

A personal blog/recollection from a trip to Libya in March 2010 by George Petry FRGS

"Libya? You are going to Libya. Why on Earth Libya?" stammered my shocked friend. "You do know about Libya?" she intimated, arching her eyebrows and patting her Daily Mail as if it was some authoritative and respective mentor.

The espresso machine hissed in the background. "Yes, I know about Libya" I replied, "that's why I'm going there, to the north and the south, the sea and the Sahara, the city and the wild silent spaces. Look, you need to get out more, stop by the library and take out a book on Mediterranean history, and find a copy of the Geographical magazine covering Libya. Read both and change your newspaper. Now, mine's a large extra-shot latte in a take-away cup."

JFK, Schipol, T5 Heathrow, Berlin, Singapore? Tripoli airport is like none of these, yet it is the essence of what we were all about to experience on our new adventure. Chaotic, colourful, dusty, noisy, surroundings and architecture trapped in the 1960s, and all totally arabic. Uniforms and moustaches leaning and loitering everywhere. As were the massive hanging portraits of Colonel Gaddafi (or more correctly, Muammar al-Qadhafi) - the second longest serving, living leader of any country in the world, (after of course, HM QE2).

Signs in English, French or even Italian were conspicuously absent. Oh dear. This was every visa-wielding visitor to Libya's "wake up and get real" moment. For our motley group of eleven sages, mostly with silver hair, our start stopped at the immigration desk, from where we were herded off to one side, for our first experience of Libyan administration. "Ah get real, welcome to Africa" and I thought of my Mail-reading friend wagging her finger.

Then in to our herd, straight out of Enid Blyton's Famous Five books, strode the tour operator's guide, a dapper, colourful, energetic, no nonsense leader. Now the fun of nine days in Libya could really begin.

This blog will continue my thoughts and memories a while longer. Please bear with me as I run through the adventure and try to recall iconic moments that amused or intrigued me, and also self-indulge in political comment and observation. If you my reader have never been to Libya and are thinking about booking a future Libya Unveiled experience, please read on, and then book your place while the country is still relatively fresh, original and totally unspoiled by hamburger and pizza ads.

Tripoli enjoys a Mediterranean climate and an Arab-African culture that dates back to pre-Roman times. The Libyan coastal region is hot, dry, dusty and beautiful; the sea as azure a blue as any travel writer or poet would want. In many ways, little has changed since before the Romans came and built their legacy cities of Sabratha, Leptis Magna etc. Astrix the Gaul would have quickly befriended Ahmed the Arab, and the two would have made Roman mischief in this extraordinary country of rich contradictions.

So of course, Tripoli was the perfect springboard from which to see the wonder of the "Roman civilising effect" on the indigenous Libyan people of the time - over two thousand years ago. That word 'civilisation' is packed with deep emotive historic connotations - some good, some not. The Romans were neither the first nor the last people to invade and influence Libya; there were Grecians and Phoenicians, Carthaginians and Egyptians, Romans and Vandals, Byzantines and Arabs, Ottomans and Italians (the Romans coming back for another try), and then the Germans, with the British counter-invading to push out the Italians and Germans. For good measure the French joined the British after the war to occupy and govern the country until the United Kingdom of Libya was established under King Idris. This ended in 1969 when Col Muammar al-Qadhafi took office and changed the country's destiny.

In all its colourful history, I would like to place on record, my observation, that Libya has been the victim of invader after invader over 3,500 years, yet has not itself

been a hostile invader. This may account for the wonderful peaceful, gentle hospitable character of the Libyan, the curious and intelligent approach to culture and learning, the liberal attitudes to many Muslim traditions whilst enforcing others strictly (such as zero tolerance for alcohol and drugs). There appears to be a deep undercurrent of respect flowing through the people, of all ages and genders, a respect earned through both tough and good times, to deal with life as it comes. That respect was manifest in the way traders did not push themselves at us the way they do in say Egypt, Morocco, France etc. Respect between local friends, between strangers, towards tourists and foreigners; it was there on the pavement and in the desert disguised as shy seriousness with humour, curiosity and generosity. One felt safe walking down the street day or night, whether female or male; we all felt the same...no one accosted us. The absence of alcohol and drunkards staggering around noisily as they do in London and Paris, was noticeable. Yes I was impressed with the Libyan people.

Libyans historically comprise Arabs of various tribal types including the Berbers of the north-east coast and nomadic desert Tuaregs. This is a young country with some 50% of the 6 million population aged 18 or less, 99.5% of devout Muslim faith, in a territory of 679,358 sq miles. Just to get a perspective on the country, Libya is bigger than: France, Spain, Italy, the UK and Ireland all put together - and most of it is in the Sahara desert.

So what did we do.....we eleven plus the guide, over nine days, in the Libyan hot sunny winter, while our friends and families in the UK suffered grey rain and biting cold winds of a British winter?

Well, first we instinctively accepted that as a group, we were all over 50...comfortable and I guess mentally privileged - so we had lots in common beyond the silver hair. We all enjoy travel, and some had travelled to amazing exotic places and had done amazing things in their lives. Our guide was of course virtually living out of a travel bag, leading a nomadic peripatetic lifestyle. The physical demands of this Saharan adventure would be fairly evenly enjoyed in this age group.

We met our local Libyan guide for the duration, Nouri, a gentle intelligent, hugely knowledgeable history graduate, with a subtle sense of humour. Nouri was proud of his country and proud of its culture and history. We in the UK have perhaps a more cynical perspective on Libya, engendered partly by the country's recent involvement in foolish overseas activities, and partly because of 'Western' Press demonisation. For my part, whatever the truths behind those 1970 and 1980s activities, they were aberrations in history, a version of which every country has in its darkest cupboards and hates to have revealed.

Nouri took us to the ruined Roman coastal city of Sabratha and lit the touch-paper of Libya's history for us. Our first day out as a tourist group, and we relaxed in to the Libyan way of life touching the energy of Roman history - the marble walls, columns, magnificent mosaic floors and pavements, and in the museum, the marble statues and figures that had been rescued from looters and the ravages of weather.

The afternoon was spent in Tripoli, exploring the Medina, souk and coffee houses, and generally getting in to the character of this country and its traditions. Nouri explained how the local toilet system workssince Arab toilets generally don't have paper. They use a funny squirry hose usually clipped to a wall on the right for which there is a tap (usually out of reach), and it is customary to use one's left hand for cleaning, leaving the right for eating, though not at the same time. Hmmm, that's enough information.

On a personal note, this was also when two of us went off with our Security Man, Ahmed, for a puff. The iconic TV advert might add...this was 'no ordinary puff, it was an M&S puff'. Ahmed took us to a really dodgy bar away from the Medina, near the port, where we sat outside in the garden and had our Shishes brought out to us. M&S stands for Men & Smoking. The bar was for men only... not a woman in sight. As foreigners we were directed to the garden - locals and hard-core regulars went

indoors to relax on opulent cushions, and where the thickness of the smoke and the glowering of glowing black moustaches gave the impression of a 19th century seedy London opium den. Smoking was from a Shish, the wonderful water cooled 'hubble-bubble' made famous in the 1960s and 70s by dope-smoking hippies. Libya is a dope-free country, so we enjoyed flavoured tobaccos, with either cinnamon or apple flavouring. Delicious and relaxing and nothing at all like smoking a cigarette or pipe. We soon got in to the spirit and chilled while the toxic chemicals in the cool tobacco smoke hit our non-smoking lungs and went straight to our heads. We chatted like a couple of old hippies while Ahmed sat opposite, solidly, puffing away and looking as if he didn't understand a word we were saying.

Then we floated back to the coffee house to meet up with the rest of the group, and set off for the airport to fly down to Sebha, the capital of the Fezzan area near the Akakus mountains. The CAA and BA Health & Safety regulators would have had a field day with our flight. It was tough resisting the temptation to photograph the passengers, virtually all men, businessmen I guess, all on their old phones, new phones and iPhones, from the moment they got on until we were airborne and had lost a signal. The plane didn't blow up or fall out of the sky, and all electronic and gyroscopic equipment worked fine, though one man got very cross with his iPhone because it was beating him at chess. He was not a Tuareg, but I loved the notion that he was playing the ancient Persian game of chess so seriously against an invisible opponent, and was losing.

Sebha was the start of five days of adventure in the Sahara. First we loaded up into a rickety old mini bus that somehow was perfect preparation for the next stage. The drive south took us through lush green fields of cash crops irrigated and sprinklered from underground wells and reservoirs introduced with great foresight and strategic planning during the 1970s.

In a small village we met up with our adventure team - five Tuaregs who had exchanged their traditional camels for modern all terrain 4 x 4 off-roaders. There the changes ended, as we were to discover. A Tuareg is like the desert in which his family thrived for thousands of years, unchanging, tough, independent and perhaps crazy. We were privileged to meet these 'sailors of the sandy seas' each with their own differently coloured 5-seater Toyota Land Cruisers - blue, black, silver and white. The chef, his assistant and their driver had their own white pickup.

In Sebha, Nouri took us to a haberdashery to buy material for our Ashishes - the Tuareg turban that protects their faces from blowing sand, burning sun and freezing cold at night. We all chose different colours, and Nouri taught us how to wind the 4 metres length of cloth around our heads correctly. Then, he disappeared into a public phone box dressed in jeans and T-shirt; there was a flash of light, and out stepped a Tuareg in full flowing Arab dress, happy to be back in his desert.

The wild phase of this adventure began as we each picked a driver, loaded our packs and braced ourselves as the drivers took off down the melting, cracked tarmac, empty like an unrolled strip of unending liquorice undulating south into unexplored deepest Sahara.

In the middle of nowhere the drivers suddenly turned 90 degrees left, off the road and into the desert. Yee haa...away from people, from civilisation, from technology and out into thousands of miles of empty golden yellow nothingness and black rock strewn about the desert floor, or stacked high as a bare thirsty mountain. Accommodation was to be in two-person tents, alone or sharing. Food was Spartan Libyan and tasty. Camping is not a gourmet experience. Water was bottled and plentiful. There was a large whole hairy black goat-skin water container slung on the side of Mohammed's vehicle. Once a goat, now with its neck and bottom tied off it was the refreshment point. Somehow we (the soft spoiled underbelly of western decadence) could not bring ourselves to drink this water, though the Tuareg boys did.

Our tour guide was watchful yet hands off, not a nanny; everyone had to take responsibility for themselves, which of course for our rebellious ageing baby-boomer

generation was perfectly normal. There was no standing on ceremony, and everyone helped when help was needed. Privacy and modesty were respected...which sometimes meant a long walk in to the desert, away from the campsite. These little treks were at their best at night, when the air temperature fell to zero, and the unpolluted sky positively glowed like a black canvas pricked with twinkling pinholes of life. A couple of us slept outside each night, on the desert floor in our sleeping bags, in sandy dug-outs like the Tuaregs. Everyone else preferred their tents. It was still winter in Libya, and scorpions were not yet active at night. The desert, lit by a bright cloudless half-Moon, whispered mysterious nocturnal sounds, and sometimes howled from behind rocks.

Our first cultural attractions were the Mesolithic and Neolithic cave carvings and paintings at various in the Akakus mountains; some of these dated back to 10,000 BC. The carvings and paintings were of extraordinary quality and proliferation, and Nouri explained that they had, through careful archeological analysis, been graded into five distinct evolutionary phases. The most recent, some three thousand years old, of hunting and social scenes such as people cutting or combing hair were beautiful. I have to say however, that beautiful though these were, they are primitive when compared with say, Etruscan and early Greek frescoes of the same period - on the other side of the Mediterranean.

That said, the other observation that needs to be made is that the depicted scenes were of local hunts, for giraffe, lion, elephant and gazelle - of which there are none now. Even some two thousand years ago, what is now a desert, was then a fertile wooded landscape teeming with bird and animal wildlife, woodland, flowers and water. The Romans savagely depleted the country of wildlife and forest interfering with an ecosystem that eventually destroyed its indigenous peoples too. Nature did the rest, and now it is all bone dry desert, only the evidence of Banksy's forefathers to warn of what can happen when humans abuse their environment.

After each breakfast and lunch we all set off for a walk, to limber up, get some exercise and help with digestion; this of course allowed the chef and drivers to pack away the kitchen and picnic kit. At lunch on the third day, it was suggested by the drivers that we might like to try fresh goat meat for supper. What a good idea, so we all chipped in ten Dinars each (about £5), and the chef was detailed to drive off and buy a goat from a farm somewhere in this middle of nowhere. What no one expected was that the chef vehicle would be accompanied by all the vehicles, and our guide Nouri. These are Tuaregs remember, who do their own thing, in their own desert. We on the other hand were mature adventure-seeking adults, out for an after-lunch walk...expecting the vehicles to turn up as normal after about thirty minutes. As normal, our party of twelve split up, to walk in pairs or groups according to length of stride and energy.

So there in the middle of the midday sun, slightly north of the Tropic of Cancer, in the middle of a desiccated magnificent sandy emptiness, walked twelve European over-fifties, not really prepared for more than a leisurely stroll. Time passed and the vehicles did not steam over the sandy horizon; they had vanished, and there was no radio or mobile contact. By the time it became obvious the boys and their vehicles were not coming, two hours had passed and our group was strung out over nearly two miles.

Two of us, Rommel (a German) and Montgomery (me representing the British) were out ahead, marching out through the Fezzan and the Wankasa sand sea, northwards, backs to the sun, towards a large acacia tree on the horizon. Luckily we had water, warm sunshine and a gentle breeze, lots of energy and a total happy grasp of the unreality of the situation - that if the drivers decided not to come back, ever, we would probably die in the desert. We felt strong and alert, just as those two generals were. The others in our group, the troops straggling and struggling behind us were less so, and the distance between us and them grew as the distance between us and the acacia narrowed. Time passed quickly as we marched through

the desert heat; it always does in good company, particularly when mindful of but not intimidated by, potential danger.

We got there and the shade was a relief. The acacia was somehow surviving in a large dry wadi; camel footprints and dung, and tyre marks in the nearby sand trail suggested sooner or later someone may pass by. We had lost sight of our troops who were some two or three miles back. Our tour guide was with them, very angry; we hoped someone had water, and that they had the sense to stop under a small acacia we'd passed about an hour earlier.

The Black mountains of the Akakus were only about ten miles away across a flat gravelly expanse of desert, but we two generals agreed that under the fierce Saharan sun, it would be silly to march there now. Instead, our plan was simple; conserve the water and wait for the vehicles and anyone else following our footsteps. If no one came within the next two hours, we would carve out in the sand, in very large letters...H E L P...and hope that an alert CIA satellite operative might notice and warn the Libyan authorities to investigate. Isn't it wonderful how the mind works under abnormal conditions?

After over three hours, the roar of the approaching 4 x 4 blitzkrieg and the clouds of sand billowing out behind them meant our little Libyan adventure was over. Everyone had been picked up, watered and was safe and comfortable. Nouri took his reprimand about leaving us from the tour guide and smiles reappeared. The freshly skinned goat was in the back of the cook-wagon, tenderising itself for dinner. Life was good.

This blog cannot bring back every memory, of every place, of every event...there were simply too many. Sorry.

Other iconic moments worth mentioning were the extraordinary turquoise lizard, over twelve inches long, we found sunbathing on a warm rock; the night-time howling and scurrying visits by desert foxes; the rough homestead of an ancient Tuareg who refused government resettlement monies to move to a town - with his beautiful and shy old Tuareg lady who stood out in the sun, while her even more wrinkled husband sat in the shade in their visitors shack talking to us. Little step by little step she came over, and then slumped into an 80 year old heap outside the shack, but in the shade. She had the most beautiful old eyes I think I have ever seen; dark, distant, warm, motherly, mysteriously intimately hiding a million desert secrets.

The last two days we spent dune bugging through the Great Ubari sand seas, racing up over down and around the waves of crispy petrified dunes. Sometimes they were predicable and sometimes not. What looked like a knife edge going up a sharp dune, left the adrenalin hanging when the other side flattened out. And what looked like an easy ride up got the adrenalin pumping as the vehicle tipped over a knife-edge and raced down a sharp slope. The Tuareg boys loved this style of freedom driving, which I guess is more fun than lumping around on a camel. What they didn't like was getting stuck in soft sand. The day ended at the spectacular mud-brick Garamantes City at Germa, discovered by the Italians in the 1920s, hidden under sand for some 2,000 years. Italian archeologists excavated, revealed it and then left after the war. It has since been slowly decaying and washing away in the occasional rain storms. So sad.

On the last day we raced around the dunes some more, and deep in the desert found the oases of Mafo and Gabraoun. These lakes are palm-fringed with high dunes as a backdrop, an that image would happily decorate the lid of a box of dates. At Gabraoun there was a ski hire shop for those tourists who wanted to have a go at dune skiing or sand-boarding. We were not persuaded nor convinced any sand-ski surface could better snow. The oasis waters are extraordinary, clear yet a green colour and freezing cold at the surface and boiling hot some 4 feet below. Yes some of us had to test the water, and experience the weirdness of a cold neck and blistering hot feet unable to feel the bottom. Swimming was difficult because the water was almost as salty as the Dead Sea, so our bodies floated high up. We were

strongly advised not to put our faces or hair in the water; good advice. After the swim, Nouri had the responsibility of showering us down with a bucket of cold water drawn from a nearby freshwater well. This was fun...but the excitement nearly got out of hand when a pretty young Italian girl in a black bikini began flirting with Nouri. It was obvious Nouri had been in the desert too long, and needed a girlfriend, or wife.

Our fond and sad farewells were made to the drivers after showers and lunch at the Takarkiba campsite. Then back on the rickety minibus to Sebha airport and a late plane to Tripoli.

The last day was reserved for the best - Leptis Magna, the grand finale. There is no Roman ruin anywhere in the Mediterranean world that can prepare a visitor for the sheer scale and splendour of Leptis Magna. We were all blown away, and our local specialist guide was warm and knowledgeable enough to bring the city's history alive. I could wax on about this wonder...but won't. If you have seen it, then my words won't match your memories. If you haven't seen it...and if you enjoy history, you MUST go there.

Our last supper was a joy. Nouri took us to a fish restaurant a few miles to the east of Tripoli, that was open for only its second day of business. All along in front of the restaurant were fresh fish stalls displaying every fish and crustacean found in the Mediterranean. We each picked the fish of our dreams for the chef to prepare for our supper. Libyan food when served simply, is simply delicious, and not complicated with fancy sauces. We all swapped fish pieces, and because these were served in their natural juices, we were able to experience their different tastes and textures. Our tour guide as a kind personal gesture, ordered for each plate, a single massive king size prawn, giving a nice touch of colour and taste. I noticed the proprietor making a mental note of this neat presentational idea.

Harissa, a fiery dark red paste Libyans dip their bread into is delicious and dangerous. I took a foolhardy deep dip and went into throat spasm. The ever attentive proprietor perched by the front door, noticed and sent over a glass of Libyan lemon sherbet drink. My coughing stopped within seconds. Try getting that on the NHS or in Boots! The meal was a highlight, and the idea of drinking alcohol with a meal seemed a distant and almost pointless memory; we had all dried out, and mention of G&Ts or wine had all but vanished.

The last day was spent visiting the Medina Museum of extraordinarily beautiful artefacts, marble statues and mosaics, rescued from Leptis Magna, all under the watchful eye of a 30ft high Col Gaddafi. After that it was back to wandering around the souk for last minute souvenirs and pressies, coffees etc, and then the drive back to Tripoli airport, and the end of another travel adventure for everyone. Well almost...the last real adventure was a visit to the men's toilets in the Departure Lounge. I have travelled widely, but have no words for that pointless memory, when everything else went beyond my expectations.

Will I go back to Libya? Yes without hesitation, and soon, before oil revenues bring the burger and pizza bars which will bring insanity to this extraordinary country.