

5 TRAVELOGUE - HOLY LAND

Surprisingly, the weather wasn't that bad. Cairo was about 30 deg C, and this drive through the Sinai desert wasn't that hot either. The bus had a good aircon, and a restroom, but there always



were places where the driver would pull in for snack or bladder break. Soon after we turned off from the coastal road and started climbing into the “wilderness” of the desert towards St Catherine, we stopped at a restaurant, where we ordered sandwiches for lunch. And there, at one corner was a prayer rug, and soon, the Muslim faithful started taking turns doing their prayers. I found it fascinating, and very quietly took a few snapshots, especially being careful for the guy at the right who had an Uzi strapped to his belt. I tried to imagine the burly Filipino bodyguards of our politicians kneeling in prayer, and it just wouldn't connect.



As we drove on, the scenery became more rugged, with caves appearing on the mountain walls, and green spots marking where there was precious water. I saw herds of goats eking a living from the sparse grass, and what I first thought may have been an apparition of St John crying in the wilderness. See two pictures below.



Then we were at the “Protectorate of St Catherine”, the official name on the map. The hotel had a swimming pool, and at one end was an empty function room where Fr Robin celebrated the second mass (the first had been in his hotel room in Cairo the day before). Even after an early dinner, it was still light, and Marilou called for the final head count for tomorrow's early morning optional adventure: getting up early in the morning, riding a camel for 2 hours partially up the mountain, then hiking up for another hour or more, so as to see the glorious sunrise over Mt Sinai. Our guide had to make all the arrangements with the camel drivers. If I had hadn't been feeling feverish, I would have gone, but Lisa, and Avril, the young doctor in our group prevailed. The high altitude was bad for those with stents, so this also knocked off Allen, the other US retiree. Even Fr Robin had to decline because of his diabetes. The head count settled down to 5 brave souls. They left at 1:30 in the morning, and straggled back at 8:30. And so did a whole busload of Korean tourists.

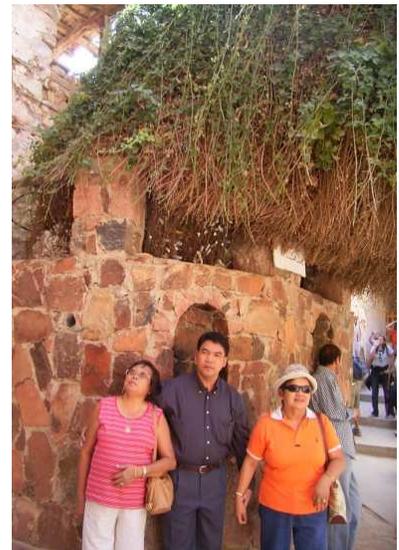


Picture on left is from the camera of Dennis, who had reportedly fallen off the camel. This was the sunrise over Mt Sinai. Barely discernable in the center is the



valley where the hotel and Monastery is located. At right is his wife Gloria at daybreak with part of the camel convoy, waiting for the group to trek back on foot from the mountain top. It was more than 700 steps.

After a late breakfast, it was time to pack up, load up on the bus, and go, but first having a stop at the famed St Catherine monastery nearby, recently restored compliments of the Emir of Qatar, and holding ancient artifacts, the best known of which was the Burning Bush, somehow still living.



The cool St Catherine Hotel, the cool pool, and the cool group, sans us. The Burning Bush above.

The bus ride to Israel was a scheduled 4 hours. We were to have crossed the border at Taba, gotten into a new bus with new guide, and then have a late lunch at the resort city of Eilat. But we were running very late already. By that time also, we had realized that our mute guide was not a guide but just an escort. This would be much in contrast to the new Israeli guide. Anyway, we got to Taba almost at 2:30 pm. And it took 2-1/2 hours to get through the border, with all the security checks, x-raying of luggage, and also because one in our group was random-checked and his documents had some glitch. So we were on the road after a late, late lunch at about 6:00 pm, onward to Jerusalem, almost 300 km north.

The new guide was Filipina, nicknamed “Exie” by Pinoys, but known as “Romema” to others which is Hebrew for her real name “Exaltacion”. She was NY based until the mid 80’s when she moved to Israel with her Messiahnic Jew (they believe in Jesus) husband who was an ordained Eastern Orthodox minister. And her maiden name was Cruz. ...To be continued....