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West of Arabia: A Journey Home

Gary Heath

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Gary Heath : West of Arabia: A Journey Home before purchasing it in order to gauge whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised West of Arabia: A Journey Home:

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. West of Arabia -- A Journey Home. A Review...By Chuck Phillips "West of Arabia -- A Journey Home" by Gary Heath on Ozaru Books, England, 2011 Gary Heath's daunting task for the Fall of 2010 was to travel South from Saudi Arabia to Eritrea via Yemen then overland North to the Sudan

and Egypt, then proceed West to every other country in North Africa all the way to Morocco. He intended to then cross the Strait of Gibraltar North through Spain and France all overland to his former home in the U.K. He had hoped he would triumph over the sterility of personal freedom-denying Shariah Law Islamic culture and the vast desert there itself, both literally and figuratively, to open up and reveal vistas of nurturing experiences and then detail them in a journal diary of his "minor Odyssey." "Travels in Taiwan" revealed a friendly, avuncular tone throughout as Heath reveled in the free, open culture and environment of the island he explored throughout that book. His daunting task in West of Arabia would be to somehow have this same window open up now as an outsider -- a non-Muslim -- on the outside looking in on the Western edge people and culture of the vastly different, Islamic Middle East. His is a courageous attempt to duplicate what he did in a Travels in Taiwan, and for that he should be admired and applauded, for in Arabia in his chapter entitled, "An Education," in Eritrea and the Sudan he succeeds. Also, in Egypt and Tunisia he does as well. It is when he must surrender his familiar, trusty, beloved freedom of traveling unencumbered by himself via public transportation to having to be forced to accept the constraints of being desultorily shepherded around by two laconic and lazy local national SUV drivers through the vast stretches of Libya that his tone changes from his usual friendly, avuncular style to that of understood irritation and begrudging resignation. He must suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune in also rudely being denied a travel visa to traverse Algeria in Tunisia, forcing him to rather fly over that country, much to his chagrin, in a commercial aircraft. Obviously tired by the time he comes to Morocco, he must suffer the company of some boorish, know-it-all Western travelers in a train carriage there, before crossing the Strait of Gibraltar. The strengths of the book are in his keen revelations of the contemporary TEFL language teaching scene of university Preparatory Year instruction in KSA in his chapter there, "An Education"; his charming experiences in Eritrea and the Sudan, where he must rein in an obnoxious Austrian lady; his quite perceptive experiences of Egyptian contemporary culture in his travels in that country; his beloved Gibraltar and Spanish sections, including one of his Madrid art museum visits; and his return via rail to the U.K. where he writes a concluding chapter on his cross-cultural experiences that reveal an alienation having to become immersed again in a stifling British cultural morass, so stultifying to someone who needs and demands the freedom of personal liberty. I recommend the book, but the book might benefit from a new concluding chapter on the so-called Arab Spring, which has rather turned out to be as tragic as Tennessee Williams' ironic "The Roman Spring of Mrs. Stone," what with Al-Qaeda jihadist elements muscling in to take over and hijack the democratic movements for their own darker purposes as revealed in the terrorist-supportive Muslim Brotherhood take over in Egypt, in the violent terror attacks on the U.S. Consulate in Benghazi, where four Americans, including the U.S. Ambassador, were cruelly murdered on September 11th, and in the terrible oil company attack in Algeria by Al-Qaeda in the Maghrib, one of the benefactors of the Spring in the void it left in North Africa.

Faced with the need to travel from Saudi Arabia to the UK, Gary Heath made the unusual decision to take the overland route. His three principles were to stay on the ground, avoid back-tracking, and do minimal sightseeing. The ever-changing situation in the Middle East meant that the rules had to be bent on occasion, yet as he travelled across Eritrea, Sudan, Egypt, Libya, Tunisia and Morocco, he succeeded in beating his own path around the tourist traps, gaining unique insights into Arabic culture as he went. Written just a few months before the Arab Spring of 2011, this book reveals many of the underlying tensions that were to explode onto the world stage just shortly afterwards, and has been updated to reflect the recent changes.