



Photographs by Jehad Nga for The New York Times

A.T.M.'s are now a common presence in Tripoli, including one at the Bab al-Bahar, above. Below, the Corinthia Bab Africa has a spa and a sea view from its rooftop pool.

Tourism Is Making an Imprint on Tripoli

By KEVIN GRAY

THE beach was dark. Along the shore, where the black Mediterranean lapped the Libyan sand, whispering figures crept beside the water's edge. My friend, a man I had met in Tripoli just a day earlier, had left me there among a dozen deserted grass huts at the bottom of a nameless road 20 miles from the city. He had hiked back behind the hills, he said, "to make a call." That was an hour earlier.

To say I was nervous is an understatement. I had \$1,000 strapped to my stomach in a money pouch; my international cell-phone had no range; and no one back home knew where I was. At a distant end of the beach, on a high rocky jetty, a tent lighted by fires flapped in the wind, its silhouetted occupants beating their African drums.

A sudden skittering near my feet made me jump. Flashlights swept toward me over the sand. That's when I saw them: dozens of long-legged crabs that had come up to the beach to feed but, chased by 10 or so children, would soon become dinner themselves.

A few seconds later, my friend Mecki was at my shoulder, and with him were six childhood buddies. They were carrying fresh fish they had speared that day in this same inlet, a wood-burning grill and a plastic Fanta bottle full of homemade schnapps.

That was two years ago, shortly after the United States lifted its 24-year-old trade embargo against Libya, and I was as much a curiosity to my new friends as they were to me. Since then, small groups of Americans have trekked to Libya and undergone similar transformations from suspicious outsiders to welcomed insiders.

They've taken kitschy photos beneath billboards of Col. Muammar el-Qaddafi, the man Ronald Reagan once called "this mad dog of the Middle East." They've wandered through the fragrant alleyways of Tripoli's old city and haggled with its expert silver-



smiths. At night, they've smoked hookahs in Italianate courtyards near the harbor and eaten shaved ice alongside families escaping the heat of their homes.

In May, the United States announced that it was restoring diplomatic relations with Libya, which means Libya's capricious visa-approval process should become simpler, leading to what tourism officials hope will be an influx of American visitors.

Thanks to a flood of new investment from the West, Tripoli is already remaking itself into a travel-friendly destination, as I found when I returned there this spring. Where visitors once had to choose from a handful of state-run hotels, there are now dozens of private places: from the family-run Tebah Hotel, with its chrome-trimmed lobby and collection of stuffed cats, to the over-the-top Corinthia Bab Africa Hotel, a \$192 million showcase overlooking the sea, complete with spa, gym and fine restaurants.

It's no mystery why the Phoenicians picked this deep-water port 2,500 years ago as one of their primary trading posts on the North African coast. The water is Greek-island blue and placid. The marina's docks are packed with bountiful fishing boats, sun-shrived fisherman and boys who sell cups of espresso and cans of Pepsi wrapped in foil to keep them cold for 1 dinar (about \$1.25) apiece. On the horizon sit massive idling oil tankers, whose deck lights form a faint string of jewels at night from one end of the Earth to the other.

A busy roadway separates the sea from Green Square, a broad plaza from which the main shopping streets branch out, and a good place to start the day and watch the bustle unfold. But get ready for strangers to

accost you. Chances are, you'll be the only Westerner in sight, and your new friend will want to know if you've ever met Oprah, whom he watches on satellite TV, or if you know why "Friends" was canceled.

Wandering down 1st September Street, named in honor of Colonel Qaddafi's 1969 coup, you immediately grasp that the heart of Tripoli, a city of 1.7 million (roughly one-third of Libya's population), beats at a colonial pace. It is very much the Havana of the Arab world, a time capsule thanks to years of severe sanctions.

THE Italians, who ruled Libya as a colony from 1911 to 1947, built this section of the city in the 1920's, with its filigreed iron balconies and broad marble courtyards, which are now filled with drying laundry, exposed wires and the shouts of uniformed schoolboys playing soccer. The Euro-clothing stores, with their soccer jerseys and Armani shoes, are nearly all aimed at men (most women wear the traditional hijab and shop for fabrics in the medina, or old city). Young guys in Diesel knockoffs slouch against the windows on the high narrow sidewalks and will offer warm hellos if greeted.

While the city still runs on a bring-your-cash economy, A.T.M.'s are appearing in larger hotels and a few camera shops catering to tourists take credit cards. Of course, modernity is nowhere in sight once you cross Green Square and enter the medina. Its meandering souks offer everything from cheap luggage and Nike knockoffs to stuffed pythons and cheetah pelts to illegal ivory and handcrafted gold and silver arabesque jewelry sold by the gram.

Since the entire city shuts down for about three hours around 1 p.m. so the locals can avoid the blistering heat with a shady nap at home, it's a good idea to grab lunch in the medina. The best place to do that is al-Bouri, a rustic carpet-walled cafe a few yards north of the medina gate and through a warren of back alleys. You can get a full meal (spicy Libyan soup, couscous with lamb and grilled shilba, a type of seabream) for 5 dinars.

There is little to do as the city sleeps, so you may want to catch a cab at Green Square (most rides around town are 2 to 3 dinars) back to your hotel for a little rest. Libyan drivers like to make up for the strict politics of their leader by ignoring traffic lights and swerving into approaching traffic if it means getting past a logjam of cars. So hang on to your lunch.

And if you're staying in the area of al-Kendi Street, a booming residential and retail district south of the square, where hotels are going up on nearly every block, don't be alarmed by the rubble and garbage in the street. It's all part of the chaos of progress — and the lack of any clear cleanup plan.

The evenings in Tripoli are a bit of a bust if you're looking for night life. Libya is one of the few dry countries left on the planet. The best bet is a leisurely dinner a few miles east of town, at the Hoffra (meaning hole) Fish Market. It is a slippery, slimy alley of fishmongers, who offer squid, shrimp, farouge (a local fish) and other things by the kilogram.

One of several nearby cafes will cook whatever you buy for 5 dinars a person. You can follow that with a relaxing hookah and a cup of stiff and muddy Arabic coffee.

If you happen to have taken the phone number of that stranger you met in the morning, however, and if he happened to invite you to the beach, you can find yourself swilling bootleg schnapps cooked on a stove-top pot as the stars twinkle extra brightly overhead. Of course, you'd also wake the next morning with a poisoned headache, sand fleas biting your face and the surreal scene outside your grass hut of teenage girls in black hijabs as they splash in the blinding surf atop inflated Donald Duck rafts.

And sitting closer to you, your new friends would be smoking cigarettes and laughing, while the nice families stare and one new pal bellows, "Don't worry, these are not terrorists." ■

ONLINE: MORE ON TRIPOLI

Details on how to obtain a visa for a visit to Libya, as well as recommendations on where to stay, where to eat and where to shop in the medina:

nytimes.com/travel