

# Expedition Yemen By Camel

*Report for Flag 179*

*By*

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*Tanya Holm and Mikael Strandberg together with Kensington The Camel in the Sands of Al Mahra, Yemen, June 2012 carrying Flag 179.*

**Dear Explorers and readers,**

I have just come back from the heat and freedom of the Sands of Al Mahra, one of the hottest deserts in the world. I am slowly adjusting to the daily family life in quite boring and predictable Sweden. My wife Pamela and myself, and our 2 year old daughter, is expecting another daughter to turn up any day. Which means another adventure is coming up soon, thank God!

This past Expedition was really two parts, or even three and four parts, because just before the Arab Spring hit Yemen I was set to do a long camel Expedition over 2 years through the Arab World. This was the major reason I went to Yemen the first time back in the year of

2009. The idea was to learn Arabic, but instead I met my American wife Pamela there and today we have a daughter named in honour of the great queen of Yemen, Bilquis or Queen of Sheba as we in the West call her. I fell in love with Yemen. And the camel idea never left me and when Yemen hit the global news during the Arab Spring with its internal war and the negative links with the terror organisation we call Al Qaeda, I wanted to show another side of this great country. So I decided to do my Camel Expedition. It became a 2-part one!

Yemen is such a treasure in many ways. I just feel very much alive and inspired in this extra ordinary country. I have visited 125 countries today during my 25 years of exploring professionally and Yemen is a gem among them. Even though they're facing many problems right now with instability, a country continuously at the brink of a civil war, security issues, poverty, big economical gaps between people, lack of proper education, possibly a growing network of terrorism, hunger and unemployment, **STILL**, travelling in Yemen is discovery at its best!

So, once again, it feels like I have returned home having discovered a treasure, but I fear that my positive reports from this ancient country won't do much to put a dent in the negative news shooting out daily from the global and sensationalist media!

However, even though there was a war taking place on the first trip and that there appear to have been a possible kidnapping threat during the second journey, I feel I pretty much accomplished most things I set out to do. But not all!



*The greatest of Al Mahra Bedus, Sheikh Saleem Hamid Ambe Somota Al Mahri filling up Kensington the Camel with water. Gravel and small pebbles was a bother for me who walked in sandals.*

**The objectives of the expedition before leaving Sweden where as follows:**

*My idea was this as of March 2012:*

I want to cross the most interesting and beautiful country on earth, Yemen, from the west to the east by camel. A journey starting in Al Hudaydah and ending at the Omani border. It is 1300 kilometres consisting of very demanding and extreme nature, through one of the hottest deserts on earth, Rub Al-Khali (And the Sands of Al Mahra) and through mountains over 3600 metres. I will travel in local dress, for comfort and to show my deep respect for the country, together with a Yemeni who speaks English.

Through this Expedition I want to try to explain, in a simple easy way, the world of the Arabs, Islam, Muslims and the Middle East. There's no better place in the Middle east to do this than the oldest Arab country of them all, Yemen.

This I will do by crossing this geographically rich country from West to East by meeting ordinary Yemenis and documenting their daily lives. I can say, after having spent half a year in this extra ordinary country 2009 plus that I have spent the last 25 years visiting more than 120 countries, that Yemen is one of the most fantastic countries on earth, both visually and challenging. And with the most passionate people I have ever come across. I also want this fact to become known to the rest of the world!

It will be a positive, educating, culturally bridge building, raw, simple and inspiring story which will make us all more open, understanding, and lively and integrated!

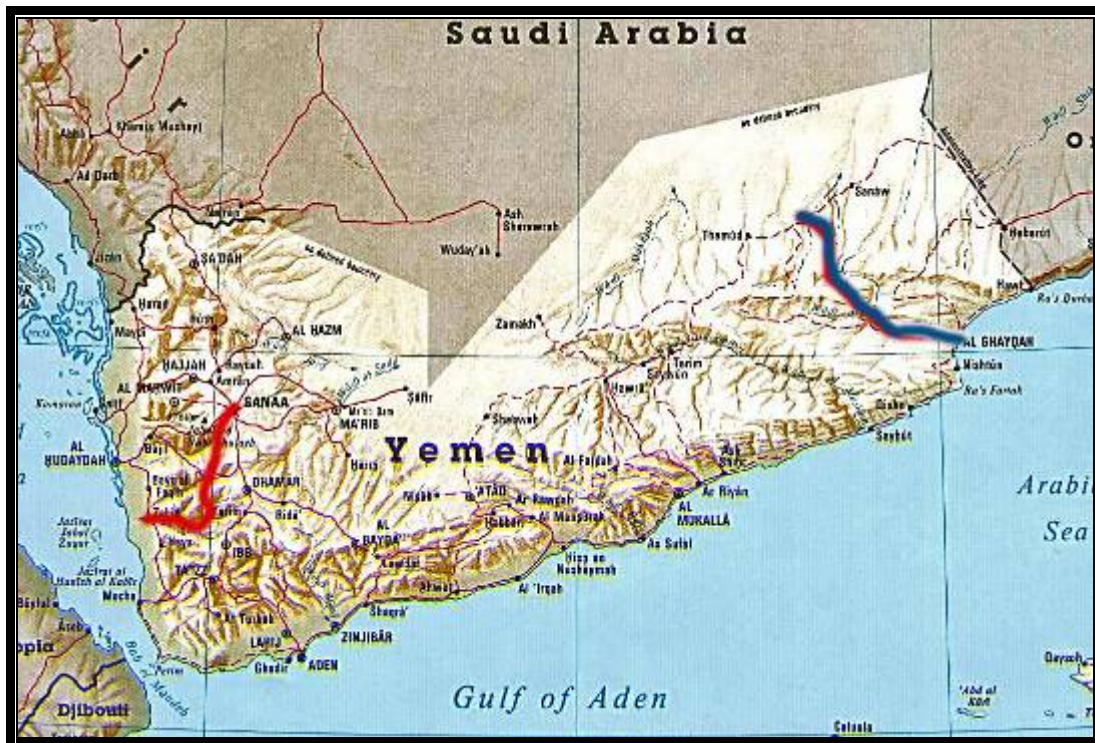


*My good friend Mauna Adams draped in Flag 179 with Old Sanaa in the background.*

### **Short summary of the Expedition:**

We are really talking two separate Expeditions. But all together 700 km during two months of actual travel, but I spent 6 months in the country.

The first Expedition took place from Zabid to Sanaa, 350 km:s accomplished in December 2011 during the war, a time when loud and scary mortars hit our neighbourhood near Tahrir Square the day I left the capital together with a friend, Amin Gazzim. Even though it was virtually impossible to get out of the capital due to all armed road blocks belonging to three different fighting fractions, we did just that and took all the back roads through the mountains that existed to avoid detection before ending up in Zabid not far off the Red Sea Coast. I immediately bought a camel called Antar and with him came the handler who sold him to me, Ali Hassan Hussein from Tihama. (*He would later buy it back from me in Sanaa*) Together we walked through deep valleys, *wadis*, over 2500 meter high mountain passes in baking heat, we passed many tribal communities, had a kidnapping threat over us from the Bani Salaam (Anis) and arrived to a mighty crowd in the Old City of Sanaa and its famous gate, Bab Al Yemen.



*The red line shows the first expedition from Zabid to Sanaa in December 2012. The red-blue line shows to crossing of the Sands of Al Mahra from Al Ghaydah to Rumah in Hadramahwt in June 2012.*

The second Expedition, for which I carried Flag 179, was a crossing of one of the hottest deserts on earth, the Sands of Al Mahra, made famous by the British explorers Wilfried Thesiger and Betram Thomas back in the years of 1946-47. It was deemed impossible and extremely dangerous and I got little help getting it onboard in Yemen. Everyone thought that we, that is Tanya Holm, a Swedish writer and Arabic speaker and me and four different Bedu guides, would get either kidnapped or killed by Al Qaeda. Just a week after arriving to Sanaa, I was far to close to the suicide bomber which killed almost a 100 people and injured far more. People were terrified. However, we managed to get the needed permits and set off to Al Mahra, presently the most stable of Yemen's states.

Once in Al Mahra on a permit which only allowed us to fly, we did a summer crossing of this amazing desert, which basically meant 50 degrees Celsius (*122 degrees Fahrenheit*) heat during the hottest hours between 11-15.00 hours every day. But it should be noted that even

the nights were extremely hot at ground level. Maybe the temperature was 30 (86 *Fahrenheit*) standing up, but lying down, the hot sand added it up to 35 degrees Celsius (95 *Fahrenheit*) at mid night. It made it difficult to sleep. But, the heat problem taken into account, by crossing this desert we came across a Bedu culture which was relatively unknown today, but fascinating!

For me, this was one of the best and most important Expeditions I have done!



*Tribal men and warriors from the Bakil tribe in Yemen during a 2 day court case as regards to a murder that the tribes deal with themselves. The accused killer came from the Hashid tribe.*

### **Accomplishments:**

**-Let me first say that a full crossing of Yemen is pretty much impossible at the moment and have been for quite awhile.** The reason for this is that most of Yemen is based on a very tribal community and for every state or region one would like to pass through, you need to get the permission and backing of the leading tribal chief, *sheikh*. And during my last time in Yemen, none of them could ensure full protection, *sayyara*. They based their reasons on the after affects of the Arab Spring. By which I mean the loss of control for the tribes to either what we call Al Qaeda, Ansar Al Sharia and/or other terrorist networks or to their own youngsters who doesn't care too much about the tribal values anymore but have their own agenda.

So the chance of getting kidnapped and held for ransom exists. But this isn't the only concern as regards to doing any travel in Yemen, because since the arrival of the Arab spring there's serious political instability in the country and it is still on the brink of a possible civil war.

According to the government, it is therefore impossible to travel outside Sanaa, Aden and a few other places. I still did it and these two Expeditions should therefore be seen through this reality, **so even if I couldn't cross the entire country as the plan was, just being able to travel at all the way we did is quite an accomplishment!**



*Tanya preparing the vital Camelbak for the afternoon trek.*

**- I also wanted to travel through one of the hottest deserts at the hottest time of the year to see how the body would react to this.** I have crossed quite a few of the deserts of our world, but almost all during times of the year, when things have become far easier once the sun sets. The difference in summer is that even if the heat gets bearable after 4 -it starts getting unbearably hot already at 7.30 a.m.- the ground temperature at midnight is about 4-5 degrees hotter than it is one and a half meter higher standing up. So sleeping wasn't easy.

Midday temperatures went up to 50 degrees Celsius (*122 degrees Fahrenheit*) and at those times our throats became sore, dry and hurting. Sweat was pouring down the body even when we were sitting dead still under the makeshift shadow we had created by hanging a blanket between two thorn trees. The time was around 11. It would just get hotter by the hour up until 3 p.m. when it would start cooling down enough for us to feel alive. I knew from experience, if we don't drink 1,5 litres per hour during the hottest hours, cramps, sunstroke and a gruesome death would eventually follow. But to be able to get drinkable water, we had to pump whatever water we picked up through a filter to be sure we wouldn't get ill. It took us 20 minutes of hard work to get a clean litre to drink. Worst of all, however, was the strong sunlight. It was especially hurting Tanya's eyes and I knew that it was strong enough to permanently cause blindness if we didn't take care. Even though I had taped her sunglasses early in the morning to avoid sunlight to bounce off the sand into her sore eyes whilst walking, her eyes were terribly red and watery. This was another reason that walking was out

of question between 8 a.m. and 4 p.m. In an hour we would have problems just breathing, it would be impossible to think and good decision-making was out of the question.

Finding grazing and water, for both camel and humans, is of course, much harder and you need to come across people to survive almost daily.

And as for the locals, there's nothing genetically they have developed to how they handle the heat all seasons, it is just adaptation over time and they seemed to suffer at least as much as we did, who came to the region physically trained, which very few of them are today in these times of the car.

We kept to my original plan, meaning getting up at 4 every morning, keeping the camel light, walking really hard for 2-3 hours depending on how fast we could get going, averaging 5-6 km:s per hour, I carried around 15 kg:s on both trips, and then we did 2-3 hours after 4 p.m. No rest whilst walking. A schedule and idea which made it extremely demanding for our guides, since they were not used to either speed or no rest. We carried 2 litres of water in the morning and the same amount in the evening, so we drank 4 litres whilst walking. Or sipped through a Camelbak, a modern invention which made a great difference, which was packed in our backpacks. In total we drank about 6 litres per day in average. The camel, Kensington, adapted quickly and not once did he seem tired. But he got adequate food and water every day.



*Arriving at one of the settlements not marked on any map.*

**-We realized that there's no modern maps marking all the new settlements along the route we choose.** So, with the help of the GPS we have marked every permanent settlement in these areas and valleys which are much more populated than any map makes you believe. Basically we found unmarked settlements in the following areas:

*Wadi Shaimut, Wadi Al Jiz, Marayt Springs, Wadi Kidyut, Ar Rahab, Wadi Da, Ayn Al Mifal, Wadi Mahrat, Wadi Dubbrayi, Wadi Tumayr and Wadi Armah*

**-I have written over 100 reports and articles on the subject of Yemen, I have more than 100 hours of interviews with Yemenis from all walks of life and I have spent a lot of time during the last 5 years in the Arab World.** My aim has been to try to give a perspective on this country, and the Arab World, and make an effort to explain what they're made up of. Especially Yemen, the oldest country of them all. Unfortunately, when reading about Yemen in global media today, it is all misery. The main themes are the war on terror, poverty, Al Qaeda, internal strife, a country of lazy *qat* chewers, injustice, hunger, religious extremism, tribalism of the worst kind and kidnappings. All this does exist, but it is overwhelmed by all the positive aspects. According to me, the tribes are doing their very best to do their part to keep the country together, the Yemenis are a very generous and welcoming people, they're the most moderate of Islamic countries I have visited and fundamentalism is hard to come across. I think if Yemen gets their act together, eventually, because it is a long hard road ahead, they will be a positive role model for the rest of the Arab world. The Arab Way, not the Western one. Because one of the most important lessons I have picked up during these years is that they have to find their own way, not the Western solution to what we think is right or wrong.



*Drinking sweet and milky tea, chai, with a local Bedu Sheikh belonging to the Bani Khawar.*

**-As with Yemen, the story about the Bedouin comes across as very negative in most media.** As a people they're spread all over the Middle East and North Africa and there's no doubt that their lives has changed dramatically the last years and the integration with modern society has been difficult. Unemployment and illiteracy is a major problem, but compared to their kindred in Jordan, Israel and Egypt for example, the Al Mahra Bedu is doing better. And compared to the rest of Yemen, Al Mahra is still free from most of the other problems



affecting the rest of the country. In reality, in culture and living, they more belong to the Gulf countries, where quite a few of them are living and are employed today, so their standard of living is generally *-in the settlements-* better than the rest of Yemen. Most of them see themselves as part of the Gulf countries, especially Oman, since the region of Al Mahra spreads into this country as well. I spent three weeks in the Omani region of Al Mahra back in 2008 and I see very little difference from the Yemeni Al Mahra Bedu.

There's also no doubt that there's a long time since any foreigner passed through this area by camel. According to a few reliable sources we travelled together with and met, the last where probably Wilfried Thesiger and his Rashid guides in the year of 1947. Or possibly even Bertram Thomas, who passed a year earlier. Both wrote about the loyalty, good humour, infinite patience and especially the generosity encountered in those days. That hasn't changed. No matter where we turned up, whether a settlement or a Nomadic camp, the Bedu would always supply us with the scarce water and food for Kensington. And us. They never charged us a penny.

So I am happy to report that the Yemeni Al Mahra Bedu still seem to keep to their traditional way of thinking, with putting their camels, their land, families and culture first. We have documented their present life in this area of the Sands of Al Mahra well with long interviews, photos and film.

But, of course cars, satellites, TV, freezers have made their way in and even in the most isolated areas we visited; they had education for their young one's. It wasn't a government initiative, but all parents in these outlying camps, put money together to bring a teacher, often from Hadramawht, to educate their youngsters. And there were more settlements than the maps we had showed, but it was also far more Nomadic camps, where they tended camels and goats, than expected.



*Antar, my first camel whilst travelling from Zabid to Sanaa, was a strong and calm camel, but was handled by his Tihama owner Ali Hassan Hussein by the use of this evil nose peg, which had ripped his nostrils in two parts. I never saw the Bedus use this. Ali Hassan treated Antar generally well.*

**-The future of the camel in Al Mahra is bright!** Until I met the Al Mahra Bedu I have had quite a lot of really bad experiences with other camel people on earth, treating their camels way to hard. But the Al Mahra Bedus genuinely respect their camels. When two Bedu meet they rub their noses against each other as a respectful greeting. The same applies when greeting a camel. I never saw a Bedu treat a camel bad. However the days of camel travel in Al Mahra is over. One of the last to be involved in the big caravans that used to ply their trade from Al Ghaydah to Rumah, our chosen route, was our final guide Sheikh Saleem Ambe Somota Al Mahari. He told us that it took 20 days to do that stretch and the caravan consisted of a hundred camels and fifty men. Half of them rode, the other half walked. This was part of the old frankincense route, but in the last years they carried food, fish oil and salt. It stopped the same day the car arrived.

Prices for a good camel in this area is around 2500 US dollars. It is higher than in the rest of Yemen, but Kensington was worth every cent of it! At the end of the trip we left Kensington as a gift to Sheikh Saleem. We couldn't have left him to a better human being!

**-Most important of all, however, is the fact that after this time in Yemen,** I feel a lot of hope for the future! Not only is it one of the most colourful, exciting, vivid and dramatic countries on earth, never a boring second here, but the Yemenis are also one of the most hospitable and generous people I have ever come across. So, I set out to prove the global media wrong and it turns out I was right!



**Members of the Expeditions:**

***Zabid-Sanaa December 2011***

Mikael Strandberg, Sweden  
Amin Gazzim, Ibb, Yemen  
Ali Hassan Hussein, Tihama Yemen  
The Camel Antar

***Al Ghaydah-Rumah June 2012***

Mikael Strandberg, Sweden  
Tanya Holm, Sanaa and Stockholm, Yemen and Sweden  
Sheikh Saleem Ambe Somota Al Mahari, Yemen  
Mabkhout Saleem Kelshat Al Mahri, Yemen  
Mohammed Oman, Yemen  
Mohammed Saaed Mohammed Saleem Solot Kelshat, Yemen  
Kensington the Camel



*Receiving Flag 179 in Malmö together with my daughter Eva Belquis May 2012.*