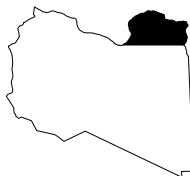


Cyrenaica



Cyrenaica is wholly unlike anywhere else in Libya. There are faint reminders of Libya's desert geography in the far southeast, where Tobruk, one of the world's premier WWII sites, provides a gateway to the little-visited oasis of Al-Jaghbub and the remote Great Sand Sea. But for the most part the region is physically different to the rest of the country. Cyrenaica is Libya's greenest corner, home to the Jebel al-Akhdar (Green Mountains), which closely shadow the coastline creating some spectacular landscapes, particularly around Ras al-Hillal.

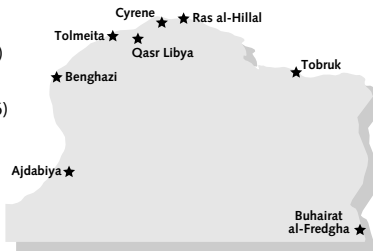
Cyrenaica's main difference, though, is cultural. Although the Romans left their mark, Cyrenaica was more strongly influenced by the ancient Greeks. Nestled in its narrow strip of coastline are three outstanding cities of Greek antiquity – Cyrene, Apollonia and Tolmeita. Pockets of Byzantine culture, such as Qasr Libya and L'Atrun, round out the picture.

During the Islamic period Cyrenaica was often ruled from Egypt. When the rebellious Cyrenians refused to yield to Egyptian rule, hundreds of thousands of families belonging to the Bani Salim tribe from Arabia were transplanted to Cyrenaica. Their descendants remain here, giving rise to the claim that Cyrenaica is, linguistically and culturally, the most Arab region in the world outside of the Arabian Peninsula. It is often said that the Middle East begins at Ras Lanuf.

Cyrenaica's distinctiveness from the rest of Libya also finds expression in the region's cuisines, and its people's reputation for being gregarious storytellers and poets. Indeed, clamorous cities, such as Benghazi are more evocative of Egypt than the rest of Libya.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Marvel at the aesthetic vision of the ancient Greeks at **Cyrene** (p141) and **Tolmeita** (p134)
- Examine at close quarters the skilled mosaic artistry of the Byzantines at **Qasr Libya** (p136)
- Enjoy the old-world charm of Freedom Sq and the clamour of Souq al-Jreed in **Benghazi** (opposite)
- Take in the panoramic sweep where the Jebel al-Akhdar meets the Mediterranean at **Ras al-Hillal** (p149)
- Pause to reflect on the wartime tragedy of **Tobruk** (p151)
- Get a taste of the Sahara at the dune-framed lake of **Buhairat al-Fredgha** (p155) near Al-Jaghbub
- Drive the desert road from **Tobruk to Ajdabiya** (p154) without falling asleep at the wheel



WESTERN CYRENAICA

Cyrenaica's west is more a place to pass through on your way somewhere else, although Benghazi is an agreeable city with great hotels and restaurants and enough sights to warrant half a day's exploration. Awjila is a long way from anywhere, but its exceptional Al-Kabir Mosque and the old city may just be worth the detour.

BENGHAZI

☎ 061 / pop 665,689

Libya's second city and the principal city of eastern Libya, Benghazi is a mix of busy commercial centre and rundown Mediterranean charm, although it lacks the obvious appeal of Tripoli. All but the merest traces of Benghazi's antiquity are buried beneath the modern city, and much of the old town was destroyed during WWII.

Nonetheless, if you know where to look Benghazi is worth exploring. It can also make a good base or staging post for touring the Jebel al-Akhdar, as well as the Greek cities of Tocra, Tolmeita, Cyrene and Apollonia. The climate is also one of the more pleasant in Libya; even in summer, you've a good chance of catching a sea breeze. Benghazi is at its best around sunset and early evening, when the streets are often alive with people and the city lights provide the perfect backdrop to the waters of Benghazi's double harbour.

History

The original settlement here was just east of modern Benghazi and was founded by Greek settlers from Cyrene, although some archaeologists argue that the settlers came directly from the islands of the Aegean. Called Eusperides, it was first mentioned in historical records in the 6th century BC and was thought to be the site of the legendary garden of Hesperides, from the Greek myth of the golden apples. The only reminder of this site of myth is the lake surrounded by reeds, picnic areas and water slides alongside the road to Al-Bayda, around 4km northeast of town.

Eusperides was abandoned in the mid-3rd century BC and a new settlement grew up on the shores of the Mediterranean in what is now modern Benghazi. By around 249 BC

the new settlement was named Berenice (see p126), named after a Cyrenaican princess and wife of Ptolemy III of Egypt. Like other formerly Greek cities of northeastern Libya, Berenice fell under the sway of the Romans in the 1st century BC. By the time that the Byzantines arrived, the city was in decline and although they made some repairs, it fell into obscurity.

After the Arab invasion, Benghazi was again neglected in favour of other cities of more strategic importance, such as Ajdabiya. It was only in the 15th century AD that Benghazi was rediscovered by Tripolitanian merchants, taking the city into a new and prosperous phase. Benghazi is named after Ibn Ghazi (also Bani Ghazi), a local holy man renowned in the 15th century AD for his good deeds.

The Turks took Benghazi in 1578, but their attempts to make it a centre for tax collection drove traders to other towns. Benghazi recovered its fortunes during the mid-19th century, but this was not to last. In 1911 the Italians laid siege to the city from the sea. The city subsequently became an Italian fortress in the face of fierce resistance by the surrounding tribes. With the resistance finally subdued during the 1930s, Benghazi virtually became an Italian city.

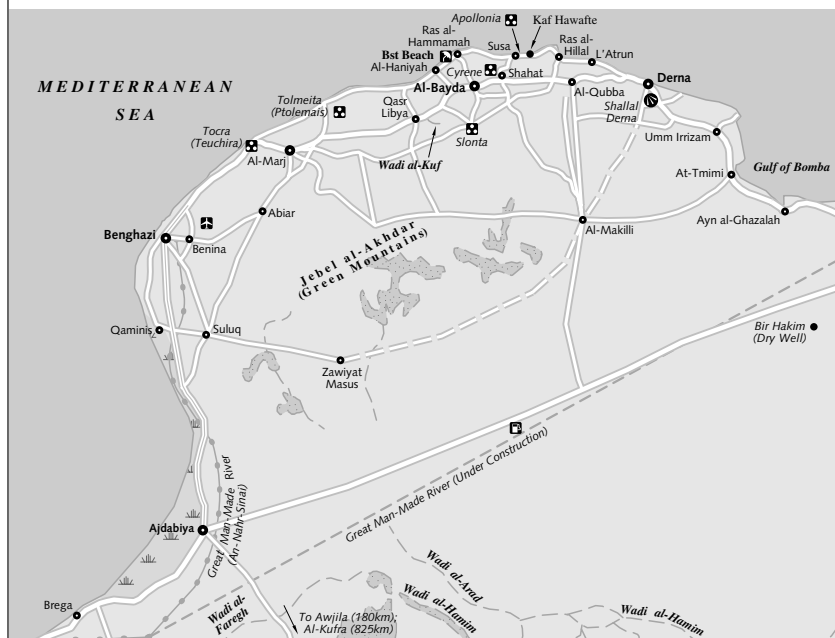
During WWII the city constantly changed hands. More than 1000 bombs rained down upon the city and by the time the war ended there was little left. After the war, many settlers from trading families from western Libya, especially from Misrata, came to the city. After independence the development of the city began again, and the harbour was enlarged to accommodate commercial shipping.

Benghazi was bombarded by the missiles of the US Sixth Fleet in April 1986, causing considerable damage and killing as many as 30 people (see p41).

Orientation

Benghazi's hotels are spread far and wide. The older part of the city stretches out from the northern shores of the harbour and covers an area roughly bounded by Sharias Ahmed Rafiq al-Mahdawi, 23 July and Al-Jezayir. The heart of the 'medina' is the partly Italianate Freedom Sq; to the northeast is the covered Souq al-Jreed.

CYRENAICA



Benghazi's two harbours divide the northern sections of the city from the road south to the university suburb of Qar Yunis.

Information

INTERNET ACCESS

Internet cafés (☎ 10am-midnight Sat-Thu, 6pm-midnight Fri) are found on almost every street of the city centre, although many places come and go. Look for the blue Internet Explorer sign or red Yahoo! sign on the window. The more convenient places are along Sharia Jamal Abdul Nasser and along Sharia Qasr Ahmed; each of these is marked on the map. Hotels also have internet access, including **Funduq al-Fadheel** (per hr 1LD; ☎ 3pm-midnight) and **Funduq Tibesti** (per hr 2LD; ☎ 10am-midnight).

JAWAZZAT

The **jawazzat** (☎ 9098765; Sharia al-Corniche) is at the western end of Benghazi harbour.

MONEY

There are plenty of banks in the central area. The Masraf al-Tijara Watanmiya (Bank of

Commerce & Development), where you can get Visa cash advances, has branches at the airport, Islamic Call Building, Funduq Uzu and Funduq Tibesti; the latter has an ATM that serves Visa and Visa Electron, with a maximum daily withdrawal of 200LD.

A small and relatively open black market of moneychangers operates between Freedom Sq and the southern entrance to Souq al-Jreed.

POST & TELEPHONE

The **main post & telephone office** (Sharia Omar al-Mukhtar; ☎ 10am-10pm Sat-Thu) is about 300m north of the harbour.

Sights

OLD BERENICE

Just set back from the water and next to the old lighthouse are the low-lying remains of the old Greek (and later Roman) settlement of Berenice (see p125). There's not a whole lot to see, but what there is, in outline, includes a broad range of historical eras – a trace of the 3rd-century BC **Greek city wall**, four **Roman peristyle houses** and six **wine**



vats and a **Byzantine church** with a mosaic in desperate need of restoration. These ruins formed the northern part of the ancient city, which extended south and east but now lies buried beneath modern Benghazi.

FREEDOM SQUARE

Benghazi's **Old Town Hall** runs along the western side of Freedom Sq. Built during the period of Italian occupation, the town hall is now derelict, rubbish-strewn and closed to the public, although traces of its former elegance remain nonetheless. The decaying, whitewashed Italianate façade is unmistakably grand, with some lovely arched doorways and pillars. The large balcony once played host to its share of important orators – Mussolini addressed the crowds, German field marshal Rommel reviewed his troops and King Idris spoke to his subjects from here.

At the northern end of Freedom Sq is the **Atiq Mosque** (also known as Al-Jame' al-Kabir, or the Great Mosque). The original mosque on the site was built in the early 15th century, but had many later renovations.

Behind the mosque is another square surrounded by modern porticos and off to the northwest is the **Osman Mosque** with its distinctive Ottoman-style minaret.

SOUQ AL-JREED

The covered market of Benghazi, Souq al-Jreed, stretches for over 1km from Freedom Sq to Al-Funduq Market. It's not the most evocative bazaar in the Arab world but its liveliness and colour are among the highlights of a visit to Benghazi.

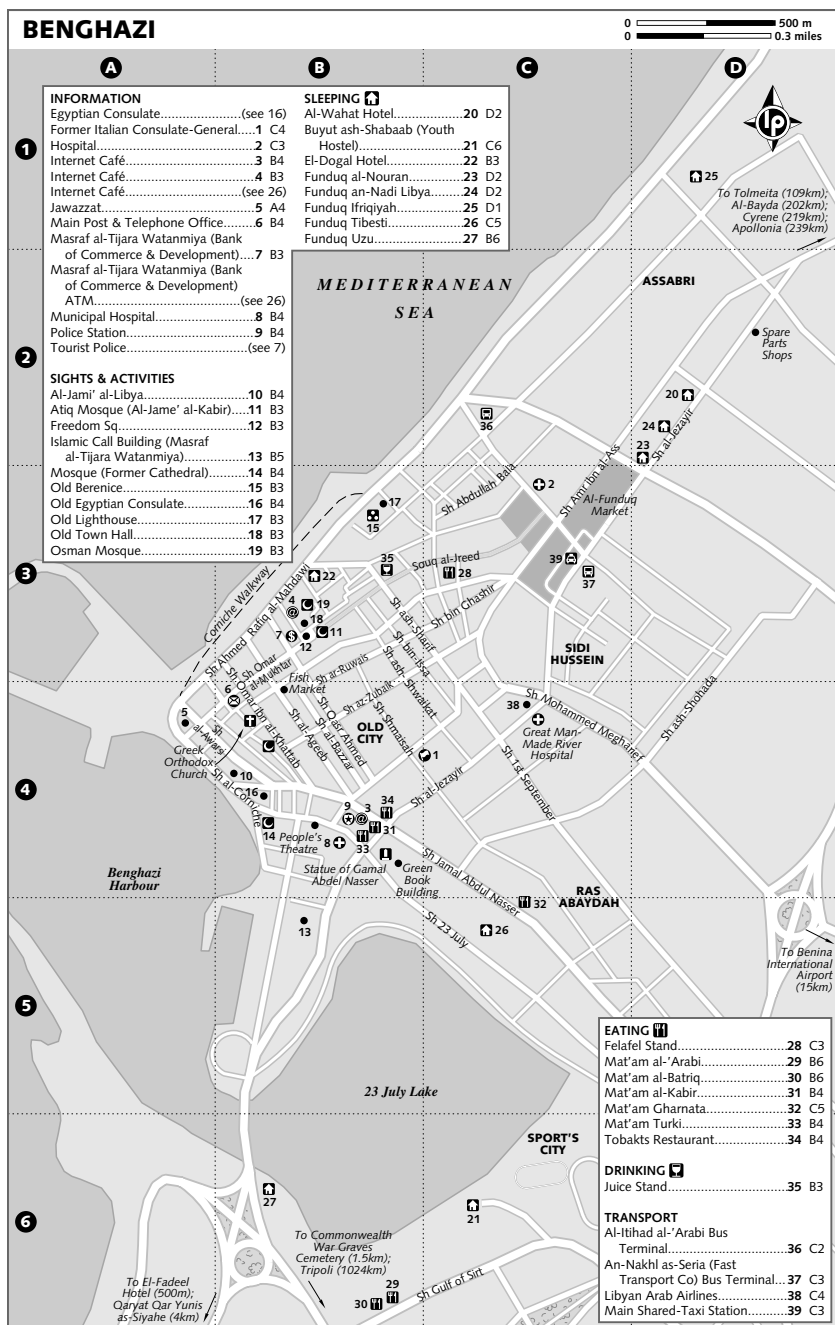
Like any Middle Eastern market worth its salt, Souq al-Jreed offers just about anything you could want and plenty that you don't. This market exists primarily for locals, which is what makes it so worthwhile. There are watches, cheap clothes, elegant gold jewellery, *galabiyas* (men's robes) of alternately questionable and refined taste, henna, Levis and 'anything you want, one dinar', all displayed to the accompaniment of the music of Umm Kolthum crooning out from the latest Sony sound systems. Also visible through the cloud of overbearing perfumes are pharmacies, felafel stalls, mosques and glossy pictures of Mecca. The nearer you get to Al-Funduq Market, the greater the noise and general clamour, and the more the lines between an Arab bazaar and an African market become blurred. For many reasons, this is a place to wander through slowly, not least because the floor is quite uneven in parts.

COMMONWEALTH WAR GRAVES CEMETERY

Benghazi is home to a small but well-kept cemetery for Allied soldiers killed in WWII. It contains the graves of Australian, British, Greek, Indian, Jewish, Libyan, Norwegian, South African and Sudanese soldiers. The cemetery is 5km southeast of the city centre. Take the First Ring Rd from Funduq Uzu, passing under the road to Tripoli. The cemetery is on the right behind a fence of iron railings. If you're taking a taxi (3LD), ask for '*maqbara australiya*'.

OTHER SIGHTS

On the waterfront, next to Old Berenice is the square-sided **old lighthouse**, which was built during the Italian occupation and remains in use. The waterfront here runs southeast from here for around 700m and



THINGS THEY SAID ABOUT... BENGHAZI

Benghazi's Medina is nearly as large as that of Tripoli – one square, whitewashed house after another, and in every street small Arab cafés where for a halfpenny you can get coffee and hookah. The market was closing. The tradesmen had fastened their booths with shutters; the camels from the country stood with their loads on their backs ready to leave; only the cafés were open, and the monotonous Arab gramophone music sounded from them all.

Knud Holmboe, Desert Encounter (1931)

in Al-Funduq Market area, with simple but tidy rooms (with satellite TV) that have been renovated in the not-too-distant past. It's little used by tour groups, an attraction in itself.

Qaryat Qar Yunis as-Siyah (Qar Yunis Tourist Village; ☎ 9096903; www.tourist-village.com; Sharia Qar Yunis; s/d/ste incl breakfast from 27/38/60LD, chalet/apt/villa from 20/25/50LD; 🚽 🚿 🛏) Six kilometre tourist village has a range of high-quality accommodation, from spacious hotel rooms (some with renovated bathrooms) to recently built villas by the beach. There's also a children's funfair. It's a terrific base for Cyrenaica, although it's overrun in summer, when you'll need to book ahead.

MIDRANGE

Prices in this section include breakfast and all rooms come with private bathroom.

Funduq an-Nadi Libya (☎ 3372333; fax 3372334; Sharia Ahmed Rafiq al-Madawi; s/d 25/40LD; 🚽) Funduq an-Nadi Libya, 3km north of the centre, is run by the Automobile Club of Libya and has comfortable, quiet and spacious rooms with satellite TV. The hotel is in a complex of office buildings behind a large iron gate with a security guard; the sign in Arabic outside reads Al-Mujame as-Siyah (Tourist Complex).

El-Dogal Hotel (Funduq el-Dogal; ☎ 9091579; fax 9097613; Sharia Ahmed Rafiq al-Mahdawi; s/tw/d 30/45/50LD; 🚽) One of the newer hotels in Benghazi, El-Dogal has large rooms that won't win any style awards. However all except one per floor have views over the Mediterranean, while the corner single rooms here are better than solo travellers will find elsewhere. Breakfast is also above average.

Al-Wahat Hotel (Funduq al-Wahat; ☎ /fax 3372666; alwahat_hotel@yahoo.com; Sharia el-Jezayir; s/d 30/45LD, ste 55-100LD; 🚽) This outstanding new privately run hotel is hard to beat, with sparkling, spacious rooms. OK, some of their style choices may not be to your taste – pink bathrooms and floral flourishes – but value like this is rare and everything from the service to the levels of comfort make this one of our favourite places in town.

El-Fadeel Hotel (Funduq el-Fadeel; ☎ 9099795; elfadeelhotel@hotmail.com; Sharia el-Shatt; s/d/ste from 40/50/70LD; 🚽 🛏) Built in 2003, this is one of the best packages in town, with pleasant, large and well-appointed rooms. The hotel

has been repaved as a pleasant waterfront cornice.

The pastel shades and wooden shutters of the **Old Egyptian Consulate**, just off Sharia Jamal Abdul Nasser, exude a certain decaying elegance amid the palm trees and are strongly evocative of its Italianate origins.

Along Sharia al-Corniche, the grand whitewashed and arched faced is home to **Al-Jami' al-Libya**, Libya's first university. From here you should be able to see the twin domes of the **former cathedral** (now a mosque) off to the east. This was once the largest church in North Africa. From a distance, its imposing grandeur is impressive; up close, it stands forlorn and disused.

Sleeping

Benghazi's accommodation gets better all the time, although most places are spread out across the city.

BUDGET

Buyut ash-Shabaab (Youth Hostel; ☎ 2234101; dm 5LD) Behind the sports stadium, Benghazi's well-run youth hostel is basic but most rooms are well-maintained. Men and women are housed in different parts of the building and there are a few family rooms. It's a popular place, so book ahead.

Funduq Ifriqiya (☎ 3380444; fax 3386698; Sharia el-Jezayir; s/d/tr 15/20/25LD; 🚽) Funduq Ifriqiya is streets ahead of the other budget options

also has facilities for which you'd pay triple the price elsewhere: balconies, some with sea-views; a barber; laundry service; two restaurants; computers with wi-fi internet (7.50LD per 24 hours) in all suites; and an internet café. There's also a swimming pool under construction. Service is professional and you can pay with Visa. Welcome small touches include a detailed city map for each guest.

Funduq al-Nouran (☎ 3372091; info@alnouranhotel.com; Sharia al-Jezayir; s 50-60LD, d 60-75LD; 🍷) Due to open in early 2007, they were still applying the finishing touches to this new four-star hotel when we were there, but they're a friendly lot and gave us a sneak preview. The rooms we saw were large and tasteful, with clean lines, balconies and an almost European sense of style. It's always risky to recommend places before they open, but we've no hesitation in doing so on this occasion.

TOP END

Funduq Uzu (☎ 9095160; www.uzuhotel.com; Sharia al-Jezayir; s/d with lake view 60/75LD, without 50/65LD, ste 100-220LD; 🍷 🍷) One of Benghazi's top hotels, Funduq Uzu has superbly appointed rooms with all the requisite bells and whistles. Suite No 534 wins our vote for the best room in Benghazi, with its plush leather couches, cosy sitting area and views across the lake to the city centre (especially stunning at night). The buffet breakfasts are among the best in town.

Funduq Tibesti (☎ 9090017; fax 9098029; Sharia Jamal Abdul Nasser; s/d with lake view from 80/115LD, without view 75/100LD, ste from 150LD; 🍷) On the northern side of the harbour, this is another classy hotel with a luxurious ambience; look for the grass waterfalls adorning the façade. Facilities include a patisserie, health club, business centre, coffeehouses and restaurants.

Eating

Benghazi has some terrific restaurants, ranging from quick eats to places serving Turkish, Italian and Libyan food.

RESTAURANTS

Mat'am Turki (☎ 9091331; Sharia 23 July; sandwiches from 1LD, pizza 2-6LD, meals 12LD; 🍷 10am-1am) The most recent addition to the burgeoning population of Turkish restaurants in Benghazi, Mat'am Turki has fast become one of the most popular places to eat for Libyans and travellers alike. Partly it's because of

the outdoor tables, but the cheese bread is divine, the mixed grills are enormous and the atmosphere is bright and breezy.

Tobakts Restaurant (☎ 0925334425; Sharia Jamal Abdul Nasser; meals 13-18LD) For a break from North African or Turkish food, Tobakts is one of the few Italian restaurants still in town.

Mat'am Ghamata (☎ 9093509; Sharia Jamal Abdul Nasser; meals 15-17LD; 🍷 lunch & dinner) The food and service are both good. The banquet includes five salads, fish and a choice of cakes.

Mat'am al-Arabi (☎ 9094468; Sharia Gulf of Sirt; meals 16.50LD; 🍷 lunch & dinner Sat-Thu, dinner Fri) This is one of Benghazi's finest restaurants, but with an eminently reasonable price tag. The banquet meals come with flat Arab bread and are excellent value. The upstairs eating area has a delightful atmosphere, with a mosaic floor, tented roof and soft lighting. Not surprisingly, it's a popular place with locals, tour groups and expats alike.

Mat'am al-Kabir (☎ 9081692; Sharia Jamal Abdul Nasser; meals 18LD; 🍷 lunch & dinner) Mat'am al-Kabir offers a similar deal to Mat'am al-Turki, with friendly service and excellent banquet-style meals, which have all the usual accompaniments.

QUICK EATS

Mat'am Al Batriq (Sharia Gulf of Sirt; 🍷 lunch & dinner) Here you'll find fast food that's so original and tasty that we always try to stop by whenever we're in town. It does a range of food, but the chicken filled with cream is just the ticket if you've arrived from long hours on the road.

For cheap swarms and sandwiches, there are numerous cheap restaurants along Sharia Jamal Abdul Nasser and in the streets surrounding Al-Funduq Market. The north side of the vegetable market is where you'll find stalls selling *ta'amiyya* (the Egyptian variety of felafel). There's also a felafel stand halfway through Souq al-Jreed on the east side of the lane.

Drinking

The souq is also one of the rare places in Libya where you'll come across a juice stand selling freshly squeezed juices and milkshakes. In the souq and a few doors north of Sharia ash-Sharif, it sells excellent banana milkshakes (*moze halib*) for 1LD, mango shakes (*manga halib*) for 1.50LD and fruit cocktails for 2LD.

DOMESTIC FLIGHTS FROM BENGHAZI

destination	airline	one way/return (LD)	frequency
Al-Kufra	Libyan Arab Airlines	37/74 2 weekly	
Sebha	Libyan Arab Airlines	41.50/83	2 weekly
Tripoli	Libyan Arab Airlines	37.50/75	3-4 daily
	Al-Buraq Air	45.50/91	5 daily

Getting There & Away

Benghazi's Benina International Airport handles both international and domestic flights. **Libyan Arab Airlines** (☎ 9092064; Sharia al-Jezayir; 🍷 8am-7pm Sat-Thu, 9am-noon & 3-7pm Fri) and **Al-Buraq Air** (☎ 2234469; Benina International Airport) operate a range of domestic flights.

There are daily buses and shared taxis to Tripoli, Sirt, Al-Bayda, Sebha and Tobruk from Al-Funduq Market.

Getting Around

TO/FROM THE AIRPORT

Benina International Airport is 18km east of the city. A private taxi to the airport costs 10LD.

TAXI & MICRO

Most micro journeys around town cost 0.25LD, while a shared taxi costs around 0.50LD. Most private-taxi journeys will cost 2LD to 3LD, although drivers may ask up to 5LD for destinations outside the city centre.

AROUND BENGHAZI

Suluq, 55km south of Benghazi, is where the Italians hanged Omar al-Mukhtar in front of 20,000 of his imprisoned supporters (see p138). The great man's body has been buried here since his execution, but the commemorative shrine was not moved from Benghazi to Suluq until early 2001.

AJDABIYA

اجدابيا
pop 140,558

The best thing that can be said about Ajdabiya is that there are roads from here to everywhere – Benghazi, Al-Kufra, Tobruk and Sirt – and it was this role as a crossroads town that made it a historically significant as a key destination for traders arriving from the Sahara. The town was also important during the Fatimid period – you can see the rubble of a Fatimid mosque and fortress

(ask for 'qasr Fatimid'), which has stones bearing a few Roman inscriptions. If you stay longer than it takes to fill your car with petrol, however, you'll soon discover that it's a place of little charm. The promising Amal Africa Hotel, north of town just off the road to Benghazi, will soon be the only habitable hotel in town, while the simple eateries around town are uniformly unappealing.

AWJILA

أوجه
pop 6790

Awjila, one of the Jalu oases, is something of a surprise packet. It sees far fewer tourists than the lovingly restored remnants of its old town deserve. Awjila's old mosque is the finest oasis mosque in Libya. Sadly, the trickle of tourists is unlikely to increase until they improve the road south to Al-Kufra.

Awjila is also famous as a centre of Berber culture and, rarely for Libya, some people speak only Berber.

There's a small internet café, next to the mosque on the west side of the highway about halfway through town.

History

Awjila was mentioned in passing by Herodotus in *The Histories* in the 5th century BC. Much later, some historians believe that when the all-conquering Arab armies of Islam arrived here in the 7th century AD, many Berbers headed southwest into the Sahara, thereby giving birth to the Tuareg people (see p48). In the 8th century, Awjila became a prosperous commercial centre renowned for exporting high-quality dates. Later, it became an important staging post for trans-Saharan caravans and pilgrims.

Sights

The flurry of travellers passing through Awjila for the March 2006 solar eclipse encouraged the local authorities to restore sections of old Awjila, and they've done an

THINGS THEY SAID ABOUT...AWJILA

Augila, a town well known in the time of Herodotus, covers a space of about one mile in circumference. It is badly built, and the streets are narrow and not kept clean. The houses are built of a limestone, dug from the neighbouring hills, and consist only of one story or ground floor. The apartments are dark...The public buildings are yet more mean and wretched.

Journal of Frederick Hornemann's Travels from Cairo to Mourzouk 1797-8

outstanding job. They've also produced an informative little DVD on the city's history, *Awjila: History and Civilisation*.

The **old city**, west of the main highway close to the centre of Awjila, has a still-active well and some small gardens, as well as two houses, which have been transformed into museums. The restored rooms include looms for making traditional blankets, kitchens, living quarters, farming and hunting implements; look in particular for the doors made from local palm trees and the mixture of covered rooms and open courtyards. Also in the old city is an old mosque with the conical domes that are so distinctive to Awjila.

Visible from the entrance to the old city is the extraordinary **Al-Kabir Mosque**, easily the best example in Libya of the old oasis mosques that once greeted Muslim travellers and pilgrims crossing the Sahara. Originally built in the 7th century and restored in the 1980s, the mosque's appeal is only partially told by its dimensions: at 456 sq m, it contained nine doors, 21 beehive domes, dozens of arches and walls 40cm thick. But it is the overall effect of space and light that give the mosque its unique charm. The domes, built from mud-brick and local limestone, are akin to something conjured from a child's imagination, while the small openings in each dome allowed in light to the otherwise dark interior. The palm-trunk main door leads into a warren of columns and arches that are cool and in perfect harmony with the sense of respite and refuge from a harsh desert climate. Even if you're not going as far

as Al-Kufra, many travellers will consider the mosque alone worth the long detour south from the Tripoli-Benghazi highway.

Behind the mosque are some ruined mud buildings that mark the location of Awjila's former **Turkish fort**.

Not far away to the south – look for the cylindrical modern minaret in earth tones and without windows – is the **Mosque and Mausoleum of Abdullah ibn Ali al-Sarah**, the last resting place of a leader of the Islamic conquest, and companion of the Prophet Mohammed. The modern tomb is mildly interesting, but the cemetery that forms part of the mosque compound includes more evocative beehive domes; steps lead down beneath the domes into a semi-subterranean mosque that is like a smaller version of Al-Kabir Mosque.

Elsewhere in town, watch out for the pyramidal **pigeon towers** riddled with small holes for pigeons for enter and feed.

Sleeping & Eating

Awjila would make for an excellent overnight stop if the Funduq Awjila al-Siyah (Awjila Tourist Hotel) was even vaguely habitable. We were offered a prison-like room without bathroom (not a shared bathroom, *without* bathroom) and without breakfast for 15LD per person. We chose to sleep in our driver's home.

On the main highway through town, the Ojala Restaurant serves basic fare such as chicken and rice and sandwiches.

Getting There & Away

Awjila is the only town (apart from neighbouring Jalu) between Ajdabiya (250km to the northwest) to Al-Kufra (625km to the southeast).

THE ROAD TO AL-KUFRA

The long, lonely road from Ajdabiya to Al-Kufra stretches for over 900km, punctuated only by the twin oases of Awjila (p131) and Jalu, the occasional checkpoint, oil fields, electricity pylons and signs of the Great Man-Made River (see The Eighth Wonder of the World, p64). Otherwise it's unrelieved monotony of sand plains stretching to the horizon with scarcely a sand dune for the entire length of the road.

The road surface here is patchy all the way, although the last 200km into Al-Kufra is

THE CYRENAICA OF HERODOTUS

The earliest historical mention of Cyrenaica comes from the Greek historian Herodotus. In *The Histories*, an epic of history and storytelling which Herodotus wrote almost 2500 years ago, the names of the Greek cities of ancient Libya are littered throughout the text, among them Tocra, Apollonia, and Euserpides; Herodotus describes the latter as having 'good soil' and as being the westernmost point in Libya reached by an invading army of Persians. Of 'the fortunate people of Cyrene', Herodotus has much to say, including an encounter with some travellers who had passed through the region. 'Being asked if there was anything more they could tell him about the uninhabited parts of Libya, these declared that a group of wild young fellows, sons of chieftains in their country, had on coming to manhood planned among themselves all sorts of extravagant adventures, one of which was to draw lots for five of their number to explore the Libyan desert and try to penetrate further than had ever been done before' (*The Histories*, Book 2:32). These young men from Cyrene succeeded in their aim of crossing the desert and returned to tell a suitably fantastical tale of attacks by tribes of little people and visiting a land inhabited by wizards.

atrocious and easily the worst road in Libya. This stretch of road alone – a rutted tarmac riven with axle-breaking potholes, where the soft desert sand on either side is often preferable to the road itself – will take a minimum of four to five hours in a 4WD and wins our vote as Libya's worst. Yes, they're repairing (or rather, rebuilding) it but it will take a long while before things improve. Unless you're planning to visit Awjila en route, consider flying from Benghazi to Al-Kufra.

NORTHERN CYRENAICA

It's difficult to imagine a richer concentration of ancient sites anywhere in the world than the northern Mediterranean coast of Cyrenaica and its hinterland. Glorious Cyrene is the undoubted highlight, although both Apollonia and Tolmeita are spectacular in their own right. Further east along the coast, the precipitous landscapes of Ras al-Hillal share the shore with ancient Byzantine churches, particularly at L'Atrun. Inland, the green hills of the Jebel al-Akhdar conceal the astonishing Byzantine mosaics at Qasr Libya, the important if small ruins at Slonta and the historically poignant canyons of Wadi al-Kuf. Shahat, Al-Bayda and Susa, which all have excellent accommodation and make good bases for your explorations.

TOCRA (TEUCHIRA)

pop 23,688

Tocra was one of the five cities of the Greek Pentapolis (Five Cities; see p31). Although

كرة تو

we know we'll be in trouble with the enthusiastic caretaker, whose love of the site exceeds our own, we have to say that Tocra is historically significant rather than aesthetically satisfying and it's easily the least evocative of Cyrenaica's ancient sites.

Founded around 510 BC, Tocra (Teuchira) was one of the first ports settled from Cyrene. It was renamed Arsinoe, after the wife of Ptolemy II, and later known as Cleopatra, after the daughter of Cleopatra and Mark Antony. From the time of the Ptolemies, the city shared a similar history with its sister city, Ptolemais (Tolmeita). Tocra was built using soft sandstone, which proved unable to withstand the earthquakes and other vagaries that the centuries have wrought upon the Cyrenaican coast.

Sights

After passing through the gate into **Tocra** (admission 3LD, camera/video 5/10LD; ☎ 7.30am-5pm Oct-Apr, 7.30am-7.30pm May-Sep), you pass between Greek and Roman columns, while over the wall to your right are the excavated remains of **Roman tombs** cut into the rock wall of a sunken pit.

The **fort**, no more than 100m from the gate and overlooking the water, is compact and attractive; the current structure dates from the Turkish and Italian eras. There was a fort (and possibly a temple) on this site in the Greek period. The structure was later embellished by the Romans and Byzantines, although there are no obvious traces of these buildings.

Well signposted behind the castle is the **museum** (admission 3LD, camera/video 5/10LD;

(☞ 7.30am-5.30pm), with a site map of Tocra, dusty pottery exhibits and (if restoration is complete) a fine mosaic taken from the site – but only archaeologists are likely to consider it worth of the extra expense. Outside the gate and to the west, a small archaeological railway runs west to the **Eastern Basilica**, in which the skeleton of the main sanctuary, apse and baptistry are visible, as are some ancient Greek inscriptions. Also worth looking out for are the **Greek Gymnasium**, the **Islamic Quarter**, the remains of the **city walls**, another **church** with a mosaic floor, the remnants of the **Roman baths** and **neropolis**, all of which are nearby. Most are littered with **Greek inscriptions**.

Getting There & Away

Tocra is 70km northeast of Benghazi and is well-signposted off the coastal road. We hope that en route you don't encounter the man we saw taking pot-shots at birds with his rifle from his car window.

TOLMEITA (PTOLEMAIS)

The ruined city of Tolmeita (formerly Ptolemais) doesn't rival Cyrene or Leptis Magna, but its palm-fringed setting, and easily identifiable signs of the transition from Greek to Roman occupation, make this an essential stop on your Cyrenaica tour. If time allows, the beaches have good bathing and soft sand, especially to the west of town near the Italian fort.

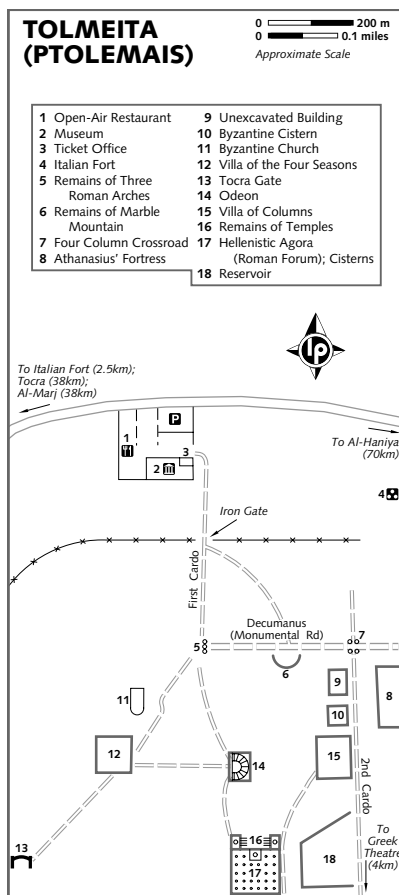
History

Tolmeita was founded in the 4th century BC and its privileged position as one of the cities of the Pentapolis continued under the Romans. The city fell into decline with the arrival of the invading Arab armies in the 7th century, although Tolmeita was the last city of the Pentapolis to fall.

The excavated areas of the city mostly date from the 1st and 2nd centuries BC, when Tolmeita covered 3 sq km and was a thriving Hellenistic city. Only 10% of the ancient city has been excavated, with further excavations proceeding at a snail's pace.

Information

There are many **guides** (50LD) who know Tolmeita well, but it's worth mentioning the knowledgeable Abdusalam Bazama, who worked on the original excavations.



Although the museum (p136) is next to the **ticket office** (admission 3LD, camera/video 5/10LD; ☞ 7.30am-5pm), we suggest that you leave it until the end, when the exhibits will be more easily understood in their historical context.

Sights

A dirt track runs up behind the ticket office towards the Jebel al-Akhdar and leads into the site. About 200m from the iron gate you can see two **Italian forts** off to the east and southwest, dating from 1923. You may also be able to see the skeletal traces of the ancient **Greek city walls** along the northern face of the Jebel al-Akhdar.

The trail continues up the hill, shadowed on the left by the rubble of the **first cardo**

(main north-south road), which ran from the water's edge to the mountains. After 250m, there are bases of three **Roman arches** which, in the 3rd century AD, stood with four columns each and marked the crossroads of the first cardo (unusually, Tolmeita has two cardos) and the **decumanus** (main east-west road). This was one of the most important crossroads in the city and stood at the heart of ancient Tolmeita. The **decumanus**, also known as the **Monumental Road**, was once lined with colonnaded arched porticos running either side along its length.

Away to the southeast is the compact **Byzantine Church**, which dates from the 5th century AD and is notable for the fact that its domed apse remains largely intact, unlike many in Libya. A further 100m southwest are the remains of the **Villa of the Four Seasons**, which was built in the 4th century AD. Belonging to a wealthy Roman notable, it contained the beautiful Four Seasons mosaic, which is in the museum. The northeastern corner of the villa was a **frigidarium** (cold room). Close to the centre of the villa was a courtyard which was, unusually, semi-circular on one side; the floor was covered with mosaics. From the villa, you can see the ancient **Tocra Gate**, about 300m to the southwest.

Around 300m to the east is the enchanting **Odeon**, a small theatre, which was once covered by a roof and large enough to seat up to 500 people. Performances of Greek music were accompanied by dancers in the sunken pit. In the 3rd century AD, the Roman love of water won out and they transformed it into a swimming pool; traces of the pipes running to the nearby cistern are visible on the southeastern side of the building. The front of the stage was adorned by three statues – Claudius, Marcus Aurelius and Archimedes – which you'll now find in the museum.

A short walk up the hill takes you to the **Greek agora** (marketplace), which later served as the Roman forum. Along the northern side were three temples, each with four Doric columns. The column bases remain; those of the northeastern temple are particularly fine. As you climb up to the raised area of the agora, be careful of the many small shafts, which drop 6m to the cavernous **cisterns** beneath the floor, which were once the largest cisterns in North Africa.

A staircase just off-centre leads down into the cisterns, which received water from mountain springs 25km east of Tolmeita via an aqueduct. The long, eerie caverns with arched ceilings suggest that a sense of style prevailed even for underground water storage. At shoulder height along the walls, note the clearly discernible dividing line between the ceiling height during Greek rule (when stone slabs were used in construction) and that of the 2nd century AD, when the thirsty Romans enlarged the cisterns by raising the ceiling using bricks and cement.

The path running northeast from the agora skirts the former **reservoir walls**, which also show the transition from Greek to Roman occupation – the bottom half marked with lines is Greek, while the top section is Roman.

After about 300m, you come to the **Villa of Columns**. The original structure was destroyed in AD 115–18 during the Jewish Revolt (see p31). The later villa belonged to a wealthy Roman local. One of the rooms on the southern side contained an exquisite Medusa mosaic on the floor. Next to it was the dining room; its floor still contains mosaic fragments and its wall traces of marble. In the centre of the villa is the sunken swimming pool. The pool was lined by two small gardens, while the pedestal in the centre once supported a small animal fountain in granite. On the northern side of the villa was the **frigidarium**.

Along the eastern side of the villa runs the **second cardo**, which was lined with shops and ran all the way up the hill to the south to the **Greek Theatre**, the remains of which are barely visible halfway up the mountain. North along the cardo is a **Byzantine cistern** and an **unexcavated building** with a mosaic peeping out from beneath the soil. Off to the northeast is **Athanasius' Fortress**, which dates from the 5th century AD.

Continuing north along the cardo, you reach the **Four Column Crossroad**, another significant intersection in the ancient city. Only the bases remain, but the columns once provided an important counterpoint to the three arches that lay west along the **decumanus**. Halfway between the two junctions are the base remains of a **marble fountain**, which depicted Bacchus. The gate by which you entered the site is not far off to the northwest.

As you leave the site, don't miss the **museum** (admission 3LD, camera/video 5/10LD; ☎ 7.30am-5pm). The central room is dominated by the superb Four Seasons mosaic from the villa of the same name; clockwise from the top left is summer, spring, winter and autumn. On the left wall is the wonderful Medusa head mosaic from the Villa of Columns; to the right of it is a plan of the Villa of Columns. On the right of the Four Seasons mosaic are the three statues from the Odeon.

The highlights of the western room are the 3rd-century AD tablets of gladiators (found in the theatre) and a mosaic of Orpheus (western wall) taming the wild beasts (2nd to 3rd century AD).

In the eastern room are raised column pieces adorned with the faces of Mars and Jupiter, as well as a number of interesting sarcophagi-and-grave covers. There are also 6th to 7th century BC statues from the city of Barce (now Al-Marj; see below), and along the northern wall is the granite animal fountain from the Villa of Columns.

Eating

Bringing a picnic lunch can be a good idea; the third Italian fortress (about 4km along the road to Tocra) would be an excellent spot. There's also an open-air restaurant, in the car park in front of the museum, which serves simple food (around 10LD) and drinks.

Getting There & Away

Tolmeita is 37km northeast along the coast from Tocra. If you're coming from the east, a good road leads down off the mountains from Al-Bayda, Al-Marj and Qasr Libya.

AL-MARJ

المرج

☎ 067 / pop 87,089

The modern town of Al-Marj marks the site of the ancient city of Barce, which was an important Greek city founded in 560 BC. Unfortunately, there's nothing left to see because it, along with the modern town which was the centre of much Italian settlement, was consigned to history by an earthquake in 1963.

QASR LIBYA

قصر ليبيا

If you come to Cyrenaica and don't visit Qasr Libya, you've missed one of north-eastern Libya's signature sights. It may be

small but this fine museum has one of the most extraordinary collections of Byzantine mosaics that you'll find in North Africa. The story of their discovery also has a Dead Sea Scrolls quality about it – when Libyan dam workers unearthed the two Byzantine churches in 1957, the exceptional preservation of their floor mosaics caused a great stir among archaeologists.

The mosaics were laid in AD 529–40, during the reign of Justinian I (527–65), in the village of Olbia, which lay in the hinterland of Cyrene. The ceramic pieces that make up each panel are less than 1cm in diameter and thus follow the Hellenistic school of mosaic. The craftsmen drew inspiration from natural and folk scenes of daily life, with pagan influences being incorporated into the Christian panoply.

Orientation

In the centre of the town of Qasr Libya is a small service road running parallel to the main road up a slight incline. At the top of the incline take the road leading under the boom gate. After 1.2km you reach a junction with a red, white and green sign in Arabic. Take the road running down the hill to your left; the Turkish fort should be visible on the hilltop to your right.

Sights MUSEUM

Viewed alone, each of the 0.5-sq-metre mosaic panels that adorn the walls of the **museum** (admission 3LD, camera/video 5/10LD; ☎ 7.30am-5pm) is impressive. But when you realise that all 50 covered the floor of a single room of the Eastern Church it all seems extraordinary. To see them as they appeared, look for the small black-and-white photo reproduction on the wall to the right after you enter, alongside an informative article from the site's excavator.

The panels, which cover a wide range of subjects and seem to have links with early Christian beliefs, are numbered, well-labelled and grouped into often diverse sets of five. Among those depicting the gods, panels seven (the river god Geon), nine (the river god Physon), 17 (the river god Euphrates) and 19 (the river god Tigris) form a set representing the Four Rivers of Paradise, with the mischievous nymph Kastelia of Delphi (18) in the middle. There

are also some fine Nilotic river scenes – panels six and 10 are especially good, with waterfowl, lotus flowers and fish. Some of the animals are also exquisite, especially the snakes (panel 11), deer (five), horses (29) and birds (42). Also stunning are the buildings including a brilliant evocation of the New City of Theodarius (three) and a wonderful church façade with columns (28).

Yet it is **panel 48** that aroused the most excitement when the church was uncovered. It contains one of the few representations of the legendary Pharos lighthouse of Alexandria. Atop the roof on the left is the dark-green (to indicate bronze) figure of the naked Helios with a downward-pointing sword in his right hand. The circular object at the tip of his sword is believed to be the famous iron mirror of the lighthouse. On the right of the panel is another human figure, standing on the mainland and depicted as a naked, bronze colossus. Nicely juxtaposed to the main image is panel 49, which represents a boat with a passenger whose hand is stretched out towards Pharos.

Also of great importance is **panel 23**, a Byzantine inscription stating that the mosaics were laid in AD 539. This panel lay in the centre of the church floor. The much larger mosaic on the museum floor lay at the eastern end of the church's northern aisle. This mosaic of panoramic scale includes a variety of plants and animals, a hunting scene, and the Nile with crocodiles and lotus flowers in the centre. Two of the three inscriptions are religious, invoking God's protection and referring to Christian martyrs, while the third (closest to the museum door) records the laying of the mosaic.

As you leave the museum, note the mosaic fragment on the wall to the right of the door. This forms part of the mosaic frieze that ran between the evenly spaced panels.

OTHER SIGHTS

Directly opposite the entrance to the museum is the tranquil **Western Church**, which is shaped like a cross. Its large, dusty mosaic in the centre of the floor, though reconstructed in keeping with its original state, seems quite dull in comparison to those in the museum.

Next to the museum and Western Church is a small **Turkish fort**, which has fine ram-

parts that obscure the view from this hilltop perch.

The **Eastern Church**, where the mosaics were found, is east of the museum, about 100m down a dirt footpath. Given the splendour of its former contents, the modern building, with its aluminium roof and reconstructed walls, is a disappointment. The now-empty squares do, however, provide some context to the original layout of the mosaics.

Getting There & Away

Qasr Libya is about 45km west of Al-Bayda and 59km east of Al-Marj.

WADI AL-KUF

وادي الكوف

Wadi al-Kuf, east of Qasr Libya on the road to Al-Bayda, was the scene in 1927 of some of the most bitter and defining battles between the Libyan resistance and Italian forces. As a result, Wadi al-Kuf holds huge historical significance for many Libyans. It also has some of the finest scenery in the Jebel al-Akhdar.

One tributary of the wadi is spanned by a striking modern bridge, but try to take the detour that leads down through the wadi proper, rejoining the main road after 8km. You can also hike through the wadi, but to do the latter you would need to be self-sufficient in food and water and, in winter, warm clothes.

Coming from the west, the road twists through the picturesque landscape of wooded areas down through the increasingly towering cliffs. The further you descend, the more the cliffs are pockmarked with caves. The resistance retreated to these caves after each ambush to hide from the retaliatory bombardments of the Italians. The greatest concentration of caves is near the bottom of the valley after about 6km.

Around 7km down into the valley an iron bridge spans the road. Built by the Italian army in an attempt to ferry troops and supplies through the valley, it marks the spot where the forces of Omar al-Mukhtar halted, albeit temporarily, the southwards march of the Italian army, which was on the move from the Mediterranean to Al-Kufra. It was not until the infamous General Graziani surveyed countryside from a cliff-top and pinpointed the caves where the guerrillas were hiding that the Italians, supported by targeted bombing, were able to break through (see p138).

THE CAPTURE, TRIAL & EXECUTION OF OMAR AL-MUKHTAR

In early September 1931, the Italians received word that a party of Libyan rebels was planning a livestock raid on Cyrene. Not long after, the small raiding party was sighted near Slonta. Italian soldiers closed in and 11 rebels, close to starvation, were killed. The horse of the 12th was shot and its rider overtaken as he tried to escape on foot. He was about to be shot until one of the soldiers recognised him as Omar al-Mukhtar, the leader of the Libyan resistance. Al-Mukhtar was taken to Apollonia and later transported by ship to Benghazi. There was great rejoicing in colonial ranks.

Upon receiving the news, Marshal Badoglio told his underlings to 'make immediate arrangements for a criminal trial which can only end with the death sentence'. The trial on 15 September was a farce, with the dignified bearing of Al-Mukhtar in stark contrast to the unseemly bloodlust of the Italian prosecutor and audience. Al-Mukhtar took full responsibility for his actions and calmly accepted his fate with the words: 'From God we have come and to God we must return'. His Italian defence lawyer was imprisoned for performing his role too sympathetically. The next day Al-Mukhtar was hanged in the Suluq concentration camp (see p131) in front of 20,000 eerily silent prisoners. The Italians had their man, the rebellion petered out and a Libyan legend was born.

Throughout Wadi al-Kuf, you may recognise many scenes from *Lion of the Desert* (see p37), the film about the life of Omar al-Mukhtar, which was partly filmed here.

AL-BAYDA

البيضاء

☎ 084 / pop 121,533

Al-Bayda is a pleasant city on the northern fringe of the Jebel al-Akhdar. Although its only sight of note is the rarely visited Temple of Aesculapius, Al-Bayda's good hotels make it one of the most important bases for travellers in this part of the country with Cyrene, Apollonia, Qasr Libya and Slonta all within striking distance. The area also has one of the mildest climates in Libya and is famous for its apples, grapes and, in November, *shmari* (a very sweet berry).

Al-Bayda was one of the main strongholds of the Sanusi Movement during the Ottoman period. After the Italians seized the town, the resistance movement moved south to Al-Jaghub and to Al-Kufra. In the years after independence, King Idris effectively used Al-Bayda as his administrative capital and spent much of his time here, alienating the powerbrokers in Tripolitania.

Orientation & Information

The easiest landmark in town to use to get your bearings is the telecommunications mast of the main post office. Sharia al-Ruba, Al-Bayda's main thoroughfare, runs straight through the centre of town and continues as the main coastal highway

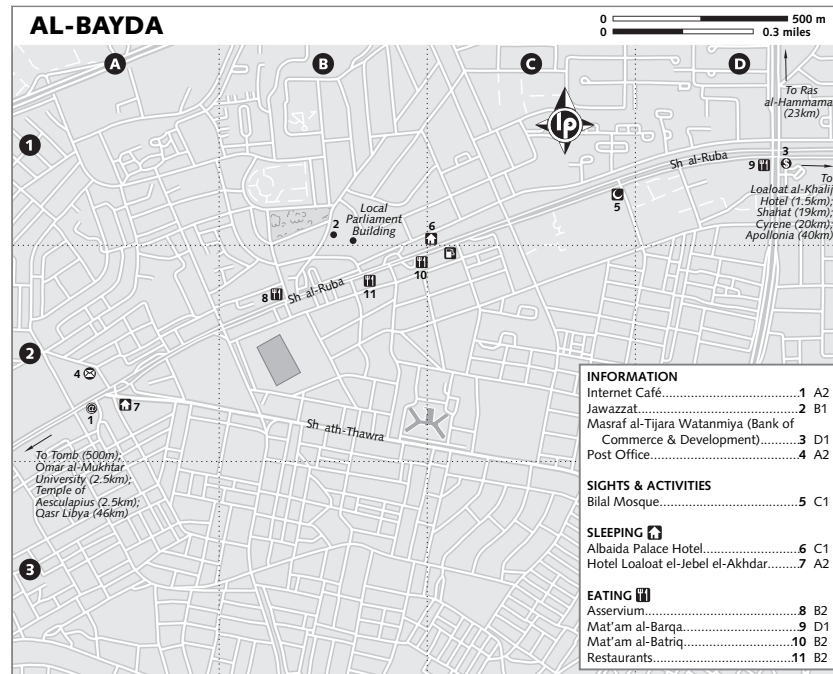
to Shahat (Cyrene) and beyond. West of the post office, on the opposite side of Sharia al-Ruba, is a small **internet café** (per hr 1LD; ☎ 10am-midnight Sat-Thu, 5pm-midnight Fri).

A further 1km east along Sharia al-Ruba, another road leading north boasts banks and the distinctive local parliament building with its large bronze dome. Behind the parliament is a compound of white buildings containing the **jawzzat** (☎ 633925). Another 1km east towards Shahat, you pass the Masraf al-Tijara Watanmiya (Bank of Commerce & Development) where you can get cash advances on your Visa card.

Sights

Al-Bayda's premier sight is the little-visited **Temple of Aesculapius**, the god of healing. Although nowhere near as well preserved as nearby Cyrene, its columns and temple outline derive from the little-known Greek city of Ballagrai. The temple, which dates from the 4th century BC, is also notable for the extremely rare representations of silphium (plant similar to wild fennel; see p144) atop some of the columns in the southwestern corner of the site. The temple is around 2km west of town, just north of the main road in from Benghazi. The turn-off is opposite the Omar al-Mukhtar University and marked by a sign to the always-closed 'Albeida Museum'. If you need directions, ask for '*zawiyat al-bayda*'.

On the other side of the main highway, on the western edge of town, is the huge



sandstone clock tower and dome of **Omar al-Mukhtar University**. Formerly an Islamic university, it's now a multidisciplinary institution that is usually open to casual visitors. West of the main post office the road is lined with cypress trees, beneath which is a simple white **tomb** topped by a green dome, the last resting place of Rawayfa al-Ansari (one of the friends of Mohammed).

At the other end of town, you can't miss the striking, white **Bilal Mosque**. This modern mosque has an attractive onion-like dome flanked by four smaller domes, as well as two piercing minarets.

Sleeping

Hotel Loaloat el-Jebel el-Akhdar (☎ 630968; fax 630971; Sharia al-Oroba; s/d/ste with private bathroom 30/40/70LD; ☎) This welcome addition to Al-Bayda hotel scene has attractive rooms, friendly management and is in a central location. A standard Libyan-style tourist restaurant here provides ample banquet-style meals (15LD). There is also a 24-hour internet café (1LD per hour) located just next door.

Albaida Palace Hotel (☎ 633455; qaseralbida@yahoo.com; Sharia al-Ruba; s/d with private bathroom 30/40LD; ☎) Now faced with competition, this erstwhile favourite of tour groups has improved. The rooms in this large, white, Art Deco building in the centre of town are fine and the service far more helpful than it used to be.

Loaloat al-Khalij Hotel (☎ 631977; fax 631981; Sharia al-Ruba; s/d 40/50LD; ☎) Probably the pick of Al-Bayda hotels, this private hotel opened in August 2006 and has good, partly carpeted rooms that could be larger if they didn't lose so much space with an entrance hallway for each room. But that's being picky – the rooms are excellent, the service good, modern local artworks adorn the public areas and there's a large and pleasant coffeehouse.

Eating

There is a handful of decent restaurants in town, as well as plenty of snack bars the length of Sharia al-Ruba for 2km east of the post office. Sharia ath-Thawra, parallel to Sharia al-Ruba two blocks to the south, has some decent grocery stores.

Mat'am al-Batriq (☎ 638450; Sharia al-Ruba; meals 3-10LD; ☎ noon-11pm Sat-Thu, 2-11pm Fri) Right in the centre of town, this place serves great pizzas for 5LD to 9LD, shwarmas for 3LD to 5LD, and chicken dishes; it also does take-away. Look for the two penguins above the door.

Asservium (Sharia al-Ruba; meals from 10LD; ☎ lunch & dinner Sat-Thu, dinner Fri) This cool place has trendy music and great outdoor seating. The upstairs terrace is a wonderful place from which to watch the world go by with a *shay* (tea; 1LD) or a *nargileh* (1LD). The affable Mustapha will ensure your stay is a pleasant one. It's in the centre of town, on the corner of the street running up to the parliament building.

Mat'am al-Barqa (☎ 635328; Sharia al-Ruba; meals 15LD; ☎ lunch & dinner Sat-Thu, dinner Fri) At the eastern end of town, Mat'am al-Barqa serves good-quality banquets in pleasant surroundings.

Getting There & Away

If you need a shared taxi to Shahat (for Cyrene), white minibuses run along Sharia al-Ruba every few minutes.

AROUND AL-BAYDA

Ras al-Hammamah (known locally as Hammamah) is a tiny village 22km north of Al-Bayda. The beach, which is a mixture of soft sand and rock pools, is a great place to swim, although there's no shade. There's a summer-only tourist village.

Further along the coast, southwest from Ras al-Hammamah, are other good beaches. About 5km west of the Hammamah Tourist Village is **Bst Beach**, a sheltered cove and home to a small fishing community. It's a good place for a picnic or campfire. A further 10km southwest is **Al-Haniya**, another small town with good beaches. The views towards the west are quite picturesque.

On Friday, families flock to these beaches from Al-Bayda, so they can get pretty overcrowded, although that makes it the best day to meet the locals.

At the turn-off to these beaches from the main highway, just east of Massah, is a high-walled compound which marks the former **Palace of King Idris**. With more than a hint of revolutionary humour, the compound has been turned into a mental hospital.

SLONTA

سلنطة

About 24km south of Al-Bayda, the village of Slonta is home to the only significant pre-Greek Libyan artefact discovered in northeastern Libya. Of more historic than aesthetic appeal, the remains of a **stone temple** (admission 3LD) cover a mere five sq m. The style of the often-childlike figures, human faces and animals carved into the rock is unlike anything else you'll see in Libya. The site was obviously a place of worship, but very little is known about the cult that gave rise to the temple. Some good examples of the Slonta carvings are on display in Gallery 5 of the Jamahiriya Museum in Tripoli (p78), although most travellers feel that it's no substitute for seeing the real thing.

The temple is 500m west of the sandstone mosque in the centre of town, behind a green metal gate with chicken wire around the perimeter. Ask for directions at the checkpoint immediately north of the mosque. The gate's usually left open and whether or not you have to pay the entry fee depends on whether the gate-keeper is in the vicinity.

At the western edge of town, a minor road runs north to the small village of **Omar al-Mukhtar**, so-named because the rebel leader was finally captured by the Italians near here.

SHAHAT

شحات

☎ 084 / pop 44,391

The modern village of Shahat has nothing of interest but it serves as the gateway to the spectacular ancient city of Cyrene.

Sleeping & Eating

Buyut ash-Shabaab (Youth Hostel; ☎ 637371; camping 5LD, dm 5LD) The hostel is a stone's throw from the gate leading down to the ruins. It's clean, friendly and has been recommended by a number of travellers; the hot water is reliable.

Cyrene Resort (☎ /fax 0851-64391; s/d 35/45LD; 📶) This former Winzrik Hotel, about 2km northeast of the police station, is set in the fields around Cyrene. It has simple rooms, some of which have some nice touches like bay windows. Best of all is the quiet atmosphere, the personal satellite receivers in most rooms and the atmospheric café and restaurant cut into one of the caves.

Cave Restaurant (☎ 635206; meals from 15LD; ☎ lunch) Living up to its name, this is another

eatery hewn from the rocks around Cyrene. It's an atmospheric place offering tasty food, friendly young waiters and good views down towards the coast from the terrace.

Barga Restaurant (☎ mobile 0926224490; meals 13LD; ☎ lunch & dinner) Not far from the Temple of Zeus, this cosy little place can get a little overrun by tour groups, but the food (the usual fare of tajine, couscous or rice along with the soup-salad ensemble you've come to know so well) is fine and it's the closest recommended restaurant to the ancient city.

Getting There & Away

Shahat is 17km east of Al-Bayda and 74km west of Derna. Shared taxis between Al-Bayda and Shahat arrive and leave from under the eucalyptus trees, just short of the pillars marking the gate leading down to Cyrene.

CYRENE

Cyrene is glorious, a worthy Cyrenaican rival to Tripolitania's Leptis Magna both for the splendour of its monuments and for its setting, looking out over the not-so-distant Mediterranean from an elevated rocky perch. Cyrene is Libya's most complete ancient Greek city; it was and remains the poster boy for the more than five centuries of sophisticated Greek rule in northeastern Libya. The site has many levels, geographically and temporally, in the sense that later Roman buildings overlay many of the Greek temples and public buildings.

In short, don't miss Cyrene.

Information

Visiting **Cyrene** (admission 3LD, camera/video 5/10LD; ☎ 7.30am-6pm May-Sep, 8am-5pm Oct-Apr) requires a compulsory **guide** (50LD). In the days when good guides were scarce we used to recommend specific guides to Cyrene, but both the quality and quantity of guides has increased to the point where there are dozens of excellent guides and we've no reports from travellers of sub-standard ones.

Entrance to the site is via the southeastern gate, which is on the upper level of the site next to the road which leads through the trees from Shahat. There are stalls selling snacks, drinks and a moderate selection of expensive books opposite the northern gate (exit).

History

In the early 7th century BC, settlers set out from the Greek island of Thera (modern Santorini). They were led by Battus, a man chosen for the task by the oracle of Apollo at Delphi. The reason for their journey was both demographic and political – the island had limited resources for a growing population, but their departure was also seen as a means of reducing the political tension caused by the prevailing power struggles on Thera. The small band of less than 100 people first landed on the island of Platea, south of Crete in the Gulf of Bomba, before heading off again to a spot just east of modern Derna. They quickly discovered that their new home was not suitable for the colony they hoped to establish. The wily Giligami tribe convinced the Greeks to

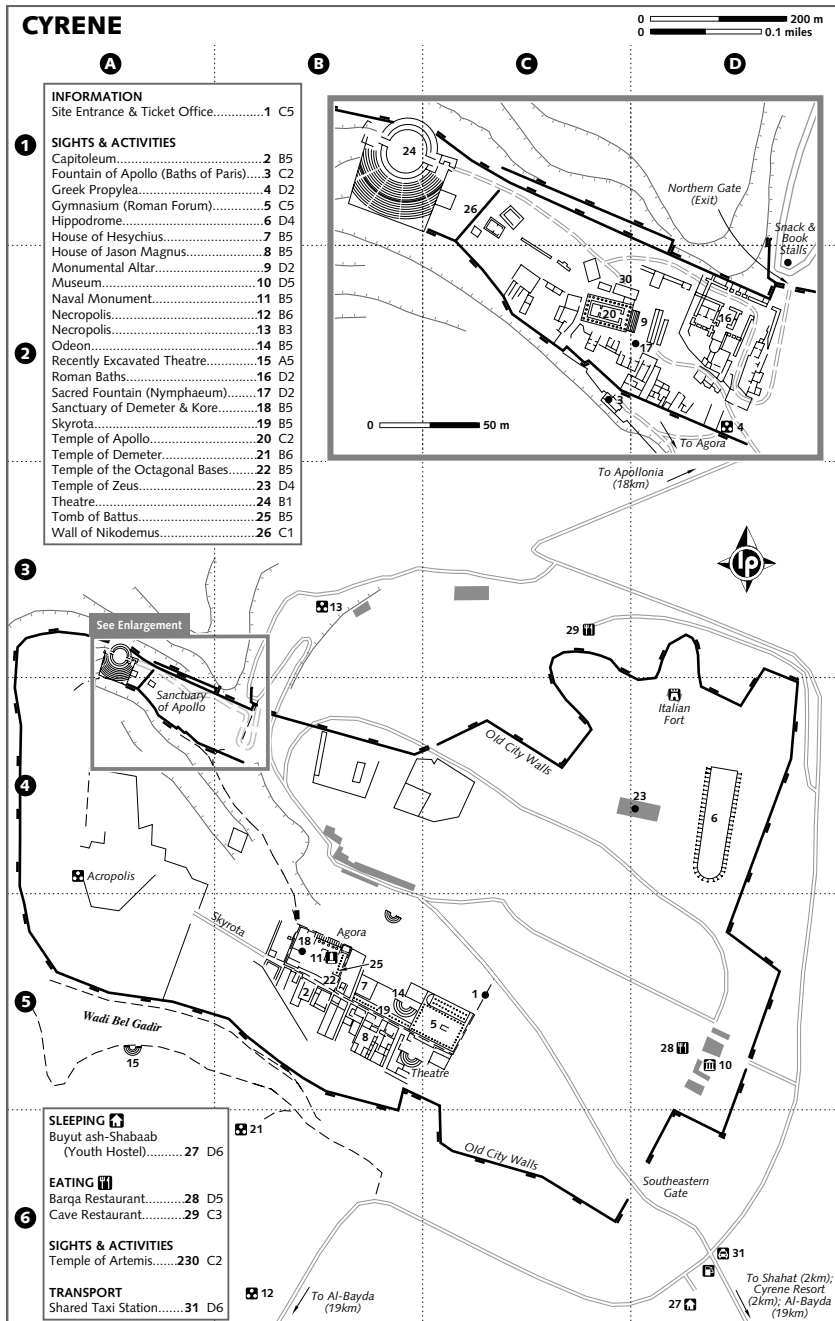
THE FOUNDING MYTH OF CYRENE

Cyrene's founding myth places the gods at centre stage in an epic tale of romance, betrayal and renewal.

Cyrene, a Thessalian nymph known in Greek as Kurana, was a princess and a very modern woman, preferring to hunt animals at Mt Pindus while refusing to undertake the domestic chores that were the lot of her contemporaries.

One day, Apollo saw her wrestling a lion and immediately fell in love with her. Clearly used to getting his own way, Apollo abducted Cyrene and took her in a golden chariot to the site that would one day bear her name. The Temple of Apollo was founded to commemorate Cyrene strangling a lion to make the region safe for settlers.

But this family epic which came to define Cyrene had a postscript. When Aristaeus, the bee-keeping son of Apollo and Cyrene, pursued Eurydice in a clumsy rite of seduction, the unfortunate woman was killed by a snake. Aristaeus' bees died in a plague of divine retribution. Only after Aristaeus conducted the ceremonies of atonement and the bees were born again from the carcasses of sacrificed animals was Cyrene freed from the titanic struggles of the gods.



THE EARTHQUAKE OF AD 365

If one event signalled the final decline of the Roman Empire in North Africa, it was the earthquake and tsunami of AD 365. There had been earthquakes before – in AD 306 and AD 262 – but this one brought centuries of civilisation crashing down. With its epicentre in the Mediterranean near Cyprus, its devastating power wrought havoc from Sabratha in the west to Apollonia in the east. So powerful was the quake that parts of these cities, including Apollonia's entire port, disappeared into the sea and the great cities of Cyrene and Leptis Magna were reduced to rubble. The empire that had conquered the world was brought to its knees and never recovered.

return the stolen land with a promise to lead them to a more fertile site where there was a 'hole in the heavens'. Cleverly, the tribesmen marched them through the night, concealing the more fertile areas en route. They took them to land occupied by a different tribe and Cyrene was founded, in 631 BC.

Cyrene soon expanded and more settlers arrived from Greece on a promise of prime agricultural land. Not surprisingly, the local tribes resented the intrusion and asked the Egyptian pharaoh for help, but the Greeks won out in 570 BC. The leader of the first colonists, Battus, ruled as king for 40 years. His dynasty lasted from 631 BC to 440 BC – a period of eight kings, great stability and territorial expansion.

During the city's golden age in the 4th century BC, Cyrene was considered by many as the pre-eminent city of the Greek world. Its wealth and agricultural abundance enabled it to save Greece from famine in 390 BC through a massive export of grain. Plato, who had been sold as a slave by Dionysius, was liberated by a citizen of Cyrene, Annikeris, in 388 BC. Cyrene was at this time a great cultural centre, home to Aristippus (a philosopher of renown who founded the Cyrenaic school of philosophy), Theodorus (a contemporary of Socrates and famous for his skill in arithmetic, geometry, astronomy and music) and Eratosthenes (mathematician, astronomer and the third librarian of the great library of Alexandria).

In 331 BC, Cyrene came under the rule of Alexander the Great. When Alexander's empire collapsed, the Greek world fragmented and the federation of the Pentapolis (of which Cyrene was the premier city) became a largely autonomous entity. In the 3rd century BC, Cyrene and the other cities of the Pentapolis fell under the umbrella of the Ptolemies, who ruled Egypt. Instability ensued and Ptolemy I sent his stepson

Magas to Cyrene in an attempt to restore their dominance. The ambitious Magas, reading from a different script, severed his ties with the Ptolemaic dynasty which was by then ruled by Ptolemy Philadelphus, son of Ptolemy I. It was not until 260 BC, with the engagement of Magas' daughter, Berenice, to the son of Philadelphus that Cyrene was again incorporated into Egypt and the period of independence came to an end.

In 96 BC Ptolemy Apion generously bequeathed Cyrenaica to the Romans and by 75 BC Cyrene had become an important Roman capital. Successive Roman proconsuls favoured an approach that recognised the Greek heritage of Cyrene, and the city remained essentially Greek in character until the 1st century AD, when the Jewish Revolt of AD 115–17 saw the city's destruction. The emperor Hadrian, often referred to as Cyrene's second founder, sought to re-establish the pre-eminence of Cyrene. His rebuilding program gave the city's architecture a more Roman flavour – temples were elevated onto platforms and columns were left smooth and unfluted.

By the middle of the 3rd century AD the city was in decline, in keeping with the general malaise of the Roman Empire. From then on it was a downward spiral, with a devastating earthquake in AD 262, a shift of the Roman capital from Cyrene to Tollemeia as part of the administrative reforms of Emperor Diocletian, and another massive earthquake in AD 365. Unfortunately, subsequent restoration work did little more than paper over the cracks.

In the centuries that followed, Cyrene became a Christian city subject to frequent droughts and predatory raids from the nomadic tribes of the interior. Much weakened, Cyrene was in no position to resist the westward march of the Islamic armies of Amr ibn al-Ass in AD 643. There is evidence

of ongoing settlement for a few centuries after then, but Cyrene's day had passed.

Sights

GYMNASIUM/FORUM

The large open square on your right a few hundred metres after the entrance gate was originally built by the Greeks in the 2nd century BC as a gymnasium. As the major sporting building of Cyrene's upper terrace, it was surrounded on four sides by Doric columns and the open palaestra (exercise area) was the scene of races and other sporting contests. In the second half of the 1st century AD, it was converted by the Romans into a forum, or caesareum (Forum of the Caesars), where political meetings were held. In its Roman manifestation, the compound contained a civil basilica and a temple. Access was through two monumental gateways with four Doric columns. Now stripped of their main adornments, the open spaces wear a decidedly abandoned air.

SKYROTA

The road running along the southwestern perimeter of the forum was the **Skyrota**, the main road through the Greek city. It's still lined with impressive columns bearing graven images of Hermes and Hercules. This section was once known as the Portico of the Hermas and the road was to become in the Roman times a monumental passageway linking the forum to the agora. Behind the western wall of the gymnasium was the **Odeon** (theatre) and the **Xystos**, a track used by athletes training for races. Across the thoroughfare was another small theatre for musical performances, which was probably abandoned after the earthquake in AD 262.

SILPHIUM

The great wealth that fed Cyrene's growth as a metropolis of monumental grandeur was fed in part by its agricultural abundance. Primary among its crops was the indigenous silphium plant, which was much sought after in the ancient world. Now extinct, this plant, similar to wild fennel, was harvested on the highlands of the plateau inland from Cyrene. The list of claimed properties for silphium is quite extravagant, but there is little doubt that its sap was used as a medicine (a purgative and antiseptic) and as a dressing added to food. There is also some suggestion that silphium was a highly effective aphrodisiac – which may explain its almost-mythical importance. The plant was so highly prized that its image appeared on the city's coinage. Carved representations of the plant are rare and one of the few remaining examples is on some of the capitals atop the columns of the Temple of Aesculapius (p138) in Al-Bayda. There is also a modern drawing in the museum at Susa (p147).

HOUSE OF JASON MAGNUS

Also across the path from the **Xystos** is the impressive private residence of Claudius Tiberius Jason Magnus, high priest of the Temple of Apollo in the 2nd century AD. The floor of the main entrance is covered with marble. A number of rooms, including the large dining room or banquet hall, feed off the main inner courtyard. Around the courtyard are a few Corinthian capitals (one bearing the bearded face of Battus, Cyrene's founder and first king) and there are some well-preserved female figures draped with finely sculpted marble clothes. The best example of the house's mosaics is the superb Four Seasons mosaic, which is now kept under an unattractive aluminium roof. From the site, look down across the valley to the southwest, outside the site's perimeter, to see the small, recently excavated theatre.

HOUSE OF HESYCHIUS

On the hill overlooking the agora is the home of Hesychius, a Christian who returned to Cyrene after the AD 365 earthquake in a bid to restore the glory days of the city. Hesychius was a friend of the philosopher and bishop Sinesius. There is a fine mosaic of an angel on the northwestern side showing clearly recognisable Byzantine iconography, alongside an inscription imploring God to protect the women and children of Cyrene. In the compact, three-sided courtyard are the remains of a small fountain, or nymphaeum.

AGORA

The agora was the heart of ancient Cyrene, serving as a public square, a forum for ora-

tors, a market and a magnet for the powerful people of the day. Many civic and religious buildings were clustered around the agora. Many still bear the traces of Roman influence, superimposed onto the fine monumental constructions begun by the Greeks. During the reign of Septimius Severus (r AD 193–211), porticoes were added.

The **Temple of the Octagonal Bases** (2nd century AD) lies in the southeastern corner of the agora, with the base of four columns remaining. It may have replaced an earlier Greek temple. However, the Roman temple is believed to have been built in honour of Aesculapius, the god of healing. The rubble also contains a poorly preserved floor mosaic.

The most distinctive of the agora's monuments is the reconstructed **Naval Monument**, originally built by the Ptolemies in the 3rd century BC in celebration of a naval victory. This stunning statue features a wingless (and now headless) Victoria standing on the prow of a ship, flanked by two dolphins and holding the tritons of Neptune. The female form is wonderfully rendered, with clothing elegantly carved into the marble.

The **Tomb of Battus**, the leader of the settlers from Thera and first king of Cyrene, is now thought to lie behind the naval monument on the eastern side of the agora, although there remains some disagreement about this among archaeologists. The founder of the colony has the rare honour of being buried not only within the city walls but also in the principal square.

The **Sanctuary of Demeter and Kore**, an unusual circular structure, was the scene of a riotous, women-only, annual celebration and feast. As part of the festivities, the women of Cyrene proceeded from here to the **Temple of Demeter**, which is outside the city walls and visible in the distance from the House of Jason Magnus. The statues represent goddesses of fertility. The cavities alongside the statues of the seated goddesses (3rd century BC) were used for offerings to the goddesses; the standing figures were added by the Romans.

Outside the agora's southern wall is the **Capitoleum**, the customary temple to the Greek trinity of Zeus, Hera and Athena (or, if you were Roman, Jupiter, Juno and Minerva).

From the northern side of the agora, a path leads down off the plateau and there

are some superb views over the Sanctuary of Apollo towards the coastal plain to the Mediterranean.

SANCTUARY OF APOLLO

This rich collection of temples, baths and other public buildings sits on a ledge overlooking the plain.

The path down from the agora leads to the **Fountain of Apollo (Baths of Paris)**. This delightful spot under the cliff is a good place to rest in the shade to the accompaniment of a particularly vocal colony of frogs. This small thermal complex at the outlet of a natural spring was built in the 5th century AD. Note that around some of the pools are some small niches used for the personal possessions of the bathers or for oil lamps.

The sanctuary's ancient gateway is marked off to the east by the four Doric columns of the reconstructed **Greek Propylea** or Monumental Gateway (3rd century BC).

The **Temple of Apollo** was one of the earliest temples at Cyrene, with the foundations dating from the 6th century BC. The initial structure was little more than an open courtyard, but was soon enhanced by rows of six columns along two sides and 11 on the other two. Fragments of the temple's pediment suggest a representation of the nymph Cyrene strangling a lion. A statue of Apollo playing the lyre was found here and now resides in the British Museum in London. The temple was rebuilt during the 4th century BC, again with 34 columns. It was destroyed during the Jewish Revolt and what you see now is essentially a 2nd-century AD Roman building in the Greek Doric style (the columns are smooth, not fluted).

Immediately in front of the temple is the **monumental altar** (6th century BC), which is 22m long and made from limestone covered by marble slabs. Religious rites, including animal sacrifices, were carried out here. The great Greek poet of the age, Callimachus, describes in his famous Hymn to Apollo scenes of sacrificing bulls, the altar adorned with flowers and crowds of dancing young people. Note also the reconstructed **Sacred Fountain**, or nymphaeum, with its attractive lions and columns.

On the northern side of the Temple of Apollo is the **Temple of Artemis**. The foundation was laid in the 6th century BC and is thought by some archaeologists to pre-date

the Apollo temple. It consisted of a room, or cella, with columns in the centre. It may once have celebrated both Apollo and Artemis. Most of what you see now, including the marble portal, derives from the temple's rebuilding in the 4th century BC. In the remainder of the sanctuary are the barely visible remains of temples to Isis, Hecate and Latona, and the tomb of Hercules.

THEATRE

Just west of the sanctuary is the spectacularly situated theatre, which could once seat 1000 spectators. Its original construction was by the Greeks and probably dates from the 6th century BC although it was much modified in subsequent centuries. In the 2nd century AD, the Romans transformed it into an amphitheatre in which the oval-shaped arena measured 33m by 29m. Seats, supported by struts built into the cliff, were constructed on the Mediterranean side. The slabs down the hillside are all that remains of this ambitious idea. The theatre affords a superb view over the sheer drop, and of the hillsides with glimpses of the old necropolis and the sea.

WALL OF NIKODEMUS

Separating the Sanctuary of Apollo from the theatre and built during the Roman era, this wall protected the much-frequented public buildings in the sanctuary from the wild animals in the amphitheatre. The wall is named after one of the priests of the Temple of Apollo.

ROMAN BATHS

The Roman baths are the last buildings as you leave the site via the northern gate. Built in AD 98–99 under the emperor Trajan and restored by Hadrian, these baths contain some good mosaics and cipolin columns. The *frigidarium* is the best preserved room of the baths complex and contains a Latin inscription honouring Hadrian. There is also a *apodyterium* (changing room), where the statue of the Three Graces now in Tripoli's Jamahiriya Museum (p78) was found, as well as the *tepidarium* (warm room) and *calidarium* (hot room). In December 1913, during a violent storm, a famous statue of Venus (or Aphrodite) of Cyrene wringing out her hair was unearthed; it now stands in the Museo Nazionale Romano in Rome.

NECROPOLIS

Cut into a cliff face along the old road down to Apollonia and in the countryside in all directions for miles around Cyrene are the more than 2000 tombs of the old necropolis. Originally built by the Greeks in the 6th century BC, they were used and added to by the Romans and Byzantines right up until the 6th century AD. Many of the tombs were later used by nomads for habitation, some of them being quite spacious. Some contain traces of the original architectural façades. The hollows in front of some Greek tombs once held likenesses of Persephone, the goddess of death, while the Roman tombs held carved portraits of the deceased. On the hillside there are also some sarcophagi with lids.

TEMPLE OF ZEUS

A steepish climb up the hill from the rest of the site is the famed **Temple of Zeus**, one of the highlights of Cyrene. Reflecting Cyrene's importance in the ancient Greek world, the Temple of Zeus was larger than the Parthenon in Athens. Constructed in the 5th century BC, the sanctuary measured 32m by 70m and was surrounded by two rows of eight and two rows of 17 columns. In the sanctuary itself there were two rows of Doric columns as well as two columns in the porch. On the main platform in the sanctuary was a statue of a seated Zeus holding Victory in his right hand and a sceptre in his left. Animal sacrifices were carried out in the temple. The ancient entrance was from the east. Under the Romans the temples was used to honour Jupiter; it also served the Greek/Libyan hybrid deity, Zeus Ammun.

The temple was restored under the emperor Augustus (r 27 BC–AD 14), but was then destroyed in AD 115 during the Jewish Revolt. Like many of Cyrene's public buildings, it was rebuilt in AD 120 by the Roman emperor Hadrian. After it was reduced to rubble by the AD 365 earthquake, it was ransacked by Christian zealots who called it a 'den of demons' in reference to the statues to ancient gods.

The temple is being comprehensively and painstakingly reconstructed by Italian archaeologists.

The rubble of the **Hippodrome** or racetrack area, which once had tiered seating, is on the same plateau to the east.

MUSEUM

The one-room Cyrene's **museum** (adult/child 3/1LD, camera/video 5/10LD; ☎ 8am–1pm Tue–Sun) is not a match for the museum at Leptis Magna (p117) or Tripoli (p76), but it nonetheless contains a fine collection of Roman statues, tablets and a small gathering of mosaics. Many of the statues are accompanied by useful explanations in English, Italian and Arabic.

All of what you'll see are fine examples of the marble finery that once adorned Cyrene's major buildings, but the statues of Jupiter (found in the Capitoleum; p144), Alexander the Great (from the Roman Baths; opposite), one of the best remaining representations of the Three Graces, a portrait bust of Marcus Aurelius and another male bust from the Severan era and found in the Temple of Apollo (p145) are especially finely rendered.

Also of great importance are the tablets that mark the great landmarks of Cyrene's history: the Cyrene Decree of Augustus that sets out the Roman laws for protecting the Greek inhabitants when Cyrene passed into Roman hands; the Diagramma or Constitution for Cyrene by Ptolemy I dating from 332 BC; the Founders' Decree (4th century BC), which records Cyrene's origins; a tablet recording Cyrene's gift of corn to Greek cities during the famine in the 4th century BC; and the will of Ptolemy VII, which bequeaths Cyrene to the Romans should he die without an heir. For a historical overview of these events, see p141.

Other highlights include mosaics from the House of Jason Magnus (p144) and surrounding area and the glass cabinet in the centre of the room, which contains gigantic fingers from a statue of Zeus that once stood in the centre of the Temple of Zeus.

SUSA

☎ 084

The small town of Susa is the gateway to the pretty Greek-Byzantine city of Apollonia. The modern town was first established in 1897 by a group of Muslim refugees from Crete.

The road down off the mountain from Shahat and Cyrene to Susa is shadowed by the ancient road between Cyrene and Apollonia, and deep ruts mark the tracks left by the chariots of old. Halfway between the

two sites stands a simple, white monument to the memory of Libyans who died in the war against the Italians. The last part of the journey involves a spectacular descent as the road winds down off the northern rim of the Jebel al-Akhdar with great views along the coast.

Susa has a petrol station and some grocery stores along the main street, close to the main post office. It is about 20km from Shahat.

Sights

Apollonia's **museum** is a short distance southwest of Al-Manara Hotel, but it has recently closed (reportedly due to a lack of interest among travellers). Before it closed, it wasn't Libya's finest museum, with poorly labelled, dusty exhibits. That said, it contained some interesting artefacts, including: a 2nd- to 3rd-century AD Roman tomb, which was found in front of the Western Church in Apollonia; a drawing of the silphium plant; mosaics from the Byzantine church at Ras al-Hilla; an 1825 line drawing of the Greek Theatre; elegant tablet reliefs from L'Atrun Church; the exquisite door frame from the Byzantine Duke's Palace; and four mosaics found in the Eastern Church. Let's hope it has reopened by the time you read this.

Sleeping & Eating

Al-Manara Hotel (Map p148; ☎ 5153001; fax 5152188; www.manarahotel.com; s/d/ste 45/60/95LD; ☎ ☎) One of the new breed of private hotels sweeping Libya, Al-Manara Hotel is exceptional. It has outstanding rooms, a prime location just 50m from the site entrance, fine views from most rooms with some overlooking the ruins, a good restaurant (meals 15LD), good buffet breakfasts and professional service.

APOLLONIA

Apollonia, the former port for Cyrene, spreads along the Mediterranean shoreline in a reminder of how the ancient Greeks and Romans always chose beautifully located sites for their settlements. It's one of the top five ancient cities in Libya, with a wealth of Roman, Greek and Byzantine buildings. It gives an unmistakable sense of walking amid the accumulating splendour of the great civilisations of the ancient world.

History

Apollonia was the harbour for Cyrene, 18km to the west, and because of this it played a critical role in the prosperity of Cyrene and the other cities of the Pentapolis. Archaeological evidence gathered to date suggests that the city was operating as a port as early as the 7th century BC. It served a similar purpose under the Romans and even came to rival Cyrene in significance in the late Roman period, as it was considered to be less vulnerable to attack than cities further inland. After Diocletian, the city was for a time the seat of Roman Governors in the province of Libya Superior.

Most of what remains today dates from the Byzantine era (from the 5th to 6th centuries AD) when Apollonia was known as the 'city of churches'. It had five basilicas and 19 towers.

Sights

The ruins of **Apollonia** (admission 3LD, camera/video 5/10LD; ☎ 7.30am-7pm May-Sep, 8am-5pm Oct-Apr) run along a narrow strip of land for around 1km east from the site entrance to

the Greek Theatre. As such it's an easily negotiable site.

Of the Byzantine city's five churches, four are within the city walls and the fifth is just outside the walls to the south. The **Western Church** is just near the entrance, with the western wall of the city running around the apse. The four green columns in the sanctuary are of Roman origin and, like much of Apollonia, were used by resourceful Byzantines in the later construction; the four white columns are wholly Byzantine. The church was originally covered with a wooden roof and the floor was entirely marble. The cisterns at the eastern end lead to the baptistry in the northeastern corner and there are some mosaic fragments on the floor.

A short distance east is the **Central Church**. Its marble floor is better preserved; in the main sanctuary are some fine pillars adorned with Byzantine crosses and the globe of Atlas. Outside the main sanctuary on the western side, you should note the bench reserved for the bishop to rest on after the strenuous task of presiding over communion and, to the north, the tiny

child's baptistry. North of the church is the rubble of **Byzantine baths**.

The **Roman baths** just east of the Central Church date from the 2nd century AD. The columns lining the eastern side have Roman capitols dating from AD 138, while the drums, clearly visible within the columns, are Greek. In the northeastern corner of the main building is the **gymnasium** – pottery from the Greek (black) and Roman (red) eras is scattered about. Immediately south of the gymnasium is the **frigidarium**.

Above the baths on the hill is the **Byzantine Duke's Palace**, once one of the biggest palaces in Cyrenaica. The first room after you enter from the north was a waiting room and library; note the huge stone shelves reserved for large books. The western section of the palace was the domain of the duke and his family. The private chapel (one of the city's five churches) is reached by passing under some well-executed stone arches. In the chapel, the elegant curve of the apse is a feature as is the throne room leading off the main room. There were 83 rooms in the eastern wing, used as quarters for servants and soldiers. A small staircase leads up to the highest point, formerly the home of the leading officer, which enabled him to keep an eye on his troops and the remainder of the palace. Close to the foot of the staircase is a large, black stone, once used by the Romans to seal their wells.

Northeast of the palace and down the hill are **Byzantine houses** and the **Eastern Church**, in its heyday the biggest church in Cyrenaica. Huge columns of cipolin marble once divided the nave and aisles, forming transepts; many are still standing. The marble was shipped from the Greek island Paros, while the granite slabs used to close off the nave came from Egypt. Although this was among the earliest of the churches (5th century AD), some mosaics remain. Other features to watch out for are the two sacrificial altars and baptistry.

After you've explored the church, follow the path above the beach to the storage rooms cut into the wall – goods being shipped awaited distribution or loading here. In the rock wall are two arched **cisterns**. On the beach itself the two stone-tower bases protruding from the sand were once used as pottery and amphora stores. Into the beach's southern wall are wedged hundreds

of pottery shards. It is believed that this was the site of a pottery factory; the blackened sections indicate that there was a kiln here. The ancient harbour, now underwater, lay out to the north. Visible offshore, Hammam Island was, before the earthquake, connected to the mainland and home to a **lighthouse**. The underwater ruins, including a ship of 22 hands, would make for fantastic snorkelling, but the authorities are understandably reluctant to allow it for fear of damage from treasure seekers. The beach is nonetheless a good place for a swim.

From the small hill above the cisterns, you can see down to the five perfectly circular holes cut from the rock. These were the **olive oil tanks** of the Byzantine city. To their right is an enormous **fish tank** (4th century AD) from where the townsfolk could come to choose their evening meal.

The remains of the Greek **acropolis** (tombs) are to the southeast, and over the hill to the east is the plunging **Greek theatre**, which stood outside the walls of the ancient city. The views are wonderful from the upper stalls. There are also remains of the Roman **necropolis** off to the east and south.

RAS AL-HILLAL

رأس الهلال

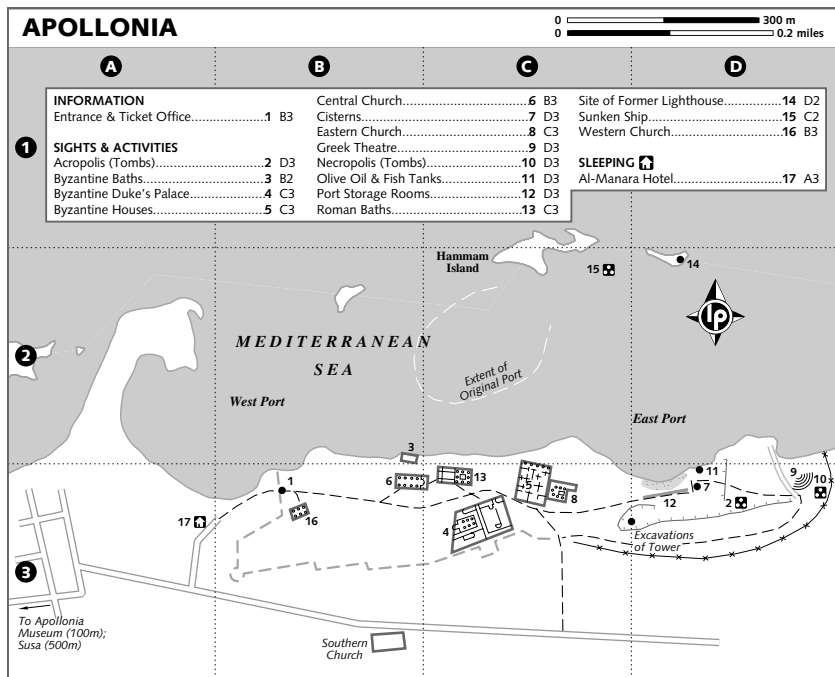
☎ 081

Plunging hillsides dropping down off the Jebel al-Akhdar into the Mediterranean. A perfect arc of bay that shelters an ancient Byzantine church with a spectacular panorama. Welcome to Ras al-Hillal, home to the most dramatic scenery along the Libyan coast.

Coming from the west, from where the cinematic sweep of the landscape is best appreciated, a small road leads off the coastal highway to the Byzantine-era **Ras al-Hillal Church**. Apart from the views, which are themselves reason enough to come here, the church is simple with the clear outline of the main sanctuary and apse and a few dusty mosaics on the floors.

Before the Byzantines arrived, Ras al-Hillal was, for a time, the second port of Cyrene after Apollonia, although nothing remains to suggest this. At the eastern end of town is a nice small beach, behind which is a fresh water spring.

The road behind the town climbs into the mountains, with some fine views en route. After 14km, the picturesque **Shallal Ras al-Hillal**



THINGS THEY SAID ABOUT...

RAS AL-HILLAL

It was a marvellous morning, and I have rarely seen anything so beautiful as this mountainous country. Colour was everywhere, from the sky which formed a deep blue arch over my head, to the thousand shades of green in the woods all around. The ground was thickly strewn with all kinds of flowers, and black and brownish-red butterflies fluttered among the gaily coloured blooms. Here the rocks, even where they were bare, were not grey, but displayed a wealth of colour.

Knud Holmboe, Desert Encounter (1931)

waterfall, which flows virtually year-round, is visible on the left. The valley shelves are an excellent place for a picnic. Climbing still further, you reach a plateau, which is also a good place to rest and then to set off exploring the Jebel al-Akhdar on foot. Around 2.5km beyond the waterfall is a fork in the road. The left branch leads up towards the **Greek Tombs**, which are on either side of the road for about 1km. A few of these lonely sentinels are surrounded by sunken graves as well as ancient wheel ruts hewn into the rock.

Sleeping & Eating

Apart from the ageing, summer-only tourist village at the western end of the bay, which was undergoing renovations when we were there, the **Rainbow Resort** (☎ 634714; 2-/4-bed bungalows 80/85LD, apt 90LD; meals 15LD) is a great place to wind down for a day or so. Formerly a university agricultural project, its good rooms, palm trees and proximity to such beautiful vistas make it one of the best choices along the Cyrenaican coast. It's well signposted off the coastal highway, up the hill to the south at the eastern end of town.

Getting There & Away

Ras al-Hillal is 30km east of Susa, along the coastal highway that leads to Derna.

L'ATRUN

الأثرون

The small town of L'Atrun, 9km east of Ras al-Hillal and 29km west of Derna, contains better-preserved Byzantine churches than those at Ras al-Hillal. The **Western Church** stands on a bluff above the Mediterranean and must have been a spectacular place to worship. The walls of the church are still intact and the sanctuary is strewn with marble pillars, some of which are marked with a carved Byzantine cross. Just outside the sanctuary walls are abandoned grave covers, with carved crosses, snakes and other motifs.

The less dramatic **Eastern Church** lies over the hill 150m to the east. To reach it, you skirt a steep, rocky cove with cave tombs gouged into the rock.

L'Atrun is around 350m north of the main road, while the modern village is on the south side of the road.

DERNA

درنة

☎ 081 / pop 79,860

The shabby apartment blocks of Derna sprawl along the coast and into an attractive wadi that spills out from the Jebel Akhdar. We struggle to come up with too many reasons to linger here but there's a moderately interesting old quarter, a waterfall, a good restaurant and a reasonable hotel to break up the journey between Tobruk and Susa.

Sights

The main square of the **old town**, which lies about 1km south of the corniche, is surrounded by small cafés. There is also a covered **souq**, which is well worth a look around for its local colour. Dominating the skyline in the old town is the **Masjed as-Sahab**, a fine example of modern Islamic architecture. Built largely of sandstone, it has two fine minarets with lattice windows halfway up the tower, a large open courtyard and lovely red calligraphic motifs above the archways.

If waterfalls float your boat, you haven't much to get excited about in Libya – so you may want to head around 8km south of town, through the narrow wadi that cuts like a gash into the jebel, to the small waterfall of **Shallal Derna**, which is fed by a series of springs further up the wadi. For everyone else, it's probably not worth the effort.

Sleeping & Eating

Funduq al-Ferdous (☎ 633570; fax 623979; Sharia Rafal Ansari; s/d/tr 25/35/45LD; ☎) There are other places to stay in town but this is the only one we feel comfortable recommending. Once you're past the unimpressive façade, the rooms are simple but well kept and the management has been praised by some travellers as the friendliest in Libya – we're inclined to agree. This hotel is signposted at the western end of the Corniche, although it's about 1km inland – ask for 'Nadi Darnus' (Derna Club), which is very close by.

Mat'am Salsabil (☎ 624863; Sharia al-Corniche; meals 15LD; ☎ lunch & dinner) This restaurant, 450m west of the harbour, is easily Derna's best with good food (standard tourist set meals or grilled mains) and above-average service. We assume that the 'heart' on the menu is a mistranslation, or at least we hope so.

Getting There & Away

The shared-taxi station is about 2km east of the town centre. Taxis run to Tobruk, Al-Bayda and Benghazi.

EASTERN CYRENAICA

Libya's northeastern corner has just three sites of interest and it's a long journey to get here, but the name of Tobruk will resonate for travellers with any interest in the WWII North African campaign. And for those whose time in Libya is restricted to the coast, Al-Jaghbab also makes an interesting and reasonably accessible Saharan detour.

TOBRUK

طبرق

☎ 087 / pop 124,340

Tobruk was the scene of some of the most important battles of WWII, and it's a name known around the world even if many people don't know that it lies in Libya. It's home to poignant Commonwealth, German and French war cemeteries and a host of other WWII sites. It's clear, however, that they weren't fighting over Tobruk for its beauty – let's be honest: modern Tobruk is one of Libya's least inspiring towns – but for its strategic significance.

That said, a recent governor – Tobruk local and now Libyan prime minister, Al-Baghdadi Ali al-Mahmudi – oversaw a mas-

sive public works campaign that has made the city's roads much more manageable and its waterfront a touch more appealing.

As the last major Libyan town on the road to the Egyptian border 139km away, many travellers end up passing through here and some reasonable hotels and a good restaurant at least break up the journey.

Orientation & Information

All roads in Tobruk lead to the harbour. The road from Egypt enters the town at the western end of the harbour, next to Funduq al-Masira. From the west, the main road from Derna passes the turn-off to the Knightsbridge (Acroma) Cemetery and then cuts through the centre of town to the harbour. The compact city centre is around the square surrounding the main post office on the hill overlooking the harbour's northern side. Here you'll find most of the banks, including the **Masraf al-Tijara Watanmiya** (Bank of Commerce & Development; off Sharia al-Jamahiriya) – where you can get Visa cash advances – a

VISITING TOBRUK'S WWII SITES

Tobruk's **WWII cemeteries** (☎ 9am-5pm Sat-Thu, 2-5pm Fri) are well maintained. There are cemeteries for most of the major participating nations, except for Italy (its government repatriated all the bodies of slain Italian soldiers). Cemetery registers are kept in a safe at the gate of the two Commonwealth cemeteries (Knightsbridge and Tobruk); these list the names of fallen soldiers, in alphabetical order, with a corresponding row number and letter to assist in finding a specific grave. Sadly, many Muslim graves are not listed.

The Knightsbridge (Acroma) Cemetery and the Australian (Fig Tree) Hospital are west of town, off the road to Derna, while the German Cemetery, Tobruk (Commonwealth) War Cemetery, French Cemetery and WWII trenches are all on, or just off the road to the Egyptian border south or southeast of town. The museum and Rommel's Operations Room are both located in Tobruk itself.

If you want to see every one of the WWII sites listed in this section, expect to pay around 20LD and take a minimum of three to four hours.

couple of hotels, the town's best restaurant and two **internet cafés** (Sharia al-Jamahiriya; per hr 1LD) where connections can be slow. The **Libyan Arab Airlines office** (☎ 622681) is on the east side of the square, diagonally opposite Funduq al-Jebel al-Akhdar.

Sights

KNIGHTSBRIDGE (ACROMA) CEMETERY

The Knightsbridge Cemetery, 20km west of town, is the largest in Tobruk. Contained within its walls are 3649 graves. Of these 2663 are of known soldiers and 986 unknown (most of these have headstones marked 'Known unto God'). The nationalities represented highlight the massive loss of life in this tragic period of history: UK (1584/703 known/unknown); New Zealand (435/61); South Africa (363/47); Australia (240/63); India (8/3); as well as Canada (15 known), France (two), Greece (12), Poland (two) and Yugoslavia (two). Among the graves are the bodies of two soldiers who were awarded the prestigious Victoria Cross.

Unlike most of the other cemeteries, Knightsbridge is on the site of an actual battleground. The large white cross overseeing the thousands of headstones lends the place an air of tranquillity.

AUSTRALIAN (FIG TREE) HOSPITAL

Between the Knightsbridge Cemetery and Tobruk, this former Australian field dressing station is often known simply as the Fig Tree. This shady spot on the now-peaceful plains surrounding Tobruk was an ideal location for a hospital, with its deep natural caves (now heavily silted up) and shelter offered by fig trees a few kilometres from the front line. It was also connected by a ridge to the battlefields of Knightsbridge. An offshoot of one of the original fig trees, which still stands, was taken to Australia and planted in the gardens of Melbourne's Shrine of Remembrance.

To reach the sight from Knightsbridge Cemetery, travel east along the main road to Tobruk for 12km, then take the turn-off to the south for 1.7km.

GERMAN CEMETERY

The closest cemetery to central Tobruk, the forbidding German cemetery overlooking Tobruk harbour, was built in 1955 to resemble a Libyan fort. It contains the

names of 6026 German soldiers inscribed in mosaic slabs lining the inside walls of the sandstone fort. It's often closed but there's usually someone around who can help find the key (*miftah*). The cemetery is signposted east off the road to the Egyptian border, 3km south of the harbour; it's reached via an 800m dirt track. Ask for '*maqbara al-manya*'.

TOBRUK (COMMONWEALTH) WAR CEMETERY

The Tobruk (Commonwealth) War Cemetery, 6km south of the harbour on the road to the Egyptian border, also has an air of simplicity and dignity. This cemetery contains 2479 graves – not all are from Commonwealth countries, but simply those who fought for the Allied cause. The countries most represented include Australia, India, New Zealand, South Africa, the UK and Poland. There are also two soldiers buried here who were awarded the Victoria Cross.

FRENCH CEMETERY

Most of the over 300 soldiers buried here died in the Battle of Bir Hakim, 80km southeast of Tobruk, in May and June 1942. The graves are marked with simple crosses inscribed with each soldier's name and regiment. The bodies of Muslim soldiers who fought alongside the French are also buried here.

The French Cemetery is behind a sandstone gate and walls, 8km south of the harbour and on the corner of the road to Al-Jaghbab.

WWII TRENCHES

During the Siege of Tobruk, the city was completely encircled by 25km of defence lines or trenches. The most easily accessible are just north of the road to the Egyptian border, 18.4km from the harbour; the trenches are not signposted and are just past the huge factory to the north, which sends up great clouds of white dust.

The four lines of concrete trenches were built by Italian and Australian soldiers. The Australians and Germans, who rarely fought in Tobruk itself, faced off in a bloody war of attrition here. The trenches have silted up over the years, but some key elements are still visible, including large, sunken tank platforms as well as smaller Browning gun emplacements. In places,

THE RATS OF TOBRUK

The Rats of Tobruk are among the best-known soldiers in Australian military history and an integral part of the country's mythology. Some 14,270 Australian soldiers (out of a total 24,000 Allied troops) participated in the Siege of Tobruk, which lasted from 10 April 1941 until 10 December 1941 (240 days spanning a fierce Libyan summer). It was here that the Allies inflicted the first major defeat on the Wehrmacht.

The aim was to halt the advance into Egypt of the German Afrika Korps, to buy time for the Allied forces in Egypt to resupply and reinforce their ranks. The besieged Allies were supplied by a motley array of seafaring vessels – known as the Tobruk Ferry Service, or the Junks or the Scrap Iron Flotilla – which made the highly dangerous Spud Run into Tobruk Harbour.

At the time of the siege, a Radio Berlin announcer denounced the Australians as the 'rats of Tobruk', comparing them to rats burrowing underground and caught in a trap, in a bid to destroy their morale. Instead, the Australians turned the name into a badge of honour and source of amusement. A famous photo shows a Bren gun carrier with the words 'Rats to you' painted on the side and an unofficial medal with a rodent on it was struck from the aluminium of a downed German plane.

On 20 June 1942, seven months after the Australians were finally evacuated, German field marshal Rommel's army launched a fresh assault and retook Tobruk in a day.

stairs lead to underground bunkers, some of which are still quite deep.

On the north side of the trenches is Wadi Dalia, a shallow valley whose walls are riddled with caves. It was in this wadi that hundreds of Australians died from aerial bombardment.

It's a good idea to wear boots or shoes, rather than sandals, when visiting, as the area is strewn with rusted WWII-vintage barbed wire.

TOBRUK MUSEUM

Tobruk Museum (admission 3LD) is in a converted church around 500m north of Sharia al-Jamahiriya. It reportedly contains a moderately interesting collection of WWII memorabilia but, as the man at the shop next door said, the caretaker doesn't show up very often and he was nowhere to be found while we were in town. We were told to go to the offices of the Ministry of Tourism, adjacent to Rommel's Operations Room, to ask for the key (*miftah*), but the person responsible had left town and the key had gone with him. We hope you have better luck.

ROMMEL'S OPERATIONS ROOM

This poorly maintained site in the heart of Tobruk, 600m north of the western end of the harbour, includes the bunker from where Rommel directed operations. In the same square is an assortment of WWII memorabilia.

Behind the white wall immediately to the east are the rusting remains of a bomber which crashed in the Libyan Desert south of Tobruk in 1943. For the full story, see *The Last Journey of the Lady Be Good*, p156.

Sleeping & Eating

Funduq al-Jebel al-Akhdar (☎ 626128; Sharia al-Jamahiriya; s with sink & shared bathroom 10LD, s/d/tr with shared bathroom 15/20/30LD) We have to confess that we've included this place only so that we can tell you that Rommel, clearly a man of simple tastes, stayed in Room 319 here, albeit for only four hours. That's also about how long most travellers would be able to withstand the grubby bathrooms and bleak rooms. Nothing seems to have changed, or been cleaned, since the great man graced the hotel's corridors.

Funduq Qartaj (☎ 620442; ferasfly79@yahoo.com; www.qartagehotel.com; Ring Rd; d with/without air-con & TV 25/20LD, tr 40LD; 🍷) When we first visited here six years ago, we thought it the best hotel in town. In truth, the rooms here are unexciting but tidy and large enough to swing a suitcase. The main drawback is the location, on a busy road about 2km north-west of the harbour, which leaves it a long way from anywhere.

Funduq el-Jaghbab (☎ 628260; hot-jag@yahoo.com; Sharia Jamahiriya; d with/without private bathroom 35/25LD, with private bathroom & balcony 40LD) The newest of Tobruk's hotels, this would probably be our pick as the best place to stay. The rooms are

fine with some of Tobruk's modern bathrooms, while you're in the centre of town, close to the post office, internet cafés and best restaurant.

Funduq al-Masira (☎ 625761; fax 625769; s/d 43/53LD) You have to admire the bravado of a place that has aged terribly but still raises its prices. The lobby is one of the finest examples of the genre of 1970s-era Libyan government hotels and the service seems wearied. The lifts don't work (and if they do, don't trust them), the restaurant is grim and the bathrooms are a study in decay. That said, the rooms themselves aren't bad at all, you'll get BBC on the dial and the breakfasts are better than most.

Mat'am al-Khalij (☎ mobile 0925785344; Sharia al-Jamahiriya; meals 10-12LD; lunch & dinner) If you spend any time in Tobruk, you'll end up eating here every night as it's easily the best place in town. Take a table on the upstairs terrace with views over the harbour and order from a range of pizzas, grilled meats and fish dishes. The service is friendly and usually English-speaking.

Getting There & Away

Given that Tobruk is about as far east as you can go in Libya, those returning to Tripoli may want to consider flying one way. Or at least you might once they finish repairing the runway, which could take a few months or a few years. When services resume, tickets cost 51/102LD one way/return.

If you're driving and you need to get to Benghazi or Tripolitania in a hurry, consider taking the gun-barrel-straight desert road to Ajdabiya (372km). There is a petrol station at around the halfway point, a checkpoint and nothing else to relieve the monotony.

Getting Around

Tobruk is a sprawling city and taxis are everywhere, but you need to know what you're looking for – not the clearly painted taxis as elsewhere in Libya but a private car with a cup or pipe attached to the roof. Strangely, these technically illegal private taxis are all you'll find in town.

AL-BURDI

Set on a beautiful arc of bay watched over by two headlands close to the Egyptian border, Al-Burdi is many travellers' first or last expe-

rience of Libya. There's a reasonable beach here, but the town was largely destroyed by Allied bombing of Italian defensive positions during WWII. The only place of interest to detain you as you pass through is **John Brill's Room** – a small room high on a bluff overlooking the Mediterranean where the British soldier John Frederick Brill painted an extraordinary tableau in 1942. His interpretation of the war includes finely rendered female dancers, a violinist, novels by Dickens, human skulls and the use of black and white to symbolise war and peace. John Brill died three months after completing the painting at the age of 22. He is buried in the cemetery at El-Alamein in Egypt.

AL-JAGHUB

الجغوب

pop 400

Rich in historical associations – it was one of the most important Saharan oases of ancient times – and closer to the Egyptian oasis of Siwa (150km) than it is to Tobruk (285km), remote Al-Jaghub is a quiet place where nothing happens in a hurry. It's a long way to come and is probably not worth the journey on its own. But if you're planning to cross the Eastern Sand Sea to Al-Kufra, Al-Jaghub is your starting point. If your time in Libya is restricted to the Cyrenaican coast but you want to see the desert, the countryside around Al-Jaghub will also give you a small taste.

History

The remote oasis of Al-Jaghub was for centuries an important staging post for pilgrims and trans-Saharan traders on their way to Siwa, Cairo and Mecca. In 1856, Sayyid Mohammed Ali al-Sanusi, the Grand Sanusi (see p36) moved the headquarters of his Sanusi movement from Al-Bayda to Al-Jaghub, and its *zawiya* (Islamic college or monastery) became of the most important of the 146 Sanusi lodges. The Grand Sanusi transformed Al-Jaghub into a fortress town and a symbol of the enduring Sanusi hostility towards Libya's Ottoman (and later Italian) rulers. Al-Jaghub's Sanusi university became so important that it was considered Africa's second most important Islamic university after Cairo's famous Al-Azhar University. Mohammed al-Mahdi, the Grand Sanusi's son, moved the Sanusi headquarters to Al-Kufra in 1896. The *za-*

GRAZIANI'S FENCE

In February 1931, the Italian Government decided to build a barbed-wire fence stretching from the Mediterranean port of Bardia to the oasis of Al-Jaghub, a mere 270km away. Supervised by armoured patrols and the air force, the fence sought to cut off the rebels from their supply sources and contacts with the Sanusi leadership in Egypt. Construction began in April and was completed by September. This move, along with the deportation of almost the entire population of the Jebel Akhdar, was decisive and precipitated the end of the rebellion. This extraordinary barbed-wire monstrosity still runs close to the Libyan-Egyptian border from near Tobruk, finishing at Al-Jaghub – whereupon the desolate Great Sand Sea begins.

wiya was torn down just two decades ago as part of an attempt to rewrite Libya's pre-revolution history.

Sights

Visible from the checkpoint as you enter town, the enormous pile of bricks and rubble was the former *Zawiya Sanusi*. This was once a world-renowned seat of Sanusi learning. Reports of the *zawiya* at its peak tell of famous scholars and the finest building materials, including wooden beams imported from India. Sadly, it didn't survive the revolution.

Of less historical significance but more aesthetically evocative is **Qasr Athani**, the brick, Italian-era fort that's visible from all over town. It's rubbish-strewn but largely intact with a warren of rooms and arched porticoes surrounding the interior courtyard.

Sleeping & Eating

There are no hotels in town, although travellers planning to spend the night will usually be provided with a room in a private home. Restaurants are also nonexistent, but there's a small supermarket in the centre of the newer part of town. Some nearby stalls also serve local dates that are much-loved throughout Libya.

Getting There & Away

The road from Tobruk to Al-Jaghub receives little traffic and the surface is, there-

fore, generally quite good. Unusually, the 953 *Michelin* map is incorrect, listing the distance as 230km – the correct figure is 285km.

AROUND AL-JAGHUB

For the last 50km into Al-Jaghub if you're coming from Tobruk, the barbed-wire monstrosity known as **Graziani's Fence** (see left) shadows the highway to the east.

All of the following sights, with the exception of **Buhairat al-Malfa**, require a local guide and a 4WD. One local guide with knowledge of all the sites listed here is Abd al-Salam az-Zintani (☎ satellite 008821633399329).

There are two salt lakes (*buhairah*) within striking distance of Al-Jaghub. **Buhairat al-Malfa** is the only one accessible in a 2WD vehicle, some 30km east of town along the road to the Egyptian border. If you've been to the Ubari lakes (p187) in Fezzan, Malfa is nothing to get excited about, but the water is turquoise and the lake covers a considerable area. On a rock ledge above the lake on the western side are some ancient **engravings** of cattle that are at least 3000 years old (see *Periods of Saharan Rock Art*, p200) and worth the climb. The area is also strewn with **fossilised shells**. The Egyptian border is 5km beyond the lake.

Closer to Al-Jaghub (18km), but accessible only by 4WD, **Buhairat al-Fredgha** is an altogether more evocative desert lake, situated as it is alongside the sand dunes that mark the commencement of the **Great Sand Sea**. In addition to the lake itself, millennia-old **graves**, complete with bones, are carved into the nearby rock, while the **twisted palm tree** is famous for the contorted shape of its trunk.

Around 35km west of Al-Jaghub town, you'll find some outstanding examples of upright **fossilised tree trunks**.

INTO THE SAHARA

One of the most evocative desert journeys in Libya – not least because it's a route traversed by very few travellers – is to cross the Great Sand Sea from Al-Jaghub to Al-Kufra (p207). This 800km, three-day, two-night desert crossing enters the sand sea south of Al-Jaghub and involves difficult driving through high sand dunes for most of the route to Al-Kufra. The exceptions

THE LAST JOURNEY OF THE LADY BE GOOD

On 5 April 1943, an American B-24 bomber named *Lady Be Good* took off from the Suluq Airfield, south of Benghazi, part of a 25-strong squadron on a routine bombing raid against Naples in southern Italy. Forced by a sandstorm to abort the mission, the pilot turned for home. The pilot radioed Benghazi's Benina International Airport, but in the severe weather conditions the radio went dead. With no radio contact and with fuel running low, the nine crew members parachuted from the plane, which subsequently crashed over 700km southeast of Benghazi (600km south of Tobruk). One parachute failed to open. The remaining eight crew members began a desperate walk north. Five crew members gave up after an epic 104km. In his diary, which was found with his corpse, Robert Toner wrote on 12 April: 'There is no hope whatsoever and the night is cold'. The remainder of the crew refused to give up, with one walking a further 44km before collapsing and dying.

None of this was known to the outside world until 1958 when a team of British geologists prospecting for oil found the wreckage of the plane. Eight of the bodies were found by an American search team two years later. The body of the last crew member, Vernan Moore, has never been found.

The wreckage of the *Lady Be Good* remained at the crash site for 51 years until graffiti and treasure-hunters forced the Libyan authorities to take custody of the plane. It can now be seen next to Rommel's Operations Room (p153) in Tobruk.

are flatter country for about 130km about halfway through – it was in this area that an American B-24 bomber crashed in 1943 (see The Last Journey on the *Lady Be Good*, above) and black, rocky mountains for the last 100km into Al-Kufra. Once there, remember that it's a further 350km from Al-Kufra to the southeast's main attractions

of Jebel al-Uweinat (p209) and Jebel Arkno (p208).

An experienced local guide is essential for this journey. We highly recommend the English-speaking **Ali Hamed** (📞 mobile 0913754088; alihamed64@yahoo.co.uk), while **Abd al-Salam az-Zintani** (📞 satellite 008821633399329) has also been recommended.