



# The Forty Days Road

From Shadows in the Sand—  
Following the Forty Days Road  
By Lorraine Chittock

**E**longated shadow of legs—one hundred camels, four hundred legs, slowly crossing and uncrossing each other's shadows in the sand, swaying across the ever-changing ripples created by the unceasing north wind. A shimmering mirage of pattern upon pattern, a criss-cross image of icing on a cake, ripples of water on a lake.

From the dawn of civilisation, the great trade routes across the Indian Ocean carried goods between Africa, southern

Asia and the Far East. Along the east coast of Africa a string of ports, many established by Arab traders as they extended their influence south a millennium ago, funnelled goods into and out of the continent. Inland, camels became the bearers of spices, silks, gum, ivory, ostrich feathers and other prized goods. Humans too, were bought and sold; slaves from the area ended up in Egypt, Persia and Europe. Even in the late 1800s there are records of slaves being taken into Egypt by way of numerous

camel caravan routes.

The most treacherous of these was the Darb el-Arbein, the 'Forty Days Road,' so named because of the length of time it took to travel from Dar Fur province in western Sudan to Southern Egypt; although a good rider, with a strong camel and little in the way of provisions, could make the journey in as little as eighteen days. The caravans comprised as many as 5,000 camels and in 1782 one was recorded as having 24,000 camels. Because of the size of such caravans

travel times were often up to three months, as the caravan had to be divided into several groups so as not to deplete water wells and pasture along the route.

Slaves that were taken on this route sometimes went in the blistering heat of summer, as winters in the desert are cold and losses to bronchitis meant monetary losses to traders. A slave who walked from Dar Fur to Egypt in the 1830s recalled, "We had not food enough to eat, and sometimes we had not drink at all, and our thirst was terrible; when we stopped, almost dying for want of water, they killed a camel, and gave us blood to drink. But the camels themselves could not get on, and then they were killed, and we had their flesh for meat and their blood for water."

At that time, trade did not flow in a northerly direction and stop. On reaching Cairo, some three-quarters of the camels were sold for meat and as pack animals, but the remainder returned south with good that were desirable in Sudan and the surrounding region; European-made paper, balsam oil, textiles, metals, beads, whalebone, scents, dyes and small amounts of military supplies.







slaves and items from Black Africa and Persia.

By the late 1800s, however, the British—whose interest in the region increased markedly with the opening of the Suez canal in 1869—began measures to deem the slave trade illegal (The Anglo-Egyptian Convention for the suppression of the slave trade, for example, was signed in 1877). Slowly but inevitably, the number of slaves travelling the Forty

Days Road diminished.

Other developments decreased the reliance upon camel caravans as a means of transport. In 1897 the British, as part of their military action against the Mahdi in Sudan, built the railroad from Wadi Halfa to Abu Hamed. This was gradually added to and at present there are 5,500 kilometres of track in Sudan. After the completion of the Aswan Dam in 1972, a ferry service

Caravan leaders who took on the role of keeping the sometimes massive number of people and camels organized on these expeditions were given the title *khafir*, or ‘expert.’ In accordance with his rank he was given two huge drums; they sat in front of him on either side of the camel and he beat them to organise the caravan and to announce its approach to villages. As the arrival of a great caravan from the desert might only happen once every few years the people took it as a wonderful opportunity to celebrate, and the event was often marked by fireworks and other festivities. Upon reaching Kharga oasis after the arduous trek through the Libyan Desert, long ceremonial gowns were given to the *khafir*s as a token of respect. After resting for almost a week the caravan would continue on. By that time messengers had been sent north to Assiut to announce the caravan’s forthcoming arrival so that merchants might assemble to buy the goods. What was not purchased was carried past Kirdasa, within sight of the Giza pyramids, and then to Cairo, where there was a large market below the citadel for the buying and selling of







years, survives, only time will tell, though the camels place in the civilisation of the Middle East is secure, as Mohammad, the Prophet of God said, “May the blessings of this world, until judgement day, be tied to the forelocks of our horses, sheep are a benediction and the Almighty in making animals created nothing preferable to the camel.”

(Or, if you’d prefer a less religious quote)

as a Kababish sheik once said, “A camel has no real price. The buying and selling of camels merely represents a rough equivalent of their value, and it goes on because people need things, not because it represents the true value of camels. One can drink camel’s milk, use its hair, make it carry a load and even eat it. And with the blessing of God it multiplies under your hands.”

was opened across Lake Nasser between Sudan and Egypt. The increased use of air travel, too, greatly diminished the need for goods to be carried on treacherous overland routes. There seemed little need for the Forty Days Road with the advent of all these new modes of transport.

But Cairo was developing a rapidly expanding population and camels have always been a healthy source of protein. Renewed life was given to the Forty Days Road and the caravans thrived once more—only now the camels were carrying no loads, other than their own meat.

Although Sudan, with four million camels, is the world’s second largest producer after Somalia, its export figures cannot be relied upon. Officially, 50,000 camels a year enter Egypt from the largest country in Africa, but many slip by the borders undetected by the Sudanese authorities. Many camels that do not come through the official checkpoint near Abu Simble, in the south-west of Egypt, enter through the Red Sea hills to the east of the Nile. According to some estimates, 40 percent of the trade is now illegal.

Frenzied dealings are still part of the market as prices can soar to eight hundred

dollars for a large healthy camel, more money than the herders make for the entire three-month trip.

But the camel is not just seen as a materialistic possession. One seemed to serve as a religious billboard, bearing the inscription written along its flank: “This is a gift of God.”

Today, the camel trade

along the Forty Days Road is in a state of flux. Political tensions between Sudan and Egypt make it more difficult for herders to cross the border, further encouraging the illegal trade and diminishing the usage of this ancient route. Whether the Forty Days Road, travelled by camel caravans for thousands of



**Lorraine Chittock’s book *Shadows in the Sand—Following the Forty Days Road* is currently out of print. If you’d like to be informed when there is a reprinting, email her at [LC@LorraineChittock](mailto:LC@LorraineChittock).**

**Cairo Cats—Egypt’s Enduring Legacy is available at [www.CairoCats.com](http://www.CairoCats.com)**

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