

Bedouin Paths Ltd

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"stranger in a Bedouin land..."

The town of St Katherine is nestled amongst the surrounding mountains. It is a small town. A mosque; the usual post office and bank, a lonely bus station. A few desultory shops sell handicrafts to the occasional tourist, and groceries to the locals. The three hotels cater for the bus loads of pilgrims from the coastal resorts that spend a day visiting the monastery and Mt Sinai (Jebel Mousa); few of whom bother to spend any time in the town itself.

Yet the town does have visitors. These people do not stay in the hotels and although they too want to spend time following the line of tourists up Jebel Mousa, they also spend time in the mountains. They stay in local guesthouses (like our one), visit local restaurants and buy handicrafts directly from the local women. They stay a few days or perhaps a week.

Sometimes they stay a longer. Like years.

I went there for the first time last year for 4 days to go hiking. Since then I have started a hiking company, funded a local school and taken over a guesthouse. God only knows what will happen in the next year.

It is a special place. The mountains give you a sense of peace and tranquility; the wide expanse of arid landscape is interrupted by the beauty of the Bedouin gardens. But it is the Bedouin themselves that allows you to escape from the tedium and stresses of everyday life. Sitting around a camp fire, gazing at the night sky and watching with awe as the guides prepare the evening meal with skill and efficiency with the most basic of tools; it takes you away to another place. Although you are not one of them, you are nevertheless accepted and welcomed. Indeed they care for you as would your mother, concerned over your health, your comfort and most importantly, your appetite.

As a result, I am not alone in my love and respect for the land and its people. There are quite a few of us, growing in number, each of whom has found the part of the landscape that fits our purpose. Maybe they work locally in developing the area; perhaps rebuilding walls and gardens. Maybe they have found their own peace and help out on local projects. Others teach, build or study the local geography and fauna.

Professionals arrive for a week, and end up staying for years. People backpacking through, intent on staying for a day or two, end up staying for months. And for others, after a swift visit, return soon and set up house. The place speaks to them, and the answer is in the affirmative.

And so although all of us are strangers here, from many different countries; we all share one thing in common. Amongst the Bedouin, strangers we are not.

Bedouin Paths runs ethical hiking tours out of their Bedouin Camp in St. Katherine in Sinai. Contact mark at mark@bedouinpaths.com or call the Bedouin Camp on +20 189662010 or go to the website at www.bedouinpaths.com .