



Tunisia – Since the turn of the twentieth century, moneyed Europeans arrived to the dreamy landscape of Tunisia in search of sandy beaches, azure waters and ancient cities where tall tales of Sinbad and Ali Baba were spun.

Hailed as a filmmaker’s backdrop to such movies as *The English Patient*, *The Life of Brian* and *Star Wars*, now more than ever Canadians are making their way to North Africa’s most northerly tip for sun, relaxation and romantic nostalgia, all hallmarks that translate into a vacationer’s paradise. Thanks to affordable travel packages from tour operators like Holiday House, an 8-day stay starts from \$299 with airfare and day excursions extra.

While a compact country, a fraction larger than England and Wales combined with a population of 9 million, Tunisia meshes the sea, desert and mountains with the ancient and cosmopolitan, giving travelers plenty to offer. Its dry Mediterranean climate makes walking the streets bearable beneath the hot sun. Having a local guide too is helpful

as Tunisians speak Arabic and French with some English in tourist zones.

Around this tiny thumbnail wedged between Algeria and Libya, you’ll discover how the Phoenicians, Greeks, Ottomans, Andalusians and French left their footprint, creating a rich lively culture. Tunisia is like a rising jewel perched on the crown of Africa as it sits on the crossroads of civilizations sandwiched between old tradition and modern technology. Today, massive ultra luxurious hotels are sprouting up along its shores. A local Tunisian will tell you their country boasts a peaceful tolerant culture. The groundwork was laid down in 1956 by president Habib Bourguiba who transformed Tunisia into an independent state for which Tunisians are proud.

Tunis

For arrivals the Tunis-Carthage International Airport is reminiscent of 50’s European flicks where ceiling fans whirl above excited tourists gathering their luggage and if you’re like most, a tour guide greets you flapping a sign then ushers you off to one of the many four and five star hotels located outside the hullabaloo of the capital city.

By the hotel beach strip of Gammarth known as a playground for the rich and famous, camels rest beneath shady palm trees in preparation for the popular camel rides along the coast. I paid 10TD for a magical moment with Aayesha, a four year-old camel led by Yousef and was delighted to learn 45-minute massages were 50DT at my hotel.

One must-see in Tunis is to visit the unique Bardo Museum, home to rare Roman mosaics that are stored in this former bey’s “king’s” palace. Afterwards, it’s off to explore the serpentine narrow alleys of the ancient Medina with its jammed souks, hammams, kasbahs and mosque. You’ll need a ball of twine like Theseus or a pocketsize map to help guide you through this historic labyrinth. Don’t get fooled by the stalls in the markets as the souq is cleverly separated into sections for jewelery, carpets, perfumery, copper, garments and others.

With my new finds, I entered the Dar Bel Hadj, a traditional Tunisian restaurant off Rue des Tamis for a classic brik Maison, Tajine aux Fromages and mint tea. Price: \$12TD.

Hammamet

Considered a Tunisian Saint Tropez for its laid-back casualness and Mediterranean hospitality, Hammamet is where Canucks are discovering a coastal paradise that's affordable. I arrived at the five-star le Royal Hammamet, which averages about \$150 nightly and learned there are plenty of pools, full breakfast and beachfront to keep me busy.

Situated in the Cap Bon Peninsula, Hammamet was once described by the Romans as a "beautiful peninsula" pulchri promontorium while these days guidebooks like Lonely Planet have pegged the ancient city as "holiday heaven" for its amber sand beaches that stretch endlessly into the Mediterranean.

Known as Tunisia's fastest growing resort town, Hammamet's foray into a tourist Mecca happened when a Romanian millionaire vacationed here in 1926. George Sebastian loved the white walled Medina so much he built a villa nearby and called it Villa Sebastian. The place started to boom when the chic Roaring Twenties crowd arrived by cruise liner.

For day tripping, we hit the Medina "the old city" that looms over the coast facing Sicily only 80 kms away. The alleys beckon you into their ancient world. Young girls get their hands hennaed with the Fatima "for good luck" while boys stand stoically by the Mediterranean blue painted doors. It seems like a place locked in time.

But drive a few kilometers south to Yasmine Hammamet and you'll find the newest leg of this resort empire includes a state-of-the-art casino, two golf courses, amusement park and 44 hotels. Tunisia's newest resort strip stretches along 4 kms of coastline with 740 rings around its marina and provides sumptuous 4 and 5 star properties that will definitely echo the "1001 nights" Arabian melody.

Like a modern day Sinbad, I floated up a stone rampart leading to the Médina Mediterranea, the newest medina to hit Africa. The brainchild of Tunisian millionaire Abdelwaheb Ben Ayed, this gem has some of the best architectural reproductions that include a mansion of the Shah of Iran, medinas across North Africa, a Carpet House, a religious museum incorporating Christian, Muslim and Jewish teachings and the piece de la resistance, its very own Carthageland, an amusement park complex with a strong educational fix.

Mister A. Ben Ayed's dream was to create a complex that would master the architectural achievements of the Mediterranean countries from the seven to the 15-century. "I wanted to find an Arab city of my childhood, this medieval city where as a small boy I liked to saunter. My eyes cherishing the shapes in the curves, the cupolas and the vaults, which overhung the alleys. For a long time, I was awaked by a clamor where the cries mixed with travel, the tinkling of the objects out of copper and the voice of Muslims calling in prayer," he noted.

Aboard a ride on a wooden vessel, I splashed through the dark chambers and into the adventures of the Barberousse (Red beard) brothers. The interactive exhibit of mannequined sword fighters and damsels in distress is punctuated with pyrotechnic explosions. Opened last year, the ride is one of over 18 attractions at North Africa's first and only Disneylike theme park.

Nabeul

We left the mega theme park, the uber chic ritzy resorts and the ancient walled city of Hammamet behind and drove 10 km northeast to Nabeul, a quieter and compact town that is the pottery capital of Tunisia.

When the Romans settled this coastal fishing village they dubbed the area Neapolis, the root of the name Naples in Italy. Today, visitors wander through the souk for rare curios and spices and shop for colorful Tunisian pottery and ceramics made and sold from the countless storefronts that double as ateliers.

Inside the Societe Kerkeni along Avenue Habib Thameur, the pottery wheels spin by the push of a slippered craftsman who transforms wet clay into delicate leaves. The shelves are lined with moulds, greenware of urns, plates and boxes of Fatima hands.



photography: Stephen Smith

The prices like everywhere in Tunisia are reasonable and negotiable. A shopper's dream, I picked up a ceramic floral patterned Fatima figurine and a bagful of plates and bowls and leave behind 35 TD about \$35.

Sousse Sandwiched between the gulf of Hammamet and the Gulf of Gabes, the cool sea breezes offer a gentle tonic from the Mediterranean heat. Known as the "Pearl of the Sahel" Sousse has captivated the hearts of the Phoenicians, Romans, Byzantines and Arabs all of whom have left their imprint on this "fertile city."

I set my path in search of panoramic views and rare finds in one of the finest medinas in the country. The day I arrived, Malouf music blared from transistor radios and the shops were bustling with sifsari clad Muslim women lugging grocery bags while young men demonstrated the uses of Berber necklaces by draping the ornate silver around my neck.

But it was the look of one old man that changed my course as he huddled over a bowl eying tiny turtles scampering about. Some slept while others stretched their heads skyward. "Marhaba. (Welcome) to Tunisia. This is the most beautiful city," he declares with an infectious smile as he twirls his wrist toward the towering minaret while the turtles attempted their escape.

"Have you seen the carpets?" He asks in French then leads me to a nondescript building where shy smiles enveloped the faces of young women who were hand knotting rugs stretched on looms.

Some say that the ancient technique of rug making was perfected here. My old turtle man leaves me in the capable hands of the carpet shopkeeper, Abdallah Toumia of Dar El Medina. A regular looking Sultan himself, he leads me into his carpet shop humming with buyers and stage hands who are now performing a carpet theatre unrolling rug after rug in this exclusive performance. I got dizzy.

“This one is after the 1001 nights. Our carpets are all unique in design. No two are the same,” he boasts.

Inviting me for dinner, I thank his kindly offer and return to the narrow alleys of arches and turrets where the aroma of harrissa spice and fresh mint spills into the streets. You could spend days foraging through the old town but knowing I only had a few hours I returned to the place where my turtle man was standing and saw that he was gone.

In Tunisia, turtles like the Fatima hand ward off evil and are welcomed into the homes for good luck. I considered my meeting with the old man as a sign of good luck and returned to the pathway where a crowd gathered to watch a board game. Finding the gems of Tunisia was as easy as walking into the Medina and losing yourself for a couple of hours was only part of the charm. I had only just begun to uncover the magical aura of this exotic country I thought as I joined the other onlookers in the shade away from the Mediterranean sun.