

## The Red Sea as a Time Warp

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During my five year-stint at Kagnev Station in Ethiopia, much of which was due to my duties as English instructor for UMUC, I had opportunities to spend time on the fabled Red Sea out of the steamy port city of Massawa. I swam in it and deep-sea fished on it, making several boating trips out to the Dahlak Archipelago to bring in rich catches of jack tuna, barracuda, red snapper, grouper and an occasional shark or two. (One of those isolated islands even had a herd of camels living on it, a very startling sight in the middle of that famed body of water.) But crossing over to its eastern shores happened only twice: once was for a short stay in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, and then there was that memorable week-long venture to the triangle of cities in Yemen, consisting of Sana'a, Al Hudaydah and Taizz. After growing reasonably accustomed to life in Ethiopia, as foreign and exotic as that was, going that short distance across the Red Sea was like moving through a kind of time warp into an ancient past that neither I was ready for, nor were the Yemeni peoples ready for me.

We began with an easy Saturday morning flight from Asmara into Sana'a that took only about an hour. But it could just as well have been the other side of the world. Our first stop was to be taken directly to the new government tourist office where we were ushered into a huge, practically empty room with only one man, seated behind a completely bare desk, and with just one large poster on the wall behind him. He proceeded to apologize to us that his office had just opened that month, and so he had not had much chance to decorate it yet. That should have been almost a warning for what was to follow. After the exchange of a few polite bows, we were escorted downstairs where a small van with an Arab driver awaited. Our hardy group consisted of fifteen, mostly males, with a couple of their wives sprinkled in, looking for a new adventure. It did not take long before "adventure" found us.

We left Sana'a almost too soon, but extracted a promise from our driver that we would see it in full a few days later. I began to get the impression that tourism was not yet a well-planned enterprise in this country. One thing that I did notice as we headed south was the distinctive architecture of the city: dark brown stone buildings, many of them over six stories high, with trimmed-in-white windows, looking as if they were many centuries old. Some were even perched high above us on cliff faces, teetering there as they had perhaps done for ages. On the dusty road on the way to Al Hudaydah, we came into a small, nondescript village where, without warning, the driver hit the brakes hard next to a small hut. He leapt out and ran into the hut, emerging five minutes later with his treasure: a small plastic bag of khat, which he tossed casually on the dashboard. He popped a few of the narcotic leaves into his mouth and began chewing away merrily, as if he were no longer responsible for navigating the van and its passengers down the road. Perhaps an hour later, with nary a word to inform his charges about where we were and what we were seeing, he pulled into another village and told us that it was now time for lunch.

I soon discovered that lunch in Yemen is the big meal of the day. Being seated on the floor was a little off-putting, but we quickly learned to get used to that local custom. The main dish was called "salah," a spicy concoction of rice with chunks of lamb, eaten communally from a large porcelain plate placed in our midst. Living in Asmara for many years had prepared me for that situation. Some mango fruit juice drinks and strong coffee helped to finish the meal. A choice of halvah or baklava

went nicely with the coffee. That same meal, with minor variations, was to be our staple, replicated many times during the week that followed. The place where we had lunch was conveniently right next to a market shop; we were of course ushered in to look over the merchandise. It soon became apparent that the shop was run by a relative of our driver. One only had to observe him standing and smiling patiently next to the cash register, waiting for his percentage of the take, to make that determination. By the time our shopping break, and convenience stop, was finished, it was already well after 6pm. Herded back into the van with a few extra treasures and now empty bladders, we set off again towards Al Hudaydah.

The drive was slow as we ascended into the mountains and darkness soon descended. The driver pushed on for another half hour or so when again we made an unexpected stop. He invited us all to step out from the van to examine the sight that lay at our feet: some beautiful terraced gardens that he told us were the pride of his country. However, getting there late at night made it impossible to see anything that his headlights did not illuminate, which was not very much. Chalk another one up to poor planning and being new to the tourism game. Granted, we were in the vanguard of Americans in a country just opened for tourism; but more such incidents happened in the short span of one week. For example, on another occasion on a dusty road between Al Hudaydah and Taizz, the van driver was unable to go around a small vehicle that had casually been left parked in the middle of the narrow road though a village. Our driver honked his horn a few times to no avail, but then rather than wait for the blocking auto's driver to return, six of us exited the van and, on the count of three, physically lifted the little car and moved it over about eight feet. Just as casually, we got back into the van and with applause proceeded on our merry way.

There were further market breaks like the one mentioned earlier, but the driver soon realized that this ongoing scam was wearing thin, and by the third or fourth stop most of our group had already purchased more than enough Yemeni souvenirs to satisfy us. I will even admit to having made a purchase myself: at one stall I found an elderly Arab gentleman willing to part with his jambiya (a curved Yemeni dagger with its belt and sheath), which now is most likely buried in a long-neglected box or trunk either on a shelf in my garage or down in my basement. I can well imagine that my many other fellow Marylanders, with their lives constantly on the road, have accumulated similar hordes of such exotic and now-forgotten mementos.

By the end of the week, we were headed north again towards our final main destination in Sana'a, as promised. Along the way on our journey, I had noticed from time to time that people were dumping garbage out their white windows and just letting it lie on the ground below. To me, that appeared to be yet one more indication of the backwards or even primitive nature of this foreign culture. It happened enough times that I did not bother to remark on it to other members of our group, so sure was I that they had witnessed it as well. The practice soon became noticeable enough that it hardly seemed worth even asking our driver about it without running the risk of making him either embarrassed or resentful. We still needed him to get us safely back to our hotel in the capital city. But the significance of what I had observed was not to strike home until that final Friday evening on the eastern side of the Red Sea.

Our "grand tour" of Sana'a turned out to be not much to write home about. Most of us were road-weary and dust-covered, and so paid little attention to the scant details that the driver proudly provided. But on that last night at our hotel, it soon became apparent that the presence of a small group of American tourists in Yemen had not gone completely unnoticed. At the front desk, we were presented with an invitation to come to the British consulate for an informal round of drinks and conversation. I was among the half dozen or so who readily accepted the invitation, looking forward

to a new experience, and so donning my last change of clean clothes, I joined my few fellow invitees for the two-mile evening ride to the consulate. The building was fairly impressive, featuring a large ballroom with a crystal chandelier and some smartly dressed waiters scattered around to serve us. The drinks were non-alcoholic, of course, in keeping with the culture of the host nation. Our British hosts were curious about how we found the week's travel experience. I was a bit guarded in what I said, not wishing to insult either those British officials or the ears of any of the Yemeni waiters. It was, all in all, a pleasant evening and a nice way to close off our time in this unusual country.

However, noting that we had an early morning flight to catch, we decided as a group to make the two-mile walk back to our hotel. That was when we were stopped at the door and were firmly informed that a vehicle would take us back. Our claims that the walk would be just fine were cut short with a polite warning: "No one walks about in Sana'a at night!" On our drive back, we very quickly discovered why. Yemen has no garbage collection system. What they have instead, and what they have used for who knows how long, are packs of fierce feral dogs that descend from caves nightly and that consume the refuse. Those dogs are vicious enough, our British host informed us, that they have been known to attack and take down an adult male. I saw enough of their bared fangs in the headlights to believe his warning. That sight, added to the lack of anyone walking the streets the whole distance, left me with a vivid impression that lingers to this day. Whether this circumstance still prevails in Yemen after over fifty years since that night I cannot say for certain. But given what I saw back then, it is little wonder that the country is not that popular of a tourist mecca. I doubt that many travelers seeking new adventures affording travel back in time would place Yemen at the top of their list. I know that I would not.