

OIL SLICK

As Libya prepares to open its doors to the West, Tripoli's young elite talks tattoos, illicit booze and—very carefully—politics. **By Danielle Pergament**

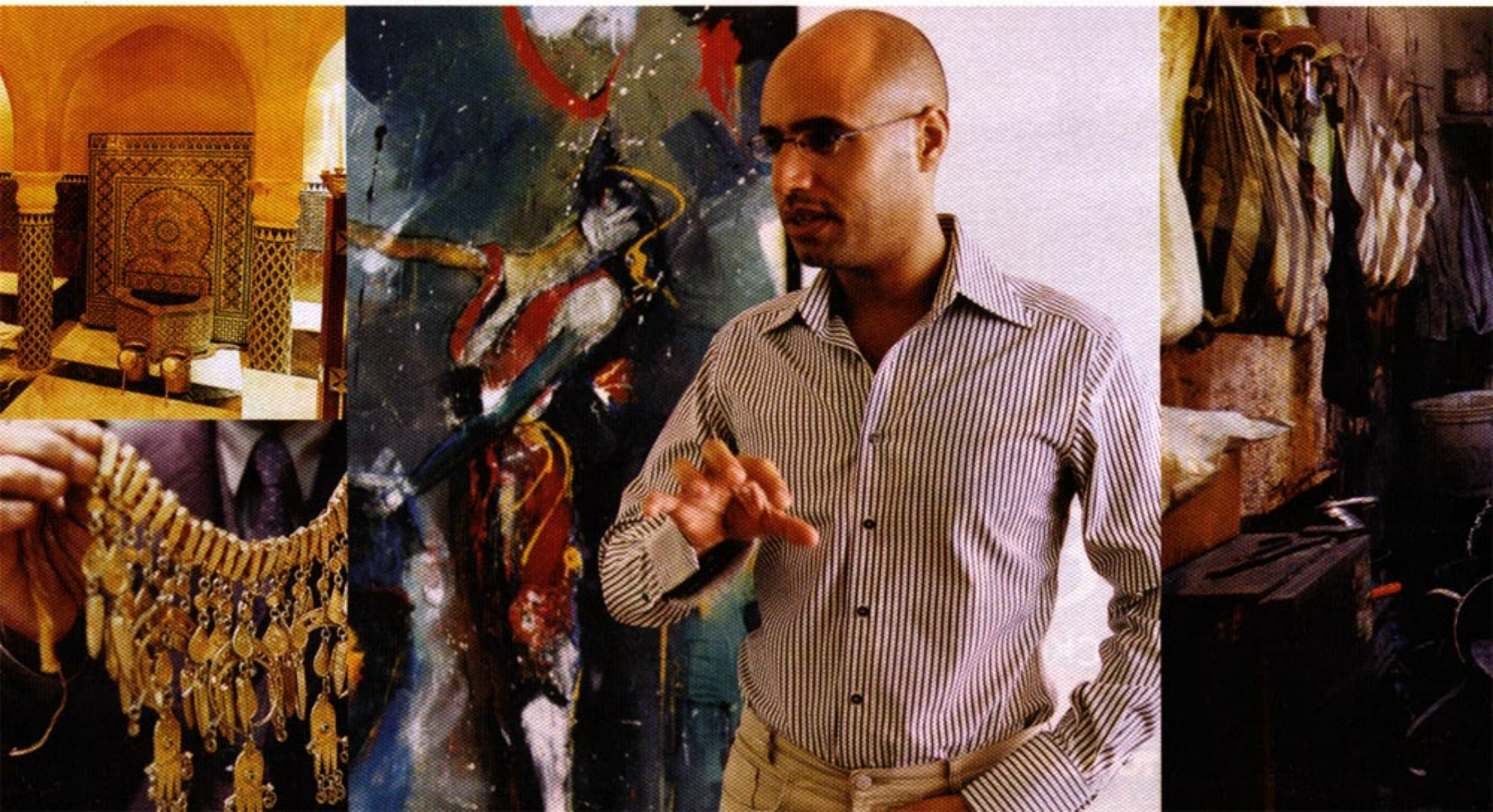
PHOTOGRAPHED BY JASON FLORIO

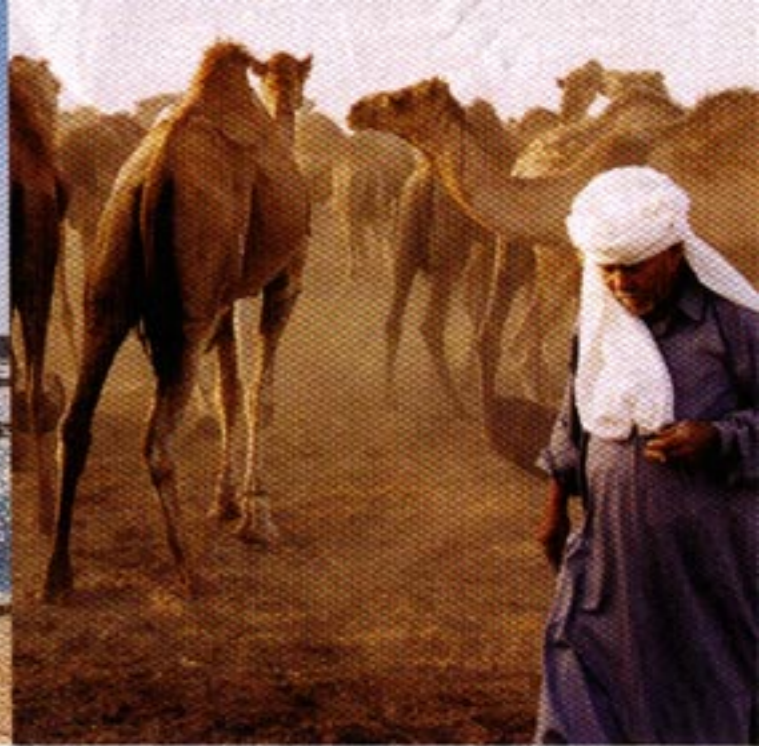
Midnight in Tripoli is unseasonably cold for June. They tell me this over and over again. The days have been a little on the chilly side, but the nights, they say, have been brutal. I'm outside on a marble terrace overlooking the Mediterranean and the flickering skyline of downtown Tripoli, with its sprawl of seven tiny skyscrapers. There are eight of us on the terrace, the men casually flicking their cigarette ashes onto the beach below and the women shivering in their pashminas. The night air hovers around 70 degrees Fahrenheit. They're sorry. They want me to know nights in Libya are unwaveringly balmy, but this—this preposterous 70 degrees—there's just no explaining it.

"You know the hottest recorded temperature on earth was in the Libyan desert," says one man, shaking his head at this thermal chaos. "And now we're coming into the hot season. The Ghibli winds pick up in the Sahara, and it gets so hot you can't even go there pretty soon." It's my first introduction to the local hospitality: Libyans feel responsible for getting you whatever you need while you're a guest in their country—be it food, shelter or tropical temperatures.

The party is a gathering of Tripoli's bright young things: women wearing tight jeans and stiletto sandals, men with gelled hair and bright button-down shirts. The setting could easily be a seaside mansion in Malibu, except the buffet is set with platters of lamb, couscous, octopus salad and camel burgers; a three-foot-tall hookah

Top row: A sea turtle off the coast of Fawaa Island, near Tripoli; Sa'ad, a Qaddafi family driver; a Turkish fort in the town of Ghat, in the Sahara desert; the lobby of Tripoli's Corinthia hotel; Mohamed Qaddafi's house; the camel market in Sebha.





pipe for smoking tobacco and dried fruit, called a *nargila*, sits in the middle of the coffee table, and conversation bounces between Italian, English and Arabic. "I want to show you something," says Hanna, a 19-year-old girl who bears a striking resemblance to a young Cindy Crawford (and who, like most of the other young Libyans I spoke to, is afraid to have her real name appear in print). She takes me into the bathroom and closes the door. She unbuttons her Miss Sixty jeans and pulls them down a few inches, revealing a tattoo of a small rose on her lower back.

"You got that in Libya?" I ask.

"No way," she says. "You're not allowed to have tattoos like this here. I got it in Toronto." She licks the last word as if Toronto were the most magical place in the world. "I would do anything to go back," she says, clenching her fists for emphasis. "I want to be somewhere where I can just walk down the street in sweatpants and eat a bagel and not have everybody nosing in my business. It really pisses me off, truly. Tripoli is such a small town—everyone knows everything."

Not quite, as it turns out. Hanna's best friend doesn't know about the tattoo, and her parents certainly don't know about her British boyfriend. Her cousin Leila "could never tell anyone" that she has spent the night with her fiancé. And no one outside this house knows there is alcohol being served here. Men, although permitted many more social freedoms than women—smoking, hanging out in cafés and wearing short sleeves in public—fall noticeably silent when conversation turns to politics or world events. "Of course I have opinions, of course I watch CNN," says Aziz, a tall business student with spiky black hair. "But if you want to know how I feel about the government, we have to go into the desert to talk."

As the party winds down, Leila wraps her pashmina around her shoulders, careful to cover her exposed back before heading to her car. "I can wear anything I want inside," she says. "But if I wore this outside, people would talk. This is Libya."

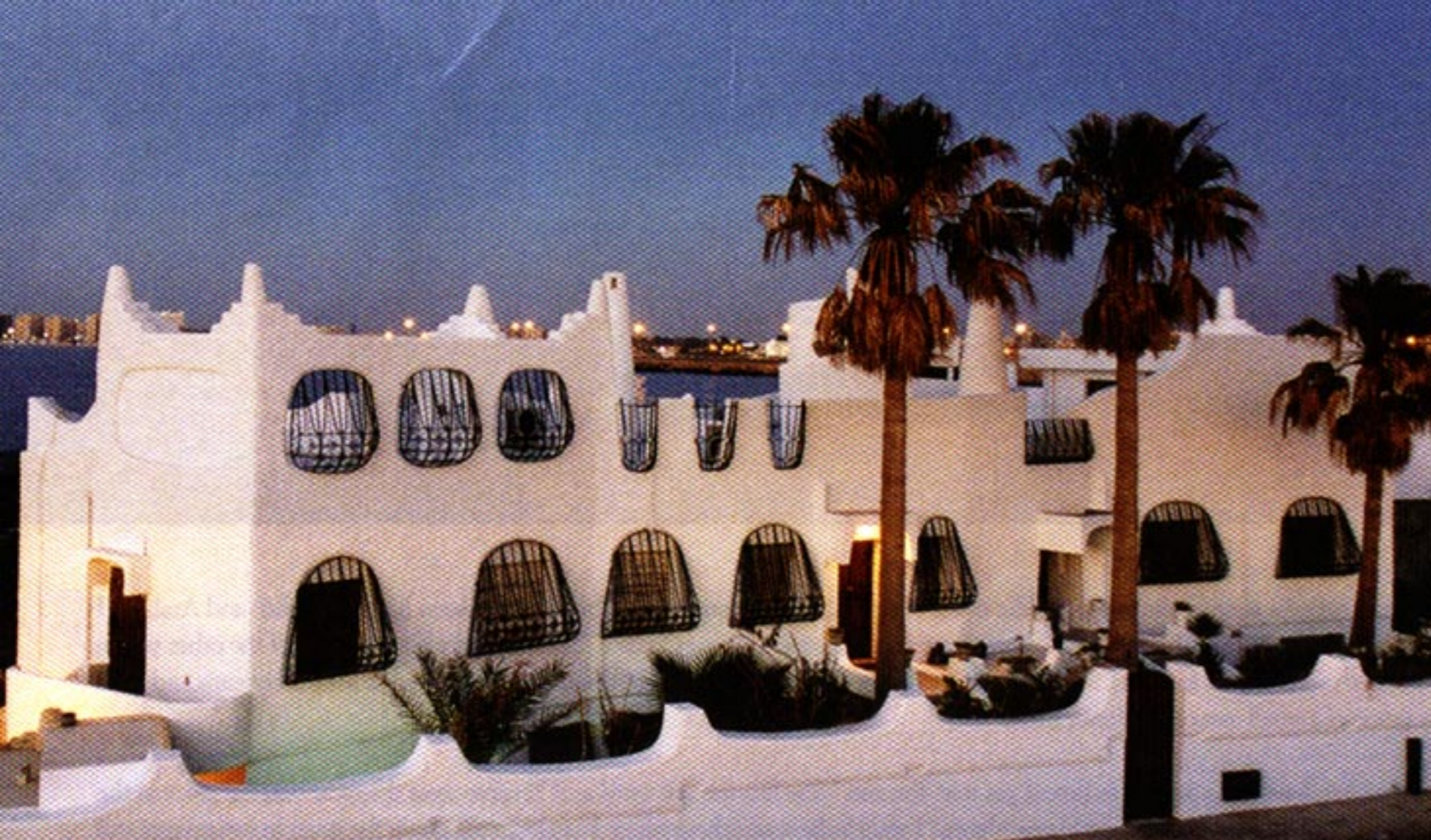
Once seen as a pariah state and an honorary member of President Bush's axis of evil, Libya is open for business to the West for the first time in 23 years. Last winter, after years of secret negotiations, Libya took drastic steps to get back in the good graces of the developed world. Moammar Qaddafi, the Libyan leader President Reagan once called "the mad dog of the Middle East," started surrendering his country's weapons of mass destruction to UN and U.S. inspectors and agreed to pay \$10 million to the family of each victim of the 1988 bombing of Pan Am Flight 103 over Lockerbie, Scotland, which killed 270 people. At press time, \$4 million had been paid to each family, and the rest is scheduled to be distributed in September—if the remaining sanctions are lifted and Libya is taken off the U.S. list of state sponsors of terrorism.

In response, the State Department recently removed travel restrictions for Americans, making a trip to Libya legal for the first time in more than two decades. (Attaining the appropriate visa, however, can be an exhausting process, and the State Department has issued a travel warning, urging visitors to maintain a "high

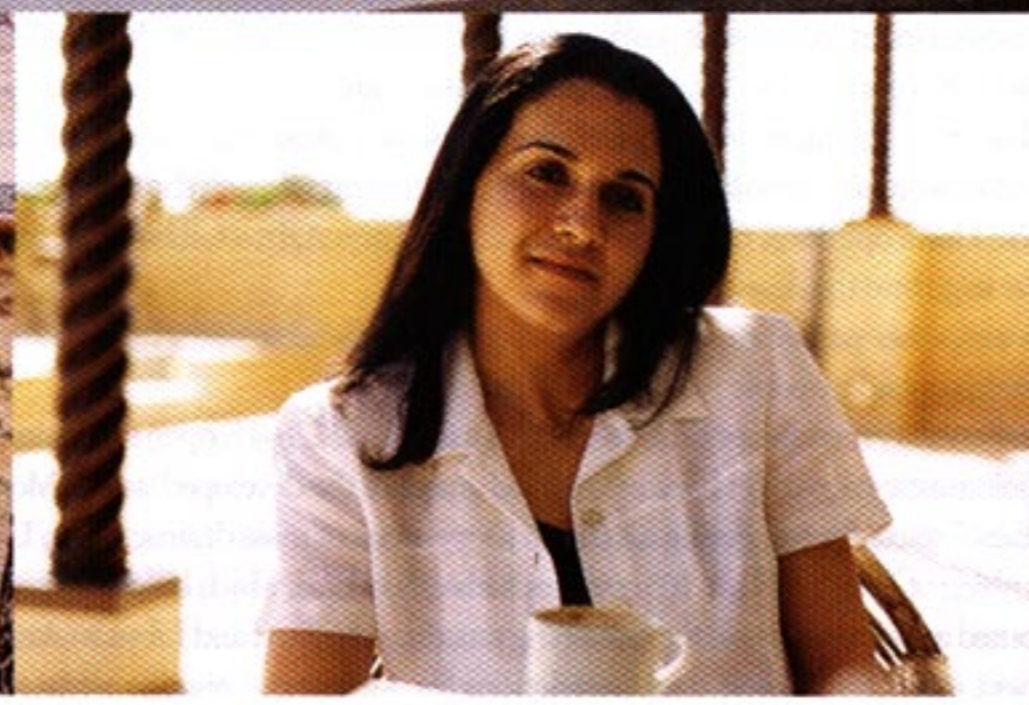
Bottom row, clockwise from upper left: The spa at the Corinthia; Seif Qaddafi, at home in Vienna; a copper worker in the Tripoli souk; inside the house of Ali, a university student; wares from silversmith Abdul el-Shakshoki; Leila and Manan, two upper-class women, show their feet; the Umm al-Maa Oasis; a necklace from el-Shakshoki.

QADDAFI'S HOUSE: DANIELLE PERGAMENT; ALL OTHER PHOTOS: JASON FLORIO/APERTURE





Clockwise from top left: A mansion overlooking Tripoli; Ibrahim, a desert guide in Ghat; a view of the Tripoli medina; the Leptis Magna Roman ruins, a two-hour drive from Tripoli; in the copper market, half-moons for the minarets of mosques; weaving rugs in the medina; Manan on the roof of the Corinthia hotel. Far right: Hatthiem, a university student, at a beach house in Tajura.



“If you want to know how I feel about the government,”



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level of vigilance.") Almost all UN and U.S. sanctions have been lifted, and diplomatic ties with the United States have been formally restored. Oil-thirsty businessmen, their dreams of a black gold rush in Iraq having been quashed, have hurried to book entire floors at Tripoli hotels.

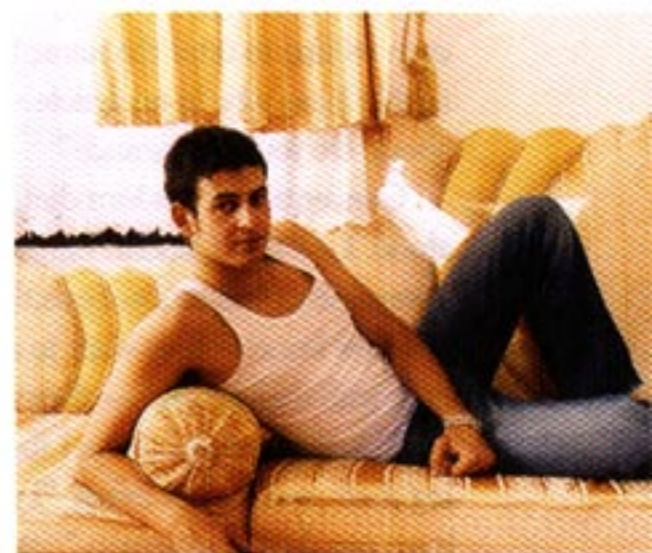
The person credited with spearheading the change in policy is not the Libyan leader but his 32-year-old son Seif, who negotiated the Lockerbie and WMD deals. Unlike his father, the younger Qaddafi has spent much of his adulthood outside Libya—first in Vienna, getting an M.B.A. and a master's degree in philosophy, then at the London School of Economics, where he's now working on a dissertation on global government. He divides his time between London, a house in Vienna and his Tripoli farm.

I have only been in Libya long enough to take a shower when my hotel room phone rings. "The Principal is ready to see you now," says the unidentified man on the phone. Confused, I ask him to repeat himself. "Mr. Seif al-Islam is ready for you now," he says. "You will be picked up in 45 minutes."

Three hours later, I'm picked up in a small white car. (En route, the driver turns to me and says, "You're a freelance writer, and I believe in free press!") On a lush bed of startlingly green grass, surrounded by barbed wire and desert terrain, is Seif Qaddafi's farm, so called for his collection of caged wild animals—two yellow tigers, a black panther, four falcons and his prized white tiger. The place is a labyrinth of stone pillars and arabesque archways, ornate fountains and colorful mosaics. Seif is one of seven Qaddafi children. His brother Saadi is a professional soccer player in Italy and heads up Libya's football federation; when he played for the Libyan league, he was reportedly notorious for having referees make calls in his favor. The colonel's eldest son, Mohamed, is in charge of revamping the country's telecommunications and postal systems. Daughter Aisha is a lawyer, and referred to in Libya as the "Claudia Schiffer of the Middle East." She was recently named to Saddam Hussein's defense team in Iraq.

After an hour of waiting in a spacious room with long, low couches, I meet Seif. He is tall, over six feet, with a shaved head and neat, wire-rimmed glasses. He's wearing a white T-shirt, jeans and sneakers, and walks with the relaxed gait of a frat guy. Outwardly at least, there is no sign that he is the heir apparent—a title I'm urged to avoid and one that he abhors and vehemently denies.

"My personal view is to have cooperation between my country and the West," he says. Qaddafi asserts that developing ties would be mutually beneficial, that America and its allies can help Libya get back on its sanction-crippled legs and Libya can be a new American friend in a tumultuous region. In the future, he says, Libya itself will be a democracy, complete with free elections. But gaining entrée into the international community is an ambitious enterprise, and the question on everyone's mind is when—or indeed, if—this relationship with the West will develop. Libya remains one of a handful of places on the map that has been closed off to Americans. And what goes on inside bears little resemblance to what we may have imagined. There are no angry throngs burning pictures of President Bush in the streets. In fact, the people are almost relentlessly friendly. In this country,



says one young Libyan, "we have to go into the desert."

three times the area of Texas with the population of Minnesota, crime and homelessness are virtually nonexistent. "It's the plus side of the regime," says Salaam, a 45-year-old driver. "There's no rape, no murder. People in Libya aren't afraid of crime, they're afraid of pissing off the government."

After all, Salaam says, there are lingering tales of people "disappearing" for offending the government as recently as a few years ago. Colonel Qaddafi is notoriously paranoid: Four-wheel-drive vehicles were outlawed in Tripoli until last spring, as Qaddafi historically feared cars that could provide potential assassins easy escape into the desert. And Minky Worden, a spokesperson for Human Rights Watch—an organization banned from entering Libya—says the country "has a history of holding government opponents for years without charge or trial." During my stay, officials do not attempt to hide the fact that my phone is tapped; on one occasion I return to my room to find my laptop, which I had closed before departing, open and my e-mail program running.

Nevertheless, Tripoli, the capital city, is being positioned by the Libyan government as the Riviera of the South. To be sure, the crystal water and white, rocky beaches invite comparison with the Côte d'Azur. But in place of Versace, champagne and P. Diddy, you've got head scarves, nonalcoholic Beck's and a seemingly endless forest of Qaddafi billboards. There is just one five-star hotel, the Corinthia, built last year. Starting at dawn, the melodic call of the muezzin sweeps over the city, rousing the pious (except when his voice breaks into a rasping cough, the ripple of amplified hacking over the rooftops serving as a reminder that about 90 percent of Libyan men smoke).

The vast majority of Tripoli is unfinished: Square, concrete buildings are wrapped in rickety scaffolding, and enormous cranes loom above. Ask most Libyans why Tripoli is in such bad shape and they'll blame the sanctions. "We didn't have any air traffic for eight years. Why wouldn't it look like this?" asks one young woman rhetorically. But now, fastened atop the sea of concrete are hundreds of white satellite dishes, like a field of upturned mushroom caps, symbols of a city vigorously trying to reach the outside world.

The Libyans with perhaps the greatest interest in seeing their country open up is the under-30 generation, the ones who have known only a Qaddafi-ruled Libya. When Colonel Qaddafi shifted his country's economy toward socialism in the Seventies, most Libyans who could afford to moved abroad. Of those who stayed behind, many had to sell their land, their property, even their houses to the government. "There are now two kinds of rich people in Libya," explains Khalid, a middle-aged businessman with a round face and a receding hairline. "There's the old class of rich people, like me. We had our fortunes, but the government took most of our money away. Then there's the new class of rich—ones that made money recently through the government or had it stashed overseas." Over the past few years, as American and European leaders have slowly welcomed Libya back into the international fold, many of those families who fled Libya have returned home. And they have brought their children with them.



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This new breed of twentysomethings speak two or three or four languages, fly to the Cyclades for vacation, wear Dolce & Gabbana and have mixed feelings about the *Friends* finale. They are eager to exercise the freedoms that will inevitably come with an influx of Westerners: wearing tank tops, reading *The International Herald Tribune*, drinking beer. Officially, Libya is a dry country, but alcohol is available to anyone with means. "You can get it if you know people at the embassies," explains Hatthiem, a 21-year-old university student. "Otherwise you either smuggle it in from Tunisia or know people who do."

"It's a thousand times looser than it was a few years ago," says Aziz, who is outspoken compared with his peers, in part, perhaps, because he has already had a run-in with the law (he was arrested a few years ago for assault, and refers to the judicial system as a "circus"). "If you were caught with a whiskey, you'd go to jail for a year. Now, you pay a fine. But Libya is still Libya, you know?"

For example, almost none of the young women—and few of the men—are willing to be photographed. "For a Libyan girl to have her picture taken, it's like for an American girl to walk down the street naked," explains one 32-year-old Libyan man. There's more to it than modesty. "You will write about a very important person," says Leila from her cell phone one afternoon, not even willing to utter the name Seif Qaddafi. "And it would be terrible for my family. I can't be in an article with that person—you know who I'm talking about. Do you understand?"

Conventional wisdom dictates that Qaddafi is not a name to be spoken aloud. I ask Seif Qaddafi himself why Libyans seem so loath to talk about the government, and he's not exactly forthcoming. "Maybe they're busy with their business because they want to make money," he says. "And all the people are busy with their projects—they want to enhance their living standards."

This small group of the Libyan upper class is indeed interested in enhancing their standard of living. "I get a new BMW every two months because I burn out the transmission," says Ali, a 22-year-old student, grinning proudly. Earning an impressive salary is important to the men for another reason: It's the groom who pays for the weddings. "Men want to be with their fiancées—they can't spend the night together until they're married," explains Ahmed, a soon-to-be-groom. "So, you know, they rush to make money." Many of these young men have their eye on executive-level jobs at Shell, Occidental or other newly visaed oil companies.

But despite this yearning to develop stronger ties to the international community, curiosity about the United States is surprisingly low. One explanation: Thanks to Hollywood, most Libyans think they have a pretty good idea of life inside America's borders. Another is that displaying too much interest could be perceived as disloyal.

"I have a question about the United States," Aziz whispers, deadly serious. "What's going on with Mickey Rourke?"

With Libya opening up to the rest of the world, perhaps no one group stands to gain as much as its embryonic tourist industry. But generating tourism is a big undertaking for a country that sees about 50,000 tourists a year, compared with neighboring Egypt's 5.6 million. "We have to have the right master plan to build tourism," says Seif Qaddafi, adjusting his glasses. "American investors came already, and they're coming again to help the Libyan government because we don't want to start from the wrong master plan."

There's a lot of planning to do. First off, only a handful of streets in Libya



actually have names. The streets themselves are often disrupted by potholes the size of Mini Coopers; there are no road signs written in English; DHL and a scattering of P.O. boxes comprise the postal system.

Whether or not these things pose a problem depends on whom you ask. The minister of tourism, Amar al-Mabrouk al-Litaif, claims Libya is satisfactorily prepared for an influx of Westerners. "Libya is a free country," says al-Litaif, a tall, soft-spoken man with graying hair and a flair for propaganda. "You can take a car and look around everywhere." Asked if the ban on alcohol will be lifted for Westerners, he states, "Every country has rules. In America, alcohol was forbidden for a long time, and you smuggled, and some people became very rich. Like the Kennedy family."

Seif Qaddafi has a different view. When asked if Libya is ready for a wave of sunburned Americans, he replies, "Not now, certainly. We are working very hard to create resources in the right places." The key, he says, is the right strategy. "We shouldn't target the most tourism, like other countries, but the most exclusive. We should also concentrate on winter tourism. The Italians and the Tunisians or the Maltese or the French cannot compete in winter. But we have the desert. It's the most beautiful place in the world. It's just sand, sand, sand, an ocean of sand, and then suddenly palm trees and water."

My guide and driver through the desert is Sa'ad, one of the Qaddafi family drivers. Swathed in a *sheersh*, a traditional piece of cloth wrapped around his head, leaving only his black eyes exposed, Sa'ad ferries me over dunes the size of small mountains. (It's impossible to drive in the desert midday because the absence of shadows can make the steep edge of a dune look as flat as a beach.) Our destination is Seif's own favorite vacation spot, the Umm al-Maa Oasis in the Ubari region. In southwestern Libya, about 90 miles from the Algerian border, Umm al-Maa ("mother of water") is a seemingly bottomless lake so salty as to make diving utterly impossible—you just buoy back up. On its border is a fringe of palm trees and just beyond, in every direction, miles of copper sand.

Other attractions include the Roman ruins of Leptis Magna and Sabratha, both a few hours outside Tripoli. The two sites are breathtaking, and empty: A busy day at Leptis Magna consists of a Maltese couple and a handful of German tourists. Sabratha, the smaller of the two, is so deserted it can feel like your own private Roman ruin—a few acres of crumbling sandstone and limestone structures sweeping down to the Mediterranean.

Private companies will soon begin building hotels on the beach, according to al-Litaif. Currently, American, Dutch, Italian, French and German companies have hotel, golf and marina developments under way. There's even talk of a Club Med opening up in the beach region of Tajura, according to Qaddafi. Richard Branson is rumored to be investing in a new flight path for Virgin that will include Tripoli, although his camp is tight-lipped on the subject.

Despite a long road ahead, the people making the decisions in Libya are convinced that when the Americans are ready, they will be, too. "Yes, why not?" asks Qaddafi. "We have money. We have a beautiful country. We have a beautiful coast. Therefore we don't have a problem."

The détente, however, may be tenuous. Days after I returned to New York, reports emerged of an assassination plot, allegedly ordered by Colonel Qaddafi, against Crown Prince Abdullah of Saudi Arabia—an accusation Seif called "nonsense" in *The New York Times*. But if the allegations are true, all of Libya's elaborate plans for the future may turn out to be a mirage. Meanwhile, there's a lot of waiting—waiting for new businesses to open, waiting for the tourists to arrive, waiting to see if this new friendship will get off the ground.

"It's gotten more open, absolutely, but the real changes haven't happened yet," says Manan, one of Leila's friends (and the only woman who agreed to be photographed), over a cup of mint tea at the Corinthia hotel. "I'm sure they will," she adds hastily. "At least, that's the hope." ●

A view of downtown Tripoli

