

THE EXPLORERS JOURNAL

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global awareness

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JOYCE MORGAN & CONRAD WALTERS


Sir Aurel Stein and the oldest book in the world

BERTRAND PICCARD

solar-powered flight and sustainability

LEROY CHIAO

traveling by smoke in Papua New Guinea

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editor's note

GREATER GLOBAL AWARENESS

This edition of THE EXPLORERS JOURNAL we take you on a truly global adventure with our authors collectively having set foot on each of the seven continents.

Mikael Strandberg shares his recent experience traveling through the deserts of what he calls "the other Yemen," a place, he says, that could not be more different than the war-torn nation we hear about so much in the media. Halfway around the world, astronaut Leroy Chiao communes with elders in Papua New Guinea, who also "journey into the heavens" via the smoke emitted by fire. And through the artful eyes of Rosemarie and Pat Keough, we glimpse the beauty that remains within the Inside Passage.

Sydney-based journalists Joyce Morgan and Conrad Walters spent the better part of five years following in the footsteps of early twentieth-century Hungarian adventurer Sir Aurel Stein, who, during his travels through Central Asia, brought to light a copy of the *Diamond Sutra*. Found in a cave at Dunhuang and dated to A.D. 868, the manuscript is the oldest known printed book in the world.

We also hear firsthand from Bertrand Piccard, who, with André Borschberg, just completed an intercontinental journey between Switzerland and Morocco in *Solar Impulse*, the world's first solar-powered airplane. Not only did the craft accomplish a number of important firsts for aviation, it highlighted the potential we have for building a future no longer dependent on fossil fuel. Piccard will be returning Explorers Club Flag #50, which made the history-making flights, at this year's Lowell Thomas Awards Dinner on October 13. In further celebration of the event, we toast the accomplishments of 2012 Lowell Thomas Award honorees Scott Wallace, William Thomas, and David Hempleman-Adams this issue.

Passports, please!

ANGELA M.H. SCHUSTER, Editor-in-Chief



ANGELA M.H. SCHUSTER VISITS WITH
WEAVERS NEAR TAN-TAN, MOROCCO.
PHOTOGRAPH BY CARL G. SCHUSTER.

ACROSS THE SANDS OF TIME

by MIKAEL STRANDBERG

Mikael Strandberg, FI'03, has cycled more than 90,000 kilometers over the past seven-and-a-half years. He has explored Patagonia by horse, lived with the Maasai in East Africa, and spent a year in Kolyma, Siberia, the coldest inhabited place on Earth, where he traveled by canoe and skis. He has written seven books and produced three documentaries. He is currently working on a film about his experiences in Yemen.

DESERT HEAT

Temperatures soar to an oppressive 50°C (122°F) during the day in the desert of Al Mahra. Travel on foot here was only possible at dawn and at dusk. Photograph by Mikael Strandberg and Tanya Holm.





"I have to get out of this heat!" Tanya cried out. "I can't stand it. I will die out here!"

It was nearly 11:00 A.M. and already my thermometer was reading 50°C (122°F). Our throats were sore and dry and we were sweating profusely even though we were sitting dead still in the shadow of a blanket we had strung between two thornbushes near the Bedu settlement of Marayt. It would only continue to get warmer by the hour until 3:00 P.M. and I knew from experience that if we didn't drink 1.5 liters of water per hour during the hottest hours, cramps, sunstroke, and a gruesome death was sure to follow. Unfortunately, it took us 20 minutes of hard labor just to get a single liter of clean water to drink. Beyond thirst, the blinding sunlight was beginning to take its toll, particularly on Tanya. And considering the brain ceases to function at around 45°C, it was almost impossible to think clearly, much less focus on the journey ahead.

Sometime after 4:00 P.M., the temperature would drop to a near tolerable 38°C (100.4°F), at which point we would press on.

It was June 9, and it had been three days since we began our trek in Al Ghaydah in southeastern Yemen, accompanied by my friend Mohammed, our guide Mabkhout (for whom this extreme heat was a natural part of life), and Kensington, our newly acquired camel.

We had brought with us some 40 kilograms of supplies, including computers, cameras, and a GPS. Mabkhout carried nothing but his Kalashnikov. Astonished by the amount of baggage we were carrying, he begged us to ditch

the tent, which we argued was necessary to protect our equipment. In hope of impressing him with the wonders of modern technology, I brought out the GPS and explained how it worked and that it could tell us within a meter just where we were on the planet at any given moment. Mabkhout looked at me quizzically and asked, "Can it tell us where we can find water or forage for the camel?"

Surprised by his question, I shook my head no. He then said, "So what good is it?"

Thus began a series of interesting exchanges we would have with the Bedu during our foray into the desert.

This expedition was the second in my quest to traverse Yemen by camel, an effort that had begun in December 2011. At that time everyone thought I was out of my mind to embark on a trek through a war-torn country. Nonetheless, I traveled some 350 kilometers from Zabid to Sana'a. I was neither killed nor kidnapped. Instead, my travels were enabled by the generous, hospitable, and charismatic Yemenis I encountered.

My hope for this expedition is to cross the sands of Al Mahra, one of the hottest places in the world, during the summer and, in the process, document the life of the local Bedu, whose ancestors were among the first inhabitants of the Arabian Peninsula, settling here 8,000 years ago. Although these desert dwellers have mastered the art of living in one of the most extreme environments on Earth, as is the case with so many tribal peoples, their age-old ways are slowly yielding to the demands of the modern world.

My hope during this journey is to experience what is left of their ancient way of life—as witnessed by Bertram Thomas and Wilfred Thesiger in the mid-twentieth century—before it vanishes forever. Moreover, I want to do what I can to share with the world what I know from my previous expeditions of the real Yemen, which stands in sharp contrast to the country's media image—particularly in the wake of the Arab Spring—as a land of quarreling tribes and a haven for Al Qaeda operatives.

Given the risks of oppressive heat and civil unrest, fomented in part by Al Qaeda, I found it almost impossible to recruit fellow travelers for this expedition save for one, Tanya Holm, an intrepid Swedish journalist based in Sana'a who has a profound knowledge of Yemen and is fluent in Arabic.

Over the course of three weeks, we would walk 350 kilometers through numerous meandering *wadis* (ancient river valleys, long since dry) from Al Ghaydah to Rumah in the Hadramaut, in the company of a camel, possibly two, to carry our supplies and a local guide—of which we would have three—to navigate the complex socio-political landscape through which we would be traveling. We planned to cover 25 kilometers a day, walking from 4:00 A.M. until it became unbearably hot around 8:30, and then again from 4:00 P.M. until just after sunset, around 6:30.

Just before reaching Marayt, it was clear that Mohammed was beginning to succumb to heat, exhibiting the symptoms of sunstroke. He chose to remain in the settlement to recover rather than continuing on. Mohammed, like our guide, was a member of the Kel Shat tribe. Both were wary of crossing into rival tribal territory that lay ahead. Mabkhout agreed to accompany us until we reached the next settlement, Al Dabin, several days later.

The terrain from our starting point at Al Ghaydah had been largely flat and featureless. As we approached Al Dabin, however, the landscape became far more rugged once we entered a small canyon.

It took us three days to reach Al Dabin and upon our arrival, Mabkhout dared not continue. He had set us up, however, with the most revered guide in all of Al Mahra, Sheikh Saleem Ambe Somota Al Mahari. Unfortunately, he would not be joining us until we crossed yet another tribal area. A young man named Mohammed agreed to guide us until we met up with Sheikh Saleem.

After three days, Sheikh Saleem turned up and we bid Mohammed farewell.

Sheikh Saleem was among the last to be

involved in the big caravans that used to ply their trade from Al Ghaydah to Rumah, our chosen route, and he recounted the days of caravan travel:

"It took us 20 days. It consisted of 100 camels and 50 men. Half of us rode, the other half walked. This was part of the old frankincense route, but in the last years we carried food, fish oil, and salt. It stopped the day the car arrived."

Together we passed through the most beautiful parts of Wadi Kudyut and Wadi Mahrit, encountering numerous nomadic settlements. We eventually made it to a small settlement called Al Arabah. At that point, our trek became far more demanding with extreme heat, rugged terrain, long distances between water sources, heavy loads for Kensington, and our need to cover more ground by walking longer hours and distances.

After 21 days in the desert, we finally reached Rumah, where we were immediately stopped by the police. We returned to Al Ghaydah by bus the following day. Just before we left, we gave our formidable Kensington to Sheikh Saleem as a gift.

Throughout the journey we came to rely on the generous hospitality of numerous Bedu whose settlements and camps dotted our route. While maps of the region tend to show it as a land devoid of human activity, we found that Al Mahra was anything but empty; we encountered small settlements or nomadic camps every 30 kilometers or so.

Once villagers spotted us, male Bedu would inevitably turn up for tea and conversation, and perhaps to observe the foreigners who chose to travel in such an antiquated manner. At times we and the Bedu had problems agreeing on the simplest things of life. How to arrange the saddle and the equipment, how far we should walk between rest stops, how much food we should have, and even where to urinate.

We were aware that our every move was watched. If I walked away to take care of business, I was often followed so that they could see what I was doing.



And then there were the questions, which, no matter what time of the day or how tired we were, were always the same:

Are you Muslims?

Why don't you travel by car?

Do you marry as Muslims?

How many wives and children do you have?

Are you rich?

The Bedu saw themselves as the chosen people and they therefore did not care much for the ways of the outside world. And it did not occur to them that there could be other ways of doing things than those to which they were accustomed. By adapting to their ways, we began to fully appreciate this harsh and sparse environment and the people who are part of it.

The days of camel travel in Al Mahra are largely over due to the introduction of the cars and buses, and all manner of conveniences such as washing machines and satellite telephones and televisions have entered the Bedu world. However, for most of the Bedu we met on this trip, their way of life is still demanding and hard, particularly for the women.

Beautifully attired in colorful dresses, jewelry, and stunning facial decorations, most of the women didn't cover their faces—eschewing the full black *abbayya* and *niqab*, which is common in the cities—and for the first time in Yemen, they actually spoke with me.

Given that it was in the middle of the hottest season of the year, most of the men moved around slowly, lazing about in the shade. The women, however, labored away in the heat, cooking, feeding goats, and taking care of children. When they did have some free time, they would share with Tanya their bodily pains. She often provided relief through a thorough massage. One day, when Tanya expressed her happiness by saying to a group of Bedu surrounding us, I want to live for 3,000 years, they thought she was mad and objected noisily:

"Thirty years is enough!"

Tanya even worked on the muscles of our guides. I was largely unaware of this until well into the trip as the guides—who rarely

engaged in exercise—didn't want to appear weak. When they began to tire they would tell me, "The woman is tired. I think we need to rest." When I would tell them not to worry, that she is fine, they would go back to Tanya, whine about me, wait half an hour or so, and then come back and say, "The camel is tired. I think we need to rest."

Difficult as our journey was at times, it would not have been possible without the support and friendship of Sheikh Saleem, who showed us the overwhelmingly positive aspects of these proud and strong people. At times, no matter how tired he was, he would talk away around the campfire until it was time for us to get up for the first prayer at 4:00 A.M. and start walking. When I asked him what they had discussed, he said mostly the old days and the oddities of seeing foreigners traveling by camel.

At some point I asked Sheikh Saleem if other foreigners had passed through this region on camel. He replied, "Yes, there was another Englishman on camel and his Bedu guides who passed here not too long ago."

"Really?" I said, "When?"

"Well, I think maybe thirty years ago."

It was probably Wilfred Thesiger and his Rashid guides in 1947 or even Bertram Thomas, a year before. Both wrote about the loyalty, good humor, infinite patience, and especially the generosity encountered in those days. This hasn't changed. No matter where we turned up, whether a settlement or a nomadic camp, the Bedu would always offer water and food, not only for us but for Kensington, for which they would not accept a penny.

As for Al Qaeda, we did hear about them when we arrived in Rumah. People told us they were in town, but assured us they were neither a problem nor dangerous. As it turned out, they were members of a family originating from a village called Al Qaeda.

Perhaps the most valuable lesson we learned was, "A guest fed in one's own tent today may be the one who can provide food tomorrow." 