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Yemen's Exotic Secrets

By TOM DOWNEY

ON my first morning in Sana, the capital of [Yemen](#), the call to prayer didn't just rouse me from sleep, it rattled the window panes, seemed to shake the foundation of my hotel, and spread from minaret to minaret as if the entire Old City was an enormous echo chamber. The scratchy invocations thundered on for so long I wondered whether it was even worth attempting to sleep again.

Out my window, I glimpsed a stream of worshipers scurrying toward the nearest minaret, scarves wrapped around their heads to ward off the morning chill. After trying every possible pillow-as-earplug configuration, I decided that resistance was futile. Of course, just after I'd showered and finished dressing, the calls to prayer abruptly ceased, as if someone had slapped a giant snooze button.

As I sipped strong coffee on the rooftop of my hotel, the Old City came alive seven stories below. There were satellite dishes in view, a lone taxi winding down an alley, and a few stray electric lights. But despite these technological advances, Sana's Old City is a remarkably well-preserved medieval metropolis.

The city's boundary walls, a few of them still standing, many just rubble or remembrance, enclose labyrinthine souks, corrals to store livestock brought to market, lush green [gardens](#) planted next to mosques, and ancient high-rise homes built of stone and brick (six or so stories tall, many of them dating back to the 11th century). The houses are lavishly decorated with white gypsum detailing that registers like a rhetorical flourish. Top-floor windows are made of alabaster or stained glass to tint the magnificent vistas of both the cityscape of early skyscrapers and the mountains that envelop the city.

Despite its superb [architecture](#), intact traditional culture, stunning vistas and passable tourist infrastructure, Yemen sees only a trickle of visitors, mostly from [Europe](#). Most travelers are understandably frightened off by the shadow of civil war, reports of terrorist attacks like the bombing of the American destroyer Cole in 2000, and stern State Department travel warnings. But for people willing to accept those potential dangers and explore this beguiling country, Yemen offers a pleasure that comes from getting lost in the flow of life, not from visiting long-dead or just-hatched places peopled only by touts and tourists.

On the main street of Sana's souk, black-clad shadows — local women — duck into fabric stores to buy colorful garments I'll never see them wear. Working teenagers huddle next to food vendors, eating boiled potatoes and eggs dipped in coarse salt and bright red pepper. A fruit vendor wearing one thick rubber glove carefully selects a prickly pear from a wheelbarrow and strips off the spiky outer skin. Men and boys wear the curious costume of northern Yemen — a Western suit jacket over a one-piece jalabiya. The crowning

accessory is a curved dagger called the jambiya that's sheathed in a fanciful scabbard belted across the belly.

Yemen was long ago crowned Arabia Felix (Fortunate Arabia) because it was covered in fertile fields that made it the richest place in the land. Market cities like Sana grew fat from trade in incense, coffee and foodstuffs. But black gold and natural gas now trump frankincense and myrrh, so Arabia Felix has become the pauper of the peninsula – a stark contrast to the bling of [Dubai](#) and the luxurious beach resorts of Oman.

Yet it is a country that retains a strong sense of its own rich past.

Surprisingly, one of the figures who can take credit for preserving the atmosphere of Yemen's past is the Italian filmmaker and poet Pier Paolo Pasolini, who visited Sana back in 1970 to shoot a sequence for his adaptation of Boccaccio's "Decameron." Having seen so many wondrous parts of [Italy](#) ruined by modernization, Pasolini worried that long-cloistered Sana, then just opening to the world, would be destroyed by those same forces. He took up his camera and created a passionate plea to [Unesco](#) to grant Sana's old quarter World Heritage status.

Watching Pasolini's short film "Le Mura di Sana" 37 years later is the ultimate testament to his success. The city he brought to life in his documentary looks virtually indistinguishable from the Old Sana of today, though the city outside the walls is everything he feared, with many neighborhoods razed or transformed.

Pasolini is long gone, but in Sana I met Marco Livadiotti, Pasolini's heir apparent in the fight to safeguard Sana from the ravages of the modern world. Mr. Livadiotti arrived in Yemen at age 5, when his father became the personal physician to Yemen's last king, Imam Ahmed bin Yahya. Raised in this storybook city at a time when foreigners were nearly unknown to its inhabitants, Mr. Livadiotti went on to create Yemen's leading travel company, the Universal Touring Company, and lives in a finely restored ancient residence in the old Ottoman quarter of Sana.

He led me on a walk into the Old City, starting at a vantage point by the Sa'ila, a modern road (courtesy of [United States](#) aid) that bisects the Old City and floods when it rains. From this angle, there were only ancient high-rises, minarets and mosques in view; there was nothing of the new city, with its concrete horrors and too-tall buildings.

We wandered past stalls filled with trays of sticky dates, bore past spice vendors dwarfed by giant mounds of pungent powders and leaves, and then found a small plaza in the heart of the Suq al-Milhi (the Salt Souk). Men roared up on motorcycles and quickly dismounted to snarf down a snack of preserved persimmons, dipping their licked spoons into the communal tray to gather more sugar syrup.

Mr. Livadiotti led me through a doorway into one of the last remaining caravansaries in town. It was in ruins, but a few traders still inhabited second-

floor rooms that looked over the central courtyard, where once the guests' animals would have been stored while they conducted business.

We exited and peeked into some of the mosques along our route, structures built in a style that seems spare and serious compared with the architectural excess of the homes. Unfortunately, nonbelievers are barred from entering mosques in Yemen, so I could only gaze at these holy places from outside.

The first-time visitor to Yemen will likely be confronted by three iconic images that will no doubt reinforce whatever initial qualms they had about going there, photographs that they will see everywhere, from motorcycle windshields to teahouse walls. The most prevalent is of Yemen's long-serving leader, President [Ali Abdullah Saleh](#), whose bushy mustache and fashion ensembles (military, stately, of the people) make him look like [Saddam Hussein](#)'s mini-me.

The second most popular photo is of Hussein himself, who became a folk hero here after his defiance in the first Gulf War. Third place goes to Lebanon's [Hezbollah](#) leader Sheik [Hassan Nasrallah](#), whose call to arms against [Israel](#) made him a superstar even in Yemen, despite his being a "twelver" Shiite and most Yemenis belonging to a different sect.

There's also a virtually unreported war going on in the Sada region of northern Yemen, and the country is certainly not immune to miscellaneous outbursts of chaos. On a previous visit two and a half years ago, I went for a jog one morning and heard a taxi driver complain that gas prices had nearly doubled overnight. A few hours later, I watched thousands of rioters storm through the streets and heard shots ring out.

Add to this political instability a long history of tourists being kidnapped and a recent suicide bombing that killed seven Spanish tourists, and it's a wonder that any travelers come here at all, despite Yemen's considerable charms.

SO why visit a place this volatile? I came to find a complete and ancient way of life that is still largely intact. Moreover, despite the country's problems (and a need for tourists to be both alert and cautious), the place feels surprisingly safe. Indeed, few attacks on tourists have taken place in what I consider Yemen's two most spectacular draws: the Old City of Sana and the eastern oasis of Wadi Hadhramaut.

Most of the trouble comes from the restive region between Sana and Hadhramaut, an area that is home to the ruins of Marib and to a patchwork of tribes who often oppose the central government. On this trip, in April, I decided to fly from Sana to Hadhramaut and avoid the Marib region entirely.

But before that flight east, I drove west to the Haraz Mountains that surround Sana, perhaps best known for the gloriously intact 11th-century village Al-Hajjara carved into the rocky landscape. The lush green fields we passed through outside of the city were about as far as you can get from the popular image of a barren, desertified Arabia. The fields sprouted khat, a leafy green drug that is virtually omnipresent in Yemen and is chewed daily by everyone

from taxi drivers to sheiks.

Our driver insisted we stop at a market town to stock up on khat. I followed him into the dark interior of a tin-roofed shack, where a man with a rounded cheekful of khat presided over bushels that covered every inch of floor. Our driver moved from stall to stall, fingering leaves, dismissing out of hand what he was first offered, haggling over prices, and finally selecting a rubta, the standard measure. That bunch of long, wet branches was wrapped in cellophane and handed over for the equivalent of about \$8, a considerable expense in a country as poor as Yemen.

On the outskirts of the market town, the driver pulled over to a lone bunker filled with illicit Scotch whiskey, smuggled cans of Heineken and dangerous looking off-brand liquors. I guess a country that tolerates almost everyone getting high on khat is bound to be somewhat forgiving when it comes to other indulgences.

After staying at a raucous lodge in Manakhah where Yemeni men danced traditional dagger steps into the wee hours of the night (more to lure French female tourists to the dance floor than to celebrate their culture, I think), we drove a few miles to Al-Khutayb. It's the spiffiest village I saw in Yemen, with newly renovated mosques, swanky pilgrims' lodging, a fast-flowing fountain and a landscaped park. It turns out that a tomb built for a 12th-century cleric is now a requisite stop for Ismaili pilgrims from [India](#) and Pakistan. (The Ismailis are the Muslim denomination led by the Aga Khan.)

The mountains surrounding the town are extraordinary – rolling fertile fields punctuated by mountaintop fortress towns that look as though they're still ready to resist a years-long siege. The sun started to burn off the morning chill, though fog loomed in the distance. We [hiked](#) past acacia trees, waved to men plowing fields, and finally followed an almost-blind old man into town.

In nearby Al-Hajjara I spotted a Williams College T-shirt and met an American tourist, Leo Murray, a semi-retired [Hong Kong](#) resident who treks all over the world. When it started to pour and we went inside a hotel for tea and shelter, I ran into a fellow Long Islander desperate to speak English with a compatriot. She said she had tacked on a solo trip to Yemen after a group tour of Saudi Arabia. These were the only two American tourists I met the whole trip.

A day later, I was on a plane to Hadhramaut, surrounded by a few fellow tourists and scores of Hadhramautis returning home, probably from working abroad. (Hadhramaut has traditionally sent its sons abroad to make their fortunes; the most famous of these is [Osama bin Laden](#)'s father, Mohammed.)

The crown jewel of Hadhramaut, the longest wadi, or fertile valley, in the Arabian Peninsula, is supposed to be the town of Shibam. But at first sight, Shibam looked like a dead city. The only living creatures in evidence were a few nosy European tourists peeking into people's homes, some mangy goats chewing on garbage, and a few adventurous children chasing both the goats and the tourists. It was simply too hot – about 100 degrees – for any sensible adult to venture out.

But, I reasoned, the residents can't live indoors their entire lives, so back at my hotel, I decided to rent a [bike](#) and return at dusk. An hour or so before sunset, when it had cooled down enough to go outside, I cycled toward Shibam, about four miles west.

At the town of Al-Hawta, I was greeted by the whoops and hollers of kids snacking on freshly fried potatoes. Then I passed through some pasture lands, where female shepherds led their goats alongside the road. The women wore the distinctive get-up of Wadi Hadhramaut: they were covered from head to ankle in black, and topped this off with a peaked straw hat nearly two feet tall. Supposedly the air circulating inside the hat keeps them cool.

Finally, I rounded a bend, pushed out of a lush palm grove, and beheld Shibam. Its tall, narrow mud-brick tower houses are packed together so densely inside the city walls that the English traveler Freya Stark back in the 1930s christened this city "the Manhattan of the desert."

Conveniently, all the other tourists had now retreated to a hilltop that offers a silhouette of the city at sunset. While dozens of them snapped photos a mile up the mountain, I entered the whitewashed main gate all alone. Just to the left was a small area covered in rugs where village men slammed down dominoes under the dwindling light of the evening sun and sipped glasses of sweet, scalding tea.

As I sat down and ordered a cup, the wise locals who had been cloistered inside during the scorching sunlight hours emerged to shop for sticky desserts from a trio of vendors. Men streamed into the mosque for the final prayer of the day, and the blue light of the moon cast soft shadows down the dirt alleyways.

Inside these city walls, as in the Old City of Sana, you can dart around a corner and leap back centuries.

BACK IN TIME

For visitors from the [United States](#), the most convenient way to reach [Yemen](#) is via [Dubai](#). From Dubai, both Emirates and Yemenia offer nonstop flights to Sana, with fares starting at about \$240 for a flight of just under three hours. Based on a recent online search, a round-trip ticket on a nonstop flight in late January between New York and Dubai would cost about \$1,200 on Emirates (800-777-3999; www.emirates.com).

Many United States citizens can buy visas on arrival at Sana's airport (depending on which airline they take) for \$30 to \$50, but check with the Yemen Embassy in [Washington](#) (202-965-4760; www.yemenembassy.org) to confirm that this policy is still in effect.

The State Department Web site, www.travel.state.gov, lists a formal travel warning about "the high security threat level in Yemen due to terrorist activities." Other information on Yemen is in the site's Consular Information section.

The Yemeni government periodically restricts visits to certain regions. A responsible and reliable travel operator will update you on the most recent developments and advise accordingly. It's simplest to book a trip outside of Sana through a travel agency that can arrange for government permits, plane tickets, a guide and driver, and hotels.

I traveled to Manakhah and Hadhramaut with Universal Touring Company (967-1-272-861; www.utcyemen.com). Marco Livadiotti, the owner, said that the cost of a driver and a guide would be the equivalent of \$100 to \$140 a day. His e-mail address is marco.universal@gmail.com. There are also dozens of other lower-budget travel agencies near the tourist hotels in the Old City.

Upscale hotels and restaurants will normally accept credit cards, but you'll need Yemeni rials (the exchange rate is about 200 rials to the dollar) to pay for everything else. There are a couple of A.T.M.'s around the center of the city, which will dispense rials from American accounts. But these are often out of cash or out of service, so definitely bring some dollars along just in case; they can be easily exchanged in major cities.

WHERE TO STAY

The Taj Sheba Hotel (Ali Abdulmoghni Street; 967-1-272-372) has been sold and will no longer be part of Taj, the Indian chain, starting Jan. 1. But it's the best-located standard hotel in the city, just on the edge of the old quarter near Sana's central square, Midan Tahrir. Double rooms go for \$160 for the older rooms and \$185 for the newly renovated chambers.

The grandest hotel in Sana is the shockingly ugly but very comfortable Mövenpick Hotel Sana ([Berlin](#) Street, Dhahar Hemyer; 967-1-546-666; www.movenpick.com) looming above Sana on a hill that also is home to the United States Embassy and the shabby old Sheraton. Doubles in this new 338-room Mövenpick start at about \$150. It has an excellent Moroccan restaurant and a nightclub, as well as a fitness center and two pools.

The most comfortable address inside Sana's Old City is the new Burj Al Salam Hotel (Harat Al-Fulayhi; 967-1-483-333; www.burjalsalam.com). The rooftop restaurant, cafe and khat chewing room offer the best views in town. There are 47 rooms, from small singles to larger suites, and prices start at \$50. After staying at the Burj Al Salam, I was told by Mr. Livadiotti of Universal Touring that the contractors built this hotel from concrete rather than traditional materials, and made it three stories higher than any other building in the neighborhood, flaunting the [Unesco](#) stipulations for the Old City.

A handful of ancient tower houses in the Old City of Sana have been converted into simple backpacker-style hotels while preserving most of the beauty and some of the disadvantages of medieval living. Most rooms share baths. Mattresses can be thin and treacherous, but the atmosphere is unbeatable. Among the best of these tower hotels is the Arabia Felix (Avenue Saila Al-Jeila; 961-1-287-330; arabiafelix.free.fr) located on Sa'ila, which crosses the Old City. The 44 rooms are 22 to 35 euros (about \$32 to \$51, at \$1.47 to the euro), including breakfast in a delightful [garden](#).

In Manakhah, Al Hajjarah Tourist Hotel and Restaurant (967-1-460-124; e-mail, alhajjarahhotel@hotmail.com) is the best bet, though late-night [music](#) and shenanigans may annoy light sleepers. Doubles are 6,000 rials, with breakfast and dinner.

In Shibam, Al Hawta Palace (967-5-425-010; www.universalyemen.com/hotels) is a former palace with 58 air-conditioned rooms, a swimming pool, restaurant and [bike](#) rentals; it is owned by the parent company of Universal Touring. Doubles start at \$145.

WHERE TO EAT

Salta, a steamy green stew, is a classic Yemeni dish, and perhaps the best in the country can be found at Ali's, an unmarked restaurant in Sana (near Bab al Shuhub; 967-1-221-708) just outside the Old City in a bustling mercantile quarter. When I was there in April, what appeared to be a handful of giant Bunsen burners were presided over by a few alchemists who transformed miscellaneous meat parts, heaps of fenugreek and handfuls of hot red pepper into a flaming cauldron of spice and flavor. A large meal for two will run about 3,500 rials.

Ali's, like most every restaurant in the country, caters almost exclusively to men, and it's not the kind of place where you'd think to linger after wolfing down your food. When a group of men hunched over their salta saw me come in, they slapped me on the back and generously, if aggressively, urged me to share their salta.

If you yearn for some Indian or Continental cuisine or are desperate for a cold beer, try to weasel your way into the British Club. It's next to the British Ambassador's residence in the Haddah area of Sana.

But if you can't get in the club, the Haddah area, a 15-minute ride from the Old City, offers the best selection of high-end restaurants in town. Haddah Street has a kind of restaurant row, with a variety of Italian, Lebanese and Egyptian restaurants, most of which are passably good.

You'll eat well at the Al Hajjarah Hotel in Manakhah. Outside of hotels in Manakhah and Hadhramaut, the best you'll do is probably a hunk of barbecued meat or fish, and some bread soaked in honey for dessert. There isn't really a restaurant culture in Yemen outside of the big cities, and even there, it's mostly for foreigners and rich Yemenis. Most ordinary places feel more like cafeterias than restaurants.

WHAT TO READ

Lonely Planet's [Oman](#), UAE & Arabian Peninsula Travel Guide (\$20.99 at shop.lonelyplanet.com) contains a useful chapter on Yemen.

The contemporary classic travelogue of the country is "Yemen: The Unknown Arabia" (Overlook Press, 2000) by a British-born Yemen resident, Timothy Mackintosh-Smith, a wonderfully erudite and endearing romp around the

country.

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