

Libya:

In search of Ancient Splendor and the far flung outposts of Empire

A private trip offered by Stephen Harby,
March 16 to 28, 2011



Libya has long beckoned to the intrepid traveler in search of spectacular landscapes, some of the best preserved Greek and Roman cities, and a culture that has remained distinct from the ever more homogenized modern world. Until recently it has been out of reach to most travelers and especially Americans, but that has changed, as the government of Mohammar Qaddafi now realizes the enormous potential for tourism the country possesses.

Now is an excellent time to plan a visit to this fascinating country. Visitors still remain few and far between, which means that those of us intrepid and lucky enough to go will experience ancient sites that are free of crowds, even silent, and where visitors can wander at will without the barricades and restrictions that are increasingly hampering free access to the great archaeological sites of Greece and Italy. In the souks and medinas of the Islamic cities visitors will be warmly and graciously welcomed with delight and curiosity for the unusual phenomena that we are. For a short time yet, we are free of the curse, of being branded as tourists and the source of instant potential commercial windfall, that has befallen us in most of North Africa. Along with this, with the exception of the relatively new five star hotel in Tripoli where we will stay, facilities and services for foreign visitors can best be described as being in the “developmental” phase. While safe, clean, and acceptably comfortable, an adventurous spirit is the best key to having a trip of a lifetime!

Our 12-night 11-day trip will take us to the fertile and verdant coastal strip of Libya that includes Tripolitania and Apollonia as well as deep into the Sahara to the oasis town of Ghadames. The former were the areas that the Phoenicians, Greeks, and Romans colonized and to which the Italians under Mussolini returned; the harsh desert to the south never saw significant settlement by the Ancients, however the fascists left their mark in terms of new towns, and tourist facilities which remain today. These successive occupations have all left their traces, in the form of spectacular cities (some of the best preserved in the ancient world) as well as some of the best of Italian modernism. And even today it is still possible to have a proper cappuccino just about anywhere! We will also see stunning examples of Islamic architecture and urbanism, and will experience a modern country, which through the omnipresent and charismatic influence of its leader can be said to be like no other in the world.



Arch of Septimius Severus, Leptis Magna

Since we need to arrive all together given our group visa for Libya, we will use London as our jumping off point. Participants will travel there on their own, and assemble at Heathrow airport where we have arranged rooms at the Sofitel Hotel in Terminal 5, convenient for our flight to Tripoli the next day. In Libya we will begin in Tripolitania, familiarizing ourselves with Tripoli, and its sites nearby, then fly to Cyrenaica in the east. Returning by air to Tripoli, we will then drive south to Ghadames before finally returning to Tripoli to fly home via London.

Itinerary

Day 1 Wednesday, March 16, 2011

Departure

Depart home cities and travel independently to London, our gathering point for the onward journey to Tripoli.

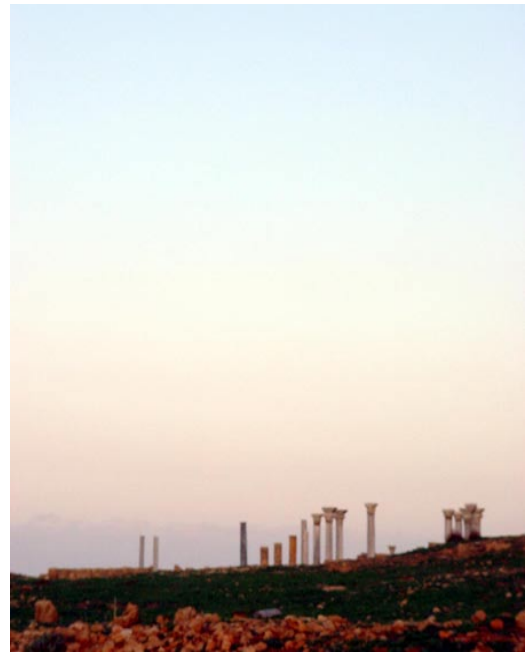
Day 2 Thursday, March 17

London

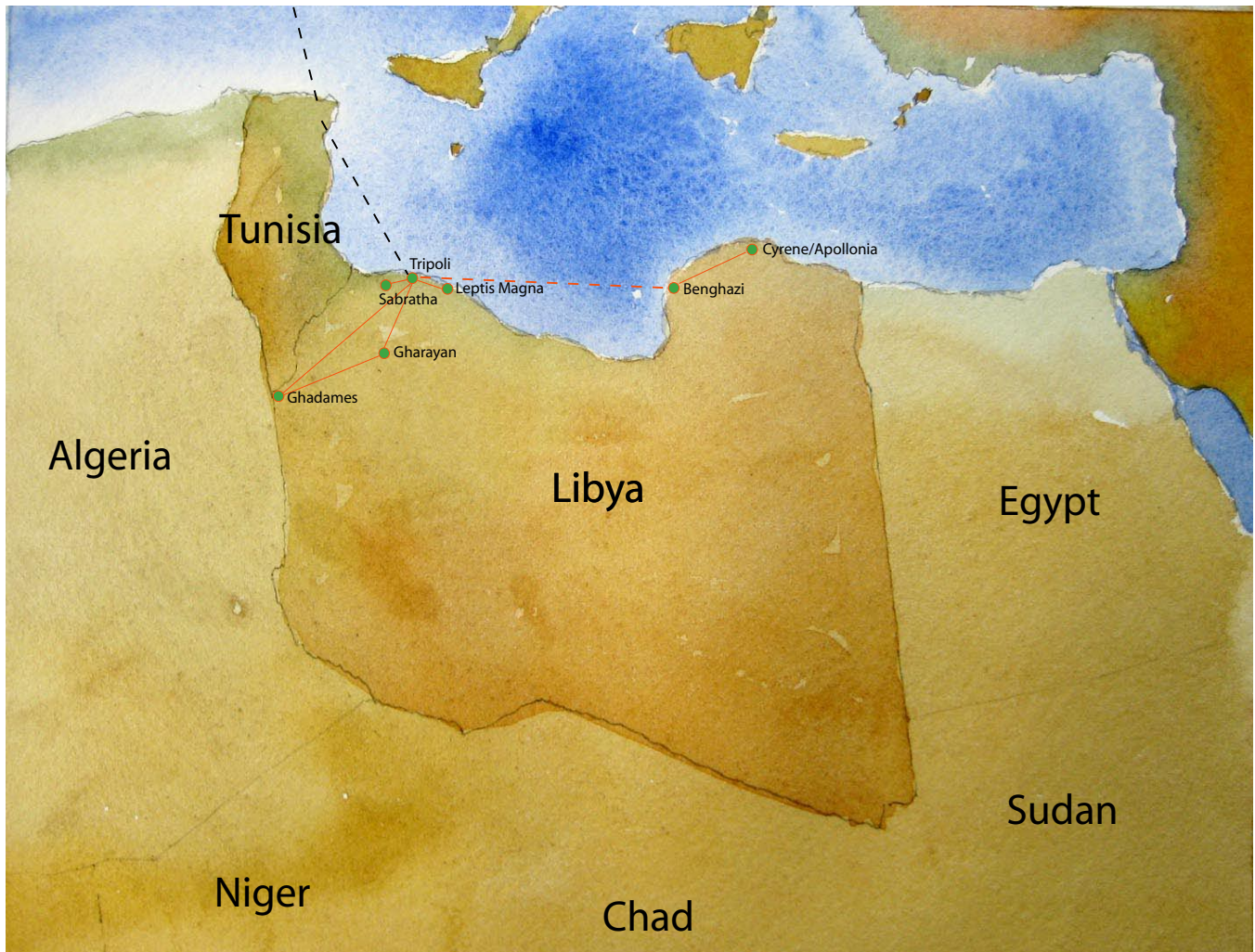
Participants will arrive in London this day. Accommodation is provided at the Sofitel Hotel connected to Terminal 5 at Heathrow Airport. We will assemble at a time to be determined (based on arrivals of participants) for a welcome cocktail reception and orientation about our trip ahead, followed by dinner at the hotel.

Day 3 Friday, March 18 London to Tripoli

After breakfast at the hotel, we will transfer to the check-in counter for our 9:20 am (BA 898) flight to Tripoli. Once there at 2:50 pm, after entry formalities (entering on a group visa) we will be met by our local guides and taken to the Corinthia Bab Africa Hotel, one of Libya's few world class



Above: view of Apollonia; below: Map of area of tour with major stops. (map, watercolors and all photos by Stephen Harby)



five star hotels. It is sited beside the Mediterranean between the port and the medina and offers stunning views of all three. There will be time before dinner (no pre-dinner drinks, as Libya is strictly dry!) for a walk through the town, catching a glimpse of the Arch of Marcus Aurelius, which marked the center of Oea, the Roman city, now subsumed by Islamic and modern Tripoli. We will continue on, passing Green Square into the “new town” to promenade along the arcaded boulevards and into the squares grandly laid out by the Italians in the twenties and thirties. These evoke any number of provincial towns back home on the peninsula, but add an overlay of many north African stylistic influences which the architects sensitively introduced. We will pause at Maidan al-Jezayir (Algeria Square) by the main post office and former cathedral and nearby will see the former governor’s palace. Our group dinner will be in a nearby local restaurant. (Since the timing of all this depends on our timely arrival, some of these sites may be deferred to the next or subsequent days if we run short of time.)

Day 4 Saturday, March 19

Tripoli and Sabratha

This morning we will begin with a visit to Tripoli’s new Interactive Libya Museum, which gives an overview of the history and setting of the country.

Next, we will head west to Sabratha, an hour’s drive on the coast. This is one of the three great ancient cities of Tripolitania (among Leptis and Oea) and was settled from the 5th century BC, but its importance was established by Punic settlers from Carthage who chose it for the quality of its safe harbor. It was expanded by Hellenistic settlers in the 2nd century BC, and following a violent earthquake in the 2nd century AD (another one hastened its decline in AD 365), it was largely rebuilt under Roman influence in the form we see it today. We’ll spend several hours walking the beautiful seaside site seeing temples, fora, basilicas, baths with vivid mosaics, and one of the most complete theaters in the Roman world, largely restored by the Italians. We’ll have a picnic lunch looking out over the sea from the rarely visited amphitheater.



Left: The ancient Roman city of Sabratha is picturesquely situated right beside the sea.

Tripoli’s Medina or old town, 19th c. clock tower



Images of Colonel Qaddafi are ubiquitous!



The view of Tripoli from our hotel

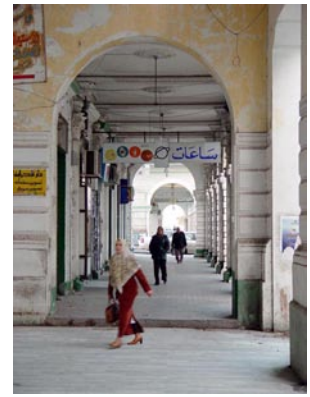
Retracing our steps to Tripoli, we will have dinner in the hotel.

Day 5 Sunday, March 20

Tripoli

Today we will continue our explorations of Tripoli. First thing, we will visit the Jamahirya Museum between the medina and Green Square. Its collections contain everything from the VW Beetle that Colonel Qadaffi drove at the time of the 1969 revolution, to stunning antiquities from the major archaeological sites and extensive and detailed reconstructions of those sites.

Following what will inevitably seem to be too brief a time in the museum, we will have a walk through the old town where for the rest of the day we will concentrate on the sites of the Karamanli House, Old British Consulate, Old Turkish Prison, St. George's Orthodox Church, and the Arch of Marcus Aurelius. At lunch time we will take a respite in the Obaya Restaurant, an atmospheric and typical Libyan eatery. Time permitting we will enter the souk and browse in the stalls where we will be welcomed with some curiosity as visitors rather than as potential buyers, and surprisingly most merchants will carry on conducting their commerce as if we weren't there. This will be quite a surprise to those who are expecting the sort of commercial frenzy that a visitor to the souks of Morocco, Tunisia or Egypt attracts. Following this, we will return to the hotel, where we will have some free time before setting out for dinner in town.



Arcades streets of Tripoli's new town

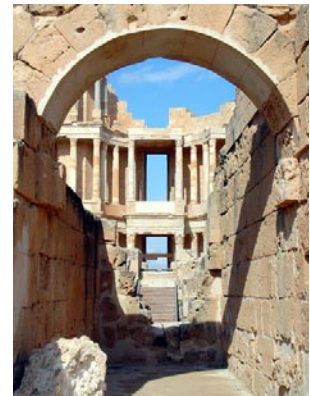


Three Graces (from Cyrene)

Day 6 Monday, March 21

Tripoli to Benghazi and Cyrenaica

We will check out of the hotel and make our way to the nearby domestic airport for the short flight to Benghazi. After collecting ourselves we will set out on the several hour drive towards Apollonia, skirting the verdant Jebel Akhdar mountains. We will make a stop at Ptolemais, a vast beautiful site of Greek origins but with primarily Greek and Byzantine remains. Continuing on to Apollonia, we will arrive at the recent Hotel Almanara just beside the archaeological site, and this will be our home for the next two nights. Before dinner we will be able to stroll from the hotel into the archaeological site of Apollonia. It was the port for Cyrene, and most of its remains date from the Byzantine era and are a series of churches rebuilt



Theater, Sabratha



Central Church, Apollonia

Artemis (Leptis Magna)



from Greek and Roman spolia. These are picturesquely strung out along the rocky coast ending in a Greek theater built into the natural rock. From here we may watch the sun set over the sea which forms the scenic backdrop. It is a short walk back to the hotel for dinner. (N.B. Depending on the flight schedule, the stop enroute to Apollonia may be made on the return journey.)

Day 7 Tuesday, March 22 Apollonia and Cyrene

This entire day is devoted to Cyrene, an ancient city dramatically sited up from the coast in the foothills; its dramatic siting certainly belies its Greek heritage. Its topographical resemblance to Delphi may not be coincidental, as its founders in 631 BC were said to have been led by a man selected by the oracle at Delphi. Expansion rapidly followed, coming under the rule of Alexander the Great when it was perhaps the most important city of the Greek world. The Romans made major contributions as well when parts of it were rebuilt under Hadrian, giving it several major Roman monumental complexes. It's a vast site, so we will stop where convenient with box lunches from the hotel or try a local restaurant. In the late afternoon we will descend to the sea and tour Apollonia, a beautiful site from which to watch the sun set over the Mediterranean.

Day 8 Wednesday, March 23 Apollonia to Tripoli (via Benghazi)

We will leave Apollonia this morning for the drive back to Benghazi, making stops at Slontah (a curious pre-Greek site with early primitive human figures carved in the rock) and at Qasr Libya to see Libya's best collection of Byzantine mosaics, which are stunning by any standard. These were in two churches and were only discovered in 1957 during work on a dam.

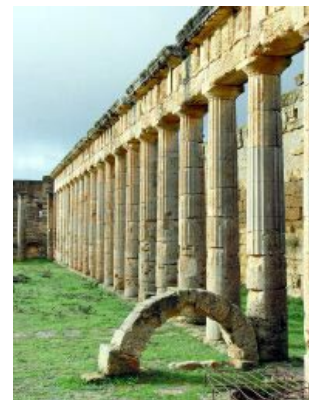
Next we will reach Benghazi where we will have lunch and tour the area around Liberation Square. This area of town was largely replanned and rebuilt under Mussolini, was damaged in World War II, but a stunning core

Sanctuary of Apollo, Cyrene

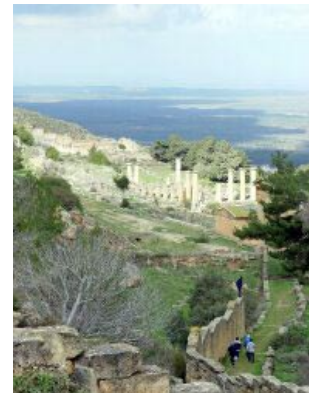


Temple of Zeus, Cyrene

The Doric colonnade of the gymnasium from the Greel period pf Cyrene



The overall view of the site of Cyrene shows its dramatic topography and relation to the coastal plane below.



of Italian modernist buildings downtown has recently been restored. After our tour of the town and a walk through the market we will head to the airport for our flight back to Tripoli. We will return to the Corinthia Bab Africa Hotel where we will have dinner.

Day 9 Thursday, March 24

Tripoli to Leptis Magna

We will spend the whole day outside of Tripoli at Leptis Magna to the east on the coast. The site is arguably one of the most extensive and best preserved cities of Roman antiquity. It also was established early—possibly from the 7th century BC and expanded by Phoenician and Punic settlers, but its present day grandeur was established under the Romans, with major complexes having been built under emperors Hadrian and especially Septimus Severus (a native son).

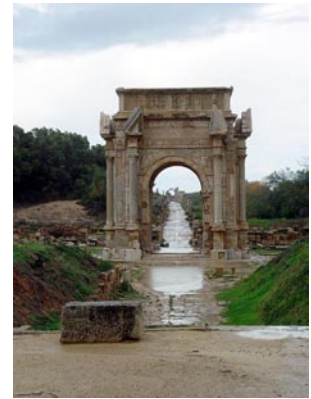
Before returning to Tripoli, we will stop at nearby Villa Sileen, from the Byzantine period. It is still under restoration, so our visit is predicated on receiving a special permit. The domed seaside structure is resplendent with grand halls whose surfaces are covered with mosaics and frescoes. We will return to Tripoli where we have arranged for dinner in the Tripoli's fish market.

Day 10 Friday, March 25

Tripoli to Ghadames via Nalut

Today we head inland and will experience dramatic changes in landscape, topography and culture. Today, our objective is Ghadames, a long day's journey away to the south west in the heart of the Sahara just on the border with Algeria. But the length of the trip will be relieved by many changes in scenery and interesting stops along the way. Barely twenty miles inland the verdant coastal plain will give way to barren desert sands and dramatic mountains. We are entering the lands of the Berber and Touareg peoples and we will see many mud pisé structures and villages as well as Qasrs and subterranean courtyard houses. The "Qasrs" are a major building type in this region and are beehive shaped mounds or man-made mountains, whose narrow passageways ring a honeycomb of small chambers. Their purpose

Severan Basilica, Leptis Magna



Arch of Septimus Severus, Leptis Magna



Gharayan



Qasr Libya (above) and Nalut (below)



was the storage of grain, oil and other precious commodities, making them the banks of the time. We will break our journey at Qasr al Haj before coming to Nalut which is the largest and most dramatically situated of these bastions. Nearby, we will stop for lunch in an Italian modernist hotel built in 1933 designed by Florestano di Fausto. Like much that the Italians built in Libya during this period, it merges the latest in modern style with the traditional elements of the local vernacular. (In the likely possibility that the hotel is still closed for renovation, we will have a picnic nearby).

After lunch, we will continue on to Ghadames, arriving in time for dinner at the Hotel Dar Ghadames which will be our home of basic comforts for the next two nights.

Day 11, Saturday, March 26

Ghadames

The town of Ghadames is certainly one of the highpoints to any visit to Libya. Declared a UNESCO world heritage site, its old town is one of the largest and best preserved such pisé earth complexes in Libya. It was founded due to its oasis, with springs flowing in channels just below the surface, which can still be seen today. It thus became an important entrepot town and stopping point for trading caravans going across the desert.

The form of the largely abandoned 800 year old town is that of a sort of vast megastructure rising up out of the surrounding date palm groves with intricate networks of dark arcaded streets running through it. These passageways are lit by shafts bringing daylight down from many stories above. They link small courtyards surrounded by arcades and stairs leading to the flat roofs above. During the heat of day, these dark streets and the adjoining houses are pleasantly cool, and only at night did the inhabitants emerge to lounge and socialize on the rooftops. After exploring the streets, courts and plantations, we'll be invited into one of the houses to recline on cushions piled on the floor and be served a traditional meal of couscous, lamb and vegetables.

A Mosque in the town of Ghadames



Hotel Nalut, built by the Italians



Touareg guide lighting a fire from desert driftwood



Ghadames, streets, squares and passages (above and below)



At the end of the day, we will venture out into the dunes of the Sahara where we will see the setting sun bringing out the rich colors of the desert. Dinner will be one of the several simple places in town.

Day 12 Sunday, March 27 Ghadames to Tripoli

Today we return to Tripoli, by a slightly different route and stopping along the way for a picnic lunch and to see some of the qasrs we might have missed on the outward journey, including Kabaw Qasr and the Berber village of Tormisa. We will reach Gharyan in time for a mid-afternoon break, where we can see one of its typical underground courtyard houses which protect their inhabitants from winter cold and summer heat, thanks to the insulating quality of the earth. We will return to the Corinthia Hotel in time for a late dinner.

Day 13 Monday, March 28 Tripoli to London

After a morning free to return to the old town or relax at the hotel, we will depart for the international airport in the early afternoon for our 3:25 pm flight (BA 899) to London, Heathrow, arriving at 6:05 pm. For those whose flights are not until the next day, and who are not planning to spend time in London, we will arrange for accommodations at the airport hotel upon request.

Note: Schedules for March, 2011 are still subject to change and thus details dependent on flight timings may be subject to change.



Ghadames



Ghadames, interior of house



Banca d'Italia, Benghazi, G. Ferrazza, 1938

Mosaic panel, Qasr Libya

