Cyrenaica

Cyrenaica is wholly unlike anywhere else in Libya. There are faint reminders of Libya’s desert geography in the far southeast, where Tobruk, one of the world’s premier WWII sites, provides a gateway to the little-visited oasis of Al-Jaghbub and the remote Great Sand Sea. But for the most part the region is physically different to the rest of the country. Cyrenaica is Libya’s greenest corner, home to the Jebel al-Akhdar (Green Mountains), which closely shadow the coastline creating some spectacular landscapes, particularly around Ras al-Hillal.

Cyrenaica’s main difference, though, is cultural. Although the Romans left their mark, Cyrenaica was more strongly influenced by the ancient Greeks. Nested in its narrow strip of coastline are three outstanding cities of Greek antiquity – Cyrene, Apollonia and Tolmeita. Pockets of Byzantine culture, such as Qasr Libya and L’Atrun, round out the picture.

During the Islamic period Cyrenaica was often ruled from Egypt. When the rebellious Cyrenai-cans refused to yield to Egyptian rule, hundreds of thousands of families belonging to the Bani Salim tribe from Arabia were transplanted to Cyrenaica. Their descendants remain here, giving rise to the claim that Cyrenaica is, linguistically and culturally, the most Arab region in the world outside of the Arabian Peninsula. It is often said that the Middle East begins at Ras Lanuf.

Cyrenaica’s distinctiveness from the rest of Libya also finds expression in the region’s cuisines, and its people’s reputation for being gregarious storytellers and poets. Indeed, clamorous cities, such as Benghazi are more evocative of Egypt than the rest of Libya.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Marvel at the aesthetic vision of the ancient Greeks at Cyrene (p141) and Tolmeita (p134)
- Examine at close quarters the skilled mosaic artistry of the Byzantines at Qasr Libya (p136)
- Enjoy the old-world charm of Freedom Sq and the clamour of Souq al-Jreed in Benghazi (opposite)
- Take in the panoramic sweep where the Jebel al-Akhdar meets the Mediterranean at Ras al-Hillal (p149)
- Pause to reflect on the wartime tragedy of Tobruk (p151)
- Get a taste of the Sahara at the dune-framed lake of Buhairat al-Fredgha (p155) near Al-Jaghbub
- Drive the desert road from Tobruk to Ajdabiya (p154) without falling asleep at the wheel
WESTERN CYRENAICA

Cyrenaica’s west is more a place to pass through on your way somewhere else, although Benghazi is an agreeable city with great hotels and restaurants and enough sights to warrant half a day’s exploration. Awjila is a long way from anywhere, but its exceptional Al-Kabir Mosque and the old city may just be worth the detour.

BENGHAZI

بنغازى

061 / pop 665,689

Libya’s second city and the principal city of eastern Libya, Benghazi is a mix of busy commercial centre and rundown Mediterranean charm, although it lacks the obvious appeal of Tripoli. All but the merest traces of Benghazi’s antiquity are buried beneath the modern city, and much of the old town was destroyed during WWII.

Nonetheless, if you know where to look, Benghazi is worth exploring. It can also make a good base or staging post for touring the Jebel al-Akhdar, as well as the Greek cities of Tocra, Tolmeita, Cyrene and Apollonia. The climate is also one of the more pleasant in Libya; even in summer, you’ve a good chance of catching a sea breeze. Benghazi is at its best around sunset and early evening, when the streets are often alive with people and the city lights provide the perfect backdrop to the waters of Benghazi’s double harbour.

History

The original settlement here was just east of modern Benghazi and was founded by Greek settlers from Cyrene, although some archaeologists argue that the settlers came directly from the islands of the Aegean. Called Eusperides, it was first mentioned in historical records in the 6th century BC and was thought to be the site of the legendary garden of Hesperides, from the Greek myth of the golden apples. The only reminder of this site of myth is the lake surrounded by reeds, picnic areas and water slides alongside the road to Al-Bayda, around 4km northeast of town.

Eusperides was abandoned in the mid-3rd century BC and a new settlement was named Berenice (see p126), named after a Cyrenaican princess and wife of Ptolemy III of Egypt. Like other formerly Greek cities of northeastern Libya, Berenice fell under the sway of the Romans in the 1st century BC. By the time that the Byzantines arrived, the city was in decline and although they made some repairs, it fell into obscurity.

After the Arab invasion, Benghazi was again neglected in favour of other cities of more strategic importance, such as Ajdabiya. It was only in the 15th century AD that Benghazi was rediscovered by Tripolitani merchants, taking the city into a new and prosperous phase. Benghazi is named after Ibn Ghazi (also Bani Ghazi), a local holy man renowned in the 15th century AD for his good deeds.

The Turks took Benghazi in 1578, but their attempts to make it a centre for tax collection drove traders to other towns. Benghazi recovered its fortunes during the mid-19th century, but this was not to last. In 1911 the Italians laid siege to the city from the sea. The city subsequently became an Italian fortress in the face of fierce resistance by the surrounding tribes. With the resistance finally subdued during the 1930s, Benghazi virtually became an Italian city.

During WWII the city constantly changed hands. More than 1000 bombs rained down upon the city and by the time the war ended there was little left. After the war, many settlers from trading families from western Libya, especially from Misrata, came to the city. After independence the development of the city began again, and the harbour was enlarged to accommodate commercial shipping.

Benghazi was bombarded by the missiles of the US Sixth Fleet in April 1986, causing considerable damage and killing as many as 30 people (see p41).

Orientation

Benghazi’s hotels are spread far and wide. The older part of the city stretches out from the northern shores of the harbour and covers an area roughly bounded by Sharias Ahmed Rafiq al-Mahdawi, 23 July and Al-Jezayir. The heart of the ‘medina’ is the partly Italianate Freedom Sq; to the northeast is the covered Souq al-Jreed.