

G H A D A M E S

by C. M. Anderson

ND tomorrow you will see Ghadames, said the man—a Libyan Government mechanic—who, three hours before, had rescued us from the sand. He was making a present to us of tomorrow: There had been a few bad moments on that dusty, infamous road from Derj to Ghadames when—our desert truck bogged to its hubs in sand, unable to see to try and dig it out in the stinging sand-storm, and night falling—we might have considered his a gift of dear life itself.

And when you see Ghadames you will forget the road from Derj, he said, adding apologetically, it certainly is not a very good one. No ill-fated caravan straggling in from Timbuctu with half the camels lamed and the other half eaten could have been happier to see the end of it than we!

He sent us on to the hotel accompanied by a guide to lead the way through winding, dimly lit, empty streets guarded by the ghostly-white Fatimate horns leaning over us from the corners of the roof.

By next morning, the wind, that for several days had been blowing strong from the northwest, had blown itself out, and the April morning was clear, sunny, and cool as an Alpine village. . . . an illusion quickly dispelled by our first glimpse in daylight of the city of Ghadames.

An oasis. It is green and lush as a corner in some tropical rain-forest—and this illusion persists: trees, throw cool green shadows over the narrow streets, and their high walls are hung with brilliant blossoming shrubs and vines. Rooftops are shaded by lowering date palms, their fronds, and those of the low-growing palmettes, rustle in the breeze with a sound of rain. Birds in quick flight high in the tree tops throw shadows like arrows to the ground, and fill the air with their cries.

The city is built in much the way a wasp might build it, adding cell to cell, with never a hard line or sharp corner. And its colors are a soft cinnamon-brown, white, and deep green, and appear in endless variations. . . . white mosque against green leaves, earthen plaza with white-washed walls, and the fig-green pool. Ein el Fairs, in whose clear surface is reflected a brown wall with white arches.

The fresh, green beauty—in the Hamada el Hamra, three thousand and five hundred square miles of rock-strewn wasteland—and its unique architecture perhaps account, in part, for its attraction for tourists, a number of whom manage each year to arrive here, despite the difficulty by automobile, and the unpredictable air flight schedule.

But there is another quality, more felt than seen, that lends to it a depth and mystery very appealing to visitors from Tripoli, weary of endless preoccupations with today and a quality of great age, and continuity, the flow of slow unbroken time.

All the people who have gone into the creation of Libya have called Ghadames, at some time, home: thousands of years have passed through Ghadames, and their multitudes of people have left the print of hands.

In the beginning, some five hundred years before the Christian era, were the Garamantes, the early Libyan people whose capital was near Sebha; then came the Romans, whose trade-expansionist Third Augusta Legion made it headquarters for the western region. Then, in the middle of the Seventh Century, the Arabs arrived from the east to whom Ghadames was a city of considerable importance, one of the first to appear on Thirteenth Century Arabic maps of North Africa. In the Sixteenth Century it was the Turks. And all the while, drifting in from the surrounding desert were Berbers, and from the south, Tuaregs.

There are said to be remains of Garamantic settlement somewhere out of town. And there are Roman remains, standing bricks and masonry, shard and a fort. Ras el Gnuul, of broken stone on top of a hill out of which the Arabs routed the Roman defenders by cutting the line to the well. Most of the existing buildings that give the city

its unique flavor were built by the Arabs and Turks.

The people in the streets show evidence of mixed history. . . . ballooning sarawals of the Fezzan, long ashen-looking robes trimmed in braid, the wool turbans, heavily wrapped veil and high turban of the Tuareg, his baracan worn like a poncho and the younger men in dark trousers and white shirts of urban Libya.

But whatever their origins, that ancientst had one thing in common. . . . trade. They were drawn to Ghadames by the overland commerce between the Mediterranean and Central Africa, begun by the Carthaginians, carried on by the Romans (accounting, in good part, for the wealth of Lepcis Magna and Sabratha), continuing on through the Arab domination until the early part of this century.

It was not until the camel was introduced into North Africa, in the Fourth Century, that the caravans could make the fearsome three month's desert march in such size and numbers to reap the enormous profits enjoyed by the Arab merchants, under which Ghadames flourished. Thousand-camel

plodded thousands of desert-miles up from places such as Ghana, Mali, Timbuctu, Gao, Tekeddi, Kano and Lake Chad, through mountain passes of the Hoggar and Tibesti, through desert once more and on to such cities as Agedis, Bilma, Ghat, Muzak, Alghai, Kullm. . . . and Ghadames. They carried to the market of Europe and America the exotics of Africa. . . . ostrich plumes and eggs, ivory, feathers and skins, gold and precious stones. And men, women and children.

Deep in the shadowy tunnels that weave beneath the houses of old Ghadames is a small square, where the sun strikes down from a small patch of sky above the surrounding buildings, now used by local children as a playground, and filled with the sound of their laughter. It was not always so.

This square was the old slave market. Recessed into its walls are archways in three sizes, small, medium and large—suitable, it would appear, for display of men, women and children to prospective buyers. In the centre of the square grows a great mulberry tree, and each spring—the season when slaving was at its height—it drops its dark

red fruit to be crushed on the floor of the old market like stains of inextinguishable blood.

But there are lighter tales of old Ghadames days:

How the spring came to be: in the town's center, enclosed by a high wall, is a round pool, and the sweet water that bubbles into it is said to have sprung up when an Arab warrior's white mare pawed the ground. . . . hence its name, Ein el Fairs, spring of the mare.

How the name, Ghadames, came to be: when the people of Islam first travelled west, some of them around the middle of the Seventh Century A.D., bent southward, and passing through this oasis at midday stopped and took their lunch. Then they travelled on. The next day, encountering only more of the arid fog of Hamada el Hamra they decided to turn back and settle at that pleasing place of yesterday's lunch.

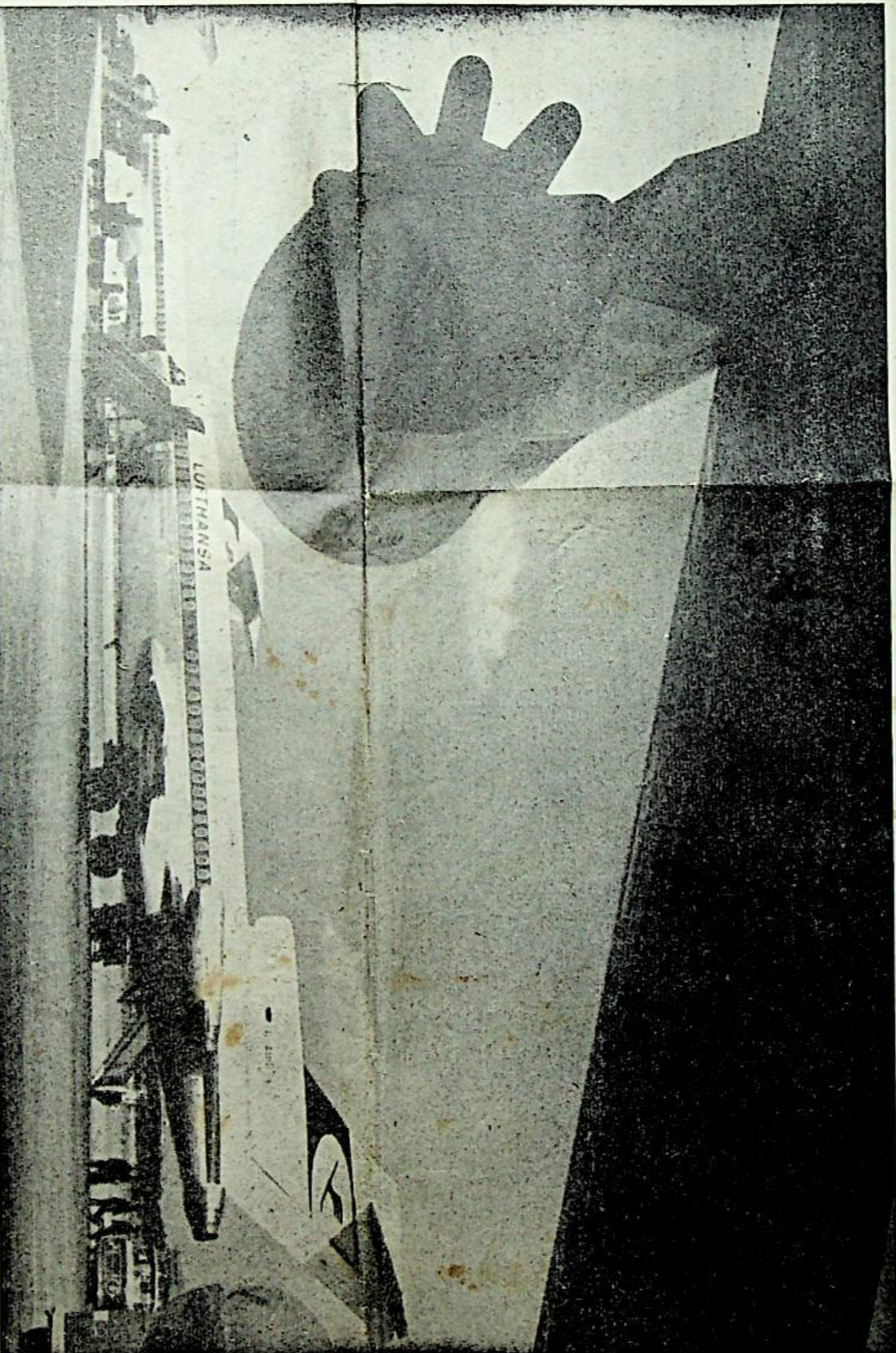
. . . gada (lunch)—ames (yesterday). Ghadames is perhaps most famous for its rooftops, where the women spend their days, and where no man or visitor is allowed. Because there are few disillusioning facts to go on, these rooftops are commonly supposed to be laid out in

gardens, filled with caged songbirds, pavilions to keep off the sun, where the women sing, gossip, and play the lute. . . . then what do they need with all those pots to empty out into drainage sinks in muddy passageways, below?

But its rooftops are the only place Ghadames reserves for the tourist: Tourists are being encouraged to come in the most effective way. By making it possible to come, quickly and easily. In June, KLA is scheduling a three-day-a-week flight from Tripoli. Already there is built a handsome new Ghadames airport—air-conditioning, soft black leather armchairs, a refreshment bar. And vendors are out for a new Nant-Ghadames highway.

And now you have seen Ghadames, said our rescuer, as we prepared to depart, will you come, again?

«Oh, yes,» we answered, and when we do you must promise to rescue us from the sand! We both laughed, knowing that when we did come, again, getting stuck in the sand would be only an amusing incident told of a nostalgic, scarcely credible past.



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