

Tunisia's Time

With its tradition of tolerance—not to mention glorious Roman ruins and Mediterranean beaches—Tunisia may yet emerge as a beacon of hope in one of the world's most troubled regions. **Joshua Hammer** relishes the sights and the spirit of optimism in this rare desert bloom.

Photographs by
Cathrine Wessel





Honeyed sweets and Turkish coffee at Dar El Jeld, a restaurant in a centuries-old home in the Tunis medina. Opposite: Houmt Souk, the vibrant, multi-cultural commercial center of Djerba Island.



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I'M SITTING in the garden of the Mornag Eco Farm, outside Tunis, Tunisia's capital, dipping slabs of flatbread in olive oil and honey and basking in the Mediterranean sunshine. I have bicycled here with a friend—a twelve-mile journey past mosques and a giant soccer stadium, across wetlands and a scruffy beach—to an undeveloped slice of rural Tunisia. We are meeting Amine Draoui, a hydrology engineer who had been working in France and was vacationing in his native Tunisia when the Jasmine Revolution swept his country. He decided to stay and now owns an ecotourism company that teaches organic farming and leads hiking trips into the nearby mountains for young Tunisians and a few Western adventurers. Before the movement that unseated Tunisia's dictator in January 2011 (and launched the Arab Spring), security forces had regarded the mountains as a potential sanctuary for Islamic militants. "They were generally suspicious of everyone and made it difficult to obtain permits to hike there," Draoui says. "Nowadays, all those restrictions are gone."

He leads me around the experimental farm, through an olive grove and herb gardens of fragrant thyme, basil, and coriander. We wind up at an igloo-like apiary, where Draoui is considering importing bees and teaching tourists and local kids how to harvest the honey. Nearly three years after Tunisia's democratic revolution, Draoui tells me, "the atmosphere here is wide open—there's a sense that anything is possible."

That feeling of a society unleashed practically knocks me off my bar stool that same night, when I visit the year-old Le Plug Rock Bar on a pier in La Marsa, a beachfront suburb north of Tunis. At happy hour, I take a seat beside the large open windows overlooking the bay, order a Celtia beer (the local brew), and take in the scene. U2 blares over the sound system, the air is thick with cigarette smoke, and waitresses with lip rings and tight

denim cutoffs dart among tables fashioned from fifty-five-gallon red metal oil drums.

Some ninety-eight percent of Tunisia's population is Muslim, but this boisterous scene is far from any stereotypical image of the conservative Muslim world. The country has always looked toward different religious and cultural models, including southern Europe and Morocco—the cradle of Sufism, the mystical, tolerant form of Islam that spread through North Africa centuries ago. Tunisia is as Mediterranean as it is North African. "This bar is really all about freedom," says Salim, a Marlboro-smoking college student. He's wearing a black T-shirt that proclaims, "Dear God, thanks for women, beer, and foot-

North Africa's largest island, Djerba, where Berber horsemen still perform at village weddings, has some of Tunisia's finest beaches and splashiest resorts. It's also home to the highly atmospheric Dar Dhi-afa hotel (opposite), composed of a series of sixteenth-century stone houses.



ball." Le Plug, Salim continues, "reminds us that we're not a country of Islamists. We're a lot of things. We can't be pinned down."

From this vantage point, it's almost hard to imagine that over the past three years this country has witnessed protests and street battles, the overthrow of a dictator, short-lived interim

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He puts it down beside a plate of lamb steamed with rosemary.

“You can tell the whole story of El Kef from what you’re eating,” says the owner.



A *brik* pastry, a Tunisian staple, made with minced meat, herbs, and spices. Opposite: The Tunis medina, built by Arab conquerors in the ninth century, is a magnificent jumble of ancient mosques, Ottoman-era mansions, cafés, and overflowing shops.



Dougga, a second-century outpost established by the Roman conquerors about sixty miles due west of Tunis. Until recently, the settlement—one of the best surviving examples of an ancient Afro-Roman town—was virtually ignored by travelers.

Dropping down near-ninety-degree slopes,
the camel almost jolts me from my saddle.
The sun bathes the dunes in a luminescent glow
and casts elongated shadows on the sand walls behind us.
“It is like a frozen orange sea,” says my guide.





governments, clashes between Islamists and secularists, and the near collapse of its economy, which is largely reliant on tourism. Extremist Islamists are accused of assassinating a prominent secular politician last July. The killing set off protests that led the ruling Islamist Ennahda party to agree to step down in November and turn over the reins to a nonpartisan interim government. (At press time, new elections were scheduled for the spring.) And yet despite all the recent turbulence, this North African nation of 10.7 million—sandwiched between Libya and Algeria—is experiencing a surge of optimism and opportunity. A sense of freedom is percolating throughout the

An antique tea set at Dar El Médina, near Tunis's Casbah. A converted Ottoman-era villa, it's now a twelve-room hotel.



country, influencing everything from interior design to offbeat tourism ventures like Draoui's. With a democratically elected government, a famously tolerant society, an educated citizenry, and a sizable middle class, this is the one Arab Spring country that just might emerge as a success story.

I visited Tunisia in the tumultuous aftermath

of the revolution, but this time I've returned to experience newly unfettered Tunis and to explore less traveled parts of the country. After a few days of wandering the French colonial boulevards and labyrinthine medina of the capital, I set out for Dougga, one of the best-preserved Roman settlements in all of North Africa. Sixty miles west of Tunis, it's an astonishing site consisting of a beautiful facade of a small Roman temple, the foundations of private homes, a still-intact grid of streets, an amphitheater, thermal baths, and The Capitol, an imposing shrine to Jupiter. On the stone plaza, I can make out a mosaic map, bordered by sea nymphs and other divinities, cheeks puffed out like tuba players, depicting the world's prevailing winds.

The complex provides an extraordinary image of life in an outpost of the Roman Empire two millennia ago, but until now it's been virtually ignored by travelers. That's slowly changing with the help of a few new small hotels—and their determined innkeepers—in the town of El Kef, forty miles from the ruins. I have a reservation at the year-old Dar Boumakhlouf, the guesthouse of Faouzia Alaya, the former director of the local conservation society. Faouzia has gambled that Tunisia's new spirit of openness will pay off in travelers eager to explore the country's multi-layered past, and there's no better place for that than El Kef. A city of 45,000 built on a mountainside high above a fertile plain, it was seized from Numidia by the Romans in 106 B.C., then conquered by the Byzantines, who laid out the medina—one of Tunisia's best preserved—before surrendering the city to the Arabs in the seventh century. In the early seventeenth century, the scholar Sidi Bou Makhlouf arrived from Fez, the spiritual capital of Morocco (some 1,000 miles west), bearing Sufism. French troops marched into El Kef from nearby Algeria in 1881 and soon declared Tunisia a protectorate.

So rich and colorful is El Kef's past that Faouzia accompanies her spectacular multi-course dinners with erudite lectures about the city's culinary and cultural history. The night I'm there, a waiter brings in a platter of *bourzguen*, a dish indigenous to El Kef and consisting of couscous blended with sugar and almonds and covered with a layer of dates. He puts it down beside a plate of *knef* (lamb steamed with rosemary) and bowls of yogurt. "You can tell the whole story of El Kef from what you're eating," says Faouzia. The Berbers, a tribe that dominated the Maghreb before the seventh-century Arab invasion, introduced couscous, she explains. Andalusian Muslims brought the dried fruit after their 1502 expulsion from Spain. After two hours of non-stop eating—and the most delicious history lesson I've ever had—it's time to walk off the meal. Faouzia's son, Tarek Chokki, a twenty-eight-year-old law student at the University of Tunis, leads me on a stroll through town. "We didn't have much of a revolution here, unlike in Tunis," he says. "Things were mostly quiet." We stop at the town's popular gathering place, at the top of the medina: Café Sidi Bou Makhlouf, six rickety metal tables and chairs on a flagstone plaza in



Sidi Bou Saïd, an artists' colony in the hills above Tunis. During French rule, Paul Klee lived and painted here, drawn by the Mediterranean light.



The Moorish-style atrium at Dar Boumakhlouf, one of a handful of small hotels that opened in the storied city of El Kef in the wake of the Tunisian revolution.

the shade of a mulberry tree. Over cups of tea, we breathe in the scent of jasmine from nearby gardens and watch a group of young locals at the next table, chatting in Arabic sprinkled with French phrases. Next to us is the three-domed *zaouïa* (shrine) of Sidi Bou Makhlouf, a pilgrimage site for Sufis from across the Maghreb. Tarek tells me that a mob of fundamentalist Salafist Muslims tried to damage the shrine two years

ago, but irate locals drove them off. “This town has a reputation of being very open-minded, and we don’t have much use for the Salafists,” he says. The fundamentalists recently launched a half-hearted campaign to shut down the city’s bars but got nowhere. “You can’t take the beer away from the people,” Tarek says with a laugh.

FROM THE FERTILE, ruin-studded plateau near the Mediterranean coast, our three-man traveling team—a young driver; my guide and translator, Hatem Bourial, a veteran newspaper columnist and TV talk show host; and I—speed by van across the industrial heartland. This is a dreary zone whose phosphate factories and mines became breeding grounds for discontent during the last days of the dictatorship. Then we follow a causeway across the Chott el Jerid, a crystalline salt pan that forms a barrier between Tunisia’s north and south. Ksar Ghilane, once a military post, is a tourism gateway to the Sahara, although the business has almost disappeared since the revolution. It’s five-thirty in the evening and the heat has begun to subside when Hatem and I arrive at this man-made oasis fed by boreholes. We walk to the stables on the settlement’s outskirts, where Belgessam, a wiry and unsmiling Bedouin guide with a white turban, helps us mount a pair of docile camels, then leads us into the desert. The burnt-sienna dunes rise like waves, rippled by the wind and speckled with tufts of desert grass. Dropping down near-ninety-degree slopes, the camel almost jolts me from my saddle. The sun bathes the dunes in a luminescent glow and casts elongated shadows on the sand walls behind us. “It is like a frozen orange sea,” says Belgessam.

After an hour-long ride, we reach the ruins of Tisaver, one of a six-hundred-mile line of Roman forts in Tunisia and Libya built in the second century to secure the southern frontier of the empire from Berber attacks. Today it’s a silent, windswept pile of stones. Belgessam disappears with his camels to deliver food and supplies to

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nomads camped a couple of miles away, leaving Hatem and me to explore the ruins. I pass beneath an ancient archway and inspect the foundations of Roman legionaries' quarters. Contemporary invaders have sprayed some walls with graffiti—namely boasts in Arabic of sexual prowess. A gang of teenagers roar out of the desert on dune buggies and swarm over the fort, searching for a good vantage to observe the sunset. Then Belgessam reappears and we remount the camels, trekking back to Ksar Ghilane in the gathering darkness.

THE NEXT DAY, after a long drive east, we catch the ferry to Djerba, a large island off the southern coast that has some of Tunisia's most beautiful beaches and luxurious resorts and, remarkably, one of the last Jewish communities in the entire Arab world. Hatem and I order freshly caught shrimp at one of the many seafood restaurants that line the harbor of Houmt Souk and, toward evening, walk down the sandy streets through Hara Kabira, the Jewish quarter. In all of my travels across the Arab world, I have never seen a Jewish enclave as thriving as this one. Mezuzahs hang on every doorway, and boys in yarmulkes wander home from their yeshivas, past kosher butcher shops adorned with Hebrew signs.

"We work hard to keep our community together, and we're holding out," says Yusuf Kohen, a septuagenarian in a prayer shawl, inviting me to sit with him inside the Synagogue of the Kohanim of Djirt. One of twelve on the island, it has stained glass windows, blue-and-white arches, and columns fringed with gold. Tunisia's Jewish population numbered 105,000 in 1956, but increasing tension and fallout from the Six-Day War drove out almost all of them. Of the remaining 1,500, about 500 live in Tunis, the rest here on the island. Residents worry about the protests Salafists have mounted in front of the Grand Synagogue in Tunis, and hardliners in Parliament have tried—so far without success—to write a law into the new constitution that would criminalize contact with Israel. But multiculturalism still rules in Djerba. After services to celebrate Shavous, the holiday commemorating God's handing down the Ten Commandments to Moses on Mount Sinai, men, women, and children throng the main promenade. Muslim teenagers on motorbikes cruise by and wave hello. Locals greet me with "Chag sameach," Hebrew for "Happy holidays." Somewhere in the distance, a muezzin begins to call the faithful to prayer.

BACK IN TUNIS, Hatem takes me to his favorite corner of the city: Sidi Bou Saïd, the artists' colony named for a Sufi holy man who retreated here in the thirteenth century. In the Ottoman era, wealthy residents built vacation homes in the neighborhood; during French colonial rule, painters such as Paul (Continued on page 129)

Jewels of the Sahara

WHERE TO STAY

Dar Dhiafa, Djerba Tucked on a backstreet in the interior town of Er Riadh, this Moorish-style guesthouse—a feast of arches, cupolas, and passageways—has 14 rooms, a hammam, and a fine restaurant (216-75-671-166; doubles from \$100).

Dar Boumakhlouf, El Kef With three tidy guest rooms built around a Moorish atrium, and sumptuous breakfasts and dinners, this guesthouse at the top of El Kef's medina is full of personal touches: The blankets on the beds, for instance, were knit by the owner's mother for her bridal trousseau (216-20-447-116; doubles from \$135).

Dar HI, Nefta The design may be stark and modern, but this hotel in the southern oasis and religious center of Nefta is anything but ordinary. The four categories of rooms include cave-like dwellings resembling the subterranean homes of Tunisia's Berber troglodytes and *pilotis*, or towers, with dramatic views of Sufi shrines, date palm groves, and the Sahara beyond. The outdoor pool is fed by a hot spring (216-76-43-2-779; doubles from \$345).

Dar El Medina, Tunis Just down the street from the landmark Jemaa Zitouna (Grand Mosque) in Tunis's Casbah, this converted Ottoman-era villa has 12 individually furnished rooms built around a limestone courtyard (216-71-56-30-22; doubles from \$198).

Mövenpick Gammarth, Tunis This 119-room resort, which opened just before the revolution, suggests an Andalusian palace, with fortress-like white walls and verdant lawns shaded by date palms and dropping down to a private beach. It is the ultimate place to relax in style before venturing out to discover the rest of the country (216-71-74-14-44; doubles from \$170).

WHERE TO EAT

Restaurant Haroun, Djerba This huge, nautical-themed restaurant at the Houmt Souk Marina has been around for years, and while not known for its creativity, it does know how to

cook fish. All of it is freshly caught and served with traditional side dishes, along with a good sample of local wines (216-75-650-488; entrées from \$11).

Dar Zarrouk, Sidi Bou Saïd Down the street from the more famous Au Bon Vieux Temps, Dar Zarrouk has an equally splendid setting and a better—if often overpriced—menu. Grilled sea bass with fries and *tastira* (a peppers-and-egg dish) is \$47, while the well-prepared chicken with stuffed peppers is a more modest \$17 (rue Hédi Zarrouk; 216-71-74-05-91; entrées from \$17).

Dar El Jeld, Tunis You pay for the location if you decide to dine at the eighteenth-century ancestral home of the Abdelkefi family, in the heart of Tunis's medina. The generally fine food—lamb topped with a layer of dates, fish couscous—is served in the Andalusian-style courtyard or on balconies one level above (5-10 rue Dar El Jeld; 216-71-56-78-45; entrées from \$25).

El Firma, Tunis A converted 1920s farmhouse with antique cushioned chairs, old stone walls, and a window framing a lush garden, this trendy French option serves (mostly) good haute cuisine such as *crème de fois gras* and *magret de canard* (58 rue des Fruits, La Soukra; 216-71-86-30-89; entrées from \$18).

La Sirene, Tunis This fish restaurant in the harbor-side neighborhood of La Goulette doesn't appear in any guidebooks, but it's one of the liveliest spots in Tunis. Pluck a raw fish from the ice beds at the fishmonger next door, weigh it, drop it off to be grilled, and then take a seat on a crowded bench and watch the procession of Tunisian street life while you wait (ave. Franklin Roosevelt; 216-24-970-409; entrées from \$15).

HOW TO BOOK

Travel specialist **Jerry Sorkin**, founder of TunisUSA, served as a World Bank consultant in Tunisia following the 2011 revolution (cntrvlr.com/Jerry; 888-474-5502).—J. H.



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Tunisia

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Klee, drawn by the seductive Mediterranean light, established ateliers; and literary greats from Cervantes and Flaubert to Colette and Simone de Beauvoir wrote there. Today, Sidi Bou Saïd is a maze of cobblestoned alleys lined with whitewashed stone houses and artists' studios, with window shutters and arched doors painted peacock blue. Bougainvillea climbs the walls, and every turn produces a vertiginous view of the Gulf of Tunis. It could almost be a mountaintop village in the Sporades

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of Greece or a slice of the Amalfi Coast.

We head down a cliffside path to the Centre of Arab and Mediterranean Music, in the Ennejma Ezzahra Palace. Considered a masterpiece of traditional North African architecture, the palace was constructed in the early twentieth century by Baron Rodolphe d'Erlanger, a French Arabist, musical scholar, watercolorist, and preservationist. Its fortress-like exterior conceals elaborate interior spaces: veined pink-marble walls, arabesque friezes in white stucco, and gilded wood ceilings. Today, the center hosts such diverse acts as Parisian jazz quartets and "Arab electronic" musicians from the Maghreb. Apparently, business has never been better. "People are using culture as a form of defiance to the Salafists," says Mounir Hentati, the center's curator, as he leads me through a miniature Persian garden filled with fountains and Seville orange trees. Despite a recent attack on a Sufi mosque not far away, he is optimistic. "Tunisia has always been an open country, and we would never accept the idea of going backward," Hentati says. "Nobody will convert Tunisia into Afghanistan."

But given Egypt's continuing struggles, is there a chance that Tunisia could be swept up in similar violence? Despite the recent political turmoil, there are reasons to trust in Tunisia's stability. For one, its military is small, weak, and averse to intervening in politics; during the 2011 revolution, the troops sat on the sidelines. Tunisia's constitutional process has also been far more inclusive than that of Egypt.

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Tunisia

Tunisians are likely to put their trust in the ballot box rather than force a violent, Egypt-style counterrevolution in the streets.

On one of my last evenings in Tunis, I return to the Centre of Arab and Mediterranean Music for a performance by whirling dervishes from Istanbul. The event itself is a vote for tolerance: Hentati has invited them to dance before an audience of Tunisian Sufis, whose mystical form of Islam has been threatened by the ultraconservatives. I walk down a moonlit path to the palace entrance and take a seat in a columned concert hall. The stage lights darken, a trio begins to play a haunting melody, and three dervishes, dressed in tall maroon kepis and wide white skirts, sweep into the room. Eyes shut, heads tilted back, arms raised, the men begin to spin. Around and around they twirl, skirts billowing upward, their facial expressions frozen into masks of devotion. Afterward, I join the throng of excited Sufis in the courtyard, conversing happily about the performance. Then I walk alone down the cliffside path, through the streets of Tunis. The lights twinkle across the way in Sidi Bou Saïd, the moon rises over the Mediterranean, and I pray that this diversity and tolerance—so rare in this part of the world—will endure. □



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