

# Northwest Algeria



It has rolling hills, fertile farmland, some glorious – and gloriously uncrowded – beaches, big ports, and towns embellished with reminders of the region’s glorious past, yet the northwest is the least visited region of northern Algeria.

Oran, the capital of the northwest, is Algeria’s most important port and naval base. Home to pirates and princes, fought over by the Spaniards and Ottomans, and rebuilt in grand style by French colonialists, Oran today is a lively Mediterranean city with a distinctive character that sets it apart from Algiers.

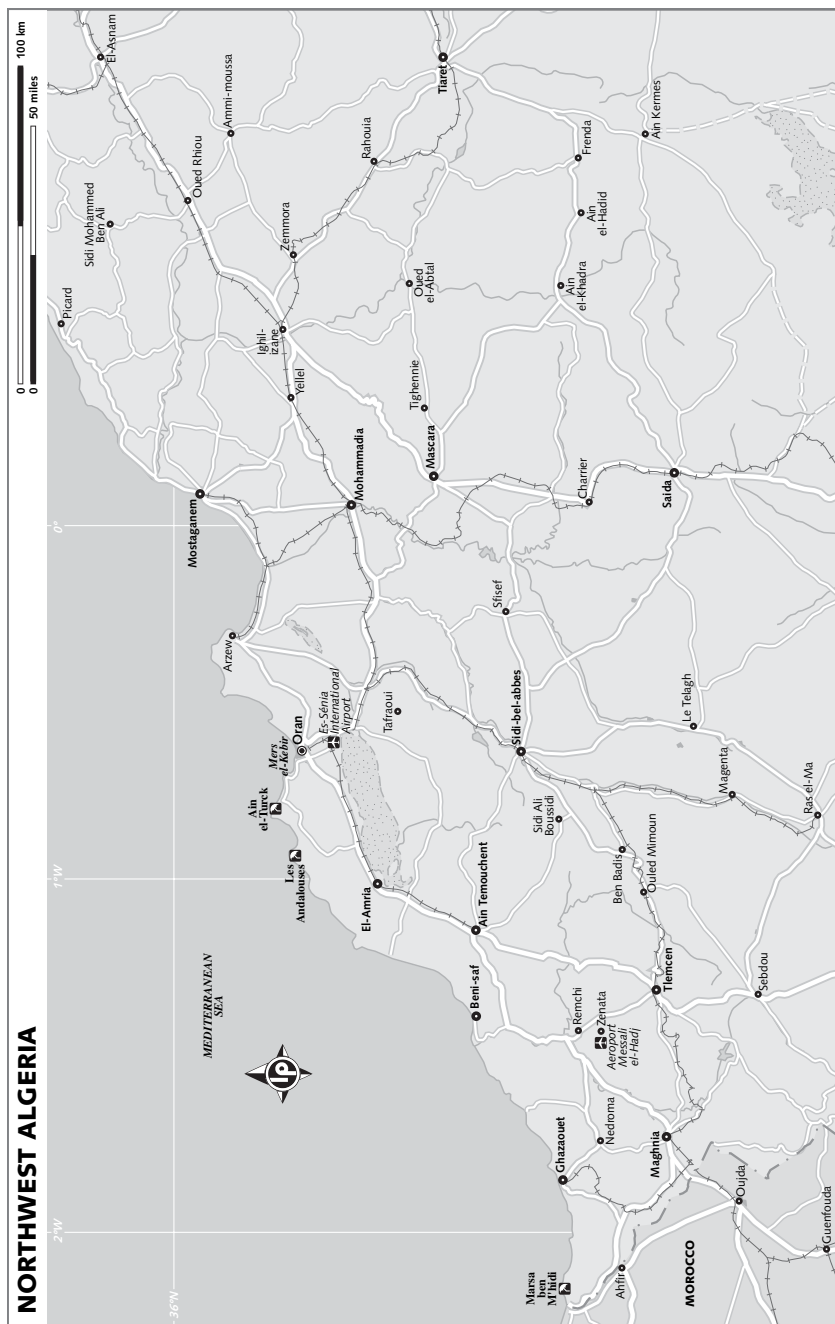
The northwest also contains some of Algeria’s richest farmland, particularly around Tlemcen, which in part explains why that town became the capital of the Maghreb, this part of northern Africa, in the 14th century. The region has also long been noted for its grapes and it was here that French colonists based their winemaking, a tradition that continues today – the best of Algeria’s considerable selection of cuvées come from around Tlemcen and the area south of Oran.

Outside of Oran the pace is slow and the sight of foreign visitors less expected. Tlemcen contains the best of the sights, both in town and on the heights above it. The coast from the Moroccan border to Oran has some of the Mediterranean’s most unspoiled beaches, with beautiful coves and large swaths of sand, although significant coastal developments are being planned as Algeria – and the northwest – gears up to attract more visitors.

## HIGHLIGHTS

- Take in the royal view from the ruined sultan’s palace in Tlemcen and then visit the neighbouring tomb of the revered mystic **Sidi Boumediene** (p149)
- Be moved by the beat of rai in the place of its birth – if you can’t be there to join the crowds at the August festival, head to one of Oran’s nightclubs at **Ain el-Turck** (p145)
- Stretch out on the pristine **beaches** (p142) along the coast west of Oran – the further you head, the more likely you will have the place to yourself
- Have a quiet moment in the **Grand Mosque** (p148) of Tlemcen, one of the Maghreb’s most impressive religious buildings
- Stroll around the casbah and old town of **Oran** (p139) for a taste of its pirateering days





## History

There's a strong Moroccan influence in the northwest, which is unsurprising considering its location up against the Moroccan border. Under Roman rule the northwest was farmed intensively, and the region's main town at the time, Pomaria (modern-day Tlemcen), was a stopover along the south Mediterranean coastal road. When Arab armies swept through the region in the 7th century during their conquest of North Africa and Spain, they were merely following the Roman – and pre-Roman – road. A few centuries later Berber armies arrived from the west and left a lasting Moroccan influence that can still be seen in the buildings of Tlemcen. Nineteenth-century French colonists, who had different priorities, recognised that the soil and location were ideal for vines and the area remains Algeria's centre of wine production.

## Dangers & Annoyances

Northwest Algeria has seen less violence recently than the northeast. Nevertheless, at the time of writing several foreign governments continued to advise against travelling in the area west of the Massif de Ouarsenis, particularly around Relizane and Mascara, and the area south of Blida, especially near Medea.

## ORAN وهران

☎ 041 / pop 1.5 million

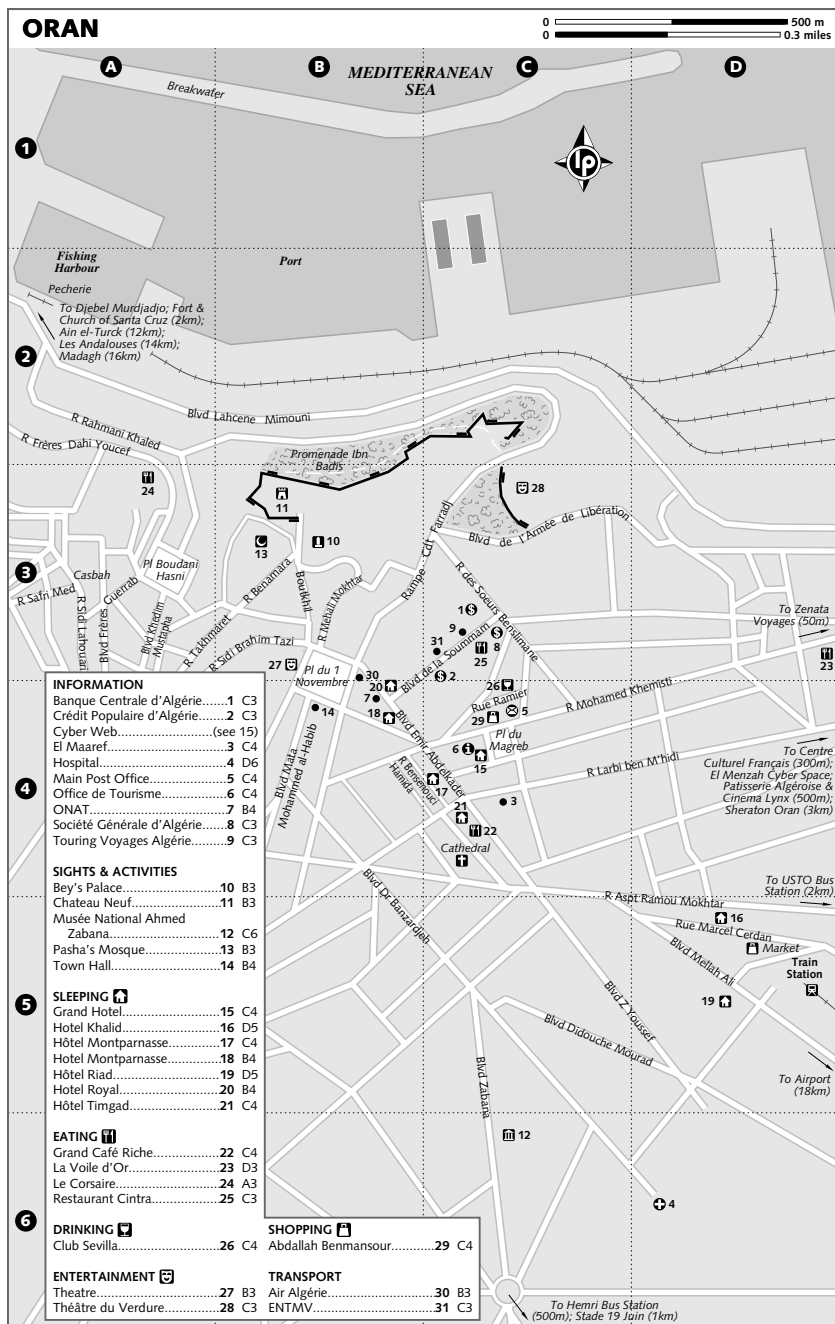
Algeria's second city is a lively port with plenty of history and a lot of rhythm. Yet here, more than in Algiers, the consequences of the violence of the 1990s and the subsequent government neglect are plain to see, and every ship that sails north to Europe is watched by hundreds of people. Many of them long to make the journey to what they believe will be a better life, perhaps hoping to emulate Oran's most famous émigré, fashion designer Yves Saint Laurent. Albert Camus, who founded the city dull and dusty when he lived here in the 1940s, used it as the setting for his novel *The Plague*. But for all its problems, Oran is still fascinating, a city with a sense of its own history and culture, which has contributed much to the world, not least North Africa's liveliest music movement, *rai*.

## History

Humans settled around the broad sweep of the Mers el-Kebir bay 100,000 years ago, but the story of Algeria's second city really starts when it became the port of Tlemcen. Andalusian traders started using the harbour in the 10th century. Spanish soldiers conquered it in 1509 and held it intermittently until 1792. The Spanish built fortifications that remain some of the city's most prominent landmarks today. The city was fought over by the Spaniards and Ottoman Turks throughout the 18th century and lost much of its importance in the process. Its prospects were made worse in 1790 when it was hit by an earthquake so large that tsunamis battered the Spanish coast. Oran's fortunes revived from 1831, when French colonists began to develop the port and to build a large naval base in the harbour of Mers el-Kebir. Under French control Oran became a *département* of France and one of France's largest cities, a cosmopolitan place of whitewashed houses, broad avenues and grand civic buildings. At the outbreak of WWII the Mers el-Kebir naval base was home to a significant squadron of French battleships. When France surrendered to the Germans in 1940, British forces attacked the French fleet to stop it falling to the Germans, killing 1300 French sailors in the action. Almost half of Oran's population left after independence.

## Orientation

The oldest part of town, the casbah, sits just above the old port, with its back to 400m high Djebel Murdjadjo and the Spanish-built fort of Santa Cruz. With each development the city has spread to the east and south, lining the bay. The colonial French city with its boulevards of whitewashed buildings sits above the more modern, eastern port. To the south of the French city, modern blocks spread far back into the interior. To the east the new Sheraton hotel, built on a rise overlooking the sea, serves as a useful marker. The place du 1 Novembre still serves as a focal point, while the *front de mer* (waterfront), known locally as the balcony, attracts crowds in the evening. The parallel streets of rue Mohamed Khemisti and rue Larbi ben M'hidi are the main shopping streets. Albert Camus lived at 65 rue Larbi ben M'hidi, above what is now Boutique Warda.



## Information

### BOOKSHOPS

**El-Maaref** (☎ 066 640972; 10 rue Larbi ben M'hidi) A helpful bookshop tucked into an arcade along this busy shopping street, which can usually get hold of Institut National de Cartographie maps of Algerian cities within 24 hours.

### CULTURAL CENTRES

**Centre Culturel Français (CCF)** (☎ 041 403541; www.ccf-oran.com; 112 rue Larbi ben M'hidi; ☎ 9am-noon & 1.30-8pm Sun-Thu) The CCF is particularly active, with a library, a selection of French newspapers and magazines, and regular performances of music and theatre. It also shows films each Monday and Thursday.

**Instituto Cervantes** (☎ 041 409730; 22 rue Médécine Belhoucine; ☎ 9am-1pm & 1.30-4.30pm Sat-Wed) Proof of Spain's continuing influence in Oran, the Instituto holds Spanish courses, has a library and organises music, literary and theatrical events.

### EMERGENCY

**Ambulance** (☎ 041 403131)

**Police** (☎ 17)

### INTERNET ACCESS

Internet cafés are opening all over the centre, one of the best being **El-Menzah Cyber Space** (3 rue Pomel; DA60 per hour; ☎ 9am-2am Sat-Thu, 2pm-2am Fri), with good connection speeds and a nice air-con room near Cinema Lynx. **Cyber Web** (du Magreb place; DA50 per hr; 9am-11pm Sat-Thu, 2pm-11pm Fri), beside the Grand Hôtel, also has fast connections.

### MEDICAL SERVICES

**Civil Hospital** (☎ 041 343311, 343316; 76 blvd Benzerdjeb)

### MONEY

There are a growing number of ATMs, but only the **Crédit Populaire d'Algérie** (blvd de la Soummam) accepts foreign bank cards and even that is not guaranteed, although you can also withdraw cash on a Visa card during banking hours. Banque Centrale d'Algérie and Société Générale d'Algérie (both on blvd de la Soummam) change money, the latter also running a Western Union money transfer service. You may be able to change foreign currency on the street near the Main post office on rue Mohamed Khamisti.

### POST & TELEPHONE

**Main post office** (rue Mohamed Khamisti) Sells stamps and also phonocards for public phones.

## TOURIST INFORMATION

**Association Bel Horizon** (☎ 061 210714; www.oran-belhorizon.com) A local organisation promoting the city's history and culture. It publishes books and CD-ROMs about the city.

**Office of Tourisme** (☎ 06 395130; 4 rue Mohamed Khemisti) Has some city maps (though not necessarily of Oran) and basic tourist information.

## TRAVEL AGENCIES

**ONAT** (☎ 298210, 393106; 10 blvd Emir Abdelkader) This state-run organisation runs tours and can arrange both domestic and international plane tickets.

**Touring Voyages Algérie** (☎ 041 598078; www.touringvoyagesalgerie.dz; 5 blvd de la Soummam)

**Zenata Voyages** (☎ 041 391227; www.zenatavoyages.com; 24 Blvd Tripoli) Offer a similar service to ONAT.

## Dangers & Annoyances

As well as the usual precautions, care should be taken when walking in the area around the casbah. Oran has a large number of unemployed people and tension does rise in the street. In the summer it can get very crowded – and the noise in the centre of the city can continue late into the night.

## Sights

Most of Oran's attractions are to be found within walking distance of each other and part of the pleasure on offer here is the scenes glimpsed as you wander.

## PLACE DU 1 NOVEMBRE

Oran's main square, the place du 1 Novembre, is the definitive expression of French rule in Oran. The city's main meeting place (called place Napoleon, place d'Armes and place Maréchal Foch at various times in its history), it has a baroque **theatre** on one side and the **town hall** on the other. In the middle of the square stands an obelisk topped with a Winged Victory, erected by French sculptor Dalou in 1898. The original work commemorated the French soldiers who died at the battle of Sidi-Brahim in 1845. After independence the French sculpture was replaced by busts of the Sufi saint Moulay Abdelkader. The town hall, which Camus thought pretentious, has a magnificent onyx staircase and restored painted ceilings (you can usually walk in if the door is open). It's a short walk from here to the Promenade Ibn Badis, the *front de mer*, created in 1847 with excellent views of the port and old town.



The **Cathedral of St Louis (6)** was built by the French in 1839 on the site of a 1679 Spanish church, destroyed, like much of this part of the casbah, in the 1790 earthquake. The cathedral is now closed and derelict, but if you find the resident guardian you may be allowed to look around.

From here, head northeast to rue Frères Dahl Youcef, then east, passing **Le Corsaire (7, right)**—here the street is also known as pl de la République—then south back to place Boudani Hasni, also known as place Rabah. From the square, head back to the upper town.

## Festivals & Events

The **Festival National de la Chanson du Rai d'Oran** ([www.festival-rai.over-blog.org](http://www.festival-rai.over-blog.org)) is the city's celebration of its home-grown sound. Started in 1985, it takes place in August in the Théâtre de Verdure, the outdoor arena beneath the eastern bastion of Chateau Neuf fort. The festival has long suffered from cash shortages, but the government has promised to increase its support.

## Sleeping

**Hôtel Riad** (☎ 041 403850; 46 blvd Mellah Ali; s/d/tr DA400/700/1000) A very basic option across from the train station (and mosque), for those times when the budget won't stretch to anywhere else. Some rooms come with showers.

**Hôtel Khalid** (☎ 041 332628; 21 rue Marcel Cerdan; s/d incl breakfast DA1500/1700, s/d with air-con incl breakfast DA1800/2200; 🍷) The best of several budget places along the backstreets close to the centre. More expensive rooms have street-side windows.

**Grand Hôtel** (☎ 041 391533; 5 place du Magreb; s/d DA2000/3000; 🍷) A reminder of the city's glory days, the Grand is well past its prime, rooms are as tired as reception staff, but there is still plenty of atmosphere and it has a central location.

• **Hôtel Residence le Timgad** (☎ 041 394797; [www.hoteltimgad.com](http://www.hoteltimgad.com); 22 blvd Emir Abdelkader; s/d incl breakfast DA3400/4150; 🍷 🍷 🍷) An extremely well run and friendly hotel in an uninspiring modern block right in the centre of town. Rooms are large, spotless, double-glazed and well appointed. The ground-floor restaurant is reliable, and the parrot in reception does a great imitation of phones ringing. It may have detailed city maps for sale. Recommended.

**Hôtel Montparnasse** (☎ 041 395338; 9 rue Bense-nouci Hamida; s/d DA3500/4000; 🍷) Don't be put off by the 'back door' on blvd Emir Abdelkader, this is a good, clean, central hotel with shower, fridge and TV.

**Sheraton Oran** (☎ 041 590100; [www.sheraton.com/oran](http://www.sheraton.com/oran); Route des Falaises Es Seddikia; s/d incl breakfast DA13,300/18,000; 🍷 🍷 🍷) Currently the best in town, the Sheraton has a curvaceous mirrored wall containing the height of Oranese luxury (at least until the Royal is running). It's a short drive from the centre, with fully equipped rooms and a range of restaurants.

**Hôtel Royal** (☎ 041 393144; [www.softel.com](http://www.softel.com); 3 blvd de la Soummam) When it reopens in 2007, the Royal will be Oran's most elegant hotel and should live up to its name. At the time of our visit, the gilding was being applied to the ironwork.

## Eating

A recent survey found that 60% of men in Oran prefer to eat breakfast in a café rather than at home and, as a result, the city is packed with cafés. Good restaurants are harder to find, and it's harder still to find the local speciality of *brannieh* (a stew of lamb or beef with courgettes and chickpeas).

**La Voile d'Or** (62 rue Mohamed Khemisti; dishes DA400-500; 🍷 lunch & dinner Sun-Thu) A simple air-conditioned restaurant near a popular public garden, serving fresh fish dishes and alcohol.

**Restaurant Cintra** (☎ 041 393345; 14 blvd de la Soummam; dishes DA450-1200) An old-timer on one of the grand boulevards with an international menu of Catalan tuna, Spanish crevettes and French sole. Alcohol is served.

**Le Corsaire** (☎ 041 397620; 6 place de la République; dishes DA500-600; 🍷 closed lunch Fri) The restaurants by the Pecherie serve some of Oran's best fish, but none match the Corsaire, its motto *on y est bien en famille* (you are among family here). Chose from the display and have it cooked the way you want. Paella, a speciality, is best ordered in advance. No alcohol.

**Grand Café Riche** (☎ 041 394797; 22 blvd Emir Abdelkader; dishes DA800-950; 🍷 lunch & dinner) The name is misleading: not a big, bustling café, but the restaurant of Hôtel Residence le Timgad. Food is standard French, the cloths are crisp white, the room curtained

and service is friendly and efficient. Alcohol is served.

## Drinking

There are plenty of seedy bars in town (look for the Stella signs).

**Club Sevilla** (5 rue Ramier) is a cut above the rest. It's a small bar with food and music till late.

## Entertainment

Oran is the proud birthplace of rai and it won't be long before you hear its distinctive beat. But it can be hard to track down live music, outside of the August festival. The circuit tends to shift by the season and fashion, but in high summer the clubs of Ain el-Turck should all be running. Look out for Le Biarritz (where Khaled first performed), Le Chalet and El-Jawhara. L'Ambiance at the Sheraton also has live music.

The **Centre Culturel Français** (☎ 041 403541; [www.ccf-oran.com](http://www.ccf-oran.com); 112 rue Larbi ben M'hidi) has regular screenings of French-language films. Something more macho can be found at **Cinema Lynx** (81 Larbi ben M'hidi; films DA69).

**213tv** (☎ 015 028030; [www.213tv.com](http://www.213tv.com)). A new Franco-Algerian operation with a mission to revitalise Oran's cultural life, stages regular live music events.

## Shopping

Rue Larbi ben M'hidi and rue Mohamed Khemisti are the city's main shopping streets, lined with boutiques and sports shops.

**Abdallah Benmansour** (☎ 041 397882; 5 rue Mohamed Khemisti). Benmansour is one of Algeria's most respected artists; his paintings hang in the shop and are for sale. He also sells stationary and art materials.

**Pâtisserie Algéroise** (☎ 041 398759; 81 rue Larbi ben M'hidi). The best *baklava* and local pastries in town are sold at this pâtisserie.

## Getting There & Away

### AIR

**Es-Sénia International Airport** (☎ 041 511153/591031) is 18 km southeast of town, near Taffraoui village.

**Air Algérie** (☎ 041 427205, 041 427206; [www.air.algerie.dz](http://www.air.algerie.dz); 2 blvd Emir Abdelkader; 🍷 8am-noon & 2-5pm Sat-Wed, 8am-noon Thu) flies direct from Oran to a number of airports around Algeria including Algiers (approximately DA3720), Tindouf, Tamarasset (approximately DA14,200), Adrar and Annaba.

International destinations served by Air Algérie include Paris, Lyon and Marseille. **Aigle Azur** (☎ 041 390940; [www.aigle-azur.fr](http://www.aigle-azur.fr); airport) also operates a daily direct service to Paris.

### BOAT

There are regular sailings from Oran to Alicante (Spain; 12 hours) and Marseille (France; 11 hours). Tickets must be bought in advance from one of several agencies in town, **ENTMV** (☎ 041 392166; 9 blvd de la Soummam) being the biggest.

### BUS

Oran has several bus stations, which can be confusing for visitors, especially since they are strung out across the city and, since the privatisation of bus services, there is no reliable information.

Agence Castor, off the 2nd blvd Périphérique, is a relatively new bus station serving northwest Algeria, including Mostaganem (DA80), Mascara (DA90) and Chlef (DA90).

The **Gare Routière el-Hemri** (Blvd Colonel Lotfi), formerly known as SNTV, was the central bus station until bus services were privatised. Destinations include Algiers (DA470, eight hours), Tindouf (DA2100, 14 hours), Constantine (DA900, 14 hours), Setif (DA700, 12 hours), Ouargla (DA900, 12 hours), Ghardaia (DA700, 10 hours) and other distant places. There is no phone service, but M Boumazair of **Amin Voyages** (☎ 070 122926) at the station can provide information.

Buses leave the **Yaghmourassen station** (rue Yaghmourassen) for Tlemcen (DA200) and the west. **Transport Veolia** (☎ 021 498024) runs a day and night Oran-Algiers service from here (day/night DA720/820, eight hours).

### TAXI

Taxis leave round the clock from the car park beside **Stade 19 Juin** (av des Martyrs de la Révolution) for Algiers (DA900, six hours) and from 4am to 8pm to Constantine (DA1600, 12 hours) and eastern Algeria.

Standard *taxis collectifs* (shared taxis) destinations from the **USTO station** (off rue Djemila, near Cinque Nekkache) include Biskra (DA120), Ghardaia (DA1100) and Msila (DA900).

### TRAIN

The **train station** (☎ 041 401502, 041 361788; blvd Mellah Ali) is a 10-minute walk from the





under Almoravid ruler Youssef ben Tachfine, who moved his capital here; for centuries it was one of the centres of power in the Mahgreb. In the first half of the 14th century the Merinid sultan Abou Yacoub besieged the town for so long that his camp, Mansourah, became a town in itself. During the colonial period Tlemcen held off the French for more than 10 years and always had a strong anticolonial movement. Algeria's first independence movement was founded by a Tlemceni in 1924. Today, easy-going Tlemcen, known as 'the town of cherries', is a pleasure to visit. It also has a vision: Algeria's largest university campus is currently being built by a Chinese contractor.

### Orientation

The town sits beneath the wooded ridge of Lala Setti, on the edge of the rich farmland of the Henneya and Maghnia plains. It has had several centres over the centuries: the Idrissid one at Agadir, the Almoravid one at Mansourah and the Zianide one around the Mechouar. The Grand Mosque and place Emir Abdelkader are now the town's main hub and most sights and facilities are to be found within a 20-minute walk of here. Mansourah lies to the southwest of the centre, Agadir to the northeast. Both are too far to walk.

### Information

#### BOOKSHOPS

**Librairie Soleil** (☎ 043 266501; 39 rue Ibn Khamis) Has a good selection of French novels and history.

#### CULTURAL CENTRES

**CCF** (☎ 043 261722; www.ccf-tlemcen.com; 1 rue Col Djeber) Has a library, an exhibition space and a cinema.

#### INTERNET ACCESS

**Cyber Star Internet** (17 av Cdt Ferradj) Above Café Mechouar, opposite the entrance to the Mechouar. Has fast connections in a nice room.

**Mansourah Web Café** (Optique Ophthalmique Bldg, Place Emir Abdelkader) Near the Grand Mosque; also reliable.

#### MEDICAL SERVICES

**Civil Hospital** (☎ 043 261821; 76 blvd Ben Zerdjeb)

#### MONEY

Don't count on the Tlemcen ATMs accepting your bank cards. Several banks in

the centre will change foreign currency, including **Banque Extérieure d'Algérie** (av Cdt Ferradj). Hôtel les Zianides may change a small amount, though at a less favourable rate.

#### POST & TELEPHONE

As elsewhere in Algeria, you don't have to walk far to find a taxiphone booth.

**Main post office** (av Colonel Lotfi) Sells stamps and also phonecards for public phones.

#### TOURIST INFORMATION

**Office de Tourisme** (☎ 043 263456; 17 rue Cdt Ferradj), run by the very helpful M Boubakar, has maps, information and a library (mostly French). Some information is also available online at [www.tlemcen-dz.com](http://www.tlemcen-dz.com).

#### TRAVEL AGENCIES

**ONAT** (☎ 043 271660; 15 rue de l'Indépendance)

**Zenata Voyages** (☎ 043 277090; [www.zenatavoyages.com](http://www.zenatavoyages.com); 11 rue Cdt Mokhtar) Offers domestic and international travel facilities.

### Sights

#### GRAND MOSQUE

Tlemcen's **Grand Mosque** (place Emir Abdelkader; ☎ 8-11am Sat-Thu) is one of North Africa's most important Islamic buildings. Begun by the Almoravid leader Youssef ben Tachfine around 1091, it has been substantially rebuilt several times over the centuries but retains some important early features, including the mihrab, elaborately decorated in stucco and carved stone, and a fine cupola with a massive chandelier. More impressive, though, is the atmosphere of reverence that fills the building. There are 133 steps to the top of the minaret, the oldest in this part of the Maghreb and the highest in town. To visit the mosque, you need to observe the instruction that 'women must wear long clothes'.

#### PLACE EMIR ABDELKADER & PLACE MOHAMED KHEMISTI

Tlemcen revolves around these twin squares, divided by rue de l'Indépendance. On the south side is the old colonial-era **town hall** (1843), opposite is the Grand Mosque and on the west side is the 12th-century **Mosque of Sidi Bel Hassan**, built in 1297 by the son of the noted local ruler Yaghmorassen and dedicated to a local holy man. The squares are busy throughout the day, particularly after prayers, when the cafés are buzzing and

### THE GRAPEVINE

The French pride themselves on having created the Algerian wine industry, during the long years of colonisation, but wine-making in the region goes back much further than the mid-19th century.

Ancient Persians are said to have planted vines near the town of Medea several thousand years ago and the Numidians exported wine to Rome, enough of a reason for some, for the Roman conquest. Arabs brought new varieties of grapes, including the Grenache, from Spain, while the Ottomans brought other varieties from the eastern Mediterranean. And in the 1860s French winemakers looked with envy to their new colony as French vineyards were decimated by Phylloxera, a North American aphid which is calculated to have destroyed 40% of French vines.

The French looked to Algeria for quantity, not quality. Towards the end of the colonial period, Algeria was producing more than 500 million gallons a year, much of it exported to blend with weaker north Mediterranean wine. Current production is around 15 million gallons, set to rise over the next few years to 40 million. But the Algerians now have their sights on quality. They compare their soil type to California, but with more rain.

The northwest is the main wine-growing region, accounting for as much as three quarters of the country's production, with important vineyards around Mascara, Medea and Tlemcen. The Coteaux de Tlemcen and Coteaux de Mascara, both robust, dark ruby wines, best served lightly chilled, are among the best and are widely available in Algeria.

men sit under the shade trees. Northwest here, at the end of rue Docteur ben Zerdjeb, is the lively **Kissaria**, the market area.

#### MECHOUAR

Very little remains of the early settlement of Agadir, but the camp Youssef ben Tachfine occupied during his siege of Agadir has now become the Mechouar (entrance on av Cdt Ferradj). A citadel was built over the camp in 1145 and has been one of the town's centrepieces ever since. The Zianide ruler Yaghmorassen moved his residence inside the Mechouar walls in the early 14th century and a mosque was built in the 1310s. The Ottoman admiral Barbarossa used it as his stronghold in the 16th century and the French followed suit after the fall of Tlemcen, using it as a barracks and hospital. Today the Mechouar offers a place of peace inside its massive walls and across its broad esplanade. The Moorish mosque, restored in 2003, is currently closed. One of the central buildings houses the **Chambre de l'Artisanat et des Métiers** (☎ 043 263224; ☎ 8.30am-noon & 1.30-5pm Sat-Thu), where local handicrafts, including embroidered camel saddles and hand-woven covers, are on sale at fixed prices.

#### TLEMEN MUSEUM

Given the wealth of history, you would be forgiven for expecting the **museum** (rue 20 Aout;

admission DA20; ☎ 8.30am-noon, 1.30-5pm Sat-Thu) to be equally rich. It is not. The collection used to be housed in the mosque of Sidi Bel Hassan, on place Mohamed Khemisti, but now occupies a 1905 college building. Arranged over two floors, the collection is basic and the arrangement is confusing, with Almoravid, Merinid and Zianid coins, brass lamps, carved stile and stucco all jumbled together. Among the treasures are 15th-century carved epitaphs from royal tombs. Also worth finding are the 1940s oil paintings by local artist Abdelhalim Hemeche.

#### SIDI BOUMEDIENE

About 1.6km southeast of the centre, as the crow flies, lies one of Algeria's most beautiful complexes, the **Mosque & Tomb of Sidi Boumediene** (Al Ubbad; ☎ 9am-4pm Sat-Thu), restored by craftsmen from Fès in 1986. Abu Madyan Shu'ayb ibn al-Husayn al-Ansari, to give him his full name, was born near Seville around 1115 and studied with Islamic mystics in Morocco before settling in Bejaya on the north Algerian coast and creating his own Sufi circle. A mystic, poet and man of great integrity – he was called the Sheikh of Sheikhs and the Nurturer – Abu Madyan, or Sidi Boumediene, as the Algerians call him, died in Tlemcen in 1197, on his way back to Marrakech. His tomb has become a place of pilgrimage and his cult was still sufficiently strong for former Algerian President

Mohamed Boukharouba to have adopted the name Boumediene as his nom de guerre during the independence struggle.

The *sidi's* tomb is down steps on the left as you enter the complex. The tomb is a simple affair, Boumediene on the right, Sidi Abdelsam el-Tonsi on the left. The tiled antechamber houses a worn, marble well, its water believed to bring blessings from the *sidi*. Beside the tomb, a doorway leads to the Dar es-Soltane. Abou el-Hassan, the Merinid ruler of Fès, refused to live in Mansourah, so had this residence constructed beside the saint's tomb. The rooms are ruined – a little carved stucco remains in some corners, enough to suggest vanished grandeur – but there is no mistaking the beauty of the site and the wonderful views over the plain.

Across the way stands the mosque, built by Abou el-Hassan in 1328. The building is both grand and beautiful. A stairway leads to a massive entrance porch and, through massive bronze-clad cedar doors, to the mosque, an open-sided, rectangular prayer space, beautifully proportioned and finely decorated in tiles and carved stucco.

A *madrassa* (Quranic school) was built above the mosque by Abou el-Hassan in 1347. The courtyard is elegant but undecorated, surrounded by 25 cells for students. It was here, soon after it was finished, that the great Arab scholar Ibn Khaldun gave classes.

If the gates of the mosque or *medersa* are locked, look for the guide, Habri Belattar, who runs the last stall on the right as you approach the complex.

## MANSOURAH

Just under 3km from the Mechouar, **Mansourah** (🕒 24hr) – the victorious – never lived up to its name. It started as the camp where Merinid sultan Abou Yacoub settled his army in 1299, when he besieged Tlemcen. The siege lasted eight years, during which the camp became a residence, complete with palace and mosque. Just as the city was about to fall, the sultan was murdered by one of his slaves and the Merinids retreated. Remains of the 12m-high walls that protected the camp stretch across the olive groves far into the distance. The main sight here, though, is the remains of the massive **mosque**, rebuilt by Sultan Abou el-Hassan

of Fès when he came to besiege Tlemcen in 1335. The prayer hall measures 60m by 55m, but most impressive is the 40m minaret, a twin of the Tour Hassan in Rabat and the Giralda in Seville, its inner side having fallen leaving it a vulnerable and evocative shell. The site is open at all times. The lions you might hear roaring as you visit are across the road in the Mansourah Zoo, closed at the time of writing.

## Sleeping

**Hôtel Majestic** (☎ 043 262546; place Cheikh Ibrahim; s/d without bathroom DA400/800) The welcome is fresher than the rooms in this central budget hotel, where the only washing facilities are a washbasin or the nearby public baths.

**Hôtel El-Mansour** (043 265678; place des Fedayyines; s/d/tr without bathroom DA450/650/950) The Mansour is run by a very attentive patron, who calls himself a 'sleep trader' and keeps the best budget hotel in town, perhaps even the region. It is secure, as well. Most rooms are arranged around a courtyard, those on the upper floor being brighter, the few that look into a corridor being darker but having less mosque noise. There are no fans, so it can be hot in summer, but there are showers on the ground floor and a sweet-water well in the courtyard.

**Hôtel Agadir** (☎ 043 271962; 19 rue Khedim Ali; s/d/tr incl breakfast DA1600/2400/3000) A modern hotel beside the bus station, a short walk from the centre. Rooms have showers and TV, but no fans or air-con.

**Hôtel les Zianides** (☎ 043 277221; 12 rue Khedim Ali; s/d B&B DA3000/5000; 📶 🚰 🚿) The red-brick Zianides, designed by celebrity French architect Fernand Pouillon, was Tlemcen's pride and joy when it opened in 1973. But the state-owned hotel has been neglected, rooms are shabby and dire cooking is served in a restaurant where waiters chase cockroaches. The pool sits in a mature garden.

## Eating

Tlemcen doesn't have much to offer by way of culinary delights – the tourist office only recommends a place kilometres out of town. So, with the restaurant of Les Zianides to be avoided, the best food is going to be simple. There are plenty of pizza places and bakeries in and around place Emir Abdelkader.

**Restaurant Agadir** (☎ 043 271962; 19 rue Khedim Ali; dishes DA300-600) Situated in the hotel of the same name, this restaurant serves a good couscous dinner, though check ahead, because it sometimes closes if the hotel is empty.

**Restaurant Familiale** (blvd Gouar Hocine; meals DA300-400) On a row of several simple restaurants, this place serves excellent meals of *harira* thick meat, lentil & chickpea soup and rotisserie chicken with vegetables, inside or out on the covered terrace. Recommended. Near Bab Sidi Boumediene

**Restaurant Coupole** (4 rue 1 Novembre; meals DA300) Across the road from Hôtel Moderne, the Coupole isn't quite up to Familiale's standards, but the simple meals are reliable and the service is friendly.

## Shopping

As well as general shopping in the Kissaria and crafts in the **Chambre de l'Artisanat et des Métiers** (☎ 043 263224; inside the Mechouar; 🕒 8.30am-noon & 1.30-5pm Sat-Thu), Tlemcen is noted for its textiles. You can find good-quality burnouses along rue Merabet Mohamed, which runs east of Pl Emir Abdelkader. **Farouk Stambouli** (☎ 043 264783; 8 place Cdt Ferradi) is a long-established merchant who has a range of top-quality, hand-woven rugs and blankets.

## Getting There & Away

### AIR

Aéroport Messali el-Hadj is 21km out of town, near the village of Zenata. **Air Algérie** (☎ 043 264518; www.airalgerie.dz; rue du Docteur Darnardji Tedjini) flies direct from Tlemcen to Algiers (from DA4558, one hour).

### BUS

There are regular departures during the day from the station beside Hôtel Agadir on bldv Ghezlaoui Abdeslam to Oran (DA150, five hours), Sidi Bel Abbes (DA80, two hours) and towns en route to Algiers (DA600, 12 hours). Safar Mabrouk Coaches runs an express service to Algiers leaving at 6pm (DA700, 10 hours).

### TAXI

*Taxis collectifs* leave from beside the bus station. The main destinations are Oran (DA250, three hours), Sidi Bel Abbes (DA180, two hours) and Algiers (DA1100, nine to 10 hours)

## TRAIN

Since the Oran–Casablanca express was cancelled following the closure of the Moroccan border, the only service running out of Tlemcen station is the 7.30am for Oran.

## Getting Around

The centre of Tlemcen is easy to walk around, though there are taxis if you get tired. *Camionnettes* (local buses) are unlikely to be of use getting to Mansourah or Sidi Boumediene unless you are leaving from the station. Taxis can be flagged down in the street or call **Taxi ben Ali** (☎ 043 203148/49).

There is no bus to the airport, but a taxi should cost around DA100.

## GHAZAOUET غزوات

Algeria's westernmost port sits in a well-protected bay, some 70km from Tlemcen (DA150 in *taxis collectifs*). The road is busy with *halabiyah*, the so-called 'milk run' of vehicles, from trucks to small cars, smuggling cheap Algerian petrol to the Moroccan border.

The Romans called Ghazaouet Ad Frates (the Two Brothers), after the twin 25m rocks that rise out of the water at the mouth of the harbour. Under the French the port was known as Nemours, after the French aristocrat who governed here, and had a reputation for the quality anchovies and sardines canned in its factory. The centre still has a French feel, with its covered market (1938) and the central church, now a library (1931). The **Pecherie**, at the east end of the port, is a good place to walk and watch the fish being landed off boats as well as locals trying their luck with rod and line.

The best **swimming** is found away from the port. There's a fashionable beach 10km east where, it is said, 'even the rich like to go'. There is also good swimming west, at Marsa ben M'hidi, a 2km stretch of fine sand that is cut through by the Moroccan border. To get there you'll need a car. Some people hitch with the petrol smugglers.

## Sleeping & Eating

**Hôtel Ziri** (☎ 043 323025; www.hotel-ziri.com; 📶 🚰 🚿) Ghazaouet's only viable hotel. Perched on the rocks on the eastern end of town, its 34 rooms all have bathrooms and sea view balconies.



There are several cheap places to eat near the market in the centre of town, a few minutes from the church, but the best food in town is served at Le Dauphin (closed for refurbishment at the time of writing) in the Pecherie, where the local catch is served grilled or fried. Fish is also on offer at the more basic Etoile de Mer, in a nearby shack.

### Getting There & Away

The Spanish ferry company **Trasmediterránea** ([www.trasmediterranea.es](http://www.trasmediterranea.es)) operates a ferry service between Ghazaouet and Almeria in Spain. Inland there is an irregular bus service to Tlemcen (DA140, one hour and 40 minutes). *Taxis collectifs* make the journey for DA200 a seat. Otherwise, a private taxi for the day will cost around DA1200.