



# The Petrified Forest

A sanctuary for desert lovers just outside of Cairo

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In this city, sometimes I feel like I'm watching people through a giant fish tank, one that I'm trapped in. Through the glass, I can see their lips move but I can't hear a word. Other times, I feel like a solid object floating in a sea of noise -- an incessant chatter. And I could hear neither my soul nor God. The universe is closed to me.

The Bedu, those who roam and wander in the desert (and we all know thanks to J.R.R. Tolkien that "not all those who wander are lost"), are very silent people. When I meet some of them in journeys that go into the depth of the *Sahara* (Arabic for desert), I always regard their "silence" with a mix of envy, reverence and dread -- the latter resurfaces when I remember my own episodes of silence. It's not easy, sometimes, to be alone with your thoughts. We have also been conditioned to associate silence with loneliness, waiting -- and worst of all-- with separateness.

Silence is a presence, and on that day less than a month earlier, I felt I craved it.

I was at a rowdy party with some friends, including a young avid traveller who takes frequent sojourns with his ghosts into the desert, when the notion of going away popped up. It began with the both of us saying that we miss the desert. "Do you want to go now?" He suggested. "Right now?" I asked, with a smile. "Yeah," he said, shrugging his shoulders. We managed to find two other friends who would join on



the spot, and a couple of hours later, we were heading to the nearest strip of desert in the vicinity of the Greater Cairo: The Petrified Forest.

It was a small spur-of-the-moment decision, and all we needed was an able 4X4, which my friend owned, some food, drinks and enough water. One of us had an iPhone to track our route once we're on sand, and the friend with the car provided jackets for everyone. His car already carried a blanket, a head-torch and two carpets. A matchbox to light a fire using wood from the small 'desert' was all we needed.

Mind you, we were not all dressed for it -- but this turned out to be one of the fondest memories of this small adventure.

In 'V for Vendetta', both the Graphic novel and the movie adaptation, there's a scene where V's girl Evey Hammond --played by Natalie Portman in the movie-- ventures out on a balcony after a horrifying albeit liberating episode in her life. Under the pouring rain, Evey stretches her arms, soaking wet, and announces, "God is in the rain."

I pondered.

God is in the darkness, I thought as my friend maneuvered traffic in Cairo with his bulky Wrangler, the music of Dream Theatre emanating from the vehicle's stereo.

No, I corrected myself moments later, he's in the singularity which encapsulates both the darkness and light, and all the opposites, the feminine and the masculine, space and sea, Yin and Yang, good and evil. He's in the silence. And the silence is Him. Whoever is your God -- even if it's yourself-- you'll find Him in the desert, the silent womb that hides us from the world when it becomes too mundane, too un-God-like ... too loud.

We were soon driving through the 'circular road' (*al-da'ery*) heading to what is crudely known in English as The Fifth Settlement or *al-Tagamu al-Khamis*, which the Petrified Forest is near. The 'forest' itself is a small protectorate surrounded in the distance by gated communities and some roads. But some parts of the forest are less elevated than others, drowned between small hills, so they hide any sign of civilization from view, including the nearby dirt roads.

The area is void of any flora or fauna -- but insects and small snakes, and perhaps fennec foxes, have made appearances to visitors of this area. There are of course petrified trees, which the forest is named for -- and if you are lucky, like my friend, you can find an ancient log of wood which you can carry or pocket (depending on its size) for keepsake.

Entering into the forest was a bit tricky, since the strip of desert was surrounded by small hills of rock. We scoured for a suitable entrance for a few minutes, driving along the stretch of sands on both sides of the road, before we found a small passage (for those of you who would like to visit. These are the coordinates of the entrance: 29°59'22.33"N 31°28'6.58"E. Use Google Earth). We were solo, and getting stuck

alone was something we tried to avoid -- our friend who was driving was confident he could press past a rather nasty-looking pile of rocky sand, very well near the entrance, which was what stood between us and the desert ahead.

But of course, the desert mocks in its own peculiar ways, and we were soon stuck, a minute later actually. Mind you, we left the party back in the heart of Cairo and went straight to the desert -- without changing. So you can imagine how out of place I might have looked in that barren area, digging out sand from beneath the tires, in my short dress, coat, and ballet shoes, pushing and shoving rocks, along with others, and trying desperately not to make a hole in my favorite pair of pantyhose or chip off my fiery red nail varnish.

Four people, and it took us around 20 minutes to get unstuck, the last five of which, we were pushing the feisty vehicle like there was no tomorrow. Then again, the remote area near the suburbs of Cairo is infamous for thieves and pillagers, and we didn't want to catch their attention so close to the road -- where only a dull-looking tractor passed in the time it took us to release the car.

But the God who lived in the silence of deserts was generous, and we merged our wills with His, and after a thrust of force, the car moved past this spot reeling into the desert, its engine roaring triumphantly. Cheers and high-fives followed -- the stress we all seemed to mask so well while we wondered minutes earlier "What if we can't get out of this?" was released from bondage and we were laughing with relief again.

Two kilometers in, we chose a nice spot to set camp -- the flattest ground we could find-- since sitting near a small hill or rocky pile meant insects and creeping lizards could pop out. One of our friends kept insisting that the area had 'vipers' -- not a good thought when you're already there. We soon brushed off the image of 'vipers' from our heads, instead diverting our attention to making a bonfire. We used wood from the area. We started brewing aromatic tea with "*marmariya*" from Sinai -- its smell bringing sweet peace to our small gathering. The stars twinkled above, and the silence was ... beautiful.

Nearing dawn, a fog started to creep in. So did the cold. I pulled a blanket tightly around me and was soon lost in thought.

A fog tip-toeing from all directions was a different sight in the desert -- the white clouds created a surreal dreamy atmosphere as it hugged us and concealed everything else from view. At this point, we were all huddling in a small circle around a dying fire. The friend --the traveller-- was struggling to keep the burning timber alight. He had once told me he liked looking at the light of fire. And it looked like, as he turned the wood, blew at the flames, and just watched it grow, that this was his form of meditation.

Bouts of silence punctuated the quiet chatter, and the stillness was a field of energy in its own right.

The desert, and its elements, teach you to love your mind, I thought. But you have to hate it first. You have to endure its venom, before you learn to forgive it. Unlike the heart, it's the only piece of us that feels like someone else's -- like a different person. Antoine de St. Exupery once wrote that, "one must have ruined oneself for generations keeping a crumbling chateau in repair before one learns to love it." My mind is this crumbling chateau, and in those hours, when I'm blessed with a friendly encounter with stillness, is when the repair takes place. I tell my thoughts I forgive them, and I love my ghosts, like Saint-Ex, "with the only love that matters."

At some point, looking at the fog as we sat in its stomach or failing to look through it, I thought to myself, perhaps I was wrong. Perhaps, God was in the fog after all. Or maybe like religions profess, he's everywhere -- and the fog is his hand, reaching out.

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