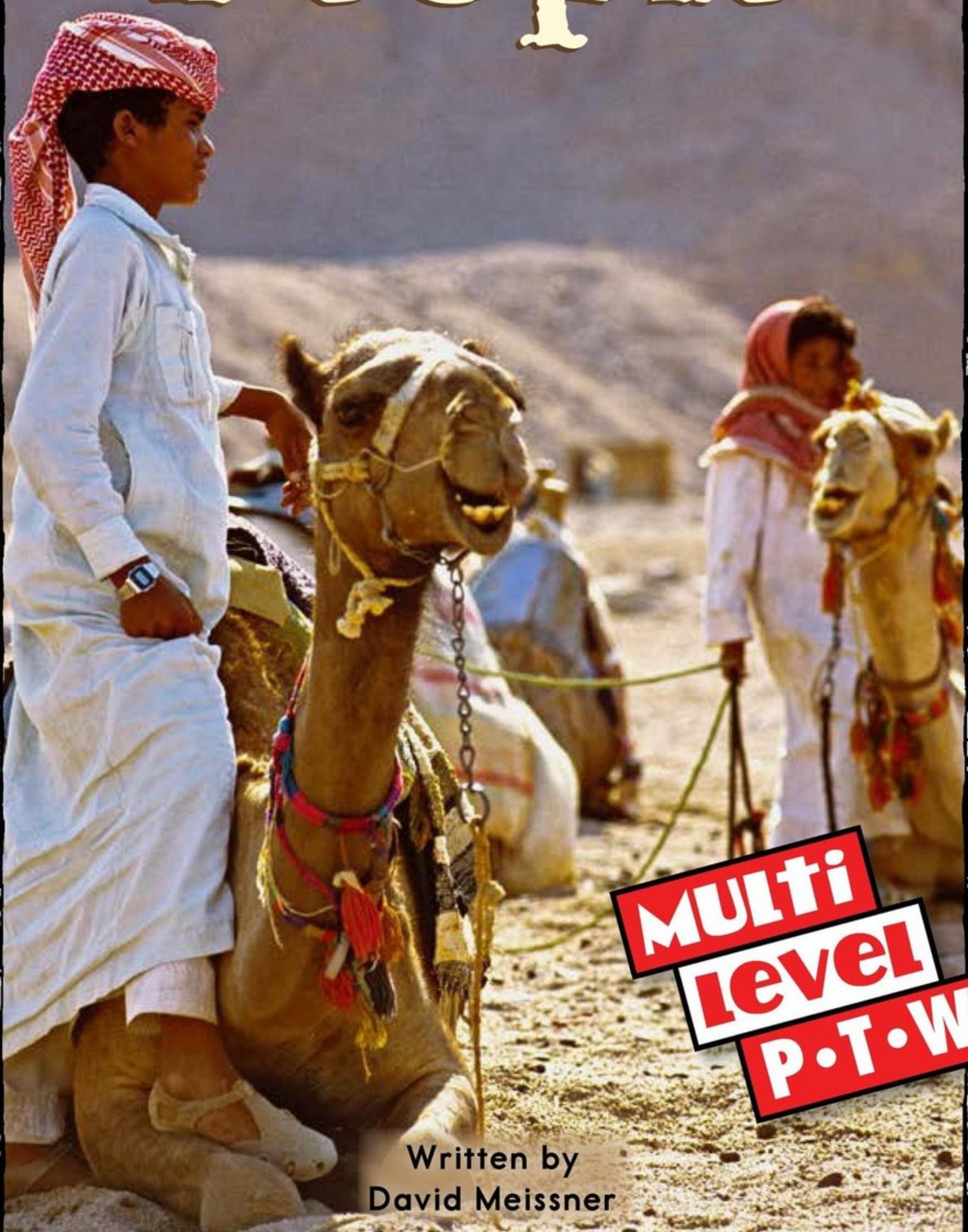


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Desert People



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Written by
David Meissner

Desert People



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Sunrise in the desert

Demanding Deserts

Imagine that you are standing alone in the desert before dawn. There is total silence except for the soft call of a dove. The fresh breeze feels good on your face. The Sun begins to rise over the mountains, which slowly change from black to lavender. Then the Sun's rays peek out and turn the morning into day.

Look around you. Imagine that your family and friends also live here. What are your lives like? Imagine, as was true a few hundred years ago, that there are no cars, bicycles, or paved roads in this desert. How do you travel from place to place?

Imagine that you feel hungry in this desert. There are no stores or supermarkets. Can you feel the thirst in the back of your throat? Where can you find water to drink? You look around. There are no drinking fountains and no flowing rivers. There is not a single cloud in the light blue sky.

What Exactly Is a Desert?

Would you recognize a desert if you saw one? Would there be camels walking on sand dunes? Would there be rattlesnakes, tall mountains, and saguaro (suh-WAHR-oh) cacti? Or would the landscape be rocky, **desolate**, and barren, with only a few shrubs and trees?

All three of these descriptions apply to different kinds of deserts. Deserts may contain rocky mountains, graveled plateaus, or rolling sand dunes. Some desert areas even have streams and rivers.

There are many varieties of desert environments, but all of them share some common traits. Compared with the rest of the world, deserts are **arid** places. They usually receive less than 25.4 centimeters (10 in) of **precipitation** each year. Deserts tend to have dry soil and not much **vegetation**. Although some deserts can get very cold, most deserts are sunny and hot.

Word Wise

Why cacti?

The plural of *cactus* is *cactuses* or *cacti* (KAK-tie). The word *cactus* comes from the Latin language. *Cacti* is the plural form of *cactus* in Latin.



Finding shade in the desert can be challenging.

Desert Survival

If deserts are such **inhospitable** places, how have people survived in them? Where did they find food to eat and water to drink? What materials did they use to build shelter from the elements?

For thousands of years, desert people have found answers to these questions. They have used local **resources** for food, water, and home construction. Desert people have found ways to **adapt**. Each desert presents different challenges, and each desert has its own solutions.

World Deserts Comparison Table

	Sonoran	Sahara	Gobi	Atacama
Climate	Good rainfall for a desert	Very hot and very dry	Cold and windy	Driest desert in the world
Continent	North America	Africa	Asia	South America
Size (sq km)	310,800	9,064,960	1,036,000	139,860
Terrain	Flat basins, mountains	Gravel plains, mountains, sand dunes	Stony, sandy soil, grasslands	Sand, salt basins, lava
Example of Desert People	Tohono O'odham	Bedouin	Mongols	Atacama Indians
Compare these four deserts. Notice that they are all different.				

In this book, you will learn about two interesting groups of desert people: the Tohono O'odham and the Bedouin. You will also read about sand dunes, wild foods, villages, hunting, and more. You will even read about dogs that ride on camels!

Word Wise

Desert: a dry, barren area of land, especially one covered with sand, that is characteristically desolate, waterless, and without vegetation.*

* This is the official New Oxford American Dictionary definition of desert.

The Tohono O'odham

Tohono O'odham means “desert people.” The Tohono O’odham are Native Americans who still live in the Sonoran Desert in the southwestern United States.

For years, they have watched the Sun rise over Baboquivari (bah-boh-KEE-vah-ree), their sacred mountain. They believe that Baboquivari is where Elder Brother created them from the clay of the Earth. Like many Native Americans, the O’odham believe that a powerful spirit named Coyote helped create the people and the land. They believe Elder Brother gave the desert to the O’odham and taught them how to use its plants.



For many years, they were called the Papago. Today, Tohono O’odham is the official name of the tribe.

The O’odham lived in villages and slept in round houses with flat roofs. These homes were made out of a plaster of dried mud, branches, and grass called *adobe* (uh-DOH-bee). The O’odham also built covered shelters called *ramadas* to create shaded areas near their homes.

The Sonoran Supermarket

Like other deserts, the Sonoran Desert can be a difficult place to live. It is hot and dry. Months may pass without any rain, and summer days can reach 49° Celsius (120°F). Winter nights can dip below freezing.

But compared to other deserts, the Sonoran is relatively **lush** and **bountiful**. Sometimes it rains in the winter, and **monsoons** drench the entire desert with water every summer. During the monsoon season, flash floods sometimes race down the canyons!

Historically, the Tohono O'odham lived in an area where 30.5 centimeters (12 in) of rain fell each year. Enough rain fell to support many forms of life. Shady trees, big cacti such as the saguaro, and even summer flowers all grew there. Insects, birds, rabbits, and coyotes lived there, too.

Some of the O'odham lived near large mountain ranges. In the mountains, they found resources lacking in the desert below. Different plants and animals lived up in the cooler **climate** on the mountain slopes. In the mountains, the O'odham gathered food and hunted large game animals. They also collected water from springs and streams.



The desert is filled with resources, if you know where to look.

A Different Kind of Shopping

If the Tohono O'odham had a supermarket, it was their desert. When they needed vegetables, they planted seeds. When they needed water, they went to a spring. When they needed meat, they hunted animals. And if they needed pine nuts, they walked up into the mountains to find pine trees.

Fruits and Vegetables

In the early summer, O'odham men dug small holes in the ground with sharp sticks. Women dropped seeds in the holes and covered them up. The dry fields flooded when the monsoons came. The O'odham grew corn, pinto beans, and squash in this way. In the winter, they grew wheat, peas, and watermelons.

Meat

The Tohono O'odham hunted rattlesnakes, rabbits, and birds in the desert. In the mountains, they killed deer, bighorn sheep, and sometimes even bears. When sneaking up on the deer, O'odham hunters dressed in deerskins and walked on all fours to blend in with the animals.



A desert jackrabbit

Organic Specialty Items

The Tohono O'odham also gathered food that grew in the wild. In the desert, they found chile peppers, wild onions, mesquite beans, and fruit from saguaro and other cacti. They made syrup from the fruit. In the mountains, they collected acorns, roots, and pine nuts. O'odham men even made four-day trips to the ocean just to get salt!



The Tohono O'odham grew tepary beans in the dry lands of the Sonoran Desert.

Drinking Water

Some O'odham villages were lucky enough to be located near springs and streams. Other villages dug wells in the ground. But many people lived far away from water sources. Young girls often hiked high up into mountain canyons to fetch water.

The O'odham created wonderful baskets from the leaves of the yucca (YUK-uh) plant. They weaved beautiful designs into the bottoms of the baskets. These baskets were tight enough to hold water.



Bedouin tents are low to the ground so the wind will not blow them over.

The Bedouin

Think of all the things in your room. Can you imagine packing up and moving to a new place every week? Would you get tired of carrying so many things? How would you enjoy the traveling life?

Traditional Bedouin people were **nomadic**. They moved from place to place on camels in search of food, water, and grazing land. They also rode horses and raised sheep and goats. The Bedouin had very few possessions; they believed their lifestyle was simple and pure. *Bedouin* means “people of the desert,” but it is a word that French people created. Bedouins call themselves *Badw* (BED-oo).



An oasis in the Sahara Desert

Today, most Bedouins are Muslims, but long ago they had different beliefs that were tied to the landscape they lived in. Water was considered sacred, and so were caves. Ancient Bedouins saw kind gods in **fertile** places and cruel demons, called **jinn**, where it was desolate. They worshipped the Moon and the evening star, Venus.

The Bedouin lived in low black tents called *bayts*, which were made out of goat hair or sheep's wool. These tents protected them from the sun, wind, and blowing sand. In a matter of hours, Bedouins could pack up their camps and move on to their next "home." Today, small numbers of Bedouins still roam the Syrian, Arabian, and Sahara deserts. In some ways, they live exactly as their **ancestors** did five thousand years ago.

The Saharan Supermarket?

The **vast** Sahara Desert is the largest desert in the world. It stretches across northern Africa for 9 million square kilometers (3.5 million sq mi). The Sahara is hot and dry. In some parts, it rains less than 25 millimeters (1 in) per year! The Sahara has more sandstorms than rainstorms; huge clouds of dust and sand can fill the sky.

The Sahara Desert is less of a “supermarket” than the Sonoran Desert. Less rain falls in the Sahara, and fewer plants and animals live there. With few local resources available to them, the Bedouin could not just remain in one place. They had to constantly travel the desert in search of food and water.

Ancient Bedouins were used to eating and drinking less than other people. One secret to living in the desert was to wear light layers of white clothing. These clothes helped Bedouins remain cool under the hot sun and helped their bodies retain much-needed moisture.

The Saharan landscape contains more than sand dunes. It also has rocky **plateaus**, tall mountains, valleys, and **oases**. An oasis—a rich, fruitful place in the desert with water—was sacred to the Bedouins.

The Camel Convenience Store

Arabian camels, known as *dromedaries*, made nomadic life possible. The Bedouin wove camel hair into fabrics out of which they created beautiful blankets and heavy winter coats. They also milked the camels. Bedouin women knew how to turn that milk into yogurt or *ghee* (a kind of butter). Bedouins also ate camel meat. They even burned camel **dung** to fuel their campfires!

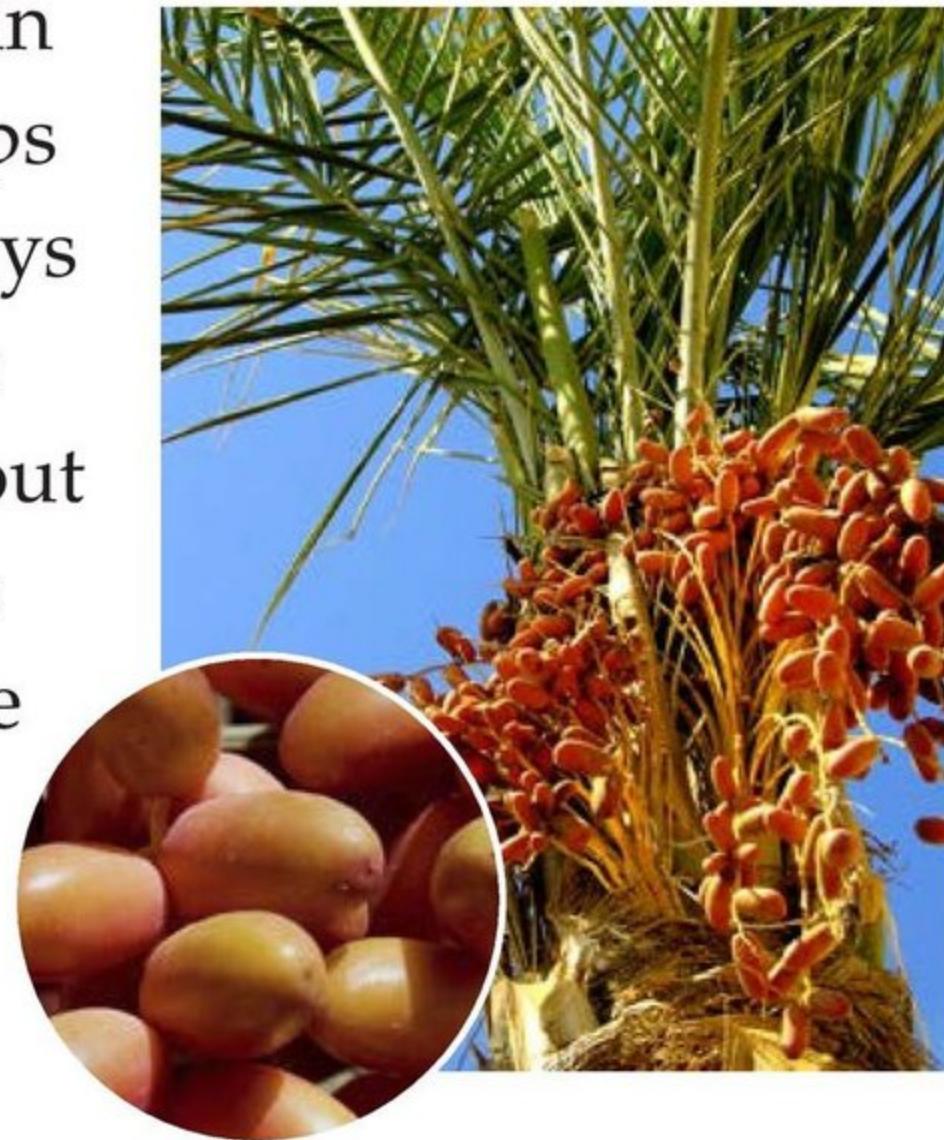
Camels were well suited for the desert. They could go for long periods of time without water. They stored fat in their humps. Camels could drink amazing amounts of water at one time—a useful behavior when one might not have another drink for days. Arabian camels could walk 50 kilometers (30 mi) a day while carrying up to 270 kilograms (600 lbs) on their backs.

Some families owned many camels, which was considered a sign of wealth. Camels were so prized that people fought over them. Some Bedouins went on raids to steal camels from others. Bedouins were very good at raiding, and for thousands of years, other desert peoples were afraid of them. In the desert, people traveled in **caravans** for safety. If a caravan wanted to pass through Bedouin territory, it might have to pay a toll or hire Bedouin guards for protection.

Fruits and Vegetables

The nomadic Bedouin did not grow many crops because they were always on the move. But in late summer, they camped out near oases because date palms grew there. These palm trees produced sweet, tasty fruits.

The Bedouin ate some dates fresh and dried others to save for later.



People living around the Sahara Desert have been eating dates for at least 6,000 years.

Meat

Bedouins did not eat meat very often. Since their camels were valuable, they only ate them on special occasions. They also ate sheep and goats during celebrations. The Bedouin hunted ostriches, wolves, foxes, and gazelles. They also trained falcons to hunt foxes and small birds for them. Sometimes dogs called *Salukis* rode with Bedouins to help track and hunt animals. Can you imagine a dog riding on a camel?

Drinking Water

The Bedouin knew where to find the desert oases and where to dig. They dug wells to **extract** water from the ground.



Australian Aboriginal children

More Desert People

The Tohono O'odham and the Bedouin are just two of the world's traditional desert peoples. There are many other deserts, and there have been many other desert peoples.

The Australian Aborigines, for example, walked about their continent for **millennia**, moving from water source to water source. They learned songs that told them where to find water in the desert, which covers most of the continent. Men hunted kangaroos, bandicoots, many kinds of birds, and other animals with spears and boomerangs. Women gathered vegetables such as acacia seeds, bush tomatoes, desert limes, and bush bananas. The Australian Aboriginal diet also included roots, insects, and grubs.

Nomads roamed the cold, windy Gobi Desert in Mongolia and China. They were sometimes called the “five-animal people” because they traditionally herded horses, sheep, goats, cattle, and two-humped Bactrian camels. They lived in round tents called *gers*. They ate cheese, meat, and curds made from goat or camel milk. Four times a year, these nomads would pack their *gers* and other belongings and move to a different area to find food for their animals.



Gobi Desert nomad in Mongolia

The Atacama Indians lived in the dry Atacama Desert plateau in Chile. The Atacama is one of the driest areas in the world. Much of the area has not received any rain for hundreds of years. It is also very cold because it is so high in the mountains.

The native Atacama people raised guinea pigs, llamas, and alpacas. They also planted corn, beans, and squash in areas with water from melting snow. Though it rarely rains in the Atacama, there are some areas where thick fogs rise up from the Pacific Ocean far below. Native people harvested water from these fogs by using funnels to capture the morning dew.

Bushmen lived in the Kalahari Desert in southern Africa. They traveled in small bands and moved around frequently, following the animals they hunted for food. They sometimes stored water inside empty ostrich eggshells. They lived in huts made of branches tied together and covered with thatched grass. Women gathered berries and roots. Melon was a favorite food, and honey was a treat. Men hunted animals with bows and poison-tipped arrows. Sometimes they ate giraffes!



Kalahari Bushmen in southern Africa carry small bows.

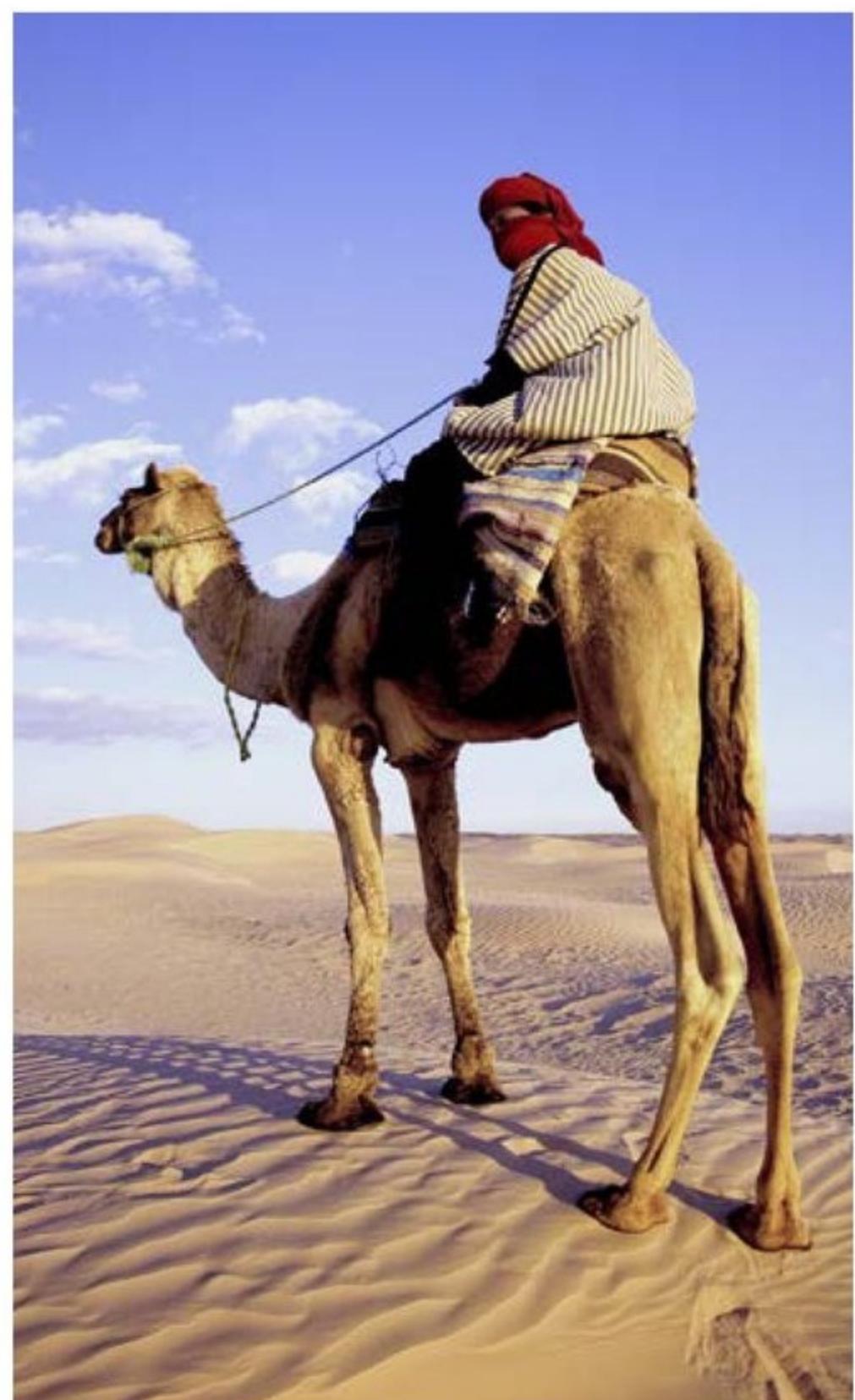
Deserts cover roughly one-fifth of the Earth's surface. Can you find the Sonoran Desert? The Sahara Desert?



A Way of Life

Imagine again that you are standing alone in the desert. The Sun is now shining over the mountains. The doves have found shade under a tree. You feel a bead of sweat on your forehead. What will you do on this day?

If you grew up in the desert, you would know exactly what to do. Your grandparents would have taught your parents. And your parents would have prepared you with many generations' worth of knowledge from your ancestors. For thousands of years, people have adapted to deserts. They have found food, water, shelter, and more. For these people, the desert is not just about survival. It is their way of life.



Dressed for the desert

Glossary

adapt (<i>v.</i>)	to adjust to new conditions (p. 6)
ancestors (<i>n.</i>)	family members from long ago (p. 14)
arid (<i>adj.</i>)	dry (p. 5)
bountiful (<i>adj.</i>)	abundant; plentiful (p. 9)
caravans (<i>n.</i>)	groups of people traveling together (p. 16)
climate (<i>n.</i>)	the weather conditions in an area over a long period time (p. 9)
desolate (<i>adj.</i>)	empty and unwelcoming (p. 5)
dung (<i>n.</i>)	animal manure (p. 16)
extract (<i>v.</i>)	to remove or take out (p. 17)
fertile (<i>adj.</i>)	able to sustain life (p. 14)
inhospitable (<i>adj.</i>)	harsh, unwelcoming, or challenging to live in (p. 6)
lush (<i>adj.</i>)	rich with vegetation (p. 9)
jinn (<i>n.</i>)	desert demons, sometimes called genies (p. 14)
millennia (<i>n.</i>)	thousands of years (p. 18)

monsoons (<i>n.</i>)	seasonal storms that bring heavy rains to an area (p. 9)
nomadic (<i>adj.</i>)	traveling from place to place without a permanent home (p. 13)
oases (<i>n.</i>)	fertile places in the desert that have water (p. 15)
plateaus (<i>n.</i>)	large raised areas of flat land (p. 19)
precipitation (<i>n.</i>)	rain, snow, sleet, or hail (p. 5)
resources (<i>n.</i>)	supplies of valuable or very useful things (p. 6)
vast (<i>adj.</i>)	very great in size (p. 15)
vegetation (<i>n.</i>)	plants found in certain areas (p. 5)



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PRONUNCIATION GUIDE

Bedouin: (BED-oo-in)

Tohono O'odham: (toe-HOE-noh OH-eh-dom)

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