

Country Briefing

Tunisia



TUNISIA

Geography

Time: Tunisia is +1 hour GMT

Tunisia (the Tunisian Republic) is the northernmost country in Africa. It is bordered by Algeria to the west and Libya to the east-southeast. The country enjoys over 1100 km (680 miles) of coastline with the Mediterranean Sea to the north-northeast.



The north of the country is mountainous and of a temperate climate. Winters are mild and rainy in the north, and hot and dry in the summer. To the south, roughly 40% of the country is desert, eventually becoming part of the Sahara. This semiarid area is hot and dry more or less year-round. Between the temperate north and desertous south lies a dry, hot plain.

In Tunisia average temperatures range from 9 °C (48 °F) in winter to 26 °C (79 °F) in summer. By contrast, in Tataouine, temperatures can range from about 18 °C (65 °F) in winter to a staggering 47 °C (117 °F) in summer.

Required Clothing: Lightweight clothing is necessary when visiting in the summer or traveling to the south of the country. Mediumweight clothing and raingear is recommended when visiting the north in the winter.

Political Background

Tunisia is a presidential republic. It became an independent country after winning its independence from France in 1956. A bicameral parliament (the Chamber of Representatives and the Chamber of Advisors) balances the power of the presidency. The judiciary is independent. The military is professional and not involved in politics.

Zine El Abidine Ben Ali is the current president and has served as such since 1987. Ben Ali is only the second president in the history of independent Tunisia, having taken over from Habib Bourguiba in 1987 after Bourguiba was declared unfit to execute the duties

of the presidency. In some ways, Bourguiba's handling of the fledgling Tunisian state is reminiscent of Atatürk in Turkey—education, women's rights, and repression of Islamic fundamentalism were high priorities.

Under Ben Ali, a moderate tone has continued to flourish. Though Islam is the official state religion, religious tolerance tends to be the norm. The press has been given increasing (though not total) freedom, and opposition political parties have grown from zero under Bourguiba to eight officially today. The president stands on record as being against the involvement of religious parties in politics. Women continue to enjoy freedoms not usually found in other Arab states.

Economy

Tunisia's economy is one of the most competitive in all of Africa according to the World Economic Forum, and even ranks ahead of some European countries (Portugal, Italy, and Greece most notably) by that measure. Despite that, average wages top out around US\$19 per day (GNI was roughly US\$3,300 in 2008 according to the World Bank). Years of heavy government intervention in the economy are now giving way to a more liberalized market-oriented scheme. Historically Tunisia's economic growth depended on natural resources (oil and phosphates), manufacturing (e.g. car parts, footwear and textiles), agri-food products, and tourism.

Broken down by sector, Tunisia's GDP is comprised of approximately 11.6% agriculture, 25.7% industry, and 62.8% services, including tourism. Agricultural exports run the gamut but include olives, grain, dairy, tomatoes, sugar beets, dates, almonds, citrus fruits, and beef. Besides petroleum and phosphates, other notable natural resources include iron ore, salt, lead, and zinc.

It is estimated that 7.4% of Tunisians live below the poverty line, versus the estimated 40-50% of sub-Saharan Africa according to the World Bank. However, skilled labor is in apparently short supply in the economy. Unemployment hovers around 14%. Almost a quarter of the population is below the age of 15.

Tunisia's exports continue to grow as the economy liberalizes and diversifies. Due to its proximity to Europe, the country's biggest export markets include France, Germany, and Spain, but also include its African neighbors Libya and Algeria.

Society & Culture

Population: 10,486,339 (July 2009 est.)

Ethnic groups: Berber/Arab/mixture of the two 98%, European 1%, other 1%.

Religion: Islamic 98%, Christian (mostly Catholic) 1%, Jewish and others 1%. Islam is the official state religion, and the president is required by the constitution to be a Muslim. However, Tunisians enjoy a remarkable degree of religious freedom—for instance, there is a thriving and ancient Jewish settlement on Djerba, home to one of the oldest synagogues in the world. Most Tunisians generally will not inquire about one's religious beliefs.

Language: Arabic is the official language of Tunisia. However French is the *de facto* official language day to day, a legacy of Tunisia's colonial past. Also, some Berbers speak Shelha, a Berber language, though language researchers believe only roughly 1% of the Tunisian population does so.

Family: Tunisian family life is typically Muslim in many respects. There is a strong patriarchal flavor to interactions, for instance, permission must be asked from the father and eldest brother of a woman before marriage. However, this is tempered by the moderating trend of recent political history. In the above example for instance, permission of the father and eldest brother is only *required* if the woman is under the age of 20. Generally, women are granted equal legal rights with men and family life tends to reflect this.

Meeting & Greeting: Relationship building is critical, since Tunisians tend to do business with those they like and respect. French is the language of business in Tunisia. The French influence is strong with respect to business dealings. Expect both courtesy and a degree of formality. Handshakes are the accepted form of greeting amongst individuals of the same sex. A woman should extend her hand first in greeting a man; otherwise, the man should merely nod in recognition.

Appearance is critical to the relationship building process. Formal business attire is the norm. Men should wear dark-colored suits to an initial meeting. Women should wear either business suits or dresses. In accordance with Muslim tastes, skirts should go below the knee, sleeves should cover most of the arm.

Often, business meetings are held in cafés and restaurants. Credentials go a long way, so any such (for instance, a doctorate or special recognition in one's field), should be woven into the conversation. The "meeting" normally will not begin until after a prolonged period of small talk.

The concept of "face" is important in business dealings as Tunisians tend to be non-confrontational. Often a Tunisian will prefer to agree with someone during a meeting rather than cause them to lose face. This works in the other direction as well—it is important to not overtly criticize a Tunisian in a business meeting.

Despite some tendency towards formality, meetings once started tend to be free-flowing affairs. Do not be surprised if acquaintances drift into the meeting to chat. Should this happen, it normally is best not to try to bring the conversation back to the original topic until the newcomer has left. The most important thing is to not force an issue and be patient—Tunisians are very deliberate and usually come to decisions only after careful consideration.

There are a few more important considerations when meeting in Tunisia. Tunisians try to avoid meeting in July and August when the weather is hot. Also, Tunisians try to avoid meeting during Ramadan when workdays are shorter and Muslims must fast. Many businesses close between roughly 12:30PM and 2:30PM for lunch Monday through Friday. Some businesses also may close during Muslim prayer times (dawn, noon, afternoon, sunset and evening).

Gift Giving Etiquette: Some general gift giving tips include:

- Take pastries, sweets, nuts, fruit, cake or flowers for the hostess if invited to a home.
- Due to Muslim sensibilities, do not give alcohol unless it is known the host drinks.
- Gifts are not generally opened when received.

Communication

Telephone: the international dialing code for Tunisia is +216

Mobile Telephone: Travelers are advised to check with their mobile phone service provider. Major international carriers tend to provide service in the country, especially in urban areas. Coverage continues to expand with increased competition between the two major Tunisian mobile phone service providers.

Internet: Internet access is widely available with 350+ ISPs in Tunisia; there are approximately 1.1 million users in the country, and hundreds of Internet cafes known as 'publinets'.

Post Office Hours: Mon-Sat 0800-1300 in summer (approximately 15 Jun –15 Sep); Mon-Fri 0800-1200 and 1400-1800, Sat 0800-1200 in winter (approximately 16 Sep –14 Jun); Mon-Sat 0800-1500 during Ramadan.

Money

Currency: 1 Tunisian dinar (TND) = 1000 millimes. Notes come in denominations of TND30, 20, 10 and 5. Coins come in denominations of TND1, and 500, 100, 50, 20, 10 and 5 millimes.

Currency Exchange: Money can be changed in all banks and other authorized outlets. For travelers checks, the tellers may ask for a receipt and will ask for a passport. Post offices will exchange cash only.

Credit/Debit Cards and ATMs: MasterCard and Visa are accepted in a few places in most major towns and tourist areas. American Express and Diners Club are accepted in few places in tourist areas. ATMs are located in most towns and all tourist resorts.

Banking Hours: Mon-Fri 0730-1300 in summer (approximately 15 Jul –15 Sep); Mon-Fri 0800-1600 in winter (approximately 16 Sep –14 Jul).

Transportation

Getting Around by Air:

Internal flights are operated by [SevenAir](#), the domestic arm of [TunisAir](#). Air travel is a relatively fast and an inexpensive way to travel some of the larger distances between cities in Tunisia. Most major cities have an airport—the Carthage airport in **Tunis** and Habib Bourguiba airport in **Monastir** are two of the principal domestic air hubs. The Zarzis airport in **Djerba** is also popular.

Getting Around by Bus:

Generally, major cities have bus depots where there are regular long-distance bus departures. Somewhat confusingly, long-distance buses are called *cars*. “*Car comfort*” generally implies more amenities, like television and air conditioning. Long-distance bus routes off of major routes can be erratic and plagued by poorer quality roads and vehicles.

Getting Around by Car:

Taxi: Taxis are one of the better ways to travel both within and between cities. Rates are not fixed, so it is important to set a price with the driver *before* starting the trip. Haggling can be worth it—one traveler reported a 30 km (19 miles) intercity trip costing roughly TND10 (US\$7). Yellow taxis will travel anywhere and do not stop for other fares. White taxis will stop for another fare so long as there is an empty seat in the vehicle.

Renting: The Tunisian highway system is relatively well-developed and maintained on major routes. However, extreme caution is warranted—Tunisian “rules of the road” tend to be virtually non-existent, so driving oneself should be considered only if no other options are available. Rentals tend to be more expensive than other modes of transportation, often running TND80+ per day.

Getting Around by Train: Train service extends from Tunis and includes southern routes to Sousse, Sfax and Monastir as well as northern routes to Carthage, Marsa and Sidi Bou Said. Fares can be very inexpensive and service is reliable.

Health

Outside of the Tunis-Carthage-Marsa area, water used for drinking, brushing teeth or making ice should be boiled or otherwise sterilised. Within that area the tap water is generally considered of acceptable quality, though caution should be exercised. Only eat well-cooked, hot meat and fish. Fruits and vegetables should generally be peeled and cooked.

Other Risks: Vaccination for Hepatitis A, Hepatitis B, typhoid and measles is recommended. Medical opinion is split over precautions regarding cholera—generally cholera is not prevalent in North Africa. Besides typical food and water precautions, the potentially intense heat of the Tunisian climate is the other typical health risk. Adequate clothing and hydration with liberal application of sunblock and common sense should mitigate any heat-related illness.

Health Care: Medical insurance is strongly recommended. In case of a medical emergency, the emergency number to call for an ambulance is **190**; however, response times can be slow and service outside major urban areas may be non-existent.

Food and Drink

Tunisian cuisine reflects its history of repeated conquest. Generally though, its food reflects the country's Mediterranean roots, with olive oil, spices, tomatoes, seafood and meat having prominent roles. Tunisian food tends to be significantly spicier than most other North African cuisines –the fiery pepper sauce *harissa* is used frequently both as a condiment and as an ingredient. International and local-style restaurants are available in all main towns. Bottled water and other drinks are widely available.

Legal drinking age: 21 (though opinions seem to vary); despite being an officially Muslim country, drinking is allowed though sometimes frowned upon.

Tipping: Outside of resort areas it is not customary to tip, though locals appreciate it. Within resort areas, tipping is expected. Tips should be 10% and indicate approval of the service provided. Tipping porters or other helpful individuals in resort areas is also customary.

References

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