

# Tunisia

## Diversifies into eco-tourism

By Ian Stalker

Tunisia is inviting visitors to step away from the country's popular and sun-soaked Mediterranean beaches for at least part of their vacation and enter a world of sand and oases that long ago played host to Roman Legions and camel-borne caravans, and on a more recent note has seen the swashbuckling Luke Skywalker and his fearsome black-clad foe Darth Vader.



Tunisia's beaches have been the cornerstone of its flourishing tourism trade but tourism officials, aware of growing interest in ecotourism, are increasingly promoting their share of the world's greatest expanse of desert. But guide Karim Tlemceni says those visiting the Tunisian Sahara shouldn't simply expect endless sand, with the region having many oases, and brush being seen alongside many roads. "The south is very varied," he says. Much of southern Tunisia's tourist trade centers around the city of Tozeur, found in a large oasis. Visitors will find many Tozeur travel firms offering a host of desert excursions, including ones to what locals refer to as Star Wars Village, a site that has smallish structures built in the mid-1970s under the supervision of film director George Lucas for such movies as Star Wars and The Phantom Menace. (Other Tunisian sites have appeared in the Star Wars movies as well, among them Tatouine, with Lucas phonetically adopting that name for his out-of-this-world blockbusters.) Star Wars Village attracts a steady stream of curious

foreigners, and also periodically hosts some grand celebrations, including ones on New Year's Eve.

But a region that once saw slow-moving caravans moving under a blazing sun can now accommodate tourists in air-conditioned comfort, with Tozeur lodging options including a five-star Sofitel property, and the town having an international airport. A growing tourism infrastructure is also seeing an 18-hole golf course being built.

However, Tozeur, which owes its greenery to underground springs, continues to have its natural side, with palm trees seen throughout the town, and figs, dates and other fruit grown there too. A Tozeur architectural trademark is distinctive geometrical patterns on the brick exteriors of buildings.

Vacationers drawn to southern Tunisia can also briefly experience the nomadic life that was once common in the area, with some firms inviting people to overnight in the type of large tents long favoured by those who opted for a lifestyle that often saw them on the move.

And vacationers seeking more unusual

accommodations may opt to overnight in a southern Tunisia Troglodyte community, where subterranean dwellings were literally hacked from stone. Some of those dwellings, which have beds, will host visitors.

Another way of experiencing earlier lifestyles is through a guided camel excursion that may range from an hour to several days. The community of Zaafrane, for instance, lures many eager to go on short camel jaunts, with those ships of the desert heading into an area of seemingly endless dunes.

"You come for the dunes and you've got plenty of dunes," Tlemceni says. "There's a proverb that says you will be enthralled by the dunes and come back."

Southern Tunisia is also home to part of the Atlas Mountain range, salt flats and rock of varying colours.

And Tlemceni adds that the region's predominant topographical feature -- which was encountered by Roman Legionnaires and North African traders who crossed the Sahara long, long ago will always be on display for tourists. "The sand," he says, "is eternal." ■