

## TUNISIA & MALTA

**15 days**

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### Day 1 Arrive in Tunis

Arrival in Tunis.

The capital of Tunisia houses one-sixth of the nation's population within the embrace of the Gulf of Tunis. Founded by Berber tribes but shaped successively by Phoenicians, Romans, Vandals, Byzantines, Arabs, Ottomans, and French, the city embodies North Africa's layered history. Modern office towers and European-style cafés share space with the dynamic souks of the ancient medina, creating urban rhythms that seamlessly blend tradition with contemporary life.

The French colonial legacy remains visible in the elegant Ville Nouvelle district, but it's the medina—one of the Arab world's most vibrant—that captures Tunisia's essential character. Here, craftsmen practice trades passed down through generations while merchants negotiate in Arabic, French, and Berber dialects, creating a linguistic tapestry as rich as the goods displayed in their shops.

Overnight in Tunis.

Included Meal(s): Dinner, if required.

### Day 2 Tunis: The Medina, Bardo Museum & Carthage

The call to prayer echoes across Tunis as we enter the UNESCO-protected medina through the ancient Bab el Bahr (Sea Gate). This labyrinthine quarter preserves medieval Arab life among monuments spanning a thousand years. The Great Mosque, Jemaa Zitouna, anchors the medina's spiritual heart, while narrow lanes reveal Koranic schools, traditional hammams, and the elegant Ottoman palaces of Place du Gouvernement.

At the Bardo Museum, we see the world's finest collection of Roman mosaics—sophisticated narrative artworks depicting mythological scenes, daily life, and zodiacal symbols. The craftsmanship rivals anything produced in Rome itself, proving that North African workshops often exceeded metropolitan standards.

We proceed to Carthage. At the Tophet cemetery, thousands of urns testify to religious practices that horrified Rome yet sustained Carthage for centuries. The reconstructed Punic ports reveal engineering genius that made Carthage the Mediterranean's greatest naval power—circular military harbours with sophisticated dry-docks that challenged Roman supremacy for three centuries.

From Byrsa Hill, where Hannibal once planned campaigns that brought Rome to its knees, we see how the Cathedral of St. Louis crowns the ancient acropolis where Carthaginian temples stood. The massive Antonine Baths—among the Roman Empire's largest bathing complexes—represent Rome's attempt to outdo Carthaginian magnificence through architectural grandeur, a stone symphony celebrating the empire's triumph over its greatest rival.

Overnight in Tunis

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

### Day 3 From Tunis: Bulla Regia & Dougga

This morning we journey toward Bulla Regia, one of North Africa's most ingenious responses to climatic challenges. Here, wealthy Romans created an architectural innovation found nowhere else in the empire: luxurious underground villas designed to escape the brutal summer heat. Descending cool stone staircases into these subterranean palaces, we discover remarkably preserved mosaics and frescoes that have survived nearly two millennia.

These aren't crude cellars but sophisticated residences with multiple levels, central courtyards, and elaborate decoration. The engineering required to create waterproof underground chambers, ensure adequate ventilation, and manage drainage demonstrates Roman technical mastery adapted to African conditions. Walking through rooms where toga-clad families once escaped the noon sun, we understand how

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imperial wealth translated into climate-controlled luxury.

After lunch among olive groves that have produced oil for over two thousand years, we reach Dougga—UNESCO's crown jewel of Tunisian archaeology. Spread across rolling hills, this remarkably complete Roman city offers an unparalleled journey through daily life in provincial Africa.

The Capitolium temple, dedicated to Jupiter, Juno, and Minerva, crowns the forum with imposing grandeur. From its steps, panoramic views encompass green valleys where Roman agricultural estates once supplied grain to feed the empire. The theatre, carved into a natural hillside, seats 3,500 spectators who gathered to watch comedies and tragedies under the African sky.

We explore residential districts where Roman families lived in houses with geometric mosaic floors, private bathhouses, and shaded courtyards. The Cyclops Baths, House of Dionysos and Ulysses, and numerous other villas reveal how provincial wealth created architectural magnificence rivaling Rome itself.

Dougga's preservation stems from its abandonment—when trade routes shifted, residents gradually departed, leaving this urban masterpiece frozen in time for archaeologists to rediscover centuries later.

Overnight in Tunis

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

#### Day 4 Tunis - Monastir - Kairouan: City Touring

Tunisia's fertile northern landscapes unfold around us as we journey southward through valleys that have earned the country its traditional epithet: "Tunisia the Green." Here, ancient agricultural patterns persist—olive groves, wheat fields, and vineyards that have fed civilizations for millennia. Storks perch atop telephone poles and minaret towers, their massive nests testament to the enduring rhythms connecting human settlement with natural cycles.

Monastir introduces us to a unique Islamic institution: the ribat, a fortified monastery where soldier-monks combined religious devotion with frontier defense. Built in the 8th century when Muslim expansion faced Byzantine counterattacks, the Ribat of Monastir exemplifies how early Islamic civilization created institutions unknown in Christian Europe. From its towering walls, we survey coastlines where medieval fleets once launched expeditions across the Mediterranean.

Modern cinema has discovered Monastir's dramatic appeal—this ribat provided locations for Monty Python's "Life of Brian" and Zeffirelli's "Jesus of Nazareth," its ancient stones playing roles in stories spanning religious traditions.

Kairouan, our ultimate destination, holds unparalleled significance in Islamic history. Founded in 670 CE by the Arab general Uqba ibn Nafi, it became the first Islamic city established in North Africa and the fourth holiest city in Islam after Mecca, Medina, and Jerusalem. Seven pilgrimages to Kairouan equal one to Mecca—a medieval ruling that established this oasis as North Africa's spiritual heart.

The Aghlabid Basins reveal how 9th-century engineers solved desert hydrology through monumental public works. These enormous reservoirs, fed by aqueducts reaching 36 kilometres into the surrounding hills, supported a city whose influence extended from Spain to Egypt.

The Great Mosque of Kairouan astounds with its forest of columns—hundreds of marble shafts looted from Roman sites across North Africa and repurposed to support Islam's expanding architectural needs. Each capital differs from its neighbours, creating a museum of classical design within a revolutionary religious context. The mosque's 8th-century minaret, among Islam's oldest, established architectural forms still followed across the Islamic world.

At the Mausoleum of Sidi Sahab, legendary companion of the Prophet Muhammad, we witness how popular Islam transformed austere early mosques into centres of devotional art and architectural splendour.

Overnight in Kairouan

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

#### Day 5 Kairouan - Sbeitla - Tozeur

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The Roman city of Sufeitula—modern Sbeitla—presents one of North Africa's most photogenic archaeological ensembles. Three perfectly preserved temples dedicated to Jupiter, Juno, and Minerva rise from the forum like a classical textbook illustration, their harmonious proportions exemplifying Roman architectural ideals adapted to African settings.

Sbeitla prospered during the 2nd and 3rd centuries CE through olive oil production—the "liquid gold" that made North Africa Rome's wealthiest province. Walking past ancient olive presses, we understand how provincial cities accumulated the wealth to construct monuments rivalling Rome itself. Stone-paved streets lead past public baths, theatres, and Christian basilicas with elaborate baptisteries, their colourful mosaics illustrating how early Christianity transformed Roman architectural forms.

Our route south carries us across landscapes that shift dramatically from Mediterranean fertility to Saharan vastness. This transition zone—the Sahel—has witnessed some of history's most significant cultural exchanges as trans-Saharan trade routes connected sub-Saharan Africa with Mediterranean civilizations.

Tozeur emerges from shimmering heat mirages as a palm-fringed jewel. This legendary oasis city controlled medieval caravan routes carrying gold, ivory, salt, and slaves between North and West Africa. Medieval accounts describe over 1,000 camels departing daily, laden with deglet nour dates—the "fingers of light" still considered among the world's finest.

The Eden Palm Museum introduces us to oasis agriculture's sophisticated techniques: the three-tier cultivation system where date palms provide shade for citrus trees, which shelter vegetable crops below. This ancient agricultural wisdom maximizes water use in environments where every drop is precious.

Wandering through the palmerie as afternoon light filters through date palm fronds, we experience the profound peace that has drawn desert travellers to oases for millennia. Here, the harsh beauty of the Sahara meets human ingenuity, creating landscapes of almost mystical serenity.

Overnight in Tozeur.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

## Day 6 Tozeur - Douz - Djerba

Our eastward journey crosses Chott el Jerid, Tunisia's largest salt lake—a crystalline expanse covering 5,000 square kilometres. This depression, lying 30 metres below sea level, preserves evidence of ancient seas that once covered North Africa. The salt floor's surface creates otherworldly reflections—pink and yellow hues that shift with the sun's angle while heat mirages transform the horizon into liquid fantasies.

Geologically, the chott represents millions of years of climate change. When the Mediterranean was lower and North Africa wetter, this basin held a vast inland sea. Today's mineral-rich flats support flamingo populations and create landscapes so alien that science fiction films regularly use them as extraterrestrial settings.

Douz, our midday stop, proclaims itself the "Gateway of the Sahara"—a title earned through centuries of desert trade. Here, traditional oasis life continues alongside modern tourism, creating fascinating cultural juxtapositions. Sand dunes rolling to the horizon remind us that we're standing at the edge of the world's largest desert, where nomadic cultures have adapted to extremes of heat, cold, and isolation.

Our final destination, the island of Djerba, floats in the Mediterranean like a fragment of myth made real. Connected to the mainland by a Roman causeway still in use after 2,000 years, Djerba has maintained distinct cultural identity through successive conquests. This may be Homer's legendary land of the Lotus Eaters, where Odysseus's sailors found paradise so seductive they forgot their desire to return home.

The drive through Tunisia's olive-growing heartland reinforces the country's agricultural abundance—over 65 million olive trees, roughly six for each inhabitant, making Tunisia the world's fourth-largest olive oil exporter. These groves, many dating to Roman times, connect contemporary Tunisians to Mediterranean agricultural traditions spanning millennia.

Overnight in Djerba.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

## Day 7 The Isle of Djerba

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Djerba reveals itself as a living museum of Mediterranean civilization. Officially recognized as Tunisia's newest UNESCO World Heritage site, this 514-square-kilometre island preserves cultural traditions and architectural forms found nowhere else. The island's 125 kilometres of sandy beaches attracted ancient Phoenician traders, but it's the unique blend of cultures that makes Djerba extraordinary.

The Museum of Patrimoine introduces us to traditions that have evolved over millennia. Traditional costumes, wedding ceremonies, and household implements illustrate how island isolation preserved customs lost elsewhere. The intricate arts of weaving, calligraphy, and metalwork demonstrate how Djerba's artisans adapted Mediterranean, African, and Middle Eastern influences into distinctive local styles.

Guellala village reveals one of North Africa's oldest pottery traditions. Here, families have worked clay for over a thousand years, their techniques passed down through generations of master craftsmen. The kilns, some medieval in origin, still fire vessels whose forms echo ancient Phoenician and Roman prototypes.

El Ghriba Synagogue represents one of Judaism's most significant pilgrimage sites. Legend claims Djerba's Jewish community arrived after the destruction of Solomon's Temple in 586 BCE, making this one of the world's oldest continuous Jewish settlements. The synagogue's architecture reflects centuries of cultural fusion—Jewish religious requirements interpreted through Islamic decorative traditions and Mediterranean construction techniques.

The building houses ancient Torah scrolls and preserves traditions linking contemporary worship to biblical times. Each year, thousands of pilgrims gather here for the Lag B'Omer festival, creating one of the Jewish world's most significant gatherings in an Islamic country—testament to Djerba's remarkable tolerance.

In Houmt Souq, the island's main town, medieval Borj el Kebir fortress recalls the bloody conflicts of 1560 when Ottoman and Spanish forces fought for Mediterranean supremacy. Today's fish auctions and vegetable markets continue traditions established when this port connected North Africa to European trading networks.

Overnight in Djerba

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

## Day 8 Djerba - Matmata - Sfax

The Berber village of Matmata challenges every assumption about desert architecture. Here, ingenious adaptation to harsh climate produced one of humanity's most distinctive building traditions: homes carved directly into soft sandstone, creating subterranean courtyards surrounded by chambers that maintain comfortable temperatures year-round.

These "troglodyte" dwellings—some over 400 years old—demonstrate sophisticated understanding of thermal dynamics. The circular pit design captures cool air while radiating heat upward, maintaining pleasant indoor temperatures when surface conditions become unbearable. Rooms branch off from central courtyards like artificial caves, each serving specific family functions within underground complexes that can house extended families.

Visiting a local family's traditional home, we witness how architecture shapes social organization. The central courtyard serves as communal space where family life unfolds, while individual rooms provide privacy within collective security. These aren't primitive dwellings but sophisticated responses to environmental challenges—sustainable architecture perfected through centuries of refinement.

Our route toward Sfax traverses landscapes that reveal Tunisia's geological diversity. Olive groves give way to industrial agriculture, while phosphate mining operations remind us that modern Tunisia's economy balances traditional Mediterranean agriculture with mineral wealth accumulated over millions of years.

Sfax, Tunisia's second-largest city, pulses with commercial energy absent from tourist-focused destinations. This working city processes olives, almonds, and phosphates while maintaining one of North Africa's finest preserved medinas. The 9th-century ramparts still enclose neighborhoods where traditional crafts and commerce continue patterns established over a millennium ago.

Unlike museum-piece medinas designed for visitors, Sfax's old city thrums with authentic daily life. Artisan workshops, traditional markets, and residential quarters create urban rhythms connecting contemporary Tunisians to their ancestors' commercial traditions.

Overnight in Sfax

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

## Day 9 Sfax - El Djem - Sidi Bou Said - Tunis

The massive Roman Amphitheatre of El Djem rises from flat agricultural plains like a sandstone mountain—a monument to imperial ambition and provincial wealth. With capacity for 30,000 spectators, this colosseum rivals Rome's own, yet its superior preservation makes it perhaps more impressive than its famous model.

Built during the brief reign of emperors Gordian I and II (who ruled mere weeks before Roman legions crushed their African rebellion), the amphitheatre demonstrates how quickly provincial wealth translated into monumental architecture. Here, gladiatorial combats and wild beast hunts entertained crowds drawn from across Roman Africa.

The Archaeological Museum's extraordinary mosaics, relocated from wealthy Roman villas, include the unique House of Africa mosaic—the only known representation of the personified African continent. Climbing to the amphitheatre's upper tiers, we survey landscapes where Roman agricultural estates once supplied grain to feed the empire, while basement chambers preserve sophisticated mechanical systems that created theatrical spectacles for bloodthirsty crowds.

Our final destination, Sidi Bou Said, perches on clifftops 20 kilometres north of Tunis like a blue and white jewel. This artists' village, famous since the 18th century as a creative haven, preserves distinctive Tunisian architectural traditions through building codes requiring traditional colour schemes.

Wandering cobbled streets past jasmine-scented courtyards and traditional cafés, we understand why painters, musicians, and writers have found inspiration here for centuries. The panoramic views across the Gulf of Tunis create scenes of almost perfect harmony between human creativity and natural beauty.

Overnight in Tunis.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

## Day 10 Tunis, Tunisia - Valetta, Malta

Our flight carries us from North Africa's ancient shores toward Malta, the Mediterranean's smallest nation. This aerial journey, whether direct or via Rome, traces routes followed by Phoenician traders, Roman governors, medieval crusaders, and modern travelers—testament to these waters' role as civilization's highway.

Malta emerges from azure seas as a golden limestone jewel, its strategic position between Sicily and North Africa having attracted conquerors for over 4,000 years. Here, the Knights of St. John created Europe's most formidable fortress state, while earlier civilizations built temples older than Stonehenge.

PLEASE NOTE that, though we are often able to get a direct flight, such flights do not necessarily operate every day and, if the airlines change their schedule, today's journey may end up being more convoluted, ie with a connection in Rome or elsewhere.

Overnight in Malta.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

## Day 11 Valetta: City Tour & Dingli Cliffs

Today we explore Valletta—Europe's smallest capital at just 1000 by 600 metres—from a vessel showcasing why this location became the Mediterranean's greatest fortress. The city commands two natural harbours whose strategic value shaped 4,000 years of history. Our harbour cruise reveals the defensive genius that saved Christian Europe from Ottoman expansion. In 1565, Jean Parisot de la Valette led 600 Knights of St. John against 40,000 Ottoman invaders in the "Great Siege of Malta." Their miraculous victory prompted Felipe II of Spain to found a new capital worthy of these heroes—Valletta, built on Renaissance military engineering principles.

From Upper Barakka Gardens, we survey Grand Harbour's fortified peninsulas—Senglea and Vittoriosa—their bastions creating interlocking fields of fire that made Ottoman conquest impossible. The Grand Master's Palace, now housing Malta's presidency and parliament, preserves the Knights' aristocratic legacy. Walking through State Apartments where European diplomacy once unfolded, we examine 17th-century Gobelin tapestries depicting scenes from the Americas—reminders that Malta's Knights wielded continental influence. The Palace Armoury

houses the world's finest medieval and Renaissance weaponry collection, with thousands of armor suits testifying to the military brotherhood that dominated Mediterranean warfare for three centuries.

"The Malta Experience," screened in the Knights' former hospital, provides us the perfect historical context through a 45-minute audiovisual presentation tracing Malta's story from prehistory to modern independence.

PLEASE NOTE: Malta's Hal Saflieni Hypogeum site and tour is a popular option should you choose to extend your stay outside of our tour. We do not include it in our program as the number of visitors per day is very limited and spaces tend to sell out before many/most of our travellers commit to our tour; as such, promising the visit in our itinerary is problematic. We suggest booking your own visit once our tour is 'guaranteed' to operate.

Most of our tours are accommodated in St Julian's, a smaller seaside district located just to the north of Valletta.

Overnight on Malta

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

### Day 12 Valletta & Prehistoric Malta

Our Valletta sightseeing continues to St. John's Co-Cathedral, transforming our understanding of Baroque religious art. Built in the 1570s by Maltese architect Gerolamo Cassar, this masterpiece served as the Knights' spiritual heart. The interior's symphony of gold leaf, marble, and masterful painting demonstrates how military monks expressed devotion through artistic magnificence. Over 300 Knights lie entombed beneath elaborate marble floor slabs, each a decorative masterwork depicting heraldry and achievements. The Cathedral Museum houses Caravaggio's largest painting—"The Beheading of St. John the Baptist"—the only work the master ever signed, created during his turbulent Malta period (1607-1608).

The National Museum of Archaeology introduces Malta's prehistoric temple builders who created the world's oldest freestanding stone structures. These artifacts, dating to the 4th millennium BCE, represent civilizations flourishing 500-1,000 years before Egypt's first pyramids.

At Hagar Qim, spectacularly positioned on cliffs overlooking Fila islet, we encounter architecture challenging assumptions about prehistoric capabilities. Built between 3600-3200 BCE, these temples demonstrate sophisticated understanding of astronomy and monumental construction. Massive limestone blocks—some weighing over 20 tonnes—were quarried, transported, and positioned using technologies lost to history.

Nearby Mnajdra Temple complex reveals how prehistoric Maltese developed increasingly sophisticated architectural forms. Careful alignment with solstices and equinoxes suggests these weren't merely religious centres but astronomical observatories connecting earthly worship to celestial cycles.

In Marsaxlokk village, brightly painted luzzu boats preserve Mediterranean maritime traditions, their distinctive eye symbols connecting contemporary fishermen to Phoenician customs over 2,500 years old.

Overnight on Malta

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

### Day 13 Day Trip to Gozo

The brief ferry crossing to Gozo transports us to an island that feels like Malta's rural cousin. Gozo maintains a distinct cultural identity and dialect, with landscapes and traditions that modern Malta has largely abandoned. The prehistoric temples of Ggantija rank among humanity's oldest religious monuments, dating back to 3600-3200 BCE. Local folklore attributes their construction to giants, and the megaliths' sheer size is awe-inspiring. Victoria, Gozo's capital, clusters around the fortified citadel of Il-Kastell, which has been continuously fortified for over 4,000 years.

Within the citadel, the Cathedral of the Assumption showcases trompe-l'oeil ceiling paintings that create illusory domes. The Archaeological Museum reveals how successive civilizations adapted the same strategic location to serve their defensive needs. The Folklore Museum provides intimate insights into traditional Gozo life, illustrating how island communities maintained self-sufficiency through ingenious

adaptation to limited resources.

At Dwejra, we witness geological forces at their most dramatic. Two enormous limestone caverns collapsed to create today's Inland Sea, a lagoon connected to the Mediterranean through a 100-metre tunnel. Local fishermen guide us through this natural wonder, past the Blue Hole and Fungus Rock, where Knights of St. John once harvested rare medicinal plants. The cynomorium coccineus growing on Fungus Rock was highly valued for its medicinal properties, reminding us how biological diversity creates economic value across cultures. Overnight on Malta.

Overnight on Malta

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

### Day 14 Mosta, Mdina & Rabat

This morning, we visit the Rotunda Church of Mosta, a remarkable architectural achievement that dominates the island's central plateau. Based on Rome's Pantheon, its dome ranks as Europe's third-largest unsupported span. The church's most famous story emerged during World War II, when a German bomb penetrated the dome but failed to explode during evening mass. The unexploded bomb remains displayed as testament to faith surviving warfare's brutal realities.

We then proceed to Mdina, Malta's ancient capital, which preserves the medieval Arab city within massive fortifications. As we walk through the narrow streets, we experience urban planning designed for shade, privacy, and defensive strength. The Cathedral of St. Paul occupies the site where tradition claims the Roman governor Publius welcomed the shipwrecked apostle.

From Mdina's bastions, we take in panoramic views of Malta's landscape, understanding why successive conquerors established strongholds here. Next, we visit the nearby Rabat, where the Domus Romana reveals how wealthy Romans lived beyond official Mdina. The excavated villa's mosaic floors and columned courtyards demonstrate provincial luxury. Finally, we explore the Catacombs of St. Paul and St. Agatha, which preserve early Christian burial practices and feature characteristic agape tables.

Overnight on Malta.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

### Day 15 Departure

Our Mediterranean odyssey concludes as we prepare for departure from Malta's international airport.

BON VOYAGE!

Included Meal(s): Breakfast