

Desert rain is no surprise to hardened trekkers

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THE GREAT SAND SEA, Egypt - It rained here Monday. Not just a few drops, but a steady rain for hours.

So what's the big deal?

Asked when the last time it rained here was, local guide Yahia Kandil said: "Maybe three or four or five years ago."

Despite the odds, no one from this expedition was surprised as this peace mission has taken on a "what next?" attitude as it hits the home stretch in its push to plant an olive tree from Jerusalem on Mount Sinai.

The comedy of errors isn't weighing on everyone, though. "It's an adventure," said Ukrainian Yezgen Petrovich Kozhushko, who fought in the Iraq war. "The rain and everything else doesn't bother me."

The rain came on the second leg of a two-day, 700-kilometer push from the desert oasis Siwa to Cairo via the remote Baharia road - "road" being a generous description of the mostly rocky, often

jarring, military checkpoint-laden path which links the Baharia oasis with Siwa.

Before setting out, special travel permits were required. The price, according to Yussuf, the Beduin guide who arranged the permits: \$10 per Western passport, \$500 for Palestinian Mohammad Azzam Alarjah.

Baksheesh?

"It was a mistake," said Sammy, the soldier that accompanied the group on the military road. "This is the price Arab princes on hunting trips have to pay." Can we get a refund? "Ha ha ha," he laughed. So \$700 lighter the group set out, with a half dozen people taking advantage of the slow going to sit on the roofs of the trucks and take in the view of the Great Sand Sea upon whose northern edge the Baharia road runs.

At the first military checkpoint, the group climbed to the summit of a three-storyhigh sand dune from whose vantage point the sea stretched southward as far as the eye could see. Like waves of water, dune after dune crested in this ocean of sand, their peaks and troughs dictated by harsh desert winds and tracked by months rather than seconds.

And then the fun began, with the Israeli leader of the group, Heskell Nathaniel, kicking off the dune tumbling event in the Breaking the Ice Summer Olympics. Down he rolled in a tight spiral with Director of Operations Adam Rice and Kozhushko hot on his tail. At the bottom, the three embarked on a real challenge: standing up without losing balance as cochlear fluid swirled around the inner ear and caused the horizon to do the same in the field of vision.

As the day unfolded, the northern landscape continually changed. Lunch was taken a few hundred meters off the road in an ancient seabed, where shells and stones moved out by eons of water flow lined the earth which comfortably sank a few centimeters with each barefoot step. Under a baking desert sun, mushroomshaped cliffs of fossilized coral reefs spontaneously broke the flat and rolling terrain.

Though the occasional marsh or lake lent a little greenery through the scenes, the roof-top view of the parched earth gave way only when the sun went down and the stars of a moonless desert night appeared in a display of the constellations.

Despite protestations and a warning from Sammy that an investigation was forthcoming about why the group was stopping in a closed military zone, camp was made around 9 p.m. and a few people took advantage of the first windless night in a week to sleep sans tents.

That proved somewhat costly at daybreak when the first raindrops started to fall.

While the locals said the rain was good luck, the constant precipitation meant braking the plans to camp in the desert 100 km. out of Cairo and driving through the mosquito-ridden confines of a hot camp next to the pyramids of Giza. That, and one of the trucks running out of fuel for the second time on the trip, made for a night where many in the group saw the sun before the pillow.

Though the rain and unseasonably cold weather continued through Tuesday afternoon as the expedition drove towards the Suez Canal, one bit of good news lightened the spirits of the peace mission: Iraqi Latif Yahia, good to his word, rejoined the group in the Egyptian capital after a two-day hiatus.

"Back to family again," the former Uday Hussein body double said after receiving hugs and kisses from the group during their Cairo rendezvous.

