

Northeast Algeria

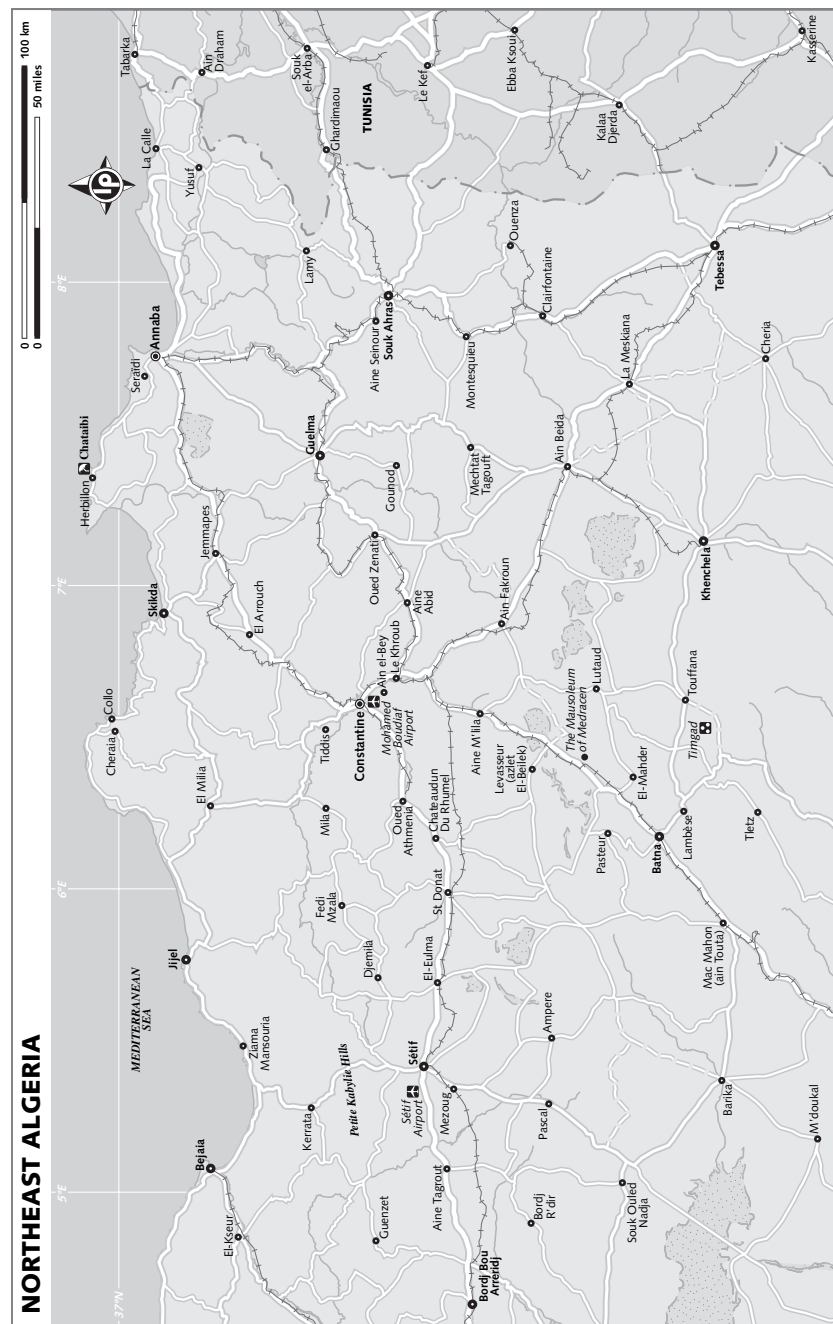
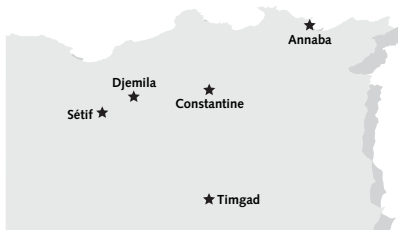


East of Algiers, beyond the soaring hills of the Haute Kabylie, lies a region rich in natural beauty and stirring history. The rugged coast of pine-clad hills and headlands hides a succession of natural harbours and, by Mediterranean terms, unspoiled beaches. Towards the Tunisian border the landscape levels out as meandering rivers irrigate a rolling countryside of rich farmland. It was this combination of good anchorage, reliable water supplies and fertile land, which drew the succession of peoples who shaped the northeast – first Berbers, then Phoenicians, Numidians, Romans, Vandals, Byzantines, Arabs, Spaniards, Ottoman Turks and French. The traces they left behind – especially the Numidian and Roman remains, as at **Timgad** and **Djemila** – are the region's big draw.

The northeast is graced with some of Algeria's most interesting towns and cities and some striking landscapes. Constantine, perched high above a river gorge and reached by vertiginous bridges, should not be missed. The coastline around Annaba is one of the highlights, a rugged line of plunging wood-clad hills and hidden coves of fine sand and clear water. In all these places, as in **Sétif**, **Guelma** and elsewhere in the northeast, tourism outside the summer rush of returning Algerian expats is a low-key affair – you may have hotels, restaurants and sites to yourself. Until tourism picks up, one of the features of the region, particularly of the towns, will be a sense of abandonment, of financial hardship and broken dreams, glimpsed in the faces of people who walk the streets or sit in cafés and on benches, apparently with nowhere better to go and nothing much to do.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Hang over the edge of Constantine's vertiginous **Mellah Slimane Bridge** (p119), before strolling around the atmospheric old city
- Take in the ancient town of **Djemila** (p132), as close as you can get to stepping back in time
- Walk in St Augustine's footsteps at **Hippo Regius** (p113) before cooling off under the elegant colonial arcades of **Annaba** (p110)
- Admire the **Aïn Fouara** (p131) and the incongruity of this statue of a naked French woman gracing a fountain near the central mosque of Sétif
- Line up with the legionnaires who founded **Timgad** (p126), a perfect example of Roman town planning with its carefully planned grids and many baths



WARNING: SAFETY IN THE NORTHEAST

Northeast Algeria has seen continued violence over the past few years, even as the rest of the country has remained quiet. There are both historical and social reasons for this, and the aftermath of the 2003 earthquake – when the government dragged its feet over providing relief, especially to the militant town of Boumerdes – has not helped. Many foreign governments continue to advise against travelling through parts of the northeast, especially the Haute Kabylie, the recommendation being to fly into Sétif, Annaba or one of the other regional centres if possible. While this may seem extreme, especially when the situation is calm, there is clearly a continuing risk to foreigners travelling in remoter parts of the region as well as in some towns; police were attacked in Tebessa in 2006 and Skikda in early 2007, and four bombs were exploded in Tizi Ouzou in February 2007.

ANNABA عنابة

☎ 038 / pop 352,000

Annaba's excellent natural port and its proximity to fresh water and some very fertile farmland drew the Phoenicians here in the first place and have ensured the city's continuing prosperity. Today, its port handles the majority of the country's considerable mineral exports. But alongside business, Annaba has preserved its sense of history and culture. The city where St Augustine chose to live out his last years, known variously over the centuries as Hippo Regius, Hippone, Annabe, Bône and now Annaba, has a reputation for being a quiet haven, in spite of the fact that in 1992 President Mohamed Boudiaf, recently returned from 28 years in exile to head a reconciliation government, was assassinated here. Annaba saw little of the violence that scarred other cities during the 'black years' of the 1990s and many families moved here from Algiers and the west.

The port, the steel mills and tourism, centred around the stunning remains of nearby Hippo Regius and, in the summer, the beaches, provide the majority of work opportunities. Annaba is Algeria's fourth largest city, with a sizeable university. Ringed by hills, close to some good

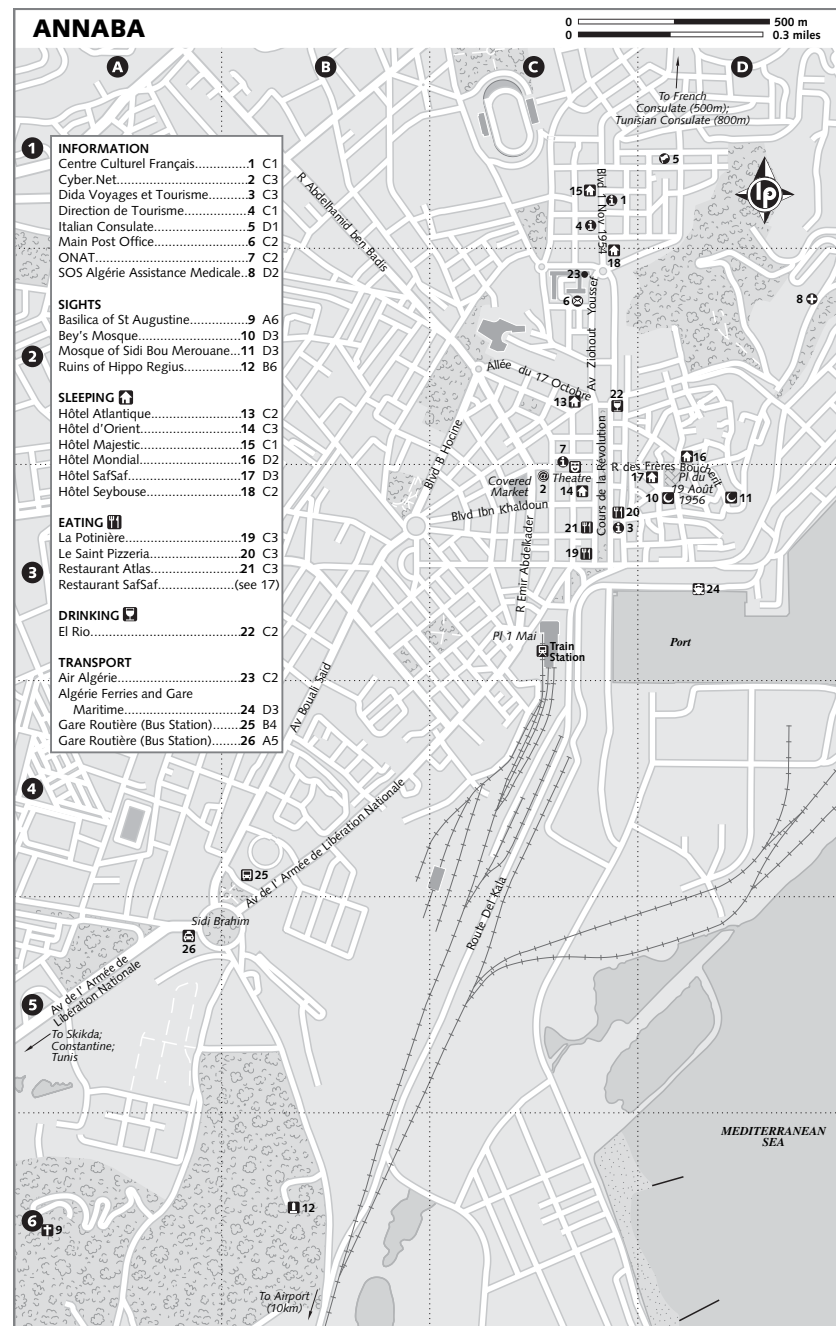
beaches and with an elegant colonial-period centre, the city makes an excellent start or end point for a tour of the northeast.

History

The Phoenicians settled beside the natural port some 3000 years ago, connecting this part of the country with Carthage (in today's Tunisia) and a string of trading colonies that stretched across the Mediterranean. Since then Numidians, Romans and Vandals, Byzantines and Arabs, Ottomans and French have all fallen for the site, with its natural defences and ready supply of food and fresh water.

The original settlement, Hippo Regius, later known as Hippone, lies a mile south of the present city: in antiquity, there was more of an inlet, since filled in by silt from the Seybouse River. The Numidians developed the settlement, but Hippo Regius flourished most under the Romans, becoming a municipality under Augustus and then elevated to a colony under Hadrian. Its wealth then, as now, rested on its port – Hippo Regius shipped wheat that fed Rome. But of the ancient settlement's many stories, the most poignant is that of St Augustine. Christianity first appeared here in the mid-3rd century – Bishop Theogenes was martyred in 259 – but Augustine was not baptised into Christianity until he was 33. Four years later, in 391, the Christians of Hippo Regius chose him as their priest, and he was soon elevated to bishop. Under Augustine, and particularly after Rome fell to the Visigoths in 410, the city became one of the key centres of Christianity. Shortly after Augustine's death in 430, Hippo Regius fell to the Vandals and began a rapid slide into obscurity.

The settlement was moved to its present site – presumably to escape flooding – in the 11th century and in the 16th century was given its present name by the pirate Kheireddin Barbarossa. When he took the town in the 1520s, he is said to have noticed the abundance of jujube trees, called Annabe in Arabic. Ottoman rule did little to advance the town, when it became subject to Constantine. But after the French invasion of 1832, Annaba – renamed Bône – was developed into a modern city and major port. British and American forces used it as a base during WWII, which led to it being heavily bombed from 1942 to 1943.



Orientation

The modern city revolves around the Cours de la Révolution, a large open space, covered in trees and lined with grand buildings, leading down to the port. The colonial city has seen much development since independence, and has spread north, west and south of here, while due east of the Cours lies the older Ottoman town. The remains of ancient Hippone and the Basilica of St Augustine lie just over 1.5km southwest of the Cours.

Information

CULTURAL CENTRES

Centre Culturel Français (☎ 038 864540; www.ccf-annaba.com; 8 blvd 1 Nov 1954; ☎ 9.30am-5.30pm Sun-Thu) Has a library and theatre, and shows regular films.

EMERGENCY

Police (☎ 17 or 038 546664)

SOS Algérie Assistance Médicale (☎ 038 860858; 3 Chemin des Caroubiers)

FOREIGN CONSULATES

France (☎ 038 860583; rue Sebti Ghouta)

Italy (☎ 038 868080; 8 rue Khaya Mohamed Tahar)

Tunisia (☎ 038 864568; av du 28 janvier 1957)

INTERNET ACCESS

There is no shortage of places all around the centre, but if you can't see one, head for the small square behind the theatre. **Cyber .Net** (☎ 038 805325; 23 rue Emir Abdelkader; per hr DA60) has the fastest connection.

MONEY

Several banks along the Cours de la Révolution and in the new town will change money and a few, including the **Crédit Populaire Algérie** (No 7) have ATMs, as does the main post office (though none that accepted European cards at the time of our visit). Hotels Seybouse (p114) and Majestic (p114) will change foreign currency, but the best rates are to be had in the street around the covered market.

POST

Main post office (1 av Zighout Youcef)

TOURIST INFORMATION

The Syndicat d'Initiative was not open at the time of our visit, but the **Direction de Tourisme** (☎ 038 863013; 9 blvd 1 Nov 1954) may be able to help.

TRAVEL AGENCIES

Of the many travel agencies in town, the following offer a booking service for shipping (Algérie Ferries, SNCM) and flights (Air Algérie, Aigle Azur).

Dida Voyages et Tourisme (☎ 038 866666; www.dida-voyages.com; 3 Cours de la Révolution)

ONAT (☎ 038 865891/865886; 1 rue Tarek Ibn Ziad)

Dangers & Annoyances

Like any port and like any city with work shortages, you should take extra care of your valuables, carry only the necessary on you and be wise about where you walk. Be particularly careful in the area around the market and the casbah in the daytime, and everywhere at night.

Sights

CITY CENTRE

Bône la Coquette (the Elegant) they used to call it, and the centre of town has retained some of its charms, if a little jaded. The **Cours de la Révolution** was the centrepiece of the French city and remains the bustling heart today. A long, broad street, its lanes separated by a broad, tree-shaded esplanade, it also boasts the city's most elaborate architecture, where, with buildings such as the Amphorae and the Lion & Caryatid, colonial architects vied to outdo each other in the extravagance of their façades. In the middle, palms and giant fig trees provide shade for a number of popular outdoor cafés, where the city's elderly and idle while away the day. Here too is the Hôtel d'Orient (p114), the theatre and town hall.

Rue des Frères Boucherit leads off the Cours, to the place du 19 Aout 1956, the centrepoint of the old town, some of it dating back to the 16th century, when the pirate Kheireddin Barbarossa claimed Annaba for the Ottoman sultan. The streets here are more narrow and the houses less elaborate. There is a small second-hand and food market in the square most days. The **Bey's Mosque**, built soon after Barbarossa had taken the town, looks over the square and is the largest in this part of town. More interesting is the **Mosque of Sidi Bou Merouane**, 250m away, reached via a steep climb up the street. Named after an 11th-century holy man, the mosque is smaller than the Bey's but built using columns and stones from Hippo.

THE CHURCH FATHER

St Augustine was born to a pagan father and Christian mother (later canonised as St Monica) in Tagaste, now Souk Ahras, on 13 November 354. Nothing about his early life suggested what was to follow. A teenager of exceptional intellect, he went to Carthage to finish his studies like other promising Numidian students. As well as furthering his education, Augustine fell for the temptations of the city, kept a mistress and fathered an illegitimate son before he was 18. He lived during the end of the Roman Empire, taught literature in Tagaste and then Carthage before moving to Rome and then, in 384, to Milan, where he was appointed Professor of Rhetoric at the imperial court, one of the most important intellectual posts in the empire. He was just 30 and had the emperor's full attention. In Milan he was won over to Christianity by Bishop Ambrose (later a saint), who baptised Augustine and his son, Adeodatus, on Easter Saturday in 387. The conversion was the end of his court ambitions: Augustine longed for a quiet retreat where he could pray and read scripture. He settled in the town of his birth in 391, but two years later was on a visit to Hippo Regius when the congregation pressed him into being their priest. In 393 he was elected to the bishopric of Hippo, a position he held, and from which he preached and wrote, until his death. Augustine's contribution to Christianity lies in his works, *Confessions* (397), his autobiography and *De Civitate Dei* (413), a reaffirmation of fundamental Christian values at a time when the church was seen as corrupt and in decline. In May 430 Vandals under Genseric besieged Hippo Regius. Augustine died on 28 August, just before the city fell.

HIPPO REGIUS عناية

The ruins of the ancient city of **Hippo Regius** (adult/child DA20/10; ☎ 8.30am-noon & 1-4.30pm), also known as Hippone, are among the most evocative in Algeria, stretched across a rolling site, full of flowers, rosemary, olive trees, birds and sheep, and overlooked by the imposing, colonial-era Basilica of St Augustine. You enter from what was the seafront, the water having receded several hundred metres over the millennia. There is a good plan of the site by the entrance. It is worth climbing the small hill to the **museum**, before seeing the ruins. The ground floor contains a good collection of sculpture in the Salle des Bustes, including the Emperor Vespasian found in the forum. The star piece of the museum, the unique 2.5m-high Trophy, is a bronze representation of a post on which is hung a cape and military armour. On the wall is a fine mosaic of four Nereids. There are more mosaics across the hall, the most impressive being a 3rd-century hunting scene, in which lion, leopards and antelope are chased into a trap. Another mosaic, of a fishing scene, includes a view of 3rd-century Hippo.

The ruins are spread over a large area. The district near the entrance and 'seafront' was residential and the remains of several villas can be visited, their courtyards marked by columns, some of the walls and

floors still visible. The so-called **Villa of the Labyrinth** and **Villa of the Procurateur** are the most impressive. Here too are the remains of the smaller southern baths.

The path continues to the Christian quarter where the 42m-long outline of the **grand basilica** can still be traced, especially its central apse, which unusually faces north, while its floors are still covered with mosaics. This may well have been the basilica where St Augustine was bishop – the date is right, but there is no other evidence to prove the possibility. A path of massive paving slabs, laid over drains, leads to the market (a central dias reached by three steps and enclosed by four acanthus-capped columns) and then on to the **forum**. It stands 76m by 43m, with some of its 3.6m-high columns still intact. The forum was surrounded by a colonnade, several small shrines, a fountain at the north end and latrines to the south. In the middle stood the ancient capitol and several statues (of which nothing remains), and beyond is an inscription by one of the city's benefactors, C Paccius Africanus, made proconsul in AD 78 by Emperor Vespasian. The great North Baths, beyond the forum, were closed at the time of research.

Towering above the ruins, on its own small hill, the colonial-era **Basilica St Augustine** (☎ 9-11.30am & 2.30-4.30pm Mon-Thu, 11-11.30am & 2.30-4.30pm Fri & Sun, closed Sat) was

intended as a sign of France's revival of past glory. The first stone was laid in 1881, the basilica completed in 1900. Beneath the soaring nave and huge arches, surrounded by Carrara marble, Grenoble stained glass and local onyx, lies a statue of St Augustine, its right arm containing one of the saint's arm bones.

The 1st-century **theatre** of Hippo, with the largest stage of any antique theatre in North Africa, lies at the foot of the hill. The gate separating the ruins from the basilica can only be opened from the side of the antiquities, so if you want to visit both on foot, you will need to start at the ruins and walk up the winding path to the basilica.

Sleeping

Hôtel Mondial (☎ 038 862946; 9 rue des Frères Boucherit; s/d B&B with shower DA750/1200) A hang-over from the groovy 1960s, its bright, simple, spotless rooms all have heating and fan. The halls are lined with photos and plants, the Hertz car-rental sign at reception is now just a souvenir of times past, but the owner is as friendly as ever.

Hôtel Atlantique (☎ 038 862857; 2 rue Bouzbid; s/d B&B DA850/1600) Rooms with shower here are what you would expect at this price, straightforward and functioning, but the cleanliness leaves a lot to be desired. The location is good though.

Hôtel Touring (☎ 038 861449; 3 rue des Volontaires; s/d B&B DA1400/1800; ☺) The calling card says the hotel has been entirely renewed, but, judging by the state of the rooms here, that might have been a while back. The 1930s building is well placed, the reception friendly and the rooms OK, with shower and TV.

Hôtel SafSaf (☎ 038 863435; place 19 Aout 1956; s/tw/d/tr B&B DA1600/2200/2400/2900; ☺) An unexpected find, this modern, midrange hotel on the central square of the old town has been well renovated. It offers comfortable rooms with private bathrooms and a reputedly good restaurant.

Hôtel d'Orient (☎ 038 860364; 13 Cours de la Révolution; s/d B&B DA2500/3000; ☺) The obvious choice for lovers of old hotels, the d'Orient still has some of its colonial splendour, including a piano in the café and plenty of Moorish Orientalist touches. Rooms overlooking the main road can be noisy, but have excellent views.

Hôtel Majestic (☎ 038 865454; www.hotel-lemajestic.com; 11 blvd 1 Nov 1954; s/d/ste B&B DA5000/5800/7800; ☺) A plain exterior disguises this extremely well-run hotel. Opened in 2006 at the end of the Cours de la Révolution, the Majestic has large, soundproof rooms with good bathrooms (and baths), an extremely helpful reception and a panoramic restaurant serving typical Algerian dishes. A free shuttle runs to the airport, though you need to contact the hotel in advance to be met.

Hôtel Seybouse (☎ 038 862093; 1 blvd 1 Nov 1954; s/d B&B DA6000/10000; ☺) The city's only five-star hotel sits right in the centre. It's a 1970s block with smart rooms, a panoramic restaurant, a bar that serves alcohol and, should you feel the need, a disco.

Eating

Le Saint Pizzeria (☎ 037 327715; 9 Cours de la Révolution; mains DA200-300) A popular pizza place right in the centre of things, under the arcades of the Cours. Pick up your pizza and eat under the trees, perfect on a warm evening.

Restaurant SafSaf (☎ 038 863435; place 19 Aout 1956; mains DA300-400) It's hard to fault this simple restaurant, on the 1st floor of Hôtel SafSaf. Clean, air-conditioned and run by a meticulous maître d', it serves simple, well-prepared dishes including lamb shoulder and grilled fish. There is often a good-value lunch menu.

La Potinière (☎ 038 866141; 1 Cours de la Révolution; mains DA400-600) Right at the beginning of the Cours, the Potinière is an Annaba old-timer, serving reliable French-inspired food, a cut above (and a little more expensive) than most of the competition.

Restaurant Atlas (☎ 038 802570; 2 Zenine Larbi; mains DA500-600) A reliable air-conditioned restaurant just off the Cours de la Révolution, it serves grilled steaks and *merguez* (spicy seasoned lamb or goat sausages), calamari rice and fresh fish. It also serves alcohol.

Drinking

Alcohol is hard to find in Annaba outside of the places mentioned above and **El-Rio** (30 Cours de la Révolution), which tends to stay open later than most. If the weather allows, the cafés under the fig trees along the Cours are popular for a tea or ice cream.

Getting There & Away

AIR

Rabah Bitat Airport (☎ 038 520132; www.egsa-constantine.dz) is 12km from the centre and as there is no bus, you'll need to go by taxi (up to DA500). A new terminal building is currently being planned. **Air Algérie** (☎ 038 847333; Rond Point Sidi Brahim ☎ 038 867120; www.airalgerie.dz; Cours de la Révolution) flies to Algiers and Oran, as well as Paris, Lyon, Marseille and Nice (France).

BOAT

Most of the shipping in Annaba's port is industrial, but **Algérie Ferries** (☎ 865557; www.algerieferries.com; Gare Maritime) sails to Marseille (France) and Alicante (Spain).

BUS

The *gare routière* (bus station) is just over 1km from the centre along the av de l'Armée de Libération Nationale at Sidi Brahim, a 20-minute walk or DA100 taxi. Since the buses were nationalised, the upstairs information and booking office has been abandoned and you must ask at the quays for tickets and information. Main services include Algiers (DA700, 10 hours), Sétif (DA350, four to five hours), Constantine (DA150, 1¼ hours) and Guelma (DA70, one hour). For many other destinations, you need to change at Sétif. The Tunis service seems to have been discontinued, though there are still shared taxis.

TAXI

Shared taxis leave from the Sidi Brahim *gare routière*. Destinations include Algiers (DA1200), Sétif (DA500), Constantine (DA250), Biskra (DA600), Tebessa (DA400) and Guelma (DA100).

TRAIN

Annaba's huge mosque-like **station** (☎ 038 863302/855263) with a minaret clock tower is a short walk from the end of the Cours de la Révolution and close to the port. The overnight express to Algiers leaves at 8.20pm (sleeping car 2nd/1st class DA1221/1650, seat DA945; 10 hours). Other destinations include Sidi Amar (DA20) and Souk Ahras (DA95).

Getting Around

Most places you will want to visit in Annaba are within easy walking distance of the

Cours de la Révolution, even the ruins at Hippo Regius. A taxi to Hippo should not cost more than DA150, although you will need to negotiate to be picked up. There is no public transport to the airport. A taxi should cost around DA500.

AROUND ANNABA

Beaches

Annaba's inability to exploit beach tourism has long had Algerians gnashing their teeth. In 1995 the municipality drew up a new plan to develop and promote beach tourism in the area, but progress is ultra slow. However, this doesn't mean the beaches will be empty. The huge Al-Hadjar steel works and other industrial plants on the outskirts of the city mean the nearest beaches are not as pristine as they might be, but if you come in July or August you will find the place packed with holiday-makers and locals cashing in on the accommodation shortage by renting out rooms as B&Bs. The coast west of the city is the place to head for, a series of beautiful coves, where the hills fall right into the sea. The best of them start at **Ras el-Hamra**, also known as Cap de Garde and include La Caroube, Toche and Ain Achir. A lighthouse, built by the French in 1850, marks the *ras* (headland) at El-Hamra. Out of season it's given over to mussel and oyster farmers, lovers in need of privacy and pilgrims coming to pay their respects to Sidi Nour. The cave to the left of his white, barrel-vaulted tomb, known as Beit el-Qaid, is used for religious and family gatherings. The best of the beaches lie between Ras el-Hamra and Chataibi.

SLEEPING & EATING

Hôtel Shams les Bains (☎ 038 882155; rte Cap de Garde; info@shamslesbains.com; ☺ ☺ ☺) Algeria's first private resort isn't as fresh as when it first opened in 1984, but in season it still gets lively with Algerian families. There's a cabaret and disco at night.

Hôtel Mountazah (☎ 038 874118; village of Ser-aidi; ☺ ☺ ☺) Among the hotels the French architect Fernand Pouillon built in Algeria from the 1950s, the Mountazah ranks as one of the most inspired. A white fortress perched on a rock in this hillside village, it has large whitewashed rooms, a restaurant that works well when busy and a curvaceous

pool that overlooks magnificent woods and the sea.

Hôtel Rym el-Djamil (☎ 038 882143; rte Cap de Garde; P) (☎) (☎) There are no budget hotels along this stretch of coast and only one four-star, the Rym, popular in summer with honeymooners. The hotel is above a small, semiprivate beach.

There are few outstanding restaurants along the coast, the exception being **La Caravelle** (☎ 038 822950/805373; rte de la Corniche; mains DA400-1000), an old-timer with plenty of fresh fish. It's reputedly the best of the lot.

GETTING THERE AND AWAY

It's 50km from Annaba to Chataibi. During the day there are a few departures from the *gare routière* at Sidi Brahim towards Ras el-Hamra and then on to Chataibi. A taxi will save time and aggravation (around DA800 to Chataibi).

Guelma قالمة

☎ 037 / pop 110,000

If you are following the story of ancient Algeria and still have an appetite for ruins, then you will want to stop at Guelma. The small agricultural town, 65km southwest of Annaba, 115km northeast of Constantine, sat near the frontier of ancient Numidia and Proconsul Africa. The town's early history is something of an enigma, but it is known that the Roman army was defeated near here by Jugurtha in 109 BC. By the time of Trajan, Guelma (or Calama as it was known) was a Roman municipality and in AD 283 became a colony. St Augustine's biographer Possidius lived here before the Vandal invasion of 437. In 533 the Byzantines retook the town and made it one of their North African strongholds, but with the arrival of the Arabs in the 7th century Guelma sank into obscurity. When the French army arrived in 1836 it was a ruin.

The modern town is a sleepy, provincial place with little to show for its illustrious past. Walking along the main street, blvd 1 Novembre, you would be forgiven for missing it, while finding most of what a traveller needs in the way of banks, hotels, restaurant and taxiphones. The rue 8 May 1945, just beyond the central Hôtel la Couronne, leads to the **Jardin Archéologique**, where columns and statues have been arranged in a garden that was locked at the

KEEPING AN EYE ON YOU

Anthony Sattin

I was followed out of my hotel in Guelma. I had walked around town all the previous day, so I knew it wasn't like parts of Algiers or Oran, where you might be hassled by people with nothing better to do than to see what opportunities a lone foreigner might provide. I didn't have to wait long to find out what this man wanted. He caught up with me on the main street and introduced himself as an agent of the Service for the Protection of Tourists. He didn't offer any ID, but I reckoned it didn't matter. 'Are you here for business, or tourism?' he asked and then wanted to know if I was alone. 'Yes, alone. Is there a problem?' 'No,' he replied, 'no problem, it's just...'. 'Good,' I said lightly, 'for how could there be? People here are so welcoming.' He still seemed to be troubled by the idea of my travelling alone – solo foreigners are still a rare sight – so I asked if he wanted to accompany me to the museum. 'The where?' he responded.

time of our visit. Beyond lies the **theatre and museum** (admission DA20; ☎ 8am-noon & 2pm-4.30pm Sat-Thu). Most of the ancient theatre was quarried over the centuries, so what stands today – a soaring backdrop, an imposing stage and rows of seating – dates back no further than 1902, when the French archaeologist M Joly began the reconstruction. The site is impressive though, as are the statues of Neptune and Aesclepius on stage, and a mosaic of the triumph of Venus in the right-hand side-chamber. But Guelma's most celebrated sculpture is the so-called 'schoolboy of Madaure', supposedly a representation of St Augustine as a child.

If you need to stay in Guelma en route for Constantine, **Hôtel Mermoura** (☎ 037 262626; av Ali Chorfi; s/d/ste DA2750/3300/12000; P) (☎), an uninspiring concrete-block three-star hotel, a 10-minute walk from the *gare routière*, is the best option, with comfortable beds and a helpful reception. The restaurant is lacklustre and better food is to be found in the simple restaurants along and just off blvd 1 Nov, where a meal of soup and chicken couscous will cost up to DA300.

Guelma is easily visited en route between Annaba and Constantine. The *gare routière*

is at the end of the main street and there are regular buses to Annaba (DA40) and Constantine (DA70). Collective taxis run to Constantine (DA200), Annaba (DA100) and as far afield as Algiers (DA1000), Tebessa (DA300) and M'Sila (DA700).

CONSTANTINE قسنطينة

☎ 031 / pop 485,000

Algeria's third city, Constantine, is one of the grand spectacles of the north, made by nature but embellished by man. Over time, the Oued Rhumel carved out a deep gorge around an outcrop of rock, creating a natural fortress that was already occupied in Neolithic times. Since then Constantine (Cirta as it was known in antiquity, Qacentina as it has also been called) has always been a city of political, cultural and economic significance.

The Numidians made it their capital and after Julius Caesar defeated the army of Juba I at Thapsus, it remained the capital of Roman Numidia. The Romans destroyed the city after a rebellion in AD 311, but the Emperor Constantine then gave orders for it to be rebuilt – and renamed, using his name.

The French writer Alexandre Dumas called it 'a fantastic city, something like Gulliver's flying island'. The sense of fantasy has still not left it, for however much building has gone on around, the heart of Constantine remains on that upland shelf, reached by bridges. It is a cosmopolitan place which, over the centuries, has attracted traders, as well as invaders, from around the Mediterranean including Jews from France and Spain, Ottoman Turks, Genoese and others. From the 16th century, after the Turks conquered much of what is now Algeria, Constantine – Qacentina – became an important, independent beylik, and even after the last bey was chased from his palace by the colonising French, the bey continued the struggle from elsewhere in the region until resistance became impossible, for a while. On 8 May 1945 (a date commemorated in street names across the region) it was here, and in neighbouring Sétif and Guelma, that the independence movement started (see the boxed text, May Day p129).

Constantine today has grown far away from its original fortifications – the new

city spreads down across the plain below the old battlements – but it has not lost sight of its origins. There is remarkably little to see, considering how long and interesting a history it boasts, but there is something special about the place, evident in *malouf*, its Arabo-Andalusian music, in its sophisticated embroidery and a dozen other ways that express Constantine's long, proud story.

Information

CULTURAL CENTRES

Centre Cultural Français (☎ 031 912591; www.ccf.constantine.com; 1 blvd de l'Indépendance) As active here as elsewhere in Algeria, with a library, theatre and regular film screenings.

EMERGENCY

Hospital Ibn Badis (☎ 031 944966)
Town hall (☎ 031 922900)

INTERNET ACCESS

Constantine is currently not as well-endowed with internet cafés as other north-east towns, such as Annaba and Sétif, but there are several dotted around the centre, including one with good connection across rue Hamlaoui from the Hôtel Central (p120).

MONEY

There are banks and ATMs on place 1 Novembre, though the bureaux may only take cash and the ATMs may not accept foreign cards. Hôtel Cirta (p121) may change foreign cash. There are usually people willing to change money on place 1 Novembre. You will know them by the wads of cash they will be fluttering.

POST

The main post office is one of the large, white-washed buildings on place 1 Novembre.

TOURIST INFORMATION

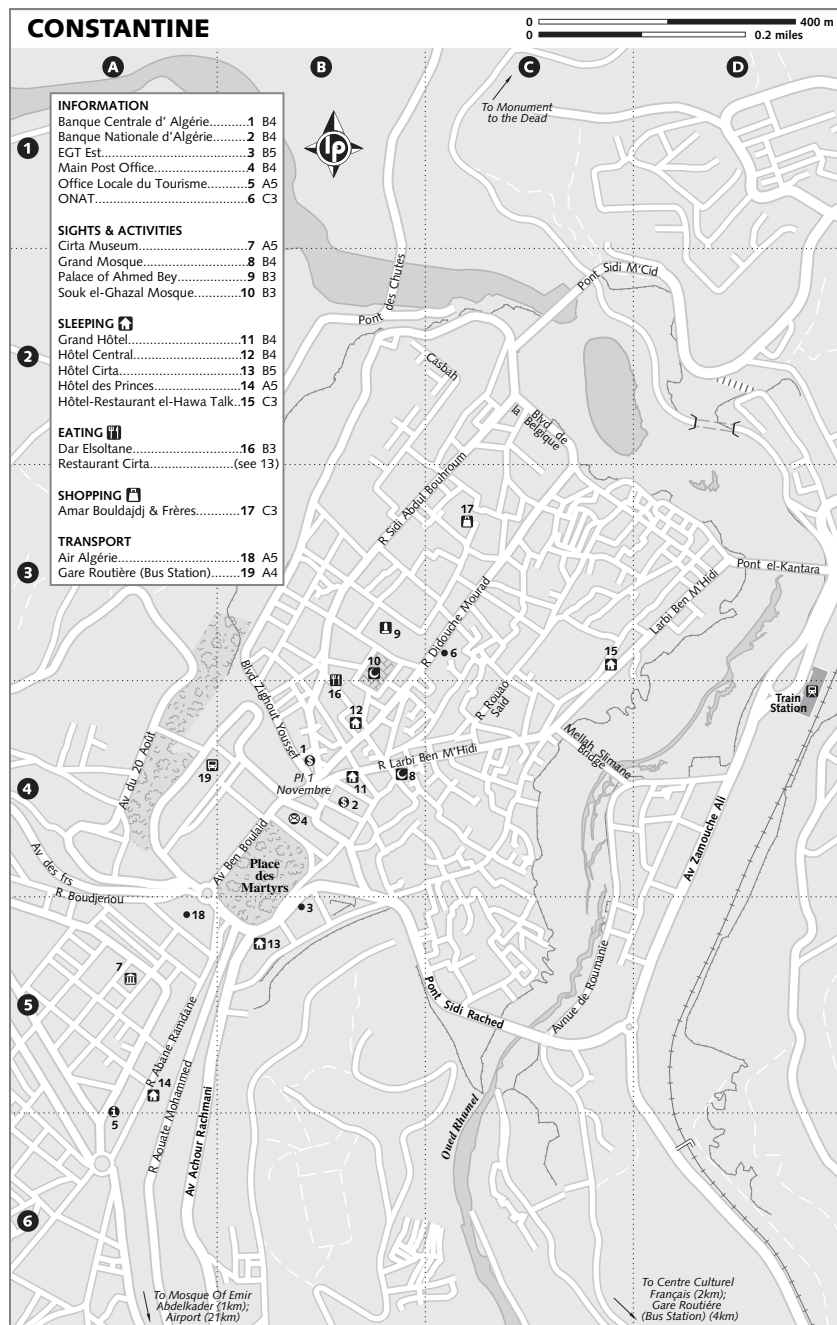
Office Locale du Tourisme (☎ 031 943954/932661; 32 rue Abdane Ramdane)

TRAVEL AGENCIES

EGT Est (☎ 031 929235; Hôtel Cirta)

ONAT (☎ 031 941403; 16 rue Didouche Mourad) One of two branches of the nationwide agency, it can book flights and hotels as well as local tours.

Zénith Voyages (☎ 031 620023; 9 rue Larkab SMK)



Sights

SIDI M'CID BRIDGE

The Sidi M'Cid Bridge (also known as the Suspended Bridge) is Constantine's iconic monument, its image defining the city. It is a 164m-long suspension bridge, opened to traffic in April 1912. The bridge links the casbah to the slopes of Sidi M'Cid hill. Views of town and the gorge 175m below you are stunning and, in spite of movement, the bridge is quite safe; 12 of its cables were replaced in 2000. Unfortunately, in recent years this bridge (and the others around town) have become popular for suicides, as it seems that the majority of Constantine's suicides are people jumping off the bridges.

PALACE OF AHMED BEY

Hajj Ahmed became bey or ruler of Constantine in 1826, and started building his new **palace** (place Si-El Haoues; ☎ officially closed at the time of writing) two years later. Progress was slow, partly due to objections of the more powerful dey of Algiers, but Ahmed finally occupied his new home in 1835. Beyond the high white walls lies one of the finest Ottoman-era buildings in the country. With a series of courtyards surrounded by tiled arcades, it is filled with gardens of olive and orange trees, and decorated with Tunisian and French tiles. Ahmed's enjoyment of this wonderful place was short-lived because two years after he moved in, the French chased him out and turned the palace into their headquarters. After independence the Algerian military moved in. The palace has been closed for more than 25 years but was undergoing significant restoration at the time of research. It's a massive project – there are, for instance, some 250 marble columns, acres of tiles and 45 carved cedarwood doors. A completion date was not announced, but it may be possible to visit by contacting the **Agence Nationale d'Archéologie et de Protection des Monuments et Sites** (☎ 031 946831; 2 rue Sif Med).

MELLAH SLIMANE BRIDGE

Of all the dramatic bridges that cross the Oued Rhumel, none is as exciting to walk across as the Mellah Slimane Bridge, some 100m above the water. Stretching 125m long and a mere 2.5m wide, it joins the train station with the centre of the old town.

Eight years in the making, it was opened in 1925 and is heavily used today, so much so that you will feel it swing and wobble as you cross the centrepont. Steep steps lead up from the bridge to street level on the city side. A **lift** (DA3; ☎ 7am-6pm Sat-Thu, 9am-12.30pm Fri) will save your legs.

CIRTA MUSEUM

The city doesn't have much to show for its illustrious past, but the colonial-period **museum** (☎ 031 923895; www.cirtamuseum.org.dz; Plateau Coudiat; admission DA20; ☎ 8.30am-4pm Sun-Fri) has proof enough. The collection comes from excavations in the city and nearby Tiddis (see p122) and with the displays being something of a jumble, it appears as an old-style 'cabinet of curiosities'. But there are some stunning pieces, the highlights include a seated terracotta figure from a 2nd-century BC tomb and an exquisite marble bust of a woman known as the 'beauty of Djemila'. Also worth seeing is the beautifully cast bronze sculpture of winged 'Victory of Constantine', found by soldiers while excavating the streets of the casbah in 1855. If you are planning a visit to the Roman site at Tiddis (p122), look out for the collection marked *Vie quotidienne à Tiddis* (Daily Life in Tiddis). The museum also houses a small collection of paintings by Algerian and French Orientalists, including a study of a horse by the French 19th-century romantic Eugène Fromentin.

SOUK EL-GHAZAL MOSQUE

The Souk el-Ghazal Mosque is closed to non-Muslims, but is worth a look on your way to the Bey's palace. Built in 1730 by Abbas ben Alloul Djelloul, a Moroccan, on the orders of the then Bey of Constantine, Hussein Bou Kemia, it reuses Roman-period granite columns. After the French defeated the Bey and took control of the city, the mosque was enlarged, realigned and converted into the cathedral, Notre-Dame-des-Sept-Douleurs in 1838. It was turned back into a mosque after independence.

OTHER MOSQUES

Constantine is graced with several other beautiful mosques, but these, as all others, are only open to Muslims. The oldest, and one of the most visible, is the **Grand Mosque** (rue Larbi ben M'Hidi). Built in the 13th century on

the site of a pagan temple, it was intended, as the Friday mosque, to hold most of the city's population. Although it has been rebuilt over the centuries and has a modern façade, the interior has retained some of its original features, including some pillars and Corinthian capitals brought from Hippo Regius. The city's most prominent monument – you will see its twin 107m high minarets as you approach the centre – is the **Mosque of Emir Abdelkader**. The project started in 1968 as a desire to build a mosque capable of accommodating 10,000 in its prayer hall, but when the then president Houari Boumediène became involved, it grew into the current, ambitious building: one of the world's largest mosques and Algeria's first modern Islamic university.

MONUMENT TO THE DEAD

Just beyond the Sidi M'Cid Bridge, on a hill of the same name, stands the Monument to the Dead. It was built specifically for the people of Constantine, from Alfred Abdilla to Jacob Zitoun who died 'Pro Patria', the country being France, not Algeria. The monument is a copy of the arch of Trajan at Timgad (p128). The statue of winged Victory that tops the monument is an enlarged replica of the bronze sculpture in the Cirta Museum (p119).

Walking Tour

With its winding streets, sloping alleys, sudden staircases and dramatic views, central Constantine is perfect for walking. You could rush around the main sights in, say, half a day, and think that you've been there and done that, but you definitely would have missed something important: the essence of the place. This isn't something found in any one sight, instead it is something to be absorbed, glimpsed perhaps in a doorway or up an alley, as you walk about the centre. This tour will take you past most of the main sights and past places with stunning views of the city and gorge.

Begin at the **Cirta Museum** (1; p119), a good place to start, as it gives a comprehensive overview of the hidden history of the city, from prehistoric to the Islamic period. Take the steps down opposite the entrance and, at the bottom, veer left, then turn right onto rue Boudjenou passing the Hanatchi Bookshop on your right and coming into the

place des Martyrs (2). With the white bulk of **Hôtel Cirta** (3; opposite) on your right, continue to place 1 Novembre. Several streets lead out of the north side of the square: take the one straight ahead, rue Didouche Mourad, beside Café el-Andalous. A little way down, steps on your left lead past the **Souk el-Ghazal Mosque** (4; p119) to the small square (currently an unofficial car park) in front of the **Palace of Ahmed Bey** (5; p119). The Café de la Place is a good place for refreshments. Take the small road beside the café and turn right, beside the Banque Extérieure Algérie, and continue up rue Sidi Abdul Bouhroum.

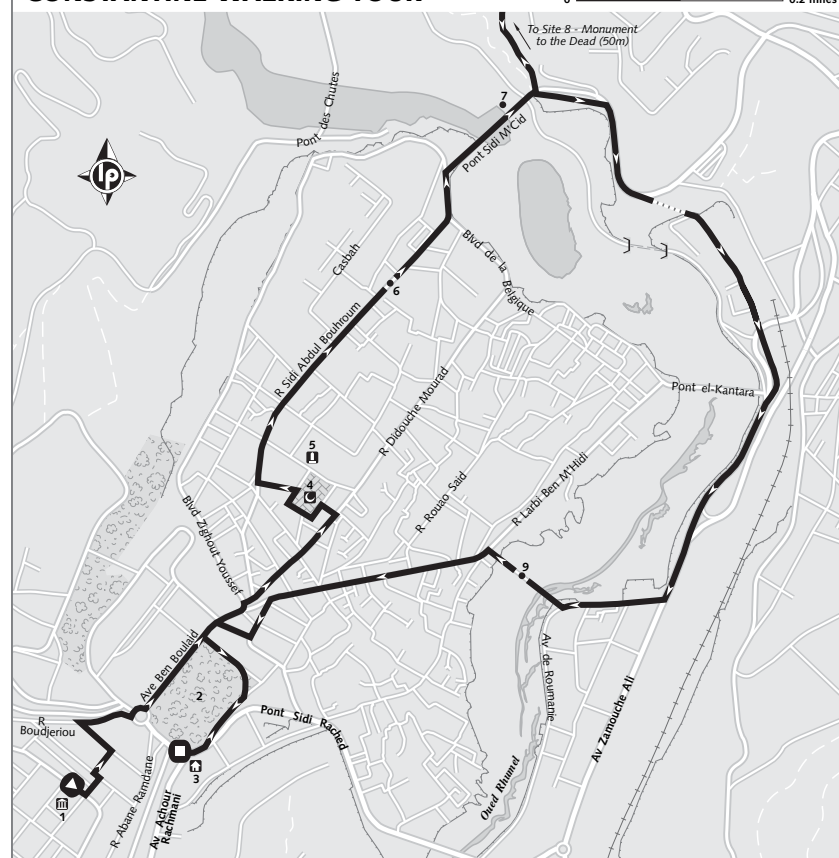
At the top of the hill, opposite the lively Café des Chasseurs and a good embroidery shop, is the 1848 **Porte de la Casbah** (6), the French-built gate to the fort, now (as always) off-limits to civilians. The road continues down to the spectacular **Sidi M'Cid Bridge** (7; p119). Cross the bridge and take the path on the left, from where there are stunning views of the casbah, gorge and city. Continue to the triumphal **Monument to the Dead** (8; left), with more big views over the plains, and then return to the bridge and follow the road left, beneath the huge, domed, colonial-era hospital. Look out on the right for steps, which lead steeply down into the gorge and end up at an elegant, tiled villa. Turn right, over the railway lines, and staying on the east side of the gorge, follow the busy road past the train station and the statue of Constantine. On your right you will see the old city, up on the hill, and the pedestrian-only **Mellah Slimane Bridge** (9; p119). Cross the bridge (if you don't have a head for heights, you'll want to stay close to the rail) and then take the lift (if it is working) to the street below, the rue Larbi ben M'Hidi. Turn left, past the Grand Mosque, and return to the place des Martyrs and the Hôtel Cirta, perfect for a drink or meal.

Sleeping

Hôtel Central (☎ 031 641321; 19 rue Hamlaoui; s/d with DA450/600) Rooms are basic but it lives up to its name, though it is on an alley that some will find seedy. No breakfast is available but the Café el-Andalous is around the corner.

Grand Hôtel (☎ 031 642201; 2 rue Larbi ben M'Hidi; s/d B&B 615/930) Grand by name but not by nature, this basic hotel, in a colonial-era building just off the central place 1 Novembre,

CONSTANTINE WALKING TOUR



WALK FACTS

Start Cirta Museum
Finish Hôtel Cirta
Distance 3km
Duration Two to three hours

has plenty of character and is clean and warm. It doesn't have showers though, and you'll need to cross the road to the passage marked Café des 2 Arcades for that.

Hôtel des Princes (☎ 031 912625; 29 rue Abdane Ramdane; s/d/tr B&B DA1000/1500/4100; ☎) On the arcaded street that runs down to the main square, the family-run Hôtel des Princes has the city's most elegant reception

and a range of rooms and prices. All rooms are extremely comfortable, equipped with good beds, shower (some with bath) and fridge. Rooms on the street (and mosque) side can be noisy, but that's a small price to pay for quality at this price.

Hôtel-Restaurant el-Hawa Talk (☎ 031 940480; 88 rue Larbi ben M'hidi; s/d/tr B&B with shower DA1130/1330/1740) Another budget place on this busy street, but this one's further down the hill, past the mosque and the lift down to the Mellah Slimane Bridge. Rooms are adequate but not always very clean.

Hôtel Cirta (☎ 031 921980; 1 av Rahmani Achour; s DA4300-5600, d DA5200-6000, tr/ste DA5600/8900; ☎) Not the city's finest but certainly its most atmospheric, the three-star Cirta

is a throwback to colonial days. It's a huge white Moorish building that looms over place des Martyrs.

Eating

For a city of such sophistication, Constantine has a disappointing selection of restaurants, most of them being little more than fast-food joints. The notable exceptions are the following:

Dar Elsolatane (☎ 031 642256; 23 rue Hamlaoui; mains DA300-600) Up a staircase in a narrow alley, the 'Sultan's House' is a lot more reputable than its entrance suggests. It's still nothing to write home about – a good restaurant at reasonable prices – but given the dearth of competition this one stands out.

Restaurant Cirta (☎ 031 921980; 1 av Rahmani Achour; mains DA500-950) In the hotel of the same name, this is some of the best food in town. A mix of French and Algerian dishes are served with style in a large Moorish hall, accompanied by a good range of wines.

Shopping

Amar Bouldajdj & Frères (☎ 031 947725; 15 rue 19 Juin 1965) Embroidery is valued throughout Algeria, but perhaps nowhere more than in Constantine. The Bouldajdj brothers have an excellent selection of new embroidered clothes, particularly *mejboudi* (embroidered, sleeveless, velvet gowns), some of which sell for thousands of dinars.

Getting There & Away

AIR

Constantine's **Mohamed Boudiaf Airport** (☎ 031 810101; www.egsa-constantine.dz) is 21km from the centre near the village of Ain el-Bey and as there is no public transport you'll need to go by taxi (up to DA400, depending on the time and your negotiating skills). **Air Algérie** (☎ 031 927070; www.airalgerie.dz; 1 place des Martyrs & 36 rue Abdane Ramdane) flies to Algiers, Ouragla, Oran, Tindouf and Tamanrasset and in France to Paris, Lyon, Nice and Marseille. **Aigle Azur** (☎ office 031 810186, reservations 021 642020) flies to Paris, Lyon and Marseille.

BUS

Constantine has suffered with the privatisation of bus services. There are two *gare routière*. SNTV 17 Juin serves destinations to the east, including Skikda, Souk Ahras

and Annaba. There is also a service to Tunis (DA1600). The larger, eastern SNTV station at Boussouf, several kilometres from the centre on the road towards Sétif, serves Sétif (DA130), Algiers (DA600), Biskra (DA270) and many other destinations. A taxi from the centre will cost DA100.

TAXI

Shared taxis leave from beside the SNTV at Boussouf for Sétif (DA200, two hours), Alger (DA900), Bejaia (DA400), Batna (DA200) and Bou Saada (DA600) among other destinations. You can, in theory, also find a shared taxi going to El-Eulma (DA150), the jumping-off point for Djemila, but in reality you may have to charter a private taxi as there is little demand.

TRAIN

The **train station** (☎ 031 641988/948831), a short walk from the end of the Mellah Slimane Bridge and fronted by a statue of the Emperor Constantine, is really only of use if you want the service to Algiers (6.30am and 11pm) or Annaba (4.45pm).

Getting Around

Central Constantine is best visited on foot. Local buses leave from near the train station, on the east side of the gorge, for both SNTV stations. There is a yellow taxi rank outside Hôtel Cirta, but you can often flag down taxis in the street.

AROUND CONSTANTINE

Tiddis تيديس

Although it in no way compares to the splendour of Djemila (p132), the Roman town of **Tiddis** (adult/child DA20/10; ☎ 8am-4pm) makes a great day trip from Constantine. The guardian will appear at your arrival to sell you a ticket and may want you to pay for guiding services. Drinks and snacks are sometimes available, but you should be sure at least to bring your own water in summer.

There was a settlement on this site from early times, at least since the Neolithic Berbers, but it was the Romans who developed Castellum Tidditanorum, which, as its name suggests, was a *castellum* or fortress, one of a series of fortified villages that surrounded the larger settlement at Constantine (then Cirta) and protected its territory.

Excavations began in 1941 but have not been touched since 1969.

Perhaps it required Roman genius to understand how to develop the site, on the slope of a hill near the gorge of Khreng, carved by the same Oued Rhumel that moulded the landscape around Constantine. The Romans arrived during the age of Augustus, but built much of what can now be seen in the 3rd century AD, adapting their fundamental rule of town planning – two straight central streets that cross at the heart of the community – to the curves of the site. Tiddis had no water sources, so one of the most interesting features of the houses here are the channels and cisterns. They were designed to preserve the rains that fell, on which the community depended during the long, hot summers.

From the car park you are greeted by rock, striking red earth and the remains of several circular tombs, some of which are pre-Roman. The main entrance to the village is a classic Roman arch made of massive stones. You can still see where the gate hung and was locked, even this far out into the countryside. Much of what lies beyond the gate – houses; sanctuaries to the Roman gods Ceres, Vesta and Mithra; a solar god of Persian origin; olive presses; and later Christian baptisteries – are little more than ruins, but there are still fascinating traces to be seen. The cisterns can still be clearly seen on the upper part of the site: three large basins flowing into each other; between them they could hold some 350,000L of water. On the lower side of the site, the large 'Villa of Mosaics' is marked by the pair of columns flanking its entrance, and here you can make out mosaics, the remains of an olive press, and baths that were later used as a pottery. Above the site, but still on the flank of the hill, there is a cave heated by thermals (which is welcome in winter but you might want to avoid it in summer). The summit of the hill is topped with a sanctuary, originally dedicated to old African gods, rededicated by the Romans to their corn god Saturn, appropriate in a place where agriculture was so important.

The turn-off to Tiddis is signposted off to the left, 27km north of Constantine along the Jijel road. The site is another 7km from the sign, along a narrow road, which should be drivable throughout the year. There is no public transport to the site. You could

take a bus or collective taxi from Constantine heading to Jijel, and jump out at the appropriate place, but you are unlikely to find return transport. So if you don't have a vehicle, the surest way is to arrange a private taxi from Constantine. The return trip, including an hour or two at the ruins, is likely to cost around DA1000.

BATNA باتنة

☎ 033 / pop 250,000

It may only be a 100km drive from Constantine, but Batna is a world away. Separated from the coastal northeast by a series of salt flats, Batna is the capital of the Aurès Massif, a continuation of the Moroccan Atlas Mountains. South of the Aurès, the Sahara begins.

There isn't much history here: Batna's beginning was its most significant moment, created by a decree signed by the Emperor Napoleon III on 12 September 1848. The reason for its creation is the reason you might want to visit: it sits at the crossroads of east-west and north-south trade routes and has good transport links, which makes it a useful base for visiting the Roman site at Timgad.

Ville propre, citoyen propre (clean town, clean citizen) is the slogan plastered on billboards around town and it seems to have been a successful campaign in most places, because, at least in its centre, Batna is clean and tidy. Sitting in the middle of a broad valley at 980m above sea level, it also boasts good air, though winters are cold and summers very hot. Batna is going through a massive building boom and the centre is surrounded by a landscape of concrete apartment blocks, among them housing for the more than 30,000 students attending the city's thriving university.

The centre of town is around the junction of the avs de l'Indépendance and de la Révolution.

Information

ONAT (☎ 033 804345; 14 allée ben Boulaid) The state-owned travel agency for tours and plane tickets.

Timgad Voyages (☎ 033 803888; www.timgad-voyages.com; 1 place de la Liberté & the old *gare routière*; ☎ 8.30am-5pm Sat-Wed, 8.30am-3pm Thu) Arranges guided visits to Timgad. Its office in the old *gare routière* may also be able to change money.

Tourist Office (av de l'Indépendance)

Sleeping BUDGET

Hôtels-Salam (☎ 033 556847; 10 av de l'Indépendance; s/d B&B DA500/900) One of several cheap hotels along the avenue, with a black-tile entrance in a white building, the Salam has basic rooms and communal showers.

Hôtel el-Hayat (☎ 033 804601; 18 rue Mohamed Salah Benabbes; s/d B&B DA600/1000) The best of the budgets, in a modern building between the main street and the market, it has rooms with showers and heating.

Hôtel Karim (☎ 033 805181; s/d B&B DA600/1000) Another long-time favourite, the Karim is well kept and has rooms with a choice of shower or bath.

Hôtel el-Mansour (☎ 033 805766; 46 allée ben Boulaïd; s/d/tr B&B DA700/1300/2000) A popular choice up at the top end of the *allée* near av de l'Indépendance, the modern Mansour is well placed for Batna's facilities.

TOP END

Hôtel Chelia (☎ 033 865334; 2 allée ben Boulaïd; s/d/ste B&B DA4200/5100/8000; 📞 📺 📺) It could just be another classic concrete box of past decades, but the four-star Chelia offers a friendly welcome, large well-equipped rooms and a reasonable restaurant. It is also the only top-end hotel in town. Reception can arrange transport for Timgad.

Eating

There doesn't seem to be much call for gastronomy in Batna, but there are a few places where you can eat simply and well. Several places serve good grills and rotisserie chicken along allée ben Boulaïd and around the central market, at the end of rue Mohamed Salah Benabbes.

Pizza Mango Pulp (75 allée ben Boulaïd; pizza around DA190) Of the many pizza places this is one of the smartest and serves the best thin-crust pizzas. No alcohol, of course.

Restaurant Kimel (☎ 033 852803; 56 av de l'Indépendance; mains DA200-500) This is the fanciest place in town (which isn't saying much). It advertises *banquet sur commande* (feast on command) but can usually be relied upon to serve a good steak or roast.

Getting There & Away

AIR

Aéroport Mostafa Benboulaïd (☎ 033 868543) is 15km from the centre. **Air Algérie** (☎ 033

870305; www.airalgerie.dz; rue des Frères Maazouzi) flies to Algiers and also direct to Paris, Lyon, Nice and Marseille.

BUS

The old *gare routière* in the centre of town now only handles local buses. The new *gare routière* is several kilometres from the centre (local bus 5 and 15, DA10, or taxi DA80 to DA100), right on the outskirts of the sprawling suburbs. There are regular departures to most cities in Algeria including Algiers (DA600), Annaba (DA250), Constantine (DA100), Sétif (DA100) and Biskra (DA130).

TAXI

Taxis collectifs (shared taxis) leave from the parking beside the new *gare routière* on the outskirts of town. Destinations include Algiers (DA850, eight hours), Annaba (DA450, two to three hours), Constantine (DA200, 1½ hours), Sétif (DA200, two hours) and Biskra (DA200, one hour).

Getting Around

There is a service from the old *gare routière*, in the centre of town, to the airport (but its schedule is uncertain). A taxi from the centre will cost around DA500.

AROUND BATNA

The Mausoleum of Medracen ممدغسن

As you approach over the flat farmland, something vast and cone-topped appears over the horizon which you would be forgiven for thinking is a hill. It is, instead, a mausoleum and one of Algeria's many archaeological mysteries.

The mausoleum is 18.5m high and 59m in diameter, and composed of a vast number of cut stones laid over a rubble core. It is an imposing construction, a circular base with a conical roof. It was built out of massive stone blocks, the base decorated with 60 columns topped with Doric capitals. It was obviously intended as a royal burial place: there is a false door and a real, hidden entrance that leads – via steps to a corridor and then a cedarwood door – to the empty burial chamber beyond.

Now for the mystery: it was long assumed this was the burial place of Micipsa, son of the great Numidian king of Massyli, who died around 119 BC. But carbon

dating suggests that it was built earlier, perhaps before the 4th century BC, though for whom it is not known. Whenever it was constructed, the mausoleum is evidence of a sophisticated people, influenced by Berbers and Libyans, Carthaginians and Greeks, and who knew how to cut and manipulate massive stones with great accuracy.

The mausoleum lies some 34km northeast of Batna: heading towards El-Khroub and Constantine, the turn-off onto the W165 is on the right. Public transport (either bus or *taxi collectif* running along the Batna-Constantine road) can drop you near the turn-off, but it is a long walk and there is little local traffic. Unless you have your own transport you will need a private taxi (around DA1000 including a little waiting time).

Lambèse-Tazoult تازولت

The road from Batna towards Timgad and Khenchela makes a slight detour around the modern village of Tazoult, infamous as the location of a high-security prison, the latest incarnation of a penitentiary built by the French in 1855. But military presence here goes back much further than the French because all around (and beneath) Tazoult lie the remains of a settlement that once served as the capital of Roman Numidia and was, for a long time, the partner and sometime rival of nearby Timgad. Lambaesis has disappeared from most itineraries and, if seen at all by visitors, it is usually glimpsed from the window of a car or bus as they shuttle between Batna and Timgad.

There was a small army post at Lambaesis around AD 81, manned by detachments from the Third Legion, properly called Legion III Augusta. Although the legion built a colony at nearby Timgad (p126) in AD 100, it built its main military base here in the late 120s, during the reign of the Emperor Hadrian. The legion was the only Roman force stationed in Numidia at the time, made up of some 5000 men, all Roman citizens, and their local support teams. The Emperor Septimus Severus gave the legion the title, 'Faithful Avenger'. The base at Lambaesis had two functions: the legion had responsibility for maintaining the Pax Romana along the Saharan fringe, from Numidia (southern Algeria) across what is now Tunisia and southern Libya, and it was expected to control traffic and collect tax

along the important trade route. Lambaesis consisted of a military camp – not unlike a modern military base, with barracks, armoury, hospital and so on – surrounded by a wall and watchtowers, and civilian camps outside the perimeter.

The most visible remains of the camp is the four-sided arch, often called the praetorium, erected in 268. This massive, two-storey limestone structure, which is 23m by 30m, stood in front of the ancient parade ground and is now less than 100m from the prison. The amphitheatre, due east a couple of hundred metres, was built in AD 169 and could hold up to 12,000 spectators. It was quarried by the French to build the prison.

The remains of the town that built up around the military camp are spread over a considerable distance. Northeast of the amphitheatre lies a large cemetery; archaeologists were able to piece together some of the camp's history from the inscriptions they found. South of here, at the edge of the modern village, the remains of an arch dedicated to Septimus Severus mark the beginning of the ancient town. Beyond are the ruins of baths and a temple to Asclepius, the god of healing, of which only some stones and fragments are standing; the temple was yet another victim of quarrying – in the 19th century, the entire façade was intact. The nearby capitol, dedicated as ever to the trinity of Jupiter, Juno and Minerva, is recognisable by its pedestal and surviving sections of walls and columns, with others laid out in front of it.

In the modern village a small **museum** (adult/student DA20/10; ☎ 9am-noon & 1.30-4.30pm Sun-Fri) has a limited but surprisingly rich collection, the highlights of which include mosaics discovered near the arch of Septimus Severus in 1905; the works of sea monsters and of the nymph Cyrene are of very high quality. Statues of the god Asclepius and his daughter Hygieia were found in the temple grounds. If the temple is not open, look for the guardian in the nearby village.

Lambèse-Tazoult is a little over 10km from Batna. Buses run to the village of Tazoult from Batna. The best way to visit is to drive, or arrange a taxi (count on DA1000 to DA1500 for the return ride, depending on how long you spend there), and take in Timgad, taking lunch with you to share with the ghosts of Roman legionnaires.

TIMGAD تيمقاد

Nothing in the surrounding area – certainly nothing in concrete-clad Batna, the jumping-off point 40km away – prepares you for the grandeur of **Timgad** (adult/child DA20/10; ☎ 8.30am-noon & 1.30-5pm Sun-Fri). Even the entrance is deceptive, a large car park, a line of trees, a museum and then... an entire Roman town. At first sight it may seem just a vast field of stones and rubble, but walk around, take the time, inhabit the place, and Timgad will more than repay the effort.

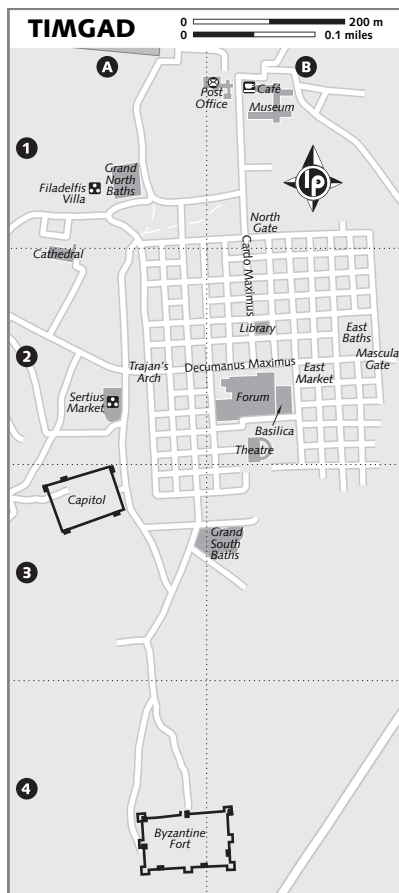
History

Whatever happened at this site before AD 100 is of little consequence: the story of Timgad begins in grand style when the Emperor Trajan decided to build a colony for soldiers and veterans of his Legion III Augusta. The Colonia Marciana Traiana Thamugadi, to give it its full name, is, in the words of the Unesco report that recommended inscribing it on the World Heritage list, 'a consummate example of a Roman military colony'.

Timgad was intended to provide accommodation for 15,000 in all, but it soon outgrew that number and moved beyond the original grid, with new quarters being added to the original ground plan over the next 300 years, leading to a quadrupling of the original camp. During its 2nd- and 3rd-century heyday, Timgad stood as a clear expression of Roman power in Africa – solid, brilliantly conceived and executed, and perfectly located at the head of the Oued el-Abiod and a crucial junction that gave Romans control of one of the main passes through the Aurès Mountains, and therefore of access to and from the Sahara.

There was a Christian presence at Timgad from the mid-3rd century, which grew to such prominence that a Church Council was held here in AD 397. The Vandal invasion of 430 brought an end to any centralised power and at the end of the 5th century the region was so weak that Timgad was sacked by tribes from the nearby Aurès Mountains, the very people the camp had been designed to control.

Timgad was revived in 539 under the Byzantine Emperor Justinian, when a fortress was built outside the original town, reusing many blocks from earlier Roman buildings, but this remote outpost could



only survive with a strong central power and, with the Arab invasion in the 7th century, the end was at hand. The site was abandoned some time in the 8th century.

Ruins

The entrance leads to the **museum** (closed for renovation at the time of our visit), which contains a particularly impressive collection of more than 200 mosaics. Among the masterpieces here is a large still life (in the first hall) with panels showing various foods, The Triumph of Venus (right-hand room) surrounded by a grand decorative border, and the mosaic of Filadelfis Vita, in which the god Jupiter chases Antiope.

From the museum a path leads northwest to the **Great Baths of the North**, a huge public place of some 40 rooms built outside the original camp walls. The baths were designed symmetrically, with the same latrines, warm and hot rooms on either side of the complex, leading to a central *frigidarium*, the cold room with an icy plunge pool and a room off either end for relaxing after the bath. Just beyond this are the remains of a large private villa, evidence of the wealth Timgad enjoyed. Apart from a number of good-sized rooms, the owner of this desirable residence had his own baths, in the hot room of which once stood the mosaic of Filadelfis (now on show in the museum).

Back towards the museum, the path, which was once the road to Constantine (then Cirta), continues to the town's north gate. The original Roman town was designed as a perfect square, 355m long on each side, with this gate set into the middle of its north wall. From here you'll hit the *cardo maximus*, the main north-south street, a long straight stretch of chariot-rutted paving that runs uphill to the centre of town. Five metres wide and 180m long, it covered one of the main drains and was, in its prime, bordered by colonnaded arcades or porticoes.

The first building on the left inside the gate was another of Timgad's 14 baths or spas, while the house next door, one of at least a hundred that have been excavated here, shows evidence of having been turned into a Christian chapel at a later date. The most interesting building of all along this street lies five *insulae* or blocks in from the north gate, before reaching the centre. Designed in the 4th century reusing an earlier structure, this is one of only two known Roman-period public libraries, the other being at Ephesus. The most easily recognised part of the **public library** is the book shop, a semicircular room which still shows the niches in which the 'books' (actually manuscript pages or parchment rolls) were stored. Just beyond here, the *cardo* ends at a T-junction with the *decumanus maximus*, the town's main east-west artery. There's a great view of rows of columns west along the street, and, in the distance, Trajan's Arch. Eastwards the paved way leads to the **east baths**, completed in AD 146, and the **Mascula Gate**, which marked the eastern end of town

and the start of the road to what is now Khenchela.

But continue immediately south, across the *decumanus*, to the large open space that was the **forum**. The street side of the forum was taken up with a row of shops and, on your left were the public latrines, a large room with 24 squat holes over an open drain along which, one hopes, water constantly flowed. The forum, 50m by 43m and surrounded by limestone Corinthian columns, statues, temple, municipal offices and, later a large basilica, would have provided some welcome open space in town. It seems also to have inspired an envy-worthy sense of well-being because engraved on the steps is the following slogan. *Venare, lavari, ludere, ridere, occ est vivere* – hunt, bathe, play, laugh, that is life.

Due south of the forum, the **theatre** was one of Timgad's civic joys. It was created in the 160s by cutting into a hillside and had seating in its rows, for as many as 3500 people. French archaeologists reconstructed most of what we see today; the original was quarried by the Emperor Justinian's soldiers when they built the nearby fortress in 539. Whatever went on here in antiquity – and whatever happens here during the summer Timgad festival – the main spectacle for visitors today is the great view of the whole site from the 'gods', the theatre's uppermost seating. From here or from the hill beyond it, you can use our map to identify the major monuments, from museum and baths in the north to the Byzantine fort in the south, the southern baths just below you, Trajan's Arch in the west and, in the distance, the Aurès Mountains.

From the theatre it is worth walking across the pitted path and through the scrub to the **fort**. The Byzantines chose to build outside the original settlement, on the site of an earlier shrine to the guardian divinity of a water source. In contrast to the original camp of Timgad, which was never walled, the fort is a massive military structure, 112m by 67m, its limestone walls 2.5m thick, defended by towers in each corner and at the gate. Inside the fort, officers were quartered on the right, around the basin associated with the water deity, and soldiers on the left. The remains of barracks and many other rooms can be made out among the overgrowth. The land around

the fort, like much of Timgad, has yet to be fully excavated.

Returning towards the centre, veer left towards the remains of the **capitol**, easily identified by two vast columns still standing on its raised platform. The capitol was dedicated, like the temple it echoed that stood in the centre Rome, to the gods Jupiter, Juno and Minerva. This was the most sacred place of pagan worship and, when it was completed in AD 160, the most impressive, enclosing a larger space than the forum, reached by a flight of 28 steps. Little remains beyond the two reconstructed, 14m-high columns and some fragments that have fallen nearby. Lack of perspective sometimes makes it difficult to grasp the scale of these buildings, but you can get an idea of scale by standing beside the decorated capitol in front of the pedestal, which is more than man-high.

This outer road continues past the 'new' **Sertius market**, with its slabs where traders laid out their wares, to one of Timgad's major monuments. When it was first built Timgad had a western gate much like the gates at the other cardinal points. But at the beginning of the 3rd century, when the town had already spread westward beyond its original grid and was closed by a new triumphal gate, the original inner gate was replaced by **Trajan's Arch**. The soaring, three-arch pile helps to join the new town to the old and is the most elegant of Timgad's surviving structures. The high central passage was reserved for chariots, their passage smoothed along the bumpy stones by the cutting of guiding grooves. The arches either side were for pedestrians, who passed beneath a pair of tall flanking columns and the gaze of imperial statues.

Sleeping & Eating

There are – or were – two hotels just outside the site, the **Hôtel Timgad** and the **Hôtel el-Kahina**, but at the time of our visit both were locked. A small bar, just outside the entrance to the site, serves drinks and some snacks, although the availability of anything more than packets depends on luck and the season – the more visitors, the more likely you are to get fed, assuming they haven't run out. As ever, if you worry about not having anything to eat or drink, come prepared.

Getting There & Away

Several buses and *taxis collectifs* run from Batna along the N88 towards Khenchela and Ain Beida and pass close to Timgad. The turn-off, on the right, is signposted. The monuments are a short walk from the turn-off. Returning to Batna might be more difficult. Private taxis can be hired for DA500 one way or up to DA1500 return (less if you can haggle), including some hours' waiting time.

SÉTIF سَطِيف

☎ 036 / pop 215,000

Algerians keep saying that Sétif is more than a convenient stopover en route to the wonders at Djemila: it is a destination in its own right, a pleasant town of broad streets and some elegant buildings. The climate is also a draw: at 1096m above sea level, Sétif manages to stay cooler when the rest of the country bakes in the summer. Algerians also come to remember that this was one of the centres of resistance against French rule.

Like many other towns in the region, Sétif is a Roman creation. Originally known as ancient Sitifis, it was founded around AD 97, during the reign of Roman Emperor Nerva, and was settled with retired Roman soldiers who had seen duty in North Africa. The colony grew thanks to the success of the wheat harvest and in the early 300s, as capital of a region, Mauretania Sitifienne, was considerably expanded, with an amphitheatre and hippodrome. Falling to the Vandals in the 5th century, the town was retaken by the Byzantines in the mid-6th century and enclosed by a high stone wall (p130). The ruins of the ancient town were still largely visible at the time of the French conquest, but have since mostly been buried beneath the urban sprawl.

The French had the same plans for Sétif as the Romans: recognising its strategic value, along the main east–west highway and on a route from the Sahara to the Mediterranean coast, they built up a military town and provincial capital where, in May 1945, the war for independence began (see the boxed text 'May Day' opposite). Today, Sétif is a conservative place with a centre that has retained much of its French-era charm, and around which the 21st-century city has grown. With good hotels and restaurants, it makes an excellent base for Djemila, 45km away.

MAY DAY IN SÉTIF

The date 8 May 1945, also the name given to the main street in town, was a decisive moment in Algerian history as the day the War of Independence began. There had long been unrest in Algeria over French colonial rule, but things came to a head at the end of WWII. Algerians had been encouraged to believe that they would earn independence by supporting the Allied fight against fascism. As the war drew to a close, the Algerians realised they had been fooled – General de Gaulle gave a speech in Brazzaville (the modern-day Republic of the Congo) announcing increased legislative power for Algerians, but it did not go far enough.

Messali Hadj, leader of the Algerian People's Party (PPA), who had been against sacrificing Algerian lives to further French interests abroad, joined with pro-autonomy groups and religious parties to form a new group, Friends of the Manifesto and Freedom (AML). As tension escalated in April 1945, the French deported Messali Hadj to Brazzaville. The AML prepared to march on 8 May to celebrate VE day, for the Allies success in Europe. But in Sétif and Guelma things got out of hand.

In Guelma a hardline deputy head of police encouraged colonists and militia to attack local communities. Hundreds, perhaps thousands, were killed. In Sétif where permission had been given for a march, trouble started when police confiscated the PPA flag (now the Algerian flag) and banners demanding the release of Messali Hadj. French soldiers opened fire on the crowd and then chased protesters through the town, committing a number of atrocities. The violence spread, local tribes rose and the French used artillery and aircraft to bomb the protestors into submission. In the immediate reprisals 102 Europeans are believed to have died. The French authorities, who carried out many investigations and inquiries, never released a definitive figure for the number of dead Algerians, the calculation made more difficult by the fact that many bodies were immediately burned in lime kilns. French historians have cited 1500 dead Algerians. Algerian sources put the number at 45,000. The actual figure is likely to lie between the two.

General Duval, who gave the order to open fire on the Sétif crowd, told his superiors in Paris that he had set the independence movement back 10 years, but that if France did nothing in the meantime the Algerian nationalists would be unstoppable. On 1 November 1954 the nationalists began their campaign of violence.

As part of the 1962 independence agreement, signed at Evian in France, no French soldiers were ever brought to justice for atrocities committed in Sétif and Guelma.

Orientation

The French built their town around a central street, the av 8 Mai 1945, which runs east–west, to Algiers and Constantine. It still holds many of the town's main offices, from the post office and banks to hotels and mosques. One block north lie the remains of the Roman city of Sitifis and modern Sétif's pride and joy, the amusement park and zoo. Two blocks south of the main avenue is the market, liveliest in the morning. Everything in the centre is within walking distance.

Information

INTERNET ACCESS

There are several internet places on the streets between Ahmed Aggoun and rue des Frères Meslem.

MONEY

The most useful banks are to be found along av 8 Mai 1945, including a **Banque**

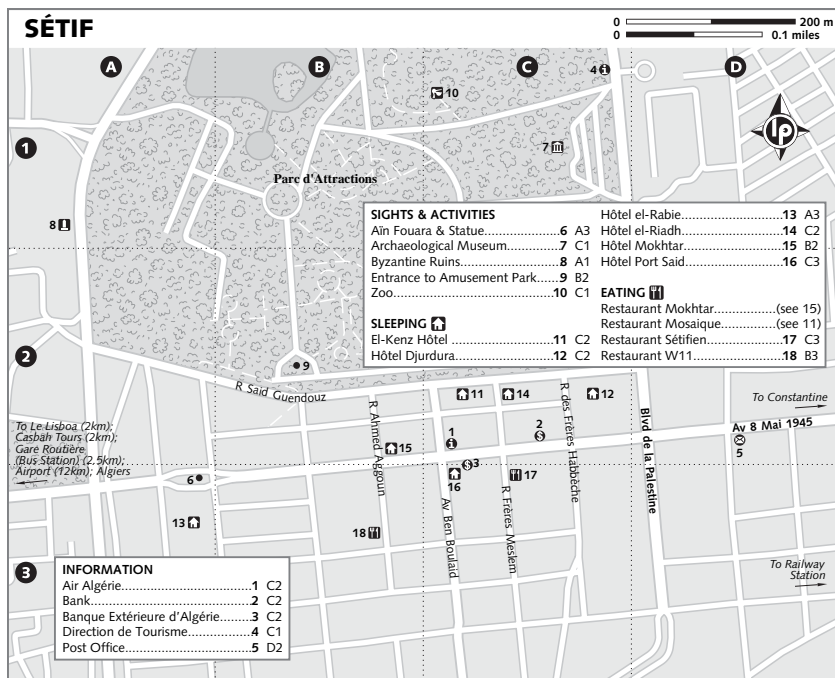
Extérieure d'Algérie across the road from Air Algérie, but its ATM was not accepting foreign cards at the time of writing. You can change money inside and perhaps also, at worse rates, at the reception of **Hôtel el-Rabie**. The best rates are to be had on av Ben Boulaïd, where money changers can usually be found fanning wads of cash.

POST

The main post office is a large concrete building on av 1 Novembre, the continuation of av 8 Mai 1945, on the eastern side of the bldv Filistin intersection and the clocktower roundabout.

TOURIST INFORMATION

There is neither a tourist office nor an ONAT, but someone at the Direction de Tourisme on bldv Filistin beyond the museum, may be able to help with information or general inquiries.



TRAVEL AGENCIES

Casbah Tours (☎ 036 845261; 39 rue Saïd Boukhrissa)

Dangers & Annoyances

Sétif is a calm place, but as everywhere, you are advised to take care of your money and valuables.

Sights

An amusement park might not be what you came to Algeria to see (and its attractions are lame by comparison to any European park), but it is worth walking through here, if only to marvel at its existence and at the fact that it is so popular. For while cinemas, bowling alleys and other civic amenities in so many northern towns have remained closed since the end of the black years of sectarian violence, the **Parc d'Attractions** pulls in the pundits. The park is a large open space of gardens, cafés, and booths selling CDs. In the centre, there is a boating lake, dodgem, big wheel and various other amusements, which really come into their own in summer. There is also a **zoo** (adult/child DA20/10; ☎ 9am-5pm), a place where camels,

porcupines, wild boars, foxes, vultures and an ark-full of other animals are crammed into spaces that must contravene international protocols. Most of these creatures were once found in abundance in the wild here, as were the zoo's prize exhibit: a pride of lion. And just to show that survival instinct has withstood captivity, a lioness gave birth to two cubs in October 2006. The staff cannot be faulted for their enthusiasm.

Not far from the zoo, on the east side of the park you can still make out some of the scant remains of the ancient town. The park is still partly enclosed by a stretch of **Byzantine wall**, built when Sétif was retaken from the Vandals and before it fell to the Arabs. There is more history on show at the **Archaeological Museum** (blvd Filistin; admission DA20; ☎ 8.30am-noon & 2-5.30pm Sun-Thu, 2.30-5pm Fri Apr-Aug, 8am-noon & 2-5pm Sun-Thu, 2.30-5pm Fri Sep-Mar) and although locals may not be aware of its existence, it is worth seeking out this bunkerlike building, fronted with canons, because although small, it holds a couple of treasures. As well as cabinets filled with pottery and lamps from Roman Sétif, and

a good selection of pieces from the Byzantine and Fatimid periods, the real stars here (and more than enough of a reason to stop in Sétif) are the mosaics in the ground floor central court. One depicts the Triumph of Venus, a 4th- to 5th-century work showing the goddess sitting in a shell, naked but for her jewellery, surrounded by monsters and cherubs. The masterpiece, however, is the Triumph of Dionysos, the theme being a triumphal procession to celebrate the god's conquest of India. All sorts of exotic and bizarre creature are here including tigers, elephants, camels, lion and the only known Roman-period North African portrayal of a giraffe. Another section of the same mosaic, displayed nearby, shows a wild boar hunt. Both have an extraordinary subtlety, a stunning range of skin colour and tone, muscle definition and facial expression.

One attraction all Algerian visitors seem to know about is **Aïn Fouara**, a fountain that sits in an island in the middle of av 8 Mai 1945. The fountain is a classic piece of French-period urban decoration. The base is a large stone fountain, with spouts on four sides, facing the cardinal points. But the real attraction here is the figure of a naked young girl that sits on top. The nude was carved in 1892 by French artist Francis de St Vidal (1866–1911). Legend has it that he used a young French woman, born in Sétif, as his model. The military governor of Sétif fell for the statue while it was on display in the Louvre and arranged for it to be shipped south. Public nudity seems strange in the middle of modest Sétif, especially some 50m from the Grand Mosque, but the statue has become a local treasure and has acquired a reputation for finding husbands for unmarried women. There was outrage in April 1997 when the fountain was blown up, but the young lady has since been restored to her original glory.

Sleeping

Hôtel Djurdjura (rue des Frères Habbèche; s/d DA600/800) Closed for works at the time of our visit, the long-established Djurdjura, in a side street near the park, provides standard budget rooms, without showers and, for the moment, without a phone.

Hôtel Port Saïd (☎ 036 843810; 6 av Ben Boulaïd, s/d/tr/q DA700/1000/1500/1800; ☎) Comfort and calm are promised, but the quiet may not

always be guaranteed given the proximity of this 21-room hotel to the mosque. Rooms are basic but acceptable, as are the communal showers (DA60). Some rooms have air-con. Breakfast is served in the café downstairs. It's a reliable budget option.

Hôtel el-Riadh (☎ 036 843832; 2 rue des Frères Meslem; s/d/t/q 900/1200/1600/2000) Rooms have showers and TV, but breakfast is another DA70 per person.

Hôtel el-Rabie (☎ 036 845794; place de l'Indépendance; s/d/t B&B DA2800/3276/3500; ☎) Immediately in front of the Aïn Fouara fountain, right in the centre of town, El-Rabie has maintained its popularity in spite of the arrival of two newer, better-equipped rivals. Rooms are large and well kept, but both reception and the restaurant lacked a smile.

Hôtel Mokhtar (☎ 036 843550; 39 av 8 Mai 1945; s/d/t B&B DA3000/3500/4000; ☎) Sétif's newest hotel, opened in the summer of 2005, is on the main street, close to the central fountain. It has well-equipped rooms and good views from the upper floors. The restaurant is also recommended.

El-Kenz Hôtel (☎ 036 845454; www.hotel-el-kenz.com; 10 rue Saïd Guendouz; s/d B&B DA4000/4500; ☎) The Setifis Hôtel, down near the *gare routière*, has more stars, but the newly-built Kenz is currently the best hotel in town. Right opposite the Parc d'Attractions, rooms come in a variety of styles, colours and sizes, some with small balconies, some with bathtubs instead of showers. The restaurant is excellent, the reception helpful and management is keen to maintain high levels of service.

Eating

There has been an explosion of pizza places in Sétif and there are a couple of good ones along rue des Frères Meslem and av Ben Boulaïd, south of av 8 Mai 1945. Some are no more than a counter selling pizzas whole (around DA120) or by the slice (DA20). More than a dozen basic restaurants serve simple grilled meals (up to DA400) on rue Saïd Guendouz, facing the Parc d'Attractions. The restaurants listed below serve more substantial meals. Most will close for Friday lunch, the exception being the smarter hotels.

Restaurant Mokhtar (☎ 036 843550; 39 av 8 Mai 1945; mains DA400-700) A small 1st-floor restaurant with bright lights and little atmosphere, but

it has attentive service and some excellent cooking from a diligent chef. Daily specials are announced on a board outside.

Restaurant Sétifien (☎ 036 925066; 8 rue des Frères Meslem; mains DA500-800) On a street of pizza takeaways, the Sétifien serves a range of salads, fish and French-style meat dishes, including kidneys. It also has a licence to serve alcohol.

Restaurant Mosaïque (☎ 036 845454; www.hotel-elkenz.com; 10 rue Saïd Guendouz; mains DA600-800) The Mosaïque is tucked away in the basement of El-Kenz Hôtel, so it's a good place for lunch on a hot summer, or a cold winter night – it snows here most years. The menu is mostly French and generally comforting, including grilled swordfish and rolled veal. Service is sharp, the TV is usually on and fellow diners tend to be discreet.

Le Lisboa (☎ 036 815630; Cité Hachemi; mains DA600-900) A taxi ride from the centre, the Lisboa is run by an Algerian-Portuguese husband-and-wife team who serve dishes from both countries and can usually be relied upon to have wine.

• **Restaurant W11** (☎ 036 820909; 11 rue Ahmed Aggoun; mains DA700-1000) The political complexities of running a restaurant-bar in a town as conservative as Sétif mean that W11 may well be closed by the time you get there. But ring the bell anyway because the staff sometimes locks the door to deter drunks. The smoke-filled upstairs bar is popular with locals in the early evening, while the ground-floor restaurant goes on later, serving Mediterranean cooking with plenty of fresh seafood and grilled meat, prepared with a flair often missing elsewhere in town. The owner is usually there, shaking hands, checking food, suggesting drinks. Music is soft and the range of Algerian wine and foreign spirits more interesting.

Getting There & Away

AIR

Sétif's **airport** (☎ 036 933140) is 12km west of town. The new passenger terminal was opened in 2006 amid some confusion, as domestic and international passengers were being mixed together, with the result that people heading to Algiers found themselves being searched by customs officials.

Air Algérie (☎ 036 919292, reservations 036 936406; 13 av 8 May 1945) flies direct to Algiers and

Paris. **Aigle Azur** (www.aigle-azur.fr) flies to Paris, Marseille and Lyon and, at certain times of year, to Bordeaux and Toulouse. It doesn't have an office in town, but its Algerian reservation number (☎ 021 642020) is open for reservations 8am to 6pm from Saturday to Thursday.

There is no airport bus. A taxi will cost DA250 for the 40-minute ride (could be longer if there is much traffic at the town-limits roadblock).

BUS

The **gare routière** (☎ 036 842140) is a couple of kilometres from the centre, at the end of av Saïd Boukhrissa, in the direction of Algiers. Sétif has good services across the country, with regular departures to Algiers (DA350, six hours), Constantine (DA120), Ghardaïa (DA600, 14 hours), Oran (DA700, 15 hours) and elsewhere. There are also several buses a day to El-Eulma, the turn-off for Djemila.

TAXI

When full *taxis collectifs* leave from beside the *gare routière*, on av Saïd Boukhrissa, for Algiers (DA600), Constantine (DA200), Ghardaïa (DA1000), Oran (DA1200) and elsewhere.

TRAIN

The train station is on the east side of town, just walkable from the centre. The SNTF runs to Algiers (2nd class DA520) and Annaba (2nd class DA440). There are usually two departures a day in either direction.

Getting Around

The only local bus you are likely to need runs from the *gare routière* to several places in the centre. There is a taxi rank just off av 8 May 1945, a few metres from the fountain.

DJEMILA جميلة

A highlight of Algeria (and of North Africa for that matter), the remarkable World Heritage site of Djemila is all that remains of the ancient Roman town of Cuicul. Tucked into the strikingly beautiful Petite Kabylie hills, some 40km inland from the Mediterranean, Djemila is one of the most perfect expressions of the meeting of Roman power and African beauty. Here, more than almost anywhere else this side of the Mediterranean,

perhaps even more than in the great Libyan sites of Leptis Magna or Sabratha, you can come closer to understanding the Roman aesthetic: the marriage of order and beauty. It is, as the French writer Albert Camus observed, 'a lesson in love and patience'.

History

Djemila's early history is lost, but it was occupied by Berber tribes in the early centuries BC. The surviving town can trace its origins only as far back as the 1st century AD, during the brief reign of the Roman Emperor Nerva (96-98). As well as the new colony at nearby Sétif (p128), Nerva ordered that some veteran soldiers from the Legion III Augustan, the same who were to found Timgad a few years later, be settled at a place then known by its Berber name, Cuicul.

The site had advantages and disadvantages. The biggest advantage was its position, 900m above sea level on a spur of land created by two mountain rivers, the Gueourg and Betame, surrounded by rolling hills. The hilly stronghold was easy to defend. The main disadvantage was the irregularity of the spur – the classic Roman townplan was a square, bisected by two broad streets, the *cardo* and *decumanus maximus*, but here it had to be turned into an irregular triangle to fit.

The early years were some of the best: Cuicul took shape under the Antonine emperors – this was when the forum, the *curie* (town hall), market, capitol and other temples and even the theatre were built. Growth continued under the Severan emperors (AD 192-235), themselves of North African origin, and Cuicul outgrew its original enclosure wall – new roads were laid out, the great temple to the Severan family built, the nearby baths plumbed, and a new forum was built outside the original town. But even with these developments, Cuicul was never a grand city: its grandeur lies in the location and in the arrangement of stone buildings in such an unrestricted landscape.

Christianity came to Cuicul in the 3rd century – the first bishop, Pudentianus, was first mentioned in AD 255. By the beginning of the 4th century the town, perhaps now with some 12,000 inhabitants, had spread up the hill and developed what is

now known as the Christian quarter, with its chapels, baptistery and basilicas.

The Vandal army reached here in 431 and the town easily fell. The Vandals moved on in 442 and the area was retaken by the Byzantines in the first half of the 6th century, but abandoned on the eve of the Arab invasion of North Africa, after which Cuicul – which the Arabs later called Djemila (beautiful) – sank into obscurity.

Soon after the French conquest of Algeria, the Duc d'Orleans hatched a plan to dismantle Caracalla's monumental Arch and reassemble it in Paris. Although that plan was dropped, some sculptures were shipped to France in the 1840s, intended for an Algerian museum in Paris that never came to fruition.

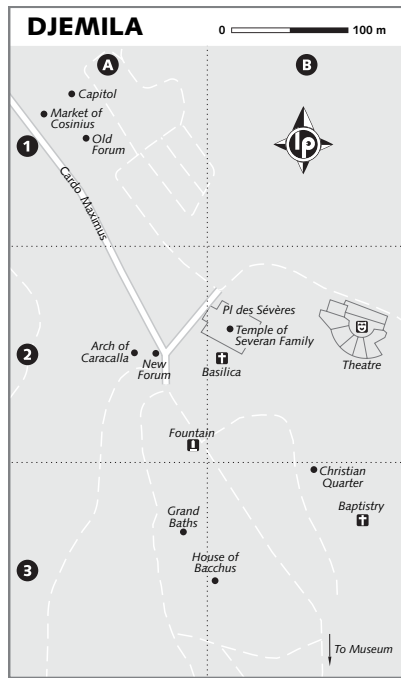
The site was excavated relatively late; work started in 1909 and immediate progress was made. In the first year the northern part of the House of the Donkey, the temple and the Severan forum were discovered. The main streets were uncovered and mosaics removed from the House of Amphitrite in 1912. The old forum was revealed between 1913 and 1915. In 1917 the grand baths, theatre and *cardo* were excavated. Work finally stopped in 1957.

But much remains and is in need of attention. The extremely knowledgeable and friendly M Mohand Akli Ikherbande, conservator of the museum, is unequivocal about threats to the site. A brief look around shows up the problems: even the mosaics removed from houses into the museum for safekeeping are falling off the walls. Whether the Algerian authorities will provide necessary funds before these and other treasures are lost remains to be seen. But with Djemila inscribed on Unesco's World Heritage list as 'one of the world's most beautiful Roman ruins', it would be a matter of national shame and international scandal were this to happen.

In August 2006 the president of Algeria was patron of the 2nd International Festival of Djemila, a nine-day celebration of Algerian music held at the site.

Ruins

Djemila (☎ 036 945101; adult/student DA20/10; ☎ 9am-noon & 1.30-5.30pm) is small enough to allow you to walk around the entire site



comfortably in half a day. But spend longer here, linger in the temples and markets, stroll through the bath chambers, or just lie down on one of the pavements or in the shade of villa walls (as a number of locals were doing during our visit); the magic will be felt and this unique place will be better understood.

The **museum** is to the left on entering the site and, as ever, is best visited before the ruins. At quiet times, it is kept locked, but will be opened if you ask at the entrance to the site. Outside the museum building there are many tombstones and other funerary sculptures, the outer walls lined with mosaics salvaged from the site, the covered court housing busts of the emperor Septimus Severus and his wife, Julia Domna. The mosaics, which line most of the interior walls, are more impressive. Among the treasures here are a mosaic showing a hunting scene; the 10m-long so-called Mosaic of the Donkey, which shows a huge range of local animals; and the inscription of Bishop Cressonius, a statement of faith lifted from the floor of the South Basilica. The master-

piece – one of the greatest North African mosaics – is of the Legend of Dionysos, brought from the House of Bacchus and now in the third hall. The mosaic shows four scenes in the legend of Dionysos: being nursed by the nymph Nysa; being carried on a tiger; an offering made at a cult festival in winter; and an initiation scene during which a woman turns her head from a phallus. The mosaic's central panel shows another scene from the Dionysos myth in which the nymph Ambrosia is murdered by King Lycurgus. The design and execution suggest the level of sophistication achieved in ancient Djemila. Also in this last room is a 4th- to 5th-century mosaic of men on foot and horse, hunting lion, boar and panther – note the kneeling hunter levelling his spear at a leaping lion. In the cabinets, a range of objects found at the site, including medical instruments, door locks, jewellery and pottery objects, help to give an idea of how life was lived. Also worth taking in here is the scale model of the ruins, which gives a useful overview of what is to come.

From the museum, ignore the path between the trees (which will bring you to the later Christian quarter) and cross the meadow directly to the ruins. This will bring you to the end of the later extension of the *cardo maximus*. This street, which runs north–northwest, crosses the centre of Djemila. Passing a series of houses, after some 50m you will pass on the left the **Grand Baths**, built in AD 183 during the reign of Emperor Commodus. These were designed along a symmetrical plan where a double-sided exercise room leads to two changing rooms and then on to the hot, tepid and cold rooms. The baths are well preserved and below floor level, beyond the hot room, you can see where fires were stoked to provide heat. Water was stored in cisterns along the north side. Immediately to the south of the baths is the **House of Bacchus**, a grand mansion built around the beginning of the 5th century, with two gardens and a pool which served as the household fish tank.

Continuing north past a ruined fountain (on the left), the *cardo* comes into the **place des Sévères** (Square of the Severus family), the centrepiece of the extended town. Immediately to the left is the **Arch of Caracalla**, decorated with columns and Corinthian

capitals. Originally it was graced with statues of the emperor and his parents, Septimus Severus and Julia Domna. This was the town's west gate and, at 12.5m high, it made an imposing entrance for people coming from Sétif and beyond. The arch was dismantled by the Duc d'Orleans in 1839, ready to be shipped to Paris, but when the duke died three years later the project was scrapped. The arch was reconstructed in 1922. Immediately to the north of the arch was a fabric market, built in the 360s, and a public latrine. Across the expanse of the square stands the **Temple of the Severan Family**. Reached by a grand staircase, fronted by rows of massive Corinthian columns, this early-3rd-century building is one of Cuicul's most prominent landmarks, just as Septimus Severus would have wanted it. The statues of the emperor and his wife, on display in the museum, were found here.

Across the square, the *cardo maximus* enters the old wall and into the original settlement. A building on the right, marked with a phallus, has often been mistaken as a brothel, an unlikely attribution: brothels would have been placed in less central locations. Rather than being a shop sign, the phallus is more likely to have been a totem, a good-luck charm to bring fertility or wealth. The *cardo* then leads past a row of large houses and through an arch to the **old forum**, a paved area, 48m by 44m. Originally lined with porticoes, it was flanked by three of the town's most important buildings: the *curia*, a basilica that served as town hall; and the capitol, the central temple dedicated to Jupiter, Juno and Minerva. Little remains to distinguish these buildings, although there is a fascinating stone altar with a scene of animal sacrifice carved on its side.

There is more to be seen in the **Market of Cosinius**, which is lined with tables on which traders spread their wares. There is plenty of decorative carving to be spotted as you walk around this delightful enclosure, which makes it easy to imagine how it must have been when the stalls were full of olives, wheat, hunks of meat, fish from across the hills and whatever else Roman Cuicul fancied for dinner. Also here is a carved stone that shows how weights and measures were checked. Immediately below the market, but entered from the *cardo*, there is a subterranean prison, presumably used to

hold traders and others found to be cheating. The arches and vaults are impressive and the place is still evocative.

Heading back south across the forum and up towards the place des Sévères, as you leave the original town walls, with the remains of the public granary on your left, take the path to the left of the Temple of the Severan Family. This will lead past a Latin inscription declaring that Julius Crescens and the executor of his will, Caius Julius Didius Crescentianus, built an arch here decorated with statues of Fortune and of Mars, the colony's protecting deity. As the path suddenly drops down towards the deep valley, it leads to the **theatre**, cut into the hillside in the 2nd century. The theatre was placed outside the original walls to avoid jams for the 3000 people who attended plays and other performances.

The **Christian quarter** lies at the southern, upper end of the town, the furthest from the original enclosure walls. At the centre of the Christian community was a group of Episcopal buildings: two basilicas, a baptistery and chapel. The baptistery is the most easily identified beneath a dome constructed by archaeologists to preserve the mosaics that adorn the floors. The building is often locked, but can be visited (you may need to ask at the museum). Beside it are baths, perhaps for religious purification, and the northern basilica, a 6th-century building where services were held immediately after baptisms. This building was linked by a corridor to the larger basilica of Cresconius, named after the bishop whose name was celebrated on a large mosaic, now in the museum. Forty metres long, its central nave lined with elaborately topped columns, its floor covered in mosaics, this basilica seems to have been the last significant structure built in Cuicul, presumably after the Byzantines had re-established themselves in North Africa, a last flourish before the town died.

Sleeping & Eating

The modern village of Djemila has little to detain visitors.

Hôtel Belle Vue (☎ 036 945110/070 920529; s & d B&B DA1500) This very pleasant hotel, just outside the gates of the ancient town, has eight rooms around a vine-covered courtyard, as well as heating, communal showers

and toilets. Until tourism picks up, and whether you are staying in the hotel or not, you need to call a day or two ahead if you want to be sure of something to eat. A full meal of salad, meat or chicken and dessert will cost DA800 to DA1500.

You can also buy food in town and picnic among the ruins (being sure to leave no rubbish behind you).

Getting There & Away

Unless you are going to stay at the Hôtel Belle Vue, Djemila is most easily visited as a day trip from Constantine or Sétif.

There is a direct bus from Sétif, but it is infrequent and irregular. The easiest way of getting to Djemila is by changing at El-Eulma. There are regular bus and collective taxi services to El-Eulma along the main Constantine–Sétif road. There is a bus from there to Djemila but you will be spending your time better by continuing by taxi. One way by private taxi over the 30km from El-Eulma to Djemila should cost around DA500. Expect to pay more than double if you want the driver to wait. Returning from El-Eulma, there is more chance of a collective taxi to Sétif than Constantine.