





STANLEY STEWART EMBARKS ON A NOMADIC  
QUEST TO CROSS THE VAST BAYUDA DESERT, A  
STARTLING, LUNAR LANDSCAPE OF BARE BEAUTY.  
PHOTOGRAPHS BY ALISTAIR TAYLOR-YOUNG





SOMEWHERE IN THE DEPTHS of the Bayuda Desert we met Hassan. He was an old man, but agile as a gazelle. When he spotted our cars, he was down off his camel in a flash. He salaamed us, pumped our hands, clapped our backs and sang blessings on our families, while his camel leered at me over his shoulder.

Encounters in the desert often have a celebratory quality. It seems a triumph against the odds that you could have run into one another in all that empty space. Hassan was keen to make the most of it. He wanted the gossip. Who had we seen? What were they doing?

We had been driving all morning in a landscape that would make the ocean seem crowded and rather small. Harsh, elemental and beautiful, the Bayuda stretched into unfathomable distances.

There had been people, a few distant figures on the horizon, some on camels, some on donkeys. To Hassan, presumably, they were old friends, neighbours, relatives, popping out on some nomadic errand. To us, they looked like lost souls wandering in a Biblical wilderness, no doubt doomed to visions and prophecies.

To make conversation using my limited Arabic, I commented on his camel, perhaps in the hope that it would stop staring at

me. ‘*Helwa*,’ I said, hoping the word (‘sweet’) did not seem out of place for an animal. Hassan was quick to sense a man who had no idea what he was talking about.

‘He is yours,’ he cried. ‘Take him. Only 20,000 Sudanese pounds.’ He had already thrust the reins into my hand. ‘A man without a camel is half a man,’ he said. ‘Take this beauty. He suits you. Take him to England. Your friends will die of envy, 20,000 is a small price to pay for such a camel. Look – he likes you.’

The camel was looking at me as if I was something unpleasant he had stepped on. Hassan shrugged. He was beginning to see I was not a serious player in the camel market, and I had no news of his cousins over in Wadi Abu Tuleih. As a desert encounter, I was proving a bit of disappointment.

He shook our hands and bade us farewell. In a moment, he was back aboard the camel and on his way, waving over his shoulder. Back in the car, I turned to mark his progress.

At first I couldn’t see him. And then I spotted him, already small and inconsequential in a vast landscape, trotting through a mirage in the middle distance. But what was curious was that Hassan and his beastly camel cast a reflection. Their mirror image





was shimmering on the silver surface of a lake that didn't exist. In that strange moment, the desert's illusions and its realities merged.

**A**LMOST ALL of northern Sudan is desert. It is only the Nile, coming from distant provinces of rain in the heart of Africa, that gifts life to these barren regions. In the great bend of the river between the fourth and sixth cataracts lies the Bayuda, an eastern extension of the Sahara. Travelling with a couple of guides, a couple of photographers, the drivers and a cook, I was hoping to cross it, by camel and by car, some 200 miles between the two arms of the river. An heroic landscape, the Bayuda was just the place to be seduced by the romance of desert travel: the camels, the turbaned guides, the spectacular bleached light, the thrilling emptiness, the circle of tents beneath a dome of stars, the ancient ruins swathed in dunes, the sense that few things were what they seemed.

Let's begin with the ruins. We were heading north on a paved road from Khartoum, skirting the desert, a small, self-contained expedition travelling in two four-wheel-drives packed with tents, food supplies, several barrels of sun lotion, a hundredweight of

toilet paper and a faulty torch I had bought in an outfitters in Yeovil. Along the road, the landscape seemed to be unravelling. Its elements – roadside eating houses, villages, fields, children waving – were falling away one by one. Flat-topped acacia trees were scattered across the gravel expanses. Goats stood on their hind legs to nibble at the lower branches. And then these too were gone, leaving only the strip of paved asphalt, its verges littered with the scraps of truck tyres that had exploded in the heat, and the blank desert on either side.

After a time, we left the paved road and struck across the sands, following meandering tracks. Dust devils danced between black basalt hills. When the car got bogged down temporarily, I got out and walked the last half mile or so, arriving at the pyramids of Meroe in the romantic tradition, a solitary explorer on foot.

Half buried in sand, the pyramids are much smaller and steeper than their counterparts in Egypt. Containing the rulers of the mysterious Kingdom of Kush, they huddle together on a ridge. The

*The banks of the Nile just below the third cataract in northern Sudan. Previous pages, a nomad on a camel in the Bayuda Desert*





**FROM THE SWAYING BACK OF A CAMEL, THE DESERT IS HYPNOTIC:**





# THE UNDULATION OF OUR SHADOWS, THE VAST, BURNISHED SKY







## FINDING PYRAMIDS IN THIS REMOTE PLACE, A THOUSAND MILES

flanks of some are little more than a cascade of broken stone. But most are remarkably intact, bar the fact that the pointed tops were blown off by an Italian treasure hunter in the 19th century.

Finding pyramids in this remote place, a thousand miles upriver from their Egyptian equivalents, is like discovering a Tudor palace on a lake in Finland. If they seem out of place, they are also curiously out of date. When they started to lay the foundations for the first of these structures, in the eighth century BC, no one in Egypt had built a pyramid for more than a thousand years.

But I was learning it was better not to mention Egypt. To our guide, these were Sudanese buildings, and he was prickly about comparisons to the country with whom Sudan had always had a troubled history. In the small attached chapels, among the hieroglyphics, the reliefs of the Egyptian gods Horus and Ra, the depictions of pharaonic and religious paraphernalia, he pointed proudly to the women's bottoms. In the tombs of the Valley of the Kings or on the walls of Karnak, Egyptian women had slender bottoms. But these bottoms, the guide insisted, framing the reliefs with outstretched hands, were generous, impressive, more than a handful. These, he nodded knowledgeably, were Sudanese bottoms.

The following day, we crossed the Nile on a small ferry with five camels and an ancient Bedford lorry. The ferryman had been on the river since the age of 12, having inherited the job from his father and grandfather. It was doubtless the experience of three generations that allowed him to slouch in the stern smoking a cigarette, reading a week-old newspaper, chatting to

friends, while spinning the large metal wheel with his feet as he navigated the complex currents.

On the west bank we stopped for bread at a village bakery. For an hour or so, the Nile seemed hard to shake off. We had tea at a stall run by a jolly woman whose daughters were available for marriage for the bargain price of a second-hand car. We paused for a chat with a chap who needed advice about how to become an illegal immigrant in the USA, and were waylaid by another fellow who wanted a lift to Saudi Arabia.

Eventually, we made our way through the fields of sorghum beyond the village where men were cutting the crop with scythes. In the deep shade of a palm grove, three women smothered smiles in their headscarves. We came to the desert with an abruptness that was startling, entering it as you would a house, in a single stride.

Our camels were waiting, kneeling in the sands like sneering Buddhas. We climbed aboard gingerly, hanging onto the pommels. Then with a couple of sudden jerks, throwing us first forward and then back, the great beasts got to their feet.

Mounted, we set off into the wide embrace of the Bayuda. For a time, in the strange acoustics of the desert, the sounds of the riverbanks trailed after us: donkeys braying, children's voices drifting, the distant thud of water pumps. Then they were gone, leaving only the sound of the camels' soft, splayed feet, barely a whisper on the desert floor. We were riding into silence.

From a distance, the Bayuda looks like the scaly, desiccated hide of some prehistoric creature. Closer up, it is a wind-scoured





## FROM EGYPT, IS LIKE DISCOVERING A TUDOR PALACE IN FINLAND

wasteland of rock, gravel and thin grit, alternating only occasionally with sensual waves of sand, the classic desert dunes. In some reaches there are no features except for a few skeletal mountains riding the horizon. Elsewhere, hardy plants thrive: acacia, thorn shrubs, tussock grasses, the poisonous apples of Sodom. Most adapt with elaborate root systems penetrating the sands in search of water. Many have the ability to dry out completely and stage their own resurrection at the merest hint of water.

Like the plants, desert animals are all specialists. There is the Dorcas gazelle who can go its entire life without drinking, getting all the moisture it needs from plants. There is the bat-eared fox, whose kidneys are specially adapted to restrict water loss. And there is the remarkable monitor lizard. Monitors are highly intelligent, and have been known to count up to six in experiments at San Diego Zoo. Presumably out here in the Bayuda, their more savvy wild cousins are doing algebraic equations.

We rode all afternoon through a scattering of thorn scrub and grass. In the late light, our own elongated shadows trailed after us across the sands. From the swaying back of a camel, the desert soon became hypnotic: the heat, swimming in front of our eyes, the slow undulation of our shadows, the vast, burnished sky. The beginning of the world looked like this.

We camped in a dry wadi of sparse, bleached grasses, where grasshoppers the size of small birds buzzed from tussock to tussock beneath the feet of the camels. With the tents pitched

and the cook at work in the lee of a windbreak strung between two thorn bushes, we retired to the fire where the camel herders were brewing a kind of coffee known here as *jebena*, flavoured with sugar, ginger and cardamom. Night came suddenly; lit only by the firelight, the herders' faces seemed to float in the darkness. Above us, vast crowds of stars jostled for space in infinity.

**T**HE NEXT DAY, we took to the cars and drove for two days through a desert of surprises. We discovered the British monument to the Battle of Abu Klea, part of the Gordon Relief Expedition in 1885, when the Mahdist forces broke the British square. Scattered across the bony hills were the unmarked graves of the dead. We visited an extinct volcano – a dramatic caldera hundreds of feet deep, where salt is extracted by the donkey-load from the saline lake on its floor. We came upon nomads at wells, hauling glistening goatskins full of water from the depths of the earth, pouring it out into troughs for their goats and camels.

At night we pitched camps in the feigned shelter of the dry riverbeds. With our tents and fire and camp chairs, there was something reassuring about imposing a temporary domesticity on this wild place. But once we were gone, after a day or two of wind continually rearranging the desert surface, all the marks of our camp

*Above, from left: a traditional Nubian house; tombs in Old Dongola. Previous pages, a nomad battles the desert winds*















would be obliterated. There would be no sign that we had stopped here, as if our presence had no more substance than a mirage.

One night, a great wind began to howl: the famous *haboub* that has been known to bury entire villages. All night it blew, threatening to lift the tent from its moorings. When I crawled out in the middle of the night to check the pegs, the wind almost knocked me off my feet. The desert seemed to be on the move, snakes of sand whipping across its surface. It was like a gale at sea, the wind roaring and the sand thundering like rain on the tent flaps.

Just before dawn, the wind died, and the day arrived with the deceptive gentleness of a desert morning. The sands were placid as a pond. Doves cooed in the acacia scrub and delicate shadows pooled in the hills off to the west. Only the pretty, wind-sculpted drifts of sand, many of them banked inside the tents, were evidence of the previous night's violence.

**O**NE OF THE SURPRISES of the desert was the people who lived there. Suddenly there would be an inexplicable cluster of jerry-built huts, a flock of black goats, a couple of mournful donkeys. A dog barked and dark children appeared, followed by men in patched white *jalabiyas*. Their tradition of nomadic hospitality meant they couldn't let us pass without inviting us to tea.

One such invitation brought us to a family of women chaperoned by a 20-year-old man. Once we had taken our seats along a sagging metal cot, three sisters arrived, each more beautiful than the one before. Then the young man's mother appeared. Finally, his grandmother came in, a tiny woman with a stick. Ancient, weathered and thin, she seemed to echo the spare, unadorned landscape. Her face was a complex map of lines.

If the small hut seemed a little temporary, that's because it was. Instead of tents, these nomads build seasonal houses – rickety constructions of wood supports, rush matting and thatch. As they're people on the move, constantly packing and unpacking, it was all a bit of a domestic clutter. Camel saddles, ropes, rugs, mats, cooking pots and goatskins covered every inch of space.

A tray of tea arrived, and once the pleasantries were over, I tried to ask why they lived here. The Nile, with its verdant and seductive banks, was only a couple of days away.

The old woman made a face at the mention of the river, pulling that complex net of lines into a frown. 'Life is better here with our animals,' she said. 'We are not digging the earth like slaves.' She was reflecting the age-old idea, common among nomads everywhere, that a shepherd with his flocks was a free man while a farmer, on his knees in a field, was not. 'The river can be a bad place,' she went on. 'Too many people, too many problems.'

But the truth is that the life of the Bayuda is changing. Climate change is part of the shift. It does rain in these deserts – brief, seasonal showers – and the plants on which the nomads' animals graze are dependent on this water. But the failure of rains over recent decades had shaken their confidence, threatening a lifestyle that had lasted for centuries. A number of families had moved to the dreaded riverbanks. Among the young people of this family, there was the feeling that the old life, with its noble nomadic traditions, no longer made sense.

**A**FTER THE STARK SIMPLICITIES of the desert, the return to the green banks of the Nile was a moment of almost unbearable sweetness. In a Nubian village beyond Old Dongola we followed irrigation channels through the latticed shade of palm groves. From barren wastelands we had



arrived in a fertile world of birdsong and the scent of blossoms. There is a Sudanese word that conjures the sensation of the banks of the Nile, *dou'sh*. It refers to the aroma of wet earth but implies something soft, feminine, intimate.

We spent the night in a village house. Large and sculptural, with blank adobe walls and central courtyards, Nubian houses are a triumph of minimalism. The only furniture was a handful of chairs and metal cots, the only storage a line of hooks on a wall.

The matriarch of our house was a colossal woman with gold teeth and the tribal facial scarring more common 50 years ago in Nubian villages. Like the old woman in the desert, she too seemed to reflect her environment – in this case, abundant and lush.

In the evening, she brought a chair to sit beside me in a courtyard. Her manner was affectionate, almost flirtatious. She flashed her gold teeth and ordered tea from a passing daughter. She had a question.

'Why are you travelling?' she asked.

For a moment, I was stumped. The question was both too complex and too simple to prompt an easy answer.

'I wanted to see the desert,' I said.


She made a face. To the dwellers along the Nile, the desert was a place of evil spirits, the abode of the dead.

I tried again, hoping to humour her. 'I wanted to see the Nile.' She wagged her head. This was better, but do people really leave home just to see a river, she wondered.

Then finally, I had it.

'I've come to meet you. I've come to meet people, just like you.'

It was the answer she was looking for. She flashed her teeth again, and called for ginger biscuits.

Later, I realised that the answer was not so flippant. I had come in search of a desert. But what I had found were people. 

**Getting there** Journeys by Design ([www.journeysbydesign.com](http://www.journeysbydesign.com)) offers a two-week trip, full board, including a two-night camel trek through the Bayuda Desert, visits to the Meroe pyramids and Nubian villages, guides and transfers from £4,950 per person. Excludes international flights. Qatar Airways ([www.qatarairways.com](http://www.qatarairways.com)) fly from Heathrow to Khartoum