

Bakhaarka Oasis

At the heart of the great plateau of the Bakhaarka Tableland is a roughly oval, cliff-ringed depression in which is this Oasis, centred on the large freshwater **Bakhaarka Lake**, some 3.5 miles southwest-northeast by 1.5 miles southeast-northwest at its widest (6 by 2.5 kilometres). Fish, insects and crocodiles live in and around the Lake, which is always sparkingly clear and inviting. Surrounding the lake within the hollow is an extensive **Palm Forest**, where many palm and other trees, flowers and lower vegetation thrive, along with birds, insects and other small creatures. Small marshy areas can be found at the Lake's edges in places too. Also within the hollow are the ruins of several ancient settlements, half-buried in drifted sand and overgrown with vegetation, including those of the legendary Bakhaarka City, all largely now forgotten, as this has become a shunned and haunted place, around which tales of ghosts, ghûls and worse cluster. Only a few foolhardy treasure seekers have ventured near in recent decades, and fewer still of those have returned, only rarely bearing more than a handful of scraps of treasure, along with tales of weird mirages, solitary ghostly figures that stalk the dune-fields, unnatural half-human raptors hovering far overhead, giant serpent or dragon trails in the sand, and a huge, sphinx-like creature seen striding along far-off. Stories persist of great riches lost in the city's ruin, however, that continue to bring occasional adventurers to dare the deadly desert, and chance their doom.

On the outer rim of the hollow, the cliffs of the **Oasis Scarp** rise around 100 feet (30 metres) from their base, often with a lower cliff line, reaching up to another 50 ft at most (15 m), further from the Lake, making the descent like a couple of tall steps in places, for all the upper cliffs can be very variable in height, with frequent gaps. In the lower main cliffs of the Scarp, there are just three, much wider, breaks, the **Western, Southern and Eastern Gaps**, which allow an easy passage into the Oasis hollow itself. Old tales suggest they once formed routes to the Oasis and the City, continuing from still greater valleys through the outer Tableland's Great Escarpment. No trace of any such roads can be made out now.

The Scarp cliffs are ancient and quite natural, with a number of ordinary caves in them, along with some that have been deliberately enlarged as houses and tombs, together with numbers of rock-cut tombs clustered chiefly in a couple of places to the northeast and northwest of the Lake. Beyond the Scarp, the true desert returns, along with the curious features of the Zaziq Pillars that seem much less natural, and appear somehow to be less ancient than the cliffs. Such Pillars are gigantic, stone, claw-like forms, seeming to have erupted from the desert sand, as if some vast demon were trying to drag the entire landscape down into the dust. They resemble curving, rib-like fossils, and while made of stone, they are far harder and more resistant than any other of the local rock outcrops across the desert, including the Scarp's cliffs. While they are very obvious landmarks, often reaching 200 to 300 ft in height (60 to 90 m), their similarity to one another makes them dangerous to rely on as travel guides. Some are rumoured to have strange powers, and perhaps to move at times when no one is watching them, or so the tales suggest. Luckily, none lie very near the civilised parts of this region, and locals sighting one of the claws by accident in the far distance will make suitable protective signs to ward-off their supposed evil powers. Several are shown on this map, including the straighter, less claw-like group on the northern edge, The Three Pylons. Plus of course, the desert has more typical dangers as well - heat, sand, lack of water, sandstorms, snakes, jackals, desert lions and wolves, vultures, scorpions and the like.

Features found on the map were drawn from, adapted and suggested by a variety of sources, including random tables in the Shadowdark RPG rules (by The Arcane Library), the *Dread Laironomicon* and *Dread Thingonomicon* from Raging Swan Press, the revised edition of the *Tome of Adventure Design* and the *Nomicon* from Mythmere Games.

Labelled Places

Bakhaarka City Ruins: An extensive series of ruins lie by the southeast-central side of the Lake, the remains of the former great City there. Ancient texts suggest it was once called Zazuq, and although some sages suggest this is simply because the Zaziq Pillar name has been adopted for it, others claim the Pillars were named from the City instead; still more claim the two names are unconnected, despite their seeming similarity. Whatever the case, much of the ruins are buried in sand, or overgrown by the Palm Forest, which, with the hidden, broken wall-lines and rubble making for unstable masses of sand in places, means this is an especially difficult area to traverse quickly. The area east of the Southern Gap in the outlying Oasis Scarp cliffs is particularly treacherous because of its network of old cellars, basements and tunnels that honeycomb the land below the ruins. These are liable to collapse, plunging visitors into sandy abysses without warning. Some of the more visible surviving structures across the whole City zone are merely the upper storeys of taller buildings, which may not be obvious at first. Not all of these are sufficiently stable to support much extra weight without also collapsing into voids that were their lower floors. Ancient, worn pictograms can be made out, carved into the walls in places, often too incomplete in any single instance to be read. One common

grouping that recurs in many places, if it can be pieced together and translated, can be read as, "Wise rulers and loyal peasants are the blessings of Hishayna," where "Hishayna" carries the "Place" identifier, not that for a person or deity. Surviving tales hint that Hishayna was an unreal or mythical land of wonders and strange beasts known in ancient times. North, towards the lakeshore, ghostly, insubstantial figures, often barely visible, may be glimpsed, carrying out daily tasks where their movements can be followed. These are mostly harmless, and cannot usually be interacted with. They seem to be chiefly memory-shades of the distant past. On the southeastern side of the ruins, near the Southern Gap, a giant-sized, Human-like, heavily eroded, carved stone head can be seen sometimes, when the sand drifts clear around it. It is attached to an equally gigantic, though less eroded, standing body buried deep in the sand here, facing southeast towards the Gap. It was once one of a pair of welcoming statues that flanked the old road through the Gap from the southern ramp-valley through the Great Escarpment at the edge of the Tableland's plateau. The other statue lies face-down, far below to the southwest of the visible-head one, across the old roadway, some of which road also survives beneath the huge depth of sand.

Beheaded Kings: Between the southern base of The Three Pylons and the top of the Oasis Scarp cliffs, at the most northerly point around the Oasis, is a row of 16 huge, carved-stone, seated regal figures, all heavily worn by wind, sand and great age, each of which has been crudely beheaded in relatively recent times (decades to centuries ago, rather than millennia), as if by some great force knocking them away to the south, over the cliff edge. Their heads lie broken and sand-buried below the outer cliff line of the Scarp, and some seem to have been deliberately defaced, aside from their worn, smashed states. Rare old texts suggest these may have been deities, or kings and queens, of the City before it was ruined.

Bone Tomb: One among the numerous Cliff Tombs in the Scarp cliffs northeast of the Lake, this one is an expanded natural cave, cut inside into a more typical tomb for this place. A large, stone sarcophagus is filled with the bones of a great many individuals, all jumbled together. A hidden compartment in its base, accessible only when all the overlying bones have been removed, contains the remains of a single person, still wearing a pair of ornate, ancient, golden arm-bracers, decorated with swooping birds of prey.

Cliff Tombs: Two sections of the lower Oasis Scarp cliffs on the northern side of the central Lake contain substantial numbers of rock-cut burial tombs. These may include, or expand upon, existing caves. More, though less concentrated, tombs, often taking advantage of other small caves in the cliffs, can be found elsewhere, although all are basically similar, in that some are empty, some not, and many are either partly filled with sand, or hidden behind dunes and vegetation. Aside from buried bodies, bones and cremation jars, a few still have some minor treasures, as well as occasional natural or undead creatures lurking inside. Four of the more significant are marked by specific labels, places detailed separately in these notes.

Cold Zaziq: In the southeastern map corner, the smaller of the two Zaziq Pillars there has an aura of perpetual cold around it, poisoned by necrotic energy seeping through from an unidentifiable source. This can reach damaging levels to living creatures here at times. The wind sighs like a creature breathing nearby.

Dagger Tomb: One of the more easterly of the northeastern Cliff Tombs, this has an elaborately-carved outer face on the cliffs, and a group of three tomb chambers within, each containing a sealed stone sarcophagus. Two of these are quite empty, but the third contains a pair of gleaming silver daggers, engraved with ravens.

Devil Zaziq: Towards the upper right map corner, close to the eastern map edge, this Zaziq Pillar often has the wind sighing around it strongly enough to stir-up dust devils, sometimes of stinging fury.

Dune Valley: Immediately south of the Oasis Scarp, and reaching right up to the west side of the Southern Gap in the cliffs, a pair of unusually high, long seif dunes form a deep, shady valley trending southwest-northeast. The dunes run more or less parallel to one another for nearly 3 miles (5 km), and most curiously, their trending direction is quite across the usual northwest-southeast line that virtually all the other dunes in the region prefer. Where the shadows are deepest in mid-valley, just south of the map edge here, is a hollow near the western dune's base, with a scatter of humanoid bones among the sand. If disturbed, these form-up into four web-covered Sandy Skeletons and will attack. Sandy Skeletons are like the typical undead animated creatures of RPGs, but whose bones are covered with a magical armouring of rough desert sand. This makes them much more robust and a lot harder to damage than normal ones. They are armed with scimitars, spears and bows, and their magical spiderweb covering enables them to reform even if completely destroyed or magically de-animated, after a short pause.

Ghûl & Shadow Caves: Along the eastern and northeastern base of the easternmost of The Three Pylons, is a series of small caves. A group of five Ghûls have taken up residence there, while another of the caves has long been the lair of a trio of undead Shadows, that sometimes lurk in the shade of the south side of the Pylons instead. Ghûls look like skeletally-desiccated, mummified humanoids, whose dry skins are hard as,

and the colour of, mahogany, with a roughened, sand-like surface. They are demonic eaters of the dead, not averse to killing the living first. They have other powers much like the more traditional RPG Ghouls, including a paralysis ability to affect the living by scratchy skin contact. While demons, they are classed as undead, albeit ones that will only react to local religious customs and symbols, the more ancient the better.

Ghûl Tombs: In the map's southeast corner, southeast of the Inscribed Zaziq Pillar, and roughly midway between this, the Cold Zaziq and a third Pillar off-map to the south, is a group of up to twenty or so Tombs. Their area extends off-map, confirming that as tales say, they cannot be counted. The tales further relate that one should not try to do so. Anyone ignoring this prohibition will end up confused during the task without ever accomplishing it, and unless guided by someone else not involved in the counting, may simply wander off into the desert to die. An individual Tomb stands like a tall, rounded-top menhir, each fairly near one another in a random pattern. All are roughly 15 ft tall (4.5 m) and about 8 ft in diameter (2.4 m) at the base, tapering slightly towards their tops. They are hollow inside, with a single, round-topped opening at their base, which is typically around 4 ft high at most (1.2 m). Their surfaces are roughened and worn by the desert wind, and they are made from clay, baked over long ages to a concrete-like hardness by the sun. Stories about them often describe them as like great hooded spectres, and they do indeed have such a likeness and an eeriness about them, whether from a distance or closer-to. Set up in the ancient past as tombs for the dead, some still have bones, cremation urns, or canopic jars inside them, the ceramics sometimes finely and colourfully decorated with abstract and linear designs, and an occasional minor object made from precious metals and gems. Ghûls (described in the Ghûl & Shadow Caves notes earlier) lurk in them, ready to pounce on unwary visitors, clinging effortlessly to the higher interior or exterior of the Tombs. One Ghûl here wears old, tattered finery, and stalks in a regal manner, with several golden chains and necklaces. Just one Tomb contains any bones, a pile of long, unusually thin ones. If disturbed, these assemble into a Bone Naga.

Giant Scorpion Cave: While there are various other unmarked caves in the Oasis Scarp cliffs, this one southeast of the Lake and north of the Inscribed Zaziq Pillar, is more substantial, and is the den of a Giant Scorpion. It may not be the only such creature hereabouts.

Giant Sphinx: Close to the northwestern lakeshore, southeast of the Cliff Tombs and southwest of the Jhikuf-Tree Grove, stands a massive carved stone statue of what at first sight seems to be an enormous Sphinx. It is though actually a Lamia in its Lion-Centaur form. It is posed lying with its head raised, arms folded across its chest, resting on its outstretched forelegs, facing directly towards the Lake. While obviously ancient and somewhat worn, it is free from both sand and vegetation, and its facial features are sharp and clear, with a definite, close resemblance to Halak-Sha, for those who have seen her. Nearby are three stone-carved Desert Lions, each lying in a similar pose, facing the Lake, and each on a separate, raised rectangular plinth, two to the Sphinx's northeast, one to its southwest. While much larger than life-sized Lions, these are far smaller than the Sphinx statue, and while seemingly comparably ancient and of identical carving style, the Lions are all much more weathered, although equally free from sand and vegetation.

Halak-Sha's Lair: The Lair of the Lamia, Halak-Sha, who controls much of what happens across the Tableland, is in an ancient rock-cut tomb in the northeastern cliffs of the Oasis Scarp, westernmost of a substantial collection of tombs there. In the nearby Palm Forest vegetation are red, black and white flowers of different types that all give off soporific, scented pollen. While this is more likely to be a problem for those camping in the vicinity, it also makes those passing through this area less alert and more relaxed, often without realising it. There are a few minor ruins in the Forest here too, and the remains of a tattered tent flap lazily, snagged by one such ruined wall. The Lair itself is detailed by a separate Atlas map.

Haunted Ruins: A large tract of the Palm Forest southwest from the south side of the Eastern Gap in the Oasis Scarp, almost as far as the Giant Scorpion Cave in the Scarp cliffs, is characterised by unusually stunted, gnarled, dense vegetation, intermixed with a scatter of mostly sunken building-wall ruins, possibly an outlying part of the old City, or one or more separate, smaller settlements. The whole tract seems subject to a perpetual gloom, despite the often unbroken daytime sunlight, and ethereal spirits can be sighted moving across and through the place, although their forms are hard to define. One of the ruined buildings contains pictographic inscriptions too worn to be read, but which glow faintly in the dark, shedding light like a candle. In another spot, a heavy, life-sized, Human statue lies face-down in the sand and undergrowth. Weatherworn, the face side remains in fair condition, and still has a pair of black onyxes for eyes.

Haunted Tomb: One of the larger, more elaborate rock-cut tombs in the Scarp cliffs northwest of Bakhaarka Lake has rows of bone-filled niches in its walls inside. Spectral people blink in and out of existence at times in and near it outside in the Palm Forest, sometimes with strange, mournful sounds, and occasional soft, faint chiming that lasts a few minutes each time.

Inscribed Zaziq: Largest of the on-map Zaziq Pillars, this is towards the lower right map-corner. All around the base, where the main pillar begins rising from its surrounding lower rocky hilltop, is a series of anciently-carved pictographic texts. Despite being age-worn, they can still be read with little difficulty, and if translated encompass simple, repeated phrases of death, doom, and damnation. If read here, a light rain of tiny, insubstantial motes of darkness floats down like dust, the motes vanishing when they touch a living creature.

Jhikuf-Tree Grove: Among the Palm Forest trees and vegetation on the Lake's northwestern side, near the Cliff Tombs there and the Giant Sphinx statue, is an extensive area where many of these once-sacred fruit trees still predominate. The Jhikuf bears orange-sized, dark blue fruits regularly all year, which have mild healing properties when fresh. This power fades about half a day after picking, although the fruit remains tasty and nutritious for up to a week, even in desert conditions. They can also be dried and still retain this edibility (only) for some months. Towards the cliffs, hidden and overgrown are the remains of a once-tall stone tower, lying as if it had fallen from the cliffs in some earlier epoch. The cliffs nearest its probable base show no sign there was ever anything built there, although they have obviously crumbled away over time in places too.

Lost Ziqqurat: Towards the Oasis Scarp cliffs on the western side of Lake Bakhaarka, half buried in sand and heavily overgrown by Pine Forest vegetation, are the remains of this ancient Ziqqurat. An obvious entrance tunnel into its base on its southeast-facing side is partly blocked with drifted sand, and a short way inside it has completely collapsed. However, on the surviving tunnel walls, traces of low-relief sculpted Snakefolk can be made out still. If excavated, there are better-preserved examples hidden below the sand and rubble.

Marked Route: The tips of two lines of well-spaced, tall, ancient stone markers, some of which lie buried in drifted sand now, show the alignment of an old west to east side route from the southern approach road, just southeast of the Southern Gap in the outer Oasis Scarp. The roads themselves are deeply buried by sand. The markers lead about half a mile (0.75 km) east to the western base of the Inscribed Zaziq Pillar, where there is an old tunnel cut into the rock. Around 40 ft inside (12 m), the tunnel is blocked by a collapse that has formed a small cave. This is now a nest of vipers.

Mirage Zaziq: In the map's lower left corner, most of this Zaziq Pillar is shown. From its just-off-map western base, a persistent mirage of a false oasis far to the west on the Tableland is commonly seen, shimmering as if magical, or in a haze. While most frequently sighted closer to the Pillar, it can be seen sometimes from the dune-hills nearby too, especially when following a direct line towards it.

Obelisk Hill: The hill on the north side of the Scarp's Eastern Gap, a little southwest of Devil Zaziq, has an oval ring of vaguely triangular obelisks on its top, long-axis aligned southeast-northwest. In the ring's centre is a deep shaft leading down to a cavern far below, containing a small lake. The surface stones could be an ancient observatory. They are black, unlike the local sandstone rocks, ancient and weatherworn, yet are never buried by the sand, nor has the shaft been blocked or the lake filled-in with drifted sand.

Old Town Ruins: Northeast along the lakeshore from the Lost Ziqqurat in the western Oasis, lie the scattered remains of a roughly town-sized settlement, buried in sand and half-overgrown with vegetation. Pits and crevices formed by the buried wall-lines in places create quicksand-like conditions that can suck people down rapidly, notably in the more open, flatter parts, where the vegetation is much less.

Second Camel Zaziq: The Three Camel Zaziq Pillars on the Tableland (only a small part of the base of this one is on the western map edge), are a trio lying on a loosely southwest-northeast alignment, west and northwest of the Oasis. They each have one feature in common. Each has the desiccated corpse of a camel at its foot, tied securely to some part of the Pillar's base by its reins. This middle one has its camel body tied to a low rock spike on the Zaziq's western, off-map, side. The barriers between the Living and Dead Planes are weak here, but the influence is too weak to animate the body; merely enough to make it quiver and judder at times, when there is no wind. Light sources - even sunlight - always seem dimmer here than elsewhere, including magical types, and in gloomier conditions, rare minor undead Shadows may manifest briefly.

Third Camel Zaziq: This is the northernmost of the Three Camel Pillars. The stone of its basal outcrops, and the Pillar itself, contain many massive Nautiloid shell fossils. A hole worn through the thinnest central section of one of these great fossils at the Pillar's southwestern base has been used to tie this camel's reins through.

Thornbush Hills: An area of dunes in the southwestern map corner, extending off it, is notable for the woodland-dense clusters of tough, thorny bushes that block the valleys between them for all but the smallest travellers, forcing most onto the higher slopes and crests, or into the southwestern end of the Dune Valley.