

matt jones

Interview – The Writer, Wilfred Thesiger

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Soul still in the desert

*The lure of Arabia brought legendary explorer, writer and photographer Sir Wilfred Thesiger back to the UAE. He shares his memories of the region with **Matt Jones**.*

It has been almost 50 years since Sir Wilfred Thesiger last left his “monstrous footsteps” in the sands of Arabia, half a century since he entered Arabian folklore for becoming the first European to cross the barren Empty Quarter. His life as an “Arab” among Arabs inspired one of the greatest travel books, *Arabian Sands*.

Thesiger, a founder member of the SAS in North Africa in World War II, is 86. Frail but with a robust dignity, he rises to greet the fortunate few who have been invited to meet him in the British Consul General’s residence in Dubai during his fourth brief visit to the city since he flew “into exile” in 1950.

Once he would have worn an Arab *thobe*, now he wears a grey suit and tie. A walking stick is near, as his rifle and camel-stick would once have been.

Thesiger was “quite determined never to write a book” when he came to Arabia in 1945. *Arabian Sands*, which has never been out of print, was written at the prompting of friends in 1959 – nine years after he left.

Is there anything he has since recalled that he regrets not putting in? “No,” he says. “It’s all there.”

Thesiger’s reason for coming to Arabia in 1945 was to collect information on locust movements. But it was the self-sufficient life of the desert nomad that had really attracted the adventurer in him.

“It was a challenge,” he says. “I’d been interested in deserts, had done a certain amount of traveling in them. The Sahara was previously explored, pacified by the French. No other desert offered me what I wanted.

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“I wanted to live as a *bedu*. I wanted to be accepted by them. Every single thing I had was in my bag. The only things I had that the others didn’t were my camera, field glasses and compass.

“Once we went for three days, grim days, with not a single thing to eat. It was hunger and thirst the whole time. On the first crossing, our fear was that the camels might collapse.”

So his memories are bad ones? Actually, no. Not at all.

“There’s no doubt about it those years were by far the most memorable of my life,” he says.

With the discovery of oil, the Gulf has changed dramatically since Thesiger said a final *ma salaama* (goodbye) to travelling companions Salim bin Kabina and Salim bin Ghabaisha.

“There is no part of the world that has an equivalent today,” he says, citing modern communications and transport as reasons.

“Since I was a boy, I always detested cars and aeroplanes. They rob the world of its diversity.”

As well as documenting his trips in words, Thesiger took stunning photographs of the people and places he visited, some of which feature in the Silver Jubilee Photographic Exhibition at Dubai Chamber of Commerce and Industry, which ends tonight.

Enjoying the 20th century hospitality of British Consul General Christopher Wilton, Thesiger happily recalls the generosity of his travelling companions and those *bedu* he met in the barren desert. One, who saw Thesiger’s party passing by his camp without the customary courtesy call, had a peculiar way of inviting them for dinner.

“He said, ‘If you don’t come to my tent I’m divorcing my wife,’” Thesiger recalls. “Think of it in our terms. If someone is passing our home, we wouldn’t say, ‘Come in and have a drink!’”

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Two days before his arrival in Dubai, Thesiger received a letter, via Penguin, his UK publisher, from a UAE national living in England. With a shaking hand, he pulls the letter from his pocket. It is from Juma bin Thani Al Fulasi, of the Baniyas tribe, lately of Twickenham, London. He had been moved by *Arabian Sands* and wrote:

“It was one of the most interesting books I have ever read. By reading it, I felt I was travelling with you in the good and the bad times. For a week after finishing reading, I felt lonely, looking for bin Kabina, Al Ruf, bin Ghabaisha and yourself.

“All your descriptions about Arabs and their behaviour is true, and when I look back, I say to myself, ‘That’s us.’ Not embarrassed to ask for money and exchange news whenever we meet, and of course our love of camels.

“Nowadays, people are not so interested in camels but I am still determined that when I finish my studies I will go back and own some camels, like my family and the rest of my tribe.

“I am one of the younger generation who want to keep the traditions alive for as long as we can.”

It says a lot that Thesiger, this knighted gentleman who has known Emperors and Sheikhs, should treasure a letter from a 23-year-old student.

“I rang him the next day and said I was off to Dubai on Friday,” says Thesiger. “I’m going on Saturday!” he said. I’m very much hoping to meet him but in any case he’ll be back in England.”

After living in Kenya for 30 years, Thesiger has been in London now for “two whole years”. The “whole” suggests that he finds life in the British capital more of a hardship than traveling by camel through deserts.

“In the previous 65 years I never spent more than three months in England,” he adds.

And does he travel much now? “I’m too old to travel,” he says, apparently dismissing the flight from London to the Emirates as something less than travel. But then it isn’t travel in the Thesiger sense of the word. To Sir Wilfred, travel is footsteps in the sand – “monstrous” ones, because his Western feet were so much bigger than those of his companions.

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