

Strange Bewildering Time: Istanbul to Kathmandu in the Last Year of the Hippie Trail

Mark Abley

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In the summer of 1978, Mark Abley and his friend Clare embarked on the Hippie Trail, an overland route from Turkey to Nepal that many Westerners took in search of adventure and spiritual enlightenment. *Strange Bewildering Time* is Abley's vibrant, poignant memoir about those travels.

Bookended by chance meetings with the Shah of Iran and Indira Gandhi, Abley's narrative draws from the copious notes he took during his trip, providing an intimate glimpse of far-flung regions during times of change, just before some regions became inaccessible to Westerners. He writes about the hubbub of Istanbul and a harrowing bus ride to Afghanistan through the Khyber Pass. Lush descriptions of urban life and natural surroundings dominate, while enlightening historical and cultural context is provided for each destination along the way.

Above all, the book communicates the overpowering wonder of visiting unfamiliar lands, where awe and the mundane intermingle. Visits to spectacular temples and ancient cities are counterbalanced by the difficulties of travel in pre-internet days, when information was hazy and traversing close regions could represent weeks of travel if a single bus became unreliable.

Abley's measured, melancholic tone exists in striking contrast to the innocence of his younger self. Throughout, he notes how much the world has changed in the intervening decades while often remaining the same, as when discussing a sobering visit to Van; this leads to reflections on the continuing Armenian genocide. Likewise, the book presents the pros and cons of cultural immersion, as encounters with locals lead to heartfelt exchanges or moments of true danger.

An engrossing travelogue with introductions to the Middle East and Central Asia, *Strange Bewildering Time* is nostalgic and thoughtful—a paean and a lament for a time long gone.

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