

YEMEN, FROM PAGE 25

the Old City bazaar. Where waiters walk around teahouses swinging smoking incense braziers. Where you stand on the rooftops and listen to a real *muezzin* you can actually see chanting the call to prayer on the minaret a few yards away.

Where you never hear Britney Spears.

If that weren't reason enough to visit, Yemen — before the fighting in Lebanon — was one of the most welcoming countries in the Middle East. Hospitality seems to be universal, starting with locals yelling, "Welcome to Yemen" (in English!) as you cruise through Sana'a. However, a visit here is complicated by the quirkiest social dynamics in the Arab world. While the worldwide tension between Western liberal ideas and the strictures of eighth-century Islam is not apparent to the casual visitor, it percolates beneath the surface.

One of the first things visitors will notice is how life in Yemen revolves not so much around fundamentalist Islam as around *khat*, a mild stimulant/euphoric that is highly addictive. "A common Yemeni saying is, 'Anything to help except money or *khat*,'" said my friend Faris, an Iraqi exile whose family lives near Sana'a.

Perhaps 70 percent of men, as well as a sizable percentage of women, walk around chewing the stuff, a softball-size wad of the iridescent green leaves under a bulging cheek. Sana'a seems to go through daily mood swings — anxious mornings before the first chew, elevated activity during the afternoons and listless evenings.

One could shrug it off and compare the *khat* jones to Seattle on really intense coffee buzz. But Jim Crane, an American teaching English in Sana'a, told me how alluring the drug can be. About "kay'eef," or "chillin'" in the mellow first moments of a chew. About what the Yemenis call "the Hour of Solomon," when *khat* makes users introspective at the end of the day, and everyone sits silently lost in their thoughts.

About how difficult it is to quit chewing.

But not all is mellow here. There are reasons not to go to Yemen, from the current Lebanon conflict to a brewing Shiite insurrection in northern Yemen to al-Qaida strongholds in the eastern Hadramaut province.

Still, U.S. officials working in Sana'a rue the way Yemen is portrayed to the outside world, and emphasize there is neither petty crime nor terrorist attacks. "There have been far fewer attacks here than in Great Britain and Spain," noted one U.S. security official.

Americans I talked to rate it their favorite assignment. Under pro-Western — though unpredictable — President Abdullah Saleh, Yemen is the second freest Arab state I've visited behind, ironically, Lebanon. Saleh has cracked down on fundamentalists, many of whom have died in fighting in Iraq or Afghanistan.

All these factors have led to a big increase in visitors. When I was there in April, I met scores of travelers from Belgium, Germany and the Netherlands ignoring the risks, seduced by Yemen's many draws. Must-sees include the urbane business centers of Aden and Ta'iz, the "1001 Nights" setting of Sana'a, and Socotra Island, one of the most unique ecosystems in the world.

As I walked through Sana'a's central Tahirer (Emancipation) Square and Old Town and met ordinary Yemenis, I had an epiphany. If you stand



Could buildings such as these in Yemen's old city be the world's first skyscrapers? Some of the multi-story residences are 400 years old, predating Manhattan's high-rise apartments by three centuries.



Motorists in Sana'a drive on what was designed as a huge canal, meant to channel storm waters out of the city. When the rains come, heedless drivers often end up with submerged cars.

and stare too long outside a house in my native Kentucky, then start taking photos, there's a better than even chance the owner will come out shooting. If you stand and stare outside a Yemeni house, then start taking photos, there's a better than even chance the patriarch will come out and invite you in.

Faris and I were admiring the distinctive Old Town architecture, which comes out of a fantastic southern Arabian tradition common to Yemen and neighboring Oman. The center of Sana'a, unlike other fabled Arab capitals such as Baghdad and Damascus, escaped the 20th-century curse of concrete and steel mainly because

Yemen was teetering on the edge of anarchy for the last 60 years.

Extended families live in tower houses that look like multi-layered, chocolate confections. I was shooting photos when Daris, an affluent young merchant, approached and wondered: Would we like to see the inside of his house?

Absolutely!

Entering off the street, we went room to room, floor-to-floor to the rooftop, commenting on ornamental touches such as molded plaster inlays with verses from the Quran and stained glass windows. Festive is the best description.

We proceeded to the upper floors



Although most women older than 18 wear the "hijab," Yemeni girls and young women seem to live lives that, through the Western lens, appear more liberated than those in other Arab countries. But hardly anything in Yemen is as it seems.

after getting the "all clear" — the women of the house were in their private quarters. In conservative Sana'a, you'd have to be close friends or family for the women to come in unveiled. (I'd like to have heard those inner-sanctum conversations: "Great. Daris is inviting in tourists off the street again!")

As much time as I've spent in the Middle East, I still find irksome the divide between women and men no matter how religious Muslims justify it. But during the week or so I was in Sana'a, I was struck by how women go unescorted everywhere, and make up half the work force — far more independent than in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait. Men and women walk arm and arm, and one couple even asked that I take their photo.

Still, I didn't see more than a few women without the *hijab*, or head cover, and even veils, though women from other nations working in Yemen tend toward Western attire. One disconcerting moment involved a woman speeding toward me down a narrow alley, driving her large SUV while wearing a full chador that I doubt enhanced her ability to see where she was going.

Oddly, I, as a Westerner, was no more a stranger than Faris, who fled to Yemen after insurgents threatened his once-influential family. In fact, his Baghdadi accent raised eyebrows everywhere, while people didn't seem to notice me. That could be because

there are so many foreigners doing business here.

Chinese businessmen come by the droves for construction projects funded by Yemen's significant oil reserves. West Asian businessmen run the hotels. Syrians and Lebanese own the best restaurants. As of early 2006, there were about 70,000 Americans working in Yemen, more than in Saudi Arabia, according to State Department figures.

Then there's the shopping. Yemen's location on the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden has made it a center for traders, smugglers and pirates working Middle East-to-Asia routes, as well as European trade routes to Africa. At least 10 centuries worth of stuff has accumulated here, making the country one of the world's great depositories of the arcane ... and a bargain basement for buyers.

Every visitor to Yemen ends up with a *jambiya*, a curved blade knife, and Yemeni men really wear them. I passed because I couldn't tell a good one from tourist junk.

But I did get a very nice Baluch/Afghani tribal rug that would have cost \$1,000 in Europe for \$120 after two days of on-and-off haggling. I also paid about \$20 for an 80-year old "uniform" once worn by a soldier in the army of the imam who ruled Yemen until it became a secular republic. The elaborate cotton and silk tunic was hanging from the rafters of a shop where it had been forgotten for



A merchant shows off his finest jambiya, the curved-blade knives in ornate sheathes that all Yemeni men carry. Cheap tourist versions sell for as little as \$5, with old, collectible knives selling for thousands.

a decade, judging by its coating of dust.

One item I passed on — only to regret it — was a small bronze figure, a votive that looked like an authentic pre-Islamic antiquity. But the green patina was too perfect. "Yes," the young shopkeeper said cheerfully, "it's new. A fake, but a very good fake, from (the village of) Zabied, famous

for its fakes."

Several pieces in the British Museum are actually the work of the crafty Zabied forgers, he assured me. Personally, I found refreshing that sort of good old-fashioned, good-natured entrepreneurial fraud.

And everywhere you go, there's fabulous food, such as *sawahuk* — a spicy tomato/pepper paste — and



When he saw a reporter admiring his house, Daris, a young merchant, invited him in for a tour and a chew of the highly addictive "khat," which his guests politely declined.

mendi, tandoor-like rice dishes cooked in clay pots.

My days in Sana'a made me wonder how someone like Osama bin Laden, with his vengeful, inflexible Muslim Puritanism could have come from Yemen, a contradictory society of *khat*-chewing, industrious, welcoming people. I concluded that bin Laden is not only the black sheep of his family, he's a Yemeni anomaly — more a product of Saudi extremism.

Whatever is going on here — and you can never "know," only interpret — I vowed to return and to take my family to see all the things I missed. But unlike most countries I've visited, it's not up to me. The question is: Who will win here? Can Yemen retain its character without having to choose between being a dismal Islamic fundamentalist backwater, or another Dubai — a freaky Arab Disneyland?

With all the unknowns, travelers may be prudent to move Yemen to the destination wish list marked "some day soon."

Email Terry Boyd at boydt@mail.estrines.osd.mil.



Sana'a architecture runs from rather crude buildings from the 16th century to incredibly detailed 19th century buildings, such as this mansion with intricate, arched fans over windows. The fans are mostly hollow and allow air to circulate.