

Tunisia

By Tom Kirvan

A GATEWAY TO NORTH AFRICA'S RICH HERITAGE

The magnificent beauty of the Mediterranean and the vastness of the Sahara are two of the defining features of Tunisia, a North African nation with a population of approximately 12 million people.

The population is predominantly Arab-Berber, with Arabic as the official language and French widely spoken due to Tunisia's historical ties with France. Islam is the dominant religion, with the majority of Tunisians practicing Sunni Islam. The country has a youthful population, with a significant proportion of people under the age of 30. Tunisia's population is concentrated in the northern and coastal regions, particularly in urban areas like Tunis, Sfax, and Sousse, while the southern and interior regions are more sparsely populated.

Tunisia's geographic diversity is one of its most striking features, offering everything from Mediterranean beaches to the vast expanses of the Sahara Desert. The country covers an area of about 163,610 square kilometers, making it the smallest country in North Africa. The northern part of Tunisia is characterized by fertile plains and rolling hills, ideal for agriculture, while the central part features steppes and semi-arid landscapes. The southern region is dominated by the Sahara Desert, with its iconic sand dunes and oases. The eastern coast is lined with beautiful beaches and the warm waters of the Mediterranean Sea, making it a popular destination for tourists seeking sun and relaxation.

Tunisia's history is woven from the influences of various civilizations over millennia. The ancient city of Carthage, located near modern-day Tunis, was one of the most powerful cities in the Mediterranean during the first millennium BCE, rivaling Rome itself. Carthage was eventually destroyed by the Romans in 146 BCE, who rebuilt the city and made it the capital of the Roman province of Africa. The region later became part of the Byzantine Empire before the Arab-Muslim conquest in the 7th century, which brought Islam and Arabic culture to Tunisia. The country was subsequently ruled by various dynasties, including the Aghlabids, Fatimids, and Hafsids, before becoming part of the Ottoman Empire in the 16th century. In 1881, Tunisia became a French protectorate, gaining independence in 1956. The country's post-independence history has been marked by significant political and social changes, including the 2011 revolution that sparked the Arab Spring, leading to Tunisia's transition to a democratic republic.

Tunisia's economy includes key sectors of agriculture, manufacturing, mining, and tourism. Agriculture remains a vital part of the economy, with olives, dates, citrus fruits, and cereals



Fast Facts

Capital: Tunis

Population: 12 million

Languages: Arabic and French

Highest Point: Jebel ech Chambi (5,066 feet)

Primerus Member: Adly Bellagha and Associates

Adly Bellagha and Associates, a full-service business law firm based in Tunis.

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being major products. Tunisia is also one of the world's leading producers of olive oil. The manufacturing sector is diversified, with industries such as textiles, automotive parts, and electronics contributing significantly to the economy. The country has a well-developed mining industry, particularly in phosphate extraction, which is a major export. Tourism also plays a crucial role in Tunisia's economy, attracting visitors to historical sites, Mediterranean beaches, and desert landscapes. Despite these strengths, Tunisia faces economic challenges, including high unemployment and regional disparities in economic development.

Tunis, the capital and largest city of Tunisia, is a vibrant metropolis that serves as the political, economic, and cultural heart of the country. With a population of more than 2 million people in the metropolitan area, Tunis is a bustling city where ancient history meets modernity. The city's medina, a UNESCO World Heritage site, is a maze of narrow streets filled with traditional markets, mosques, and historic buildings. In contrast, the modern part of the city features wide boulevards, contemporary architecture, and lively cafes. Tunis is also home to important cultural institutions, including the Bardo Museum, which houses one of the world's finest collections of Roman mosaics.

Top 5 Must-See Tourist Destinations

- **Carthage:** The ancient city of Carthage, located on the outskirts of Tunis, is one of the most significant archaeological sites in North Africa. Once a powerful city-state that rivaled Rome, Carthage was the center of the Phoenician civilization before its destruction by the Romans. Visitors can explore the ruins of this ancient city, including the Roman amphitheater, the Antonine Baths, and Byrsa Hill, which offers panoramic views of the Gulf of Tunis. The site also includes the Carthage National Museum, which houses artifacts from the Punic, Roman, and Byzantine periods.
- **Sidi Bou Said:** Perched on a hill overlooking the Mediterranean Sea, the picturesque village of Sidi Bou Said is famous for its blue and white architecture, narrow cobblestone streets, and stunning views. Located just a short drive from Tunis, Sidi Bou Said has long been

a haven for artists, writers, and musicians drawn to its beauty and tranquility. Visitors can stroll through the village, visit local art galleries, and enjoy traditional Tunisian cuisine at one of the many cafes with terraces offering breathtaking views of the sea. The Ennejma Ezzahra Palace, once the home of French artist and musicologist Baron Rodolphe d'Erlanger, is now a museum dedicated to Arab and Mediterranean music.

- **El Djem:** The town of El Djem is home to one of the best-preserved Roman amphitheaters in the world, a UNESCO World Heritage site akin to the Colosseum in Rome. Built in the 3rd century AD, the El Djem Amphitheater could seat up to 35,000 spectators and was used for gladiatorial contests, chariot races, and other public events. Visitors can survey the vast arena, climb the tiers of seating, and even descend into the underground passages where animals and gladiators were kept before their contests. The nearby El Djem Archaeological Museum houses mosaics and other artifacts from the Roman period, providing further insight into the history of this remarkable site.
- **Matmata:** Located in southern Tunisia, Matmata is famous for its troglodyte houses – traditional underground dwellings carved into the soft sandstone. These unique homes were built by the Berbers to protect themselves from the extreme heat of the desert. The village gained international fame when it was used as a filming location for the original "Star Wars" movie, where it served as the home of Luke Skywalker on the planet Tatooine.
- **Dougga:** Dougga, located in the northwest of Tunisia, is one of the most important and best-preserved Roman sites in North Africa. A UNESCO World Heritage site, Dougga was once a thriving Roman city, and its ruins offer a glimpse into the grandeur of the Roman Empire. The site includes a well-preserved theater, a capitol, temples, baths, and houses, all set against a backdrop of rolling hills and olive groves. The Dougga Theater, built in the 2nd century AD, is particularly impressive and is still used for performances today. The site's elevated location offers stunning views of the surrounding countryside, making it a must-visit destination for history enthusiasts.