

Tunisia

We have just visited Cameroon in Central Africa where we got acquainted with lifestyles of benue-congos, savoured the national cuisine, played football with Cameroon lions and, definitely, visited local gambling houses. No sooner had we come back to Russia, relaxed after such an exotic and tense trip, than our Editor-in-Chief asked us to go to one more African country. To celebrate a New Year in Tunisia, combining pleasant things with business, job with rest – what could be better? Though we both had missed our home and Russian gambling culture so much, we hurriedly packed again our suitcases and went to the airport.

The history of Tunisia goes back to the 9th century BC when the Phoenicians arrived to Tunisian coasts and founded several colonial settlements, i.e. base stations, sanctuaries and trading stations. The most famous city among them was Carthage. Since the middle of VII century BC its citizens had started a sequence of victorious wars, which at the beginning of VI century BC resulted in the foundation of Tripolitania that united under its ruling Sicily, Sardinia, Corsica and the Balears as well as South Spain and all the coastal areas of Northern Africa. In V century BC the Phoenicians managed to put under their supervision the Canaries and the Atlantic coast of Morocco. And only in 480 BC the Carthaginians' great defeat held up their advance to Southern Italy and saved Hellenic world from complete devastation.

In III century BC the growing power of the Roman Empire led to the conflicts known as "the Punic wars" between two major states of the epoch. As a result only the territory of today's Tunisia remained among all the Carthaginians' winnings. During the Punic War III a prediction of the former powerful city death came true – the city of Carthage was conquered. Its lands were damned to perdition, the territory was sterilized by tons of salt, beautiful houses were destroyed and fertile areas were divided among the participants of the victorious campaign. In 146 BC, after Carthage's fall, today's Tunisia was united with the

first Roman Colony in Africa. In the 1st century a new world religion – Christianity – came to that country.

In the time of the Roman Empire cities that had previously appeared were rebuilt. Their ruins still remain in Tunisia: Utika, Carthage, Gippo, Diga, Hadrumet, Phoesdrus, Suphetula and others. The structure of the cities resembled that of other provincial cities in the Roman Empire: the same streets, baths, forums, houses, triumphal arches and temples.

At the end of XVI century Tunisia was captured by the Turks, with the invasion lasting for three centuries. In 1881 Tunisia was taken under French protectorate. In 1956 the country became independent. And in 1957 the republic was proclaimed.

Though the official language in Tunisia is Arabic, the majority of signs and guideboards are written in the second language – French. Since tourism is one of the main sources of income, the locals also speak German, Italian, Spanish, and English. Nearly all the Tunisians speak French as fluently as Arabic. And it is quite simple to explain: a lot of the aboriginal people look forward to immigrate to France. Thus, no matter what your nationality is, you will not have any language problems in this country.

Tunisian monetary unit is dinar (Dt). The exchange rate is as follows: 1 euro = 1.5 Dt, a 1\$ = 1.17 Dt. But, dear tourists, watch out! One dinar equals to one thousand milliemes, unlike Russian system (1 ruble = 100 kopecks). At first you are perplexed, but after a week you get used to it and it is on arrival home that the problems begin, when you have to switch to your country's system. You can exchange money at the airport or in a hotel, provided that you have a passport. We would strongly recommend you to keep at least one exchange receipt, in case you need to make a reversal exchange from dinars to euros. Taking local money abroad is prohibited. You can only save some small notes as souvenirs.

Tunisia is a presidential republic. Since its proclamation there have been only two presidents. Zine El Abidine Ben Ali has been at power for about 17 years. On October 24 2004 he was again reelected for the whole term of his life. The president in Tunisia is such a respectable person that people avoid even talking

about him. And if so, they do it only in whisper. In every institution you can see his portrait. Just as in the USSR during Stalin's regime.

If all your knowledge about Tunisia is limited by Carthage we are glad to assure you that it is not a single sight in this country. Here practically every city contains a piece of history. It can be Roman ruins or Spanish forts, or even an orthodox church, built by Russian sailors, or an Arabic mosque. And if you add to the above-mentioned history never-ending snow-white beaches, a warm sea and a mild climate, you will have nearly Eden. The locals themselves call their country an Eden and repeat the saying, which has become an advertising slogan: "If you want to go to Eden, visit Tunisia!"

Our plane at last landed in a Tunisian airport and we went straight to the hotel but not to put on our bikinis and rush to the beach in search of free chaise longues. This season is rather cold in Tunisia and it is impossible to sun bathe at + 10. We arrived in the afternoon, having taken a rest, we had a wonderful dinner and then supper as well as an evening soup and after a good sleep we decided to conquer Tunisian world of gambling.

Prior to our departure from Russia we had learnt all the relevant information. There are 4 casinos in this African country. All of them are opened only for tourists since the locals are not allowed to gamble there. For a start we went to the Island of Djerba, where the first casino in our list – Le Casino Djerba – was situated. Its history traces a long way. According to a legend, it is that very island where Nymph Calypso had been holding Odysseus for seven years trying to gain his love. There are about 200 mosques in the island, the majority of which are interesting from a historic point of view. For more than 2 thousand years Muslims have been living side by side with a Jewish community. The Griba synagogue located in the Island is the most ancient one in the planet. Every year in May pilgrims from all-over-the-world arrive here. Besides, this is the place where the most ancient tores are kept. We had seen the synagogue before it got dark. In the evening we took notebooks and pens and following our already traditional route went to Le Casino Djerba situated in the heart of the tourist zone Sidi Mehrez.

Approaching the magnificent building of the casino with alluring lights we remembered that it belonged to the French group Partouche. Once we had already been to their casino in France. And our Editor-in-Chief has visited about 20 Partouche gambling houses in different countries. Having walked around the casino we came in: the interior, the service and the work of the personnel – everything was on a very high level, which is characteristic of Partouche group. There are 157 slot machines and 20 tables (English roulette, Black Jack and stud-poker) in the casino. Also, slot machines for children are available. In addition, a snack bar, a restaurant and shops are provided for gamblers. The staff turned out to be exceptionally hospitable. And some male employees did not fail to offer us their services as guides ... not only inside the casino. However, we did not plan such a close acquaintance with the casino and having cast a quick glance at the halls we decided to leave that too welcoming gambling house. Those who would like to visit it can call to Le Casino Djerba (75 757 537) or to write (casinodjerba@yahoo.fr) either in French or in English.

Other three casinos are located in Hamammet (the name can be translated from Arabic as “the place for bathing”) – one of the best Tunisian resort centers. Since the town itself is rather small practically all its population works in the field of tourism. The number of hotels exceeds the one of dwelling houses. Summers are very hot and merry there; winters are cold but still merry. Hamammet is the most verdant and picturesque region in Tunisia, which is famous for its sunlit sandy beaches. This place is also well known for its Spa springs and modern centers of talassotherapy. Recently a new big complex Yasmine Medina (with lots of bars and restaurants) has been built in the Southern part of the town. There are a cinema and relatively big theme park for children "Carthage Land". Frankly speaking, we did not understand why the park was cold “children”, because the majority of its visitors was constituted by grown-ups. And some merry-go-rounds were really hard to stand even for adults. However, we did stand them! And no wonder! Our recent trip to Cameroon had been such a trial! We spent sleepless nights trying to wash the colour of gambling tokens off our hands! And there in Tunisia "Carthage

Land" excited us so much! One important fact should be mentioned: the entrance fee amounts to 15 dinars and during one working day you can visit the park several times. 20 kilometers from Hamammet one more wonderful place is located. Phrygia Park is a zoo similar to South African reserves where animals live in big open-air cages and visitors watch them from passages hung over the cages. Apart from all this, there is a Congress Hall and a local bath Hamam where for relatively low cost you will be able not only to take a steam bath but also to have an excellent massage. To be quite frank, we should confess that we did not dare to visit the bath. But we could not resist the temptation to go to a famous Arabic market Suk. Though it was only its simplified variant (a mall street with lots of souvenir shops), the excitement we got from dickering with locals over different exotic knick-knackery could be compared with the one you get in gambling houses. But if you still believe that even after all this your passion to excitement has not been satisfied you can go to a new casino – La Medina, which was opened in April 2004. This is the most beautiful gambling house in Tunisia now: spacious, airy and very light. It works every day from 20 pm to 4 am and on Friday, Saturday and Sunday – from 5 pm to 5 am.

We liked the casino a lot. There are 3 halls in La Medina. The first one houses four American roulettes, two poker tables, two Black Jack and Punto Banco tables. In the second hall VIP-clients can try their luck in American roulette, play Punto Banco, Black Jack and Stud Poker. And in the last third hall there are 74 slot machines produced by Bally Gaming and Recreativos Franco companies. Though the slot machines are brand new, the games are out-of-date. As we had come to Tunisia only a week after EELEX exhibition, we were slightly disappointed with such poor equipment. Progressive Jackpots are not available. The stakes are as follows: min – 0,5 Dt, max – 25 Dt. Unlike the halls the bar in La Medina is rather modest and drinks are not free. However, the casino has its own restaurant where you can savour dishes of Lebanese cuisine.

To enter the casino for the first time you need to have a passport and then – a client card. It's quite strange but the casino does not accept and exchange local

money – dinars. So, if you are inclined to gamble, you should have dollars or euros on you. Though you can exchange money at the table, for the first time it's preferable to do it at the pay deck. You will not find in this casino a familiar to us crowd of security guards: one, who is rather a doorman, will meet you at the entrance, and one more – a policeman – in the hall. However, there are a lot of other policemen. Financial police watches not the clientele but the casino staff. The casino cannot open and close without these people; every millieme is taken into account. And even tea-boxes are transparent in this casino.

The casino has its own bus, which will drive you to the hotel and vice versa. On Friday and Monday one can enjoy live music there. You can even take you children with you and they will wait in the bar.

In the casino we felt a very friendly attitude of the staff towards us. Frankly speaking, in comparison with Cameroon “hospitality” at first it surprised us a lot. However, after we had got acquainted with a Russian woman working in La Medina, we learnt that Tunisia welcomes every client especially from our country. The casino even invites employees from Russia expecting a lot of Russian gamblers. “But this summer (which lasts 5 months!) not more than 20 Russian clients have visited the casino”, – our new friend complained.

We played a bit slot machines (as a result Olga and Victoria lost 10 and 15 \$ respectively – the note being made by the Editor-in-Chief), as well as the roulette and Black Jack (Olga: - 30, Victoria: + 120, the note being made by the Editor-in-Chief) and then went to our rooms.

The day after that our new acquaintance agreed to answer some of our questions and told us about the casino personnel and the game peculiarities. The staff consisted of 22 people: practically all were locals and only one person was from Egypt. 12 people were professionals and the rest were trainees who worked as chippers. It turned out that the present brilliant state of the casino to some extent could be explained by the professionals working there. They came from casino Caraibe that had closed in the town of Sousse and from Grand Casino in Hamammet. We were also very much surprised having learnt that there was not a

division into dealers and inspectors. Though in Sousse, which our Editor-in-Chief visited some years ago, it existed. We were told that there was a division according to the tables: two professional dealers – for Punto Banco, 5 (including our new friend) – for Black Jack and some more people for the roulette. Dealers and cashiers wore black waistcoats and waiters – red ones. You would be able to distinguish dealers and cashiers from waiters with the help of red bow ties and belts that were put on the game participants.

As for the gamblers, the majority of them is constituted by Italian tourists that come to Tunisia for a weekend twice a month. Germans, Swedes, Englishmen, Frenchmen and even people from Japan also visit this country. All of them come for a short time and stake in a modest manner. The nearest neighbours – Arabs from Egypt, Algeria and Syria – also drop by. But an ideal casino client is a Turkish tourist. If they gamble they do it for a long time and in a big way. Almost like the Russians! When we asked our acquaintance about the most interesting game during all her stay in Tunisia she answered that not long ago an Italian tourist visited La Medina. He was one of “Fiat” top managers or may be its director. He gambled in a very passionate and beautiful manner. “I even could not imagine such gambling!” – she exclaimed. “By the way, on the New Year 3 French and one Italian groups visited us. All in all there were 345 clients in the casino. We had been working since 5 pm to 5am. We were very tired. But I have never seen so many gamblers in one place (just gamblers but not mere visitors)!”

We went on for some hours talking to that girl and listening to her interesting and useful stories. Explaining where and what it was better to play, she advised us to exchange money not at the table (as the majority of amateurs did making a queue in front of a constantly busy croupier) but at a waiter, which was in the hall all the time. Also, our new friend, accustomed to Russian equipment, complained of a poor quality of the tablecloth produced by French company “Bourgogne et Grasset”: “Not only rolls it up as woolen things but also it is badly stretched. Sometimes you pull the roulette payoff and the cloth follows the tokens. And then you just have to tighten it. This is for sure a large drawback and clients

have mentioned it several times. In addition, the wheels with a small tube for launching the ball are not very good. I needed some time to get used to them though I had not have any such problems before. But as for the rest, actually, I like it.” Then we asked her to tell us about different game peculiarities and she immediately switched to the professional language.

It turned out that poker in Tunisia does not differ greatly from familiar to us 5-card poker. Only one card can be exchanged to one ante. However, if a client has made an exchange they have to gamble (i.e. to stake BET before the exchange). There are some differences in the payoff: Street 5:1, Flash 8:1, Full 10:1. A dealer is not allowed to gamble. There is a bonus stake – 1 Dt. Min stake is 10 Dt; max. stake is 500 Dt. Black Jack is the same. Surrender for each card except for the ace, double for any two cards, one split for aces, and two splits for other cards. Each gambler can play min 2 boxes and max 5 boxes. Min stake is 10 Dt, max 1000 Dt.

Punto Banco is very popular with French and Italian gamblers. But Russian gamblers are not interested in it. And indeed, how can a Russian person understand why they have to pay 5 % if their stake on Banco has won?

As for the roulette, we did not find any serious differences in the rules. The following stakes are allowed: 2.5 – 200 Dt, at chances – from 10 Dt.

So, if you have made up your mind to visit La Medina gambling house, the address is for you: Yasmine Hammamet, tel. 72 241 777, fax. 72 241 555. e-mail: casino.lamedina@planet.tn.

Not far from La Medina, Le Grand Casino Yasmine-Hamammet belonging to Italian Casino Group Astro Tourism is situated. Not to lose the enchanting impression from La Medina we dropped in Le Grand Casino only to find out that its visitors can choose from 17 tables (BJ, roulette and poker) and 140 slot machines. If you have decided to visit this casino, you should call or write in advance: tel. 72 240 777; e-mail: casino.hammamet@planet.tn.

The second casino belonging to the same group is situated in hotel Sol Azur in North Hamammet -- Le Grand Casino de Hammamet.

As the previous one it is characterized neither by a luxurious interior, nor by up-to-date equipment. This gambling house is rather small with only 8 tables and 50 slot machines. We got acquainted with it following the previous script but in the reverse direction: after coca-cola we went to La Medina again. The casino telephone is 72 279 550; it e-mail: belazurhotels@orangers.com.tn.

According to rumours one more casino belongs to Italian Casino Group Astro Tourism is located in Port El Cantau. But we failed to find any relevant information about it and thought that the house would not be interesting for foreign

gamblers.

Also we learnt that Tunisia was waiting for opening of casino Caraibe – the biggest gambling house in the country. Located in Sousse, the casino had been successfully operating till recently. It was suddenly closed without any obvious reason. The official explanation was need for repair. It is quite possible that the casino’s success made for its closing.

ОБОРУДОВАНИЕ ДЛЯ РАЗВЛЕКАТЕЛЬНЫХ ЦЕНТРОВ

АРБАТ КЛУБ

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CASINO de Paris MOSCOW

METROPOL CLUB

КАЗИНО КОСМОС

Donkhai Palace

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If it opens again other casinos will suffer from lack of dealers since a lot of them are temporarily working there. After the casino is opened Sousse’s tourist life will

change as well. Many people used to come to that town only because of an opportunity to gamble in Caraipe. And now when it is closed they have to make a 75-km trip to the nearest casino in Hammamet.

So, within one week we managed to visit all major gambling houses in Tunisia. And on our arrival to Russia we have brought a “hot” news to all the tourists who would like to forget about our northern snow in this African country. Since the New Year a new variant of poker – TERASINA – club poker, similar to 7-card one, has been introduced in La Medina. Its rules are as follows: the gamblers stake and after this everyone receives two cards (one of them – in blind). Then the gamblers make stakes again with a possibility to increase the previous ones. The dealer gives every gambler one more card until each of them has 5 cards or all of them but one discard. It’s quite probable that in a couple of months this game will appear in other three Tunisian casinos. And who knows, may be, in Russian gambling houses as well.

Having fulfilled the required program in advance, the last two days of our trip we dedicated to acquaintance with cultural sights of Tunisia. We went to the ruins of Carthage, saw the world's finest collection of Roman mosaics in the National Museum of Bardo, visited Salamambo Punic Ports and the Roman amphitheater in El Jem Museum.

Frankly speaking, after we had come to the airport we started to miss that kind, hospitable and interesting country. But for “hot” Tunisian guys that every 5 minutes tried to get acquainted with us, we would have sent the materials to our Editor-in-Chief and stayed there for one more week. On board of the plane flying to snow-covered Moscow we took our “field book” – an atlas – and guessed where we would find ourselves according to the fate’s or rather the Editor-in-Chief’s will next time. A new surprise will not make us wait for it too long.

Evgeny Kovtun

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