

136 BARETRIP

WORDS
PICTURES

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THE WESTERN DESERT, EGYPT: SEARING HEAT... YES. RUDOLPH VALENTINO...
MAYBE. AN OASIS... IF YOU'RE LUCKY. AN ECO-LODGE... YOU'RE KIDDING →



ABDALLAH DRIVES HIS OLD TOYOTA 4WD on a narrow track through a lush palm grove, where the leaves tickle my face through the window. Children pop out of the green, smile, are beautiful. A tape plays a popular Siwan song about a man seriously inebriated with love. I spot the odd sand dune, but they look more like rubble. Then, suddenly, all vegetation stops and a gravel track runs straight into the desert. We soon drive off it into smooth and soft sand. It's as if we're navigating a boat on a silky sea. The desert is exhilarating and immense.

I'm in Siwa, an archipelago of oases in Egypt's Western Desert, close to the Libyan border and on the edge of the Great Sand Sea, which stretches from here deep into Sudan. Abdallah and Suleyman, two Siwans, are showing me their favourite dunes. They smile and tell me that every time they come out here they are just as excited as I am now. No wonder: I'm overcome with the quietness of this vast sandscape of dunes which look like big girls asleep on their sides.

We drive at one of the dunes really fast and I try to imagine what lies beyond. Then we are up on the crest and the world opens up again. More dunes, in an endless variety of shades: pink,

SIWANS LOVE THEIR PALM TREES. THEY SAY, 'IT'S GOOD TO KNOW THE TRUTH AND TO SPEAK THE TRUTH, BUT IT IS EVEN BETTER TO KNOW THE TRUTH AND SPEAK ABOUT PALM TREES'

beige and purple, even more beautiful. Next, the car is sliding down, slowly and softly, an incredibly sensual feeling.

After an hour, we arrive at Bir Wahid, a tiny oasis with a cold-water lake and a natural spring. The water in the lake is *surprisingly* cold, but the small pool of the spring is a perfect 40°C. Its bubbling water massages my skin. The sun is about to disappear and the light on the surrounding desert is magnificent. If there is a heaven it should be like this. While I'm floating, Suleyman and Abdallah bring me sweet red hibiscus flowers and a hot yellow drink made of wild lemon grass.

The most famous spring here is Cleopatra's Bath, also known as *Ayn al-Gubah*. The 5th-century BC Greek writer Heroditus described it as tepid in the morning, cold by noontime so the Siwans could water their gardens, but boiling by midnight. However, Heroditus was more interested in the oracle of the god Amon. Today, the remains of the Temple of the Oracle are rather unimpressive. In its heyday, though, this was one of the world's most important oracles. Alexander the Great confirmed Siwa's spiritual importance when he visited it in 331BC. The priests welcomed him as Amon's son and told him he would be the lord of the world.

It took Alexander seven days of harsh travel to get to Siwa from his newly created capital, Alexandria, and even now, with a good →



road, it still takes six hours by car. Because of its isolation, Siwa is a unique place, with its own history, traditions and language, *Siwi*. Although modern technology and an improved infrastructure are threatening that isolation, Siwans are very keen to preserve their way of life and now a fellow Egyptian is helping them.

In 1996, Dr Mounir Neamatallah, an environmental consultant from Cairo, fell in love with a plot of land near Siwa between a salt lake and a mountain called Adrère Amellal. He built a small ecodge there, which he named after the mountain, and employed master craftsmen to build the traditional way, using palm trunks and *karshif* – a mixture of mud and salt rock. The result has a wonderfully rough-hewn beauty.

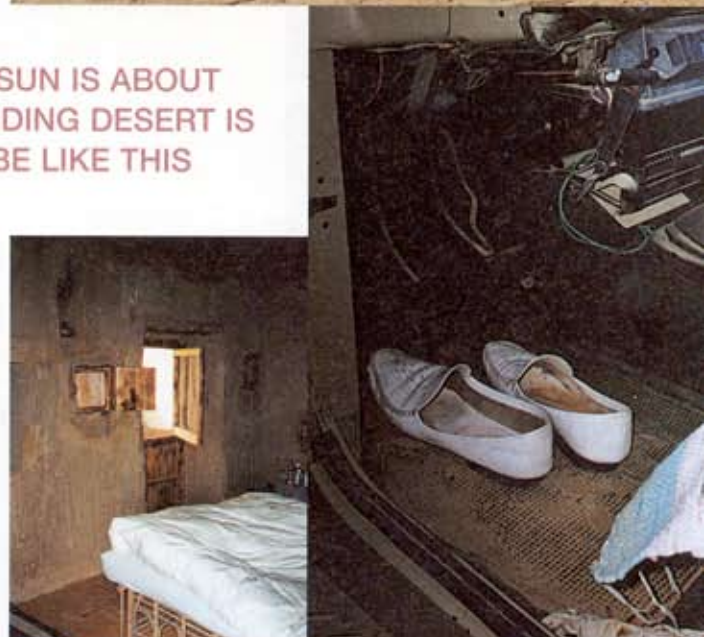
As I arrive at Adrère Amellal, Siwan boys light torches and drinks are served against the dramatic backdrop of the mountain. In the foreground, the salt lake shimmers, and a million stars shine in the sky above. In a candlelit vaulted room, decorated with glittering salt crystals, we eat a delicious dinner of okra flowers and pigeon. My room is also lit by candles and has a large balcony overlooking the lake. Some of its windows are placed low, so you can lie on the floor and still have a good view. There is no phone and no road nearby, so the night is covered in total, blissful silence.

THE BUBBLING WATER MASSAGES MY SKIN. THE SUN IS ABOUT TO DISAPPEAR AND THE LIGHT ON THE SURROUNDING DESERT IS MAGNIFICENT. IF THERE IS A HEAVEN IT SHOULD BE LIKE THIS

I wander around the mountain for several days, combing the salt-crusted shore of the lake, walking in the lush garden, admiring the last pomegranates on the tree. Then it is time for a dip in the bright green pool, and another excellent lunch. Meals are gatherings and a forum for ideas. 'This place made me discover things I didn't know I had in me,' Mounir says. 'I feel that for the first time in my life I can be myself here in Siwa.'

On my last afternoon, Abdallah and Suleyman take me into the desert to sit on the crest of a dune and watch the red sunset. They make a fire that smells of olive wood and, while it kicks in, perform the Muslim sunset prayers. The fire crackles, the first stars appear and a gentle desert wind blows away their quiet chant, 'Allah Akbar...' The vast space seems pure and simple. Later, when I ask Abdallah if some places are nicer to pray in than others, he laughs and answers, 'Yes, of course. To pray in the desert is the best. That is how it was meant to be.'

He and Suleyman tell tall desert stories until it is completely dark. Then, for a grand finale, Suleyman breaks up a piece of red-hot charcoal and produces fantastic fireworks. The glowing ashes sparkle off the sand dune, heading towards the stars and a slight, perfect, crescent moon. 🌙





WHAT TO WEAR

Siwan society is very traditional. Wear modest clothing and avoid strong colours – especially red which is seen as shocking and violent. The heat can be quite intense, so clothes should be simple, loose and in natural fibres. It is advisable for women to wear a one-piece swimsuit when bathing in the springs. Bring a sun hat, desert boots, and a sweater for the nights, which can get cold.

WHAT TO BRING

- Spare camera batteries, tampons and any particular medicine
- Binoculars to look for wildlife in the desert or on the lakes
- A map of the night sky for star spotting
- A sleeping bag if spending the night out in the desert
- Good sun cream, mosquito protection and insect bite cream



Even though
this was one of
the coolest trips
of my life
right now I just
want to go home
and be with
my girlfriend.
Love
Erik

HOW TO GET THERE

British Airways has daily flights from the UK to Cairo (return fares from £330), and a few flights a week to Alexandria (return fares from £430). Call 0845 773 3377 – www.british-airways.com – for reservations. If you are familiar with driving in the desert, you can rent a 4WD from one of the car rental firms in Cairo, or arrange a car with driver to take you to Siwa. The eco-lodge office in Cairo, EQI (see below for details), has several drivers and cars available to do the trip for its own visitors. The journey from Cairo takes eight hours by car, and six hours from Alexandria. Otherwise, there are two daily buses from Alexandria (eight hours).

WHERE TO EAT AND STAY

Adrère Amellal. To stay at the eco-lodge, book through EQI (00 20 2 736 7879/ 738 1327, fax: 00 20 2 736 3331, info@eqi.com.eg). A room costs from \$300 for a single and \$400 for a double per night. This includes three meals and daily desert safaris. EQI is about to open Shall Lodge, a small, beautiful but cheaper hotel in a palm grove in the centre of Siwa Town. There are several small budget hotels in town, including **Palm Trees** (00 20 46 460 2204), **Yousef** (00 20 46 460 2162) and **Cleopatra** (00 20 46 460 2148).

SAND BATHS

Bedouins, Libyans and more and more Egyptians visit Siwa to have sand baths, especially from mid-May to mid-September when temperatures soar above 50°C. Sand baths consist of being buried naked up to your neck in the sand for 25 minutes. Then you are dug out, covered, and led into an enclosed tent, where hot herbal drinks are served to avoid dehydration. You stay here for three or four hours in quite unbearable heat. This routine is repeated for three days. The incredible heat is believed to be effective in treating rheumatism, infertility and impotence. Older Siwans take a sand bath every year for these invigorating qualities. For more information, contact the Tourist Office in Siwa or Abdallah Baghi (see *Useful Contacts*, below).

OTHER PLACES TO VISIT

Siwan House. A small museum with information on oasis traditions.
The Shall. The centre of town is dominated by the spectacular sight of this 13th-century fortress built by Berbers.
Temple of the Oracle. The remains of this ancient holy site lie four kilometres east of the town, near the Temple of Amon, also known as the Temple of Umm El-Ubeyda.
Gebel al-Mawta (Mountain of the Dead). Nearer Siwa town, these Greek and Roman rock tombs contain ancient paintings on some of their walls.
Bir Wahid. You can swim in the cold water lake or hot spring of this tiny oasis.
Lake Shiyata. A beautiful cobalt-blue salt lake in the middle of the desert where you can swim alongside flamingos.

USEFUL CONTACTS

Mahdi Hweily at the Siwan Tourist Office (00 20 46 460 2883) is very helpful and friendly. Abdallah Baghi (00 20 46 460 2005, shali55@hotmail.com) has won a UN award for his work with conscientious tourism development in Siwa. He speaks fluent English and can organise desert trips and arrange permits for travel outside Siwa.