

# Fezzan & the Sahara



The Sahara is nowhere more beautiful (or accessible) than in Libya. It's possible that no other Saharan country has such a stunning variety of desert landscapes.

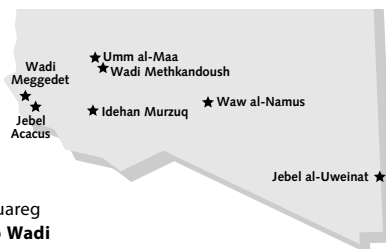
In the far southwest, the **Jebel Acacus** is at once hauntingly beautiful and one of the most important open-air galleries of prehistoric rock art on earth. Nearby, at least in relative desert terms, are the unearthly rock formations of **Wadi Meggedet**. Further east, the sand seas of **Wan Caza**, **Murzuq** and **Ubari** are enchanted showpieces of nature's artistry. Hidden among the dunes of the latter are the **Ubari Lakes**, which carry more than a whiff of fantasy. And then there are the unique, black volcanic sands of **Waw al-Namus** or, as far southeast as you can go in Libya, the gloriously remote wadis of **Jebel al-Uweinat**.

But this is also a land with a fascinating human history. The trade routes of the Libyan Sahara had strong links to the great empires of central and west Africa. The oases of the interior – small explosions of fertility in the midst of great expanses of desert wasteland – spawned towns such as **Ghat**, which endure to this day, holding out as redoubts against the vast Sahara. Improbably it was in the Fezzan, close to the modern settlement of **Germa**, that the great civilisation of the **Garamantians** flourished and, for almost 1400 years, made the desert bloom.

The Sahara is also the land of the **Tuareg**, the former nomads of the central Sahara. This proud and hardy people, once the feared protectors and pillagers of caravans, continue to inhabit the remotest of areas, eking out a harsh existence from animal husbandry, small crops and, increasingly, tourism.

## HIGHLIGHTS

- Watch the sunset from above the south bank of **Umm al-Maa** (p188), one of the most beautiful of the **Ubari Lakes**
- Explore the glorious rocky monoliths and millennia-old rock art of the **Jebel Acacus** (p198)
- Discover the dark heart of the Sahara at unforgettable **Waw al-Namus** (p206)
- Escape the crowds amid the bizarre rock formations of **Wadi Meggedet** (p193)
- Get so far off the beaten track that there is no track at **Jebel al-Uweinat** (p209)
- Find the perfect sand dune and thousands more just like it in **Idehan Murzuq** (p203)
- Contemplate a campfire alongside a silent Tuareg while shooting stars light up the sky close to **Wadi Methkandoush** (p204)



## Maps

Navigating the Sahara requires good maps and an experienced local guide. A satellite-generated Global Positioning System (GPS) can also come in handy, but it's no substitute for good local knowledge – a GPS can point you in the right direction but can't tell what lies in between, and hence the most appropriate route.

Maps of the Sahara are notoriously inexact and, with two exceptions, most are insufficient for navigating. For the **Jebel Acacus**, the outstanding *Jebel Acacus – Tourist Map & Guide* (1:100,000), published by **EWP** ([www.ewpnet.com](http://www.ewpnet.com)), is based on satellite maps, is

exceptionally detailed, locates most rock art sites and has commentary in both English and French. It can be purchased for UK£10 from **West Col Productions** (☎ 01491-681284; Copse House, Goring Heath, Reading RG8 7SA, UK).

The **Jebel Acacus** map is based on the old Russian survey maps (1:200,000) from the 1970s. They may be in Cyrillic but they're still the best maps for Saharan navigation. They can be difficult to track down; try **Stanfords** (☎ 020-7836 1321; [www.stanfords.co.uk](http://www.stanfords.co.uk)).

The other, larger-scale maps that cover the Sahara give a vaguely accurate picture although few tracks or topographical features are shown. The better-ones include

## THE ERA OF EUROPEAN EXPLORATION

Of the most important expeditions to discover the true course of the Niger or Nile Rivers, or to reach fabled Timbuktu, many began in Tripoli and crossed the Libyan Sahara. With much of the funding coming from Britain, the British Consulate in Tripoli (see p86) became the scheming hub from which many of the following explorers radiated.

A theological student from Germany, **Frederick Hornemann** left Cairo in 1798 posing as a Muslim in a caravan of merchants. He passed through **Al-Jaghhub**, **Awjila** and **Tmissah** before reaching **Murzuq** on 17 November 1798, about 10 weeks after leaving Cairo. He became very ill, was forced to stay in **Murzuq** for seven months, before finally joining a caravan to **Katsina** (Nigeria). He wrote a letter to the Africa Association on 6 April 1799 in which he told them not to begin searching for him for three years. He was never heard from again. To get a more detailed picture of his Libyan adventures, read *Journal of Frederick Hornemann's Travels From Cairo to Mourzouk 1797–8*.

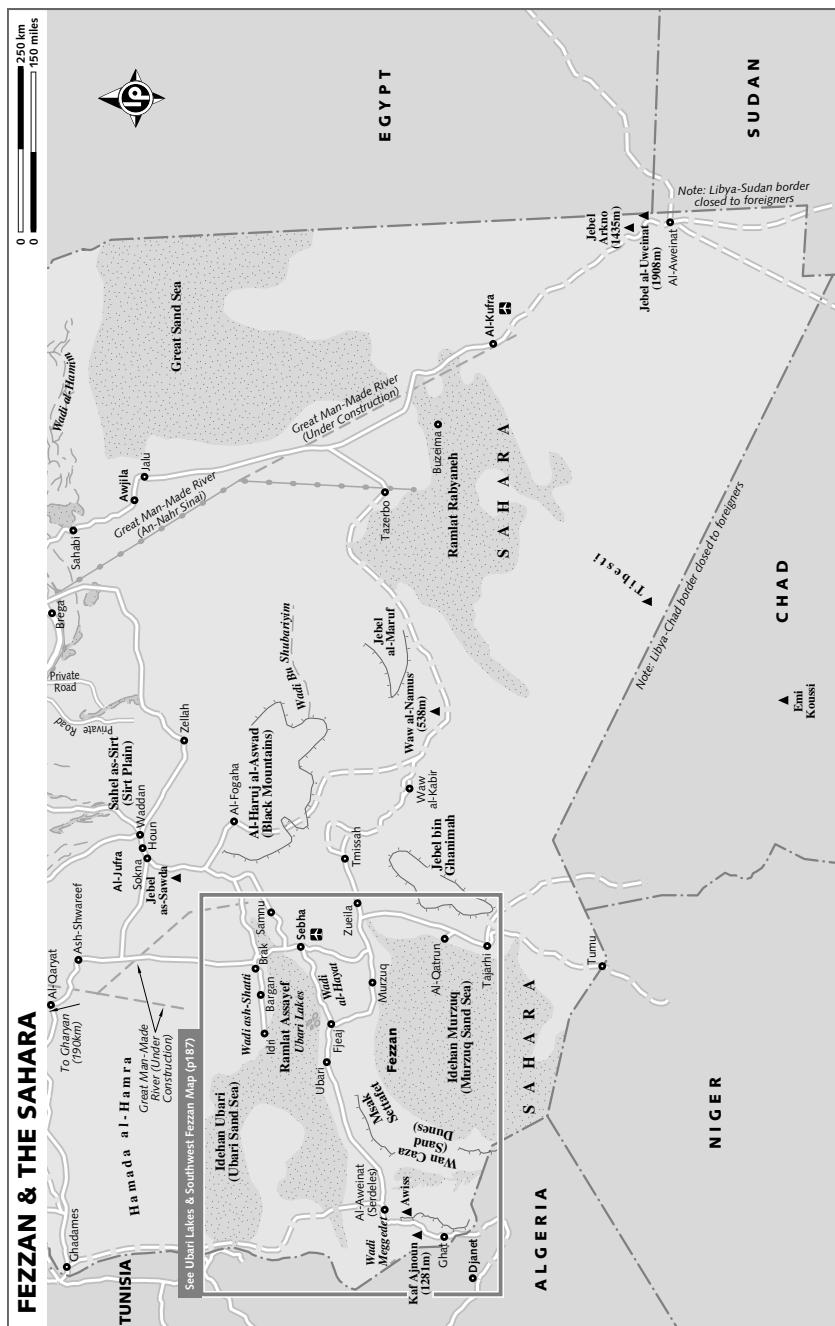
**Hugh Clapperton**, a naval lieutenant from Edinburgh, set out from Tripoli in early 1822. Accompanied by **Walter Oudney** and **Dixon Denham**, his plan was to reach the kingdom of **Bornu** (Lake Chad). Clapperton was laid low by malaria in **Murzuq** but during his recovery made forays to **Germa** and **Ghat**. The party laboured on to Lake Chad and two of them returned to tell the tale of a journey that was 'distressing beyond description to both camels and men'. Oudney died while trying to reach the Niger River. His Journals are published as *Difficult and Dangerous Roads*.

**Major Alexander Gordon Laing** started out from Tripoli in 1825 headed for Timbuktu. His route took him through **Ghadames** and then across the Algerian Sahara. He was the first Western traveller to reach the former city of riches, but was murdered soon after leaving Timbuktu on his return journey. His notes were never found.

Travelling under the banner of the British Bible Society, **James Richardson** left Tripoli in August 1845 and travelled from **Ghadames** due south to **Ghat**, where he was warmly welcomed by the sultan who presented him with gifts for Queen Victoria. His second expedition, in 1850 on behalf of the British Government, included a young **Heinrich Barth** (see below). Richardson was, however, a difficult man and the party members travelled separately and slept in separate camps. Barth and Richardson travelled together to **Murzuq** and **Ghat** before going their separate ways.

Arguably the doyenne of European Saharan explorers, most of **Heinrich Barth's** travels from 1849 to 1855 took him beyond Libya, especially to **Agadez** and **Timbuktu**. He was one of the first Europeans to report rock carvings in the **Tassili-n-Ajjer**, very close to the **Jebel Acacus**. But he nearly didn't make it that far (see *The Legends of Kaf Ajnoun*, p194).

**Alexandrine Tinné**, a wealthy Dutch heiress, arrived in **Murzuq** in 1869 with a large caravan (she travelled in style) and a bodyguard of two Dutch sailors. An **Ahaggar** Tuareg chieftain promised to escort her from **Murzuq** to **Ghat**, but a few days into the journey he attacked her, slashed off her hand and left her to slowly bleed to death.



*Sahara & Environs* (1:2,200,000) by International Travel Maps and 953 – *Africa North & West* by Michelin (1:4,000,000).

Another excellent resource for Sahara expeditions is *Sahara Overland – a route and planning guide* by Chris Scott. Its section on Libya includes seven detailed route descriptions (including GPS coordinates).

## SEBHA REGION

Sebha is most people's gateway to the Libyan Sahara and although the most evocative Saharan landscapes lie further south, some rarely visited sites in the vicinity allow you to escape the crowds that converge on the Sahara's better-known sights. According to some sources, this is the most arid place on earth. But don't let that deter you.

### SEBHA

☎ 071 / pop 130,244

Sebha is the largest settlement in the Libyan Sahara and now serves as a sprawling garrison town. It's also an important transit point for Saharan travel, whether by tourists or heavily laden trucks bearing human and other cargo for destinations as far afield as Chad, Niger and Algeria. As a result, it's an incongruous, sometimes fascinating mix of tour buses with digital-camera-toting tourists, dusty sub-Saharan Africans waiting in the shade for passage north or south and cheap (often smuggled) goods that have arrived from across the desert.

It's a bit too far from the action to make a convenient base for exploring the southwest of the country, but overnighting here enables you to break up the long journey to or from the coast, have a hot shower, check your internet and change money.

### Orientation & Information

It's unlikely that you'll need to stray beyond the two main streets, Sharia Jamal Abdul Nasser and Sharia Mohammed Megharief, which run parallel to each other through the heart of town. Sharia Jamal Abdul Nasser is the extension of the road in from Murzuq and Germa.

The *jawazzat* (passport office) is in the unpaved street north of Sharia Mohammed Megharief, just north of Mat'am Acauc. **Masraf al-Jamahiyya** (Jamahiyya Bank; Sharia

Jamal Abdul Nasser) and **Masraf as-Sahari** (Al-Sahari Bank; Sharia Mohammed Megharief) both change money.

The post office is in a small street connecting the two main streets not far from Funduq Kala; look for the huge telecommunications tower. Private telephone offices, some doubling as internet cafés, are abundant along the two main streets. There's also an internet café in Funduq Fezzan (see p182).

### Sights

Not much really. The **Italian fort** that overlooks the town doubles as a military base and anywhere in town you should be very wary of pointing a camera in its direction.

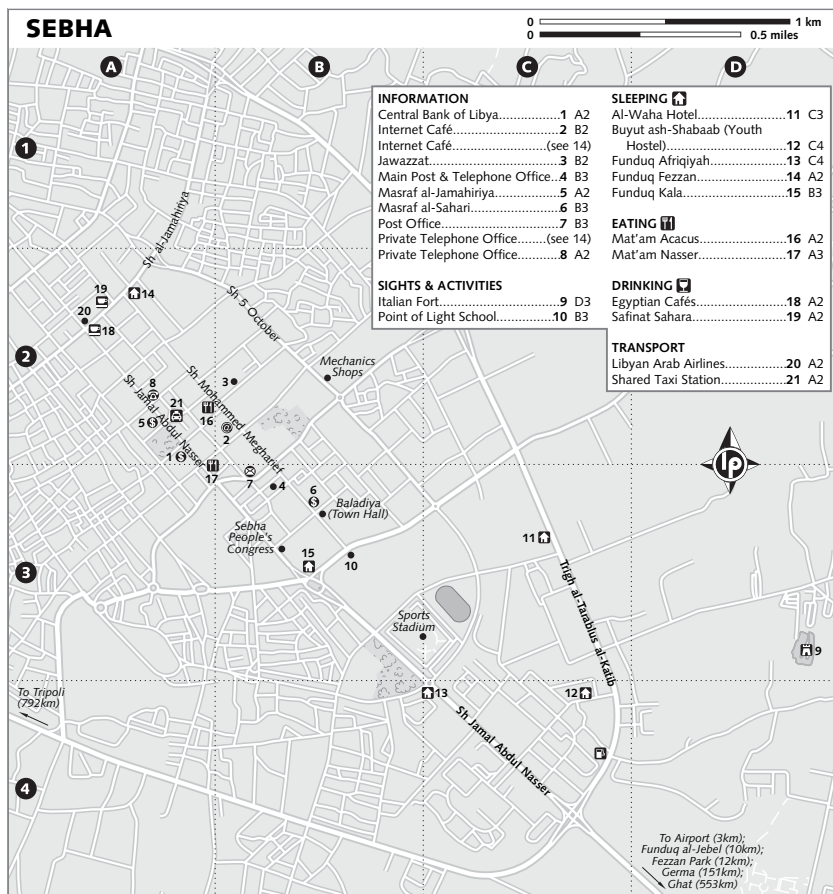
The **Point of Light School** (Sharia Mohammed Megharief) is where a young Muammar Qaddafi studied secondary school before being expelled, probably for organising demonstrations against government inaction during the 1956 Suez crisis. The school is at the eastern end of Sharia Mohammed Megharief and, as it's still in use, not open to visitors. Local students are, however, constantly reminded of their famous forerunner by oil paintings depicting scenes from his life in his old classroom.

### Sleeping

Sebha has a reasonable range of accommodation, although service with a smile is difficult to find at any of the hotels in town; staff are usually civil at best, but don't expect to be bowled over by the warmest of welcomes.

**Buyut ash-Shabaab** (Youth Hostel; ☎ 621178; off Trigh al-Tarabulus al-Katib; dm 5LD) After a bright start a few years back, this hostel has not been very well maintained and can be quite grubby. It's often filled with dusty sub-Saharan Africans recovering from their ordeal of crossing the Sahara.

**Fezzan Park** (☎ /fax 632860; mobile 0925131967; Sharia al-Jamahiyya; huts per person with shared bathroom 10LD, ste 50LD; ♿ ♿) Arguably the best of the Sahara's camps, this appealing place is 10.8km southwest of Sebha off the road to Ubari. It offers the usual huts, which are generally airtight, but most of the beds will have you longing for the comfort of a sand bed amid the dunes. The suites will seem like paradise after dusty desert trails. If we have one complaint it's that the high volume of tourist traffic that passes through



here is taking its toll on the service which is not as efficient as it once was. There's also a swimming pool and a zoo with desert animals. The roaming ostriches are more inquisitive than dangerous. Breakfast costs 5LD.

**Funduq al-Jebel** (☎ 629470/9; s/d 25/35LD; 🍷) This fully renovated hotel of long standing occupies a hilltop location around 10km from town, with sweeping views over the barren plains and palm groves – sunset is the time you'll most appreciate staying here. The rooms aren't all that exciting, but they're comfortable. The corners of each floor are best for views from the balconies. Check a few rooms if you can, as some of the bathrooms are a bit iffy. The restaurant (meals 12-15LD) isn't bad if you can't face the long drive into town.

**Funduq Fezzan** (☎ 631910, fax 628549; Sharia al-Jamahiriyah; s/d/tr/ste 25/35/45/60LD) Originally built for Libyans in town for government business, Funduq Fezzan (formerly Funduq al-Mehari) has changed its name but left the rooms as they were. Perhaps it did so out of nostalgia, but we would prefer to see an overhaul. The rooms are run-down, tired and not everything works, but the suites could easily sleep four and are large, airy and fine for a night. Service has improved since we were last here, but that's not saying much.

**Funduq Afriqiya** (☎ 623952, fax 631550; Sharia Jamal Abdul Nasser; s/d/tr/ste with private bathroom 25/40/65/80LD; 🍷) The recently renovated Funduq Afriqiya has large rooms that are unexciting

but comfortable. There are some fine views over town from the upper floors.

**Funduq Kala** (☎ 637181; alkala@winzrik.com; Sharia Jamal Abdul Nasser; s/d/ste with breakfast 40/55/90LD; 🍷) Don't be put off by the cavernous, 1970s-era public spaces of this hotel, because, thankfully, it has spent most of its renovation dollars on the rooms, which are among the best in Sebha. Rooms are semi-luxurious, at least by the standards of southern Libya. All are spacious and some have balconies overlooking a lovely shady courtyard.

**Al-Waha Hotel** (Funduq al-Waha; ☎ 636424; alwaha\_hotel@yahoo.com; Trigh al-Farabius al-Katib; s/d/ste with breakfast 50/65/125LD; 🍷) Sebha's newest hotel is also its best, with excellent rooms, friendlier staff than at most Sebha hotels and bathrooms that sparkle. Not surprisingly, it's often full. Hopefully, if it keeps doing what it's doing, it might encourage other hotels in town to lift their game. Meals here cost 15LD to 25LD.

### Eating & Drinking

Aside from the hotels, most eating places are along Sharia Jamal Abdul Nasser or Sharia al-Jamahiriyah. Don't expect fine dining, but at least Sebha is generally cheaper than other Libyan cities.

**Mat'am Acacus** (☎ 634934; Sharia Mohammed Megharies; meals from 6.50LD; 🍷 lunch & dinner) It's hard to see why you'd eat anywhere else in Sebha, because this is one of the few places in town that seems to understand tourists. The dining area and bathrooms are spotless, the service is welcoming and the quality of the food is first-rate, if not particularly imaginative. Great coffee is another bonus. In short, it's an oasis in what is otherwise an uninspiring town.

**Mat'am an-Nasser** (☎ 628220; Sharia Jamal Abdul Nasser; meals from 10LD; 🍷 lunch & dinner) Although not quite as impressive as the Mat'am Acacus, Mat'am an-Nasser is also good; the atmosphere in the upstairs air-con dining room is a bit plain, despite the eerie blue aviary. However, it produces reasonable food and the service is well intentioned if a little quirky at times. It also serves up a range of sweets, such as baklava (4LD per kilogram), and snacks such as chicken *shawarma* (1LD) in the bright and breezy downstairs dining area.

**Safinat Sahara** (Sharia al-Jamahiriyah; hamburgers 1LD; 🍷 11am-3pm & 6pm-1am) Open late, Safinat

Sahara is usually filled with locals. It's more a tea and *tawle* (backgammon) kind of place, but it does snacks, too.

**Egyptian cafés** (Sharia Jamal Abdul Nasser; 🍷 11am-1am) On the corner opposite Libyan Arab Airlines are two wildly busy cafés that attract a lively group of Egyptian and Libyan workers in the evenings. It's an all-male crowd; Western women will attract initial looks but little else. Options include *tawle* (free), nargileh (1LD to 2LD), tea (0.5LD) and oily *ta'amiyya* (felafel; 1.5LD). The café closest to the corner is the more appealing. As Sebha's only real nightlife, it's a good earthy place to spend an evening, although your conversation will have to compete with Egyptian movies blasting from the TV.

### Getting There & Away

#### AIR

**Libyan Arab Airlines** (☎ 623875; cnr Sharia Jamal Abdul Nasser & Sharia al-Jamahiriyah; 🍷 7am-2pm Sat-Thu May-Sep & 8am-3pm Sat-Thu Oct-Apr) has nightly flights to Tripoli (37.50LD) and to Benghazi (46.50LD) as well as a twice-weekly flight to Ghat (28LD), although check that the latter is indeed operating. Sebha airport is 5km southeast of the town centre.

#### BUS & SHARED TAXI

The bus and shared-taxi station is along Sharia Jamal Abdul Nasser in a small yard about 400m southeast of the Libyan Arab Airlines office. There are evening and morning departures to Tripoli, as well as more frequent cars to Ubari.

### Getting Around

#### TO/FROM THE AIRPORT

Private taxis into town shouldn't cost more than 2LD to 3LD, but drivers often ask for, and won't budge from, 5LD.

### WADI ASH-SHATTI

#### وادي الشاطي

The 139km-road through Wadi ash-Shatti is shadowed by the Jebel Hasawinah to the north and the sand dunes of the Idehan Ubari (Ubari Sand Sea or, as it is also known here, the Ramlat Assayef) to the south. Some locals claim to be descended from the ancient Garamantian people (see p30). In small villages you may see interesting, deserted mud-brick houses, although most have been reduced to rubble. There are more beautiful wadis, but as few

travellers take this route it has an appealing, out-of-the-way character.

**Idri**, at the far western end of the wadi, is most travellers' only experience of the Wadi, lying as it does at the convergence of trails between the Hamada al-Hamra and Idehan Ubari. Historical accounts suggest that Idri was once a beautiful place of gardens, springs, date trees and a dramatic castle. Things have definitely changed. The town was destroyed in 1836 and it now has an abandoned, end-of-the-road feel to it; all the rubbish from the wadi seems to have blown here. The castle exists only as rubble, and distant views of the sands are the town's only redeeming feature.

Expeditions south across the dunes to the Ubari lakes are possible from the villages of **Missaan** or **Al-Gurda**.

There are no tourist facilities in the wadi, although a number of basic camps were being built when we passed through.

## SEBHA TO GHARYAN

The 595km road north-south from Sebha to Gharyan (see p158) is one of Libya's most monotonous. Crossing the road at two points and running alongside it in a few places is the Great Man-Made River (Al-Nahr Sinai; see The Eighth Wonder of the World, p64 – a decidedly unremarkable bump in the landscape. Elsewhere only the cursory checkpoints relieve the boredom. The road is in an appalling condition close to Sebha with canyon-like potholes and ridges of asphalt that will slow your car to a careful crawl.

The dusty settlement of **Brak**, around 75km north of Sebha where the Tripoli-Sebha highway passes the entrance to Wadi ash-Shatti, is unlikely to detain you for long. It does have a 19th-century **Turkish fort**, a 20th-century **Italian fort** and a dilapidated mud-brick **old town** beyond the palm groves, but they're hardly worth your time as you speed somewhere else more interesting. If you're heading south and hungry, wait for Sebha.

The nondescript town of **Ash-Shwareef**, 277km north of Brak, has petrol and eating facilities. Mat'am Al-Qala'a isn't bad for couscous and chicken (6LD).

**Al-Qaryat**, a further 90km to the north, is similarly uninspiring. At the checkpoint just south of town is the turn-off for the desert

road that leads across the plains to Derj (313km) and Ghadames (408km). South of the checkpoint is a petrol station and a few scattered restaurants and teahouses.

The town of **Mizda**, 130km north of Al-Qaryat (about 70km south of Gharyan), has some old mud houses that mark the **old town** and locals can usually point the way to the **House of Heinrich Barth**, where the celebrated German explorer stayed on his way south. Mizda also has a petrol station and a few sandwich and chicken restaurants along the highway. Signposted in Arabic just off the main road is **Funduq Mizda al-Siyah** (☎ no phone; s/d/ste 25/35/45LD), which has big, airy rooms, ornate curtains and carpet that doesn't quite reach the wall. It's nothing special, but the rooms are fine for a night if you want to break up the journey.

## AL-JUFRA

الجفرة

Halfway between Sebha and the coast, east of the Tripoli-Sebha highway, are the three adjacent towns of the Al-Jufra oasis – Houn, Sokna and Waddan. Bizarrely, Al-Jufra was announced as the capital of Libya in 1987, but the idea never caught on and Libyans love to say that this is a great place to buy a house because the building boom that followed the announcement was not matched by subsequent demand.

If you're coming from Sebha, the last part of the journey passes through the **Jebel as-Sawda** – a wild, rocky landscape of black basalt. In contrast, the road northwest from Waddan to Abu Nijayn is lined with more than 100km of palm and olive trees, which form part of the Wadi al-Lout agricultural project.

Dates from the Al-Jufra oases are highly sought-after throughout Libya. Another reason to come is that very few travellers make it here.

## Houn

هون

☎ 057 / pop 19,373

Houn, 345km from Sebha, is the main town in Al-Jufra. Houn is often referred to as the migrating town, as the modern town is the fourth settlement in an area that has been occupied for the last 700 years.

The bank, post and telephone offices are along Sharia al-Jamahiriya, Houn's main street, as is the museum.

## SIGHTS

The original town, called Miskan, is buried beneath the dunes 4km northwest of Houn and the second town, about 500 years old, is nearby although next to nothing remains. The third city is the **medina** of the current town and is 150 years old; it was abandoned for modern housing during the 1950s and 1960s. There is one large, typical **medina house** that was built in 1842 and has been restored.

Houn's sweet little museum, **Thakirat al-Mouina** (admission 3LD; ☎ 9am-1pm & 3-6pm Tue-Sun), has a collection of local artefacts and memorabilia. It's the warehouse-like building opposite the turn-off to the old medina; ask for 'al-Mathaf'.

## FESTIVALS & EVENTS

If you happen to be in Houn at the end of February or beginning of March, you may happen upon the annual **Sweet-Making Festival**. The celebrations to herald the end of winter see the town's best cooks vie to make the most outlandish sweets and cookies. The results are later consumed by all and sundry in a wonderfully indulgent way to mark the beginning of spring.

## SLEEPING

**Buyut ash-Shabaab** (Youth Hostel; ☎ 2040; dm 5LD) Next door to the school and run by one of the teachers, this small hostel is about 500m from the highway. The place is simple and friendly, although a bit noisy when school is in.

**Funduq al-Haruj** (☎ 3067, 3381; s/d 25/35LD) This oasis of relative comfort, on the main highway near the Houn hospital, is the only hotel for hundreds of kilometres in any direction. The rooms are enormous and the private bathrooms are good. Lunch or dinner costs 10LD to 20LD.

## Sokna & Waddan

سوكنة & ودان

pop 28,313

Sokna, a few kilometres south of Houn, became an important regional centre in the 19th century when its Arab traders and financiers were active as far afield as Murzuq and the central Sahara. In the process they often formed alliances with the powerful Fezzan tribes of the Awlad Suleiman and Awlad Muhammad, as well as Al-Qaddhafa who were Colonel Qaddafi's forebears. The

landscape around Sokna is very attractive, with palm trees and sand dunes.

Waddan, north of Houn at the crossroads where the highway splits to Misrata and Sirt, is a small and quite charming town with a picturesque ruined brick castle on the hill in its centre; it provides a panoramic view over the town and oasis. Close to the castle are some old mosques built in the local style.

## AL-HARUJ AL-ASWAD

الهرج الأسود

If Waw al-Namus (p206) is the dark paradise of the Sahara, then Al-Haruj al-Aswad is the black heart of Libya. Covering about 45,000 sq km in the geographical centre of Libya, 'The Black Haruj' is an immense extinct volcano that has erupted six times down through the millennia and left behind a landscape closely resembling that of Mars. A black, brooding world of granite and basalt with the occasional wadi, it's a fascinating place, although at midday it can feel like labouring across the Devil's Anvil. It's heavy, slow going and the scenery is more compelling than beautiful. Occasional gazelle, waddan and Houbara bustard (see p63) hide from local and international hunters in isolated valleys. A few prehistoric engravings dot the rocks.

There are reportedly quite extensive **petrified forests** on the east side of Al-Haruj, close to **Wadi Bu Shubariyim** off the route between Tazerbo (p207) and Zellah, although we can't confirm this.

The most easily accessible gateway town to Al-Haruj is Al-Fogaha, a sleepy village around 325km northwest of Sebha. It has a modern town with a post office and a few small grocery stores, and a mud-brick **old town** down amid the palm trees behind low sandstone buttresses. There were once 22 **freshwater springs** in Al-Fogaha and 18 remain in use. They are on the fringes of the reasonably extensive old town, which has a time-worn air, a fine white vernacular mosque and traditional houses in various stages of disrepair. Look out for the occasional black stone from Al-Haruj al-Aswad which was used in the construction of some buildings. You're likely to be the only tourist here, which is part of the town's moderate charm. One of our highlights was sitting down in the sand with the elders of the village and listening as they patiently told us their memories of

the town, all the while drawing lines in the sand as they told of the arrival of Islam, the dynasties of the sultans of Fezzan and other dates of local importance – ask your guide if they can do the same.

When we visited, the mayor showed us to what he called the Funduq as-Siyahe (Tourist Hotel), but it had yet to become fully operational. It was unclear whether it would actually become a hotel, or more accurately an occasional guesthouse for travellers, but it was super-clean. The multiple mattresses were heaven after 10 days sleeping in the desert (although we did miss the stars) and even the shower produced by the problematic plumbing was as enjoyable as it was necessary.

At least one French tour company, Point Afrique (p233), offers tours to Al-Haruj; you're unlikely to come across any other travellers – something which is becoming increasingly rare in the Libyan Sahara.

## IDEHAN UBARI & WADI AL-HAYAT

The most accessible of the great sand seas that give so much depth and beauty to the Libyan Sahara, the Idehan Ubari (Ubari Sand Sea, also known as the Ramlat Assayef or Ramlat Dawada) and the lakes hidden behind its dunes are Libya's most popular desert experience. You won't have the lakes to yourself, but it's nonetheless a landscape of rare beauty. And such is its scope, there are ample opportunities to escape the maddening crowds when it comes to a camp site all your own.

Wadi al-Hayat, the Valley of Life, which ranges from 2km to 12km wide, is wedged between the sand sea's southern border and the brooding ridges of the Msak Settafet (Msak Setthaf). The wadi is one of the most fertile, and hence habitable, areas of the Fezzan. The underground water table lies close to the surface, allowing palms to flourish unirrigated. Once also called the Wadi al-Ajal (the Valley of Death), this is the former home of the Garamantes, a fabled civilisation that ruled the desert and made it bloom (see p30). The wadi's strategic location made an import axis of communications along the caravan routes. These days,

the wadi is home to a string of towns, especially Germa, Ubari and Tekerriba, which can provide a base for exploring the region. The main highway from Tripoli to Ghat runs through the heart of the wadi and there are good hotels and camps as well as well-stocked grocery stores ideal for kitting out your desert expedition.

### FJEAJ

📞 0728

Fjeaj, 133km southwest of Sebha, has little to see, although a colourful **Thursday market** and the prehistoric **rock-carved giraffe** on the rocky wall across the highway from the youth hostel could detain you for a short stopover.

The **Buyut ash-Shabaab** (Youth Hostel; 📞 2827; main highway; dm or camping 5LD) is just back from the main highway. It's a friendly place with basic though clean rooms. Guests can use the kitchen and meals are available from 6LD. Some of the staff speak French.

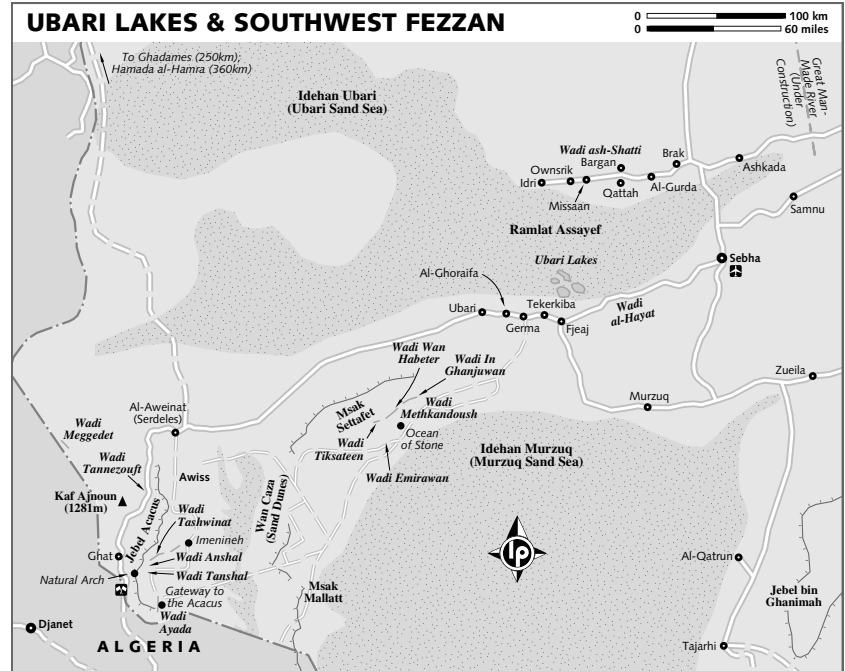
### TEKERKIBA

Tekerriba, the main gateway to the Ubari Lakes, is where you survey the steep ascent of what could be your first sand dune and, depending on your state of mind and level of experience, either get a rush of adrenaline or wonder what you've let yourself in for. Don't worry, it's nowhere near as scary as it looks and many would say not at all. There are three camps (signposted in English off the main highway) that face the wall of dunes on the northern fringe of Tekerriba. We recommend using them just for a (usually) hot shower and a soft drink, because sleeping in a straw hut alongside the tyre-marked ramp of sand is no substitute for finding an isolated and perfectly sculpted sand valley of the Ubari Sand Sea beneath a canopy of stars. But some travellers don't agree. When Hugh Clapperton passed through Tekerriba in the 1820s he remarked, 'We found a great deal of trouble getting anything to eat'. There are no such problems these days, provided you're not expecting haute cuisine.

The busy **Camping Africa Tours** (📞 071-625594; camping/thatched hut 5/15LD, motorcycle/car 5/10LD, meals 10-15LD) has the best facilities but can get a little overrun with 4WDs and people. It's run by the alternately funky and offhand Abdul Aziz, who serves cappuccino for 1LD

### الفتح

### تكر كيبا



if he can be bothered. There's usually no charge to use the shower or toilets.

Also nearby are the quieter Camping Fezzan and Tekerriba Tourist Camping; the latter in particular tends to avoid the convoys that stream off the dunes during peak season.

### THE UBARI LAKES أوبارى بحيرات

Whether you travelled to Sebha by plane or passed long days across monotonous desert plains, your first sight of the Ubari Lakes is not one you'll ever forget. It's the aesthetic relief of the deepest blue in a land engulfed by sand, the miracle of the sound of water lapping at the shore in the desert's heart, the sense that our childhood imaginings of the Sahara's beauty were not misplaced. If you've spent time in other Saharan towns and become disillusioned with how humankind has tamed the beauty of the oases with sprawling towns of no discernible beauty, the Ubari Lakes are an evocative antidote. Yes, the lakes are salty – so salty, in fact, that swimming here is a buoyant experience almost as curious as Jordan's

Dead Sea – but there are freshwater wells in the vicinity and the stunning visual effect is everything. And yes, the lakes can get overrun with convoys of tourist-bearing 4WDs, but the combination of sand dunes, waters of the deepest blue and palm trees will more than compensate.

There are at least 11 lakes in this eastern section of the sand sea, although many have dried up as a result of evaporation and lowered water tables from intensive agriculture in the nearby Wadi al-Hayat. One of the most celebrated lakes, Mandara (p189), has also all but disappeared. But Mavo, Gebraoun and Umm al-Maa remain as picturesque as ever. The four lakes are clustered in pairs, with Mavo and Gebraoun separated from Umm al-Maa and Mandara by a massive ridge of sand – crossing from Gebraoun to Umm al-Maa requires an exhilarating steep descent and plenty of fine photo opportunities.

Although the lakes are splendid places by day, resist the temptation to sleep here by night as mosquito swarms are an unpleasant feature.

For those of you driving your own vehicles, note that there are a number of smaller ridges that you have to cross and, as this is an area of surprisingly heavy traffic, you should approach each ridge-line with caution in case something is coming the other way.

### Mavo

مافو

The closest lake to Tekerkiba (about 40km), Mavo nestles against a high ridge-line of sand, overlooking countless small undulations away in the distance to the north. The water's edge is also surrounded by high reeds, and there are plenty of palm trees. Of the four major lakes described here, Mavo is probably the least spectacular, but as the first one most travellers reach, you'll probably only think so in hindsight. With tourists has come another feature of visiting the lakes, with unobtrusive Tuareg silver merchants laying out an array of jewellery pieces for sale at the eastern end of the lake. There are three other lakes, now dry, in the area.

### Gebraoun

قبر عون

Gebraoun, around 3km east of Mavo, is many travellers' favourite among the Ubari Lakes, not least because an abandoned village fans out from the western shore and the wall of sand rising precipitously up from the southern bank is one of the highest in the region. Gebraoun is also one of the largest of the Ubari Lakes, measuring about 250m by 300m, and is supposedly deep; when we asked some locals how deep it was, their answer was no more enlightening than 'very deep'.

The ruins of the town of Old Gebraoun (whose name means the Grave of Aoun) are slowly returning to the sands with gaping doorways and a generally abandoned air. In 1991, after centuries of habitation, the population of Old Gebraoun was relocated by the Libyan Government to the bleak settlement of Gebraoun al-Jadid (New Gebraoun), which is on the main highway in Wadi al-Hayat. Among the few recognisable buildings are two mosques with squat minarets, and a school. On the dune overlooking the town and the lake is a small tomb marked with a flag; this is the last resting place of the local notable Aoun, who gave the area its name.

Gebraoun lake is the best Ubari Lake for a swim and there are plenty of access points around the shore-line. Once immersed,

### THE WORM-EATERS OF GEBRAOUN

The inhabitants of Old Gebraoun were members of the Dawada tribe who went by the none-too-charitable name of 'Worm-Eaters'. The epithet has been in use since the British explorer, Walter Oudney, became the first European to visit the lake in 1822. The reason for the name is that their diet once included tiny red shrimp-like creatures that were found in the lake's shallows and that thrived in the high salinity levels. Fishing for the shrimps was the preserve of women who pounded their catch into cakes, which they sun-dried. Surplus cakes were exchanged, along with dates and other fruits of the oasis, for the tobacco and olive oil of passing Tuareg.

you'll notice the curious sensation of water at an agreeable temperature close to the surface with scalding temperatures just a few feet below. If you do decide to swim, please be discreet about your bathing costume (preferably a T-shirt and shorts) to avoid transgressing local sensibilities. Another reason why Gebraoun is most swimmers' destination of choice is the freshwater well in the camp on the north side of the lake – use its water in moderation, but enough to avoid spending the rest of the day caked in salt. And one final piece of advice to would-be swimmers: don't even think of shaving on the morning of your visit.

There's a small camp at the western end of the lake where you can get tea, buy local souvenirs and rest in the shade as the day heats up. Camp Winzrik, the larger camp on the northern shore, also has a kitchen which can be used by visitors, simple meals (around 15LD) and soft drinks and, wait for it, skis and a snowboard (5LD). If it's your first time, practise on some of the smaller dunes nearby before attempting the main hurtling descent behind the lake. Camp Winzrik's friendly Tuareg caretaker, Sheikh, loves to serenade visitors.

### Umm al-Maa

أم الماء

It's time to come clean: this is our favourite of the Ubari Lakes. Umm al-Maa (the name means 'Mother of Water') is magnificent, a narrow, elongated stretch of water surrounded by closely packed palm trees and

with a backdrop of perfectly sculpted sand dunes in the vicinity and small clusters of palm trees petering off to the horizon. As a smaller lake and much less open-sided than the others, it has an intimate feel to it and is an idyllic spot. After a number of visits where our photos didn't quite match the beautiful reality that we remembered, we've finally worked out the trick – the best photos are to be taken just before sunset from the steep ridge of sand that runs the length of Umm al-Maa's southern shore. Breathtaking.

As this is one of the more popular lakes, plenty of Tuareg handicraft sellers spread out their wares not far from the eastern shore.

### Mandara

مندره

Mandara, once one of the most stunning of the Ubari Lakes, is now almost entirely devoid of water. This seemingly irreversible process is a shame for many reasons, not least because the lake was not so long ago renowned for the changing colour of its water: from brilliant shades of green and blue to red, depending on the time of day. Like Gebraoun, it used to be surrounded by a small village, but the inhabitants were forced to leave in 1991. The buildings are now derelict and, with the receding water line, contribute to the sad sense of a dying place. The dry lakes of Umm al-Mahsan and Atroun are also in the same area.

The views towards the densely clustered palm trees of Mandara remain picturesque,

especially from the sand ridges to the north and west. For now, Mandara remains on most travellers' itineraries, but that's really only because it lies on the main route from Umm al-Maa to Wadi al-Hayat.

### GERMA

جرمة

📍 0729

Almost everyone who visits the Libyan Sahara ends up passing through Germa at some point. Although the main section of town along the highway is largely unattractive, the city has a rich history. This was once the capital of the Garamantian Empire (p30) which bequeathed it the mud-brick ruins of the ancient capital of Garama, and subsequently a terrific museum. With an excellent hotel and a few good camps dotted around town, Germa can also make a good base for exploring the area.

### Orientation & Information

The residential area of Germa is north of the Tripoli-Ghat highway, although most of the facilities are along the highway. At the turn-off to the paved road running south over the Msak Settafet to the desert is a petrol station and nearby are a couple of hotels, basic restaurants and the museum.

Germa is not a good place to change money as the town's handful of banks aren't always willing to do so.

### Sights

#### GARAMA

Ancient **Garama** (adult/child 3/1LD, camera/video 5/10LD; 🕒 8am-7pm May-Sep, 9am-5pm Oct-Apr), the ancient city of the Garamantians, is one of the most significant archaeological sites in Libya.

The initial Garamantian settlement was at Zinchecra (see p191), high on the hills of the Msak Settafet overlooking Wadi al-Ajal, as the wadi was then called), 2km south of Germa. In the 1st century AD the Garamantians moved to Garama, a new city made of stone, clay and animal dung at the foot of the sand dunes. This new location took full advantage of the natural fortifications offered by the Idehan Ubari and the mountains of the Msak Settafet. There was a lake and natural spring nearby. Garama originally had six towers within the city walls; most of the buildings that remain were added in subsequent centuries.

### THINGS THEY SAID ABOUT... THE SAHARAN CLIMATE

The climate of Fezzan is at no season temperate or agreeable. During the summer the heat is intense; and when the wind blows from the south is scarcely supportable, even by the natives. The winter might be moderate were it not for the prevalence of a bleak and penetrating north wind during that season of the year, and which chilled and drove to the fire not only the people of the place, but even myself, the native of a northern country.

*Frederick Hornemann, Travels from Cairo to Mourzouk 1797-8*

About 50m after entering the site is an open **square** on the left where wild horses were brought from the desert to be domesticated and then exported to Rome; the Garamantians were famous as horse breeders and herders of long-horned cattle. The square also functioned as a starting point for caravans, which carried dates, barley and wheat to exchange for Roman goods, such as wine. In their heyday, the voracious Garamantian traders controlled most central Saharan caravan routes from their base in Garama.

The newer-looking sandstone structure on the southwest side of the square was a wealthy **merchant's home**. When Islam came to Garama, Muslims moved into the old town and remodelled it. The buildings behind the merchant's house made up the **Islamic Quarter**. In this section is the modern reconstruction of the mosque and madrasa.

The **western sector** of the ruins is the oldest part of town and at least some of the buildings are believed to show traces of the original settlement. The rubble immediately northwest of the junction was once thought to be the remains of a bath built in the Roman style, but the British archaeologists excavating the site now believe it was more

likely an ancient **temple**. The ramshackle **lanes** that twist out from behind the temple through the old quarter were built just wide enough to enable camels laden with saddle bags to pass through.

The old city is dominated by the large castle-like structure at the western end. This building may once have been a **Garamantian palace** containing a harem section on the far western side of the enclosed compound. When the Byzantines moved in, it was inevitably converted into a church. Little remains of either manifestation, but there are good views over the old town from the walls.

Old Garama is about 1km north of the main highway. There's a sign in English pointing to the 'Old City' opposite the petrol station on the highway.

#### MUSEUM

Germa's small but excellent **museum** (admission 3LD, camera/video 5/10LD; ☎ 8.30am-2pm & 3-6.30pm Tue-Sun) is 50m west of the petrol station on the Tripoli-Ghat highway. It's especially notable for a good time graph showing the various eras of rock art in the region; a dramatic satellite photo showing Wadi al-Hayat wedged between the Ubari and Murzuq Sand Seas; an ancient Garamantian mummy found near Germa; photos of the prehistoric carvings from Wadi Methkandoush; a map of the region carved in rock; improbable organic shore deposits from Wan Caza; a few broken ostrich eggs from the Jebel Acacus; and a model of the cemetery of Mohammed's companions in Zueila. Some of the exhibits are illuminated by informative English labels.

#### Festivals & Events

In some years in March the town hosts the **Germa Festival**, which is a colourful occasion. Inhabitants of Wadi al-Hayat don traditional dress and perform local dances, all contributing to a highly festive atmosphere. Many of the children from Germa and the surrounding areas also dress up and in some performances occupy pride of place. Unfortunately no-one seems to know from one year to the next when the next festival will take place.

#### Sleeping & Eating

Germa's cosy little camping grounds are generally better for showering (2LD for non-guests) and eating (breakfast 5LD, lunch or

dinner 10LD) after emerging from the sand than for sleeping, as night-time mosquitoes are a problem. That said, many travellers do stay here and the camps are well-equipped with simple straw huts and kitchens that can be used for a small fee.

**Eirawan Camping** (☎ 642413; camping 5LD, huts per person 10LD) This long-standing camping ground consists of whitewashed mud huts with thatched roofs. It has the advantage of being down a quiet side road and hence escapes the unappealing ambience of the highway. There are shared showers (with geyser-sourced hot water) and squat toilets. The covered eating area is quite pleasant. It's 250m north of the Tripoli-Ghat highway and the turn-off is 1.5km west of the petrol station. On the same side road as Eirawan Camping and closer to the highway, **Timbuktu Camp** (☎ 2416) promises to be similar once the building work has finished.

**Old City Tourist Restaurant** (☎ 0722-642245; camping 5LD, huts per person 10LD, meals 8-12LD) Next to the gate of ancient Garama, this laid-back restaurant has added a number of simple huts to its repertoire which makes it a good overall package, especially given its location. You can use the kitchen (4LD) and smoke a nargileh (1LD) while you wait for the afternoon heat to pass.

**Tassilie Tourism Camping & Restaurant** (☎ 642299; Tripoli-Ghat highway; s/d 10/20LD) The accommodation here is a tad run-down and there are only seven rooms (with private bathroom) set around a compact courtyard. The owner is friendly and there's a small restaurant doing simple meals. It's about 200m east of the museum.

**Funduq Germa** (☎ 642276; Tripoli-Ghat highway; s/d 15/30LD; ☎) The friendly management of Funduq Germa has gone for the utmost simplicity in its pricing system – prices are the same whether or not you have a room with air-con or a private bathroom (some with a mosaic tiled floor). It's not bad value if you can get both. The rooms are otherwise jaded.

**Funduq Dar Germa** (☎/fax 642396; www.darsahara.com; s/d 40/50LD) If you're arriving from the desert, Funduq Dar Germa will feel like the Garden of Eden. The rooms are very comfortable and the squeaky-clean private bathrooms come with, wait for it, a bathtub. The restaurant is easily the best in town and it can also arrange a picnic lunch for excursions to the lakes or elsewhere for 10LD.

There's a gift shop, a small teahouse and the front terrace is most pleasant, especially when bedecked with sunflowers. It's the maroon building 50m south of the petrol station on the road to Wadi Methkandoush.

#### Getting There & Away

Germa is 150km southwest of Sebha; there are regular shared taxis to Ubari and Sebha.

#### AROUND GERMA

Almost 13km west of Germa, just after Al-Ghoraifa on the south side of the road, are the best-preserved examples of the curious square-topped pyramid Garamantian tombs known as **Ahramat al-Hattia** (admission 3LD, camera/video 5/10LD; ☎ 9.30am-1.30pm Sat-Thu, 3-5pm Fri). When the tombs were first excavated some interiors contained offering tables, stellae (stone slabs bearing a commemorative inscription), amphorae, pottery dishes and even gold and ostrich eggs. Some tombs have been reconstructed to something resembling their original form. There were once 100 tombs in the area and all are thought to have belonged to the dynasties of the Garamantian royal family, although some archaeologists claim they were first built in 3000 BC by the Garamantes' forerunners.

Other tombs that look like they are melting back into the earth lie hidden amid the palm trees on either side of the main highway between Germa and Ubari.

Alongside the road from Wadi Methkandoush as it crosses the Msak Settafet and descends into the Wadi al-Hayat are all that remains of the ancient Garamantian capital of **Zincheera**, the forerunner to Garama. As the wadi began to dry out, the Garamantians moved their capital down into the valley and Zincheera was thereafter used as a place of burial; the tombs that are all that remain of Zincheera are among 50,000 that once dotted the area.

#### UBARI

☎ 0722 / pop 44,500

Ubari is an important regional centre and the town where many travellers emerge after crossing the Ubari Sand Sea from Idri. As such the first sight of it – a forest of palm trees of the Wadi al-Hayat set against the backdrop of the black Msak Settafet (also known here as the Jebel al-Aswad, or Black Mountains) can be quite picturesque. That

#### THINGS THEY SAID ABOUT... THE GARAMANTES

The territory is encircled by sand but this does not prevent the Garamantes from easily finding wells at a depth of about two cubits, for the waters of Mauritania flow through this region. The Garamantes build their houses from salt extracted from their mountains like stone... In the middle lies Phezania facing the solitary reaches of Africa...it seems scorched or, or else it flames as it reflects the rays of the sunup. Till now it has been impossible to trace the route leading into the territory of the Garamantes. If our reconnaissance is correct, the brigands of this nation cover their shallow wells over with sand.

*Pliny the Elder, Natural History  
(1st century AD)*

**THINGS THEY SAID ABOUT...UBARI**

Oubari is situated amidst well-cultivated fields and Gardens surrounded by a higher wall and in better condition than any other town in Fezzan. The houses are also in good condition as is the Castle which like all other buildings in this country is built of mud or clay though the foundation of this castle is built of rough stones. The inhabitants appear to be more plentifully supplied with the good things of this world than the rest of their countrymen.

*Hugh Clapperton, Difficult & Dangerous Roads (1822)*

said, away to the west in the sand sea and visible in the distance as you approach the descent into Ubari is an oil field. Look a little closer at the town itself and you'll soon be longing for the solitude of the sands – it's a dusty, wind-blown place lined with mechanics' workshops; sand stained black with crank grease and oil. Water shortages are a periodic problem here and palm trees have seen more fertile days.

Ubari does, however, have at least one good hotel, a couple of internet cafés and well-stocked grocery stores, and is the only town of any size between Germa and Al-Aweinat.

**Orientation & Information**

Ubari sprawls either side of the highway, but most of the facilities you'll need are along the main road. There's a bank just east of the fort, almost opposite the road to Ghat. The petrol station is at the eastern end of town, while the main post and public telephone office is at the western end of town; for the latter, take the highway until it reaches a T-junction, 100m west of where it branches off towards Ghat, and it's along on the right.

There are two **internet cafés** (per hr 1.50LD) 50m west of the roundabout in the town centre. Connections can be slow.

**Sights**

If you're here in the morning or late afternoon, the **old market** is still in use; it's just north of the main roundabout. The hybrid

Turkish-Italian **fort**, 50m west of the Ghat turn-off, is worth a quick look, as is the **Tuareg Mosque**, which dates from the 19th century and is named in honour of the town's Tuareg heritage.

**Sleeping & Eating**

**Wat Wat Camp** (☎ 642471; south of Germa-Ghat highway; tents 5LD, huts with/without breakfast 13/10LD, meals 8-15LD) Reasonable huts, outdoor eating and friendly staff are the order of the day here, but like most oasis tourist camps, sleeping can mean a plague of mosquitoes.

**Funduq Ubari** (☎ 623095; s/d 30/35LD, meals 15LD; ☹) It's difficult to decide whether the pervasive smell of disinfectant here is reassuring or disconcerting. The beds also sag prodigiously and the atmosphere is that of a typical government hotel – adequate but depressing.

**Funduq Qala'a** (☎ 626000; castle\_oubari@hotmail.com; Germa-Ghat highway; s/d with shared bathroom 30/40LD; ☹) Ubari's most atmospheric choice, this converted castle has tidy rooms that are extremely comfortable for this region. The castle origins can mean some rooms are a little cell-like but it's very well maintained and the courtyard's an antidote to the bleakness of the town surrounds. The meals (15LD) are arguably the best in town although nothing that will live too long in the memory.

Apart from the camp and two hotels, basic restaurants are found all along the highway. They serve couscous, (sometimes scrawny) chicken and not much else.

**Getting There & Away**

Germa is 60km west of Germa and 262km northeast of Al-Aweinat (Serdeles). From the shared-taxi station, about 100m east of the fort, taxis run infrequently to Ghat (four hours, 362km) via Al-Aweinat (three hours) and to Sebha (2½ hours, 190km) via Germa (30 minutes).

**SOUTHWEST FEZZAN**

Home to the extraordinary natural wonders of Jebel Acacus, Wadi Meggedet, Idehan Murzuq and Wan Caza, the old caravan towns of Ghat and Murzuq and some of the finest open-air galleries of prehistoric rock art anywhere in the Sahara, Libya's far south-western corner is where the Libyan Sahara comes alive. Spend as long here as you can.

**AL-AWEINAT (SERDELES) العوينات**

☎ 0716

The small town of Al-Aweinat (which also goes by the lovely Tuareg name of Serdeles) is one of the more pleasant oasis towns of the Libyan Sahara. It's not that there's anything to see here, but its tree-lined streets, excellent camp and convenient location give it a more welcoming feel if you're arriving from the desert than larger oasis towns like Germa, Ubari or Murzuq.

Most travellers who've crossed the Hamada al-Hamra and Ubari Sand Sea coming from Ghadames (p176) rejoin civilisation here. Al-Aweinat has always been the most important gateway into the Awiss region (p199) in the north of the Jebel Acacus, but the uncertain situation at the time of research regarding the road south of Ghat (see p195) also means that Al-Aweinat has also become the most important entry and departure point into the Jebel Acacus as a whole.

Al-Aweinat has a **fort** that is built on the spring of Al-Aweinat. According to the British explorer Hugh Clapperton in the 1820s, the local Tuareg believed it to be inhabited by ghosts and, as a result, they wouldn't enter the site. The Libyan police clearly don't have any such qualms for they now occupy the site; entry is not permitted and nor are photos of the exterior. It was built as a castle during the Arab/Islamic period.

**Alfaw Camp** (☎/fax 021-3340770; mobile 0912140678; alfawtravel@yahoo.com; Tripoli-Ghat highway; s/d/tr per person 15/25/37.50LD) This place has become an essential staging post on the road into or out from the Awiss region of the Jebel Acacus and, as such, can get very crowded with cars, campervans and all manner of travellers. The mud-thatch huts are fine and how much you enjoy the simple meals (8LD to 10LD) of chicken, couscous and salad probably depends on whether you're arriving from the desert or about to enter. It also has a travel agency onsite (and camps at Awiss) and it's therefore a good place to trade stories and get advice from locals and other travellers.

**WADI MEGGEDET وادي ماغد يت**

As you wind your way along the sandy valleys of Wadi Meggedet, close to the Algerian border, you'll find yourself shaking your head in disbelief. Wadi Meggedet is like nowhere else in Libya: pinnacles emerge from

the sand, like a city of rock skyscrapers in miniature, taking on the strangest shapes and causing even the most experienced desert traveller to marvel at nature's eye-catching artistry. It could be Mars, it could be the moon but it's the sort of place that leaves one lost for words. Although most of the area known as Wadi Meggedet is flat, the northeastern reaches drop down quite steeply and are wonderful places to explore as footprints of gazelle, waddan and fennec fox lead into a world as labyrinthine as any North African medina. Not many travellers make it out this way. Get here before that changes.

Wadi Meggedet is separated from the Al-Aweinat-Ghat highway by a long ridge of sand dunes. It is possible to cross the dunes in a 4WD, although the sand is soft in many places, or you can take the longer route – driving north until the dunes peter out, then heading south. Wadi Meggedet is most easily visited from Al-Aweinat (Serdeles, 80km; left), but to avoid doubling back after visiting the wadi, continue south between the sand dunes and the Algerian border before turning east to rejoin the highway next to Kaf Ajnoun.

**KAF AJNOUN كهف الجنون**

The end-of-the-earth landscapes of the Sahara lend themselves easily to myths and legends, but few places have attracted quite so many as 1281m-high Kaf Ajnoun, also known as Idinen. Rising up alongside the most important ancient paths that led from Fezzan and Ghadames to Ghat, this strange rock formation appears as if from nowhere around 25km north of Ghat (from where it's visible on a clear day).

Its name, which means the Mountain of Ghosts, is a reminder of how Kaf Ajnoun's otherworldly aspect has always played on the minds of travellers. The local Tuareg have a treasure-trove of ghost stories about the place (see The Legends of Kaf Ajnoun, p194). The mountain bears an uncanny resemblance to a haunted desert citadel, with a fortress-like summit complete with pinnacles of rock that could easily be watch-towers. To truly appreciate the strangely disturbing symmetry of Kaf Ajnoun, take the trail shadowing the Algerian border from Wadi Meggedet to Ghat; it is from the west that Kaf Ajnoun really makes you



### THE LEGENDS OF KAF AJNOUN

Kaf Ajnoun was once known among the Tuareg as the Devil's Hill, a 'mountain hall of council where djinn [genies] meet from thousands of miles around'. Not surprisingly, such stories lured many a sceptical European explorer. In 1822, Hugh Clapperton claimed that 'we had been told many wonderful stories about this hill, that there were people with red hair living in it, that at night when encamped near it you would hear them beating on their drums, see their fires and hear them firing on their musquets'. Mind you, the appearance of white men among the locals was almost as strange as Kaf Ajnoun itself, and the two naturally coalesced – white strangers were feared as the children of Idinen (Kaf Ajnoun).

Clapperton recounted the story of a merchant travelling from Ghadames to Algeria. The traveller had been stopped by one of these red-haired djinns who then demanded a gun, for which it paid with a piece of paper inscribed with writing the merchant could not understand. The djinn told the merchant that on arriving in a town in Tuat (Algeria), the paper was to be given to a black dog that would come to meet him at an appointed place. The merchant was surprised to receive the payment from just such a dog at the appointed place in exchange for the paper; he was blessed with riches for the rest of his life.

Legends such as these ensured that no Tuareg would climb the hill or even get too close, although European explorers just couldn't resist the temptation. Walter Oudney climbed the hill without any adverse effect. But before you dismiss the legends as superstition and set off to climb to the top, remember the difficulties of two other explorers. In 1845, James Richardson became lost and was unwell for days after attempting to climb Kaf Ajnoun. Just five years later, Heinrich Barth reached the summit, but was exhausted and dehydrated by the time he got there. On the way down, he lost his way and collapsed. To stave off thirst he cut open a vein to drink his own blood. A mere 27 hours after setting out, he was found by a local Tuareg man, feverish and close to death.

wonder. It's possible to camp close by, if you dare, and some travellers have scrambled up to the summit without suffering any adverse effects. But it's an eerie place, and there are those who claim to have heard strange night-time noises while camping here.

Beyond the sand dunes across the highway is the broad **Wadi Tanzerouft** which offers fine views of the western wall of the Jebel Acacus and contains the hot springs of **Al-Fawar**. Some travellers journey from here by camel into Ghat.

### GHAT

☎ 0724 / pop 25,172

Perhaps the most attractive of the oasis towns in Libya's south, Ghat has always been a travellers' favourite, and not just because it has served as one of two main gateway towns to the Jebel Acacus. The mud-brick medina in the heart of town is probably the finest of its kind in Libya. The setting is superb, with a backdrop of stunning sand dunes, the dark ridges of the Jebel Acacus to the east and the distant peaks of the Tassili-n-Ajjer (in Algeria) to the west.

### غات

It is also notable as one of the few permanent Tuareg settlements in the Sahara.

### History

Ghat's medina was built by the Garamantes in the 1st century BC atop of the ruins of an earlier settlement known as Rana, although it has been much modified and most of what's now visible dates from the 12th century. In Garamantian times, Ghat was one link in a chain of fortified oases that afforded protection to Garamantian caravans as they crossed the desert. It also served as part of the defence system of Garama: a bulwark and early warning system against hostile forces from the south. Although it never rivalled Ghadames in size, its strategic location as the only significant town in the region ensured that it played a critical role in the ebb and flow of Saharan trade and war. This role as a natural hub of Saharan communications brought it considerable prosperity.

The Tuareg came to know the area as the 'Land of Peace'. It was also known in the old Libyan language as the 'Land of the Sun'. It was not until the 14th century that the name Ghat began to appear in the accounts

of geographers and travellers. Throughout this period and until relatively recently, the town came under the aegis of the Tuareg of the Tassili-n-Ajjer. They used their influence to set up a free-trade zone of sorts, although caravans only remained free of peril if they paid protection money to local Tuareg tribes. By the early 19th century, Ghat was said to be on the verge of supplanting Ghadames and Murzuq as the principal town of the Libyan Sahara.

The Sultan of Ghat (a hereditary position passed down through the female line) was subservient to the sultans of the Ajjer Tuareg, but always enjoyed a significant degree of autonomy. In the 19th century, however, the Ottomans extended their reach into the Sahara. Ghat's age of autonomy came to an end in 1875, with the first full-scale Ottoman occupation of the town. This, combined with the decline of the slave trade and the shift away from trans-Saharan trade routes, saw Ghat fall into decline. Ghat later came under the rule of the French and Italians, although both maintained little more than a token presence in town. Cross-border trade ensured that the town did not disappear entirely, and Ghat's remoteness ensured that non-Muslim visitors were rare – until Libya's recent tourist boom.

### THE ROAD SOUTH OF GHAT

Like so many old Saharan caravan towns, Ghat was at the time of writing passing through a difficult historical moment. In early 2006 the Algerian army occupied a major wadi south of Ghat, thereby closing off the routes from Ghat into the Jebel Acacus and leaving the town marooned. Travellers began to leave the road and enter the Acacus at Al-Aweinat, 100km away to the northwest. We still think Ghat is worth the effort, but judging by the empty camps and hotels when we visited, not too many travellers were willing to come this far to find out. Although by the time you read this the Libyan and Algerian authorities have probably sorted things out and reopened the route south of Ghat, check the latest information before setting out.

In case the southern route has reopened, we have included a route description based on an earlier visit; see p202.

### Orientation & Information

Ghat is a compact town. It has one main street – the highway in from the north, which sweeps past the medina, the police station, **jawazzat** (passport office; ☎ 7102308) and a number of cheap restaurants, then on past the main post office, Masraf al-Safari (bank) before heading south towards Algeria.

There are a couple of **internet cafés** (per hr 1LD) in the centre of town.

### Sights

#### MEDINA

Ghat's medina is a fine example of vernacular Saharan architecture, with a tangle of lanes weaving between crumbling mud-brick buildings that bear the merest traces of their former glories. The medina is compact but you could easily spend a couple of hours wandering through it.

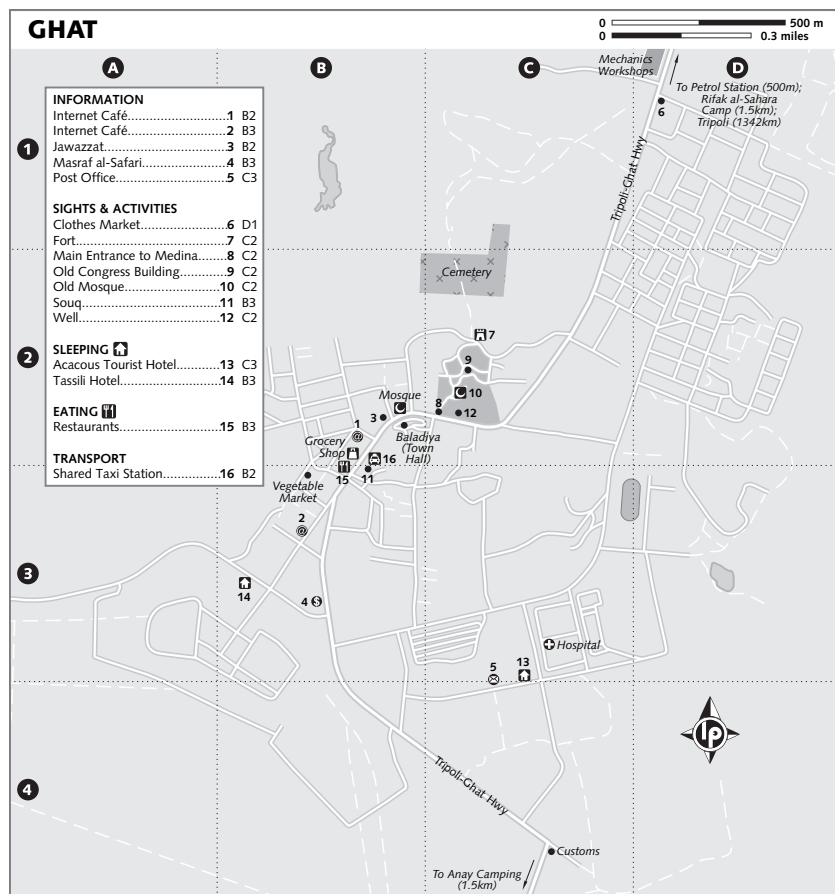
The old city has, like many of its kind, only been deserted quite recently (for more details see *Out With the Old*, p59). The last of the medina's old inhabitants only moved out, into modern housing, in 1991. Although some families are reported to have moved within the medina's walls, these are recent immigrants from Niger rather than townfolk.

The main entrance to the **medina** (adult/child 3/1LD, camera/video 5/10LD; 🌅 sunrise-sunset) is via the small open square opposite the **baladiya** (town hall). There's no ticket office, but once you've entered, word will get around and the friendly Tuareg ticket seller will find you soon enough. By the roadside just outside the square is a wonderfully well-preserved ancient **well**.

In the medina proper, the first square you come to after passing under the low arch was used for weddings and is still used for festivals (see p197). This western area of the medina (*agrum wusharan*) is the oldest part of town.

The medina's **old mosque**, which is not generally open to the public, has a distinctive squat minaret in the Sudanic style and was built in 900, although next to nothing remains from this time. Given the hotch-potch of alterations, it shows a surprising unity of style.

The ziggurat-like structure in the heart of the old town served as the **old congress building**, where public meetings were held and from where the people of the town could be



addressed. Climbing to the top affords excellent views over the roofs of the medina.

On some of the small flat platforms surrounding the lanes are indentations caused by the ancient process of crushing date seeds.

The houses, and indeed most of the public buildings of the medina, were built from a durable mixture of animal dung, sun-dried clay, mud-brick and straw, while roofs were often supported by wooden beams and laced with palm fronds for added protection. Carved into some interior walls are some nice relief façades. Watch out also for the tiny palm-trunk doors; the passing centuries have seen the level of sand rise, raising the ground level of the town. Atop

some houses are mud adornments of alternately upright and inverted triangles. While no-one is certain, one local legend (which is also believed in Ghadames) claims that their resemblance to a crown is to remind the inhabitants of a much-loved Berber queen who ruled the desert.

Overlooking the medina is the **fort**. The Turks started its construction, but it was not finished until Italians arrived and converted it into a barracks. There are some superb views of the Jebel Acacus from the roof and you may be able to make out Kaf Ajnoun (p193) to the north. The best views over the medina itself are from the path that climbs up to the fort from behind the old town.

## TYING A TUAREG TURBAN

The Tuareg turban (known as *ashaersh* or *tagelmoust*) has puzzled ethnographers for centuries. The Tuareg are one of the few people in the world for whom men, but not women, must wear the veil. One functional purpose is as protection against wind and sand. However, it also serves a social purpose in the rigid hierarchy of social relationships. A Tuareg man is not supposed to show his face to one of higher status, and Tuareg who still follow the traditional way of life will rarely expose the lower half of their face in company. When such men drink tea, they are supposed to pass their glass under their *tagelmoust* so as not to reveal the mouth.

There are many ways of tying the *tagelmoust*. Although it's likely to take a while for you to muster the casual ease with which Tuareg men accomplish the daunting task, one relatively easy way to do it is as follows:

- Step 1** Fold the cloth so that it remains the same length but half the width.
- Step 2** Drape the folded cloth flat over your head so that three-quarters of its length hangs down in front of your right arm and the shorter length over your left.
- Step 3** With your right hand, hold the cloth about halfway down its length.
- Step 4** Place your left hand across your body, tense it so that your four fingers are pointing out to your right and your thumb is pointing to the sky.
- Step 5** Holding your left hand just below your right shoulder about chest high and about six inches out from your body, rest the nearest fold of the long length of cloth on your left hand between the thumb and flattened forefinger.
- Step 6** With your right hand, quickly take the length of cloth in a full circle in front of your face and around the back of your head until you return to where you started.
- Step 7** Repeat as many times as necessary.
- Step 8** Tuck any remaining strands of cloth into the folds on the top or back of the head.
- Step 9** Ask your Tuareg guide to sort it out.

There, we told you it was easy.

## SOUQS

Ghat has a busy, open-air **souq** (🗓 Tue) that's worth delaying your departure for if you're in town. It has a delightful feel and you can hear a mix of Arabic, Tuareg and French being spoken. Most of the stalls sell clothes, but there are also watches, sunglasses and fruits on offer. This is the place to purchase your Tuareg turban (*ashaersh*) for protection against the sun and sand of the Sahara. The standard cost is 3LD per metre and although some Tuareg take up to 10m, three should be sufficient. Another good buy are Tuareg pants (*akerbai*), with their exquisitely brocaded hems. These loose-fitting pants (except to pay around 15LD) are very comfy and ideal for minimising the chafing of riding a camel. On days when the market is not open, try the **clothes market** on the main highway 1.7km northwest of the medina.

## Festivals & Events

New Year is a great time to visit Ghat. The **Acacus Festival** is one of Libya's more regular

festivals and sometimes includes a spectacular sunset concert against the cathedral-like backdrop of the Jebel Acacus. The festival is also an excellent (and possibly the only) opportunity to see performances of Tuareg dancing (p60).

## Sleeping & Eating

Ghat is not blessed with an abundance of accommodation, but most travellers only stop here long enough to refuel and head out into the desert. Like most camps across Fezzan the two camps suffer from an abundance of hungry mosquitos, so bring repellent or buy a spray in town.

**Anay Camping** (📞 7102587; mobile 0925357308; tents 5LD; thatch huts per person 10LD, campervans 10LD) Some 2km south of town off the main road to the Issayan, this place has the usual cute, simple thatched huts, although they're not particularly airtight and the mattresses are somewhat dusty. The hot showers are wonderful if you've just come in from desert. Ramadan, your host, is an amiable chap;

there's a small artisan's shop in the compound and the kitchen can be used by guests.

**Rifak as-Sahara Camp** (☎ 7102362; mobile 0912146091; Tripoli-Ghat highway; cabins per person 20LD, camping 10LD; 🚻) Strange place, this. The newly built and airtight cabins are very impressive, but only three of them have air-conditioning; absurdly, the price remains the same. The cabins also belong to the architectural genre of toilet blocks, while the adjacent older, now-closed thatch-and-stone huts were far more in keeping with local architecture. It has also built a new restaurant. It's the first building you come to on the left as you enter Ghat.

**Tassili Hotel** (☎ 7103001; s/d 15/20LD) You'd have to be desperate. In fact, we only include it here for two reasons: to award it the prize as the worst tourist hotel we came across in Libya and to warn you to mutiny if your tour guide tells you're staying here. Nothing works, the smells are years old and the whole place looks like it was built as an afterthought and could fall down any day.

**Acacus Tourist Hotel** (☎ 7102769; hotelacacus.ghat@ghat.gov.ly; d with/without TV 30/20LD, ste 45LD, meals 15LD) Ghat's only habitable hotel is, fortunately, very comfortable and quite new. OK the carpet doesn't always quite reach the walls, but the furniture is new, the rooms are spacious and are all-in-all very comfortable. You can also walk to the medina from here.

Cheap restaurants serving chicken and rice or sandwiches are along the main drag west of the medina. Expect to pay 5LD to 8LD for soup, salad, drinks and main dish.

### Getting There & Away

Although timetables for Libyan Arab Airlines list twice-weekly flights from Tripoli

to Ghat (one way/return 51/102LD), services are unreliable and were suspended at the time of research.

You're a long way from anywhere here – Ghat is 100km southwest of Al-Aweinat, 552km southwest of Sebha and 1342km from Tripoli. Shared taxis congregate at the entrance to the souq on the main road; most only go as far as Ubari.

### THE JEBEL ACACUS جبل اكاكوس

The Jebel Acacus (pronounced A-ka-kous) is not the most famous massif of the Sahara, but that can only be because Libya was for so long closed to the outside world. Dark basalt mountains with sand dunes piled high into many of the cliffs, sandstone butresses fashioned by the wind interspersed with golden rivers of sand, rock formations that seemed to have been crafted by an experimental artist alongside rock art brilliantly executed by the hand of the ancients – these are the secrets of the Acacus. This Unesco World Heritage-listed area deserves as much time as you have and probably more.

This was once purely the domain of the Tuareg; settled and nomadic Tuareg families ranged across the whole Acacus region. Most of the Tuareg families have in recent years moved to the towns, especially the oases around Ghat, and only 13 families remain in the Acacus and Awiss region – it's not uncommon to find old Tuareg men wandering the wadis blissfully alone. Theirs is a disappearing world. Many Tuareg who have left the Acacus now return as guides and drivers, and to have a Tuareg companion show you the land of his ancestors is one of Libya's highlights.

### THE DISCOVERY OF SAHARAN ROCK ART

Although the indigenous Tuareg inhabitants of the Sahara have known about the rock art in their midst for centuries, it has only recently captured the attention of the outside world. The German explorers Heinrich Barth and Gustav Nachtigal reported their findings and even made sketches of some of the pieces. On 6 July 185, Barth wrote, 'No barbarian could have graven the lines with such astonishing firmness, and given to all the figures the light, natural shape which they exhibit.' But it was not until 1955 that a team from the University of Rome, led by Professor Fabrizio Mori (whose name has become synonymous with the rock art of the Acacus), undertook a serious study of the art. This tradition continued through the 1990s when another Italian team recorded over 1300 sites in the Acacus alone. Their findings, and the modern threats to the art, have contributed to the area being added to Unesco's World Heritage List of Endangered and Protected Sites.

The landscapes and people of the Jebel Acacus are themselves reason enough to visit here, but it is the astonishingly enduring rock art that gives it a special dimension. Their whimsical beauty reflects an almost child-like simplicity, but they were created by extremely skilful artists. The rock-art's appeal is also enhanced by an understanding of what it represents: the local Tuareg believe that the ancient artists saw their art as a school for their descendants, leaving behind a history book cast in stone of what they saw and how they lived.

It is not known who was responsible for the art. Some archaeologists attribute the images to the ancestors of the modern Tuareg, a people who remained in the Sahara as the climate dried around 4000 years ago. Others claim that the Garamantes people, who inhabited Wadi al-Ajal to the north, were responsible. Both claims may indeed be true, but the fact that much of the art predates these groups suggests that they were merely following a tradition set in motion by earlier indigenous inhabitants of the region.

For information on the different types of Saharan rock art, see p60.

### Permits

Permits, obtainable from the police stations in Ghat, Al-Aweinat or Ubari, are required to visit the Jebel Acacus, but your tour company will take care of this probably without you realising it's been done. For the record, permits must be obtained for each tourist (8LD), Libyan-/foreign-registered car (5/20LD), and local guide, driver and/or cook (5LD).

### Entering the Acacus

The main gateway towns to the Jebel Acacus are Al-Aweinat (p193) and Ghat (p194), while many travellers also arrive from the desert to the east after visiting Wadi Methkandoush (p204), Idehan Murzuq (p203) and Wan Caza (p203). However, given that entering the Acacus from Ghat was not possible at the time of writing (see The Road South of Ghat, p195), our coverage runs from north to south.

Many travellers have told us that not all Libyan guides know the precise locations of the rock-art sites in the Acacus. For that reason we have included GPS points for some of the more important sites.

### JEBEL ACACUS – THE TOP TEN

- **Afozedzhar Arch** (p202)
- **Adadh** (below)
- **Painting of wedding scenes** (Wan Melol; p201) in Wadi Tashwinat
- **Painting of hunting scene** (Wan Traghit; p201) in Wadi Tashwinat
- **Elephant carving** (p201) in Wadi Tashwinat
- **Canyon and ghelta** (Wadi Tashwinat; p201) in Wadi In Ferdan
- **Panoramic view of the Acacus in Wadi Am'raka** (Wan Imlal; p201)
- **Panoramic view of Awiss** (below)
- **Watching the sunset over the Acacus from Wan Caza** (p203)
- **Your first shower in days at Aminaner well** (p201)

In addition to this guide, the 1:100,000 *Jebel Acacus – Tourist Map & Guide* (see p179) is a must-have companion for exploring the Acacus, covering the mountains in exceptional detail, including many more rock-art locations than we can cover here.

### Awiss

The northern Awiss region of the Jebel Acacus has some wonderful rock paintings, although it's more famous for its weird and wonderful landscapes. There's no finer example of this phenomenon of nature imitating art than one of the first sites you come to in the north of Awiss – **Adadh** (N 25° 31' 18.77" E 10° 35' 58.70"). This so-called 'Finger Rock' somehow seems to defy the laws of gravity, and at almost 20m high you can't help but think that it just has to fall soon. Around 350m east of Adadh are some quite impressive engravings of lovemaking.

Having started with one of the Acacus' signature sights, it's time to get an overall perspective of the landscape that defines the Acacus. Not far south of Adadh, a **panoramic view** (N 25° 30' 24.41" E 10° 34' 22.51") opens up after a short climb. Better at sunrise than sunset, it's a stunning location with views of Adadh away to the north. Further south you'll come across a range of **rock art** (N 25° 20' 00.49" E 10° 31' 19.52") providing an excellent introduction to

## PERIODS OF SAHARAN ROCK ART

The rock art of North Africa is thought to have its origins almost 12,000 years ago (10,000 BC) in the central Sahara. There is a belief among some archaeologists that it was from here that such art spread to Ethiopia, Kenya and Egypt, the latter possibly drawing on the Saharan art for inspiration in the great subsequent flourishing of Egyptian art. Although centuries of exposure to the elements have made it difficult to precisely date much of the rock art, most of the examples to be found in the Libyan Sahara fall within five relatively discrete historical periods.

The first of these is most commonly known as the **Wild Fauna Period** (10,000–6000 BC) but the period is also called the Early Hunter Period and the Bubalus Period after a species of giant buffalo that became extinct 5000 years ago. This era is characterised by the portrayal of elephants, giraffes and Barbary sheep from the time when the Sahara was covered by the plentiful savannah.

The **Round Head Period** (8000–6000 BC), overlapping for a time its forerunner, is known for human figures with formless bodies and painted, circular heads devoid of features. During this period, the people of the central Sahara are believed to have been foragers in the era prior to the appearance of domesticated stock. Its later stages feature more decorative figures adorned with headdresses and unusual clothing.

The next era was the **Pastoral Period** (5500–2000 BC) or Bovidian Period, which coincides with the gradual transition from a temperate to arid climate. Accordingly, human figures are shown in positions of dominance over the natural world, with spears, domesticated cattle and ceremonies in keeping with more settled communities. Experts also believe that this was when the skill of the artists began to decline.

The **Horse Period** (1000 BC–AD 1) followed, with many images of horses or horse-drawn chariots, some seemingly propelled through the air, reflecting the fact that transport and movement became more sophisticated and enabled relatively long-distance travel. Cattle are by far the dominant forms. Human figures from this period are represented by two triangles, one upright and one upside down, joined at the apex with a circular head on top. Much of the Tuareg writing (Tifinagh) alongside the paintings is from this period.

The final era of Saharan rock art was the **Camel Period** (200 BC–present). Camels became the Sahara's beast of burden and they are shown in abundance during this period. Paintings from the earliest part of this period are of the highest quality while more recent ones are nowhere near as finely conceived.

the genre. Most periods of Saharan rock art (see above) are represented with good paintings of a giraffe (minus its head), ostrich, a stick-headed human figure and a hunter with a bow and arrow; there's also an enormous carving of a man wearing a mask which signifies that we've caught him in the act of making love. Dog or jackal masks are a feature of lovemaking scenes in Saharan rock art; some experts believe them to be an invocation of the Saharan fable of a jackal's wedding, symbolising fertility and rain.

You're now venturing into the heart of the Awiss region and just north of Wadi Tiheden are some exceptionally rendered carved **elephants** (N 25°19' 37.16" E 10°32' 25.03"), with giraffe and cattle carvings in the vicinity. Also nearby are some of the clearest examples of painted stick-head **human figures** (N 25°19' 32.64" E 10°32' 16.22"). Not far south, in Wadi Udhoen, there is a clear painting

of a **chariot** (N 25°17' 12.88" E 10°34' 53.12"). Before leaving Awiss, pause to take in the outstanding **fighting scenes** (N 25°16' 01.25" E 10°35' 45.13") in Wadi Tiheden, complete with dead bodies and fighters wearing horned helmets; note the one about to attack from behind.

Note that there are vehicular routes between Awiss and the rest of the Jebel Acacus to the south. As a result, you'll need to head west towards the well of Bir Talawat and journey south between the dunes of Wan Caza and the eastern ridges of the Acacus.

### Wadi Tashwinat & Around

The main access point for Wadi Tashwinat if you're coming from Awiss is the well of **Aminaner** (N 24°51' 34.21" E 10°39' 38.59") at the northern end of Wadi Wan Millal. This is one of the Acacus' most popular wells, where water is pumped out in generous quantities for travellers and local Tuareg alike. Situated

on a broad, barren plain, Aminaner strongly highlights the miracle of water in the desert. You can have a bucket shower and give those clothes a much-needed wash; drying is not a problem.

You could easily devote an entire day to exploring the 101 wadis that make up the main valley of Wadi Tashwinat (also known as Wadi Tashween). As one local Tuareg told us, Tashwinat is the capital of Acacus.

Close to the entrance of Wadi Tashwinat is **Awanini**, a small mountain whose name means 'Go Up and See', so named after a legendary figure did precisely that, but was unable to climb down and hence died there. On a wall facing Awanini to the south, and signposted as Wan Traghit, are some of the finest and most famous paintings in all the Acacus. The most beautiful is the **hunting scene** (N 24°51' 21.52" E 10°32' 25.09") in ochre and white, with the hunter and his prey (possibly waddan or mouflon) appearing to dance across the rock. Also present on the same rock face are giraffe and a Garamanian chariot. This wonderfully varied collection spans a number of periods, ranging from around 10,000 BC (the giraffe) to the more recent chariot. Sadly, the best giraffe has been defaced by souvenir hunters.

Approximately 300m around the corner to the west is a superbly carved **elephant** (N 24°51' 36.69" E 10°32' 16.95") represented in a skilled line-carving of perfect proportions. Next to it is a smaller elephant, which has been less well preserved due to water damage. These engravings are unusual for the Acacus, which is dominated by paintings.

Also not far into the main wadi, behind a sign saying Takdhalt, a series of tablets, sheltered by an overhang of rock, show remnants of what must have been an enormous and ancient **rock-carved map** (N 24°51' 07.58" E 10°31' 09.16") of Wadi Tashwinat. The tributary wadis are marked by lines and the wells by small depressions in the rock. Next to the map are some fine human figures and Tuareg Tifinagh letters.

In the main Wadi Tashwinat, is one of the Acacus' famed painted **wedding scenes** (N 24°50' 25.89" E 10°30' 09.35"), designated by a yellow Department of Antiquities sign as 'Wan Melol', where the 6000-year-old detail is exquisite, especially the women washing hair and the women trying on dresses. If only all wedding photography was so originally rendered.

Nearby, and signposted as Wan Mughaj are the **excavation pits** of Professor Mori where a child's skeleton from 5400 years ago was found (it's now in Gallery 4 of Tripoli's Jamahiriya Museum; p78). There's also a smaller, three-columned **natural rock arch** (N 24°51' 24.45" E 10°34' 41.12"), shown as **Tin Khilqa**, at the entrance to a small valley. The columns are as finely fluted as any Roman column in Leptis Magna. At the end of the arch are some more paintings, including a unicorn.

Also within striking distance is Wadi In Ferdan, a tributary wadi off the southern end of Wadi Tashwinat. Here you'll find a **desert mosque** (N 24°49' 17.20" E 10°29' 20.47"), which consists of a collection of stones facing Mecca that have served desert travellers for centuries. High above the mosque is a rock ledge, the walls of which have **hunting scenes** with human figures pursuing animals with bows and arrows, as well as **giraffe** and a faint representation of what may be a **panther**. Above the ledge and visible from the 'mosque', there is a rock formation shaped like a camel. Further into Wadi In Ferdan, a narrow, steep-sided **canyon** (N 24°47' 33.36" E 10°29' 59.20") which leads to three **ghelta** (natural springs), which once provided an invaluable water source for the Tuareg; they're now only used for animals.

The highest point (1506m) of the Jebel Acacus is behind the wall of mountains almost due west.

### Southern Acacus

The southern reaches of the Acacus receive fewer visitors than they used to before the closure of the road south of Ghat (see p195), but it's every bit as spectacular down here as elsewhere in the Acacus. If anything, the mountains rise more steeply here than further north.

As you work your way south from Wadi Tashwinat – the easiest way is to leave close to where you entered near the **Aminaner well** – look out for the elevated ledges on the eastern side of **Wadi Am'ra** or **Wan lmlal**. From one of these, there are signature **panoramic views** (N 24°47' 40.80" E 10°40' 10.76") over the Acacus for miles around. Further away to the southwest are the adjacent wadis of Anshal and Tanshal, which are home to some of the best rock art in the southern Acacus.

The southernmost of the two is **Wadi Tanshal**, where the first site you come to

### THE CLIMATIC CONTEXT

When the Ice Age peaked in the northern hemisphere around 20,000 years ago (18,000 BC), it ushered in a period of low rainfall and barren landscapes across the Sahara – much the same as prevails today. With the thaw of the Ice Age 12,000 years ago (10,000 BC), the climate of the Sahara again became temperate and animals and people returned to occupy most of the region. Another possible dry spell approximately 8000 years ago (6000 BC) saw the introduction of domesticated cattle from the West, but for the next 3000 years the Sahara was covered with savannah, year-round lakes, pastureland and acacia trees. The temperate, often humid, climate continued until 4500 years ago (2500 BC) when the last transition commenced and the Sahara began to become the vast, arid desert it is today, a process that was drawn out over 1500 years. Perennial lakes were replaced by more-seasonal water sources and as the region became progressively drier, oases replaced lake-side and mountain villages as the sites of settlements and agricultural or pastoral activity. It was also the period in which trans-Saharan trade became the dominant economic activity fostered by an increased reliance on chariots, then horses and finally camels that were introduced to the Sahara 2200 years ago (200 BC).

The rock art from these periods is an invaluable resource depicting humankind's changing relationship with nature. Professor Mori's tracing of the transition from the dominance of animals over human beings towards domestication and a taming of the natural environment through food production still holds true. Indeed, it remains the most enduring legacy of the art – a deeper understanding of the ancient world.

includes a cow, camels and a number of ancient Tuareg letters, most of which date from the time when domesticated beasts of burden had replaced wild animals as the predominant wildlife of the Sahara. There's also a very faint giraffe from an earlier period. The second site, also on the west side of the wadi, shows cows as well as a fine, stylised human figure. From here, a cave leads into the rocks and comes out on a ledge affording fine views back down the wadi.

The third site, on the other side of the valley, involves a bit of a climb, but is worth it for the very faint image of an elephant, of which the top half is missing, and the superb representation of **three women dancing** (N 24°42' 03.51" E 10°37' 08.83"); it stands almost half a metre high although it has sadly been damaged by recent rains.

**Wadi Anshal** is almost 13km long. At the far end of the wadi are some fine paintings of **women** (N 24°43' 27.49" E 10°31' 52.66"), with good **elephant and giraffe carvings** (N 24°43' 34.84" E 10°33' 11.44") about 2km before you reach the women. A further 2km back towards the entrance of the wadi, you'll see some tyre tracks leading into a cleft in the rock. If you follow them, you'll discover more recent carvings of camels and human riders superimposed on an earlier and much more sophisticated carving of female cattle.

Almost due south of the entrance to the two wadis is the most famous (and largest) of many natural arches in the Jebel Acacus, the towering, 150m-high **Afozedzhar Arch** (N 24°41' 04.16" E 10°37' 57.74), which stands watch over the junction of three wadis. This massive stone gateway is nature at its most creative and easily the most spectacular natural rock formations in the Acacus. Although there are others, none is as impressive as this one.

### Coming from Ghat

Although the road south from Ghat was closed at the time of research (see p195), it is likely to reopen at some time during the life of this book. The following route description is based on earlier visit.

From Ghat, the paved road continues south as far as **Issayen**, literally the town at the end of the road. From here the trail descends into a rocky and sandy series of tracks and, soon after Issayen, one of these branches off to the Algerian border. Alongside the main track approximately 5km past Issayen is a white **monument** to the Libyan and Algerian mujaheddin who died fighting the French. Also next to the main trail are a number of **overturned French military vehicles** marking the spot where the French occupying army lost a battle. Until the Algerians and Libyans reopen this route, this was as far south as you could go at the time of writing.

Thereafter, the road runs roughly parallel to the Algerian border as it heads south and then east. The border is marked by evenly spaced white markers and you must be careful not to stray into Algerian territory – even in this remote area, a border is still a border.

After encountering the picturesque **Takharkhuri Dunes**, trails lead north into the Jebel Acacus via **Wadi Ayada** (Tuareg for 'leg'), a broad wadi lined with uneven cliffs rising to towering rocky bluffs. As you make your way through the wadi, you may come across an army checkpoint which marks the official **Gateway to the Acacus**. A few kilometres after the checkpoint, the trail leads over a deceptive ridge that is followed by an exhilarating descent of almost 100m. This is the southern Acacus' point of no return.

### WAN CAZA

### وان كازة

The golden sand dunes of Wan Caza run in a narrow, roughly north-south chain from close to the Ubari–Al-Aweinat highway almost to the Libya–Algeria border. They shadow the Jebel Acacus all the way, with the Msak Mallat running parallel to the dunes to the east. Wan Caza may lack the epic scope of the sand seas elsewhere (it's all relative), but they're as beautiful as any dunes in Libya. Most travellers encounter them when travelling between the Jebel Acacus and the Idehan Murzuq or Wadi Methkandoush.

At the main crossing point, the valley is famous for its multicoloured sand beneath

the surface, including black and white. The valley is thought to have been the site of a **Neolithic cemetery** and pottery shards, fragments of ostrich eggs and the ash-coloured sand provide considerable weight to this theory. Organic shore deposits found by geologists at Wan Caza (there are examples in the Germa Museum; p190) also suggest that this was once the shore of a large lake or inland sea; it's hard to escape the impression that Wan Caza still wears the aspect of a graduated shoreline, albeit this time of a desert as vast as any ocean.

Visible from the eastern reaches of the Jebel Acacus, Wan Caza also makes a wonderful campsite after leaving the southern Acacus and before entering the Awiss region (p199) to the north. The panoramas from the sand dunes at sunset towards the silhouetted peaks of the Acacus is the stuff of legend. In particular, we like the view from N 25°12' 11.47" E 10°48' 58.08", not far from the well of Bir Talwawat.

### IDEHAN MURZUQ

### أدهان مرزوق

The Idehan Murzuq (Murzuq Sand Sea) is the desert of which you've always dreamed. This incomprehensibly vast mountain range (over 35,000 sq km – not much smaller than Switzerland) made entirely of sand is simply breathtaking. It's home to as beautiful desert scenery as you'll see anywhere – dunes rise hundreds of metres high and myriad wave-like ridges, sculpted by the wind, ascend to

### THE FORMATION OF SAND DUNES

Sand dunes are among the great mysteries of the Sahara. In the desert, sand particles are relatively heavy so even the strongest winds can rarely lift them much higher than an adult's shoulders. The slightest bump in the landscape can cause a phenomenon known as cresting, where an accumulation of drifting sand builds up. The slopes facing the wind are generally more compacted and less steep than those that lie on the other side of the ridge-line. The actual formation takes place where there were originally favourable land formations (often surprisingly small) and a constancy in the direction of the winds. Over time, with a base of ever more densely compacted sand, they become a 'permanent' feature of the landscape. Individual or small groups of dunes inch forward with time, pushed by consistent winds, although sand seas are relatively stable, having formed over millennia as rock is scoured and worn down to individual grains of quartz or sand.

One of the most common types of dune are barchan or crescent dunes (the shape of the ridge-line), *seif* (Arabic for sword) which have long, sweeping ridges and *akhlé*, a haphazard network of dunes without any discernible pattern. Unique combinations of all of these can be found in both the Idehan Ubari (p187) and Idehan Murzuq (above).

For more information on sand dune formation, *Geomorphology in Deserts* (1973) by Robert Cooke and Andrew Warren is dense but comprehensive, while Ralph Bagnold's *Libyan Sands – Travels in a Dead World* (1935) is more accessible.

razor-sharp summits. The northern face of the sand sea rises up from the impossibly barren Murzuq Plateau. From a distance during the heat of the day, the Idehan Murzuq shimmers pale yellow in the heat haze. In the midst of the dunes as the sun lowers, the undulations change into subtle yet magical plays of light and shadow.

The Idehan Murzuq is far less frequented than the Idehan Ubari further north. Indeed, if you venture deeper into the Idehan Murzuq beyond the northern reaches of the sand sea, you'll likely travel for days without seeing another vehicle and the choice of sand valleys in which to camp are seemingly endless. This is a place to soak up the solitude of the desert, sleeping under the stars and surrounded on all sides by moonlit sand dunes.

Ask your Tuareg guide to tell you stories about one of the northeastern valleys of the sand sea. It is said that at night, those camping there will hear the sounds, carried eerily by the wind, of ghosts at a wedding party, singing and dancing in order to lure the inquisitive to their deaths. This is also one of the places where it's possible to hear the curious desert phenomenon known as the Drumming Sands – the interplay between the wind and the sand's surface. As one guide who has heard the phenomenon told us, 'it sounds just like an aeroplane'.

### WADI METHKANDOUSH & AROUND

وادی متخدوش  
Barren and inhospitable **Wadi Methkandoush** (adult/child 3/1LD, camera/video 5/10LD; ☎ 8am–5pm), where the Msak Settafet meets the Murzuq Plateau, has one of the richest concentra-

tions of prehistoric rock carvings in the world. Most of the carvings in the soft sandstone date back at least 12,000 years, making this one of the oldest rock-art sites in Libya. This open-air gallery contains hundreds of wonderful carvings of giraffe (including a bullet-scarred engraving of a giraffe herd), hippopotamus, elephant, crocodile, ostrich and rhinoceros. The most spectacular carving, of two catlike figures sparring on their hind-legs alongside four ostriches, is astonishing – the most spectacular single rock carving in Libya; it adorns a large flat boulder about halfway along the wadi and requires a moderately easy climb to reach.

The proliferation of animals represented at Wadi Methkandoush is all the more remarkable because of the barren, nightmarish black-rock terrain of the surrounds. The carvings run for around 12km, although only a small section, which is fortunately the best, is open to the public. Like any wadi, and as unlikely as it may seem, Wadi Methkandoush is subject to flash-flooding; if you don't believe us, look for the watermark above head high on the northern wall of the wadi, which dates from 2006.

Dozens of other wadis lead into the Msak. Most are lined with rock carvings and are home to gazelle that have retreated into the valleys to escape hunters and tourists alike. The most accessible wadis for carvings lie just to the west of Wadi Methkandoush. These include **Wadi In Ghanjuwan**, which has good elephant engravings, and **Wadi Wan Habeter** where you'll find some excellent giraffe engravings. Further west again is **Wadi Tiksaateen**, where the woman milking a cow is extraordinarily realistic.

It may just be us, but the black stones that surround these wadis are not our favourite spot for camping. Apart from the gloom that seems to envelope the landscape, known by the Tuareg as the Ocean of Stone and which looks like a post-apocalyptic vision of the end of the earth, snakes abound in the rocky clefts when the weather's warm. If you're continuing west towards the Jebel Acacus, we much prefer the sand dunes of the Idehan Murzuq (p203), which are an hour's drive away. Alternatively, many travellers visit on a day trip from Germa, 150km away.

### MURZUQ

مرزق  
pop 44,909

Murzuq was one of the most important Saharan towns of history, but it has never been the most beautiful place to live. The capital of the chiefs of Awlad Muhammad tribe who ruled Fezzan from the late 15th century until 1813, Murzuq was one of the desert's true centres of power. When the German explorer Frederick Hornemann visited her in 1798, he found a prosperous town through whose gates passed countless traders. Their merchandise included slaves, gold, tiger skins, ostrich feathers, copper and silk. Goods came from all four corners of the Sahara, and Cairo, Tripoli, Ghatames, Tuat (in Algeria), Agadez (Niger), Bornu (Chad), Turkey and India.

That said, few ancient travellers have ever had too many kind words to say about Murzuq, in part because of the historical dangers of desert travel around its perimeter and also because of its unhealthy and once-malarial climate. Frederick Hornemann was one of many European explorers to fall ill; he was stuck here for seven months. After 1813, Murzuq quickly lost its wealth and stature, a process accelerated by the shift from trans-Saharan to ocean-borne trade. Its time had passed and that's how it feels to this day.

The modern town (170km south of Sebha) is downright ugly, but it does house a petrol station (which often runs out of supplies), a grocery store, whose stocks are similarly limited, and a post office.

The highlight of the town remains the shady, open-air **market** which seems to belong more to African village life than to the clamour of a large Libyan town. The **castle** (admission 3LD) is still intact and open to the public as a museum; it might take a while to

track down the caretaker who has the key. It was home to the Sultan of Fezzan and his considerable household and later to a Turkish garrison of 500 men. Next to the castle is one of the most charming **vernacular-style mosques** in Libya. The prayer hall is vividly painted in Fezzan colours and the mud-brick minaret curves unusually. The town is notable for being one of the few cities in Libya to have a largely Toubou population (for more information see p49).

Unless the *buyut ash-shabaab* (youth hostel) has reopened, there's nowhere to stay and camping is the only option. Nor are there any restaurants to speak of, although the occasional café serves chicken and couscous.

### AL-QATRUN

القطرون  
This remote settlement, 310km south of Sebha, is little more than a few shacks, houses and a checkpoint. Located on Wadi Ekema, it was historically Fezzan's most southerly town on the trade route to the kingdom of Bornu at Lake Chad. It's now the last town of any size en route to the Niger border and the end of the tarmac road. The authorities at the checkpoint will be keen to scrutinise your papers before allowing you to pass – it's here that you'll find out whether the advice you received in Tripoli about the logistics of crossing the border into Niger was correct; we hope for your sake it was. If the border has reopened, the Libyan authorities may require that you complete exit formalities here unless the border post at Tumu is staffed.

## THE EASTERN SAHARA

Libya's far southeast has a number of stand-out highlights, most notably Waw al-Namus and Jebel al-Uweinat, and by the time you venture beyond Waw al-Namus you've well and truly left the beaten track. To travel in this region, you'll need plenty of time, because it can be a long road to anywhere, but the empty Saharan landscapes are more than adequate compensation.

### ZUEILA

زويلة  
Zueila is another former home of the Fezzan sultans (the town used to be called Balad ash-Shareef or Town of the Chiefs) and a rendezvous point for caravans, although it

### PROTECTING SAHARAN ROCK ART

As remarkable as it seems, tourists pose the greatest threat to the survival of the rock art of Wadi Methkandoush, the Jebel Acacus and Jebel al-Uweinat. Although it happens rarely, enough tourists have decided that the region's famous rock art would make a wonderful souvenir of their time in Libya – actions which were largely responsible for Libya ushering in the current era of escorted group tourism. To acquire their piece of priceless Libyan heritage, tourists have chipped away sections of the rock walls, thrown water on the paintings to enhance the light for taking photographs or used complex silicon processes designed to copy the paintings. It seems incredible that we should have to make such an obvious point, but whatever you do, please leave the paintings and carvings as you find them.

If you want to learn more about Saharan rock art or about efforts being undertaken to preserve rock art across Africa, contact the **Trust for African Rock Art** (TARA; ☎ 254-20-884467; www.africanrockart.org; PO Box 24122, Nairobi, Kenya).

never rivalled Murzuq as a centre of trade. When the Arab traveller Al-Bakri visited in the 11th century, he described seeing a cathedral, mosque, bath and markets, while Frederick Hornemann in 1798 found it one of the most hospitable towns on his travels across the Sahara.

There is a handy petrol station at the eastern entrance to town although, as always in this part of the country, supplies can be unpredictable.

The **fort** overlooking the old town is quite impressive, but the town's main attraction – a set of **seven tombs** (known as As-Sahaba) – is around 7km east of town. Architecturally the two-storeyed tombs are distinctive, made of sun-dried bricks and stone and each topped with a dome; six of the seven have been restored to something resembling their original appearance. But it's the fact that the tombs date to AH 27 and belong to seven Companions of the Prophet Mohammed who died here in a battle to defend the town in the 7th century that gives the site its real significance. If you're asking for directions, ask for '*maqbara Sahaba*'.

There is nowhere to stay in town and as for food, take what you can find in Zueila, which will hopefully be better than that Frederick Hornemann found in the 18th century when the food was 'apt to produce flatulencies and diarrhoea'.

Zueila is 130km east of Murzuq or 200km southeast of Sebha.

## WAW AL-NAMUS

و او الناموس

The Libyan Sahara has everything you longed for in a desert landscape: from soaring sand dunes to palm-fringed pools, from remote desert massifs to oasis towns of antiquity. And yet, even amid such splendour, Waw al-Namus feels like an unimaginable bonus, for it's the sort of place that you never dreamed existed. This extraordinary extinct and steep-sided volcanic crater is a weird-and-wonderful place, one of the most remote destinations in the world and arguably the most captivating in the Libyan Sahara. The black volcanic sand is stunning both from afar and when examined in miniature; look closely at some of the lava fragments and you may find green crystals from beneath the earth encased in the black crust. The three palm-fringed lakes arrayed around the crater are as surprising as they

are beautiful, with each one a different colour – red, green and blue. Even here, so far from the nearest stand of trees, small but plentiful animal footprints leading towards the lakes tell of a micro ecosystem all its own. The crater is 7km in circumference and the summit of the rocky mountain in the centre affords stunning views. The sense of being somewhere *really* remote – Waw al-Namus is around 300km from the nearest towns – is another highlight of coming here.

You could easily spend half a day exploring the crater, but don't for a minute consider sleeping here – not for nothing is Waw al-Namus known as the Crater of the Mosquitoes. One other important point: it is preferable to leave your 4WD at the crater's rim and descend into the crater on foot using existing tracks in order to avoid scarring the landscape for others.

Visiting here is a major undertaking and involves a two-day round trip in reliable, well-equipped vehicles. The road east from Zueila goes as far as the tiny town of Tmisah (76km). Thereafter, it's unsurfaced for about another 100km to Waw al-Kabir, an army camp where you'll find showers and basic meals. Beyond Waw al-Kabir are two army checkpoints, including one just before you arrive at Waw al-Namus; dropping off cigarettes and reading matter is much appreciated by the bored conscripts staffing them. A permit is officially needed to visit Waw al-Namus, but this should be handled by your tour company and the price included in the overall cost of your tour.

You may be thinking that this is a lot of trouble and expense just to see a crater. But this is not a place you'll easily forget.

## TIBESTI

جبال تيبستي

Libyan guides to whom we spoke claim this breathtaking chain of extinct volcanic mountains (which are also known as Jebel Nuqay on the Libyan side) has Libya's most superb desert scenery: dramatic cliffs, curious rock formations and deep ravines. It is also home to more fine examples of prehistoric rock art. Most of the range lies across the border in Chad, including the highest peak in the Sahara, Emi Koussi (3415m).

Sadly, the area is presently closed to tourists. The main reason is the presence of thousands of unexploded mines left over

from Libya's border conflict with Chad in the 1980s, as well as continuing unrest across the border in Chad. For more information, see p218.

## TAZERBO

تازربو

Most people turn back from Waw al-Namus, but a hardy few continue eastwards towards Tazerbo, skirting the northern reaches of the **Ramlat Rabyaneh**, home to some splendid sand dunes of fine sand – the *ramlat* (sand sea) involves some of the most difficult desert driving in Libya.

Tazerbo is a small place, but it can seem like a metropolis if you're arriving from the empty desert wastes. Tazerbo has taken on national significance as a source of water for the Great Man-Made River project; the well fields are south of town. In the town itself, the remains of an old **Toubou fort** are all that catch the eye. There's nowhere to stay and only a few grocery stores.

If you found that your experience of the Ubari Lakes (p187) was somewhat spoiled by the convoys of 4WDs in the vicinity, consider taking the desert route to Al-Kufra (the paved road is appalling for the last 200km into Al-Kufra in any event; see p132) because it passes through the oasis of **Buzeima**. Although not a match for the dramatic surrounds of the Ubari Lakes, Buzeima is beautiful (and deserted) nonetheless, with plenty of dunes nearby. This would-be spa town and lake has very hot spring water that is supposedly good for rheumatism. Once famous for its dates, Buzeima was long ago abandoned.

## AL-KUFRA

الكفرة

☎ 0652 / pop 47,919

Al-Kufra is one of the most remote towns in the world – if you discount tiny Tazerbo off on a minor side road on the road to Benghazi, the nearest town is Jalu, an epic 625km away to the north. Although it is possible to fly here from Benghazi, Al-Kufra's sense of isolation is enhanced by the fact that the only paved road linking the town to the outside world is the worst in Libya; for more information, see p132. The state of the road may be why the cluster of oases that make up Al-Kufra are such a welcoming sight as you approach the town. In truth, however, Al-Kufra is a place to transact essential business (obtain travel

permits, sleep in your last bed for a while) before continuing southeast to Jebel Arkno and Jebel al-Uweinat.

Al-Kufra was once an important staging post for trans-Saharan trade and, from the 19th century, it was an important centre of the Sanusi Movement in their resistance against Italian rule. It was finally occupied by the Italians in the 1930s. During WWII the oasis became a base for the Long Range Desert Group under the British.

## Orientation & Information

The main road in from the north passes a petrol station, with another on the second road leading left (east). This latter road leads into the city centre (around 2km from the turn-off), passing the town's hotel, grocery stores, a number of restaurants and police station where travel permits are issued en route; **travel permits** (free) are required to visit Jebel Arkno and Jebel al-Uweinat, and although you won't need to visit the police station in person, you will need to bring two passport-sized photos so that your tour company can obtain the permit. The town centre contains the post office, a number of private telephone offices and cheap eateries.

## Sights

The only sight worthy of note is the massive **camel market** 10km south of town alongside the road to Jebel Arkno. Many of the camels you see in Libya have, at some time, passed through this market after the arduous 40-day forced march from Sudan and Chad.

Where the road peters out into the sand, impossibly overlaid **trucks** bound for Chad or, if the border is open, Sudan, gather to load their human and other cargo ready for the seven-day journey across the border. Always ask before taking photos.

## Sleeping & Eating

**Al-Waha Hotel** (☎ 7502701; tw with shared/private bathroom 15/22LD) If you encounter the same receptionist we did, you most definitely may *not* see the room until you've paid for it. Given that you're not exactly spoiled for choice in Al-Kufra (what are you going to do, drive back to Benghazi on principle?), fork out the cash and climb the stairs to large, generally clean rooms illuminated by a bare light bulb. Some have balconies,

some toilet seats are missing and don't even think of asking reception for towels. (They're actually quite friendly once you get to know them.)

**Friends Restaurant** (meals from 6LD) Along the main road into town, this is hugely popular for its 'Kentucky Chicken' and salads; it may take a while to arrive but servings are enormous. It also does hamburgers and other hearty dishes.

In the centre of town, cheap restaurants serving kebabs and Egyptian-style felfafel abound.

### Getting There & Away

It's not often that we feel inclined to say this, but thank God for Libyan Arab Airlines. Twice-weekly flights (one-way/return 37/74LD) from Benghazi save you a two-day return journey, not to mention allow you to avoid the thoroughly uninteresting and almost as often arduous road journey; for information on the road from Ajdabiya to Al-Kufra see (see p132). The airport is 8km west of town.

If you belong to the school of thought that air travel to the Sahara is somehow cheating, two far more interesting desert routes from Tazerbo (p207) and Al-Jaghbug (p155) lead to Al-Kufra.

### THE ROAD TO JEBEL ARKNO

The trails leading southeast from Al-Kufra to Jebel Arkno (around 325km) are marked only by tyre tracks and by the desiccated carcasses of camels that didn't quite make it on the 40-day journey from Sudan.

Coming from Al-Kufra, the first landmark of note is the rock monolith of **Gara Khamsin** (50km) followed by the sight of the low sand dunes of **Seif Saba'een** (70km) away to the east. After 140km of unrelenting sand sheets, you enter the soft sand hills of **Gur Zwaya** where the low rock formations resemble nothing so much as the fossilised skeletons of long-extinct animals. There's a Libyan army checkpoint close to here. By the time you reach the small chain of dunes known as **Seif al-Matar**, you've broken the back of the journey.

Just beyond the dunes is an abandoned restaurant; hard as it is to believe, this place was not so long ago a buzzing meeting place of traders and travellers, smugglers and long-haul truck drivers where you could

order a cold soft-drink and a meal then pay in Sudanese pounds, Chadian francs or Libyan dinars. As the western Sudanese region of Darfur descended into violence, borders were closed, trade dried up to a trickle and the restaurant closed its doors.

Soon, the **Gar'at el-Rih** (Mountain of the Wind) should come into view to the west, while Jebel Arkno itself should also be visible on the horizon to the southeast. Don't mistake the rocky pyramids of **Ashreef** for Jebel Arkno. Instead follow them south, skirt **Jebel Arkno** on its western side until you reach the tree marking the only entrance into the jebel.

### JEBEL ARKNO

جبل اركنو

You wouldn't come all this way just to see Jebel Arkno – a series of barren rocky outcrops encircling a central wadi – but you should definitely stop here as you make your way to Jebel al-Uweinat.

Jebel Arkno has three main attractions. The first – a well-preserved **armoured car** – greets you soon after entering the wadi. It belonged to the Libyan-backed Chadian forces of Goukouni Oueddei, who were based here during Libya's long war with Chad in the 1980s. Libya's protégé served as Chadian president from November 1979 until 1981 and would fight against Hissene Habré until 1987, when Libya officially ended its armed campaign to win control of the uranium-rich Aouzou Strip in northern Chad. Oueddei was so close to his Libyan sponsors that in 1981 he announced plans to unify the two countries. Hard to imagine, however, that a would-be president would have felt too at home in this arid corner of the desert. For more information on the war with Chad, see p41.

There is also the shell of an abandoned jeep from the same era, 3km into the wadi.

Also concealed within Jebel Arkno are some clear **giraffe** and **ostrich engravings** on a rock face of the western wall of the wadi, 5km after the tank (2km after passing the jeep). The carvings are thought to date back 12,000 years.

The meagre grasses and bushes of Jebel Arkno somehow support desert creatures of more recent vintage with the notoriously shy gazelle, waddan and fennec fox all reasonably prevalent. With the nearest Libyan army post some 40km away and tourists making only rare appearances here, this is

### STUCK IN THE SAND *Anthony Ham*

There's something gloriously remote about Libya's extreme southeast, but I quickly lost my enthusiasm for it when we awoke one morning in the sands between Jebel Arkno and Jebel al-Uweinat to find the car's battery was a complete nonstarter.

I'm accustomed to my Libyan guides and drivers being able to fix anything – a legacy of the embargo years when spare parts were scarce: Libyans had to make do with what they had and went on to become some of the most skilled mechanics (and improvisers) in the world. I have watched, somewhere between Waw al-Namus and Al-Haruj al-Aswad, as my driver dismantled a Landrover's suspension and then rebuilt it in just over two hours. I have marvelled in the Idehan Ubari (Ubari Sand Sea) as my guide and driver changed the entire gear system of a Toyota Landcruiser. Most of my five years of desert travel in Libya has also been in the west of the country, where passing travellers who can send for help or share supplies or parts are a regular occurrence. So I wasn't worried at first.

We dug the wheels from the sand and pushed. When that failed, they jacked the car and tried to spin the wheels, hoping they would coax the engine to life. They dismantled the fanbelt and tried to charge the battery by hand. Then, at a particular moment, my two guides and driver stopped peering into the engine and, as one, looked hopefully out to the horizon. That's when I knew we had problems and began to wonder just how much trouble we were in.

And so it was that one guide and one driver set out to walk 25km across the sand to the police post just beyond Jebel al-Uweinat, leaving us to contemplate what it truly meant to be stuck in the sand with no prospect of passing traffic. As the hours passed, with the sun overhead, we crawled under the car for shade. What if they got lost and never returned? What if the police vehicle was under repair or away on patrol? We knew we had enough food and water for at least a week, but the sense of helplessness soon morphed into morbid thoughts.

Although I often break my own rule and venture into the Sahara in just one 4WD, I do so only with experienced drivers who know their car. Where possible, I also always travel off the beaten track with a satellite phone. In this case, in part because the east simply doesn't have the tourist infrastructure or experience that southwestern Libya has mastered, I had neither.

After six hours, a machine-gun-mounted patrol car of the Libyan police appeared over the horizon, bearing our guide and driver (who were originally mistaken by the police for illegal immigrants from Egypt) and the means to restart our car.

A happy reunion. Relief that you could almost taste. And one of the most important lessons of Saharan travel learned – always know your vehicle before taking it into the desert.

one of the best places to see some of the Libyan Sahara's most iconic species (for more information see p63).

### JEBEL AL-UWEINAT جبل الوينات

Rising from the sands where the borders of Libya, Sudan and Egypt converge, Jebel al-Uweinat (two-thirds of which lie in Libya with the rest shared between Sudan and Egypt) is worth every kilometre of the long journey to get here. That's partly because there are some outstanding rock-art sites hidden in the rocky clefts, and also because the scenery is exceptional. But perhaps above all else, it's because this is like the rest of the Libyan Sahara used to be before the tourists arrived; you'll find yourself revelling in the idea of just how deep in the Sahara you are and just how quiet it all is.

There are two main wadis that run into the heart of the Libyan section of Jebel al-Uweinat. Although you could easily follow these routes in reverse, we suggest that if you're coming from Jebel Arkno (38km away), you enter the massif via the northernmost wadi, **Kerkur Bou Hlega**, which follows a southeasterly path into the jebel for around 7km.

Kerkur Bou Hlega is reminiscent of Jebel Arkno, with very little vegetation and a sun-seared hue to the boulder-strewn mountains. On the western side of the wadi, hidden in caves, are two **rock art sites**. One has fine representations of cows and a goat (or perhaps a waddan), but the second one you come to after entering the wadi is quite possibly the most extensive single gallery of rock paintings



in Libya. There are clearer and arguably more beautiful scenes in the Jebel Acacus (p198) in Libya's far southwest, but the array of human figures here is astonishing. If it brings to mind the scenes of the Cave of the Swimmers from *The English Patient*, that could be because the inspiration for the movie came from rock-art sites a few short kilometres from here on the Egyptian side of the border. Sadly, crossing the border here is not permitted. One Libyan guide with whom we spoke did try and was promptly dispatched with a military escort to Cairo. So near...

Near the southeastern end of the wadi, a narrow thoroughfare between the rocks allows you to cross into the other main wadi, **Kerkur Ibrahim**. Almost without warning, you've entered another world where vegetation carpets the valley floor and catching sight of the relatively abundant **desert wildlife** of Jebel al-Uweinat suddenly seems possible; it was here that we saw our first fennec fox, when rival armies of them fought over our dinner scraps at night.

In addition to watching for wildlife, keep an eye out for the macabre camel carcass beneath a tree – the glue-like liquid secreted by the tree has preserved the upper side of the body, which has solidified even as the underside has been eaten away.

One local guide told us that around half-way through the roughly 10km-long wadi, a

steep valley climbs away to the south until it reaches an elevated spring surrounded by palm trees; '*ain*' is the Arabic word for spring and their prevalence in the massif give it its name. Having lost so much time with car problems earlier in the day (see *Stuck in the Sand*, p209), we weren't able to investigate, but it's highly recommend that you do.

As the wadi continues its northwestern path, and you approach the point where the wadi leaves the mountains, you'll find some of the jebel's most dramatic and unusual rock formations. We can think of no better way to describe some of them than by evoking a Flake chocolate bar. Magnificent stuff! Also in the vicinity here are three rock-art sites – one in a cave in the southern rock wall of the wadi and the others in the folds of a rocky island surrounded by sand, close to the wadi's north side. Look particularly for the **ochre giraffe paintings**, as well as more representations of **cattle**.

There are some fine places to camp around here.

To get an evocative sense of the lie of the land at Jebel al-Uweinat, track it down on Google Maps (<http://maps.google.es/>). Saul Kelly's *The Hunt for Zerzura: The Lost Oasis and the Desert War* is one of few works of history to describe Jebel al-Uweinat in detail, all the while evocatively capturing its remote, end-of-the-earth feel.