

# Lost in the Desert

(a cautionary tale that shows its author in a bad light  
but equally illustrates the brilliance of the Bedouin)

To set the scene, it should be explained that the writer, Yogi, just short of seventy years of age, is kept fully occupied when at home, being an academic workaholic and having a house and garden to maintain, but when pressure is released by his being on holiday he promptly becomes irrepressibly hyperactive! The trouble described in this article arose because after lunch had been taken one day on the Wind Sand & Stars ‘Pilgrimage’ trip in the Sinai desert, the leader (Liz Dempsey) announced that there would then be a pause or siesta, with nothing to do until 3 pm. It was 1.45 at the time, and the thought of such inactivity did not appeal, so the writer asked for (and received) permission to go for a walk for one hour, fully expecting to be within sight most of the time and promising to be back by 2.45. Of course he had every intention and expectation of keeping that promise, but in the event was unable to do so because he got hopelessly lost. This account is by way of showing how easy it can be to get lost if one is not watching one’s step sufficiently carefully, and to illustrate how things can go wrong even if one is not aware of doing anything that is actively stupid.

The event occurred on the fourth day of the ‘pilgrimage’, 12 April 2005, after the morning had been spent climbing to, and looking at, the ancient temple of Serabit el Khadem, a monument to the god Hathor. From there we went on a short walk to a place where an overhanging ledge provided a nice strip of shade for a lunch stop. The shelf of rock on which we sat for lunch overlooked a wadi of no great depth, perhaps 100 feet. The whole district is composed of sandstone that has been elevated geologically without distortion and is still lying in horizontal layers. It is topographically very young: the sandstone has been weathered, probably in the main by occasional floods, into badlands with a total relief that in the relevant locality is limited to a few hundred feet, with numerous dry wadis and intervening hills or mesas [there is probably a proper local word for them]. The sandstone is quite weak and weathers easily; its beds are not all equally soft, so it tends to weather into a topography in which vertical steps alternate with horizontal ledges and terraces. In most places there is no significant difficulty in scrambling up or down the hillsides — one can follow along a ledge until one comes across a chute of fallen rocks that give access to the next one.

Opposite the lunch spot, seemingly just across the wadi, there was a hill with a somewhat pointed top, and it was *that* that I asked permission to go and climb when I would otherwise have had to be being patient at the lunch place. A short distance to its left there was another, lower, hill with a flat top, and I could see that there were terraces that led back, *i.e.* away from us, some distance from the wadi towards that hill, which I therefore supposed to be further back than the summit that I intended to climb. I thought at the time that ‘my’ hill rose pretty steeply all the way from the wadi in front of us to the summit, and that I would be in view of, and have a view of, the lunch spot nearly all the time I was away except just at the start when I was trying to get across the wadi. Thus I had not the slightest thought or fear of losing my way and did not take even the most elementary precaution of noticing which direction was which. The Sun was high in the sky and I somehow failed to look to see which direction it was in.

I was wearing a long-sleeved top and a kafia, so only my hands and face were exposed to sunshine. Liz asked me if I would take any water with me; the question seemed to be put more as a reminder than as an instruction, and as I preferred not to be bothered with a daypack I had a drink then and there and claimed that I could manage for an hour without further water. That was not too reprehensible, but lack of water did create a bit of anxiety after I got lost and seemed likely to be away for *much* more than an hour. All that I had with me apart from the clothes I was wearing were a watch and a camera.

The terrace where we had been having lunch shelved down towards the right, so I started off in that direction and, traversing constantly to the right and getting downhill wherever opportunity offered, I soon reached the floor of the wadi, at a place where the wadi divided into two branches. I crossed to the other side, and traversed back in the opposite direction, with the wadi on my left, gaining altitude at every opportunity. Soon I encountered a terrace much broader than the narrow ledges that I had hitherto been walking on, and

it led round a corner to the right, going roughly at right angles to the wadi. That was unexpected, but only because from the lunching place the nature of the terracing was not apparent under conditions of high-Sun illumination and I had not appreciated that there were wide terraces interposed between the wadi and ‘my’ hill although I did have some idea that the flat-top hill lay some distance back. There proved in fact to be several successive wide terraces, but the whole distance was not very great and soon I arrived at the summit — or at least, it was *a* summit. It was a flat-topped one, and I am almost certain that it was indeed the flat-topped one that was to be seen from the lunch site. That is to say, it was *not* the one that I was intending to go up. I looked at my watch: I had been gone only 15 minutes, and so was under no pressure of time.

At that juncture I made what I afterwards recognized as another omission that contributed to my getting lost. Since I was sure that it was not the summit that I was aiming for, I did not stand and look round carefully or look for the lunch spot across the wadi. The time to do that, I thought, and to holler to the others, was when I reached the proper summit. I believe, however, from what I was told afterwards, that I was actually seen on the flat-top summit by at least one person at the lunching place.

There was indeed another, higher, summit not very far away, the other side of a small declivity, and I naturally (and, I still believe, correctly) identified *that* as my intended goal, so I scrambled up it — it could not have taken more than a very few minutes from ‘flat-top’. But I think that it was then that I lost my sense of direction, because in my mind I saw ‘my’ hill as being much nearer to the wadi than ‘flat-top’ was, in fact just across from the lunching place, whereas I now think that it is actually *further* from the wadi. I have come to that conclusion from a picture that I took from where we had had lunch, or perhaps it was only from *near* that point, after I had been rescued. With the Sun then much lower in the sky, the terracing is shown up in the photograph by shadows which were lacking in the middle of the day, and it seems fairly clear that my pointed hill is in fact a long way back from the wadi, a good deal further back even than ‘flat-top’.

I believe that I was totally disoriented by that misunderstanding of the basic geography of the district. I thought that, when going from ‘flat-top’ to ‘pointed-top’ I was going more or less *towards* the lunching place, whereas in point of fact I was going *away* from it. Accordingly, on reaching the summit I looked for the lunch place in more or less the direction in which I had been heading when I was coming from ‘flat-top’. I did not know quite what it would look like, because I had not bothered to look for it from ‘flat-top’, but although I looked carefully at the formations on the other side of the wadi I could not see the place at all. That, I am pretty sure, is because I was looking in altogether the wrong direction, across the wrong wadi! — one that, from the point of view of the lunch site, was *behind* the hill that I had intended to ascend and on top of which (I still quite think) I was at that moment. What I probably needed to do was to turn round and search in diametrically the opposite direction — but that did not seem at the time to be a useful or rational thing to do at all. Since I could not see the place where the others were, I refrained from shouting and waving and dancing about as I would no doubt have done to call attention to my success if I had felt successful. That was a pity, because doing so would have been likely to elicit answering shouts, which I would have been astonished to hear coming from *behind* me.

Instead of feeling successful, however, I was actually nonplussed at not recognising where we had had lunch: since the relevant summit was so clearly visible from that place, the reverse should have been equally true. There was, therefore, cause for serious misgivings, and I began to think I must be lost, although I could not imagine how that could have come about. I knew that, in such a situation, the thing to do was not to panic but to think rationally, and that was what I tried to do. I decided that, although it might seem an unnecessarily long way round, the thing to do was to go back by exactly the route by which I had come, starting by returning to ‘flat-top’. There was plenty of time to do that. So I returned as far as the declivity between the hill I had just been up and ‘flat-top’. Of course I can see now that the proper thing to have done was to go right up onto ‘flat-top’ again and have a good look round from there to try to identify the lunch spot and get my bearings; but I was not aware then that I had altogether *lost* those bearings and I thought that I was at the start of the broad terraces up which I had come and that all I had to do was to follow them round until they led me back into the wadi from which I had started.

I think that that was actually true, but from the picture that I took afterwards, with the Sun low, I think that I suffered a misfortune through not going far enough *down* the set of terraces before following them round to the left. There appear in the picture to be upper terraces that go a long way anticlockwise round ‘pointed-top’, at a level where that summit is still distinct from the main bulk of the massif that rises opposite the lunch stop, whereas the lower terraces come a long way ‘forwards’ towards the ‘home wadi’. I knew and expected the terraces to swing round to the left, and they did so; but they all look frightfully similar to one another, and I was not keeping track of *how far*, cumulatively, they may have turned. As a result, I believe that, instead of coming out on the side of the home wadi I came out on the side of the wadi at the back, the one across which I had been unable to see the lunching place from the summit. When the terraces had led me round so that I was above that wadi, I was almost certain it was the wrong one — it looked somehow bigger and deeper than I was expecting, and I was not able to console myself much with the thought that maybe I had struck it at a different place from where I had left it. It was all very confusing! It was about then that it was borne in on me that I was in all probability lost, and it occurred to me to try shouting to see if I could raise an answer. In fact I understand that Margaret Hustler (at least) heard shouting at 2.25 pm, which would have been about the time that I was at that place, but of course there was no reason for anybody who heard me to realise that the (invisible) source of the shouting was hoping for a response, and none came.

Because the wadi was quite deep and the opportunities for getting down the terracing were rather limited, I must have travelled quite a long way along the side of the wadi before reaching the floor. On arrival there I tried shouting again. There were some goats on the floor of the wadi, and soon I saw a lady who was no doubt in charge of them. When I first saw her she was on the other side of the wadi. I crossed to speak to her, and as I did so she produced a black cloth [?name] with which she covered most of her face. I could not communicate with her; the only thing I could think of to say was “Hathor?” — the name from the temple — and point interrogatively first to the left and then to the right. She evidently did not understand what it was that I wanted to know, although of course she could easily see that I was lost! I started to go a bit further down the wadi in the same direction as I had been heading, in the faint hope of coming across the junction between wadis at which I had first descended into the ‘home’ one, but there was no sign of any such confluence. Rather than go a long way at random I stopped and tried to think whether I had any clues as to which way I ought to go. It was not until then that it occurred to me that, in a general sort of way, the Sun must have been behind, rather than in front of, the ledge where we had had lunch, for there to have been the shade that existed there, and so the best direction in which to go to return there would be generally *towards* the Sun. That was *not* the direction in which I had been heading, but was more nearly the opposite one. I therefore turned and went along the wadi floor in what I had then concluded was the better direction.

After several minutes — by that time it was approaching 2.45 and I was walking pretty quickly if not actually running — there was no sign that I was getting towards anywhere that looked much like the piece of wadi from which I had originally come, and it was only too clear that I was completely lost. I was extremely vexed with myself for having got into such a predicament, not only on account of the danger to myself but because I was letting Liz down on my promise and putting her into a position of frightful difficulty as to what she should do, both about me and about the rest of the party. I decided that it was no use just rushing aimlessly about, when the truth was that I was lost: the chances were that the further I went the further I might be getting from where I started, and I knew that the best thing to do when one was lost was to stay in one place and hope to be found. Besides, I was in quite a sweat and becoming uncomfortably aware of being thirsty, and I realised that there would be a lot to be said for keeping still and trying to conserve liquid. I considered whether it was best to stay in the wadi or go to a summit, and decided that a summit was better — one could be seen from different directions, and shouts would carry all round instead of being largely confined to a wadi. So I ascended the left-hand wall of the wadi, the usual scramble up ledges, and came out onto a broad and largely flat summit area, where there was nothing more to be done except to shout from time to time and to wait and hope for rescue. I went so far as to take a picture of myself there, on the pessimistic grounds that the camera would eventually be found even if it were too late for me!

There was quite a wind on the summit, and to conserve moisture as much as possible I lay down in the lee and shade of a big rock, carefully arranging a couple of large stones as a pillow and recalling (with wry amusement despite my predicament) that in doing so I was following the example of Jacob! I took off my kafia and wrapped it right over my head and face and hands to minimise air flow and evaporation, and settled down to wait. I prayed for rescue. It was about 3 pm. Naturally I wondered how long I might have to wait. It did seem a bit ironic that impatience at the prospect of inactivity for an hour or so at the lunch site had led to enforced inactivity for an unknown duration in much less agreeable circumstances, to say nothing of the negative effects on many other people. It never crossed my mind that there could be manpower enough within our own party to mount an immediate search: I supposed that it would be necessary to recruit a search team from the valley where we had spent the previous night, and that there could scarcely be time to do that before dark, so I was very likely to remain where I was until at least the next day. The previous nights had not been cold, so although I would be thirsty I did not see myself as being in immediate danger. I was, however, very anxious about the effect on everyone else's holiday, and wondered however Liz was going to cope with the situation that I had irresponsibly created for her, and thought what a telling-off she would be likely to suffer from her Director in London for her (as it would appear) ill-advised good nature in allowing me to go off by myself.

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It was just about 4 pm when I heard shouts. Of course I jumped up with great enthusiasm to see whence they emanated and to shout in return: there was a man only a few hundred yards away! More remarkable still, he was not only on my level, but was *on the same mesa*, and it took me only a minute or two to walk and run to meet him. He proved to be Yusuf, a young Bedouin who had not been with our party all the time but had (I think) joined it just that morning and had helped our regular Bedouin host, Liz's assistant, Amr, to prepare lunch. Needless to say I shook his hand with great warmth and thanked him profusely for finding me; I was quite unable to comprehend how he could have done so so quickly. Amr, too, appeared on the scene, and we set off under Yusuf's leadership to return to the rest of the party. I was somehow too dazed by the sudden relief and turn of events to take in the route by which we were going; in any case we were obviously in a hurry and I was at full stretch physically, because Yusuf was not travelling as if he were escorting a geriatric so much as leading an orienteering race! It was, I think, about 4.30 that we arrived back at the ledge where we had had lunch; the whole party was still there. Liz came a few yards to meet us; I knelt and kissed her hand, making an abject apology to the best of my ability; but instead of being furious with me, as she had every right to be, she gave me a big hug and made a fuss of me, and in fact none of the party, whose afternoon I supposed I had wrecked, seemed to hold it against me at all. However, there was no time to spare if we were all to get down the considerable distance to the valley, where we were due to camp not far from the site of the previous night's camp, before dark, so we set off immediately. It was remarkable how the slowest members of the party made a special effort and thereby minimised the repercussions of the delay that I had precipitated. Although I believe that we did not go by the route that we would otherwise have taken, but instead largely retraced the morning's route, we did reach the camping place by dark, so the episode did not seriously impair the programme for the holiday as a whole.

It was explained to me subsequently that the Bedouin knew the district well. In fact Yusuf lived quite nearby (we subsequently visited his family's tent in the middle of the desert); he was 18 years of age and had been known to Wind Sand & Stars from the time he was a baby. It did not seem to me, however, that knowing the district was at all the same thing as managing to search the whole area in just one hour. On the Bedouins' own statement, the place where they found me was surprisingly far away, in view of the fact that I had been gone such a short time. It seems that, soon after the time for my return passed, they set out largely on their own initiative to find me, and like me they gave themselves an hour. First, for reasons that I could not follow, they looked 'behind' the lunching place, but then they set out in the direction in which I was supposed to have started, shouting from time to time. Although I did not hear them, there came a point at which their shouts reached the attention of the goatherd lady, who responded in some way, and they

thereupon went down into her wadi and spoke to her, and she told them that she had seen me and which way I had gone; I do not know if she had been able to tell them which mesa I had ascended, or whether it was just lucky that they went up that one, or they may even have tried several of them. At the rate that they were travelling they evidently could cover a lot of ground, but, even so, to have effected a rescue from scratch in such a short time seems to me to border on the miraculous. They did, actually, appreciably over-stay the hour that they originally allocated for the search; Amr told me afterwards that the hour had been nearly up when they met the goatherd lady, but they thought then that success in a short further time was so probable as to warrant continuing the search. The fact that they were past their own deadline also would have increased the hurry to return to base after they had found me.

Although, therefore, there is no doubt that I made some serious mistakes that could well have had serious consequences, such consequences were obviated thanks to the remarkable knowledge, energy and willingness of the two Bedouin who were with the party at the time. The gravity of the episode seemed to diminish daily in the sight of the members of the party, and the event was even recalled by some, towards the end of the week, as being one of the ‘high points’ of the whole trip. It remains, all the same, an object lesson to me, and I shall always remember with gratitude the incredible promptness and efficiency of the Bedouin search party. It was so nice that night to be in my sleeping bag at the proper campsite with the others, instead of coping as best I could, alone and without water or food or warmth, on an unidentified mesa top!

### Caption to picture and sketch-map

The picture was taken from the place where we had lunch, or nearby, but not until after I was rescued and the Sun was quite low in the sky. In relation to how the lie of the land looked at the time that I set out, it is misleading in two respects. First, it was taken with a camera lens of very short focal length, which makes everything look small. The actual appearance of ‘Flat-top’ (just left of centre) and ‘Pointed-top’ (almost central) was considerably more imposing than appears from the picture. Secondly, the low Sun throws shadows on the right-hand side of the picture, making the terracing there obvious and revealing clearly that although in some places the ground is steep, consisting of alternate minor ledges and vertical steps, there exist relatively broad level terraces between some of the steep slopes. I had thought that the whole visible face of ‘Pointed-top’ was more or less of the character of the steep sections visible in the picture in shadow between the wide terraces; I had however been able in part to recognise the wide terraces in front of ‘Flat-top’. The picture covers such a wide angle that, although the Sun casts shadows on the right-hand side, it is nearly ‘behind the camera’ in respect of the left-hand side, and the nature of the topography is not nearly as clear there. In fact one can scarcely make out the demarcation between the edge of the flat area on which the photographer was standing (just beyond the edge of the shadow on the near left) and the base of the ‘Flat-top’ massif on the opposite side of the intervening wadi, part of whose wall is seen immediately above the shadowed area in the foreground to the right of the picture. It may easily be appreciated that, in the shadowless conditions when the Sun was high, nearly all sense of distance was lost.

I have tried to draw a sketch-map with a shot at very qualitative contouring, showing, in principle only and with a reliability that starts low and rapidly decreases further, (a) what the photograph now suggests to me about the lie of the land between the lunch spot and the two hilltops on the other side of the wadi, (b) the possible nature of the route that I followed, which led into the wrong wadi, and (c) totally conjectural topography on the sides of that wadi. If the map is anywhere near correct in broad principle, it illustrates how, upon reaching ‘Pointed-top’, I was in exactly the position that I expected to be vis-à-vis a wadi, across which I looked in vain for the lunch site, because the hill I was on was in a quite different position from where I had imagined it to be (the point marked on the sketch-map right opposite the lunching site), and the wadi that I was looking across was the wrong wadi. It was then through a second, independent, mistake or misfortune that in attempting to re-trace my route in reverse I probably followed terraces at too high a level and they led me round into the wrong wadi as indicated in the sketch-map.