

Arabia

A Journey Through the Heart of the Middle East

Levison Wood



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Walking the Nile

Walking the Himalayas

Walking the Americas

Eastern Horizons

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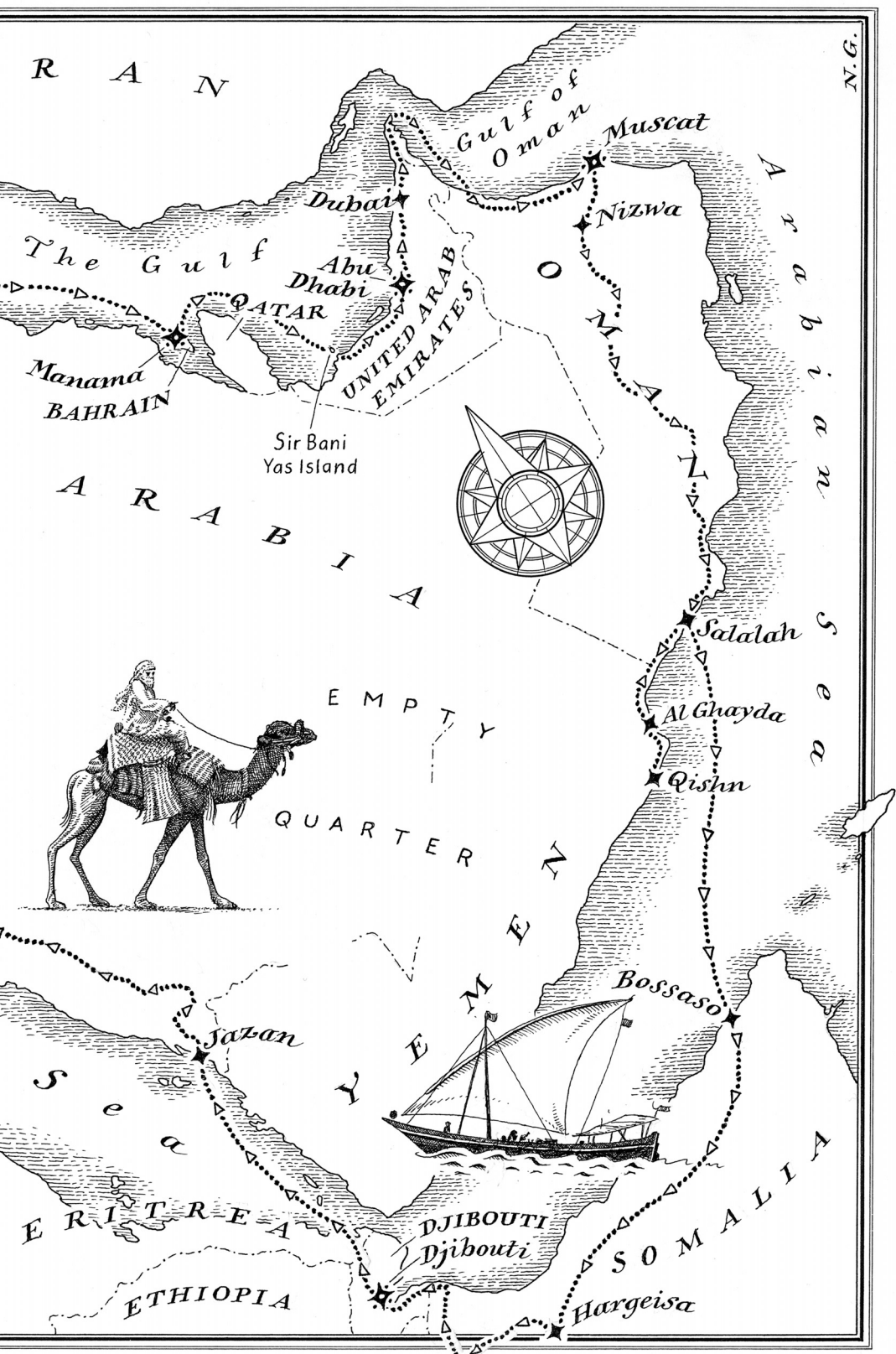
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In memory of Alex Coutselos





N.G.

For me, exploration was a personal venture. I did not go to the Arabian desert to collect plants nor to make a map; such things were incidental . . . I went there to find peace in the hardship of desert travel and the company of desert peoples . . . To others my journey would have little importance. It would produce nothing except a rather inaccurate map which no one was ever likely to use. It was a personal experience, and the reward had been a drink of clean, nearly tasteless water. I was content with that.

Wilfred Thesiger, *Arabian Sands*

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The Call to Prayer

*When you sleep in a house your thoughts are as high as the ceiling,
when you sleep outside they are as high as the stars.*

Bedouin proverb

Most people old enough can remember where they were on that tragic day in September 2001. Personally, I was on a long-distance coach taking the cheapest road home from Poland, unable to afford a flight after several months travelling on my very first solo journey at the age of nineteen. I was heading back to England, eager to begin reading history at the university of Nottingham the following week, and I finally felt ready, having travelled all over Africa, Asia and Europe as a backpacker.

I was young, enthusiastic and had a great deal of faith in the kindness of strangers. After five months vagabonding, I had it all worked out; I was on the verge of becoming a hippy, with long hair and fisherman's pants that made me look like a poster boy for a cliché gap-year holiday. I was full of joy and couldn't wait to spend the next three years making new friends, drinking and maybe even learning something new.

The news came over the bus speakers as we drove along the autobahn somewhere near the Dutch border. It was a bulletin that interrupted the German radio station's incessant blaring of 1990s techno music. My school days' German language came in

handy as I could just about translate the mumbled reports from New York. The news echoed through the coach and the other passengers began shaking their heads in unison. As the bus transited through the Netherlands and into Belgium the true horrors of the day began to unfold.

I'll never forget the silence on the ferry across the English Channel as returning tourists stared in shock at the television screens, watching on loop as the twin towers came crashing down. Every newspaper shared the same image. Everyone knew that things would never be the same again. A new inter-civilisational war was about to commence and its initiators were lined up on our screens for all to see: dark-eyed, sinister-looking Arabs, intent on the destruction of Western civilisation. They were the perfect enemy.

Of course, there had already been the Gulf War in 1990–1, the Iran–Iraq war before that, and both Afghanistan and Iran were ruled by psychotic religious zealots. In Saudi Arabia they enjoyed chopping hands and heads off, and Beirut was a byword for bombs. But terrorists aside, the stereotype of an Arab was either a shepherd riding a camel across a desert, or a wealthy sheikh dripping in gold, hiding his hawkish face behind a pair of oversized designer sunglasses.

Whatever we thought of Arabs in their own lands, in general it didn't affect our perception of the dishdashi-wearing shopkeepers we would occasionally say hello to on the Edgware Road or Atlantic Avenue. Before 9/11, Muslims had existed in relatively peaceful anonymity in the United States and Europe, but as soon as George W. Bush announced the West's 'War on Terror', a long shadow was cast across the entire region and all of its expatriates.

Much has been said about the rights and wrongs of the Second Iraq War and many people blame it for the ills of the

early twenty-first century. It seems to have defined a generation – my generation – in a way that is usually the case for much larger conflicts. By military standards, the Iraq war was a minor skirmish. Lasting only a month, it was really an artillery bombardment followed by a swift *coup d'état*. The war, at least from the American and British perspective, was effective, rapid and, at that time, apparently justified. Casualties were limited to only those military targets that resisted, and the city of Baghdad was left largely undestroyed. Civilian casualties numbered into their hundreds, rather than thousands. It was a job well done.

In May 2003, shortly after the statue of Saddam Hussein had been pulled down by American troops, and the war officially declared won, I had just finished my second year of studies. I remember watching as the American flag was hoisted over Baghdad and thinking to myself what interesting times we lived in, however ominous. Through a combination of chance and curiosity, I'd ended up completing a number of modules of my degree course in Middle Eastern history. I'd studied the early Crusades and examined their impact on medieval Islamic culture in the Levant, and I'd reviewed the consequences of Pan-Arabism in the mid-twentieth century.

I had studied travel literature of the Silk Road and read the journals of eighteenth-century pilgrims who undertook the overland route to Jerusalem. I'd read about the conquests of Alexander the Great and Genghis Khan; the history of Persia; the travels of Ibn Battutah and even dipped into the Qu'ran. But it niggled me that I hadn't seen the places other than in my imagination. I wanted more than anything to see the Dome of the Rock; the Church of the Holy Sepulchre; Petra; Wadi Rum; the gates of Damascus and the souks of Sana'a.

I was having a beer with my housemate Alex in Nottingham to celebrate the end of exams, which is how most interesting journeys begin. Alex was a medical student and young eccentric – highly intelligent, brave, fun to be with and well read – and he had the added charm of never saying no to an adventure.

‘Why don’t we go to Egypt this summer?’ I said. ‘We can go and see what Cairo is like. I really want to see the Pyramids.’

A wide grin spread across his face.

‘Excellent. I’d been thinking something similar myself,’ he said. ‘Let’s go to Israel as well, and then we could take the boat to Greece and backpack through Europe.’

Alex’s father was Greek and lived in Athens, and his mother was Jewish, so it made perfect sense. I knew he’d be game for it.

So, a couple of months later, at the end of July, we boarded a plane to Egypt with a very loose plan and whatever spare change we had left from the term, which wasn’t very much.

It was a summer to be reckoned with. We spent a few days exploring the souks of Cairo and the banks of the Nile; then we headed east over the Suez Canal and trekked across the Sinai Desert. We scaled the mountain where Moses received the commandments and saw the remaining twigs of the burning bush. After that, a fortnight was spent admiring the domes of Jerusalem and the churches of Bethlehem. I’d fulfilled a childhood dream of seeing the Levant with my own eyes, and it did not disappoint.

I smelt frankincense in the church of the Holy Sepulchre and looked out across the glinting stillness of the Dead Sea. I walked in the footsteps of Jesus, Moses and Abraham. Memories of Sunday school were still fresh in my mind and I felt a deep joy and sense of satisfaction that I’d seen places none of my peers

had at that age, and been to places most of my family could only dream of. I tasted falafel and hummus, and ate fresh fish from the Sea of Galilee. I saw camels in the dunes and even rode a donkey through the gates of Petra.

We stayed as guests of Alex's Israeli relatives in Tel Aviv and watched as the sun set over a golden Mediterranean. The turmoil in Iraq, which had unfolded earlier that year, seemed distant and remote as we swilled beers on the beach and partied with hippies in Eilat.

It was good to be young and carefree. We'd planned to take a boat from Haifa across the Mediterranean to Cyprus and Greece, and from there to hitchhike home through Eastern Europe. But there was no rush; we had a whole six weeks to play with, and as long as we were back in time for the new term in September we could go wherever we wanted.

In spite of our relaxed itinerary, it goes without saying that we weren't prepared for the suddenness with which our plans were dashed when, on 19 August, a Palestinian suicide bomber exploded himself in the city centre of Jerusalem, killing twenty-five civilians and injuring a hundred more. As Alex and I sat on the beach enjoying our holiday, the news spread through Israel like wildfire, and the country went into lockdown.

It was the start of a new wave of violence across the region. Security was beefed up everywhere. As Israeli Special Forces scoured the country searching for terrorists, the boats out of Haifa were cancelled, the border back to Egypt was closed and it appeared that we may well be stuck.

'Leave while you still can,' said Ronnie, Alex's uncle. 'This place is about to explode.'

'But we can't go back to Egypt, and we can't afford to fly home,' said Alex.

Ronnie shrugged and said he wasn't able to give us any money. 'If you go to Jordan today, you'll be able to go north from there into Syria and get to Europe through Turkey that way. Good luck to you, though, even if I was allowed to go myself, I wouldn't go anywhere near those hell holes.'

It seemed we didn't have a choice. We packed our bags and made for the eastern border. The Israelis had halted all incoming traffic over the Allenby Bridge, but they let us leave when Alex told them he was Jewish. We took a bus to Amman and a few hours later we found ourselves in the capital of Jordan.

But just as we celebrated our successful escape out of Israel, it appeared we had jumped out of the frying pan and into the fire. That afternoon, at four-thirty, as we were checking into a cheap hostel, a massive bomb exploded at the UN headquarters in Baghdad, killing the United Nations special representative and dozens of others. This time it was al-Qaeda. Jordan, fragile in its location sandwiched between Israel and Iraq, decided to close its borders too. Now Alex and I really were in a pickle. There was no going back to Israel and Syria was closed off as well.

'There's only one thing for it,' I said to Alex, as we sat on the roof of our grotty little hostel, smoking a shisha.

'What's that? We can't ask for any money; both our parents think we're safe and sound on a beach holiday in Greece. They'd go nuts,' he said.

'We can't let a bomb or two stop us,' I urged. 'There's only one border left open. Let's head east.'

Alex looked at me blankly.

'Are you actually suggesting we cross into Iraq?'

'Yes, if it's our only option. There are Americans on the border, they'll surely let us in. We can say we're journalists or something. Then we can find a way north up to Turkey.'

‘Are you mad?’

‘Well can you think of a better idea?’ I asked him.

In all honesty I couldn’t quite believe I was suggesting that we hitchhike to Baghdad, but it seemed a preferable option to asking my parents for money to fly home and admitting defeat.

Alex shrugged. ‘No, not really. I suppose it’ll make a good story one day. If we survive.’

And so that’s what we did.

There were no buses going into Iraq, so we went to a taxi stand by the old Roman theatre and asked how much it would cost to go to the Iraqi border, which we’d been told was five or six hours’ drive.

The taxi driver grinned. ‘I’ll take you all the way to Baghdad if you like?’ he said. ‘I’m Iraqi anyway and it would be a good excuse to see my mum.’

‘How much would that cost?’ I asked. It was over nine hundred kilometres and I was expecting the worst.

The man looked us up and down. ‘You look poor. I’ll do it for twenty dollars each.’

Alex looked as stunned as I did. ‘Twenty dollars, is that it?’

‘Fuel is cheap,’ the taxi man said, with a shrug. ‘Are you coming or what? It’s a long drive.’

So that’s how we ended up taking a taxi for ten hours across the Syrian desert into Iraq, only recently conquered by the Americans. A National Guardsman from Alabama stood sentry on the quiet border post. He looked at our passports, welcomed us to the newly liberated country and suggested we buy some guns when we get to the nearest town.

‘There’s still a lot of bad guys out there,’ was his sage advice.

The journey was fairly uneventful, apart from a slightly unnerving hour when our driver cut off the main highway to

drive across the desert in a bid to circumvent the town of Fallujah, which was apparently infested with al-Qaeda.

That night we found ourselves arriving in the darkness on the edge of the green zone at the Palestine Hotel, overlooking the notorious roundabout where Saddam's statue had been ripped down a few months before, although the man himself was nowhere to be found. Our taxi driver was convinced the Americans had spirited him away and the whole thing was a conspiracy. Either way, we were at least fairly safe behind the concrete chicanes and razor wire of the compound.

When we discovered that the price of a room was a princely one hundred dollars, Alex suggested we sleep on the roof among the rubble for free instead. A few weeks before, an American tank commander had blown the top off the hotel when he mistook an Iraqi cameraman for an insurgent, killing the innocent journalist and demolishing the rooftop terrace simultaneously.

As I was about to suggest a compromise by camping in the gardens instead, we were approached by a Scottish journalist who was there covering the war. Martin Geissler was the ITV news correspondent, and he seemed rather surprised to see us.

'You pair of idiots. Who let you in?' he said.

We explained the rationale for our unexpected journey.

'Well, we can't have you sleeping on the roof, can we?' He tutted and shook his head. 'You know you are probably the first tourists in Iraq since the war? We have a spare room for the cameras and equipment, so you can stay there.'

And so Alex and I found ourselves with a decent suite on the tenth floor, with great views of the Tigris River. By day we drank cocktails by the pool, listening to stories of the mercenaries who went out hunting for terrorists in disguise, and by night

we watched as Black Hawk helicopters flew over the city, patrolling the skies. Often we'd hear the crack of gunfire in the distance, or the rumble of a faraway explosion. It was all very surreal at the age of twenty-one, but an experience we'd never forget.

We ended up staying for a week and eventually managed to blag a free ride all the way to Turkey with some ex-SAS soldiers, who were now security guards responsible for looking after journalists. We travelled through Mosul and Tikrit, where, unbeknown to us at the time, Saddam Hussein was hiding in a hole while US Special Forces searched high and low for him.

Alex and I did make it to Greece in the end, and from there we hitchhiked home through Europe, back to England in time for the next semester, with more than a few tales to tell.



I'd held a fascination for the deserts of Arabia since my childhood. I think deep down there had been a psychological draw to a place of such controversial allure ever since I'd been read stories from the Bible and *One Thousand and One Arabian Nights* as a child. Like many, I'd been captivated by the Middle East, where blurred lines of myth and legend have torn at the souls of travellers for eons. One of my earliest memories perhaps goes some way to explaining why I undertook this journey.

The snow had been falling heavily outside. The fields were glistening white and the little red-breasted robins danced in the holly bushes of my garden. It was 1987 and magical. I'd spent the weekend before we broke up for the Christmas holidays sledging with my father down the slopes of Park Hall Hills. I was

only six years old and nothing could beat the thrill of being hurled down what seemed like a mountain. I made my first snowman and threw snowballs at my baby brother.

But despite the exhilaration, something had been bothering me. All week the talk at the school had been about the impending nativity play. I was scared stiff and the pressure was mounting, because I had been given a starring role – I was to be a king. All week we'd been learning about the birth of Jesus. I enjoyed the story of how his family had walked all the way from Nazareth to Bethlehem. Having myself had to walk to school twice that week, because of the snow, it was something I could sympathise with.

I also liked how the Holy Family had been turned away from the inn. I remembered the time last week when we'd gone to the shop to buy oatcakes, and they'd all sold out and my mum came out fraught, and we'd had beans on toast instead. It was basically the same thing, I thought.

I didn't really understand the bit about virgin births and angels, but that didn't matter, because the important bit was the fact that baby Jesus was born in a stable next to some donkeys in something called a manger. And even if Mary and Joseph had it tough, they must surely have been cheered up by all the shepherds who came to say hello. Then there were the kings, whose eminent ranks I was to join on Friday in the play. We'd been read stories by our teacher about the Magi, these wise men from the East, who came bearing gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh.

As a child I knew nothing about the East, other than what I'd learned at Sunday school. I knew there were sand dunes and palm trees. That was certain, because I'd seen pictures of them. I even knew the different types of camel, and the fact that some had two humps and others just one. I was safe in the knowledge that the Holy Land was special somehow, but I wasn't sure

exactly why, other than lots of important things had happened there.

For me, Jerusalem was a faraway mythical city where Jesus had been killed by a man called Pontius Pilate for no other reason than claiming to be the son of God. It all sounded a bit far-fetched and I couldn't distinguish between what was real and what was legend.

Now I had to become one of the kings. It seemed that my coronation was the highest priority for Mrs Watts, who was determined that one of her class would have the honoured role of bringing the baby Jesus a present. I was the one to bring frankincense, which I was assured was a very valuable smelly thing.

Even at the age of six, I was fairly certain that in the olden days, they didn't have Santa Claus wrapping paper around their frankincense packages. My mum had made a crown of golden cardboard for me, encrusted with plastic rubies, and Mrs Watts gave me a long red cloak, edged with fur, which I was sure had been recycled from last year's Santa Claus costume, but again, I kept my mouth shut. Even kings should recycle, I supposed.

The role seemed so complex, so intimidating. I had to lead the other two kings; even Jonathan Barclay, who was the king with the gold. Why did I have to go first? Why couldn't Ben Bowler go first with his myrrh? I was even more scared, because I had to give my fake box of frankincense to Mary, who was actually Stacey Hubbard, who I really fancied. It was all going to be a disaster.

On the big day itself, my nerves were at an all-time high. The crowds were gathered, the stage was set. Baby Jesus was already waiting in the crib and Stacey Hubbard was looking magnificent in her blue robes. Ben Bowler was being naughty and

spraying his myrrh perfume all over Dominic Cooper, who was doing a sterling effort of being Joseph, even if his beard was on upside down. I was carefully donning my crown in anticipation of a regal entrance. I was terrified it might fall off.

But then Mrs Watts came storming into the classroom, where we were all getting changed into our costumes.

‘We have an emergency,’ she said with real alarm. ‘There’s a change of plan. Poor Andrew Mitchell isn’t feeling well and has to drop out. Levison, you’ll have to stand in.’

I froze, not sure whether to laugh or cry. Andrew Mitchell, the sneaky little bastard. I knew for a fact he wasn’t poorly, he just didn’t want to be in the play.

‘But, but, but . . .,’ I stammered.

‘Hush,’ said Mrs Watts. ‘We need someone who is coordinated and can manage the very important job of walking without looking. We can’t have a holy animal with no back legs.’

And with that, my crown and robe were confiscated and handed over to Mark Knapper, who grinned with delight. He’d been promoted from being a palm tree, and I’d been relegated to being the back end of the donkey.