



Unfair stereotypes and obsolete political ratings keep the most stunning and absolutely gorgeous ancient Greek and Roman ruins on the planet at bay from travellers. This is more than just unfortunate.

The western part of the coast is dotted by the ruins of magnificent ancient Roman cities, while the eastern part is home of the ancient Greek ones, later converted by Romans. The dry climate of the desert preserved those sites remarkably, and they are arguably the best preserved ancient Roman and Greek sites on this planet.

ROUTE

As expected, the itinerary for this Libyan holiday was changing several times, before I even stepped on the airplane. It has become a tradition that I change the travel plan several times while planning a holiday.

The key sites included the ancient ruins of Leptis Magna, Sabratha, Ptolemais, Cyreneica and Apollonia, however the main destination was Nalut, whose vicinity was a lucky witness to the solar eclipse – the very reason of my trip.

I read in publications that no trip should be made to Libya without visiting Ghadames, an ancient Berber town, deeper in the Sahara desert, close to the border with Algeria, in the western part of the country.

Having all these data therefore, has made this trip one of the easiest routes to plan, however Libya turned to be a hard place to get to.

My flight from Vienna was cancelled before I even got the tickets, but could change the dates, even to those days which were previously unavailable.



Then, a twist of fate allowed me to book a regular ticket, which was flexible, and I could plan my entire trip accordingly.

This was not a long trip, and therefore was a relatively easy one to plan. Having reviewed the geography of Libya I decided to make the trip as the graphic illustrates on the next page. The actual trip and the destinations are presented in the table below.

The route required a return flight with Libyan Arab Airlines from Tripoli to Benghazi to visit the ancient Greek sites of Cyrene, Apollonia, and Ptolemais. The rest of the transportation was by a rented car, which was flexible enough to see the most of the country in such a short time that I allowed Libya to make an impression on me. I guess

it was a little unfair, as the country has plenty to offer.

Later on, I built on slightly on this itinerary as the occasions arose. However, I kept the main destinations as a must. I am covering them pretty much in a chronological order in this story.

Before I do that, though, let me tell a little more about the events before I actually landed in Libya.



The process to obtain Libyan visa was more difficult, or rather inconvenient, than it should be.

The current Libyan law discouraged independent travel and all visitors had to go with an organised group. I should rather say that I had been told by two local travel agents that this was the case and many others refused to speak with me as an independent traveller.

Eventually, I managed to speak to two travel agents, who were prepared to help me to come to Libya, by issuing an official invitation for me. It was the first time ever that I had to engage in such a process, which was a whole new experience to me. Although I understood it was necessary, I did not like it. It was quite beyond my comprehension that a system like that was a formal procedure. It certainly discourages tourism.

28-Sep-05 Wednesday	29-Sep-05 Thursday	30-Sep-05 Friday	1-Oct-05 Saturday	2-Oct-05 Sunday	3-Oct-05 Monday	4-Oct-05 Tuesday	5-Oct-05 Wednesday	6-Oct-05 Thursday	7-Oct-05 Friday	8-Oct-05 Saturday
Tripoli (in)	Sabratha	Apollonia Cyrene Ptolemais Benghazi	Leptis Magna	Abohamam	Nalut	Ghadames	Ghadames Kabaw Qasr Al-Hajj	Gharyan Tripoli	Tripoli	Tripoli (out)
**	****	*****	*****	**	***	*****	*****	*	**	**
	UNESCO site	Medieval site	Town				Ancient Site			Landscape

I share an opinion that UNESCO listed sites belong to the entire human race, and not to a particular nation or a country, and therefore should be accessible to everyone who chooses to visit them. And perhaps pay a tribute to our great ancestors who built those places or give our respect to Nature (or any other recognised Creator), which shaped those unique landscapes for us to marvel at.

No travel agent in Libya would assist one in getting a visa and not try to charge at least 150 euro for it. That is most certainly a massive rip-off because the only thing the travel agent does is sending a fax to the relevant embassy.

Furthermore, the agents would insist that since they have invited travellers, they are responsible for them (which is in fact understandable) and the travellers should agree that the agent organised the entire trip in Libya, again for a price.

I tried to find an agent via the Internet (as suggested by the Libyan Embassy in London) and although I found many travel agencies and tour companies in the Libyan Yellow Pages, the majority of the phone numbers were incorrect or I had such a consistently bad luck, that I could not get through to the majority of them.

I sent faxes and emails and waited, but the time was flying and I was getting nervous. I had no replies for about three weeks and there were about four weeks before my planned entry to Libya.

One day, I finally managed to get someone from Tripoli on their mobile phone and agreed to get engaged in the process they chose. In the meantime, one of the other agents to whom I sent an email (which I found in one of the guidebooks) replied to me as well. Things were getting better logistically, but definitely not financially better.

One of the agents, called Arkno Tours, quoted me 2,189 euros (1,453 pounds or 2,355 US dollars at the time) for the itinerary I suggested, and as illustrated below. It was all inclusive, but I still found it excessive and much too expensive for me. I could not agree to that.

A peculiar twist of fate allowed me, all over sudden, to be dealing with two travel agents at the same time. I kindly informed them about this fact, which was quite canny I believe.

I managed to negotiate a better deal with Raki Tour (www.rakitour.com) of Tripoli, who agreed to the same itinerary and

promised to charge me about €175 euros a day – all inclusive. That was a saving of €439 (£291 or \$472) altogether, enough to pay for one year University education of the Lao monk that I am sponsoring. I was happy with the deal, yet still wondered if I was paying much too much for this holiday.

Surely, that was not within my principles of the independent travel, other than that I was supporting a local business with my custom. However, there was little I could do, as I was getting desperate after having been turned down by a number of other travel agents, and the local law was to obey.

Fortunately, due to the rivalry of the two agents, I did not have to pay for the visa application in advance. I felt more comfortable with this, since there was never certainty that my application was going to be accepted. Then, not only would I lose the GBP40 application fee but also EUR150 invitation charge.

The visa process itself was not too bad. Since 20 September 2004, passports needed not to be translated into Arabic, and the only papers necessary to apply for a visa were: single (green) visa application form, four passport-size photographs and the invitation letter. Passports lodged in the morning are ready for collection at 3pm the next day.



... historically

Libya was a witness to some fascinating ancient history of this planet, or at least this part of the planet.

I do not want to bore anyone with hundreds of words on ancient history, but I have always found it amazing how quickly and astonishingly confidently, the kings, emperors and Caesars of the ancient world expanded their empires.



One of the most famous and mysteriously built empires was Persia. The Egyptian pharaohs feared it and many times failed in the numerous wars with it. At some point in history, for example between 550 and 336 BC, the borders of the empire stretched beyond Egypt and included the eastern parts of Libya.

Then, of course, there was Alexander the Great, who conquered the Persian Empire and managed to go farther than any of the European rulers, apart from the Russian Tsars a millennium later.

Alexander was one of the world's greatest kings of all time, and he was only 19 years old when he became the king. Within thirteen years, he managed to achieve more than any European king ever did before or after him. His mysterious death at the age of 33 proved that him and his tremendous charisma were keeping the vast and diversified empire together, since, as soon as he died (most probably poisoned by his wife or rebelled army generals), the empire collapsed.

After Alexander, there was obviously the Roman Empire, which left magnificent legacy in the western part of Libya and yet preserving the monuments built by the Greek and Macedonians.

The Ottoman and the Arab Empires were the last to include Libya in their territories.

... today

Now, Libya is a socialistic, developing country with great potential due to its oil resources.

It has been 36 year, since the 1 September 1969, Mr (Colonel) Muammar Al Qathafi took power in the country, and since then there are no extremely rich or extremely poor people in the country. The anniversary is proudly broadcasted by numerous banners displayed around the country featuring the image of Mr Muammar Al Qathafi in a good mood and full glory.

Well, from the first sight, it appears that the petrodollars of this fifth richest in oil country on the planet are being wisely spent. The country has electricity and running water is widely available while the roads are among the finest on the continent. I liked it very much, because compared with Nigeria, which suffers humongous underdevelopment of the rural areas, Libya is investing well in the infrastructure.

However, there are still a few Libyans who claim that not enough of the petrol money is being spent to increase the standard of living of average Libyans. Those ones, at the other hand, are not sure what happens to Libya after Qathafi. Anyway...

One day, Mr Qathafi famously stated that democracy means popular rule, and not popular opinion. I have to say that it an accurate statement.

The popular rule has been stretched so far that each district has a committee, which is





encouraged to meet regularly to the extent that the meetings have become mandatory for the citizens.

I was told the following joke that might just illustrate Libyan's growing attitude towards the system – with humour, of course.

One morning, a man woke up with the words 'this is impossible' on his mouth. For the entire morning he repeatedly was saying 'this is impossible, this is impossible, this is impossible'. He went for days like this and eventually his family lost their patience and sent him to a doctor, hoping that this could be stopped or at least explained. At the doctor's the man did not stop even for a minute saying 'this is impossible' and the doctor was struggling with the case. After a long day, he got the man to say what happened. The man said that one night he had a dream. In the dream he saw Colonel Qathafi one hundred years old with quadruple chin and terrible wrinkles covering his entire face, and he was still governing Libya. The doctor's face immediately went totally pale and the he started screaming 'this is impossible! this is impossible! this is impossible! ...'

Nothing is black or white in Libya, there is always a colour in between. Although there are rules and there is some sort of law, but the actual ruing always depends on the official. Therefore all is pretty much unpredictable.

Recently, Libya's government has been opening back to the rest of the world, which should benefit the country. Tourists are trickling back, curious of the culture and the remains of the ancient cities. Fairly good road infrastructure should facilitate the growth of tourism as it is relatively easy to move around. The question remains however, whether the government will allow for this growth.

Obviously, there is so much to be done as well. For example, the 2000 kilometres of coastline should be properly taken care of. Currently, all sorts of rubbish that smells beyond imagination is dumped on the beaches, which makes it rather impossible to spend any longer than a few seconds there.

How this is gong to develop is a big question mark. The thing is that certain large scale investments in Libya were not particularly

successful. For example, the two thousand kilometre-long Great Man-Made River is a total failure. The artificial river, which runs by pipes for over a thousand of kilometres brings water from the desert, but the water is so expensive that it hardly makes any sense to pump it.

Libya suffers from too much bureaucracy as well. At a number of tourist sites, like Sabratha, Leptis Magna and Ghadames, my guide had to make three copies of my invitation to Libya! One for the venue, one for the tourist police and the other one who knows for whom! Allegedly this is a requirement in certain parts of the country, however in Cyraneica I did not have to present any papers... I heard from my guide that paperwork is most definitely the most favourite part of any official's job.

I could understand the situation in Ghadames, which is located a few kilometres from the Algerian border, whose history is not great. Today, there are trouble makers at both sides of the border. They are not political or religious but drug related. Therefore the area around the border is not considered completely safe. As I wanted to

get a little closer to the border to see certain things, my driver was required to complete additional paperwork.

I was a witness of a very peculiar situation one day. In a certain area south of Tripoli, there was no gasoline at petrol stations. How bizarre in a petrol producing country! There were large queues at the stations and people were getting angry and fought about the place in the line. One guy jumped the queue right in front of me – I have not seen a more rude and blunt behaviour for years! I asked my driver what that was supposed to be, and he said that it was a bad man, that's all.

Yet, there were others that tried to be clever to jump the queue, too. It was a private station and out of five pumps only one worked and two queues formed to this one pump. I do not expect anyone to be a saint, but that behaviour at the stations was not exactly what Islam suggests.

As the situation was getting uglier with every minute, the owner seeing people pushing and bumping each other cars, said that he might close the station for good. I do not know what happened as I left, having filled my tank.

Traffic Chaos

Traffic in Libya is a total nightmare and chaos. There are no rules but one that is based on a first-come first-serve basis. Driving is a secondary skill, which follows the skill of avoiding other vehicles and pedestrians. Hardly! I cannot possibly overemphasise how happy I was that I was not driving in this frenzy disarray.

Driving in the wrong lane is also very common. My driver did that buoyantly at least twice and laughed about it. To do such thing is extremely frightening, but everyone does it! In Germany, for example, driving in the wrong lane of a motorway is punishable by long term in jail!

I saw many drivers stopping at an intersection, right in the middle, and chat to other drivers, or worse, to a pedestrian. Those people appear not to have any imagination at all.

Apparently there was this one Danish guy who, after arriving to Libya started driving like the Libyans. When he was asked why he switched from being a polite and defensive driver to a monster behind the wheel, he

allegedly replied that if one wanted to drive normally amongst the Libyan drivers, one would never arrive to one's destination. I could easily believe that!

Prohibition

Libya prohibits alcohol. This one, contrary to Morocco or Egypt, for example, where one can very easily get beer and wine (and even spirits) is a total prohibition.

First of all, it is a serious crime to bring alcohol into the country (although from my experience it is not rigorously checked), there are no places in Libya that sell alcohol, not even upmarket hotels, and it is illegal to possess alcohol in any quantity, except perfume, aftershave and disinfectants. This makes travelling in Libya an experience!

There is beer available – Beck's being the most popular, but it is the non-alcoholic beer, which tastes rather funny, however it effectively kills thirst, and it does sound rather mucho to order 'one beer!' instead of 'one Pepsi!' I am not sure how many of those I managed to consume, which gave me a lot of gas to burp and fire to fart.



Oh, and my guide told me that there are no belly dancers in Libya either, so entertainment is based on drinking super-sweet mint tea, smoking shisha or going to a cinema.

Now, what happens behind the scenes, I do not know. I heard a few stories, however about it... shush...

تريبولي

The capital city of Libya is not very large. It is home to one million people, which is rather small for a North African nation.

It was in the past a Roman city, of which there are a few remains, like the Triumphal Arch of Marcus Aurelius. I liked it very much and its location, right by the walls of the medina make it so easy to find. It stands slightly below the street level, almost in a lower garden and it contrasts harmonically with the surrounding Arabic architecture of the old medina.

After the Romans, the Ottomans came and they left some legacy, one of which is the

Red Castle – right at the end of the medina and close to the harbour. Part of it is ruined but secured and the rest is housing a museum. It looks nice but is not excessively impressive. I like its location and shape. Just outside of the castle there are two columns, which resemble those standing in Rhodes, Greece. That was intriguing because the columns did not look very old...

The medina, although very old, it fails to impress that much, compared with those in Fes, Meknes or Marrakech of Morocco. I was expecting a more bustling and colourful place. Nevertheless, the Tripoli medina is unmistakably Arabic and there are small souqs and shops selling carpets, amphorae, desert roses, and obviously gold. There are many cafés with plastic chairs and sweet sticky tables, serving excruciatingly sweet mint tea and other soft drinks.

The medina slowly comes back to life, after a period that suggested it might die like other old towns around Libya. A few buildings are being restored or rebuilt from a total ruin – from scratch. It is a very positive sign. There are many lively souqs there as well, which suggest that tradition continues and maybe in the future, the old town of Tripoli

will shine like it once had.

Another distinguishing part of Tripoli is the Italian architecture around the 1 of September street (1 September 1969 is the date when Mr Qathafi took power). The Italians occupied (again!) the country for about five first decades of the twentieth century.

Obviously, they have to leave their fingerprints on Tripoli by commissioning a hospital and remodelling some of the buildings in the centre to follow a classic Italian style. It looks great!

Modern Tripoli is still growing. The new high rise buildings only start to grow. There are still concrete and ugly, but I saw plans for more modern ones of glass and steel. I saw on Qathafi billboards that skyscrapers mean development and progress to him, so one should expect tall buildings to rise in Tripoli faster than one can say '37th Anniversary'. Eating in Tripoli reminded me the holiday days in Morocco nearly a decade ago. I wanted seafood, so after arriving at the seashore, I saw a number of fishermen selling their catch from tables lined up along the street.





I knew I was entering a fishy area before I could see it. My nose told me that. So, there was this young man, perhaps in his late teens, hosing down the area he was occupying with his simple wooden table bearing the catch. The water from the hose and the melting ice from under the fish created little streams, which mixed with the dirt road and formed slippery mud.

There were a few of those fishermen there doing the exact same thing. The scene was rather messy...

Right beside them, other entrepreneurs were heating grills with charcoal. The process requires you to select the fish from the fisherman and choose your preferred table at a restaurant nearby. The fisherman gives you a number, organises the fish preparation with the grilling man and gives it to the restaurant, which, at the end of the day, provides you a consolidated bill.

At 7 o'clock in the morning, telephone rang in my room. A man at the other side demanded to speak to Mr Ivanovic. He refused to acknowledge that I did not know Mr Ivanovic of Belgrade, Yugoslavia, and that he should call his room. He said that he did not know in which room Mr Ivanovic was staying. He only new that Mr Ivanovic was

staying in *my* hotel last week. Then I lost it and told him that I do not own a hotel and that he should rather call reception downstairs and let other hotel guest sleep. He was still blazing something when I was hanging up.

Domestic departures area at the Libyan airports (well, at least Tripoli and Benghazi) is a scary sight. If you can decipher your destination from the signage, then you should make sure you elbow through your way to the check-in counter, because queuing is not a concept that is remotely accepted in Libya. Usually, there is a swarm of people solidly attached to the counter, and although they might have been denied a boarding card (due to overbooking), they would remain there hoping situation might change for them somehow.

Hey, just because you got hold of a boarding card, there is no reason to relax. The next challenge it to get on the plane. First the airline would pack everyone on an airport bus and keep them there with the doors and windows closed for about fifteen minutes – just outside the aircraft. Then, soon after opening the doors where floods of people approach the plane, the airline workers would attempt to stop everyone reaching the steps. When somehow the crowd gets to

the steps, other airline workers would make everyone wait there as well. Oh, by the way, there is agonizing shouting involved by both parties, and pushing by the crowd.

I mean, I am not sure what exactly the problem is. Not like the aircraft was not ready for boarding because of cleaning process, because the aircraft look like they have never been cleaned from the day the airline acquired them. And these are not new aircraft at all. The first one I was on was the ageing Fokker 80, and the other was the outdated Boeing 727.

Maybe this horrifying mess is because of free sitting, which the airline offers, contrary to whatever might be printed or written on you boarding pass. I do not know.

Use of mobiles on board and during the flight is absolutely fine as apparently they do not interfere with electronic equipment in Libya.

Two local guys sitting in my ABC row were showing off their mobile phone. They were very funny actually and definitely wanted to see my mobile, on a basis of 'show me yours and I show you mine'. They did not speak much English but somehow we managed to have a sing-language conversation and since



they were very friendly it worked perfectly fine. Plus, they could remember my name.

My personal tour operator from Raki Tour, Abdu Rahman, at the other hand, called me all different names but my first name. He started with my last name, then, called me Maria, and finally Mark, which is an English translation of my middle name – Marek. It was very amusing because I had no idea that he was actually talking to me. He must have thought I was crazy or total arsehole that I was not responding when he was calling or addressing me. Honestly, I did not know. Later, of course, I figured but not being used to be called Mark, I had a somewhat retarded response time...

One night I went on wandering around the town for the first time on my own. As I did not take a map with me, I was not sure where I was going. I simply watched the direction of the long afternoon shadows, to keep the right azimuth towards the Green Square (As-Sadah al-Kradrah). When I found myself entering the walls of the medina, I thought that without a map or a guide at this time of day, I should rather stay out of the old city, because I could easily get lost. I took a slight detour, but managed to get to the square with no problem. While I was

walking, I watched the reactions of the locals on my sight. I could not exactly pinpoint them, but they all were positive and an ounce of curiosity what I was doing there on my own.

Eventually, I ended at a very posh restaurant called Athar, situated by the ancient and wonderful Arch of Marcus Aurelius erected in the year 164 to emphasise the importance of the city of Oea (now Tripoli). The restaurant serves delicious traditional Libyan and Mediterranean dishes. Their fish dishes are wonderful – and you select your fish from a table while it is still half alive.

When the sun started to set, the place gained on its magical ambiance and the chants from the mosques added a more local spice. The restaurant lit up the little green garden in which the Arch stands and put a gentle light also on the ancient monument as well. When the bats started to chase whatever they were chasing, I thought it was a perfect evening with an excellent dinner.

Well, I only had to wait a little longer when a guy started to play on a synthesiser. He was able to spoil every single song, from the theme of 'Love Story' to 'Hotel California' or

Lionel Richie's 'Hello'. He was playing so badly, adding every possible side effect from the synthesiser and adding his own tunes to the main melody, that I thought I was going to be sick or pass out. I seriously could not stand it and was thinking about asking my waiter to stop that man or else. Fortunately, by the time I was ready to do that, another prayer was called from the mosques and he had to stop. That moment was like a bliss. I took my bill quickly and promptly left.

سابر اثار

This magnificently surviving ancient Roman city offers the most complete theatre of the antiquities in the world. When I saw it appearing from behind the hill, I thought I was dreaming. Maybe not totally, but I guess I thought I moved back in time to the year of 190, when the construction began.

I have never seen anything like it in my life, and I did see quite a bit before arriving to Libya. I did go to Rome, Greece and Turkey, but nowhere can one find a theatre like that. There are arenas like the Colosseum in Rome or similar ones in Arles or Nimes in southern France or Pula in Croatia, but those

are totally different structures, erected for a completely other purpose. The arenas were built for the bloody sport of wrestling between humans and hungry wild animals or between gladiators. The theatres were built for actual art; music and play.

The Sabratha theatre is remarkable, because the city of Sabratha with no city arch was much less important than the neighbouring ones, like Leptis Magna and Tripoli. However, the theatre with the 95 meters auditorium was the largest one in Africa!

What is the most mind-boggling is the classical behind the stage façade with its three tier alcoves combining 108 columns which are over 20 meters tall. This makes this theatre, the theatre of theatres!

I particularly loved the one meter tall panels, at the front of the stage, actually below the stage – an area just before the orchestra and the auditorium, which I think is called pulpitum. The curved panels boast carvings in marble showing personification of Rome and Sabratha as well as scenes from myths, such as the Judgement of Paris. However, there are also Mercury, Hercules, Muses and Graces there as well. These carvings look magnificent and I was struggling with my camera and a right position for quite a while to ensure I can capture them properly in my photographs.

Sadly, the massive earthquake of the year 365 destroyed the theatre along with entire city of Sabratha, but also Leptis Magna and the cities of Pentapolis in the east, and the whole Roman Empire, in fact.

Many buildings and structures of Sabratha are still uncovered and the few elements of the city, which have been excavated, are quite impressive. There are a few baths, and lines of columns, which look great at the front of the ancient port. Nevertheless, in comparison to the magnificence of the theatre, everything else looks so insignificant.

My guide, who was not particularly knowledgeable of this area at all, claimed that it was all the fault of the government that so much remains unexcavated. He also claimed that the area has been closed for general public, because people who wandered amongst the ruins and started digging a little, were finding gold and golden coins from the era.

Unfortunately, I could not linger any much longer to find out if that was true or not as it started to rain!

Oh, there was this other thing that I liked about Sabratha – when I arrived there at about 10 in the morning, I was the only one who was admiring this magnificent theatre. I

must have spent there about 45 minutes before a group of four Japanese came to take a few photographs.

apollonia

'When the sun came up that morning, like a burning red balloon, it broke into my window and slipped across the room. It spread itself upon me like a smell of sweet perfume.' I was snoozing with getting up waiting for the right moment.

As this morning happened as described above, the Eurythmics' song, from which most of the aforementioned words come, was sticking to me for the rest of the day. Maybe, this was because the morning did happen exactly how Annie Lennox described it in the song. Fortunately, I had in my iPod, so I could listen to it as well.

I knew was about twenty metres from the ancient Apollonia, the Greek ruins with Byzantine influences, so I did not hurry, although I did want to catch the best light for my photos. I actually could see most of them from my balcony through the harsh morning sunrays.

It is relatively small site yet hosting three great temples with gorgeous columns, and a





Byzantine fort. There are also large slabs of marble lying around. Obviously, the majority of Apollonia is yet to be excavated, and large proportion lied underneath the sea, as the effect of the famous earthquake of the of 365.

Until the excavation happens, the site appears poor in comparison with other ancient sites along the Mediterranean coast. Although the tall and straight standing columns impress and allow the mind to begin imagining how great those temples must have been. The temples are spread for about one mile, so Apollonia must have been an important city. I did not even go to the very end of it, where the amphitheatre is. It is because I forgot to take my map with me, and my 'guide' had absolutely no idea what to do there or what to see.

It is such a pity that the ancient port has never been excavated from the sea, where all of it is – submerged and invisible. The guard only charged me the camera fee of LYD 5 and waived my entry fee, and I have absolutely no idea why. Maybe my greedy tour operator had something to do with it, I do not know.

ΣΥΤΑΡΕ

Legendary ancient Greek city of which everyone must have heard. It is quite large but there is a single thing that made the most impression on me – the perfect Gymnasium or Roman Forum. It is enclosed by a line of columns running on the rectangle of the piazza – see picture above. I did not expect to see anything like that at all! The two of the remaining magnificent gates are also imposing.

The other place that screwed my imagination was the Greek Agora, later transformed by the Romans. It used to be the central square of the city designed for the public. It is still a superb place with outstanding statues and temples. My favourite temple was the Sanctuary of Demeter and Kore – the rulers of the underworld. It is a round, small building in which wonderful statues of the goddesses stand.

Many locals say that it a miracle that neither British nor Italians took the statues out of there to populate museums in their

countries, like they did with many other monuments of the antiquities.

The lower part of the city, the extensive Sanctuary of Apollo, which boasts a large temple of Apollo and smaller temples for other gods and goddesses, is also interesting, although it did not made as large impact on my as the Gymnasium or Agora did.

Sadly, the once great theatre fantastically situated on the verge of the escarpment has not been restored and it requires a stretch of imagination to see how wonderful it might have been.

The temple of Zeus is undoubtedly the very highlight of Cyrene (picture on the next page). One can always tell, which temple was for Zeus, because the size, or specifically the thickness, of the columns is incomparable to any other in the area. I think the columns might be three times as thick as the ones at the temples for other gods.

I thought this one at Cyrene was marvellous. Obviously, I went inside to soak the history



and the ambiance of the place. It was immense!

When I was wandering around this gigantic temple, I again knew why I loved seeing those ruins in Libya. First of all, there was no-one else there but me and I could walk anywhere on the site and step on any stone!

Cyrene is so large that one can struggle to find ones ways without a guide. It is a good half an hour walk from one gate to another, if downhill from the South-Eastern Gate. And one steps among unexcavated and partially excavated households, forums and piazzas. The city had four stages for performances within its walls. That says a lot about the size and importance of the place!

Tombs in the escarpment around the ancient city add a curious variety to the ancient city. There are many of them, and in the past, there was one tomb per family. I did not go into any of them, but they are clearly visible from the road.

PTOLEMAIS

Ancient Greek city later transformed by the Romans, like all the other ancient cities in Libya.

Only 10 percent is excavated, and the process takes a long time, because work only takes place two months a year. The Libyan government made deals with a number of universities around the world, which send their professors and students of archaeology to dig at the sites. Ptolemais is being taken care of by the University of Warsaw, Poland.

Mosaics, which were found in Ptolemais are among the finest in Africa. I specifically went into the museum to see them, and I was astonished that from a distance they look like paintings. This is because their individual elements are smaller than one square centimetre.

Odeon, a Greek invention, which is a small stage for listening to the music was not an idea for the Romans. Romans preferred larger theatres for listening to the music on a larger square. The Greek enjoyed music in a more cameral atmosphere. Perhaps this is why the Romans transformed the Ptolemais's Odeon into a swimming pool, six hundred years after it was constructed as a small concert hall. Cheeky bastards, because they could have easily built a swimming pool and leave the Odeon alone.

For the first time, I was able to see very close and touch an ancient Greek statue. I

simply could not believe how detailed and thoroughly sculpted it was. I think it was a statue of a soldier with perfect body, and it was sculpted in such a way, that every single muscle could be felt. It was amazing.

BENGHAZI

Libya's second largest town was surprisingly pleasant with very well maintained seafront promenade. I definitely did not expect that having seen a few photos around.

I only came to Benghazi as I had a little spare time before my flight back to Tripoli. I stopped only once to explore the Freedom Square with its majestic, although decaying rapidly, old town hall. It is a superb building with so much character, that I must have taken 30 photographs of it. Probably 25 too many, but I just wanted it photographed from every single angle. The building has a balcony, which played a very significant role in Libya's history. Italy's Mussolini, Third Reich's Rommel and Independent Libya's King Idris all spoke from it.

The square also has a mosque, called Atiq Mosque, which wonderfully contrasts with the Italianate architecture of the rest of the

square and the pedestrian precinct that leads to it.

I found myself on the square in late afternoon, and all the shops around were already closed. Many kids were running around the place and as soon as they spotted me with my huge camera dangling from my neck, they asked for photographs. I obliged without hesitation. Some of the kids were so eager to be photographed but later on were too shy to have a look at my camera's LCD screen for the result.

Leptis Magna

One of the most spectacularly preserved ancient Roman cities in the world, Leptis

Magna (or Lepcis Magnae) took my breath away.

I did not expect anything of the site, because I only saw a few close-up pictures of statues and one picture of the Roman Theatre, but not much more. And that was a good thing, because the city took me by surprise and I threw my imagination on my knees!

The grand entry to the site is the Arch of Septimius Severus. It has been wonderfully restored and the result is mind-boggling! It makes such an impact that everything else that I had seen in the Mediterranean of this kind looked now bleak. The path from the entrance to the arch, which is located on much lower ground, does not reveal anything until the very last second and then

it hits you! I simply could not believe my eyes. The arch is, for a lack of a better word, perfect.

I met a few Italian people, actually Romans, and they admitted that they were overwhelmed by this arch. Their actual words were "We are from Rome, and we do not have this! This is exceptional!!"

Hadrian's Baths of Leptis Magna were potentially the most magnificent place in the city and arguably the most extravagant baths in the Roman Empire. The baths contained several pools, sophisticated heating system for the steam rooms (sauna) and complex toilet. All was meticulously decorated with different variety of marble, perfectly sculpted statues and elaborate mosaics. It must have been *the* place for





spending time, socialising, gossiping, trading or just being seen. One of the most interesting features was the toilet, which was simply a marble bench with holes. There were no cabins and the holes were just 2.5 feet away from one another. This allowed for the guys to continue socialising, gossiping, trading or just being seen while taking a crap.

Adjacent to the Hadrian's Baths was the sports ground, at the end of which a temple for Septimius Severus and his family was constructed. All in perfect harmony and surrounded by colonnades.

The massive Septimius Forum, which the Emperor Septimius Severus (the son of Leptis Magna) added to the Old Forum redefined the central part of the city, which at that time was home to eighty thousand people, a quarter of whom were slaves.

When I stood in the place where the temple was (now in ruins) I could easily imagine what a wonderful city it must have been to live there. The decorations on the columns and the number of shops and bars around are unprecedented. Unfortunately, the statues, which were adding to the splendour of the piazza are now missing, but if they were there, woow!

If I thought that there could not be any other magical place at this site, I obviously

did not see the Septimius Basilica – right next to the Forum. It was a more judicial place rather than church (obviously it was later converted to church), and with its wooden roof over the marble floor and two tiers of columns, it was a perfect hall.

Old Forum did not strike me that much since there is little left of it. I was amazed though by the number of games engraved in the floor of the piazza. The games involved rolling and throwing marbles across the engraved lines and dimples. How clever!

The beautiful Market boasts two private stores, one for selling clothes and the other for produce. When I stepped onto the Market and saw the round cloth shop, my imagination again took me two thousand years back. I was imagining how exclusive those shops must have been, and the people wandering around and selecting material for their new togas.

The Roman Theatre, which could sit seven thousand people, is one of the oldest stone theatres of the Roman Empire. The construction of this one started at the year of the Jesus Christ's birth and it only took a year to complete. The most magnetising feature of this theatre was its stage, whose background was created by a large number of columns, sculptures and statues. That must have been not only the place where art

was shown, but where it was also born. This place is so gorgeous!

I went wandering around the auditorium and climbed places, where I should not really be, but I just wanted that perfect view of this extraordinarily magnificent place.

The Harbour of Leptis Magna is now overrated, because it is now overgrown by bushes and marsh, and although the guides will claim that the harbour was great, it actually never reached its potential since soon after it was created it stilted and there was no use of it. However, the design is in fact nearly perfect.

The Amphitheatre, at the other side of the harbour, surprised me. I must have overlooked it in my guidebook and did not expect to see one, and definitely not so well preserved. Since a large number of structures within Leptis Magna have been at least partially reconstructed, the Amphitheatre is completely original. It could sit sixteen blood thirsty spectators and the show was twice a day, I heard. The morning was for a juicy wrestling between the humans (criminals, slaves, prisoners of war) and undernourished for days wild animals.

The afternoon show was of gladiators taking on either other slaves and criminals or other gladiators.



The Circus, at the other hand, is in total ruin and only the southern part of the seats remains visible. It is nevertheless superbly positioned along the beach, and quite a large stadium for chariot racing, whose length was 450 meters. In the middle of the Circus, there was a catwalk for acrobatic performances and additional places to cheer

the racers. The podium is still visible, and it was once decorated with statues.

I was so glad that I chose to come to Leptis Magna last. I mean this was my last ancient city to visit in Libya. It is by far the grandest of all in Africa and its state successfully competes with Rome. One can easily and

lucidly imagine how spectacular Leptis Magna once was. It is such a shame that the French in the XVIII and XIX centuries and then the Italians in the XX century plundered the place, stealing the statues and columns.

I hope that one day they will restore Leptis Magna completely to its full glory, including

the port and the circus. I would love to see that!

alohamam

Not far from Gharyan, there is a place where two people, called Mosa Ahmed and Arabi Mohamed, restored an underground Berber house and started converting it into a hotel. They made a great job so far and they have great plans to develop it further.

Now, the house looks almost like the one from Star Wars' home of Luke Skywalker on the desert planet of Tatouan.

Mosa Ahmed studied six years in Poland's University of Economics in Wroclaw. So, I spoke with him in Polish. He was astonished how much he forgot of the language. He showed me around the house, which originally was home for eight families.

Each family owned one dwelling of the house, and each dwelling was divided into three parts. The front one was for the grandparents, the middle one was for children and the deepest part was for the parents.

Although each dwelling had three parts, it was in fact one big room, and only the

gentle arches on the ceiling marked the territory of the specific generation. Often, the parents had a little room at the back, which could be separated by a hanging cloth. The room could be used for making more children, I guess.

Sometimes, a dwelling had also a storage room within it and most definitely a small hole immediately before the entrance, for a hen to lay eggs.

The entire house is authentic and the only modern things there are toilets and a shower, cleverly confined not to spoil the entire ambiance of the place.

The guys are also planning to open a restaurant and a café in the immediate vicinity of the house. Oh, I forgot to say that the house, although actually in the ground (or underground), is located on a high hill, so the restaurant and the rooftop café will offer a magnificent view reaching as far Tripoli, some eighty kilometres away, plus an oasis at the bottom of the hill. Quite lovely, I have to say.

تبلان

Nalut was the city I chose to stop for the solar eclipse. It is on the way from Tripoli to

Ghadames, so it makes sense to break the long 700 kilometres journey, anyway.

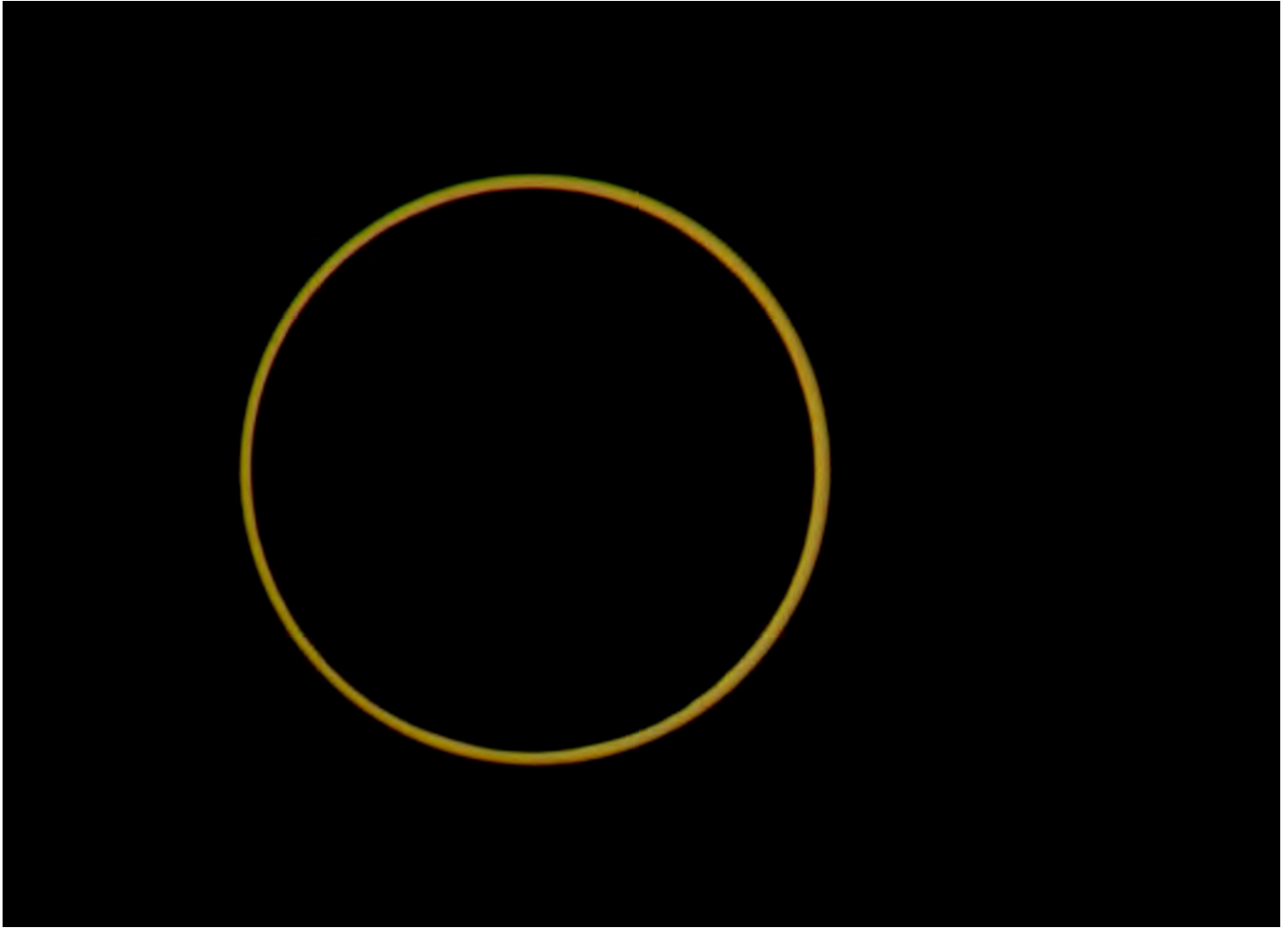
The town itself has got nothing to offer but the great old district with incredible grain warehouses, called granaries in English and qasr in Arabic. The only hotel in town, offers a superb views to the old town and the fortified granary as well as the canyon-like landscape around. I am actually writing these words from the hotel's terrace overlooking this 765 year-old qasr.

Interestingly, the hotel personnel must have loved Sandra, the singer from Germany, who was one of my favourites when I was in the high school, and they played gentle remixes of her greatest hits in the main café and restaurant adjacent to the terrace. So, I am writing this travel story, looking on to this extraordinary old town of Nalut while listening to my once favourite singer. What an evening!

I could not wait to explore it. As soon as I saw the view, I started speculating at what time I should go and check the old town out. I think it took me half an hour and one can of Pepsi to decide.

I wandered down there, which took me about ten minutes. As I reached the main troglodyte qasr, I realised that some of it was locked with a padlock. There was one





particular picture in the guidebook, and I wanted to find where this particular part of the granary was. As I could not see it anywhere, I assumed it must have been in the locked part.

As I started to wander off, a middle-aged man spotted me and asked me if I was looking around the qasr. I said yes, and he invited me to his house. It was very basic and small, but had five rooms, four of which were the size of a double bed and 130 centimetres high, and the main one was about 2 metres high and could sit, say, seven people around.

I mentioned that part of the qasr was locked and he quickly jumped out, reached for his key and took me there. As soon as he opened the door, I realised that I would have missed the main part and the actual granary! I was amazed with what saw. It felt so good that Libya continued to impress me.

The qasr of Nalut is very special. It is like a small village within a village. The storage rooms are tightly packed close one to another and the passage around the qasr is very narrow, that even a donkey with a baggage would not fit there. Maybe without

a baggage it would. Little light reached the palm-tree wooden doors of the storage rooms therefore. I had quite a difficulty to take a decent picture there.

I learned that the purpose of the fortified qasr was to protect the groceries, dates, produce, grain and oil of the village people from looters, who often kept invading the villages in the middle ages of the XIII and XIV centuries. Later on, when an invasion occurred, the bandits could only rob the families of one week worth of produce, while the rest was safely locked in the granary. Each family of the village had one storage room. There are about four hundred of them in Nalut, and the keeper of the granary knew exactly how much each family had in their rooms at any time when asked.

As I looked inside, I saw that some families are still using this facility. Not many, but the seven century tradition continues to this day, hence the site is kept locked.

I also found the spot of the granary from the picture, so I was very happy. The day was coming to an end, sunset was approaching and the play of colours and shadows at the qasr made this quick escapade the highlight of the day.

سولار ائسولپس

Weather prospects and their history were the main reason of selecting Libya for the place to watch the annular solar eclipse of the 3 October 2005.

As I descended from the plane in Tripoli I realised that I forgot to take my eclipse glasses from home. Well, I did not think much about it then and thought that it should be quite easy to get something usable in Libya. When I asked my tour guide if I could for example get the glass from a welding mask, he said that it was rather impossible. Then, I started to be a little concerned.

Well, later on, when I was actually on my way to Nalut, I mentioned this to my driver, Khalifa, and he said that there could not be an easier job for him to find what I needed, because every second shop in Libya is a welding shop. It took him about five minutes to get me a couple of slabs of welding glass for one dinar each! So, I was prepared then, I thought.

Not exactly! I still did not have appropriate filter for my camera to take the pictures.

With total eclipse of the sun, no filter is necessary, but with an annular eclipse, the sun is still too bright.

When I woke up and took a peculiar shower. Since the bath tube was very dirty I did not have much courage to step into it. I simply stood outside of it on the bathroom floor and bent towards the shower. Water was hot only for about five seconds. However, when I looked outside the window I saw that weather was perfect for the eclipse, so I was happy and I did not care much about the shower.

Refreshed a little, I went back to the terrace with a wonderful view, from which the eclipse should be nicely visible. As I stepped into the café, I realised that I was not alone. About twenty Catalonians were humming in the room and on the terrace. They were all prepared thoroughly for the event of the day.

They had filters, telescopes, and astronomical meters all set up. I thought 'great!', at least I will know exactly at what time the annularity will happen, because the chief of the Catalan expedition knew everything.

I quickly made myself known to them showing off that I could speak a little Spanish. They adopted me to their group with no questions asked. They kindly equipped me with the necessary filter, and told me how I should set up my camera.

That was a good thing, because I might have set it wrong. Intuitively, I figured that the shutter should be at least 1/2000 of a second and the exposure about f20, with the ISO set to 100. However, of the guys with a telescope attached to his camera (who offered to send me the pictures, good man), told me to try it.

As I took a few photographs of the still full sun, I realised that my settings were not perfect. Eventually, I had to increase the shutter speed to 1/4000, and decrease the exposure to f38. Only with those settings, the picture was coming out sharp.

I asked one of the funniest guys from the group why they came all the way to Libya, while the eclipse was also passing through Spain as well. Two reason he said to me: First – they have never been to Libya. Second – weather forecast for Spain were not great and they did not want to take any

chances. Good thinking! These were exactly the same reasons why I selected Libya for my eclipse trip.

The eclipse came at 11:22 local time (09:22 UT), and it was great. The air temperature dropped and the light was slightly subdued, almost like at about 6pm the night before.

This was my first annular eclipse, and I must say it was completely different from the total eclipses. During totality, it becomes dark with twilight at the horizon, and all becomes very calm. The birds stop singling, and some hide their heads to sleep. At the annularity, no such thing happens. The day is still bright, and beside a slight drop in temperature and daylight, one would not even notice there was a moon in the middle of the sun in the sky.

So, I kept looking through my camera lens and kept taking pictures, changing the settings slightly. I have to say, that I am very happy with the results. And thank God for the Catalonians, who gave me the filter!

The moon entered the sun from the top, and gradually moved down. It was significantly smaller than the sun in the sky, and as it





was completely inside the our star, it still took about a minute or two for it to place itself exactly in the centre, creating a perfect ring. Burning ring!

The guys let me look through the telescope and I could see the moon's craters. That was fascinating.

The terrace of this terrible hotel was at that time full. There a couple of Ukrainians, completely uninterested with the event, and maybe ten locals who kept looking into the sky. One of the ladies from the Catalan group gave them the paper filter to look through. She was very kind. I obviously wanted to be good too, so I passed my welding glass slabs to three Libyan guys who came especially from Tripoli to see the event. I think they liked my welding glass more, because the picture through it was much clearer.

One of them, Malek, who studied in the States, asked me if I could send him the pictures I took. I was still being a good man that morning, and I agreed. We exchanged emails and he said that I should call him when I am back in Tripoli, so he could show

me around. I liked the idea very much, because I needed someone to show me a little of the Libyan night life. I realised that due to Ramadan, it could be harder than normal. However, I was rather wrong. There is more about it in the nightlife section below.

Soon, after the annularity, I left for Ghadames. There were about 340 kilometres to do to reach it.

Ghadames

Perhaps the most famous Berber town anywhere in Northern Sahara, Ghadames, is also called the Jewel of the Sahara. I would definitely agree to that statement. There is absolutely no exaggeration here.

The roofed streets and passage ways of this amazing town create inexplicable atmosphere and climate. I seriously find the right words to begin describe the place.

I cannot really compare Ghadames to any other place I have seen in my life. It truly

feels like you landed somehow in XIII century in the middle of a desert. When I was visiting the lighting of the passage ways did not work so my experience was authentic.

Luckily when I let myself loose in the old town, there were absolutely no tourists around – only local people wandering around or attending prayers in the very old mosques. When I say that I let myself loose, I mean it all the way. I did not have any guide and I simply did not know which way to turn and I did not care much if I get lost. There was always someone from the locals, who would be able to let me out of this amazing maze.

In fact, after making two circles, I realised that it was not that hard to follow after all. Obviously, I had no idea what I was passing and what I was looking at, but it felt great to wander pointlessly in those dark passages. Every now and then, I ended up in a small courtyard or an entrance to a mosque. Uh, in fact, names of certain streets in Ghadames, are unusually for Libya provided on the buildings in two languages – Arabic and English.

I walked for about an hour and a half taking, what I think are, some great photographs. The title page is equipped in exactly a picture taken in Ghadames. I tried not use the flash to capture the ambiance and the play of shadows in the passages. Yet, the photos do not represent what it felt like to be there.

Eventually, I ended in a small café called Dan Baro, which is based in a very pleasant garden of a traditional four hundred year old Berber house. The person behind the bar, offered me to see the house, of which I was rather curious.

The house was very richly decorated in gold, red and white. The young man explained everything to me and even let me on the roof for a view. Well, I thought it was for a view, but actually he was trying to explain that in the past, women were not allowed in the streets so they were walking on the roofs. And by the way, the kitchen, for the convenience apparently, was also located at the top terrace of the house.

Well, the view was great. It made it clear how the houses were connected, and showed that no inner street was visible from the air. There are a few narrow streets leading to the gates of the city, but no inner street can be seen. Also, from the top of the

house it is easy to see that Ghadames is simply an oasis. A nice, large oasis!

For a number of years, UNESCO has been fronting a rehabilitation project for Ghadames. Many houses got restored to their full glory, and so did the city walls. Extinction threatened to this oasis when in the late 1970's the level of the underground waters dropped significantly killing many palm trees and cutting off the water supply to the houses and gardens. About that time, the population of Ghadames dropped as well. Thankfully, also though the United Nations, the main water reservoir of Ghadames is now being modernised to secure the water supply.

I was genuinely impressed with the size of the keys to Ghadames's houses. Some of them could be one meter long, but usually, they measure from 25 to 60 centimetres. They are still in use, and they operate massive locks in the old doors. They are truly magnificent, those keys.

When I arrived to the town it was about 3:45 pm and at first, I did not realise that everything was actually closed. I did not take lunch as I did not want to waste any time. Then, I realised that I could not get anything to eat in the town before 6:30pm. It was not an issue for me actually, because I did want

to see the old town in the late afternoon light.

So, the only things I had to nibble were mixed pistachio and cashew nuts that I had with my beer at the Dan Baro café ('dan' in Berber language means 'house'). When the time came, I moved out of the old town to find a restaurant. I found one, but although it was already open and the tables were ready, the kitchen was not. They claimed that they need another two hours to get ready and start taking orders for food. I thought it was a bit ridiculous, and went to see if maybe some other restaurant had a faster kitchen service. One had.

After dinner, I made arrangements for the next day. I wanted to go back to the old town in the morning, but well before the crowds. And in the afternoon, I thought it would be a good idea to see the desert lake near the Tunisian and Algerian borders with Libya, a desert castle and desert dunes.

In the morning of my next day in Ghadames, as I went back to the old town, I recognised the places I have seen before. However, having a guide, who can show things and let you climb to the roofs of the houses for a good photographic opportunity is invaluable. I went on top of the old girls' school and now UNESCO building, and the view was





great. The guide, whose name was Uthman, showed me a place, where, as he claimed, 85 percent of the tourists do not come. The view from that house was superb – see the photograph of it below.

As I was walking through the old city again, I knew that this was the ultimate Libyan experience. No-one should ever come to Libya without visiting Ghadames. The wandering around in the dark corridors was an unforgettable experience. Some of the streets were completely dark, that it was impossible to see anything without light.

At night, from 8pm to 7am, when the city was locking all its gates and no-one could come in or leave the city. Ghadames was using oil lamps to light the passages, squares and streets. Otherwise it would be absolutely impossible to navigate through the labyrinth. Later, electrical bulbs replaced the oil lamps, however nowadays none of them work anymore.

Sadly, the old city of Ghadames is now completely uninhabited. It is almost like a ghost town. All families moved out to the new town leaving the old district only for prayers in the still operating mosques, and relaxing – almost like a refuge from the heat of the day. The temperature in the shaded corridors and passages is significantly lower than outside in the sun.

There are two reasons why the old town was abandoned. First is the damage that the city suffered from the hard to explain bombing during the World War II, particularly on the 11 January 1943. More than 200 houses were damaged and many were completely destroyed including the oldest mosque of Ghadames (now rebuilt and in full glory and completely operational).

The second reason was the comfort of living. The houses in the old town do not have running water and comfortable washrooms. There are no connections to the telephone lines or television, unless one has a satellite dish, which in the open would look ridiculous on the roofs of the medieval mud houses.

Apart from two cafés (when I visited only one was open – the Dan Buro Café), the old mosques and one traditional house, which operates like a museum and a traditional eatery for the hordes of buss-loads of tourists, there are no other dwellings with live souls in them.

The same is applicable to the many gardens around the old town. Now, few of them are used to grow groceries and dates. The rest is decaying.

Sofia Loren came to Ghadames a long time ago to shoot two films. One called 'The Way To Tombouctou' and the other 'Black Cat'. I

have not seen any of them, but now I am obviously planning to do so.

MJEZZEM

In the early afternoon, I went some forty kilometres east of Ghadames to see a salt lake of Ain ad-Debanem, called Mjezzem.

It is a tourist trap. The lake is uninspiring and the shores are polluted heavily with rubbish, mainly empty cans and plastic bottles. It looks more like a rubbish dumping site than a lake in which anyone would consider swimming.

One of the lakes is reportedly seventy meters deep, and the condensation of salt in it would make the skinniest person float like a hundred kilograms of lard.

I did not like the place at all. Furthermore, the swarms of flies getting into one's mouth, ears and hair were a total nightmare! I could not wait to get out of there.

Obviously, in a different country, where tourism was more important, the lakes would be redeveloped to provide a safe place to swim and relax over coffee or a cold drink. The place would be spotlessly clean, there would be showers to wash down salt after swimming and perhaps even a small

hotel nearby. Well, it seems that a few years will fly before this happens in Libya.

رأس الغول - Ras al-Ghoul

Later in the afternoon, I went to see two other places around Ghadames, the desert castle of Ras al-Ghoul ('The Mountain of

Ghosts') and the Sahara desert sand dunes for the sunset.

The castle, called Mountain of Ghosts, is beautifully perched on a dramatic hill. It is said to be standing there well before Islam arrived with the Arab invasion in 668.

However, the story that at the time of the invasion, many Arabs died around the site,

and claims that the castle is haunted, is widely discredited by the local Berber community of Ghadames.

The exact origins of the castle are not known, and perhaps little effort is made to maintain this spot as a tourist attraction. The ruins appear to be deteriorating systematically over the years. The process is likely to continue uninterrupted.



However, the view from the top of this ruined fortress is rather great. One can even see the buildings of the Libyan-Algerian border in the west, which have an Algerian flag displayed on a very long post.

When I was visiting it, the sky was full of storm clouds of many different colours ranging from white, to cream, to blue, to violet, to grey. This dramatic sky contrasted brilliantly with the various colours of the desert. The sand came with the many shades of yellow and red.

Weather decided not to contribute much to the attractiveness of that afternoon and I had to stop hoping for a good sunset at the desert dunes later on.

The sand dunes, which were few, were not very high and cannot possibly compare with their counterparts of the Namib Desert of Namibia. Those in Libya that I saw, were almost at random placed among the stone desert, and could be traversed within twenty minutes. All of them! I guess I could expect a little more from the largest desert on this planet. In fairness though, no-one promised me an entire sea of sand dunes that evening.

Nevertheless, the experience at the dunes was great. The local Berber people pitched a traditional tent at the bottom of the dunes, and served traditional bread baked in the desert sand heated with hot ash, and very sweet traditional tea.

The tent, which was equipped with carpets and cushions, was a great place to relax and chat with other travellers, if desired. At some point, there were about thirty vehicles,

which brought tourists from Ghadames, including a small bus, so the place was not exactly deserted...

Three Tuareg-looking people, dressed in traditional blue outfits, who came with camels, were offering photo sessions and a ride to the top of a smaller dune. I went on foot to the second tallest dune, where I caught the Algerian mobile signal. I sat there and watched the sun behind the layers of clouds and desert dust. There was no sunset.

After dinner, I went back to the Dan Baro Café for a drink with my young guide Uthman. As I was passing through a very short stretch of the old town again, this time at night, the little lamps in the walls created magnificent ambiance. I loved it. Since this part of the town was open, it was just possible to see in the dark.

The café was beautifully lit with small lamps, which gave subdued light in the little garden. I ordered beer (non-alcoholic, of course!) and the owner prepared shisha for me.

To my greatest surprise it was tobacco with honey. As I do not smoke, and was expecting dried fruit rather than tobacco, I struggled a lot. The amount of tobacco in that shisha exceeded half a packet of cigarettes, so it was quite a strong issue for me. Plus, of course, shisha is based on a water pipe, so one can imagine how intense the smoke was.

I was trying desperately to separate honey from tobacco and enjoy my smoke somehow. It did not work very well. Serves me right! When I asked the guy earlier that

day, if it was possible to smoke shisha, I did not specify what kind I wanted.

At least I could pretend that it felt great to be sitting in the middle of the desert in an ancient Berber town, drinking ice-cold beer and smoking shisha. Apart from the wrong smoke, the shisha was real, the ancient Berber town was real, the ice-cold non-alcoholic beer was real, and the desert was real. That actually worked.

كَبَاو

At Kabaw, there is a different type of qasr, I thought, when I saw it. Well, the previous one that I had seen, in Nalut, is actually special.

The 'normal' qasr was built as a vertical mud-brick tube, and the storage rooms were placed on its inner walls. The central courtyard was empty to provide room for intermediate selection and preparation of the produce to be stored.

Still the qasr at Kabaw is special. In addition to the unusually high six vertical levels it has also two underground levels with supplementary storage. In the centre of the courtyard, there a small building, which could have been used as a caretaker hut.

When I climbed to the top of the old city to see the granary, I was completely on my own. It was great! I could do what I wanted, looked where I wanted. The qasr is no longer in use and I am not sure if it is actually protected as a national treasure or not. It is over seven hundred year old urban,





cultural, architectural and possibly economic-social monument.

I climbed on the second level of the structure and had a proper look. Then a man came, wanted me to go underground and started asking really personal questions, like: 'where are you from?', 'are you married?', 'what languages do they speak in Poland nowadays?', etc. All over sudden he started climbing on the qasr, to the very top, and saying something I did not understand. As he was on the top of the structure, I took this opportunity and left.

I really liked this qasr, because it was so different from the one in Nalut. It was more compact and perhaps even more dramatic, and the underground part seemed really nice and creepy. I hope it will eventually be turned to a museum or something and saved from destruction. If that is not going to happen soon, I fear this great granary will share the fate of the completely ruined old town that surrounds it.

زقاق-ال-قاسر

Certain literature stated that Qasr al-Hajj was the largest sample of Berber architecture in Libya, and possibly the most

stunning. Well, I cannot say that I would agree to that. Yes, it is a great example of the medieval Berber architecture, but the old town is in total ruin, so I would argue that Nalut, for that matter, was any less striking.

Hey, do not get me wrong, I really liked Qasr al-Hajj! It is the most complete one from that I saw, and the most uniform. The walls are complete and all storage rooms are in perfect condition. I liked the fact that there was a narrow walkway between the third and fourth levels. The oval courtyard in the middle had a few medieval items left loose, which was quite aesthetic.

The qasr looks really impressive from the outside as well. It is situated within a small square among the restored part of the old town. The area has been gently redeveloped and there is even a small fountain in the middle of it, benches, palm umbrellas, and a bathroom! The qasr looks like a little castle, or a small fortress. All around the outside walls there are very small windows, which really are just vents for the storage rooms. But they really look like widows for rifles or lookout holes.

When I came from the part of the totally ruined part of the old town to this redeveloped part, I felt really good. First, I thought that this fortified granary might still

be in use, hence the local people decided to keep the area clean for picnics and social events. This is because the structure of the qasr looked like new.

The main gate to the qasr was padlocked. There was no-one around, and I was not quite sure what to do. I did not really want to involve my driver, because he was quite lazy on this second day of Ramadan. So, I decided to walk out of the old town and find someone in the new part, who might be able to help me find the key master.

I wandered towards the main road, and went into a shop over there. I asked the man behind the cashier if he spoke English. He said yes, but he did not. I made myself very clear about opening the qasr for me. The world qasr he recognised very well, and I thought he understood my gestures of opening a padlock. He kept saying something in Arabic to me and the situation was increasingly annoying me.

Then, couple of young guys who were lingering around the shops claimed that they spoke English. However, I must have been only just an exotic visitor and they wanted to be seen talking to me. They were not even trying to help me. That really annoyed me, because I was only wasting my time and getting nowhere.

I decided to leave immediately and started walking back towards the qasr. As I go there, a car with a man dressed all in white behind the wheel arrived. The man in his fifties got off and asked me in broken English if I wanted to see the granary. That was music to my ears. I paid LYD 4 for the tickets and was inside. I think this is the only qasr in the Jebel Nafusa area with an entry fee. I think it is right though, because the revenue is spent for the maintenance, which is necessary as the qasr suffers occasional damage from adverse weather.

Qasr al-Hajj is of the same built as the one in Kabaw, but it has only four levels and no underground storage. It is larger in diameter and entirely complete, like it was built five years ago. Well, this is a good thing, because the qasr has been in constant use since it was erected by As-Sheikh Abd-Allah ibn Mohammed ibn Hillal ibn Ganem Abu Jatla in the twelfth century.

Apparently, there are exactly 114 storage rooms – the same number as there are chapters in the Quran (As-Sheikh Abd-Allah ibn Mohammed ibn Hillal ibn Ganem Abu Jatla was very religious), but I did not count them. As I was walking around on the narrow walkway, two snow-white doves gave away their nest. It was built in one of

the disused storage rooms of the top level. It was quite surreal to be walking in a nine hundred year old fortified qasr (which actually means castle) with two doves flying around.

The real thing was that I had to be very careful on this narrow walkway. My camera bag hanging from my shoulder was making me very uncomfortable. I did not want to fall down or be shatted by the white flying rats. There were pretty white doves alright, but they are still pigeons full of white shit. And since I discovered their nest, I am sure they were pretty angry with me.

RAYNAH MYSIERY

Between Qasr al-Hajj and Bir Ayyad, there is a stretch of a road leading to Raynah, that pulls cars in a single direction against the forces of gravity.

It is not known why this happens. It could be electromagnetic or geomagnetic. The road is a very gentle slope and cars when left on neutral gear, just go uphill.

Apparently, there is another stretch of road exactly like that near Benghazi.

فحاتيان

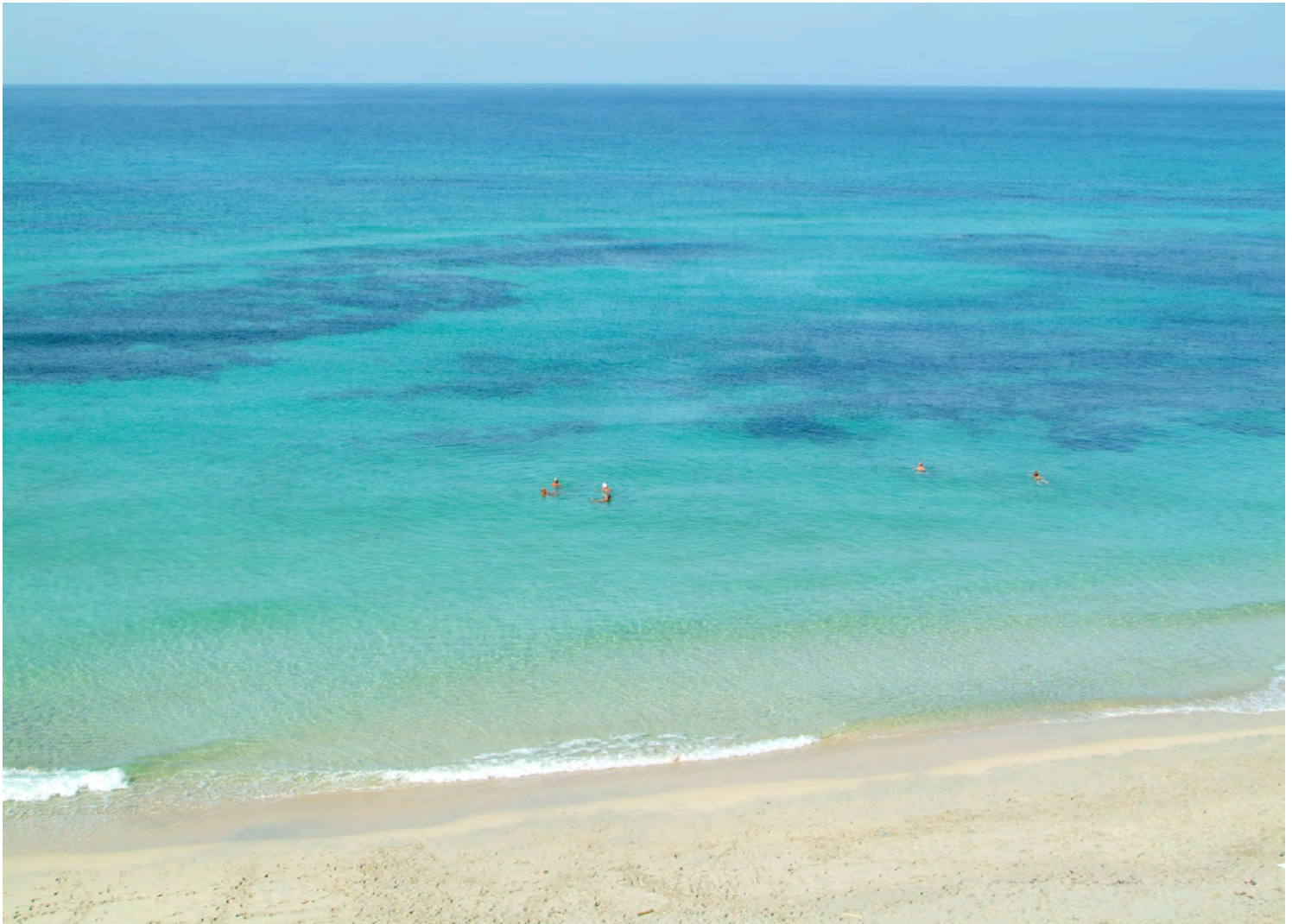
I made an unexpected stop in this town on the way towards Tripoli. It is renowned for its manufactures of colourfully decorated pottery, and many derelict underground Berber houses. Otherwise, there is absolutely nothing to do there.

زانزور

Just 20 kilometres west of Tripoli, there is a different seafront world. Zanzur or, I guess it could be spelled Janzur, is a small, very civilised village right at a great beach. The sea is full of surprisingly tropical colours of turquoise, sea green and sea blue, dark blue and navy blue.

The residential complex of Zanzur offers studios for rent, which can be taken for as little as two days, a weekend for example. It is well organised, and, what extremely important and so unusual for Libya, clean. There is also a small hotel there as well.

The village stretched for about two kilometres along the coast and in the middle of it, directly on the beach there is a large



swimming pool. However, when I visited, it was dry.

Although I did not check the quality of the apartments or the hotel, I would highly recommend Zanzur as the place to stay in Libya around Tripoli. Already from the outside they look decent enough and the surroundings are incomparably more pleasant than the smelly and noisy Tripoli. And one can go for swim on a decent beach right before or after breakfast.

I cannot believe that I did not make enough investigation myself before I came to Libya, so I could make it damn clear to my travel agent where I wanted to stay other than letting him choose for me. Having own transportation it makes an ideal base around Tripolitania.

RAKI TOURS

My travel agent, Raki Tours, did not impress me over all. I have to say in fairness that Abdu Rahman, the owner, was in fact paying attention to what I wanted and I did not have problems in agreeing where I wanted to go and what I wanted to do. However, it cost me dear.

Abdu Rahman was charging me 280 Libyan dinars (175 euros or 120 pounds Sterling) a day. I must have been a goldmine for him. I subsequently learned about his costs. I found out that he was paying the driver (an interesting character as well, by the way) only 45 dinars a day. An average hotel cost 40 dinars and the meals 15 dinars. He was making a fortune on me. I actually felt I was being ripped off.

Khalifa, the driver, told me that Abdu Rahman was a scruge and expected Khalifa to be my guide as well, but Khalifa did not know much about anything and was only making up nasty stories about Italians, who robbed the country.

Although my trip should be all inclusive, I ended up paying additional guide fees (50 dinars) and camera tickets (5 dinars) at the sites. As soon as I found out how much money Raki Tours was making, I refused to pay anything extra. How cheeky was that!?

I would like to warn everyone of using Raki Tours. They will organise what one wants, but one should negotiate hard the price with Abdu Rahman. According to my calculations, the decent price to pay for my itinerary should not be larger than 180 Libyan dinars (110 euros or 76 pounds Sterling) a day.

Well, I was quite tired after dealing with Abdu Rahman and Khalifa for a week, and I could not be happier when I met Malek and Hussain.

PEOPLE

The vast majority of the people, and particularly those young, are very, very friendly. There was this one guy sitting at the front of his shop inside Tripoli's medina, who, having seen my camera, suggested that I should enter the mosque, have a look inside and take many pictures because the mosque was worth it. He did not insist that I went to see his shop at all, but smiled and said that the mosque was really old and that I would like it. I did not even expect to be able to come into the mosque, since in the majority of the Muslim countries, non-Muslims are not welcome in mosques.

Later I realised that he was assisting in a wedding shop, and perhaps this was why he never invited me to the shop. We had a little chat and he told me that he converted to Islam from Christianity a couple of years before. He is now practising a moderate version of Islam that allows him to drink alcohol. I think this is his version of Islam...



RAMADAN

The other time was just outside Tripoli, in a seafood restaurant. I ordered a large bottle of water and expected to take home what would be left of it after I finished my dinner. In fact, there was more than two thirds left, and I forgot to take it with me upon leaving the venue. I came back and the checkout guys, who collect payment, just smiled at me again (he did before when I was leaving) and gave me a fresh bottle for nothing. That was very kind!

I guess the thing is that tourism in Libya is in its very early stages of infancy, and tourists are an exotic sight. Children in the streets would look one in the eyes so deep, that one feels the look bouncing from the back of one's retina.

FOOD

Libya's traditional food is cuscus with sauce and some meat. Bread is also traditional and is served with anything. Also, as an obligatory, however usually on the house, starter, any restaurant or eatery would serve hyper-fresh and warm bread with a variety of pastes, such as humus, for example.

Then, it is eggs, which are usually consumed as a starter. In larger towns, one can find also shish kebab and my favourite showarma (which is often in Europe called kebab, sold in the streets around the clock, usually in close vicinity to a club or a discotheque) and koefta – minced lamb with spices.

Libya's two thousand kilometres of coastline, should provide plenty of seafood, which in fact is underappreciated. Obviously in Tripoli and Benghazi, one can enjoy the freshest fish, squid and prawns, but elsewhere the eateries would not offer more sophisticated seafood than dried fish or grilled fish, which is most definitely not fresh.

Liver is used in many dishes. The most popular is the liver sandwich, which is served warm is also filled with hot peppers and tomatoes. It is not too bad, provided the cook is not too easy on the liver. I heard that liver is even placed on pizzas, which would never cross my mind...

Camels in Libya provide transportation, clothing from their wool, milk and meat. The milk is salty and the meat loses approximately 75 percent of its volume upon cooking! The meat is rather hard and chewy.

Unlucky or otherwise, my trip to Libya coincided with the time for Muslim fasting.

Ramadan started on Tuesday, the 4 October. That was my first full day in Ghadames.

Since fasting lasts all day, from sunrise to sunset, people take it easy and most of them rest, trying not to move too much, otherwise they would get hungry, or equally risky, thirsty. The lethargy gets everywhere as many businesses do not open until sunset, and life only begins then. By 9 o'clock in the morning everyone is tired, they hide in the shade and breathe slowly.

The smokers struggle the most, because the rule is 'nothing inside the body', which includes smoke. Some of them complained to me that they develop headaches. Then, of course, when the sunset comes, they smoke much too many cigarettes at once.

Eating and socialising are also moved to the hours of darkness, and since fasting is good for the body, most of the people spoil everything by eating too much too late in the



night. The problem is that often half a day is spent on preparing the food for after sunset, and during that time, many get very hungry, watching and smelling the food.

There are exceptions for travellers like me and my guides. If one travels more than eighty kilometres, then one may take some water and something simple to eat. In my case it meant that I could easily do it because I was easily exceeding one hundred kilometres a day. However, this rule is rarely applied, because it became slightly outdated. Islam introduced the rule, when travelling happened mostly by foot or a camel, which was more tiring than today's movement by car or plane.

At 7pm on Ramadan days, it is time for breakfast, which is immediately followed by dinner. This breakfast usually contains milk, orange juice, dates, bread, and some sweet cake. Dinner then is a traditional soup, bread with humus, liver with rice or couscous and sauce and raw vegetable salad. Sometimes, instead of liver there are lamb chops.

ليلة نيقية

Malek and Hussain, whom I met in Nalut, took me out on a Thursday night, which is the first night of the weekend, since Friday is always off in Libya. The guys took me to what has been the best night out I had in months!

On the way to the main venue, Malek told me that going out in Libya sometimes means taking a car and drive around the town. Petrol almost does not cost anything in Libya and cruising is in style.



Malek

At about 9:30 pm, we went to Hussain's farm (a decent size garden about 25 km outside town) to hang around with Hussain's friends. I immediately met Ahmed, and another guy and it appeared that all of them played guitar very well, and banged the drums.

Hussain had the equipment set up in one of the rooms in the farmhouse, and Ahmed brought some additional parts plus an electric guitar. So, there was enough stuff

for the entire band – a complete set of drums, two electric guitars, a microphone and even a bongo.

The party kicked off with some great samples of rock music. We had all the classics from Led Zeppelin, to Nirvana, Metallica, Guns 'n' Roses, Red Hot Chilly Peppers, the tune from the legendary The Pink Panther...

Ahmed took the lead on singing, and something tells me that the microphone immediately fell in love with him.

Hussain set up a shisha and made green tea with mint, so I was in heaven. There were traditional Libyan snacks and, as Libyans turn nocturnal during Ramadan, more people trickled in.



Hussain

We were chatting, playing, singing, smoking shisha that never ended (Hussain had an entire bag of charcoal in the garage) and drinking hectolitres of tea. I have not been in such a genuine party in years! It felt like I was in the University again...

That night was truly a great fun, and an excellent example what nightlife in Libya looks like.

The parties usually happen in private homes and on farms. This is time for friends to be together and just being friends. The evening usually ends with playing cards. There is this national game, whose rules Malek tried to explain to me, and I thought that when I see the guys playing, I will get them, but they were playing much too fast, so it remains a mystery to me. Hussain appeared to be a champion of this game.

Malek, who drive me to my hotel, let me stay there until 2:30 in the morning. I was really happy!

On the next night, I went back to the farm, and joined another of those parties that the bunch was throwing. Again, it was a great night. Hussain, Malek, Ahmed, Hamzah (50

Cent), Aimn, Mohammed... the guys have a great connection. It was so good to see that. And my last night in Libya could not have possibly been better. I had so much shisha to smoke that it eventually gave me a spin, which I did not think was actually possible from smoking dried fruit. It could not be anything else, because it was Ramadan, and the guys were respecting that.

As I let myself loose and relaxed to the max, I might be responsible for giving Hamzah (third from the right on the picture below) the nickname of 50 Cent. He is hilarious! They way he was getting mad with a microphone is truly beyond belief. He was jumping and screaming so much, that his brain experienced shortage of oxygen and gave him a headache. When we found out about it, we were pissing ourselves laughing.

Ahmed (second from the right on the picture below) is another character. He has an impossible laughter! He has a joke and a burst of hahaha!! every two sentences. I thought there could be something in the food, but I had tried everything, properly served by 50 Cent, and was jealous that I cannot develop a state in which Ahmed appeared to be for the entire evening.

I told the guys that when they speak Arabic, then they should say Han Solo, every now and again, because the language was very similar to the one used in George Lucas's 'Star Wars' – from the fictitious planet Tatooine (I think I mentioned this planet before). The Arabic word crossroad was in fact used in the film in its plural form, specifically by the young Anakin Skywalker. The guys did not believe me!

Hussain is a superb host, and a great guy. He allows the boys to rock the place, and everyone feels very comfortable on the farm. He made *me* feel very comfortable. His hospitality and attitude were overwhelming. I felt like I was among good friends that I have known for years!



It was so great to see such a happy bunch. Meeting people like those Libyan lads is the essence of my travel. It is them who are the reason that I am passionate about travelling. It is them, who make me addicted to touring other countries, visiting other cultures.

I was honoured to be invited to those parties of theirs. The guys were genuinely very friendly and they made my short holiday in Libya unforgettable.

FINAL WORD

Libya was a great experience. The ancient Roman, Byzantine and Greek sites and the

medieval Berber towns at the Sahara oases threw me on my knees. I did not expect that.

The openness and genuine friendliness of the people impressed me immensely. Meeting Hussain and Malek and the other guys was a definite highlight of my entire trip.

I was happy that I decided to go to Libya and I would strongly recommend everyone

to check this country out for themselves. The cumbersomeness of getting the visa and making the way there is all worth the effort!

the end

All names in this report are true and the story should be entirely accurate. All photographs were taken by the author during the trip. All rights reserved.



Tripoli		
Hotel		
Bab Al Bahr	☹	LYD 60 S, 70 T
Restaurant		
Ship Sea Meals	😊😊	Al Shat Road, behind Shatea Al Nakhil Hotel – tel. 092 506 1406,
Bab Al Bahr	😞😞😞	LYD 15 set menu
Athar Restaurant	😊😊😊	Arch of Marcus Aurelius– LYD 20 – 40 a la carte, tel. 4447001,
Venezia	😊😊😊	Corinthia Bab Africa Hotel– pizza and pasta from LYD 10. Friday brunch LYD 25 per person.
Apollonia		
Hotel & Restaurant		
El Manara	😊😊😊	(www.manarahotel.com) in Susa
Nalut		
Hotel & Restaurant		
Winzrik Nalut Hotel (WTS Group)	😞😞😞	LYD 30 S, LYD 40 T
Ghadames		
Hotel		
Winzrik Motel	😊	LYD 30 S, LYD 35 T
Café, Bar		
Dan Baro	😊😊😊	Old Town, east of old Italian hotel), drinks LYD 1,
Restaurant		
Jawharat as-Sahra	☹	LYD 15 set menu
Awal Elsuahi,	😊	LYD 15 set menu, tel. 62429
Gharyan		
Hotel & Restaurant		
El Jebel Elsuahi	😊	LYD 35 D, set menu LYD 15

