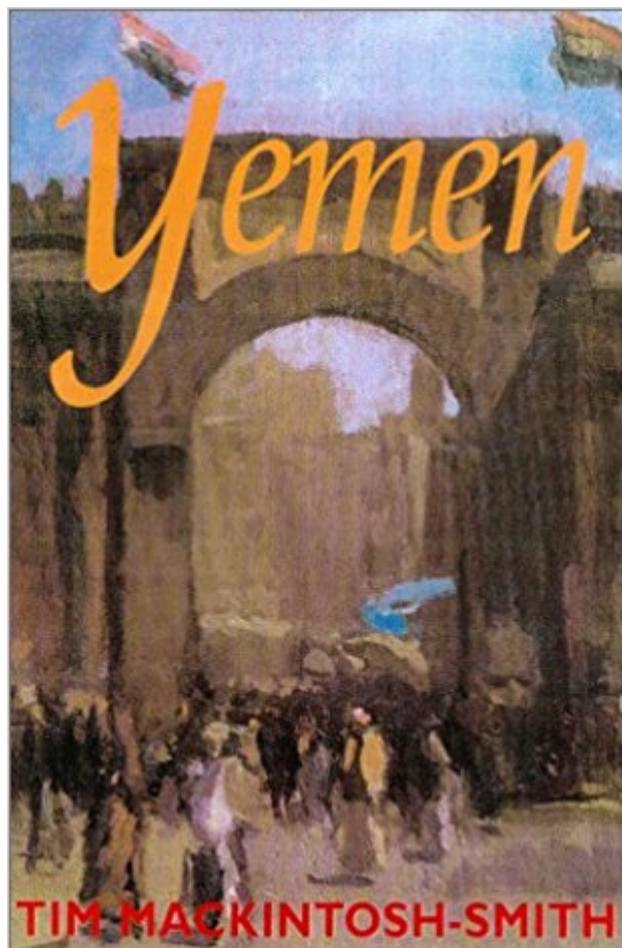


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Yemen



Synopsis

Arguably the most fascinating and least understood country in the Arab world, Yemen has a way of attracting comment that ranges from the superficial to the wildly fantastic. A country long regarded by classical geographers as a fabulous land where flying serpents guarded sacred incense groves, while medieval Arab visitors told tales of disappearing islands and menstruating mountains. Our current ideas of this country at the southern tip of the Arabian Peninsula have been hijacked by images of the terrorist strongholds, drone attacks, and diplomatic tensions. But, as Mackintosh-Smith reminds us in this newly updated book, there is another Arabia. Yemen may be a part of Arabia, but it is like no place on earth.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Englishman Tim Mackintosh-Smith was studying Arabic at Oxford when he visited Yemen, a forgotten country at the heel of the Arabian peninsula, and became obsessed with the place and its language. He's lived there since 1982, and this book--marketed as travel writing but more a blend of personal memoir and national history--is the result. There are certainly travel episodes, such as a trip to the remote island of Susqatra where the Gulf of Aden meets the Indian Ocean. Yet Yemen is more the product of a man gone native than a visitor with an itinerary. Indeed, Mackintosh-Smith offers a forthright defense of the country's lotus-like drug culture, which centers on qat, a leaf that produces a narcotic effect when chewed. "We qat chewers, if we are to believe everything that is said about us, are at best profligates, at worst irretrievable sinners," he writes. Although international health officials have warned against the drug, Mackintosh-Smith assures us this is all

"quasi-scientific poppycock." The leaf, he says, helps its users to "think, work, and study." Yemen is surely an exotic land, and one of its charms--fully revealed in Mackintosh-Smith's digressive prose--is the way it has remained quaintly Arabic and seemingly immune to the modern forces transforming its neighbors. Well-received upon its initial publication in the United Kingdom, Yemen may come to be recognized as a small classic. --John J. Miller

Against the advice of his Arabic teacher ("Why don't you go somewhere respectable?"), Mackintosh-Smith decided to go to Yemen in 1982 and has "been there ever since." As a result, this is no ordinary travelogue, but an impressionistic exploration of a non-Western land by an experienced observer. A latter-day Lawrence of Arabia without the military exploits, the author has taken up many of the customs of his adoptive land: he's become addicted to qat, a plant that is chewed, often in groups, for its calming effects. The book, a bestseller in Britain, takes the reader on Mackintosh-Smith's travels throughout this south Arabian land, introducing the reader to both wizened Yemenis and the perils of roughing it--even in the late 20th century--throughout a mainly unexplored land. Sleepless nights on rocky inclines mix with desert heat and scorpions on one trip through the countryside, while an odd visit to a Yemeni dancing club highlights his trip to the city of Aden. An engaging writer with a journalist's eye for detail, Mackintosh-Smith never loses his sense of humor: his description of his visit to an English class, where the teacher asks the students, "How many noses does Professor Tim have?" is sidesplitting. The book offers an opportunity for dedicated armchair travelers to delight in a land few Westerners will actually visit. One warning: the author intersperses some history and politics among his travels, but the lay reader is advised to keep a reference source handy. Etchings by Martin Yeoman. (Jan.) Copyright 1999 Reed Business Information, Inc.

was used for a school report and had some good info in it

Not a bad book really, rather light and amusing, and perfect for romantics who want to project an image of exoticism on Yemen. In classic Orientalist fashion, it celebrates a European perspective on the Arab world, one which insists that its culture is best when it is at its supposedly "traditional" - the antipode to (and, I would speculate, escape from) European civilization. The author is uncomfortable with the proudly multi-cultural traditions of Aden, positively angry with women in Yemen who challenge its social norms, and tied into the idea that Yemen is an unchanging paradise. Indeed, the essentialism of his portrait is summarized in this sentence: Yemen's 1,200

mile coast is "a tacked on sort of place. The essence of Yemen is here diluted in the ebb and flow of outsiders. If I treat the coast as an afterthought, I admit to prejudice." Having spent considerable time in Yemen, I certainly agree that Yemen is a charming and wonderful place, but am perhaps uncomfortable with the way the author ignores its changing political and social currents in favor of a search for an eternal essence. Such an essence doesn't exist except in the imagination and projections of Europeans. An amusing book, but ultimately Yemen is a far, far more complex, challenging place than the author is willing to confront. But, as light escapism, for fans of travel books it is reasonably entertaining.

This is a travelogue of a Brit's visit to and exploration of Yemen. The author paints a beautiful and romantic picture of Yemen with text that is both easy and enjoyable to read. I knew virtually nothing about Yemen before reading this book, and I purchased it from on a whim. I was not disappointed. Although there is some discussion of history and politics in this book, the author's primary emphasis is describing the scenery, the people, and the culture that he has experienced on his travels. If the author's goal was to convey a bit of the complexity of Yemeni culture, some of the natural beauty of the Yemeni landscape to a Western audience, and a part of the rich history of Yemen, he has succeeded. I found the author's description of a sailing trip to Suqutra, an island off the coast of Yemen, to be particularly evocative. The 'ritual' of qat was also surprising and interesting. I would recommend this book to anyone wanting to learn about Yemen from a Westerner's viewpoint, particularly if one looking for an entertaining, not scholarly, account. Some of the less enthusiastic reviews of this book state that the account is too idealistic. This is probably a fair criticism, but I do not view this as a drawback in this type of book.

This work is outside the usual parameters of my taste in reading, but a stretch is good for everyone. I want to thank the author, first, for displacing the first image that comes to mind when I hear the word "Yemen": the desperately fictitious destination picked by Chandler as he tries to escape Janis on Friends. This is a wonderfully rounded depiction of a culture that somehow manages to exist in the past as well as the present. I especially enjoyed the visit to the isle of Susqatra. Mr. MacKintosh-Smith uses his insider/outsider status to great effect, and his mastery of observation and fluid description takes the reader on a journey of discovery. Bravo.

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