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Gaddafi's lost world

SANCTIONS-BOUND, governed by a pariah variously accused of supporting the IRA and building weapons of mass destruction, Colonel Gaddafi's Libya was once the loneliest place listed in the famed Lonely Planet Guide for adventurous travellers. But the "Leader of the Revolution" has melted in recent years – sufficient for Britain to restore diplomatic links, and for a handful of intrepid tour operators to begin opening up a cornucopia of ancient treasures and stunning vistas to a trickle of travellers and tourists.

I flew to Tripoli, a glorious mixture of fading Italianate architecture and bustling Arab markets, just three-and-a-half hours from London, with Amelia Stewart, the founder of Simoon Travel – simoon is Arabic for "a desert wind". With its wonderfully preserved – and empty – Roman sites, its ancient Berber towns, Second World War battlefields around Tobruk and unspoiled desert oases, promoting Libya as a tourist destination provided a challenge she had to rise to. And in a country of only eight million souls, which is oil-rich, well organised and above all, hassle-free, there is a great deal of potential for the hardy few prepared to take their chances on her "Taste of Libya" tours.

Gaddafi has spent the best part of 40 years attempting to foster Arab and African unity with varying degrees of success. As a result, the capital, Tripoli, has a number of well-appointed hotels rising above the shoreline. The centre of the city is dominated by an imposing Medina, behind which sit the network of alleyways, shops and mosques that makes up Tripoli's main market. Hassle and haggle is the order of the day in souks from Marrakech to Baghdad, but not here, where everything – from intricate gold filigree to lizard skin wallets – comes at a "fixed price".

Away from the old town, the streets

After years of isolation, Libya is opening up to tourists. You'll find ancient treasures, wild deserts and stunning architecture – and, strangely, souks where it's considered rude to haggle

BY MARK SEDDON

widen out into tree-lined boulevards, with boutiques selling the latest European fashions.

Fortunately, Gaddafi's urge to erase the miserable memories of Italian occupation in the 20th century did not extend to demolishing the elegant Italianate fountains and marble squares encircled by faded architectural gems.

As we settled in one of the squares for a ritual, and increasingly addictive, hookah pipe, I noticed that recent restoration work had inadvertently extended to the repainting of a Mussolini-era fascist party emblem on a facing wall.

In between making the Libyans' lives a misery, the Italians did begin to excavate the magnificent Roman cities at Sabratha and Leptis Magna that had been buried and preserved under the sands. Both

contain what are reputed to be the finest theatres of antiquity. Anywhere else they would have been swamped by hordes of tourists. But here it was almost as if we were following in the footsteps of the great 19th-century writer Stendhal, as his "Roman Journey" stumbled across historic sites barely visited since they had been abandoned centuries before.

Many of the delicate reliefs, mosaics and statues from the Byzantine and Roman periods have been removed to safety and to Tripoli's treasure of a National Museum back at the Medina. Here, among the glories of the ancient world in a museum to rival some of the finest in Europe and America, was the odd Libyan eccentricity thrown in for good measure. One of the most popular exhibits is the beaten-up old Volkswagen Beetle that Gaddafi drove as he plotted the 1969 revolution that toppled King Idris.

We headed to the old Berber town of Nalut on the edge of the Sahara. Here, ancient granaries teetered above

mosques dating back thousands of years.

In the small town of Yefren, we descended into a subterranean world of hollowed caves, granaries and olive oil mills once the domain of Herodolites, who according to Herodotus, "eat snakes and other reptiles and speak a language like no other, but squeak like bats". And in Yefren came the unexpected again – a village elder who opened a creaking corrugated door to an abandoned synagogue some 2,000 years old, its pitted, dark ceiling replete with barely legible words in Hebrew.

Ghadames, our next port of call further south still, is known as the "Jewel of the Sahara", and for good reason. The old caravan trading town of winding alleyways and irrigated palm-adorned gardens has been designated a Unesco world heritage site and is being restored to all its former glory. My ticket number for 2005 came in at a mere 751. Although the inhabitants moved to the new town some

years back, Old Ghadames comes alive for the November festival of Tuareg culture and music, a three-day extravaganza also staged further south in the desert town of Ghat, where Amelia is planning a special tour later in the year.

After an afternoon's siesta in one of the cool, exquisitely decorated Berber houses, we headed into the desert with Saleh and his Tuareg drivers. Our objective was a massive dune, which Saleh proceeded to drive up at a ferocious speed, then hurtle down a near vertical incline on the other side. Simoon Travel is not for the faint-hearted. Later, we enjoyed a barbecue in the dunes, watching the sun go down. Suddenly, a Tuareg in flowing blue robes raced his black stallion past us as the fire crackled, an experience I will never forget.

One of our last stopovers was at a gloriously kitsch and near-empty Seventies villa not far from a private beach near Leptis Magna, which Amelia modestly revealed to have once belonged to Colonel Gaddafi. Travellers can even book the leader's old bedroom, replete with substantial bed and a headboard of mirrors.

Libya is a captivating place, enigmatic and beautiful. I'm already planning my next visit to watch the solar eclipse next March – and now I know just which room to book.



Images of Libya: Top, the second-century amphitheatre of Sabratha. Above: (from left) a Tuareg nomad in the desert, the granary at Nalut, and the bustling streets of Tripoli's Medina

WAY TO GO

Mark Seddon travelled to Libya with Simoon Travel (020 7622 6263, www.simoontravel.com), which offers the seven-night Taste of Libya trip from £1,205pp, including all meals, sight visits, accommodation, transfers, flights with British Airways (0870 850 9850, www.ba.com) and a guide.

Bluffer's Guide

Population: 5.7 million.
 Currency: £1 = 0.42 Libyan Dinar.
 Language: Arabic (French-influenced).
 When to go: autumn for the best climate (around 20C) and the annual Tuareg festival (in Ghadames in November and Ghat in December).
 Time zone: GMT +2.
 Flight time: three-and-a-half hours from London.
 Bear in mind: tight and skimpy clothing are frowned upon. Alcohol and drugs are illegal.