

TATTLER



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It's totally radical! A place that time forgot in the middle of Egypt's nowhere. OK, it takes a while to get here but this oasis hotel is big news. Geordie Greig whips up a desert storm...

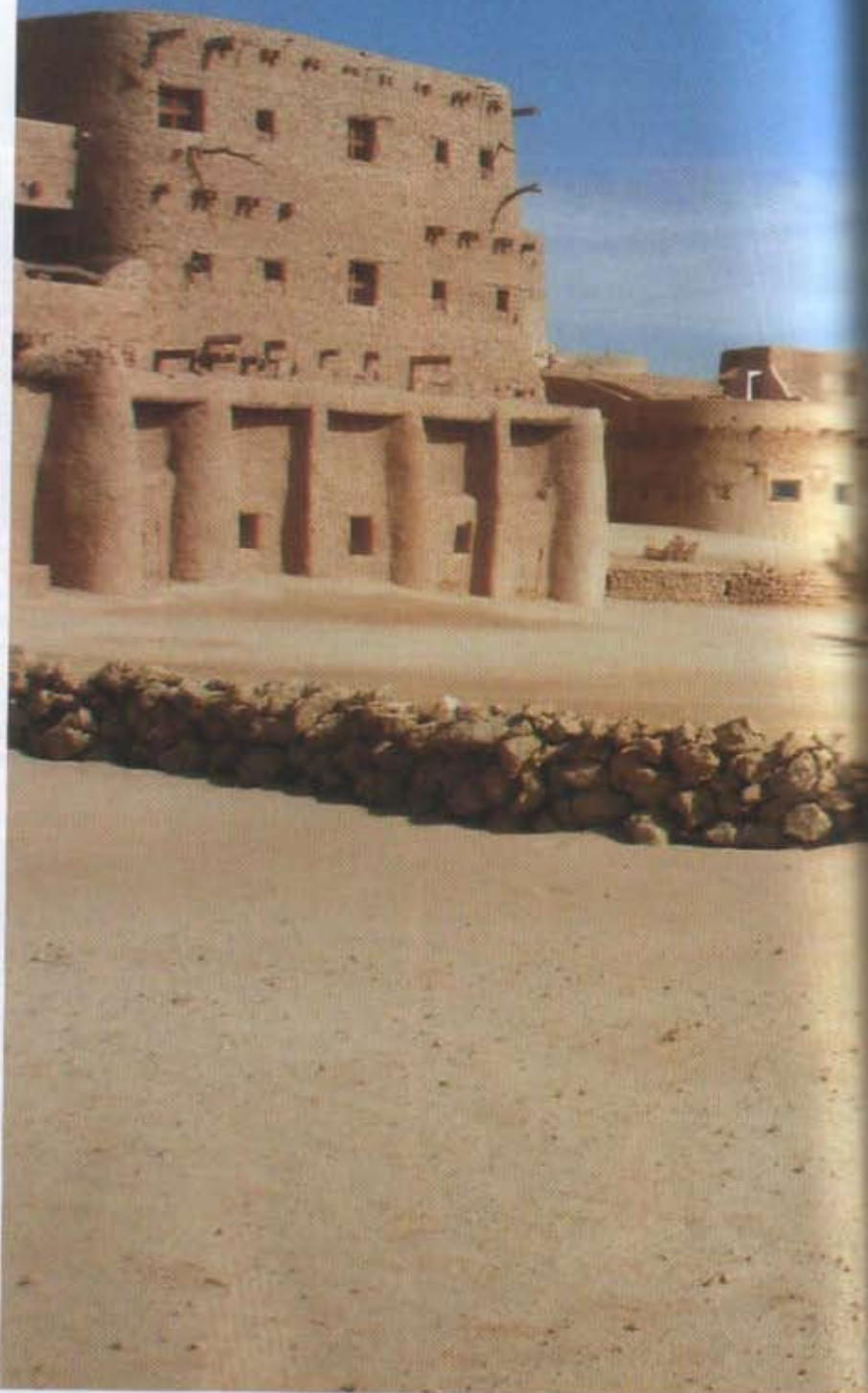
The only sight in the silent darkness of Egypt's Western Desert is that of a hundred hurricane lamps, lined up in the sand like a constellation of stars leading to our room. There's no electricity. There are no phones. In the cave-like houses of rock salt and mud built into the mountain, beeswax candles are lit. The staff resemble medieval monks, dressed in white hooded robes with plimsolls and baggy cotton leggings. Was anything very different just over 2,300 years ago, when Alexander the Great rode for three days with his army to consult the oracle of Amun at Siwa Oasis? One would imagine not, except that today the Adreer Amellal – one of the world's most unusual eco-hotels – stands here.

This is modern-day Bedrock – a sort of Flintstone territory crossed with a pharaonic set from *Indiana Jones*. With a backdrop of mountains that makes Colorado seem low-key, and overlooking olive and palm groves as well as a shimmering salt lake, the site is breathtaking. And it sort of needs to be. If you don't have a private jet to zoom you in, it's a seven-hour car journey from Alexandria via the battlefields of El Alamein, where German tanks still stand in the desert.

But it is more than worth it. This is Egypt off the beaten track and on the radar of only the most sophisticated travellers. Norman Foster booked in and stayed on for three extra days. Queen Paola of Belgium was so entranced she called Queen Elizabeth from her mobile and the word was passed to the Prince of Wales, who made a special detour to see it. At the end of the hotel's sandy drive, the stylish British art dealer Michael Hue-Williams has a house made in the same architectural style, but with Richard Long sculptures and paintings inside and out.

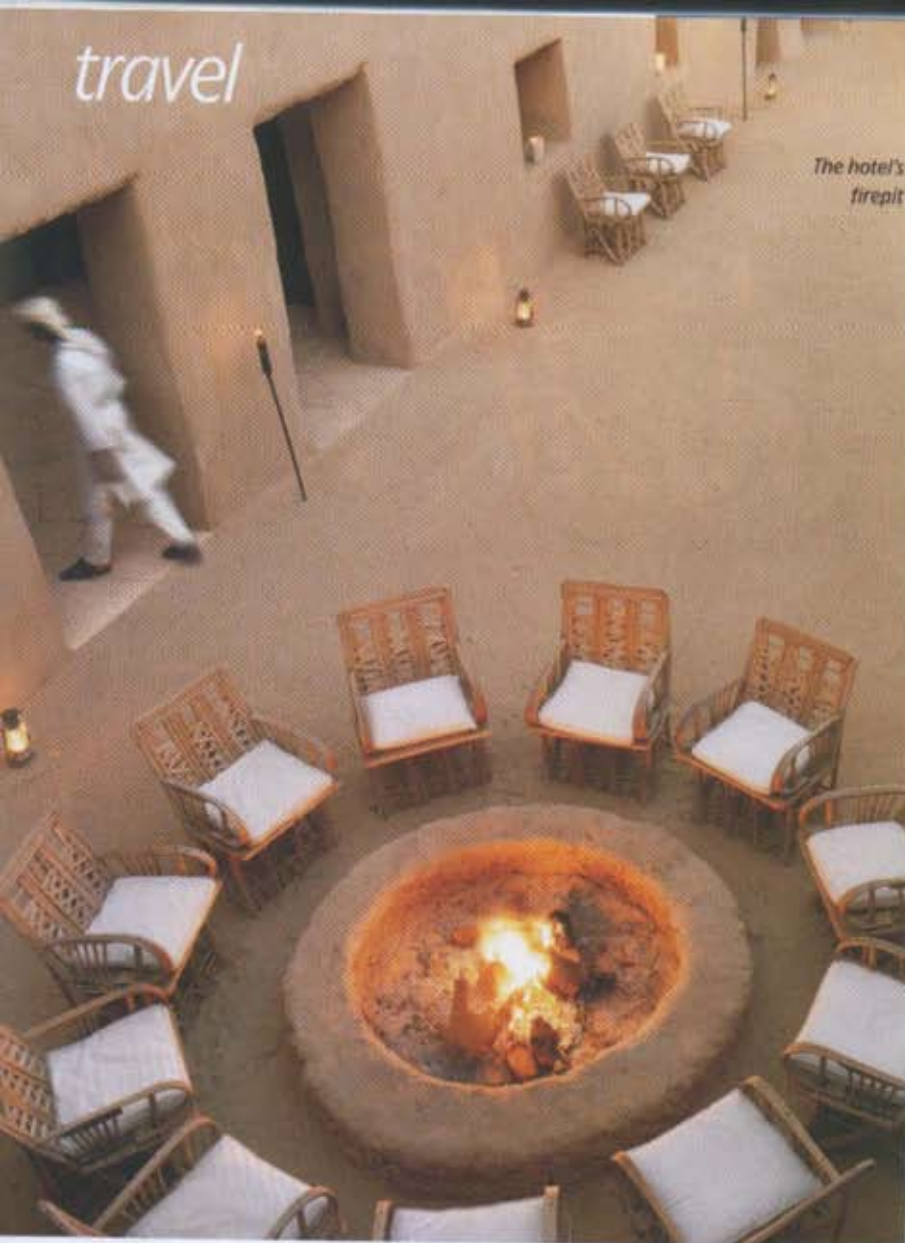
So this is medieval Egypt, biblical Egypt, with the most imperceptible but heavenly modern twists. The whole area, including the hotel, is populated only by Siwis, originally Berbers from Morocco who arrived around 700bc and who are now an almost forgotten people (there are roughly 5,000) with their own language and culture. The locks on >

Norm



ad's land





The hotel's firepit

◁ the doors are all wooden Heath Robinson mechanical structures. A carpenter with a donkey and basic tools is on site, and practically central casting for Joseph. The walls are decorated with sand dollars that look like little chocolate buttons but are actually fossils, literally millions of years old. At night, bowls of hot ash under the dining table keep the desert chill at bay. Hot-water bottles help you stay toasty in bed. The food – aubergines, tomatoes, artichokes – is organic and almost 100 per cent home-grown. Doors and windows are sort of Le Corbusier-meets-caveman, strategically placed to capture the breeze and eliminate any need for air-conditioning. Lunch is served outside at wicker tables; a turbaned Siwi with a flair for making martinis mans the cocktail bar.

Everything outside the hotel is aeons old. The Mountain of the Dead in the village of Siwa (15 minutes by car, one hour by donkey and cart) is where Egyptian grandees were buried. You can scamper down a burrow, like Howard Carter or Lord Carnarvon, to find the mummified remains still there. An

Bowls of hot ash keep you warm at night

abandoned village, ravaged by floods, stands empty and eerie. This must be what Shelley felt like when he wrote *Ozymandias* – ruins and sand are the only things that remain in any form of permanence.

The sands are everywhere, so it is not only a visual paradise but a brilliant playground too, especially for children. Sandboarding down 200-foot dunes can be addictive. It ain't Gstaad but it's way more exotic (and doesn't have queues for the lift). Just as there are game drives in Africa, in Siwa from 3.30pm till sunset desert rangers take you far into the undulating dunes, deflating the tyres of their cars to give them adequate grip. The sweep and stretch and endless changes of the sands are staggering.

This enchanting place is the brainchild of Mounir Neamatalla, a visionary entrepreneur and chairman of Environmental Quality International, a consultancy firm specialising in development projects. Siwa is one of the poorest places in Egypt and yet, since Adrere Amellal opened its doors in 1997, he has injected a sense of renewal through the region's own ancient cultures and traditions. He hopes Siwa will be an example of a simple ecosystem sustained by its own natural resources. He has insisted that his oasis hotel, more an installation than a dwelling-place, remain as timeless and as timelessly simple as when the salt and mud houses were first created. 'Why should I put solar panels here?' he says. 'They would deprive the visitor of the sense of being in a place untouched for a thousand years.'

With light that is somehow more amazing than that of California or Tuscany, there's a definite feeling that nature rules here. It may be deeply chilly in the evenings, but at noon you can roast under the hot sun and go swimming in the lake. This is a place with a very special, luxurious sense of the primitive, surrounded by the kind of magic that only ancient tribes, majestic mountains and ruthless desert climates can conjure. □
Cleveland Collection (tel: 0845 450 5732; clevelandcollection.co.uk) arranges tailor-made trips to Egypt that include the Adrere Amellal. For further information about Egypt visit the Egypt Tourism Authority's website at egypt.travel.



Sandboarding in Siwa