

THE OSTRACON

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House of Scrolls

***Egypt: Civilization in the Sands* by Pauline and Philippe de Flers**
2000, 238 pages. Konemann ISBN 3-8290-5441-6

The photos and descriptions of the oases and the Sahara which embraces them in *Egypt: Civilization in the Sands* are enough to stir the imagination of even the most jaded reader. At first glance this tome looks like your run-of-the-mill coffee table book with *Egypt* writ large on the cover. The reader's first clue that its pages contain an eye-opening and illuminating journey is the cover photo – the rippling golden dunes of the western desert, their flanks lost in shadow, at once mysterious and familiar. Not a Giza pyramid, Theban colossus, or royal mummy in sight. Instead, this is a story of life beyond the Nile valley.

Authors Pauline and Philippe de Flers are your tour guides to the oases west of the Nile and the uncompromising desert that surrounds them like an endless ocean of sand. The desert has always loomed large in the Egyptian mind and culture. The ancients buried their dead in its sands and later, in its massive stone cliffs and valleys. The desolation and isolation of the desert gave birth to monasticism and the oases provided refuge in a forbidding and unforgiving landscape.

Siwa, Bahariya, Farafra, Dakhla and Kharga, each haunted by ruins of Pharaonic, Christian, and Islamic civilizations, come to life in elegant prose and striking photos. The text is part romantic ruminations on the effects of the sand on the psyche and is part matter-of-fact primer on the geology and history of these islands in

a sea of sand. Here the visitor finds legends, deserted towns, tombs of Pharaonic nobles, Christians, and Muslims, spiritual purity, and “extraterrestrial treasures”, such as Libyan glass, meteorites and glass-like tubes – “petrified thunderbolts preserved by the sand” (page 189).

Early humans also left their mark on the landscape with stone tools and hearths, in a distant time when seasonal rains made the desert more hospitable. The authors devote several pages to prehistoric rock art and cave paintings, images of hunters, herdsman, and animals. The images are easily recognizable but their true meaning is unknown and perhaps lost to us forever.

The authors remind us that the oases and the ever-encroaching sands are more than homes to romantic ruins, lost glories or archaeological sites. People have lived in the oases and traveled the intervening sands for thousands of years. We see two women in conversation in a narrow, high-walled lane, and a trio of men riding donkeys across an expanse of sand with mountains rising behind them. Lush palm plantations and market gardens that would not have looked out of place in the time of the Pharaohs thrive from the unexpected gift of water.

If you want to venture, albeit vicariously, beyond the confines of the Nile valley, this is the book for you. The de Flers will regale you with ancient tales of piety, treasure and mystery that make the Sahara an unending source of wonder.

Susan Cottman