

YSES Sinai 2010 Expedition – Initial Report.

The expedition consisting of 9 young people, (7 female & 2 male), and three leaders flew from the UK for the Sinai on 29th July and returned on 20th August. Within the group there were individuals with a range of medical conditions; one of the females was confined to a wheelchair, one male with a nut allergy another two female members were asthmatic and one had been diagnosed with epilepsy.

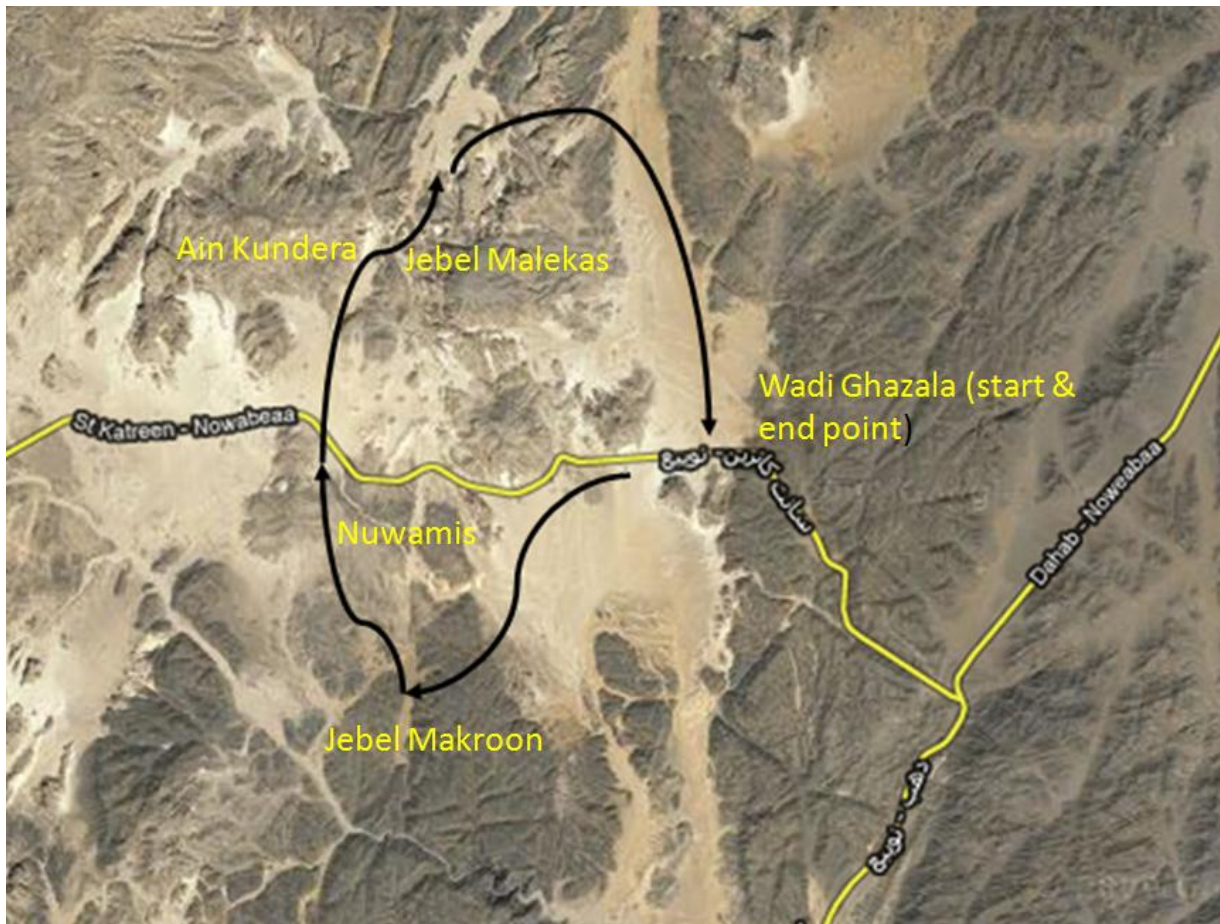
Upon landing in Egypt the group spent one full day at the Red Sea coastal resort of Dahab, some 100km north of Sharm el Sheik on the Gulf of Aqaba. There participants started to come to terms with the summer heat, (generally above 40°C throughout the day, rising to in excess of 50°C in the middle of the day). We also purchased Bedouin clothing to wear in the desert as the clothing best designed to cope with the conditions that we were to meet on the camel trek.

The area of South Sinai in which the expedition travelled



On 31st July we embarked on the ten day camel trek through the arid mountains of South Sinai, travelling with a disparate group of Mizayna Bedouin, led by Suleiman Yemeni, who were our guides, camel handlers, cooks and friends throughout the trek. Over the ten days we followed a roughly circular route bisected by the St Katherine's Road:

The approximate camel trek route



Over the ten days of the trek we developed a routine that served us well. Waking at 6am we ate breakfast prepared by our Bedouin guides, (sometimes helped by the expeditioners). At 8am we started the trek; riding or walking depending on the terrain to be crossed. At about 11am we found a shady spot to doze away in the heat of the afternoon, waiting it out until 5pm when we trekked for another two hours until we found a suitable campsite where an evening meal was prepared, various English & Arabic counting games were played and we slept under the stars until the next day. The pace of life was necessarily slow in order to compensate for the heat and the strong mid-summer sunshine. The Bedouin say that the soul travels at the speed of a walking camel – a wonderful pace at which the body should travel too!

Whilst on the trek we visited several isolated desert areas such as Jebel Makroon, the tombs at Nawamis, the White and Closed Canyons and the springs at Jebel Malekas. We also travelled to more populated areas such as the oasis at Ain Kundera (a cafe and cool plunge pool) and at Wadi Disco, (the busy Bedouin road short cut to the Nuweba road). We met a range of people, mainly Bedouin, but also Egyptian and Palestinian, all of whom added richly to the colour of the journey.

Five of us, (three expeditioners and two leaders), managed to walk or ride for the whole journey, the other seven spending at least a half day in the supporting Landcruiser which took the less direct route between stopping points.

The second phase of the expedition involved returning to Dahab in order to spend time scuba diving. We spent this phase living in the relative luxury of the Bedouin Moon Hotel just to the north of the Bedouin village of Asala, now a suburb of Dahab. In this phase nine members undertook the PADI Open Water Diving course with Reef 2000. Eight members gained the qualification, (unfortunately one participant was unable to continue with the course due to a pre-existing medical condition that involved a day of visits to the local clinic and a large number of texts and phone calls to PADI and medical contacts in the UK. The tenth expedition member successfully gained the PADI Advanced Open Water Diver whilst the two leaders and experienced divers had the luxury of diving some of the world's most famous dive sites.

As the expedition drew to its close the group visited St Katherine's Monastery, the site of the Biblical Burning Bush, at the foot of Mount Sinai of Old Testament note. Whilst at St Katherine's we also visited the Fansina Craft Centre where we found out about the work of the Makhad Trust, (www.makhad.org), who work in partnership with the local Bedouin to restore local garden farms and small wadi dams and to provide craftwork opportunities for Bedouin women.

Throughout the trip we were conscious of the value of Bedouin culture, which is under threat from various external pressures, and undertook to work largely with the local Bedouin and to spend money with Bedouin businesses. We were also conscious of the threats to the local terrestrial and marine ecosystems. On dry land we were particularly concerned about the level of carved graffiti to be seen in the various desert canyons, some of it dating back to Roman times, but the vast majority from recent years. At one point we did have a difference of opinion with a group, of European tourists who were carving names into a rock face whilst being observed by European tour guides, (who should know better).

In our diving phase it became depressingly obvious, to the people who had dived the sites on previous trips; that the environmental quality of the coral reef along the coast at Dahab was in decline. Sadly this is the penalty of the popularity of the area for scuba diving, but there was a general feeling amongst the group and other experienced divers that the Egyptian Authorities needed to start to look at controlling access to these dive sites before it's too late.

As a practical activity the group undertook a beach clear-up on the 200mtr stretch of foreshore in front of the Bedouin Moon Hotel and Reef 2000 Dive Centre. There we collected seven large bin bags of plastic debris and a discarded car tyre. The amount of plastic debris on the foreshore between the southern dive sites in Dahab and the Blue Hole dive site to the north of the town is a massive problem and, again, will need the local

residents and authorities to provide clean-up initiatives spurred on by visitors and tour companies who should be taking responsibility for their impact.

Medically the expedition was relatively trouble free. We anticipated some problems for the wheelchair bound member; these were largely with regard to mobility on sand and toileting and were overcome due to the resilience of the expeditioner and the wholehearted cooperation of other expedition members and local people. One member of the group discovered just how sharp a Swiss Army Knife can be, as is traditional on an expedition with me – this was treated by sterilisation with iodine antiseptic and dressing. There were a few blisters in the desert and a couple of ear problems whilst diving; one of which along with a case of heat exhaustion required a visit to the local diving clinic for treatment. Despite her GPs letter stating that she could dive the epileptic member was barred from the diving course after the third day due to the concerns of the PADI Instructor – after much discussion and many phone calls to the UK it was decided that we would err on the side of safety and comply with the Instructor's decision.

Thanks are due to a wide range of people who supported us during the expedition some of whom are listed below:

- Gilly Mansfield for general logistical organisation in the phase leading up to the trip and whilst we were in the desert and the bullying of various leaders throughout the trip!
- Suleiman Yemeni, Salem Arabi and the Bedouin group that took us into the desert and, more importantly, brought us out again.
- The staff at Reef 2000 and at the Bedouin Moon Hotel for making our stay and diving so comfortable and enjoyable.
- A range of guests at the hotel and residents of Asala for their help and good humour.
- The Staff at the Fansina Centre and the Makhad office for the time which we spent there.
- Neil Drake, the YSES Home Agent, and Mark Edley, PADI Course Director, for being at the end of phones in the UK to offer advice and support when needed.
- Finally, the expedition members who made the trip both enjoyable and easy to lead.

Here are a range of evaluative comments from participants:

"I think the best trip of the 2010 YSES trip to Sinai was the people I went with. I've met some amazing people through the trip and got some brilliant relationships out of it. I also really really enjoyed the brilliant opportunities for photography that I got, the diving, the camels and the sand dunes! I miss my camel!"

The hardest bit of the trip I think, for me, was leaving everyone at the end. I knew we were all going to be meeting up after, that it wouldn't be the last time I see them, but I really didn't want to go home.

After this trip I have a new found appreciation for the Bedouin way of life and the desert itself. I've come away with loads of new friends and also a new understanding to how, as well as being really different from us, how much we and the Bedouin have in common too. I can't think of much that could have been done much better when it comes to the leaders of the group. I really appreciate how much they left us to do our own thing so it was more like we were with our friends than authority. "

Courtney

"My best bit was how we met so many different, interesting and fantastic people. The Bedouin were fairly quiet with us for the first few days, but we slowly began to talk more, which gave me the opportunity to learn more about their way of life, help improve my Arabic (slightly), and on the last few nights, we enjoyed singing, games and dancing late into the night. Briefly, we saw the monks of St. Catherine's going about their daily life, and it surprised me how much one would adapt their lifestyle to follow their religion. I have learnt what sensitive and caring people I was with on the trip, expeditioners and expedition leaders alike.

My most challenging part was coping in the desert. It took a few days to get the technique right in a way that meant that you didn't get sunburnt, knew how to use all your equipment and keep yourself and others around you safe. However, the team leaders were experts in all areas and were very good at monitoring our safety and I never felt in danger. "

Hannah

"Personally the best bit of the trip for me was trekking in the desert, while meeting and interacting with the Bedouin. I enjoyed the relaxed atmosphere the desert seemed to create but also the absolute silence and the feeling that we were virtually in the middle of nowhere. Furthermore the stars at night were beautiful and seeing at least 5 shooting stars a night made it even better.

Most importantly I got out of this trip is eight new great friends that I will hopefully keep in touch with for a long time to come, furthermore its one of the best experiences of my life, which I will never forget. Also I gained a new respect for a different culture which I would never have experienced if I had never gone on this trip.

The trip has made me realise that there is more to life than just work and exams and that has given me a different perspective on life. Furthermore it has spurred me on to go travelling even more and to see the world.

Personally I didn't think you could have improved much more, it was run very smoothly and professionally and I felt that I was always in a safe environment. Good Job! "

Will

"It's very difficult to say what the best part of the trip was: I enjoyed all of it! I'd probably have to say that I enjoyed the desert part more though, I felt privileged to be able to

experience the Bedouin way of life in a greater depth than the usual tourist would be able. It was just such a unique cultural experience, whereas although I still very much enjoyed the diving part of the trip it was really something that you could do on a holiday. Before signing up to the trip, I really had little knowledge of the Sinai region and had heard of the Bedouin only in passing. I now feel like I have a better understanding of their way of life, and why organisations like the Makhad Trust are so important in preserving their lifestyles.

I did find coping with the heat a little difficult, it tired me more than I was expecting which could be seen by my occasional bouts of irritability (sorry about that). My first improvement would be to get a less wilful and spiteful camel. My only other improvement would be to make the trip longer! Seriously, I had an amazing time and so was happy with pretty much everything. I especially appreciated the degree of responsibility that we were given whilst we were in Dahab, it was a lot less regimented than other trips I've been on which I think made it a lot more enjoyable."

Rachel

"I can honestly say that the Sinai trip 2010 was one of the best three week periods of my life.

The best bit would have to be the ten days spent in the desert. This would have been impossible without the knowledge and expertise of the Bedouin guides, who were incredibly skilful as well as really funny and friendly. The opportunity to experience this nomadic culture is something I may never get to do again, especially as the lifestyle is dying out as younger Bedouin move into the towns. The last night in the desert was probably the highlight of the entire expedition.

The desert, although my favourite part, was also the most challenging. The heat was the biggest factor here, but also the lack of water and the isolation from civilisation made the ten days strenuous at times. However, the closeness and amiable nature of the group made the whole trip so much easier - there was always someone to talk to whenever you needed to.

The trip has taught me a lot about Egypt and the Sinai - the politics, geography, social structure and customs of the Middle East are all really interesting. I have also learnt lots about Islam, especially as we were there during Ramadan. I found myself comparing what I saw to the Western lifestyle, sometimes with unexpected conclusions. From the trip I have obtained a better informed view of the world and of other cultures, and of the Middle East in particular. I am also now a qualified Open Water Diver!

This trip was fantastic- I am so grateful to YSES for enabling young people like myself to visit these incredible places."

Sarah

Paul McGreavy. September 2010.