the country seems to be undergoing an identity crisis. There has been a separation of religion from politics, but many people view this as a bad thing; additionally, a growing number of youths seek economic freedoms and a desire to focus on this over politics or religion. Due to this, many locals are trying to force their definition of being "Tunisian" on others by trying to alter the government since the "Tunisian" identity is nationally, not ethnically defined. This has led to political disruptions and disagreements, while many minority groups, particularly the Berbers only see themselves as Berber and seek political stability more than a cultural and political definition to match their identity.

## History

The people of modern day [Tunisia](#) are the descendents of the Berbers and dozens of other ethnic peoples. Being located on the Mediterranean Sea coast, the seaside was occupied by the Phoenicians who established the city and empire of Carthage, which was located near modern day Tunis.

With the fall of Carthage and their leader, Hannibal in 146 BC, came the invasion of the Romans into the region. After a failed attempt, the Romans finally established a base in Tunisia in about the year 0. For the next few hundred years, the Romans ruled the coasts and region, but little changed for many of the Berbers who lived in the countryside and mountains.

In the 600s the Arabs overran much of [North Africa](#), reaching [Tunisia](#) and converting many of the people to Islam. Despite the Berbers' conversion to Islam, the Berbers and Arabs maintained two separate ethnicities as they rarely intermarried. Despite this Arab control, little of the Arab influence reached the Berbers other than their conversion to Islam.

In the 1100s the Berber majority took control over much of the more influential, but minority Arab population. From this point until the 1500s the Berbers essentially ruled themselves, although there was no true unified rule over the entire modern day country.

The 1500s brought in new leadership in what is today [Tunisia](#) when the Ottoman [Turks](#) and Spanish arrived. These two foreign groups started fighting for power in the region. The Ottomans soon realized that the most effective way to control the [North African](#) coast was to allow their merchants and seafarers to pirate the coast. The North African coast, also known as the Barbary Coast became protected by these Ottoman Turks who ravaged passing ships and demanded money for safe passage.

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As these pirates became more and more powerful, the Ottomans granted some of these pirates power over the coastal lands as well. Perhaps the most famous of these ruling pirates was Khair ad Din, also known as "Barbarossa" or "Red Beard." Barbarossa ruled over Algiers and at times ruled over parts of modern day [Tunisia](#). He, along with other Ottoman pirates encouraged the [Turkish](#) language and culture on the people as Arabic and Berber were suppressed.

After centuries of successful control over the Barbary Coast, the Ottoman [Turks](#) began to lose power and control in the early 1800s. During this time the [French](#), [Italians](#), and [Brits](#) all got involved in [Tunisia](#) as each tried to control the region to varying degrees, while expelling the Ottoman pirates. In the 1860s the French took over Tunisia as there were border disputes with neighboring [Algeria](#), which was already French controlled.

The [French](#) takeover of [Tunisia](#) led to hostilities both in [Europe](#) and in Tunisia as both the French and [Italians](#) wished to control the region. Meanwhile, the local people began independence movements, which peaked in the 1920s. Despite these movements, World War II (WWII) was about to break out and Tunisia found itself as a battleground. To the west stands [Algeria](#), which was French controlled, while to the west is [Libya](#), which was Italian controlled. Additionally, Tunisia was home to both Italians and French so as France fought both Italy and [Germany](#) in WWII, Tunisia became the centerline for WWII's North African fronts. After being taken by the Germans, then retaken by the French and Allied troops, Tunisia was overrun and destroyed.

Once the war had ended, independence movements in [Tunisia](#) again arose in the 1950s. The [French](#) were hesitant to grant Tunisia independence since many French had settled in the country and the French government feared their future. After much debate, Tunisia was granted independence in the mid-1950s. As Tunisia tried to gain favor with [Europe](#), they still battled [Algeria](#) over border issues and communicated with Israel during Israeli-Arab wars, turning them off to most of the Arab world.

In the 1980s the [Tunisians](#) improved relations with both the Arab world and [Europe](#), but at the same time their economy struggled. This led to an overthrow of the government and a new, perhaps more suppressive government, that separated mosque and state, which was argued by some and this government repealed other social and political freedoms.

In 2010 and 2011 protests again erupted in [Tunisia](#), eventually leading to the overthrow of their president. Despite this overthrow, the current government continues to be run by the former president's supporters, so it is questionable whether any permanent change will take place.

## Dress & Behavior

As a primarily Muslim country, there are a number of religious laws which should be obeyed by everyone in [Tunisia](#), including tourists.

It is considered inappropriate for women to leave their hair uncovered, however this has almost entirely changed in [Tunisia](#), especially among foreigners. Women covering their heads will show great respect to their culture, however most Tunisians understand if you don't cover your hair.

Both women and men are expected to cover their legs and shoulders; showing your knees can be offensive. 3/4 length pants, like Capris and short sleeve shirts are only looked down upon by strict Muslims, however wearing full length pants and long sleeves at all times is the best course of action. Staying at a seaside resort often times allows these rules to be ignored, but follow the example of locals in these places.

Islamic law forbids pork products and alcohol. Being a fairly liberal Muslim country, drinking alcohol is not completely unheard of by the locals, but public drinking or intoxication is strictly forbidden. Pork products are difficult to find in [Tunisia](#) since there is little market for pork. Avoiding these foods is easy due to its inaccessibility. To learn more about dining etiquette in Tunisia, continue reading below.

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# Food

## Dining Etiquette

If you're lucky enough to be invited to an [Tunisian](#)'s home, dress conservatively and bring pastries or fruit as these are great gifts for a host. Once you arrive you should remove your shoes and greet every person individually. Start with the oldest person first and work your way down to the youngest, but observe others as many times men should only touch the hand of another man, as offering your hand to a woman can be interpreted as inappropriate. Women should offer to help in the kitchen if you are dining in a local's home, but this offer will rarely be accepted.

Depending on the individual family or company you are dining with, men and women may eat separately, or if in a restaurant at different sides of the table, so let your host seat you. Before sitting though observe those around you. You are expected to wash your hands prior to eating, but you may find that this is in the form of literally washing your hands, or in some places may only be a bowl of perfumed water passed around the table for a symbolic washing. In this situation, only dip three fingers on your right hand into the water. You may also find that the tables are low and the chairs non-existent, as sitting on the floor is common in [Tunisia](#).

Once you actually begin eating, the place setting will look similar to that of Europe as you'll have a spoon, fork, and plate. Most dishes will contain couscous, which should be eaten with a spoon. If you need to use your hand to eat, or just in holding your fork or spoon, only use your right hand.

You will most likely be offered more and more food and do accept a second helping as your host will view this as a compliment. Once you are finished, leave a small amount of food on your plate to compliment your host has having provided more than enough. As you finish

though, leave some room for dessert, as sweet pastries are common and although these are small, they can be filling.

## History & Influences

[Tunisian](#) food, much like most [North African](#) food, is based on the traditional Berber diet and what ingredients were locally available. More than many other North African countries though, the Tunisians, even today, maintain a diet based on [Mediterranean](#) foods. Citrus fruits, olives, fish, and herbs are very prevalent as these were, and continue to be, easily accessible in Tunisia.

The first major outside influence to [Tunisian](#) cuisine was in and after the 600s. The Arabs entered the region in the 600s and brought with them new foods, spices, and traditions. Dietary laws were changed as these new spices and foods vastly altered the daily cuisine.

In the 1500s the Spanish, then the [Turks](#) took over the region that is now known as [Tunisia](#). While both these groups influenced Tunisian cuisine, the Turkish spices and desserts made the most significant influence in the diet. In the 1800s and 1900s the [French](#) and [Italians](#) entered the [North African](#) coast and their influence was quite significant. Pasta became a favorite among the locals, but it was France that colonized Tunisia as their breads and, to a lesser degree, wines became regulars in the Tunisian diet.

Today, despite these outside influences, [Tunisian](#) food remains primarily local, both in the popularity of regional dishes as well as the use of locally available ingredients. While typical [Mediterranean](#) stuffed vegetables have entered the regular menu and [Turkish](#)-styled desserts are common, Tunisia maintains its roots. Tuna and fish from the Mediterranean is the most common protein in the diet and found in many dishes, typically finished with a squeeze of lemon. The people also love hot and spicy food and this "heat" cannot always be avoided, particularly in home cooking. Additionally, from one city to the next the local foods vary and while some ingredients, like *couscous* are found everywhere, what it's prepared with varies significantly.

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## Staple Foods

**Couscous:** semolina, which is a made of flour; considered the national dish

**Tabuna:** [Tunisian](#) round bread

## Regional Varieties & Specialties

**Breek:** fried dough stuffed with vegetables, eggs, and fish

**Harissa:** spicy sauce made of chili peppers and garlic, flavored with coriander, cumin, olive oil and often tomatoes

**Shakshouka:** poached eggs in a sauce of (usually) tomatoes, peppers, onions, and cumin

**Tajine:** a general term for the popular [Tunisian](#) stews, although there are dozens of varieties

## Drinks

The [Tunisians](#) love mint tea and mineral water, which are easily accessible and commonly drunk.

As a primarily Muslim country, [Tunisia](#) has little alcohol available, but it can be purchased. Despite the fact that most Tunisians don't drink, both wine and beer are produced in the country.

# Practical Information

## Visas

Many foreign nationals need a visa to enter [Tunisia](#), however the requirements for citizens of different nationalities varies. To learn more about who need visas, what type of visa is needed, what requirements are needed to obtain a visa, and visa costs, please visit the [Official Website of Tunisia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs](#) (not all information is in English; available in French & Arabic) or contact your nearest Tunisian Embassy.

## Health & Insurance

Every part of the world has different health concerns and diseases, including [Tunisia](#). Before traveling, consult with a physician to learn more about your destination and what steps you can take to prevent illness. At the time of writing, Tunisia didn't have any health immunizations that are required prior to arrival, although a number of immunizations are strongly recommended.

Many health insurance providers don't cover health care that is provided outside your home country. Before going abroad check with your health insurance to see if they cover international care. If not, consider purchasing an international medical insurance option, preferably from a company that specializes in international medical insurance.

## Transportation

Unless you're on an organized tour or working with a travel agent, you will have to arrange some transportation. The below links can greatly help you start your planning, first by finding a flight to [Tunisia](#), then with car rental agencies. If you don't know where to begin, try the

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"Flight & Rental Car Search Sites" to learn competitor's prices during your trip.

**Largest International Airlines:** [Air France](#), [American Airlines](#); [British Airways](#); [Cathay Pacific](#); [China Southern Airlines](#); [Delta](#); [Emirates](#); [KLM](#); [LAN](#); [Lufthansa](#); [Qantas](#); [Singapore Airlines](#); [United Airlines](#).

**Largest Rental Car Agencies in Tunisia:** [Alamo](#); [Avis](#); [Budget](#); [Europcar](#); [Hertz](#); [National](#); & [Sixt](#).

**Flight & Rental Car Search Sites:** [Expedia.com](#); [Farecast.com](#); [Kayak.com](#); [Orbitz.com](#); & [Travelocity.com](#).

## Housing

Housing options are numerous in most tourist destinations, but every individual seeks out something different when it comes to housing. The below links should help you get started, with low- to high-end hotels, hostels, and camping options.

**Popular International Hotel Conglomerates:** [Accor Group](#) (various price ranges); [Choice Hotels](#) (low- to mid-price range); [Hilton](#) (various price ranges); [Hyatt](#) (high-end to resorts); [InterContinental Group](#) (mid- to high-price range); [Marriott Family](#) (various price ranges); [Starwood Hotels](#) (high-end); [Wyndham Hotels](#) (low- to mid-price range).

**Hotel Search Sites:** [Expedia.com](#); [Kayak.com](#); [Orbitz.com](#); & [Travelocity.com](#).

**Hostels:** Although there are many hostel websites, some of the most popular and reputable include [hostels.com](#), [hostelworld.com](#), & [hostelbookers.com](#).

**Camping:** Camping is still a foreign concept in Tunisia, plus camping is not safe in most locations. The desert is unforgiving and there

are some extremists outside the major cities so setting up a tent is not a good idea.

## Opening Hours, Expenses, & Tipping

[Tunisia](#)'s local shops, restaurants, and stores generally open and close a little later than their [European](#) or [North American](#) equivalents. While many businesses work from about 9:00 am to about 6:00 pm, some places open and close much later, perhaps to avoid the intense heat. At some businesses, Tunisians don't begin work until noon and finish at 8:00 pm or even later. Lunch tends to take place in mid-late afternoon and dinner begins after work. Restaurants don't begin to fill up until 8:00 pm or later. In tourist locations, restaurants and shops tend to be open all day to cater to the foreigners. Tunisia typically follows a Saturday-Sunday weekend.

The one time of the year that shops and restaurants are closed more often than not is during Ramadan (ninth month of the Islamic calendar, which rotates every year compared to the Gregorian calendar), when fasting is required from sunrise to sunset. Due to this Islamic requirement, most shops close down and it can be difficult to find an open restaurant anywhere outside major hotels catering to tourists.

Most of [Tunisia](#)'s attractions aren't overly expensive and most of the sites are still a good value for the cost. However, it seems most people's draw to the country is for the coastline and beaches and, in many resorts, guests have access to these beaches at no additional cost.

Hotels prices can range from 30 dinar (\$20) for a private room to well over 300 dinar (\$200) in business hotels or beach resorts on the Mediterranean Sea. Food prices also vary greatly; grabbing a quick snack from a local street-side market will only cost about 3-4 dinar (\$2-3), but eating in a nice hotel restaurant can cost up to 75 dinar (\$50). Transportation in [Tunisia](#) is also fairly reasonable, particularly if you travel by bus; most flights are roughly equivalent to costs associated with a flight in [Europe](#) or [North America](#) at a similar distance.

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Tipping is a growing trend in [Tunisia](#), particularly in tourist areas. At nice hotels and restaurants catered to foreigners tipping is expected; tips are expected in the form of about 10% for a meal and about 1 dinar (\$1) a bag for bell hops. In local restaurants tipping is rare, but rounding up is appreciated. If you hire a tour guide, tips are also expected, however the amount is at your discretion.

## **Crime & Safety**

[Tunisia](#) is a relatively safe country, however is more susceptible to violent outbreaks than much of Europe. Most religious and political extremists have little voice in Tunisia and there are few violent attacks by these groups, but they do exist and going to the wrong town can be dangerous. Likewise, protests have erupted in 2011 among the general public protesting the government and, although their intentions are peaceful, violence can break out at these rallies. Always check with your country's foreign (State) department for any travel warnings to Tunisia.

Pick pocketing is not extremely common except on crowded public transportation, so use street smarts wherever you are in [Tunisia](#), particularly in popular European beach resort towns and cities.

Another annoyance to most tourists in [Tunisia](#) is from tourist touts and scams, so be careful whom you trust when it involves parting with your money. If anyone who gave you assistance asks for a tip, tip at your discretion; if they provided a service to you, it is expected you tip them, although this amount does not have to be large.