

ADVENTURE HOLIDAYS

Learning to walk like an Egyptian

Following Bedouin guides and their camels for two weeks on the Sinai Trail teaches biker Lois Pryce that there's more to life than the fast lane

'Shway-shway!" Musallem called out to me across the desert, as I strode off with a little too much enthusiasm at the start of day one. The Arabic equivalent of "take it easy", "shway-shway" would become my watchword over the next two weeks. There were many miles ahead, and both my body and my mind would need to adapt to this new pace.

Maybe due to hailing from such a green and pleasant land, deserts have always held an allure for me. But all my previous desert expeditions have been undertaken by motorbike, while my walking experience is of the Sunday afternoon stroll with a pub at the end variety. But there comes a time in every motorcycle adventurer's life where a bit of exercise doesn't go amiss, and so I found myself agreeing to take a walk - a 150-mile (240km) walk - on part of the new Sinai Trail.

The trail is a welcome success story in Sinai's otherwise sorry tourism tale. The once-booming holiday hotspot of Sharm el-Sheikh is still suffering the fallout from Egypt's 2011 revolution. But 90 miles (145km) north up the coast, near the port town of Nuweiba, it's a different story. Here, a collective of enterprising Bedouin are bucking the tourism downturn. Over the past few years they have been collating their ancient knowledge of the land to create the Sinai Trail. Egypt's first long-distance hiking route - and bookings are pouring in from

travellers all over the world. An entirely grass-roots initiative, with no involvement of Egypt's tourist board or government, the Sinai Trail has expanded from a 12-day hike to St Catherine's Monastery to a 340-mile (550km) route across the peninsula, taking 42 days. Thankfully, it's not compulsory to do the whole thing...

UK airlines no longer fly direct to Sharm el-Sheikh, so a small plane out of Cairo delivered me into Sinai's inky night and I was soon heading up to Nuweiba to meet my guide, the man behind the project, Musallem Faraj Tarabin. Entering a softly lit tent at his

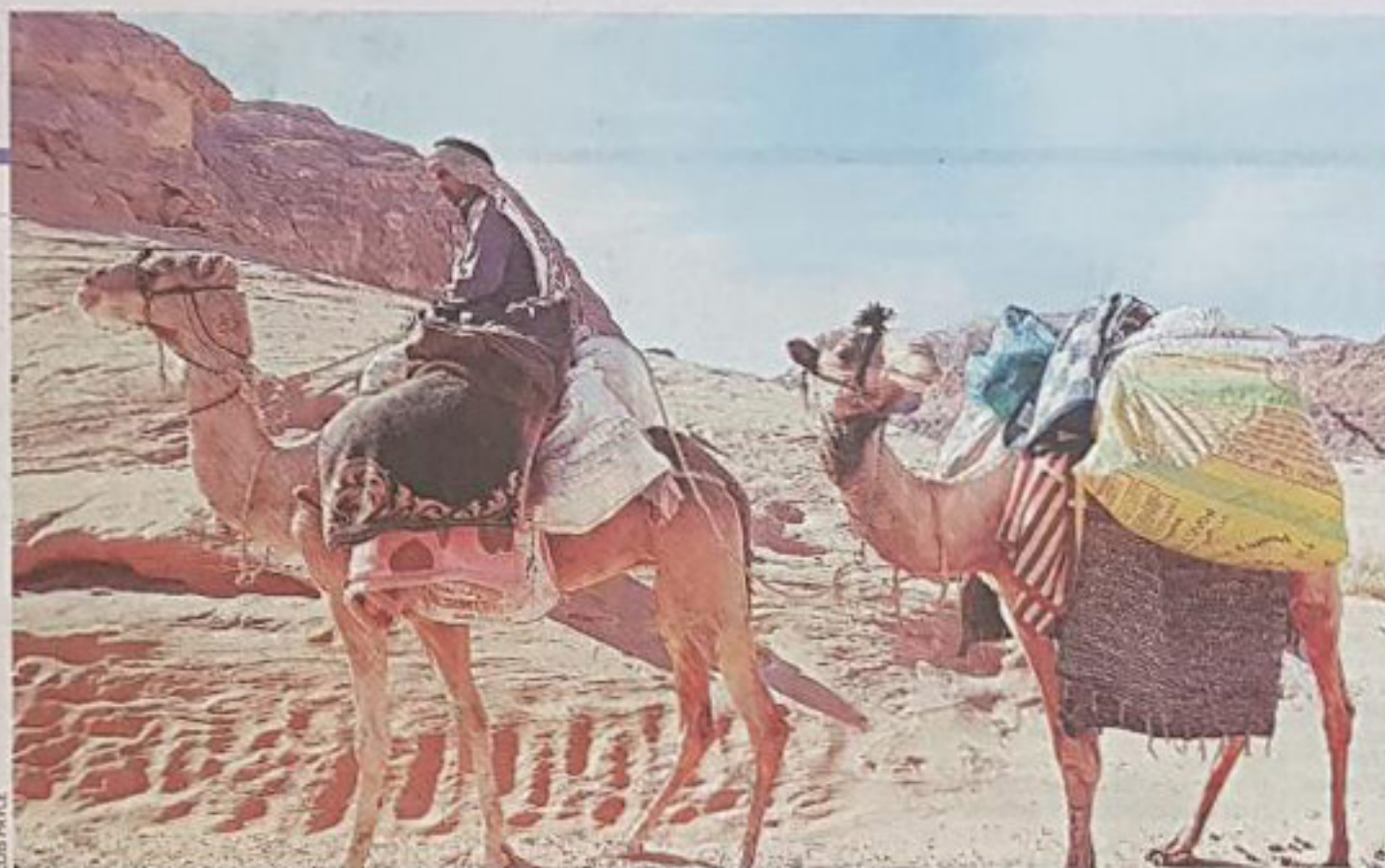


beach camp, I found him lounging barefoot on floor cushions, drinking tea and smoking shisha with his Bedouin compatriots.

"Salaam! Welcome! Life is good!" Musallem greeted me with an expansive, nicotine-stained smile, handing me a glass of sweet black tea.

Charismatic, twinkly eyed and endlessly enthusiastic about introducing the wonders of Sinai to the wider world, I knew I was in good hands. But I couldn't help noticing, as I kicked off my shoes, the difference between my city-dweller's feet and Musallem's leathery soles, toughened from years of desert walking. I took comfort from my stash of talc and plasters in my backpack, and sank into the cushions, tuning into the sounds of Arabic chatter and the gentle lapping of the waves. Across the Gulf of Aqaba, the lights of Saudi Arabia glinted with all the lure of a forbidden land. But tomorrow we would be turning away from the ocean and walking west into the arid wadis and jebels of the Sinai.

The next morning revealed a thrilling sight - two young cameleers, Khalid and Mohammed, loading their beasts of burden with our supplies. The four dromedaries knelt obediently, while an incomprehensible amount of equipment, food and water was piled upon their humps. With a cry of "Hareeeee!" from Khalid, the camels jerked into action, flexing their necks and baring tombstone teeth as their spindly front legs pushed them



TAKE A HIKE

◆ Sinaitrail.org coordinates Bedouin guides. Hikes can be tailored to groups of all sizes. Prices start at approx £380 per person. Cost includes all meals. Flights not included.

generation to generation, and the only way to walk the trail is with the locals. As we moved slowly across the desert, Musallem brought his homeland to life, identifying medicinal plants, pointing out rusty barbed wire from the Six-Day War in 1967, and sharing ancient Bedouin myths.

The pattern of our days and nights fell into a routine. The sun was our alarm

clock. Up at dawn, a pot of tea boiling in the fire, and freshly made bread, baked in the sand. Then while the camels were loaded, we would set out to walk. At the beginning I was worried I would find walking for hours each day, well, frankly, boring. But my fears were unfounded and I began to appreciate the meditative rhythm. Bursts of adrenaline came via sudden scrambles up canyons and gullies, and human interest came with halts for tea at remote Bedouin villages where Musallem would shoot the breeze with his fellow tribal leaders while I tended my feet, which were holding up well. We slept on the ground without tents, and although the nights were sometimes chilly, our reward was to fall asleep watching shooting stars, and awake to a celestial dawn, rather than a nylon fly sheet.

Our route was a circular one, ending with a long, dry riverbed taking us back to the coast. After nearly two weeks of living outside, it was something of a shock to return to the "civilisation" of a hotel room - a plastered ceiling for the sky and a 60-watt bulb for the sun. Upon waking, I was struck by the realisation and then, unexpectedly, disappointment; I didn't have to walk anywhere today.

I was going to miss the simple routine of walk, sleep, eat, repeat but it had been an important lesson in slowing down - high-octane thrills and spills are fun, but sometimes we all need a bit of "shway-shway".



DESERT DREAM Bedouin guides and their camels, main; Lois Pryce and her fellow trail walkers, above; jebels and wadis, left

up to standing. Leading the way, they made for an iconic silhouette, ambling with grace across the rocky ground despite their heavy load.

With Musallem's "shway-shway" ringing in my ears, we soon left the easy trudge of the horizontal behind, turning sharply up a steep mountainside, edging our way along a narrow, rock-strewn ledge before reaching the saddle, breathless but exhilarated to be rewarded with a grand vista. Here was the Sinai as a real-life geography lesson, stretching away as far as the eye could see - a landscape of dry riverbeds, peaks and plains, layers of red, brown and gold beneath a pale blue sky.

The Sinai Trail is a true wilderness experience. There are no signposts, mile-markers or visitors' centres. All the information is stored in the heads of the Bedouin, passed down from