



Focus On TUNISIA

School Program

Extending from the luxuriant Mediterranean seacoast to the arid Sahara, Tunisia is a North African Muslim nation that feels strong ties to the Middle East. At one time, Tunisia hosted the headquarters of both the Arab League and the Palestine Liberation Organization. In addition, Tunisia's official language is Arabic, even though its population is homogeneously Berber, a North African ethnic community whose native language, in Tunisia at least, has become mostly obsolete. (Bilingual Tunisians most commonly speak Arabic and French.) Tourists flock to Tunisia's sparkling coastal beaches, but seldom stray from Mediterranean resorts to explore the country's extensive, well-preserved Roman ruins that lie inland. Both inside and outside tourist districts, family-oriented Tunisians welcome visitors who respect their Muslim traditions, even at single-sex bathhouses where Tunisians typically gather to socialize.

AFS & Your Experience

AFS programs were launched in Tunisia in 1968 when Tunisian students went to the United States. Four years later, Tunisia started hosting foreign exchange students on summer programs and, from 1977 on, year programs.

These programs continued and substantially expanded until 1989. During this period, more than 350 foreign exchange students from 10 countries were hosted in Tunisia.

Throughout the 1990s, AFS Tunisia operated international archaeology work camp programs along with study tour programs. In addition, the organization sustained its family hosting experience by arranging short-term placements for both university students and professors, mainly from the US. These programs have given AFS Tunisia a strong recognition from the Ministry of Culture and Youth and from the Ministry of Education and Training. Importantly, they helped sustain the "AFS spirit" in Tunisia. The traditional AFS sending and hosting programs resumed in 2003.

AFS will be at your side throughout your intercultural exchange. Even before leaving your home country, you will participate in organized AFS orientations and have the assistance of experienced AFS volunteers. Once in your host country, you can rely on your local volunteer contact and other chapter volunteers to support you in your experience. Together we will ensure that you have an incredible experience abroad.

Landing in Tunisia

As soon as you arrive at the Tunis-Carthage airport, you and your fellow AFSers will collect your luggage, pass through customs and be met by AFS volunteers, who will take you to your first orientation.

Arrival Orientation

The arrival orientation aims at preparing you for your experience in Tunisia in terms of integration into the host family and school and to provide you with cues to understanding Tunisian and Arab cultures.

The first orientation session will be combined with a language training camp to give you an initial introduction to Tunisian Arabic dialect and to the classical Arabic language, which will be used by both the family and your school. The first orientation and language training session will last four to five days, after which you will be picked up by your families or be escorted to them by volunteers.

Living in Tunisia

Lifestyle and Family Living

Tunisian culture is an interesting and charming example of Arab Islamic culture blended with Mediterranean, European and Western influences, the result of 3,000 years as a melting pot of Mediterranean cultures combined with a genuine openness to and acceptance of others. The geo-strategic position of the country at the heart of the Mediterranean Basin and as a crossroads of the Arab world has also strongly influenced the country's identity. In addition, Tunisia is historically the country that gave its name to the entire African continent. Although only 5% of its population is black, some of its traditions belong to the African cultural heritage.

With such a diverse and rich culture, and with tolerance and peacefulness as some of the strongest features of its personality, Tunisia offers good opportunities for the most interesting intercultural experience. In large cities, Tunisian youth live along similar patterns as youth in Europe; yet religious celebrations and social rituals are deeply rooted in Arab culture. Tunisian youth dress and behave like Europeans: they like the same kind of music, go to fast-food restaurants and drink soft drinks, and dating is relatively common. Yet back at home, they are sometimes part of a family that is conservative and functions according to the same patterns as those of traditional male-dominant families.

Tunisia is one of most westernized Arab countries. Education, tourism and the media have been strong factors in this, along with the modernist inclination of Tunisia's leaders. The degree of Western liberality, of course, varies from urban to rural sectors and from one region to another: Tunisia is a land of diversity.

Tunisian families are quite close-knit. Family members enjoy being together particularly for special occasions such as religious celebrations, weddings, circumcisions and other family events during which the extended family along with friends and neighbors gather to celebrate. (Weddings are sometimes attended by several hundred people.) In daily life, everyone is busy with his or her own occupations (studies or work), but at least one meal is eaten as a family.

Dress and Appearance

Tunisian youth dress casually wearing most of the time pants and T-shirts or sweatshirts or a blouse or a shirt. Girls are usually more attentive to their dress and appearance; they try to dress fashionably and wear make up. Schools usually require girls to wear a uniform; however, this is not systematic.

You should bring sports clothes (jogging suits with T-shirts and sweatshirts) along with pants, jeans, shirts, blouses and dresses. Pack both sports (tennis) and city shoes along with sandals that you might like to put on during hot weather days.

On special occasions, you are expected to be well dressed with a formal outfit: a dress or a blouse and skirt for girls and pants and jacket with or without a tie for boys. Winter is cold and rainy; it is advisable to bring a coat or a warm jacket.

Diet and Meals

Tunisian cuisine is tasty, with much diversity. Tunisians eat a lot of meat, chicken, fish and turkey, along with cereals and all kinds of vegetables. Bread is very good and is a key component of Tunisian cuisine, especially since several dishes include a sauce (with meat or chicken and potatoes or vegetable), which you eat by dipping the bread in the sauce. Some people use forks and knives, others basically use their fingers (hands are always washed before and after each meal).

The national dish is *couscous*, which is the oldest known dish in the world. It is made of steamed semolina mixed with a light sauce made with meat, fish or chicken along with various vegetables. *Couscous* is eaten with a spoon, although older people in certain regions prefer to use their hands. Tunisian cookbooks include at least 27 different recipes for *couscous*.

Other cereal dishes include traditional *borghol* and *mhames*, made from wheat or corn, and non-traditional, such as rice and pasta. Pizza, another imported dish, is common, although it is usually eaten in restaurants rather than prepared at home. Vegetable salads are also part of the Tunisian diet, including the *mechouia* salad (grilled tomatoes and pepperoni).

Dessert is usually fruit, and Tunisian markets are colorful with all kinds. Oranges and strawberries are the most common in winter. April to June is the time for apricots, blackberries and *medlar*. Summer fruits are the melon, watermelon, peaches and grapes. The prickly pear (Hindi) and pomegranates appear in autumn, followed by oranges and dates (one of the best varieties in the world grows in Tunisia: the *Deglet Nour*). Apples and pears are present year-round.

Candies and sweets are also popular; Tunisian traditional pastries are extremely good. When you visit a relative or a friend, you are usually served pastries with coffee or mint tea or a soft drink. Pastries are also served during religious or family celebrations, which are occasions to prepare traditional regional dishes.

School

Schools are generally public, managed by the Ministry of Education and Training. The private sector accounts for less than 1% of primary education and less than 5% of secondary.

The system is structured in a nine-year cycle (six primary and three intermediate years) followed by four years of secondary education leading to a national exam taken at the end of 13th grade and called *le baccalauréat* or *le bac*. The first year of secondary education includes “common core” studies for all 10th grade students. At the end of 10th grade and depending on students’ performances and grades in various subjects, they can move into one of five fields of specialization that begin in the 11th grade: arts/humanities, math, experimental science, technology and economics/management.

The average time spent in school is 32 hours per week, unevenly distributed between weekdays (from three to six hours per day) and between classes (from one to five hours per week), depending on the field of specialization. On Friday afternoons, Saturday afternoons and Sundays, schools are closed.

Typical classes in secondary education are math, biology, physics and chemistry, computer science, French, English, German, Spanish, Italian, Arabic, history, geography, civic education, religious education, philosophy, artistic education and physical education. In some branches, other classes are added such as economics, statistics, management, financial mathematics and technology. The language of education is French for scientific, economic and technology classes, and Arabic for literature, philosophy and social sciences.

The specific grades and classes an AFS student will attend will depend on his or her age, level of mastery of French and specific motivations; they will be negotiated on a case-by-case basis with the school administration. Students can also participate in clubs and extracurricular activities (usually on Friday afternoons) such as drama, music, sports or health clubs.

If possible, a student will be registered in a school either within walking distance of the host family’s home or convenient to public transportation (bus or metro). The host family will accompany some of the students to school. The average class size is 32 students.

Homework is common in secondary education; an average of 90 minutes daily will be necessary for preparations. Evaluation is done through regular tests and quizzes during the trimester and then through a one-week examination period during the first week of December, the first week of March and the last week of May. Grades are given out with a possible high score of 20, and certain classes are considered more important and account for a larger share of the average, which needs to be higher than 10 for passing.

The school year starts on September 15th and ends the first week of June. It includes one-week vacations in November and February and two-week vacations in late December/early January and late March/early April.

Teen Life

Teen life is dominated by school, since a substantial part of the day is spent in class or doing homework. (Some Tunisian students attend extra classes with private tutors who help them in their studies.)

Some teenagers are involved in youth center activities (extra-curricular sports and arts); otherwise, they go out in groups to cafés or to fast-food restaurants and occasionally to the cinema. In summer, discos are very popular as are international summer festivals.

At home, teenagers spend time watching TV. In addition, boys play cards in cafés or billiards and video games in playrooms. (Girls seldom engage in these activities). Internet centers increasingly attract both boys and girls, who like to surf the web or chat.

Dating is becoming relatively common; however, girls will avoid going with their boyfriends to a place where they might meet their siblings or their fathers. Boys and girls treat each other on an equal basis (although exceptions continue to exist).

AFS Activities

In addition to an orientation at your arrival, AFS Tunisia will provide you with several others. AFS orientations are a chance for participants to meet (often for a weekend or for a few days) and talk about expectations for the future program and past experiences. Orientations involve participating in group activities and self-examination. Sessions usually provide new information and ways of looking at things while also allowing participants to share points of view. AFS orientations are social, interactive and educational, bringing together young people from many countries and helping them to better understand their own intercultural learning experience.

There is a Mid-stay evaluation where all AFS students from four or five countries gather to assess how their experiences are proceeding and to reflect upon the rich learning processes they are going through. The Mid-stay evaluation is also an opportunity for participants to review their initial expectations and goals and to assess where they stand now.

At Christmas, AFS throws a party, where participants meet an ever-growing group of volunteers, counselors, families and friends.

You will have a chance to participate in an excursion to the south that is quite different from the rest of the country. The beautiful desert and oasis landscapes, including caves that served as a set in the original *Star Wars*, are among the most interesting regions of Tunisia.

Before you return to your home country, you will participate in an End-of-Stay evaluation. You will have the opportunity to reflect on your goals and the extent to which your experience has fulfilled your expectations. The session will allow you to take stock of the rich learning process you have gone through, which will continue after you return home. It will also prepare you to understand and cope with any difficulties you might have adjusting to your return home.

Language

Classical Arabic is the official language of Tunisia, as it is in all 20 Arab countries with a total population of nearly 300 million. This language is used in schools, newspapers and official correspondence. In daily life, within the family, with friends and in informal contacts, Tunisians speak a Tunisian Arabic dialect.

French is Tunisia's second language and is very widely spoken. English is third; it is taught in school starting in seventh grade and is spreading through computers and the Internet. Tourism, among other factors, has led to the spread of German and Italian being spoken by Tunisians working in the hotel and tourist industries. These two languages, together with Spanish, are also taught in schools.

Host students will be registered for a course in classical Arabic at a specialized Language Training Institute (four hours per week); successful students will receive a diploma. This will be paid for by AFS Tunisia. Participants also have the option of registering for a more intensive course (10 hours per week), but they will need to pay the difference. The language-training institute operates only in Tunisia's five main cities. Alternative solutions can be arranged for students placed elsewhere.

Travel

Although it is natural for you to want to travel while in Tunisia, AFS is not designed as a tourist program. AFS offers the rare opportunity to be immersed in a culture and a country. It is likely, however, that you will have many opportunities to travel your host family, school, community organization, local chapter or AFS Tunisia. We strongly discourage traveling on your own or with friends.

Spending Money

Host families are asked to pay only for ordinary family events in which you are expected to participate. When you do such things as shopping for yourself or going out with friends, the expenses are your responsibility.

Young Tunisians are not used to carrying or spending large amounts of money. AFS recommends that you bring no more than US\$80 per month. Spending more money than your peers and family may create a distance between you and them. It is wise to learn to spend as they do.

Safety and Support

Tunisia is safe, and foreigners usually have little to worry about. As in all big cities, there are some pickpockets in Tunis (especially on buses and in the crowded commercial streets of the historic center).

Each student will have a volunteer counselor who will help whenever needed to solve problems with the family, the school or anything else. Counselors will play an important role in promoting the learning process inherent in the AFS experience.

During your stay, local AFS volunteers will be available to assist you as you learn to live as a Tunisian. In the event of an emergency, AFS staff can be reached 24 hours a day by you in your host country and by your natural family at home.

For the welfare of participants, AFS worldwide has two rules: no driving and no use of drugs for non-medicinal purposes. Any student who violates either of these rules will be automatically sent home. AFS Tunisia may have additional rules.

Health Precautions

In addition to the precautions mentioned above, AFS suggests that you discuss the health recommendations for Tunisia (which you can get from your government or easily find on the Internet) with your personal doctor, to determine what is best for you and your personal needs.

If you require medical assistance during your stay, your host family or local volunteers will be ready to help find it. As an AFS participant your medical expenses are covered

for illness or injuries incurred while on the program, exclusive of pre-existing, dental or visual aid expenses.

Documents

You must have a passport that will be valid for six months longer than your intended stay. In addition to your passport, you also need a visa to enter and reside in your host country. Visas are obtained through the consular offices of your host country, and requirements often vary from consulate to consulate.

Consulates charge fees for their services, and obtaining your visa can be a complicated and lengthy process requiring a great deal of paperwork, patience and persistence. AFS will help you obtain the visa and provide you with instructions regarding the required documents.

Program Prices

Please [contact the AFS office in your home country](#) for information about program price and scholarship possibilities and what the program price covers for the various program offerings. In most cases the program price covers the following: round-trip international travel with your AFS group; travel in the host country to your host family; travel from your host family to your international departure point; AFS's medical plan; placement with your host; orientation in your home country and your host country; 24 hour emergency assistance in your home and host countries; a global medical assistance organization to support extreme emergencies; a network of trained volunteers who support you throughout your experience.

In order to keep costs low and provide good service, AFS utilizes a network of volunteers and staff in 50+ countries around the world. Volunteers need training, support and assistance from professional staff in each country. Other expenses you will normally need to pay in addition to the program price: passport and visa fees, required inoculations, expenses for eyeglasses, contacts and dental care, school uniforms (where applicable) and personal spending money. Your housing and food are provided by your host family as part of their commitment to our program.

Country Information

Geography and Climate

Tunisia covers an area of 162,000 km²/62,550 mi², one quarter of which, located in the south, is desert with a few oases. The rest of the country is relatively green in the northern part, with some forests and agricultural land (growing cereals, grapes and citrus fruits), while the central part is less green with very little forest left but much arboriculture (growing olives, almonds, pistachios, apricots and peaches along with vegetables).

The country is relatively flat, and the highest mountain, the *Chaambi*, located in the central western part of Tunisia, is only 1,544 meters/5,066 feet high. Several chains of mountains/hills exist, particularly in the north. The most important, called *la dorsale*, cuts the country in its center from west to east; it is the backbone of Tunisia.

The country has 1,300km/800mi of coastline along the north and east, starting close to *Tabarka*, near the Algerian border, and ending near the Island of Jerba, close to the

Libyan border. The sea is very important in Tunisia from three perspectives: two important economic sectors are dependent on it (tourism and fishing), the sea has a strong moderating effect on the climate, and Tunisians love to go to the seaside during the summer.

The climate is Mediterranean along the coast and Continental inland. The country enjoys relatively moderate temperatures with an average of 12°C/53°F in January, which is the coldest month, and an average of 31°C/88°F in August. In some high areas of the west, temperatures can drop below 0°C/32°F at night in January or February and exceed 40°C/104°F in July/August.

Rainfall is irregular. Some years are very wet while others are very dry: 2002 was the driest year in 50 years, while 2003 was one of the rainiest.

Population

Tunisia has a population of 9.7 million (2002). The density is 60 inhabitants per km²; and 65% of the population lives in urban areas. Tunis, the capital, is the largest city with almost 2 million. It is divided into four administrative provinces. Other large cities are Sfax (450,000), Sousse (250,000), Kairouan, Gabes, Nabeul and Bizerta.

Language

Classical Arabic is the official language of Tunisia. French is a widely-spoken second language.

Government

Tunisia is a republic with a President. The monarchy was abolished in 1957 after the country gained its independence from France in March 1956.

The President of the Republic is the head of state and plays the leading role in conducting the affairs of the country. He is helped by a Prime Minister who is the head of the government, which includes approximately 20 ministers and eight state secretaries. The President is also the chief of the army.

The President, the Prime Minister and the ministers belong to the ruling party—the *Rassemblement Constitutionnel et Democratique* (RCD). This party has run the country since independence and holds more than 85% of the seats in the Tunisian Parliament. There are seven opposition parties which are young and have yet to develop their constituencies and their potential.

The country is divided in 24 provinces called *Gouvernorat* or *Wilaya*, which in turn are divided in 260 districts.

Religion

98% of the population is Muslim, and Islam is the official religion of the State. There are small Christian and Jewish minorities.

Launching Your AFS Experience

Evaluations by previous participants support our belief that those students who prepare prior to leaving have the best experience. In order to get ready, first make every effort to learn some key Arabic and French words and phrases so that you arrive with at least some basic knowledge of the languages.

To familiarize yourself further with life in Tunisia, make use of your local library and/or the Internet. A lot of general information is available about Tunisia and its culture.

Although each participant's experience is unique, we strongly suggest that you speak with a recent AFS participant to Tunisia. This person will be an excellent resource regarding living as a Tunisian. If you do not know any alumni, please contact your local volunteer or national AFS office. In addition, AFS Tunisia will provide you with a special packet of country-specific information.

Tunisian people will be curious about your home community. You may be surprised to find out how much they already know about your country. Therefore, it is also helpful to be as informed as possible about current events in your community and country.

If you have not already received a full AFS application packet, please contact your local AFS volunteer or national office to request one. We wish you a wonderful experience!

Curiously Tunisian

1. In ancient Tunisia, Hannibal was the leader of the Carthaginian army in the 3rd century B.C. which almost conquered Rome and which would have changed the history of the Mediterranean World. The strategy he followed in his war against the Romans is still taught in military academies around the world.
2. Ibn Khaldoun (12th century A.D.) is considered the founding father of Sociology.
3. A small Jewish community has been living in Jerba since the fifth century BC. Their synagogue, "la Ghriba," has one of the oldest copies of the Torah.
4. Tunisia has 25,000 classified monuments and sites, including six which are part of UNESCO's list of Mankind's Heritage.

How to Apply

To become a participant in this country's School Program, contact your nearest AFS office. To locate an AFS office, go to <http://www.afs.org/contact>

Student age (upon arrival)	16y to 18y	
Country data	Size	162,000 km ² ; 62,550 mi ²
	Population	9.7 million
	Official language	Classical Arabic
	Government	Republic
Currency	Tunisian dinar divided into 1,000 millimes	

Useful website	http://www.tourismtunisia.com/ http://www.tunisiaonline.com/
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AFS program destinations are not always available to residents of all countries. If a program interests you, please contact your nearest AFS office to find out if it is an option for you. You can locate your nearest AFS office at <http://www.afs.org/contact>