

## ***Lent in the Wilderness***



In the January issue of *"Faith Matters"*, I wrote about my plans for a Bedouin Challenge ride in the Wadi Rum during March, and appealed for sponsorship. Thanks to the generosity of St Faith's congregation and other friends, I reached my target of £2,000, and have just returned from a wonderful adventure.

The Wadi Rum is in the south of Jordan, and is part of the Wilderness of the Bible. I was only there for six days, rather than the full forty years, but it was a suitable place to be during Lent. It is a sand desert between large rocky outcrops – you may remember it appeared prominently in the film *Lawrence of Arabia*.

Our objective was to ride Arab horses through the valleys of the Wadi for five full days, in company with Bedouin guides, camping overnight, and to raise money for the British Horse Society's (BHS) Equine Welfare organisation in the UK. There were 16 of us who met at Heathrow Airport on 24<sup>th</sup> March, all women, including the organiser from the BHS, and the travel agents, who rode with us. We flew to Amman, arriving at our hotel well after midnight, and had our last night with beds and chairs for a week.

Next morning (Sunday, the first day of the working week in Jordan) we drove quickly down

the Desert Highway – apart from occasional slowing down for sleeping policemen, not what you expect on a major dual carriageway! – and arrived at Wadi Rum in time to meet our horses after lunch, and have a short ride on them to prepare for the main ride next day. I must say my mare was quite scatty, and didn't like to stand still. And when she was tethered to a post in the sand for the night, she would do her best to uproot it and wander off. But I stayed with her for the whole week. Some of the other riders didn't like their horses, and changed them two or three times.

The days were pleasantly warm (maximum was 26°C) but it gets cold at night in the desert. On our first night, camp was behind the prominent rock called *"The Seven Pillars of Wisdom"*. All sixteen of us slept together in a big black Bedouin tent, but before that we had a barbecue prepared by the Bedouin support team. There were almost as many of them as us, including the driver of the 4x4 which carried our luggage, and a doctor and a vet. Mahomet, our chief guide, accompanied us all the way, on horseback.

The days were similar, but all different. We rode for about seven hours, with a break for lunch. Usually the horses walked, which is the easiest pace on soft sand, but a couple of times

Mahomet let us have a '*cantour*' – not a British canter, but a flat-out gallop. Very exciting. What made the days varied was the tremendous differences in the landscape we passed through. Twice we rode over rock bridges connecting two rocks over the track between them.

The evening barbecues were full of fun, with singing, dancing and Bedouin jokes. The others fell into bed quite early, but I found the desert climate suited me far better than the humidity of Havant, and was full of energy, up early and late to bed. Some of the younger Bedouin were rather shy with the full group of women, but when they had mostly gone, the young men were happy to talk.

The meals were delicious, even though prepared in the middle of nowhere, and I never had a moment's stomach problems. Some of the group seemed taken aback by the local food, but I think it was part of the adventure. We drank a lot of '*shy*', weak tea with sugar served in small Pyrex glasses – very thirst-quenching.

Our longest day was Thursday, when we rode 30 miles, and went all the way to the Saudi border. Mahomet pointed it out, but there was no other sign of it, just identical sand on both sides of an invisible line. We also got a view down to the sea at Aqaba, like Lawrence of Arabia again. And then on Friday we rode north across the railway, rather a surprise in the desert, back to the road where our bus was ready to take us back to Petra – and a hotel!

Saturday was spent in Petra, first on a visit to the Brooke Hospital for Horses. This principally looks after the horses which are hired to tourists visiting the ancient city. Although many of the horse-owners look after them well, we saw a few very distressing cases with bad sores caused by overwork. In fact two of the girls in our group were so impressed by the Brooke that they decided to try to train for veterinary nursing. Then we spent the rest of the day visiting the enormous city, where all the buildings are cut into the red rock cliffs.

Our last evening was given over to a final dinner in the hotel. Delicious, but three of the group had been suffering from a lack of pizza and chips in the desert, and preferred to go off for that instead. And then it was an early start on Sunday

for the airport, and back to England – not at all exciting after the Wadi Rum.

So I have had a wonderful adventure, and after all the costs are paid, we raised £10,000 for the BHS.

***Frances Hakim***

