

## Mar Mousa Syria, April 2011



Two hundred meters above the desert floor an organic growth of buildings clings to the dun-coloured cliff. When you reach the top of the stone stairs you are at 1300 metres and the air is chilly. There is an unmarked door 40 inches high. You still have to keep your head down inside the dark rock labyrinth which leads to a sunny terrace. To the east is a limitless biblical wasteland.

Restored by the charismatic Father Paolo, the monastery at Mar Mousa is home to a handful of monks, a nun or two and a floating population of visitors. A couple of dozen were now in residence. We were invited to lunch. We'd already eaten, but we could not resist the sharp fresh yoghurt provided by the monastery's goats. We filled our cups three times.

An evening service convened in the cosy church with carpets and cushions on the floor and layers of frescos on the walls, the earliest from the 12<sup>th</sup> century. Father Paolo, a tall, bearded, controlling presence, conducts the liturgy in Arabic, French and Italian. English was reserved for an important secular message: someone had failed to use a toilet brush in one of the lavatories.

As in most religious services, singing, repetition and ritualistic physical movement were the key psychological elements of subdued mass hysteria. Is Father Paolo still a Jesuit? The chanting and physical jerks resembled a performance in a Tibetan temple. The light was reduced to flickering candles and a swinging censor perfumes the air. A moment of silence followed – well 45 minutes for meditation or eye-closing – before readings from the bible. The

first was Job 29, and if there was any doubt that we were now in the grip of some cosmic force, it was dispelled when the 2,000 page bible in Judith's hands –written from back to front – fell open at the correct page. Afterwards, Father Paolo solicited interpretive comment from the audience, and a young lad droned on in barely audible French.

I hadn't understood a word – apart from the hygienic advice – so afterwards I wisecracked to Andrew, an Englishman, "I'm not sure I agreed totally with the theological argument." He said "I couldn't really follow some of it", which I thought was a wet reply, until the following morning when I discovered that he speaks French and some Arabic and is a full-time theologian.

After the two-and-one-half hour service, platters were laid on the carpets heaped with humous, yoghurt, cucumbers, tomatoes, olives, Arab bread, za'atar and oil. Exactly the same as lunch - plus some tasty lentil soup.

Men and women are put up in separate dormitories, but we were lucky. We had two single rooms in a separate stone structure like a small fort. Carrying your bed linen, you have to cross a steel footbridge, climb another 100 stairs and find your way through more dark stone passageways. My large, whitewashed cell was furnished with two cots, a chair and table and an unlit stove, but the blankets were sufficient. Judith was located up a few staircases in the women's wing and I was down in the dungeon, but we both had a fantastic view of the sun rising.

And there is hot water. The shower is fed by a boiler bolstered by solar heating panels. There was a kitchen, too, in the women's quarters, and I sneaked up there for a morning cup of tea.

We felt we had entered a computer riddle game like *Myst* or *Riven*. The stone buildings are connected by rambling staircases and by aerial cables which stretch down to the valley floor and up to the peak of the ridge. Buckets whisk along the cables delivering food supplies and building materials. Outside there are balconies, pipes, pulleys and chimneys, and mysterious mechanical contrivances. Inside are meandering stairs and corridors, strange empty rooms furnished with cushions and carpets, alcoves and cabinets, icons and statues. Now and then the overwhelming quiet is broken by the flutter of doves, the distant cries of workers or the clanging of the improvised church bell – a four-rung metal chime.

The library is vertical. The steel racks contain philosophical and theological tomes in Arabic and French, old Lonely Planet guidebooks and a biography of Michael Caine stamped by the British Council Library in Damascus. Through a hole in the floor you discover there is a second, and then a third level. There, beneath the shelving is another 40 inch high door which leads onto a catwalk above a the fourth level, a carpeted room with generous windows revealing the desert panorama below. A large table fills the centre and there is a clutter of computer equipment.

We breakfasted on the terrace of the old church. You guessed it – humous, yoghurt, cucumbers, tomatoes, olives, Arab bread, za'atar and oil – minus the

lentil soup. There is no charge for anything. You are expected to help out with the meals or building projects, and donations are accepted.

In addition to the earnest backpacking acolytes, there were a few mature travellers. In a random group of two dozen people, outside Africa, how many do you think would speak Malagasy? We had two. One was a Norwegian pastor, who was astounded and delighted to discover that we had not only seen two Norwegian films, but counted them amongst our all-time favourites. The other was Stefano, an Italian aid worker, who is spending a year at the monastery to study Arabic. He worked in Madagascar for several years, and in the former Yugoslavia during the war, and so possibly may soon be the only person in the world who speaks Malagasy and Serbo-Croat and Arabic as second languages.

Andrew's wife works for Shell in Dubai because theologians don't make a lot of money. Christian, another Englishman who looks like a young Wilfred Thesiger, seems to have been travelling most of his adult life. Whatever exotic location we mentioned – Ladakh, Louang Prabang, Ulan Bator – he seems to have visited three or four times, and remembers the names of all the mountains and rivers and towns. Why does he do it? The best answer he could come up with was "It's better than working."



Why are they here? For Christian it's another way station on his restless travels. The pastor comes to read, to write, to walk on the rocky paths, and to discuss ecumenical issues with Father Paolo; the school in his small town outside Oslo is now seventy-five per cent Muslim. The theologian questions whether what he is doing is worth doing. We came down to

Damascus. Al Jazeera says rebellion is spreading throughout the country. Mar Mousa remains aloft in a spirit of submissive tranquility.