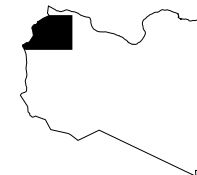


# The Jebel Nafusa & Ghadames



The barren Jebel Nafusa (Western Mountains) is Libya's Berber heartland and one of Libya's most intriguing corners, a land of stone villages on rocky perches and otherworldly Berber architecture. The fortress-like architecture of the jebel reflects the fact that this is a land of extremes. Bitterly cold winters – snowfalls are rare but not unheard of – yield to summers less punishing than elsewhere in Libya, though the southern reaches of the Jebel Nafusa merge imperceptibly with the scorching Sahara.

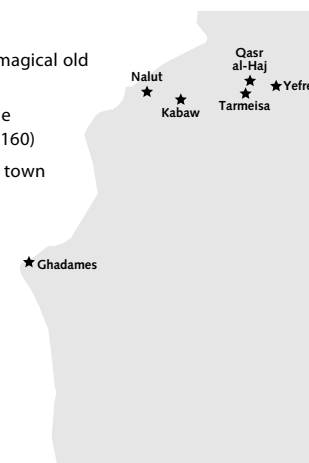
It was to here that many Berbers retreated from invading Arab armies in the 7th century, and the Jebel Nafusa remains one of the few areas in Libya where Berber culture still thrives. Consequently, the jebel's human landscape is as fascinating as its geography and architecture.

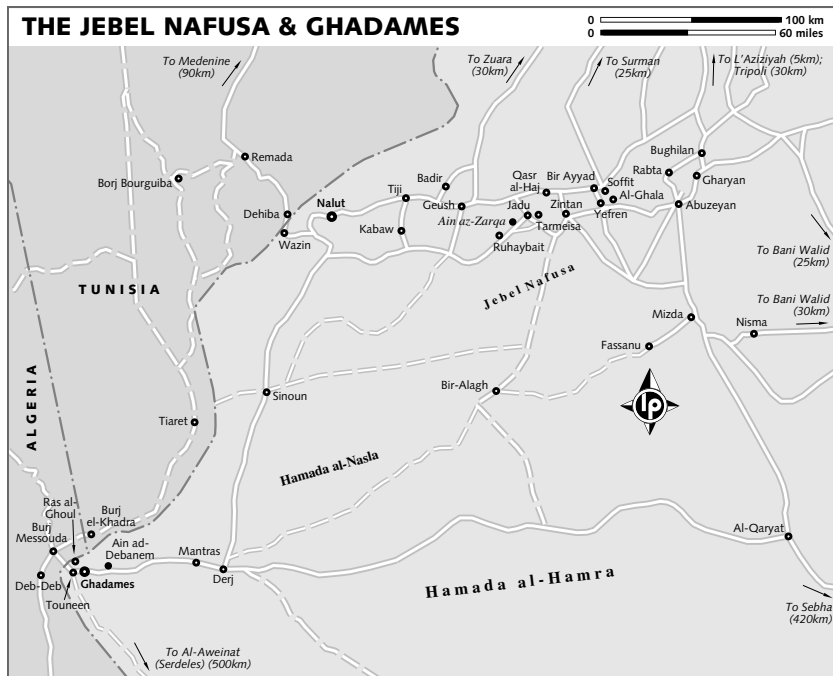
The Jebel Nafusa merits as much time as you can spare. From the underground houses of Gharyan in the east to the crumbling *qasr* (fortified granary store) and old town of Nalut in the west, imagination and necessity have fused into the most improbable forms. Nowhere is this more true than in Qasr al-Haj and Kabaw where the wonderful *qasrs* look like a backdrop to a *Star Wars* movie. Elsewhere, the abandoned stone village of Tarmeisa surveys the coastal plain from its precipitous rocky perch, while Yefren makes an agreeable base.

Beyond the jebel on Libya's western frontier lies one of the world's best-preserved oasis towns. Ghadames is an enchanted spot, a labyrinthine caravan town of covered passageways, intricately decorated houses, beautiful palm gardens and a pace of life perfectly attuned to the dictates of the desert. Ghadames one of our favourite places in Libya.

## HIGHLIGHTS

- Lose yourself in the labyrinthine lanes of the magical old city in **Ghadames** (p164)
- Imagine yourself in a galaxy far, far away in the perfect Berber granary store of **Qasr al-Haj** (p160)
- Pick your way through the best preserved old town in the Jebel Nafusa at **Nalut** (p162)
- Picnic amid the enchanted troglodyte *qasr* at **Kabaw** (p162)
- Crawl to the edge of the precipice at the abandoned stone village of **Tarmeisa** (p161)
- Watch the sunset from the terrace (or your balcony) in the **Yefren Hotel** (p159)





## GHARYAN

☎ 041 / pop 87,142

Gharyan sprawls across the top of the plateau at the eastern end of the Jebel Nafusa. Although not the region's most picturesque town, it's worth a quick stop to see one of the underground Berber houses, buy some pottery or break up the long journey south – this is one of the last towns of any size before Sebha, 690km south across the desert.

### Orientation & Information

Most of the facilities you'll need are within easy walking distance of Funduq Rabta (see opposite) on Sharia al-Jamahiriya. The post office is two blocks east of the hotel (look for the telecommunications mast) and there are a couple of banks nearby. In the same complex as the hotel is Gharyan's most convenient **internet café** (per hr 0.75LD; ☒) 9am-midnight Sat-Thu, 5pm-midnight Fri).

### Sights

#### DAMMOUS (BERBER HOUSES)

Gharyan's underground houses (*dammous*) were built by the ancient Berber inhabitants

## غريان

of the area and provided a refuge from cold winters, hot summers and invaders – the houses were invisible to all but those within a few hundred metres. All of Gharyan's houses have been abandoned by their owners for modern housing and some are now used as storage pens for animals. Sadly many have also fallen into disrepair.

To reach the best preserved **dammous** (admission 5LD), walk 400m south from Funduq Rabta (right as you leave the hotel) and then turn right again. One is about 50m along on the left behind a 3m-high wall with two decrepit pottery amphorae atop the gate. Back where you left the main road, ask for the key (*miftah*) at the coffeehouse.

The living quarters are at the base of a dramatic circular pit, with a radius of about 10m, cut three storeys deep into the earth; the depth of the houses varied as the inhabitants dug until they found sufficiently hard rock. The wooden door at ground level opens to a tunnel that leads down into the house, which consists of living rooms, a kitchen, bedrooms and storage areas that were cut into the base of the walls. Animal bones were

once placed into the well in the centre of the courtyard; the worms that emerged from the bones assisted drainage. The house was once home to as many as six families.

There's another well-preserved **dammous** (☎ mobile 0912106859) near the Shima Mosque in the town of Abu Hamam, close to Bughilan.

### POTTERY

**Gharyan** and neighbouring **Bughilan** are famous throughout Libya for their pottery. Stalls line the road in from Tripoli selling everything from huge serving bowls to small storage jars. To see the pottery (*fakhar* or *gilal*) being made, head to the crafts school in the small street south of the Funduq Rabta. You should be able to see pottery-making and carpet-weaving demonstrations.

### Sleeping & Eating

**Funduq Rabta** (☎ 631970; fax 631972; Sharia al-Jamahiriya; s/d/ste 25/35/50LD) Good news: Funduq Rabta hasn't aged in five years and it's even lowered the price. The bad news is that five years ago it was already run-down and had (and still has) 'government hotel' written all over it. Rooms are simple but adequate for a night. The **restaurant** (meals 15LD) is cavernous and forlorn and the food reasonable.

**Funduq Dar Gharyan** (☎ 631483; fax 631415; s/d 35/45LD) Off the main highway near the town entrance as you arrive from Tripoli, Funduq Dar Gharyan is similar to the Rabta with tired, 1970s-era décor that has been kindly left unaltered. The **restaurant** (meals 15LD) here is like that at Funduq Rabta – uninspiring banquet-style meals (15LD) that will fill but not excite you. The problem here is that you're a long way from anything else.

There are cheap restaurants dotted around town, especially lining the main roads into town.

### Getting There & Away

Gharyan lies on the main road between Tripoli (84km) and Sebha (595km). Shared taxis to/from Tripoli leave throughout the day from 6am, with less regular departures to Yefren, Sebha and Nalut.

### YEFREN

☎ 0421 / pop 69,291

Yefren is one of the more appealing towns in this mountainous region. It sits high on a series of rocky bluffs, overlooking the flat

coastal plain, and is surrounded by attractive wooded areas. It's a relaxed place and nothing happens here in a hurry. There is, however, **internet access** (per hr 1LD) at a few places along the main street; look for the blue Internet Explorer sign.

### Sights

The deserted **old town** is over 500 years old and there are a few ruined remains scattered around the hillsides. To gain an appreciation of Yefren's remarkable location, wander out to Yefren's only hotel (see below), which has superb views from its back terrace. The nearby **Turkish mosque** also has an attractive minaret, overlooking the plains below.

Over the hill east of the town centre are the remains of an ancient **Jewish synagogue** (*ma'abed al-yehud* or *kanisat al-yehud*) that served a Jewish community of up to 2000 people until 1948. There had been a synagogue on this site for almost 2000 years. The ramshackle interior contains six arches and six windows (the number represents the points of the Star of David) surrounding a raised platform. The ceilings are adorned with ancient Hebrew inscriptions. The main entrance was via the east door through a short, arched passage. It's impossible to find this place under your own steam; ask for directions at the hotel. The caretaker is usually nearby with the key, and although there is no formal entry fee, a donation of around 5LD is appreciated. He can also point you in the direction of some **dammous** nearby.

Around 12km east of the town centre is **Qasbat Suffet**, a hilltop Roman mausoleum that's visible from miles around. A possibly apocryphal story which we were unable to confirm tells of how, during the Italian occupation, General Rodolfo Graziani (see p36) visited here, found a Roman coin and duly dispatched it to Mussolini with words to the effect of 'we have returned'. The road leading to Qasbat Suffet is next to the petrol station – take the first turn-off if you're coming into Yefren along the main road from Gharyan, the third if you're coming from the west.

### Sleeping & Eating

**Buyut ash-shabaab** (Youth Hostel; dm 5LD) The pleasant youth hostel is behind the police station, up the hill from the post office.

**Yefren Hotel** (☎ 60278; www.yefrenhotel.com; s/d/tr 30/50/60LD; meals 15LD) Welcome to the best hotel

in the Jebel Nafusa. The rooms may be spacious and attractive and the staff friendly, but the views from some rooms and from the hotel terrace are without parallel, especially at sunset. If you're fortunate to snaffle one of the west-facing rooms, peel back the carpet (!) and contemplate the sweeping panorama. All in all, it's outstanding.

### Getting There & Away

Shared taxis run reasonably regularly to Gharyan and Zintan and beyond.

### ZINTAN

الزنتان

The inhabitants of this pleasant but un-spectacular town, 34km west of Yefren, are renowned throughout Libya for their quick wit – they're certainly a friendly lot. There are a few **dammous** (underground and in caves) dotted around the town. There are also a couple of petrol stations (one in the centre of town and another on the road from Nalut), a **buyut ash-shabaab** (youth hostel; dm 5LD) and well-stocked grocery stores, it's a reasonable place to break up a journey. Zintan really starts to bustle around sunset.

The main Gharyan-Nalut highway runs through the southern outskirts of town, and the surrounding fields are covered with olive and almond groves. The road to Qasr al-Haj (below) is spectacular, with a ruined **fortress** on a nearby bluff and a palm-fringed **spring** down in the valley.

### QASR AL-HAJ

قصر الحاج

This village is home to Libya's largest, most spectacular example of Berber architecture; a must-see even if you're just passing through en route to Ghadames. The circular and completely enclosed fortified granary is wonderfully preserved; recent landscaping at the entrance and renovation work on some of the houses in the surrounding old town, which fell into disuse in the 1950s, mean that this site will get even better in the coming years. There's a public toilet just outside the *qasr*.

This extraordinary *qasr* (admission 2LD) was built to store the harvests of the surrounding area in the second half of the 12th century by the formidably named As-Sheikh Abd-'Allah ibn Mohammed ibn Hilla' ibn Ganem Abu Jatla (Sheikh Abu Jatla).

When the *qasr* was first built, Sheikh Abu Jatla, a deeply religious man, extracted rent from each interested party in the form of

### THE BERBER QASRS OF JEBEL NAFUSA

Berber architecture in the Jebel Nafusa is like something out of a *Star Wars* film set. Most of the fortified granary stores, known as *qasrs*, date from the 12th century and have stood the test of time remarkably well.

Despite their name (*qasr* means castle), these structures were rarely used as a form of defence. Instead they offered protection for the local crops needed for the community's survival. Constructed from local rock, sundried mud brick and gypsum, the cool storage areas, sealed with doors made of palm trunks, warded off bugs, thieves and inclement weather. Their purpose was akin to that of a modern bank, with the system of enforced saving and stockpiling preventing the crop-holders from squandering their resources.

Rooms below ground were used to preserve olive oil; the above-ground rooms customarily housed barley and wheat. You'll often see animal horns on the ramparts; these served as amulets of good fortune. Also evident are the remains of ancient winches used for hoisting produce from ground level to the upper storage rooms.

barley and wheat, then distributed it among the poor and haj pilgrims or sold it for money for the upkeep of the mosque and to pay Quranic teachers in the madrasa.

You enter the *qasr* from the eastern side. After passing through the main door, the passageway is flanked by two spacious alcoves where you'll see displayed the huge latches for securing the doors.

The main courtyard is breathtaking, and like wandering into a self-enclosed, man-made canyon. The walls are completely surrounded by cave-like rooms. In all, there are 114 storage rooms in the *qasr* – exactly the same number as there are suras (verses or chapters) in the Quran – although many are now subdivided into pens for different crop types or for various families who share the same space. The *qasr's* area is 1188 sq metres, with each storage area about 5m 'deep' from the door to the back wall. There are three storeys of rooms above the ground and another 30 rooms underground.

If you arrive after good rains, many of the stores may be filled to overflowing,

although those on the top floor are no longer in use. When we visited, some crops had been stored for as long as 12 years and looked as fresh as if recently harvested. Please note, however, that these crops represent people's livelihoods, so don't venture inside without permission.

Some of the rooms still boast the original palm-trunk doors, which have aged remarkably well. Note also the holes on either side of each door for threading the latch (usually made from the wood of olive trees).

Viewed from any angle, the *qasr* is spectacular. For a different perspective, climb the stairs leading up above the entrance. A ledge (1m wide in most places) circles the *qasr's* top level.

Today, the site is usually kept closed, not least because many of the storage rooms are still in use. The caretaker will usually get wind of your arrival, but any of the villagers know where to find him. Your entry fee goes towards efforts to preserve the *qasr* from heavy rains and vagaries of time.

### JADU

جادو

pop 6160

The modern hilltop town of Jadu is a mixed Berber-Arab settlement overlooking the Sahel al-Jefara (Jefara Plain) from the barren escarpments of the Jebel Nafusa. Built on the site of an older town, Jadu has lost much of its charm and the few old buildings that remain are in a sorry state. The post office and petrol station are both on the road running southwards out of town and there are no banks that change money.

### Sights

The **museum** (admission 3LD, camera/video 5/10LD; ☎ 9am-1pm & 3-6pm Tue-5un) contains an oil press, a model reconstruction of Qasr al-Haj, examples of building materials traditionally used in the area, local costumes and agricultural implements. You'll often find the museum closed during its official opening hours, but if you ask around for the key someone will usually let you in, except at prayer time. The museum is in the stone building 100m north of the main roundabout in the centre of town (ask for *al-mathaf*).

### Sleeping & Eating

Jadu's only hotel is the simple **Funduq Jadu as-Siyah** (Sharia al-Jamahiriya; per person 15LD) in the

pink building just east of the main roundabout. Expect basic but habitable rooms.

For food, take what you can get in Jadu. There are the usual grocery stores selling biscuits and tins of tuna, as well as a few cheap restaurants that do hamburgers and liver sandwiches for 1LD to 2LD each.

### Getting There & Away

Jadu sits atop the plateau 146km east of Nalut. There are infrequent departures by shared taxi to Tripoli, Nalut, Gharyan and Zintan.

### AROUND JADU

#### Ain az-Zarqa

One of many natural springs or wells dotted throughout this stretch of mountains, this small, crystal-clear pool fringed by palm trees is stunningly located at the bottom of cliffs that surround it on three sides. It's a great spot for a picnic and particularly popular with locals on Friday.

To get there, take the road southwards out of Jadu for 4.5km, from where a dirt track runs off to the right (west). The turn-off is marked with a maroon-and-blue sign in Arabic. After about 1km, you come to an open picnic area. For those with limited time, a short walk takes you to the edge of the cliffs that overlook the pool far below; be careful of loose stones, as it was here that one Lonely Planet author nearly took a high dive. Alternatively, follow the road down the canyon – about a one-hour walk going down and twice that coming back up.

#### Tarmeisa

This abandoned and ancient stone village, 10km southeast of Jadu, clings to a narrow, rocky outcrop overlooking the Sahel al-Jefara and is one of the most evocative of the ancient Berber settlements in the Jebel Nafusa.

The only entrance to the town is from the car park at the road's end across a dirt 'bridge' with a deep trench on either side. This was once the town gate, with a draw-bridge surrounded on three sides by plunging cliffs. The bridge was opened every morning at 6am and closed again at 6pm, effectively sealing off the town. The first house you come to on your left was one of the last to be abandoned in the late 1950s. Look for the **tunnels** leading underground to the houses, one of which contains a huge oil press.

Entering the village proper, there are plenty of small doorways and passageways to explore. About halfway through the village, one house on the eastern side contains a well-preserved **bridal room** (for use on the wedding night), which has traces of relief-carving patterns and attractive storage alcoves. Elsewhere, note the roofs reinforced with a multitude of palm or olive tree trunks.

The buildings at the northernmost (and narrowest) end of the village include a **mosque** with a squat, pyramidal minaret. Most of the structures in this section were rebuilt in 1205, suggesting that the original construction of the village took place much earlier. There are fantastic **views** from here, and a stunning vista down off the escarpment over the Sahel al-Jefara, with its hundreds of snaking wadis heading northwards. Be very careful as there are no rails to prevent unsuspecting travellers from falling.

## KABAW

كاباو

The quiet Berber town of Kabaw, 9km north of the Gharyan-Nalut road and around 70km west of Jadu, is set among rolling hills and is home to another stunning *qasr*. This stretch of countryside is one of the more fertile areas of the Jebel Nafusa; the sight of shepherds with their flocks in the surrounding fields is not uncommon.

## Sights

The *qasr* (also known locally as the *ghurfas*) is over 700 years old and, while smaller and less uniform than the one at Qasr al-Haj, is still captivating, with a wonderful medieval charm. None of the storage rooms remain in use and the door is permanently left open. The *qasr*'s impregnable hilltop position highlights how, in such an unforgiving landscape, the protection of grains was almost as significant as guarding water.

The rooms surround an open courtyard, with some sections climbing four- or five-storeys high. Many of the doors are made of palm trunks and most of the structure is a combination of rock, gypsum and sun-dried mud bricks. In the centre of the courtyard is a white tomb belonging to a local religious notable. Pottery storage jars are scattered around the courtyard's perimeter. Most of the time you're likely to have the place to yourself, except on Thursday afternoon and Friday, when it

comes to life as a favourite picnic spot for local families.

Outside the *qasr*'s walls, the ruins of the old town tumble down the hillside. Most of the houses are sadly derelict.

## Festivals & Events

In April most years, Kabaw hosts the **Qasr Festival**. The festivities celebrate the unique heritage of the Berber people of the area, with particular emphasis on Berber folklore. Important local ceremonies (weddings, funerals and harvests) are re-enacted by people in traditional dress.

## Eating

**Hannibal** (☎ 0912123957; meals 10-12LD; ☺ lunch & dinner) This is the only restaurant, 11km south-east of town on the Gharyan-Nalut road, 2km east of the Kabaw turn-off. The soup is hearty, the chicken dishes tasty and the service willing. It also does a tasty fruit cocktail.

## NALUT

نالوت

☎ 0470 / pop 68,865

At the western end of the Jebel Nafusa, the regional centre of Nalut is home to yet another exceptional *qasr*, as well as an old town tumbling down the hill. Unlike others in the region it occupies its own rocky bluff, which makes for some wonderful photos.

The road from Tripoli winds up off the plain to the east and meets the Ghadames road (which approaches across the plateau from the south) at the main roundabout in the town centre. The large white *baladiya* (municipal or town hall) and post office are west of the roundabout; along this road are a number of shops and a mosque. There's a petrol station along the road to Ghadames.

## Sights

### OLD TOWN

The *qasr* was once the old town's centre-piece and is now almost completely surrounded by the uninhabited remains of the stone-and-gypsum village that cling to the edge of the steep hillside. The views over the mountains and plains from any of the elevated areas around the *qasr* are superb.

There are three mosques, only one of which (the white mosque) is still in use. The white mosque between the car park and the *qasr* is the most recent; it's closed to visitors and rarely used. Down the hill immediately be-

## THINGS THEY SAID ABOUT...NALUT

[Nalut is] the chief town of the Jebel Nefusah, on the brow of the mountain which dominates the desert. The dwellings – with the exception of the Turkish fort and a few government dwellings – are some of the most curious in the world....But the grottoes of Nalut were typical of this mountain country; everything here was rock: there was not a plant or a tree to be seen. On the highest point of the promontory rose the castle, almost part of the rock itself.

Alberto Denti di Pirajno, *A Cure for Serpents* (1955)

hind the white walls is Nalut's oldest mosque, **Alal'a Mosque**. Its low arches and stone mihrab suggest that it was once a fine, if simple, place of worship. There is also a functioning well in one of the rooms off the compact main sanctuary. The walls just inside the entrance are marked with Arabic relief inscriptions stating that the mosque was rebuilt in 1312. Old Nalut's third mosque is beyond the *qasr* on the eastern end of the outcrop.

Also near the *qasr* are two old **olive oil presses**. One is about 30m back towards the car park from the caretaker's tent, off the northern side of the path; look for the huge circular platform and crushing stone. There's another, equally impressive example of an oil press around 150m west of the *qasr*, off the southern side of the path. In use until 2000, this one is kept locked so you'll need to ask the *qasr*'s caretaker for the key – ask to see the '*ma'sered zeytoun*' (olive press).

## QASR

Like the other *qasrs* of the Jebel Nafusa, the main section of this ancient troglodyte **granary** (admission 2LD; ☺ daylight) is reached through a covered tunnel that used to regulate entry to the inner sections. The walls of the entrance tunnel are lined with Arabic inscriptions carved in relief, which record that the *qasr* was rebuilt over the ruins of an earlier structure in 1240.

The *qasr* of Nalut is quite unlike those at Kabaw and Qasr al-Haj. While the same principles are in evidence – small stor-

age rooms carved into the rock and self-enclosed within high walls from a perch on a rocky bluff – the *qasr* at Nalut has the feel of a small, fortified village. Rather than facing onto an open courtyard, the rooms with their palm-trunk doors are tightly packed and overlook two narrow thoroughfares without any hint of uniformity.

The structure's interior is strewn with old pieces of pottery once used to store dates, wheat, oil and barley. As well as the palm-trunk doors and holes used for latches, look for the small wooden struts protruding from the walls – these provided reinforcement to the walls, which look fragile but have proved remarkably resilient. The larger rooms belonged to richer merchants or farmers, while some were subdivided for families unable to justify a room all to themselves. There were 400 chambers, but the keeper always knew how much each family had in storage at any given time. The last rooms fell vacant in 1960.

For the best view of the *qasr*, head for Funduq Winzrik (below).

## Sleeping & Eating

**Buyut ash-Shabaab** (Youth Hostel; ☎ 2858; Sharia Ghadames; dm 5LD) Close to the petrol station, this small hostel is basic but as cheap as you'll get in Nalut, and it's rarely crowded.

**Funduq Winzrik** (☎ 2204; s/d/ste with private bathroom 25/40/50LD; meals 15LD) Built in 1933 by the Italians and magnificently located across the valley from the old town, Funduq Winzrik has been restored – although not with much imagination. Design features include carpet on the floors, carpet on the walls, carpet on the bedside table... The rooms are spacious and simple but the bathroom plumbing is in need of attention. Its best feature is the terrace, which has unrivalled views of the old town and *qasr*, especially just before sunset.

Like in any Libyan town, there are small sandwich and hamburger bars along the road in from Ghadames and just down the hill on your right from the roundabout.

**Mat'am Ajweiba** (☎ mobile 0913705327; meals 10-12LD; ☺ lunch & dinner) Located 8km south of town at the petrol station on the turn-off into Nalut from the Gharyan-Ghadames road, this is one of the better restaurants in this part of the country. It has a pleasant dining room, good food and friendly service.

## Getting There & Away

Occasional shared taxis and one daily bus leave from next to the *baladiya* for Tripoli and nearby towns.

## NALUT TO GHADAMES

Shortly after you leave Nalut, the landscape loses the last tinges of green. About 125km from Nalut is the bleak settlement of **Sinouh** which has a tiny stone-and-mud-brick old town with a crumbling fort.

Just before reaching the checkpoint outside Derj, a turn-off to the east leads to Al-Qaryat (312km) and Sebha; this road shares the prize with the road from Tobruk to Ajdabiya for Libya's most unexciting road.

The sleepy town of **Derj**, 210km south of Nalut, is little more than a place to stop and refuel. The road bypasses much of Derj itself, which has a post office and a mud-brick old city that is rarely visited but worth exploring if old cities are your thing.

The road from Derj to Ghadames is quite bumpy in patches. Wind-blown sand can encroach onto the road and wandering camels can be a hazard.

## GHADAMES

☎ 0484 / pop 17,092

There's nowhere on earth quite like Ghadames, which could just be our favourite place in Libya. The Unesco World Heritage-

listed old city is a magical evocation of an idyllic caravan town of the Sahara – a palm-fringed oasis, the sense of an intricate maze, stunning traditional houses huddling together for company amid the empty spaces of the Sahara, and extensive covered walkways that keep the desert heat at bay. Around seemingly every corner is a world of wonder, a sense that here, at last, is a place where the cliché rings true and time truly has stood still. Now abandoned although increasingly well preserved, Ghadames may be drawing ever-greater number of tourists, but when you're lost in its labyrinth it can feel like you're the only person in a city of ghosts.

## History

The stories of Ghadames' past are safeguarded by the old men of the community who keep the oral history alive.

It is believed that there was a town near Ghadames' current site around 3000 BC, but little is known of the area's history prior to Roman occupation in 19 BC. The Romans fortified the town, which they called Cydamus, and turned it into a regional centre that provided the coastal cities with olive oil. Under the reign of Septimius Severus (AD 193–211), Ghadames became a garrison town for the Third Legion. The Roman occupation of Ghadames lasted for over two centuries, during which time the

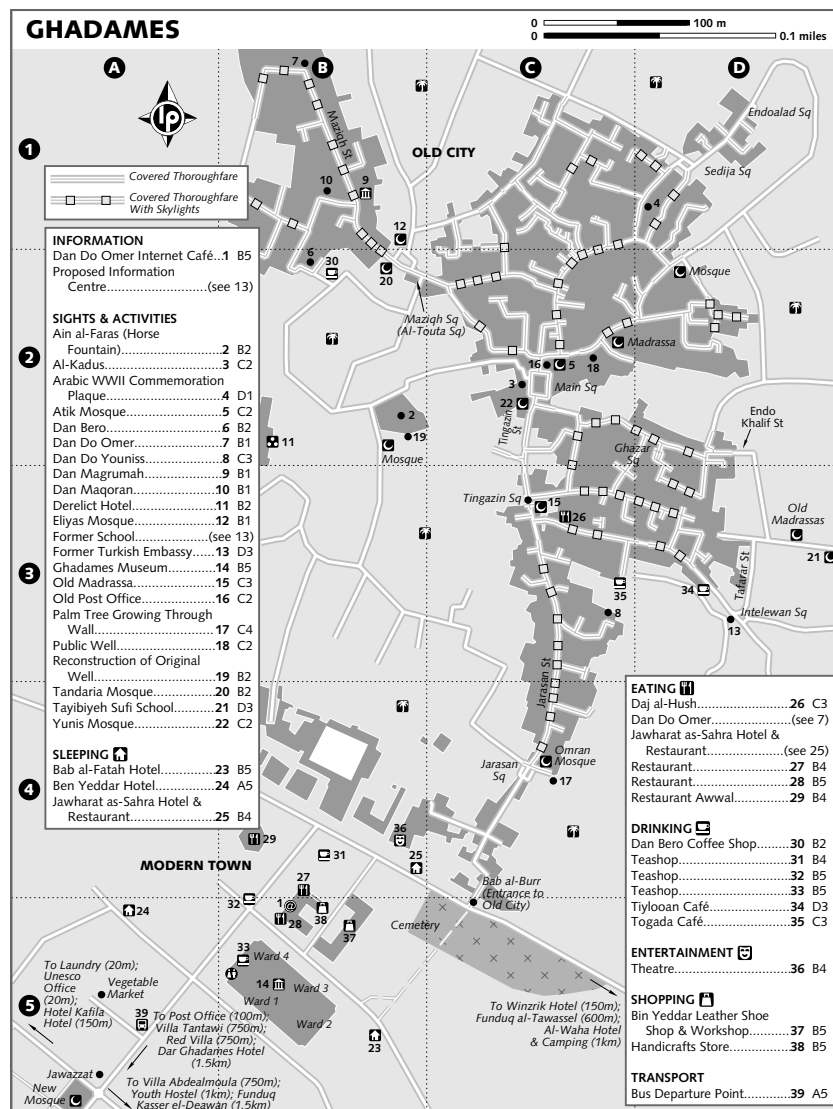
## THE GREAT CARAVANS OF GHADAMES

Remarkably, for one of the principal trading centres of the Sahara, Ghadames produced only one product of note, and a not very lucrative one at that – embroidered slippers. Instead, Ghadames became one of the great entrepôt towns for goods from all over Africa; the merchants of Ghadames were famous throughout the Sahara. So prolific were the Ghadames caravans that when caravans arrived in towns across the Sahara, they were often assumed to be Ghadames caravans.

The town was also unique in that the main traders rarely travelled themselves but relied on a network of agents across Africa who, when a Ghadames caravan arrived, would check loads and undertake transactions on behalf of the real owners, the entrepreneurs of the desert. The influence of the agents stretched from Mauritania to Egypt, from Lake Chad to the Mediterranean – and their descendants can still be found living across Africa. Many cities such as Timbuktu still have a 'Ghadames St'.

Goods from the interior of Africa that passed through the gates of Ghadames en route to the coast included an exotic array of precious stones, gold and silver, ivory, Tripolitanian horses, dates and ostrich plumes. In the other direction, glass necklaces and Venetian paper (for use in religious texts), pearls from Paris and linen from Marseille passed through on their way south.

The arrival of a caravan in Ghadames was quite an event. The camels bearing great chests were unloaded and the goods almost immediately offered for sale in the markets of the town. These were heady days of celebration in Ghadames, with the caravans also bringing mail, loved ones, stories of desert adventures and news of a wider world from across the sands.



ancient idols of the traditional religions lost influence in the town.

In the 6th century AD, the Byzantine armies of Justinian I brought Ghadames under the empire's jurisdiction, while Greek missionaries who followed in the army's wake effectively turned the town into a Christian settlement. With the arrival of the Islamic ar-

mies in Libya, the town was overrun in 46 AH (AD 668) and most of the Berber inhabitants converted to Islam (see Ras al-Ghoul, p175).

Although dates of any precision are difficult to come by, it is believed that the site of the old city was founded around 800 years ago. It is the third town in the area now known as Ghadames. The town remains

### HOW GHADAMES GOT ITS NAME

An ancient caravan of travellers and merchants from the Nemrod tribe stopped for lunch at a tiny oasis to break up the arduous desert crossing. With the sun beating down, the oasis was a welcome sight, although they thought it didn't have enough water to warrant a lengthy stay. As they continued their journey the next day, they realised that they had left behind a cooking pot, so one of the men was sent to retrieve it. As he was about to leave the oasis, his horse pawed the ground and fresh water rose to the surface. In honour of the occasion, but with a little less romance than some of us would have liked, the party combined the words *ghad* (which means 'lunch') and *ames* (which means 'yesterday') to produce the name Ghadames, or 'lunch yesterday'. The other traditional name of Ghadames is Ain al-Faras (Well of the Mare, or Horse Fountain). This spring formed the foundation of the original oasis and subsequent settlements.

largely unchanged in design since that time, and the Islamic and Turkish character of the architecture remains intact.

In AD 1228 the Hafsid dynasty extended its control southwards to Ghadames. The imposition of taxes by far-distant rulers later caused tension and, with the Ghadamsis' taxes unpaid, the rulers in Tunis sent an army of some 10,000 men to collect their dues. Met by a force of Ghadames men outside the town, a terrible battle ensued in which, according to one chronicler of the day, the fighting 'raised such a black dust that the sky could not be seen'. Remarkably, the Ghadamsis won the battle and, their point made, duly paid their taxes. Not long afterwards, the town became largely independent. Ghadames remained one of the most important caravan towns of the northern Sahara until the 19th century. As the colonial powers began to assert their control over the Sahara, in the 1840s the slave trade was abolished first in Tunis and then French Algeria, with devastating consequences for the economic life of Ghadames.

The Ottomans loosely administered Ghadames after 1810. When squabbles broke out between the semi-autonomous families of the city in 1874, the town was occupied by a full Ottoman garrison that remained until the Italians arrived. When the Allied forces sought to eject the Italians from Libya during WWII, even Ghadames was not spared. On 11 November 1943 French pilots flew US-registered B-17 bombers in an assault on Ghadames, launched from neighbouring Algeria. Although lasting for only 10 minutes, the intense bombardment killed 40 Ghadamsis (their names are listed in Arabic in the museum), including 12 children, destroyed 70 houses and damaged a further 200. The Atik Mosque, which had

stood for almost 1300 years, was destroyed and the neighbouring Yunis Mosque (the second oldest in Ghadames) was significantly damaged. No Italians were killed.

In recent decades, Libya's old cities, including that of Ghadames, have fallen victim to the revolutionary government's push towards modernisation. In 1982–83, the Libyan government began building a new town beyond the walls and new houses were given to Ghadamsis to encourage them to leave the homes of their ancestors. In 1984, there were 6666 people living in the old town; four years later there was just one family left. Although some families move back into the cool of their old houses during summer (especially during Ramadan), the old city is effectively deserted.

Fortunately, the potential windfall from tourism and the involvement of the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) since 1999 has helped to assure the future of old Ghadames, with surveys of the old town, new maps and significant renovation work. One of the most stunning examples of their work is the well of Ain al-Faras (see p173). Until 2005 the well was a rubbish-filled pit; now it's filled with water and resembles its original state.

There are plans to open an information centre for the old city in the old Turkish consulate (see p171).

### Orientation

Ghadames is an easy place to find your way around. Entering town from the east, the road forks just before entering the built-up area. The right fork runs past the cemetery on your left while the old city fans out beyond the walls on your right. About 1.5km after the fork, the main road of new Ghadames runs off at right angles to the south.

### Information GUIDES

A **guide** (half/full day 40/60LD) is essential for your first visit to the old city. There are now a number of local guides speaking English, French and Italian, all of whom are, in our experience, excellent.

If you're launching an expedition south into the desert (see p176), the following two Tuareg guides are recommended:

**Al-Sheikh Bahous** (☎ 63230; al,sheikhbah@hotmail.com) A hugely experienced French-speaking guide who's great company in the sands.

**Bilal S Aghali** (☎ 62956; bilal\_aghali@yahoo.com) A friendly English-speaking guide who comes highly recommended by travellers.

### INTERNET ACCESS

**Dan Do Omer Internet Café** (☎ 62300; dandoomer@yahoo.com; per hr 1LD; ☎ 9.30am-midnight) Also offers international phone calls and fax.

### JAWAZZAT

**Passport office** (☎ 62437; ☎ 9am-noon & 5-8pm Sat-Thu) Almost opposite the New Mosque.

### LAUNDRY

If your clothes are in danger of exploring the old city without you, there's a good **laundry** (☎ 9am-1pm & 6-9pm Sat-Thu) a small block west of the New Mosque. Your clothes will be dry-cleaned and ironed (sometimes including your underwear!). Shirts and pants cost 1.5LD each, and underwear is 0.5LD

### THINGS THEY SAID ABOUT... GHADAMES

Enclosed within their oasis and isolated in the vast desert, the Ghadamese nevertheless maintain contacts all over the world; they combine the flabbiness of sedentary people with the broad vision of the nomads. The Ghadamese tradesman, huddled in his little hovel stuffed full of goods, will talk with the greatest simplicity of his stays in Paris and London, or of the letter he has just received from his representative in Marseilles or New York.

*Alberto Denti di Pirajno, A Cure for Serpents (1955)*

each. If you're having trouble finding it, ask for 'Ash-Sharouk Maasella' or 'Laundrie'.

### POST & TELEPHONE

**Post office** (☎ 8am-1pm & 5-8pm Sat-Thu) South of the New Mosque – look for the usual telecommunications mast.

### Sights OLD CITY

The original families still retain ownership over the houses in the **old city** (adult/child 5/1LD, camera/video 5/10LD) and many return regularly to carry out maintenance. Many of the gardens surrounding the covered areas of the city are still in use. In total, the old city consists of around 1600 buildings, which includes almost 1250 houses, 21 mosques and 17 *zawiya* (religious colleges).

The covered alleyways rely entirely on natural light and in most places there are evenly spaced skylights – some are as high as 10m – which can be surprisingly effective. Areas where the skylights are not as prevalent can be quite dark, so it's worth bringing a torch. Almost every thoroughfare is lined with sitting benches that are good places to rest – even on the hottest summer day the covered areas are remarkably cool. Most of the houses and other buildings are not open to the public (except at festival time), although an increasing number, possibly up to 30, are opening. Some of these are listed in the Walking Tour, p169.

The old city of Ghadames was a city of loosely configured concentric areas. The inner circle consisted of residential and commercial districts and covered around 10 hectares. As you moved further away from the city's heart, the densely packed houses gave way to gardens. Beyond the gardens was the city wall.

The built-up areas of old Ghadames were divided into two main sections to represent the two major tribes of the region: the Bani Walid and the Bani Wazid (named after the sons of one of the first Berber leaders of Ghadames). The Bani Walid occupied the quarters north of the main square, with their sector subdivided into three sub-groupings of families, while the Bani Wazid area to the south was home to four distinct sub-families or tribes.

Each of these seven sections were known as 'streets'. There are, therefore, seven main streets in old Ghadames. Each 'street' used

### THE TRADITIONAL HOUSES OF GHADAMES

Nothing can quite prepare you for your first visit to a Ghadames house, another world of pristine white walls, exquisite decoration and deceptively large living areas that make maximum use of vertical space. The design of the houses – which were built from gypsum and sun-dried mud brick with ceilings reinforced with palm trunks – is uniform, although they sometimes vary in terms of size and the richness of decoration depending on the wealth of the owners.

After entering the palm-trunk doors at street level, you'll pass through a small reception or entrance room where guests were greeted. A short corridor runs past a storage room on the same level, then a staircase leads to the next level, at the top of which was often a 'dry toilet'.

The small landing at the top of the stairs leads onto the main living room. This large room (generally around 3m by 4m) was where a family would take its meals, entertain guests and spend most of its time. It was also the centre of the social life of the women of the house. The ceiling may be as much as two-storeys high with a skylight at the very top; note the strategically placed mirrors throughout the house to reflect the only source of external light. At night, oil lamps were used. Adorning the walls are intricately painted decorations, including the four-fingered hand of Fatima that was believed to ward off evil. The decorative flourishes were done largely by women, often as a means to prepare the house for married life.

Another feature of the living room was the large number of painted cupboards, each serving a specific purpose – cooking implements, women's clothes, the father's possessions, a toy cupboard or gifts for a boy on reaching manhood. Smaller niches were repositories for sugar and tea, while the small, circular hole at ground level was the place to throw date seeds when you'd finished with them (like most things in Ghadames, these were later recycled for animal feed).

On the same level as the living room are usually two smaller rooms. One was a bedroom but the other had an arched doorway with the Al-Qubba canopy, formed by two pillars with a pointed roof. This was where a woman received her husband on their wedding night (see A Woman's World, opposite).

Two sets of stairs usually leads up from the living room to more bedrooms, and storage and food preparation rooms. One staircase ultimately takes you to the roof. In the wall of an upper room there was often a small door that connected to a neighbouring house. This door served a dual purpose of being a fire escape and a pathway for women passing from house to house. Five or six houses were often joined in this way and neighbouring houses often belonged to close relatives. The roof area often contained the kitchen and more storage areas reached via more stairs – Ghadames houses were clearly not for the infirm.

With help from Unesco and driven by Ghadames' popularity among tourists, an ever-growing number of the old houses have been restored and opened to the public; some of the most accessible are covered in the Walking Tour (opposite). The best idea is to combine your visit with a meal (p174).

to be like a self-contained town, with its own gate that was closed at sunset each night, and a mosque, houses, schools, markets and a small communal square. The square was used for weddings, celebrations and funerals.

Although the rhythms of daily life were largely played out within the seven streets, and conflicts between the different quarters were frequent, there was also a strong sense of belonging to a wider Ghadames community. Whenever the whole town was under threat from an external enemy or a collective decision was needed, the families of the seven streets would congregate in their respective squares to agree

on a response. The oldest man or most respected elder from each of the seven families would then be sent to the central square of the whole town where the seven representatives would organise a communal defence or come to a collective decision. These councils of elders would also handle internal community disputes, discussions around ancient customs, criminal issues and irrigation. Punishment for indiscretions often comprised of exclusion from festivities or market activities.

All events of city-wide importance took place in the central square. At other times, it was where news was passed from one

### A WOMAN'S WORLD

In Ghadames, women led a life of concealment in keeping with the dictates of traditional Islamic society. Although the public world of Ghadames life was traditionally dominated by men and they made major decisions relating to family life, the women's domain was the house and women made many important decisions regarding life within the four walls.

One of the central features of any traditional Ghadames house was Al-Qubba, a canopy set up in a room where a wife received her husband on their first night of marriage.

When her husband died, the wife was confined to the house for four months and ten days (a Quranic principle known as Ar-Ridda), after when she was free to remarry and resume a normal life, as there would be no doubt as to whom was the father of her children. A bereaved husband was, of course, free to remarry immediately. Although the mourning woman was free to move within the house, tradition demanded that she receive any visitors in Al-Qubba.

Men would attend the funerals in the public squares, while women performed the mourning ceremonies, attended only by women, inside the house. Other public ceremonies were similarly held in the town squares for men and either in the houses or on the rooftops for women – the city was designed in such a way that Ghadames women could conceivably walk across the entire city without being seen by men. In matters of inheritance, a wife received one-eighth of her husband's property and her daughters half that of her sons.

Whenever a decision was made or judgment passed down by the town's elders, the women of the city were informed by two specially appointed, freed, female slaves. A weekly women-only market was held on the interconnected rooftops of the old city.

sector of the city to another. The main square also reflected Ghadames' position as a trans-Saharan caravan town – caravans from throughout Africa would enter the city through here, bringing news of shifting tribal allegiances, battles and the wellbeing of loved ones far away; for more information see The Great Caravans of Ghadames, p164. Staring off at each other across the main square are the two main mosques of the old city, one for the Bani Walid (the Atik Mosque) and one for the Bani Wazid (the Yunis Mosque).

In addition to the two primary subdivisions of the town, a third (outside the old city walls) began to spring up to the west of the old city in the 1960s. This area, known as *fogas*, was home to the Tuareg who had started to move away from a purely nomadic lifestyle and chose to settle in Ghadames.

### GHADAMES MUSEUM

The town museum (☎ 62225; adult/child 3/1LD, camera/video 5/10LD; ☎ 9am-1.30pm) is housed in an old fort that began life as a police station under the Italians. It has five sections; only those of greatest interest are listed here. There are old black-and-white photos of Ghadames.

Ward 1 contains some informative posters about Ghadames' history and a range of ethnographic exhibits. Highlights include the famous embroidered slippers of

Ghadames made by the Bin Yeddar family, huge copper keys and padlocks, the like of which are still used in the old city, and a large selection of folk medicines – the remedy for constipation (top row on the left) looks particularly nasty.

Ward 2 contains artefacts from the Roman era, including the remains of Roman pillars from the town's Triumphal Arch.

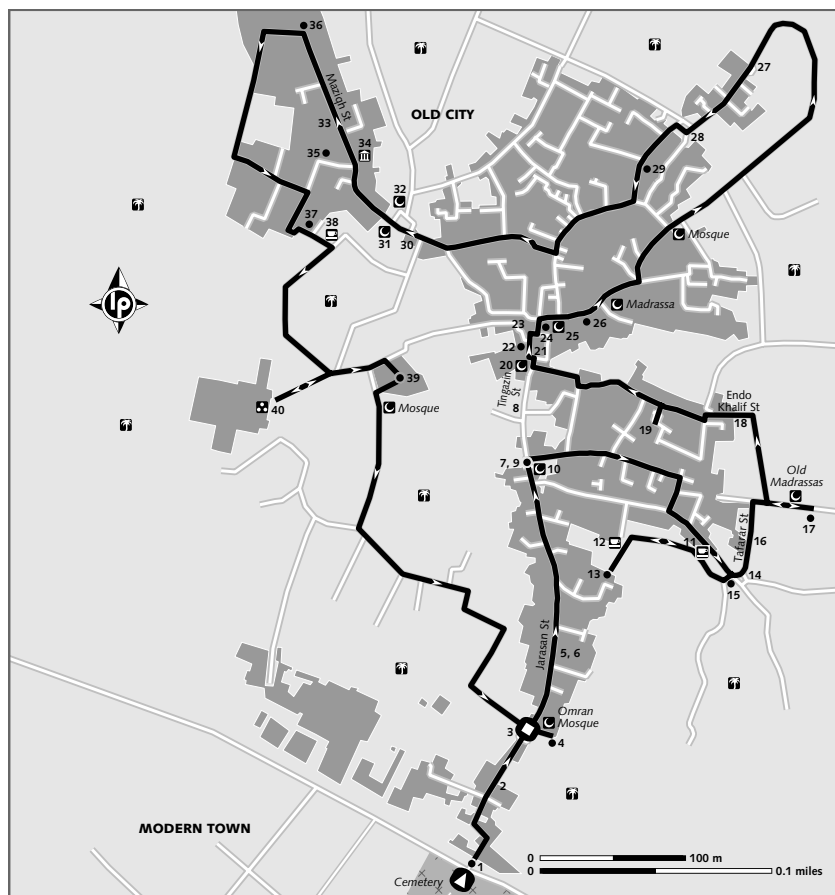
Ward 3 has a decent collection of Tuareg items, while Ward 4 has architectural drawings from a Libyan-Italian archaeological team, building materials, fossils and a few stuffed animals.

### OTHER SIGHTS

Modern Ghadames is a pleasant town whose skyline is dominated by the attractive **New Mosque** with its marble pillars and towering minaret; non-Muslims are not allowed inside. The old **cemetery** opposite Bab al-Burr, the main gate to the old city, is filled with thousands of what appear to be unmarked gravestones. However, true to the Ghadames tradition of oral history, the precise identity and location of each grave is passed down from father to son.

### Walking Tour

The following walking tour takes you through the seven sectors of the city. If you



### WALK FACTS

**Start** Bab al-Burr  
**End** Jarasan Sq  
**Distance** 5km  
**Duration** 3 hours

want to fully explore the old city, you could easily take an entire day, although this walking tour can be completed in three hours.

The best place to start is at the main gate of the old city, **Bab al-Burr (1)**. This was once used by the city's inhabitants; strangers usually entered the main square via Ain al-Faras (see p173), meaning that the residential districts were spared from the arrival of unwanted intruders. Immediately after passing under

the arches, you find yourself in a covered passageway lined with benches.

Continue to the end of the **passageway (2)**, turn left and then right. This is the start of one of the seven major streets, Jarasan St, which runs deep into the heart of the city. The lovely whitewashed walls are a taste of things to come and, during the time when the city was inhabited, their height must have offered residents significant privacy. A short distance further on is **Jarasan Sq (3)**, entered through an attractive archway framing the minaret of the white Omran mosque. This compact square was the meeting place for one-seventh of the city's men and, as such, is surprisingly small. Note that in the four corners are the remains of Roman pillar bases – these

were taken from the old Roman city nearby and used for building materials by residents of the later Islamic city.

Take a short detour to the southeast from Jarasan Sq for the famous **palm tree (4)** growing through the wall and then return to Jarasan St. The street leads into the covered section of the city, where the cool walls can provide welcome respite from the heat. Note the skylights that climb up in narrow shafts between the houses. The natural light enables you to both find your way and admire the distinctive **Ghadames doors (5, 6)**. Made of sturdy palm trunks split in half to form planks, the larger doors lead into houses while the smaller ones indicate chambers used for storage. Note also the improbably large padlocks used to secure the rooms. Another feature of the doors are the small leather studs in bright red, green and yellow (the colours of Ghadames), which partially cover some doors; these indicate that the owner has made the haj pilgrimage to Mecca.

After about a 300m walk north of Jarasan Sq, you reach **Tingazin Sq (7)** which also represents the start of **Tingazin St (8)**. Although similar in size to the earlier square, the feel is entirely different. This delightful square is completely covered from the sun and is lit by a soft light from nearby skylights. On the western wall are some **decorative patterns (9)** carved in relief. Taking the road running east off the square, you pass the shell of an **old madrasa (10)** on the right. Head east for approximately 200m, then turn right and then left. The covered area continues for a short distance before you again come out into the open air – the start of the garden area.

Almost as soon as you come out into the light, the **Tyloaan Café (11; p175)** is on your right. You could also double back to **Togada Café (12; p175)**, behind which is the **Dan Do Youniss (13; ☎ 62724; admission 2LD; ☼ daylight)**, one of the traditional Ghadames houses that has opened to the public; unusually, it has helpful English-language labels in most rooms. There are also good views from the roof.

A little further to the southwest, you come to another open area, **Intelewan Sq (14)**, where you'll most likely find a few souvenir sellers. On the right as you enter is a whitewashed building that was the first non-Quranic **school (15)** in Ghadames. Modern sciences were studied in the building, which was

later used as the Turkish consulate. If you turn north, the path is lined with gardens enclosed behind walls. This thoroughfare is **Tafarar St (16)**, another of the seven main streets. At the next junction, turn right to the white domed building 50m along on the right. This is the **Tayibiyeh Sufi School (17)** and is worth visiting for its intimate courtyard and splendid views from the roof.

Return the way you came and take the first right, into **Endo Khalif St (18)**, which once again leads you undercover and turns left. The roof is, typically, covered by palm leaves with struts made from palm trunks. Winding your way left, right, right again and then left brings you into **Ghazar Sq (19)**. This lovely uncovered square is surrounded by alcove niches and a balcony encircling the square on the 1st floor. This balcony enabled children to watch the public ceremonies played out in the square below; wedding festivities sometimes lasted for up to 14 days!

The path heading west soon leads to the main square. Just before entering the square, you can visit the **Yunis Mosque (20)**, built in 1422 and the main mosque of the Bani Wazid part of town. This simple mosque makes use of pillars from the old Roman triumphal arch. Upon entering the square, you leave the Bani Wazid part of town.

The **main square (21)** of Ghadames is, like the seven tributary squares, surprisingly small in size given its importance in the public life of the city. With two mosques overlooking its open courtyard, the square is simple and lacks the charm of some of the smaller squares. In a niche on the northwest wall of the square, built into the back wall of the Yunis Mosque, is **Al-Kadus (22)**, the unlikely headquarters of Ghadames' water supply regulator (see Al-Kadus & the Art of Water Management, p172).

If you exit the main square under the northern arch, you enter the **Bani Walid (23)** districts of Old Ghadames. If you turn right at the first opportunity, the **Old Post Office (24)** is on your right. Above the path immediately outside the door hangs a chain from one of the palm struts. This is where bags of mail were hung. The appointed man from each departing caravan could sort through the bag to see whether any letters could be delivered along his caravan route, while arriving caravans could check whether any mail had been sent to them during their long absences.



By all accounts, the old men who loitered around the main square made a point of knowing everybody's business, so it usually wasn't necessary to check the mailbag.

Next door to the post office is the **Atik Mosque (25)**. This was once the oldest mosque in Ghadames, if not all of Libya. The original mosque on this site was built in 44 AH (AD 666) and, incredibly, survived until 1943, when it was destroyed by Allied bombing (p164). The sanctuary is off-limits to non-Muslims, but from the door you can see the attractive row of arched pillars, running across the centre of the rectangular hall, and the mihrab.

To get to the women's section of the mosque, return to the main thoroughfare outside the door and take the door immediately to the east. The next opening, again, leads into the **public well (26)**, which served as a public water-gathering point.

After leaving the well, follow the covered street to the east for about 400m. The uncovered path running east through the gardens is divided by a shallow canal which still serves as an irrigation channel. Wind your way north and then west between more gardens, you re-enter the built-up areas of the old city at the very small and partially covered **Endoalad Sq (27)**.

To the southwest is **Sedija Sq (28)**, which is surrounded by some superb three-storey,

mud-brick Ghadames houses. Note the pattern of alternating upright and inverted triangles running along the top of one of the walls. The design is found across the Sahara of western Libya (as far south as Ghat) – one legend claims it represents the crown of an ancient Berber queen who ruled over the desert.

Taking the right fork of the two lanes running southwest, you pass a **plaque (29)** in Arabic which commemorates the bombing of Ghadames during WWII. You'll soon return to the covered lanes, where you can fully appreciate the value of skylights (and a torch), as there are fewer of them. At the T-junction, turn right, follow the curving arc of a lane to the southwest and then turn right again; watch out for jutting walls in the darkness. Continue west then northwest through a light passageway that is one of the most lovely in the old city. The benches along its side are a nice place to sit and rest.

The passage leads into **Maziqh Sq (30)**; also known as Al-Touta Sq). This open courtyard has a tree just off-centre; if you're game, try one of the small white berries, which are tasty, not to mention perfectly safe. On the western side of the square is **Tandaria Mosque (31)**, while **Eliyas Mosque (32)** fronts onto the eastern side. The perimeter is lined with the usual arched alcoves.

**Maziqh St (33)** continues across the square. Not long after leaving the square, just after

veering to the right, is **Dan Magrumah (34)**, a traditional Ghadames house open to the public. **Dan Maqoran (35)** is in the street running off to the west, while a further 250m, at the far northwestern end of the city, is **Dan Do Omer (36)**; see p175).

Maziqh St continues to the outer reaches of old Ghadames. At the end, turn left where a few twists and turns between walled gardens and mud-brick houses, past **Dan Bero (37)** and the **Dan Bero Coffee Shop (38)**. You'll finally reach **Ain al-Faras (39)**; Well of the Mare, or Horse Fountain), the site of a deep well that gave birth to the creation myth of Ghadames (see How Ghadames Got Its Name, p166). Unesco has recently realigned and re-activated the spring, making it a delightful spot; steps lead down behind the water to an underground reconstruction of the old well and photos of how it once looked.

Immediately west of the well is the place where caravans and other outsiders could come to tether and water their camels; they could gain access to the town via the nearby main square to receive mail, news and provisions. Also nearby is the elegant façade of a **derelict hotel (40)**; Sophia Loren slept in Room 10 while filming *The Road to Timbuktu*. This was also the area for strangers who were not to be privy to the secrets of the magical old town.

From the mosque on the south side of the square, an arch leads to an irrigated path that twists away to the southeast and back to Jarasan Sq.

## Festivals & Events

In October/November, Ghadames' annual **three-day festival** brings the old city alive in a riot of colour and activity. Ghadamesis return to their family homes in the old town and throw open the doors for singing, dancing and public festivities, most of which are performed in traditional dress. It's a great chance to see re-enactments of ancient celebrations in their traditional environment.

On the first day of the festival, some public events are held in the modern city. On the morning of the second day, the festivities move to the old city, with weddings and ceremonies to celebrate the rite of passage of young men to adulthood. Up to thirty of the old houses are used – where some events would once have lasted seven days,

seven houses are used to represent each day. On the third day, the festival moves to the Tuareg part of town (west of the old city) and into the desert, concluding in the evening in a Tuareg camp amid the sand dunes.

During the tourist high season (October to April), you'll find traditional performances by local dance troupes somewhere in town on most nights. Tuareg groups perform in the sands west of town, while traditional Ghadames performances take place in the theatre (see Map p165) close to the main junction.

## Sleeping

Accommodation in Ghadames is improving all the time, ranging from stays in family homes to a top-notch hotel – with more of the latter already on the drawing board. All accommodation is in the new town.

## BUDGET

**Youth Hostel** (Buyut ash-Shabaab; ☎ 62023; dm 5LD) Ghadames' youth hostel is basic, has small rooms and is plagued by problematic plumbing, but for this price you can hardly complain.

**Jawharat as-Sahra Hotel & Restaurant** (Funduq Jawharat as-Sahra; ☎ /fax 62015; bed in 4-bed r 5LD. Run by the avuncular Ahmed at-Tunisi, this small hotel is a stone's throw from the entrance to the old city and has basic rooms. See also p174.

One solution to Ghadames' shortage of beds is the prevalence of villas – homes that operate like B&Bs. All are simple, well-kept and far more personal than the hotels. They also offer kitchen facilities and charge 20LD (including breakfast) per person.

If the ones listed here are full, the owners are usually happy to ring around and find you a bed.

**Red Villa** (☎ 0912133524; 🛏 ) Simple rooms but most have private bathrooms.

**Villa Abdealmoula** (☎ 62844; villa\_moula@yahoo.com; 🛏 ) Run by the energetic Othman Elhashhashie, this is the most homely of the villas and is very well run.

**Villa Tantawi** (☎ 62205; 🛏 ) Friendly place with ornate, over-the-top rooms and a resident cat.

## MIDRANGE & TOP END

All of the following places have air-con and private bathrooms (unless stated otherwise) and prices include breakfast.

## AL-KADUS & THE ART OF WATER MANAGEMENT

Ghadames was renowned on the caravan routes for the plentiful water from its well, and the city authorities recognised the need to carefully manage their most precious resource. The egalitarian system they devised was ingenious.

The main water supply was connected to all points in the city via a network of underground canals. Water users were divided into three categories: private homes were the first to be supplied; followed by the mosques, which required water for ablutions and general distribution; and then the gardens.

To precisely calculate and distribute the water, a man would occupy the niche in the main square into which water was fed from the spring and into canals. This guardian of the waters ensured that the large bottle (*al-kadus*) that hung underneath the outlet was filled each time. A hole in the bottle then released the water into the canal. The time it took to empty (approximately three minutes) represented a unit of measurement – one *kadus*. Each *kadus* was noted by making a knot in a palm leaf. Two men helped the main regulator by telling him how much water each district or garden was permitted. Each garden was fed off the main canals – when they had received the correct amount, a stone was placed over the opening to ensure that no-one took more than their fair share.

So regular was this process that time was measured for the whole city by calculating how many *kadus* had passed since sunrise. Anyone could find out the time by visiting the main square and asking in the *al-kadus* niche, thereby making Ghadames one of the few places to have devised its own independent system of time and water management.

**Winzrik Hotel** (Funduq Winzrik; ☎ /fax 62485; camping 5LD, s/d 30/40LD; 🏠) This comfortable place has 16 spotlessly clean rooms with bath and air-con. The splashes of traditional decoration in some rooms is a nice touch and the location, a short walk east from the entrance to the old city, is also better than most. You can pitch a tent in the hotel's walled compound; the cost includes use of the shower and toilet.

**Funduq al-Tawassel** (☎ 62971; fax 021-3601374; s/d 30/40LD; 🏠) Although the rooms at this intimate little hotel are simple, they're spacious and nicely kept. Best of all, the staff exude a gentle desert charm and seem genuinely pleased to see you, in an unobtrusive way. If you're here as a group, you'll probably fill the place and it will feel like your own private house.

**Kafila Hotel** (Funduq Kafila; ☎ 021-3609990; kafila hotel1969@hotmail.com; s/d from 30/40LD) In the streets behind the New Mosque, this is one of the longer-standing hotels in town and it remains a popular place for groups. Perhaps that's because the rooms are enormous, although it has to be said that most are uninspiring and careworn.

**Al-Waha Hotel & Camping** (Funduq al-Waha; ☎ 62569/70; wah.2000@yahoo.com; camping 5LD, s/d 30/40LD; 🏠) Another of the oldest hotels in Ghadames, Al-Waha is popular with tour groups, but the truth is that all rooms are simple and some are showing none-too-graceful signs of age; most beds sag and the bathrooms in particular are in need of an overhaul – one traveller reported that their bath took 45 minutes to fill. Breakfast here is also no great thing.

**Funduq Kasser el-Deawan** (☎ 63350; fax 041-634115; s/d 35/50LD; 🏠) Almost as far south as you can go in Ghadames (which isn't far), this new place is excellent, with spacious, well-appointed rooms with satellite TV. It's a popular place and our only complaint is that some rooms could be cleaner when things are busy, but don't let that put you off because there's no better place for the price in Ghadames.

**Bab al-Fatah Hotel** (Funduq Bab al-Fatah; ☎ 63356; fax 021-3615262; s/d/tr 35/50/75LD; 🏠) At last a new hotel from where you can see the old city from your room, at least if you have a north-facing room. The rooms themselves are well-sized, clean and comfortable, if a touch overpriced, but we've no hesitation

in recommending a stay here because the location is easily the best in town.

**Ben Yedder Hotel** (Funduq Ben Yedder; ☎ 63410; yedder@hotmail.com; s/d 35/50LD; 🏠) Another easy-to-recommend new hotel close to the town centre, Ben Yeddar has rooms that are the merest cut above others in a similar price range, and excellent bathrooms. Although we visited when it was still new and yet to age, we suspect that the attentive staff will keep it in good nick.

**Dar Ghadames Hotel** (Funduq Dar Ghadames; ☎ 021-3621414; fax 63408; www.darsahara.com; s/d/ste 100/110/150LD; 🏠 📺) Now here's something special. One of just a handful of traditionally styled hotels in Libya, Dar Ghadames recreates the clean lines and tranquil air of the old city, using traditional architecture in the public areas – note the palm-wood roof above reception and the arched corridors which feel like an old, if somewhat polished Ghadames laneway. The rooms are large, supremely tasteful and as comfortable as anywhere you'll find in Libya. Most also have an outdoor terrace, there are plans for a swimming pool and the restaurant (below) is excellent. If you splurge once in Libya, make it here.

### Eating

For a cheap meal of meat, chicken or liver sandwiches or a hamburger (each 0.75LD), try the two small restaurants either side of the internet café.

**Restaurant Awwal** (☎ 62429; meals 12-15LD; 🍽️ lunch & dinner) Almost every tourist who comes to Ghadames eats here at least once. The food – mainly chicken and lamb dishes, including *tajeen* (a lightly spiced dish with a tomato and paprika-based sauce) – is fairly standard tourist fare but the food is tasty and the service attentive.

**Jawharat as-Sahra Hotel & Restaurant** (☎ 62015; meals 5-15LD; 🍽️ lunch & dinner Sat-Thu, dinner Fri) This pleasant place does good couscous, barbecued meat and shish kebab and is all the better for the fact that it doesn't get too many tourists. The chilled atmosphere goes perfectly with the macchiato (1LD) and thick Arabic coffee (*qahwa*; 1LD). See also p173.

All the hotels also have restaurants serving set meals that are good if unexciting. **Dar Ghadames Hotel** (Funduq Dar Ghadames; ☎ 021-3621414; fax 63408; www.darsahara.com; lunch 20LD,

### DINING IN TRADITIONAL HOUSES

An Italian visitor to Ghadames during the 1920s remarked that 'the delicate sensibility of these people delights to place beautiful things before guests and then to leave them the joy of discovering them for themselves'. Many such pleasures remain and the best eating experience in Ghadames – lunch or dinner in one of the **traditional houses** (meals incl soup & drinks 15LD) of the old town – is a case in point. The most frequently prepared meal is the delicious local speciality of *fitaat* (lentils, mutton and buckwheat pancakes cooked together in a tasty sauce in a low oven and eaten with the hands from a communal bowl). Some places also do camel couscous. Eating this wonderful meal amid an evocative atmosphere is one of Ghadames' must-dos.

Your tour company will most likely make the arrangements and most of the nearly 30 houses open to the public offer this service, including **Dan Do Omer** (☎ 62300; dandoomer731@yahoo.com) and **Daj el-Hush** (☎ 62004), although all of them are excellent.

dinner 25LD) is an exception with outstanding buffets. See also opposite.

### Drinking

A number of traditional teahouses have opened in the gardens of the old town and are wonderful places to break up your ramble through the old town. They usually open early in the morning and close just before sunset. The better ones include two places just northwest of Intelewan Sq: Tiyloan Café has a pleasant courtyard, while **Togada Café** (☎ 63377) is set in an ample garden. Another good choice in the northwest of the old city is the shady palm garden of Dan Bero Coffee Shop, although it was closed for renovations when we visited.

For more information on finding these places see the Walking Tour, p169.

In the modern town, outdoor cafés and teahouses abound; they're marked on the map. The greatest concentration is along the road running between the main intersection and the new mosque.

### Shopping

Ghadames' most famous handicrafts are the striking embroidered slippers in bright colours. Unique to Ghadames, they've been produced by the local Bin Yeddar family for centuries. The family has a shop and workshop in the small market north of the museum. Prices start at around 43LD.

Most of the shops scattered around Ghadames sell a range of Tuareg handicrafts, especially leather items, replica camel saddles, cloth for Tuareg turbans and silver jewellery. You can also pick up palm-woven products and tacky items such as long-dead desert scorpions and snake skins in glass cases.

### Getting There & Away

#### AIR

There are no regular scheduled flights between Tripoli and Ghadames, although there's always talk of this changing and one-way/return prices for these nonexistent flights are listed by Libyan Arab Airlines as 26.50/53LD. The airport is 19km east of town.

#### BUS & SHARED TAXI

There are at least two buses daily from Ghadames to Tripoli; both leave from the main street, 50m northeast of the new mosque. Shared taxis for the Jebel Nafusa require a change in Nalut.

#### CAR & MOTORCYCLE

Ghadames is 611km southwest of Tripoli. For information on the road between Ghadames and Nalut, see p164.

### AROUND GHADAMES

#### Ras al-Ghoul

About 10km northwest of Ghadames is the lonely desert castle of Ras al-Ghoul (Mountain of Ghosts), perched on a rocky bluff rising up from the plains. This dramatic fort predates the arrival of Islam and was once part of a chain of desert castles across North Africa that communicated with each other through messengers and smoke signals. When the forces of Islam swept through Ghadames in 668, the majority of Ghadamsis converted. Those who didn't were driven from the town and took refuge at Ras al-Ghoul. The Islamic soldiers encircled the castle and placed it under siege, not realising that a secret well within the remote redoubt could keep the rebels alive indefinitely. After

negotiations took place, a compromise was reached and the siege was lifted.

The castle originally consisted of three concentric walls and the stone skeletons of the castle's rooms remain visible. Be very careful when climbing up as the deep shaft of the ancient well is uncomfortably close to the top of the path. From the eastern side you can see (100m away to the east) the barely visible low remains of a camp used by Islamic fighters during the siege; a further 100m east are the remains of the camp's cemetery, containing 13 graves. Perhaps not surprisingly, given their losses, the Arabs also called the site *Jebel ash-Shohada* (Mountain of the Dead). It was from the camp that the ghostly legend of *Ras al-Ghoul* was born as the soldiers reported seeing strange lights coming from the castle.

Elsewhere from the summit, the views are simply superb. The undulating sand dunes to the north and west lie within Algerian territory, while just 7km away to the northeast is the Tunisian town of *Burj el-Khadra*. It's one of the most accessible places in Africa to watch the sunset in three countries.

To the west, you can see a sandy track running over a low ridge of uniform hills, along which are a series of Algerian border posts. Beyond the ridge, the track leads to a large sand dune (about 4km away) which is in a small finger of Libyan territory surrounded by Algeria. The sunsets here can be stunning.

If you've hired a guide for Ghadames, the full-day service usually includes a sunset trip to *Ras al-Ghoul*.

### Touneen

The small village of *Touneen*, 3.5km west of Ghadames, has a mud-brick old city and, in terms of style, is like Ghadames in miniature – with some covered areas and far fewer tourists. That said, the village is in far worse condition than Ghadames, save for its mosque, which remains in use.

### Ain ad-Debanah (Ain M'Jazzam)

Some 39km east of Ghadames along the road to *Derj*, a rough track leads for 9km to the two salt lakes of *Ain ad-Debanah* (also known as *Ain M'Jazzam*). The lakes in the *Idehan Ubari* in the *Fezzan* are more beautiful but if you won't be venturing that far south, this may be your only opportunity to swim in a desert (salt) lake.

## INTO THE SAHARA

Although you could take the paved road from Ghadames to *Sebha* and beyond, well-frequented desert trails head south and southeast deep into the Sahara across the forbidding *Hamada al-Hamra*. Such deep-desert expeditions are not to be undertaken lightly and definitely not without an experienced local guide. If you're crossing in winter, night-time temperatures can plunge well below zero, so come prepared. For many, however, it's worth it. As one traveller wrote to *Lonely Planet* after crossing from *Al-Aweinat* to Ghadames:

The sand is orange pink, the mountains high and out of HG Lovecroft's books. Out of this world. After three days of Garamantian graffiti...and caves containing drinkable rainwater, on to *Al-Aweinat*. Four days pass as we drive northwards along the Algerian border. The medina of rocks and sand, with streets and avenues made by solid high rocks takes our breath away. The Tuareg call it *Madrgrat*. Teas in the desert, bread baked in the sand, the full moon. At the end we reached Ghadames, the jewel of the desert.

*Christina Koutoulaki, Greece*

### Ghadames to Al-Aweinat

There are a number of reasons to take the direct route south from **Ghadames**, not the least of which is that, at journey's end, you're at the gateway to the *Jebel Acacus* (p198), *Wadi Meggedet* (p193), and *Ghat* (p194) without needing to double back via *Ubari* and *Sebha*. Far more romantically, there's the cachet of crossing a largely uninhabited stretch of the Sahara. That said, the landscapes, though harshly beautiful, lack the epic scale of routes further east and elsewhere in the Libyan Sahara.

The main route – which no longer crosses or shadows the Algerian border due to a dispute between Libya and Algeria – leads south across the **Hamada al-Hamra** (roughly 310km), the western reaches of the **Idehan Ubari** (*Ubari Sand Sea*; 80km) and then a rocky landscape (210km) into *Ghat*. Within these broad designations there are a variety of landscapes. When we crossed, recent rains had left the shallow wadis of the *Hamada* bathed in a tinge of green, and

### THE HAMADA AL-HAMRA

The *Hamada al-Hamra* – the Red Plain of northwestern Libya – is an unrelenting void, as emptied of landmarks as of signs of life. Nothing catches the eye. Perspective is difficult to grasp. But there are moments of absolute clarity when eternity begins just beyond the car door.

And yet, the *Hamada* owes its existence to water. When the rains ceased and the Sahara began to dry out around 4000 years ago, the rivers which once flowed from the mountains of the central Sahara to the sea dried out. They left behind mountain debris carried down onto the plateaus, eroded landscapes and gravel plains like the *Hamada*. This great tableland of sedimentary limestone, newly exposed to unimpeded Saharan winds, was thereafter polished smooth as all loose debris was scoured away by wind and sand.

The dimensions of the *Hamada* are impressive, stretching almost 500km from west to east and 300km from the foothills of the *Jebel Nafusa* in the north to the cliffs of the *Jebel Hasawinah* in the south, a total area of around 90,000 sq km. Sand seas get all the attention, but in actual fact barely one-ninth of the Sahara rises as sand dunes, and sand covers just one-fifth of the desert's surface. As such, gravel plains like the *Hamada* are the Sahara's truest terrain.

To see the *Hamada* at its most extreme, the route from *Derj* to *Idri* (below) perfectly catches that sense of uninterrupted emptiness, while the western reaches of the *Hamada* between *Ghadames* and *Al-Aweinat* (opposite) have more subtle variations of topography.

there were isolated sand dunes and the occasional prehistoric **rock engraving** littered along the route. In the northern *Hamada*, local shepherds roam from November to March with their flocks of sheep; as spring approaches, large family groups join them for ritual shearing of the sheep and festive feast.

There's a natural gas field in the western reaches of the *Hamada* (from where gas is piped to a refinery on the coast near *Zuara* and on to Italy) so don't be surprised if you come across large trucks crossing a semi-paved road on your first day (if you're coming from the north). The last stretch of the journey into **Al-Aweinat** is becoming easier by the day as an oil company grades the road to its oil camps and rigs.

A couple of points worth watching out for as you travel south are the eerie vestiges of a **petrified forest** (N 28° 25' 06.42" E 10° 36' 43.47") and, further south, the fresh-water well of **Bir Helou** (N 26° 42' 09.49" E 10° 18' 29.06") which has a resident cat and a caretaker who appreciates gifts of cigarettes or bread.

To make this crossing requires a minimum of three days and two nights, although you may spend three nights sleeping in the desert if you leave after lunch from Ghadames on your first day. The drivers of the *Paris-Dakar Rally*, of course, routinely make the journey in one day.

### Derj to Ubari

Although you can also begin this route in Ghadames, we like to begin the crossing from **Derj**. That's because it takes you through the heart of the **Hamada al-Hamra**, one of the most extreme desert territories on earth (see above). Unlike the more undulating western reaches of the *Hamada* on the Ghadames to *Al-Aweinat* route, here the *Hamada* is unrelentingly flat and an extraordinary evocation of the Sahara's vast, featureless plateaus.

We suggest that you camp the first night in the *Hamada* to truly appreciate the epic scale of this empty land. On the second day, you drop down off the western ridges of the *Jebel al-Hasawinah*; at one point a sign warns: 'Your vehicle must be safe before go'. You'll also pass by a windswept well surrounded by abandoned mud dwellings en route to **Idri** (p183) at the eastern end of the *Wadi ash-Shatti*. From *Idri*, trails enter the **Idehan Ubari** (*Ubari Sand Sea*). This enormous sand sea has some of the most spectacular dune-scapes in the Libyan Sahara. On your second night, you should definitely camp in this wonderful cathedral of shifting sand.

The 'easier' route across the sands heads roughly southwest to **Ubari** (p191), although more challenging routes abound. From *Ubari*, most people head along the *Wadi al-Hayat* to **Tekerriba** (p186) and sleep the third night close to the **Ubari Lakes** (p187).

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