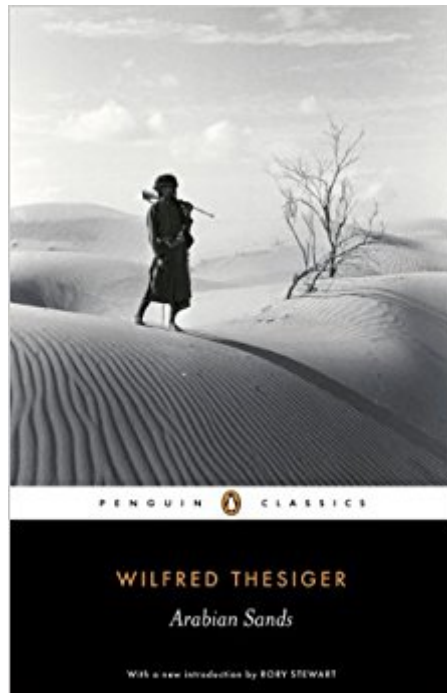


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Arabian Sands (Penguin Classics)



Synopsis

"Following worthily in the tradition of Burton, Lawrence, Philby and Thomas, [Arabian Sands] is, very likely, the book about Arabia to end all books about Arabia." — "The Daily Telegraph" — Arabian Sands is Wilfred Thesiger's record of his extraordinary journey through the parched "Empty Quarter" of Arabia. Educated at Eton and Oxford, Thesiger was repulsed by the softness and rigidity of Western life — "the machines, the calling cards, the meticulously aligned streets." In the spirit of T. E. Lawrence, he set out to explore the deserts of Arabia, traveling among peoples who had never seen a European and considered it their duty to kill Christian infidels. His now-classic account is invaluable to understanding the modern Middle East.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

"The narrative is vividly written, with a thousand little anecdotes and touches which bring back to any who have seen these countries every scene with the colour of real life." — "The Sunday Times (London)

Wilfred Thesiger (1910-2003) was a British explorer and travel writer. He was born at Addis Ababa, Abyssinia (now Ethiopia). Educated at Eton and Oxford, he worked in the Sudan Political Service and later, for a year, as a Political Officer for the Ethiopian Emperor, Haile Selassie. He is best known for two travel books: Arabian Sands (1959) and The Marsh Arabs (1964). — Rory Stewart (introducer) has written for the New York Times Magazine, Granta, and

the London Review of Books, and is the author of *The Places In Between* and *The Prince of the Marshes*. A former fellow at the Carr Center for Human Rights Policy at Harvard's John F. Kennedy School of Government, he was awarded the Order of the British Empire by the British government for services in Iraq.

The greatest non-Arabian nomad ever. I have his beautiful book *The Last Nomad* which is large and fully illustrated and had a copy of *Arabian Sands* but regretfully lent it to the wrong kind of friend but am delighted with this copy from . It is exclusively about Arabia a country (especially the Bedouins of the Rub'Al-Khalid) that has always fascinated me.

I have almost finished this book, and like the previous one, I find it incredible that this man was so determined to travel the Empty Quarter of Arabia with the Bedu, living a life of such hardship for weeks on end and forming good friendships with the Arabs. Again I went to the computer and Google Earthed every place name and mountain, amazed to see the desolate places he went to, and also saddened to see vehicle tracks wreaking the pristine beauty of the sand dunes. In Thesinger's time the wild life was hard to find and conservation appears to have been unheard of...as we know it. Interesting to read that the tribal fighting then is not much different to what we have today. I would love to know what happened to Wilfred Thesinger after his time in the desert countries.

I'm only about a quarter through this book, and I'm enthralled. Takes you back to another world, before oil riches flowed, to a time when conditions were unrelentingly harsh and unforgiving, where the people were hard and austere, accustomed to a life of great demands and hardships, yet also capable of great courtesy and hospitality. The author explains why he was drawn into the desert and living with the Bedu and describes how the time he spent there was the happiest of his life. Thesinger served as a foreign service officer in Sudan for a number of years as a young man before setting off on his 2 crossings of the empty quarter in southern Arabia. He notes the great abundance of wildlife in Sudan: herds of thousands of elephants, an abundance of lions (he shot 70 himself on hunting trips while stationed there). It's such a sad shame that it's almost all gone now after years of poaching, over-hunting, and civil war. Though apparently there has been some return of these animals on a much smaller scale with some degree of peace in South Sudan. It's hard to imagine that a description of desert life--traveling with camels and how important they were to survival, the daily hardships and rituals of endurance that were just routine, the constant

danger--would be fascinating, but it is. Even though Thesiger's travels happened only about 60 years ago, they seem taken from a different era, a much different and wild time. It is, for example, jolting to read that slavery still very much exists in Arabia at this time. And the religious fundamentalism is striking too: for example, a Bedouin is taken aback when Thesiger tells him that in England they have weathermen who can tell you when it is going to rain; the Bedu think that is something only God knows and that it is blasphemy to say otherwise.

This is one of the all time great adventure and travel books. Thesiger describes a world and a lifestyle that is now passed away, but existed not very long ago. He was the last of the British explorers who can nonchalantly describe things like going without water for days at a time as if his local deli had forgotten to include sugar packets with his order of coffee. If you read this book, you should also catch the documentary about Thesiger on the Journey Pictures channel on YouTube. In it, you can hear him, shortly before his death, reflect on his life and adventures. The filmmakers also visit and interview Thesiger's Bedouin companions and contrast their past and contemporary lives. The juxtaposition and contrast is interesting to watch and ponder.

I purchased this volume by mistake. Yet no mistake could be more welcome. Arabian sands is not a romantic reinvention of a travel diary, as we might be accustomed to read. Its crude and plain style underlines the harshness and the richness of Theisinger's experience. While most narrators like to fantasize and dramatize, Wilfred chooses to let the reader understand how the hardships are part of a way of life which since has been lost. One of the few diary books worth reading twice.

An excellent book and a good one to read after Arabian Felix by Bertram Thomas

Do not be put off by the extraordinary comments by Rory Stewart, a tiny bug in comparison to the giant that is Thesiger. All of Thesiger's books are exceptional; he was a man made for better and less psychological times.

I just returned from Saudi Arabia and 3 days travelling with Bedouins across part of the Empty Quarter from Wadi al Dawasir to Riyadh. The experience put this book in context. A true classic. An outstanding adventure in days gone-by beautifully described Wilfred Thesiger. I highly recommend it.

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