



# Tourism in the city of Sousse, Tunisia: evolution, crisis and regenerative development

Mohamed Hellal<sup>1</sup>✉, Slim Aliouet<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Department of Geography, Faculty of Letters and Humanities of Sousse, University of Sousse, Tunisia*

**Abstract.** Since the 1960s-1970s, mass seaside tourism has developed along the northern coastline of the city of Sousse. At the end of the 1970s, the inauguration of the integrated El Kantaoui tourist resort contributed to the structuring of a new playful centrality in relation to downtown Sousse. Successive crises, notably that linked to the Covid-19 pandemic, have influenced mass seaside tourism in Sousse, as in all classic areas of Tunisia (Hellal, 2021b). In addition to the development of real estate in place of derelict hotels, we are witnessing the regeneration of tourism activity through the emergence of new products: luxury urban tourism, health tourism, home tourism, etc. In this text, our aim is to show the mutations of the tourism sector in Sousse in relation to the urban, under the effect of the crisis. To carry out this research, we used statistics and fieldwork.

**Keywords:** mass tourism, city, Sousse, crisis, regenerative development

**Résumé.** Depuis les années 1960-1970, le tourisme balnéaire de masse s'est développé sur le littoral septentrional de la ville de Sousse. À la fin des années 1970, l'inauguration de la station touristique intégrée El Kantaoui a contribué à la structuration d'une nouvelle centralité ludique par rapport au centre-ville de Sousse. Les crises successives, notamment celle liée à la pandémie Covid-19, ont influé le tourisme balnéaire de masse à Sousse, comme dans toutes les zones classiques de la Tunisie (Hellal, 2021b). Outre le développement de l'offre immobilière à la place des hôtels en friche, nous constatons la régénération de l'activité touristique par l'émergence de nouveaux produits : le tourisme urbain de luxe, le tourisme de santé, le tourisme chez l'habitant, etc. Dans ce texte, notre objectif est de montrer les mutations du secteur touristique à Sousse en rapport à l'urbain, sous l'effet de la crise. Pour réaliser ce travail de recherche, nous avons eu recours aux statistiques et aux travaux de terrain.

**Mots-clés:** tourisme de masse, ville, Sousse, crise, renouvellement, produit

## CORRESPONDENCE:

✉ AnTeSaPer UR 16ES11, B-P 547, Cité Erriadh 4023 Sousse, Tunisia

✉ [mohamed.hellal2012@gmail.com](mailto:mohamed.hellal2012@gmail.com) (M.H.)

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## Introduction

The city of Sousse is located on the eastern coast of Tunisia and in the middle of the Gulf of Hammamet. It was the historical capital of the Tunisian Sahel region and nicknamed the "pearl of the sahel". According to the 2014 census, it has 221,530 inhabitants and manages, as the capital, a region of 675,000 inhabitants. It has a fairly varied economic fabric: industry, services, fishing, tourism. This last sector has evolved from a few urban hotels in the colonial city to a seaside tourist area consisting of a series of hotels. In 1979, the integrated resort of El Kantaoui was inaugurated, which constitutes a new tourist and leisure centrality in relation to the city of Sousse. It is a small city organized around its main equipment of animation, the marina.

However, this development of tourism activity was interrupted by a spiral of crises that broke the investment in this sector, which proved to be very fragile in the face of political and security implications. Successive crises, notably that linked to the Covid-19 pandemic, have had an impact on mass seaside tourism in Sousse, as in all the classic areas of Tunisia (Hellal, 2021b). We have already demonstrated in a published article on the evolution of the tourism system in Tunisia (Hellal, 2020) that tourist areas are at the end of their cycle (Butler R., W. 1980) and are forced to reconfigure and reconcile themselves with their territories. The study of changes in the urban composition of tourist areas is part of the tourism regeneration paradigm (Dredge 2022, Bellato & Cheer 2021, Ateljivic 2020). In the case of the city of Sousse, in addition to the development of real estate in place of derelict hotels, we are witnessing the regeneration of tourism activity through the emergence of new products: luxury urban tourism, health tourism, home-stay tourism, and so on.

All these crises, having influenced tourist activity, have had effects on the local economic system and on the urban of the city of Sousse: closure of hotels and para-tourist facilities, urban wasteland, change of vocation of the tourist land, etc. To this end, we ask ourselves about regenerative development in the tourism sector in Sousse in relation to the urban, under the effect of the crisis. Then what are the prospects for the development of alternative tourism in Sousse? Here, we hypothesize that a process of mutation into a new tourism product is taking place, in relation to the multiple crisis context: systemic, health and political.

In this text, our aim is to show the changes in the tourism sector in Sousse in relation to the urban area, under the effect of the crisis. To carry out this research work, we used the statistics of the tourist office, the administrative documentation and the scientific works to study the mutation of the tourist sector in relation to the urban, under the impact of the crisis. To support these quantitative data, we had resorted to the field visits and to the realization of the semi-directive interviews with the actors of the tourist sector to prospect the evolution of the system and the tourist product, in the town of Sousse.

Our text is divided into three parts: first, we will look at the evolution of the tourism sector in relation to the city of Sousse, then we will analyze the effects of the tourism crisis on the local economic system and the urban environment, and finally we will look at the prospects for development after mass tourism.

## **1. Evolution of the tourism sector in relation to the city of Sousse**

### **1.1. Sousse: diversity of the economic sectors and urbanization**

Heir to the ancient Hadrim, Sousse occupies a coastal site in the central east of Tunisia. During the modern era, it continued to be a port city open to the Mediterranean Sea: commercial exchanges, immigration of a large number of Europeans, urban influences at the level of the new city, etc.

In the colonial context, the influx of a large population of European origin (French, Italian, Maltese), as well as its economic and administrative role, contributed to the evolution of the urban fabric of the city of Sousse. By keeping a non-buildable area within a 250 m radius around the ramparts, a new city in a grid pattern spreads out between the old core and the port. This modern urban fabric is structured around squares such as those of Pichon (opposite Bab Bhar) and boulevards such as that of Krantz, which connects the promenade of Boujaafer. Modern buildings expressing colonial power were built: administrations (town hall), facilities (station, post office, casino) to constitute landmarks (Ghannouchi, 2012). Thus, there are urban hotels that were built in the central places of the modern city. These modern hotels are in addition to the caravanseraï of the medina, which hosts mainly traders and rarely tourists (Ben Hassine, 2014).

On the eve of independence, Sousse remained a city of regional importance firmly anchored to its olive-growing hinterland. In addition to its administrative functions, the economic activities of the agglomeration were closely linked to olive growing, the olive oil trade and industrial processing (Lamine, 1998). It is still a maritime city thanks to its port, which is partly fishing, but mainly international trade. This dichotomy of activities and its strong relationship to both the sea and its agricultural territory are represented by the two colors of the heraldry of the municipality of Sousse: yellow in reference to oil and blue in reference to the sea.

The products of "soil", oil and fish, were valued in the first local industries: soap factories and units of conservation, before they were exported via the commercial port. Later, the latter promoted the development of other export industries (textiles and clothing) in the Sahel region, as well as industrialization activities of imported materials for local consumption: carpentry, hardware, marble, etc. The city of Sousse, through its commercial port, has thus played the role of an interface between its Sahel region and the outside world.

In addition to its economic dynamics, the city of Sousse also benefited from its role of administrative framework. Until 1974, the date of creation of two new governorates of Monastir and Mahdia, this "pearl of the sahel", constituted the only chief town of the whole region of Sahel and subsequently its capital. To this end, these multiple functions are reflected in the urban structure of the city.

In the functional center of Sousse, which developed between the medina and the port of the city, we find the various administrations and facilities of regional interest, as well as shops and services. To the south of the commercial port, an industrial zone was developed which is made up of the first processing units of local or imported material (oil, cereals, metals) and which was structured in parallel to the unhealthy coastline (bhar zebbla), being at the time the outlet of wastewater. These factories were alternated by depots and counters of all types.

If the southern coastline of Sousse has been devoted to industry, then its northern coastline, still protected from pollution, will be devoted to tourism development.

## 1.2. From the beginnings of tourism to the development of the tourist area

The first modern hotels in Sousse, the Claridge, Regency and Hadrumète, were built during the colonial period, in the modern urban fabric. This last hotel (Hadrumète) was built by a Soussian promoter in the hotel business, Ali Mhenni, being at the base a contractor in BTP. Following independence, and according to Lamine (1998) the same promoter realized other hotel units: El Hana in 1969, then El Hana Beach in 1975 and Chams El Hana in 1986<sup>2</sup>. All these hotels of the Hana chain have an urban and seaside vocation, as they overlook the "cornice Boujaafer. These aligned hotels, whose number increased again during the years 1970-1980 (Nejma, Justinia, Nour justinia), are alternated by cafes, bars to constitute a playful centrality of linear type, in parallel to the Boujaafer promenade.

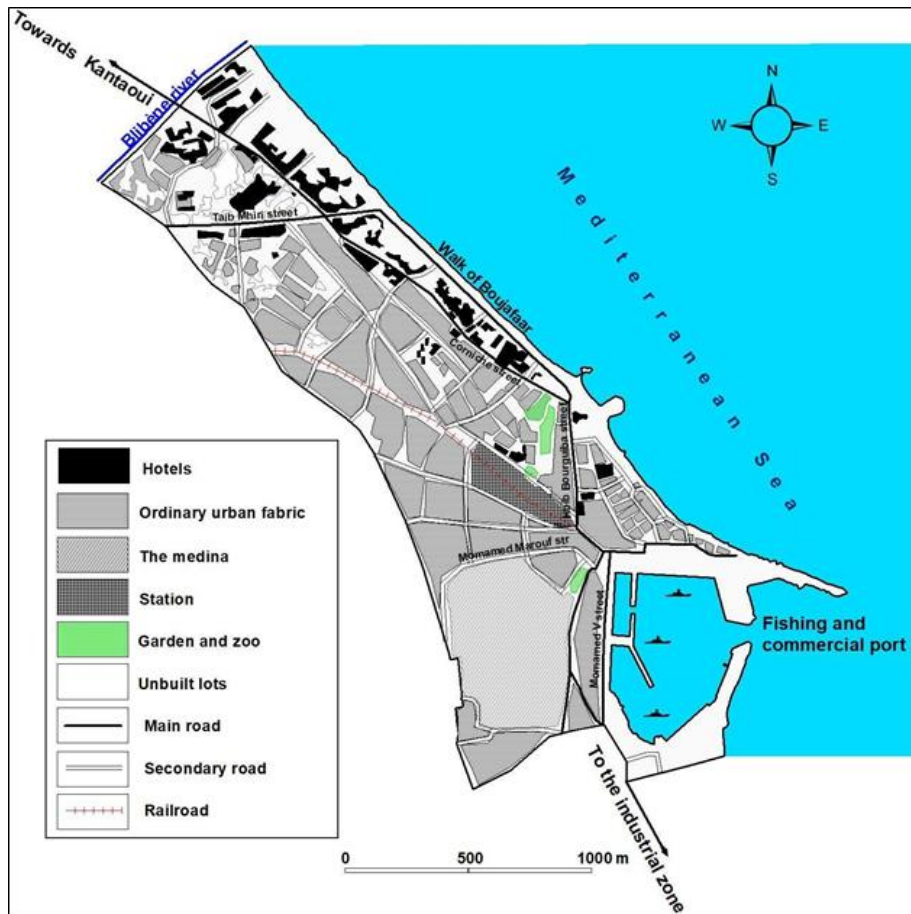
In reality, the Boujaafer Promenade is a development from the colonial period and a replica of other projects on the Côte d'Azur in France, notably in Nice, Cannes, etc. This urban structure with its tourist road classically constitutes the link between the city center and the tourist resort marked by its casino or its marina (MIT, 2003). Precisely, in Sousse the beginning of this promenade was marked by a casino (now disappeared) and associated with a hotel that its site is now occupied by the hotel Boujaafer Abou Nawas<sup>3</sup>.

At the end of the Boujaafer promenade, in the 1960s, a series of club hotels were built, foot in the water type: Riadh, Jawhara, Marabout. Over time, this

<sup>2</sup> Sousse-Palace and another hotel with an urban and seaside vocation, having a location rather foot in the water and not overlooking the promenade of Boujaafer. It was built in 1967, before it was renovated twice in 2000 and 2011.

<sup>3</sup> The small hotel "Boujaafer" built in 1971 left its place for a new structure of a larger and more modern hotel "Boujaafer Abou Nawas" in 1996.

structure has changed so that the Riadh club becomes rather the annex of a large modern hotel Riadh-Palm which imitates the silhouettes of neighbouring hotels of the chain El Hana. These hotels, which are distinguished by their volume, constitute an urban composition of articulation between the cornice Boujafer and the tourist area.

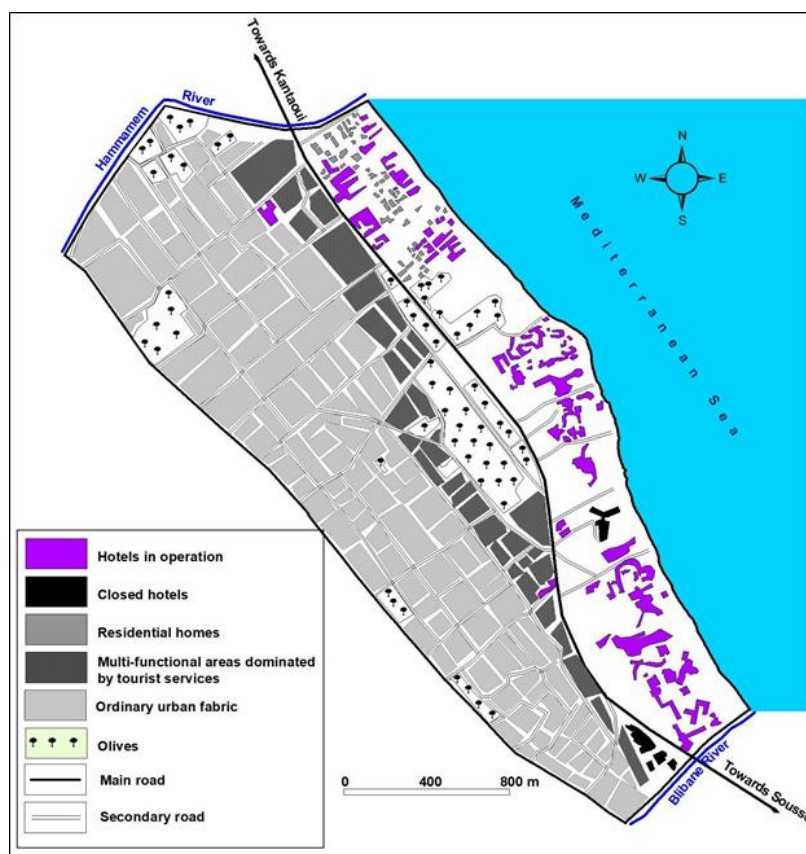


**Figure 1.** Tourist development in Sousse, in relation to the city, up to Oued Blibène  
Source: the authors.

In the 1970s, the Soussian promoter Mohamed Driss, owner, along with others in the Sahel region, of the Marhaba chain, built a series of seaside hotels, parallel to the shoreline. This is the context for the development of mass beach tourism.

In the 1980s, east of the tourist road, on the second strip where the lots are more urban, in terms of location near the main traffic axes of the tourist area, other hotel units were built especially those of Tej Marhaba and Samara. Moreover, their neuralgic locations in the heart of the recreational and tourist zone have allowed their promoters to realize nightclubs annexed and very trendy at the time (in the 1990s): Samara, Maracana, in addition to the Casino "Caribbean" which is also a great equipment of tourist animation located near them. Otherwise in the second band and

further from downtown, we see the proliferation of luxury residences to Khzama and Hammam-Sousse. Later, these housing areas were joined by urban services: shops, stores, banks, etc., to constitute polyfunctional urban areas, on both sides of the tourist road. This heterogeneous linear composition will be interrupted to the north by the El Kantaoui station, which will restructure the relationship between the tourist area and the city of Sousse (see Figure 2).



**Figure 2.** The tourist sub-area of Sousse which extends between Oued Bliène and Oued El Hammam

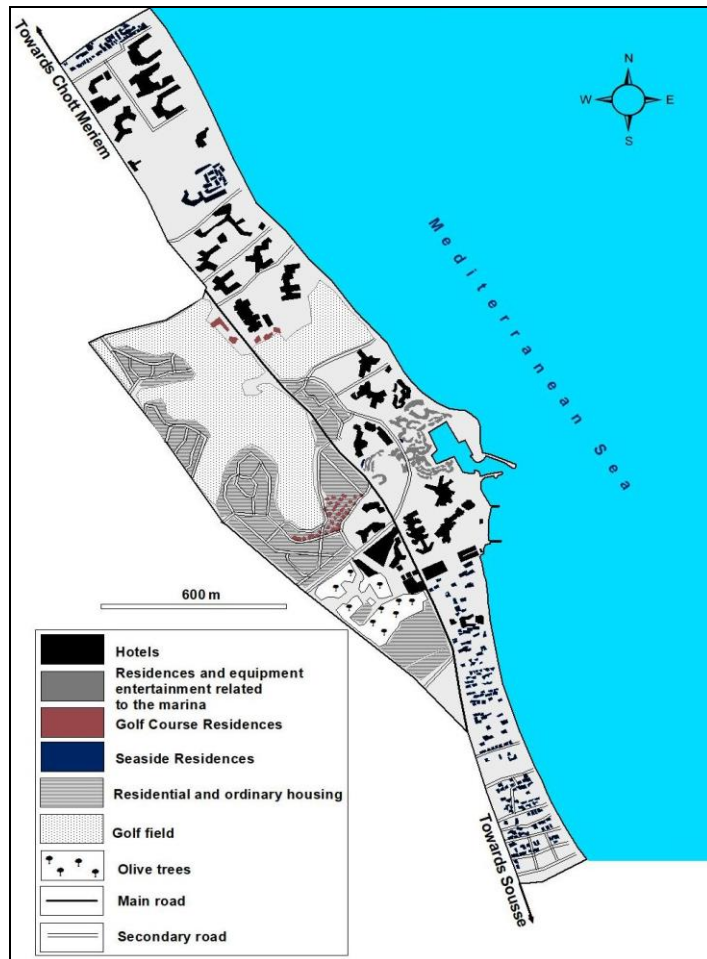
Source: the authors

### 1.3. The El Kantaoui project: restructuring the relationship between the tourist zone and the city centre

The evolution of mass tourism has produced a series of hotels that extend northward to finally give establishments away from the city centre. According to Lamine R (1998; 2001), in the perspective of creating a new centrality in relation to the city center of Sousse, in the late 1970s and early 1980s, the Tunisian state promoted the new integrated tourist resort El Kantaoui, north of the tourist zone.

This new tourist area "was intended to be an innovation in terms of tourist development, contrasting with the 'concrete walls' of the previous period" (Lamine,

1998). Organized around a marina and a golf course, the resort is composed of hotel units, apartment-hotels, restaurants and shops, sports fields and a golf course and a luxurious residential area. In fact, El Kantaoui constitutes, in the context of the late 1970s, the first grandiose project in terms of tourism development in Tunisia (13 600 beds) (see Figure 3).



**Figure 3.** The urban structure of the tourist resort El Kantaoui  
Source: the authors

The El Kantaoui resort was built by a semi-public company (the Company of Planning and Development Sousse-North) amidst olives (Miossec, 1996). Although it is far from the city center of Sousse, the urban composition around the port El Kantaoui is quite picturesque and reproduces the Tunisian vernacular architectural style: vaults, arcades, domes, etc. The whiteness of the building which is a specificity of the Tunisian urban landscape reminds Sidi Bou Said and even the medina of Sousse, except that here the carpentry (doors, windows, guenneries) are in green and not in blue in search of a symbiosis with the few olive trees left in the state and the orchards that surround them.

The designers and policy makers of the time tried to territorialize the project: its name El Kantaoui was chosen in reference to a local marabout "Sidi El Kantaoui". The entrance to the marina, which was inaugurated in 1979, was marked by a large natural stone archway supported by two capitals of Dar Chaabène, which recalls by its volume the large doors of the Tunisian medinas. In terms of functionality, the Tunisian residents who have residences in the marina itself or in the residential areas of the 2nd strip of the resort in relation to the shoreline ensure a minimum of animation during the low season, so that El Kantaoui is animated throughout the year.

The El Kantaoui resort attracts the Sahelian population of all the surrounding agglomerations for work and leisure. The cafes, restaurants and stores of the marina, which take advantage of the marina's decor, constitute a playful centrality and the ambient heart of the integrated resort. As a new centrality, "the marina of El Kantaoui has played the role of a leisure space that compensates for the lack of attractions in the city of Sousse and in the neighbouring Sahelian agglomerations" (Lamine, 1998, 206). Moreover, like the city centre of Sousse, it plays the role of a place of sociability and meeting between the local population and tourists.

At the scale of the Sousse agglomeration, despite the extension of the tourist area to Chott Meriem, the medina of Sousse, as a territory of identity and originality remains a place of visit by European tourists for shopping and for the change of scenery (Lamine, 2009). Moreover, since the development of mass tourism in Sousse, the main artery of the medina has changed its function to become a street of trade in crafts for tourists. This type of stores as well as tourist restaurants and cafes participate in the animation of the streets that connect it to the promenade of Boujaafer. Commercial activities and services related to tourism have contributed, for decades, to the urban change of downtown Sousse.

Finally, the spatial organization of the city of Sousse has been profoundly changed under the effect of the new economic system, being transformed largely under the effect of the development of the tourism sector.

## **2. The effects of the tourism crisis on the local economic system and the urban**

Over time, Sousse has become the 3rd largest tourist area in Tunisia: 93 hotels and nearly 38 000 tourist beds in 2023 (ONTT of Sousse, 2023). The development of mass tourism, during the second half of the 20th century corresponding to the Fordist model, meets the demand of European tourists from the consumer society. Concerning the destination Tunisia and particularly the tourist area of Sousse, this tourist sector begins its systemic crisis (Hellal, 2020) since the events of September 11, 2001 and the attack of Djerba in 2002.

## 2.1 The effects of political and security crises

The tourism offers in Sousse, divided by the ONTT into three sectors: the tourist zone linked to the city, the El Kantaoui resort and Chott Meriem, has always been marketed under the banner of "destination Tunisia". The policy of centralized tourism marketing has not allowed the affirmation of the tourist destination "Sousse", independently of the mother destination "Tunisia". To this end, the tourist destiny of the tourist city of Sousse has always been linked to that of the destination Tunisia, especially in relation to the effects of the crises.

Since the advent of mass tourism in the 1970s, the tourism system in Tunisia has not evolved as long as it remains dominated by tour operators who are the primary customers of Tunisian hoteliers. The communication for the destination made by these TO (Tour Operators) on Tunisia is too focused on a stereotyped image of 3 S: sea, sand, sun. In the tourist area of Sousse, we have developed for nearly five decades a mass beach tourism consisting of hotels that are aligned in parallel to the shoreline.

Coinciding with the first Gulf War in 1991, the destination Tunisia began its structural crisis. Moreover, it is since the tourist offer, which is mainly hotel and seaside, did not adapt to the international demand which is in perpetual evolution (Hellal, 2021b). The offer of these tourist areas designed in the 1970s no longer satisfies the new demand of European tourists who are becoming more sensitive to tourist territories carrying identity and principles of sustainable development. In the world, the crises of mass seaside destinations such as Majorca in Spain in the 1990s and Agadir in Morocco in the 2000s are indicative of this change.

The security crises faced by Tunisia as a family beach destination have amplified its crisis. The image of a dream vacation is not usually associated with undesirable events (such as terrorist attacks, crime and disasters) (Camară, 2022). The crisis of the tourist sector in Tunisia becomes more felt after the attacks of September 11, 2001 in the USA and April 21, 2002 in Djerba. This last attack was the cause of the "erosion" of the German clientele which constituted the first market for Tunisia. Moreover, until the year 2000 by recording more than one million German arrivals (ONTT, 2000). Since that time, the TO begin to sell off the tourist beds in the destination Tunisia and require the all inclusive formula, even in the category of hotels (5 stars). In this context, the international hotel chains, Iberostar, Vinchi, RIU, which get hold of Tunisian hotels in franchises, in rent or in management for account participated in the decence of the hotel industry in the meander of the cheap tourism. This operation of the tourist system influences the profitability and the amortization of these Tunisian hotels to make them very sensitive, facing the economic situation.

Tunisia, which began the "Arab Spring", has suffered the full force of the negative consequences of the climate of insecurity that accompanied its "revolution" of 14<sup>th</sup> of January, 2011. The political assassinations in 2013 following this event have

seriously shaken the tourism business. TOs are influenced by the increase in the price of their insurance and by the media discourse on Tunisia, which systematically affects the level of booking of the destination.

The crisis has become suffocating following the terrorist attack at the Bardo National Museum on 18th March 2015, around 12:30 pm. It was two terrorists armed with Kalashnikovs who first killed a law enforcement officer, before heading inside to shoot at tourists killing 24 and wounding 45 people of different nationalities. Immediately, the Tunisian forces stormed the museum to free the hostages and kill the two terrorists. Following this event, there was a drop in reservations on the destination Tunisia. The national union of travel agencies in France, which is the first market for Tunisia, recorded a drop of 60% of reservations.

Three months after the Bardo attack, on June 26, 2015, we wake up abruptly on the announcement of another attack that targets tourists in their place of stay, at the resort El Kantaoui by making 39 dead and 39 injured. The terrorist arrives on the beach with the clothes of a holidaymaker, his weapon being hidden in an umbrella. He headed to the beach of the Imperial Hotel Marhaba where he shot tourists sunbathing before continuing his massacre around the pool. Following the intervention of the Tunisian police, the terrorist was shot. But this was the worst terrorist attack in the country's history, bringing the entire tourist industry to its knees.

The majority of the victims of the deadly attack in El Kantaoui were from the United Kingdom: 30 dead and 26 injured. There, terrorism targeted the most important tourist market for the tourist area of Sousse. Moreover, until the year 2015, on a European scale, the English market is in first place with 674 372 overnight stays, before the German market in second place with 510 809 overnight stays. Following the effects of the terrorist attack, in 2016, the English market recorded only 23 678 nights, leaving its first place to the German market, which recorded 942 nights. To this end, it recorded a large drop of -96.6% compared to the previous year.

The choice of the target hotel is not a coincidence. It is a 5 stars establishment, which belongs to a member of the National Assembly and which hosts mainly English tourists constituting until 2015, the main tourist clientele of the tourist area of Sousse. So we can deduce that the attack embodies strategies.

The event in Sousse is a turning point in the *modus operandi* of terrorist groups as it targets tourists in their place of stay. The objective was to attack one of the key sectors of the Tunisian economy, isolate the country and prolong its crisis of political and security instability. This planned escalation stands out for its symbolism and its dangerousness as it takes advantage of the situation of weakness, in this post-revolution context and just after the first democratic elections in Tunisia's history.

The Tunisian authorities have been embarrassed by the attacks of Bardo and Sousse which have had a very negative echo, worldwide. To this end, the

communication specialist (Ben Ammar 2017-2018, p. 45) who worked on government communication on the occasion of the attack on Sousse believes that "the Essid government has failed to meet the requirements of crisis communication related to the attack on Sousse. It seems that no capitalization has been made on the lessons learned from the Bardo attacks. Thus, he sees that "it is clear that at the time of the occurrence of the Sousse attacks, no institutional crisis communication was in place. This leads us at first glance to say that the crisis communication was not thought through enough, but rather ad hoc and circumstantial" (Ben Ammar 2017-2018, p. 52). Yet "terrorist attacks are not crises like any other. They are distinguished by their complex nature, which argues for a different communication than would have been adopted in the case of a classic crisis" (Ben Ammar 2017-2018, p. 48).

It is clear that the attacks on Bardo and Sousse, which occurred in a period of 3 months, at the beginning of the tourist season, mark a change of target and strategy in the *modus operandi* of terrorist groups. After the politicians, national and military security, comes the turn of the civilian population, including tourists, are targeted. It is particularly aimed at the foundations of the national economy by attacking one of the key sectors of the Tunisian economy, already in search of recovery, after the events that followed the revolution of January 14, 2011.

A few hours after the attack in Sousse, the President of the Republic, Béji Caïd Sebssi, delivered a speech on the media expressing his empathy for the victims and he apologized for the tourists "Hosts of Tunisia", while emphasizing the cross-border nature of terrorism. Thus, after the observation of a certain dysfunction of the security apparatus, several officials, including the governor of Sousse, were dismissed. The media and consular reports of the issuing countries in Europe have influenced the prices of insurance for TO and subsequently the intention of the latter to book on the destination Tunisia. Moreover, the perception of Tunisia as a less secure seaside tourism country than before has influenced bookings downwards. The weakening of its image means that it can be substituted by any destination, especially among its direct competitors in the Mediterranean basin.

Under the impact of two terrorist attacks, tourist nights in Sousse fell from 6 110 801 in 2014 to 3 375 812 in 2015, which indicates a rate of decline of -44.8%, against -44.4% for all Tunisia. Thus the average capacity put into operation fell from 33,594 beds in 2014 to 32 772 beds in 2015, which is the equivalent of -2.45%. Moreover, this average capacity put into operation in 2015 represents 83.24% of the available capacity (39 995 beds) as long as entire floors and blocks of hotels are no longer operated, in addition to the units closed on the occasion of the crisis. At the same time, the bed occupancy rate dropped to -22 points from 50.5% in 2014 to 28.5% in 2015 (ONTT, 2015).

The effects of the events of 2015 continued into 2016 as long as overnight stays fell further to 3 362 636. On the other hand, the year 2017 was marked by a nice

recovery to record 4 232 974 nights with an increase of 25.9% compared to the previous year 2016 (ONTT, 2017). But, conversely the average bed capacity has declined: from 32 207.7 in 2016 to 28,975.4 in 2017(ONTT, 2015). In 2018 and 2019, overnight stays continued to climb, achieving 1 148 322 and 1 308 712 overnight stays respectively (ONTT, 2019).

Despite this recovery in overnight stays, the impact of the terrorist attacks continues in some European markets. The English market, whose share dropped significantly in 2016, recording only 23 678 overnight stays in 2017, weakens further by recording only 23 242 overnight stays. Even if it records a recovery in 2018 and especially in 2019 (ONTT, 2019), with respectively 99 860 and 506 846 nights, while it does not recover its first place in the podium of tourist markets.

The security crisis has fully participated in the change of tourist markets for the area Sousse-El Kantaoui. In 2019, the Russian market comes in first place with 1 485 355 nights, followed by the national market with 798 633 nights, then Algerian with 736360 nights. To this end, we note that the area Sousse-El Kantaoui undergoes the erosion of its traditional European markets, especially English and begins to become a popular destination. This image crisis, which hits Sousse as the entire destination Tunisia in the European markets, will be caught up in convalescence by the health crisis of COVID-19, which will not be without impact on tourism and urban Sousse.

## **2.2. COVID-19: an unprecedented crisis**

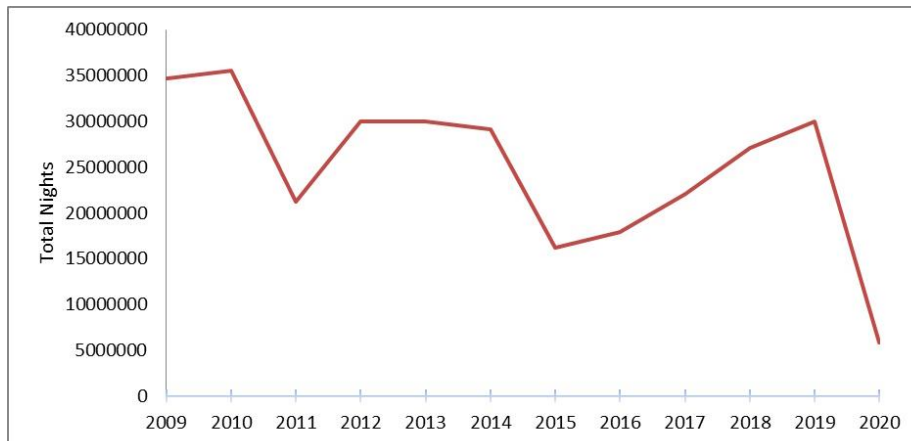
Globally, modern tourism experienced its first health crisis during 2003, with the spread of the SARS (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome) epidemic in China, which caused a slight decline in the number of tourists (2004) worldwide (11 million) and was forgotten by the following year (Duhamel, 2018). On the other hand, the new COVID-19 epidemic that was much more contagious and dangerous than SARS, brought world tourism to its knees, which experienced the most serious crisis in its history.

The coronavirus that was discovered in Wuhan (China) in December 2019 was highly contagious and very quickly became a pandemic that affects many countries around the world. On 2<sup>nd</sup> March 2020, the Tunisian authorities announced the first case of imported contamination. Gradually the contamination became local or horizontal. To face the risks and to be able to manage the epidemic situation efficiently, the Tunisian authorities decided to close the borders. This decision can only be catastrophic for the tourism sector, especially at that time, during the middle season (March), in full preparation of the high summer season of 2020. Following the closure of the borders to stop local contamination, only flights of repatriation of non-resident Tunisians abroad have been scheduled.

As for the destination Tunisia, during the year 2020, compared to the previous year, a decline in tourism revenue of -64%, while tourist arrivals have fallen by -78% (against -72% globally) and overnight stays have collapsed by -80.5% (ONTT, Tunisian tourism in figures, 2020).

Regarding the tourist area Sousse-El Kantaoui, in this pandemic context, arrivals have declined from 1 308 712 in 2019 to 302 003 in 2020, with a decline rate of -76.9% and overnight stays have also declined from 5 811 946 to 872 662 nights, with a difference of -85% (ONTT of Sousse, Report of the year 2020). To this end, and despite these declines, we note that the area Sousse-El Kantaoui is more resilient than the rest of the tourist areas of Tunisia, in terms of number of entries and not in terms of overnight stays, as it specializes more and more in national tourism and proximity (Algeria and Libya) of short stays.

The Covid-19 crisis represents the most serious crisis in the history of tourism, at all its levels: international, national and local. Under the effect of this pandemic, the area Sousse-El Kantaoui, recorded the largest decline during the last 12 years. However, the revolutionary context (2010-2011) as well as the political and security events that followed it have also influenced the performance of the Sousse-El Kantaoui area. Moreover, the curve of evolution of tourist nights has declined on the occasion of each incident of this type (see figure below), which confirms the vulnerability of the tourism sector in Sousse as everywhere in Tunisia.



**Figure 4.** Evolution of tourist nights in the tourist area Sousse-El Kantaoui

Source: statistics issued by the ONTT of Sousse

Faced with the spread of the Covid-19 virus, from March 8, 2020, the Tunisian authorities have decided that returnees apply the self-containment in their places of residence in Tunisia, systematically after their return. In order to properly manage the situation, following some outbursts and non-application of the rules of self-containment, on March 20, 2020, the authorities have chosen to put returnees in places of compulsory containment, called "Covid-19 centres. These controlled

accommodation structures are spread throughout the national territory, but they are mainly concentrated in seaside cities with large capacity hotels in terms of beds: Hammamet, Sousse, Djerba, Monastir, etc. (Hellal, 2020).

After their success in fighting the pandemic during the first wave and under pressure from the Federation of Tunisian Hoteliers, on 27th June 2020, at the beginning of the summer season, the Tunisian authorities have decided to open the national borders to welcome tourists and expatriates Tunisians. Such an orientation that aims to cushion the economic and social impacts of COVID-19 on the one hand and to exploit their prowess in effectively fighting the virus on the other. But to limit the risks of external contamination (or vertical), the Tunisian authorities were obliged to classify the countries of origin of Tunisian expatriates in 3 zones according to the level of spread of Corona virus: red zone for countries of high risk, orange zone for countries at medium risk and green zone for countries at low risk. So, we decided to put only the arrivals of the red zone in the mandatory confinement, for a period of 7 days, before carrying out a test that will allow them to continue the self-confinement at home. Otherwise for the orange zone, Tunisian expatriates are subject to self-containment at home. Thus to welcome tourists without risk, we opted for a national health protocol applied from all their trajectories: from the airport, through the transfer bus and to the hotels.

Since the opening of the borders on June 27, 2020, the number of COVID centres has been reduced to only two, so that the rest of the hotels can be used to receive tourists. However, the tourists did not show up. They did not come in crowds in the seaside hotels during this summer season of 2020, as it was expected by the actors of tourism in Tunisia (Hellal, 2021a). Moreover, during the year 2020, the majority of European countries have turned to local tourism, in this particular health and economic context, in order to reduce at least part of their losses. To this end, the success of Tunisia, in terms of effective control of COVID-19 has not been by itself a sufficient argument to convince tour operators and individual tourists to book in seaside hotels in the country. So, since March 2020, Tunisia is experiencing a new crisis of attendance that further weakens the tourism sector, which is proving to be very unresilient. Worse still, the opening of the borders in June 2020, under pressure from the Federation of Hotel Developers, has been responsible for the second, third and fourth wave of the pandemic that impact the entire economic fabric of the country.

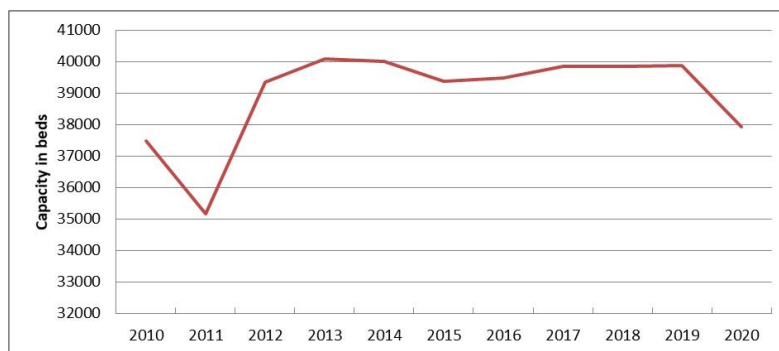
We note that mass beach tourism remains a fragile product in the face of various crises. The impact of the current health crisis related to COVID-19 and previous political and security crises on the area of our study, Sousse-Kantaoui, are clearly visible on the local economic system and urban.

### 3. The effects of the crisis and development prospects after mass tourism

Currently, January 2022, the city of Sousse has 93 hotel units, with a hotel capacity of 37 270 beds, including 10 that contain Thalasso and spa centres. This hotel offer is accompanied by 61 tourist restaurants and 274 travel agencies. Thus, the sector creates nearly 18 000 permanent jobs and 13 000 non-permanent jobs in a direct way, as well as nearly 63 000 jobs in an indirect way (ONTT of Sousse, Report of the year 2022) in normal times. To this end, the crisis in the tourism sector has, without doubt, an effect on employment, on the economic system and subsequently on the urban.

#### 3.1. The effects of the crisis on the agglomeration and the prospects for developing new tourism products

The various crises that have occurred since 2001 have had a significant impact on mass beach tourism in Sousse. They confirm, to this effect, the sensitivity of this fragile sector. Thus, the health crisis related to Covid-19 accentuates the problem of exploitation of hotels, which is reflected on the available capacity in beds and subsequently on the average capacity put in exploitation, at the level of the whole tourist area Sousse-El Kantaoui (see Figure 5).



**Figure 5.** Evolution of the available hotel capacity in beds between 2010 and 2020

Source: statistics issued by the ONTT of Sousse

The decline in available operating hotel capacity is largely due to hotel closures. Today, in July 2022, out of a total of 94 hotels, 37 are closed, including 12 permanent closures and 25 short-term closures. The crisis has also been responsible for the closure of tourist restaurants, night clubs and a casino (see Table 1).

**Table 1.** Status of tourist establishments in Sousse

	Total units	Units in operation	Permanent closure	Short-term closure
<b>Hotels</b>	94	37	12	25
<b>Tourist restaurants</b>	61	59	02	-
<b>Night-Club</b>	08	07	01	-
<b>Casinos</b>	03	02	01	-
<b>Travels Agency</b>	274	203	12	33

Source: ONTT of Sousse, July 2022

In addition to tourist establishments, the crisis has significantly affected the sector of crafts and trade. In the various places of tourist practice in Sousse: the medina, the city centre, the cornice district and all along the tourist road to arrive at El Kantaoui, we note the closure of stores of craft businesses or changes in their functions.

At the level of the tourist sub-area of Sousse, we note two successful operations of development of urban luxury hotels: Mövenpick, Marriot. The first hotel takes the place of the club Jawhra which is completely demolished and the second is the result of a total renewal of the hotel El Hana Beach. These two international brands are trying to market business stays and hosting seminars in establishments equipped for this purpose, taking advantage of their urban location.

Several promoters have not managed to put their hotels back in operation because of financial and management problems, or unavailability of funds and foreign partners. Even the national program to upgrade hotels, launched in 2005 and which should affect 113 hotels nationwide (25% of total capacity), has no effect on the hotel park in Sousse. According to a senior official of the Office of Tourism in Sousse: "The money from the program of upgrading the hotel industry were not spent where it should be" (Interview conducted with Sofien Boughzala, Executive of the ONTT Sousse 14<sup>th</sup> of June 2021). So, for these reasons related to mismanagement and crisis, we observe several hotels closed and that mark well the urban landscape, then the complex Nejma, which integrates the hotel establishment Nejma is completely demolished (see Figure 6).

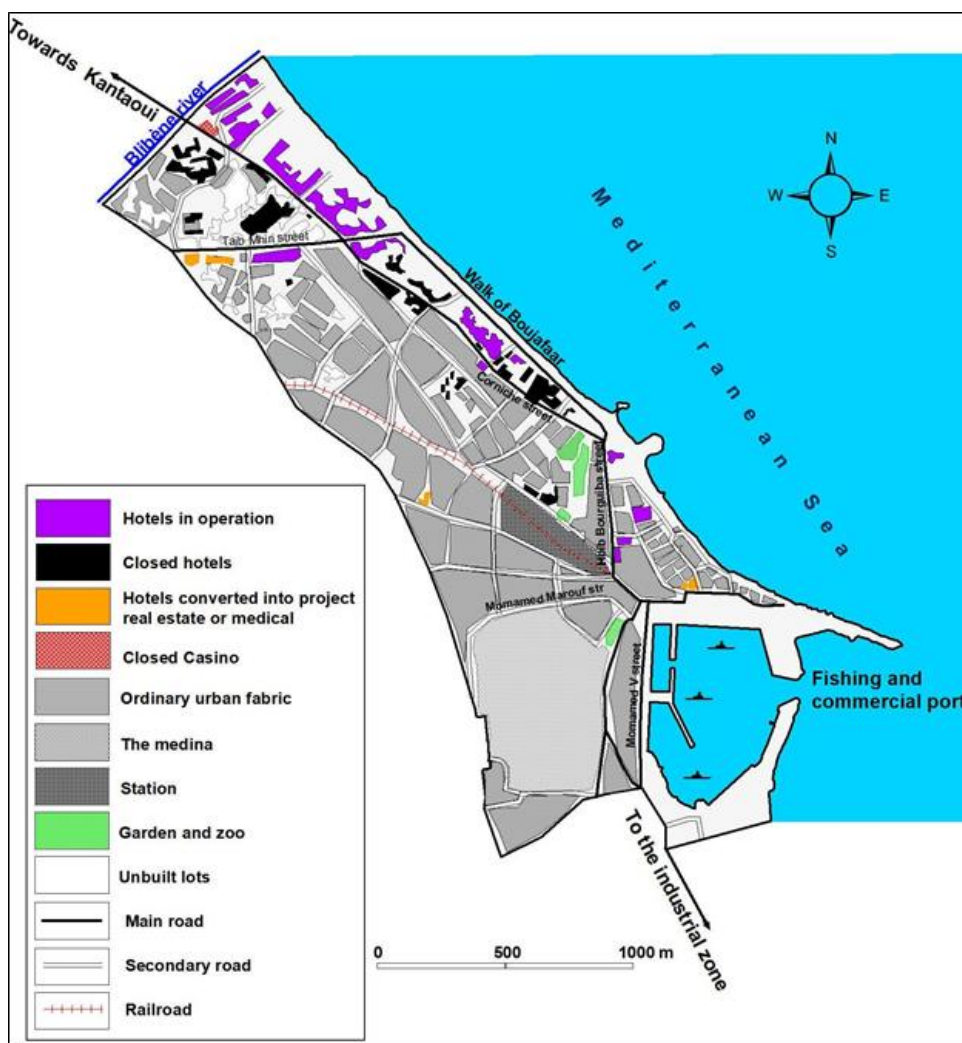


**Figure 6.** The Nejma complex being demolished (foreground) and the Hotel El Hana in urban wasteland (background) and at the level of the Boujaaffer promenade

Source: Photo taken by the authors, 2022

The hotel wasteland, especially at the level of the promenade of Boujaafer is frustrating: hotels in ruins as Nejma, El Hana, as well as hotels in unfinished construction because of financial problems as the case of Boujaafer, etc.

This image gives the impression that the hotel business is in a state of decline, here in the most emblematic and symbolic destination of Sousse, Boujaafer (See Figure 7). The crisis has had consequences on other tourist and para-tourist activities to change function and to make dangerous drifts: tourist restaurants have become popular bars, handicraft stores have closed or have been converted into grocery stores, while massage centres are transformed largely into undeclared brothels.



**Figure 7.** The changing situation of hotels as a result of the crisis

Source: the authors

In the eyes of the promoters, investment in real estate is more profitable than the hotel business and is gradually gaining ground on hotel investment. On the second axis of the tourist zone, there are units that have proceeded to change the

vocation of hotels to convert into residences: Blibène, Rabi, Fenix, Hadrumet, Samara, Rim, Lynda, etc<sup>4</sup>. In addition, other hotels are converted into Foyers as that of the "Roserie". Thus, the hotel "Panorama" located in a rather urban environment and set back from the shoreline has changed assignment to become Panorama medical. It is a modern facility that includes medical offices that operate in interaction with the clinic Essalem located across the street and a few hundred meters from the university hospital Farhat Hached (see Figure 8).



**Figure 8.** The Panorama Hotel (a) before and (b) after conversion to a medical project  
Source: Essouaid (2018)

Taking advantage of the infrastructure and health skills in the city of Sousse, we have seen the development of a niche product in recent years which is health tourism<sup>5</sup>. Moreover, we are witnessing the birth of specialized agencies that develop and market standard and even customized packages of this type of medical stays: air ticketing, airport reception, leisure activities and excursions, complete care in clinics, etc.

Faced with the crisis of mass tourism, health tourism could become an alternative to restore the existing superstructure, especially the closed tourist establishments. To this end, abandoned hotels, especially those in urban areas with an adaptable structure, can be converted into clinics. Moreover, the city of Sousse, which already has 2 university hospitals, has so far 7 private clinics of different specialties. In addition to Tunisians, they attract patients from Libya, Algeria, Africa and even Europe.

In addition to health tourism, we also note new tourism trends in the city of Sousse, including the type of tourism in the home: guest houses in the medina of Sousse and cottages in the hinterland of the city of Sousse. But, since our work here is about the city of Sousse, we limit ourselves to the study of the phenomenon of guest houses in the medina of Sousse.

<sup>4</sup> Interview conducted with Sofien Boughzala, Executive of the ONTT of Sousse, June 14, 2021

<sup>5</sup> Interview conducted with Mohamed Ikbel Khaled of mayor of the town (Sousse), June 12, 2021

### **3.2. Towards changing tourism practices in the medina of Sousse**

The medina of Sousse is the ancient core of the city of Sousse and its identity marker, on the urban level. It was built on the highest part of the city and partly on the ruins of the old Hadrumet. In its Kasba, we find the Khalef tower which is converted into a lighthouse since 1890. During the Middle Ages, particularly under the Aghlabids, Sousse played the role of defender of the capital of Kairouan, against the invasions coming from the sea. Its military and religious buildings, notably the fort, the rampart and the great mosque, as well as its urban composition and its architectural wealth, make Sousse a typical example of the cities of the first centuries of Islam in the Maghreb. It is mainly for these reasons that it is registered since 9th December 1988 with the world heritage of UNESCO.

The medina is open to the modern city and the port via Sidi Yahia Square, which is an urban centre and the starting point of the tourist discovery circuit. It is the destination of tourists especially for the change of scenery and cultural and recreational practices, which are enhanced by urban practices and shopping. To this end, the street "El Marr", which extends between the great mosque and Bab El Gharbi, is the main path of discovery and shopping for tourists. It is lined by stores and crafts. It is, thus, the obligatory passage to reach the authentic souks: rbaa and gold and monuments of tourist interest, including the museum "El Kobba" of local traditions.

Despite its tourist importance, the medina has not been immune to decay, as long as it has become since the 1960s a space for immigrant families seeking work in the most important city in its region (Essouaid, 2018). Thus, the crisis in the tourism sector has not been without effect on the dynamics and sustainability of the urban fabric of the medina. In the city centre and the medina, moreover, as well as in the streets tangential to the Boujaafer promenade, we note that there are many craft stores that have closed or changed their functions.

The degradation of the medina under the effect of social and economic change in recent decades has been somewhat mitigated by the various rehabilitation projects and development that have targeted this ancient core and identity of the city of Sousse.

Since 1991 until 2002, we are witnessing a series of projects to redevelop the streets and alleys of the medina of Sousse in natural stone. To this end, to achieve these projects in several phases, for a total cost of 920 500 thousand dinars, several actors are involved: National Heritage Institute, the Agency for the Development of Heritage and Cultural Promotion (AMVPPC) and the Ministry of Tourism through the protection fund of tourist areas. These efforts to rehabilitate the medina continued between 2003 and 2004, within the framework of a partnership project between the municipality of Sousse and the Ministry of Tourism, which share the cost of the worksites: 200 thousand dinars. The public interventions also concerned 20

dilapidated traditional houses in 2003. This same type of site also affected 50 homes in 2006 and 10 homes in 2009 for a total cost of 1250 thousand dinars. These restoration works have concerned, as well, landmark monuments such as the zawiya of Sidi Abd Essalem, in 2005.

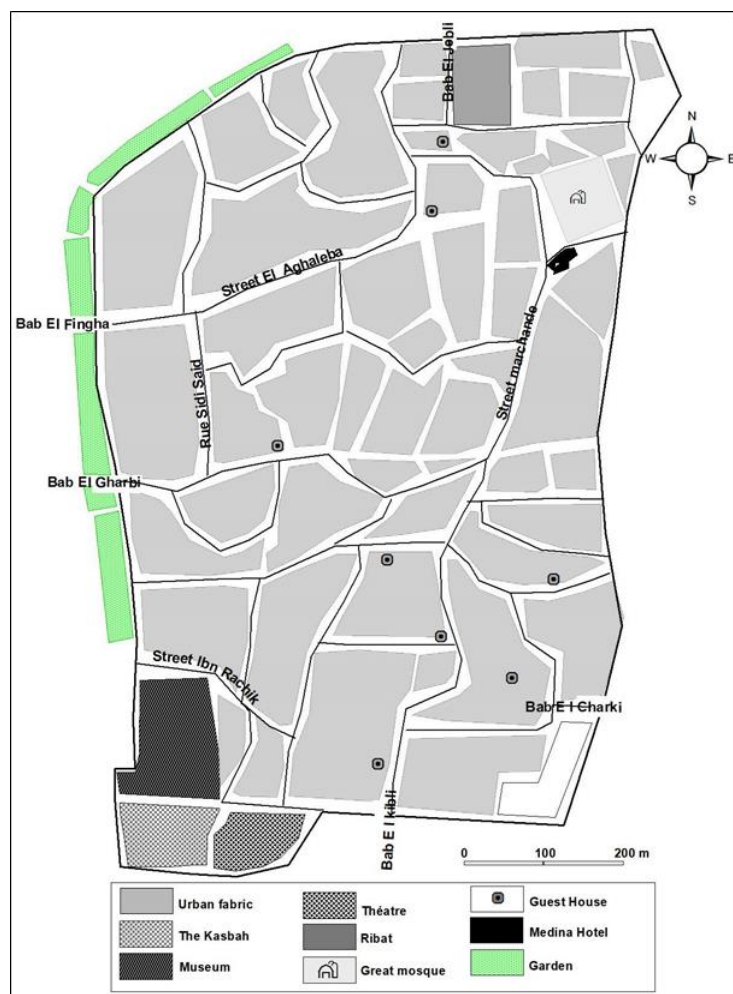
In 2016, in the medina of Sousse, we are witnessing a new generation of rehabilitation project that is part of a more comprehensive approach aimed at safeguarding urban and architectural heritage, but also economic and social development. It is part of an integrated project that includes a pilot tourist circuit. Although the Agency of Rehabilitation and Urban Renewal (ARRU) is the project owner here, then the financing was provided by the French Development Agency and the European Investment Bank.

The project includes major interventions on the entire underground infrastructure in order to renovate the drinking water, wastewater and rainwater networks, as well as to bury the overhead, electrical, telephone and public lighting networks. It also includes the rehabilitation and enhancement of the facades, standardizing colours and styles. This project, which cost 3 700 000 dinars, concerns the most important arteries in terms of tourist practices, especially those that connect the main gates of the medina on the one hand and the souks and the museum of the city on the other hand. The work also concerned the most emblematic places in terms of heritage and best located in relation to the cultural circuit of the medina: Souk el Gaed, Zuagui alley, Sidi Bouraoui alley, April 9 street, the Sofra and the Bab El Gharbi square. Thus in the second phase of the project, we restored the facades in the alleys Dar El Bey and Souk El Gaed. These rehabilitation projects have helped to improve the image and attractiveness of the medina. The latter, as being an authentic and patrimonial setting, has begun to welcome, for a few years, projects that take advantage of the patrimonial setting: cultural cafés, charming restaurants and guest houses fitted out in traditional residences (See Figure 9).

In 2020, in the medina of Sousse, there are 9 guest houses that are marketed as bed and breakfast by online TOs and booking platforms, in addition to social networks. Despite the health crisis related to Covid 19, in 2021, the Ministry of Tourism authorized the opening of 3 new guest houses in the governorate of Sousse: in Sousse, Kalaa Kbira and Hergla (ONTT of Sousse, Annual Report, 2022).

These guest houses that have opened their doors in the medina and have benefited from various rehabilitation projects in this ancient core are a recent trend in the development of a new type of tourism "in the home". It is presented as an alternative to classic mass beach tourism. This inaugurates a new process of development of tourism, under the effect of the measures of social distension imposed by the health crisis. This tendency concerns national tourists, but also international ones in search of new human experiences and authenticity. It is accelerating on an international scale in the context of the post-Covid crisis. In this

sense, Michel Maffesoli (2020) writes: "the crisis will radically transform mobilities on a global scale, mass tourism is long gone and the post-crisis world will reinvent the relationship to travel, to places and to people, giving pride of place to proximity and slowness. At the same time, alternatives to tourism, based on new values (local roots, community involvement, personal development, etc.), should develop.



**Figure 9.** Tourist accommodation structures in the medina of Sousse

Source: the authors

Nationally, Tunisians since the first wave of the pandemic in March 2020 have taken refuge in nature: walking and tourist practices in parks and hinterlands of urban agglomerations, discovery visits and camping in natural sites, as well as small stays in guest houses and scattered rural cottages, etc. The city of Sousse and its hinterland have also been affected by this phenomenon. In addition, the scandal that

occurred in an Eco Lodge in Kalaa Kebira<sup>6</sup>, governorate of Sousse, in the midst of the Covid-19 crisis confirms that alternative tourism is competing with illegal practices that evolve spontaneously and are gaining ground. This is due to the weakness of control and the lack of strategic vision for the future of the tourism sector from the competent authorities.

## Conclusion

After the realization of the first urban hotels in the modern city of Sousse, during the colonial period, mass seaside tourism has developed on the northern coast of the city, since the years 1960-1970. At the end of the 1970s, the inauguration of the integrated tourist resort El Kantaoui, which is structured around a marina has contributed to the development of a new centrality recreational in relation to downtown Sousse. To this end, the area Sousse-El Kantaoui distinguished itself from other seaside areas in Tunisia by its urban atmosphere, which attracts national and international tourists.

The destination Tunisia and particularly the tourist area of Sousse, begins its structural crisis since the events of September 11, 2001 and the attack of Djerba in 2002. The Tunisian revolution of January 14, 2011, as well as the security incidents that followed it were responsible for the return to crisis, following a period of recovery during the second half of the 2000s. The situation was chaotic after the terrorist attack on Bardo and especially after that of the Imperial Hotel in El Kantaoui in 2015, which killed several tourists. Finally, the impact of the health crisis of COVID-19 was also catastrophic for the tourism sector in Sousse.

These successive crises that have impacted mass beach tourism in Sousse confirm the sensitivity of the sector. They have not been without effect on the urban: hotel wasteland especially at the level of the promenade of Boujafer. As for the city centre and the medina, many craft stores have closed or changed their function. Thus, the other activities para tourist and tourist services: bar, restaurants, cafes are popularized. This confirms that the area is sinking further into the phase of obsolescence, the end of the cycle (Butler, 1980; Chadeaud, 1988, cited by Suchet, 2015).

Faced with the crisis of mass tourism, in addition to the development of the real estate offer in place of abandoned hotels, we note the emergence of new products: luxury urban tourism and health tourism, tourism at the inhabitant's home, especially in the medina. To this end, we confirm our hypothesis that the evolution of

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<sup>6</sup> « A security raid conducted in the evening of Saturday, May 22, 2021 in an ecolodge closed for a year and converted into a leisure space located in the vicinity of the city of Kalaa Kebira under the governorate of Sousse. The organizers of a concert without having a prior authorization thus violating the preventive measures including mainly the curfew applied from 22 hours. Twenty people were arrested in connection with this case or illegal trade in alcoholic beverages. A quantity of drugs was seized within the framework of this raid »

the area of Sousse is part of a phase of "regeneration" or "renewal", through the mutation of the tourism product. However, this post-crisis renewal perspective requires a territorial branding strategy that builds on the identity and the heritage and urban assets of the city of Sousse.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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