

Bargains at the Camel Bazaar!

First of a new series of
African adventures

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—Photos by the Authors.

The camel, like the horse, reveals a lot through his teeth.

El Djem, Tunisia.

LIFE in the Sahara can become monotonous if you let it. The North African desert Arab doesn't. Perpetual tribal feuds, week-long wedding celebrations, camel races, pilgrimages to Mecca, an occasional public execution or raid on a passing camel caravan, a bit of smuggling and gun-running all lend that extra bit of spice to desert life.

Camel trading can be a lot of fun, too.

Arlene and I had put in a long day in the saddle of our motorcycle in riding south from Tunis to the desert village of El Djem where once a week the largest camel auctions of North Africa are held.

We arrived blue with cold and soaked from the rain we had encountered in the desert. Twice we almost lost the cycle and equipment while fording flooding gullies.

What made us most miserable though, was whenever we stopped at a village no one would sell us food. It was Ramadam, the Holy month when the faithful Muslim takes neither food nor water during the daylight hours, not even daring to swallow their own saliva lest Allah be angered.

Muslims take their religion seriously; backsliders are not tolerated. We encountered one Libyan whose hand had been cut off at the wrist by his neighbors who caught him sneaking a drink of water at midday.

WE WERE unloading our gear and carrying it into the only hotel in El Djem when some one fired a rifle signaling that darkness had officially arrived. We forgot about unpacking and galloped over to the village eating house.

Darkness brought life to the village. The unlit streets were thronged with desert people arriving for the coming day's auction. Bronzed Bedouins shouted and clubbed their bull camels ahead of them. Libyans wearing saucy Fez caps were arriving from Seba with their herds of animals.

There were a few tall Touregs, the mysteriously veiled blue men of the desert, driving their prized white camels. One caravan of Berbers had come all of the way from Morocco. The blue

eyes and blond hair of these men of the Atlas Mountains reveal their European ancestry.

In early morning we awakened with a start. From outside our open window came the din of Arabic shouting and screaming and the roaring of camels.

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THERE were at least a couple of hundred camels and I don't know how many Arabs. The men gathered together in various groups of about six to 12 in each. Every one was faced to the middle like a football huddle.

The similarity ended there. The Arabs were all shouting or screaming at once, waving their arms in wild gestures or flailing the air with walking canes.

Near each group stood a camel, obviously the object of the controversy. Oblivious to the bedlam the camel munched away at his cud with an aloof, almost haughty, expression on his face.

I moved up to one group. Every one was so excited that no one noticed me. I figured that the Arab doing the most shouting was the camel's owner. This seemed confirmed when he suddenly grabbed the camel's halter rope and cracked the beast across the shins with his cane, whereupon the camel knelt to the ground.

The owner then stepped back and thumped the camel's hump significantly. I had learned that a camel's physical condition is best evidenced in the hump, the fatter the hump the more healthy the animal.

The camel quit chewing his cud and began roaring hoarsely. Next, the owner grabbed the camel's upper and lower lips, pulling them apart to reveal the teeth. Other owners sometimes avoided doing this, obviously trying to conceal the fact that their animals' teeth were worn short.

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THE initial half-hour of arguing never brought forth a price at all but dwelt upon the animal's quality, training and age with the owner extolling its virtues and the buyers and onlookers pooh-poohing his claims.

When finally some one made an offer, which was about 25 per cent of what the owner asked, things really got interesting. It seemed incredible that an argument could reach so fervent a pitch without violence taking place.

Suddenly the owner flung both hands into the air and declared that the price bid was the vilest of insults and he could no longer endure such abuse. He grabbed the camel's halter rope and stomped off in a magnificent show of hurt pride. Invariably his exit was made a circle which ended back in the group again with the argument renewed with even greater fervor.

One Arab moved from group to group and intervened as referee whenever buyer and seller came to a deadlock. Once things were ironed out he moved on to see where else his services were needed.

He was trying to sort out a dispute in our group when trouble broke out in the bunch nearest us. The seller had guaranteed his camel was gentle, but when a prospective buyer tried to feel its hump the camel bit him on the backside.

The animal clenched his teeth and held fast while the Arab howled with pain. The others, including the seller, howled with delight. Some one finally pried the camel's jaws apart with his cane.

Being released did not improve the victim's humor and he grabbed the seller by either side of the collar in a cross-handed kind of scissor hold, pulling the collar tight against the throat. The seller's laughter faded and his face had turned a bluish purple color before the referee stepped in and broke it up.

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WITHIN a short time bartering began anew. I noted that, strangely enough, the recently bitten Arab bought the camel.

The Saharan Arab does not usually take kindly to strangers with camera. I was having trouble getting the pictures I wanted until Arlene finally broke the ice.

She was watching a sale when a seller, to prove the gentleness of his animal, insisted on her sitting on the camel as it knelt. She did. Then the animal stood up. This action has to be seen to be appreciated. The camel's back lurches suddenly forward as he gets to his rear feet and pitches sharply backwards as he rises to his front legs.

Arlene squealed with fright and the Arabs cheered like cowboys at a rodeo. Other sellers, noting the asset of Arlene's indorsement, insisted on her sitting on each one's camel. This went on all day, and I finally got my pictures.