



A picture shows a view of the exterior of dwellings carved into Libya's arid Nafusa mountains, in Gharyan town. — AFP photos



A resident shows a bedroom in a "damous".

LIBYA'S UNDERGROUND HOMES WAIT FOR TOURISM REVIVAL

Gharyan's unique underground houses were hewn into the mountainside centuries ago, and many lie abandoned, but residents of the Libyan town are hoping tourism can help restore their heritage. "My great-great-great-great-grandfather dug this yard 355 years ago," said Al-Arbi Belhaj, who owns one of the oldest houses in the mixed Berber-Arab town south of Tripoli.

His ancestor would have used a "tajouk" pickaxe to chip away at the ground before loading the rubble into a woven date-palm "gouffa" basket to carry it away, he said. Dug deep into the arid Nafusa mountains at around 700 meters (2,300 feet) above sea level, the home would have been protected against the scorching summers that bring temperatures up to 45 degrees Celsius (113 Fahrenheit). It would have also stayed warm throughout the often snowy winters.

The region's bedrock has a consistency that allowed the underground dwelling-known as a damous-to last for centuries without collapsing. Some of the buildings are over 2,300 years old, and ancient Greek historians mentioned their existence, according to historian Youssef Al-Khattali. The area also has burial sites dating back to Phoenician times, he added.

Today, Belhaj says he is the owner of the oldest underground home in Gharyan, a town where many residents have family records and property deeds



These pictures show views of an external yard of a "damous".

dating back centuries. The warren of rooms dug into the rock around the courtyard once housed as many as eight large families, he said. He was the last person to be born there, in 1967. In 1990, like many people seeking more comfortable dwellings with running water and electricity, the family moved out of the home, but they kept ownership of it. Now, Belhaj has renovated it and turned it into a tourist attraction.

'Designed to be versatile'

While late dictator Moamer Kadhafi allowed tourists to visit the country on

organized trips, visitors have been thin on the ground since his fall in a 2011 revolt, which sparked a decade of chaos. But the region's Berber villages have continued to attract domestic tourists, and Belhaj is hoping that a return to relative stability could open the door to more visitors from Europe and elsewhere. He charges an entry fee equivalent to a dollar for Libyans, or two for foreigners.

While some come for a cup of tea and to explore the building, others stay for lunch or spend the entire day there. Damous structures were once common across a stretch of western Libya and



eastern Tunisia-the other side of a border only drawn up in 1886. "The same tribes extend from Nalut to Gabes," said historian Khattali, referring to towns on the Libyan and Tunisian sides. Their sites were carefully chosen and the buildings painstakingly excavated by hand to avoid them collapsing in the process.

In 1936, they attracted the attention of colonial power Italy, featuring in a tourist guide. And they were not just used as homes. "First of all, there were underground dwellings for humans and their animals, then buildings intended as places of worship," Khattali said, referring

to synagogues and churches that were mostly later converted to mosques. Some were also used as defenses, he said. "You can still make out the traces of fortifications in certain parts of the mountain, including the remains of watchtowers." The buildings "were designed to be versatile, and they've stood the test of time," Khattali said. "That's why they're so important in the history of Libyan architecture."—AFP



A picture shows a view of an external yard of a "damous".



These pictures show views of the interior of a "damous".



Egyptians see red over Zionist-run dance festivals in Sinai

Zionist-organized twin dance festivals in the Sinai have sparked outrage in Egypt as they come just days before the anniversary of the end of the Jewish state's occupation of the peninsula. The Nabia and Grounded festivals, which coincide with the Jewish Passover holiday, also come as Muslims observe a daytime fast during the holy month of Ramadan.

The festivals follow events in which more than 150 Palestinian worshippers were injured on Friday in clashes with Zionist security forces in the Al-Aqsa mosque compound in Jerusalem. The Egyptian branch of the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement, which opposes Zionist's occupation of Palestinian territories, has called for a boycott of the festival's venues.

"As we do every year, we were preparing to celebrate... the stories of the heroic resistance but we discovered that the Zionist occupation was returning to the Sinai," the branch said in a statement Wednesday. The Nabia festival is due to run from April 17 to 20; the Grounded fes-

tival from April 20 to 23. Both offer all-night dancing with an international lineup of artists.

April 25 is the anniversary of Zionist's withdrawal from most of the Sinai in 1982 under a landmark 1979 peace agreement, ending an occupation which began during the Six-Day War of 1967. Egyptian Facebook user Farah Mourad complained that the festivals are taking place ahead of "Sinai Liberation Day... and during the holy month of Ramadan".

She also pointed to the recent clashes at the Al-Aqsa mosque compound, saying Zionist forces had attacked Palestinian civilians. The music scene has become a major draw for Zionist tourists visiting the south coast of the Sinai Peninsula, along with its beaches, dive sites and low costs compared to Zionist entity.

In 2019, before the coronavirus pandemic hit international travel, more than 700,000 Zionists visited Egypt, according to the embassy in Cairo, the great majority of them heading to the relative security of southern Sinai. Direct flights between Tel Aviv and the Sinai resort of Sharm El-Sheikh are to start on Sunday, making the region's resorts even more attractive to Zionists.

The flights were one of the fruits of a September visit to Egypt by Zionist Prime Minister Naftali Bennett, the first by a Zionist premier in a decade. "This agreement will bring Zionist entity and Egypt closer together," Bennett said last month. — AFP



Muslims gather along a street-long table for break their Ramadan fast together in a mass "iftar" meal on the 15th day of the Muslim holy month of Ramadan in the Matariya suburb in the northeast of Egypt's capital Cairo on April 16, 2022. — AFP