

Bedouin Paths Ltd

Bedouin Lives – Column 10: Saturday 20th September 2008

"Bedouin and bartering ..."

As every westerner knows, one of the joys in coming to Egypt is the bartering. You know that the "genuine" statue from the time of Ramses III that the shop owner is selling you, is not in fact from the time of Ramses III but rather from the time of last month when it was made in a nearby shop. Plus the story that said statue has been handed down through the generations to said shop keeper and that he is willing to (reluctantly) part with it is purely because you are a special friend and he likes you; is complete rubbish. You know it's a con, he knows that you know it's a con but that is ok; its all part of the experience. You end up paying less than you were prepared to and he ends up getting more than he wanted. Both parties are happy.

If you get to know the shop keeper over time then he will stop selling you "genuine" antiques because he realizes you are part of the community and not some tourist and therefore you end up getting a fair price for a fair product (albeit a western price). It may take several negotiations but eventually you end up paying what the locals would pay, plus a small premium (which is fine).

The Bedouin however never give up with the negotiations. No matter how many time you have met them, bought from them, provided customers for them; they will still try it on. Not because they do not recognize or respect you but because business is business. Their DNA forces them to offer a price that is at least twice or three times higher than they would accept, simply because they figure you are going to negotiate them downwards whatever price they offer so they might as well offer a high price. Even though you have negotiated the same price for the same product before. Countless times.

So there we all are in the desert oasis, after a short camel ride, and needing a cold drink before we start the afternoon hike to various canyons. I have been here many times, brought many customers and provided much needed income to the local Bedouin families for accommodation and food. We are thirsty and need a cold soft drink. The cans are kept in a bucket of water (which is at room temperature), fished out and solemnly handed out as if they were the finest bottles of iced water from some garden of Eden paradise. You can buy these cans of drink for 2 LE at a normal shop. We sell them cold from the fridge for 3 LE at our guesthouse; with a nice glass and some ice to go with it

Mr Bedoiun wants 10 LE for each can.

Mr Bedouin knows me. I know him. We have been doing business for over a year. "La, la habibi" I say. I then explain in a mixture of bad Arabic and slightly better English that this is ridiculous, as well he knows, and that we always pay the same price for the drinks (well actually it varies from 3 to 5LE depending on how generous I feel). He puts on a look of bewilderment and concern on his face as if I have personally offended both him, his family and his entire tribe not to mention bringing into disrepute his honour and position in society. He won't back down and insists that this is a fair price. He mentions

travel costs, taxes (taxes?) and that the drink is cold. This goes on for some time and then he decides that since I am a special friend I will get a special discount. I pay 4 LE. Next time I see him it will start all over again.

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 .