



THE 1001-STAR HOTEL

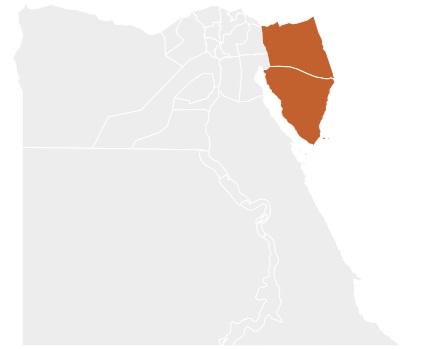
What about your **private desert**, shots of happiness on the house
and an **OPEN-AIR BEDROOM** that will 100% guarantee **sweet dreams**?

Text Isabelle Vander Heyde - Photography Desert Soul

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he Sinai desert is a place of raw, pure energy thanks to its mineral-rich soil, filled with copper, manganese, calcium, magnesium, phosphorus, silicon and turquoise gemstone. Many consider her oases, rugged mountains, canyons, rolling sands, dunes and moonscapes magical. The perfect setting for a mystic journey, and we're not even the first ones to think so: Moses, who we might consider the world's first inspirational hiker, agreed. The geographical fact that he had to cross this mysterious area to get from Egypt to Israel may have played a part in his choice of route too, but then again; nothing is ever a coincidence. So far for our lecture on Magical History, let's move on to Geography: the triangular Sinai Peninsula is a land bridge connecting Africa and Asia. The vast area, twice the size of Belgium, is bordered by the Mediterranean Sea to the north, the Red Sea to the south, and the Suez Canal to the west. Humans have walked the Sinai lands since prehistory; the ancient Egyptians recorded expeditions as early as 3000 BC. Many have disputed the strategic North over the years. It belongs to Egypt nowadays, making it the only part of Africa that is technically Asian. Sinai's population of approximately 500,000 people mostly lives in the mountainous northern region and coastal planes. The South, a mix of high mountains, deep canyons, and deserts, is inhabited still by traditional, nomadic Bedouin tribes.





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We found you the ultimate all-in experience if you’re interested in sand, sand, even more sand, and the adventure of a lifetime. Sinai-born Farag Gomma and Belgian Marleen Hofman are the driving forces behind Desert Soul, an organisation hosting an array of inspiring desert journeys, including family treks. Now we know the last place you’d think of for a relaxing family holiday is a desert -because very hot and very arid, thus very dull, right? Wrong. The experiences they’ve been crafting for the past seventeen years are anything but monotonous. In fact, the very will to break with the classic pattern of “jeep-in, jeep-out, some snaps with a dune, maybe a picnic and back to the all-in resort” sparked the whole project. Instead of speeding around like dehydrated chickens, Farag and Marleen offer to slow down and just... be.

Again: this is not how you sell a holiday to cool kids these days, teenagers especially, yet no underage tourist has ever regretted joining one of Farag’s thrilling treks. On the contrary, they are always the first to open up and fully embrace the adventure. “Guests are invited to live the Bedouin lifestyle for a week. From the start, we all become one big family, including the local guides and their accompanying children,” says Marleen. “At first, the youngsters look at each other with amused bewilderment. The Bedouins aren’t used to screens, they are living close to nature and its rhythm. On the other hand, visiting children have never slept under the stars nor provided for themselves. It’s crazy how easily kids can shake off those differences and find common ground. Where parents need some time to adapt to the change of scenery, culture and incentives, little ones are remarkably resilient. They consider this strange new world one big playground and easily join the Bedouin kids running down dunes, playing football, climbing rocks or drawing in sand. There’s this immediate, actually quite touching, shift in creativity and energy. Children easily bridge the differences between two cultures; the parents generally follow shortly after. Our goal is to have them fall in love with the simple joys of life again, and no better way to do so than to address one’s inner child.” The Bedouin have mastered that art for ages. Surprisingly, because life in the desert is hard. They struggle to survive and use their resources sparingly. There’s not much firewood around, for instance, so guests and guides are always looking for roots or old branches. Once they’re done cooking, they bury the wood to save it for later. Nothing goes to waste. Also, there’s no electricity or running water, even though guests get to wash in the world’s most beautiful bathroom; in front of majestic landscapes and endless skies. You have to give in to an elementary level of comfort. Still, you get

world-class luxury in return: the desert all to yourself, the discrete yet extremely considerate hospitality of the Bedouins and that priceless feeling of pure, raw freedom. The experience brings families closer together but also changes every member, regardless of age, on an individual level. “The limited amount of washing water quickly becomes an easy habit; most visitors don’t even use up their bottles by the end of the week. The experience reignites this long-lost respect for nature and teaches them to appreciate its little gifts and miracles. That is in fact the very key to Bedouins’ joie de vivre and youthfulness. It’s what surprises our guests the most: the hardship of life hasn’t made these people sully, nor has it made them harsh, just super authentic. This is a place where children are wise beyond their years and adults are young at heart. They have no filter and enjoy everything to the fullest, singing, dancing, and playing all day. Watching adult men and their children joke and jump up and down dunes is quite infectious -we dare you to keep a stiff upper lip- and before you know it, you’re doing car-wheels too.”

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Of course, there’s more to this than playing in the sand. The week-long trip typically starts with a day or two in a hotel by the edge of the desert, the perfect opportunity to snorkel and discover the Red Sea’s mesmerising underwater world. The real adventure starts on day two, as you trek into the desert and set up camp in the heart of a beautiful nature reserve. This will act as a home base for the next few days, a starting point for hikes in the surprisingly diverse landscapes of the Sinai desert. One of the world’s most beautiful deserts and remarkably full of colour -once you’ve accepted that you won’t see much of the colour green. Steep canyons, chalk cliffs, majestic mountain plateaus, rock formations in every hue imaginable, oases that pop up out of nowhere and offer refreshing afternoon dips, and then the landscape abruptly stopping, making way for a series of dunes. Anything but repetitive, as we said. There’s work to do too, for those who want:

helping the guides to gather firewood, bake bread every morning (children love that part) and arrange the campsite. If you prefer, you can also just lie down and read Winnie The Pooh in the sun, do some drawing or whatever you like to do to unwind. The Bedouin guides happily prepare delicious food while you’re at it. Evenings are for stargazing and making music around the campfire. Even though each family unit has its tent, kids often fall asleep by the fire or bunk together in the big common tent. They actually just move their sleeping mats to whichever spot they’d love to sleep, and that’s it -just like their Bedouin friends. You’ll also get to visit prehistoric nomad graves, some lively villages or even a school to discover the traditional lifestyle of the desert. A culture threatened by poverty and the lure of modern cities, which is why Marleen started the project in the first place. “Tourism is basically their sole source of income, and I wanted to play my part by bringing foreign visitors to the region. The profit of what we do goes directly to these people and helps their culture to survive by funding water wells, solar panels, irrigation systems, local education, etc.” As far as transportation is concerned: no visit to the desert without camels, so brace yourself for a bumpy ride. Even bumpier still, and the highlights for many young guests...the jeep rides traditionally enjoyed on the roof! Halfway through the week, the group will move to a new campsite and new adventures, such as a day of snorkelling and chilling by the Red Sea -far away from the large-scale resorts this coastal line has become notorious for. Speaking of which, Marleen advises resisting the urge to combine this trip with a visit to Egypt’s ancient monuments and miracles. As magical as they are, they come with a radically different experience and the downside of mass tourism, including tour buses, rip-offs, and over-the-top buffets. A desert that may prove difficult to digest after the Bedouin diet. So, leave that for another trip, have some sweet mint tea and enjoy its vivid after-taste for a bit longer.





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