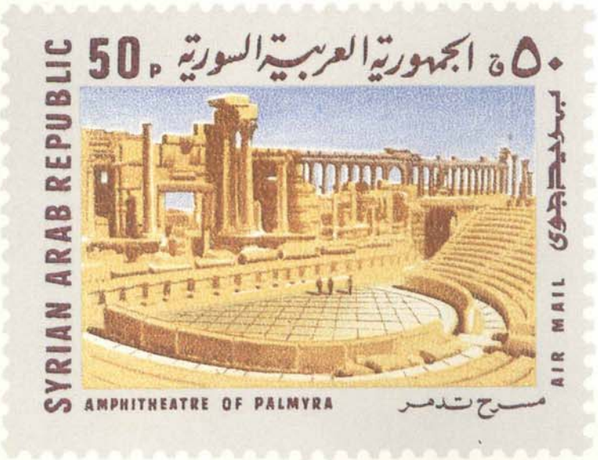

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magazine

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HUNZA:
Shangri-La of Islam

ARAMCO WORLD magazine

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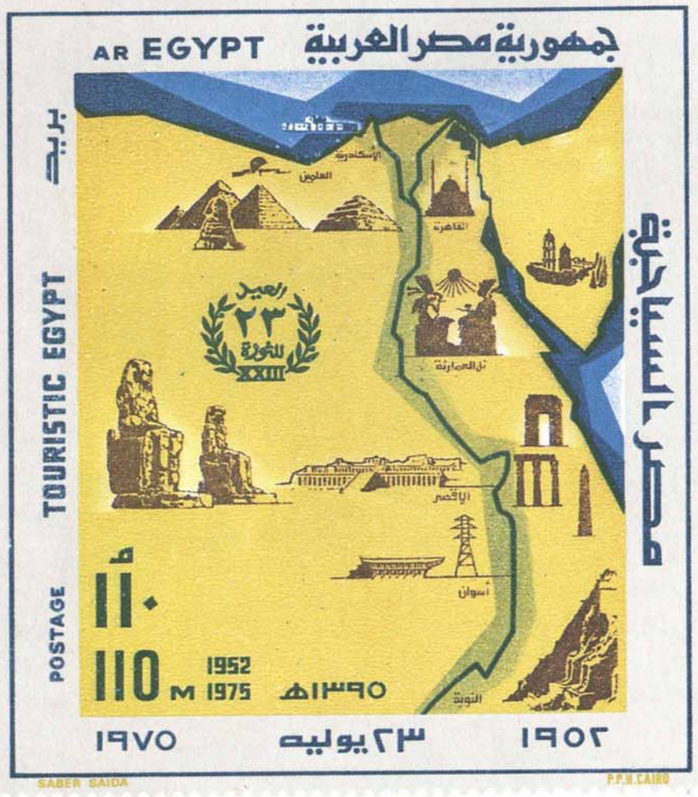
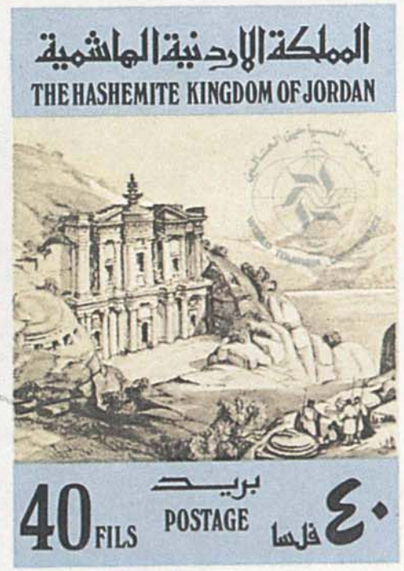
Cover: While vacationing in Pakistan, S. M. Amin, a veteran contributor to *Aramco World Magazine*, photographed the dazzling scenic beauty of the lush Hunza Valley and, as shown here, the towering peaks that surround and guard what some think was the inspiration for Shangri-La in James Hilton's *Lost Horizon*. Back cover: A sample of the touristic motifs that adorn so many stamps issued in the Arab World. From the collection of Robert Obojski.





A PHILATELIC TOUR OF THE MIDDLE EAST

WRITTEN BY ROBERT OBOJSKI
STAMPS FROM THE AUTHOR'S COLLECTION

For obvious reasons, tourist attractions provide fine motifs for postage stamps, and in the Middle East such thematic elements are almost innumerable: the Pyramids, the Great Sphinx at Giza, the Nile feluccas, the great ruins of Baalbek in Lebanon, the Citadel at Aleppo, Petra, the "rose-red" city, and the breathtaking Sakarya Gorge in northwestern Turkey, to name just a few. These and hundreds of other attractions, major and minor, have been featured on literally thousands of varieties of postage stamps turned out by the Middle Eastern countries for more than a century.

Such stamps offer vicarious travel through the length and breadth of the Middle East and its environs – or at least provide a kind of photo album with glimpses of those special tourist attractions that we absolutely must visit in person some day, or, if we have visited them, must never forget.

High – and probably highest – on everyone's list of attractions is Egypt, whose standing as a contemporary tourist draw is mirrored in its rich postal issues. The Pyramids of Giza and the Sphinx, in fact, became a signature on the country's early stamps; some 150 major varieties of Egyptian stamps show them. Among the most dramatic of Egypt's stamps are those air-mail issues showing planes flying over the

Pyramids – the supreme contrast between "the old and the new" – with the Great Pyramid at Giza on the west bank of the Nile graphically reflecting the grandeur of ancient Egypt. Built by King Khufu (Cheops in Greek), the Great Pyramid is the most massive structure ever built by man and is the only one of the "Seven Wonders of the Ancient World" to survive today (See *Aramco World* May-June 1980). Though it has lost nine meters (30 feet) at the apex, it is still 137 meters (451 feet) high – equal to a 40-story building; it is fully 225 meters (740 feet) long on each side of the base, covers 53 square kilometers (13 acres) and contains well over two million blocks of stone averaging two and a half tons each. According to Herodotus, the renowned fifth century B.C. Greek historian, 100,000 men worked for 20 years to build the Great Pyramid.

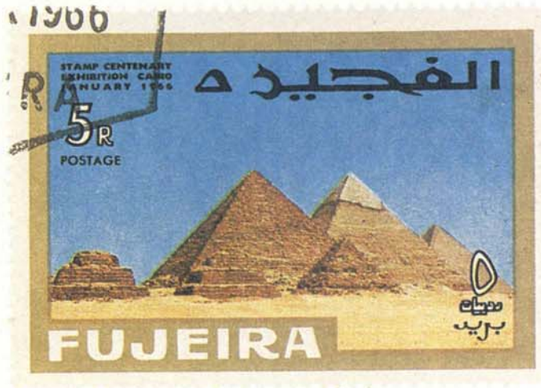
Equally famous, perhaps, is the Sphinx, thought to have been erected during the reign of King Khafre (Chephren in Greek) about 2550 B.C. A tribute to the awesone technical skill of the ancient Egyptian builder, the Sphinx, carved out of natural rock, has a man's head 10 meters high (33 feet) and the body of a crouching lion 53 meters long (172 feet). Over the centuries the Sphinx has been partially buried by desert sands and battered by vandals, but a comprehensive excavation of the project – started in 1817-18 and completed in the mid-1920s – cleared the entire area and disclosed a wall erected during Rome's occupation of Egypt.

On stamps, these monuments show up most recently on a large 10 millièmes specimen released on December 27, 1961 to publicize the installation of floodlights and sound equipment at Giza, an innovation that increased the area's touristic attraction still more. They are also featured on a 110 millièmes air-mail multicolored tourist publicity sheet showing a map of Egypt with major tourist areas marked.

In what is a direct link to tourism, Egyptian stamps also show an impressive array of hotels. Among the hotels depicted are: the famous Shepheard's Hotel, Cairo, 10 millièmes, 1957; the Nile Hilton Hotel, Cairo, 10 millièmes, 1959; another view of the Nile Hilton, 2 millièmes, 1964-67; Tower Hotel, Cairo, 40 millièmes, 1964-67; Cairo Sheraton Hotel, 20 millièmes, 1970; and the Hotel Meridien, Cairo, 100 millièmes air-mail, 1974.

Some of the loveliest stamps reflecting the touristic motif are also the saddest: the stamps from Lebanon issued in the early happy years before civil war and invasion destroyed the country.

Once a part of ancient Phoenicia, Lebanon has within its boundaries Baalbek – among the most magnificent ruins in the world – the famous Cedars of Lebanon, modern cities, old villages, orange and olive groves, banana plantations, wonderful wildflowers and crystal-clear rivers gushing from grottoes. Because all these elements have appeared on Lebanese stamps, the student of Lebanese history and culture has a rich lode of stamps to examine: some 1,700 major varieties since 1924 (this figure includes regulars, airmails,



and such special issues as semi-postals, postage dues and postal tax stamps.

The most famous ruins in Lebanon, of course, are the Roman ruins at Baalbek, some 40 miles east-northeast of Beirut, and they first appear in the 1925 pictorial series.

A Roman colony under the emperor Augustus (27 B.C. – 14 A.D.), Baalbek attained its greatest splendor in the centuries immediately following, when three great temples were built: the Temple of Jupiter, the Temple of Bacchus and the Temple of Venus. Of these, the Temple of Jupiter was the most impressive; indeed it is one of the most imposing structures ever built by the Romans: 97 meters long (300 feet), with 58 massive Corinthian columns, a few of which survive to this day.

In the 1925 series, a general view of the Baalbek ruins is given on the ·25 piaster value, while the Temple of Jupiter is depicted on the 10 piaster; all three temples are featured on the 1930-35 pictorial series in which, interestingly, the massive west wall of the Bacchus Temple is in an excellent state of preservation. Among more recent stamps depicting the grandeur of Baalbek are those included in two separate series issued by Lebanon to publicize "International Tourist Year, 1967."

The 1925 pictorial series also included the famous Cedars of Lebanon, the handsome evergreen that often reaches a height of more than 30 meters (100 feet) and that has been valued through the centuries for its durable and beautiful timber – some of which, according to the Bible, was used by King Solomon to build the Temple of Jerusalem. For Lebanon, these ancient trees are almost a logo and are depicted on the country's flag.

A particularly handsome Cedars of Lebanon set consists of the five values in the 1937-40 regular issue series, and among more recent stamps the 50 piaster regular issue of 1974.

One of the earlier tourist publicity issues is the 1936 set of eight promoting skiing in Lebanon, and there were others later: a 1968 airmail series of five publicizing the 26th International Ski Congress.

Another area that can be "toured" by stamps is Syria, in ancient times a region that included what is now the Republic of

Syria, Lebanon, occupied parts of Palestine, in today's Israel, and Jordan. Because it was a land bridge connecting Europe, Africa and Asia, Syria was a prize for numerous conquerors – and the monuments and ruins on Syrian stamps reflect it. Syria, for example, was a link between the storied civilizations of Mesopotamia and the Nile, a province ruled, in succession, by Egyptians, Babylonians, Assyrians, Hittites, and Persians; it was also conquered and ruled by Alexander the Great and the succeeding Seleucid emperors.

In 64 B.C., Syria was conquered by Rome, came under Byzantine rule in the fifth century and, by 640, had become an integral part of the Muslim Empire. In 1516, the Ottoman Turks won control of Syria and ruled it until the end of World War I in 1918, when France was given a League of Nations Mandate over the Levant. Finally, on September 16, 1941, Syria was proclaimed a Republic, achieved full independence in 1946 and became the Syrian Arab Republic in 1961.

Syrian stamps – issued in great variety – clearly and graphically reflect this lengthy history and the rich cultural traditions that have evolved as a result. From the time France first issued occupation stamps for Syria in November 1919, up to early 1982, more than 1,850 major varieties have been ascribed to Syria.

Most of Syria's earlier issues were overprint-surcharge type stamps, but in 1925 the country issued its first pictorial stamps series featuring famous landmarks from some of its most important cities; it included, for example, a 1 piaster stamp showing the great Umayyad Mosque at Damascus. Damascus mosques were shown again in the 1930-31 pictorial series, the Damascus Museum can be seen on several values from the 1940 regular issue series, and a 1969 set of three airmails commemorates the completion of the new Damascus International Airport, continuing the new-old theme started on the 1 piaster stamp from the 1931-33 series; it shows a plane flying over Damascus' ancient city wall.

Syrian stamps also offer a glimpse of the country's international role. In 1971, for example, Syria turned out a set of four large-sized multicolored stamps to commemorate the 18th International Damascus Fair, specifically featuring the country's fertilizer, electronics, glass and carpet industries. In 1978, the country also issued a set of two to mark the 25th anniversary of the Damascus Fair – which draws tens of thousands of people annually – and also issued a set of five showing various types of flowering cacti to mark its International Flower Show. Some issues offer a short tour around Aleppo, Syria's second most important city, an ancient trade center and today a major industrial city.

One view of Aleppo is given on the 5 piaster in the 1925 pictorial series, and another – of Aleppo's Citadel – is featured on the 1 piaster in the 1930-31 pictorial set.

Other stamps are: a 1957 set of three publicizing the Cotton Festival at Aleppo in the fall; five large-sized multicolored stamps marking the 1970 Industrial and Agricultural Fair; a 1968 airmail issue – a set of three – which shows the Euphrates River Dam Project, one of the modern wonders of the Middle East; and a 1973 regular issue set of two publicizing commencement of the same dam project. There is also a single 60 piaster specimen released in December 1978 commemorating the inauguration of the dam and its associated power plants.

All Syrian stamps are inscribed at least partially in Arabic, the country's official language, though French inscriptions were also used during and after the Mandate period and some English inscriptions are still used.

As noted, countries of the Middle East have collectively produced several thousand varieties of stamps that relate in one way or another to tourism, but because of space limitations only a few types can be mentioned. In addition to "tourist" specimens from Egypt, Lebanon and Syria, for example, there are a number of particularly outstanding issues from Fujeira, Jordan, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and Turkey.

Egypt's first official adhesive stamps – a seven-value set (from 5 paras to 10 piasters) – issued in January 1866 under the aegis of the Turkish khedive Ismail Pasha (ruled 1863-79) – caused a bit of a problem in their day because postal clerks in Europe and elsewhere could not determine either the country of origin or the denomination of the stamps; they apparently thought the stamps were Turkish, not Egyptian. As a result a new series of stamps was ordered for 1867, in which the central design left no doubt as to the country of origin; a German engraver named Hoff executed the dies for the six 1867 values (from 5 paras to 5 piasters), with each depicting the Sphinx and Pyramid at Giza in the center, with Cleopatra's Needle and Hadrian's column in Alexandria in the side panels.

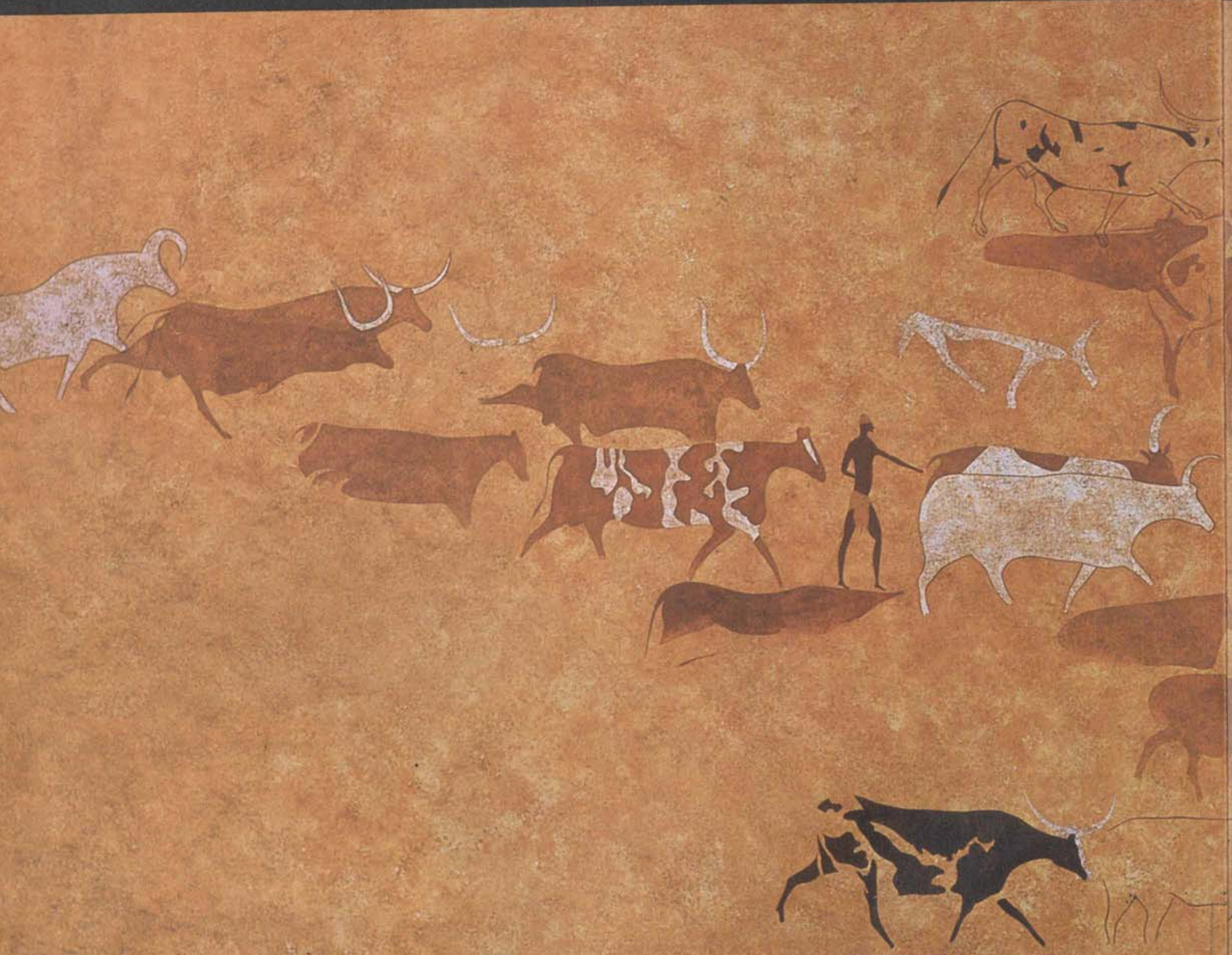
The inscriptions were still in Turkish, but the numerals of value were rendered in European style. This set remained current until 1872, and from then on Egypt's great monuments have been liberally portrayed on her stamp issues. The series of 1872,

1874-75, 1879-93, as well as several others, feature variations of the classic Sphinx and Pyramid vignette – the focus of the mass tourism that is a factor in the economics of not only Egypt, but much of the Middle East.

Robert Obojski, a specialist on Middle East stamps and coins, contributes regularly to Aramco World *magazine.*

PAINTINGS FROM THE PAST

WRITTEN BY MARTIN LOVE PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY MME. IRÈNE LHOTE ©HENRI LHOTE 1959



Two species of cattle can be discerned in this splendid polychrome painting of the "Bovidian" period at Jabbaren.

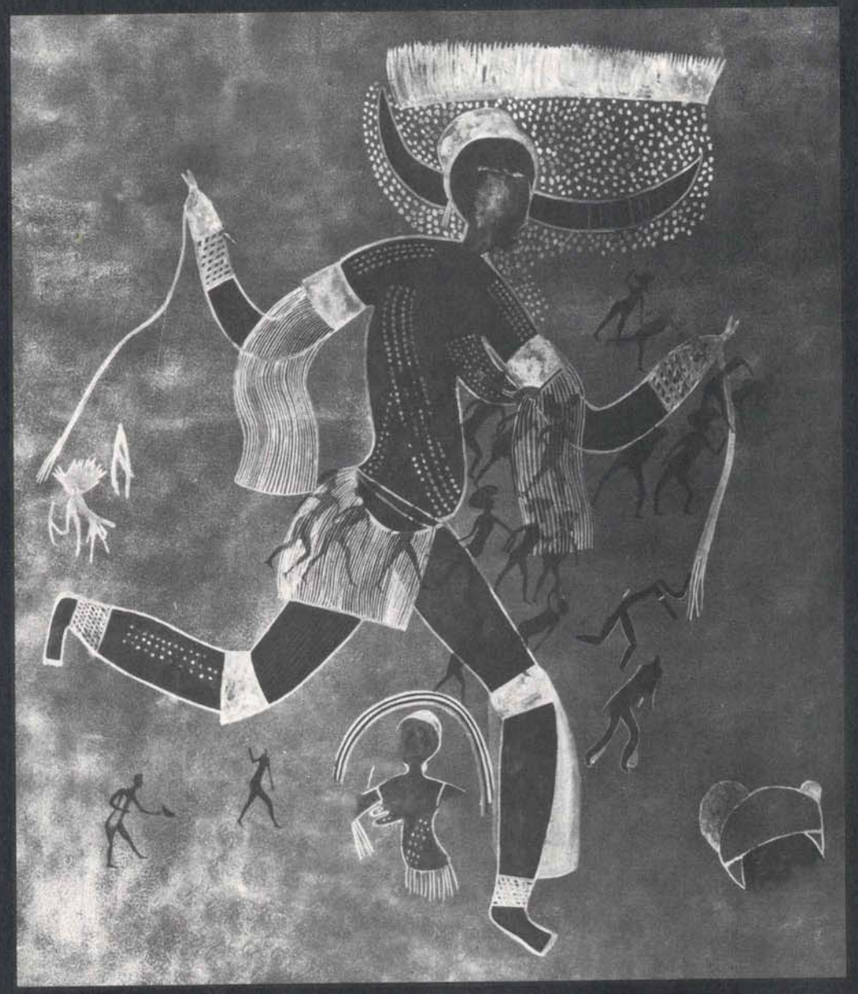
Life in the Sahara – 8,000 years ago

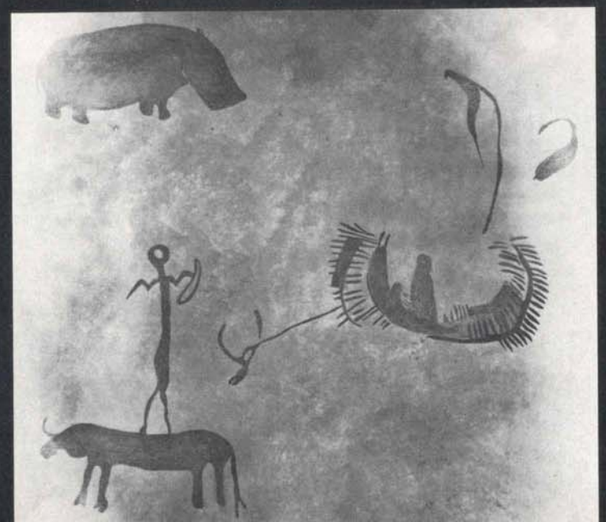
In *The Search for the Tassili Frescoes*, (Hutchinson, London, 1959) Henri Lhote, a French expert on prehistoric cave art, says Algeria's Tassili-n-Ajjer, with its ancient "frescoes," constitutes "the greatest museum of prehistoric art in the whole world."

Actually, the "frescoes" are not frescoes at all; they're prehistoric paintings some 8,000 years old. But Tassili-n-Ajjer is without doubt the great "museum" that Lhote says it is: an assembly of 800 or more magnificent works of primitive art scattered among deserted caves and rock shelters in a virtually inaccessible region on the edge of the Sahara desert.

Today, Tassili-n-Ajjer is virtually empty of life – as is most of the Sahara. But this was not always the case; as various prehistoric campsites hundreds of miles from the Mediterranean littoral attest, the Sahara was once inhabited by man and beast and today the bones of wild creatures, humans and fish can still be found at the campsites – along with stone implements. Once, in fact, great rivers, rising in the mountain massifs of North Africa, were part of a hydrographic system linked to the Niger River, Lake Chad and other lakes whose shrunken remains can still be seen in parts of southern Tunisia. And in the first century B.C., Strabo, the Greek geographer and historian, noted that horses were still common in the Sahara, and, according to the Elder Pliny, a little later, carnivorous beasts still existed in what he called "Libya" – the lands lying to the west of Egypt.

The first European to see the rock paintings and engravings on the sandstone of the Tassili-n-Ajjer was a French soldier named Lieutenant Brenans, who, in 1933, ventured into a deep canyon on the Tassili plateau during a police operation and noticed, on the walls of wadi cliffs, strange figures engraved in the stone: elephants, rhinoceroses, giraffes and, side by side, human figures.





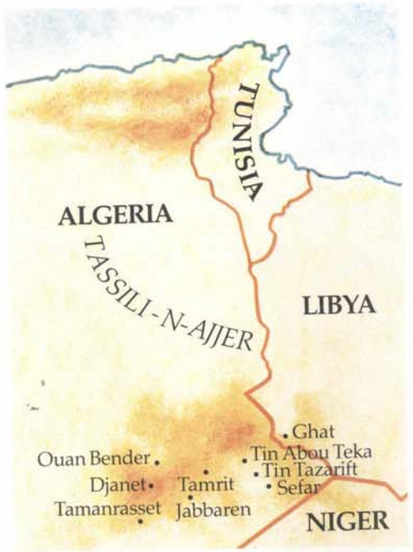
Above: This remarkably detailed painting from Aouanrhet represents "The Horned Goddess" and betrays Egyptian influence. Below: In this charming painting of Hippopotami, also from Aouanrhet, is proof that Tassili was well-watered in the past. Right: A prehistoric masterpiece from Tamrit depicts the antelope known as "addax" and dates from the "Bovidian" period.

A Trip to Tassili

WRITTEN AND PHOTOGRAPHED BY SUSAN H. FINDLEY

In 1978 I went to Algeria with my husband, Marshall, who was to teach for the Algerian Petroleum Institute. We lived in Bourmedes and at Zemouri al-Bahri, a fishing village on the Mediterranean. Whenever we could, though, we traveled south, deep into the country, and in 1979 set out to see the famous rock paintings of the Tassili-n-Ajjer, a series of plateaus in southeastern Algeria on the northern edge of the Central Sahara. These paintings, we'd heard, depict life in the Sahara 7,000 to 9,000 years ago.

The Tassili region is wild, strange country: a region of eroded outcrops of sandstone, intricate ravines and wadis, of contorted columns of rock — all honeycombed with caves. For us, though, the attraction was the rock paintings of Jabbaren, Ouan Bender, Tharen, Tin Tazarift, Titeras-n-Elias , Tin Abou Teka, Ralan-Ralen and at Sefar — thought to be the best collection.



To get there was not easy. We left the Mediterranean coast in a small aircraft bound for Djanet, a former outpost of the French Foreign Legion a few miles from the Libyan-Algerian border. At noon, we landed in Djanet where we met an agent from Altour, the government-run tourist agency, and rode into town in one of the agency's Land Rovers. On the way, we passed large, black, rock mountains in bizarre shapes, and an oasis. A gray mud wall separated the oasis from the road. Beyond the wall were date palms, orange and apricot trees, and beneath the trees were vegetables grown beside irrigation ditches that ran out from a central spring in the oasis.

Djanet, farther on and built around a hill, is a town of mud walls and houses with courtyards and slits for windows. The inhabitants, mostly Tuareg, are thin, tall and dark, with the women in black veils and brightly colored dresses ending in trains.

The next day, after a night in a small hotel in Djanet, we purchased tickets to see the Tassili-n-Ajjer, now part of a national park. By mid morning we had piled into Land Rovers with 10 French-speaking tourists, and soon, at a ledge under a gigantic rock pile, began to climb on foot, heading for a camp called "La Ville de Toile," the Town of Cloth, or Tamrit. Often, a guide would stand on top of a huge boulder and pull each person up one at a time. A fall would have been disastrous.

At one stop, we sat on boulders and looked out over the valley where, long ago, herds of wild animals roamed free and where rivers flowed freely; now, to procure water, engineers have to sink wells into the dry soil.

Finally we saw a red circle on a rock, with a cross inside. It was a Tuareg sign which apparently designated our arrival in Tamrit, actually little more than several tents, including one that served as a kitchen and another used as a communal dining room. The donkeys had arrived ahead of us and were waiting patiently with their attendants along with foam pads, blankets and sleeping bags.

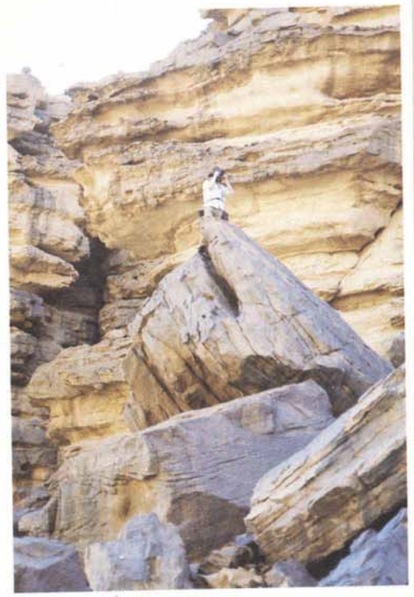
When we had flown south, the entire surface of the earth resembled a series of lakes and rivers, except that instead of water, they contained only sand. The sand rivers and streams created a maze of zig-zag channels and although wind erosion had obviously played a part in their creation, it was almost inconceivable that these formations could have been formed by anything other than large quantities of water.

Now that we were on the ground, what had appeared to be mud or sand, was in fact sandstone, the "lakes" were large, flat areas covered with sand, gravel and flat rocks, and the dried up streams were relatively flat passages between towering rocks. Often the passages were close together and the tall rock formations had partially fallen, or there were cross passages washed or fallen out between the long-dried-up streams.

To travel across the vast areas of the plateau, you sometimes follow a lake bed for more than a mile, then go up one or another "stream"; there are hundreds of stream beds, each miles long, numerous "lakes" and thousands of towering rocks and ridges. Without a guide, it would be impossible to find your way through the area. We heard stories about how French soldiers got lost — and perished — just a short distance from their camps.

Finally, though, we came to a huge overhang. Inside, on the rock wall, there was a lovely drawing of two grazing antelopes with little horns and white breasts. We had arrived at the paintings.

The next day, on the way to Sefar, site of the most extensive rock paintings, the Tuaregs led us through a rock pass in the plateau and into a valley covered with deep sand. The going was difficult, but by noon we reached Sefar's camping area and that afternoon saw the paintings — perhaps the most unusual collection of outdoor paintings in the world.

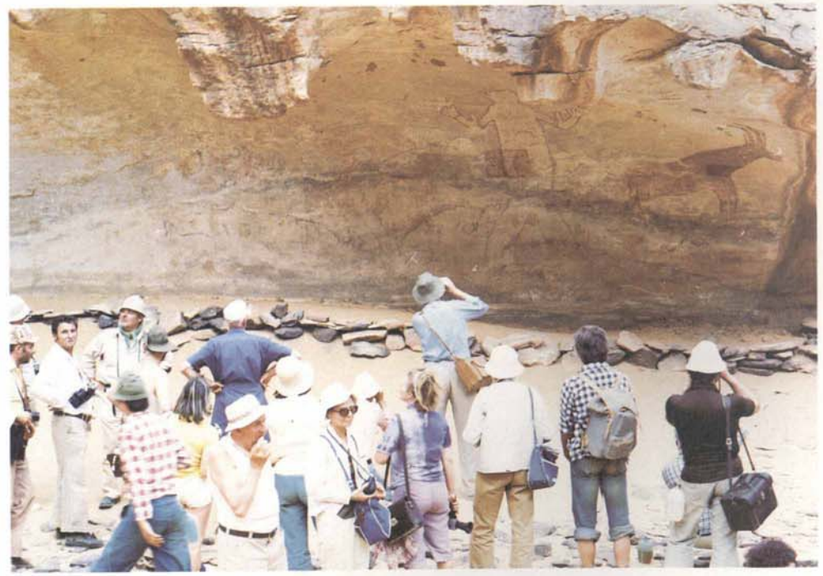


They were on the smooth undersides of rock overhangs and colored vividly with red, white, gray, yellow, blue, purple and black — scenes of how people lived and worked thousands of years ago when the region was green and fertile. Men had stood once on these moon-like plateaus and watched herds of elephants, lions, giraffes and antelope. Today, the animals are gone, but their former presence is recorded in the drawings.

First, we saw a large, red-colored human hand. Then, if one looked closely, one could see another painting underneath of people squatting in a semi-circle. Often we could see paintings superimposed on other paintings, indicating that several generations had lived around Sefar.

We then came to a painting of two men in loincloths, decorated belts, armbands, masks and decorative hair styles, one lifting a stick above his head with his other arm outstretched. The other man has both arms outstretched and appears to be falling, holding onto an animal horn. Another painting showed a proud warrior, elegantly dressed with a headdress similar to those worn by the ancient Egyptians. All of the figures are done in profile with both eyes on one side of the face.

Our eyes then fell on what the French call forme symbolique *— abstract painting. The symbol looked like a large tulip — a long stem topped by circles within circles — and may have been a fertility symbol. Next there was a large giraffe, then running antelope — so precise that the figures came alive — and finally, under another overhang, herds of cattle with long horns, like Texas longhorns, their muscle and bone structures almost medically exact.*



The most impressive and the most famous painting of the Tassili-n-Ajjer is a scene of several different animals being chased by hunters; in the lead there is an antelope, a small, baby-like ghost figure floating over his back. Out of the scene rises a huge figure with outstretched arms and a white mask. His muscles are flexed and on his stomach is the same abstract symbol we had seen before — a circle within a circle.

The paintings we viewed were only a small fraction of the numbers on the rock overhangs at Sefar. We couldn't help wondering how many paintings had been eroded in the thousands of years.

The next morning we marched back to Tamrit to begin our descent from the plateau, spent one more night in the desert, and returned to Djanet. After a night at the hotel, one of two at Djanet, we decided to cross the Sahara to Tamanrasset, some 1,127 kilometers (700 miles) to the northwest where there was an airport and daily flights to Algiers. Two days later I had left Algeria and, on a white sand beach in Jacksonville, Florida, was reflecting on my experience. I realized that I had gone from the prehistoric past to the 20th century in 48 hours and had brought with me unforgettable images left by man before history began.

Not long after, Brenans' discovery came to the attention of Henri Lhote, a pupil of the Abbé Breuil, the great expert on prehistoric cave art in France. In Algeria at the time, Lhote went right to Djanet, a town south of the Tassili plateau, met the lieutenant and, ultimately, examined the discoveries himself. He had, he wrote later, never seen anything "so extraordinary, so original, so beautiful."

Some 15 years later and again in 1956, Lhote led a team of painters and photographers to the plateau to copy and record the art work, under the aegis of the Museum of Man in Paris and with the financial support of the National Center of Scientific Research in France. Altogether, Lhote and his associates discovered some 800 paintings, many of which they carefully copied.

Left: Superbly animated hunting scene from Jabbaren dating from the "Bovidian" period. Above: Incised cattle from Wadi Jerat are rendered with an extraordinary economy of line. Right: A lively battle scene from Sefar.

Exploring the Tassili, Lhote discovered that the prehistoric inhabitants of the region left paintings almost everywhere they found a favorable spot, particularly in their "homes": the caves and rock shelters in which they lived.

At a site called Tan Zoumiatak, for example, Lhote and his team, during their 16-month stay, found a large rock adorned with great, sometimes fanciful human figures painted with yellow ochre, and depictions of various animals that once roamed the region; the same was true of shelters at Tamrit, Timonzouzine, Jabbaren and Aouanrhet.

Most prehistoric art, as Lhote said, was probably inspired by religious beliefs, but the Tassili seemed different because the paintings could be found almost everywhere, often in places that did not appear to be religious sanctuaries. Most, moreover, seemed to have been done without any discernible order – suggesting a simple spontaneity.

In his book, Lhote said that the most

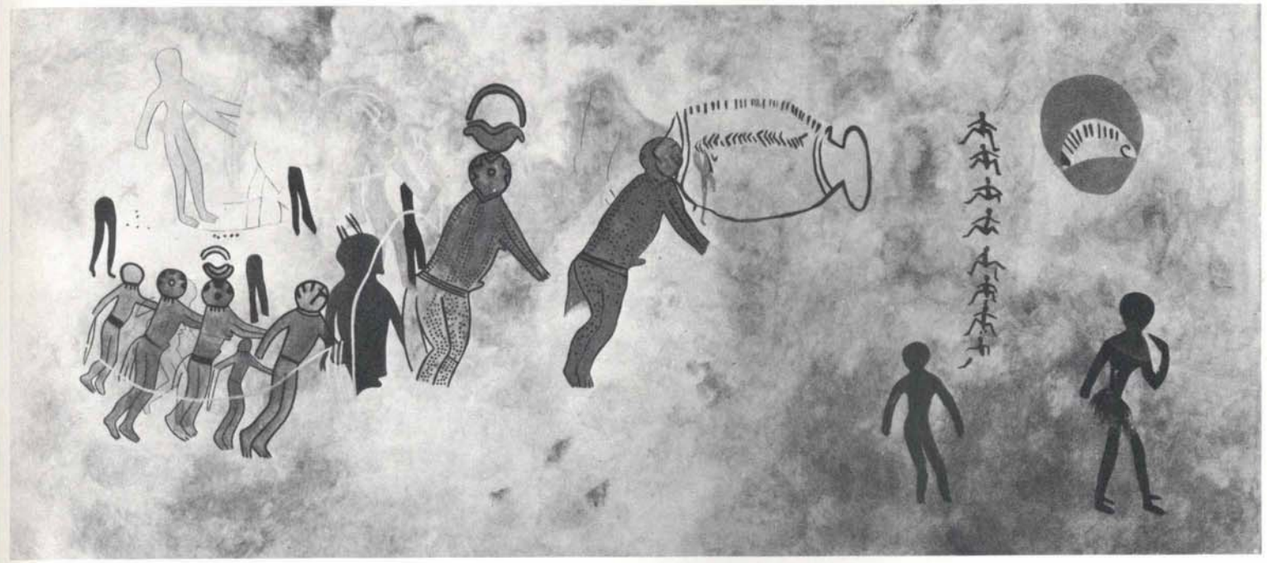
Above: Partial view of the "Great God" from Sefar, painted over an antelope.

Right: A family of "round-heads" with two larger tattooed figures from Jabbaren.

ancient paintings – going back perhaps 8,000 years – consisted of small human figures with schematic bodies and round heads, all painted in violaceous ochre. This round-headed human type, he said, is a basic style found in many paintings of the Tassili, and later phases or periods of artistic development are derived to some extent from this phase. But he also found what he called an "evolved" period, characterized by the appearance of polychrome paintings or round-headed human figures, larger and with thickened limbs. At the end of this latter period, at an undetermined date, he said, a recognizable Egyptian influence crept into the art of the Tassili. In this period Tassili artists painted bodies in red ochre, and added stylized flowers similar to ancient Egyptian motifs. After the "evolved" period, artistic quality declined, the drawings became coarser, the forms heavier, and the details, if any, are carelessly executed. This "decadent" period marked the last attempts by the Tassili's early inhabitants to paint the round-headed figures.

Lhote postulates that the "decadent" period ended when cattle-tending herdsmen migrated to the Tassili and pushed out the indigenous population, a view he bases on the fact that Tassili rock shelters were ultimately covered with a new style of painting consisting of human and animal figures of relatively small size. He said that this new period – "Bovidian" – represents the "greatest naturalistic school" of pre historic art in the world, and pointed out that the animals probably occupied a place of great importance in the lives of the Bovidian herdsmen. Wild animals – the elephant, giraffe, ostrich, gazelle, antelope and lion – were treated no less skilfully by Bovidian artists and the abundance of animal depictions attests to the existence of a damp and rich pasture.

Lhote believed that the herdsmen of the Bovidian period came from the Nile valley, or at least had contact with the peoples of Egypt, and pointed out that some Tassili paintings show boats like the ones that could be seen cruising the Nile 5,000 to 6,000 years ago.



In recent years, Lhote's theories about the provenance has been challenged, in an amusing way, by Erich von Däniken, whose *Chariots of the Gods* proposed that astronauts from another planet had visited the earth sometime in the prehistoric past. As evidence, von Däniken included certain inexplicable facts concerning the 1513 Piri Reis map of the world (See *Aramco World*, January-February 1980) and the Tassili paintings, some of which, von Däniken believes, bear a striking resemblance to the space suits of today's astronauts (See page 14 and below).

But if the historical provenance of the Tassili paintings is uncertain, the artistic value is not. They are, quite simply, beautiful. Like many prehistoric cave paintings – Lascaux, for example, or Les Combarelles – the Tassili paintings have a freshness of color, an economy of line and a simplicity of treatment that are the envy of modern artists – and this is an additional reason to worry about their preservation. Because of their inaccessibility the Tassili paintings were once safe from man's often destructive curiosity. But since Lhote studied them, repeated wetting by tourists – to permit photography – has begun to erode them; and with the protective film of dust gone, the elements can now get at the colors.

Worse, perhaps, Tuareg entrepreneurs began, in 1968, to break off fragments of painted rock and sell them to tourists. The results, as one writer put it, are deterioration and destruction of man's most ancient artistic heritage.

Martin Love is a former assistant editor of Aramco World *Magazine.*

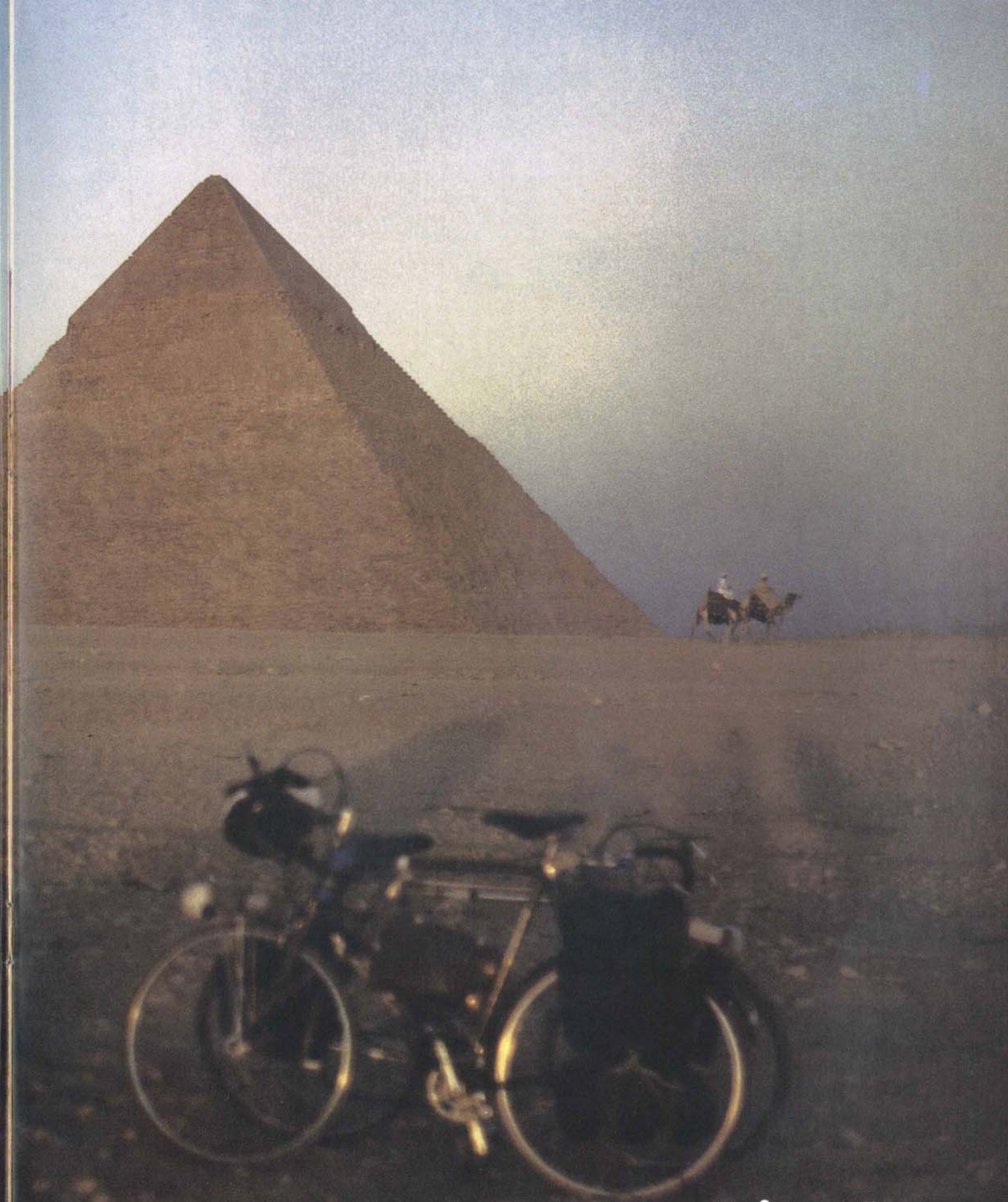
BY BIKE TO DUBAI

WRITTEN AND PHOTOGRAPHED BY TIM GARTSIDE

In October, 1981, Ben Stout and I mounted bicycles on the outskirts of Cairo and headed for the Sudan. Two months later we pedaled wearily and warily into Dubai, having traversed the Arab world from west to east, from Cairo on the Nile to Dubai on the Gulf. In between, we discovered the Arabs.

To many people, the idea of traveling thousands of miles by bicycle probably seems ridiculous. But it's certainly nothing new. In 1894, for example, three Englishmen named Fraser, Lunn and Lower vaulted aboard their cycles near St. Pancras Church in London and set off in the rain to ride right around the world, in what a *Cycletouring* review of *Around the World on a Wheel* said was "... one of the most remarkable cycle rides ever."

It was probably not the first around-the-world ride, the review went on, but it was to be the longest ever undertaken up to that time: "...more than 30,900 kilometers (19,200 miles) of actual cycling through



Across the Arab East~on bicycles

seventeen countries, on roads that more often than not were the roughest of tracks and through countries where very few inhabitants had ever seen a bicycle..."

Our plans were more modest: from Brescia in Italy to Bombay in India, a distance of some 11,140 kilometers (6,500 miles), covering a total of 11 countries. But biking is still a grand way to see the world and the cycling is nowhere near as difficult; compared to the 1894 sturdy, one-speed Victorian bicycles used by Fraser, Lunn and Lower, our lightweight, 10-speed bicycles were like motorcycles. We could manage all but the steepest inclines easily and were able to cover 100 kilometers a day.

Naturally, we kept our gear to a minimum: 20 kilos (45 lbs) each of clothes, tools, spares, a small, multi-fuel stove, cooking utensils and sleeping bags, plus a dome-shaped, self-supporting tent (by means of fiberglass poles) that we could put up anywhere: on concrete, on sand or, on one occasion, half way up a stairwell. We carried that gear in four panniers – two on the front, two on the rear on each bike, clipped onto special frames that permitted us to pack up and be off in about 20 minutes.

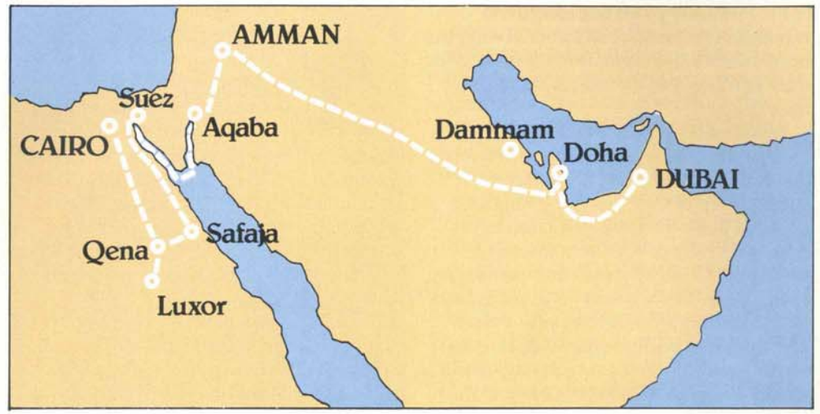
By the time we reached the Middle East – from Italy, via Yugoslavia, Greece and the Mediterranean – we had fallen into a rough routine that varied depending on terrain and weather. We did have a schedule, but we were not in a race, so it was only rarely that we had to push ourselves; there is something intrinsically pleasing, after all, in riding bikes through the countryside and meeting and

Heading for the Jordan Valley the cyclists buy supplies.

speaking to people, all at a pace allowing you to absorb everything that is going on. Indeed, our daily rhythm was tuned to the progress of the sun, since neither of us wore a watch.

Cairo, our first stop in the Middle East, was striking: full of people, full of dust and full of character, its streets a chaotic bustle of horse carts and donkey carts and a staggering array of rickety buses, trucks, pre-war English motorbikes and other veteran vehicles disguised with layers of grime. Nevertheless, it was a relief when, on a hot October morning, we left the city behind and headed for Luxor.

Originally, we had planned to travel south into The Sudan and sail from Port Sudan to Jiddah, Saudi Arabia, but as Sudanese visas proved difficult to get, we revised our plans: after Luxor we would retrace the 60 kilometers (37 miles) along the Nile road to Qena, ride across the Eastern Desert to Port Safaja on the Red



Sea coast, north to Suez and then sail to Aqaba, Jordan.

First, though, we had to get to Luxor and we did, after a leisurely, pleasant ride during which we began to see why the Arabs are famous for gracious hospitality. A few days down the Nile road, for example, outside of a small cafe, we were introduced to the "hubble bubble" pipe and entertained by a man named Salah, who, Ben Stout's diary records, "was truly gargantuan and at one stage entertained us all by flexing his bulging pectorals."

A day or so later, near Asyut, we were sitting on the western bank of the Nile canal when a distinguished local man invited us to lunch and, since he lived on the other side of the canal, loaded us, bikes and all, aboard an old, wooden boat which a young boy ferried across to us by pulling on a fixed wire runner. Once over, we were led to our host's house on a large, well equipped farm, where the children laid out cushions for us, served us hot goat's milk and large, juicy pomegranates – the start of a great meal that eventually included soup, a great steaming bed of rice topped with succulent pieces of lamb, freshly baked bread and tea, after which we re-crossed the canal and started south.

In Luxor, we arrived late one afternoon just in time to find a hotel and ride to the *Son et Lumière* at Karnak temple, three kilometers north of Luxor, a show so effective that you can feel yourself going back into the Egypt of millennia past.

Next on our schedule was the Valley of the Kings on the western side of the Nile. But in lieu of the paved road to the valley – the site of the famous tomb of Tutankhamen – we decided to climb a mountain track on our bicycles. It was not an unreasonable proposition, despite the pressing heat, and we did actually ride a few hundred yards along the ridge that separates the Valley of the Kings from the river side.

From Luxor, in accordance with the new plan, we headed for Qena, bought supplies to sustain us for the day and a half's ride to the coast – potatoes, oranges, bananas, grapes, bread and water – and pedaled out of town. We weren't sure what to expect, because one friend had described it in grim terms: "100 miles of nothing, where water tankers will run you off the road and you'll be chased by mad desert dogs."

Actually, it was lovely. The road climbed gently for 96 kilometers (60 miles) and we felt an enchanting harmony between the

In Egypt they crossed the Nile by ferry for lunch.

◀ *In the Valley of the Kings the cyclists rode along the ridge.*

silent progress of our bikes and the vast stillness of the desert – though in Safaja the following day, our friend's forecast proved more accurate when several dogs began to chase us. We managed to out-pedal them, however, and rode on to Suez.

En route to Suez, we made a two-day excursion to St. Paul's, a Coptic monastery, 19 kilometers (12 miles) off the main road and up a very rough, gravelly track. It was dark when we arrived and there was only the faint glimmer of candlelight through a window high up one of the monastery walls. We pitched our tent outside, and in the morning one of the monks showed us around the monastery; pointing out the vital well, the only source of water for the monks and for their gardens and the mill that ground their grain.

From Suez we sailed – on the *El Arish* – to Aqaba in Jordan, steaming southwards down the Gulf of Suez, around the southern tip of the Sinai peninsula and then north up the Gulf of Aqaba. From Aqaba we rode north along the scenic, but very hilly, Kings' Highway to Amman, an idyllic tour; the road was good yet carried little traffic and the scenery was breathtaking, with the highway twisting, turning and dipping along the top of the mountain range which falls away to the west to the Jordan Valley and the Dead Sea.

One highlight, of course, was Petra, with its famous al-Siq defile, a narrow, winding mile-long gorge, only 4 or 5

En route to Suez the cyclists visited a Coptic monastery.

meters wide (13 feet) with the symmetric and almost parallel walls rising up some 24 meters (80 feet) to the sunlight. On the walls, at roughly hip height, is a carved-out channel, a conduit for water, and at the end of the defile the visitor is rewarded with an interesting site: "The Treasury," one of the magnificent buildings sculpted out of Petra's sheer reddish rock.

In Jordan, we encountered our first major mechanical problem. North of Shaubak, my wheel shed its tiny ball bearings all over the road and we were suddenly faced with a very tricky repair. Although a bicycle is, in principle, a simple machine, it has hundreds of moving parts and sometimes, just occasionally, something goes wrong that is best repaired in a properly equipped workshop. This was one of those occasions.

Before starting, of course, we realized that workshops dealing in lightweight bikes would be few and far between in the desert, and so we had brought the necessary 60 or so spare ball bearings. It was a painstaking job to place them one by one into the freewheel body, but we eventually managed it and continued on the trip.

Another highlight of Jordan was the ride through the Hasa and Mujib wadis, two immense dry river valleys cutting across the mountains to the Jordan Valley. They are absolutely massive and, on a bike, terrifying to descend and grueling to climb.

On the other hand, whooshing down a steep slope on a bicycle is one of *the* great thrills in bicycling. The sense of speed is tremendous and all that's between you and the road is a frail 13 kilograms of thin steel tubes, wire and rubber (28 pounds) as, at 80 kilometers an hour (50 mph), you ride around curves sharp enough to induce a heart murmur.

Still, we had decided to try it and so, slowly, we climbed the Mujib. Just before beginning the descent it began to rain and a woman invited us into her house for a cup of tea. That day, Jordan felt almost like England; the weather was wet, misty and cold and water for tea was on the boil.

By the time we had our tea, the weather had cleared and there we were at the top looking down on that daunting valley. It *was* steep – so steep that our fingers cramped from braking. Luckily, there was little traffic, so we could use most of the road – swinging wide and low around the corners. On the fastest sections, though, we wondered: what would happen if the steering froze? Or if a front tire burst? Or if the thin cables that work the brakes suddenly snapped?

At the bottom of the valley, the gradient eased, the road straightened and for a short while we were able to coast. Then, as our speed slackened, we saw a small truck caught in the sand off the road and we stopped to help. The driver, very pleased, offered us a lift and, when we declined, shook his head in disbelief. Surely, he was saying, we didn't intend to cycle up there? Six miles?

We did, of course, intend to do just that – a full hour of hard, head-down, sweat-sodden riding. A gang of roadworkers watched us – wondering, no doubt, about the two idiots sweating their way up the road. At the top, panting, but euphoric, we sat down and looked back over the valley. It was an awesome sight, the huge wadi with the thin scar of the road fading out of view.

In Amman, Jordan's capital, we were delighted to get a transit visa for Saudi Arabia. There was a problem: we had to pedal 2,000 kilometers (1,243 miles) in only a few days. Just over the border, therefore, we hitched a ride with a British truck driver named Bob "the Glob" Hedley en route to Damman with a cargo of machinery. He was driving the road that parallels the Trans-Arabian Pipeline.

For us, it was a luxurious change to sit in the air conditioned cab, listening to stereo cassettes as the gently curving road unwound, mile by mile, beside the ever present pipeline. Bob, however, who had been driving the Europe-Middle East run for some time, wasn't quite as impressed; he told us what it was like to drive long distances, work long hours and face hazards of accidents and breakdowns in wild sections of Turkey or, for that matter, in Saudi Arabia's deserts. It was, he suggested, an arduous life.

To us, of course, it didn't seem arduous at all. Roaring along the straight black strip of asphalt was hypnotically pleasant, and camping at night in the silence of the desert under the stars was sheer joy. Furthermore, we covered 1,300 kilometers (800 miles) in 33 hours and when Bob dropped us off at the road to Qatar we felt so good that instead of waiting for another truck we cycled off towards Doha.

By then we were feeling rather pleased with ourselves; Bob and another long distance driver, Dick Snow (See *Aramco World,* November-December 1977) had indicated that we might be the only cyclists ever to use the Tapline Road. In all their years of driving, they said, they had never seen or heard of any others on that highway.

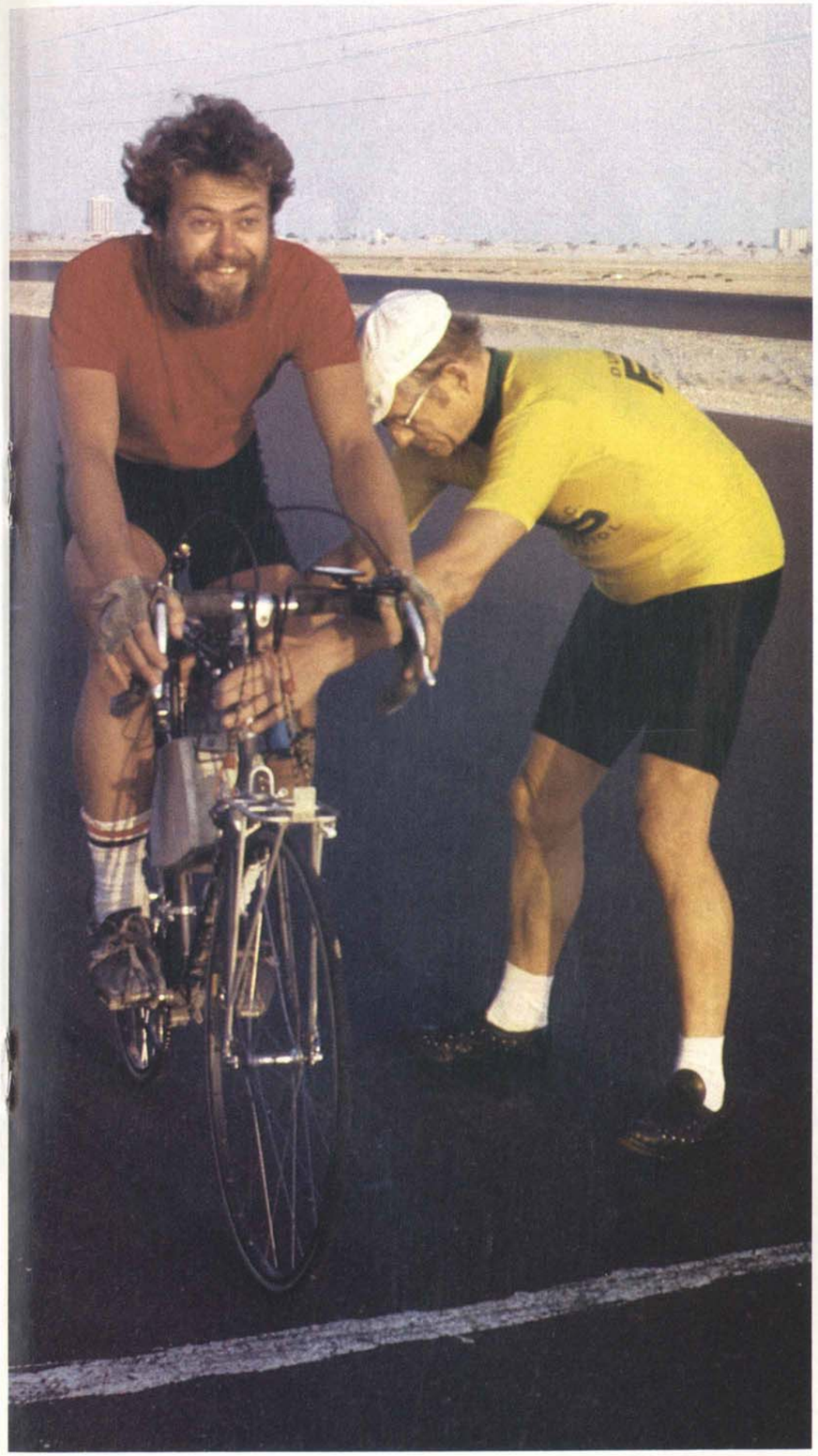
After 16 kilometers (10 miles) we were lucky to be swinging aboard a second truck and heading towards Doha. It was late by then and in the darkness we could see the flares at oil installations – flares, we learned, that would soon go out forever when Saudi Arabia's great gas processing program (See *Aramco World*, November-December 1982) was completed.

In Doha, we were interviewed for the local radio and newspapers. After a few days in Doha, we moved on to Dubai and got involved in, of all things, a bicycle race when an English friend, a keen racing cyclist, decided that we could not leave the Emirates without taking part in one of the regular weekly races, an 80-kilometer time trial (50 miles). A time trial is a race against the clock only – the riders set off alone at one-minute intervals – and we were not completely taken with the idea; we could do that in England. Nevertheless, we did participate – as Dubai's daily paper, the Khaleej Times, made clear:

> Dubai Protectol Cycling Club members refused to cancel their 80 km time trial despite the very strong winds and rising sand which blew across the course on the Bayadat Road on the weekend. High spot of the day was the surprise entry of two cyclists who had ridden from the UK on their way to India and Pakistan. Ben Stout and Tim Gartside had the fitness but not the speed to match the race-trained members of the Protectol Club. They both, however, put up fine performances with Tim Gartside running the last 3 kilometers with his cycle over his shoulder having decided with a puncture so close to home a tyre change would have cost more time.

One of the most attractive aspects of cycling is that a traveler on a bike is unrestricted. He – or she – with a tent is completely independent. Ben and I, for example, meandered where we wanted, stopping as the whim took us. Furthermore, we got great response; people everywhere seemed to respect the effort that went into our travel by bike – although they didn't always fully appreciate the rewards.

We were, though, limited by our funds; on a couple of occasions, usually when we were depending on a ferry, we had no option but to move on. One example was the *Dwarka,* the ferry from Dubai to Karachi, a monthly service. Though we could have easily spent more time in the Emirates, we had to catch the ferry or wind up with only one month on the Indian sub-continent, our final destiny. Thus, exactly two months after our arrival in Egypt, we left Dubai for places like Agra and its Taj Mahal, bringing with us memories of hospitality, stunning scenery, marvelous weather and some of the most fascinating archeological sites in the world.



To their surprise the Trans-Arabia cyclists wound up in a time trial bicycle race in Dubai. ▶

Tim Gartside, 26, began to ride a bicycle seriously as a nine year old news boy in Melbourne, Australia and later participated in the Great British Bike Ride — from Scotland to Lands End. On his return from Bombay he and a friend opened a "bicycle-taxi" service in London.

Against all the odds, she "nobly persevered"...

Alexine and the Nile

WRITTEN BY LEO HAMALIAN
ILLUSTRATIONS BY MICHAEL GRIMSDALE

In the story of the search for the sources of the Nile, one explorer – rarely mentioned – was Dutch and female. Alexine Tinne, who would have been one of the richest heiresses in The Netherlands, squeezed into her short life enough adventure to satisfy a dozen ordinary mortals, and then died tragically and dramatically in the Sahara.

Nothing in the early years of Alexine Tinne's life hinted at the extraordinary experiences she was to survive – or the unexpected end she was to meet. Because her family was both affluent and liberal, she received the best European education available and spent summers visiting friends in London and Paris, where she learned to speak both English and French fluently. But then, at 19, she went on a tour of Egypt.

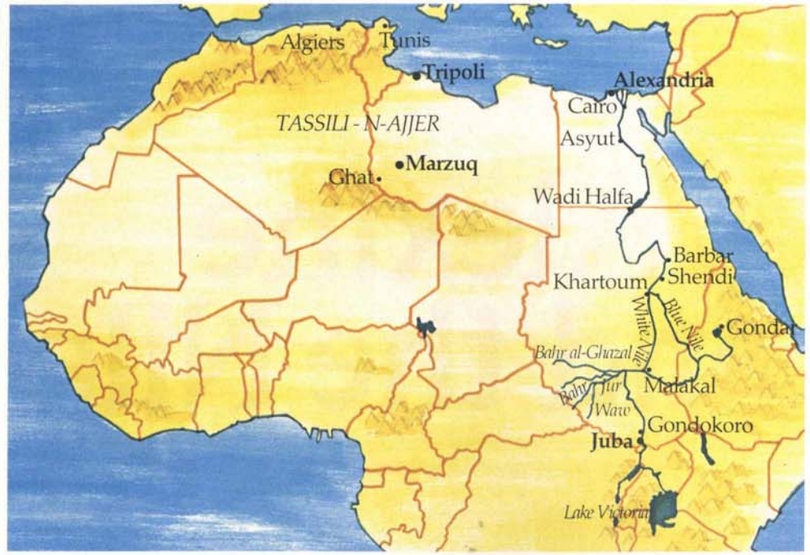
For Alexine, Egypt was a turning point. Inspired by its ancient glories, she and her mother set out on an arduous five-day trek by donkey and camel to the Red Sea and, later, also toured the Holy Land – at a time when the area was still unsafe for western women – and went on to Damascus. It was, in a sense, a prelude to the more perilous journeys ahead.

Those journeys began in 1857 when Alexine, then 22, began to explore the Nile in earnest. With her mother she started up the Nile a second time, reaching Wadi Halfa, some miles upstream from the temple of Rameses II, before the formidable second cataract forced them to turn back. Then, three years later, with still a third woman – Alexine's aunt, Adriana – she began to prepare for a major expedition into the Sudan towards the unknown source of the Nile.

For this venture their family's money was important, since they were able to afford a small steamer; it would tow two boats laden with provisions to feed them and their Arab crew, their servants, some soldiers, a horse, a donkey and five dogs (which had to be put ashore twice a day).

Up to that time, the most extensive expedition to get beyond Khartoum by Europeans had been made under the former Viceroy of Egypt, Muhammad Ali, but in three attempts even this party got no further than just beyond Gondokoro, where dangerous rocks and rapids had blocked further progress up river. Nevertheless, the Dutch party pressed on to a place called Jabal Dinka, after the tribe of Dinkas. There supplies began to run low and the mother, Harriet, had to return to Khartoum on the steamer for fresh stores. In Khartoum she met a startled English couple named Baker – the discoverers of Lake Albert. When she told them of their plans Samuel Baker wrote to his brother: "There are Dutch ladies traveling without any gentlemen... They must be demented. A young lady alone with the Dinka tribe... they really must be mad. All the natives are naked as the day they were born."

Demented or not, Harriet got her supplies, returned to Jabal Dinka, and with Alexine and Aunt Adriana, steamed upstream again – in spite of fierce mosquitos which bit them until their faces swelled beyond recognition, tropical



fevers which laid them low, and "floating islands" that threatened to wreck the steamer. During her leisure time, Harriet kept a notebook entitled "A Few General Directions for Travellers on the Nile," in which she advised neophytes on the river to avoid draughts, to wear flannel around their loins, and to maintain a proper diet – "an English diet, not too much fruit and well-cooked vegetables."

Meanwhile, the now-famous Speke and Grant – sent by the Royal Geographical Society on a second expedition to Lake Victoria – had arrived in the southernmost part of the Sudan and were running short of supplies. Learning of this, Alexine generously decided to transport food and medicine to them in her steamer. But then, John Petherick, an English consul assigned to help Speke, set off overland with supplies, and Alexine resumed her exploration of the Nile.

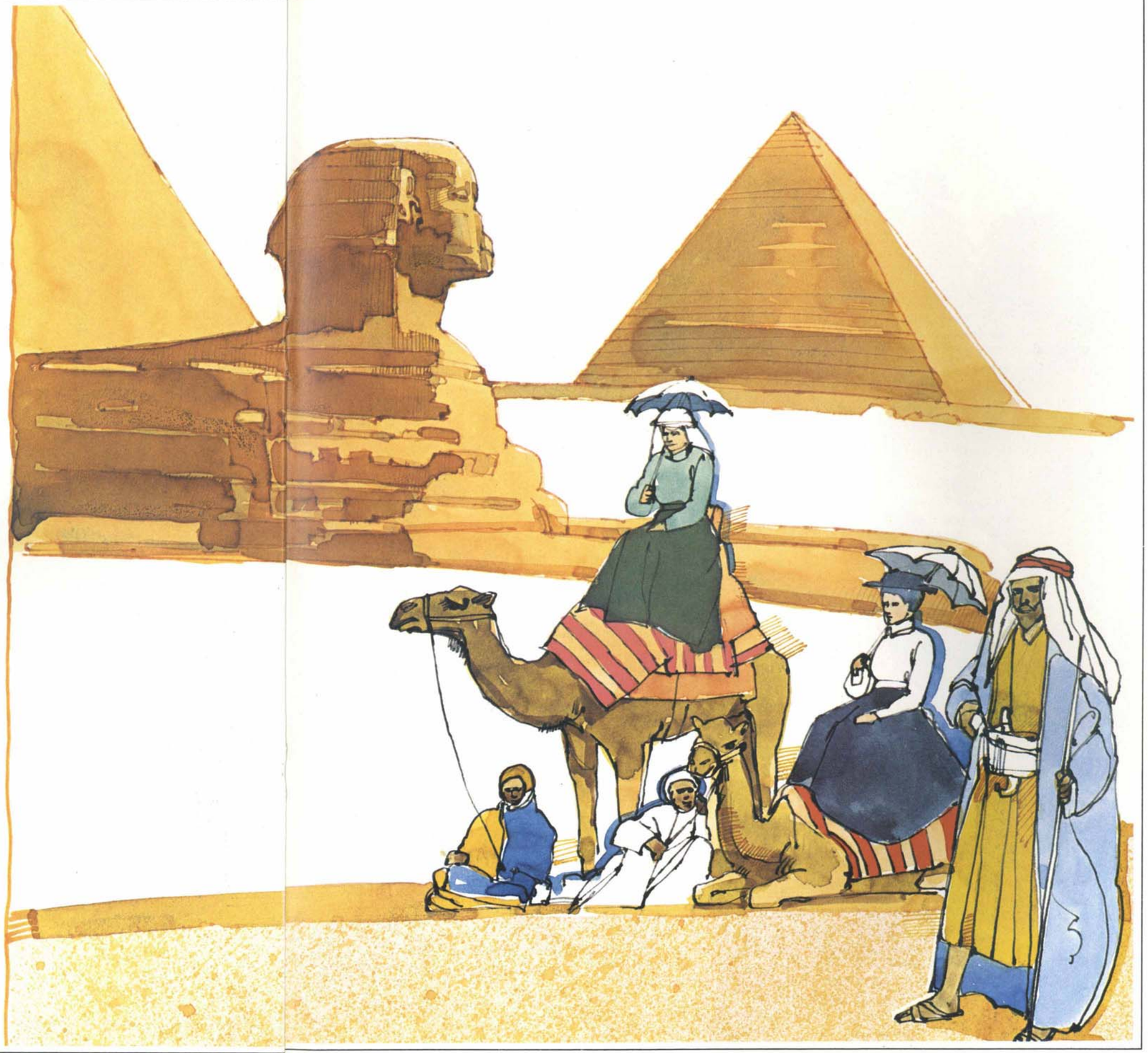
In Gondokoro, their approach generated a wave of excitement; their little steamer, the first such craft ever seen there, caused a sensation when it docked. From Gondokoro the Dutch ladies – though told that it was impossible to go beyond – promptly set off on an excursion up river and got as far as Juba before retreating. Then, however, Alexine fell desperately ill with fever and the party had to spend a full month among the Shilluk tribesmen while she recuperated. They took advantage of the time to question the Shilluks about the source of the Nile but got nowhere; the tribesmen would merely laugh and say that it had none.

The ladies did not believe this, of course – Victorian ladies were like that – but since reconnaissance on foot had revealed a series of rapids too trying for Alexine, the party had to retreat; a month later they were back in Khartoum, justly proud of their achievement: no other European women had ever gone so far up the Nile.

By then, however, Alexine had been bitten by the exploration bug, and sometime during the return to Khartoum decided to explore the great unknown interior of Africa by steaming up the Bahr al-Ghazal, a major tributory of the Nile, and then moving overland to Lake Chad – thought by some to be the source of the Bahr al-Ghazal. She may also have hoped to discover the source of the Congo River – another great goal for Victorian explorers; Captain Speke himself had called it "the last feature of interest in Africa."

Speke, in fact, warned the ladies against the undertaking. "I should be sorry to see any ladies attempt an exploring journey when failure would inevitably be the result, not from want of pluck, but the fearful effects of African climate, which cannot be overestimated," he wrote. But Alexine was adamant and subsequently they set out.

To reach the River of Gazelles, they had to steam 483 kilometers (300 miles) up the White Nile – again moving towards Gondokoro. After being paddled up the unexpectedly shallow tributory – reduced to a muddy trickle – the cavalcade started across the savannah toward the Jur river. But by then the rainy season had begun



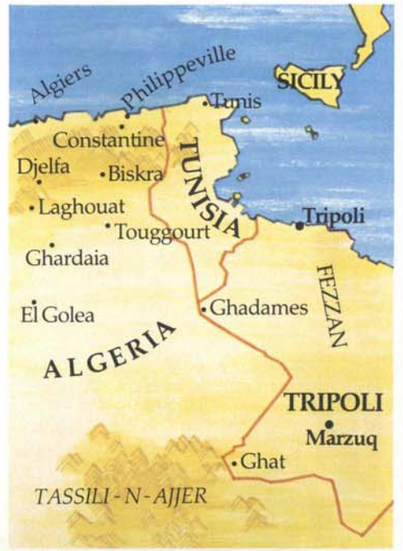
and soon they were in trouble. Storms lashed them with hail and lightning; their tents collapsed; they were constantly cold and wet. Worse, the soldiers hired to protect the party mutinied over rations. Then Alexine became seriously ill and no sooner had she rallied than her mother, her favourite maid Flora, and one of the servants came down with the fever – and, tragically, succumbed to it.

For Alexine this was a terrible blow. She was devastated by grief and guilt, thinking that had she not persuaded her mother to come on the expedition, her mother would not have died. Sadly, friends and relatives in The Hague seemed to share that sentiment and Alexine, shamed, decided she could never return home. Meanwhile, a relief mission sent out by Adriana from Khartoum met Alexine at Waw and helped her to return there – where tragedy struck again. Adriana also came down with fever and in July 1864, less than seven weeks later, died.

By now, Alexine's exploits had inspired admiration and praise in the newspapers. She was described as "young and beautiful," "remarkably accomplished," "a fearless horsewoman," "mistress of many languages including Arabic" – a reputation that helped when, later, she moved to Algeria and Tunisia, and began to speak out candidly against the suffering involved in slavery, and set up a house for liberated slaves next to her own home.

During this time, Alexine also made the papers by experimenting with an unusual bicycle specifically designed, like the sidesaddle, for the ultra-modest Victorian lady. The *London Times* wrote: "Miss Tinne recently imported into Barbary a velocipede of the latest Parisian manufacture: but finding it not adapted to the sands of the Great Desert, she presented it to the Pasha of Tripoli."

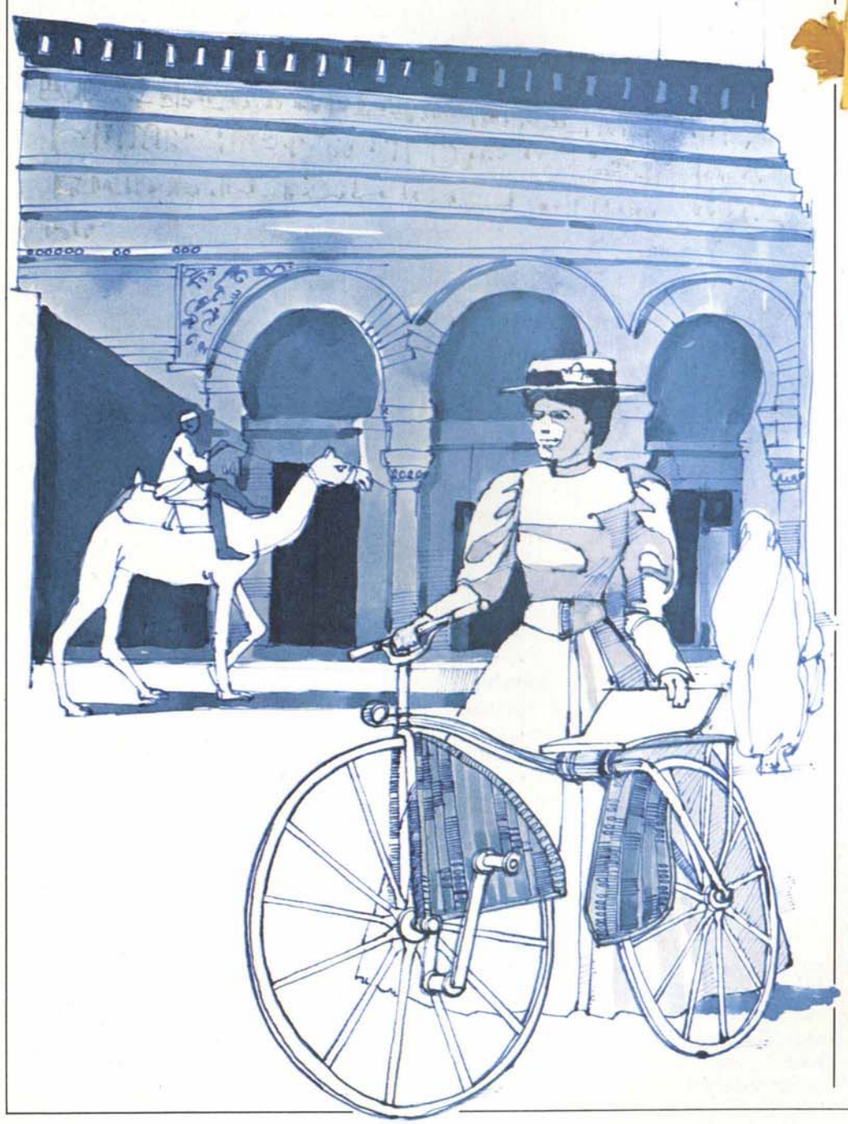
Alexine, however, was thinking of more important things than sidesaddle bicycles; she had plans for the "Great Desert" – the



Sahara. In 1869, determined to become the first Western woman to cross it, she recruited two Dutch sailors, persuaded them to join a caravan, and headed for Lake Chad, the goal of her expedition some years before.

Her plan was to follow the route pioneered two years earlier by the French explorer Duveyrier, the only European who had ever spent any time in the land of the Tuareg. From the Tassili-n-Ajjer plateau (See page 7) she would head south to Lake Chad, then on to the sultanate of Bornu, and through Darfur to the Nile at Khartoum.

In that era, an expedition like that would have compared with Peary's polar expeditions. Nevertheless, the first phase



went well; her caravan reached Marzuq, 800 kilometers (500 miles) due south, encountering nothing more ominous than the usual sandstorms. But in Marzuq, Alexine met a guide who persuaded her to let him escort the caravan through the unknown Tuareg country to a rendezvous with the Tuareg chieftain Ichnunchen at the Oasis of Ghat before pushing on to Lake Chad. Alexine agreed, and on July 21, her party left Marzuq, with the guide.

Knowing the hazards of desert travel, Alexine had taken along not only an ice machine for Ichnunchen, but also two iron tanks of water carried by camels. Unfortunately, however, rumor preceded her that the tanks were actually full of gold coins, not water, and as they left an oasis called Wadi Shergui to set out again for Ghat, 12 riders on camels rode into camp. They said they had been sent by Ichnunchen to lead them to Ghat, but ominously, their guide quickly slipped away and within minutes an altercation broke out between Alexine's Arab servants and the newcomers. When one of the Dutch sailors tried to break up the fight, a Tuareg warrior ran him through with a lance, and the Tuaregs then turned on Alexine, who raised her hand as though commanding them to cease. Mistaking her gesture as an attempt to draw her revolver, one of the Tuareg, using his sword, cut off her hand and in the ensuing chaos, the other Dutch sailor and several Arabs, while trying to defend Alexine, were killed before the marauders sped off leaving Alexine to bleed slowly to death.

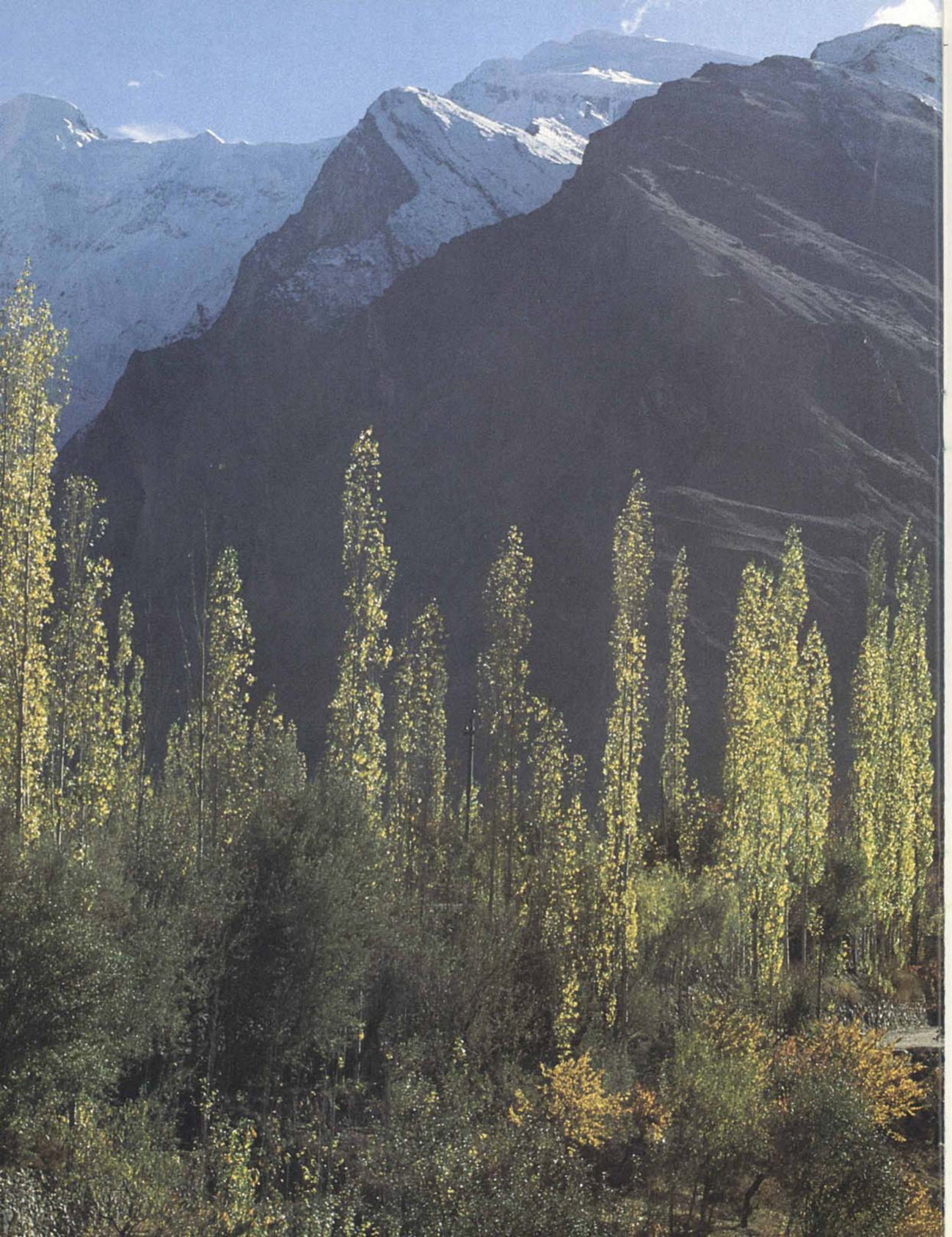
In retrospect – and considering the status of Victorian women – Alexine, her mother and her aunt were extraordinary. Though, they may seem like dilettantes, they brought back much valuable material relating to the climate, geology, animals and plants – in particular, a series of skillful botanical drawings subsequently published as *Plantae Tinneanae*, a book still available in many libraries. Unfortunately, though her life is only sketchily documented.

Her adventures, in fact, are preserved in just one diary which her mother kept, and according to her biographer, the entries are so incomplete that they do not make a readable record by themselves. Alexine did write many charming letters, but like the crates of her ethnological specimens which were stored in London – and like the small English church erected in her memory in The Hague – almost everything was destroyed by Hitler's bombs in World War II.

Still she is remembered – in a little obelisk near Juba in the Southern Sudan which records her name at the farthest point she was to reach in her search, and in a memorial provided by none other than Dr. Livingstone, the explorer and missionary, who said:

> The work of Speke and Grant is deserving of highest commendation, inasmuch as they opened up an immense tract of previously unexplored country. But none rises higher in my estimation than the Dutch lady, Miss Tinne, who after the severest domestic afflictions, nobly persevered in the teeth of every difficulty.

Leo Hamalian, a professor of English at the City College of New York, is author of such books as Burn after reading, As others see us, In search of Eden, New Writing from the Middle East, Ladies on the Loose *and* D. H. Lawrence in Italy.



The peaks of The Karakorum Mountains guard...

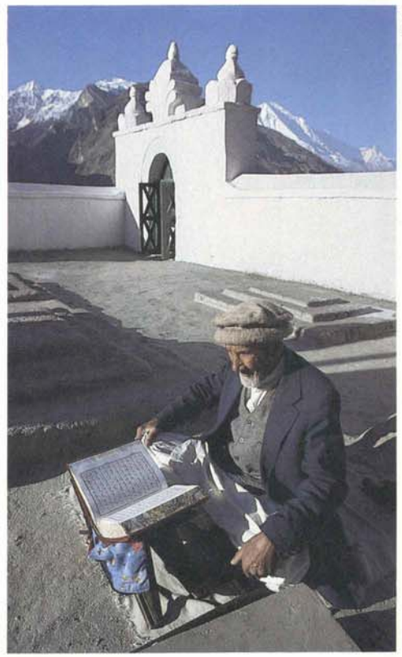
HUNZA:
Shangri-La of Islam

WRITTEN BY MICHAEL WINN
PHOTOGRAPHED BY S. M. AMIN

Legend suggests that the only religions that flourish in high mountains are Buddhism and Hinduism. Actually, Islam flourishes in the Atlas Mountains of Morocco, in the coastal ranges of Yemen and Oman, among the peaks of northern and southern Turkey, in the Pamirs of Afghanistan and Russia and, above all, in the very highest reaches of the world: the western end of the Himalayan massif in northern Pakistan.

In that region, the Karakorum Mountains stand like a clan of giants shrouded in a gargantuan cloak of ice and snow; the average Karakorum peak is above 6,100 meters (20,000 feet), double that of the Alps or Rockies, and higher, on the average, than the Nepalese behemoths surrounding Mt. Everest. It's a forbidding, starkly lunar terrain, and in it, amid glaciers and sub-polar ice fields, lies a lovely valley called Hunza, possibly the highest outpost of Islam in the world.

In some ways, Hunza resembles the fictional Shangri-La in James Hilton's novel *Lost Horizon.* Its people are famous for robust health and a longevity said to often exceed 100 years – an important part of *Lost Horizon.* To reach Hunza used to be one of the most difficult feats in the world – another feature of Shangri-La – which probably accounts for romantic legends that have grown up about the valley. The standard point of departure was Gilgit, Pakistan's major terminus for trade with China, and in the old days the road from Gilgit to Hunza was difficult even for a pack animal to traverse. Though the difference in elevation is only 1,525 meters (5,000 feet), the ups and downs through the Hunza river gorge add up to 15,240 meters (50,000 feet), and it once took a good three days on foot. And early British explorers who reached the valley inevitably called its lush green terraces and white spires one of the most



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marvelous sights in the entire Himalayas – just as Hilton did in *Lost Horizon.*

The first of the Europeans to penetrate the Hunza sanctuary was a British military spy named John Biddulph, who posed in the 1880's as a gentleman pursuing big game. A seasoned Himalayan traveler, he made entries in his journal on the wonders of Kashmir Ladakh (Little Tibet) and the Pamirs, and described with feverish exhilaration his difficult climb and his first glimpse of the terraces rising up into the clouds at the snow line.

"In no other part of the world," he wrote, "is there found such lofty mountains within so confined a space." He was right. Within 24 kilometers (15 miles) of the main valley there are 21 peaks over 6,100 meters (20,000 feet), five of them higher than Mount McKinley, the highest peak in North America.

The "Hunza Road" is a 2,000-year-old branch of the ancient Silk Road that linked China to Rome, the Mediterranean, Africa and India. It was probably its economic and military value that led Muslim Pathan tribes from Afghanistan to try to capture the valley; they would have wanted to prevent neighboring Tibetans, Mongols, Chinese or Kashmiri forces from controlling the Karakorum passes. And though it took three major invasions in the eighth, ninth and thirteenth centuries, the Muslim forces eventually succeeded and Hunza has been a center of Islam ever since.

Until the 1960's, the Hunza Valley remained almost as isolated as it had been in Biddulph's day. Then, in 1961, a rough track, passable by jeep, was built and by the time I reached Gilgit as *Aramco World's* correspondent in late 1981, things had changed radically. In less than three hours I drove to Hunza in a pickup truck at 112 kilometers an hour (70 mph) on the now famous Karakorum Highway.

Carved through the Himalayas the Karakorum Highway, stretching nearly 805 kilometers (500 miles) from Pakistan's capital of Islamabad on the plains in the south, is an engineering marvel; even with the aid of tens of thousands of Chinese laborers, it took nearly 20 years to build. And on completion it immediately affected the timeless tranquility of Shangri-La.

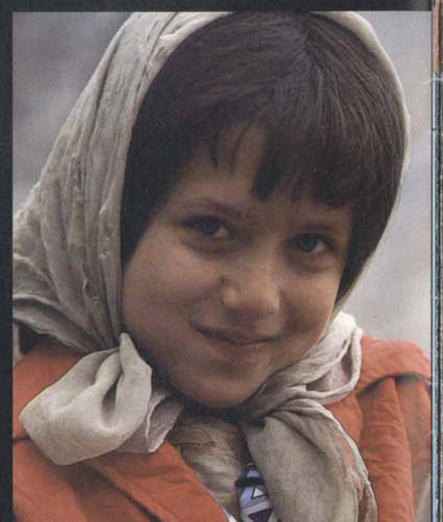
In Gilgit, for example, I visited the giant bazaar that serves as the main market for Hunza's goods: dried apricots, fresh mulberries, apples, cherries, peaches and a variety of garden produce. I wandered

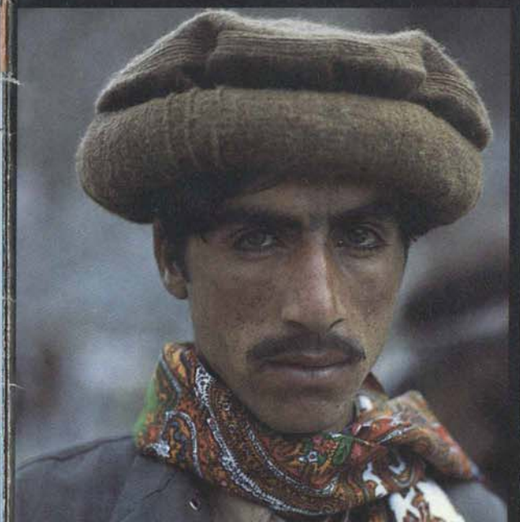
about, dodging hawkers selling everything from juicy white grapes to smoking shish kebabs, past hundreds of stalls filled with the mixture of goods that give bazaars their distinct character – Mongolian scarves, copying machines, Chinese porcelain, Japanese motorbikes, American tractors, and an array of locally embroidered woolen scarves, vests, and greatcoats handwoven by local craftsmen.

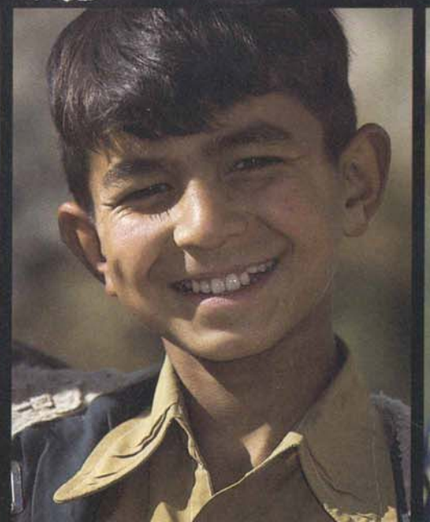
It was here I stumbled upon one of Hunza's leading citizens, Gulam Mohamad Beg, whose shop was piled to the roof with hundreds of books in Arabic, Urdu and English, the remaining space a microcosm of life in Hunza: apricot oil lamps, muzzle-loading muskets, snowshoes, thick blankets and embroidered skull caps, and an array of local semi-precious stones – rubies, garnets, tourmaline and amethyst. Wearing thick rimmed glasses and cap of karakul wool topping his large-jowled robust face, Beg looked his part: a self-educated schoolmaster, a mountain man, an Islamic religious leader and a defender of Hunza culture that, sadly, has been on the wane since the highway was built.

"Hunza is not the same since the Karakorum Highway invaded our quiet lives," Beg said. "Before, no one even locked their doors. Theft was unheard of.

Wood must be carried from places far away from the village in some areas. Left: Baltit Fort in Hunza.







Aerial view of Saiful Maluk in the Kagan valley region.

Valley of the Hunza, lush with apricot, peach and apple trees.

Before, the social pressure to be honest was strong. Besides, there was little money to steal. Now everyone chases after money to buy or ruin their health eating canned food from Karachi. Every year there is more crime. Only 10 years ago we had no jail or police! But the saddest part is that Hunza people are forgetting their own culture. We used to share everything.

Everyone in the valley got married on the same day – December 21 – and spent a week together feasting. We passed the winters by dancing all day for hours on end. Our life was communal and that was enough."

Actually, the impact of the modern world has been more complicated than that on Hunza. It has, for example, simultaneously stimulated a resurgence of religious interest and generated a faith in "science."

Beg's 26-year old son, for example, scoffs at "rozhis" or "spirits", which play a role in Hunza folklore. A medical student visiting from Karachi, Ikram says that the younger generation in Hunza does not believe "in spirits" anymore but "in science."

"But don't you yourself have faith in God?" I asked. "Yes, of course, but that is different," Ikram replied, "That is religion." Beg grinned tolerantly. "If science will keep you young in your old age, I will believe it... For youth to believe in science only is to follow a blind man."

From Gilgit, I drove to Hunza along the Karakorum Highway, chiseled out of cliffs of solid gray stone. It was monotonous and oppressive, like driving through a giant quarry. Even though paved, parts were covered with dirt from fresh landslides; the Karakorum mountains are geologically young and still very active so earthquakes and frost heaves make maintenance a full time job and a frequent cause of delay to travelers.

The road banked and suddenly Hunza hove into view, with the white-blanketed Mount Rakaposhi reigning with queenly splendor over the valley below from a 7,620 meter (25,500 feet) throne. Several miles distant, and bathed in sunlight, the valley was a vision of greenery between the snowy heaven above and barren rock below. It was a September afternoon, the air was as clear and as hard as a diamond, with brilliant leaves of autumnal gold splashed across the hillside.

Beg had arranged for us to stay in his friend Babur's home, a modern four-room villa unfurnished, in typical Hunza fashion, but made comfortable with an ample assortment of bright cushions and carpets. Servants appeared immediately and served us tea and a platter of fruit freshly picked from an orchard in the front yard.

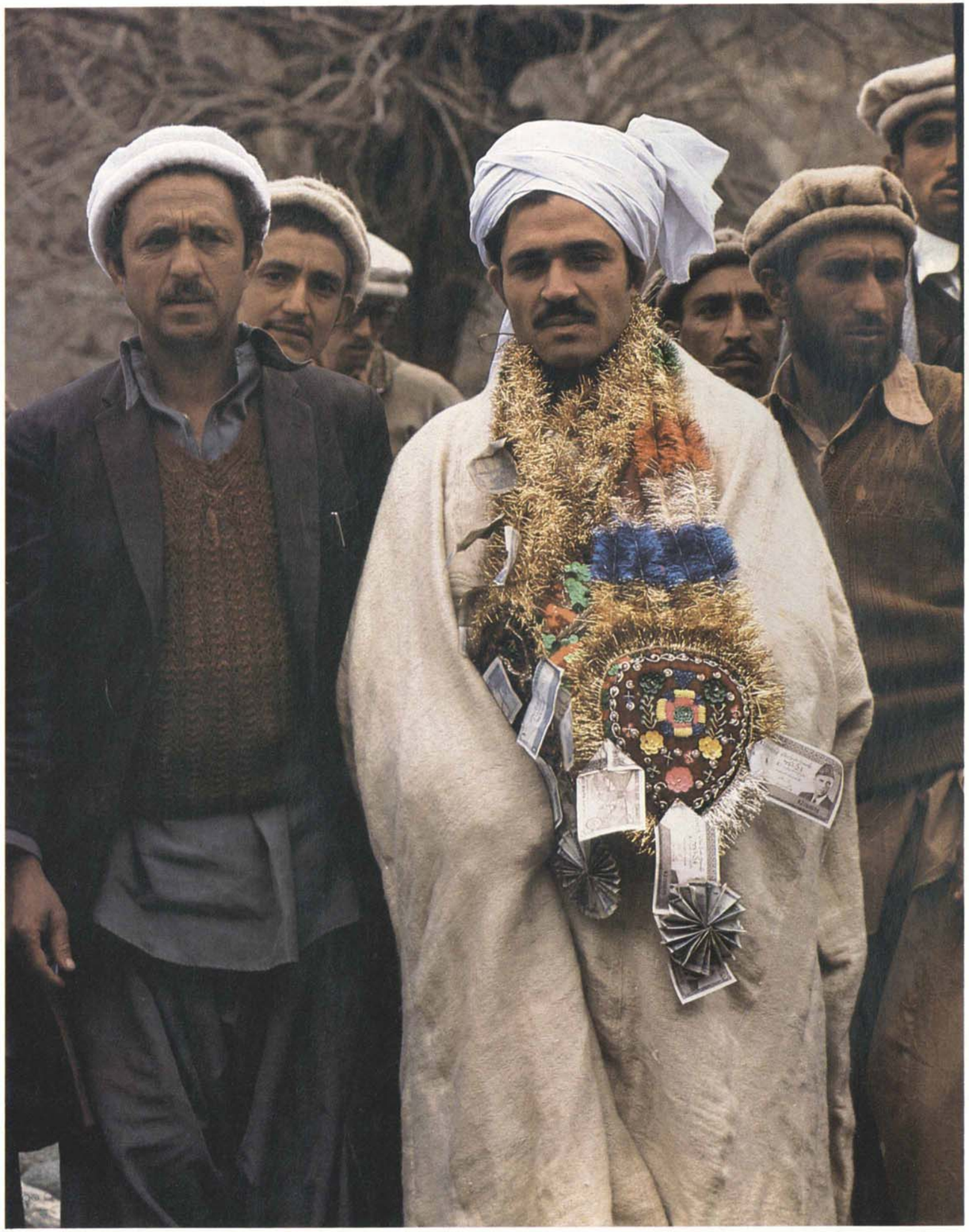
Babur, a man of 70, looked as if he had a good chance of becoming another of the famous Hunza centenarians. He dressed in the local "choga," a woolen gown tied at the waist, topped by the rolled felt cap worn by nearly all Hunza men. "This house was built with money my son earned in Saudi Arabia," Babur told us. He estimated that there were several hundred Hunzakuts working in the Gulf area, a tiny fraction of Pakistanis who work there, but a significant number from a 97 kilometer long valley (60 miles) with a population of some 78,000.

Most of these people are still impoverished. They live in huts of stone and wood, caulked together with mud, and their diet is sparse – mostly potatoes, barley, unleavened bread, fruits, and tea – to which they add the endlessly useful apricot. Its kernel is eaten like an almond nut, ground to make flour, or pressed to make cooking oil. Babies are fattened on a teaspoon of apricot oil a day and the dried fruit is eaten all winter.

Walking with Babur through his village, Haiderbad, I was fascinated by contrasts. Many homes, for example, were filled with smoke because there are no chimneys; yet the Hunzakuts once knew how to build aqueducts 97 kilometers long (60 miles) to provide irrigation for their terraces in a basically dry climate. Their home construction also employs principles of passive solar heating: thick walls and southern exposures. "The winters in Hunza are not too cold," Babur told me, which seemed surprising given the ring of snowy peaks encircling us. "It is because most of the snow is dumped in the Potwar Himalayas 483 kilometers to the south (300 miles). These foothills may get nine meters (30 feet) of snow when Hunza barely has two feet. These big mountains are also like a friend to us. They keep us safe. It is like living in a fortress."

That evening I met Shah Khan, a younger son of the former "Mir" of Hunza and now a colonel retired from the Pakistan Air Force. With his dashing good looks – at 65 he had kept his wavy black hair – it was easy to see why he is revered as something of a local hero; that plus his feats as a mountain climber, soldier and horseman, and his son's memorable achievement: he was the first Pakistani to climb the 7,772-meter (25,500-feet) Mount Rakaposhi which dominates the valley.

"Hunza was an independent kingdom for 900 years," Shah Khan said in his impeccable English. "We have no written history – just songs and tales of brave hunters or great polo matches. Only in 1972 did the central government take over administrative power from the Mir. Most of it was for the better. They built schools and aqueducts and replaced the Mir's court with a system of local magistrates."



A typical Bilgitti bridegroom going to the bride's house.

Over a typical dinner – lentils eaten with thin round chapatis, a spiced vegetable broth and roast chicken – Shah Khan continued, "The Hunzakuts were tough. I know of farmers who would sleep with one arm in a bucket of ice water to keep themselves in shape for turning the irrigation sluices in the middle of the night.

"Another example. On numerous expeditions a total of 39 people had been killed trying unsuccessfully to climb to the top of nearby Nanga Parbat, at 8,126 meters (26,660 feet) the eighth highest mountain in the world. The group that finally made it to the top was the first to use porters from the Hunza.

"You ask, what was the secret of their good health? I will tell you. First, they ate a simple diet of fresh food. No coffee or tea, no sugar, plenty of fruit, lots of minerals in the drinking water, and delicate meat in the winter only, from goats fed on the finest grass and herbs. Second, they worked hard in summer and climbed in the mountains for exercise and danced in the winter. Third, there was little mental stress. We could trust our neighbors to help in a disaster. Our only worry in life was whether the crop would be good – and who can you get mad at if the weather is bad? With such vigor and peace of mind combined, it is no wonder an average person lived to be 90 or 100."

Like every society, Hunza needs some outlet for aggression, and in Hunza it's a rough-and-tumble brand of polo.

Polo, in fact, originated in this region – "polo" is Balti for "ball" – and was later taken by the British to the West. In Hunza, however, it was never a gentleman's game. There are virtually no rules, and no substitution of horses or players allowed; contestants play to exhaustion and in olden days the game was used to settle boundary disputes, celebrate the harvest and set a standard of both bravery and bravado.

Another outlet, as travelers in the past few centuries have written, was banditry.

A young girl of Hunza in typical costume.

Notorious brigands, the Hunzakuts preyed on caravans crossing the Karakorums and as late as the 19th century would cross as many as 48 rivers – generally icy torrents of glacial melt – to swoop down on unsuspecting merchants.

The next day my guide and I hiked from Babur's home to the village of Baltit, which had a large fort built in traditional Tibetan style with thick walls and narrow slit windows for defense. The fort was still in livable shape, but since 1959 has been used by the Mir of Hunza only once a year during the spring planting festival. This is the biggest event of the valley, and the highlight comes when the Mir, still the titular leader in the valley, sows a handful of gold dust to symbolize the riches expected to come forth.

Curiously, I discovered, the Hunza Valley has a split personality. On the east bank lies a people known as the Nagir who, despite their proximity, have none of the qualities the Hunzakuts are famous for: hospitality, communal culture and a festive nature. Though materially more prosperous than the Hunzakuts, with better homes and schools, they seem to lack some ingredient in their lives that makes the Hunzakut people across the river happy.

"They are not friendly to us," said Beg. "There was no bridge across the river so people rarely talked and in the end differences led to competition and even raiding... even though they are more wealthy they are jealous of Hunza culture... God has blessed our side of the valley with sunshine. The Nagir must sit in the shadow of Rakaposhi, where it is very dark and cold."

Those differences, however, are minor.

The real problem for "Shangri-La" is the intrusion of the outside world. Despite its idyllic past, Hunza simply can no longer isolate itself from the larger Pakistani society. Hunza's free education and medical programs, for example, and its wheat subsidies, come from the government, the UN or the Aga Khan. And the Karakorum Highway was not built to help the sparsely populated local economies, but for military security against the Russians; the road was built wide enough for two tanks to pass. Since 1981, moreover, when the Soviets annexed the Wakhan corridor in Afghanistan, Soviet forces have been patrolling the north side of Hunza's Karakorum passes.

This, on the other hand, isn't entirely new to the region; it's really the latest in a century-old struggle between Russia and the western powers for control of the Indian sub-continent. In Rudyard Kipling's novel *Kim* for example, this contest was known as "The Great Game," and even today, is still a force that helps bind Hunza's society together. The other force, of course, is Islam.

For example, Babur took me to the site of a new mosque in his village. "The old mosque is too small for our growing people," he said, "so we are building a new one." He pointed at a pile of heavy stone blocks. "You can see how deeply the people here love God. These big stones were each carried by hand three miles across the side of the mountain from the quarry. Everyone in the village is helping. It is the same with schools and clinics. Everyone volunteers to help build them."

Together then, Islam and Hunzakut tradition continue to resist the onslaught of modern life in this mountain stronghold in the high reaches of the western Himalayas, so wisely captured in the ancient proverb, "One hundred epochs would not suffice to describe all the marvels of this Abode of Snows."

Michael Winn is a free-lance writer who recently traced Marco Polo's route to Asia.