

St. Somewhere Times

The Long Weekend

Whew. It was our first big weekend. My diving gear had been dry for too long. I was going diving for the weekend. What I didn't know, was the amount of excitement in store for me around all of the diving.

Did you know our weekends are Friday and Saturday? Friday is the Muslim Holy day so the week is set up a bit differently. The last day of September is the celebration of Egypt's Armed Forces. We had a holiday of four days off.

The tourist bus showed up right after school got out on Tuesday. Brad and Wendy organized a list of about 20 people to pitch in for the bus. Each of us pitched in about 200 LE (\$35 US) for the entire trip. For seven hours we rolled through the afternoon and into the night across the Sinai desert. We made a few stops along the way for snacks but many of the teachers had brought enough food to feed a small community.

I stayed up for most of the trip and watched as our bus driver navigated across the desert. Where was I when we learned about the famous Suez Canal in class? Maybe I skipped that day. Did you know there is a tunnel that goes under the canal? Pretty amazing.

As our headlights cut through the desert darkness I couldn't help but think of all the ski trips I have been on. Why? The sands that drift across the highways remind me of snow drifts. Every few kilometers I could see tracks along the side of the road where some tractor had plowed the drifting sand. At one point there was a stray camel on the highway. How strange.

Dahab - The Low Key Diving Town!

I'd like to quote Mr. Jimmy Buffett: "I have found me a home". It sure seems like I have found my new dive home. Dahab is a small strip of dive shops, bars, restaurants, and stores along the Red Sea. Actually the body of water is named the Gulf of Aqaba, but it veers off of the Red Sea.

Dahab is a small dive community that is overshadowed by the popular Sharm El Sheik, similar to the Bay Islands of Honduras. "Sharm" is a hotspot for all of the Russian, Italian, and other European tourists. Dahab is more of a diver paradise. I heard more German in Dahab than I did Arabic.

I truly love the walkway along the water. There is not much beach, as in the white sandy beaches of Florida. The water's edge is mainly rocky shallows with a reef about 50 meters out. What makes the town, in my opinion, is the walkway. I am told the walkway is only a few years old. Now there are restaurants and shisha pits along the water side of the walk and shops along the other side. I would guess the walk is about 2 miles long.

It is not difficult to sit at a waterside restaurant for an entire day while reading a book. In fact, that is exactly what I did for the first of our three days in Dahab. I tried my new bank card at the ATM to no avail. With only a few hundred pounds, not enough to dive with, I had decided to turn the dive weekend into a relaxation marathon. Linda, a fellow teacher, and I stayed at the same restaurant for about six hours while everyone else in our group came and went. Linda told me her stories about sailing around the world while we lounged. She had spent about three years sailing and navigating as a captain and crew of three.

Holy Moses!

Who would've ever thought I would be within a frisbee throw of the great Mount Sinai. Yes, I mean the mountain we all read about in the Bible. Remember the story about Moses talking to the burning bush on the mountain? Well, for me it is now... "been there, done that!"

Our small group of eight met at the Penguin Dive shop at 11:00 P.M. We drove into the night headed for the famous mountain. There was little hope of dozing in the mini bus. The desert highways are poorly maintained and make all of your bones rattle non-stop. I had taken a long nap in the afternoon. Good planning.

The mini-bus arrived at about 1:00 A.M. and dropped us off with a few directions. After the monastery, go left for the camel trail and right for the steps. It was lucky we had been told to bring warmer clothes and a flashlight. The desert is cool at night.

We started our climb with the intention of taking the several thousand steps up the mountain. A monk had gone through all that trouble to

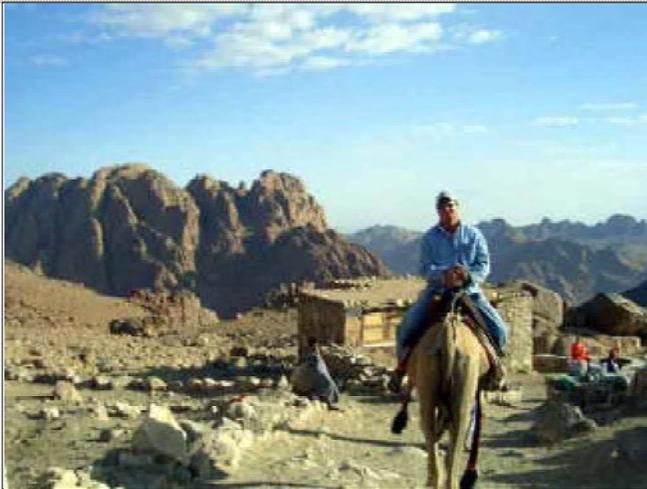
place the stone steps, why should we take any other route. We got a little lost and ended up going along the camel trail. The Arab camel owners were relentless with their comments: "Good camel" ; "Camel ride down bad, you want camel now!" ; "America good, you ride camel, good price for you"; and many more.

We spent three hours going up the mountain in the dark. As we looked behind us we could see a long trail of flashlights from two hundred other people walking in the steps of Moses. Every once in a while we would be passed by a camel. We really couldn't see anything in the dark. We just followed the trail and the other two hundred people followed us.

At the top of the main trail are about five little coffee shops. Hikers that had arrived before us were milling around drinking tea or coffee. The five of us that were still together continued on and tackled the final 700 steps to the top. No more camels from here on out. Just steps to heaven. A small army of Bedouins, at the very top, were offering blankets and cushions to make the sunrise watch more comfortable.

We were the very first ones to the top. We had our pick of rocks to sit on. After bartering for a few blankets and cushions, the five of us found a sweet spot looking East. No one could sit in front of us or spoil our view because there was a sheer drop off down a few thousand feet.

We spent the next hour and a half in bliss. We watched the fiery snake of hikers wind their way up the trail, nibbled on whatever food we had with us, and huddled under the blankets waiting for the sunrise to beat all other sunrises. And IT WAS BREATHTAKING!



Whoah Camel!

The three hour climb up the mountain was more than enough for my poor legs. I had already made the decision half-way up that I would ride a camel down. There were six of us that wanted to ride camels so we bartered with the camel guys. They wanted 60 or 70 pounds for each camel. We bartered them

down to 40 each, if we rode six of their camels.

Of the three guys, I was the only one that stayed on for more than five minutes. The saddles are very small and narrow. In order to keep the rider in the saddle there is a large saddle horn on the front and the back. There is NO way for a man to survive riding in a downward position. I chose another way.

First of all, the camel guys are the men who urge the stubborn beasts of burden up and down the mountain. The man either pulls on the long bridle rope or walks behind the camel yelling and slapping with a stick. Paul distracted my camel guy long enough for me to turn around in the saddle and face backwards. It worked! Midway through my turn a round, the camel guy saw me and started yelling "NO. BAD WAY TO RIDE CAMEL. YOU NOT RIDE CAMEL." Those were the same words he would mumble at me for the next hour and a half! Every time I went

by another camel, my camel guy would chat it up with the other camel guy and point at me in disgust. Oh well. I didn't think the camel cared one way or another.

Whoa' camel. Slow down! I started the trip at the tail end of the six camel group. My camel, dubbed as Norman, was a late bloomer. About an hour into the trip he started to take off at quite a clip. At one point, camel guy grabbed onto the bridle and dragged his feet to slow Norman down. It turned out to resemble waterskiing. Norman wanted to go. Norman soon passed up the others in my group and was first back to base camp. What a great camel ride.



Here is a look at a few of the upper steps.

Taking Steps to Educate my Readers

Mt. Moses, also Mt. Horeb or Mount Sinai and known with its Arabic name Gebel Mussa, is honored by the three great monotheistic religions. The path of Moses, Sikket Sayyidna Mussa, starts in a gentle slope and gets steep on the last bit where it ends at the valley of Elijah. It is believed that God appeared in fire to the prophet. The two chapels are dedicated to Elijah. The final steep climb leads over rocky steps to the summit. Just below the summit in a natural hollow the imprint of a camel's foot can be made out. Bedouin tradition has it, that here is the place where Prophet Muhammad started his night journey to heaven. The magnificent view from the summit is worthwhile the effort of a 3 hour long climb to the top of Mt. Moses.

3600 steps –skillfully arranged by a monk on penalty - lead to the gate of Stephanos, where he heard the confessions of the pilgrims and giving them absolution before letting them pass. The steep way down leads to points with extraordinary views, always the smell of herbal plants and the chirping birds at company.

Informational notes taken from <http://www.sinai4you.com/santa/>



The Diving of the Red Sea (rather than dividing it)

You, the Reader, may be offended by my Biblical jokes. Well, don't be.

You climb all the way to the top of Mt. Sinai and swim down to 25m under the Red Sea and then criticize me. Besides, what if the Biblical authors made a mistake in the spelling and Moses actually dove in the Red Sea. Hah.



Maybe I will go to hell for that joke. If I do, at least I got a chance to dive. It was amazing. I could dedicate a whole issue just to diving. Here are a few highlights instead:

- ✘ It costs 25 euros for each dive (5 less with personal gear, 5 less if you dive with Trevor)
- ✘ shore diving rather than boats
- ✘ they START diving at 9:30am - too late for me
- ✘ most shops dive once in the morning and once in the afternoon
- ✘ the night dive is usually the lighthouse - that means you see a lot of divers - YUCK!
- ✘ on our night dive - Paul and I saw octocoitus - maybe they were just holding tentacles, but it is the first time I have seen TWO octopi that big and together
- ✘ I spoke more German on the diving trips than English
- ✘ The lion fish here are amazing. There are so many that most divers don't even acknowledge them on a dive. I could watch them for an entire 60 minute dive.
- ✘ The fish are similar to the Caribbean but many different colors, and more schooling.
- ✘ I have found a place to live this summer!

armed with machine guns, but very **slow** drivers



My First, Fully-Armed Escort!

I am sure many of you heard about the bombings in Taba. Taba is a small resort town on the border of Israel and Egypt. It was a very popular place for the Israelis to vacation. October 1st was a holiday for Israel and there were several terrorist attacks, the bombing of the Hilton in Taba being the most widely covered by the press.

Our bus route led us near Taba on the way back. This police truck with machine-gun toting fellas decided to escort us for way too long. The driver must have felt important, or influential, or simply wanted to control the tourists. We must have been moving at about 24 km/hr! Checkpoint to checkpoint they moved us along. Our bus driver was just about to run the small truck over. After about a half hour, they turned around and we sped up to cruising speed. There were no events.



Speaking for the 20 or so of us that went on the trip, **Thank you!** to Brad and Wendy for planning the Dahab trip.

That's All Folks