

# Walk like an Egyptian - the Sahara, Coptic Church and a priest on his mobile

By Tertia Butcher

In Egypt you can ride a motorbike without a helmet (but it is a status symbol if you casually hold one in your hand), buses don't need to have doors, you can travel in the back of a ute, passengers don't have to wear a seat belt and you can stack 20 people into an eight-seater van.

But a mini bus cannot drive faster than 90 kilometres an hour on the Desert Express – a deserted three-lane dual carriage highway across the Sahara between Cairo and Alexandria.

A speed camera will have you pay an on-the-spot fine of 400 Egyptian pounds (\$80) in no time.

So it was a long road north to the Pearl of the Mediterranean for our Travelscene Hay escorted tour group, with not much to see other than sand seas, sand storms, sand dunes and more sand.

We sighed with relief 100 kilometres north of Cairo when our Egyptologist guide, Hassan announced we are stopping at Wadi El Natroun, one of the earliest Christian monasteries in the world.

What a treat this was!

Here we visited the Monastery of Saint Bishoy, one of the oldest Coptic Churches in the world and kept immaculately. The Coptic Orthodox Church is one of the most ancient churches in the world and was founded by St Mark the Apostle during the first century AD. It is the major Christian religion in Egypt.

We were told that the body of St Bishoy (who died

in 417 AD) remains uncorrupted in a shrine in the monastery.

The reason for this dates back to 407 AD when, according to Coptic scripture, Jesus promised to appear to all the monks on the top of the mountain at an appointed day. On that day all the monks hurried up to the top, except St Bishoy who followed them with his stick. On the road he met a frail man whom he helped by carrying him. As St Bishoy walked up the mountain, the load became lighter and lighter until the old man disappeared. St Bishoy heard a voice from Heaven saying: "Because you carried my body, your body will not see corruption".

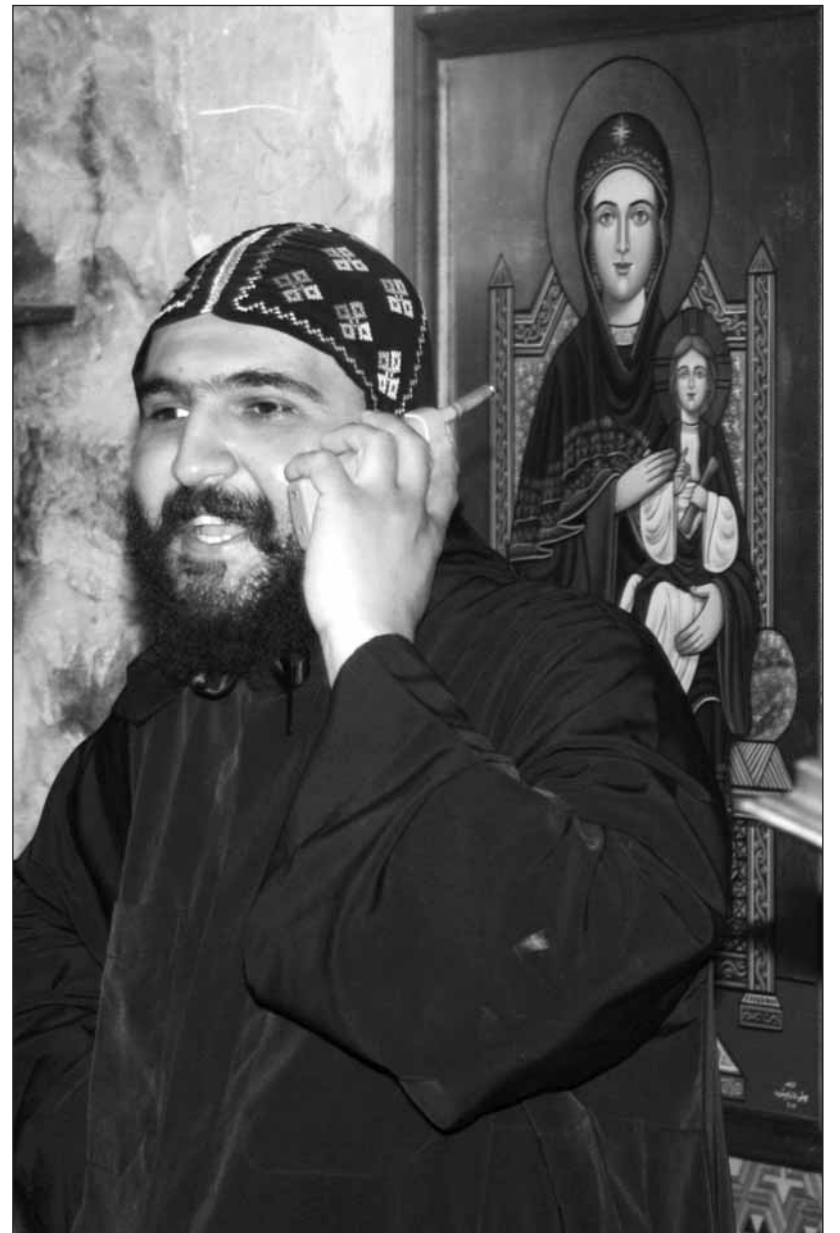
When St Bishoy died 10 years later his body was buried in Upper Egypt. Twenty-four years later his body (still uncorrupted) was moved to the monastery.

The monastery is surrounded by a keep, which was built in the fifth century AD to protect it against the attacks of the Berbers (indigenous people of North Africa).

We also saw the Well of the Martyrs and were told that the Berbers washed their swords in this well after they killed 49 Elder martyrs and subsequently threw their bodies in the well.

Under the current Pope of the Coptic Orthodox Church, Pope Shenouda III, the Monastery of Saint Bishoy began to expand, with new land purchased and developed.

Cattle breeding, and poultry and dairy facilities



were also developed to ensure the Coptic community is self-sufficient.

Amid all the traditions of an orthodox church, we were quietly ushered into a chapel next to an area where holy communion was being served to the monks.

Incense wafted through the air as our priest explained to us, during a two-hour long sermon, what Coptic christianity was about.

A phone rang. We froze – someone had forgotten to turn off their mobile.

Anxious faces stared at the priest who reminded me of my 'fire and brimstone' preacher grandfather. How will he react to this?

Without missing a beat, the priest (pictured above) delved one hand into his ample black cloak, and from the depth of his pocket retrieved a phone and began to speak in rapid Arabic.

He totally missed the point when we

all burst into laughter.

For him it was quite normal – he is a former surgeon and answering the phone is very important, no matter where you are.

He did assure us though that it was only a house phone and that the gardener needed to speak to him – urgently. Back on the road to Alex again we passed a roadworks sign – slow down to 60 – 40 -20; pretty much the same as trying to get to Wagga from Hay in a hurry.

But here in Egypt the ingenious locals make the most of the traffic conditions. Under an umbrella (pictured below), just where you have to finally stop your car, there is a makeshift stall selling scarves, walking sticks, local dates and sunglasses made in China.

I do love Egypt!

To continue next week.



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