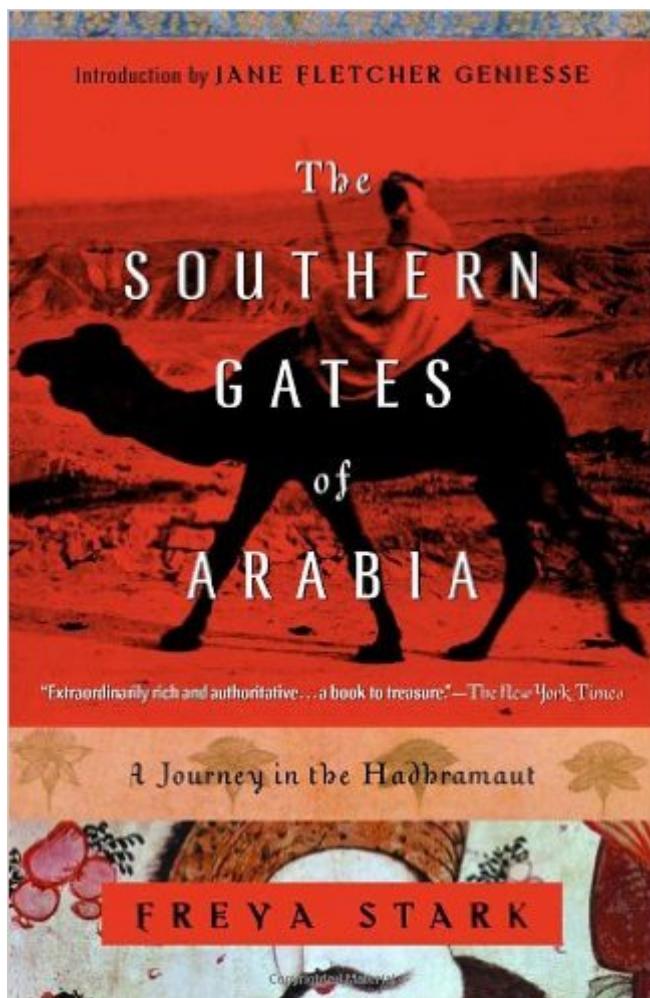


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The Southern Gates Of Arabia: A Journey In The Hadhramaut (Modern Library Paperbacks)



Synopsis

In 1934, famed British traveler Freya Stark sailed down the Red Sea, alighting in Aden, located at the tip of the Arabian peninsula. From this backwater outpost, Stark set forth on what was to be her most unforgettable adventure: Following the ancient frankincense routes of the Hadhramaut Valley, the most fertile in Arabia, she sought to be the first Westerner to locate and document the lost city of Shabwa. Chronicling her journey through the towns and encampments of the Hadhramaut, *The Southern Gates of Arabia* is a tale alive with sheikhs and sultans, tragedy and triumph. Although the claim to discovering Shabwa would not ultimately be Stark's, *The Southern Gates of Arabia*, a bestseller upon its original publication, remains a classic in the literature of travel. This edition includes a new Introduction by Jane Fletcher Geniesse, Stark's biographer.

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Customer Reviews

In 1934, Freya Stark determined that she would follow the ancient frankincense routes through the fertile Hadhramaut valley to locate and record what was left of the legendary lost city of Shabwa. In 1936 she published *The Southern Gates of Arabia: A Journey in the Hadhramaut* which, as did many of her thirty-odd books, became a best seller. It is now republished by the Modern Library, and is a welcome reminder of a brave, erudite, and witty explorer. The current volume has as an introduction a capsule description of Stark's life by her biographer, Jane Fletcher Geniesse. Born in 1892, Stark was only able to indulge in travel in her thirties; she realized that there was a hunger for knowledge about exotic Arabia, and she schooled herself in the language and history of the area,

through which she traveled by foot, car, donkey, and camel well into her eighties. She lived to be 101. The explorations of these exotic lands are rendered now more strange and lovely by time. Few of us will get to see the lands Stark loved, but we will never see them as she did. For most of the steps along the trail described in this book, Stark was the first European woman to come that way, and that she did so unaccompanied by a European escort gave the Bedouin, the learned men, and the sultans something to admire and wonder at. One who thought himself a leader of her group attempted to exclude her by bringing her meals to a separate area. "He was showing a Victorian disapproval of females who do not keep themselves to themselves, a thing I find dull and difficult to do." She finds that she very much likes being in the middle of the group, even as an outsider.

I found this book absolutely fascinating as it described a time, only 70-odd years ago, when there truly were unexplored reaches, where legend and history still co-existed, and where a culturally sensitive and aware, and properly respectful traveler could find peaceful and fulfilling adventure. This book is even more interesting now, given the changes in the Middle East in the past ten years. Can one imagine making the same kind of journey in Yemen now? Of course not; it would almost be suicide. That time has long since been destroyed, everything about this book but its pure physical setting gone, so this memoir is even more poignant and compelling. Stark has an eye for detail, as jaundiced as it is with the unavoidable Orientalism of her time and socio-cultural context. This can be forgiven/overlooked, and she's a lot more fair and obliging when describing those she encounters than the majority of her contemporaries. She's at her best when describing the landscapes she is encountering, the stark desert and wadis, the unexpected lushness of the oases and tucked-away mountain crevices where all the shades of green burst forth. More than anything, what comes through in this book is Stark's grace and abiding respect for the people she meets. She has taken the time to learn their language, and is familiar with their culture, and takes pains to encounter them in terms that will make them comfortable. She does not attempt to bend anyone to a Western European point of view. This is not to say she is subservient or fawning; she most certainly stands up for herself when it is required. But throughout the book and on this journey, her continued success comes from her honesty tinged with her respect for the region and the people with whom she is interacting.

Trekking over the desolate, rocky plateau that lies between the coast and the interior valleys of Hadhramaut, Freya Stark travelled in 1935 with a group of Bedu and a government slave-soldier. The area has been known as Aden Protectorate, the Qu'aiti State of Shihr and Makalla, South

Arabia, the People's Democratic Republic of South Yemen, and is now part of united Yemen. She visited several of the interior towns, almost never seen by Europeans at that time (though the RAF did maintain a presence), and has written beautiful descriptions of the unusual physical environment as well as a kind and sympathetic treatment of the people she met. She talked in Arabic with the ladies of the harim as well as with the rulers, scholars, and ordinary men of the communities. Stark aimed to travel to Shabwa, a long-lost ancient city much further in the interior of the Arabian peninsula, to an area then contested between Yemen and Saudi Arabia. Illness prevented her from doing so. This book then, is an account of her curtailed trip. She was evacuated by airplane from the interior, lucky to be alive. I always like travellers who respect the people they visit and who do not condescend. Freya Stark is certainly among them. For a travel book that describes a time long gone and a place still far from the beaten track--do you know many people who have been to Shibam, Makalla, Tarim, or al Qatn?--you cannot do much better. You might use it as a guide as to how you could get along with people of a very different culture to your own--step number one, don't try to force them to adhere to your value system. However, one thing about this book puzzled me. Compared to most travel literature, it is a most existentialist piece. "Here I am, travelling through remote Hadhramaut.

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