

Breaking the Ice: One more leaves

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In 526 BCE, the Persian emperor Cambyses received a prophecy from the Oracle of Amun located here that his expedition to conquer Egypt would fail. Legend has it that, in his anger, the emperor sent an army of 50,000 men to destroy the oracle. En route, they were swallowed by a sandstorm, never to be seen again.

The Sahara Desert did not engulf the entire Breaking the Ice expedition, but a stop in Siwa has cost the peace mission another member.

the former body double for Uday Hussein, left Saturday for Cairo. He is the third Muslim participant to leave the expedition since they met three weeks ago in Jerusalem, leaving only Palestinian Muhammad Azzam Alarjah and Iranian Neda Sarmast with two Israelis, two Americans, and a Ukrainian.

Before leaving, Yahia said he intended to rejoin the group in Cairo and travel with them for the journey: planting the olive tree from Jerusalem that was meant for Tripoli on Mount Sinai instead. But he has spoken daily of leaving for the last week, and already the group is placing bets on whether he will return.

After being turned away from Libya due to the presence of three Israelis in the group, the new plan was hatched at a meeting late Friday night under a moonless Siwan sky.

"What better place [to plant the tree] than somewhere where all three faiths have claims?" said New York Fire Department Cpt. Daniel Patrick Sheridan. "It's symbolic of bringing the three religions together."

Held amongst torches and sound recording equipment, the meeting was the second tense encounter in as many days for the peace mission which, with its dwindling numbers, is feeling more and more like a Survivor series.

However, in this Sahara Desert version, the tribal council meetings are used to urge members to stick out the journey rather than kick them off the island.

"The expedition is about people from different backgrounds and cultures achieving peace between us," said Israeli Galit Oren. "So many people leaving the group means that we failed to do it."

So then there were seven, and they spent two days traipsing around Siwa by day and camping at a hot spring on the edge of the Great Sand Desert at night.

In the 2,500 years since the emperor's army vanished, few places in the world have changed as little as this mystical desert oasis, which only opened to tourists in the 1980s. With thousands of palm trees and vast lakes suddenly appearing out of the parched Saharan earth, Siwa still beckons the wary desert traveler.

Donkey carts are used to haul goods from the market as well as ferry tourists from the central square across from Abdu's Restaurant through the shade of the drooping date trees. Nearly every woman in Siwa - the locals are ethnic Berbers - wears a blue burka and a stark black veil that completely covers her face, with no eye slits.

The 800-year-old Shali, the old city of Siwa, though mostly uninhabited, still stands in a maze of mud brick that was never rebuilt after the "Great Flood" of 1926, when it rained here for three straight days. The average rainfall here is three millimeters per year.

At sunset, the last rays of the day strike the limestone Mountain of the Dead which peaks above the sea of palms. In dozens of caves dug into its second-tier plateau, some 100 meters below the summit, lay the bones of thousands of Siwans from ages past, open to the air and the dozens of tourists who walk among their graves every day.

Like Alexander the Great, who came in 332 BCE, the Breaking the Ice mission also made a pilgrimage to the Oracle of Amun. Though they did not receive confirmation of their divine bloodlines, as the man who conquered half the known world had, they saw it as a chance to improve their karma before heading back into the desert after the recent trying days.