

Pilgrimage

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The first time I ever rode a camel, I almost broke my neck. It was on a dusty camel ranch outside of Waco, Texas, on a punishingly hot August day. Now, I'd lived in the jungles of Central America and spent time hiking in Arizona deserts in the middle of July, but nothing prepared me for a Texan August. The heat was inexplicably oppressive -- there were no clouds in the sky nor canopy of trees to explain the humidity, just bright, endless, glowing azure skies with an unforgiving ball of fire, everywhere around us, pressing down.

Dr. Lester and I arrived at the ranch in the early afternoon to meet with Doug, a camel wrangler who has guided people through Texan hill country, the Middle East, North Africa, and India by camel for decades.

"Okay, so you're going to get up by throwing your leg over Richard, and then when he starts getting up, lean as far back as you can ... or, you know, you'll fall off," Doug laughed. I did not find this funny.

Richard is the consummate gentleman, he's steady, reliable, and sweet. At least, that's what Doug told me as he's convincing me to ride.

"Uh, um, so..." I flung my leg over Richard, who was kneeling down and looking at me with his giant doe eyes, a bit curious and a tad bemused. I didn't know this at the time, but camels are basically large domesticated cats who simply tolerate us, humans, out of a sense of pity and resignation. They recognize our frailty in comparison to their relative robustness, and, thankfully, they're kind to us.

As Richard leaned forward to first stand up on his back legs, I pushed back my entire body and it felt like the world was upside down and I was about to fall flat

on my face, but then Richard rose in the front and all was right-side-up with the world again. And I was three miles high in the sky.

“Great job, Kat! See, you’re a natural!” Doug cheered.

“I don’t know about that,” I scoffed as Richard slowly moved to the side to allow Dr. Lester’s camel, Gobi, to rise to his feet. She looked infinitely more practiced on the uptake and I smiled at her. “Now she’s a natural.”

As we strolled around the grounds, the bright aquamarine skies, the steady rhythm of movement, and the distance from the ground merged to give me the sense that I was flying, enveloped by the heat of the heady sun. And maybe I was too close to it, but I didn’t care.

“Let’s head in for some mint tea,” Doug announced after about an hour, slowly guiding our camels toward the barn. He made a quick motion with his hand and Richard began to kneel his front legs before I was prepared; for a split second, I felt as though I was going to catapult over his head, my heart racing and cheeks flushed. I *was* going to fly. Doug reminded me to lean back as far as I could, and I tried, barely maintaining my perch. In that moment, I wondered to myself if I could actually trek on these beasts throughout the deserts of Jordan and Egypt. But I figured that I wouldn’t know until I tried.

The first time Doug worked with camels was when he was a zookeeper in Nashville, Tennessee. He’d actually been interested in working with elephants, but

that wasn't an option, so when the zoo director brought in trained camels to give rides as a moneymaker for the zoo, Doug volunteered.

"Within a week of working with them, I was smitten," he grinned. His unabashedly open smile was framed by a reddish-gold goatee, accented with silver, and the only wrinkles on his face were deeply grooved smile lines around his eyes and mouth. "I love how affectionate and docile they are and I appreciate that they have made life easier for cultures around the world who live in really inhospitable regions."

We were eating hummus, beans, falafel, and a salad of fresh tomatoes and cucumbers from his garden, sitting in the kitchen, shaded from the sweltering heat.

"What inspired you to start giving tours in the Middle East?" My question was a bit muffled by the copious amounts of food I was shoving into my mouth.

"Well, I didn't try to," he began. "I first traveled to Egypt in January 2001 to learn more about camels. I'd been looking for an apprenticeship, more or less, with a traditional camel culture and, after some internet inquiry, was put in touch with a Bedouin man, Saleh, about 55 years old, who ran tours in Sinai." Doug paused to take a sip of iced mint tea.

His house wasn't what I would have expected from a Texas ranch, but Doug wasn't what I would have expected from a Texas rancher, either. While he donned the customary wide-brimmed cowboy hat that I assume every Texan is issued at birth, he paired it with utility pants or cargo shorts and hiking boots, not the highly structured jeans and boots that I've seen other ranchers wear. His house was filled

with the artifacts of raising three children and working with camels around the world: His wedding photo was proudly displayed next to high school and college graduation shots, lining the walls, while every available surface was filled with a variety of camel figurines. "Everyone knows I love camels, so they can't help themselves," he laughingly shrugged when we first walked in. "Seems a shame to hide 'em."

Back at the kitchen table, Dr. Lester and I were dividing our attention between Doug's delicious food, his refreshing mint tea, and his story.

"So, Saleh welcomed me into his home and family, and we spent the better part of January 2001 together trekking around Sinai," he continued. "We spoke very little of each other's language, so I learned through observation and felt like I'd learned a lot at the end of our time together." Doug reached behind him and pulled out a bowl full of olives. Dr. Lester and I squealed in delight.

"Ha! Well, okay, then," Doug laughed. He grabbed a handful for himself and continued. "I returned home to Texas with no plans to repeat the experience, but a year later an opportunity presented itself for me to return and it was on this trip that the idea was presented to me to bring American groups to Egypt and Sinai. Initially, I resisted because I thought it sounded like a lot of work and responsibility, but after some thought, I recognized that it could be good for both the Bedouin and me. So my first group tour was in 2003 and I haven't stopped since."

The first time I met Bedouin men, it was at Al Amra, near the leftover ruins of what they believe to be a hunting cabin dating from the 700s. Historians regard it as the playhouse, or a pleasure palace, of one of the caliphs during that time, but they're not quite sure who, as they have few concrete records and must base their assessments largely on the detailed frescoes that still survive on the cabin's sandy ceilings.

We arrived at the crumbling, domed structure as dusk was falling, the sun serving as just a simple red line on the horizon. We were late and our guide greeted us somewhat out of breath, as he had gone home to his village -- flung far away enough in the open desert that we couldn't see it -- and then returned after receiving word that we were, in fact, on our way.

As we crept through the small curved doorway into one of the cabin's claustrophobic rooms, our guide handed us large, chunky green flashlights that looked to be military-issue. Windowless and dank, many of the areas were cordoned off from visitors as they were crumbling too quickly to preserve. Our guide's voice reverberated throughout the tiny coves as we shuffled and squeezed past each other, lights dancing across the frescoes, the trapped air oppressive.

The dense, fetid smell of musty rock was nearly overwhelming, and it was hard to stay focused on what the guide was saying. Something about orgies and parties and hunting. Faded portraits of naked women dancing and muscular men atop equally muscular horses peeked back from the end of my flashlight, and after

about twenty minutes, I returned to the cool night air, sucking in the cool, crisp desert night in one, deep breath.

I don't know where he actually lives, but Hakim runs an ornate Bedouin tent located right outside of Al Amra, set up with everything that one might need as a Bedouin proffering Bedouin-style experiences to foreign tourists: long, rug-covered benches overflowing with pillows (enough to seat about thirty people, but there were only six of us,) five low-slung coffee tables (three of which had large dishes of spiced rice and roasted lamb and the other two housed the usual side dishes of tomato-and-cucumber salad, olives, hummus, pita, and fried eggplant,) several hookahs, a cadre of semi-feral kittens, and an old refrigerator emblazoned with the *Coca-Cola* symbol at the back. Oh, and two ember-filled fires atop of which sat charred silver teapots, overflowing with sweet, mint tea.

Now, it's hard for me to characterize this beverage, so ubiquitous amongst the Bedouins we stayed with, as simply a "tea;" it was more of an herbal elixir. It is a viscous thing, more syrupy than you think it should be, and far too sweet to be enjoyed alone. It's an aperitif, and a digestif, and a welcome foil to spicy food. Cleansing and invigorating and restorative: almost always handcrafted over an open fire and offered in tandem with a welcoming grin: *Come on in and stay awhile.* The variant that Doug had served to us over two years before, adapted for a stifling Texan summer, seemed as distant in relation to this tea as I was to these men. Sure, we're part of the same human community, but we were very, very different in

terms of structure, consistency, flavor, and style. Yet, still, we were connected in spirit.

As we entered the tent, Hakim's eyes and silver teeth twinkled in the firelight. A radio hidden somewhere deep in the tent hummed quietly in the background, and several of Hakim's brothers spilled out from some hidden back room. We sat down on the long benches in front of a table, and the tea began to flow.

Hakim pulled the aluminum foil off of the platter in front of us to reveal a mountain of yellow spiced rice, crowned by the defleshed lamb's skull. Its sockets staring back at me gave me a jolt and, for a moment, I wasn't sure if I could eat it. I looked over at Dr. Lester and saw my surprise reflected in her own eyes, so, at that moment, I knew that we would both eat because we knew that, to do otherwise, would have been deeply offensive.

I took some pita and scooped up some of the rice; sesame, sumac, and thyme burst into my mouth, as well as the deep bass note of rich, fatty lamb. Whenever I scooped up a particularly lamb-riddled section of rice, I squirreled little chunks of it away and then slipped them to the feral kittens who sat patiently under the coffee tables, their soft, sandpaper tongues licking my fingertips clean, out of sight of my hosts. It was a happy alliance, and I noticed that Dr. Lester's hands were dipping under the table every so often, too.

This is when the mint tea really shined; its cloying sweetness seemed to embrace the essence of the dishes, and it elevated them. It was the mortar in the wall of flavors that surrounded us.

As Hakim began to light up the hookahs, one of his brothers brought out a traditional instrument, which looked like a cross between a two-stringed guitar and a violin, and Hakim began to play. For being produced on such a simple-looking instrument, the song was rather complicated in tone and perforated by forlorn-sounding lyrics. We didn't need to understand Arabic to know that he was sharing the Bedouin version of an old American Country song. "You can only sing songs of sorrow with this," he intoned soberly afterward. "Never songs of joy."

As if in response to Hakim's gravity at that moment, another of his brothers fished the tiny radio out from its hiding place. He announced something rather jovially in Arabic, and everyone who understood laughed and clapped, so he turned the music up louder in response.

One by one, all of the men stood up and fell in line, joining hands. They began to dance slowly, closely, in a circle around the tiny radio. Their hands were gripped tight at their sides, arms interlocked, singing lowly. We women weren't allowed to join -- this was a fraternity -- but soon our male compatriots were integrated into the circle.

I sat there, curled up on rugs, sunk deeply into pillows, surrounded by purring kittens, watching and absorbing and thinking: What if this was what it was

like, all those years ago? A getaway set deep in an ancient desert, where stranger-friends met, covered in ochre dust and za'atar, to eat and laugh and celebrate and dance and sing?

And through it all, cutting through the swirling fire-and-hookah smoke, this almost-sickly sweet mint tea: grounding us in its honey.

The first time I met a Bedouin woman, it was on the way to The High Place of Sacrifice. She was a widowed grandmother who still lived in Petra, as her Bedouin ancestors had done for hundreds of years. It was technically illegal for her to live there, though, as the Jordanian government had tried to move all of the Bedouin out once Petra was designated as an UNESCO World Heritage site in the 1980s. She was one of the holdouts.

Petra is carved out of and into cliffsides, making the trek a bit precarious. While there were some camel and donkey vendors hanging out at the entrances, we opted to walk through the site, making this part of our journey on foot instead of camelback. As we climbed up a particularly steep section of the path, huffing and puffing, we were thrilled to happen upon her small platform tent. It was plush and carpeted, and she squatted next to a charred teapot nestled into embers. Greeting us with a joyous, toothless grin, spread from ear to ear, she motioned us to sit as one of her grandchildren buzzed around her like a dusty little bee.

Her English was fragmented, so we spoke a bit through our guide; for her, we were traveling minstrels with news from faraway lands, so she asked us where we were from, where we've been, where we're going, what our lives were like. Her tent was overflowing with sandy-yet-opulent pillows, making it a welcome reprieve from the biting January wind. As she tended the coals of her tiny fire, she produced pot after pot of mint tea, and we didn't want to leave; it felt so good to sit there, sipping the sickly sweet tea that was so sugared, it felt thick and syrupy on the tongue.

We eventually stepped out into the cold, the sky's impossible shade of blue reminiscent of those August Texan skies seemingly a world away and a lifetime ago. Our journey had begun early in the morning as we had crossed water-hewn gulleys peppered with a rainbow of trash and continued as we scaled cliff sides in order to explore the somewhat rudimentary and weathered cave dwellings. Several hundred years after the Nabateans that built Petra disappeared, Bedouin tribes moved into the abandoned caves and the smoke from their cooking fires had stained all of the insides black, giving each abode the look of a charcoal rubbing. The natural grain of the sandstone that surrounded us in layers had a wrinkled look to it, its wavy lines peculiar and somewhat fluid. We had continued through The Siq, a towering, meticulously carved corridor, and arrived at the impressive sight of The Treasury, its highly detailed symmetrical carving humbling us. It was there that we met our local guide, Shahar, who sported a too-tight jean jacket, a Bedouin-style headscarf, and a backpack. He was almost puckish in his features, his clear eyes and easy smile were effective mirrors of his joyful personality.

After admiring the intricacies of the carvings and the statues that seemed to grow out of the sandstone walls, we had continued our journey to this point, toward The High Place of Sacrifice, toward more steaming hot mint tea.

The first time I rode a camel in the Middle East, we were in Wadi Rum, in Jordan, a deep red desert so alien-like in its aesthetic, it was used as the location for Matt Damon's film *The Martian*. The camel I rode was female -- in fact, the only female camel that I ever rode -- and she had spent her formative years as a race camel. Her seemingly agitated demeanor was very different from Richard's calm air. It felt like, at any moment, she was going to break free from our small group and run, like she was a Corvette masquerading as a camel, engine revving beneath the saddle, like she was just one second away from running as fast as she could toward the finish line in her mind -- until she actually did. Spooked by another camel's movements, she sprinted across the red sand as I hung on with all of my strength. Our guide ran as fast as he could to catch us, yelling, but my camel didn't really care. I was torn between the childish glee of not wanting it to stop and the sheer terror that it wouldn't stop. In that moment, we were both free and I was airborne, flying again.

Eventually, she slowed down and our guide caught up to us, grabbing her reins and tying them to his camel's saddle. He led us back toward our camp, a series of huts tucked into a vibrant red cliffside, and I was invigorated. We gathered

around a small fire, tucked in between our huts, and sipped mint tea as the sun slipped behind the cliffs.

That night, I dreamt of running, running, running, running on camelback, through that ruddy desert, and into the sea.

The first time I slept in an actual desert oasis, we were trekking from Dahab to Saint Katherine, through the beige deserts and cream-colored cliffs of the Sinai Peninsula. We had been trekking for a couple of days when we arrived at this infamous site; there are historical anecdotes of a rather motley cast of characters -- from Biblical times through World War II -- that have rested at that particular spot. It rose out of the desert much as I recall the oases of cartoon television shows from my childhood: Shimmering and lush, somewhat mysterious and unbelievable. We were there in January so it wasn't hot at all; the cool spring was too cold for us to swim in, but we could imagine how restive, how palliative, how refreshing it would be to come upon this small wonder during the height of summer.

That night, over the fire, mouths, and hands full of rice and beans and cans of tuna, we shared stories with our guides, and I asked Doug more about his farm.

"What's your favorite part about it?"

"Probably that my kids have grown up with a realistic understanding of life," Doug started as he sipped his mint tea. "And death. They've learned biology from raising animals and they've learned how to process grief and loss as some animals have died over time. These are real-life lessons that help them prepare for the loss

of loved ones, like their grandparents." In the dusky firelight, I could see several heads nod.

"Do you think they'll carry on with it when you retire?" I was sipping on my third glass of hot, syrupy mint tea.

"Nah," he smiled, somewhat wistfully. "They have their own lives. And so I'm not breeding new camels, what I have is what I'll have. Our youngest, Daleel, is 5 and so, I figure that when he dies, I'll be ready to be done, too."

In that firelight, wrapped up in the carpets and pillows left by other travelers who had taken refuge in this oasis before us, the reality of the situation washed over me. I conjured the images of that dusty little farm, the fields stretching out over the horizon, the deep blue of the sky, those welcoming walls replete with the artifacts of a joyous family, the hundreds of camel figurines covered in a fine film of dust -- all of it collecting more dust, and eventually disappearing into the edges of time.

The mint tea in my hand was hot and sticky, so different from the cool and refreshing pitcher Doug had made us on his ranch, and it reminded me that even though some things feel the same, they always change.

The first time I saw Mecca it was on a 15-inch television that was sitting atop a tower of several milk crates in the front room of our Bedouin hosts in Giza. The matriarch of the family, Suad, had a wide, gentle face that broke easily into a jubilant grin. Her eyes were curious and sweet, and when she wasn't taking care of

her house or family, she perched on a floor cushion, watching intently as the pilgrims circled the Kaaba, sipping the customary sweet mint tea.

My knowledge of Egyptian Arabic was limited, but I tried my best to talk with her and learn more about her life. She understood more English than she spoke, so I would gently inquire about her life and her family, to which she would nod or shake her head. I assumed I was only getting ten percent of her story, but I sat with her every chance I got, anyway, because that was what that journey was about, more than any others that I had taken: Vivid snapshots and brief tastes of the succulence that was life in that part of the world, underpinned by a sense of the familiar. While it seemed foreign in its external trappings, it was the same in the way that a conversation even amongst lovers can often be somewhat stilted, but a smile can smooth all discord away.

Our small tour group regularly came and went from this Gizan flat for weeks, and Suad spent her days without us following a standard routine of caretaking and homemaking, greeting us with an open smile upon our returns, and waving cheery goodbyes on our departures.

It was after many of these departures and returns, over three weeks, that I was eventually greeted in another way. After we returned from several days trekking in the desert, she smiled and greeted everyone and then grabbed my hand, guiding me over to her cushions by the television; we lowered ourselves down, next to the hot plate and boiling teapot. And we sat there, holding hands and sipping mint tea, occasionally smiling at each other as the early evening sounds of

Giza -- moped engines and roosters and children shouting -- filtered in through the windows, and the seemingly endless rotations around the Kaaba flickered on the television in the background.

Context: I wrote this for the research/travel assignment in 3086 and honed it a bit based on class feedback. I then incorporated the piece that I wrote for our Sensory Details forum. I have several more tea experiences that I could work into it, but I think it might be long enough. Do you think the "The first time..." construct/repetition is too cheesy? Do you think I should add more vignettes, remove any of the vignettes, or have more exposition? I'm considering a submission to Narrative magazine for this piece.