

4 TRAVELOGUE - HOLY LAND

Marilou announced that Hashim would not be joining us on the Sinai trip, and that there would be another guide. We got our wake-up calls at 6:00, placed our baggage ready for pick-up outside our rooms at 6:30, had breakfast at 7:00, and were on the road by 8:00, after each of us ascertained that

our bags were properly loaded on the bus. Breakfast today was an even bigger grab-bag event, with most of us stuffing bread, fruit, boiled eggs into napkins and slipping them into our travel bags, as "baon" for the long trip ahead. And it wasn't only us; most of the crowd in the dining room were from other tour groups, and they were doing the same thing. Picture on left shows the fancy Grand Pyramids Hotel façade, with Marilou and new guide at far left.



Tour organizers apparently have to be quite flexible in their schedule, and it seemed that the original itinerary called for a flight from Cairo to Jerusalem, but due to the heavy holiday travel, a 2 day overland route was decided instead, which was a bonus as it took us to St Catherine, a sleepy mountain town in the south Sinai peninsula, next to Mt Sinai. The Google map on left traces (in black) the route the first day, and (in red) the next day. And most of the route was through desert. We were to change buses and tour guide at Taba, the border town entering Israel.

We drove on and on along the arid desert (right), and after some bantering talk and singing (and praying) by Marilou and Fr Robin over the microphone, the group fell silent, but not before two of the guys up front started green joke time which I found great. I myself wasn't feeling so good; I had a rasping cough and started a temperature and was flopped in the backmost seat. The new guide, whose name



escapes me, was strangely silent. Marilou explained that he cautioned us from taking pictures of anything military. And indeed, there were. On the road eastward towards Suez Canal, there were many checkpoints, with machine-gun nests plainly visible. I wondered whether this was because Egyptian strongman Mubarak was scared of Islamic fundamentalists or Israeli invaders or perhaps even US invaders. This place reeked with fascinating recent history. With the silence of the guide getting more frustrating, I thought of grabbing the mike and recounting at least what I knew: the Balfour Declaration; the British Palestinian Mandate; the 1948 war of independence; the 1956 Suez campaign of France, England and Israel; the 1967 six-day-war where Israel pre-empted all those air strikes and captured the entire Sinai, West Bank and Golan heights after Nasser had closed the Gulf of Aqaba and the Israeli port city of Eilat and how Israeli paratroops stormed the strategic Sharm-el-sheik overlooking the Straits of Tiran; the 1973 Yom-Kippur war; the peace treaty, etc. etc. Never mind the parting of the Red Sea by Moses (many of us had in mind Charleston Heston being pursued by Yul Brynner).

Soon after we went through a long underground tunnel which I presumed had the Suez Canal above it, we made quick right turn, then onward for a few minutes, then a U-turn back to the main road while Marilou explained that the guide said we were making a bonus quick view of the Suez Canal, but no stopping and no pictures. This happened so fast I didn't even have a chance to take a stolen shot from my digital. I remember a glimpse of some docks, machinery, and the vegetation alongside the canal. We were now going parallel to the canal (but not in view of) in the southeast direction. Remember, the Suez is at sea level, and sand dunes lie alongside.



After about half an hour, we must have gone past the canal because now there were views of an open sea, the Red Sea. We made a stop at an oasis named Moses Well. This is where Moses camped after parting and crossing the Red Sea then asking the Lord for water.



Picture on left shows one of the two wells, and although this was dry, the other had water. In the background and in the other left picture were tourist stalls with Bedouins selling all sort of handicraft and trinkets. The sea channel beyond had convoys of ships entering and leaving the Suez Canal, as shown below. I felt this juxtaposition of space and time quite moving. To be continued....

