

# Libya

Libya has it all – ancient Roman and Greek cities of rare splendour, the Sahara that you thought existed only in your imagination and an unmistakable cachet that comes from having been ruled for almost four decades by one of the iconic figures of the 20th century.

Libya was one of the great crossroads of civilisations and within striking distance of Tripoli, Libya's ancient and cosmopolitan capital, Leptis Magna is the extravagant jewel in Libya's crown and sufficient reason on its own to come. Sabratha, too, is splendid, while more ancient cities await in Libya's northeast; for many travellers, Cyrene is Leptis' equal.

If it's the solitude and otherworldly beauty of the world's largest desert that you crave then Libya has few peers. The great sand seas of the Sahara are home to palm-encircled lakes surrounded by soaring dunes, and desert massifs such as Jebel Acacus with its stunning land formations and superbly rendered prehistoric rock art. Amid scenes such as these, Waw al-Namus feels like an unimaginable bonus. And there's no finer caravan town in the Sahara than Ghadames.

But there's more. While Egypt, Tunisia and Morocco were selling their souls to the god of tourism, Libya was holding fast to its traditions and here you'll find one of the most hassle-free destinations on earth. Libyans have an old saying that you should enter the country with its people and it's true that the only way to visit is as part of an escorted tour. Visa arrangements can be a hassle, but by the time you leave Libya you'll have seen the country through Libyan eyes.

## FAST FACTS

- **Area** 1.8 million sq km
- **ATMs** Widespread
- **Borders** Tunisia (Ras al-Jedir) and Egypt (Amsaad) open; Chad, Sudan and (usually) Niger and Algeria closed to non-Libyans
- **Budget** US\$75 to US\$100 per day
- **Capital** Tripoli
- **Languages** Arabic, Berber
- **Money** Libyan dinar (LD); US\$1 = 1.23LD, €1 = 1.78LD
- **Population** 6.3 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



**HOW MUCH?**

- **Museum or site admission** US\$2.50
- **Tripoli–Benghazi flight** From US\$30
- **Colonel Qaddafi watch** US\$8 to US\$40
- **Internet connection** US\$0.80 per hour
- **4WD rental** US\$65 to US\$95 per day

**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

**HIGHLIGHTS**

- **Leptis Magna** (p133) One of the world's best-preserved Roman cities, with bath complexes, theatres and forums by the Mediterranean.
- **Tripoli** (p130) An atmospheric white-washed medina replete with Ottoman mosques and houses, and the world-class Jamahiriya Museum.
- **Ghadames** (p135) A labyrinthine, palm-fringed old city and possibly the Sahara's most enchanting oasis town.
- **Cyrene** (p134) An extraordinary ancient city with a fine location and splendid Greek and Roman monuments.
- **Jebel Acacus** (p137) A jagged desert massif in the Sahara's heart, home to the semi-nomadic Tuareg and magnificent 12,000-year-old rock art.

**CLIMATE & WHEN TO GO**

Libya is at its best in October and November, when the skies are clear and temperatures are mild. The next best alternative is from March through to early May, although there's a higher chance of sandstorms in April and, by May, temperatures are really starting to rise. December through to February is also popular, although temperatures can be surprisingly cool and night-time temperatures in the Sahara routinely drop below zero. In summer (mid-May to September), temperatures can be fiercely hot.

**ITINERARIES**

- **One Week** Tripoli (p130) deserves at least two days, with a further day each for Leptis Magna (p133) and Sabratha (p133). For the rest of the time, it's a two-day round-trip to Ghadames (p135), visiting the Jebel Nafusa (p135) en route, for an unforgettable taste of the desert. An alternative is to fly to Benghazi (p134) and spend two days visiting the ancient cities of Cyrene (p134) and Apollonia (p135).
- **Two Weeks** Depending on what you've covered from the one-week itinerary, devote the rest of your time in Libya to the Sahara. Fly to Sebha and then spend a couple of days exploring the Ubari Lakes and Idehan Ubari (Ubari Sand Sea; p136). An extra two days will allow you to make it to Waw al-Namus (p137) and back, while you'll need at least three days for Jebel Acacus (p137).

**HISTORY**

Throughout history Libya has been blighted by its geography, lying in the path of invading empires and the wars of other nations.

**The Great Civilisations of Antiquity**

From 700 BC, Lebdah (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 (p133) and Leptis Magna (p133).

On the advice of the Oracle of Delphi, in 631 BC Greek settlers established the city of Cyrene (p134) 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 (p135). But with Greek influence on the wane, the last Greek ruler, Ptolemy Apion, finally bequeathed 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, Septimius Severus, became Rome's emperor (r AD 193–211).