

LEAVING FOR LIBYA

Former MediaCorp Radio Gold 90FM DJ

STEVEN SHALOWITZ is on a round-the-world journey after leaving Singapore. The Chicago resident recalls gearing up to get lost in the Libyan Desert.

FOR someone with “Wanderlust” stamped across his receding hairline, I was looking for a sense of adventure between my move from Singapore and my return to the United States.

I wanted to break out of my comfort zone and go where tap water wasn't potable and toilet paper would be my best friend.

Where chain coffee houses weren't found and where hotels didn't know the meaning of a vacuum cleaner.

I wanted to go where few Americans had been before and to immerse myself in an alien culture.

Most importantly, I wanted to rough it.

Having seen the Asia-Pacific, toured Europe and Latin America, I went straight for the Africa section on my favourite travel website.

“Niger River Expedition in Mali”, or “Mountain Gorilla Safari in Uganda”? Perfect, but the departure dates didn't fit my schedule.

Another click and there it was: “Libya Exploratory”.

After December 2003, when Libya announced its intention to purge its Weapons of Mass Destruction, Americans warmed to the idea of visiting “Gaddafi Country”, seeing Libya as one of the last frontiers in travel.

I later discovered the intrepid from France and Libya's former ruling colonial power, Italy, had already been venturing to the North African nation, albeit in a trickle. This was a new journey being offered by my travel agency that only added to my sense of excitement.

A quick call and I was confirmed as the 8th member of the group.

Tripoli here I come!

ANYONE GOT A HEADLAMP?

The following day I took an armchair journey to Libya.

The country boasts no less than five Unesco (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization) World Heritage Sites and I would be visiting each: Three Greco-Roman cities in the north, a desert oasis town on the ancient caravan route in the west,

and Neolithic rock art in the south.

I was particularly excited about seeing the latter as it was part of a week-long camping/camel trek in the Sahara.

With Roberta Flack's *Midnight at the Oasis* playing in my head, I was energised for days.

That is, until the “Departure Notes” arrived.

The air ticket, insurance and inoculations I could handle, but the visa would be tricky. I would have to courier my passport to a visa processing centre in Arlington, Virginia in the US.

They would then send my passport to the Libyan Embassy in Ottawa, Canada for the final chop (neither Singapore nor the US has a Libyan Embassy).

What terrified me, though, were the requirements for clothing and equipment – all standard items for seasoned campers, of which I was not.

Iodine crystals for water purification? Sleeping bag rated to 35F? Head lamp?

And what about all the heavy clothes needed – warm hat and gloves for chilly early morning and evening hours in the desert? Where was I to find them in steamy Singapore?

outofoffice
explore with attitude

FROM WISCONSIN TO LIBYA

The “Camel Trek” section didn't make me feel much better. The warning had me thinking the worst: “Anyone participating ... must acknowledge the inherent risk in riding and perhaps falling from the saddle, and agree to accept any and all responsibility”

Yes, I wanted an active holiday. But who was I kidding?

I hadn't gone camping since I was nine and even then, it was a literal wash-out. Twelve of us campers plus two counsellors were fast asleep in our tents during a weekend outing in the woods of Northern Wisconsin when the skies opened and the tents collapsed from the weight of rain.

Without any let up, we collected our soggy gear, stuffed it into the van and drove to a nearby rest-stop where we spent the night sleeping on hard wooden dining tables.

Indeed I wanted to get out of my comfort zone. But reality suddenly hit that I would soon be travelling way beyond any recognisable postal code.

I was off to Libya.

And I was terrified ...

Look out for part two of Steven Shalowitz's trip next Thursday. For more on travel, turn to our Traveller pages from 52 to 58.

Cuban music's grand dame looks forward to Singapore visit

AT 75 years of age, Omara Portuondo is the grand dame of Cuban music.

But even though her career stretches more than 50 years, mainstream recognition only arrived courtesy of *The Buena Vista Social Club* and the Wim Wenders-directed 1999 documentary of the same name.

Before that, Portuondo – who will be in town for a concert at the Esplanade Concert Hall on Nov 3 – was already an established name in her homeland with many tours, albums and film roles to her credit.

Along the way, Portuondo has won considerable acclaim overseas as well, with *BBC Music Online* describing her latest album *Flor de Amor* as “one of the finest Cuban albums you'll hear this year”.

However, *The Buena Vista Social Club* propelled her to international stardom. Many fans of the documentary cite Portuondo and Ibrahim Ferrer's duet *Silencio* as one of its highlights. Ibrahim Ferrer died on Aug 6 and Portuondo is still struggling to come to terms with his death.

Speaking through a Spanish translator from Hong Kong, Portuondo lamented: “Ibrahim's death was very painful for me. We had a lot in common and we were good friends.”

Portuondo revealed they had sung together a month before Ferrer died.

“He looked fine so when I heard he passed away, it was very unexpected. To be honest, I still have not recovered from the news,” she said.

Ferrer's death, along with other Buena Vista Social Club colleagues Compay Segundo and Rueben Gonzalez (both in 2003) has ensured Portuondo will continue to pay tribute to them by performing the music they loved. She plays at arenas around the world, attracting audiences into a world cloaked by heart-wrenching, whiskey-soaked Cuban jazz anchored by Portuondo's raspy, velveteen voice.

Portuondo is looking forward to her concert the Esplanade Concert Hall, which will be her third visit to Singapore.

Portuondo first came to town with the rest of the Buena Vista Social Club for a performance at the now defunct Harbour Pavilion on Feb 18, 2001. In September of that same year, Portuondo gave her first solo performance at the Singapore Indoor Stadium and attracted 4,000 eager fans.

On Nov 3, Portuondo will be accompanied by a 13-piece band as well, along with a string ensemble from the Philharmonic Chamber Orchestra. And she promises a night to remember.

“I'm proud to bring my culture and language to this part of the world,” she said. “But whatever you may think of Cuban music, I promise you will have fun at my concert!” —ZUL OTHMAN

WHAT: FLOR DE AMOR –
OMARA PORTUONDO IN CONCERT
WHEN: THURSDAY, NOV 3
WHERE: ESPLANADE CONCERT HALL;
TICKETS AVAILABLE THROUGH SISTIC



GETTING BETTER WITH AGE: Omara Portuondo, 75, tasted worldwide fame with the 1999 music documentary *The Buena Vista Social Club*.

STEVEN SHALOWITZ