

Destination Paradise

While European tourists enjoy a fairytale holiday on the Tunisian beaches, police violently hunt down migrants at sea and along the coast to deport them. The human suffering caused by police actions is the dark side of the Tunisia deal, which ultimately yields nothing for Europe but costs a billion euros.

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There can be many reasons why we want to escape our daily reality and begin to long for a place we'd rather be. The travel industry plays on our unconscious tendency toward escapism by promising immersive, authentic experiences in far-flung destinations. The lure of luxury resorts with resounding names that evoke a royal, exotic, and certainly carefree atmosphere should provide the final push to click the "I'm going to book" button.

During my trip along the Tunisian coast (first half of October 2025), I saw that most of these luxury resorts are located in a secure enclave, with access routes for tour operators and security checks on the vans of suppliers. These police checks are also intended to keep another group of travelers out of the tourists' sight: the "black," primarily West African migrants who have sometimes been here for years and have made multiple attempts to cross to Italy. Tunisia is a country that has become economically dependent on tourism and cannot afford to damage its cherished image of a safe, carefree holiday destination.

I made this trip primarily to see firsthand the conditions under which migrants in Tunisia have to survive. However, in this photo essay, I choose a broader concept to portray the schizophrenic reality of the coastal strip. While European tourists escape their daily routine to enjoy an affordable yet luxurious beach holiday, migrants risk their lives from a beach a little further away to reach Europe. These contrasting worlds revolve around each other like polar opposites along the coastline. The tourist stays in their secure, all-inclusive cocoon, and at most sees a few women begging on the street. To entertain themselves, they sail around the coast in a mock pirate ship that could be the cover of a Lego set. Or they don a life jacket and let themselves be pulled across the sea by a speedboat with friends and family on an inflatable banana. The resemblance to the now-familiar image of African migrants in rubber boats, with both legs on either side of the air-filled cylinders for balance, is obvious. At the same time, the contrast between the two types of travelers couldn't be greater.

The average tourist has no idea of the drama unfolding just around the corner from their resort. If anything of "dark" Africa appears in their view at all, it's as a tourist attraction and in a childishly naive representation. For example, near Sousse, there's a zoo designed like a large African village where flown-in South African Zulus play music and dance for and with the visitors. On the coast near the town of Bekalta, I visited an indoor sports and recreation area with fairground attractions, decoratively decorated with elephants, a giraffe, and an ape with a fake, flowing beard. But the crowning glory was the Safari Shopping Center, located near fancy resorts in a tourist enclave near Monastir. It depicts a primitive Africa of tough warriors, wild animals, and dancing women, some of whom are bare-breasted. It's as if the architect was inspired by dated comics full of clichés about the colonial era on the African continent.

Because of the contrasts between rich and poor, white and black, fake and real, the velvety fairytale and the harsh reality, and because the Tunisian government does everything it can to

mask the painful story of "black" Africans in their country, I wanted to visually bring both worlds together in this story.

What is the world like for migrants in Tunisia? And what do they experience on a daily basis? Instead of a better life in Europe, they have become stranded on the Tunisian coast, without food, water, money, humanitarian aid, medical care, or a place to stay. Among the tens of thousands of migrants are so-called "fortune seekers," but there are also "genuine asylum seekers" who have fled the war in their countries, such as Sudanese and Syrians.

It is forbidden to provide assistance to migrants in any form whatsoever. Dozens of national and international aid workers have already been arrested and accused of participating in a criminal organization. Film crews have been denied permission to film since the spring of 2025. In this way, the government is attempting to conceal the violent methods used to stop boats heading to Europe and to deport arrested migrants to neighboring Libya and Algeria.

Despite the ban, journalists managed to secretly film. Arte's July 2025 report reveals that the government's approach completely falls short of the respectful, humane treatment agreed upon in the 2023 migration deal with Europe. The coast guard grazes overcrowded, sometimes homemade, boats, attempting to capsize them. There is also footage filmed by migrants of the coast guard attempting to overrun a boat and of officers beating the paralyzed occupants with long sticks. A mother can be heard screaming for her baby. Migrants who experienced the same thing told me that the coast guard continues this until a boat lists and sinks. These witnesses saw drifting migrants disappear into the waves. They themselves survived this horror, were arrested, returned to shore, and immediately deported.

The approach on land is no less violent. The National Guard hunts down migrants in cities and in the camps between El Amra and the port city of Sfax. What the police bulldoze and burn, the migrants rebuild. That's why the repression has been deliberately intensified since the summer of 2025. Almost weekly, bulldozers destroy the makeshift shelters under the olive trees, made of discarded furniture, mattresses, blankets, and plastic sheets. Upon entering El Amra, I saw such a convoy of eight police buses, three bulldozers, and two coaches ready for another manhunt.

All arrested migrants face the same fate: first, the police confiscate all their possessions (money, phones, documents). Then, silently, handcuffed, and bent over, they are forced to board waiting coaches. Their destination is the border with Algeria or Libya, where they are chased into the desert with batons. According to a September 2024 article in The Guardian, women are systematically raped by National Guard officers. If the police haven't already sold the detainees to a militia group waiting at the border, the migrants begin a weeks-long return journey to their previous homes on the Tunisian coast, without food or water. Many die, and the survivors see no other way out than to start over and save for another attempt to cross the Mediterranean. It has cost them and their families too much to get this far, and failure is not an option.

How do the migrants earn the money to survive, now that all aid organizations have withdrawn? Although employing a migrant is illegal, in the larger cities you see men working on construction sites, repairing cars in garages, or providing odd jobs for entrepreneurs or private individuals. Those who are unemployed can still collect empty water bottles from the abundant trash along the streets. At the end of the day, this yields a maximum of a few euros in deposits, not enough to live on. Women sometimes find work in cafés or restaurants.

Mothers with young children sit begging at a mosque or on the sidewalk of a shopping street, while others offer sexual services on more remote access roads. Some, in dire need, appeal to their families for a small donation. There is a strong sense of community. Anyone who has something shares it with others, regardless of language or tribal differences. Cooperation is essential for survival as a group. At the same time, people regularly die from malnutrition, dehydration, disease, and lack of medical care. Then someone calls an ambulance to come and collect the body.

While there are certainly Tunisian citizens who care about the plight of the migrants and, despite the ban, still give them food or money, there are also countless examples of everyday racism. People demonstratively hold their noses as they pass by and avoid all physical contact. Migrants are refused entry to taxis, and they are also not welcome in shops and cafes. Several people independently told me about street robberies by Tunisian youths.

These inhumane conditions are the downside of the Tunisia deal, which has earned the government over a billion euros. European politicians are aware of this and dutifully call on the dictatorial president to better respect human rights. But so far, they have done nothing to stop the violence.

A cynic might argue that the approach is working, because almost no boats are reaching the Italian island of Lampedusa from Tunisia anymore. A realist might argue that the migrant deal has essentially failed. The repression has only resulted in more migrants arriving in Italy from Libya. According to a recent article in *Trouw*, this represents a 66% increase in one year. In the words of foreign correspondent Faïrouz Ben Salah: "You can try to drive migrants away with sophisticated border control systems, unexplained arrests, deportations, torture, human trafficking, starvation, or slavery—Tunisia and Libya both have disastrous reputations in this regard—but that destroys thousands of lives without, on balance, reducing the number of migrants coming to Europe."

The migrants in Camp 24 near El Amra all said they continue trying to reach Europe. They form a dwindling but hard core that refuses to give up despite everything. Yet, the International Organization for Migration (IOM), part of the UNHCR, has recorded a rise in the number of migrants applying for the European-funded return program for the past two years. This has led to waiting times of six months or more. Those on the waiting list have to fend for themselves during that entire period.

One of the migrants who wants to return is Abdoul. He was standing at a café with a small terrace on the beach in Mahdia and asked if I wanted a drink. For two weeks, I hadn't seen a dark-skinned African on the tourist beaches, and now there stood a cheerful young man, very relaxed, serving customers in French and Arabic. He was playing soccer with the children of a Tunisian family, who seemed to know him well.

Only later did I realize that I had experienced something that is actually perfectly normal—diversity at a holiday destination—as exceptional. Almost an anomaly, as if this dark-skinned person didn't belong there. It was horrifying how quickly my own brain had normalized apartheid in Tunisia. And at the same time, I was hopeful that there were still citizens who, despite the repression, could see him as a human being. And, of course, as a very cheap labor force.