

Tunis

A funky old medina and ancient archaeological treasures help history come alive in the sophisticated Tunisian capital.

1. Bardo Museum Tunis' greatest archaeological asset, the incomparable Bardo Museum (Rue Mongi Slim, Bardo, tel: 216 71 513 650), is one of North Africa's largest. It is a repository of superb examples of Roman and Byzantine mosaic floors from the 2nd and 3rd centuries AD that were unearthed from the country's various Roman sites then painstakingly reconstructed. Competing for attention in the vast collection, which is spread over three storeys and includes jewellery and murals from the Punic and Islamic epochs, is the building itself. The galleried and colonnaded former palace, dating from the Middle Ages, has rooms that feature awe-inspiring gilding, mouldings and wood-panelled ceilings. By 2010, the more than 200,000 artefacts currently in storage will finally be on display to the public.

2. Carthage Founded by Phoenician Princess Dido in 814BC then destroyed by the Romans during the Third Punic Wars (149-146BC), Carthage was one of the most important cities in the Roman empire and deemed the capital of the Roman province of Africa by Caesar Augustus in 44BC. Today, having been swallowed up by Tunis proper, its leafy streets are home to diplomatic residences that recall Le Corbusier and early modernism, the sprawling and well-guarded presidential palace and a smattering of lesser archaeological sites. The most noteworthy is the Antonine baths (below centre), an expansive complex that was the largest of its kind in the continent and third largest

in the world. A short distance away, a crescent-shaped waterway is all that remains of a Punic harbour, which was later used as a naval port by 220 Roman vessels.

3. Sidi Bou Said The most striking of Tunis' many suburbs, the 13th-century hilltop village of Sidi Bou Said (below left) is 17km northeast of the city centre and has 360-degree views of the Mediterranean and the hills of the distant Cap Bon. This gleaming whitewashed commune of meticulously preserved villas, each with ornate studded doors, is mapped onto a cobbled grid. The streets overflow with bougainvilleas and wisteria and are speckled with restaurants and teahouses emitting the sweet redolence of *narghile* (water pipes).

4. Medina One of eight Unesco World Heritage sites in Tunisia, the medina, or old town, was founded 13 centuries ago during the Arab conquest of North Africa and remains the beating heart of the capital. It is anchored by a half-dozen souks, including the alluring central market. This is a web of bustling narrow corridors and covered passageways lined with diminutive shops and *métier*-specific stalls, where merchants peddle everything from hand-stitched leather goods to hand-hammered silver accessories and mountains of felt hats called *chéchia*. Another notable souk is Souk el-Berka, a one-time prison where European slaves were traded. Now goldsmiths and metal and fabrics workers ply their trade here.

The quarter is laid out around the Great, or Zitouna, Mosque, which is the largest of the 36 mosques in the medina and dates to 698 but is off-limits to non-Muslims.

5. Ville Nouvelle Tunis' modern epicentre, the Ville Nouvelle district, was fashioned between about 1700 and 1850 and sidles up to the medina. Its broad leafy boulevards are lined with cafes, sleek office towers and beaux-arts buildings – colonial villas adorned with wrought iron and belle époque facades dating from the time when Tunisia was a French protectorate. The neo-classical front of the French embassy looms large, as do the pair of bell towers belonging to the cathedral of St Vincent de Paul and St Olive.

6. Villa Didon Perched atop the upmarket cypress-shaded suburb of Byrsa Hill, which offers sweeping views of the Gulf of Tunis, Villa Didon (Rue Mendès France, tel: 216 71 733 433; www.villadidon.com) is Tunisia's most dramatic creation – at least since the Romans erected the El Jem amphitheatre 2,000 years ago. Designed by French architect Philippe Boisselier, the hotel boasts 10 minimalist suites, each named after a figure in Greek mythology. Shielded by sleek electronic sliding doors, the stark interiors are dressed up with Portuguese linens and Ron Arad-designed chairs. At the heart of the property, where there is a hammam, guests relax in a lobby bar on Vitra chairs and Francesco Rota Atollo sofas after a rich dinner next door at Alain Ducasse's seventh Spoon outpost.

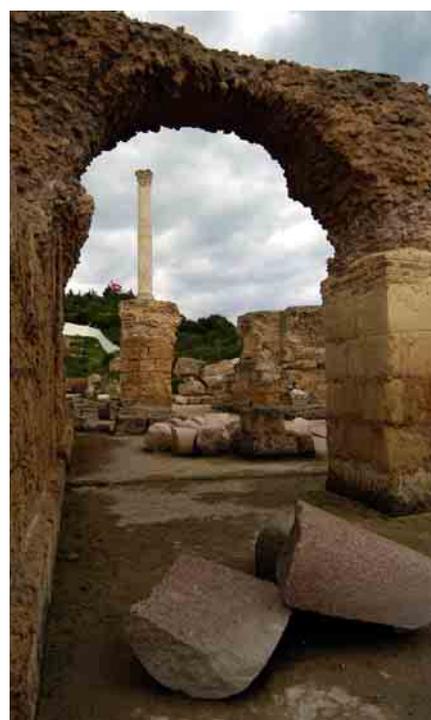
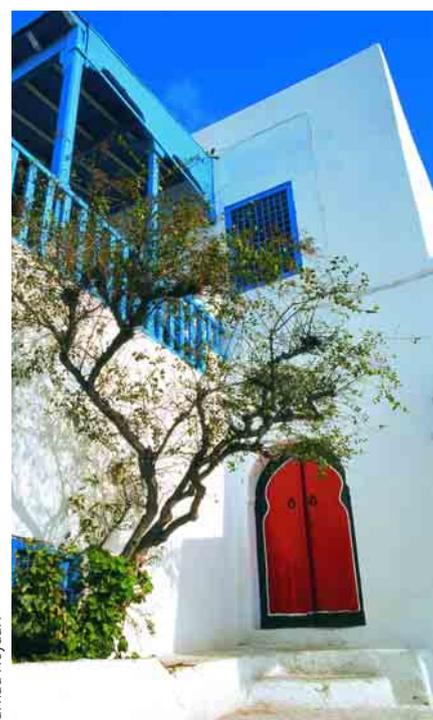


7. Musée de Carthage The Carthage Museum (Byrsa Hill, tel: 216 71 730 036) sits adjacent to the former Basilica Saint-Louis atop Byrsa Hill and, like the Bardo, features mosaics, sculptures, vases, statues and other artefacts, including a pair of terracotta tiles and an intricately carved panel known as *The Adoration of the Kings and the Annunciation*. The museum also contains a room dedicated to the scientific methods and instruments used in excavations. Outside, the grounds offer lovely panoramas and contain remnants of a Punic residential neighbourhood dating back to the 2nd century BC.

8. Dar El Jeld The grand dame of Tunisian restaurants, Dar El Jeld (5 rue Dar El Jeld, La Kasbah, tel: 216 71 567 130; www.dareljeld.tourism.tn) is as noted for its lavish surroundings as its cuisine. Located behind a set of arched wooden doors in an opulent palace with a domed atrium and intricately tiled walls and floors, this is where government ministers and local cognoscenti turn out for unfailingly good local specialities, including couscous with fish or lamb served off the bone, tagine of various sorts and nouvelle Tunisian offerings.

9. Thalassotherapy (left) At the waterfront Residence Tunis (Les Cotes de Carthage, La Marsa, tel: 216 71 910 101; www.theresidence-tunis.com), one of the Mediterranean's best resort hotels, guests are spoiled with top-notch pampering at the in-house spa, Les Thermes Marins de Carthage. Open to non-residents, the facility has been styled to mimic a Roman bathhouse. It has a large indoor pool warmed for the precise therapeutic benefits of thalassotherapy, the medical use of seawater, as well as a traditional eucalyptus-scented hammam, a sauna and countless age-defying treatments, including endermology cellulite massage. The hotel has 170 rooms, several restaurants and Swiss-trained staff who have fawned over everyone from actress Catherine Deneuve to rocker Sting.

10. La Marsa This seaside hangout is a favourite of moneyed locals, expats and diplomats' families. Lined with casual cafes and kitschy nightclubs, the quarter sits astride La Marsa Plage. During the summer, the beach is the centre of activity; in the winter the action shifts to the road overlooking the surf, where restaurants are housed in upscale villas and boast some of Tunis' best international fare.



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