



Tunisia: Glorious “Arab spring” breaks

By Sinem Bilen-Onabanjo

At the height of the Arab Spring in 2011, which sparked off in Tunisia with a single flame on 17 December 2010 and swept across northern Africa, this bijou country in the very centre of Mediterranean Africa would not have been your first choice for a sun-soaked getaway. However, a year on, having rebuilt herself from her ashes, Tunisia is firmly back on the tourist trail. There is one catch though: if you want to avoid the raucous sun-sea-and-sand stampede, opt instead for a spring fling with Tunisia and you'll be in for a glorious 'Arab spring'.

A two-and-a-half hour flight from London and currently on the same time zone, getting there shouldn't

take much out of the energy banks; and with its white sand beaches that stretch for miles on end, the ruins of the ancient Phoenician city of Carthage, the picturesque suburb of Sidi Bou Said and its rich and seamless mix of Islamic, Mediterranean and African cultures, Tunis – the laid-back capital of Tunisia – is sure to keep even the most seasoned traveller satisfied.

Five-star relaxation

Amongst the other five-star hotels dotting the Gammerth coastline only a 15-minute drive from the Tunis-Carthage Airport, is the Regency Tunis Hotel. While the hotel's luxury beachfront accommodation boasts all the standards you would expect from a high-class international property, its prime attraction has to be the L'Angelite

Spa, a 700-square metre space that offers massages from different cultures, revitalising therapies, traditional treatments with marine water, three Jacuzzis – and a Turkish hammam. During the off-peak season, when despite Tunisia's mild Mediterranean climate it could still be too nippy for a swim outdoors, there is also a heated indoor pool.

A stone's throw from the Regency Tunis is The Residence Tunis, equally majestic and home to an 18-hole golf course designed by Robert Trent Jones II, along with the luxurious thalasso-spa Les Thermes Marins de Carthage. After soaking up the Arab-Andalucian grandeur of the hotel lobby, make your way down the spacious hallways and you will find the tranquil spa designed in the style of ancient Roman thermal



Tunisia's hotels offer the visitor luxury combined with elegance. Main picture: Sentido Aziza Beach Golf & Spa. Inset: The Residence Tunis



baths. One of the most reputable spas in the Mediterranean, the 3,500m² facility offers a wide range of treatments using Darphin Paris products, including Lavender Relaxing Exfoliating Polish, Shea Butter and Wheat Moisture Drench, and Kiwi and Pomegranate Hydrator facial, to name but a few. Afterwards you can relax sipping a dainty glass of mint tea by the seawater swimming pool and basking in the light streaming from the cupola.

Once you manage to tear yourself away from the treatment cabins, the oriental hammam and the poolside, a light lunch across the road at the Club House overlooking the lake and the 18-hole golf course is the order of the day. I use the word 'light' casually here – the mixed meat platter is filling as well as delicious.

Treasures old and new

For us girls who feel more at home at a souk than a spa, hitting the streets of Tunis is as effortless as lounging on a treatment bed.

Two of the gems Tunis has to offer that you'd be mad to miss out on are the upmarket Carthage, home to the presidential palace and the ruins of the once mighty Phoenecian city of the same name, and the nearby suburb of Sidi Bou Said.

Driving towards the sea in Tunis along spotless streets lined with palm trees, the smell of iodine clears your nostrils and soothes your mind. And walking amid the ruins of the ancient city of Carthage, which once dominated the entire western Mediterranean, is bound to bring out the goose bumps as you marvel at the country's rich heritage.

When the urge to seek out a bargain strikes, the enchanting suburb of Sidi Bou Said, a 10-minute drive away, will satisfy your every desire. While the local vendors will try to sell you everything from little jars of spices and handcrafted jewellery to the stray cat called Shakira,

all at unashamedly inflated prices, they're often friendly and game for haggling. It's the ladies who come at you with their pots and brushes of henna that you need to fear. Regardless of your protests, once caught you become their human canvas and after a five-minute struggle, which sees them triumphant and you sporting a run-of-the-mill design on your hand, you're forced to pay up for their efforts which you did not require in the first place.

Sidi Bou Said has also gained a reputation as an artists' hub, no doubt attracted by its spacious cobblestone streets, pristine white-washed two-storey houses, doors and shutters painted in vibrant blue and glorious views of the Mediterranean. It is a favourite spot of some renowned artists, such as Paul Klee and Gustave-Henri Jossot, and home to the Ecole de Tunis (painting school of Tunis).

Relish the peace and quiet

While the seaside resort of Hammamet is a busy package-holiday hub during summer months, in the spring it offers



The picturesque suburb of Sidi Bou Said and, below, the ruins of Carthage are sure to impress travellers to Tunis

a far more tranquil experience. Located in the southeast of the northern peninsula of Cap Bon, on the northern edge of the Gulf of Hammamet, it is known as the 'Garden Resort' for its eucalyptus trees, citrus groves and flowering shrubs, and offers two worlds in one: the quieter north and the more commercialised south. If you're after a fuss-free break to relax the mind and rejuvenate the body, head north, or more specifically to the four-star Sentido Aziza Beach Golf & Spa.

Here you will find the rooms snazzy and the views superb. And once you settle down and unpack, the place to really enjoy your stay is the thalassotherapy centre Biorivage. With more hydromassage options, algotherapy cabins, jet showers and thalassotherapy treatments you can shake a piece of driftwood at, you're guaranteed to be thoroughly cleansed, body and soul.

Aimed at improving the functioning of the Veino-lymphatic system, the Heavy Legs Cure, for those who feel, well, heavy-legged, is a must. Then you and your fresh pair of legs will be ready to take on the world in an early morning run along the sandy beaches of Hammamet.

The Arab south

Although you may think that the further south you travel in Tunisia, the more African this melting pot of different cultures is likely to get, the coastal town of Sousse salutes in style the country's Arab links.

In the central east of the country some 140km south of capital Tunis, this



sizeable city, which dates back more than 2,800 years, boasts an historic Old Town, a buzzing medina, sandy beaches and a busy port.

The medina's charm lies in its size. Neither too big nor too small, it is easy to manage and is rich in variety. Unlike the more relaxed vendors in Tunis, however, here you may encounter a little more persistence from shopkeepers who will likely try to lure you into their shops to part with your hard-earned Dinars, but nothing a

RETURN FLIGHTS TO TUNIS

Tunisair operates five flights per week from London Heathrow to Tunis. Prices start from £180, including taxes. For reservations call +44 (0)20 7734 7644 or go to www.tunisair.com.

Rooms at the four-star Aziza Hotel in Hammamet start from £37 per night, based on two people sharing a double room on a bed and breakfast basis. For more information or to book please go to www.hotelaziza.com/en

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firm "non, merci" will not resolve. For culture vultures, the most ancient monument in the town is the Ribat of Sousse, which dates back to 821AD and is definitely worth a visit as one of the finest examples of Islamic architecture in Tunisia. It was part of a chain of fortified monasteries built by the Aghlabids and occupied by warrior monks, fighters in the 'holy war', who in times of peace devoted themselves to religious duties. A 89ft-high circular watchtower atop the rectangular structure offers fine views of the medina and the harbour.

Another Sousse sight worth visiting is Port El Kantaoui. Built in the Arab Andalusian style, the marina accommodates 340 boats and is home to various shops and restaurants. A four-course meal (including complementary tapas) at the upmarket La Daurade will set you back a pretty penny, but it is well worth it. While there, don't forget to try the Tunisian appetiser Brik à l'oeuf – a crispy thin pastry filled with egg, parsley and onions and served hot. You'll be left wondering how the egg inside remains deliciously runny and golden.

After a busy afternoon in downtown Sousse, an ideal place to head is the four-star Hasdrubal Thalassa and Spa Hotel where you can wash away the day in an indoor seawater swimming pool and enjoy the age-old Mediterranean art of thalassotherapy massage (derived from the Greek word thalassa, meaning 'sea'), which uses seawater to revitalise the body and skin and improve circulation.

Relaxing post-treatment in the light and airy herbal team room, you may be tempted to skip dinner and spend the remainder of your evening at rest, but it would be a mistake not to sample the delectable offerings of the hotel's main restaurant, Amilcar, which offers traditional Tunisian dishes along with a wide variety of international cuisine.

Tunisia has made great strides to put the Arab Spring of 2011 behind it and is busy refashioning itself as a fiercely modern Arab democracy. Climbing back up travellers' lists as an old favourite, it is proving to be a perfect destination for a spring getaway where the holidaymaker can wash away the woes of winter ready for the new season ahead. ■

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£3 April/May Issue 13

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