

MOHAMMED, MOSES AND THE GENERAL

by Rob Harris

Tour operator Hassan Khattab checked his client list against the passengers disembarking Air Malta flight 710 at Cairo Airport, rounded up the dozen of us who were Holy Land Travel customers - along with one nattily dressed American who said he wasn't a Holy Land traveler but would listen to Hassan's sales pitch in exchange for a ride to Giza - and guided us through customs where not a single passenger's bag was inspected.

I had a four-day break from work on *Gladiator* in Malta and I wanted to see the Great Pyramids. Actually, I wanted to go home. I missed my wife, my kids and my dogs – in no particular order. But it was too long and too expensive a flight to Upstate New York. Holy Land travel offered an affordable package of airfare and hotel for around \$800. So, here I was, far from anyone I knew, filling the gap in my heart with adventure and the gap in my knowledge of the Arab world with a first-time, first-hand experience.

I sat up front with the driver, paying Hassan as little attention as possible. I wasn't interested in the tour he was offering; I wanted to explore Egypt clumsily, aimlessly, organically. Maybe even a little dangerously.

Our driver was an angular, cow-eyed man in his late 20s or early 30s who seemed remarkably alert considering it was around 2:00 a.m. and he had just casually told me he hadn't slept in three days. I'd noticed he did slow down at times for no apparent reason. As Hassan nattered on, I assumed responsibility for keeping us all from dying at an unlit intersection.

How much do you normally sleep?

"I tried to sleep two hours this weekend. But my kid was crying," he said resentfully.

How old is your kid?

“Seven months.”

Get used to it.

He laughed.

Then he nearly ran the van into a truck passing in front of us at full speed.

I wasn't expecting to encounter this much danger until I broke from the pack. But the others were oblivious, listening to Hassan or napping. So I the only one aware how close our expedition had come to ending before it had begun.

The driver said he had a job in a couple of hours driving a tourist to Alexandria - a distance of about 200 kilometers.

You get a chance to rest?

“No. Have a cup of tea and go to the toilet.”

There were eight to ten taxi's in the eastern corner of the parking lot of the Oasis Hotel when we pulled in at around 3:00 a.m. A handful of cabbies roused and shuffled a few half-hearted steps from their cars to shout, “Hello, my friend. Where are you from?” to the five of us - two couples and myself - stepping out of the Holy Land van.

The machinegun-toting guard and the metal detector through which we all had to pass sounded a wordless, “Beware!”

I lay awake in a room with striated green wallpaper and two double beds. Despite the lateness of the hour, someone in an adjacent room was watching German television. I tried to read The Egypt Handbook. The words blurred. I stared at the family photo I take everywhere and had placed on the dresser.

I awoke, after three hours sleep, to the sound of a jackhammer smashing concrete about 20 feet from my bungalow. The front desk clerk wanted me to believe there were no other rooms available in this 250 room faux four-star but was persuaded – without the bribe he was hoping for – to find one out of range of the demolition wake-up service.

“Is it safe to walk in the direction of the Pyramids?” I asked, consecutively, the desk clerk, the hotel manager and the captain of the three-man, armed security team.

I posed the question that way to avoid getting the response that it was “too far” - which I got from all of them anyway. It was about six kilometers.

“You must be careful of cars. They drive all over.”

“The busses, they don’t care if they hit you when you are in the street.”

“The taxis see you walking, they don’t leave you alone.”

But no one referred to any danger from drive-by shootings or kidnappers - both of which were a major concern when I’d opted not to work on a movie here in 1992.

It was a barely releasable picture called *Ruby Cairo* (title later changed to *Deception*) but the imagined thrill of experiencing exotic Egypt with my family seemed reason enough to do it. They simply didn’t make many American movies here and this might be our once-in-a-lifetime chance to visit on someone else’s budget.

However, my wife began hearing U.S. State Department warnings of violence and abductions - especially to women and children - as part of the rebel Muslim Brotherhood’s campaign to cripple the Egyptian tourist industry. I shamefully dragged out negotiations with the p.r. company who’d offered me the job, hoping I might be able to negotiate my partner out of her worries, but eventually, wound up yielding to them.

Seven years later, wife-less and child-less and still suffering a “sez who?” gag reflex when warned not to do something, I exited the hotel lobby, ignoring the taxi driver shouts of “How are you, my friend?” “Where you from, my friend?” “I show you best places, my friend,” and started walking in the direction of the sole survivor of the Seven Wonders.

Ingesting entreaties from passing taxis and exhaust from passing busses, I found the walk to the Great Pyramids held no greater peril than a stroll along the Autobahn - and a purposeful pace was enough to deter the private cars with bearded men that slowed to look me over.

I had crossed the main boulevard from Giza’s Hotel Row and was walking alongside the clay wall that fronted Pyramids National Monument, half a block from the ticket gate. But I’d made the mistake of hesitating a moment, getting my bearings before determining whether to turn left or right towards the entrance.

“Taxi, my friend? Where you going? I take you see the Pyramids. I give you tour.”

A dozen taxi drivers swarmed like carrion birds; the one talking to me was clearly the alpha hack. He volunteered his name, Raffa, as he impeded my progress along the sidewalk.

Mustached, with slicked-back hair atop a square-skull, wearing a windbreaker over a collarless shirt tucked carelessly into polyester trousers, I guessed Raffa to be in his early 40s, about 5'10 and a not-especially muscled 180 pounds. I had four inches of height, 10-15 pounds and doubtless a higher protein diet going for me. Though slowed by the crowd of cabbies, I thought I had maintained enough momentum to push past him. But as my armpit made contact with his shoulder, he stuck with me like an NBA guard in a one-point championship game.

“My friend, come with me to the Pyramids. I only charge you 10 pounds.”

For a ride around the corner? Thanks anyway.

“I take you the back way. It’s better. Less people. Where you from, my friend?”

Fake left, pivot right.

“Don’t go the main gate. They charge an extra fee. Only rich Americans want to pay that. Come with me, my friend. I charge you only one pound.”

He was reading my indifference as negotiating skills. One pound was about 35 cents. It was worth more than that to get rid of him. I was about to give him the pound as a kill fee - until he added:

“I take you the back way. I get you a horse or camel so you can ride to the Pyramids.”

Ride to the Pyramids on a camel. Get my virgin view of the most amazing man-made structure on earth without the strictures of a crowd, sailing on a “ship of the desert” that had swept men across the sands since antiquity.

“Only one pound, my friend. What’s your name?”

Raffa talked non-stop during the short ride, pumping me for information, trying to establish a rapport. I told him I was here for a “few days,” I was staying “at a hotel in Giza” and I preferred a camel to a horse for cross-desert transport.

The streets narrowed as we progressed in a north-to-south semi-circle around the monument area; the souvenir kiosks thinned, along with the density of taxicabs and tourists. Amidst crumbling buildings and litter-filled gutters, gaunt old men sat on curbs, empty-eyed young men leaned against posts, idle canines slept between parked cars and women were scarce.

Raffa parked on a sidestreet and we both exited the cab. Before I’d even closed my door, a grinning man with two horses was standing beside me. He was my height with an extra 30-odd pounds of girth, wearing a skirt-length kaftan over blue jeans. Raffa introduced him as Franco.

“It’s alright; he works for the government,” Raffa hastened to offer.

And Tutankhamen’s his second cousin, once removed.

“Nice camel,” I mused, looking over the bigger of the two western-saddled horses. It was a Quarter-type, apple-buttred Appaloosa gelding with a slightly shaggy mane but in otherwise fine condition. Though I’d made it clear I preferred something with a hump, I didn’t argue. Four legs and a tail that would take me over the dunes in dramatic style was all I wanted now.

We negotiated a price - 60 Egyptian pounds (about \$20) to keep the horse out for the day, which I guessed could be five or six hours given that it was nearly 11:00 a.m. and the Pyramid chambers stayed open until 4:30.

Raffa drove off after hearing the fee, of which he was sure to get a cut.

Then Franco threw himself onto the big horse. I hadn’t even glanced at the small mare hidden behind it - whose left flank he now pulled around for me to mount.

She was a bay, swaybacked, with hip points that looked like shark fins. It didn’t require a keen eye for horseflesh to know this animal shouldn’t be carrying a chubby two-year-old.

My first inclination was to stare down Franco and say I wasn’t going anywhere on this horse. I subsequently became aware I was standing on a side street about the width of – yes – an alley, not knowing where I was, with a guy twice my size (counting the horse). The standoff - between me and me - lasted about 15 seconds. I shook my head in a way that I hoped said, “I’d punch your lights out but I wanna get to the damn Pyramids,” and mounted.

I used to own a small horse ranch with a psychotic woman who taught me a lot about horses and much of what I’m still trying to unlearn about women. So I knew a few things about horses. Before Franco and I had crossed the street, I knew my horse was not only underfed but also favoring her left hind leg.

We turned through a weedy yard and I saw a stretch of desert beneath the Pyramids. We were on sand. I could see the tip of Cheops. I forgot everything else.

Then my horse stumbled and I lost my cool.

“This horse is lame!” I screamed, pulling the mare to a stop.

“No, no. She is fine,” he grinned back, continuing on and waving me to follow.

I dismounted.

“She is fine,” he shouted over his shoulder. “A little lazy maybe. You have to force her to go.”

“I’m not forcing her to go anywhere. She’s fucking lame. She’s sick. And probably starving. What the fuck are you doing renting out an animal in this condition? She’s gonna die, Franco, then she won’t be worth a goddamn cent to you.”

For the first time his grin broke.

“These are not my horses. I tell the guy when we get back that he should feed this one more. Really, I tell him.”

Really, I tell him. Feed it more? Fucking horse is gonna need an I-V and a wheelchair by the time she gets back to the barn.

Franco said nothing more. He just lowered his head and waited for me to make a move.

I’d noticed a few barns in the area. I could walk over to one of them and find a healthy mount. Or I could flag down another cab; there weren’t as many on this side of the monument but there had to be a few. Or I could walk back around to the main entrance. Wherever that was.

Then what would happen to the mare? No chance she’d go back to the barn; the day was still too young. Easy enough to get two or three more renters to ride her into the park.

“How long will it take us to get to the Pyramids?”

“20 minutes,” Franco brightened.

“So that’s about, what, 40 minutes walking? I’m gonna keep the horse all day, Franco. I’m gonna tie her up at the top, you’re going to get her some water. Then you’re going to stand guard over her. If I come back from any of the tourist sights, you’re not there or she looks like anybody else has ridden her, I’m not paying you. You understand? You get nothing.”

“O.K.,” he said quietly, smile gone.

I grabbed the reins and led the ragged nag slowly alongside Franco’s gelding.

“I work with a lot of people who meditate, you know?”

A regular sensitive, New Age guy.

My Lawrence of Arabia daydreams put out to pasture for the present, I tried to detach:

Breathe deep and take in the full splendor of your surroundings.

But everywhere I looked I began to see abused and unhealthy-looking horses. Most were having their mouths torn up by tourists who probably hadn’t been on horseback since that picture on a pony at their seventh birthday party. These could be forgiven for their arrogant simplicity. Less forgivable was the cruelty.

In the desert, not far from where we rode, two men were whipping an animal as it struggled at the end of a halter, beaten harder each time it backed up. It made cowboy-style “breaking” – of which I’d seen enough not to admire – look like a day at the petting zoo.

We passed two dead horses, laying rigid a half-mile from one another, unrelated deaths linked only by vultures picking at the carcasses. They lay less than 100 yards from the sloping trail we tourists blithely rode – and walked.

We finally arrived at Monuments Park where I handed my horse over to Franco.

Those of us who love to travel are cursed for it. We love stepping into another life though it means losing a footing in our own. We love being where no one knows us even as we lose touch with everyone we know. We love visiting other realities, as long as they don't get too real.

This was the first of The Big Three places I swore I'd see before I die: the other two being The Great Wall and Machu Pichu. But I was not completely here. I was distracted.

I made frequent detours from my touring to see if Franco had moved from the spot where I'd left him and always found him within a few yards of where we'd agreed to meet. I wasn't ready to give him a humanitarian award but my anger toward him subsided. He was just one of a horde of horse-ride hustlers who couldn't give a whoopi-ki-yo about their animals beyond their exploitation value; I'd seen no evidence that he was among the worst of them.

Franco was nearly silent on the ride back, except for telling me: "I take you to the Papyrus Museum now, o.k.?"

I asked him what it was.

"Museum with beautiful paintings."

I told him I wasn't interested

"You must open your heart to the people and the feelings."

I summoned my most stoic stranger-in-a-strange-land etiquette and followed him to the Papyrus Museum - which was a store that sold mass-produced paintings on papyrus. I stayed a polite two minutes before walking out.

Outside, Franco was waiting for me with another man, thin, mustachioed and two-bit-card-sharp dapper in a maroon blazer. Franco introduced him as the owner of the horses, to whom I was now supposed to pay my fee.

“This horse is skinny and sick,” I snarled at the scumbag. “You need to feed your horses more. And take care of this one’s leg.”

“Yes, I will,” he beamed as if I’d just told him I liked his jacket.

I slapped the money in his palm.

“And if you want to tip me for being your guide...” Franco turned on the charm.

“Get it from your pal here,” I snapped, jabbing a finger in the direction of the greaseball.

Forlorn Franco walked me around the corner to where Raffa and his cab stood waiting.

“You should go to Saqqara to see the pyramids there,” Franco suggested as he grabbed my hand. “I’ll take you there tomorrow.”

“I don’t think so,” I quietly told him.

In the taxi, Raffa asked me why I seemed so angry. I told him.

“Oh, you have feelings for the horses?” he pretended to empathize.

He dropped me off with a last pitch to drive me to Saqqara the next day.

When camels fly, I wanted to say. But didn’t.

Good Man, Bad Car:

“Poverty is not the absence of riches but a positive plague,” Preston Sturges had a butler tell a wealthy Hollywood producer in *Sullivan’s Travels*.

“For every extreme of cruelty, maybe there exists a balancing extreme of kindness,” I wrote in my journal on my third night in Egypt. “I take this as a matter of faith. But it’s a faith that was restored this morning.”

On my second night at the Oasis, a middle-aged man came to my room around 11:00 to fix the reception on my TV. He wore a lab technician's white coat and bore an eerie resemblance to Dustin Hoffman with Ratso Rizzo's orthodonture. He had a voice that addressed the listener from a hiding place under an inclined head.

He took surgical care in adjusting the television and graciousness in dismissing my apology for calling him so late. He would be on duty until 2:00 a.m.

"Then, I will be first in line at the taxi stand at 6:00 a.m.," he gave a slight smile.

He bore the workload "because my wife still wants to stay home with our youngest boy" who was twelve. He had four other children: a daughter who recently became the first in their family to graduate university, a boy and a girl who were currently attending university and another boy who was getting training as a refrigeration mechanic at a technical college.

I said I thought he was a lucky man - despite the lack of sleep.

"I sleep in my taxi when I'm waiting. I go home in the afternoon for one hour. Sometimes I sleep more, sometimes less. Insha'Allah."

He translated that: "as God needs it." It had earlier been interpreted for me as, "if God wills it." *Need* sounded so much gentler. He made a quick exit without waiting for a tip.

I awoke the next morning with the single ambition of getting the hell out of Dodge. My Great Pyramids excursion had both fulfilled my main tourist goals in greater Cairo and soured me on staying here any longer. I didn't care about cost, I planned to check out of the Oasis Hotel and get on a train to Luxor and the Valley of the Kings.

I quickly learned, however, that the train ride was nearly a full day - that meant spending two days of my remaining three in transit. And investigating domestic flights, I learned there were none available until the next evening.

So, I went to breakfast with Anne & Keith McLachlan's excellent Egypt Handbook, looking for a place to go and found, in a grey-boxed sidebar, a reason for staying.

"Some owners of horses do not have perhaps as much consideration for their animals as European visitors might expect. Some animals are 'a sorry sight.' Something can be done to improve their lot. See first the box 'Brooke Hospital for Animals,' page 220."

Page 220 told a remarkable story.

The pair of armed guards at the metal detector, whip-panned their heads like gamblers at a dog track as I strode out of the Oasis, toward a corner of the parking lot where cab drivers rose up in a wolfpack in front of their vehicles.

"Good morning, my friend. Where you want go this morning?"

"Hello, my friend. I take you to see Pyramids."

"Where you from, my friend? You come; we go."

Standing on the fringe of the pack, a familiar-looking face squeezed out a small smile and offered a tentative wave. It took me a second to recognize him out of his lab coat.

"Abdul-Aziz-Good-Man-Bad-Car," one of the rival drivers warned sotto voce as I signaled my erstwhile television repairman to lead me to his cab.

The rival driver's caveat about the car proved mild: it may once have been a Peugeot but now more closely resembled the purloined homebuilt in Johnny Cash's *One Piece at a Time*. It was mostly navy, with sections of white paneling on the front and back. The front bumper

looked like a twisted cinnamon stick with sugar-dots of rust; the rear had a cracked tail light below a dented trunk that required a crowbar to open.

The hole in the floor under the front passenger's feet had been patched with checkered linoleum; scraps of grey felt were glued over gashes in the vinyl dashboard. The inside door handle was missing, so I would have to crank down a fragment of window handle to let myself out. Both backseat windows were jammed with newspaper to keep them from falling open.

The biggest surprise though, came when I reclined against the front passenger seat and it collapsed. Abdul-Aziz sheepishly helped me lift it so it locked in a perfect L-shape. Still, I preferred sitting bolt upright in front to riding in the back where, besides the dangers of the precariously wedged windows, the blanket-covered bench seat looked as if it had been form-fitted to a two-humped camel - and who knew what dagger-like springs that blanket disguised?

Abdul-Aziz was a careful driver and his vehicle plowed steadily through highway and city traffic on the way to an address in downtown Cairo where I had called ahead to make an appointment with a man named Brigadier Hasan Sami.

I was an American writer, I'd told him, interested in a possible story about the Brooke Hospital for Animals.

Brigadier Sami:

"All of our cases come to us by the (animals') owners, voluntary," Brigadier Sami leaned forward so his soft voice might convey that he'd finally arrived at the point he'd wanted to make through the last fifteen minutes of small talk. "We never force or hunt cases at all."

Light-colored eyebrows above teddybear-brown buttons, a wreath of closely cropped white hair around his mostly bald head, it wasn't easy to envision this man mapping battle

strategies and barking orders to soldiers - which he did for 21 years in the Egyptian army, earning the rank that now replaced his given name to everyone at the clinic.

“Of course, we don’t accept this (abusive) behavior from the owners but we understand why they do it,” he continued. “They are always in a hurry to make more trips per day to get money for their families. Definitely, if they didn’t find some way to use their cart - which will be pulled by this horse - this day, it means there is no food in the evening for the family. So they are always a bit late (bringing us the horse) because they know that if we put the animal in hospital it means the source of their living will stop.”

The Brooke Hospital took in horses and donkeys like a free auto repair shop, no questions asked. But “free” was often too costly for their clientele.

“So, as we (get to) know these people for a long time and we know them by name and we know how many animals they have, if we are sure that a man has one animal only and we know he is quite poor, we give him some money, so when we keep the animal as an in-patient, the man can feed his children.”

In 1998, the Cairo clinic recorded over 20,000 treatments of horses, donkeys and mules. They accepted only working animals here but had another building, more recently opened, where they took in dogs and cats. Brooke had clinics in Alexandria, Luxor, Edfu and Aswan, as well as “White Clinics,” mobile units that could treat animals wherever they were found.

It all began at the end of World War I, when the British sold 22,000 warhorses to various buyers throughout Egypt.

By the time Mrs. Dorothy Brooke, the wife of a British Cavalry General stationed in Egypt between the World Wars, visited her husband in Cairo in 1931, she saw the legacy of a

dozen years of poverty and neglect on these animals: nearly all had become work horses and nearly all were underfed and poorly cared for.

Mrs. Brooke's initial outrage fueled her successful efforts in collecting donations to buy back most of the horses. In 1934, she opened the building that is now named in her honor, which she then called The War Horse Memorial Hospital; she imported veterinarians from Britain to save the animals that were still salvageable and humanely put to death the hopeless cases.

Noble as this effort was, however, Mrs. Brooke really distinguished herself from fellow animal rights activists - past and present - by exposing her western standards and values to a process of re-education that must have been as painful as it was indispensable.

By going into Cairo's neighborhoods and townships in search of animals that needed rescue, the high society Englishwoman began to make the connections between neglect and poverty, abuse and ignorance. Many of the animals she found were in only slightly worse condition than their owners.

In 1937, Mrs. Brooke hired the Hospital's first Egyptian veterinarian, Dr. Murad. He was instrumental in helping her understand the steps needed to effect some meaningful change in the pattern of animal cruelty in Egypt: treat, trust and teach.

"A very important part of our activity is to educate or to advise the owners how to deal with their animals in a good way," the Brigadier explained. "We don't try to force anyone but we try to advise him who we see mistreating the animals. We can have the authority to stop this by law but we don't want to do it because, if we do it, the owners will avoid us."

In 1953, Mrs. Brooke was in poor health and her family was urging her return to England. She sensed that her mission in Egypt was finished: Dr. Murad had built an adequate staff of trained veterinary care workers and a steady flow of donations was coming in, mainly

from an economically recovering United Kingdom. There had also been a military coup in Egypt the previous year, led by army general Mohammed Naguib, which had ousted Western-friendly King Farouk. Many of Mrs. Brooke's British compatriots had already begun abandoning their interests in Egypt and returning home. But General Naguib's government asked her to stay to help rebuild the nation.

Dorothy Brooke remained to guide the clinic until her death in 1955.

"She is buried in Cairo at the Commonwealth Cemetery," Sami said. "It was her will to be buried in Egypt." She left the bulk of her estate to the hospital and a foundation was established in her name.

Dr. Murad continued as the hospital's chief surgeon and veterinarian for 51 years, also assuming a greater part of the administrative responsibilities. In the mid-1960s, the doctor befriended a young army officer who began coming there regularly. The young man was "an animal lover" but neither that nor his budding friendship with Dr. Murad was the real draw. Assisting the doctor with the clinic's books and records was his beautiful niece.

"I met her when I came around to see Dr. Murad at the clinic," the military officer smiled. "So, I was lucky. And she was not so lucky."

His laughter was as soft as the movement of his finger around the lip of the coffee cup into which he had lowered his gaze.

Brigadier Sami left the army to become assistant director and then director of Brooke in 1982. In addition to raising two children in nearly 30 years of marriage, he and his wife have continued to devote their lives to the sick and damaged animals of Egypt. She runs the clinic in Alexandria where he makes the two-and-a-half hour drive home almost every night.

“You were asking me what was the ‘biggest challenge,’” he said as we neared the end of the interview. “I try to expand the 24 hours of the day to make 40 or 48. But I can’t. That is my main problem: how to be in two places at the same time.”

Sami spotted Dr. Saleh Wahib, the veterinarian who had replaced Dr. Murad and asked him to take me on a tour of the clinic.

I had one final question for Brigadier Sami.

“When you’re driving around Cairo, you see so many sick and abused animals, maybe even see someone abusing an animal right in front of you. What do you do? What do you feel like doing?”

He understood what I was really asking and deliberated before responding.

“Of course, I want to stop and say something that will make him change what he is doing,” Sami replied. “But I want to say it in a decent way. Not to say ‘how wrong you are.’ I’m going to lose this man if I spoke this way. And if I lose this man, I’m going to lose the horse.”

But what if you’re talking to a stone wall?

“Of course there are some naughty boys in the world everywhere,” he pursed his lips. “We still insist to do it as advice. We know that even if he refuse, two days, three days after, he’ll come back. We know that the horse is suffering these two, three days but no way to avoid it. At last the horse will come again (when) the man recognize that it is not going to cure by itself. Even if it is a bit late, better that than to say ‘no, you should,’ and he left feeling like he hated us and he never comes back. If we don’t build good relations with the owners then we can’t go on helping them.”

We shook hands outside the front door where a pair of young boys who assisted Dr. Wahib showed me a horse and a burro the clinic had nursed back to health. I took their picture because I knew they wanted me to. The photo would show two healthy boys standing beside two healthy pack animals but it would tell no story.

On the drive back to the hotel, I considered whether I had behaved yesterday like someone interested in saving a horse or more interested in demonstrating his moral superiority.

But what if you are talking to a stone wall?

Strollin' with Moses:

The front seat of Abdul-Aziz's taxi collapsed into an upholstered gurney the moment I sat down.

It was the morning of my third day in Egypt and I had already decided not to make the trip to the necropolis of Saqqara and the ancient capital of Memphis in this booby-trap on retreads. It seemed to me, the trek couldn't be any less comfortable on the back of a camel.

Brigadier Sami had told me that camels were much better treated than horses in Egypt. Among the reasons for that, he explained, were that camels were "tourist animals," as opposed to "working" animals. Another reason might have been the Islamic belief that camels were holy: 99 names of God are known to man - but only the camel knows the hundredth.

If Allah could entrust the camel with that kind of secret, I could invest it with my latter-day Valentino daydreams.

"The camel revolutionized travel no less than the automobile or the airplane," writes historian Peter L. Bernstein in *The Power of Gold*.

The Bedouin name for the camel is “Ata Allah,” meaning “God’s Gift.” The beasts, surprisingly, may have originated in North America, around 40 million years ago, and migrated across the Alaskan land bridge to Asia. There, they evolved into two separate phyla: the two-humped, shorter-legged Bactrian and the single-humped, longer-legged Dromedary, which traveled on to Africa.

The hump, which is a mound of fatty tissue and not a water-storage tank as folklore would have it, adds about a foot of height, measuring the average Dromedary around seven feet from the ground to the top of its back. The saddle sits atop the hump on a platform frame, usually covered by a blanket. In lieu of a bit and bridle, a halter that loops around the snout is generally all that’s needed to guide the animal. These are often very colorful.

By the time we arrived at AA Stables, Abdul-Aziz had convinced me that I couldn’t have the kind of day I wanted on camelback alone.

“It’s too far. And you can’t go to Memphis on camel. Also, it’s too cold if you ride back at night.”

“Cold” to Egyptians meant temperatures that dipped into the (Fahrenheit) 60s.

I confirmed with Fat Abu, the Sidney Greenstreet look-alike who ran AA Stables that my driver was right about not being able to take the camel across the Nile River to Memphis.

“You also can’t ride it into Saqqara because the police will arrest you,” Fat Abu flatly added. “You must leave your animal and guide and walk into the park, maybe ten minutes, half a kilometer.”

The most practical option seemed to be meeting Abdul-Aziz in Saqqara and suffering the drive to Memphis and back to Giza in his Bad Car.

Before finalizing my arrangements, however, I did some quick comparison shopping at a stable next door where a group of a dozen or so Americans were already saddled up and ready to ride out. Scanning the faces, I asked no one in particular if their trip included Memphis. The collective blank stare was such that they must have thought I meant Elvis's hometown. I asked if their tour price at least included admission to some of Saqqara's museums and attractions.

"No, just up and back," one replied in a tone that dismissed the world's oldest pyramid like it could've been a flagpole.

It was examples of American youth like this camel cavalry that made me proud to be a “Canadian.”

My new nationality was the result of telling one-too-many inquiring cabbies-bartenders-waiters-store clerks-hotel employees I was from New York. The response was uniformly, “New York? You rich!” So, I decided to be from Canada. The constant, “Oh, Canada Dry!” left me feeling a lot less defensive.

With memories of Franco’s irritating chatter still rankling, I hoped today’s escort knew very little English and was disinclined to practice.

Praise Allah, my hopes appeared to be rewarded when Fat Abu introduced me to my guide. The tiny turbaned man who rose from a gathering of hookah smokers seated on blankets thrown over the dirt remained silent even during our introduction.

He was a Bedouin, the size of a jockey, with more fingers than teeth. He hoisted himself up with a stick, which he immediately put to use, gently, behind the knees of a camel to get it to kneel. He lowered the stirrups from the saddle of the now ground-level animal and used the same stick to signal me to climb aboard.

The camel brought itself back to full height in stages, like a building being lifted with a jack and blocks. Then, the little man whom Fat Abu called “Mohammad” led my camel by its halter rope to a toy-sized grey burro, which he mounted.

I yanked on the lead rope, communicating that I had no intention of being led like a child on a string pony.

With an odd reluctance, he handed over the lead, and then wordlessly reassumed his position ahead of me. He appeared distracted, pensive, and I recalled a look of concern that had crossed his face when Fat Abu was explaining his assignment in Arabic.

We started silently towards the desert - at a pace that couldn't have been slower if Mohammed and his burro had switched positions.

I saw horses galloping over the dunes maybe a quarter mile from us and my envy must have shown because Mohammad chose that moment to break his silence.

"He seven years," my guide said, indicating my mount. "I like this camel very much."

With the Pyramids receding on my right and the featureless desert spread out under a low-morning sun straight ahead, Mohammad turned left, away from the rise of dust from the vanishing riders. We sauntered past a small, disheveled cemetery.

"Muslim cemetery," he said, directing me to admire it as we passed.

Weeds covered headstones, debris littered the ground, there was nothing stylistically interesting about any of the markers and they didn't appear to be very old.

"Nice," I lied.

We were moving along the eastern fork of a hard dirt road leading in the opposite direction from where another group of horse riders appeared to be headed.

"Where are they going?" I pointed to the riders.

"Sahara City."

That satisfied me for the moment. But not for long.

We exited the south side of the cemetery onto an asphalt street, riding against the one-way auto traffic as we merged onto a wider avenue.

Mohammad, turned around and showed me all eight of his teeth.

“Ya la!” he mimed a rider galloping. “Ya la.”

“I don’t want him to gallop on pavement. It’s bad for his legs.”

“You good man.” Hmm. Mohammad seemed to understand more English than he let on.

We continued along the street, past industrial buildings and warehouses, until we connected with a busy four-lane road whose signage, in English below the Arabic, indicated it as a main auto thoroughfare to Saqqara.

Now traffic whizzed by, unnervingly close.

“Mohammed, why are we going this way?”

“This way,” he agreed.

The scenery changed from uninteresting to downright ugly.

We turned onto another main street, a broader two-lane that was divided by a canal in which a pair of boys were bathing a pair of horses. Judging by the accumulated garbage along the canal banks, the children and animals would emerge radioactive.

Between the street on which we were riding and the Western Desert on which I wished we were riding, was a sprawling military complex. I could see clean white sands through the compound’s chainlink fencing.

“I wanna be out there, Mohammad,” I shouted to my guide. “Not on the street.”

“No, no,” he made a gesture as if firing a rifle. “They shooting.”

Drivers in Egypt honk their horns constantly and at anything - sometimes, seemingly, at nothing. With my camel in the lead, our little caravan rode single-file

flanked by the cesspool of canal and abandoned construction sites from which entire families would come out to stare at us.

“The longer we stay on pavement, the more money I’m gonna take out of your tip!” I craned my neck to shout at my guide whose little burro had fallen several camel lengths behind.

It had been nearly 45 minutes since we’d left the sand.

“No, no, soon. End of canal.” His English was improving but his answers were getting more annoying. From my seven-foot high hump nest, all I could see was canal for miles ahead of us.

The Egypt Handbook - which had recommended AA Stables - said it took 4-5 hours to get to Saqqara from Giza by camel. Fat Abu had told Abdul-Aziz it would take three. Either he had a different system of timekeeping or the Egyptian-Jabba-the-Hut figured he could get his camel back to work in the afternoon if he instructed his man to take a short cut past the garbage dumps. Meanwhile, the desert was tantalizingly never out of my view to the west.

“I want to be there, Mohammad!” I pointed emphatically. “I’m not having a good time.”

Freelance guides, I’d learned, are constantly asking if you’re “having a good time.” If you answer “no,” they badger you with pleas, platitudes and denials; you say “yes” and the cash register lights up.

“Bedouin people,” Mohammad indicated the large family who had emerged from a row of Quonsets beside a vacant lot decorated with auto parts and crawling with stray cats on rat patrol. We had been riding for the past fifteen minutes through an area of

brown brick tenements with steel support rods protruding unevenly at the roofline like great unfinished wicker baskets.

“I see,” I said through gritted teeth.

I looked at the children looking at me. When we were closer to the city, children watching the large, ludicrous American (“Canadian,” damnit) riding by on an anachronistic animal with gumball-colored fuzzies dangling from its halter, would laugh and wave. Here, they didn’t laugh and wave. They just stared with narrowed eyes that could have held incomprehension or suspicion... or worse.

As we passed more of these “Bedouin people,” my western media-influenced mind began launching warning flares: Al Fatah, Hezbollah, Islamic Jihad, Fundamentalist+Extremist+Terrorist+ one pissed off guide whom I’d just spent the last 20 minutes threatening not to tip = uh, oh.

I’d scoffed at my movie colleagues’ paranoiac misgivings about my coming here alone on vacation. I’d reassured my wife that, yes, I was aware of the tourist killings and kidnappings but they only happened to groups of tourists so the terrorists could make a statement. I would be a lone traveler, devoid of symbolic value. (When that worried her more, I said I’d try to stay near groups but not with groups and not really alone by myself but more like, kinda, well, you know... I’d be fine.)

But now those pernicious news items were mixing with my suppressed Western prejudices in a test tube of toxic...

“You want stop for Coke?”

“No!” I snapped. Then, realizing it unwise to further alienate the one individual who might yet save me from the business end of a crescent saber, I amended, “But if you want to, it’s alright with me.”

A few housing projects ahead of us, the pavement turned to dirt road on the side of which Arab men sat cross-legged, smoking hookahs on rows of rugs surrounding a tree-shaded, wood-slat counter set up as a coffee bar.

The road diverged at this juncture: to the right was a cement factory from which trucks exited and entered seemingly every 20 seconds.

Mohammad tied up his burro and ordered my camel to squat. He walked over to sit with the men and their pipes and invited me, with a motion, to pull up a carpet.

“No, thanks,” I said with due courtesy. “I’ll just, uh, walk around.”

Walk around where? The cement factory?

But Abdul-Aziz had taught me the Islamic shoulder-shrug of “insha’Allah” which I took this opportunity to invoke. Nothing like visions of kidnapping to exact a religious conversion. And the invocation did, in fact, deliver a modicum of serenity.

I strode around the corner, along the road leading to the cement factory, catching glimpses of some of the passing truck drivers. Most stared trance-like in weariness but some were able to conjure a cordial nod at a vagrant visitor. I began feeling reinvigorated; T.E. Lawrence had wandered among ordinary villagers in somewhat this manner, hadn’t he? I might not be on the desert but I was beginning to feel “of the land.”

I strolled back to the hookah parlor with renewed forbearance. Mohammad sat blithely toking on his pipe, an untouched cup of Turkish coffee beside him. O.K.,

tolerance has its place but the sun was nearing its zenith and time was a-wasting.

Wouldn't hurt to light a little bit of fire under my traveling companion.

“Almost done, Mohammad? ‘Bout how much longer you figure?”

He grinned up at me.

“Maybe half-hour.”

A seismic eruption from deep below the place where I stood burst up through my feet, my legs, my trunk, my neck, exploding out my mouth.

“WHAT?!?!?”

Every hookah puffer on every ragged carpet in the little courtyard looked up into the raging torrent beneath my pulsing temples.

“Keep your goddamn camel!” I spat. “I’m hitching a ride back with one of these trucks.”

“No, no. We go now. Is o.k.” He sprinted towards his burro.

We rode past the cement factory where the pavement ended in a row of single-family shacks; past not one but two separate packs of more than a dozen, scavenging wild dogs; past a boy holding the hand of his little sister, staring with inquisitorial eyes that traced a line from the dangling rainbow fuzballs to a red-faced man parading past their poverty: a neon sign flashing “American tourist” (“Canada Dry! Please!”).

But, at last, we were heading towards the desert. I could see the infinite expanse of silicon stretched out not 100 meters ahead of us. I should have been overcome with a wave of rapture and forgiveness, anticipating my ship of the desert hoisting sail again. Instead, I was still pissed off.

I'd spent well over an hour riding past trash, traffic, packs of possibly hydrophobic hounds and potential strongholds for equally rabid zealots. And, for the second time in as many tries, my pages as the fourth brother in Beau Geste had blown away like potato flakes under an e-fan.

The target of my ire was sitting on his little grey ass, fallen nearly ten camel lengths behind me. At the moment, though, I didn't care if he suddenly sank into a pit of quicksand. We were back on the desert headed south toward Saqqara; there were a smattering of small farms to the east, my left, which would serve as navigational marks. I no longer needed the gap-toothed, pip-squeak who was now sulking because I'd threatened not to tip him.

Then, just as I was letting go of my animosity toward the turbaned twerp, back in the moment, on a camel in the Egyptian desert... duplicity popped my bubble.

The string of subsistence farms along the desert's eastern border abruptly gave way to one enormous oasis of pasture, paddocks and a training arena dotted with man-made lakes. I stopped my camel to stare.

"Alemagne Hotel," Mohammad crept up on his burro to tell me.

Almost on cue, a dozen gorgeous galloping horses appeared over the dunes. As they passed in front of us, on the way to the gates of this magnificent resort for riding enthusiasts, I forced a smile and a wave.

"Where you coming from?" I shouted.

"Giza. The Pyramids," an American-accented man hollered back.

Uh, huh. From over the dunes.

"Good ride?"

He grinned and gave a thumbs up as he lifted the reins of his beautiful Arabian mare and raced with the others towards the resort gate.

I glared back at Mohammad who reestablished himself a safe distance away.

“Ya la,” I commanded the camel. “Ya la! Go!”

It trotted about five feet, then slowed back down to a walk. I tried it a few more times with the same results. Alright, so my hump-backed bundle bearer wasn't exactly a romping Rosinante; at least I was increasing the gap between me and my devious Sancho Panza. I veered off more deeply into the desert.

Mohammad, I noted, was doing the opposite: he was drifting farther east, toward the row of ramshackle farms.

I was just hitting my stride, starting to feel good again about the sand, the solitude, the...

The little bastard had stopped at a farm where two mules about the same size as his were grazing in a field behind wire mesh. A man emerging from a tin-roofed shack, approached Mohammad and they talked.

I continued riding. I was sure the sawed-off shit was ditching me because it had finally dawned on him that, at this point, he'd sooner get milk out of a bull than a tip out of this camel jockey. I might as well cut him loose.

“Do you want me to wait?” I hollered across a football field-length of desert.

“Wait, wait,” he said limply, waving his arm in a way that could've meant go away or sit down.

Bobbing his head to seal whatever bargain he'd made with the farmer, Mohammad led his animal to a makeshift gate and handed over the reins. I expected him

to wait as the farmer exchanged his burro for a fresh mount. Instead, with a fond look back at his diminutive donkey, my guide turned and started back to me... on foot!

“What are you going to ride?” I yelled as he was still a hundred feet away, leaning on his walking stick and now revealing an arthritic limp.

This time his arm gesture came unaccompanied by verbiage. He shuffled to the place where I was perched, grabbed hold of the camel’s tail, waved to me with a backhand and tapped the beast on the butt. We started away.

I reached deep for some suitable reaction and couldn’t find one.

Then, I saw clouds from another group of galloping riders.

A few minutes earlier, this sight had fired up all my angry demons. This time, I had to stifle a laugh. Thundering over the hill on their way to some swank Brauhaus at Hotel Alegmane, the stylish riders would be witness to a Dadaesque diorama: a bowlegged prune of a dervish attached to the tail of a camel sporting an indignant American (You heard me! From New York!), all puffy and self-important, trying to giddyup, so as not to be late for an appointment with some guys who’ve been dead for almost 4,000 years. At that moment, it all seemed hilarious. And I was the joke.

I looked back at Mohammad. He wasn’t anywhere near laughter. To the contrary, his lined face seemed a portrait in grim determination.

We walked on. He was sullen. Fine with me; it also made him silent.

I was just settling in to enjoy the sand, the solitude, the scorching heat...

“You want stop, take picture,” Mohammad puffed.

I looked around: to my left was a tumbledown farm that seemed to be cultivating brown dirt; to my right was the monochromatic surface of Luke Skywalker's childhood planet before the Empire re-landscaped.

"You want me take picture?" His brown-skinned face was taking on a tint of strawberry.

"I'll wait 'til we get to Saqqara." I extended my water bottle but he shook his head. Sweat was dripping down both sides of his face.

We walked on, his heavy breathing the only sound in the soundless desert. Each time I looked back, the drag of his walking stick was making deeper and longer lines.

I stopped the camel.

"Stop for picture now?"

"No. C'mon, get up here for awhile." I was starting to sweat - and I wasn't walking.

"I too heavy," he shook his head.

"You weigh 95 pounds!"

"Too heavy," he panted.

He was sweating buckets; his face a mustachioed cherry.

"Mohammad, I outweigh you by 100 pounds," I said. "If the camel can carry me, he can carry you too."

"No. Too much heavy. No good for camel!" he jabbed his stick in the sand. Did he also stamp his foot? He was angry with *me* now.

We stopped three times during the next 15 minutes to "take pictures": him taking one of me, me taking two of him.

Sweat, stagger, puff, drag.

I stopped to take another picture - of what? Sand? Now he was resting, hands on knees, doubled over.

“Mohammad, you o.k.?”

“O.K.,” he straightened, waving me on.

I wouldn't budge before he answered a question.

“Mohammad, how old are you?”

He lifted his head, displaying the staggered handful of upper teeth as his cheekbones met his wrinkling eyes.

“Five.” He held up ten fingers.

50?

“And ten.” He flashed another ten.

60.

“And ten”

70?

“And five more.” He looked delighted with himself. Sweatbeads pouring down the engraved map of his face, staring up as he, again, bent to support his upper body with hands balanced on bowed knees.

“Get up here,” I ordered.

“Ya la,” Mohammad tapped the camel. And we marched on as we were.

Two days ago, I'd been infuriated by some guys who would've made animal Snuff Films if there was a market. Now, here I was, taking a slow ride through a broiling

desert, with a 75 year-old man willing to risk his life and his tip to avoid over-exerting his precious burro or overburdening a camel he doesn't even own.

Mohammad had released the camel's tail and, slow as I was going, he was falling further behind. If this was a matter of personal pride, he'd made his point. From here on, every step was a health risk.

I gracefully dismounted the camel - like jumping off the roof of a garage.

Reflexively, Mohammad waved his stick, as if - too late - to get the camel to kneel. Walking towards him, I stooped to pick up a rusted horseshoe, examining it before putting it in my backpack, as if that was really why I'd gotten off. I stretched and massaged my saddle sores.

Mohammad squatted in the sand, waiting for me. I led the camel in his direction and, before he could struggle to his feet, I plopped down cross-legged next to him, opened my backpack and pulled out two bags of potato chips and two bottles of water.

"Let's have a picnic," I said, handing Mohammad one of the bags and one of the bottles.

We sat wordlessly, under a 1:00 p.m. sun, in what little shade the camel had to offer.

From over a sand dune, at a distance that made him the size of an acorn, a man in a caftan appeared. The acorn grew to a small oak and we saw he was lugging a five-gallon gas can. He spoke to Mohammad who held up his water bottle in declining the contents of the can.

"Tell him I'll give him a pound for taking our picture," I instructed.

He took two: one vertical, the other horizontal. I hoped he got the potato chip bags in the frame. I paid him his pound and he made one final attempt to sell us water (what horrible death might one experience from a single sip?) before he disappeared over the dune from where he came.

I helped Mohammad to his feet and the camel rose as I grabbed his halter. I draped the lead rope over my shoulder and Mohammad took my right arm.

“Are you happy?” Mohammad asked. Of course, he was really asking, “Will I get a tip?”

“I’m very happy,” I told him.

We walked on, into the desert, not a single landmark to use as guidepost and the mid-afternoon sun showing no mercy.

“Does the camel have a name?” I asked.

“Moses.”

There was nothing about Mohammed’s face that said he was kidding.

So, with a hobbling septuagenarian on one arm and a lead rope epaulette dangling down the other, a wanna-be Lawrence led Moses and Mohammad across the desert.

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