All in all, I stayed, lived, worked, suffered and enjoyed a period of three years in the Libyan desert. It was a period with many ups and downs, but always extremely interesting.
I didn't keep a diary when I stayed in Libya, so everything you read below are stories I recall from memory. I may have forgotten some details, names, dates and places, but in general what I write should be pretty accurate. The story I write is is not fiction. Everything is a true description of events that actually happened.

Some constants are always present when staying in the desert. One is that it can be really very hot over there and there is always wind. And the funny thing about where we stayed is that from whatever direction the wind came, it was always hot desert wind.
During those three years we had rain twice. The first time was kind of a drizzle that lasted for a day or two. The second time we had real rain. For a day.
Sometimes you can read statements that there are no clouds in the desert. This is not completely true. We often could see clouds passing by, but alas, if they carried rain, that rain was not for us. But indeed, most days were cloudless. And one good thing coming from that was nighttime. Since we were far away from anything or anyone, there was no light pollution. The number of stars we could see at night was impressive. We even learned how to recognize satellites as they flew over. They we visible without any optical aides, though nowadays I would need glasses to see them.

Saying that life in the desert is always fun is an outright lie. I have seen people getting very depressed, at the brink of insanity even. What you need to know is that we always were located far away from any significant town and even in these towns or villages, there was practically nothing. If you plan to go to the desert for entertainment then you better change your plans. Whatever entertainment there is, it often is at the expense of suffering of others.
If on the other hand you like solitude then the desert is most definitely the place to go for you. But mind you, the stories of oasis suddenly popping up out of nowhere are just too idyllic to be true. The harsh truth of the desert is that if you don't have a steady water supply one way or another, you die.

The interesting part was the wildlife. If you looked carefully you could, even in the sand dunes, discover these little insects that looked like a crossover between spiders and scorpions. I still don't know what they were, but they were very fast. We could never get close enough to get a good look at them.
The desert people let their camels (dromedaries actually) out in the desert to roam around and try to survive on their own. We occasionally encountered them. There was a kind of gazelle too. We once could catch one by hand because they don't know people and thus didn't run away from us. The same with desert rats. They don't look like the rats we know over here, more like a guinea pig with a long tail and long hind legs. They would approach us and we could hand feed them.
The most remarkable moment was when a swarm of some species of swallows were passing by. I held out my finger and one landed on it and another one on top of my hat. They too were not afraid of people.
Somewhat less cute animals were the snakes. They are anywhere in the

desert all right, but spread very scarcely so in normal circumstances you won't see snakes too often in the desert. That changed when we arrived there and produced a lot of household refuse. This attracted the snakes from kilometers around. Most of them were horned vipers. Quite poisonous it seems, but not aggressive. The little guy from Mauritania who was in charge of our laundry showed me how to catch them. He just wore flip-flops at his feet as he approached such a snake. So, he explained to me, you just have to put your foot on them, right behind the head and then you can take them. And before I could stop him, he did so. He told me it was important not to step on the tail, which I believed so too. And we attracted many of those snakes. They were anywhere in our camp. It was particularly tricky if you had to go out in the dark. Very dangerous to do so without carrying a torchlight, as the snakes could be anywhere and as the Mauritanian boy said, it was better not to step on their tail. And there was another species of snake too, but it was very slender and very fast. I don't know if those were venomous or not. I know they were there because once I entered a large tent where I kept supplies and I wanted to pick up a piece of copper tube. When my hand was centimeters away from the "tube", it moved and slid away at high speed.
Occasionally we had some kind of lizard visiting us too. And apparently there were scorpions too, but I never saw one. Some of the laborers got stung by them, so they said, so I have to believe we had scorpions too.
But I cannot remember ever seeing a spider in the desert. So, it was paradise for arachnophobiacs.

The story happened between July 1977 and July 1980. For those who can't imagine how it was to live in those days I can tell you there was no internet, no PCs and no cell phones. We only had landlines and a telex if we were lucky. International calls could only be made from a post office and had to go through an operator. And that post office would be in the nearest town which was most of the time about 65 km away from us. And these 65 kms were desert. We were there to build the road.
Photocopiers were available, but the process had more in common with developing a film than what we can do now. Where we stayed, there was nothing but us. No shops, no doctor, no post office, no nothing. If we wanted to send a message to our friends and relatives in Europe we could give a letter to someone who happened to travel to Sebha, a four hour drive. There was a post office and we held a PO box there. All replies we got, if any, would end up in that PO box and then brought to us by someone who happened to travel our way. It typically took three weeks to get a letter to Europe and another three weeks to get a reply. By the time we received the reply we mostly had forgotten already what we had written to begin with.

I wish I could say we always had a joyful time over there, but that would be untrue. It was harsh living there, with very little comfort and very little to do but working.
Not that it was bad all the time. Luckily we had some fun too, but sarcasm was never far away. Sarcasm became part of of our life. And I guess it stayed with us for the rest of our lives.

There are some places which recur often in this story. If you're not familiar with Libyan geography then the list below might be of some use.

Tripoli (طرابلس)

Also known locally as Tarabulus.
Capital city of Libya.
The company had an office there at the outskirts of the town, near the medical center headquarters. I systematically got lost when trying to navigate to that office.

Sebha (سبها)

A small desert town, also known as Sabha. There too we had an office, which served as a base for arrivals from Tripoli, before continuing to the work site itself.
Sebha is located at about 780 km from Tripoli.
Sebha had an airfield. The most common planes to land there were the Boeing 727 and the Fokker F27, both operated by Libyan Airways.

Ubari (أوباري)

Also known locally as Awbari (it's just a matter to find a way to write it so as to get the correct pronunciation)
A small desert town, famous for its nearby sand dunes and oasis with a lake. We never went to visit the oasis itself because at the time it was not known to us that there was an oasis with a lake. No Google Maps and the like back then.
This is where the existing asphalted road, coming from Sebha, ended and where we were supposed to start building a new road to Ghat.
Ubari is located at about 200 km from Sebha. It takes between 2.5 and 3 hours to drive the stretch by car.
At the time, there was no airport at Ubari. It could only be reached overland.

KM 65
This was where we set up our second camp. The spot was at 65 km from Ubari. There was nothing and nobody but us. And of course no road because we were there to build the road. We had to be completely self-sufficient there. Most of the time we were in Libya we camped at KM65.
Check it on Google Maps at these coordinates: N 26.423139, E 12.185327

Serdales (العوينات)

Also know locally as Laowinat, or Awaynat.
Located at about 250 km from Ubari.
This village was where we set up our first camp. We stayed there for about 6 months, after which we moved to KM65.
We rented a villa at Serdales for a while, whilst waiting there for our gear to arrive and the camp being set up.
Serdales is located at an altitude of about 750 meter. It was hot during the

summer (temperatures of 50°C and more) and cold in the winter, when the maximum temperature in the afternoon was typically not more than 35 °C. In wintertime it could occasionally freeze at around 8 o'clock in the morning.

Ghat (غات)

Also known locally as Raht.
This small desert town near the Algerian border was the end point of the road, at 365 km from Ubari and 125 km from Serdales.

July 1977

I have a job as a mechanic in a production plant of clay pipes. It is not out of curiosity that I do this job but a neighbor informed me some two years ago that I could apply for a job at that factory. It suited a bit better than the job I was doing back then as a laborer. First in a chemical plant where cadmium was won as a byproduct of zinc production, and later again in another factory as a laborer in a plastic producing plant that made high density polyethylene granulate. It kept me busy and I got some money from it. Enough to get drunk in the weekends.

This new job, at the vitrified clay pipe factory, was a bit more in line with what I studied for. I was kind of a mechanical engineer and the job offered required a bit more thinking and initiative from my part. I also earned some more money. Not that I needed lots of money. I was young and not married. Not even a girlfriend. Living with my mom in Hotel Mama provided for most, if not all my needs. Convenient and not too far away from the job.

After a couple of years in the clay pipe factory, rumor spread that the brother of the one I worked for joined a consortium with five other companies. The brother ran a road building company. I knew nothing whatsoever of road building, but I was a fast learner. And besides, they didn't need all staff to be road building specialists. A good, solid base of mechanics and electricity was enough to get me a job in this consortium. That and the fact that the person who made sure I got the job at the clay pipe factory to start with, also made sure that I got the job at the road building consortium. Thank you my friend.

I was keen on working abroad. One motivation was a feud I had some years before with a guy from the town hall. At that time, there still was conscription for military service in Belgium. My older brother was drafted and he did well. He got an attestation of "good soldier" at the end of his service simply because he was the only one eating his soldier's emergency ration during a multiple day exercise. He told me later he ate the stuff only because he was hungry and then got awarded for that. No wonder the Germans got in so easy twice.
My younger brother wouldn't have to go because I had to go. We were with five, my mother and four kids. The eldest was my sister so she wouldn't be drafted anyway. Funny detail is that later on she sought and found a job at the Belgian air force. And she found herself a husband there too.
Since my father died when I was about one year old and my mom raised the four of us all by herself, I figured it was unjust that I too had to join the army. We just finished our studies so it was time for us to finally earn some money. The army was also a problem for me because I don't go well with authority. And yet another and more important reason was that conscripts didn't get any pay, apart from some pocket money to spend in the camp's bar. So I discussed and tried to persuade the town hall official who was responsible for the drafting to skip me. One of our family at the army was enough, we badly needed some income after all.
The guy was for some reason, not clear to me, of ill will. He got angry and

answered my plea with the words that he would make sure I was going to be drafted. And then, of course, my reply to him was that I would make sure I wasn't going to go.

Early 1977 I received a letter from the army that I had to present myself at the drafting center for a medical, a psychological and a cognitive test. It used to take them three days for that but luckily by the time I had to go they figured out themselves that they could do the job just as well in one day.
Off I went. One day in the army wasn't too bad I reckoned. I had to take the train to Brussels and a train ticket was included with the letter they sent. At least that part was well organized. Also included were instructions on how to proceed from the Brussels South Railway Station to the drafting center. Seemed pretty straightforward to me. Get on the train near my place, get off at Brussels South and then walk to the drafting center. Piece of cake.
I checked what train I needed to take to arrive there in time. The 5:45 one would do. But hey, 5:45 that is about the middle of the night. A train later would have to do too. Too bad if I would be late. So, I arrived at Brussels South with about an hour delay. I took out the description of the way to follow. It said that I was to proceed to the exit and then turn left.
The idiots forgot to mention there are two exits. So I turned to the exit nearest to me and turned left. After walking for about fifteen minutes the description didn't correspond with the surroundings anymore. Damn, I went the wrong way. Not my fault I reasoned. But the clock was ticking and I was already an hour late now, so I decided to take a taxi. Taxi drivers know their way around and indeed, the man neatly dropped me off in front of the main entrance of the drafting center.

I walked through the gate and at my right was some kind of office where several people in uniform were going through long lists of names. They were doing a head count and I was quite sure they were missing at least one conscript. That is what the army does. Head count. Be prepared for times of war where you really want to count the number of your subordinates available. It's not a good idea for an officer to go to war and then realize that you're there just by yourself and have to do the fighting on your own.
So, with a big smile on my face I entered the room and showed them the letter I received. One of the guys behind the desk immediately started shouting at me, kind of the same style you see doing the drill sergeants in boot camps. I guess this was the army attitude and this specimen clearly did not know how to address civilians or perhaps this was just his way of welcoming new recruits. I didn't feel like being shouted at as a greeting, so I turned around an started walking out of the office without saying a word.
What happened next was something that went so fast that it is hard to imagine. Before I knew well what was going on, two of the other guys in the office jumped over the table and grabbed my by the arms. The one to my right was friendly and could utter words without shouting. He even sounded nice to me, so I decided to wait and listen to that one to hear what he had to say. This man even excused himself for his colleague's weird (hostile would perhaps suit better) welcome and he said that never mind, he'll try to fit me in for that day, which he figured would be possible after all. So, I had no idea what I missed during the hours I wasn't there. Clearly a waste of time, so I was glad

for being late.
This was the only day in my life I served in the army.

Then came the consortium.
I already knew which day I had to present myself at an army base in Belgium to be transformed into a warmonger. That day came closer at a very fast pace. In the mean time, I was hired by the company that would build the road in Libya and had my visa already. I was ready to leave and forget about the army and my mom. On the other hand though, I was sure neither my mom nor the army would forget about me. The latter was kind of an issue that still needed to be solved. Worries for later. And I still could write letters to my mom if I felt the need for it.

On a sunny afternoon on the first of July we left by plane to France. Destination Paris Charles De Gaulle airport. We had flights booked on UTA, a now defunct French airline, but they couldn't fly us that same day to Tripoli. We had to stay overnight at an airport hotel. The name of the hotel was Jacques Borel Sofitel. At that time I had absolutely no idea who or what was Jacques Borel, but the hotel was very nice and comfy and after diner we slept like roses and got up in time to catch our flight to Tripoli.
And by the way, Jacques Borel is a French writer. Famous enough, in France anyway, to name a hotel after him.

The flight time from Paris to Tripoli, or Tarabulus as the town is known locally, takes about three and half hours. The flight goes all over France and then over the Mediterranean. You don't get to see the desert. Just France from above and water. Also from above.
In those days, the Tripoli airport wasn't much of anything. One could walk in and out of the terminal building without any security check. The terminal building was just a small departure and arrival hall and each hall could fit about 150 people maximum.
We had to open our luggage upon arrival for inspection. No x-ray machines back then to scan the luggage and surely no sniffing dogs. Libyans in general were not very fond of dogs anyway. The customs were looking for any kind of contraband, ranging from sex magazines to liquor and all things in between they might deem illegal at the time. I once tried to enter the country with a small bottle of Johnny Walker (Black label), but the customs agent very soon felt the neck of the bottle in the inner pocket of my jacket. Lack of experience from my side and too much experience from his side I guess. My friend had told me how to do it and he could get away with it. Not me.
I had to follow the officer to his office and he just told me to give him the bottle. No need to pretend this time, so I reached in my pocket and handed him over the bottle. He then looked very stern. I don't know whether it was that he didn't like the brand or that he was truly upset with my smuggling attempt. Probably the latter. He then proclaimed that he had to put me in jail for this offence. This is the point where one needs to start discussing things. I carefully explained to him that this tiny small bottle of 20 cl was my ration for the coming twelve weeks and that it would not be sufficient to get me drunk for even one evening. It took some convincing and a pitiful face from my part. But mostly the fact that he seemed to like the idea that if he didn't put me in jail, he wouldn't have to do any paperwork and would be able to keep the bottle for himself did the trick. After half an hour of exchanging the necessary courtesy

formulas and promising I would never do this again I was free to go. No papers signed, no proof that anything was confiscated. Since he seemed genuinely upset with my felony I kind of expected him to smash the bottle on the concrete floor in a wave of disgust. But no, the bottle was gently placed in one of the drawers of his desk and I even could notice a faint smile on his face, but I swear, only for a fraction of a second, not any longer.

Tripoli was a busy, bustling city, full of live and activities of all kinds. Plenty of soldiers everywhere on the streets though. And often they were women soldiers wearing these tight trousers. I kind of liked that sight. It gave me a sense of safety. Yes, they often were armed, but believe me, they looked good. Not threatening at all. And I always wondered if they were part of the Qaddafi bodyguard team, which was, as we all know, exclusively composed of women.
A certain colonel Qaddafi was running the show in Libya. Theoretically, it were the people's committees that made the decisions and ran the country, but in practice they just had to do and say what the great leader ordered. For most Libyans life was bearable, but in general they were not extremely happy neither. Moammar AL-Qaddafi's portrait was omnipresent in the streetscape. Even in the smallest hamlets. You just couldn't miss who was in charge. Moammar also wrote down his ideas in three small booklets. Another illustrious leader in China had done the same some time before him, with some success, so Moammar decided he needed a Libyan equivalent too. Mao's booklet was known as the Red Book, but that color didn't suit Moammar and he went for green. His own Green Book, three parts. Of course I have all three. Somewhere in the attic I think. They must be collector's items by now. The Green Book never became as popular as the Red Book, but carrying it around in your back pocket, the top of it slightly visible, was kind of a signal to the army and police officers to just don't bother you. I've never known if this was truly a fact, but fact is that I was never stopped by police or army whilst strolling in Tripoli with the book in my back pocket.

Libya was and still is an Islamic country. When you travel to the country you are to follow the laws of the country and many of those laws are in tight relation with Islam rules and customs. Being a foreigner and a non-believer you are mostly not bothered by that, as long as you respect the law. And the law does not stipulate that you have to be a believer nor that you have to visit the mosque every Friday.
What does strike in the beginning of your stay in Libya, as in most other Islamic countries, is the call for prayer 5 times a day. In the days of the prophet there were no electronic amplifiers or loudspeakers. These were relatively recently introduced in the mosques. Some die-hard imams still climb the minaret to call for prayer by means of a chant. The human voice, especially when sounding from the top of a tower can carry quite a distance. But imams do get older and climbing these narrow stairs 5 times a day can be a cumbersome task. So, embracing modern technology can make life a bit more easy for some. And an extra advantage is that one can place four loudspeakers on top of the minaret and direct them to the four quarters of the compass. And, of course, the loudspeakers carry the human voice over much greater distances, thus reaching more people.

It would be unjust to say that this call for prayer is an unwanted intrusion in the lives of the people. For the vast majority it is not. They do want to pray 5 times a day and then someone calling them for prayer is more convenient than having to set your alarm clock. And besides, the prayer times vary slightly every day as they are linked to sunrise and sunset. The imam knows, so rely on him.
Now, I have heard many imams chanting in many different countries and often they are not very talented. They do their job, but it is not uncommon that there is a lack of emotional connection between their duty as a caller for prayer and the way they perform this call. It often sounds like an automatism without a soul.
There was one notable exception though and that was the imam of the main mosque in Tripoli. Really, hearing this man sing the words calling the believers for prayer was a pleasure for the ear. I truly enjoyed listening to the man, especially early in the morning, when everything was still quiet outside. When he sang I woke up with joy and intensely listened to his chant. It made me feel a lot more sympathy towards Islam. I could describe it as pure joy.
Since that imam was active over 40 years ago now, I can only presume he's retired now, but I do hope he might be still chanting with his beautiful voice for the people of Tripoli.
Allah is great, there is only one god and Mohammed is his prophet.

The city center of Tripoli is rather pleasant. It is also the historical center. And one square in particular, Maydan Alshuhada' or Martyrs' Square is very interesting and definitely worth a visit. Moammar also realized this and he wanted to emphasize his teachings by painting this square in green. No idea how many liters of paint this may have cost, but green it was.
In Qaddafi's last days he was parading on foot on that square carrying an open umbrella over his head to protect him from? I don't know from what because he was there after sunset that day and it didn't rain. He smiled as he looked around, but it all seemed a bit clownish to me. His days as a man who knew what he was doing (more or less) were long gone by then.

And as in every Arab city there were several souks in Tripoli.
Now, I do tend to get lost in cities. Any city for that matter. So I don't recall where exactly the souk was located that I used to visit. It was not overcrowded with tourists. No, in fact there were very few tourists in Libya. So, visiting that souk was more an exercise in mingling with the locals. Once I found a small shop in the souk with a stone urn outside, filled with what looked like ancient coins. I looked a bit closer at them and indeed, they seemed to be old Roman coins. The shop owner assured me that they were all copies, so no looting involved. And since they were all copper coins I felt like having to buy a handful of them. Still have them somewhere. Genuinely certified copies.
The Romans did have settlements in Libya in their days. Some significant remnants were still standing in my days and could be visited. The two nearest to Tripoli were Sabratah and Leptis Magna. Sabratah was about 65 km west of Tripoli and nearest to it. Leptis Magna was about 100 km east. So, we visited Sabratah. Perhaps a good choice because it was open to visitors but there hardly were any. This place is also where I discovered how the public toilets in an ancient Roman city were organized. Very instructive. It was a

circular building, offering seats at the outer rim to about a dozen of visitors in dire needs. One could sit there hand in hand and enjoy. I don't know if they actually did. The sign with some brief explanation on it informed us that they had no toilet paper but used sponges instead to wipe their bottoms. No specification if the sponges were for single use only or had to be reused by the next customer as is. Or perhaps it was a BYO, who knows.
It is clear that the place was conceived as a meeting place, as the users were sitting side by side, butt against butt, doing their thing. And probably chatting about how rough life could be and complaining about too much salt in today's soup and other critical or trivial things. What can one discuss about whilst being seated on the loo anyway? I could and still can vividly imagine how it must have been going in there.

After arriving in Tripoli non of us really knew what we were supposed to do then. We later found out that this was a structural error in the organization and that this disorganization was endemic to the company and the country. I got used to it and even started enjoying it because it offered me lots of freedom. We were lodged at the Beach Hotel, not surprisingly conveniently located near the beach. Not much to do there but eat, drink and sleep. The drinking part consisted of non-alcoholic beverages and the eating part was limited to what was available in the country. Mostly pasta dishes of all sorts. And the sleeping part meant that we were lodged in rooms with each four beds. Cleanliness was an issue. The rooms were cleaned by the staff all right, but it was clear that we weren't staying in the suites, so a daily quick swipe with a broom was about it. One night I was awaken by something crawling over me. It was dark in the room so I couldn't see what it was, but I figured it had to be a cockroach. There were plenty of cockroaches all over the place and our room was no exception. I was able to grab the unwanted intruder and then decided that others should have some fun too, so I threw it on the guy in the bed next to me. I slept well for the rest of the night.

That first month in Libya we filled our days with doing nothing or else pretending to do something useless. It was kind of boring, especially since our hotel was not within walking distance of the city. We could go to the beach or take a stroll on the dike. Which was fun at times, since the weather was good most of the time. And we could meet and talk to other victims who were stuck there. We learned a lot this way. Mostly those things that were not allowed and how to escape detection if you felt like going for it anyway. It served us well later on in the desert.

After a couple of weeks it was decided that we should visit the ending place of the road. A small desert town called Ghat. The locals there called it Rath. Why is there nearly always a discrepancy between how we call a place and how it is called locally? Tripoli is actually Tarabulus and Bangkok is in fact called locally
Krungthepmahanakhonamonrattanakosinmahintharayutthayamahadilokphopnoppharatratchathaniburiromudomratchaniwetmahasathanamonphimanawatansathitsakkathattiyawitsanukamprasit. Now, I can understand why we prefer to call it Bangkok, but nevertheless, the Thai refer to their capital city as Krung Thep, as most locals don't know the full name of the city either. So, there is

some logic there to give it another short name. To ease thing up somewhat, we foreigners go for Bangkok and the locals go for Krung Thep.

From Tripoli to Ghat is about 930 km, as the crow flies (or any other bird for that matter), so most convenient was to fly over there. By car it would take us two days to get there.
There was a landing strip in Ghat and really, it was nothing more than that. The runway was a dirt track that was somewhat leveled and with most potholes filled. The vice minister of transportation decided it was a nice trip for him too, so he joined us. I guess he had some relatives living there, so the opportunity suited him. All the chiefs of the consortium were joined in too. We chartered a plane, a Fokker F20, which was just fine to get the job done and after a two-hours flight we safely made it to Ghat. I still don't know why we went there. Apart from being invited by the mayor of the town for a really delicious couscous and walking around a bit in the town, we did nothing there. Again this was characteristic to the whole enterprise. I guess we went there to inform the locals that the road would arrive and end at their place and so brace yourselves. Later on it turned out that things were processed a bit slower as initially anticipated.

When back in Tripoli I asked the headman of the consortium for a private talk and explained him that I was in the process of becoming a deserter in the coming weeks. His reaction was laconic. He just told me that oh, if it's only that what is bothering you. Not to worry, he would take care of it in a wink. It turned out that his company worked exclusively for the Belgian army and that all people working for him were ex-military, ranging from captains to generals and everything in between.
A couple of days after he had returned to Belgium, my mother (thank god we all have a mother) received a very kind letter from the army, explaining her in detail which forms (included with the letter, yes) she had to fill out and what to write where and I would be registered as being a volunteer providing developing aid to Rwandan personnel in Libya. Never saw a single Rwandan during my entire stay in Libya, but apparently that was just a minor detail. Important was that the paper work was done and I had to register at the Belgian embassy in Tripoli and declare my volunteer status in Libya and then make sure that I stayed at least 24 months in Libya over a period of three years. I can already tell you now that I made it, to the day. So I am officially not a deserter and I won from the prick at the town hall in Belgium.

August 1977

By the end of July we all felt it was time to move and get settled a bit closer to the workplace.
The general administrator, something equivalent to a present day CEO, had arranged an office in a town called Sebha. One might assume to meet the queen over there, but not so. It is Sebha, not Sheba. The queen is to be found in Sheba. Wherever that might be.
In fact, the general administrator didn't find that office all by himself. No, one of the site engineers had been working the years before in Libya and the company he used to work for rented that place before us, so it was actually a piece of cake to arrange the deal. No need to boast about it.
The office was in fact a completely walled villa, with a garden in which grew nothing but some stubborn weeds that refused to get killed by sunburn.
The villa kind of resembled a walled fortress. One single entrance and a three meters high wall around it. The building itself had a flat paved roof and I used at times to sleep there because inside the house it could be way too hot at night. In the summer, temperatures rarely dropped below 30°C at night, so sleeping under the open sky, watching the stars and satellites pass by was kind of a relief.
But sleeping in open air had at times some drawbacks too. If the wind came up at night it carried lots of sand with it and that sand entered every cavity of your body. Those were difficult moments in the morning to get rid of the sand and clean yourself a bit up.

No flying this time. We drove there by car. It's a 770 km drive and, Allah willing, takes 9 hours to cover. I'd say that if there weren't any potholes on the way, we probably might have made it in 9 hours. Luckily, the French site engineer knew better and we left early in the morning, so we arrived just before dusk in Sebha.
Driving a car during high summer in the Sahara is quite an experience. What we didn't know, but very soon found out, were two things. First was that driving with the windows open was not a good idea. The hot desert air that came inside that way was just too hot to bear. The only option was to drive with the windows closed.
And a second thing we also found out was that the airco was not sized to cope with temperatures of over 45°C (and probably higher than that at times). So we were kind of stuck in e dilemma: get cooked inside the car by the hot desert wind coming in through the open windows or get cooked inside the car because of an undersized airco.
We did get cooked that day, I can assure you.
But mind you, while we at first wondered why they didn't put more potent aircos in the cars there, we noticed that after spending a year or so in the desert, one got used to the high temperatures. By then we could drive happily with the windows wide open, arm outside and forget about the airco. Just showing of like being cool. That was one way to distinguish newcomers from long term residents. Besides, the aircos fell out after a couple of months because of the potholes in the roads. They just got shaken into pieces with every bump in the road. And bumps there were plenty. And they could be gigantic.

The road between Tripoli and Sebha was asphalted. Well, mostly that is. Sometimes there were bits and pieces of asphalt around the potholes. One had to be very careful and selective to pick the right path to circumvent the potholes so as to pass with the least of damage possible without stopping the car all together.
One day my roommate came back from a leave in Belgium and was asked to drive a small Nissan truck from Tripoli back to our camp in the desert. My mate was not known for treating the vehicles with care, but I have to admit, he too tried to avoid the biggest potholes, which could be easily 30 cm deep. That truck was not the fasted one one could imagine and the gearbox was not synchronized. Which meant the driver hat to double clutch every time he needed to switch gears. Tiring, especially on that long stretch in the desert between Tripoli and Sebha. And it is easy to lose concentration. After some hours of driving it becomes difficult to stay on the road because there are really very long stretches that are straight. Vision starts to blur and the hot air rising creates a haze in the distance so it is difficult to see where the road is going and where the horizon is starting, even if it's going straight ahead. This haze gives you the impression that the road seems to wind all the way. What you see is nothing but a distorted view.
So, halfway his drive, he suddenly noticed a series of giant potholes and he feared that if he went through them at that speed, he might damage the truck completely and get stuck there or that the load he was carrying could be bumped out of the truck's loading bay. Too late to brake, so the only option he saw as a way out was to give the steering wheel a sharp turn in order to try to avoid the potholes. Too sharp it seemed and he rolled over. After several rollovers he finally came to a standstill. Later on, when I spoke to him, he told me he was a lucky guy, because the truck ended on its wheels, ready to continue the drive. Only, his load was now spread all over the place in the sand.
Lucky for him, a series of trucks were behind him and the drivers stopped to help him load his gear back on the truck.
When he finally arrived at the camp he limped and his upper body hung somewhat lopsided. In fact, most of his body had an askew aspect. I could heartily laugh about his adventure. He was in a somewhat less funny mood though. I wonder why.

The dirt roads in the desert however were of a different magnitude than the asphalted roads. They were called "pistes" and were more or less marked so one could at times see where the piste was intended to be and where the desert was. Many people did not use the pistes and drove through the dunes in the desert. This was kind of risky if they went too far inside the sand dunes. The wind in the desert tends to blow from just any direction. This makes the slopes of the sand dunes smooth and one can drive at very high speed over them. Speeds of up to 120 km per hour are feasible. There was nevertheless one serious danger about this. If the wind blew long enough in the same direction then the leeside of the dunes behave like waves on the sea do. The dune slopes up gently at the wind side, but just after the top it curls inside backwards, like the waves on which the surfers in Hawaii show off. Only, a car at high speed suddenly lacks solid ground and floats through the air for a

while. Then, mostly, the car will descend, nose down first. And the people inside the car tend to get injured. Or die. So, driving through the sand dunes could get you very fast at your destination. Or not at all.

The reason why the pistes were often avoided (I mostly avoided them too) was that when the piste was made, it was smooth, but after a while it got uneven. Like a corrugated sheet. Only, the bumps were across and they could be as high as 30 cm and so one had to drive from bump to bump. For hundreds of kilometers. There were basically two speeds at which one could drive on those parts of the piste and that was at 3 km per hour or over 80 km per hour. When driving the higher speed, a Toyota Land Cruiser tends to last for 20 000 km, before falling apart. A Land Rover could withstand 40 000 km. The difference was the bodywork of the Land Rover, which was made out of aluminum.
So, I figure it was a good enough reason for people to try their luck off road. At first I was very unsure doing so, but after a year or so, I knew exactly where I was by just looking at the ground. One learns to recognize the different types of soil after a while and the one knows where to stop and, more importantly, where not. If you stop on the wrong kind of soil you can be pretty sure you'll need to dig yourself out. Which is not so much fun when temperatures rise to over 40°C.

Once we were settled in Sebha plans were made to move on since the road we were supposed to build started another further away. But this meant we had to wait in Sebha for the material to arrive on site. We stayed some time at the villa (yes, with cockroaches too) and the French engineer drove off to a small village called Serdales, which was at about 450 km from Sebha. And here we go again, locally Serdales is known as Laowinat, or Awaynat as it is spelled in Arabic. He rented a house there and that would be our temporary base until our gear was brought to the camp site.
The French engineer was at times a stern man. It is not necessary to be stern in the desert for any reason. Survival is of more importance. And his manners, especially in the morning when he sang "soldat reveille toi" (soldier wake up) meant that I felt like being in the army after all. Which I loathed. After his wake up song he and the others had breakfast. I had the habit of not eating before noon, so breakfast was not for me. They were going to drive to the location of the camp site by car. So, in my simplistic reasoning I thought it would be fine if I jumped in the car just before they would set off. The French Lieutenant however was upset by my behaviour and drove off seconds before I could get in the car. He shouted to me that he would make sure this day was going to be withheld from my pay. Lucky me that he had no saying in that at all.
The prospect of having to stay in that house for the rest of the day whilst the other had fun playing in the sand looked grim to me. I reasoned that walking the way was just the same distance, and so I did. I can't remember what we were doing there after all that day. Probably nothing exciting. But I do remember that one day we drove a bit further to a hilly landscape where the road was supposed to,pass through (I made it a habit of getting up in the morning some 15 minutes after he sang his wake up song and that would give me plenty of time to get timely in the car). This place was, the man said, what it was all about.

You see, Serdales is located at about 250 km from where the asphalted road ends that runs between Sebha and Ubari (yes, also know as Awbari). Logic would dictate that we started building the road from Ubari onwards and would have our base camp at Ubari. But the French guy then explained that the plan was to start right there, in the middle of the desert, because these hills we saw in front of us were considered being rock and to excavate them we would get 7 times the amount of money as we would get for digging in the sand.

Yes, my friends, prior to us, a geologist had been there and he had checked the underground and assured the consortium that it was rock and money would fall from heaven if we started working there.
It is clear by now that if that geologist was a westerner and if he was not used to some heat, he might really have been there and tried to dig out some sand by his hands and then quickly concluded that yes, this was rock indeed and then jump into his car and get the hell out of that oven before his private parts were cooked.
We were screwed, as we found out when it was too late.

After we had set up camp (I was promoted assistant camp manager in the mean time) and the material started to arrive -some new, some antique- and the surveyors showed up too. The surveyors were curious and wanted to check just what kind of rock we were going to excavate.
We had one brand new bulldozer available and the operator walked it over there. If I remember well, those hills were at some 15 km away from our camp, so it took him several hours to get there. Bulldozers do not tend to move really fast.
The rock test is really very simple. A bulldozer has a hook at the rear side, a ripper. This hook can be lowered and then rip through the soil, hence why it's called a ripper. The technique is that the dozer operator tries to pry the hook as far as possible into the rock (supposed to get in only some centimeters deep) and then move forward thus making a trench into the soil. Depending on the power needed to move forward, the surveyors know how solid the underground is and what type of rock we talk about. I later spoke to the operator and he said that he could push down the ripper all the way (about 50 cm) with no effort at all and then set the engine at idle and drive forward with the brakes on. It still went through it as through soft butter.

We were lucky bastards though and the Polish surveyors were very thirsty and we could provide them with enough self-brewed liquor and so it was decided that we could call that hard sand "rock" anyway.
The second part of our plan was very clever. We would use this rock that we had to excavate, to fill up the depth between two hilltops and again that would save us a lot of work and bring in lots of much needed money.
Alas, no matter how much liquor we fed the surveyors, they kept on saying that this "rock" was unsuitable to fill up the valley because it contained too much dust and so would never be stable enough to hold the road. We had to ditch it at the side of the road's trajectory and leave it there.
Curses could be heard throughout the camp. Loud curses. Very loud even. But, rest assured, there were no children present. Only adults, of which some had, unfortunately, the mental age of a child. But that is besides the question.

The surveyors were contracted by the Libyan government and they were from Poland. At that time, Poland was still a member state of the COMECON and thus a communist country.
Our contract with the Libyan government stipulated that we had to lodge and feed the surveyors at out expense. The contract did not stipulate anything about the drinks, so that was left upon us to decide and the surveyors were quite happy that part of their liquid supply would consist of 60° proof liquor. Homemade, but made by experts in the field.

Serdales, October 1977

I spent 12 weeks in Libya and then could go on leave for three consecutive weeks. Paid leave, that is. Same (high) salary as when working. Most of the others couldn't keep up with the desert and went on leave already after 8 weeks. They got 2 weeks paid holiday and a good deal of them didn't show up anymore after their leave. Probably the desert call wasn't strong enough for all.

A couple of days after the camp was set up it was decided that I would be promoted to specialist in cooling techniques (not assistant this time). This involved stuff like repairing aircos and cooling cells and freezers and so on. They gave me a book and I was told that everything I needed to know about the job was in that book.
So I started studying the book and became familiar with all techniques and physical processes involved. It suited me well because whilst back in Europe I also bought me a set of six books about particle physics and quantum dynamics and the like. Which I also read and studied. It's still not clear to me for what purpose I studied that, but it was fun and damn interesting. In my mind I promoted myself from ordinary mechanic to a quantum mechanic.
With the job also came the tools. And I did remember from chemistry class at school how to make a distilling installation. It worked very satisfactory and produced real good liquor. We had our product tested in Belgium and received congratulations for it. Nobody got blind after a drinking session and no one died neither from consuming our alcohol.

To make the booze, we needed a lot of sugar and fresh fruits. That became a little suspicious after a while because nobody got to eat any fruit and we bought a lot.
The trick was that we put 25 kg of sugar in a plastic drum of 220 liter, added it halfway with all sorts of fruits, mostly oranges, and then topped it with water. After fermentation the French called it "jaja".
One day a policeman from Serdales came into the camp and he inquired if we were making any alcohol there. Of course not. We were a law abiding workforce and there to do a job, not to make booze. The funny thing about this interrogation was that the policeman was leaning on one of the plastic barrels that was fermenting in the sun whilst he questioned us about our habits. I suspect the guy knew perfectly well what was in the barrels and he wanted to make sure he knew and that we understood the risk involved, all without having to arrest us.
That evening we dumped half of our fermentation stock and stored the other half in a tent nearby, out of sight. That apparently did the trick and the police stayed away. For that issue anyway.

As I already mentioned, after living in the desert for a while, I was able to navigate there without too many problems. When visibility allowed it, which was most of the time, I could rely on the ever changing landscape.
At first it is difficult to notice, but when you get to know the environment you start seeing different patterns at different places. So, after a while and having done enough kilometers in the desert, I could determine with some precision

where I was simply by looking at the soil I was riding on. This meant that I didn't need to see the landscape to know where I was. And as stupid as it may sound, this was a critical parameter when you are driving through a sandstorm.

After some time we were relocated at a new spot, at 65 km from Ubari, but that is another story. One day I had to go from there to Sebha to fetch some stuff. I left as usual late in the morning and planned to return only the next day. It was equally normal that I would drive off road, through the desert. The piste was somewhere to my right. After leaving I noticed that the wind got stronger and far away at the horizon I could see that there was some dust in the air. Now, if I would have been born and raised there, I would have known that this was a sure sign of a nearing sandstorm. But I wasn't. So, I left as usual, with just enough petrol in the tank to reach Ubari and with practically no water. It was only a one hour drive to Ubari, so nothing special. And also the fact that I was alone in the car was nothing unusual.
The further I drove, the harder the wind was blowing and the more sand and dust was in the air. After an hour or so I had to rely on the direction of the wind. I knew that I had the wind coming exactly from behind me when I left and that was the direction I needed to drive.
This went well until I noticed that because of the tail wind, the engine started overheating. Mind you, wind or no wind, the outside temperature was close to 40°C. The radiator of the car didn't catch any wind anymore as I drove at about the same speed as the wind was blowing and so the thing got hot. The only option I had was to make a 180° turn an place the car with the radiator in the wind. This did the trick and the temperature of the water started to go back to normal. All I needed to do was turn the car precisely 180° again and follow the wind. That would have to do. I knew where I was by looking at the soil, but of course I could not say by the meter how far exactly from the town. So I just made sure I had wind in tail and navigated by looking at the soil until the wind got really strong and all tracks of other cars were completely wiped away. On top of that, the visibility was reduced to about 10 meter. I couldn't see a thing in front of me. And after a while driving like that, you get disoriented because you actually stare at nothing. You can't see the difference between the sky and the ground anymore. You might just as well be driving somewhere up in the sky inside a cloud. But I guessed I was probably on the right track and I knew that I also couldn't be far away from Ubari. The question was just how far?
So I stopped and started reasoning what my options were. I knew that a sandstorm like this could last for several days. My water supply was finished and I could be way off track as well. What to do? Wait there for the storm to lessen so that I could see more or continue right now? But if I kept on driving I could miss the town entirely and end up in the sand dunes next to the town, which was not a pleasant prospect.
So I stayed there for a while, and after sternly calculating these possibilities (admitting that life was short, art long, opportunity instantaneous and experiment uncertain), I told myself that it was unworthy of a gentleman to be daunted by such petty calculations *(I must admit that I stole these lines from Umberto Eco)*.
So, I decided to take the risk and continued driving, straight ahead.

Ten meters further I could suddenly see the trees that formed a fence around Ubari and I was exactly at one meter away from the entrance of the town. And ten meters ago I didn't have the slightest clue that I was so close. And I was at the exact spot where the piste, which I never followed, ended.
This was one of the moments in life when I started wondering how much luck a person can have without the intervention of some divine creature. Or was it just me?
I drove through the gate with a smile on my face and continued my way to Sebha.

Sebha, summer of 78

We all have probably seen one time or another that cartoon where someone is, under a scorching sun, frying eggs on the hood of the car. This image always makes me smile. The smile comes for the simple reason that this is perfectly well possible. Of course I tried it.

The Land Rover was parked outside on the street. Well street is actually a bit exaggerated. It was a space of a couple of hundred meter wide, just sand. The sand was hard enough to drive on without too much worry.
It was high summer and I needed to check the fuel pump of the car. This fuel pump is situated next to the engine, under the hood, so I had to open the engine compartment. When I touched the hood with my bare hands I very quickly had to withdraw them. At first a thought I received an electric shock, but soon I realized that it was because I just had burned my hand. The metal of that hood was literary burning hot. Some moments after my first surprise I got the idea to do the egg test, always ready for an experiment.
And yes, my friends. I could fry an egg on that hood. It didn't go as fast as in a frying pan, but frying it did.
Maybe, just maybe, this was an explanation as to why it could get so damn hot inside a car in the desert. And perhaps this too was a good explanation why the airco couldn't handle that heat. We could though. I don't know if that heat left some permanent damage to our brains, for they were surely cooked as well. Let's say that we more or less got used to the heat.

The effect of the heat of the sunshine was visible in many cars. These were the times that cars were equipped with loudspeakers at the rear shelf of the car. And the casing of these loudspeakers was in plastic. Black plastic. And typically this plastic was molten due to the heat inside the car. We never tried it, but I think that if we were to leave a chicken in a car in the sun with the windows closed, we'd be eating boiled chicken for diner. I do not dare to think what temperatures can be reached in a car that way, but I'm pretty sure nobody would survive it if locked up in there for more than half an hour.
The cushions of the seats in the car were at times so hot that we needed to put several towels on them to prevent burning our bums.

When we first arrived in Libya, the company took very well care of us. We even received clothing. Some expert back in Belgium decided that cotton clothing was the best solution to tackle the heat. The clothes we got were off-white. At least they had the color right. White was indeed a good choice. But the cotton...
When you walk outside in the sun, you sweat a lot. An awful lot even. That's why we were told to drink on average 9 liters of water per day. I drank a lot of water all right, but nine liters? And water? If they would have advised nine liters of beer a day, now that would have been a game changer. But water?
It is probably during those years in Libya that I learned to distinguish between all kinds of water. I think that now I'm capable of picking out good, pure fresh water, just by the smell and the taste of it. But believe me, if I can help it I'm not drinking water now anymore. Any drinkable liquid will do but not water. I've had way too much of that stuff. I don't digest it anymore.

Anyway, it is not because you sweat a lot that you're also soaking wet because of the sweat. By no means you are. Your sweat evaporates the moment it travels through your clothes. But, and here comes the interesting part, it evaporates only there where your clothes are in contact with the air. Now, imaging you are driving a car. Naturally it's just as hot inside the car as outside. But you're sitting with your bum on a car seat and with your back against the back of the seat. You got the picture. No air circulation there, meaning your sweat doesn't evaporate at those parts.
So, the first time I experienced this, when I got out of the car my trousers and my back felt wet. And looking in a mirror, it looked as if I had peed in my pants. And since the clothes were white and the seats were dirty from the brownish desert sand it was a pretty sight for all bystanders. And I didn't like that a bit.

Lucky I had a pair of black synthetic trousers with me and quickly changed. And that did the trick. No more brown stains on my bum, no sweat that got absorbed by the tissue and no more laughter from the spectators.
So, believe me or not, but cotton simply is no good to wear in the desert. I stick with synthetic, which doesn't stick to my bum and legs when wet and which dries a lot faster than cotton.

To give you an idea what hot desert winds actually means, here's a practical example that you can test yourself if you happen to be in the desert in summertime.
I took a bucket of water with some detergent in order to wash my (cotton) T-shirt. Washed it by hand and then rinsed it in another bucket with cold water. I then held the T-shirt by the shoulders in front of me until it was dry. In less than half a minute it is dry. No need to iron, can be worn just like that.

In the sandbox between 1977 and 1980

No, I have never seen a fata morgana in the desert though I wish I had. What I did see is that at the horizon, the hot air that rises, forms some kind of a veil which makes it impossible to actually see the horizon. It becomes a blurred strip that seems to float between heaven and earth. And especially on the long and straight stretches of a road, of which there are plenty in Libya, it becomes after some time hard to stay concentrated and focused on the road. When the road is winding or hilly, it is less of a problem but when having to drive straight for a hundred kilometers or more it becomes dangerous. It happens that people fall asleep behind the wheel and then they wake up in hospital. Or not at all.

A phenomena that can be seen, quite often as well, are these small mini tornadoes, little whirlwinds that form a funnel that reach somewhere between two and fifty meters in height. They are completely harmless and I tried many times to step into them to see what happens.
Nothing happens. And these whirlwinds can only be seen because of the dust they carry up into the air. And dust there is in abundance. The locals call these whirlwinds *djinn,* with which they actually refer to ghosts.

Since there is always wind in the desert and that wind carries a lot of dust and sand with it, one better get used to finding everything, inside and out, covered with a layer of sand and dust. It is very hard to protect anything from being covered. Also our food suffered from that and so it is very likely that I have eaten loads of sand over there. When cooked and spiced it's OK but the bigger sand grains make a freaking noise when you start chewing them.

What I always wondered was why solar and wind energy wasn't used at all. The desert is place of enormous potential energy, but nothing is done with it. It's left there unexploited. And it would be so easy to make good use of that energy.

When we imagine the Sahara, for most of us the first image we think of is that of vast areas of sand dunes. I can confirm that for certain parts of the Sahara this is indeed the case. And since the sand is constantly moving because of the wind, it is very difficult for anything at all to grow there. In the sand dunes little to no vegetation can be found.
But, surprisingly, there is lots of wildlife and I have no idea where these creatures dwell, nor what they may eat or drink. I'm sure that Mr. Attenborough has answers to that, but I don't. The deeper you go into these dunes, the less wildlife you encounter, but it's still there. Especially the Desert Crickets can be found way deep into the sand dunes. They are very fast and stand nearly upright on their hind legs, which is enough for not trusting them (you never know what these creatures can do to you, but I guess they're completely harmless).

Apart from the dunes, the desert is mostly a flat landscape consisting of sand, rocks, sparse vegetation and powdered limestone. And there are very few oasis, so don't bet on them to save your life when you get lost in the desert.

People die in the desert if they run out of water and cannot find a water supply in time.

With some experience it is possible to drive through the sand with any kind of vehicle. If it's your first trip in the desert I would recommend a 4 x 4 with wide balloon-like tires that you can deflate if necessary. But, when you get the hang of it, the Sahara can be conquered with a Renault R4 and half a cow loaded in the back. I know, because I've done it several times. We got our meat from the slaughterhouse at Ubari. Since we were a fairly large group to feed, we bought our meat per half cow. And since I was assistant of whatever came up, I was sent to the slaughterhouse with my R4 (850 cc, 29 HP) to get the slaughtered cows over to the camp. The carcasses were too long for the car, so I couldn't close the rear door and had to cover up the meat with bed sheets so as to protect them from collecting too much dust and sand.
And you have to trust me on this one: if you are an inexperienced desert driver, you'll never reach your destination that way. But if you know the trajectory nearly by heart and know where to ride and, more importantly, where not, then it is quite possible to do so. But as a newbie, don't do it. You'll get stuck for sure.

Especially these areas of powdered limestone are very tricky to drive through. If you happen to get stalled in such an area then probably the only way out for you is to deflate the tires until they're about halfway flat. With the flat tires you can save yourself out of most situations. But, once you hit solid underground again, you have to inflate the tires again or you'll screw them after a couple of kilometers. And then you're stuck again
Now, you may think that we drove through the desert with well equipped cars. Forget it. The only thing we cared about was having enough petrol in the gas tank. When the tourists came (each winter a couple of cars with tourists might want to try their luck) they drove Land Rovers with all the gear on and under it that you can imagine. Of course they did so by lack of experience. It's a lot easier to drive a car in the desert which weighs as little as possible. That is much more important than anything else. I have seen Belgians arriving on site and the first thing they did (they were "experts") was adding a lot of extra weight to the rear end of the car. We of course knew that this was utterly nonsense and it made the driving a lot more difficult, but we encouraged them to do so because they were convinced from the start that they knew exactly what to do. It was just too hot to spent time and energy trying to convince them of the contrary, so we told them to add even some more weight. They were happy with our "advice" and after some kilometers we could see them coming back to the camp on foot because they got hopelessly stuck in the sand. And they just couldn't figure out why.

One day, at KM 65, trucks arrived from the port of Tripoli and brought us the parts to assemble our quarry equipment. That day I was promoted to assistant crane operator and I had to go to the unloading place with a 30 tons crane truck. The truck was a 6 x 6 and I was hoping this was enough to get it to the quarry site. I was in a hurry because the trucks were waiting to be unloaded and I was driving a 6-wheel powered truck which made me feel confident and so I decided to take a shortcut. This proved to be a bad idea. After a hundred

meter or so the truck didn't move forward anymore but made a downward movement. Meaning I got stuck in the sand. Even with the 6 x 6 engaged it wouldn't move a bit forward.
So I walked back to the camp and asked a wheel loader operator (a French guy with a beard) to come and pull me out of my misery.
Now, this wheel loader had a shovel that could scoop up 18 tons in one go. Its wheels were close to two meters high, so it was not a small play toy. He came there with a big chain in the shovel. I always had, and still have, my doubts about using chains, but there he was and that was all he had to work with. So we hooked up the crane to the wheel loader and he started pulling whilst I was trying to drive the thing froward using the 6 x 6 traction. Nothing moved. Only the wheel loader started to descend as well. He then started making sideward movements with the back of the wheel loader, which creates enormous forces on the chain. Nothing moved but the chain snapped. The French guy had enough of it and he let me and the crane in our misery. It was then that I had the idea to deflate the rear tires. It takes a while to deflate truck tires that are inflated at 8 bars pressure, but after a while I thought I had deflated them enough and I gave it a try. And sure enough, the truck started riding as if nothing had happened.
So, the lesson to be learned is that when you get stuck in the sand, deflate the tires and you should be able to drive away on partially flat tires.

About six months earlier, when we were still located in Serdales, an English guy arrived there and introduced himself as a quantity surveyor. We had lots of quantities and thus it was not clear to us what he meant by being a quantity surveyor. It seems that this is a specific profession and the people doing so verify that whatever is excavated is counted for and we get payed for it. So all the maths were done by him and we were ready to see the money rolling in without the need for us to have to discuss this with the Polish surveyors. The Polish surveyed our work and had to report to the Libyan government and then we would get paid. So it was worthwhile for us to have someone on site who was good at calculating excavated stuff and make sure the Polish believed what he was saying.
A couple of days after his arrival he was interested in seeing the trajectory where we were to build that road, so he could already prepare himself and his pocket calculator (no, there were no personal computers as we know them now at the time).
So, I was promoted to assistant tour operator and we took off with a Toyota Land Cruiser (3000 cc, 150 HP, 4 x 4). In my mind, I was an experienced desert driver, so I assured the English guy that with a car like this it is impossible to get stuck in the sand. He then asked me to stop at an awkward spot, with rocks and sand in between, and so I did.
Now, I found out that day, and several times after in my life, that I should never say with certitude that some thing cannot happen and try to defy fate. After we made out tour on foot at that spot and I wanted to drive away again, we were stuck in the sand. With the special balloon tires, the 4 x 4 and all the available horsepower, we were stuck and the damn car wouldn't move at all. I tried everything. Forward, backward, fast, slow, but to no avail.
And just when I wanted to officially declare our situation being hopeless, a pick up truck arrived with a Libyan man at the steering wheel. He didn't ask a

lot of questions but I'm sure he wondered how on earth could anyone be so stupid to get the car right there at that spot. I didn't offer him any explanation neither.
About ten minutes later he had pulled us out of our misery and we were ready to try and explore other (less risky) parts of the desert.

These other parts of the desert were a mixture of different types of sand, where the powdered limestone was the trickiest. Where there were no dunes there often was some vegetation, thorny bushes like acacia trees with leather-like leaves that only camels (actually they are dromedaries) could pluck and chew. Which they did. The Tuareg let their camels roaming free in the desert and they had to provide food for themselves. If they needed water they had to walk to the waterhole, which they perfectly well knew where it was, sometimes several dozen of kilometers away from where they were. They are really clumsy animals and the way they walk is funny to see. But they can survive a lot longer in the desert tan I can, I have to admit. Here and there one can find a carcass of a camel that didn't make it, but mostly there is just sand an some bushes. Occasionally there is some scattered gravel too. Small pebbles that are remnants from the time the sea reached upon the cliff that was next to the trajectory of the road for most of the way. At certain spots at the foot of the cliff one could find fossilized shells. I never had the opportunity to search long enough for other types of fossils, but I'm sure there must have been, as the shells were really very abundant to find.

Sometimes, especially after a period of some strong wind, we could see spots in the sand with pebbles that looked like they were kind of out of place there. They were like isolated islands in a sea of sand. We soon found out that these spots were the remnants of very old settlements. We knew they used to be settlements because stone arrowheads and other prehistoric tools could be found between the pebbles. Searching for these prehistoric tools was a Friday pastime. Friday was our day off as we had to follow the local customs, which were Islam based. We tended to drive into the desert on Fridays, looking for those unusual spots and then started searching under the scorching sun.

There also were many strange heaps of sand mixed with stones and pebbles that were somewhere between half a meter and a meter high and two to four meters in diameter. We were of course very curious what they could be because their appearance was not natural and so one day we decided to dig into one of these hills to find out if anything was in there at all. It proved to be an ancient tomb, with a body beneath it. For completeness, I need to tell you right here that we only opened one of those sand hills. Once we knew what was below them we left them untouched. I think the locals must have known these were burial places because along the road's trajectory they marked several places of interest that we weren't allowed to touch. Even if that meant we had to alter the road's trajectory. But if they knew for sure that these heaps were ancient burial places I'm not sure. I can only guess they did know or suspected them to be of some importance. Or perhaps they had no clue at all what they were. We never discussed this with them.

The cliff was on average about two hundred meters high. It took a good hour to climb it since there was no path we could use. We at times had to jump from boulder to boulder to get on top of the cliff. I once went up alone via a way we had explored before. But, being young, a bit foolish and very curious and naive, the explorer's instinct overtook my sensible reasoning and I decided to take a different path to get down. This was a path no one had ever taken before and probably would never be taken after me ever again. At one point I had to jump off a ridge that was about two and a half meters high and try to land on a flat stroke that was less than half a meter wide. I jumped, I survived, and I nearly did it in my pants. I then decided that this had probably not been one of my better ideas and I wondered how many days it would have taken the others to find me there should I have fallen and broken my leg. Or worse.
And now you may wonder if I got any wiser in the future? No, of course not.

By exploring the slope of the cliff we often encountered strange signs carved out in the sides of the larger boulders. These symbols seemed to resemble some kind of writing but we couldn't make any sense of it. Later on, with the help of the British Museum, we found out that it was writing indeed.

"*These symbols are writings in tifinagh. Tifinagh is believed to have descended from the ancient Libyan (libyque) or Libyco-Berber script, although its exact evolution is unclear. The latter writing system was widely used in antiquity by speakers of the largely undeciphered Numidian language, also called Old Libyan, throughout Africa and on the Canary Islands. It is attested from the 3rd century BC to the 3rd century AD. The script's origin is uncertain, with some scholars suggesting it is related to the Phoenician alphabet.*
The writing is an abjad. An abjad is a type of writing system in which (in contrast to true alphabets) each symbol or glyph stands for a consonant, in effect leaving it to readers to infer or otherwise supply an appropriate vowel, similar to present day written Arabic." (with thanks to Wikipedia and myself)

According to the museum, these writings could be anywhere between very old and very recent, as people still carve out these writings nowadays and started doing so many centuries ago. We noticed that the writing that was very contrasting to the stones had to be the newer ones. This was because we also found many drawings of animals carved out on the stones which were not so contrasting at all and these images depicted giraffes, crocodiles, lions and hippos. Not the kind of animal that resides in those areas nowadays.

Serdales fall 1977

My three weeks (paid) leave was over and I had a new visa to work in Libya. We had a work permit all right, but we needed a new visa each time we came back to Libya to continue our job.
We also needed a visa to leave the country. This was for the authorities to make sure that all dues were paid for. This varied from taxes to medical insurance to a contribution for the Jihad, the Holy War. The latter actually meant that we contributed to Qaddafi's strive to, among other purposes, conquer the world and introduce Islam everywhere. He probably had good use for that money too to sponsor some terrorist activities here and there, but really, that was none of our concern. And besides, it was the company that paid all this, so we never cared about it. It all happened behind our backs and all we saw were the stamps stating that the amounts due were paid. But, in order to get our exit visa it all had to be paid for in advance or we couldn't leave. There is an interesting story about this at the end of our activities in Libya. That story will come later.

I got picked up at the airport and after spending a night at the villa in Tripoli I was booked to fly to Sebha. It was always nice to come to that villa in Tripoli for it had a cute small garden with orange trees in it. And a bakery a bit further on in the street where we could buy excellent fresh bread. If they had flour, that is. Nearly everything needed to be imported in Libya, also flour and pasta. They had almost no local production of basic food stuff. Strange thing is that also the crude oil they pumped up was sent to Italy for refining because there were no refineries in Libya. So we all were very dependent on the timely arrival of ships in the harbor as most of the goods that were imported were shipped by the sea. It was no exception that certain goods were at times not available.

Arriving in Sebha wasn't half as much fun as arriving in Tripoli. No adrenaline there, just a lot of pushing to get out of the plane. The same pushing as for getting in in Tripoli.
For those of you not familiar with the boarding practices at that time, I can inform you that there were boarding cards, but no seating. You actually had to fight your way into the plane to get a good seat. Some people were real specialists in doing so. I didn't bother too much, especially on those short flights. Everyone had a seat (most of the time, that is) and then it didn't matter too much where to sit. But since they usually overbooked the plane, one had interest to be not with the last travelers to get into the plane because they issued boarding passes all right, but everyone with a ticket would get one and nobody bothered to count the number of boarding passes on beforehand. So there were often some people left behind on the runway. Raising your voice and being tall helped to get in the plane timely and have a seat.
The plane was divided in a smoking and a non-smoking section. It was never clear where one started and the other section ended. Everyone seemed to smoke those days and the condensation trails of the plane might just as well have come from the cigarette smoke.

Once we got in Sebha we had to make it to the villa over there. Mostly someone came to pick us up at the airport, but sometimes we had to take a taxi if they forgot to come and collect us. Not a big deal if it weren't that most of the streets there had no name. So, in case of a taxi, we had to guide the driver over there. And I tend to get lost in cities. Any city for that matter. But I must have some guardian angel for cases like this because I always arrived at my final destination one way or the other.
It was more complicated to guide the taxi driver from the airport to the villa in Tripoli, but luckily that one was not too far away from a medical center which most drivers knew where it was. But on one occasion the taxi driver had enough of me asking him to take the same street again and again because I had no idea where exactly the office was. He then just dumped me next to a main street and told me to sort it out myself. I then used the few swearing words I knew in Arabic. That was a relief for me and it made the taxi driver to give me a broad smile and a fuck you too. Off he went and there I was, with my luggage at the side of the street. I then walked into the side street that was nearest to me and after two hundred meter I was right in front of the office.

Once in the villa in Sebha I had to wait for transportation to the camp. That was in most cases arranged after a couple of days, so I had to wait there and go to the market in the mean time.
The market, a souk, was not too far away from the villa. It was within walking distance, but if I went there for shopping I used the car. It was a small Toyota Corolla, but convenient for the shopping. In my second year in Libya, when I wanted to return to the villa after some shopping, I was stopped by a policeman. Well, "man" is not really the right description. It was a boy of about nine or ten years old, dressed up like a policeman with a kepi and a gun in a holster at his side. Before I could turn pale I noticed that his "gun" was a crudely cut wooden replica that someone had made for him with much love and passion. But I knew that these children actually had the power of a plain policeman, so I better listen to what he had to say before he started crying for his mom and half the police force of Sebha would be on my heels.
He wanted to see my drivers license and my passport. Like hell I would give that to him. I didn't have them with me anyway, so I gestured that both were at some government office to get stamped and that did the trick. OK for him. He figured that administration was important after all and so he let go of that demand. But then he asked for the car keys.
My only problem was that I has food I just bought in the trunk of the car and I wanted to have diner. No way I would let him take off with my food. So again I made signs that I wanted to empty the trunk, which he agreed with, a hand on the wooden gun, ready to draw and shoot. So I handed him over the car keys and wished him a happy ride. Apart from me having to walk the way back to the villa with my foodstuff I couldn't care less what he wanted to do with the car. It was a company car after all, so no problem if we got one less. They broke down all the time anyway.
When back at the villa I explained what happened to our local agent there and we both had a good laugh. He went to the police station the next day to collect the car and he had to pay a fine of 1 dinar, which is approximately three euro. After paying the fine he got the car back and I could go shopping again. I never saw the little one again.

The reason why these children had police authority was simple. Qaddafii had an acute shortage of people in Libya, more specific in the armed forces, and so he needed every hand he could get to help him maintain law and order. Even children would do. And that was also the reason why people from the neighboring countries were let in so eagerly and could acquire the Libyan nationality without too many questions asked.

After a couple of days in the villa I could drive to the camp in Serdales. We were several people in the car and I was promoted assistant driver, so I drove most of the way. Fact was that there were other people in the car too, but the engineer who was with us wasn't convinced about their driving skills. For some strange reason, absolutely not clear to me, he preferred me driving. And so I did.

In the camp we had people with lots of different specialties. One was a land surveyor, another one a nurse and one an F16 fighter pilot. We had little use of the latter one, but it helped greatly to get him hired as his father was chief of staff of the Belgian army. And I must say, our pilot was a very sympathetic guy. We had lots of good laughs together, especially after he knew that I was nearly a deserter. I suspect his father had something to do with my so easy release of duty.

One day, it was decided that the nurse and the land surveyor would drive by car to Ghat to see what the trajectory of the road was like. They didn't make it to Ghat. The nurse driving found a small bump in the road and decided to give it a try. As a result the car overturned and after that it was difficult to drive it again. Some Tuaregs on their way to Serdales helped them to put the car back on its wheels and they drove back to the camp at a snail's pace. Needless to say that this only confirmed the engineer's view of the driving skills of the nurse.
Both guys were a bit bruised, but nothing broken. The car was damaged beyond repair though. The first one of a series we lost.

Winter neared in Serdales and the weather started to switch from hot to cold. At about 8 in the morning it could even freeze. A very undesired situation because we had lots of means to cool us but nearly nothing to heat us. It was pure providence that the aircos also could heat.
There were people from Niger and Chad who came to Libya looking for a job. Often they were on foot. If they hadn't the money to pay for a seat on top of an overloaded truck, they had to walk their way to Libya. For them this was often a trip of thousand kilometers or more. When they arrived after sunset at our camp, they just wanted to rest and sought refuge between the stacked equipment parts that still needed to be assembled. I could see them there in the morning, frozen and unable to move because of the cold. Once the sun came through, they thawed and would continue to their destination, wherever that might be. I felt sorry for these guys and they must have had a very strong constitution to just survive that journey. Respect.

When a diesel fuel tank arrived at the camp we noticed that there was a small fissure in it, just beneath the outlet valve. I was promoted assistant welder and requested to weld it close.
Now, welding on a filled fuel tank may sound dangerous, but actually it isn't. As long as it's diesel inside. Don't do that on a tank filled with gasoline, because that will be the last thing you do. But diesel is far less dangerous, so I cleaned the fissure with a grinding disk and started welding.
Of course I couldn't close the fissure and whilst I was busy there, swearing like an idiot, a black man approached an watched me plod. Between a few very strong of my swear words, he saw the opportunity to address me and said I was doing it wrong. Oh yeah? And you can do it better perhaps? He just nodded and took the welding gear over from me. Man, that guy could weld. I'd never seen someone welding with so much skill. After the job was done he told me that he was a welder by profession and more specific that he was specialized and certified as a welder in the oil industry. He beat me there with street lengths. We were best friends from then on.

His mate was an electrician and I knew better by then not to question this. They were both hired a couple of days before and were already paying off. They both were from Togo.
His mate too became a good and respected mate of me. I liked both of them very much. Such nice and friendly people.
So, I was demoted from assistant welder to carrier of the welder's equipment. Of course I didn't have to carry his gear, but as a person and a welder, I adored this man from Togo.

One day, the welder came to see me in our storage tent and he had a painful face, nearly in tears he explained me he had a splinter in his finger. This had to be serious because what he usually did after he welded something together was taking the burning hot stuff in his hand and I could then smell the scent of burning flesh. This will make my hand much tougher afterwards was his explanation for this strange ritual. I hated seeing him doing that, but he insisted. And now this same man came to me, nearly in tears because he had splinter in his finger. Well well.
I could see the end of the splinter in his finger. So I grabbed that part with a pair of tweezers and started pulling that thing out. It came and came and came. There seemed to be no end in the length of that splinter. When I finally got it out completely I could see it was about the size of a match. No idea how he managed to get that into his finger but I could understand why he was in pain.

Serdales, Christmas 1977

After I returned from my first leave many things had happened at our camp. For one thing, the camp was there... When I left, nothing was there and during my three weeks leave they had set up the camp.
Our cabins were kind of mobile homes that were shipped on trucks from the Tripoli seaport to Serdales. For me it still is a miracle that so many of the cabins actually survived this transport at all. The cabins were each mounted on a couple of wheels that were attached to some kind of chassis. What the designers in Belgium clearly did not know about was the condition of the roads in Libya. If they would have had a good understanding of what transportation of goods through the desert actually means, I'm sure they would have come up with a different design. But, for some mysterious reason most of the cabins arrived in a more or less pristine condition in Serdales. Some of them though were damaged and the chassis was just pushed up into the cabin's floor. It was then that I was promoted assistant cabin repair man. And I must admit I had lots of fun in doing so.
One thing you really need when working in Africa is controlling the art of creating something with nothing. If you have it in you, you're able to do miracles. If not, you're helpless and lost. And apparently I had it in me. Moreover, I liked working that way, having to use all my creativity to get things going again. I loved that. It kept my mind busy.

Of course, when it came to welding I knew by then whom to call. My Togolese pall was always bright and smiling and together we managed to straighten even the most hopeless cases. I did the rectifying, he did the welding. Because of the nature of the damage to some of the cabins I was also promoted assistant carpenter, assistant plumber and assistant electrician. The electricity was pretty much undamaged so mostly it was enough to just fix the electrical cables to the frame again.

The cabins were equipped with a shower and a chemical toilet. This toilet was new to me. Luckily, the one who designed the interior of the cabins was my boss at the camp and he explained us how this was supposed to work. The toilet had an outlet with a valve at the outside of the cabin. Just drop a handful of these green grains into the pot and do your thing and that's it. And when the container of the toilet is full, go outside and open the valve. What's in there is by then supposed to be liquid and doesn't smell, so we can dig a hole in the ground underneath the valve and cover that hole with some planks and that's it. He was right about the stuff coming out being liquid. When someone innocent enough opened the valve the liquid stuff spat out and drops of it were projected meters around. I added an extra downwards tube to our outlet. What my boss forgot to mention was that these green grains were quite active things and after that our land surveyor accidentally dropped a few grains on the toilet seat and sat on them and then burned his butt and complained about that, the boss told us not to do so because the chemical aggressiveness of the grains. We then took these green grains more seriously than before.

The cabins interior design was according to a strict a hierarchy.

If you were hired in Africa, you ended up in cabins with eight bunks and no shower and no toilet. If hired in Europe then it mattered what your position was in the hierarchy of the company. Most cabins came with a toilet and shower and even a small sitting area and had four bunks. That was where I was going. Economy class. But since we had at that time cabins to spare we were mostly lodged with two in it. My roommate had previous Libya experience, so I was initiated pretty soon in the way I was supposed to behave, what was done and more importantly, what was not done. Mostly it came to it to do what you please, just don't get caught.

Then there were the cabins with two bunks. Business class. These were for some intermediate positions in the company. I'm still not sure who belonged to that category. I guess the ones with the loudest voice who thought of themselves that they were important settled in there. My boss had one of those since he was the one who made up the list that said who was to stay in which cabin. And mostly people adhered to that.
The first class cabins came with only one bed. Those were for the Polish surveyors and the resident engineer.

Now, the resident engineer was a special man. He was big and fat and smoked Cuban cigars. But he was keen on his rank and in my opinion that had to do with the fact that he was partly of African origin. He made the nurse (who had little else to do anyway) wash and iron his clothes. His hankies had his initials embroidered on it and after ironing those had to be folded in a very specific way. The nurse was instructed how to fold the hankies before handing them back to him. And yes, the initials had to be visible after the folding.
The way he behaved was strange to me. Why couldn't he just be himself? Or maybe he was, I still don't know. When I grew up, my closest friend was a black boy from Rwanda. We were really close. And yes, there were often nasty remarks made towards him. I felt very bad for that and couldn't understand why people could be like that. We don't choose our parents and after we're born we are what we are. Good or bad. Or nothing at all. That some people judge others by their looks is repulsive to me. I'm probably too stupid to understand their reasoning.
It was and is clear to me that our resident engineer suffered from a feeling of inferiority and wanted to show to us that he was the boss and we were not. His choice, not mine. For me he was in charge and that was it. Could have been anyone for that matter. But his behavior was at times a bit worrisome. Only when one day I offered him a box of Cuban cigars he he started being very friendly with me from then on. Whatever it takes, I guess. The cigars were too strong for me anyway.

Our canteen was a giant plastic tent, dome-shaped. Mostly white, with red flaps at the ends. It was sturdy plastic all right, but later on we would discover that it was not strong enough to withstand the sometimes strong desert winds. The initial plan was that we would spent all of our free time in that tent, all together. Noble thought, but no one adhered to that. It was a lot more fun in our cabin, where we could drink our home made booze without being discovered by prying eyes.

One evening we had invited two of the Polish surveyors over at our place and when they knew we had booze, two of them were more than happy to join. A third one was kind of a monk I think because he preferred not to come. Or maybe he had his own supply. That is also possible.
The boss of the Poles taught us how to drink liquor. He explained that it was very important not to breathe in the alcohol vapors. So we had to stop breathing just before drinking and then empty the glass in one go into our throat. We soon found out that this was indeed an effective way to prevent from getting drunk too easy. By seven o'clock in the morning duty called and we had to end our party. The boss of the Poles got out of the cabin and the other one followed. Boss stayed reasonably upright. Number two was able to take the steps and made his way home it quite well for one meter. He then fell flat forward on his face and didn't move anymore. We could hear him snore, so we were not too worried about his physical condition. Boss had to call in the monk, who was up already, to drag number two back to his cabin and he got the day off to recover.
We went to the canteen to have breakfast and some coffee, grateful of having received that night instructions from true experts in the field about how to consume liquor. Another day had started.

Not all days were alike. Most were, but sometimes something special happened. One of the French operators had been working in Libya before and he knew where he had left a motorbike during his last stay. After his leave he collected the motorbike and brought it to the camp. We all were allowed to take a ride. When it was my turn I wanted to show off. I had driven a motorbike often in the Thai jungle, so driving one in the desert would be a piece of cake for me. The only difference was that there was mud in the jungle and not sand. I pretty soon found out that this made a hell of a difference and after less than two hundred meters the front tire started wobbling. I tried to counter-wobble, which resulted in me and the bike hitting the desert floor at high speed. Apart from my pride, nothing critical was damaged to either the motorbike and myself.
Needless to say that I stayed away from that bike in the future.
The French operator though was an expert in handling machines. All kind of machines. The motorbike was just one of them. I once saw him operating an excavator and it looked like he was one with the machine. I could operate that machine too (after I had myself promoted to assistant excavator operator) but the ease with which he operated that machine was just stunning.

This operator however wasn't very fond of colored people. In his eyes they all were stupid and useless. I think he saw me as colored too. I resented the way he barked to the locals. So we never made it to being close friends.
On Christmas eve our cooks had done their utmost best to prepare a delicious meal with turkey on the menu. And of course that meal was accompanied by loads of our booze.
Most of us, who had taken course by the Poles, could by now handle rather impressive amounts of alcohol without getting really drunk. Perhaps the French operator thought he was so good in everything that he failed to be instructed by the Poles and as a consequence, by the end of our Christmas diner, he was kind of drunk. But then suddenly he started chasing the

Togolese welder for no reason at all. The boy didn't want to fight, so he avoided him at first, but soon had to start running for his life as fast as he could. Nobody reacted.
When I saw what was happening I got up and pulled the French guy by his shirt, which made him stop. He then got really angry with me and started to fight me. I wore a nice T-shirt that I had earned in my local pub in Belgium for being a very good customer there and he managed to tear that T-shirt in pieces. Shame. It had taken me lots of beer to earn that T-shirt. He then wanted to give me a head-butt, but being so drunk he (lucky me) was too slow to do any harm. I could easily avoid his move. By then others teared him away from me and put him to bed. I changed my T-shirt and the party went on. My welder forgave me my clumsy welding and I got a big smile from him. We were true buddies then.

We regularly needed to haul in food supplies. In Serdales was close to nothing and no one there had enough in stock to sell to us. They barely managed to have enough for themselves. In Ubari there wasn't much to buy neither, so we did our shopping in Sebha. That was just a 450 km drive, of which 250 through the sand. Nothing unusual.
Lucky for me, finding our office in Sebha coming from Ubari was not too difficult, even for me. One day, on the way back, I was asked to take one of the Polish surveyors with me. Fine for me because that way I wouldn't be alone in the car. After driving hundred kilometers or so, the Pole, who didn't speak any other language but Polish and Russian, made clear to me that he wanted to drive for a while too. No big deal as we still were on the asphalted road to Ubari. So we swapped placed and he wanted to start. But then came the questions which made me suspicious. He wanted to know how to start the engine. OK, they probably didn't have this type of car in Poland, so I explained him. Then he wanted to know how this trick with the gears worked. Well, perhaps he'd only driven cars with an automatic gearbox in Poland. So I had to explain him this thing with the clutch too. He was a fast learner and soon he found the forth gear and we advanced at high speed. I was already buckled up but was missing very badly a brake pedal at the passenger's side. I tried to convince him that perhaps, just a suggestion, he might want to slow down a little. No, he had just too much fun and I started getting really worried when he kept on swaying the steering wheel left to right for apparently no reason at all but in the hope this made him look like an experienced driver. I turned a bit pale but somehow he managed to keep the car on the road.
When we neared a village I tried to make clear to him that he had to slow down. There were people and animals on the road and politeness required to not hit them with the car. But to no avail. He kept on going at very high speed through the village. I turned completely pale and didn't know what to do to make him go slow. So I used one of the few Russian words I knew and I shouted STOY DAMN IT, STOY ! (note: the *damn it* part was English). He seemed to understand this and slowed down after which I made him stop completely and took over the steering wheel.
When we arrived at the camp and the Pole had recounted his driving exploit to his boss, the boss came to see me, somewhat embarrassed, that I had to give the other one his very first driving lesson and that he had no driving licence at all and never before in his life had driven a car. The other Poles got informed

by their boss that they had to take driving lessons the official way and make sure they got a driving licence and were not allowed to drive any of our cars anymore. Only theirs, which at that time they didn't have yet.

When driving in the desert, a lot is asked from the car. Everything in the car suffered enormously and wore out very fast.
As I wrote before, when it was hot and we had to drive with the wind in our back then the engine could easily overheat because the radiator didn't receive enough air to cool it down. And even 50°C hot air would cool it down because the operating temperature is 90°C.
But other stuff could get overheated too, such as the fuel pump. Our cars were all running on gasoline. The Land Cruisers were after 20 000 km consuming about 25 liter per 100 km, so with a tank of 50 liter we could do 200 km. Enough for making short trips around the camp, but unsuitable for longer trips or we had to take several jerrycans of gasoline with us.
Once, when we were about halfway between Serdales and Ubari, the engine of our Land Rover sputtered and then stopped completely. That is the moment one needs to check the state of the car, try to find out why the engine stopped and do something about it. It was my lucky day (again) because a Belgian car mechanic was coming with me and he started checking many things. I was happy that whilst doing so he willingly explained what he did and why. That was when I found out that the fuel pump of a Land Rover can overheat. This was one of those trips that we actually took water with us (the mechanic insisted doing so before leaving), so after he poured some water on the fuel pump we were all set to drive again. He explained to me what the problem was. Because of the outside temperature, the gasoline in the tank was already heated up more than what was good for it. It then started gassing prematurely inside the already hot fuel pump and thus could not pump any liquid gasoline to the carburettor since it was filled with gas pockets. Simple, but you had to know it. Now I know, but it's cold here in Belgium, so I'm most likely never going to have to put that wisdom into use anymore.
Another remedy would have been to just wait and let everything cool down a little bit. Or call the AAA patrol. The latter was unfortunately not available in the whole of Libya.

Apart from food we also needed drinking water. We had these water drinking water fountains that provided cold drinking water. Most of the time anyway, but the service man, me that is, was always nearby.
In the Serdales camp our water supply was a 10 000 liter water cistern mounted on a truck. The truck belonged to a Libyan man and I guess he must have liked me because I was the only one allowed to drive his truck when he was not there. That meant that from time to time I took the truck and drove to the well of Serdales village. This was always exciting. The excitement was in the form of the local women who came to the well too to collect water. They carried plastic containers on their head and walked seemingly effortlessly around that way. They knew the truck, but as soon they saw it was me driving it they ran away in all directions. Too bad because they were really very beautiful women and I never managed to talk to them. They had a very dark complexion and wore golden ornaments on their ears and golden rings pierced through their noses. The gold gave a very beautiful contrast with their

skin and the colorful clothes they wore made them look like some kind of fata morgana.
It was a good thing we didn’t stay very long at Serdales because I think we started exhausting the water supply. The locals collected some 20 liter at a time and we 10000. But, I liked going to the well.

Leaving Serdales - spring 1978

When our efforts to earn as much money as possible from one particular location were exhausted, it was time to move to another, logistically more logic location.
Everything had to do with money.

In Europe, the consortium consisted of 3 French and 3 Belgian companies. One of those Belgian companies had very tight relations with the army and was coordinating everything.
I have no knowledge of how the consortium came into existence but I believe it had something to do with landmines that were sold to Libya by Belgium. Not just a handful of landmines, but a massive amount. To everyone's luck and relieve, most of the landmines were still stored in one location in Libya by the time Qaddafi was ousted. But when things went sour for Qaddafi and the country was in mayhem, the stock of landmines was suddenly not secured anymore and who knows what happened to it.
Anyway, there was a vivid arms trade between Belgium and Libya in the 70's and it is my guess that the one Belgian company that took lead in the consortium knew more about this. That was probably one of the reasons why they could get hold of the contract to build that road. Another reason was that one of the French companies had successfully been active in road building in Libya in the years before, so they knew their way around.
The consortium took care of the basic equipment that was needed to get the job started and shipped that to Libya. Most of that equipment was brand new, but some of it was pure antique. And most of that antique stuff was supplied for by the company in Belgium that had ties with the company I worked for back then. The owners of these companies were brothers.
It's getting a bit complicated now.

I was hired by the company that led the consortium, but only after approval of my boss's brother in Belgium to join the consortium as an employee.
Representing this a bit more schematic, I was working for company A which was owned by owner 1. Owner 1 had a brother (owner 2) who was the owner of a road construction company (company B) in Belgium.
Owner 1 of company A endorsed that I would leave his company to start working elsewhere, although it was said from the start that nobody could be transferred from company A to company B (or the consortium for that matter) to start working in Libya. Being Belgians and maintaining good traditions, this was overruled by owner 1 and owner 2 in my case, due to some internal forces in company A that backed me up totally (and probably were happy seeing me leave company A).

The managing (Belgian) company of the consortium (company C) then hired me because owner 2 claimed I was a valuable asset. Of course I was, but he had no way of knowing that at that time.
And as already said, company C had very good relations with the Belgian army.

At the time, it was a bit complicated to get money into Libya for operational purposes. I guess the risk was considered high and banks were not too happy to help here. Also, the consortium provided for the equipment and that alone was a serious investment. It is not clear if the consortium received an advance from the Libyan government to purchase that equipment, but I wouldn't be surprised if that was the case.

Company B was a real star in finding old and worn equipment to be shipped to Libya. In fact, all the old stuff that arrived there was shipped to Libya by company B. Later on I had a discussion about this with owner 2, because there were only complaints about that old equipment and it served only as a scrapyard filling in the desert and made nobody happy. His reply was that I shouldn't make fun of that (Did I? Of course I did.) and that each of those things on wheels had a very specific purpose. Only, nobody ever specified to us what those purposes might have been. We were stuck for instance with three WW II Command Cars that were at the time already over 35 years old. We didn't know what to do with them and they practically fell into pieces when we got them.

So, once we arrived in Libya we needed cash to support the organization and make things work. The consortium found a Libyan partner who was the local money supplier. That worked well until this local ATM ran out of cash. From that point onwards we had to provide for our own income in Libya, meaning we had to send in reports to the Libyan government via the Polish surveyors that a certain amount of work was done and then we would get payed for that. This proved to be much harder than anyone of the planners had dared dream of. We had so many problems that made progress very slow and so the hard needed cash flow didn't start timely. Which made our situation even more difficult.

The first drawback was in Serdales and had to do with the "rock" not really being rock and that the material we dug up couldn't be re-used. So we got only half of the money from there as anticipated.
Things went from bad to worse.

Since it was kind of idiot trying to start to build a road near to its end point, we went over to Plan B. The camp in Serdales was abandoned and a new camp was to be built at KM 65.
KM 65 ?
That was a point at 65 km from Ubari. We still had 65 km of desert to do before reaching the first signs of civilization. 65 km of unpaved road, which was not a trump card for us and we, poor, ignorant employees, had a hard time accepting this. For us it just didn't make any sense. We later on learned that according to that same geologist, the one who declared that Serdales stretch "rock", that KM 65 was an ideal spot to start a quarry and install a crusher mill.
This prediction proved to be a bit more correct than the Serdales one, but still, the same type of rock could be found much closer to the starting point of the road. So, even after all those years it is still unclear to me why KM 65 was

picked for the new camp location. Perhaps the consortium didn't like simple solutions.

So, one day everyone moved to KM 65 and two people were to stay at the Serdales site to clean up the remaining stuff that needed to be moved to KM 65 too.
These two people were my roommate and myself. Perhaps there were a few others too, but I can't remember. I think it were just the two of us.
I was young, inexperienced and simple minded, so perfect for the job. Or so the management thought. They did think the same about my roommate, but there they were completely wrong. Boy, did I learn lots of new techniques those days. I still admire my roommate for his simple solutions and in the process not caring too much about the way we did our job.

For instance, there was an electrical cable for the mains supply that we needed to recuperate. This cable was dug in into a trench and covered with earth. I suggested that we'd take a shovel and started unearthing the cable so we could get it out of the trench.
No way, was my roommate's answer.
He had another technique in mind. The management was so gullible that they left a bulldozer in our hands in Serdales.
Wrong.
Completely wrong.
Big mistake from their end.

We tied a steel cable to one end of the electrical cable and hooked that to the bulldozer. It was then just a matter of driving the bulldozer in the opposite direction, towards the beginning of the cable and the electrical cable magically followed the bulldozer. Took us five minutes whereas the planning had been for two days.
We had time now for a drink. Or two.

A similar thing happened when we had to disassemble the steel framework of the main tent. This giant dome-shaped thing.
The galvanized pipe construction beams that held up the plastic cover were bolted to the concrete floor. There were many pipe beams and even many more bolts.
Again we were lucky that the management was so careless as to let a torch cutter at our disposal. At first I objected that we would cut of all the bolts with the torch cutter, stating that one day we perhaps would return to this very same spot and would need those bolts again, but my roommate gave me such a nasty look that I quickly agreed. Cutting it was.
And again we gained a couple of days by doing so.
And again we had time now for a drink. Or two.

All in all, tearing down all the bits and pieces and preparing them to be sent to KM 65 proved to be a relaxed job. We had good fun doing so and at night we dreamed of other things than the possible problems there might be in setting up the camp again at that spot in Serdales sometime in the future.
Shortcuts were invented for us to use.

KM 65 - Spring and summer 1978

By the time we had everything ready for shipment to KM 65, I was ready for yet another (paid) leave. I liked these paid leaves. Even more so because I would meet a lot of good friends again. What a better prospect to go on holiday. And a three week leave gave me plenty of time to hop over to Thailand and witness yet another military coup. As usual.
At one point in time I really began to worry that the military in Thailand were waiting for me to arrive to stage a coup, but after some years I noticed that there were so many coups that it was actually hard for me to miss one.
Back in 1976 however I wasn't prepared for the events of the 6th of October, so after that day I was a bit more cautious when traveling to Thailand. Just a bit though, not too much.

When I returned to Libya, leaving my love behind in Thailand, the erection of the camp at KM 65 was well advanced. The plan was to stay there for a longer period of time, so it was decided to construct a number of stone buildings there. I was promoted assistant chief masonry. We could more or less do what we wanted. Was I then a Freemason?

The team that would erect these small buildings were all Pakistani. I held the plans (there were none) and they reported to me. Which meant they started working at 7 o'clock in the morning, so I had to get up early every day to tell them what to do that day. I hated it that they were always so punctual in the morning.

With a grader we dug a trench around the camp. That trench was the outer limit of the camp and all that was inside that perimeter was claimed by us.
It still is not clear to me as to why we needed that trench, because nearly no one ever came that far anyway. I guess it gave a sense of security to some because that way you could drive in the camp only via one single entrance.
We also had a guardian to watch over us. The function of that guardian was also not clear to me, but he was a very nice man who lived at the outer edge of the camp in his tent. And he was very experienced in making super good tea, that sweet stuff that is an excellent alternative to plain water. So I went to visit him in his tent regularly and chatted with him.
He explained to me that many of the people we hired were from the same tribe as he was, the Toubou. They lived in Libya and since we had to adhere to a clause in our contract with the Libyan government, we had to hire a certain percentage of locals of different ethnics. The Toubou were one such ethnic group. And, as the guard explained, they were soldiers and the only thing they were good at was fighting. They said of themselves that they were askari, which means soldiers. I had no problems with that. On the contrary, I liked these folks and likewise they were very friendly with me too.

The guard's son also worked for me. He was in charge of the laundry and the toilets. At first he had not much to do because the Pakistani were still constructing the laundry and the outside toilets. Later on he had enough to do to keep himself busy most of the time. His father had a good time doing nothing at all and so he was really bored after a while. My visits alone were

not enough to keep him busy. And when boredom become too strong, one day he just packed his tent and went away. He probably went home. His son didn't know neither.

The camp at KM 65 was more extensive than the one at Serdales. Here we had a first dome tent that I think was originally supposed to serve as recreation area, but after we found out that the heat in such a tent was unbearable, we abandoned that plan. So I used it as a storage room for spare parts and the like.
The second dome was our canteen. At the back end we had our kitchen installed and it was neatly sealed to the dome. The kitchen in fact were two cabins, fully equipped with all utensils a cook could dream of. And next to the kitchen we had two cold storage rooms, of which one of the freezers didn't work because of a Freon leak and I couldn't find where the coolant gas (the Freon) was leaking. Inside the thing a good deal of the copper pipes were invisible because they ran through the walls and outside the cabin there was most often just too much wind to be able to do any serious attempt to find the leak.
We could do with what we had however. And if one day we were in dire need of an extra freezer they just would have to sent a specialist to Libya to fix the problem.

The two people that worked in our kitchen at the camp were from Mauritania. I respected them very much, so needless to say we had a very good relation. They both were very devout Muslims but I informed them from the start that I am an atheist. They respected this too, so we got along very well. I'm truly proud that I could call them very good friends. I guess respect is all it takes. We didn't try to convince each other that our view on religion was the right one. And I guess there is no such thing as a right view when it comes to religion. Whatever believe makes you feel comfortable will probably suit you. Just respect each other's believe and values.
Like one day I was driving with one of the cooks to Ubari. After half an hour or so I saw he started moving uncomfortably on his seat and it seemed to me that it was the time of the day that he needed praying. So I asked him if he wanted us to stop for a break and he gladly agreed. He did his prayers and we could continue our way. Everybody happy. It often doesn't take a lot to make people feel comfortable.

We also had a bakery. Also fully equipped. The only ones ever using it was me, when I craved for a good cake, and one of the operators who used to be a baker in a previous life. I think the bakery was used 5 times in all.
The Pakistanis also built a dry storage next to the freezers so we could store food there that could withstand the heat.

The canteen dome was placed on a concrete slab that extended a bit outside the front of the tent where the front entrance was located. Later on this extension would serve as a meeting place for the people that were stuck in the camp. They would sit there unprotected from the sun, just staring in front of them, into emptiness and suffer mentally. That was a very pity sight, but I'll come to that again in a different chapter. (spoiler: I never sat there)

At one corner of our domain, we had dug a large pit in which we dumped our refuse. Mostly leftovers from the kitchen. This later on proved to be not such a brilliant idea, as this pit attracted snakes from miles around. Especially the horned vipers seemed to like this banquet. So, walking around in the camp at night without a torchlight was strongly advised against because of the risk of stepping on a snake by accident. Of course by accident. The only one I knew who stepped on them on purpose was the laundry manager, the son of the guardian. That was his way of catching them.

We never ate snake. I did in Thailand, but not in Libya. Once we ran over some sort of rabbit by car and took the dead animal back to the camp where we cooked and ate it. I thought it was not an undivided success and that the meat tasted bad. So I advised to not hit rabbits again by car as a source of food. Everyone agreed. I didn't say anything about hitting camels, so they tried that. The owner of the camel was not pleased that we left the animal there where we ran over it. This time we should have taken it to the camp to cook. The owner claimed that camel meat was excellent meat to eat. We had to compensate him financially for his loss and then he didn't feel as bad anymore for losing one stray animal. But he still was upset with us for not bringing the camel to the camp and eating it. What a waste.

A bit further away from our living quarters stood the generators. We had seven of 400 kva each and a smaller one of 250 kva. For the power supply of the camp we had two of the big ones and the small one for backup at our disposition. Mostly we had enough power if we used only just one of the bigger ones. The other five big ones were for the quarry.
I'm getting a bit technical now but I think this part is interesting.
The generators were powered by diesel engines. They were 8 cylinder, two stroke diesel engines. When I talk to people that we had two stroke diesels most declare me insane. They have never heard that this type of diesel even exist, but they are very common for powering the propeller of ships.
These engines had advantages for us, but I totally forgot what they were. Anyway, they had the same disadvantages as all other diesels, meaning that once the steady supply of diesel fuel was interrupted, it was impossible to restart them. Unless you had a technician from Benin at hand.
This little guy was responsible for the maintenance of our generators, but not for filling up their tanks. Usually a 500 liter tank lasted for about a day or so. But they needed a refill before the tank was empty. Can you imagine that one day one of the generators ran dry? It had to happen sooner or later, that was written in the stars.
So, the technician came and he explained to me that the only way to get the thing running again was to suck the diesel fuel into the diesel pump through a hose.
We have to suck, he said.
So suck it, I said.
Which he dutifully did.
I could see the flow of diesel come through the tube and he kept on sucking. It came and it came and it came. Until he had a good gush of diesel in his mouth. He quickly covered the end of the hose with his finger to prevent the

diesel fuel from flowing back again and then I thought he went into overdrive. As it turns out, diesel doesn't taste so well and he was spitting and flushing his mouth with water for the next fifteen minutes.
I thanked him extensively for his effort and inquired when he would hook up that tube to the pump again. We needed electricity after all, not a spitting mechanic. It was a good thing I knew that man had a good sense of humor, so afterwards we both had a good laugh about it. I liked him and he was very professional. Apart from the sucking episode, that is. I would have used a pump instead of sucking at the end of a tube.

Across the generators at about two hundred meters away, was the garage and the warehouse for the spare parts they needed in the garage.
For a month or two, the warehouse was staffed by a very gentle an polite Frenchman. He was a bit older than the rest of us and I always could go and see him for a chat. But, as happened so often with many others, after his tour of duty, which lasted two months, he didn't show up anymore. We then found out that the warehouse could also be run without a warehouse keeper. Moreover, we found out that we could run the whole operation with lots of people less, so long as we could keep the right people.

And next to the warehouse was the garage. In the beginning it had been a completely covered dome tent, just like the other domes, but after a somewhat serious sandstorm half of the plastic covering was blown off by the wind. The chief mechanic thought this wasn't too bad an evolution as it was too hot to work inside anyway with the plastic covering on it. So we didn't bother to replace the cover again and they worked in open air.
Needless to say that this did not improve the working atmosphere. Especially when the ever blowing desert wind carried lots of sand with it, people got cranky and everything that could go wrong seemed to go wrong. Also everything that could not go wrong started going wrong. So, work did not advance as planned and the much needed money did not flow in as expected. This was the beginning of the end.

We also had a dog. The beast stayed mostly with my roommate and me. We fed it and cared for it and it could go and roam around freely. There was nothing or nowhere to go to, so no need to keep it on a leash.
It looked a bit like a Belgian shepherd dog, but really wasn't. This was a friendly dog and didn't bother anyone. Usually it slept under our cabin and could be found there or not too far away.
We got the dog because the office chief at the Tripoli office had it there as a pup but couldn't keep it because he was out of the office too often. So he asked if we cared for having a dog at the camp.
One day, at the camp there were complaints from the kitchen personnel that there were too many snakes at our refuse pit, so I decided to cover it up with sand and dig a new one. For that I needed the excavator and I liked playing with that machine, so the pit was a good excuse.
The machine was parked outside, not too far from our cabin, so I jumped in it and drove away. Just when I drove the first half meter I heard our dog howl as I never heard her howl before. I was curious about that because the noise seemed to come from not too far away and so I got out of the excavator only

to find our dog's rear end under one of the tires of the excavator. It looked bad. Very bad, and I knew the dog could not be saved anymore. She was caught by the tire from her belly down to her hind legs. Everything under the tire was crushed. She must have fallen asleep in the shade of the excavator, in front of one of the tires and since she was used to the noise of the engine she was not alerted when I started it.
In the mean time my roommate had also heard the howling and he came to see what that meant. I drove the excavator a bit backwards and the dog came free, but she couldn't move anymore. My roommate tried to pull her from under the excavator, but the dog was in so much pain that it snapped to his arm and bit right through the glass of his watch. He then suggested we had to bring the dog to a veterinary to get her fixed again. I don't think he realized how seriously hurt the dog was. And the only vet I knew, if he was available, was the one in the slaughterhouse. I knew what he would do. There was no point in letting the animal suffer any longer, so I told my mate that it was best to make an end to its misery right here and right now.
By now, several people were gathered around us and the dog and I decided to get it over with right away. I took a metal pipe and hit the dog right on its head with it. Nothing much happened. I only the sad eyes of the dog looking directly at me as if to ask what the hell I was trying to do. I had to hit her harder again and again until her skull was completely crushed. I dropped the pipe and told the Pakistanis to take the dog away and bury it somewhere away from the camp. Me nor my mate were able to do it ourselves. I was sick of sorrow and had to go in our cabin and have a large drink of our booze. My mate softly cried.

Outside, in the open, we had a giant plastic bag laying on the ground. It could contain up to 20000 liters of water and was sturdy enough for me to walk on it. Someone, me for instance, had to take care of the water. I suppose I was promoted assistant water manager. This meant I had to fill up the water bag and check the chloride content of the water by means of a refractometer and if and when necessary add some chlorine tablets.
When the water consumption was high enough then the water was not too much heated by the scorching sun. It arrived lukewarm at our cabin, saving us the trouble of having to use the boiler for taking a shower with warm water. It was however important that the water would stay more or less free of harmful bacteria, so I checked the level of chlorine every day or two. There was not enough chlorine in the water to taste it. They were really small tablets and nobody ever complained. And as far as I know nobody ever got sick from drinking that water.
By that time I could fetch the water at a newly drilled well not too far away. This well was a project of the Libyan government in an attempt to grow food in the desert. It was only years later, long after we were gone, that I found out that they also drilled for oil at that very spot and that there even was a small airstrip. That part of the Fezzan (that's what the Sahara is called over there) was not known for its oil reserves. Or maybe they did know it but needed the road before they could exploit it.
It was a Bulgarian company that drilled the wells. Not just a well that you would drill in your back garden. No, this well was 800 meters deep. And the water quality was excellent.

We had a really very nice Mercedes truck tractor, a 6 x 6, but the car mechanics found out that after a couple of months of use the gearbox had a problem and so we could use that truck only to drive short distances. Ideal play toy for me to fetch water. We had a trailer with a 20000 liter cistern, so one day I wanted to hook the truck to the trailer to haul water in. And believe me, I knew how to do that because I was appointed assistant truck driver. So I moved the truck tractor backwards to get the slide skid of the tractor aligned with the kingpin of the trailer. Not too difficult. Then I was supposed to hear a click when the locking mechanism of the skid plate engaged with the kingpin of the trailer. Checked that. Then I visually checked that the trailer was hooked up correctly and the lock was closed. After that I connected the airlines from the tractor to the trailer and waited for the brakes to release (I'm pretty sure I knew what I was doing). So, once everything was ready to go and the green light was on, telling me the brakes of the trailer were off, I drove away.
Alas, it was just the tractor that drove away. The cistern stayed where it was and fell down. The car mechanics were not really happy with my exploit. They checked the locking mechanism of the skid and concluded that it worked well. They then lifted the cistern and hooked it up and gave it a try. The cistern fell off the skid a second time.
It took a while before they figured out what went wrong and then fixed it. We were saved and I could fetch water.
We had placed one of our generators at the well and connected to the pump and could thus pump up water. It was said that at lesser depths there were layers of water too, but the yield would be lower and the water quality was not so good. That plus the fact that they were paid by the meter they had to drill made the well so deep.

Driving back to the camp from Ubari after dark was an interesting experience. In the dark it becomes very difficult to orientate in the desert. Everything starts to look alike and just when you think you're on the right track, you find out that you don't recognize anything around you. You couldn't see the dunes or the cliff. And it was useless to look at the soil to see if you recognized that because it all looked the same in the dark. It was a bit scary at times.
But, we had a 1000 watt spotlight installed on top of the entrance of the canteen dome and that light pointed towards Ubari. That spotlight could be seen from more than 30 kilometers away. So in practice it meant that we just left Ubari and started driving in the direction where the camp was supposed to be and never stopped until we saw the spotlight of our camp.
The reason why we couldn't stop was that we couldn't figure out what type of soil we were driving on and should we stop at the wrong spot we might be stuck there for the rest of the night. That is also why we (the experienced ones) never stopped on an upward slope. It was near sure that we wouldn't be able to drive away that way. If we needed to stop on a slope then if needed we always made a turn first so as to point the front of the car downhill.
Once we could see the spotlight we just followed that direction and if we didn't meet too many acacia trees or camels on the way, we should reach the camp without too many difficulties.

KM 65 - War is coming.

There were many different nationalities working at the camp. We had, by Libyan law, to hire a specific number of people from different ethnic backgrounds. This also included a certain tribe from the border region of Libya and Chad, the Toubou. It was a bit problematic because they openly said they could do only one thing and that was to fight. They called themselves *askari*, meaning soldiers. They were all unskilled workers, but they liked to war upon our Pakistani laborers.
I respected them for what they were. And they could make very good tea. This was really sweet stuff. I got invited many times to have a cup of tea with them and I had the impression that we got along rather well. I found them to be very interesting people and I definitely liked them. They were not hostile at all towards me, which I cannot say from many of my fellow Europeans who were there too. They really loathed some of the Europeans and that was apparently a mutual feeling.
One day the Pakistani foreman came to my cabin and told me that the Toubou had plans to kill them. This of course I could not allow. The Pakistani were our masons and they still had to finish quite a number of buildings. I needed them. At first I didn't take this situation seriously but soon I was convinced that what the Toubou had planned was a lot more serious than I imagined and that the Toubou indeed had plans to attack the Pakistani.
I asked one of the Mauritanians, a short guy, to follow me with a wheel loader into the camp of the Toubou. I went in every tent and collected all the possible weapons they had concealed or just spread out openly. I guess I collected about 250 kg of "weapons" that day. I then asked the guy in the wheel loader to dump the stuff in front of my cabin and left word to the Toubou that if they wanted their weapons back, they could come and collect them, but they first had to kill me.
You know, I was young then and fearless (I still am fearless). Perhaps a bit reckless too, but I counted on the good relation I had with the Toubou.
Since my roommate was on leave I was alone in the cabin. That night I slept with a big machete under my pillow, ready to slash down anyone daring to enter my cabin.
The next morning one of the Toubou knocked politely on my door and handed me over a small piece of paper. On the paper they called me chief and it was written that they agreed with me and would not kill the Pakistani, because of me. They didn't really see me as their chief but as someone who deserved their respect and acted accordingly. The language I spoke to them and my actions accordingly were things they could understand.
The machete went back in the storage room and I could go on tea visits again. There was mutual respect and laughter again.

And the Pakistanis? They suddenly all disappeared after payday and we never saw them back again. I felt pity for them because they must have lived truly in fear for a while.
The Toubou stayed and did their thing. Which wasn't much. But I liked these rascals. Apart from poverty they had a sense of unity, a notion of belonging somewhere. Which I hadn't then and still don't have. I belong everywhere I

guess. Or maybe nowhere at all. It doesn't matter to me, as long as the people are friendly.

Politics.

When it comes to politics in Libya, we had little or nothing to do with that. We were supposed to follow the law and for the rest shut up. Which we generally did.

Only one time we were directly involved in a decision of the Supreme Leader. It was known that many Libyans stored a lot of cash money in their houses. This often was money that was never declared officially, so they could use it only for cash payments and with people they trusted. The Central People's Committee (under impulse of the Supreme Leader) one day decided that this black money thing needed to stop, so it was decided to print new banknotes that would replace the existing ones. All this was planned and executed in greatest secrecy and I think very few people in Libya knew that this was going to happen. Those who were rich enough had their money parked at European banks, so it didn't bother them too much. But for many Libyans this came as a shock. One day it was broadcast that after three days the old money would be void and everyone would have to use the new banknotes. And in the meantime only very limited amounts of money could be exchanged at the banks. If they were open at all. The man from whom we rented himself and his truck had the cupboard under his kitchen sink stuffed with banknotes. That money was meant to buy him a new truck. He was not so happy with the plans of the Central Committee. Not happy at all.

We were informed by someone in Ubari that there would be new banknotes and we tried to exchange a handful of the old ones, but we never managed to do so. I went to a bank but there were too many people queuing up already and nobody was sure that the bank had a sufficient supply of new banknotes anyway. So when the day came, we couldn't buy anything at all. And we couldn't pay any bill neither because all the financial transactions with our suppliers were cash only. And of course right then I had to go shopping in Sebha.
We drove to Ubari, where we had an office too and all we had with us were a few tin cans of beans. And no can opener. We had to be inventive to open the tin cans but managed to do so after a while. And we ate them with a putty-knife as that was all we could find to scoop up the beans.
We then drove to Sebha and by the time our fridge in that office was empty, we were given a handful of new Dinars by our local representative and I could buy at least a little bit of a supply for the camp.

Driving in Libya

In Libya, I drove around with anything that had wheels and I didn't have a valid driving license for Libya. I even didn't have a driving Belgian licence for a truck but it was fun driving trucks and the truck didn't care about the license.

When the police stopped me and asked for my papers I just told them every time that I worked for the road building company and that my papers were at the ministry to get stamped. That did the trick.
So, we as Western Europeans had very few problems with the Libyans or the government. The situation was very different for Eastern Europeans and the black Africans. They could have rough times there and the prisons were not so comfortable.

Going home

No, not me going home. One of the French electricians finished his eight week tour of duty and was ready to go on leave. I was requested to drive him to Sebha and he would be my only passenger. Not that I minded driving alone because I often drove that route on my own, but some company was always welcome. And I liked that electrician. He taught me a lot as we went to different places and problems together. Like when we went to hook up that deep well pump or when trouble shooting the relay controlled quarry operating system.
And yes, he knew his trade and we got along quite well.

This trip reminded me of the first time my roommate went on a leave. We were still at Serdales then and he wouldn't let me drive. He was just too excited to go back home and he wanted to go there as fast as possible. That was an eight hour drive. Five hours through the sand to Ubari and then another three hours on an asphalted road from Ubari to Sebha.
My mate didn't seem to care too much about sparing the car so I told him I didn't like his way of driving. In my opinion he was wrecking the car.
So what, he said. We'll get to Sebha all right, so shut up.
But I have to ride back all the way to Serdales with that same car you're wrecking now, I said.
He then slowed down a little bit. Not much, but a little bit anyway.

For the electrician it was obvious that before leaving he wanted to say goodbye to all his palls. I was in a hurry because we were already late and I wanted to arrive in Sebha before dark. It was awkward driving through the desert, even if it was on an asphalted road.
He kept jumping in and out of every cabin of his palls and finally, after fifteen minutes, he appeared, ready to take off, drunk as hell.
I think they must have fed him up a liter of booze during those fifteen minutes. He managed to get in the car with difficulties and I drove off. Two minutes later he fell asleep, with his head leaning against the window.
I didn't like this a bit because it meant I had no company after all. He was just ballast, sleeping it off. I then thought it was perhaps a good idea to give him a couple souvenirs from that trip and so I took every bump and pit in the road on his side of the car. His head kept on bumping vigorously against the window but he kept on sleeping right through it.

We made it to Sebha and he then woke up. Not feeling well he went straight to bed. I had diner and a good night's sleep.

The next morning when he woke up he complained about having a headache and I told him I wondered how he got that. He didn't say a word about him being drunk the day before and I didn't say a thing of him hitting the car's window with his head.
I drove him to the airport where he took the flight to Tripoli. I never saw him back again.

The quarry.

We had a nice set of stone crushers set up at the quarry. The quarry was a couple of kilometers away from the camp. This at least was one thing they had done right because the crushers create an awful lot of dust and we had dust enough in the camp already without the crushers.

Since the electrician was on leave, I was appointed assistant electrician. And it was expected that sooner or later there would be trouble with the relay technique in the control room. It was sooner.
I was summoned to the control room, so I collected all the gear I could find that an electrician possibly might need and off I went.
At first, I didn't understand a thing about how this worked. The French electrician had explained a few things to me about it, but it was all new to me, so I had to start more or less from scratch and try to find out what went wrong. It was nice that they had an electrical diagram that showed how all the relays were interconnected to one another. And I was proud of myself because after twenty minutes I had figured out which relay was broken. And on top of that, they even had a spare relay, which was more than I could hope for.
The defective relay was replaced and they were up and going again. Cheers for me.

The crushers were an important part of the road building. We had to shovel up rocks that were laying all around the crushers and then dump them in the first one of the series. The rocks would then be broken in smaller pieces and the pieces that were still too big went into the next crusher. And the next and the next. I think there were four in total. The result was gravel mixed with fine dust. Ideal to mix with some water and then spread it out on the bedding of the road and compact it.
On that bedding first came layers of the ground that was available next to the trajectory of the road and that served as a base for carrying the road. At least that part of the job was well prepared by the geologist.
All layers were each compacted with a compactor till they were dense and flat enough. On top of the last layer came a coat of bitumen so that the asphalt would stick well to the layers beneath later on. Spoiler: we never reached that last stage.

In between the crushers at the quarry were conveyor-belts to transport the crushed rocks from one crusher to the next. More often than not, debris fell on the cover beneath the conveyor. That cover was there to prevent debris from dropping on the returning part of the belt. But, a lot of debris could accumulate on that cover and so it needed to be removed constantly.

There was a Toubou man assigned to the task of clearing the debris with a hook. The hook allowed him to grate the debris away between the belt and the cover.
Nice hook but our man thought it would be easier and faster if he just removed the debris with his hands.
All went well until one day he saw his right arm going up withe the conveyor belt while the rest of his body stayed behind. Gone arm. Ripped off neatly.
After the guy had a quick visit to our infirmary (yes, we had an infirmary too) my roomy was called in to take him to the hospital in Ubari. And just to be sure, you never know, he took the arm with him too. Either my mate still believed in Santa Claus or he wanted to give the impression to the victim that perhaps, maybe, who knows, it might be possible that in the hospital in Ubari they could sew the arm back on.

When he arrived with the patient and the arm at the hospital he deposited the arm on the doctor's desk. The doctor did not appreciate this gesture and looked quite upset. He then took the arm with lots of disgust and dropped it into his bin. The wounded man didn't like that.

A week or two later the guy was back at the camp, missing an arm, but he could use the other arm to collect the money that we were still due to him and after saying goodbye to his friends he went back to wherever he lived. We never heard anything from anymore him afterwards. He was now at the mercy of the Libyan social security.

The crushers performed well for a couple of months, but then the bearing of the main crusher jammed and the damn thing refused any further service.
Panic.
Consternation.
Chief engineer, engineer, chief mechanic and mechanics all agreed that the part had to be sent back to Europe because it would be impossible to repair it here on site. This meant the work stopped because we needed the gravel from the quarry to be able to continue working.
So, word was sent to the headquarters in Tripoli and negotiations began on how to get that part as soon as possible to Europe and back after reparation.
Panic again. This would take weeks and we were really short of cash at that time. We absolutely needed to get work done so we could claim another installment.
After a couple of days, when the first excitement was over and people just sat around, complaining and suffering, I took a look at that part and decided it was worth a try. I estimated that I would be able to get the shaft removed from the bearing. After all, in Company A back in Belgium (remember?) I had done similar things which seemed a lot harder to me.
So I talked to the bosses and asked them if I could give it a try. They figured that nothing was lost with me trying, but told me in advance that it was simply impossible to remove the shaft with the tools we had on hand.

My friend, the Togolese welder was still around and I needed him to weld a couple of things together first. Then with some chains (I hate chains but

nothing else at hand) an a couple of hydraulic jacks I started pushing out the shaft from the bearing.
What exactly happened next was and still is not clear to me. I suppose that one of the mechanics must have seen me really, effectively, pushing out the shaft and before I knew what happened five or six of the mechanics pushed me and the welder away and they started jacking like madmen themselves. Cheers all over the place that they managed to remove the shaft from the bearing.
I took the welder by the shoulder and we silently disappeared to have a well earned drink. Two days later the main crusher was up and running again. I was now appointed assistant mechanic.

I don't know what happened to those mechanics once they arrived in the desert, but they seemed to have turned off their brains upon arrival. Or was it just a heat shock?
We used lots of machinery that was typical for road building. I knew absolutely nothing about road building, but I could read.
One of those machines is a scraper. It does scrape earth from the ground and collects it in a bowl after which an apron closes off the bowl and the machine rides to wherever that earth needs to be dumped. It can deposit the earth in a similar way as it collected it in the first place as a pusher pushes out the previously collected earth, so it deposits a layer of earth that then can be compacted by the compactors. The latter is what compactors are meant to do anyway.

They had a problem with the drive of one of these scrapers and the mechanics removed the drive shafts to inspect the drive. They didn't really find anything wrong with it but adjusted here and there a little bit and then wanted to test the result of their intervention. They started up the engine and absolutely nothing happened.
Panic. We needed that scraper.

After my stint with the shaft of the crusher, one of the mechanics was smart (and desperate) enough to come and see me if I perhaps could help because they had run out of ideas.
I like hopeless situations. Since it's hopeless people won't shout at you if you can't find a solution. So the first thing I asked was if they had a manual for that scraper. Yes, they had, but it was in English and they could only speak French so they didn't understand a thing of what was written in the manual.
But I did.

After five minutes I had found what I was looking for. Their problem was exactly described in the manual. And the manual said that it was impossible to test the drive mechanism with the drive shafts removed. And of course they had removed the drive shafts. Sometimes I get a mean looking smile on my face. This was one of those times. I told the mechanic to assemble the drive shafts back in, start the engine and get the damn thing back to work without much more explanation. He looked at me in utterly disbelieve, but since I was the only one giving him instructions, he did so and the scraper worked happily ever after.

Now that I'm at it praising myself I shall just continue doing so. Not that I was always right, but I can't remember ever being wrong in Libya. Except when they dropped me off somewhere in Tripoli or asked me to drive them to the city center. Even the city center I couldn't find. Well, nobody's perfect I guess.

The excavator was a nice machine but it could be damaged if one wasn't careful enough. The excavator has a four toothed shovel to dig. If not careful, it was possible to touch the tires of the excavator with the teeth of the shovel. Not just touch, but puncture them as well. And yes, you guessed it, someone managed to do just that.
The problem was that every now and then I needed that excavator too but it stood there idle for some weeks already with a damaged tire and no spare tire to fix it.
So I went to see the resident engineer, who was by now my friend, after the Cuban cigars and the jammed bearing, and asked him if it was OK with him if I fixed the excavator. Of course he agreed. If you can fix it. Take what you need and do it.
I was tempted by his "take what you need", but decided it was probably more prudent to not interpret this order too loosely. I so resisted the temptation and stayed with repairing the tire.

What I noticed from the start was that the bolts of the rims of the excavator were positioned identically as the ones on most of our trucks. And we did have spare tires for the trucks. Only that the truck's tires were about half as wide as the excavator's tires. But, when two truck tires were placed side by side on the excavator, they were just perfect.
The chief mechanic, a French guy who was on the brink of losing his mind, saw that I was stealing a couple of truck tires and came after me, yelling like crazy. Where do you think you're going with these tires, he shouted. I shrank a bit because an upset French chief mechanic is not someone to mess with. He was in a state that I thought he might have possessed supernatural powers and I wasn't ready to find that out. So I very politely explained to him that yes, the resident engineer said I could take what I wanted (missed a nice opportunity there) and was going to put the tires on the excavator. It was now the chief mechanic's turn to shrink. He realized on the spot that I was right and damned himself for not having that idea himself. He kept on swearing and walked away.
I had my excavator now and asked all the operators to please be careful when excavating because we only had a limited amount of truck tires.

Disaster in the sand dunes

One hot afternoon I saw from a distance that somebody was walking towards our camp from a direction where there was absolutely nothing. What was that guy doing there? He was dressed in the traditional Tuareg clothes and walked a bit askew. Like if he was missing a shoe or so.
The man came closer and when close enough I could see that his clothes were covered in blood. He could walk but was very tired and thirsty. So we made him sit down and gave him water to drink.

It seemed that he and his colleagues were cruising through the sand dunes at high speed and they had the bad luck to ride over a dune that was shaped like a wave at sea, so once on top of the dune they suddenly found themselves flying through the air and, as expected, the car dived down, nose first. The impact was so serious that he was the only one able to walk and seek help and he knew that the we were nearest possibility to get help. One of the passengers was dead on impact.

When our first male nurse left us for the last time, he called me to him and said I was to be assistant nurse from then on. He even took five minutes to explain to me how and where I could place injections in people's bodies. I liked the prospect.
Being assistant nurse I felt it my duty to ask the man where he was in pain. Mainly his back he told me, so I took a look there and I saw he was missing a handful of skin and a piece of meat there. Forgive me if I don't use the correct medical terms, but what can you expect after a five minute crash course in first aid? In any case, it had stopped bleeding already. I was tempted to practice sewing him up, but decided it was perhaps safer if a doctor would do that.
I was requested to bring the man to the Ubari hospital and another team would go after the other passengers.

It doesn't rain often in the desert, but the day before we had something what can be described as rainfall. The desert is not very good in absorbing rainfall, so the top layer of the sand and dust was still wet. I took the dirt road next to the road we were building. It felt very slippery and when I drifted through the first bend, the injured man sitting next to me turned really pale so I thought it perhaps was a good idea to slow down a little bit. We arrived safe and well at the hospital and I dropped him of at the entrance where the medical staff took care of him.
What I didn't know at that time was that he was an official working for some ministry and that the car they just wrecked was an official government car.

But, a week or so later, the Ubari police came to the camp. Not to decorate or thank us, but they ordered us to go and fetch the car and bring it to the police station in Ubari.
This was an error. A critical error.
If he would have asked us politely, we would have gone and get the car, but ordering us?
OK, my roomy said, we'll fetch the car.
I looked at him in disbelief but was smart enough to keep my mouth shut.
The next day we prepared an expedition to find the car and deliver it to the Ubari police station. We loaded one of our Land Cruisers full with all kinds of tools that we thought we might need, picked up a Belgian car mechanic to come with us and set off.
It was easy to find the wrecked Land Rover. We had to replace a tire and pull back the body work of the car here and there so all tires ran free. My buddy tried to start the engine and it worked. So we didn't have to tow it, we could drive it to Ubari. Happy!

The mechanic and I took the Land Cruiser and drove next to the damaged Land Rover to keep an eye on it. After ten minutes or so I noticed some smoke coming from the Land Rover's radiator and made sign to my mate he better stop and check. He firmly shook his head no and continued driving making signs that everything was OK. At one point there was even more smoke coming from the radiator and then the car stopped. The engine had stalled. We had to tow the car anyway.
When we arrived in Ubari we put the Land Rover on the parking lot in front of the police office and left without saying anything.
Mission completed as ordered.

Water wells and goats.

My boss was a gentle and friendly man. When someone in Ubari asked him if we could deepen out a well he had in the desert that was bogged down he just couldn't refuse this request. So I was appointed for the job, jumped in the excavator and drove 20 km or so. The owner of the well was waiting already together with his friends and relatives. Their well consisted of a number of concrete rings that were stacked one on top of another and had a diameter of about four meter. The rings had already sunk deep into the soil by about one meter and the men had cleared some space in front of it where the camels could come so they could reach the water to drink. This was where I could position the excavator.

The first half an hour things went fine and I dug out a considerable heap of sand. But then the engine started to sputter whenever I went a bit too askew with the excavator in order to try to dig deeper. This was because the level of the fuel in the tank of the excavator became too low and the motor started sucking air instead of fuel. After some more attempts and the excavator's engine still sputtering I had to quit. I still needed to get the excavator out of the deep and I knew what it meant if there was getting too much air into the fuel pump. And no mechanic around to suck the tube.

An excavator is a very nice peace of equipment. Especially at places where any other machine can't come. The power that the hydraulic shovel is so strong that you can actually lift the excavator from the ground with it. And that was exactly what I needed to do in order to get out of that pit.

While I was digging I saw that the men came with a goat. And with the next scoop I took from the well I saw the goat laying on the ground with its throat slid open. It looked like that was diner. And so it was. They stared a fire with the wood they could find around the well and the goat was cut in pieces and thrown into the fire.
With salt on it it tasted really good but no beer or wine to go with it though.
After diner I said goodbye to the men and drove back to the camp in the dark. No problem to reach the camp as I could see the spotlight of the canteen very well.

Being a nurse.

Since I was promoted assistant nurse of the camp, people came to see me for treatment. No, don't worry, I didn't play doctor. What they needed mostly was some aspirin or pills for a sour throat.

But one day, one of the Algerian guys came to see me. I can't remember what his function was, but he was just back from a leave and his doctor in Algeria had prescribed him injections that he needed to receive within certain intervals. Now, finally, I could practice my non-existent skill and gave the guy his injection. Obviously I didn't tell him he was experiment # 1.

The nurse had explained to me where to aim in the butt because at that spot there was the least chance of hitting a vein. And injections that needed to go intramuscular were not supposed to end up directly in the bloodstream. That much I remembered.
You could check if the needle was in a vein or not, once it was thrown in. It's kind of like playing darts, but from a much closer distance. So what you do is get the needle in and then pull the plunger a bit and see if you draw blood. If so, don't extract the needle completely but pull it back a little bit and insert again in another direction. Repeat the trick with the plunger. If you (or the patient) really had bad luck you would end up again in a vein and had to repeat the process again until you couldn't see blood coming anymore when pulling the plunger.
I cleaned his butt with ether (only that part where the needle had to come or what did you think) and thrusted the needle into the meat. Then pulled the plunger a bit and hit the jackpot. The needle was in a vein. I told the guy to not move and did exactly as the nurse told me to do in that case. Pull back the needle a little bit and then push back in it again in a slightly different direction. It worked and I injected the liquid in his butt.
When finished, the guy thanked me and assured me that I way way more experienced than his doctor and the injection was less painful this time. You're welcome!

Fire in the house.

Our kitchen was well equipped but, as with all kitchen utensils, they tend to suffer from wear and tear.
Both the chiefs were Mauritanians and they knew how to cook. Everybody loved the way they prepared rabbit, with a tomato sauce. A real delicacy. And one day I discovered that their religion prohibited them from eating rabbit. It seems there are different versions of how to be a devout Muslim and their version didn't agree with rabbits.
Pork, for obvious reasons, was never on the menu. But French fries were. You gave these guys a bag of potatoes and they turned them into excellent French fries. Yummy. Felt like being at home.

One day one of the cooks came running towards me saying that the kitchen was on fire.
Now, if there was one thing I didn't like then it was having no kitchen. This call was top priority. Already several people were gathered around the kitchen and were discussing what to do.

Rule number one: don't panic. Stay cool. (I like that part)
A lot of smoke came out of the kitchen and I saw some flames too. The cooks told me that the frying pot for the French fries was on fire.
Oh, if it's only that. No problema. Please find me a blanket or a bed sheet.
Within seconds someone handed me a bed sheet and I went inside the kitchen, armed with the sheet. The plug was still in the socket and the electrical resistors were happily heating up the oil of the frying pot more and more. And flames we had. I remembered once having read in a book that in cases like that you first pull out the plug from the socket.
Done.
Then you throw a fire blanket on the source of the flames.
Done.

This was the point when something I had read didn't correspond with that what should have happened next. The fire was now supposed to be extinguished, but instead the bed sheet caught fire and we had a lot more fun. It started getting hot in there. Big flames sprouting out of the fryer.
I yelled to bring me a wet bed sheet this time, not a dry one. I pulled off the burning bed sheet and stepped on it to extinguish the flames. That worked. Step two again, this time with a wet bed sheet. The fire stopped immediately.
Now, the researcher in me was awaken and I wanted to put a theory to test. If the oil was hot enough, it would self-ignite and the fire would start again.
Step three: remove the wet bed sheet again and see what happens. And yes, the hot oil caught fire again. Physics seemed to work. Time to place the wet sheet on the frying pot again because everyone started getting a bit nervous.
Now, that went well.
That was the point that someone shouted at me I should stop playing because he was hungry and wanted the kitchen for the cooks so they could continue to prepare our evening meal.
By now there was a lot of smoke inside the kitchen and I had to come out and to my dismay stop playing and experimenting.
The resident engineer was waiting for me outside, at a safe distance, and congratulated me for my coolness and for saving the kitchen. He seemed genuinely happy and didn't comment on my physics experiment. I didn't receive a medal neither. But we had diner.

Fine tuning.

In our canteen, close to the kitchen, we had set up a bain-marie where the prepared food could be kept warm. I always had trouble with the idea why people wanted their food to be hot in the desert. Still don't get it. But they insisted.

One of the employees was an Algerian man and he was the only one who managed to also get his wife hired by us. A nice lady and I wonder how that guy ever was able to marry her.
Our Algerian man was the type that could best be compared with Fonzie from the series Happy Days. But he was a born storyteller. So we made him tell story after story. If less than half of what he told us was even half true then he must have lived a life we can only dream about. Or praise ourselves lucky that

it happened to him and not to us. He was one of a kind and seemed to end up always at those places where problems lurked.

We let him play boss over a team of which nobody was quite sure what they were supposed to do. But our Fonzie did small jobs too himself. That's how he was.
The kitchen personnel complained with me that they continuously stumbled over the electrical wire that supplied the bain-marie set with electrical power. Time for action.
I called Fonzie to come over and showed him that wire. To make sure that he understood what I was talking about I kicked the wire with my foot. You see Fonzie?, that wire. And told him to take a hammer and chisel and make a groove in the concrete floor where the wire then would be cemented in.
Fonzie nodded very hard. He understood and don't worry boss, he would take care of this. I could count on Fonzie.

After half an hour or so I went to see how he advanced. Fonzie was not Speedy Gonzales, we all knew that, so better to have a look at the progress every now and then. You never knew, he might be telling stories and I wouldn't want to miss that too.
When I got there and saw what he was doing I had to sit or I would drop flat on the floor laughing my ass off.
When I kicked that wire with my foot earlier on, it lay twisted and wiggled on the floor and that was exactly the trajectory he was chiseling out. Not off by a millimeter.
It could have been worse I guess.

Visiting the hospital - as a patient

I came back from yet another leave and to my own surprise I had spent most of that time in Thailand again. I wonder why.
By now I thought that since I was used to the desert heat, the tropical heat in Thailand wouldn't bother me anymore. Wrong. Very wrong.
My body wasn't adjusted to the wet tropical heat, only to the dry desert heat. Man, did I sweat in Thailand! And no way to show off with me being used to heat. My Thai friends laughed at me when I told them that Libya was a lot hotter. They knew better and so do I now.
The key to solve this issue is the air. In the desert the air is very dry. The relative humidity in the desert can be 20% and lower. Much lower even. In the tropics it can be 95% and up. The amount of water vapor in the air, which determines the relative humidity, is what is mostly holding the heat. Air is not a good heat conductor but water is. So, the more water there is in the air (higher relative humidity) the more heat it can store within a same volume. If the relative humidity in the desert would be 95% with a temperature of 50°C and up, then it would be impossible to live there for us. We would be literally cooked. The desert feels more like a sauna and the tropics like the water in a hot bathtub.

Drinking enough liquid was not an issue in Thailand. There was plenty of beer and soft drinks were cheap. I drank a lot of both.

But in the desert we weren't aware of sweating. It was incredibly hot alright, but we weren't really thirsty so as a result we didn't drink enough on average. One reason might have been that there was no beer available, only water and the water wasn't digesting anymore.

So it happened that when I peed I started to feel a burning sensation starting from my kidneys all the way down to the outlet. It wasn't a pleasant feeling because it actually hurt. And after some days it got worse. That looked grim. And it also felt that way. The problem was that the pain got slowly worse and never ceased. It was like a toothache in your back for 24 hours a day. I felt a very tiny little bit relieved if I could walk. So I walked in circles all the time. And just when I was in the midst of yet another pain shot, there was a guy who asked me if I was feeling well. I told him to go away because I could hit him right in the face any time now. He chose not to find out if that was truly going to happen and left me alone. After nearly a week I told my roomy to grab a car and drive me to the hospital in Ubari.

My buddy drove me to the office in Ubari first to get instructions about what to do with me. My boss was there and he seemed in no hurry to give an answer. Truth is that he probably didn't know himself where to send me. So I told them that I would leave on foot and find myself a doctor. My buddy pushed me in a car and drove me to a nearby medical center. Some kind of first aid station. It was staffed by Indians. I wasn't sure if it was meant for Indians only but whilst there I explained what was going on and they decided to give me an injection in my arm with something. I didn't know what it was but at that moment anything would do. It would work very soon, they told me. I thanked them and we left.
But the pain didn't go away and I couldn't hold it anymore. I was going crazy by now from that constant pain. We went back to the Indians and there I nearly collapsed and started crying from the pain. The Indians looked at me with surprise and then looked at each other with even more surprise. One of the ladies there was feeling sorry for me and she grabbed something from a cabinet nearby and told the guys to inject that into my arm. And so they did. I don't know what it was . Morphine I guess. Anyway, it worked immediately and I instantly felt really relieved. I threw many grateful looks in the direction of the lady and she acknowledged.
We were then told that it would be best to bring me to the hospital because what they gave me was something against the pain, but it was no medication to cure whatever it was I had.
Off we went to the hospital and I was in a happy mood. Good thing that my mate drove the car. I would have hit just about anything with the car out of sheer fun because the pain was gone.

In the hospital we somehow made it to a doctors examining room and I sat down there. When he entered and saw us there he was upset. I think we had to do some paperwork first, but since everything was in Arabic we skipped that part. No matter how upset the man was, I kept on smiling my heavenly smile. Finally I was admitted to a hospital room and could lay down on a bed. Another doctor came to see me and I don't remember what he said or did to me. Only that he was friendly and was soft spoken. I instantly liked the guy.

If I remember well I got an infuse in my arm and they left me on my own. There were other patients in that room too. We were four or five. I didn't care and was just happy that I could lay down and didn't feel the pain anymore.

The next morning that friendly doctor came to see me again. He was an Egyptian Copt. The doctor was rather corpulent and walked with braces on his legs. He had difficulties walking but he was a good-tempered man. And he spoke English and he liked talking. So we had our daily chats of small talk. That's when I found out he was from Egypt and had a house in one of the suburbs of Cairo. The fact that he was a Copt, an Egyptian christian, meant that he didn't live according to the Islamic rules. Which was not always evident in Egypt.
Later on I found out that the present-day Coptic writing was in fact based on ancient Egyptian writing, Demotic. These ancient Egyptians wrote in hieroglyphs for official texts, but for daily use they used a sort of writing that is more similar to what we use nowadays, Demotic writing. It was that type of writing that could be linked to old Coptic writing, and the latter could be read and understood, and so the hieroglyphs could be deciphered by going from old Coptic to Demotic to Hieroglyphs. (Champoleon and the likes, remember?)
I kept contact with the doctor for several years after I had left Libya and he was back in Egypt. A truly nice man.

It seemed that I had inflamed renal tubules but not actual kidney stones. Same pain, but different remedy. A week later I could leave the hospital and had to promise the doctor that I would drink more. I can only guess he meant water, but in my mind booze would have to do too.

Traffic in Libya.

At a first glance one might be tempted to think that traffic in Libya was either chaotic or that there were no traffic rules, but it was neither of that. Traffic in Libya in the cities was not so different from traffic in Belgium. We drove just as reckless. There was a difference however outside of the cities.
If you had a slower car or truck in front of you on the desert roads (yes, some people really did drive slower than us) and when they noticed that you wanted to pass them, they would check the road in front of them and if they could not see giant potholes or oncoming traffic, they would turn on their right blinker and then you could rely on the road being clear and safe to overtake the vehicle in front of you. Nice gesture and soon we did the same. Not that many people wanted to overtake us as we were usually the fastest.

What was a bit strange was that there were many Italian built Fiat trucks and that those trucks all had the steering wheel on the right, whereas traffic in Libya was right hand driving. Most of the time anyway.
There were frequent truck accidents on the desert roads and the damaged trucks were often left on the spot. This I think had two reasons. One was that it was likely too expensive to haul the wreckage to a garage and the other was that these wrecks were a sad reminder of what could happen to you if not driving carefully.

So, I reasoned and I think the Libyans too, that if the steering wheel is on the right and you had a frontal collision, you had a fifty percent chance that the right side of the truck was not hit on impact. The left side of the truck had a very much higher probability of being hit in a heads on collision. And if the steering wheel is on the left, that's where the drives sits.

I'm not sure if there were significantly more traffic accidents in Libya then there were in Belgium. We could see more wrecks but that was likely because in Belgium we would tow those wrecks away as soon as possible and in Libya they often just stayed where they were after the accident.
As we have seen earlier in this story, that seemed not to be the case for government vehicles if there was a European company active in the neighborhood.

Ramadan and nurses.

At our camp we had one cabin that was equipped as a first aid station. Apart from some basic stuff and some basic medication, there was not much to it. It had however the advantage that there was an airco in it. One that worked. And there was a bed too.

When our Belgian male nurse left for a leave and didn't come back afterwards, it was decided that we ought to have a local nurse instead to man the operation.
Presumably there was not enough trust in my qualifications, for which I can't blame them, so it was opted to hire someone locally, a fully qualified person. I strongly favored a female nurse, imagining her hopping around in a fancy nurse dress and wearing a white apron, but there seemed to be none or at least none available.
So, we got ourselves a male Algerian nurse instead.

I had little or nothing to do with him. He did his thing and I did mine. No problem. He did however esteem himself a bit higher than the rest. OK for me as long as this didn't cause any conflicts.
But a conflict was looming.

The month of Ramadan had started and so all Muslims are morally required, if possible, to fast during the day and eat at night. It is the "if possible" part of the sentence that is important to know. Weak or sick people are not required to fast and if circumstances are too tough then you don't need to fast everyday neither.
Most of the Muslims in the camp however felt that they needed to follow the call for fasting very strict. This meant no eating or drinking from sunrise to sunset. I think the no eating part is feasible. The no drinking part is really damaging, especially if you have to work during the day. And working we did because it was impossible to work in the dark. So, most of them indeed didn't drink during the day. I felt sorry for them. One day I saw the boy working in our laundry with foam on his mouth, but he stubbornly refused to drink. I told him he was damaging his health by not drinking and that that was not the

meaning of Ramadan. I think he believed this too, especially after I told him that fasting is in fact optional in Islam and not compulsory.

Somewhere halfway through the month the Togolese electrician came to see me, telling me he had a terrible headache. I told him to go to the infirmary and get some aspirin there. He said he had been there but that it was closed. Then go and find the nurse, I told him. The nurse is in the infirmary he said, and he refuses to open the door and let me in. He's fasting with the airco on and doesn't want to do anything during the day, so no way to get any pills at all. And especially not because the Togolese guys were not Muslim.

This is the point I felt that great injustice was going on, so I went with the electrician to the infirmary and politely knocked on the door. No response. I tried the door knob, but the thing was locked. Knocked again, but this time a bit louder. I could hear a faint go away. The nurse was inside alright. I knocked even harder and yelled he should lift his lazy arse and open that door. I would get the aspirin in his stead, he wouldn't have to do that himself. He then said that it was Ramadan and that he refused to open the infirmary. He was resting and fasting.

Now, this is another phase in the process of getting me upset. I started boiling. Some more yelling from me that I insisted he opens the door and the same reply to go away and leave him alone.
No way I was going to do that and I was going to open that door with or without his help.
These were the days of me being much younger and watching too many Kung Fu movies. And I had practised some kicks that I'd seen Bruce Lee doing. What Bruce could, I could do too. More or less.
And I have to admit, if you use the right technique (thank you Bruce, you're my hero) it's no so difficult to kick in a door.
One kick and the door lay inside the infirmary.
We could get in if it were not that that the nurse strongly objected this and was rather upset about me kicking in his door. I guess I can say he was pissed. So he started taking empty Pepsi bottles and threw them at me. He was lousy in throwing Pepsi bottles. They all missed. And now I was pissed because he could just as well have thrown full bottles. I was thirsty now.
I picked up a couple of those bottles and with the bottles in my hands I dared him to come outside and let's have a fight. He came out alright, but only to let us in. I took a handful of aspirin and gave them to the electrician and asked him on his way back to the camp to fetch a carpenter because we had a door that needed repair.

For me that was the end of it.
For the nurse it was not.

I went back to our cabin where four of us were having our afternoon coffee, which we used to drink with a good shot of liquor alongside. So we were enjoying our coffee when suddenly the nurse stood in front of our door and gave it a kick, just as I had done with his door.

Wrong technique, that much was clear. The door didn't move a bit. Clearly the nurse was not familiar with Bruce Lee or he forgot to practice. I opened the door and asked him if we could be of any service to him. He said nothing but went away.
As far as i was concerned this was the end of it.
As far as the nurse was concerned that was not at all the end of it as I found out later on.

Some days later we got a message from Ubari that I was summoned over there. No problem. I went.
When I came in our office in Ubari, the male nurse was there and a man with a large turban too, whom I didn't know. It was clear that the nurse had been complaining somewhere and that now I had to explain myself.
The turban man told me that it was not nice of my part to kick in the nurse's door. I replied that it was not nice of the nurse neither to refuse to help people who needed his help as a nurse. The latter was apparently a part of the story that the nurse forgot to tell the turban. I saw the man's face change. And the nurse's face too. So the turban decided this was ridiculous and that both the nurse and I should forget about it and shake hands. Which I did (I squeezed hard so the damn idiot knew we just made an agreement). We looked each other in the eyes and I could see the hatred burning in his eyes.
Turban was happy, I was happy and the nurse was disappointed (and still pissed I think).

Shopping.

Going shopping was always an adventure. To begin with, we had no idea on beforehand what would be available and what not. We even didn't know if anything at all would be available. But one way or anther we had to come back to the camp with food.

We went to Sebha on yet another shopping spree. My roommate was with me and he decided he wanted to eat mutton. I don't know what turned him on, but apparently it had to be mutton. Why not? We needed meat and it didn't really matter what kind of meat it was. The cooks would turn it into a feast anyway. They were good at that.
At the souk we found a butcher shop with lots of meat on display. Neither of us knew the word in Arabic for mutton. I still don't. My mate tried and explained and explained, but to no avail. They didn't get it what we wanted and kept on shaking their heads.
We looked around to see if by chance we would recognize any of the meat on display as being mutton but we both came to the conclusion that we were not experienced enough to see the difference between the different bodily parts of the animals on display. It could have been anything as far as we were concerned. And it probably was.
Then, suddenly and before I realized what was happening, my mate went on all fours, started hopping around in the butchery whilst loudly bleating like a sheep. Everyone in the shop was stunned and speechless. I wasn't. I had to sit on the floor because I had to laugh so hard it nearly hurt. Days later I still had to laugh about his performance.

We went back to the camp without mutton.

Comes a dog - part two.

After one of his leaves, my roommate came back from Tripoli with another dog. It looked nearly the same as the first one we had, but this one was only about half the size. But it proved to be a good watchdog.

The dog was used to white people but not so much to black people. That and the fact that the dog barked at everything that came close to our cabin and the fact that most of the locals weren't very fond of dogs made that the black people didn't trust the dog. It was a mutual mistrust.

Apart from the near constant barking, everything went reasonably well with us and the dog.
One day a Land Rover stopped at the camp. They were Italian tourists. It was wintertime, so that was the time of the year tourists took the risk and went to explore the desert. His car was very well equipped. He probably could drive it straight to the top of the Mount Everest if he wanted.
The man got out of the car and was greeted. Then his wife opened the door and got out too. When our dog saw the woman, it went straight into overdrive, ran towards the woman and bit her in the leg. She bled and screamed. The Italian's wife was black woman.

It appeared the Italian was a medical doctor so presumably his wife was in good hands, but the man was not happy at all. He demanded that the dog should be killed. This was OK for my roomy, so he told the Italian to go get it and kill it. No he said the dog belongs to the people here, so catch it and kill it. Sorry, but we couldn't do that.
The Italian left with his wife. Very upset. We never saw them back again.

Of course, an incident like this is very unfortunate. We truly regret what happened although I think the black population in our camp had something to do with it. They kept on throwing stones at the dog and chasing it. For me, what the dog did was a natural reaction. It didn't trust black people anymore. Too bad a mishap like this had to happen to a colored woman. She was innocent and had nothing to do with it. She only had the color of her skin against her. I guess that's how racism often starts. Even for a dog.
From the bottom of my heart, I want to apologize for what happened that day.

A couple of months later the dog suddenly disappeared and we never saw it again.

Fresh blood.

People came and people went. I don't recall how many I've seen there in Libya, trying to build a road. The Libyan people's road.
I know who stayed there the longest of all, but that is something for the end of this story.

One day, new blood arrived. Somewhere, somehow, the headquarters in Europe had managed to hire someone who knew it all and who was going to explain to us how that site was supposed to be handled. Piece of cake.

When the man arrived, we soon found out he was a talker. He loved talking. In fact, that's all he did. And who is surprised to find out now that we took that to our advantage?
One of the first things he said to everyone he met was something personnel about that person. He was well prepared and must have had a list of things, weak points, with which he could put pressure on each and everyone of us. That meant he was a dangerous man for most of us. We had to find his weakness, and the sooner the better. We vowed to succeed.

He could tell jokes though. He was a true expert in telling jokes. Once he told me to say just any word and he would tell a joke about it. I remained silent. I thought he was joke enough. And dangerous for me.
A couple of days after arriving he was in our cabin and he told each one of us what he knew of us. He knew for instance that I was there instead of doing my military service. From the way he said it I knew that he knew that I had to stay in Libya long enough or my attempt would be declared void and I would be drafted after all. Not something I was looking forward to. So, the less I told him the better. What he didn't know he could not use against us.

It didn't take us very long to discover his weakness: alcohol. Once we found out, he was at our mercy. And I made sure we had plenty on stock so he would never dry up.
But really, it is sad to see how someone with probably very good intentions could fall for booze after such a short period of time. We could see that he didn't like being in the desert, as we had seen with so many people before him.
The desert is a mysterious thing, you like it or you leave it. My buddy and me, we felt comfortable in the desert. We didn't feel comfortable with the unprofessional approach of the organization though. And it surely was not a good sign that so many people came and went. Most of them probably saw how hopeless it was and gave up. We didn't see them again. Our man was bewildered that things didn't work out as he had imagined in his dreams and, more important, he was short of liquor.

So the new man did his eight weeks and it was bye bye. Exit.
We could breath again.

We need fuel.

It shall be clear by now that things evolved in a not so positive way. Of all the plans that where initially made, most fell through, no matter how hard we tried. I can try to find excuses, but the main reason was incompetence and lack of experience at working in the desert. Short sighted people with unrealistic expectations not used to working under harsh conditions. Unwillingness to listen to other people and accept that maybe they might be right.

I don’t know all the stories, but I do know mine. And I’m afraid that the management often laughed at me when I suggested something. I was young and had no specific skill in management or road building. Yet, I had a pocket calculator and I could calculate. For that I rated myself qualified.

One day I overheard a conversation about the fuel supply and how smooth that was going to run. By that time I knew enough about how things worked in Libya and I knew that there was a huge flaw in their reasoning.
The resident engineer reasoned that we would get a steady supply of diesel fuel and I instantly knew this was wrong. This was Libya and the boss thought that they just had to pump up the petrol and bring it to us. I believe he was unaware that nearly all fuel in Libya had to be refined in Italy. This meant pumping it up, sell it to Italy and then ship the crude oil over there. In Italy it would be refined and Libya then had to buy back whatever of the refined products they needed. The crucial part was that Libya didn’t own the crude oil anymore after it was shipped to Italy. They were completely dependent on what happened in Italy and the financial means they had available to buy back their own but then refined oil. This was bound for shortages and during the time we already spent in Libya we knew very well about these shortages. What made our management think we would escape that fate is unclear to me. Was it wishful thinking or just hope that all would proceed as planned? Or just plain stupidity?

It was an easy and straightforward calculation. We had a number of machines that ran daily and each machine consumed about 500 liter of diesel fuel per day. I counted with a fuel interruption of three weeks, so we had to have enough fuel in stock to cover the normal rotation of deliveries plus these three weeks. Simple, no?

Then I presented the result of my calculation to the resident. And as expected, he laughed at me. You silly boy, what do you know about logistics. Go and play in the sand and keep yourself busy.
I did just that: I kept myself busy and waited for doomsday to come. And doomsday arrived sooner than I imagined. We soon ran out of diesel fuel. What they did at the road site wasn’t my problem. What they did at the quarry wasn’t my problem neither. But what happened in our camp was absolutely my problem. We had to feed over one hundred hungry mouths and in order to prepare food we needed electricity and the electricity came from generators that ran on diesel fuel.
In order to stretch the limited stock of fuel we had in the camp I needed to go as low as possible on fuel consumption. That meant I had to switch off the main generator. Then I placed the small generator just to supply the kitchen with electricity. Only the kitchen, the cold stores and the water pump had electricity and I knew what was coming. After their shift the workforce would arrive at the camp and wanted to take a shower, cool off in their cabin and then eat a warm meal.
No, light in the cabins no airco, no fridge. All cabins were shut off from the electrical network. Only the kitchen, the cold storage, the water pump and the lights in the canteen worked.

It didn't take long before they gathered in front of my cabin and demanded an explanation as to why I cut off the electricity. It was a very short meeting. I told them that I could switch on the main generator again and that then probably in to next couple of days we would have no electricity at all anymore because we would run out of fuel. Up to them what they wanted, but once we ran out of fuel we also ran out of the kitchen and we would have to throw away all the food that was stored in the refrigerators. Your choice.
The choice was made just as quickly and they went to see the resident to complain about the situation. Bad luck, because the guy had disappeared and was in Tripoli by then to try to find fuel.

All we could do was wait and hope that the small generator would have enough fuel until a new supply arrived.
This was a tipping point in the operation. We were stalled and we waited for fuel to come. Nothing to do in the mean time. And no airco. I guess we could call this situation a crisis. All the more because my distilling installation worked on electricity.

Since there was nothing to do, people sat outside, in front of the canteen, under the burning sun, staring just in front of them. This was a very sad thing to see. Most of them were married and had children. I didn't have that problem and for me it didn't matter if I worked or not. My military counter ran anyway.

After more than a week a new limited supply of fuel arrived. We could do things again but still had to be careful not to run out of fuel again.

Cabins versus tents

We were in Libya in the late seventies. The general appreciation of white people versus black people was different from what is generally accepted now. Racism still existed openly and people of color were often denied their rights. I think that nowadays this is still the case, but now there is a tendency to condemn that attitude. These other voices that took stance for colored people were much less heard and not taken seriously back then.
The situation then was already better than what it was 40 years before. In the days of the colonization colored people were hardly seen as human beings. They were things that mostly just stood in our way. We, the white ones, were the cream of the world population and everyone else should bow to us. When I grew up I had seen that mentality at several occasions when I was with my close friend, someone from Rwanda. I always wondered how it must feel to someone who is born in a black skin and only for that reason is classified as inferior. I still wonder. It feels as the greatest injustice possible.

For financial reasons the locally hired staff was lodged in tents. No airco, no comfort. They were used living like that, so why change that?
I must say that I was happy living in a cabin, with some comfort and an airco. But I was part of the system and didn't stand up. It would have been useless anyway. The only thing I could do was being as understanding as possible towards the locals and treating them as equals. That was about it.

Of course there are differences between different cultures. What is accepted or customary in one culture isn't necessarily so in another culture. This is just the way cultures evolve. We have to accept these differences and try to understand them, but not necessarily agree with them. I had and still have the most difficulties with the position of women in societies. There is an awful lot of silent suffering going on. Or acceptance, because women often don't know that alternatives are possible.
When I see someone from a different culture I see in the first place a human being. After that I can find out what type of mentality that human being has, but the other person still remains a human being to me, no matter how far apart our visions on society are.

For the company, the locals were all those who were not hired in either Belgium or France. And in our camp, the locals were housed in tents. Green army tents of four meter by four. And four people per tent.
Each had an iron foldaway bed with a thin mattress on top and a blanket and a pillow. I knew these beds as I had slept on them too for months in Serdales.
There were separate stone buildings erected that served as toilets and showers. They also had their own canteen, separate from ours. It was the same dome-like construction, and about the same size.
They were the ones who had to deal with the scorpions and snakes in and around their living quarters. We lived in cabins that stood on wheels, about 40 cm from the ground, where no snake or scorpion could get in.
And for our convenience (or was it conscience?) we didn't come too often in the local's camp or canteen. We were uptown, they were downtown.

There was only one thing that was good about the tents and that is that the side walls could be lifted. Even during high noon, with the side flaps lifted, the temperature in the tents was bearable. It has to do with what your body is used to absorb as heat and the temperature differences it has to cope with. I have experienced exactly the same in Thailand where many people lived in bamboo huts and inside these huts it was relatively cool. It all had to do with being in the shade and the wind that could roam freely through the tent or the hut.
I will never say though that living like this is ideal or that the living situation is clean and safe. It is not clean and not safe.

In a way, we were the lords and the locals were the slaves. Those were the seventies. And few of the lords lived with their eyes open and even fewer wanted or could do something about it.
Has the world changed so much in the past forty years?

The old soul keeper stands up and I can hear him walk a few steps. His voice fades, muffled by the wind blowing through the poplars and by the morning chorus of birds. 'It is good to see you chief. Most people sleep from the womb until they die. They never really open their eyes all the way. Oh, sometimes a few wake up and have to take a good look at the world, but then they prefer to go right back to sleep. Not seeing is so much easier.'

Michael Gear & Kathleen O'Neal - People of the Raven

New blood - part two.

Again, many people came and many went. I lost track of it. Sometimes I was happy if someone didn't return after a leave. And sometimes, very sometimes, I was sad about it. But life went on, with or without them.

One day a new man arrived being in charge of the operations. He was Indian. A short, well fed man, who meant well and, more importantly, was friendly.
I believe he had experience in road building under harsh conditions, but I also believe he had little or no experience in Libya. The latter was a true setback. For him. For us, things could hardly get any worse.
We welcomed the man and very soon he started organizing things. I felt a bit useless in the whole process because in the camp there was not so much to do and I wanted to contribute to the advancement of the works. Which meant I wanted to be an operator and work at the road.

My offer was accepted and I ended up the next morning in a compactor. A compactor is a machine with rear wheels and in front it has a heavy giant steel roll. You can just roll the thing or make it vibrate whilst advancing. The vibration makes the compacting factor even much stronger. That's what we needed. But, this creates an awful lot of noise. Driving such a thing without ear protection is slowly but surely damaging your hearing. Needless to say I didn't wear ear protection.
I drove this thing for one day and the next day the new boss told me I had to go shopping.
My guess is that the locals thought it was silly to see one of the lords driving around in a compactor and thought it would be wiser if I didn't show up there anymore. So, shopping I went.

Still, after a couple of days I craved to do something more productive and so I ended up in a truck. A big Mack truck. Made in the USA.
I had as good as no experience in truck driving and definitely had no driving license for trucks. I thought I was the perfect one to drive a truck like that. Just imagine, empty the tractor and trailer weighed 30 tons. And it could hold 70 tons in the trailer. One hundred tons under my command! King of the road.

A minor problem was that this truck had three gear sticks and one had to use those with insight or risk to get stuck or better even, damage the truck's engine. Wow. Power to the people!
Yes, I had to learn how these gears had to be used but another one of the truck drivers gave me some tips and off I went. The only problem was (really the only) that when I reached the site where I had to dump my load, I had to ride backwards with the fully loaded truck. And they wanted me to drive backwards fast. That was a challenge. And kind of a disaster. But, in the end I managed to position the truck where they wanted it and then had to drive forward (easier) and open the bottom aprons to dump my load evenly on the road whilst moving forward.

Only, the system that had to open the aprons operated pneumatically and was slow. Too slow it seemed. So I dumped my load too late, which made the overseers shout at me. Lots of swearing too.
The next day, I again was requested to go shopping.
Although the truck driving was fun, I decided it was perhaps wiser to continue my job in the camp.
Know thy place.

The Indian engineer didn't stay long. He went back again to wherever he came from and was never heard from again.

It's weekend again.

It happened every week. Once a week there was a Friday. That meant our day off. In the beginning it was a bit awkward that our Sunday was now on a Friday, but it really makes no difference. You have a day off one day a week and it's always the same day of the week and that's it. What does it matter which day it is? Yet, it was difficult to let the brain know that Sunday was a working day and Friday was not. We were conditioned that way and making the switch sounds easier than it is. That Sunday feeling on Sundays never faded away completely.

Since we stayed in the camp for six days a week, well, most of us anyway, the locals wanted to go to Ubari on Thursday evening and had to be picked up again on Friday evening. But we, the lords, we stayed at the camp.
The only diversion we had was exploring the surroundings. And there was sand and rocks and more sand and more rocks. Meaning there was not so much excitement for us.

An activity that became popular soon was driving into the desert and looking for spots where there had to be activity in the stone age. Once you know what you were looking for they were easy to find and, I must say, rather abundant. At those spots we could find flint arrowheads, fist axes and scrapers in different sizes and different levels of finishing. These cavemen (there were no caves you silly) sure made lots of stone tools. And finding we did and collecting we did.
I read now, only recently, that collecting these artifacts is not allowed and punishable by law. Whatever there is is considered cultural heritage and must be left untouched.I have no idea what the law said about this in my days. We were happy finding that stuff in the sand and weren't concerned about heritage or whatsoever. Those were nice souvenirs. And it's not that we found dozens at a time. No, after several hours of staring into the desert sand you were lucky to find one or two. But it was a pastime for us and so we kept on searching.

One Friday, my roomy and me decided we wanted to do something else and so we went to inspect what work we had already done so far. We took a Renault R4 and set off. When we were about 20 km from the camp, we had a puncture.

Two mechanics together in one car. Couldn't be a problem at all to change a tire. Only, we found out that there was no spare tire. Now what?

As if sent by heaven, we saw one of our Land Rovers approaching. We recently had welcomed a bunch of Italians who lived in Belgium and were now hired to do the job in the desert. At first we liked them because they would only come to Libya for a wage that was substantially higher than the very high wage we already had. And so we got a raise in wage too. One would love these guys for less.
Their leader however was a braggart. Drove a Ford Mustang in Belgium and complained he was loosing too much horsepower with the catalyst installed in the exhaust. In one go he bragged about his car and the fact that he was way advanced on us because he already had a catalyst and we didn't. But he had no idea what it meant to work in the desert. I think his natural habitat was likely a bar at night somewhere in a dark alley surrounded with girls and booze. Apart from that he was harmless to us. And he didn't stay long anyway. Was gone, back to his bar, after a couple of weeks.

His right hand aide was a somewhat older man, I guess in his fifties. Probably too old for the job but probably needed the money. He didn't like us, Thought we were fiddlers and had no useful purpose there. But, OK, point taken and noted.
It was this man driving the Land Rover and when we flagged him down he actually stopped. We then asked him to give us a ride back to the camp but no, he was on his way to Ubari to pick up the locals and that had priority and go and screw yourself and see that you make it back to the camp.
And he took off and left us there, flabbergasted.

We were disappointed and a bit angry as well. This was not something you did in the desert. Living there meant helping others in need. Unconditionally. He didn't get that part. Yet.
My mate wasn't planning walking back the whole way, so we started the car and drove. At first the flat tire was more or less cooperating but after a few kilometers it started disintegrating and making a disturbing noise. The more we advanced, the more noise the tire created and the more disturbing it sounded. And when we finally made it to the camp (no, we didn't walk a single meter) we were riding on the rim and whatever there was left of the tire was hitting the gasoline inlet pipe with every turn it made.
We dumped the car next to the garage and had our evening coffee.
Another day, just like any other.
We did make a mental note however of the Italian abandoning us in the desert.

Things are going bad.

We needed to get rid of some surplus workforce but not so many wanted to go voluntarily. There was a Yugoslav electrician working for us. He was hired locally, so he fell under Libyan labor law. It was not easy to make him leave voluntarily. He needed and wanted the money.

The man couldn't help it of course, but there was in fact nothing to do for him in the camp. So my boss decided that the best thing he could do was cleaning the camp. And I had to tell him that.
For me, any job was a job and it didn't matter what I did. I was paid by the month, regardless what I did.
But to make a proud electrician clean up the camp, that was one step too far for him. He was upset and refused to do that.
Back to my boss and told him that.
Hand him over a piece of electrical wire and he can walk around with that all day, my boss said.
OK, boss.
The man was really not happy with that action and I can't blame him. So I told him that perhaps it would be better for him to grab that broom and start cleaning. Which made him really pissed. He drew a potato knife and threatened me with it. I'm not sure how serious he was about that, but me backing off? No way. We both stood our ground and he started swearing at me in Serbian. Loud and long.
But since I didn't understand a word of Serbian it hadn't any effect on me and certainly not the desired effect the man had in mind.
After a while he put away his knife and walked away. So did I.
Soon after that he quit the company and left the camp. I think he got his arrears paid and thought it was indeed best leaving these assholes behind. And he may well have been right.

This is one episode of my stay in Libya of which I'm not proud at all. It shouldn't have gone this way at all, but I guess my boss had no more phantasy left and I was too much of an idiot to not think it over any better myself.
I'm sorry man that it had to end this way, but you were one of the lucky ones after all. You got away in time before things started getting really nasty.

Trucks, dust and a land surveyor.

We tried to continue working as well as possible, which wasn't really well at all.
In the mean time we had a new land surveyor. He was a French speaking Belgian, but we got along very well. Most of the people in the camp only spoke French after all, so that was not an issue.
When I arrived in Libya I soon found out that working together with French companies meant that the common language was French. People who grow up in a French environment usually don't speak any other language but French. It was an interesting experience for me because at that time I spoke Dutch, French, English and German. But my French was school French, which didn't mean a lot so I had to pick it up from the French guys very quickly and I suppose my French improved fast. It wasn't flawless, still isn't, but I could make myself understood and I could understand them. That's what communication is all about to begin with.

Our new land surveyor was given a Toyota Land Cruiser since he didn't have to go very far in any case but had to go off road regularly. That's why he also

got a driver with the car. The man was from Benin and rather quiet, but a good driver.
On a sunny afternoon -we had none other- he drove off with the driver at the wheel to check out something.
We had those enormous dump trucks, with wheels as high as a man. Cool machines to drive. You had to climb a ladder to get in the cabin, from where you had a nice overview. They had an eight speed automatic gearbox that could be locked in any gear jut by hitting a pedal with your foot. This was sometimes necessary to keep the monster in a certain gear, when driving up or down. I loved driving these things and they could reach speeds of up to 60 kph. And certainly at the construction site they would drive that fast because they often had to do stretches of several kilometers to haul their loads and dump it where it was needed.
They couldn't drive on the road that we were building since we never got any further than a bitumen top layer. We didn't put one single meter of asphalt in three years time. If the dump trucks were to ride on our newly laid base, they would destroy it and we would have to start all over again.
So for the sake of these big trucks we had cleared a path parallel to the road and they maneuvered there. But that side road was dusty. Very dusty.
At one point the car with the land surveyor drove behind one of those dump trucks and it made an awful lot of dust, so best was to overtake it as fast as possible. The wind blew from the right, thus covering the sight of the left side of the road. They started overtaking and when they were alongside the dump truck that was in front of them they suddenly saw that there was another dump truck coming at high speed from the other side. This was disastrous. The Land Cruiser all but disappeared underneath the other dump truck. Both the driver and the land surveyor were real badly hurt.

Both men were freed from the wreckage and brought back to the camp. There was nothing we could do there for them. We had to bring them to the hospital in Ubari and hope they would be able to help them.
The land surveyor could sit upright, but nearly every bone in his body was either severely bruised or broken. My roomy was ordered to take a Land Rover and drive him to Ubari. That left me with the driver, the man from Benin. He could not be transported sitting upright, so I was given a pickup truck and we put a couple of mattresses in the rear on which he could lay down. The only one available to come with us was the little man working in the laundry. I told him to sit in the rear, together with the wounded man but no, he was afraid to do so he said. And he couldn't drive the car.
The driver was in a very bad shape and we needed to go to the hospital as fast as possible. No need to discuss with the little one and I made him sit in front again. The driver was on his own in the rear and we drove off.

We were building the road, so there was no road between us and Ubari. This meant either taking the piste, but that one was in a terribly bad state, or driving through the desert. The latter was a bit more flat, so that was in fact our only option. I looked constantly in the rear view mirror and I could see the poor man jumping up and down and screaming all the time that he was going to die.

It was not a pretty sight. The man was seriously hurt. I think he had several broken ribs and probably one of the ribs had entered his lungs which made he had difficulties breathing. He also threw up blood and had a few broken teeth. The sight of it made the little one even more scared. The driver's right arm was broken too. Not just broken. Whenever he lifted his arm, the front half of his forearm fell down so that his hand touched his elbow. It was an open bleeding wound and the bandage we put around his arm before leaving was gone already.

I stopped and begged the little one again to sit in the rear and hold the driver down. But he was too scared to do that. He, who caught very poisonous snakes by stepping on them was scared of sitting next to a wounded man. Nothing I could do and the only option left was to continue with the driver on his own in the rear, screaming all the time that he was going to die.

We arrived at the hospital. It was good that the little one was with me because he knew where the hospital was so I didn't have to search for it and he spoke Arabic. We delivered the poor man at the hospital and that was all we could do.
The next day we heard that he had not made it. He died in the hospital.

By pure coincidence I was the only one whose papers had all the stamps and I had an exit visa in my passport, so I was assigned to accompany the land surveyor back to Europe.
In the hospital in Ubari they couldn't or wouldn't do anything for him, so they arranged an ambulance that brought him to a hospital in Sebha. He was a little bit better off there but not much. We needed to get him in Tripoli without any delay. I drove from the camp to Sebha with my gear packed in a small suitcase. The next day they had arranged a flight for us from Sebha to Tripoli. It was a standard passenger flight, but they knew we were coming, which meant he could be transported horizontally. He was brought into the plane on a stretcher and then the backs of three seats of three rows were laid flat and the stretcher fitted on there. At least something that worked. I could sit next to him. He was in pain and moaned nearly all the time. Luckily the flight to Tripoli takes only an hour.

I was surprised to find out that the cabin crew could speak Dutch. Flemish even. They were all Belgians and the plane, painted in the colors of Libyan Airlines was actually leased from Belgium, crew and all included.
When the girls saw my partner and the state he was in they looked very worrisome. And so did I. But I was glad we were in good hands on that flight. And I could chat with the ladies, which was a relief as well.

Upon arrival in Tripoli an ambulance was waiting for the patient and he was brought to a hospital.
The next day we were informed that there too there was nothing they could (or would) do for him. They also had a shortage of blood, so an operation was out of the question. When I went to the hospital to visit him I offered that they take blood from me but no, they were not willing to operate on him. His knee was

shattered and he had multiple bones broken and was bruised all over his body.
So, on the third day in Tripoli a flight to Paris was booked and we were to go to Belgium via Paris.

Before leaving the hospital, the man was sedated but they told me it most likely wouldn't last for the duration of the trip. I didn't tell that to the surveyor.
At the Tripoli airport I had to go with him via a side entrance to put him on the plane. Same procedure as in the flight to Tripoli but this time we were flying in first class. I liked that. What I didn't like was that one of the guys who put my partner on the plane was going to take away the blanket he had on him. I had a row with this guy for it was our blanket, not his and all the more, my partner had no pants on, so it would become a very embarrassing flight for him with his private parts exposed to everyone. After some pulling back and forth with the blanket the other guy finally gave in. No, you're right he suddenly said, this is your blanket. I thanked him. And it was bloody well our blanket.
Then I had to get off the plane because I still had to check in for the flight and go through passport control.
In good Libyan style they sent me up on my own through the technical part of the airport and I had to find my way up on my own. This went well until the moment I encountered a military guy in full uniform, apparently an officer, who paced towards me and asked me what the hell I thought I was doing down there. He only spoke Arabic.
This, my friends, was the point that I had to gather my complete vocabulary of Arabic words and try to explain to that guy with lots of gestures too that I just accompanied a sick man onto a plane and now had to check in myself because I was going with him on that flight.
My effort must have been enough. He seemed to understand what was going on and I could continue my way upstairs. And again on my own. I was just hoping that I was heading the right direction and that I wouldn't encounter another military guy.
I made it to the check-in counter and got my boarding card.
The surveyor smiled when I finally sat down next to him. And so did I.

Once in Paris, everyone seemed to be ready and awaiting us. No passport control, no formalities. My partner was hauled in the waiting ambulance and we took off at high speed. This was very well organized.
The ambulance was a Citroën break. But what was weird about it was that it was a six-wheel car, a Loadrunner. Citroën had build for a short time that type of car. It was not a great success and we saw very few of them. But there I was, sitting in an exclusive car heading at high speed to Brussels. The driver didn't seem concerned about the speed limits. He just kept on speeding all the way.
At that time there still was a border between Belgium and France, with customs and all. I don't know if they knew at border we were coming or if it was standard procedure but we again could pass without stopping and were on our way to Brussels without any delay at the border.
Then the driver of the ambulance asked me if I knew where the hospital was where they were supposed to bring the patient to.

There was a moment of silence. I guess I turned a bit pale as well. First, I always get hopelessly lost in cities and second I hadn't the slightest idea where that hospital might have been.
I don't know how they managed it, but they drove straight to the hospital. It was high time because half an hour ago the sedation was over and my partner started moaning from pain. I tried to reassure him that it was not long anymore and please hold on a little bit longer. Show me you're a tough desert guy and you can take a bit. You can do it.
He could. And he more or less healed too after weeks in the hospital.
Some years later he was married to a Swiss girl and I met him again in Switzerland. He was in better shape than I was. And probably still is.

Funeral.

<u>Warning</u>: this section is explicit in language and in contents. If you are fainthearted I strongly advise you to skip it and go to the next section.

Meantime in Libya.
The driver had died and to my luck he died in the hospital. Would he have died in my car then I might have been held responsible for his dead. Sometimes in life you need a bit of luck. Too bad for the driver. He had none.

The office in Tripoli was busy then. They contacted the next of kin of the deceased and asked for instructions. The body was here in Libya and did they want the remains back in Benin or what should we do?
It was an insurance matter, as usual. And the family decided he should be burred in Libya. They couldn't afford the costs of the funeral in Benin, so it was better for them that he stayed in Libya.
This must have been a terrible decision for them. But what can we do? Our company was as good as broke, so no money to spare. We couldn't help them neither.

The body was brought from the hospital in Ubari to the one in Sebha. The reason was that in Sebha they had a freezer to conserve the body in the morgue and thus they could keep it for a longer time than Ubari. And time was needed to find out what would happen with the remains.
After some days the hospital started complaining and we had to remove the body from the mortuary. They needed the space, so get him out of here. And in Islamic countries it is customary that people are buried the day after they die, so they were not used to keeping bodies in there for several days.

As soon as we knew he was to be buried in Libya, my roomy and four of the friends of the driver went to Sebha. The friends had to perform some last rites. That was important for the soul of the deceased to find its way to eternity.
A simple coffin was arranged and the five of them went to the morgue. They had to cut the nails of the dead man and some of his hair and later on hand that over to the relatives in Benin.
Then it was time to take the body out of the morgue's casket and put it in the coffin. My mate asked the others to help him lift the body from the casket, but they wouldn't. They were afraid they said. They didn't dare to touch the body. After all these days in a freezer, the corps was frozen hard and stuck in the casket. There was no way my mate could remove the corps on his own from the casket. And the people of the morgue were not prepared neither to give him a hand. On the contrary, they yelled at him to hurry up and get the hell out of there with that body.
The only option left was to turn the casket upside down and then let it fall on the floor a few times until finally the body fell out of the casket on the floor. He then could lift it and place it in the coffin. His palls were prepared to touch the coffin so luckily they helped him load it in the back of the Land Rover and went of to the cemetery.

They couldn't bury the driver at the Muslim cemetery because he was not a Muslim. But there was a field, somewhere lost in the desert, that served as graveyard for all non-Muslims. My mate knew only the general direction in which to go, but they could find it after all and so the driver got this grave there.

I'm going back.

After I dropped off the surveyor at the hospital in Brussels I was ready for my holidays. What do do? Where to go?
Stupid questions. In no time I had booked ticket for Thailand and less then 24 hours later I was in Chieng Mai in the north of Thailand, my second home.
I needed that holiday and time passed without me noticing it, but I had peace in my mind. I knew I had done what I could in Libya and I could live with that.
It was only after my return to Libya that my roommate told me the story of the funeral. We had mixed feelings about it. On the one hand it had something funny about it and on the other hand it was a very sad story.

Before going back to Libya I had a meeting with owner B. There were rumors that the situation in Libya was very serious for the company and that things didn't go well at all. Mostly financial problems.
Owner B told me in all honesty that if he were to be in my place, he wouldn't return. Clear message, but I still was a few months short from completing my alternative military service. And to be honest, I wanted to go back. There was a lot of misery for us in Libya alright, but the prospect of sitting at home and looking for another job was not appealing. So I told him I would use my already booked ticket and fly to Paris to start with. In Paris I then would call the office in Tripoli and ask them if the coast was clear. The reason for calling from Paris to Tripoli was that in France I could dial directly and from Belgium it was rather cumbersome to make a phone call to Libya. Cumbersome and near impossible.

After I landed in Paris I looked for a phone and called the office in Tripoli. The manager picked up the phone and I asked him if it was no problem for me to return to Libya. No problem at all he said. Hurry up over here.
He was a good liar.
I was picked up at the airport in Tripoli and the next day on my way to Sebha.
One guy of the management was in Sebha and I think he was glad to see me.
But he too wasn't sure if it was a good idea to have come back to Libya.
I survived so far, so I was going to survive the rest too. And against better judgment I was still hoping for a miracle.
The miracle I hoped for never came.

Then I continued to the camp at KM 65.

From bad to worse.

There was by now and acute shortage of money to run the operation. Our wages weren't paid anymore in Belgium and we had difficulties gathering enough money to even buy food. The atmosphere became grim and the

people became discouraged. Not enough fuel, again and so there was nothing much to do but sitting outside on the concrete slab in front of the canteen, just staring in the distance and thinking about home, wife, children and family.
My mate and I weren't too much affected. We kept ourselves busy and had no wife and children back in Belgium, so we had a lot less to worry about.

I'm very sure my boss did sign papers and was held accountable for that later on, but truth is, I have no idea what these papers were about. I can only assume that since it was more and more difficult to pay the wages of the locals, my boss presumably went to the bank to loan money and signed for it. If he indeed did so, this was very noble of him, but later on this could prove to be and probably effectively was disastrous for him.

Yet another Friday came and the guys who were still there took a Land Rover and rode out in search of hidden treasures in the sand. Our Italian friend was with them.
It's not clear how they managed it. They must have driven a fair end into the sand dunes, only to find themselves at a certain moment upside down and I think the car kept on rolling and came to a standstill on its wheels.
The Italian was injured the worst of all.
They made it back to the camp and it was decided the Italian had to go to the hospital in Sebha. My roommate would be his driver.
My mate told me later on that he drove fast and didn't even try to avoid the bumps he encountered on the way. It must have been a rather uncomfortable ride for the Italian. He didn't say a word, didn't complain. This was payback day.

The office in Tripoli started applying for as many exit visa as they could. That cost money so it went slow. And they also did not want to give the impression to the workforce that in fact they were trying to get as many people out of the country as possible. So their departure date was set according to their scheme as it was supposed to go. The Italian went first. He needed medical care in Belgium so he got his papers as soon as was possible and off he went.
We saw all the other leave too one by one. And since we had no contact with them once they were in Europe, we could only see they were not coming back.
The camp got emptier by the day and the locals too went away as soon as they got their pay.

One day a team of Libyan officials came to the camp and they took the inventory of all equipment on site. They were only interested in the bigger machines and on each of those machines they painted with red paint in big clumsy letters a number. The machines were numbered and so were our days in Libya.
Fewer and fewer people stayed at the camp. Only a few die-hards or idiots, whatever, stayed. In the end, there were only three Europeans left. My boss, my roomy and myself.

My roommate didn't say much to me about his plans. He just hinted that there were certain opportunities open and that he would exploit those. I only found out later what he was up to. And even if he would have told me, I wouldn't have gone with him. I didn't want to leave my boss alone at the camp.
One afternoon I saw my buddy drive away with a Land Rover, with a compressor in tow. There was no red number painted on the compressor.
He left without saying goodbye and I saw him back only in Belgium.

We slowly ran out of food so I had to go shopping in Sebha again. Buy whatever food you can lay your hands on, my boss said to me. I hesitated, because when I left he would be the only European there in the camp. And he was a lot older than I was. He could have been my father and I guess that in a way he was.
The only advantage we had was that in fact nobody knew exactly with how many people the Europeans were still in the camp; As for the locals, it seemed as if only some Toubou were still there. All the rest was gone too.

When I was in Sebha, one of the staff who was still there was outside for a moment and the phone rang. It was the management team, who had gathered by then in Tripoli. I can think of only one reason why they had left the camp and were in Tripoli and that was fear. They told me they were in Tripoli because there was so much to be organized there and they gave me instructions to pass on to my boss in the camp, mainly on how they wanted him to organize things at the camp. I told them that I wouldn't tell shit to my boss and that they better come to the camp and tell all that nonsense to him themselves. I hooked up the phone with a bang and left for the camp. They had no means of reaching my boss in the camp.
None of the people in Tripoli ever came back to the camp. My boss and I then were the only representatives of the company at the site. I felt depressed. I had hoped for a more beautiful and glorious end.

My boss went to Ubari to contact the heroes in Tripoli. It turned out that the patience of the Libyans was over and that the only option for us left was to leave the camp and go to Tripoli. Over and out.
When we arrived at Sebha the manager of the Tripoli office was there too. We couldn't afford to fly back to Tripoli, so we drove there by car.
We went to the office in Tripoli. The resident was there too. The Tripoli manager gave each of us an envelope. There was money inside. All cash that was left at the office was divided in equal parts and then handed to us.
What could I do with money? Nowhere to run, nowhere to hide.

The next day we went to the Belgian embassy in Tripoli. The gang in Tripoli appeared to have had prepared something after all. The embassy had arranged exit visa for us and tickets to fly back to Belgium. The Libyans let us go. We were free.

I met the consul and thanked him. I handed him over my envelop with the money. I had no use for it anyway and told him that this was to compensate for the cost of the ticket. It wasn't enough, but hopefully he could appreciate the gesture. I told him that once in Belgium, they shouldn't be in a hurry to

collect the rest of the money because I barely had any left. I never received the bill from the Ministry of Exterior, so I think they considered the case as settled.

The next day we all went to the airport. Only the Tripoli office manager stayed behind. He still had things to arrange in Tripoli. We didn't know at the time what these "things" were.
When we queued up for the passport control, my boss was in front of me. He kept on repeating the same thing over and again: as long as they let us go, as long as they let us go...
In the distance I saw two men talking to each other. One wearing a suit and the other one the traditional Tuareg dress, with a turban on his head. His face looked familiar to me. They were looking at the queue, checking the faces of everyone one by one.
As long as they let us go.
Suddenly one of the men pointed a finger in our direction.
As long as they let us go.
I think they point at you, I whispered to my boss.
As long as they let us go.
The men approached us and they asked my boss to follow them.
They didn't let him go.

We made it through the passport control and gathered in the departure hall. The resident came closer to me. He wanted to talk. This was the first time in my life that I saw a black man turning purple of fear. I felt sorry for him but at the same time I loathed him for abandoning my boss at KM 65. This felt utterly unjust and I didn't want to have anything to do with him so I turned away from him. Maybe that was wrong of me, but emotions ran high those days and my emotions steered my actions. I never again have spoken or seen him afterwards.
All of the staff members of the company who were still in Libya at the end would travel as far as Sebha but not to the camp to support my boss. They had abandoned him. And *that* sat very high with me.

Back home

Once back in Belgium we were in the center of the attention. For a short while at least. We made it to the evening news. When we arrived at the airport in Brussels the press was there and they tried to get us all together to interview us. *That* was the last thing I wanted. I wanted to return to anonymity as soon as possible. I had no desire whatsoever to see my face broadcast on the news or in the newspapers. So I followed all the other passengers and got outside without the press being able to get hold of me. The site engineer, a nice man, stayed and gave the interviews together with the rest of the team.

Only later on did we find out that my boss was indeed transferred to a jail in Tripoli, together with the Tripoli office manager. They were the two people who signed documents for which they were held accountable.
Months later my boss was back in Belgium and we met. He didn't want to talk about his time in the jail in Tripoli but from what I had heard from other people

in Libya, the jail there was not the most comfortable place one could imagine. I don't think they physically hurt him, but the effect of being incarcerated there must have mentally hurt him very much. He was a good man, my boss. A truly good man.

We never got to know if or when the Tripoli office manager made it back to Belgium.

It looks like that's it.

Some considerations.

The story I told is a true story. Everything I described actually happened.

After reading the above story you may have the impression that all we did in Libya was drinking liquor. I perhaps emphasized this aspect a bit too much. I can assure you that at times there were months on end that were as dry as the desert and we had only water and soluble coffee to drink. We distilled once or twice a year and each time it was only a couple of liters. Getting caught drinking alcohol was not an option. We often didn't touch a drink and were completely sober for 99,9% of the time.
I can remember vividly when my roommate came back from leave one day and he had brought a percolator and fresh coffee with him. We lived on soluble coffee and that's not the same as the real thing. I unpacked his percolator and on my own drank the first liter of coffee we made. It tasted like heaven. After that he could have a cup too.

You will also have noticed that I wrote mostly about things I had witnessed myself. That is because I don't like telling things from hearsay. The story contains two exceptions however. The first one is the story of the Italian man and his African wife who stopped at our camp and where the wife was bitten by our dog. I had this story firsthand from my roomy who stood next to the woman when she was bitten.
The other story is the one of the funeral of the Beninese driver. I was on leave then and accompanied back to Belgium the other person who got seriously hurt in that same accident. Again, it was my mate who told me what happened with authority and knowledge as he was the protagonist in that story.
Since this story gives more insight in how cruel the environment and the people around us could be at times I thought it forms an important part of our stay in Libya and so had to include it.

Definitely, I was not the one who was constantly at the center of attention. I played a minor role in our company. And I was by all means not the only one who solved problems. If I gave you the impression that the workforce was a bunch of idiots then I must firmly contradict this. There were many very capable people in the company. But their efforts were often ignored or ridiculed. The overall atmosphere often suffered from this and many of those people gave up. They left after eight weeks and didn't return. They had seen enough.

And honestly, I don't know if I too wouldn't have left if it weren't that I was there to escape from my military duty.

Contrary to most of the other Europeans, I had chosen to stay twelve weeks at a time, so I could then get three weeks leave. I have no knowledge of other people doing so too, but I was happy to have three weeks leave so I could travel during my leave. Two weeks is a bit short for that purpose. We kept on receiving our full wage during the leaves. We also had a very good insurance and social security scheme. All paid for by the company. In fact all our costs were covered by the company. Once in Libya we had no costs at all. Not even for clothing, but as I wrote in the story, I didn't wear that.
Ten percent of our wage was paid in Libya in Libyan dinars and there was little more we could do than spend it there. I don't know if it was possible to exchange it into a European currency. Anyway I never tried so.

The people who were hired in Africa could return home for one month per year. Their travel too was paid by the company and they too kept on receiving their wage during that month.

Some people who came over weren't ready or prepared to work in barren circumstances. I think there was no one with enough in-depth knowledge in Europe to prepare them for what to expect in the desert. When you have read the story you might be tempted to conclude that life in our camp was not so hard at all. Think again. Apart from being fed and lodged, there was nothing. People went to work and came back to the camp. And that was all the excitement there was.
Life was harsh and the temperature often rose to 50°c or more in the shade. The dry air and the hot desert wind filled with sand and dust did no good to your lungs. I can't remember how many times I caught a cold and was coughing like a seal. At one point I couldn't breath anymore without coughing with every breath I took. The only solution I could come up with was to wear a gas mask, even at night to sleep. That helped.
One time, a healthy young man from Belgium arrived at the camp. After a couple of days he spontaneously had a nose bleed. The bleeding didn't stop and we feared he might end up in shock for lack of red blood cells. We had to take him back to Tripoli and put him on a flight back home.
I estimate that 80 percent of the people who arrived on site didn't return after their first tour of eight weeks. And eight weeks of boredom and suffering is a long period of time if you have loved ones waiting for you in Europe.

There was racism at the camp. That is a fact. And there was little I could do apart from treating everyone with dignity and respect.
Sometimes however people's minds are so twisted and brainwashed that reasoning is not possible anymore.
I can understand the reaction of the Algerian male nurse when he didn't like me kicking in the door of the infirmary. But, the infirmary was a public place and had nothing to do with Islam or the Ramadan. That he locked himself up in that cabin was an act of egoism and showed contempt for the other Africans. I couldn't, I can't and I won't tolerate such attitude, regardless from whom it comes.

There were a group of people working at the camp who originated from Benin. The cooperation with these people went reasonably well, until we hired one who later on proved to be a fervent union leader. I have no grudge against a union. On the contrary, I am very thankful for whatever the unions already have accomplished in the world. They are very much necessary. This man however was not a man of dialog. I guess he was right on many things he brought up, but in the end he only agitated people and did everything he could to set up his fellow countrymen against the management. No matter how much he was right, he was also hostile and dangerous and he wasn't prepared for a dialog. It was a relief when my boss decided to fire him. Still, I felt sorry for the Africans because after his leave not much changed. And I think that even if the management wanted to change things for them, there was no money for it.

The last six months of my stay in Libya I was not paid. This is how bad the financial situation was. But I had a place to sleep and food to eat, so I was not homeless and hungry and had practically no costs in Belgium. Though the amount left on my bank account when I finally returned to Belgium, was considerably low.

The last six weeks of our stay in Libya, most of the people who had any say in the management went to either Sebha or Tripoli. I understand they were trying to either get the company back on the rails again or find a way to get us out of there. But they were not in the camp and left it to be.
The Belgian press wrote that we were held hostage in Libya. It didn't feel that way to me, but we couldn't get an exit visa anymore, so we couldn't actually leave the country anymore. The Libyans had had enough patience with us and wanted to clear the bills before they let us go and another company would take over.
Later on we heard that it was an Italian company that took over from us. And when Google earth became available, I could see that apparently the road was finished, presumably by them.
You can take a look on Google Maps or Google Earth and see were the camp at KM 65 was located at these coordinates:
N 26.422494696762996, E 12.185231967580068
If you zoom in on the satellite images you still can see the contours of that camp.

I was domiciled for exactly 3 years in Libya. Once in Libya we had little to no contact with the world outside Libya. An occasional letter would arrive but that was it.
Phone calls to France were possible, but not to Belgium. Making a phone call to Belgium had to go via an operator speaking only Arabic. And they would call you back if somehow they fancied to do so or were able to establish a connection with Belgium.
We had a radio, but the broadcast of the Flemish radio stations was not aimed at North Africa but at Central Africa. We occasionally could capture the Belgian news, but mostly it was just noise and so after a while we did little effort. The French would sometimes listen to a French speaking radio station

and thus we would get some news, but that was not often. Reception of European radio stations was generally poor.
That however meant that I have large gaps concerning what happened in the world from from the period between July 1977 and June 1980. I still keep on discovering things now about what happened during those years.
Nowadays children grow up with smartphones and the internet. They never have known a world without all that digitization. The internet, personal computers, tablets, mobile phones, smartphones and the like didn't exist back then. So it's safe to say we were most of the time completely cut off from the outside world. Our world was the camp.

You have noticed that I do not mention a single name in the story (don't count Fonzie, that was not his name). Although the story happened over forty years ago now, many people I mention are still alive and I have, for most of them, no way of contacting them. This means that everyone involved in this story is, at the time of writing, not aware of what I wrote.
People who were there will when reading the story undoubtedly know when I write about them.
I left out many characters because they either were just passing by or were so low profile that I can't remember anything worth mentioning about them.
For the same reason I'm not mentioning the name of the consortium. Several people involved in the consortium are still alive and I think they all prefer this chapter closed.

I also still keep on discovering details about the consortium that were unknown to me until now.
Like for instance, I found out now that in 1979 one of the partners in the consortium filed for a Chapter 11 equivalent. Meaning they asked protection from their creditors. In this case, mainly the other members of the consortium.

And even the French minister of exterior was questioned in parliament concerning two Frenchmen that were stuck in Libya:

*June 1980. Mr. A. L. draws the attention of the Minister of Foreign Affairs to the situation of a certain number of European expatriate workers, including two Frenchmen, employed by ********** in Libya. Since the liquidation of the company's assets, they have been detained in Libya in extremely difficult conditions, without the necessary funds for their material subsistence. Moreover, since these employees cannot present a tax receipt, they cannot leave Libya to join their respective families, who are currently prey to the deepest anxiety. Consequently, they ask what urgent measures he intends to take to provide a rapid solution to the problems of these employees, who wish to be repatriated as soon as possible under the conditions provided for in their employment contract.*
Answer: Following inquiries made at the authorities in Tripoli, our compatriots held in Libya obtained their exit visas at the end of June and were able to be repatriated.

A similar concern was raised by the relatives in Belgium. At one point they came together to express their concern and grieves and to find out what they

could do to help their beloved ones. My mother was there too (you never know if something useful came out of that gathering). When my mother didn't howl with the rest and they noticed that they asked her if she was not concerned about her son being held hostage in Libya. Did she have a quarrel with me and didn't care about my fate?
My mother was not the panicking type. She replied the same as I would have. He went there by himself and I expect him to return by himself.
I couldn't have said it better myself.
If a parent has fear for the well-being of a child then that is a very normal and natural reaction. But if that same parent raised that child in a certain way, wouldn't that same parent then not expect the child to behave in line as being brought up? My father died in an accident when I was one year old. My mother never remarried and she took care of upbringing her children by herself. We were supposed to be independent and not count on the benevolence of others. And I dare say that all of her children were adventurous but prudent. I seem to have been the only one at home who was fearless as well. We were all seekers and wanderers. And so are my children.

My son asked me today if I was also going to write about my time in Thailand. Who knows?

It is cold in the scriptorium, my thumb aches. I leave this manuscript, I do not know for whom; I no longer know what it is about.
Umberto Eco