



around the pommel on the front, and the other leg dangling free. Two of the camels were tethered to a camel each, and one camel walked free. A Bedouin guide held each leading camel by a rein. With heads in the air, rubbery lips all a-quiver in the wind, and a few groans (and this was just the riders) we were off.

The ship of the desert is not a swift beast. Sitting on a camel that is going at walking pace feels like moving in slow motion. From time to time the colonel would consult his GPS and tell us how little distance we had actually made since the last stop.

Our first night, after a full 10 hours of walking, was spent

During the first few hours of the trek we walked parallel to the main road, surrounded by green wheat fields. Bedouin who had long ago upgraded to lorries and pickups screeched to a halt on the road and jumped out to take pictures of our sedate caravan on their camera phones. They literally could not believe their eyes, and asked us why on earth we were using such old-fashioned, slow forms of transport. We replied that we preferred it that way, and declined offers of lifts.

'A camel is a horse designed by a committee', someone once said. We sat astride a saddle over the camel's hump, with one leg hooked



in the middle of the desert, in a camp on the brow of a hill.

The Bedu cooked us a lip-smacking mansaf (a traditional Bedu dish of chicken, peas and rice). After dinner we sat around the camp fire roasting coffee



beans in the fire, listening to traditional songs and passing the coffee grinder round as a pale green full moon rose behind our hosts. As we were tired, we declined offers of the resulting coffee, and after comparing sore muscles some more we bedded down in our sleeping bags. The next morning I asked sheepishly if I might have a cup of coffee at breakfast, and I was cheerfully handed a sachet of Nescafe and a cup of hot water. So much for the traditional Bedouin brew.

By the end of the trip we really had a sense of the peace and rhythm of the desert. We also knew our camels and their individual characters. I almost had what one could call affection for mine. Would we do a similar trip again? Yes, probably. But next time I think I will walk alongside the camel.