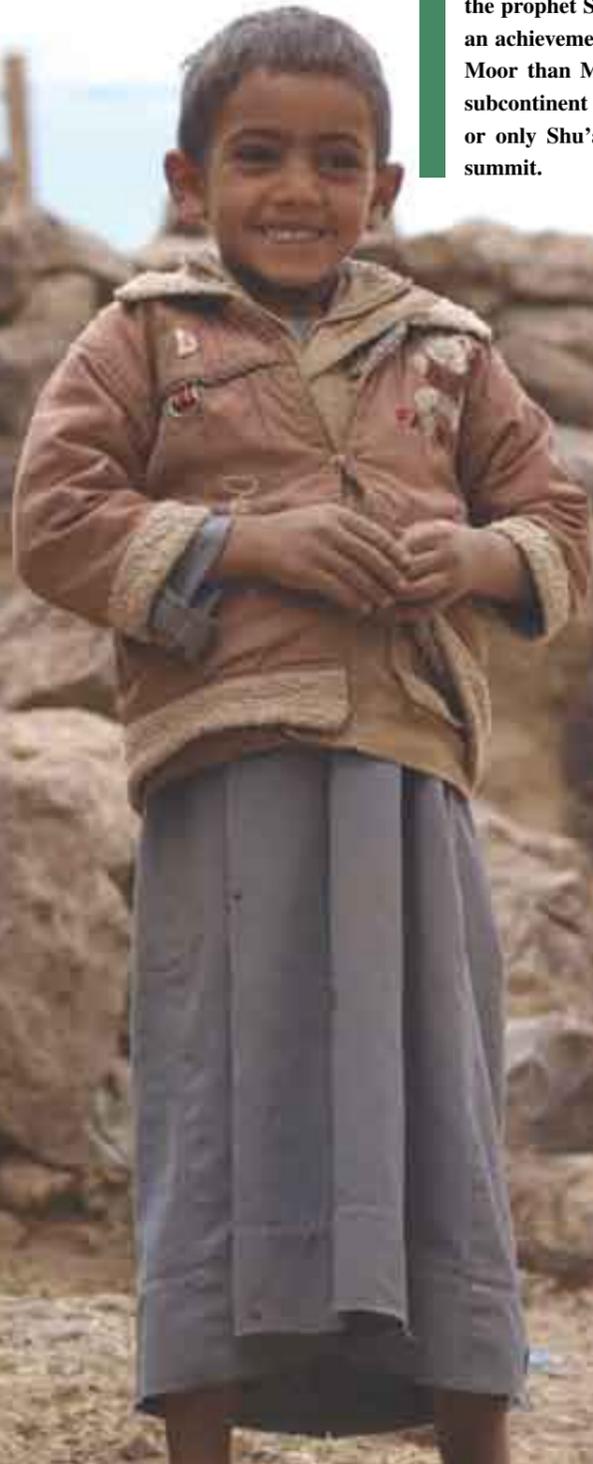


Mountain of the Prophet Shu'ayb

A few years ago, I rode to the top of the Mountain of the prophet Shu'ayb on my motorcycle. it was hardly an achievement: in shape the mountain is more likely Moor than Matter horn. Even so, in the whole vast subcontinent of Arabia there was no human as high; or only Shu'ayb, lying in his tomb-chamber by the summit.



Beneath me the earth fell away in a jumble of broken arcs and planes. the solitude was dizzy. And yet, this being Yemen, I was not alone even at 12,000 feet. through the rush of wind I could just hear other sounds, coming from the tomb-the rhythmic sound of sweeping, then a woman's voice. Minutes later I was sharing lunch with a tribesman from al-Haymah. With his wife and children, he had walked since dawn to visit the prophet and give him a spring clean. they were clearly not well off- lunch was dry barley bread and water- and when the inevitable stream of Questions came to the matter of my salary, I was relieved to be able to reply in all honesty that I had none. the Haymi looked aghast, stuck his hand in his pocket and offered me a fistful of banknotes. the money was returned to the pocket, but only after the use of physical force on my side. we parted with blessings, and I began my bowel-loosening descent. it was not an everyday meeting, but it was quintessentially Yemen in its features. there are the human ones-generosity, piety, tenacity, inquisitiveness (one sometimes feels interrogated; one never feels ignored.) And there is the setting, this great glittering wrinkled country of peaks and plains towers and surprises, in which unexpected encounters in out-of-the-way spots are, paradoxically, almost predictable. you will try to get away from it all in vain: people are ubiquitous, the land itself possessive Not a day will pass in your life, wrote the master of Belhaven, who had soldiered and wandered in the contorted interior of the old Aden protectorate, but you will remember some facet of that opal-land; not a night will pass without some twist of dream. opposite: luhayyab; gaily painted fishing boats at anchor. how to put it all across? Yemen is almost indecently well endowed. while it missed out on the languid studio-oriental Sam of the nineteenth century, in the twentieth it became the cynosure of travelling lenses- those of Hans



Helfritz, Daniel van der Meulen and pascal Marechaux among them. Jane Taylor belongs to a tradition of lady photographers in Yemen that goes back over a century, via Freya Stark to the remarkable

Mrs. Theodore Bent this latter and unsung heroine coped with the considerable impedimenta of a Victorian travelling darkroom in the unlike lies spots, from the Palmaris of Hadhramawt to

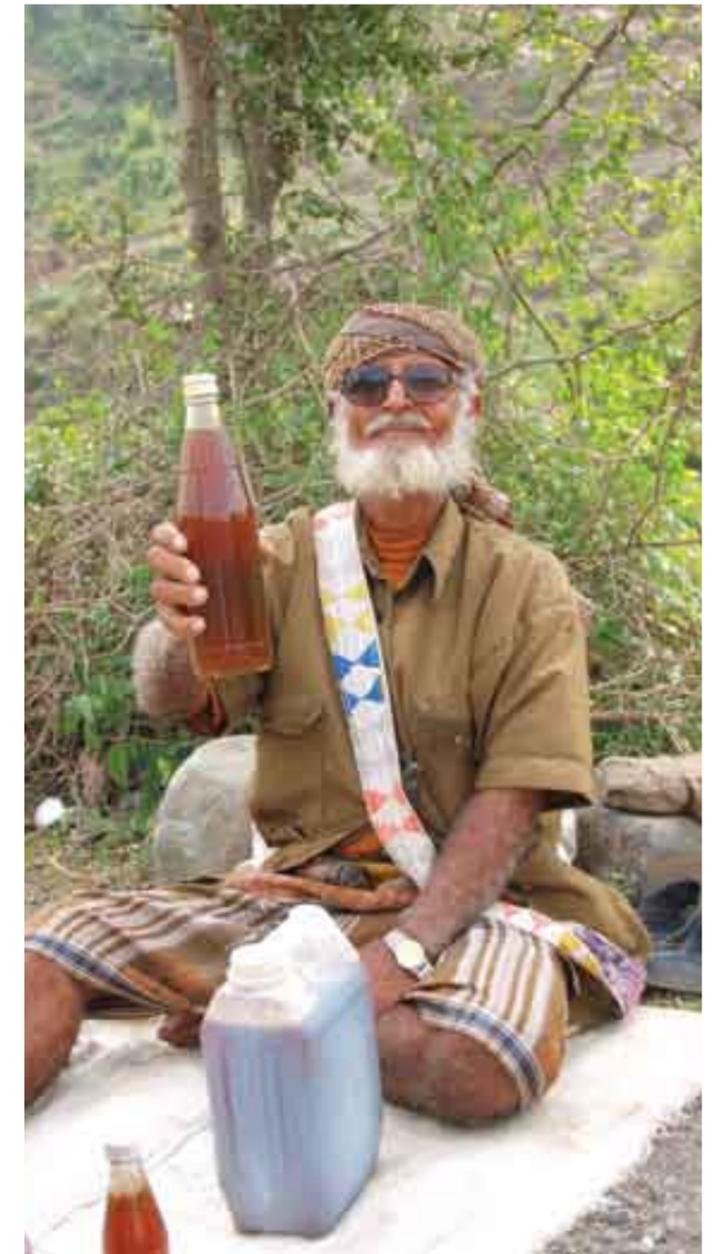


■ Al-Umari Got it right: ‘if Yemen were to be united under one ruler, its importance Would increase and its position among the eminent nation Would be strengthened.’ The two former states of Yemen were unified in 1990.

secluded dells on the island of Socotra (I envy her most her description of a tribal shaykh in the Wadi Bin Ali as a very elastic and naked sovereign. Yemen is inexhaustibly photogenic. An American photographer, jaded by a surfeit of supermodels, told me that in it he had at last found the Holy Grail of photography. But Yemen is also the victim of its own photo-genius. The alluring images of veils and daggers, guns and qat, dished out ad

nauseam, have become the ocular equivalent of fast food. Gobble up by picture editors and regurgitated in the press, they tend to nourish a conception of the place as introverted, indolent and threatening. The pictorial clichés are certainly here; but many of the inferences drawn from them by journalists on two-day sprints bear about as much relation to the real Yemen as Disney’s Aladdin does to the real Baghdad. Part of the importance of a book like this is to show

that the visual feast is of far greater subtlety and complexity. Sarah Seagriff’s text an elegant excursion around the most topographically diverse part of the Arab World and the fountain-head of its culture. Early on she puts her finger on a characteristic of Yemen: the individualism of its people. It is perhaps the surest thread to follow through the Daedalian twists of the country’s history.



Other visitors have remarked it. Seventy years ago, for instance, the Syrian traveler Nazih al-Azm wrote: ‘ the Yemenis are, to a man, free in their convictions and independent in their opinions. They do not abide injustice, neither will they bow to indignity or servility; Like the fly of prophetic tradition that contains infection in one wing and cure in the other, this irrepressible independence is Yemen’s bane and its balm. It creates tensions between state control and tribal freedoms, and yet it has seen off

the British and the Ottomans (a Turkish commander of the nineteenth century said that with a thousand men of al-Haymah-forebears of my host on the mountain-he could take the whole of Europe). It does not suffer authority gladly; but it has also never suffered authoritarianism, and it never will. Prediction- apart from that last phrase- are probably pointless. But perhaps the fourteenth-century Egyptian writer al-Umari Got it right: ‘if Yemen were to be united under one ruler,

its importance Would increase and its position among the eminent nation Would be strengthened.’ The two former states of Yemen were unified in 1990. More recently the country has solved its longstanding border dispute with Saudi Arabia. Its population is the most numerous and the most energetic in the Arabian peninsula. Its economy is stabilizing, and in Aden it has the finest port in the Indian ocean. Yemen’s future may well be as glittering as its landscape, and as full of surprises.