



...CULTURE SINAI, EGYPT

Tribal gathering

Egypt's Sinai Desert may be close to the Red Sea's big resorts, but in spirit it's a world away. **Gail Simmons** trekked through Biblical mountains and secret gardens to join an annual meeting of the Bedouin tribes

Photographs by Gary Latham



The scene was one that has been played out in the deserts of Arabia for centuries. A group of Bedouin sheikhs gathered round a campfire, sipping glasses of tea poured from bubbling, smoke-blackened kettles, the flickering flames casting a deep glow on sculpted, Biblical faces. And sitting among this distinguished group of tribal elders was

me: one of a handful of Westerners sharing the first assembly of the seven tribes of South Sinai for over 20 years.

The contrast with just a few days ago couldn't have been greater. I had been staying at the Red Sea resort of Sharm el-Sheikh en route to the Sinai Desert. As I wandered round streets that seemed rather like Blackpool – only hotter – it was hard to believe that just 30 years ago there was nothing here at all. No casinos, no shopping malls, no burger bars, no 'typical' Irish pubs. Sharm el-Sheikh was an empty beach, save for a few fishing Bedouin.

In the early 1970s the bay was discovered by divers and hippies, who pitched tents here. Then the entrepreneurs

The meeting represented the first chance in two decades for the tribes of South Sinai to gather together and discuss their laws and traditions, as they have done for many hundreds of years. The unique laws created among Bedouin tribes have never been written, yet are universal throughout the nomadic Arab world, passing from generation to generation. In recent years this Bedouin 'parliament' in Sinai has been discouraged by the Egyptian government, which is suspicious of the tribes' cherished independence from state control. And with the loss of much of their ancestral lands to tourism, the Bedouin have lacked a venue in which to meet – until now.

Once past the police checkpoints the road out of Dahab points west, plunging deep into a vista of pink rock. I was heading into the High Mountains, where St Katherine's Monastery lay hidden and protected for centuries. Indeed, it was virtually inaccessible until the recent asphalt road was laid to St Katherine's Village – a straggle of new breeze-block houses for the local Bedouin who service the coachloads of day-trippers now coming to visit.

This time, I wasn't one of them. My first destination on my way north to the desert was the High Mountains themselves, majestic peaks reaching nearly 3,000m, where I was going to trek. My guide worked with the Makhad Trust, a Cheltenham-based charity aiming to sustain the Sinai's Bedouin heritage. Here, the trust is funding the restoration of some 500 traditional walled family gardens. Scattered through the

'I wanted to discover more of this land straddling Africa and Asia: the old Sinai of my imagination'

arrived and the first small hotels were built. By the 90s every major hotel chain had moved in, and along with the tourists came the hawkers, the gamblers, the nightclubs, the drug dealers, the prostitutes and, nowadays, the Russian mafia.

Now tourism has spread along the coast of the Sinai Peninsula as the divers and hippies seek out new, unspoiled beaches. Dahab, one hour north of Sharm, is where many of them – and I – ended up. Much more laid-back than Sharm, it's a pleasant low-rise town set against the dramatic backdrop of the Sinai Mountains, with a more genuinely Egyptian ambience. As I walked along the dusty side streets a straggle of goats wandered by, the goatherd's face swathed in a red-checked *keffiyeh* (headscarf), and camels sat tethered outside their owners' houses.

What Sharm and Dahab have in common, though, is that most tourists stick to the resorts, perhaps only taking a quadbike or jeep safari into the desert. But I wanted to discover more of this peninsula straddling Africa and Asia; I wanted to find the old Sinai of my imagination.

Encouragingly, there are many signs that the traditional Bedouin cultures of the Sinai are being fought for and preserved, and ecotourism has a vital role to play. My ultimate goal was the village of Nawamis where, in a few days' time, a historic Bedouin meeting would take place – the beginnings of a longed-for annual event.

wadis (valleys) surrounding the monastery, many of these life-giving oases go back more than 1,000 years – but are now being abandoned.

"If the trees die, a whole way of life, centuries old, will die with them," shrugged a local tribesman named Hussein, whom we found tending his garden in a remote wadi. We had trekked along ancient paths, past evocative spots such as Wadi Zuweitin (Valley of the Olives) and Wadi el Arbain (Valley of the Forty Prophets) until we came to his patch of green, iridescent in the stark mountain landscape. Hussein was hauling water from a well and pouring it around an arbour of fruit trees: apricot, peach, pomegranate, apple and plum.

"Each tree needs around half a bucket of water," he explained – a tall order at a time when climate change, and the increase of mass tourism on the Red Sea coast, have seen the springs run dry.

As he cooked us lunch, Hussein told us the garden had belonged to his great-grandfather and is now shared between his siblings. The trees had been withering until the Makhad Trust stepped in, paying for Hussein's old well to be repaired and deepened to reach the shrinking water table. In the summer he also grows vegetables, and herbs for medicine. His trees have pet names, and he talked and listened to them ardently. ➤

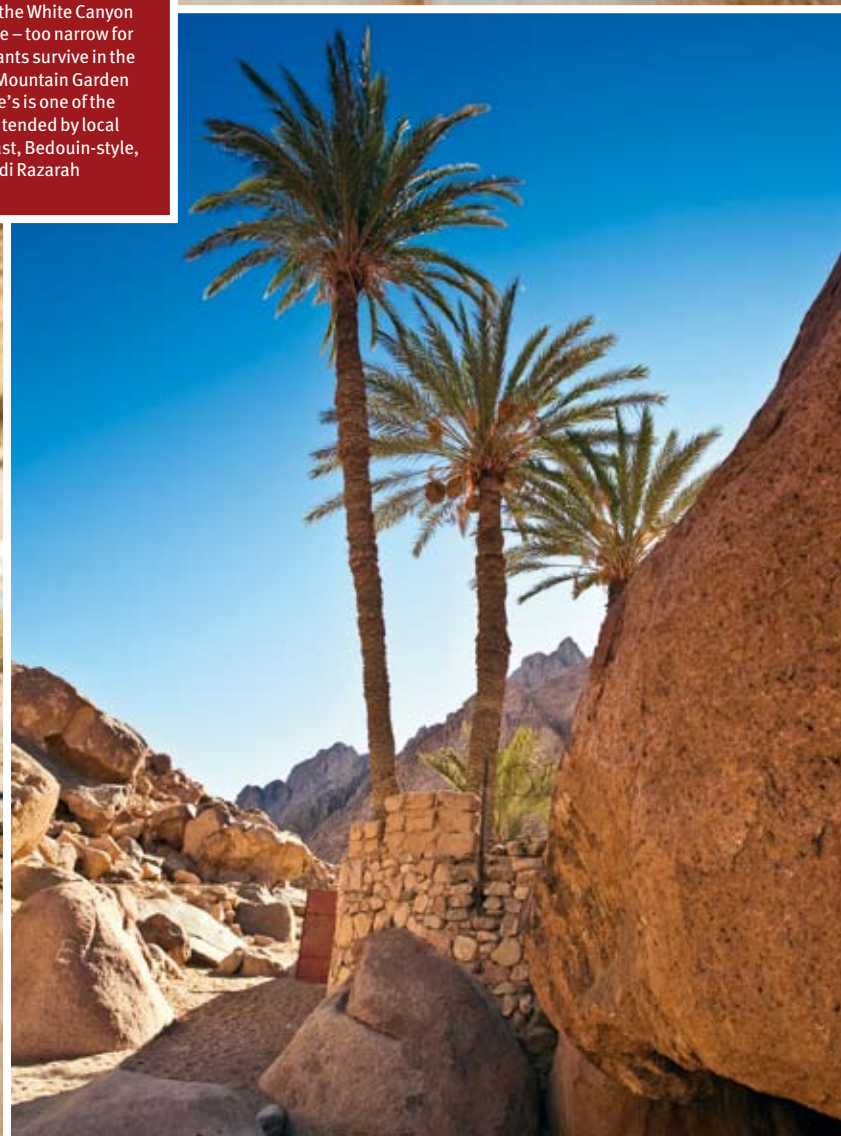


Previous:

Trekking with the Bedouin and their camels across the Biblical landscapes of Wadi Razarah is like stepping back in time

Clockwise from top left:

The ship of the desert takes a break in Wadi Khudra; the White Canyon is a bit of squeeze – too narrow for camels; a few plants survive in the desert – Amran Mountain Garden near St Katherine's is one of the patches lovingly tended by local farmers; breakfast, Bedouin-style, at camp near Wadi Razarah



Leave only footprints

Camels are perfectly adapted to walking in the desert: as they plod away from camp, near Nawamis, they leave few traces – unlike the 4WDs that passed through before

St Katherine's & Mt Sinai

Nestled at the foot of **Mount Sinai**, the 6th century **St Katherine's Monastery** is the world's oldest continuously inhabited monastery – and the desert's biggest tourist draw. Tour groups from the coast start arriving pre-dawn to allow walkers to climb Mt Sinai for the sunrise (6.30am in winter; 4.30am in summer). There are two routes: the gentle 2.5 hour 'camel path', and the faster but knee-shattering 'Steps of Repentance'. For a quieter experience, arrive the night before and sleep on the mountain; climb the mountain for sunset instead; or trek some of the myriad other 2,000m+ peaks (including **Mount Katherine**) in the area. The monastery is only open in the mornings. Don't miss the thorny evergreen bush – a transplanted descendant of Moses's **Burning Bush** – and **St Katherine's Church**, for its magnificent mosaic.



‘The surrounding hills seemed almost alive, like crouching animals ready to pounce’

◀ “Without the Trust I would have had to leave this garden – my *habibi* (sweetheart),” he smiled. Instead, he now plans to hand his beloved on to the 29 children he and his siblings have produced between them, with trekkers camping overnight helping to provide valuable income for the family.

I’d have loved to have spent longer in these remote wadis and gardens – but I now had an appointment in the desert to discover how the tribes there are coping with the challenges of the modern world. Before the tribal gathering, we were to spend a couple of days trekking with Bedouin from the Muzeina tribe, one of those hit hardest by the loss of their ancient territories and culture.

From St Katherine’s Village the road winds through hills and plains, glowing apricot in the setting sun, and drops down into the desert proper. I was entering the heartland of the Muzeina, occupied since the 14th century when the tribe migrated here from the Arabian Peninsula, and where they are working with the Makhad Trust to establish an ecotourism project that it hopes will allow the Muzeina to continue living in their desert home.

Before visiting this project at Nawamis I wanted to spend time with the tribe, travelling as they do, with only the possessions they can carry on the back of a camel, and feeling the rhythm of life in the desert, which they so desperately wish to protect.

Seemingly at random the jeep turned off the asphalt and followed a track deep into the sand. By the time we stopped the moon was high in the sky, and the desert aglow. Meeting me were my two Bedouin guides, Ahmed and Salem, and their camels. As we walked to our campsite, the surrounding *gebels* (hills) seemed almost alive, like crouching animals ready to pounce. Perhaps it was the reassuring presence of our guides, but this looming, luminous landscape didn’t feel threatening.

Our camp for the night was a small oasis, tucked away behind an escarpment, where a few date palms flourished beside a desert spring. As Ahmed and Salem lit a fire to cook supper I found a place to park my sleeping bag, in the shelter of an abandoned sheepfold. After a supper of barbecued chicken and vegetables I sipped endless glasses of sweet tea, listening to the deep silence broken only by soft Arabic conversation and the occasional snort of our camels.

I asked Salem about his life in Sinai, and how it had changed over the years. “My tribe, the Muzeina, came to Sinai over 600 years ago,” Salem told me. “Our way of staking claim to the land was by improving it – for example, by planting trees. But when the businessmen came to build the hotels at Sharm they asked us for documents to prove it was our land. Of course, we had none.”

Since the Makhad Trust started work with the Muzeina a decade ago their lives have improved. “We can now earn ▶





◀ money, and my people are able to live once more in our oases, cultivate the land and be self-sufficient,” said Salem. Eventually the conversation and the fire died down, and a deep peace descended over the little group like a thick, comforting blanket; I retired to my sheepfold to sleep.

The next morning I was woken at first light by Ahmed and Salem baking the breakfast bread in the traditional way – in the embers of the fire; I ate it, still warm, with goats’ cheese. After breakfast we followed ancient Bedouin tracks, trekking over the rocky hills and crossing wide, sandy wadis punctuated by spiky acacias. The acacia is a hugely symbolic tree to the Bedouin, signifying the presence of water and acting as a landmark to travellers.

However, I quickly realised that riding camels is far less tiring than walking in the sand. And from this new vantage, high above the ground, I could better see the vast emptiness spreading before me. The desert is a landscape pared down to its bare minimum: just rock, sand and sky, with none of the visual clutter of modern life. The only man-made features were the tracks of 4WDs criss-crossing the sand, a reminder of how well my camel was adapted to her environment, passing through the desert without leaving a trace.

After only a day of desert travel I was becoming used to the hypnotic uniformity of the scenery. Just when I thought I’d never see a green thing again we turned a bend to be met with so much lushness my eyes hurt. Ain Khudra (Green Spring) is a forest of palm trees that is surely everyone’s dream of a Biblical oasis. It was hardly surprising to learn that Ain Khudra is mentioned in the Bible as Hazeroth, where the weary Israelites rested during their 40 years of wilderness wandering. Later it was an important stop on the pilgrimage route between Jerusalem and St

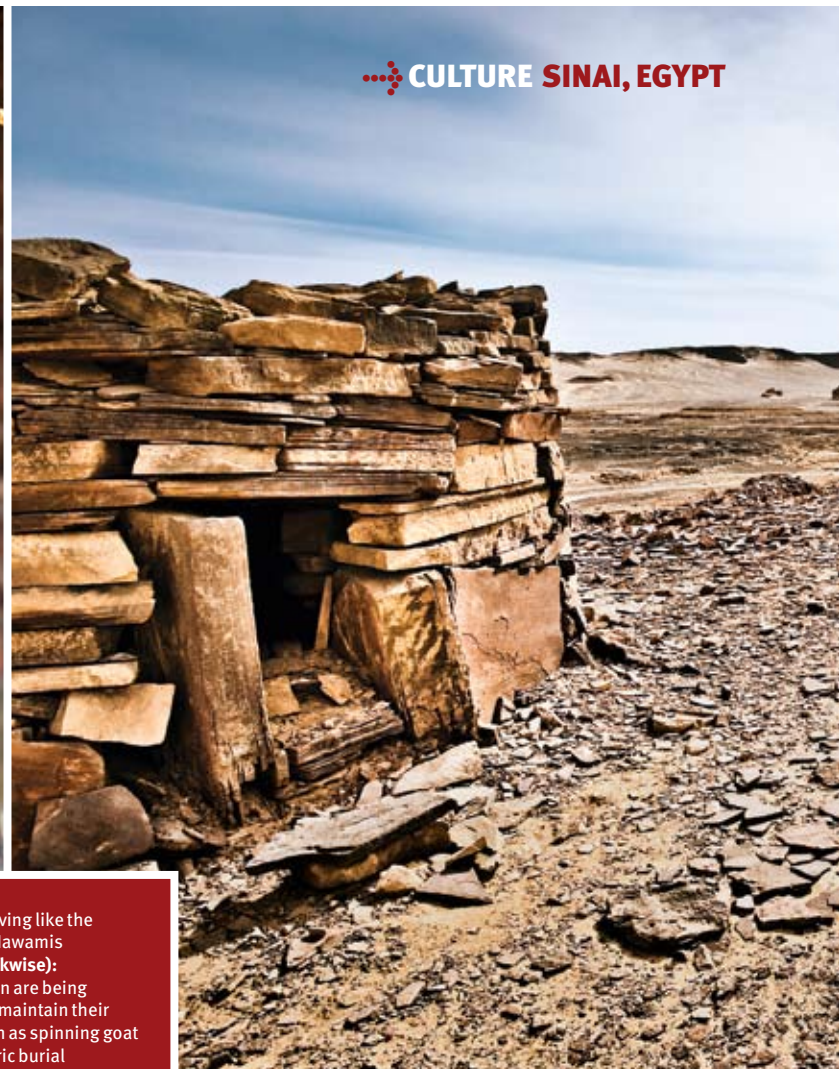
Katherine’s; we stopped too, lunching to the cooing of pigeons, which made this desert oasis sound more like an English country garden.

Tourists have discovered Ain Khudra now, and the sight of other people – just like the sight of so much greenery – was a shock. But we soon left them behind as we continued up White Canyon, so steep and narrow in places that the camels could not accompany us. It was an aptly named spot: the sand like newly fallen snow, the rocks like glaciers, giving the wadi an almost Alpine aspect. We trekked along the wadi bottom, scrambling along Bedouin paths as the canyon tapered to the width of a person. Eventually we climbed the makeshift ladders to the top, where our camels were waiting.

A brief camel lurch followed by a jeep ride took us to our base camp for the next two days, where a hot meal and copious amounts of ruby-red *karkadai* (hibiscus tea) awaited. The following morning we trekked to our final destination, Nawamis, home of the Muzeina’s ecotourism project and where the gathering of the tribes was to take place. Skirting the cliffs of the surrounding hills we reached the namesake *nawamis* themselves: prehistoric burial chambers supposedly constructed at the time of the Biblical exodus. Perched on an outcrop of rock, these circular, stone-built tombs, facing west into the setting sun, seemed to watch over the desert like age-old sentinels.

The modern village of Nawamis is little more than a jumble of breeze-block huts, surrounded by straggly chickens, shaggy goats and snooty camels. As well as being one of the oldest sites in South Sinai, Nawamis is its geographical centre, and on the pilgrimage route between St Katherine’s Monastery, Jerusalem and Mecca; as such, it is sacred to the Muzeina.

Continued on page 57 >>



Facing page: Living like the Bedouin near Nawamis
This page (clockwise): Muzelna women are being encouraged to maintain their traditions, such as spinning goat wool; prehistoric burial chambers dot the landscape near Nawamis, hinting at its ancient importance on the pilgrim route to Jerusalem; Ancient Ain Khudra (Green Spring) Oasis is a welcome flash of green amid the parched desert landscape



Keeping tradition alive
It's a slow trek by camel
across Wadi Razarah to
get to the annual
gathering of the South
Sinai tribes









Left:
The perfect breakfast
at camp near Wadi
Razarah: ember-
baked bread, goat's
cheese and a few
Western comforts

Above:
In the *makhad*
(meeting place)
at Nawamis the
gathering ends with
traditional music

« It is here that the Makhad Trust is helping the Muzeina to create a sustainable and environmentally friendly community centre to provide a venue for local events such as weddings and camel racing. It will also be visited by tourists, who'll be able to use it as a base for trekking or camel rides into the desert. And there will be a tent-weaving centre for the tribeswomen, who will be encouraged to keep this tradition – the preserve of women – alive. It's hoped revenue from the initiative will revive the Muzeina economy, depleted in recent decades by the rise of mass tourism on the coast and the fall in the water table.

The centrepiece of the project will be the *makhad* ('meeting place') itself, a huge tented area where the sheikhs were beginning to gather for the meeting of the tribes that evening. The *makhad* is being woven by the women of the Muzeina tribe. I walked over to where they were making the strips of tent from goat hair; shyly they glanced up at me from beneath their hijabs, and beckoned me over for a closer look. I crouched beside them, admiring their dexterity as they handled the cloth on the rustic looms.

Back at the *makhad* the serious business of the gathering was underway. There is a strong bond between the seven tribes of South Sinai, and traditionally they have helped one another throughout the centuries. With regular 'parliaments' at Nawamis the sheikhs spoke of their hope to maintain this bond for many years to come, and made a solemn promise to meet again at the full moon next November.

As the meeting came to a close a guest asked why they had chosen this spot for their gathering. One tribesman described

Nawamis as the geographical centre of South Sinai, and announced, "This is a dream come true. Our hearts and minds are attached to this place now." Another held up his mobile phone and announced, "And there is very good reception here!"

After the business was done, the feasting began. Everyone sat around the campfire, the sheikhs in their pristine-white *dishdashas* and keffiyehs. It was a timeless scene, the only flashes of modernity the shiny mobile phones frequently whipped out from under their flowing robes.

Then, by the light of candles set around the tent walls, one of the Bedouin began to play the *oud* (Arabic lute) and another the *tabla* (drum). Soon everyone was clapping rhythmically in time to the strange, yet somehow familiar, beat of the music. We visitors didn't know the words to the songs, though one tribesman told me they were mostly about love, or wistful ballads of nomadic life in times long gone. The firelight flickered on their venerable faces and on the golden wood of the oud, and I felt a deep sense of continuity between past and present, one we have lost in our busy, modern lives.

On our final morning we packed up our camp and trekked out of the desert, ending the journey with a sliding descent down a vast dune of pure, pale-gold sand rippled by the breeze. From the knife-edged top I looked back at the serrated peaks of the High Mountains, where I had been just a few short days ago. Beyond the mountains lay the Red Sea, and the beginning of my journey at Sharm el-Sheikh. So near, yet a whole world away. ■