



Jerba

For such a small island, Jerba contains the ingredients of most people's idea of the ideal holiday vacation: soft sandy beaches, warm Mediterranean waters, a warren of shops selling every imaginable handicraft, a maze of cobblestone streets and a history of ethnic and religious diversity more pronounced than the rest of the country. To the classically inclined, the name Jerba conjures up images of Homer's Land of the Lotus Eaters, an island so seductive that it's impossible to leave. But many visitors voluntarily sequester themselves at the McHotels along beautiful Sidi Mahres beach, and while the appeal of a luxury beach resort speaks for itself, the rest of Jerba shouldn't be missed.

The heart of the island is Houmt Souq, its largest town and one of Tunisia's most unique. So polished and charming it's like eye candy for those living in concrete jungles. It's chock-a-block with outdoor cafés, has enough carpets, souvenirs and crafts to satisfy the most demanding shopaholic and has a handful of ancient *funduqs* (inns), the town's architectural trademark, set around a central courtyard and converted into hotels.

Inland amongst crumbling homesteads you'll find one of the last remaining Jewish communities in North Africa, with their synagogue at Erriadh, as well as an equally unusual population of Ibadis (an offshoot of the Kharijite sect found only in Jerba). Jerba's postcard-perfect beaches are as good as advertised, but it's the interior with its distinctive above- and below-ground mosques and the small villages shaded by palm trees that lingers in your memory after you have left.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Shop till you drop in **Houmt Souq** (p274)
- Soak up the sun at **Sidi Mahres beach** (p280)
- Visit the ancient Jewish community at the **El-Ghriba synagogue** (p277) in Erriadh



History

When Phoenicians arrived on the scene about 2700 years ago, Berber tribes were already well established on Jerba. Among them was the Gerbitani of Gerba (near modern Houmt Souq). The Phoenicians established settlements at Gightis on the mainland and Meninx (modern El-Kantara) on Jerba. The island was one of the first places to fall to the Arabs on their march into Tunisia, but it later became a stronghold and refuge of the Kharijites in the wake of the Kharijite rebellion and subsequent Fatimid backlash that erupted across North Africa in AD 740. They belonged to the Ibadite sect of Kharijism (see the boxed text, p280) and were largely responsible for the over 200 mosques on the island.

Jerba later became a home base for some of the Mediterranean's most renowned pirates, including the Barbarossa brothers and later their offside Dragut – who became Dargouth Pasha, ruler of Tripoli. Dragut's renown was enhanced by a famous escape from the Spanish in 1551 when his fleet was trapped in the Gulf of Bou Grara; he escaped

at night by hauling the ships across a breach in the causeway. Returning in 1560, he massacred Spanish forces the next year, leaving the Tower of Skulls near Houmt Souq.

Climate

For sun worshippers Jerba is a great place to visit year-round since even in the middle of winter temperatures rarely drop below 15°C. However, as in the rest of Tunisia, summers are hot though a regular sea breeze cools things down along the coast.

Getting There & Away

AIR

Jerba's airport, near Mellita village in the northwest, handles a busy schedule of international flights with a constant flow of charter flights from Europe (see p304). **Tuninter** (☎ 75 650 320; ave Habib Bourguiba) has an office in Houmt Souq and four flights a day to Tunis (TD84 one way, one hour) in summer.

BUS

The bus station is a block west of ave Habib Bourguiba at the southern edge of Houmt

Souq. Scheduled departures are listed on a board above the ticket windows.

SNTRI runs at least three air-con services a day to Tunis (TD21). Two of these travel via Kairouan (TD15, six hours) and take eight hours; the other service goes via Sfax (TD12, five hours) and Sousse (TD16.5, seven hours) and takes nine hours. All SNTRI services stop at Gabès (TD6.1, 2½ hours).

The regional company, Sotregames, has five buses a day to Medenine. Make sure you catch one of the services that travel via the Ajim–El-Jorf ferry. These services cost TD3.7 and take 1½ hours; services via Zarzis take an hour longer and cost TD4.8. Two of these buses continue to Tataouine (TD6, 2½ hours). The afternoon service travels via Zarzis, stretching the journey time to 3½ hours and the fare is TD6.9.

There are three buses a day to Gabès (TD6.1, three hours). One service continues to Matmata (TD6.5, three hours).

CAR

An efficient car ferry service operates 24 hours a day between the Jerban port of Ajim and El-Jorf on the mainland, leaving every 20 minutes from 6.30am to 9.30pm; hourly from 9.30pm to 11.30pm; twice-hourly from 11.30pm to 4.30am; and hourly again from 4.30am to 6.30am. The trip takes 15 minutes and the fare is 800 mills for a car. Passengers travel free.

The other alternative is to take the old Roman causeway that links El-Kantara and the mainland. This only makes sense if you are heading south to Zarzis or if you're approaching Jerba from the south.

LOUAGE

Louages (shared taxis) leave from the parking lot at the southern entrance to Houmt Souq. There are frequent departures for Gabès (TD6) and Medenine (TD5.2), and services to Tataouine (TD7). Occasional louages leave for Tunis, Sfax and Sousse.

Getting Around

TO/FROM THE AIRPORT

The airport is 8km west of Houmt Souq, past the village of Mellita. There are three buses (570 mills) a day from the central bus station, which doesn't make it a very convenient option. Taxis are hassle free and

cost only around TD3.5 from Houmt Souq, or TD8.5 from the Zone Touristique.

BICYCLE & MOPED

Renting a bicycle or motor scooter is an enjoyable and relatively inexpensive way to get around the island. Keep in mind that you're unlikely to be covered by your insurance policy when riding a moped so keep an eagle eye out for young children, wayward cyclists and attacking dogs. On the plus side, the roads on Jerba are very flat. **Rais Rentals** (☎ 75 650 303; ave Abdelhamid el-Kadhi), north of the Mosque of the Strangers in Houmt Souq, has a good selection of bikes and motor scooters. Bicycles/50cc-scooters cost from TD10 to TD45 per day.

BUS

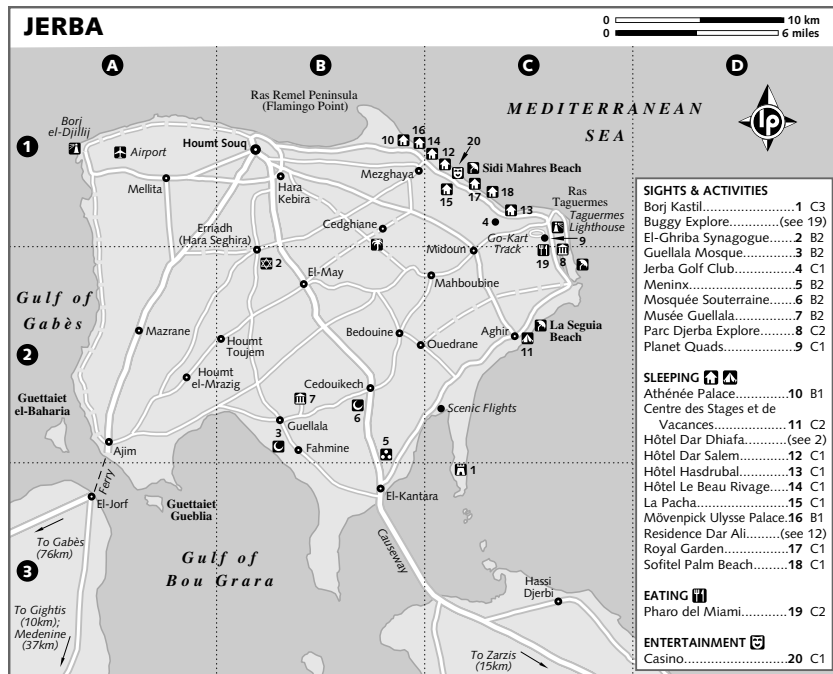
For those with more time than dinars, the cheapest way to get around the island is with the reasonably extensive local bus network, which operates from Houmt Souq to Guel-lala (TD1, 30 minutes, nine daily) via Erriadh (Hara Seghira; 600 mills), Cedouikech (800 mills, seven daily), the Zone Touristique (TD1, 13 daily), and Midoun (900 mills, 30 minutes, 12 daily) among other villages. There's a timetable and a colour-coded route map of the services above the ticket windows in Houmt Souq's bus station. You can also purchase tickets on the bus.

CAR RENTAL

If you're after flexibility and freedom and plan to explore sights on the mainland, then renting a car is an efficient option though not inexpensive. All the companies have offices in Houmt Souq and out at the airport. The offices in town include **Avis** (☎ 75 650 151; bld de l'Environnement), **Budget** (☎ 75 635 444; ave Abdelhamid el-Kadhi), **Europcar** (☎ 75 650 357; ave Abdelhamid el-Kadhi) and **Hertz** (☎ 75 650 196; ave Habib Bourguiba). It's possible to return the car at an office in another city on the mainland for a surcharge. There is a cluster of local companies at the northern end of ave Abdelhamid el-Kadhi; these tend to be less expensive than the international companies though the quality of the vehicles is more suspect.

TAXI

Renting a taxi can be a good way to see the island. Rates start at TD10 per hour, but



THE LAND OF THE LOTUS-EATERS

According to legend, Jerba is the Land of the Lotus-Eaters, where Ulysses paused in the course of the *Odyssey* and had a lot of trouble persuading his crew to get back on board. Today's islanders are said to be descendants of these people.

In a passage that more than a few visitors to Jerba can relate to, Homer described how, after landing in 'the country of the Lotus-Eaters' and being given flowering food by the natives, the companions of Ulysses did not want to leave and couldn't even remember the way home.

These days there's scarcely a lotus to be found anywhere on the island, although many visitors to Jerba wish that they could forget the way home. Even louage drivers, not normally the most poetic of men, seem to have eaten of the lotus. When we boarded our louage to Jerba, the driver told us: 'You are going to the island of dreams'.

you may be able to bargain for less. Taxi drivers know the island inside out, but do have a tendency to take you to where they think you should go rather than where you want; be firm. There are two taxi ranks in Houmt Souq – on ave Habib Bourguiba in the centre of town and place Sidi Brahim. Some of the big hotels in the Zone Touristique have their own taxi ranks. It's about TD7 from Houmt Souq to Sidi Mahres.

HOUMT SOUQ

pop 70,000

Imagine a Greek fishing village crossed with a Middle Eastern souq with a little Italian piazza thrown in and you have some idea of the beguiling charm of the island's capital. While its name in Arabic is ordinary and strictly descriptive – it literally means 'marketplace', which is all it was until the 20th century – the compact mix of uniformly whitewashed architecture (see the boxed text, p274), slow island pace and labyrinthine alleyways means Houmt Souq is one of Tunisia's gems. The ideal time to appreciate the town's charm is in the evening when the day trippers have gone, the shops have closed up, the temperature has cooled and you can wander the streets in dreamy silence.

Orientation

Ave Habib Bourguiba runs north through the town centre from the bus and louage stations and finishes near the port, while ave Abdelhamid el-Kadhi skirts the eastern edge of town. The souqs and most of the town's hotels and restaurants are found within the large V formed by these streets.

Information

BOOKSHOPS
The bookshop just north of the post office on ave Habib Bourguiba stocks international newspapers, magazines, a small collection of novels in French and an even smaller number of airport paperbacks in English.

INTERNET ACCESS

Cyber Planet (☎) 8am-10pm; per hr TD1.5) Northwest of place Sidi Brahim; fast connections.
Djerba Cyber Espace (☎) 9am-midnight; per hr TD2) Stairs to the 2nd-floor entrance are inside the courtyard of Restaurant el-Foundouk.

MEDICAL SERVICES

Clinique Dar ech-Chifa (☎ 75 650 441; fax 75 652 215; off ave Abdelhamid el-Kadhi) Private clinic northeast of town.
Hospital (☎ 75 650 018) Large regional facility about 500m southeast of the town centre on the road to Midoun.

MONEY

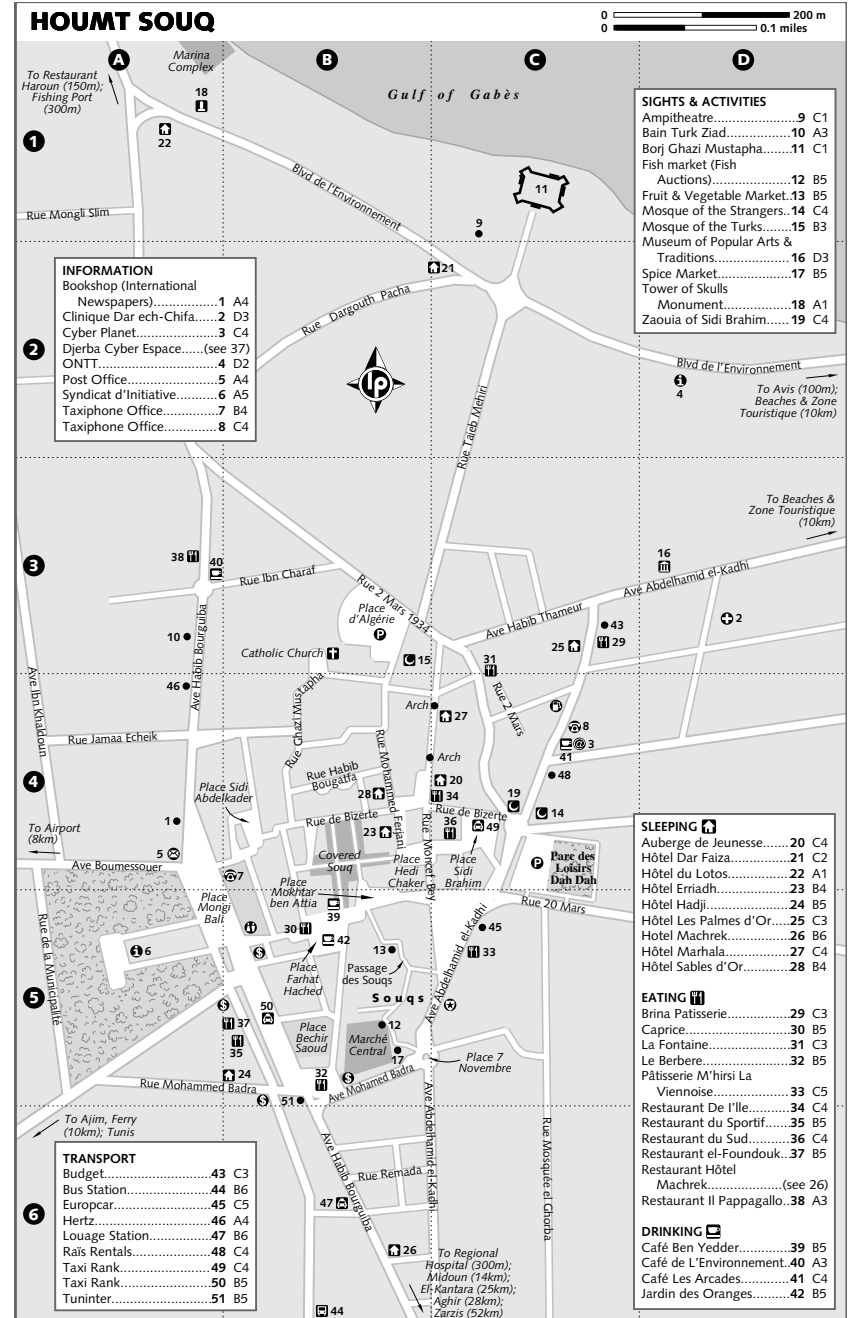
All the major banks have branches around the town centre and most have ATMs. There's always one bank rostered to be open on Saturday and Sunday; the *syndicat d'initiative* (tourist office) can tell you which one.

POST & TELEPHONE

There are dozens of Taxiphone offices around the town centre, including one on ave Habib Bourguiba and another on ave Abdelhamid el-Kadhi.
Main post office (ave Habib Bourguiba)

TOURIST INFORMATION

ONTT (☎ 75 650 016; blvd de l'Environnement; ☎ 8.30am-1pm & 3-5.45pm Mon-Thu, 8.30am-1.30pm Fri & Sat) Out on the beach road, about a 15-minute walk from the centre.
Syndicat d'initiative (☎ 75 650 915; ave Habib Bourguiba; ☎ 8am-2pm summer, to 3pm Mon-Sat winter) A little building set back from the street, behind the two large maps of the island opposite place Mongi Bali. Friendly staff.



Sights & Activities

SOUQS

Virtually every nook and cranny, every cobblestone displays tantalising wares, from striking carpets to jewellery, ceramics and miniature bird cages, the colours creating a beautiful contrast to the whitewashed buildings lining the maze of alleyways. Turn a corner and you will find an open square peopled with coffee drinkers enjoying the shade in a charming café. Shop owners have been somewhat spoiled by tourists who don't bargain hard, but there's so much competition for the souvenir dinar that with a little patience and fortitude you should be able to get a fair price. There's also a handful of fixed price shops; it's good to check in at one of these to get a feel for things.

The old town is filled with some fine examples of traditional Jerban architecture, including white walls enclosing living quarters and domes dotting the skyline. A particular feature of the old town is the *funduqs* (inns), former lodging houses for

the travelling merchants of the camel caravans that stopped here in Ottoman times when Houmt Souq was the island's most important entrepôt for trade. They were built on two floors surrounding a central courtyard; the top floor had rooms for the merchants, while their animals were housed below. Some of these *funduqs* have been turned into excellent hotels.

The daily auctions at the **fish market** are a good change of pace from tourist Jerba. They take place late in the morning in the northeast corner of the Marché Central. Auctioneers command attention performing their bit of mercantile theatre: sitting on elevated thrones they tout strings of fish handed to them by their helpers and fishermen. The bidders range from restaurant owners to local women buying fish for the family. Fishing is Jerba's second-biggest money earner and it can all get delightfully frenetic. Close by, the **spice market** and the **fruit and vegetable market** are more sedate but still worth a look. All the markets are open from sunrise to sunset.

JERBAN ARCHITECTURE

Jerba's highly distinctive fortress architecture reflects the island's long history as a stronghold of the fiercely autonomous Ibadite sect (see the boxed text, p280). The constant fear of attack encouraged the development of a bunker mentality, and the landscape is dotted with what look like defensive battlements.

The architecture also reflects the islanders' preoccupation with water conservation, and with keeping cool during the long, hot summers. Rooftops and courtyards were designed to channel rainwater into underground *impluviums* (tanks), providing both a water supply and a cool foundation. Thick rendered walls built of mud and stone provided further insulation. Finally, buildings were painted a brilliant white to deflect the summer sun.

Nothing typifies Jerban architecture quite like the mosque. These squat, square buildings positively bristle with defiance and with their heavily buttressed walls and minimalist decoration, they look more like forts than places of worship. The finest examples are the mosque at El-May – which stands in the middle of a large paved compound, dotted with hatches where you can check out the water level in the tanks below – and the one south of Guellala.

Menzels are traditional fortified homesteads. The island once boasted hundreds of them, but most have now been abandoned. There are still some good examples to be seen beside the main road between Ajim and Houmt Souq, and around El-May in the centre of the island. They were all built to a standard design, with a defensive wall enclosing a large rectangular central compound entered by a single gate. Rooms were built around the inside of the walls, which had square towers at the corners. The top storeys of these towers were used as summer bedrooms, with window grates to let in the evening breezes and slatted floors for extra ventilation.

Known as *harout*, the traditional weaver's workshops have a design that is simplicity itself: a long, barrel-vaulted *ghorfa* (room) built half below ground for insulation. They are characterised by a triangular front, extending well beyond the walls of the *ghorfa*, and buttressing along the outer walls. There's a good example to be found in the grounds of the Museum of Popular Arts & Traditions in Houmt Souq.

ISLAMIC MONUMENTS

There are some interesting Islamic monuments around town. On the edge of the souq is the imposing **Zaouia of Sidi Ibrahim** (rue 2 Mars 1934), which contains the tomb of the 17th-century saint. On the other side of the road is the multi-domed **Mosque of the Strangers** (ave Abdelhamid el-Kadhi). The 18th-century **Mosque of the Turks** is north of the souq on place d'Algérie. Built in the same fortress style as the island's traditional mosques, the only clue to its Turkish origins is the distinctive Ottoman minaret. All of these monuments are closed to non-Muslims but can be admired from the courtyard outside.

MUSEUM OF POPULAR ARTS & TRADITIONS

Though the displays aren't especially exciting, a visit to this little **museum** (☎ 75 650 540; ave Abdelhamid el-Kadhi; admission TD2.1, plus camera TD1; ☎ 8am-noon & 3-7pm Sat-Thu summer, 9.30am-4.30pm Sat-Thu winter) does provide some context and perspective on the culture of the island, one you're unlikely to get at the beaches of Sidi Mahres. It houses a good collection of local costumes as well as pottery and jewellery though exhibits are only labelled in Arabic and French. The room housing the latter still has the original terracotta domed tile ceiling as well as superbly intricate latticework design around the base. Indeed, the building itself is as interesting as the exhibits, with courtyards, arches and underground workshops. The museum occupies the Zaouia of Sidi Zitouni under the eucalyptus trees about 200m from the town centre; look for the ticket office in the small traditional weaver's hut near the entrance.

BORJ GHAZI MUSTAPHA

The town's old **fort** (Borj el-Kebir; admission TD3, plus camera TD1; ☎ 8am-7pm Sat-Thu summer, 9.30am-4.30pm Sat-Thu winter) is on the coast 600m north of the Mosque of the Turks. It was built by the Aragonese in the 13th century from the rubble of a 9th-century Aghlabid *ribat* (fortified monastery). It was extended early in the 16th century.

The fort was the scene of a massacre in 1560 when a Turkish fleet under Dragut (see p270) captured the fort and put the Spanish garrison of around 6000 men to the sword. The skulls of the victims were stacked up on the shoreline 500m west of

THE OCTOPUS CATCHERS

On this island that has been transformed by tourism, not everything has changed. The most distinctive features of Houmt Souq's fishing harbour are the great piles of terracotta pots shaped like Roman amphorae. Each bears its own mark signifying the local octopus fisherman who uses it in a traditional technique known as *gargoulette* that has changed little from Phoenician times. The 45cm to 50cm pots are tied together and cast out on long lines; they sink to the bottom and are left there for the octopus to discover. The slow-learning octopus mistakes the pot for its favourite underwater rocky nook or cranny, and obligingly crawls into the pot, only to be caught when the pots are hauled to the surface.

the fort as a grim reminder to others not to mess with Dragut. This macabre **Tower of Skulls** stood for almost 300 years until it was dismantled in 1848. A simple monument now stands in its place, although a drawing in the room next to the fort's entrance shows how it must have appeared.

The fort's interior has dozens of rooms and a mosque crammed into a small space. The ramparts are accessible and offer good views along the coast. Look for the mounds of cannonballs, both stone and rusting iron, that have been found in the course of restoration.

There's a large recently constructed **amphitheatre**, the planned setting for performances and a sound and light show, next to the fort.

On Mondays and Thursdays, Rue Taieb Mehiri, the road that leads directly back to town from the fort, is the place to find the **Libyan market**. Traders from Tunisia's neighbour to the south once set up shop here though these days it's T-shirts, jeans and other everyday Western goods. It's only open for two days of the week; ask at your accommodation for details.

FISHING PORT & MARINA

Houmt Souq's busy little fishing port is at the northern end of ave Habib Bourguiba, about a 25-minute walk from town. Early mornings are the busiest and most interesting times to visit. Also out in the

same direction is a brand new multimillion-dollar marina complex of apartments, shops, cafés and restaurants. At the time of research only about half the space was occupied.

Festivals & Events

Created and engineered for the delight of tourists, the **Ulysses Festival** is held in July to August and includes events like a Miss Ulysses beauty contest. Any of the tourist offices (see p272) can provide details.

Sleeping

There's a good array of sleeping options in Houmt Souq though none are top-end or resort quality. Prices here include breakfast unless stated. For camping on the island, head to Aghir (p281), 28km southeast of Houmt Souq.

For those who find the Zone Touristique too sterile or expensive and want a little more quiet than what's available in Houmt Souq proper, there are two hotels facing the beach on blvd de l'Environnement just to the west of the fort.

BUDGET

Auberge de Jeunesse (☎ 75 650 619; rue Moncef Bey; dm TD6) The old *funduq* this youth hostel occupies is picturesque enough for the casual tourist to stop to snap a photo; however, the rooms with two to four beds are rudimentary. Reservations are definitely recommended during the high season. Bathrooms are shared.

Hôtel Sables d'Or (☎ 75 650 423; rue Mohammed Ferjani; s/d TD13/25) This charming and attractive old home is decorated with antiques and the small but stylish rooms are immaculate. There are private showers but toilets are shared.

Hôtel Marhala (☎ 75 650 146; fax 75 653 317; rue Moncef Bey; s/d TD18/28) An atmospheric place to stay in Houmt Souq, the Marhala (owned by the Touring Club de Tunisie) has barrel-vaulted rooms surrounding a central courtyard. You may feel like a medieval monk in some of the more unadorned ones.

Hôtel Erriadh (☎ 75 650 756; mounirherbegue@gnet.tn; rue Mohammed Ferjani; s/d TD19/30; 🍷) Besides being a comfortable and charmingly decorated place, the Erriadh is architecturally delightful, housed in one of the old *funduqs*. Some of the rooms have ceiling fans.

MIDRANGE

Hôtel Hadji (☎ 75 650 630; hotel.hadjires@gnet.tn; 44 rue Mohammed Badra; s/d TD22/32; 🍷) Just around the corner from a supermarket, the Hadji won't win any interior design awards but the rooms are functional and the bathrooms are kept clean. There's a small café on the ground floor.

Hôtel Les Palmes d'Or (☎ 75 653 369; fax 75 653 368; 84 ave Abdelhamid el-Kadhi; s/d TD32/50; 🍷) Less modern and comfortable than the Machrek, this friendly hotel on the northeastern edge of town, nevertheless is popular with groups and has large, clean rooms.

Hôtel du Lotos (☎ 75 650 026; blvd de l'Environnement; s/d TD25/50; 🍷) This hotel situated opposite the Tower of Skulls monument near the marina complex is an attractive and airy whitewashed complex. Most of the rooms get good sunlight but the wooden furnishings are basic. There's a pleasant outdoor patio area with a restaurant and bar.

Hotel Machrek (☎ 75 653 155; hôtel.elmachrek@planet.tn; ave Habib Bourguiba; s/d TD28/56; 🍷) Easily the best value option in Houmt Souq, the Machrek has comfortable and modern rooms, at least as nice as many of the *zone touristique* hotels. There's a sunny central courtyard, good restaurant and professional front desk staff.

Hôtel Dar Faiza (☎ 75 650 083; www.darfaiza.darsalem.com; blvd de l'Environnement; s/d TD39/74; 🍷 🍷) Almost directly across the street from the amphitheatre, the friendly Dar Faiza feels like the private villa of a once prosperous family whose fortunes have changed. There's no denying the appeal of the small pool but the rooms are older and more basic than you'd expect from the outside; however, it's still a good choice.

Eating

The streets and alleyways of central Houmt Souq are a veritable moving feast with a café or restaurant seemingly every few feet.

Le Berbere (ave Habib Bourguiba; sandwiches TD2) Chow down on custom filled pitta sandwiches and fries at this fast food-style stand-up restaurant.

Caprice (place Farhat Hached; mains TD3) Claiming a particularly prime piece of real estate on the edge of one of the busiest squares, Caprice is a modern restaurant with indoor and outdoor seating. Food is Italian crossed

with fast food: pizza (TD2.8), hamburgers, spaghetti and meat dishes.

Restaurant du Sportif (ave Habib Bourguiba; mains TD3) Frequented by locals rather than tourists, du Sportif is a friendly no-nonsense eatery serving good portions of basic couscous, meat and chicken dishes for bargain prices.

La Fontaine (☎ 75 254 205; rue 2 Mars; mains TD4) Choose from a variety of distinctive dining areas at this fairyland like restaurant, from the wooden Swiss tea house to the Moroccan-style patio. There seems to be more than one menu and it's hard to work out the theme but you can choose from pizza (TD3.7), crepes (TD1.5) and sandwiches (TD1.5) as well as drinks and ice cream. A set menu is offered from 4pm on.

Restaurant el-Foundouk (☎ 75 653 238; off ave Habib Bourguiba; mains from TD4.5, set menu TD7-15) Set back from the road in a courtyard, el-Foundouk feels a little lonely, even more so because service can seem half-hearted and despite the French, German, English and Arabic menus, they seem unprepared for diners. One way around this is to order the special fish couscous for four (TD28) 24 hours in advance.

Restaurant Il Pappagallo (☎ 75 416 216; ave Habib Bourguiba; mains TD6) Big hearty portions of pasta are served here with an unusual amount of elegance and attention to detail. If this lovely Italian restaurant isn't crowded it's only because there's no pedestrian traffic on this road leading out of town. Even the dishes and silverware, to say nothing of the service, is a step above the rest. Pizzas (TD6.5), salads and meat dishes are also on the menu.

Restaurant du Sud (☎ 75 650 479; mains TD6) Between place Hedi Chaker and place Sidi Brahim, du Sud is fairly cookie cutter as tourist souq restaurants go, but the large helpings of seafood are fresh and comparatively inexpensive.

Restaurant de l'Île (rue de Bizerte; mains TD7) A more sophisticated version of the souq restaurants catering specifically to tourists, this place has classy trappings and tasty seafood specials for moderate prices, including overflowing plates of fresh clams. The *briq au fruits de mer* is almost big enough for a meal in and of itself. Wine is available.

Restaurant Haroun (☎ 75 650 488; mains TD15) Posh and lovely, this restaurant on the edge

of the new marina complex is the most up-market place in Houmt Souq. Whether you eat in the docked pirate-like ship or the main dining room with high ceilings and stonework, it's worth the price. *Haute cuisine* fish and meat dishes are served.

Pâtisserie M'hirsi La Viennoise (ave Abdelhamid el-Kadhi) and **Brina Pâtisserie** (ave Abdelhamid el-Kadhi) have a good array of cakes and pastries.

Of the hotel restaurants, one of the best is the streetside one at the **Hotel Machrek** (ave Habib Bourguiba; mains TD5).

Drinking

Café Ben Yedder (place Mokhtar ben Attia) Popular with locals and tourists alike, Ben Yedder is a prime people watching spot with an above average collection of pastries and snacks.

Jardin des Oranges (place Farhat Hached) Tables here are scattered over the entire square, on the lawn, under the pavilion and inside, and while it's hard to determine who in fact your waiter is, there's no hurry. Most of the territory is marked by small baskets of oranges. Beware: the juice is pricey (TD3.5).

Café de l'Environnement (ave Habib Bourguiba) Just down the road from the Restaurant Il Pappagallo on the northern edge of town, this café, nothing more than plastic tables set up in a garden, is a good place to stop for a breather on a walk to or from the marina complex.

Café Les Arcades (ave Abdelhamid el-Kadhi) More distinctive than the average coffeehouse because of the marble tables, Les Arcades feels slightly Parisian even if it's strictly filled with local regulars.

ERRIADH (HARA SEGHIRA) الرِّيَاض

The village of Erriadh or Hara Seghira (Small Ghetto), 7km south of Houmt Souq, is notable only because of its ancient synagogue and the presence of one of the island's finer hotels.

El-Ghriba Synagogue

The most important synagogue on Jerba and the oldest in North Africa is **El-Ghriba** (The Miracle; admission TD1; ☎ 7.30am-6pm Sun-Fri), signposted 1km south of the town. It's a major place of pilgrimage during *Lag Ba'Omer*, usually occurring in May, when Jews come to pay tribute to the grand master of the Talmud, Shimon Bar Yashai, who died more than 400 years ago. As part of the festivities,

local Jews and pilgrims carry the community's holy books through the town.

The site dates back to 586 BC, although the present building was built early in the 20th century. The original synagogue is thought to have been founded here after a holy stone fell from heaven at the site and a mysterious woman appeared to direct the construction of the synagogue. It is also believed that when the last Jew leaves Jerba, the keys to the synagogue will return to heaven.

The interior is an attractive combination of blue tilework and sombre wooden furniture. The inner sanctuary, with its elevated pulpit, is said to contain one of the oldest Torahs (Jewish holy book) in the world. Numerous silver plaques from pilgrims adorn the eastern wall.

Because of the 2002 attack on the synagogue, security at the site is now as tight as you'll see in Tunisia with airport style detectors (independent travellers may be asked for their passport).

Sleeping & Eating

Hôtel Dar Dhiafa (☎ 75 671 166; www.hoteldardhiafa.com; d TD180, ste TD220-260; 🚻 📺 📶) This is an elegantly opulent hotel with 10 rooms, four suites, all wonderfully and uniquely decorated with fine artwork and local handi-

crafts, wrought iron beds under a cupola and elaborate doorways to each private residence. The Dar Dhiafa is the anti-*zone touristique* hotel, so discreet, subtle and tasteful in its lavishness that you feel like royalty or a celebrity in a private hideaway. Facilities include an excellent restaurant, two swimming pools, a *hammam* (public bathhouse) and a Moorish café. The hotel is well signposted in town.

Getting There & Away

Buses from Houmt Souq to Guellala go past the synagogue (600 mills).

GUELLALA

قُلَّة

If you arrive in the middle of the day at this village on the south coast of the island, it will seem almost like a ghost town since shopkeepers shutter their doors and seek refuge from the heat. When a big tourist bus rolls down the street the pottery workshops and galleries come alive with activity. Though the selection is similar to what you'll find in Houmt Souq, odds are you'll get the real goods rather than an imitation and a better chance of striking a good deal. However, other than shopping and the museum, Guellala is not an especially exceptional place to visit.

THE JEWS OF JERBA

The Jewish community dates its arrival in Jerba either from 586 BC, following Nebuchadnezzar's conquest of Jerusalem, or from the Roman sacking of the same city in AD 71; either way this makes it one of the oldest Jewish communities in the world outside Israel. Some historians, however, argue that many Jerban Jews are descended from Berbers who converted to Judaism. Over the centuries the community also received several influxes of Jews fleeing from persecution in Spain, Italy and Palestine.

In the 19th century, Jews in Jerba were required to wear distinctive clothes: black pantaloons, black skull cap and sleeveless blue shirts. Discrimination ended with the arrival of the French in 1881. The community was known for being staunchly traditional, like its neighbours the Kharijite Muslims, and it rejected financial and educational aid from the rest of the Jewish world. Communities of Jerban Jews settled all over southern Tunisia, usually working as blacksmiths famed for their jewellery, but returned to the island for the summer and for religious festivals.

Most Jerban Jews emigrated to Israel after the 1956 and 1967 Arab-Israeli wars; after centuries of relative peace, the clash between Arab and Israeli nationalism made their position untenable across North Africa. The community also suffered during WWII, when the Germans extorted 50kg of gold as a communal fine.

The Jewish community on Jerba now numbers only a few hundred. The community's survival on Jerba was called into question in April 2002 when a truck bomb exploded at El-Ghriba synagogue, killing 19 people in an event locals call 'Le Catastrophe'. Muslim and Jewish locals are quick to point out that the two communities have lived in harmony alongside one another for generations, pointing the finger at external elements for the bombing.

JERBA AND TOURISM

The at-times-difficult relationship between tourism and traditional Tunisian society is best evident than on Jerba, particularly in Houmt Souq and the Zone Touristique. Environmentally, ground water has become less potable and agriculture less tenable as supplies are exhausted by tourist resorts and other tourist infrastructure on the island. For many of the older inhabitants of Jerba, the tourism inundation has also been profoundly alienating, with liberal displays of flesh putting the best beaches out of bounds for Tunisian families, and prices pushed ever higher to catch the tourist euro.

The most visible example of the impact of tourism upon traditional life can be found at the fishing harbour north of Houmt Souq, where local fishermen have been following millennia-old techniques passed down from father to son. Behind the little harbour is a new luxury marina complex modelled on those at Monastir and Port el-Kantaoui, intended as the domain of wealthy yachters, while the fishermen are shunted further along the coast.

Traditional ways survive in the Berber-speaking Ibadite villages of the south, like Guellala and Cedouikech, but they're fading as young people are drawn away to jobs in the tourist business.

Tourism has also brought good things to Jerba, including a renewed interest in preserving the architectural heritage of the island, the revival of the manufacturing of traditional handicrafts and the providing of much-needed jobs; government statistics suggest that every hotel bed in Tunisia supports 1.1 direct local jobs.

Your impact is likely to be diminished if you avoid the temptation to fly through the souq, make a couple of rapid-fire purchases and eat at a restaurant visited only by tourists, only to hasten back to your hotel. Take the time to talk to locals – whether it's the youngster who serves you breakfast, the vendor who sells you the stuffed camel or the old men sitting in the cafés frequented only by locals. Chances are that they'll appreciate someone taking the time to stop and listen to a different story of Jerba.

Sights & Activities

CAVE D'ALI BERBERE

Be sure to check out the Cave d'Ali Berbere, on the southeastern edge of town. Ali is an endearing man who, in French, will tell you that the cave, supported by a series of stone arches, dates back to Roman times. He'll demonstrate pottery-making as it used to be done, climb into a massive amphora to show how Ali Baba and his 40 thieves were able to hide and take you to an ancient underground olive press. There's no entrance fee but a tip is both appreciated and deserved.

GUELLALA MOSQUE

The 15th-century waterfront mosque 1.5km south of town is a fine example of Jerban Islamic architecture, and a favourite spot to watch the sunset.

MUSÉE GUELLALA

This large whitewashed complex of buildings sits in a commanding position at the top of a hill nearly 2km east of town on the road to Cedouikech. The **museum** (Museum of Guellala, Musée du Patrimoine; ☎ 75 761 114; admission TD5, plus camera TD3; 🕒 7am-11pm summer, 8am-6pm winter) is really a collection of life-size dio-

ramas using mannequins past their prime to illustrate Jerban customs and folklore. The rather kitschy reproductions of 'scenes from Jerban life' range from weddings (the depilation scene graphically captures the pain of hair removal!) and the solemn rite of circumcision to Sufi dancers and olive pressing. Music is piped through the rooms, and there are labels in four languages. There are also displays of wedding costumes from around Tunisia. Even if the dummies leave you unimpressed, there are fine views over Guellala and down to the Gulf of Bou Grara.

Getting There & Away

There are seven buses a day between Guellala and Houmt Souq (800 mills, 30 minutes). If you take a taxi, be sure to arrange the return trip in advance; transport here is extremely sparse.

GUELLALA TO THE ZONE TOURISTIQUE

The most interesting road northeast of Guellala runs through the quiet town of **Cedouikech**, notable for its subterranean mosque, the **mosquée souterraine** or Louta Mosque, with only the white domes visible above ground. It was an Ibadite mosque and dates from

the 12th century. Continuing northeast takes you to **Mahboubine**, where the Turkish or El-Kaatib Mosque is worth stopping for. The road from here to Midoun is a good place to see examples of traditional *menzels* (Jerban dwellings) along the roadside.

Midoun, the island's second-largest town, is a smaller, less charming version of Houmt Souq. It does have a busy Friday market; however, it's crowded with tourists on the prowl for souvenirs most days of the week during the summer because of its proximity to the hotels on Sidi Mahres beach. Pretty much everything you can find in Houmt Souq is also available here though the experience is less atmospheric. The town also stages a traditional **Jerban wedding ceremony** in the open-air theatre for the benefit of tourists every Tuesday at 4pm (TD2). An excellent place to catch your breath before again entering into high stakes negotiations for that ceramic dish you were eyeing is Le Palais Royal Café Patisserie, a sophisticated Parisian style place with indoor and outdoor seating. Les Delices de Jerba has great pastries, gelati and sandwiches. Restaurant de l'Orient and Restaurant Constantine serve reasonably priced Tunisian fare. There are several banks with ATMs.

Another worthwhile detour is to the oasis of **Cedghiane**. It's in the most fertile part of the island, with an ample supply of

sweet artesian water, which has allowed the development of traditional, tiered desert oasis agriculture. Tall palms provide shade for citrus and pomegranate trees, which in turn protect vegetable crops. The huge *menzels* of the area are evidence that this was once an important settlement, but most are in ruins.

ZONE TOURISTIQUE

Like other *zone touristiques* throughout Tunisia, Jerba's (which occupies most of the island's eastern coast) is filled with artificially enhanced resorts, the equivalent of an athlete on steroids. There's nothing modest about these all-inclusive behemoths – whether it's the Las Vegas meets the Kasbah design schemes or the cavernous chandelier-filled atriums, it's a little bit of a disorienting experience to stay here.

In some ways it would be unfortunate if **Sidi Mahres**, a long sweep of golden sand, was all one saw of the country, though for some it's a perfectly wonderful vacation full of sun, sand and banana boating for the kids. It begins east of the low-lying Ras Remel Peninsula, which protrudes from the middle of the north coast 10km east of Houmt Souq. The peninsula is known as **Flamingo Point** because of the large number of flamingos that gathers there in winter. Sidi Mahres beach then continues east all the way to **Ras Taguermes**, the cape at Jerba's eastern tip. A

long sand spit extends south from the cape, enclosing a large lagoon.

South of here on the east coast is **La Segouia**. The hotels are spaced further apart here and the beaches are less crowded.

Most of the beaches are the private domain of the hotels, but there are some small public beaches (ask for *la plage populaire*; the only ones left for locals) just south of the Mövenpick Ulysse Palace resort.

The road running along the coast behind the hotels has a range of restaurants, souvenir shops and bicycle/scooter-hire places.

Sights & Activities

Most people indulge in the activity of lethargy and a trip from the bar to the pool can be considered an aerobic workout. For the more energetic, all the hotels offer every imaginable **water sport** from windsurfing to catamarans, jet skiing and parasailing. For those hoping to change their financial future through the hard work of gambling, Jerba has its very own **casino** (☎ 75 757 537; ⌚ 24hr); it only accepts foreign currency.

A fairly sterile attempt to beef up the island's cultural offerings is the new **Parc Djerba Explore** (☎ 75 745 277; djerbaexplore.commercial@planet.tn; adult/child TD12/6), a combination museum, heritage zone and crocodile park out next to the Taguermes Lighthouse. The crocs are mesmerising, the museum houses a good collection of Islamic ceramics, textiles and manuscripts but the small heritage zone is nothing more than an empty house surrounded by sand. The large, modern whitewashed complex includes souvenir shops and a few restaurants and cafés.

Across the road from the Parc is **Buggy Explore** (☎ 75 745 162; per 1½ hrs TD45), where you can rent go-cart-like 4WDs to take for a spin on the sandy track down the road. Also near the lighthouse is **Planet Quads** (☎ 75 836 911) offering vehicles of lesser quality.

The **Jerba Golf Club** (☎ 75 745 055; www.djerba.golf.com; 9/18 holes TD40/70, club hire TD15) is out at the eastern edge of the Zone Touristique; reservations are required.

Sleeping & Eating

There seem to be as many hotels lining the Jerban coast on the route Touristique as there are grains of sand on the beach. The gaudy architecture and rather imper-

sonal service are redeemed by the natural assets – soft sand and warm water – that lie just beyond the back doors of these gargantuan pleasure palaces. Walk-up travellers are about as common as snow in the Sahara and you'll probably be given strange looks if you just show up looking for a room. Even if the roads and towns are deserted the hotel pools and lobbies tend to be packed. Most are totally booked out in the summer and really only worthwhile if you book as part of a package. Most are city-states unto themselves with several swimming pools, private beaches, massage centres, tennis courts, nightclubs, bars, restaurants, coffee shops, boutiques and a programme of daily activities to keep guests entertained.

Centre des Stages et de Vacances (☎ 75 750 266; dm without breakfast TD5, tent TD2.5) This is the island's centre for campers or for that matter budget travellers after a beachfront vacation. There are no bells and whistles but the four-bed dorm rooms are comfortable enough. Expect to have to walk to one of the nearby hotels for your meals if there isn't a large group in residence. It's located by the beach at Aghir at the junction of the Midoun road 28km southeast of Houmt Souq. To get there from Houmt Souq, catch the bus (TD1, 40 minutes) to Club Med via Midoun.

Pharo del Miami (mains TD4) This pleasant restaurant is directly across the street from the Parc Djerba Explore; tasty crepes, sandwiches and pizzas are served.

At the time of writing there were several five-star resorts including the **Athénée Palace** (☎ 75 757 600), the **Soffitel Palm Beach** (☎ 75 757 777), the **Mövenpick Ulysse Palace** (☎ 75 758 777), the **Hôtel Hasdrubal** (☎ 75 657 657) and the **Royal Garden** (☎ 75 658 777). Plans for even more are in the works. Summer rates for these run around TD170/218 for a single/double. Dozens of other three- and four-star hotels line the road along Sidi Mahres and while the facilities tend to be similar, the level of service and attention can be hit or miss. A few that have been recommended are the **Djerba Holiday Beach** (☎ 75 758 177, 75 758 192), **Al Jazira** (☎ 75 758 860; bravoclub@planet.tn) and **Abou Nawas** (☎ 75 657 022; fax 75 657 700).

There are several hotels at the western edge of the Zone Touristique that are

THE IBADIS

Jerba is home to one of the last remaining communities of Ibadis, an offshoot of the Kharijites. The word 'Kharijite' means 'those who go out to fight jihad (holy war)'. The Kharijites separated from other Islamic doctrines in the years after Islam was born when they accepted the legitimacy of the first two caliphs but held all others to be in error. Indeed, some argue that the Kharijites were responsible for the death of Ali (the fourth caliph, whose followers founded the Shiite Islamic sect).

When Islam spread across North Africa in the 7th century AD, the rebellious Berber tribes accepted the new religion, but typically were drawn to sects, such as the Kharijites, which rejected the prevailing hierarchies.

The Ibadis believe that the imam or head of the Muslim community should be the most worthy candidate, regardless of their origin or family background. The imam, chosen by the community, can also be removed if he fails to adhere to the Islamic principles of his office. The Ibadis even believe that it is not necessary for there to be an imam at all times. Again this suited the Berbers who would sometimes appoint an imam to mediate between the disparate tribes during times of conflict only to dispense with his services when he was deemed no longer necessary.

Under the Ottomans, the Ibadis, who lived under a council of learned elders, were tolerated and left to their own devices, but their unorthodox beliefs have always made them vulnerable to attack from zealots, hence their retreat to a few well-defended refuges like Jerba.

more welcoming to individual travellers, in part because they tend not to be as heavily booked as the three-star and up places directly on the beach. Most are close to the beach but not right on it, and are more intimate, pension-style accommodation. Expect to pay around TD70/100 for a single/double. The **Hôtel Dar Salem** (☎ 75 757 667; www.darfaizadarsalem.com; 📍), which has a large pool, is certainly one of the nicest. Others to try are the **Hôtel Le Beau Rivage** (☎ 75 758 230), **Residence Dar Ali** (☎ 75 758 045; fax 75 758 045) and **La Pacha** (☎ 75 731 827; hedi.sassi@tunet.tn).

SOUTHEASTERN COAST

Most visitors never make it to this part of the island and for good reason, unless you're interested in some solitude and fairly uninspiring scenery. The **Borj Kastil** is a reconstructed Roman fort visible on a narrow peninsula southwest of La Seguia. It's only accessible if you're on a bike.

Near the town of **El-Kantara** are the meagre ruins of Roman **Meninx**, an ancient trading post. Many of the ruins are visible from the road, especially west and north of El-Kantara. The old Roman causeway links Jerba to the mainland.