

Tunisia: A Nation of Multicultural Heritage

By Embassy of Tunisia in Japan



Photos: Ruins of Carthage, Tunisia

Hear the siren song that calls you to Tunisia. This hospitable land of colors and contrasts, spices and scents invites you to enjoy its natural beauty, ancient cities, lively festivals and warm friendliness of its people. Welcoming visitors to its shores has long been an honored Tunisian tradition, and an impressive infrastructure of modern hotels, restaurants, international airports, tourism offices and information centers has been developed to add to the comfort and pleasure of our guests.

In this land of the familiar and the exotic, one can watch the sun rise over the Sahara, enjoy a gourmet meal at a seaside resort, and top off the evening with a midnight swim in the pool of a modern comfortable hotel.

Whether you prefer a long walk along miles of sparkling beaches, windsurfing the cool Mediterranean breezes, exploring ancient sites and legendary cities, a game of golf or just a long lazy day relaxing on the warm golden sands – Tunisia has it all!

Carthage

Who has not heard of Hannibal and this city Carthage who dared brave the might of Rome?

Now the ruins of both these great empires lie open to the sun and wild flowers. Declared a national monument, the town of Carthage abounds in vestiges of the Punic and Roman empires such as baths, dwellings, temples, shrines, and the fabulous naval port of the Carthaginians.

The hill of Byrsa, where in the 8th century BC, Carthage, or “Kart Hadasht” (“the new town”), was founded by the legendary Princess Elissa-Dido, is a storehouse of history.

Carthage once ruled over North Africa. It had trading posts all over the Mediterranean basin, including Sicily, Sardinia, Corsica and the Balearic Islands and in Europe, controlling the main maritime routes and accumulating great wealth.

Meanwhile, Rome had conquered the whole of southern Italy, becoming a powerful military state and seeking further conquests. Peaceful coexistence between the two empires was no longer possible and they entered into a terrible struggle that lasted 118 years, from 264 to 146 BC.

How strange that the beautiful site of Carthage should have been the theater of such violence. As a Roman historian wrote of the fall of Carthage: “The city was then razed and burnt to the ground and the accursed land covered with salt to ensure its barrenness.”



An inauguration ceremony for “Legacy of Carthage” exhibition at Museum of Kyoto in February 2010, attended by Tunisia’s ambassador, among other participants

For 1,000 years, Phoenicians were masters of the Mediterranean and over 200 warships and innumerable merchant vessels were sheltered in the nearby port of Salamambo. At its center, Admirals Island still exists and archeologists are reconstituting the pavilion with its shrine and docks. Next to the port lies the ancient sanctuary of the goddess Tanit (Tophet), a quiet, shady square of hundreds of funeral steles.

The Romans returned to Carthage and built on its ruins a new Carthage resplendent with great buildings, theaters, villas and baths. Carthage became the administrative capital for Africa and its importance can be seen in the Antonine Thermal Baths, one of the largest built under the Roman empire, with the “cool room” an amazing 47 meters long and 15 meters high. The Roman Theater is still used today for the International Summer Festival of Carthage.

People of Tunisia

The original inhabitants of Tunisia were the Berbers, followed by settlers and tradesmen from throughout the Mediterranean basin.

Tunisia’s location in the heart of the Mediterranean has placed it at the crossroads of many of the world’s great civilizations. Conquerors such as the Phoenicians, Romans, Vandals, Byzantines, Turks, Spanish and French have all left their legacy in art, architecture, and the entire rich fabric of Tunisian society.

Throughout the centuries, colonizers and traders intermingled with the population. However, it was the Arabs who, in the 7th century, exerted the most influence and established themselves permanently. Bedouin tribes from the east arrived in the 11th century and further reinforced the Arabic language and Islamic religion. The Berbers initially resisted assimilation and retreated to the mountains, the island of Jerba or the arid regions of the south behind their earthen fortresses known as “ksours.” Centuries of intermarriage and trade broke down their isolation.

The Tunisian of today – city-dweller, rural farmer, or inhabitant of the desert or the mountains – is proud of his/her “Tunisian identity,” a composite of various civilizational influences. Aware of their rich historical heritage, Tunisians show a genuine interest and definite respect for others, as evidenced in their moderation, tolerance and hospitality.



Flyer for exhibition at Hamamatsu Municipal Museum



Examples of objects on display at "Legacy of Carthage" exhibition: warrior chest protector, lion statue, Venus head statue, Mediterranean mosaic, jewelry & sarcophagus marble statue

Multicultural Heritage

Tunisians are quick to give directions and any form of assistance they can to the visitor who asks for help. The overwhelming majority speak Arabic and French. With modern education, English is taught today in all schools and is increasingly spoken, especially by younger people. Some German and Italian are also spoken.

Tunisia also has a rich Islamic heritage with many beautiful mosques and one of the holiest cities in Islam in Kairouan. However, you will be able to see minarets and hear the call to prayer in any town and city in Tunisia.

Are you a "Star Wars" fan? If so, Tunisia is definitely the travel destination for you. Parts of George Lucas' "Star Wars" movies were filmed in the deserts of Tunisia; and yes, many of these locations can still be visited.

Tunisia's vast deserts and curious dwellings (dug out and carved underground) made it the ideal locale for "Star Wars" along with a host of other Hollywood films. For all you movie buffs – especially "Star Wars" fans – we've got a little "on location" Tunisia tour awaiting you.

"When I was searching in 1977 for a place to make the first 'Star Wars' movie, I found Tunisia the ideal country for filming: beautiful countryside, unique architecture and a very high level of technical sophistication." (George Lucas)

Exhibition of Carthage in Japan

"The Legacy of Carthage" exhibition, organized jointly by the government of Tunisia and Japanese film producer Toei Co., traces the legacy of Carthage from the Punic to Roman eras through precious artworks and a collection of mosaics reputed to be the finest in the world.

A message to Japan

Tunisian President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali considers the exhibition a message of friendship to the people of Japan, which will build bridges between Tunisia and Japan and contribute to strengthening the relations of friendship between the two countries, as well as attracting a greater number of Japanese visitors to Tunisia.

It showcases Tunisia's rich Carthaginian and Roman legacy and



Tunisian President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali

aims to increase bilateral cultural exchanges, while simultaneously increasing Tunisia's profile among the Japanese people.

A profusion of objects & ideas

During the exhibition, lasting over 18 months, 159 archaeological pieces are visiting nine Japanese cities. The exhibits include lithic objects; shaped vases; sculptures in stone and metal; votive steles with triangular pediments; lamps; terracotta vases; funerary urns; pottery; gold jewelry; bone and ivory statuettes; funerary masks; Punic and Roman theater masks; mosaics, including the famous scene Haïdra representing the islands and cities of the Mediterranean, a mosaic exceptional and unique in the world; and finally, the famous Carthaginian armor protecting the chest of the warrior. It also offers an opportunity for Japanese visitors to admire some splendid 2nd and 3rd century frescoes and mosaics discovered in Carthage, El Jem, Utica, Sbeitla, Sousse and other Tunisian cities.

The pieces trace the history of a nation that aspires ardently to remain a land of encounter and civilization, and that works tirelessly to be a bridge between the Japanese and Tunisian peoples by reducing distances and incorporating differences, which we see as sources of enrichment and development.

The exhibition has already visited Sendai, Kanazawa, Tokyo, Okayama, Morioka and Kyoto. It is now being held in Hamamatsu until May 30, and will move to Miyazaki and Nagoya later this year.

Alongside the exhibition, the Embassy of Tunisia in Japan organized lectures on the mosaic in Tunisia and conferences on the Era of Hannibal. Moreover, Tunisian Ambassador Noureddine Hached organizes a "Carthago Night" in every city hosting the exhibition. In addition, Japanese television teams and journalists have traveled to Tunisia to produce promotional works on archaeological, historical, artistic, culinary and even bathing scenes.

This event so far has attracted more than 150,000 Japanese and foreign visitors, arousing the attention of the media. It is expected to enable a large segment of the Japanese public to discover Tunisia's rich civilizational heritage as well as the history of Carthage, which is included in UNESCO's World Heritage list.

"The Legacy of Carthage" is the third exhibition of its kind, after two large-scale traveling ones: in 1987-1988 to the United States, dubbed "Carthage and its mosaics," and in 2003 to Spain, titled "Tunisia at the crossroad of cultures."

"The Legacy of Carthage" exhibition reminds our Japanese friends of the decisive role played by Carthage, the great rival of Rome, in building world civilizations, and contributes ultimately to the influence of Tunisia as an emblematic space of encounter between past, present and future.

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