



Living with Arabs: Nine Years with the Petra Bedouin

Joan Ward

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Offering an unparalleled view of a culture unfamiliar to many Westerners, this should be read by anyone wanting to further understand a people and heritage.

In *Living with Arabs*, an adventurous British schoolteacher writes about her exploration of another culture when she decides to retire and live in a community she first explored as a tourist visiting Jordan. Joan Ward's engrossing and unique story entertains as well as enlightens as she recounts the people and places she discovered in her nine years living in a region now seen more frequently on the evening news.

Ward explains how she first visited the area in 2004, in the vicinity of the world heritage site city of Petra, the stone monument most recognizable from the third Indiana Jones movie.

"In the course of my life, I have battled cancer, injustice, unhappy marriages and physical pain, but nothing was to make me dig as deep into my reserves as the life that lay ahead of me in Um Sayhoun."

She befriends Bassam Ali, her initial guide, and his extended family, eventually buying in and sharing a portion of their newly built home. Her writing is factual and up-front: she writes and opines on what she observes, whether it's cultural differences that are sometimes difficult to grasp and understand, such as mistreating the vulnerable, or whether it's the heartwarming authenticity of a man who speaks to her as an equal on the street.

The eighteen chapters contain ten reproductions of the author's personal black and white photos, offering a visual glimpse of her life there. She does an excellent job of providing brief, simple explanations of cultural words that arise; for example, "People ... return to their homes ... in order to rest and pray before *iftar*, the meal which breaks the fast, at approximately six o'clock."

In one lighthearted chapter. "Three Weeks in Winter," Ward shares a portion of her journal written to show friends back in England how she spent her time; included are descriptions of the numerous neighbors who drop by unannounced, and of the many car rides she was hit up for.

She's more serious, though, when elucidating the status of women in the Muslim world. After one large gathering, she notices "one particular woman in her mid to late thirties ... was very beautiful with lovely eyes and a fine bone structure. However, she had absolutely no teeth. During the evening, she had been breast-feeding her sixteenth child."

Though smaller in size, the book packs a lot into its roughly two hundred pages, including this insight by the author—who had to eventually return to England—concerning a twenty-five-year-old woman: "She keeps largely out of sight ... behind the high walls of her father's house, waiting, like many other women, for someone else to come and ask for her."

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ROBIN FARRELL EDMUNDS (March 18, 2015)

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