

Central West & the Tell



The hills and mountains of the Tunisian Dorsale and the Tell – the high plains north of the Dorsale that were the granary of ancient Rome – offer visitors a variety of enchanting options far from the coastal crowds.

The Romans bequeathed to this region a number of exceptional cities, now in ruins but rich in beguiling hints of their prosperous past. The undoubted highlight is Dougga, spread over an enchanting hillside overlooking grain fields and gentle hills. Also spectacular is Sufetula (Sbeitla), which has the feel of a Roman frontier town and is especially magical in the early morning light.

The Roman cities of Mactaris (Makthar) and Ammædara (Haidra) still evoke the sense of luxury and isolation characteristic of more remote Roman outposts, and serve as poignant symbols of western Tunisia's lonely sense of having been left behind by history.

Less than an hour from Tunis, the Roman cities of Thuburbo Majus and Uthina (Oudhna) also present evocative ruins, though the majority of their most outstanding mosaics are now in Tunis' Bardo Museum. Jugurtha's Table, almost on the Algerian frontier, is a remote, hauntingly beautiful mesa where Berber resistance to Roman rule enjoyed its proudest hour before being swept away.

For fans of urban delights, the friendly city of Le Kef, guarded by a towering kasbah, captures the Tell's irrepressible spirit. With its cobbled streets, cafés that time forgot and panoramic hillside setting, it's one of Tunisia's best-kept secrets. Kasserine may not be Tunisia's most scintillating city but it's a good base for exploring areas out near Algeria.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Exploring glorious, golden **Dougga** (p156), perhaps Tunisia's most enchanting Roman site
- Taking the waters like a Roman in remote **Hammam Mellegue** (p164)
- Wandering among the Roman temples of **Sufetula** (Sbeitla; p182), magical in the early-morning light
- Chilling in **Le Kef** (p160), an atmospheric hilltop town with a proud multicultural history
- Hiking up **Jugurtha's Table** (p177), a spectacular natural fortress in the middle of nowhere



History

After Rome defeated Carthage in the 2nd century BC, the hinterlands of its new African provinces were largely left to the Berber tribes of the interior, most notably the Numidians, who accommodated Roman rule even as they rebelled against it. The final Berber resistance to the Romans came at Jugurtha's Table, the legendary stronghold where the Numidian king Jugurtha made his last stand at the end of the 2nd century BC. In subsequent centuries, the area's Roman towns grew prosperous on the proceeds of agricultural production and served as staging posts along lucrative trade routes. After the departure of the Romans, the area slid into obscurity.

Climate

This region's desolate terrain briefly comes to life in spring with spectacular displays of wildflowers. The summers are very hot, whereas the winters – particularly at higher elevations – can be cold and bleak.

Getting There & Around

Even the smallest towns have at least one daily bus, plus louages (shared taxis), to Tunis; Le Kef and Dougga (Teboursouk) are especially easy to get to. Two trains a day link Tunis with Kalaaat Khasba, midway between Le Kef and Kasserine and served by buses to both cities.

Every place in this chapter is accessible both by private car and by public transport of one form or another. Destinations visitable on day trips from Tunis include Oudhna, Thuburbo Majus, Zaghouan and Dougga. Le Kef is a convenient base for excursions to Dougga, Makthar, Hammam Mellegue, Jugurtha's Table and Haidra, while Kasserine makes a good base for trips to Sbeitla, Haidra and Jugurtha's Table. Visiting Haidra and Jugurtha's Table by louage on a day trip from either Le Kef or Kasserine is one of Tunisia's ultimate public transport challenges.

SOUTH OF TUNIS Oudhna (Uthina)

أوذنة (أوتينا)

Fascinating but little-visited, the ruins of ancient **Uthina** (admission TD3; ☎ 9am–7pm Apr–mid-Sep, 8am–5pm mid-Sep–Mar), near the village of Oudhna, are about 28km south of Tunis. Still being excavated, the site has some of

Tunisia's most impressive *in situ* mosaics. Photography is forbidden.

There's a map of the site with a brief text in Arabic, English, French and Italian between the tiny ticket booth and the amphitheatre.

HISTORY

The Roman historian Pliny mentions the town as a Berber settlement named Adys and as one of the first Roman colonies in Africa. A major battle between Carthage and the Roman general Regulus took place here during the first Punic War (255 BC).

Uthina, the centre of a fertile agricultural region, was founded by the emperor Augustus at the beginning of the 1st century AD and settled with Roman army veterans. Like many of Tunisia's Roman towns, its prosperity peaked in the 2nd and 3rd centuries. Christianity took a powerful hold here and the town was home to many bishops but declined after the Vandal conquest.

SIGHTS

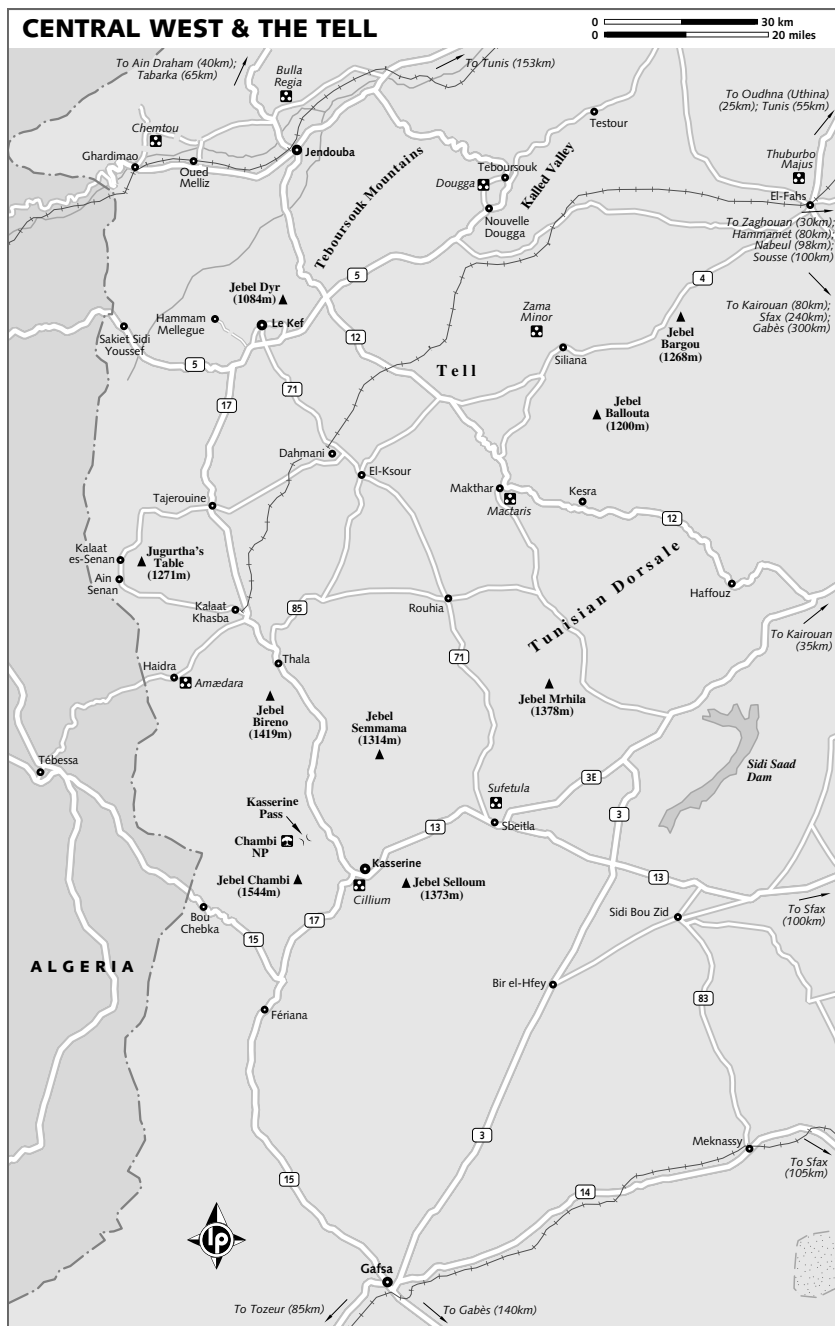
The best place to begin a visit is at Uthina's highest point, the **capitol**, known locally as Al-Kalaa (the fortress). Partly restored stone steps lead up to five newly built, oversized fluted columns. At the top, surprisingly, is an elegant – if run-down – French colonial **farmhouse**. Constructed atop the capitol with supreme colonial arrogance, it unintentionally juxtaposes two disappeared empires – both speaking Latin or a Latin derivative – that once ruled vast swathes of North Africa. There are great views from the farmhouse's back terrace.

Below the colonial homestead are magnificent vaulted chambers from the Roman or Byzantine periods; underneath that there are more Roman chambers.

The former **forum**, to the southeast, is occupied by dilapidated colonial outbuildings now used by the maintenance staff.

South of the forum, at the end of an **aqueduct** that supplied water from springs at nearby Jebel Rassas, are the remains of a **reservoir**. Most of the water was delivered to a network of enormous arched **cisterns** 200m south of the reservoir. Some have collapsed although others remain in remarkably good condition – huge, dank watertight rooms.

The jumble of collapsed masonry chunks east of the capitol mark the site of the main



public baths – nicknamed Tour Ellil (the bat tunnel) – which were damaged by explosions while being used as an arms depot during WWII. The subterranean level is in good condition. A beautiful black marble bust with a Libyan hairstyle, now in the Bardo Museum, was discovered here.

To the north, just north of the access road, are the **Baths of the Laberii**, which take their name from the inscription on the lovely mosaic of Orpheus charming the animals, now in the Bardo Museum. There are still some fine mosaics *in situ*, including a delightful one depicting fishers and fish. During the Byzantine period the northeast part of the complex was a pottery workshop and many Christian artefacts were discovered here.

The baths stand beside the remains of the celebrated **House of the Laberii**, also known as the House of Ikarios (named after a beautiful mosaic showing Ikarios giving a vine to the king of Attica), a sumptuous villa of over 30 rooms and probably the best house in town. You can still see the remains of the colonnade that surrounded a garden. All the rooms were paved with mosaics, the most exquisite of which are now on display – where else? – at the Bardo Museum.

The **amphitheatre**, near the entrance, could hold more than 10,000 spectators and is a good indication of the stature of the Roman town. Among its features: cells for the criminals and wild beasts whose 15 minutes of fame, in front of roaring crowds, were often cut short. The amphitheatre was still being excavated when we went to print.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

If you're driving from Tunis, take the highway towards Kairouan for about 20km until you get to the spot where the ancient Zaghouan-Carthage aqueduct begins following a side road. From there the site is a further 7.5km – look for the sign to 'Uthina Site Archéologique' next to the enormous base of a fake Roman column. If you get lost, your best bet is to scan the horizon for the silhouette of hilltop ruins.

From Tunis, bus 25 goes to the village of Baruta (TD0.8, 45 minutes, about twice an hour), from where it's a few walkable kilometres to the archaeological site. In Tunis the stop is about 500m southeast of place Barcelone, just off rue de Carthage a block north of rue d'Italie.

Other options include taking a taxi from Tunis to El-Fahs and negotiating with a louage or taxi driver to take you to both Thurburbo Majus and Oudhna and then back to Tunis – the whole trip should cost about TD40.

Thurburbo Majus

طبربو ماجوس

Surrounded by shimmering wheat fields and olive groves just like those that made its fortune, the Roman city of **Thurburbo Majus** (admission TD31, plus camera TD1; ☎ 8.30am-5.30pm mid-Sep-Mar, 8am-7pm Apr-mid-Sep), 60km southwest of Tunis near the utterly skipable town of El-Fahs, has a prosperous air – even in its ruinous state. In the 2nd century it had 10,000 inhabitants, the wealthiest of whom tried to outdo each other by donating public buildings and fine mosaics; many of the latter are on display in the Bardo Museum (see p50).

So far, about 7 hectares of Thurburbo Majus' (pronounced *ma-yoose* or *ma-juice*) 40 hectares have been excavated. You can get a sense of the size of the Roman town by looking for the three extant city gates, situated north, southwest and east of the capital.

Wall panels near the ticket office provide background on the site in Arabic, English and French.

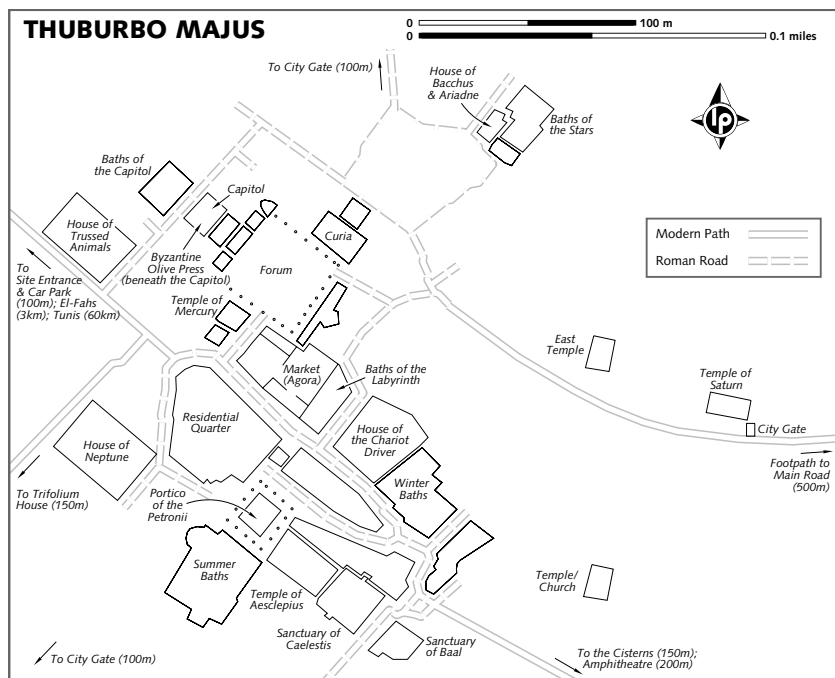
HISTORY

The town was here long before the Romans arrived – this ancient Berber settlement was one of the first to come under Punic control in the 5th century BC as part of Carthage's drive to build an African empire. It remained loyal to Carthage until that city's bitter end at the hands of the Romans.

Forced to pay tribute after the fall of Carthage (146 BC), Thurburbo Majus became something of a backwater until it was declared a municipality following a visit by the emperor Hadrian in AD 128. The town soon developed into an important trading centre for local agricultural produce – oil, wheat and wine. Most of the buildings date from the second half of the 2nd century, although there was a second phase of construction at the end of the 4th century.

SIGHTS

On a platform dominating the surrounding residential ruins is the **capitol**, with four



giant pillars of veined pink limestone marking the entrance to the **temple**. Built in AD 168, it is reached by a wide flight of stairs leading up from the **forum** (AD 161–2), which is colonnaded on three sides.

The capitol was dedicated to two emperors, Marcus Aurelius and Commodus, and was under the protection of the ancient trinity of Jupiter, Minerva and Juno. The giant sandalled foot and head of an enormous statue of Jupiter, estimated to have stood 7.5m high, were found here; they now reside in the Bardo Museum.

The ruins of a Byzantine **olive press** occupy the space beneath the capitol. As elsewhere, Byzantine builders showed themselves willing to adapt any available structure, cleverly making use of what was a bathing pool to catch oil.

On the southwestern side of the forum, the **Temple of Mercury**, with an unusual circular design, abuts the **market** – Mercury was the god of trade as well as messenger of the gods. The market stalls can be discerned on three sides of the courtyard below the temple.

Directly behind the market is a very un-Roman tangle of residential streets, obviously laid out before the Romans arrived. Beyond is the spacious **House of Neptune**, with some impressive geometric-patterned mosaics.

The imposing **Portico of the Petronii** is named after the family of Petronius Felix, who paid for the construction of this gymnasium complex in AD 225. It was surrounded by Corinthian columns made of an unusual yellow-veined grey marble; one row remains standing, still holding aloft a Latin inscription. This is where people played sports before heading to the baths. In the southeastern corner some letters are carved – part of a game.

The biggest of Thuburbo Majus' five bath complexes was the **Summer Baths**, adjacent to the Portico of the Petronii, which cover 2800 sq metres. The **Winter Baths**, 150m to the east, feature a grand entrance flanked by four veined marble columns. Both were full of mosaics – the finest are now on display in the Bardo Museum, though some can still be seen *in situ*.

The smaller **Baths of the Labyrinth**, southeast of the *agora* (market), and the **Baths of the Stars**, northeast of the capitol, are named after their mosaics. The **Baths of the Capitol** are just west of the capitol.

About 50m south of the Winter Baths, the **Sanctuary of Baal** is a small square temple that's easily identified by the two yellow-veined grey pillars atop its steps. It was dedicated to Baal Hammon, whose cult survived (in Romanised form) long after the fall of Carthage.

The adjacent **Sanctuary of Caelestis**, reached through a freestanding yellow-stone arch, was for another adapted god – this time the Roman version of Tanit. The temple was later converted into a Byzantine church, traces of which can still be seen.

A rough path leads southeast from the Sanctuary of Baal towards the ruins, set into the hill, of the massive arched **cisterns** that once supplied the town with water. The mound beyond the cisterns marks the site of a small **amphitheatre**. Another rough path leads north from here to a low hill topped by the remains of a **Temple of Saturn**.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Thuburbo Majus, an easy day trip from Tunis, is just west of the Tunis-Kairouan road, 3km north of El-Fahs. There is no public transport to the site but any bus between Tunis and Kairouan can drop you at the turn-off, leaving a 15-minute walk to the site. The sight of a city gate, marking the northern edge of the city, is an indication that you're getting close.

To get to El-Fahs from Tunis, you can either take a louage from the Cap Bon louage station (TD3.4) or a bus from the southern bus station. A taxi from El-Fahs out to Thuburbo Majus should cost between TD5 and TD7 return, including an hour or so at the site.

Zaghouan

pop 15,800

This sleepy town snuggles at the foot of rugged, rocky, red-hued Jebel Zaghouan (1295m), whose summit – sometimes snow-dusted in winter – is a vertical 1km higher than Zaghouan itself. The top is accessible by road.

During the reign of the Roman emperor Hadrian, a 132km-long aqueduct to supply

water to Carthage was built in just 11 years (AD 120–31). Long stretches, in remarkably good condition (thanks, in part, to repairs by the Byzantines and in medieval times), still stride across the countryside along the Tunis–El-Fahs road. Today, the town's springs supply deliciously refreshing water to a number of **public fountains** elaborately decorated with tiles.

The old town's charming main street, rue Sidi Ali Azouz, stretches from the yellow and green **minaret**, just west of the old **French church** (now a school), southward along the ridge, passing wall fountains spouting mineral water, and houses with dark green doors and old wooden *mushrabiya* (traditional wooden screens that allow people – especially women – inside their homes to see out without being seen) windows. Roman columns, incorporated into the corners of buildings and the sides of archways, protected them from being scraped by passing carts and carriages.

The city's architectural highlight is the **Zaouia of Sidi Ali Azouz** (rue Sidi Ali Azouz; ☎ daily), 10m down the hill from the arch, which has a green fish-scale dome and, inside, superb tiled walls, colourful stained glass and intricately carved plaster ceilings. The guardian expects a tip of TD2.

About 2km southwest of the old town along the well-signposted continuation of rue Sidi Ali Azouz, on a forested hillside, is the **Temple des Eaux** (Water Temple; admission free; ☎ 24hrs). Also known as the Nymphaeum, it's a semi-circular shrine – built under Hadrian – to the spring that kept Carthage in water. It's surrounded by 24 arches and 12 niches that once held statues depicting the months. The attractive **garden café** has a cage of chattering parakeets. As we go to press, the site is being renovated and a museum is planned.

Zaghouan is known for its *kaak al-warka*, round cakes stuffed with almond paste and flavoured with rosewater. There are markets here on Thursday afternoon and Friday morning.

SLEEPING & EATING

There are no hotels in Zaghouan.

Restaurant La Source (☎ 72 675 661; ave 7 Novembre; meat mains TD6–10) A proper restaurant with tasty food and reasonable prices, this is the only place in town that serves wine and beer.

زغوان

About 100m up the hillside, on a reed-shaded section of the street just above the Roman arch, you'll find lots of cheap little **chicken and sandwich joints**.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

The bus and louage stations are a little way down the hill and to the left from Restaurant La Source. Buses, whose destinations include Tunis, El-Fahs, Nabeul/Hammamet and Sousse, also stop in town.

Louages from Tunis to Zaghouan (TD3.5, 50 minutes) – the best way to get here from the capital – depart from the Cap Bon station. Louages also link Zaghouan with El-Fahs (TD1.4), Nabeul (TD3.8) and Sousse (TD4.4).

DOUGGA

A Roman city with a view, **Dougga** (📞 78 466 636; admission TD3, plus camera TD1; 🕒 8am–7pm Apr–mid-Sep, 8.30am–5.30pm mid-Sep–Mar) is set on an enchanting hillside surrounded by olive groves and overlooking fields of grain, with forested hills beyond. Built of yellowish-tan stone, its mellow tones meld harmoniously with the brown, tan and dark-green landscape of the Kalled Valley and the Tebour-souk Mountains.

One of the most magnificent Roman monuments in Africa, Dougga's ancient remains – a Unesco World Heritage site since 1997 – are startlingly complete, giving a beguiling glimpse of how well-heeled Romans lived, flitting between the baths (including the fine Thermes de Caracalla), the imposing Capitole, the 3500-seat theatre and various temples (21 have been identified). The city was built on the site of ancient Thugga, a Numidian settlement, which explains why the streets are so uncharacteristically tangled. The 2nd-century BC Libyo-Punic Mausoleum is the country's finest pre-Roman monument.

The best time to visit is early in the morning or late in the day; allow at least three hours. You won't find much shade so if you're neither a mad dog nor an Englishman you might want to avoid the mid-day sun. There's a café selling snacks but Dougga is a magical setting for a picnic.

History

This prime real estate – endowed with natural springs – has been occupied since the

2nd millennium BC, judging by the dolmen graves on the ridge above the ruins. It was already a substantial settlement by the time Carthage advanced into the interior in the 4th century BC. The town stayed under Carthaginian control throughout the 3rd century BC but became part of the kingdom of the Numidian king Massinissa at the end of the Second Punic War.

Thugga lay outside the boundaries of the first Roman province of Africa, which was created after the destruction of Carthage in 146 BC, and remained a Numidian town until 46 BC, when the last Numidian king, Juba I, backed the wrong side (Pompey) in the Roman Civil War.

Thugga became Dougga, part of the expanded province of Africa Nova, and the slow process of Romanisation began. Dougga's prosperity peaked between the 2nd and 4th centuries, when it was home to an estimated 5000 people.

The town declined during the Vandal occupation and the population had all but disappeared by the time the Byzantines arrived in AD 533 and set about remodelling Dougga as a fort. The ruins of an **Aghlabid bathhouse**, southwest of the Capitole, show that the site was still inhabited in the 10th century.

People continued to live among the ruins until the early 1950s, when the inhabitants were moved to nearby Nouvelle Dougga (New Dougga).

Orientation

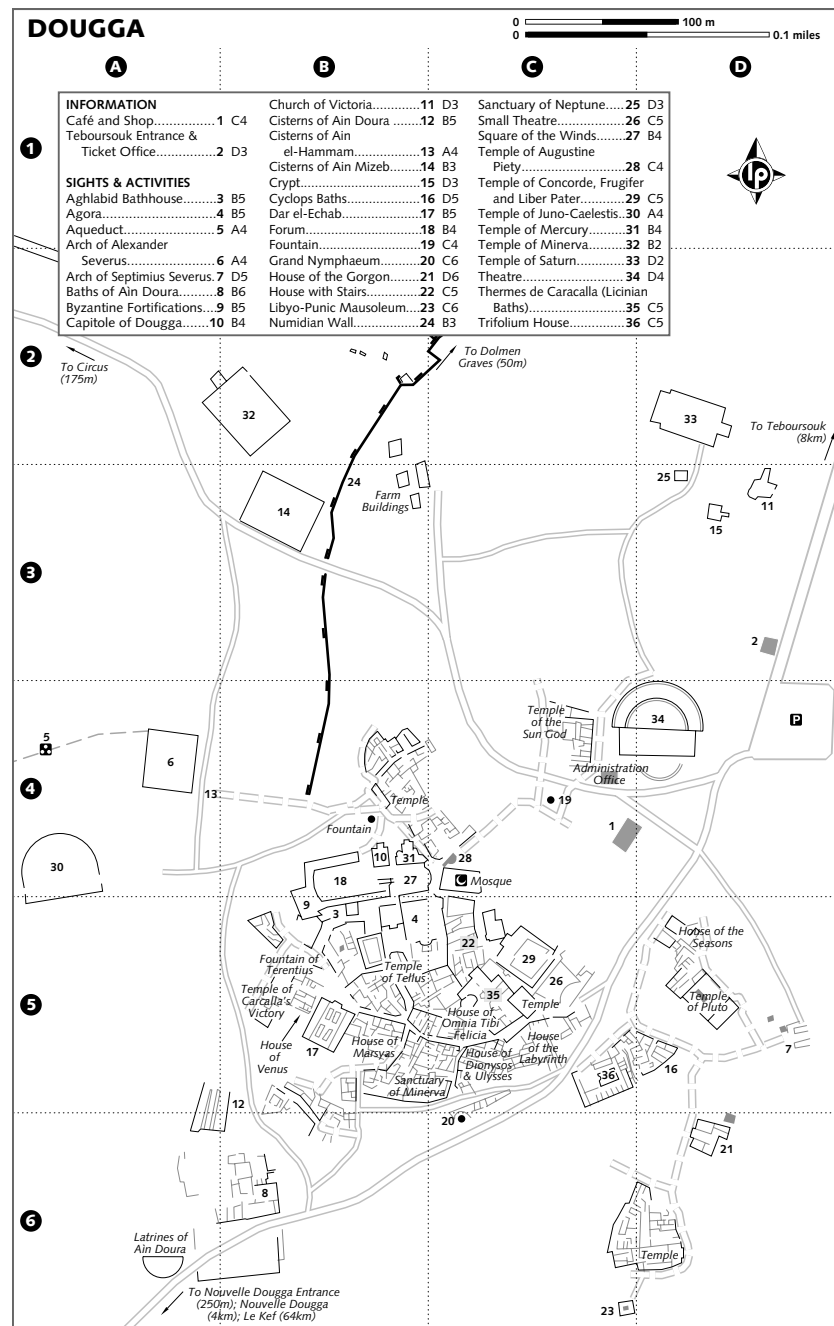
Dougga has two entrances: one faces Tebour-souk, 8km to the northeast, at the eastern edge of the site; the other, at the southwestern edge, is 4km up the slope from the Nouvelle Dougga junction on the Le Kef–Tebour-souk road.

Sights

The route outlined below begins at the Tebour-souk entrance.

THEATRE

Nestled into the hillside, the outstanding theatre, whose 19 tiers could accommodate an audience of 3500, was built in AD 188 by one of the city's wealthier residents, Marcus Quadrutus. Today, it serves as a superb setting for classical drama during the month-long **Dougga Festival** (running from early July



to early August). Travel agencies in Tunis and major resort areas organise festival excursions.

SQUARE OF THE WINDS

From the theatre, head south and follow the Roman road that leads downhill towards the Capitole, passing the ruins of a small **fountain**. The road emerges at the Square of the Winds, bounded by temples and named after the large circular engraving listing the names of the 12 winds. You can make out some of the names, including Africanus (the sirocco). The Square's function is unclear but it was probably a marketplace, used in conjunction with the **agora** to the south.

TEMPLES

The town is dominated by the imposing hill-top **Capitole** (Capitol; AD 166). In remarkable condition, it has 10m-high walls and six mighty, one-piece fluted columns – each 8m high – supporting the portico. The massive walls are the finest known example of a construction technique called *opus africanum*, which uses large stones to strengthen walls built of small stones and rubble.

The walls enclose the temple's inner sanctum. The three large niches in the north wall once housed a giant statue of Jupiter flanked by smaller statues of Juno and Minerva. The carved frieze shows the emperor Antonius Pius being carried off in an eagle's claws, with an inscription dedicating the temple to the gods Jupiter, Juno and Minerva.

The Byzantines were responsible for the **fortifications** that enclose the capitole and the **forum**, built on the orders of General Solomon and constructed using stones filched from surrounding buildings. Look out for stones bearing the dedication from the Temple of Mercury (see next paragraph), which have wound up at knee height on the eastern wall, facing the Square of the Winds.

The meagre remains of the **Temple of Mercury** are to the north of the square. To the east are four square pillars belonging to the tiny 2nd-century **Temple of Augustine Piety**.

BATHS & LATRINES

If you head south along the path running past the building known, for obvious reasons, as the **House with Stairs**, you reach a

large but poorly preserved **temple** complex dedicated to **Concorde, Frugifer** and **Liber Pater**. Beyond, facing southeast towards the valley, is a **small theatre**, next to which stand the early 3rd-century **Thermes de Caracalla** (Licinian Baths) – their size is a further indication of the town's prosperity. The walls of this extensive complex – especially those surrounding the grand *frigidarium* (cold room) – remain largely intact. A tunnel for the slaves, who kept the baths operating, is a reminder of how the good-life enjoyed by the Roman elite was maintained.

Heading east, and straight ahead over the staggered crossroads, you come across an unusual solid square doorframe to the south. It marks the entrance to an unidentified temple referred to as **Dar el-Echab**, after the family who once occupied the site. Carry on past Dar el-Echab, and then head south. The route turns into a rough path that winds downhill past the ruined **Cisterns of Ain Doura** to the **Baths of Ain Doura**, the city's main summer baths.

If you head back uphill from here along the dirt road that crosses the site, you'll pass the **grand nymphaeum** on the left. This huge, partly restored fountain is thought to have been supplied with water by an underground conduit from the Cisterns of Ain el-Hammam (see opposite), 300m northwest.

Continue along the road for another 75m, then turn right, descending the steps leading to **Trifolium House**. This is believed to have been the town brothel – the discreet name was inspired by the small clover-leaf-shaped room in the northwest corner of the house.

Next door are the **Cyclops Baths**, named after the remarkable mosaic found here (now in the Bardo Museum). The baths themselves are in disrepair, except for the sociably horseshoe-shaped row of 12 latrines just inside the entrance.

ARCH OF SEPTIMIUS SEVERUS & LIBYO-PUNIC MAUSOLEUM

From here you can head east along the paved Roman road that leads downhill to the ruins of the Arch of Septimius Severus, built in AD 205 to honour Rome's first African-born emperor.

Turn right before the arch and follow the path that winds south past the **House of the Gorgon** to the Libyo-Punic Mausoleum. This

triple-tiered, obelisk-shaped monument, an amazing 21m high, is crowned by a small pyramid with a seated lion at the pinnacle. It was built during the reign of Massinissa at the beginning of the 2nd century BC and is dedicated, according to a bilingual (Libyan and Punic) inscription, to 'Ateban, son of Ypmatat, son of Palu'. The inscription, which once occupied the vacant window at the base, was removed by the British consul to Tunis in 1842, who destroyed the whole monument in the process. The stone was taken to England (it's now in the British Museum); the monument itself was rebuilt by French archaeologists in 1910.

The well-preserved **Arch of Alexander Severus**, built between AD 222 and 235, marks the city's western entrance. A path leads southwest from here through olive trees to the roughly contemporary **Temple of Juno-Caelestis**, dedicated to the Roman version of the Carthaginian god Tanit. Funded by a resident made a *flamen* (a Roman priest) in AD 222, it was adapted as a church in the 5th century. The pillar-surrounded sanctuary retains an impressive portico, reached via a flight of steps.

CISTERNS, TEMPLES & A CHURCH

Immediately west of the Arch of Alexander Severus are the cavernous **Cisterns of Ain el-Hammam**, added during the reign of Commodus (AD 180–192) to meet the city's growing demand for water. They were supplied via an **aqueduct**, sections of which are visible among the olive trees west of the cisterns, fed by springs 12km to the southwest.

A rough path leads north through the trees from here, emerging after 150m in front of the nine **Cisterns of Ain Mizeb**. The city's main water supply, they were fed by a spring some 200m to the west and remain in excellent condition.

Follow the dirt road that leads northwest, and then cut across the fields to the **Temple of Minerva**. Looking northwest from here, it's possible to discern the outline of the **circus**, now an elongated wheat field filling a saddle between two hills.

Turn right and aim for the rocky ridge to the northeast, which is dotted with dozens of primitive **dolmen graves**. These are just north of the so-called **Numidian Wall**, which protected the city in pre-Roman days.

Cross the wall and follow the paths that curve across the hill towards the **Temple of Saturn**. This great temple must have been a magnificent sight after its completion in AD 195 but today only six stunted columns remain. Built on a platform facing east over the valley of Oued Kalled, it dominated the ancient city's northern approach. The structure stands on the site of an earlier temple to Baal Hammon, the chief Punic deity, who became Saturn in Roman times and was the favoured god of Roman Africa.

The reconstructed apse south of the temple is all that remains of the **Sanctuary of Neptune**.

The ruins of the Vandal **Church of Victoria**, on the slope east of the sanctuary, are the only evidence of Christianity at Dougga. The church was built in the early 5th century using stone taken from the surrounding temples. The small **crypt** next door is packed with large stone sarcophagi and still has relics from the saint.

From here, you can follow the path south to the theatre.

Getting There & Away

Dougga can easily be visited on a day trip from Tunis or Le Kef – or en route between the two cities. The nearest town, about 8km northeast of Dougga, is Teboursouk – see p160 for details on getting there by public transport.

From Teboursouk's louage station, hiring an entire yellow-striped louage or a yellow taxi to Dougga should cost about TD7 one way or TD10 to TD15 return (the driver will return to pick you up at a pre-set time), though iffy operators may demand a lot more or set an exorbitant per-person rate.

If you're coming from Le Kef, you can get off the bus at the Nouvelle Dougga turn-off on the main road. From here it's a 4km walk – you *might* be able to hitch a ride with locals but don't count on it. See Hitching, p311 for general information about possible dangers.

TEBOUSSOUK

pop 12,700

The small town of Teboursouk (*tuh-burr-suck* – swallow all the vowels), 68km northeast of Le Kef, has a fine setting high up in pine-forested hills but there's nothing specific to see here. Market day is Thursday.

Nearby Dougga's popularity with tourists seems to have attracted a few unsavoury types who try to take advantage of visitors.

Readers have written to us to complain that while their backpacks were in the keeping of unnamed local businesses, they were rifled through and items were stolen. However, it *may* be possible to leave your bags safely at Restaurant L'Arrêt Chez Adel, next to the SNTRI office (it's one of several adjacent eateries), if you eat lunch there.

If you've got your heart set on getting out to the ruins early or staying late, the 33-room, two-star **Hôtel Thugga** (☎ 78 466 647; s/d TD30/44; 🏠), about 1km down the hill from the centre of Teboursouk and 8km from Dougga, is a decent tourist-class choice. The only hostelry in town, it's clean and comfortable and has a restaurant.

Getting There & Away

All SNTRI services operating between Tunis (TD5.5, 1¼ hours, hourly until 5pm) and Le Kef (TD3.5, one hour, almost hourly until 8.15pm) stop at Teboursouk's SNTRI office, which is in the town centre. Across the street, louages leave for Béja, Tunis and Le Kef.

See p159 for information on details about how to get to Dougga.

LE KEF

pop 46,000

High in the hills at an elevation of 780m, Le Kef (El Kef or al-Kaf, Arabic for 'rock') is topped by a storybook kasbah offering panoramic views. On the slope below is the medina, a maze of narrow cobbled streets and blue-shuttered low-rise buildings whose highlights include a fine museum that focuses on Berber culture and Muslim, Christian and Jewish places of worship.

Le Kef, 175km southwest of Tunis and only 40km from the Algerian frontier, is one of Tunisia's most underrated tourist destinations. Particularly friendly and with lots of local pride, it's an excellent base for exploring the Roman sites of Dougga and Haidra as well as Jugurtha's Table. The city is cold in winter and oven-hot in the summer.

The area around the bus station looks distinctly unpromising but things get much more interesting as you walk up the hill.

A website (in French) with lots of historical information and old photos of Le Kef is <http://lekef-carte.postale.chez-alice.fr>.

History

Established around 500 BC by Carthage to protect the western parts of its newly won empire, the first town on this strategic site was called Sicca and was known for the temple prostitutes who hung out at its sanctuary to the goddess Astarte, whose portfolio included love. In Roman times, the sanctuary was dedicated to Venus and so the town became known as Sicca Veneria.

When Carthage couldn't pay its mercenaries, they were sent here and rose in revolt, whereupon more mercenaries were sent to sort things out, triggering a horrific four-year battle (inspiring Flaubert's novel *Salammbô*). After the fall of Carthage, Le Kef became a stronghold of the Numidian king Jugurtha during his rebellion against Rome.

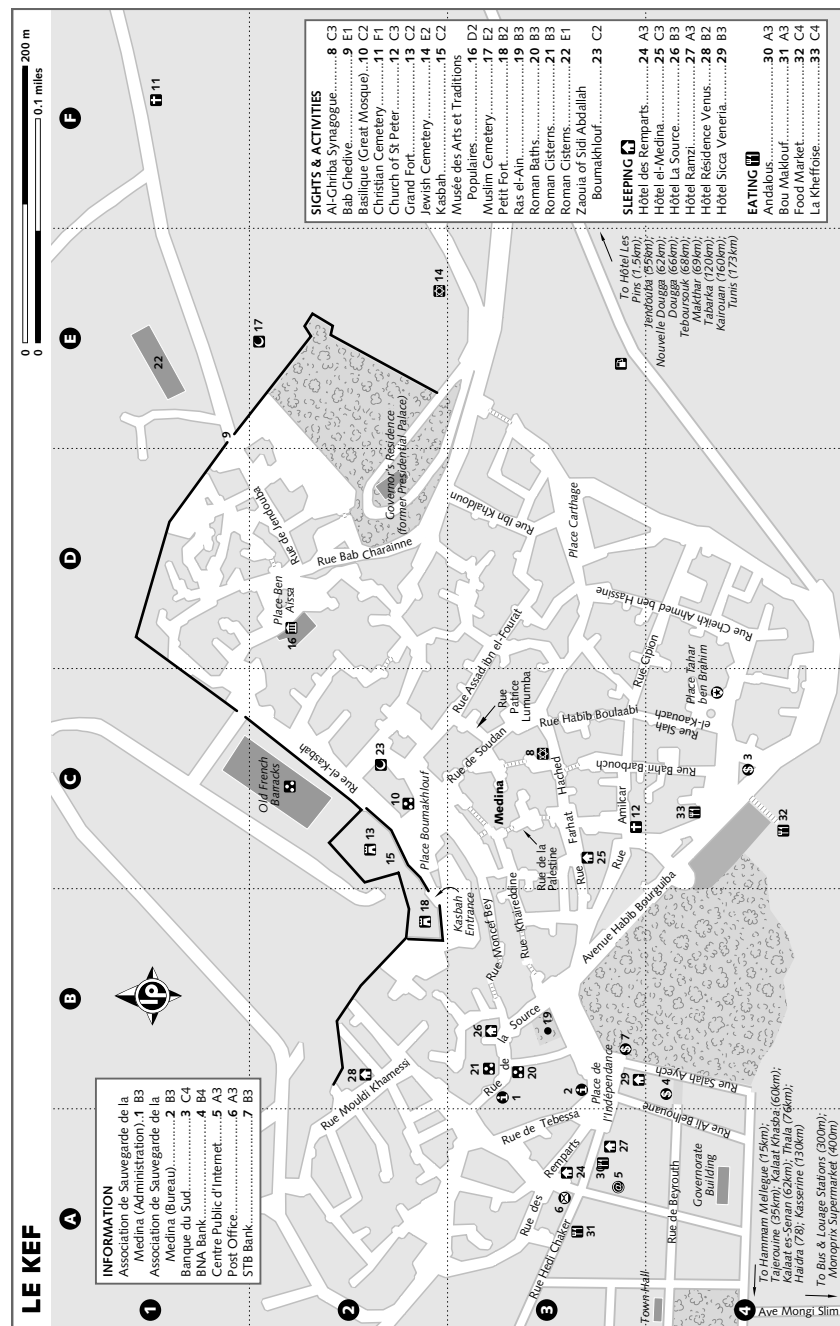
The Vandals came and went, followed by the Byzantines and then the Arabs, who captured the town in AD 688 and took to calling it Shakbanaria (a corruption of Sicca Veneria). Locals rebelled against the central government at pretty much every opportunity before becoming autonomous after the Hilalian invasions of the 11th century. The town fell briefly to the Almohads in 1159 but soon returned to its independent ways. By the time the Ottomans arrived in the 16th century, the region had become the private fiefdom of the Beni Cherif tribe.

Le Kef prospered under the Ottomans, who rebuilt its fortifications, and this upward spiral continued under the beys. Hussein ben Ali, who founded the Husseinite dynasty of beys (1705–1957), was born here.

Orientation & Information

Most things of interest to travellers are either around place de l'Indépendance or in the western half of the medina, which is on the slopes below (south of) the kasbah. The bus and louage stations are about 600m southwest of place de l'Indépendance.

Charged with protecting the city's historic sites, the two offices of the **Association de Sauvegarde de la Medina** (ASM; ☎ 78 200 476, 78 201 367; 🕒 8am–1pm & 3–6pm) also function as makeshift tourist offices. **ASM Bureau** (place de l'Indépendance) is housed in the mausoleum of



a 19th-century saint, Sidi Hacine bou Karma (look for the orange ceramic wall map of Le Kef out front); **ASM Administration** (rue de la Source) is located inside Dar el-Kahia (look for the little marble ASM plaque out front), a large, tile-decorated mansion from the 18th and 19th centuries that's worth seeing. A room off the courtyard has old photos of Le Kef and wall charts (in French) with historical background on the city's monuments.

Banque du Sud (ave Habib Bourguiba)

BNA Bank (rue de Beyrouth)

Centre Public d'Internet (per hr TD1.5; ☎ 8am-2am)

On the 2nd floor in a building 50m down the hill from the post office, between rue Hedi Chaker and rue de Beyrouth.

Musée des Arts et Traditions Populaires (admission TD2, plus camera TD1; ☎ 9.30am-4.30pm mid-Sep-Mar, 9am-1pm & 4-7pm Apr-mid-Sep) The friendly staff can provide tips and information on the city.

Post office (rue Hedi Chaker) Has an ATM.

STB Bank (place de l'Indépendance)

Sights

MUSÉE DES ARTS ET TRADITIONS POPULAIRES

Housed in a sprawling, ornate Sufi religious complex founded in 1784, the **Musée des Arts et Traditions Populaires** (admission TD2, plus camera TD1; ☎ 9.30am-4.30pm mid-Sep-Mar, 9am-1pm & 4-7pm Apr-mid-Sep) is worth a stop. There are many highlights, including the tomb of the Rahmaniya Sufi leader Sidi Ali ben Aissa (1901-56), a complete Berber nomads' tent and an old flour mill made in Marseilles in 1860 and used in Le Kef until 1992. Other features include a mock-up of a traditional Quranic school for young boys, Berber bagpipes and a room covering *travaux féminins* - 'women's labours' such as weaving, milling flour and making couscous (a summertime activity). Plus there's heavy silver jewellery - 1½ to 2kg of it - traditionally worn daily by Berber women (silver is believed to provide protection against the Evil Eye). Each child a woman had was indicated by a chain with a *khomsa* (Hand of Fatima) for a girl or a full-moon shape for a boy dangling at the end.

Chances are you didn't know that camels hate cold and, when chilled, can get very aggressive - that's why, in winter, the Berbers kept them toasty warm by dressing them in a huge sombrero.

The staff are extremely knowledgeable and may be able to give you a tour in English (a small tip is appreciated).

KASBAH

Dominating the city from high atop Jebel Eddir and affording stunning views of the old town and the grainfields beyond, the grand, crenellated **kasbah** (☎ 8am-7pm, to 8pm or later Mon-Fri, may be closed 1-2pm) consists of two fortresses. To the west is the square **Petit Fort** (small fort), built in 1601 and protected by four towers, one at each corner. To the east is the **Grand Fort** (large fort), begun under Mohammed Pasha in 1679 and enlarged in the 18th and 19th centuries. A stronghold of some sort has occupied this site since the 5th century BC; the last military occupant was the Tunisian army, based here until 1992.

The guardian appreciates a tip for accompanying you around the main points of interest: the Turkish mosque, the prison cells, a bronze cannon left behind by the Dey of Algiers in 1705, several gates and walls of various vintages.

BASILIQUE

No one is quite sure what the original function of the **Basilique** (☎ 8am-noon & 3-6pm) was, though it seems to have been built in the 4th century as some sort of storage depot for precious items such as silver and grain. Later on, probably under the Byzantines, it became a church. The structure was converted into a mosque in the 8th century, in the wake of the Arab invasions, but today, after restorations, it looks more-or-less like it did when the Byzantines were in town. Although it was secularised in 1966, many locals still refer to the structure as the **Great Mosque** (Grand Mosquée).

ZAOUIA OF SIDI ABDALLAH BOUMAKHLOUF

Just northeast of the Basilique is the enchanting **Zaouia of Sidi Abdallah Boumakhlof** (☎ 10am-noon & 3-6pm, all day Wed & Fri), with gleaming white cupolas and an octagonal, 19th-century Hanafite-style minaret. Built at the beginning of the 17th century, it's named after the town's Fez-born patron saint who, along with his family, is buried here in elaborate tombs cloaked in green. Just outside is a bewitchingly pretty, tree-shaded square with a café.

AL-GHRIBA SYNAGOGUE

Le Kef long had a thriving Jewish community; **Al-Ghriba Synagogue** (rue Farhat Hached; ☎ 7am-7pm),

in the heart of the former Jewish quarter, the Hara, pays tribute to that now-vanished part of local culture. Inside the structure, restored in 1994, you can see old wooden memorial plaques; a marriage invitation from 1952; a Torah scroll, hand-written on parchment; a circumcision chair that causes some male visitors, instinctively, to cup their hands over their crotch; a truly spooky chandelier (it's hard to believe that such items where once fashionable!); and fragments of old newspapers whose Arabic text is written in Hebrew characters (this seldom-seen language, Judeo-Arabic, is to Arabic what Yiddish is to German). The caretaker will let you in; there's no entry fee but you should give him a tip of at least TD2.

CHURCH OF ST PETER

The remains of the 4th-century **Église St Pierre** (Dar el-Kous; rue Amilcar; ☎ 8am-noon or 1pm & 3-6pm) are two blocks southwest of the synagogue. Remarkably well-preserved, the structure - built on the site of a pagan temple - has a narthex, a large nave, two side aisles and an impressive apse that was added in Byzantine times. It's often locked.

RAS EL-AIN

Le Kef owes its very existence to the **Ras el-Ain spring** (place de l'Indépendance, cnr rue de la Source), whose waters once supplied the **Roman baths** (rue de la Source) just to the west; note the hexagonal hall and the remains of a 5th-century church. Spring waters were also used to fill the **Roman cisterns**, across rue de la Source from the baths.

BAB GHEDIVE

Stepping through this city gate - the only one of the city's five gates still extant - is like a journey through the looking glass, from the city to the countryside. Just outside is a huge underground **Roman cistern** - a spooky, gloomy cavern that's popular with secret boozers after dark. Small red cliffs form a backdrop to the town - villagers walk down from here with their donkeys to collect water from the pump. East of the cisterns, past the **Muslim cemetery**, is an old **Christian cemetery**, with wrought-iron grave decorations. Down the hill, 200m west of the former Governor's Residence (formerly Bourguiba's Presidential Palace), is a large **Jewish cemetery**.

Sleeping

Le Kef has a good selection of clean, comfortable accommodation options.

BUDGET

Hôtel el-Medina (☎ 78 204 183; 18 rue Farhat Hached; s/d with shared bathroom TD6/12) Very basic but pretty clean, this 13-room place has beds reminiscent of a hospital and the hall toilets lack toilet seats. On the brighter side, there are fine views from the rooms at the back and are from the rooftop terrace.

Hôtel La Source (☎ 78 204 397; rue de la Source; per person TD6-15) Run by a real character, this nine-room place, arranged around a traditional courtyard, has peeling paint, some iffy plumbing, cracked and off-kilter floor tiles and beds that are, shall we say, a bit rickety - but you can't beat it for atmosphere. To stay in the spectacularly tiled, 18th-century 'family room' - the most extraordinary hotel room in town - with its ornate Andalusian ceiling is to live the life of a bey, albeit one whose fortunes are in genteel decline.

Hôtel des Remparts (☎ 78 202 100; 5 rue des Remparts; s/d TD10/20) On a quiet street, this hostelry - slightly ragged at the edges - has simple, bright rooms, some with big windows.

MIDRANGE

Hôtel Sicca Veneria (☎ 78 202 389; place de l'Indépendance; s/d TD22/38) This 32-room, lift-equipped place is very central but the rooms - some with balconies - are boring. The entrance is around the corner on rue Salah Ayech.

Hôtel Ramzi (☎ 78 203 079; rue Hedi Chaker; s/d TD25/50, without toilet or shower TD20/40) This is a central and very welcoming hotel whose 14 rooms are clean and decorated with lots of colourful wall tiles. It has a restaurant.

Hôtel-Résidence Venus (☎ 78 204 695; www.hotel-lespins.com, in French; rue Mouldi Khamessi; s/d TD28/40) Nestled beneath the outer walls of the old kasbah, this especially friendly pension has twittering canaries in the courtyard, great views from the rooftop and 20 rooms that are simple, clean and pleasant. It's under the same management as Hôtel Les Pins and if you ask nicely they'll let you use the pool there. The manager can arrange transport to Hammam Mellegue (TD29).

Hôtel Les Pins (☎ 78 204 021; www.hotel-lespins.com, in French; s/d TD30/42; ☎ ☎) About 1.5km

east of town on the road to Tunis, this good-value hotel – surrounding a courtyard pool – is lovely, clean and bright, with lots of colourful tiling. All rooms have nicely tiled bathrooms and some come with views.

Eating

La Kheffoise (☎ 78 203 887; ave Habib Bourguiba; pizzas TD2) This spotless little bakery and pizzeria has seating on a small interior balcony.

Bou Maklouf (☎ 98 285 211; rue Hedi Chaker; mains TD3.5-7; ☎ to midnight) This good-value cheapie is very popular for lunch, when specialties include couscous, *lablabi* (soup) and the town's best chicken and chips. The selection is more limited in the evening.

Andalous (rue Hedi Chaker; mains TD7) This simple place, run by a motherly woman who's clearly proud of her establishment, serves excellent *salade mechouia* (traditional Tunisian salad of grilled peppers and tomatoes, with olives) and tasty fish and couscous.

Edibles are sold at the **food market**, down from ave Habib Bourguiba. To get to the **Monoprix supermarket** (☎ 8am-1pm & 4-8pm) from the bus station, walk 50m up the hill and then 250m right (east) – just follow the signs.

Getting There & Away

BUS

From the **bus station** (ave Mongi Slim), located about 600m southwest of place de l'Indépendance, the Société Régionale de Transport du Gouvernorat du Kef (SRTG Kef) has bus services to Bizerte (TD8.5, twice daily); Gafsa (twice daily); Jendouba (TD3.2, one hour, twice daily); Kairouan (TD7.5, four daily) via Makthar (TD3, 1½ hours, last bus back at 3pm or 3.30pm); Kasserine (TD5.6, two hours, five daily) via Tajerouine (linked to Jugurtha's Table by louage), Kalaat Khasba (linked to Tunis by two trains a day) and Thala (linked to Haidra by louage); Nabeul (TD9.4, twice daily) via Hammamet (TD8.5); Sfax (TD12.2, four daily); and Sousse (TD9.4, twice daily).

SNTRI services to Tunis (TD8.3, 3¼ hours, hourly except around noon) can drop you in Nouvelle Dougga (TD3.2, one hour), from where you can walk to Dougga, or in Teboursouk (TD3.5, 1¼ hours), linked to Dougga by taxi.

For details on transport to Hammam Melgue see right.

LOUAGE

Red-stripe louages to Jendouba (TD3.1, one hour), Béja, Makthar and Kasserine (TD6.5) leave from the bus station parking lot. Louages to Sousse, leaving early in the morning, Teboursouk (TD8.7) and Tunis (TD8.7) stop across the street.

AROUND LE KEF Hammam Melgue

حمام ملاق

For an unbelievably relaxing hot-water soak, head to the tiny, isolated hamlet of Hammam Melgue, 15km west of Le Kef, where you can have a real Roman bath in a stunningly beautiful natural setting. Overlooking the broad, sandy sweep of the murky green Oued Melgue, the *hammam* (public bathhouse) is hidden away at the base of a dramatic escarpment surrounded by red-dish bluffs dotted with pine trees. The only electricity comes from photovoltaic cells.

Although much of the 2nd-century bath complex is little more than a roofless jumble of walls and arches, the **caldarium** (hot room; admission TD1; ☎ all day) is an extraordinary place that remains virtually unchanged more than 1800 years after it was built.

A large wooden door opens onto a steam-filled chamber lit by a skylight set into the barrel-vaulted ceiling. Ancient stone steps lead down the pool, worn smooth by the feet of 40 generations and turned dark red by iron elements in the water, which is fed by hot springs whose waters emerge from the ground at 35°C. It is emptied by removing wet rags from the ancient drain pipes, connected by gravity with Oued Melgue, and refilled from pipes connected to the spring. There are two chambers, one each for men and women.

The water is slightly saline (you can drink it direct from the inflow pipe) and is said by locals to be good for rheumatism and the problems of the digestive tract.

Bring a bathing suit, towel, flip-flops and plenty of drinking water; for security bring your stuff into the caldarium with you.

If you'd like to stay out here you can either camp or rent a very rudimentary room (TD2.5).

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Hammam Melgue attracts only a handful of Tunisians and virtually no foreigners, in part because it's so hard to get to.

BE A ROMAN!

To experience the luxurious, sensual life once lived by wealthy Romans – indeed, to actually *transform* yourself into a Roman, at least for a little while – you don't have to learn to look nonchalant in a toga or develop a taste for lead-tainted wine. A 45-minute trip from Le Kef along an almost impassable dirt track is all it takes!

Hammam Melgue (opposite), whose spa facilities have hardly changed in 1800 years, affords the real Roman bath experience, absolutely genuine in every detail. Even the mobile phone reception out here is no better than it would have been back when Scipio Africanus sent his SMS messages with runners.

To achieve maximum authenticity, you might try chatting in Latin while lolling about in the steaming spring water. 'This is *ne plus ultra*, dude – it's a good thing no one here is *in loco parentis*', you might remark to your companion. 'Instead of heading back to *terra firma*, I'd like to stay here *ad infinitum*, though I wouldn't want to drink that salty spring water *ad nauseum*. Paying TD1 *per capita per diem* for a *bona fide* Roman experience isn't bad – I wonder what it costs here *per annum*? If you dare splash me that will be a *casus belli* – not only will you become a *persona non grata* for the rest of the day you'll find me *in absentia* until you say *mea culpa*.'

Of course, if your brain is a *tabula rasa* you can always mutter '*et cetera, et cetera*'.

If you've got a car, follow the signs from Le Kef to Sakiet Sidi Youssef; the turn-off to Hammam Melgue is about 3km southwest of town at the far end of the military base – look for a sign to the 'Forêts du Kef'. Further on, the signless route passes by some Tunisian army training bases so stay on the road as the area is sensitive security-wise and there may be old ordnance lying around (that's what those skull-and-crossbones markings are about). The first 9km, which pass through rolling wheat country, are in pretty good condition. The final 3km get dodgy as the road descends to Oued Melgue. In summer the track, steep and washed out in places, is passable (but just barely) to non-4WD vehicles; during the winter rains? Fuggedaboutit, unless you've got a Land Rover.

There is no public transport to Hammam Melgue but it's possible to hire a vehicle with a driver in Le Kef. One option is to suss things out with a yellow-striped louage driver across the street from the bus station – a round-trip by *camionnette* (small truck) should cost about TD20 (a bonus for the driver: a long, hot soak). It might be simpler, though, to hire an ancient Peugeot pickup with a driver (TD29) through the Hôtel-Résidence Venus (p163).

MAKTHAR (MACTARIS)

مكثار

pop 9000

The ruins of ancient Mactaris are in the middle of nowhere on the road between Le Kef (69km northwest) and Kairouan (114km to the east). If you like classic Roman public

spaces – Mactaris boasts a fine triumphal arch, a forum and a superb bath complex – it's worth the effort to get out here but don't plan to stay overnight as the modern town is bleak and the only accommodation option unbelievably unappealing.

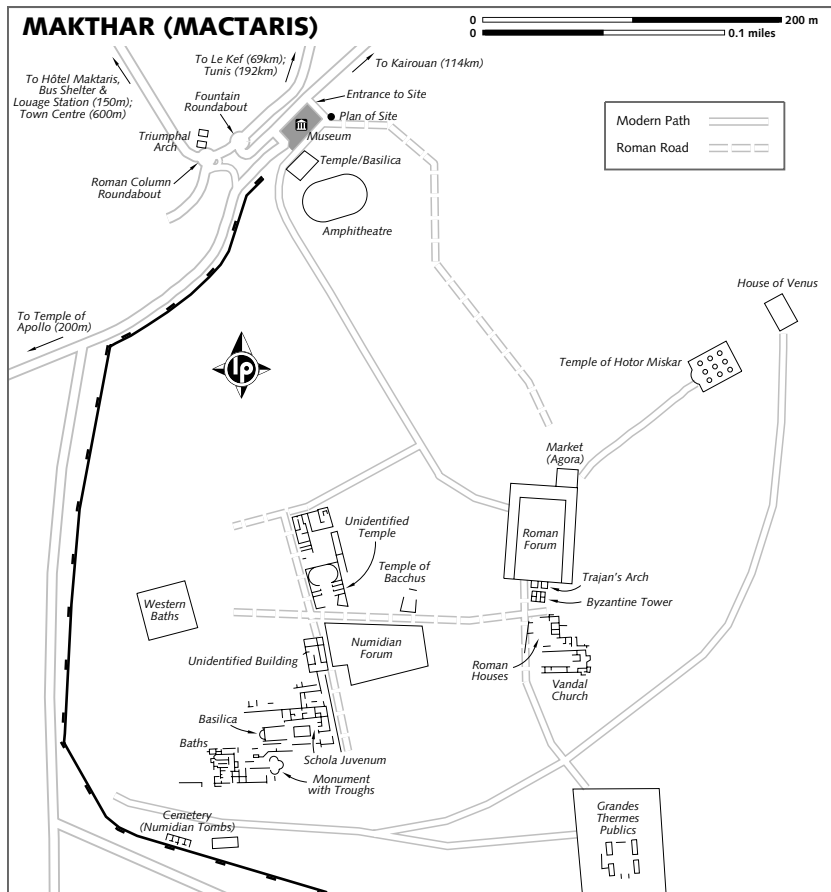
History

Ancient Mactaris was one of many native towns incorporated into the Carthaginian Empire at the end of the 5th century BC as part of Carthage's push to take control of its hinterlands. Captured by the Numidian king Massinissa before the Third Punic War, it remained in Numidian hands until the beginning of the 1st century AD, when Rome began to take the settlement of Africa seriously.

The Roman town reached the peak of its prosperity in the 2nd century; in subsequent centuries the Vandals and the Byzantines both left their mark. Mactaris continued to be occupied until the 11th century, when it was destroyed during the Hilarian invasions.

Orientation & Information

The archaeological site is on the southeastern edge of town, near the junction of the roads to Kairouan and Le Kef; the entrance is next to a roundabout with a fountain in the middle. About 100m to the west there's a second roundabout with a Roman column in the centre – from there it's 250m north to the Hôtel Maktaris, the bus shelter and the louage station. The dust-blown town centre



is about 400m northeast of the hotel in the area between the two minarets.

If you're visiting in the winter come suitably dressed – at an altitude of more than 1000m, the winds that blow off the surrounding hills can be bitterly cold.

Ancient Mactaris

The entrance to **Mactaris** (admission TD3, plus camera TD1; ☎ 8am–7pm Apr–mid-Sep, 8.30am–5.30pm mid-Sep–Mar) is through the **museum**, which houses a mosaic portraying a veritable menagerie, including peacocks, some interesting Roman and Christian gravestones decorated with Latin inscriptions and *haut-relief* figures, coins and Christian-era terracotta lamps.

Immediately south of the museum are the remains of the town's small **amphitheatre**, built in the 2nd century AD.

The main path runs south from the amphitheatre towards **Trajan's Arch** (AD 116), which has an ornate pediment and is dedicated, naturally, to the emperor Trajan; on the south side, part of a Latin inscription is still readable. The arch overlooks the stone-paved **Roman forum**, built at the same time. The four columns at the northeastern corner of the forum mark the location of the town's **market**. The foundations south of the arch also belong to a 6th century Byzantine tower.

A path leads northeast from the forum to the scanty remains of the **Temple of Hotor Miskar**, dedicated to the Carthaginian god of

the same name. Nearby are the remains of a Roman villa known as the **House of Venus**, named after the mosaic of Venus found there that's now in the museum.

The group of columns south of Trajan's Arch belong to a small **Vandal church** (5th century AD) with two rows of columns running down the middle. The baptismal font, hidden behind the rounded apse at the eastern end, still has traces of the original mosaics.

The jumble of arches and columns standing at the southwestern corner of the site was once home to the town's **schola juvenum**, a youth club where local boys learned how to be good Romans. Converted into a church in the 3rd century AD, it's a pleasant, shady spot. The area just south of the schola was the town's **cemetery** and is dotted with **Numidian tombs**.

The southern part of the site is dominated by the massive walls of the **Grandes Thermes Publics** (Great Southeastern Baths). Built in the 2nd century AD, they were converted into a fortress by the Byzantines in the 6th century but are nonetheless among the best preserved Roman baths in Tunisia. The star feature is the extraordinary deep blue, jade green, dark red and orange mosaic floor of the central hall, with its three imposing arches.

The ruins of the **Temple of Apollo** are about 200m southwest of town (they're signposted from the museum). Built on the site of an earlier Carthaginian temple dedicated to Baal Hammon, this was the town's principal temple in Roman times. Adjoining the site are the crumbling remains of the Roman aqueduct that once supplied water to the town.

Sleeping & Eating

Hôtel Maktaris (☎ 22 204 995; s, d or tr with sink TD12) Makthar's only hotel is the dilapidated, five-room hotel, situated 400m from the archaeological site above the only bar in town. This juxtaposition is fortuitous because you'll need to drink a fair bit before even considering lying down on one of the beds, whose slats can be felt through the flimsy mattresses. The general air of dereliction also pervades the boot-camp-grade toilets.

Makthar doesn't have any proper restaurants but you'll find a few cafés and small eateries in the town centre.

Getting There & Away

Makthar is on the bus line linking Le Kef (TD3, 1¼ hours, four daily; last bus at 3pm or 3.30pm) with Kairouan (TD4.6, 1¼ hours) and can be visited on a day trip from Le Kef; the stop is in front of the Hôtel Maktaris. SNTRI buses to Tunis (TD7.7, three hours) leave from the town centre.

Destinations served by louage include Tunis, Kairouan, Le Kef (until the early afternoon) and Sousse (TD8.5, until about 4pm). Stops are next to the Hôtel Maktaris.

HAIDRA (AMMÆDARA) حيدرة

The remote border village of Haidra is the site of ancient Ammædara, one of the oldest Roman towns in Africa. It's a wonderfully evocative site, spread along the northern bank of Oued Haidra, and the atmosphere is especially magical as the sun slowly sets behind the mountains of Algeria to the west, bathing the site in a rich orange glow.

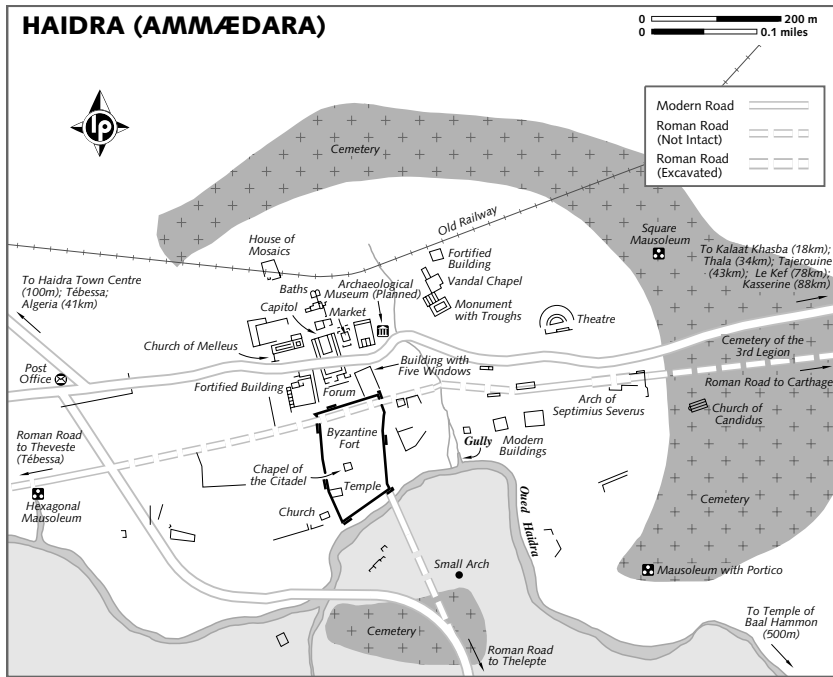
The modern town is little more than a sleepy customs post on the road to the Algerian town of Tébessa, 41km to the southwest. Along both sides of the main street, a colonnaded arcade shades shops, several groceries and two tiny eateries from the fierce North African sun.

The nearest midrange accommodation is in Kasserine, 69km to the southeast, or Le Kef, 78km to the north. Basic hotels can be found in Tajerouine (see p177) and in Thala, 54km north of Kasserine, where you could try the Hôtel Bouthelja, a nondescript building with light-blue bars on all the windows. From the police station, it's 100m down the main drag and across the street.

History

Ammædara is a Berber name, although the only evidence of pre-Roman occupation is the foundations of a Carthaginian temple to the god Baal Hammon overlooking Oued Haidra to the southeast of the site.

The first Roman settlement here was a base established by the troops of the Augustine Third Legion at the beginning of the 1st century AD during their campaign to suppress a rebellion by the Numidian chief Tacfinares. Only a cemetery near the Arch of Septimius Severus survives from this period. After Tacfinares was defeated, Ammædara was repopulated with retired soldiers and became a prosperous trading town.



Ancient Ammædara

The road from Kalaat Khasba passes through the middle of the site, which is not enclosed and can be visited at any time. Admission is free but the amiable custodian appreciates a tip. There are plans to turn the former French customs house (1886), on the main road, into an **archaeological museum** featuring mosaics, inscribed gravestones and stone sarcophagi; it *may* open in 2007 or 2008.

The site, strewn with stone blocks, is dominated by the walls of an enormous **Byzantine fort**, built in AD 550. It straddles the old Roman road and extends down to the banks of Oued Haidra. The ruins of an earlier Roman temple are incorporated into the southwestern corner.

The principal Roman monument is the extremely well preserved **Arch of Septimius Severus**, which stands on the eastern edge of the site. It was built in AD 195 and remains in good condition because it was protected for centuries by a surrounding Byzantine wall. About 300m south of here, the **mausoleum**, with its portico, stands silhouetted on a small rise overlooking the *oued* (river).

The modern road passes over the old forum. A single giant column marks the site of the great temple that once stood at the **capitol**; right nearby are the remains of the old **baths** and the **market**.

Although the site is dotted with the ruins of numerous small churches, the only one that warrants serious inspection is the partially reconstructed **Church of Melleus**, just west of the forum, which has a rounded apse and two rows of columns separating the nave from the aisles. Originally built in the 4th century, it was later expanded by the Byzantines.

Getting There & Away

Getting to Haidra by public transport is a bit of a challenge but eminently doable, though don't count on finding any buses or louages out of town after mid-afternoon. From Kasserine or Le Kef, it's possible to visit both Haidra and Jugurtha's Table on a day trip if you catch your first bus or louage very early in the morning.

(Continued on page 177)

(Continued from page 168)

Haidra is linked by louage with Kalaat Khasba (TD1, 15 minutes), 18km to the northeast, which is served by all Le Kef-Kasserine buses and by two daily trains from Tunis (TD10, five hours; departures in both directions are at around 6am and in the early afternoon).

An SRTK bus links Haidra with Kasserine (TD3.6, 2¼ hours, twice daily via Thala) – departures from Kasserine are at 6.45am and 9.30am; the last bus back leaves Haidra at 3.30pm.

Getting from Haidra to Jugurtha's Table involves taking three louages: one to Kalaat Khasba (TD1) – get off at the big roundabout on the Le Kef-Kasserine road; then one to Tajerouine (TD1.2), a distance of about 25km; and finally a third louage to Kalaat es-Senan (TD1.4), a further 27km.

JUGURTHA'S TABLE مائدة يوغرطة

This spectacular flat-topped mountain (1271m), or mesa, rises almost vertically from the surrounding plains 98km north-west of Kasserine. Its sheer, impregnable walls make it a superb natural fortress and, indeed, the mountain bears the name of the ruthless Numidian king Jugurtha (p27), who used it as a base during his seven-year campaign against the Romans (112–105 BC).

Known as the Plateau de Jugurtha on some road signs, Jugurtha's Table can be seen from the Le Kef-Kasserine highway, between Tajerouine and Kalaat Khasba, on the far western horizon.

The only access to the summit is via a twisting set of steps hewn into the escarpment; the small gate at the base was added by the Byzantines. The reward for those who climb to the top is a spectacular view over the surrounding countryside; the hills you can see off to the west are across the border in Algeria. The small shrine honours a local *marabout* (holy man).

The gateway to Jugurtha's Table is the sleepy, low-rise town of **Kalaat es-Senan**, whose less-than-thriving local economy gets a lift from some smuggling from nearby Algeria. The walking route up the mesa (two hours return) starts 3km south-east of Kalaat es-Senan in the hamlet of **Ain Senan**, on the western side of the mountain.

Take sufficient water because there's none to be found along the way.

Tourists are supposed to register at the friendly Garde Nationale (National Guard) office – *not* the same thing as the Police – on the main street of Kalaat es-Senan before they set out.

Two French-language websites with details on the area are www.jugurtha.com and www.kalaat.com.

Sleeping

It is permitted to camp atop Jugurtha's Table, making it possible to wake up to a spectacular sunrise. Make sure you bring *plenty* of water.

Otherwise, extremely basic accommodation is on offer at the eight-room **Hôtel Jugurtha** (☎ 78 296 356; s/d TD3/6), 200m south of the Garde Nationale office. The sign is in Arabic only. Reception is in the grocery and sheets are available on request. This place doubles as the only bar in town.

Another option is to stay in Tajerouine, 35km south of Le Kef, at the Hôtel de la République, on the main street a few hundred metres from the louage and taxi station.

Getting There & Around

Good sealed roads connect Kalaat es-Senan with Kalaat Khasba, 28km to the south-east, and Tajerouine, 27km to the northeast, both on the Le Kef-Kasserine road.

Buses to/from Le Kef stop in front of the Garde Nationale.

Red louages go to Tunis, while blue louages link Kalaat es-Senan with Le Kef and with Tajerouine, a stop on the bus line linking Le Kef (TD2, 45 minutes) with Kasserine (TD4, 1½ hours; last bus to Kasserine at about 4.45pm). For details on getting to Kalaat Khasba (linked to Tunis by two trains a day) and Haidra by louage, see p168.

A taxi from Kalaat es-Senan to Ain Senan costs TD0.5 per person (TD2 for the whole shebang).

KASSERINE

pop 38,000

Kasserine, famous for a WWII battle that raged just west of here (see p178), would be a strong contender in any poll to determine the dullest town in Tunisia. However, it does make an excellent base for exploring the remote western reaches of

the country – including Sbeitla, Haidra, Jugurtha's Table and Chambi National Park (see opposite) – either by car or by public transport. If you come in winter bring warm clothing.

Kasserine's main industry is the production of high-quality paper from esparto grass (see boxed text, p180) – you'll see a mountain of the stuff, piled up waiting to be processed, at the steam- and smoke-belching factory a bit west of the centre of town.

Online information on Kasserine is available (in French) at www.kasserine.com.

Orientation & Information

Kasserine stretches for over 5km along east-west-oriented ave Habib Bourguiba, from the Cillium ruins, in the west, to the bus and louage station, in the east. The main square, place de l'Indépendance – also known as place de l'Ancienne Gare (Old Train Station Square) – is situated on ave Habib Bourguiba about 4km east of Cillium and 1.5km west of the bus station.

The four banks at place de l'Indépendance – Banque du Sud, Banque de l'Habitat, BNA and STB – all change money and have ATMs.

Post office (place de l'Indépendance)

Publinet (internet per hr TD1.5; ☎ 8am-2am) One short block north of place de l'Indépendance, next to the police station.

Publinet (ave Habib Bourguiba; internet per hr TD1.5;

☎ 8am-2am) Conveniently situated about 300m west of place de l'Indépendance in the Complexe Commercial, behind the pizzeria on the 1st floor overlooking the inner courtyard.

Sights

The minor Roman site of **Cillium** (admission free) was, like modern-day Kasserine, an important regional centre. The ruins are scattered over a wide area but are centred on a low hill overlooking the broad bed of Oued Dhrib, on the southwestern edge of town about 4km west of place de l'Indépendance.

The main features are a well-preserved **triumphal arch** and a large **theatre** carved into the hillside. Both date from the 3rd century, when Cillium was at the height of its prosperity. The **capitol** and **forum** are also identifiable, as are the main **baths**. The site is signposted to the east of the road to Gafsa, about 250m south of Hôtel Cillium.

Cillium's most famous monument, on ave Habib Bourguiba 3km west of the centre, is the **Mausoleum of the Flavii**. This triple-tiered monument to Flavius Secundus and his family, standing by the roadside, looks stunning at night when spotlights sometimes highlight the 110 lines of poetry inscribed on the bottom tier.

Every Tuesday a huge **open-air market** is held in the field across the street from the bus station.

Sleeping

Hôtel de la Paix (Nazal as-Salaam; ☎ 77 471 465; ave Habib Bourguiba; s/d with breakfast TD10/14) This friendly place, 50m east of place de l'Indépendance, is a bit noisy but clean. For a warm shower ask the guy at reception to turn on the gas heater.

Hôtel Amaïdra (☎ 77 470 750; fax 77 477 397; 232 ave 7 Novembre; s/d TD25/50; 🍷) With its exuberant

CHAMBI NATIONAL PARK

About 15km west of Kasserine – that is, about halfway to the Algerian border – is Tunisia's highest mountain, **Jebel Chambi** (1544m), which is often snow-capped between December and March. The extreme weather doesn't seem to bother the Phoenician juniper, Aleppo pines or Holm oaks that flourish above 1000m, or the park's rich wildlife, which includes plentiful wild boars, endangered mountain gazelles (Cuvier's gazelles), striped hyenas, foxes, Barbary partridges and the recently reintroduced Barbary sheep. Hares and other small rodents have to keep a sharp eye out for peregrine falcons, Egyptian vultures, Bonelli's eagles and Eurasian sparrowhawks.

A biosphere reserve since 1977, the **Parc National du Djebel Chambi** (as the park is known in French) has seen a regeneration of plant life since it received protected status.

A rough track, suitable for 4WD vehicles, takes you up the mountain to 1300m. From there a trail leads to the summit (two hours), where you'll find a metal crescent erected by Tunisian boy scouts shortly after independence.

but awkward neo-Andalusian façade, this 30-room, two-star establishment – named after the ruins at Haidra – has 30 spacious but tastelessly furnished rooms with all-tile bathrooms. Opened in 2001, the building already feels several decades old. It's situated about six long blocks due west of place de l'Indépendance (ave 7 Novembre is four blocks north of ave Habib Bourguiba).

Hôtel Cillium (☎ /fax 77 474 682; s/d TD30/40; 🍷) Situated 4km west of place de l'Indépendance near the Cillium ruins (just off the road to Le Kef), this completely round hotel – which for some reason lacks a sign – has spacious, trapezium-shaped rooms arrayed around a central atrium. Virtually unchanged (though kept in pristine condition) since it was built in 1963, it's a classic of its architectural genre. It's easy to imagine jet-set French tourists in period bathing suits lounging around the long-disused pool, meticulously tiled in blue, and sliding down the now crumbling wooden slide.

Eating

Along the east side of place de l'Indépendance there are several **basic restaurants** with chickens roasting out front. The **pâtisserie** in the southeast corner of place de l'Indépendance sells – for breakfast – semolina porridge with halvah and crushed pistachios (TD1).

Pizzeria al-Amir al-Saghir (☎ 98 276 927, 20 236 999; ave Habib Bourguiba; pizzas TD2.8-5; 🍷 6am-midnight) Hugely popular with local young people who can afford it, this modern, international-style establishment, outfitted with red banquettes and a Starbucks-like café area, is named after Le Petit Prince, AKA the Little Prince. Food options in-

clude hamburgers (TD1.5 to TD2), crepes (TD0.8 to TD1.8) and *paninis* (TD1.5 to TD1.8). It's situated 300m west of place de l'Indépendance in the Complexe Commercial building.

The outdoor food market is a few hundred metres east of place de l'Indépendance, just off the main road.

Getting There & Away

The bus and louage stations are on the eastern outskirts of town (towards Sbeitla) about 1.5km from place de l'Indépendance.

SNTRI buses to Tunis (TD12.9, five hours, seven daily) pass by El-Fahs, near Thurburo Majus.

The Société Régionale de Transport de Kasserine (SRTK) has services to Gabès (TD10.2, twice daily), Gafsa (TD4.5, five daily), Haidra (TD3.6, 2¼ hours, twice daily at 6.45am and 9.30am; last bus back at 3.30pm), Kairouan (TD6.6, three daily), Le Kef (TD5.6, two hours, five daily), Sbeitla, Sfax (TD8.2, four daily), Soussse (TD8.8, twice daily) and Thala (TD2.3, 1¼ hours, four daily).

Red louages go to Gafsa (TD5.8), Le Kef (TD6.6), Kairouan (TD6.5), Sfax, Soussse (TD10) and Tunis (TD13.5, four hours). To get to Gabès you'll probably have to change at Gafsa. Blue louages go to Sbeitla (TD1.7) and Thala; the latter is linked by louage with Haidra and, via Tajerouine, with Kalaat es-Senan (Jugurtha's Table).

Passenger trains link Kalaat Khasba, 65km north of Kasserine, with Tunis (TD10, five hours; departures in both directions are at around 6am and in the early afternoon).

THE BATTLE OF KASSERINE PASS

In February 1943, the hills northwest of Kasserine, towards the Algerian town of Tébessa, were the site of WWII's first major confrontation between American and German ground forces.

In the Battle of Kasserine Pass, German Afrika Korps units – commanded, in part, by Field Marshal Erwin Rommel – tried to block the advance of the US Army's II Corps, which was moving eastward from Algeria into Nazi-occupied Tunisia. The inexperienced American forces suffered heavy casualties and were pushed back some 80km but American commanders quickly learned from their mistakes and implemented wide-ranging structural and strategic reforms. In the meantime, British forces advanced westward from Libya, setting the stage for the fall of Tunis – and the end of Axis power in North Africa – three months later.

The opening scene of the Academy Award-winning film *Patton* (1970) takes place immediately after the Battle of Kasserine Pass. More recently, a variety of computer games based on the battle have appeared.

To find original maps and sketches of the battle published by the US Army's Center of Military History, go to www.army.mil and search for 'Kasserine maps'.

ESPARTO GRASS

Never heard of it? That's hardly surprising – this tenacious, grey-green grass, one of the few plants that thrives in the harsh conditions of the Tunisian interior, hardly calls attention to itself. Wiry and narrow-bladed, *Stipa tenacissima* – as it's known, quite accurately, in Latin – grows to a height of about 1m in dense clumps topped by graceful, feathered seed heads. It's a popular water-saving garden plant in some parts of the world.

In ancient times, esparto was gathered and woven into a variety of household items, including mats, baskets and sandals. It was even strong and flexible enough to make ropes, animal harnesses and saddlebags.

These days, skilled artisans still make esparto into decorative baskets but commercially the tough, stiff leaves are exploited primarily for the production of high-quality book paper. Large areas of the countryside around Kasserine and Sbeitla are devoted to its cultivation, and you'll often see rows of women working their way across fields of esparto armed with small sickles.

In the past, raw esparto fibre was exported to places like Edinburgh for processing into paper. These days, though, the cut grass – 43,000 tonnes of which were produced in Tunisia in 2004 – is bailed and trucked to a huge paper factory in Kasserine.

A local bus from the bus and louage station into Kasserine costs TD0.3.

SBEITLA (SUFETULA)

pop 7500

Out in the middle of nowhere on the plains 107km southwest of Kairouan and 38km east of Kasserine, Sbeitla is home to the evocative ancient town of Sufetula, famous for its remarkably preserved Roman temples.

The drab modern town has very little going for it except for one really first-rate budget hotel.

History

Roman Sufetula, established at the beginning of the 1st century AD on the site of a Numidian settlement, seems to have followed an evolutionary path similar to that of other Roman towns in the region, such as Ammædara (Haidra) and Mactaris (Makthar).

The surrounding countryside proved ideal for olive growing (it still is) and Sufetula quickly waxed wealthy, building its finest temples in the 2nd century, when the town – like all of Roman Tunisia – was at the height of its prosperity. Fortuitously, its olive groves ensured that Sufetula continued to prosper long after other Roman towns slipped into decline, helping it to become an important Christian centre in the 4th century.

The Byzantines made Sufetula their regional capital, transforming it into a military stronghold from where they could

tackle the area's rebellious local tribes. It was here in AD 647 that Prefect Gregory declared himself independent of Constantinople. However, his moment of glory lasted only a few months before he was killed by the Arabs, who simultaneously destroyed much of Sufetula. The Arab victory is celebrated with the **Festival of the Seven Abdullahs**, held in the last week of July.

Orientation & Information

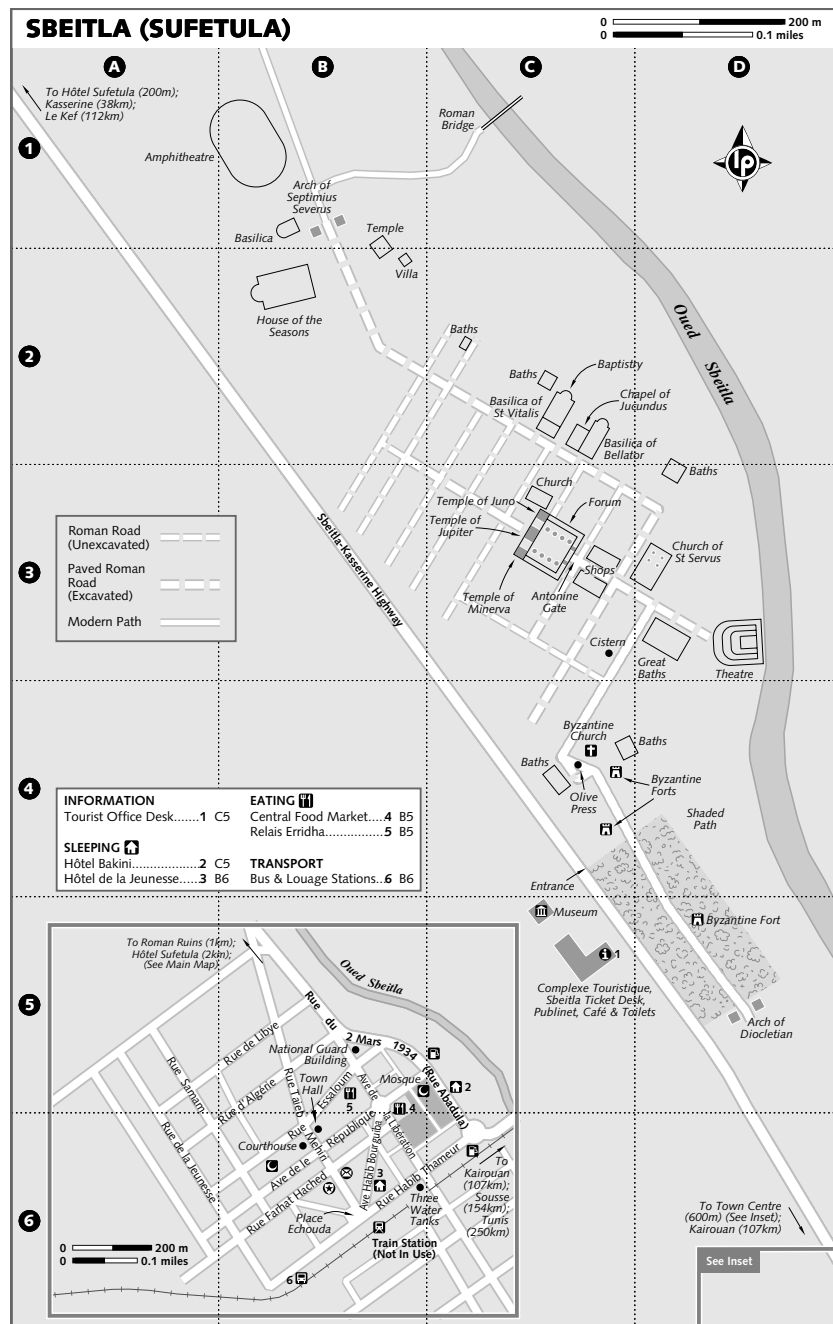
The Sufetula ruins are about 1km north (towards Kasserine) from the modern town, whose French street grid is almost as regular as Sufetula's Roman one. The main street is northwest-southeast-oriented *ave de la Libération*.

The entrance to the archaeological site is across the road from the museum and the new **Complexe Touristique**, which houses the **tourist office desk** (☎ 77 466 506; 🕒 approximately 8am-noon & 3-6pm, no midday closure in summer), a café and Publinet centre for internet access.

Sufetula

The **ruins** (☎ 77 465 813; admission TD2.1, plus camera TD1; 🕒 7am-7pm Apr-mid-Sep, 8am-5.30pm mid-Sep-Mar) are especially spectacular early in the morning, when the temples glow orange.

The **museum** (🕒 Tue-Sun), across the road from the site, has some fine mosaics and a statue of Bacchus reclining on a panther, discovered at the theatre.



TEMPLES

The celebrated **temples** – Sufetula's standout highlight – tower over the surrounding ruins. The wall around them was built by the Byzantines in the 6th century AD.

The entrance to the complex is through the magnificent triple-arched **Antonine Gate**, built in AD 139 and dedicated to the emperor Antoninus Pius and his adopted sons Marcus Aurelius and Lucius Verus. It opens onto a large paved **forum** flanked by two rows of chopped-off columns that lead up to the three 2nd-century temples, each dedicated to one of the main gods of the Roman pantheon. The **Temple of Jupiter**, in the centre, is flanked by slightly smaller temples to his sister deities Juno and Minerva. The ensemble gives a palpable sense of what the centre of a Roman city looked and felt like.

GREAT BATHS

The ruins of these extensive baths, to the southeast of the temples, are remarkable mainly for their complex under-floor heating system in the hot rooms, easily discernible now that the floors themselves have collapsed.

THEATRE

The ancient theatre, just east of the Great Baths, has a prime position overlooking Oued Sbeitla. Built in the 3rd century AD, not much remains except for the orchestra pit and a few scattered columns but it's worth visiting for the views along the Oued Sbeitla, which is particularly picturesque in spring.

CHURCHES

Just north of the Great Baths, four precarious-looking pillars of stone are all that's left of the **Church of St Servus**, built in the 4th century AD on the foundations of an unidentified pre-Roman temple.

The **Basilica of Bellator** is the first of a row of ruined churches about 100m north of the temples on the main path leading northwest towards the Arch of Septimius Severus. It was built at the beginning of the 4th century AD on the foundations of an unidentified pre-Roman temple.

The adjacent **Basilica of St Vitalis** was built in the 6th century AD as a bigger and grander replacement for the Basilica

of Bellator. The basilica itself doesn't amount to much now but hidden around the site, below ground level, are three superb mosaic **baptismal fonts**. The first one, surrounded by a fence, is adorned at the bottom with a fine fish-themed mosaic, while the second baptismal font, surrounded by stone walls and two sections of metal fence, has an intricate floral mosaic in brilliant reds and greens. A third, near four full-height columns, is all white.

OTHER SITES

The path running northwest from the churches crosses a neat grid of unexcavated streets before arriving at the meagre remains of the **Arch of Septimius Severus**. To the west, before you reach the arch, are the remains of the **House of the Seasons**, named for a mosaic now in the Bardo Museum.

A rough path continues north from the arch, past the ruins of a small basilica, to the site of the town's **amphitheatre**, which has yet to be excavated and is so overgrown that you have to look hard to find the outline. Another path leads east from the arch down to a restored **Roman bridge** over Oued Sbeitla.

At the far southern tip of the excavations stands the superbly preserved **Arch of Diocletian**, with its 7½ columns. The lovely grassy **gardens** between the arch and the tree-shaded pathway just inside the site entrance are perfect for a picnic.

Sleeping

Hôtel de la Jeunesse (☎ 77 466 528; ave Habib Bourguiba; s/d with washbasin TD10/18, d with toilet & shower TD30) This brightly painted, family-run establishment, lovingly maintained and absolutely spotless, is the best deal in town – and, indeed, is one of the best budget accommodation deals anywhere in Tunisia. The 12 smallish rooms are off a delightful, North African-style central courtyard, home to a tortoise.

Hôtel Bakini (☎ 77 465 244; fax 77 465 048; rue du 2 Mars 1934; s/d TD35/50; 🍷) The only thing this ostensibly two-star place has going for it is the air-con – otherwise it's pretty grim, with an out-of-order pool and 39 utterly uninspiring rooms.

Hôtel Sufetula (☎ 77 465 311; fax 77 465 582; s/d TD64/92; 🍷 🍷) Overlooking Sufetula's sprawling ruins from a hillock 2km north

of the town centre (towards Kasserine), this extremely comfortable, pleasingly modern, three-star hotel has spotless rooms with balconies.

Eating

Fruits and vegies are sold at the **central food market** (cnr ave de la Libération & rue de la République). There are several cafés along ave de la Libération.

Relais Erridha (☎ 77 467 500; rue Essaloum; mains TD3-6; 🍷 7am-midnight) Opened in 2006, this sparkling, spotless restaurant has cheerful blue-and-white tiling – in fact, it has cheer-

ful blue-and-white everything. It serves meat and fish mains, sandwiches and several kinds of cake.

Getting There & Away

Buses and louages leave from a lot on the southern edge of town, off rue Habib Thameur. Bus destinations include Le Kef (TD7, four daily), Kairouan (TD6, 1½ hours, two daily), Kasserine (25 minutes, frequent) and Tunis (TD12, four hours, four daily). Frequent louages go to Kairouan (TD6), Kasserine (TD1.7, 25 minutes), Sousse (TD9) and Tunis (TD12).

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