

True Tales of a Traveller

Goodbye Sinai



By Alix Lee

Goodbye Sinai

*A True Tale of a Traveller, set in the Sinai Peninsula at the time of its
return from Israel to Egypt*

1st Edition

by
Alix Lee

www.alixlee.com

Copyright @Alix Lee, 2018

Cover Design by Alix Lee.

"Adventures are the best way to learn."

Preface

The True Tales of a Traveller series of short stories and novellas consists of several dozen real-life traveller's tales covering over three decades. Although presented in a short story format for reading convenience, these stories are not fiction. Apart from some of the characters' names which have been changed to protect their identities, everything in these stories is true.

These stories do not all fit neatly into the 'travel story' genre, although some will indeed meet most readers' expectations in this regard. Others are simply adventures - or misadventures - that happen to have taken place in various different countries.

I began developing an interest in travel in my late teens. For most young people, long-term travel isn't possible without working to pay one's way, and so 'working holidays' are an option taken by many (even more nowadays than in the 1980s) who hope to get a better understanding of a place and its people than a short holiday could provide them with. And this was how I began travelling, and how I came to the Point of No Return (the point at which it was no longer possible to return to the life I had once led).

The first of this series of stories, Goodbye Sinai, is set in 1982, at the time of Israel's return of the Sinai Peninsula to Egypt.

Tale One: Goodbye Sinai

Adventure is a relative thing. For someone who spends all their life in a small village, going to the nearest large town would seem like an adventure. And for me, who at the age of 20 had spent all his life in the relatively safe and quiet corner of north-west Europe known as the British Isles, just going to Israel in 1981 was a huge, giddy adventure, and this state of adventure seemed to continue every day thereafter. Of course, for the people who lived on the kibbutz (a kind of Jewish communal settlement) I stayed at, on the border with Lebanon and close to the disputed Golan Heights, there probably seemed nothing at all adventurous about living there.

It wasn't that I had lived a particularly sheltered or isolated life in the UK. I had in fact travelled throughout the country, and grown up in a number of different towns before seeking work and making my own way in life in Leeds, Manchester and London. As a boy, our family had also holidayed in Spain and Yugoslavia, travelling overland by car to both destinations. But the Middle East was a volatile part of the world, and one I knew very little about except from what I had seen on TV news reports or read in newspapers. Touching down at Tel Aviv's Ben Gurion International Airport, and feeling the rush of hot air rising from the runway to meet me as I disembarked from that El Al flight on that late summer's day, I was filled with a jumble of feelings: exhilaration, anticipation, trepidation, and an almost uncontrollable edginess. I knew I was embarking on an adventure.

Yet the first discrete adventure, distinct from the rest of my new and exciting life as a traveller, and the new, heightened sense of adventure that seemed to accompany even the most unremarkable days didn't happen until over half a year later.

By that time, I had left Kibbutz Bar 'am, the large kibbutz on the Lebanon border I had arrived at along with a group of other foreign volunteer workers late in the night of that first day of mine in the Middle East, travelled quite extensively around the small country known as Israel both alone and with other kibbutz volunteers, lingered for nearly two weeks in Jerusalem, and finally taken up work at a second kibbutz. That was Kibbutz Magen, located in the south of Israel, on the north-west edge of the Negev Desert not far from the city of Beersheba, then a sprawling town of around 100,000 souls and not yet really worthy of claiming the title of 'city' that it does today.

The kibbutzim and the volunteers who worked at these places existed in a mutually beneficial relationship. From the point of view of a kibbutz, the foreign volunteer workers like myself provided labour in exchange for basic accommodation and a minimal stipend to cover luxuries such as alcohol, cigarettes, chocolate and so on (work clothes were provided). Most of these goods would be bought on the kibbutz, which dovetailed well with kibbutz ideology, which was inherently socialist. There was just one shop on Kibbutz Magen at that time, known to us volunteers as 'The Kibbutz Shop'!

The arid environment of Kibbutz Magen was very different from that of Bar 'am, which was set in the fertile hills of Upper Galilee. And my work was different too. In Bar 'am, like most of the foreign volunteers - whether they were in Israel for 'work experience' or to learn about life in a different country with a different culture - my work had mostly been fruit-picking; driving a contraption with an elevated platform designed specifically for the job along rows of orange trees, which enabled the driver to reach the upper branches of the fruit trees, while our Israeli supervisor went from row to row checking the harvest, and constantly reminding us to treat the fruit with care, with his frequent calls along the lines of: "Softly, softly, don't hurt the oranges!"

The reasons for volunteers spending time on kibbutzim were many and varied. In my own case, I was attracted to the idea of adventure that came with spending some time in a new and unknown land, and I also wanted to escape the British winter. But more than anything, I hoped for the chance of intimate relations with

some member - preferably attractive - of the opposite sex! Being of an inherently shy and introverted nature, I had never been successful in my bungling attempts to get close to potential girlfriends through the usual social channels back in the UK, and I probably also hoped that the vastly different environment would do something to make me less timid and bashful. Some volunteers I met had motivations similar to mine; others were more into learning the culture and history of the region. For some, who were Jewish, but without relatives in the 'promised land', there was no other obvious way to spend time in the region without spending a lot of money. Some others went to Israel to get precisely what most of the kibbutz agency advertisements offered: work experience; they had just finished school, and wanted to spend a 'year out' (a gap year) before college or university. At least two volunteers I came to know were on the run; escaping the legal consequences of their actions back home (one for fraud, the other for a hit-and-run accident). There were also a few I met who came to like the kibbutz way of life so much, or had so little to return to, that they spent literally year after year working at one kibbutz after another.

I didn't particularly want to live that lifestyle. But after six months, I was still in the country and still enjoying the kibbutz volunteer life. In Magen, I worked in a factory producing solar panels, which at that time constituted a booming industry in Israel. But like volunteer work at Bar 'am, work at Magen started *very* early, and finished at noon. The afternoons were our own, whether we used them to socialise with our fellow volunteers in the volunteer quarters - an area of lawn surrounded by one-storey, 2-bed rooms - or just used them to replenish our energy levels with an hour or two of sleepy siesta. There were not many other activities apart from those the volunteers created themselves, so exploring the world outside the kibbutz was something many of us engaged in, and something that made the whole kibbutz volunteer thing so much more meaningful. After all, you can see fruit orchards in countries all over the world, but you can only travel in Israel in Israel. Most of my fellow foreign volunteers at Magen were from the UK, the Netherlands, Germany, Scandinavia, and Australasia, and most of us were aware that after we left Israel, we would probably not be coming back. So we all wanted to see as much of the country and the surrounding region as we could while we were still there.

Let's Go Now, While We Still Can

A few weeks after my arrival in Israel, the Egyptian president, Anwar Sadat was assassinated by fundamentalist army officers. Sadat engaged in negotiations with Israel which culminated in the Egypt-Israel Peace Treaty; this won him and Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin the Nobel Peace Prize, but it didn't go down well with the Egypt's Islamists. Nor did it go down well with many of the more militant Israelis, who were also unhappy with the deal. The deal was peace with Egypt and diplomatic recognition in exchange for the return of the Sinai Peninsula, a large desert region Israel had won from Egypt in the 1967 Six Day War. After Sadat's killing, there was even talk of whether the terms of the treaty would be adhered to by both parties, though both governments reiterated their intentions to abide by the terms of the treaty.

In early February 1982, a large group of British volunteers arrived at Magen. Rowdy and boisterous, most of the existing volunteers, including myself, didn't particularly welcome the arrival of this group at first, and this was also typical of volunteer life on kibbutzim generally at the time, as far as I could tell. Volunteer work was inherently temporary, but after some weeks or months, certain 'incumbent' volunteer groups would have become accustomed to having the place to themselves. And that was also true with us. But after a few weeks, a kind of assimilation had taken place, and there was no longer any distinction between the old volunteers and the new British group.

Up until that point, I hadn't done much local travel with Magen as my base. My first major 'local' trip after the arrival of the new British volunteer group was down the Israeli-occupied Sinai desert to Sharm-el-Sheik, a small town at that time located at the southern tip of the Sinai Peninsula. I travelled with Rupert, one of the new British group, and Paula, an Argentinian girl who had arrived on her own steam shortly after I had. Rupert was an upper-middle class west Londoner, with a quietly acerbic sense of humour which I found very agreeable, probably partly because no Israelis, and not many other non-Brits (including Paula) understood it. Paula was a diminutive girl of about 20 years old with a full head of curly locks, and a very assertive - even feisty - manner.

The main condition for Egypt's normalisation of relations with Israel - the return of the Sinai - was due to be fulfilled in only six weeks' time. In casual, idle conversation on the subject, Paula quickly convinced Rupert and myself that we had to take the opportunity to visit the Sinai soon, now while we were still in Israel. If we went now, we wouldn't need to go through any visa or customs formalities and could leave immediately. So, after giving this some thought and discussion, we did. Just a few days after the subject had come up, as

soon as we could arrange the time off, we hit the road.

We took a packed evening bus from Beersheba to Eilat, and slept directly on the beach there.

Eilat lies at the very southern tip of the Negev, and the northern tip of the Red Sea. The Egyptian village of Taba, then part of the Israeli-occupied Sinai lies to Eilat's south, the Jordanian port city of Aqaba to the east, and Saudi Arabia can be seen to the south-east, across the gulf. At the time of our arrival there, Eilat was a small city of about 20,000, with a rapidly-growing tourist industry, mostly due to its beaches, coral reefs and warm winter climate.

Although at opposite ends of the same relatively small Negev desert, Eilat was noticeably warmer than Magen in mid March; So it was easy to get up early, but we lingered on the beach and at breakfast, and by the time we arrived at the road south, into the Sinai, it was already late morning. We stationed ourselves at three different locations, with the intention of thus increasing our chances of getting a lift. Rupert and I both understood that the chances of Paula getting a lift were considerably higher than our own, so we kept an eye on her, ready to run over to her as soon as a vehicle stopped for her. Over an hour went by, and it was getting pretty hot by the time we noticed that Paula was nowhere in sight. Suddenly, I saw that she was standing by a tour bus a few hundred metres away, gesturing wildly for us to go over; I called Rupert and we both ran to the bus. As we neared the bus Paula came towards us, and stated quietly, while keeping her gestures as loud as usual: "I told them we're South American Jews, we have only a couple of days, and we want to see the Sinai before it goes back to Egypt!"

She informed us of our new nationalities only seconds before we boarded the bus. Great, I thought! Even given that Rupert and I had learnt no Hebrew during our ostensibly Jewish family childhoods in South America, the standard of English in Israel was high - it was one of three official languages (Hebrew and Arabic being the other two) - I hoped nobody would ask me anything about life in South America and quickly put myself into the mindset of a tired Argentinian Jew, unable to speak anything but Spanish. And in fact, not really able to speak Spanish either if it came down to it! We took empty seats near the front of the tour bus, myself feigning sleep almost immediately to avoid our cover story being blown.

The road we travelled from Eilat to Sharm was built by the Israelis and it hugged the coast for a distance of about 240 km. it took us over three hours to get there, after which we just made the beach our home.

For most of the time we spent in Sharm - actually a place called Naama Bay, which lay a few kilometres north of the main town - we did very little other than swim, sunbathe, and crash other people's beach parties. For toilet facilities, we relied on a nearby hotel, but basically we just 'lived' directly on the beach.

The need to use the hotel's toilet facilities illustrated the way the peace treaty had suddenly uprooted all Israeli investment in the region. The hotel had only just been built and some parts of it didn't seem to have been completed. Now, the ownership was up in the air; it wasn't clear from the conversations we had with staff whether it would be sold, had already been sold, or would not be sold.

So, what does that have to do with toilets? The first time I used the hotel's WCs, I opened the door of the cubicle at the extreme right end of the row, dropped my pants and sat down, my mind occupied primarily with my bowel movement. I then became aware that in the periphery of my vision there was another WC. And glancing to my right, I saw yet another WC beyond it, with an Arab man sitting on it! The partition walls had not been installed; the owner was probably not convinced it was worth bothering with now. I exchanged a nod of greeting with my Arab neighbour, but this lack of privacy affected my use of the toilets, and I avoided peak use periods, such as the morning 'rush hour' over the following days.

At Naama Bay, apart from the hotel, there was very little else there. Which suited us fine, as we spent most of the time reading and sunbathing on the beach and only walked into Sharm itself to buy essentials, or when we got bored with beach life. It was evident that the Israelis living in the area were packing up and leaving, and also evident that most of them were far from happy to be doing so.

For most Israelis, peace with Egypt was deemed worth the exchange. Egypt was a major player in the Middle East, perhaps *the* major player, as well as an influential country throughout the Arab world and the Muslim world. Perhaps no other Arab country would follow Jordan in recognising Israel even with Egyptian recognition, but the probability would be increased significantly.

But there were also many Israelis who resented giving back the Sinai. Although not comparable with the West Bank, it does have historical significance to the Jewish nation. For example, the Bible tells the story of how the children of Israel wandered there for 40 years under Moses, who brought tablets of the law down

from Mount Sinai. Apart from that, it was a huge, wild, open space with mountains, valleys, hidden springs, remote monasteries and Bedouin encampments, and in 1982 was still relatively safe for Israelis, in no way comparable with the Gaza Strip, for example, in that respect.

The military were generally keen to hold on to the Sinai as a 'buffer zone.' Moshe Dayan once said of the Sinai: "It is preferable to have Sharm el-Sheikh without peace than peace without Sharm el-Sheikh." But this was no longer the mainstream view, although many hawks in the political establishment still subscribed to it.

Next to the main Arab town of Sharm el-Sheikh was an Israeli settlement named Ofira. It had been founded in 1969 and was meant to accommodate 500 families. It overlooked another bay near Naama named el-Maya. At the time of our visit, there were still a few hundred people in Ofira. But the Israeli tourist board advised foreign visitors not to visit the settlement, as it was home to die-hards who might insult them or even attack them (after all, the Camp David Accord which had led to the Egypt-Israel Peace Treaty was initiated by a foreigner - American president, Jimmy Carter), and so we avoided doing so.

After four or five days of lying around on the beach, I began to feel concerned that we should be getting back to Magen. But Rupert said he felt the place was worth another couple of days, and he was in no rush to get back. He made some sarcastic quips about the allure - or lack of same - of the half-past four pre-dawn rise to get out into the orchards, where he normally worked. Little did I suspect that this was his ploy to travel alone with Paula, because there was always a lot more probability of two people getting a lift together than three. As mentioned previously, we both understood that the chances of getting lifts with her were far higher than without her. But I felt we really did have to be making a move, and so I took the initiative to be the first to try for a lift. It was early afternoon, and I imagined being back in Eilat by evening.

You'll Freeze to Death, Man!

So I set out alone, and stood at the roadside. At which point Rupert and Paula passed me I never knew, but as soon as I had left, Rupert apparently came to his senses, and realised that it was indeed time to be heading back. Though the two of them left Sharm after me, they arrived back at Magen well before me.

Two Americans in their late 20s or early 30s, one with unkempt blond hair, the other dark-haired and swarthy, stood hitching a couple of hundred metres away from me. After a couple of hours, they walked over, and asked me how I felt about sharing a taxi as far as Dahab, about 80 or 90 km to the north, and well on the way back to Eilat.

"Let's face it," the blond-haired one said, "we're not gonna get a lift today. We've been here since 10 this morning!"

I agreed. After some time, a Mercedes Benz taxi came trundling along. We negotiated with the driver and a fare was agreed. Though probably only the equivalent of three or four US dollars, I was running short of funds, and I knew this would put pressure on me to get immediate lifts after Dahab. I hoped to at least get to Nuweiba (a town located some 150 km north of Sharm and about 80 km south of Eilat) the same day, if not all the way back to Eilat.

It may sound bizarrely out of place to be taking a Mercedes taxi in the desert, but this, and others I had seen at the time, were not exactly luxury models. They were Mercs, to be sure, but ramshackle old models which had obviously seen better days. After about 20 minutes, our taxi stopped for a Bedouin at the side of the road, and his goat. This was the only occasion in my life I have ever taken a taxi with a goat. Thankfully (as it was right next to me), it was toilet trained, and it also did not get frightened or agitated at being in a taxi. Perhaps it was a regular taxi passenger.

We got out at the junction of the road to Dahab, which lay on the coast several kilometres away. Without a word, the American backpackers immediately began walking towards the village, stopped after about 20 paces, and, in unison, looked back in my direction. "You coming?" the blond-haired guy asked.

"No, I've got to try to get a lift to Eilat today," I replied.

"Oh, man, you can't stay here! You're gonna freeze to death!"

I insisted that I had to at least try for a lift. I found it hard to believe there would be any great difference

between the night-time temperature where I stood and that of Dahab, which was a mere 20 or 30 minute's walk away. I knew that the nights could be chilly in the desert; even sleeping on the beach at Naama Bay had been quite cold just before morning. But I was a long way south of Magen, which was also 'desert' and not extremely cold at night. And God knew how much further south I was than Leeds! I was almost in the tropics, and that knowledge afforded me psychological protection against any threat of the cold. Apart from that consideration, there was still an hour or so of daylight, and I had to try my best to get a lift.

I noticed two young men - apparently Sephardi Jews (those with a Middle-Eastern or North African heritage, as opposed to the Ashkenazi, who have European heritage) and brothers - lying by the side of the road, their baggage serving as pillows. I took my place five or six metres behind them (further along the road in the direction we wanted to travel). They conversed quietly in Hebrew, and 'Tel Aviv' came up repeatedly; I wondered if they were settlers saying goodbye to the Sinai, to try their luck in the big city? A few minutes later, a truck arrived. Following the Hitch-hiker's Code, I didn't attempt to flag it down, but left it to them. The truck stopped, they climbed in, and left.

Of course, good hitch-hikers everywhere abide by the unwritten Hitch-hikers' Code, which prohibits you from trying to jump ahead of hikers already ensconced by the roadside waiting for a lift when you arrive there. In Israel, there was at this time an additional sub-clause to this 'regulation': In all cases, soldiers had priority. So if you arrived at a roadside spot, and a soldier arrived after you, you were obliged to give way to the new arrival. In any case, there was no point in trying to place yourself ahead of a soldier; any Jewish driver who stopped would ignore your presence entirely if there was a soldier looking for lift and no extra room for you. This was not something I really objected to, because in the 1980s, hitch-hiking in Israel was generally very, very easy, and long waits were extremely rare. With its small territory, Israel doesn't have an extensive domestic passenger air travel network, and at that time, the country's railway network was very rudimentary; the only service of any significance being the coastal line. That left buses and hitch-hiking as the main ways of getting around, with hitching being preferred most of the time by shoestring kibbutz volunteer travellers like myself.

After the two brothers had left, the place was very quiet, almost silent. I assumed that the reason they had been lying on the ground when I arrived was this lack of traffic. I had to wait at least 10 minutes before the next vehicle arrived.

The thing about the location which made the deepest impression was that although visibility was good, and with no vegetation in the way it was possible to see miles down the road, I could hear vehicles - mostly lorries - before I could actually see them.

And so I became aware of the approach of the first vehicle long before I actually had to stand up, and put my thumb out for a lift. After that long wait, it drove straight passed me! So did the next half-dozen vehicles. This I felt to be very unusual for Israel, and seeing free seats in the vehicles I even wondered how the drivers could ignore me in a place like this? But night fell without a lift. Finally, I pulled my sleeping bag out and prepared for a night at the roadside. At least, I told myself, I would be in prime position for a lift the next morning. If hitching in the Sinai was so much more difficult than in Israel proper, I didn't want to risk other hitch-hikers arriving and getting ahead of me.

On a couple of occasions the nights on the beach at Naama Bay got quite chilly just before dawn, though it was still possible to sleep. But here, I found myself, incredibly (or so it seemed to me at the time) unable to stay warm even fully clothed in my sleeping bag. To make matters worse, a biting wind picked up. I ended up huddling myself into a large crack in a rock formation a few metres from the road, fully clothed, with my sheepskin jacket over the sleeping bag and my holdall over the sheepskin jacket to block the wind. Eventually, everything I had with me was there, blocking the wind and the cold, and still it was too cold to sleep. I had never spent such a cold night in the Negev or anywhere else in Israel and I had to clench my knees to my shoulders and breath as deeply as I could just to stay warm.

By the first light of dawn, rather than being in prime position for the first vehicles, as planned, I left the spot and walked to Dahab. But first, I spent about 40 minutes covered with my sleeping bag and sheepskin jacket as I had been during the night, but directly in the early morning sunlight, trying to get as much warmth from it as it would give. I felt my energy levels had been seriously depleted trying to sleep in the rock crevice, and I had to get something to eat, and more important, some water as I had almost none left. So I walked to Dahab, had a filling breakfast, and used the public toilets there (grubbier than the hotel's but not quite so public) before returning to the junction.

On the way back to the junction with the road to Eilat, a Bedouin boy seemed to come out of nowhere, selling pitta bread. This seemed truly bizarre; I could not see where he had come from or how he could have known

there would be anyone to sell the bread to. There was no-one else in sight. Still, I bought three pieces, ate one, and kept the other two for later. I had a feeling it may be a long day.

By the time I got back to the junction, I saw that two new hitchhikers had taken my spot! Sitting cross-legged on the ground as they played chess, one had long, ragged hair and a beard. The other looked less like a hippy, but still pretty rough and unshaven. I assumed them to be French; at least they conversed in French. I sat against the same rock I had sought to stay warm against a couple of hours previously, facing them and the 'oncoming traffic', or lack of it.

Several hours passed and no vehicles even stopped, despite the determined efforts of my fellow hitchhikers, getting up and waiting with thumbs pointing in the direction of Eilat long before each vehicle arrived. The less rough-looking of the two would actually stand right out in the middle of the road as if flagging down emergency help after an accident, and only jumped out of the way of the oncoming vehicles when it became clear that if he didn't, there really would be an accident.

It crossed my mind that the appearance of the bearded guy could definitely be a factor in this lack of lifts, and that suspicion seemed to be confirmed when finally a car with empty back seats stopped, but the driver insisted he could only take one passenger; the less rough-looking guy, who quickly jumped in. I was left waiting for a lift with the hippy.

The day wore on. Naturally, in this quiet environment with nothing else in sight, we tried to get a conversation started. But we could barely converse; his English was hardly any better than my French, which would have made him one of the worst English speakers in France! But we could play chess, and he was not bad at that. I had a series of chess games with the Frenchman (I never even asked his name) before it became too hot to sit in the sun.

By noon, I was sitting in the shade of the same large rock I had huddled in the previous night; the Frenchman also took shade from this rock a little way away. His mineral water bottle, by his side, was nearly empty. I could hardly keep my eyes off it. Mine, replenished in Dahab only a few hours earlier, was empty. I realised we couldn't last the whole day without one of us going back to Dahab yet again, just to get water, and was considering walking back there, but was afraid the hippy would get the only lift of the afternoon while I was gone!

In the meantime, I decided to see if one of the pieces of pitta bread I bought on the way back from Dahab that morning would be worth a swig of the Frenchman's remaining mineral water.

"Want a pitta bread?" I shouted as I rummaged in my holdall. The Frenchman looked on in interest as I brought the two pieces of bread out of my bag and stared at them in astonishment. They were as hard as rock! The dry desert climate had leached out all their moisture in a matter of only a few hours! This place was far, far drier than Magen! I had to laugh, and so did he. I tapped the pittas on my knee before throwing them away like frisbees, for future archaeologists to discover. "Inedible!" I laughed.

I told him one of us would have to go back and refill our bottles. He agreed. But then, several vehicles passed in a matter of minutes, making us forget our lack of water momentarily. He took a swig from his mineral water bottle, and then surprisingly, offered it to me. I could have easily finished it all in one gulp, but I appreciated his generosity, and left as much as I possible could.

We then continued waiting, and I dozed off in the heat of the afternoon, hoping he would decide to return to Dahab for more water.

"Hey, a Car!"

I heard the cry as if it were in a dream. But it came again, and opening my eyes, I saw that a small Japanese hatchback car had actually stopped! The French hippy was already getting in. I jumped up, and almost fell over as my legs had 'gone to sleep' during my nap, then stumbled over to the roadside as quickly as I could manage and got into the back seat of the car, next to my travel companion. The driver was a young, curly-haired Israeli, apparently in his late 20s, dressed in sports shorts and a smart matching T-shirt, as if he had just finished playing tennis.

After introducing ourselves briefly, the Israeli turned the topic of conversation to the return of the Sinai. His

monologue swiftly degenerated into what was for me, at that time, the most blatantly anti-Arab diatribe I had yet heard. Could you believe the government was giving all this to these dirty, useless Arabs, he asked us? "Look at that!" he exclaimed seeing a Bedouin father and son herding goats at the side of the road. "Look at them!"

"What's wrong with them?" I asked.

"What's wrong with them? What's right with them? They could at least take a wash once a year or so!"

I felt compelled to defend the Bedouin. It was a desert, after all, and I knew by then that life in the desert was hard. I pointed out as delicately as I could that you couldn't really expect them to look like city slickers. Though I found this fellow objectionable, I was very much aware of the fact that we were riding in his car! I didn't want to risk being turfed out after all the trouble it had taken just to get a lift.

But he wouldn't stop. "That's what we're giving all this to", he told us, "everything we've built here. Come back here in five years time, and you'll find nothing! The Arabs are too stupid to know how to use all we've built. All they can do is eat, shit and steal."

The Israeli's English was almost as good as a native speaker. The French hitch-hiker, however, could only grasp a little of what was being said. But judging from his look of discomfort, he was getting the gist of things.

The Israeli then turned back to me, and asked: "Do you know who is Ariel Sharon?"

I answered in the affirmative. He was the Israel defence minister. But in the Six Day War - and in all the other Israeli wars - he had been a field commander. He had played a key role to taking the Sinai from the Egyptians.

Sharon subscribed to the concept of a 'Greater Israel', and for him, administration of the occupied territories was not seen so much as an 'occupation' as an intermediate stage prior to incorporation of the territories into Israel proper. And so settlements like Ofira, and Yamit - at the northern end of the Sinai (close to Gaza) - were ambitiously established by people who shared this vision. (Yamit was envisioned as a large city for 200,000 people that would create a buffer zone between the Gaza Strip and the Sinai).

"We thought Begin was a man we could trust. Now, my only hope is with Ariel. If he were prime minister, he could reverse all this stupidity!"

I found the notion very unlikely, but kept quiet. Nevertheless, the Israel's idea that Sharon could become prime minister was remarkably prescient, as he later did, though by that time he had abandoned his 'Greater Israel' views.

Then, to my surprise, the Israeli switched to French, and apparently repeated all he had just told me. After which, he began telling us some 'Arab jokes', first in English, then in French.

I just smiled and stayed silent, as the Frenchman passed incredulous glances at me. We both knew by then that the driver was a raving racist of the worst kind, but the Frenchman was probably as conscious as myself of the fact that we were in the middle of nowhere. We didn't want to get into an argument, and perhaps get told to get out of the car, so we said nothing, and just smiled wanly at the racist jokes.

However, the man wouldn't stop. It got to the point where I decided I wasn't going to take any more, even if it did mean getting chucked out in the middle of nowhere. I searched my memory for crude British 'have you heard the one about the Jew'-type jokes I had certainly heard sometime in my past, determined to give him some of his own medicine. However, before I could remember any such thing, something happened that stopped all of us in our tracks.

The Israeli pulled to a halt. Sitting on the right side of the back seat, looking out mostly to the right, I had not even noticed why he had stopped his car. "Look at that!" he exclaimed, pointing to the left.

We were about 10 or 15 kilometres north of Nuweiba. About 50 metres away from the road on the left side, a white car lay upside down on the rocky desert ground. The road at that point was elevated a couple of metres higher than the desert floor on that side; the car had evidently come off the road at high speed and overturned. There seemed to be people still in the vehicle.

I acted quickly: "We have to help them, fast!" I said, and with that jumped out of the car. I ran down the

embankment and over to the car, only glancing back in the direction of the road when I reached the overturned car. The Israeli and the Frenchman were making their way down the embankment, and I noticed then that the Israeli was wearing only plimsolls. I cursed him under my breath, and urged them both to get a move on.

Three people in their 50s, two men and a woman, were still in the car. Another woman sat outside it, covered in blood, and apparently too shocked to say or do anything. It seemed the accident had happened only minutes ago. I spoke to her in English and she replied in German in a very shaky voice.

Oh, great, I thought: just what we need! I was sure the Israeli's anti-Arabism would pale in comparison to his anti-Germanism. I decided there and then that I had to take charge. Now was no time for petty racism. If the Israeli tried to leave without getting these people to medical help, I would take his ignition keys, I decided.

I tried to help one of the two backseat passengers, a blond woman, out of the car. Although the doors had been blown outwards, the vehicle's passenger area had effectively been flattened, giving the passengers very little room to move. As I tried to pull her out, she cried out in a pleading voice in German.

Finally, the Frenchman and the Israeli were by my side. I turned to the Israeli, and told him in a no-nonsense tone: "These people are German. We have to help get-"

But to my surprise, the Israeli launched into fluent German before I could even finish my sentence! Several sentences passed back and forth, and then the Israeli apparently used the women's explanations of her difficulties to help decide how to wriggle her out. '

Suddenly I felt completely deflated: I was unable to even understand what was being said. The Israeli then tried to do the same for the other backseat passenger, and I was able to discern that the man was relieved to have someone able to communicate with him in his own language. Slowly, the Israeli began to dislodge the man from his trap.

"We have to call for help," the Israeli said, then turned to tell me. "There are phones at the roadside every so often. My keys are still in the car. Can you drive to the next phone and call emergency services in Eilat while I try to get the other one out?"

"I can't drive." I told him. He glanced at the Frenchman, who answered in French that he couldn't drive either. The Israeli shook his head and sighed in disbelief. A few moments previously, I had decided I was going to take charge of things; now I felt completely useless. It seemed the Israeli had to do everything himself.

Suddenly, I saw a truck coming from the Sharm direction, and knew what to do immediately. I ran back to the road, stood in the middle of it, and flagged the truck down. Stepping up to the truck door, I told the driver through the open window: "There's been a crash! Can you phone emergency services on your way back to Eilat? We need help quickly."

The driver looked at me with an air of complete bewilderment. He looked as if he was afraid I would attack him. "Crash!" I repeated, and pointed at the upside-down car. "We need help quickly!"

The driver stared in the direction of the upside-down car, his eyes opening wide as he finally comprehended. I had to be sure he understood, so I made telephoning gestures. He nodded, and I finally stepped down, wondering how anyone could get a job as a long-distance lorry driver without even being able to speak English?

He evidently did understand correctly, for about 15 minutes later, we heard the sound of a helicopter's rotor blades overhead. The Israeli had successfully extricated the two passengers, but the driver was in too much pain for him to move more than a fraction.

The helicopter landed just a few metres away, almost blowing us away with the wind from the rotor blades. As I was closest to the chopper, I shouted at the paramedics what the problem was with the driver, who we couldn't get out, but they seemed to ignore me completely as they ran over to car. The Israeli exchanged a few sentences in Hebrew with them before turning to us: "OK, we can go now."

Despite being vehemently anti-Arab, the Israeli was far from being racist in a general sense, and a world away from being a xenophobe. I felt I had seriously underestimated him, and at the same time I was also coming to feel I had seriously underestimated the need for travellers to equip themselves with more linguistic skills than fluency in English.

Goodbye, Sinai

And so we continued on our way to Eilat. I mulled over the problem of the next step, whether to sleep on the beach in Eilat, or try to get a lift as soon as I could. I had - perhaps - just enough money to get a bus to Beersheba, but certainly not enough to get a bus from there to Kibbutz Magen as well, and it would be late by the time I got to Beersheba; too late to hitch. Sleeping on the beach at Eilat would be preferable to sleeping in the bus station at Beersheba. But then I would have to put up with an empty stomach all the way till noon of the next day now that I had thrown my two 'frisbees' away. Then the Israeli asked us: "What are you guys going to do when you get to Eilat?"

I verbalized my thoughts of the past few moments. The Frenchman seemed to have a similar conundrum.

"Would you be willing to wash dishes tonight? My friend has a restaurant; unless he's found someone these past couple of days, he needs people to wash dishes. Without help, it always takes him and his wife till morning to clean up."

We agreed immediately.

It was a long, hard night at a French restaurant that did a roaring business. The couple turned out to be fluent in French, which pleased my hippy travel mate no end as he apparently related our hitching experiences to them, but all this left me feeling like a fool once again, especially as the couple seemed to keep forgetting that only one of us could speak French; the other one could speak nothing but English!

Perhaps in other circumstances, my ego would have been hurt. But I was painfully hungry, and my stomach came before my ego. I couldn't resist finishing off scraps I came across as the often unfinished dishes came in fast and furious. Finally, the dishes stopped coming in at about 2 am, and about 40 minutes later, we were finished. Then the owner gave us both meals he had cooked up for us. Neither of us had any trouble finishing them! He let us stay in the restaurant until he was ready to close up, so we didn't need to consider a place to sleep; it was nearly dawn anyway when we left, cash in hand. I walked to the bus stop, parting company with my French travel companion, but with his limited English and my even more limited French, I had no idea where he was heading, only that he wasn't going there by bus. I took the first bus to Beersheba and fell asleep almost immediately.

The northern Negev was in bloom when I arrived back at Magen. Although I joked with Rupert and Paula about how I had decided at the last moment to stay another couple of days at Naama Bay - hence my late arrival - and inwardly I swore I wouldn't let any hitch-hiking companion play a trick like he had on me again, I didn't really regret the whole experience, now it was over. It was clearly the first real, distinct adventure of my still short 'career' as a traveller.

End of Story