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Tune into Tunisia

It might be 6,000 miles away but Tunisia is the summer travel destination du jour, writes Winnie Yeung.

This year, why not forgo your usual Southeast Asian resorts? Let's face it: they're overpriced, touristy and overrun with schoolkids. Though it might seem far-flung, Tunisia is a destination that has been enjoyed by Europeans for decades, and it's suddenly gotten a lot more accessible, thanks to a new route by Qatar Airways, which takes tourists from Hong Kong to its capital city Tunis with just one stop en route.

This northern African country was once ruled by the Romans and the French. It's a coastal country that overlooks the Mediterranean Sea. European historical and cultural influences are found everywhere, juxtaposed with its African roots.

Sidi Bou Said

You'll realize that the long flight is definitely worth it once you arrive at the gorgeous town of Sidi Bou Said. Built in the 18th century and nestled on a hilltop, it treats visitors to a sweeping panorama of whitewashed cottages with blue-colored window frames overlooking the Gulf of Tunis. Why the blue and white? "Blue is the color of happiness for Tunisians—and it drives away flies, too," our guide explains. In fact, Sidi Bou Said's uniqueness has also made it quite popular to artists; its most famous resident was German painter Paul Klee.

To avoid the crowds and souvenir salesmen, take the winding back alleys for a quieter walk around the town, or stay in the lovely boutique-style Hotel Dar Said (Rue Toumi, 71-729-666, www.darsaid.com.tn, rates from \$2,460).



Old Carthage

Another must-see is the ruins of Carthage, which are the remnants of the largest empire in the ancient Mediterranean. Founded almost 3,000 years ago by the Phoenicians, the empire fell in 146BC to the Roman army, who eventually rebuilt the site. Today, the Roman ruins are scattered along this suburb near Tunis and have been named a UNESCO World Heritage Site. One remarkable spot is the Antonine Baths—even though only the pillars and a few walls remain, one can imagine how enormous this ancient gym once was. Or, sit on the nearby stone stools, which once served as a very public bathroom. The ruins are scattered over a wide area, so remember to bring a map.

The real jewel of Tunisian archeology is the Bardo Museum (Rue Mongi Slim, Bardo, 71 513 650), which houses an impressive collection of Roman artifacts. The museum was a palace 300 years ago and is actually an artifact in itself. It has now been transformed into a haven for Tunisian art and architecture. Check out the Roman mosaic tiles, or just soak up the ambiance, wandering from room to room in this magnificent space.

Buy, Buy, Buy

That's enough history. No trip is complete without some shopping. While Sidi Bou Said has some decent shops, the real mecca is the market in the Medina (the old town) in Tunis city center. Walking around this market is a bit of a challenge; it's easy to get lost down one of the many alleyways—especially if you speak neither Arabic nor French. So what is there to buy? Tunisia is famous for its crockery—the plates and bowls are practical but pretty enough to serve as a decoration for your home, but the real bargain is the local perfume oil. Vendors sell all kinds of scents from around the world, even recreating the aroma of popular perfumes for just \$50 for a tiny bottle. But tiny is not a problem because the oil is a lot more concentrated than your usual eau de parfum; a drop will last the whole day.





Tunisian Cuisine

Food lovers adore Tunisia because of the many cultures that have influenced the local cuisine over the years. It is essentially a mix of Arabic, Mediterranean and French dishes, with olive oil, tomatoes, seafood, lamb and spices as key ingredients. And boy, the Tunisians like it hot. Bread is served with olive oil and a red paste called harissa, a red-pepper sauce made of chilies and garlic. But you can always cool your mouth with some fiercely sweet snacks. Small cups of sugary peppermint tea are served before meals and dried dates are a staple—toothachey but absolutely delicious and cheap, too, at just \$23 for 500g.

Lamb cous cous is a key dish here and it's guaranteed to be delicious wherever you order it, but Tunisian cuisine has a lot more to offer. A brik is a deep-fried thin pastry encasing fresh meat and a whole egg—the beautifully presented parcel is simply unbeatable. Salads are made with the freshest ingredients; we particularly loved the Mediterranean version and beetroot with sardines.

If you happen to be at the Medina and crave local food, head to the legendary Dar Bel Hadj restaurant (17 Rue des Tamis, Medina, 71-200-894), which is housed in a restored mansion. Eating a meal there is an experience in itself with its theatrical décor, and the food is excellent as well. Alternatively go to the El Dar restaurant in luxurious resort The Residence (see below)—excellent Tunisian food that comes with a traditional music performance. ■



The Essentials

Time zone: GMT+1 (+2 in summer)

Country code: 216

Currency: 1 Tunisian Dinar = HK\$6.7

How to Get There

Qatar Airways flies daily from Hong Kong to Tunis, with a stop at Doha, Qatar. Fares start from \$6,053. Reservations at 2868-9833 or www.qatarairways.com.

Where to Stay

Soak up the sun and sea at The Residence. Located on a golden beach near Carthage, it's just 20 minutes from the city center. Its 170 spacious rooms and suites are equipped with modern amenities, Tunisian décor and a pleasant neroli scent. Room rates start at \$3,200. Boite Postale 697, 2070 La Marsa, Les Cotes de Carthage, 71-910-101, www.theresidence.com.



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