

20 June 2008

FINANCIAL REVIEW

Mediterranean coast without the hordes

Hugh Miles

The Australian Financial Review

TRAVEL - LIBYA

An atypical unspoilt stretch of coastline leaves Hugh Miles impressed by a Gaddafi legacy. From Benghazi as far as the eye could see, the Mediterranean coastline rolled out beneath me almost completely untouched. The sea shimmered turquoise in the spring sunshine. This is what the Cote d'Azur must have looked like 100 years ago, before the hotels and the tourist developments arrived.

I had come to Libya to investigate the maverick state's latest scheme: an ambitious environmental plan to protect and develop 5500 square kilometres of wild and unspoilt greenery in its remote north-eastern corner, a region known as Green Mountain.

The project is purportedly the brainchild of the Libyan leader's reform-minded second son, Saif al-Islam Gaddafi. He is looking for a way to manage development in the region as it begins to open up to the outside world. Due to Libya's long-standing international isolation, there are still fewer visitors to the country annually than to any other around the Mediterranean, even fewer than to neighbouring Algeria.

But with such world-class antiquities and spectacular vistas so close to continental Europe, mass tourism is now only a question of time. The danger is that, within a few years, this unspoilt coastline might end up looking like Benidorm in Spain.

So last year the authorities announced the formation of the world's first regional-scale conservation and development area, in and around the ancient remains of Cyrene and Apollonia. The architects, which include the celebrated British firm Foster and Partners, hope to achieve a variety of environmental, economic and social goals, such as preserving the archaeological sites, helping local people and introducing organic agriculture. Power will be provided by bioclimatic architecture and offshore wind turbines and everything will be carbon-neutral. The scale of the project is breathtaking, unlike anything one would find in

the West - but then again master plans tend to be more difficult to implement in democracies.

My visit came six months after the initial, unexpected announcement. Completion is not expected until the 50th anniversary of Muammar Gaddafi's revolution, in 2019. I wanted to see how things were progressing.

The four-hour drive from Benghazi up to the Green Mountain area winds through the forest-covered mountains of Wadi al-Kuf. Low, fluffy clouds were beginning to form as the moist sea air blew in over the uplands. It did not feel as though we were in one of the most arid countries on earth. In some parts of Libya decades can pass without rain.

The Greek and Roman remains in the Green Mountain area are among the finest in the world. An enormous city site was developed at Cyrene with defensive walls and huge religious enclosures. The magnificent Temple of Zeus was constructed to the same design as the Parthenon, but is even larger.

The Temple of Apollo sits on a grassy escarpment overlooking the sea beside an idyllic fountain, which the ancient Greeks called "the hole in the heavens". It is easy to imagine the forests of apples, grapes and olives cultivated on these plains all those years ago.

Despite the lush surroundings, the people who live here today are some of the most impoverished in the Maghreb. They have a reputation as rebels unafraid of confronting outside rules and ideas. In the 19th century they fought the Ottomans and in the 20th century a local resistance leader named Omar al-Mukhtar led a 20-year guerrilla jihad against Italian troops from the Green Mountain. As many as 80,000 Cyrenaicans died in Italian concentration camps before "the Lion of the Desert" was eventually captured and hanged in front of his followers in Benghazi. The caves where he and his men hid out have since become a tourist attraction for local people.

As late as the 1990s, the Gaddafi regime struggled with a major Islamic insurgency on the Green Mountain, which ended only after a huge ground and air assault by the military. The area has since become a fertile breeding ground for jihadis wishing to travel to Iraq.

What the locals think or know about what is being planned for them now is unclear. My police minder tried to prevent me speaking with them, although it did not take long to discover that many people knew nothing about the Foster master plan.

Development anywhere is a slow process, but there was little tangible evidence of environmental progress on the ground - no litter bins, let alone recycling facilities or sustainable anything.

My visit brought back memories of living in Libya as a child. It seemed to me then a stifling, colourless place, with its rubbish-strewn streets and unfinished concrete houses. Shops were banned and there was no advertising to speak of, other than ubiquitous posters of the smiling Brother Leader. Libyans themselves looked sad and withdrawn. More than 20 years later little has changed.

If Gaddafi's legacy is to endure as long as the antiquities of which he has accidentally

proved such a good custodian, the people will need to be convinced they have an interest in following the master plan being prepared for them. History has shown that the people of the region won't be afraid of standing up for themselves.

As I left Benghazi, I surveyed the redundant industrial facilities scattered about the desert from the plane window. From irrigation schemes to Arab unity to weapons of mass destruction, Libya is littered with failed projects. I wonder whether anything will turn out differently this time.

Hugh Miles's latest book, *Playing Cards in Cairo*, is published by Abacus. \$23.99.

