

## *THE LOST GARDENS OF SINAI*

Remarkably, scattered throughout the High Mountains of Sinai there are hundreds of derelict gardens. They grew out of a unique collaboration between the monks of St. Katherine's Monastery on Mount Sinai - with their tradition of walled gardens providing self-sufficiency in herbs and medicinal plants - and the nomadic Bedouin families, who, though they cultivated gardens at the oases on the desert plain, had no tradition of cultivation in the mountains.

These High Mountain gardens were essentially domestic in purpose and each of them would have been cared for by one Bedouin family. They vary in scale from something like a small cottage garden to something more like the walled garden of a country house. Sometimes the gardens are in broad wadis (dry river-beds) flanked by the rugged, sprawling rock slopes of the mountains and sometimes they are miraculously set within hidden ravines, narrow strips of cleared ground, competing with huge rounded boulders and overlooked by precipitous and wind-sculpted rock-faces. Very often there is a small building where a hermit from St. Katherine's might stay, or where simple acts of worship take place; sometimes these buildings themselves, no matter how humble, are referred to as monasteries.

The gardens were the product of collaboration between two very different cultural groups, involving a mutual exchange of knowledge, skills and understanding.

These gardens were models of self-sufficiency, adapted sensitively and intimately to their environment, nourishing body, mind and spirit, and on this basis they were also examples of a sustainable relationship between people and environment.

The gardens became lost when the temptations that were brought by rapid urban growth, in cities such as Cairo and Nuweiba, together with the potential of the tourist economy, began to lure the Bedouin away from their traditional way of life. The gardens fell into disrepair and were often abandoned completely as the families moved elsewhere.

Today, for many Bedouin, the promises of the city and of tourism have not materialised and, as in other places where this process has taken place, there is considerable poverty and perhaps even greater loss of pride, and so for some the traditional way of life still beckons, even though much of its infrastructure has withered away.

The Makhad Trust has initiated the Gardens Restoration Project in order to help re-establish this infrastructure and revitalise the option that it offers to the Bedouin economy. The plan is to restore gardens at a rate that is determined by the Bedouin themselves – it happens because they believe in it, not because someone else thinks it's a good idea. The plan is for the gardens to

develop a greater diversity – herbs, fruit, nuts, olives, medicinal plants – and for self-sufficiency to extend towards selling produce, both to specific partner organisations such as the Sekem Cooperative for Biodynamic Agriculture near Cairo, and to tourists. The plan is that visitors to these gardens will contribute to their welfare, whether through participation in a working party organised by The Makhad Trust or by buying produce or paying for overnight accommodation. The plan is that the project contributes to the economy and development of the Bedouin community and also provides an example of ecologically sustainable tourism.

The location of each garden is always dependent on the presence of water. The Makhad Trust, in association with the restoration project, is also funding the building of two new wells, one in a beautiful garden where the Archbishop of Sinai has a small retreat, and one at a location in the desert where it has been agreed it can be shared by at least five different Bedouin tribes, including the Muzeina and the Djebelieh.

Each of these gardens in the wilderness once brought a marvellous life to the desert. Each is like a little Eden. The project to gradually restore these gardens is one of The Makhad Trusts' most exciting initiatives.

The Makhad Trust  
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