



Our man in the field, Tim Lyddiatt



Before spending a week in Yemen, all I knew about the place was that seven years ago, 17 US service men were killed aboard the USS Cole following an Al-Qaeda attack and that Yemeni men spent their time chewing qat. That all changed after six days there.

Memories of Yemen



This shining white mosque is half way up a mountain in the middle of nowhere. The architecture reminds one of Greece. This is a comparatively large mosque for the village it is in and our guide Saleh noted that villages tend to build a mosque before a school. Just after taking this photo, a man with wild staring eyes and rag-taggle hair appeared, did a little dance whilst reciting from the Qur'an and disappeared again without another word - proving the point that in fact, people are the same the world over ■

Old Sana'a is one of three UNESCO World Heritage sites in Yemen. In the fading light and slow fat rain as we approached, it was difficult to make out more than outlines and the city looked like it was made of children's building blocks.

Close up and in daylight, Sana'a still resembles a city made of wooden blocks, each peppered with stained glass and brightly painted doors. It is said the world's first skyscrapers were in Yemen and it is not uncommon to see buildings of four, five and even six stories. The tradition is that a new floor is simply added as the family grows ■

Some things you cannot capture on film. Some things can live only in the memories of those that were there. I will never forget Yemen; the trip was one of those journeys where everything just clicks into place and you seem to move effortlessly from one perfect moment to the next in a stream of vivid colour, unusual sounds and the pure joy of discovery. The people that shared this journey have been changed somehow, changed by Yemen.

Yemen is a wondrous place filled with

warm, welcoming people who will invite you into their homes and make you one of them. It is noisy, a bit grubby round the edges and chaotic. It is one of the last places on earth where real adventure feels possible. Yemen is not darkest Africa nor the wilds of Indonesia. You do not sleep in tents, there are five star hotels.

Encouraging visitors to Yemen is a guilty pleasure: what if a million more visitors tear the soul from Yemen as has happened to countries all across the

world? Yet it cannot be missed. Time must be spent with Yemen's people and with her fish-eyed vistas atop her rugged mountains. It is not perfect but it is an awesome experience that challenges our modern travel expectations. The absence of conventional comforts is Yemen's greatest gift, providing a mirror in which any traveller who cares to look, will clearly see a reflection of who they really are ■

We flew with Yemenia, Yemen's national airline. There are numerous flights every week from Bahrain to Yemen's major cities. See www.yemenia.com for details.

We stayed at various hotels in Yemen, all owned by the Accor chain. The Sofitel in Taiz (pictured) sits atop a hill on the edge of the city and is by far the most beautiful. Its staff are friendly and courteous and the food stands out as a highlight. Ask them to do you the spicy, stone baked fish, it is not of this earth! See www.accoryemen.com for details.

Our guides through Yemen came courtesy of Universal Touring Company. They provided an expert in Saeed who had forgotten more of Yemen's history and culture than I will ever know. Three sturdy Landcruisers, replete with Yemeni drivers who navigated us through Yemen's treacherous mountain passes and tracks, never needing to consult a map. See www.utcyemen.com for further details ■



The stairs inside the Rock Palace at Wadi Dahar keep going up and up. It must be on eleven or twelve levels. On each level there are tiny rooms that were variously used as lounges or bedrooms, even a meditation and prayer room. There were four or five different kitchens, each one used to prepare different foods. In corners and nooks, there were cool spaces to hang and store meat. On the roof, the women servants used to do the laundry. As with all Yemeni houses, they are kept cool by building windows without glass. The Rock palace was a summer house for the Emir in the thirties and is now a museum ■

In the Suqs, a sea of colour washes over you at every corner. I love the vibrancy of commerce in markets and the sense that here is where a city goes to buy the things it needs, the very substance of life. Bab al Yemen takes this energy to another level. Partly it is the colours of the spices and the fabrics and fresh produce - bananas, oranges, potatoes and tomatoes, all grown in Yemen. On sale are all the colours of the rainbow. Down winding ginnels, silversmiths and tailors, wood workers and tanners ply their trade in tumble down shops. Haggling is expected and often a spectator sport ■





Yemen is a nation of mountainous farmland. Over the past 2,000 years terraces have been cut into the mountains to grow crops and preserve precious top soil. With peaks as high as three thousand metres, Yemen's mountain ranges are comparable to the Alps but unlike Mont Blanc, snow never falls at their summits. During the rainy season, flood waters cascade down the mountains into the valleys causing long dry riverbeds to flood, which is why rural Yemeni houses are always built slightly up from the old river banks.

To prevent the flooding in Sana'a UNESCO built new roads 12 years ago. The roads are walled and channel the floodwaters through the centre of the city away from the 700 year old houses ■

"There are no guns in Yemen." So said Saleh Farajat of Accor hotels on our first day there. "Ten years ago, maybe. But now only security forces are allowed to carry guns." I saw this man in a small village where we had stopped for lunch. He told us a story about a wedding and some German tourists. They had stopped in the village too, at the same time as a wedding. After the ceremony, following tradition, all the men started firing the guns in the air and shouting. He said, 'I have never seen people drive away so quickly, they thought it was the civil war' ■



In the Sunday market outside Yemen's old capital, Taiz, this small boy was offering his goat for sale. His sole goat is one amongst older men's herds of goats, cows and camels for sale along with women's bushels of spices, cheeses and wicker baskets. He is determined to get the best price. The goat symbolises his maturity. It belongs to him, not his father or uncle, but the monies will go into the home; he is a provider. However, past the age of twelve, he will be a very rare thing indeed in Yemen if his tiny income isn't spent entirely on qat just like 95 percent of the male population. Unemployment in Yemen is firmly blamed on qat. It is the cause of Yemen's economic crisis and the escape from it. Arguably, the economy would literally stop without it because the little that Yemeni's do earn - Ethiopians and Eritreans earn more - is spent on this low level narcotic with amphetamine qualities. Because there is qat, people work. I hope the boy sold his goat and I hope that he loves the thrill of commerce more than he loves qat because otherwise, when I return there, I will find him not scurrying around a market but slumped on steps chewing qat like everyone else. And Yemen will not have moved on ■

The most obvious difference between Yemen and the rest of the world are the clothes worn. Jambiya's are 10-inch curved daggers that every man - and boy - wears around his waist on beautifully crafted colourful belts. They seemed savage somehow, violent, which was at odds with what I understood about the Yemeni people who were always smiling and trying out their English with 'welcome' and 'helloo'. The people are more colourfully dressed in Yemen. You do see black abayat and white thobes but they are like punctuation marks in a paragraph of colour. They also all loved to have their photo taken! ■

