

The Middle East in Interesting Times

Jerry R. Hobbs

I. The Decision

Everyone asked the same question: “Why did you come anyway?” That’s what David and Julie asked when I met them in Palmyra. All their relatives urged them to cancel. Their answer was the same as mine.

I even had a second chance. My Lufthansa flight for Munich took off from San Francisco. I promptly fell asleep for forty-five minutes. When I woke up, there was one of those maps that show the location of the plane, and I expected to see us somewhere over Oregon. Instead we were circling over the Pacific Ocean just off the coast of California. I looked out the window and saw the fuel spraying out of the wing. We were dumping our fuel. The landing gear wouldn’t lift up, and the drag on the plane would be too great for the fuel we had, so we were returning to the San Francisco airport. The fuel weighed a lot and made landing more chancy, not to speak of the possibility of fire. The pilot was very calm when he described all this, but when he announced that we had landed safely, you could hear the immense relief in his voice. The key part had to be flown in from Germany, so the flight was postponed a day.

Someone who was less of a rationalist and a materialist than I might have seen a message in this: Don’t go! But I understand statistics. I got on the plane the next day.

In the mid 1980s when I began to feel my first twinges of mortality, I made up a list of the top twelve or thirteen places I hadn’t been that I wanted to see, and I began chipping away at the list—West Africa, Indonesia, Greece done properly. Then a few years ago I began feeling more urgent feelings of mortality, and seeing signs of decline, and I made up a list of the three places I’d better see soon, or I wouldn’t be up to it. Physical difficulty was not the

primary determinant. I think when I'm seventy, if I'm still in good health, I'll be able to trek in Nepal. No, it's primarily the hassles, the bureaucrats and corrupt officials, the systems that break down—problems I have less and less patience for as I get older. In western China when I had to battle the teeming masses for several hours to get train tickets, or in Tibet when I rode in the back of a filthy truck, I first thought "I'm too old for this," and then I thought, "This is why I'm taking this trip now and not later."

The list of three consisted of western China, the Middle East, and Peru. I went to western China in 1998 for seven weeks. The Middle East was next.

I don't like to travel ignorant. When I first went to England after college, I looked at Windsor Castle and realized I had no idea what had happened there. I knew there were some Georges and some Williams and some Edwards. I knew there was a Henry VIII who had six wives. Or was it Henry VI who had eight wives? So as we continued to travel, I'd spend a morning in the US Information Office in every capital reading the encyclopedia on the history of the next country.

The trouble with the Middle East, in more ways than one, is that it has so much history. I began as soon as I returned from China to read about the Babylonians and the Hittites and Ebla and Mari and Ugarit and Urartu. I reread the historical parts of the Old Testament. I found obscure books on Anatolia in the Roman era in the Stanford Library. I read the Qur'an, and a biography of Muhammad based on traditional sources. And so on. It was nearly three years before I felt ready to go.

The best time of the year for where I wanted to go—Turkey, Syria, Jordan, Lebanon, and Yemen—was the autumn. I could start in Turkey and do that before it got too cold, and by the time I got to Syria and Yemen it would no longer be too hot. So in February 2001 I used my United Star Alliance frequent flyer miles and got reservations on Lufthansa from San Francisco to Munich to Ankara, Turkey, leaving September 20 and returning November 5.

On the morning of September 11, Cynthia woke me up and said I'd better turn on the TV. A few minutes later, I got a call from my ex-wife Laurel telling me that our younger son Thomas, who works on Wall Street, called and said he was all right. (Actually, it was a much closer call than I had imagined. He didn't hear the first crash, but he saw the paper floating down and thought it was a tickertape parade. He looked out the window and realized it was a fire. He got his camera, which he always carries with him, and went out to see how close he could get. (www.geocities.com/thomas_hobbs/pics/wtc

`/index.html`) He was standing across the street from the east side of the South Tower when the plane hit the south side of the South Tower. He had four or five seconds to run for cover from the debris—it took that long to fall from that height—where the debris could be things like steel beams and plates of glass. He was walking across the Brooklyn Bridge, thinking it might have been wiser to use the Williamsburg Bridge—who would bomb that?—when he heard and then saw the South Tower collapse.) I called my mother to say Thomas was all right. She was in tears as she watched the news. She remembered Pearl Harbor and said this was worse. Through her crying she said, “You’re not going to the Middle East, are you?”

Cynthia’s attitude was a little more complex. From the start I had imagined her traveling with me. When I pictured myself in Petra or Nemrud Dag, she was there by my side. But she was not enthusiastic about the Middle East. She didn’t like the status of women there and didn’t want to experience that. There were a few things she would like to see, but there were just lots and lots of places that were above the Middle East on her list. My hopes went up when she took a class in Arabic with me, and at one point said that once learning a language, it would be good to go where they spoke it. But then in January she got a job at a start-up, where although she got two weeks vacation a year, it was the custom that no one would actually *take* a vacation. I tried to get her to see how much vacation would be acceptable. She could join me for the parts of the trip that interested her the most. We discussed it often, neither of our views ever changing, and then we stopped discussing it. It became the elephant in the corner no one ever mentioned. By the time September rolled around, we were quietly resigned to being apart for seven weeks. So when the attacks on September 11 happened, not very much changed in our discussions. If I asked, she would say, no, she didn’t want me to go, but she was sure I would, even when I wasn’t so sure, and she was resigned to it.

My kids were also sure I would go, although they reminded me of several times I had cancelled a trip. When we went to West Africa, when Thomas was ten and too young for such rigors, we had originally planned to go by bus from Mali to Nigeria. But tough travelers we met along the way painted such a dire picture of Nigeria—dead bodies rotting in the streets, women raped by customs officials, an American man strip-searched before he could enter a bank to change money—that we cancelled that part of the trip and went to Ivory Coast instead. In 1993 when William was living in Cairo, we all planned to go visit him. But one morning Islamic terrorists blew up a bus

across the street from the office he worked in, and he called us to tell us not to come. We cancelled. In 1997 when Thomas was traveling by bus through Latin America, he called and asked me if I wanted to hike Darien Gap with him—on obscure trails and rivers along the only unbuilt portion of the Pan-American Highway. I got the shots, the guidebook, and the plane ticket, but when he reached Panama City and got a little more information on the route, he learned that guerrillas infested the area and often kidnapped and killed people passing through. We cancelled, and he took a plane over that part.

But all those cancellations were to protect my children. The Middle East was just me.

I sent email to three friends from the Middle East, asking about the advisability of the trip. Would it be like taking a vacation to Japan a week after Pearl Harbor? They were all quite encouraging about it, and doubted I would have any problems in the areas they knew. This corresponded with my own feeling. In other places I've been at times of revolution or chaos—Cambodia in 1966, the Republic of Georgia in 1991, Albania in 1992, Pakistan in 1998—the situation on the ground was just fine, despite dire US State Department warnings.

When I got to the Middle East, others expressed surprise that I would go there at this particular time. At the travel agency in Damascus where I bought my plane ticket to Yemen, after I had paid for the ticket, I asked the clerk if he thought it was advisable to go. He said, "No. Maybe there will be no problems. But everyone who looks at you will wonder why you came at this time, and they will be suspicious."

Faraj, my driver in Yemen, and I discussed the issue one evening at dinner. He told me his wife had not wanted him to drive an American around the country. "Why did you?" I asked.

"Because no one else would."

Then he asked me why I had come to Yemen at this time. I wanted to say that to not come would have been to say that this was not a war against a small number of terrorists, but a war against Arabs, or a war against Islam. (In fact, this was the message of the Bush administration too. In the national memorial service on September 13, there were a number of religious leaders who got up and made statements, and the very first one was an Arab-American, representing Islam, and he began by reciting a sura from the Qur'an, in Arabic.) The way I expressed this to Faraj was to say, "If I hadn't come, that would be saying that Arabs are dangerous people."

He, an Arab, replied, “But Arabs *are* dangerous people.”

II. Attitudes

In the days after the attack I corresponded by email with a friend in Italy. I told her my analysis of the causes: American unconditional support for Israel meant that the Israeli government didn’t have to face the hard sacrifices involved in making peace. They didn’t have to make the politically unpopular move of removing the settlements from the West Bank and Gaza. Arabs knew the American role in this, and hated the Americans for it. Hence, the attack. So, as I wrote to her, “For the sake of a few Israeli madmen determined to raise their children behind walls in Hebron we have lost the World Trade Center and who knows how many lives.”

In fact, I believe, it turned out that hatred of Israel was at most a secondary motivation for Osama bin Laden. It now seems it was primarily a matter of “We’re Number One” thinking. This is ugly enough when we see it among Americans at the Olympics, but when it is used as a justification for mass murder, it is unspeakably horrible and obscene. Who cannot be chilled by Osama bin Laden’s videotaped conversation seamlessly blending talk of Allah and joy at the killing of thousands.

The Islamic Arab empire and later the Islamic Ottoman empire were the greatest powers in the world in their time, and they attributed this to their practice of the true religion. In the 1700s it began to dawn on people in the Islamic world that they had fallen behind the West in technological progress, especially as manifested in war. The Middle East was no longer Number One. Bizarrely, one response to this was not to try to catch up technologically, but rather to attempt to return to the one true religion. Islamic Fundamentalism was born.

In this view, Israel is hated not so much for what they are doing to the Palestinians, but because they are the representatives of the West and a constant reminder of the technological superiority of the West, again as manifested in war.

My friend urged me not to go. She wrote, “Two years ago I traveled quite extensively in the Middle East for a UNESCO project on women. One thing that I realized fully at that time was how much Americans are hated all over that world. It is something pervasive, and of course you are completely

impotent facing that hate, because it will not be directed against you, Jerry Hobbs, a curious and intelligent individual who wants to understand. You will be just a symbol there, and as you know, symbols kill reality. And people, quite often.”

She was worried that the whole world depended on George W. Bush. I tried to reassure her that, although George W. Bush is of very limited intelligence, he knows it, and he does not try to buck the advice of the people behind him, who are very smart. They have no genuine concerns for the world beyond America, but they are smart enough to understand the limits of their power and the consequences of their actions.

I lived through the Vietnam War, when war protesters allowed the American flag to become a symbol not of America, but of support for the war. This was a very bad development. Since then, I have not been able to look at displays of the flag but with suspicion. In 1988, in what I believe was the greatest desecration of the flag in my lifetime, George Bush pre managed to turn the flag into a symbol of the Republican Party and a coded message that children of Greek immigrants were not real Americans.

So I can't say I was delighted when American flags sprouted all over after September 11. I found it interesting that the people who flew the flags the highest were the people who before had had the greatest contempt for New Yorkers and everything to do with New York (illustrating—for Americans, ironically—the Arab saying, “My brother and I against my cousin; my brother, my cousin and I against the world.”) I liked a comment I read on a web site somewhere; a woman who saw an “I ♥ NEW YORK” bumper sticker in California called it “the thinking person's flag.” On the other hand, my colleague Drew McDermott has an eloquent argument on his web site for why the Left should not let the “My Country Right or Wrong” people claim the flag as their own.

My Italian friend lives in a country, whose prime minister, Silvio Berlusconi, leads a party called Forza Italia, which loosely translated means “Go Italy!” It's as though we had a political party called “U! S! A!” So she understands this flag-waving phenomenon.

The way she put it was this: “I understand the need to cry all together, but why should we all be stupid together?”

*

On the other hand, I also wrote to my Italian friend in that first email message, “My first reaction to the events of yesterday was ‘Nuke Kabul!’”
Stupidity is has its temptations.

*

Yet flags have not lost their appeal entirely for me. Several months later at the opening ceremony of the Winter Olympics, a color guard marched in carrying the large torn flag from the World Trade Center, to utter silence, and I found it unspeakably moving.

*

Analysis of causes is important in cases of disaster, if only to avoid the disaster again. Shortly after the attack there began to be a few articles on “why they hate us”. But human beings naturally interpret questions about causes ethically as searches for justifications, and the general feeling, quite rightly, was that nothing can justify the September 11 attacks. Our simple-minded President’s simple-minded framing of the War Against Terrorism as a matter of good versus evil then did much to suppress serious analysis.

*

My first stop was Ankara, Turkey, where I visited a Turkish colleague, and went to his place for dinner. When I asked his precocious eight-year-old daughter, who was amazingly fluent in English, what she wanted to be when she grew up, she said, “An architecture—architect.”

“What kind of buildings do you want to build?” I asked.

“Not long ones”—she meant ‘tall’—“because they fall down and kill people.”

*

My Turkish colleague said he agreed wholeheartedly with America’s War on Terrorism. He said especially we should go after the Kurds. And we should go after the countries that harbor them, especially Germany and Belgium.

*

Atatürk, the founder of modern Turkey, rejected Islam as the basis for the new Turkish state, instead striving to make it more like the West. Turkey became a secular state. My colleague said that in the 1980s the Turkish government reversed itself and made a bargain with the Turkish fundamentalists. It allowed them to thrive in exchange for their support against the Kurds. Now the fundamentalists constitute about 25% of the electorate, especially in eastern Turkey. The shadoor, once banned, has come back, and the fundamentalists have terrorists of their own.

*

At the Ali Baba Hotel in the desolate town of Derinkuyu, Turkey, the proprietor told me there were no rooms available. The hotel looked empty, but he said a Yugoslav tour was due to arrive soon. He asked my nationality, and when I said American, he became much more anxious to do something for me. He brought me tea. He offered to let me stay in the third bed of a three-bed room with two Turkish men. I declined. He showed me a tiny triangular room with two single beds jammed into it. He said he'd let me into someone else's room to use the bathroom, and that he'd be sharing the triangular room with me. I declined again. Finally it turned out that a twenty-mile drive through the night would bring me to another hotel, and he called ahead to reserve me a room. As I left, he said he was trying so hard to do something for me because "You are an American, and I don't want to discriminate."

*

In a park in Sanliurfa in southeastern Turkey, near the Syrian border, I was approached by three Kurdish high-school students who wanted to practice their English. I asked what percentage of people in Sanliurfa were Kurdish. They said it was about one-third Turkish, one-third Kurdish, one-third Arab. I asked if they studied the Kurdish language in school. They said no, to do that they would need a government of their own. I pretended to look around, and said, "Shhh." They laughed.

I recalled a conversation I once had with my colleague Hans Uzkoreit, a German linguist. I told him about my visit with a linguist in Brazil and his attempts to preserve the dying Indian languages, and how the Indians themselves look down on their own languages. Hans formulated what seemed to me

to be exactly the right policy countries should have concerning language. Everyone should learn three languages—the language of their home community, the language of their nation, and the international language, which right now happens to be English. If any two of these are the same, that gives the student the opportunity to learn another language. This struck me as eminently rational, so much more so than the Serbs' attempt to suppress Albanian in Kosovo, that led to the war there, and the Turkish attempt to suppress Kurdish, that led to the Kurdish terrorism of the last decade.

*

In the ruins of the castle in Harran I met a Turkish man who spoke English. He introduced me to his veiled wife and his father. When I told him I was American, he expressed sorrow for the World Trade Center attack. He asked me if I had lost anyone I knew in the attack. I told him Thomas's story.

I have always told the stories of my narrow escapes as adventures, and now my boys do too. William told me about crash landing a small plane that way, and about carrying the bloody carcass of a deer over his shoulders in Alaska shortly after spotting a Kodiak bear, and about being attacked in a bar by his girl friend's husband, who fortunately was unarmed. And I repeat the stories as adventures. Thomas told his story of the World Trade Center attack as an adventure, and that's the way I repeated it to people. But I noticed that every time I told the story, as I described the falling debris, my voice broke.

The Turkish man did not take the story as an adventure, but as a narrowly averted private tragedy amidst a huge public horror, which indeed it was.

*

Normally I hate having guides. What they tell you is something you already know, something that isn't true, something you'll forget right away, or all three. As I entered Harran, I was accosted by two very obnoxious teenage boys in coats and ties who wanted to be my guide. The one named Ibrahim stuck to me like a burr and ignored all my requests to leave me alone.

A little boy about nine years old started walking beside me as well. He spoke almost no English. I asked his name, and he puffed his chest out and said, "I'm Ibrahim!" I asked him to be my guide, in hopes of chasing big Ibrahim off. Big Ibrahim said, "You should have two guides." He said something in

Arabic to little Ibrahim, and little Ibrahim said to me, “You should have two guides.”

I ignored big Ibrahim and went where little Ibrahim led me.

When I was ready to leave, I pulled little Ibrahim behind a wall, out of sight of big Ibrahim, and gave him two million Turkish lira (\$1.20) for being my guide. I did it in secret because I was afraid big Ibrahim would steal it from him. Little Ibrahim was delighted. But he was not too bright. He soon flashed the two bills at big Ibrahim. Big Ibrahim made a grab for them, but didn’t get them. Then he told little Ibrahim to ask me for three million lira. Suggestible as he was, little Ibrahim assumed an angry, ugly look and demanded, “Uç milyon!” (3 million). I responded by grabbing his hand, pretending to take back the two million. In panic he cried, “Tamam! Tamam!” (Okay), and I released him. When I got in my car, I reached out to shake his hand. He angrily refused. But when I started to roll up the window, he suddenly extended his hand and we shook.

*

In the town of Kozluk, east of Diyarbakir, Turkey, I stopped at a roadside café. I nodded to a group of men as I sat down at an empty table. One asked where I was from. “California,” I said. He turned to the other men and said, “America.” They all eyed me narrowly as though I were a representative of the Devil. They were Kurdish. I asked the proprietor for a Pepsi, and he sent his boy to get one from another store.

I took out a piece of paper and asked them what the Kurdish word for “thank you” is—“sipasdikim”. I wrote it down. They asked me to join them. I did, and asked them more words. “How are you” is “çewan”. “Good” is “beshim”. “Good morning” is “roza beshim”. The boy returned with the Pepsi, and I said, “Sipasdikim.” He was shocked. I asked what the word was for “goodbye” and they said something like “dikhatiriete.” When I left, I said that as best I could.

Sometimes I do something right. I had turned them into experts with something to teach me. I had learned something useful as a result, and perhaps for a brief time made them feel a little friendlier towards Americans.

*

In Trabzon I met Tony, a 60-year-old retired English college lecturer, now an expat here. He said we Yanks had stood beside his Brits many times, and they would stand by us now. He said we should just wipe out the nest of vipers. Then he told me the United States would have been better off if we had never left the British Empire. King George III would never have let us treat the Indians the way we did. We talked on, and before we were through, he had told me that his earliest memory was of his father, a stranger, coming home from the war and taking his Mummy's attention away from him.

*

In Amasya, Turkey, two high school kids wanted to practice their English. The girl was named Esra, and the boy something like Çari. He looked typical, but she was thin, and had a short punk haircut and an irreverent style. I said Amasya was the nicest town I had seen in Turkey. "Maybe for old people," Esra said. She wanted to live in Ankara, and was looking forward to going to university there, where she wants to study American literature and culture. Eventually she wanted to end up in Los Angeles. Not Çari. He wanted to come back to Amasya after university and go into the tourist industry.

I asked their views of Islam. Çari said he believed, but he didn't pray, or go to mosque. Esra said she had nothing to do with religion. It was clear she chafed against their treatment of women. Çari saw nothing wrong with it. He said women were fortunate that they didn't have to go to mosque—they could pray at home. It was okay with Çari that Turkey is a man's world. It wasn't okay with Esra.

I wanted to know how typical Esra was, so I asked how many girls in her class wore scarves. She said only two out of fourteen, but no one made fun of them for it.

*

Antakya, the former Roman Antioch, belongs to Turkey, but it lies almost on the border with Syria. It has been ruled by Muslims for the last 800 years, but in Byzantine times it was a locus of Christian culture and scholarship, and it was the seat of a Crusader kingdom after that. I wondered what the percentages today were of Turks and Arabs, and of the percentages of Muslims and Christians. But I couldn't find out. Whenever I asked someone, the answer was always the same: "Everyone here gets along."

*

In Aleppo I asked Samir, a young man who ran a carpet store, what he thought of the World Trade Center attack. He said that it didn't make sense that the hijackers acted alone. They had to have had the backing of some government to pull off something that complicated. He suspected the Chinese, because of all the problems America has had with the Chinese in the last few years—the spy plane, bombing the embassy. But, I said, the perpetrators were Arab. They were just the tools, he replied. “Or another possibility,” he said. “You have to ask who profits from it. The dollar will go down, and the euro will go up. The Europeans could have been behind the attack.”

What I found heartening about these theories was that they were denials of blame. The people could have responded with claims of credit instead.

*

On the computer in Samir's carpet shop I found my son's web site with its pictures of the World Trade Center attack. He did not seem particularly interested. When I showed a picture of the World Trade Center in smoke, just before the collapse of the South Tower, taken from the Brooklyn Bridge, Samir saw right past the smoke and fire, focused on the other tall buildings, and said, “In my next life, I want to be born in America.”

*

Dave and Julie, the two Americans I met in Palmyra, Syria, told me a story that had all the earmarks of an urban legend. A week before a friend of a friend was walking down the street in London, saw a man lose his wallet, and picked it up and gave it back to him. The man was an Arab, and he said to the friend of a friend, “I'll do you a favor. Stay out of central London three weeks from now.” The friend of a friend went to the police to report this, and was shown a book of mugshots. He picked out the man. It was a known terrorist the police had been looking for for a long time.

*

Dave and I went for dinner at a local restaurant. His driver, Hajji Mehmet, sat down with us for a minute or two. He was pleased that I knew from his

name that he had been to Mecca. I asked him what he thought would happen in Palestine. He was very uncomfortable and said little, and soon left us for a table with the other drivers. Dave and I remarked on Syrians' reluctance to discuss politics, in any form.

*

At the archeological site of Mari near the Iraqi border in Syria, I sat down with a group of half a dozen Arab men hanging around the ticket office. They gave me tea. I said I was an American, and a serious conversation ensued, of which I understood nothing. I of course imagined they were saying nasty things about the United States, and about me as an exemplar. I caught occasional words in Arabic. A truck driver, in leaving, as he stood by the door, closed his remarks with "Abadan!"—"Never!" A man in the middle of the group said a sentence that in the middle had the words "arba'a auu khamsa"—"four or five".

They asked me if I knew Arabic. I said, "Atakkallam al-'arabiia qaliilan, laakin afham la shaii," which I think means "I speak a little Arabic, but I understand nothing." Then I amended it: "Afham kalimaat"—"I understand words." I said, "Abadan," pointing toward the door, and "khamsa," pointing toward the man in the middle. They laughed.

They asked if I had children. I always carry pictures of my family when I travel, since that is a universal connection. They gathered around to look. I showed my parents and told their ages and how healthy they are. I showed pictures of my boys, and told their ages and where they live. Then I showed a picture of Cynthia. It was not an unusual picture—just her head from the shoulders up, with her blonde hair. No one said anything, but from the interest they showed, I had a feeling I had done something wrong, as if I had just shown strangers a nude picture of my wife.

*

I went to an internet café in Aleppo before catching a bus to Hama. There was email from my mother telling me to read the State Department's warning and come home. It was no time for Americans to be traveling anywhere. I replied with a reassuring note about how friendly the people were, that I knew wouldn't reassure.

*

At breakfast in the Sultan Hotel my first morning in Damascus, I met a Belgian couple who had just been in Jordan. They said the people there do not at all avoid talking about politics, and the anti-American feeling is strong, and very much counter to King Abdullah's position. But the people there think of the king as a muppet, they said; he barely speaks Arabic, and he's completely out of touch with the people. The American government is talking to the wrong Arabs if they think there is broad Arab support for the War against Terrorism, they said.

*

I found an internet café near the Umayyad Mosque in Damascus. The terminals were all occupied, so I sat down to wait. Everyone else there was a teenager, but unlike the other internet cafes I had been to, half of them were girls. Next to me was a very cute teenage girl, who told me the line went very fast. She was bright and self-assured and spoke excellent English, with an American accent that she couldn't explain. Maybe movies. Her father was Yemeni, her mother Italian and in the Italian diplomatic corps. She had lived in Damascus for five years. We talked about how safe Damascus is, and how that's one of the benefits of a repressive government. She said that Syria has a law that if a man talks to a woman and she doesn't like it, all she has to do is tell the police and they will arrest him.

I scooted over an inch farther away from her. She looked at me puzzled, and then laughed.

*

On a bus from Damascus to the old Roman ruin of Bosra I sat next to a good-looking, self-confident Syrian man who said he had lots of friends in America, including a woman in Connecticut and a woman studying English literature at Duke University. He showed me a letter a woman friend in New York had written him after September 11, describing how the day-long smell of ash and dust had been replaced by the smell of candles burning at a vigil at Columbia University.

He said he didn't think Osama bin Laden had the capability of launching an attack like September 11th's. Like many Arabs, he suspected the Israelis.

It was from him that I first heard the story that four thousand Jews stayed home from work at the World Trade Center that day. I tried to convince him of the implausibility of none of those four thousand Jews warning an Italian or Irish or Puerto Rican friend.

He then drew for me various cartoons that he had seen that implicated the Jews. One showed the paths of the planes forming a Star of David. I told him he should distinguish between Israelis that are in favor of driving the Palestinians out of the West Bank, surely a minority, and those who want to live in peace with the Arabs. He had never heard of the latter. I told him every Israeli I know has worked for peace with the Arabs. But I don't think the message took, and when I didn't respond to his anti-Jewish jokes, the conversation died.

Later in the day I saw him walking a middle-aged German woman around the Roman ruins. A little after that I saw him at a table in the restaurant he had said he owned, but seemed to be owned by an older man. He bragged that the German woman had propositioned him and that he had turned her down.

*

In early October a Russian airliner was shot down over Ukraine by a surface-to-air missile. The passengers were mostly Israelis of Russian origin. The theory that I heard several times from Arabs was that the passengers were rich and were returning to Russia with their fortunes, something Ariel Sharon wanted to discourage. So he had the Mossad shoot the plane down.

*

At breakfast my last morning in Damascus I learned that the lead story on Arabic news was that the United States was considering targeting Damascus after disposing of Afghanistan. Apparently it was an ill-considered hypothetical in a statement by a deputy secretary of state.

*

I met a French couple, Benjamin and É, disembarking from the plane at the Sanaa airport in Yemen. We got rooms in the same hotel in the old town of Sanaa and went out to dinner together that night. We talked about Afghanistan. É thought America should have waited longer for the truth

to out about the World Trade Center attack; more diplomatic efforts should have been made. I said Bush had to respond somehow. He couldn't just tighten airport security. He had to overthrow a government, and what better government than the Taliban in Afghanistan. Benjamin agreed with me. É said the United States was being the policeman to the world. I said in many cases that was true, but in this case it was a legitimate response to a direct attack, no matter who would or wouldn't join our side.

They had been traveling in India, and had planned to travel in Iran, but the war intervened and they decided to go straight to Yemen instead. They were at the base camp of Nambat Prabat outside Gilgit when the attack happened, and they didn't hear about it until the next day.

We grabbed a taxi back to the hotel. It shook on the cobblestones of the old town like it was about to fall apart. When we arrived, I gave the driver 50 rials. "Khamsiin?!?" he shouted. So there was a dispute. I asked the hotel clerk what was fair. He took the driver's side and said 150 rials was fair, no, 250 rials. So we gave him 150 rials and lost trust in the hotel clerk.

*

As I walked around the old town of Sanaa, camera around my neck, I had lots of miniconversations with men on the street. They all wanted their picture taken, except the ones whose picture I wanted to take.

A man called out to me—"Amriki!" I think it was a man I had told the night before that I was an American. He asked me about "Boosh". I thought I should say something we both could agree on, so I pointed to my head and then held my fingers close together, saying "Saughir"—small. He laughed.

I was finding my way to the Grand Mosque when a young man started walking with me. He spoke pretty good English. In front of the mosque, which I could not enter, he pointed out a building that was as old as the mosque, 600s A.D. Yemen was one of the first countries to convert to Islam. He led me to a building called the Samsarat, where I had heard there was a good view from the roof. We went up two flights of stairs but then found the door locked. I told him I wanted to go back to my hotel. He asked for money. I offered him 50 rials. He said no, 300 rials at least. I shook my head, put away my 50 rials and walked off. He followed me, continuing to ask for 300 rials. I merely answered "Shukran"—thank you—each time. Then he said, "Okay, give me 50 rials." I said no and kept walking. When he finally realized

he'd get nothing, he shouted at me, "I think you don't like Yemeni people!" and stalked off.

*

My second night in Sanaa I went to an internet café near my hotel. In Yahoo news I read that an unnamed State Department official had said that four terrorist attacks had been thwarted since September 11, including a plot to blow up the American Embassy in Yemen.

On my way out I met a young man from Canada, here to study Arabic. "Don't tell people you're an American," he suggested. He said he had heard kids on the street say, "I want to kill an American!" I told him I often say I'm a Canadian, but that's mostly when I'm behaving badly. He said that's when he says he's an American.

*

The afternoon of my second day in Sanaa I took a taxi 15 kilometers out of town to Wadi Dhahr, where there is a charming castle perched on top of a rock pillar. As I walked toward the castle two men asked me where I was from. When I said America, one reacted with shock and seething anger.

When I wanted to return to Sanaa just before dark, there were no taxis or buses or any other obvious form of transportation. I went up to a couple of men sitting in a car and offered them 500 rials to take me back to town. I think they would have done it for free. A third man got in the car and we were off. They had two large plastic bags of fresh qat leaves. Qat is Yemen's mild stimulant, about equivalent to coffee or tea. They offered, I accepted, and they were so charmed that an American would chew qat that the entire half-hour trip they picked the best, tenderest leaves off the qat branches and gave them to me. It still tasted like leaves. To improve the quality of our conversation, I pulled out my notes on Arabic and looked up a few words. The man sitting in the back seat with me looked over my notes and used them to invite me to dinner. I used them to decline. I said I had plans, but it was my stomach I was worried about.

They let me off at Maydan at-Tahrir, the main square of the new town, and I walked back to my hotel, spitting out bits of qat at every isolated stretch of street.

*

Back at my hotel I met Heinz, an Austrian doctor working for the UN in Syria and on vacation in Yemen, on the roof veranda, where he had recommended the photography in the late afternoon light. Benjamin and É had changed to a cheaper nearby hotel, and I saw É on its roof, hanging out laundry. We waved. I had been to the National Museum that morning. The first floor was remains of the pre-Islamic civilizations—mostly just pottery shards, but some wonderful inscriptions in the ancient South Arabian scripts. The second floor was Islamic art. As we sat at a table over tea on the roof of our hotel, I told Heinz that it was at the museum that it occurred to me that “Islamic art” is a contradiction in terms. A great civilization, and their highest artistic achievement is beautiful bathroom tiles. Islamic art is art that is created in spite of the strictures of Islam. He pretended to look around for eavesdroppers, and then agreed with me.

This is not true of the architecture. The mosques, madrasas, palaces, and city gates are wonderful.

*

After dinner I went to the internet café again. I spent fifteen minutes on a computer that was glacially slow, and never got to my Yahoo mail. So the guy who ran the place, a kid of about 20, gave me his computer. I typed up my schedule for circling Yemen, but the connection crashed before I could send it. The guy was able to rescue my message and reboot, and I sent the schedule to Cynthia.

As I was leaving, the guy wanted to talk to me. He said he had been on a chatroom discussing the terrorist attacks. He told the American he was chatting with that he was Yemeni. The American cut him off completely and closed down the chatroom. He was clearly hurt by this, and wanted to know why the American had done that.

I tried to explain that the American felt anger about the attack, but had no way to express that anger. Then a Yemeni, an Arab, comes along. Here’s a way to express the anger. It would be as if Yemeni children in the street threw stones at me because I was American. It wouldn’t be personal.

*

I had a long conversation with Faraj, my driver in Yemen, at dinner in the town of Al-Baidha. We agreed that in their negotiations with the Taliban for the arrest of Osama bin Laden, the Bush administration had not taken adequate account of the concept of Arab hospitality. It was possible that something could have been negotiated had the Americans not simply bullied their way in.

Then he asked me why the supporters of Al Gore had accepted the results of the 2000 election. Why hadn't they gone to the streets and overthrown Bush. I explained that there is a respect for the institutions of government in America that overrides politics, even when those very institutions abuse their power for political ends.

I said I thought Vice-president Dick Cheney was the man really in charge in America, and he was surprised and interested.

*

As we stopped at a police post the next day, the policemen heard I knew a little Arabic. They surrounded me, showed me a lottery ticket, and asked me to read it. I sounded out the words slowly, not knowing what any of them meant. They were delighted at my proficiency.

*

At another police post, a soldier invited me to eat with them. Half a dozen of them, including Faraj, were sitting under a thatched shelter gathered around a large tray of chicken, onions, and rice. I fell backwards when I sat down, and they enjoyed that move. I reached in and grabbed a piece of white meat whenever I saw one. I picked up the rice with my fingers and sometimes ate it directly from my fingertips and sometimes let it slide into my palm, as they did. I was much less adept at this than they were, and by the end I had rice in my shirt pocket and rice all over my shirt and pants and a trail of rice between me and the plate. Then they poured some sort of yogurt mix onto the plate and brought out some rolls, and we all dipped into the yogurt with the bread. I feigned full early.

Afterwards Faraj told me I was the first tourist he had driven around who had eaten with the soldiers like that. He started calling me "adventurous Jerry".

*

In the city of Al-Mukalla along the coast of the Arabian Sea, Faraj recommended we stay in a resort hotel on the beach and eat at an outdoor restaurant next-door. He pointed out the Holiday Inn down the beach a bit, and said it was owned by the bin Laden family. I had never considered it before, but I realized from the sinking feeling inside me that I could not stay or eat anywhere they owned. He assured me that *our* hotel and restaurant weren't owned by them.

*

Shortly after we entered the Wadi Hadramawt region, we passed the turnoff to Wadi al-Qasr. Faraj said that Osama bin Laden was born in a village there, near the town of Al-Hurayda. He lived there for six years before being taken to Saudi Arabia to live with his father. His mother still lives in the village. Faraj suggested America should capture her and hold her until Osama bin Laden turns himself in.

*

In Shibam in the late afternoon Faraj drove me across the wadi to the hill opposite the town and waited for me while I walked up to a tower famous for its views of Shibam at sunset. An 11-year-old boy named Muhammad picked me up and guided me there and up dark stairs to the mud and straw roof. As I watched the light change on the skyscrapers of Shibam, I heard him say to himself, as though practicing, that he wanted "alf rial" (1000 rials). He led me back to the car. I gave him 50 rials. He naturally asked for more. I came to think of this as the Arabic way of saying "thank you". From this perspective, Intifada II is the Palestinian way of saying "thank you" for the Israelis' generous offer of land for peace.

That evening I went to a small restaurant near the city gate. A young man who spoke a little English invited me to join him, and I did. A group of men were playing cards in the corner. The cook looked like he was just heating up pita bread, but when I asked for that, he held up an egg as well, so I got an egg sandwich. Then who should come in but the 11-year-old Muhammad. He saw me and stuck his tongue out at me. I explained to everyone else that I had given him 50 rials but he had wanted 1000.

*

At the gas station at the turnoff to Ma'rib I took a picture of a cute little girl with Ethiopian features who was begging there, and I gave her 20 rials. She waved to me later and I waved back. She waved to me again, and I waved back again. Faraj told her something in Arabic, and we drove off. As we drove away, he told me what he had told her. He had told her I wanted to marry her.

*

As we drove into Sanaa after seven days circling the country, we saw something I had not seen before I left. Kids were selling tapes of Osama bin Laden's speeches on the street corners. They were not selling these tapes in and among other tapes of other people. Only Osama bin Laden, and people were snatching them up. As we waited at a stoplight, Faraj took a tape from one of the boys and popped it into his tape deck. He asked me if I wanted to buy it. I was tempted. From the screaming maniac we see in the short clips shown of Hitler in the American media, it is very difficult to understand how he could have had such an appeal to the German people. But a friend of mine who knew German and had watched movies of entire speeches could understand his power as an orator. Was it the same with Osama bin Laden? Could I, in spite of not knowing Arabic, catch something of the power of his rhetoric? As the tape played, I began to feel I could. But at the same time, I felt a very great revulsion at the horror he had committed, and by the time the light turned green, I asked Faraj to give the tape back to the boy.

*

Heinz had raved about the great views from the roof of our hotel, so I set out to climb up there. From the roof garden restaurant I climbed a flight of stairs and out a window onto a small balcony. A ladder there ended three feet short of the top of the wall around the roof. I stepped on an unstable wooden eave and a pipe and hoisted myself over the mud adobe wall and onto the roof. I stepped gingerly over the cables of the satellite dish and moved as close as I dared to the low wall protecting me from a tumble six stories down to the street below, in order to take pictures. Stretching from the roof to the top

rung of the ladder on my way down was even more problematic; it took me five minutes to get up the nerve to trust my handhold on the pipe.

Across from the window I climbed back in was the employees' lounge, and the desk clerk and two of his friends were sitting there chewing qat. They invited me in and offered me some. We talked about Yemen and America.

Then the desk clerk said that one of his friends had quipped while I was up on the roof, "If he falls off, America will give us all the electric chair."

*

My last day in Yemen I walked around the Old Jewish Quarter of Sanaa, whose former inhabitants have long since emigrated to Israel. As I walked through the narrow streets, I had my usual banter with the gangs of children I passed. I passed some boys playing soccer. They asked my name, and asked for pens. I don't think I told them where I was from. They followed me around a corner. Then one kid ran up and slapped my daypack. I turned and saw him running away. I reached the main street. Another kid threw a pebble that hit me in the ankle and ran away. About a block later another kid threw a pebble that hit me in the back of the leg and then dashed into an alley. I ignored them.

*

My last night in Sanaa I returned to my hotel after going around the city all day. The electricity in the neighborhood was out, but the hotel's restaurant had its own generator. I went in and sat with a German man and his driver. The German had grown up in a small village in Bavaria south of Munich, but he went to Berkeley in the '60s, became a radical, and never looked back. He had worked in Mali and Senegal, and now had worked in Yemen for three years in school construction.

He said "Almania" (Germany) is a good word in Yemen. There were two reasons for this: lots of tourists and aid, and Germany's history with the Jews.

"Talk about being liked for the wrong reason!" I said.

"Yes," he said.

He excused himself early, saying he had an appointment with a woman about school construction. What I found remarkable about this was the idea of a man talking to a woman in Yemen.

*

The morning I left Sanaa I got up at 4 a.m. and finally figured out how to take a hot shower by tracing pipes and wires to determine which valves to open and which switches to toggle. When I checked out of the hotel, the clerk who spoke English was roused. The room was \$14 a night, and I gave him \$30 for the \$28 bill. He said he didn't have change. But I saw a bunch of bills in the drawer. Finally he gave me the two-dollar change. Then he pulled out a bill for 100 rials for phone calls I had made the day before confirming my flights. I paid it, leaving me with exactly the taxi fare to the airport.

On the way through the empty pre-dawn streets, the taxi driver got a call on his cell phone. It was the hotel clerk, and he wanted to talk to me. He said I had stayed *three* days, not two, from the 22nd to the 24th. "That *is* two days," I said. He thought a bit and then agreed. I began a diatribe against him with "You. . ." but cut it short with "Have a nice day."

At the airport the man who stood in front of the X-ray machine putting suitcases on the conveyor belt said, "Give me money." I ignored him.

*

On the flight from Sanaa to Cairo I read the English-language Yemen Times. Whether or not we view the "War on Terrorism" as the USA versus the Arabs, they certainly do.

*

At the Damascus airport I got a taxi into town for 400 Syrian pounds. As we left the parking lot, two men appeared out of the night and asked if they could have a ride into town. I asked if they would split the cost—"Mi'tiin. Mi'tiin." (200. 200) They disappeared. The driver said, "Very good. Very good."

*

In the minibus I took through the Beqqa Valley in Lebanon, I had a conversation with a man from Beirut about Canada, which is where I said I was from. My apologies to Canadians, but come on! This was the Beqqa Valley, where in the 1980s kidnap victims were held tied up for years on end.

They let me off in Chtoura on the main road, and I caught a shared taxi for Damascus. I sat in the middle of the front seat, between the driver and a moderately attractive young Lebanese woman with spangles in her lipstick. She was the first woman I had sat next to in the Middle East. We talked to each other a little, but we had hardly any language in common.

*

At breakfast in the Sultan Hotel in Damascus, I struck up a conversation with a British man named Peter Maxwell, who worked for a humanitarian food aid organization, Save the Children, in northern Iraq, the part not under Saddam Hussein's control but under Kurdish control. The Kurds are doing relatively well, and are the closest to being independent that they have ever been. He had been in Iraq for three years, and spent six years in Bosnia before that.

We talked about the difficulty of defining terrorism. Terrorism is directed against established governments, so naturally established governments can agree to battle terrorism. A good-versus-evil war against terrorism is a war to maintain the status quo. But some terrorism, such as the Palestinian actions, seems to be the only way to battle an injustice by an otherwise powerless people. On the other hand, he felt the Northern Ireland terrorism was illegitimate since there are democratic institutions through which to channel discontent. Of course some would challenge the fairness and efficacy of the democratic institutions.

*

The countryside south of Damascus was flat rock desert, except in many places where fields have been cleared of stones and plowed. Occasional low mountain ranges in the distance.

At the Jordanian border a man climbs into a pit and the car drives over it so he can check underneath. Pleasant job. The car is searched thoroughly, the luggage less so. Are they looking for terrorists?

Northern Jordan was much like southern Syria.

*

In Petra as I began a long hot afternoon hike up to the “Monastery” a young man, a local, insisted I take his donkey. “One hour walking. Twenty minutes on donkey,” he said. I said “No”, and “Shukran” with the right negative intonation, and “La shukran” again and again, but he persisted. He stuck to my side. So I tried to walk in a way that would run him into a bush. He stopped. I stopped. I started again. So did he. I tried to walk him into a rock. He stopped again.

Finally he said, “What just happened?”

I said, “Everyone else here in Petra respects the tourists, and when they say ‘no thank you’ they leave them alone. Except you.”

He left me alone.

*

In Al-Baidha, Yemen, a dusty, garbage-strewn town in the middle of the desert, a boy I had engaged as a guide asked me if I was Muslim. Two days later in Shibam some boys I passed asked the same thing. An eight-year-old boy in a Bedouin tent where I had stopped for tea near Petra, Jordan, pointed at me, bowed toward Mecca saying, “Allah akbar,” and pointed inquisitively at me again. If adults were around, they would shush the children, seeing my embarrassment. I did not know how to answer this question when asked by children, who have such a rigid view of how the world should be.

At a Jordanian resort on the Dead Sea I met a Slovenian banker who spent much time in Palestine. I told him about these experiences, and asked how he handled them. He said he freely told Arabs he met that he was an atheist. He said it always led to good discussions as they tried to persuade him to convert.

*

In the Caravan Hotel in Amman I met a tall thin Dutch man from The Hague who spoke excellent Arabic. He had studied in Holland for a year and then in Amman for six months, and then had worked as a tour guide in Syria and Jordan. On this trip he was on his way to Dubai where he was going to arrange an exhibition of some Dutch artists he represented.

Another man joined us. He was from Baghdad, the first and only Iraqi I met on this trip, and maybe ever. I got up and shook his hand. He dealt in Iraqi carpets, and was also on his way to Dubai on business. He unfortunately

spoke little English, so it was impossible to engage in deeper conversation, which I would have loved to do.

An older, dignified Jordanian man joined us. He bragged about how much of the world he had seen; I avoided a pissing contest. I asked him the attitudes in Jordan about the World Trade Center attack and about Afghanistan. He said every reasonable person was horrified by the World Trade Center attack. It was completely against Islamic principles, he said. Islam is a peaceful religion. But he said a distinction had to be made between terrorism and legitimate resistance to oppression. About Afghanistan he said that people objected to the high level of civilian casualties, but did not object to the military targets.

He, I, and the Iraqi talked about the Gulf War. The Jordanian said that all the U.S. cares about is oil, and that's why they didn't go on to Baghdad. They had recovered the oil as soon as they had retaken Kuwait. I said I thought the reason was that the first Bush administration wanted Saddam Hussein to remain in power, because they were afraid the alternative was the Islamic fundamentalists. The Jordanian was incredulous at this idea—Bush wanted to keep Saddam Hussein in power?! Impossible!

But the Iraqi man smiled and gave me the thumbs up. He said he'd been a soldier in the Gulf War, and he remembered American planes guarding Saddam's helicopters as they attacked the fundamentalist Shi'ites in the south.

III. A History of Anatolia in Sixteen Sites

I rented a car in Ankara and drove to and around Cappadocia—Göreme, Sari Han, Ihlara Gorge, Kaymakli. From there I headed east to Nemrud Dag, a mountain top with giant sculpted heads, and south to Sanliurfa and Harran. I drove to Lake Van at the eastern end of Turkey and skirted Mount Ararat north to the medieval capital of Armenia at Ani. Then I descended to the Black Sea, Trabzon, and Sümela Monastery. I followed the coast of the Black Sea west and then cut south to Amasya and the Hittite ruins at Hattuşaş, before returning to Ankara.

After turning my car in, I took a bus south to Antakya and another bus to Aleppo in Syria.

6500 B.C.

I didn't go to the archaeological site of Çatal Höyük, but I suspect there is nothing there but some foundations of houses. It was an agricultural village 100 miles southwest of what is now Ankara, and it dates from 6500 B.C., about a thousand years after agriculture was first invented. Agriculture of the type that dominates Europe and North America today originated in Anatolia, according to current theories, and spread from there east, west and south. As population grew, new land to the west was cleared by successive generations, until the technology had spread to shores of the Atlantic Ocean and farmers had overwhelmed the hunters and gatherers who could occupy that land only a fraction as densely. According to less popular theories, they carried their speech with them, spreading the Indo-European family of languages to its worldwide distribution today.

The Museum of Anatolian Civilizations down the hill from the Citadel in the Old Town of Ankara is one of the two best museums I visited in my trip through the Middle East. Housed in a 15th century building and surrounded by a lovely garden, its collection is small but of very high quality. Among its many remarkable pieces, the one I found most stunning was a wall painting from Çatal Höyük that could barely be made out, even with the help of the explanation. In the foreground were the horizontal straight lines representing the houses of a village. In the rear was an erupting volcano. Painting goes back 30,000 years or more, but all the cave paintings we have are of isolated figures of animals or people. This may be the earliest *landscape* painting ever discovered. In all likelihood, it represented an actual event that the painter had seen. If so, then it is the earliest report we have of an actual event by an eyewitness. This painting is an exclamation of awe—an exclamation that we hear now across eighty-five centuries—awe at an event that would awe us still today, uttered by a person who lived in a village very much like the agricultural villages in Turkey a century ago, and who may well have been an ancestor to many of the people living in Europe, India and Iran, the Americas, and Australia today.

1750-1200 B.C.

The history of Anatolia is obscure until the 1700s B.C. when the Hittites burst upon the scene to occupy center stage for the next 550 years. Scholars knew of brief references to the Hittites in the Bible, and then in Egyptian inscriptions. But the heart of the civilization wasn't discovered until 1905,

and its full importance was not realized until 1915 when the Czech scholar Friedrich Hrozny cracked the code with the brilliant hypothesis that Hittite was an Indo-European language, and the thousands of cuneiform tablets found in Hattuşaş could finally be read. At its furthest extent their empire covered most of Anatolia and much of Syria. They produced a respectable literature. Around 1600 a Hittite army marched down the Euphrates valley and conquered Babylon. In 1275 B.C., we know from an Egyptian inscription that they battled and defeated the Egyptian pharaoh Ramses II at Qadesh in present-day Syria.

The first of the Hittite ruins I saw were at the small village of Alaca Höyük, at seven in the morning as the village was just waking up. The site has an impressive gate with carved lions and a bas-relief of a priest pulling a goat to the altar, but otherwise the site is just a small area of stone foundations. But it was my first Hittite ruin, and I was thrilled.

I drove on to Hattuşaş, which was their capital, and here you could get a sense of how great the empire was. Not from the sort of magnificent architecture you see in Luxor in Egypt, because Hattuşaş, like Alaca Höyük, is little more than stone foundations. You can see why it lay unknown for thirty centuries. But it is lots of stone foundations. When I drove up to Yerkapi Gate at the top of the hill and looked back, I could imagine the huge city spread out below me down the hill and into the valley. Behind me was an artificial wall of earth topped by a defensive stone wall. Just below me were the foundations of half a dozen large temples. On a peak in the distance were the royal palace and citadel. Down at the bottom of the hill in the flats were the foundations of the Great Temple, surrounded by the foundations of the houses of a large residential area. It is one of those places that you have to bring a little knowledge to, and a lot of imagination, and that perhaps is why I was the only tourist there for two hours that morning, but for me it was a glorious morning of time travel 3500 years into the past.

300s B.C.

In 390 B.C. Xenophon was one of 10,000 Greek mercenary soldiers who marched with a Persian general to the heart of the empire to do battle in rebellion against the Persian emperor. They marched across the Cilician Gates, a pass in the Taurus Mountains in southern Anatolia, and continued on to Mesopotamia, where their Persian general was killed. They then, under Xenophon's leadership, beat their way back to Greece the length of northern

Anatolia, through the wildest parts of the country, battling the fierce inhabitants at every mountain pass.

Sixty years later, Alexander the Great marched the same route through the Taurus Mountains on his way to conquer the known world.

I took a bus from Ankara to Antakya, and I hoped we would go through the Cilician Gates in daylight. It was dusk when we did. When the road reached the Taurus Mountains, it turned east to follow the base of the range, and then it turned south to follow a canyon up through the bare fractal mountains.

It was dark when we passed by Iskenderun, where Alexander defeated the Persians in the Battle of Actium, sealing the fate of the Persian Empire.

214-63 B.C.

After the death of Alexander his empire was carved up by his various generals. The successors of Ptolemy ruled in Egypt after that, and the successors of Antiochus ruled Syria from Antioch. But in Anatolia Macedonian control quickly evaporated into a chaos of contending states. Starting in the late 200s B.C. for about 150 years, ascendancy was achieved by the kingdom of Pontus in central Anatolia, based in Amasya, until defeated by the Romans under Pompey.

Then as now the city was built along the two banks of a green river, called Yesilirmak (Green River). On the north side of the river the old Ottoman houses remain, balconies hanging over the river. Rising behind them are steep cliffs, and halfway up the cliffs are very large caves excavated from the stone to be the tombs of the kings of Pontus, a stunning site from a distance. I climbed up to look inside, but little remains today besides the bare chambers.

I like to read the original accounts of the great travelers of the past. There are not so many from the classical era, but there are a few writers who set out to describe the whole known world—Herodotus, Claudius Ptolemy, and Strabo. I've read everything that remains by these writers. Strabo was born and grew up in Amasya, several centuries after the era of the kings of Pontus, after Pompey had incorporated the region into the Roman Empire. As I stood on the ledge in front of one of the cave tombs, I realized that Strabo would have grown up looking at this very tomb from his home across the river.

162-62 B.C.

In southeastern Turkey there is a small and fertile region surrounded on three sides by mountains high enough to protect it from its neighbors. I glimpsed it first when I drove past a tumulus where the queens of the Kingdom of Commagene were buried, and continued over a low pass. Flat green fields spread out with a pleasant river meandering in their midst. At the head of the valley was a village with a bridge from Roman times crossing the river just as it emerges from a steep-walled canyon.

Commagene was contemporaneous with the kings of Pontus. It was on the border between the Antioch-based Seleucid Empire of Alexander's successors and the Parthian Empire, which controlled the trade routes of Persia. A local governor asserted his independence from the Seleucids around 150 B.C. Looking down from the pass, I could see how the topography favored this. Isolated, prosperous, and easily defended, the small kingdom thrived for a hundred years. Pompey swept through Anatolia with his Roman army, but Commagene's king had the good sense to ally with him, and Pompey left the king in charge of a client buffer state.

This king's name was Antiochus, and he was a megalomaniac. Little remains of his capital and his palace beyond some stone foundations, a couple of pedestals, and a syncretic bas-relief of him in Persian dress shaking hands with a classically nude Herakles. But his true legacy is on the top of the highest nearby mountain, Nemrud Dag. He had a tumulus of crushed rock built 150 meters above the mountain's summit and surrounded it with giant statues of the gods, himself among them as an equal. Today a dozen or so of their huge eight-foot high heads are standing at the base of the tumulus, one of the most remarkable sights in Turkey.

I drove up a long steep cobblestone road to get there just in time for sunset. A lineup of tourist vans was there as well. With the horde of people, as a young Israeli man I talked to said, it was like trying to meditate at a football game. But there is usually a reason popular destinations are popular. The giant heads seemed to come alive in the orange declining light, beneath the whirl of the helicopter bringing in a dignitary for the view.

300 B.C.-538 A.D.

Antakya, the ancient Antioch, was, after Rome and Alexandria, the third largest city in the Roman Empire. It was the effective capital of the east, and a center of Hellenistic culture.

It is a bit frustrating to visit it today, because the ancient city is so little in evidence. There are a few sights here and there, like St. Peter's Church. It is located in a cave that St. Peter is supposed to have preached in. The church is more modern, renovated most recently for a visit several years ago by Pope John Paul II. From the plaza in front of the church there is a view of the city, and the slope above it, now barren, that the ancient city covered. But it is not like Rome, where you can wander through a forum, a coliseum, and the ancient baths.

I went to the Antakya Archaeological Museum, where they have perhaps the best collection of Roman mosaics anywhere. On my way out I fell into conversation with an elderly gentleman who spoke excellent English and knew the history of Antioch well. He had spent his life in the tourist industry, but he spoke with the love and knowledge of a scholar. He described the ancient city to me. Its center is where the center of the modern city is, on the other side of the Orontes River. This side no one lived on; it was devoted to cemeteries. The city spread up the hill to the walls I could see fragments of on the high ridge. I could get the best idea of the ancient Roman Antioch wandering around the neighborhood near the Greek Orthodox Church, because there the streets followed the pattern they had in ancient times. The houses were not all that different as well.

I spent the afternoon exploring that neighborhood, trying to block out the cars and telephone lines and imagine the streets filled with men in togas.

307-1456 A.D.

In Cappadocia I went to the Göreme Open Air Museum, actually a natural and historical site they put a fence around. Chalky paths wended between large cones and into small chapels that had been carved in them in the Byzantine era. There were mediocre paintings on the walls of some of the chapels, and one chapel at the top of several flights of stairs carved into the cliff had a magnificent collection of wall paintings—the nativity, the Three Wise Men, the Last Supper with a large whole fish for an entrée, and the Crucifixion.

I left there and went down the road to an area called, at least on one map, the Valley of the Swords, perhaps because of the sharp cones. I climbed a hill topped by dozens of the cones and explored. There were tiny monk's cells over a thousand years old, small chapels, crude paintings. I sat on a promontory and watched the rocks and eroded hillside opposite go through shades of gold, orange, and purple in the setting sun.

In Kaymakli, a little south of Göreme, there is an entire underground city carved out of the volcanic tufa. Apparently it was easy to do, and good defense against the invading Muslim armies. I spent half an hour duckwalking through its low narrow passageways from cell to cell, following red arrows in and blue arrows out. It was like the maze of a computer game, without the dragons.

I ended my stay in Cappadocia by descending from the treeless plain into a forested canyon, Ihlara Gorge, and walking along a beautiful stream. It was the most pleasant natural site I visited in Turkey, but it was more than that. Every several hundred yards you could take a path up to the base of the cliff, and there would be a small chapel or two carved out of the rock, some with impressive façades, some with the remnants of once excellent Byzantine paintings.

Nearly all the paintings are defaced, literally and figuratively. The Muslim conquerors scraped the faces off because they did not believe in the depiction of human or animal forms. Even before that, the Byzantine Empire went through its own period of Iconoclasm in the 700s, when icons and paintings were destroyed in an attempt to return to the purity of the original Christianity. Mostly these barbarians just destroyed the faces. It has been the modern barbarians called tourists who have carved their initials in the gowns, and the camels, and the mangers and crucifixes. We have not advanced much in our appreciation for the artistic achievements of the past.

It is perhaps a measure of how turbulent the history of Anatolia has been that the Byzantine monks in search of peace had to retreat to such inaccessible places. The monastery of Sümla is a case in point. To get there, after a few misses, I turned off the main road south from Trabzon. The road climbed up a spectacularly steep and narrow canyon for 16 kilometers. I reached the park entrance, passed up a parking lot for the timid, and in first gear continued up a very steep one-lane, drop-off-the-edge road to the monastery three kilometers away. The last kilometer was on packed mud, puddled by the rain. I parked there, and hiked up another 400 meters in the drizzle in the gray declining late afternoon light, up a stone staircase and along a cliffside forest path to the entrance. Another long stone staircase up, and the monastery, spectacularly carved into the face of the nearly inaccessible cliff, broke into view.

I explored all the chambers. In one there were once magnificent paintings, but they had been defaced by Muslim conquerors and covered with graffiti by modern barbarians. I wondered what perspective on the world it takes to feel you can destroy in a minute a painting that has been there for a thousand

years.

700s A.D.

The Book of Genesis tells us that Abraham's father Terah took Abraham and his other son Lot out of Ur in Babylonia to the city of Harran, which is now, by an accident of modern history, just inside Turkey's border with Syria. Abraham then left there for the Promised Land. Harran today probably does not look much different from what it looked like then. It is not large. It is just some sandy streets among mud adobe houses around a ruined fortress. But the houses are unique. Their roofs reach up in a beehive shape, presumably to alleviate the heat in the summer. In the courtyards of the houses are raised platforms the people sleep on in the summer, for the cooler outside air and off the ground to get away from the scorpions. The population is entirely Arab.

Nearby are the ruins of the oldest university in the world, built in the 700s by the Umayyad caliph in Damascus. As I approached it, I was accosted by the two teenage boys in coats and ties who wanted to be my guides. "That tower was built after Christ seven hundred and thirty-four." "The Mongols destroyed this city after Christ one thousand two hundred and sixteen." In an attempt to avoid them, I latched onto little Ibrahim, who would walk me to all the tourist sites without the irritating chatter.

1064-1308

Mostly the Byzantines resisted the early Muslim attempts at conquest. They lost the Levant, but they held onto Anatolia, although eastern Anatolia was a frequent battleground. It was finally the Seljuq Turks that broke the back of Byzantine rule in the east.

The Seljuq Turks were one of a succession of tribes to sweep out of Central Asia and dominate the Middle East for a short spell. In 1071 the Byzantine emperor marched east to the vicinity of Lake Van to push them back. The Seljuq Turks faded and then turned and dealt the Byzantine army a defeat they never really recovered from. At their peak the Seljuq Turks controlled Persia, Syria, Mesopotamia, and Anatolia. Then they splintered into contending kingdoms, succumbed to the Mongols a century and a half later, and left almost nothing to show for their efflorescence. More precisely, all that remained of significance was one small splinter group that later grew to great prominence—the Ottoman Turks.

There are not a lot of architectural monuments to Seljuq rule. The one site I did see was the Yellow Caravansarai, or Sari Han, in Cappadocia. “Caravansarai” is a word that has always evoked for me deep mystery. Caravansarais were only the motels of their day. But that is precisely why the word has such a hold on me. I would have loved to travel in that era, and in the places I do travel, I try to approximate what it would have been to travel then. Mounted on camels, or horses, or donkeys, a large caravan would traverse days of desert and waste. At the end, the caravansarai would materialize out of the haze on the distant horizon, and that evening it would be filled with the smoke of fires and the stench of the people and animals of a dozen caravans, as people ate and drank their fill and traded stories about what lay behind and what lay ahead.

You could imagine all that at the Yellow Caravansarai. To the west you could see the nearby, rapidly growing town of Avanos, but to the east there was nothing but broad dry plains. That is where your caravan would have been coming from. The interior looks as it would have, though perhaps painted too recently, and with the restaurant for tourists a bit too fancy for the rough men of the caravan. A large courtyard, a fountain in the middle, a walkway around the caravansarai walls from which you can observe the countryside, a great arched hall filled with the low tables and cushioned seats of the restaurant, a pleasant respite from the rigors of the road. The throngs were missing. When I arrived, a young European couple was there. They left. I sat down at a table with a cup of tea and wrote in my journal, my own respite from the road. Two beautiful young Turkish women arrived. I lingered, and then left.

1288-1922

The Ottomans began as a minor offshoot of the Seljuq Turks. As various princes set up various principalities, the Ottomans set up one across the Bosphorus and not far from Constantinople. Among the principalities, the Ottomans had two distinct advantages.

The first was their proximity to the collapsing Byzantine Empire. The strength of the ancient walls of the city meant that the conquest of Constantinople itself had to wait for the development of cannons. But as the empire collapsed, the Ottomans could make an end run around the capital and conquer the lands the Byzantines abandoned. In this way they were able to build up their own empire as far as Albania and Serbia.

Their other advantage was that they had the unprecedented good fortune of having ten competent rulers in a row. In the Age of Monarchy, it was pretty much of a crap shoot whether a kingdom would get a competent king. Competence was distributed through royalty about the same as it is distributed through the general population, and the method of selecting a king was not far from random. Strong kings who built up empires were followed by weak kings who lost them. When a succession of strong kings occurred, remarkable things happened. The Duchy of Moscovy had three strong kings in a row in the 1400s and 1500s, and the result was the huge country we know as of Russia. The Ottomans had *ten* strong rulers in a row!

They finally took Constantinople in 1454, and by the 1500s under Suleiman the Magnificent they were the strongest power in the world. At the same time, they were battling the Savafids to the east on the border of Anatolia and Persia, to the west they were contending with Venice and Spain for control of the Mediterranean, to the north they were knocking on the gates of Vienna in Central Europe, and to the south Ottoman soldiers in the Sahara Desert engaged troops from the West African Kingdom of Bornu in what is now Nigeria.

Suleiman the Magnificent lived too long and became paranoid, and had his one competent son killed for imagined rebellion. That set off a succession of incompetent sultans almost as remarkable as the succession of competent ones. The occasional strong ruler was not strong enough to combat the forces of tradition and corruption arrayed against him.

But inertia and then European geopolitics carried them through for the next three and a half centuries. Powerful neighbors like Austria and Russia chipped away at their domains. Local rulers, as in Egypt, asserted their independence in small increments. In the heart of the empire, in Anatolia, not much development took place.

At the far eastern end of modern-day Turkey, I left Lake Van, drove over some hills, and then came upon a magnificent sight. Beyond the hills was a flat plain, covered with farms and villages. The plain rose gradually and then disappeared in the haze, which looked exactly like sky. Above that was a bank of thick white clouds. Above the clouds there appeared the snow-covered peak of the isolated, 17,000-foot Mount Ararat, as though it were suspended there in the air.

At the foot of Mount Ararat in the town of Dogubeyazit, I visited an Ottoman pleasure palace from the 1600s, called Ishak Pasha Sarayi. It was

very dramatic. You walk under arches, beneath the dome, and beside the minaret of the palace mosque. There is a harem of many rooms, with pools in their centers, surrounding a pleasant courtyard. I explored the library and the dungeon as well; the harem looked more pleasant than the dungeon.

In one of the rooms of the harem there were three young German tourists, a man and two women. One of the women was leaning out a window and shouting “Hallooo! Hallooo!” as though calling to a passing knight for rescue. I came up behind her and said, “Hi.”

1915-1923

The Ottoman Empire declined. Finally in World War I it picked the losing side, and it was dismantled. Britain and France divided up its Arab possessions, and conspired with the last sultan on dividing up Anatolia itself. Various contradictory treaties were signed, guaranteeing this and that to these and those. Greece was to get a large chunk of southwestern Anatolia. Russia was to get a large chunk of northeastern Anatolia for the Armenians, and after the Russian Revolution the Armenians tried to seize it for themselves. There was even talk of Russia getting Istanbul before Britain and France stepped in and stopped such speculation.

But the one strong Turkish general, Mustafa Kemal, later Kemal Atatürk, gathered his armies around him, and from his base in Ankara retook all of modern-day Turkey—that’s why it is modern-day Turkey. He realized that the cause of Turkey’s fall from glory was that they had failed to keep up with Western Europe’s progress. So he introduced modernizations, both superficial and deep. He forbade the fez—superficial. He made Turkey a secular state—deep, for a country that is 99% Muslim.

But since the 1800s it had not been enough for the legitimacy of a realm merely to be under the control of a single regime. There had to be a story. In Europe the story was nationalism. Austria-Hungary was a multinational state, but it disintegrated. In the late 1800s Sultan Abdul Hamid II attempted to revive the empire with Islam as the story. But the remaining but still extensive Christian holdings in the Balkans and in Armenia undercut that story.

Atatürk’s story was that Turkey was the land of the Turks. But there were three problems with this story—the Greeks, the Armenians, and the Kurds. The Greek problem was taken care of in early 1920s with massive exchanges of population between modern Turkey and modern Greece, accompanied by

untold suffering and occasional massacres. Kurdish nationalism and its consequent suppression waited another half century before becoming a crisis.

The Armenians were another matter entirely. Accounts differ. Some historians say that the Turks and the Kurds allied to slaughter between 600,000 and 1,500,000 Armenians between 1915 and 1923. This is disputed. The Turks say it didn't happen. The Armenians say it did. But the first time I heard about it was from a Turkish acquaintance of mine in college, who bragged that the army had simply surrounded the Armenians, marched forward, and slaughtered everyone in their path. I hesitate to say that this historical note was in the context of what America should do about the civil rights problem, but I think it was.

Much of my trip around eastern Turkey was through the lands formerly occupied by Armenians.

Lake Van was one of those places I had wanted to see for a long time. It is out there at the eastern end of Turkey, nearly to the Iranian border, not far south of the Caucasus Mountains, home of the ancient Urartu and then of the Armenians, but always in a wild land contested by passing hordes and established empires. It seemed like one of the far ends of the Earth to me.

It did not disappoint. My first glimpse of it, as I came over a hill and approached the town of Tatvan at the western end of the lake, revealed a body of water of perfect blue surrounded by brown hills. I drove along the lake. I stopped to taste it. As I took a boat out to an island, a storm was gathering across the lake and as I returned from the island a rainbow arced before us. That evening as I climbed over the ruins of an Ottoman castle in Van at the eastern end of the lake, the sun set over and reflected in the waters of Lake Van, purple below turbulent dark gray clouds. My last glimpse of it in the early morning light the next day was deep royal blue beyond golden fields of grain.

In the town of Gevas halfway along the lake, I drove to the central plaza, went into a bus company office, and said "Adharan", the name of the island I wanted to go to. A Kurdish man popped up, short, stocky, with a five o'clock shadow and a Fuller brush moustache, and offered to find me a boat. He spoke no English. He got in my car, and we drove to a hotel on the shore of the lake. He found someone who ran a boat over to the island, and we left.

The church of Ahtamai Adasi is a remnant of the long era when Lake Van was under Armenian control. It is a small church. The paintings in the interior are defaced and covered with graffiti. But on the exterior are some of the most

magnificent bas-reliefs I have seen anywhere, depicting scenes from the Bible. There is a ship. Jonah is being thrown off, and a “whale” is beside the ship waiting to devour him. Well, I said “whale”. The artist had never seen a whale, so in fact it is a large fish with the head of a pig. Next to it is the whale spitting Jonah up. On the other side of the doorway are David and Goliath, David holding a slingshot with lambs at his feet, Goliath twice as big as David and armed to the teeth.

I arrived in the city of Van late that afternoon and drove directly to the Rock of Van. This is a large rock outcropping at the edge of the lake and has been the site of fortresses ever since settlements existed there. I climbed up worn, rugged stairs at the west end of the hill, imagining they had been carved in the rock by the Urartu, the capital of whose empire this was in the 900s and 800s B.C. The ruins of the castle at the top of the hill were Ottoman. The south side of the hill was a steep cliff. At the base was a flat plain on which there were two small mosques. But the plain was much more remarkable for what wasn't there. Before 1920 it had been the Armenian city of Van, but when the Turks under Kemal crushed the Armenians of Van, they leveled the entire Armenian district of the city, except for the two small mosques in their midst.

Several days later in Amasya, I stood in front of the cave tombs of the kings of Pontus and looked over the city, lining the Green River (Yesilirmak) and hemmed in by hills. On the near side of the river was the old Ottoman town, with the old Ottoman-style houses. On the far side the houses were all twentieth-century. But that was strange. Why didn't people build on the far side of the river before that?

Later that evening the two Turkish high school students, Esra and Çari, said that this used to be the Armenian section of town. When they “left” in the early 1920s, they burned their houses behind them, so that no one could take them over.

I wondered who really burned the houses, and what led to the people leaving.

In the far northeastern corner of Turkey are the ruins of the medieval capital of Armenia, the town of Ani. I thought I had allotted plenty of time to see it. I turned off the main road near Kars shortly after one in the afternoon onto the thirty-kilometer spur to Ani.

In a village along the way I saw a monument to the 500 Turks massacred by Armenians in this village in 1918. No mention of the million and a half

Armenians massacred by the Turks.

About twenty kilometers along I had to stop at an army checkpoint, and a soldier asked me for my ticket. I had none. He walked back to his cabin to call his superior, and when he returned he had the look of “No” on his face. I had to drive back to Kars and get a ticket at the tourist office in the center of town.

At least he made it sound simple. I figured half an hour to Kars, half an hour to get the ticket, and half an hour back. I would be back by three, with two hours to see the ruins. I drove 130 kmph on a rough narrow road designed for 90 that fell off at the edges and had frequent tractors pulling wide-load wagons, all the while however reminding myself that this sight was “not to die for”. I got to Kars at two, but it was not obvious where the center of town was. Several wrong turns, several questions to pedestrians with contradictory answers, and I finally found what looked like a main street. I went into a hotel and asked the clerk where the tourist office was. He explained the whole process to me, and showed me on my map where everything was. At the tourist office I would get an application. I had to take that to the police station and they would issue a permit. Then I had to go to the museum and they would sell me the ticket. I drove to the tourist office and double-parked. But it was Saturday, and when I went in, there was no one there. Outside I asked a policeman where I could get a permit. No problem, he said. Just go to the police station. So I went to the police station. The officer there said he could not give me a permit without the application. I had to go back to the tourist office. But there is no one there, I protested. A man behind me said there was someone there, and he would take me there. He was a tour operator. I followed him back to the tourist office and upstairs to a man behind a small table in front of the men’s room door, looking for all the world like a washroom attendant. He filled out the application and signed it. When I returned to the police station, a different officer was on duty, and he was determined to make me go through my paces. He asked where I had been, where I was going, what hotel I was staying in. He compared the signature on my application with that on other applications. I relaxed and let him play his power game, and eventually he gave me the permit. I took it to the museum. There the only man in evidence was on his way to tea. I pleaded with him, and reluctantly he sold me the ticket. 130 kmph back, and I was at the old city walls at 3:30.

There I was told I couldn’t take my camera in. Ani is right across a river from the Republic of Armenia, and if the Armenians see anyone taking pictures,

they said, they set off dynamite. But, I was told, I could buy some pictures from this gentleman here. “How did he take them without dynamite being set off?” I asked, but got no answer.

The area enclosed by the walls and the river is immense, but most of it is now rubble, with occasional discernible foundations, and about a dozen churches standing in reasonable condition. The Church of the Redeemer has half a dome left. The Church of Saint Gregory has good paintings inside. The Convent of the Virgins is dramatically situated on a sheer cliff halfway down the gorge separating the two countries. A now ruined bridge once spanned the river, but no more. The dome of the Cathedral collapsed shortly after it was built, but otherwise the building is standing strong. There is a mosque that was built soon after the Seljuq Turks conquered Ani from the Armenians in 1050. The Seljuqs were newly converted and had no architects and no clear notion of what a mosque should look like, so they didn’t object when the Armenian architect they enlisted built a mosque that looks very much like an Armenian church, with a minaret that looks very much like a church bell tower. I climbed up the minaret, feeling my way in the dark uncertainly from one worn step to the next. I wandered over the foundations of rooms in the Palace and the foundations of shops along the main street. I stepped over rubble to the Church of the Holy Apostles, which the Seljuqs converted into a caravansarai. I entered another Church of Saint Gregory, a ruined shell, and yet another Church of Saint Gregory.

The official story as to why so many restrictions surround a visit to Ani is that it is right by a hostile border. That made sense during the Cold War, when many Turks were probably like my Turkish acquaintance in college, who said he had two principles in life: “Love God and hate the Russians.” But the Soviet Union is dead and the Russians are gone and the only thing across that border is a very weak state of Armenia.

I left suspecting that the real reason Ani is not encouraged as a tourist site is that it presents the Armenians as a great civilization very much anchored in present-day Turkey. But I also suspected any Turkish official I asked would deny it.

IV. Dubious Virtue

When I came down for breakfast in my hotel in Trabzon, there were only two tables, and someone was at each of them. I sat down at the table with

a Westerner, an Australian woman named “Karin”. She was not especially attractive, but deliberately so. It made traveling in Turkey easier. A petite woman about my age, baggy green jeans and baggy sweatshirt, wisps of red hair peeking out from under a green scarf.

She had been traveling around Turkey by bus for six weeks. She was headed for Amasya that day, as was I, and she seemed amiable enough, so I offered to take her there. She accepted.

We left around 8:30. It was 330 kilometers to Samsun, along the Black Sea coast, and the hours flowed together. We talked most of the time, although I don’t remember about what. At first the road ran between lush forest and the edge of the sea. Later it was one town after another. Around eleven, we stopped in a town called Pershembe, with a cute harbor with fishing boats in basic colors. We had tea at a seaside open-air café, and then walked out onto the pier.

Samsun is a large town with not many road signs. We spent half an hour circling the interior of the town looking for the Ankara turnoff. A sign pointed left and we followed it, but there was no sign half a block later where we should have turned right, and instead we went straight, on a road that then bent around to the left and back the way we came. Then we hit a long detour around road construction that took us up hills and down. We finally asked some men directions. They spoke only Turkish, but we watched their gestures. One pointed behind us, and then two others pointed ahead. We decided it was two to one—we’d go ahead. It was another mile before we figured out that the first man was telling us which way we had to go and the other two were telling us where we had to go to make a U-turn. Eventually we made it back to our missed turn and were underway again.

In Amasya we drove to the center of town and parked on the south side of the Green River, with the wonderful view of the Ottoman houses hanging over the river and the cliffs rising behind them with the large cave tombs of the kings of Pontus carved in them halfway up. We were in tune. We both immediately wanted to cross the footbridge over the river and climb the rock stairs up to the tombs. They were just excavated chambers, but the main chambers had passageways carved around and behind them, though they were fenced off. I got a bit ahead of Karin, and when I turned around, she was gone. I apprehensively looked over the cliff. But then I heard something behind me, and I saw that she had slipped through a gap in the fence. I followed her, and we explored the passage behind the tomb.

Then we climbed up a rather chancy slope to some less accessible tombs. At the top I confessed to her that I was petrified of heights. She said she was just admiring my crazy sense of adventure, just like her own.

I had planned to drive on to the town of Çoram that afternoon and find some sort of hotel there. But it was 5:30 and it got dark at six. Better to stay here, I decided, and spend a pleasant evening in pleasant company in the nicest town I had seen in Turkey. I could leave at 5:30 in the morning and lose no daylight.

We stopped in at a pansyon in an old Ottoman house overhanging the river and looked at the rooms. They had two next to each other, for 20 million lira (\$12) each.

Karin also wanted to look at a place mentioned in Lonely Planet on the other side of the river. When we got back to my car, the two high school kids, Esra and Çari, materialized beside us, wanting to practice their English. They walked with us to the other pansyon. It was nicer and charmingly historical. They had one large room available, with three widely spaced single beds and a bathroom that you had to climb through a cupboard to get to. It was 60 million lira (\$36).

The four of us left and went for chai at an outdoor restaurant. On the way I laid out the two possibilities for Karin. We could each get a room for 20 million lira at the first place, or we could share the large room for 60 million lira at the second. I said I was in a relationship, so I didn't expect anything, but I had no problem with sharing a room. She said she didn't either, but 30 million lira was more than she normally spent. I said I could afford 40.

But while we were drinking tea, I began to have qualms. Afterwards I told her I would be more comfortable with separate rooms. We went back to the first pansyon and got rooms next door to each other, with the bath across the hall.

We cleaned up and then went out to dinner. She looked much better now, with her scarf off and her hair down. I felt I had to explain myself. I said that it was not so much that I was afraid we'd sleep with each other, but that when I told Cynthia, she would feel envious that I was there in the exotic locale with someone else rather than with her.

"Don't tell her," Karin said. She said she had learned that total honesty was not always the best policy.

I said, "I'm trying to do this one different."

We went back to the same restaurant. I had lamb kebob; she, a vegetarian,

had eggplant kebab. We shared a kind of spicy yogurt soup, and traded life stories.

Back at our hotel, as we were about to enter our respective rooms, I moved forward and gave her a hug, a warm but chaste California hug. She folded into me, and then stepped back, and then stepped forward and kissed me on my lips. Her lips felt good.

If we had shared a room, we would have shared a bed.

I did a quick laundry, and then went down to the café on the first floor to write up the day in my journal. There was beer and cards at one table, backgammon at another, and the Americans and Osama bin Laden on TV. I went to bed at eleven.

I got up at five the next morning. I tried to be quiet, but the plumbing made a lot of noise, and of course there were the muzzeins at 5:15. On my last trip out of the room, Karin came out of her room as well, in a brief sheer white nightie, to say goodbye to me. We hugged again, and this time I kissed her on the lips. Her body felt soft and desirable.

“I missed you last night,” she said.

“Yes,” I said.

And I drove on to Hattuşaş.

V. Driving in Turkey

Karin told me I drove like a Turkish driver, maybe after I had just passed a slow truck on a curve. She may have meant it as criticism, but I took it as a compliment.

A blonde Australian woman that I chatted with in Göreme in Cappadocia was amazed that I was driving my own car. Lonely Planet, which was her and her husband’s holy writ, said not to. As I drove along, I composed a letter in my mind to Lonely Planet. “You need to grow up with your readers. The people who when they were young were not afraid to take buses with the natives on days-long desert tracks will not be afraid to drive themselves now that they are old and rich enough to afford it.”

I came up with some principles for driving in a place like Turkey.

1. Start slow and defensive, and watch what the other drivers do, until you catch on to the local conventions. The best defense is to be predictable.

No one wants an accident. In Kayseri, my third day out and my first big city after Ankara, I stuck to the middle lane of my three-lane side of the road, simply slowing down when the car in front of me slowed down, and I was relieved that my turnoff wasn't until well beyond the city, where it was easy to spot. In fact, I was always cautious in the cities. The cars and pedestrians engage in a complex ballet, but I didn't know the steps, and I really really didn't want to run over a human being.

2. Take the rules of the road under advisement, but don't take them too seriously. If I had never crossed a yellow line to pass a slow truck on a curvy mountain road, I would still be there. I knew our relative speeds, and I knew if I could make it or not. I also usually knew just what was coming and how far away it was, because when I got a glimpse of the road ahead, I took it.
3. Pay attention to what the guy ahead of you is doing. The guy behind you will generally do the same. But again, be predictable, not by obeying the law, but by doing what everyone else is doing.
4. Stay awake. Nights before days I was going to drive, I would try to make sure I got eight hours sleep. And I took along a modern miracle—Starbucks chocolate-covered coffee beans. By the time I opened them, they had melted into a single gooey candy bar, but when I ate a pack, I would be as wide-awake as a high-tension wire the rest of the day.

I had a couple of close calls. In some town along the Black Sea coast, a minivan did a U-turn into full moving traffic in my lane and missed me by centimeters. I was sure I had been hit, until I didn't hear the crunch.

A little later a boy threw a stone at the truck in front of me and it bounced onto my windshield. But no chink was detectable.

On my way out of Amasya at 5:30 in the morning, the streets were almost empty. Almost. As I accelerated after a stop sign, I almost hit a minivan that materialized out of nowhere.

Those were my only near accidents, but there were other problems. Turkey was riddled with construction zones, which had to be negotiated by alternating between new road, the potholed asphalt of old road, and packed or puddled stretches of mud. Once I passed the construction zone, I always seemed to

find myself behind a slow dump truck carrying a huge boulder, or a pile of dirt that shook out with every bump in the road.

My car was never broken into, but when my Kurdish guide and I parked at the hotel on the shore of Lake Van, he warned me to be sure to lock my car. It was unnecessary; I was always very scrupulous about this. When we returned, I checked my trunk to make sure my stuff was still there, as I always did when returning to my car. There was a plastic card sticking out of it. It fell to the ground as I opened the trunk, and my guide picked it up and said, “Turkish phone card,” as though that explained its presence in my trunk. He threw it in the dirt. I checked my suitcase. It had not been tampered with.

My guess: They tried to open my trunk with various cards and forgot about that one. My guide was covering up for them.

The joy of driving in Turkey was that I could go where no tour would take me. The day I drove down to the Black Sea was spectacular. Leaving Kars near the Armenian border, I avoided the short route to the town of Artvin. The road I took went across high yellow grassland and low hills for an hour or so, to about 20 kilometers past Ardahan. Then I entered a long spectacular downward drive that lasted the rest of the day. It was gloomy and overcast, and from time to time I had encountered a light fog. Now I entered thick fog and could only see about 20 meters in front of me. I found myself going downhill rather steeply and around hairpin curves, and I finally realized I must be going down some sort of escarpment or canyon. There was little other traffic. When I finally got below the clouds, the countryside looked like Switzerland—green grass, pine forests, steep slopes of mountains, and Swiss-style farmhouses. I came to the town of Savsat, which looked like it could become a ski resort, if it were only more accessible. Small villages were scattered over mountains and valleys.

The road continued to descend, down a green canyon all the way to where it joined the main road to Artvin, about 20 kilometers before the town. Here I encountered a massive road-building project. The road rose and then descended into Artvin, a city spread the shape of a badge on the steep side of a mountain, a citadel at its craggy peak, above the road at the canyon bottom.

About 10 kilometers outside Artvin, the road was blocked. It was 11:20 and the truck driver in front of me said it would be open at noon. I didn’t understand his gesture of explanation until twenty minutes later when there was the loud nearby explosion of dynamite. I sat under a roadside shelter with the truck driver and had two cups of tea that he insisted on paying for.

At noon the road opened, and the cars raced ahead of the trucks and jockeyed for position. The road was under construction for the next 10 kilometers or so. It continued to descend through a steep canyon, and then it looped downward over green hills, finally reaching the shore of the blue waters of the Black Sea.

I rented my car from Budget in downtown Ankara. The Turkish man in the office was very friendly and spoke excellent English. He took me down to the garage, and showed me a Ford Golf for \$300 a week and a Ford Fiesta for \$450 a week, their only two cars in stock. I lusted after the Ford Fiesta, but frugality made me choose the Ford Golf. But he noticed the side mirror was torn off the Ford Golf, so he offered me the Ford Fiesta for \$350 a week instead. I snatched it up. He told me it was completely insured. If I had an accident, I should file a police report. If it was something small, like a rock cracking the windshield, I didn't need to. I could just write it up when I returned.

I had two problems, both of which seemed insignificant at the time.

The last ten miles up to Nemrud Dag was on a steep road of basalt block cobblestone and felt like it was jarring the bolts out of the car. Perhaps I drove it too fast. Going up I was worried about getting there before sunset, and going down I was worried about finding a pansyon for the night. In any case, the next morning I noticed that a piece of the radio had fallen off, the piece that held buttons 2 through 5, and now the radio wouldn't play at all. I searched the floor of the car for it, everywhere, but it was nowhere to be found. All I could imagine was that it had fallen onto my pants or my camera case, and when I got out at Nemrud Dag, it fell outside. I didn't worry about it. It seemed like a small mishap.

Two days later I was driving east through the city of Diyarbakir when I encountered a police stop. I gave a policeman the car's registration packet; he removed a card from it and sent me on to the next station where other policemen were conducting emission tests. A policeman checked my car and gave me the thumbs up. I had to pay 10,000,000 lira (\$7.00), but I kept the receipt, confident I could get reimbursed by Budget. I was given another card for my registration packet, which I figured was the replacement for the one that was taken.

When I got back to Ankara, I returned the car to the Budget office. The same nice man who spoke excellent English was there again, except now he wasn't so nice. He looked in my registration packet. It seems that two cards are necessary, and I only had one. I asked him if this car had had an emissions

card before. He said no, that's only for eastern Turkey. So apparently the card the policeman took in Diyarbakir was not the car's original emissions card, but the second required registration card. The Budget man was quite upset that it was missing. He said it would cost 50 million lira (\$30) to replace. "What can I do if the police take it away from me?" I said. He bought that argument, and I had to remind myself not to pitch through the sale.

Then there was the matter of the little piece that fell off the radio. I argued that the car was completely insured, and that it was like a rock cracking the windshield. He said the windshield was covered, but not the radio. He said because I had lost the part, it was a matter of my negligence. We argued back and forth for a long time, with all sorts of analogies. He invested so much emotion in this that I suspected he intended to use the car for a date tonight and a working radio was a pretty essential part of his plans. I asked how much the part would be. He made a phone call. 117 million lira (about \$80). We were getting nowhere in our arguments, so finally we agreed that he would fill out a charge slip for the car only that I would sign, and he would submit a separate, unsigned charge for the radio part. I could protest that if I wanted to.

When I got home a month later, there was an extra charge of \$96 on my Visa bill. I protested to Budget. They replied with a barely coherent letter saying something about claims and foreign law. The charge remained.

VI. Aleppo Encounters

From Antakya, Turkey, I took a late afternoon bus across the Syrian border to Aleppo, arriving after dark, and grabbed a taxi to the Hotel Baron, a formerly great hotel that displayed Lawrence of Arabia's bar bill but was now more than a little run-down. Early the next morning I left the hotel and walked to the modern Amir Palace Hotel nearby, where my guidebook said there was a Europcar office. There I was told the only rental car company was Hertz in the Chahba Cham Hotel, far away in the new city. I asked what a fair cab fare was to there, and they told me about 20 Syrian pounds (40 cents). I went out and asked a cab driver the fare. He said, "100 pounds."

"Don't cheat me!" I said. "20 pounds."

"50 pounds."

"20 pounds."

He nodded, or so I thought, and I got in. I learned later a meter would have been 15 pounds. At the Chahba Cham I got out and paid him 20 pounds. This made him angry, and he followed me into the hotel, demanding more, but I ignored him.

No one was at the Hertz desk; they were closed on Fridays. A young Arab man named “Samir”, who spoke excellent English, helped me out and located someone who could find their list of prices and tell me what time to come back the next morning.

I left the hotel and looked for a taxi to take me back to the Old Town. Only the same taxi was there in the hotel driveway, and he wanted 100 pounds. I didn’t bother bargaining; I went out to the street and flagged down a passing cab. He didn’t understand where I wanted to go, but another young Arab man, named “Badr”, who also spoke excellent English, suddenly materialized and translated for me.

I went to the excellent National Museum with exhibits on ancient Syrian cultures, got lost in the souqs of the Old Town, and found my way to the Citadel. After I left the Citadel, I was standing on the road around it taking its picture when a young Arab man came up to me and asked if I was American and what was my profession. He had to remind me that he was Samir, who had helped me out at the Hertz desk. He said he had studied computer science for a year, but he’d quit because they weren’t teaching him what was important—how to build web pages. He asked if I could teach him how to “hack”. I said no.

We went to his family’s carpet shop. It was closed on Fridays, but he said he liked to hang out here anyway. He gave me a cup of tea with cinnamon. He listed the five essential architectural sites in Aleppo; one was a former mental hospital, the Bimaristan Arghan, which he was anxious to take me to, but it was closed on Fridays.

While we were in the shop, two other young men came in. One of them reminded me he was Badr, who had helped me get the taxi outside the Chahba Cham Hotel.

Samir took me upstairs to where all the carpets were. I had considered buying one until I heard his prices. Okay, they were starting prices, but if he started that high, he wasn’t coming all the way down to what I was willing to pay. He showed me the difference between silk and polyester—burn silk and it crumbles; burn polyester and it curls.

He took me out and walked around the souqs with me, and showed me the

insides of a couple of old caravansarais, but mostly things were closed. Finally I told him I wanted to explore by myself for a while, and we parted.

I walked around the Old City a little longer, until I got some sense of the whole. Then I explored some of the newer downtown areas, including the Armenian Al-Jdeida district. I returned to my hotel and rested for a while.

In the late afternoon I took a taxi back to the Citadel and crossed the street to Hammam Yalbougha al-Nasry for a Turkish/Syrian bath. I spent what seemed like hours in the most distant chamber, a steam room, feeling like I was inside an espresso machine. Then to another room where a masseur scraped me with an abrasive plastic washcloth, then with lufa, and gave me a very forceful all-over massage. Tightly wrapped in towels, I returned to an alcove in the reception area for a cup of tea. In the next alcove were three German women, waiting their turn, and one asked me if I felt very relaxed now.

“No,” I said. “I feel quite tense.”

But by the time I left the baths, I was beginning to feel a very deep relaxation, and I wanted to walk back to the hotel. My path took me past Samir’s carpet shop, and when I passed there, Samir, Badr, and another young man were there. Samir invited me in.

They had a computer terminal there, and I asked about writing in Arabic. He sat me down and set me up with Word in Arabic. I typed “bayt”, the word for “house”, and watched the “baa” turn from its independent form to its initial form, watched “yaa” change from its final to its medial form. Samir put on a CD of some Arabic music and then a Canadian New Age singer with lots of Arabic elements in it. On the computer he popped in a CD of the tourist sights of Syria, and particularly urged me to go to San Simeon, northwest of Aleppo.

I told them my son Thomas’s story of witnessing the World Trade Center attack, and then I realized I could show them the pictures he put on his web site. I did a bit of poking around and found it. Badr was fascinated, but Samir seemed bored. I displayed the picture of the World Trade Center on fire, seen from the Brooklyn Bridge, and that’s when Samir said, “In my next life, I want to be born in America.”

I left and walked the rest of the way back to my hotel.

The next day I got my car from Hertz at the Chahba Cham Hotel and drove to Palmyra. The day after that I visited the ancient sites of Dura Europos and Mari, near the Iraqi border. The next day I drove all the way

back through Aleppo to San Simeon and on to the ancient site of Ugarit on the Mediterranean. The day after that I visited Krak des Chevaliers, Apamea, and Ebla, and returned to Aleppo. I turned my car in to Hertz just before they closed.

That night I spent in the Bait al-Wakil Hotel, my only splurge on a hotel on the whole trip. It was \$70 a night, rather than my usual \$20 or less. It is an old Ottoman era house, built around a beautiful stone courtyard with a lovely fountain in the middle. The room was no bigger than I was used to, however. My bellhop turned on CNN for me and I lay on the bed and watched it for half an hour. The third day of bombing in Afghanistan, and the Americans now control the air space. Five anti-American demonstrators were killed in Pakistan. Arab nations disapproved of the bombing.

That evening, in another splurge, I walked half a block down the alleyway my hotel was on, to the Bait al-Sissi restaurant. I was seated just inside the door in a nice old courtyard, and I had good pungent hors d'oeuvres and a lamb brochette that was too spicy.

Just as I was about to leave, who should peek into the restaurant but Samir and Badr. I invited them to sit at my table, and we shared a plate of pistachios.

I suggested that they had a conspiracy against me and that is why they kept running into me. Samir didn't know the word "conspiracy", so he got out his handheld English-Arabic translator.

"Conspiracy. Nice word," he said, and showed the translation to Badr.

I looked at the device, but it was too dark for me to read.

Badr ordered a water pipe to smoke. I took a few puffs—apricot-flavored tobacco.

"Oooh, I like the way you suck," Badr said.

Samir stared daggers at Badr as he asked me questions. What hotel was I staying at? What room number? Shall we go there now?

I pretended to interpret all his advances as attempts to sell me a carpet, and he picked up on this, so it became a metaphor.

Finally I said I was tired and was going back to my hotel.

They walked me back there. On the way, along the narrow alley, Badr said to Samir in English, "Shall we kill him now?" I laughed.

At the entrance to the hotel, Badr suggested one more time that we all go to my room and have a party.

"I'm not interested in buying a carpet," I said.

The next morning I wanted to see the things in the Old Town that had been closed on Friday. So I walked straight down Sharia al-Kayyali to the Great Mosque. I was not surprised to see Samir outside the mosque, as though he had been waiting for me since dawn. He accompanied me into the mosque, which was under repairs and not in official use, though people still visited here to pray among the scaffolding. He waited outside for me when I went into the Madrasa Halawiyya, a school from the 1200s with a pleasant courtyard with a pool.

Then Samir led me through the narrow maze-like streets of the souq to a favorite building of his. On the way we passed Badr going the other way, with his arm over the shoulder of a younger boy. Badr said to me, “Let me be your donkey.”

Samir’s favorite building was the Bimaristan Arghan, an ancient mental institution that he had mentioned before. Just inside the entrance was a beautiful courtyard with a pool and trees. The upper floor of the building rested on wooden planks which then rested on the lower-floor pillars, in an early feat of earthquake engineering—the wood would absorb the shock. Samir led me into the area of the cells where the insane were kept. The cells all had windows onto tiny courtyards with small fountains, on the theory, no doubt correct, that flowing water soothes the souls of the insane. The windows of the dangerously insane were barred; those of the ordinary insane were not.

In the deepest part of the interior, with the two of us alone in a tiny courtyard, Samir brushed my crotch with the back of his hand and let it remain there. I took his wrist, and pushing his hand away, said disapprovingly, “Come on.” That was the whole incident.

We continued through the building, and I asked more questions about the Bimaristan. Once outside I told him I wanted to wander around alone. He recommended Bab al-Qinnesrin, and we shook hands goodbye. I walked toward Bab al-Qinnesrin.

When I was in my early twenties hitchhiking around America, this sort of incident was common. In my blacker, lonelier moods traveling, I would think to myself, “If a man talks to me, he wants either money or sex; if a woman, money.” But it has been decades since then, and I can’t imagine those young men were attracted to me.

I recalled a conversation I had once several years ago with a gay colleague at a sidewalk café on Váci Street in the old town of Budapest. We were talking about how many countries we had been in, and that led to a discussion of what

the criteria were for counting a country. He suggested that you shouldn't count a country unless you've slept with someone there. I looked at the prostitutes pacing back and forth on the street in front of us and said, "And not paid for it."

"Oh," he said, "in some places that would just be rude."

VII. Twenty-Two Layers in the History of Greater Syria

I've described the itinerary of my trip by rental car through Syria. I traveled by bus from Aleppo to Damascus, stopping off in Hama. From Damascus I took a day trip by bus to the old Roman city of Bosra.

I flew from Damascus via Bahrain, Qatar, and Abu Dhabi to Sanaa, Yemen. Ten days later I returned to Damascus via Cairo, where I spent four hours wandering through the old city.

I went to Beirut and Baalbek in the Beqqa Valley, Lebanon, by shared taxi and returned the next day to Damascus.

On the following day I took a shared taxi to Amman, Jordan, where I rented a car and drove to Petra, Wadi Rum, Aqaba, the Dead Sea resort of Suwayma, and the upland towns of Karak and Madaba.

I flew from the Amman airport to Ankara and thence to Frankfurt and home.

1975-1992

'Ali, my Arabic tutor before I left for the Middle East, was a Christian from Beirut. He grew up in the eighties during the civil war. When I asked him what it was like, he said you got used to the bombs, and didn't worry unless they were nearby. The tensest moment, he said, was one time when the whole family was huddling in the bathroom and the rest of the house was on fire.

He couldn't tell me the Arabic word for postage stamp. When he was growing up, there was no postal system in Lebanon.

Beirut had been touted as the most beautiful city in the Middle East before the war, and it is easy to see why. Its suburbs are built into a bowl of hills surrounding the central city, white buildings embedded in greenery with the

blue Mediterranean below. I entered the city in a shared taxi from Damascus, and the road into Beirut twisted down these hills in hairpin curves.

We entered the main part of the city along Rue de Damascus, which had been the border between East Beirut and West Beirut, the Muslim and the Christian sections. We drove through slow traffic past bombed out buildings and walls pocked with bullet holes.

The taxi driver who took me to the Hamra district, where I would stay, was an old Armenian, whose nephew lived in Fresno. He said I should have seen Hamra before the war. It was all Christian then. But they all left for Europe, and now it's 90% Muslim.

The National Museum, though small, had nicely presented displays. There had been lots of Egyptian influence in the second millennium B.C. I have never been able to get a strong sense of Phoenician culture, and I was not able to here either, although there was a nice mask from the 700s B.C. The Greek and Roman material was pretty standard stuff—a couple of unusually expressive sculptures, some fine mosaics, and very nice glass, although you didn't know what was intention and what was age. Some Islamic displays. But the final display was the remains of artifacts that had been destroyed when a bomb hit a storeroom during the civil war.

In and amongst the ruins there was a lot of new construction as well. The Beirut Central District, around the Place d'Étoile, was being rebuilt on the exact plan that existed before the war, and its cafes were just beginning to attract customers. A Roman street and the Roman baths, ruins of a former age, were nicely integrated with the modern architecture. I wondered if they would preserve some of the ruins of the civil war, as a reminder of what not to do.

The remarkable thing about Beirut today is how peaceful it is. I walked around the campus of the American University of Beirut, American-style university buildings among the trees, students lounging in the quads or reading on park benches overlooking the Mediterranean. Just before sunset I walked along the Corniche, the walkway by the sea, with the strollers and joggers, past men standing on rocks at the edge of the sea casting fishing lines into the water. Christians and Muslims walked together in peace. Overhead the sky turned turbulent orange.

Surely if people can live in peace in Beirut, so soon after the end of a bitter bitter civil war, there is hope for Israel and Palestine.

1990

In Aleppo Samir took me to what is now a small mosque near his carpet shop, and showed me a Hebrew inscription on its wall. He said you could tell the former synagogues by their pointed domes. This section of the old town was formerly the Jewish section of Aleppo. Many of course wanted to emigrate, but Assad would not let them; it would be providing manpower to his enemy Israel. Then in 1990 Assad suddenly announced that they could leave if they did so within 48 hours. They had to sell everything, and so much came on the market during those two days that they sold at huge losses. Now the Jewish section of Aleppo is gone, and the synagogues are now mosques.

1980s

The Beqqa Valley in Lebanon is flat green crop and red clay farmland between the red Lebanon Range and the brown Anti-Lebanon Range. The buildings are all beige rock, beige cement, and beige plaster, and relatively new. But I would look at every house and wonder if kidnapping victims were held there in the 1980s. I would look at every man and try to judge from his age whether he had been a kidnapper in the 1980s or a child who had aspired to be a kidnapper.

But in fact there was nothing in the environment itself that triggered my sense of ominous danger.

1980s

Some sites represent more than one era, sometimes incongruously so. The Takkiya as-Suleymannia mosque in Damascus, next door to the National Museum, was an early work by the Albanian architect Sinan, who later capped his career with the Blue Mosque in Istanbul. It is pleasant enough, and maybe shows early signs of genius. But in the 1980s Assad combined it with a military museum. Now as you walk through the courtyard of the mosque, you walk past a Russian MIG, a reminder of the close ties Syria had then with the Soviet Union.

1982

Rather than take a bus directly to Damascus from Aleppo, I took a bus to Hama along the way and walked around there for a couple of hours first. There are a few old buildings. There is an old bridge, and the small and squat but charming An-Nouri Mosque. I saw four of the norias or water wheels, wonderfully intricate dark wooden contraptions as much as 60 feet in diameter, standing still in stagnant water. One or two old buildings and a few fresh ruins remained.

Hama once had one of the most unspoiled and unique old towns in the Middle East, with winding souqs and houses overhanging the river. In the early 1980s the fundamentalist Muslim Brotherhood began to be active in this area. In 1982 Assad Senior had his army surround the town and attack. 20,000 innocent people were slaughtered, and the historic old town was leveled.

There has been virtually no dissent in Syria since then.

1916-1918

Wadi Rum in southern Jordan seems completely ahistorical, as ahistorical as the Grand Canyon. Its attraction is the power of nature. But a little bit of history did happen here. This is where T. E. Lawrence, “Lawrence of Arabia”, organized Bedouin tribes to revolt against the Ottoman Turks in World War I, and there are two historical sites from this era. There is a tree beside what is called “Lawrence’s Spring”, and there are a few rocks stacked and cemented together against a boulder—his home. Not much. But nature here is as grand as any desert scenery in the world. High buttes of colors from black to brown to red to orange rise above deep flat sands of colors from orange to blond.

As soon as I drove into town a young Jordanian in an old, beat-up Toyota Land Cruiser pulled even with me and offered me a trip into the desert. I bargained him down from 30 Jordanian dinars to 23, bought a detailed map to see where we would be going, and stashed a bottle of water, a Mars bar, and an orange into my daypack in case we broke down or he abandoned me in the desert. I got in and he stopped for gas. He asked me for 10 Jordanian dinars to pay for it. I refused; I had seen too many people go through personality changes as soon as they are paid. He said evenly, “As you wish,” but I suspected he was offended. He spoke little during our excursion, and in fact I never learned his name.

His Land Cruiser had no ignition key. He had two wires twisted together to stop it and a third wire to start it—hot wiring his own car! My door had

no exterior door handle, and to open it from the inside I had to bang on it. Some paneling was missing near my feet, giving me no protection against sand the tires kicked up. But the thing kept on running. He said the old ones last forever and are easy to fix on the spot. The new ones break down immediately in this desert.

There was a list of specified items of tourist interest, and I had made a selection from among them. We started off on a sand track, rounded Ragobet Um Ejil, drove into Wadi Um Ishrin, and turned east toward a large red sand dune. I climbed it—I'm not sure why; because it was there, no doubt. The view from the top was of the gray buttes nearby, the red-orange dune, the intense blue sky, and one lone treelet at the base of the dune.

Then we looked at some Bedouin inscriptions in the smooth face of a cliff on Jebel An Faishiyya—crude pictures of camels. They could have been a thousand years old, or they could have been scratched in yesterday. We drove around Jebel Barrah and to the entrance of Siq al-Barrah. Everywhere the geology was spectacular. He drove up a 45° rock slope to show me what his vehicle could do.

We circled east of Jebel Moharrog to a long Bedouin tent, partitioned into a family part and a tourist part, and an old woman served me tea. She and my driver carried on a lively conversation; she had a warm and interesting face, smooth and complicated gestures, and a warm smile, but they were for him, not for me, whom they both ignored. I looked around the tent. It was made of Bedouin blankets held up at the four corners by a thick straight pole, a crooked stick, a bamboo pole, and a 2' × 4'. A straw mat to sit on and some small pillows. A plastic milk carton with a teapot and a cookie tin. It was an interesting mix of native materials and Western goods.

Then my driver and I set off in search of his sister-in-law, whom he believed was out here somewhere. We drove to the west side of Um Hashadeh, getting stuck in deep sand briefly until he rocked out. He spotted two women on donkeys in the distance and drove to them. They pointed back and around to the other side of Um Hashadeh, and we drove over there, and spotted a lone young woman with a small boy sitting in the skimpy shade of a cliff watching a donkey, a dog, and a small herd of goats.

I had not been entirely comfortable with him for the entire trip, and this feeling was exacerbated as I sat in the sand, in the balmy breeze, and drank the tea that she brewed. My driver said to me, "You want woman? We find nice Bedouin girl for you." In fact his sister-in-law was quite attractive, but I

didn't think he was selling his relatives, and I was so thrown off by this remark that I ignored it. The goats climbed in thorn bushes. The boy drew in the sand with his finger, and then made an airplane out of two skinny twigs and brought it in for a landing. He eyed me suspiciously, including when I made a stick airplane too. Both he and his mother ignored all my attempts to make conversation in my minimal Arabic.

Then the driver said something else very strange. "We spend night here." In fact it was very comfortable lying back in the sand on a balmy morning, but an overnight stay had been no part of the three-hour excursion I thought I was paying for. My thoughts turned to a Japanese movie I once saw, "Woman of the Dunes". A Tokyo entomologist gets stuck in an isolated desert area one weekend, and some local men offer him a place to spend the night. It is at the bottom of a large pit in the sand, that he descends into on a rope ladder, in a house owned by a widow. The next morning the rope ladder is gone, and he learns that he is a captive there to be the woman's husband and help her in mining salt in the pit. He is trapped there for years.

I imagined how I would leap onto the back of the truck if he tried to drive off without me. I wondered if I could find my way back, and how long the walk would take, and whether my slim food and water supplies would last. I wondered how difficult it would be to catch and skin a goat to survive.

But of course nothing of the sort happened. She offered me a second cup of tea. I drank it. No one objected to my taking pictures of all of them. As we left, my "shukran" (thank you) was not acknowledged.

We drove next to a viewpoint for the large Rock Bridge of Burdah. On the way we passed a party of about a dozen tourists picnicking in the shade of a rock. I waved at them and my driver waved at their driver. We drove to the little Rock Bridge of Rakehbt Al-Wadek, which I climbed. Then we drove back to the town of Rum. I paid him 25 Jordanian dinars, which he took without comment. I drove the Desert Highway to Aqaba.

1099-1271

In Latakia, Syria, I got up before dawn and drove south on the freeway that borders the Mediterranean Sea. Halfway down the Syrian coast I stopped at a café that looked like it was about to open, and convinced the proprietor to make me a cup of tea that I could drink sitting at a rickety table under a sagging thatched roof on a pavilion at the edge of a cliff over the blue sea.

Then I drove further south, turned east near Tartous, and then turned north to Krak des Chevaliers.

After the Crusaders had taken Jerusalem in 1099, they extended their rule to the entire littoral, and in the mid 1100s they built this castle on the site of an older Muslim fortress. It must be the most magnificent fortress in the world. There is one touch of obvious artistry, the Gothic arches of the loggia in an upper courtyard. The rest is all utilitarian, but so thoroughly so that it defines its own sort of artistry.

It is perched on top of a steep hill with a commanding view of the countryside. The thick walls are high and unscalable. It was still early in the morning when I got there, and I was alone. I climbed up to the top of all the towers, and then I descended to explore the lower chambers—a kitchen with a vaulted ceiling, a room full of pillars, storage rooms with huge ceramic vats for wine and oil. Passage led on to passage, like a video game without the monsters. I'd peek into a room on my way to something else, see a doorway, and take that instead to the next room and the next, and then a break in the wall would take me out to a terrace outside the walls and to another tower overlooking the buildings of the outer castle. I saw a secret passageway about three feet wide, dark except by occasional windows. I got out my flashlight and followed it, past doorways to storerooms, around a corner, and into a narrower and darker passageway, and after 50 meters around another corner and into a narrow passage with a foot-deep trench down the middle. At the end of this, I went up a flight of stairs, and I was by the loggia again.

The castle is so well built that a very few Crusaders could defend it against the opposing hordes. In fact, it was one of the last places in the Middle East that the Crusaders abandoned, in 1271, and then not because they were beaten, but because the Crusades were over everywhere else and there was no longer any point in staying.

During Ottoman times in the outer castle, underground baths were built—a honeycomb of small domed rooms and small courtyards opening to the sky through holes in the ground. I found a dark narrow staircase that led to a level below the baths and then a stairway up to the baths, and I wandered around the maze of small rooms until I found a stairway back up to ground level.

Krak des Chevaliers is definitely one of those sites you *don't* have to bring your imagination to. You can go there bone ignorant and it will create your fantasies for you.

661-750

I love cities that have layers and layers of history in evidence. Few cities in the world have as much history as Damascus. No city has been continuously inhabited for a longer period of time. There is the Street Called Straight, one of the main thoroughfares of the Old City since the time of Alexander the Great. At the northeast corner of the Old City is the underground Chapel of Ananias, reputedly the home of the man who in the Book of Acts cured Saint Paul of his blindness.

Nearer to the center of the Old City are several columns that used to be a part of the Temple of Jupiter in Roman times. When the Arabs conquered Damascus in the 600s A.D., they tore the temple down and built the Umayyad Mosque in its place, and in part out of the same stone. Within a generation of the death of Muhammad the Arabs had conquered an empire that stretched from Spain to the borders of China, the largest empire that had been seen up to that time. It was ruled from Mecca by companions of The Prophet for twenty-six years, but then 'Ali, the fourth caliph and Muhammad's son-in-law, was overthrown by the governor of Damascus. For the next 90 years Damascus was the center of the world, the most powerful city in an empire that spanned half the globe. The Umayyad Mosque represents that period, and it is magnificent. The courtyard and the interior are huge, and have a very relaxed feel to them. It seemed a very human space, with men praying in one area, sitting around chatting in another, resting against the wall in a third.

I was amazed at a German man who had very obtrusive video equipment and was filming men praying from a few feet away. Outside in the courtyard I saw a number of men in rust and brown robes and sandals, looking like they had just come in from the country. I slyly snuck closer and took their picture. They saw me and gave me the thumbs up. A few minutes later an imam in a brown robe and a long beard was standing on the platform above the Ablutions Fountain in the center of the courtyard, as though about to give a sermon there. The German was ordering the "men from the country" into position around the imam. They were extras in a movie he was making.

500s A.D.

My love of maps preceded and precipitated my love of travel. Maps I still have from my childhood have imaginary trips traced on them, and even today

I will never throw a map away. I bring back maps from every trip, and if I see a map for sale of a place I've never been, I snatch it up. For this reason, one of the most exciting sights I saw in Jordan was also one of the smallest. It was a mosaic map in the town of Madaba from the 500s A.D. of Palestine, the mountains east of the Jordan, the Sinai, and the Nile Delta. You can pick out the names in Greek of Jerusalem and Jericho, labeling walled clumps of houses. There is a boat on the Dead Sea. Beyond the Dead Sea there is a lone fragment with the town of Karak, where I had just been. You can see Bethlehem and Hebron and bits of the Mediterranean. It was only fragmentary, but truly magnificent.

400s A.D.

In the early 400s A.D. a man known to later ages as Saint Simon Stylites retired from the city of Antioch into the hills to a place now known as San Simeon. In a weird notion of devotion typical of the time and the religion, he sat on top of a pillar for nearly 40 years. He somehow added to the height of the pillar as the years went on, his fame spread far and wide, and he became an object of pilgrimage, until the pillar reached over sixty feet. After he died, a church was built around the pillar, finished in 490 A.D., at the time the largest church in Christendom.

It is now in ruins, as is a companion church. The roofs have collapsed. Only a few walls and arches remain. All that's left of the pillar is a stub about six feet high. The site is quite charming on top of a hill surrounded by farmland spreading across lower hills.

Many Syrians I met considered San Simeon the most beautiful of the ruins in their country. For a Westerner it does not seem so remarkable; it is like many ruins of churches throughout Europe. I was reminded of Fountains Abbey in England. But then it came to me: this was seven hundred years older.

258-272 A.D.

Before going to Italy in 1970, I had read everything about Roman art and architecture and made a list of my favorites. Near the top of my list of Roman architectural monuments were the ruins of the city of Palmyra in Syria. They are, strictly speaking, Roman era rather than Roman. Palmyra was the center of a client state of Rome on its border with the Parthian Empire. It was the

terminus of the frankincense trade across the Arabian Peninsula. Its period of glory was the middle 200s A.D. when its ruler Odenathus and then his widow Zenobia exploited a period of weakness in Rome and conquered most of the Roman Middle East. Because it is in the middle of a desert and, after the decline of the frankincense trade, a trading post of no importance, its ruins remained in a remarkable state of preservation. There are many ancient sites in the Middle East that require some knowledge of history and a considerable dose of imagination to appreciate. But Palmyra is not one of them. It strikes you right away with its well-preserved Temple of Bel, its acres and acres of pillars, a Y-shaped colonnade over a mile long, tall funerary towers on nearby hills, and a large Crusader-era castle dramatically perched on the peak of the tallest nearby mountain.

I arrived there about an hour and a half before sunset, one of the two best times of day to see it, when the slanting light turns everything red-orange. I explored the Temple of Bel and walked under the Triumphal Arch and halfway down the colonnaded street. I climbed up and down the steps of the theatre. Half an hour before dark I drove up to the castle for a view of the sunset lighting the ruins below. The pillars cast long shadows making them seem to leap out of the landscape. A large police escort arrived just before sunset, an entourage for the Austrian ambassador, who had picked tonight to see the ruins. I had a chance to stay a little longer; their cars blocked mine.

The next morning I returned to the ruins at sunrise and spent another couple of hours wandering around, nearly alone. I took photos of the Triumphal Arch in early morning sunshine, of pigeons flying above a colonnade, of pillars framed by arches, of the castle in the sunrise light. Back at the hotel, I climbed up onto the roof, picking my way through construction equipment, and took telephoto pictures of the entire site from a half mile away.

165-256 A.D.

From Palmyra, I drove east across the Syrian desert and then down the Euphrates River valley toward the Iraqi border. Here it was village after village, one with a lively market on the highway that I had to pick my way through scrupulously. I felt as if I had suddenly entered Africa it was that colorful and alive. As in India, the men were all in white, but the women wore bright colors of every hue, jalabiyyas and abbeyas rather than saris. Every woman seemed to have a baby in her arms.

Then the road left the valley and climbed to a high plateau. There in the distance were the huge imposing walls and main gate of Dura Europos.

The wall paintings of Dura Europos were high on my list of Roman paintings, and even though the paintings are now in the National Museum in Damascus, the city itself was a place I wanted to go, and I wondered if it would ever happen. Now my heart leapt that I was actually here.

I was the only tourist. The only other person was an old guard at the main gate, a large humorless man with an ancient long-barreled rifle. As I wandered around the ruins, I would look back and see him on the wall watching me. When my back was turned, I imagined that he had me in the sights of his rifle.

Other than the gate and wall, there is not much left of the city. It was primarily a Roman military outpost, and all that remained inside the walls were the low foundations of houses and temples. But even in this there is a message for the modern age. There was the synagogue in which the best of the wall paintings were found. Next to it was a Christian church. Farther down the wall was a Mithraic temple. Toward the center of the town were the temples of Jupiter and Artemis. This was not only an isolated outpost of the empire. It was a very cosmopolitan place, with representatives of the major races and religions of the day. Apparently, they lived together in peace, a lesson in tolerance for the modern age.

100s A.D.

In a way, the town of Bosra, a couple of hours southeast of Damascus, does not merely *have* layers of history; it's *about* layers of history. It has the most magnificent Roman theatre anywhere in the world. But from the outside it looks like a Crusader era castle. In fact, it was so huge and formidable that during the Crusader era it was used as a castle. Now when you walk in you see another layer of history—huge, side-by-side banners hung above the stage with pictures of Assad Senior and Junior. It was a discordant note—literally. They were stretched between large metal pipes and as the wind blew the banners like large sails, the metal pipes banged against the basalt Roman backdrop, producing a harsh and chaotic music.

The modern town is built on top of the Roman town. That means the ancient and the current blend together almost seamlessly. City streets have been half excavated revealing the large Roman paving stones four feet below the modern asphalt. Roman streets are lined with ancient columns and modern

shops. Modern houses exist side by side with the foundations of Roman houses. As you walk around, you can almost feel what it would have been like to walk around 1800 years ago. The town has a Christian and Muslim history as well. In 512 A.D. the Cathedral was the first place people put a round dome on a square church. Islamic tradition has it that in the Monastery, when Muhammad visited as a boy, a priest of the Nestorian sect recognized him as the Prophet. The mosque has been claimed to be one of the oldest in the world.

I heard celebrations—women ululating—in the distance, and I walked toward the sound. A would-be guide said, “No, that’s the New Town. Old Town this way.” I ignored him and continued on until I came to a house where a large group of men had gathered. I stood outside until I was approached by a man who wanted to know if I wanted to photograph the event, a wedding party. I offered to send copies of the photos, and I was invited in. A man they called “the boss” did a little dance and posed for me. I took a group picture of all the men. There were silver plates of food sitting on the ground all over the courtyard, and they invited me to kneel down and share a meal with them. There was a yellow rice base with yogurt mixed in, a leg of mutton, fatty and not well cooked, and dark brown egg-shaped items that were apparently the innards of sheep chopped up and baked. Everyone squatted around shared trays and reached in with their hands, picking up the rice with their fingers and rolling it into a ball in their palms before popping it into their mouths. I joined in.

100s A.D.

The town of Apamea, west of Hama on a hill overlooking the fertile Al-Ghab plain, was originally a Greek town, but what we see today are the remains of the Roman rebuilding of the city after an earthquake in 115 A.D. It flourished for 500 years after that, with a population of half a million, until the Persians and then the Muslims conquered it and allowed it to fall into decline. Nothing remains today but one very long street lined with pillars and a few foundations of buildings off to the side. I walked along the colonnaded street for at least half a mile, to a large portico, and then back. Then I drove on.

I drove south to the Masyaf-Hama road, turned east on that, and then turned north on a side road to avoid getting onto the freeway too soon. There I glanced to the west and saw the colonnades of Apamea in the distance, looking like a zipper between the nearby fields and the distant mountains.

15 B.C.-249 A.D.

Baalbek, in the Beqqa Valley of Lebanon, had been a religious site for eons before, and when the Romans came, they built their own massive temples there. I walked up the steps of the Propylaea, a magnificent entrance to the temple complex in the “I’m bigger than you are” style of public architecture. The Hexagonal Court was pleasingly, well, hexagonal. In the Great Court I climbed up the relatively low Large Altar and the higher Small Altar, and took a photograph of half a dozen Syrian women scattered across the Monumental Stairway in gray and brown abeyyas with colorful scarves. The Temple of Jupiter, the centerpiece of the temple complex, has only six columns that remain standing, but they give a sense of how huge the temple once was. Each column is seven feet in diameter. The nearby Temple of Bacchus is one of the best-preserved Roman temples anywhere, with even part of the roof remaining, giving a rare view of a carved Roman ceiling.

170 B.C.-106 A.D.

If there were nothing there but the Siq, the narrow curving passage between two cliffs, if there were no ruins at the end, Petra would still be one of the wonders of the Middle East. I expected the Siq to be several hundred meters long, and at every turn I expected to reach the end. But it kept going on and on, for an entire kilometer before the pillars on the left side of the façade of the “Treasury” broke into view. This is the most famous of the temples carved into the red cliffs, the temple where the Ark of the Covenant was found in “Raiders of the Lost Ark”. But it is only one small part of the huge complex at Petra. I spent a day and a half exploring the ruins, and there were still large areas that I missed completely. I did not see the Street of Façades in the best light; I walked along it in the late afternoon of two days and the early morning of the second when it was deep in shadow. But the large Greek theatre at the end of the street, carved out of the rock, was bathed in sunlight in the morning, as only I and four or five Chinese students in orange coats scrambled up and down the stairs. The Royal Tombs, beyond and across the wadi from the theatre turned orange and auburn in the sunset the first day and drew me back the second day.

The main part of the site is an ordinary Roman era ruin of a city. One small temple, the Southern Temple, has its walls still standing. A larger temple, the

Great Temple, rises in tiers with some smaller temples embedded within it. You can view the subterranean Baths from above. The Colonnaded Street has few columns remaining, although the Nabataean era pavement is intact. The Triumphal Arch is no longer an arch. Across the wadi from all these ruins is a later Byzantine church with some very fine floor mosaics, including medallions of people and animals, camels with the spots of a giraffe, and a man pulling a camel laden with a log being pushed by another man.

The morning of my second day I set out up a path of stairs carved into the rock to the top of Jebel Madhbah. When I strayed from the path to explore the rock wilderness a bit, a Bedouin woman in a purple materialized and shouted to me, “Mister! Mister! This way! Give me money!” From the top, at the High Place of Sacrifice, I could get a panoramic view of the principal parts of the site, from the Royal Tombs to the central city to the little visited tombs of Umm al-Biyara beyond the central city. I stopped in at a small tent café on top of the mountain, and then set off on the spectacular cliffside path down Wadi Farasa, with views of temples nestled in the narrow canyon below and tight steps down the cliff.

In the heat of the early afternoon I hiked for an hour up to the “Monastery”, another temple carved into a cliff and even finer than the Treasury though less dramatic in its setting. Three hundred meters beyond this one could stand on a rock and see the black mountains lead down to the flat valley that lies south of the Dead Sea and to the mountains of Israel beyond.

When I stood at the entrance to the Siq the first afternoon, I heard the clatter of hooves and then saw a galloping horse pulling a carriage emerge from the Siq, and the sound and the sight and the sense of place thrilled me to the bones. So the second afternoon, as I dragged myself through the Street of Façades one last time after climbing over the hills for twelve hours and I spotted a man with a horse and carriage, it was easy to convince myself that a ride was a necessary part of the Petra experience. I bargained him down and rode back to the entrance of the park. The ride was bumpy where the path through the Siq was smooth. Where we crossed Nabataean cobblestones it was far worse, the lurching of the carriage magnifying every bump and crack in the eroded stones, even though the horse slowed to a walk.

1300s-1200s B.C.

Ugarit flourished in the second millennium B.C., when it sat at the intersection of the Hittite-Egyptian and the Syrian-Cypriot trade routes. It was a

town of 7000, controlling a territory with 50,000. They had one of the earliest systems of alphabetic writing, and the name of a scribe survives—Ilimalku, who wrote down a cycle of myths about the god Baal in the 1200s B.C. Ugarit was destroyed by the Sea People—the Philistines—who invaded the eastern Mediterranean after the collapse of the Achaeans in Greece.

Today it is only low stone foundations, and a gate that I found impressive but that Lonely Planet compares to a culvert. So it is one of those places you need to bring some knowledge and imagination to. A couple of streets were evident, and otherwise, labels helped. Here was the Royal Palace, and up there was the Temple of Baal on the Acropolis. Standing on the Acropolis, I got my first glimpse of the Mediterranean on this trip.

Ugarit was most remarkable for a treasure trove found there in a small and very unremarkable room that I walked into—30,000 cuneiform tablets. Much of what we know of the period is what we learned from those tablets.

1700s B.C.

Near the Iraqi border in the Euphrates valley I visited the ancient site of Mari. This is another place that requires a lot of imagination. A cuneiform tablet found in Babylon at the time of Hammurabi the Lawgiver, in the 1700s B.C., is a letter from an ambassador to Mari, describing the magnificence of the palace he found there belonging to their king Zimri-Lin. Mari was a major principality on the trade route along the Fertile Crescent between Mesopotamia and Egypt from the middle of the third millennium B.C. until it was destroyed by Hammurabi in 1751 B.C.

Today it is a low hill of mud. I descended a flight of stairs that had been chipped into the mud, and I felt with every step I was going back in time several centuries. I suppose archaeologists can tell whether the mud they are digging through was once mud brick rather than merely mud; I couldn't. In any case, under a large translucent tarp were several large connected rooms with high walls, and I tried to imagine it filled with the trappings and court of Zimri-Lin. I walked around outside—outlines of rooms and low walls. I saw a shard of pottery embedded in the mud, and looked at it in wonder. It was a very ordinary piece of pottery. But it was nearly 4000 years old.

2500-2000 B.C.

Ebla is yet another place you have to bring your imagination to. It was only discovered in the 1960s, by a group of Italian archaeologists. The existence of Ebla somewhere was known from Babylonian cuneiform tablets, and northern Syria is dotted with low hills, called tells, which are actually the remains of many layers of settlement over the millennia. But until the 1960s it was not known which one was Ebla.

Ebla is still very much under excavation. When I got there, there was a bucket brigade of men hauling rubber buckets of dirt out of an excavation and onto a truck. It made a great picture, so I took it, and then I moved into position for a better angle. As I was about to push the shutter, a man in the middle of the chain shouted, "No photo!" I snapped. He went ballistic, cursing me in Arabic and throwing the bucket of dirt he had just been handed back into the pit. I tried to shrug an apology, and I walked sheepishly away the opposite direction.

This incident made me uneasy as I explored the rest of the site. But to be honest there is not much there. The foundations of a temple or two have been excavated. Just below the central hill a residential district or maybe a part of a palace has been excavated, and the mud brick walls have been covered with plaster to protect them from the elements. A gate has been excavated near the periphery.

But the excitement of Ebla is knowing what it is. We all know about the Fertile Crescent stretching from Sumeria in present-day Iraq to the Nile Valley, and we all know that this is where Western/Middle Eastern civilization began. But what was going on in the middle of that crescent, the part that goes through northern Syria? The answer is Ebla. In the third millennium B.C. Ebla was the center of a kingdom that controlled all of northern Syria, and mediated the trade between Mesopotamia and Egypt. It fell into decline around 2000 B.C., rose to prominence again in the middle of the second millennium B.C., and was finally destroyed by the Hittites.

2500 B.C.

The National Museum in Damascus does not present Syria's rich history well. The flow through the museum is not chronological, so you can step from Ebla to the Ottoman era. The lighting is poor. Less than half the displays are labeled at all, and most of those only in Arabic. There is an occasional French label, and a rare English one. The sculpture garden surrounding the museum

is pleasant enough, but not educational, since busts and plinths are scattered at random without regard to provenance.

Nevertheless, there are a few real treasures. Some excellent statuettes from Mari are on display, and in particular a two-foot high statue of King Iku-Shamagen of Mari, with alabaster eyes and bitumen for pupils; he ruled around 2500 B.C. There are some remarkably preserved textiles from Palmyra, including silks imported from China. The Hypogeum from a funerary tower of Palmyra has been reconstructed in the museum. Individual niche graves are covered by sculpted busts of the deceased. There were some large wall paintings in an out-of-the-way room that a guard was anxious to draw the curtains to show me. The Synagogue of Dura Europos has been reassembled here, with remarkable wall paintings of Samuel anointing David, the history of Esther, and the parting of the Red Sea.

8000-6000 B.C.

The National Archaeological Museum in Amman, Jordan, is small and mostly unexceptional. But worth the visit were some flat statues of men, some two-headed, with bitumen eyes, from 'Ain Ghazal from 8000 to 6000 B.C. They were very reminiscent of Cycladic statues I had seen in the Athens museum, but these were 5000 years earlier. The Cycladic sculptors were closer in time to us than they were to the 'Ain Ghazal artists.

7000 B.C.

After a day spent hiking around Petra, I drove north 8 kilometers to the site of the Beidha Neolithic Village. I parked and followed a dusty track for half a mile or so and then cut over large flat rocks on a goat trail, past a large Bedouin tent and to the archaeological site, a village from around 7000 B.C., a time when permanent villages had first sprung into existence around the new technology of agriculture. It was just a pile of rocks, really, although you could discern bits of a street and the foundations of some rooms. It was already darkening, and a full moon shone over the nearby Bedouin tent and several more in the distance.

As I walked back past the Bedouin tent, a boy and a girl and their mother invited me in for tea. I accepted. I sat down hard on the cushions that lined the edge of the tent and scraped my left elbow badly on a low rock wall I

hadn't seen. The mother looked concerned. I said I was okay. She said almost to herself, "Man," which I took to mean, "Men don't cry." The tent was of black wool, large in area, and not quite high enough for me to stand in. Almost no possessions. In the center of the tent was a small fire on the sand with a teakettle sitting on the embers. She gave me a cup. "Bedouin tea," she said, although it tasted like every other cup of tea I had drunk lately.

There were six children in the tent. I asked their ages. A boy 14, a girl 11, boys 8 and 5, a 3-year-old girl, and a nursing baby of 7 months. She said she also had an older boy. She said she was 29. I didn't do the arithmetic until later. She must have had the first of her seven children when she was 13 or 14.

I mostly talked to the 11-year-old girl and the 8-year-old boy in their sparse English and my sparse Arabic. The mother knew English words, not sentences, and I don't know what she understood. The kids showed me their schoolbooks, one Arabic and one English. "This is a book," in the 8-year-old's workbook. They went to school in the nearby village of El-Beidha. The 14-year-old had to travel 8 kilometers to the town of Wadi Musa, by Petra, for high school. The woman offered and I accepted another cup of tea. I asked if I could take a picture of her and her family—"Mumkin sura al-kul?" (Perhaps picture everyone?) She was reluctant, but the kids were so enthusiastic she acquiesced. I said "Ursiil." (I send.) But she said to bring it with me the next time I came. I paid her for the tea, thanked her, and left.

On the way back to my car, I wondered how different her life was from the lives of the people of that Neolithic village.

VIII. Finding My Way in Syria and Jordan

When I picked up my car from Hertz at the Chahba Cham Hotel, I drove away alert but full of confidence. My confidence evaporated at the first traffic circle. I wanted the road toward Damascus, but the signs were only in Arabic. I can decode Arabic, but I can't exactly *read* it. I spotted a word that began with the letter "dal" and followed that arrow. At the second traffic circle, I was able to read as far as the letter "mim". By the third traffic circle, I could read the whole name "Dimashq".

That didn't get me onto the highway, however. A road construction zone intervened. A detour sign told me to turn right and then abandoned me. Some false turns took me to an assemblage of cement mixers. Questions resulted in

random answers. But I drove toward where I thought the road should be, and eventually there it was.

In the eastern desert finding the way was easy. There was only one road, and the only traffic was a convoy of twenty oil trucks coming from the direction of Iraq. In the densely populated Euphrates Valley, it was easier to get impatient, weaving my way among oblivious pedestrians on the road, but finding my way wasn't markedly more difficult.

In western Syria the Anti-Lebanon Mountains run from the northwest corner of the Mediterranean down to the Lebanon border and beyond, and there the roads twist and turn and split and merge, and villages proliferate. My map was not good. Towns that were small dots on the map were big on the ground, and roads that looked alone on the map were indistinguishable on the ground from unmarked roads branching to completely wrong places.

The technique I developed was to drive for a while and then stop and ask someone where the next town I saw on my map was. I wouldn't understand the answer, but at least I could go the way they pointed.

More than once, they were going the way I was, and they simply got in my car and directed me. The town of Idlib, south of San Simeon, was big and full of right turns. When I had lost all confidence and sense of direction, I asked a man standing at a corner where the next town of Ariha was. Without a word, he opened the door of my car, and as I hurriedly cleared my maps and camera off the passenger seat, he sat down. He directed me to Ariha, and one town beyond on the way I was trying to go. When he got out, he finally said something. He offered me tea. But I had miles to go before I ran out of sunlight.

At Qala'at Salah ad-Din, a Crusader-Era castle named after the Kurdish commander who crushed the Crusaders, the man in the ticket booth told me that all sites in Syria closed at 4 p.m. "Including Ugarit?" I asked. Yes. It was 3:08, and 35 kilometers to Latakia, beyond which Ugarit lay. I drove the road like a mad man, slicing curves, burning the brakes, running the gears up to 4000 rpm, passing trucks on curves, slowing only for children by the side of the road. Fortunately there were few slow trucks and few children, and I made it to Latakia by 3:50. But I was furious with myself as I did this—I was rushing blindly through some of the most beautiful hilly forested country I had encountered in Syria.

I asked directions in Latakia, and again the man got into my car. He directed me several miles up the road, I suspect a little out of my way, and

then pointed me in the right direction. I got to Ugarit at 4:04, and discovered they were open till 5.

When I left Krak des Chevaliers, I drove down to the village at its base and asked a group of young men where the road to Masyaf was—the next big town that showed on my map. They pointed one way, but the way they answered made me suspicious, and when I got around the corner, I asked a middle-aged man, and he pointed the other way. He was right. I continued to ask questions at every fork in the road and every corner, and for one 5-kilometer stretch gave a soldier a ride. A turn inside Masyaf could have thrown me off my route, so I plunged straight through, even when for two blocks I had to creep through a crowded market.

*

Someone from the rental car company picked me up at my hotel in Amman and drove me to their office in the Wadi Abdun district. It was raining hard, the first rain of winter, and as in California, the rain lifted half a year's worth of oil from the road and turned the road into soap. Only more than in California, since Jordanian vehicles drop more oil all year.

I drove south from Amman on the Desert Highway and past the airport. The road was slick. I saw two accidents. In the first a small pickup had run into and killed two camels and smashed in his own front end. In the other a bus had spun out of control and was blocking two lanes of traffic, forcing a detour through the back streets of a village.

By the time I was fifty kilometers south of Amman, the traffic and the rain had both let up, and the road was fine. The road went through flat rock and sand desert, with an occasional mining complex off the road. Driving was easy after that, until. . .

There are three north-south roads in Jordan—the Desert Highway that I was on, flat and straight; the King's Highway that twists through the mountains, and a road that follows the shore of the Dead Sea and skirts the border with Israeli Negev. My plan was to drive south on the Desert Highway, cut west on a connector road to the town of Ash-Shawbak on the King's Highway and follow that south to Petra. Before I got to the connector road, I spotted a sign that said "Detour to Ash-Shawbak". I took it. Shortly before I thought I should reach the King's Highway there was a fork in the road. I followed the sign to Ash-Shawbak, and after that I have no idea where I went. Soon

I encountered signs to Petra, and then other signs that said Detour to Petra. There was such a sign at almost every junction, and I always obeyed. But what should have been a half hour drive took two and a half hours, over barren hills and through small villages where when I asked which way to Petra, the children lied and the adults pointed in some random direction and acted as though it were far far away. I turned so many corners that I can't figure out how I didn't tie a knot in myself.

But eventually I descended from the town of Wadi Musa to the entrance to Petra, in midafternoon with time before sunset for a reconnaissance mission through the main part of the site.

*

When I left the Dead Sea resort of Suwayma, Jordan, I looked for gas, but Suwayma was just a depressed little town strung along a frontage road by the highway. I asked a policeman setting up a speed trap where the nearest benzene was. He said twenty kilometers north or ten kilometers south. Fortunately I was going south along the coast of the Dead Sea. But ten kilometers later there was nothing. Twenty kilometers after that in Ghor Mazra'a I asked an auto mechanic at his garage. He said there was one twenty kilometers south in Safi or one twenty kilometers uphill to the east in Karak. Seeing my gas gauge redlining, he recommended Safi. But I was going to Karak, so I risked it, ignoring my gas gauge, but focusing on my odometer. Three kilometers before Karak I saw the gas station. I had been given the car empty, and I hoped to return it empty, so I got just 5 Jordanian dinars worth, about \$7.50.

I stopped to look at the town's Crusader castle, and then I followed signs for Amman out of Karak, thinking it would take me north on the King's Highway, whose mountainous terrain I wanted to see. As I drove along, it began to look more and more like the Desert Highway terrain. Then I reached the interchange with the Desert Highway. I had taken the wrong turn out of Karak and had driven the last 33 kilometers east on a connector road. One hour and, though I didn't think about it till later, crucial gas lost.

I drove back to Karak and made the right turn this time. I drove north on the King's Highway past fields and villages and knobby hills, and across the broad canyon of Wadi Mujib. In the town of Mulayh I glanced at the gas gauge and saw it was nearly empty again. I asked and learned there was a gas station two kilometers back. I drove two kilometers back and asked again and

was told it was two more kilometers back. I was relieved when I finally saw it, but then was told they only sold natural gas, which many of the vehicles in Jordan run on. I could drive 10 kilometers back or 24 kilometers ahead to my day's destination of Madaba. Against the man's advice I drove on to Madaba, kicking myself for allowing not one but two gas scares in one day. I made it, bought 5 Jordanian dinars more of benzene, and arrived at St. George's Church and the mosaic map just before they closed.

IX. Paying for the Desert

My first night in Sanaa, as we were coming out of the restaurant, Benjamin, Élise, and I ran into a couple from Milano and a woman from Torino. They had just spent two weeks touring Yemen in a 4-wheel-drive vehicle. It had cost them \$900 or \$64 a day. They had gone up north and had done the desert run from Ma'rib to Wadi Hadramawt.

I wanted to do the desert run.

The next morning I went to a travel agency that I will not name, since the results were ambiguous; if it had been all bad or all good, I'd name them. In the office was a tall, slender, very bright man named Adam who looked more African than Yemeni and spoke excellent English. He told me that because there were so few tourists in Yemen—"Look out there! Nobody! Normally this time of year that square is full of tourists! What is the matter with them? Don't they know if we give them a visa, we guarantee their safety?!" he would give me a 4-wheel-drive with a driver for only \$50 a day. He recommended a ten-day trip. I revised it down to seven days. \$350. Then there was the desert route. Until a few years ago it was the only way to get from Ma'rib to Wadi Hadramawt. But then they built an asphalt highway that arcs to the north. If I wanted to take the desert route, I'd have to pay another \$200 for a Bedouin escort.

I would take the road to Ma'rib, then the desert route to Wadi Hadramawt where I'd see Shibam, Say'un, and Tarim. I'd go via Al-Hajjarayn along a dirt track to Al-Mukalla on the coast. I'd return on a paved road that ran a little inland from the coast, through Al-Baidha, Rada, and Dhamar.

I tentatively agreed to it and said I'd let him know, and I went to explore other possibilities.

At a travel agency down the block, the price was \$60 a day, and I didn't like the man as much as I liked Adam. Several other travel agencies were closed.

I walked around the old town. The buildings are mud adobe towers six or seven stories high, lining narrow streets. Their windows are outlined with all varieties of whitewashed geometric patterns—I counted eight different patterns on one building. The men in the street mostly wore the same thing—a white ankle-length jilaba, an ordinary Western suit jacket, and a wide woven belt with a large, curved, green-handled knife jammed into it. The few women who were out all wore black, head to toe, making them curiously invisible, as if one cut their figures out of a photograph and left only the black album page behind. There were the minarets of more mosques than I could find on my map. The streets crooked back and forth, ended unexpectedly, narrowed and then widened into plazas. Overall, the city is as unique and beautiful as Venice, although in an utterly different way.

I worked my way toward Bab al-Yaman, the main gate of the old town. On the way I passed two men with bags of qat. Qat is universal in Yemen. It is the leaves and sprigs of a plant. Men chew it and leave the pulp in their mouths to suck out the juices. The taxi driver in from the airport had had a mouth so full of qat that his words couldn't be understood as we tried to bargain with him. Just as in India one sees sidewalks speckled with the red splotches of betel that people have spit out, the narrow streets of Sanaa were speckled with the light green splotches of qat. Lonely Planet reports that the men of Yemen often spend 25% to 50% of their income on qat.

One of the men offered me a sprig and I took it. He was selling bags for 100 rials. I offered him 50 rials for the sprig, but he refused it. It was bitter. It reminded me of my reaction to the bitterness of coffee the first time I tried it—people use this stuff?—but it was certainly tolerable. It was like, well, chewing on leaves.

From Bab al-Yaman I plunged into the crowded market along Taiz Street. I bought a stick of miswak, their other unique chemical habit, and chewed on it. It is supposed to have genuinely healthy effects, as well as functioning as a toothbrush. It had a very strong radish taste.

Originally I had wanted to go to Yemen with my son William. He had lived a year in Cairo and spoke Arabic, and it would be great fun exploring the countryside with him. I'd have paid his way. Several weeks before I left, however, he said he couldn't go. He works in the internet industry in Los Angeles and said he was the only person he knew who had a job. He didn't want to risk it by going on a two-week vacation.

Before September 11, I had figured I'd split the cost with other travelers

who were going the same way at the same time. I was sure I'd run into them once I got to Yemen. But after September 11 the tourists were few and far between. I asked Benjamin and Élise in the taxi in from the airport if they wanted to join me, but they planned to stay in Sanaa for ten days first and arrange their visas for Eritrea and Ethiopia.

At breakfast the first morning I met Heinz, the Austrian doctor with the UN in Syria. But he and his friend were at the end of their trip. They visited Aden by bus and had to get lots of permissions. When they arrived, they were the only tourists there. His friend had a roll of film confiscated by the police when he inadvertently took a picture of a military installation.

As I walked in the newer part of town in the afternoon, I saw a lone tourist. Artur was from Poland. He had recently arrived and was also looking for someone to go to Wadi Hadramawt with. I asked him if he wanted to join me, and told him what I had found out. He said maybe. He said there was a group of seven Italians at the Gundan Palace Hotel, where he was staying, and he was thinking of joining them. We traded names.

In the afternoon my goal was to go to the Government Tourist Office to see if it was possible to go around the country by bus, and then to the Gundan Palace Hotel to find these seven Italians. Thus began my experience with service taxis at 15 rials a shot. You flag them down on the street and crowd into the tiny vehicles with half a dozen other people, and you hope they let you off where you want to go. The tourist office was on Cairo Street, said one of my maps. The first service taxi let me off too early. The second one let me off too late—I think they thought I was going to Cairo, and were taking me to the airport. I asked directions at an airline office and then at a hotel, and was finally directed down a side street to the right place.

A bunch of men were lounging around drinking tea. They told me I could take public transportation via Al-Mukalla on the seacoast to Hadramawt. Permission would be immediate as soon as I gave them my itinerary. But going to Ma'rib by bus was impossible. This was all in a mixture of English, German, Arabic, and charades. Meanwhile, someone called someone who spoke English, probably a tour operator, and he told me it was impossible to go to Hadramawt by bus, even via Al-Mukalla. New rule, just today. I suspected he was lying.

To get to the Gundan Palace Hotel I asked at another hotel—they had never heard of it—and then a rental car office—they looked it up in the phone book. I was told to take a service taxi to the Mustashfa Kuwait—the Kuwait

Hospital. I did, but the driver forgot about me, and had to do a U-turn. I asked a few more people. Down a side street, right into an alley, left into another alley.

Artur's information turned out to be very confused. The tour operator he had talked to wanted \$90 a day. The seven Italians he said were leaving tomorrow had left yesterday. And Artur had apparently checked out of the hotel this morning. So I was alone again.

At dinner on the roof terrace of the hotel, I joined Benjamin and Élise again. I told them I was paying \$550 for seven days to Wadi Hadramawt and back. I would be glad to have them along for whatever they wanted to contribute. Benjamin was very tempted. It might be the only way for them to see Ma'rib on their budget. But Élise vetoed it. She reminded Benjamin they had agreed to take a relaxed trip, and were going to spend several more days in Sanaa. Spend the days here after Hadramawt, I suggested. She wouldn't feel relaxed until they got their visas for Ethiopia, she countered. She dug in, and I saw that I had lost.

So I was going to tour the country alone, as I had feared, bearing the whole expense.

The next morning I went back to the travel agency. There was no getting around paying in advance, so I gave him \$300 in travelers checks and \$250 in cash, hoping that he wasn't the sort of person who goes through a personality change after he has been paid.

I'm not cheap. Okay, I probably am cheap. When I pay for something, I like to make sure I get what I paid for. I hate being surprised by extra expenses along the way.

"What about other expenses?" I asked. "Gas. The driver's meals and hotels."

"All included," Adam said. "You pay nothing more."

He said my driver would be at my hotel at 8 the next morning. The police convoy for Ma'rib, he said, leaves at 8:30 every morning.

That evening I got a call from the travel agency, asking me to come to their office. They didn't say about what. I sensed trouble. No doubt problems requiring more money and/or delays. Just in case, I took my passport and \$200 in cash with me. As I walked over there, I thought out various contingencies. I wondered how long I could delay the trip. I imagined demanding my money back. I could fly to Hadramawt and back. I developed various Plans B, C, and D.

When I got there, five men were sitting around the room. A heavyset Arab named Khalil was clearly in charge. He explained that the police were not permitting traffic on the Sanaa-Ma'rib road for the next two days. So what they proposed was to reverse my trip. We would first go south from Sanaa and along the coast to Al-Mukalla and up to Hadramawt. Then I would take the desert route to Ma'rib and the last day back to Sanaa.

"What if the Sanaa-Ma'rib road is closed that day too?" I asked.

"We'll know that when you are in Shibam, and you can fly back," Adam said.

"How much is that?"

"About \$100."

"That would make the trip two days less, and no desert track. Would I get my \$300 back?"

"We still would have to get the car back. That takes money."

"Two days at \$50 a day," I said.

Adam said, "We would take the asphalt road, not the piste, so you would get \$200 back."

That all sounded reasonable, since my Plan C had been to fly there and back. I brightened. I was introduced to my driver, Faraj, a quiet man sitting in the middle of the group. He seemed friendly and intelligent. They sent out for tea. Then we had an intense conversation on the future of Israel and Palestine that I'll describe later.

The next morning Faraj picked me up. We drove south from Sanaa to the town of Dhamar, where I walked around the market, and turned east to the town of Rada, where we ate lunch.

Faraj's meals were supposed to be included in what I had already paid, but he nevertheless told me to pay for lunch. He said it was 600 rials, enough for both of us. But when I gave the man behind the counter a 1000-rial note, he only gave me 200 rials back. I was buying lunch for Faraj and being cheated by the owner to boot. The amount of money was insignificant, but I hate it when people try to exploit me.

That afternoon we reached Al-Baidha. Faraj drove to a hotel and said this was the place we were staying. They showed me a dirty depressing room for 1500 rials, with a squat toilet across the hall. Faraj wanted me to stay there, since then he could get his room free. I wanted to look at the other hotels mentioned in Lonely Planet, so we went on. The next hotel we stopped at had a very unpleasant man behind the desk, who said he only had triples for 1800

rials. This room was dirty and depressing too. We went to a hotel next door. By now this room looked pretty good. I liked the proprietor, an old man with a twinkle in his eye. He asked me for 1600 rials. We went through all the steps of bargaining, working through a script toward the number we both knew we'd end up with, with a palpable sense of irony. I paid 1100 rials. I asked Faraj if he could make a deal for himself, and he said not to worry about him.

The next afternoon near the town of Habban we encountered a group of Austrian tourists who had already been to Wadi Hadramawt and were on their way back. They had especially loved the desert route. They had spent the night on the desert with their armed Bedouin escort guarding them from the top of a sand dune.

But I was beginning to doubt that I would ever see the desert route. There was the problem of the Land Cruiser. In Rada I had to help push it to get it started.

The next morning all the water had evaporated from the battery. A mechanic from across the street filled it up and worked on the engine a bit, and the car started.

That afternoon Faraj stopped at a gas station for a long time. A mechanic was underneath the car banging on something with a hammer.

"What's the problem?" I asked Faraj.

"Oil leak," he said.

The car had been making a terrible sound whenever he turned too sharply to the right. He investigated. The right end of the bumper was pushed almost into the wheel. Some men pulled it out. He told me that after our meeting in the travel agency office the night before leaving, he had taken a friend to the airport, and had gotten into an accident.

Our first stop in Wadi Hadramawt was to be Al-Hajjarayn in Wadi Daw'an. There were two ways to get there—from the south a long way over a very bad dirt road, and from the north only a few miles over the bad road. Adam had constructed an itinerary for me that had me coming in from the south, which he said was more scenic. But when we got there, Faraj vetoed it. It would take us an entire day, he said. Then when we got to the northern end of the Wadi he was delighted to see that in the time since he had last been here, a new paved road had been built as far as the village we were going to.

One evening I asked Faraj if the car was his or the agency's. He said it was his. I knew at that point that he was unlikely to want to take it across rugged terrain of any sort, including the desert.

In Shibam Adam called from the travel agency and asked how my trip was going. I said Yemen is beautiful and Faraj was terrific. He said that was good, because he wanted their American friend to have a wonderful trip.

Wadi Hadramawt's three main towns, Shibam, Say'un, and Tarim, are all within twenty or thirty kilometers of each other. My itinerary had us staying one night in each and then spending a day crossing the desert to Ma'rib. But Faraj told me the desert route would take two days, "Okay," I told him, "we'll visit Say'un and Tarim both in one day, and then spend the two days getting to Ma'rib."

"Yes, but that's not good for me," Faraj said. "We will take the asphalt road."

"I didn't pay \$200 to take the asphalt road."

"The \$200 is the charge for going through Bedouin territory, whether you take the desert route or the asphalt road."

"Maybe they charge \$200 to take the asphalt road," I said with barely concealed fury, "but that's not what I was told, and I never would have paid that."

Faraj said we could take an "excursion" into the desert, three or four hours. I wasn't interested in an "excursion". I wanted to go from Point A to Point B on a desert track, not because it was a fun thing to do but because that was the way to get there. Okay, maybe the asphalt road was now the principal way to get to Ma'rib, but I wanted to take the old route.

"Take the desert route, and I'll throw in an extra \$50 for the wear and tear on your car," I said. "If not, I'll want my \$200 back."

"But there's a problem," Faraj said. "The Bedouin guide lives in Ma'rib, and I called him this morning. He's already on his way, and he's already been paid."

Now I really felt cheated. There was no way around it. \$200 for an asphalt road. "I'm a customer, not a natural resource," I said.

"What's the problem?" he replied. "The car is on the asphalt road. The desert is right over there," pointing to the right. "Right over there," pointing to the left.

In Tarim I phoned Adam at the travel agency again and said Faraj was intending to take the asphalt.

"What?! No! You paid for the desert track and that's what our American tourist will take! Let me talk to Faraj."

When Faraj handed the phone back to me, Adam had capitulated. He said

their were two desert routes, one through the ancient town of Shabwa (which was never under consideration) and one that shares a bit of the route—maybe ten or twenty kilometers—with the asphalt road. That’s the one we were going to take.

“Sorry for the misunderstanding,” Adam said, “but Faraj doesn’t speak English very well.”

“He speaks it just fine,” I said.

I saw that I was not going to get my money back and I’d get what I’d get. I got out my map, and Faraj showed me in vague gestures where we were going to go—the asphalt road most of the way, plus a “five or six hour excursion into the desert”. Earlier he had said a “three or four hour excursion”. It was clear I would not see my money again, and my problem now was to get the most from what I had already paid.

The next day was very strange, in ways that I will describe here and in the next section as well.

Faraj had wanted to begin early so we would have time for the desert excursion. I got up at four and by four thirty was in the lobby.

Faraj came down at five, and we got in the car and left. As we drove past Say’un, I noted that we had not picked up the Bedouin guide, although at one point Faraj had said that’s where he would be staying. Perhaps farther along.

Just outside of Shibam we had a flat tire, on the right rear wheel. Faraj told me afterwards it was the first flat tire he had ever changed! The jack didn’t work. It wouldn’t go up or down. We flagged down passing cars to ask if they had a jack, but they all denied having one. So Faraj built a small pile of rocks and drove the flat tire up on it, while I blocked the front wheel. He was able to jam the jack under the rear shock absorbers, but for all his fiddling with the jack with half his body under the precariously perched vehicle, he couldn’t pump it up. He was able to get the rocks out from under the wheels and pull the old tire off. The car wasn’t high enough to put on the spare tire. So he dug a hole under the wheel with his lug wrench until he could. A half hour lost.

The spare tire was bald—too bald to imagine crossing the desert on.

We drove through Al-Qatn and Al-Hawta to the turnoff to Ma’rib, where we stopped for gas, for breakfast, and to get the flat tire fixed. Faraj disappeared for a bit. When he returned, he said there was a problem.

“With the car?” I asked.

No, he said. He had left his money belt under his mattress back at the

hotel in Tarim, two hours back. He had to drive back for it. He would leave me at Shibam, where I could do more sightseeing until he returned. What I had paid the travel agency was supposed to cover gas, but of course I had to pay for the gas here. Faraj had no money.

In his hurry to get back, he honked everyone out of his way. He honked goats off the road. He even tried to honk a rock off the road.

We reached Shibam at 8:30 a.m. Faraj assured me he would be back in an hour, but I knew it would be two hours, since Tarim was an hour away. I left my suitcase in his car. I spent an hour exploring more of Shibam. Then I returned to the hotel, drank three small cartons of cold mango juice, and lay down on the wide cement railing around the veranda. I looked so uncomfortable that the hotel caretaker brought me a pillow. After half an hour of this, I sat in the lobby with the caretaker for an hour and watched an American TV show about dramatic rescues from raging rivers. I was getting more and more nervous about where Faraj was, and when he would return, and I regretted leaving my suitcase with him. Maybe he had broken down. Maybe this was his plot to stay in Shibam that night and avoid having to drive his limping Land Cruiser across the desert.

At moments like these, I tend to engage in what I call "Plan Z thinking". Plan Z thinking is when you think things like, "I'm going to kill myself, and won't that make them sorry!" I formulated a plan to take a taxi toward Tarim until I saw him and retrieve my suitcase. Then I would take a taxi to Ma'rib. I even asked a taxi driver outside the city gate how much a ride to Ma'rib would be. Finally in my growing panic I called the travel agency in Sanaa and told Adam what I intended to do; he said I couldn't. I simply couldn't. I paced nervously in the shade of the driveway.

At 12:20 Faraj showed up, ready and impatient to head for Ma'rib.

"Another flat tire?" I asked him, suppressing my anger.

No, he said. Someone had stolen 10,000 rials (\$60) from his money belt at the hotel in Tarim. He had to report it to the police, but it could have been any one of five people making up the rooms. It wasn't found.

We drove off again, through Al-Qatn and Al-Hawta and to the turnoff for Ma'rib, where we had lunch at the same place we had had breakfast. I paid for it with the money Faraj had paid me back for the gas.

We had not picked up any Bedouin guide, whose existence I now doubted.

At first the desert was dry sand and gravel with buttes in the distance. Then the buttes receded, and the desert was flat as far as the eye could see.

We saw occasional small herds of camels, rare people, almost no other cars. At 3:25 we reached Al-Arn, a concrete block village whose distinguishing feature was a large tire dump. At 4:50 I noted that the scenery was flat sand, disturbed in the distance by an occasional mountain.

My ruminations were mainly about what I would do to get my money back for the nonexistent desert route and the nonexistent Bedouin guide. I would threaten the travel agency with a Lonely Planet web site posting. It was clear by now that because of the morning's disasters, I would not even get the excursion into the desert.

Finally around 5:30, as the sun was going down, we reached an area of dunes. Time only for a few pictures. And that was the desert I had paid \$200 for.

The next night, a Monday night, I was back in Sanaa. I went to the travel agency office, where Faraj, Adam, and others gathered every evening to chew qat. They greeted me happily and offered me tea, and we talked about the adventure of it all. Then I raised the "difficult" question—my \$200. I wanted it back.

Adam agreed with me that the asphalt road didn't cost \$200, but they had already paid the Bedouin guide. The problem was that I had advanced my schedule by a day. The Bedouin guide was now in Say'un waiting for me. It was all my fault.

"I think the Bedouin guide is a fiction," I said, "and the desert track was paved over two years ago. Give me my \$200, and you can work out with the Bedouins who's going to absorb that loss."

Khalil said, "That's impossible. If any tour agency makes trouble with any of the Bedouin guides, the Bedouins won't deal with them anymore. We would be out of business." The other men nodded.

I could not use my best arguments, because it would involve criticizing Faraj. Saturday morning Faraj had told me the Bedouin guide was already on his way to Say'un; he would have been there by Sunday morning, not Monday morning as Adam was saying. But we never picked him up. The reason I wanted to leave for Ma'rib a day early was that Faraj had said the desert route took two days. On Sunday morning I kept waiting for Faraj to stop someplace to pick the Bedouin guide up, but it never happened, and when Faraj screwed up and forgot his money belt, we no longer had time even for the excursion into the desert. Furthermore, I knew that Faraj had no intention of taking his Land Cruiser into the desert; he would never subject it to that

kind of wear and tear.

But I couldn't blame all this on Faraj, because of what else happened on that trip.

X. The Real Story of My Travels in Yemen

When I called Cynthia to tell her my itinerary around Yemen, I painted a picture of a country that knows where the dangers are and makes sure tourists don't encounter them.

Faraj picked me up at 8 in the morning. He was a slender, good-looking man, with a wide smile and always impeccably dressed in the traditional Yemeni style. He apologized for his English, saying he spoke German better. He had studied economics in Munich for four years. But in fact his English was fluent.

We drove out through the extensive and random suburbs of Sanaa, a city of 1.5 million that is doubling every few years. About half an hour out we reached the first police post. Faraj had a stack of photocopies of my police permit above the steering wheel on the dash. He handed one to the policemen, they disappeared with it for about ten minutes. Another officer came out to talk to Faraj and then went away. Finally Faraj got the signal to proceed, and he gave me the thumbs up. "We made it!" he said.

"Was there any doubt?" I asked.

"Yes. They could have turned us back."

"Could they turn us back at any police post we come to?"

"No. This is the only one."

I still had too local a view of the situation I was in.

We drove on, and in a few more miles came to the next police post. Faraj talked a bit to the police officers. They disappeared, and we just sat there. I didn't notice him looking into his rearview mirror, so I was surprised when he just drove off, slowly, as if to see if the police would stop him.

We drove across the high plateau surrounding Sanaa and down an escarpment to a lower, fertile valley. I noticed there was a police car behind us, and with my California mentality, I thought, "Oh no, we'd better not speed. I hope he passes us pretty soon." We pulled over at the picturesque village of Ma'bar so I could take a photograph. I was surprised that the police car stopped right behind us. It was then that I realized they were our police escort. I asked

Faraj how long they were likely to be with us. He said probably only a few miles, to the next town of Dhamar.

Lonely Planet said that Dhamar had a Wednesday market, and today was Wednesday. I asked if we could stop so I could walk around the market. He was willing, but he wasn't sure where the market was. He pulled over and flagged the police car. They led us to the market. I realized there could be an advantage to having a police escort.

We parked in a plaza and got out, and out of the police car stepped a tall young man in a camouflaged uniform, a Kalashnikov slung over his shoulder, and the three of us set off for the market a block away.

"I feel like an ambassador," I told them.

"You are a very important person," Faraj told me.

I thought he was joking.

The market was very colorful. A man asked me where I was from. I said, "Canada," as Faraj had requested me to say for the entire trip.

"Canada Dry!" came the reply.

A police car still followed us after Dhamar. As we approached the next city of Rada, Faraj told me that there had been a war there for the last two weeks between two villages fighting over land. I wanted to walk around Rada, so a soldier with a machine gun accompanied me as I took pictures of the fort on the hill and the unpainted window frames made of mud bricks in intricate patterns.

From Rada on, a policeman rode with us in the back seat. I could see how this might be dangerous country. Outside Rada even kids selling qat by the side of the road had Kalashnikovs on their backs. Ten-year-olds carrying machine guns! Faraj stopped to bargain for some qat.

Beyond this was dry rocky desert. The surfaces of the rocks were black, as if they had suffered a rock fire, and shone like obsidian in the sun. Faraj and our armed guard chewed qat and drank bottles and bottles of water.

In a small town along the way the soldier got out to buy more bottles of water. A crazy man approached Faraj's side of the car, opened the car door, and bent his head down to bless Faraj. A young policeman from the police car behind us sprang from where he sat, grabbed the crazy man, and pushed him all the way across the road.

In Al-Baidha, after we got settled in our hotel, I set off to explore the town. "Remember," Faraj said, "this isn't America." It was a poor and not very picturesque town whose streets were buried in garbage.

After being attacked by a thousand people in an Egyptian village in my youth, I never enter the back streets of a place like this without a guide of some sort. An 11-year-old boy named Muhammad started following me, so I asked him to be my guide. He asked me where I was from.

“Canada,” I said.

“America?”

“Canada.” I don’t think he had heard of Canada.

Then he asked me in Arabic if I thought Osama bin Laden was a terrorist. Did I think he was responsible for the “boom”?

“La ‘arif,” I said. I didn’t know. In fact, this is the truth. I had seen no evidence of that yet. Like the rest of the world all I had to go on was the word of the American government.

A nearby shopkeeper, a distinguished-looking older gentleman in a long white jilaba, was listening to all this. He shushed the boy. Then he interrogated me on the hotel I was staying in. I couldn’t remember its name, so in a moment of foolishness, I pulled the key out of my pocket and showed him. It occurred to me that he now knew not only the hotel but the room as well.

I asked Muhammad to guide me to the “qala’at”, the ancient stone fortress on the top of the hill. He led me up several streets that were covered with garbage. Soon a bigger boy showed up with a donkey and offered to let me ride to the top. I declined. A friend of his arrived. They tried to chase Muhammad away. I said he was my guide. Then they blocked our way and demanded money for the qala’at, and one of the boys grabbed my wrist. I twisted free, and answered him sharply to leave me alone, and Muhammad and I turned back down the hill. At the bottom I gave Muhammad 20 rials, and a tiny friend who had tagged along behind us 5 rials, and they left. In any case, we couldn’t have gone up to the qala’at, because it was an active army post and off limits.

As a tourist destination, Al-Baidha needs work.

I returned to the hotel, where Faraj and I were the only guests. I read about the Abyan and Shabwa governates that we would drive through the next day. Abyan was a source of civil wars, and the region where some German tourists were kidnapped several years ago and then killed in a shootout with government troops. I imagined that the shopkeeper I had shown my key to was a terrorist and right now he was planning with his terrorist cell how they were going to kidnap me. At dinner I asked Faraj if the police would escort us the next day too, and he said yes, probably all the way to Al-Mukalla, but

not after that.

He said that if I got kidnapped, it would be on CNN two hours later, and he would be sent to jail for allowing it to happen.

As I lay in bed that night, half expecting the terrorists to break into my room in the middle of the night, I thought about how nave I had been. All the tourists planning to come to Yemen cancel their trips because of the war. Only I come. The tourist industry has to treat me like an ordinary tourist and sell me the services they normally sell tourists or they would have to admit that they are closing down completely. But when they go to get police permission the other side of the problem appears. If I get in trouble, it is an international incident, and it puts Yemen on the wrong side in the war. So they have to devote extraordinary resources, as I go through the motions of being an ordinary tourist, to make sure nothing happens to me. The decision to reverse the direction of my circuit around Yemen was probably made in negotiation with the police, and perhaps a return via Ma'rib would not be possible. I had no idea how high the decisions were being made, but whatever fears I had about encountering bureaucratic tangles were unfounded. This trip was being run like a well-oiled military operation, coordinated at a very high level in the government.

I was genuinely apprehensive for the first time in my trip. I viewed the next day as probably the most dangerous day of the trip. I felt the hostility of the people in this town had been palpable.

I slept fitfully. At 12:45 I woke from the mosquitoes and got up to start an incense coil. Sometime after that there was a big racket in the room next door. At 4 the muzzein at the nearby mosque began calling people to prayer, and it was cool enough for me to pull the blanket up.

But there was no kidnapping attempt from the shopkeeper's secret terrorist cell that I was aware of.

In the morning I went down to the lobby. Faraj was there, and so was a man with a gun. Faraj and I went next door for some breakfast. I asked, "Does that hotel always have a guard in the lobby?"

"He's not the hotel's guard," he said. "He's your guard."

"Did the police follow me around the town yesterday?"

"No, but they watched where you went."

As I was waiting by Faraj's car for us to get going, a policeman stood about six feet away. An old man came up and stood about two feet from me. The policeman eyed him suspiciously. I casually walked about ten feet away.

We drove through volcanic desert barren except for the intense green of an occasional field of sorghum in and among the lava flows.

After a long wait at the police post at Mukayras, we came to the top of one of the most spectacular stretches of road in the world. Northern Yemen is a high mountainous plateau whereas southern Yemen is low desert. This 6000-foot escarpment was the border between them. We could see the road twisting in tight hairpins down the cliffside and then cutting along the ridge of a foothill, down to the town of Lauder below.

The Republic of Yemen is the creation of an improbable union in 1990 of the Islamic, traditional and racially homogeneous Republic of Yemen in the north, independent since the Ottoman Turks left in the 1600s, and the Communist People's Republic of Yemen in the south, racially diverse with large infusions of people from South Asia and the Horn of Africa, a part of the British Empire until 1968. This escarpment was the boundary between the two, and though no longer a political division, it still divided two cultures.

In Laudar we waited a long time in the courtyard of the police post. Finally a surly young soldier joined us. He told me to get in the back seat. I protested. He insisted. I figured he knew what security required, so I gave in.

We followed along the base of the escarpment, through flat desert vegetated by thorn trees, with occasional large formations the shape of Sugar Loaf in Rio. We passed a shepherd carrying an automatic rifle, as most men here do, and the soldier became suddenly alert.

At the next police stop the surly soldier got out. Faraj told me to give him 300 rials. I did. He got angry and demanded more. I gave him another 100 rials. He was still angry and demanded more. I refused, and he stalked away. Faraj muttered, "Communist!" He spit the word out. He told me that the soldier had demanded much much more. There were so few tourists here to escort that he was suffering financially. He had wanted me to make up all his losses. An older and nicer soldier joined us, and I reclaimed the front seat.

We drove through mountains that looked as if they were made of yellow-orange slate. Then we followed wadis between buttes whose strata tilted diagonally. We passed through an area with mountains of lava.

In the afternoon our escort was a jeep with seven soldiers and a rocket launcher mounted on the back. Faraj told me that the Minister of Security had personally contacted that police post and ordered that I be protected. He was very concerned that they not have an incident involving an American, provoking the wrath of the American government.

Near Habban the Austrians I met at a roadside restaurant asked me where I was from.

“I’m not supposed to say,” I said in my American accent.

They laughed. We joked about my rocket launcher escort. They didn’t have a police escort.

Now our policeman in the car was a man who looked more Ethiopian than Yemeni. The countryside around there resembled Monument Valley in Arizona, and then the Canyonlands. Faraj said we didn’t have time to stop in the town of Habban, a mystical vision of a town in the middle of the desert with mud adobe skyscrapers abutting a high flat butte. A little beyond, in the distance, we could see the mud adobe ruins of Naqb al-Hajar, once the capital of a kingdom along the frankincense trade route. We drove across flat sand desert. In the late afternoon the Arabian Sea broke into view and we drove along between sand and sea, with green bushes wherever water collected. We passed through an area of black lava mountains, and then along a long sandy beach Australia would be proud of. Dark fell as we were going through another area of sharp lava mountains with sand skirts. The port city of Al-Mukalla was a long string of pearls reflecting in the ocean, squeezed between mountain and sea.

That night as we ate goat kebab for dinner at a seaside restaurant, Faraj told me he had been kidnapped three times with tourists, once for three days, once for one day, and once for two hours. I asked what it had been like for the tourists. He said they were nervous and apprehensive at first, but after a few hours they saw that they would be treated well. They were taken to the Bedouins’ village and treated like royalty. They were fed well and given jewelry as gifts. In the longest kidnapping, after three days the government released the village’s shaykh and the tourists were let go. Some of them returned to the village afterwards to visit the friends they had made. The one-day kidnapping was a noted photographer in the far north of Yemen.

When we paid our check, the owner of the restaurant told us that the police had called and asked if we were eating there. We had dropped the last policeman off at the beginning of town and then checked out more than one hotel, and yet they were still able to find the restaurant we were eating at.

We left Al-Mukalla the next morning and drove toward Wadi Hadramawt across rock and sand desert. I was hoping that we were out of the dangerous areas and that I had seen the last of the police escorts. A sinuous road led up a wadi at an escarpment. I asked Faraj to stop so I could take a picture.

A jeep with half a dozen soldiers passed us and pulled off the road about a hundred meters on, to wait for us. I realized I'd probably have an escort until I returned to Sanaa.

In general I try to travel through the world quietly, without evoking much attention. This is pretty hard to do if seven soldiers are waiting for you every time you take a picture. The novelty had worn off, and the police escort by now was just a hindrance to my explorations of the country.

We crossed a high plateau scored by wadis. The road kept to the high ground, but took long unexpected curves to do so. During a long delay at a police stop while waiting for another escort crew to assemble, Faraj shook his head in disbelief and muttered something about me being an American. Then more flat barren desert with an occasional green spot with goats grazing.

We arrived at and descended into Wadi al-'Ayn—steep orange-brown cliffs at the edges of the wadi and intense green palm groves at the bottom, with mud-brick skyscraper villages against the cliffs. We had finally arrived at my destination.

Around noon we stopped at one of these villages. It was Friday, and Faraj wanted to go to the mosque. I tried to use the time to wander around the back streets of the village. The usual crowd of children clustered around me, although some children ran away in fear when I approached them. One of my soldiers caught up with me and indicated in gestures that I couldn't explore the village but had to return to the police station with him. I was very pissed off at this, and behaving badly, as I sometimes do, I unleashed a diatribe in English about how I was being held prisoner. He didn't understand the details, but he caught the drift, and he stared daggers at me until his squad departed half an hour later in the back of a truck. So I made an anti-American, who will someday blow up a plane.

When Faraj returned, it was with someone who was probably the mayor of this town. He asked what I thought of Yemen. First I said, "Kathis buliis." (Many police.) But this was so clearly inappropriate that I quickly added that it was very beautiful. He listed some of the beautiful towns—Ibb, Sanaa, Shibam. I said, "Wa hadhihi madina." (And this town.) He laughed and patted me on the shoulder.

In Al-Hajjarayn Faraj drove up the cliff on tight switchbacks to the town and through narrow streets, his vehicle nearly scraping the walls, to the main square. At my request, he and the guard stayed in the car while I wandered around for half an hour. But then Faraj sent two boys to find and retrieve

me. They were those irritating, imperative kinds of guides who are always shouting, "Mister! Mister! This way!" I was irritated enough that I ignored them and spent an extra few minutes exploring the parts of the town I hadn't yet seen, while they followed me shouting "Give me money!"

We waited a long time at the next police post for the replacement crew. A man who was obviously very important approached me and asked me what I thought of Yemen. I said it was very beautiful. He asked me if America and Yemen were friends. I said they were. He gave me the thumbs up. The soldier who had been riding with us was about to be replaced by another, and he asked me for a tip. The important man got angry and pushed him away.

This new guard lasted until Al-Qatn, where he too asked for a tip. I told Faraj that I didn't ask for the guards, I didn't want them, no other tourists had them, and I viewed them as hitchhikers and their tips as a special tax on Americans. Faraj laughed. I don't know what he said to the soldier, but he didn't ask again.

Shibam, from a distance, looks like a single flat-topped rectangle in white and tan. Its buildings range from four to eight stories high, depending on how high the ground is they are built on, so they all top out at the same level. It is surrounded by a mud adobe wall with only one main gate, though there are smaller gates in each of the walls to give its people easy access to the fields.

We stopped at the Shibam Motel, formerly the Shibam Guest House, the only hotel in town. I was shown a room—the bed didn't sag, the hot water worked, the toilet flushed, and there were towels and toilet paper—a great room. They wanted 3000 rials, which Faraj bargained down to 2500 rials. I learned later he got his for 300 rials. We were the only guests.

I walked through the narrow streets to the Sheikh ar-Rashid Mosque. In most cities the minaret of the mosque is the tallest building. Here it is dwarfed by the surrounding houses. I encountered many children playing hopscotch in the sandy street or expertly swinging clackers. I tried to take their picture, but always a stern older girl would tell me no.

Faraj drove me across the wadi and waited for me while I walked up to a tower famous for its views of Shibam at sunset. When I returned to the car, my armed guard was gone, but Faraj had a large pistol on the car seat beside him. As I got in, he put it in his belt without a word.

That night the mosquitoes woke me up at two, so I set up an incense coil. Dogs fought ferociously outside my window.

The next morning I went down early intending to explore the town. My

armed guard was sitting on the veranda.

I walked around the outside of the walls of the city, through the date palm groves. The soldier followed at a distance. At the far corner of the city I came across some men pounding lime into the white plaster the people used on their houses. A young man picked up one of the white powdery rocks to show it to me. At that moment the armed guard came up to me and started to explain about the plaster as best he could in his sparse English. I know that he was only trying to be helpful and friendly. He was trying to be a tourist guide as well as a soldier, explaining things he was excited about. But I had dreamed of coming to Shibam all my life, since seeing pictures in National Geographic as a child, and I did not want him shadowing me the whole way on my ramblings through the town.

I turned abruptly and walked seething back to the hotel, determined to work something out. I would ask Faraj to negotiate some kind of deal with the soldier that would allow me to explore alone. But Faraj was not up yet. The hotel clerk went to get him. Twenty minutes later Faraj showed up, fully dressed, carrying his suitcase, and ready to go. I apologized for the misunderstanding and said I only needed some mediation. Faraj and the guard worked out a deal whereby the guard would only sit at the café just inside the city gate while I wandered around, and I would meet him when I finished.

I wandered. There were few adults in the street—a few men beginning work, a few women moving like shadows entirely in black. Young children in the street shouted “hello!” and then “qalam!” (pen), but when I asked to take their picture, the younger girls fled in terror and the older girls would harshly forbid me. The streets mainly belonged to the goats. In one small square a goat stood on the roof of a station wagon, inspecting the windshield as a surface to climb down.

That afternoon we went to Tarim, and Faraj let me off in the center of town by the Sultan’s Palace and the Masjid al-Jami’. I spent a few minutes getting oriented with my Lonely Planet map. Faraj had not yet driven off with the armed guard, so I suspected I was going to be followed. I went around a corner and then walked rapidly to the next corner. I found myself in the souq east of the mosque and turned some more random corners. I don’t know if the guard was trying to follow me, but I didn’t see him again until I returned to my hotel several hours later.

That evening at dinner Faraj told me that CNN was reporting large anti-American demonstrations in Sanaa.

The next morning was the morning we left at 5 a.m. for Ma'rib and got the flat tire. Where we had breakfast I offered Faraj and our guard Sabrii some of the legendary Wadi Daw'an honey I had bought in Say'un. Faraj took Sabrii and me back to Shibam and drove on to Tarim. This gave me a chance to go into one of the tall houses of Shibam, a "tourist house" that had been closed before. A young man name Murad led me up. Each floor had three or four rooms, and a stairway spiraled up the middle. The lower floors were for the animals, and above that were the kitchen and storerooms. Then the men's reception room, and above that the women's reception room and a family room with a curtain that could be drawn between the men's half and the women's half. On an upper floor there was a bridge connecting this house to the neighbors' house. Apparently one can travel quite a distance from house to house on bridges between upper floors without ever descending to the street. I had hoped for a great view from the roof, but since all the houses of Shibam are of the same height, all I could see was other roofs at my same level.

On my way out of the old town, near the city gate, a policeman stopped me and asked where I was from. I wasn't sure whether I was supposed to say I was Canadian, as Faraj had instructed me, or tell the truth that I was an American, so I pretended to misunderstand him and said, "Shibam Motel." He summoned me into the police station. There the chief of security came out of his office to greet me, exchange pleasantries, and personally assure me of my safety. He said to contact him in case of any problems.

Two incidents happened in Wadi Hadramawt that, perhaps surprisingly, gave me a lot of confidence in Faraj. In Say'un, where I explored the city for an hour and bought the jar of Wadi Daw'an honey, Faraj battled various policemen about where to park his vehicle. Faraj always took the shortest way around a traffic circle, regardless of the direction of traffic flow. On our way out of Say'un, in order to turn left and go a quarter of the way around a circle rather than turn right and go three-quarters of the way around, he had to argue heatedly with the policeman standing in the center of the circle. This indicated a perspective on traffic flow that later was to stand us in good stead.

When Faraj returned to Shibam for me, having had 10,000 rials stolen, and we got on our way, he drove quickly, angrily, and carelessly. Near Al-Hawta he passed a truck with four men in the front seat, and then got stuck behind three slow vehicles. The truck passed him back, which pissed him off. So he passed them again, and just as he went by, he swerved toward them, expertly banging their left outside mirror with his right outside mirror. I pulled in my

elbow at the last second. So they passed us on the right and at the last second swerved left and drove Faraj onto the median strip. So Faraj passed them and cut them off completely. Everyone shouted at each other until Sabrii stepped in with his machine gun and broke it up.

My conclusion from this was that Faraj was probably as aggressive and as expert a driver as he needed to be to handle anything we might have to handle. And I was right.

As we crossed the desert on the asphalt road, without a police escort, we came to a police post every ten to thirty kilometers. Most of them saw Sabrii and saluted us on through. But around 2:30 we came to one where they made us all get out. Faraj showed them his official tour guide card. That saved us a lot of trouble, he said as we drove off. The previous Tuesday, Bedouin kidnappers had dressed in stolen army uniforms, gone all the way into Say'un, kidnapped four German tourists, and held them for two days.

This made me much more nervous as we proceeded. When we finally arrived at the dunes as the sun was going down at 5:30, we got out and I took pictures of Faraj and Sabrii and had Faraj take a couple of pictures of me with Sabrii's machine gun.

The previous evening I had asked Sabrii what kind of gun it was that he carried. He said with some glee, "Kalashnikov." An AK-47. I asked if I could fire it once we got into the desert, and he said yes, and so did Faraj. I said that would make my trip—never mind the desert route. They were surprised I had never fired one.

But when we actually got to the dunes, he decided against it.

Shortly after that we reached a police post that was Sabrii's end of the line. I gave him a 1000 rials tip, three times what I had given anyone else. He told Faraj he wanted more. I said that was some people's way of saying "thank you"—I didn't say Arabs.

A new guard came on board, a young scared-looking kid, and another Yemeni man who needed a ride to Ma'rib. We continued through the night and finally came within sight of the lights of Ma'rib, still with no police escort.

We were approaching what looked like another police post when Faraj suddenly tore off his headdress and threw it at me.

"Headdress!" he said.

"Huh?"

"Put. The headdress. On."

I draped it hurriedly over my head as best I could.

Faraj had recognized at the last second that this was not a police post, but a roadblock that “twenty or fifty” Bedouins had put up to steal trucks. They were not looking for tourists to kidnap, because there were no tourists around. But if they saw me, they would certainly kidnap us. “If we had stopped,” Faraj told me later, “ten minutes later we’d be in the desert.” Since I was an American and times were so tense, I was very valuable, and they might hold me two or three months.

Faraj stopped at the roadblock. A man glanced in the car, thought he saw all Yemenis, and waved us on. Faraj started up. The man did a double take, saw me, and shouted to Faraj to stop. He kept going.

The Bedouins jumped in a car and started to pursue us. Faraj managed to pull around a large truck, honking oncoming cars off the road, and then the oncoming traffic kept the Bedouins from catching up with us.

Meanwhile, the armed guard in the back seat was scared out of his wits.

We approached another Bedouin roadblock. This time I had more time to adjust the headdress, take my glasses off, bow my head, and pull the scarf in front of the lower part of my face. Faraj told me later that he thought as we approached the roadblock that we had about a 40% chance of making it through.

We stopped. The men looked in. One said to go on, several more said to stop, and Faraj drove on.

Faraj grinned at me in elation and gave me the thumbs up. A few minutes later we turned into a walled hotel complex.

I was not entirely sure what had just happened.

I checked in. We were the only guests in the hotel. The hotel restaurant was of course closed. Faraj said he’d go out and get some dinner for us and we could eat at the hotel. I said I’d like to go out to a restaurant as well and see some of the old town.

He looked at me like I was an idiot. “*You can’t go outside.*”

At dinner he explained to me what had happened. Local villages were at war with the central government, and the central government had no control over this area. (A month later, back in America, I read in the paper that the Yemeni army invaded this area in search of Al-Qaeda.)

“Then why did they let me come here to begin with?”

“It only flared up again in the last few days.”

“What about tomorrow?”

Faraj said we would get up at seven and go around and see the tourist sights. This struck me as wacko. Right now my priority was to get the hell out of there. But Faraj said ten o'clock would be a safer time to leave the town. I would wear his white jilaba and a Yemeni headdress, and I'd sit in the back seat.

"If we do get kidnapped, tell them you're a Muslim."

"I can't pull that off."

"They're simple people. They'll believe you."

"How about if I tell them I'm a recently converted Muslim. I've come to Yemen to learn Arabic and more about Islam."

That was good. "And tell them you're here to build hospitals in the villages." The one time he was kidnapped for only two hours, it was with a Swiss man who was here to build hospitals in the villages. When the kidnappers learned that, they released him.

"I can't pull that off." I thought a minute. "How about if I tell them I'm here to install the Internet in the villages." I thought I had a better chance of faking that.

Faraj said the Yemeni government would probably want to suppress the news if it happens, and they'd pressure the travel agency to do the same. I should call someone I knew and warn them.

I asked Faraj if he was putting me on. He laughed and said no. He had called his father, and his father was mad at him for taking this job. He himself said he regretted taking it—it was like no other.

I slept well that night until four, and then lay awake. I got up at six and got ready for a kidnapping.

At seven I went downstairs to the registration desk and called Cynthia. I gave her the details of where I was, whom I was with, and so on. I said we'd leave Ma'rib about ten and should get to Sanaa about three. Then I said there was a nonzero chance we would be kidnapped.

"Oh my god"

I said if I didn't call by this time tomorrow, she should call the American embassy in Sanaa and notify them of a possible kidnapping.

I said I had considered calling my son William instead, to spare her the worry, but that I had decided it would be denying her crucial information. She was thankful for that. She said she would have been devastated if I had been kidnapped and she had not heard about the possibility beforehand. She asked

me when she should panic, and I said tomorrow at this time. I might have trouble finding a phone in Sanaa that works.

Faraj and I and our current armed guard went to a restaurant in town to eat breakfast. I considered bringing out the rest of my Wadi Daw'an honey, but decided I'd save it to sweeten up the kidnappers.

We then went to the police station to exchange our one armed guard for two more. As they were arguing in the courtyard about who would have to pull this duty, I was thinking, "Orphans and old men." Sure enough, two old men got in the car with us. Later we stopped at another police station, and a teenage boy with a machine gun got in, and I thought, "Orphan."

Then I had to be a tourist, which I found utterly bizarre. I went through the motions, walking around, snapping the pictures they expected me to take. We went to Old Ma'rib, a small area of ruins of towers of the traditional sort. One of the guards was excited about showing me a pre-Islamic inscription in the ancient Himyarite script on the lintel above a door, and was very concerned that I would like the ruins. In different times he might be a tour guide. An old woman materialized and asked to have her picture taken, so I did. When she asked for money, the soldiers pushed her away.

Next we went to the 'Arsh Bilqis, or the Temple of the Moon—five and a half square pillars standing in the foundations of an ancient temple. The tour guide guard was anxious to show me some small carvings of gazelles in a rock.

The guidebooks mention another similar ancient temple. But at the turnoff to that temple, rocks had been placed in the road, and half a dozen men looked as if they were putting up a roadblock. Faraj asked me if I wanted to go to the other temple.

"Only if it's safe," I said.

He continued straight to the ancient dam instead.

Only the sluice gates on either side remain, but the dam was once half a mile long. It was built in 800 B.C. and along with the incense trade was the source of Ma'rib's greatness. The incense trade declined with the rise of Christianity in the Middle East, the population of Ma'rib declined with it, and there were not enough people to maintain the dam. Finally in 570 A.D. the dam was breached and no effort was made to rebuild it.

After seeing the dam, we drove upriver a couple of miles to a new dam just constructed. It was financed by a rich oil sheikh in Abu Dhabi whose ancestors left Ma'rib when the first dam collapsed.

Then we were ready to leave for Sanaa. I pulled Faraj's white jilaba over

my head; it was tight in the chest. Faraj arranged one of the guard's headdress on my head. I sat in the middle of the back seat between two soldiers with another soldier in the front seat.

A police escort here was out of the question. It would only be a flag to the Bedouins that here was someone worth kidnapping.

We went through a few police posts. But for all I knew they were Bedouin roadblocks, so I took my glasses off and drooped my head down, pretending to be asleep.

We went through the last police post and around a mountain and were then in the problem area. It was a high flat desert of mixed black volcanic rock and sand with scrub vegetation and thorn trees. We drove past a Bedouin camp about a hundred meters off the road, with a dozen white tents and a truck or two. They wouldn't kidnap me to someplace so near the road, I thought. We passed a couple of men standing by the road, and Faraj eyed them suspiciously. We passed a tiny village of concrete block houses off the road, with no sign of life. There were numerous bunkers made out of lava rocks, and Faraj said this was where "the war" was fought—I'm not sure what war. It was so desolate it didn't look worth fighting over. Otherwise, no one in the car said anything.

We passed a pickup truck with a number of armed men in the back, some in army uniforms. None of our soldiers waved at them, so I assume the army uniforms were stolen. Faraj and the guard in the front seat frequently checked the rear view mirrors for the next five or ten miles.

We began to climb to a low pass, at the top of which I could see a checkpoint. Several hundred meters before the checkpoint, the guard next to me gave me the thumbs up, and by the time we rolled into the checkpoint everyone was chattering away. We had made it through.

We came down from the pass to a flat plain that looked to me identical to the last, but evidently this was not where the independent Bedouins lived. Everyone in the car was much more relaxed. At the end of this plain, at another police post, our guards got out. I gave them 1000 rials. They demanded 400 more.

The rest of the trip Faraj and I traveled without guards and without escort. We climbed the steep escarpment to Sanaa province. At the first police post after this, the police congratulated Faraj for getting the American back to the capital safely. They had heard of us, and they were waiting. Later I heard that Faraj was to receive a certificate of appreciation from the Ministry of Security.

We arrived at the outskirts of Sanaa at 12:30. Faraj wanted to take me to

a restaurant for lunch, but I insisted on calling Cynthia first. He took me to the Telecom office in the main square. I made the phone call standing at a counter.

It was 3 a.m. in California. Cynthia was wide-awake.

The man behind the counter understood English and heard the content of the call. He didn't charge me.

XI. The Book of Joshua

Let me quote from the book of Joshua.

And Joshua said, "Hereby you shall know that the living God is among you, and that he will without fail drive out from before you the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Hivites, the Perizzites, the Girgashites, the Amorites, and the Jebusites." (3:10)

Then they [the Israelites] destroyed all in the city [Jericho], both men and women, young and old, oxen, sheep, and asses, with the edge of the sword. (6:21)

And when Joshua and all Israel saw that the ambush had taken the city, and that the smoke of the city went up, then they turned back and smote the men of Ai. And the others came forth from the city against them; so they were in the midst of Israel, some on this side, and some on that side; and Israel smote them, until there was none left that survived or escaped. But the king of Ai they took alive, and brought him to Joshua. When Israel had finished slaughtering all the inhabitants of Ai in the open wilderness where they pursued them and all of them to the very last had fallen by the edge of the sword, all Israel returned to Ai, and smote it with the edge of the sword. And all who fell that day, both men and women, were twelve thousand, all the people of Ai. For Joshua did not draw back his hand, with which he stretched out the javelin, until he had utterly destroyed all the inhabitants of Ai. (8:21-26)

And Joshua passed on with all Israel from Eglon to Hebron; and smote it with the edge of the sword, and its king and its towns, and every person in it; he left none remaining, as he had done to Eglon, and utterly destroyed it with every person in it. (10:36-37)

And all these kings joined their forces, and came and encamped together at the waters of Merom, to fight with Israel. And the Lord said to Joshua, "Do not be afraid of them, for tomorrow at this time I will give over all of them, slain, to Israel; you shall hamstring their horses, and burn their chariots with fire." So Joshua came suddenly upon them with all his people of war, by the waters of Merom, and fell upon them. And the Lord gave them into the hand of Israel, who smote them and chased them as far as Great Sidon and Misrephothmaim, and eastward as far as the valley of Mizpeh; and they smote them, until they left none remaining. And Joshua did to them as the Lord bade him; he hamstrung their horses, and burned their chariots with fire. (11:5-9)

And Joshua turned back at that time and took Hazor, and smote its king with the sword; for Hazor was formerly the head of all those kingdoms. And they put to the sword all who were in it, utterly destroying them; there was none left that breathed, and he burned Hazor with fire. And all the cities of those kings, and all their kings, Joshua took, and smote them with the edge of the sword, utterly destroying them, as Moses the servant of the Lord had commanded. (11:10-12)

For it was the Lord's doing to harden their hearts that they should come against Israel in battle, in order that they should be utterly destroyed, and should receive no mercy but be exterminated, as the Lord commanded Moses. (11:20)

That's the first half of the book of Joshua. The second half discusses the division of the land thus depopulated among the various tribes of the Israelites.

We are fortunate to have this record of the traditions of the wars of an ancient people, whether real or legendary.

But this is a recipe for large-scale evil, not a theoretical evil, but an evil that is being carried out all the time in Palestine today. If you believe this is the Word of God, God help your neighbors. You will have no trouble at all justifying the killing of thousands of Palestinians who occupy the land you want.

XII. Sixty-Six Flags Over Palestine

There is a chain of theme parks that began its life in Texas, called “Six Flags Over Texas”, ostensibly as a celebration of the rich history of Texas, ruled by the Spanish, the French (briefly and not too extensively), the Mexicans, the Americans, and the Confederates, in addition to the decade it was the Lone Star Republic. Presumably the Comanche, Kiowa, Caddo, Arapaho, and other Native American groups didn’t have flags.

The notion of Texas having a rich history would be a joke in the rest of the world, and nowhere more than in Palestine. Modern humans originated in Africa and those who left Africa did so almost entirely through Palestine. When people spread into a new region, it was generally at a rate of no more than twenty miles a generation, so even groups that were just passing through probably lived in Palestine for several hundred years. So in a sense, all of us not of recent African origin are Palestinian somewhere in our past. Modern humans appeared there sometime around 100,000 to 90,000 years ago, alternating with Neanderthals in their occupation of some caves. Wheat-cattle-pig agriculture probably originated somewhere near there in Syria or Anatolia, and soon spread to Palestine. There is evidence of a city at Jericho 9000 years ago, and indeed the earliest architectural remnant anywhere is a 26-foot-high tower unearthed in Jericho.

The first name we have for people who lived there are the Canaanites. Recently I read a newspaper story about a 2000-year-old body found in the bogs of southwestern England. It turned out that his DNA nearly matched the DNA of the butler of the man who owned the property. If Palestine had bogs and bogpeople were found, probably their DNA would almost match that of some modern Palestinian. In the second millennium B.C. control of Palestine was frequently contested between the New Kingdom in Egypt, the Babylonian Empire, and the Hittites from Anatolia.

Around 1200 B.C. a group of people arrived, probably from Greece, probably because of the economic collapse of the Mycenaean civilization around the Aegean. They terrorized Egypt, where they were known as, in translation, the Sea Peoples, and when they settled in southwestern Palestine around Gaza and Ashkelon, they became known as the Philistines. The name “Palestine” derives from that, and indeed the Arabic name for Palestine is *filistiin*.

Discounting the Bible, the origin of the Israelites is obscure. A word used in documents from the second millennium B.C., “hibiru”, similar to “Hebrew”,

seems to refer to bandits living on the periphery of civilized society in the hills of Judea. One theory is that the Israelites gradually coalesced from these groups in the era between 1200 and 1000 B.C.,

The Bible tells us of the empire that Solomon established during his reign of about thirty years in the mid 900s B.C. It encompassed all of what I've been referring to as Palestine, along with the fertile parts of present-day Jordan and spilling over into present-day Lebanon and Syria. There is no evidence for such an empire in the archaeological record, and in fact no evidence for Solomon or a kingdom based at Jerusalem at that time. According to the Bible, the kingdom of the Israelites split up into two kingdoms on the death of Solomon, Judah and Israel, and thereafter they controlled no more than Judea and Samaria, essentially the modern West Bank. They alternately defeated, were allied with, and were defeated by each other, the Philistines, the Syrians, the Moabites of present-day Jordan, and the Egyptians. The kingdom of Israel was destroyed by the Assyrians in 722 B.C., and the kingdom of Judah was destroyed by the Babylonians in 587 B.C.

The Babylonians, and then the Persians controlled the area after that. The Israelites were allowed to rebuild their temple in Jerusalem, but they had at best very limited political power. Alexander the Great conquered it on his way to Egypt, the people of Gaza putting up a short but fierce resistance. It was then contested by Alexander's successors in Egypt, a bunch of kings named Ptolemy, and his successors based in Antioch, a bunch of kings mostly named Antiochus.

The Maccabees, local Jewish leaders exploited the weakness of Antioch's kings and took some portion of central Palestine. For a period of about sixty years until the Roman conquest under Pompey, they controlled all of Palestine; this was only the second time in history that was true, if Solomon's empire existed, and for the first time in history if not. The Romans, too busy conquering other lands, put most of Palestine under the care of a successor to the Maccabees, King Herod of New Testament fame. For about thirty years, and for the last time until modern era, a Jewish ruler ruled over most of Palestine, though with Roman indulgence. Herod's progeny, just as Solomon's progeny are said to have done, split the kingdom between them. The Jews rebelled in 70 A.D., and the Romans took over direct rule. The Jews rebelled again in the 130s A.D. and were massacred by the Romans and expelled from Jerusalem. Thereafter the Jews were the majority only in Galilee.

Roman rule passed to the Byzantine Empire when the Roman Empire split

in two in the 300s A.D., a Greek empire based in what is today called Istanbul. The Byzantines and the Persians hotly contested control of Palestine in the early 600s, until the Arabs defeated both the exhausted opponents, on their way to conquering half the world. Before long, the people of Palestine, like much of the rest of the Middle East, had largely adopted the Arabs' language and religion, and for that reason are today known as Arabs.

As the Arab empire weakened and disintegrated, Palestine again became a bone of contention, mostly between the Arab or Berber kingdoms based in Egypt and the Arab, Turkish, or Kurdish kingdoms based in Syria. At the end of the 1000s, a new force appeared in Palestine, bent on conquering Jerusalem—the Crusaders, who came from all over Europe but were primarily French and were known to the Arabs as “Franks”. The Christian kings of Jerusalem were mostly relatives of the royal family of France. Of course virtually all of European royalty was related to each other at that time, one big extended family. Salah ad-Din, a Kurd and a ruler of Egypt, descended from rulers of Syria, in 1187 conquered Jerusalem back from the Crusaders, who then regained it in 1229 through negotiation by Frederick the Great, who was the Holy Roman Emperor and thus the ruler of Germany, but was also and more particularly the king of Sicily. He and his people held it for fifteen years, when it finally fell to the Egyptians.

Palestine remained Egyptian until the Ottoman sultan of Turkey, Selim III, conquered both in the early 1500s. It was a quiet provincial backwater of the global Ottoman Empire for several hundred years. In 1799 Napoleon, in one of history's more bizarre military campaigns, took Egypt and led an incursion into Palestine, bogging down at Acre. Muhammad Ali, an Ottoman governor of Egypt of Albanian origin, became essentially independent of the Ottomans, and his son tried to extend their realm into Palestine and Syria, and succeeded for a while, until the British fearing an independent power in that region, put a stop to it.

Upon the collapse of the Ottoman Empire at the end of World War I, the British took over Palestine and Jordan as mandates. After World War II the area was divided between the Jews, who had immigrated there in large numbers since the 1880s, and the Arabs, who had been living there all along. War broke out, and at the end of it, the Jews had more land, and the Arab portion was taken over by Egypt and the new kingdom of Jordan.

Suppose all those six countries whose flags have flown over Texas demanded to own it now. The six flags would be flying over armies, and there would be

Six Wars Over Texas.

One claim for the legitimacy of Israel is that it is the Chosen Land, the ancestral home of the Jews. You can see how this would exercise a powerful pull over believing Jews. But the Chosen Land argument will have little force for those who don't believe the Bible is the Word of God, or who don't accept that particular interpretation of the Bible, or who believe that the Old Testament has been superseded by other holy writ. The doctrine can motivate a particular group of believers, but it can't function as a justification on a global scale.

The idea that Israel's claim to Palestine is legitimate because they once lived and ruled there is ludicrous. If everyone who ever lived and ruled there made that claim, we would have a war involving—let's see...—Egypt, Syria, Greece, Iraq, Turkey, Iran, Arabia, Italy, France, Germany, Albania, Azerbaijan, Jordan, and Great Britain, at least, as well as Israel and the local Palestinians. Moreover, even accepting a claim based on occupation 2500 years ago, the claim for *all* of Palestine is very weak indeed. The Israelites ruled all of Palestine only four times: once for about thirty years under King Solomon, if he existed, which is doubtful; once sporadically under the Maccabees for about sixty years, and once for about thirty years under King Herod as a client of the Romans. That's a total of 90 to 120 years in the last three thousand. The real historical homeland of the Jews is not all of Palestine, but Judah, that is, the southern half of the West Bank. The current state of Israel largely coincides with the ancient land of the Philistines.

If one were really sincere in applying this argument, then one should be in favor not of Israel's taking all of Palestine, but in favor of the Israelis and the Palestinians trading countries.

I haven't heard any of the Israeli settlers on the West Bank proposing that.

XIII. Other Issues

The Balfour Declaration gives Israel legitimacy.

The Balfour Declaration was promulgated in 1917 by the British, then on the verge of victory over the Ottoman Empire in the Levant. It was formulated by Arthur James Balfour, the British foreign secretary, heavily influenced by Chaim Weizmann. Weizmann wanted it to say that Palestine would become the national home of the Jews. In fact, it said that a national home for the Jews would be established in Palestine.

Let's put this in context. This was at a time when the Ottoman Empire was disintegrating and a lot of wild and contradictory promises were being made. The Armenians were promised northeastern Anatolia. The Greeks were promised southwestern Anatolia. The Russians were promised Constantinople. The Arab King Faisal was promised Greater Syria for a kingdom, an area that included Palestine. Of all these promises, only the Balfour Declaration is remembered today.

The Israeli historian Tom Segev quotes Arthur Koestler as saying that the Balfour Declaration was "one nation promising another nation the land of a third nation." If you believe Israel's right to exist rests on the Balfour Declaration, you can hardly be surprised that the Arabs view Israel as the last vestige of European colonialism. (This has to be one of the supreme ironies of Israel's situation, since Israel resulted from Jews fleeing European persecution and prejudice.)

Israel is the only democracy in the Middle East.

This is almost true. Turkey is a democracy, although it has gone through some rough patches. Iran is struggling toward meaningful elections, and Pakistan has struggled along as a kind of off-and-on democracy for decades. There have been sporadic and questionable elections in Algeria and Egypt. Yasser Arafat won an election in the West Bank and Gaza.

But how sincerely do people trumpeting Israel's democracy really want democracy in the Arab countries. In December 1991 there was a parliamentary election in Algeria and the Islamic fundamentalists won 188 of 230 seats. The military took over and nullified the election. I don't recall many voices of protest from the West.

Is Israel really a democracy? Yitzhak Rabin said about the time of the Oslo Accords that whereas Israelis would like their country to be a Jewish democracy occupying all of Palestine, they could only have two out of the three conditions. In signing the Oslo Accords, he was opting for a Jewish democracy. If they were to keep all of Palestine and give full citizenship rights to the Palestinians, they would lose their fundamental Jewish character. The present situation is the third possibility. They control all of Palestine, and they retain their fundamental Jewish character, but the Arab Israeli citizens, 20% of the population of Israel proper, are second class citizens in that they do not serve in the army and they are excluded from living in certain strategic

zones. The Arabs of the West Bank and Gaza are very much under the control of the Israelis and they are third class noncitizens, with essentially no rights, subjected to daily harassment, torture if arrested, and collective punishment. In its present situation Israel is a democracy in the same sense that South Africa was a democracy in the days of apartheid. First class citizens have the right to choose their leaders, and the rest of the people are oppressed.

Israel is America's strongest ally.

This is certainly true, but what other choice does Israel have.

There is a question as to why America gives Israel unconditional support. The general belief in the Arab world is that it is the power of the Jewish lobby in America. I have always resisted this as a complete explanation. One cannot dismiss it entirely. Lobbying has always been important in the history of Israel. Chaim Weizmann, the first man to hold the honorary position of President of Israel, was first and foremost a lobbyist *par excellence* with the British. But the Saudis, for example, would never be able to achieve as much with the same amount of effort and money.

I had a conversation about ten years ago with a young Israeli traveler in south India. He felt Israel had no reliable friends, and that America was Israel's ally only because of Israel's strategic position. That doesn't make sense to me either. Whatever America gains from that oil-poor toehold in the Middle East it loses tenfold from the oil-rich Arab states. America's position would be immensely stronger in the Middle East if it were to abandon Israel.

I argued that, to the contrary, the first reason for America's, and Europe's, support for Israel is a feeling of guilt for allowing the Holocaust to happen, a feeling that after all the Jewish people have been through they deserve a country of their own as a refuge. The second reason is that in America, Jews are viewed as honorary Christians, whereas Muslims are thoroughly Other; indeed, even a rabid right-wing Christian fundamentalist like Pat Robertson is careful to refer to the "*Judaeo-Christian* tradition" when he clearly means the "Christian tradition". I think there is a feeling on the part of many American Christians that under the Jews, the "Holy Land" is in good hands; under the Muslims it is not.

There are no Palestinians, only Arabs living in Palestine.

Theodor Herzl, one of the founders of Zionism in the late nineteenth cen-

ture, promoted Palestine as “a land without people for a people without a land”. A friend of his went to Palestine and wrote back with surprise that there were already people living there.

Throughout subsequent history there have been among Israelis strong currents of denial of the existence of a Palestinian people, as opposed to Arabs who happen to be living in Palestine. In my youth I drove across some of the wilder parts of Africa with an Israeli man who had fought in the wars of 1948 and 1956. He spoke fluent Arabic and would engage every Arab or Somali we met in a debate about Israel’s right to exist. He had a map that he would pull out, showing tiny Israel occupying only a tiny sliver of land, Palestine, while the Arabs ranged all the way from Morocco to Sudan to Yemen to Iraq. “Why can’t you let the Jews have just this little bit?” he would ask.

Suppose the Chinese decided to move into and take over all of Massachusetts. Picture the map. Imagine your reaction to a similar argument on their part.

Still today I see the occasional letter to the editor blaming the Arab countries for the problems in Palestine, because they have failed to accept and integrate the Arabs from Palestine into their own country—that is, because they will not aid the Israelis in the expulsion of these people from the land the Israelis want. Indeed, a recent poll revealed that 47% of the Israeli public would be in favor of the wholesale transfer of all Arabs out of Palestine into other Middle Eastern countries, although it is unclear how much of this is simply despair at the seemingly unbreakable cycle of violence.

The Palestinians will not even admit Israel’s right to exist.

This was true for a long time. In the 1990s, however, when it looked like a just peace was possible, the PLO formally declared Israel’s right to exist. The recent Saudi plan, which has had a cold reception in Israel, offers diplomatic recognition from all the Arab countries.

But let’s look at the other side of the coin. What has Israel had to say about Palestine’s right to exist? It has actively prevented it since 1967. Even during the 1990s while it was promising a just peace, Israel was continuing to build settlements in the West Bank and Gaza, and especially in East Jerusalem, together with an infrastructure that isolated the Palestinians into separate pockets of land, undermining the very possibility of a viable Palestinian state. Very recently Prime Minister Ariel Sharon’s own Likud Party voted against ever allowing a Palestinian state to be formed.

Israel and Palestine can achieve peace only when each recognizes the right of the other to exist, and both sides can be faulted for their actions so far.

Israel needs the West Bank in order to be secure.

Israel won three wars from within its 1967 borders, and won them handily. It is immensely more powerful now than it was then. Israel does not face any serious threat of annihilation from the Arab countries in the foreseeable future.

Israel is a very narrow country. It will always be vulnerable to attack from its neighbors, regardless of whether it takes all of Palestine or returns to its 1967 borders. Arab countries already have rockets that can reach Tel Aviv. Keeping the West Bank won't change that.

Israel can only be secure when it is at peace with its neighbors.

XIV. The Obvious Solution

Everyone I asked about the Israeli-Palestinian situation, regardless of their biases, said it was a complicated situation.

"No it isn't," I'd reply. "There is a very simple solution." Then I would outline it, and they would agree that that was a solution, regardless of their biases.

The solution is based on the principles that everyone has a right to live in and be a citizen of the country of his or her birth, and that no one individual has the right to say what the government of that country will be; it must be decided by the whole.

The solution has seven parts:

1. A return to the 1967 boundaries, with an independent Palestinian state comprised of the West Bank and Gaza. History matters, and a perception of fairness is essential. If Israel tries to keep more than that, it will not be perceived as fair, and there can be no end to Palestinian resistance/terrorism.
2. The old city of Jerusalem would be put under international jurisdiction, or joint jurisdiction of Israel and Palestine, or under the United Nations, or under the Pope. The talks in 2000 mentioned putting it under the jurisdiction of God, and that's as good a solution as any. Israel could assure the security of and access to the Western Wall, and the Palestinians could assure the security of and access to Al-Aqsa Mosque.

3. The settlers in the West Bank and Gaza can return to Israel or they can remain in Palestine. But if they remain in Palestine, they will be Palestinian and not Israeli citizens, with all the rights and responsibilities of other Palestinian citizens. Probably few settlers would want to remain under those conditions. For those who do, however, Palestinian willingness to accept them as a minority would go a long way toward alleviating the Israeli feeling that the Palestinians will tolerate no Jews at all in their midst.
4. Share the water on a per capita basis. If this is not enough for Israel's more advanced economy, they can buy water from Palestine, thus improving Palestine's economy.
5. Palestinian refugees everywhere will be given the option of becoming citizens of the country they currently reside in, or they will be allowed to come to Palestine, that is, the West Bank or Gaza. Many, such as most of the Palestinians in Jordan, will choose to remain in the country of their current residence. See below for one glitch in this part of the plan.
6. The "Right of Return": There are two rights of return—the right of Palestinians to return to their family homes, now in the state of Israel, and the right of Jews everywhere to return to their ancestral homeland of Israel. Balance these two rights on a one-for-one basis. In order to admit one Jew from elsewhere in the world, Israel must also admit one Palestinian refugee. To keep the number of Palestinian immigrants down, Israel would also have to suppress the number of Jewish immigrants. This constraint gives Israel a motivation to allow Palestinians to return. It creates no real hardships for Jews elsewhere in the world, because since the massive immigration of Russian Jews to Israel in the 1990s, there are no longer any large reservoirs of persecuted Jews anywhere in the world. The fundamentally Jewish character of Israel would be preserved.
7. Security: Relations between Israel and her neighbors would be normalized. Palestine would be demilitarized except for token forces required to maintain order. If a crime is committed by a Palestinian against an Israeli target, Israeli police will have full access to the investigation

and prosecution of the crime. And vice versa. This would cover acts of terrorism.

This plan would put an end to the general Palestinian belief that terrorist acts are a legitimate form of resistance, because it would be perceived on all sides as fair. There will no doubt still be Israelis who want to blow up the Dome of the Rock mosque and rebuild Solomon's Temple in its place, just as there will be Palestinians who want to expel the Israelis entirely from historical Palestine and put it under the rule of a caliph in Mecca with an empire that stretches from Spain to China. But these groups would become marginalized and have no significant support among the general populace, especially as the prosperity of both sides became more and more dependent on the economic links between the two.

I thought this plan was brilliant until I described it to Peter Maxwell, the British aid worker I met in Damascus at breakfast in the Sultan Hotel. He said all these wars are fought over issues that any fifteen-year-old could come up with a constitutional solution for in a few minutes. He gave the example of the first war between the Croats and the Serbs. Croatia wanted communication between two Croat areas through a majority Serb area. Well, duh! Build a road with universal access. But instead a war broke out over the issue and the formerly majority Serb area is now 3% Serb.

The one glitch with the plan is in Point 5. When I described the plan to my Arabic tutor in Palo Alto, 'Ali, a Christian from Lebanon, he said it was impossible for the Palestinian refugees in south Lebanon to become Lebanese citizens. They are all Muslims, so it would upset the delicate balance in that country between the Muslims and Christians.

My conversation with three Israeli hitchhikers I picked up in Cappadocia began with them wishing me, as an American, condolences over the September 11 attacks. I was very sensitive to the way everyone was trying to interpret it all to their own advantage. Falwell blamed the gays. Indians responded by urging the bombing of Pakistan. The president of Yemen said he was all for eliminating "terrorists and other troublemakers", i.e., his political opponents. Corporate leaders, wondering how they could snag a new generation of defense contracts, asked, "How can we help our country fight terrorism?" The Israeli response was to equate Bin Laden's terror against America with the Palestinian resistance to Israeli occupation. The Israeli hitchhikers said, "Now you understand what we have to live with."

“Don’t get me started,” I said, and then I started. I said the settlers in the West Bank and Gaza are the front line of an invasion, and the Palestinians know that. Of course they fight back. Every nation would. The fact that they engage in suicide bombings is testimony only to the extent to which they are outgunned.

Far from being a security measure for the Israelis, the settlements are a provocation to terrorism.

“They teach their children in their schools to hate the Israelis,” the woman in the back said.

“They don’t need to. The Israelis do quite well enough at that by themselves. They learn to hate the Israelis when they see their parents humiliated at police checkpoints, when they see their older brothers hauled off to jail, when they see their neighbors’ houses bulldozed into rubble.”

“You don’t understand the Middle East,” said the man in the front seat, who was a physics student. “We left Lebanon, and the Arabs interpreted that as weakness.”

I said, “You left Lebanon because you shouldn’t have been there to begin with.”

“They started four wars against us.”

“The last one was twenty-eight years ago. The wars didn’t stop because you occupied the West Bank. In fact, the last war was provoked by that. They stopped because they kept losing. The occupation doesn’t change that. You’re using a hypothetical evil to justify a real, daily evil.”

“I can see we need to try harder to get our message across in the media,” the physics student said.

“It’s not a public relations problem,” I said. “It’s a moral problem. You’re occupying someone else’s land.”

We all tried to stay friendly through all of this, although I think the woman in the back seat was seething. I apologized frequently but then launched into yet another diatribe. One of them tried to wrap up the conversation with “It’s a complicated situation.”

I replied that it was not at all complicated, and then I told them the obvious solution. Even they agreed.

“That’s what we offered them last year,” the woman said. “And look what we got in return—Intifada Two.”

Well, that is not quite what they offered. I’ve seen the map. Most of the settlements were to remain, and remain under Israeli control. Even in Gaza,

where the Israelis have no religious, historical, or economic reason to be, some settlements would remain. Israel got the rivers and the roads. Palestine got the wasteland. The complaint of the Palestinians has been that it would not give them a country, but a loose confederation of bantustans. Imagine if the Chinese took over America and then generously offered to give back everything but the Mississippi River, the interstate highway system, and the states bordering Mexico. That would be the same.

“But then why didn’t they negotiate for more?” she asked.

When I let them out, I shook hands with the physics student. The other two hurried off.

In the office of the travel agency in Sanaa I had an intense conversation with the five men there about Israel and Palestine. Early on, I said “infitada” instead of “intifada”, and they quickly corrected me. I redeemed myself when I recognized “thania” as “second” and began referring to it as “Intifada Thania”, as they did.

I described my peace plan to them, and they agreed. They recognized that Israel cannot be driven into the sea; too many people live there now. They saw an Israeli state and a Palestinian state living side by side with the 1967 borders, with lots of economic ties. Adam would like it to be as in the United States; passing from Israel to Palestine would be no more difficult than crossing from California to Arizona. But he said that with current hatreds, that is far in the future.

In Aqaba I ate a dinner of shish tawouk and hommos at the Ash-Shami Restaurant, at a table on their balcony with a cute two-year-old from several tables away toddling up and down the balcony, making eyes at everyone, and tugging at the straps on my backpack. As I looked at the gleaming white high-rises of Eilat, Israel, across the Gulf of Aqaba from us, I was reminded of a dinner I had had in the Fernsehturm in East Berlin in 1986. My East German colleagues looked wistfully at the lights of West Berlin and wondered if it was really one city or two. There ought to be heavy traffic between the two sister cities at the head of the Gulf of Aqaba—Eilat and Aqaba—but whatever traffic there was has dried up to a trickle since Intifada Thania began.

After dinner I walked along the highway that follows the shore. A young man was sitting at a table in front of his shop. There were two empty chairs at the table. He invited me to join him, and to his surprise I did. A friend of his joined us soon after. We talked a bit about my efforts to learn Arabic, and theirs to learn English. Then I turned the conversation to Palestine.

They were both Palestinians. The shopkeeper's father was from Nablus. He himself had never been to Palestine. I asked if he would return if he could, and he said no. His life was here now. I tried to describe my peace plan to them, but they spoke English much better than they understood it, so I didn't get very far. But they both agreed that whereas the Jews stole the land from the Arabs 120 years ago, all Arabs realize and accept that they are there permanently. They know there is no possibility of removing six million Jews from Israel. They know the two peoples have to learn to live in peace. About a return to the 1967 borders, the shopkeeper objected that there had to be a connection between the West Bank and Gaza. I said that was easy; build a road with free access to all. It had not occurred to him that that would be a solution. He also said that all of Jerusalem had to belong to Palestine, because it is a holy city. I pointed out that it is a holy city to everybody. He had no counter, but seemed to agree with me when I praised the plan of declaring the old part of Jerusalem to be under the sovereignty of God.

After his friend left, I asked him what he thought of King Abdullah II, hoping to get a confirmation of the "muppet" view the Belgian tourists had reported. But he would only say that King Hussein had been good, and his son is good too.

At breakfast at the Jordanian Dead Sea resort of Suwayma I met a Slovenian banker in his fifties named Marko, who owned a house in Bethlehem, and spoke pretty good Arabic. He had fought alongside the Palestinians in the 1960s and 1970s, and had spent time in an Israeli prison.

I said that I saw the settlements as one of the greatest difficulties in the way of a negotiated peace. He said that most were temporary residences for American Jews, and were generally empty. The ones in Gaza—only the soldiers live there. But try to remove them and influential American Jews halt it. He asked me if I remembered the scenes on television of Israeli troops removing Israeli settlers from the Sinai Peninsula after the peace treaty with Egypt. "Can you imagine the footage if Israel tried to remove the settlements from the West Bank? No Israeli politician has the courage to face something like that!"

On my idea of a one-for-one right of return, he said that was okay. Most Palestinian refugees have made a life elsewhere and would be unlikely to return. It is only the 400,000 in southern Lebanon who have not been assimilated who would want to return. If the Palestinians in Jordan returned, that would be 80% of Jordan's population. The country would collapse. The real solution, he

said, is a program of compensation, on the model of European compensation for Jews after World War II—compensation for personal suffering for those who personally suffered, and compensation for economic losses for those persons and their heirs.

He said the Israelis arbitrarily halt traffic for hours at a time just to harass the Arabs. He said Israel brags that there are Arabs who are Israeli citizens, but Arab citizens of Israel have been removed from villages in northern Israel, for fear they will collaborate with the refugees in Lebanon, and they are not allowed to return to their homes. He said that for the first time they are firing and bombing near the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem, and they recently destroyed a beautiful Ottoman-era hotel there.

At one point I mentioned with approval America's new efforts to attack the money laundering sources of the terrorists' funds. He said Israel was the money-laundering capital of the world, and there was no chance the U.S. would do something about that.

How could such a plan actually come to pass? I think Yasser Arafat would do much better if he simply stated the final settlement the Palestinians wanted, refused to negotiate on it in any way, asserted that resistance would continue until that was achieved, and pledged that all terrorism would cease once it was achieved. But that is the northern European in me speaking. That is a very non-Arab mode of operation.

What could the United States do? A lot. Shortly after World War II President Truman discovered that the Dutch were spending exactly as much on their attempted reconquest of Indonesia as they were receiving in aid from the United States for rebuilding the Netherlands. Truman told them he was not going finance the reestablishment of the colonial empires, and the Dutch quickly agreed to recognize Indonesia's independence.

The United States gives Israel at least three billion dollars a year in aid, and maybe as much as ten billion, if you count loan guarantees and tax deductible contributions to Israeli charitable organizations. For comparison, the United States gives India, a country with 200 times the population \$300 million a year. The American government could simply refuse to finance the occupation of the West Bank and Gaza. It could reduce the amount of aid by the cost of the occupation. That would provide a powerful incentive to Israel to come to some sort of arrangement with the Palestinians.

When I told Marko the story about Truman, he raised his eyebrow in disbelief.

“Times have changed,” I said.

XV. A Religion of Peace

Let me begin by stating my biases up front. I am an atheist. I believe, metaphysically, religion is simply a mistake, a misanalysis of the world and a clinging to traditional stories that scientific progress has made inappropriate. Religion offers comfort and consolation to billions of people. That is good. But I view this as simply wishful thinking. The ethical argument for religion is that it makes people behave. I have felt the force of this enough to feel anxiety at raising my children without religion. After all, I was raised in a religion, and I think of myself as a good person. As it happens, I was raised in the Presbyterian religion, which, however stringent it may have been in sixteenth century Scotland, by the time it reached the middle class Midwest in the mid 20th century, rested very lightly on one’s shoulders and was easy to cast off—nothing like the Southern Baptist religion which a college friend of mine had to have a nervous breakdown to shuck. Ultimately I decided that all you can do is let your children know what it is to be loved, and hope for the best. Fortunately, they turned out well. I now believe what I think Steven Weinberg, in his essay “A Designer Universe?”, said best: “With or without religion, good people can behave well and bad people can do evil; but for good people to do evil—that takes religion.”

Osama bin Laden is as far from a good person as you can get, but without religion he would have been an ordinary sleazy businessman and a danger only to the people who did business with him.

You have often heard it said since September 11 that Islam is “a religion of peace”. I don’t know what that means. Buddhism is a religion of peace. Or maybe I say this only because I don’t know enough of the history of southeast Asia, where Buddhism has been a factor in politics. But Judaism? Christianity? Islam? Of course most Jews, Christians, and Muslims want peace; most *people* want peace. But what can it mean to call the religions “religions of peace”?

Judaism has the best record in this regard. As we saw in the book of Joshua, it was born in war, and the Old Testament is one war after another, in the name of the Lord. But for most of their subsequent history, the Jews have been a very small minority living in the midst of a hostile majority, and that

situation is not conducive to starting wars. Jews were victims rather than victimizers. Not until the Jewish terrorists of the 1930s who later became prime ministers of Israel, and the current Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza do we see Jews making war in the name of religion.

Jesus, from the little information we have about him, was a man of peace, and Christianity was a religion of peace for its first three hundred years. Or rather, it was a religion lacking in power and frequently victimized. For the last seventeen hundred years, however, untold millions have been slaughtered in the name of that man of peace. I grew up singing “Onward Christian Soldiers” and “Battle Hymn of the Republic”. In church.

Muhammad was not a man of peace. He was a man who raided passing caravans. He was a general who led his army of believers in battle, and a very good general he was. To be sure, he used peaceful means as well, but they were in the service of his conquests. His followers did not go out and proselytize as did the followers of Jesus. They went out and conquered. Within the space of a generation, they had conquered an empire stretching from Spain to China. But once in charge, they were not especially heavy-handed in spreading their religion. People were converted less by the sword than by tax breaks, right from the beginning and on until the last days of the Ottoman Empire. Nevertheless, zealots arose and people died for what they believed. In the early 1000s, Hakim, the Fatimid ruler of Egypt, young, cruel, and capricious, imposed draconian Islamic laws against beer, wine, honey, women’s shoes, and women going outdoors; he persecuted Christians and Jews in order to convert them and in 1020 destroyed the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem, an act that eventually precipitated the Crusades.

It would be a formidable calculation indeed to determine whether more people have been murdered in the name of Christianity or in the name of Islam.

Intolerance is part and parcel of religions such as Christianity and Islam. If you believe believers go to heaven and nonbelievers go to hell, it is intolerable that your fellow human beings believe other than you do. It is a short step from there to believing that those who lead others into error ought to be killed, and to rationalizing executions as saving the victim’s soul.

When I was traveling in Libya in my youth, I met a man who said that the reason he believed in Islam was that the Qur’an was the most beautiful Arabic he had ever heard. It must be, literally, the word of God, as it is believed, literally, to be.

This does not come across in the English translation I read. There are a few poetic passages, but for the most part the English is very pedestrian. It is repetitious in the extreme. I believe that if you removed all the passages that appear elsewhere in the Qur'an, you would reduce its length to one fifth what it is now. There are "historical" passages about Jesus and Old Testament prophets like Noah, Abraham, Moses, and Jonah, but the story always seems to be the same: he preached the word of God, but people ignored him, and they were punished by God.

Normally, when Faraj played the few tapes he had brought with him, Arabic or American, they were loud and raucous, and I tried to turn it off in my head. But the morning we left Tarim in Wadi Hadramawt at 5 a.m. and drove for an hour to Shibam in the early light, he was playing a tape that had almost the most hauntingly beautiful music I had ever heard. It was a peaceful music that put you at one with the world, seemingly a strange blend of traditional Arabic and New Age music. I asked the name of this singer. I imagined a Yemeni woman.

"As-Sudays," Faraj said, "reciting the Qur'an."

When I got back to Sanaa I wanted to buy a CD. A lot of shops sold tapes, but finding one that sold CDs was a challenge. I was directed to a neighborhood several miles away, took a service taxi there, and asked and asked and finally found a store. They sold CDs, but not that one. But I learned more. The other customer there was a young man who spoke excellent English and in fact was leaving for London the next day. He told me As-Sudays is not a singer, but the imam of the Grand Mosque in Mecca, and is not singing, but "reading". He said As-Sudays's recordings of the Qur'an are well known and easily available all over the Islamic world. I would have no trouble finding them when I returned to Damascus, or I could order them on the Internet.

The clerk seemed delighted that an American wanted to buy As-Sudays's recordings of the Qur'an. He called the one other store he knew that sold CDs, as the English-speaking young man offered to have his driver take me there since it was a long way away. But the other store was out. I bought an As-Sudays tape, in case I couldn't find a CD in Beirut or Amman.

In Petra on the way back after dinner from a restaurant to my hotel, I stopped in a music store. They had very few CDs but among the ones they had were a stack by As-Sudays. I asked the clerk to recommend one for me, and he picked one out. He played a little for me, and it was utterly beautiful. He said that when they play it, sometimes they cry. You are not supposed to

talk while it is playing. He asked if I was a Muslim. I said no. He said that Christians and Jews are not allowed to buy it, and I think he was only half joking. In any case, he sold it to me.

On my way into the hotel, three men were in the lobby watching Al-Jazeera. One spotted my CD and, I think knowing what it was, asked me what it was. I think they were surprised and impressed that I had bought this. I said I had heard it, loved it, and immediately knew I had to have it.

Two days later as I drove south from Petra to Wadi Rum, through flat desert amid high buttes, I popped the tape I bought in Sanaa into the tape deck of the car and listened to As-Sudays recite the Qur'an. He has a high smooth voice with enough range to keep you engaged, not enough to throw you off balance. Not knowing the language I heard syllables, with a narrow range of vowels, a wide range of consonants. The recitation echoed, and I imagined it happening within the high dome of a pure white marble mosque. The music created a deep peaceful calm. It is the music of the desert with broad expanses on a pleasantly warm afternoon. It is not music you can march to war to.

XVI. Sunset on Mount Nebo

When I began to imagine my trip to the Middle East, Israel and Palestine were essential parts of it. They were relatively peaceful and there was much to see. When Intifada Thania broke out, I did not believe it could last very long, and I kept hoping it would end before my trip began. Even when I realized it would still be happening, I was tempted to visit anyway, just to see what conditions were like, although it would be impossible to see everything I wanted to see. I think it was only after September 11 that I knew I could not go there, but even then I secretly hoped I could spend a few days traveling Jericho to Jerusalem to Tel Aviv. I even took along with me flight information for Tel Aviv to Ankara, in case it became possible.

I left Aqaba in the midafternoon, after scuba diving on a coral reef in the morning, and took the Wadi Araba road north. This travels in a straight line from the Gulf of Aqaba to the Dead Sea, in the Rift Valley between the mountains of Negev in Israel to the west and the mountains around Petra rising rugged to the east. There were occasional Bedouin villages of concrete blocks or black blanket tents, but almost no traffic.

The Dead Sea surprised and delighted me with its beauty. I had expected something flat and featureless like the Great Salt Lake, but the Dead Sea is

in the Rift Valley, and its east coast resembled more the coast of California. Cliffs plunged into the water, and the road was etched into the cliff just above the water's edge. The sea itself resembled the deep beautiful blue of Lake Van. The sun was setting, casting a yellow sword across the water, turning the mountains different shades of brown, red and purple. The sun set as I reached the bridge over the steep and intricate canyon of Wadi Mujib, and I saw the sun's last shaft of light into the canyon. I continued north to a resort at Suwayma, where I got a cute little bungalow for the night.

At the beachside snack bar a large group of Saudi men were talking about Palestine in Arabic. I would have loved to join them, but as I sidled up nearby, they all got up to leave. I did have a brief conversation with one man. They were all Islamic astronomers at a conference concerning the fine details of the motion of the moon and its relation to the Islamic lunar calendar. This man was a professor near Riyadh.

There were a number of towns whose lights were visible on the "west bank" of the sea. I asked him if he knew where the border between Jordan and Palestine was. He wasn't sure, but he told me the bright lights and the large glow at the top of the ridge were the lights of Jerusalem. I was electrified. I was so close I could see it!

I had asked the Israeli hitchhikers I picked up in Cappadocia if it was safe to travel in Israel at this time. They said yes, but I still shouldn't come. There are too many police checkpoints. Too much hassle. Wait until the difficulties are over. And I had assured my family that it was unlikely that I would go there.

But now I was so close I began to consider the possibility. I asked the clerk in the gift shop if the border would be open tomorrow. With a rather sour demeanor he said it was, especially for an American tourist.

I began scheming. My Plan A was to get a refund for my Amman-Ankara ticket for two days hence, go to Jerusalem and Tel Aviv, and fly from Tel Aviv to Istanbul to Ankara. But notes I had brought from America said that that ticket would be \$500.

So Plan B was to drive to the border and leave my rental car there for the day, take a taxi to Jerusalem, tour the Old City, return in the late afternoon, hoping I could get back into Jordan to return my car.

After dinner, however, as I read Lonely Planet on Jerusalem, I changed my mind. It would be a day of hassles and mishaps, with a chance of not getting back for my flight to Ankara and a Jordanian crossing point stamp

in my passport that would preclude further travel in Arab countries, all for a fraction of a day in a city that a week would not do justice to.

The next morning at breakfast I sat with Marko, the Slovenian. He urged me to go to Jerusalem for the day, “for the excitement”. But the more he talked the more formidable it seemed. There were two ways of doing it. I could go through the border as an ordinary person. I might have to wait an hour for a bus to take me the four kilometers from the last Jordanian border post to the first Israeli one. I wouldn’t be harassed myself, but I’d spend a long time waiting in line while the Israeli soldiers harassed the Arabs ahead of me. (He said he himself generally is made to wait two hours, because of his known Palestinian sympathies.) Once I got through, I could forget about a shared taxi—no one to share it with. So I’d have to take a bus to Jericho, and then another bus to Jerusalem. Buses take forever to get through the Israeli police checkpoints. It would take me all day just to get to Jerusalem, let alone getting back in time for my flight from Amman the next day.

The other way to do it was as a VIP. “But I’m not a VIP,” I said. He said a VIP is someone who pays \$54 to be whisked through Israeli customs. He could call a taxi driver he knew in Jerusalem who would drive down and meet me at the border for \$50 each way. By the time he was finished describing this option, it sounded like it would cost me \$200 for part of a day in a city demanding a week. I decided against it.

So I didn’t go to Palestine or Israel.

In the book of Deuteronomy we are told, “And Moses went up from the plains of Moab to Mount Nebo, to the top of Pisgah, which is opposite Jericho. And the Lord showed him all the land, Gilead as far as Dan, all Naphtali, the land of Ephraim and Manasseh, all the land of Judah as far as the Western Sea, the Negeb, and the Plain, that is the valley of Jericho the city of palm trees, as far as Zoar.”

On my last night in Jordan before returning via Ankara and Frankfurt to California, twenty minutes before sunset, as I drove around Madaba after seeing the mosaic map in Saint George’s Church, looking futilely for the Archaeological Park, which in any case was already closed, I spotted a sign that said “Mount Nebo 9 km.” and I thought what a wonderful place to watch the sunset from. Mount Nebo is but a bump in the escarpment just before the road plunges down to the Dead Sea. I did not have the special assistance Moses had, but my view was nevertheless impressive indeed. The lights and glow of Jerusalem could not yet be seen, but the sun set orange behind the hills of

Judea beyond the glimmering Dead Sea.

I tried to convince myself that Israel is close enough to Europe that I could go there the first time I went to Europe after the conflict had died down. Or maybe even before it died down.

XVII. Necessary Completions

I had an afternoon to be a tourist in Frankfurt on the way back. I examined the map to decide what I should see—obviously the Jewish Museum. It would be a useful antidote to the anti-Zionism and anti-Jewish feelings one hears in the Middle East. There was a reason, after all, that the Jews fled Europe for Palestine.

But there again was that question. The Muslims historically were much more tolerant of the Jews than the Christians were. Why should Arabs pay for German sins? Better to have given the Jews Bavaria. Why should Arabs pay for Russian pogroms. Better to have given the Jews Moldova.

I zigzagged from my hotel near the Hauptbahnhof to Untermainkai and to the museum. The displays focused on the history of Jews in Germany since the Middle Ages. There was more on the folk culture than on the pogroms. There was a fascinating model of Jüdengasse, the narrow street in the prewar Jewish ghetto. A few displays on the Holocaust. But I thought it lacked the power of other places I had been.

I must have learned about the Holocaust sometime when I was growing up in Indiana, but I'm not sure when. I don't think I really began to appreciate its horror until my senior year in college. During spring break I hitchhiked up to New York, and I spent one night at the home of Alex, a Jewish classmate and a fellow writer. I got up earlier than he did, and his mother fixed me breakfast. I can still smell the toast and coffee; see her fleshy arms and her curly dyed red hair; hear her low voice full of a painful power. I wonder if it was because I was a WASP from Indiana that she told me what she did, as I sat there riveted, stunned almost.

She and her husband were Polish Jews. The Nazis took them and their families to a concentration camp. Everyone was killed except them. Everyone. She listed her relatives who died—her parents, his parents, aunts, uncles, nieces, nephews, her own son and daughter—Alex's brother and sister. That was one thing I couldn't get out of my head—that Alex, born after the war,

had a brother and sister that he never met. She and her husband escaped from the concentration camp and fought with the Resistance. She had a reputation in her group as a fearless fighter. "I would never show it," she said, "but I was frightened every minute of every day."

After the war she and her husband made it to America and began another family.

After college in the course of traveling around the world, Laurel and I were hitchhiking around Poland. One morning we took the train from Krakow to Auschwitz to see the concentration camp. What I remember most now are two rooms behind large windows, one filled with shoes, the other with eyeglasses. The glasses especially got to me. I wear glasses. They are so small and so personal, so much a part of the person. It is hard to comprehend the scope of the Holocaust. But when you see a room full of the glasses of the murdered, you can begin to, just begin to comprehend.

In the middle '80s in the course of driving around East Germany, I went to the concentration camp at Buchenwald, outside Weimar. I walked through the first few rooms, the entrance hall where hundreds of thousands of victims were processed in on their way to gas chambers. I was getting more and more depressed by each of the displays. I stepped outside onto the path to the barracks that remain. They were far away across a vast expanse of mud, and the very distance gave one a powerful impression of the huge scope of the tragedy. I felt suddenly exhausted and incapable of walking that far. I returned to my car.

In 1996 I went to Vilnius, Lithuania, which before World War II was one of the three great centers of Jewish culture. The Nazis wiped out 100,000 Jews. Only one of 96 synagogues remains. I went to the Holocaust Museum in a small four-room wooden house, and found this as powerful as any representation I had seen. In the first room what struck me the most was a photograph of a woman clutching her baby turning away from a German soldier who is about to shoot her, as though her body could protect the baby. What is as remarkable as the content of the photograph is the fact that someone took it and was not shot for taking it. The soldier was not ashamed of what he was doing.

Two rooms later, covering an entire wall, there were small pictures of the Jewish inhabitants of Vilnius before the war. These were the victims, and you can begin to comprehend the enormity of what was lost. This display had an impact that was particularly personal. These were the faces of the people you see in American academia. These were the pictures of my friends.