

Tunisian treasure

The island of Djerba offers history, hearty food and holistic spa resorts, finds **Rory Buccheri**

You're not the same person coming out as you were going in," says guide Jamel Arfaoui, as he introduces us to the maze of murals created by the Djerbahood street art project, an open-air gallery in the village of Erriadh on Tunisia's largest island. Bright-pink bougainvillea provide the only shade as we make our way past the village's white walls and blue wooden doors, mirroring the sky and the pillowy clouds above. This labyrinthine layout is common across Tunisia – an ancestral way of building villages "to confuse foreigners trying to invade", as Arfaoui puts it, eliciting a chuckle from our small agent group. I'm travelling with nine agents on an easyJet holidays fam and we get to know each other as we peek behind painted corners to admire the artworks around us.

Nearly 80 years as a French protectorate, before gaining independence in 1956, has made Djerba a hit with French-speaking tourists. But since easyJet launched flights and packages from Luton and Manchester in November 2024, the Mediterranean island is back on the British radar.

NOT JUST DESERTS

Tunisia has a reputation for value, but it's rich in cultural attractions too. In Djerba, these range from the medieval Borj El Ghazi Mustapha fort to El Ghriba,

the biggest and oldest synagogue in North Africa with parts dating back to 500BC, which is ornately decorated in blue and silver geometric tiles. To learn more about the island, suggest clients stop at the Guellala Museum atop Djerba's tallest hill, from where they can catch a magical sunset.

Star Wars fans might also be interested to know the village of Tataouine – the inspiration for the film franchise's desert planet – is a two-hour drive away, on the mainland.

Local artisans in the bustling medina will tell you Djerba is the 'land of Ulysses', a place whose lure was so strong that the Greek hero forgot why he wanted to go back home. For modern travellers, the island is ideally positioned to combine traditions from the Mediterranean and the Sahara.

I learn about unique regional dishes, uniting Bedouin simplicity with seafood galore, in a cooking class with Chef Leila at the Iberostar Waves Mehari Djerba hotel. We whip up pillow-soft flatbreads, lamb couscous and crunchy brik – a filo pastry parcel filled with tuna, onions, egg and harissa that is deep-fried until golden brown.

We tour six of easyJet holidays' most popular hotels on the island, from familiar international brands such as the five-star Radisson Blu Palace Resort to smaller properties with a stronger ➤



One of the open-air murals created by the Djerbahood street art project

by Rory Buccheri

DESTINATIONS

WINTER SUN | TUNISIA



DJERBA

Iberostar Selection Eolia Djerba

This family-friendly, five-star beachfront resort features five pools, including one for children. Youngsters can choose from 140 activities at the kids' clubs, while adults unwind by the pool or at a beach bar with Bali beds. Dining options include a buffet and an à la carte restaurant serving Tunisian dishes such as *tajine maadnous* (an oven-baked omelette). A night's all-inclusive starts at £140 in a double room.

iberostar.com

Royal Karthago Resort & Thalasso

The property celebrates its location on Djerba's east coast with a lagoon-style pool, private beach, saltwater pools with massage jets and thalassotherapy treatments galore. The whitewashed hotel is just 10 minutes by car from Djerba Golf Club. A night in a standard room costs from £96.

royalkarthago.com

Iberostar Waves Mehari Djerba

Dining is a highlight at this four-star family resort, with themed restaurants serving Arabic, Mediterranean and international cuisine, alongside several bars and a shisha cafe. Facilities include large outdoor and family pools, a spa, a fitness centre and a kids' club. Double rooms lead in at £135 a night on an all-inclusive basis.

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CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: A mausoleum in Borj El Ghazi Mustapha fort; the Iberostar Selection Eolia Djerba; the agent group

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connection to the local area. Standouts include the Royal Karthago Resort & Thalasso, where guests can enjoy entertainment in an open-air amphitheatre or dine at a restaurant fashioned after a Bedouin camp, complete with candlelight, clay tagines and woven tents.

HEALTH AND HEALING

Many of Djerba's four and five-star hotels feature *thalasso* (from the Greek for 'sea') in their names, with spas that source treatments straight from the ocean. The restorative algae scrubs, seaweed compression wraps, saltwater pools and hydromassages are as old as time.

As an extra selling point, all-inclusive hotels such as Cesar Thalasso include up to two treatments in a stay, while all-day spa packages are an affordable £90 per guest (including massage and hammam) at Ulysses Thalasso.

Indeed, affordability plays a key role in Djerba's allure, with seven-day holidays often significantly cheaper than in more-popular Mediterranean hotspots.

While many clients will recall the 2015 terrorist attack in Port El Kantaoui, some 250 miles away from Djerba, Tunisia has been building links with the UK trade, expanding adventure travel product and expecting £350 million in hotel investment over the coming years.

Tearing myself from Djerba's breezy beaches and peaceful spas is an arduous task, but one that comes with the reward of jasmine wafting in market squares and silk or pottery stalls to browse in the medina. Preparing to leave the island, I recall Jamal's words: to not be the same person leaving as I was coming in. **TW**

BOOK IT

EasyJet holidays offers seven nights' all-inclusive at the Royal Karthago Resort & Thalasso from £529 per person, based on two adults sharing a Standard double room with a garden view. The price includes 23kg luggage, shared transfers and flights from Luton on April 21. easyjet.com/holidays

AGENTS' VIEWS



Lyndsay Mylchreest,
travel consultant,
Go Cruise&Travel
"You don't have to fly to the Caribbean

to get guaranteed sunshine and beautiful beaches. The hospitality here is phenomenal – you could come for three nights and have a great relaxing break. Djerba caters to lots of budgets, from families and couples to groups of friends."



Kaitlan Timothy-Quye,
travel consultant, **East of England Co-op Travel**
"I expected Djerba to cater more to resort-goers, but it is perfect for culture lovers. I loved the Guellala Museum and El Ghriba Synagogue."



Evie Bodycote, travel consultant, **Hays Travel**
"I was blown away by this hidden gem – and interest in the area is

at a peak. I'd recommend the Iberostar Selection Eolia Djerba to couples for a more laid-back, luxury experience, and the Cesar Thalasso or Royal Karthago Resort for families who want to use the kids' clubs and animation activities."