

A Christmas camel survey, Libya 1962

The northern escarpment of the Hamada el Homra

I was a military instructor at the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst. Soon after returning from the Sandhurst Archenu Expedition I set about preparing my next desert project for the Christmas break in three months time, but this was to be a camel survey of the northern edge of the Hamada el Homra, about 130 miles south of Tripoli. I had failed to find the escarpment when on a training exercise four or five years earlier because it was wrong on the old Italian maps. Perhaps I am doing the Italian surveyors an injustice, but I suspect they flew over the area sketching busily, not minding too much about accuracy. I am sure there could have been no closing of traverses or star fixes.

It was easy to reach Tripoli since the RAF had aircraft going backwards and forwards regularly. I asked Lt Col Ian Gill, the College Commander, if I could add on an extra few days at the end of the Christmas break for my survey project and he reluctantly agreed. Tim Creasey, the Chief Instructor, clearly did not think much of a young captain taking the few days extra. However, I had what I wanted and just before Christmas I set out by myself to RAF Lynham and got a lift by air to Tripoli carrying my Black's Arctic sleeping bag with a little food, all packed in an aluminium framed canvas rucksack. I headed south to Mizda on Christmas Day and caught a bus part way to Garian, but things were closing down for Christmas, even in the Muslim country. I started walking, from Garian, the last town on my route. Happily a car came by, stopped, and the driver gave me a lift. The kind man, Amor Mohamed Bousade, said that I could not possibly go further that night. Nobody would be passing, and he insisted on giving me a bed for the night in his house well south of Garian. We went into a courtyard and his quarters consisted of a bare room with two upright chairs, three sleeping mats on the floor and some advertisements on the wall at the centre of which was a picture of Nasser and a carpet from Mecca. I had had tea with some Libyans near the airport earlier in the day, and they had said that Nasser was good for Egypt, but that he wanted to become leader of all Arab countries.

It was fascinating to watch Amor cook the macaroni for our evening meal. His hospitality was superb. Next day, after Amor had cooked me some fried egg and given me coffee I set off again to be given a lift for about three miles in a van and waited and walked for much of the day hoping for a car or truck, or perhaps the bus, which Amor said would be in the evening. Boxing Day 1962 was a long day devoid of traffic going south until, in the dark, the bus came.

Mizda was quiet and in darkness when the bus pulled in at about ten in the evening. Fortunately there was enough light from the usual brilliant stars associated with desert nights to find my way about. Travellers quickly dispersed, and I had no idea where I might spend the night. Luckily the bus driver was still checking his papers, and he suggested I should go to the fort and would be given a bed there. Having found the fort at the southern side of the oasis I banged loudly on the metal gates, and it was not long before a night watch came with an oil lantern. He understood at once what I wanted, and

led me to a room with two empty bed frames and one chair in it. I was quick to settle and be heavily asleep on the springs of the bed.

On waking the next morning I was surprised to see that one of the other beds was occupied by a Tuareg who had come up from the south. He must have been surprised to be greeted in the long and formal Tuareg way by this European foreigner. He looked furtively at me, and was quick to leave. I wondered what he was up to.

My first task was to find a guide and camels, so I sat in the main street drinking coffee, and it was not long before I was in conversation. There was much interest in my intentions, and Ahmed bin Dau was called since he had camels nearby. I estimated that Ahmed bin Dau, with grey hair, was in his 50s, of average height, and he had a pleasant smile. I later discovered that he claimed to be only 39. He spoke fewer words of English than I spoke of Arabic, but I soon discovered that with the help of a little sand drawing we could communicate reasonably well, having many good laughs together about it. As we discussed the price and arrangements we had as many as 20 spectators. All were interested in me. Suddenly two trucks arrived and stopped opposite, and out came Mr Johnston of the English Libyan paper, the Sunday Ghibli. I was in my Arabic dress, but was recognised, and he gave me news that Claudio Vita Finzi had returned to Cambridge and the plucky little Barbara Toy the travel writer had flown to Australia. Suddenly Johnston and his party had gone, leaving only a trail of dust as far as the vehicles could be seen. Then I was alone and had Mizda to myself. I had visitors nearly all day coming to talk to this curious Englishman, though I did get a chance to visit the school where they put on a political play of an Italian judge and his lawyers. They used a ladder on a couple of buckets as the bench, and occasionally a wheelbarrow appeared. The acting was good. In the evening Ahmed Tahar, the French speaking policeman invited me to have cous cous with them, and I was given a long Arabic lesson. I turned in at 11.30 and had only had half an hour to myself all day. Talking over tea, coffee and food was ceaseless.

Next was a day of collecting food, which turned out to be a bag of onions, a quantity of macaroni, a tin of olive oil, some small tins of tomato puree, tea, peanuts and sugar. Ahmed advised me to buy one of the local round purple felt hats to set me off well with the Bedouin blanket I had had since earlier years in Libya. We started our journey along Wadi Sofejjin making good headway before hobbling the camels and setting up a fire for our evening meal. I had long learnt that one should always stop for the night where there was some pasture for the camels, and we had located a good spot. While Ahmed was preparing supper we heard a dog bark followed by a moan from one of our camels, and then we saw a figure approaching cautiously. Ahmed shot over to him and greeted him. There were furtive looks in my direction as they talked before Ahmed led him over to join us for our meal. We squatted round the fire eating, and it soon became clear that the man had brought dates up from Brach to sell in Tripoli, walking right across the Hamada el Homra. He wanted to hear news about Mizda. The next morning after the breakfast of three glasses of tea served from a small metal teapot into mean sized glasses, the third being poured over roasted peanuts in the glasses, we went our ways.

On our third morning we spotted the escarpment to the south, pale blue and shimmering in the distance. As we approached our bull camels became agitated and walked faster, and their tongues came out and they slobbered. We discovered the reason was that there was a herd of female camels some miles ahead. Having passed them we returned to a normal pace, though our beasts were still not quite the same. I was travelling about ten yards behind Ahmed, when my camel suddenly shot forward and bit the backside of his camel. Ahmed shot into the air, but happily landed safely back into the saddle.

When we finally reached the escarpment I discovered that there were three main layers, the bottom being a sort of clay while the next was a mixture of fossil remains, mainly shells. Ahmed collected some from each layer to sell for making pottery when he returned to Mizda. The top layer was formed of a hard crust with pieces broken off to make caverns and passages. I looked at three different points along the escarpment, the third being the lonely well of Grizia where we found a gang of nine tough looking Arabs repairing it and bringing it back to use. We joined them in their 'home', an overhanging rock which provided some shelter. Transistor radios were at that time becoming popular everywhere. The gang leader, Bedewy, had one, and after supper we all sat round while the wretched Bedewy fiddled with the tuning, making a hideous noise, and destroying any chance of conversation which would be the normal after supper occupation. The following morning, having replenished our water from the well, we were thankful to leave them. The following evening we made up for the previous evening by talking until late. He wanted to know about England. It was before televisions were sold in Libya. Was the pasture (gesh) good there, and what of camels and of the winters? He told me an unlikely story of a friend of his who, in nearby Wadi Zem Zem, had hobbled his camel for the night, had his meal, drunk and enjoyed his three glasses of tea, and then went to sleep with his camel nearby. During the night his camel rolled onto him and nearly killed him. That night I was a little worried about the camel nearest to me and had a bit of a restless night.

Ahmed was easy to tease, and we had many a laugh about misunderstandings, still laughing some days later. He had a bad cough at night, probably due in part to the fact that when he turned in he would merely wrap his blanket around his body and face while I was cosy and comfortable in my sleeping bag. Nights were cold, and I found a little ice in my water bottle one morning. Breakfast was the Spartan three glasses of strong tea, though weakening with each glass, the peanuts roasted on the fire put into the last glass being the only sustenance. We would stop for about an hour at lunch time and hobble the camels. Collecting anything that could burn we would make a fire, and Ahmed would make a flat, sandy bread in the embers. Every evening meal was the same. We put some oil into the saucepan, heated it and cut up an onion into it. We then added a small tin of tomato purée and spice, letting that cook for a little. Finally we poured in enough water to cover the macaroni that we threw in. When the water almost dried the meal was ready. Once camp in the evening was established and while Ahmed was cooking, a wonderful calm took over the desert. The wind would often drop, and the colours as the sun set brought a feeling of intense peace and wellbeing.

One night we had prepared our meal. We were on hilly stony ground, and we had not hobbled our camels in the hope that they would wonder a little to find pasture. It was dark when we went out to find them and hobble them. We could follow their tracks by using a weak torch, but then the tracks disappeared on the stones. The moon had set, and there was no way we would find them and perhaps not even be able to find our camp site in the dark. We gave up and bedded down for the night. There was no sign of the camels in the morning. We were about than 60 miles from Mizda. The situation reminded me of Trooper Moor of the Long Range Desert Group who, in the last war, when the Italians did so much damage by bombing the LRDG patrol's vehicles at Gebel el Simbel, 100 miles south of Kufra. Rather than head north for Kufra and give himself up to the Italians then occupying it, he headed south and walked for some 200 miles: an astonishing feat to survive on a bottle of water. Mizda would be a short walk by comparison, and we had more water.

While we squatted over the fire drinking our tea, I scanned the far hills, and was alerted by a small dot on a far distant hill moving slightly. Ahmed confirmed it and thought it was one of his camels, as it indeed turned out to be. The relief was great, though I suspect that time meant little to him, and adding extra days to hunt down the camels would not be of much concern, but I had already stretched my Christmas leave.

When we returned to Mizda I had enough time to enjoy a day sipping tea in the centre, talking to the locals, and also time to give an English lesson in the school. The young lads were hugely eager and thrust up their hands enthusiastically to answer questions I put to them. In the evenings Ahmed and I would be joined by others to walk out of the village and sit and talk in the hills. They would break off at some stage to say their prayers, leaving me to soak in the beauty of the desert evening with Mizda below, the tall palm trees, and romantic looking fort and the tall stone tower of the mosque. Ahmed insisted on feeding me with great and typical Arab hospitality. I was sad to leave and take the daily bus back to Tripoli, but I said I would probably be back to finish my survey.

I was surprised that nobody in Mizda seemed worried about setting about surveying their land. Most Arabs would be. I seem to have gained good friendships and trust.

I returned to complete the task two years later. This time I did not ask for any extra leave when the next term started, and Christmas 1964 saw me back in Mizda. This time I had many friends in Mizda. Despite being early at the bus station in Tripoli, I found that it was already full. The driver put my kit not on the roof with the rest, but in the boot and gave me the added preferential treatment of a standing place right at the front of the bus. As we left Tripoli the conductor worked his way forward with passengers with sacks, live chickens and all sorts. On reaching me he remembered me from two years ago, and he then called everybody's attention and, at the top of his voice, told them about my last visit.

At Garian the bus stopped for a while and suddenly a voice greeted me from behind "Hall bin Hall". I turned to find that it was the school teacher from Mizda. There were now

spare seats, so we sat together and I heard news from the oasis. He said he knew I would return because it is said that all those who drink Mizda water return, and here I was. He gave me the sad news that Ahmed bin Dau was working in Tripoli. On arrival at night in Mizda, he took me at once to Salem who greeted me warmly and insisted I stay for bread, with a sheep meat dish followed by tea.

After a restless night I was woken by Salem telling me to join him for some millet and oil and tea. Then we went to the suk and met a merchant who had camels. Following negotiations over price of camels there was coffee with Hadi Fridge Tire (spelling??) who was so pleased to see me in Mizda again, and we talked long. Finally I went to the school where there was coffee with the headmaster, and I had to show off my ability at table tennis at the 'Club'. Tire returned and he gave me rice and meat. Later the same morning (non-stop meeting, talking, coffee and food) the merchant brought me macaroni. In the afternoon I went up a nearby hill and did a couple of pencil sketches of the oasis with its mud houses, mud tower to the mosque and fort. I was called back because the camels had arrived. They were sturdy beasts.

On reflection I suspect the two young men, my guides, Brahim (20 years old) and Mohammed (31 years old), were probably ordered to come by the merchant, because they seemed reluctant to travel, always wanting to ride rather than walk, and to stop for the night early. When I did not understand Brahim he had the tiresome habit of just raising his voice. However, things improved as we got to know each other, and in the evening we sang.

Mohammed was clearly the leader of the two, and while walking with him, I asked him if he was rich. When he replied that he was not, I said "But Libya now has oil". His response was only too correct: "Oil makes one man rich while others are poor".

My first night out was uncomfortable. Waking at six, my hips and back were really cold. Noon the next day found us at the well of Mazuza where there was good water at about 20 feet. Each camel took about 10 small bowls of water. A man called Hussein was there looking for his lost camels, and he joined us for lunch. He seemed to mistrust me at first, but by the evening he opened out a little to me. That night was the coldest so far with ice forming on the inside of my groundsheet, though on the following night it dropped to 19 degrees Fahrenheit. Mohammed was getting fed up with macaroni and little else, and I think his sandal falling apart was partly his desire to ride rather than walk. They seemed unused to the desert and badly equipped for it. Mohammed's socks were more holes than sock, and they showed insufficient respect for the camels, wanting to ride them the whole time, with their loads of kit and water. I am used to mixing walking and riding on camels, giving the camels a chance to have some time without the extra weight. I have found that Arabs appear to have respect for those who care for their camels in this way. Ahmed bin Dau always mixed his walking with riding, as did the Tuareg in the southern Sahara.

The one word of English Mohammed knew was 'Mister', and it took a few days training for him to call me Hall bin Hall. Brahim knew a few swear words, and asked me what they meant. After telling him, he never used them again.

I found the escarpment had the same structure as I had found further west two years previously. The hard crust at the top was not tough enough for rock paintings or carvings, and I found no evidence of Neolithic man up there.

I had fixed the eastern section of the escarpment with Mizda by compass and by distance estimated through the speed of the camels. Now it was time to return via the well of Mazuza where we spent one night. I noted a strange feeling in the place. There were a few ruined houses on the hill nearby. We chose to go up a side wadi to camp where there were grasses and scented flowers, all rather attractive.

At Mizda I was sad to be leaving Mohammed and Brahim. Though they appeared idle and not to be as good with the camels as Ahmed bin Dau, a temporary friendship was struck up. I have always felt very sad leaving places with people I had loved, and this was no exception. I probably knew that I would never return, but it had given me such a highlight in my life.

I prepared a revised map of the escarpment which was to be used by others at later dates.