

Disclaimer: These notes have been created following the Discovering Libya travel event held at the RGS-IBG on Wednesday 9 June 2010. We have done our best to reflect names of places and the discussion in an accurate and accessible way. With thanks to one of our interns for transcribing the discussion.

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## **Discovering Libya**

Chair: Dr Rita Gardner CBE (Director)

### **Panellists:**

#### **Chris Bradley**

Chris has been helping develop tourism in Libya for almost a decade. He is the author and photographer of the Berlitz Guide to Libya (2006, updated 2009) and lectures on Libya both in the UK and overseas. Chris is also a documentary maker, tour leader and photographer.

#### **Amelia Stewart**

Amelia's passion for the desert and its people spurred her to found Simoon Travel in 2004. Initially providing an opportunity to explore this diverse and beautiful country as the UK's only Libyan specialist tour operator, the company has since expanded its portfolio.

Following introductions from Amelia and Chris, the panel and audience discussions took place and are reflected below:

**Q:** Rita Gardner:

I understand I could not just travel to Libya on my own, is that true?

**A:** Amelia Stewart:

We organise group and tailor-made tours. If you want to go on your own, you certainly can, but it has to be within the structure of an organised tour, which has to have been organised prior to you going. You cannot just turn up in the country with your backpack and do your own thing. It has to be structured, it has to be organised, and you have to have a local guide to accompany you throughout your time in Libya. So, yes and no I think to that one.

Chris Bradley:

I think it really depends on what you mean by independent travel – for some people it is the idea of just getting a flight, turning up somewhere and then using local transport to see what there is. You cannot do that in Libya at the moment, your itinerary has to be organised in advance, you have to be invited into the country and it is invariably a tour operator locally that will do that. The majority of visitors do congregate together for tours that are organised by companies in this country. But if your idea of independent travel is maybe to work with a local agency, to hire a car and to have a driver, and to work your way that way then that is possible. It just takes

quite a long time to organise it, but if that was your method of working around a country independently then you can do that. You just need to fix everything up in advance and it is not a place to suddenly decide you want to abandon the itinerary that has been set down. There are some fantastic adventures that people do. Apart from the very south of the country, around the Tibesti Mountains, really there isn't anywhere in the country you can't go to, you just have to organise in advance, and work with the local agency to do that. For most people, that's too much of a hassle to do and so by pooling your resources and going through a company it is the most practical way of going, but you can do it to whatever level you want.

**Q:** Rita Gardner:

Perhaps the most obvious question – as a woman traveller, how do I fare? Are there any particular difficulties or issues? This question is specifically addressed to Amelia.

**A:** Amelia Stewart:

I've travelled all over the country on my own as a single woman and I have never ever had any problems with hassle, or any sort of aggressive behaviour of any sort whatsoever. This is in a huge contrast actually to travelling on my own through Morocco and Egypt where the hassle is intense – it really does wear you down, so Libya is a refreshing surprise. It really is no problem whatsoever, and in terms of clothing you don't have to have your head covered unless you're in a mosque. You can wear t-shirts; loose cotton flowing clothing is the best really anyway but people really pay you scant attention and it's surprising for that, it's good.

**Q:** Rita Gardner:

Let's say I had two weeks and I was thinking of either a coastal civilisation or a real desert adventure, what would you recommend?

**A:** Chris Bradley:

Invariably most people will want to see the highlights of Tripolitania, the Leptis Magna, Sabratha and maybe go over to see Cyrene, to see the eastern part of the country. It depends how long you have, long weekends are very popular – flying out on BA on the Thursday and coming back on the Monday – a dry weekend for people. On top of that you can add whatever you want, there are quite a lot of itineraries from different companies that may or may not include Ghadames. For the majority of people that is most of what they will see in a 10/12/14 day period. It's really a choice of then maybe going to the desert, because most people would tend to want to see those highlights, and then move onto maybe a second tour that would be more of a desert trip for people to go and have a look at.

Amelia Stewart:

We've definitely had quite a few people who have been to Libya on one of our tours and focused primarily on the archaeological sites and then realised that Libya is 90% desert and there is a huge amount of desert adventure to be had. To come back and to just get into it is the thing to do, and they haven't been disappointed I have to say having done that. For me, if it was a two week tour I would certainly incorporate some of the desert because it is utterly spectacular to wake up in desert in the morning; to be with the Tuareg round by a campfire at night; the galleries of rock art; walking through the desert – it's just wonderful. To bathe in one of these extraordinary desert

lakes is really nothing short of a miracle actually, just surrounded by 100m high sand dunes and floating around in a warm lake in the sunshine, it's quite an experience.

**Q:** Audience:

If you're travelling independently, is getting a visa problem? What information do you have to supply, to whom or through whom?

**A:** Chris Bradley:

When you say travelling independently – you're going to have to deal with local tour operators at some point and your itinerary would have to be agreed. They then physically invite you into the country; you cannot get on the flight without that, so the situation does change regularly, sometimes you might have to show your passport, but normally what happens is you just give your passport details to the agency. If you were not going through a tour operator at this end you would have to deal directly with the agency in Libya. They would want all the passport details of everybody that was going, and they would arrange your visa and for a photocopy or a fax printed out in Arabic, which you present when you arrive.

**Q:** Audience:

What happens if you are visiting relatives?

**A:** Amelia Stewart:

It's more or less the same procedure, if you're visiting relatives and you want to stay there they might be able to help you, but you'd certainly need an invitation letter from them. If you want to go through on a business or a tourist visa you would have to get an invitation, a basic structure of what you want to do, where you're going to stay, and then we take on board the visa process. It's fairly smooth going at the moment, with a turnaround time of five or ten days.

**Q:** Audience:

Why did you focus on Libya and did you have a background on travel before you started (Amelia)?

Yes I did, I just fell in love with the desert, and I was working for a specialist company that focussed on the Sinai western deserts in Egypt. Libya was a very curious, very closed country that I just became really curious about. In 2004 it was of course starting to open up, so I went with the idea of perhaps setting up a company to make sure it came on the map for the right reasons. Very much yes I do have a background in travel and a passion for deserts, and the combination of the two made me start it up.

**Q:** Audience:

Are the borders open between Libya and Chad and Niger?

**A:** Chris Bradley:

As far as I know the border between Libya and Chad has been closed for decades; they had a war with Chad quite a few years ago and the whole area is just covered in landmines, which haven't been cleared. Even though apparently the Tibesti

Mountains are just superb, (there are bound to be one or two people who have been down there) – that border is closed. I'm not too sure about the border with Niger. One of the situations is that illegal goods carried between the various countries, alcohol being one, into Libya, result in that border being kept as secure as possible. I've got a feeling that there probably isn't the possibility of going across the border to Niger. As far as Algeria is concerned that actually keeps changing, I know that there are a couple of big transit points going into Algeria at Ghadames and then Ghat further south. And that situation does keep changing; sometimes the border is open but it's only for Libyan or Algerian nationals. Getting any reliable information as to whether any third-country nationals can cross – all you could do would be to deal with whoever has put your itinerary together because there must a local agency working with you – they would be the best people to ask.

**Q:** Audience:

Are tours available for American passport holders?

**A:** Amelia Stewart:

Americans can now actually enter Libya, which is brilliant. They passed this new rule about three weeks ago, it had been closed off to American tourists for many years but literally in the last few weeks it is now open. It would be the same visa procedures for those holding American passports. But no Israeli stamps, I'm afraid; a new passport would be required there.

Chris Bradley:

I just want to say one thing about the rather flexible entry requirements that are needed for Libya; things change almost on a monthly basis and reflect the relationships between various countries. Things change quite a lot, if the Libyans have got to jump through an awful lot of hoops to get into the States, then Americans are going to have to do the same sort of thing, for getting into Libya, and that's the same for the European countries. Apart from the individual national requirements for the entry visas to go in there are also the general requirements that every six months seem to change. For example, suddenly everybody needs an Arabic translation of the details of their passports to get into the country, so the point when there were cruise ships that were just off the Libyan coast and Libya was on the itinerary, and they couldn't land because nobody had these guaranteed, official translations of their details into Arabic in their passports. And they bring it in straight away. Another one was that you needed biometric passports, so everyone was rushing into getting a biometric passport, and then you needed \$1000 cash to show at the border when you come in. Some of these things last a few weeks, some of them last a few months – the Arabic translation, that is still going. Weird things come in and they're too complicated so they go.

**Q:** Audience:

What about getting around in Libya in terms of language?

**A:** Amelia Stewart:

Arabic, English is widely spoken, and when I say widely I probably mean mostly, and Italian because of the Italian influence during the Italian occupation of 1911. There are still many remnants of the Italians still there not only in the architecture but in the way that the locals dress and their ability to speak Italian. And a bit of French too.

**Q:** Audience:

Any issues around Muslims and disruption?

**A:** Chris Bradley:

No, nothing at all. There's a lot of dissent outside of the country, not everybody is too keen on Gaddafi and his regime. Inside the country it is tightly controlled and people tend not to step out of line. Within the country itself you will see nothing, no problems at all. A completely different situation to Algeria.

**Q:** Audience:

Where are the desert lakes?

**A:** Amelia Stewart:

West of Sebha - this is a huge sand sea, 100m towering sand dunes that go for hundreds and thousands of miles. The lakes are a couple of hours south of Sebha, so very accessible. They are regularly included on itineraries.

**Q:** Audience:

Where is the oil industry?

**A:** Chris Bradley:

Most of the oil comes from just inland from the coast, there are a few terminals. That's where people would tend to be working if they are in the oil industry, but there are other gas terminals along the coastline, so it's just the length of the gas pipes and oil pipes that need to be able to get to the coast to be able to export it out of the country. The only thing you'll really see would be if you were going on an overland journey along the coast you would occasionally come to across one of the big terminals where the oil is going out. If you go to Leptis Magna occasionally there are one or two ships since there is a small terminal not too far away.

**Q:** Audience:

With the extent of the structure which is required to visit Libya, how do you really get a feel for the people in the country?

**A:** Amelia Stewart:

A lady who has just returned from one of our tours say that she perhaps felt she wanted more interaction with the local people. It sometimes depends on what time of year you go, and if you're at the sites on a Friday when it is a holiday in Libya, when there are hundreds and hundreds of children and they all come rushing up to you and want to say hello and they're all very curious and that sort of thing. I've always found just wandering round the Medina, the Souks of Tripoli, just sitting down and chatting to people actually, because they are curious. They don't hassle you, they're not intrusive and they won't approach you, but if you're sitting having a cup of tea then more often than not you do get into a conversation with locals. If you are on one of our desert tours you've got a team of Tuareg drivers, guide, cook around you, and

you really do get to know them and they love interacting with you, and showing you their games and all sorts of things. You really do make friends.

**Chris Bradley:**

It might sound like these entry requirements translate into quite a tough regime but actually once you've jumped through the hoops to get into the country you'll be amazed at how free and open everything is once you're there. When you're there there's as much or as little local interaction as you want, you're not confined to the hotels, you're not confined to the itinerary day by day that the group are doing, if you want to go off and have a look around the local Souk or visit different places you're more than welcome to do that. So even though you have to fix this itinerary before you go in either through a tour operator or by doing it yourself, once you're there you're quite flexible to move within 24 hours. You can't move the nights but within the days you can see or do as much locally as you want.

**Q: Audience:**

To get from A to B, along the Eastern side, with 4 wheel drives, how long would it take?

**A: Chris Bradley:**

Anything south of the half way point you're talking about a major expedition. The south is a pretty remote area; it's the place where many scenes from The English Patient are set. Going from the coast I would say, you would not be able to go direct through there because you are a bit too close to the border, you'd probably have to come down a route which would take you about four days. How long did it take on the Egyptian side? It's a similar sort of thing, you'll have to relatively stick to the same tracks otherwise you're talking long range desert patrol stuff taking weeks going through this region here, but sticking to the major tracks, as far as I know you would be able to get permission for that. If you're hiring a local 4 wheel drive vehicle then there are desert operators that can do that, I just need to put in the fact that you need to pay for an extra vehicle to carry the national guide and maybe a man from the Ministry and whoever might want to wonder why on earth you are actually coming down into this region. But yes, a few days. Most of the tracks shown on the map are not tarmac roads, graded dirt roads and then straight into desert.

**Q: Audience:**

Any railways?

**A: Chris Bradley:**

If you come across the border from Tunisia there is actually the bed of a planned railway, and there are still some wonderful posters of Gaddafi overseeing what looks like a high speed bullet train going through the desert. The plan is at some point in the future to have this railway that will go along the north coast, and there was a company that started to put down the bed of the railway, but as we speak at the moment, there is no railway in Libya. If you were travelling 50 years ago in Italian times there were two little railways, one around Benghazi and one inland. It was like an old Italian hill station going up to Gharyan inland from Tripoli, but I can't even find any vestige of that, there are no stations, no tracks, no bed, nothing.

**Q: Audience:**

Can you bring your vehicle in from the north and what about the expense of local guides?

**A:** Amelia Stewart:

Yes you can bring your vehicle in, you have it shipped over to Tunisia, we've organised a few overland expeditions who have done just that; crossed the border between Tunisia and Libya and brought their vehicles in. It's a bit more time-consuming with organising number plates and the paperwork and the red tape, but we've organised quite a few expeditions to do that. You do again have to have your own guide to accompany you and the tourist police, and depending on how many people in your jeep, they will come in their own car or not. Price varies, depending on whether they bring their own camping equipment and if you're feeding them etc, so we'd have to sit down and work it all out quite carefully and then cost it all up for you.

Chris Bradley:

The experience is you don't ship your vehicle directly into Libya, it would be held up in customs for a long time. You bring it into 'easier' countries, invariably into Tunisia. Certainly what people in the UK would do would be to drive down through France or into Italy, take one of the regular car ferries across and then drive down through Tunisia to the land border, and that's where your adventure really starts.

**Q:** Audience:

A question about culture and society.

**A:** Amelia Stewart:

Tripoli is quite a teeming, big city, certainly with traffic problems as with every other North African / Middle Eastern capital, but not hugely so. The centre of Tripoli is Green Square, and the traffic goes round and round. Outside of Tripoli, and again people are very modern, cosmopolitan, nothing unusual – outside of Tripoli the towns get smaller, they're coastal, with one main road which stretches right across the coast. Further south in the Jebel Nafusa in Western Libya you have these wonderful granaries, more village-type areas, troglodyte houses, very lazy, slow-moving pace of life. Further south in the desert, Gaddafi has tried to take control and move the Tuareg out of their nomadic dwellings and their tents, into more concrete dwellings into the cities of Ghadames and in Ghat. You will see a sea of TV aerials, fairly basic houses, and there are one or two communities and families of Tuaregs still living in the Acacus Mountains, but dwindling unfortunately but you do still come across them. They are mainly agricultural, certainly towards the east, and Cyrenaica where it's much more of a Mediterranean feel actually, both in terms of the Earth, agriculture; you see a lot of farming, a lot of pastoralists, a lot of sheep-grazing, cattle, and growing more vegetables and fruit.

Chris Bradley:

One of the things about Gaddafi and his regime is that his aim is to raise the standard of living of the Libyan people. The population is not that great, about 5 million; they get quite a lot of subsidies, free housing depending on where they are outside of the main cities, so things are moving very quickly, as far as people losing their tribal roots as such. It's becoming much more of an urban rather than a rural landscape. Even in the 10 years that I've been coming in and out of Libya it has

changed an awful lot, and will continue to do so, and I think at an even greater pace because it does seem obvious at the moment that Libya is courting more connection with the west, since the embargo was lifted a few years ago. That will continue to make the places become more western and the people become less tribal, so I think that's one of the reasons why you should visit sooner rather than later, because it will become more western, it will become more influenced from outside situations.

**Q:** Rita Gardner:

If I wanted to spend some time with the Tuareg in their pastoral, nomadic lifestyle, could I do that?

**A:** Amelia Stewart:

I don't think you could do that no, I think they would find that a bit of an intrusion to be honest. But if you were to do a walking tour through the Acacus, just taking it slowly day by day, you would see the Tuareg, and you could certainly go and sit with them, drink tea with them, but in terms of spending long periods of time with them, probably not.

**Q:** Audience:

Any wildlife?

**A:** Chris Bradley:

Not a great deal, you would have to go pretty remote to possibly see Desert Foxes, Fennec, there's quite a few little gerbils and things like that that run around, a few scorpions, snakes – I've seen tracks but never actually seen any snakes – but large animals you're not going to see anything larger than a fox. There are stories where there are supposed to be hyenas and maybe even wolves in some of the more remote areas, but again it would be a real expedition to try to prove that there are these animals there. There are some gazelles in the very south of the country, but you're very unlikely to see anything larger than a fox. In terms of domesticated, owned animals, you will certainly see horses, camels and donkeys, around wherever people are.

**Q:** Audience:

Would there be any risks in terms of attitude if you were visiting around the time of when the Lockerbie bomber died?

**A:** Amelia Stewart:

I think Libya has a very good relationship with Britain, particularly after Megrahi was released and brought back. Obviously it's a very delicate subject, I have had a journalist come in to me to say, "I'd love to go to Libya for a week to see Leptis," I said, "really?" And he replied "well no actually I just want to go and find Megrahi," and of course that would not be allowed. People don't crow about it, they don't talk about it. He's still living but I don't there is going to be a huge celebration if he goes or a big hooah. It's coming up to Independence Day on the 1<sup>st</sup> September and that's the only time really in Libya where there are huge celebrations and parades going through Green Square, and any sort of military thing. Other than that, nothing untoward, least of all towards tourists.

Chris Bradley:

...would not anticipate any problems or great backlash against the British or the Americans so would not worry.

**Q:** Audience:

A question about health, and also if there was one place you would go to in Libya, where would it be?

**A:** Chris Bradley:

Health wise, there is no more danger in going to Libya than going to any other country, you just use the basics of bottled water, but quite often the change of temperature or location can mean some people fall prey to sickness more rapidly than others. I wouldn't consider it to be more of a health risk than going to the neighbours Tunisia or Egypt, so I wouldn't particularly worry.

As far as the one place to go, if it was me, my favourite place is Ghadames, this amazing trading city that is just here, right at the point where Tunisia, Libya and Algeria all meet, but the town itself is actually within Libya. Over 30 years of travelling around the Sahara, Ghadames is a place that keeps cropping up, whether you're in Mali in Timbuktu, people are heading off towards Ghadames, or if you're in Khartoum in Sudan, people are heading off towards Ghadames. It's a great desert crossroads in the north Sahara, and the reason why its there is because they've got a natural spring of water, that's why it's so important. I think that what you can see there is just the best example of a desert trading town, the old town of Ghadames is just a fantastic place to wander around. It's now protected so it's a UNESCO World Heritage site, everybody has been given by Gaddafi new houses in the new town with air conditioning, but there's still quite a few of the old guys that still favour their old haunts down in Ghadames. To me, that's where I would go, it's just something very special – it was just so important for the trade, Romans actually had their furthest south fortress at Ghadames to try to control this enormous great wealth of all the wild animals and the gold and the salt that was coming up from west and central Africa, it's a very special place.

Amelia Stewart:

For me it would have to be somewhere in the desert, perhaps going down to the lakes again, floating around in one of the lakes reading a book, which you can do because it's so salty you can float. Or perhaps venturing east further into the desert into Waw an Namus which I've been to once to see a solar eclipse. It's an extraordinary volcanic area with beautiful lakes, very remote. And I've never actually got myself down to Uweinat where the cave swimmers are.