

Desert rose

An upmarket safari company is about to launch holidays to Sudan, a country usually framed in terms of hardship and bloodshed but which is also rich in history and has more pyramids than Egypt. By Mike Carter, with photographs by Don McCullin

First came the sound of drums and low chanting. Then, across the vast necropolis of sand-mound graves, I saw them: a group of men, 100-strong, some bearing huge, billowing standards of green and red, their shuffling feet kicking up clouds of orange dust in the heat, still stifling one hour before sunset.

Most were dressed in dazzling white djelabas and taqiyah prayer caps, while some, with dreadlocked hair, wore multicoloured patchwork robes, festooned with rags and amulets, looking like jesters.

The crowd parted to admit them to a circle, plunging the men into the shadow cast by the dome of the Hamed al Nil mosque. The drumming and chanting upped tempo and volume: "La ilaha illallah," they shouted, staccato, again and again. "There is no God but Allah".

Here were the famous whirling dervishes of Khartoum – Sufi holy men, followers of the mystical form of Islam, gathering for their Friday evening *dhikr*, or ritual, where a frenzied recitation of God's name creates ecstatic abandon in which the adherent's heart can communicate directly with God.

The women in the crowd started to ululate. A man in a leopard skin robe and a conical scarlet hat swept around the circle with a thurible, creating a great fug of incense that mixed with the choking dust. A few of the dervishes started to spin on one leg, heads flung back, gone from this world, mouths fixed in rictal ecstasy. A priest threw himself on to the dirt, writhing on his belly like a snake.

The sun was almost gone, its last rays buttering the sky. The chanting reached a climax. "Allah al haiyu" they screamed, "God is alive". The crowd was a frenzied, chanting mob, swaying as one like a wheat field in a gale, the drums like machinegun fire, and my heart keeping pace.

Suddenly, the drums stopped. It was over. The dervishes and crowd fell exhausted to their knees and prayed in the encroaching gloom, the dust settling slowly until all was still. My heart slowed.

When I said I was going to Sudan, most people asked: "Why?" Here is a country invariably framed in terms of bloodshed and hardship. From General Gordon, butchered by the Mahdi in Khartoum in 1885, to recent decades of famine and civil war and a president, Omar al-Bashir, wanted by the International Criminal Court over the Darfur genocide.

In 2005 there was a peace treaty and in 2011 South Sudan seceded, losing Sudan its title of Africa's biggest country. However, recent fighting on the disputed border, just 150 miles south of Khartoum, makes peace prospects seem remote. Less well known is Sudan's rich, ancient past, when the Kingdom of Kush was a superpower, dealing with Egyptian pharaohs and Roman emperors as equals, leaving behind some of the world's greatest archaeological treasures – including more pyramids than Egypt – lying in the desert unheralded and largely unvisited by outsiders.

I'd read, too, that the Sudanese were among the most hospitable people in the world, its ancient position as Africa's economic crossroads, linking the Middle East to sub-Saharan Africa, bringing together a thousand years of disparate cultures that led former US president Jimmy Carter to talk of the "essential humanity of Sudan".

And, as counterintuitive as it might seem, tourism is on its way to the country. Late last year I travelled to Sudan with Will Jones of Journeys by Design, a tour company dealing in luxury African travel, whose clients include Ralph Lauren. Jones was going to the country ahead of launching tailor-made trips there this year.

We headed north from Khartoum through benighted suburbs of houses built from sticks and rags, where donkeys and carts outnumbered other forms of transport. Soon we were crossing the Nubian desert on an arrow-straight strip of tarmac flanked by acacia trees and exploded tyres. Sudan may be only half the country it used to be but the distances are still vast. We drove for 300 miles through



Treasures Ancient Sudanese sites such as the 100 pyramids of the Royal City of Meroe, above, and the temple complex at Musawwarat es Sufra, below left, are becoming more accessible. The Nubian Rest House hotel in Karima, below right

an empty landscape thirsting under the desert sun, great waves of sand blowing across the road in the ferocious wind, the horizon broken occasionally by squat mud houses and the spike of a bright green minaret, like a crayon in a sandpit.

We pulled off the road and into a small Nubian village with date-palm roofs and whitewashed walls painted with henna flowers. A group of women came out with wide smiles and beckoned us into their home, where, in a courtyard lined with oleander and bougainvillea, they poured us karkade, a tart juice made from hibiscus blossom, and Sudanese coffee, strong, thick and sweet, infused with ginger and cloves.

We drove on for hours through the emptiness, passing the occasional train of ghostly pale Sudanese camels. The horizon to the right filled with a mirage-like strip of dark green, which came to meet us as our path converged with the Nile.

Along sandy tracks through the date palms, the harsh world transformed into a lush, benign place, villages clinging to the life source like an umbilical cord. We bounced past fields of sorghum grass being worked by emaciated-looking boran cattle and past smiling, leather-skinned old men, their faces framed by white turbans, riding donkeys laden with palm leaves.

On the east bank of the Nile we came to a row of mud-brick coned tombs, 15 metres tall, looking like giant bishops' mitres sticking out of the sand. Behind them were the ruins of Old Dongola, once a medieval boomtown and capital of the Christian kingdom of Makuria from the seventh century until 1323, when Islam arrived and the Coptic churches were converted to mosques.

Today it is slowly returning to dust, a collection of crumbling walls and marble columns sticking carcass-like out of the sand, the ground strewn with clay pots maybe a millennium old.

We camped in the desert, driving away from the road for 15 miles, across golden dunes and then a barren rocky landscape redolent of the moon.

After dinner, in the profound dark of a moonless night, I walked alone under a million stars. The desert roared in its deep, sonorous silence. I kept checking I could see the pinprick of light from the camp; if I lost it, I would probably die.

For the next week we drove, largely clinging to the serpentine Nile, carving its giant "S" in the desert. To Tombos, where 14th century BC stelae carved with hieroglyphics and pharaonic granite statuary lay lonely in the sand, and then to the market town of Kerma, the seat of the first Kingdom of Kush, where we climbed the ruins of one of two giant *deffufas* (a Nubian word meaning "mud-brick buildings"), dating from 1500BC, the oldest man-made structures in sub-Saharan Africa.

In Karima, alongside the hulks of the Victorian Nile steamer fleet, gently rotting amid a sea of acacia bushes, we ate *ful*, Sudan's salty staple of bean stew, and wafer-thin *kisra* bread made from sorghum. In the street men greeted each other with the "Sudanese salaam", a baroque ritual of shoulder tapping and embracing that made them look like courting swans.

We scrambled up Jebel Barkal, a sandstone mesa that the Egyptians and Kushites thought resembled the pharaonic crown, thus indicating that the god Amun must dwell within it. From the top, with

The crowd was a frenzied, chanting mob, swaying as one like a wheatfield in a gale, the drums like machine-gun fire

the ruins of an Amun temple below us to the south, and steep-sided pyramid tombs of third century BC Napatan kings to the west, we sat as kites wheeled overhead and, as a muezzin concert filled the air, the sky caught fire before fading to grey.

The next day we drove 250 miles across the Bayuda desert. Eventually Sudan's greatest treasure came into view: the pyramids of the Royal City of Meroe, another ancient capital of the Kushite kingdom, dating from the eighth century BC, standing alone high on a sandy ridge.

At 30 metres high, they are smaller than their headline-grabbing Egyptian counterparts and resemble a row of broken teeth due to decapitation in 1834 by Italian treasure hunter Giuseppe Ferlini, who thought, wrongly, that they contained great riches. But it's the sheer scale of the site – there are 100 pyramids in all, in various states of decay – that makes Meroe one of the most spectacular sights I have ever seen.

We walked among the pyramids, with not a tout in sight, quite alone in the desert with these silent, ancient tombs, the final resting place of Kushite kings and queens. We wandered into the low funerary chapels that adorn each pyramid, their walls covered in bas relief carvings, with scenes of processions, often with Isis in attendance, and long passages from the Egyptian Book of the Dead.

That night we stayed in permanent luxury tents set up on a ridge to overlook the pyramids and the ochre basalt hills beyond – built and run by an Italian company and

a sign perhaps that Sudan is beginning to realise its tourist potential. Nomadic tribesmen passed by on camels. It was impossible not to feel like the first Victorian adventurers to chance upon the place.

We headed back to Khartoum, driving across the sands to see the beautifully preserved, dune-haunted Amun and Lion Meroitic temples at Naqa, dedicated to the lion-headed Kushite god Apedemak, with their massive carved reliefs of Kushite kings and queens. And afterwards to the temple complex at Musawwarat es Sufra, where long ramped corridors and carvings of elephants suggest – though like much of Sudan's ancient history, nobody is exactly sure – a centre where elephants were trained for war.

On the outskirts of Khartoum, in Moheli, on a dusty plain, we stopped at Sudan's largest camel market, where hundreds of camels were complaining bitterly, having walked 600 miles from Darfur. After being sold, they would be walking, and doubtless complaining, another 600 miles to the dinner tables of Cairo. Men sat on their haunches in pairs, drawing figures in the dirt with their fingers.

On that last evening I went for a walk in Khartoum, under the mahogany trees lining the turbulent and oleaginous Blue Nile, dark with alluvial silt, which the Sudanese say represents the male sex, as it races in from the mountains of Ethiopia, wild and crazy.

I walked across a headland to the White Nile, pale and calm after its journey across the swamplands of South Sudan – the female, they say. And on to the tip of Tuti island, where the two rivers meet, the dark and the light, each holding on to its identity in a distinct colour divide for a few hundred yards before blending for the journey. This they call the marriage.

I heard drums and singing and came across a group of 30 young men in white robes gathered around a fire in the dust under the Tuti bridge. They beckoned me to join them. "Welcome, welcome," they shouted. The drums picked up, the dancing grew wild, the singing raucous.

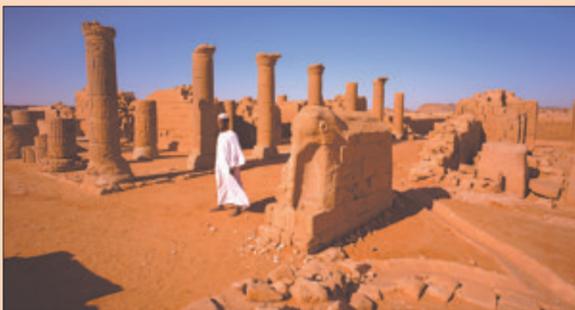
The men – some tall and black, others shorter, with the lighter skin of the Maghreb, and everything in between – seemed to represent the whole of Africa. As they danced and sang and watched me watching them, there was always the smile and the warmth in the eyes I had grown to know in this remarkable country. Beyond them, the Nile flowed past, timeless and indifferent.

Details

Mike Carter was a guest of Journeys by Design (www.journeysbydesign.com) and BMI, British Midland International (www.flybmi.com). A two-week tailor-made safari through northern Sudan costs from £3,500, including full board accommodation, private 4x4 and guide. Flights with BMI from London to Khartoum, via Baku, cost from £495 return.

ON FT.COM

For a slideshow of Don McCullin's pictures of Sudan, see www.ft.com/travel



Postcard from ... Klosters

When the sport of kings enlists rock royalty

It was almost midnight and the biggest storm to hit the Prättigau Valley since 1999 was just getting into its stride, when Markus Haltiner, the mayor of Klosters, got an urgent call. "It was Dani Waechter, director of Klosters Snow Polo," says Haltiner. "So much snow had settled on the tents where the ponies were stabled he was worried they might collapse." Within 30 minutes 10 local firefighters, Waechter and the mayor himself were on the scene to help in an emergency snow-clearing operation that went on until 4am. For the annual polo event, whose eighth edition ran from

January 18-22, overcoming obstacles has become something of a habit. In previous years Waechter's team has had to import snow, excavate powder-buried pitches and deal with temperatures so low the ponies struggled to breathe. This time around, 400 truck-loads of snow were dug out of the arena before the evening matches, lit by huge helium-filled lanterns, could start. Meanwhile a construction crew wrestled with an intriguing stack of shipping containers, timber and tarpaulins that would, the following night, be the Alpine Soul Kitchen, a pop-up, 200-capacity nightclub that could have beamed

down from either London's Hoxton or Zurich West's hip industrial zone. The club was the centrepiece of Altitude, a one-day music festival that accompanied the polo for the first time, a clear signal of the event's desire to stand out from more corporate tournaments and share the rarefied thrills of the "sport of kings" with a wider audience. The emergence of a music festival in the quiet, traditional village of Klosters is symptomatic of a trend that has spread across the Alps in recent years. Inspired by the success of Snowbombing in Mayrhofen, which is now in its 13th year and attracts an

audience of 5,000 and musicians such as Fatboy Slim and Dizzee Rascal, high-altitude music festivals have sprung up in numerous resorts, often being scheduled to fill hotels in what are usually the quietest weeks of the season. Klosters Snow Polo enlisted the help of Dan O'Neill, a consultant for east London's annual Lovebox festival, to book acts, including Duran Duran as headliners. After a performance by Swiss band Pegasus the clouds cleared for the first time in days and the world-conquering

Ski-o Duran Duran's Simon Le Bon Brummies fired out a hit-packed 90-minute set which had the crowd in the sold-out, 2,000-capacity marquee dancing like teenagers (despite an average age closer to 45). Next came another new fixture, a charity polo game and gala dinner in aid of Prince Harry's South African youth and HIV/Aids charity, Sentebale. More British

rock royalty joined the party in the form of the charity's representative Annie Lennox, who made a conscience-stirring speech before guests. "We put on a high-end event but it's not a manufactured marketing gig that turns up and invades the village," says Celeste Neill, the event's co-organiser. "It's open to everyone, it's relaxed, and we improvise quite a lot of it – Annie had to wait to make her speech while we went off and found her a box to stand on." Later Brighton-based DJs Andy Singh and Andy McKirdy traded Motown- and Stax-

inspired tracks in the Alpine Soul Kitchen, while guests danced around a bucket catching drips from the venue's one last unresolved leak.

Rupert Mellor

The writer was a guest of Swiss ([swiss.com](http://www.swiss.com)); returns from London City to Zurich from £126; the Switzerland Travel Centre (www.stc.co.uk); returns by rail from Zurich to Klosters from £95) and the Turmhotel Victoria (www.victoria-davos.ch); doubles from SFR300). For details of next year's event see www.klosterspolo.com

