

Gabès, Matmata & the Ksour



Covering a good chunk of territory from the Gulf of Gabès to the Libyan border, this fairly remote region of southern Tunisia is a forbidding landscape of inhospitable desert, though not the sandy sort that inspires poetry and romantic fantasies. Recognisable to anyone who has travelled in the western part of the United States or *Star Wars* fans, the land here ranges from scrub brush flats to low mountain escarpments, all of which looks like the ends of the earth.

The area receives few visitors, most on lightning-quick Land Rover 'safaris' of the underground troglodyte dwellings of Matmata and one or two of the ruined hilltop Berber villages around Tataouine. It's easy to find yourself staring at the empty fortress-like homes imagining what life would be like, so isolated not only by distance from other settlements but by the mere physical challenge of visiting the neighbours. Each of the villages has at least one *ksar* (the plural is *ksour*), the wonderfully idiosyncratic fortified strongholds that are the region's trademark. Gabès, the terminus of the rail line, is the de facto transport centre and while its *palmeraie* (palm grove) is an attractive place in which to get lost, the city's industrial character holds few visitors in its thrall.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Go underground, literally, visiting or even sleeping in a troglodyte dwelling in **Matmata** (p228)
- Hike to the top of one of the hilltop **ksour** (fortified strongholds; p237) south of Tataouine
- Fall asleep in a **ghorfa** (a distinctive structure once used to store grain) near Metameur (p239)



History

The Ksour district, centred on the hills of the Jebel Dahar has long been a stronghold of Berber culture – ever since the seminomadic Berber tribes who inhabited the Jeffara were driven into the hills by the Hilalian invasions of the 11th century. The villages around here are among the last places where the local Berber language, Chelha, can be heard. With the deaths of elderly speakers, the language too is dying out.

Getting There & Away

Other than flying to Jerba and then crossing the Roman causeway or ferry to the mainland, the quickest way to the region is

to arrive in Gabès via the train. There are no commercial flights from Tunis or elsewhere in the country.

Getting Around

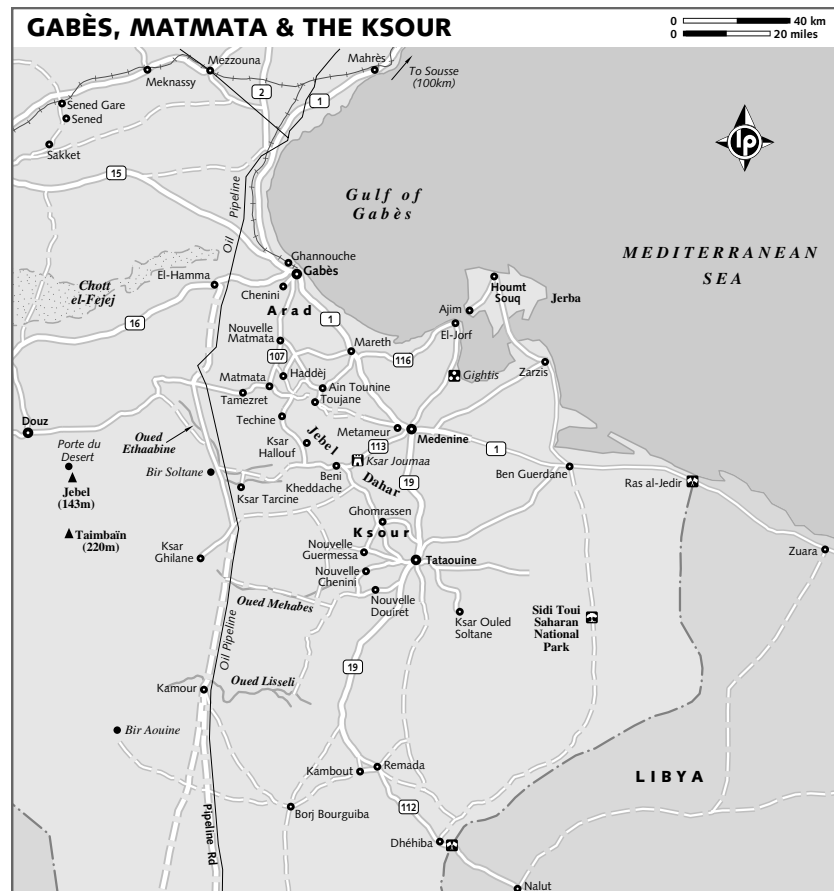
Most people zip around the region in a 4WD as part of a group tour. A rental vehicle allows you the luxury of choosing your itinerary. Public transport connects the towns in the region though it's sometimes difficult to do more than two legs of a trip in one day.

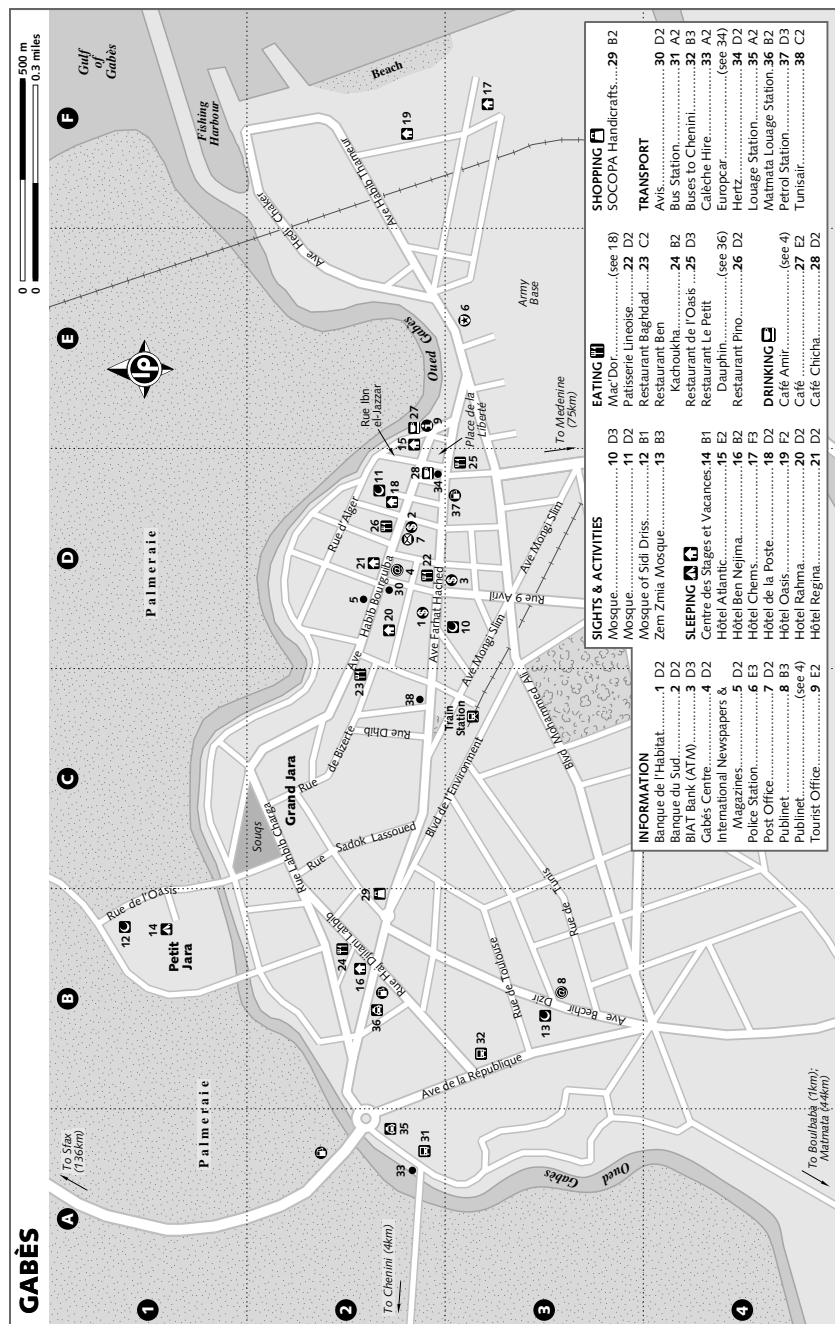
GABÈS

pop 116,300

For a seaside city at a major transport crossroads, Gabès does little to take advantage of its location, at least as far as tourism

قَابِس





goes. The infrastructure of the busy port and industrial sector blocks much of the seafront and pollutes the air, so that the city focus is directed instead inland towards the impressive *palmeraie*. Most people who have travelled this far, 137km southwest of Sfax, are on their way to or from Matmata, the Ksour or Jerba. The city is home to a recently established university that specialises in information technology and engineering. The main campus is in the southern part of the city on the road to Matmata.

History

Gabès has been inhabited since prehistoric times though little of note happened here until the town grew rich in the 14th century as the main Tunisian destination for the great camel caravans that brought gold and slaves from across the Sahara. The French invasion of the Sahara in the 19th century killed off the caravans and Gabès slipped back into obscurity. It boomed again after the discovery of oil in the gulf in the mid-20th century.

Orientation

Although Gabès is a coastal city, its orientation is towards the *palmeraie* that surrounds the modern town to the north and west. The town centre is about 2km inland, skirted by the Oued Gabès to the north. Most of the services required by travellers are on or near the two main east-west thoroughfares – ave Farhat Hached and ave Habib Bourguiba. The Gabès Centre, a hulking shell of concrete with a few shops, is at the heart of the town. There's a small, unspectacular beach next to the fishing harbour.

Information

INTERNET ACCESS

Publinet (2nd fl, Gabès Centre, ave Habib Bourguiba; per hr TD2; ☎ 8am-10pm)

Publinet (ave Bechir Dzir; per hr TD2; ☎ 8am-midnight)

MEDIA

There's a shop that sells international newspapers and magazines on ave Habib Bourguiba.

MONEY

There's a cluster of banks on ave Habib Bourguiba around the Gabès Centre.

Banque de l'Habitat (ave Farhat Hached) ATM.

Banque du Sud (ave Habib Bourguiba) ATM.

BIAT (ave Farhat Hached) ATM.

POST & TELEPHONE

You can use any of the Taxiphone offices around town.

Post office (ave Habib Bourguiba) Centrally located; telephones.

TOURIST INFORMATION

Tourist office (☎ 75 274 248; cnr aves Farhat Hached & Habib Bourguiba; ☎ 8.30am-1pm & 3-5.45pm Mon-Thu, 8am-1pm Fri & Sat) Doesn't see many tourists but more helpful than most. There's a complete list of bus departures, hotel prices and an old Lonely Planet map of the town posted on the door.

Sights & Activities

PALMERAIE

The *palmeraie* stretches inland along the Oued Gabès. It begins on the coast at **Ghanouche** and ends more than 4km west of Gabès at the oasis village of **Chenini** (not to be confused with Chenini near Tataouine – see p236). This western section is the most interesting (and least polluted) part.

Walking is the best way to explore. You can follow the shortcut used by the *calèches* (horse-drawn carriages), crossing the *oued* (dry riverbed) by the bridge behind the bus station and turning left onto the Chenini road. The road then twists and turns through the *palmeraie* to El-Aouadi, where a left turn leads down to Chenini. It's a pleasant walk of about one hour. The *palmeraie* looks its best during the pomegranate season in November and December, when the trees are weighed down with huge ruby-red fruit.

Chenini itself has not much more to offer other than loads of souvenir stalls. A path (negotiable by bicycle) heads off around the back of a partially reconstructed Roman dam and winds through the *palmeraie* to an open-air café tucked away in the palms. It's about a 20-minute walk and you can continue along the *oued* to the end of the valley. Climb up the small escarpment for a view of the surrounding area.

To get back to Gabès from Chenini, bus 7 runs between the village and rue Haj Djilani Lahbib, or pay around TD3 for a taxi. Horse-drawn carriages (TD15), which can hold up to four people, are a popular alternative to walking; find them behind the bus station.

JARA

The Jara is the old district that straddles the *oued* on the northern edge of town. The **Petit Jara**, amid the palm trees north of the *oued*, is the oldest part of town. The **Mosque of Sidi Driss**, at the far end of rue de l'Oasis, dates back to the 11th century. The old market, where the slaves once were sold, is in **Grand Jara**, south of the *oued*. These days you're as likely to find cheap tourist souvenirs as gold, and silversmiths and henna.

Sleeping**BUDGET**

Centre des Stages et Vacances (☎ 75 270 271; dm TD5, camping for 2 TD7) In a shady location in the *palmeraie* of Petit Jara, this government-run youth hostel provides typical bare-bones accommodation with, on average, seven to nine beds a room. There's a large canteen that will serve up grub for groups.

Hôtel de la Poste (ave Habib Bourguiba; s/d TD8/15) This hotel doesn't have much going for it besides its central location and cheap price tag but for many that's enough. It's been around since the '20s and it shows in the chipped paint and less-than-comfortable beds. Bathrooms are shared.

Hôtel Ben Nejima (☎ 75 271 591; cnr ave Farhat Hached & rue Haj Djilani Lahbib; s/d TD10/16) Even if the lobby décor is chintzy and artificial, the friendly Ben Nejima should be applauded for the effort. For better of worse, none of this was carried over to the fairly spartan rooms, however, it's hard to beat for the price and convenience to the *palm-*

eraie and local transport. Bathrooms are shared.

Hôtel Regina (☎ 75 272 095; fax 75 221 710; ave Habib Bourguiba; s/d with private bathroom TD13/20) It has a good location opposite the Gabès Centre and popular street-side cafés but the Regina is a little dreary. Basic rooms with large bathrooms surround a big and bare concrete courtyard that could be put to better use.

Hôtel Atlantic (☎ 75 220 034; fax 75 221 358; ave Habib Bourguiba; s/d TD15/28; 🚿) Dramatically framed by two towering palm trees that reach to the 5th floor rooftop, the Atlantic's ornate colonial façade is best seen at night when, like an aging movie star its flaws are harder to see. The rooms themselves are not in terrible condition though the size and quality vary but be warned that there's some kind of DJ booth/bar on the ground floor that blasts music loud enough to hear in Libya.

MIDRANGE & TOP END

Hotel Rahma (☎ 75 275 385; fax 75 275 710; rue Boulbaba Mrabet; s/d TD30/45; 🚿) Easily the best choice in Gabès, the Rahma has small, modern, well-kept rooms with cable TV. The only downside is not much natural light makes it into the rooms. There's a ground floor restaurant and café and it's only a short walk from the train station.

Hôtel Chems (☎ 75 270 547; www.hotelchems.com.tn; off ave Habib Thameur; s/d TD55/80; 🚿 📺 📶) The Chems is a better choice than the next door Oasis though it too suffers from grandiose ambitions, maybe best exemplified in its very own small bowling alley. Most of the rooms are well kept and have balconies with sea views and the pool is a pleasant spot to relax.

Hôtel Oasis (☎ 75 270 381; www.sdts.tourism.tn; off ave Habib Thameur; s/d TD64/104; 🚿 📺) Don't judge this hotel by its stars – four are too many and the rates are high for rooms that are far from posh. The fitness centre looks like it hasn't been used since the days of Charles Atlas but there is a thermal swimming pool and bar, and it fronts the beach. The restaurant is merely adequate.

Eating

Pâtisserie Lineoise (ave Farhat Hached; 🚿) The Lineoise is a friendly and modern bakery with good coffee and ice cream to boot.

As You Like Chapati (ave Habib Bourguiba; sandwiches TD2) The name says it all at this fast-food-style joint.

Mac'Dor (ave Habib Bourguiba; sandwiches TD2) Like its American namesake, Mac'Dor is usually hopping, though the menu here is mostly hearty *shwarmas* (sliced meat in pitta-type bread) and pizzas.

Restaurant Le Petit Dauphin (ave Farhat Hached; mains around TD3.5) For those heading out of town, this is conveniently located as part of the louage (shared taxi) station complex, but it's also worth a visit for the friendly ambience and big helpings of couscous. Open for breakfast, closed Sunday night.

Restaurant Ben Kachoukha (☎ 75 220 387; rue Haj Djilani Lahbib; mains TD4) An unassuming and no nonsense place, Ben Kachoukha serves a regular clientele but will welcome strangers. It serves standard Tunisian fare and freshly caught fish.

Restaurant Baghdad (ave Habib Bourguiba; mains TD4) This modest place in the quiet part of town is accustomed to foreign travellers. There are tablecloths, an English menu and healthy sized servings.

Restaurant Pino (ave Habib Bourguiba; set menus TD5; 🚿) One of the best places to refuel, Pino is a pleasant and modern restaurant, serving up large portions of the standard meat dishes plus salads and pizzas. The 2nd floor dining room is quiet.

Restaurant de l'Oasis (☎ 75 273 087; ave Farhat Hached; mains TD8; 📺 closed Sun) As close to a culinary institution as you can come in Gabès, the Oasis adds a touch of class to the usual fare, with both Tunisian and continental dishes served up in elegant if not baroque dining rooms. It's one of the few places in town where credit cards are accepted.

Drinking

Maybe the most popular night-time spot for men, women and children is the café behind the tourism office. There's a small park with a duck pond and trees for shade.

Café Chicha (cnr aves Habib Bourguiba & Farhat Hached) In the gravel spot in the place de la Liberté, the aptly named Chicha is a little more refined than the average plastic chair joint.

Café Amir (Gabès Centre) Most of the tables here are set up in the interior courtyard of the Gabès Centre though there's a fan cooled indoor area as well.

Shopping

Gabès is a major centre for straw goods – baskets, hats, fans and mats. There's plenty to choose from in the souqs off rue Lahbib Charga in the Grand Jara district.

Getting There & Away**BUS**

At least three companies operate out of the bus station at the western end of town. Daily departures include: Tozeur (TD9.7, 9am, 1pm), Jerba (TD6, seven daily), Sfax (TD7.3, six daily), Sousse (TD12.2, four daily), Tunis (TD17, six daily), Tataouine (TD6, 10am, 4.15pm), Douz (TD8, noon, 3.45pm, 6pm), Matmata (TD1.7, six daily) and Gafsa (TD8, six daily).

CAR

Because of its location Gabès is a good place to begin and end a trip further south if you intend to rent a car. Avis, Europcar and Hertz all have offices in town.

LOUAGE

The louage station adjoins the bus station, with departures for Kebili (TD6.2), Jerba (TD6, includes cost of ferry), Medenine (TD4), Sfax (TD7), Sousse (TD12), Tunis (TD18.3), Douz (TD7.7), Tozeur (TD10) and Tataouine (TD6.5). Most departures are in the morning; things quieten down considerably as the afternoon wears on.

For Matmata, louages leave from a separate lot along ave Farhat Hached. Services go to Nouvelle Matmata (TD1.4) where you'll have to change to old Matmata (a further 750 mills).

TRAIN

The **train station** (☎ 75 270 944) is just off ave Mongi Slim, a five-minute walk from ave Habib Bourguiba. There are four trains daily to Tunis (2nd/1st class TD14.9/20.1, six hours, 5am, 11.15am, 4.10pm, 12.05am).

MATMATA**pop 1000**

From above, the underground troglodyte dwellings Matmata is famous for looking like bomb craters, providing an interesting and unique inverse skyline. Home to around 500 people, the ingenious dwellings only come into focus up close and are a testament to our urge to domesticate

HENNA

Gabès is well known for its high-quality henna, which is made by grinding the dried leaves of the henna tree (*Lawsonia inermis*), a small evergreen native to the region. Gabès' henna produces a deep red-brown dye. Berber women use it to decorate their hands and feet, as well as to colour and condition their hair. You'll see henna powder for sale in the souqs, piled up in colourful green pyramids. Henna costs about TD1.5 for 100g.

If you want a henna tattoo, ask any of the stall holders around the souq on rue Lahbib Charga or in the *palmeraie* village of Chenini. Prices vary as wildly as the designs.

anywhere. Some of these are hard to find, blocked by conventional, modern buildings that are now in the majority. Surrounded by a barren, eroded landscape of fissures and craters, the Berbers of Matmata found a way to rig up air conditioning naturally. More recently, Matmata, 45km southwest of Gabès gained a measure of cinematic fame as the setting for the home planet of Luke Skywalker of *Star Wars*. Residents and tourism officials have eagerly embraced this fact, and it's sometimes hard to tell whether the busloads of visitors, most on overnight excursions from Jerba, are more excited by the *Star Wars* memorabilia or the unusual architecture.

There are licensed guides who charge TD10 for a guided tour of the village or TD15 for tours of both Matmata and Tamezret (you'll have to provide the transport to Tamezret). You can reach the guides through the *syndicat d'initiative* (tourist office) or ask at your hotel.

Orientation & Information

The road from Gabès descends into Matmata from the north and continues through town to the east as the back road to Medenine. In the centre of town, ave de l'Environnement branches off to the west towards Tamezret and Douz. All of the town's attractions are on or just off these two main thoroughfares and all of the hotels are just off the southern side of the road.

The closest bank is the Banque Nationale Agricole in Matmata Nouvelle, 15km away. Midrange and top end hotels might be able to help with exchanging cash. The post office is in the centre of town, opposite the turn-off to Douz. The small *syndicat d'initiative* (☎ 75 230 114; ☎ 8am-noon & 3-5.30pm Mon-Thu, 8am-noon Fri & Sat) is just downhill from the bus station, at the turn-off to the Hôtel Kousseila. The staff aren't trained to provide any real help.

Troglodyte Homes

Matmata's underground homes are easily accessible to travellers though many people are satisfied after visiting several of the budget hotels. Just about all group tours stop at the **Hôtel Sidi Driss**, which outdoes the others in terms of sheer tackiness, as if nailing a *Star Wars* beach towel to the wall proves its screen credentials. Spread over

five pit courtyards, all connected by underground tunnels, the hotel courtyard did stand in for the young Skywalker's childhood home and the hotel was used again in *The Phantom Menace*, *Attack of the Clones* and *Episode IV – A New Hope*. Of the other hotels, **Hôtel Marhala** has some of the best-looking grottoes and tunnels.

Another option for viewing the pit dwellings is the small **Musée Berber** (☎ daily), run by local women who have displays of carpet-making and traditional keys – because doors are secured by long, wooden bolts that disappear into the wall, these keys are up to a foot long, and open the door by releasing the bolt through a keyhole in the wall. The long, sloping entrance tunnel is one of the best in town. It's all quite rustic and unadorned, wherein lies its charm. Opening hours are unpredictable but mornings are the best times. A donation of TD2 is expected.

You'll probably be accosted by children offering to take you around to visit private homes. You may even be flagged down while driving and stop, thinking someone is in danger only to be offered a tour for an inflated price. If you do decide to take one of the kids up on their offer, agree to a price in advance. The people of Matmata get little enough privacy so respecting by invitation is infinitely more respectful than seeking them out on your own.

There are also a couple of homes set up for tourists on the last 3km into town from Gabès.

Sleeping

Matmata has an excellent choice of accommodation for all budgets. Some places, however, are often completely booked out by large tour groups passing through for the night. The town's three budget hotels are traditional troglodyte dwellings.

BUDGET

Hôtel Marhala (☎ 75 240 015; fax 75 240 109; s/d with breakfast TD13.5/18, half board TD15/22) The best of the below ground hotels, the Marhala is run by the Touring Club de Tunisie, though it has anything but a tourist group vibe. There are plenty of compact and cosy doubles with comfortable mattresses and electricity and the share bathrooms are immaculate. Meals are served in a dining room cave.

Hôtel Les Berbères (☎ 75 240 024; fax 75 240 097; off ave de l'Environnement; s/d with breakfast TD14/25) This is the last of the troglodyte options before heading out of town on the road to Douz. Long labyrinthine passages lead to simple bedroom grottoes.

Hôtel Sidi Driss (☎ 75 240 005; fax 75 240 005; s/d with breakfast TD16/32) Stop by if you're interested in standing where Luke Skywalker dined in *Star Wars*, otherwise it's best to avoid the Sidi Driss, easily the worst of the troglodyte hotels. Accommodation is an afterthought here and beds seem to have been tossed into the underground rooms willy-nilly. Don't be surprised if your wake-up call is a group of camera toting tourists.

MIDRANGE & TOP END

All of the hotels in this category are above ground and prices include breakfast.

Hôtel Kousseila (☎ 75 303 355; fax 75 240 265; s/d TD32/64; ☎) Housed in a large rambling complex without any effort to blend in to the desert surrounds, this modern hotel in the middle of town is popular with large groups. Be sure to ask for one of the doubles with the vaulted ceiling since these are quite large and comfortable compared with some of the more basic rooms on offer. There's a restaurant and bar and good views from a series of rooftops.

Hôtel Matmata (☎ 75 240 066; matmatahotel@yahoo.fr; s/d TD35/70; ☎) A cross between Berber architecture and a *zone touristique* hotel, the Matmata combines the strengths of both. It has modern rooms, some with vaulted domed ceilings, rose petals scattered on the beds, tile floors and colourful carpets, but it's designed to resemble a traditional *ksar* from the outside. There's a pool, restaurant and bar. Highly recommended.

Hôtel Ksar Amazigh (☎ 75 240 088; fax 75 240 173; s/d TD35/60; ☎) Looking like a run-down Berber village, this hotel 1.5km out of town on the way to Tamezret, has equally run-down rooms, though the pool and views do provide compensation. It has a restaurant and bar but it's bound to feel lonely if there isn't a big group in residence.

Hôtel Diar el-Berber (☎ 75 240 074; www.diarelbarbar.com; route de Tamezret; s/d TD70/120, half board TD80/120; ☎) Like the Matmata, this hotel 1.8km west of town has the façade of a traditional *ksar* but the Diar el-Berber

ratchets things up a few notches in terms of luxury. The courtyards, surrounded by several floors of modern barrel-vaulted rooms, look surreal and the views over the desert from the poolside terrace are breathtaking. Buffet meals are served in the restaurant and there's a relatively posh bar with a big-screen TV.

Eating

The two restaurants in town, the **Chez Abdoul** (mains TD4) and the **Restaurant Ben Khalifa** (mains TD4), both across from the bus and louage stations, serve standard fare and all of the hotels, including the troglodyte ones have restaurants. It helps to order in advance and if there's a big group in residence there's often no choice but to order the more expensive set meal. The Hôtel Diar el-Berber has the nicest restaurant in terms of décor and service and you can sit outside for excellent sunset views.

If you're staying the night, you're better off taking a room with half board.

Getting There & Away

The bus and louage stations are in the centre of town. Louages run throughout the day to Nouvelle Matmata (750 mills), from where louages go to Gabès (TD1.4). This is the only way to get to Douz or Tataouine without your own transport.

There are nine buses a day to Gabès (TD1.7), as well as an afternoon bus to Tamezret (900 mills, 1.30pm) that returns to Matmata an hour later, although check with the driver before setting out. There are also two to Techine (900 mills), one to Jerba that leaves at 10am and one evening SNTRI bus to Tunis (TD18.6, eight hours).

AROUND MATMATA

Haddèj حَدَّاج
The village of Haddèj, 3km northeast of Matmata, provides a chance to see **pit dwellings** without feeling like you're following in well-trodden footsteps. Though hardly developed compared with Matmata, the purpose of your visit is no secret to locals and you'll probably be surrounded by enterprising and persistent children hoping to act as guides. It's best to take one of them up on the offer – a tip of course is expected – since you'll likely feel uncomfortable bounding into homes on your own, many of which were abandoned

home. This small **museum** (Memory of the Earth Museum; route de Chenini; admission TD1.5), 2.5km south of town across the street from the Hôtel Mabrouk, houses an interesting range of fossils and dinosaur models. There's a large dinosaur sculpture on the hill above the museum.

The museum keeps irregular opening hours – officially they're 9am to 7pm Tuesday to Saturday, though the few times we stopped by it was closed.

MARKETS

If you're in town on Monday or Thursday, don't miss the lively markets held in the souq at the southern end of ave Habib Mestaoui.

Sleeping

There are only two good options in town as most people are in groups and stay in one of the upscale hotels several kilometres away in the desert.

BUDGET

Hôtel Residence Hamza (☎ 75 863 506; ave Hedi Chaker; s/d with breakfast TD17/28; 🏠) For those satisfied with the basics – four walls, a comfortable bed and light – the Hamza is actually a better deal than the nearby La Gazelle. Admittedly, the entrance is none too promising but reception is on the 2nd floor and the family that runs the place is very welcoming. Every four rooms share a bathroom.

None of the other budget options can really be recommended though **Hôtel Ennour** (☎ 75 860 131; ave Ahmed Tili; s/d TD3/6) and **Hôtel Medina** (☎ 75 860 999; rue Habib Mestaoui; s/d TD9/15) are clean enough to be occupied. All facilities are shared.

MIDRANGE & TOP END

Hôtel La Gazelle (☎ 75 860 009; fax 75 862 860; ave Hedi Chaker; s/d TD33/49; 🏠) Resting on its laurels as the only midrange option in town, La Gazelle isn't especially good value though the large and simple, characterless rooms are comfortable enough. It has some cavernous public spaces including a bar and a restaurant that's kept so dark it's hard to read the menu. Large groups tend to pull in here for the night and vacate early the next morning.

Hôtel Mabrouk (☎ 75 853 853; hotelmabrouk@messagerie.net; route de Chenini; s/d TD45/80; 🏠) A

less costly alternative to the Sangho is this attractive brick compound around 2.5km southwest of town on the road to Chenini. Unfortunately, it's not the most friendly place, especially if you show up on your own, but the stone and marble rooms, charming vaulted hallways and large outdoor garden more than make up for this. Plans call for a pool in the near future.

Hôtel Dakyanus (☎ 75 832 199; www.dakyanushotel.com; s/d TD62/74; 🏠 🏠) From the front, the attractive low slung façade of this hotel looks like a traditional *ghorfa* (a long, barrel-vaulted room built to store grain) and blends into the desert environment. It's 6km from town, has modern rooms and facilities and is not quite as nice as the Sangho but is a good choice for a more moderate price. There are panoramic views from parts of the property including 2nd-floor room balconies. It has three restaurants, a pool and a tennis court. Excursions can be arranged through hotel staff, though most people arrive already part of a tour.

Hôtel Sangho Tataouine (☎ 75 860 124; fax 75 862 177; off route de Chenini; s/d TD86/120; 🏠 🏠) This is the nicest place to stay in Tataouine, not only for the facilities but also for the large and relatively posh low slung bungalows. There's a pool (nonguests TD10), tennis courts (net-free when we stopped by), bar (rum TD2.3) and a good restaurant. The Sangho is around 3km southwest of town; to find it make the left just before the Mabrouk.

Eating

RESTAURANTS

Few restaurants in Tataouine are geared to tourists; most are coffeehouses-cum-cafés or holes in the wall that aren't especially inviting.

Hôtel La Gazelle (starters from TD2.5, mains TD6; 🍷 lunch & dinner) For a true sit down experience, your best bet is to head here or better yet, to one of the top end hotels outside of town. Expect to pay around TD12 or more for a meal and if there's a big group in residence you'll probably be limited to whatever set menu they're having.

Restaurant Essendabad (🚫 closed Sun) Across from the bus station, Essendabad has a range of daily specials though it's filled as much with people waiting for their transport as it is with diners.

THE BERBERS

The Berbers, the indigenous people of North Africa, got their name (the Greek *barbarikos* means 'foreign') from the Arabs who arrived at the end of the 7th century and sought to distinguish the Berbers from those who had adopted Roman/Byzantine culture. The ancient Egyptians knew them as the Libou (nomads); the Greeks called them Libyans, as did the Phoenicians; and the Romans called them Africans.

Ethnically, the Berbers are a cultural melting pot – the result of successive waves of immigration from the Near East, sub-Saharan Africa and southern Europe. By the time the Phoenicians arrived in the 10th century BC, these diverse peoples had adopted a uniform language and culture.

Berber territory was divided up into tribal confederations. Northern Tunisia was the territory of the Numidians, founders of the cities of Bulla Regia, Sicca (El-Kef) and Thugga (Dougga). Other tribes had settled in the major oases of the south, while others lived a seminomadic pastoral existence.

Although conquered many times through history, the Berbers proved hard to repress. Military resistance to Roman rule continued until AD 24, and later resurfaced in the 4th century. They were probably at the peak of their political and military power when the Arabs arrived. The Berbers' greatest success against these latest invaders was the capture of Kairouan, which became the base for a short-lived Berber kingdom until 689.

The next wave of rebellion was led by Al-Kahina, a legendary figure in Berber lore. The widow of a tribal chief from the Aures Mountains in Algeria, she defeated Hassan bin Nooman at Tebessa in 695 and pushed back the Arab armies as far as Gabès, before fighting her last stand in the colosseum of El-Jem (p208). More trouble was to follow in the form of Berber-led Kharijite rebellions that flared intermittently over the following 250 years, but effective resistance to Arab rule ended with the Hilalian invasions in the 11th century.

Tunisia's Berbers have become all but totally assimilated with the Arab population. Berber customs, however, continue to survive – particularly in rural areas. Many women still wear the traditional *bakhnoug* (shawl) and *assaba* (headband) and tattoo their faces with ancient tribal symbols; men still favour the *burnous*, a hooded woollen cape.

Restaurant La Medina (ave Farhat Hached) and **Restaurant el-Baraka** (ave Ahmed Tili) have similar menus of cheap Tunisian standards for around TD2 a dish.

For bargain, good-sized *brîqs* (pastries; 400 mills) with a hint of onion, it's hard to beat the small unnamed restaurant just along from the bus station on rue 1 Juin 1955; look for the orange-and-yellow awning outside.

PÂTISSERIES

All of Tataouine's many pâtisseries sell the local speciality, *corne de gazelle* (350 mills) – a pastry case, shaped like a gazelle's horn, filled with chopped nuts and soaked in honey. Good places to try are the hole-in-the-wall **Pâtisserie Sahara** (ave Farhat Hached), **Spécialité Corne de Gazelle Restaurant** (ave Farhat Hached) or **Pâtisserie du Sud** (ave Habib Bourguiba).

Drinking

Not surprisingly, the coffeehouse is the centre of social activity in Tataouine for men.

Café Ennour (ave Habib Bourguiba) This place is at the intersection just south of the clocktower and spills out onto the street in the afternoon.

Café de l'Union (ave Hedi Chaker) Next to Hôtel la Gazelle, this café is a standard no frills coffeehouse, but enough groups of tourists stop here so female foreigners should feel perfectly comfortable.

Hôtel La Gazelle has the only bar in town and it's this monopoly that may explain why little effort has been made at decoration. Cold beers cost TD2.

Getting There & Away

BUS

The bus station occupies the large compound at the western end of rue 1 Juin 1955. There are four daily buses to Medenine (TD2.4, one hour), one to Houmt Souq (Jerba; TD6.4, 2½ hours) and six to Ghomrassen (TD1.3, 30 minutes); the last bus back from Ghomrassen leaves at 4.30pm. There's a daily bus southeast to

and spreads across two peaks, linked by a narrow causeway. The larger peak is topped by a ruined *kalaa*. Less intact than some of the other villages, old Guermessa gives an impression of the village slowly merging back into the mountain, an effect that the photogenic white mosque below merely highlights. Guermessa remains relatively undiscovered by large numbers of visitors.

You need a 4WD to drive up to the site, which can be reached via the road to Ksar Ghilane and Douz, signposted to the east 1km north of the modern village. The turn-off to the site is 3km along this road, and loops back to Guermessa. This approach provides a great view. If you're walking, take plenty of water.

You might find the occasional bus to Nouvelle Guermessa from Ghomrassen, but the best option is to charter a taxi from Tataouine (see p235) and combine your visit with one to Chenini and Douiret.

The most direct road from Guermessa to Chenini is 4WD only.

CHENINI

شئني

Part of the 4WD 'safari' circuit, Chenini, the best known of the hill villages can get crowded by mid-morning. The approach to this village, only 18km west of Tataouine, is a scenic rollercoaster of small hills and turns but the village only comes into focus after rounding the mountain bend and looking up.

The picturesque ruins of the original *kalaa*, dating from the 12th century AD, stand at the junction of two ridges. The settlement tumbles down and out from this point, built into the rock along a series of small terraces that leads around the steep hillside. The houses consist of a cave room, which has a fenced front courtyard containing one or two more rooms. Highlights include doors made from palm trunk, and the interiors of some cave rooms still containing the faded remnants of decorative paintwork and carvings on the roof. Some of the doorways here are so small they require a contortionist's flexibility to enter. The *ksar* is still used to store grain and the village even retains a few occupants (unlike the other villages), although most of Chenini's inhabitants have moved to the modern settlement of Nouvelle Chenini.

THE SEVEN SLEEPERS

The area around Tataouine lends itself to legend and fairy tale, whether in dramatic hilltop villages or improbable *ksour* architecture that has drawn the directors of Hollywood.

One local fable is not out of place in such company. Beyond the white mosque of Chenini, a 20-minute walk leads to a mosque and a series of strange 5m-long grave mounds known locally as the graves of the Seven Sleepers. According to local legend, seven Christians (and a dog) went into hiding in a nearby cave to escape persecution by the Romans. They slept for 400 years and awoke to find a world of Islam, long devoid of Romans. While they had slept, their bodies had continued to grow until they were 4m tall. They awoke only to die almost immediately, which must have been quite disappointing. To compensate, the story goes that, before dying, the men converted to Islam, assuring them of their place in paradise.

A path leads up from the road to a beautiful white mosque situated on a saddle between the two ridges.

To get the most out of your visit, it can be worth allowing one of the village children to show you around, as some of the features can be hard to find. There's a very nice and modern **restaurant** (☎ 7am-3pm) and **café** at the base of the village where you'll park. There's a *à la carte* menu though if there's a big group in town the set menu may be your only option.

Camionnettes from Tataouine stop at Nouvelle Chenini; sometimes it's possible to persuade the driver to continue the last 2km to the ruins. A charter taxi from Tataouine starts at about TD20 return.

There's a good sealed road south to Douiret, following the course of an *oued* through the hills to Nouvelle Douiret. The road directly north from Chenini to Guermessa is best tackled by 4WD; there's another sealed road that's more roundabout though only slightly longer.

DOUIRET

دويرات

Most of old Douiret is abandoned, both by residents and tourists, so a visit here is a chance to wander around an ancient and

crumbling *ksar* at your leisure. Perched high on the spur of a hill 22km southwest of Tataouine, and above a dazzling white-washed mosque, white *marabout* (holy man or saint) and other tombs dot the plains below. As at Chenini, the houses are built into the rock along terraces that follow the contour lines around the hill. The main terrace leads south for 1km to more houses, some of which are still occupied. Look out for some of the ornate carved doorways and Berber designs painted on the walls. Stairs lead up the hill next to the mosque and the higher you climb, the better the views.

The road to Douiret is signposted from Debbab, 9km south of Tataouine on the road to Remada. Unless you've chartered a taxi, transport to Douiret is few and far between. Early morning is the best time to catch a *camionnette* from Tataouine, but they normally go only as far as Nouvelle Douiret, 1.5km before old Douiret. You may be able to persuade the driver to take you the rest of the way, but you'll certainly have to walk back afterwards to find a ride to Tataouine.

THE K SAR

The structure that typifies Berber architecture is the *ksar* (plural *ksour*), the traditional fortified granary built by the region's tribes. Its design reflects the main priority of its builders – to preserve and protect the precious grain crops produced in good seasons. *Ksour* were usually built on natural defensive positions, and occupy some spectacular ridge and hilltop locations.

A single *ksar* consists of many *ghorfas* (long, narrow, barrel-vaulted rooms built of stone and gypsum and finished with a mud render). The *ghorfas* themselves were like caves, with a single tiny door opening onto the courtyard. The very low humidity of this arid region, combined with the cool conditions inside the *ksar*, meant that grain could be kept for years in the *ghorfas* without deteriorating. The storage areas were sealed with doors made of palm trunks and warded off insects, thieves and inclement weather alike. Sometimes a caretaker, often a local religious figure, regulated how much could be taken by the owners during times of scarcity. Its purpose was, therefore, akin to a modern bank and prevented the crop-holders from squandering their resources through a system of enforced saving and stockpiling.

Entry to the courtyard was by a single fortified gate or *skifa*. The *ghorfas* were stacked three or four storeys high and access to the upper levels was by a narrow staircase. Where no such staircase existed, precarious stone steps were built into the walls. The tree branches protruding from the top of the upper *ghorfas* were part of a pulley system, allowing the *ghorfas* to be filled and emptied without having to carry the grain up the difficult stairs.

Although the practice varied from town to town, in general each *ghorfa* belonged to a particular family or group of families. Grains like barley and wheat were usually kept in the rooms above the ground with olive oil stored in underground chambers.

The oldest examples of *ksour* are to be found occupying the highest peaks of the ancient hilltop villages west of Tataouine, but these are in poor condition. Most of the best examples are more recent constructions dating from the 15th and 16th centuries, built by Arab settlers who had adopted Berber traditions.

Ksour

KSAR OULED DEBBAB

القصور قصر اولاد دباب

This huge *ksar* sits on a low hill just east of the modern village of Debbab, 9km south of Tataouine on the Remada road. It was occupied until several years ago and most of the buildings are still in good condition. There's a sealed road leading up to the entrance gate from Debbab; the walk takes about 20 minutes.

KSAR OULED SOLTANE قصر اولاد سلطان

Ksar Ouled Soltane, 22km southeast of Tataouine, has the best set of *ghorfas* (long barrel-vaulted rooms built to store grain) in the south, rising a dizzying four storeys around two courtyards. The *ghorfas* have been renovated to give a sense of how they must once have appeared. It's a terrific place that shouldn't be missed. The lower courtyard is used as a stage for performances during the **Festival of the Ksour** in late November.

The views of the sunset from here are wonderful, but don't get here too late or the courtyards will be quite dark. There's a small, friendly café in one of the *ghorfas*.

The only bus to Ksar Ouled Soltane (TD1, 40 minutes) leaves Tataouine at 6am; *camionnettes* are a better bet. There are occasional services to Ksar Ouled Soltane, but plenty to Maztouria. There's quite a lot of traffic along this road, so hitching shouldn't be a problem (for information on the risks associated with hitching see p311).

OTHER KSOUR

On the way between Tataouine and Ksar Ouled Soltane, it's worth looking in at the **Ksar Beni Barka** and **Ksar Tamelest**, which are more modest than Ksar Ouled Soltane, but nonetheless interesting examples of small village *ksour*.

If you have your own transport, you can continue on beyond Ksar Ouled Soltane, southeast to **Mghit**, which also has its own little *ksar*.

The road turns northeast to **Ksar Ezzahra**, which almost rivals Ouled Soltane as the best *ksar* in the region. It is almost uniformly four storeys with two courtyards, many staircases and multilayered tiers. Because it's further from Tataouine, you'll have the place to yourself. The small section of dirt road between Mghit and Ksar Ezzahra is easily traversed by conventional vehicle.

The road continues beyond Ksar Ezzahra to Tataouine. En route back to town, don't miss the expansive ruined complex of *ghorfas* at **Ksar Jelidet**.

Remada & South

There's little reason to visit Remada, unless of course you're travelling to or from Libya, which in theory should be possible now that the relationship between the two countries has normalised. There's direct transport from Tataouine to Tripoli so there's no need to spend a night in Remada; if you are stuck there's little choice but to throw yourself on the hospitality of a local family. See p306 for information on border formalities.

MEDENINE

pop 61,700

This uninspiring modern town 76km southeast of Gabès is a convenient place to break up a trip further south, though really only for petrol or lunch since there's little quality accommodation in town. There is a well preserved *ksar*, which sees busloads of tourists stop by for a quick visit.

مدنين

Orientation & Information

The main street is ave Habib Bourguiba, which runs north-south through the centre of town. The other main thoroughfare, where you'll find the *ksar* and your probable route into the city if coming from Jerba, is ave 7 de Novembre. The streets in the market area and to the north of Place 7 Novembre are confusing to navigate.

The **post office** (place des Martyrs) is south of the town centre, although most other things of importance – banks (with ATMs), hotels and restaurants – are north of the *oued*.

Ksar Medenine

Medenine's only attraction is its well preserved *ksar*, though the fact that almost every square inch of every *ghorfa* surrounding the courtyard is covered with souvenirs, ceramics and carpets on sale for visiting tourists, detracts from the atmosphere. It was built by the Ouergherma Federation in the 17th century following the decision to leave the mountain stronghold of Ghomrassen and assert authority over the plains.

It's on ave 7 Novembre; the ruins of two other *ksour* are to the north, in varying stages of disrepair, though they're not always open.

Sleeping

There's little reason to spend the night in Medenine since there is much better accommodation elsewhere, whether at Matmata, Tataouine or one of the *ksar* hotels in the area. The one tourist-class hotel in town, the Étape Sangho was closed for the foreseeable future.

Hôtel Essaada (☎ 75 640 300; ave Habib Bourguiba; s/d TD7/10) Everything here could use a paint job but at least the rooms open up onto a relatively quiet courtyard set back from the street. Toilets are shared but some of the rooms have private showers.

Hôtel el-Hana (☎ 75 640 690; ave Habib Bourguiba; s/d with shared bathroom TD10/20) Another option with bare-bones rooms that could use some attention, at least this hotel has a restaurant on the ground floor where you can hang out.

Hôtel Le Sahara (☎ 75 640 007; ave 2Mai; s/d TD20/30; 🍽) It's a backhanded compliment to say this is the best hotel in Medenine since the competition is hardly fierce. The rooms are slightly nicer than you'd expect from the

building itself and while some have air-con units they're not always functioning. Check before checking in.

Eating

There is a bunch of cheap restaurants on and around ave Habib Bourguiba and ave 7 Novembre.

Montazah Al-Meria (ave 7 Novembre; mains TD4) Just north of the *ksar*, this is probably the most pleasant place for a meal. There's a huge garden out the back where you can chow down on pizza and hearty pitta sandwiches.

The other places are all fairly similar: indoor/outdoor seating with standard fare like couscous and *merguez* (spicy sausages), all for around TD3.

Restaurant Chrigui (ave Habib Bourguiba) is in the same building as Hôtel el-Hana and the **Restaurant Carthage** (rue 18 Janvier) is a no frills place to wait while your louage fills up. **Café de Paris** (ave Habib Bourguiba) is a basic coffeehouse where you can get soup and pastries and maybe a meat dish or two. **Café el-Ksour** is a tiny little place at the entrance to the Ksar Medenine.

Self-caterers can stock up on supplies at the **Grand Magasin supermarket** (ave Habib Bourguiba).

Getting There & Away

BUS

All services leave from the bus station 1.5km north of town on the Gabès road.

SNTRI has seven buses daily to Tunis. The buses via Kairouan are quicker and cheaper (TD18.8, seven hours) than those via Sfax, El-Jem and Sousse. Getting a seat in summer can be difficult because only one service originates in Medenine.

There are frequent local buses to Jerba; services via the ferries at El-Jorf are faster and cheaper (TD3.7, 1½ hours) than those via Zarzis and the causeway (TD4.8, 2½ hours). Four buses daily head to Tataouine (TD2.4, one hour) and Gabès (TD4, 1¼ hours).

Local services include two daily buses to Metameur (500 mills, 15 minutes) and Beni Kheddache (TD1.6, 45 minutes).

LOUAGE

Louages to the north and Tataouine (TD2.2) leave from next to the bus station. Gabès

(TD3.6) is the main destination. Louages to Jerba (TD4.5) leave from the centre of town on the small street linking rue 18 Janvier and ave Mansour el-Houch.

Louages for Beni Kheddache (TD1.5) leave from ave Masbah el-Jarbou.

AROUND MEDENINE

Metameur

متامر

The small village of Metameur, 4km west of Medenine, has **Le Café Metameur** (☎ 75 640 294), which is set in the renovated *ghorfas* of a 17th-century *ksar*. It's a favourite of tour groups and a nice detour if you're exploring the area. The café is clearly visible from the Gabès-Medenine road, 1km to the east, on a low hill above the modern village. The **Hôtel les Ghorfas** (☎ 75 560 533; fax 75 656 458; per person TD15) offers rustic accommodation in one of the restored *ghorfas*. A taxi from Medenine costs about TD3 or there are two daily buses.

Ksar Joumaa

قصر جومة

Joumaa, 30km southwest of Medenine, is as good a *ksar* as you could hope to find, and one of the few that's easily accessible by public transport.

The *ksar* is strung out along a narrow spur to the east of the modern village of Joumaa, the first place you come to after climbing the escarpment on the road to Beni Kheddache. The best approach is via a rough track signposted to the left about 1km before Joumaa on the road from Medenine. It's easy to spend an hour or so exploring the many *ghorfas*. Look out for unusual motifs on some of the ceilings. An archway leads to an inner courtyard and the ruins of the old *kalaa*.

Buses and louages running between Medenine and Beni Kheddache pass through Joumaa.

Beni Kheddache

بني خداش

Beni Kheddache, 36km southwest of Medenine, is the main town of the northern Jebel Demmer. The remnants of the town's old *ksar* are signposted on the way into the village, but there are better *ksour* in other towns, most notably Tataouine. There are two buses a day to Medenine (TD1.6, 45 minutes) and more frequent louages (TD1.5).

The road southwest to Ksar Ghilane is best left to 4WDs, but there are good roads

northwest to Ksar Hallouf and south to Ksar Haddada and Ghomrassen.

Ksar Hallouf

قصر حلوف

Ksar Hallouf, 14km northwest of Beni Kheddache, provides a great opportunity to retreat from the stresses of everyday modern life and experience the stresses of the Berber life, well heat and isolation for a day or so. But whether you decide to simply hang out and take it easy or meditate in a cave like St Anthony, an overnight stay at the **Relais Touristique de Ksar Hallouf** (☎ 75 837 148; fax 75 837 320; bed TD5, full board TD15), a 13th-century *ksar* overlooking a picturesque valley, is a highlight of any Tunisian visit. Accommodation is in a small restored section of *ghorfas* and even though it's rudimentary, it's clean and kept fairly cool by natural air conditioning. Ablutions are available in cold showers and toilets are of the squatting variety.

The road to Ksar Hallouf is clearly signposted from the centre of Beni Kheddache. There are a couple of unsignposted forks in the road along the way; take the right fork both times. The first 10km is a good sealed road, which finishes at an army base; the final 4km of dirt road presents no problems for conventional vehicles. A taxi from Beni Kheddache costs TD5.

Gightis

قطيس

The Roman port of **Gightis** (admission TD1.1, plus camera TD1; ☎ 8am-noon & 3-7pm Sat-Thu Apr-Sep, 8.30am-5.30pm Oct-Mar), 20km south of El-Jorf on the back road from Medenine, is one of Tunisia's least-visited ancient sites.

Established by the Phoenicians, Gightis became a busy port during Roman times, exporting gold, ivory and slaves delivered by trans-Saharan caravans. Most of the buildings date from the 2nd century AD and are spread around the ancient capitol and forum. The site lay buried until the early 20th century and is largely undeveloped. It's a good spot for a stroll, with clumps of palms and acacia trees dotting the coast above the gleaming waters of the Gulf of Bou Grara.

Don't worry if the site appears closed – the guardian lives opposite and will emerge.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Buses and louages between Houmt Souq and Medenine can drop you at the site, which is just south of the tiny modern village of Bou Grara. You'll have to pay the full fare for Houmt Souq to Medenine if you catch a louage. Getting away is more difficult; you may have a long wait for a bus, and louages are likely to be full. The local practice is to flag down whatever comes by.