

HD CAIRO TO KATHMANDU OFF THE BEATEN TRACK.**BY** By Susan BUCKLAND.**WC** 773 words**PD** 16 May 1999**SN** Sunday Star-Times**SC** SUNSTT**PG** 11**LA** English**CY** (c) 1999**LP**

AFTER graduating from university last year Aucklander Rachael Ockelford decided to take three months OE off the beaten track.

She dyed her blond hair brown "to merge more into the scenery" and set off overland from Cairo in a canvas top truck with 17 other like-minded adventurers and a driver.

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Eleven "sometimes tough but mostly great" weeks later she farewelled her travel companions at the end of the journey in Kathmandu.

"I didn't want to do the standard OE. The Middle East, Turkey, Iran, India and Nepal sounded more challenging," said Ockelford. "So I paid \$5200 for the overland trip. It covered just about everything - transport, food, accommodation.

"If I'd organised the trip myself I would have found it difficult to do as cheaply. The tour company took out the hassle.

"Our ages ranged from 19 to 57. We packed in a huge amount of travelling and sightseeing with the occasional 4.30am starts. Sometimes we felt tempted and mosqued out but then we'd do something amazing like climbing to the top of Mt Sinai in the cool of the night and waking to watch the sunrise. You just have to be prepared for a pretty cold night on the mountain. But no colder than sleeping out on the deck of the Egyptian felucca as we sailed down the Nile."

In Jordan, instead of hiring a donkey, she did more climbing - this time to the High Point of Sacrifice above Petra, "the forgotten city" surrounded by a fortress of mountains.

Then it was down to the Dead Sea where the salt made her so buoyant she had to force her body below the water. For all its antiquity Jordan's capital city of Amman had modern western touches - like McDonald's. But the ubiquitous hamburger chain had not penetrated the Islamic culture of Iran.

"I bought a chador, the traditional Muslim female attire when we arrived at the border of Iran," she said. "You can also buy them very cheaply inside the country. Women have to look shapeless. We wore singlets and shorts underneath. It was constraining. But at least you see the women out and about.

"In Pakistan they are in the shadows, hidden away.

"Having to wear a chador in Iran was offset by the friendly people and the pleasure of visiting places like Isfahan. It's one of the prettiest cities. In Iran I also got the best rugs for the price."

After leaving Pakistan the group travelled into the Indus Valley to the Karakoram Highway and the foothills of the Himalayas where pot-holed roads slowed progress but the air was fresh and the scenery stunning.

When the truck broke down on an un-policed section of the Khyber Pass there were a tense few hours before a ride was arranged back to Peshawar.

In Amritsar in India Ockelford had to cover her head again but was pleased to see women were allowed on the streets. And it was good to be able to buy a quenching beer in India after Iran where alcohol is banned, and Pakistan where it isn't readily available.

Apart from the occasional hotel and overnight train journey the group camped most the way, pitched their own tents, sometimes in the middle of nowhere. They took turns to shop and cook. At one stage Ockelford got food poisoning from their home-cooked brew. But travelling in a group turned out to be a good idea.

"By the time I got to Kathmandu I was ready to come home. But it was an amazing trip and I'm glad I went." She travelled from Egypt and the Sinai into Jordan, Syria, Turkey, Iran, Pakistan, India and Nepal.

Tracy Wheeler of Sun Travel says **Encounter Overland** has been operating overland trips for at least 30 years and a trained project leader drives the purpose-built vehicles with trailers to carry the equipment.

Encounter's shortest trip is six weeks overland from Istanbul to Cairo (from \$3110). Popular with New Zealanders are the 11-week overland trips from Kathmandu to London (from \$4765 plus \$US590 paid in the country of travel, mainly for food) and Cairo to Kathmandu: (from \$5080 plus \$US590 paid locally). The return airfares from New Zealand need to be added.

Encounter caters mainly for 18 to 45-year-olds. TravelBag Adventures, catering for a wider age group, are not overland holidays but travel to the same countries and allow plenty of interaction with the locals. Shorter trips range from 8 to 15 days.

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