

Adventure Travel: Crossing Egypt's Western Desert With Satnav

By Karen Dabrowska

The tumultuous events in Cairo didn't worry Mahmoud Mohareb who has been leading two week Safaris in Egypt's Western Desert since 2005.



Mohreb promoted his company, London at the beginning of
Tribe Expeditions, at this year's February. The annual exhibition,
Adventure Travel Show held in now in its 12th, year is organised

by Escape Events. It is the only consumer travel show committed to creating an all-important point of contact where adventure travel companies can meet and do business with their key target audience.

«There is something in the desert which makes the soul very peaceful», Mohreb told «Islamic Tourism». He is a bedouin who laments the disappearance of bedouin life. «A real bedouin moves after the rain with his animals. Nobody does this nowadays. The bedouins have

cars and can bring water so they don't need camels. They are settled now but it is not healthy for them. They lived for thousands of years as nomads».

On the 15-day desert safaris there is no need to use the sun or the stars for navigation. It's done by GPS (Global Positioning System Receiver) or Satnav for the uninitiated.

Like Mohareb the Safari crew are bedouins. They are experts at setting up camp in desert areas which are unnamed on the map,



Fayoum oasis



baking bread and producing delicious food.

The expedition route to Gilf Kebir is designed carefully to travel through one of the world's most remote deserts with a variety of landscape formations and astonishing prehistoric rock art paintings. The diverse landscape ranges between bizarre limestone formations, sand stone and sand dunes as well as volcanic craters, sand plains, depressions, plateaus and mountains all beautifully

shaped by the strong, desert wind. The white desert has unique formations.

The inhabited part of the route includes Fayoum, Bahariya, Dakhla and Siwa. In Fayoum the expedition moves through the remains of an ancient sea and the skeleton of a 40-million-year-old whale fossil, while in the Siwa oasis ancient culture has been preserved throughout the centuries and the past and present live happily side by side, like the

bedouins who sit around the camp fire as in days gone by after reaching the remote spot with the aid of satnav.

Further along the route are rock art paintings of swimmers discovered by Almasry in 1933 and made famous by the film *The English Patient*. Then comes the Mestikawi-Foggini cave, a relatively new discovery in 2002 that represents one of the most interesting and well preserved

rock art sites in the whole of the Sahara. The huge cave is full of paintings and engravings whose meaning scientists are still trying to discover along with the connection between its creators with the ancient pharaonic people of Egypt. Nature offers many unique phenomena including the silica glass field.

Regardless of what happens in Cairo, what government is in power, the desert will always be

Geoff Hann (left) speaking to would-be travellers



Herat



there to inspire Egyptians and foreigners with tranquility and stillness.

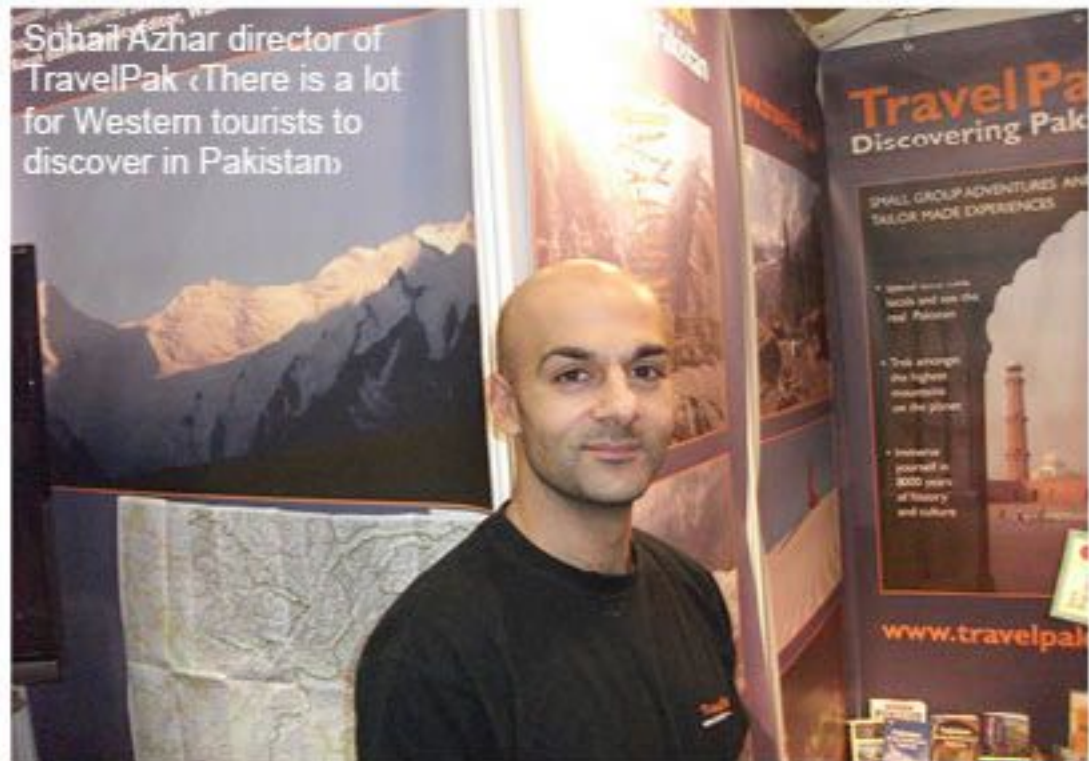
Veteran overland tour operator Geoff Hann, managing director of Hinterland Travel, who specialises in trips to Iraq and Afghanistan had an impressive stand with Afghan carpets, hats and even burkas.

«Travel to Iraq is looking very good», Hann believes. «The government is supporting tourism and we are very happy to deal with them, travelling around the country,

seeing archaeological sites and visiting Saddam's palaces. Kurdistan is also very popular and tourists are starting to go there. It is the Switzerland of the Middle East but still lacks infrastructure».

Hinterland reintroduced its Mesopotamia and Kurdistan Iraq tour in March 2009 and sites such as Eridu, the Marsh Arab area, Tikrit and Erbil have been added to the regularly visited attractions such as Nimrud, Samarra, Babylon, Uruk and Ur.

Sohail Azhar director of
TravelPak (There is a lot
for Western tourists to
discover in Pakistan)



Ur



In addition to its Iraq tours which only stopped when war and conflict intervened, Hinterland has been revisiting Afghanistan for the last eight years. «We feel that decades of international conflict and internal disputes are slowly being resolved», Hann said. «Some people will think that this is a little premature given that there is still internal dissension, and still only a tenuous groping toward central government control and that is certainly the British Foreign Office

advice. We prefer to state that Afghanistan is at the cutting edge of adventure tourism, which in itself can offer benefits and progress. As an organisation, Hinterland or rather its predecessor, Hann Overland travelled through Afghanistan frequently in the seventies and eighties. I personally checked out the routes in November 2002 that we would use and have led all the Afghanistan trips since that date.



Hinterland stand at Adventure travel

Karakoram Highway



«The country is desperately poor, frankly it needs any help that we or anyone can provide. The vast sums of money promised by the international community have only just trickled in, have yet to be fulfilled or are just promises. At least we can make a direct contribution to local people through the use of their services. The main roads had become diabolical but are now being totally reconstructed, the international community having recognised the importance of the

trade routes to and through Afghanistan. The Afghan people are friendly and cheerfully welcoming, although wary until we can prove that we are travellers and not something else. Ancient and recent history are scattered everywhere, from Buddhist remains to burnt out tanks.

«Our tours are not so steeped in excavated ancient remains as for example is our Iraq tour - they are more scenic, peoples tours but we

fit in as many religious and historical sites as we can. Herat, for example is full of Islamic remains. Despite our adventurous natures, we have to be sensible with our itineraries, so our road tour takes in as much as the first time visitor could hope to fit in, given the time factor of three weeks.

Pakistan is another emerging adventure travel destination promoted by Sohail Azhar of Travel

Pak. He is working closely with the National Union of Pakistan Students to promote the country to an audience that has links with Pakistan.

«The students don't know what's in their own country», Azhar said. «The World Wildlife Fund is interested in developing eco tourism in Baluchistan and there is potential for Western tourists but word needs to spread. Pakistan is the cradle of four religions:





Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam and Sikis).

For the best introduction to Pakistan and the Karakoram Highway, TravelPak usually starts off the tours from Lahore - the heart of Pakistan. From here there are tried and tested routes that take visitors on incredible journeys tracing the ancient silk routes. There is a choice of continuing up the KKH and its valleys right to

the Chinese border at the 4700m Khunjerab Pass or branching off either to explore the magnificent valleys of Chitral or the wilderness of Baluchistan.

As always Adventure Travel introduced countries not normally associated with tourism and illustrated that with careful planning even Afghanistan and Iraq are not beyond the pale.