W

SAHARA OASIS
EGYPT'S ECO-LUXE PLAYGROUND

A Tale of Two Houses: Minimalism To the Max Downtown, Wall-to-Wall Masterpieces Uptown

Hook-Up Hiatus: The Truth About Sex After Plastic Surgery

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High Gloss

CHRISTY TURLINGTON BURNS SHINES IN SPRING'S FRESHEST LOOKS

January

Habitats for Humanity

The saltwater pool at Adrère Amellal

When most people think of Minimalism, Donald Judd's geometric plywood sculptures come to mind, or maybe Helmut Lang's sleek, sharp-edged clothes, or even the clean, fuss-free modernism of Bauhaus stars like Mies van der Rohe. Unadorned is one thing, but what Museum of Modern Art curator Klaus Biesenbach has conjured for his own living space is something else entirely. Picture an empty room. You've got it.

Biesenbach, as European Editor Christopher Bagley discovers in this issue of *W,* has chosen to furnish his apartment on New York's Lower East Side with pretty much nothing at all. There's a bed. But, anyway, he prefers to sleep outside on the terrace, with its magical panorama of the city, though presumably not in January. He also has a video projector and a few chairs. Not comfy ones, but something to sit on other than the hard floor. The kitchen consists of a sink and a mini fridge. The bathroom, mercifully, contains the essentials. The walls are bare and could use a fresh coat of paint. "Normally I have to make so many decisions about the tone of white and the tone of gray," Biesenbach tells Bagley. "And should this be a half an inch higher, and to the left? So I actually think this space is about making no decisions."

Biesenbach's abode is the perfect foil to philanthropist Agnes Gund's invitingly chic Park Avenue co-op, furnished with 20th-century-modern French chairs, Ming tables and, oh yes, an ecstatic array of contemporary art masterworks, from Jasper Johns's *Map* over the sofa in the living room to Roy Lichtenstein's *Masterpiece* in the dining room. And it's not just the big guns. Gund, whose monetary and energetic contributions to myriad institutions have made her a New York institution in her own right, makes a point of encouraging emerging artists as well. Even her choice of decorator to overhaul the place speaks to her support of new talent: Kristen McGinnis is just 33, and when Gund hired her in 2007, she was still working out of her apartment. The Gund place was, of course, a dream commission, but McGinnis notes that she had no illusions about the job: "It's about Aggie," she says. "It's about the art."

As passionate as Gund and Biesenbach are about art, *W*'s Bagley is about travel. Loyal readers may recall his Indonesian surfing sojurn a couple of years ago or his many jaunts to points around the globe, from Tangier to Tokyo, Mexico City to Cape Town. For this month's "Far and Away," Bagley's wanderlust led him on a nine-hour drive from Cairo through the Sahara desert to Siwa, a remote Egyptian oasis. There, a Columbia University–educated environmentalist named Mounir Neamatalla created an eco-resort called Adrère Amellal. It has no electricity and is built the local way—out of *kershef,* a mud consisting of indigenous rock salt and clay. The kicker: Every half century or so, this corner of the desert gets pelted with torrential rains, at which point, Bagley writes, Adrère Amellal "is likely to melt into the ground." Nothing but sand dunes and palm trees for as far as the eye can see? Sounds like Biesenbach's next home sweet home.

—JULIE L. BELCOVE

FAR AWAY

THE SUBLIMELY ISOLATED OASIS OF SIWA, ON EGYPT'S LIBYAN BORDER, IS LURING A NEW CROWD OF GROOVY TRAVELERS (AND PRINCE CHARLES TOO). A DISPATCH FROM THE LAND THAT TIME FORGOT.

BY CHRISTOPHER BAGLEY
PHOTOGRAPHED BY PHILIP-LORCA DICORCIA

This page: A domed ceiling at the eco-lodge Adrère Amellal, built from Siwan rock and clay. **Opposite:** A view of the dunes.

Left: Abdallah Baghi brewing tea on the dunes. **Below:** The saltwater pool.

"You don't trust me?"

It's an hour before sunset in the dunes of the Sahara, near the oasis of Siwa in western Egypt, and our turbaned, galabia-clad driver, Abdallah Baghi, is careering our Land Rover up and down the mountains of sand, riding them like a big-wave surfer. There are three of us in the back of the car, and judging by Baghi's sly smile, he's happiest when he can hear all of us yelping in terror; at one point he hurtles over a peak so steep that the car's underside slams into the crest, threatening to leave us teetering at the top, cartoon-style.

It helps, slightly, to learn that Baghi moonlights as a respected local official (Siwa's superintendent of schools) and that he has accidentally flipped the car "only" once, with no resulting harm to his passengers. Still, "sometimes people get a little bit scared," Baghi says, before steering us toward a flatter stretch where the dunes have shifted to expose a curiously jagged patch of ground, pocked with what looks like tiny white stones. When we get out to walk around, we see that the stones are actually prehistoric ocean fossils: hundreds of sand dollars and oyster shells, remnants of the era when this part of Africa was completely underwater. While we're still contemplating our discovery of a virgin fossil field millions of years old, Baghi drives us to a high ridge, where we watch the sun drop behind the dunes as he quietly takes out his handmade hatchet, along with a few olive tree branches, and builds a small bonfire. It's time for tea, brewed in an elegant iron pot with locally grown mint leaves.

Just another afternoon at the oasis of Siwa, in a remote part of Egypt that offers exhilaration and edification in equal measure. Few Americans have heard of Siwa, let alone considered a trip there, but in recent years the oasis has been luring a new wave of in-the-know travelers, including Prince Charles, the Duchess of Cornwall, Christian Louboutin and others craving its unique mix of ecologically sound adventure and haute-rustic style. The fact that the only way to get to Siwa is by driving nine hours from Cairo—or by hopping a private jet—has so far kept most tour buses away. But the news that a local military airport might soon open to commercial flights has some residents fretting that the place's timeless charms are now marked with an imminent expiration date.

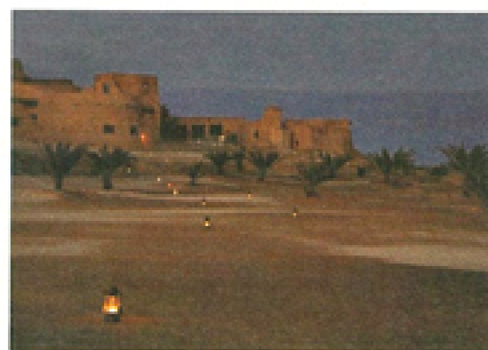
Our visit begins unpromisingly, with the monotonous daylong journey on the featureless road from Cairo. It's the kind of drive that reminds me why desert road trips rarely live up to their majestic reputations. (I find myself rooting for a major sandstorm, just to ease the boredom, and the wish is granted: For an hour or so our car is pelted with blindingly thick clouds of dust that clear up only occasionally to reveal an oil rig or a wayward camel.) After nightfall we finally pull up to our hotel, Adrère Amellal, which is reputed to be the most luxurious eco-resort in Egypt. At first we wonder if we've taken a wrong turn. Yes, the porters greeting us are decked out in chic white robes, and they lead us up a winding pathway lined with artfully placed hurricane lanterns, but after they deposit our bags near the fire pit that apparently doubles as a reception area, they seem as confused as we are about what to do next. Eventually we figure out that we're supposed to take a look around and choose our own rooms, which isn't easy

For now, the only way to get to Siwa is by driving nine hours from Cairo—or by hopping a private jet.

This page, clockwise from near right: Beetroot leaves stuffed with spinach; preparing lunch in the kitchen; Adrère Amellal at midday; the lodge at dusk. **Opposite:** Setting up for lunch on the dunes.

because the lodge, true to its eco-conscious mandate, has no electricity and nary a flashlight; the whole place is lit with torches and candles.

During dinner an hour later, I begin to suspect that everything's going to be okay. The sandstone dining table, in the middle of a cavernous room with a domed 15-foot ceiling, is set with antique silver and French china; to ward off the winter desert chill (temperatures drop into the 30s at night), stone braziers filled with smoldering olive-wood embers have been placed at our feet. There's no menu, but the meal is easily the best I've had in Egypt: roasted chicken with saffron served on traditional clay cookware, and succulent zucchini from the back garden, yellow florets still attached as proof of just-picked freshness.



With a gigantic salt lake at its center, Siwa makes other oases look like sad little puddles.

The owner of the lodge and the man responsible for all of these little details, Egyptian environmentalist Mounir Neamatalla, has joined us for dinner. A genial, blue-eyed Cairo native, Neamatalla, 61, has a Ph.D. from Columbia University and the natural élan of a statesman from some mythical country where everyone can discuss, in four languages, the differences among varieties of artisanal capers. In the mid-Nineties Neamatalla, who runs a consulting firm that specializes in sustainable development, was eager to put the firm's principles into practice and decided to open his own eco-lodge, Egypt's first. His initial visit to Siwa was a "revelation," he recalls, because he found a society still embracing ancient traditions that today seem downright progressive: a holistic, low-impact approach to living and a deep, instinctual respect for nature. "Generally you learn about these things in books," says Neamatalla. "In Siwa you experience them. It was like living in medieval times." He spent nine years building the resort on a lakeside plot dotted with palm groves and hot springs.

When I get up to explore Adrère Amellal after sunrise the next morning, I see how completely Neamatalla has achieved his vision. If Fred Flintstone had had a brother with a flair for interior design, he might have created something like this place. The 17 buildings, scattered along a slope beneath a dramatic sandstone mountain, are made with a local mud called *kershef*, a mixture of rock salt and clay. Hidden among the rooms and suites, which can accommodate 80 guests, are various dining spaces, bars and cavelike lounge areas, minimally decorated with a Berber rug here, a few white canvas cushions there.

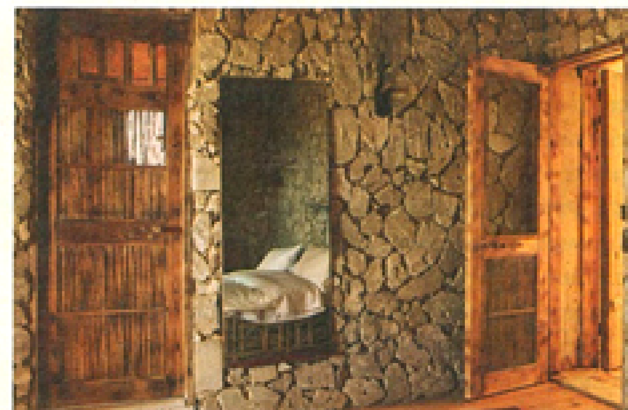
More than just a fantasy compound for discerning cavemen, the lodge is a lesson in the wisdom of Siwa's native building techniques. Solar panels? Nope—too modern. Instead there are tiny square windows framed with local palm logs, and walls made with a translucent alabaster-like rock salt that lets in daylight while keeping out heat and cold. Each night while we're at dinner, someone sneaks into our frigid bedrooms and slides flannel-covered hot-water bottles between the sheets. (Somehow, these keep the bed warm until morning.) One problem: Every half century or so, Siwa gets soaked with torrential winter rains, and the next time that happens, this hotel, like the rest of the oasis's traditional mud structures, is likely to melt into the ground. Asked about that prospect, Neamatalla smiles and admits that advance planning is not one of his fortes. "At least it won't leave much debris behind," he says.

The almost biblical magnificence of Siwa's natural environment becomes even more apparent during an afternoon hike up the mountain behind the resort. From the peak one can see the oasis's giant salt lake and its 300,000 palm trees, which are nourished by natural springs. Siwa makes other oases look like sad little puddles. But despite the landscape's primitive power, this area has developed a kind of stealth sophistication, thanks to links with an international network of VIPs. Neamatalla's house, adjacent to the hotel, is a gorgeously spare sanctuary that he built with the help of Paris-based designer India Mahdavi. Even our daredevil driver, it turns out, has been honored by Kofi Annan: Baghi flew to New York in 1999 to accept a United Nations award for his community service in Siwa.

For the fancy types who've been flocking here lately (Charles and Camilla stayed at Adrère Amellal in 2006, at the suggestion of Queen Paola of Belgium, and in 2007 Louboutin and decorator Jacques Grange, among others, dropped in), part of the draw of Siwa is its indigenous culture, which is more North African than Egyptian. Located 30 miles from the Libyan border, Siwa was founded by Berbers and became known throughout the ancient Middle East as the home of the Oracle of Amun. Alexander the Great stopped by in 331 BC and asked the Oracle to confirm that he was indeed the son of Zeus. Over subsequent centuries the Siwans, always wary of outsiders, remained willfully isolated; they still speak their own language even though they've been under Egyptian authority since 1820. European visitors who arrived during the 18th century were bewildered by many of Siwa's customs, including stringent Muslim codes that coexisted with a tradition of open homosexuality and marriages between men. (King Fouad put an end to the fun in 1928.)

Now home to 20,000 people who earn their living mostly by growing dates and olives, Siwa is still a very traditional place. The locals abide by a strict segregation of the sexes—the men do all the food shopping, since

This page, clockwise from near right: A cauliflower dish; keeping the flame in the kitchen; a cavelike guest room. Opposite: The lodge's owner, Mounir Neamatalla.



married women rarely leave the house. (Even male and female donkeys are kept apart so that there's no risk of women witnessing any unseemly mating activities.) Neamatalla's sister Laila, a designer who owns a jewelry and clothing boutique in Cairo, recently started an embroidery workshop in town, where young women master age-old needlework techniques. When I stop by one morning, most of the women are too shy to speak to me, but one says she likes the workshop because it gets her out of the house. "Before," she says, "we had to stay at home all day, every day."

Like all of the world's remaining preindustrial enclaves, Siwa is in an extremely fragile position right now, since the qualities that make it unique are the same ones that make it vulnerable to destruction. "You are talking about 20,000 people living in their own little ecosystem," Neamatalla says. "It's a tiny dot in the Sahara that for centuries was totally excluded from the rest of Egypt, and the rest of humanity. So Siwa will be making a grave mistake if it begins inviting tourism that's not to scale. If you have 30 or 40 people walking out of a bus in this small oasis, that is an act of aggression."

All this becomes clearer when I walk around central Siwa—a smattering of shops and cafés surrounding a main square cluttered with donkey carts—and sit down for tea with Sheikh Omar Rageh, the leader of one of the oasis's 11 tribes. (Tribal sheikhs still effectively run the oasis, though they now answer to the regional governor in the city of Matruh, to the north.) Rageh, a handsome 42-year-old dressed in a traditional indigo robe and burgundy camel-hair cap, says that the defining attribute of Siwan culture is its strong social bonds. When someone dies, everyone in the village goes to the funeral, which is paid for with community funds. But that custom, like many others, has been waning since 1985, when the only road to Siwa was paved, drawing new residents and vacationers from Egypt's Delta region and beyond. "Now everything's changing," Rageh says, speaking through a translator. "When the people from the Delta come, they build new houses and paint them different colors: green, yellow, orange. There's no consistency now." He adds that Neamatalla is one of the few people in Siwa fighting to heal the "scars" of rapid development.

The lodge does indeed feel like an oasis within the oasis, a place where 21st-century anxieties quickly evaporate into the great arid expanse that extends for hundreds of miles. Even if the rooms did have electrical outlets, the act of recharging a BlackBerry in a place like this would feel like utter sacrilege. (Cell phones are banned in the lodge's public areas, but they can be used in the rooms and charged in town overnight.) And Adrère Amellal's staffers, if not overtly eager to please, are like walking advertisements for the kind of reserved, gentle dignity for which Siwans are known. One night after dinner, while I'm staring up at the dazzling riot of unfamiliar constellations in the night sky, the maître d', Mohammed El Sherif, asks me where I live. Paris, I say, and he asks about what he's heard from previous guests: "Is it true that it's very noisy there, and you can barely see the stars at night, and there is always rain falling down?" I tell him that's about right.

The next afternoon Baghi takes a few of us, including Roberto Rossellini (Ingrid Bergman's son, who's just arrived at the hotel with his wife, Dominican diplomat Gabriella Bonetti), for a long drive through the dunes to Lake Shiata, whose lush shoreline is a habitat for flamingos, jackals and slender-horned gazelles. In this part of the desert, called the Great Sand Sea, the dunes are sculpted like smooth swirls of frosting on a giant cake, and the effect is so spectacular that it leaves even jaded travelers awestruck, mouths agape. "I've never seen anything like this in my life," says Rossellini, 57, who can't stop snapping pictures as he charges up and down the dunes.

How long the area will remain so pristine is difficult to say. Baghi says flatly that Egypt as a whole, with its exploding population and declining resources, "is going down the drain," and that Siwa itself won't be far behind if development continues unchecked. "The outsiders come here, and they bring their bad manners," Baghi says. Local wedding ceremonies, he notes, used to last an entire week: "Now it's barely one night. You show up and it's, 'Okay! Congratulations! See you later.'" Neamatalla, meanwhile, is especially anxious about the prospect of regular flights to Siwa, which would cut the travel time from Cairo to one hour and possibly turn the oasis into a package-tour free-for-all. (The authorities recently decided to keep the ban on commercial air travel, for now.)

On our last day in Siwa, we head back into the desert for another leisurely lunch, this one a showstopper: The waiters have set up a table in the middle of the dunes, and after a glass of champagne, we sit down for a meal of date-marinated lamb served on palm skewers, and an herb salad with qatta (the original variety of cucumber). Neamatalla tells us that he once scolded his chefs for picking the herbs midmorning instead of waiting until just before lunch, because he could taste the difference in the salad's flavors.

The next day we awake at 6 a.m. for the journey back to the chaotic urban mess that is modern-day Cairo. By midafternoon, while we're fighting our way into the snarl of diesel-spewing trucks, cars and motorcycles that clog the highways on the outskirts of the city, Siwa already seems like a mirage. In central Cairo we pass an irrigation canal that now serves as the neighborhood dump—a fetid stew of cans, plastic bottles and urban sludge that turns my stomach. Evidently 18 million people *can* be wrong. Even though I'm reflexively eager to charge my cell phone and turn on CNN, I'm more aware than ever of the price of so-called connectivity. And I remember that at lunch two days ago Neamatalla told us about a wild, unpopulated place, three hours east of Siwa, called Tabaghbagh. He described it as an awe-inspiring spot, a spring-fed ridge nine miles long, where he hopes eventually to build his next retreat, after Siwa is overrun.

At the hotel in Cairo, I turn on my computer for the first time in five days. The first thing I do is Google Tabaghbagh. ●

Sheikh Rageh worries about Siwa's future. "Now everything's changing," he says.