

In Egypt's desert, an oasis blooms anew

BY CATHRYN DRAKE

LONG ISOLATED from everything but Bedouin caravans and the occasional conqueror, the Siwa oasis has all the hallmarks of a great escape: adventure, exoticism, history, relaxation—even great food.

This idyllic island of green is located in Egypt's vast Western Desert, where the powdery dunes of the Great Sand Sea begin. The desert contains some of the most arid land on earth, but this lush spot is home to about 300,000 date palms, 80,000 olive trees and four sapphire salt lakes.

Still known for its prized dates (a specialty often stuffed with almonds), Siwa seems to have changed little in the past 2,000 years, with torrid winds blowing up from the Saharan dunes to carve their story in its golden hills. But the oasis, visited by travelers as varied as backpackers and European royalty, is now being touted as a destination for ecotourism.

Mounir Neamatalla, a U.S.-educated Cairo native, hopes to make Siwa a model of sustainable development with private incentives and microfinance programs through his organization, EQI.

Captivated on his first visit in 1996, Mr. Neamatalla opened the Adrère Amellal ecolodge four years later. Built from the local material kersheef, a mixture of mud and salt, the compound blends into the landscape and requires no electricity. At night, the lodge is illuminated completely by candlelit lanterns. Organic gourmet meals, served under the shade of date palms near the swimming pool, are cooked using propane tanks with ingredients grown mostly on the premises.

A spring delivers water to the pool, garden and 40 rooms: Water flows from the pool to irrigate the garden and plantations, and from the showers to the wetlands, where the runoff is purified through a system of absorbent papyrus and three layers of rock salt, finally streaming into Birket Siwa, a large salt lake.

Near Egypt's border with Libya, Siwa is an eight-hour drive from Cairo unless you have a private jet and permission to land at the military airport 40 kilometers away. An asphalt road linking Siwa to Marsa Matruh, on the Mediterranean coast, was built in 1981, ending the oasis's centuries of isolation.

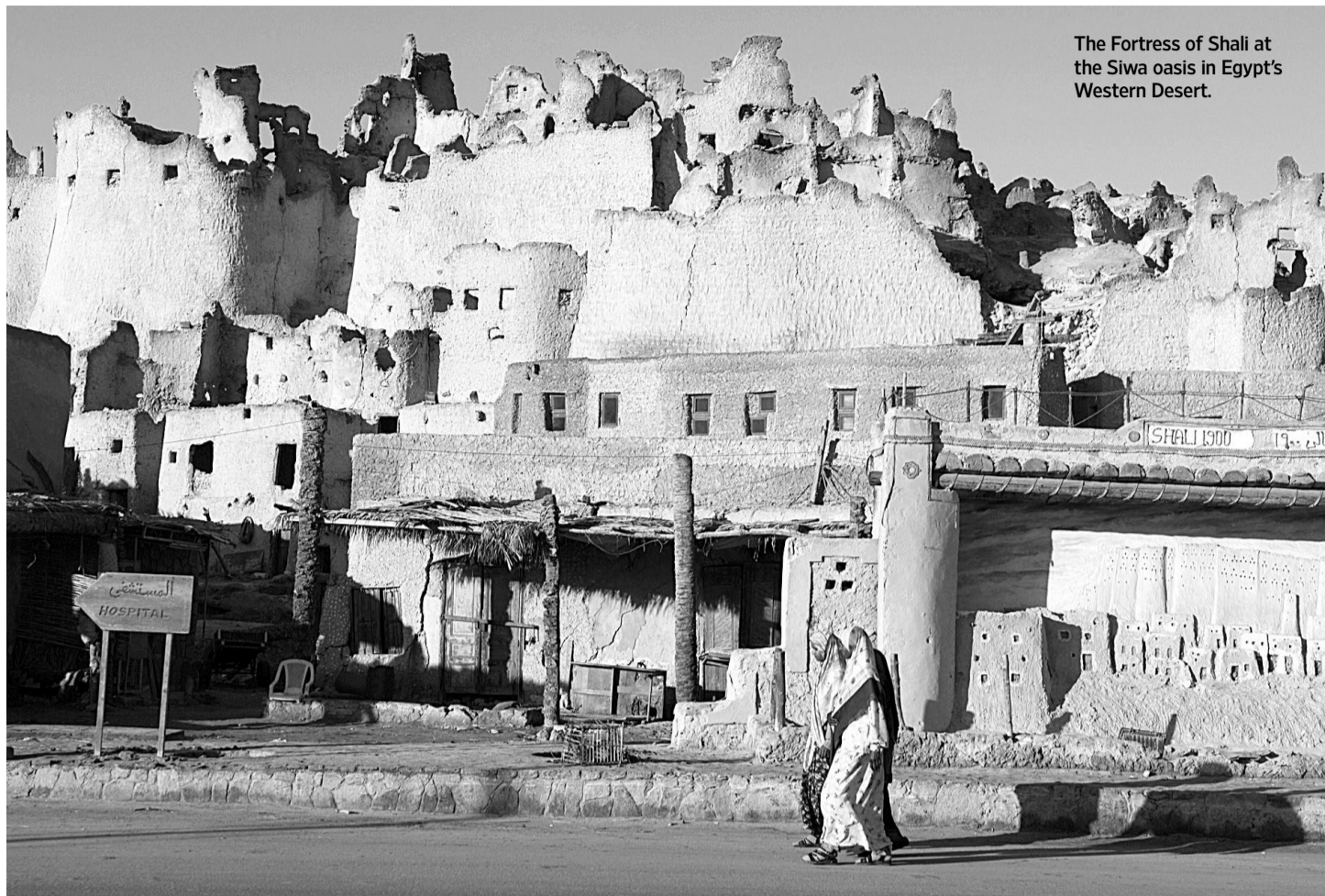
By the time I first visited Siwa in 1999, too many wells had already been dug, resulting in frequent flooding and the prospect of water supplies running dry. Rumors of a commercial airport were also on the horizon. But the memory from Siwa that remained etched in my mind was that of a courtyard piled with green and black olives, with a youth in a loose white tunic straining at an olive press in time-honored tradition.

Ever since, I had longed to return to see whether Siwa's timeless charm would be just a memory impoverished by the invasion of modernity and tourism, like so many former earthly paradises.

A flier from the Siwa Tourist Office dubs the oasis "the world's first and oldest tourist destination." The most remote oasis in Egypt, Siwa has also been inhabited the longest. Its Berber natives, who have retained their unique language and customs, are more akin to their tribal relatives in the Maghreb than to fellow Egyptians. Home to the Oracle of Amun, whose ancient temple is still partly standing, Siwa was first settled about 10,000 years ago and sought out for its valuable salt supply.

Over the centuries the remote palmed enclave has enticed many to brave the route through the scorching desert. In 524 B.C., an army of 50,000 Persian soldiers reportedly perished in a sandstorm on the way to sack Siwa. After establishing Alexandria nearly 200 years later, Alexander the Great headed south from the coast for an eight-day trek to get confirmation from the divine mouthpiece that he was a god, the son of Zeus.

Reaching Siwa is difficult enough that the arrival itself is part of the reward. As we turn south from the Mediterranean coast, the wind augurs the road by whipping up a minor sand-



The Fortress of Shali at the Siwa oasis in Egypt's Western Desert.

storm.

After about three hours of flat nothingness and an occasional military watchtower or oil-field track, we encounter giant flat-topped plateaus reflecting the geography of the former seabed (fossils of ancient mollusks can still be found among the wavy dunes). Soon, mud dwellings and palm trees spring up out of nowhere, culminating in the town center, announced by a few larger cement buildings and finally the medieval citadel and small market square.

Mr. Neamatalla recently opened two more modest hotels in downtown Siwa. The mud-brick Shali Lodge, a five-minute walk down a palm-lined road from the main square, is decked out in handicrafts and Bedouin carpets, with a large lounge area and lively terrace restaurant.

I stayed at Albabenshal, an 11-room bed and breakfast built into the ruins of Shali, the 13th-century citadel, which is being restored. Indiscernible from the ancient mud structure, which resembles a melting sandcastle, the hotel has a calming, spare aesthetic, adorned with carved palm-wood doors and shutters,

cylindrical salt lanterns, and striped Bedouin carpets in earth tones.

The rooms are comfortably ventilated with a traditional cooling system: 50-centimeter-thick mud walls with three circular holes in a triangular arrangement near the ceiling. The highest one conducts heat out; the lower two, half the diameter, bring in fresh air.

About 12 kilometers southwest of Siwah is Bir Wahed, a hot sulfur spring discovered by oil prospectors, framed by palms and some tufts of grass, where one can take a dip and recline as the afternoon sun diminishes in intensity—followed by a refreshing swim in the cool spring nearby.

Closer to Siwa, it's easy to while away the day at the Adrère Amellal ecolodge, a short drive out of town and beyond the ancient necropolis Gabal al-Mawta, or Mountain of the Dead, a site with an impressive view and beautifully decorated tombs that locals believe to be haunted. Adrère Amellal is nestled between the tabletop White Mountain, for which it is named, and Birket Siwa.

At a small circular tower on the lakeshore we have green mud from Upper Egypt slath-

ered all over us. There is a small pool where you can rinse yourself after the mud dries. Our poolside lunch: pea risotto with stuffed beetroot leaves and iced hibiscus-mint tea, followed by crème caramel.

Mr. Neamatalla, whose hotels are managed by locals, has started a trend of historic restoration and is behind many of the microfinancing initiatives in the oasis, including organic agriculture, and training and employing local women to embroider clothes, part of a fashion business headed by his sister, Laila.

"There is no development without women's development," he says. Europeans are also buying and building houses around the oasis and stimulating employment.

British art dealer Michael Hue-Williams, who flies in with his private jet, has built a chic, airy residence in kersheef next to the resort. He facilitates major art projects for Siwa, such as Chinese artist Cai Guo-Qiang's 2003 collaboration with local schoolchildren to make and fly hundreds of kites in the desert, and a sailing ship constructed by Russian artists Ilya and Emilia Kabakov in 2005 with the help of local kids.

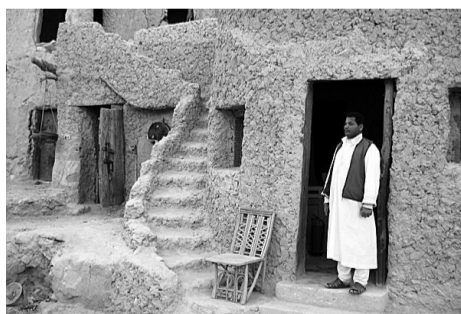
In her 1999 book "Pillar of Sand," fresh-water expert Sandra Postel observes, "It is impossible to talk about the history of human civilization without talking about water." In Siwa—a microcosm of our planet's environmental dilemma—one is constantly aware of both its presence and its dearth.

With the increasing population and influx of tourism requiring more wells, the issue of whether to open a commercial airport may be merely academic: It would likely only speed up the inevitable loss of the very character that draws visitors to the oasis.

I remember a romantic sunset at the thermal pool on Fatnis Island, in Birket Siwa, with a thatched café that the proprietor dubbed his "million-star hotel." But to avoid seeing anyone, go to the hot springs behind Gabal Dakrur, a sacred mountain, at midnight and soak under the cool light of the full moon, where you will feel utterly out of this world.

For now at least, although all that remains of the oracle of Amun is a ruined temple, Siwa is still one of the few magical places left on earth to relax and regenerate far from the globalizing crowds—and at least feel like a god.

—Cathryn Drake is a writer based in Rome.



Clockwise from above left: entry of bed and breakfast Albabenshal at the ruins of Shali; resting at a desert spring; lunch at Adrère Amellal; the Adrère Amellal ecolodge.

