



PHOTOGRAPH: COURTESY GAIL SIMMONS



# JOURNEY INTO SILENCE

*“Rather than fasting I was feasting,  
and the vast, bountiful desert was my food.”*



**W**e arrived at our Bedouin camp, deep in the Sinai Desert, by moonlight. Leaving the jeeps that had transported us far from the hubbub of Sharm el-Sheikh airport, my companions and I walked in silence across pristine sand as white as freshly fallen snow, and into another world.

I was awoken the next morning by the scent of bread baking in the embers of the camp fire: plain Bedouin bread made from flour and water, which we broke and shared in a ritual of fellowship. Bread which to me tasted like heaven in the knowledge that, as part of a week-long desert retreat, I was about to undertake a three-day solitary fast.

Throughout history fasting has been a central ritual in many of the world's major religions, but in today's secular society it seems out of place. We live in an age where we are defined not so much as people but as 'consumers', and as such are encouraged to consume endlessly, whether it be holidays, cars, cosmetics, alcohol or food, because – as the advertisement proclaims – we're "worth it".

Yet the more we consume, the more worthless we feel. Consumption, it seems, doesn't make us happy. It certainly did not make me happy, so perhaps the opposite would: a period of non-consumption, of privation, of fasting. As someone who beyond skipping the odd meal had never fasted, who even finds it impossible to give up chocolate for Lent, this would be a challenge.

Even more so, as it was to take place well outside my comfort zone, in the austere environment of the desert with just a warm sleeping bag for company.

**IN FACT, AS** I was to discover, Sinai was the perfect place for a solitary retreat. After all, this was once the home of hermits who, from the 3rd century CE, roamed the desert and mountains in search of spiritual enlightenment, eventually gathering together to form the community at St Katherine's Monastery. Unlike those early hermits, however, I would be alone for only a few short days.

For two days we acclimatised to our desert environment, and prepared for our retreat. As dawn broke on the third day I withdrew to my chosen spot, less worried about the lack of food than by the three days and nights that stretched ahead of me, as empty as the desert

landscape. I had plenty of water, some books and my comforting sleeping bag, but that was all. I had nothing to do but collect twigs for my fire and watch the changing colours of the desert. Each morning, aware as never before of the eternal cycle of night and day, I saw the sun rise over wind-sculpted mountains, and each night I witnessed the constellations pass across the heavens, shooting stars fizzling to nothingness.

I did not feel bored, nor did I feel lonely, despite my solitude. Cradled by the yielding sand, wrapped in the immense silence of the desert, caressed by the soft winds, I felt safe. I made friends too, with the occasional bright flower that I found on my daily explorations, a fly that buzzed past, a distant bird whose squeal tore the skies, the little creatures whose furtive footprints surrounded my sleeping bag when I awoke each morning.

And at last I began to understand why those hermits found solace here, away from the distractions of the world. Breaking the comfortable daily routine of three meals, one relies instead on internal resources. The body empties, but the spiritual vacuum is filled. Despite the occasional pangs, I did not feel hungry, and I realised that rather than fasting I was feasting, and the vast, bountiful desert was my food.

**AT DAWN ON** the last morning I returned to join my companions at base camp where our Bedouin hosts had prepared a delicious breakfast: fresh feta cheese in herbs and olive oil, scrambled eggs, ripe red tomatoes and fig jam, and endless glasses of sweet hibiscus tea, the flavours sharpened by three days of abstinence. Veterans of Ramadan themselves, the Bedouin understood and respected our fast, and their constant, watchful presence throughout, as still as deep waters, was profoundly reassuring.

After breakfast they handed us warm bottles of a freshly prepared herbal ointment which they use to wash their new-born babies, and I sluiced the sand from my hair and body. Never had my skin felt so soft. Never had I felt so purified, so cleansed, both outside and in. R

Gail Simmons travelled to the Sinai Desert with the Makhad Trust. Satish Kumar will be participating in a similar retreat for the Makhad Trust from 22nd to 29th March 2010. For further details visit [www.makhad.org](http://www.makhad.org)