

Bedouin Paths Ltd

Bedouin Lives – Column 6: Saturday 24th May 2008

"Employing the Bedouin..."

People sometimes ask me what it is like employing the Bedouin. I reply that anyone who thinks they employ a Bedouin clearly does not know the Bedouin. No-one employs a Bedouin. You may think you do, but you don't. You may pay them a wage, give them shelter, and direct them in their duties and so on; but one thing you do not do is employ them. No-one does. Not even the Bedouin.

There is an invisible line in the relationship between you and the Bedouin. Cross that line and it is all over. They will not hurt you (the Bedouin are incredible peaceful in terms of violence against others) but they will leave you and never return. This means you should never argue or shout or violently disagree with them, especially in public or in front of their family and friends. And if you are unhappy with them then you must never tell them this to their face. You must tell their friends instead; preferably when the Bedouin concerned is present.

It took me some time to understand this. Let's say you are unhappy with a Bedouin. The way to tell him this is for you to tell others and for them to tell him. This way face is saved because then the friends can be blamed for any "misunderstanding" in terms of the message being passed on. He will then change his ways or come to you and discuss. Even better, do it while he is there; it saves time.

Keeping face and showing respect is the basic building block of all relationships with the Bedouin. And the Bedouin are fiercely independent which means that as soon as you try to get them to do something they do not want to do, or which makes them look silly, or indeed offends their sensibilities or (worst of all) actually order them about; then watch out. You will only see the back of their heels as they stomp off. They would rather lose money or possession than lose face or respect.

The Bedouin will work with you for a common purpose and you may think that since you are paying him and you are therefore by definition the customer, that he will take your words and act upon them. No. He will take your words, decide whether they are in line with what he has already decided to do and then get on with what he has already decided to do.

So getting them to do things which go against the grain (like being organized for example) takes Machiavellian planning and Byzantine cunning. Since I have neither, I ask politely and sit back to see what happens.

So if you fancy getting into the same business as we at Bedouin Paths, and desire to employ some Bedouin, you need to remember one thing. You don't employ Bedouin, they employ you. And we wouldn't have it any other way.



Bedouin Paths runs ethical hiking tours out of their Bedouin Camp in St. Katherine in Sinai. Contact mark at mark@bedouinpaths.com or call the Bedouin Camp on +20 189662010 or go to the website at www.bedouinpaths.com .