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Red Sea sanctuary

Dahab, Egypt, retains its tranquil image despite '06 terror attacks

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DAHAB, Egypt - The morning light glistened off hand-laid mosaic tile walkways as we stumbled through the hostel courtyard to breakfast.

Adele and I, two Albany residents traveling through Egypt for two weeks, had arrived in the middle of the night at the eastern Sinai peninsula desert. Our friend Annie, a Montanan who we met on the road to Cairo, had come earlier and booked us beds in the Bishbishi Hostel.

As the sun rose we blessed Annie, and the fresh tropical fruit shakes in glasses as tall as our forearms. We befriended, as everyone at the Bishbishi does, the gregarious Egyptian proprietor Jimmy, who took our money for an afternoon snorkeling trip before returning to a backgammon game with a cluster of Nordic blonds.

This is how I think of Dahab.

Another view looms - the videos of carnage at the Red Sea resort, blasted around the world after terrorists struck a month after our March visit last year.

At work in Albany, I watched the news cameras follow rescue workers carrying bodies on restaurant benches, possibly the very one I lounged on exactly four weeks before.

Egypt is full of daily hassles, from confused taxi drivers to constant sexual harassment. Add to that very real concerns about terrorism and people constantly question why anyone would choose to travel there. But it is also an exotic, beautiful

place of dreams that offered a chance to better grasp a culture that is so vital to understanding the world today.

After the attacks

It is hard to mesh such divergent views - of a haven and a horror.

After the attacks I e-mailed Jimmy to see how Dahab had recovered. Originally from Cairo, he moved to Dahab for the chance at a better life working with tourists and owning his own business.

"You can not believe how much the attacks hurt us," he wrote. "The sick people are sick, and unfortunately we cannot do anything about it, but be sure that all of us here are sane and will be happy to share at least a little bit of our lives with anyone who is interested."

I prefer to focus on the Dahab where a traveler on a tight budget can afford to languish sea-side on lazy sun-filled days amid Bedouins, desert cliffs and palm trees.

Sea-view hotel rooms with private baths and balconies cost as little as \$10 per person, such as at the Penguin Village, famous for leading diving tours across the road from the Bishbishi. But the Penguin can be crowded; the night we arrived, only the Bishbishi had rooms.

Refreshed by our fruit shakes and our hostel host, we three Americans forked over \$4.50 for snorkeling gear and a Jeep ride. Our destination: the Blue Hole, a reef just outside town. Dahab's pavement quickly ended, and we off-roaded for 20 minutes.

The Sinai coast is shockingly undeveloped. Sharm el-Sheikh, at the southern tip of the peninsula, is a popular stop on the European playboy circuit of German tour groups. The rest of the coastline north to the Israeli border is blissfully quiet. Exposed steel beams and concrete along the peninsula's main roads hold the promise of future development, but the Sinai isn't there yet. And Dahab feels years behind even that.

The Jeep hugged narrow paths along cliffs as we clung to the rollbar, trying not to fall out the back. We could see the mountains of Saudi Arabia across the sea.

Undersea world

The Jeep dumped us at a dive-restaurant combo on the sand and, dodging camels to reach the water, we plunged into Nemo's world: rich blue depths, neon fish, living coral. I hovered on the surface, watching pink, gold and green clams breathe. Clown fish lurked among the anemones. Angel fish and a million other brilliant creatures I couldn't name darted about.

In between dips, we sunned ourselves on the restaurant roof and chatted with fellow travelers, making dinner plans with an Irishman and two Canadians, who enlarged our party with four students, Japanese and Vietnamese, who tagged along for dinner.

The Dahab shore is dotted with Bedouin-style restaurants. The proprietors dig shallow, round pits in the sand, line them with colorful rugs and cushions or low benches, and set a short table in the middle. Diners eat sitting cross-legged and reclining, lulled by the soft sounds of the sea and the dance of flames in fire pits that banish the desert's nighttime cool. Three courses and drinks can run \$8.

We chose the Aladdin restaurant in the main tourist area, which runs a few hundred yards along a soft curve of the sea.

Mount Sinai

We lounged on cushions against windows that hovered a few feet above the water. Annie remarked that it felt like an aquarium, and we were the fish.

We needed to eat well to sustain us through the next 16 hours - a sleepless night, a bus trip and a hike, to see the sun rise on Mt. Sinai.

Dahab is the closest town to Mount Sinai, where devout Judeo-Christians and secular adventurers greet the dawn and pay homage to the (alleged) remains of Moses' burning bush.

The hike is a switchback along a dry, desert mountain that took the better part of three hours before dawn. The trail was really a camel path, and Bedouins barreled past

on camels carrying pilgrims, many of them middle-aged European women in sandals who couldn't take the rocky hike. Often we found ourselves dashing to the edge of a precipice to avoid camel hooves.

The hike was cold, dusty and steep, punctuated by Bedouin shacks offering drinks the price of our hostel rooms in Dahab.

Nigerian pilgrims danced among us, singing spirituals and shouting encouragement.\

At the summit, we shivered and envied a group of Poles who sang increasingly slurred hymns with the assistance of deep swigs from flasks.

Dawn was a disappointment masked by clouds, a slow lightening rather than the sudden appearance of sun.

We clambered down the Steps of Repentance, carved by a penitent man, as explained in our tour books, and marked by stones others left to memorialize their trip and loved ones long past.

At the bottom we wound our way toward a monastery and the remains of the burning bush. I was tapped. I sat on a patio outside the bush shrine, stretched out in the sun and promptly fell asleep on the uneven stone.

The ride back to Dahab was a sleepy blur. Adele hooked up with another bus that would take her on to the Israeli border and Jerusalem. Annie and I wanted another night in Dahab. We couldn't get enough.