

# The awakening of Leptis Magna

**By James Merriman**

The first thing I notice about Leptis Magna is the complete silence. There are no coachloads of tourists. No queues for the toilets. Not even a souvenir stall in sight. The early September morning heat feels oppressive, a physical weight with no breeze for relief.

I meet my guide, Mahmud, at the entrance gate to the ruins. He is a weathered local Libyan in his early 60s, who speaks exceptional English. He gives me a firm handshake with one hand, while balancing a piping hot Arabic coffee in the other. 'You have water, very good!' he comments. 'Now we go back in time.' My excitement grows as I catch the scent of cardamom from his drink.

Mahmud leads me along a dusty path lined with tall palms, until a magnificent four-sided arch rises into view. I stop in my tracks, speechless. 'This is the arch of Septimius Severus', he explains. 'Severus was born here and rose through the ranks of the Roman army to become Emperor in 203AD'. The arch bears marble reliefs of imperial triumphs, supported by intricate limestone columns. I study each column intently, deciphering the Roman soap opera before me, making the most of the shade the arch is offering.

Leading me eastward from the arch, Mahmud gestures towards a Roman paved road. I can see the grooves made by the wheels of chariots that would have passed along here. 'This is the M1 for the city', Mahmud informs me. His unexpected knowledge of UK motorways makes me chuckle.

The Roman road ends at a vast open square, paved entirely in gleaming marble. 'Welcome to the Forum', Mahmud proclaims. He tells me this is where caravans from the Sahara and Arabia would meet ships from across the empire to exchange goods and ideas.



*Above: James stands in front of the great amphitheatre of Leptis Magna., Below: The arch of Septimius Severus*





It is mid-morning and heat shimmers off the marble floor and sweat trickles down my neck. My bottle of water feels as if it could boil over at any moment. We take brief shelter underneath one of the towering columns surrounding the marketplace. Mahmud directs my attention to a circular marble carving of a lady with two snakes slithering through her curly hair. 'This is Medusa, meant to ward off evil spirits from the traders', he says.

We walk the exit path, along another paved Roman road, heading uphill away from the Forum. About 200 metres away, we stop to look at a small, crude carving edged into the wall on the right side of the road, which I can only describe as a tiny, wilted cucumber positioned between two golf balls. Slightly embarrassed, I ask Mahmud if that is what I think it is. 'Indeed!' proclaims Mahmud, and points westward towards the edge of the city. 'Red light district of the city is that way'. We both share a laugh at the phallus symbol. Some directions, it seems are timeless.

Continuing the walk through the ruins, the only company we have is the presence of crickets. 'And now the finale,' Mahmud concludes, as we walk the last two 200 or so metres uphill.

Ahead rises a forest of titanic pillars, positioned in front of a perfectly preserved arc of sunbleached stone seats. I feel a sense of pride that after years of reading about the ruins in history books, I have finally set eyes on the amphitheatre of Leptis Magna.

Mahmud points to the top and instructs me to take a seat. Despite the midday heat directly above me, I climb up and do so. I am greeted with a grandstand view of the whole arena, backed by the clear, royal blue of the Mediterranean Sea, the smell of the sea air mixing with the desert dust. I close my eyes and imagine the spectacle of gladiatorial battles being fought. For now, in my imagination, Leptis Magna has awoken from its long sleep.

