



SITUATED ON AN ANCIENT CARAVAN ROUTE AT THE EDGE OF THE SAHARA, TOZEUR HAS LONG ATTRACTED TRAVELERS WITH ITS PRIZED DATES AND MESMERIZING SURROUNDS. A LUXE NEW DESERT RESORT PROVIDES YET ANOTHER REASON TO MAKE THE TRIP.

BY CHRISTOPHER P. HILL PHOTOGRAPHS BY MARTIN WESTLAKE

DESERT VISION



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And nutritious. It is said that Bedouins could live on nothing but dates and camel milk for many days at a time.” I don’t doubt it; the three honey-sweet deglet nohrs I pop into my mouth are enough to sustain me until dinner.

The artesian waters of Tozeur, in Tunisia’s arid southwestern Jerid region, have supported human settlement since prehistoric times, with successive civilizations—Numidians, Romans, Byzantines, Umayyad Arabs—occupying the site in antiquity. The town’s *palmeraie*, as Tunisians call their palm groves, has been irrigated by a communal network of channels, dykes, and sluices for at least a millennium. Reorganized by a 13th-century engineer and magistrate named Ibn Shabbat, the system enabled landowners to expand their date plots across more than 1,000 hectares of desert and to cement Tozeur’s position as an important trading post on the caravan routes that once crossed the Sahara. Of all the villages in the Jerid, wrote English cleric Thomas Shaw of his visit to the area in 1727, Tozeur’s “Dates are most esteemed … exchange[d] for Wheat, Barley, Linnen Cloth, and other Commodities, brought to Them from all Parts of This and the neighbouring Kingdoms.” Grimly, he also noted a “great Traffick” in slaves from Ethiopia.

THRILLING AS IT IS to ride an explosively flatulent camel alongside a derelict *Star Wars* film set on the edge of the Tunisian Sahara, I’m more taken by our visit later that day to the date-palm oasis at Tozeur, where we trot on horseback under a canopy of outstretched fronds, sparrows chittering overhead. The palms—there are 260,000 of them, according to our guide, Shedly Bakhta—are fed by ancient irrigation channels that also water all manner of fruit trees: peach and pomegranate, lemon and orange, fig and banana. Wildflowers grow in their shade. It seems almost ludicrously lush, given the blinding salt flats that lie just beyond this island of greenery.

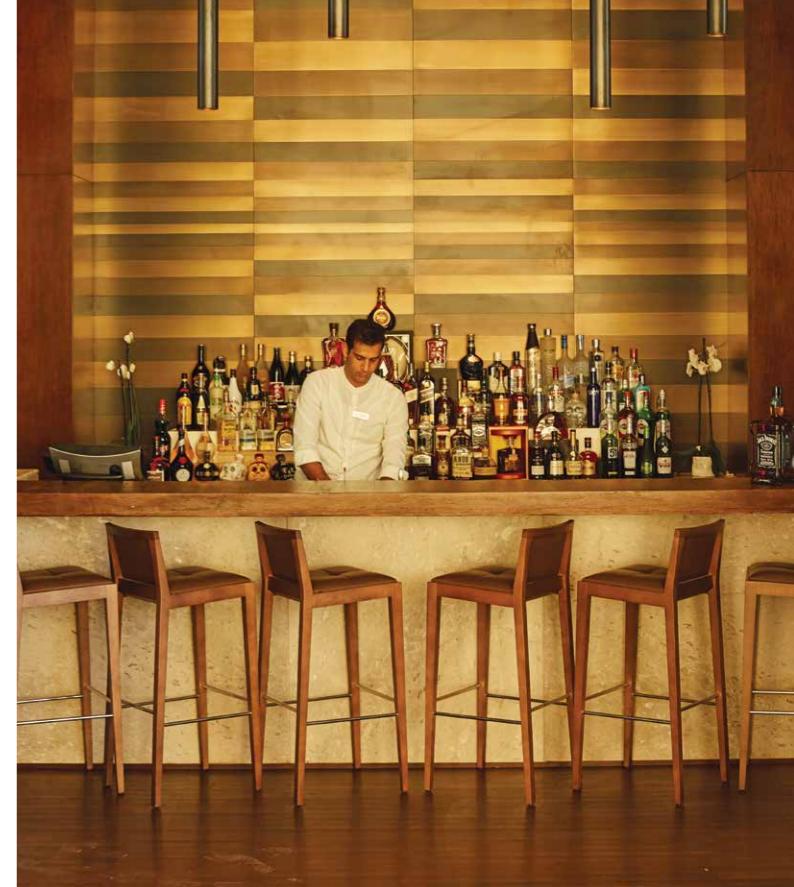
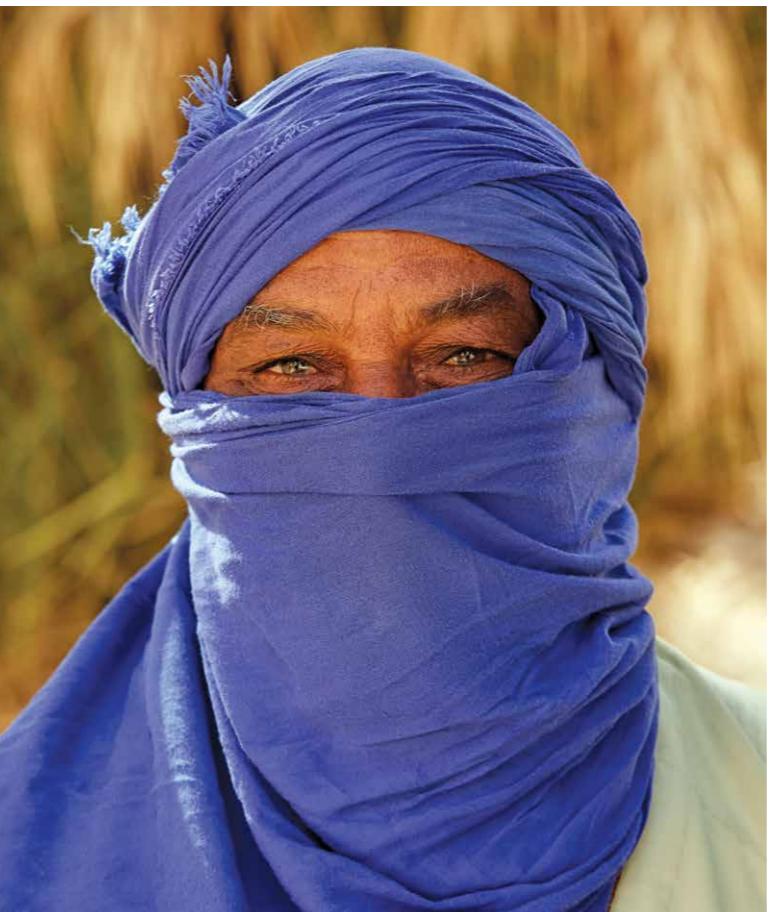
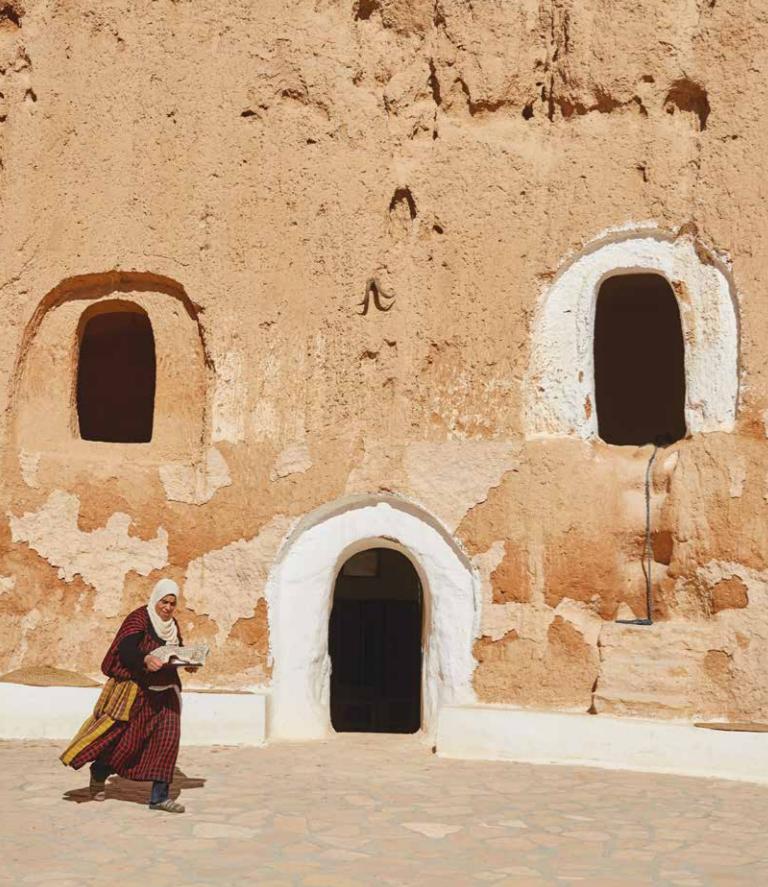
Dismounting, we sit with Shedly and one of his colleagues on a Berber carpet laid out on the ground, a platter of mint tea and dates set before us. The dates come in a half-dozen varieties. There are soft red *alig* and crinkly brown *medjool*; golden-hued *kenta* and plump, black *kimia*. But the date that everyone obsesses over is the *deglet nour*, of which Tunisia, a North African nation of 11.5 million wedged between Libya and Algeria, is the world’s largest exporter. “The name means ‘finger of light,’ ” Shedly tells us with the gentle manner of a retired schoolteacher, which he is. By way of explanation, he holds one up to the sky. The fruit glows with a soft translucence. “These are the queen of all dates, the most delicious in Africa.

Above, from left: A hostess at the Anantara Tozeur’s all-day Sarab restaurant; the Berber symbols of the fish and hand welcome guests to a troglodyte dwelling on the way to Matmata. Opposite: A pool-side dining setup at the Anantara.

The prosperity of those days is still reflected in Tozeur’s 14th-century medina quarter, Ouled el-Hadef, which lies at the fringe of the *palmeraie*. Tiny compared to the medina in Tunis, this largely residential warren of narrow alleys and palm trunk-roofed passageways is nonetheless strong on atmosphere, and a showpiece of the town’s traditional brickwork architecture. (The color of powdered ginger, the handmade bricks are still much in demand thanks to a municipal mandate requiring all buildings in Tozeur to be clad in the material. It gives the impression that the city has risen straight from the Sahara.)

We wander around Ouled el-Hadef after our horse ride. A muezzin’s melodic call to prayer echoes from a nearby minaret. Shedly, ever the educator, explains how the intricate relief patterns of the brick masonry serve as more than just decoration: they also increase the surface of the wall that is in the shade, helping to cool the interiors naturally. And as for the three knockers that



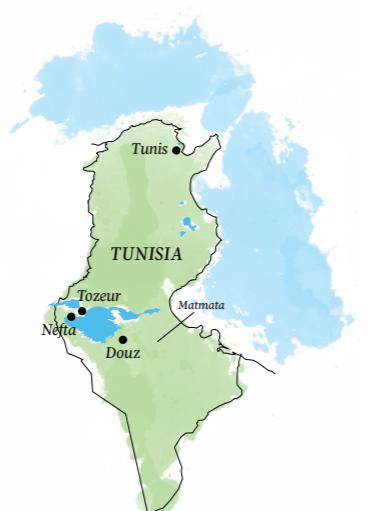


adorn the heavy wooden doors of the most traditional houses, one is for women, one is for men, and the lowest one is for children; each gives a different sound, so that the appropriate family member knows to answer the door.

What Shedly doesn't need to explain, however, is the scarcity of other tourists. Covid-19 aside (our January visit coincides with the early days of the coronavirus outbreak), tourism in Tozeur—the name refers to both the city and its surrounding governorate—has yet to recover from the turbulent aftermath of Tunisia's Jasmine Revolution, which in early 2011 unseated longtime autocrat Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali and triggered the Arab Spring. An hour's flight from Tunis, Tozeur was spared from the worst of the subsequent unrest and violence. But the tourism boom that began here in the late 1980s and '90s quickly went bust.

Yet as visitor numbers elsewhere in the country return to pre-revolutionary levels—particularly at the Mediterranean beach resorts on Tunisia's east coast, long a magnet for sun-seeking package holidaymakers from Europe—Tozeur can't be too far behind. Business is slowly returning to the city's Zone Touristique hotel strip; an international film festival was launched in 2018; and Les Dunes Electronique music festival was revived last November in the sands outside the nearby oasis town of Nefta, drawing 5,000 revelers to the crumbling Star Wars set of Mos Espa (where I ride that flatulent camel) for a 30-hour nonstop techno rave.

Another hopeful development is the opening of the Anantara Tozeur Resort, where photographer Martin Westlake and I have based ourselves for four nights. Built to the tune of US\$75 million, the property, owned by a Qatari investment firm and managed by the Bangkok-based Anantara group, is clearly banking on Tozeur's potential as a high-end destination. It sits in splendid isolation to the west of town, a collection of low-slung buildings finished in



Above, from left:
A Berber woman
in the courtyard of
her cave home in
Matmata; a pool
villa at the Anantara
Tozeur Resort;
Chebika guide
Hassan Zamouri;
bar-side seating
at the Anantara's
Whiskypedia
whisky lounge.

THE DETAILS

Getting There

Tunisair Express (tunisair.com) operates three flights a week between Tunis and Tozeur-Nefta International Airport, which is otherwise served only by one weekly Tunisair flight to Paris. By road, it takes more than six hours to reach Tozeur from the capital.

Where to Stay

Rooms at **Anantara Tozeur Resort** (216-70/100-800; anantara.com) start from US\$220 a night, and pool villas from US\$700 a night. In Tunis, where you'll likely need to overnight between flights, top-rated hotels include **The Residence Tunis** (216-71/910-101; cenizaro.com; doubles from US\$180) and **Four Seasons Hotel Tunis** (216-31/260-001; fourseasons.com; doubles from US\$210).

Both are in Gammarth, an upscale seaside resort area that's a bit of a hike from the center of town, but well positioned for quick visits to the picturesque village of Sidi Bou Said and the ancient ruins of Carthage.

local brickwork and pale sandstone. There are just 93 guest rooms and cube-like villas, each appointed with mottled gray marble floors and camel-wool *margoum* carpets (a handsome if slippery combination), sleek furnishings and Berber bric-à-brac, and beds dressed in fine French linen. A short buggy ride from the lobby at the edge of the property, my pool villa comes with a sand-flanked terrace that looks south over a ribbon of palm groves and the pallid expanse of the Chott el-Jerid salt flat beyond. The pool, unheated, is too cold to enjoy thanks to the chilly nighttime temperatures of the Saharan winter, but the views from my sun lounger don't disappoint.

Nor, for that matter, does the food. Save for a Berber "pizza" (fiery red *harissa* chili paste and onion sauce folded into a griddle-cooked flatbread) that Shedly acquires for me from a roadside stall, and a lunch of lamb stew at an underground restaurant in the distant village of Matmata, we eat exclusively at the resort. Not a single meal lets us down. *Ojja merguez* (eggs poached in spicy tomato sauce with *harissa*-spiked beef sausages) quickly becomes my new go-to breakfast item. Lunches revolve around Tunisian and Maghrebi classics like *brik*, a deep-fried pastry filled with a runny egg and potato; *slata mechouia*, a spicy mash of grilled vegetables studded with chunks of tuna; tender clay-pot lamb with saffron couscous; and

fricassé sandwiches of fried brioche (a legacy of French colonial rule) stuffed with hard-boiled eggs, olives, and more *harissa* and tuna. The poolside Oasis restaurant serves a mean camel burger, and the chef surprises us one day with an unexpected treat: beef cooked in a rich, deep-green *mloukhia* (jute leaf) stew. Eight hours in the making, it's hauntingly delicious.

And for dinner, options range from the Southeast Asian flavors of Mekong, a glass-walled dining room overlooking the sultry central swimming pool where

Isan-born chef Nuntthawut Poungpouw serves us Thai standards like tom yum gung, green-curry beef, and mango sticky rice; to Sarab, the resort's all-day restaurant, which in the evening presents refined European dishes, including a buttery beef tartare (mixed tableside by an earnest-faced young waiter) and swordfish *a la plancha* with mustard sauce and ratatouille.

For all its other on-site diversions—a hammam-equipped spa, floodlit tennis courts, a whisky bar—the Anantara's *raison d'être* is the desert, and there's plenty of it to explore. Shedly, who freelances for the local travel company that the resort uses for its excursions, is our chaperone for the duration. One day we head north across a flat, stony plain to Chebika, an abandoned Berber village in the foothills of the craggy Djebel el Negueb range, an off-shoot of the Atlas Mountains. In antiquity, there was a Roman frontier station here called Ad Speculum. No trace of that outpost remains today, nor indeed does much of the later Berber settlement; three weeks of torrential rain and flooding in 1969 left its earthen dwellings in ruin and obliged its several hundred residents to relocate to a new village below. A small tourist trade has sprung up in more recent times for visitors to Chebika's mountain spring, a pool of luminous green water cradled in a steep-sided ravine beside a palm grove. To my surprise, there's



The brickwork old quarter of Ouled el-Hadef, Tozeur's 14th-century medina. Opposite: A selection of dates from the nearby palm groves.





also a small waterfall. It's all very cinematic, and I'm not the first person to think so: scenes from *The English Patient* were shot not far from here. Hassan Zamouri, a jovial, purple-turbaned Berber who guides us through the oasis, tells us he was an extra in the film. "Mr. Ralph Fiennes, very nice man," he grins.

A considerably longer drive the next day will bring us to Matmata, two governorates over in Gabès. But first, we must cross a paved causeway that cuts through the dry salt lake of Chott el-Jerid, said to be the largest of its kind in the Sahara. It has long fascinated travelers. Passing through here in the 1930s, Aldous Huxley described the landscape as "furred with a bright saline efflorescence. At a distance, you could swear you saw the sea." Shimmering mirages aren't the only thing that will make you blink twice. One roadside stop decorated with camel bones—the memento mori of the desert—offers mint tea and access to a squalid-looking concrete water closet labeled, perhaps in jest, TOILETTE COMFORTABLE; across the road, on the chott's parched surface, an old rowboat sits marooned under a flapping Tunisian flag. Cue the Instagrammers.

Matmata, about 120 kilometers farther along, is an old Berber settlement famous for its troglodyte dwellings—underground houses cut into the hills and escarpments of the stony *hamada* desert. One

of these, converted into a hotel called Sidi Driss, is particularly renowned as the site chosen by Star Wars director George Lucas as the boyhood home of Luke Skywalker, which featured in the original 1977 movie and one of the prequels. Only the most ardent sci-fi geeks need apply; it's a kitschy attraction. But a nearby cave house inhabited for generations by the same Berber family seems like the real deal: beyond a grotto-

Above, from left: A bedroom in one of the Anantara Tozeur's pool villas; guide Shedly Bakhta in his burnoose. *Opposite:* A buggy path winds past a row of guest rooms at the Anantara Tozeur.

like threshold marked with the protective symbols of a fish and outstretched hands, we're led through bedrooms and store rooms and a kitchen all carved out centuries ago in the soft sandstone. A satellite dish perched above the central pit is one of the few concessions to modernity.

Another Star Wars set brings us to the desert north of Nefta, by way of a rearing rock formation called Ong Jemel (Camel's Neck.) Shedly has donned an appropriately Obi-Wan Kenobi-like brown woolen burnoose for the occasion. Built amid the dunes in 1997 for *The Phantom Menace*, Mos Espa is a "spaceport" of dome-roofed plaster buildings and prop moisture vaporators that is slowly being engulfed by the sand. For now, though, it's a base for camel rides and quad excursions. We opt for the former, and I'm soon bumping along on Amarouch, a gentle if unashamedly gassy dromedary. It's touristy, sure. But it's also education. Lesson number one: hold on for dear life.

On the drive back into Tozeur, I chat with Shedly about his country's ongoing transition to democracy. There are serious hurdles, he says: high unemployment, corruption, political infighting. "Do you know how many political parties we have now?" he asks me. I guess five. "Eighty-one!" But he's sanguine about Tunisia's prospects. "We just need more time to be mature. *Inshallah*."

Soon enough, the Anantara appears like a mirage set against the great void of the Chott el-Jerid. The good thing is, this illusion is real. ◉