

Libya

Libya is a crossroads of history, continents and ancient empires. Home to the Mediterranean's richest store of Roman and Greek cities – Sabratha, Cyrene and, above all, Leptis Magna – each of which is overlaid by remnants of Byzantine splendour, it's a place where history comes alive through the extraordinary monuments on its shores. Every corner of cosmopolitan Tripoli resonates with a different period of history. It's where the Sahara meets the Mediterranean.

Libya is also home to Africa's most exceptional and accessible desert scenery. The Sahara engulfs over 90% of the country, offering up vast sand seas the size of small European countries. Visit the enchanting oasis towns of Ghadames and Ghat, where the caravans once showcased the riches of Africa. Marvel at palm-fringed lakes surrounded by sand dunes in the desert's heart. Be bewitched by extinct volcanoes, such as Waw al-Namus, where black sand encircles multicoloured lakes. Go deeper into the desert and experience Jebel Acacus, one of the world's finest open-air galleries of prehistoric rock art.

One important point to note is that visits to Libya can only be made as part of an organised tour. While those of you accustomed to travelling independently would probably love the chance to do so in Libya, remember that Libya is a vast country and on a tour you'll be able to cover so much more territory than you otherwise could. Remember also that organised groups can be as small as a party of one (plus guide) and with most tour companies you can design your own itinerary.

FAST FACTS

- **Area** 1.8 million sq km
- **ATMs** One, but likely to be more soon
- **Borders** Tunisia (Ras Adjir) and Egypt (Amsaad) open; Algeria, Chad, Sudan and (usually) Niger closed to non-Libyans
- **Budget** US\$50 to US\$100 per day
- **Capital** Tripoli
- **Languages** Arabic, Berber
- **Money** Libyan dinar (LD); US\$1 = 1.3LD
- **Population** 5.5 million
- **Seasons** Hot (June to August), wet (March and October), dry (rest of the year)
- **Telephone** Country code ☎ 218; international access code ☎ 00
- **Time** GMT/UTC +1
- **Visa** Arranged as part of organised tour; can be picked up on arrival



HIGHLIGHTS

- **Leptis Magna** (p134) Tread softly through one of the world's best-preserved Roman cities, with exceptional bath complexes, theatres and forums in a stunning seaside location.
- **Tripoli** (p131) Lose yourself in the delightful, whitewashed medina replete with Ottoman mosques and houses and the world-class Jamahiriya Museum.
- **Ghadames** (p137) Find the oasis town of your imagination in the labyrinthine, palm-fringed old city and the most enchanting caravan post in the Sahara.
- **Jebel Acacus** (p137) 4WD through the striking mountain range which is home to the indigenous Tuareg and magnificent 12,000-year-old rock art.
- **Waw al-Namus** (p138) Marvel at the remote volcanic crater, off the beaten track in the heart of the Sahara, with black sand and red, green and blue lakes.

CLIMATE & WHEN TO GO

Libya is at its best in November and from February to April. Summer (June to September) is generally very hot with average temperatures on the coast around 30°C, often accompanied by high humidity. Don't think of going into the desert from mid-May until October, when temperatures reach a sweltering 55°C. Desert nights can drop below freezing.

ITINERARIES

- **Two Weeks** Two weeks is the minimum time required to get a real taste of the country. Tripoli (p131) deserves at least two days (preferably one at the begin-

VISITING LIBYA

Since late 2000, visits to Libya have only been possible as part of organised tours and visas are only issued to those with an invitation from a Libyan tour company. The official reason for such a rule is that freewheeling European tourists were caught red-handed trying to take priceless antiquities and prehistoric rock art out of the country.

You will at all times be accompanied by a guide from the Libyan tour company who organised your visa and is responsible for you throughout your stay. Discuss your itinerary in advance with the tour operator, although most likely you will have little choice when it comes to hotels and restaurants. All your transport while in Libya will be similarly organised by the tour operator and, apart from domestic air travel, it is highly unlikely that you will travel by public transport. For this reason, we have covered sleeping, eating and transport options only in brief throughout this chapter.

For a full list of Libyan tour operators, see p141. Information on obtaining visas can be found on p140.

HOW MUCH?

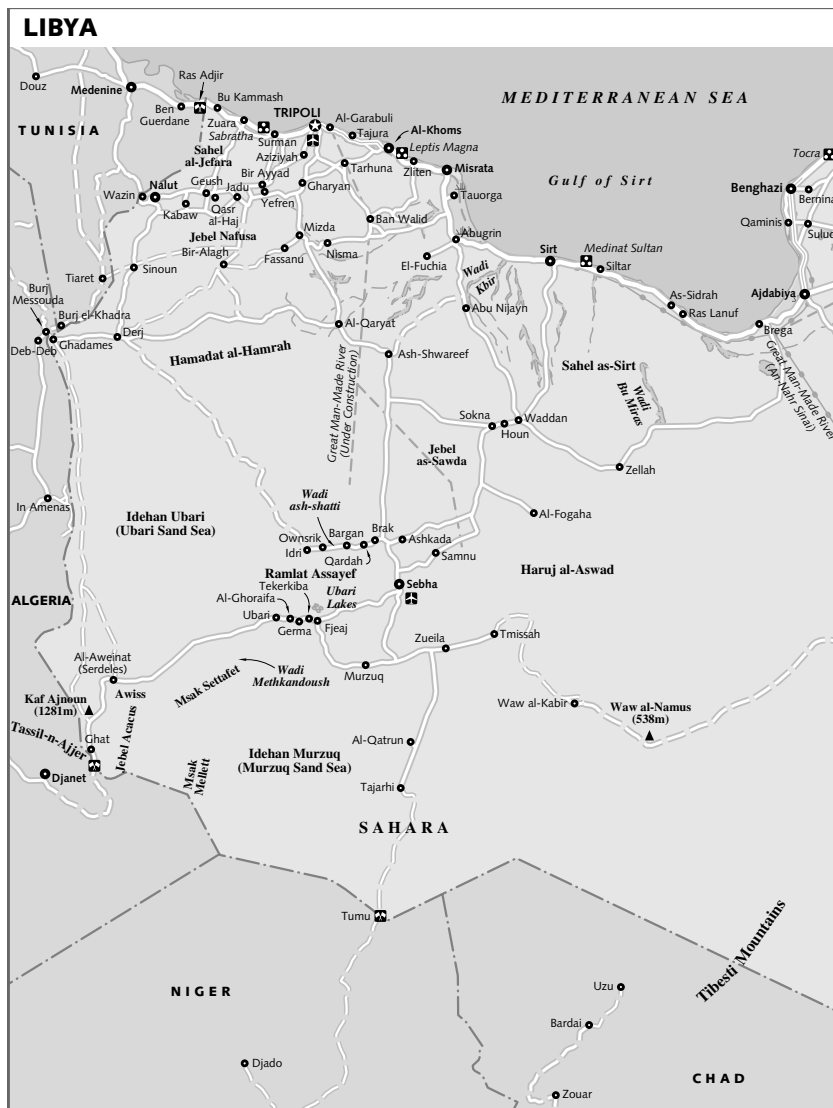
- **Museum admission** US\$2.40
- **Tripoli–Sebha flight** US\$30
- **Colonel Qaddafi watch** US\$4 to US\$32
- **Internet connection per hour** US\$0.80
- **4WD hire per day** US\$71

LONELY PLANET INDEX

- **1L petrol** US\$0.10
- **1L bottled water** US\$0.80
- **Bottle of (nonalcoholic) beer** US\$1.20
- **Souvenir T-shirt** US\$9
- **Shwarma** US\$0.80

ning and another at the end of your trip), with a further day each for Leptis Magna (p134) and Sabratha (p134). You can see the best of the Jebel Nafusa (p136) on a long day en route to Nalut (p136) or Ghadames (p137); you'll need at least a minimum of a good half day for the latter. Crossing to the Ubari Lakes (p137) takes a minimum of two days. Allow a few days for the Jebel Acacus (p137). Flying back to Tripoli saves a full day's journey by road.

- **One Month** With a month you could see everywhere covered in this chapter. Adding Waw al-Namus (p138) and Ghat (p137) to the two-week itinerary is a must, while you could also spend more time exploring the Idehan Ubari and Jebel Acacus. A week in Cyrenaica visiting the ancient cities of



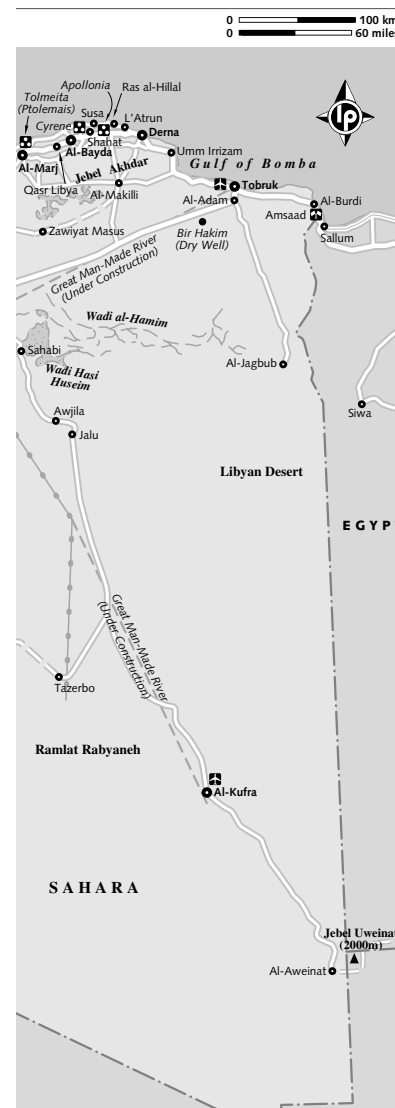
Cyrene (p135), Apollonia (p136), as well as Benghazi (p135) and Tobruk (p136) should round off your trip nicely.

HISTORY

Throughout history Libya has been blighted by its geography, lying in the path of invading empires and someone else's war.

The Great Civilisations of Antiquity

From 700 BC, Lebda (Leptis Magna), Oea (Tripoli) and Sabratha formed some of the links in a chain of safe Phoenician (Punic) ports stretching from the Levant around to Spain. Traces of the Phoenician presence in Libya remain at Sabratha (p134) and Leptis Magna (p134).



queathed the region of Cyrenaica to Rome in 75 BC.

Meanwhile, the fall of the Punic capital at Carthage (in Tunisia) prompted Julius Caesar to formally annex Tripolitania in 46 BC. The Pax Romana saw Tripolitania and Cyrenaica become prosperous Roman provinces. Such was Libya's importance that a Libyan, Septimus Severus, became Rome's emperor (r AD 193–211).

Islamic Libya

In AD 643, Tripoli and Cyrenaica had fallen to the armies of Islam. From 800, the Abbasid-appointed emirs of the Aghlabid dynasty repaired Roman irrigation systems, restoring order and bringing a measure of prosperity to the region, while the mass migration of two tribes – the Bani Salim and Bani Hilal – from the Arabian Peninsula forever changed Libya's demographics. The Berber tribespeople were displaced from their traditional lands and the new settlers cemented the cultural and linguistic Arabisation of the region.

The Ottomans occupied Tripoli in 1551. The soldiers sent by the sultan to support the Ottoman pasha (governor) grew powerful and cavalry officer Ahmed Karamanli seized power in 1711. His Karamanli dynasty would last 124 years. The Ottoman Turks finally reined in their erstwhile protégés in 1835 and resumed direct control over much of Libya.

On 3 October 1911, the Italians attacked Tripoli claiming somewhat disingenuously to be liberating Libya from Ottoman rule. During almost three decades of brutal Italian rule, a quarter of Libya's population died as a result of the occupation.

With the onset of WWII, devastating fighting broke out in the area around Tobruk. By January 1943, Tripoli was in British hands and by February the last German and Italian soldiers were driven from Libya.

Qaddafi's Libya

Desperately poor Libya became independent in 1951, but the country's fortunes were transformed by the discovery of oil in 1959 at Zelten in Cyrenaica. Over the decade that followed, Libya was transformed from an economic backwater into one of the world's fastest-growing economies.

With the region in turmoil, it came as no surprise when a Revolutionary Command Council, led by a little-known but charismatic

On the advice of the Oracle of Delphi, in 631 BC Greek settlers established the city of Cyrene (p135) in the east of Libya. Within 200 years the Greeks had built four more cities of splendour as part of the Pentapolis (Five Cities), which included Apollonia (p136). But with Greek influence on the wane, the last Greek ruler, Ptolemy Apion, finally be-