

## The Frogs of Yemen

In 1977, Yemen was a relatively quiet and peaceful country, despite its being divided into two independent states. There was no concerns regarding terrorists or militants, but there were many unknowns for people thinking of traveling there. It was not a popular destination with multiple well-known sights or attractions. But for myself and five friends, it seemed like an interesting place to explore for a week's vacation. At the time, we all were in our late 20's, living and working in Saudi Arabia, which made our flight to Yemen short and direct. We had made reservations at a hotel in Sana'a, which was the capital of Northern Yemen. It remained the capital after Yemen was re-united as one country following many years of struggle.

Our group did wonder how sensible this venture was when we boarded the Air Yemeni flight. Our six-person group were the majority of the plane's entire passenger manifest for that day. Thankfully, the flight was quiet and we landed in Sana'a without incident. Once we cleared customs, a group of local taxi drivers descended on us. One persistent taxi driver commandeered us away from the other drivers, insisting that he could fit all six of us and our luggage in his single taxi cab. Much to our amazement he did so. As he spoke decent English, we enjoyed the half an hour drive to our hotel while he regaled us of times that he had driven members of Scottish battalions around, when they were stationed in Aden in Southern Yemen.

We checked into the hotel, which was an old palace standing in its own grounds. Having been issued keys to our rooms and finding no lobby staff to guide us, we set off to find our rooms on our own. I was not certain that the front desk staff knew themselves where the guest rooms were located. We found several of our rooms and they all turned out to be uniquely different. One room was quite large with a huge dome shaped window that had primarily yellow tinted glass filling its panes. Nobody could possibly have slept in that room during the daytime because sunlight coming through the panes created a bright yellow light that was overpowering, even with one's eyes firmly closed. Other rooms were smaller with an odd assortment of furniture and plumbing fixtures. I was the last to still be hunting for my room. Following along the room numbers, I realized that mine should be at the end of one corridor. But when I reached the end, I was still without my room. I noticed a small door that led outside onto a small terrace, which I crossed. On the far side of the terrace, I found a small set of steps leading up onto the roof of the old palace. There I found my room along with its solo neighboring room - two small rooms up on the top of the roof. It was a fight to persuade the ancient rusty key to turn the latch, but eventually it did. The room had no AC and it was over 100 degrees outside, which sent the interior temperature soaring and made the tiny space feel even smaller.

I surveyed the room – it took no time. I had a bed, a chair, and a dresser. By putting my small bag down on the floor, I had occupied about three quarters of the available walking space. I tried the single bed. As I had a thin frame myself, I fit on the bed widthwise, but the thought of rolling over had me concerned. With my head on the

pillow, my knees barely stayed on the bed. I looked around the Spartan room and thought about its remoteness from other rooms within the old palace. I quickly concluded that I had probably been assigned what originally had been one of two cells for prisoners.

After thirty claustrophobic minutes in this room, I picked up my luggage and returned to the front desk. I enquired about anything else that may be available. The desk staff apologized saying that no other rooms were ready and unoccupied. As I tried to describe the tiny cell that I had been assigned, the clerk suddenly pretended to not understand English very well. This attempt at stone-walling added to my frustration, but it actually turned to my advantage. The manager overheard the exchange and came out of his office to intervene. He said he had one alternative that could work. He offered me the gate keepers lodge that was across on the far side of the car park. It was a short walk from the main palace, but that was fine with me.

I took the key and walked over to my new quarters. The key opened the door to my new room without any problem. However, I was confronted with a most unusual room interior. The main room was large but it was totally circular - there were no corners to the room. I quickly realized that corners of a room are expected points of reference that our brains use to navigate around a room. Taking those corner reference points away caused the brain to scramble around trying to adopt other features such as the door and windows as those necessary grounding points.

Off to one side of the room was the bathroom which had been tiled in white, or at least that had been the color centuries before when the place had been built. I was pleased to see a shower as well as the toilet and sink - they all seemed to work reasonably well, considering their age.

I joined my friends in the bar before we went out for an afternoon of exploring. We immediately realized one interesting anomaly – beer was far more expensive than liquor. It transpired that the cost of transporting alcohol to Yemen was the primary component of the cost for customers. Thus a bottle of beer was about one third of the cost of an entire bottle of vodka – it all depended on the weight of the bottle plus the weight of the contents, not what the contents were.

When we later returned from our initial meander through the city of Sanaa, I headed to my lodge for a shower as I felt rather dirty and dusty. I had to play with the ancient shower controls for a while to give me a steady flow of warm water: I relaxed as the water cascaded down me carrying away the dirt. After a short while, I thought I heard a "grrrbtt, grrrbtt, grrrbtt" sound. I looked around and could not see the source of it, so I continued with my shower. Another series of "grrrbtt"s stopped me and I turned the water off, to listen more closely. I stood there waiting and about a minute later, it happened again. Without the sound of the shower in my ears, I quickly found the source. Yes, there on the dis-colored tiles on the edge of the shower stood a small brown / green frog. He did not seem to be very concerned about a tall human being

standing just a matter of a foot or two away. If it had been a bug, then I would have known how to handle it: but a frog - that was out of my normal experiences.

I decided to dry off and try to coax him out through the entrance door. He was willing to be chased to the bathroom door, but would then dart back around me to reposition himself on the edge of the shower. After a few futile attempts at eviction, I gave up and went to join my friends in the bar before heading out for dinner. When I returned later, my shower buddy was no longer sitting on the edge of the shower.

I went to bed wondering if the frog was going to disturb my slumbers. I arose in the morning well rested as I had not been awoken by any midnight croaking. After a quick inspection of the shower area, I realized that the bathroom was mine alone. I started the shower and when it felt warm, I put my head under the flow of water. It felt refreshing and good. In a certain way, I was not too surprised and not displeased when I heard appreciative croaking coming from down on the edge of the shower again. Where the little frog came from, I had no idea, but it must have hopped into position as soon as it sensed the water. I decided to share my shower with the little frog provided he did not bring a gang of friends with him.

For the entire duration of our stay in Sana'a, I could walk into the bathroom and the frog was nowhere to be seen. But as soon as the shower was turned on, it magically appeared on the edge of the shower so that it could bask in the warm mist. The frog seemed to have long term residential rights and no temporary stay vacationer was going to displace it. So I decided a mutual respect policy was going work best. He never made a sound, except for when the shower was on and after a while I took that as a statement of its' appreciation.

While we were staying at the hotel, two young French couples arrived for a stay. We met them in the bar just after they settled in. They talked enthusiastically about starting an exporting company in Yemen that would supply local Yemeni crafts and clothing to a distribution center that they already ran in France. They had been concerned about transportation for themselves and their business in Yemen and had decided to ship two brand new Toyota Landcruisers with them. On their second day, they decided to take one of them out .to visit an ancient village that lay about two hours north of Sana'a. Later in the day, we were rather surprised to find them sitting in the bar, drinking heavily and talking in quiet but angry tones. Their little adventure had not gone as they had expected.

They managed to drive out to the area that they intended visiting. In a vast expanse of open scrubby, rocky desert, they came across two young local men whose old and rather dilapidated car had broken down. They were under the hood checking out the engine and, in that heat, it was not a particularly enviable situation. So the French couples pulled over to give them some assistance. As they all started looking under the hood themselves the two guys pulled out a couple of old hand guns.

They indicated that they wanted the keys to the new Landcruiser, which the French group gave them without much hesitation. They decided no matter how old the guns looked, they were still guns, therefore they did not have much choice. The two men got in and started the Landcruiser. Just as they were about to drive away, they tossed a set of car keys to the French couples and pointed to the car that they had been working on. As the couples' new vehicle disappeared into the distance, they tried to start the dilapidated car and it spluttered into life.

Their return to Sana'a took them much longer than their early morning drive. Eventually the very upset French couples made it back to the city where they immediately reported the car theft. Sadly, the police response was quite simple "What do you want us to do about it?" In frustration, the couples turned to the French Embassy who explained a few fundamentals of Yemeni ways to them, which did not help their moods. Apparently, the Sana'a police had some control over the actual city but beyond the city limits the police were totally devoid of any power. The surrounding desert was controlled by local tribal chiefs and a few warlords. However, out in the desert, there were very strictly upheld standards of behavior (derived from Bedouin traditions) with known consequences for violations. This was the reason for the two guys tossing the keys for the old car to the French group. To steal one's means of transport while out in the wilds of the desert was considered tantamount to actually killing a person. Therefore, the traditional punishment for such a crime was beheading. But if, as one steals another person's means of transport, one gives them an alternative means of transport to return to safety, then the crime is considered to be just stealing. In this case, the punishment would be to lose a hand. But, it was very unlikely that any tribal chief was going to worry about this particular theft as the original owners had been infidels (non-Muslim.)

By the time that we departed back to Saudi, the French couples were re-assessing their plans and actually thinking of finding some local shipping agents with whom they could transact business when they resettled back in Paris. It was going to be a tough decision because they had committed a whole lot of time and resources to start their business venture in Sana'a. They had laid out their business plans and expectations, but I suspect that their grasp of actually functioning in Yemen had sadly not been as well researched. My own group of six had been fortunate to have lived in Saudi for some time where we, to a high degree, had been protected. Within those confines, we had talked with others who had travelled around the area and learned from their experiences. We had learned, among other things, the need for awareness of one's surroundings and we had had the chance to practice such skills around our camp in Saudi. For us, those sensitivities and awarenesses were heightened when we traveled to Yemen as the local laws and rules were different to what we knew in Saudi.. There was need for constant vigilance. Unfortunately, the French couples had not been allowed the time to learn their street smarts.

When it comes down to it, there was nothing but bad luck and bad timing that had brought the French couples into contact with those car thieves. Had the thieves planned to steal someone's car or was it just an opportune moment for a couple of local rogues? We will never know, but for the French couples, bad luck chose them that day.

Could the theft have been prevented? Quite possibly. But could something even more tragic have happened on their trip? Quite possibly. Or could they have enjoyed a wonderful day out without incident? Quite possibly. The point is that no matter how much planning is made, success of an endeavor can never be guaranteed and no lack of planning will guarantee failure. We each need to determine how much planning or lack of it we are willing to have in our lives to feel safe, feel exhilarated, or to feel a sense of achievement. There is no simple answer that is always true for any of us. It is a constantly moving target, depending on surroundings, circumstances and our own internal state, at the time.

Life is an adventure. Would you have felt comfortable sharing a room with a frog or driving out into an unknown desert landscape? Sometimes we feel the need to be as restrained and controlled as the Queen of England. At other times, we can be as free as Tarzan swinging through the trees. Any situation can challenge our level of comfort. Some people may be happier in situations requiring the Queen's restraint and others may prefer Tarzan freedom and there are all points between the two. There is no right or wrong answer, just an understanding that all people are different and we can never predict accurately how people will react to any given circumstance. Is it possible to understand how others react to situations or even, sometimes, understand our own reactions? I believe that we can never fully understand others and it is a lifetime journey to try to truly understand ourselves. That is one of the true beauties and unsolvable mysteries of being human. And may it always be that way.

I hope those French couples found the path to achieve their endeavors and that they adopted a brown / green frog as their company logo for good luck.