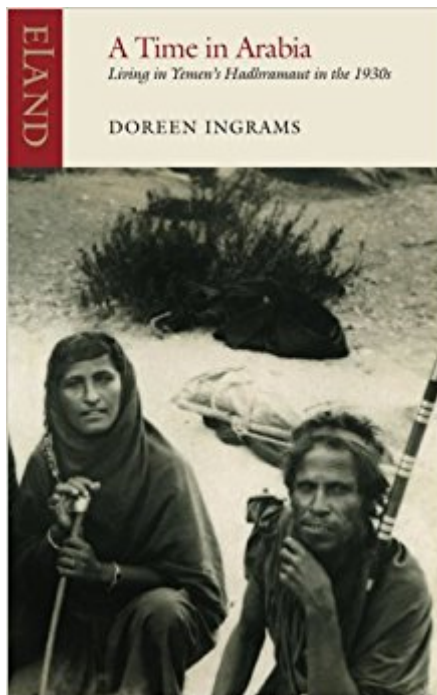


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A Time In Arabia: Life In Hadramaut



Synopsis

Doreen Ingrams and her husband were the first Europeans ever to live in the Hadhramaut, an extraordinary, isolated region of southern Arabia. Married to an Arabic-speaking British official, she arrived by boat, and during their ten-year residency travelled throughout the region by camel and donkey. Doreen kept a diary in which she detailed their adventures and described her unequalled access to the domestic quarters, to the women and children, the food, the scents, secrets, jewels, and privileges of this extraordinarily rich traditional society. *A Time in Arabia* is a precious document - part history, part time-travel, seen through the eyes of a decent, modest, and compassionate woman. "Blending history, travel and autobiography with strong cultural observations, this is a fine and engrossing work."--Midwest Book Review February 2014

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Customer Reviews

Blending history, travel and autobiography with strong cultural observations, this is a fine and engrossing work. --Midwest Book Review

Doreen Ingrams worked for twelve years on the staff of the BBC's Arabic Service, and was a well-known writer and speaker on the Arab world.

I once had a "working vocabulary" of about one thousand Arabic words. In very pidgin, sans grammar style, I could make my needs known, or even exchange a few pleasantries. One of those thousand words was "emaut," which I did have to use a few times. It

means "dead." One of my unfulfilled goals in life, one that, realistically, will never be fulfilled, is to see Shibam, in the Hadhramaut, home of the mud skyscrapers, the tall homes, which influenced the artists who created the stelas at Axum, in Ethiopia. But until I read this fascinating book by Doreen Ingrams, I had never realized that the Hadhramaut, one of whose most famous progeny is Osama bin Laden, actually means: "death is present." Let's bring back colonialism! At least the good kind. Though Ingrams herself would probably demur, that was one of the takeaways from her account. She and her husband, a consular official of the British government, created (some understandable) "mission creep," to use modern parlance, if only to get away from the execrable and rigid expat colonial society in Aden. First, there was India, always the "crown jewel" of the Empire. The route to India, through the Suez Canal, had to be secure, and thus Captain Haines of the British navy captured Aden from Sultan of Lahej in 1839. A suitable refueling and provisioning port along the way. But there were those warring and troublesome tribes in the interior, who might disturb tea time in Aden. Enter the Ingrams, Harold and Doreen, the year is 1934. From their base in the smaller port city of Mukulla, they would travel up and down virtually every wadi in the interior region known as the Hadhramaut. It would be the same year that Freda Stark, who is mentioned in this account, but not extensively, would travel in the same region, as told in *The Southern Gates of Arabia: A Journey in the Hadhramaut* (Modern Library Paperbacks). Doreen Ingrams was the first European woman to enter Seiyun and Tarim, two key towns. As a woman, she had "access," that is, to the women's quarters, the "harem" as it were, and was obviously the center of attention for these women who lead a very circumscribed life. She reports that they seemed to have an obsession with learning if she was really that white, all over! Many of the Hadhrami were world travelers, of necessity, since it was hard to "scratch out a living" in those beautiful, but difficult to farm, wadis. They would routinely travel and live along the coastal cities of Africa, Hyderabad in India, and in Singapore, Malaya and Java. (these non-euro-centric travel routes were first introduced to me in Amitav Ghosh's *In an Antique Land: History in the Guise of a Traveler's Tale*. Sometimes the men would be gone for decades, having second families in these other lands, but the pull of the beautiful and austere wadis was strong, and they would usually consider them home, despite the constant tribal conflicts. Let's give peace a chance, as the Ingrams proposed, three decades or so before the Beatles made the same proposal. They established good working relationships with the leadership of the two principal states: Quaiti and Kathiri. Doreen Ingrams found that the women were even more enthusiastic about the peace than the men, since they were tired of having their husbands and sons killed, and

could work behind the scenes promoting that objective, perhaps in the fashion of *Lysistrata*). But it was far more than just tribal conflicts. Ingrams states that in some wadis there would be trenches dug to the fields, because a feuding neighbor might take a pot shot at you as you went to work! And only women should go, since the neighbor was less likely to shoot at them (and, of course if they did, they were more expendable!) The men also wanted peace, and Ingrams notes that they particularly desired the good governance that they saw in Singapore and Java. In 1937 the peace took effect. And it appeared to hold, completely, for its three year duration, and then was renewed for another ten. The enforcement mechanism? A solo British plane, based in Aden, would bomb the truce-breakers, with sufficient notice so that the residents could leave their houses that would be destroyed. Harold and Doreen became very popular figures among the Hadhramis. There is much else in this gem of a work. The Ingrams adopted one Hadhrami child, Zahra, and would produce their own, Leila, who was born in Cairo, during the beginning of the Second World War. There is a great picture of the two of them traveling in wooden boxes on the side of a mule. Leila, in 2012, provided the bibliographical afterword. Doreen died in 1997. She also relates her experiences from her 1963 return visit. Tim Mackintosh-Smith, the *Æsage of Sana'a* (I wonder if he can STILL be living there), author of "Travels with a Tangerine" says in the introduction, of Doreen Ingrams: *Could there be any greater antithesis to the aloof and dreadful memsahibs? Ah, for the simpler times of camel and donkey travel, and sleeping out in the open, as Doreen did. Today we have a refugee crisis, with all sorts of people, in varying countries, fleeing this, that, and something else, but certainly NOT good governance, which we ourselves seem to lack. Enough to make you long for a few hundred Ingrams in our diplomatic corps, not to mention our home governments. 5-stars, plus, for Ingrams charmingly told and insightful experiences in the Hadramaut, in the days of yore.*

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