

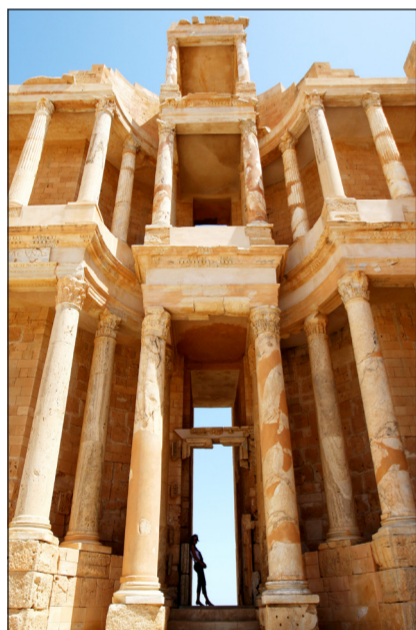
TRAVEL

THURSDAY, APRIL 23, 2009

PAGE 13



Libya comes in from the cold



Once a pariah state shunned by tourists and governments alike, Libya and its wealth of Roman ruins are back on the itinerary

BY ANNABELLE THORPE
THE OBSERVER, LONDON

The first hit of an Arabic city is always unforgettable. The ground is dusty and dry, old Mercedes cars bump across unmade roads while gleaming 4x4s shoot past nearby on newly built freeways. The air is thickly scented; tobacco, coffee, mint and oil, periodically infused with the melancholic tones of the muezzin, calling the faithful to prayer. As I step out of my hotel in Tripoli's ramshackle medina, this air of difference wraps itself around me. I pull my coat a little tighter against the surprisingly cool air and walk down to the harbor, where mammoth tankers lie slumbering in the water, glinting through the dusk.

In the half-light, faces are turned towards me with surprise and interest, but no one speaks. Before long I realize that to be a female tourist out and about on her own in Tripoli is still something of a curiosity. I look back, struck by the different looks and races that pass by: angular Egyptian faces, dark Algerian skin, Touareg gliding past draped in head-dresses and robes. It feels slightly alien but not for a moment — even on that first walk on that first night — do I feel unsafe.

How many times was I asked before I came to Libya: Is it safe? I'd smiled and nodded and said that I was going with a group and was sure it would all be fine, but by the time the 10th person had looked anxious for my fate my anxiety levels were starting to rise. But now I was actually

here, checked into my cozy room in the El Khan hotel, where the manager had welcomed us into the elegant courtyard like old friends and handed us champagne flutes filled with almond milk, I was already struck by how very different the reality of Libya is to the perception.

'A FUTURE TO LOOK FORWARD TO'

People come to Libya for two things. Most, like the group of three couples I was with, come for the Roman ruins: Leptis Magna, Sabratha, Cyrenaica are some of the most impressive ancient sites in the world. Others come for the desert, to trek across the vast silent wastes of the Sahara that lie in the south of the country. It's still not an easy place to visit — the visa process and red tape are almost impossible to negotiate independently (Israeli passport-holders cannot enter the country and Americans can have difficulty) and 90 percent of visitors come on escorted tours, which tend to be expensive.

But new short-break itineraries — I was on one of the first four-night trips with Kirker Holidays — are a more affordable option, giving the chance to experience a country in transition, before tourism has barged through the door and dressed everything in familiar colors. Tripoli itself has the air of a city emerging into the light after a period of darkness; bemused, blinking but determined to make up for the lost years.

And there have been lost years — Lockerbie, sanctions and bombings combined to make Libya one of the most reviled countries on the planet throughout the 1980s and 1990s. "For many years life was difficult," says Abdul, our guide. "The sanctions hit ordinary people hardest. But now we have oil money, there are constant discoveries of natural gas reserves, and Gaddafi has improved

relations with the West. We feel that the good times are coming again, that there is a future to look forward to."

There is a sense of rebirth in the air. Muammar Gaddafi is still everywhere, of course, pictured in aviator shades and startling purple-satin outfits on countless advertising hoardings. But the country he has dominated for almost 40 years is finally starting to change: laws are being introduced to bring in a minimum wage, grants to start businesses and buy houses, schooling for children. On the first morning we drive out of Tripoli past shiny hotel and apartment towers that look as if they have been imported straight from Dubai. Tripoli is a city on the up.

But if the future is what dominates the Libyan capital, it is the past that defines its other famous cities. We walk through the windswept ruins at Sabratha while the sea shifts and shimmers in the background, the sun glinting off mosaics that have seen off two thousand years of winds, salt and sea. The scale of Sabratha is impressive but time has not been kind; apart from the gaudy theater, reconstructed in the 1920s at Mussolini's behest during Italy's colonial rule, there is little that remains standing. Most of it was flattened by an earthquake in 365, what was left was sacked by the Vandals and for me it required too much of a leap of imagination to picture the city as it once was.

Leptis is a different story; although the same earthquake brought many of its 12m columns and walls crashing to the ground — where they lie, unmoved more than 1,600 years later — the limestone edifices and structures have survived far better. It is an astonishing place, with enough of the market, the forum, the circus, the gymnasium and baths in place to gain an idea of the sheer size and scale of the buildings, of how life would have been lived more than 2,000 years ago.

Archaeologists believe that only a third of the site has yet been uncovered, and I sit for a while at the top of the amphitheater, looking out over the Mediterranean, and try to imagine how such a place was constructed without technology and machines, created from ambition and determination and a belief that the lives of

slaves were cheap.

Visiting the sites makes you realize how far Libya has yet to come in terms of tourism — and how fortunate this makes those of us who visit now. At Leptis, coaches pull into a dusty car park fringed with ramshackle tourist stalls. In one corner, a barely noticeable, weed-strewn path leads off to one of the greatest — and least visited — Roman sites in the world. When we visited we met only two other tourists on the whole site. Between our day trips to the sites we spend a day in Tripoli — once an ancient city to rival Sabratha and Leptis. Now all that's left is the occasional Roman pillar built into a medina wall — and the beautiful Marcus Aurelius arch that dates back to 163.

GREAT EXPECTATIONS

If I am honest, it is this — present-day Libya — that I came for as much as its exalted past, and I am delighted to find that an afternoon among the souks and stalls of the medina involves none of the hassle factor of Marrakech or Cairo, or even the incessant banter and comments that come with a solo stroll in Turkey. Far from being the poor, badly-behaved relations of the Arab world, Libyans believe their country to be the refined, wealthy elder statesman — hassling and banter belongs firmly in the world of their Maghreb cousins.

I stroll past market stalls heaped with sequin-studded headscarves, trestle tables groaning beneath sneakers and bags, saucepans and candy, and surprisingly salacious underwear. I happen upon the metalwork souk and peer into dark workshops where men are doing terrifying things with molten metal and bare hands, and come away with a beautiful copper dish, green with age and dust and mine for US\$7. I stroll past the gold shops, where nervous-looking men look on as their womenfolk coo and point at the windows crammed with gaudy jewelry that flashes bright yellow in the sun.

On the final morning I walk up to the newer part of town, where Italianate architecture lines streets that could almost be in Florence or Milan. I duck into an art gallery and find an elderly man sitting in the back, reading. He asks me where I come from and when I tell him London he beams; "Dickens," he says. "Charles Dickens. Do you know *Great Expectations*?" I shake my head sheepishly and follow his direction upstairs to look at more canvases. "*A Tale of Two Cities*?" The voice floats up the stairs.

"No, I'm sorry."

There is a pause. "*Little Dorrit*?" I blush.

When I come downstairs we have a long conversation about how he used to work in London in the oil industry, and while he wraps a print I've bought he tells me about his love affair with Dickens. It's a little surreal, standing in a Tripoli back street being ticked off by an elderly Libyan for not reading Dickens, but then nothing about this oil-rich, strictly Muslim, misunderstood dictatorship is as I had imagined. Our perception — and expectation — of Libya is so different to the reality that visiting the country is a constant stream of the unexpected, the unusual and the unpredictable. It's diverting, exciting and it can't last. Go now.



Top, above left and below: Tourists visit the Roman Theater at the well-preserved ancient coastal city of Sabratha, Libya. The UNESCO World Heritage site contains a Roman public arena, temples, a forum, public baths, a theater and fountains. A shopkeeper works outside his shop at the old market in the Libyan capital of Tripoli.

PHOTOS: AP AND RELUTERS

