Riddle of the Stars

The granite adventureland of Egypt's Sinai Desert

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The first recorded climb in the Sinai was remarkably well documented for a route thousands of years old. It was part of the opening salvo in a saga that, since then, has spawned more than its fair share of bad books and genocides. The climber was Moses, and he received the Ten Commandments on the summit of Mount Sinai (locally known as Jebel Moussa) which looms over the desert village of St Katherine. Today, the area is an international destination for pilgrims and the curious. For most of the year, a steady stream of religious tourists follow in the footsteps of Moses. In this way, the faithful get their fix and the camel drivers get a good income from the sometimes overwhelmed pilgrims.

Life in St Katherine continues today as it has done for centuries. The queues outside the bakers form from first light to buy 'khobz', traditional flatbreads sold by the grinning, flour-faced bakers. The water-seller wanders through the sleepy marketplace in the heat of the day, dispensing water from a camel skin on his back. The men smoke and drink tea in the shade of the local cafe while children play in the road, shrieking.
I've been through the desert on a horse with no name,
It felt good to be out of the rain.
In the desert, you can't remember your name,
'Cause there ain't no one for to give you no pain.'

- A HORSE WITH NO NAME, AMERICA

fighting, and laughing. In this traditional Muslim society, the women are not always visible; they're usually behind the ornate doors of the home, cooking and carrying out the roles society has given them. Tourism has been a recent addition to St Katherine, and has improved the income and affluence of the village. Hotels have sprung up, one of which has a swimming pool. When it first opened, the ripples of excitement that went around the village turned into splashes of delight as the locals piled into the grounds, and jumped into what they assumed was a giant bathrub. The guards were powerless to stop the party; so half jumped in, the other half ran off. Fun is an integral part of Bedouin culture.

The Bedouin are Sunni Muslims and follow their religion with compassion. As a part of their faith, they maintain a strong connection with the natural world. Most Bedouin regularly spend time alone in the desert so they can reconnect with its tranquility. This closeness to nature allows them to predict storms hours in advance on otherwise perfect, blue-sky days. In 2009, our guides told us to prepare for snow and ice (which hadn't been seen in the region for over 25 years) and they were cruelly ignored. Within 48 hours, inches of snow had fallen, leaving everyone open...
The Sinai is a desert with shifting dunes and sandstorms, but because of its aridity. The rocky walls (or canyons) along the region are often quite verdant, with groves of pomegranate trees and acres of opium poppies. These plantations are well known and there isn't a policeman in the region who can't reel off the locations where they're grown. Some of the larger plantations are occasionally 'destroyed', under a programme funded by the US government. However, enough poppies are left behind for the farmer to make some money and start over again. The US get satisfaction, the police get their money and the farmer whose crop was partially destroyed might be visited again for 5 years. It's a solution that could only work in the Sinai.

There's a tremendous peace and tranquility to the Sinai, and perhaps that's what draws me back as much as the new routes and sunshine. Everyone lands in Sharm el Sheikh - an appalling resort where any trace of Egyptian culture has been removed, save for humorous misrepresentations of the pharaohs. Driving away from this Sodom at high speed is a necessity, and to arrive at St Katherine in the embracing heat of the late afternoon is one of the greatest antidepressants around. The wide open skies, cliffs rearing up around the village, and the smells of a traditional desert life do strange things to my brain. I always giggle as I walk up the familiar main street to the chicken restaurant, relaxing into this desert life once again.

There are four main climbing areas to get to grips with. Laid out around St Katherine are many obvious crags and cliffs. They range from single pitch bolted slabs to multi pitch monstrosities comparative to Cornwall, but four times the size. The Sinai is effectively a land bridge between Africa and Asia and has been the scene of a great deal of conflict. In 1973, the Israelis launched the October War to liberate the peninsula and over the next ten years the Israeli Alpine Club set about developing the area round St Katherines with military zeal. They left a legacy of adventurous multipitch trad lines that take many of the most striking features on the cliffs around the village. For the most part, climbing here involves an array of jumaring techniques, from thin fingers to offwidth. All of which takes a toll on your skin and clothing. After ten days in the desert, it's a pleasure to stumble back into town and not have to jam any part of your body into any more cliffs.

Another area near the village was developed after a Belgian artist took up residence. He started experimenting with opium, moved out into the desert south...
Dahab, a place of legend and mystery. For years, rumours circulated amongst the Bedouin that high on a ledge was a casket of gold. From the ground it was obvious that something was there, and it looked more like a treasure chest every time we squinted at it. The ledge was only accessible by climbers, so it seemed unlikely that there would be anything, but you never know - the desert is a strange place. The local Sheiks contracted us to find out what was there. We agreed that we could have whatever we could put in our pockets, and the rest would be distributed amongst the Bedouin according to some arcane rules. The first line to hit the ledge was the excellent jumaring testpiece of Skeleton Arrows of the Bedouin (E2, 100m) but, predictably, the casket turned out to be nothing of the sort, and merely a treasure chest sized block of golden granite. The scene round the campfire that evening was one of pragmatic reflection on what could have been. For us, the real treasure was the development of the cliff.

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of the village - and then things got weird. He bought a load of United Nations blue paint, and started painting the rocks and boulders. He spent a year creating an abstract landscape that, once it became known The Blue Desert), brought the tourists in droves and gave the locals another source of income. In the middle of all that, Dave Lucas (Hot Rock Pioneer and Sinai fanatic) found the Cheesewire Cliff, a single-pitch venue of steep cracks and grooves that’s a fantastic centrepiece to the area. Around the cliff lie dozens of painted boulders that provide a bizarre playground. All the routes provide steady experiences between HS and E1. Other unclimbed crags exist nearby that are yet to be explored, providing more incentive for the curious. A couple of hours west of the village lies Umm El'adah; a wadi with an enormous amount of rock. The two standout lines amongst so many are the stunning Hand of Allah (E5, 125m), tracing a line up the side of a massive feature that in Bedouin lore is a perfect representation of Allah’s hand. The second is the evocatively named Echoes from Another World (E2, 250m). I spotted the line a few years ago and climbed its superb twisting groove whilst basking in the heat of a spring afternoon; the higher we got, the clearer the chants from the mosque in St Katherine became, carried miles across the desert on the warm winds.

Four hours’ walk from St Katherine lies Jebel Dahab, a place of legend and mystery. For years, rumours circulated amongst the Bedouin that high on a ledge was a casket of gold. From the ground it was obvious that something was there, and it looked more like a treasure chest every time we squinted at it. The ledge was only accessible by climbers, so it seemed unlikely that there would be anything, but you never know - the desert is a strange place. The local Sheiks contracted us to find out what was there. We agreed that we could have whatever we could put in our pockets, and the rest would be distributed amongst the Bedouin according to some arcane rules. The first line to hit the ledge was the excellent jumaring testpiece of Skeleton Arrows of the Bedouin (E2, 100m) but, predictably, the casket turned out to be nothing of the sort, and merely a treasure chest sized block of golden granite. The scene round the campfire that evening was one of pragmatic reflection on what could have been. For us, the real treasure was the development of the cliff.

The grand prize though, is Jebel Naga five miles north west of St Katherine. Stairingly visible from the air, this enormous cliff has dominated our thoughts for years. Most of Naga faces west, with the bulk of the cliff towering 500m above the wadi. It tails to a mere 250m to the north and south of the central section. So far, only one route has breached this cliff, sneaking in from the northwest side. The Hills Have Eyes (2008, 250m, E1 5b) is a 10 pitch line that consists of classic pitches, with increasing difficulties, culminating in a superb 40m 5b pitch with a perfect nut slot and finger lock just where you need them. Isn’t it curious how such random quirks of geology make all the difference? Mike Hutton made an optimistic attempt in 2010, coming to an impressive six pitches up the biggest southwest face. His options at that point were to press on, protectionless, into unknown territory miles from rescue, or retreat to safety. In 2012, Dave Lucas and I bought our way up a number of pitches aiming to breach the main face at its highest point, but came to a halt at an overhanging, friable groove that would have gone at around E4 had we had the balls.

This last effort put into sharp focus our ‘no bolts in the desert’ ethic. In order to get through the second pitch, we placed a bolt on a blank 5c traverse. Further routes climbed on that trip resorted to occasional bolts to pass blank sections. We felt this was appropriate when there were no other options and when safety, in this remote area, is paramount. A direct ascent of Naga is the great prize of the Sinai, although the truth is that there are many other cliffs yet to be discovered, likely giving up quality lines from VD to E5.

Ultimately, the great attraction of the Sinai doesn’t necessarily hinge around the climbing alone; the fellowship of the desert is as reassuring as a bomber runner next to a solid jam, as is waking to morning sunshine and the smell of freshly made bread and coffee, climbing in the desert heat, then returning to a roaring campfire and bubbling pots of stew. Beyond the routes, perhaps, the positive and peaceful attitude that the Sinai encourages, campfire conversations beneath starlit skies and meaningful exchanges with the Bedouin are the true, great treasures of the Sinai.
Getting There

Charter flights to Sharm el-Sheikh operate throughout the year. To get from Sharm to St Katherine, contact Sheik Sina who will arrange a minibus pick up for you. The only two operators worth contacting are Sheik Sina and Sheik Mohammed both in St Katherine.

Seasons

March to mid-May and September through to early November are the best times for climbing.

Gear

Double ropes, lots of cam nuts up to 6, plus many slings and extenders. Take plenty of tat per person for when you need to retreat descend, and knots to leave behind.

Dangers

Mainly loose rock, falling off camels and Egyptian driving. Check with your doctor for medical precautions and the Foreign Office for travel advice. Rescue is the event of an accident is a local self-help affair. Know your wilderness first aid and make wise decisions when new routes. Stay hydrated and clean, and don't even think about taking illicit drugs - you won't survive an Egyptian prison.

Bedouin Guides

In the Sinai when you're climbing away from St Katherine, you're required to have a guide. Sheik Sina & Sheik Mustafa are the places to go in the village. Ask for a guide who has been on a climbing trip with Dave Lucas (known as 'Sheik Dawood'). On expedition you will be catered for by the guides. Let them buy the food and deal with that side of things, they know what they're doing.

Guides

There is no current guidebook, although Dave Lucas at The Expedition Consultancy is creating one that covers the areas mentioned plus others. There are online topos at the Israel Alpine Club website, although they're in Hebrew.