



Libya

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Fast Facts

Capital Tripoli

Population 6.54 million

Languages Arabic, Berber

Area 1.759 million sq km

Currency Libyan dinar (LD)

Ancient Ruins & Saharan Sand

Libya is an ancient crossroads of civilisations that bequeathed to the Libyan coast some of the finest Roman and Greek ruins in existence, among them Leptis Magna, Cyrene and Sabratha. Libya also has some of the most beautiful corners of the Sahara Desert, from seas of sand the size of Switzerland and sheltering palm-fringed lakes (the Ubari Sand Sea) to remote massifs adorned with prehistoric rock art (the Jebel Acacus), labyrinthine caravan towns (Ghadames) and an isolated black-as-black volcano (Wawa al-Namus) in the desert's heart.

The upheaval caused by Libya's revolution in 2011 and 2012 continues and the whole country remains off-limits to travellers with chronic instability and ongoing conflict.

Libya at a Glance

Leptis Magna One of the world's best-preserved Roman cities looks out across the Mediterranean.

Tripoli An atmospheric whitewashed medina and a world-class museum.

Ghadames The Sahara's most enchanting oasis town with a labyrinth of covered passageways shadowed by palm gardens.

Cyrene This extraordinary ancient city has some of North Africa's finest monuments to Ancient Greece.

Jebel Acacus A jagged Saharan massif with 12,000-year-old rock art, Tuareg inhabitants and extraordinary scenery.

Ubari Lakes Idyllic lakes surrounded by exquisite sand dunes in one of the world's largest and most beautiful sand seas.

Waw al Namus A black-sand volcano sheltering multi-coloured lakes and otherworldly scenery.

UNDERSTAND LIBYA

Libya Today

Libya is a country awakening from a nightmare, but it's not over yet. Qaddafi may no longer rule over the country, but the country is deeply divided, not in two, but rather into as many fiefdoms as there are armed militias. It's difficult to see from where true peace will come, but if the number of Libyans who turn out to vote is any indication, they haven't quite given up hope yet.

In the west, militias from Zintan and Misrata each control large swathes of territory and refuse to recognise the elected governments. In the east, around Benghazi, renegade General Khalifa Haftar battles militant Islamists in a devastating turf war that has destroyed large parts of Libya's second city. Into the power vacuum has stepped the so-called Islamic State, including many battle-hardened veterans of the war in Syria and Iraq; for a time they controlled Derna and Sirt. And all the while, rival governments – one in Tripoli backed by the UN as a unity government, one in Tobruk voted to power in earlier elections – claim to be the rightful administration. In the short term, Libya's future looks bleak. The path to a peaceful future is a complicated one that must resolve or remove at least two major roadblocks: the ongoing power of armed militias and the difficulties of the government – whoever that may be – in asserting effective control over the country.

History

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 and Leptis Magna.

On the advice of the Oracle of Delphi, in 631 BC Greek settlers established the city of Cyrene 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. But with Greek influence on the wane, the last Greek ruler, Ptolemy Apion, finally bequeathed the region of Cyrenaica to Rome in 75 BC.

WARNING

There is nowhere in Libya that is currently considered safe to travel. Terrorist attacks and the threat of kidnapping remain extremely high across the country. Although fighting is not constant everywhere, car bombings and the escalation of tensions into outright military conflict are a serious risk.

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).

Islamic Libya

By 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.

After centuries of rule by local and other North African Islamic dynasties, 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 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, whether from direct military attacks, starvation or forced migration.

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.