

Desert bloom

Libya's new rapport with the West means it's starting to open up and show off its treasures to intrepid travellers

BY MARK SEDDON, PHOTOGRAPHS BY AMELIA STEWART

S ANCTIONS-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 *Lonely Planet* guides for adventurous travellers. But the "Leader of the Revolution" has mellowed 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 "desert wind". With its wonderfully preserved, and empty, Roman sites, its ancient Berber towns, Second World War battlefields around Tobruk and unspoiled desert oases, would promoting Libya as a tourist destination provide a challenge? 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 Stewart's Taste of Libya tours.

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

sits the network of alleyways, shops and mosques that make 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 – is "fixed price".

Away from the old town, the streets widen into tree-lined boulevards, with boutiques selling 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 hookah pipe, I noticed that recent restoration work had included 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 he stumbled across historic sites in Rome barely visited since they had been abandoned centuries before.

Many of the delicate reliefs, mosaics



The Severan Forum at the Roman city of Leptis Magna, above; dune roaming with Simoon Travel's Amelia Stewart, right; a mosque in Tripoli, below

and statues from the Byzantine and Roman periods have been removed to safety and Tripoli's National Museum back at the medina. Here, among glories of the ancient world to rival those found in European and American museums, was the odd Libyan eccentricity. One of the most popular exhibits is the beaten-up old Volkswagen Beetle Gaddafi drove as he plotted the 1969 revolution that toppled King Idris.

We headed to the old Berber town of Nalut on the Sahara's edge. 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 troglodytes, 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.

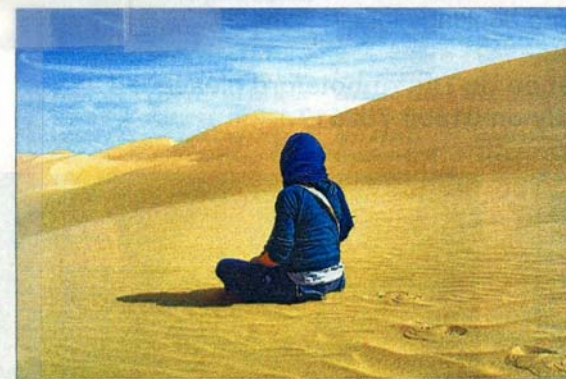
Ghadames, our next port of call, further south still, is known as the "Jewel of the Sahara", and for good reason. The old caravan trading town of winding alleyways and irrigated palm-adorned gardens has been designated a UNESCO world heritage site and is

being restored to its former glory. Although the inhabitants moved to the new town some years back, Old Ghadames comes alive for the November Tuareg festival, a three-day extravaganza of the culture and music of this distinctive Berber group. It is also staged further south in the desert town of Ghat – Stewart is planning a tour over New Year to take in this second festival.

After a 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, before hurtling down a near vertical incline on the other side. Simoon Travel is not for the faint-hearted. Later, as the sun went down, we barbecued in the dunes. 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 1970s villa near a private beach near Leptis Magna, which, says Stewart, belonged to Colonel Gaddafi. Travellers can even book the leader's old bedroom.

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



FACTFILE LIBYA

HOW TO GET THERE

Simoon Travel (tel: 020 7822 6263, visit www.simoontravel.com) offers a seven-night Taste of Libya trip from £1,205pp, including all meals, site visits, accommodation, transfers and flights with British Airways from Heathrow (tel: 0870 850 9850, www.ba.com) and a guide.

AND THERE'S MORE

Autumn is the best time of year to visit for the climate (around 20C)



and the annual Tuareg festival (Ghadames in November and Ghat in December).

