

TRAVEL TO *Tunisia*

By Monica Frim

Photography by
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Come with me to ze Kasbah.

The iconic meme evokes images of P p  le Moko, the thieving character played by Charles Boyer in the 1938 movie, *Algiers*, dashing Hollywood-style through the narrow streets and blind alleyways of the medina (old city quarters), except that we were in Tunis, not Algiers, and the famous kasbah line attributed to Boyer never did make it into the movie. Instead, a lovesick cartoon skunk named Pep  le Pew, usurped the expression and gave it immortality. Pep  and his French-accented pick-up line are still making the rounds almost 80 years later. In my mind's eye, the adorable cartoon skunk of my childhood perfectly sized up the historic heart of Tunis.

In the strict sense of the word, a kasbah is a fortress or citadel, although in some North African countries kasbah can refer to the entire medina or any structure behind a defensive wall.

In the capital city of Tunis, the Kasbah is a central district of spaciousness and relative quiet where modern government buildings and a large public square now occupy the historical sites that once bore the imprints of Turkish, Spanish, French and other conquests. It's known a few protests, including the Arab Spring uprising of recent history, but remains, for the most part, an oasis of calm next to the hustle and bustle of the adjoining medina, one of North Africa's best preserved.

Hundreds of palaces, mosques, mausoleums, fountains and monuments from various dynasties and cultures surround the Kasbah. But the real pulse of the medina is found in a tangle of cobbled alleyways where bazaars and souks (shops) buzz with the sounds of artisans



Blue doors, decorated with nails, are hallmarks of traditional Tunisian design.

A metal craftsman hammers finishing touches onto a plate in a Tunisian souk.



hammering designs onto bronze and copper wares, or carvers scraping wood into beautiful sculptures. Weavers pull colorful yarns through hand looms, and hat vendors put finishing touches on carmine-colored brimless caps known as chechias, Tunisia's national trademark. Windows shimmer with gold and silver jewelry and semi-precious stones. In other shops, a collage of hookah pipes, carpets, ceramics, musical instruments, textured leather bags, colorful fabrics and kaftans hang like oversized fruit, of which there too is an amazing selection. The scent of roast lamb, incense, or jasmine and orange blossoms hangs over the streets and shops like sea spray, rife and redolent. One could feel woozy from the mix of

colors, tastes and smells. Although the medina is arguably Tunis' most vibrant attraction, the busy commercial areas surprisingly co-exist alongside quiet residential areas. Side streets awash in white buildings with archways and studded blue doors provide pockets of calm within the surrounding frenzy. Ten percent of the population of Tunis lives inside the medina in historic homes, some of which date from the 7th century. Many have been renovated in traditional styles with glazed ceramic tiles articulating doorways. Former palaces and stately mansions have been turned into museums or lavish restaurants tucked away in unassuming neighborhoods.

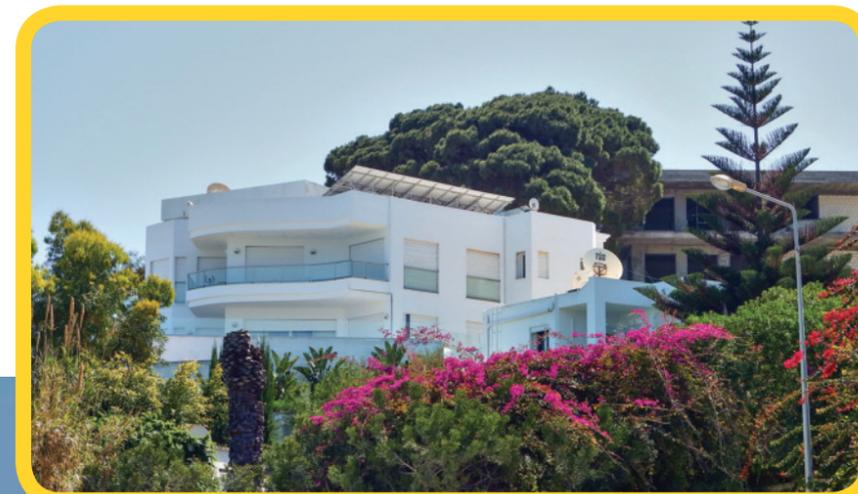
About the size of Florida, Tunisia is a blend of European

and Arab traditions. Its capital city is a true international crossroads with a traditional medina surrounded by a modern metropolis. Walk from the medina through the crenelated arch of Bab el Bahr (Sea Gate), which separates the Old Quarter from the Ville Nouvelle built by the French during the colonial era, and you'll find yourself on a wide boulevard lined with trees, balconied buildings and decorative facades. Here outdoor cafés, swanky restaurants and upscale stores stand alongside international hotels, theaters and the iconic Cathedral of St. Vincent de Paul. You could trick yourself into thinking you had landed in Paris' Champs-Élysées.

Head away from the city and you're in either a Floridian world of beach resorts and golf courses or on a journey through time to bygone civilizations. Tunisia features some of the best-preserved ruins from antiquity in the world, surpassing even the Roman-Greco ruins of Rome, thanks to a more agreeable climate and less tourist traffic. Most outstanding are the Roman mosaics,

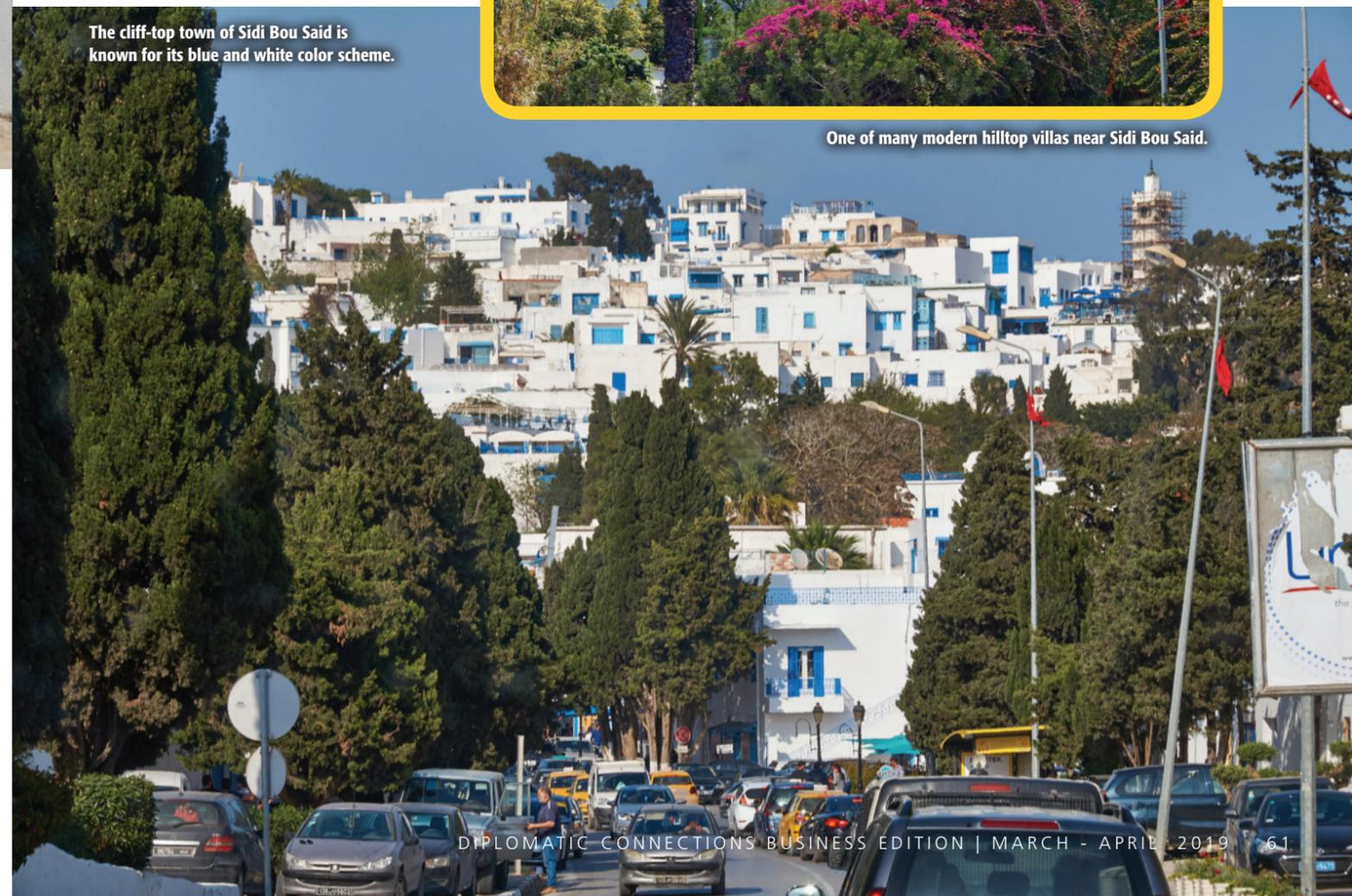
with the best specimens featured in Tunisia's national archaeological museum, the Bardo. The Bardo Museum's collection is reputedly the largest display of Roman mosaics in the world.

Many of the Bardo's artifacts come from the suburb of Carthage, founded circa 814 by the Phoenician Queen Dido, also known as Queen Elissa, after she fled from her brother, King Pygmalion of Tyre in today's Lebanon. According to legend Dido landed at the foot of Byrsa Hill, now part of the archaeological site of Carthage, where she negotiated with the local Berber chieftain for as much land as a single ox hide could encompass. It proved a clever ploy. By cutting the hide into a continuous thin strip, Dido was able to



One of many modern hilltop villas near Sidi Bou Said.

The cliff-top town of Sidi Bou Said is known for its blue and white color scheme.





A tea house in Sidi Bou Said

of tranquility. Although Thuburbu Majus became part of the Roman Republic, its Punic past survives in several archaeological remains that predate by several centuries the destruction of Carthage. It seems the Romans did not raze the existing buildings but simply added their own, which also explains why there are no straight Roman-style streets in Thuburbu Majus. The site is also delightfully void of crowds.

While Tunisia, is an archaeophile's delight, beach tourism has, in general, surpassed heritage tourism.

In the Tunis suburbs from Goulette to Gammarth, cliffside villas and resorts stretch along a Mediterranean seashore dotted with beach bars, sandy coves, fishing piers and archaeological ruins. Hibiscus, honeysuckle and jasmine bushes spill capriciously over verdant hillsides, their candy-colored flowers fluttering like the feathers of tropical birds in the salty breeze. Many visiting artists found their muse in these glorious views, and decided to stay. They turned lowly fishing huts into jaunty homes, studios and galleries, but with sensitivity to Tunisian aesthetics and traditions.

Sidi Bou Said is one of the most beautiful villages to grace the seaside cliffs, with views that stretch all the way to the mountains of the Cap Bon Peninsula, the finger of land that separates the Gulf of Tunis from the Gulf of Hammamet. Within the village, narrow cobblestone streets wriggle over hills of white-washed houses with blue doors that bubble out of the hillsides like giant scoops of vanilla ice cream. The scene is reminiscent of the blue and white villages on the Greek Island of Santorini but with decidedly Tunisian mashrabiya latticework and wrought iron filigree. Art galleries, palaces and guesthouses are tucked neatly behind the studded doors and facades, and souks pulse with the repartee of sellers and buyers in pursuit of a good transaction. Reputedly some of the most sought-after souvenirs are scroll-wire bird cages, a national symbol of traditional Tunisian artistry.

Sidi Bou Said became a go-to place for bohemian travelers in the early 20th century after Europe's finest artists and literary celebrities stumbled upon its

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encircle nearby Byrsa Hill with the hide and establish a Punic (Phoenician) settlement that was to become one the most powerful civilizations in the Mediterranean. Carthage was eventually destroyed after a series of wars over maritime power between the Phoenicians and the Romans. Known as the Punic Wars, the battles stretched over 118 years until 146 BC when the Romans finally defeated the legendary Carthaginian general, Hannibal, and burned Carthage to the ground.

One hundred years later, Julius Caesar ordered a new city to be built upon the ruins. It soon became the third most important city of the Roman Empire after Rome and Alexandria. Pity the glory didn't last. From the fifth to seventh centuries Carthage passed through eras of Vandal, Byzantine and Arab control and eventually became eclipsed by the neighboring city and port of Tunis.

Not much remains of the original Punic city of Carthage. Its Archaeological Site features largely Roman ruins and artifacts, save for a few fragments of Punic pillars and funereal relics, which are displayed in the Carthage and Bardo National Museums.

While Carthage is Tunisia's most popular site owing

to its legendary history and proximity to Tunis, thousands of better preserved ruins, including 50 Roman amphitheatres, lie scattered throughout the country. Many lie in out of the way places that are difficult to reach, which may account for their excellent condition. The third century amphitheater at El Jem is arguably the most magnificent in the country. It is on the UNESCO World Heritage list along with Carthage and the sites at Dougga, Kairouan and Kerkouane. (The Medinas of Sousse and Tunis, and Ichkeul Lake are also on the list.)

About 40 miles south of Carthage, the lesser known, but more extensive and well-preserved archaeological site of Thuburbu Majus is a haven



Open air restaurants and cafes are scattered throughout Tunisian towns.



Restaurant Le Mediterranee in the resort town of Port El Kantaoui, offers fine food and superb views of the marina.



The arched entrance to the harbor at Port El Kantaoui.

Mediterranean charms. The village is more commercialized now but still one of Tunisia's most idyllic haunts. A favored activity among locals and visitors alike is sipping a mint tea sprinkled with pine nuts or a Turkish coffee dashed with orange-blossom water in a hilltop café. Most famous is Café des Nattes where you just may sit in the very spot where some of Sidi Bou Said's most famous patrons—Paul Klee, Simone de Beauvoir and André Gide—took inspiration and repose.

Although there's an adequate dose of sun and sea in the suburbs of Tunis, it's the strand along Hammamet Bay

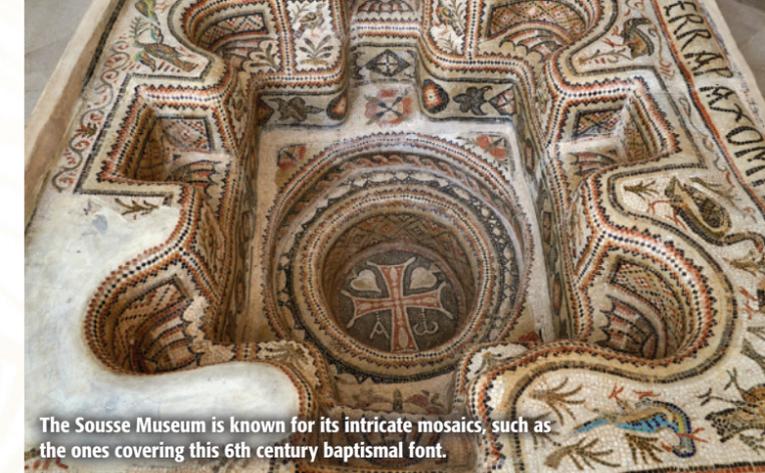
that really draws a mostly European crowd. Here, amidst a shoreline fringe of modern hotels, casinos, nightclubs and restaurants, Tunisia's third largest city, Sousse, offers a blend of old and new. In the heart of the city, arched gates and 9th century walls topped with rounded crenellations are among the best-preserved in the country. Two strongholds, the 11th century Kasbah and the Ribat, an 8th century monastic fortress that in its heyday served both military and religious purposes, are among the city's most prominent historical structures. Intrepid visitors can climb the spiraling, claustrophobic staircase of the Ribat's



Sousse's Ribat is known for its arched courtyard and views over the city.

89-foot nador (watchtower), then pop like shot peas out of the small opening at the top for an impressive view of the medina and the Kasbah perched high at the southern end of the ramparts.

The Kasbah now houses Tunisia's second most important museum, the Archaeological Museum of Sousse. Many of the museum's Roman and Byzantine mosaics were retrieved from the city's Christian catacombs, which explains the preponderance of biblical scenes and symbols.



The Sousse Museum is known for its intricate mosaics, such as the ones covering this 6th century baptismal font.

Equally striking are other mosaics made up of animal motifs, geometric patterns or mythological figures, and the funeral relics of Punic and Roman times.

Between the Kasbah and the Ribat, Sousse's medina is a riot of color bustle and zing. Neatly partitioned into sections selling household items, souvenirs and food, this medina is less confusing than its larger counterparts but with all the character of a traditional Tunisian market.



Sousse's fish market boasts an amazing array of fish and seafood, including octopus, a favored Tunisian delicacy.



Tunisian carpets are among the most sought after souvenirs.





Marina Yasmine Hammamet



The beach below the Kasbah in Hammamet.



One of many beaches that stretch along the Gulf of Hammamet.

Sandaled feet slap along cobblestone alleyways lined with blazing hot peppers, candied nuts, dates, and bags of pungent spices. Although visitors tend to focus on items they can take home as souvenirs—such as kilim and mergoum woven carpets, glazed ceramic plates from Nabeul, or burnished copper goods—it's the foodstuffs that offer the most authentic image of daily life in Sousse. A bakery full of freshly baked breads and pastries evokes childhood memories of cartoon characters floating towards a heavenly scent. In the fish market, a galaxy of freshly caught fish—from tiny anchovies and sardines to giant Bluefin tuna—gleams among cuttlefish, squid, and octopus, their suckered arms and tentacles spilling like beaded curtains out of plastic latticed crates. Down another alley, tables piled with exotic fruits and vegetables attract shoppers in search of artichokes, dates, pomegranates, persimmons, apricots and other Tunisian comestibles. If

there's one thing that unites the goods, it's how clean and organized the souks and bazaars are.

Six miles away, historical authenticity gives way to purpose-built tourism in the Port of El Kantaoui, a modern resort built in 1979 to include a golf course, theme parks, and a huge artificial harbor surrounded by chic boutiques and upscale restaurants. With cobbled streets, stone archways and buildings painted in the traditional blue and white colors of village houses, Port El Kantaoui has tried to incorporate time-honored architectural elements into its contemporary tourist complex. While the effect falls short of the real deal, it's nevertheless a popular place for sybarites in search of a modern holiday playground.

Farther up the coast, Hammamet, too, straddles the centuries with one area devoted to the past and another, known as Yasmine Hammamet, to contemporary tourism. Named for Tunisia's national flower, Yasmine Hammamet

is a hot bed of casinos, dinner shows, theme parks, mega hotel complexes and an impressive marina brimming with luxury yachts and pleasure boats. The scene here is a far cry from the traditional fishing village that spread around an old Spanish fortress until the 1930s when a dashing Romanian, named George Sebastian, built himself a cliff-top villa and put Hammamet on the map. Known as Dar Sebastian, the villa was praised by architects Frank Lloyd Wright and Le Corbusier, and drew a veritable who's who of European and American glitterati to its receptions. Partaking of dishes like plump Tunisian partridge and fresh figs from the garden, were the likes of Winston Churchill, Wallace Simpson, Jean Cocteau, André Gide, Paul Klee, Cecil Beaton, Greta Garbo and Somerset Maugham. The villa is now the International Cultural Center of Hammamet, and the old Spanish fortress, also known as the Kasbah or Citadel, a museum with excellent views from its ramparts

over Hammamet Bay and its arcing sandy shore.

Attached to the Citadel, the medina echoes the spirit of old Tunisia found in town centers throughout the country. Metal workers ping copper and brass plates and merchants hawk ceramics, leather goods, embroideries and carpets. Local men play checkers or cards, or suck on hookah water pipes, the latter a pastime shared by tourists of both genders in the crowded cafés. But away from the buzz and whirr of the commercial sector lies a quiet world that hasn't changed much in the last few centuries. Here, in typical traditional Tunisian style, the ubiquitous white houses with rooftop patios and nail-studded doors lie sprinkled like sugar cubes, a buffer of calm between the bustling souks of the medina and the blue-green expanse of the sea.

Had Pepé le Pew really visited Tunisia, he'd likely have stayed. ■



Swimming pool at the Hasdrubai Thalassa & Spa Hotel in Yasmine Hammamet.