

Sudan Camel Trek

Crossing the Sahara



My camel, Bishari and I crossed section of the Sahara in Sudan for 10 days. We travelled total 156 miles, lived closely like a desert nomad, drank water from wells, and endured a scorching sun with average temperature of 100F. Bishari carried me on his back and slowly trotted through miles and miles of unspoiled, unknown and remote landscapes, where something of the old ways still survive. Everyday, we set off to another horizon, watched another sunrise, tortured by another noon, and witnessed another sunset.

There were no summits to climb, no goals to reach, but the simplicity of the desert life I experienced and the good natured and noble character of the Arabs I encountered made this journey another remarkable adventure.



January 2008
By Chi S. Chan

A Tribute to a magnificent man, Wilfred Thesiger



"No man can live this life and emerge unchanged. He will carry, however faint, the imprint of the desert, the brand which marks the nomad; and he will have within him the yearning to return, weak or insistent according to his nature. For this cruel land can cast a spell which no temperate climate can match."

Sir Wilfred Patrick Thesiger

Those words caught my attention as I began to read Wilfred Thesiger's masterpiece, the *"Arabian sands"*. This book undoubtedly is the greatest book I have ever read. Since the first time I studied this book, I was allured to read it over and over. Each time, I became more impressed by Mr. Thesiger's adventure life. Through his writings, I have come to learn places that were once timeless, untroubled and unspoiled, people who were courageous, loyal, endurable, hospitable and generous.

Mr. Thesiger by far, is my greatest hero, It was "the lure of the unknown; the constant test of resolution and endurance" which drove Mr. Thesiger to cross the desert in Empty Quarter. It is Wilfred Thesiger; the man I admired profoundly induced me to make this journey.



Sudan

The Sudan, largest nation in Africa, is still the least known country in the world. It is the place where the Blue and White Niles meet. What attracts me about this land is, 60 years after Mr. Thesiger left the country, today, it is still possible to find the traditional Bedouin nomads wandering on the great desert plains, attending herds of camels and flocks of sheep as their ancestors have done for centuries. Their way of life remains almost untouched by the outside world.



For years, the Sudan has remained a politically unstable country. Although the country ended its 20-year-old war in the south, Darfur is still in the middle of crisis. I was advised not to travel to Sudan by the US Government and the travel warnings delayed my plan more than a year. The visa situation posted another problem. Since it was nearly impossible to obtain a visa using my US passport, I finally decided to travel with my Chinese passport. Yet, the application remained uncertain for months. Two weeks before my departure, I finally received a copy of entrance permit from the Sudanese official. “*Inshallah*”¹ as the Arabs always say.

The Republic of The Sudan Ministry of Interior Passport & Immigration General Administration Foreigners Affairs Administration		جمهورية السودان وزارة الداخلية الإدارة العامة للجوازات والهجرة إدارة شؤون الأجانب	
91597		إذن دخول Entry Permit	
Permit No.	رقم الإذن	64997	
Name	الاسم	CHI SHEUNG	
Nationality	الجنسية		
Passport No.	رقم الجواز	1710314	
Permit Date	تاريخ الإذن	01/11/2007	
Purpose	الغرض من الدخول		
Coming from	قادم من		
Sponsor	الضامن		
<p>التعليمات</p> <p>١- تقديم صورة التمتع بصفة المقيم عند الوصول فسيتم صياغة الجوازات لتوضيح التأكيدات بها وبمطابقتها بأصل التمتع بصفة المقيم. ٢- يجب أن لا تزيد التكاليف الإضافية من الترخيص بعد ذلك من الجوازات إلا إذا حصلت على تصديق بذلك. ٣- يصرح بالمرور هذا التمتع لمدة شهر واحد. ٤- أي تعديل أو تغيير أو كتمة يفسد هذا الإذن ويعتبر مخالفة وتزويراً يعرض صاحبه للمساءلة القانونية.</p> <p>Attention</p> <p>1- Copy of permit should be presented to immigration officer to finish the relevant procedure. 2- The visitor will not be allowed to stay more than 30 days, unless getting the approval for the visit extension. 3- This permit valid for single entry and for one month only. 4- Any modification, change or scrape will invalidate this permit, it's holder will be prosecuted by laws.</p>			
<p>For General administration of passport & Immigration Director</p>			

My Guide, Michael Asher



Michael Asher, perhaps is Britain’s greatest living desert explorer. My research of the desert led me to him. I read all his desert books and am genuinely impressed by his knowledge of the desert. More than twenty years ago, he and his wife became the first Europeans ever to cross the Sahara from west to east by camel without any modern means or supports, a journey of 9 months and 4,500 miles. His book, “*Two Against the Sahara*” is a must read desert book. I am lucky to find him as my guide. In addition, what attracted me about Michael’s trek was; unlike other adventure companies; which only offered a 4-wheel drive excursion. Michael’s trip entirely depended on camels.

Taking little modern technology and carrying our entire belongings on camels, we followed an ancient caravan route and traveled just as the Sudanese nomads have done for centuries. The combination of walking and heat made his trip an arduous trek. This trip is definitely for those who crave for a real adventure!

¹ A common phrase used by the desert Arab. They believe, if God is willing, everything will turn out fine.

The Nile

A brief visit to the local market, we left Khartoum, the capital of the Sudan, and headed for the desert. After nearly four-long hours drive, we reached the Nile and had a first glimpse of this legendary ancient river.

Waiting for our ferry, I watched men wearing white full-length Arab shirts, women covering with bright color flower dresses, and children riding on donkeys boarding and un-boarding the ferry. Time seemed to turn back a hundred year. For a moment, I seemed to lose my own time and place.

“Time to go!” Michael reminded us. Our minibus boarded the ferry to reach the opposite bank, where our camels and camel-men were waiting for us.



“In these deserts, the river was life itself”



A short ride brought us to a small village. The driver unloaded our bags into a huge pile and left. The midday sun was very hot and we sought shelter under a board acacia tree. Our arrival caused a stir of excitement. Many locals seldom saw a foreigner, especially a Chinese female. They sat next to us with a curious look, children staring with wide eyes.

I spotted a shy beautiful boy, and took a few photos of him. He was not too happy and at once hid himself behind his father. Michael reminded us that we should ask permission before taking pictures. Some of the Sudanese still do not like being photographed. However, once I showed the digital image of the little boy to his father, the crowd immediately broke into a cheerful cry. Here in the Sudan, there were

people who still had not yet been tainted by the material world. Their ignorance of the outside world attracted me. I was really looking forward to meeting more of them.

Meeting my Camel

We were about to receive our first lesson from Michael on mounting, dismounting and riding a camel. One of our camel men; Al Kharim took me out of the crowd and led me to a camel. The beast was not happy as I approached him. He tried to intimidate me by showing his teeth and growling at me. I learned from my readings that camel could be both vicious and vindictive. If you show your fear, they know. The camel, however, could also be gentle and patient.

I was very nervous in front of this giant beast. Al Kharim stood on the animal's front leg and handed me its head rope. I struggled awkwardly into the saddle, held on tightly to the saddle horn. Before I had the chance to adjust my position, the camel began to get up. First, the camel's back tilted violently backwards, then forwards, then backwards again. All the sudden, I was 10 feet high from the ground. It was a scary experience. I dismounted the animal as quickly as I could.



After we all gained our first lesson, we were assigned to our own camel. Michael handed Bishari, the camel I rode on, to me. He tried to explain to me how special Bishari was. At that moment, I was not so sure. I took the head rope from Michael and insisted on walking instead of riding Bishari that afternoon.

It was later afternoon when we left the village. A small caravan consisted of an English guide, 8 British, 1 gentleman from New Zealand, 1 Chinese female from New York, 5 local camel men, an African cook and 20 camels moved slowly but steadily towards the distant horizon. “*Go in peace*”² I could hear the villagers whispering, wondering what the “hell” these aliens doing in their desert, especially that tiny Chinese (?) woman.

1st night in the Desert

We arrived at our first camp quite late and while the camel men were busy setting up our mass tent, Michael asked us to set up our own tents. All my previous treks, I was usually well taken care of by the end of the day. Not mentioned a tent would be set up for me, a bowl of hot water with a cup of tea would be waiting for me by the tent. I was well aware of Michael's expedition style and the nature of this crossing, I did not mind at all helping around the camp or setting up my own tent. However, not having “washie, washie” surprised me, but no one in our team complained. I sat inside my tent, assessed the emergence

² Another common expression of the Arab

situation, took an inventory of all my wet wipes. Luckily, I brought enough wipes, but to be conservative, I decided to ration out allowing no more than four pieces a day. Hopefully, it would last me the whole trek.



In spite of some minor discomforts, I was very happy to be here. That evening, I witnessed the most magnificent sunset in the desert. An orange sun lodged on the edge of the world, lighting the sky like a flame. Our camels, wandering off freely on the horizon, created a perfect harmony to the scenery. I felt serene and content.

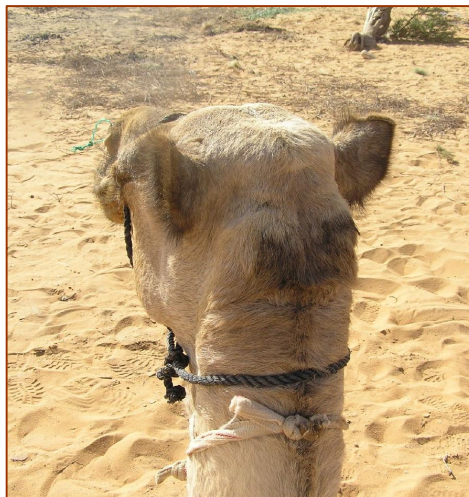
After dinner, Mohammed, our camel man, brought in all the camels to camp. In total darkness, I could hear him making the coaxing and clicking sounds around the animals. Before I knew it, I drifted to a deep sleep and did not wake up until dawn.

Bishari, my Camel

It was still pitch dark outside my tent. Our camel men were already up and busy around the camp. I packed up quickly and was eager to see my camel. I gingerly approached Bishari and said good morning to him. He ignored me and just kept grinding and grinding. Al Kharim saw me and smiled; he pointed to the other side of the camp and said with a high pitch and cheerful voice “Bishari”. Oops! I got the wrong camel. I was so ashamed for not recognizing my own camel.

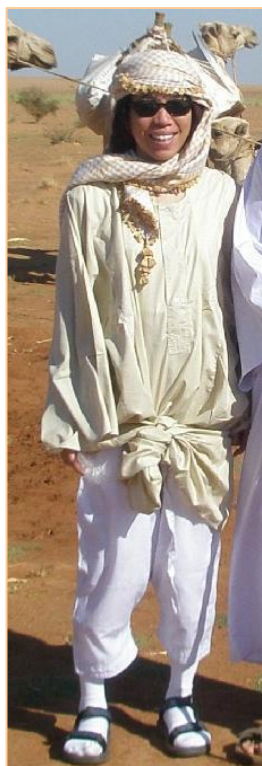


Bishari was crouching on the sand, calmly chewing leaves when I approached him. I called his name; he looked at me with his big pair of eyes and turned the other way as if I did not exist. I attempted to give Bishari a gentle pat but withdrew quickly when he growled at me again. “He will come along, give it time”, Al Kharim nodded and gave me silent words of encouragement.



As I examined Bishari more closely, I realized he was really a magnificent animal. Unlike all my teammates' camels, Bishari has a darker fur, especially those around his ears. He had a circular branding on his right face and his eyelashes were long and beautiful. His lower lip slightly flapped downward as he walked. The most adorable part of his body was his neck, which seemed a bit shorter compared to that of my other teammates' camels. When he ran, its neck stretched back and forth, and was very cute to look at. When he stood up, his head always pointed to the sky as if he was communicating with God. I wondered how anyone could find camel ugly as I was admiring Bishari's graceful beauty.

Jellabiyya



After breakfast, most of us changed to a desert outfit, which consisted of a turban, *jellabiyya*, and a pair of trousers. Michael advised us to wear them during our 10 days trek.

Jellabiyya is a long, loose-fitting shirt. When wears it under the hot sun, the shirt allows a layer of cool insulating air to circulate beneath it. The turban or headcloth, which not only keeps the head cool but also can be used to veil the face in a sand-storm or cover the face from the hot sun. The baggy trouser or loincloth on the bottom is ideal for riding. Besides, a baggy trouser is much more appropriate for answering nature's call in places where there is no cover. Since I am small, the shirt was much too long for me so I had to tie a knot shortening it.

Most of us chose to walk a few hours in the morning to spare our camels. The sun had warmed the sand and the temperature in the shade was already close to 90 degree, but with the breeze and my new outfit, I did not feel hot at all.

Desert Scenery

I never thought of desert could be such breathtakingly beautiful. Early on our march, we passed through a wide plain of acacia forest and wadi³ with thick vegetations.

Sometimes, the entire desert floor was carpeted with grasses of golden color, bedecked with tiny flowers of purple,

yellow and white. Later, the scenery changed into a semi-desert plain. Some places had nothing but red sand or cracked grey soil, in others covered with wild melons and Sodom's apple trees. Gradually, the vegetation began to disappear and the rich carpet of grasses gave way to parched earth. Rolling sand dunes, stone ridges, mystical peaks hung in the heat-haze; mirage emerged at the edge of the vast emptiness as we rode deeper into the heart of the Sahara.



Everyday of our march, the desert appeared, supreme, primitive, and beautiful. The slow march of our camels allowed us to see and feel everything around us. I began to understand Wilfred Thesiger's choice of traveling the desert by camel instead of by vehicle; for

"they will never know the spirit of the land nor the greatness of the Arabs"



Wild melon

Even I was enjoying the desert scenery; my bottom actually was killing me. The combination of sweat and rubbing on the saddle, I had developed a bad sore on my bud. By the second day, I could not stand it any more, so I walked the entire afternoon. I was so relief when we finally reached camp. I nearly used up all my baby powder to release the pain. On the other hand, my relationship with Bishari made a good turn after that day.

A Racing Camel

The following morning as I approached Bishari, he did not threaten me by snapping his teeth. He even let me rub his neck and pat his head. Encouraged by this sudden gentleness from Bishari, I started talking more often to him. I even sang to him during our ride. Our guide Michael did mentioned once to us that all good camel men sing to their camels. I noticed

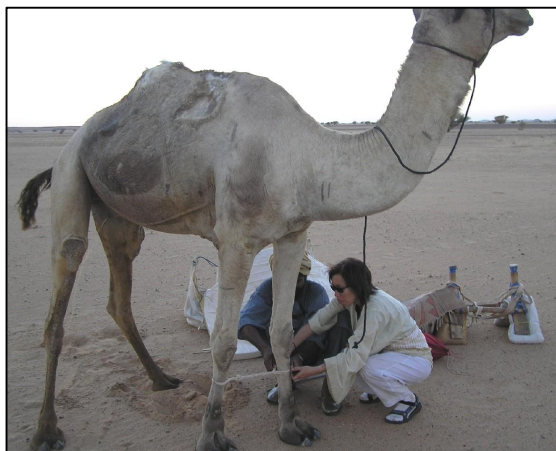
³ Wadi: dried river bed

how Bishari reacted to my singing. His ears started moving back as if he was listening. The ride with Bishari that morning was such a pleasure experience that I nearly forgot my painful bottom. The most rewarding event occurred that day was during our first break.

According to Michael's instruction, to dismount a camel, simply give the head rope a quick and sharp tug, crying "Khyaa!, Khyaa!", a command that a camel is trained to follow. Maybe my tug was too soft or my command was too weak, Bishari never sat down voluntary and let me get off him. Each time, either Al Kharim or Mohammed had to come rescuing me. That morning, I repeated my attempt and gave the rope a tug, crying "Khyaa!, Khyaa!", Bishari hesitated a moment, moved back slowly and then he sat down. I dismounted him over joy. "Good boy! Good boy!" I kept patting Bishair's head and rubbing his neck. Al Kharim gave me a thumb up.



After that day, our relationship escalated. Sundown when we reached the camp, instead of waiting for Mohammed to unload Bishari, I took over the responsibility to care for Bishari. It was hard work to lift the heavy baggage off Bishari, and it required a skill to untie the saddle properly, but I enjoyed brushing his fur around his hump, hobbling him and finally setting him free to graze. Bishari seemed to appreciate what I did for him and sometimes; he would look back at me and let out a low roaring sound. The entire process created a bond between us, and as a result, I grew very fond of Bishari and quite attached to him, especially after I found out his another talent.



Learning to hobble Bishari

One afternoon, Neil's camels instigated a fight by biting Chris' camel. Two camels went crazy and charged to the front, and it created a great commotion among the whole herd. All the sudden, camels were roaring and running wild. Bishari, first looked around, hesitated a moment, then unexpectedly, chased after the two crazy camels. Sitting on the saddle, all I could see was Bishari's neck moving back and forth. Surprisingly, I did not feel the rocking motion I normally felt when riding a running horse. He continued at a fast trot as his feet moved like feather duster flying over the sandy floor. Passing the two troubled camels, Bishari

did not stop. He carried on, passed our two guides; Michael and Bela, about 100 yards; he finally slowed down, stopped and turned around.

With me on his back, Bishari and I stood about 200 yards in front of the group. Sixteen pair of human eyes, plus another nineteen pairs of camel eyes looked back at us. I was as stunned as everyone else was, but I had to admit, I was proud. Michael approached me and reiterated his early comment, “I told you, Bishari is a special bred”. He explained the name “Bishari” in Arab meant a “breeding of fast camel from the Butana”. Now I realized, I had a special camel indeed! Since then, everyday before reaching camp, I let Bishari run, and each time, with the wide-open spaces of Sahara before me, I was thrilled with a sense of undeniable freedom.

Midday Halt & the “Shei” (Sweet Tea)

Around noon when the sun and the temperature became unbearable, we would find a tree and halt for a few hours. We hid inside a mass tent and had lunch, rested a couple hours to escape the blistering heat. Three o’clock came, we would saddle up and set off again, traveling until sunset and made camp.



One afternoon, I could not sit still after lunch, so I ventured outside and found one of our teammates, Alice sitting with the camel men under the shade of a board acacia tree. Immediately, Bela, the headman cleared a space for me to sit down. He placed a blanket on the sandy floor and gestured me to sit next to him. Although we could not communicate, their warm smile broke the barrier between us.

Alice handed me her cup fill with very dark liquid. She told me it was “Shei” or sweet tea. I took a sip and felt the sweetness of the strong tea dipping all the way down to my belly. Normally, I do not take sugar with my tea, but I found the Shei was very refreshing after a hot day march. The strong flavor of the black tea and the sweetness of the sugar seemed to work magic and I felt re-energized. I could not help but asking for my own cup of Shei.



Abdul Radhman, the young cook added a few dried twigs to the fire, poured some water to the pot and made me another cup. After that day, I was hooked and looked forward to a midday halt and enjoying a cup of Shei with my new friends in the desert.

Life in the Desert



After a few days, I grew accustomed to the life in the desert. The brownish color of our drinking water no longer bothered me. The sand I found in all my foods did not irritate me any more. I also became more efficient on packing and

unpacking. Every day, we were up around 6:15am, walked for a few hours before noon, rode on the camel in the afternoon and made camp by sun down. Traveling with camel, we had the opportunity to enjoy the desert scenery, which changed from acacia forest to rolling sand dunes, from narrow stony gorge to breath-taking desert landscape with hardly a single tree. Occasionally, we passed through camps and the settlements of desert nomads, with their herd of goats and flocks of sheep baaing and mewling under the handsome acacia trees. It was always an interesting encounter with a camel rider who seemed to appear from nowhere in the desert. The greeting each time was a pleasant one. “*Salaam alaykum*”, meaning peace be upon you, a standard Islamic greetings brought friendship among strangers.

At sunset, I was mesmerized by the western sky tinted by variety of color, first came the pale blue, then pink, gradually changed from rose-red to violet and finally the blue-black horizon appeared. Before long, the moon was seen in the sky, as though placed there miraculously. At night, the familiar pattern of the stars appeared and I found myself sitting around the fire with the camel men and watched Abdul Radhman cooking a simple meal. When the moon was high above me, I lay down to sleep and let myself fall into a desert dream.

The simplicity of desert life gradually poisoned me, and I knew that soon I had to leave. The thought that I would wake up one morning and found myself no longer in the desert saddened me, but for now, I would rest and let myself continue to have more and more desert dreams...



Jakdul and the Water Pool



On the morning of our 4th day march, we descended into a dense warren of sand dunes. The sizzling sun splattered orange color across the rippling sands. Occasionally, clumps of grass appeared here and there. We all felt the heat and even our camels began to slow down.

On the edge of this emptiness, Michael pointed to a massif dark cliff on the distant horizon. It was to be our next camp; Jakdul. A special place where contained a rainwater pool; the only open water in this part of the desert. To reach this water pool, we must hit the rock wall at precisely the right point to find the sheltered entrance. That afternoon the march seemed endless, and we arrived at the rock wall of Jakdul after dark. By the time we set up our camp, the moon was already high above us. Some of us skipped dinner and went to bed right away.

I was anxious to explore this unusual place next morning. Mohammed and Al Allah were busy collecting our drinking water from the pool when I approached the rock wall. Around the pool, the entire ground was littered with camel droppings, fresh and old. The rainwater, no double, was contaminated with animal dung and urine and was very muddy. Climbing up to a ridge, a second and third water pool appeared. Alice and I found a dead mouse flowing on the second pool. I



could not picture myself drinking this water but was fully aware that in desert untainted water was rare.



Mike, drinking the muddy water from the pool

“A cloud gathers, the rain falls, men live; the cloud disperses without rain, and men and animals die”

It is this precious water that sustains life in the desert. To be a real desert explorer, I accepted the challenge of drinking this water. Besides, we already ran out of our drinking water. Our next water source was a 2-day march away, the Bardalla well.

Antique Well & a Lovely Arab Girl

One of the most interesting encounters in this expedition was to visit an ancient well at Bardalla. That morning, after a two-hour march we reached the well. At this early hour, the well was already surrounded by cattle, sheep and goats. By the well, a tall Arab man, his head shiny with sweat, was hoisting a bucket of water to the surface. We couched our camels and greeted the Arab. Our camel man exchanged a few warm greetings with him and began working together merrily.



I looked down to the well; it was very deep, over 200 feet and the water could not be extracted without animal power. Around the opening of the well, a wooden scaffold was built as an anchor. The tall Arab man dropped the goatskin bucket in, and there was a faraway thwack as the bucket hit the water. A long leather rope running over a pulley was tied to two donkeys. "Pull" he yelled and a smart looking teenage boy led the donkeys forward. As the heavy bucket reached the surface, the man grabbed it and heaved it over to where the animals were. He poured the water to a trench and the sound of its gurgling was as pleasant as the sound of a waterfall. Mob of sheep and goats, bleating, pressing and pawing at each other, vying for a place around the trench and began to drink the muddy water contentiously.



Few minutes later, a young Arab girl, no more than ten years old, accompanying by her grandfather arrived at the well with her two white donkeys. She wore a pale yellow flower dress with a ruby scarf loosely wrapped around her shoulders. She had large sparkling eyes, shiny black hair and a face of classic beauty. With dazzling white teeth and creamy-brown skin, she was as flesh as a half-open water lily.

Her grandfather's appearance was equally striking. His face was very dark, and as wrinkled as an old waterskin. His body weathered by the harsh life of the desert, only the essential flesh, bone and skin remained. However, his eyes shone with life and he was as alert as a young man. I was enthralled by their appearance and

watched them very closely as they moved around the well.

Standing by the well with her donkeys, the little girl waited patiently for her grandfather's instruction. The boiling sun did not seem to bother her. The old man tied the leather



ropes around the donkeys' neck and gave her granddaughter a shout. She held a stick over the donkeys and gave them a short, sharp whack on the back. The donkeys felt the pain and ran with her master, leaving a small cloud of dust behind. Once the bucket was lifted, the old man filled his plastic water container carefully, not letting a drop wasted. Then, the bucket went back into the well, time and again, the little girl ran with her donkeys. Slowly, her yellow dress was coated with sandy soil, but the faded color of her dress seemed only harmonizing with the sands around her. When she rested, she leaned on her donkey and gently brushed its fur. The animals seemed to enjoy its master's attention and stood quietly with contentment. Watching her that morning, I slowly drifted into an ancient world that was depicted by Mr. Thesiger so vividly in his book; the "*Arabian Sands*"



The Desert Nomads

Centuries ago, the everyday hardships, the danger of hunger and thirst in the desert provided the challenges of a nomad life. This wasteland made no allowance for weakness. Under the harsh conditions, only the hardiest and best could survive. It was also this hardship and merciless life that shaped the characters and the spirits of a desert nomad. Mr. Thesiger wrote:

"I had witnessed their loyalty to each other... I knew their pride in themselves and their tribe; their regard for the dignity of others; their hospitality when they went short to feed chance-met strangers; their generosity....their absolute honesty; their courage, patience and endurance and their thoughtfulness"

It was his portrayal of these noble characters captivated me and drew me to the desert of Sudan. Today, I came face to face with the lineal heirs of these magnificent people.

This little girl, young, innocent and beautiful, neither can read nor write. She has little knowledge of the outside world other than her own. Since birth, she is accustomed the physical hardships of the desert; enduring intense heat and cold, drinking muddy water of the sands, eating gritty unleavened bread and withstanding blinding glare in a land without shade or cloud. Sunrise, she comes to the well fetching waters for her family and animals. Sun down, she goes home and rests. Living the same way as her grandfather, her great grandfather did centuries ago. For her, life in the desert is neither dull nor harsh for it is the only life she knows.

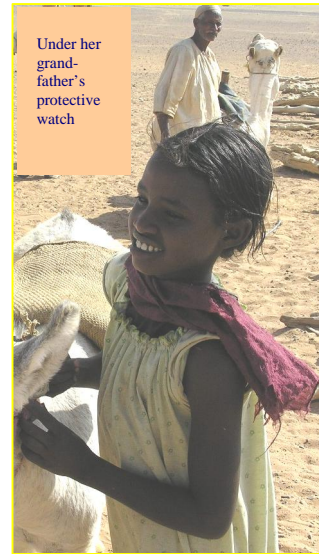
Torn Between Two Worlds

In his book, Mr. Thesiger bitterly rejected modernization. He was deeply saddened by the changes of the desert nomads; the disappearing of their surviving desert skills, the degradation of their noble characters and the fading of their powerful spirits, all these qualities that once defined them. Thesiger wrote,

“I craved for the past, resented the presents, and dreaded the future”.

I sympathize Mr. Thesiger’s feeling, but disagreed with his animosity and deep resentment to the modern world. I too, envy this little girl simply life, but it would not be fair to wish this way of life continues on this part of the world. This girl or any children in Sudan should have the right to enjoy the comfort of a modern world and entitle to receive proper education.

On the other hand, I also agree that moderation could sometimes be fatal. It has corrupted many countries, poisoned many young people and demoralized many cultures. I value greatly how discipline and hardworking my parents once were, and today, I am disappointed by how extravagant and idle my youngest sister is. Fortunately, I grew up in a period when the old and the new worlds co-exist and see the difference between them. I can choose which world to live in. This little girl, however, has not yet been given a chance to choose.



Even so, watching this little nomadic girl, I cannot help but fearing that perhaps someday, her innocent world, her graceful characters, her remarkable endurance and her safe haven, will only become a vanished past.

Michael’s voice brought me back to reality. He gave the old man some money and asked him to fill our water vessels. I approached his granddaughter and gave her all my candies, wishing I had something more to offer her, at least a doll....

After we refilled our water, Michael handed me a cup of the muddy water from the well. In this merciless land, water is as precious as gold. I took a cup from him and drank it without hesitation. This cup of water symbolized the spirit of a desert nomad, for that brief moment, I felt I was one of them.

Baby Camels

Around noon, the baking heat forced us to seek shelter. Without a single tree around us, we hid ourselves in a nomadic hut, a simple wooden structure with dried grass top. While we were having lunch, a group of camels, whites, brown, reds and beige leading by a handsome Arab man, came up to the well. Later I found out, this man was a father of the teenage boy I met this morning. He and his son approached me with a smile and wished to be photographed together. I was more than happy to do that. I just hope someday, I will return to this magical place and find them again with all their photographs.

After lunch, with my camera, I tucked in my turban and walked out to the blistering sun to take more pictures of those adorable baby camels. A group of young camels was as curious about me as I was about them. They kept watching me with those innocent eyes. Their

protective mothers never let their youngsters stray too far. A mother camel pushed her baby away gently as I got too close to them.



Crouching on a salmon-pink sandy floor, a she-camel with her baby rested quietly under a desert sun. I sensed a tremendous feeling of rhythm and grace about these great beasts. How could you not falling in love with them?

Slaughtering a Goat

While we were waiting for the midday heat subsided, Michael mentioned to us about buying a goat from the nomad. He implied that our camel men would appreciate the feast since their daily diet only consisted of *asida*, sorghum porridge with onion gravy. Michael paid the tall Arab man, and led a terrifying goat to Mohammed. Most of my teammates did not want to watch the slaughtering, but I would not miss the occasion.

I watched Bela did the honorable prayer first. Holding down the goat, Bela grabbed the goat's head and quickly slit its throat with his dagger. The goat made only a few kicks and lying on a pool of blood motionless. A splash of crimson stained the sand and some of my teammates turned their faces the other way.



In moments, Mohammad and Al Kharim skinned the goat neatly and expertly. They opened the goat's belly and cut out the liver, kidneys, heart and lungs.



Mohammad put them all in a huge steel bowl and handed it to a nomad. For the Westerners, none of those organs was considered edible, but for the desert nomads and our camel men, they were delicacies. Soon, the smoky smell of the roasted foods permeated the desert; you could feel the excitement around the hardworking men. Someone made the "shei" and others built more fires. Finally, steaming lumps of organs covering with dripping gravy arrived. Men squatted down in front of the communal steel bowl, digging in with their right hands, in the Arab fashion, stuffing themselves with the foods.

Bela saw me watching them, and he offered me a piece of liver. I ate the piece and gave Bela an approval smile. Immediately, Bela dug his hand in the bowl again, found another piece and

signaled me to try it. I had no idea what that was, but it was delicious!

Alice and I were interested in the foods and excited about the event. We quatted down with the men and felt completely at home. Some nomads who were not used to the company of female, especially westerner were feeling a bit unease. Bela mentioned a few words, and they broke out with a laugh. I laughed with them and did not care much about what Bela said. All I knew: it was a good and memorable midday halt!

My Favorite Time of the Day

Around three, we left the well and traveled until sunset, reached a sandy floor where Sodom's apply trees were abundant. They were in full bloom and their tiny purple flowers were quite beautiful. Their waxy leaves like plastic and their grapefruit-like fruit are poison.



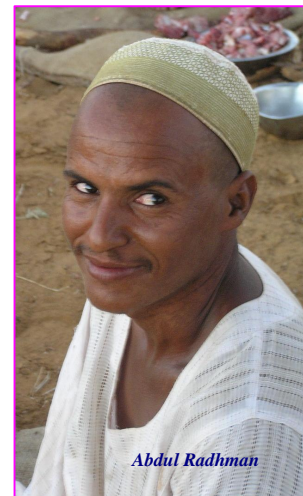
Under the splendid sunset, I happily put up my tent. Lately, I found myself looking forward to reaching the camp. As soon as I unpacked and changed, Alice and I could not wait joining the camel men by their campfire.



Al Kharim

Al Kharim was cutting the leg of the goat when I approached their campfire. Using an axe as a knife and a piece of wood as cutting board, Al Kharim separated the meats into small portion and roasted them over the low fire. The rest he cut into strips and lay out to dry on a thorn tree. The camel men were already used to our nightly visit, when Abdul Rahman, the young and good-looking cook saw me, he waved with his cooking stick and invited us sitting next to him. "Sit down", the only English words he knew. In the dark, with the dim light from the fire, he managed to cook the onion gravy in a small black pot. I switched on my headlight and gave him some light. He smiled with appreciation.

Soon, Bela, Al Allah and Mohammed all gathered around the fire. Bela took my headlight and examined it with curiosity. Compared to their old fashion "made in China" flashlight, mine was a much more interesting piece of camping equipment. I showed Bela how to strap it over his head, flip it up and down for the desired angle. He stood up, acting like a little boy with his new toy, walking around the camp with my headlight. Later that night I promised him when we returned to Khartoum, my headlight would be his. Meanwhile, to assist Abdul Radhman with his cooking, I took out my spare flashlight and handed it to him as gift.



Abdul Radhman

Tonight, Abdul Radhman showed us how to make bread, the nomadic way. First, he took out some flour from his sack, added a little water to the flour

and worked it into dough. He carefully made the dough an oval shape and let it rest. The campfire now already burned down to glowing spills. Abdul Radhman removed some of the big pieces and dug a shallow pit, carefully laid the raw dough inside. He fetched some dried grasses and covered the dough with them. He then lit a fire to the dried glasses. The heat instantly sealed the dough and created a hard crust on the surface. Once the fire died down, he carefully scooped sand over the dough. Twenty minutes later, he brushed away the ashes and sand. A crusty baked loaf, nicely browned with dust emerged from the sand. Scrapping out some of the burns with his dagger and blowing away most of the sand, Abdul Radhman broke a piece and offered it to me. There was a touch of earthly taste, a pinch of smoky flavor, and a trace of burnt aroma. The bread was incredible! Now I knew why I was so anxious to reach the camp everyday!

Our Camelmen and Their Evening Prayer

At a very early stage of our journey, I noticed the natural kindness of our camel men. Most of our camel men are small deft men, alert and watchful, no more than five feet six inches in height, and very lean. Bela is the head guide, Al Kharim and Al Allah are the funniest, Abdul Rahman is the young cook and Mohammed is the quiet camel man.

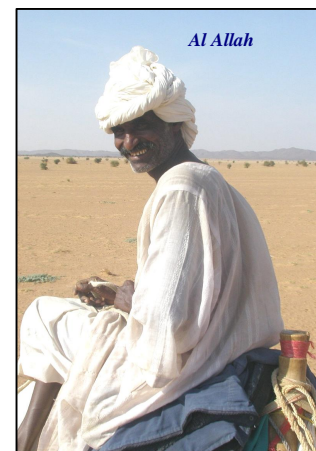


Mohammed interested me the most, for he is the reserved and serious fellow. In the evening when we gathered around the fire, he always sat away from the boys, very restrained in his movement. His dark and watchful eyes missed nothing in the dark, and constantly checking on his camels. He would not completely relax until he counted all his camels and brought them back to the camp.

One thing I noticed about Mohammed was his kindness towards me. During our march, no matter how slow and how fast Bishari and I marched among the group, every time, I turned around, Mohammed was either behind me or next to me. When Bishari was becoming hard to control, I could hear a light whip on Bishari's bottom or a clucking sound from behind. He was a man with a cold face but a warm heart.

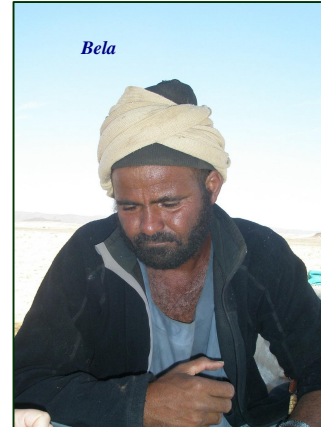
Al Allah is the eldest and funniest among the five of them. When he smiled, his face lit up like a splendid sunrise. He loved to be photographed and created his own camera with a small plastic water container. He would point at his artificial camera and me; made a clicking noise and announced a perfect picture was taken.

Our camel men are all Arabs, and two years ago before this trip, I knew nothing about these people, their culture and their belief. After September 11, I was even afraid of seeing them. Thanks to my research of the desert and reading of the two remarkable books, "*Arabian Sands*" and "*Two Against Sahara*", they awakened me



from my total ignorance. I have come to realize how noble and magnificent these people really are.

One evening around the camp, I saw Bela was doing something unusual. He first used the sands cleaning his hand, and then kneeling down, murmuring, bowing until his forehead touched the ground. I realized he was practicing his evening prayer, the religious ritual among the Islam. A hundred yard away, Abdul Radhman was doing the same thing; each man facing east, toward Mecca, murmuring verses from the Koran, making his own individual submission to God. Here in the heart of the desert, they had not forgotten their religions.



That late evening by the fire, through Michael's translation, Alice and I asked a few questions about their religious. Through their answers, I could sense the power of their belief, their acceptance that there is no God but God. To them, God is reality, and God's presence gives them the courage to endure. I asked what they think about Alice and I being here in the desert and Bela's answer was both profound and innocent. First, he never understood why we, woman, would come to this harsh wasteland willingly for vacation. He suspected that we both had some problems in our lives back home and wished to look for answers in the desert. For him, we had come to the right place.

When I asked him about the stars above us, didn't he think they were beautiful? Bela's answer was indifference. He believed God put them there and he simply accepted as they are. He did not think they were either pretty or ugly.



I looked at Bela and found the attraction among their people. I looked up the stars again, and there were millions of them sparkling like diamonds hanging on a velvet sky. I felt humble in front of my camel men, and I also felt privilege and lucky to be here in the desert with them. I envied their simple life. All the evening I spent with them around the flicking campfire, drinking shei,

using our hands to communicate in the dark, will always be one of the fondest moments of my life.

Illness among Us

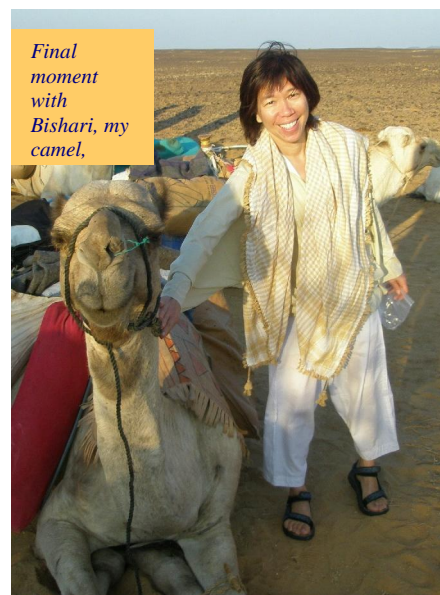
On the morning of our last day march, I woke up with a severe cramp in my stomach. Before I had a chance to put on my Jellabiyya, I rushed to a nearby bush to relieve myself. What came out was both massive and disgusting. Walking back to my tent with a light dizziness, I saw Alice approach me with a concern, “how are you feeling?” “Not well, I had bad diarrhea” I felt a bit embarrassed. “You too! Gilly and I spent a lot of time in the bush last night!” Later, we found out six of us were sick with the identical symptoms. We all suspected it was the water from the rain pool or the well that made us sick.



Bishari: “why didn’t you sing this morning?”

Breakfast, I could not eat anything. The smell of food and taste of muddy water made me throw up. The virus hit me fast and hit me hard. That morning, I lost all my energy. Mounting Bishari was nearly impossible. After I took two antibiotic pills from Michael, I was feeling a little better. Two hours later, the symptom returned, and I found myself spinning with a severe headache, throwing up with nothing in my stomach. I could neither talk nor sing to Bishari that morning. I was even unable to lead him. Al Allah took over the head rope and tied it to his camel. Bishari was very gentle and looked back at me a few times wondering why I was so quiet.

Approaching midday, the searing desert sun became agonizing. Feeling worse than before, I desperately held on the saddle horn, the fear that I would fall off Bishari any moment kept me awake. It seemed a very long time when we finally found a tree for the midday halt. Gilly and I appeared to be suffering the most. We both collapsed on the mattress as soon as they were placed inside the mass tent.



Final moment with Bishari, my camel,

I slept two hours and woke up soaking wet. The sweat seemed to wash away some of the poison. I gained back partial energy, but still had a terrible headache. Michael offered me some juice but I politely declined his offer. From now on, I would only drink the hot boiling water.

Later that evening, Chris, another member of our team also fell ill. Between Chris and his wife, we could hear the zipper of their tent going up and down all night long.

Go in Peace, Bishari

I was so occupied by my sickness in the morning that I had nearly forgotten that today would be my last day with Bishari. Feeling a bit guilty not talking or singing to Bishari whole morning, I stood next to him during all our afternoon breaks and gave him the passionate rub on his neck which he liked. I carefully picked out some of the ticks that burrowed around his eyes

and neck, he did not protest as he used to do. Bishari had grown to accept me as his camel woman. He was my good companion in the desert. I hope he will remember me, as I definitely will remember him!

As the day coming to the end, Michael pointed out something familiar in a far distance. “Chi, see those electric power line, beyond that is the Nile, Damn those bloody people, they are destroying our desert!” I felt a sudden weight of sadness.



A nomadic hut with simple wooden structure

Hidden from the outside world, this part of Sudan that we crossed; continues to preserve the old ways of living. The traditional nomadic huts and black tents remain scattering around the desert floor. The modern world has not yet penetrated to this wildness of sands and I am grateful to be here just in time to witness this part of the world that few people had ever seen.

The sun was setting, blinding my eyes with its glittering rays. Looking back the Sahara disappearing behind me, I bid my farewell; “*Remain in the safe keeping of God!*” For ten of us, this part of Sahara we crossed will always have its own special meaning. “*No man can live this life and emerge unchanged. He will carry, however faint, the imprint of the desert...and he will have within him the yearning to return.....for this cruel land can cast a spell...*” Thesiger’s words reappeared.

Suddenly, I had the urge to run with Bishari. I wrapped the turban around my neck and gave Bishari a kick. “Ya! Ya! Ya!, go Bishari go!”

*She is bouncy as a ball
Chirpy like a bird
And only 2 feet tall
She loves her cups of shei
With Bela and the boys
And when she is on her camel top
She makes a helluve noise
She was the envy of us all
She had the thoroughbred
Bishari was his name
He ran like the wind they said
Ya ya ya was her desert call
She strides through the sand
Like she is rally ten feet tall
Chi, you are generous and kind,
You have a heart of gold,
You are tiny only in status
Cause you are courageous and bold!*

Safe journey, with lots of love, Alice xx (a poem written by Alice about Bishari and I)

As the desert flew past Bishari and I, I knew how it felt to be free!

THE END

Appendix

There are some places that I did not mention in my journal, for example, the Pyramids at Meroe, the Lion temple and the Great Enclosure, Musawwarat es-Sufra located by the Nile banks. They have significant meanings in the Sudanese life and history. Readers are encouraged to contact me if they are interested.

The Meaning of the Sudan's flag:



RED: The red color stands for the struggles and for martyrs in the Sudan and the great Arab land.

WHITE: The white color stands for peace, optimism, light and love

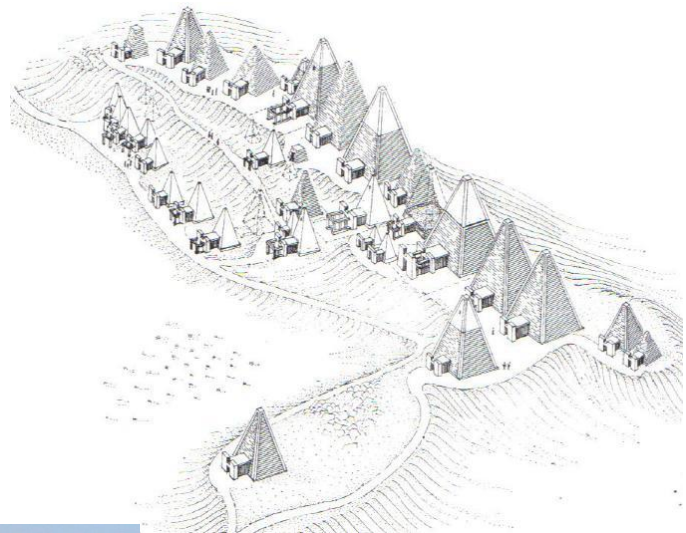
BLACK: The black color symbolizes the Sudan and the mahdija revolution during which a black flag was used

GREEN: The green color represents and symbolizes Islamic prosperity and agriculture

The Ancient Mero Pyramids of the Sudan

The largest site of the Sudan ancient civilization burial pyramids lies north of Khartoum, along the Nile River. These pyramids were built by the Kushite ancient Sudan to house the bodies of departed kings. The pyramids have a distinct and elegant style, even if they are far smaller than the ones in Egypt.

The area is large enough to fill a day's wanderings, even if things are only partly excavated, and not restored, you can get a pretty good view of what has been. Each tomb is facing east, the place of sunrise and rebirth. Every royal tomb is housed within a pyramid. Most of the tombs were badly plundered in ancient times, but pictures and inscriptions preserved on the wall of the tomb chapels tell stories of an ancient kings and queens.



The site reminds me an ancient poem from China:

*The regal tombs have vanished,
but their legends and myths linger*

How appropriate!