

Libya Lures Visitors to Splendours of Rome



Two thousand years after this stunning place blossomed into one of the great cities of antiquity, Libyans are hoping that the Roman site's cobbled streets will bustle once more, this time with Western tourists eager to explore one of the last hidden corners of the Mediterranean.

"This is one of our greatest treasures," said Musbah Ilqat, a bored young guide at Leptis Magna, who spends his days eagerly awaiting the tourist boom that has yet to materialise. "People visit from all over the world, but not very many. We hope that now we have made peace with America, everyone will want to come."

As Libya emerges from decades of isolation it wants to capitalise on its fast-improving relations with the West by attracting foreign investment. While American oil companies will need no encouragement to restake their claims in the energy sector, transforming the tourist business into a multibillion-pound industry, as neighbouring Tunisia and Egypt have done, will be much harder.

The centrepiece of the campaign, launched five years ago without much success, is Leptis Magna, a Roman city 75 miles east of Tripoli. At its peak, under Emperor Septimus Severus, the city rivalled Rome, with a population of 90,000 people, two theatres, a sporting complex, temples, shops and even a market for wild animals, captured in Africa and shipped to Rome. But this week, aside from a few workmen restoring the stage at the amphitheatre and a couple of Libyan families having a picnic on the beach, the sprawling site was deserted.

"Tourism is a resource that has not yet been tapped. We think that the development of the last and biggest shore on the Mediterranean will be a win-win situation for investors and Libya," Shukri Ghanem, the Prime Minister, said, "but we need to build an infrastructure and we need to lift travel restrictions."

Getting people into Libya is less difficult than it was since the lifting of sanctions, including a ban on international flights, in 1998. Nevertheless, despite the promises, foreign investors may think twice before committing.

Alexia Mizzi, an assistant manager at the Corinthia Towers Hotel, said that the country still had a lot to learn in developing tourism. The five-star hotel, owned by a Maltese company, opened last year. It has done well from foreign businessmen and a small group of intrepid tourists, but she predicted that opening the country for mass tourism would be tough. "It could take as long as 15 years to really develop," she said. "There is no infrastructure here."

IMPERIAL GEM

The expansive baths, temples, forums and triumphal arches of Leptis Magna befit a city that bore a Roman emperor, Septimius Severus - but they also tell of Leptis's importance as a port, guaranteeing a vital supply of North African staple crops to Rome.

Without food, Rome's population became notoriously restless.

The city was founded by the sea-trading Phoenicians in the tenth century BC and became one of the major cities of Rome's early enemy, Carthage.

The Magnificent Ketchaoua Mosque in Algiers

One of the fascinating sites to visit in Algiers is the ancient Ketchaoua Mosque.

Situated in the Kasbah of Algiers, the Ketchaoua Mosque has a long and interesting history.

During the rule of the Ottoman Empire, the Ketchaoua Mosque was strategically placed at the center of the city at the point where the roads from the lower Kasbah led out to the five gates of the city. This was a district that contained grand family palaces owned by the wealthy and influential political and commercial figures of the Ottoman Regency.

During the 16th and 17th centuries the Ottoman Empire dominated territory in three continents including large areas of Southeastern Europe, North Africa and the Middle East. Remnants of the Ottoman Empire's influence are still found in architecture throughout these territories.

It is believed, but not proven, that a mosque had occupied the site of the Ketchaoua Mosque since the 14th century. However, the only documentation of the mosque's existence is a notarial document dated in 1612. According to the commemorative



inscription, the Ketchaoua Mosque was rebuilt by Hasan Pasha in the latter part of the

18th century. In 1838 the mosque became the St. Philippe Cathedral and in 1940 a

cross was placed on top of the building under the direction of Marshal Sylvain Valee of France - the conqueror of the Algerian city of Constantine. In 1962 the cathedral was converted to the Ketchaoua Mosque.

Overlooking a public square, the mosque has twin minarets rising up either side of the three-arched entranceway.

The mosque is of Byzantine and Moorish design with graceful archways, black and white marble columns and beautiful decorations throughout. A tomb with the remains of San Geronimo is housed in one of the mosque chambers.

With the development of the city of Algiers crowding in on it, the Ketchaoua Mosque may not stand out as prominently as it did in by-gone days.

Nonetheless, this mosque-turned-cathedral-turned-mosque bears testimony to the history of Algiers.

It also serves as a symbol of the restitution of the Ketchaoua Mosque to Islam and is seen as having significant religious and cultural importance. Visitors to the Algerian capital of Algiers should include the Ketchaoua Mosque on their list of interesting places to see.