



Beyond the Pyramids

Timothy Barber travels through the Sahara desert to experience the temples and spring waters of one of Egypt's most isolated towns

IF you construct your house from mud bricks, and the mud contains salt, you're going to have a problem when it rains: the salt will start dissolving and the house will collapse.

Of course, in the middle of the Sahara desert, that's not so much of a problem. The old Egyptian fortress town of Shali, a high-rising metropolis of mud constructions piled one on top of the other above the palms of the Siwa oasis, stood for centuries since the area was settled by Berber tribes in medieval times. A century ago, however, the once-in-a-millennium rains came and the town melted to rubble.

The deserted remains still overlook the present town of Siwa. They form a higgledy-piggledy heap of ruins that, beautifully floodlit by night, are both a throwback to the town's ancient origins and a reminder of the fragile transience of

life lived amidst the Saharan dust.

ISLAND OF FECUNDITY

The inhabitants of Siwa still build their houses the same way, mixing mud from the nearby Great Saltwater Lake with wood from the thousands of palm trees that grow around this island of fecundity in the sand dunes, and provide the finest dates and olives in North Africa.

Siwa is an intoxicating place, partly – perhaps particularly – because of its isolation. Deep in the Egypt's western desert, just 50km from the Libyan border, it's a world away from the sightseeing playgrounds of Egyptian antiquity, overrun as they are by peddlers of every kind of tourist tat to every kind of tourist.

Until just 40 years ago Siwa's population had little interaction with the outside world. They still speak their own dialect, along with Arabic, mostly get around by



brightly-painted carts pulled by donkeys, and keep their women hidden away from prying eyes.

STEPPING BACK IN TIME

Visiting the place is like stepping back in time, though how far back you step depends on which parts you visit. For Siwa, isolated as it may be, has its own connections to the ancient world, including antique ruins that, in their quietly understated way, are as beautiful and mysterious as any number of tombs or pyramids.

You reach Siwa via a single road through the desert, running for hundreds of miles from the Mediterranean resort of Marsa Matrouh. It is the kind of flat, endless landscape from which you might expect to see Omar Sharif appearing like a mirage, but it suddenly changes as you near Siwa, with great rock erosions bearing evidence to the presence of water.

The Siwan population numbers several thousand, making their living from palm and olive trees that number several hundred thousand. The dates are fabulously sweet, while the local olive oil is distributed throughout North Africa.

For the time being, tourism only offers a little to the local economy, and the rickety cafes clustered round the town's sandy central square are designed for locals rather than visitors. Nevertheless, if making a trip here, the Shali Lodge, with airy

rooms, beautiful open spaces and excellent food, provides a comfortable base.

And there are many interesting excursions to be made, most famously the Temple of the Oracle on the town's border. Built at some point during the 26th Dynasty (around 570BC), it is particularly well known for having been visited by Alexander the Great. The oracle was renowned across the ancient world, and upon conquering Egypt Alexander came

here to seek confirmation of his own divinity.

The temple stands upon a hill, its high, tapered square tower standing sentinel over the expanse of Siwan palms and the desert beyond. Picking through the stone ruins, where hieroglyphics can still be made out here and there in the oracle's inner sanctum, is made all the more eerie by the notion held by some scholars that Alexander is actually buried here.

Eerier still is the Mountain of the Dead, a rocky hill that erupts from the flat

desert and is pockmarked by hundreds of small holes – entrances to the tombs of thousands of ancient Siwans who are buried here. Some of these date back to pharaonic times, and stepping into the tombs you may be greeted with stunning hieroglyphic paintings.

HUGE NECROPOLIS

The sands of this huge necropolis are littered with pieces of bone – a jawbone here, a fibula there. It's amazing how chilling the desert can seem.

The Greeks were here, and of course the Romans were too. Out in the desert beyond Siwa, a crumbled collection of mud-huts is the earliest still-standing set-

tlement in the area, pre-dating Old Shali. At the heart of it stands part of a Roman temple, its interior blackened by soot from cooking fires long ago.

The Romans were also responsible for Cleopatra Spring, one of the finest of the hundreds of springs and pools where mineral-rich waters bubble to the surface. A large circle of carved stone, you'll find local kids bombing each other here, and you're welcome to join them.

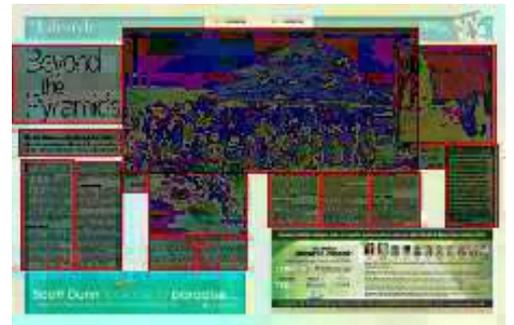
The best oasis waters, however, require a jeep-trip out into the desert. Squeezed into a rough and ready 4x4, you can enjoy a hair-raising ride at top speed over the expansive dunes of the Great Sand Sea, powering to the peaks and plummeting down the depths. Lord knows how the skilful drivers navigate, one dune hardly

different from another.

Eventually you arrive at the kind of rush-fringed lake you imagine desperate travellers flopping into after days adrift in the desert. Swim in its fresh waters, or bathe in the warm, medicinal waters of a nearby hot spring.

ROCK FORMATIONS

A little way away, your driver may leave you a while in a remarkable valley, where strange rock formations emerge from the sand. Dotted with fossils of starfish and crustaceans, and littered with thousands of seashells, they tell of an era before oracles and pharaohs, when this was the bottom of the ocean. It's astonishingly quiet, and utterly beautiful – a proper step back into the most ancient history.



SIWA: HOW TO GET THERE

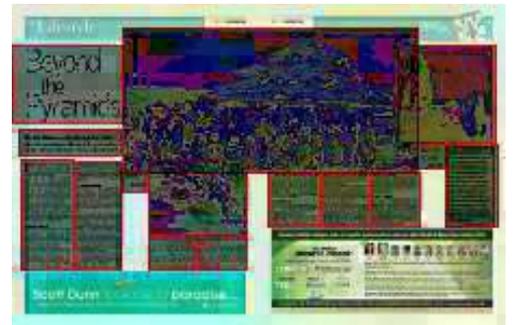
City AM travelled to Siwa with On The Go Tours, who specialise in touring holidays in Egypt, Jordan and elsewhere. On The Go's seven day Siwa to Alexandria tour begins in Cairo, taking in the WW2 battle site of El Alamein on the drive to Siwa via Marsa Matroh. Two days in Siwa include activities mentioned in article, as well as bike rides and sunset dinner and campfire at the Great Saltwater Lake. Following this journey to Alexandria, via Marsa Matrouh's Libyan market, finally returning to Cairo. Optional additions and bespoke tours are also available.

Price per person: £379 per person for two people sharing a room. £99 supplement for single travellers. For more information visit www.onthegotours.com



Right, cooking on the streets of Siwa

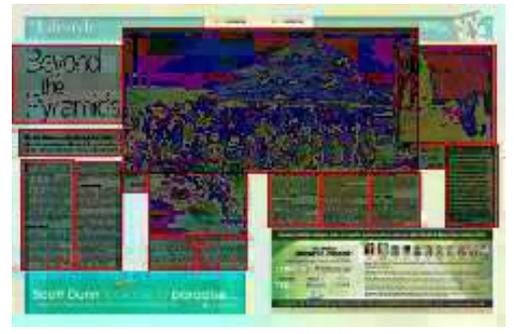
Picture: Timothy Barber/City A.M.



Above, the Temple of the Oracle at Siwa

Left, the collapsed town of Old Shali

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