

Guide-book on the shelf

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The Times reported recently that Dr Menashe Har-El has postulated from the results of his researches a fresh site—the thirteenth—for the mountain on which the law was given to Moses. It is good to learn that, in spite of the war between Israel and Egypt, work on a historical subject can still be pursued in Sinai. Not many travellers have known its deserts and mountains; those who have, agree that for beauty and quietness its wilderness is unrivalled. Some have recorded their appreciation; Colonel Richard Meinertzhagen wrote in Nicholl's *Birds of Egypt* in the exciting section about the ornithology of Sinai:

'The Sinai Peninsula, a desolate region of insignificant size, has for its area surrounded itself with a halo of more romance, legend, and history than any other part of the globe. From a geographical and geological aspect it is unique, combining the three great factors which go to make up natural beauty—Desert, Sea, and Mountains. Its geographical position, conterminous with Arabia, Palestine, and Egypt, has given it an importance and an historical claim equal to that of no other country, and this in spite of the fact that there is no evidence which can fix to any locality any single episode of the Exodus, the greatest event in the history of the Peninsula. It is bound up with the history of Palestine, Arabia, and Egypt as the great connecting link between the three. The romance of Sinai, so impressive to-day, surpasses any feelings which may be aroused by Egypt's ancient monuments or Palestine's legion of mythical or legendary sites or sights. Sinai has given to three worlds its most influential religions, and witnessed the birth of Christianity.

Its natural beauty is no less remarkable. The silent grandeur of its southern mountains, snow-capped in winter, sun-scorched in summer, aptly called the unclothed Alps, its wealth of plant life thriving under extreme conditions of heat and cold, an incongruous mixture of alpine and desert forms, its fertile oases and wadis, the broad expanse of northern desert, the turquoise-blue border of coral seas and its curious faunal salad, give it a fascination denied to any other country of its size.'

Major C. S. Jarvis, a former governor wrote in *Yesterday and Today in Sinai* its life and history as one who had lived there for many years in a position of high responsibility, whilst G. W. Murray, who was with the Survey of Egypt from 1907 to 1951, described his happiness when in the Peninsula in his book *Dare me to the Desert*; his terse summing up of the place was, 'A day out of Sinai is a day wasted'. Sir Flinders Petrie, the father of Egyptology, wrote more prosaically in *Researches in Sinai* and one of his research team, Lina Eckenstein, produced a very useful *History of Sinai* in 1920. Other travellers have paid their tributes.

During the Second World War, Sinai could quite easily be used for purposes of leave by those serving in the Middle East and who could organise their trips,

and no doubt this continued to apply to travellers until the onset of hostilities between Israel and Egypt, but since then the situation has in the nature of things undergone a complete change. Brief visits for organised parties by coach or aeroplane round the coast or else to, or over, interesting places such as the convent of St Katherine have been advertised by the Israel Government Tourist Office for the last three years, but otherwise travel in Sinai is not allowed, understandably in the circumstances. Maps of Sinai remain a problem. I have called at Stanfords every year for a long time hoping to get a map of Southern Sinai as good as the one available for the Forces in the 1939–45 War, which still seems to be on the restricted list. Until three years ago there were no maps for sale, and then came one for aerial travel and a new one produced by Israel, with relatively few names on it and these, naturally, in Hebrew.

I first saw the mountains of Sinai from the deck of an India-bound liner in 1929. Dawn was about to break and the serrated horizon to the East looked like a single ridge until the sun had risen high enough to throw contrasting shadows into the valleys between the summits, when a complete mountain range seemed quickly to appear. I knew that Mount Sinai itself was hidden within this range though not visible from the Gulf of Suez, but I had no idea of the names of the enormous peaks now standing out in the sunlight; none of the other ship's officers on deck knew one from another, and there were no passengers astir at that early hour to offer suggestions. I sailed past this awesome sight again in 1941, this time as a soldier, bound for Egypt and to a job not far from Suez. Whilst the Eastern Desert did not at first appear either comfortable or exciting, it was not slow to show its good features. The limestone hills of Central Sinai seemed to change colour from the moment that the sun rose over them to the moment of setting. The Attaka Hills to the south, whilst lacking this glamorous habit, were a noble sight and good for scrambling about on when one could take a day off, but the mountains of south Sinai seemed far off until, learning of my interest, friends in Port Tewfik introduced me to one who for many years had made them his interest, travelled there, climbed them and kept a log of all that he had done and observed. Monsieur Daumas was a tall athletic Frenchman who showed immediate pleasure in meeting another mountain lover, and invited me to join him and his climbing partner, Monsieur La Roche, on a forthcoming trip into Southern Sinai providing I could get leave at the appropriate time; this happy concatenation of events did not occur until the Autumn of 1943.

Southern Sinai, apart from its surrounding stretch of flat sandy and rocky shore—at most a few miles in width—consists of a mountainous plateau, the mountains intersected by valleys, in some places broad in others narrowed to defiles, with stretches of desert and table land. There are a few valleys with surface water and oases, but apart from these everything is dry, and knowledge of the whereabouts of spring or well, or where water may be found by digging is necessary, not just for comfort but for survival; a party must take all its food with it. My companions who had been many times before had developed the routine of hiring camels with their drivers to transport the commissariat through valleys suitable to these beasts of burden to pre-arranged points where there was water, whilst the climbing party bivouacked and made contact with

their stores every few days. On this occasion we were accompanied by Fatur, a Bedu, as one of the exploring party. His local knowledge, strength, and good humour were assets on a number of occasions.

The mountains may be reached from Suez by overland journey, partly on primitive road and partly along wadis with no tracks at all; six hours in a robust motor vehicle (barring accidents) or six days with camel transport which is safer and more in keeping with the scenery and will get a party to the convent which is in the middle of the range. Another way is to sail to El Tor, a small port, quarantine station, and convict depository on the West coast; but I find myself using the present tense, I should have written WAS instead of IS, my memory of the past has been too vivid, these things can no longer happen. It best suited the plans of Daumas and La Roche to set out from El Tor and after two days' journey of sustained delight, calling at small ports and lighthouses on the Egyptian coast, we arrived, off-loaded our stores and obtained a night's shelter from the local monks. Daumas and La Roche hired camels and drivers whilst I called on the Egyptian army officer in local command who saved us a hot and wearisome walk across the coastal desert by lending us one of his trucks and a driver. We were bound for Wadi Imlaha which was quite impossible for the camel party who made their way into the range by a more orthodox route.

For a fortnight I climbed splendid mountains amid scenery the like of which I have never seen before or since. I am not capable of describing it, only of remembering its impact on my sluggish Anglo-Saxon emotions; this mountain wilderness has been praised by enough good writers to excuse me from plagiarism. The Bedu have lived in Sinai at least since history began and little has happened to change their lives over this long time; looking back I imagine that a description of the scenery by Charles Doughty—had he had cause to include it—would have fitted well into *Travels in Arabia Deserta*. The mystery of the true location of the Mountain of the Law is still with us and, if the events chronicled in Exodus really took place so far south as Mount Sinai, the scouting and foraging parties of the Children of Israel must have seen and explored most of this mountainous country. My companions were better mountaineers than I, but patient of my imperfections, their camp cooking was superb. Daumas made notes of everything, often referring back to previous records to check and alter details as on one particular climb, a new one to the summit of Gebel oum Shomer. This was a good climb, with one rock face that stumped each one of us in turn until Fatur, with his usual smile on his face, removed his sandals and by using his toes as well as his fingers for grasping the minute cracks in the granite soon overcame the problem and lowered the rope to bring us in turn up to his stance. My leave ended before that of the others, so we parted after reaching the convent and spending a night as guests of the Archbishop and his monks. I left them all early the next day, mounted on a camel and accompanied by two young Bedu, to make the three day journey to Abu Zeneima where I intended to hitch-hike to Suez on the weekly lorry from the mine.

I left the Middle East six weeks later and Daumas promised to send me one day his guide-book to the mountains of Southern Sinai. It arrived in 1951 *La*

Péninsule du Sinai, published by the Royal Automobile Club of Egypt; inside it he had pressed a piece of fennel (oum shomer is arabic for mother of fennel). The book was reviewed in the *Alpine Journal* by G. W. Murray (*A.J.* 58 546), who praised it and concluded by writing, 'What would not Moses have given for an advance copy?. Yet it might have tempted some of his younger men to spend more than forty years in their exploration of the peninsula'. He also added the comment of his earlier days, 'A day out of Sinai is a day wasted'.

Apart from days now wasted perforce, we must lament for *La Péninsule du Sinai*, sitting on the shelf, available in Cairo, unknown (I was informed by the Israeli Government Tourist Office) in Israel and in any event unusable till peace is restored to Sinai. When differences have finally been settled, then by general agreement Sinai should be hallowed as the scene of that great event in history which formed the basis for the Jewish way of life, and later led to Christianity and the Muslim faith; it should also be established as a unique nature reserve and a sublime example of wilderness. In the unlikely event of Monsieur Daumas reading this, may I again thank him for the most memorable fortnight in my sixty-eight years of life?