

Icons at St Catherine

An invitation to discover the secrets of icons and their hidden message in a place where heaven and earth seem to touch

15th - 22nd November

Guest Speaker Aidan Hart

There are some sites on earth that the Celts have called 'thin places', where heaven and earth seem to touch. St Catherine's Monastery is one of them. It is a place where countless people such as Moses and St John of the Ladder have encountered God. The monastery's remarkable icons are also a place of encounter between heaven and earth, from its famous 6th century mosaic of Christ's transfiguration in the apse to its smallest illuminated manuscript. But to new eyes the style of these Orthodox images can at first seem strange, and so it is invaluable having an expert and practising iconographer such as Aidan to help us unearth their secrets and put them in the context of the church's life of mystical prayer and communal worship.



This week of retreat & exploration is open to all and may appeal to those with an interest in icons and how to read them and to spend time contemplating their hidden depths. There will be regular morning and evening meditation for those who wish and a chance to attend some services in the Church.

Guest speakers

This will be a unique opportunity to explore the world of Orthodoxy, its iconography and prayer cycles with the renowned icon painter, [Aidan Hart](#) who was a novice monk in the Greek Orthodox tradition for twelve years, six of them as a hermit. He is delighted to be making this pilgrimage to St Catherine's which he says has long been the desire of his heart. A professional icon and fresco painter, carver and mosaicist for over thirty years, he is the director and teacher of the Icon Painting Certificate for The Prince's School of Traditional Arts. He has published two books and numerous articles on iconography and lectured widely. In 2018 he presented '*The Creation of an Icon*' for BBC Radio 4.

Saint Catherine's Monastery



Saint Catherine's Monastery or the **Sacred Monastery of the God-Trodden Mount Sinai** lies at the foot of Mount Sinai where the Bible says Moses received the Ten Commandments. The monastery is built where it is said that Moses saw the Burning Bush. A Chapel on the site of the Burning Bush was built by order of Helena, mother of Constantine I. A fortified Greek Orthodox Monastery was built to protect the Chapel at the order of the Emperor Justinian (527-568).

One of the oldest working Christian monasteries in the world, it is also renowned for its unique

collection of icons, most notably those painted in the ancient encaustic technique from the 6th and 7th centuries, and from the Komnenian period (1081-1185). St Catherine's is unique in preserving so many icons from before the iconoclastic period. These survived because Sinai was by that time under the rule of the Moslems and thus out of reach of the Iconoclast Emperors. The dry climate helped and the fact that they remained part of the monks' daily life of prayer. Included in their collection is the oldest panel icon of Christ (see illustration).

The monastery library houses a vast and unique collection of early codices, manuscripts and books that is outnumbered only by the Vatican Library. Amongst its treasures was the *Codex Siniaticus* until it was brought to the West, and many remarkable Byzantine illuminated manuscripts, such as the gloriously illustrated Gospel Book made 1000 AD, manuscript Sinai gr. 204 (see illustration). The library has been extensively restored and a reading room is available for specialist study.

Travel arrangements

We will be based at the Monastery's Guesthouse. All travel arrangements for the retreat (excluding flights) will be made by Wind Sand & Stars, a company with over 25 years of experience in South Sinai, with an excellent local team under Dr Rabia who has strong links with the local Bedouin. The Monks at St Catherine look after the local Jebeliya Bedouin tribe, who guard and service the Monastery. In the last few years, tourist travel to Egypt has diminished with a knock-on effect on the trade which the Bedouin rely on. Both the Monks and the Bedouin as well as the local guides are always so pleased to see us. It is an integral part of Wind Sand & Stars journeys to continue this connection and to support the Bedouin who in turn protect the Monastery. Security at all times is paramount and Wind Sand & Stars' provision of security is second to none, with everyone's safety and wellbeing a top priority.



Journey Itinerary

Day 1 Arrival Your guide will meet you at Sharm el Sheik Airport at 7pm, local time, before heading to a 4* hotel in Sharm for a well earned rest after a day of travelling.

Day 2: Journey to St Catherine's Monastery

We road trip through the desert towards St Catherine's Monastery. Stopping along the way, we will view rock inscriptions carved by early pilgrims as they journeyed from Jerusalem to St Catherine. We can take in the stunning view of the nearby oasis of Ayun Khudra as we enjoy Bedouin tea, before we continue into the mountainous interior where this Greek Orthodox Monastery lies at the foot of Mount Sinai – the very place where God appeared to Moses in the Burning Bush.

Built in the 6th century by the Byzantine Emperor Justinian, its towering outer walls, built to protect the monks from marauding tribes, still stand. During the day we will have time for introductions and orientation before our first talk by Aidan in the evening.

Days 3 – 7:

At St Catherine's Monastery

We will spend the next five days based at the Monastery. The Monastery is open to visitors each morning, except Friday, from 9am-12pm, while the afternoons will offer us time for retreat and reflection. A flexible daily programme will begin with a morning meditation together, followed by time alone for retreat and reflection or study. In the mornings inside the monastery we can visit the magnificent Basilica, with its famous 6th century mosaic in the apse, and spend time with the rare collections of icons and early manuscripts in the museum. Icons require time and understanding for their inner meaning to unfold, and while with the collections Aidan will be available to talk with us if we wish about their meaning and use. There will be optional excursions to the local village of St Catherine and walks to some nearby hermitages and viewpoints, or simply time to absorb the special atmosphere. We may be invited to attend afternoon Vespers. We gather together again in the evenings for review and a talk and discussion on the monastery's iconography and the monastic life, led by Aidan.

There will be an optional ascent of Mount Sinai one day, a steady uphill walk for 2-3 hours along the traditional camel path (with camels available for hire for the ascent), then up steep Byzantine steps carved into the rocks to the summit. . (The camels cannot continue on this final section).

All activities are optional and the final daily programme will depend on the group, local conditions and to allow for Monastery opening times.

O/n St Catherine's Monastery Guesthouse. Please note accommodation is basic and rooms are generally shared, though a few single rooms may be possible depending on availability and we always try to secure them when requested. A single supplement is payable.

Day 8: Depart

We return to Sharm el Sheikh and our flight home.

Please note all itineraries are subject to change and may depend upon availability

Costs

In Country land arrangements £1,650

Flights £250 - £450 approximately (depending upon route, carrier and time of booking)

Minimum number to run: 12

Cost Includes

- All local transport and accommodation
- Full board at the Monastery Guesthouse and half board at 4* hotel in Cairo
- Qualified Wind Sand & Stars group leader in Sinai
- English-speaking Egyptian guide
- St Catherine's National Park fee and Museum entrance fee

Cost Excludes

- Egyptian Visa (25 USD on arrival or ahead of departure via the [E Visa Portal](#))
- Flights - we have a travel agent we can recommend to book these for you and suggested routes/carriers if you wish to book independently of the travel agent
- *Gratuities £50 (invoiced)*
- *Single Supplement per person £185 (invoiced)*
- *Hire of camel for ascent of Mt Sinai (25 USD, optional)*
- *Soft drinks and any other personal expenses*

Flights

There are two flight options that we recommend, and we would suggest booking flights through our trusted partner, Carolyn Stanley at [Travel Counsellors](https://www.travelcounsellors.com). We have been working with Carolyn for many years, and she has impressive experience and efficiency with managing flights, carolyn.stanley@travelcounsellors.com

Option 1

Easyjet return to Sharm el Sheik:

15/11/22 LGW departing 0925 arriving in to SSH at 1655

LTN departing at 1050 arriving in to SSH at 1825

22/11/22 Departing SSH at 1755 arriving in to LGW 2135

Departing SSH at 1920 arriving in to LTN 2305

Approximate cost based on today's (02/08) search = £250

Option 2

Outbound as above - either LTN or LGW

22/11/22 Departing SSH at 1525 to Cairo

Extend in Cairo for a number of days, as desired, and return to LGW or LTN from Cairo.

Total cost for flights approximately £420



Who we are

Many years ago, Wind Sand & Stars fell in love with Sinai and its people. Working closely with the Bedouin tribes of South Sinai, we have developed strong partnerships and made life-long friends, which enable us to deliver unique and safe experiences for all.

We are proud of the many wonderful journeys and incredible experiences that have been shared; from captains of industry to the homeless, doctors to geologists, students to pensioners, church groups to those seeking the adventure of a lifetime. Our trips have combined desert adventures, mountain treks, camel safaris, field trips, school journeys, silent retreats, pilgrimages to historical religious sites, charity projects and so much more.

To book your place on this journey, please complete and return the booking pack attached, or for more information, please

contact: office@windsandstars.co.uk

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