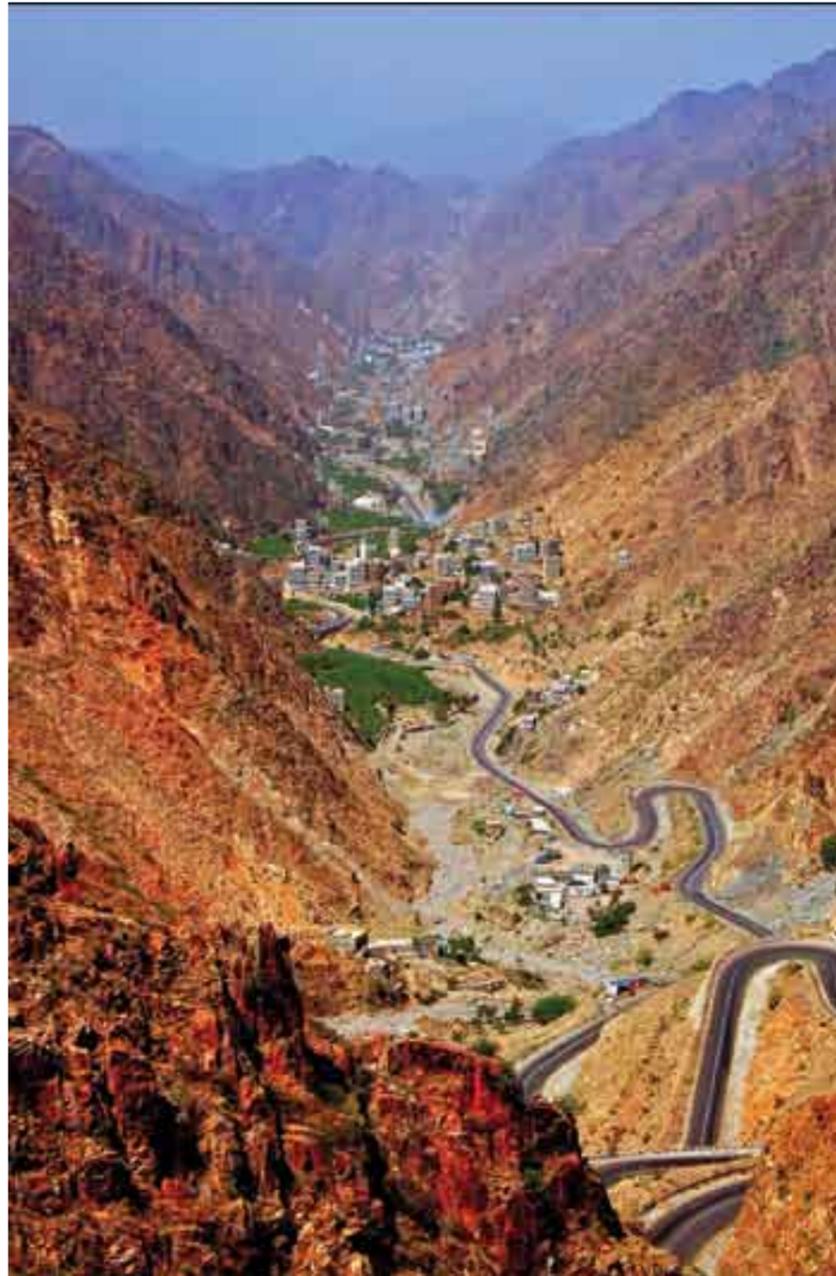




# ***A Country fair in its water and Air***

So the Syrian-American traveler Ameen Rihani was assured in 1922 by a Yemeni companion. First impressions of Yemen are more dramatic; the landscape erupts through the early morning mist like the dawn of creation,





The geological upheavals of this corner of Arabia inscribed on its escarpments, in its gorges, over its lava-strewn plateaus. Yemenis tell the story of how God decided to visit the world he had created. He went first to London- <changed a lot,' he said, <since I made the place.' Then he went to Egypt- quite different', he said, <from what I created., Finally he came to Yemen. Ah, that I recognize! He said. <'that hasn't changed since the day I created it.; the narrators have a point but they ignore man's sculpting of the western escarpment

over thousands of years, a densely woven tapestry of terraces draped down the precipitous mountainside. The Yemeni mountains belong geologically to Africa-vast outpourings from the intense volcanic period that occurred four hundred and fifty million years ago. Around ten million years ago the Rift Valley began to be formed, a process of splitting and lifting landmasses that separated Asia from Africa, Yemen from the Horn of Africa, and formed the mountains of Ethiopia and Yemen.



The process is still happening; the formation of the Red Sea, with its crucial opening to the Indian Ocean at the Bab al-mandab, is part of the continuing movement of the Afro-Asian plates along the Rift Valley fault, demonstrated in regular tremors and the occasional quake. No recent volcanic eruptions have occurred on land, however; the last is thought to have happened at least a thousand years ago. But all the variety and colour of rocks raised by giant tectonic movement will be seen caught in the building materials used

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everywhere by Yemenis with the strong decorative sense one soon learns to associate with them. Those Rift Valley movements, the upward tilt of western Arabia, explain the country's geography. They created, for instance, the country's hot, humid coastal plain, called Tihamah, which emerged from the Red Sea. At its foot is a succession of hot springs-another demonstration of that geological ferment. The springs, fed into smelly cavernous pools, are almost too hot to enter; in one of them, (Ayn al-sukhna, the last Imam but one used to soak his ailing, ulcerated body. Few roads lead up and over the escarpment. In the late nineteenth century the ottoman turks then governing Yemen invited the French to build a railway connecting the port of Hodeida with their headquarters in san'a; the track struggled a

**Yemn: Land And People**

Few miles out of town but sensibly gave up before turning vertical. The cold war eased the problem of communication, with rival powers competing to bring the blessings of modern engineering in the form of what roads there are. But much of the time one climbs up and down skillfully laid basalt stairways that connect villages clustering on rocky outcrops like ship- wrecked sailors, leaving any space that is not completely vertical to be banked into terraces for coffee (on the lower slopes), grain and the ubiquitous and mildly stimulating qat, a plant chewed by Yemenis most afternoons. Women still walk up and down the stairways with vats of clean water from springs that may be several hours' walk from home, bedecked with lumps of coral and turquoise and silver beaten from maria Theresa thalers, the old currency of Arabia. From the top of the escarpment, crowned by Arabia's highest mountain, jabal al- Nabi

shu'ayb at 3,700 metres, one descends slightly to the highland plains, undulating from north to south, dotted with diminutive volcanic cones like chil- dren's sand-castles; the fields between the lava flows are green in the growing season with sorghum and wheat, vines and qat, watered by expertly engineered irrigation channels, all too often nowadays augmented by the diesel pump.

To the south, beyond the dramatic sumarah pass, are the heeneest areas of Yemen, well watered by monsoon rains. The highlands slope upwards to the east to the sarat mountain chain, and then down to the dry flat lands that ring the great Arabian desert, the sands of Ramlat sab'atayn (known also as the sayhad) leading to the so-called Empty Quarter or Rub, al-khali. Out here.

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