

Chapter Two

Desert Nomads in the Qattara Depression

'If you reject the food, ignore the customs, fear the religion and avoid the people you might better stay at home.' James A. Michener

'Sunshine all the time makes a desert.' Arab proverb

Although I didn't know it, I was about to have a spiritual eating experience in the sand dunes of the Sahara desert. Within two hours of being in Egypt I decided to do some desert riding instead of following the standard coastal tarred route. The asphalt road snakes along the northern border of Egypt, joining the city of Marsa Matruh to the famous city of Alexandria, the second largest city in Egypt. Although it is a stunning ride with the Mediterranean on the left of the bike, and the vast expansive sand of the Sahara Desert on the right, I was yearning to divert off this main thoroughfare and shoot into the desert and the middle of nowhere. I stopped in Marsa Matruh to prepare properly for what could be a hazardous expedition, especially if ill-equipped.

The Qattara Depression where I was heading was considered, during the war, impassable by tanks and most other military vehicles, although German Afrika Corps patrols and the British Long Range Desert Group did operate in the area. Its presence shaped the Battle of El Alamein. The features that make the Depression so impassable include its salt lakes, high cliffs or escarpments, and Fech Fech (fine powdered sand). I also knew that there was the Mogra Oasis but there was little chance I would find this uninhabited, brackish lake. Without the proper planning and provisions the Qattara Depression could

easily become more than depressing. I was determined that this would not happen to me. I had a ten litre bladder bag which I filled with water, a handy bit of equipment, as it contracts as you drink, thereby taking up less space. I also bought two new, yellow, plastic jerry cans from a street vendor who was also selling plastic litre bottles of fuel. I purchased ten and siphoned them into the new containers which I then strapped to the back of my panniers. He was also flogging small plastic dolls (?!) and flip flops but I decided they were a luxury and not at the top of my list of survival equipment in the Sahara. I declined his offer to buy two dolls and get one for free, thanked him, and headed off to a food stall I had spotted earlier on, a hundred metres further back up the street, on the opposite side of the sandy road. A large lady in a bright headscarf was busy selling handmade Egyptian bread, and that's what I had my eye on. The bread, known as Eesh baladi, is whole-wheat, circular and about fifteen centimetres in diameter. It is very filling and more to the point was the perfect shape for slipping into my rucksack.

The proprietor of the stall had her hands full over an open fire. She softened the bread by placing it under running water from a stand pipe sticking out of the sand, next to her stall. She would then pass it over a naked flame and serve it up on battered tin plates, with various sauces, to the waiting customers. I purchased five loaves of bread and a variety of sauces which she poured into the corners of plastic bags and tied off. She then cut off the excess plastic above the knot, letting it drop into the fire, causing an instant cloud of acrid, thick smoke. This seemed to have no effect on her whatsoever, as she stood in the dead centre of it, negotiating with the clientele. At times only her arms were visible sticking out on either side of a column of smoke, happily gesticulating to the patient group. I also bought three cans of chilli sardines, thanked the column of smoke, and headed out of Marsa Matruh towards the Qattara Depression.

As soon as I was in the open desert the atmosphere changed

completely. Anyone who has been in sand dunes will tell you that it is an experience so magical, so personal, yet so otherworldly, that it is never forgotten. The hairdryer heat, the stillness and the beauty of the contrasting horizon; dazzling, clear blue sky turning to pristine yellow/white sand produces a feeling of such vast immenseness that you cannot help but feel humbled. As I was riding I imagined an overhead camera view of me on the bike, the camera slowly pulling further and further back, a snaking tyre trail disturbing the patterns in the sand behind me, until I disappeared like a grain of sand in the ever-changing dune landscape. I defy anyone not to feel small and insignificant in this environment.

Riding in sand is hard work until you get the hang of it. The desert's sole intention is to swallow up the tyres of the bike at every possible opportunity. The first thing to do is let them down to about 5 psi to allow the tread to spread out, create a bigger footprint, and therefore prevent them sinking so easily. It is important to keep the throttle steady and even and to keep pushing forward without hesitation. It goes against normal instincts but it is better to stand up, go as fast as you feel safe, and then a bit. I fell often before I learnt these techniques, but luckily, the landing was fairly forgiving apart from the odd rock jutting out of the sand.

I rode steadily, but stopped often to soak up the experience and to check my compass bearings. I did not see anybody for two days. The only living thing that crossed my path was a small sand fox which appeared briefly, standing on a dune, silhouetted against the immaculately blue sky, momentarily checking me out, before disappearing into the desert. It was liberating to be alone. Everything is so much more personal, vivid and unique. Being unable to share experiences with others verbally adds beauty to life. Loneliness puts a special burn on sunsets and makes night air smell better. Loneliness is really the wrong word. Language has created the word 'loneliness' to express the pain of being alone, and it has created the word

‘solitude’ to express the glory of being alone. I was feeling the full glory!

On the second night I stopped before sunset to set up camp. I unpacked my tent and rolled it out on the desert floor as a ground sheet, blew up my mattress and lay it on the tent. There was no way I was going to enclose myself in the tent in a place like this - scorpions and snakes or no scorpions and snakes. I took off my boots and socks, laying out the sweat-soaked socks in the last dying rays of the sun to dry out. I stuffed the tent bag full of extra clothes as a pillow and lay it down on my sleeping bag. I flopped down and wiggled my bum around in the sand to make a comfortable indentation. I undid my water bottle and took a generous swig, before retrieving my notebook and pencil from my rucksack. I wanted to write down some thoughts under this beautiful amphitheatre of rapidly appearing stars. I wrote steadily for thirty minutes or so, adjusting my position regularly, as my elbow succumbed to pins and needles, straining my eyes against the glare of the paper, beads of sweat dripping onto the page, despite the fact that it was early evening. I was starting to feel very heavy-lidded, so decided to prepare some food and get an early night, in preparation for a sunrise start tomorrow. I’m not sure if something caught my eye, but for some inexplicable reason I stood up and decided to scan the shimmering horizon. What a stunning sight was unfolding in the far distance. I was transported straight into my own Indiana Jones movie. (What a western comment.) Walking towards me through the haze came four tall, angular Bedouin nomads. They were swathed in black and white cloth, their heads wrapped in burgundy and white and all were carrying rifles. Three of the men had coal black beards whilst the fourth, with a hawk on his shoulder (no, I am not making this up) was obviously older, his beard speckled grey and his gait less steady. As they came closer, two things became obvious; firstly by his demeanour, it was obvious the more elderly man was the leader, and secondly, to my delight they all had beaming smiles

and looked genuinely pleased, if not a bit surprised, to see me. They had cloth sacks on their backs which they gently offloaded onto the sand as they approached me. The leader stepped forward and offered me his hand. Although I did not speak a single word of Bedawi Arabic and they had no words of English, we somehow muddled through. Once all the introductions and etiquette were observed I couldn't believe how quickly and how elegantly they set into action, organising a camp for the night.

They worked in silence, each having a specific job to perform, so I just busied myself with setting up my part of the camp. The nomad who I judged to be the youngest, disappeared silently into the desert and returned forty minutes later with a bundle of wood. I must have missed the 'Nomad Supplies Shop' on the way here, because I had not seen a single tree or branch on route. He proceeded to offload the wood and slowly but steadily dug a circle out of the sand, broke up the tinder-dry wood with a large dagger, and made a small pyramid of kindling in the centre of the circle. He then unwrapped a piece of cloth containing dried camel faeces, broke it up and placed it under the twigs. He lit the fire, gently blowing it until it sparked into life. He sat back on his haunches to survey his work. The nomads were so incredibly graceful and peaceful, and the desert was so still, I was having a real experience here! Everything about their mannerisms and movements seemed in tune with the atmosphere of the desert: they oozed poise and serenity. This is the sense of the desert hills, that there is room enough and time enough. What a contrast to the frenetic, everyone-for-themselves, impersonal mayhem of many urban centres. People's characters and behaviour do reflect their environment. I sincerely believe it is rarer to find happiness in a man surrounded by the miracles of technology than among people living in the desert or jungle who, by our society's standards, would be considered destitute and out of touch. I was so happy. It's the simplest things in life that are the most extraordinary.

Within minutes they had tea brewing on an open fire and made an incredible meal. We had aubergines with onion, a salad with diced carrots, tomatoes and whole chillies and *fuul* (Java beans cooked with oil and lemon and unleavened bread) and minced, seasoned meat and 'ta amiyya' (falafel). It was a meal fit for the finest restaurant. During the dinner all we really managed to ascertain from each other was that my name was Spencer and that their names were Ali, Ali, Ali and Ali (in that order from youngest to oldest) and that they were from the Bedawi Arabic tribal group of Eastern Egypt. Somehow it did not matter in the slightest that we had communication problems, we managed with sign language and a lot of smiling and gesturing. I was in a strange way pleased, as it minimised the conversation and added to the magically silent atmosphere of this insanely different picnic. (Well, it was certainly different for me!!) As darkness began to fall we settled down to sleep, but not before 'Main Man Ali' offered me his own blanket. I refused politely and we all set about wrapping up in preparation for the cold desert night ahead. I slept outside my tent, my head sticking out of my tightly drawn sleeping bag and stared up at the stars. Poets say that science takes away from the beauty of stars; that they are mere globs of gas atoms. I, too, could see the stars as I lay there on this desert night. But did I see less or more? I felt like the luckiest person alive and the awakening in the morning only confirmed this.

As the sun rose, I felt its first rays warming my face and slowly opened my eyes. My four friends were gone and the camp was completely spotless, no litter, no sign of the fire and no sign of them. It was as though they had swept the desert clean. But right in front of me, on a small piece of cardboard stuck in the sand were the words, "Thank you". *They* were saying thanks! It's me that should be saying thank you, thank you, thank you, thank you, the four Ali's, and long may you roam the desert in your serene way. I am forever jealous. I thought it ironic that the term Bedouin, which predominantly

refers to camel-raising tribes, is sadly often now used among various Arab groups as a derogatory term for another, implying a lack of culture and refinement. How far from the truth is that!

Lying there in the silence looking out at the sand stretching endlessly before me it was difficult to believe that Egypt has a population of 80 million. But having said that it does have an area of 997,739 square kilometres and I was sure I would get the shock of a lifetime when I saw how many people were squeezed into the capital, Cairo. There is a saying that 'the desert has its holiness of silence, the crowd has its holiness of conversation'. I know where my holiness vote goes.

Having said all that, although the desert is unbelievably beautiful there is still no denying the fact that the Sahel, the area bordering the Sahara, is shrinking at an alarming rate as animals graze on its fragile land, and trees and bushes are cut for fuel. Without the vegetation to hold it in place, the thin topsoil of the Sahel blows away, leaving stony land where neither grass nor crops can grow. I realised that I was looking at it through the wondrous eyes of a visitor but to the people of the Sahara region it is a constant battle against the elements and the encroaching desert. Sadly it is much easier to create a desert than a forest.

As I packed up my things to head to Cairo I pondered on the amazing four Bedouins who arrived and disappeared, as though it was a dream, back in to the desert that they had conquered and made their home. They had adapted perfectly to their environment and I felt privileged to have spent a short time with them. I love it when life resembles a novel more often than novels resemble life. That is the wonder of travel, it's an unpredictable pursuit. As I bungeed up my possessions to the bike, eager and ready for the next experience, the sun exploded into the sky and showered me with warmth. Within five minutes I began to feel hot, hot, hot. It was time to start the bike, get the breeze through my body and find the sealed road.

Nothing could go drastically wrong as far as directions were