

Cool for Qat

A Yemeni Journey: Two Countries, Two Times

Peter Mortimer



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COOL FOR QAT

A Yemeni Journey: Two Countries, Two
Times

Peter Mortimer



EDINBURGH AND LONDON

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1

The Place Never Visited and the Elusive Mr Hani

HARDLY anyone goes to Yemen. It's not on the hippy trail. There's not a hint of its becoming a stag-night venue. Club 18-30 never gave it a thought. And those who might vaguely think of paying a visit are soon warned off. Many people don't even know where the country is.

Take out an atlas, poke around the Arabian Peninsula and there it is, the bottom ball in the bag, beneath Saudi Arabia. The Red Sea borders it to the west, and to the south is the Gulf of Aden, leading into the Indian Ocean. Yemen's extreme south-west edge is sniffing at Africa, almost making it into Ethiopia or Somalia.

You might be embarrassed if you were asked to name the capital (I know I was). Considering this is probably the oldest city in the world and has architecture unlike any you've ever seen, our ignorance might seem surprising. The capital is San'a.

It's possible you've heard of the port of Aden. This is because, for almost a century and a half, this city in the southern part of Yemen was a British Protectorate. The Brits have been gone for 38 years, but you'll still find an imposing statue of Queen Victoria (is there any other type?) in Steamer Point park, and a portrait of the Queen still hangs in the foyer of the Crescent Hotel (which the British built).

To visit Yemen might need some determination on your part. The official British Government policy is to dissuade all but the most vital travel there. You'll be told Yemen is a dangerous country and a haunt of al-Qaeda supporters. They will quote statistics - in the last ten years more than two hundred Westerners have been kidnapped and held to ransom. Usually, however, this has not been to further the Islamic domination of the globe, but to cater to more specific local needs, like the building of a village school or a new road. Virtually all of the hostages were released unharmed. The authorities will also stress that in no circumstances should foreigners stray from the major cities.

Another potential obstacle is getting a visa. Some people strike lucky and are issued one straight away. Others, like me, battle for more than five months. There is also the catch-22 that you cannot apply for your visa without first booking your airline ticket. So you buy your ticket three months ahead of your flight, send it to the embassy along with your application and fee, and every week ring up to find if there is any progress, which in my case there wasn't.

But why was I going to Yemen anyway? I'd been commissioned to write a play for the Customs House theatre in South Shields, Tyneside, based around the Yemeni seamen's riots in that town in 1930. Customs House director Ray Spencer knew I'd been grappling with another play based loosely on the riots on the Meadowell Council Estate in North Shields in 1991. His idea was two Tyneside riots, two plays separated by one river, sixty-one years and a huge cultural divide, but united by one dramatist, one region. After its long and painful gestation the Meadowell play *Chain* was produced at The Customs House in 2004 in a Cloud Nine production.

If you've never heard of these Yemeni riots, you're in good company, both in South Shields and Yemen - and the rest of the world. I live just across the river from South Shields and they were new to me. It is forgotten history. Yet it was quite

dramatic stuff: bloodshed, stabbings and the eventual deportation of more than 20 Yemeni seamen.

It wasn't a theatre piece that I was keen to tackle. I'd written 19 plays but they tended to be either based on contemporary life or fantasy; issue-based theatre was a pretty curdling concept for me. My Meadowell play was proving a nightmare. Why should this be any different? Besides, we were talking about an incident that happened 75 years ago, involving a culture (Arabic) about which I knew very little, set in a town I didn't live in. And here we are at a time when relations between the indigenous British and the Muslim community, post 9/11, are especially sensitive. My instinct was that some members of various ethnic communities might just shout, 'Clear off, whitey,' when they heard about my play. Come to that, quite a few of them did.

And, anyway, if I was going to write the play, shouldn't I make some efforts to visit Yemen? Not for any specific programme of action, just to be there and get some sense of the place. And maybe find some historical trace of those young seamen who made the long and no doubt daunting journey to Tyneside? I knew I wasn't hot on research as a tool of my playwriting trade; it tended to get in the way of the imagination. And the fewer reference books the better. That was my excuse, anyway, but it probably wouldn't wash here, and I knew what I needed to do was get off my arse and visit the country.

Luckily the Arts Council was sympathetic to this idea and gave me a travel award. The Yemeni authorities weren't quite as understanding. Over the course of several months, I struck up an interesting telephone relationship with a Mr Hani, an official of the Yemeni Embassy in London. He had my airline ticket and passport; I had only my optimism. I would ring Mr Hani on a weekly basis, and our conversations would go something like this:

'Hello, Mr Hani, Peter Mortimer here.'

'Ah, Mr Mortimer, and how are you?'

'I'm very well, thank you. You too, I hope?'

'Yes, thank you.'

'I wondered . . . was there any news of my visa yet?'

'No news, no.'

'Because, you see, Mr Hani, it's been more than three months now, and in fact the date on my airline ticket has now passed, so I'm having to rearrange everything this end, and it is quite inconvenient not having a clue as to when I can travel.'

'Yes, I see.'

'So, I just wondered, do you have any idea when the visa will come through?'

'I don't unfortunately, no.'

'Is there anything at all you can tell me, Mr Hani?'

'No, there isn't. You could try next week, Mr Mortimer. Maybe then.'

'Thank you, Mr Hani.'

'Thank you, Mr Mortimer.'

And one more week would pass, with a similar conversation once again taking place, the end product being the same. I contacted the British Embassy in San'a. I contacted the Foreign Office in the UK and the Ministry of Culture in Yemen. At this juncture I knew only one native Yemeni, and he had made efforts on my behalf too. But none of this made any difference.

I suppose many authors get used to this. Governments are often wary of writers, a compliment probably few of us deserve and in a perverse way one that makes us feel important. I remembered this from my times in the old Soviet Union, where writers were strictly controlled. I was naturally aghast, but was also aware of what Marcuse called 'repressive tolerance' in the West, where the authorities didn't give a toss what we writers did because it made no difference anyway.

I remembered having a similar experience when applying for a visa to Nigeria. Eventually, on the day of my flight, I'd wandered desperately through the corridors of the Nigerian Embassy in London with my bit of paper, getting pushed from functionary to functionary like some bewildered Kafka character. I failed to get the visa and ended up catching a flight to Kenya instead for reasons I've never fully understood. Only later did I realise that in such a situation a greased palm oils almost all Nigerian administrative wheels.

Palm greasing was not the issue with the Yemeni Embassy. According to a friend of mine, Tony Milroy, the problems may indeed have involved my being a writer, but also the fact that my letter of application was typed on paper with the letterhead IRON Press, which I edit. 'They would see the word 'press' and think you were a journalist,' he said. 'That might make them very wary.'

Tony was a great support to me prior to my visit. His agricultural charity, Arid Lands, based in Hebden Bridge in West Yorkshire, has worked in Yemen for 20 years. 'I know it's frustrating, but the visa will arrive in due course. Meantime, the absolutely worst thing you could possibly do is to lose your temper. In Yemen losing your temper is appalling behaviour. It would prove disastrous.'

A country where people never lose their tempers? At such moments you felt your interest quicken.

* * *

South Shields can boast the oldest Muslim community in the UK, its first members arriving as long ago as 1860, though the major influx came at the start of the twentieth century, a time when the British merchant navy was expanding rapidly and the cheap, reliable (and sober) workforce provided by the Yemenis and other Arabs was much sought after. At their height the number of Arab seamen in South Shields numbered 2,000, a hefty number for a small port.

Since Aden was a British Protectorate, it was an obvious place to recruit. Young men would pour down from the mountain villages and make their way to the southern port, where sometimes they were able to claim British citizenship, if they could prove they were born there, and sometimes not (having a birth certificate in Yemen at that time was a bit hit-and-miss). It didn't always matter, since bribery wasn't uncommon (euphemistically known as 'the right to coffee'). The men would then make their way to Britain, sometimes directly, sometimes via France, working the ships. They came to Liverpool, Cardiff and South Shields because that was where the work on the boats was, and they were snapped up. Only young men came, and often they knew no English and little about the alien culture which they were about to enter.

In South Shields, they settled in the West and East Holborn areas, which run alongside the River Tyne, and Laygate, just off the river to the south. The early settlers had lodged in the town's existing boarding houses, but their different tastes, lack of English and calls to prayer led to tensions and conflicts. Thus a network of Arab boarding-house keepers slowly evolved. The older, more established Yemenis set up their own boarding houses and often acted *in loco parentis* for the young seamen, sheltering and protecting them, and financing them when they had no money. It wasn't all altruistic, of course, and there was a good deal of competition between the boarding houses.

Many of the seamen intermarried - South Shields is the only part of Tyneside to boast a large Arab population; Newcastle was and remains probably the most alarmingly white big city in England - and in 2004 there were few first-generation Yemenis left in South Shields. The old men often met up in the town's only surviving boarding house in Brunswick Street.

The original mosque was demolished and in 1971 replaced by a new one, the Al Azhar mosque in Laygate,

next to which stands a Muslim school, where children learn the Koran. In 1977 the legendary boxer Muhammad Ali visited the mosque to bless his own marriage and that of a local Muslim. I was a journalist at the time and was sent to interview him. I met the great man in the lift for 15 seconds after kicking my heels all day in the hotel foyer. The interview went like this:

‘So, how do you like Tyneside, Muhammad?’

‘Tyneside’s OK.’

‘Anything special you’d like to do while you’re here?’

‘Nope.’

By which time the lift had arrived at the ground floor and the in-depth interview was at an end.

Intermarriages produced some unusual hybrid names, such as Mohammed McCabe, and in the last 60 years or so relations between the two cultures have been exemplary, while elsewhere in the country things have become unsettled. The blot on the landscape was the 1930 riot (and an earlier smaller riot in 1919). Many people in Shields viewed it with shame, which may explain why the town’s communities later managed to coexist so peacefully.

The whole Yemeni project had a long gestation, during most of which I was in a state of some anxiety at what I’d taken on. Like most people in the Western world, I knew little about Arabic nations or Muslim societies. A state of ignorance was a good starting point for Socrates, less so probably for me. So, with the cooperation of (and funding from) The Customs House, I ran some sessions with Muslim women (a mixed-sex session wasn’t feasible). These were officially described as ‘Writing Workshops’, but several of the women had limited English and my Arabic was non-existent, so we just tended to sit around, chat about all manner of things, drink tea and gobble down the wondrous Arabic cakes and biscuits which they often brought with them. I was quite happy with this, and everyone else seemed to be too. None of the women was born in Yemen;

they were from Saudi Arabia, Iran and Iraq. They often brought their children along, who were incredibly well behaved and polite, which contrasts sharply with the often sullen, disaffected behaviour of many white Britkids.

The Iraq War was being fought at the time and I listened to stories from the Baghdad women about their fears for their families, which were being affected by heavy coalition bombing, and I felt more ashamed of my own government and the USA than previously. Maybe it was the contact with these women, and their instinctive generosity and warmth that also fortified me when that loud voice boomed down from the sky, commanding, 'You must go to Yemen!' and I whispered back, 'All right.'

I had originally planned to visit Yemen in November 2003, but it wasn't until February 2004 that the eagerly awaited phone call from Mr Hani came. He had my visa. Honestly? Right there in his hand. Did I want him to post it? No, I would come to London and collect it personally (up to a million letters a day were going astray in the UK mail, according to statistics at the time, besides which Mr Hani had taken on legendary or mythical status, and I wanted to see him in the flesh).

This is how I imagined Mr Hani. He would be smartly dressed, like an important functionary. He would sit at a wide desk on the right of which would be a large IN-tray. This tray would contain several hundred visa applications. To his left would be two more trays: the large one would be entitled APPLICATION DENIED, while, the second, much smaller one would be labelled APPLICATION GRANTED. Every few days Mr Hani, slowly and deliberately, would take an application from the IN-tray and stamp it. Occasionally this would say APPLICATION GRANTED; more likely it would be APPLICATION DENIED. Meantime, lesser functionaries were placing more and more applications in the IN-tray.

This was not how it was. Nor was the embassy as I'd imagined it. I thought of embassies as places of glittering

chandeliers; elegant women tripping down giant staircases; ultra-polite men in dickie suits, sipping fluted glasses of champagne borne on silver trays by stiff-backed flunkies.

The embassy is on Cromwell Road. To get your visa, you are directed round the corner into a side street and what would once have been called the tradesmen's entrance. Inside was a totally featureless room in the style of a taxi depot, those places where the main concern is that waiting customers, who might be tanked up, have nothing at hand that can be used as a weapon. To be fair, the table and chair in the embassy room were not bolted to the floor. As in a taxi depot, there was a small window, and behind this stood a young Arab in open-necked shirt and jeans.

'I'd like to see Mr Hani, please,' I said.

'I am Mr Hani,' said the young man, who was as far removed from my fantasy as could be imagined. 'And you must be Mr Mortimer. Wait here one moment, please.'

Even at this stage I suspected a hitch, some complication. But no. Mr Hani reappeared with visa, passport and (out-of-date) air tickets. Several times I had wanted to strangle him. Now I shook his hand through the sliding-glass window. He had been an important part of my life for some months and had now removed all obstacles to my planned Yemeni visit. I was delighted. And a bit terrified.

What followed immediately may be of little significance, but I recount it anyway. My 'journey to Yemen' experience started long before I set foot in that country and helped in some ways to put into context modern Britain too. Maybe this is the main function of all travel - to make you see your home anew. I went to the national airline Yemenia's offices in Soho to change my flight, even though the official date had now passed. I'd kept them up to date with the ongoing saga, and they'd been highly sympathetic. They issued me with a new ticket, at no charge, and while the paperwork was being done, the two assistants and myself talked about the war, Western policies and global politics, and the two

fed me some interesting information and advice on Yemen itself.

From there I went directly to King's Cross, where I had to change the time of my return railway ticket to Newcastle. I stood in a long queue and eventually reached a stony-faced assistant who, without making eye contact, and with an expression as flexible as those on Mount Rushmore, informed me the alteration would cost £50, almost the price of the original ticket, even though I'd been told on the phone that the fee was £20. I wondered whether he would be inclined to discuss the political situation in Iraq with me, but there were already 15 people behind me in the queue and old stone face's body language suggested the conversation was now finished.

2

The Case of Women's Clothing and the Broken Windows of San'a

THERE were only two flights a week from Heathrow to San'a with Yemenia, and the plane was two-thirds empty. But more of that anon.

At this stage I was still thinking only in terms of the play, not a book. Usually I keep a diary when I travel – unlike at home. My pet theory is that a regular diary distorts a writer's normal creative process, which tells him or her what is and isn't important, and what should and shouldn't be sifted for future use. Diaries make no such selection. They are writing for non-writers. Yet when journeying in a strange land, a diary is like a travelling companion, a comfort blanket, something to turn to in the dark and lonely times when you are aching for the comforts and familiarities of home. So I kept one in Yemen. And it ran to 30,000 words. And before long I realised it was the framework of a book.

In my mind was a strong image of the young Yemeni seamen arriving in South Shields: a distant country, an alien culture and religion, no one to meet them, maybe not a word of the language. Reverse the situation and it was me arriving in San'a at 5 a.m. There should have been someone to meet me, but there wasn't. The journey from Tyneside to Yemen had already thrown up several mini crises, so when I finally set foot on Yemeni soil, I had less energy than a dead

battery. Here's the strange sequence of events which took me there.

Tony, of Arid Lands, had put me in touch with a Yemeni family in south London. I visited Abdul Kader al Chouafi, his wife Asia and their children in Dollis Hill. Abdul Kader had helped me with my visa. He had a small clothes shop in San'a called London Fashions, and his life was divided between the two countries. He would be in San'a on my arrival and had agreed to meet me off the plane. I'd only met the family in Britain once; they were very supportive and so when Asia asked me to take something over to Yemen for her husband, I agreed. It was, she told me, a suitcase full of women's clothes. Ah. Into my mind came the potential meeting between me and airport security.

'Is this your case, sir?' (Well, now you mention it, no.)

'Did you pack this case yourself, sir?' (If you put it that way, I didn't, no.)

'Are you fully aware of its contents? (Erm . . . not in so many words, no.)

'Did anyone ask you to carry anything in this case for them?' (It's funny you should say that . . .)

Thus my dilemma. On a Arabic airline too. I spent a few sleepless nights then rang Asia with a possible solution. I'd bring down an empty case of my own, repack all the women's clothing into it, and at least then I could answer three of the above questions truthfully. I was unsure whether I was being a suspicious, mistrusting Westerner or a gullible fool.

I'd also been asked to take some recording gear belonging to BBC Radio with me in case anything interesting presented itself. Producer Julian May agreed to give me a quick crash course at Portland Place on the morning of my flight on how to use it. Asia and I would also meet at the BBC for the ceremonial handing over of female garments.

I was staying in Putney with a writer friend Katie Campbell and her partner Mike the night before the flight. The plan for

next morning was to whizz into central London at about 10 a.m., sort out tape recorders and women's clothing, have lunch and return to Heathrow to check in around 4 p.m. for the early evening flight. It didn't quite turn out that way. The reason was to do with yet more women's clothing.

I realise now my own mental state at the time was one of anxiety at this leap into the unknown. Was I being rash to ignore warnings about Yemen? What did I expect to find there? Would I be kidnapped and ransomed, then hauled up before video cameras to plead for my life? I admit this kind of question was distracting me and caused the awful blunder that occurred in transit. Just before going to bed at midnight in Putney, I opened my suitcase and out spilled a load of skirts, blouses, tights and knickers. It was not my case. I had picked the wrong suitcase off the luggage belt at Heathrow after the flight from Newcastle. This case was virtually identical, but belonged to another. I had attached no address label on mine. Neither had this person. Somewhere in London (or, heaven forbid, on a connecting flight to somewhere else in the world) a woman had my jeans, socks, shirts, underpants, shaving gear, notebooks, contacts, background material. I was due to pick up one suitcase full of women's clothing the next day. Now here was another.

I would like to recommend at this juncture, as part of any corporate initiative test for rising executives, the following: lose your case on a Heathrow luggage belt and try to retrieve it within 12 hours. Ring the airport at midnight and you'll hear various recorded messages, plus some Vivaldi (who, through no fault of his own, has become the world's most cursed composer), and eventually, after dogged persistence, a live human being, who can only tell you that nothing can be done till 7 a.m. when staff come on duty.

You ring at 7 a.m. plus five seconds, after another sleepless night. More recordings, more music, a few adverts, 12 sets of user options and the announcement, 'Your call is

now parked.’ Again it is possible, in time, to locate a sentient being who can tell you the only thing to do is to go and track down the case at Heathrow, and no, sorry, he can’t just put the phone down and take a look himself. Why? Because he’s in Newcastle.

Of course he is. It is the same system and philosophy that has young men from Bombay ringing to sell you a new mobile phone on Tyneside.

I now had to travel once more to Heathrow, dragging all my luggage, in the rush hour. After which (should I be lucky enough to locate my case) I would need to travel back to central London, again dragging all my luggage, and soon afterwards back, for the third time in less than 16 hours, still dragging all my luggage, to Heathrow. This may have been something of a world record.

Locating my case at Heathrow took three hours. In those three hours I covered every inch of the airport, I pleaded with every official at every desk, sometimes twice, I picked up countless phones and dialled endless extensions to no avail. I pleaded, I cajoled, I grovelled. After two and a half hours I sat down on a seat in Terminal 3 and silently wept, wondering if slit wrists were more efficient than a bottle of aspirin. Ten minutes later I rallied myself, spotted what looked like a potentially sympathetic face at one of the many British Airways desks, and flung myself utterly, totally and unconditionally on his mercy.

‘Please, please, please, please don’t send me anywhere else, because people have been doing that for hours. Please, please, please, please try to locate my suitcase, because I fly to Yemen later today, and at present will have to spend my entire trip in a skirt and frilly blouse. I am by now almost insane. Please, please, please help me.’

I was probably raving, but the sympathetic face had compassion enough to spot a broken man, and after a short pause said, ‘You’d better come with me.’ And this real live human being, this person who understood utter despair and

frustration, led me through barriers, offices, checkpoints and red tape, then down a corridor to a small room, in which was a burly-looking man behind a counter, and at one side of the counter was my very own suitcase. I gave both my saviour and the burly-looking man a huge hug, which may have been misunderstood.

It was only much later that I paused to consider who was my unwilling partner in this, the female whose case I now plonked down in exchange. Maybe one day she will read this and think, 'The wally!'

And back to London, to Regent Street, where the intricacies of BBC recording equipment were sorted with Julian May, the repacking of women's clothing was sorted with Asia. She took a long look at me and said, 'Peter, you look very harassed. Yemen will make you less harassed.'

She was right. I needed to be away. At that moment Britain seemed highly unattractive. It was surly, unhelpful, aggressive, stressed out. It was full of disillusioned people going off to jobs they hated on choked roads and in crowded trains. Its inhabitants were drinking themselves senseless or swallowing bucket loads of anti-depressants to block out reality. And it hadn't won the World Cup in almost 40 years. Except at rugby. Which the Germans and Brazilians didn't play.

Then it was third time lucky, back to Heathrow. In the departure lounge, I bit into a Danish pastry. Sometimes that was what was needed. I looked on the bright side: my luggage was intact and (I hoped) on the plane, I had kept my nerve when interrogated about my suitcases and had blurted out nothing about women's clothing, and I wasn't going to Yemen totally cold. Abdul Kader would meet me off the plane and help me find a hotel till I sorted myself. I had a few email addresses and phone numbers of Yemeni writers given to me by Margaret Obank, editor of *Banipal*, a magazine which publishes Arab literature in translation. I'd tried contacting these writers by email already, but such

pre-planning was not the Yemeni way. 'You are very English,' came one reply. 'In Yemen, you arrive, *then* make contact.'

I tried not to worry. Tell people you're off to Yemen and they either say, 'Where's that?' or 'Isn't it very anti-Western?' Certainly Yemen (unlike several Arab states) had refused to give any backing to the USA in the Iraq War, which was the kind of thing Uncle Sam didn't forget quickly. So, although Yemen was a democracy, the wonders of which political system the States constantly trumpeted, the country got no support from America. Much of the Arab world is fiercely hostile towards America, but what about their poodles, us, in Britain? How would the Yemenis be with us?

We'd played a large part in the country's history - until they chucked us out of the South in 1967 (just as earlier they'd chucked the Turks out of the North). After the revolution they'd created a Marxist state, which hadn't worked. It's always a pity to socialist romantics such as myself that Marxist states just *didn't* seem to work; but, hey, who said it could *never* ever happen! Civil war had followed and in 1990 the North and South united to become one country: the Unified Republic of Yemen. There weren't that many republics in Arabia, but the union didn't attract much publicity in the West; whereas, in the same decade, the union of East and West Germany was trumpeted globally as a triumph - capitalists had rubbed their hands with glee and thousands of people had nicked a lump of the Berlin Wall.

* * *

It was at 5 p.m. and in a state of some exhaustion that I boarded the Yemeni plane. I had never previously been on a long, alcohol-free flight. There were no dedicated whisky drinkers. No laddos building small mountains of beer cans. No holidaymakers in bright shirts determined to get sozzled

by 25,000 feet (despite medical advice that on a plane, apart from jumping out of the door, heavy drinking was about the worst thing you could do). There were few passengers overall, and they seemed mainly Arabic, though I did spot a few Brits. The latter had that down-to-earth no-nonsense look that suggests contractors. Two hours into the flight, on accepting a glass of orange juice from the air steward, I uttered my first word of Arabic: *shukran*, which means thank you. It made me feel pretty good.

The 5 a.m. arrival in San'a was not ideal. The airport is not the largest in the world. Forget moving escalators, VIP lounges, long arterial journeys between plane and baggage reclaim. You get off the plane, walk across the tarmac, through passport control, and find the one conveyor belt for luggage. Friends and relatives who come to collect passengers simply park by the main entrance. When I arrived, a small area close by had been cordoned off and two men were already offering up their first prayers of the day in a make-do mosque, though a mosque could be anywhere, so maybe there was nothing make-do about it.

Dawn was still to arrive. I felt groggy, and only when I'd reclaimed my luggage did I realise my topcoat was missing. This was a tasty bit of gear, a present from my partner Kitty. I called it my Withnail coat, because Paul McGann wore a similar one in *Withnail and I*, a humorous, if dated, piece of decadent celluloid. I had no coat, and there was no Abdul Kader to meet me. I now faced my first Yemeni dilemma: did I stand by the main entrance waiting for my man, or did I go in search of my coat (which I might well have left on the plane) and possibly miss him altogether?

Two Yemeni soldiers were watching my indecision. You always see soldiers as soon as you arrive in a country. It's to remind you to behave yourself. The two had ill-fitting uniforms, though, which meant they didn't frighten me as much as normal soldiers. An airport worker walked past me, and I stopped him, attempting, without a word of Arabic, to

convey that my lost coat might still be in the luggage rack on that plane. This involved me in a display of charades. He nodded his head at my overstated mime movements and passed on.

Still the soldiers looked at me. Still no sign of Abdul Kader. Still no coat. I didn't find it at the airport. I didn't find it when I checked with the Yemenia offices the day after. I didn't find it when I searched Heathrow departure lounge on my return. To this day my Withnail coat lives elsewhere.

I did find Abdul Kader. Or he found me. Fifteen minutes later. He eyed me somewhat cagily. 'Peter?' he asked.

Yes, that was me. And I wondered if, for him, it was a case of all 'whiteys' looking the same. Then realised I had met him just the once, nine months back, when my appearance had been somewhat different.

I'd been advised by several people that my ageing hippy look might not go down well in Yemen and could create unnecessary obstacles for me. So I'd trimmed my long, thinning locks and cut back on the silver jewellery. This had the effect of rendering me more sober and mature-looking, but a man must suffer for his art. Even so, during my Yemeni travels I would receive a proposal of marriage, from a man. I was pleased to see Abdul Kader. For one thing it meant the curse of travelling with an unwanted case of women's clothing was about to be removed.

Abdul Kader had hired a car. So, where were we going? He shrugged his shoulders. We would find a hotel. He was a small, quiet man, whom I trusted implicitly on first meeting. We drove out of the airport and towards central San'a as the first glimmerings of dawn appeared in the sky. The city looked fairly ramshackle, and on many street corners groups of male Arabs stood waiting to be picked up for a day's work on nearby building sites. My other immediate impression was that every car from every scrapyard in the world had suddenly been reborn and plonked down in the streets of San'a. And drivers treated usual traffic etiquette with, shall

we say, a certain flexibility, so that traffic lights became not mandatory but a mere suggestion; a hint that slowing down or even stopping might be just one option among several.

I saw no one in Western dress. Nor did I see a single woman during this first journey. Many men wore the Arab headdress and male skirt known as the *futah*. Almost each one had a large, ornate belt into which was fastened a curved dagger I came to know as a *djambia*. In the UK this would be classed as an offensive weapon and sporting it on your belly would see you marched off by PC Plod. The *djambia* was purely decorative, and I was soon to learn that Yemeni males were not given to stabbing one another. Why bother wearing it then, I asked myself, but realised the same argument could be used in the West for the necktie, which itself could be an offensive weapon.

In my semi-comatose state, I vaguely recall driving past the historic gates of old San'a, which, had I been less exhausted, would have produced from me a string of superlatives rather than a weary yawn. I needed a bed. Abdul drove to three separate hotels, all of which seemed as half-asleep as myself. In each small hotel a group of Arab men was gathered in the foyer. At the first two Abdul Kader exchanged a few words in Arabic with someone, shook his head and we left. I was too tired to ask why. Hotel three was called Al-Shamiri Plaza and was just off Ali Abdul Mughli Street, a central, straight, wide thoroughfare in the middle of modern San'a.

The hotel cost £11 a night, which was roughly a week's wage for most Yemenis. The design was mainly Western functional with a strong emphasis on the featureless. It stood ten storeys high like a shoebox on its end, and it was difficult to believe a fully trained architect had designed it: you could have sketched it in two minutes on the back of an envelope.

I said goodbye to Abdul Kader. The lift took me up to my own small room on the fifth floor. It was on a corner, so had