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Dawn on the 'Mount of God'

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The first sign that there was something wrong came when our driver began muttering to himself in Arabic.

Then, without warning, he pulled off the road and gestured for us to get out - our minibus had broken down. It was in the middle of the night, and we were in the middle of the desert.

We had stopped next to an Egyptian military checkpoint. Our driver explained the situation to a soldier, who told us to wait with them until our new minibus arrived.

There we were - 13 foreign adventure seekers, half a dozen Egyptian soldiers, and a driver who didn't speak a word of English - alone together in the middle of nowhere.

But what could have been an unnerving situation turned almost comical when the soldiers, certainly not known for their hospitality, began laying chairs out for us in the sand. It was the first time I had been offered a seat by someone with an automatic rifle slung over his shoulder.

Luckily, after half an hour of writing my name in the sand, our new minibus arrived and we continued on to our destination - Mt. Sinai.

For adventure seekers, history buffs, and religious pilgrims alike, there are few better destinations in Egypt than Mt. Sinai. The mountain is revered as the spot where Moses received the Ten Commandments from God, and climbing it is a profound experience for anyone willing to go a little off the beaten track.

The best place to stay is in the nearby town of Dahab, which stretches along the beach on the Gulf of Aqaba. It is full of small hotels and beachside restaurants which constantly play Bob Marley - it is the Sharm el-Sheikh for budget travelers.

But I wasn't there to relax. I made arrangements with a local travel agency to be picked up from my hotel at 11pm. My plan was to climb the mountain in the middle of the night to watch the sunrise from the top.

When our replacement minibus finally arrived at the base of Mt. Sinai at nearly 2:30am, we were not greeted by the serenity of the desert or the harsh beauty of nature, but rather by at least 20 giant coach buses. Apparently, my small group wasn't the only one interested in seeing the sunrise.



The sunrise as seen from atop the historic Mt. Sinai, where Moses received the Ten Commandments from God (Chris Mallinos/Epoch Times)

I began my ascent. The trek was not very treacherous because most people followed the wide camel path. But what made things difficult were the hundreds of other climbers of all ages, shapes and sizes, as well as the countless Bedouin touts offering camel rides at "great prices."

Determined not have the crowds ruin my experience, I blocked out everything I could and focused on nothing but the mountain. The rocky path zigzagged its way up into darkness. The only sounds to be heard were the gentle murmurs of fellow climbers, and the rhythmic sound of footsteps. I walked as fast as I could.

After nearly an hour, I stopped and turned to see the most beautiful sight I've ever seen. Tearing through the darkness below was a narrow line of hundreds of tiny white lights bouncing up and down - the flashlights of people behind me. They mirrored the stars above, which at this point blanketed the sky.

The rest of the climb seemed like an eternity. Every time I thought I had finished, I would turn a corner and see another peak. I began to think the path went on forever. Finally, just over two and a half hours after setting out, I reached the top - 7500 feet high. It was still dark, and I staked out a spot on the edge. A group of nuns sat close to me. The small surface area at the top quickly filled with climbers. We squeezed together as tightly as we could in the freezing cold. Then we waited.

At 5:45am, a small yellow crescent peaked out over the horizon to the sound of awes (and cameras flashing). Within 10 minutes, the bright red sun triumphantly revealed itself to us - like a burning bush - as if it knew we were waiting. The sky became a pinkish-yellow and the mountains a deep orange. For the first time we could see what we had been walking through. The jagged edges of Mt. Sinai were the centerpieces of a vast and incredible mountain range which towered over the desert below. We stood at the top of it all.

After admiring the view for a while I decided to head down a different path, hoping to avoid the crowd. So I descended down the 3750 Steps of Repentance, carved out by a monk. They were as intimidating as they sounded, and I began to wonder just how many people have fallen and injured themselves on the narrow, slippery steps.

There were far fewer people on this route, and about two-thirds the way down I noticed that a previous climber had carved his name in the mountain - signed DW and dated 1890.

In 3 hours I was back at the bottom, exhausted and with throbbing calf muscles. After a quick visit to the 4th century St. Katherine's Monastery, where the bush God used to talk to Moses is believed to be located, I met my tour group and we piled back into the minibus.

Back at the beach in Dahab, I pulled out my copy of the Old Testament and began to read, trying to fully appreciate where I had just been. Nature, history and religion meet on the top of Mt. Sinai. It is a uniquely awe-inspiring place, a definite highlight of Egypt.

Though next time I'll spring for a better bus.

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