

The sound of desert silence



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For years, I have been fascinated by, and drawn to, what I call the S's - stillness, silence, solitude, simplicity, sacredness and soul. Whilst reading Sara Maitland's excellent [The Book of Silence](#), I learned of her exploration and experience of desert silence; this was something I knew I wanted to experience for myself. So earlier this month I travelled to the eastern Sinai Desert with specialist tour company [Wind, Sand and Stars](#) to spend a week in (near-) silence in this vast desert.

The desert has consistently figured in all the Abrahamic traditions as a place of retreat, of contemplation, and of transformation. Whether you read the biblical stories as myth, metaphor or history, people were 'lost' in the desert and emerged with new spiritual insights. Moses led the Israelites through the desert for 40 years in a circuitous search for their promised land. Prophets went out to live in the desert. And the transformational beginning of Jesus's ministry began with his period of temptation in the wilderness. The Egyptian deserts became a home for the reclusive and ascetic fourth-century Christian abbas and ammas (the Desert Fathers) who lived in solitary caves or small communities, away from civilisation, in order to practice their faith without distraction; these early monastics experienced a life of hardship and relative solitude that gave them deep insights into human spiritual nature that have been passed down through the oral tradition as great teachings. Several of these communities survive today as great desert monasteries such as St Anthony's and St Catherine's, with an unbroken history of continuous Christian worship stretching back seventeen-hundred years.

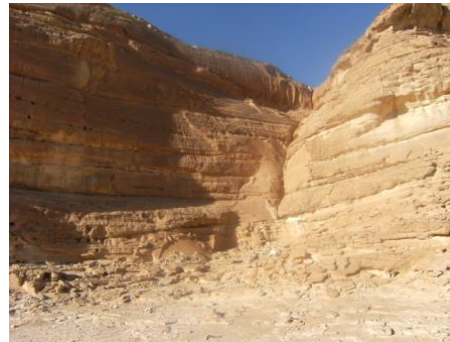
Our more limited desert experience took us deep into the Sinai. This sandstone plateau is carved into the most fantastic landscape of towering vertical cliffs, like iceberg islands, set amongst an almost flat network of wide connecting wadis. The cliffs are bedded and shattered; the wind has carved fissures, cracks, gullies, caves, stalactites, pillars and other amazing shapes. There are large areas of broken stone littering the cliff-foot. The day-time temperature is over 40 degrees. And there is sand. Not the familiar sand of the British seaside dunes, but a granular sand that is sometimes compacted into a hard surface, sometimes loose for a few inches, and sometimes piled in massive slopes hundreds of feet high against the vertical cliffs. It is bright. It is harsh. The sun is unrelenting. The overwhelming colour is of sandy-beige - and yet within this there are yellows, ochres, purples and black. It is incredibly clean: nothing decays, except in geological time. There is no evidence of water, other than early morning dew. Animal life is limited to some ravens, scorpions, a desert fox or two, and the mouse that made a daily appearance around my place of solitude.



The desert is stark. It strips you back. I came to experience the desert as 'emptying'. It empties you out. It voids the body and the mind. Life returns to great simplicity - finding shade, minimising movement, and drinking water. There is time to observe the landscape, from the minute details of individual stones and sand-hills, to the vastness of the horizons. It is the nights that are perhaps the most extraordinary of all. Dusk falls around 6.30 as the sun's shadow runs across the desert floor and up the cliff walls. Then the deepness of the skies becomes more evident. Without cloud cover, without atmospheric rubbish, without light pollution, the sky becomes a magnificent panoply of stars and planets and space. It is said there are as many stars in the sky as there are grains of sand on earth. This heavenly

panorama is magnificent. It is endlessly observable. As you lie in a sleeping bag on the desert floor, waking up at intervals, you look up and see this slowly moving (although actually it is moving at thousands of miles per hour!) kaleidoscope of constellations and galaxies. Moon-rise follows sun-set, with another shadow crossing the floor and climbing the walls. A full moon that enables you to see clearly to the far horizon, and to read your book by moonlight in the middle of the night.

This is the desert experience - huge, grandiose, infinite, humbling. We humans are totally insignificant in the presence of such awesomeness. We are no more than a single grain of sand - or a far distant twinkling star. And yet we are also the magnificent perceiver and witness of all this creation. We are a part of the amazing web that connects the microscopic particle with the quantum whole. "I am a part of that of which I am the whole." I am ... empty yet whole, body yet spirit, tiny yet complete, alone yet connected, human yet divine, myself and not myself.



In this emptiness, we imagine the desert to be silent. The relative absence of humans and animals (the largest creators of noise on our planet), the heat and dryness, are all reasons for noise to be diminished, but - frustratingly! - it is not silent. You hear the noise of a camel caravan crossing the sand, of a fellow-camper turning over in her sleeping bag, of the Bedu family making bread, of the ravens wheeling in the sky, of the wind across the desert floor, and (most present for me) of the flies buzzing around your head. You learn to detect individual sounds. And when you can separate these discrete and random sounds, you make the amazing discovery that each sound has a definite beginning and ending. When the sound is ended, you can't be sure it actually happened. You discover the silence *between* the sounds. Revelling in this experience, I started to become aware of the silence *beneath* the sounds. These silences are completely new to me, and they are profound. Now that I am home again, and surrounded by the continuous noises of everyday living, I can listen and find this same silence between and beneath the noise.

The night-time silence is the deepest of all. To wander out into the desert, away from the murmurs around the camp fire, to lie on your back on the ground as it leaks the day's heat back into the air, and to gaze at the soundless universe, is truly humbling. The body is upheld by the ground whilst the soul wanders through these infinite expanses; the mind cannot cope with such voids and - for once - gives up the struggle for control. Here is the connection with all that is ... and it's a boundlessly full void.

This silence is not devoid of content. Many of those who have explored silence have tried to describe or explain the 'sound of silence'. Even in this total absence of noise, there is something present. I could hear my own blood rhythmically pumping around my body. And beneath that, there is another gentle rhythmic "hum" as of electrical energy; the nearest description I can offer from my own experience is of the imagined sound of a distant electricity sub-station heard on a quiet day from a mile away. Yet there are no electricity sub-stations or generators in the middle of the Sinai. This elusive and magical 'sound of silence' has been ascribed to many different sources: to the chemistry within our planetary atmosphere; to the constant creation occurring around us; to the solar and stellar energies bombarding our earth; to radio and light waves. That this 'sound of silence' exists constantly between and beneath all other sound - even in total silence - is surely a cause for wonder. What resonates (!) for me in this discovery, is a sound of silence that is our cosmos at work - creating, transforming and destroying, with energies that we can neither understand nor rationalise, that gives rise to both life and death. The Buddhist tradition asserts that 'Om' is the sound

of the universe being created - the big and silent bang. This present sound of silence heard in the desert is a window into that infinite Mystery that creates us and enfolds us, always.