

Yemen

A destination that's hard to beat

> By Nick Redmayne

For a country proud of its Roman epithet, Arabia Felix (Fortunate Arabia), in recent times Yemen has struggled to find its winning streak with centuries of Arab civilisations all too often ignored by those in search of a snappy headline. However, the complexity of real life cannot be condensed into media sound-bites without context being lost and truth being obscured - Yemen is no exception. Despite ancient associations with Arabic language characterising the country as 'dictionary land', right now Yemen is a definitive example for seeing once being worth more than a thousand words of news reporting.

Arriving, steeled for an interminable immigration process, entailing Byzantine form-filling administered by ineffective and grumpy officials, my cynical expectations proved refreshingly at odds with reality. Sana'a airport's mantra of 'Welcome to Yemen' seemed to translate into actions and the whole procedure was

over in ten minutes, including the issuing of a tourist visa. My colleague and namesake, Nicholas and I left the terminal feeling surprised and slightly cheated. Sa'id our driver greeted us in French, and smiling broadly, pointed towards his car, a decommissioned New York Police Department cruiser, still in black and white

livery – and why not indeed..? Surging through Sana'a's morning traffic Sa'id seemed not the least bit disadvantaged by his NYPD car's lack of flashing blue lights and siren. In a style that can best be described as calm and assertive, he confidently and swiftly navigated choked highways to Sana'a's Old City. ▶



Harat Talha/ Old city
حارة طلحة/ المدينة القديمة

Finally slowed by narrowing streets, Sa'id pulled over and let us go on foot to our hotel, a converted judge's tower house in the Old City. Five breathless floors up we dumped the bags and continued to the roof. Though I'd previously studied photographs of Sana'a, to see the wealth of the city's vista through my own eyes made the incredible credible. Here was a city originally designed to comprise 48 quarters, 48 mosques and 48 gardens, to this day maintaining its unmistakable multi-story skyline of uniquely decorated brick towers. How could men have been afforded the imagination to contrive such beautiful and intriguing dwellings? This architecture spoke of old world wisdom, deriving structural integrity from a strand of knowledge divergent to that of Europe, and arguably achieving a superior result. Forget Manhattan, here was high-rise living Arabian Peninsula-style. Back at ground level, I waited for Nicholas. 'What country are you from?' enquired a passing Sana'ani. 'Ana min Ingiltera' I

optimistically reply. 'Oh, oh. You are in dangerous place. We kill you!' Then he laughed heartily, adding, 'Welcome to Yemen' before waving and walking jauntily on his way.

Sa'id arrived, and it was apparent he'd changed his clothes, now sporting a fresh white gelabya, red-checked kuffiyeh and most strikingly, a dangerous-looking curved dagger, a janbiya, displayed prominently at his waist. Exploring the Old City's Souk Al-Milh amongst thronging crowds, it was soon obvious that almost all adult males were similarly attired – we were the odd ones out. Sa'id reassured us, 'A janbiya is hardly ever drawn in anger... but if it is then it cannot be replaced without drawing blood...' - so that was alright then.

We made a dignified progress through areas invisibly demarked for particular trades or commodities, Sa'id waiting patiently as we tourists dallied amongst the intense foreignness. Above the hubbub, a blacksmith and his assistant beat time on hot metal,



Souk Al-Milh/ Sana'a

سوق الملح/ صنعاء

sending out showers of sparks. A little further, purveyors of the world's most extensive range of kettles and cooking pots sat cross-legged, justifiably proud, amidst their



Harat Talha/ Old city

حارة طلحة/ المدينة القديمة



Cloth salesman

بائع القماش

wares. As thoroughfares became constricted, barrow vendors weaved past balancing colourful pyramids of mangoes. Venturing further, an innocuous side alley opened into a busy courtyard emporium trading myriad raisin varieties. Elsewhere, dates, tea, herbs and spices too, all had their designated pitches, unchanged possibly for centuries, alongside sellers of Yemen's equally timeless fragrances of myrrh and frankincense.

Walking further, an excited mob besieged a street-side kiosk, their outstretched arms thrusting coins and grasping at returned metal mugs. This had to be something special, so I joined the amiable melee and was rewarded by a cool draught of sharab al-zabeed, a spiced raisin drink worth fighting for. Just in time too, as supplies were soon exhausted, leaving an unlucky few sharing dry-mouthed disappointment before melting once more into the crowds. As the market stalls thinned and the sun's rays once more had full reign, a straw-hat seller did a steady trade from a prime position. Outside the gate of Bab al-Yemen a band of peripatetic tailors patrolled below, collectively determined to identify unconscious desires for cloth amongst passers by. I watched aloof from atop the gateway as crowds from the souk spilled out, the intensity of activity diluted only by the space occupied.

As early afternoon approached, another side of Yemen revealed itself. 'Qat time' announced Sa'id. Was this to be the equivalent of lunchtime, teatime or even



Mosque in the old city/ Sana'a

مسجد في المدينة القديمة



Sana'a

صنعاء



Souk Al-Milh

سوق الملح

Miller time, I wondered? The answer was evident in the rustling of little black plastic bags and a sweeping epidemic of hamster cheek amongst Sana'anis men. Resembling the leaves of a privet hedge qat is the ubiquitous narcotic of choice for many Yemenis. 'Isn't it bad for your health?' I enquired of Sa'id. 'Yes, very bad. Bad for gums, teeth and stomach. But if you need to think, it helps. In particular, very good if you have a job with something electrical.' From pious beginnings, qat's stimulant effect allowing earnest Sufis to forgo sleep and worship longer, the fondness for mastication had spread throughout Yemen to become a national obsession. Despite lyrical claims for qat's efficacy in releasing the spirit whilst simultaneously focussing the mind, not to mention improving electrical engineering skills, my observations catalogued an ensuing glassy-eyed torpor as it descended across the city's streets. The WHO estimates that the average Yemeni qat addict wastes almost 1,500 hours a year just chewing, whilst in some households as much as 50% of income is spent supporting the habit.

Once more on the road again in Sa'id's black and white cruiser, some 15km outside Sana'a the Wadi Dhahr lookout offered expansive panorama towards one of Yemen's most photographed sights, the precipitous seven storey 'palace of the rock', Dar Al-Hajar. Once home to absolute monarch Imam Yahya in the 1930s, the palace's unassailable rocky perch still commanded regal views across the fertile fruit orchards and qat plantations of Dhahr Valley. Later, the fortified hilltop settlement



Old city/ Sana'a

المدينة القديمة/صنعاء

of Thula invited comparison with a Tuscan Italian counterpart. The village is under consideration for UNESCO World Heritage designation and it was obvious that considerable effort had been expended to maintain buildings of note and keep the streets in good order. As well as utilitarian goods, one or two local businesses sold the kind of trinkets that sightseers love - there was even an English-language street map for sale. There were however, no tourists. I took the opportunity to search out my favourite masculine redoubt in any Arabic country, the barber's shop for a cutthroat

shave. Yr300 later, after the kind of animated chit chat that a feeble 50-word Arabic vocabulary would support, Thula's Sweeny Tod had done his work well.

A few kilometres further, at Hababa, the scene was different. Crumbling and collapsed buildings formed playgrounds for a band of boys intent on increasing their stocks of pens, 'Calam! Calam! Calam!' Next to the mosque, a surprisingly beautiful lagoon seemed out of scale with its surroundings. Here, one of the boys opened up a diminutive soft drinks concession housed in a wooden shack. Between photo sessions we gulped warm ▶

Fanta and stared and smiled at each other. By now hunger was overtaking fascination but both appetites were addressed in Shibam where the Al-Hamida restaurant provided a traditional repast of monumental proportions. Bowls of Saltah, an excellent Yemeni stew of vegetables and meat, were soon emptied, followed by spiced potatoes, succulent lamb and minty, yoghurt-laden shafout (pancake-like bread), finishing with a honeyed dessert of bint as-sahn (girl of the plate) and tea. It was a feast.

Back in Sana'a, I left Nicholas on his mobile, trying to make himself heard over the collective call to prayer of the city's 48 mosques. I walked back through darkened streets towards the souks, and found a simple café still serving tea and offering a place to contemplate. For most Europeans Sana'a is a forbidden city and Yemen a closed country. However, as a rare British visitor I'd experienced no feeling of menace on the streets and no restrictions on my roaming. Without exception all the Yemenis I'd encountered had been friendly and welcoming. I'd a few more days left to explore, but already the harsh reality of the frustratingly brief stay was concentrating my mind on ways to justify a future longer visit. Sana'a's proliferation of language schools offered some hope. A residential course would improve my ability to communicate with the world's 400 million native Arabic speakers – though obviously not all at once. It would be cheaper than staying in England! So, how do I sell that concept to my wife..?

For those in search of a MacDonaldis-free zone, a country devoid of ostentatious ephemeral glitz, where time is still a virtue and language a reason for national pride, Yemen is a destination that's hard to beat. Don't ignore security problems, and certainly listen to advice, but in the end be prepared to draw your own conclusions. Yemen's engagingly exotic lexicon of experiences will richly reward any traveller ready to be beguiled by authentic Arabia. ■

Nick Redmayne flew to Yemen with Yemenia www.yemenia.com tel 020 732 33213 and travelled with Universal Touring Company www.utcyemen.com tel +967 1 272861/2/3.



Spice vendor

بائع البهارات



Date vendor

بائع التمر



Cookware vendor/ Souk Al-Milh

بائع أواني الطبخ / سوق الملح