

THE SILENCE OF SINAI

Part of Egypt, the setting for Exodus and fought over by countless armies, the only way to appreciate the Sinai is on a camel, says CHARLES MARSDEN-SMEDLEY

THE British fascination with the Sinai was not confined to diplomats and military figures. The holy ground that had seen the Exodus and so many other historic and religious migrations drew a procession of slightly barmy English explorers, who—often with little more than a pith helmet, a light cotton suit, a water bottle, a few camels, a bemused Bedouin guide, and scant knowledge of Arabic—wandered into the wilderness...

Sinai has held—[fascination]—over the past five millennia for such disparate groups as wandering Semites, ascetic Christians, and eccentric Englishmen.

Burton Bernstein, *Sinai: The Great and Terrible Wilderness* (1979).

If having an interest in wild places puts me into Mr Bernstein's group of slightly

barmy, eccentric Englishman, I plead guilty. I am a liar, too. I first visited the Sinai in 1986, and took a Bedouin guide and camel from Nuweiba for a day, not even staying a night in the desert. In the intervening 22 years, that experience has grown into the utterly erroneous claim, for the sake of a good story, that I had crossed the Sinai by camel.

Without a pith helmet or cotton suit, but with a water bottle, two camels, a bemused Bedouin guide and a (woefully) scant knowledge of Arabic, I returned to the Sinai to make amends. I was collected by jeep from the Savoy, Sharm El Sheikh. We sped north on the 9th Brigade Road for two hours, before turning off to meet my guide, Suleiman.

Sinai, the wedge of land between Africa and the Middle East, is part of Egypt, although

people still talk of 'Egypt proper', being everything to the west of Suez, thus excluding Sinai. Its strategic position between East and West has made it one of the most fought-over territories in the world, suffering something like 50 different invading armies since recorded history began. The opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 massively added to the strategic importance of Sinai.

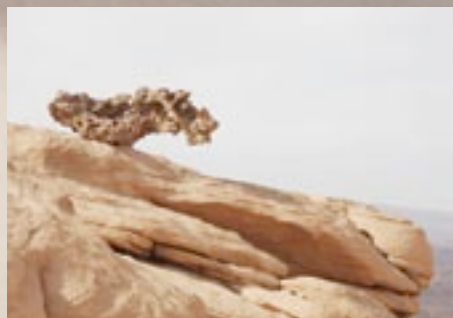
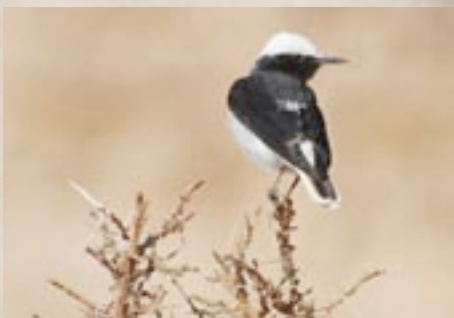
But it's a holy land, too, not only a battlefield. It is the wilderness of Exodus, through which Moses led the Israelites from slavery in Egypt having crossed the Red Sea. Mount Sinai is believed to be the site where God gave Moses the Ten Commandments.

Sinai is about surviving, solitude and silence. Two great survivors at the heart of the Sinai are its people, the Bedouin, and a building, St Catherine's Monastery.

St Catherine's is, and has been, a working monastery for 1,600 years, making it one of the oldest continuously occupied buildings in the world. It's a Christian survivor in an Islamic world, but its solitude and silence are lost. The Israelis built an airport nearby during their occupation (1967–82) and that, plus the hordes of tourists, means that the monastery's survival is probably under greater threat now than at any other time.

I stayed at the monastery and climbed Mount Sinai above it in 1986. I chose this time not to return to St Catherine's, but to

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concentrate instead on that other survivor, the Bedouin people. I travelled alone with my Bedouin guide so I was able to enjoy the immense silence and solitude of the desert.

I do believe that if you're interested in understanding the desert and its people, you should travel by camel and not by jeep. The desert isn't a place to be viewed through a windscreen. Riding a camel may confine you to a smaller area, but it allows you to see more, not less. A bird in the desert is an event, so is a tree. You need to feel the different textures of sand and rock. Travelling with the Bedouin and camels, you can see a rhythm of life virtually unchanged since Moses walked these mountains.

I saw a way of life attuned to the conditions, in which there's a finely balanced economy of movement and means: everything is pared back to the essentials. Nothing is wasted or thrown away—in the absence of water, nothing decomposes in the desert. The abundance of firewood, once you know where and how to look, is startling to the novice who sees so little vegetation. After eating an orange, the peel is set aside for the camels.

The bread-making fascinated me. My guide kneaded some flour and water, plus a little salt, into a ball, and then flattened it into a pizza shape. Next, the embers of the fire are moved to the side, and the 'pizza' is laid on the ground. The embers are pushed

back over the dough (with a carefully chosen stick). The dough is left for a few minutes, then turned. Finally, the bread is removed and the ash cleaned off. Delicious!

The Bedouin are nomadic. At night, we simply made a camp, wrapped up warm and slept under the stars. No tents. Fire is essential, as is, of course, water (where I was travelling, it hasn't rained for four years). Just before stopping, my guide would gather firewood, and we always carried a supply of wood, in case we were going to be high up, where there's less wood available.

We all have preconceived ideas about what a desert should look like. The Sinai constantly challenges those preconceptions. The southern half is predominantly mountain and rock. There are extraordinary landforms in the granite and sandstone. Some of the sandstone is so soft it crumbles underfoot, or the strata so lightly laid that they split apart in the hand like sheets of cardboard. When I picked up a block of granite, that hardest of rock, I found that the desert had left it friable. It fell apart in my hands.

'And you shall strike the rock, and water shall come out of it, that the people may drink.' Exodus 17. In a 20th-century version of Exodus, there's a good story of a British soldier losing his temper and striking a rock with his shovel, only for it to gush water. As far as I know, he wasn't immediately

canonised. He had discovered (as had the Old Testament prophets) that some boulders have hollow parts that contain water secretly stored for millennia.

Not only mysterious, the landscape constantly challenges you to make sense of the huge variety of forms, and to find a vocabulary adequate to describe it. Some valleys, *wadis*, with their lack of trees and sides composed entirely of loose boulders resembled nothing so much as slag heaps. But then there would be a ravine with a narrow floor of soft sand up which we would ride; or a *wadi* with trees dotted about, such as the beautiful acacia. The rock colours vary from areas of black lunar landscape, through reds and purples, yellow and ochres.

Camels aren't difficult to ride. In fact, at times, in the heat of midday, between the slap, slap of the camels' feet on soft sand, and the soporific lollop of my camel's gait, I would feel myself being lulled to sleep.

I could not have done the trip without the help of Dr Emma Loveridge, who runs a travel company, Wind, Sand and Stars, that specialises in Sinai and works closely with the Bedouin. Her approach is a fine example of responsible tourism. She makes sure that visitors respect the environmental fragility of the Sinai desert, and its native people.

For information on travelling to Sinai, telephone 0870 757 1510 or visit www.windsandstars.co.uk

(Clockwise from right) Baking the bread; around the campfire at night; a desert well, a Bedouin group at an oasis; Mohammed, my guide's 11-year-old cousin; a rock poised on a mountain that resembled a dragon's head; the bald-headed wheatear, a frequent visitor to our camps; Suleiman, my guide, leads the way; after eight days and nights in the desert, we return to Suleiman's village; crossing the desert the Bedouin way. (Background image) The author and his camel on the Sinai sand

