



# COUNTRY BRIEFING:

# Libya

*After ending its international isolation, travellers are beginning to rediscover Libya's charms. With its mix of historical and cultural influences and its spectacular natural landscapes, this is a fascinating destination for adventurous travellers. The recent history of the country is well documented but Libya's past involves much more than the revolution and rule of Colonel Gaddafi.*



The Theatre of Sabratha



Desert fire to make tea

The Greek and Roman sites of the Mediterranean coast are the main draw for most visitors, but inland there is evidence of a much earlier civilisation in the form of pre-historic Saharan rock art, some of which dates back over 10,000 years. In the medina of Tripoli the later Arabic and Islamic influences are obvious, whilst the new town has some beautiful Italian architecture from the colonial era. The Allied war cemeteries of Libya are a reminder to all of a more sombre period when Libya was of strategic importance during World War Two.

## Tripolitania

Tripoli itself has a bustling medina with colourful, noisy souqs and a long corniche stretching beside the Mediterranean. Beyond Tripoli are the major Roman sites of Sabratha and Leptis Magna. A little imagination is needed to bring these places to life, and the extent of the ruins is certainly testament to the importance of North Africa as a province of the Roman Empire - indeed, the only African Roman Emperor, Septimus Severus, was from Leptis Magna.

## Cyrenaica

A short flight away from Tripoli, across the Gulf of Sirt, lies the eastern region of Cyrenaica. Here the coastal plains merge into the Jebel Akhdar (the Green Mountains), creating an interesting and varied natural landscape which is dotted with archaeological sites. My favourite site was Cyrene, where I was shown round by Dr Fadil Ali Muhammed, who has been responsible for most of the excavations and restorations of the site over the past twenty or so years. There are ongoing digs at Cyrene, as well as at nearby Apollonia and Ptolemais and if you are lucky you may witness the unearthing of yet another mosaic, theatre or bath complex.

## Jebel Nafusa

The towns and villages in the mountains of Jebel Nafusa are predominantly populated by Berbers, who constructed multi-purpose dwellings known as qasrs. The qasrs were at once granaries, forts and homes for families and although they are no longer used as such, they remain relatively intact

despite their precarious positioning on cliff edges and hilltops. The medina of Ghadames, located on the northern edge of the Sahara Desert, is a World Heritage Site where whitewashed alleyways hide vividly decorated and cool interiors. On the way back to Tripoli I broke the journey with a visit to the town of Gharyan, where the local population constructed underground dwellings to avoid the searing heat of a Libyan summer. All in all, a visit to Jebel Nafusa is a great lesson in traditional Libyan architecture and town planning.

## Jebel Akakus and the Ubari Sand Sea

The Akakus Mountains, with their extraordinary rock formations, were the canvas for pre-historic artists. Here you will find images of everyday life and animals more usually associated with central and southern Africa, dating back to 10,000BC. I spent five days exploring the Akakus and the Ubari Sand Sea, travelling in a 4WD vehicle and camping under a full moon. Salty lakes break up the rolling Ubari Dunes and are a great place for a swim after a couple of days in the wild. However, the best aspect of these desert expeditions is the company of the drivers and chefs, who manage to convey a brilliant sense of humour despite the language barrier.

Travel to Libya is not without its challenges, but the rewards of discovering a magnificent, ancient land sealed off from the outside world for so much of our lifetime more than made up for these during my visit.

**Sarah Whatman**  
Libya Specialist



The Akakus Mountains



Umm Al Ma'a Lake, Ubari Sand Sea

## FACT FILE

A ten night trip to Libya taking in the sights of Tripolitania costs from £1,200 per person, whilst an extensive itinerary including all the major Classical sights, plus time in the desert and Ghadames would cost upwards of £2,500 per person based on two travelling. Please contact Sarah for further details on 01993 838 409.



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