

## Magic in the Medina

By Alia Al-Senussi.

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El Khan Hotel

I suppose my own misconceptions got in the way; I walked by the gleaming white walls, two perfect potted plants and the sign that read simply “fine dining” and thought nothing more of it. Not until my recent trip to Libya, to speak at the *Libya Summit* conference, did I step in to the magical hotel and restaurant *El Khan*.

My father had been telling me about this special place for months, but I couldn’t quite fathom it. I also knew not to be silly enough to attempt to find it on my own, what with all the windy allies, vague directions and murmured finger-pointing.

So finally, on my *final* night my father walked us to the El Khan and deposited us at this place that appeared like an oasis in the middle of the old town. It was a classic post-revolutionary dinner, like in the novels of yore: I was accompanied by an old friend, a visiting banker looking for adventure and knowledge for future investments, along with a journalist heading up a local office for an international news agency and a technology and defense specialist from the Levant—you couldn’t have made it up if you tried!



Interior of the hotel

There are hardly words to describe how beautiful, elegant and simply perfect El Khan is. It is not just that one doesn't expect to find this place in Tripoli but that one doesn't expect to find this place at all. El Khan has almost a mystical quality about it with wrought iron Moroccan-style lamps emitting strange light figures, the plush cushions strewn about the smooth floors and the ornate Kufic script decorating the walls.

The proprietor, Mr. Aref Salim, is a modest man who revels in Libyan history. He is an expert on the Romans, the Greeks and even the Phoenicians. It is he who was the sole designer and the interior competes with those of Jacques Garcia or Jacques Grange! He asked me my name, and my middle names, and then proceeded to regale us all with fabulous stories of my family history. He had known my grandfather and told me extraordinary tales of life in the 1950s and 60s, of glamorous Libya, of a time almost forgotten. I had heard some of these stories but hearing them from a stranger, yet with such an intimate understanding of my family, made them all the more real.

El Khan is special in its own right, but perhaps what makes it stand apart is that it is a sanctuary amidst the madness. The medina of Tripoli is charming, in fact it is exactly what one thinks of for an "old town": full of dusty pedestrian alleys, dark corners, unassuming stalls selling their wares, workshops, gold and silver, boys kicking around pseudo-footballs, and yes, pockets of trash and poverty, but with glimmers of hope—you see them on the walls.



Graffiti in Tripoli

The graffiti that covers the walls of Tripoli, and Benghazi, is a testament to the possibilities in those streets. I am a recent convert to street art *aka* graffiti. *Art in the Streets* at the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art taught me a lot, but most of all it demonstrated to me the simple power of art in the streets.

I saw this first-hand in Tripoli and Benghazi when I was there in 2011 and am even more amazed by these enduring images upon my return visits—the paint that never seems to fade, the graffiti that no one erases. Is it art, is it political expression, or is it both?

I moderated a panel at [Art Basel](#) in [Miami Beach](#) and this past December asking just that question, and had the pleasure of hearing firsthand from JR, one of the most well-known artists practicing this genre. His enthusiasm was infectious and his passion for taking his art to unexpected places like Afghanistan, Gaza and Israel, and freshly-liberated Tunisia was apparent to us all, panelists and audience alike.

Tala Saleh described her experiences with the fascinating political graffiti of Beirut and Bomi Odufunade of the Museum of Everything put everything in context by describing the artists that have been marginalized by society but are making their cultural contribution nonetheless.

Most of Libya's artists have had the feeling of a similar marginalization with no formal art training or education, and living much of their lives with little freedom of action or voice. Some of these artists, and civilians, have made themselves heard at the first possible opportunity and with the streets as their canvas. Libya's street art was a revelation for me. El Khan restaurant and hotel is a work of art also, elegant and mysterious, posited amongst the graffiti, amongst the living, breathing heart of the city.

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