

Episode 90b: Driving Through Arabia, 1976 (Part 2)

Summary

In the second part of this two-part conversation about his overland trip from South Africa to the UK in 1976, our guest Reg talks about travelling through Arabia, including Yemen, Saudi Arabia and Syria.

Transcript

Reg: And then we went north of Kenya, uhh, into Ethiopia. And that was probably the most difficult of all, because it was the year Haile Selassie had died. And there was a civil war in the north, umm, and all the people that we met had come south, said, 'Don't go north.' And our plan had been to go north and then go into the Sudan to Juba, which is now South Sudan - the capital - and drive across the Sahara. That was always the plan. Umm, but because we hit this civil war in, uhh, northern Ethiopia, umm, our choices were limited. And somebody suggested we drive down to Djibouti, which is on the Horn of Africa. And, umm, we did. We took a train, the van on a train, down to Djibouti. And then we had to wait nearly a month to try and get the van on a boat, across the Red Sea to North Yemen, right? Uhh, so, the whole, sort of, you know, the whole planning that we got into changed dramatically, 'cause, you know, we were then having to go back to the UK through the Arabian Peninsula. Umm, which was not easy, 'cause that meant going through Saudi Arabia.

Nick: Which is still not easy, even to this day.

Reg: Absolutely. So, umm, we finally got a boat, uhh, a Polish, uhh, cargo¹ boat that was able to accommodate four passengers. And we were the only two of the four passengers, plus the vehicle. Umm, and it was called the, I think it was called the SS Świnica. Umm, and we thought, 'Overnight passage, twenty-four hours,' but of course we hadn't planned for the fact that Hudaydah, which was the port of North Yemen, only had three berths², and we were one of about twenty boats waiting, off-shore, to be offloaded. Now, the Greeks could bribe the, uhh, harbour master, but the East Europeans couldn't, so most of the boats that were stuck

¹ cargo: (adjective) a ship or plane that is for carrying goods, not passengers; (noun) goods on a plane, ship etc

² berths: places for ships to dock (park)

waiting for a berth, were Russians, Yugoslavs, uhh, Polish, Romanian. And we were stuck for a month.

Nick: Well, there you go.

Reg: But it didn't cost us anything, because the contract for our overnight passage was just twenty-four hours. So we were quite hungry by that time, having been about nine months on the road. Uhh, and they fed us. They fed us for a month. And we made firm friends on that boat because we ... they came, a couple stayed with us in Malaysia, saw us in Australia years later, umm, 'cause the Poles are just a lovely bunch of people. And they were very cynical about communism. So we were stuck on that boat for a month. Uhh, finally got offloaded in Hudaydah, umm, and the captain was a charming guy, but he was totally mad. He was an alcoholic, he was the foremost³ private butterfly collector in Poland. He'd written a book on the butterflies and moths of the world.

Nick: That's incredible!

Reg: So at night, and it was during the Montreal Olympics, I would sit in the kombi listening to the Olympics with all of the, uhh, lights on, because you had to when you were berthed offshore, with this mad butterfly collector running around collecting moths with a butterfly net. So there were those sort of weird little vignettes⁴, umm, that, uhh, just remain embedded⁵ in my mind. And so when we got to Hudaydah, we then had to work out how on earth we were going to get up to, uhh ... through Saudi Arabia, you know, uhh, Syria, Yugoslavia and then home. And the first, uhh, challenge was just getting out of, uhh, North Yemen, and we went up to Sana'a, which is the old capital, beautiful old city. And we met up with a couple who were working for the UN and we got talking, we were just sort of by the roadside. And they stopped, he stopped Richard stopped in his land rover and said, 'No, come and stay with us and we'll work it all out.' So we stayed with them for about three weeks and, uhh, I had to go for day after day to the Saudi Arabian embassy, to persuade them to give me a visa to get into Saudi Arabia to drive up the coast.

Nick: And were you just trying for a transit visa or...?

Reg: Yeah, transit visa.

Nick: And even that...

Reg: Even that was hard. But, umm, we got it and, uhh, we thought, 'Well, before' - they gave it to us, sort of two weeks hence - so we thought, 'Ahh, before we

³ foremost: best, most famous

⁴ vignettes: small images or stories

⁵ embedded: stuck, fixed

actually leave North Yemen, let's go down to the ... near Aden, which was the capital of South Yemen.

Nick: Right.

Reg: Which was communist. Just to see if we could actually get in. Umm, and it was on the drive down towards Aden that we ... and it was very secured, these mountain passes that we were going through, 'cause it's very beautiful, North Yemen, it's sort of highlands, the centre. Uhh, I lost the brakes going down and panicked⁶ and changed gear from third into first and there was this awful sound of an engine exploding. And, in fact, I then stood on the brakes and managed to stop, but the engine had actually burst - pistons, everything.

Nick: And could you use the training that you'd done to fix it?

Reg: Well, amazing story. Umm, are we alright for time? The amazing story was that, umm, we started to ... we thought, 'That's it.' And we were part near a village. They all came out, the Yemenis, and looked at us and thought we were mad. And we started selling stuff to people who were going by in their cars. And then this, uhh, Volkswagen passed and, uhh, the guy stopped and he said, uhh, 'What's the problem?' I said, 'Our engine's blown up.' I said, 'We're stuck.' He said, 'Look, I actually work at an Anglo-German road construction about 60 ks down the road.' He said, 'If you can get down there,' he said, 'I'm sure they'll be able to help you.' So I said to Pam, I said, 'Look, get a taxi,' 'cause there were taxis going past. 'Get a taxi back to Richard and Mary, get them to come down in the land rover' - which she then did - 'I'll meantime take the engine out and we'll go with the engine down to this Anglo-German construction camp.' So when they came back, loaded on the engine, drove down to this, uhh, Anglo-German construction camp, met the Austrian works manager, who - believe it or not - had four young Yemeni apprentices who were re-servicing and conditioning a 1600, made-in-Brazil kombi engine. I mean, because it was Brazilian made, and when we got talking, I said, 'Is it Brazilian?' He said, 'Yes it is.' He said, 'This is what I'll do.' He said, 'I'll take your old engine 'cause they're just finishing this one. I'll give you that one, put it on, and then if you get it working, come in and we'll service the whole vehicle.'

Nick: That's an amazing coincidence that they had that right there.

Reg: So yes, so we thought, 'OK, we've done the course, we'll take the engine back.' And, you know, we were taught things like: if you take an engine out, you put a tyre under it. You inflate the tyre, you can then rest the engine on that tyre, then you deflate it and pull it out. Amazing, I would never had thought of that, but I was taught that. Umm, so we did, I did that. It's only four bolts, a kombi engine, so, and it went, and we were on a hill, so pushed it down the hill and it started.

Nick: Wow.

⁶ panicked: got scared and acted irrationally

Reg: Incredible.

Nick: And did you eventually make it through Saudi Arabia?

Reg: I certainly did. We got the engine, uhh, got the whole car serviced, new accelerator, cable, put a new, uhh, carburettor in. Uhh, got through Saudi Arabia, we had to get a boat from Hudaydah up to Jedda, because you couldn't drive through northern, uhh, North Yemen, 'cause there was, again, civil war - some, uhh, trouble, fighting.

Nick: As there is now, more or less.

Reg: And we drove on what was then a very new road along the coast. And we went up through Saudi Arabia, and we reckon⁷ we were probably the first white people who had driven on that road. Umm, drove into Mecca by mistake and got chased out, 'cause they said, 'No infidels⁸.' Umm, and yeah, so we drove up past, uhh, through Syria, visited places like Aleppo, the one that's just been razed to the ground⁹ in the civil war, which we were very saddened by. Because I think after Sana'a, it was the oldest, uhh, continuously...

Nick: Continuously inhabited.

Reg: ... urbanised city in the world, uhh, very beautiful. Anyway, so we went through places like Damascus, Aleppo, uhh, through, uhh, Syria, through Yugoslavia, through Greece, uhh, and then through Western Europe, uhh, and arrived back in September '76, where on the ferry across from Calais to Dover, it started raining. And the UK had the biggest drought¹⁰ in 600 years, and we arrived the day that the rains came. And I thought that was very interesting, you're arriving back when it starts raining. So that was our trip: twenty thousand miles, umm, about eleven months. And it made me want to be a foreign correspondent.

Nick: No, it's an amazing journey and it's great to ... it's incredible to see how much things have changed.

Reg: Yes.

Nick: And in some cases, how much things have stayed the same.

Reg: Yeah. And interestingly, about two or three months after we arrived back, there was some dispute between Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania, and they closed

⁷ reckon: think, calculate

⁸ infidels: unbelievers in a particular religion (Islam in this case)

⁹ razed to the ground: completely destroyed (city)

¹⁰ drought: period of no rain

off the borders, right, so we couldn't have got through. So we were lucky in the timing that we actually got through.

Nick: Alright, Reg, thank you very much!

Reg: OK!

Comprehension Questions

1. Why did Reg have to stay on the boat to Yemen for a month even though the journey was only one day?
2. What was the boat captain's unusual hobby?
3. What happened on the day Reg arrived back in the UK?

Exercises

Use the words and expressions in the footnotes of the transcript to fill in the gaps.

1. When the police car started chasing him, he _____ and crashed his car into a tree.
2. She's the world's _____ expert in the field of Visigothic script. She's currently doing a fellowship at the University of Salamanca.
3. The parade was very crowded. I _____ there were about 20,000 people there.
4. In World War II, many cities such as Warsaw were _____ and had to be rebuilt after the war.
5. If there are no passenger boats going where you want to go, you might get lucky and be able to go on a _____ boat instead.
6. When she saw the Eiffel Tower in Paris for the first time, that image became _____ in her mind forever.
7. If there's a _____, farmers and food production suffer because crops don't get the water they need.
8. When she travels, she takes her sketchbook with her and draws little _____ of the places she visits.
9. The stated reason for the Crusades, which started in the 11th century, was that so-called _____ were ruling Jerusalem.
10. When the sailor arrived in the small fishing village, he was worried that there wouldn't be any _____ for him to dock his boat for the night. But in the end there was plenty of space.

Discussion Questions

Discuss these questions with a partner or in the [English in 10 Minutes Listeners group on Facebook](#):

1. What do you think of Reg's journey? Could you imagine doing something similar?
2. The Polish captain of Reg's ship was a butterfly collector. Are you interested in this hobby? Why or why not?
3. Reg mentioned a drought in the UK. Do you have droughts where you live?

Answers

Comprehension Questions

1. Because there were not enough available berths to dock (park) the boat at the port in Yemen when he arrived.
2. He collected butterflies.
3. It started raining, ending a drought.

Exercises

1. panicked
2. foremost
3. reckon
4. razed to the ground
5. cargo
6. embedded
7. drought
8. vignettes
9. infidels
10. berths