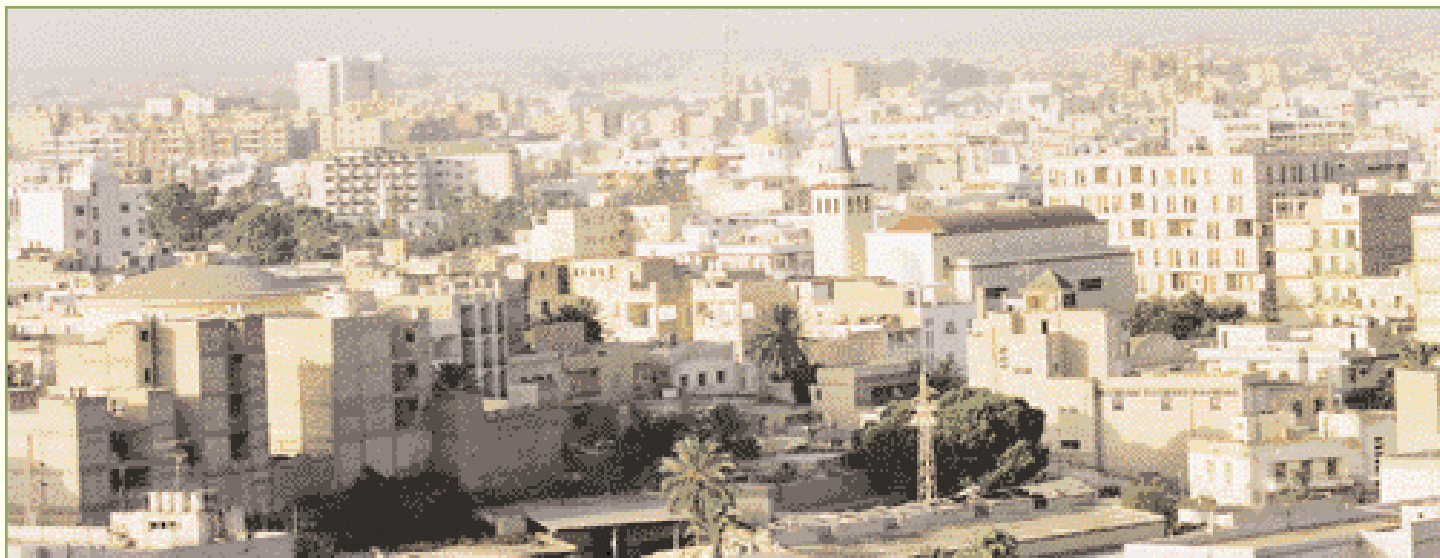


Libya

Optimism about the future of tourism

By Ian Stalker



Tripoli.

طرابلس.

Will legions of tourists be travelling to parts of Libya once traversed by the Romans?

Libyan tourism officials hope so.

Libya, for a long time generally shunned by the West but now seeing rapidly growing ties with it, wants to diversify a petroleum-based economy, and so is encouraging Western tourists to see archaeological sites and huge swaths of the Sahara, and possibly down the coast, soak up sunshine along its Mediterranean coast, a type of vacation experience that bordering Tunisia has marketed successfully.

Abdurrazag Abulgasm of Libya's Ministry of Tourism, reports Libya and the World Tourism Organization have been working together on a 20-year tourism master plan for the country, found between the tourism success stories of Tunisia and Egypt. Abulgasm, speaking in Madrid while participating in January's FITUR tourism show, reported that Libya saw around 800,000 visitors last year – up from around 15,000 about 10 years ago when border crossings by Berbers in bordering countries are excluded - and hopes for around 1.2 million in 2006.

Coinciding with that expected increase would be an increase in tourist beds, from around 6,000 now to a hoped for around 25,000 by 2006, with Abulgasm reporting that such hotel chains as France's upscale Le Meridien are showing interest in Libyan properties. Already in Tripoli is Malta-based Corinthia Hotels International.

Libya also hopes to host the 2010 World Cup soccer competition, either by itself or jointly with Tunisia.

Still, Abulgasm conceded that the country's tourism infrastructure needs

to be improved, with more tourism guides among items on the Ministry of Tourism's wish list.

But tourism officials are upbeat, noting that such European airlines as Lufthansa, KLM and Alitalia now fly to Libya, providing air links that didn't exist a few years ago, when international sanctions isolated the country. Those sanctions forced those who wanted to visit to cross by land from bordering countries or reach it by ferry from Malta.

And officials are also pointing to numerous archaeological ruins – the country has five UNESCO World Heritage Sites -- left by the Romans and ancient Greeks, and landscapes of dunes, mountains and gorges they say should appeal to the growing number of ecotourism enthusiasts.

Even the country's 1,820-kilometre coast – which isn't now being promoted aggressively– may end up attracting large numbers of European sun seekers, Abulgasm reports several foreign firms are toying with the idea of building coastal resorts.

Mustafa Shibani of tour operator Nozha Voyages, which has offices in Paris and Tripoli, is among the Libyans reaching out to foreign visitors. Shibani, who said his country is a "bridge between the Orient and the Maghreb (Tunisia, Algeria and Morocco)," praised Libya for being rich in history while citing such sites as the Roman ruins of Leptis Magna and Cyrene, built by the ancient Greeks.

Shibani's clientele includes French, Italian, German and American visitors, with Shibani saying the Americans are often initially uneasy but relaxed by the second day of their trip because of a friendly welcome.

Shibani said Libya's growing ties with the West bode well for its tourist trade. "It was blocked before and now we have opened the door." ■