Culture in Tunis

Tunisia’s capital is deservedly re-emerging as a travel destination. At the confluence of Eastern and Western civilisations, Tunis is an engaging city full of hybrid ideas and layered histories, as this guide reveals.

**SIGHTS**

**Antonine Baths**
* (Impasse des Thermes d’Antonin)*
The Romans chose a sublime seaside setting in Carthage for this monumental terme (bath complex), a short walk downhill from the Roman villas. Begun under Hadrian and finished in the 2nd century AD under Antoninus, it was the largest terme outside Rome, supplied with water by the great Zaghoudan aqueduct.

**Bardo Museum**
* (bardomuseum.tn)*
The main draw at Tunisia’s top museum is its magnificent collection of Roman mosaics. These provide a vibrant and fascinating portrait of ancient North African life. Also here is some equally magnificent Hellenistic and Punic statuary.

The massive collection is housed in an imposing palace complex built under the Hafsids (1228–1574), and fortified and extended by the Ottomans in the 18th century. The original buildings now connect with a dramatic contemporary annexe, which has doubled the exhibition space.

**Dar Ennejma Ezzahra**
* (cmam.nat.tn; Maison du Baron Rodolphe d’Erlanger)*
Built between 1912 and 1922 for French-born Baron Rodolphe d’Erlanger and his Italian-American wife Elizabetta, this palace residence is an exhilarating mix of Modernist architecture and traditional Maghrebi and Andalusian design. It’s filled with virtuoso carved stucco and wooden inlay work, marble floors and columns, ornate furniture and a renowned collection of traditional musical instruments.

**Galerie A. Gorgi**
* (agorgi.com; 3 Rue Sidi El Ghemrini)*
This highly regarded gallery showcases the work of contemporary Tunisian artists in individual and thematic group shows. Note that some street signs use the gallery’s former name, Ammar Farhat Gallery.

**L’Acropolium**
* (acropoliumcarthage.com; Cathédrale Saint-Louis de Carthage)*
The architect of this now deconsecrated 19th-century French-built cathedral employed an unorthodox mix of Moorish, Byzantine and Gothic architectural styles in its design, and the result sits atop symbolically loaded Byrsa Hill. The interior has been restored and is now used for exhibitions and concerts.

**Marché Centrale**
* (Rue de Allemagne)*
Tunisian food markets offer a great insight into local culture, and Tunis’ Marché Centrale is particularly atmospheric. The original market building dates from 1891 and the halls behind are later additions. There’s an enormous fish hall and a central hall where mounds of spicy harissa, tubs of plump olives and blocks of pungent cheese are sold.

**Medina**
* (Medina)*
This sprawling maze of ancient streets and alleyways is one of the most impressive medieval medinas in North Africa and one of Tunisia's great treasures. It’s home to numerous covered souqs selling everything from shoes to shisha pipes, as well as cafés, back streets full of artisans at work and residential areas punctuated by grand, brightly painted doorways.

**North Africa American Cemetery**
* (abmc.gov; Rte de Roosevelt)*
Around 750m along the road from La Malga Cisterns, a striking forest of 2,841 neatly ordered white crosses bears testament to the Americans killed in North Africa during WWII.

**Souq des Chechias**
* (off Rue Sidi Ben Arou)*
This hugely atmospheric souq is filled with exquisitely decorated shops producing and selling chechias, Tunisia’s traditional blood-red felt caps. In the 17th century, when this souq was built, a million chechias were made annually by 15,000 craftsmen, sold locally and exported worldwide. Today, the 10 or so chaouachis working here produce the traditional Tunisian version as well as customised hats in a variety of colours and styles.

**Zitouna Mosque**
* (off Rue Sidi Ben Arou)*
In the heart of the medina, this important mosque was built on a site once occupied by a church. It was totally rebuilt in the 9th century and restored many times. The huge prayer hall holds more than 200 columns scrunched from Roman Carthage, and its Almohades-style minaret is a medina landmark. Only Muslims may go inside, but the courtyard can be viewed from the terrace of the Panorama Medina Cafe.

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**Good to know**

Tucked behind Café des Nattes in Sidi Bou Said, Galerie Yasmine is an Aladdin’s cave of a souvenir shop. It’s a good place to pick up traditional Tunisian handicrafts. Owner Ibrahim welcomes passers-by with a smile then retreats to allow pressure-free browsing of the huge selection of rugs and ceramics (00 216 71 746 606; 3 Rue Sidi Bou Said).
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6 Marché Centrale

SLEEPING
1 Dar 24
2 Hôtel Ritza
3 Grand Hôtel de France
4 La Chambre Bleue
5 La Villa Bleue
6 L’Hôtel Dar El Jeld

Sleeping

Dar 24
Best for beautiful mosaics
(24 Rue Sidi Brahim Riahi)
Three guestrooms overlook the pretty tiled courtyard and have excellent bathrooms and ultra-comfortable beds.

Hôtel Ritza
Best for a central location
(35 Ave Habib Thameur)
The Ritza offers small, clean and very basic rooms. The Centre Ville location by Parc Habib Thameur is convenient, if a little noisy.

Grand Hôtel de France
Best for saving money
(8 Rue Mustapha M’barek)
The best budget option in the city, this colonial-era hotel next to the Marché Centrale has endearing 1930s elegance.

La Chambre Bleue
Best for an opulent suite
(dareljeld.com)
Helpful hosts in this charming medina house offer one huge suite on the top floor and a second room in the historic stables below.

La Villa Bleue
Best for ocean views
(lavillableuesidibousaid.com)
La Villa Bleue in Sidi Bou Said delivers excellent facilities including a lovely spa, hammam, two pools, a restaurant and bar.

L’Hôtel Dar El Jeld
Best for its lemon tree garden
(dareljeld.com)
Hotels in the medina are rare and this classy establishment in a converted 18th-century palace is the cream of the crop.

FURTHER READING
Our Africa guide (£19.99) has a chapter on Tunisia, which discusses Tunis. The guide is also available to download as an eBook (£13.99).