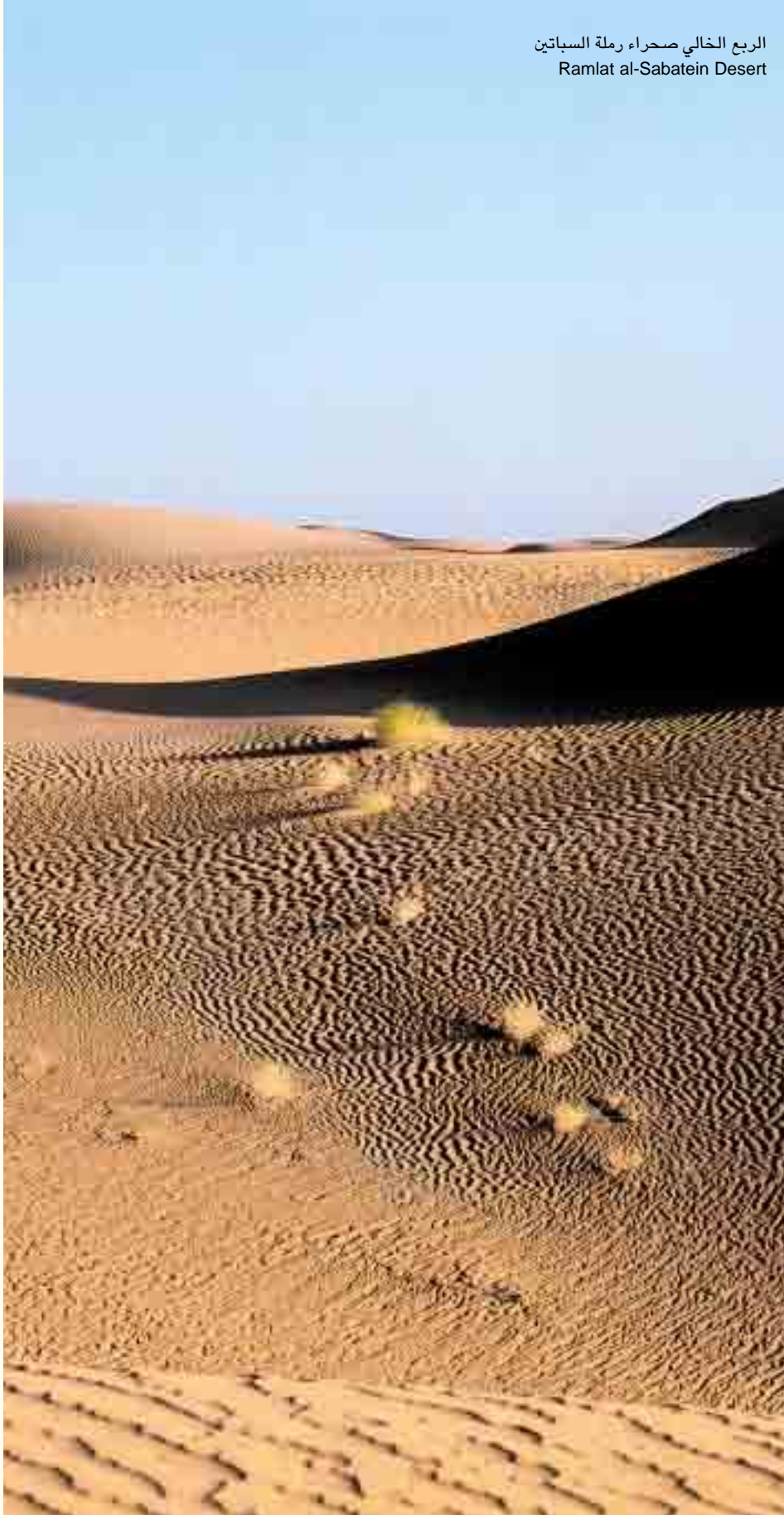


A Yemen Diary

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وادي حضرموت
Wadi Hadhramawt

الربع الخالي صحراء رملة السباتين
Ramlat al-Sabatein Desert



The British Museum trip to Yemen took place, on the 15th to 22nd of May. *Islamic Tourism* joined part of the expedition, the first of its kind since 1998. We gratefully acknowledge the assistance of Ms Hannah Boulton.

Day 1:

The Yemenia Airways flight to Sana'a' left in the evening from London via Cairo. It was an almost empty airliner and there was plenty of time to catch up on reading and also introducing oneself to the British Museum party that had assembled for this journey. These included prominent journalists, writers and academics.

Day 2:

We arrived early in the morning in Sana'a and were greeted by Saeed, our guide throughout the tour, who works for Universal Touring Company, the co-organizers of the trip. Alan D'arcy, of the British Yemeni Society, who speaks fluent Arabic, welcomed our party as we boarded the minibus that took us directly to the Hotel Taj Sheba where we had a brief respite before visiting the Old City.

Sana'a boasts 20,000 old palaces which are six to seven hundred years old, though they are disappearing fast and urgent restoration work is required to save the unique Yemeni heritage. Walking through the maze of narrow alleyways, past exquisite gardens and the unique housing structures, infants with grubby smiles giggled as we passed.

The old souq is a bustling labyrinth filled with all variety of shops selling all variety of products. This is spice heaven as stall after stall is stocked to the brim with dried chilli, fenugreek, ginger, poppy seeds, cardomom, cumin, ginger, turmeric, and so on. A block of incense is lit and the air is filled with a wonderful aroma, mingling with the scent of the other spices - this, after all, is the land of frankincense and myrrh. Further in we come to the pulses, again row on row of all types of lentils and beans.

A climb up four flights of stairs inside a typical Yemeni house that has been converted into an art gallery reaps its own reward as we are greeted with a spectacular view across the city to the mountains beyond. The vista is filled with minarets and the tops of the traditional Yemeni tall houses. This is followed by a trip to the offices of Marco Livadiotti, head of Universal Touring Company, an Italian who embraced Islam in 1992, and who is married to a Yemeni, living here since childhood. His love of the country is obvious as he explains with relish how Yemen is at last opening its doors once again to visitors.

We lunch at a local restaurant within the Old City where many tourists often prefer to stay.

Day 3:

We leave Sana'a for Baraqish and ➤



Ma'rib, both once important cities on the incense route to Jerusalem, Rome and Egypt. At the first checkpoint out of the city we are met by the British Ambassador, Frances Guy, who accompanies us on the trip. The scenery along the way is stark yet stunning, testament to an epic country. The remains of Baraqish rise imposingly from the landscape. The foundations date back to around the 8th century BC, with more recent Islamic additions.

In Ma'rib, we visit the remains of the Moon

and Sun Temples. The Awwam, or Moon Temple complex (the site itself has been fenced off to stop the Bedouin driving their vehicles over it) is also known as the Mahram Bilqis and is thought to be the place that the Queen of Sheba would have travelled in order to sacrifice to the Sabaean god 'Almaqah prior to her departure to Jerusalem. The site has been excavated several times, initially by Wendell Phillips in 1951/2 (he excavated the peristyle hall), but this mission was curtailed due to instability in

the region at that time. Large-scale excavations were undertaken by the German Archaeological Institute in Sana'a in the 1980s. The most recent excavation took place last year under Dr William Glanzman. Objects from these excavations feature in the British Museum exhibition, some of which date back to the 7th century BC. However, the sand always recovers the ruins and you can only guess what lies beneath. The temple complex is enormous, with the remains of the cemetery still visible. ➔

The Bar'an Temple is more completely excavated and viewing platforms have been built allowing visitors to get a sense of the site. The Bar'an Temple is much smaller than the Moon Temple but it still has the distinctive pillars and ibex-decorated artefacts seen at the Mahram Bilqis.

We travel on to see the old Ma'rib Dam, a masterpiece of ancient engineering which irrigated the area and made it fertile and green. The new Dam has been recently built with money from the United Arab Emirates and provides a scenic viewpoint to sit and chew qat, the local mild narcotic-stimulant enjoyed by most Yemenis.

The final stop was old Ma'rib itself, virtually abandoned since it was bombed by the Egyptians in the 1960s. The tumbledown houses give a glimpse of the city's former glories. It is inhabit-

ed now by a few poor Bedouin families.

Day 4:

A dawn start heralds a drive across the desert known as The Empty Quarter, or Rub al-Khali, an area of the peninsula as dramatic as its name suggests. We turn off into the Ramlat al-Sabatein desert, and resume our trek across the sand. Watching the sun rise over the dunes is a magical experience. There is also local wildlife, including a glimpse of the otherwise coy desert fox, and of course plenty of camels.

Driving on, we arrive at Shabwa, capital of the Hadhramawt Kingdom. Today, the Wadi Hadhramawt stretches from the Rub al-Khali to the Arabian Sea forming the eastern border of the present-day Republic of Yemen. Although now a desert dotted by oases, the

same area in ancient times was one of the most fertile and agriculturally productive lands on Earth.

Shabwa contains the ruins of another ancient site linked to the incense road. The site has been fairly extensively excavated though many of its secrets may still be hidden beneath the sands. The work that has been done allows us to glimpse how impressive the settlement would have been. It is a huge site with a central path that would lead straight up to the temple front, decorated with vast stone and bronze sculptures.

Shabwa's importance was in part determined by its salt mines. These are still mined today by Bedouin who chip away at the rock and grind the salt down.

Shibam is remarkable for its mud skyscrapers that appear out of nowhere on ➤



مناجم ملح في شبوة
Salt Mine, Shabwa

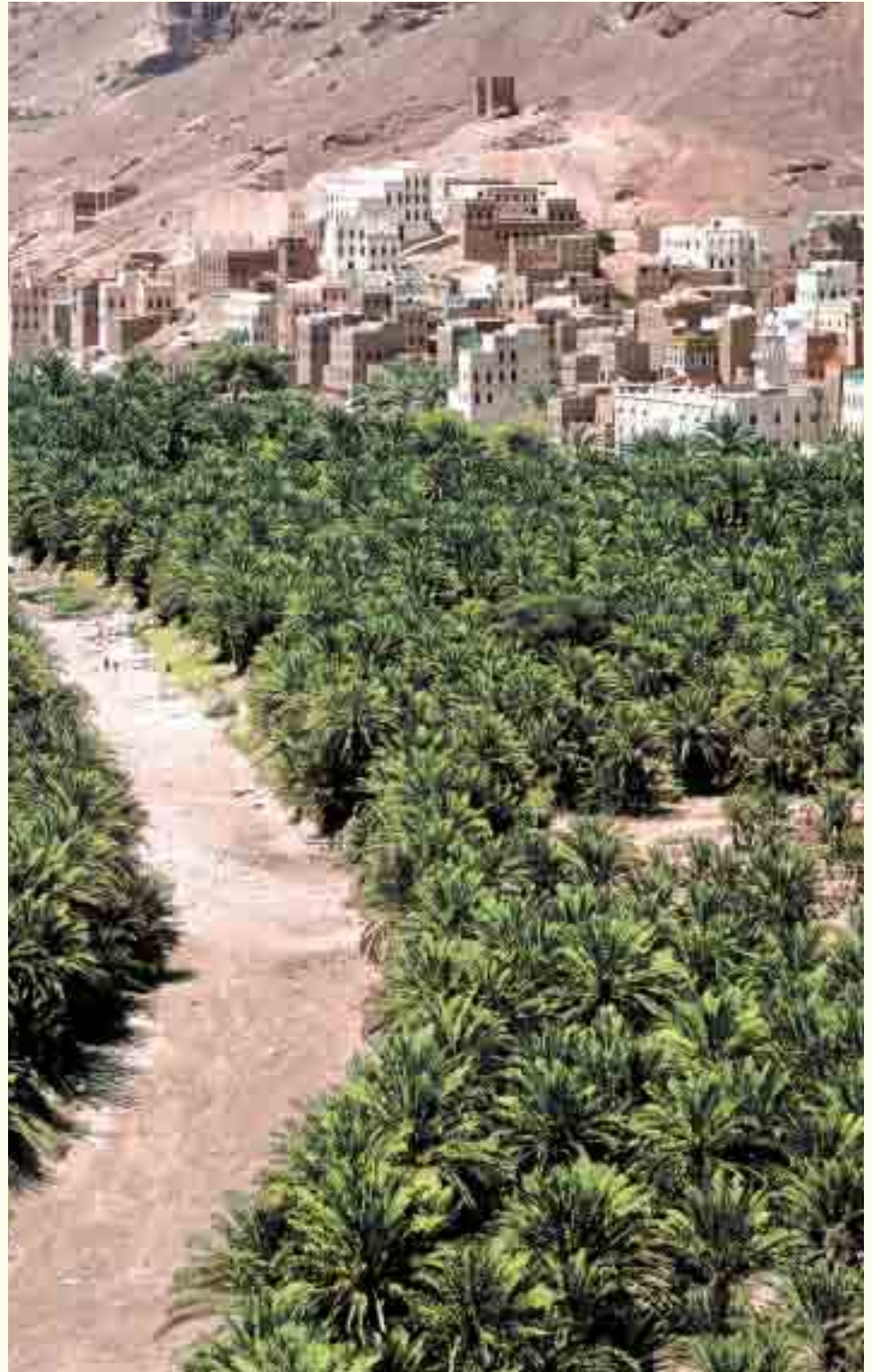
the horizon, towering into the blue sky. It is situated on an elevated mound and is surrounded on three sides by date palm groves. The tall mud-houses tower 5 to 8 storeys above the city wall. Laid out on a grid, the city's streets cross at right angles. Two mosques date back more

than 1,000 years and there are palaces dating from the 13th century. In the city, the traditional houses have the most intricate carved wooden doors, miniature examples of which are available to buy from the many tourist shops in town (most of which opened up when they saw us ➤



قطع صحراء رملة السباتين بسيارة لاندكروزر
Crossing the Ramlat al-Sabatein by Land Cruiser

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وادي حضرموت
Wadi Hadhramawt

coming). The houses are about 500 years old, but again the heritage of the town is threatened. Many of the skyscrapers are crumbling. As with Sana'a', Shibam is a World Heritage Site but there is little sign of any restoration work currently being undertaken.

The al-Hawta Palace Hotel, our place for the night in Shibam, has been restored and redesigned by Marco Livadiotti. It is a beautiful place, traditional but very comfortable, built entirely from mud and clay. The original structure dates back 150 years.

Day 5:

A long drive (11 hours!) through the Wadi Doan to Mukalla. The first stop is at the ruins of Raybun, another important archaeological site on the incense route. Beautiful villages nestle into the valley walls throughout the Wadi (this was the journey that Freya Stark took by camel in

the 1930s, and very little has changed since then) and one of the most beautiful is al-Hajjarayn. We drove past the villages of Sif, Rashid, Buda and al-Khurayba. Just before leaving, we drove up onto the tops of valley walls and looked down onto the palm trees and villages, which was a beautiful sight and provided a much needed cool breeze.

Driving on we eventually rejoined the asphalt road though some of the road had been washed out due to the recent rains. The drive down to the coast to Mukalla has its own serene beauty, despite the increasing heat.

Day 6:

The Old City of Mukalla includes a walk around the Sultan's Palace, which is now the museum. Then a humid walk through the souq, which is a shopper's paradise for local goods.

Day 7:

The fish market sells the most amazing variety of fish anywhere in the Middle East. At the harbour you can see the local fishermen bringing in the morning's catch. It is incredibly busy with restaurant owners bartering for the best looking sea beasts. Much of the catch was filleted on the sand, and tourists are encouraged to watch.

Following the late flight back to Sana'a', we drive straight into the mountains to see some of the northern Yemeni villages. Thula was beautiful, with much evidence of Jewish influence. Then onto Hababa with its wonderful water basin. On the way back to Sana'a', we stopped at a viewing point across the Wadi Dahr.

Day 8:

An early morning departure from Sana'a' via Aden to London. ■



أطفال يلعبون أمام بناية قديمة
Children playing outside an old Palace