

A Short Trip to Tripoli

Libya has had a bad press in recent years, especially in this country since the Lockerbie air disaster. However, now that the trial of the Libyan suspect has taken place – even if political rumour suggests some other country was in fact responsible for the bomb – Libya is opening up to some extent to tourism. I believe it is still very difficult to travel there as an individual, but groups are welcome. And since I have wanted for many years to see their Roman ruins, said to be the best in the world, Frances and I joined an organised tour to Tripoli in February.

We were delighted but surprised by the country. The people were most welcoming, and unlike their neighbours in North Africa (Egypt and Tunisia) nobody pressed you to buy something all the time. Even in the markets of the old Medina, it was possible to look in a shop window without the owner rushing out to pull you inside. Nobody asks for tips, even when they deserve one. The Libyans seem very self-contained and unflappable. We were there just after the matter of the Danish cartoons had caused riots in many Islamic states, but there was no sign of that where we were. (There was trouble a week later in Benghazi, at the other side of the country, but I believe that was caused by an Italian politician being deliberately provocative.) There was the traditional disadvantage for foreign tourists: the call to prayer five times a day on heavily amplified loudspeakers from every mosque. The Dawn call is always earlier than the average tourist wants to wake up. The men were dressed much as in most countries round the Mediterranean: shirts and trousers, or suits for formal occasions. Women appeared to have freedom to dress as they wished. We saw everything from full Islamic scarf and full-length gown to informal Western-style, often without a headscarf. The shop windows had fashionable evening dresses on display. Even though it is an Islamic state, the regime is tolerant of Christianity, but it is a minority religion, mainly for expatriate workers. Just up the road from our hotel was the Roman Catholic Church of San Francisco, built by the Italians in the 1930s. It has services every day, especially Friday (the Islamic 'weekend') and Sunday, held in Arabic, English, French, Italian, Korean and Polish. Perhaps things

would have been easier when the Mass was in Latin. On the other hand, the cathedral built by the Italians in 1928 has been converted into the principal mosque.

In spite of dire warnings in the guide book, I found the traffic very orderly. You can even rely on a zebra crossing to get over the road safely. There must be some danger: we did see a lot of dead cars, old bangers upside down by the roadside, but although the traffic in the city was very heavy, I never saw an accident.

The other great reputation Libya has overseas is the cult of the leader, Colonel Gaddafi. Certainly, he restarted the calendar when he took over the country in the coup of 1 September 1969, so that posters all over Tripoli had a prominent '36' on them – as do the stamps in our passports. But I have been to many countries where the cult of the leader's personality is more obvious.

So, what did we do on our short visit? We were a group of 25, mostly middle-aged or older, and as far as I could find out, all except us two were either teachers at school or university, or travelling with one. Everyone had come because of having studied Latin, so there was great argument at the Roman sites about the meaning of the Latin inscriptions. These are notoriously difficult to decipher, written in an early form of text messaging, and when key letters have weathered away, the results can be ambiguous.

Our first day out was to Sabratha, about halfway between Tripoli and the Tunisian frontier. It was a beautiful sunny day, and we were able to wander about the site and look over the blue of the Mediterranean which made a magnificent backdrop to the rebuilt theatre. Libya was under Italian control between WWI and WWII, when Britain took over briefly after General Montgomery had defeated Rommel. The Italians had invested a lot of effort in archaeology; after all, Libya was an important province of the Roman Empire, and part of Italy's own history. The Sabratha site is about a mile square, and littered with columns of temples, basilicas and other public buildings. One of the best-preserved is the latrines, still in working order (but not in

use!) attached to one of the bath complexes. The theatre has been rebuilt, and dominates the site. Many of the buildings have mosaic floors, some with the same patterns as here at Fishbourne, but the finest have been removed to museums. The best mosaics are made up of such tiny stones that it isn't until you get very close that you realise they aren't paintings.

Tripoli is the Greek for 'Three Cities', which are Sabratha, Leptis Magna and Oea. The first two had the advantage of being abandoned for centuries, so the sites are easy to excavate, and the remains are in good condition. But Oea is under modern Tripoli, and a lot of it is impossible to discover because of more recent buildings, often themselves historic monuments. There is one very fine arch, built by Marcus Aurelius in AD 163, and now about 15 feet below street level, but the best Roman remains are in the museum, set in the old fort. Here are breathtakingly lovely mosaics, lots of Roman statues (including one fine one of the goddess Venus, only recently returned by the Italians, who had presented it to the Nazi Marshal Goering in the 1930s) and even the 1960s Volkswagen 'Beetle' used by Colonel Gaddafi as he was going around building up support for his coup. Not to mention a whole floor devoted to the achievements of the revolution: unfortunately all but two exhibits were entirely in Arabic, so I can't tell you much about them. In fact throughout the country, notices are exclusively Arabic, except in a very few places frequented by tourists.

Next to the fort is the Medina, a traditional warren of narrow streets lined with shops selling all manner of goods. There are very few shops for tourist souvenirs, but everything for leading a full life: food, clothing, luggage - mostly, of course, Made In China. Our third day of sightseeing was to Leptis Magna, about 80 miles east of Tripoli. This should have been even finer than Sabratha, but unfortunately it rained, and we missed the wonderful colour we had seen at Sabratha. The site is even bigger, with magnificent buildings standing up to three stories high. Leptis was the birthplace of the emperor Septimius Severus (who died in AD 211 at York - it is facts like this that bring home the extent of the Roman empire) so his imperial favour

ensured that money went into beautifying the city, which was already one of the most important cities of the empire. One of the most impressive areas is the market, decorated with marble during his reign, including the most beautiful fish shops I have even seen: the counters are supported on marble dolphins.

Libya is hoping to increase its tourist trade, possibly seeing the prosperity it is bringing to its neighbour Tunisia. But there is a long way to go yet, and some steps may be unacceptable. There are few beaches, and certainly no specially-developed tourist enclaves. Alcohol is totally banned (so is pork), though in the smarter restaurants it is possible to get Becks non-alcoholic beer, brewed in Germany and very similar to their lager. And the food is not very exciting. With the short time we had, the group tended to eat together in restaurants chosen by the guide, where the menu was almost unchanging. It started with soup. "What kind of soup?" we would ask. "Libyan soup," was the reply, though you did get the choice of Libyan soup-with-meat or Libyan soup-with-fish. Then there was a choice of meat (usually tough) fish or chicken followed by a sort of micro-fruit salad: mostly apples (odd, since they are imported, while the roads were lined with stalls selling oranges) cut up in very small cubes. Yet the pastry shops sell wonderful sticky honey cakes, and there are excellent ice-creams, another legacy of the Italians. We only had time to visit a very small part of a very large country. In the east, Cyrenaica has Greek ruins of the same standard as the Roman ones we saw. To the south is the Sahara, mostly empty but with the oilfields that give Libya more prosperity than many countries in that area. Would I recommend a visit? Yes, definitely, but only if you are interested in the Roman and Greek sites.

Alan Hakim

