

C a r a v a n s

Summer-Fall 2006

The Desert Foundation
PO Box 1000
Crestone, CO 81131
www.desertfound.org

Dear Friends,

Summer came too early in the high altitude desert of Crestone, with 90 degree temperatures long before the summer solstice. We are experiencing another severe drought, and fire danger is extreme. Our volunteer fire department has urged all Crestone residents to come up with an evacuation plan and do “fire mitigation,” creating “defensible space” within fifteen feet of our houses. This is crucial for Fr. Dave and me, since our hermitages are located off the grid, far out in the desert. We are spending several hours every week pruning trees and clearing away inflammable brush and branches. Please consult Desert Prayer on our website and join us in praying for rain. As a poetic alternative as well as a touch of green in our already browning landscape, I’ve planted colorful flower pots and herbs, watering them with buckets I haul from San Isabel Creek, which separates Fr. Dave’s hermitage from mine.

During the next months you can connect with us not only via our website but through the following activities:

July 12-16 I will join Joan Halifax Roshi and other leaders in Santa Fe for a Women’s Retreat entitled “In the Shelter of Each Other.” For further information contact Upaya@upaya.org or call 505-986-8518.

From July 30 to August 6, Fr. Dave will lead a seminar called “Grief, Belief, Rage and Surrender” at *Image* journal’s annual Glen Workshop at St. John’s College in Santa Fe. Through poetry and art as spiritual reading, participants will explore a spirituality of grief and a wide range of responses to loss, including depictions of the Crucifixion and the Mother of Sorrows portrayed by New Mexican *santeros* in their traditional wood carvings. For more information, visit www.imagejournal.org or call 206-281-2988.

In September, Sounds True will release my six-hour audio program on Christian mysticism entitled, “Wild at Heart.” To order, contact www.soundstrue.com or call 800-333-9185.

In conjunction with the Spanish Peaks Celtic Music Festival in La Veta, Colorado, I will give a talk on Celtic Spirituality on September 30. For further information contact Rev. Claudia Smith at 719-742-5202 or revclaudia@centurytel.net. What does Celtic spirituality have to do with the desert? The earliest Celtic monks were inspired by the Fathers of the Desert, the first Christian monks living in Egypt, Syria, and Palestine. Do you know that there are over five hundred examples of the word “desert” (modern Gaelic spelling: *diseart*) recorded from around Ireland by Edmund Hogan in *Onomasticon Goedelicum*?

Looking ahead, April 30–May 10, 2007, I will once again help lead a pilgrimage to the Holy Land, with an optional extension to Jordan and Palestine. Please join me, Jewish and Sufi leaders, and several Buddhist teachers for an interfaith perspective on the spiritual and geographical origins of Christianity and its relationship to other world religions. For further information contact tina@authenticasia.net or call 888-586-9958.

Till our next issue,

Fessa Bielech





Fire Mitigation

Dear Friends,

As we celebrate the Desert Foundation's first anniversary, I want to thank you for your encouragement. Although much of our communication with you takes place through the website, below are two short book reviews on the sunset of two civilizations. You may want to add *Arabian Sands* or *In an Antique Land* to your reading list. This summer I look forward to inaugurating a new feature on our website. Much of the international news we read and hear is filtered through abstract geopolitical language. I propose to snoop around the web and less "corporate" news sources to find stories of relations between Jews, Christians, and Muslims that may be hard to find in our mass media. I'll share some of these stories as well as their sources. If you have experiences or reports you want to share, please write to me. We need to build up our Circle of Friends by sharing the stories, whether tragic or promising, which tell the tale our family life as Abraham's children.

Gratefully,

Arabian Sands

Arabian Sands by the late Wilfred Thesiger, first published in 1959, recounts the young Thesiger's explorations in the southern Arabian Peninsula just before the great oil companies arrived to create an international energy hub and destroy the pre-petroleum-age Bedouin culture. If you are thirsty for descriptions of the sheer physical atmosphere of the desert and portraits of men who adapted to its rigors and inherited an ancient Bedouin tradition, this book will satisfy your thirst. It teems with paradoxes, including descriptions of fierce loyalty and hospitality and customs that to us seem terrifyingly primal, such as circumcision rites for teenage boys. But Thesiger's portraits of bin Kabina and bin Ghabaisha, two young Bedouin friends, are touching and revealing.

Thesiger himself was a strange combination: an upper class Englishman who had connections that enabled him to travel in remote areas, and who suffered an "aching nostalgia for this comfortless yet satisfying life" in the desert. He mapped uncharted regions knowing that "the maps I made helped others, with more material aims, to visit and corrupt a people whose spirit once lit the desert like a flame."

Thesiger's descriptions of village versus desert life challenge the notion put forth by Gaber Asfour, an Egyptian writer who distinguishes between "desert" and "river" Islam. According to Asfour, Osama bin Laden represents "the intolerant 'trend of transmission' associated with the harsh desert," whereas the cosmopolitan Nilotic culture of Egypt represents a more tolerant "Islam of the rivers." In the town of Laila, Thesiger had a terrible time getting

T.E. Lawrence wrote, 'Bedouin ways were hard, even for those brought up in them and for strangers terrible: a death in life.' No man can live this life and emerge unchanged. He will carry, however faint, the imprint of the desert, the brand which marks the nomad; and he will have within him the yearning to return, weak or insistent according to his nature. For this cruel land can cast a spell which no temperate climate can match.

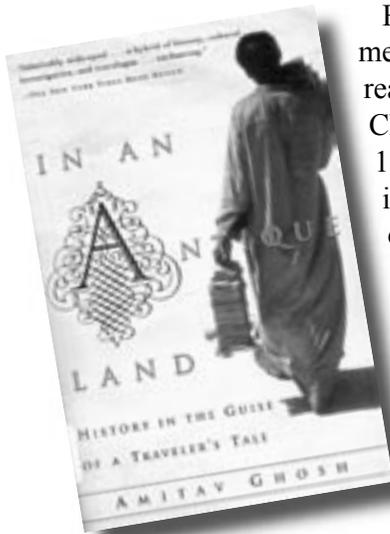
From the Prologue to *Arabian Sands*



supplies for one of his journeys. His Bedouin fellows “were cursed and spat at for bringing an infidel into the town.” Shopkeepers said they would accept the infidel’s money only if it were publicly washed! The Bedouins were scandalized. “They say you are an infidel,” raged bin Kabina, “but you are a hundred times better than such Muslims as these.” So in this case, at least, the desert was not the birthplace of fanaticism, but of hospitable willingness to judge a man on his merits, not his religion. How about the Bedouins’ attitude toward Jews? At the palace of Shakhbut, ruler of Abu Dhabi, Thesiger hears the sheikh’s account of the war in Palestine, soon to become Israel. Shakhbut ends with a diatribe against the Jews, and a puzzled bin Kabina leans over to Thesiger, whispering, “Who are the Jews? Are they Arabs?” Fifty years later, it is hard to imagine a Bedouin who has never heard of Jews or the state of Israel.

Arabian Sands includes countless beautifully written passages, and Thesiger’s description of Zayid bin Sultan and a hawking expedition with this Bedouin prince seems to come from the Middle Ages rather than from the 1940s.

In an Antique Land



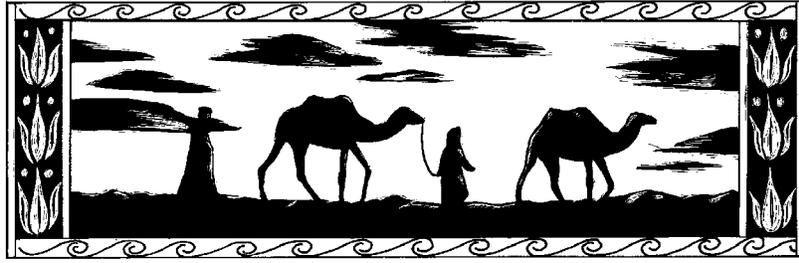
For those interested in an urbane novel that time travels between contemporary and medieval Egypt, Aden, and India, Amitav Ghosh’s *In an Antique Land* is a wondrous read. Although not directly related to the desert, this is a tale of Muslims, Jews, and Christians, with two Hindus, Ghosh and a medieval slave, thrown into the mix. We see 1980s Egyptian village life through Ghosh’s eyes. He describes the arrival of television in a rural town, the relationships between families, the struggle to eke out an existence on the land, and the effect of the Iran-Iraq war on young Egyptians seeking prosperity through emigration. But Ghosh is also researching a medieval Jewish merchant’s life in Egypt, Aden, and Malabar. We learn about an era in which Jews, Muslims, and Hindus lived and worked together in relative peace for centuries. The spell was broken with the arrival of Vasco da Gama in 1498. Having gradually introduced the reader to this colorful, prosperous, cosmopolitan medieval economy and Ben Yiju, the Jewish merchant whose letters we encounter throughout the book, Ghosh allows us to imagine the shock of sudden militarization introduced by a foreign power, Portugal: “Soon, the remains of the civilization that had brought Ben Yiju to

Mangalore were devoured by that unquenchable, demonic thirst that has raged ever since, for almost five hundred years, over the Indian Ocean, the Arabian Sea and the Persian Gulf.”

For us Americans, many of whom still attempt to leave history’s “baggage” behind, as did many of our immigrant forebears on this continent, these two books offer stunning insights into the end of one civilization and the ascent of another. They remind us that we are making history and in sometimes tragic ways, we are repeating it. We may want everyone in the world to forget the past, drop everything, and become democratic capitalists. But our predecessors, whether leaders of a *Reconquista*, circumnavigating imperialists, or multinational oil developers, have left heavy footprints on these shores, and although we may remain ignorant of our Western historic exploits, the descendants of bin Kabaisha and Ben Yiju remember.

Ben Yiju and his friends were all orthodox, observant Jews, strongly aware of their distinctive religious identity. But they were also part of the Arabic-speaking world, and the everyday language of their religious life was one they shared with the Muslims of that region: when they invoked the name of God in their writings it was usually as Allah ... Shortly before Ben Yiju's lifetime the Jewish mystic Bahya Ibn Paquda composed *The Duties of the Heart*, a treatise culled largely from Sufi sources, which was to have a powerful impact on the world of Mediterranean Judaism, infusing generations of readers with Sufi ideas.

From *In an Antique Land*, p. 261



The drum of departure reaches my spiritual ear from heaven.
Behold, the driver has risen and made ready his files of camels,
And begged us to acquit him of blame: why O travelers, are you asleep?
These sounds before and behind are the din of departure and of the camel bells;
With each moment a soul and spirit is setting off into the Void.
From these inverted candles, from these blue awnings
There has come forth a wondrous people, that the mysteries may be revealed.
A heavy slumber fell upon you from the circling spheres:
Alas, for this life so light, beware of this slumber so heavy!
O soul, seek the Beloved, O friend, seek the Friend,
O watchman, be wakeful: it behooves not a watchman to sleep.

— *Jalal al-Din Rumi*, “The Journey to the Beloved”

Responses from our Readers

One of the richest aspects of this first year of our new Desert Foundation is the gratifying exchange we enjoy with you via email, “snail mail,” and in person. The Rumi poem was given to us by John Sack from Jacksonville, Oregon. As of May 1, John began to live in a cabin on five acres surrounded by pasture, orchard, and forest. “Not desert,” he wrote, “but some of the same opportunities for solitude and silence.” Aren’t silence and solitude the essence of the desert, no matter how green the terrain?

Brian Volck of Cincinnati, Ohio shared his essay on solitude in the Grand Canyon, Sylvia Rieth from Wynantskill, New York, her photos of Arizona, Utah, and Wyoming.

Mary Daniels of Mimbres, New Mexico wrote: “Your new venture is as intriguing and inspiring as the desert. It has prompted me to seek literature on desert spirituality.” She was “especially moved” by Carlo Carretto’s *Letters from the Desert*, sent us an anniversary edition, and concluded: “I look forward to the next arrival of *Caravans* and its ‘treasures.’”

Jennifer Heath of Boulder, Colorado sent us a friend’s photos of Afghanistan and her remarkable book, *The Scimitar and the Veil: Extraordinary Women of Islam*. Mirabai Starr loaned us her own copy of *The Poetry of Arab Women: A Contemporary Anthology*, edited by Nathalie Handal. (Look for reviews of these books in future *Caravans* and then on our web site.)

Jacob Baynham, a recent college graduate from Denver, has just written from Afghanistan where he is collaborating with local journalists through the Open Media Fund, which provides resources to Afghan radio, television, newspapers, Internet providers, and journalist associations in order to foster the growth of free expression in a peaceful civil society.

In our Winter-Spring issue we’ll tell you more about our upcoming course on *Desert Spirituality: from the Middle East to the American Southwest* and our conversations with Sufis, a Rabbi, a Crypto-Jew, and *penitentes* from New Mexico. See our web site, www.desertfound.org, for more responses from our Circle of Friends.

— ***Tessa Bielecki***