

# Sinai Journey Report November 2016

**Makhad**  
People Spirit Environment



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## ***News from Sinai, project updates, and forthcoming journeys***

Brrrr! It's cold in St Katherine's now!! Winter has come early and when the sun dips down behind the mountains the temperature drops like a stone. There hasn't been a frost yet but it won't be long now. The little house I stay in is tucked into the bottom of Safsafa mountain just behind Fox Camp and now the sun doesn't reach the house until after 9.30 so I need the heating on most of the time, but everywhere is a very comfortable temperature in the sun. As you can see from the photo above, November is a time for rain too.

The big news though is the tremendous storm that hit Sinai at the end of October. It was barely three weeks after the new dam, Rahabat Dam, was finished that rain started. Mahmoud tells me it was good gentle rain for most of the day - just what was needed, but by evening the rain got harder and harder, the thunder rolled and sheet lightning lit up the dark sky. Hail stones the size of marbles rained down turning the ground white. Floods the like of which people cannot remember having seen before coursed through St Katherine's and down the wadis. All the dams were filled, but so were some of the wells. Fortunately no-one was hurt. The storm raged over all Egypt and in other places some people were less lucky and there have been some fatalities. The road from Tarfa to Wadi Ferian was washed away for a large part as the floods are really big here, as all the mountain rain on the west side runs down to the sea through here. Everywhere we have been we could see where the rain has scoured the landscape, cutting through sand and shifting rocks. One of the major casualties in St Katherine's was Abu Giffa path, the main thoroughfare into the mountains and the only access by camel. Most of the path was damaged and large parts were swept away. However the Bedouin, resourceful as ever, already have a plan and some repair has started - more news of this later.



The olive harvest and the almond harvest have been good this year so people are pleased to have the produce and the income. Tourism is very slow with only a trickle of Israelis and mainly Egyptians

visiting. The monastery is busier at weekends with coaches from Cairo but Egyptians are not so likely to buy souvenirs or camel rides up the mountains. Although several European countries like Germany and Italy have lifted their travel embargo on Sharm El Sheikh, this is not yet translating into bookings in Sharm hotels or people visiting St Katherine's so work is still scarce.

The other big news is that the Egyptian government has devalued the Egyptian pound. For some time to come we expect the exchange rates to fluctuate a great deal but at the moment they are very favourable at around 20 EGP to 1 GBP. The problem for the Bedouin is that there is now rampant inflation and food prices have soared. We fully expect that labour costs will follow suite shortly and already cement has gone up in price. As long as the exchange rate stays high against the pound this won't be too much of a problem for funding the projects and will be an advantage for future journeys.

This last journey of the year is a solo one with the focus on existing projects, particularly the wells project.

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## The Projects - Wells

This project continues to be the mainstay of our work and it certainly continues to make a huge difference. It is also the main conduit for our connections with the wider Bedouin population and keeps us in touch with a very large number of them. Mahmoud, the Sinai Manager, and Helen the UK Project Manager, with Faraj Fox usually providing the transport in his jeep, make up the team facilitating this project.



One of our early visits was to a well belonging to Dr Ahmed. Some of you may have met Dr Ahmed and may remember that the Makhad Trust helped build a Herbal Medicine garden and school for Dr Ahmed. He spends nearly all the time living very simply in his mountain garden in Wadi Itlah and looks to be one of the healthiest bedouin in the whole of Sinai. When asked what his secret of good health is he replied that it is living simply, eating organic food grown in his gardens, lots of fruit and olives, but mostly being active and taking exercise, including walking a lot. He certainly lives these principles and it seems to be working for him. We had gone to visit his newly

restored well which we started last visit. We found the well was completed and he has good water in the well, so will be able to grow even more vegetables next spring.

Accessibility to wells vary a great deal from ones that are close enough for Faraj to park his jeep next to them, to others that take half a day to visit. One of the latter, was a well providing water for some of the community of Zaituna, just outside St Katherine's. The owner had warned us that it was a long walk so we were fairly prepared. However the well was an hour and a quarter from the community up a beautiful wadi called Naqb Zaituna, and then up the steep sides of the wadi to a small basin just 50m below the summit. The climb up was a bit of a scramble and a challenge at times, in all about 300m up the mountain. It will take quite a bit of organising for the well owner to arrange for the restoration, but they didn't seem to think it would be a difficult job.



We also went to visit two wells currently under repair in the remote community of Eggrayradt about an hours drive out of St Katherine's. This community was mentioned in a newsletter some time ago as being in desperate need of fresh drinking water, and also water for their gardens as they don't have much access to fresh food due to being so remote. We are pleased to report that one of the wells has been completed and another well we started on the last visit is expected to be finished very soon. This will give the community two working wells but it is really not enough for the summer when the local population mushrooms as people bring their goats for grazing, along with their families. We have two other wells on our waiting list here. They treated us to a very tasty lunch.



During the trip we started 4 new wells and found 7 wells were completed. Here are the new updated statistics.

#### Wells statistics as at 30 November 2016

	Completed	Underway	Waiting Sponsor	Waiting List
Garden Wells	172	4	27	176
Community Wells	153	9	48	140
Totals	325	13	75	316

In all 391 wells are waiting for sponsorship.

#### The Beekeeping Training Project

Salem and the trainees have settled in to their training regime and have been spending the last two months learning a lot of theory about bees. They seem to be enjoying the process hugely, as did the last course attendees - maybe its something to do with talking about honey! Salem's classroom has been adorned with a huge poster full of diagrams about bees and beekeeping. He had ordered the protective clothing for each trainee together with a smoke machine and Helen was pleased to be part of the symbolic presentation of these essential tools of the trade to each prospective beekeeper. Now they have the protective clothing they are going to be getting up close to real bees from this point forward. There are still a few hurdles to overcome, one of which is what should the staging for the hives be made of, taking into consideration that they will be carried up into the mountains by camel. The usual metal ones are heavy and cumbersome. Mahmoud and one of the beekeepers who is a carpenter are going to come up with an Ikea inspired flat-pack bee hive rack! It will be interesting to see how this invention works. They will be taking delivery of their bee swarms in February so on the next visit it will be exciting to see how they get on with their new bees.



#### Orphan Herb Project

It was the last day of the course for our first intake of fatherless children. We have called this the Orphan Herb Growing Project, though to be more correct the children mostly have mothers. However to loose a father is to plunge a family into abject poverty as there is no government benefits or help and few women work except for making the beaded bags (though a flow of tourists is needed to purchase them). The project started with 10 children who had all lost their fathers. Atia



and his associate S'lem, along with the children welcomed us when we arrived. They were happy to tell us what they had learned and liked most about the course. As far as we can judge the children have learnt quite a lot but the proof will be when they set up their own small herb gardens.

Nearly all Bedouin seem to have a good knowledge of herbs and use them regularly in cooking and for minor health problems. Plant lore is part of their traditional culture. However most Bedouin do not know how to cultivate the herbs and it is important that the knowledge does not get lost. Many herbs are indigenous only to the unique climatic conditions of the Sinai Mountains so passing on the knowledge is vital.



The education system in Egypt leaves quite a lot to be desired so where parents can afford it they send their children for private lessons. Widows cannot afford private lessons for their children but by attending the herbal school, they will be increasing learning across a variety of subjects.

S'lem lives in Esbaia, where two of the fatherless girls come from and he has been able to help them set up their garden already. We will find out next year, and there will be another course starting with a new intake as soon as school finishes at the end of May.

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## The Horticultural Project

Over the last 5 or 6 years, St Katherine's town and the wadi's surrounding it have become gradually greener as the garden well project has progressed. There are hundreds more trees growing and new ones being planted all the time. As we have said before, there are few opportunities for work and earning money so Bedouin are returning to their gardens as a source of food for their families and as a source of income by growing cash crops.



Skill levels and knowledge vary considerably with much of the current knowledge having been gained from the monks and then the Israelis during the Israeli occupation in the 1980's. It is a fairly standard conventional way of growing but without any fertilizer or chemicals which the Bedouin cannot afford. During our visits to the gardens we have noticed that some Bedouin do not seem to

understand the need for diversity in crops, nor over-wintering of crops, nor keeping water evaporation to a minimum. There are many ways that yield could be increased, so that families are growing not just enough for themselves but also to sell in the towns to bring in an income and provide better food for people without access to gardens. Improving and expanding horticulture could lead, eventually to a state of food security for the Bedouin and it would be very helpful if they were not dependant on the poor quality, highly priced food available from Cairo.



This is a new project which we hope will bare fruit - literally - in the near future! In order to get the ball rolling with enthusing the Bedouin gardeners to re-evaluate how they grow food, we took a minibus load of keen garden owners to visit the Habiba organic farm at Nuweiba. There a young Bedouin man told them about his experiences growing food organically. We had arranged the trip through one of the volunteers there called Islam. He showed them other more efficient ways of irrigating so they can grow more for the same amount of water. The trip was such a success that they are already talking about more visits in future. We hope this project will find a life of its own that will just need steering from time to time. However the Bedouin have asked for good quality seed so we will have to look at funding this properly.

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## The Library

While we were in St Katherine's in September, Farhana got married to her long time fiancé and has taken a break from running the library while she adjusts to married life. Her sister Jemeya has stepped into her shoes and the library is running as smoothly as ever. The children still love the colouring books and the games that have been donated to the library. The next big step for the library is the start of an expanding literacy program called the CLE Program (Concentrated Learning Experience). This method of teaching has been tried and tested by Rotary organisations in various countries and is one of the best methods. This week the first cohort of teachers is being trained in CLE principles. They will then each teach 4 to 5 Bedouin for around 3 months by which time the pupils should be literate. They then carry on with new pupils. We hope to teach more trainers too so that the scheme with snowball with more and more people becoming literate. Nora, from our sister organisation, Nuwamis Development Society, and a new member, Mahmoud Abdulla are running the program.



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## Abu Giffa Path

In the last newsletter we mentioned that Abu Giffa path connecting the mountain gardens to St Katherine's had started to deteriorate and many Bedouin were seriously worried for the safety of their camels when using the path. A small deputation of Bedouin had come to see us in St Katherine's to ask for help. Then a few weeks later the storms came and partially destroyed the path in many places. Quite a number of people responded to the email and Facebook posts and we have collected quite a good sum of money which will pay for the cement needed as well as camel transport. The Bedouin will do a lot of the work themselves as a community commitment and they are also asking for funds from the National Park and other NGO's. They are determined to get the path safe again in the near future.



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## Forthcoming Journeys



Here is advance notification that Rachel Devas, one of our trustees is organising another dam building journey for the last week in April. If you are interested in joining her please get in touch with Helen or the office for your details to be forwarded to her. The feedback we get from participants on the journeys is always extremely positive with many people saying how they have had the most amazing experience. The photo is one that Freddi Devas took on the last trip in October, to build Rahabat Dam. When we have more information we will post details to the website.

The next project journey will be at the end of February towards the end of winter. We hope to have enough funding then, to start 10 new wells.

### Contact Details

If you would like to know more about any of the projects mentioned here, or contribute in any way, please get in touch with Helen at [helencranston@makhad.org](mailto:helencranston@makhad.org). Also see our website [makhad.org](http://makhad.org)