

Desert theatre

There is nowhere else quite like it on Earth

✂ KERI HARVEY 📷 © SAND SAFARIS





High atop a silky sand dune, near the desert oasis of Siwa, my toes are tickling the sand of the great Western Desert of Egypt. This mighty sand sea sweeps for hundreds of kilometres, its creamy canvas dotted with oases. These are places that seem lost in time, where the local Bedouin people navigate by the stars.

When we visit the mushroom rockscape of the White Desert and bizarre volcanic pebble Black Desert, we see these navigation skills at work. There are no roads, no markers or maps, just a massive sand field streaming with mirage. But our Bedouin driver, Ali Ganawi, knows his way precisely. "How can you get lost?" he asks quizzically, "when you have the moon and sun and stars to guide you." Ganawi has never seen a compass, much less a GPS. But he has no need for either.

Born in the oasis of Siwa, Ganawi can't imagine the choreographed

chaos of Cairo, 500 kilometres away and home to 20 million souls. He loves the stillness of the desert and the sight of shifting sand and the towering natural sculptures that adorn the vast area. He has no city aspirations. All he needs and loves is right here.

It's seldom you still come upon places that are truly otherworldly and breathtaking in their natural beauty. Siwa is one such place. The old mud brick city of Shali rises as a hilltop labyrinth above the low-slung town. And from its lofty vantage point the countless salty oasis lakes interwoven with date palmeries look strangely coastal, even tropical. There's Death Mountain in the distance, a simple mountain hollowed out for ancient tombs. The elaborate temple to Alexander the Great also lies in sandy ruins, along with one for the cult of Amun, which practised around 300 BC. Everything here is ancient and fragile.

Traditional blood-red, camel-hair carpets and tapestries sway in the breeze above shop fronts, and dusty Bedouin children in brightly layered clothing play in the street. In roadside cafés, old men with moustaches smoke traditional shishas (waterpipes) and discuss the events of the day. Just like the rest of North Africa, Siwa comes alive at night, when Egyptians eat and drink and socialise.

Between the very different oases of Siwa and Bahriya are the evocative Black and White deserts. Two very different and distinct landscapes, one is volcanic and jet black, the other is ice-white limestone. The Black Desert starts showing its sultry face just outside Bahriya, where its rolling sand mountains appear to be dusted with black pebbles showered from above. But right underneath the scorched little stones is creamy sand again. This is Egypt's moon-scape and as close as you'll get to outer space without going there.

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If you don't know about it, you'll drive on straight past Crystal Mountain. Only when you see this mountain from up close does it completely dazzle you with its quartzite crystals, shining like diamonds in the desert sun. A glistening natural rock arch beckons to a sand path winding past shining gems encrusted in the rock. Egyptians believe the place has special powers and is very spiritual.

Desert driving may sound monotonous, even boring, as carpets of sand roll out before you, but here, not for one minute is this so. As the sandscape unfolds, it becomes more and more alluring and captivating, drawing you in. Here in this place, where the environment is fragile and the horizons endless, silence speaks loudly. In the desert you don't measure distance in kilometres but in time, because if the sand is thick a short distance can take a long time.

Under the noon sun we stop at a rock overhang for a picnic lunch. In authentic Bedouin style there's a bright carpet to sit on and a low table for dining. Traditionally, Bedouins sit on their haunches and eat, looking as comfortable as if they were reclining on a velvet chaise lounge. All around us, strewn on the desert floor and encrusted

in the rocky outcrop, are disc-like sea shells, fossilized after 80 million years in the baking sun. We're hundreds of kilometres from the Mediterranean, but once it was here, too. The desert has even exposed a whale skeleton, though many more ancient secrets surely still lie hidden beneath its sands.

Driving south, the sandscape flattens out as if the low hills are slowly being ironed flat. And then the fantastical stone sculptures start appearing. From a distance they look like desert snowmen that have melted in the sun, but as you draw closer a theatre of limestone art comes into focus. Fantastical creatures, birds frozen in flight, a huge sphinx in a field of giant mushrooms, towering pinnacles like chimney stacks and animal faces – they all stand in sugary sand sprinkled with black pebbles. As we arrive a full moon bathes the scene in liquid indigo light.

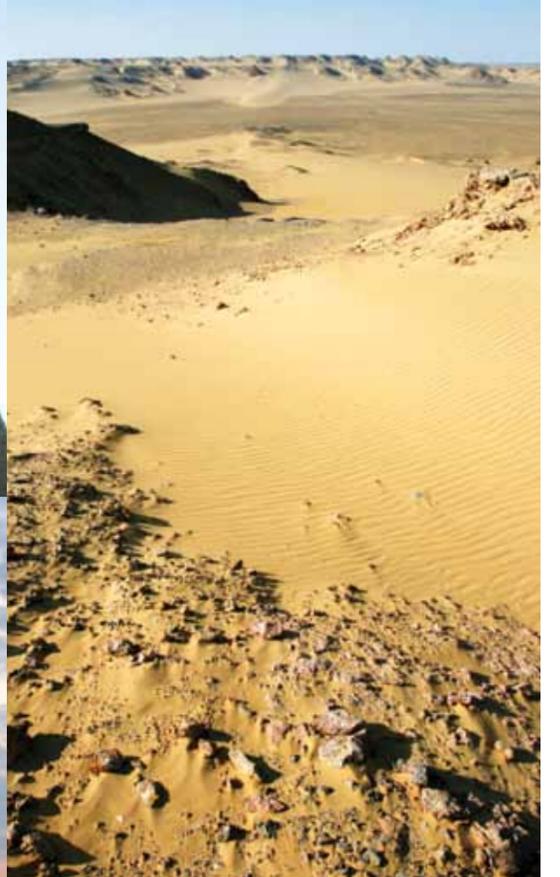
The scene is so quiet you can hear your heart beat, so movingly beautiful you won't want to blink for even a second. White rock sculptures under a full moon glow in ethereal light and, as evening darkens the sky, the stars pop out clear and brilliant – whiter and

brighter than seems natural. This is indeed a million-star hotel.

Ganawi smiles as he prods another log into the evening fire. "I see in your eyes that you understand," he says. "This place makes your heart beat faster. It is where I feel completely myself." Then he points to the full moon and jokes in humorous Egyptian style. "Look, there's a perfect Bedouin moon out tonight. Can you see the line of its moustache?"

After a fire-grilled dinner and plenty of 'Bedouin whiskey' (sweet black tea), enjoyed next to the glowing coals, I turn in – but not to sleep. Ganawi and the other guides sit on their haunches, Bedouin-style, and chat around the fire, and I lie flat on the sand and stare heavenwards at the brilliant star canopy. No tent for me, no bed either. My eyes are wide open staring heavenwards, counting the stars.

In the morning, with the rising of the sun, the White Desert wears a cloak of soft orange. The colours seem impossible, but this is the very allure of the desert and its changing theatre of light. Appreciated with a tiny glass of fresh mint tea and a handful of plump dates, it is an exhilarating way to start the day. ✿



Ed's note: The best time to go is from October to April, to avoid the extreme heat of summer – Egypt sees temperatures of up to 50 degrees some days! And remember that South Africans do require visas to visit. For more information, visit www.sandsafaris.com.