

Ascending Mount Sinai

by David Rostad

Waking up at 2:00am has never been something I would look forward to, let alone plan for, but this was different. We were going to ascend the legendary Mount Sinai*, joining hundreds of other pilgrims on the arduous journey to the summit. Of course we could have started later, but then we would have missed witnessing the incredible sunrise and the spiritual experience that accompanies it.

It is February 28, 2005 and I am escorting our first group to the Holy Land in four years. We are staying at Catherine Plaza Hotel, just a couple of minutes away from the Saint Catherine Monastery which lies at the foot of Mount Sinai. We arrived here yesterday afternoon, having come from Cairo, and are planning to take this afternoon's ferry from Nuweiba, a town on the east coast of the Sinai Peninsula, across to Aqaba in Jordan.

After dressing in layers so we are ready for the cold of the desert night, we venture out to meet the rest of our group. Obviously we are not the only ones intending to make the climb. Most of the buses in the parking lot have their lights on and people are huddled over their cup of hot coffee (or was it tea?), using it to keep warm and stay awake. For a moment I wish I had learned how to drink the steaming liquid that everyone seemed to be enjoying.

By 2:45am we are off the bus and then introduced to our Bedouin guide who will accompany our group to the top. Ahmed lives in a village 30km away and makes the trip three days



Mount Sinai

each week so he can make some money and hopefully get married some day.

Off we go, walking about one kilometre to the spot where we can hire camels. I convince everyone to take a camel (except my daughter Kristin), explaining that it is a three-hour journey to reach the 7500ft peak, and that the camels can only take you three-quarters of the way. The final ascent is up 700 rugged steps and only those accustomed to walking 10km+ (uphill) should attempt the entire journey on their own. I even subsidize the US\$10 fee for the camels.



Camels for Hire

Next is a rather confusing scenario where, in the dark and with a throng of people milling about, young Bedouin men line up until their name is called and they are assigned a pilgrim for their camel. We watch our group members mount their camels and hope no-one falls as the camels stand up, first the hind legs then the front. "Hold on!" we shout but then they are gone, with the camel driver leading them along the snake path.

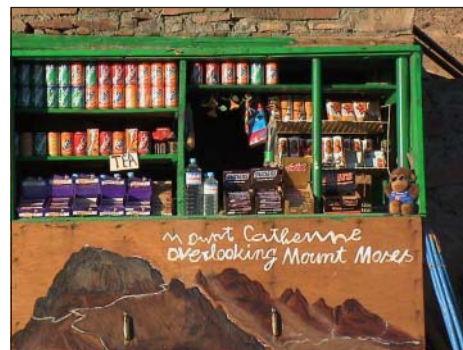
Once everyone is paired up and disappears from our view, Kristin, Ahmed and I start walking. We don't need the flashlight yet as there is just enough moonlight to determine the best place to walk, avoiding loose stones and camel "tracks". The flashlight does come in handy later though, after the mountain blocks out the moonlight and everything turns quite black. After thirty minutes I start to wonder why I have all these layers on and stop to remove my jacket. As the cold air hits my damp shirt, we press on.



Mount Sinai Path

The scenery along the way is incredible. I actually made the journey five years ago, but not early enough to see the sunrise. Now the moonlight is accenting the sharp edges of the surrounding mountains and I regret that my camera cannot capture this beautiful combination of light and shadow. I tell myself to take mental images and appreciate that I can experience this alongside Kristin.

Passing other walkers, we notice that most speak languages other than English. We even catch up to some of our group, happy to see that they are still high in the saddle, admiring the scenery and pleased with their decision to ride. There are also many Bedouins leading their camels down the mountain, hoping to make a second journey with tourists not willing to sacrifice their sleep.



Sinai Vendor

We walk by a few rest stops along the way where you can buy water, hot tea, soda, and chocolate bars. There are even one or two huts labelled WC, but I'm told that they are "very basic" and am glad that I can travel long distances without needing the facilities. My back pack has lots of water and

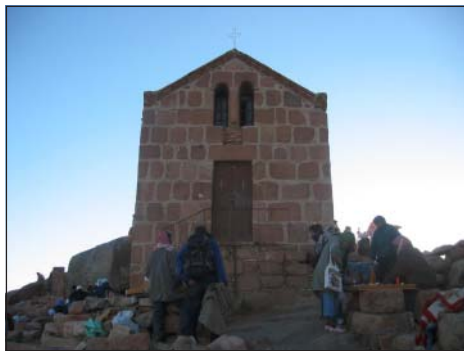
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even some energy bars that I brought from home - plenty of sustenance to see us through to the top.

We finally reach the furthest point the camels can travel and find several group members waiting there. They decide to watch the sunrise from this rest area, an excellent decision considering some are over eighty years young or soon will be. One or two others have bad knees that prevent them from attempting the steps. Once they are settled, the rest of us depart for the final ascent. I notice the temperature is much cooler up here and put my jacket back on. Let's go!

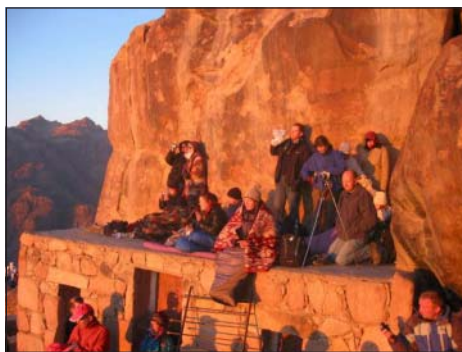
Most of the steps have been hewn out of the mountainside and are in varying states of repair. It is single file most of the way, although you can pass people who stand to the side for a rest. More than once we think we are almost there, only to have another peak appear around the corner. The sky is beginning to glow, illuminating the stairs and tantalizing us with what will soon occur. Not wanting to miss the event, we try to pick up the pace, not an easy task this far into the journey. Looking at the time, I notice it's just 5:45am and realize we should make it - the hotel said that sunrise wouldn't occur until 6:09am.



Chapel of the Holy Trinity

At last - the stairs end and we can see the Chapel of the Holy Trinity, erected in 1934 on the site of the original chapel from 363AD and later rebuilt in the 6th century by Justinian. People are scattered all over the summit, everyone staking out their spot to view the sunrise. It is obvious that some have slept here; wrapped in sleeping bags and using mats rented from the Bedouins. Impossible to get an accu-

rate count due to the various levels, cliffs and crevasses, I estimate there are over two hundred pilgrims that made it to the top.



Viewing the Sunrise

Everyone is quietly peering eastward over hundreds of silhouetted mountain peaks, not wanting to blink and miss the first appearance of the sun. The horizon turns orange, followed by pink and finally bright red. There it is - the sun peeks out then decides to grace us with all her warmth and beauty. A loud cheer echoes all around. For the next few minutes, the sound of camera shutters, excited whispers and gasps of delight permeate the air. I have never stared at the sun for this long but it is difficult to look away. Turning around, I am amazed to see the brilliant colour of nearby peaks as the sun finds them and slowly moves down the mountainsides. This is also when I notice the smiling faces of those around me - everyone is revelling in the moment. We did it! We came, we conquered, we saw. No-one can take this moment away from us.

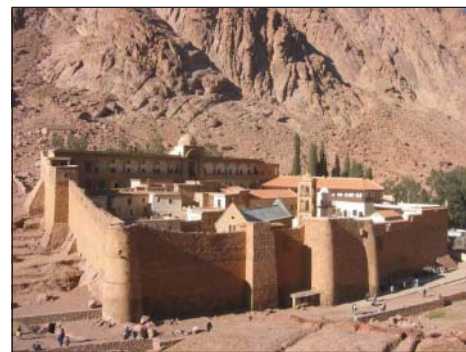


A Sinai Sunrise

After about thirty minutes, people start heading to the stairs to begin the journey down. A long procession of heads can be seen winding down the mountain. Now that it is light, the

route we took just a short time ago is fully revealed. Would we have made it had we seen it in its entirety? Would we have even attempted it? All we know for sure is that we are filled with a tremendous feeling; a combination of calmness and great satisfaction.

We look for the rest of our group at the rest station but they have already departed. After a leisurely descent we find them waiting for us at the St. Catherine Monastery. It opens for visitors at 9:00am and the line is starting to form. After our visit to the Monastery and the Chapel of the Burning Bush we return to the hotel, pack up our suitcases and enjoy the breakfast we missed.



St. Catherine Monastery

Was it worth it? Definitely. Will I do it again? Absolutely. Next time I hope to try the "Path of Moses", a shorter but much more difficult climb consisting of almost 4000 steps. Care to join me?

* Mount Sinai is the biblical name given to the peak where God first appeared to Moses as a burning bush and where he received the Ten Commandments after leading his people out of Egypt. It is also the modern name given to a group of mountains located near the southern tip of the Sinai Peninsula. Whether this is the actual "Mount Sinai" is debatable and will likely never be determined. The mountain we climbed has been called Gebel Musa, or Mount Moses, for centuries and thousands of pilgrims have made the journey here, going all the way back to the 4th century.