

*Romantic visions of desert noblemen aside, a visit to a Bedouin camp near Egypt's Red Sea reveals a world of surface modernity alongside staunch tradition ▶▶▶▶*



# Shifting Sands

At the foot of rugged desert hills, hugging the Red Sea coast, is the popular resort of Sharm el-Sheikh. It drips with luxury hotels, shopping malls and glitzy bars and is a beacon for divers after world-renowned sights. It's an image in stark contrast to what lies just beyond the rise of rocky crags—a tourist attraction of a different sort, the Bedouins of the Sinai Desert.



**F**OR MANY, THE WORD “BEDOUIN” CONJURES UP IMAGES OF MYSTICAL PEOPLE ENVELOPED IN FLOWING ROBES, JOURNEYING BY CAMEL OVER AN

OCEAN OF SHIFTING SANDS IN SEARCH OF ELUSIVE OASES. But languishing in the air-conditioned splendour of my hotel in Sharm el-Sheikh, I found it hard to believe that just over that purple-peaked horizon such a parallel world could exist. I was soon to discover the reality as I set out on an afternoon camel safari to a Bedouin settlement.

I had imagined a landscape of rolling dunes and mirages, but the desert terrain beyond Sharm’s glittering strip is like a scorched moonscape of beautiful but barren country framed by towering tiers of jagged rock. Apart from the occasional lone tree, there is virtually no vegetation. I wonder how any living thing can survive in such an unforgiving environment.

The settlement lies a few kilometres up a dusty track. It’s a large, open area with a long, tent-like structure on one side lined with an array of brightly coloured cushions. In the centre, Bedouin men recline on rugs, smoking *shisha* pipes and brewing tea.

Sitting on cosy, low-lying seats under the camel-skin canopy of the tent I discover that despite nearby convenience malls, the teeth-itchingly sweet tea we are served has never been near a grain of sugar. My guide Mohammed explains that although the Egyptians consume a lot of sugar, the Bedouins prefer to use sweet herbs that have the added benefit of medicinal qualities. And in spite of the close proximity to fast-food restaurants, Bedouin people stick to a simple but nutritious diet of goat, camel, mutton, dates, milk and bread. Having been told this, it comes as a surprise when dinner arrives—in hotel catering dishes—and instead of camel tagine, I’m faced with a beef burger!

“That’s what tourists expect,” says Mohammed sheepishly. “They don’t want to eat ‘real’ Bedouin food.” At my incredulous look, he continues: “Obviously to maintain our business we have to tailor the excursions specifically to tourists’ needs. Originally we provided traditional Bedouin food, but too many visitors complained.”

As well as catering to the whims of tourists, the tour operators also have to adhere to the wishes of the Bedouin, which means making a deal with the group’s leader, or Sheikh, before a



## « Despite nearby convenience malls, the teeth-itchingly sweet tea has never been near a grain of sugar »

“Bedouin experience” excursion can go ahead. Despite playing a role for decades in the country’s growing tourism industry, working as guides and custodians of ancient sites, most Sheikhs are shrewd enough to prevent the 21<sup>st</sup> century from infiltrating their world beyond a surface



influence. Which is why we visitors are not allowed into the real Bedouin homestead. Instead, we experience local culture in a specially designated area. We are forbidden from seeing the local women, though we have indirect contact with them through the jewellery and scarves they make and sell to visitors.

Within these apparently strict rules lies a dichotomy: “If you get lost, you might come across a settlement and they would help you,” explains Mohammed. “But these days, even though less than 10% of Bedouins are educated, they know about

**Life in the open:** above and left, a Bedouin man drinks sweet tea made from herbs with medicinal qualities; Bedouin men sit around a camp fire at dusk in the Sinai desert





# Going nomad

*How to book your own Bedouin experience*



- ▶ Most hotels in Sharm el-Sheikh are affiliated with tour companies that offer desert excursions such as Bedouin dinners, camel trekking and quad biking.
- ▶ If you're an independent traveller, it's best to book with a reputable company through a local hotel, rather than booking with an unknown operator online.
- ▶ Cairo Express Travel organises all Sharm el-Sheikh and Hurghada trips for the Red Sea Hotel group, which includes the five-star Grand Hotel Sharm El Sheikh ([www.redseahotels.com](http://www.redseahotels.com))

■ « Bedouins have consistently triumphed against some of the most inhospitable environments »



**Desert hospitality:** above, a Bedouin man unrolls traditional rugs in a tent for guests to relax

▶▶▶ financial incentive and would probably ask for payment in return. That said, the money would generally be used to buy water or food, rather than say, a fancy mobile phone." At this juncture I point towards a Bedouin gentleman making flatbread—and talking into a mobile. "That's provided by us," grins Mohammed. "How else can we order your dinner?"

While cell phones are not crucial to Bedouin life, camels are. They provide transport, food, clothing and fuel. They can live without water for up to three weeks and can smell it up to 30m underground, which means it's the camel's nose that dictates where the Bedouin will make their camp. However, most tribes today tend not to stray too far from back-up water tanks, which are fed by Sharm el-Sheikh's reservoir system.

As with our evening meal, the camels have been tailored to fit tourists' needs, with only placid animals used for trekking. My beast is positively nonchalant and plonks along without incident behind a minuscule Bedouin boy. The "safari" turns out to be a 15-minute saunter round yet another designated area—however short the duration, it's a magical experience being perched atop such an extraordinary beast in the tranquillity of the desert.

After a somewhat ungainly dismount I manage to quickly clamber up a rocky hill to snap shots of the setting sun before the evening's musical entertainment begins. Traditionally the women dominate the singing, though our male choir proves entertaining. For most of us, at

least. While Mohammed eggs people on for a spot of self-conscious jigging, one visitor seems preoccupied with watching the previous night's karaoke on his video-cam. "We try to provide some insight into the Bedouin way of life," shrugs Mohammed, "but if people are not really interested—what can you do?"

As we shake hands with our hosts and trundle off to our respective luxury resorts, it dawns on me that despite the apparent apathy of some outsiders and the palpable pull of modern Egypt, this parallel Bedouin world has a chance of remaining intact. When you consider that the Bedouins have consistently triumphed against some of the most inhospitable environments in the world and lived unencumbered by material possessions, it seems misguided to assume that the trappings of tourism could cause this world to crumble.

For those of us living in the fickle world of credit cards and crunches, this is something we would do well to learn from.

