

A Desert Experience

by Edwina Gateley

"But what will you do in the desert for three months?" The question was common and I began to wonder myself - how would I survive for that length of time in a strange country, not knowing the language, without any of my friends around me, without anything familiar and, above all, with no activity! I got so worried I learnt to play solitaire and took a pack of cards with me when I left London for Algeria!

I needn't have been anxious. My three months were full and absorbing. The first 15 days I spent 1,000 miles into the South of the desert in the mountain refuge of Charles de Foucauld. When I first arrived I was deposited by the mountainside and seeing no human habitation in sight I got worried! But after $\frac{1}{2}$ an hour's steep climb with my bag on my back I came to a tiny rough stone hermitage (12' x 6') set in the mountainside. This was it!

I had a sleeping bag, a barrel of water, an oil lamp, a tin stool and a supply of dried carrots, olives and goat's cheese. My life was very simple and basic. I would rise at 5.30a.m. and after bread and coffee climb for about $\frac{1}{2}$ an hour to the top of the mountain where there was a tiny stone chapel. Two priest hermits lived on the mountain with me and we had Mass in French sitting on goat's skins in the dark chapel.

After Mass I would go off into the desert mountains taking with me a flask of water and my Bible. The land was magnificent - enormous mountain peaks and pinnacles rising up from the vast desert plains into the great blue sky. I could see for hundreds of miles all around - and not a human soul in sight (except, perhaps, from time to time, a solitary nomad with his goats). The silence and the utter solitude was powerful.

One could not but be aware of God before such magnificence - His presence was in the very silence and in the beauty all around. I found this awareness so real that I was able to remain there - sitting on some rocky mountain top - absorbed and held - for the

whole day until the sun began to set behind the hills.

Then I would climb down from the mountain and return to the hermitage. Water was scarce and I had just a little to wash on the rocks outside. After that I would eat a bowl of boiled carrots with some olives and a piece of goat's cheese and that was it for the day!

The Sahara night swoops down at about 7.00 p.m. and brings with it a profound silence all of its own. Not a sound to be heard except the rustling of cockroaches beneath the water barrel. The stars are clustered and sharp, and the moon, white and enormous, rises up and throws its light on the vast Sahara. I sat alone with my oil lamp and thanked God for the beauty and the stillness that He had shown to me.

There is a peace here which surely must be rare
For it is very deep. It soaks inside one.
It steals in the moon filled night
And envelopes this tiny stone hut -
Gently, silently.
Peace - Listen! Silence sleeps.
Even the cockroach crouches un-moving
And the flame in the oil lamp is
Still, still.
My soul stirs with wonder.
God creeps in - Almighty Presence -
Into His domain of solitude
And deeply, deeply enters every
Crevice and corner
Gently, imperceptibly
Holds my soul suspended in
His mighty silence.

One day my water supply ran out. There was nothing for it but to go off into the desert and find some more! So, armed with plastic water bottle, off I went. I walked on and on sweating in the hot afternoon sun, and two hours later I heard a noise. Then I saw movement, and there, in the distance, I saw goats. As I approached I made out a rough shelter of stones and goatskins. It was hard to believe that anyone

could live there. From beneath the goatskins a withered old Tuareg woman rushed out to greet me, in great excitement. I realised, through various signs that I was being invited to tea! So there we sat - not a word between us - in the middle of the lonely desert beneath the goat skins, drinking Tuareg tea and goat's milk and smiling happily at each other.

The old lady then showed me a cluster of rocks - and there in the middle was a pool of water! On closer investigation I discovered to my great surprise that it was full of tadpoles! Who would have expected to find tadpoles in the Sahara! The water was thick and brown and had a bit of life in it. But it was wet and I returned to my little hut with great joy and with my flask full.

So I spent 15 very happy exuberant days in my mountain hermitage. Never before having felt so utterly and totally alone, but never before experiencing so deeply the presence of the Lord.

My next weeks were spent in the compound of four Little Sisters of Jesus. These Sisters work among the poor and live like the poor. They speak the local language and are very much one with the people who are all Moslems. They are a tiny Christian presence in the heart of the desert (amongst the Moslem people). The simplicity, joy and poverty of these Little Sisters made a profound impression on me.

I lived in a small mud room. It was hot - 120° and more, so I ran with perspiration most of the time, and the flies were forever crawling over me. Goats and camels wandered listlessly around foraging in the sand. It was a place of great peace and stillness. Life was slow and we had to make an effort even to walk.

Our diet was simple. We sat on the floor with a tin dish, of whatever food was available, in the middle. It was often carrots, or bitter cabbage, or rice. We also had a tin jug of water from which we all drank.

The chapel was beautiful. Very small with walls of red ochre mud and the floor covered in fine white sand. My days were days of just being with the Lord in long, silent encounter. It was a time of great peace.

Sometimes I would feel a little lonely (three months is a long time to be without conversation!) and sometimes I would miss my home comforts - music, a night out, a drink etc. but at the same time I came to love the simplicity and poverty of the life I found in the Desert and I felt honoured and grateful that I should be blessed with such an experience.

After staying with the Little Sisters I moved to the north of Africa and spent a month with two White Sisters in their tiny compound in a desert town. This was a totally different experience from the freedom and vast spaces I had enjoyed before. It is not acceptable for a woman to walk out alone in an Arab country so I was very much confined to the tiny compound. There I had to learn that God is not only to be found in the great desert beauty and solitude, but that ultimately God is to be found within us - wherever we may be. So that month was one of deep searching and discovery proving as fruitful and meaningful as my earlier experience in the great mountains.

My last two weeks (just for a change) I spent in silent retreat at a Trappist Monastery in the hills. This was a time of consolidation, a drawing together of the total experience. It also brought a few welcome perks - the monks grow grapes and produce their own wine so I tasted my first wine for 2½ months! I was able to join in the singing of the Church's Office and by this time I had got quite used to praying in French.

Looking back on my three months desert experience I have many things to be grateful for. One was the love and friendship with which I, a total stranger, was received by the very small Christian communities which welcomed me in Algeria. The words of St. Paul were truly lived out by the Christians I met: "So you are no longer aliens or foreign visitors, you are citizens like all the saints, and part of God's household." (Eph. 2)

Another thing was the experience of living as a Christian in a Moslem country and community and seeing a totally different missionary approach to what I was accustomed to in other parts of Africa.

And above all, the experience of searching for and encountering God in the silence and solitude of the Sahara desert. "What did I do in the desert?" I did nothing.

But I received a great, great deal.