

Pages from Palmyra: 'Bride of the Desert'

by Rana Haider

1969 — First visit to Palmyra, Syria

It was hot, dusty and the car journey from Damascus, 210 kms away was never-ending I do not recall there being any air conditioning in the car either. Relentless elements of time had carved patterns and created contours on the ancient tablelands of mountains. The vast arid and barren landscape did nothing to break the monotony of the interminable journey. Ahead appeared yet another range of desert mountains. How much longer? We made the incline went down the slope of the mountain and POW!

There, as far as the eye could see, lay the 'Bride of the Desert' — an ancient architectural showpiece — its vast scale evoking its fallen splendour. It was breathtaking in its magnificent desolation. Palmyra is a poignant and moving site — a telling reminder of the transient existence of human grandeur. In the final analysis, we are simply a 'mini-blip' in the Passage of Time.

The family trek to Palmyra in 1969 had actually originated in Beirut, Lebanon where my late father, Mirza Rashid Ahmad was Ambassador of Pakistan to Lebanon.

What led Henri-Paul Eydoux, eminent French archaeologist to declare about Palmyra: "He finds himself in a world of marvels — a gigantic architectural decor in an immense, motionless setting ... few civilisations flowering in the arid lands have attained such heights." What lay before us was a vast necropolis of Roman funerary towers that broke the desert landscape. One of them was five-stories high, about 100 feet high, a family mausoleum. Like watch-towers filled with burial catacombs, the overwhelming feeling was one of the solitude and silence amidst the desolate desert. Others were deep and vast underground tombs like that of the Three Brothers with numerous chambers coming off the main corridor. Tourism in the late 1960s was not the global package tour phenomenon of today. We stayed at Hotel Zenobia, a small hotel built in a long bungalow-style, having much character and a splendid view of the ancient Palmyran city lying at its doorstep.

The piece de resistance, the masterpiece of Palmyra was the Great Colonnade of 1500 adorned columns lining the main thoroughfare leading to the grandiose temple dedicated to the Roman god Bel. The pre-eminence of Bel gave rise to the credo that there was a trend towards monotheism. Henri-Paul Eydoux speaks of one dedication that described the god Bel as 'a god who is one, unique and merciful.' We saw some 150 remains of the original 1500 columns, in virus forms of ruin — a few stood in all its original glory whilst others were half to a quarter standing only. We walked through the Triumphal arch, the agora (market place) and the amphitheatre. The ruins retain a sense of immense and impressive grandeur.

The name Palmyra goes back only to the beginning of the Christian era. The city was classically known by its Semitic name Tadmor from far back into antiquity. The Roman historian Pliny the Elder in the first century AD, graphically sketched Palmyra: "Palmyra is a city famous for its situation, for the richness of its soil and for its agreeable springs; its fields are surrounded on every side by a vast circuit of sand, and it is as if it were isolated by nature from the world, having a destiny of its own between the two mighty empires of Rome and Parthia, and at the first moment of a quarrel between them always attracting the attention of both sides."

Palmyra was founded as a caravanserai (a caravan-site) a halting-post in a verdant oasis in the midst of a hostile desert more than two thousand years ago. As a caravan city, it was closely allied to the Roman empire; strategically located at crossroads of international arterial trade between the East (China, India, Central Asia, Persia) and the West (Europe). Excavations in Palmyra have yielded rich evidence of its commercial heritage — aromatic herbs from Kashmir and China, fabrics from India, China and Turkestan and pearls from the Persian Gulf. Palmyra was a cosmopolitan city based on trade and communication — a central link in the caravan land-routes that transported silk, tea, spices, precious stones and other commodities across continents. This was an era prior to the discovery of a sea-route from China and India to the West. In time sea-routes weakened and eventually cancelled, the time-consuming and costly caravan land-routes.

The word caravanserai originates from a Persian word meaning a "hostel

for travellers". Caravanserais were complex constructions, often built like a fort housing travellers and traders, their goods and their means of transport (horses and camels). A single door served as both entrance and exit for security reasons. The fortress-like walls were built around a courtyard where was centrally located the life-giving water-well. Rooms around the courtyard housed travellers and provided stables for their animals. A room for bravers was also set aside.

Many of the important and large caravanserais were provided for and maintained by rulers as a means of controlling vital trade routes and convenient venues for the collection of taxes. Caravanserais were to be found all over the Middle East: Arabian Peninsula, Anatolia, Central Asia, Iran, Syria, Turkestan, Yemen. Some were built as staging-posts en route to the Holy Places of Mecca and Medina notes Yves Thoraval, in 'Dictionnaire de Civilisation Musulmane.'

By the second half of the third century AD with Rome's powerful hold over its colonies declining amidst anarchy and invasions, Palmyra rose to its zenith of glory and grandeur under Queen Zenobia (266-272 AD). Today, Palmyra is synonymous with Queen Zenobia. Her fame has come down through the ages along the ranks of Cleopatra, Hatshepsut and Nefertiti.

Another Roman historian Trebellius Pollio generously endowed Queen Zenobia with the following: "She was the noblest of all the women in the East, and the most beautiful... She had a dark skin, black eyes full of fire, teeth as white as pearls, a wonderfully lively countenance, and was of unimaginable gracefulness... Usually travelled on horseback, but could equally well march three or four miles on foot with the troops. She drank with her generals but never took too much. She used vessels of gold set with precious stones that had belonged to Cleopatra. She kept royal state... She appeared in public as a Roman emperor, a helmet on her head and clad in a purple mantle with fringes decorated with pearls that left her arms bare..." Exercising greater independence, Zenobia soon founded an empire in the heart of the Syrian desert that extended from the Mediterranean sea to the Tigris river and from Asia Minor to Egypt. She created in Palmyra, a cultural milieu the most vibrant in the Middle East.

The pinnacles of fame and power attained by Queen Zenobia soon reached the ears of the now Roman emperor Aurelian who regained control of Palmyra as a Roman vassal city and deposed Zenobia in 272 AD. Captured, Queen Zenobia was paraded through the streets of Rome in golden chains as the symbol of royal booty. She died in Tivoli near Rome.

This was the rise and fall, the glory and collapse of the Palmyran civilisation. Much later, Arabs came and built a fortress on the highest mountain peak and transformed the Roman temple of Bel into a citadel whose broken-down walls housed a community of Palmyrans as late as the 1930s.

Much, much later...

1999- Second visit to Palmyra

Thirty years later, my husband, Tufail K Haider was posted as Ambassador to Iran. Also being accredited to Syria as Ambassador, I felt that I could not let go a second opportunity of a lifetime to visit Palmyra. For my husband and our daughter, it would be their first. What would it be like to see a time immemorial sight in the brief interval of thirty years of my lifetime?

This time, we set out from Damascus in an air-conditioned car and made the drive in no time — so it appeared to me — since anticipation accelerates the speed. My daughter, in no clear terms, thought otherwise. There were occasional built-up sites along the way. I was on the lookout for the particular mountain which once crossed, would reveal the Palmyra plain. We made the incline, took the dive and then once again it was POW!

Majestic monumental ruins preserved in the hot desert sun with a triumphal arch gracing columns that stood silhouetted under the clear and deep blue sky. Truly, a poet was needed on the scene. There it was — just as I wanted to remember it.

We climbed the massive blocks of the tallest funerary tower — a feat given my husband's and my aging feet; followed the indomitable Italians before us into the large tomb of the Three Brothers and then moved on to mingle amongst the sprawling remains of the once prosperous metropolis. My husband

wrapped his head with a *kaffiyah*, the Arab headgear popularised by Yasser Arafat, as a sun-screen. A guide gave us a worthwhile tour of the grand temple of Dell, pointing-out the wine-presses, water aqueducts and the evidence left by people through the ages — an Ionic column-decoration here, an icon painting there, Arabic inscriptions here and the many wall-engravings depicting palms — the veritable symbol of Palmyra.

As we drove by the Triumphal Arch, I all of a sudden, came across a somewhat faded and dilapidated signpost — Hotel Zenobia. I gasped, just imagine, it still exists! We made a sharp left and entered the premises of the hotel where we had stayed thirty years ago. This time, my husband and our daughter had replaced my parents, my sister and brother as I sat once more under the shade-giving tree and drank coffee, marvelling at the spectacular open-air museum laid out before us. The French aphorism — *plus ca change, plus c'est la meme chose* (the more it changes, the more it remains the same) came once more to mind.

I asked the waiter if the manager was on duty. He seemed perturbed, expecting a rebuke of some sort. I assured him that I simply wanted to meet the manager — which I did at length. I told the manager that I am an old customer of thirty years ago — surely, before he was born. He laughed and replied, "Yes, Madame, I am twenty-four years old but you must have been a baby" (indicating my size with his hands). I was most flattered at the gallantry of the young man but corrected him. "No, I was at university!" We were both happy! After all, an Austrian saying declares: "At 20 you have the face the Lord gave you, at 40 the face that life gave you and at 60 you have the face that you deserve."

I then asked him the history of Hotel Zenobia. We were standing in a building more than one hundred years old. It had originally been built as a caravanserai for a Palmyran Bedouin nomad family. Syria became a French protectorate (1920-1946) following the collapse of the Ottoman empire at the end of the First World War. A French military post was stationed in the building. Adding spice to life, a Madame Margot de Andria alleged to be a French spy had resided here. The building became a hotel run by a French company from 1920-1938. It was run as a hotel then by Palmyrans, the al-Assad family (no relation to the President of Syria, Hafez al Assad). In 1990, the present Orient Tours and Company took over the management of Hotel Zenobia.

The original thirteen rooms facing the Palmyran ruins remain. We had stayed in one of them thirty years ago. Some additional rooms were added to the back of the bungalow recently. Among the historical and notable personalities who had graced the rooms of Hotel Zenobia have been T.E. Lawrence (the man himself!) I saw after a long interval recently. 'Lawrence of Arabia' made in 1962 with Peter O' Toole as T.E. Lawrence. It truly remains a superb film with respect to the intelligence dialogue, splendid settings, brilliant characters and historical interest. It must rank as one of the finest films ever made.

Then there was Agatha Christie who had occupied suite number two for nine days in 1938. We were offered to see it the next morning since it was now occupied. Unfortunately, we were leaving Palmyra early next morning for Krak de Chevalliers, the formidable fortress constructed by European Christian crusaders in the Middle Ages. Agatha Christie's husband, Max Mallowan, renowned British archeologist worked for years in the Mesopotamia, the land between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers — a vast cradle of civilisations today largely within the national boundaries of Iraq. More recent guests have included Jacques Chirac, President of France and heir — apparent of President Hafez al-Assad — his son Basher Al-Assad.

We had seen the rooms where Agatha Christie had stayed at the Old Cataract Hotel overlooking the Nile in Aswan in Upper Egypt in 1995. In the now-named Agatha Christie suite, she wrote her famous novel 'Death on the Nile' in 1937, subsequently filmed on site. My daughter for the first time and I once again saw the film recently and delighted in 'having seen it all'. The Old Cataract Hotel, full of historical and physical riches celebrated its hundred years in 1999. Distinguished guests at the Old Cataract Hotel have included Winston Churchill, King Farouk of Egypt, Tsar Nicholas II and Aga Khan III and his Begum. The Aga Khan chose to be buried in Aswan in a Fatimid architecturally-styled mausoleum on a bill in Aswan.

He died in 1957 when my father was posted in Paris and my parents presented official condolences on behalf of the Government of Pakistan to the young French-born Begum Aga Khan. We had the honour of meeting the graceful and gracious Begum Aga Khan clad in a French chiffon sari in Paris in 1997. The late President of France, Francois Mitterand was a regular guest at the Old Cataract Hotel. His last stay was a few months before his death when he was accompanied by his daughter Mazarine. His regular suite has been named the Francois Mitterand suite.

A gem of an anecdote goes like this: Lord Benbrook, a regular guest at the Hotel Cataract, who, arriving at the Terrace to find his favourite table taken, approached the intruder thus: "I am sorry, but this table is reserved." The occupant an American, said: "since when?" Benbrook politely replied: "since 20 years."

Hotels such as these are historical jewels whose very air and ambience breath charm and character and constitute pages from history. If only I had known that Hotel Zenobia was still there after thirty years, we would never have stayed the night at the twenty-year old 'five star' Palmyra Chams chain-hotel. Already under renovation, the elevators were inoperative and the bathroom door did not lock. The narrow double-bed in the large room had hanging over it, an enormous spotlight that dominated the room and in the dark appeared like a UFO in flight. How I regret not knowing of Hotel Zenobia's presence. However, we did make it back there for dinner and viewed the magnificent memorabilia in the moonlight.

A welcome impression in Palmyra after the long interval was the fact that 'new' urban settlements and the supporting tourism infrastructure have been kept aside from the ancient settlement. The 'new' town of Palmyra is distinctly separate. The hostels, hotels, cafes, restaurants, snack-bars, carpet and curious shops are all grouped together and do not infiltrate the *raison d'etre* of a visitor's odyssey to Palmyra.

Amongst the limestone mountains in Cappadocia (Goreme), Turkey, early Christian chapels, monasteries and sanctuaries adorned with beautifully painted frescoes and much gild were carved deep into the rocks in the first century AD. Earlier, the Hittites had carved accommodation in the soft Contours of Nature. I first visited Cappadocia in 1976 from London and then again in 1998 route to Iran. I was appalled at the litter of campsites, Coca-Cola stands, souvenir stalls, beer-houses and other features of global tourism encroaching into the mountains upon my second visit. It was a sorry sight. Measures have to be taken to prevent the support system of tourism from blighting heritage sites.

A trek to the top of the highest mountain in Palmyra, where are the remains of the Arab-built citadel, to see the sunset is mandatory. Hardy trekkers and back-packers make the long and arduous climb on foot. Us comfort-seeking creatures sought the facility of a car-ride. On the climb-up, we had an aerial view of the sprawling city of Palmyra and Annual Palmyra festival celebrated in May attracts Syrian, Arab and international entertainers. A recently laid-out-race-course for camels and horses comes alive then. A few ancient funerary towers are spaced here and there in the distance. A small square, white-painted building (appeared to be newly-built) caught my eye. It appeared highly incongruous in the setting. As we approached closer — clearly visible was WC written in large letters across the front facade. This was surely a sight for sure eyes but definitely a boon for the bladder.

Some one hundred sun-set viewers (all tourists) stood at the base of the formidable fortress in small groups silently waiting for sun-down. It was a golden setting. All around us, there was nothing — not at the height we were at. Yet, even down below in the Palmyra plains, it was as if time had stood still. The sense of timelessness that imbues Palmyra was paramount at that very moment in Time.

A quotation in a travel-guide book on the Arab world comes to mind, "Arabia sands are a source of intense fascination from time immemorial. Ripples of sand and sand-dunes are bathed in glorious gold with the setting sun."

About the writer: Raana Haider is the author of 'Parisian Portraits' forthcoming from the University Press Limited, Dhaka. Her travelogues have appeared in newspapers and periodicals in Cairo, Paris and Tehran.

poem

Mist Missed

by Nuzhat Amin Mannan

Mist missed,
Mist surely
secretly
missed
but I am not
fooled
I know
you are
there!

Mist,
call me,
ps. — don't!

I woke up
crying, I think,
this dawn
Mist, did you come?

Mist Mist Mist
must you be so
so so so
discreet!

Mist, I am
going to
suffocate
Mist you don't
care, do you?
Don't care then,
see if I care!

Mist, I am hoping
still
... I must be
mad.

mist...mist...
Mist...is that you?

mist phantom
ghost in
my dreams
stop plaguing
me.

I will wait
for you
Mist, please don't
forget to come home.

Mist, wherever you are,
wherever,
I have tired
of waiting, Mist!

It's winter
here are you ever
coming?

Wait, I know,
I must wait,
Mist, this is
good
don't come,
now, tomorrow
ever —
I will die
if you come,
Mist,
have you lost
your way?
did amine
blow you up?
Maybe you
lost my number.

Mist
do you remember my
name?
Don't remind me...
we've never met!

Mist can I tell
you something?
Hell, never mind.

Are you
settled on
some eave
that I can't see?
No...you can't
be!
please Mist
let it not be you
who
the weather vanes
want.

Mist...
My Indifferent
Selfish
Tease.

Love
shouldn't
have
been
this unkindly
blind.

