

Chapter 03



CUSTOMS & TRADITIONS

NATIONAL HOLIDAYS

Tunisia has a number of national holidays during which banks, public offices, schools, and most shops are closed. Though there are often street celebrations, most of these holidays are not as important to the average Tunisian as the religious holidays. However, many people take the opportunity to visit their families, so public transportation can be packed. Unlike the religious holidays, these holidays fall on fixed dates each year because they are based on the Gregorian or solar calendar used by government and business.

RELIGIOUS HOLIDAYS

The Islamic calendar is based on the phases of the moon and consists of twelve lunar months, beginning with the *Hejira*, Prophet Mohammed's flight from Mecca to Medina in 622 CE (1 AH in the Islamic calendar). Since the lunar calendar has approximately 354 days, religious holidays occur eleven days earlier each solar year.

NATIONAL HOLIDAYS

New Year's Day (January 1): This day is celebrated as a secular holiday, which gives Tunisians a day to recover after New Year's Eve parties.

Independence Day (March 20): commemorates the day that Tunisia became independent from France in 1956.

Youth Day (March 21): honors and celebrates youth and youth workers.

Martyr's Day (April 9): commemorates the Tunisian martyrs who died in 1938 seeking independence from France.

Labor Day (May 1): May Day is celebrated in Tunisia as the internationally recognized day to honor labor.

Republic Day (July 25): commemorates the day when Tunisia became a republic with Habib Bourguiba as president in 1957.

Women's Day (August 13): marks the anniversary of the adoption of the Personal Status Code by the Tunisian Parliament on August 13, 1956.

Evacuation Day (October 15): commemorates the day in 1963 when the last of the French troops evacuated their military base at Bizerte.

New Era Day (November 7): commemorates the day in 1987 when Zine El Abadine Ben Ali assumed the presidency from Habib Bourguiba.

Islamic holidays depend upon a visual sighting of various phases of the moon, so published schedules of these holidays in date books and calendars are only approximations.

Islamic New Year

Hejira is celebrated on 1 Moharram, the first day of the first month of the Islamic calendar. There is no public celebration, though usually government and religious officials mark it with a special function.

Prophet Mohammed's Birthday

Moulid-an Nabi, or simply Moulid, celebrates the Prophet's birthday, and falls on the twelfth day of the third month of the Islamic year. Moulid is a great family celebration. Children are decked out in their best clothes and given special sweets.

Ramadan

Ramadan, the ninth month of the Muslim year, is especially holy because the word of God, as represented in the Qur'an, was revealed at this time to the Prophet Mohammed by the Angel

Jibril (Gabriel). This is a time of fasting (*sawm*). Between sunrise and sunset Muslims abstain from eating, drinking, and smoking. Exemptions are made for children, pregnant women, the elderly, and the sick. Each day the fast ends at sundown. Immediately after prayer, one eats something light. Mohammed was said to break his fast with a few dates and a glass of milk, and many people like to keep up this tradition. Then the *iftar*, a huge meal, follows. Sometimes people eat more during Ramadan than normal, and gain weight! You might expect there to be little interest in food during a month of fasting, but the reverse is true. Women take great pride in preparing their best dishes for the *iftar*, and the magazines are full of recipe ideas.

Evenings are lively and festive, and feature special foods, [carnivals](#)¹, shopping, and street festivals. For the past twenty-five years, the Medina Festival has brought leading Arab musicians, artists, and intellectuals to enliven Ramadan nights in the former palaces and mansions of the Tunis Medina. Similar events are held at historic [venues](#)²

¹ 狂欢节

² 地点, 会场



elsewhere in Tunisia.

In olden days there would be a procession to a site where the crescent moon could be clearly seen before the fast was proclaimed, with lanterns to light the way. This practice survives in elaborate decorations being hung outside homes, shops, and in the streets during Ramadan, and in children being given a colorful lantern.

Charity and goodwill are especially valued during Ramadan. A stranger will give a date or a fig to a person who has not been able to make it home in time for *iftar*. Outside mosques, *iftar* tables are laid out for those who are fasting and have nowhere to eat. These tables, known as *mawa'id al-rahman* (“tables of the merciful”), are set up for the needy and paid for by wealthy donors. Any one without an *iftar* to attend may line up to get a place, the idea being that no one should have to break his or her fast alone.

If you are invited to an *iftar*, be sure to show up on time! Otherwise, you may find Tunisians waiting for you, the honored foreign guest, and prolonging their fast. As the author can attest, this

is very embarrassing!

While all-night parties are popular, most Muslims manage to snatch a little sleep before eating a predawn meal, known as the *suhur*, which has to keep them going for the whole day.

Foreigners, while not expected to fast themselves, should be respectful to those who do. It is *not* a good idea to eat or drink in the street while others are fasting. Some cafés and restaurants will be open, so you can eat and drink discreetly indoors during Ramadan.

Since it is a sacred month, Tunisians dress modestly during Ramadan, even those who normally wear **flashy**¹ clothes. For the same reason, drinkers often give up alcohol for the month.

Keeping the fast is especially hard when Ramadan falls during the summer months, when days are longest and hottest. Usually the first few days are the worst when fasters are still adjusting to not eating, drinking, or smoking. Traffic jams increase and tempers flare as people rush home from work just before the *iftar* to join friends and families. Traffic accidents are **endemic**² at that

¹ 浮华的，俗艳的

² 某地特有的；（尤指疾病）地方性的

¹ 习惯的，通常的

time. Don't even think of trying to get a taxi. Also, expect workmen and household help to slow down during Ramadan.

In 1960 and 1961, President Bourguiba encouraged Tunisians not to fast, arguing that Tunisia could not afford the decline in productivity that occurs during Ramadan. He cited the Koran, claiming that Tunisia was engaged in a *jihad* against underdevelopment and that Islam excused participants in a *jihad* from fasting. But popular resistance to his campaign against fasting was intense, and many religious leaders openly rejected Bourguiba's reinterpretation of Ramadan. In the end, Bourguiba had to back off. Since then, Ramadan has been observed traditionally.

Eid al Fitr

This three-day festival marks the end of the Ramadan fast. It is **customary**¹ to have prayers at sunrise at the mosque, followed by a celebratory family meal. This is a time for exchanging gifts, buying new clothes for the children, and traveling home to see loved ones.

Eid al Adha

This, the “Feast of the Sacrifice,” marks the end of the Muslim pilgrimage to Mecca. A three-day holiday commemorates the story of the willingness of Abraham to obey God by sacrificing his son.

In the Bible the son is Isaac; in Islam it is Ishmael. Later, Abraham is allowed to sacrifice a ram in his son’s place. In remembrance of this, Muslims offer a sacrifice of their own by slaughtering a cow or ram and donating a portion of the meat to the sick or poor. This feast takes place on the tenth day of the last month of the Islamic year.

LOCAL AND REGIONAL FESTIVALS

From the smallest settlements to the largest, festivals are **omnipresent**¹ throughout Tunisia. They are lively affairs and celebrate such diverse events, activities, or subjects as the arrival of spring, autumn harvests, sea sponge fishing, Arab horses, Tunisian music (*malouf*), and the lives of local “saints” (see below). Any foreigner who happens to pass through town during one of the numerous summer festivals will be welcomed and

¹ 无所不在的



urged to join in. Before long you will find yourself dancing and sharing a cup of tea.

Some of the most interesting festivals are in the desert oases. Douz, the last major oasis town before entering the Sahara, hosts a festival that was originally a Bedouin marriage market. It attracts an estimated 50,000

visitors a year to an event that includes a lively mix of traditional music, dance, camel and greyhound racing, storytelling, and feasting. Another is the Oasis Festival held in Tozeur, a pleasant town bounded on one side by an enormous stand of palm trees and on the other by a desolate salt lake, the Chott el-Jerid.

SUPERSTITIONS

Certain folk beliefs and customs, most likely pre-Islamic in origin, persist in modern Tunisia, especially among the poor and uneducated. Sophisticated urbanites may denounce these practices as backward and un-Islamic, but they are

strongly rooted in the Tunisian [psyche](#)¹.

A *djinn* — from which the English word genie derives — is a spiritual being that may play a role in human affairs if called upon. Belief in *djinns* is widespread in the Muslim world. One protects against *djinns* by wearing an amulet of verses from the Koran.

Another common superstition is fear of the Evil Eye: an envious person can cause your good luck to disappear by casting the Evil Eye on you.

How could the Evil Eye hit you, the bowlegged one!

Tunisian proverb

(A person with physical defects need not fear the Evil Eye because no one envies him.)

To avoid the Evil Eye, Tunisians are quite discreet about discussing good things. They may not talk about the health and beauty of a child or reveal a new job until they actually begin work.

One guards against the Evil Eye by reciting verses from the Koran and wearing the *Khomsa*, or Hand of Fatima (daughter of the Prophet). Hands



¹ 灵魂；心灵

¹ 垂饰² 有效的, 强有力的³ 血石, 血石髓⁴ 绿松石

of Fatima are hung above doorways and dangle from car mirrors throughout Tunisia. Silver and gold earrings and **pendants**¹ of Hand of Fatima design are among the most popular jewelry in Tunisia.

Precious stones having magical powers (*khatems*) are the special province of Tunisian witches. Among the most **potent**² of these are the **bloodstone**³, which cures toothaches, the topaz, which counteracts jaundice, and the diamond, which cures all diseases. The **turquoise**⁴ cures eye disease and assures an abundance of milk in nursing mothers.

President Bourguiba unsuccessfully tried to root out these beliefs. He once devoted part of an important speech to criticizing belief in the Evil Eye, the avoidance of the numbers ten and fifteen, and the custom of blessing a new house by putting vessels of food in all the rooms to placate the *djinns* of the place. He urged Tunisians to discard these outmoded ideas, which he said were unworthy of Islam.

VISITS TO LOCAL SHRINES

In each town or community in Tunisia there will probably be a tomb of a holy man or “saint,” which attracts the faithful in large numbers. These shrines are probably a continuation of a pre-Islamic nature cult and may reflect unusual features in the landscape, such as caves, hilltops, springs, or odd-shaped trees. Such a shrine may be the object of an annual festival that draws together people from a particular community, such as a village, extended family, or tribe, to honor the holy man in a vibrant event, bursting with color and festivity. Women play a greater role in these ceremonies than in formal Islam, which is heavily male-centered.

People visit a shrine for many reasons, such as to request help from the shrine’s “saint” or to thank him for favors granted. This visit may turn into an annual ritual of reconnection between the individual or his family and the holy man. People fear that if they do not seek this reconnection, the “saint” will feel slighted and send his *djinn*s to afflict them. This is a popular folk explanation for

- ¹ 神圣化，神灵化
- ² 苏菲派，伊斯兰教内部的一个非主流派别，相信通过不断的自我净化，人可以达到与造物主合一的境界
- ³ 使协调



illness or misfortune.

Properly, only God can grant favors, because **sanctification**¹ of a person through sainthood is not permissible under Islam. But the role of a holy man serving as an intermediary to help a person connect with God is well established in popular culture.

These beliefs are linked to **Sufism**², the inner or mystical dimension of Islam that originated in the eighth century. There are many Sufi orders in Tunisia that gather at the mosque or tomb of their “saint” or holy man and follow a particular *tariq* (path), or way of worshipping, more **attuned**³ to a mystical communion with God than a literal studying of the Koran. Once, Sufi orders had

great prestige in Tunisia, with close ties to the court of the bey, but as Tunisia moved toward independence, they supported the powers-that-be¹ and their reputation suffered. Today Sufis are a small minority.

¹ 有权势的人