

Interview:

Tremendous potential for the development of Libyan tourism

By Karen Dabrowska

Amelia Stewart, who set up the first company specialising in trips to Libya, talks about her experiences as a tour operator, her recent visit to the country and the future of tourism which can only grow from strength to strength.

Ibrahim and Amelia



You set up Simoon Travel in 2004 as a company that only took visitors to Libya? Can you

tell us why you decided to focus on Libya?

I first went to the desert when I

was 16 and lucky enough to be on a school theology trip to the Sinai Desert. It was such a formative experience and I fell in love with the desert, travelled with the Bedouin by camel, slept under the stars and climbed Mt Sinai. I got a job taking school groups to the desert and then Libya was opening up in 2004. It was shortly after Blair had gone to the country and the infamous handshake with Gaddafi and relations were being strengthened with the West. I knew that Libya had 90 percent desert but also wonderful Roman ruins so I visited and found an amazing country. Why wasn't anyone there? They should be seeing all these wonderful sites like Leptis Magna and Sabratha. I came back to the UK and realised there was a gap in the market. That is why I set up a specialist company focusing on Libya. But I realised that tourism in Libya was still in its infancy. The infrastructure was very basic and business took precedence over tourism so I added on other countries that would link up with Libya and that involved desert and culture.

What is most memorable about

your time running Simoon?

I once took a group of 46 elderly ladies and gentlemen from a gentlemen's club in London deep into the Libyan Sahara. There was a team of 70 of us, about 22 jeeps crossing the Ubari sand sea. Two nights under the stars in February were bitterly cold. We were in little basic tents. The sun rose across the dunes and I decided to warm the people up with a game of football. The Tuareg and my guides were involved and we had the most wonderful game.

You returned to Libya after the revolution on a visit in March this year? What were the biggest changes you noticed?

I was getting fed up hearing all the bad news about Libya and I wanted to see with my own eyes if there had been any serious damage to the sites. I travelled back with my Libyan business partner who lives in the UK. For him it was a very emotional journey. We went straight to Misrata and both of us were deeply shocked. It was unrecognisable. For everyone war is still a very raw experience. I got to speak to everyone from political activists to the local sheikhs and

Leptis magna



all my friends and guides who had become rebel front men. The change was a very visceral, raw change. I was experiencing what these people had gone through.

I went to see the sites. It was a beautiful hot sunny day at Leptis Magna and nobody was there. I was talking to all the guides. They told me how as a community they took all the valuable objects from the museums, hid them in their houses and welded the museum doors shut to protect their heritage. There was no damage, it was as if

nothing had happened but I know through talking to the Libyan society in London that the sites are very vulnerable to looters due to the lack of security. During the war there were two robberies in the two main museums. The British Museum is helping a lot with archaeological teams in Libya.

When I went back to Tripoli I noticed an air of paranoia - maybe because there were more supporters of Gaddafi there. There were a lot more power cuts and blackout but a tremendous sense of hope and joyfulness prevailed

with people singing in the streets. Gaddafi rap was coming out of car windows and there was an explosion of creativity and art. The people were incredibly welcoming, it was very positive.

Libya has taken huge steps towards its future in comparison to so many other Arab countries. Through the election they have shown everyone what they want. When our tours get back up and running I will make sure that the people I take have an understanding of what went on [during the revolution].

This year Simoon merged with Original Travel. Do you think loosing your identity as company which specialises in travel to Libya will affect your business?

Obviously the Arab Spring affected Simoon hugely given the majority of my business was in Libya and Syria. It was a difficult time, but I had the idea to approach Original Travel - and join forces with them which has allowed Simoon to continue and flourish- which has been great! And Im looking at new destinations whilst hoping to remain at the forefront of travel to

North Africa when it is safe to do so again.

How do you see the future of tourism in Libya? We have heard from businessmen that it is still difficult to get a visa? Will you face the same problems as before?

Security is a huge problem. I have always worked with my very good Libyan partners and found a way to smoothly get peoples visas. I got a lot of aid to Misrata during the war but I never really had any real dealings with the embassy itself. Libya has always stood firm on the alcohol issue. They do not want to become like Sharm El Sheikh,. They have 2,000kms of fabulous coastline and they want it to be developed carefully not like in Morocco or Egypt. That will hinder some tourists but the people who come on my tours are interested in history, culture and ruins. The first issue is the visas, the second is the hotels and the service. A lot of outside help will be needed to run the hotels properly. There is also the problem of security. In the south there is the most wonderful desert adventure land but it is totally unsafe with

Sabratha



roaming militias, drug smuggling, arms and fluid borders. When I am talking about tourism now I am only talking about the north – Tripolitania.

I think the future of tourism in Libya is bright. The way the country has progressed since the war can only be a positive thing. The elections have shown that the majority of the people want the same thing. They are a small population in an oil rich country, they have the resources and the heritage for tourism to flourish, it just needs help and encouragement

from the West to develop it on their terms.

Can you tell us something about the new destinations you are developing?

I am hoping to go to the North of Sudan in November. I have the wonderful author Anthony Sattin who has written several books on Egypt to accompany a tour from Khartoum following the Nile up to Cairo, looking at the beautiful Nubian architecture. An American lady in her 70s has just booked a tour with me to Algeria and Tunisia.

She is very interested in WWII graves. We need to support the countries of the Arab spring by visiting them. When do you ever get the pyramids to yourself? I am also looking at Georgia and

Armenia and the stans: Uzbekistan etc.

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Amelia Stewart in the desert

