



Tunisia in 12 steps

Fares Triki

I have selected 12 steps for visiting Tunisia. Not all of them are among the top touristic places in the country. I have picked the ones that I think offer the most authentic coverage. Beside today's obvious Muslim and Arabic culture influence, the charm of Tunisia comes from the diversity of its cultural roots. Thanks to the strategic position of Tunisia in the Mediterranean Sea, it has been the settlement of various civilizations when at the top of their powers. Originally Berber then Numidian peoples where there. Then Phoenician, coming by sea, created from there the empire of Carthage that ruled the Mediterranean countries from 814 BC to 146 BC. After a long war against the Carthaginians, the Roman took the power. They, as well as the Ottoman Turks and the Arabs that followed them, took it as their main settlement in the North Africa. In addition, French colonization, and less recent Spanish intrusions added some more colors to this mixture of

cultural heritage.

We start the trip by the very far North West town. **Tabarka (Tabarka) 1** is the closest city to Algeria and the only one that can offers both great mountains and sea activities. It is also a place where you can enjoy a good diving, a coral festival of underwater photography in September or some good Jazz in the Jazz festival in July. The second town you should visit is the top north town of **Benzart (Bizert) 2**. Benzart was founded around 1000 BC by



Tabarka mountains



Utica

It takes an important significance in the recent history as it was the last city that France wanted to keep control on after the declaration of independence in 1956. A strategic battle led to the retreat of French troops and the full independence of the country on 1963. The town has a nice small harbor and a special atmosphere town center. The area has numerous beautiful wild beaches like Ras-Enghela, Ghar-el-melh, and Rafrat. On the road to Tunis, you can visit Utica (Utique), one of the jewels of Tunisian archaeology. From its Phoenician name "Outih", it is the oldest Phoenician settlement on the coast of North Africa. **Tounes (Tunis) 3** is our third stop. It is the capital of Tunisia. The most important place to visit in the city center is the medina. El Medina means the city, and is the old Arabic city center. Go there to visit the traditional souk (markets) and the interiors of traditional Dar (houses). Some of them have been transformed to restaurants. I highly recommend a dinner in Dar el Jeld (book before). You should also visit El Zitouna Mosque, the Great Mosque of Tunis, Dar-al-Bey



Benzart old port



Example of Tounis medina interior house



Tunisian door



Typical houses in Sidi Bou Said streets



Carthage archaeological site

Go and visit the archeological site if you are interested to know more about this ancient civilization. Nearby, you can find Sidi Bou Said Village. It is named after a Muslim religious saint that people still visit every day. The village has a very typical Tunisian style and colors. It also has been a town of artists; most famous is probably Paul Klee. Many other lived or worked there. I recommend an evening Tunisian tea at Chabaan café with a gorgeous view on Tunis Lake.

Now, let's go south. If you look for beaches and fun, stop in the town of **Hammamet 4**, the preferred holiday place of local young Tunisian. Originally a small quite village of sailors, Hammamet is now a lively costal city with lots of 5 stars resorts and world famous night places. Third top DJs most frequently visited place in the Mediterranean Sea. Very busy from July to August, the city recovers its natural calm the rest of the year as the population got reduced by 80% and only the local's remains. The old part of the city has kept the historical charm of a sailor village so go and visit the beautiful old medina that lead to the quite little sailor's beach. I recommend a lunch at Barbarous restaurant in the medina roofs, for the food and the view. It was named after the famous Tunisian corsair Barbarossa that terrorized the Mediterranean boats in the 15th century.

(Old Otmanian ruler house), and Bardo Museum, an old arabic palace now a place to rare and interesting antiquities collections. Few miles from Tunis center, you can find the ruins of Carthage and the village of Sidi Bou Said. Carthage is the capital of the Carthaginian Empire, founded by Queen Elissa (Dido) in 814 BC.



Carthage Empire

Carthaginians, as the Greeks or the Romans, had elected legislators, a popular assembly, and have been ruled using a constitution. Tunisia enjoyed a period of economic prosperity during that period. Unfortunately, only remains few rare ruins and history records as Romans have destroyed most of the cities and records about it at the end of the Third Punic War.



Hammamet sailors beach



Handmade traditional carpet in Kairwen



The great mosque (Okba Ibnou Nafea Mosque) in Kairwen

For the first time let's leave the coast to inside the country. At summer time, you will probably appreciate the relative freshness of the coastal cities only when you go deep inside the main land. The stop number 5 on our map is **Kairwen (Kairouan) 5**. Kairwen is a very important historical Arab city. Capital of Aghlabite dynasty that ruled North Africa between 800 and 900, it has given Tunisia the power and prosperity that it had in Carthage time. It was also the third holiest city in Islam in the medieval period, after Mecca and Medina. The city has been the temple of knowledge of that period attracting scholars from all over the Islamic World. The great mosque was playing the role

of a university. I suggest a visit of the great mosque, to the medina and its markets. A day is enough to visit Kairwen. The city is also known by their pastries and traditional handmade carpets. In 921 the Shiite Fatimid dynasty overtook the Sunni Aghlabite and transfers the capital of North Africa to a new Tunisian coastal city **Mahdia 6**. Apart from its historical importance, Mehdiya coast is the most beautiful sand beach coast in Tunisia by our opinion. Mehdiya has few nice resorts where you can enjoy a relaxing beach break as the town is much less touristic than Hammamet, Soussa or Jerba. You can visit the medina, Borj El Kebir, Skifa el Kahla and the old sailor port. Next stop is **El Jem 7**. The city has been built on an ancient Roman city, Thysdrus, itself built on the ruin of a Phenician city. Thysdrus became a Roman *colonia*, settlement with full rights of citizenship, in 244. You can notice the wealth of its territory by visiting the vast amphitheatre built there. The Britannica encyclopedia describes it as: "the largest Roman monument in Africa and second in impressiveness only to the Colosseum at Rome." I suggest that you go there for a simple visit or better, during the international festival of symphonic music mid July to mid August. The symphonic music performances are done at night, inside an illuminated impressive colosseum. Let's go few other miles south to **Sfekes (Sfax) 8**. It is Tunisia's Second city in number of habitant. Far from being a touristic city, Sfax has the most beautiful and authentic medina in Tunisia, and the most interesting one in our opinion. You can walk around, not disturbed by touristic shops as in Tunis, and witness the business in the medina as usual, with different souks and small traditional shops. There are also some beautiful traditional houses to visit, like Dar El Jallouli. A day is enough to see the most of it. Let's now leave Sfekes throw a rich olive tree landscape. As you will notice, the north part of the country and the golden coast offer different sceneries. But the south of Tunisia is just a different world! We reach the villages of **Matmata 9** and **Tatooine (Tataouine) 10**. Yes Tatooine, the home planet of the Skywalker family.



Beach in Mahdia coast



EL Jam Roman Theater



Sfax, Beb El Diwen door, El medina



Matmata



Tatooine

No virtual Hollywood decors, all of the unusual houses architecture of the StarWars planet are real. The rich architecture and the desert (Sahara) landscapes attracted numerous movie directors. George Lucas teams landed many times in the Tunisia to shoot the six episodes of the legendary saga. Anthony Minghella used south Tunisia desert for The English Patient. We can also cite Steven Spielberg, Roman Polanski, Terry Jones, Franco Zeffirelli and many others. Matmata and Tatooine (that means water source in Berber)



One of the Star Wars Vaporator

areas are probably the right place to go to see many of the best examples of troglodyte architecture in the world. Impressive vertical caves dug into soft sandstone. Historically used to hide from enemies at to plan defensive attacks, some homes dug are connected by underground passageways. Plan a visit with a local guide because the troglodyte villages are spread in the area. Visit Ksar Ghilane and Ksar Ouled Soltane. And if you have time, to some



Douz

nearby berber villages as Chenini, Douiret, Guermessa and Ghomrassen. Now we go deep into the Sahara (Desert) to reach the first oasis **Douz 11**. You can do the connection by road, but it is more impressive by 4WD into the desert dunes. Douz is only alive during the Thursday bedouin market. It is also the host of the International Festival of the Sahara that takes place in December with various traditional desert culture shows with camel wrestling, and racing of horses. We leave Douz for the last step of the trip: **Toouzer (Tozeur) 12**. It is the largest oasis in south Tunisia with hundred of thousands of palm trees that produce the best dates you will ever taste. This oasis is the birth place of most of Tunisian poets like Abou Kacem el



Toouzer

Chebbi. Houses of Tozeur have a very special architecture, one of the most beautiful in the country. Visit also Dar Cheraït museum. It is also probably the best place to have relaxing stay in a luxury resort and plan different trips into the Sahara. If you have time go north to Metleoui to take the "Lezard Rouge" historical train. Very spectacular train trips through stony desert landscapes, mountains, gorges, waterfalls and oasis.