

مصر

Desert



■ by **Pat Canfield**
photos by *Nasr Marei*

LIVING COLOURS OF EGYPT

*The Western Desert
Kharga & Dakhla*

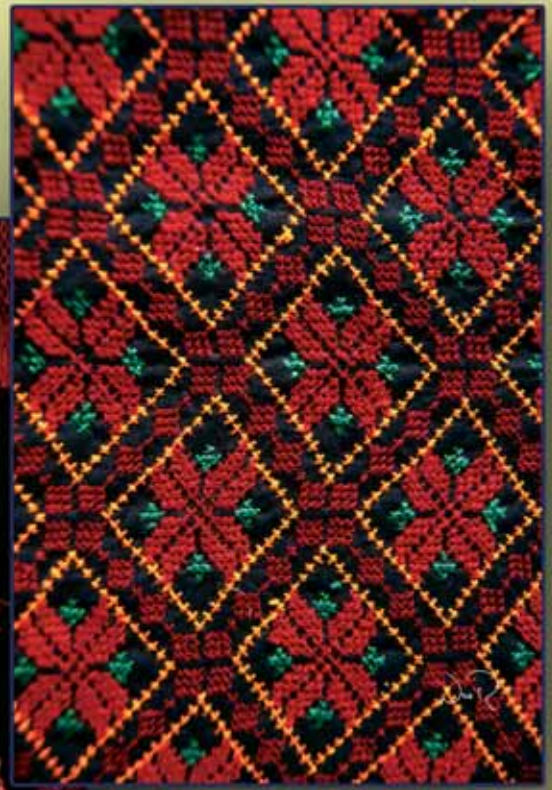
“Desert” A word which immediately creates images in our minds of a vast expanse of barren rocks and moving sand dunes which flow along the horizon until they meet with an azure blue sky at what looks like the ends of the earth. Hundreds of millions of years of history are frozen in time in a place like this. In Egypt, the Great Western Desert, which begins at the west bank of the Nile and joins with the Sahara Desert, is one of the largest deserts and sparsely inhabited places in the world.

OASIS

Kharga & Dakhla

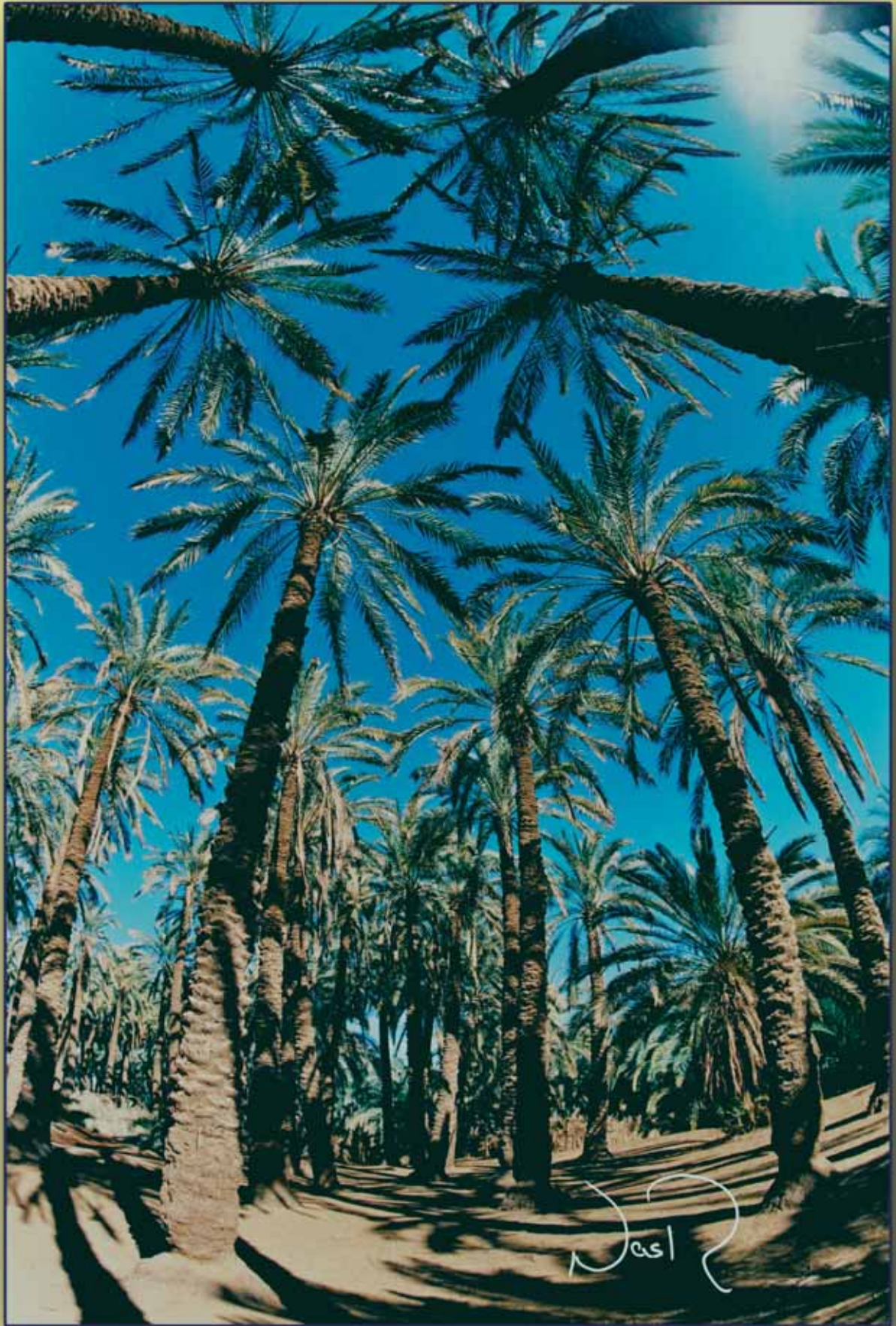


Even though there is an appearance of no life at all, there are actually traces of inhabitation since earliest recorded history. Throughout the Desert, we have prehistoric artifacts as



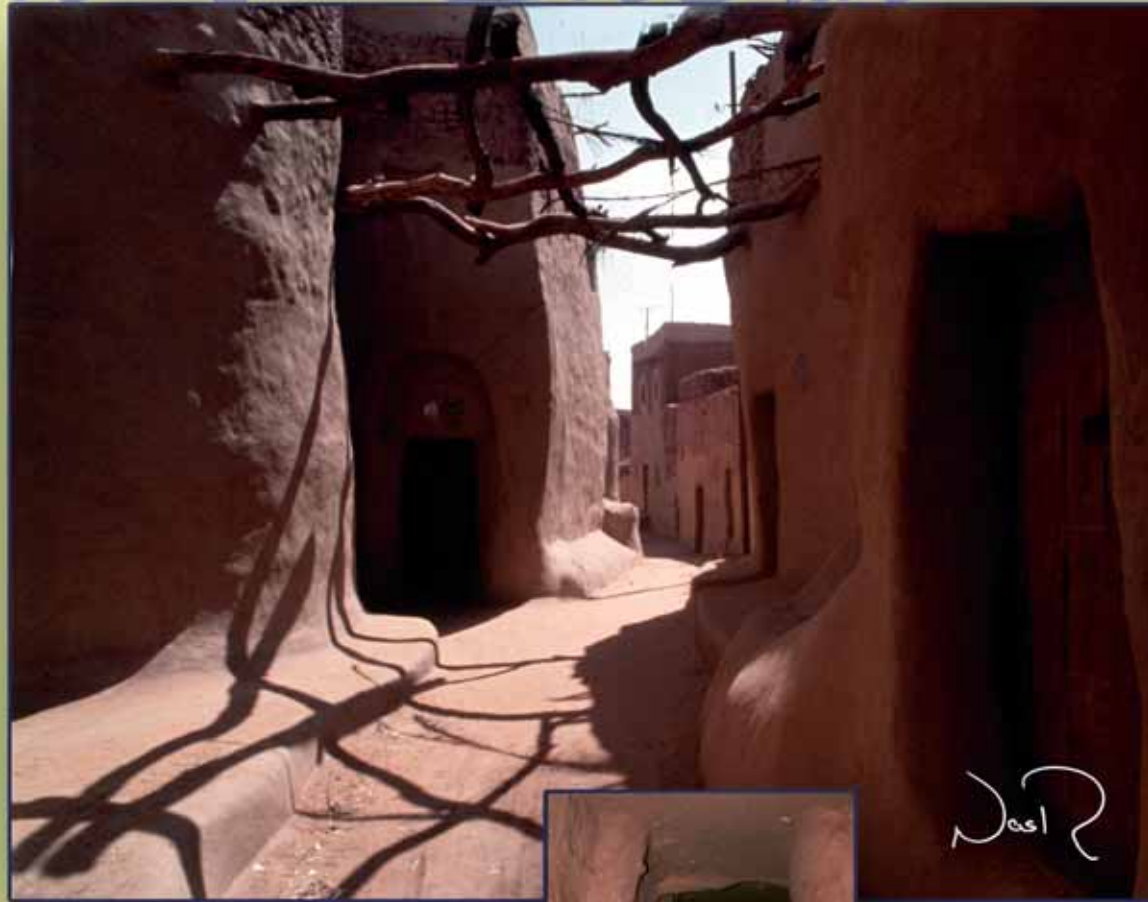
well as remains from Pharaonic Egypt, Roman occupation, Medieval trade routes, and Bedouin tribes including today's camel caravans which still travel the "Darb El Arba'in", the forty-day camel route between Sudan and the Nile valley.

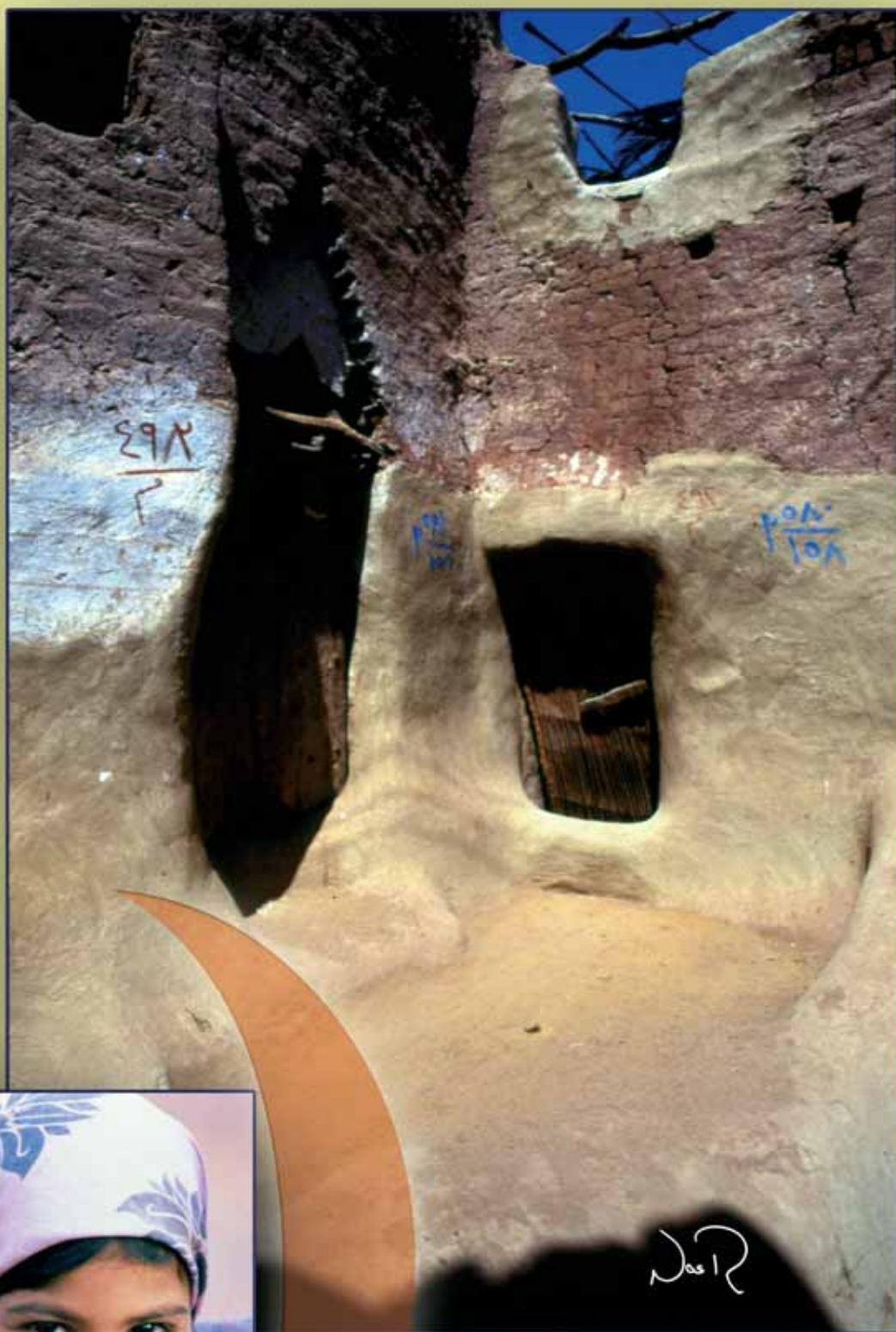




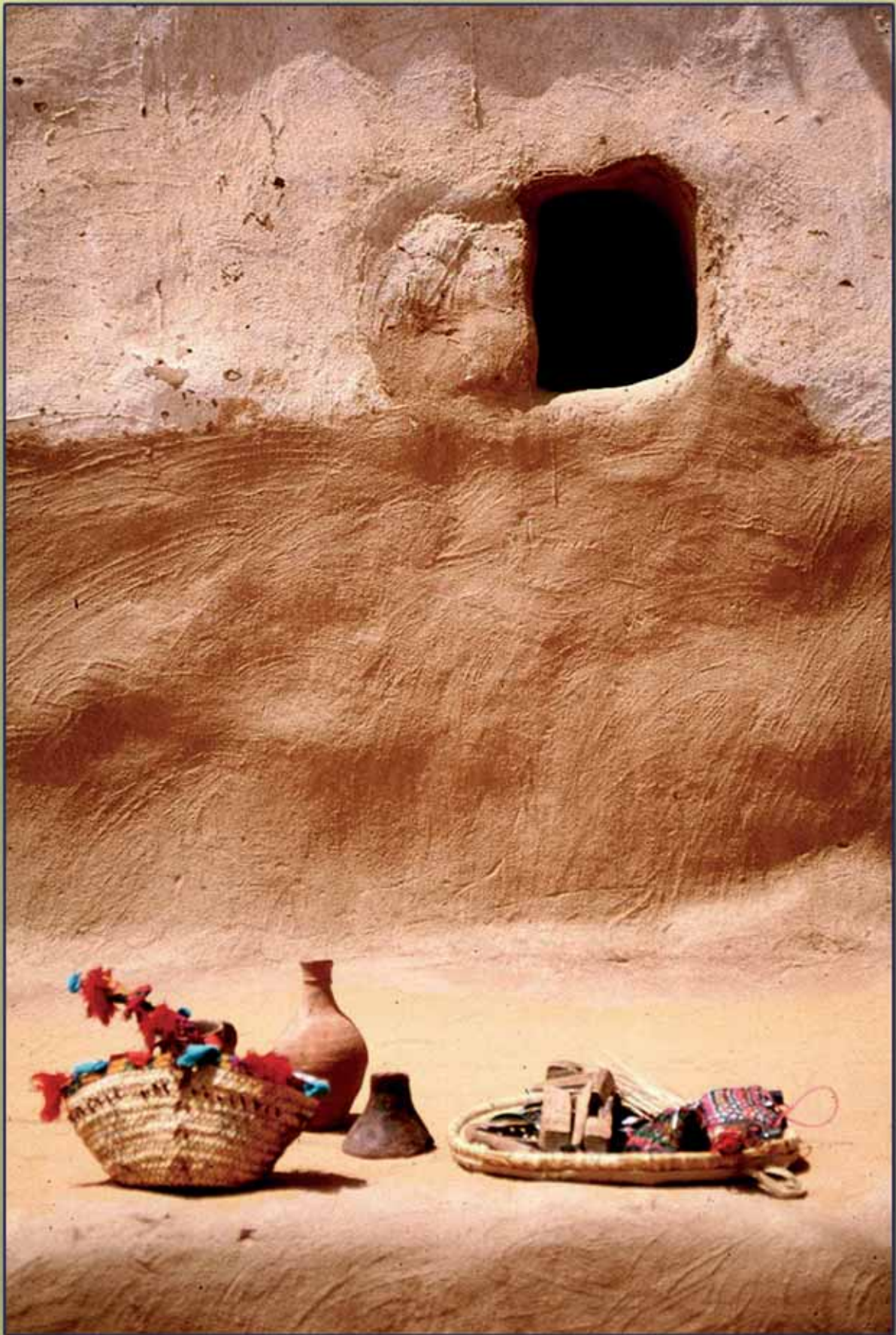
Kharga & Dakhla

And yet, even in this desert, one of the most unwelcoming places on earth, there are "Oases" thriving, vibrant settlements of people whose families may stretch back through centuries on the same land. Kharga, the largest and southern-most oasis is the most developed of the seven. In this place of extraordinary winds, heat and arid land we find a thriving community of farming people who produce crops of dates, wheat, rice and vegetables which are sold throughout the Nile valley.





0ASES





Another vital segment of Kharga Oasis is its traditional crafts, which share design patterns with the other southern oases. Embroidery, baskets and pottery all have a function in the daily life of the people and also have a great appeal to a growing tourist industry. Ruins of some Roman forts, late Pharaonic temples and early Christian sites provide a fascinating overlay to the towns and villages. Kharga was even a remote place of banishment for troublesome clergy during the Roman and early Christian times.





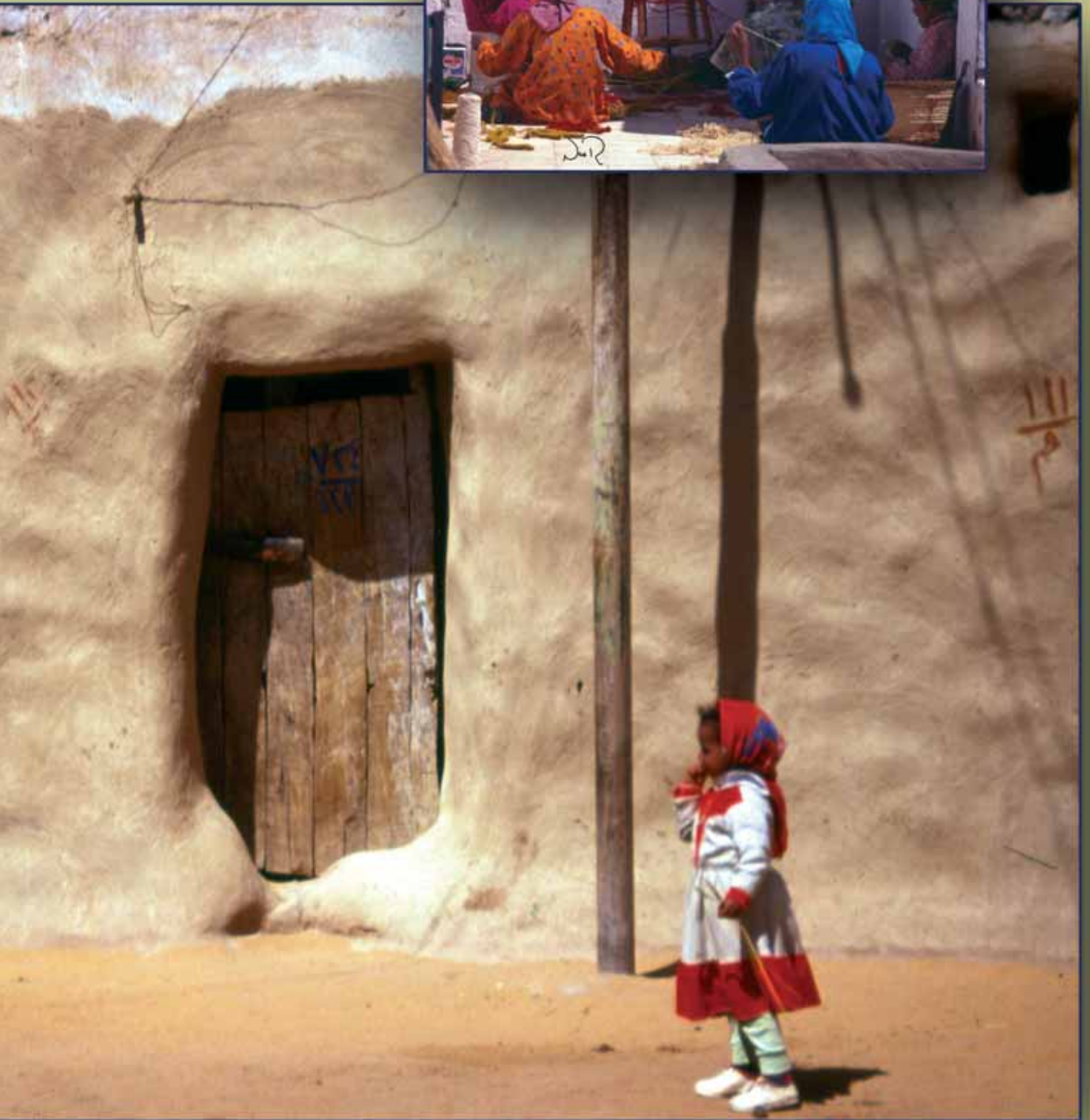
As you travel north from Kharga after one hundred and fifty kilometers, you reach the oasis of Dakhla. Here, in addition to pre-historic remains, we can find ruins going back to the Old and Middle Kingdom of Pharaonic Egypt. Today, this oasis is important for many of the same crops that were grown during the earliest of historic times.

In the desert - one always holds the possibility of surprise. It may be a wink of a red flower in the shadow of a sprawling sand dune. It might be a verdant grove of date palm trees framing a natural turquoise blue spring of water. It could be a smile from a child peeking from behind a bright blue wooden shutter. No matter what the gift of expected delight - we may be sure that it will be a quiet pleasure and always a living colour of the Desert of Egypt.

The route between Kharga and Dakhla is a microcosm of the history of that area. Ruins of Roman forts are scattered among pre-historic remains and caves with inscriptions carved into the rock where hermits often lived for many years. Buried Pharaonic remnants form the base for Christian and Islamic settlements. The Roman forts served as refuge for travelers as well as for defense. Wells from that time are still in use today.

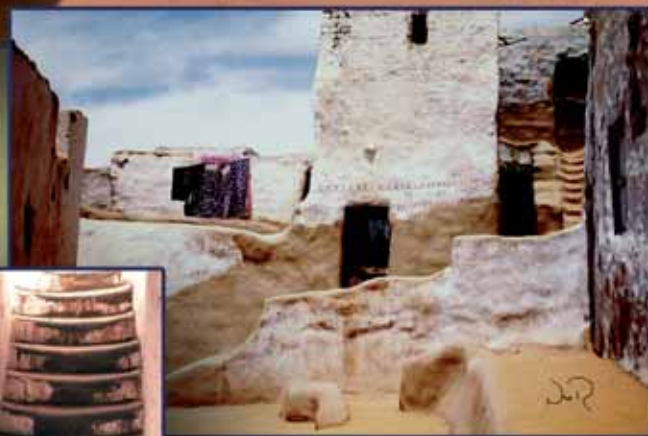
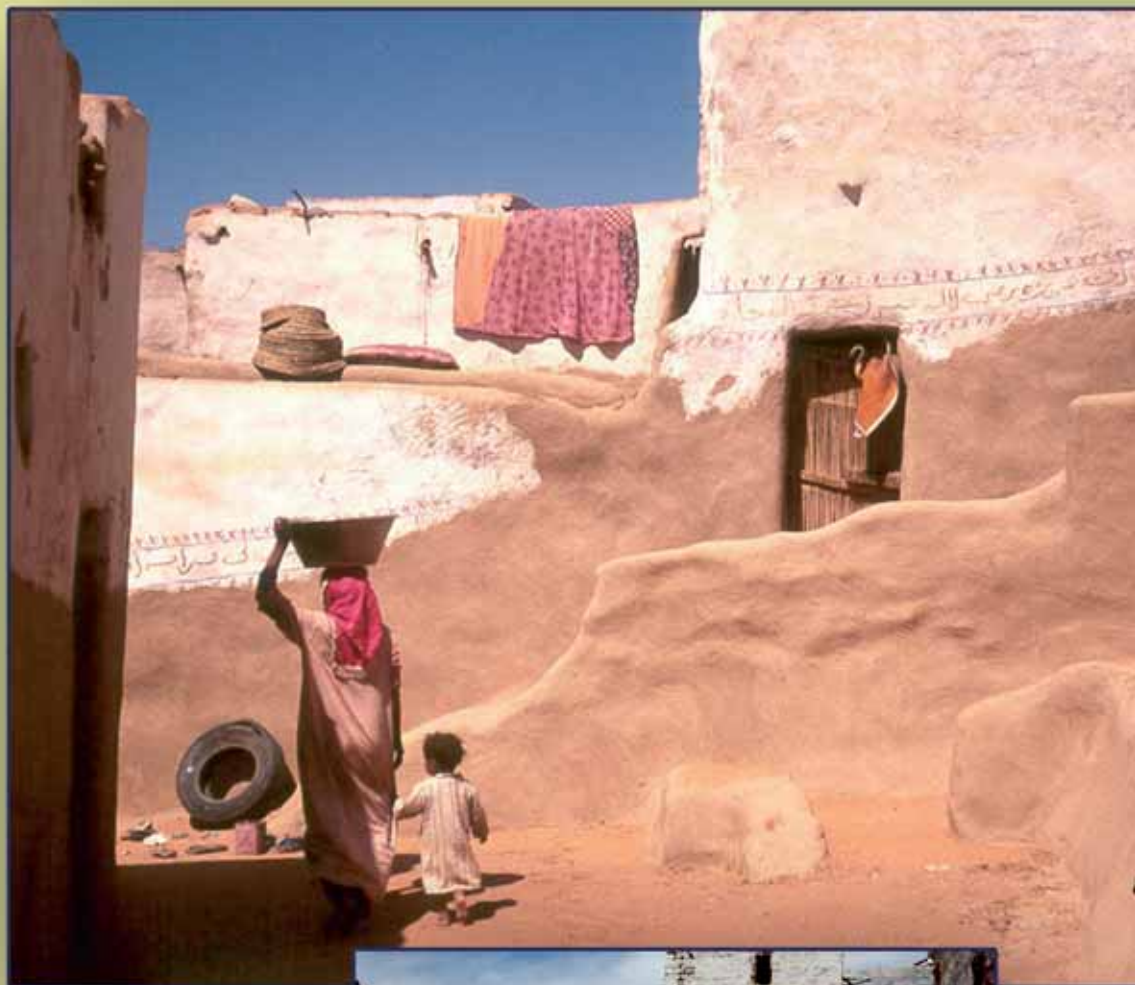
At Hibis, two kilometers north of Kharga, stands the Pharaonic Temple of Amun Re which was built by the Persian ruler, Darius in the 26th Dynasty. The monumental sandstone portal and surrounding walls may have been built over the remains of earlier structures and were certainly enlarged in Ptolemaic times.





A short distance from Hibis you reach the ancient cemetery of Baghawat, possibly the earliest and best-preserved Christian cemetery in the world. The expanse of domed mausoleums and underground galleries is well preserved until today. Two hundred and sixty three tombs provide a tremendous archive of burials from single rooms to family tombs. They are beautifully constructed with domed enclosures, arched and columned chambers.

Throughout the oases, life continues with exploration of the past along with enjoyment of today's dwellers. The people of this region have learned through the centuries to respect their environment and yet to overcome its hardships and forge lives of contentment and joy in each other and their world of many colours.



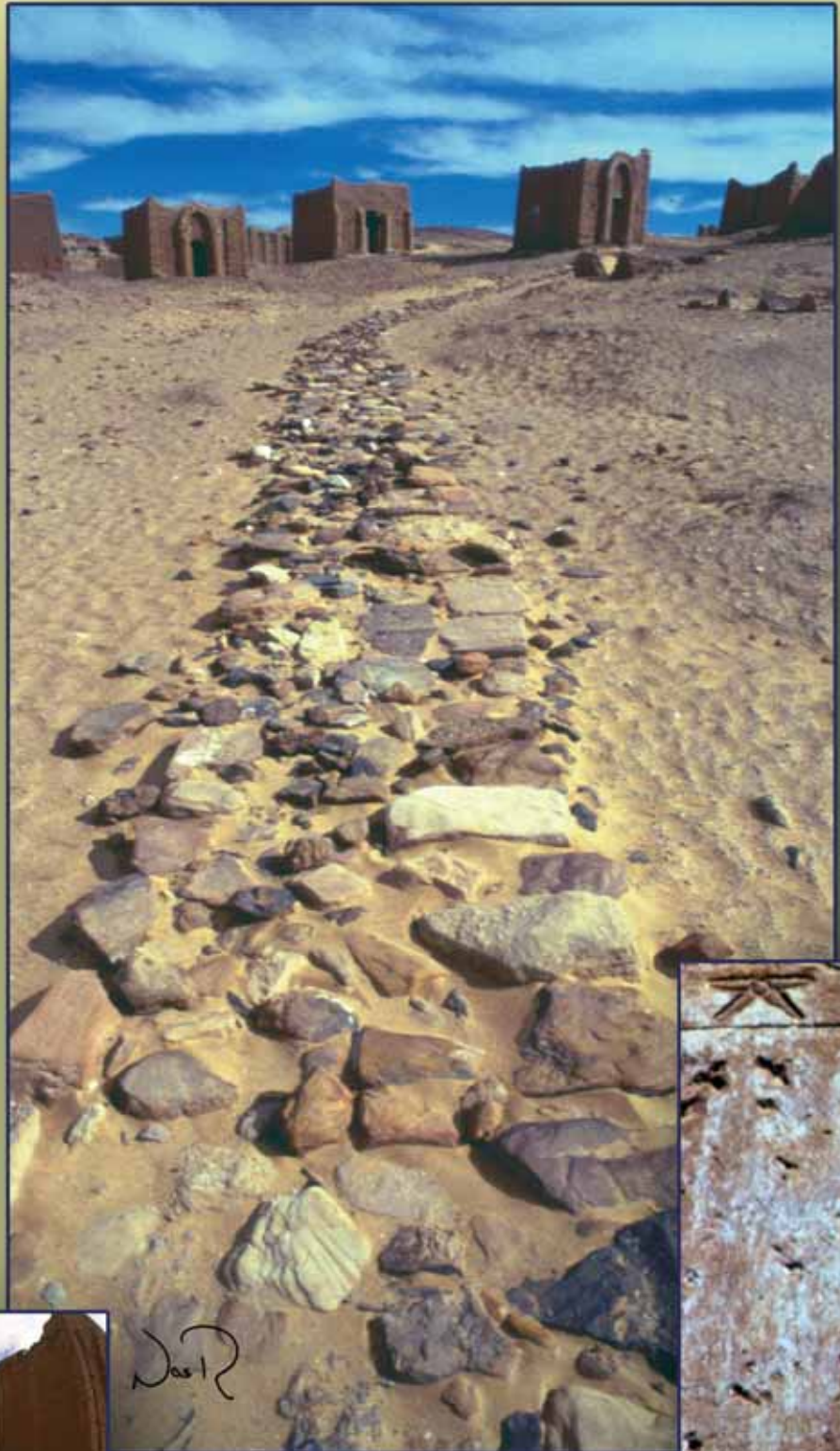
OASIS

Kharga & Dakhla

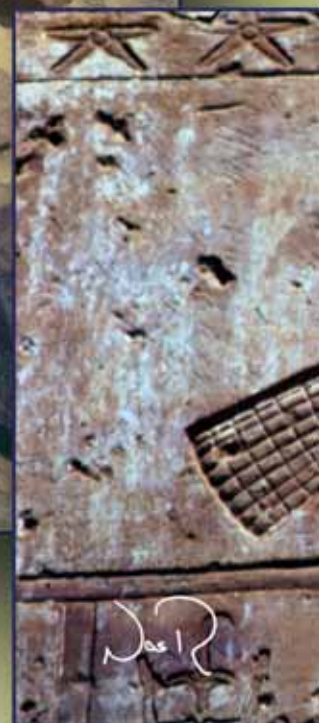


Life in today's desert is grouped into Bedouins who still live a nomadic life of sorts with some habitation on the edges of the oases and farmers who live within the agricultural settlements. The houses in these villages are built to withstand the ordeal of the heat, sands and wind. The villages are labyrinths of natural looking houses which blend into the surroundings. They are built with very thick walls of mud brick - formed from mud and straw - and plastered over in stucco. Small-latticed wooden windows protect the interiors of the home from raging storms and dust. In some towns, upper floors are added and heavy wooden doors fit closely against rounded doorframes to protect against encroaching sands. Painted wooden doors and Arabic medallions with calligraphy serve to decorate and bless the dwellers with scenes from the Hajj, the Pilgrimage to Mecca.

Balat and Bashindi are two of the villages on the route between oases which show Christian and Islamic settlements built over ancient sites. Balat in particular shows the use of covered streets and pathways which also prevented marauders from attacking on horseback.



Handwritten Arabic calligraphy: "بالتة"



Handwritten Arabic calligraphy: "بالتة"



The life in these settlements centers around the women and their daily work. As in all closely-knit communities, daily chores are done together. Bright colours and fabrics bring joy to their world. The time-honored dress of the oases has disappeared in many areas but is still maintained through some of the families. Traditional black dresses are beautifully embroidered by precise cross-stitching which runs in strips down the arms, around the hem and most especially framing the bodice. Tassels, old coins and buttons are used to accent the patterns.



OASES

Rugs are usually of a kelim type. They are woven in geometric patterns of red, orange, black and white. The pieces are done in long strips on horizontal looms and are then stitched together to make the full rug. The natural dyes in the wool fibers allow the families to use the pieces for many years and then recycle them.

دعاء



Kharga & Dakhla



Baskets are woven from palm fronds and twine. Their shape is dictated by their purpose in the daily lives of the people. They are used for everything from carrying crops and lunch to the fields to a trousseau basket for brides. In Dakhla, in particular, they add special decorative touches in the form of ribbons, wool and tassels. Throughout the oases, the people forge a life of vibrant joy among the living colours of their sometimes desolate world. □