



# dead silence

With his love of Saharan solitude still outweighing his fear of being stranded, starved and scorched, **Anthony Ham** travelled to Jebel al-Uweinat, one of the desert's most remote outposts. Will its beauty win the day? Or will a dead engine cause all to be lost?

In the chill of early morning, a glow lights the eastern sky, as if a great city lies just beyond the horizon. But there are only stars, sand and the gentle wind that heralds the day's coming.

I shift in my sleeping bag, longing to doze off. Then, knowing that heat and light will soon drain colour from the day, I leave camp, stiff-legged, to watch the unfolding drama of the Saharan dawn from a nearby sand dune. To the north, the sun ignites the serrated peaks of Jebel Arkno, one of the legendary 'lost oases' of the Sahara. To the south, the black cliffs of Jebel al-Uweinat, which the desert explorer Ralph Bagnold called a 'great, crumbling citadel' and 'the loneliest oasis in the world', rise from the desert's heart. Between the two, the sand's surface is furrowed into infinite tiny ridgelines. Here, where the frontiers of Libya, Egypt and Sudan intersect, where wars between European and, later, African powers raged, where Hollywood drew Oscar-winning inspiration, all is quiet.

In the distance my camp stirs and I watch Asalheen, my desert guide, silhouetted in his hooded *burnous* against Jebel al-Uweinat, pray, bending and straightening to a fluid, patient rhythm, murmuring like some whispered incantation of ancient ritual carried by the wind. Mornings like these remind me why the Sahara holds me in its thrall.

Back in camp, the remnants of last night's fire are coaxed into life and we drink tea, all the while preparing for our departure. As we load the 4WD, El-Mehdi, my groggy driver, turns the key in the ignition. Nothing. We



Once among the busiest routes across the desert for immigrants and traders of doubtful repute, the trails from Al-Kufra to Jebel al-Uweinat have fallen silent. Libya's border with Sudan's Darfur region has closed and the frontier with Egypt was never really open, casting Jebel al-Uweinat and Jebel Arkno – watched over by a 1970s-era tank, a relic of the desert wars fought between Libya and Chad – adrift on the road to nowhere. All along the trail, there are ample reminders of the desert's peril: the carcasses of innumerable camels, their sun-bleached skeletons perfectly preserved in the desiccated Saharan air.

A decaying tank (above) along the route reminds travellers of one of the desert's previous perils, while sun-bleached camel skeletons (below) are an all too poignant reminder of how dangerous this bleak environment is

## Almasy, a flawed desert romantic obsessed with finding the mythical oasis of Zorzura, would later stumble upon an even greater prize: the Cave of Swimmers

stand still, frozen in mid-task, aware that silence of this kind in the Sahara is sinister, especially when sitting on one of the desert's least-frequented trails, some 325km from the nearest town. Hakim, my long-standing Libyan guide and friend, is stony-faced and keeps his thoughts to himself as he sets to work on the engine. He is quietly furious, aware, as we all are, that we have broken the golden rule of desert expeditions: never travel deep into the desert in only one vehicle without a satellite phone.

After more than an hour of ingenious but ultimately fruitless improvisation, my three companions reach the conclusion that this 4WD will not start without divine or other outside intervention. As one, we all look to the horizon.

The 'road' to Jebel al-Uweinat is a long one. From Ajdabiya, a shabby crossroads town close to the Libyan coast, the tarmac balances atop vast sheets of sand with scarcely a turn or town before the cluster of oases at Awjila and Jalu. Awjila is home to more than palm trees, dates and artesian water. Its beehive domes also provide refuge from the concrete outbuildings that are the urban aesthetic of choice in Colonel Qaddafi's Libya. Far beyond Awjila and Jalu lies Al-Kufra, one of the most remote towns on earth – it's a mere 625km away, without a single town of any size en route. Past Al-Kufra, beyond the wind-blown detritus of the modern world that scars the outskirts of so many Saharan oases, beyond the vast camel market and the impossibly laden trucks bound for Chad, the void.

Being hundreds of kilometres from the nearest settlement and within sight of a mass graveyard of camels, we look to the horizon more in desperation than in hope.

Asalheen, with the hope that the Libyan border post may still be occupied, sets off on foot with El-Mehdi for the 25km journey. Hakim and I stand silently, watching until they become specks on the horizon. We wait. Nothing moves. The day becomes hotter, driving us into the shade of the 4WD, then under the ❧





Above: Caves within the wadi Kerkur Bou Hlega conceal dramatic, millennia-old galleries of giraffe, cattle and human figures. The Cave of the Swimmers, immortalised in *The English Patient*, sits just across the border in Egypt's Gilf Kebir

Top right: Other-worldly landscapes of Jebel al-Uweinat

Bottom right: A local truck about to set out across the Sahara from Al-Kufra to Chad



vehicle itself, each of us lost in the labyrinth of our own imaginations, emerging only to scan the horizon. People die in situations like this. Why not us?

With the shadows lengthening and the day beginning its long descent into night, a distant cloud of dust announces the approach of two 4WDs, one with a mounted machine gun. Libyan soldiers clad in turbans tumble out, followed by Asalheen and El-Mehdi.

Exhilarated, our battery charged, we race across the sand towards the granite walls that mark the perimeter of Jebel al-Uweinat. Like breaching the defences of a forbidden kingdom somewhere close to the end of the earth, we entered through a small opening in the rock - boulder piled upon black boulder, broad sandy valleys backed by the ramparts of the massif's inner reaches, unfamiliar footprints leading deep into this forgotten world.

In the lee of rocks along the *wadi* known as Kerkur Bou Hlega, caves and small alcoves conceal splendid, thousands-of-years-old galleries of giraffe, cattle and human figures etched in ochre. Exquisite

and sophisticated, Jebel al-Uweinat's rock paintings open a window onto a world where primeval man once rested in the shelter of these mountains and recorded what he saw. To what purpose? I cannot say. But such paintings, surrounded by rocks shaped by the once-plentiful water that cascaded down the mountain, are the only signposts to more fertile Saharan eras when lakes, forests and grasslands covered what would later become desert.

Adding to their mystique, the paintings at Jebel al-Uweinat were discovered by one of the Sahara's most beguiling figures, the Hungarian Count László Almásy, whose legend (if not the truth of his life) was immortalised in the book and film *The English Patient*. Almásy, a desert romantic obsessed with finding the mythical oasis of Zerzura, would later stumble upon an even greater prize: the Cave of Swimmers whose portrayal in the movie has done more for the cause of African rock art than decades of serious-minded research. Sadly, Wadi Sura, the 'Valley of Pictures', in Egypt's Gilf Kebir, lies just across the border and the



## PLAN YOUR TRIP

### Getting there

Most European airlines fly to Tripoli, including **British Airways** ([www.ba.com](http://www.ba.com)), **Alitalia** ([www.alitalia.com](http://www.alitalia.com)), **Air France** ([www.airfrance.com](http://www.airfrance.com)) and **Swiss International Airlines** ([www.swiss.com](http://www.swiss.com)). (Sometimes cheaper) alternatives include **Afriqiyah Airways** ([www.afriqiyah.aero](http://www.afriqiyah.aero)) and **Point-Afrique** ([www.point-afrique.com](http://www.point-afrique.com)), which flies to Sebha.

### Visas

Libyan visas must be arranged through a Libyan tour company and a guide will accompany you throughout your stay in the country; most Libyan companies are flexible in letting you plan your own itineraries. The process takes four to six weeks and, armed with the tour company's invitation, visas can then be picked up on arrival in Libya. Your passport details must be translated into Arabic and you must carry a minimum of US\$1000 when entering the country.

### UK operators

Quality UK operators who run trips to Libya include **Fulani Travel** ([www.fulanitravel.co.uk](http://www.fulanitravel.co.uk)) and **Simoon Travel** ([www.simoontravel.com](http://www.simoontravel.com)). Both can arrange bespoke itineraries to Jebel al-Uweinat.

### Local tour operators

**Robban Tourism Services** ([www.robban-tourism.com](http://www.robban-tourism.com))

**Fessano Tours** ([www.fessano-w-tours.com](http://www.fessano-w-tours.com))

**Taknes Co** (+218 21 3350526)

### Climate

October to March is the best time to visit.

### Money

Sterling, US dollars and euros are all readily exchangeable in Libya. Visa cash advances are available from the Bank of Commerce & Development.

### Books

Lonely Planet's *Libya* guidebook is a solid choice (2nd edition, August 2007). Historical accounts centring on Jebel al-Uweinat include *The Hunt for Zerzura – The Lost Oasis & the Desert War* by Saul Kelly, and *Libyan Sands – Travels in a Dead World* by RA Bagnold.

friendliness of our Libyan saviours did not extend to permitting an incursion across the frontier.

A decade after his discovery, Almásy, as a Hungarian, worked as a German agent as Jebel al-Uweinat became one of WWII's most unlikely theatres of war – the point where Italian Libya met British Egypt and Sudan. The massif's strategic significance was its then-abundant water, in the midst of the desolation that is the Libyan desert. Besides observing a fennec fox, that gremlin-like creature with fur-soled feet and disproportionately large ears, a gazelle and a shifting shadow that could be the goat-like waddan high on a precipice, we see no signs of the perennial pools of water for which Jebel al-Uweinat was famed. But the accumulating vegetation and wildlife of Kerkur Ibrahim, another steep-sided thoroughfare through the massif, nonetheless confirm the existence of a rare ecosystem of desert life unharried by the presence of humans.

As dusk casts summits near and far into silhouette, we make camp amid a niche of boulders strewn as if Jebel al-Uweinat had crumbled to its core. Eroded,

free-standing pillars of rock in the most unusual forms rise from the sands, petrified in an act of epic geological upheaval. Blistered rock glistens with the patina of millennia. Pristine small dunes, their ridgelines sculpted by the wind, form perfect crescents.

I hear the wind, hot and blustery, a messenger announcing the power of the natural world, telling us that we have entered a land which man and his machines enter at their peril. Without warning, enveloped in the audible silence of the Sahara, I am afraid, elated, filled with a sense of unutterable calm and with an intense longing for solitude. My love of the Sahara's solitude has always marginally outweighed my fear of its waterless tracts. Today, for the first time in a decade of Saharan travel, I wondered whether that balance of emotions may have shifted.

Asalheen, our indefatigable foot-soldier of the desert, disappears to pray. El-Mehdi lies down in the sand, exhausted. The sun sets the western horizon ablaze. Hakim draws near and stands silently by my side. We look at each other. We smile. 🐾

Left: Solitary sunrise, prayers in the Sahara

Below: The spectacular backdrop that is Jebel al-Uweinat

