

Bedouin Paths Ltd

Bedouin Lives – Column 9: Saturday 23rd August 2008

"a good toilet is hard to find..."

Ever tried to build a toilet on a mountain? You would think that with lots of tourists clambering around the mountains of South Sinai and the Bedouin wanting them to sleep in their gardens so as to earn some extra money; the decision would be simple. A garden with a toilet is a better garden than one without right? So therefore choosing a garden and building one should be a straightforward process yes? And since all I want is to build a toilet, calculating the cost would be a simple process, agreed? And since I know what a toilet costs to build (around 5,000 LE in 2007 prices), I should be fully in charge of the negotiations shouldn't I? I really should know better by now.

Firstly there is much discussion with the local Bedouin as to what type of loo to build, which design and what the core features should be. A simple dry loo ends up with mirrors, loo rolls and an outside wash basin. Then there is the issue of who to build it; who has the skills and will they produce a quality loo, on time and to specification and budget. Since the cost of cement and building materials has risen hugely in the past year, my 5,000 LE toilet has risen to 8,000 LE.

Once much tea is drunk and cigarettes smoked, the collective decision on the new Bedouin Paths Toilet Mark I model is agreed. The mirror is included and there will be a sit down toilet inside the construction. The Mark I model will be of standing height, fully enclosed and will last for a good 4 years without any need for emptying. This is because the dry toilets decompose in a clever way, without any smells, and all that is required is minor repairs such as fixing the door or putting in a new pile of wood shavings (which are used to mix with the effluent and thereby break it down into non smelling compost).

More tea is drunk. Now then the issue is which garden to put it in. The plan is to build a new toilet every month, funded by our hiking customers. So who goes first? Now we enter the world of the Bedouin tribal and family system with its myriad of hierarchies, quarrels and alliances that go back generations. Maps are studied, call are made. A decision is agreed, the garden is on our usual hiking routes so future customers can see where their money is going. I am beginning to think the hard part is over and that the work can start soon. But no, the Bedouin have plans for this toilet that I am only just beginning to understand.

The garden they have chosen has no arisha, three wells (only one working, sort of), no gate to enter into and is untidy. So why, I ask them, did they choose it. Because it is a good garden they reply and therefore to make the toilet worthwhile the garden must be made fit for the toilet else no customers will want to stay there. I ponder this logic for a while. Making good the garden means more work of course and more money. Ah ha! Now I see the logic, more money equals more work for them plus their Bedouin chums get a brand new garden. I came with the idea of funding a toilet and am leaving by funding a whole garden. I ask how much this extra work will cost; eyes are lowered, mutterings are muttered and lists are drawn up. One new garden with the new toilet, three working wells (plus a pump

to draw up the water), new gate and arisha plus general tidy up will come to around 25,000 LE. It will employ many Bedouin for around a month to finish. Once done each customer spending a night there will be charged 10 LE which goes to the garden owner. Damn they're good.

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 .