

# Mt. Sinai starkly beautiful

BY LOIS J. PETERSON

**S**inai peninsula, the small wedge of land sandwiched between Egypt and Israel, has been called "24,000 square miles of nothing."

This description might be contradicted by those who have braved the stark beauty of the region to climb Mount Sinai.

Rising 7,500 feet above sea level, Mount Moses, as it is called by the people of the region, may be disputed as the actual place from which Moses brought down the tablets bearing the Ten Commandments. But putting religious history aside, it still draws the faithful, who make the trek each day to the summit to watch the emergence of dawn's first light.

Long before the monks of St. Catherine's Monastery, lying in the valley at the foot of the mountain, have risen for their first devotions, a steady stream of hikers begins the ascent. Some are already at the summit, having chosen to make the climb in the evening to settle in sleeping bags at the top for the night. Others rest for a few hours in the Monastery hostel and rise at 2 a.m. to hike up the mountain in the dark, their way lit by the night stars and the processional glow of their flashlights.

It is an arduous, although not difficult, climb and there are three routes to take. One entails climbing a trail of 3,700 stone steps, purportedly carved by a penitent monk. The easier way to make the two-and-a-half hour climb is along a trail of switchbacks that was constructed by the Egyptian authorities during the 19th Century. Easier still is to hire one of the camels parked in shadowy mounds behind the Monastery. For 10 Egyptian pounds (about \$5) the camel owner will lead the rider to the top, a quicker ascent than by foot but perhaps not the most comfortable one for novice camel riders. The vigil begins once visitors

have slept the night at the top near the Chapel of Mount Moses,

built in 1934 from the materials of a church erected there in 532 A.D., are packing up their blankets and seeking out positions from which they will have a good view of the horizon. After a few minutes to recover from the climb, the newcomers join them, each one searching for the best vantage

point.

It is a gentle dawn that comes to the Sinai. As the sun rises, layer upon layer of mountains unfold from the night, and the sun casts a glowing warmth on their ragged peaks and valleys. The climbers sit with their faces to the sun, silenced by the view over a landscape that echoes with the solitude of pre-history.

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## Egypt's glory intact

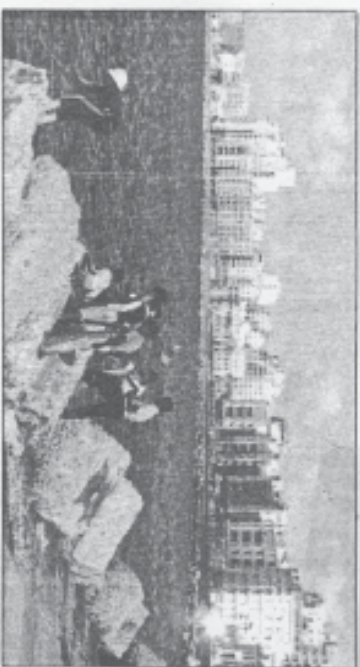
BY LOIS J. PETERSON

**M**any first-time visitors to Egypt might be warned away from Alexandria by guide books. They caution that its history is faded or buried and little of its former glory remains.

But those who make their way there — either by the four-hour train ride from Cairo or by either of the desert or delta roads that provide a glimpse of the death-dealing habits of Egyptian drivers — discover a city that thrives on its present.

First established by Alexander the Great in 332 B.C., the city is spread sinusoidally along 20 kilometers of Mediterranean waterfront.

It is here along the harbor that many Alexandrians pass their leisure time. On Fridays, the Moslem equivalent of our Sunday, the Corniche is a mesh of fishing rods wielded by small boys, young men in their Friday best, or older men wearing traditional galabiyas — the long shirts that give the appearance of a populace escaping to play in their pyjamas before breakfast.



Boys fish from the rocks in Alexandria, Egypt.

Photo by Lois J. Peterson

men of Alexandria seem to have little to do other than stroll arm in arm along the corniche. Small boys will trail tourists asking "Where you from? What you name? What you looking for?" For the most part, they are just eager to practise their English, and might only ask for gum or "snylos" as badsheesh. It is easy here to hail a horse-drawn carriage for a tour of the city, and the driver will often wait while the visitor makes the obligatory stops at the few historical sites of Alexandria that remain.

The Roman Amphitheatre, the only one discovered in Egypt, is a small oasis of calm at which the city's hushed din can be heard in the distance. The Roman-Greco museum provides a fine introduction to the ancient past of the city and the Ptolemaic civilization that was once centred here. The Catacombs of Korn-el-Shokala are located in some of the city's poorest streets where children play soccer in any available space.

# GUIDE

## TO EXOTIC VACATIONS

and street markets are at their most lively. The sandstorm rambles of Fort Qayit Bey loom over the peninsula that separates the eastern and western harbors where the Mediterranean waves