

SUNRISE ON MOUNT SINAI

At the beginning of May 2006, Sandra Jackson and her husband Jack set off on the journey of a lifetime. From Gatwick they flew to Taba, Egypt. Taba, surrounded by mountains and the Sinai Desert, is on the northern shores of the Gulf of Aquaba - close to the border of Israel. On 24th April three terrorist bombs in the Red Sea resort of Dahab killed 24 people and injured more than 80. Two days later a suicide attack in Northern Sinai wounded two peacekeepers. Momentarily they had thought about cancelling their holiday but like so many of us they have become resilient to terrorist threats.



“Moses, Mountains and Monasteries... looked like we were off on our Pilgrimage after all”, I thought at the Welcome meeting of our hotel in Taba - as we booked trips for the two weeks ahead. Just over a week before bombs had exploded in Dahab, and we had thought about cancelling our holiday, now we were off to St. Catherine’s Monastery, Moses Mountain, Masada, the Dead Sea, Dahab and Jerusalem.

The next evening, a mini-bus collected us at 10.30 p.m. for a 2 hour ride across the Sinai Desert to the Mountain of Moses, to climb the summit, a height of 2285 metres and watch the sun rise. I had vaguely remembered the words “strenuous and not for the hard of walking”, but other people we picked up seemed to be dressed casually and not equipped with pick-axes and mountaineering gear.

We were a small group of 12 and we were all given a torch and a carrier bag containing our breakfast for the morning. Breakfast was left in safe keeping at the restaurant, close to St. Catherine’s Monastery. As we walked away from the lights of the Monastery, the path became darker and now there was only the light from the beautiful constellations of stars above and the dim light of our torches. The uphill journey had already become difficult as we stumbled over rocks and endless sand dunes. Large boulders were on either side of the path. It was difficult to make out, but some were camels asleep with their Bedouin owners.

Every now and then we stopped for water; camels awaited us at every bend to offer a lift to the top. At first it seemed a failure to give way to this temptation and not climb the 3750 steps in 3 hours.

We reached the first station, a primitive Bedouin hut equipped with cushion seating on the floor – Bedouins selling canned drinks and Bedouin tea. Groups of people had collected there; we decided to make a deal with some camel owners and continued our journey by camel.

There was a sense of loneliness up there on the hump of my camel rhythmically going backwards and forwards, hoping the camel wouldn’t lose its footing as we climbed higher and higher.

The stars looked so bright and as I looked back there were small distant rows of torch lights slowly following the snake path up and the glow of cigarette ends as we passed Bedouins still hoping for customers. I thought of Moses. He must have been fit and I wondered about his sandals, how shock resistant were they battling the craggy rocks and shale. Did he have to replace them often?

To pass the couple of hours or so I found myself silently praying as my camel and I trod the path that Moses once trod. My mind cast back to the first five books of the Bible which Moses wrote and to the beginning of time. I was reminded of my journey down the Nile, that I did the year before, where Moses travelled in a basket as a baby and now here I was where Moses received the Ten Commandments.....

We had reached the end of the camels' journey and at the last 'station' again groups of people rested for a while before continuing to the top of Moses Mountain via 750 rocky, uneven steps.

More and more people were appearing, we couldn't find our group to meet up with - the gathering crowds swept us up the steps. People of all ages, nationalities and varying degrees of health were summoning up all their strength and endurance to complete their pilgrimage.

Again another almost lonely journey in the darkness of the night. People were standing aside every now and then to try and get their breath back and slow down their heart rates. I wondered how many people in the past had collapsed or fallen from the mountain.

There was a man on crutches, he seemed to have an effortless technique of tackling the almost treacherous 750 steps, by placing the toes of the crutches on a step and swinging his legs through.

I knew we must be reaching the top of the mountain – I could hear a group of people singing the hymn:

*Holy, holy, holy! Lord God Almighty!
Early in the morning our song shall rise to Thee;
Holy, holy, holy, merciful and mighty!
God in three Persons, blessèd Trinity!*

I was silently praying, thanking God for bringing us safely to our destination. Here it was another world.

Bedouins were dashing around hiring out blankets as the rocks of the mountain seem cold as ice especially as we searched out a place to sit to get that perfect photo of the sun rising. There was a buzz of haggling prices as people bought rocks, crystals and hand made necklaces from the Bedouins and their children.

Our group had already reached the top and our guides had recognised us, and quickly beckoned us to follow them to the breath-taking high spot, close to the Chapel of the Holy Trinity, on the peak of the mountain.



There was a sudden silence, the selling had stopped and everyone seemed to hold their breaths momentarily as the sun started to appear. It was almost as if a miracle was taking place. The cloak of darkness was replaced by the shroud of dawn. The sight of hazy mountain tops with the realisation of how high we had climbed through the night was awesome. The breath-taking views were all around and the sound of cameras capturing everything. Suddenly everyone dispersed, descending the now day lit 750 steps. We were happy to take a camel at the bottom of the steps, back to the first 'station'.

We walked back to the Monastery, thinking of Moses taking back the tablets with the Ten Commandments. We were taking back a memory and a feeling of achievement engraved in our minds and our hearts.

Camels rested at a watering spot, as we approached the grounds of the Monastery and our guides again found us and led us to the restaurant where we happily and wearily ate our breakfast.

Next stop, St. Catherine's Monastery; the Burning Bush, the Chamber of Monks skulls, St. Catherine's three Fingers, Byzantine art and religious icons and more.....and people visibly moved by all they saw.

To be continued.....

Sandra Jackson



THE TEN COMMANDMENTS

Coming soon...



Moses, 1659 by Rembrandt

On hearing the news that Sandra, David Clarke's sister, was going on a pilgrimage to Mount Sinai, where Moses received the Ten Commandments, your Magna team decided the theme for the major new series in 2007 would be...

THE TEN COMMANDMENTS.

Our Rector, Neil Richardson, each month will be exploring the Ten Commandments and their relevance to modern day life.

