

Sinai Journey Report November 2017

Makhad
People Spirit Environment



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***News from Sinai,
Wells Project,
Beekeeping Training
Project, Orphan Herb
Project, & two new
initiatives***

Wherever we visit Bedouin communities the children are always curious to see visitors and they love to have their photo taken. When we went to visit wells in Sheikh Awad where there is no phone signal, the only way to find the well owner is to go from house to house asking. When we find the well owner we are invited to drink the obligatory hospitality sweet tea and the children come too. These children in the photo lined themselves up on this rug without any prompting. They look happy enough but the sad fact is that chronic disease affects all ages here and two of the boys are sick. One was born with a heart complaint and has had many operations and the other has a kidney complaint (we were told) that means he can't walk properly and has stick-thin legs. But despite this they are bright as buttons! The very next day I met a lady with her seven year old daughter with her who was also unable to walk or even stand. It is heart-breaking to see such suffering, not just in the children but their parents too. Medical help here has to be paid for, though there are charitable schemes for helping the disadvantaged too. If Bedouin families cannot get free help, then the medical bills are massive, and sometimes just too expensive for the invalid to be treated properly.

On arrival I found Fox Camp was a hive of activity. The lack of tourists in St Katherine's often means that I am the only guest for meals but this time there were Egyptian groups coming to trek in the mountains, a couple of Israeli girls on a trekking holiday, a group going to climb Mt Shoma and the Sinai Trail was hosting two Wilderness First Aid courses, the first of which was for anyone and the second one was for Bedouin guides. The first course was full with 16 people, and Christina, administrator of the Trail, told me that she could have filled many more places. There was also a group of American guys who had come for some sunny climbing. After a couple of climbs they declared that the South Sinai mountains were brilliant for climbing. They went off deeper into the high mountains to make a film about their climbing experiences. It is really heartening to see so much activity and to know that many Bedouin are earning good money for the time being. The Sinai Trail is doing well and bringing lots of groups hiking on all parts of the route from Nuweiba on the coast to St Katherine's. They are just starting to plan the next phase of the trail from St K to the west coast, north of El Tur.

The Team on the Ground

The team that facilitates the projects, consists of three people. Mahmoud is our only full time staff member and is our Sinai Manager, working hard visiting wells all over the mountains. Helen is the UK Project Manager, acting as a bridge between funders and recipients. Faraj is our facilitator, driving us to remote places and intervening on our behalf whenever it is necessary. Together we make a great team of complementary skills and personalities. This photo was taken of the Sinai team a few weeks ago. This team is supported back in UK by Sheila who fundraises, and our Trustees, particularly Michael and Sherif.



The Wells Project

Thanks to our funders we were able to start another 13 wells this time, having started 15 the last time, so we had lots of wells to visit. The wells we see vary hugely from community wells in the towns for 15 families to wells far out in the desert, to garden wells in the high mountains. Here are a few well stories.

On every trip there is usually one site visit that stands out above and beyond all the others. This time it was a visit to the well of Eid in Wadi Itlah. However the story starts before then. In September we visited wells in Wadi Itlah when we came upon a family sitting in the shade of one of the huge date palms, watching a man digging a massive hole in the middle of the wadi floor. He asked us to do a site visit for his garden well. We have a rule that we only do a site visit for a garden well if the garden is closed and fit for purpose. His garden was a patch of the wadi and the wall had long since disappeared in various floods. The date palms and a large nabug tree were all that were left of the garden Eid had inherited from his grandfather.

Eid and his family had been living in Wadi Ferian for many years but he moved back to Abu Sila because there was no work in Wadi Ferian and he needed a garden to provide for his family of 9. The well had been completely filled in by floods years ago but he knew where it was and so he had dug more than 2 m of huge boulders. It was a huge hole but he had found some water. Eid needed financial help to dig the well deeper, line it and build flood protection. We explained that we couldn't do the New Site Visit because there was no wall to the garden but if he would 'close' the garden we would come back. Usually in these circumstances, the owner will put in posts and barbed wire to keep out animals and we would consider this sufficient although not ideal.



Six weeks later, we went to see how Eid had got on. As we approached the well, we could see a new cemented wall across part of the wadi. Then we followed a massive new wall along to the end to get access to the newly enclosed garden that now included the well within it. And it was a colossal wall more than 50 m long (the same size as about 3 or 4 of our dams)! To say I was amazed, or staggered would be an understatement. The amount of effort for one man to make such a wall in so short a time was almost unbelievable. Eid had shown immense powers of dedication to providing for his family in the only way he knew how and had put all his physical effort

into doing so. We discovered that he had little money which is probably why he built a wall costing nothing instead of using posts and wire which he could not afford.

The more I looked at the wall and at Eid, the more humbled by the experience I felt. Eid had literally worked himself to the bone; he was terribly thin. When we complimented him on his efforts he told us how much hard work it was lifting and moving the massive boulders to form the wall and now, unsurprisingly he had a bad back. As we walked away from Eid's herculean efforts there was no question of not supporting him by starting his well immediately. We had all been intensely moved by Eid's sheer determination and we felt that there was really no decision to be made, only to do what was right.

The following morning Faraj brought him to Fox Camp and Mahmoud informed him that we had decided to start his well immediately. A brief smile crossed his face as he looked up to thank the Gods, but he seemed to relax. Faraj gave him some warm winter clothes for his family and some dried food stuffs so he went off with a large sack, a pocket full of money and a lighter step than before. This family have had a very tough time for several years and we hope that the tide has turned for them now. We will be visiting again at the end of February next year and plan to take packets of seeds for him to grow in the spring.

The photo shows Eid standing next to the well with two of his daughters, with just part of the new wall behind him. We will let you know how the family gets on.



One of the wells that was completed on our last visit is right out in the desert far from St Katherine's at Rahaba. While the well water is mostly for people, the owner had also built three large low pools which he regularly fills with water so that many other desert dwellers can come to drink. We saw a large herd of around 40 camels drinking here as we came past. All the camels belong to people but when they don't need them (such as when there are very few tourists), they let them loose in the desert to graze and get exercise. Faraj says that camels that have been in the desert are in very good condition. However, they can only live in the desert if there are pools like these.



Another well completed on this trip belongs to Ramadan in Wadi Arbaeen. Ramadan's garden is one of the main starting points for climbing Mt Sinai and Mt St Katherine's as it is sandwiched between the two. Many hikers come for a rest here or to stay the night and people will remember the garden as it is one of the few places where you can see hyrax, a large Guinea Pig relative.



There is quite a large community of people living around here, mostly relatives of Ramadan's but they didn't have enough water. Thanks to the fundraising efforts of a teacher from London and Louise from the Friends of the Abraham Path, the well is now restored and giving a staggering 8 cubes of water at day. This should be enough for the gardens, tourists trekking through and for the hyrax.

Well Statistics for November 17

	Completed	Underway	Waiting Sponsor	Waiting List
Garden Wells	190	13	29	194
Community Wells	180	12	50	175
Totals	370	25	79	369

In addition we made 26 site visits to wells under contract and 15 new site visits to prospective wells. 11 were completed during this trip.

Beekeeping Project



Class III have got off to a good start. The theory mostly done, and now they are in their practical phase but won't have their bees until the end of winter. We went to see the class learning about the different types of bees in Wadi Itlah in Hosnee's garden. Hosnee had been on the course last year and his bees were the nearest to the village. As there are 10 students this year, Selem has split the class into two which gives everyone two opportunities to attend training sessions and seems to be working well. The other half of the class will go to see bees in Wadi Ferian where it is warmer and they are still active. The

beekeepers are still working on the problem of how to organise metal racking to stand the hives on to keep them out of the way of ants and lizards. Several beekeepers had problems with both this year and lost quite a few bees this way. The problem is not so much getting the frames, as transporting them to mountain gardens by camel. Hussein from Class II who lives in Farsh Rumana which is a very long way from roads, had some metal frames made up that slot together like Meccano. They will see if this is a solution that works for everyone.

Abu Giffa Path

Some of you may remember that this time last year there were tremendous floods in the high mountains, which caused quite a bit of damage including almost wiping out the camel route up into the high mountains. Many of our supporters and people who have come on journeys to Sinai sent donations to help pay for the restoration of the path. The worst parts were mended earlier in the year but the builders were hard at work again on another stretch of the path. It takes them over 4 days just to repair and rebuild one criss-cross section. There are still quite a few sections still in need of repair including the downhill stretch into Wadi Tobuk.



The Orphan Herb Project

Also more accurately known as the Herbal Horticulture Course for Fatherless Children. This is in its dormant phase along with the herbs at this time of year. We met with Selim, the teacher who is looking forward to resuming teaching in the spring. We agreed that the extensive curriculum needs to be taught over two years to see the whole growing cycle repeated at least once. Selim hopes to inform the whole population about the care of wild herbs as there is a risk that irreparable damage will be done to plants when people go to gather them for sale. The wild oregano is especially in demand as this is the only place in Egypt where it grows and it is much sought after in the cities. Selim wants to persuade people to grow the herb by their houses and to leave the wild ones alone. He feels responsible for the heritage of the plants and Bedouin knowledge and wants to pass this on for the benefit of people and plants.

The New Carpentry School Project

In the last edition of this newsletter, this new project was still at the drawing board stage of inception. Thanks to two generous donors and Ahmed Oda's continuing desire to teach carpentry skills we have been able to make a start with the setting up process. The first thing to sort out is a building for the school. Ahmed has a small building near his house which can be extended. The room needs to be able to accommodate cutting wood 7m long, so the plan is to demolish one wall, extend two others and put the roof back on. This will be happening over the next few weeks. Ahmed says he knows where to get quality second hand tools (often rather better than new ones) but this will still need some funding. In March the School room should be ready for the students. Ahmed will teach 10 to 13 fifteen year old boys, who have dropped out of school but are looking for a more practical education. As the course will be teaching about accurate measuring, different types of wood for tasks, cutting, smoothing, and how to make joints amongst other things, the boys should be getting a good supplementary education. The school will run for 3 days a week and the course will last 2 years. The first year will be about learning how to use hand tools and the second year will be about how to use machine tools.



We will need to find funding for this project which is expected to cost around £2600 per year. It is difficult to apply to trusts for funds when a project has yet to begin so if anyone would like to help and support this project in its initial stages we would be extremely grateful. Any size of donation is helpful. We hope we can attract more funds once the school is working.

St Katherine's Library

This is still going strong, now under the supervision of Zainab. We are hoping to have access to another room across the corridor in the City Council building, so that other classes can be held there, such as the Literacy classes and now for Storytelling for the children.

Local Personalities and Living Legends

Most of our journey participants will have heard of and probably met Amria, the elderly lady who lives most of the year alone in her mountain gardens. She has become quite famous to all who trek in the area and much admired when people see the hard and simple life she leads. However she is not the only inspiring Bedouin lady in the mountains. As Mahmoud and I were walking along Wadi Arbaeen, which runs alongside Mt Sinai, we came across Hadja, a diminutive but strong lady. At once one can tell that this lady is a bit different



from other Bedouin ladies. Mahmoud tells me that although she is a grandmother, every morning she wakes at around 4 am, gets up and makes bread. Then she packs the bread and water from her well, onto her donkey and walks up to the coffee shops on Mt Sinai where she sells the bread and water and walks back down again. We saw her on her way to the town to get more supplies. In the afternoon she repeats the whole journey up Mt Sinai! One trip up the mountain in a day is enough for most of us but two in a day, every day, when one is 75 is astonishing.

Dr Ahmed is a hugely respected Medical Herbalist all his life. He learnt from his father, who learnt from his father so the knowledge goes back a long way. He lives almost full time, (he spends one night in the town with his family on Fridays when he goes to the mosque), in his mountain garden. He always welcomes visitors and guests and if we are in Wadi Itlah, where he lives it, would be rude not to visit. He has at least 5 gardens where he grows nuts, fruit and vegetables and they always taste fabulous. He usually gives us some produce from his garden when we visit. He has just completed a guest room for people to stay in. It has a central fireplace, a supply of firewood, water containers, mattresses and rugs, crockery and cutlery and cooking pots. If you would like to stay here, it could be arranged through Faraj Fox.



Bedouin Bags



For many years we have been bringing back beautiful bags made by the Bedouin ladies, and selling them in England with profits going into the projects. Since our original supplier, Selima, was paying her ladies such a pittance for their work, many ladies have gone into business themselves and there are lots of small bag 'shops' springing up all round St Katherine's. There is no shortage of lovely items for sale, and of course now is a great time to be buying, in time for Christmas. Our sister charity The Isbourne Foundation has some of the bags for sale in their reception. Hooda, Selma, Nadia, and Mohamed would

all be delighted to receive orders, but you have to plan ahead. Do let us know if you would like to hold a bag party and we will get in new stock on future trips.

Visiting Sinai

Two of our trustees will again be taking a group to the high mountains to build a dam. Rachel is coordinating the journey and participants, and it will be from Saturday 7 April to Sunday 15 April. The journey will include trekking in the high mountains, sleeping under the trees and stars in a Bedouin garden, a visit to St Katherine's monastery and of course, delicious food. Your bags will be carried by camel so no need to worry about carrying a huge rucksack. You will work alongside the Bedouin on the dam, mostly fetching and carrying supplies of stones and cement. There are roles for everyone no matter how



strong or unfit. Please see our website for more information www.makhad.org



If you would like to go to visit Sinai and cannot come for Rachel's journey dates, then have a look at what the Sinai Trail has to offer. They run trips from the full 14 days desert traverse from the coast to St Katherine's to 4 day hikes along part of the trail. Some journeys are with riding camels and others just walking. See their website Sinai Trail for more details.

For a more bespoke journey, you can arrange with Faraj Fox to go on any number of different treks, supported by guides and camels. There is also a lovely Eco Lodge just at the edge of the mountains which makes a great retreat centre and Dr Ahmed has just finished his very nicely furnished (in Bedouin style) guest room see above. Contact us for more information.

If you decide to come on any of these journeys you will be supporting the Bedouin people who work as guides and provide camel transport, and helping them keep hold of their traditional heritage.

Our Next Friends Event

Our Next Friends of Makhad Trust event will be a Sunday lunch and walk on Rodborough Common on **Sunday 21 January** at The Bear of Rodborough, near Stroud in Gloucestershire. If you would like to come and meet fellow Makhad travellers, hear more about our projects and have a delicious lunch, then please contact Helen at helencranston@makhad.org We hope to see you there.

A Merry Christmas to all our friends and supporters!!

Helen Cranston
Project Manager
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