

TUNISIA

Written by

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“Cosmopolitan cities, Roman temples, stunning hotels and the grandeur of the Sahara in North Africa,” from an article entitled *‘Tunisia’s Numerous Surprises’* by Suzanne Wright for Tunisia.com.

Tunisia is a magnificent country with large-scale cultural and historical appeal. In northern Tunisia, the coastal beach resorts are the major attraction of the country's prosperous tourism industry, while in southern Tunisia it is the Sahara Desert, which is considered to be the greatest desert in the world. In between the major cities of Tunis and Sfax, Roman ruins and Islamic architecture dot the landscape.

Tunisia has a total population of over ten million, with about 60% living in urban locations. Tunis, Tunisia's largest city (population of approximately two million in and outside the city proper), is the capital city and the country's center of government and commerce. Tunis is located just six miles (ten kilometers) from the Gulf of Tunis, and sits on the shores of a lake that connects with the Mediterranean Sea.

Geography and Climate

Tunisia is situated at the northern most point on the African continent. It is a small country, and all destinations within Tunisia can be reached in a day's drive. The geographical landscape in the northern part of Tunisia is characterized by mountains, whereas the southern part (bottom two-thirds of the country) is relatively flat land.

The 870-mile (1400-km) coastline of the Mediterranean Sea makes up the northern and eastern borders of Tunisia. The major mountain range which occupies this north-eastern corner of the country is called the Tunisian Dorsale. Also located here is the Gulf of Tunis. North of this area is the Medjerda Valley, which is characterized by rivers and a grain-growing region.

Tunisia is bordered in the southeast by Libya and in the west by Algeria. The coastline between the city of Bizerte and the border of Algeria is characterized by numerous secluded beaches, small bays, and steep cliffs. The countryside in this region is marked by little villages. Southern Tunisia, where the Sahara begins, is semi-desert. In some parts, there are oases with giant palm trees and small market gardens.

Tunisia has a Mediterranean climate. Along the coast of northern

Tunisia, summers are hot and dry, and winters are warm and rainy. Yearly rainfall in this coastal region is about 17 inches (43.18 cm). The mountain ranges typically experience more annual rainfall, about 34 inches (86.36 cm). In the northwest, there is occasional snowfall in the mountains.

In southern Tunisia, it is hotter and drier. There is little rainfall, especially along the edge of the Sahara Desert, and some areas of the desert will not get rain for years. Central Tunisia is characterized by varying weather patterns.

History

The history of Tunisia begins in 814 BC when the city-state of Carthage was founded. It grew to be the most important power in the western Mediterranean. A power struggle subsequently erupted between Carthage and the Roman Empire, which led to various wars that were fought for over 125 years. Rome eventually destroyed Carthage in 146 BC and then rebuilt the city. After it was rebuilt, the city was captured at different times by various groups, including the Vandals, the Byzantines, and finally the Arabs in 670 AD. The Arabs ruled for the next 1,000 years. In 1574, Ottoman Turks conquered Tunisia. They ruled through the early years of the 18th century. In

1881, the country was invaded by the French. It was declared a French protectorate in 1883. French rule lasted until 1956 when Tunisia gained its independence.

Language

The official language of Tunisia is Arabic. French is also widely spoken. Most Tunisians are bilingual and speak both languages. About one percent of the population speaks Berber. English is becoming another language spoken by many Tunisians. Other European languages, such as Italian, are also spoken in commercial and tourist areas of the country.

Religion

Most Tunisians are of Berber lineage and regard themselves as Arabs. About 99 percent of the population is Muslim with the major and state religion being Sunni Islam. Tunisia also has a small Christian population, which is made up of Roman Catholics, members of the Greek Orthodox Church, and French and English Protestants. In addition, there is a small population of Sephardic Jews living in Tunisia.

Economy

Tunisia is considered to be the most modernized country in North

Africa. Once based on a socialist economy, it is now privatizing many state-owned industries. In recent years, economic and financial reforms have stimulated growth and reduced inflation and the country's external debt. In 1995, Tunisia signed an agreement with the European Union (EU), which provided for the integration of the Tunisian and EU member-state economies and the reduction of customs tariffs over a period of 12 years. The aim of this agreement was to promote foreign investment and create new markets for Tunisian goods. The agreement went into effect on January 3, 1998.

Despite these efforts the country's economy continues to rely heavily on its own agricultural sector, which employs roughly half the population of Tunisia. Commodities include livestock, dairy products, fish, dates, grapes, vegetables, olive oil, olives, barley, wheat, henna, almonds, citrus fruit, sugar beets, and cork. Because of the inadequate irrigation in Tunisia, agricultural contributions to the economy depend greatly on rainfall. For example, the drought in 2002 brought Tunisia's real growth to a 15-year low.

Mining, which employs about two percent of the population, is another major industry in Tunisia. The country is the world's fifth largest producer of phosphates, exporting millions of tons a year. Tunisia's

natural resources include oil, iron ore, zinc, lead, gold, barite, fluorspar, petroleum and salt. There are also large reserves of natural gas.

Tunisia's manufacturing industry, which employs over 20 percent of the working population, is being restructured. Most of the jobs created since 2001 have been in this sector. Products include textiles, carpets and cement. Tunisia's manufacturing industry also relies on food processing and sugar and oil refining.

The largest percentage of Tunisia's exports are agricultural and mining products, which generate over 11 billion dollars a year. Tunisia's biggest export partners are France and Italy. Imports total almost US\$14 billion and commodities include industrial goods and equipment, hydrocarbons, food and consumer goods. Tunisia is a member of the Arab Fund for Economic and Social Development (AFESD), the Arab Monetary Fund, and the Union of the Arab Maghreb (UMA).

Business Customs & Etiquette

Although many different social customs among African countries exist, you will find that most of the population conform to western or

international business customs. Of course, there are some discrepancies. You should allow some time to get better acquainted and to gain the confidence of the local people. Expect some delays in business transactions, but be patient, understanding, and flexible. If you are negotiating a deal, it is a good idea to bargain softly. Tunisians are turned off by hard-nosed bargaining. A forceful attitude is not welcomed and will not produce the friendly business relationship that is preferred. Leave yourself and your co-workers a lot of room to maneuver. French is most commonly spoken for business. You may want to hire an interpreter if you do not speak fluent French.

Upon introduction, it is normal to shake hands. The offering of a business card is not necessary, but it is a polite gesture. When conducting business, it is advised you obtain a written contract, although verbal contracts are enforced in courts. This process can be lengthy and expensive, so all important business contracts or deals should be reinforced with a written document. Know, however, that contracts are prepared to be general rather than specific.

While conducting business, avoid discussing topics like the country itself, the political situation, and ethnic differences. In addition, try not to compliment an individual or a group in public. Instead, save all praise for private situations. Tunisia's cultural practices should be

understood and reciprocated. For example, it is important to know that during Ramadan (the ninth month of the Islamic lunar calendar), there is a reduction of work hours as well as fasting. Also, it is also best not to schedule meetings in July and August when the temperatures are at their highest.

Although most Tunisians are adopting international mannerisms and customs, this may not always be the case. Before you begin business discussions, it is recommended you converse for a long period of time. It is considered rude to get right down to business. Make sure you discuss their family or other social topics and interests. You are also expected to greet an individual with a lengthy welcome. Brevity is a sign of disrespect. Ask about their day, their family and other topics and expect the same in return. It is impolite to improperly address someone. If you do not know the name of an employee, ask. You should only use their first name, however, after they have used yours.

Most modern conveniences can be found in business offices in Tunisia. Fax machines, personal computers, digital equipment and e-mail services are widely available and play a large role in most business practices. Due to high import tariffs, however, this equipment tends to be expensive. If you need this equipment in Tunisia you may want to

purchase it outside the country. Information regarding the importation of office supplies and business-related products can be acquired through the nearest embassy or consulate.

Typical work hours are 8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. Some businesses, however, do open later and close earlier. Most businesses close for lunch from 12:30 p.m. to 2:30 p.m., Monday through Friday. They might also close during prayer times. Business hours vary in the summer, and are shorter during the month of Ramadan. At these times, do not expect many of your contacts or colleagues to be available for business and try to avoid setting up important meetings or events.

Entertaining

Tunisians are extremely hospitable, but initial business entertaining will most likely take place at lunch in a restaurant or private club. Since Tunisia is a Muslim country, remember that the left hand is considered unclean and reserved for hygiene. Gesture and eat with the right hand only. Business lunches typically last a long time, and spouses are typically not invited. Be sure not to dive straight into business-related discussions. If you appear interested and remain polite, a friendly relationship will quickly develop. After introductions

have been made, you can expect to be invited to a Tunisian home for dinner or to a sporting event. Business dinners are more like social events, and spouses are more than welcome. Gifts are not generally given.

Making the transition to life in Tunisia is generally not achieved without some slight difficulties. To minimize adjustment, it is helpful to know some French, as this language is widely spoken. Although it is possible to get by in Tunisia without speaking much French (English is now being taught to all school-aged children), a poor grasp of the language will seriously hamper your chances of integrating into the community and taking full advantage of the numerous opportunities for enjoyment.

The country is a treasure trove of ancient historic sites. Tunisia's main cities are all within driving distance of each other, and a day trip can be taken to the various archaeological sites located throughout the country. Ancient Roman ruins, temples and villas, Islamic architecture, and Turkish forts are just a few of them. Other attractions include the seaports of the cities of Sousse and Sfax, which are enclosed by ancient ramparts and watchtowers, and the beaches of Tunis.

Adventure seekers can also enjoy exciting outdoor activities such as

bird watching for rare and migratory species and camel trekking through old villages.

Cultural Highlights

Around Tunis, you can also see both Arabic and French concerts and plays. Theater season is from October to June. Classical music is performed during the summer at the Roman Amphitheater. Belly dancing is quite popular, and many local Tunisian bands play traditional music. During the month of Ramadan, there are many special cultural events in the evening to break the fast. These events will be listed in local newspapers.

The cultural center of Tunis is the medina (old town). Generally, it is a combination of souvenir shops and historical archaeological structures. A great way to see the medina is by taking a walking tour of the ancient mosques and villas, including the Zitouna Mosque, the Mosque of Youssef Dey, the Kasbah Mosque, the Mosque of M'sed el-Kobba, and the Mosque of the Dyers.

Other popular cultural attractions include the Bardo Museum and the Dar Ben Abdallah Museum. The Bardo Museum is the country's best with its collections of mosaics from around the world and important archaeological finds. The Dar Ben Abdallah Museum is located on Impasse Ben Abdallah in the medina. The museum houses the Tunis

Center for Popular Arts and Traditions, and is also included as a site on walking tours because of its ornate architecture.

Local Cuisine

Tunisian cuisine, which has been influenced by European, Oriental, and desert dwellers traditions, is very hot and spicy. Popular Tunisian spices include aniseed, coriander, cumin, caraway, cinnamon, saffron, mint, orange blossom and rosewater. Many local dishes are a mixture of semolina grains, water and a little oil. Couscous is the country's national dish. Popular drinks are Turkish coffee and mint tea with pine nuts, which you can enjoy at the Moorish Cafes in Tunis. Popular local liqueurs are Boukha and Thibarine.

The center of Tunis has many restaurants, cafes and fast food places, which offer a range of different cuisines and prices. Local cuisine is well prepared and delicious. For a meal at an expensive restaurant in Tunis expect to pay about 15-20dt. A good meal at an inexpensive restaurant costs about 4dt.

Tunisia's handicraft shops, called the Souks (also sook, souq, or suq) sell many wonderful local crafts, including olive wood carvings, embroidered clothing, enameled jewelry, and woven and knotted carpets. Other items of interest for sale include silver Berber bracelets and necklaces, ceramic tiles and pottery, engraved copper and brass

articles, leather ware, embroidered wall hangings, antiques, statues, and ancient coins.

The Souks in Tunis are located in the medina. Merchants expect customers to bargain, so do not be afraid to initially cut their offer in half before agreeing on a purchase price. Besides the Souks in the media, there are weekly country markets in most of Tunisia's other towns, where villagers sell their merchandise.

Getting Around Tunisia

Road conditions in Tunisia are fairly good; however, driving can be dangerous. Drivers often fail to obey traffic rules and ignore signs and signals from other drivers. Additional danger is caused by pedestrians who don't pay attention to moving vehicles and dodge in and out of traffic while crossing the street. Defensive driving is extremely important in Tunisia, and you must always wear your seatbelt. There are traffic police that are strategically placed at several intersections in Tunis who try to maintain orderly traffic rules by pulling drivers over for speeding or reckless driving.

Parties involved in traffic accidents are not required to file a police report, unless there are injuries. Any injured people must immediately go to a medical facility, and then file a police report soon after. Most

hospitals have a police office in their location to help expedite the process.

Foreign nationals should avoid driving after dark outside of Tunis, as road signs are terrible and it is fairly easy to get lost on isolated roads. As an alternative to driving, foreign nationals should consider using public transportation while living in Tunisia. It is the best way to get around in the city of Tunis.

Public Transportation

The newest public transport system in Tunis is the Metro Leger Tram Line. It is a great way to get around the downtown area. Trams operate along five main routes in the city. In addition to the tram system, there is also a light-rail system, which connects downtown Tunis to the beachside suburbs. The light-rail is affordable and convenient, although cars tend to get crowded during rush hours. Fares can vary, depending on the location to which you are traveling in the city.

Safety and Security

Although Tunisia is considered a medium threat for security, all of the rules you would follow in any foreign country apply. If you are driving, keep valuables out of sight when you park the car, and, of course,

keep the doors and windows locked. You should not carry valuables in a handbag or briefcase that can easily be snatched by thieves on motorbikes in busy areas. In Tunis, walking alone at night in the medina is not safe, or for that matter any unfamiliar area at night can be risky.

Enjoying Tunisia can easily be an enjoyable assignment for you and your family. The history and culture, the new and the old, the views and surrounds will be an amazing experience!