



The Arabian Nights flirts with the French Foreign Legion: Heavily-studded doors testify to an Arabic past (left) while tourists can escape to the Hotel Tamerza in the Sahara (above)

## Ancient 'bread basket' ripe for new invasion

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IT FOUGHT off marauding Greeks. It repelled vandalising Latins and, in 146BC it was trashed by Romans. Today, Carthage is an ancient suburb of Tunis, the capital of Tunisia. Beneath its grassy embankments, the rubble and remains of entire civilisations lie hidden and the only sound is the pine-scented breeze, whispering through the ruins, statues and Arcadian glades.

Founded about 800BC as the capital of Phoenicia, Carthage is not familiar to most Australians and most Tunisians think Australia is Austria and are amazed we speak English.

From this side of the world Tunisia is a long haul, but British Airways paves the way with a direct connection – a Speed Link bus whisks passengers from London's Heathrow to Gatwick and onto a two-and-a-half-hour flight to Tunis. It's enough time for a cocktail or two and a re-focus as British Airways crisp and attentive flight attendants adopt more sunny Mediterranean smiles.

Once the "bread basket of Rome", it contributed to the fall of that Empire when its merchant fleets succumbed to pirates, leaving ancient Romans weak with hunger. Carthage is a window on Tunisia's convergence of cultures. Its famous mosaics, like snapshots, capture daily life from pre-Christian and Roman times to 19th Century. For instance, one landmark, the Cathedral of St. Louis,

crowns Byrsa Hill. Built by the French in the 1890s, it is dedicated to the 13th Louis.

At the National Museum, also on Byrsa Hill, significant remains of Punic, Carthaginian, Roman, Byzantine and Christian civilisations are on display. Gems and jewellery look strangely modern. Winged priestesses, prophets with pointy beards and god-like creatures stare sphinx-like from the depths of sarcophagi. Clothing (sculpted in marble), domestic implements, weaponry and maps of ancient cities speak volumes about a sophisticated society. In one section a "back-to-the-future" display shows how glass withstands the passage of time and how it might prove to be a solution for the storage of dangerous radioactive waste in the future.

Excavated areas around the museum are scattered with columns, torsos and heads of nymphs, while a series of plaques document Carthaginian athletics, feasts, battles and prize givings.

Nearby, in the Roman amphitheatre, the smell of "the crowd and the roar of the grease paint" lingers over the tiered seating where, these days, Carthage hosts an International Film Festival every October in odd numbered years. In July-August it also stages Tunisia's annual cultural event – music, poetry and amphitheatre performances including works by The National Theatre of Tunisia and its director, Mohamed Driss, who is married to the only Australian woman resident in Tunisia.

A walk down Byrsa hill leads to the

Punic Carthaginian Naval Harbour and Oceanographic Museum. Built in the 5th Century, its architectural brilliance will be restored with a UNESCO project starting next year.

These days Tunisia is a heady mixture of cultures – French romance and Arabic passions minus the fundamentalism. Exotic perfumes, musk, amber and jasmine, float from the rippling biblical robes worn by some Muslim men and women. Baguettes and glistening Arabian pastries line the cafe counters. Coffee and fragrant mint teas waft along the wide BMW-lined boulevards.

Tunisia is *1001 Nights* flirting with the French Foreign Legion. Accommodation, can be simple – whitewashed and arranged around a hotel courtyard or Ottoman style indulgence. One Tunis-based five star hotel, The Residence, takes relaxation and indulgence to a new dimension. Cocktails are served from the bar and grill in the centre of the swimming pool. Guests can steam themselves to the point of perfection in a hammam (steam bath) in the Thelasso Therapy Centre. It features a heated spa, the size of a ballroom, which pumps mineral rich water from a depth of 1000 metres offshore. The domed ceiling evokes the atmosphere of a mosque. The scent of jasmine mingles with the aroma of Mediterranean cuisine in the L'Olivier Restaurant. Love seats, casement windows and Juliet balconies trailing with roses, are among the features.

The most direct way to see Tunisia is to take advantage of inside knowl-

edge with a company like Atlantis Voyages. Kamel Lagha, is married to one of the three female international airline pilots in Tunisia. The company caters for special interest groups, archaeologists, anthropologists and universities such as Harvard and Boston, as well as casual sightseers. Tours, with local guides, 4WDs, air conditioned coaches or mini buses take in camel markets, souks, perfumeries, olive farms and date oases. This year UNESCO declared Tunisia's the world's cultural capital, testimony to the spread of Carthaginian culture throughout the world.

Beat the rush. See it now.

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### Facts for travellers to Tunis

**Getting there:** British Airways via London.

**Accommodation:**

- The Residence Hotel, Tunis. PO Box 697 – 2070, La Marba, Les Cotes De Carthage. Phone 0011 216 1 91 01 01.
- Hotel Tamerza Palace, 2212 – Tamarza (Gouvernorat de Tozeur). Phone 0011 216 6 453 722/844/845.

**Getting About:**

- Atlantis Voyages – 22 Avenue Habib Thameur 1000, Tunis. Phone 0011 216 1 334 855; Email: Atlantis@GNet.tn
- TGM (suburban rail) to Carthage Byrsa and Carthage Sallambo (for Punic Port and Oceanographic Museum).
- Yellow Cabs – cheap.

• Red Lizard train – full and half-day trips. Contact Hotel Tamerza Palace (above).

**Money:** One Dinar = \$(US)1.1 Dinar divided into 1000M (millimes). Government controlled standard exchange rate everywhere. Dinars are worthless outside Tunisia so shop to drop them before you leave.

**Visas:** Necessary. Can be arranged on arrival at Tunis International airport with US dollars and passport size photo.

**Medical:** Vaccinations necessary. Check with your doctor.

**Camera:** Buy film duty free before arriving.