

ONCE UPON A TIME IN FARAFRA

PHOTOGRAPHS *Catherine Hyland*

The mind-bending geology and epic history of Egypt's White Desert is hard to comprehend today. Many thousands of years ago the land was lush and fertile. Now it's arid, and it has been that way ever since the time of the Pharaohs. Simon Ings pays a visit to this stunning spot to uncover its remarkable story





Previous pages: at El Jayame in the White Desert (or Sahra al-Beida) the differential weathering of the landscape has left protrusions of hard rock standing like chess pieces across the desert. Left: the sand and rocks change color with the time of day, glowing warm variations of orange and peach as the sun sets. Right: here resembling an avalanche of snow, the rock in the desert hints at a time when it was covered by water, dotted with fossils such as clams and sea urchins from millions of years ago



Three hundred and fifty miles southwest of Cairo, in the middle of the 263,000-square-mile depression that is Egypt's Western Desert, is a town called Farafra. There is an oasis here and gardens large enough that every old family in the town gets its own not inconsiderable patch. Dates, olives, and lemons grow here; there has never been a time the town's not been able to feed itself. There's a hot spring and much talk over the years about harnessing the geothermal energy here to power the town. For now, cement cisterns sunk into the middle of a field on a patch of nowhere five minutes' drive out of town keep the locals refreshed and the area's few tourists entertained.

Speak Arabic to one of the five thousand or so native Farafroni, and the Egypt of the guidebooks feels far away indeed. The elder generation, especially, has a dialect so peculiar that the tens of thousands who've blown in here from the Nile delta (to farm a desert

greened by government borehole projects) profess themselves baffled by the natives.

Farafra stands somewhat apart from the prevalent Cairo culture. How could it do otherwise? It's not too far from the Libyan border and peopled, at its core, by Bedouin who still recall the ancient trade routes. More to the point, it's old: older than Cairo; it's older even than five-thousand-year-old Thebes (or Luxor). The earliest settlements around here are more than ten thousand years old. Before Farafra, there were no settlements in Egypt – at least none that we know of. The area around Farafra is where people learned the art of staying put.

It's an irresistibly romantic idea that outposts of greenery have persisted in what is now one of the most arid spots on earth. In colonial times European geographers, adventurers, and archaeologists staggered from one oasis to another, notebook and compass in hand, from Siwa to Kharga by

Bahariya, Farafra, and Dakhla, stepping, so they reckoned, on the bones of an Eden lost under the desert dust. They weren't wrong. A few hours' drive southwest of Farafra, there survive, in a cave, Stone Age carvings of goats, gazelles, a giraffe, and – the clincher – a boat.

Imagining a desert underwater or in bloom is simple. The hard part is coming to terms with how long ago this region – now the White Desert National Park – dried up. This place was already desert by the time of the Pharaohs, and Farafra was no more than a stopover on the route linking the Mediterranean Sea with the Libyan Sahara. The land was ungrazed and unquarried; even the indefatigable Romans, when they occupied, managed only a few artesian wells. Yet romantic dreams of a lost Eden pertained even then – why else would the region have been dubbed *Tā-ihī* or “land of the cow?”

The thing is, you won't find one single cow represented among the bones petrifying



More or less halfway between the oases of Dakhla and Bahariya, Farafra's oasis is the most isolated in the Western Desert, and closest to the White Desert. With a history of being a watering hole on an ancient trade route, it provides gardens

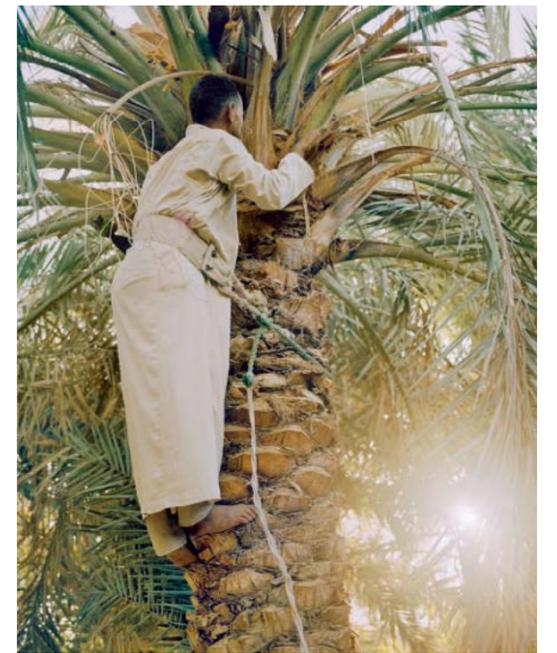
(left) for the Farafra and fertile land for agriculture and grazing animals, such as the camels and sheep that supply the local wool trade. Right: fresh dates are harvested from the palms (top and middle) and a cow grazes in the shade (bottom)

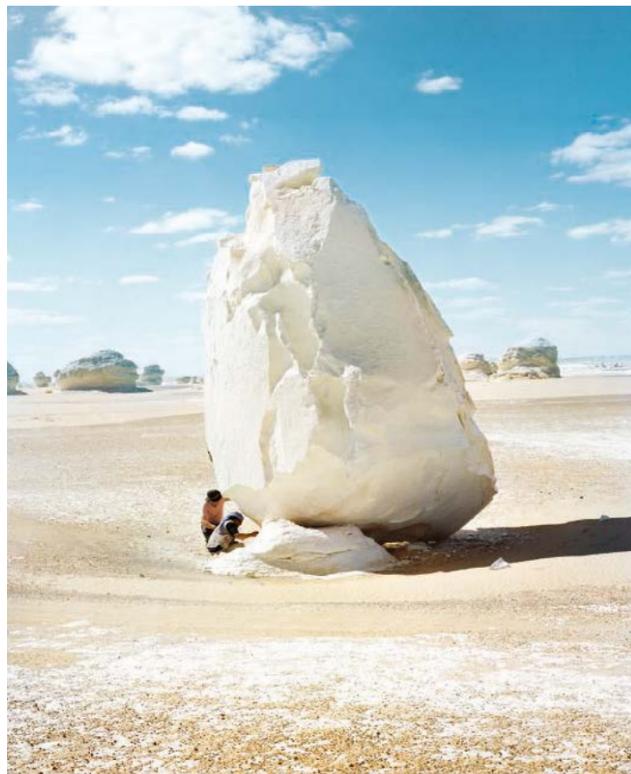
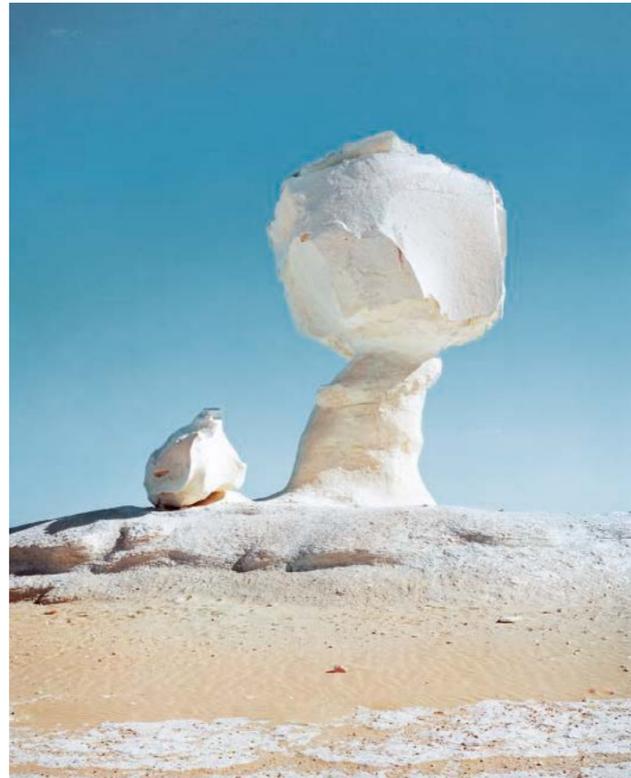
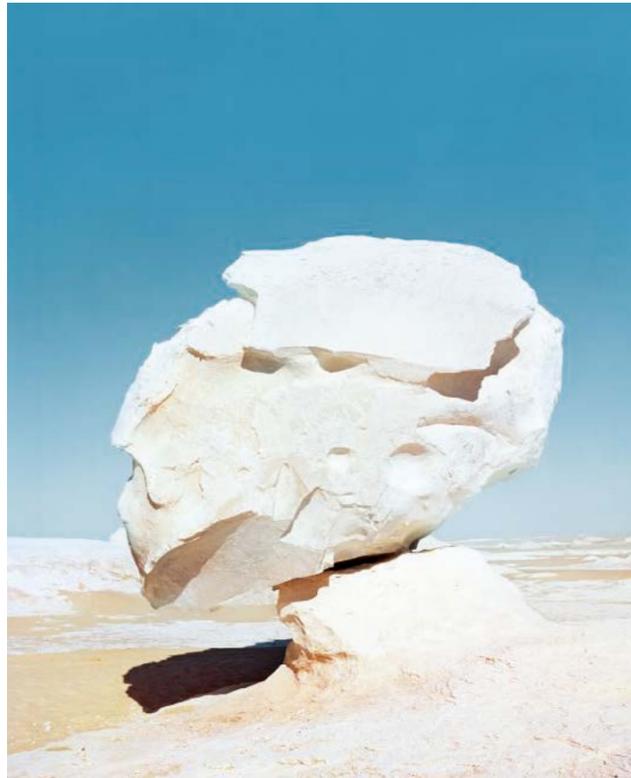
here. Camels, yes. Gazelles. Ostriches. (The shells of ostrich eggs served so well as vessels that the locals didn't think to make pottery.) So why should a Nile-based civilization want to remember a dry, obscure, inhospitable corner of neighboring desert as a land of plenty? Archaeological work over the past quarter-century provides the answer. Civilization didn't start by the Nile. It started here, in the wetlands around Farafra. The habit of herding and farming spread eastward as the land dried up.

You can drive into the White Desert, but you'd be a fool to try it without a guide; camels and a week for exploration are best. The desert is mountainous and cantilevered like solidified clouds, and, like clouds, the features are impossible to measure or even hold in mind. Twenty minutes' ambling is enough to cross a valley floor that looks like it ought to have taken a day's trek.

This is a landscape best walked through rather than ridden over. Impossible pinacles turn out to be no taller than dunes. Where sand and wind have carved the valley's chalk bed as they might a glacier, you struggle to take a photograph that doesn't look like Iceland. Turn around and wind-driven sand is pouring through gaps in the mountains, and it suddenly dawns on you that you've lost sight of your camp. Yes, walk, by all means, but keep your wits about you; a change in the light alters the color of everything around you. And nothing, absolutely nothing, in this place looks the same from two angles. This is the land that symmetry forgot.

The White Desert is white enough, or whatever color the sun makes refracting off the chalk that the lakes left behind – every possible orange, every possible mauve, at





Opposite: some of the rock formations, carved by centuries of sandstorms and standing like sculptures in the desert, resemble a face (top left); a chicken sitting beside a giant mushroom, or a tree, according to some (top right); and a mammoth egg propped up on a bare nest (bottom left). Some have a monumental quality, such as the chisel rock (bottom right). This page: the modern tin-roofed buildings of the town of Farafra, developed since the 1980s, are a stark contrast to the old traditional earthen-built homes of the Farafroni, most of which have fallen into disrepair. Many people now live in the growing hamlets that surround the main town

dawn some improbable Arctic blues. Dark streaks turn out to be nodules of iron from old volcanoes or the petrified remains of acacia trees. Here and there the ground is littered with fragmented stone twigs. The spindly trunks of young tamarisks remain rooted in the chalk, turned to a softish stone that you can crack between your hands.

This area has been dry for so long that its geology no longer remembers rain. There are no drainage lines, no gullies, no riverbeds, only the shores of ancient lakes, and even these are hard to spot in a landscape by now shaped entirely by wind and sand. When *Mariner 9* and the *Viking* lander and orbiter took pictures of Mars, NASA trawled its library of satellite images of Earth to find the nearest terrestrial equivalent of what they were seeing. Find a patch of Mars on Earth and you can speed up your study of Mars. Study of the White Desert informs NASA's current mission planning.

In another part of the desert, you can stand on the floor of great lakes that once stretched well-nigh to the horizon. The chalk here has eroded almost to nothing, leaving only isolated bergs, undermined from below by wind-borne sand until they resemble giant works of superior abstract sculpture, perched on narrow pedestals. The shapes recall ruined capitols of ancient cities, enormous petrified skulls, conch-shaped thrones, a sphinx (of course), also, lowering the tone somewhat, a chicken.

Among these bizarre towers, the eye and mind give way very easily, for nothing is what it appears, nothing stays the same to the eye in motion. Sounds, too, can unnerve you in this absolutely still and silent space. The march of armies fills the



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air as you walk alone among these shifting figures whose undercut bases reflect your own footsteps back at you, redoubled again and again. Elsewhere the sculptures are smaller, hardly up to the waist, and they stretch for miles like young clouds, waiting to swell and burst free of the earth. (A cute idea, but the rocks themselves around here are cute, like rockery features in some vast dead garden center.)

And back to the sand, the foot-cutting pumice, and on to the road, a two-lane where camels once trod, and home, to a town electrified in 1981 and moving with the times in its hospitals and schools – there's even a university, a good one, just a bus ride away.

Returning to Farafra it is not hard to gain an invitation to the gardens that have, for millennia, fed the town and given it its little trade. Any visitor taking the trouble to find out how this place actually functions gets

what amounts to a free pass here. (Too many tourists, poorly prepared, make one meager dash at the desert and flee.) We sat drinking tea, watching dates being harvested, nodding ruefully as our guide (also our hotel keeper, also a political campaigner, also head of an NGO, also a musician staging concerts in the desert – it's that kind of place) explained how the earthen-built center of Farafra had by now almost vanished, untended and unoccupied, as the contemporary local families embrace hot-in-summer, cold-in-winter concrete for their homes.

That will change. The idea of a town of earthen houses built along winding, shaded alleys may look old to the locals, but to western tourists of a new breed it is a model of sustainable modernity. One day Farafra will rebuild itself into something new and strange – and not for the first time in ten thousand years. ♦