After the splendours of Luxor I hope my readers will be content to travel south with me up river to Sinai and the Red Sea. I have always wanted to climb Mount Sinai, although I had no idea what that ambition might entail, how much of a challenge it might prove to be. Whatever was I thinking?!

From Cairo I take the bus down to Hurghada, through miles and miles of white sand – a cruel desert landscape, then fly to Sharm-el-Sheik. Neither city seems particularly interesting and on landing I am thankful to be rescued by Suleyman, the Bedouin driver who is waiting to drive me to Dahab on the Red Sea coast. Tall, stern, beautiful looking and clearly educated, he does not speak much but there is a nobility about him, he has the proud distinctive bearing of his race. He wears the full traditional Bedouin dress, long flowing white robes and a thick red and white check turban around his head.

There are roadblocks all along the way and we are frequently stopped but Suleyman is prepared. He buys a dozen large bottles of water and a carton of 20 packs of cigarettes which he distributes freely to the idle-looking soldiers on the roadblocks. When I ask him about this he replies quite fiercely that they are doing a great job for him, his family, his country, keeping them safe. At one check-point the guards take my passport, walk across the road to their little cabane and do not return. After half an hour I begin to feel quite nervous – but then Suleyman is talking to them, and suddenly they hand it back and we are on our way again. The countryside as we approach Dahab becomes a mass of granite mountains of all colours, pink, grey, green, brown, hazy in the dusty air – dramatic scenery against the bluest of deep blue skies and the newly constructed road cuts a curvaceous swathe through the landscape.

I stay a few days in Dahab swimming and snorkelling in the sparkling blue waters of the Red Sea, taking a boat out one day to see the amazing Coral Reefs, still utterly beautiful though now much eroded by pollution and unthinking divers. The myriad fish are brilliantly lit and coloured, swimming in huge shoals all following some unknown leader like birds migrating in the sky.

Finally one night I decide to climb the mountain. I am warned to take warm clothing so bring along all I have, together with plenty of water and chocolate and my passport for the many roadblocks ahead. Around 11pm a minivan arrives to drive our little group to the foot of Mount Sinai, a two-hour journey. There are eight of us, an eclectic mix, travellers from Croatia, Belgium, Thailand, America, Spain and a young South American I had met in Cairo – even out here the world is small! For the first part of the climb there is an option to take a camel for which I am heartily grateful.

For two hours the camel makes his sure-footed way climbing under the dazzling moon so bright it turns the rocky scenery almost into daylight. I sit comfortably or lie back on the camel gazing at the infinite stars above – a magical experience. Riding the camel is perfect as the route is different to the one the hundreds of pilgrims on foot take, so there is a real sense of being alone on the mountainside. Under the brilliance of the moon and stars and with the rocky terrain all around, there is a grand silence except for the soft padding tread of the camels. The air is sharp and cold but windless.
After Elijah’s Basin the only way up is on foot and I join the many pilgrims wending their way up the mountain. Luckily Mohammed, the Bedouin camel man, decides to come with me, and indeed I could hardly make it without him. He is solicitous careful and kind, a true gentleman of the Desert. The last hour is steep and uneven, the stone steps each nearly a foot high which is hard going.

By 5 am I am seated on a flat rock gazing down on the slowly emerging grey dawn and sipping a delicious hot chocolate with Mohammed before the final climb. Refreshed, the last 15 minutes do not seem so hard and at last I am on the very top of the world! well of Mount Sinai anyway … and drinking in the glorious sight of the sun rising over the mountains, creeping in pink and gold and red. It feels like a real victory – this was not easy for me and coming down will not be much better. But I do it! It feels quite Biblical, Moses, the Commandments, a special place of pilgrimage and meditation, at the very heart of Christian, Jewish and Islamic culture and belief.

After the long trek down, we arrive at the foot of the mountain and St Katherine’s Monastery, dating back to around 330AD, which houses the longest continuously functioning monastic community in the world. The monastery has been the site of many historical events over its 1700 years – from the Emperor Justinian who built the Basilica and fortified the walls, to Mohammet declaring his Divine Protection against Arab hordes, to the finding of St Katherine’s body on a nearby mountain. One of the oldest copies of the Bible, the Codex Sinaiticus, is kept here (although not on show to the public), stolen and repatriated many times. After visiting the ancient Basilica and monastery it is back to Dahab for lunch and a day or two later I fly back to Cairo.

Having started these articles with Cairo it seems fitting to end there. The City welcomes me with its habitual rush and chaos after the peace of the desert and the Red Sea coast. Mustafa takes me to what I call the “Coffee Shop Street” off Talaat Harb and they all greet me like long lost friends, familiar faces jumping up to say hello and giving me plenty of hugs. Sitting companionably in the sunshine drinking coffee and smoking shi-sha, I feel a grand contentment.

One man writes a poem for me, scribbled on a scrap of paper and shyly hands it to me then disappears. It is in Arabic of course so I cannot read it and Mustafa has difficulties too. The others crowd round but only understand a word or two, and only one of them can decipher it. He reads it out slowly and they all giggle at the elaborate language but it is actually lovely and I keep it. Surprisingly many Arabs cannot read or write Arabic. Modern use of telephone texting however, is forcing a conformity of the language, raising the level of literacy. Even up to quite recently, reading and writing was only for the elite, vowels being virtually unwritten as the educated were expected to know which vowels should be used and where.

Dr Alaa calls me and I am commanded! to attend him that evening. He is giving a Seminar and would like me to be there. I have a rendez-vous already to meet Robert Twigger, a British writer who has been living in Cairo for some time and writes marvellously about Egypt. He invites me to meet him at the Maadi Great Mall outside Costa’s Coffee house and Craig, a Fireman from London who has been travelling through Africa for two years, comes with me. It takes over an hour to get through the heavy traffic, but finally we arrive and find Robert and his Egyptian companion Sania. They are charming, Rob leads a strange life out here, his favourite place being the Desert where he often goes to contemplate.

After chatting for over an hour we get up to go and are surprised to find ourselves bundled into Rob’s car and taken off to a Christmas party! It is good fun, I had forgotten all about Christmas. Craig and I meet lots of people, Egyptian and British, mostly artists and writers and an American pastor, all fascinated with tales of Craig’s
adventures. We have mulled wine and mince pies and there is a Christmas Tree – strangely incongruous in Egypt.

After a couple of hours we extricate ourselves to go to find Dr Alaa. Rob gets us a taxi to Ameen Sani Street and we climb the five floors to get to the Seminar which is in full swing. Dr Alaa spies me at once and waves me in. There must be a hundred men in here and half a dozen women. Of course it is all in Arabic and there is no time for Dr Alaa to translate for me, indeed I fear him halting proceedings to talk to us so Craig and I hide at the back and after half an hour we leave discreetly. I do not want to discuss politics in these articles but it is interesting to note that just three weeks later, in January of 2011, the Arab Spring movement began.

The next day Craig and I re-visit Dashur and the great Pyramids. The Red Pyramid is spectacular – probably the oldest true pyramid in existence, and red because uniquely it is made of sandstone. It has one of the best interiors although the air inside is hot and fetid. Craig goes down but I do not need to. Then the Bent Pyramid, resting place of Sneferu, which is beautiful and easily in the best condition. It is smooth, not built in steps like the others, with each block meticulously carved to slant upwards, an extraordinary feat, so precisely worked over 4,500 years ago. Finally we go to Saqqara and the famed Step Pyramid of Djoser, a masterpiece built for him by his Vizier Imhotep, now in grave danger of falling in. In 2006 a British team of experts was sent to restore it but during the troubles they had to leave and the present Egyptian government has put in a largely incompetent team, the future of the great Pyramid being again severely threatened.

Next day we decide to explore Coptic Cairo. This is the architectural heart of Christianity in Egypt. Wandering down the narrow lanes we pass ruins from the time of the Roman Empire and come across the famed Hanging Church, so called because of its location above a Gate leading into the Empire’s Babylonian Fortress. There are 29 steps up to it, which open out onto a grand ornate room with carved pillars and woodwork and a massive vaulted roof. The Churches of Saints Sergius and Bacchus are built here on the spot where it is believed the Holy Family rested on their Flight into Egypt.

The great Mosque-Madrasa of Sultan an-Nassir Hasan built during the 14th century in the Mamluk-Islamic area of Cairo, is a short walk away. In 1350 Hasan, at the age of just 16 began his rule, although due to his wild spending excesses he was soon imprisoned for three years. On his release in 1356 construction of the Mosque began, a vastly ambitious structure, with walls of over 36 metres, and minarets of 68 metres, and containing Madrasas (educational establishments) for the teaching of all four schools of Sunni Islamic thought, that is Shafi’i, Maliki, Hanifi and Hanbali. Although never completed and never (as intended) housing the body of Hasan, which disappeared after his assassination in 1361, it remains the grandest, largest and most fantastical of all Egyptian Mosques.

A late lunch in the buzzing Bazaar of Khan El-Khalili is a must and after browsing through the jewellery and leather shops we have falafel, and karkade, the traditional hibiscus-based tea with a shi-sha on the side. Each time I leave Cairo, the intellectual heart of the Arab world and its largest city by far, I promise myself to return soon as yet another Egyptian adventure in this ever fascinating country beckons.