General Presentation

Tunisia is a North African country which belongs to the Maghreb. It is bordered on the North and the East by the Mediterranean. Its western border opens on Algeria (965 km) and its South-eastern border on Libya (459 km). Its name is derived from that of its capital, Tunis, located in the north of the country.

Nearly 40% of the surface area of the territory is occupied by the Sahara desert, the rest is made up of fertile soil, cradle of the Carthaginian civilization which reached its apogee in the IIIrd century B.C., before becoming the «breadbasket» of the Roman Empire.

Called for a long time Regency of Tunis, in particular under the Ottoman domination, Tunisia passes under French protectorate in 1881. With the advent of independence, March 20, 1956, the country takes the official name of Kingdom of Tunisia under the reign of Lamine Bey, the only Tunisian sovereign to have the title of king. With the proclamation of the republic, July 25, 1957, the nationalist leader Habib Bourguiba becomes the first president of the Republic of Tunisia and modernizes the country. Succeeded since November 7, 1987, by Zine El-Abidine Ben Ali who begins a policy of a social and economic restructuring based on openness and tolerance.

Integrated into the principal authorities of the international community, Tunisia also forms part of the Arab League, the African Union and the Community of the Sahel-Saharan States.

Geography

Tunisia covers 163,610 km², which makes of it the smallest country of the Maghreb. It has a relief relatively contrasting according to the areas and a significant maritime front (1,298 kilometres) mainly directed towards the east. The principal mountain chain, which crosses the country in the south-western direction - the North-East on the way to Cap Bon, is the Tunisian dorsal which constitutes the Eastern end of the Atlas chain. Between the mountains of this area there are fertile valleys and plains. Its highest peak is Djebel Chambi (1,544 meters) and the average altitude is 700 m. the Sahara, in the south of the country, covers approximately 40% of the territory.

Only one river is feeding continuously: Medjerda which flows into the Gulf of Tunis.
Its principal natural resources are oil, phosphates, iron ore, lead, zinc, salt and its arable soils.

**Climate**

The climate of Tunisia is influenced by the Mediterranean and Saharan climate: it is in fact divided into 7 bioclimatic areas favourable for a great diversity of husbandries, the great difference between the north and the rest of the country is due to the Tunisian dorsal which separates the areas influenced by the Mediterranean climate from those influenced by the arid climate engendered by the Sahara.

Annual pluviometry varies according to areas:

- about 1 000 millimetres in the north
- about 380 millimetres in the centre
- about 300 millimetres in the south

The summer season is marked by a significant aridity which is characterised by heat and dryness partly due to the sirocco. The temperatures vary because of the latitude, and the nearness to or farness from the Mediterranean Sea. The average temperatures for the whole country are 12 °C in December and 30 °C in July. The country also profits from a rate of significant sunshine (exceeding 3 000 hours a year). Temperature may be a few degrees below 0 in winter in the mountains of Kroumirie, and sometimes it can be, in summer, around 50 °C in the shade in the desert areas.

**Principal Towns**

64,9% of Tunisia is urbanized (2005) and has an annual urbanization rate of 3,6 %. The urban network is located on the Eastern littoral strip, between the areas of Tunis and Gabès passing by the Sahel and Sfax (Eastern centre of the country), which has the greatest economic infrastructures and concentrates more than 80 % of the urban population.

The principal towns are:

- Tunis : 728 453 inhabitants (2 083 000 including Greater Tunis)
- Sfax : 265 131 inhabitants (500 000 including Greater Sfax)
- Sousse : 173 047 habitants (400 000 including Greater Sousse)
- Kairouan : 117 903 inhabitants
- Gabès : 116 323 inhabitants (170 000 including Greater Gabès)
- Bizerte : 114 371inhabitants (150 000 including Greater Bizerte)
**Demography**

Whereas the vast majority of the Tunisians (98 %) are identified culturally with the Arabs, several studies tend to indicate that they would be ethnically closer to Berbers and also to certain Europeans:

Moreover, many civilizations had invaded the country then they were assimilated to different degrees: Phoenicians, Romans, Vandals coming from Germany, Ottomans and finally French. Moreover, much of the Moors and Jews arrived from Andalusia (Spain) at the end of the XVth century.

The first Eastern Arabs, who came since the VII th century with the Muslim conquests, contributed in the conversion of the major part of Ifriqiya to Islam. On this occasion new towns were founded such as Kairouan and Mahdia. Starting from the XI century, with the arrival of the Hilalian tribes driven out of Egypt, the linguistic and cultural Arabization becomes determining.

Certain groups, descendants of Berbers, however knew how to retain their language and their customs, often because of their geographical enclosure. Indeed, nowadays, they often live in mountainous areas (Matmata, Tataouine, Gafsa or Sbeïlta). However, the Berbers, who represent a large ethnic minority in Morocco and Algeria, remain very few in Tunisia.

Almost all Tunisians (98 % of the population) are Sunni Muslims (Maleki). There are also small Christian and Jewish communities.

The few nomadic tribes, who are a minority, are integrated and settled.

The Tunisian population knows an annual increase of 1,08 % and 63,3% is urbanized (2003).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Index</th>
<th>Value</th>
<th>World ranking</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Index of Human Development (2005)</td>
<td>0,753</td>
<td>89 out of 177</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Life Expectancy (2006)</td>
<td>75,12</td>
<td>52 out of 192</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Population (July 2006)</td>
<td>10 175 014</td>
<td>79 out of 193</td>
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<tr>
<td>Number of women for 100 men</td>
<td>97</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

**Languages**

Tunisia is the most homogeneous country in the Maghreb on the linguistic level. The languages spoken in Tunisia are Tunisian (Semitic mother tongue derived from written Arabic and has no official status) and the written Arabic (official language taught from the nursery school).
The chelha is spoken by less than 1 % of the population, mainly in the semi-Berber villages of the south — Chenini, Douiret, Matmata, Tamezret, etc. — and also in some villages of the island of Djerba (especially Guellala/Iqellalen, Ajim, Sedouikech/Azdyuch, Ouirsighen/At Ursighen).

The majority of the Tunisians also speak French (language of schooling taught from primary school) as a second language and learn English in primary school (from the age of 9). Thus, they speak 3 languages. As for the high-school pupils, they must choose German, Spanish, Italian, Russian or Chinese as an obligatory fourth language option.

**Education**

Basic teaching is free and obligatory for all the children until the age of 16. The rate of illiteracy is 22.9 % in 2004 and the rate of schooling of the 6 year old children, for both boys and girls, is 99 %.

**Economy**

Tunisia has today a diversified economy. It is historically linked to agriculture (wheat, olives, dates, citrus fruits and sea products), to mines and energy (large producer of phosphates and to a lesser extent of hydrocarbons), to tourism (6,5 million tourists in 2006) and to manufacturing industries (textile, food processing and electromechanical engineering). In the industrial field, the interventionist policy of the State is decreasing with the increase in privatizations, the simplification of tax structure and a cautious approach of the national debt (budget deficit of 2,6 % of the GDP in 2004). At general level, the average annual growth of the GDP is 5 % since 1987 and it reached 5,8 % in 2004. The increase in the tourist sector and trade are among the principal elements of this regular growth. The rate of inflation is relatively low (2,9 % in 2005).

Tunisia was the first Mediterranean country which had concluded an agreement of free trade with the European Union (17 July 1995). This agreement came into force the 1st of March 1998. According to the terms of this agreement, Tunisia and the European Union are committed to gradually create by the year 2008 a free trade area. Tunisia will then have a status comparable to Norway or Iceland.

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Data</th>
<th>Values</th>
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<tr>
<td>Gross Domestic Product</td>
<td>36,522 billion dollars (2006)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gross Domestic Product per person</td>
<td>3 600 dollars (2006)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Labour per sectors (2006)</td>
<td>agriculture : 16,3 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>industry : 34,3 %</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>services : 48,9 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Index of human development</td>
<td>87th (2006)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sources : CIA World Fact book
**Transport**

Tunisia has 7 international airports but the rail transport is the principal activity at the national level as regards transport. It consists of a national network of 1 905 kilometres of railways and 200 stations. The length of the road network is 18 997 km and makes it possible to link the various regions of the country and to connect Tunisia to its Algerian and Libyan neighbours.

**Craft industry**

Tunisia is also famous for many craft industries:

- **Potteries**: the model, the firing and the decoration of the potteries have remained primitive. The lines, stitches, sawcuts, serration, the crosses, the rhombuses are many patterns which remind us of rural tattooing and fabrics. The potteries of Guellala are the origin of the creation of other pottery centres on the Tunisian littoral: Tunis, Nabeul, Moknine, etc. The porous pottery is identified with Guellala, while the enamelled (yellow, green or brown) is the trademark of Nabeul.
- **Wrought Iron work**: Andalusians are credited with the decoration of studded doors which become characteristic of the Tunisian wrought iron. They are traditionally blue, intended to embellish the houses and to preserve the intimacy of the inhabitants, these gates recall the moucharabiehs of Arabo-Andalusian tradition (carved wood panels which allow women to look in the street without being seen).
- **Costumes**: each area or village has its own costume at the beginning of the XX century. Today, the traditional costume is the costume par excellence for marriages and ceremonies. It is the jebba which established itself as the national dress. This ample dress, covering all the body, is different according to the quality of its fabric, its colours and passementeries.
- **Oriental slipper**: the oriental slippers for men generally have the natural colour of leather. Those of women are in their majority embroidered of silk threads, cotton, in gold and silver threads with floral pattern or crescents.
- **Carpets**: the town of Kairouan is the national centre of carpet production where particularly the technique of kilim-weaving is used.
- **Mosaic**: Tunisia has the richest collection of ancient mosaics of the world. In roman times and especially starting from the IInd century, this art had developed to the extent that one can speak about a real African school marked by the control of the illustrated representation.

**TOURISM**

The importance of tourism in the socio-economic life of the country confers to the growth of the sector the rank of the strategic requirement. This option has been realised since 7 November 1987 through impressive achievements, on quantitative and qualitative levels.
**Tourist accommodation:** spectacular development, since it passes from 100,000 beds to about 200,000.

**Saharan tourism:** has a special place in the strategy of development. The number of beds, multiplied by 3, goes up to about 10,000. Occupancy rate is in constant improvement. It is practically a new area.

**Tabarka:** New area, Tabarka has advantages, even though it did not reach yet the level of development of the oasis area in the south of Tunisia. Tourist accommodation: 4,000 beds approximately. Very active area, served by its international airport, which was recently founded.

**Mahdia** emerges as an important tourist pole with an increasing tourist accommodation, which reached quickly 7,000 beds.

**Yasmine - Hammamet:** Realized according to a new concept, the integrated resort of Yasmine-Hammamet is the jewel of national tourism thus announcing the new face of the Tunisian hotel business of the XXI st century. It is the most prestigious and ambitious construction: Hotels 4 and 5*, bungalows, residences, villas, studios, restaurants, marina, medinas, theme parks and open spaces. Tourist accommodation: 25,000 beds.

Tunis-north can also be considered as a new area. Tourism accommodation exceeds 15,000 beds, with prevalence of the top-of-the-range.

Tunisian tourism focuses on the development of its offer.

The improvement of quality is reflected in the place hold by the top-of the range units, in the structure of the hotel park, which represented in 1987 only 15,000 beds and which represent in 2000 more than 65,000, that is to say more than four times while the total tourist accommodation was multiplied by two. The improvement of the quality of the offer is also proved by the introduction of new criteria of classification of the hotels, Standards 2000. The effort made as regards hotel training is another illustration of this policy which makes it possible for Tunisian tourism to better satisfy the traditional clienteles and to attract new clients groups.

From this perspective we find also the diversification of the tourist offer by the promotion of the new products.

In few years, eight golf courses were created, and are spread out around all the tourist areas.

Thalassotherapy has shown a terrific progress. The country has today more than ten centres, working according to the strictest international standards.

Cultural tours are set up; tourism of conferences developed a lot.