

Tripoli cafes offer Libyans taste of normality

Weaving between tables at a seaside restaurant in Libya's capital bearing freshly baked rosemary bread, Abdelmuttaleb Twigiri shuttles between the wood-fired oven and his customers in a blur of hospitality.



Tripoli, Libya

It's the opening night of his brainchild Toucan, a Mediterranean 'fusion' eatery that Twigiri hopes will give residents of once-bustling Tripoli a rare taste of normality amid political chaos.

"If I think of a government that could provide everything I need, I'd risk waiting a very long time," the 46-year-old tells AFP. "It's only thanks to the people that life goes on."

The North African nation has been mired in unrest since the 2011 NATO-backed ouster of longtime dictator Moamer Kadhafi, with militants fighting for power and a piece of Libya's vast oil reserves.

A militia alliance swept into the capital in August 2014, setting up its own parliament and forcing the internationally recognised administration to flee to the remote east.

Although a new, UN-backed unity government has gradually asserted its authority in the capital, Tripoli residents have grown used to fending for themselves.

It is in keeping with Tripolitans' do-it-yourself spirit that Twigiri created Toucan. "There are enough people in distress," he says. "But now we want to live."

His establishment is one of several cafes and restaurants to spring up in the past three months along a 15-kilometre (nine-mile) stretch of road linking several neighbourhoods in western Tripoli. They are braving an economic crisis marked by a dramatic cut in oil revenues, spiralling living costs, late wages and a recent liquidity shortage.

Safety and investment

Entrepreneurs hope the unity government can calm some of the chaos befalling Libya, particularly security in a country that is increasingly a haven for extremists including the Islamic State group.

"Once people feel safe, they invest," explains Abdelqader al-Kanuni, president of a local charitable fund.

Tripoli remains dogged by sporadic violence but even a near-total breakdown of daily routine has failed to sap one passion all of its residents agree on: a love of coffee. Libyans drink the stuff "morning, noon and night," according to Mohamad Aguli, who two months ago opened his Harley Davidson Cafe on Tripoli's western fringe.

Coffee is often imported from former colonial power Italy along with clean, modern machines with which to make it. In straitened times such as these, import costs could impair Libyans' coffee intake, but Aguli says there are still cafes to suit every pocket.

Nevertheless, he is fully aware of the economic and security risks involved in the business. "You need to have courage," he says in his coffee shop, which each afternoon is flanked by several chrome motorcycles that give the spot its name. "You have to throw yourself out there. Then it's make or break."

In the family section of Cafe Veranda, a renowned patisserie, which despite the odds has maintained its reputation after its Italian chef fled in 2011, immaculately manicured cousins Hind, Mira and Lamaan struggle to make themselves heard above the hubbub.

"Pastimes are limited" in Tripoli, says Mira, a 23-year-old pharmacy student. "There are cafes, hours spent on Facebook, or both at the same time."

Hind, 25, says the capital's cafes and restaurants are a good way of giving them "the feeling" of a social life. "If they are open then everything is fine. Even during bombings or economic crises, people will always drink coffee."

For Twigiri, whose restaurant looks out over date palms planted to replace a wall built by Gadhafi's sons to block access to the beach, Tripoli's cafe culture is a symbol of a people unbowed by turmoil. "Tripolitans bend - they don't break," he says.

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