

BIBLICAL SCENE

The mountains of south Sinai

Diamonds in the dust

Give yourself over to an unforgettable holiday amid awesome landscapes untouched by modern civilisation. Here are five great reasons to pull on your desert boots and head for the oasis

1 THE SPIRITUAL TREK SINAI DESERT, EGYPT
We are camped in a wadi – a dried-up riverbed – the size of an Olympic stadium. Pink granite mountains loom, their rock faces striped in blazing colours. We are on the same caravan route that Moses reputedly followed when he led the Israelites out of Egypt. In this heartland of the south Sinai desert, the Makhad Trust, a UK charity, is hosting a remarkable eco-pilgrimage, introducing us to the desert, its people – and to hidden aspects of ourselves.

Escorted by Bedouin, we explore a wilderness of silence and space on camel and on foot, sharing meals around

campfires and sleeping under the stars.

Reaching the High Mountain foothills, we spend two days working in Amran Garden, one of hundreds of 'lost gardens' that are the heritage of the Djebelieh tribe, helping to build a rock terrace, renovating a burial ground for Byzantine saints and Bedouin sheikhs, and developing an irrigation system. Lured by the empty promise of coastal tourism, many Djebelieh have deserted their traditional territories, causing their gardens to fall into decline. In helping the Djebelieh to restore these oases, the Makhad Trust offers them an alternative to working on a Red Sea building site.

On the ensuing pilgrimage to Mount Sinai, we explore terrain where for

centuries hermits have meditated in caves. Descending to St Katherine's Monastery (the site where, it is said, Moses received the Ten Commandments), we are given special permission to witness a spectacular dawn mass staged by monks, who recite from scriptures, chant incantations and perform theatrical rituals. This ceremony has taken place every day for 1,500 years, and it was a privilege to watch it. WILL GIBSON
The Makhad Trust (01242 544546; www.makhad.org) offers seven nights in the Sinai, including a two-day project at Amran Garden, for £975, excluding flights; 40 per cent of the cost goes towards the preservation of Bedouin culture. Excel Airways flies from Gatwick to Sharm el Sheikh, from £250 return.