**Elsewhere. Trips to the world’s least visited countries**

**Written by Gunnar Garfors  
  
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**Sample translation by Adam King**

**Foreword**

It wasn’t so long ago that I started travelling. In purely evolutionary terms, it’s not been very long since anyone started travelling for any reason other than to look for food. Nevertheless, just in the course of my lifetime I’ve witnessed big changes in travel habits. In the nineties – the 1990s – it was a big thing to travel to Paris, London, New York and Hong Kong, not to mention Singapore and Los Angeles or the one and only Rio, Rio de Janeiro. And, of course, there’s nothing wrong with any of these cities. Except that they’re too far away.

More and more direct routes from new cities mean that more people are trying out new destinations for the first time. It’s alluring to experience something new and unique, either alone or with friends and family. For a lot of us, the so-called budget airlines have also helped to open up the world from Norway – the world of Western Europe, the United States and Thailand, at any rate. The adverts say that ‘now everyone can travel’ and ever more of us have taken the message on board: we travel. And it doesn’t stop there – both seasoned and novice travellers are setting out for longer trips. Caravans, campers, tents and lean-tos have been swapped out for a boarding card and often a print-out as proof of a reservation via one of the many online booking platforms.

Now we’re really going out there and exploring the world. But what’s that got to do with you, you who were already doing this at the end of the last century and the beginning of this one? Spending time in Seville, Olbia or Split no longer feels particularly special. Travelling has become a status symbol and so you better have travelled to a more exciting place than your neighbour, your boss, your sister. At the very least you ought to have stayed at a hotel that is more expensive, more exclusive or simply cooler, ought to have found a jealousy-inducing apartment on AirBnB, or have eaten at restaurants with as many Michelin stars as possible over the course of a long weekend. If the budget doesn’t quite stretch that far, your eateries ought to figure at the top of the charts on TripAdvisor or pop up as star-studded suggestions on a Google Maps search. And everything will, must or ought to be documented in real time via Instagram, Twitter, Facebook and Snapchat, or a combination of them. Consequently, wifi or a mobile data allowance that doesn’t cost you the Armani shirt off your back is also a requirement. Soon not even those above-averagely interesting accommodation and eating places are going to be enough. We want something new, preferably something that the fewest people possible have seen before, ideally as unobtainable as possible, or so obscure and unknown that you can roll your eyes if your audience hasn’t heard about it. Then, what’s more, you’ll need to provide a lesson in culture and geographical facts mixed with a social anthropological analysis of those who live there. *The locals*.

Paris, is a sense, is an exception. Most of us are so familiar with it that we don’t need the locals. The city itself still passes for a romantic destination, even if it is among the world’s most visited, most touristy places and, as a result, not very original, exciting, or romantic.

For more and more travellers who of course have been to Paris and London several times, *nowhere* is the place to be. That means off the beaten track, far out in the sticks, where nobody would think it possible to live – nor would bother travelling to. Nowhere is in vogue. Nowhere is awesome.

Nowhere is the new thing. Or ‘nowhere is the new black’ as they would say on the almost-worldwide web. Except for in North Korea, where all they have is intranet, admittedly with its own dating services.

Nowhere is also where you say you’ve been if you don’t want your interrogator to know the previous day’s GPS coordinates, like when I was in Afghanistan with two friends. Both of them had told their mothers that they were in Iran, commendably enough to lower the anxiety levels and insomnia at home, but in reality they weren’t anywhere that their audience could or should know about: they were nowhere.

As an umbrella term for dream destinations, it’s good that nowhere is a relative concept. For certain people it’s a village in Trøndelag, for others a mountain in Armenia, or maybe a carefully chosen vineyard in Portugal, Italy or Chile.

There’s just one question remaining: What’s the best nowhere for you? Almost no matter who you are, I think that the world’s least visited countries ought to be given some consideration. Both geographically and culturally, they are rather unfamiliar and distant. And they are places that no one travels to, or at least, the fewest possible do. Some call it the ultimate bucket list. But it wasn’t enough to just travel to a place, take a few pictures and go back home or on to the next location. Travelling without speaking to those who live there is really of no greater value than watching a video of the place online. Personally, I believe that a traveller who visits other cultures without allowing himself to be affected by the experience, without reflecting on social differences or getting to grips with his own first-world arrogance is not much of traveller at all. He gets himself from A to B, but he scarcely *travels*. Of course, the fact that people do take trips to other countries is, nevertheless, a good start.

I was no exception, but by travelling to many different countries I have forced myself to once again contemplate established truths. People in other places on earth aren’t doing things wrong, they’re just doing them differently.

19 MAURITANIA, AFRICA

Inhabitants: 4,300,000 (Wikipedia)

Tourists per year: 39,000 (UNWTO)

Area: 1,030,000 square kilometres

So we’re keeping to Africa’s west coast. The journey north to Mauritania from Guinea-Bissau took us through Senegal, encircling the whole of Gambia, where middle-aged men and women from the West help themselves to young, beautiful but poor local people. Mauritania, by the way, is a country that mustn’t under any circumstances be confused with the southern paradise of Mauritius, east of Madagascar. Mauritania is ‘everything’ Mauritius is not. First, the country is primarily desert – 90% of the surface area is sand. Bone-dry Saharan sand. Muslim rule also means that the country is also dry when it comes to its choice of drinks. With all its bars, the same cannot be said for Mauritius. Both countries can flaunt their beaches, which is to say that beaches make up all of Mauritania’s entire 600-kilometre-long coastline, although they’re rarely, if ever, used. Swimming in a burka has never really taken off, in a way. Mauritius, on the other hand, is a mecca for swimming, snorkelling, diving and honeymoons.

The difference in size is also important. With its 1,030,000 square kilometres, Mauritania is gigantic. It’s almost three times the size of Norway, and 505 times bigger than little Mauritius, with its measly 2,040 square kilometres.

Mauritius was named by a Dutch admiral after Prince Maurice van Nassau in 1598, while Mauritania got its name from the ancient kingdom of Mauretania, which existed from 300 BC and lasted a thousand years. The name means ‘land to the west’ and was led for a time by King Atlas, who is credited with inventing the globe. It is perhaps not so strange that he saw the need for such an invention – the country then was even more immense than it is today, encompassing what is now Morocco and Algeria, Africa’s largest country.

Today the Mauritanian coastline is almost uninhabited. Although there is still a lot of life on the beaches of its few coastal towns, almost all of it relates to fishing. Even in the capital.

‘Looking for fish for dinner? Buy it from me here, mine’s the freshest!’ yelled several of the colourful vendors after me as I walked through the fish market, ten metres from the beach itself, on the outskirts of the million-strong city of Nouakchott, like a scene from the comic *Asterix* except nobody was using the fish as to assault others. Mauritania’s geographical location means that the population is mixed: a large proportion are of North African descent and relatively light-skinned, while others have darker features from Southern and Central African forebears. From a geographical point of view, the country forms a bridge between Arab North Africa and the more ‘traditional’ Africa. Its inhabitants are, roughly speaking, divided into three groups: half of them are called Bidhan and have Arab ancestry, while one-third are Haratin, descendants of slaves from great swathes of the continent. The final one-sixth can trace their family tree to West Africa. It is perhaps a little unusual for we northerners to think about people in categories, but in Mauritania the differences between these groups are at the root of a caste system that is out of the ordinary – more on that later.

Still, the most vibrant thing about the fish vendors is the clothes they wear. Some believe optimistically that intense, diverse, occasionally garish colours will attract buyers; colour theory is presumably on the school curriculum in Mauritania. With their broad array of vivid tones, the goods – fish, lobsters, crabs and shellfish – also play their part. The choice is impeccable. Some were selling from countertops, others had their wares in freezer boxes full of ice – there was no electricity in the covered, open-plan fish market.

Down from the building, which had faded to yellow, almost ochre, the traditional long, narrow fishing boats in multiple colours lay shoulder to shoulder. Fishermen, porters and mechanics jumped between them. All were men. There were women there too, but they were on the beach to relax, sell fish or find someone to buy fish from – fish that they could sell on with sufficient profit that muggings occurred on this chaotic strip of sand. Five or six well-covered teenage girls were hopping about at the water’s edge, braving a few steps out into the waves before whipping around and leaping back to land as they giggled and laughed behind the black scarves concealing their faces. The clothes clearly denoted to which religion they belong. With the exception of a small group of Christians, more or less everyone in the country is Muslim. The breaching of Muslim values is punished by fines or imprisonment, while atheism is so strictly forbidden that those found guilty of it are sentenced to death. The same applies to blasphemy.

I was standing a few metres away in the shadow of an upturned wooden boat perched on trestles, watching the blue-green waves smashing into the sand, shore and schoolgirls with perfect rhythm and intense power. It made it difficult for boats to launch off the shallow sand flats; it didn’t help that other boats were also on their way in. Even though the beach is long, it was very cramped for space. It was all about being as close to the fish market as possible, since under this blazing sun the catch can soon lose its value. For fishermen and vendors it’s a question of getting the seafood delivered quickly to their customers, who can then put it in the fridge or on ice, or at least filleting the fish as swiftly as possible and hoping to sell most of it before the flies ruin its appeal. Ice is expensive; not everyone can afford such a luxury, and I could smell that as I walked back away from the beach through the open fish market. Fortunately a fresh breeze improved the situation somewhat. I was taking a look before lunch; conditions presumably worsened throughout the afternoon.

Nouakchott has only been the capital since 1960, the same year that the former French colony became independent. In the Afroasiatic language Tamazight, spoken in northern parts of Africa, the name means ‘the place where the wind blows’. With breezes coming from the Atlantic Ocean, it’s something of an appropriate name. Unfortunately the city is completely flat and so at its centre, several kilometres inland from the coast, you barely notice the wind. It’s just hot. Scorching hot.

Just like Guinea-Bissau, Mauritania is ruled by a leader who took power in a coup. Under General Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz, the military toppled the president in 2008. Aziz later resigned as general in order to be able to run ‘legitimately’ for election the following year. He won. Few were surprised.

What is less well known is that Mauritania was the last country in the world to ban slavery, officially as late as in 1981, but it wasn’t until 2007 that a law was introduced to criminalise slave trafficking – so for 26 years slavery was illegal, but there was no way for it to be enforced. Things take time, and bad habits are hard to break. Five per cent of the population still live as slaves. Being a slave owner conveys status, particularly amongst certain tribes in the north, but slave ownership has not been eradicated completely in the southern region of the country either, as we will see later.

Certain terror groups are also holed up in the desert and it is inadvisable for western tourists to travel inland alone. In the international press there were two terror attacks in particular that gained a lot of attention, and which to this day play a part in warding off many tourists from visiting this vast West African land. The most gruesome attack took place near Aleg on Christmas Eve in 2007. Four French tourists were killed, one seriously injured. Masked men attacked a family who had stopped for a picnic by the side of the road. Police later arrested nine men with links to Al-Qaeda and referred to them as members of an isolated sleeper cell. In the West the attack received massive press coverage, and the international community failed to be convinced that this was a one-off event. The 2008 edition of the Dakar Rally, among others things, was cancelled as a result of the attack. Two years later a suicide bomber from the same terror group took the life of an American teacher and injured two Frenchmen just three days after the Mauritanian presidential elections. Compared to many other countries, two attacks is not a big deal, but for one reason or another the fear has never gone away. The explanation I was given is that much of this is owed to the largely nomadic lifestyle and proliferation of gangs in inland regions of the country. People know that shady groupings persist in anonymous regions of the desert and fear that they can strike at any time, any place. It is difficult to rid oneself of the sense of fear – something that leads us to associate Mauritania with terror even today.

So I was now keeping mainly to the coast. In Nouakchott I had arranged a meeting with Ibrahima N’Gaédé, an engineer who works for the Ministry of the Interior and, among other things, is responsible for the servers and software that mean that visitors can get a visa on arrival, or VOA. The expression *visa on arrival* is music to the ears of many a traveller. It means that you avoid wasting time at an embassy, like the first time I visited and had to stop by the diplomatic stations in both Berlin and Dakar before eventually obtaining a visa.

I thank the 36-year-old for the work he has done. Any country without needless bureaucracy is a friend of mine. Far too many places ask for worthless information before they issue visas. What on earth are they going to do with information about flights and hotels at the moment of application? If I don’t get the visa, I’ve wasted time and money to no avail. And if I’m coming, I’m coming, and they’ll find out about it at the border. Then they are free to ask me where I’ll be staying – which, in Mauritania, is exactly what they do. It has to be said that there is a huge amount of inventiveness and time wasting in the diplomatic world of visas. Certain countries require, for example, a print-out of your bank balance, letters from employers, information about how many wives you have (and many you are planning to bring along with you), a copy of every page in your passport, a police criminal record check, details of the religion of your parents and spouse(s), a medical certificate, a copy of your vaccination card, proof of negative HIV test, and/or a list of every country you have visited in the last ten years, the latter with five lines provided on the application form. I just wrote ‘all of them’.

Ibrahima, or Biba to his friends, reached for his can of Sprite. It is possible to find restaurants that serve alcohol under the counter in Mauritania if you know whom to ask, but in this Muslim country, very few locals drink. I kept to lush, perfectly sweet orange juice, freshly squeezed of course. Desert land or not, there is good access to familiar and unfamiliar varieties of fresh fruit. For the most part this is down to trade with their neighbours. We ate dinner at San Francisco, one of the city’s most popular restaurants. Ibrahima had proposed that we meet there.

‘I don’t eat out much so I’m the wrong person for restaurant recommendations, but I asked several colleagues and they all suggested San Francisco,’ he explained as we entered the gloomy premises. His tone was almost absolvent, just in case the meal turned out to be catastrophically bad. I understood why. Inviting a foreign guest to a restaurant and ending up with unhappy friends is bad enough in Norway, a country that sits high up on the bucket list of many a fussy gourmet traveller the world over. I could only imagine how awkward it would be in a country that almost no one visits in the first place, a country with so few recommendations on online travel sites that a single ruinous depiction from a visiting westerner would have many potential tourists avoiding San Francisco like the plague. There wasn’t a great deal of light penetrating the restaurant, primarily due to its small, partially covered windows. On the walls hung large TV screens showing international football, and as we know, sunshine and flatscreens have never been the best of friends. In spite of the darkness, I liked the atmosphere. Laughter floated freely about the tables, almost all of which were occupied. Around some of them people were sitting tightly packed in order to make room for everyone. Biba had been given good advice. We hit it off and discussed everything from football to surfing to Mauritanian city planning, before the subject turned more serious.

‘I’ve also heard about this thing with slavery, but have never seen it with my own eyes,’ he replied to a direct question from me.

‘As far as I understand it’s not a question of slavery in the traditional sense. It’s more like the class system in England or the caste system in India. In any case, many people outside the cities work for almost nothing, so if you look at it that way, strictly speaking you can call it slavery,’ he chuckled, taking a slurp of soda. We were waiting for our main course of king prawns. My mouth had been watering ever since being at the fish market earlier in the day and I hadn’t been able to stop myself when I saw them on the menu. I had probably walked past the prawns that very morning, and took it for granted that they were fresh.

‘Many families see themselves as nobles and claim that they have blue blood. They would never permit their sons and daughters to marry someone from a lower rank, people who they see as almost slaves. And at any rate, slavery was widespread here for a long time, and now it’s still there at the back of people’s minds, in their mentalities,’ Biba continued with an air of gravity. Making something illegal doesn’t necessarily mean you’re going to stop it – this we know – and the same is true of the ban on slavery, which was so ingrained in this country. The photojournalist Seif Kousmate visited Mauritania in 2018 to write a piece about modern slavery and was able to verify that tens of thousands of people still live as slaves here. The vast majority come from the two African minority groups mentioned earlier: As many as half the Harantins live as slaves or in slave-like conditions. Much of this goes far back in history and applies to the whole of North Africa. The Arabs raided villages and introduced a strict caste system that is still in effect. To put it briefly, the lighter-skinned are the ‘masters’, and so much higher in the hierarchy than those with darker skin that it equates to a master-slave relationship. Since the status of the slave is passed on from mother to child, ‘recruitment’ is guaranteed. The lack of education among the slaves further contributes towards maintaining and legitimising the practice.

‘When I was younger my mother told me each and every night that we had to respect out “masters” because their caste was higher than ours and because they were “saints”,’ a young man, Moctar, told Kousmate. He managed to escape, but his mother refused to join him and even later criticised him for having fled his ‘owner’. It is not unusual for freed slaves to return to their ‘owners’ of their own free will because they have a sense of loyalty and think that it’s wrong for the concerned to have lost his ‘property’. So it’s a different aspect of Stockholm syndrome. Moctar has no plans to return to his life as a slave and now has a place at school. His dream is to become a lawyer in order to fight slavery in Mauritania.

Fortunately, he’s not the only one, despite a good deal of opposition. Activists working against slavery have often been harassed or even tortured. At the same time, the ruling powers deny that there is any problem with slavery. And for some of them, there certainly isn’t: their slaves are a benefit, not a drawback. For the election in 2019 there is hope that the most important anti-slavery organisation in Mauritania can actually seize power. Initiative for the Resurgence of the Abolitionist Movement (IRA) is led by Biram Ould Abeid, who came second in the 2014 presidential elections. Now he believes the time is ripe finally to be able to beat the current president, former coup leader Aziz. The incumbent is Arab and in many ways personifies reality in Mauritania: The light-skinned Arabs have better jobs, more leadership positions and higher salaries than those with more pigment in their skin.

I had spent a few days exploring the capital on foot and it was striking just how reserved people were. Almost nobody said hi or smiled – just like being home in Norway, I thought. Neither Norwegians nor Scandinavians in general have especially affable reputations out in the wider world. We are seen as arrogant and dismissive, something I’ve often faced. My theory is that we are shy, but this hardly excuses the fact that we barely smile at people we meet – unless we’ve got alcohol in us, then we suddenly become a lot more Mediterranean. It was as though Biba was reading my mind.

‘Maybe you’ve noticed that we’re not the easiest to get to know. In contrast to Senegal to the south and Morocco to the north, we are quite simply tight-fisted. And that’s a shame, because then we don’t get to meet others. I don’t really know why it’s like this, but I think it’s because many of us have got it too easy. We have too much money,’ he claimed.

It wasn’t quite the angle I was expecting. Maybe in Norway, but not here. Sure, the airport is brand new, and I was surprised by a modern four-lane highway with streetlights for the thirty kilometres to Nouakchott. But a glut of money is something else – was I really in Africa?

‘Too much money? How so?’ I wondered. Officially, forty per cent of the population live below the poverty line. A high concentration of donkeys is a sure sign of low income. When you can’t afford a vehicle powered by petrol or diesel, you resort to one that runs on grass. Nouakchott is swarming with donkeys, and men of all ages sit on their carts behind the donkey and steer. Sometimes the cart is empty, at other times there are two full oil drums or enough furniture to fill a house. In any case, the animals walk at their own pace. I can quite understand why they’ve gained a reputation for being stubborn. Who volunteers to move mountains, barrels brimming with oil, or a houseful of furniture?

‘Now I’m talking mainly about Nouakchott. We’ve discovered oil, so there’s some corruption here. People have enough, and that means that they aren’t so keen to approach other people. They don’t need to sell you anything,’ Biba explained.

With the exception of the fishermen and a woman on the street selling coffee and baguettes, he was right. Nobody had approached me, which I perceived as highly unusual considering this was Africa. People on the streets of the capital constantly avoided my gaze, and didn’t smile. A few had yelled warnings to me when they saw me taking pictures, which they clearly weren’t happy about.

‘Do you think this is contributing to the lack of tourists?’ I wondered.

‘Sure. In addition to the fear of terror attacks,’ he said, under his breath. He had heard it before, from his brother who lives and works in France, and from others. There, especially, many saw Mauritania almost as a synonym for terror after the doomed family picnic that had made terrible headlines in France and elsewhere in the West.

It doesn’t exactly help our stereotypes that most men in Mauritania often cover their faces with a kind of scarf. It’s actually a type of turban, most often called *cheche* or *haouli*. The rectangular cloth is between three and five metres long and is wound around the head. When it is being put on, it starts and ends at the top. The turban is essential, and by no means only for decorative purposes. Desert dwellers need to take measures to stop the body being constantly lashed: The headscarf protects its owner against sunlight and heat, not to mention dust and sandstorms. The eyes, respiratory system and skin all benefit from a little protection in this tough climate of hot winds and cold nights. But the traditional dress doesn’t just cover the head. Over their bodies they wear a *boubou*, which has been perfected to withstand the sun and wind. The noble white robe is personalised using gold embroidery and has, over the generations, evolved as an answer to the forces of nature. It consists of a robe with a hole in the middle for the head and two large open sleeves. When it gets exceptionally warm in the summer, the sleeves can be rolled up to the shoulders. Pockets are sewn on each side with space for personal possessions. In wintertime, long undergarments can also be worn. That might mean just a broad pair of trousers called *saroual* or an additonal long shirt with short or long sleeves called *tunic* that can be made of different materials such as cotton, sheep’s wool or camel hair. Some types stop below the waist, while others go all the way to the ankles. On their feet they wear sandals, typically made of gazelle hide. As in Norway, the temperature influences the choice of underwear, and temperature swings in the desert can be extreme. And just like in Norway there is a big difference between the clothes used on the plains and those worn on the coast. The long, colourful garments in use at and by the sea would be of little use in the desert.

No matter what the temperature, you will not see women’s legs in Mauritania. It is quite simply unacceptable. Outsiders should not even be able to see the contours of women’s legs through their dresses, which are called *melahfa* and are often made of a colourful fabric in creative patterns. The dress consists of a long piece of fabric that a woman wraps around her in a carefully practised and particularly elegant manner; getting dressed is no walk in the park. They usually wear at least two layers, amongst other reasons to stop the gazes of men other than their husband. But there were also exceptions to the rules. In sports arenas even the forces of conservatism have given up; there, Mauritanian women wear shorts too.

In their traditional garb only the eyes and hands of the men can be seen. At last a country where men wear burka-like clothes, even if they can quite easily be removed with no repercussions. To the untrained eye everyone looks anonymous and almost the same, but there can be great differences in colour combinations, technique and embroidery if one takes a closer look.

For thousands of years, trains of camels have crossed the country on established routes with well-covered bedouins as their noble escorts. The proud, traditional style of clothing is effective and lifesaving in a land of almost pure desert.

But well-covered Muslims are not the same as terrorists, historical offensives or not. Biba, in any case, did not think that the fear of terror attacks and obscured men alone were keeping people away from the country.

‘The most important reason behind the lack of tourists can be blamed on the total absence of a focus on creativity at school. Here it’s the losers, those who have failed the traditional education, who go on to become artists, singers, designers or writers. And it shouldn’t be like that! It’s one thing that we don’t have anything exciting to offer tourists, but what about ourselves?’ he asked rhetorically. He wasn’t exactly selling his country, and I thought he might benefit from seeing the potential in surfing, kiting and ancient monuments.

At last a waiter arrived. He was balancing two portions of king prawn on one unusually long arm. On the other he had found room for salt and pepper shakers as well as vegetables, rice and French fries. So, all bases were covered with the side dishes. Ibrahima barely noticed the food. As a non-artist he was surprising passionate about the subject.

‘In Mauritania you’re seen as a success if you find a well-paid job and can sit in an air-conditioned office all day long. It might be extremely tedious, but then you’re living a good life and have a high standing. And you can often leave work early without anyone complaining. While creative people who spread ideas, opinions and joy, we’re not interested in them. It shouldn’t be like that!’

He worked at an office too and he was the first to admit that he wasn’t particularly artistic, or creative. But he wished he was.

‘Then maybe I could help bring more tourists here, by marketing our wonderful country. Here in Mauritania we’re terrible at promoting ourselves as a country and a tourist destination. Nearly everyone mistakes us for the little island of Mauritius.’ He was almost fuming. He was obviously sick of being misplaced on the wrong side of Africa. If nothing else, he has made it much easier to get into the country thanks to the new visa system.

Mauritania is perhaps best known for having one of the world’s largest ship graveyards, all the way in the north, outside Nouadhibou, a city of around 100,000 inhabitants. At its peak there were said to have been three hundred shipwrecks along its beaches. I just had to see it with my own eyes. I took a domestic flight from Nouakchott and in three-quarters of an hour I was at the only gate at Nouadhibou’s tiny airport. Since the occasional international flight from the Canary Islands or Morocco goes astray here, everyone has to go through passport control, even from domestic flights. The gruff official checked my visa and whether I’d got an entry stamp before nodding me through. I walked out of the microscopic terminal building. The highway runs straight past it, a few short metres from the entrance door. There was nowhere to be dropped off or picked up; to take advantage of such luxury you first have to cross the busy road to a gravel car park. There’s no pedestrian crossing.

In Nouadhibou a taxi can’t simply be flagged down. Taxi drivers flag you down, if they like the look of you. The government has recently introduced a rule stating that only holders of Mauritanian passports can drive taxis. This is reportedly to protect the profession, and perhaps it does, but it has led to an acute lack of taxis, and the few taxi drivers that are to be found now are appropriately expensive. The positive aspect of it is that if they get the impression that you are the right customer for them, they’ll almost propel you into the back seat of their car – at least until they realise that you don’t speak French. Then you’re swiftly manhandled back out again. It took me three rapid rounds in and out of as many back seats before I got one who was tolerant enough of my deficient language skills to be willing to make an attempt at driving me to the ship graveyard. It is located some kilometres out towards the southern tip of a narrow peninsula shared by Western Sahara and Mauritania. Nobody lives just north of the border in Western Sahara, but all the same, surly Mauritanian border guards make sure that nobody is able to visit the ghost town of La Güera in the neighbouring land. The city was established by the Spanish colonial master Francisco Berns as recently as 1920. In its golden age it even featured an airport, but by the early 2000s sand had reclaimed most of the city and there were just a few fishermen left. Now even they, too, have given in to the Sahara. But the city never really had a chance. Even its name is relatively desolate, coming from the Spanish word *agüera*, meaning drainage ditch.

If you want to go there you first need to travel to Western Sahara by legal means, and thereafter rent a boat or leg it across the desert. My taxi driver actually made an attempt to drive me over the border on the narrow road from Mauritania after I insisted *and* tempted him with extra payment. The border guards were not impressed and put a quick stop to it. The driver received orders to pull a u-turn and, suitably disapppointed, we drove towards the ship graveyard over a kilometre away. He missed out on his bonus, and I missed out on exploring a ghost town. Once there, I jumped out of the taxi and began heading for the beach. The taxi driver nodded when I asked him to wait in exchange for a double fare. Having to hike back to the centre of town was not especially alluring.

‘What do you think you’re doing?’ someone yelled from behind me.

I turned around, waiting for a man in military uniform to make his way over to me. Fortunately he was smiling.

‘I was thinking of going to look at the impressive ship graveyard you have here,’ I answered the watchman, who must have emerged from a gate in a wall that concealed the industrial estate’s exploits from the outside world. It looked like some kind of engineering works.

‘You’re not allowed. We’re not proud of the ugly, rusty wrecks here. This is not what we want to be known for,’ he said.

‘But I’ve travelled all the way from Norway to see this,’ I said, an ever so little white lie.

‘Where is Norway?’ he asked inquisitively, before catching himself. ‘Anyway, it makes no difference. We don’t want you showing this.’

He had seen my camera.

‘Can I just take a quick look, just for a few minutes?’ I proposed and began walking gingerly back down towards the beach. Against all odds he came along quietly. Perhaps I represented a welcome change in the watchman’s otherwise static workday.

‘All right, but then I’ll have to come with you. And no pictures,’ he replied.

‘Not even from here?’ I asked from the water’s edge. Rusty pieces of iron, empty oil drums and a great deal of plastic were lying around. It wasn’t very appealing.

‘Especially not from here! But nice try,’ he smiled.

‘Can’t I take a selfie, then?’ I proposed for a final, slightly desperate photo op. His answer goes to show how it often pays not to take no for an answer.

‘Yes, that’s OK.’

I pulled out my phone and switched to the front camera, quickly realising that the only wreck this kind of picture would be able to show would be me.

‘Can you take the selfie for me?’ I asked, well aware that it wouldn’t be a selfie any more. Once again he confounded the odds. He agreed, took the compact camera in his hand, snapped three pictures and passed the camera back to me before he began walking back towards the gate from which he had emerged. He didn’t look back and I took the opportunity to snap a few more pictures. Some security guard.

All the same, those few minutes were enough. There were only a dozen ships left of what was once the world’s largest collection of shipwrecks. Now there were just a few workers remaining. The wrecks used to be deliberately run aground in order to be dismantled and sold as scrap, but eventually there weren’t enough workers willing to take on the job for the money they were being offered, and Mauritania stopped receiving ships that could only just get there under their own power. The slowdown thus means that some iron and steel hulls are still lying there, but hopefully the clean-up process will be complete in the not-too-distant future. The fact that they have cleaned up at all ought to be a positive, and not in the least disappointing, but I have to admit that I had been looking forward to photographing more spectacular rusty ghost-ship motifs in Nouadhibou Bay. But money talks. There used to be a living to be made from salvaging the metal; now penny-pinching shipowners send scrapped vessels to Bangladesh instead. There the pay is lower while there is much more competition for jobs and contracts. Almost forty times as many people live in Bangladesh as in Mauritania, which has just over four million inhabitants. As the journalist Seif Kousmate has demonstrated, Biba’s portrayal of things are relatively rose-tinted, but it might be worth asking where there are more ‘slaves’: in Bangladesh or in Mauritania.

It was soon time to depart Mauritania, but first a 600-kilometre detour due east, where there is a distinctive 100-million-year-old circular mountainous formation made up of five ring-shaped, eighty-metre-deep ditches, one after the other. At the outer edge of the thousand-year-old town of Ouadane lies the Richat structure, nicknamed the Eye of the Sahara or the Blue Eye of Africa. At fifty kilometres across, you need to get up high in order to get a proper perspective. For those of us struggling to find a budget-friendly and safe travel route to Ouadane with an all-inclusive hot-air balloon trip, the satellite image on Google Maps is a good second best. Personally I found nobody who was both willing to drive me to the formation and actually knew how to get there, but was told by the proprietor of a café that from ground level the eye is quite simply too big to be particularly exciting to look at or take pictures of – it’s just sand and rocks in somewhat difficult terrain. The very few who make the trip rent a four-wheel drive with a driver, but with the exception of certain enthusiastic archaeologists, all end up being disappointed even if they’re standing close to the centre of the formation. At such close quarters, nothing seems especially exciting. If nothing else, you’ll appear as a tiny little dot in the direct eyeline of an astronaut. The innermost ring is twenty metres wide and six kilometres across, while the outermost is a whole fifty metres wide and between seven and eight kilometres from the centre.

It was originally believed that an asteroid or a volcanic eruption brought about the circles. Now scientists think that it was a symmetrical stone cupola that has collapsed, followed by 100 million years of erosion. None of them, however, can quite account for how all of the almost perfect rings are at the exact same distance from the centre. This has opened up for an array of speculation. Plato himself thought that the Richat structure was the remains of Atlantis and that the ditches were dikes that the inhabitants navigated with boats. Of the five rings, two were said to be filled with water while three were tracts of land. In Greek, *Atlantis* means the island of Atlas, and Plato believed that it referred to the island in the middle of the structure.

We shouldn’t knock Plato, even if he probably never saw the formation with his own eyes. The legend of Atlantis was, in any case, barely a footnote in his works, but something that in retrospect has stirred the most interest. Now, however, the odds of Atlantis actually being shown to have been located in the Sahara desert, six hundred kilometres from the nearest ocean, would be sky-high.

There are several islands in the Atlantic that are more likely candidates.

1. YEMEN, ASIA

Population: 27,600,000 (Wikipedia)

Tourists per year: 60 (garfors.com)

Surface area: 527,968 square kilometres

‘In Yemen, most men chew *khat*,’ I once mentioned during a talk I was giving at Sunnefjord folk university college in Førde. One student raised her hand immediately. The seventeen-year-old looked terrified.

‘That’s so awful! What have the poor little cats ever done to them?’ she asked, on the verge of crying.

Somehow I managed to stop myself from laughing and explain the difference between cat and khat.

The stimulant khat is about to make one of the world’s most cursed countries even more cursed. The narcotic plant requires enormous amounts of water, which is terrible news in a land that scarcely has a drop of it. When 90 per cent of men are addicted to khat, food production soon drops down the list of priorities, something that is contributing towards famine in Yemen.

The great demand, combined with the plant’s ability to grow so fast that it provides three crops a year, makes it far more lucrative to cultivate khat than grains, grapes or green beans. And so that’s what the farmers do. That anyone plants food crops at all is down to the fact khat requires huge amounts of water, and H2O is in short supply in great swathes of the country. The green leaves from the plant provide a tranquilising high said to be akin a strong dose of caffeine or a mild amphetamine. Khat usage furthermore dulls the appetite, and with the food shortages here it is perhaps no surprise that its popularity has shot through the roof.

When I visited the capital Sana’a in 2009 I saw two boys, five or six years old. Not only were they both chewing khat, they were also smoking a hookah pipe at the same time. Start ’em young, et cetera.

But now it’s not just the widespread cultivation of khat that is threatening the food supply. The civil war that has been raging since 2015 has led both to the closure of the country’s airspace and at times most of the ports too. This has given rise to acute and precarious shortages of food and emergency aid, and one of the worst humanitarian catastrophes of recent times. Predictably enough, this has had powerful repercussions, not least contributing towards Yemen being the world’s least visited country.

The world’s *least* visited country. That’s a dubious world record to lay claim to – and, with a meagre five tourists per month, one that’s almost unbeatable. But Yemen has not always been ravaged by war, or ever before even been close to being the world’s least visited country. There have been people in Yemen for at least seven thousand years: For almost two thousand years from 1200 BC, the region was a centre of power in the Middle East, much owing to its two-thousand-kilometre-long coastline strategically located between east and west. There was a lack of water then, too, and it was difficult to keep the kingdom united, even though the Sabeans managed to beat back ten thousand charging men from the Roman Empire in 25 BC. After that, chaos reigned, and from the year 275 Judaism and Christianity alternated as the leading creeds of various kings before Islam was gradually accepted in the 7th and 8th centuries. The religion has endured since then, but that didn’t quite stop the British from getting their hands on the country last century, and they governed southern Yemen, including Aden, until 1967. This lead to Aden becoming a free-trade zone and, in fact, being overrun by tourists. Thereafter, North Yemen and South Yemen existed side-by-side until, as recently as 1990, they merged to become Yemen.

Now of course there are not many signs of tourism to be detected, and in a country ravaged by war with little in the way of food and water, it’s principally the legendary island of Socotra that leads to the country receiving any visitors at all. One of the world’s most exceptional islands, it is located five hundred kilometres from the mainland. Most visitors make their way there in their own sailboats and are said not to be disappointed, though I still haven’t had the opportunity to make the trip myself. Reports, however, are clear: What we have here is the Middle East’s answer to the Galapagos, with its own utterly distinctive wildlife of which the characteristic dragon blood tree is perhaps the best known. Young girls gather its red sap to use it in homemade nail polish and make-up. The name Socotra comes from the Sanskrit word for paradise, and its 60,000 inhabitants, who are scattered across six hundred villages, have largely been able to live in seclusion from the war on the mainland. There are no Houthis on the island.

A few foreigners also make the trip from Oman, but often only for a few hours, if not just a few minutes. On the whole these are people who have misconstrued traveling and only want to cross a country off their list. There is, however, little to see just over the border, and in professional or semi-professional travel circles this type of ‘visit’ is frowned upon. The reasons behind such border hops among country collectors are partly logical. Sana’a in the north is now almost impossible to reach due to the civil war – the airport is closed. North Yemen is controlled by the Houthis, a Shia Muslim rebel group, while South Yemen is ruled by the Sunni Muslim Salafists, who are being propped up with weapons as well as fighter jets and bombers by a coalition of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. In addition, this is a tribal society and a constellation of gangs and groups control different provinces. In order to reach Sana’a unscathed and without huge hold-ups, one either has to have the gift of the gab or know someone senior enough in the right tribe.

I had visited the capital’s Old City several years ago. Together its historic flat-roofed brown houses look like an enormous gingerbread town. Houses built of bricks and rammed earth often scale several floors. Space was tight, so height had to be taken advantage of. With its densely packed skyscrapers of the age, it is in many ways an early version of New York. The browns almost blend into the dry, golden landscape surrounding it, with beautiful untamed mountains as a backdrop. But not everything in and around Sana’a is brown; green parks and gardens can be seen breaking up the colours in a surprising number of places. In addition, the dwellings are decorated with white framing and artful, considered geometrical patterns, also in white, like ornate icing atop gingerbread houses. They seem to be built every which way; narrow alleyways thread between them. It is as though the houses were strewn where they now stand. Perhaps city planning wasn’t in vogue two and a half millennia ago, when the mountain valley, 2200 metres above sea level, was first settled. Now there are six thousand houses in the Old City, in addition to over a hundred mosques.

Sana’a was a vital trading city in Jesus’s time, and Christianity took a strong hold here early in the Christian era. But as with many other places in the Middle East, the far younger Islam gradually took over as the most important religion, in Sana’a as in the rest of Yemen. The Grand Mosque is said to have been built during the lifetime of the Prophet Mohammed himself. Now only ruins remain, but a modern version called Al Salah with space for 44,000 people was completed in 2009 and opened by then president Ali Abdullah Saleh. He was killed by a sniper in December 2017.

It is safer and easier to travel to Aden in the south. First, it’s a port city, and second, the airport is partly operational – that is, for most of the day. And that’s why Aden also receives a very few tourists. In any case, it is mainly locals, aid workers and journalists who take the few flights that still go to the country’s second largest city. For a tourist it’s not simply a question of getting hold of a visa and thereby being allowed to board a plane or ship heading in that direction. It’s a good thing that fixers exist. If perhaps not quite so hard-bitten as Mr. Wolf and Matthew.

Still, not much can be done about it. I was given the Whatsapp number of Adel the fixer, if somewhat reluctantly, by Belgian student journalist Katya Bohdan, who wrote her thesis on the media situation in Yemen, with a focus on Aden.

‘What in hell are you going to do in Aden?’ she asked.

‘I assume you were asked the same question yourself,’ I countered.

‘You do know that Yemen is no place for tourists?’

‘You do know that Yemen is no place for student journalists?’

She smirked and said that it was expensive to fly to Aden with Yemenia, who at that time were flying three to four times a week from Amman and Cairo, although the flights were often cancelled. Neither could tickets be bought online, or at your local travel agency.

‘Either someone in Yemen has to buy them for you, or you have to travel to Amman or Cairo and try to buy a ticket at the airport,’ she explained. We were getting along, and I got Adel’s telephone number, before she added that even though the visa was supposed to be free of charge, it might be necessary to bribe someone or other in order to get it. She had obtained a press visa, and as an author I opted for the same. Katya is from Belgium and speaks Dutch, French, Russian and English fluently, but is not so good in Arabic and so has decided to travel to the Middle East for two years. The last time I was in Yemen she was working for Al Jazeera in Qatar.

As a fixer, Adel arranges everything for visiting journalists – from finding interviewees, film locations and people with background information, to sorting out hotels, transport, food and security guards. His services have previously been used by the BBC, *The Independent*, CNN, Norwegian TV2 and *Vice*, to mention just a few. If he couldn’t get me in I had no idea who else to turn to. For once I wouldn’t be traveling alone. I decided to take a photographer with me to the world’s least visited country. An American photographer promised to take pictures for nothing as long as she could come along with me into this shuttered country.

I knew Lexie Alford from before, online. She’s one of the growing number of people whose ambition is to visit every country in the world, and she had asked me for tips and advice on several occasions in the past. I get a steady stream of questions from other travellers about visa challenges, local contacts and general travel tips. But Lexie was a little different. At the age of 19 she had visited 126 countries and Yemen was the trickiest one left. By chance she got in touch again a couple of weeks before I was planning to fly out there, asking about a minuscule visa loophole for another country in the Middle East – what is written on an embassy’s website is not always correct or up-to-date. I helped her out with that, and she thanked me kindly, before asking almost as a courtesy what my next destination was going to be.

‘I’m going to Yemen in a couple of weeks to research a book about the world’s least visited countries,’ I wrote via a messaging app.

‘Wow! Can I join you? Please!’ she replied, ten seconds after I had pressed ‘send’.

‘Well, how good a photographer are you?’

‘Very good!’

‘Hahaha...prove it,’ I challenged her.

Lexie signed off by directing me towards her website with hundreds of in some cases amazing examples of photography from a wide range of destinations. In addition she worked as a portraitist in California in order to earn money for her travels, and with her professional SLR, she was fluent in photography.

‘OK, but you need to be spontaneous. I’m running out of time and am going to fly out the same day I get the visa.’

The reply came straight away.

‘Count me in.’

Not bad coming from a teenager.

Around lunchtime on 2 April I got an answer from Adel. The media and photography permit together with the press visa was ready at last, and the latter could be picked up from the Yemeni embassy in London.

‘Can you be in London on the morning of 4 April, or do I have to travel to Yemen alone?’ I instant-messaged Lexie. She was home in California, nine hours behind Norway. I wasn’t banking on getting an answer for a few hours yet.

Then she called.

‘Are you serious?’ she said in the sleepiest voice of the decade. She had obviously just woken up.

‘Deadly serious. Can you be in London early the day after tomorrow?’

‘Let me check tickets. I’ll let you know,’ she replied, and hung up. Her parents run a travel agency, so when it comes to booking flights she has insider information.

‘Is it early enough if I land at Heathrow at 07:45?’ came her response ten minutes later.

‘Yes. Just.’

I met Lexie for the first time at a café next to Gloucester Road tube station at 09:30 on 4 April, 2018. We had time for a coffee before strolling the two hundred metres to the embassy. The visa section opens at 10:00 and we were there before the ambassador. Presumably it was he who had to sign our visas.

‘How are we getting to Yemen?’ asked Lexie while we sat in the waiting room waiting for the ambassador. We each had a cup of extremely sweet, milky coffee. The Yemenis like it sweet. I take my coffee with sugar or honey, but there has to be a limit. Lexie drank both.

‘We can fly in with Yemenia via Cairo or with Djibouti Air via Djibouti. The problem with Yemenia is that we can’t buy tickets outside the Middle East.’

‘Can we go via Djibouti? I haven’t been there yet,’ Lexie said with an extra squeak to her voice. Yemen plus a bonus country wouldn’t be a bad result.

‘Same here. But first we have to get the visas in our hands,’ I replied. Too often I’ve bought tickets before getting the visa, and then found out that the visa process took longer than planned. Once bitten, twice shy.

The ambassador walked in fifteen minutes later. He nodded and smiled before entering the embassy itself, further beyond the waiting room. After another fifteen minutes both visas were ready to hand over. In exchange for £500! The law of supply and demand applies at embassies too, it seems, but at least the surcharge for the express service was included.

Outside the embassy we took each other by the hand. The first step on the road to getting in! Back at the Gloucester Road café the only thing left to do was whip open the mobiles and book two tickets to Djibouti with Turkish Airlines via Istanbul. An hour later we took the Piccadilly Line to Heathrow and sat down in the United Airlines lounge. Both airlines are members of Star Alliance, and this is the only lounge in Terminal 2 with showers. Lexie had already been traveling for twenty hours and wasn’t exactly reluctant to get her hair wet. With a short stop for breakfast in downtown Djibouti, the onward journey would be another twenty hours.

It was odd to enter the terminal building at the airport in Aden. Not because it was in the middle of a warzone, or because there were only two other planes there, but because there wasn’t a single policeman at border control. Suddenly a man in black-clad man in sunglasses and black hat tapped me on the shoulder.

‘Are you Gunnar? I’m Adel,’ he said. Practised and professional. There are cases in war-torn countries of kidnappers passing themselves off as the person the foreigner is due to meet. They don’t introduce themselves, but smile and say hi. The typical response from the visitor is then to ask if this is the person he or she is supposed to be meeting – Hussain, for example. Then all ‘Hussain’ needs to reply is yes and ask for the passports of the unsuspecting visitors, then he has everything he needs to take them into the country with him, into a car, and straight into captivity. But now it turned out that the risk of being kidnapped in Aden was lower than anticipated.

‘The situation here has been pretty calm for several months,’ Adel al-Hasani was able to report.

All the news organisations he had helped before had been focussed on war and misery. The worse the things they could report were, the better it was to get the report on the air. I was there to write about tourism. I was looking for positive stories. Things that might give hope and perhaps motivate more people to travel here. Not tomorrow or the day after, but maybe in a year or two, or six.

Adel has immensely good connections more or less everywhere. Even the president picks up the phone if he rings, and he knows people in the military, private security forces, various tribes, and in IS and Al-Qaeda. Adel was, for example, the middleman used to secure the release of an Indian priest who had been held by IS for over a year. Among other things, the fixer took care to obtain, verify and distribute a video confirming that the hostage was still alive. Both government forces and terrorists trust Adel and see him as an honest and impartial figure.

‘IS rang me from a telephone booth and asked me to come to a busy square. Suddenly a young guy approached me. He was wearing jeans and a t-shirt, no beard or long hair. Many IS fighters do what they can so as not to stand out. I reckon he was 23 or 24 and he was even changing his accent so that I couldn’t place him in any one province. He turned off my mobile so that no one could track us, and then we walked through the crowd and into a side street. There they gave me instructions about where and how I would be able to get the priest out.’

Adel got it done and the footage of the gaunt, shaggy-bearded priest, Father Tom Uzhunnalil, was soon rolling across screens in news broadcasts worldwide. Four nuns, two nurses, eight elderly patients and a security guard were not so lucky. They were all killed during the kidnap operation.

A few days before travelling to Yemen, Kristin Solberg, the Norwegian news correspondent who covers the region, had gone live on the news in connection with a dramatic report that, among other things, mentioned that she was a kidnap target and therefore had to move positions constantly. That resulted in me receiving a number of messages from friends telling me to consider not traveling into the extreme danger of Aden.

I thought that it wasn’t the right moment to be focussing on myself and how dangerous it is in a war zone – quite apart from the fact that I couldn’t believe it was actually true. No foreign journalist had been kidnapped for years, and if it was going to happen at all, it would hardly do so with the cameras rolling. I double-checked Solberg’s angle with Adel. He dismissed it as a figment of the imagination.

‘It hasn’t been this calm and stable in Aden since the war began in 2015. Where on earth has she got that idea from? She exaggerating, and she shouldn’t be doing that.’

The circumstances of war invite this kind of reporting. First of all, reporters are at liberty to call attention to themselves and gain ‘cred’ at home for daring to report in dramatic circumstances from ‘deadly’ regions. Second, their editors aren’t there so they have to rely 100% on the reporter and cameraman, if there is one, although they are often local hires. Furthermore, these kinds of news features with one’s own reporter on the screen are great for the viewing figures, and TV stations can make full use of statements such as ‘X is one of the very few broadcasters present in Y.’ And that’s exactly what they do.

As a fellow employee of Norwegian broadcaster NRK, I got in touch with my colleague Solberg by email to hear what the basis for the report was. A week later I got a reply.

‘The threat against us was real and in no way sensationalised. [...] Our local security company, our fixer and the family who were hosting us in the village all thought it was wholly necessary to evacuate. [...] You’re correct that the kidnap risk in Yemen is lower than before. NRK’s security company still counts it as ‘extreme’ and amongst the highest in the world,’ she wrote in her email. As in any war zone, there can be big differences in how situations are perceived. Whom you are with, the situation from one day to the next, or your location a few hundred metres in either direction can make all the difference. Our perceptions of being at approximately the same place at around the same time were obviously completely different.

In this patriarchal society I really wanted to meet a young woman and Adel had been calling around to arrange it. Noor, a 25-year-old journalist, works for the government forces in Yemen. Her dream is to be an independent, well-known and respected journalist. One evening we met Noor at a restaurant. In the short term she has but one hope for the war-torn country.

‘I wish they would throw all the world’s weapons into the sea!’ she said in a clear voice. Possibly the best proposal of all time.

After Adel, Lexie, Noor and I had eaten dinner at the restaurant in Aden we said goodbye to Noor and made the trip home to the apartment hotel. The receptionist had served us a large pot of scorching hot tea and we sat on the sofa waiting for it to cool down enough to drink.

‘I’ve never had it as easy as this with other people I’ve worked for before,’ said Adel completely out of the blue. ‘No stress at all! I usually smoke between forty and sixty a day. Since you’ve been here I’ve only been smoking ten.’

Living in a region at war such as Yemen can be extremely stressful, and certain people struggle more than others. After countless bleak experiences, one cameraman from an American TV network was under great strain. The 37-year-old had never smoked in his life.

‘After four days in the region around Aden, he took his first drag. Three days later he was puffing a pack of twenty a day. And he kept it up. But I’m no better myself,’ smiled Adel, lighting up a fresh cigarette.

To me, Adel came across as calm, stable and assured. As a foreigner I in no way felt particularly exposed. But Adel told me that the situation was far worse for certain local imams. A hundred of them feature on a grisly ‘hit list’. They’re marked for death.

‘In the last few months over forty of them have already been done away with in different ways. Most have been killed early in the morning as they’re on their way to dawn prayers. That’s the most effective time of day to kill them, when there are few witnesses about,’ said Adel.

Those left know full well that they are on the list, and some have taken precautionary measures such as hiring bodyguards. Others leave it to God to decide their fate, and carry on as before.

‘I know five of them on the list, the most prominent imam in South Yemen among them. Abdul Rahman Mara’i led the Dar al-Hadith mosque in Al-Fayush, north of Aden, and he was wiped out in a terror attack. All the same, the Salafists don’t go looking for revenge. They don’t have it in them, and it’s not a part of their culture,’ said Adel. The sinister list, and how it has been put into effect in the very neighbourhood we sat in, gave me the shivers.

As the list of imams gets shorter and shorter it is said that non-religious Salafists will also start getting killed.

‘Now they’re going after any person with influence. It’s terrible. It’s overkill, and as a result people have lost the slightest sympathy they once had for the Houthis.’

It is not, in any case, the Houthis who came up with the assassination plan, although most people do blame them. In all probability there’s a wealthy businessman from the Emirates behind it. The attempt to create additional discord in the deadlocked civil war seems, to a certain degree, to have succeeded. At the same time, the Salafists’ alliance with the United Arab Emirates and the Yemeni government forces cannot be said to be flourishing.

‘The hatred goes too deep. The Salafists are never going to follow the Emirates’ lead, no matter what the government forces say. The solution in the long term is for the parties to come together and negotiate an agreement without foreign interference. People here in the south cannot govern the country. The northerners are wiser, more organised and better qualified to rule. Both sides know that, and I hope that they put the arms to one side and come to a peaceful solution before this spills over into a full-scale war, completely out of control. But in the current circumstances we are a long way from peace,’ said Adel, sighing heavily. He pulled out another American cigarette, as he often did.

If you ignore the impasse, both Aden and the region surrounding the city are utterly fantastic. The city is built around several peaks with houses up along the mountainsides, and has an abundance of beaches and ports. The fish market, for example, is situated next to an extremely pretty natural harbour, partly encircled by two summits and a beach. In the harbour the fishing boats lie closely packed, while the traditional square brick houses have been built just by the shoreline. Following the outbreak of war, however, most large hotels are closed and it’s not difficult to understand why. Their walls are peppered with bullet holes and artillery scars. The entire mid-section of the Mercure has collapsed, while the Gold Mohur Hotel has taken only one hit, to its top floor. It seems, though, to have been high-calibre ammunition, a 1000-millimetre round, I would reckon.

We lived well in a perfectly anonymous apartment hotel, and felt safe there. The first two nights, anyway. On the third night both my photographer and I were woken up by bursts of machine gun fire just outside. Lexie came storming into my room. She was terrified.

‘What’s going on?’ she whispered, almost panicked.

The firing had stopped and there was no way she wanted to attract the attention of the shooters outside.

I stood up and we crept over to the window in the living room, opening up a narrow gap in the curtains. Hundreds of people were standing outside. Had they got wind that foreigners were living here, and were they making plans to lynch us? Kidnap us? Or was it just a gathering or a party?

The fireworks that suddenly rushed up pointed towards the latter. Fortunately the whole event was a wedding party, which in Yemen is celebrated by firing hundreds of times in the air with a Kalashnikov or three – except, of course, bullets that go up must come down again, and dozens of people die every year from celebratory salvos making their way back down to earth.

We told Adel about the experience the morning after. He just smiled.

‘Well, here that’s completely normal. But since you’ve had the experience of being terrified here in Yemen, now we need to think about safety,’ he said, motioning that we should get into the car. Half an hour later we had picked up a Kalashnikov automatic rifle and enough ammunition to see us through the average ambush. From there we drove out to an empty stretch of desert beyond Aden, and Adel showed us how to shoot. Lexie got to try first. She sliced off the top of two-inch metal pipe that was stuck into the ground just as well as he did.

‘Good shooting, Lexie!’ yelled Adel. After a few turns of firing the AK-47, the world’s most popular machine gun, relaxing by the sea came as a welcome respite. Youths and teenagers were swimming on the sandy beaches of Gold Mohur. From there we could see the Elephant’s Trunk, a distinctive cliff that forms a nose thanks to a hole through the rock. Young adventurers and strong swimmers swam almost all the way over to the hole, but since water doesn’t pass through it, they can’t swim to the other side. At the same time their mothers are relaxing, apparently, in their black niqabs on the beach. If it’s actually possible to relax for real in Yemen, especially with so many clothes on. Lexie was wearing a niqab over her regular clothes and was about to succumb to the heat.

‘How on earth can the women here put up with this? It’s not even the hottest time of year,’ she complained.

We were lucky; it was about thirty degrees in the shade at the most. In July temperatures can hit fifty degrees, sometimes fifty-five. Poor people. And poor, poor women. It doesn’t exactly help that the niqabs are black. In the Middle East the men’s distinctive robes, if nothing else, are made from white material, usually cotton. These can be called *thawb*, *dishdasha*, *jubbah*, *kandoorah*, *gandora*, *khaftaan*, *aselham*, *mudawwar*, *gamis*, *perahan*, *bekishe*, *cübbe* or *jelebeeya*. Except for in Yemen, where the garment goes by the name *zannah*. A robe by any other name... Meanwhile the burka has but one name, and so is perhaps not quite as cherished.

With several dozen people on the beach, Adel thought it a little overcrowded.

‘Let me take you to a better beach. Is it okay if we take a boat there?’ he asked. The country is half as big again as Norway is, and has a long coastline. I had nothing against exploring parts of it. A promise of a boat ride on smooth turquoise sea in thirty-degree heat was an idea I could get behind. We drove to the fishing village of Bassem Alwan. Adel asked us to stay in his Korean car with blacked-out windows as he opened his own door and headed outside.

‘If the fishermen see your white faces it’ll be double the price. At least!’ he explained. The fixer arranged transport with fisherman Nasher Said and ten minutes later we were on our way to the beach of our dreams. The 44-year-old fisherman had four children; his wife was pregnant with number five.

‘How many wives does he have?’ I asked Adel. Nasher didn’t speak any English and had to have the question translated. Our skipper was clearly a little shy.

‘Only one,’ he said, almost stammering, ‘and you’re not the only one to ask. My mother nags me constantly to have more wives and lots of children. “They’ll look after you when you get old,” she says.’

He had so far resisted. The fishing didn’t amount to much, and his income was not particularly compatible with 8–10 kids. There’s no such thing as child benefit allowance in Yemen. The extra income from our ride was welcome, and he had taken the opportunity to bring along two of his sons. There was no doubt that he knew his trade. As Adel translated, he told us about the time a British fisherman had come along with him on an evening trip. Even in the dark, and based only on how the fish were moving and feeding at the surface, Nasher could tell the Briton exactly what types of fish were in the vicinity. His guest couldn’t believe that even with their echo locator and other modern aids on board their huge steel fishing boats, they knew far less about how many and what type of fish were in the water around them than the Yemeni in his open wooden boat did. Nasher wasn’t used to praise.

The beach nestled between two cliffs right at the foot of a steep, sixty-metre-high sand dune. Walking uphill through the sand was hard work, almost like tramping through deep snow. Each step was a workout, but the view was worth it. The yellow boat lay a few metres off the beach with a grapnel on the sandy bed. To the left of our eyeline was a tiny little island with a distinctive twelve-metre-high, incredibly steep rocky section. The island is called The Rook after the chess piece of the same name. To the right lay a half-round cliff and a few skerries. The colour tones of the water above the shallow beach was striking. And on the beach there was only Nasher, his youngest son, and Lexie. She was not ready to race up the sand dune in her compulsory textile cage. None of the locals would have cared if she took off the black robe, but she felt that it wouldn’t be right. I rubbed it in after bouncing down the dune, throwing off everything except my boxers, wading into Neptune’s kingdom and starting to swim. What a temperature for a dip! I swam the two hundred metres to The Rook, wondering about attempting to climb all the way to the top, but with bare feet it was a lost battle. I satisfied myself by walking around the crag before diving back out in to the wonderful water. It felt almost surreal that this was war-torn Yemen.

After lunch Nasher delivered us back to the village and from there we drove to an elderly camel farmer. Naib, 63, told us that he had been doing this since he was two feet tall. He used to have five or six times as many camels, but now in his old age he was happy with ten.

‘It’s enough for an old guy like me,’ he said, chuckling in his fortnight’s growth of white beard until his big belly wobbled. He let Lexie take his picture a few times and asked us to send him one. I proposed doing it electronically.

‘Eh? What is Facebook? What is Whatsapp?’ he asked in bewilderment. Adel promised to get the picture printed and bring it with him next time he came by to buy camel milk. This time we took two litres with us, waved goodbye and drove on. Camel milk tastes a little more bitter than cow’s milk but still just as sweet. I thought it would make a good caffè latte. Unfortunately Adel didn’t know of any cafés in the city with an espresso machine, so it’ll have to be tried another time.

A forty-five minute drive later we were standing outside a mango farm on the outskirts of the village of Al Makhshabah, with eighty houses. Fifty huge mango trees with thick limbs and green leaves provided us with plenty of shade. The copious fruits meant that certain branches hung heavily just above the ground. A hollow had been dug around each tree so that the fruits would gather around the trunk when they fell, making gathering them easier. On one edge of the mango grove there was a deep well. An old, well worn diesel engine was coupled to a pump that was sometimes used for essential watering. The farmer welcomed us and invited us to taste some of the small mangoes. They were more or less ripe, while the larger fruits were still hard and green. The sample melted in the mouth – these were the freshest, the best mangoes I had ever tasted. Through Adel once again, I asked the farmer’s name.

Both of them smirked.

‘Ali Abdullah Saleh,’ they said, almost simultaneously. As if the name required a translation.

‘Why are they laughing?’ I wondered.

‘He’s called exactly the same as the former president of Yemen,’ the fixer explained. ‘And not many are.’

It wasn’t so strange that the mango farmer was also a supporter of the former president. He even had a picture of him inside his house. That was perhaps not so wise. ‘If that gets found out, he’s in trouble,’ said Adel.

In Yemeni politics one should never tempt fate, but neither should one be seen to support a once-sitting president, at least publically. Democracy, after a fashion.

‘Wouldn’t it be more lucrative to grow khat?’ I asked Ali Abdullah Saleh, the mango farmer.

‘Yes, much more lucrative, but there’s not enough water here in the lowlands. If I could grow khat I would never leave my farm, just sit in the shade of a tree, relaxing and chewing khat all day long, every day for the rest of my life,’ he smiled dreamily.

I asked Ali several more questions and he was impressed by my curiosity and how much I wanted to know. In the end he invited us in for lunch. We had made plans to visit an immensely wealthy alcohol smuggler for lunch. I was curious about how the smuggler operated and made a polite attempt to sidestep lunch by agreeing to a quick coffee.

The strategy looked like it had worked. We were shown into the living room where a small chunky twelve-inch TV stood on a tiny chest of drawers. Apart from that there was nothing else in the room except for thin foam mattresses covered in colourful sheets. The floor was constructed of brown and beige tiles a foot square, while the walls were pastel green and the ceiling pale pink. All the windows stood wide open in their metal frames, a fresh breeze making the temperature bearable. Except for poor Lexie in her niqab. On the outside of the windows were metal gratings to which one end of a clothesline was fastened. The other end was tied around a frail tree some metres from the house. Clothes in different colours hung from the line.

The coffee soon arrived on the floor and we could only savour the jet black, steaming hot drink. Yemen produces some of the best coffee in the world – the problem is simply that nobody knows about it. Several attempts at exporting it have failed and the current situation is not inspiring anyone to try again. Half an hour later, while Ali was outside for a while, I tried dropping a hint that we should perhaps think about getting on the road.

‘I swear on my grandmother’s grave that they will eat lunch here,’ said Hashed, one of Ali’s five sons. The mango farmer also had five daughters, but all of them had been married off and no longer lived at home.

‘That means that we have no choice. It will be extremely offensive if we don’t eat here,’ explained Adel. ‘We can meet the smuggler later.’

Little by little Hashed brought the food in. We sat in a circle around the food, which was placed on a large round metal tray – chicken soup, a kind of fish stew and freshly baked flatbreads from the round stone oven out in the courtyard. It was Ali’s wife who had cooked it, but we never met her. When it comes to male strangers, men in Yemen are often protective of their wives.

‘It’s an honour for me to offer you lunch here at my farm. I am very proud that you made the choice to share this meal with us,’ said Ali. Some choice. We didn’t mention the grandmother’s grave. But the meal was utterly fantastic, and the best we ate in Yemen, even including a lobster dinner in the city where I got one and a half steaming fresh lobsters and sides for eleven dollars. At home with Ali there was no doubt that the chickens were free range, completely free of growth hormones or industrial feed. Several of our chicken’s siblings were still hopping around outside.

Ali had been talking about the drought and I asked if he had noticed anything of ‘global warming’. The mango farmer didn’t recognise the term, but had no gripes.

‘It is Allah who decides. We have nothing to do with the wind, weather or climate.’

But the farmer, who was in his sixties, had noticed a change, and having run the farm since 1964 he knew what he was talking about. In the beginning he helped his father out before taking over the reins. Ali said that they had noticed a change in the climate in 1994.

‘I remember the year because the harvest was noticeably smaller than the year before. And it’s never been quite the same since. Water conditions worsened and steadily became drier. Now we have to use more diesel to run the pump, but at the driest times of year the well runs dry after an hour or two. So we have to wait for the inflow for a few hours before we can pump more water.’

He was clearly passionate about it. Whether Allah or humanity was to blame, any way you looked at it there was a marked decline in his production of mangoes.

‘Worst of all was in 2016. Then it was really dry,’ he remembered, in spite of the persistent tension of the war the year before. When troops from the north passed through the area on their way to Aden, they had to abandon the farm for the night.

‘We dislike the Houthis so much that we call them disgusting worms, after the worms that sometimes attack our tomatoes,’ smiled Hashed. The shy 16-year-old mango farmer’s son obviously had a clear opinion about one of the parties in the war. ‘If we try to propagate a new plant from a tomato that has been attacked by the worm, nothing grows. It’s completely dead.’

We thanked them wholeheartedly for their hospitality and went out into the hallway to put our shoes back on. Before we left I asked how many people lived in the village of eighty houses. Ali smirked.

‘There’s a man with twenty-eight sons in one of the houses. And around twelve daughters.’

Clearly a patriarchal society. The number of girls wasn’t so important.

‘Unbelievable! Can we visit him?’ I wondered.

Ali and Hashed had an explanatory discussion in Arabic.

‘Sorry, he actually died last week,’ Ali answered calmly. ‘May peace be upon him.’

For the first time I hoped that a man had more than one wife.

I never got an answer to how many lived in Al Makhshabeh, but it was guaranteed to be more than Norway’s 2.2 people per household.

I wouldn’t have traded the excellent meal at home with Ali, but it meant that we never managed to meet the busy alcohol smuggler, who was on his way to pick up a new delivery at a secret location. At least I’ve got a standing invitation to learn about his methods on my next trip to Yemen.

Instead I challenged Adel to find a local tourism expert. Finding anyone who had seen so much as a single tourist in Aden was not easy, but nobody would categorically deny that tourists came to the Aden region. We eventually found someone who at least knew something. The historian and writer Bilal Hussein has written four books about Aden, the most recent of which was published in 2018 and is now a bestseller in the country. In the absence of a functioning postal service, his biggest problem is getting his book distributed to North Yemen. The solution is to ask acquaintances on their way north to take a stack of books in their luggage, or to send them with obliging bus and truck drivers.

‘In 2010, four hundred tourists came to Aden; the year before, just as few. But in the fifties and sixties Aden was like Las Vegas. At that time we had between 800,000 and 900,000 tourists a year, spread over almost 7000 ships! Much of it was due to the city being a free-trade zone to which people flocked from all over the world. In addition to the unique geography here, with mountains and beaches everywhere around the city,’ Bilal told us eagerly. He had invited us home to his residence in the centre of Aden. We sat on plastic chairs in his shaded backyard and in the afternoon heat were served extremely tasty fresh water from a local source.

Bilal thought there would have to be a revolution if Aden was once again to see high numbers of tourists, and he wasn’t just talking about the war coming to an end.

‘Ideally Aden should go back to being a free-trade zone again, to put the city back on the map and attract foreign investors and businesses. When it comes to business, Aden ought to be set apart from the rest of Yemen, like Hong Kong and China,’ he explained, pointing out that tourists needed to have something to do, or more importantly, something to spend their money on.

‘What on earth is the use of tourists if they don’t leave their money behind?’ he asked rhetorically. A good point. He elaborated further.

‘I mean, what use is a cruise tourist to us if they come here and are on land for a few hours and only go to see monument A, beach B, castle C? Then they’ll just wear down our infrastructure, pollute with their ships and buses and cause extra traffic and delays. All without spending a single rial,’ he went on passionately.

He might as well have been speaking about foreign cruise ships in the Norwegian fjords.

‘The very least we can do is to charge entrance fees, offer souvenirs and take them out for activities such as diving or climbing. That will provide jobs as guides or instructors to people living here, together with keeping the souvenir manufacturers and vendors busy.’

He personally estimated that a maximum of a hundred tourists visited Yemen every year, and he wasn’t far off the mark. I got the final figures in conversation with a director of the Ministry of Immigration. He didn’t want to be quoted, but claimed an average of five tourists arriving per month. As mentioned, most go to Socotra while the odd one strays to Aden across the land border with Oman. There are two border posts there, often used as mentioned by country collectors who are in the country for a few minutes or maybe closer to an hour to ensure themselves the essential photo evidence. Preferably geotagged.

The question then is how many minutes one has to be in a country in order to be able to call yourself a tourist. Country collectors aren’t there long enough to leave behind huge sums of money, but anyway, five dozen tourists are never going to satisfy any minister of tourism. Yemen has a long way to go before it has enough work for any kind of tourism sector, not to mention earns enough money from curious foreigners with cameras, maps and cash.

As long as the war rages, the tourist figures are obviously not going to increase. But in contrast to Nauru, which barely has a single tourist attraction, the potential for tourism in wild, beautiful Yemen is enormous. The only big obstacle is the perception of the security situation. When the population feels safe, foreign investors will quickly be back on the scene. Following that it will only be a question of weeks or months before those first travellers with an overgrown sense of adventure arrive. The stories they go on to tell and the pictures they go on to show are almost guaranteed to create a virtuous circle, and in a short while Yemen will no longer be on this list of the world’s least visited countries. There are so many attractions, so much fantastic food and such an excess of hospitable people that the war-torn country won’t look back.

The question is when it will happen. On behalf of all Yemenis and tourists the world over, I hope it happens before the year is out.

If I only knew which year.

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