

Northern Tunisia



Beloved by Tunisians but often overlooked by visitors from abroad, Northern Tunisia may just be the country's most underappreciated region. Not only does it have some of Tunisia's finest and most secluded beaches, but it's also home to extensive forests, rugged hills that drop precipitously into the glinting blue Mediterranean, and rolling farmland that's magnificently lush in winter and golden in summer.

Bizerte, the region's main city, is endowed with a picturesque ancient port and a bustling – and largely untouristed – commercial centre. It's an excellent base for exploring Ichkeul National Park – one look at the lake and you'll understand why it's a Unesco World Heritage site – and some of the handful of Tunisian beaches that can give southern Thailand a run for its money, including Sidi Ali el-Mekki and Cap Serrat.

Tabarka, out near Algeria, is a slow-moving seaside town with a passable beach, tree-shaded cafés, an excellent golf course, Tunisia's finest scuba diving and, in summer, four of Tunisia's hottest music festivals.

Heading south from Tabarka along narrow, winding roads takes you into the Kroumirie Mountains, thick with cork oak and ideal for hiking (with a guide). The main town is Ain Draham, a friendly, one-time colonial hill station that's high enough to get snow in winter.

Further south, Jendouba is the best base for exploring the subterranean Roman villas of Bulla Regia and the ancient Chemtou quarries, renowned for their unique yellow marble. Béja has an interesting old medina and an evocative Commonwealth military cemetery, while Ghardimao is truly the end of the line.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Frolic in the calm, shallow waters of **Sidi Ali el-Mekki** (p132), perhaps Tunisia's finest beach
- Sip something cold or hot at the enchanting old port in **Bizerte** (p125)
- Enjoy top-flight international talent at one of the four summer music festivals in **Tabarka** (p138)
- Explore the exquisite underground Roman villas of **Bulla Regia** (p145)
- Ramble through the cork forests around **Ain Draham** (p140)
- Marvel at the living creatures and wild landscapes of **Ichkeul National Park** (p132)



History

Northern Tunisia has been fought over for millennia not only because of its strategic ports but also because it's one of the country's richest agricultural regions.

It was first settled by European migrants between 6000 BC and 2500 BC, then the Phoenicians gained a foothold here when they established Utica in 1100 BC. During the Second Punic War (204 BC) the Roman general Scipio landed at Utica. The Romans gained power a century later but were content to let the Numidians rule. Over time, the Romans – with a main base at Vega (Béja) – rebuilt the earlier Punic settlements and made the most of the region's prodigious wheat-growing capacity – hence the glorious wealth of settlements such as Bulla Regia.

With the coming of the Arabs and Islam, the seat of power moved southwards to Kairouan. The Spanish and the Ottoman Turks played pass-the-parcel with the region's strategic centres in the 16th century, when piracy was rife.

In the 19th century, Tunisia's northern riches proved very attractive to the French. During WWII, in the spring of 1943, the area became a battleground, as a number of military cemeteries testify.

Climate

Summers are hot and dry along the coast but up in the Kroumirie Mountains it's a few degrees cooler – that's why Ain Draham was such a popular hill station during the colonial period. In winter the mountains along the Algerian border can get surprisingly cold – in December and January there's often snow. During the winter of 2005 Ain Draham got a record 1.7m of the white fluffy stuff!

National Parks

Ichkeul National Park (p133) supports a remarkable variety of plants, insects, mammals and, especially, birdlife. Near the border with Algeria, forested El-Feija National Park (p149) is known for its wild gazelles and rare Barbary deer.

Getting There & Around

Tunis-Carthage International Airport is linked to Bizerte by bus (see p129). Tabarka's international airport is served by the occasional European charter.

Buses and louages (shared-taxis) to every city and large town in the region leave from Tunis' northern (Bab Saadoun) bus station (see p86). Trains link Tunis with Bizerte, Béja, Jendouba and Ghardimao.

With a bit of patience, you can use public transport to get to and between virtually all the places mentioned in this chapter.

BIZERTE

بنزرت

pop 113,400

Many visitors to Bizerte tend to hang out mainly in the Zone Touristique, with its row of beachside hotels, but the city centre – endowed with a picturesque old port, a sprawling outdoor market, colonial architecture and a marina – is great for aimless ambling, people-watching in cafés and dining.

Bizerte makes a good base for excursions to Ichkeul National Park and the beaches of Raf Raf and Sidi Ali el-Mekki.

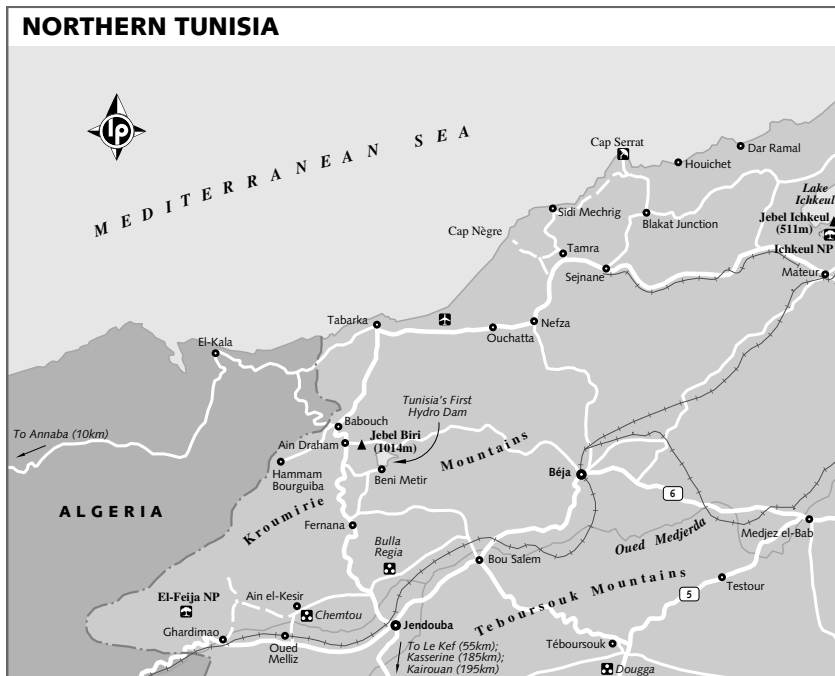
History

The Phoenicians founded the port in the 8th century BC as Hippo Zarytus and later built the first canal connecting Lake Bizerte (Lac de Bizerte) to the sea, opening up one of the finest harbours in the western Mediterranean. The Romans destroyed the city in 146 BC to avenge its part in the Punic Wars but rebuilt it 100 years later as Hippo Diarrhytus. The city was later occupied by the Vandals and the Byzantines.

In AD 678 the Arabs captured the town and renamed it Bizerte. The Spanish occupied the town from 1535 to 1570, then the Ottomans took over and it became an important base for the Muslim corsairs (pirates) preying on Christian shipping in the Mediterranean.

The 1800s saw Bizerte in decline until the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 gave the port renewed significance. The French transformed the town, digging a new canal (completed in 1895) to handle modern steamships. They filled in the old shipping canal dug by the Carthaginians, building in its place the Ville Nouvelle (new town).

France held onto Bizerte and its strategic naval base after Tunisia became independent in 1956. More than 1000 Tunisians died in 1961 in fierce clashes that broke out after Habib Bourguiba demanded that the French leave, something they finally did in 1963 (see p32).



Orientation

The Ville Nouvelle, now the city's commercial centre, stretches from the shipping canal north to east-west-oriented ave Habib Bourguiba. North of there, around the café-lined old port (Vieux Port in French), you'll find the huge outdoor market, the medina and the kasbah.

North-south-oriented blvd Habib Bourguiba (not to be confused with the avenue of the same name) leads from the marina (*port de plaisance*) northward to the Zone Touristique, with its beaches and hotels, eventually – 3km north of the kasbah – becoming ave de la Corniche.

The shipping canal is spanned by a modern drawbridge leading southeast to Tunis.

Information

There are lots of currency exchange and ATM options around place du 7 Novembre 1987, especially between the town hall and the Main Bus Station.

Banque du Sud (rue Habib Thameur) Situated 50m west of the town hall.

BIAT Bank (rue Moncef Bey cnr rue Habib Thameur)

BNA Bank (rue Habib Thameur cnr rue 1 Juin 1955)

Centre Public d'Internet (rue Salah bin Ali; internet per hr TD2; ☎ 8am-10pm)

Cyber House (rue Habib Thameur cnr rue d'Alger; internet per hr TD2; ☎ 9am-10pm) Quiet and modern.

La Muse Internet Café (rue du 1 Mai cnr rue de Grèce; internet per hr TD1.2; ☎ 8am-midnight) Popular with young locals, this place also serves hot and cold drinks (see p129).

Maison des Jeunes (blvd Hassen en-Nouri; internet per hr TD1; ☎ 9am-8pm Jun-Aug, 9am-noon & 4-8pm Sep-May) This hostel has an internet room.

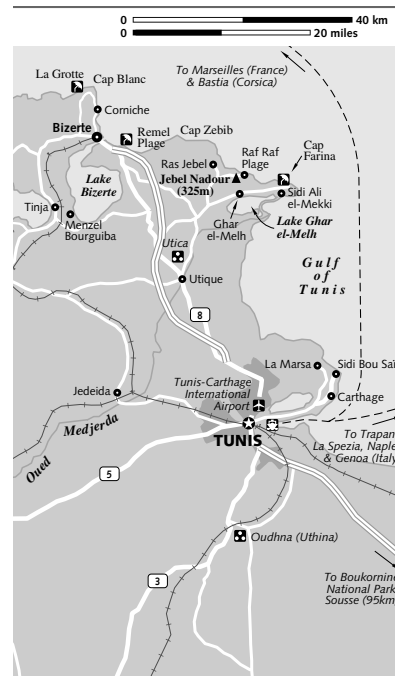
Main post office (ave d'Algérie)

Office de la Topographie et de la Cartographie

(rue 2 Mars 1934 cnr ave d'Algérie; ☎ 8am-noon & 2-6pm Mon-Fri Sep-Jun, 7am-noon Jul & Aug) Sells good maps of Tunisia, Bizerte, Tabarka and Ain Draham (about TD5 each). Take the payment voucher to the BIAT bank and then come back to pick up your map.

SOS Infirmier Chida (☎ 72 434 640 or 21 074 433; 5 rue du Théâtre; ☎ 24 hr) Can administer first aid and summon a doctor if necessary. Phone to arrange a house call. The staff speak French and a bit of English. Situated one block west of Rue Thaalbi, just north of ave Habib Bourguiba.

Tourist office (ONTT; ☎ 72 432 897; crtb.onnt@email.ati.tn; Bizerta Resort; ☎ 8.30am-1pm & 3-5.30pm Mon-Thu,



8am-1pm Fri & Sat Sep-Jun, 8am-2pm Mon-Sat Jul & Aug) Can supply you with a town map and brochures. The anonymous entrance is on the south side of the Bizerta Resort.

Sights & Activities

OLD PORT & MEDINA

The old port, lined with cafés, its multicoloured fishing boats making squiggly reflections in the water, is an enchanting place for a stroll. Two blocks west of the port's southern end is **place Bouchacha**, now the centre of a vast **outdoor and indoor market** where locals come to find both edibles and durables.

Northwest and north of the port is the medina, known as the Ville Arabe (Arab Town) during the French period. The richly decorated, lavishly tiled **Zaouia of Sidi Mokhtar** (5 rue de la Grande Mosquée; ☎ 8.30am-1pm & 3.30-5.30pm Mon-Thu, Fri morning & Sat morning Sep-Jun, 8.30am-1pm Mon-Sat Jul & Aug), well worth a look in, is home to the **Association de Sauvegarde de la Medina de Bizerte** (☎ 72 430 424; www.asm.bizerte1.com), the group responsible for medina conservation. Displays include a fascinating map of Bizerte in 1881 – before the old canal was filled in – and old photos

of the city. If you leave ID you can borrow books on Tunisian history and architecture in French. On sale is *Bizerte – Identité et Mémoire* (TD40), an excellent illustrated book about the city (in French).

Next door, the **Great Mosque** (Grande Mosquée; rue des Armuriers), built in 1652, has an octagonal, stone-built minaret decorated with blue and white tiling. The women's section, in back, affords views of the old port. At prayer times it might be possible to get a peek of the courtyard, with its slender marble columns and delicate stone arches.

West of here is the heart of the medina. The area was damaged during WWII by Allied bombing but its alleys, with blue grills and keyhole-shaped doors, are worth a wander. The tiny **rue de Forgerons**, still true to its name, is lined with cluttered blacksmiths' workshops.

On the north side of the entrance to the old port stand the 10m-high fortified walls of the **kasbah**. Along with its kid brother, the **ksibah** (small fort) on the southern side, it was originally built by the Byzantines in the 6th century AD. Today's kasbah, constructed in the Ottoman period (17th century), encloses a warren of tranquil residential streets. Inside the **Kasbah Mosque**, straight ahead as you walk through the kasbah's only gate (situated on its western side), 30 stone columns – topped with an assortment of recycled ancient marble capitals – hold up 20 elegant stone cupolas. It was being renovated as we went to press.

From outside the eastern buttress, steps lead up to the **ramparts** (adult/child TD0.5/0.25; ☎ 9am-12.30pm & 3-8pm). On top, with a view of the port, is a café, an evening favourite with local couples.

SPANISH FORT

Built from 1570 to 1573 by Uly Ali, the military ruler of Algiers, *after* he had booted out the Spanish (thus the confusing name), this **fortress** (ave du 15 Octobre 1963; admission free; ☎ 8am-5pm) overlooks the medina from the north. All that remains are two long wall sections and one citadel. The views across the town, over the modern cement amphitheatre, are stupendous.

KSIBAH

This squat little fort, facing the kasbah, was modified by the Aghlabids, who added the

Courses

Courses on offer at **Espace Culturel La Muse** (☎ 72 424 514; krsenda@yahoo.fr; rue du 1 Mai cnr rue de Grèce) include Tunisian and classical written Arabic (available one-on-one by the hour), painting and guitar.

The **Maison des Jeunes** (☎ 72 431 608; dmj.bizerte@jeunesse.tn; blvd Hassen en-Nouri) sponsors all sorts of courses for young people, including karate, aerobics, chess, spelunking and theatre.

Sleeping

Bizerte's budget options are all in the centre, while its midrange and top-end places are spread out along the coast north of the city, mostly in the Zone Touristique.

BUDGET

Hôtel Saadi (☎ 23 737 545; rue Salah Ben Ali; s/d/tr with shared bathroom TD7.5/15/22.5) The best of the super-cheapies, this clean, welcoming place has 14 smallish rooms (without sinks), some with balconies overlooking a small football stadium. Situated about 400m northwest of the centre in a tranquil but nondescript part of town. There's a *hammam* (public bathhouse) half a block away.

Maison des Jeunes (☎ 72 431 608; dmj.bizerte@jeunesse.tn; blvd Hassen en-Nouri; dm TD8) Open to travellers of all ages, this welcoming youth centre, about 1km north of the centre, has a bright, airy campus. The 80 beds are pretty tightly packed in but the rooms – including four-bed family rooms – while basic, are clean. Unlike the *foyer garçons* (men's building), the *foyer filles* (women's building) has toilets in the rooms. In July and August it's a good idea to reserve ahead.

Hôtel Africain (☎ 72 434 412; 59 rue Sassi el-Bahri; s/d with shared bathroom TD10/20) In the middle of the happening market area, the 13 rooms of this hotel (some with windows that open onto the hallway) have high ceilings but are very basic, lacking even a sink. The bathroom is clean but on the ground floor – bit of a hike if you're up on the 2nd floor.

Hôtel el-Fath (☎ 72 430 596; 136 ave Habib Bourguiba; s/d with shower in Jul & Aug TD15/30, Sep-Jun TD10/20) This modest establishment (also known as Hôtel el-Fateh), very near the main mosque, has lots of North African-style tilework but, alas, cannot be described as spotless. Some rooms have balconies. Situated about 350m west of the centre.

MIDRANGE

Hôtel de la Plage (☎ 72 436 510; 34 rue Mohamed Rejiba; s/d TD17/35, with shared bathroom TD15/30) Clean, simple and friendly, this place has an excellent central location and 25 smallish but cheerful rooms. A pretty good deal, though the showers may not always be hot and the rooms at the front can be noisy at night

Hôtel Nador (☎ 72 443 022; fax 72 433 817; Zone Touristique; s/d Jul & Aug TD30/50, Sep-Jun TD25/40; ☎ ☎) By the beach 2.5km north of the kasbah and 250m east of the road to the corniche, this sprawling hotel, built in 1967, has huge gardens, an old-fashioned outdoor pool and a slight jet-set era vibe. The 106 rooms have barrel-vaulted ceilings, spotless bathrooms and balconies with garden views. A taxi to the centre costs TD1.5. After renovations, planned for 2007, room prices may rise by TD5 or TD10. Offers good value.

Le Petit Mousse (☎ 72 432 185; fax 72 438 871; ave de la Corniche; d May-Aug TD80, Sep-Apr TD60) Dating from 1946, this intimate 12-room hotel, 5km north of the centre, occupies a blue and white building across the road from the narrow corniche beach. Has an excellent restaurant (see opposite).

Hôtel Sidi Salem (☎ 72 420 365; www.hotel-sidisalem.com; ave Hedi Nouria; s/d Jul & Aug TD65/90, Apr-Jun & Sep-Oct TD50/70, Nov-Mar TD40/60; ☎ ☎) The bougainvillea-draped garden is scraggly and half the grass is dead but this establishment, just 300m east of the kasbah, has large rooms facing a wide sandy beach, lots of sports facilities and a disco on Friday and Saturday nights (from 10pm).

TOP END

Bizerta Resort (☎ 72 436 966; fax 72 422 955; hbizerta@gnet.tn; ave Hedi Nouria; s/d TD69/130 mid-Jul-mid-Sep, TD60/110 Apr-mid-Jul & mid-Sep-Oct; TD47/85 Nov-Mar; ☎ ☎) This four-star place – whose amenities include indoor and outdoor pools, a Jacuzzi, a fitness room, a sauna and a *hammam* – is the best place in town to lounge languorously in the luscious lap of luxury. Opened in 1998, it has 104 stylish rooms and a sleek bar with generously stuffed wing chairs. Situated on the beach 700m north of the kasbah.

Eating & Drinking

Self-caterers should check out the sprawling, indoor and outdoor **food market** (around place Bouchoucha; ☎ 7am or 8am-about 8pm), just

west of the old port, or the **Monoprix supermarket** (ave Habib Bourguiba; ☎ 8am-almost midnight), just east of rue 1 Juin 1955.

There's a cluster of popular eateries open till late at night along the easternmost bit of ave Habib Bourguiba and around the corner (to the south) on blvd Habib Bourguiba. The old port is lined with cafés.

Up along ave de la Corniche there are a number of ice cream and crepe places as well as several proper restaurants specialising in rather pricey fish and seafood.

Café-Pâtisserie Bellahouel (ave Habib Bourguiba cnr rue de Tunis; ☎ 5.30am-almost midnight) Facing the old port, this place has super-fresh pastries (about TD0.4) and excellent coffee you can sip while seated at little, round sidewalk tables. A perfect place to start the day!

La Cuisine Tunisienne (7 rue 2 Mars 1934; mains TD2.5-4; ☎ noon-11pm Mon-Sat, noon-3pm Sun) A cheap-and-cheerful eatery with a good choice of traditional Tunisian standards. Not gourmet but offers reliable good value.

Pizzeria Le Grand Bleu (☎ 20 241 129; rue Ahmad Tlili; pizza TD4-5; ☎ noon-10 or 11pm) A spotless, brightly lit ground-floor pizzeria with pretty good pies, lasagne, shwarma and sandwiches.

Restaurant Le Grand Bleu (☎ 97 464 750; rue Ahmed Tlili; pasta TD6-10, meat mains TD10-12; ☎ noon-3pm & 7.30pm or 8pm-midnight or later; ☎) A genuine Italian restaurant – the chef is from Italy – with tacky Italianate décor and 12 kinds of spaghetti. Upstairs from the pizzeria.

Du Bonheur (☎ 72 431 047; 31 rue Thaâlibi; meat mains TD8.5-14, fish per 100g TD4.5; ☎ 11am-1am or later; ☎) Decked out in the traditional North African style, this restaurant serves tasty Tunisian specialities, including couscous (TD7 to TD8.9), at tables separated by *mushrabiya* (traditional wooden screens that allow people – especially women – to see out without being seen). The prettiest seats are way in back. Not to be confused with the all-male bar of the same name a few doors down.

Le Phénicien (☎ 72 424 480; old port; couscous TD11-14, meat mains TD14-24, fish per 100g TD6-10; ☎ noon-2am or 3am; ☎) So now you know what that wooden monstrosity 'moored' at the old port is – opened in 2005, it's an upscale fish and seafood restaurant that's supposed to look like a Phoenician warship. Surprisingly, the food is good and, though tacky, this place is very popular with well-off Tunisians. The bar (alcohol

served) on the upper deck affords superb harbour views.

Le Sport Nautique (☎ 72 432 262; quai Tarak ibn Ziad; fish per 100g TD6.5-7.5, meat mains TD14-24, couscous TD18-22; ☎ noon-2.30pm & 8-10pm; ☎) Established for the French colonial elite back in 1928, this highly regarded restaurant offers delightful views of the marina from its breezy terrace. You select the fish you'd like from a trolley wheeled elegantly to your table.

Le Petit Mousse (☎ 72 432 185; ave de la Corniche; fish per 100g TD7-9.5; ☎ 12.30-3.30pm & 8-11pm early May-Sep, noon-3pm & 7-10pm Oct-early May) The corniche's most upmarket fish and seafood place, this elegant establishment also serves French dishes such as *coq au vin* (TD16.5). Has a balmy, candlelit veranda with sea views and, downstairs, garden seating. Attached to a hotel of the same name (see opposite)

Entertainment

Espace Culturel La Muse (☎ 72 424 514; krsenda@yahoo.fr; rue du 1 Mai cnr rue de Grèce) Opened in late 2005, this privately funded cultural centre, behind the former cathedral, organises film screenings and concerts (eg guitar). It's a good place to meet young locals, perhaps to converse in English. You can also grab a bite, sip coffee, check your email, play chess and view paintings by Tunisian artists.

Cinéma Le Paris (end of ave Taieb Mehiri; admission TD2) screens first-run films in Arabic.

Getting There & Away

Bizerte's intercity public transport is decentralised, which is a nice way of saying that there are three bus stations and three louage stations, each serving different destinations.

AIR

The nearest airport is Tunis-Carthage. **Tunisair** (☎ 72 432 201; 76 ave Habib Bourguiba) has a local office.

BUS

From the **Zarzouna Bus Station** (☎ 72 593 161; rue de Tunis), 1.5km south of the centre (across the drawbridge over the canal), express buses go to Tunis' northern (Bab Saadoun) bus station (TD3.5, one hour, at least hourly till 7pm). Nonexpress buses to Tunis (TD3, 1½ hours, every half-hour till 7pm), via Utica, take Route Nationale 8.

The buses to Tunis-Carthage International Airport (TD3.5, one hour, 11 daily)

are yellow and have destination signs in Arabic. At the airport, the stop is way over to the left as you exit the terminal building. There are departures every one to 2½ hours – until 7pm from the airport, till 5.30pm from Bizerte.

Destinations served by STRB buses departing from the Main Bus Station, at the southern end of rue Ibn Khaldoun, include Ain Drahem via Tabarka; Mateur (TD1.8, every two hours); Menzel Bourguiba (TD1, every half-hour); Ras Jebel (TD1.7, seven daily), where there is onward transport to Raf Raf and Ghar el-Melh; Sejnane (TD4, twice daily), which has links to Cap Serrat and Sidi Mechrig; and Tabarka (TD7.4, 3¼ hours, at 6am, with an SRT Jendouba bus at about noon).

Long-haul buses depart from the **SNTRI bus station** (☎ 72 431 222; rue d'Alger) Destinations include Jerba (TD23.9, 11 hours, at 6am and 6.30pm), Kairouan (TD12.3, four hours, at 6am), Sfax and Sousse.

CAR

Bizerte's multitude of small car-hire agencies include the following:

ADA (☎ 72 431 508; 27 rue d'Alger) Affiliated with France's largest discount car rental chain.

Eurocar (☎ 72 439 018 or 20 44 796; 19 rue Rejiba, nr rue Mohamed Rejiba)

Hertz (☎ 72 438 388; rue 8 Janvier 1938) On the side of Centre Bizerte.

Opera Car (☎ 72 421 427; rue Ahmed Tlili) Can arrange a car with a driver.

LOUAGE

Red-stripe louages to Tunis leave from next to the Zarzouna Bus Station.

Across rue de Russie from the Main Bus Station, blue-stripe louages depart frequently for Ras Jebel (TD1.9), where you can catch onward louages to Raf Raf and Ghar el-Melh.

From the parking lot just outside the train station, blue- and yellow-stripe louages go Sejnane (TD3.9) and blue ones go to Mateur (TD2.2), Menzel Bourguiba (TD1.2), Nefza and Tabarka (one daily).

TRAIN

The **Gare de Bizerte** (train station; rue de Russie) is linked to Tunis (TD3.2, with air-con TD4, 1¼ hours, four daily) via Tinja and Mateur.

Getting Around

The white local buses are decorated with colourful abstract doves, apparently the work of some Picasso wannabe. Buses 2 and 21 (half-hourly) link the corner of blvd Hassen en-Nouri and ave Habib Bourguiba with ave de la Corniche.

Buses heading east, such as local bus 8, can drop you at the Remel Plage turn-off (TD0.3, every 15 minutes).

EAST OF BIZERTE

Utique (Utica)

أوتيك (أوتيقا)

Utica, the first Phoenician city in North Africa, was founded in about 1100 BC, 300 years before Carthage. Situated at the mouth of Oued Medjerda, it soon became a thriving port and remained important – and a rival of Carthage – for more than 1000 years.

Having defected to the Roman camp before the Third Punic War, Utica became the capital of the Roman province of Africa after the destruction of Carthage in 146 BC. Caught up in the Roman civil war in the 1st century BC, Utica supported Pompey. When the local commander, the Roman statesman Cato the Younger (Cato of Utica), realised that all was lost, he committed suicide rather than be captured – becoming a symbol of probity in public life the hard way – and Julius Caesar entered the city.

Under Hadrian Utica continued to flourish. A new aqueduct was built, along with a forum, baths and some elaborate residences. The city's days were numbered, though, by the fickle waters of Oued Medjerda, which silted up because of the increase in wheat cultivation under the Romans. By the beginning of the 2nd century AD, the river was no longer navigable and the port had been rendered useless.

These days, the **Site Archéologique d'Utique** (Utica ruins; admission TD3, plus camera TD1; ☎ 8am-7pm Apr-mid-Sep, 8.30am-5.30pm mid-Sep-Mar, museum closed Mon) – now 15km from the coast – occupies a low hill overlooking rich farmland. The remains are a bit sparse compared with some of Tunisia's other ancient cities but there are some fine mosaics and the tranquil site is cypress-shaded and flower-filled.

The best place to start a visit is the Musée d'Utique (museum), 2km off Route Nationale 8 (the old Bizerte-Tunis road). The Punic room shows everyday objects

found at the necropolis, including make-up utensils, razors and some beautiful jewellery. Imported Greek pottery indicates the sophistication of the Punic settlement, while in the Roman room you can admire the marble garden statuary that was all the rage 2000 years ago. A new mosaics gallery opened in mid-2006.

At ancient Utica itself, 800m down the road from the museum, three Roman villas are the main attraction. A number of glorious mosaics – protected from the elements by low wooden roofs – have been left *in situ*; if you take a tour, the guide will spray water on them to bring out the rich colours.

The **House of the Cascade** (Maison de la Cascade), with a central patio, is named after a fountain in a northern room decorated with a fishing-scene mosaic. One glorious basin mosaic shows a fishing cupid in a boat, while the **triclinium** (dining room) is floored in green marble (from Greece) and golden marble (from Chemtou) in striking geometric patterns. A mammoth mosaic from Utica with a sea-god theme can be seen at the Bardo Museum (see p50).

Pretty much the only way to see the squat toilet, the glories of Roman water engineering (including the rainwater collection system) and the gruesome 7th- or 8th-century BC *in situ* skeleton of a teenage girl is to hire a guide – for an informative tour in French, Italian or Arabic call **Hedi Selini** (☎ 96 151 317).

Signs at the site are in Arabic, English, French and German. A book on Utique (in French) is on sale at the ticket counter.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Utica can easily be visited on a day trip from Bizerte or Tunis, perhaps in combination with one of the nearby beaches.

The turn-off to the archaeological site, marked 'Utique Ruines', is just east of the small town of Utique, 33km north of Tunis on Route Nationale 8, the old (ie non-toll) road to Bizerte.

By public transport, take a non-express Tunis-Bizerte bus and ask the driver to drop you on the main road; from there it's a 2km walk to the museum.

Raf Raf Plage

ررفراف

The unpretentious beach at Raf Raf – often crowded with Tunisian families – consists of a long narrow crescent of sand, much of it lined by whitewashed low-rise buildings, and a slightly ramshackle promenade. Off-shore, framed by luscious turquoise waters, loom the cliffs of a dramatic sand-coloured island, **Jazirat Bilou**.

The drive to Raf Raf and its *plage* (beach), 4km beyond the uninteresting *centre-ville* (village centre), takes you through rolling hills whose tans and olive greens contrast sublimely with the deep blues of the Mediterranean.

SLEEPING & EATING

The only accommodation option is the midrange **Hôtel Dalia** (☎ 72 441 688/630; s/d Sep-Jun TD35/70, Jul & Aug TD55/90; ☎), 150m up the hill from the beach. The 10 small, bright rooms come with little balconies.

LAKE ICHKEUL BIRDLIFE

Providing its seasonal variations in salinity are in balance, Lake Ichkeul is a true haven for our feathered friends. Some hunt along the shoreline or probe the soft mud at the water's edge; others stride into the shallows on long legs in search of their dinner; and yet others, such as the brightly coloured kingfisher, dive in search of underwater prey.

Most spectacular are the greater flamingos – if you're in luck, you'll see one of Tunisia's ornithological highlights, a mass of pink above the shimmering waters. Other large migrants that pass through include squacco herons, cattle egrets and white storks, famed bringers of babies and beloved symbol of France's Alsace region. Warblers, finches and rails dart about the dense vegetation surrounding the lake.

Autumn sees the arrival of birds – especially ducks and geese – fleeing the approaching winter in northern and eastern Europe and Russia. Their usual migration routes are via Corsica and then Sicily or over the Italian boot. On one occasion a Eurasian wigeon banded in Britain was recorded.

Birds of prey you might see gliding over Jebel Ichkeul include Bonelli's eagles, short-toed eagles, Eleonora's falcons and Egyptian vultures.

Restaurants serving sandwiches, pizza and fresh fish – caught by the small local fishing fleet – and a few fruit and veggie vendors line the seafront.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Ras Jebel, 6km west of Raf Raf, is the nearest public transport hub, with services to Bizerte (TD1.7, seven daily). Raf Raf is linked to Ras Jebel by taxi (TD1.2 per person; the stand faces the Hôtel Dalia) and bus (TD0.65).

Ghar el-Melh

غارالمح

The village of Ghar el-Melh, on the other (southern) side of Jebel Nadour (325m) from Raf Raf, snoozes beside a silted-up lagoon. Surprisingly, it's endowed with three imposing, stone-built **Ottoman forts**, each worth a look inside, and a small, somnolent **fishing port** with a relaxing little café. The road through town passes under an arched section near the **old market**.

Ghar el-Melh was founded during the reign of Osta Murad Dey (1637–40) as the pirate base of Porto Farina. Its notoriety was such that in 1654 it was attacked and temporarily knocked out of action by the celebrated English naval heavy Sir Francis Drake. After privateering was abolished at the beginning of the 19th century, the Husseinite beys attempted to turn the port into a major naval base. Ahmed Bey (1837–55) ordered the construction of two new forts, a defensive wall and a port but his efforts were soon foiled by the silt-laden waters of the Oued Medjerda, which clogged the lagoon. Attempts at dredging failed and the port was abandoned in favour of La Goulette, near Tunis.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Ghar el-Melh is only a few kilometres south of Raf Raf but about 20km by road. The town is linked to Bizerte by louages and by bus (TD1.5, one hour, two daily). There's no public transport out to Sidi Ali el-Mekki.

Sidi Ali el-Mekki

سيدي علي المكي

Sidi Ali el-Mekki beach, on the southern side of Cap Farina at the edge of the Ghar el-Melh lagoon, is one of the handful of beaches in Tunisia that's in the same league as southern Thailand. Favoured by well-off Tunisians, it

has broad expanses of fine-grain sand and lusciously transparent waters that shade from jade to turquoise to aquamarine.

From mid-June to mid-Sept the beach has life guards, Gilligan's Island-type fibre parasols (TD5, including a table and four chairs), refreshment kiosks and even its own little Garde Nationale post. There are rudimentary toilets and showers.

Thanks to the protection afforded by pine-forested **Cape Sidi Ali el-Mekki**, to the north, the waves are generally tiny, making this an ideal beach for small kids. An ice plant-lined **trail** leads from the beach to the tip of the cape, a distance of about 3km.

The whitewashed structures up on the hillside are caves housing the **tomb of Sidi Ali el-Mekki** and the tombs of other local saints. They attract a mixture of the devout, who light candles in the hope of saintly intercession, and the curious, attracted at least in part by the spectacular view. Come dressed in a bit more than swimwear.

SLEEPING & EATING

It may be possible to rent a straw shack. Camping is OK too.

Restaurant Cap Farina (☎ 98 442 851; fish TD14; ☎ daily mid-May–mid-Oct, Sat & Sun mid-Oct–mid-May) serves salads and delicious fresh fish and seafood, barbecued on pine cones.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Situated 6km east of Ghar el-Melh, Sidi Ali el-Mekki is not served by public transport, though you could walk or try hitching (for the risks of hitching, see p311). Parking costs TD0.6 – pay at the gate.

FROM BIZERTE TO TABARKA

The area west of Bizerte is hilly and rural, with wide expanses of undulating grain fields between secluded villages. The dramatic coastline, largely uninhabited, consists of a series of rugged promontories and sparkling blue bays and is only accessible at a few points.

Louages go virtually everywhere people live but you'll need patience to get to the more remote villages along the coast.

Ichkeul National Park

بحيرة اشكل

A Unesco Natural World Heritage site since 1980, the sublimely beautiful, 120-sq-km **Ichkeul National Park** (Parc National d'Ichkeul; TD1;

☎ 8am–5pm, once inside you can stay till dusk) encompasses **Lake Ichkeul**, a shallow, brackish lake – in the most extraordinarily gentle shades of blue and green – surrounded by marshland that floods in winter; and **Jebel Ichkeul** (511m), whose reddish bulk rises from the surrounding flats and low hills like a Mediterranean version of Uluru (Ayers Rock).

Lake Ichkeul covers about 89 sq km in summer, when its average depth is about 1m, expanding in winter to flood 30 sq km of the surrounding marshland. It's a paradise for birds and bird-watchers (see p131), though the entire lake ecosystem is now under threat (see below).

Ichkeul was managed as a hunting reserve at least as far back as the 13th century and today is home to wild boar, crested porcupines, Egyptian mongoose, wild cats and four species of bat. Otters have been hunted almost to extinction. The 60 water buffalos, descendants of a pair given to Ahmed Bey in 1840, can weigh up to 1000kg.

The rather dated exhibits in the small **Écomusée** (visitors centre), opened in 1989,

present the lake's unique ecosystem in French and Arabic. One wall chart describes the lake as being like 'a very rich soup' that, like any broth, can be ruined by too much salt. Another chart illustrates various bird species' feeding habits. Nearby, **trails** lead around the hill and up its flanks.

There are **hot springs**, popular with locals, on the northeastern edge of Jebel Ichkeul.

There's no accommodation in the park and camping is not permitted. The best time to spot wildlife is early in the morning or around dusk.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Entry to the park, about 30km southwest of Bizerte, is on the eastern flank of Jebel Ichkeul, which overlooks the lake from the south. The turn-off is about midway between Tinja and Mateur, near where the train tracks cross the highway – look for a sign reading 'Parc Echkeul'.

At the gate to the park you must register and pay an entry fee (TD1) before

AN ECOSYSTEM AT RISK

Lake Ichkeul is one of the four most important wetlands in the western Mediterranean (the other three are the Camargue in France, Doñana in Spain and El Kala in Algeria).

For countless millennia the lake's unique ecosystem thrived thanks to seasonal variations in salinity. During the autumn rainy season, six seasonal rivers brought in fresh water, reducing salinity to about 5g per litre, whereas from July to October evaporation and the inflow of saltwater from nearby Lake Bizerte, a nearby marine lagoon, brought salinity up to above 30g per litre.

In recent years, following the construction of dams on three of the rivers – to provide much-needed water for homes and agriculture – winter and summer salinity levels have increased significantly. The consequences have been fast and devastating. Narrow-leaved pondweed (*Potamogeton pectinatus*) – the major source of food of waterfowl – has been replaced by salt-tolerant plants that the birds cannot eat. The result has been a precipitous drop in the number of migrant and wintering birds: two decades ago some 200,000 waterfowl spent the winter at Lake Ichkeul; today only 50,000 do so. Over this same period, the number of wintering greylag geese has dropped from 20,000 to under 1000.

Rushes and reeds, too, are sensitive to salinity and their disappearance from marshlands is having a severe impact on the birds that used to construct nests in them, such as herons, egrets and the threatened marbled teal. Indeed, none of these species now nest here. Mammals, such as the otter, for whom the rushes and reeds provided shelter, have also been affected, as has the insect population, including some huge dragonflies.

Unless the lake again receives sufficient freshwater, it is in danger of becoming a saltwater lagoon, resulting in a tragic loss of biodiversity – that's why, in 1996, the park was placed on Unesco's List of World Heritage in Danger. In 1986 226 species of bird, including 34 that bred here, were recorded. How many will be left in another five or 10 years?

Each foreign visitor to Ichkeul National Park is a tangible expression of the lake's international ecological importance and of its potential – if the ecosystem is properly protected – as a magnet for ecotourism and thus for local economic development.

continuing for 3km along a mostly gravel road to a complex of bright white buildings; the Écomusée is up the stairs.

Buses (about TD1.5 from Bizerte, every two hours) and louages between Bizerte and Mateur can drop you at the 'Parc Echkel' turn-off but from there you'll either have to walk (about 7km) or hitch. Traffic is light, especially from the park entrance to the Écomusée.

Sejnane

سجنان

Sejnane is set amid hilly grain fields and grey-green forests but the sole reason to come to this hardscrabble town, 71km southwest of Bizerte, is to catch a bus or louage to somewhere else. The only thing even half worth seeing is the **storks' nests** – check out the roof of the freight-only train station, 250m up the road from the Mobil petrol station, and the adjacent, long abandoned mining rig.

The main street is a chaotic, dirty jumble of cafés, cheapie eateries, market stalls, shops and flocks of louages. At the far end, at the top of the open-air market, is a basic **hospital**. All this hustle and bustle attracts some rough-edged characters, in no way hostile but hardly models of politesse.

Sejnane has no hotels.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Buses and louages can be found at or near the main junction, next to the Mobil petrol station. SNTRI buses travelling the northern route (via Mateur) between Tabarka (TD2.5) and Tunis (TD5.5) stop here, as do

SEJNANE WARE

The techniques used by the potters of the Berber villages around Sejnane to make their distinctive wares date back to Neolithic times. Clay is hand-moulded into unusual animal figurines and bowls of different shapes and sizes, then open-fired on mounds of glowing coals before being decorated with rusty reds and deep browns.

You'll find Sejnane ware on sale at tourist shops countrywide (and in Bizerte's open-air market) as well as at roadside stands around (but not in) Sejnane – for instance, a few kilometres out of town along the roads to Bizerte and Mateur.

louages to Bizerte (TD3.9, one hour; until about 6pm), Cap Serrat beach (TD1.3, one or two daily in winter, more in summer), Mateur (TD2.5) and Sidi Mechrig (TD1.2, eight daily). Transport from Sejnane to Tabarka is infrequent – a louage trip may require changing at Nefza and Ouchtata.

Cap Serrat Beach

رأس سَرَاط

Cap Serrat Beach is dazzling, serene and secluded. Situated across the small Zeyatine River – lined with marshes and eucalyptus trees – from the shaded parking area, it's definitely one of Tunisia's mellowest beaches, a quiet, friendly place to chill. The two rocky islands offshore are known as **Les Frères** (the brothers).

To the northwest, the cape is topped by a white **lighthouse**, while to the east are gentle, sandy hills. The whole area, including the inland eucalyptus forests, can be explored on a network of **trails**. You can sometimes spot wild boar.

Alas, the beach – a long, wide expanse of sand that gets hit with some pretty vigorous waves – is not the cleanest. In addition to the usual blight of plastic bottles, the sand is strewn with dark-brown discs – on closer inspection you'll see that they're dried cow pats (pies). The showers (TD0.25) are pretty dilapidated. It's possible to hire a small boat, skipper included.

SLEEPING & EATING

Tunisians and foreigners alike camp on the sand under the trees.

Le Pirate (☎ 23 694 746 or 23 968 939; d TD40, ☹ Mar-Dec, call ahead in Jan & Feb) serves excellent grilled fish (per 100g including salad and desert starts from TD4) on an outdoor terrace and also has three basic but rather pricey rooms. Everything, including the toilets, is absolutely spotlessly clean.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

The road to Cap Serrat, 27km north of Sejnane, snakes through eucalyptus and pine plantations filled with beehives – in summer you can buy honey at the roadside. A rough road hugs the coast from Cap Serrat to Sidi Mechrig, some 20km to the west – in winter it requires a 4WD as some bits are sandy.

Louages to Cap Serrat from Sejnane (TD1.3), well connected with Bizerte, run a few times a day in July and August but only

once or twice a day in winter, in the morning. It's more convenient to take a louage from Bizerte to Blakat junction, midway between Sejnane and Cap Serrat, and then a *camionnette* (small truck) to Cap Serrat.

Sidi Mechrig

سيدي مشرق

Sidi Mechrig is a tiny coastal settlement with no mobile phone reception, one guest house, a small but modern fishing port and a stretch of sandy beach overlooked by three **Roman arches** – the remains of an ancient bathhouse. Unfortunately, it's not as laid back as Cap Serrat and the beach is strewn with detritus that's been washed ashore. Beyond the small fishing port (a bit northeast of the beach) you can see the Cap Serrat lighthouse.

Trails lead to a pretty little spring and through the nearby pine forest to the tomb of Sidi Bou Tayeb. The trail along the coast goes to Jebel Chitane and the tomb of Oma Nowala, a woman saint.

SLEEPING & EATING

Auberge-Restaurant Sidi Mechrig (d/q with common bathroom TN30/50; ☹ year-round), next to the Garde Nationale post, overlooks the beach. The 10 large rooms have high ceilings, big beds with new mattresses, and patterned tile floors

THE WILD SIDE

The remote, sparsely populated area north of the Bizerte-Sejnane highway (highway 51), between Cap Blanc and Cap Serrat, is well worth exploring if you've got a car, a taste for dramatic landscapes, some time to burn and the patience to get lost. The reward at the end of the serpentine, one-lane roads to nowhere, through undulating fields of grain and along maquis-covered hills: some truly wild Mediterranean coastline. If you reach the dirt-poor hamlets of **Dar Ramal** or **Houichet** you've truly arrived at the end of the line.

There don't seem to be accurate maps of the area. Both Michelin's 1:800,000-scale map of Tunisia and the 1:750,000-scale map produced by Tunisia's Office de la Topographie are pretty useless out here – worse than useless since they show roads that don't exist. Mobile phone coverage is patchy. Bring food and water as there are no shops.

from the late French period. The **restaurant** (fish TD8.50-10) serves grilled fish and various Tunisian dishes, including couscous; everything comes with salad and chips. A cold beer is recommended.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

The signless turn-off to Sidi Mechrig is 10km west of Sejnane on the road to Tabarka, a bit before Tamra. From there it's a further 17km through eucalyptus tree plantations and past scattered houses.

Sidi Mechrig is linked with Sejnane by louage (TD1.2, eight daily) and a few buses a day, timed to get local kids to school.

TABARKA

طبرقة

pop 13,600

Just 22km from Algeria, the port town of Tabarka sits at the western edge of a beach-fringed bay, south of a rocky peninsula crowned by an imposing Genoese fort. Renowned for affording Tunisia's best scuba diving, its focal point is the marina, which serves both pleasure craft and fishing boats – the latter bring in the fresh fish and seafood served around town. During July and August Tabarka hosts four fabulous music festivals.

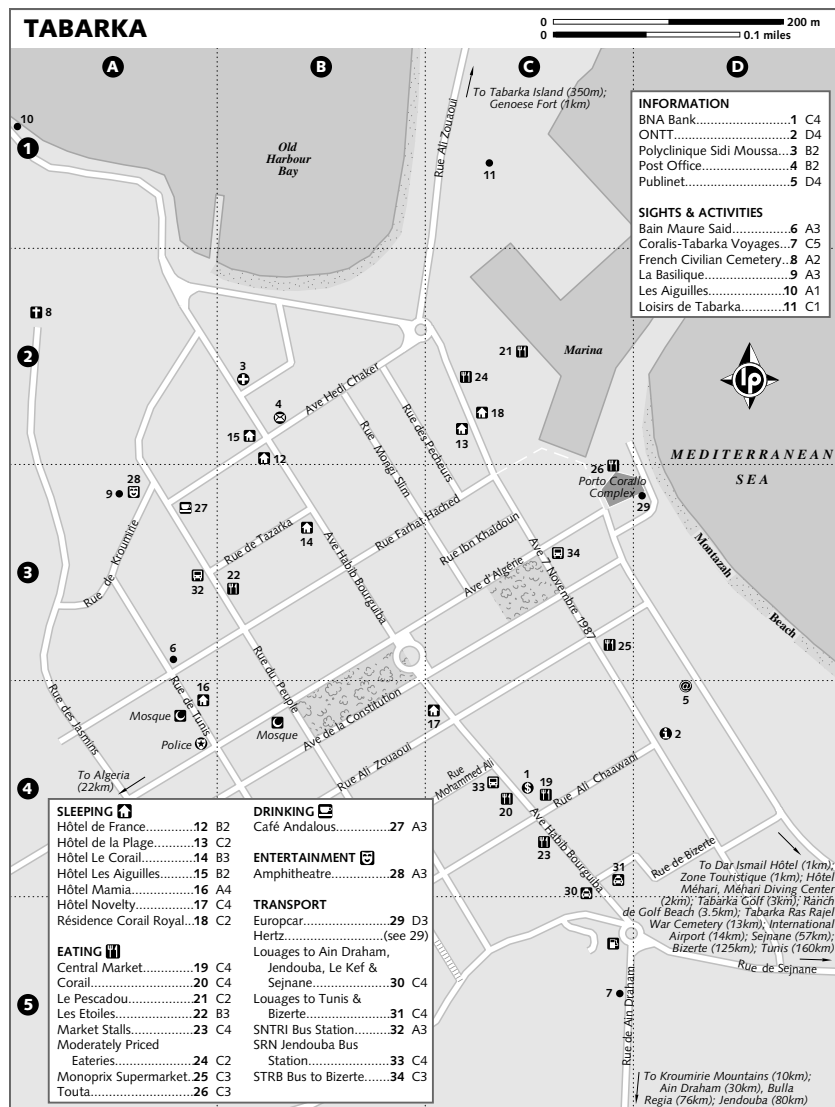
Tabarka is a good base for exploring the Kroumirie Mountains, Ain Draham and several Roman sites, including Bulla Regia.

History

Like so many North African coastal towns, Tabarka began life as a Phoenician settlement. Originally called Thabraca (Shaded Place), it remained a minor outpost until Roman times, when it became a major port thanks to the export of Chemtou marble. It also served as the exit point for many African big cats en route to the colosseums of Rome and elsewhere.

In the 16th and 17th centuries, Tabarka was one of the bases for the Barbary Coast corsairs. They included the notorious Khair ed-Din Barbarossa, who was obliged to hand over Tabarka Island to the Genoese in the 1540s as ransom for the release of his cohort, Dragut. The castle the Genoese built enabled them to retain Tabarka against the Ottomans until 1741, when it fell to the bey of Tunis.

The French constructed both the causeway to the island and the modern town. Despite these developments, Tabarka remained enough of a backwater for the



French to consider it a suitable place of exile for Habib Bourguiba in 1952.

Orientation

The marina is just northeast of the town centre. The main drag is northwest-to-southeast-oriented ave Habib Bourguiba, which ends at a roundabout (and a

petrol station) from which roads head south to Ain Draham and east to Sejnane and Bizerte. The Zone Touristique begins 1.5km east of the marina.

Information

There are a few banks situated along ave Habib Bourguiba. Useful websites include

www.tabarka.org (in French) and www.tabarka.de (in German).

BNA Bank (ave Habib Bourguiba) Faces the SRN Jendouba bus office.

Polyclinique Sidi Moussa ☎ 78 671 200; 5 ave Habib Bourguiba; ☏ 24hr Can deal with medical needs and emergencies.

Post office (rue Hedi Chaker cnr ave Habib Bourguiba)

Publinet (internet per hr TD2; ☏ 8am-9pm or 10pm) Next to the tourist office.

Tourist Office (ONTT; ☎ 78 673 555; crtt.ontt@email.ati.tn; ave 7 Novembre 1987; ☏ 8am-10pm daily Jul & Aug, 8.30am-1pm & 3-5.45pm Mon-Sat Sep-Jun) Occupies the old train station.

Sights

The heart of Tabarka is its **marina** (*port de plaisance*), just northeast of the town centre. If you tire of strolling on dry land, you can ask around for a boat offering sea excursions.

About 1km north of the marina on rocky **Tabarka Island** (Île de Tabarka), turned into a peninsula by the French, stands a magnificent **Genoese fort**, now occupied by the Tunisian army. It can be admired only from the outside.

Across the **Old Harbour Bay** (*Ancien Port*) from the peninsula, **Les Aiguilles** (lays aigwee; The Needles) – a grouping of spiky pinnacles of rock – and the adjacent **jetty** are a popular destination for photo-ops and short evening strolls.

On the hillside above Les Aiguilles is an old **French civilian cemetery** with views of the port – to get there, take rue Farhat Hached west to rue des Jasmins and turn right.

The **Basilique** (La Basilique) is a Roman cistern turned into a church by French missionaries at the end of the 19th century. Delicate and airy it's not – inside you can see some massive square columns holding up some equally massive arches. The 1500-seat **amphitheatre** out front hosts Tabarka's four famous music festivals (see Festivals, p138).

About 14km east of Tabarka, just west of the turnoff to the airport, is the neatly tended **Tabarka Ras Rajel War Cemetery**, in which 500 Commonwealth soldiers who died in WWII – 60 of them unidentified – are buried.

Activities

BEACHES

Montazah Beach begins at the marina and stretches eastward around the bay, past the

big hotels of the Zone Touristique. The further from the marina you go the cleaner it gets.

HAMMAM

Bring along shorts, a towel, flip-flops, shampoo and soap to **Bain Maure Said** (rue Farhat Hached cnr rue de Tunis; bath TD1.2, massage TD1.2; ☏ for women noon-5pm, for men 5-8pm Sat-Thu, for men 5am-noon, for women noon-8pm Fri). Documents can be deposited in little boxes.

DIVING

Based at the marina, **Loisirs de Tabarka** ☎ 78 670 664; www.loisirsdetabarka.com; rue Ali Zouaoui; ☏ about Mar-Oct) offers CMAS level 1/2 courses with six/eight dives for TD330/430 and packages of 1/6/10 dives for TD27/138/200 (from July to September TD30/144/220), not including equipment (TD20 per dive). Excursion options include an all-day trip to the protected Galite Islands, three hours from Tabarka, which are famed for their fantastic sealife (TD70 per person including a barbecue; minimum 12 people).

Hidden away in the Hôtel Méhari complex 2.5km east of town, the experienced **Méhari Diving Center** ☎ 78 673 136; www.mehari-divingcenter.com; Zone Touristique) runs level 1/2/3/4 CMAS PADI-SSI courses for TD230/280/350/400; 1/6/10 dives cost TD25/132/200 (a bit more for night dives), not including equipment rental (TD15 per dive).

HORSE & CAMEL RIDING

Ranch de Golf Beach ☎ 98 824 144; Zone Touristique; ☏ year-round), just to the left of the gate to the Golf Beach Hotel, charges TD25 for a two-hour guided horse-ride along the beach and through the forest; the price for a camel ride is the same.

GOLF

The **Tabarka Golf Club** ☎ 78 671 031; www.tabarka.golf.com; Zone Touristique; 9/18 holes TD35/55; ☏ year-round) has a fine 18-hole layout. Theoretically you need a handicap of 36 but in practice just having a golf handicap certificate (*carte verte* in French) is sufficient. Renting a half-series of clubs costs TD7. Reservations, necessary for groups in spring and autumn, can be made by email or fax (summer is the low season here). Three- to seven-day beginners' courses and private lessons (30 minutes costs TD22) are available.

Tours

Coralis-Tabarka Voyages (☎ 78 673 740; coralis@gnet.tn; 13 route de Ain Draham; ☎ 8.30am-1pm & 3-6pm Mon-Sat & sometimes Sun May-mid-Oct, open mornings only Jul & Aug) runs half-day excursions to Bulla Regia (TN30; every Sunday and perhaps other days) and all-day trips to Dougga and Chemtou (TD50; once or twice a week). Reserve a day or two ahead.

Festivals

Tabarka is famous far and wide for its four first-rate, summertime **music festivals** (www.tabarkajazz.com in French; admission TD10-20). The season kicks off with the outstanding, weeklong **Jazz Festival** (second week of July) and is followed by the **World Music Festival** (mid-August), the **Latinos Festival** (late August) and, to cap off the season, the **Rai Festival** (at the tail end of August), which brings to town *rai* superstars from France and Algeria.

The main events take place in the amphitheatre just outside the Basilique but are supposed to be transferred to a larger amphitheatre northwest of town as soon as it's built.

Sleeping

Budget options are scarce. The most luxurious places are along the beach in the Zone Touristique, 1.5km to 4km west of the marina. Prices rise precipitously in July and August.

Campervans can park near the marina for a fee.

BUDGET

Hôtel Mamia (☎ 78 671 058; fax 78 670 638; 3 rue de Tunis; s/d/tr with toilet Jul-Sep TD22/30/45, Oct-Jun TD15/20/30) The windows of the simple, clean rooms open onto a plant-filled courtyard, where you'll find the showers. The management may make you feel as if you're inconveniencing them. Situated across the street from a mosque.

Hôtel Le Corail (☎ /fax 78 673 082; rue de Tazarka; d with hall bathroom TD35, with bath & toilet TN50-65, about 50% less mid-Sep-Jun) This place has 20 light and airy rooms – the better ones have pretty tile floors and high ceilings, the cheaper ones are spartan and have an old-fashioned feel. Scrubbing till the end of eternity would not make the hall bathrooms feel really clean; the plumbing is a bit iffy.

MIDRANGE

Hôtel La Plage (☎ 78 670 039; 11 ave 7 Novembre 1987; s/d with shared bathroom late Jun-mid-Sep TD25/44, with shower TD30/50, with air-con TD45/70, s/d with shared bathroom mid-Sep-late Jun TD15/20, with shower TD20/35, with air-con TD20/35) Clean, small and central, the nicest rooms here have balconies overlooking the street. The entrance has some crazy fibreglass seashell action but otherwise the reception is dour. Watch out for the hard, lumpy pillows.

Hôtel Les Aiguilles (☎ 78 673 789; fax 78 673 604; hotel.lesaiguilles@wanadoo.tn; 18 ave Habib Bourguiba; s/d late Jun-mid-Sep TD55/80, Apr-late Jun & mid-Sep-Oct TD30/40, Nov-Mar TD20/30; ☎) Housed in an old colonial building, this welcoming, 19-room place is nothing fancy but the rooms come with high ceilings and proper bathrooms and, in some cases, sea views. Excellent value except in summer.

Hôtel Novelty (☎ 78 670 176; fax 78 673 008; 68 ave Habib Bourguiba; s/d Jul-mid-Sep TD45/90, Apr-Jun & mid-Sep-Oct TD30/60, Nov-Mar TD25/50; ☎) This establishment, very centrally located, has 26 bright and airy rooms, all of them simply furnished but neat and clean. Watch out for the low ceiling over the staircase.

Hôtel de France (☎ 78 670 600; fax 78 671 132; ave Hedi Chaker cnr ave Habib Bourguiba; s/d Jul-mid-Sep TD65/100, Apr-Jun & mid-Sep-Oct TD50/70, Nov-Mar TD30/40; ☎) This lift-equipped three-star, with a popular pavement café, has 16 smart, recently renovated rooms with TV; some also come with tiny balconies and good views over the bay. Bourguiba stayed here during his brief exile.

Résidence Corail Royal (☎ 78 670 370; ave 7 Novembre 1987; 2-/4-/6-/8-person apartments with 1/2/3/4 rooms Jul-mid-Sep TD110/160/205/230, Apr-Jun & mid-Sep-Oct TD56/90/120/150, Nov-Mar TD46/80/110/140; ☎) Right next to the marina, these 59 self-catering apartments have spacious kitchenettes and elaborately tiled bathrooms; some come with sea views. Overpriced in summer but a good deal the rest of the time.

TOP END

Hôtel Méhari (☎ 78 670 184; www.goldenyasmin.com; Zone Touristique; s/d Jul-Aug TD107/164, mid-Mar-Jun & Sep-Oct 72/110, Nov & Mar TD54/100; ☎) Part of the Golden Yasmin chain, this luxurious complex, 2.5km east of the marina, offers a fine strip of beach, two swimming pools, tennis, a fitness centre, a Jacuzzi, a *hammam*,

massage, *thalassothérapie* (saltwater therapy) and an on-site dive club (see p137). Kids have a 'mini-club'. Bungalow studio apartments costs TD125 (TD80 in winter).

Dar Ismail (☎ 78 670 188; www.hoteldarismail.com; Zone Touristique; s/d Jul-mid-Sep TD95/190, mid-Sep-Jun TD63/126; ☎) Situated 1.5km east of the marina, this five-star, Moorish-themed place, painted in glitzy shades of tangerine, has peachy, comfortable rooms and all the comforts – plus a fine stretch of beach and lots of grass. A business centre with internet is due to open in 2007

Eating

Not surprisingly, fish and seafood – especially grilled fish – are a Tabarka speciality.

There's a bunch of moderately priced eateries at the northwestern end of ave 7 Novembre 1987 and some cheapies with a local clientele along rue du Peuple near ave Farhat Hached (around Les Etoiles – see below). The fish restaurants around the marina are more upscale.

A number of midrange hotels have restaurants with good-value three-course meals – places to try include the Hôtel Les Aiguilles (TD12) and the Hotel Novelty (TD10).

Les Etoiles (rue du Peuple; grilled fish TD4) Perhaps the best of several similar simple places on this street. Has outside tables and a nice local feel.

Corail (ave Habib Bourguiba; mains TD6.5, 3-course set menu TD8) This cheap-and-cheerful place has a good set menu, some outside tables and jolly management.

Le Pescadou (☎ 98 237 996; marina; fish & meat mains TD8-10; ☎) closed Ramadan & weekdays in winter) One of the sea-based specialities here is bouillabaisse.

Touta (☎ 78 671 018; marina; fish per 100g TD6; ☎) 11.30am-midnight or 1am, closed for a few months in winter) Specialises in locally caught fish and seafood, including langouste (crayfish; per 100g TD9). Has a great marina setting.

Self-caterers will find fruits and veggies at the **central market** (rue Ali Chaawani). There are more market stalls just across ave Habib Bourguiba and the usual items can be found at the **Monoprix supermarket** (ave 7 Novembre 1987; ☎ 8.30am-10pm).

Drinking

Café Andalous (ave Hedi Chaker) This old-time, teetotal café is worth a visit just to see the

wall tiles, made long ago in Tunis by Jews; the wood-and-copper figurines of Ottoman Turks strung along the ceiling; and the chandeliers, which have to be seen to be believed. During the jazz festival, this is one of the venues for live music.

Getting There & Away

AIR

Little happens at Tabarka's international airport, 15km east of the city, except for the occasional European charter flight.

BUS

Buses to Tunis (3¼ hours, six daily) via Mateur or Béja depart from the **SNTRI bus station** (rue du Peuple).

The **SRN Jendouba bus office** (84 ave Habib Bourguiba cnr rue Mohammed Ali) handles buses to Ain Draham (TD1.1, 40 minutes, a dozen daily), Bizerte (TD7.4, 3¼ hours, at 6.45am, with an STRB bus from Restaurant Sidi Moussa at 12.30pm), Jendouba (TD2.9, 1¼ hours, four daily) and Le Kef (TD5.5, 3½ hours, twice daily).

CAR

Car-hire companies include the following: **Europcar** (☎ 98 237 967; Porto Corallo complex) **Hertz** (☎ 78 670 670; Porto Corallo complex)

LOUAGE

Louages congregate near the southeastern end of ave Habib Bourguiba. Louages to Tunis (TF8.7, 2½ hours, frequent departures) and Bizerte (one daily) leave from the east side of the street, while louages to Ain Draham (TD1.3), Jendouba (TD3.6), Le Kef (TD6.5) and Mateur via Sejnane (one daily at about 6am) leave from the west side of the street.

Getting Around

A taxi from Tabarka to the airport costs TD10 (TD15 at night).

A cab ride from the town centre to the Zone Touristique costs TD1.5 to TD3, depending on how far out you go.

AIN DRAHAM

pop 15,300

Often snow-covered in December and January, Ain Draham (altitude 900m), about 30km inland from Tabarka, is Tunisia's hill station. Its steep-roofed houses spill down

the western flank of Jebel Biri (1014m), the highest peak of the Kroumirie Mountains, while all around are rounded hills covered in cork forest. The town is a great base for hiking, mountain biking and horse riding (see below).

Ain Draham was popular with colonial hunters – the last of Tunisia's lions and leopards were shot around here early last century. Hunting continues to be an attraction, with wild boars now the primary target, but most visitors come to relax and escape the summer heat and a few come to do serious training at the well-equipped sports centre.

The road linking Tabarka with Ain Draham is one of Tunisia's most beautiful. As it climbs through rich countryside, it passes from the coastal plain into the Kroumirie Mountains' famous cork oak forests, affording views of the deep-blue sea and the verdant valleys leading down to it.

Orientation & Information

The simplest way to navigate around Ain Draham is to measure distances from the fountain roundabout at the northern edge of town, in the middle of the T-junction formed by the intersection of two main roads: ave 7 November 1987, which heads southward down the hill past the bus station and on to Jendouba, and ave Habib Bourguiba, which heads both northwest towards Tabarka and southeast (up the slope) to the centre of

town, from where it arches southward and eventually joins ave 7 November 1987 to form the main road to Jendouba.

Hospital (☎ 78 655 047; rue Habib Thameur; ☎ 24hr) Situated 600m southwest of the fountain roundabout on the other side of the valley from the town centre. Look for a sign reading *urgences*.

Maison des Jeunes Internet Room (☎ 78 655 087; ave Habib Bourguiba; internet per hr TD1.2; ☎ 9am or 10am-almost midnight) To the left and up the stairs from the main building.

Post office (ave Habib Bourguiba) About 400m up the hill from the fountain roundabout.

STB Bank (ave Habib Bourguiba) About 250m up the hill from the fountain roundabout. Ain Draham does not have any ATMs.

Sights & Activities

Strung out along the main commercial street, ave Habib Bourguiba, are colonial-era buildings, cafés, a few restaurants and small food, clothing and crafts shops. The town is especially animated on Monday, which is market day.

One local walking option is to head out along the road towards Tabarka to the Hôtel Nour el-Ain, in an area known as **Col des Ruines**. From the western edge of the hotel parking lot, up the stairs, a trail heads up the hill to a cement water-tank and then continues south and southwest through the pine and oak forests back to town. The whole circuit takes about two hours.

ECOTOURISM IN THE KROUMIRIE MOUNTAINS

The hills, forests and plains around Ain Draham have huge ecotourism potential that, so far, is almost entirely untapped, in part because the absence of decent maps pretty much precludes heading out on your own. Fortunately, Ain Draham's **Royal Rihana Hôtel** (see opposite; ☎ 78 655 391; www.royalrihana-hotel.com; ☎ generally May-Oct) organises a variety of guided outdoors expeditions. Groups usually have to have at least eight participants.

The Rihana's experienced team offers **hikes and treks** through the mountains, along the coast and/or to Roman sites. Full board is provided and accommodation en route is either in hotels or in Berber-style tents. Four/eight nights in a tent cost TD489/832; reserve at least a week ahead.

For **mountain biking**, you can either base yourself in Ain Draham and take guided day trips (the hotel provides hot lunches) or head out on a longer expedition; one/two/seven nights cost TD269/342/489.

If you've got a group of at least 20, one option is a nine-day **back-roads cycling trip** (€999), with about 100km of riding a day, from Ain Draham to Le Kef, Sbeitla, Kairouan, Mahdia, Hammamet, Kélibia and Tunis. In each governorate the group is accompanied by a local police escort. You'll need to bring your own bicycle.

Horse-riding trips cost TD489/589/929 for four/five/nine nights.

LES TAPIS DE KROUMIRIE

Bold, colourful carpets and handbags, many decorated with simple, traditional Berber motifs, are woven in Ain Draham by a small women's cooperative called **Les Tapis de Kroumirie** (☎ 78 655 226; rue Abou el-Kacem Echebbi; ☎ 8am-1pm & 2-5pm or 5.30pm, closed Fri afternoon & Sat afternoon). Launched in the 1980s by two French doctors and operated with the help of Ain Draham's Centre d'Action Sociale (Social Action Centre), it aims both to provide employment for poor women and to preserve local carpet-making traditions.

At the friendly, airy workshop, where you can see women working the looms (other women prefer to work at home), two varieties of thick-pile wool carpets are available. A *tapis de Kroumirie* has 40,000 knots per square metre, while a *tapis berbère* (Berber carpet), made with thicker yarn, has 10,000 knots per square metre. Kilims (woven rugs) made of wool or cotton are also on offer. All the wool is spun by hand and coloured using vegetable dyes. Prices are fixed but they're not high – a woven handbag costs TD10 to TD18, while carpets are TD60 to TD80 per square metre.

The most straightforward way to get to Les Tapis de Kroumirie – though it involves a bit of up-and-down – is to walk down the flight of stairs next to the post office on ave Habib Bourguiba and then, at the bottom, turn left for 50m. The workshop is on the 1st floor, above the Ministère des Affaires Sociales office.

Products made by Les Tapis de Kroumirie are available in Tunis at **Mains de Femmes** (☎ 71 330 789; 47 ave Habib Bourguiba), an exhibition of women's crafts run by a nonprofit organisation.

You can also walk to the top of **Jebel Biri** – the path starts near the Hôtel Rihana and takes about three hours return.

Sleeping

Maison des Jeunes (☎ 78 655 087; ave Habib Bourguiba; dm TD6) About 1km up the hill from the fountain roundabout, this hostel has 90 beds in basic rooms.

Hôtel Les Pins (☎ 78 656 200; fax 78 656 182; ave Habib Bourguiba; s/d Nov-Jun TD25/38, Jul-Oct TD34/52) Situated 200m up the hill from the fountain roundabout, this welcoming hotel has a haut-relief pine tree over the entrance, a salmon-pink lobby and 21 spacious rooms with piping hot water year-round. Somehow all this comes together to give the place a vaguely chalet feel. An excellent deal.

Hôtel Beau Séjour (☎ 78 655 363; s/d TD35/50) Painted white with green shutters, this former hunting lodge feels like the setting for an Agatha Christie novel – perhaps it's the fangy, dive-bombing boars mounted on the lobby wall across from the old brick fireplace. The 18 rooms have balconies reached via French windows. The café serves beer.

Royal Rihana Hôtel (☎ 78 655 391; www.royalrihana-hotel.com; s/d Sep-Jun TD54/98, Jul & Aug TD59/98; ☎ ☎) With hammered copper hunting scenes behind reception and pictures of dead boars nearby, this unique hotel – the name is also spelled Rayhana – has a masculine feel. The 74 rooms are spotless,

practical and unpretentious and have wonderful forest views; amenities include a bar-side fireplace with roaring fires in winter, a grape-shaded patio and an indoor pool. The idiosyncratic décor grows on you. See the internet site for seasonal deals. Situated 2km south of the fountain roundabout along ave Habib Bourguiba, up the slope from the sky-blue statue of a giant mouse with huge white ears.

Eating

There's a cluster of eateries right just west of the fountain roundabout. These include Restaurant L'Escale (not to be confused with the café of the same name), which serves excellent quarter-chickens with spicy sauce (TD2.2) and, in the evening, super *m'lawi* (TD0.85; rolled chapatis filled with tuna, potato salad and other goodies). About 800m up ave Habib Bourguiba, Restaurant du Grand Maghreb, painted brick-red with green trim, serves pizzas (TD1.5 to TD4).

Shopping

For details on wool items hand-woven by local women, see above.

On ave Habib Bourguiba up near the Maison des Jeunes, shops sell locally made carved wood items and planters made of cork bark that look like the cross-section of a tree trunk but weigh almost nothing.

Getting There & Away

BUS

The **SRT Jendouba bus station** (☎ 78 655 022; ave 7 Novembre 1987), 150m down the hill from the fountain roundabout, sends buses off to Beni Metir (TD0.70, one bus daily at 12.30pm), Bizerte (at 6am via Tabarka), Hammam Bourguiba (TD0.85, two daily), Jendouba (TD1.9, four daily), Le Kef (three daily) and Tabarka (TD1.1, a dozen daily). SNTRI buses go to Tunis (five daily).

LOUAGE & TAXI

On the street outside the bus station there are blue-stripe services to Tabarka (TD1.3, 40 minutes) and Jendouba (TD2.2, 45 minutes) and red-stripes to Tunis. Yellow-stripe louages to Fernana stop 250m down the hill from the bus station.

Taxis occasionally go to Beni Metir (TD5). A taxi to Hammam Bourguiba costs TD4 (TD1.2 per person).

AROUND AIN DRAHAM

Hammam Bourguiba

حمام بورقيبة

An enchanting winding drive through forested hills takes you to this remote village 17km southwest of Ain Draham. In a small valley just 4km from the Algerian border, it feels on the edge of something and in the middle of nowhere. The hot springs here, a favourite of former president Habib Bourguiba, are renowned for their health benefits.

Hammam Bourguiba makes a fine day trip from Ain Draham and is a good base for walks in the surrounding forest and valleys (eg to the reservoir). Stay away from the frontier.

ACTIVITIES

Hôtel El Mouradi's **Centre de Cure** (☎ 8am-1pm & 3-6pm, closed during Ramadan), frequented mainly by wealthy Tunisians, is able to offer a variety of water cures and beauty treatments thanks to two natural hot springs, known as Source Eucalyptus (38.5°C) and Source Les Pins (50°C to 56°C). Set at the base of a forested hill, this ultramodern place is, in the French spa tradition, somewhat clinical – gotta love the staff in neo-nurse gear.

The 2½- to three-hour **Forfait Bien-Être** (wellness package deal; TD60) includes time in the **pool** (☎ 9am-1pm & 4-6pm, women only 3-4pm), a massage bath and a massage. Other options

include *hydrothérapie* (a sort of computer-controlled Jacuzzi), something called 'starlight' (a Jacuzzi with underwater lights that change colour), an *application algue générale* (you get smeared in sea algae in a sort of hot, all-encompassing water bed; TD12), shiatsu (for 45 minutes TD45) and even a *douche nasale* (nasal shower; TD3). Just using the pool costs TD5. The high season here lasts from October to mid-May.

There's a total disconnect between the luxurious, gated spa and the impoverished village of Hammam Bourguiba, which consists of little more than a school and a few shops. Fortunately, the villagers – and visitors on a tight budget – can enjoy the joys of lounging around in hot spring water at the **Hammam Shaabi**, (people's bath; admission TD0.40). It's located in an unmarked building with blue-barred windows next to a giant white water-tank 150m up the hillside through the eucalyptus grove from the Garde Nationale post. The men's section is to the left, the women's to the right. A massage costs about TD1. Bring bathing gear and flip-flops.

SLEEPING

Hôtel El Mouradi (☎ 78 654 055; www.elmouradi.com; s/d TD77/104, incl full board TD101/152; ☎ ☎) This four-star luxury hotel, attached to the spa (see left), has 152 very comfortable rooms and 30 bungalows. Details on promotional rates are available online or by phone.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

There are two daily buses from Ain Draham (TD0.85), or you can take a taxi (TD1.2 per person). There are also infrequent louages.

Beni Metir

بني متير

The quiet village of Beni Metir, 10km southeast of Ain Draham down a winding road, was built by the French starting in 1948 to house the workers who constructed Tunisia's first hydroelectric dam, then – as now – the town's *raison d'être*.

Locals are proud of their distinctive **market square**, surrounded by an ensemble of white arcaded buildings with striking red and black doors and windows – both the architecture and the colour scheme date from the French period. The squat, deconsecrated **church**, with a pointy cement belfry, is now a children's club.

The surrounding cork oak forests are a great venue for relaxing day walks – options include following the lakeshore towards the dam or heading out to **Ein Jemel** (Spring of the Camels), a few kilometres from town.

SLEEPING & EATING

The **Centre de Stages et de Vacances** (☎ 78 649 200 or 98 500 944; market square; dm q TD5/20) This 100-bed, 35-room hostel, in an old French building, has large rooms with soft, comfortable beds. It's well kept and clean. A few tiny cafés and grocery shops can be found at or near the market square.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

The best public transport connections are with Fernana (TD1 per person by taxi), 15km south of Beni Metir and 19 km south of Ain Draham on the Ain Draham–Jendouba road.

One bus a day links Ain Draham with Beni Metir. Louages on this route are infrequent; hiring a private taxi may cost TD5 to TD10.

BÉJA

باجة

pop 56,400

Not many tourists make it to Béja, a solid small city set among curvaceous grain hills, but the medina and war cemetery make it worth a short stop.

From the train station, walking up the hill takes you to **place de l'Indépendance**, the main square – check out the imposing **town hall**, with its columns and balcony. From here, the **medina** is 300m further west, past a **deconsecrated church** that's now used for cultural events. The medina's southeast-to-northwest-oriented main street is lined with shops and fruit-and-veggie vendors.

The **Great Mosque** (rue de la Mosquée) has a square minaret with terracotta tiles on the sides and candy-striped Moorish arches up top. About 150m northwest is the fish-scale dome of the **Zaouia of Sidi Abdel Kader**, with a tile panel over its green door. It isn't really open to the public though you might be able to peek into the tiled courtyard.

A few streets north of the mosque its the white-domed **Zaouia of Marabout Sidi Boutef Faha** but it, too, is pretty derelict inside, though people do come to light candles. Inside you can see henna handprints left prior to circumcision and marriage ceremonies.

From there, walking down the hill will take you to an overgrown and partly looted colonial-era **Christian cemetery** with lots of Italian names, some of them from as late as the 1990s.

Turn right at the train tracks and you'll soon come to the **Commonwealth Military Cemetery** (rue Mohamed ben Kahla; see p144), a neat, serene field of 396 graves, 87 of them unidentified; most perished in the spring of 1943 during the Allied offensive. To get to the cemetery from the train station, walk north along the tracks for 500m.

Sleeping & Eating

Maison des Jeunes (rue 18 Janvier; dm TD4; ☎) A basic hostel across the street from the bus station. Offers internet access to guests and nonguests alike.

Hôtel Phénix (☎ 78 450 188; www.phenix.com.tn; 6-8 ave de la République; s/d/tr/q TD30/40/50/60; ☎) Just east of place de l'Indépendance, this very central hotel has 14 clean, bright, spacious rooms – the front ones, with little balconies over the street, are best. Excellent value.

Favoured by visiting government ministers, the **Phénix restaurant** (meat mains TD7-13; ☎ noon-midnight; ☎) the best in town, serves Tunisian cuisine as well as fish, pasta and pizza. There are several cheaper restaurants along the same street.

Getting There & Away

The **SRT Béja bus station** (rue 18 Janvier) is across the train tracks from the train station – to get there take the road to Tunis and cross the grassy area. Destinations include Ain Draham (two daily), Bizerte (four daily), Teboursouk (one daily) and Tunis (three daily).

Louages to Bizerte, Sousse, Teboursouk and Tunis leave from the train station.

The **train station** (ave Habib Thameur) is linked five times a day with Tunis (TD4, 1¼ hours) and Jendouba (TD2.6, 1¼ hours).

Béja's taxis don't seem to have meters.

JENDOUBA

جندوبة

pop 44,700

Jendouba, a quiet governorate capital 153km west of Tunis and 60km north of Le Kef, is regarded by most as pretty dull but it has a gentle feel and the centre comes alive somewhat in the early evening. Linked

THE PRICE OF VICTORY

The painful progress of the Allies' WWII North African campaign (p31) is marked by a series of **military cemeteries**.

War dead from Great Britain and the countries of the Commonwealth are buried near where they fell in eight cemeteries designed and maintained by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission (www.cwgc.org), which has responsibility for about 2500 WWI and WWII cemeteries worldwide. Sombre and dignified, with neat lawns and uniform rows of white stone markers, each is an immaculately maintained corner of British pastoral. Many of the gravestones bear a personal dedication chosen by next of kin; others are marked simply, 'A Soldier of the Second World War/Known unto God'.

Tunisia's largest Commonwealth cemetery is 3km outside **Mejez el-Bab** (also spelled Medjez-El-Bab), 60km southwest of Tunis on the road to Béja. It contains the graves of 2903 WWII soldiers, 385 of them unidentified; a memorial bears the names of another 2000 soldiers who fell in Tunisia and Algeria but have no known graves. The birdsong in the surrounding trees seems appropriately haunting and chaotic.

There are other Commonwealth cemeteries at **Béja** (see p143), **Bordj El Amri** (Massicault; 30km southwest of Tunis on the road to Béja), **Oued Zarga** (80km southwest of Tunis towards Béja), **Tabarka** (Ras Rajal; p137), **Thibar** (30km southwest of Béja towards Teboursouk), Enfidha (Enfidaville; 95km southeast of Tunis) and **Sfax** (4km south of the city on the road to Gabès).

American war dead are buried at the **North Africa American Cemetery & Memorial** (www.abmc.gov) at Carthage, five minutes on foot from the Carthage Amilcar TGM suburban rail station.

There are French cemeteries at **Enfidha** (95km southeast of Tunis) and **Gammarth** (see p99) and a German military cemetery at **Borj Cédria**, on the Gulf of Tunis about 25km southeast of the capital.

by train to Tunis, it's an important transport hub and makes a good base for visits to Bulla Regia and Chemtou. Wednesday is market day.

Orientation & Information

The train station (with storks' nests on top), police station, post office and two banks (UIB and STB), both with ATMs, are right around place de la République, the filthy but shaded main square in front of the train station.

From there, rue Mohammed Ali, the narrow tree-lined main commercial street, heads south; after about 350m you get to a Mobil petrol station (at the corner) and place 7 Novembre, a giant roundabout with a towering sculpture that looks like a giant Lego rocketship. The bus and louage station is 200m further on (ie south, just past the Hôtel Simitthu).

Publinet (internet per hr TD1.2; ☎ 8am-11pm or midnight) is diagonally across the street from the Hôtel Atlas.

Sleeping & Eating

Hôtel Atlas (☎ 78 603 217; rue 1 Juin 1955; s/d TD18/25) Just off place de la République

behind the police station, this hostelry is bare-bones and a bit out of date but the rooms are clean and – despite the tissue-paper-thin sheets and lumpy pillows – relatively comfortable. It's convenient if you're travelling by train.

Hôtel Simitthu (☎ 78 604 043; blvd 9 Avril 1938; s/d TD30/44) About 100m south of place 7 Novembre and just north of the bus and louage station, this place is dull, musty and overpriced – but convenient if you're travelling by bus. Simitthu was the Numidian name for Chemtou.

For self-caterers there's a **Monoprix supermarket** (place de la République; ☎ 8am-2pm & 4-9pm) facing the train station and a great bread and pastry **bakery** (rue Youssef) facing the Mobil petrol station.

Getting There & Away

The **bus and louage stations** (blvd 9 Avril 1938) are about 200m south of place 7 Novembre, ie just south of the Hôtel Simitthu. SRT Jendouba buses go to Ain Draham (TD1.9, nine daily), Béja (twice daily in the morning), Bizerte (TD6.7, twice daily), Le Kef (TD2.5, six daily) and Tabarka (three daily). SNTRI buses serve Tunis (TD7.8, six daily).

From the **louage station** next to the bus station, red louages go to Bizerte, Le Kef (TD3.2), Tunis and, via Kairouan, to Sousse (TD12.2).

Louages to Ain Draham and Tabarka stop just across the train tracks from the Total petrol station – the spot is 200m northwest of place 7 Novembre and 250m southwest (along the tracks) from the train station.

Five trains a day link the **train station** (place de la République) with Béja (TD2.6, 1¼ hours), Ghardimao (TD2, 26 minutes) and Tunis (TD6.8, 2½ hours).

BULLA REGIA

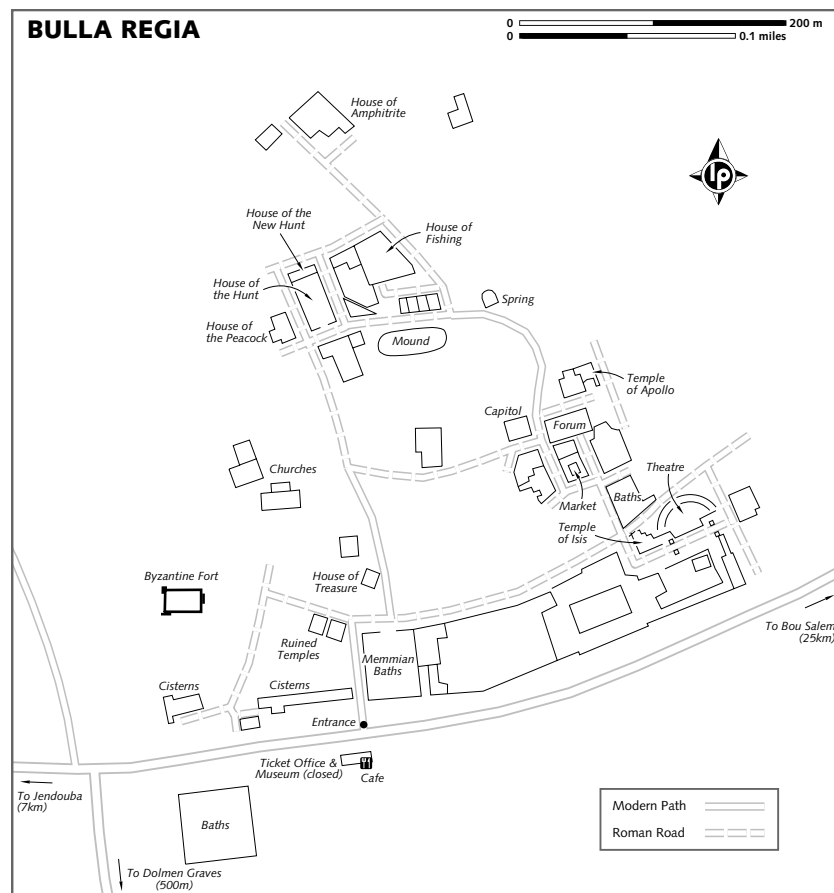
Famed for its extraordinary underground villas, the Roman city of **Bulla Regia** (admission

بلا رجية

TD3, camera TD1; ☎ 8am-7pm Apr–mid-Sep, 8.30am-5.30pm mid-Sep–Mar), 7km northwest of Jendouba, offers a rare opportunity to walk into complete, superbly preserved Roman rooms rather than having to extrapolate how things once looked from waist-high walls.

To escape the summer heat, the ever-inventive Romans retreated below the surface, building elegant homes – complete with colonnaded courtyards – that echo the troglodyte Berber homes at Matmata. The name each villa is known by reflects the theme of the mosaics found inside; some (but not all) of the best are now in the Bardo Museum (p50).

As you tour the site watch your step so you don't plummet into a cistern.



History

The dolmens (Neolithic tombs) that dot the surrounding hills show that the area was inhabited long before the Romans arrived. The town of Bulla emerged in about the 5th century BC as part of Carthage's move to develop the Medjerda Valley as a wheat-growing area. 'Regia' (royal) was added later when it became the capital of one of the short-lived Numidian kingdoms tolerated by Rome following the destruction of Carthage.

Bulla Regia flourished under Roman rule, its citizens growing rich on wheat – and, through grand construction projects, made sure their neighbours knew it. The town reached the peak of its prosperity in the 2nd and 3rd centuries AD; most of the site's buildings date from that era.

Bulla Regia was subsequently occupied by the Byzantines, who as usual added a fort, but was abandoned after the Arab conquest in the 7th century.

Sights

The **Memmian Baths** (Thermes), to the right of the entrance, were named after Julia Memmia, wife of Emperor Septimius Severus. The most extensive of the site's above-ground structures, its rooms are surrounded by arched service areas – a reminder of the slaves who kept the waters hot and Roman backs scrubbed.

Walking northwards, following the signs to the Quartier des Maisons (villas quarter), takes you to the city's wealthiest residential neighbourhood. The villas – seven of which have been excavated – vary in their level of sophistication but are all built to the same basic plan, with a central courtyard open to the sky. As you descend into each, you'll feel a significant drop in temperature – just what the Romans intended.

The first home you come to is the small, subterranean **House of Treasure** (Maison du Trésor), named after a cache of Byzantine coins discovered here. The large dining room is decorated with a geometrically patterned mosaic; next door is a bedroom.

Continuing north, you pass two side-by-side, 6th-century Byzantine **churches** (*basilique chrétienne*), with some columns and a walk-in, cross-shaped baptismal font. North of here is the rather unloved-feeling,

subterranean **House of the Peacock**, named after a mosaic that's now in the Bardo.

Across the road is the truly impressive **House of the Hunt** (Maison de la Chasse), centred on an underground hall with eight ornate pillars; hexagonal holes at the top of each cleverly reduce the structure's weight. Off the courtyard is a spacious mosaic-floored dining room, an indication of the lavish lifestyle once enjoyed here. Upstairs are some neat, side-by-side latrines, next to the building's private *hammam* – this place was really state of the art.

Next door, an above-ground hunting mosaic has been left *in situ* at the **House of the New Hunt** (Maison de la Nouvelle Chasse). Large chunks are missing but there's still plenty left to view, including an action-packed lion hunt. Underground is a five-column hall with a swirling geometric floor.

Take the path east and then north to Bulla Regia's star attraction, the **House of Amphitrite**; the entrance is near the metal grate in the pavement. The underground mosaic is exquisite – a perfectly preserved portrait of a nude Venus flanked by two centaurs, one shocked (having his hair tugged), the other quizzical. At the base are some lively cupids riding dolphins – one of them is checking himself out in a mirror at the same time. Leaping fish add to the vibrancy and balance of this masterpiece.

South of here is the spacious **House of Fishing** (Maison de la Pêche), the earliest of the villas. This place had a fountain in the basement; a small room contains a mosaic with a fishing theme.

Heading southeast, you'll pass on your left the **spring** that once supplied ancient Bulla Regia with water – and still delivers its cool waters to nearby Jendouba. There's a fine panorama from atop the nearby **mountain**.

Walking east and then south will take you to the **forum**, surrounded by the ruins of two temples – the **capitol**, to the west; and, to the north, the **Temple of Apollo**, which yielded the truly godlike statue of Apollo displayed at the Bardo.

Just south of here is the **market** and a little further down is a small but beautifully preserved **theatre** with a large mosaic of a not-very-fierce bear. The front three tiers are extra wide and are separated from the

rest by the remains of a low wall – VIP seating. Southwest are the remains of the small **Temple of Isis**, which honoured the Egyptian goddess, a fashionable addition to the Roman pantheon.

The hill south of the ticket office is covered with Neolithic **dolmen graves**.

Getting There & Away

The turn-off to Bulla Regia is about 4km north of Jendouba on the road to Ain Draham; from there, the site is 3km east.

SRT Jendouba buses link Jendouba's bus station with Bulla Regia hourly until 7pm (6pm in winter). A taxi from Jendouba costs about TD4 one-way.

Any bus or louage travelling between Jendouba and Ain Draham can drop you off at the Bulla Regia turn-off, from where it's an easy hitch or a pleasant 3km walk (if it's not too hot).

CHEMTOU

شمتو

The largest marble quarry in ancient North Africa, **Chemtou** (admission TD3, camera TD1; ☎ 8am–7pm May–mid-Sep, 8.30am–5.30pm mid-Sep–Apr) was the source of an unusual pink-veined yellow marble that was prized throughout the Roman world as the exotic stone that most resembled gold. It's daunting even to contemplate the work that went into carving out and transporting the huge blocks of stone. The site is brought to life by an excellent museum.

A café is supposed to open here sometime in 2007 – until then bring along food and drink.

History

The site, on the northern bank of Oued Medjerda, was originally the Numidian settlement of Simitthu. Marble from here was used to construct the celebrated Monument of Micipsa at Circa (modern Constantine in Algeria) in 130 BC.

The region came under Roman control after the battle of Thapsus in 46 BC, when Caesar defeated the combined forces of Pompey and the last Numidian king, Juba I. Its marble became a symbol of Roman might and wealth – not only was it golden but it expressed the empire's domination over exotic lands. After Julius Caesar's assassination, a 6m-high column of Chemtou marble was erected in his honour in Rome's forum.

The Roman settlement here was founded during the reign of Augustus (27 BC–AD 16) and thanks to the marble craze it quickly developed into an important town. The quarrying operations here were said to have been the most sophisticated in the Roman world – each block of marble carried the stamp of the emperor of the day, that of the proconsul for Africa and the quarry supervisor, and a reference mark. The workers were slaves.

Initially, the blocks were hauled to Oued Medjerda on rollers and floated downstream to the port of Utica (Utique) on barges. By the beginning of the 2nd century, silt had all but closed the river to barge traffic, obliging the Romans to build a special road across the Kroumirie Mountains to link the quarries with the port of Thabraca (Tabarka).

The quarries were worked until Byzantine times but were abandoned following the 7th-century Arab invasion. These days marble is quarried just east of the archaeological site.

Sights

Chemtou sprawls over a wide area between Oued Medjerda and the band of low hills that were the source of the town's 'marble-ous' wealth.

Despite the town's proximity to the river, drinking water was brought in by aqueduct from a spring in the hills 30km to the north. If you arrive from the north, the first ruins you see are the remains of this aqueduct advancing across the landscape. It ends at the ruins of the **municipal baths**, to the right of the access road, which continues past a Roman **theatre**.

The first-rate **archaeological museum** is the star attraction here. Labelling is in Arabic, French and German, reflecting the source of the museum's funding ('you pay for it, you get to choose the language'), but the layout is clear enough. An informative 20-minute **film** on the site, available in six languages, is usually shown only to groups but if you ask nicely a private screening can probably be arranged. Highlights include a chart showing how, 200 million years ago, Tunisia used to be located approximately where New York now is; exhibits on the technology used to quarry and transport marble; a fine mosaic floor representing the four seasons; a

re-creation of the Monument of Micipsa, which once crowned a nearby hilltop; and an impressive marble plaque designed to glorify the emperor – an early, rather cumbersome version of today's political bumper stickers and campaign buttons.

To the left as you exit the museum is a small section of original **Roman road** used to transport marble down to the river. Excavations of the **forum**, a few hundred

metres to the west, have revealed that it was built on the foundations of a Numidian temple.

The **quarries**, three in all, are in the little hills north of the museum. Chemtou marble ranges in colour from dark red to green but the most highly prized hue was golden yellow.

A path leads up to the top of the easternmost hill, where you can see the ruins

THEIR BARK IS BETTER THAN THEIR FLIGHT

Money may not grow on trees but cork does, and if you live in the mountains of northwestern Tunisia it might as well be the same thing.

Cork is something of a miracle material: it's durable, light, almost impermeable to liquids and highly elastic. That's why it's long been used to make stoppers for wine bottles. In the Kroumirie Mountains you often see chunks of the stuff lying around and when you hold it and probe it with your fingers and weigh it in your hand it's hard to believe that it is what it is.

From the point of view of environmental sustainability, cork is an ideal product: not only is it 100% biodegradable but it's also completely renewable. Raw cork is harvested in the late spring and early summer by removing the outer bark of cork oaks, which look a bit reddish and bald for a while but immediately begin regrowing their protective outer layer. After nine to 12 years, a tree's cork sheath is again as thick as a wine stopper is wide and can once more be harvested.

Each harvest cycle, a cork oak – which lives for one to three centuries – produces between 25kg and 60kg of raw cork. Only about one-eighth of this can be turned into bottle stoppers; the rest is used for less lucrative products such as corkboard, floor tiles and coasters.

Cork oak forests are hugely important ecologically. Able to thrive in the often-harsh climate and marginal soils around the western Mediterranean, they are home to an exceptionally high number of plant and animal species. In Tunisia, they provide a habitat for the extremely rare zen oak and – in winter – for countless migratory birds from northern Europe. The almost-extinct Barbary deer (*Cervus elaphus barbarus*), Africa's only native deer, lives exclusively in the cork oak forests of northwestern Tunisia and adjacent parts of Algeria. As they grow back a new layer of cork, the trees take three to five times more CO₂ out of the atmosphere than non-harvested trees.

Cork harvesting makes forests a valuable source of income for remote rural communities, creating a powerful economic incentive for local people to protect them from degradation. Bottle stoppers are the cork industry's *raison d'être*. In 2005, 1kg of top-quality, one-piece cork stoppers was worth a whopping €46, compared with just €6.60 for 1kg of agglomerated cork stoppers and €3 for 1kg of decorative corkboard.

In a roundabout way, the greatest threat to Tunisia's cork oak forests comes from the Australian wine industry, which has led the switchover from natural cork bottle stoppers to cheaper synthetic ones or even – *quelle horreur* – aluminium screw-tops. About 35% of the stoppers used by Australia's wineries are now noncork, and if current worldwide trends continue – even in France one in 10 bottles of wine now has a noncork cork – the demand for cork stoppers, and thus the price of raw cork, could plummet.

Ecotourism, including trekking in the forests around Ain Draham (see p140), and the purchase of Kroumirie cork souvenirs will be able to make up for only a tiny part of the income loss should the global cork market crash.

The WWF (www.panda.org) fears that cork oak forests that no longer produce income for local communities face poor management, conversion to agriculture, overgrazing, fragmentation and accelerated human encroachment, processes that could result in increased erosion, more frequent forest fires, biodiversity loss and even desertification. That's why they've launched a worldwide campaign to encourage the wine industry to continue to use genuine cork bottle stoppers.

of a Numidian **temple**, later converted into a temple to Saturn by the Romans and then a Byzantine church.

A few kilometres south there's a **Roman bridge** over Oued Medjerda, just downstream from the modern bridge. Situated further along from the bridge are the ruins of a **turbine mill**.

Getting There & Away

Chemtou is in the middle of nowhere. More specifically, it's 16km west of the Bulla Regia turn-off on the Jendouba–Ain Draham road, which is about 4km northwest of Jendouba. You can also take the Jendouba–Ghardimao road to Oued Melliz and turn right.

A taxi from Jendouba or Bulla Regia to Chemtou costs about TD15 to TD20 one-way and TD30 to TD40 return, including a couple of hours at the site. Chemtou is quite spread out so you might want to arrange in advance to be driven from site to site.

Doing a bit of walking is also an option (bring plenty of water). Chemtou is about 3km north of the Jendouba–Ghardimao road – ask your bus or louage driver to leave you at the turn-off. To get back, walk to the highway and then continue on another kilometre or so to the village of Oued Melliz, where there are local louages to Jendouba. Another option is to go via Ain el-Kesir, a village 3km north of Chemtou, which also has occasional louages to Jendouba.

GHARDIMAO

pop 19,400

Ghardimao, 36km west of Jendouba, has an almost appealingly dead-end feel, with the sort of brooding, still atmosphere that in a Western movie precedes a shoot out. This really is the end of the line, especially since the suspension of the Al-Maghreb al-Arabi (Trans-Maghreb Express) train service that once linked Tunisia with Morocco via Algeria.

Welcome to Tunisia's wild west, surrounded by countryside whose stark beauty is tempered by the tension of the frontier. The town itself bakes lazily in the relentless

غار الذمّاء

west Tunisian sun, exuding a general air of dereliction

Truly off the beaten path is **El-Feija National Park**, about 20km to the northwest near the Algerian frontier, whose mature oak forests are home to the rare Barbary deer. Endemic trees include the African oak and the cork oak, which grow alongside aromatic plants such as lavender and myrtle.

Orientation & Information

The main drag, ave Habib Bourguiba, is on the other side of a partly tree-shaded square from the train station.

There are some shops and a **BNA bank** (no ATM) at the main square on ave Habib Bourguiba, marked by a stone pedestal holding aloft a broken clock whose sole remaining hand twists slowly in the wind – some say it was caught in the crossfire between the sheriff and a notorious Algerian smuggler.

It may be possible to connect to the internet at **Al-Maktaba al-Arabi** (ave Habib Bourguiba; per hr TD1; ☎24hrs), a writing supplies shop with one computer in the back. With a blue awning out front, it's 100m southwest of the Maison des Jeunes (no accommodation available), housed in a deconsecrated French church.

Sleeping & Eating

If you get stuck here the only accommodation option is the **Hôtel Tebounik** (☎78 660 043; s/d with shared bathrooms TD10/20), which has 11 passable rooms, some with balconies. The name is spelled 'rnik' on the sign, probably because the other letters were shot off one day at high noon. Across the sunbaked square from the train station, this place has a restaurant (mains TD3 to TD5) and one of only two beer-serving saloons in town.

At the main square there are several small eateries and an arcaded food market.

Getting There & Away

Trains go to/from Tunis (TD8.4, three hours) via Jendouba (TD2, 26 minutes) and Béja (TD3.8, 1¼ hours) five times a day.

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