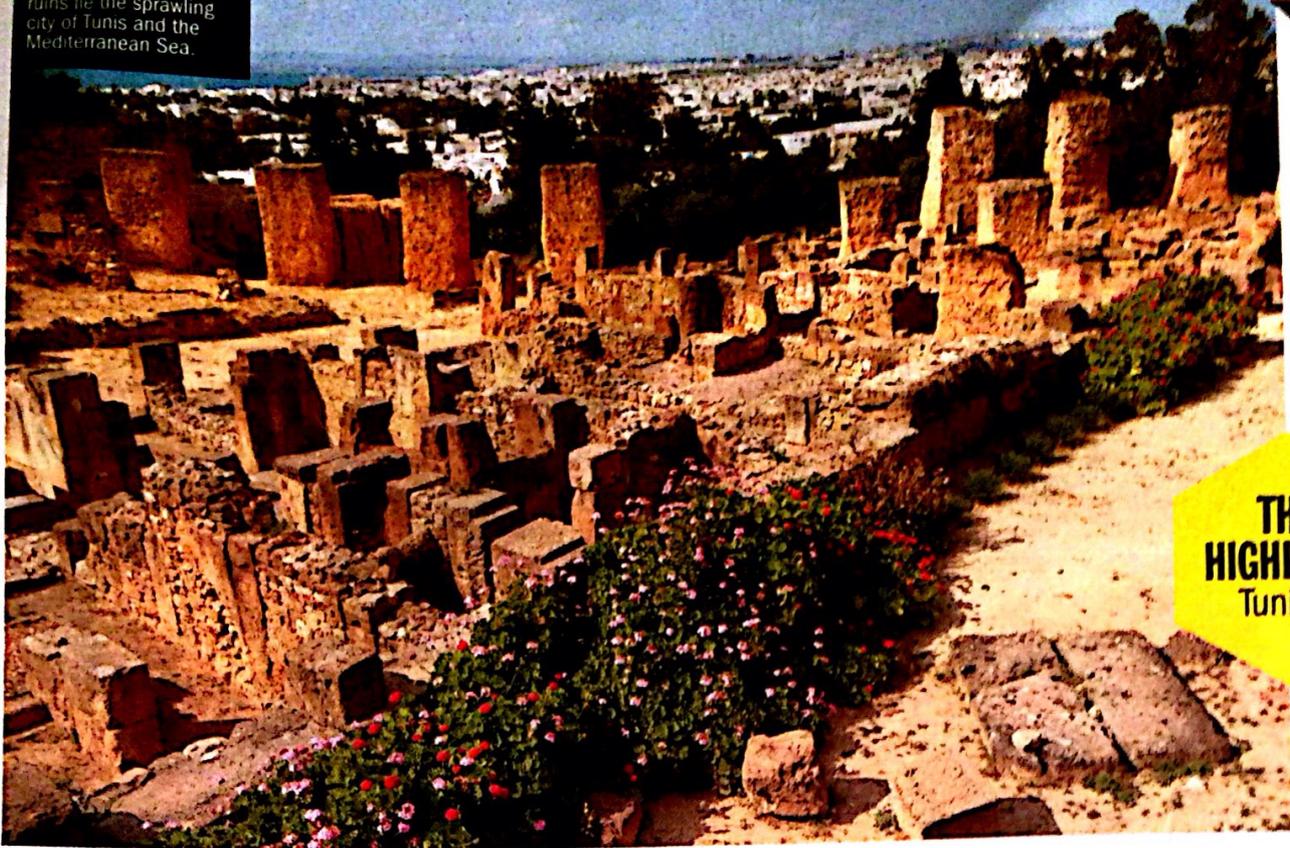


ruins lie the sprawling city of Tunis and the Mediterranean Sea.



THE HIGHLIGHT Tunisia

Revolutionary roads

Nearly two years after the revolution, a day's tour of Tunis reveals a mostly tranquil—and tourist-bereft—capital city. By **Kelsey Rexroat**

The day tour of Tunis begins with a disappointment. Our driver, Ali, refuses to take my boyfriend and me downtown. "It's not safe," he says. Our visit coincides with Tunisia's Labor Day, and two trade unions are holding protests in the city center, a site where Tunisians protested nearly two years ago in reaction to a frustrated fruit vendor's self-immolation. Their demands not only launched the country's Jasmine Revolution, but set in motion the entire Arab Spring.

But Ali, a local driver recommended by the Sheraton Tunis Hotel where we're staying, shakes his head adamantly. Similar protests erupted in violence only weeks before. "They don't know how to protest," he says. "They just start throwing rocks."

Instead, we head north from our hotel toward the Mediterranean coastline. Set on brilliant blue waters, the landscape passing by looks more like Italy than Africa. I ask Ali if the recent revolution was a good thing. He says it needed to happen. "But for me?" He hesitates before offering a vague reply: "I work in tourism."

This frustration becomes clearer as we tour the city's attractions away from downtown. Deserted ticket-booth lines and parking lots underscore how Tunisia's tourism industry has struggled to climb back after the revolution. At our first destination, an ancient Roman amphitheater that once eclipsed Rome's Coliseum in size, we are the only visitors as we photograph wildflowers thriving among the columns and wander

underground tunnels, which are all that remain of the site after years of erosion and looting.

The scene is livelier just outside of Tunis at Sidi Bou Said, a picturesque coastal village of uniformly white buildings with azure doors and window grates. Sidewalk shops line the cobblestone streets, where eager merchants push everything from traditional ceramics to *shisha* pipes. We pause to sip tea with mint and pine nuts at a cliffside café before the short drive to our final stop: the ruins of Carthage.

Once a stronghold of the Phoenician empire, Carthage is now a pleasantly leafy suburb of Tunis. We wind up Byrsa Hill, its peak dominated by the 19th-century Saint Louis Cathedral. After paying \$3 to enter the adjacent Carthage Museum grounds, we are rewarded by expansive hilltop vistas. The modern cityscape and Bay of Tunis below set the backdrop for Carthage's crumbling stone ruins, once a Phoenician settlement toppled by the Romans before their own demise in the Muslim conquest. The marble columns and headless busts against the distant emerald sea create a breathtaking panorama. But, like earlier attractions, the area is also striking for its solitude.

Before we reluctantly turn back to the car, I spot a cruise ship along the horizon, aimed toward the harbor. The sight is a welcome one for the nation's tourism industry, as are reports later that night that the day's protests had proceeded peacefully.

GET THERE Several airlines fly to Tunis-Carthage Airport, including Air France and Lufthansa, and the stoppage is \$1,200. U.S. tourists do not need a visa to enter the country. Cabs can be hired for the trip, and on-day excursions, negotiate your fare before starting the trip.

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