NBC's Richard Engel takes a look at the ancient Greek colony of Cyrene, east of the rebel capital Benghazi in Libya, which has been rarely explored by tourists.

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Cyrene, Serene, Ancient, Greece, Greek, Helen, Hellenistic, Rebel, Control, Benghazi, Libya, Socrates, Tourism, Excavation, Preservation, Roman, Empire, Natural, Spring, Irrigation, Aqueduct, Archaeology, History, Dictator, Ruins, Mediterranean, Statue, Architecture

Citation
MLA
The Rich History of Cyrene, a Greek Colony

RICHARD ENGEL reporting:

East of the rebel capital Benghazi is the ancient city of Cyrene. UNESCO called it one of the most impressive complexes of ruins in the entire world, with a forest of columns, temples, and a massive theater overlooking a long valley. Two thousand five hundred years ago, this was a flourishing Greek city. It was called the Athens of North Africa. There was even a school here established by the students of Socrates. But history moves on, and eventually it became a Ptolemaic city, a Roman city, even the Christians lived here. But because of Libya's modern political isolation, there's been almost no excavation. And this remains one of the best-preserved classical Hellenistic sites outside Greece.

Details hint at what life was like here, a home to Greek scholars and later a breadbasket of the Roman Empire. Cyrene was rich with carpets of geometric mosaics and gracefully proportioned statues, defaced by iconoclasts centuries ago, but now undisturbed.

This is the Fountain of Apollo, and it's the real reason this city was built here in the first place with a natural spring flowing right from the cliffs. And even today the elaborate system of irrigation, with layered pools and aqueducts pumping water throughout the city, still works. Water traces through canals in a steady stream, feeding wildflowers that grow between the rocks.

Cyrene is open to visitors, but few come. It's a rare joy to have an archaeological site almost to yourself. Some Libyans come here to escape the war. Yusuf Susi, a pipe welder, brought his family to forget Gadhafi and guns and fighting.

Mr. YUSUF SUSI: (Foreign language spoken)

ENGEL: `Libya's culture belongs to the world. It should be opened to tourists, to everyone. That's the image we want the world to have when they think of Libya,' he said. A rich history, often overshadowed by war and dictatorship.