



## Bedouin Paths

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## The Bedouin



### Overview

Bedu, the Arabic word from which the name Bedouin is derived, is a simple, straightforward tag. It means "inhabitant of the desert," and refers generally to the desert-dwelling nomads of Arabia, the Negev, and the Sinai. For most people, however, the word "Bedouin" conjures up a much richer and more evocative image--of lyrical, shifting sands, flowing robes, and the long, loping strides of camels.

For several centuries, such images were not far from the truth. In the vast, arid expanses of the Sinai, as in the Negev and the deserts of Arabia, the many tribes of the Bedouin journeyed by camel from oasis to oasis, following a traditional way of life and maintaining a pastoral culture of exceptional grace, honor, and beauty.



Most of the Bedouin tribes of the Sinai are descended from peoples who migrated from the Arabian peninsula between the 14th and 18th centuries, making the Bedouin themselves relatively recent arrivals in this ancient land. Today, many of the Bedouin of the Sinai have traded their traditional existence for the pursuits and the conventions of the modern world, as startling changes over the last two decades have irrevocably altered the nature of life for the Bedouin and for the land they inhabit. Nonetheless Bedouin culture still survives in the Sinai, where there is a growing appreciation of its value and its fragility.

### The Gebeliya Tribe

Bedouin Paths concentrates its treks in the area of Sinai inhabited by the Gebeliya Bedouin tribe. The Bedouins of the Gebeliya Tribe - 'the people of the mountains' - are the descendants of Macedonian people from Europe who were sent by Emperor Justinian to Saint Katherine to protect the Monastery. Since the sixth century AD, the Gebeliya (Jebeliya) live in the high mountains of Sinai, protecting the monastery and guiding people in need.

When hiking tourism began, some problems appeared because the Bedouins speaking good English were taking all the jobs. To solve this problem, Sheikh Mousa had the purpose to create a unique office for dealing with all the treks.

With the agreement of all of the tribe, it was decided that only his office can organise treks in the mountains, giving the job to everybody by a system of turn.

Everybody, the guides, the camels and the cooks, have a number and can wait at their homes for the job, because Sheikh Mousa will call all of them for the tours. The tribe now feels very comfortable with this system because everybody has the same job and they can preserve their traditional lives the other times.

'All visitors to the mountain region must always be accompanied by a Bedouin guide. Your Bedouin guide will share his knowledge of the area's rich environment, and will make your walk both safer and easier', as stated in Protectorate publications.

With your Bedouin guide you will discover the natural and cultural features of the area as well as the traditional lifestyle which make this region unique



### The Bedouin Way

Few places in the desert are capable of supporting the life of even a small community for an extended period of time, and so the Bedouin of the Sinai, like those of Arabia and the Negev, would stay on the move. With herds of sheep and goats as well as camels, the Sinai Bedouin migrated from one meagerly fertile area to another--each offered sustenance and shelter for time, while the others were naturally replenished.

In such an unforgiving environment, any violation of territorial rights was viewed with severe disfavor. It is a hallmark of Bedouin culture that such trespasses were neither easily forgiven nor quickly forgotten. At the same time, a shared respect for the dangers and hardships of the desert imbued Bedouin culture with a profound and justly celebrated sense of hospitality. In the vast silence and brooding solitude of the Sinai, simply encountering another person was--and in some regions still is--a rather unusual and note worthy event. A new face was cause for great interest, for happy generosity and careful etiquette, and for common civility, all values celebrated in Bedouin poetry, sayings, and songs.



### Bedouin Clothes

The Bedouin of the Sinai share with other Egyptians the jalabiyya, a long, hooded robe that is a standard form of clothing both in the teeming metropolis of Cairo and in the solitary plains of the Sinai.

The most easily recognised aspect of a Bedouin's attire is his headgear--which consists of the kufiyya-cloth and 'agal-rope that constitute proper attire for a Bedouin man.

The headrope in particular carries great significance, for it is indicative of the wearer's ability to uphold the obligations and responsibilities of manhood.

Bedouin women, too, signal their status with their headgear--while all women are required to keep their hair covered, married women in particular wrap about their forehead a black cloth known as 'asaba

### Bedouin Burials

Bedouins mark their graves with exceptional simplicity, placing one ordinary stone at the head of the grave and one at its foot. Moreover, it is traditional to leave the clothes of the deceased atop the grave, to be adopted by whatever needy travellers may pass by.



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### Bedouin Tents

A bedouin tent is customarily divided into two sections by a woven curtain known as a ma'nad. One section, reserved for the men and for the reception of most guests, is called the mag'ad, or 'sitting place.' The other, in which the women cook and receive female guests, is called the maharama, or 'place of the women'.

Having been welcomed into a bedouin tent, guests are honored, respected, and nourished, frequently with copious amounts of fresh, cardamom-spiced coffee.

Visitors are also cause for some festivity, including music, poetry, and on special occasions even dance. The traditional instruments of bedouin musicians are the shabbaba, a length of metal pipe fashioned into a sort of flute, the rababa, a versatile, one-string violin, and of course the voice. The primary singers among the bedouin are the women, who sit in rows facing each other to engage in a sort of sung dialogue, composed of verses and exchanges that commemorate and comment upon special events and occasions.

