



# Tea With The Bedouins

These are not ordinary people. They have a philosophy and they live in tune with nature, very close to Mother Earth, says **FARZANA CONTRACTOR** from deep inside the desert.



The gypsies of the world are so fascinating. I find their whole lifestyle so appealing. It's not just the rustic approach but the entire philosophy behind the simple way of life that is so telling. Specially in the context of the modern, material world, where human values are diminishing and insanity increasing.

Sitting in a Landcruiser, the new ship of the desert, with a Bedouin at the wheel, already twenty kms. into the desert, off Hurgada, driving towards the Red Sea Mountains and away from the Gulf of Suez, I had a hundred different questions to ask my guide who spoke the Bedouin dialect of Arabic. He would answer the questions to which he already had answers and ➤

A Bedouin mosque in the desert.



enquire of Mr. Bedouin, those he didn't. And this went on till we reached the Bedouin camp.

Upon our arrival we were immediately taken to a shamiana like tent and offered sweet, black tea. Hospitality is an important part of their culture.

A little later we were taken around to see the way they live.

I became aware I was not in a genuine Bedouin village because I saw other foreigners around and was a bit disappointed. But, I was told,



going deeper into the desert was not very advisable. These tribes don't care very much for voyeurs since they are rather private people. Well alright I thought, I can understand that.

Yet, it was an enlightening trip.

There I was sitting on the sandy desert floor, besides this veiled woman with just the beautiful, dark, kohl eyes exposed. I was trying to get friendly enough with her to convince her to uncover her face so I could get a nice picture. She did relent and I captured her hawk-like beauty, as she

continued to pull at the loom at which she was helping her husband weave. She was a mother of five children, each just a year older than the other.

After leaving her hut I made my way to another where the woman was rolling out huge rotis, the oriental bread. A little baby with what looked like henna paste on her head was lying besides her, sleeping peacefully till her sister of two years came along and patted her face and shook her up not too gently so that she would wake ➤

Source of sweet desert water.



ailments. Harjal is a herb to cure cough, handal for joint pains, and sheeh to scare away snakes. They even make an ointment from the blood of a Gazelle for headaches!

After returning from a long camel ride, I walked around some more and visited the mosque and a well that miraculously had some water at the bottom. We pulley-ed some up and drank deeply. I learnt the Bedouins are rather crazy about pigeons. They breed them for their meat as well as for pleasure. I saw one training a flock to fly in formation.

The Bedouins dry everything that they want to eat and stock the stuff. Meats, fruits, dates, rice, corn, beans. Green vegetables is a luxury, but they do get that too once a week when a male member goes to the town market to pick up supplies.

Where I was, was called Um Garia, which means Mother of Garia and there were just six families banding together. They belonged to the tribe of Il Mayade. Just in this region there are 2,000 of them, but 2 million all over Egypt.

Bedouins are not limited to Egypt, nor are they limited to any region of Egypt, though the traditional ones inhabit the desert regions, including the Sinai, the Western and the Eastern Deserts. Though there are also some who have got themselves educated and joined the mainstream and live in cities, including Cairo.

But when the Bedouins wander through the desert they don't do so aimlessly. There is a pattern. They know where they are going, where they want to be. They return annually to locations in their territory where land and water can sustain them for the season.

These nomads continually search for fresh grazing for their camels and goats and water for their families. Little in the desert escapes the Bedouin's eye. He knows where and when he can find water and whether it's just brackish or toxic; shrubs tell him when it last rained and how much. Signs left in the sand ➤



Helping with the loom.



up. Which she did and I got my chance at playing with a Bedouin baby doll. Except she was burning with fever. When I pointed that out to my guide, he said the mother had already applied a paste of some medicinal leaves plucked from the desert and left the child to the will of Allah.

I learnt two things. That Islam plays a very important role in the lives of Bedouins and that they are very good at making medicine from herbs and plants and have a cure for most





proclaim who has been there before him, when, the directions from which they came and departed, the size of their flocks, and perhaps even the ages of their camels. Bedouins navigate by the stars for which they have their own names, familiar landmarks, and stone markers left on a previous trek. They travel light, leaving caches hanging in trees. Other travellers, if in need, are welcome to the food and water but are bound not to touch the remaining articles.

The Bedouin dresses for the desert, his layered and flowing robes absorbing the sun's hot rays while

allowing cooling breezes to circulate. He winds a cloth around his head and neck to retard moisture loss that can lead to heat stroke and to shield his face against the harsh, dry sand. Women wear black dresses and head covers embroidered in tiny cross-stitch designs: blue for unmarried women, red for married. They cover their faces with a veil highlighted in the same stitches and often decorated with shells and coins.

Bedouin live in tents of goat and camel hair panels that the women have woven. They live in tightly knit tribes, and their leaders, picked for their wisdom and judgment. Modern



inroads into the desert are changing the Bedouin's life. Over the past, some rulers of Egypt have provided farm land to the Bedouin, and encouraged their settlement. Many families have settled, building houses, and the handmade tents are disappearing. Trucks bring water in 100-gallon barrels and move goats to pasture. The Bedouin is investing in land and business, and sending his sons to school in Cairo and Alexandria. Although he still keeps himself apart from the sedentary Egyptian, his ancient desert lifestyle is vanishing; the Toyota pickup is steadily replacing the camels. ❄️

