

Tea in the Desert

A bundle of coloured cloth was dropped into my lap, and a baby's eyes locked into mine. Smoke was taking its time rising from a small fire. The air was thick with the sweet smell of tea, poured from a blackened but elegant teapot. In the daytime gloom of the tent the Syrian Bedouin, their faces sculpted by weather and habit, were showing us one more of their most precious possessions.

First, we had met the shaggy brown goats outside bleating softly in their pens—a source of milk, yoghurt and cheese; then the huddles of sheep, also providing meat and an income when sold. Their woolly bodies and satisfied faces were strangely comforting in this barren desert landscape, with its occasional scattering of black plastic bags, worn-out tyres and discarded debris. And now, the youngest member of the family was being passed around for us to admire, like a special Christmas present. Half an hour earlier, our Syrian-speaking guide had instructed the driver to turn off the road. He had spotted a tent, a *buryuut hajar* (literally 'house of hair'), in the distance. Nicholas would respectfully ask these unsuspecting nomads if we could meet them. Our itinerary of ancient cities, citadels and archaeological treasures had just got even better.

Ahmad, the head of the family, was happy to show off a few gold teeth as he smiled his welcome to our group, sitting around the fire on layers of worn carpet. It was impolite to address questions to any other member of the family. '*How do you get to a dentist?*' asked Rosemary, her gentle eyes and fine complexion preserved by a lifetime spent in libraries. '*When a white tent appears in the desert, the dentist is ready for business*', Nick translated. Agonising extractions came to mind. We learned later that Ahmad's resplendent teeth had only gold foil wrapped around them. After more questions, and fragrant tea sipped from tiny cups, one of the wives led the female guests through a heavy cloth partition. Richly patterned carpets, embroidered blankets for walls, a sagging cloth roof and heaps of coloured cushions created a kind of sanctuary. Women broke off their chatter and smiled self-consciously as we briefly shared their separate living space.

We left with a final farewell to the goats and sheep, indifferent to our studied reverence. But the Bedouin's love for their animals was palpable. We had already seen herdsmen, in their brown *tob* and red *keffiyeh*, pick out a sturdy-looking sheep and lift its two front legs onto their shoulders. Running their hands along the length of the animal's body, with the love and attention of a curator examining a Rodin sculpture, they were choosing the strongest animal to sacrifice at the end of Hajj: commemorating Abraham's sacrifice of his son, Isaac.

Two days later, in Deir ez-Zor, Bedouin women traded goods with the locals while their husbands walked untethered sheep along the street to the tiled shops for slaughter. Large wooden chopping blocks sat on tables outside. Behind them, men were busy chatting to old friends and sharpening knives. Every part of each animal would be carefully separated, to be used for food or clothing. We walked past wooden carts piled high with fleeces and innards; sheep's heads and hooves lay in separate heaps nearby. This orthodox community saw few tourists. I felt the stares. In our western clothes we were as alien to them as a bowl of sheep's eyeballs were to us—though this bond between human, animal and nature felt honourable. Only one young boy, perhaps a football fan, called out, '*Hello, England!*'

Yet before leaving the Byzantine church of Mushabbak, sitting high above a village further north, two young girls had each held up a bunch of red anemones that they had picked for us. One dressed in a thick red tunic, the other in a stained white jumper, leggings and blue plastic boots; threads of dark straggly hair blown across deep brown eyes and shy faces. And when we pulled out of Damascus on the Hejaz Railway—steam billowing, carriages swaying and windows rattling as the train creaked and screeched its way out of the station—excited children ran alongside shouting

'Salaam!' Older boys clung to the carriages for a free ride, smiling back at us with jubilant faces, before jumping back onto the road.

Sitting in the guardsman's seat, watching the desert recede as we travelled south through the fertile plains of the Hauran to Bosra, I wondered how we would have responded to strangers arriving at our home out of the blue. Would we have happily shared our tea, let strangers hold our babies or shown them where we slept? And would our children have ever picked wild flowers and offered them, smiling, to a stranger?