



TUNISIA

# Destination made in heaven

**“W**hen God made Tunisia,” says Fakhredine Messai, director of the National Tourism Office, “he must have had tourism in mind.” It is difficult to argue with him. Consider a country with 1,300 km of beautiful sun-baked beaches; crystal clear coral-fringed seas; romantic oases straight out of the *Arabian Nights*; a history that is 3,000 years old; 20,000 cultural sites; 400 annual festivals and some of the friendliest and most welcoming people you are ever likely to meet - and you must surely be looking at a tourist destination made in heaven.

“But that is not all,” says Messai. “We are only two hours away from most European capitals — Rome is only one hour away.” This proximity to one of the most travel-conscious regions of the world, added to the low cost of a luxurious holiday, has made Tunisia one of the fastest growing tourist destinations in the world.

“Last year, we received 4.4m tourists,” adds Messai, “which was 10% more than the previous year. We expect to welcome 10% more visitors this year — which will take tourist arrival figures beyond the 5m mark.”

Tourism generated \$1.6bn in revenue last year and

although it contributes 6% to the GDP, it provides employment for well over 300,000 people. A good deal of energy is now being devoted to developing tourism in the arid south of the country. “The aim is not only to provide exciting new forms of tourism to our visitors, it is also to raise the living standards of the people in that area,” says Messai.

Developments in the south have already had several positive effects on the lives of the people there as well as on the environment. Artesian wells, some going down to 270m, have provided irrigation not only for greenhouses in which to grow winter vegetables but also much needed water for date palms in the oases. Locals have been able to double or triple their incomes by using their spare time making carpets, handicrafts and acting as guides to the increasing number of visitors. Several five star hotels have been constructed but all have had to blend into the environment.

The south is rapidly becoming a mecca for big-budget films following the world-wide success of films like the *Star Wars* trilogy and the Oscar-winning *The English Patient*.

Currently shooting on location is the French director, Cedric Klapisch, who has Jean Paul Belmondo playing in a futuristic film titled *Peut être* in which Paris is engulfed in sand. “These projects have not only been very stimulating to our own film industry but they are also creating a world-class cadre of technicians,” says Messai. Filming generates considerable local economic activity, opens up hitherto unknown scenic spots and often leaves behind permanent structures like roads and film sets. “One day you have a lot of sand which not even the camels are interested in and then, when a film unit has finished and gone, you have a viable economic unit of considerable interest to a lot of people.”

The development of tourism in the south has not only halted the urban drift, it is attracting many young people back from the cities. “With income from tourism,” says Mohamed Essayem, head of the south-west tourism sector, “we have been able to win the war against desertification and multiply the agricultural output. In 1987, there were only 3,500 beds in this sector; today there are 10,000 — and 65 hotels. In 1998 we received 789,000 visitors, mainly French, German and Italian.”

Tozeur is the centre for the industry. Well maintained roads connect it to such romantically evocative places as Nefta, ‘the pearl of Jerid’, Gafsa, ‘the rose of the sands’, Kebili and Douz, ‘the gateway to the desert’ and Gabes, ‘the garden of henna’.

Tunisia already boasts some of the most attractive and accessible golf courses in the Mediterranean region but you will soon be able to tee off in the desert when a 27-hole course is completed near the Palmyre hotel in Tozeur. “Think of it,” says Essayem, “in the middle of the European winter, you can get on a plane and, in two hours, you could be swinging your golf club in the middle of the Sahara!”

The bulk of tourism, however, is concentrated around the beaches and cultural sites. With sun for ten months out of the 12, Tunisia’s main winter tourists come from Germany, England, northern and eastern Europe. During summer these visitors are joined by large numbers of tourists from Mediterranean Europe, the Gulf states, Japan and the Far East.

Airport facilities at the main tourist entry points, Monastir and Djerba, will be doubled by 2001 while Tunis-Carthage, the principal entry point into the country, will be able to handle 50% more passengers from this year on.

The development of Tunisia’s tourism sector has been care-



Five-star luxury has become the norm



Romantic deserts await the adventurous

## TOURISM

fully planned rather than allowed to grow randomly as has been the case in many African countries. Bed capacity has increased by 40% to 190,000 and there is room for further expansion.

"But we do not want to rush it," says Fakhreddine Messai. "We do not want to fill capacity with unhappy faces. The World Travel Organisation has given Tunisia the highest rating in Europe for return visits and we want to maintain the high quality."

The emphasis now is on a diversification of products: A major convention centre for Tunis is on the draw-

ing board; the annual jazz festival is rapidly becoming an international calendar event; the bi-annual Carthage Film Festival has grown beyond cult status and is now an important international event; the Paris-Dakar rally is likely to run through Tunisia and a host of international musical and sporting events are springing up all over the country.

"We are a moderate people with a moderate climate," says Messai. "What we are not moderate about is our enjoyment of life and our desire to share this enjoyment with all our guests." ■



## Scenic Tunisia

**S**teeped in history, Tunisia offers endless opportunities for visitors. From ancient temples to white beaches, from yachting to golfing, the choices are vast.

**Kairouan:** Situated in the centre of Tunisia, this is the most important Muslim city in north Africa, with its cultural and scholastic influence extending into Europe and Asia. With its medina painstakingly restored, its numerous mosques, zoouias, other monuments and sites, Kairouan is a town of obvious historical and religious interest and also a world-famous craft centre.

**Monastir:** Edged by a sea-front promenade, this is a grandly elegant city. The sweep of the beach is cut short by a 9th century Ribat — a fortress for warrior monks — which has been used as a backdrop for Monty Python's *Life of Brian*



Mysterious castles of the desert, known as Ksars

and the TV series *Jesus of Nazareth*. Just around the corner from this historical setting is a modern marina and a new 18-hole golf course

**Djerba and Zarzis:** The island and the peninsula, these two oases surrounded by sea and long stretches of bathing beaches are linked by a causeway dating from ancient times.

These tourist centres are equipped with every facility a visitor could wish for. Zarzis is known as one of Tunisia's shadiest corners with 500,000 palms and 100,000 olive trees. The ancient Ghriba synagogue in Djerba is a place of pilgrimage for Jews all over the world.

**El Kantaoui:** One of the more up-market tourist destinations in Tunisia, it has an up-to-the-minute complex, complete with a 27-hole golf course centred around an Andalucian-style marina. For the price of a cup of coffee, you can sit at one of the cafes and watch the "beautiful people" aboard the 300 luxury yachts.

**El Jem:** The ancient city of Thysdrus, once one of the richest trading settlements in Roman *Ifriquiya*, El Jem is situated 40km from the coast at the centre of an ancient network of roads through Tunisia's interior.



Port El Kantaoui marina complex