

Sinai Journey Report

April/May 2017

Makhad
People Spirit Environment



Mahmoud taking a ride



***News from Sinai,
Wells Project,
Beekeeping Training
Project, Orphan Herb
Project, & two new
initiatives***

News from St Katherine's

Life continues as ever despite the unsettled politics and economy. Prices continue to go up with flour having increased by 400%, and cooking oil by 300% so it is increasingly difficult for the Bedouin to feed their families. A government program of dam building in Wadi Ferrian, the long wadi leading down to the Gulf of Suez, has given temporary employment to a reasonable number of Bedouin builders which helps - temporarily. Tourism is picking up slightly and there are now around 10 to 15 tourist buses a day bringing visitors to the monastery, more at weekends. They seem to be mostly from the Philippines, Nigeria, Japan and other Far East countries. While this is bringing in an income for some Bedouin, most of these people don't go trekking in the mountains like the Europeans used to so the increased tourism isn't filling the income hole for the average Bedouin family. There are quite a few Israeli people and more Egyptians going trekking which is helping keep things going, but there is still a sense of hankering after the heyday of the Germans and the British trekkers. Despite security concerns by some, St Katherine's feels the same as always. The numbers of checkpoints increases sometimes and then they disappear, often for no apparent reason one can work out. Faraj continues to be very busy, acting as a bridge between the authorities and the Jebeliya. He has this senior and elder role, above other Sheikhs in the tribe, because he can read and write (and they cannot) and because he knows most of the Bedouin and can vouch for or identify them. There is a cross-over benefit with the wells project and Faraj's assistance to us, because as he drives us, he regularly meets a wide number of Bedouin in outlying and surrounding communities on our well visits. Sitting drinking hot sweet tea and sharing the news is part of sustaining a strong sense of community. It is good to know that our influence helps in hidden ways too.

The Weather, The Flora and The Forna

When I arrived on 17 April it was still chilly and spring like but by the time I left, summer had arrived and it was very hot. The seasons can change abruptly in a day or two and it is easy to be caught out. Due to lots of rain this winter, the wadi's and mountains are turning



green! Even Gebel Katharina does actually look green. On our way up Mt Sinai we found a high wadi that was festooned with herb bushes, all bright green and very scented, smelling beautiful. It is a joy to see so much vegetation. And not only are the plants thriving, there is masses of grazing for goats and camels so they are thriving too. There is also running water in most of the wadi's - something not seen in many years.



There were some unusual plants like this one that resembled a straggly thistle but with very beautiful, delicate purple flowers. Most of the plants are herbs and the more knowledgeable Bedouin were excited by the fact that some had not been seen growing in Sinai for many years because of the lack of rain. But they are growing here now!

The Dam Build



Dick, Fabienne, Johnny, Kirsty and John arrived on Thursday 18th April to walk up to Farsh Rumana to build the Makhad Trust's 19th dam, Shigif Mibarak Dam. They had a good trip and Mahmoud had arranged a strong party of Bedouin builders so that the dam was built in under 3 days, also due to this being an almost perfect site. There was obvious bed rock to build on, so no digging in the wadi this time, big supplies of sand for cement to hand, and lots of rocks for building. Water for the cement came from the dam built two years ago just a

short distance above. This left time for a trek in the mountains, visiting the monastery and a more leisurely time in St Katherine's before flying back home. We hope it won't be long before the new dam is filled with water. It will help to bring more water to many gardens below in Farsh Rumana, and hopefully encourage more families to return here in the summer months. Well done to the team!

The Sinai Trail

Meanwhile, I went back to Sharm to meet with my 10 friends who were to walk to the 200km Trail with me from the Gulf of Aqaba north of Nuweiba to the top of Mount St Katherine's at 2642m. The trip was arranged by the Sinai Trail team who provide guides, camels, food, water and all the support necessary for a 12 day trek. We started out with Tarabin



guides, led by Musallam, aided by Shwailem and a number of camel men and cooks. It takes 12 days of solid walking to complete the Trail - which we did. We walked up canyons, along desert wadi's, over mountain passes and finally arrived at the foothills of the great mountains around St Katherine's, from where we started our last assents - to the very top of Mt Sinai and Mt St Katherine's. We all felt a huge sense of achievement and enjoyed every minute of it despite blisters and 40 degree heat. I can highly



recommend this adventure. The Sinai Trail has won the Best Trail award by National Geographic and Best New Trail by the British Guild of Travel Writers. Every participant on the trail is helping to preserve Bedouin desert culture and traditional knowledge as well as provide an income and employment for guides. The trail will help to preserve what would otherwise be dying knowledge. You can find out more at sinaitrail.org

Down to work!

Just before setting off on the trail, Mahmoud and I went up into the mountains to check on the possible dam location and to see two of the new trainee beekeepers, all in Farsh Rumana. This rather remote valley is at the centre of the mountain area to the west of the town and takes around 3 hours to reach at a brisk walk. It was a long day making all the visits. Mahmoud was recovering from a chesty cold and finding the going difficult at times so was very glad to be offered a camel ride for a bit. After I completed the 200 km Sinai Trail, Mahmoud and I got down to business visiting wells in the mountains, in Tarfa, Wadi Gharba, Esbaia, and other areas surrounding St Katherine's.

Wells

We started 11 wells this trip and had site visits to do for the 10 we started in March, plus there are always some wells that take a bit longer and need to be visited several times. We had several mountain wells to visit this time and they were quite spread out so we decided to take two days and stay the night in a garden in Wadi Buleia, at the half way point. It is always a joy to spend the night under the stars in a mountain garden!



Our first visit was to the well of Jemeya in Wadi Shaq, about 2 km beyond Oda's garden. There is a small community of Oulat Saed people who now live here for over half the year, living the traditional lifestyle in stone houses, tending goats and growing fruit and vegetables. We have funded the restoration of 2 garden wells here but the growing community needed more drinking water so on the last trip we started Jemeya's well. We found that they had done excellent work, finished the well and it was giving good water. The community were really pleased with the help and let us know that it is really important to them by giving me a big bag of almonds.

Another well we visited belongs to a young woman called Zainab, who has two gardens in the wadi behind Fox Camp. She and her widowed mother grow food for their large family (Zainab has 5 sisters all with children) and the garden is their only source of income. One of my friends on the Sinai Trail was the sponsor for Zainab's well and was invited to a ladies-only lunch in the garden to celebrate. It felt like a very special privilege to be there as it isn't often we get to meet Bedouin ladies or be invited into their private spaces. Our sponsor, found the whole experience extremely moving and rewarding.



Hosnee is a young man of 25 who started digging a new well a couple of years ago. He dug 2 m though the hardest granite and found the rocks were wet so we agreed to sponsor his well for his community in El Milga in St Katherine's. Hosnee's father had died about four years ago and he assumed head of household at the age of 21. He started to build a large and beautiful house for his family around that time, doing all the work himself in the evenings and on holidays, as he works as a builder when he can. It is now nearly finished and he thinks it will take just one more year before they come to live there.

Hosnee is also a mountain guide and was one of our guides on the Sinai Trail, and he is one of our trainee beekeepers. He is a quiet, unassuming young man who always has a big smile but underneath the calm is a strong determination. He is a great inspiration and it is amazing what he has fitted into his adult life so far.

Abu Giffa Restoration

As you may remember, Abu Giffa is the main access route to hundreds of gardens in the high mountains and an essential route for garden owners with camels and donkeys. Over the years it had been deteriorating as all heavily used paths do, and a deputation of Bedouin came to ask if we could help because it was dangerous for the camels to use. Just a few weeks later, the biggest storm in living memory struck St Katherine's and almost obliterated the path. Since then people have been doing some emergency work to make it passable again. However, due to a



number of generous donors in UK and the US we raised enough funds for it to be properly repaired with cement by professional builders. Work couldn't start until the weather was warm enough for the cement but since the start of April they have completed the lower third of the path. By the end of May they should have most of the middle section complete and the upper section is in a reasonable condition. Thank you very much to all the sponsors for making this essential work possible. The path is now used by goats and camels without mishap.

Beekeeping Training Course - sponsored by the Eva Crane Trust

All the 2016 - 2017 Course trainee beekeepers now have 10 hives of bees each in their own gardens. Mahmoud and I went to visit all of them and see how they are getting on with their bees. Salem, their teacher, is monitoring them all closely and is happy with the standard of expertise. Most of them, including Salem have bees in the mountains. We saw Hussein's and Mohamed's bees first in Farsh Rumana which is about 3 hours walk from St Katherine's. We visited Sulieman's



Amed's bee hives in St K before the move to the mtns



Hosnee's bee hives at the top end of Wadi Itlah



Salem's bee hives in Wadi Shreesh behind Fox Camp

bees in Wadi Buleia close to his brother Salem's bees, Hosnee's bees at the top of Wadi Itlah where his family have a beautiful garden, Salem who has a garden up behind Fox Camp and Ahmed whose bees are about to move from St Katherine's up to his father Oda's garden in Wadi Shaq. When we walked up Wadi Gibal on our way to see Salem in Wadi Buleia we heard the bees busily buzzing from some distance away. They will all be feasting on the desert flowering herbs so their honey should be wonderful. The first of two crops of honey should be ready by July.



Mohamed's bees in Farsh Rumana, in the central mtns



Hussein's bees also in Farsh Rumana



Suliman's hives in Wadi Buleia

Orphan Herb Course

Last year we set up a prototype course to teach orphan or fatherless children about growing herbs. The idea was that they would be trained for a career and be able to grow the herbs to sell for a small income for their families. The course was set up and initiated by an experienced elder Bedouin called Atir. He did a great job of preparing the garden and organising the training. He was assisted by a much younger man called Slim who really engaged with the children. We have learnt a few lessons ourselves about running this sort of course and hope to be starting a new course after Ramadan finishes in June once the children have finished school. Slim should be running this new course now that Atia has a job with the National Park. We will see how things are working out on the next visit in July.



Horticultural Project

It seems that the two trips with a minibus full of Bedouin garden owners to organic and permaculture farms have been very popular and caused a lot of discussion. One of the comments was that good quality seeds are needed. It seems that the Egyptian seed stock will produce a good crop one year but only half the crop size or fruit size the following year, and almost nothing in the third year. The Bedouin always save seeds to plant the next year so their stock was getting weaker. On the last two trips I was able to bring out many thousands of organic vegetable seeds from a UK company called Seed Parade which supplies vigorous traditional and heirloom seeds. They gave us a good price as it is for charity. Now we have engaged Suliman who works for Faraj Fox, at Fox Camp, to be our seed man and distribute the seeds. We hope this will really increase the stock everywhere. As well as the usual onions and spinach that are commonly grown in Sinai, there are all sorts of new varieties of vegetables that they haven't come across before such as beetroot, celeriac, cauliflower and broccoli. The idea is to increase the variety of vegetables eaten and to increase the nutritional value of the diet and thereby, gradually, increase health.



The Literacy Project



This is in full swing now, managed by Nora and our sister organisation the Nawamis Society for Development. There are

four classes being taught by the new literacy teachers - all Bedouin ladies and they have been going since January. A training supervisor from Cairo, Mr Hossam Nafea, came down to check on progress and to update everyone. The courses

run for 6 months and by the end, all the students should be able to read and write. At the moment there are only ladies classes running. The next stage is to get the men interested!



The Library



The library is getting busier now with all sorts of events. Farhana is still in charge but she is being assisted by an Egyptian called Mahmoud Abed who is putting on film shows, documentaries, recycling workshops and some outdoor activities, partly for the children but also to draw in adults too. It is great to see so much activity in the library and that it is a focus for so many children.

Rubbish Proposal - Can you help?

During the March we were visited by a deputation from Sheikh Taha Kdher and Mohamed Eid who acted as interpreter. Sheikh Taha wants to do something for the community and is looking for investors/funds to help him with his plan. He wants to set up a business to gather all the rubbish in the High Mountains, in St Katherine's and in all the wadis surrounding the mountains and then to process this at a nearby recycling plant. They estimate 25% could be recycled and sold. The plant was built by the EU several years ago but has never been operational.

As well as recycling plastic and other rubbish, some people would act as waste food collectors taking the food from the Hotels to give to poor families. Other waste food not fit for human consumption could be fed to the goats to help prevent overgrazing. In the future they would be working towards zero rubbish in the St K area. The scheme would also aim to teach the young people about the consequences of throwing away rubbish.



Saed next to his well in St Katherine's where the rubbish is a huge problem

Sheikh Taha is a business man with a private cleaning business and also provides staff to some of the hotels. He is looking for finance of 500,000LE to set up the company/scheme. This equates to around £22,000. He is also looking for technical help with how to recycle.

It is not proposed that Makhad Trust finds funds or becomes involved with this project as it is out of our scope. However it is an exciting proposal that would have many positive gains for the local people and economy. It would be ideal for a UK company to support as part of their CSR remit. If you have any contacts in CSR, know of a company who may be interested in supporting this plan or technical knowledge of recycling, please get in touch.

And Finally...

The next Project Manager visit to Sinai will be in July. Do get in touch if you have any feedback, ideas, offers of help or general interest. We would love to hear from you. You can find us on Facebook and you can email me at helencranston@makhad.org



*The 'empty' desert north of St K
where many families have
gathered for grazing their animals*



Tea and conversation



*A hardy acacia tree in full leaf after the
winter of rain*



*Dr Ahmed inflicts his delicious
strawberries on Mahmoud*