

The Colonel and I: A Journey from the Halls of Mediation to the Shores of Tripoli

Recently, I found myself in the final stages of my preparation for Libya. I realised later that this meant drinking from desert wells, a preparedness to eat four day old non-refrigerated goat meat writhing in the odd maggot and a willingness to go to the Libyan equivalent of Stage 8 water restrictions (i.e. 5 cm of water to wash myself in every second day).



Before I left, I was asked by IAMA whether I would write an article on mediation while visiting the Socialist People's Libyan Arab Jamahiriya. I contacted the Libyan Consul in Canberra immediately (I was flying out in two weeks) and was greeted by Yemen (a person, not the country) who helpfully advised me to put my request to meet a Libyan official in Tripoli in writing, which I did. Unfortunately my timing coincided with Ramadan and key staff were on leave. I contemplated following Jana Wendt's footsteps (all 60 Minutes worth) and thought about how I could secure an interview or audience with Colonel Gaddafi. Unfortunately my application to join the Colonel's all female bodyguard was unsuccessful. I can only speculate that it had something to do with my lack of mascara and the dowdy woodland camouflage fatigues I was wearing during my photo shoot which accompanied my application form.

I did not let this deter me and left Australian shores to enjoy an unscheduled 8 hour stop in Dubai due to the closure of Libyan airspace because of the National Mourning Day (the anniversary of the Italian occupation). The next day I faced my first failed negotiation, when I was unable to persuade a soldier to hand over his AK 47 and let me pose with him in a photo outside the Libyan Central Bank. At least he was good humoured about it. Instead I enjoyed posing with the Colonel, whose smiling face appeared more or less on every street corner.

The following day I found myself lying half naked on a slab of cold marble. I arrived at my destination and was greeted by an elderly man who must have forgotten to hand me the plethora of forms enquiring about my cholesterol, blood pressure, condition of my heart and latest bowel movement which usually accompanies a "treatment experience" in one of Australia's spas. At least I passed the entrance exam: after parting with two dinar I was ushered into the hamman (a local public bathhouse – men and women on alternate days). This was not the kind of experience you'd read about in the Conde Nast Best Day Spas of the World. The "beauty therapist" assigned to scrub the living daylights out of me and erase every piece of dead skin from my body, just grinned and laughed when I handed her my loofah. She had bigger plans and a loofah three

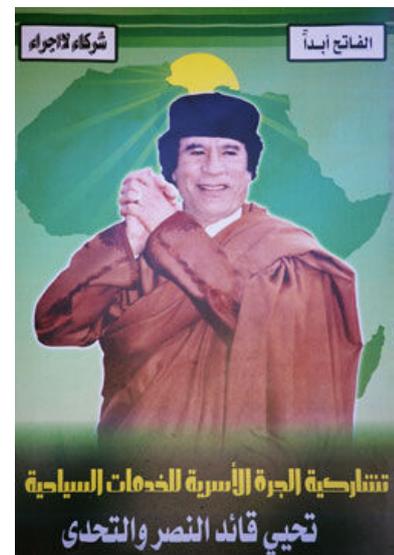
times the size of mine. As the process began my free hand naturally reached out for something to put between my teeth, unfortunately the sea sponge just didn't do the trick. At the end of the scrub, amongst the grins and chatter of other women who made me feel welcome I finally departed on an endorphin high with skin softer than a discharged patient from the Ponds Institute.

My journey to the Sahara finally took off literally after two days in Tripoli, with a flight to a desert town and a long drive to a place which the Lonely Planet described as one of the "most remote destinations in the world." Our group of seven – along with "Urban" Ali, our cheerful police escort (he hated the desert and couldn't wait to get back to his hookah and coffee in Tripoli) met up with our Tuareg guide, cook and drivers to begin our journey over the dunes. A single Bob Marley tape remained a constant companion in our non-air-conditioned car for hundreds of kilometres, along with the odd stray camel and falcon hunters we encountered along the way.

Eventually I thought that I'd better get around to the topic of mediation and seized the moment after my anthropologist companion had exhausted her line of professional questions about moieties and kinship groups amongst the Tuareg (i.e. the desert nomads who live throughout the Sahara). My enquiry directed to our guide about conflict and how it was resolved amongst his people, was greeted with the comment that there is no conflict because the elders sort this out. Perhaps this was an insight - after all, the guiding light of Libya, Colonel Gaddafi, had negotiated the resumption of diplomatic relations with the United States after he renounced his weapons of mass destruction and acknowledged Libyan involvement in the Lockerbie bombing.

A handful of Chadian entrepreneurs, perhaps inspired by the Colonel's 1988 promise of a "gift to Africa" and Libyan military withdrawal from their country decided to diversify their income stream and enjoy some of the proceeds of the Libyan tourist trade. The boys down south had obviously scored a pirated DVD version of Al Gore's Inconvenient Truth and took to recycling like a duck to water. Busying themselves with digging up landmines on the border and using them to set up roadblocks to rob passing tourists, the lads had become a True Inconvenience to the Libyan government. As an aside, the territorial dispute over the Aouzou Strip was finally settled by the International Court of Justice in May 1994 in Chad's favour – Libya complied with the referee's decision.

To protect the tourists who passed through Waw Al Namus (an extinct volcano in the middle of nowhere, famous for its mosquitoes!) which happened to be my next stop, the Colonel had sent six of his finest conscripts to man a makeshift shelter in the desert, hundreds of kilometres from the nearest mint tea cafe. I felt sorry for these



soldiers and speculated whether they had committed the misdemeanor of forgetting to salute one of the smiling portraits of their glorious leader. Fortunately the most recent batch of tourists robbed at the volcano by the lads from Chad were found by local falconers tied up and unharmed, minus their four wheel drives.

I have to say I enjoyed my stay in Libya immensely and found the people hospitable and welcoming. During my fourteen days in the Sahara I adapted to my changed circumstances but the one thing I never adjusted to was the sheer beauty of the desert, which was breathtaking.

Before my departure back to Australia I reminded myself at the airline counter as I pleaded for an upgrade to an exit row seat that I should “never negotiate out of fear, but I should never fear to negotiate.”

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