

Yemen Diary

Allen J. Fromherz

Sun, 21 Jul 2002

I am just back from the Hadramawt, a large oasis in the eastern Yemen desert. I went with a group of Spanish students (I am learning just as much Spanish as Arabic!). We were required to have a military escort to protect us from potentially rebellious tribal groups. It was all fairly safe, however, and we did not run into any major incidents. We even met some friendly bedouin when we stopped for traditional Yemenese tea (the best!) at a refueling station.

On the way to Hadramawt we visited the legendary ruins of the “Queen of Sheba” (Bilqis in Arabic), a sun temple and a moon temple built by the Sabeans thousands of years ago. Nobody really knows why they were built or if there even was a Queen of Sheba. The Italians who were excavating were driven out by some angry Mar’ib residents who, probably with some reason, did not understand the purpose of the excavation and did not want their legendary temples shipped away or destroyed.

We also saw the ruins of Mar’ib, an incredibly old trading center (again, nobody knows how old, it may even be as old as Jericho, 9000 BC). There were no other tourists, just us and a few Yemenese children playing with improvised toys among the ancient ruins.

The US Embassy representative I met at the airport said I would not be able to make it out of Sana’a because of the roadblocks and concern over the kidnapping of tourists. I think my Jordanian-American friend, Akil, and I may have been the only Americans outside of Aden or Sana’a.

The desert was a very stereotypical scene. There were, indeed, lines of camels slowly moving across vast expanses of rolling dunes. There was no sign of green or life for hundreds of kilometers. At one point we were only 30 km from Saudi Arabia and saw a large oil refinery. It was beyond incredibly hot. By noon, opening the jeep windows did not help but only blasted baking air and sand onto our faces. We travelled for some 8 hours in the heat. Fortunately for us, a new road had just been built and there were military checkpoints every 10 KM with contact to the outside world. We also had a soldier with a rifle in the backseat of every jeep. The new paved road was part of a program to control rebellious desert groups and secure transport between Sana’a and the Hadramawt.

We sometimes saw a random tour bus. But these were all filled with citizens of other Muslim countries: Saudis, Jordanians, perhaps coming to Yemen to see their ancestral homes. After 9\11 the Yemen government has tried to encourage tourism from other Muslim countries.

Although entering the oasis of Hadramawt did not relieve the heat, it did relieve the harsh sense of lifelessness from the desert. There were palms, qat and date fields. Women in full back covering and an incredibly tall, woven hat were cutting the crops and loading them onto donkey carts. Except for my Spanish friends, and girls under 16, I did not see any women without full covering. Goats and goatherds roamed everywhere, from the middle of the city of Shibam to a isolated sufi saint shrine on the edge of the oasis.

The city of Shibam rises some seven or eight stories like a fortress from the surrounding fields. Instead of building walls and houses within the walls, the houses of Shibam are the walls of Shibam. There is only one bab al Shibam (gate into Shibam), a small, narrow path hidden on the corner of the city and an opening for carts. Although Shibam looks like a perfect, rectangular box from the outside, the streets inside are not nearly as geometrical. Many times I found myself walking in circles, running into dead ends, swearing I had not seen a road before only to discover I was just there two turns ago. The high walls of the houses and the random arrangement of the streets leave you lost but also provide, I think, a level of private space for the inhabitants in such closely built quarters. I felt we were being watched; at one point I looked up and saw the shutters of ornately-carved, wooden shutters closed with a “whap.” On a vantage point outside of the city I met some children who were supposed to be at mosque (it was Friday after all!) but were instead playing in the hills. One boy took me on a tour of an abandoned house built high on the hill. There were assembly rooms with ornately carved wooden pillars, one for men and one for women. There was a kitchen and the remnants of an oven.

We also saw the cities of Tarim and Sayyun, famed for its Salafi school and apparently a hideout for al-Qaeda, training ground for John Walker. Most of the mosques and madrasas, however, were sufi (mystic) or even advocated a moderate, Indonesian form of Islam. A Spanish friend of mine was given a pile a pamphlets discussing the meaning of Islamic modernism and the importance of recognizing the relative opinions of many.

I learned that John Walker actually attended the Yemen Language Center. He apparently left within weeks because they refuse to teach Islam here and the classes are mixed between men and women. He may have left Yemen for Afghanistan disappointed that there were few who supported his narrow-minded, strictly ritualistic interpretation of religion.

I also just started yesterday teaching English in the evening to some Somali refugees at a UNHCR center. I am using the Rassias method! They are all very eager students.

Sat. 27 July 2002

I met a wonderful friend in the old city near the mosque built in 630 (yes, the time of the Prophet). He was extremely friendly and no matter how insistent I was, he would not let me buy anything. He even invited me to his friend's wedding. (I was slightly overwhelmed by his hospitality towards me, a complete stranger.)

We were lost on the way to the wedding and could only find the house where the women of the bride were having their celebrations. I asked why we could not simply ask a woman at the door where the men's party was. My friend was quite surprised I would even think such a thing. It would be shameful to them for us to approach the bride's party. (Come to think of it, I might be slightly unwilling to ask the bride's party at a USA wedding too!)

The groom's party was outside on a dirt road. There were lights everywhere. There were only men and small children. You could see the groom's female relatives peeking from the windows of a nearby house. The groom was elaborately dressed with wreaths of white bean flowers, red velvet and a gold sword. A metal tree of candles was placed in front of him as well as two vases with cedar bows. A small boy about 6 or 7 years had memorized the entire one-and-a half hour traditional Yemenese wedding chant and was blasting his voice over speakers. Next there was dancing with jambiahs (the knife that most respectable Yemen men wear around their waist) Then we went to the mafraj (an ornately decorated sitting room) to congratulate the groom. We left only because the power went out!

I learned from my friend that this was quite a traditional wedding arrangement. The groom did not even have the chance to see his bride before the wedding (she wore the burkha) but relied on the judgement of his mother and sisters to make certain she looked respectable.

I may be going to Soqatra, a virtually unvisited island off the south coast of Yemen.

Mon. 29 July 2002

A few days ago I had an amazing experience visiting the Women's National Committee center in Yemen.

I went with a group of Spanish students. I had to juggle translating between Arabic, Spanish and English!

We were given a tour of the center and an opportunity to speak with the Vice Chair and the Chairwoman, Rashida Ali Al-Hamdani. We discussed the relationship between women's rights and the Qur'an, the role of women in a traditional Islamic society, the issue of maintaining traditional "family values" and women in the workplace. Except for tourists (*ajnabyoon bi arabiyya*), I have not seen a single woman on the streets not wearing the full burkha, often covering the eyes. Unlike

Egypt or Jordan where the burkha and hijab may be a statement of identity or even fashion (I saw a teenage girl on Air Jordan wearing a “Calvin Klein” hijab!), the burkha in Yemen is essentially a social requirement.

Interestingly, Rashida said that when Yemen sends women to international conferences in Europe or America, they do not want the women wearing the burkha or even the hijab. The government feels the best way to project an image of “modernity” is to provide a picture of women in Yemen that does not really exist.

Rashida is quite a strong and unique woman. Her husband stays at home in another city, raises the children and does the chores. He does not want her to work but she does her job anyway!

Her organization drafted and lobbied for new laws in the parliament giving women better rights with divorce and domestic violence. A man can still kill his wife after seeing her in bed with another man and only get a one year sentence. A woman used to get a life sentence or death for killing her husband in adultery (because he may have been with another one of his wives?) but this has now changed because of Rashida’s organization.

In reality, these legal improvements are only small steps. In some ways the Women’s National Committee may seem powerless and superficial. Dealing with an ancient and mainly masculine interpretation of the *sharia* (the Muslim religious upon which the Yemen constitution is based) has been a major problem. An improvement in women’s rights is sometimes interpreted as a threat to the entire Islamic tradition. More and more women, however, are becoming *qadis* and interpreters of Islamic law. Rashida hopes these women will provide a new view of how Islam can be applied to modern society.

(to be continued...check back weekly for additional installments)

Allen Fromherz is a 2002 honors graduate of Dartmouth College. He is a student of Islamic history and will be spending the next year in Morocco on a Fulbright.

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