

June 09 - SUMMARY – Arabian Sands

by Wilfred Thesiger

The bar has been raised yet again. Not only computer research, area maps and actual photos and stories from a traveler, David also arrived in costume complete with headdress, belt and knife! The only thing missing was the goat meat and a sample of camels' milk!

David led our group of 11 through the Empty Quarter in Arabian Sands by the adventurer, Wilfred Thesiger. While the book began with his journeys in Africa, the book focused on the part of the world that really captured his imagination – The Arabian Peninsula. While Thomas and Philby had already investigated some of the region in the 1930's, Wilfred spent five years in the 1950's crisscrossing the Empty Quarter that is now made up primarily of Saudi Arabia but also parts of Yemen, Oman and UAE.

The group asked why would a man from the elite of British society want to travel across such a wasteland without sufficient provisions or conveniences? Because he could and he wanted to! From the book, it was obvious that this man wanted to experience a society very unlike his own before it disappeared. (Rather like Jungle Child that we read earlier this year.)

We got the impression that he admired the wild and rugged men who lived in the desert (noble savages). He himself disliked civilization and wanted to experience a "non-privileged" life. We felt he romanticized the Bedu, the nomadic people who migrated all over the peninsula. He admired their non-materialism and at times their self-defeating generosity (Starving and when finally in view of a meal, giving it to two visitors and not accepting any for themselves). He felt that their lives were going to change forever, and I suspect, he hoped that they would not be "tainted" by civilization. The definition of a Bedouin is an Arab of the desert, in Asia or Africa; nomadic Arab.

Phyllis pointed out that while he was working at living like them (bare feet, native dress, eating and traveling as they did), he did at times remain apart with his affluence and the ability to purchase supplies. (The 30 animal camel train they had on some journeys and his sleeping bag). His "jobs", that might have been a cover while in the area, helped him to fund his mapping trips which would not have been available to the Bedu otherwise.

The group was surprised to find out that while the tribal groups of the Bedu all shared the same religion (Muslim), based on their sect, where they were from or the genealogy of the tribe, fighting and raiding seemed their main occupation. There was some discussion on how the leadership of the tribes was determined. David indicated that the Bedouin are one of the last two that have sultans. A sultanate is a sultan's domain, the territory ruled by a sultan, just as a kingdom is a territory ruled by a king. Sultan is the name for an Islamic sovereign. Like a monarchy, a sultanate is a government in which supreme power resides in one person. Some sultans have absolute power, and others' authority is constitutionally limited.

Someone asked what did the Bedu take away from their interactions with Thesiger? It was agreed that it was most likely the adventures and journeys open to them by accompanying Wilfred. Our group felt that while he appeared to be liked and admired by his traveling companions, the population at large still probably viewed him as an infidel and therefore suspect.

We discussed how the tribal lifestyle is still evident even today in some cultures while other traditionally nomadic, tribal people have assimilated into a more structured, area based lifestyle. The discovery of oil most likely played a large part in this "civilization" of the nomads as they might have lost traditional migratory routes.

The book had an every changing mix of words such as slaves, servants, guides and aids. The fluidity of these terms and the true nature of the relationship between Thesiger and the Bedu will most likely remain a mystery to the readers. David felt that his closest "friends", allies or guides were Salim bin Kabina and Salim bin Ghabisha. More trusted than slaves or servants, but not quite friends, these two men were critical to Thesiger's success in his journeys.

Many of the people who had read the book, indicated that the first 50-100 pages were a bit tedious. They felt that the early portion was more of a snap shot of his life. Once he began discussing his journey across the Empty Quarter, however their interest was piqued. The early part of the book may also be hampered in that Wilfred did not always take notes and therefore might have been writing from memory. Perhaps it was his interest in the Empty Quarter and his love of the area that made him journal in greater depth and made these stories more interesting to the readers.

David's display of maps, and photos showing the mud bricks that make up most of these desert cities, gave us visuals to accompany the stories from the book. We got to see what an expensive racing camel looked like (the happy camel picture from David) and while beautiful, how they would have been inappropriate for an Empty Quarter journey. The belt David wore was wonderful, but was really only a display holder for the Khanjar, or the traditional curved dagger from Islamic countries.

Thank you David for a wonderful discussion. For those of us who had not had a chance to read the book, we have a good idea where to start.

FUTURE MEETINGS

Thanks to all who came and helped us celebrate the 2nd anniversary of the start of the Travel Lovers Book Club. Also, thank you to everyone who submitted books to be considered and those that voted on what the group will read. Below is the list of books for the remainder of the year.

Just a reminder, I order 5 copies of the books to be read and have them at the reserve desk at the Colfax Tattered Cover the month prior to the book discussion.

At the Tomb of the Inflatable Pig by Gimlette is on reserve at the Colfax Tattered Cover as of yesterday. Guns, Germs and Steel will be available at the July meeting.

	Book	by	lead by
Jul 13	Tomb of Inflatable Pig	Gimlette	Kathleen
Aug 10	Guns, Germs and Steel	Diamond	Jane
Sept 14	Into Africa	Dugard	Sharon
Oct 12	The Unheard	Swiller	Willie
Nov 9	Black Wave	Silverwood	Richard
Dec 14	Baghdad Without Map	Horwitz	Susan

UPCOMING TRAVEL RELATED EVENTS

FYI –The movie that Willie recommended last month as we discussed *My Path Leads to Tibet*, **“Blindsight”** is available through the Denver Library System. One copy is found at the Ross UHills Library, the same location as the Budget Treasures Travel Club.

THURSDAY, JUNE 25 – 6:00–7:30 PM the Budget Treasurers Travel Club at the Ross UHills Library www.budgettreasurerstravelclub.com

EVERY TUESDAY - CHANGES IN LATITUDE - in Boulder offer lectures on various travel topics. www.cil.com

IF YOU COME ACROSS ANY TRAVEL RELATED EVENTS THAT WILL HAPPEN BETWEEN NOW AND THE NEXT MEETING, PLEASE LET ME KNOW AND I WILL FORWARD THEM TO THE GROUP.

Thank you for your continued support and interest.

I look forward to seeing each of you at our next meeting. Until then, travel in safety!

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