

Coastal Tripolitania



Leptis Magna and Sabratha – what more do we need to say?

There is no finer ancient Roman city than Leptis Magna anywhere in the world and most travellers agree that it's Libya's most rewarding site. Leptis Magna was all about excess and extravagance, a city that embraced its moment as a centre of wealth and power. The extant ruins are so extensive, the public buildings so decadent that this is one ruined city that resonates with the spirit of those who made Leptis great.

Sabratha may always have been the relatively poor (though in reality extremely rich) cousin of Leptis, but it too is one of the most beautiful ruined Roman cities of the world. Strung out along the Mediterranean shoreline from its monumental heart, it whispers grandeur at every turn, nowhere more so than in its extraordinary theatre.

Villa Sileen is another essential element in the Leptis experience: it was to seaside villas like this that the Roman elite fled to escape from the rigours of city life. Floors composed entirely of intricate mosaics and frescoes adorning the walls provided the backdrop for the cultured art of serious Roman relaxation.

Together with Oea (which lies buried beneath Tripoli), Sabratha and Leptis Magna gave this province its Roman name: Tripolitania means 'the land of three cities'. The modern Tripolitanian coast has since sprouted many more cities such as Zliten and Misrata, but in reality these are sideshows and of interest only for their proximity to the splendour of ancient Rome.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Be spellbound by your first glimpse of the **Arch of Septimius Severus** (p111) in glorious Leptis Magna
- Survey the Mediterranean beyond the sweep of ruins from the upper levels of Leptis Magna's **theatre** (p115)
- Swim in the sea alongside the evocative ruins of **Sabratha** (p100)
- Imagine yourself a diva in Sabratha's exquisite Roman **theatre** (p105)
- Admire the Roman frescoes and mosaics in the seaside **Villa Sileen** (p107)
- Discover that there was more to ancient Libya than the Romans at **Ghirza** (p121)



WEST OF TRIPOLI

If Libya ever develops Tunisian-style tourist resorts, chances are that most of them will be along the relatively deserted coast between Tripoli and the Tunisian border. White-sand beaches stretch to the horizon and the proximity of the ruins of splendid Sabratha, the undoubted highlight of this stretch of coast, are surely more than a glint in a developer's eye. Visit before it changes.

SABRATHA

☎ 024 / pop 103,991

Were Sabratha anywhere other than a few hundred kilometres down the road from Leptis Magna, it would be hailed as one of the most beautiful Roman cities in the Mediterranean. In that sense, history has never been kind to Sabratha, existing as it always has in the shadow of its more famous cousin. The truth is, Sabratha is a stunning site that is a must-see, preferably before you visit Leptis. Its highlights include a theatre that was one of the most beautiful in ancient Rome, the fact that the site takes far better advantage of its seafront location than Leptis and the extant remains of Phoenician occupation that have been buried beneath the work of later civilisations elsewhere.

To catch a sense of the glories of Sabratha before you visit, Gallery 9 (p79) of Tripoli's

Jamahiriya Museum has an excellent model of the ancient city in its Roman heyday.

One final piece of advance planning that will enhance your visit is to bring if not your toga then your swimmers, towel and a couple of bottles of fresh water – swimming in the Mediterranean alongside the ruins as the Romans themselves once did is one of Libya's most rarely enjoyed highlights. Other beaches to the west of the ancient city are quieter (except on Fridays) but you won't have the ruins nearby to help you dream.

History

The origins of Sabratha's name have been lost to time, although it may have been a derivation of a Libyan-Berber word meaning 'grain market'. There was a periodic (possibly nomadic) settlement here in the 5th century BC, but it wasn't until Punic settlers arrived in the 4th century BC from the neighbouring stronghold of Carthage that a permanent settlement was established. For this seafaring people, Sabratha's safe harbour was paramount and the Punic city consisted of narrow, winding streets with most houses facing the northwest to take full advantage of the seaborne winds. The arrival of Greek (Hellenistic) settlers in the 2nd century BC began to dilute the Punic character of the city as Greek architectural flourishes began to appear. One thing didn't change: Sabratha was renowned as a wealthy city and important regional centre covering at least four hectares.

A violent earthquake destroyed much of the city in the 1st century AD and during the subsequent rebuilding phase the city's architects turned towards Rome, which at the time was the pre-eminent power in Tripolitania, for inspiration. The result was the noticeably Roman character that remains so evident today. A number of Sabratha's most important buildings – the forum (p104), the Temple of Liber Pater (p104), the Judicial Basilica (p103) and the Temple of Isis (p105) – were built during this period.

By the end of the 1st century AD, the last vestiges of Punic influence were being threatened by the inexorable weight of Romanisation. Like the other cities of the Tripolis, Sabratha's heyday was during the reigns of the four Roman emperors Antoninus Pius (r AD 138–61), Marcus Aurelius Antoninus (AD 161–80), Lucius Aelius Commodus (AD 180–92) and Septimius Severus (AD 193–211). Although never competing for significance or grandeur with Leptis Magna, Sabratha grew in size and status, and received the coveted title of colony (*colonia*) in the 2nd century AD. The city's wealth depended on the maritime trade of animals and ivory from Africa, although the city kept a wary eye on its hinterland and on the ever-present threat of raids by Saharan tribes. Under Marcus Aurelius and Commodus, the extravagant, monumental heart of Sabratha extended ever-further south at the expense of formerly Punic structures; under Commodus, the theatre (p105) was built.

Sabratha's residents probably thought the glory days would last forever, but the terminal decline of Rome's economy in the 3rd century began Sabratha's decline and the earthquake in 365 dealt Sabratha's soft, sandstone buildings a blow from which they would never recover; for more information on the devastation wrought by the earthquake all along the coast, see p143. With the tide of Christianity sweeping the region, none of the ancient temples was rebuilt and a smaller city, a shadow of its former self, grew over the ruins.

In 533 Sabratha fell under the sway of the Byzantine general Belisarius who oversaw the rebuilding of the city walls (p102) to enclose only the western port and central area, thereby leaving the Roman parts of the city further to the east exposed and abandoned. The city survived for at least a century after the Islamic arrival in the 7th century AD, but was thereafter abandoned and left to the sands and Mediterranean winds. Sabratha was rediscovered by Italian archaeologists in the early 20th century.

Information

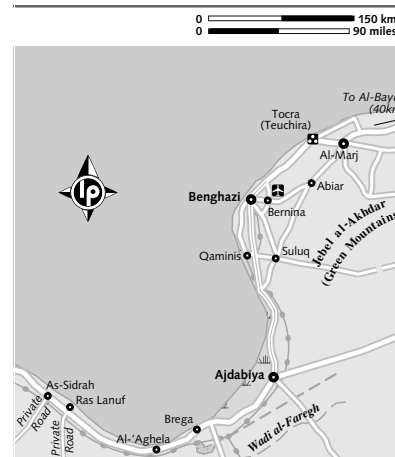
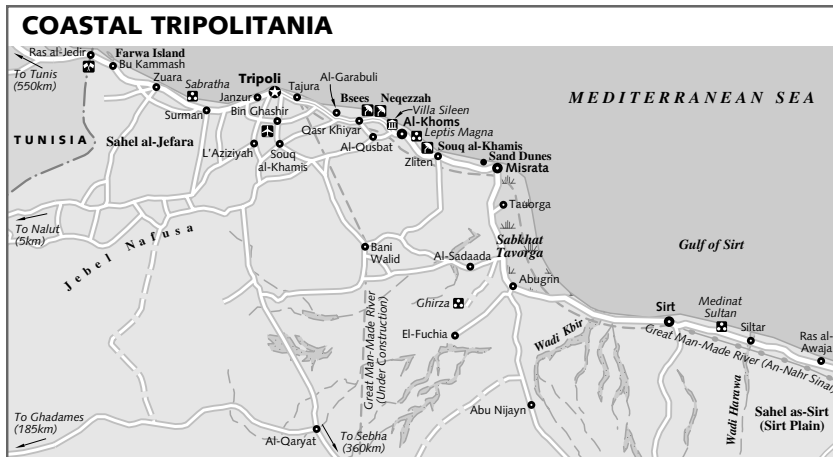
In order to enter the old city **site** (☎ 622214; adult/child 3/1LD, camera/video 5/10LD; ☎ 8am–6pm) you must be with a **guide** (50LD). Outside the entrance are a couple of stalls selling snacks, water and postcards. There's a public toilet inside the site, in front of the Roman Museum (the women's section is around the back).

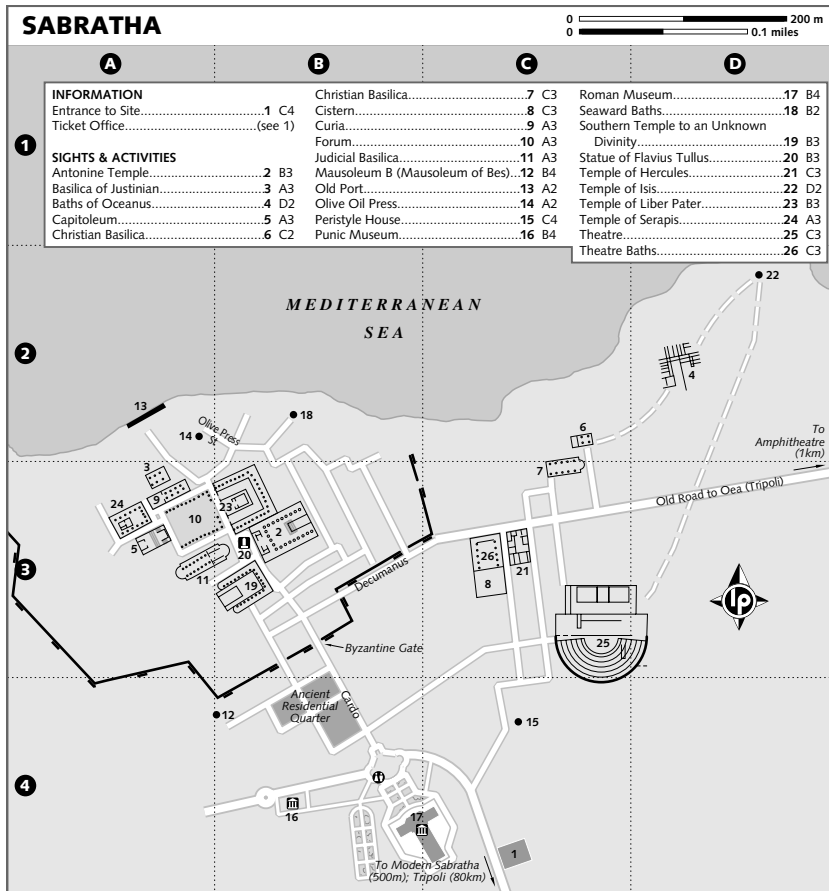
Sights

ROMAN MUSEUM

The first site you'll reach after entering the site is the **Roman Museum** (adult/child 3/1LD, camera/video 5/10LD; ☎ 8am–6pm Tue–Sun) is excellent, although many visitors prefer to leave it until the end so as to better understand the exhibits.

The statues in the main courtyard set the tone with a winged Victoria writing on a shield while two barbarian prisoners beg for mercy. The western wing of the museum contains underground objects found in the tombs of Sabratha, while the central or southern wing contains some wonderful mosaics from the Basilica of Justinian (p104). The mosaic which once occupied the basilica's central nave shows a scene of considerable abundance, including a





vibrantly coloured peacock. On the mosaics from the basilica's two aisles are on the wall. The columns and bases are copies of the originals that remain in the basilica.

The eastern wing contains more superb mosaics and frescoes from a private house whose ornate decoration highlights the one-time wealth of Sabratha and its inhabitants. There are also some statues from the former Temple of Zeus (now the Capitoleum; p104) that was at the western end of the forum. In the fourth room is a mosaic of the Three Graces and a stunning one of Oceanus lifted from the centre of the baths that bear his name (see p105). In the final room, there is a mosaic of nymphs grooming the mythical winged horse Pegasus.

PUNIC MUSEUM

Around 50m west of the Roman Museum is the **Punic Museum** (adult/child 3/1LD, camera/video 5/10LD; ☎ 8am-6pm Tue-Sun), which is only worth the effort if you have an expert's interest in the city's earliest history. Exhibits include underground ceramic objects and fragments from Mausoleum B (Mausoleum of Bes; opposite), representations of lions, male figures and the deity of the Egyptian god Bes in all his repugnant glory.

SOUTHWESTERN QUARTERS

The path that leads north towards the sea from the Roman Museum is the old Roman **Cardo**, the main north-south thoroughfare in Roman times that led into the heart of

the city. One of Sabratha's old **residential quarters** is off to the left where some houses contain cisterns and pottery shards.

Mausoleum B (Mausoleum of Bes), nearly 100m northwest of the **Cardo**, offers a rare insight into Punic Sabratha, although what you see is a reconstruction of the original. The mausoleum is nearly 24m tall and stands on the site of an underground funerary chamber dating from the 2nd century BC. It has a triangular base, concave façades and a small pyramidal structure on the summit. The motifs (originals of which are in the Punic Museum) show Bes and Hercules, who are thought to have been the protectors of the tomb, as well as lions. The mausoleum was dismantled by the Byzantines, who used the materials to build their wall around the city in the 6th century.

The **Byzantine wall** was designed to encircle and protect the city from restless Berber tribes from the interior. The **Byzantine Gate** was once flanked by small towers and marked an important point where access to the central commercial, administrative and religious districts could be controlled. The wall is at its most intact around the gate.

SOUTHERN TEMPLE TO AN UNKNOWN DIVINITY

The first major building on the left after you pass through the Byzantine Gate is a Roman temple built to an unknown deity; it's also known as the South Forum Temple. Much of the large rectangular courtyard still bears the original marble floor. It dates from the 2nd century AD, the great period of Roman monument building when cipolin columns and a portico once surrounded the courtyard. Apart from the marble floor,

the capitals and pediment fragments are the only remaining original items.

ANTONINE TEMPLE

The elevated Antonine Temple is believed to have been dedicated to the Roman emperor Antoninus Pius, although some archaeologists believe that Marcus Aurelius was the real inspiration. It once had a small porticoed courtyard. A modern staircase allows you to climb to the top without damaging the crumbling gradations on either side. The views from the top are superb, showcasing Sabratha's prime coastal location and overlooking the adjacent public buildings that stood at the monumental heart of Roman Sabratha. Immediately outside the temple is a fine fountain and headless **Statue of Flavius Tullus** in commemoration of this fine 2nd-century citizen who commissioned an aqueduct to bring water to Sabratha.

JUDICIAL BASILICA

Also known as the Basilica of Apuleius of Madona (see also The Defence of Apuleius, below) or House of Justice, this building was originally erected in the 1st century AD. Most of what remains (marble columns and some excellent paving fragments) dates from around AD 450, during the Byzantine period. Between these dates, the building changed function as Sabratha made the transition from a Roman to a Byzantine city. Under the Romans, the basilica was broadly equivalent to a court and consisted of a large hall measuring 50m by 25m and surrounded by a portico. The Byzantines later converted it into a Byzantine church in which the main sanctuary was divided into a nave and aisles.

THE DEFENCE OF APULEIUS

In AD 158 a sensational trial rocked Sabratha from its decadent slumber with all the scandal of a modern soap opera. Apuleius was a renowned philosopher of the Plato School who travelled throughout the colonies expounding his theories to great acclaim. One of Apuleius' speaking tours took him to Sabratha, where he married Pudentilla, a rich widow many years his senior. The citizens of Sabratha were scandalised. One family, which stood to lose out on the widow's massive inheritance, formally brought a charge against Apuleius. The accusation? Using his magic powers to win over the widow (there is no record of whether she was given a say). The trial of the decade was presided over by the Roman proconsul Claudio Massimo in the Judicial Basilica (above). In a captivating oration that lasted three (some say four) days, Apuleius won his freedom. As other celebrities through the ages have discovered, the publicity only enhanced his reputation.

FORUM

Like all great Roman forums, Sabratha's forum formed the centrepiece of the ancient city and served as a market and public meeting place where the news of the city was disseminated. Most of what remains dates from restoration work in the 4th century AD; this work probably restored damage caused by the earthquake in AD 365. The original structure was built in the 1st century BC or 1st century AD. Before the Antonine Period (AD 138–61), the forum was only accessible via a single entrance. Over time, the shops and offices became more grand and more permanent, and a portico was built with grey columns of Egyptian granite. Some of these remain.

CAPITOLEUM

The Capitoleum, also known as the Temple of Jupiter or Zeus, was the principal temple of the city and dedicated to Jupiter, Juno and Minerva. The huge bust of Jupiter in the Roman Museum was found here, as were a rich storehouse of statues. The Capitoleum was first built in the 1st century AD and then reconstructed in marble the next century. Overlooking the forum as it did, its platform was the soapbox of choice for the great orators of the era. The original adornments of the platform are either gone or are now in the Roman Museum.

CURIA

On the northern side of the forum is the Curia (Senate House), marked by a restored archway at the entrance. The Curia was the meeting place of the city's magistrates and senators and consisted of a four-sided courtyard covered with a mosaic. The wide steps around the perimeter were used for portable seats upon which the great senatorial backsides could sit. It was one of very few major buildings rebuilt after the earthquake of AD 365; a portico was added during the reconstruction. Its grey-granite columns are a feature. There were three entrances to the forum from the Curia and the niches in the perimeter were adorned with statues.

TEMPLE OF LIBER PATER

East of the Curia is the Temple of Liber Pater (Temple of Dionysius), which was never rebuilt after the AD 365 earthquake.

It is marked by five columns in light sandstone on a high podium overlooking the monumental heart of ancient Sabratha. It was once flanked on three sides by a double colonnade of sandstone columns. Dedicated to one of the most revered gods of Roman Africa and second only in importance to the Capitoleum in the hierarchy of temples in Roman Sabratha, this temple sat atop an elevated platform that was reached via a wide staircase. It was constructed in the 2nd century AD on the site of an earlier temple. Only the column bases and two of the columns are original.

TEMPLE OF SERAPIS

Immediately west of the Curia, this temple is dedicated to Serapis, a healer and miracle worker. The cult of Serapis, which originally came from Memphis in Egypt, was often associated in Sabratha with that of Isis. It is thought to be one of the oldest temples in the city, although its date of construction is not known. Some of the columns of the portico are still present in a combination of grey marble and limestone.

BASILICA OF JUSTINIAN

This was one of the finest churches of Byzantine Sabratha. Built in the 6th century AD, its main nave and aisles were adorned with breathtaking mosaics that now reside in the central wing of the Roman Museum (p101). Many features, including the magnificent, square-sided column on the apse with intricate acanthus motifs (2nd century AD), date from an earlier period, as construction materials were taken and reused from other parts of the city. The mosaics in the Roman Museum make it easy to imagine the grandeur of this church, which also had three naves, a pulpit and an altar (the foundations of each remain clearly visible). The pulpit originally formed a part of the cornice on the Capitoleum.

NORTHWESTERN QUARTER

The buildings overlooking the Mediterranean north and east of the Basilica of Justinian are some of the oldest in Sabratha, many dating from the 1st century AD when the city was still primarily Punic in character. This was the site of the **old port**, the launching pad of Sabratha's wealth. This was also a residential area. The ruins of an

old **olive oil press** are nearby as are the public **latrines** that doubled as a meeting place (it's a pity their existence doesn't spur on the modern Libyan authorities to provide similar amenities in their cities).

Don't miss the **Seaward Baths**, which are superbly located east along the coast. One of many such complexes in Sabratha, the baths are famous for their lovely mosaics overlooking the water and for the hexagonal latrine, which is paved and lined with fine marble.

THEATRE QUARTER

About 150m southeast of the baths is the **Decumanus**, the main east-west thoroughfare of the Roman city. Flanked by parts of the old Byzantine wall, it runs past the **Temple of Hercules**, behind which is a large **cistern** used for storing water for the **Theatre Baths**, which are immediately opposite. These baths enabled the patrons of the arts to unwind before or after a performance and contain some mosaic fragments on the floors.

Northeast of these buildings are two **Christian basilicas** dating from the 4th to 5th centuries AD. They once formed part of a large religious complex under the Byzantines. A little further northeast are the **Baths of Oceanus**. The decoration of these public baths was extraordinarily lavish, with marble on every surface. You can see the **tepidarium** (warm room). The mosaic that is missing the central fragment once bore the head of the god Oceanus, but he now rests in the Roman Museum.

TEMPLE OF ISIS

The superb Temple of Isis, northeast of the Baths of Oceanus, is arguably the finest of Sabratha's temples. Built in the 1st century AD, it faces onto the Mediterranean in keeping with its dedication to the Egyptian goddess Isis, who was seen here as a protector of sailors. Every spring a great feast was held to celebrate the start of the sailing season. The colonnaded courtyard has a row of eight Corinthian columns. Look beyond the temple to the north and you can see part of the temple foundations that have been eroded by the sea; beyond that are parts of the city lost to the waves during the earthquake.

THEATRE

The outstanding theatre, south of the basilicas, is the jewel in Sabratha's crown and is

visible from miles around. Construction of the theatre was begun in AD 190 under the reign of Commodus although some historians claim it was completed by Septimius Severus the following decade. It was still used into the 4th century until it was destroyed by the earthquake of AD 365. It was rebuilt by Italian archaeologists in the 1920s and is largely faithful to its original form, although the blocks used by the Italians were only half the original size. With an auditorium measuring close to 95m in diameter, it was the largest theatre in Africa.

The façade behind the stage is one of the most exceptional in the Roman world. The three tiers consist of alcoves and 108 fluted Corinthian columns that rise over 20m above the stage. There are some exquisite floral carvings atop the columns as well as carvings of divinities. The stage, 43m long and nearly 9m wide, overlooks the orchestra area that was paved with marble slabs. The front of the elevated stage is simply magnificent, and three large concave niches are the highlight. The central curved panel shows personifications of Rome and Sabratha, flanked by military figures and scenes of sacrifice. The left panel (facing the stage) depicts the nine Muses while the one on the right shows the Three Graces and the Judgement of Paris. Set back into the wall are four rectangular façades between the concave niches, which show comedy scenes as well as dancing and a few assorted divinities (including Mercury) and the Greek mythological hero Hercules.

The balustrade at either end of the orchestra area marks the seats reserved for VIPs, who were kept suitably separated from the riff-raff. The seats climb sharply skywards and once had room for 5000 people; even today it can seat 1500. Underneath the seats were three concentric semicircular passageways that were known as promenades, parts of which were lined with shops. Only two of these promenades have since been rebuilt.

PERISTYLE HOUSE

On your way back to the exit, it's worth visiting this private residence that has good views back towards the theatre. It has a number of fine mosaics, one representing a labyrinth, a few columns and underground rooms that were used in summer.

AMPHITHEATRE

A longish walk away along the old road to Oea (Tripoli) to the northeast, Sabratha's amphitheatre was built in the 2nd century on the site of a converted quarry; a century later, Christians were fed to the lions here. The amphitheatre, which is built of limestone blocks, could once seat 10,000 spectators. The arena, which measures 65m by 50m, is bisected by two deep underground tunnels that were used for storing sets and equipment as well as providing easy access to the arena for performers. The tunnels were once covered with a wooden roof. Travellers are divided over whether the walk is worth it. If you've seen the better preserved amphitheatre in Leptis (p116), you could probably give it a miss if time is short.

Sleeping & Eating

Most people visit Sabratha on a day trip or en route to the Jebel Nafusa. The sleeping options in modern Sabratha are fairly uninspiring.

Buyut ash-Shabaab (Youth Hostel; ☎ 622821; dm 5LD, camping 5LD) Around 600m east of the entrance to the old city, this hostel is basic, clean and well run; you can also pitch a tent in the grounds+.

Funduq al-Asil (☎ 620959; s/d 20/40LD) This is Sabratha's newest and best hotel, and it's located on the western side of town, around 400m south of the coastal highway to Zuara. The rooms are tidy and spacious and some at the back of the building have a distant view of the ancient theatre. There's a **restaurant** (mains 8-30LD), coffeehouse and pool table.

Mat'am al-Bawady (☎ 620224; meals 10-12LD; ☎ lunch & dinner) Along the highway on the western side of town, Mat'am al-Bawady is the only place to consider eating while in Sabratha. The food is excellent, the prices reasonable and the service friendly. There are also some nice decorative touches, which all adds up to Sabratha's best.

Getting There & Away

Sabratha is 69km west of Tripoli. Shared taxis run regularly to Tripoli and Zuara.

ZUARA

☎ 025 / pop 184,228

Zuara, 60km east of the Libyan-Tunisian border at Ras al-Jedir and 109km west of

Tripoli, is a lively Berber town with excellent white-sand beaches.

Like many towns along Libya's northwestern coast, most of Zuara is located between the shores of the Mediterranean and the highway. The banks, post office and *jawazat* (passport office) are east of the main square (known locally as the piazza).

In August, Zuara's **Awussu Festival** takes place. If you're within striking distance, joining the locals for sailing, swimming races and folk dancing is definitely the thing to do in Libya's wilting heat. Beneath the waters off Zuara are reported to be the remains of Old Zuara, which would make for an interesting snorkel if you have your own gear.

Zuara has a **Buyut ash-shabaab** (Youth Hostel; east of main square; dm 5LD), while **Funduq Delfin** (☎ 22711; fax 22710; main highway; s/d/tr 25/50/70LD), west of the town centre on the road to the Tunisian border, is ageing but fine for a night to break up the journey.

North of the main highway around 2km west of Zuara is the **Farah Resort** (☎ 220542, mobile 0912138705; fax 021-3335819; ste 75-100LD; 5-bedroom villa 300LD), Libya's best tourist village. Opened in 2006, it has sparkingly clean and comfortable rooms, a swimming pool, medical clinic, restaurant, prime beachfront location and nice touches, such as the golf carts that take you to your suite. It also has a billiard table, quad bikes for rent, a children's playground and plans for jet skis. Beach tourism for foreign visitors hasn't yet taken off in Libya, but when it does, expect this place to be one of the most popular places. Until then, book well in advance in summer, because Libyans have already discovered this fine place.

The shared taxi station is east of the post office, with departures for Ras al-Jedir (2LD, 45 minutes), Sabratha (1LD, 30 minutes) and Tripoli (2LD, two hours). There are less-frequent departures to the Jebel Nafusa.

ZUARA TO RAS AL-JEDIR

In all likelihood, the most you'll see of this area is out of a tour-bus window as it hurtles to or from the Tunisian border. If you have the time, the beaches along this stretch of coast are some of Libya's best.

Bu Kammash, home to a petrochemical plant and a Roman-era cemetery, is the

gateway to **Farwa Island**, which has a clean white-sand beach on the northern side of the island. The rest of the 471-hectare island is covered with almost 4000 palm trees, a few sand dunes and tiny villages. Farwa is separated from the mainland by a 3km-wide lagoon, although a large sand bar at the eastern end almost connects the two. Small ferries cross between Bu Kammash and Farwa (0.50LD) on an intermittent basis. At its widest point, the island is only 1.1km wide.

EAST OF TRIPOLI

East of Tripoli is all about Leptis Magna and Villa Sileen, although the coastline east of Tripoli is Libya's most densely populated region with cities, such as Al-Khoms, Zliten and Misrata making good bases for visiting the ruins.

Around 90km east from Tajura is the pleasant **Bsees beach** with white sand. The main highway in this area is dotted with makeshift stalls selling honey, olive oil and date juice.

There's another beach at **Neqezzah**, 101km east of Tajura and around 20km west of Al-Khoms. This lovely beach is popular with students from the nearby college and the place throngs with people on Thursday afternoon and Friday. Neqezzah is 4.2km off the main highway (the turn-off is a dip in the road, immediately west of three telecommunications masts). On the road down to the beach is **Funduq al-Neqezzah** (☎ 031-626691/2; tw/chalet/ste 30/40/50LD; ☎), which has spacious rooms with air-con, TV and phone; prices include breakfast.

VILLA SILEEN

The gracious Roman **Villa Sileen** (admission 3LD, camera/video 5/10LD; ☎ 9am-5pm) is all of that remains of the villas of the elite that once dominated the ocean frontage for miles around Leptis Magna. At the time of writing, it was necessary to buy your admission ticket at the site entrance to Leptis Magna (p111), although expect that to change in future.

Villa Sileen's role served a purpose akin to a country retreat from the hustle and bustle of the city and its mosaic-strewn floors and lightly frescoed baths, which to-

gether give the place its charm today, provide further confirmation that the ancient Romans really knew how to live. For more information on mosaic art, see p108.

The small garden that looks out over the Mediterranean is bounded on three sides by the compact villa. Before entering, note the mosaics depicting Nilotic scenes in the courtyard.

In the main, western wing of the villa, the floor of every room (and part of the outdoor garden area) is covered with delightful mosaic tiles, while the floor centrepieces are exquisite with tiny pieces used to extraordinarily detailed effect. These in turn are frequently encircled by repeated geometric designs of larger tiles. Our favourites in the western wing include a marvellous portrayal of the Leptis circus (p116) and a Four Seasons motif. Some of the walls are also adorned with faded frescoes of ochre-coloured human figures and pastoral scenes. There's also what was once a private church, although it was closed when we visited. The house faces onto the sea and its modern-day seclusion only adds to the beauty.

The eastern wing is topped with a number of sand-coloured domes. Inside are the former baths, complete with swimming pools and hot tubs. The small number of frescoes in these rooms are magnificent and are dominated by bath scenes. Some of the walls are made of marble. There are some mosaic pieces on the upper architraves in some rooms; imagine what these baths must have looked like when all the mosaics were intact. The main domed room also has fine stonework atop the pillars, with good mosaics of fighting scenes above some of the attractive sandstone alcoves and a wonderful mosaic showing the head of an unidentified man surrounded by sea creatures and birds (swans, crabs etc) in the centre of the floor. Throughout this section of the building are traces of pottery pipes.

Our only complaint is that, unusually for Libya's ancient sites, recent restorations have been patchy and it's sometimes necessary to walk atop the mosaics themselves in order to see them; the flimsy carpets provide scant protection. Despite having only opened to the public in 2005, there is also an air of dust and neglect.

MOSAICS – A PRIMER

The use of mosaics as adornments in important public buildings dates back to around 2000 BC when terracotta cones were embedded, point first, into a background as a means of decoration. The art form evolved slowly with different coloured pebbles used to make patterns, but it was the ancient Greeks, in the 4th century BC, who first used the pebbles to create detailed geometric motifs and depict scenes of people and animals. In the 2nd century BC, artisans began to make mosaics using the tiny made-to-measure though naturally coloured stone squares cut from larger rocks. Called *tesserae*, they were carefully laid on a thick coating of wet lime, an enduring technique that gave clarity and depth to so many of the mosaics that survive today.

In the 1st century BC, travelling Greek craftsmen introduced mosaic art to the Romans (the stunning mosaics found in Pompeii in Italy were executed by Greeks) who thereafter carried it throughout the empire and adopted it as their own. Their trademark was the use of mosaics to adorn floors in private villas and bath complexes. The larger mosaics required painstaking effort and great skill, taking months or years to complete. As a result, they were only created for wealthier citizens who could afford them and, later, for important buildings such as churches during the Byzantine period. Motifs included scenes inspired by the surrounding countryside, mythology or the more picaresque public events in Roman life, such as the superb representation of a day at the circus of Leptis on the floor of **Villa Sileen** (p107).

Unlike the mosaics found in some other countries (Italy, for example), mosaics along the Libyan coast were made primarily for the floor and were hardy enough to withstand anything, except massive earthquakes. For some reason, very few of the artists signed their names on the mosaics, possibly because so many people were involved over many years. By the time the Byzantines had taken the art form to a new level from the 4th century AD, names are sometime listed, such as the people who helped to pay for the mosaic and clergy in the church. Churches throughout Libya were adorned with floor and wall mosaics; there is no finer collection of Byzantine mosaics in Libya than those of **Qasr Libya** (p136) in Cyrenaica.

Archaeologists are still finding a rich variety of mosaics along the Libyan shore and in 2005 a German team in Wadi Lebda (close to Leptis Magna) unveiled five extraordinary mosaics created during the 1st or 2nd century. The mosaics depict hunting and a masterfully portrayed gladiator at rest and are thought to have adorned the pool of a frigidarium in a Roman villa at Wadi Lebda in Leptis Magna. They can now be seen at the **Leptis Museum** (p117).

In addition to the spectacular mosaics of Villa Sileen, Qasr Libya and Leptis Museum, there are especially fine examples to be found in the ground-floor galleries (p77) of the Jamahiriya Museum in Tripoli, the **Roman Museum** (p101) and throughout the ancient city of **Sabrattha** (p100), **Toimeita museum** (p136) and the **House of Jason Magnus** (p144) in Cyrene.

Getting There & Away

Villa Sileen is 14km west of Al-Khoms and is almost impossible to find without a guide. There's no public transport to the site.

AL-KHOMS

☎ 031 / pop 207,248

Bustling Al-Khoms is the closest town to Leptis Magna for which it makes a reasonable base, although the hotels are better in Zliten and Misrata.

Orientation & Information

Most of the action in Al-Khoms takes place along or just off the main street, Sharia al-Khoms, which runs northeast into town from the main highway before turning east

at the main roundabout, marked by a small mosque. From here Sharia al-Khoms continues east through the centre of town to Leptis Magna, around 3km away.

Internet cafés (per hr 3LD; ☎ 10am-midnight Sat-Thu)

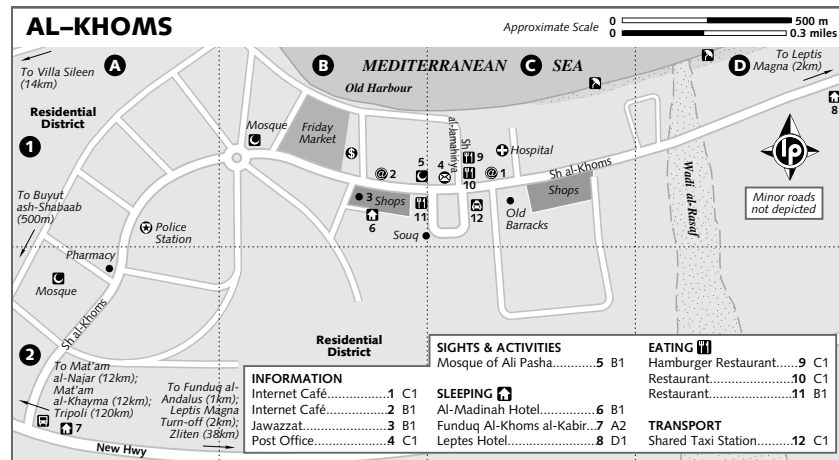
There are a number of internet cafés along Sharia al-Khoms.

Jawazzat (☎ 621375) This office is 250m west of the Mosque of Ali Pasha.

Post office (Sharia al-Jamahiriya) Next to the mosque.

Sights & Activities

There's not much to see in the town itself, although the **Mosque of Ali Pasha** in the centre of town is attractive, with a large conical dome in distinctive cream tones and a fine minaret adorned with vertical and horizontal lines.



There are also some good beaches in the area so it's a great place to relax for a few days.

Sleeping & Eating

Buyut ash-Shabaab (Youth Hostel; ☎ 621880; dm 5LD) In a quiet area 2km west of the town centre, this is a basic but friendly hostel that fills up fast.

Al-Madinah Hotel (☎ 620799; al_madinahhotel@yahoo.com; s/d 15/20LD; ☎) The rooms here may be simple but they're spotless and come with TV, phone and decent bathrooms; don't expect towels in all rooms. For this price, you won't find better in Libya. Dodgy pillows are the only disappointment. It's behind the *jawazzat*.

Leptes Hotel (☎ 621252; lepdahotel@yahoo.com; Sharia al-Khoms; s/d from 15/25LD; ☎) Almost as good as the Al-Madinah Hotel, the Leptes is the closest hotel to Leptis Magna. The rooms (with balcony) have character, although stay here too long and you'll find them a bit dark and overdone. The bathrooms are excellent and the staff win many a vote of thanks from readers, not least the room cleaners who'll even hang your clothes in the wardrobe. Breakfasts can be something of a disappointment, as is the absence of an elevator if you're staying on the 3rd floor.

Funduq al-Khoms al-Kabir (☎ 623333; main highway; tw/st 20/40LD; ☎) Once Al-Khoms' finest hotel, this place near the junction of Sharia al-Khoms and the main highway is run-down, although it has been undergoing

snail's pace renovations the last time we visited. The renovations clearly started with the suite, which is excellent value. The other rooms are soulless; the rooms at the back are quieter. There's a depressing restaurant, a light and airy coffeehouse, a billiard table and a teahouse next door, which goes a small way towards compensating for the distance from the centre of town.

Funduq al-Andalus (☎ 626667, fax 626199; main highway; s with shared bathroom 20LD, tw/d with bath 30/40LD; ☎) Our love affair with this place has waned over the years. Perhaps that's because on our first visit in 2001 reasonable hotels stood out. That's no longer the case, although the rooms here are still clean and spacious if a bit drab; those at the back of the building are quieter. There's also a **restaurant** (meals 15LD).

In Al-Khoms itself, there are cheap restaurants selling hamburgers, sandwiches and pizzas along Sharia al-Khoms and another small hamburger restaurant along Sharia al-Jamahiriya.

Tell Libyans that you're passing through Al-Khoms and many will ask with envy whether you'll be eating at either **Mat'am al-Najar** (☎ 0913205398) or **Mat'am al-Khayma** (☎ 0913205169), 12km west of Al-Khoms on the road to Tripoli. That's because they're famous throughout the country for their *bourdim* (meat slow-cooked in a sand pit). Most meals go for around 8LD.

The best restaurant in the area is Mat'am Addiyafa (p118) in the grounds of Leptis.

Getting There & Away

Al-Khoms is 120km east of Tripoli along the busy coastal highway and is well-served by regular shared taxis to/from Tripoli, Zliten and Misrata. Shared taxis and micros shuttle between the town (Sharia al-Khoms) and Leptis Magna at reasonably regular intervals. Alternatively, it's a 3km walk from the centre of town to Leptis and some readers have also reported walking along the beach.

LEPTIS MAGNA

☎ 031

If Leptis Magna was the only place you saw in Libya, you wouldn't leave disappointed. Leptis (originally spelled Lepcis and often known locally in Arabic as LebDAH) was once the largest and greatest Roman city in Africa and it's a title it easily retains today. Because no modern city was later built on the site and because, unlike Sabratha, Leptis was constructed of sturdy limestone that left it more resistant to earthquakes and the ravages of time, the ruins are wonderfully well preserved and it's that rare ancient city where sufficient traces remain to imagine the city in its heyday.

But the charms of Leptis are not restricted to its state of preservation. So large is its scope that it remains a showcase of Roman town planning, with streets following an ordered pattern. Above all, it is a testament to the extravagance of ancient Rome with abundant examples of lavish decoration, grand buildings of monumental stature, indulgent bath complexes and forums for entertainment at the centre of public life. It must have been a great place to live.

After having examined the various districts of the city at close quarters, visit Room 1 of the Leptis Museum (p117) where model-map representations give a strong and evocative sense of how Leptis must once have appeared.

One final thing: if you want to make a day of your visit – Leptis deserves as much time as you can give it – bring along your swimmers and towel as a mid-afternoon dip in the Mediterranean has a certain cachet.

History

The first city on the site of what we now know as Leptis Magna is believed to date from the 7th century BC. It began as

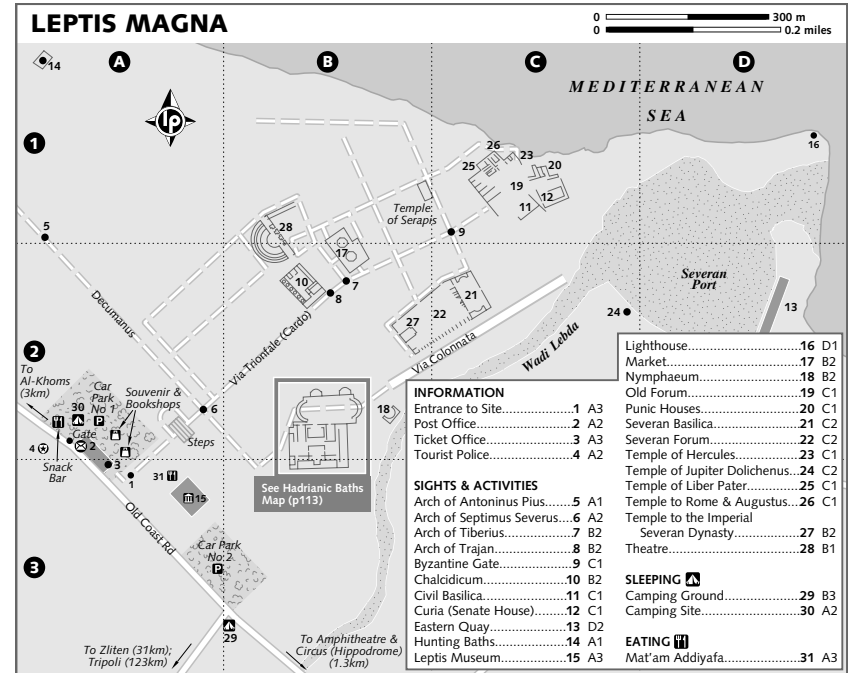
a peripheral trading port populated by Phoenicians fleeing from conflict in Tyre (present-day Lebanon) as well as Punic settlers from Carthage (in Tunisia). Other than the Old Forum (p114), little remains from this city, which lasted for up to 500 years, but it was a modest settlement with none of the ordered urban design of the Roman era.

When Carthage fell in 146 BC, Leptis nominally came under the wing of the Numidian kingdom. The shift towards the Roman sphere of influence began in 111 BC, when the city's inhabitants concluded a treaty of alliance and friendship with Rome and large numbers of Roman settlers began to arrive.

Under Emperor Augustus (r 27 BC–AD 14) Leptis' status as an important Roman city of emerging power began to take shape. The city minted its own coins, the town was laid out in the Roman style and then adorned with monuments of grandeur. It soon became one of the leading ports in Africa, an entrepôt for the trade in exotic animals that were so essential to the entertainments that so defined ancient Rome. It also fell under the spell of a wealthy Roman elite with grand visions and money to burn. One local aristocrat, Annobal Tapapius Rufus, was responsible for the construction of the market (8 BC; p115) and theatre (AD 2; p115), giving Leptis the essential touchstones of a Roman city of significance. The grand, monumental city of Leptis had begun to become a reality.

After backing the wrong side in one of Rome's internecine spats, Leptis momentarily lost its status as a friendly city and ally of Rome and was punished for good measure by an annual tax of between one and three million litres of olive oil. The city's stability was further threatened by the constant threat of invasion by the hostile tribes of the interior. In AD 69 the city was overrun by the Garamantes people of the Sahara (see p30) who had been called in to assist Oea in its dispute with Leptis.

Despite these momentary difficulties, Leptis emerged as a prosperous city that owed its wealth to agriculture (especially olives) and trade from trans-Saharan caravans and seagoing trade, particularly in exporting live animals to Rome. Successive Roman emperors continued to decorate the city with exceptionally rich public buildings. In the time of Hadrian (r AD 117–38)



the city secured a lasting water supply via aqueducts, which in turn enabled the construction of arguably Leptis' greatest indulgence – the Hadrianic Baths (p112). In the 2nd century AD, marble began to adorn the city's buildings, embellishing the already superbly rendered limestone façades, and the city began to grow in size, extending westwards along the coast.

But it was under the reign of Leptis-born Septimius Severus (r AD 193–211) that Leptis took on the stature and grandeur for which it would be forever known. For more information, see Septimius Severus – the Grim African, p112.

Between 294 and 305, the reforms carried out by the Emperor Diocletian saw Leptis become the capital of the new autonomous province of Tripolitania. By then, though, the glory days of Leptis had passed. Earthquakes (especially in AD 365), a catastrophic flood and Rome's general decline took their toll, ushering in two centuries of neglect. By the 6th century AD, the city was in Byzantine hands and the emperor Justinian I built a wall around the city, parts

of which survive to this day. There is some evidence that the city survived the Arab invasion of the 7th century AD and was occupied until the 10th century, after which it slowly disappeared under the sands.

Information

The Leptis Magna site (☎ 624256, 627641; adult/child 3/1LD, camera/video 5/10LD; ☎ 8am–6pm) is entered via car park No 1; the open area of the car park has book stalls, a place selling drinks and snacks and a post and telephone office. It is compulsory to visit Leptis with a guide (50LD).

Sights

ARCH OF SEPTIMIUS SEVERUS

This is one of Leptis' signature monuments and the grandest possible introduction to the architectural excesses of the city. It was built in AD 203 to commemorate the emperor and his family, and to mark his visit to his native city. The core of the structure was built of limestone, unusual for the time, and covered with a marble exterior. What you see today has been faithfully reconstructed

SEPTIMIUS SEVERUS – THE GRIM AFRICAN

Rarely has the identity of a city been so inextricably linked to one person, but equally rare is the fact that someone from an outpost of the empire could rise to occupy its highest office.

Lucius Septimius Severus was born in Leptis Magna in AD 145 and spent his formative years in a city that was already one of Rome's great centres. He quickly progressed through military ranks and was declared the governor of a far-off province. After the assassinations of the Roman emperors Commodus (at the end of AD 192) and Pentinax (three months later in AD 193), Septimius Severus was proclaimed emperor by his troops. Emboldened by the fierce devotion of his army, he marched on Rome where he swept all before him to assume full imperial powers in AD 193.

With its favourite son installed as emperor, Leptis came to rival Rome as the most important city in the empire. A military man first and foremost, Septimius Severus spent the early years of his reign waging a ruthless campaign to extend the boundaries of Rome's empire. By this stage known as 'the grim African', the feared emperor won a further victory over the Parthians in AD 202–3, temporarily dispelled all challenges to his power, and ushered in an era of relative peace.

Leptis celebrated both peace and its growing ascendancy with a Severan-inspired building boom that sealed the city's reputation as one of the grandest cities of the ancient world. The market (p115) was rebuilt, the Great Colonnaded St (opposite) took on its current form, while the Nymphaeum (opposite), Severan Forum (opposite), Severan Basilica (p114) and port (p115) were also constructed during this period. His fellow citizens did their part by hastily building their own monument to their emperor on the occasion of his visit to the city – the exquisite triumphal Arch of Septimius Severus (p111) to honour a visit by the emperor.

by archaeologists to stunning effect. It remains a work in progress. The friezes attached to the arch are, in fact, replicas with the originals residing in Gallery 11 (p79) of the Jamahiriya Museum in Tripoli. Other original elements of the arch are to be found in Room 4 of the Leptis Museum (p117).

The arch consists of four imposing pillars supporting a domed roof. Each of the four vertical panels on the pillars' exterior was flanked by two Corinthian columns, in between which were carved adornments in relief depicting the great virtues and successes of the Severan era. At the intersection of the dome and pillars are eagles with their wings spread – one of the key symbols of imperial Rome. Above the columns are two panels of fine detail showing triumphal processions, sacrificial scenes and Septimius Severus holding the hand of his son Caracalla. The interior of the pillars show historical scenes of military campaigns, religious ceremonies and the emperor's family.

HADRIANIC BATHS

The arrival of water and marble in Leptis Magna early in the 2nd century AD prompted the Emperor Hadrian to commission the superb baths (Map p113) bearing

his name. The baths were opened in AD 137 (some archaeologists put the date at around AD 126–27) and they quickly became one of the social hubs of the city. Attention to detail was a feature of the baths and in keeping with well-established Roman tradition, the baths lay along a north-south axis and the symmetry of the buildings was a key requirement.

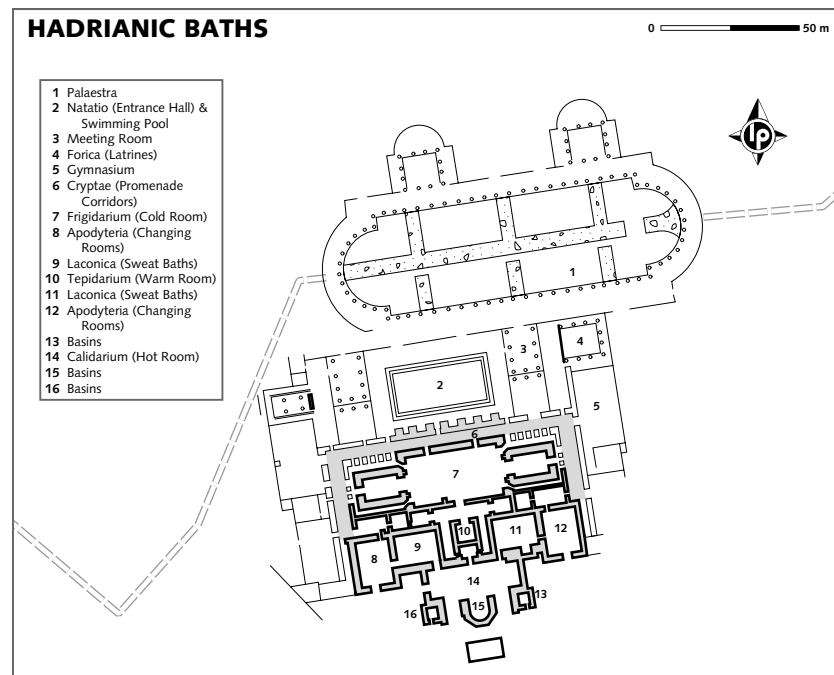
Entrance to the baths is from the *palaestra* (sports ground). The entrance hall (*nataatio*) contains an open-air swimming pool that was surrounded by columns on three sides and paved with marble and mosaics.

Off the *nataatio* was the grandest room of the baths complex and one of the most splendid in Leptis – the *frigidarium* (cold room). A total of eight massive cipolin columns nearly 9m high supported the vaulted roof and the chamber measured an impressive 30m by 15m. The floor was paved with marble and the roof adorned with brilliant blue-and-turquoise mosaics. There were pools at either end and the niches around the walls once held over 40 statues, some of which are in the museums in Leptis (p117) and Tripoli (p76).

The *tepidarium* lies immediately south of the *frigidarium*. It originally consisted

HADRIANIC BATHS

- 1 Palaestra
- 2 Nataatio (Entrance Hall) & Swimming Pool
- 3 Meeting Room
- 4 Forica (Latrines)
- 5 Gymnasium
- 6 Cryptae (Promenade Corridors)
- 7 Frigidarium (Cold Room)
- 8 Apodyteria (Changing Rooms)
- 9 Laconica (Sweat Baths)
- 10 Tepidarium (Warm Room)
- 11 Laconica (Sweat Baths)
- 12 Apodyteria (Changing Rooms)
- 13 Basins
- 14 Calidarium (Hot Room)
- 15 Basins
- 16 Basins



of one central pool, lined on two sides by columns; two other pools were later added. The rooms of the *calidarium* (hot room) surround the *tepidarium*. They faced south, as the theory of bath design at the time demanded, and may have had large glass windows on the southern side. The room had a barrel-vaulted roof of wonderful domes with five of the *laconica* (sweat baths) added during the time of Commodus. Outside the southern walls were furnaces used for heating the water. On the eastern and western sides of the buildings were *cryptae* (promenade corridors); many of the smaller rooms you'll see were the *apodyteria* (changing rooms). The best preserved of the *forica* (latrines) are on the northeastern side of the complex – the marble seats must have been pretty cold in winter.

NYMPHAEUM

East of the *palaestra* and Hadrianic Baths is an open square overlooked by the Nymphaeum, or Temple of Nymphs. Although half-collapsed and requiring considerable imagination, its superb façade of red-granite

and cipolin columns was once reminiscent of the façade of Roman theatres and its niches were once filled with marble statues. The monumental fountain was added during the reign of Septimius Severus.

GREAT COLONNADED STREET

The square in front of the Nymphaeum represented the start of a monumental road (Via Colonnata) leading down to the port. Lined with porticoes and shops, this thoroughfare was more than 20m wide (plus an extra 20m if you include the porticoes, which were reserved for pedestrians) and around 400m long. Connecting the baths and new Severan Forum with the waterfront, it became one of the most important roads in Leptis during the Severan era.

SEVERAN FORUM

Septimius Severus' audacious transformation of Leptis involved reconfiguring the heart of the city – moving it away from the old forum to the new one that bore his name. The open-air Severan Forum measured 100m by 60m and its floor was

IMPERIAL PLUNDER

One of the reasons why Leptis is such a joy to visit is the faithful restoration work of devoted archaeologists, particularly those from Italy and Libya. Sadly, it was not always the case. From AD 1686 to 1708, the French consul to Tripoli, Claude Le Maire, used his post to plunder the wealth of ancient Leptis on behalf of his country. He excavated and exported to France an astonishing quantity of marble monuments, especially columns. With complete disregard for local heritage, many columns were laid out along the shore, only to be abandoned as too heavy. Those hundreds of items that made it to France were often dismantled and used in building the monuments of imperial France, most notably the chateau of Versailles and the church of St Germain des-Prés. The hardest-hit buildings of Leptis were the Severan Forum, the Great Colonnaded St and the Hadrianic Baths.

covered with marble. Ancient remnants of former glories are still strewn around the courtyard and it's easy to picture the forum in its heyday.

In the great tradition of Roman city squares, Septimius Severus' forum was once surrounded by colonnaded porticoes. The columns of cipolin marble rose to arches. On the façades between the arches were Gorgon heads, over 70 of which have been found. Most were symbolic representations of the Roman goddess Victory and included some superb Medusa images, as well as a few sea nymphs; look particularly for the heart-shaped eyes, necklaces of serpents and eyebrows of fish fins. Unusually, the arches were of limestone while the heads were carved from marble. In front of the remaining carved heads are vertical panels with dedicatory inscriptions that served as plinths for statues.

Along the shorter, southwestern side of the forum was a temple to the imperial Severan dynasty. Roman emperors were deified and their subjects, while believing in their divine status, also undoubtedly saw great political benefits in treating their leaders as gods. Only the staircase, platform and underground storage room remain. Some of the red-granite columns around the forum once belonged to the temple.

SEVERAN BASILICA

The Severan Basilica, 92m long and 40m wide, ran along the northeastern side of the Severan Forum. The basilica, originally a judicial basilica rather than a church, contained two apses at either end, a nave, aisles divided by red-granite columns and possibly a wooden roof. It was started by

Septimius Severus and completed by his son Caracalla in AD 216 (read the dedicatory inscription on one of the panels of the nave). The relative austerity of the main hall stands in marked contrast to the extravagantly sculpted pillars at either end, many of which honour Liber Pater (Dionysius) and Hercules. In the 6th century AD, Justinian converted the basilica into a Christian church, with the altar in the southeastern apse. From the top of the stairs off the northwestern corner are good views of the remainder of the ancient city, although it's not always open.

BYZANTINE GATE

Northwest of the basilica, a track leads to Via Trionfale (the Cardo) and the Byzantine Gate. Note the phallic reliefs to the right of the gate – one of many at junctions around the city – which suggest the existence of prostitutes in the ancient city. Also watch out for what look like bullet holes but which in fact were where supports affixing marble to the streets' walls were hammered into the walls – Leptis Magna's streets may not have been paved with gold, but they were lined with marble.

OLD FORUM

The old forum of Leptis Magna was the centre of the first Punic settlement on the site (from the 7th century BC) and the early Roman era. The barely excavated remains of Punic houses are off to the northeast. This square was allowed to fall into neglect after the shift of the city centre to the south, so little remains. Nonetheless, as the monumental heart of the building projects by the Emperor Augustus, it remains an important signpost to life in the ancient

city. Paved in AD 2, it was surrounded by colonnaded porticoes on three sides.

On the left, as you enter the forum if coming from the Byzantine Gate, were three temples. The Temple of Liber Pater dates from the 2nd century AD, but the high podium is all that remains. The Temple to Rome & Augustus (AD 14–19) was built of limestone and may also have been used as a platform for speakers addressing crowds in the square. Next to nothing remains of the Temple of Hercules. On the right as you enter the square, the grey-granite columns mark the site of the Civil Basilica, which was built in the 1st century AD and then rebuilt in the 4th century. It was later converted into a Byzantine church of which the apse, aisles, narthex and seriously eroded columns are discernible. The Curia (Senate House; 2nd century AD) was nearby. In the centre of the forum is a small baptistry in the shape of a cross, as well as a particularly unreligious exedra that local guides like to call the casino.

PORT

The port was another key element of Septimius Severus' vision. The **lighthouse**, of which only the foundation remains, was once more than 35m high. Some historians believe that it was not that different from the more famous Pharos of Alexandria. The best-preserved sections of the port are the **eastern quay** with warehouses, the ruins of a watchtower and some of the loading docks. Look also for the imposing staircase of the **Temple of Jupiter Dolichenus**. Jupiter Dolichenus was a little-known Syrian deity at the time of Septimius Severus. It is believed that the appearance of a temple in his name at Leptis Magna was attributable to the fact that Septimius' wife was Syrian.

Don't be fooled by the lack of water. The reason the buildings of the eastern quay are still relatively intact is that the port was hardly used. Soon after its construction, the harbour silted up and is now covered by vegetation.

MARKET

As you're returning from the port, detour northwest past the Severan Basilica to the market, one of the most unusual and attractive of the Leptis monuments. In its two reconstructed octagonal halls (approx-

mately 20m in diameter) stalls were set up to sell the bounty of Leptis farmers and merchants. The northern hall is believed to have been the section for fabrics; next to it is a copy of a stone measuring tablet from the 3rd century AD. The top length equates to a Roman (or Punic) arm (51.5cm), the middle was a Roman (or Alexandrine) foot (29.5cm), while the bottom length was known as the Greek (or Ptolemaic) arm (52.5cm). The other hall was reserved for trading in fruit and vegetables. There were more stalls in the colonnaded portico that surrounded the perimeter.

The market was built in 9–8 BC and rebuilt during the reign of Septimius Severus; some of the columns with marble capitals date from this latter period. Of the richly decorated façades, the best that remains is of two ships (in celebration of the seafaring merchants of Leptis). Look also for the stone benches with deep lines gouged by ropes used in moving large amounts of produce.

MONUMENTAL ARCHES

Just outside the southern corner of the market, on Via Trionfale, is the **Arch of Tiberius** (1st century AD). A short distance southwest is the **Arch of Trajan** (AD 109–10), possibly commemorating the accession of Leptis to the status of a colony within the Roman Empire. Both arches are of limestone.

CHALCIDICUM

This monumental porch is in the block immediately west of the Arch of Trajan. Built in the early part of the 1st century AD under Augustus, its colonnaded portico was reached via steps from Via Trionfale. It contained a small temple, honouring Augustus and Venus, of which statue bases remain. There are also some cipolin columns and Corinthian capitals from the 2nd century AD. Look for the elephant base in the eastern corner (fronting onto the arch).

THEATRE

Leptis' theatre is one of the oldest stone theatres anywhere in the Roman world and is the second-largest surviving theatre in Africa (after Sabratha). It was begun in AD 1–2, although many adornments were later added, and was built on the site of a 3rd- to 5th-centuries BC Punic necropolis. The

READER'S TIP

A rather trivial thing concerning Leptis Magna, which, however, made my visit to the site even more exciting and memorable. Our Polish guide recommended to us to do one simple thing when visiting the Theatre in Leptis Magna – you should climb to the top of the theatre (upper stalls) without looking back as you go up. Then when you've reached the highest part, you should turn back and admire the view of the Theatre and the panorama of the city against the background of the turquoise waters of the Mediterranean – an unforgettable experience.

Malgorzata Januszko, Poland

most striking feature of the theatre is the stage with its façade of three semicircular recesses surrounded by three-tiered fluted columns dating from the era of Antoninus Pius (r AD 138–61). The stage was awash with hundreds of statues and sculptures that included portraits of emperors, gods and wealthy private citizens. Two remain – Liber Pater (decorated with grapes and leaves) and Hercules (his head is covered with a lion skin).

The VIP seats just above the orchestra were separated from the paying customers by a solid stone bannister that was added in AD 90, while the lower seats were actually carved out of the existing rock at the time of construction. Atop the upper stalls of the *cavea* (seating area) were some small temples and a colonnade of cypolin columns.

HUNTING BATHS

If you head northwest from the Arch of Septimius Severus, you pass under the Oea Gate, or **Arch of Antoninus Pius** (2nd century AD). You eventually come to the superb **Hunting Baths**, recognisable by their consecutive, barrel-domed roofs in light sandstone. These baths never rivalled the Hadrianic Baths, but the frescoes and mosaics throughout the building are superb. The *frigidarium* contains the fresco that gave the baths their name – showing hunters and

animals in the Leptis amphitheatre. There are also some fine frescoes in the adjoining vaults. On the walls of the bath is an exceptional Nilotic fresco; watch out for the good marble panelling. The baths, constructed in the 2nd century AD, were used for almost three centuries.

Before you make the reasonably long trek out here, check that the baths are open as they were temporarily closed when we last visited.

AMPHITHEATRE

Around 3km east of the centre of Leptis Magna (you'll need to get here by car), the evocative **amphitheatre** (adult/child 3/1LD, camera/video 5/10LD; ☎ 8am–6pm) once held 16,000 people and was hollowed out of a hill in the 1st century AD. The upper stalls may have once been circled by a colonnaded portico. Note that as the amphitheatre is separated from the main site, you'll have to pay an additional entry (fine) and camera (excessive) charge. There's a model replica of the amphitheatre in Room 10 of the Leptis Museum (opposite).

CIRCUS

The circus (or hippodrome) is reached via a side passage on the western side of the amphitheatre. Dating from AD 162 during the reign of Marcus Aurelius Antoninus, it was home to chariot races attended by up to 25,000 people. The long side of the track ran for 450m while the short sides were only 100m in length. As such, it was one of the largest known circuses outside Rome. Acrobatic performances were sometimes used in the central area to keep the crowd

THEY CALLED IT SPORT

The entertainment on offer in Roman amphitheatres was not for the faint-hearted. A typical programme consisted of people hunting rabbits and small rodents in the arena in the morning, followed by shackled criminals being left to the mercies of the lions. At least the Christians, who followed the criminals, were allowed into the arena free of shackles, although few escaped. All of this operated as the pre-match entertainment for the main event – the epic contests of the gladiators.

entertained in between races. A normal race programme included numerous races of seven laps, each run in an anticlockwise direction. These days, the circus consists of not much more than low-lying foundations, but for a fine mosaic representation of a day at the circus, make sure you visit Villa Sileen (p107), west of Al-Khoms.

LEPTIS MUSEUM

The **Leptis Museum** (adult/child 3/1LD, camera/video 5/10LD; ☎ 8am–6pm Tue–Sun) is like a smaller version of the outstanding Jamahiriya Museum (p76) – expansive in scope, beautifully laid out and very well organised with informative posters in each room detailing the history of the relevant period – although here many of the individual exhibits are labelled in both English and Arabic. Allow a minimum of two hours to see the museum properly.

The rooms on the ground floor run in an anticlockwise direction.

Room 1 deals with Libya's prehistory, and has examples of petrified trees from the Libyan desert, an evocative model-map reconstruction of Leptis and stone carvings from the Jebel Acacus. **Room 2** is devoted to the Punic/Phoenician era and includes pottery pieces from the 5th and 6th centuries BC that were found in the Punic necropolis under the theatre. **Room 3** is also dominated by Punic pottery. The representation of the goddess Tarnit is of special interest, as are the descriptions of Punic town planning and a dedicatory slab from the market place.

Room 4 is the chamber of Roman triumphal arches, including an imposing two-level relief from inside the Arch of Septimius Severus depicting Septimius and his wife; between them is the head of Hercules draped with a lion's head. **Room 5** has another statue of Hercules draped as a lion, some Roman pillars, dedicatory inscription tablets and, on the northern wall, the symbol of Aesculapius, the god of healing, whose symbol is used by modern medical practitioners. Many of these items were found in the Temple of Jupiter Dolichenus in the port (see (p115)). **Room 6** is given over to busts, including a particularly fine one of Neptune.

Room 7 is one of the museum's most impressive rooms, with superbly sculpted marble statues dating from the Severan age. Clockwise from the left, the statues repre-

sent an athlete, an elegant marble woman of Leptis Magna, a young Marcus Aurelius, Serapis in the form of Aesculapius, a partial black-stone Serapis, Isis and a Leptis woman from the first half of the 3rd century AD. Note especially the exceptional skill used in sculpting the folds in clothes. The glass cabinet on the right as you enter contains the many faces of the goddess Isis.

Room 8 contains excavations from the Hadrianic Baths (p112), including the huge hand of Septimius Severus and an incredibly skilful marble representation of a seated (and now headless) Mars. There is also a modern painting of the *frigidarium*.

Room 9 is dedicated to the Nymphaeum (p113) and port, and includes a possible (unlabelled) statue of Isis (note the tail of the cornucopia).

Room 10 is another fine room, this time with the theatre (p115) as its theme. Items to look out for include representations of Mercury and Venus and a huge dedicatory inscription tablet in Roman and Punic – both languages were used until the 2nd century AD. Note also the statue of a woman with a portly child holding poppies, thought to be a representation of the family of the Roman emperor Hadrian. There is also a model reconstruction of the amphitheatre (opposite).

Room 11 showcases the Severan Forum (p113) and Old Forum (p114) with Medusa and Gorgon heads high on the wall, two column bases from the temple to the Severan dynasty in the Severan Forum. **Room 12** is a ghostly room of headless and handless statues (body parts were often carved separately to increase the statues' resale value). There are also Latin inscriptions commemorating the reconstruction of the market porticoes and five portrait busts found in the market (p115). **Room 13** also has an interesting collection of busts representing the diverse faces of Leptis, a pompous statue of a magistrate and an attractive marble panel inscription to a 2nd-century governor of Africa.

On the 1st floor, where the rooms are arranged in a clockwise pattern, **Room 14** showcases the ancient trade activity of Leptis and includes the original measuring tablet used in the market. **Room 15** is devoted to the coins of the Misrata Treasure (see p119). **Room 16** fronts onto the open staircase and contains items of everyday Roman

life. **Room 17** houses funerary objects, a small statue of a sleeping, winged Eros and ornate urns (alabaster for the wealthy) used to store ashes after cremation. Note also the poignant pottery coffin of a child in one of the glass cases. **Room 18** has more funerary urns and small coffins, as well as a two-faced Janus (Roman god of doorways, passages and bridges) relief and big stone reliefs from the fortified farms of Ghirza (p121). **Room 19** has similar reliefs, this time from Qasr Gilda.

Room 20 marks the transition to the Byzantine period with a dusty but attractive mosaic from a church 60km south of Leptis, as well as tablet reliefs from the four churches that were in Leptis during the Christian era. **Room 21** covers the Islamic period and has beautiful pottery bowls and unimaginative models of a mosque, madrasa (school), mihrab (niche in a mosque) and *minbar* (pulpit in a mosque). **Room 22** commemorates Libyan resistance to Italian rule with weapons and a woodcarving of the battle of Al-Mergeb. **Room 23**, near the staircase, is given over to a reconstruction of a traditional Bedouin tent (note the separation of men and women), with dolls showing traditional outfits. **Room 24** has gifts given to Colonel Muammar Qaddafi. Highlights of this quirky collection include a map of an undivided Palestine, a huge book made of palm trunk lauding the colonel, and a document of homage written in blood by an Iraqi traveller. **Room 25** has some anticlimactic photos of the Great Man-Made River (Al-Nahr Sinai; p122). The stairs lead back down to the exit, past the towering painting of Colonel Qaddafi being adored by the masses in the central skylight area.

Sleeping & Eating

Most people choose Al-Khoms (p108) or Zliten (right) as a base for exploring Leptis. It's also possible to visit as a day trip from Tripoli or, if you're heading east, to visit Leptis and then continue on to Misrata for the night or, at a stretch, Sirt.

Inside Leptis itself, it's possible to **camp** (5LD) in car park No 1 under the pine and eucalyptus trees; it's a quiet spot at night and guarded by police from the station opposite. There's another small camping ground opposite car park No 2.

Inside Leptis, between the ticket office and museum, is **Mat'am Addiyafa** (☎ 621210; meals 15LD; ☺ lunch), which has an agreeable atmosphere and a good set lunch.

Getting There & Away

Leptis Magna is 3km east of Al-Khoms and 123km east of Tripoli. If you're coming from Tripoli and plan to bypass Al-Khoms, the turn-off to Leptis Magna is 3.5km east of the main turn-off into Al-Khoms and is marked by a yellow sign with a small painting of the ruins. Zliten is 31km east of Leptis, Misrata 91km. Shared taxis run regularly along the coastal road to Al-Khoms from both directions; there are reasonably frequent shared taxis to Leptis from Al-Khoms.

ZLITEN

☎ 0571 / pop 101,900

The coastal oasis of Zliten sprawls along the coast 34km east of Al-Khoms. It's a largely unattractive town although it is redeemed by three things: the proliferation of palm trees along the main highway, its stunning mosque and mausoleum and a hotel that makes a reasonable base for Leptis Magna (p110). Before the revolution it was renowned for its wine-making, but it now has a large fishing port.

In the streets of the old town, most of the houses are derelict and earmarked for destruction but the occasional door has traces of the town's former elegance. Villa Dar Bu Kammar, a ruined villa in the area, has fallen into disrepair, but its mosaics will one day be on show, probably in the Leptis Museum (p117).

Sights

MAUSOLEUM & MOSQUE OF SIDI ABDUSALAM

This is one of the finest modern Islamic buildings in Libya and was reportedly decorated by the same artisans who worked on the Hassan II Mosque in Casablanca. Its distinctive green dome is surrounded by a multitude of minarets and smaller domes. The external panels of the façade contain some superb ceramics with floral and arabesque motifs. The tiled pillars are most attractive, particularly the unusual small, tiled pillars around the minaret's balconies. There is some fine Arabic calligraphy in

sandstone on top of the outer pillars of the building saying 'Al-Mulk-illah' (Everything to God).

Non-Muslims are not permitted inside the mausoleum's inner sanctum but the gilded tomb is clearly visible from the door, as are the marvellous stucco ceilings. Please be especially discreet during prayer time. The tomb belongs to the pious Sidi Abdusalam, who died in Zliten in the 16th century AD. There is also a madrasa on the site.

Sleeping & Eating

Funduq Zliten (☎ 620121; zlitenhotel@ltnet.net; Sharia al-Jamahiriya; s/d/ste 35/45/75LD) When we first visited this place in 2001 in the days when Libyan government hotels were pretty grim, we thought Funduq Zliten was like paradise. The rooms are still quite good, but they're starting to show their age, many of the bathrooms could be cleaner and most of the staff learned their service skills at the government school of disinterest. The disconcerting smell of Dettol in the corridors was also not a highlight of our visit. The restaurant (meals 15LD) is fine but nothing special.

There is a handful of cheap eateries close to the post office and between the highway and main roundabout.

Getting There & Away

Shared taxis connect Zliten with Misrata, Al-Khoms and Tripoli.

AROUND ZLITEN

The area around Zliten is renowned for its **marabout tombs** (*turba*; also known as *zawiyas*), which attract a steady stream of pilgrims. A visit to the holy tombs is said to bestow a greater fertility upon pilgrims; many women come here to ask for help in having a child. Local taxi drivers know where to find the tombs. There's also a good **beach** at Souq al-Khamis.

MISRATA

☎ 051 / pop 406,800

Misrata is Libya's third-largest city and has a distinctive feel with its well-ordered and relatively clean streets and, remarkably for Libya, 'no smoking' signs in many buildings. There's little to see in town, but as the last major town before the long trek east to Benghazi, it makes a decent overnight

stop. Some people also use it as a base for visiting Leptis Magna (p110), although it's 100km away.

History

In ancient times, Misrata was an important port for the caravan trade and traders from Misrata were famed throughout the Sahara. Its carpet industry is also one of the longest standing in Libya. Two Arab families, the Muntasir and the Adgham, dominated the city's life and led the local tribes in their disputes with the Turkish overlords during Ottoman times when Misrata was an important administrative centre and was considered the second city in Turkish Tripolitania. Under the Italians it was again a centre for settlement and administration – a time when the relatively structured layout of the streets was completed.

Orientation & Information

The centre of town and the main square (Maidan an-Nasser) are around the intersection of Sharia Abdul Rahman Azem (which runs all the way from the highway to the centre of town, north-south all the way) and Sharia Ramadan Asswayhli (which runs east-west through town).

The **main post office** (Sharia Ramadan Asswayhli) is 500m north of Maidan an-Nasser, while there are internet cafés dotted around the centre of town; one of the better ones is in the street behind Funduq al-Diyafa.

Sights

The town's **souq**, in the lanes off Maidan an-Nasser, has a thrice-weekly market for local clothing and carpets. The only other sight of note is the **Quz al-Teek** (Tower of

THE MISRATA TREASURE

In 1981 more than 100,000 coins of unknown origin were discovered in an underground chamber not far from Misrata by archaeologists doing routine excavations. The coins, dating from AD 294–333, are thought to have been the property of a garrison rather than a private individual, so immense was the haul. Some of the coins are in the Misrata museum, although the largest collection is on display in Room 15 of Leptis Museum (p117).

Dunes), west of the town centre. This sky-piercing, space-age tower is a monument to the Libyan resistance. Beneath the tower is a small **museum** (adult/child 3/1LD; ☎ 9am-1pm & 3-6pm Tue-Sun) containing some pottery artefacts of minor interest, photos of prehistoric Saharan rock art and parts of the Misrata Treasure (p119).

Sleeping

Buyut ash-Shabaab (Youth Hostel; ☎ 624880; dm 5LD) Not up to the standard of other youth hostels in Libya, this place seems to be rarely cleaned.

Funduq as-Siyahe (☎ 619777; Sharia Ramadan Asswayhli; s with shower 20LD, d with shower & toilet 25LD) This grand old hotel is a friendly if run-down place very close to Maidan an-Nasser. The clean rooms have high ceilings, a touch of old-world charm and many overlook a courtyard.

Funduq al-Diyafa (☎ 629620; Sharia Ramadan Asswayhli; s/d with shared bathroom 15/20LD, s/d/tr with private bathroom 20/30/45LD) Funduq al-Diyafa is in a similarly good location as Funduq as-Siyahe, a couple of hundred metres south of the main square but set back behind a shady open square. The rooms are simple but well-kept and better than the exterior or the lobby suggests. It also wins the prize for the cleanest bathrooms (shared and private) in Misrata. It also has a coffeehouse and a restaurant (meals from 10LD) that serves reasonable Turkish food.

Funduq al-Kabir (Grand Hotel; ☎ 620178; grand hotel@maktoob.com; Sharia Sana Mahidly; s/d/ste from 30/35/45LD, studios/villas 55/85LD; 🍷) This professionally run hotel is excellent value and has a much more intimate feel to other hotels in town. It's central, but on a quiet street, and the rooms are spacious and comfortable. It also has a good restaurant (meals 15LD).

Funduq Quz at-Teek (☎ 613333; fax 610500; Sharia Dar al-Ry; s/tw/ste 35/42/90, s/d studio 38/45LD, villas with breakfast 50LD; 🍷) If you've slept in Tobruk at the Funduq al-Masira (p154), you'll do a double-take here because the resemblance is uncanny: from the tapestries in the lobby to the signs of decay in the bathroom. Once Misrata's best hotel, the rooms are still worth the asking price although it's in increasing need of an overhaul. The hotel is next to the Quz al-Teek tower, about 2km west of the city centre.

Eating & Drinking

There are a couple of good patisseries on Sharia Ramadan Asswayhli, about 400m south of Maidan an-Nasser; look for the sign brandishing a chef. Almost next door to the patisseries is a simple, unnamed restaurant doing hearty servings of half a barbecued chicken (*djeaj mahama*) with soup and beans (8LD, including drinks).

Misrata's contribution to café culture comes in the form of a swish, semicircular and glass-walled coffeehouse overlooking the main intersection on the western side. About 100m to the west, just off Sharia Abdul Rahman Azem, is a small pizza restaurant that serves, not surprisingly, pizzas (4LD to 8LD) and hamburgers (from 1LD).

Getting There & Away

There are regular shared taxis and micros from Misrata to Tripoli, Zliten and Sirt. You might also find an early-morning shared taxi or bus heading for Benghazi. The taxi station area is adjacent to the main square.

AROUND MISRATA

About 17km west of Misrata (31km east of Zliten) are some of the largest **coastal sand dunes** in the world. If you've spent any time in the sand seas of southern Libya, you may wonder what all the fuss is about. Nonetheless if these are the only dunes you're likely to see in Libya, they're worth a small detour. They're 5km north of the highway via a good road. If you can't find them, ask for '*tanaret zray*' (the nearby tuna factory), which is the name by which locals know the dunes.

TAUORGA

Tauorga, 53km south of Misrata by road, has the unusual distinction of being the only town on the Libyan coast where most of the inhabitants are as dark skinned as sub-Saharan Africans – some locals claim to be the descendants of freed slaves, while others argue they are related to Libya's original indigenous inhabitants.

Tauorga is renowned for its palm-woven products, including bags, baskets and mats. Many of these items are offered for sale from roadside stalls along the main highway, opposite the turn-off to Tauorga (41km south of Misrata). Here you'll also find the colourful pottery of Gharyan for sale.

After passing the turn-offs to Tauorga, you start crossing the Sahel as-Sirt (Sirt Plain), a flat, scrubby and featureless expanse of nothingness that stretches all the way to Ajdabiya.

GHIRZA

The monuments of remote Ghirza are considered to be some of the most important indigenous contributions to Libyan civilisation. These 3rd-century-AD public buildings include temples and tombs (3rd to 5th centuries AD) as well as a series of **fortified farms**. To get an idea of what to expect, some examples of Ghirza stonework is on display in Galleries 1 and 5 of Tripoli's Jamahiriya Museum (p76) and stone reliefs from the fortified farms in Room 18 of Leptis Museum (p117).

Ghirza is believed to have been a 3rd-century settlement on the southern fringes of Roman Tripolitania. It was built by Romanised Libyans and the architecture was heavily influenced by the Roman style of the day. When Arab travellers passed through the area in the 11th century AD, the temples were still in use.

At the far (southern) end of the site are the three **tombs** that are the highlight of Ghirza's remains. There are distinctive, sandstone pillars encircling these elevated, squat mausoleums, each adorned with relief carvings of scenes from everyday life, including evidence of harvests that are now difficult to imagine in such a barren landscape. The central tomb has some detailed animal and flower motifs around the façade, while the northernmost tomb features particularly fine stonework atop some of the pillars, and Latin inscriptions flanked by two Roman eagles.

Getting There & Away

It's a hard slog to get to Ghirza and there is no public transport to the site; we picked up one local who had been waiting patiently at the checkpoint for hours. The best option is a very long day trip from Misrata or a detour as you head east towards Sirt. It can get fiercely hot here in summer, so bring plenty of water with you.

In case your driver or guide doesn't know the way, take the main highway from Misrata towards Sirt. After 82km, take the turn-off for As-Sadaada to the south. After 18km, you reach another road junction with

a checkpoint. Ghirza is off to the east, 91km away, along a partially asphalted road. The road is shadowed for almost the entire distance by the Great Man-Made River. At a fork in the road about 80km after the checkpoint, turn right (there's a sign to Ghirza in Arabic). The ruins are a further 11.5km and reached through the bleak modern village of Ghirza; take the stony tracks leading out from the eastern end of the village.

SIRT

☎ 054 / pop 133,900

Sirt is a custom-built city waiting impatiently for the day when it can be declared the capital of the United States of Africa. Colonel Qaddafi was born, and spent part of his childhood around Sirt and he has transformed it from a small village into a central pillar of his ambitious scheme for an economic and political community of African states.

Built on the site of the ancient city of Euphranta, Sirt was later an important land communication point with the south and an embarkation point for many caravans. Under the Italians it was an administrative centre.

Sadly, this supposed showpiece of the revolution is a city without soul, a lifeless place of few charms. It's a friendly enough town but the only reason for travellers to spend any time here is to break up the long journey between Benghazi and Tripoli.

Orientation & Information

The town's main thoroughfare, Sharia al-Jamahiriya (also known as Sharia 1st September), sweeps from the southeastern entrance to the town to the western perimeter. About 3km from the highway, at the point where Sharia al-Jamahiriya turns west, are most of the facilities you'll need – the main post office, pharmacy and a good grocery store underneath the town's best restaurant. Also on this bend is a bank, Masraf al-Jamahiriya. Between Sharia al-Jamahiriya and the highway are the headquarters for the General People's Congress (GPC; p40). The modern, sprawling parliamentary complex runs along the western side of Sharia al-Jamahiriya.

Sights

Not a lot really. If you're an aficionado of **revolutionary murals**, the posters of Colonel Qaddafi may qualify as Sirt's only tourist

attraction (there are some particularly fine examples of the genre). Without any apparent attempt at irony, one proudly proclaims in Arabic that 'The best thing about Sirt is that it is in the centre of Libya'. Most of the billboards laud African unity and the Great Man-Made River.

Sleeping & Eating

Sirt arises from its customary slumber whenever parliament sits (usually close to the end of the year) or the city hosts one of its pan-African conferences. Sirt is also home to large celebrations commemorating the 1 September revolution. Finding a bed at these times is near impossible.

Buyut ash-Shabaab (Youth Hostel; ☎ 61825; off Sharia al-Corniche; dm 5LD) The youth hostel is a friendly, down-to-earth place without pretensions to luxury; it's often full if you arrive late in the day. Staff can arrange simple meals from 1LD. It's a small block north of the corniche, opposite a college and next to the Red Crescent building.

Funduq al-Mehari (☎ 60100; fax 61310; Sharia al-Jamahiriya; s/tw/d 35/45/50LD, ste 90-120LD) Funduq al-Mehari is a bit out on a limb, just north of the road almost 6km west of the post office, but the rooms are comfortable, spotless and excellent value and some even have traces of elegance. Some bathrooms are a little run-down, but if the showers are an indication of the achievements of the Great Man-Made River, then it is (literally) a roaring success.

Funduq Qasr Mutamarat (☎ 60165; fax 60959; www.sirtgulfhotel.com; info@sirtgulfhotel.com; north of GPC; s/d/q with private bathroom 48/70/128LD, standard/presidential ste 128/430LD) This is Sirt's showpiece hotel with large, extremely comfortable rooms spread over four buildings. After five years of trying, it has finally allowed us to see one of the six presidential suites – extravagant, mock-Louis XIV furniture, enormous rooms and serious questions about whether African dollars are being well-spent. The hotel is just north of the parliament buildings, about 300m west of Sharia al-Jamahiriya.

Mat'am al-Aseel (☎ mobile 0927011018; Sharia al-Jamahiriya; meals 10-12.50LD; ☎ lunch & dinner) Far and away the best restaurant in Sirt, this Turkish restaurant is all most visitors see as they rush on to Tripoli and Benghazi. Fortunately the food (grilled meats and Turkish bread are a recurring theme) is good and the service likewise.

Getting There & Away

At 592km to Sebha, 561km to Benghazi and 463km to Tripoli, Sirt is a long way to anywhere. The main shared taxi station is just north of the post office.

GREAT MAN-MADE RIVER

(AN-NAHR SINAI) نهر الصناعي العظيم

Although you may see the mounds, pumping stations and construction work of the Great Man-Made River throughout Libya, the reservoir 17km east of Sirt offers an opportunity to take a closer look, if only for the symbolism attached to Colonel Qaddafi's grand vision. The gravel track leading south off the highway leads to the reservoir 2.2km away; you may be escorted to the dam's edge by a friendly, machine-gunning soldier.

The large reservoir is filled with water pumped from wells via underground pipes, some of which are visible beneath the iron grille on the viewing platform. Note the map showing the various stages of the GMR project although it won't necessarily include the latest stages. For more information on what Colonel Qaddafi dubbed the 'Eighth Wonder of the World', see p64.

MEDINAT SULTAN

مدينة سلطان

Medinat Sultan, 50km east of Sirt, was an important Fatimid site but is now dusty and derelict, scarcely managing to relieve the monotony of the long road east to Ajdabiya. The excavations include the rubble of the old Fatimid mosque, a couple of kilometres inside the main gate, but you'd require lots of imagination to make any sense of it. Of greater interest are the two muscular **Philaeni brothers**, cast in bronze and lying in a walled compound just inside the gate. The hollow statues, one facing west towards Tripolitania, the other facing east to Cyrenaica, once formed part of a more-than-5m-tall Italian-built arch (Arco Philaeni) demarcating Tripolitania from Cyrenaica at Ras Lanuf, 200km to the east. The point where the arch once stood was where the Phoenicians and Greeks divided the land between them in a novel way; turn to See How They Run (opposite) for details. When Colonel Qaddafi and his revolutionary government came to power in 1969, they saw the arch as a symbol of the fractured nation they

SEE HOW THEY RUN

In the mid-4th century BC, the Greeks and the Phoenicians decided that it was high time that they divided Libya between them on an official basis. An agreement was reached that Greek runners should set out from Cyrene in eastern Libya and Punic (Phoenician) runners from their capital at Carthage (in modern-day Tunisia). Where they met, the border would be drawn. When the runners met at Ras Lanuf, the Greeks accused the Phoenicians, the Philaeni brothers, of cheating. They were offered the choice of either being buried alive or allowing the unsporting Greeks to progress. They chose martyrdom.

were trying to unite and, in the early 1970s, tore it down.

Across the other side of the dirt track that runs through the site, on an open patch of ground 50m to the north, are some scattered **stone reliefs**. These once adorned the façade of the arch with carved scenes of Italian soldiers. The closest one to the gate shows Mussolini (second from left) being saluted by his soldiers. The dusty and unlabelled museum on the site is not worth any of your time.

The entrance to the site is through a pair of green iron gates on the northern side of the highway. There are no regular opening times although it's usually open from around 9am until just before sunset daily; there's an on-site caretaker, so simply bang on the gate.

MEDINAT SULTAN TO AJDABIYA

The coastline from Sirt to **Ajdabiya** (see p131) runs past a large area of salt basins and the towns along the way are of interest to travellers only as petrol, toilet or food stops. The gulf region, known as Al-Khalij, is nonetheless the heart of Libya's most prolific oil-producing areas and the towns along the dip in the gulf – especially **As-Sidra**, **Ras Lanuf** and **Brega** – are little more than adjuncts to overgrown oil terminals.

Just 19km east of the main turn-off to Ras Lanuf and 197km west of Ajdabiya is the old border between Tripolitania and Cyrenaica. The only evidence of this historically significant spot (for details check out See How They Run, left) is a flattened area of around 5 sq metres on either side of the road. If you look closely, you can just see the foundation outline of the Arco Philaeni.

One town of particularly grim notoriety is **Al-Aghela**, 87.4km east of Ras Lanuf. A concentration camp was based to the south of here during the Italian occupation. Thousands of Bedouin died here with over 10,000 people crowded in at any one time. A famous Libyan poem of lament by the popular poet Rajab Buwaish speaks powerfully for a generation of Libyans: 'I have no illnesses but the illness of the concentration camp of Al-Aghela'; an English translation is available on www.libyana.org.

Note that the town of Al-Aghela is actually part of Cyrenaica, but we have included it here for ease of navigation – the Colonel would be proud of us for disregarding the border between the two ancient provinces.

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