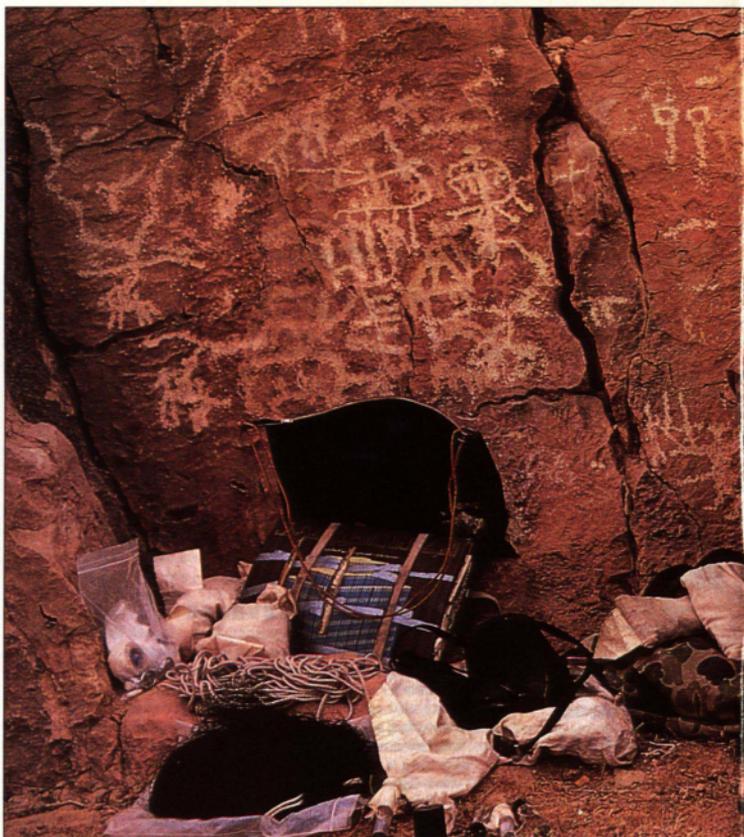


After traveling more than 30 days, Joe Hobbs takes a self-portrait in front of neolithic writings carved 5,000 to 10,000 years ago. His kit includes a sleeping bag, plant press, camera and tape recorder. No wonder some call him



Indiana



Joe

BY DEBORAH DIAMOND
PHOTOS BY JOE HOBBS

Talk to people about Joe Hobbs, and the Indiana Jones thing just keeps coming up.

"He's like Indiana Jones except he's a geographer, not an archaeologist," says a former student.

"He's like Indiana Jones except he's a happily married man with a new baby," says a colleague.

Even the dental hygienist who cleans his teeth gets a kick out of her client's adventuresome escapades. "Indiana Joe," she calls him.

OK, maybe you wouldn't mistake this MU geography professor of Columbia for Harrison Ford of Hollywood. But even Hobbs has to admit — however reluctantly, with some good-natured eye-rolling — that there is some basis for the comparison.

"But that's a movie," he astutely points out, ever the stickler



for detail. "This is real life."

Dr. Joseph Hobbs' real life does have a cinematic edge to it, however. This is a guy who was born Christmas Day in Alaska, who spent part of his childhood in Saudi Arabia, who attended high school in southern India. This is a guy whose idea of a honeymoon is to take his bride on a grueling three-week tour of Egypt at a time of year when the mercury climbs upward of 120 degrees. This is a guy who leads expeditions to the Arctic, to Australia, to places with romantic names like Djibouti and Sri Lanka and Madagascar.

He is fluent in spoken and written Arabic. He has spent months at a time living in the desert, and he can butcher a kid goat with a Swiss Army knife and afterward cook up a fine dinner over an open fire.

It's no wonder he wows 'em in the classroom back home.

Students who sign up for his courses — prepared to memorize country capitals and major rivers — are treated instead to a whole different slant on what it means to study geography. Boiled down, it goes something like this: The globe isn't just something you get as a graduation gift and set on a shelf; it represents a world out there waiting to be explored and better understood.

"Never pass up a chance to go abroad," is the Hobbs mantra. "It will require sacrifice, but it will change your life."

One of the episodes that changed the course of his life,

Hobbs says, was spending four years of his boyhood in Saudi Arabia, where his father worked for a company that maintained the airport in Dhahran. "Some Americans there had a demeaning attitude toward the local people," he recalls. "But my family didn't live in a compound. We lived among Saudis, Qataris, Pakistanis, Indians — people from all over the world — and it made a big difference in our experience."

In college, Hobbs struggled to combine his diverse interests, choosing to seek bachelor's degrees in both anthropology and environmental studies/natural history at the University of

California at Santa Cruz. He spent his junior year abroad at the American University in Cairo and found himself smitten with ancient Egypt. Just as he was considering a career in Egyptology, though, he met two Dutch ornithologists who needed an interpreter to help them in their fieldwork on the trapping and marketing of migratory birds. While with them he was introduced to a Bedouin man named Saalih Ali Suwaylim, who was to become the young American's chief mentor and guide in the Egyptian deserts.

Many desert
travelers
have been

astonished by the nomad's navigational and tracking ability, calling it a "sixth sense." The Khushmaan are exceptional way-finders and topographical interpreters able, for instance, to tell from tracks whether a camel was carrying baggage or a man; whether gazelle tracks were made by a male or female; which way a car was traveling and what make it was; which man left a set of footprints, even if he wore sandals; and how old the tracks are. Bedouins are proud of their geographical skills which, they believe, distinguish them from settled people.

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"It was a chance meeting that turned into a career," says Hobbs, who became fascinated by the Bedouin people and the relationship these pastoral nomads have with their environment.

Then he found out there was an academic discipline that embraced the very things that fascinated him so. "I was surprised to learn that geography makes linkages between the natural world and cultures and the historical world," he says. "The way geographers express themselves is through maps, but they are most interested in human and environmental relationships."

Hobbs earned a master's degree in geography from the University of Texas at Austin in 1980 and emerged with his doctoral degree in 1986. His research, culminating in "Bedouin Reconciliation with the Egyptian Desert," won the Outstanding Dissertation Award at the University of Texas Graduate School for that year. In 1988 he joined the MU faculty, where he teaches Geography 2, a class with as many as 800 students, as well as several courses and seminars on the Middle East, environmental geography and humanistic geography.

Hobbs is well-known around campus for the painstaking preparation he puts into his lectures. Virtually every one is accompanied by slides he's taken himself or video footage from his fieldwork. "I love using video, because it's so engaging," he says. "A lot of students connect better with visuals." His method is to surround 10- or 15-minute segments with discussion that provides geographical and cultural context, and whenever possible he ties in current events.

"I talk a lot about how people use their resources, both wisely and unwisely," Hobbs explains. "I argue that we have many lessons to learn from the Bedouin, such as the ability to recognize limitations and stay within them. These are people with very few resources, but they have recognized the danger of exhausting what nature has given them. They could cut down all the acacia trees and kill all the ibex. But they know if they did that, they would be forced to move out of the desert and settle down."

Regardless of how passionately Hobbs presents that argument, however, there's nothing quite as compelling for students as observing these things for themselves. "When I show

video of Bedouins hunting gazelles without guns, throwing rocks with deadly accuracy — when they see that — it makes quite an impression."

Another point Hobbs likes to make is his classes is "how Bedouins have skills you and I have lost by virtue of our isolation from the natural world." He tells a story in which a 15-year-old Bedouin casually told him not to sit in a certain spot, because there was a viper lying there just beneath the surface of the sand. "I looked and looked, but I couldn't see it," Hobbs recalls. "I even photographed the spot, but still couldn't tell where it was. Then Sulimaan put a stick to the viper's head." When Hobbs shows the photo of the venomous snake's hiding place and then the snake revealed, students get the point.



Joe Hobbs almost sat on this spot, but a 15-year-old Bedouin told him to beware. Even after close examination, Hobbs could not see a viper lurking below the sand until a companion put a stick to the snake's head.

In addition to his formal research, Hobbs does a stint each year as expedition leader for several "ecotourism" outfits that allow interested travelers to learn about what he calls "human impact on fragile places." This unusual line of work began in 1983 when a cruise director in the Red Sea asked Hobbs to give a talk on the Bedouin and the native plant life. The presentation was so popular

that Hobbs was asked to be a guest lecturer the following year. Since then, he has served as resident naturalist, lecturer and cruise director on tours to Turkey, Jordan, Sudan, North Yemen, Scandinavia, Russia, Ecuador, Ireland and many other destinations.

Dr. Kit Salter, professor and chairman of geography, emphasizes the benefits to students of Hobbs' unusual combination of intrepid explorer and meticulous scholar. "When Joe lectures about deserts, he talks about sitting around campfires with the Bedouin," Salter explains. "When he talks about the polar latitudes, he shows video clips of his approach to the North Pole. And when he talks about the importance of animal ecology, he can show slides and tell stories about his own interactions with exotic desert animals. He uses his field exploits to enliven every lecture he gives, which makes geography seem wonderfully real to Missouri students. We're lucky to have him."

According to Salter, many students cite this associate

professor as the reason they have chosen to pursue geography as their own vocations. Former student Michael Steinberg, BGS '88, MA '92, counts himself among the Hobbs converts. "I was a rather confused graduate student at the time I met him, and he encouraged me to pursue my interest in the role local people can

play in natural resource management," he recalls. "He showed me through his own work that this is a viable field of study." Steinberg worked for Hobbs as a teaching assistant and admired the way the young academic lit a fire under jaded undergraduates.

"This was not just some PBS special," he says. "The guy on stage is showing videos he filmed himself, and he can explain every detail because he was there. Students were just amazed by that. Here's this guy who leads a seemingly normal life in mid-Missouri, and in the video he's traipsing around the desert with a tiny backpack and speaking fluent Arabic to these Bedouins. The textbook gives you the statistics, but Dr. Hobbs will give you the images that you remember."

Steinberg, who plans to become a geography professor himself, ranks Hobbs among the top two or three faculty members he's encountered. Hobbs demands much of his students, Steinberg says, but he also holds himself and his own work to some very high standards.

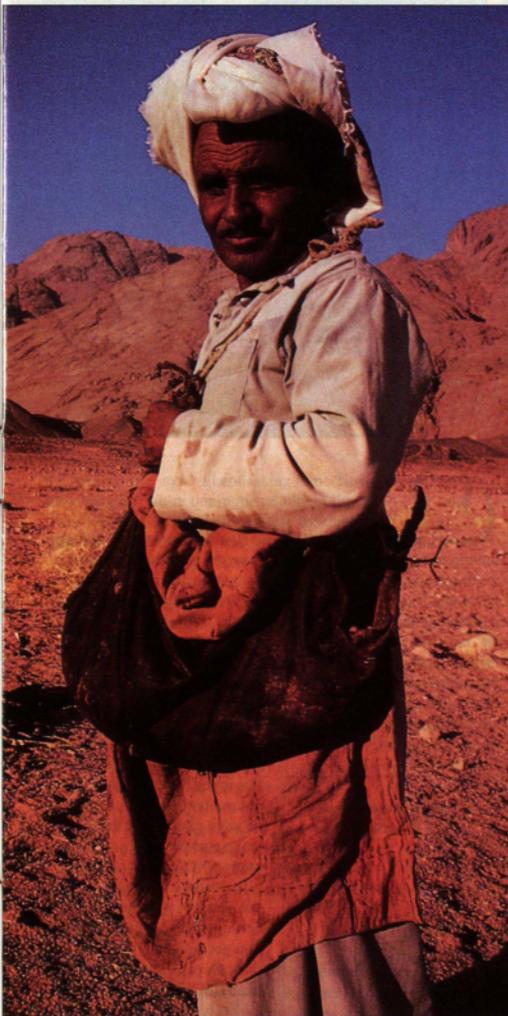
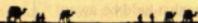
"I would say students think he's a bit eccentric," Steinberg concludes thoughtfully. "But eccentric in a good way. I think they're a little bit in awe of him."

Which is understandable, considering what Hobbs has accomplished in his 37 years. Already a widely respected authority on the Middle East, he has written two books on the region — *Bedouin Life in*

Sulimaan spotted two gazelle feeding below us.

His father caught up, surveyed the situation, and whispered to Sulimaan to take up a weapon. Saalih armed himself with an oblong fist-sized rock and edged closer to the canyon wall. He was downwind from the animals, and the upper branches of an acacia partially blocked the view: the gazelles were unaware of him. He crept closer to the canyon wall, then stood and hurled the rock with what he later said was half his might, for more velocity would have diminished his accuracy. I snapped photographs and expected a brief chance to catch the animals fleeing in fear down the canyon. Instead I heard a gazelle's desperate bark and Saalih's shouts for my pocket-knife. From thirty-five feet he had pitched his weapon with mortal accuracy, striking the animal's spinal cord.

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Joe Hobbs' guide on his forays into the Egyptian Eastern Desert is Saalih Ali Suwaylim. The Ma'aza tribesman has a reputation among his peers as an outstanding naturalist.

Camels and Maaza
Bedouin nomads trek
across the South
Galala Plateau in
eastern Egypt. The
harsh climate and
topography are major
contributors to the
nomadic lifestyle of
the Bedouins.



the *Egyptian Wilderness* and *Mt. Sinai* (forthcoming) — and co-wrote and edited a third, *The Birds of Egypt*. In the six years he's been at MU, he has earned some significant recognition for his teaching: in 1992 the student body honored him with the Purple Chalk Award, and this spring he was selected as one of 10 professors to receive a prestigious \$10,000 William T. Kemper Fellowship. And Hobbs has been awarded a much-coveted Fulbright grant that will fund more than a year of fieldwork in Egypt, where he will act as consultant to the government to help it plan a national park in southern Sinai.

Coincidentally, it was his fieldwork that indirectly led Hobbs to meet the woman he was to marry. "He used to hire me and my sister to take care of his house and his five pet tortoises while he was gone," Cindy Hobbs recalls. The two married in 1988, and in February 1994 their daughter, Katie, was born. "I miss him when he's away, of course," says Cindy, who teaches fifth grade at Fairview Elementary in Columbia. "But that's whom I fell in love with, was this traveling person who came back from these remote places and has such incredible stories to tell. I knew going into this marriage that he'd be away for long periods of time. Although sometimes I kid him that he married me so he wouldn't have to pay me to house sit."

Over the past decade or so, Hobbs has managed to make the trip to Egypt nearly every year, staying with the Bedouin for weeks or months at a stretch. Typically in the company of his guide and friend Saalih Ali, who has a reputation among his peers as an outstanding naturalist, Hobbs furiously tape-records and takes notes as he learns about the region's natural history, the local tribe's family history and the Bedouin world view. At the end of each day he transcribes his notes while they are still fresh in his mind. This makes for less sleep throughout an already rigorous trip, but Hobbs seems to relish the challenges presented by travel under trying circumstances.

"Much of the appeal for me lies in the beauty of that natural world, of the desert," he says, glancing at the maps and travel posters covering the walls of his office.

"Particularly the nights under the desert sky — there is a certain depth and perspective you get being out there. It's a difficult place, but it's raw and beautiful."

Even more gratifying, however, have been the close relationships he's developed with the nomads who have shared their knowledge, their

Communicate

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as a student at MU?

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food and their friendship with him.

"They are a tremendously warm, generous people who care intensely about their families," Hobbs says. "The people live there with so little, with no homes or possessions to speak of, and they're very happy. They're wonderful people to work with."

Sometimes Cindy goes with him, and each time she is struck by the bond her husband has with this place. "I remember when he first took me to meet his friends in

the desert," she says. "I kept asking him, 'How will we find these people? We're out in the middle of the desert.' He said, 'Don't worry, I told Saalih where to meet us.' And sure enough, there he was. Saalih had borrowed a truck from somebody and we bounced all over the Eastern Desert, going from one bunch of family members to another, having tea and going through these elaborate greetings. When it got to be nighttime, we just stopped in the middle of nowhere and rolled up in a blanket and went to sleep.

"It was one of the best experiences of my life, sleeping under the stars," she says. "I could see then why he's always wanting to go back."

Dick Doughty, a journalist, first met Hobbs in 1989 when he and his wife accompanied the researcher on a three-day hike in the Sinai peninsula. "Joe is good at what he does because he doesn't take his ego on the plane with him," Doughty says. "He approaches his work with a certain amount of humility. He walks slowly and makes time to meet people and have coffee with them and talk. When he comes along it's not, 'Oh, here's the great geographer from the United States.' It's, 'Oh, here's Joe, the great guy.' They like him for who he is."

One incident during that expedition was particularly telling, Doughty recalls: "We were sitting under the campfire with a man named Mahmud and one of Mahmud's uncles, and the two of them started arguing about the shape of the earth. The uncle was saying the earth was flat, and Mahmud was saying, 'You old coot, the earth is round.' Finally the uncle turned to Joe

and asked him what he thought. Joe hesitated, and then said, 'Well, we have this friendship that it's round....'"

Doughty laughs even now as he tells the story. "I thought that was great. Here's this geography professor sitting there talking with a man who is convinced the earth is flat, but he wasn't putting down the guy's ideas, he was just putting another idea out there and letting it sit, for what it was worth. He has a lot of genuine respect for these people, and that comes across."

Back in Columbia, Hobbs continues his dizzying pace. Just back from an expedition he led on a Russian icebreaker making its way through the frozen seas north of the Arctic Circle, he is now preparing for the fall semester's classes, writing the captions to send off to the publisher of his latest book, and plotting his next trip to Egypt.

"Right now I'm trying to figure out how to bring Cindy and the baby along with me," he says. The intrepid explorer is momentarily appearing somewhat puzzled. "I'm new to this stuff," he admits. "But why can't you take an infant into the desert?" Then he brightens.

"I'm really looking forward to having them there with me, because Cindy will have access to the world of the Bedouin women. Their tradition requires pretty strict sexual segregation, so I've had very little contact with the women. She'll be able to tell me all sorts of interesting things."

But some questions remain unanswered: Will our Indiana Joe and his stouthearted spouse be successful in convincing little Katie of the value of rigorous geographic research? Or, perhaps more importantly, what will Indiana Joe do when there's a wild case of diaper rash in their midst and nary a drugstore in sight? No doubt he'll learn of a splendid natural remedy that's older than King Tut's tomb and write it up in his next book.

"We'll figure something out," he says, in true Indiana Jones style.

Stay tuned for the sequel and see. ☞

About the authors Deborah Bereset Diamond, BJ '87, is a Columbia-based free-lance writer whose work has appeared in *The New York Times*, and *Redbook* and *Parents* magazines. She also is a contributing editor of *Ladies' Home Journal*.

The Bedouins are awed by the purported size of the earth. It is difficult

for them to reconcile their detailed understanding of their homeland with the vast chaos described to them. Musallim

Sulimaan, bouncing his five-year-old daughter on his lap, was philosophical:

"Hamda, is the world wide or narrow?" I interjected, "It is wide," and he answered, "If you are afraid, the world is narrow. If you are not, and you are free as we are, then the world is wide."

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