

by Ihab Zaki

Having emerged from 20 years of sanctions on March 23, 2004, Libya began welcoming tourists until 2006 when they unexpectedly denied access to Americans. Four long years later they have once again put out the “welcome mat” for US citizens. Inshallah (God willing in Arabic), Libya will remain open for many years to come. This news was greeted with much joy in the office of Spiekermann Travel Service (STS) as the demand to visit this fascinating country had been steadily growing amongst our well-traveled clientele as was our frustration in not being able to provide the experience. Exactly one month after the announcement I find myself in Tripoli for a “refresher course” if you will, to reacquaint myself with the tourist “amenities” of the country as well as to familiarize myself with any new developments that have occurred over



the past five years since I last visited. I am pleased to report that while we were denied the privilege of entry, the Libyans continued to make improvements in all facets of their infrastructure. Everything from the introduction of luxurious hotels to the addition of many restaurants to appeal to all culinary tastes, great strides have been made to attend to the comfort and satisfaction of the tourist. I was particularly pleased to see all of the small, unique boutique hotels that are sprouting up everywhere along the route as I prefer to use this type of accommodation whenever possible. And after having experienced a steady diet of chicken for every meal except breakfast when I was last here I especially welcomed the mix of restaurants running the gamut from traditional to international cuisine. Another boon was the restoration of the small museums that are attached to many of the sites and a few newly opened ones such as the Libya Museum (pictured at left) with state of the art technology.

The recent thaw in relations spurred us into action and I came to the conclusion that in order to offer the best options I would have to be more knowledgeable than my competition. The best way to acquire all the pertinent information that



would allow STS to better serve you would be to experience it firsthand. So despite the less than favorable conditions (grueling heat), I was determined to make the supreme sacrifice in order to re-educate myself thus enabling STS to reestablish ourselves as the experts in this field. My goal is to offer interesting tours with multifaceted appeal.

Of course the highlight for many people is the abundance of well-preserved ruins, many of them World Heritage sites. One can't help but be overwhelmed by the relics that have survived from ancient times. Some of the more spectacular jewels in Libya's crown include Sabratha, Leptis Magna, Apollonia and Cyrene. But the country has more to offer than these remnants of the past. For instance Tripoli is a vibrant capital city poised between dilapidation and rehabilitation and home to a delightful old Medina. Pristine sand stretches for 1,250 miles along the Mediterranean coast and many new hotels are cropping up providing access to both beaches and ruins. Heading south towards the Sahara Desert one discovers the many oases towns still visited by camel caravans. As in many countries around the world I am always impressed by the reception I am given as an American. The Libyans were no exception as everywhere I went the people I interacted with greeted me with warmth and hospitality. Many were grateful that I am committed to bringing Americans to visit their country!

Back in 2004 when we first introduced tours to Libya it was somewhat of a challenge to prepare for your trip. Visas had to be obtained through their embassy in Ottawa, Canada by our agency. It was a costly, tedious and at times confusing procedure! There was still a US State Department warning in effect that made some people uncomfortable about traveling there. But if you were one of the few who made the journey once you arrived you found hotels that lacked modern conveniences, a meager choice of restaurants, no printed material on the country and its treasures and very few qualified guides. You couldn't even find a postcard! Though the influx of American tourists came to a complete standstill over the last few years, the country welcomed European visitors whose numbers averaged 100,000 to 200,000 a year between 2005 and 2009 creating a demand for better services.

During my stay in 2005 the choice was between dilapidated government owned hotels and small uncomfortable inns. The only acceptable hotel was the newly opened Corinthia which charged (and still does) very hefty rates. Today there's a whole menu of options to choose from including the Radisson, the Intercontinental, and a few private hotels in the old city housed in some of the late 18th and early 19th century mansions. Very soon a Marriott and the Four Points by Sheraton will join that list. I was taken by my local host to the Dar Arkno, a delightful small hotel (16 rooms). Sitting across from the ex-King's palace which houses the newly opened Libya Interactive Museum, it is a calm oasis away from Tripoli's noise and traffic with an accommodating staff that aim to make one's stay a pleasurable experience. Featuring good sized rooms that offered a clean bathroom, air conditioning, plasma TV, wireless internet, mini bar and a safety box it had all the necessities that made me feel immediately comfortable. Stepping onto the patio to sit and enjoy the welcomed breezes and a good



cup of coffee (available gratis along with tea) I realized that this charming traditional guest house had all the required elements to recommend it as the place of choice to stay in Tripoli.

I also inspected two gorgeous boutique hotels tucked away in narrow alleys of the old city that would also be agreeable choices. I took the time to sample the cuisine at one where I enjoyed a lovely meal of excellent seafood indulging in my favorite, grilled shrimp. Another pleasant surprise is that one can find wireless internet in every hotel which was unheard of 5 years ago. I was told that the two camps we will be staying at on our tours that visit the Sahara offer internet as well!

The country has improved in almost every aspect though finding a good guide is still a challenge. Credit cards are still rarely used, ATMs are almost nonexistent. But I did find an amazing phenomenon called a Bank on Wheels which I tried and to my amazement it actually worked. These are vans equipped to dispense cash using ATM or credit cards. Alcohol is still banned though there is talk of it being available in restaurants of large luxury hotels in the near future. The greatest stride of course is the ease in which one is now able to obtain a visa. I sent the local agent a scanned copy of my passport and they were able to secure an approval within a week. I was then able to print a copy to take with me to show to airline personnel when checking in. I also had my main passport page translated into Arabic (\$60 cost including handling and shipping) which is required to enter the country. And, to my surprise, the \$40 I was told I needed to pay upon arrival was not levied. More money to spend on souvenirs... if only they had any! Though even here I must confess I have seen some improvement. I experienced for the first time the new Libyan airline Afriqiyah, which Colonel Qaddafi launched about 4 years ago to link Europe with the countries of West Africa via Tripoli. I flew from Rome to Tripoli on a seamless 1 ½ hour flight and I landed in a tired looking airport made welcoming by the brilliant sun. I couldn't help but notice all the nearby cranes surrounding the skeleton of the upcoming state of the art airport which is scheduled to open in 2012.

I still had energy on the first day to head out on foot into this city of about 2 million people, one-third of Libya's total population. I am a veteran of how to cross the street in Tripoli, where the roads aren't divided into lanes, there are no stop signs and vehicles move in herds. You walk out bravely, with your hand held in the pose reminiscent of a guard at a school crossing and "usually" drivers give you the right of way. Perhaps being raised in Cairo gave me sufficient training to apply my skills to maneuvering in a city with similar habits. Perhaps to it is fair to say that it is really no different than any other large city (Beijing, Buenos Aires, Montreal, New York, Rome come to mind) around the world.

My walking tour of ancient Oea (modern Tripoli) was as exciting as it was educational. The Libyans make claim to the fourth largest gold market in the world after Dubai, Kuwait, and Saudi Arabia. I wandered through alleys littered with gold shops that glittered so brightly it was hard on the eye and streets packed with artisans working in copper and textiles. There were spice shops sprinkled in among the quaint antique shops. Gone are the days when I would poke around these shops looking for that unique item that would speak to me in such a way that I had to take it home. When I got to test my bargaining skills against the pros. Though Reem (my wife) certainly welcomes the little trinkets I manage to find, she has put the kibosh on any large items as soon, we would be able to open our own little shop! Now I attempt to appease my obsession with window shopping and by asking the occasional price. Not the same but at least I can report that I found prices to be very fair and was reasonably sure that the Libyans have not yet learned the art of faking ancient pieces. So what they say is old IS old.

Tripoli has been many things since the Phoenicians founded it around 500 BC. It began as a Roman colonial hub that sent grain, slaves and gold from central Africa to the imperial capital. Over time it morphed into an outpost of gilded Byzantium and the home port of Barbary pirates. In the years leading up to World War II it was the seat of Italian colonial aspirations. Today it sits beside the Mediterranean, all toothpaste striped white and green, and everywhere you look you see portraits of President Moammar Khadafy. In the heart of the city is Green Square. Streets to the east, with shuttered balconies and Baroque plaster molding, exemplify the Italian colonial period, which began in 1911 and left many Libyans bearing Italian surnames, fluent in the language, addicted to eating pasta and inhaling a quick breakfast of croissant and café macchiato while remaining standing. To the west of the square are the walled old city and castle, which date from the era of the Ottoman Turks, 1500 to 1800 and the Jamahiriya Museum, with its extraordinary collection of sculpture, mosaics, coins and other treasures of the classical world. One finds Roman friezes from the triumphal arch in Leptis Magna and a polished marble statue of the Three Graces from Greek Cyrene.

Although my time is limited I am yearning to revisit one of my most favorite sites in the world, Leptis Magna. It truly is deserving of its recognition as THE jewel of Libya's ancient sites. The remains of this vast and remarkable city are located just two hours east of Tripoli by vehicle. One still hears all the time that location is everything. Certainly that was true back then though probably for different reasons. Situated on the Mediterranean overlooking its crystal clear blue waters, Leptis Magna was once the terminus of a trade route to sub-Saharan Africa, one of about 600 colonial settlements on the coast of North Africa that fed the empire's talent pool. By 200, one-third of the senators in Rome were from North Africa, and a native son of Leptis Magna, Septimus Severus, was proclaimed emperor. The partly reconstructed arch near the entrance of the site was built to commemorate his visit home in 203. As you stroll through that arch and gaze out over the city you will notice toppled Corinthian capitals, cracked columns, and floors with mosaics still clinging to them, temples and forums that roll down towards the sea. One can marvel at the amazing Hadrianic Baths, which had cold and hot pools and the still-intact marble toilets. As the path takes you towards the theater you are struck by its setting. Hugging the shore with the Mediterranean as a backdrop, it offers stunning views of the sea. Enough daydreaming! As I said, my time is limited and I would have to save Leptis Magna for my next visit.

Since my main reason for coming to Libya was to inspect new hotels and meet with our operator I would only have time to visit 2 sites and alas Leptis Magna would not be one of them. Instead, my first excursion was to Sabratha, an hour's drive west of Tripoli on a good highway. Sabratha began as a Phoenician trading post in the late 5th and early 6th centuries BC and was part of the short lived Numidian kingdom of Massinissa. The Romans rebuilt the city in the 1st century AD and it continued to prosper as many of the senators that formed their governing body were from Tripolitania, a region represented by Sabratha, Leptis Magna and Oea (modern Tripoli). Among its chief attractions are villas with private baths, the Temple of Serapis, the Capitulum, the Temple of Hercules and the impressive colonnaded Temple of Isis. The latter, built from 30 BC to 14 AD, sits majestically on the edge of the sea, waves occasionally spilling over its foundation. The nearby 2nd century theater with its dramatic three storey backdrop of columns is exquisitely intact. An architectural masterpiece, it was designed to allow for the amplification of actors' voices and to keep audiences cool by funneling ocean breezes through doorways on the backstage wall.

My second foray away from Tripoli took me to the Berber town of Gharyan where I had lunch in a typical troglodyte house built in 1666 (the same year of the London fire). Just an hour south of the capital, this village is dotted with roughly 40 such houses built underground to protect the inhabitants from the cold winters and the scorching heat of summer. A necessity in this area where temperatures have been recorded (in the small town of Aziziya) as high as 57.8 C or 136 F. A delicious home cooked meal of lamb and chick peas was served to the accompaniment of traditional Berber music played by local musicians. A truly memorable experience! I was returning to Tripoli to inspect a new hotel that had just recently opened, the deluxe Radisson Blu. It is a beautiful property in an ideal setting overlooking the port of Tripoli. I partook of the lavish dinner buffet of seafood and feasted on my favorite, grilled shrimp. I went to sleep well sated and with memories of an exceptional day swirling around in my head. Pleasant dreams! The following morning, a Friday and day of rest, I had breakfast on my balcony overlooking the port of Tripoli and the quiet streets.

I returned to the cosy Dar Arkno for my last night. I was warmly greeted by the smiling faces of the friendly staff welcoming me back. It was a reassuring feeling and a wonderful ending to a successful inspection tour of the country. Best of all, Libya, reminiscent of what China was in the 1970s, remains largely untouched by commercial tourism, mass crowds and congested sites. The current situation denies entry to tourists unless they are sponsored by a local travel agent. There's an air of naiveté and freshness unlike any I've ever encountered in all my years of touring. To my delight I can announce with extreme confidence that Libya is ready and those who will experience firsthand its hospitality and explore its empty sites on our upcoming tours are truly in for an unforgettable adventure. Consider adding and extension to the far south into the desert to see the petroglyphs or beginning your journey in Egypt where you will explore Siwa oasis before crossing into Libya.

Both I and Michelle have been to Libya and are available to answer any questions you may have regarding travel to the region. We are hoping that if you have been thinking about visiting Libya you will join us on one of our tours to what we consider to be one of the most fascinating places on earth.



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