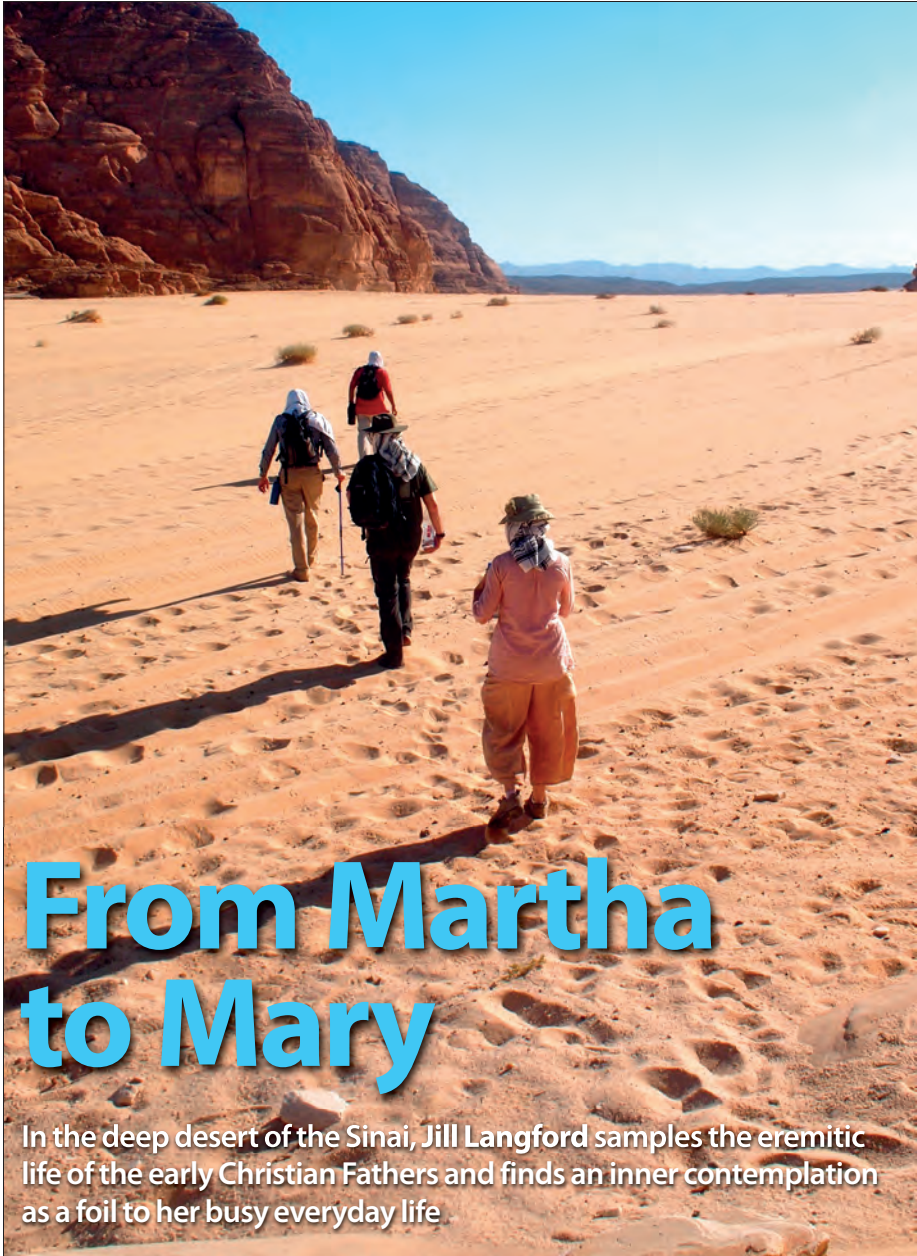


TABLET Traveller

RETREATS AND PILGRIMAGES

NOVEMBER 2011



From Martha to Mary

In the deep desert of the Sinai, Jill Langford samples the eremitic life of the early Christian Fathers and finds an inner contemplation as a foil to her busy everyday life

In my daily life I am a Martha, constantly on the go, rarely sitting down. The demands of seven children, many animals, a husband, parents and many visitors keep me on the trot. The truth is, I enjoy it. Yet, every now and then a small voice comes to the surface and I make it known that I need to be alone, somewhere quiet, lost in contemplation like Mary. In the past I have made pilgrimages to Iona, where St Columba dwelt with his fellow

monks. One year I took off with my one-man tent and pitched it on the deserted Galloway coast, close to home, and spent a few days alone, wandering its windy shores. This year I signed up for a week in the Sinai desert to sleep out under the stars and wander in the region where Moses led God's people out of Egypt. My trip, entitled Adventure into Silence, was organised by a company called Wind, Sand and Stars and co-led by the *Tablet* columnist Sara

Journey into solitude: retreatants in the Sinai desert

Maitland, whose book, *A Book of Silence*, has proved an inspiration to many, including several of my travelling companions who had come to the Sinai to experience the "deep silence" of the desert that Sara describes so beautifully in her book.

The idea was to follow, loosely and in a non-denominational sort of way, in the footsteps of the Desert Fathers, those early Christian, pre-monastic men and women who attempted to live out the message of the Gospel as truly as possible, away from the immediate demands of the family, society and church organisation. Retiring to the deserts of Syria, Palestine and especially Egypt, these ordinary men and women were free to concentrate on exploring the motives of conduct and thought within themselves, so that what was disordered could be brought to light and redeemed by encounter with the forgiveness of God.

Whether believers or non-believers, it was clear that everyone in the group of 15 who were to be my companions for the week shared a strong desire to "get away from it all". Some were at what they described as "a crossroads", wondering what direction to take in the next bit of their journey through life. Others, perhaps, came to make time for prayer, or simply to respond to the invitation to "ad-venture" into silence. I suppose that what we all wanted, as well, was to listen, intently, to the sound of silence and to make something out of it.

Only one member of our group, a Londoner and the youngest at 49, confessed that he had come along only because "it sounded mad". I found his simple honesty refreshing. He contributed little to the discussion but bore quietly and without fuss a painful eye infection. When asked, at the end of the week, whether it had been sufficiently "mad" for him, he smiled his quiet, shy smile and made no reply. His silence spoke volumes.

Nobody could have been under any illusion that a week sleeping out on the desert floor with temperatures of 40 degrees by day and no water to wash with would be comfortable, but perhaps this was another reason why we came. Perhaps we needed a little physical discomfort. Our

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INSIDE | A silent retreat | The revelation of Patmos | California's mission trail



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Sun 1 - Fri 6 Preached Retreat - Rev Ciaran O'Callaghan CSsR

Fri 6 - Fri 13 "Friendship with Jesus" Preached Retreat - Rev Peter Burns CSsR

Sat 14 - Fri 20 "Spending Time at the Well of Meditation" Preached Retreat with Sr Joann Heinritz CSJ

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Western way of life is so far removed from what is natural and basic to human needs that we often feel encumbered by possessions, the complications of modern life and excesses of every kind.

In contrast to the desert inhabitants, the Bedouin people who were our hosts for the week, and despite our attempts to pack only the bare minimum, we must have been a sorry sight, struggling to haul our heavy suitcases across the sand, rifling through our daypacks for lip salve and sun cream every 10 minutes, uncomfortable in our restrictive, desert fatigues. Awestruck, we watched as our gracious Bedouin hosts moved silently around our camp, carrying steaming plates of heavenly rice and lentils spiced with cumin, which they had somehow managed to cook for us from a hollow in the rock, their bare feet treading softly upon the sand as they moved, at ease with themselves and in harmony with their surroundings. One of our group decided that Suleiman, our cook, was himself the personification of silence. Quiet and humble, dignified and peaceful, his "silence" and beauty stemmed, perhaps, from his deep communion both with the desert and with his God. Unhurried, living simply, he made time, each day, for prayers, which echoed across the sandstone valley.

From my chosen spot where I spent each morning and afternoon in solitude, I could sometimes make out, in the distance, the diminutive shapes of my fellow human beings, minuscule figures in a sea of ochre and gold and blue, utterly at the mercy, in that vast and arid landscape, of the elements and of God.

How wise of the Bedouin, I thought, to bring God into everything. Why can't we be more like that? Weighed down by the trappings of rich men, how easy it is to forget the source of our being, the source of all mercy. In the desert, where life is simpler and humans appear as grains of sand in a great wilderness, nothing is taken for granted, each day is lived slowly and to the full. "Breakfast will be at 6 a.m.," they say. "Inshallah" ("God willing"). "The camels will return by 9.30 a.m., inshallah."

Reading to us daily from *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, Sara subtly awakened us to the possibility that external ascetic practices might lead to what the Desert Fathers felt was the worst sin of all, pride. Our week in the Sinai was not intended, therefore, to be a test of each individual's ability to survive the challenges of hardship, nor a litmus test by which holiness might be measured, but rather to give us a taste of the eremitic life.

While our adventure into silence and into the eremitic life did not, for most of the participants, come from a religious conviction, one felt that "change of heart"

which religious hermits are aiming for become a tangible reality within the group. Initially suspicious and full of preconceptions about one another, we found, by the end of the week, that we were seeing one another with new eyes. The lesson of humility is learned quickly in the desert. Dispensing, each morning and afternoon, to our chosen hermit cave where we took shelter from the relentless sun, we had ample time, during the week, alone, to sit quietly and listen. Aside from the distant crying of a Bedouin baby and the occasional croak of a raven traversing the blue overhead, there was no sound at all. As the week progressed, one was able, by degrees, to move towards that deep, quiet place where God dwells within us.

We were learning, in the silence, to still ourselves, our minds, our bodies and to rediscover the beauty of a peaceful soul and that "still small voice of calm". While I strove to empty my head of all thought, I found that the last three verses of that lovely hymn, "Dear Lord and Father of Mankind", kept intruding. At first I pushed them aside, resentful of their refusal to be dismissed, but by day three I realised that they were here to stay and was singing them out loud.

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Back from the desert and flung, once again, into the bubbling pot of domestic life at home with my family, there is an apparent contradiction. How is the "new me", brought to life in deep silence and enabling me to view the world in a new and joyful light (Christ's light), to be incorporated into my daily routine, surrounded as I am, once more, by noise, opposition and anxieties? How can I seek the better part, that of Mary, if I am constantly being called to be

a Martha?

The answer, I now realise, is that I can be both. It is important that I allow myself to be confronted by daily life. Carrying in my heart the deep silence of the desert and ready to return to this quiet place of the heart whenever my daily life permits, I find that I am better able to alternate between action and silence, thus bringing the two together. In the desert, I discovered that the contemplative in me, the Mary who would rather sit quietly at the feet of Jesus listening to his voice and absorbing his peace, is only able to be herself because of Martha's action, ministry and hospitality.

Perhaps I can learn to combine action with silence, doing with being, by being both a Martha and a Mary at one time. It is here, right here, deep in the silence of the heart, that God can be found. I do not need to go into the desert any more. But I rather think I will.

■ Wind Sand and Stars organises desert retreats and other journeys.
www.windsandstars.co.uk