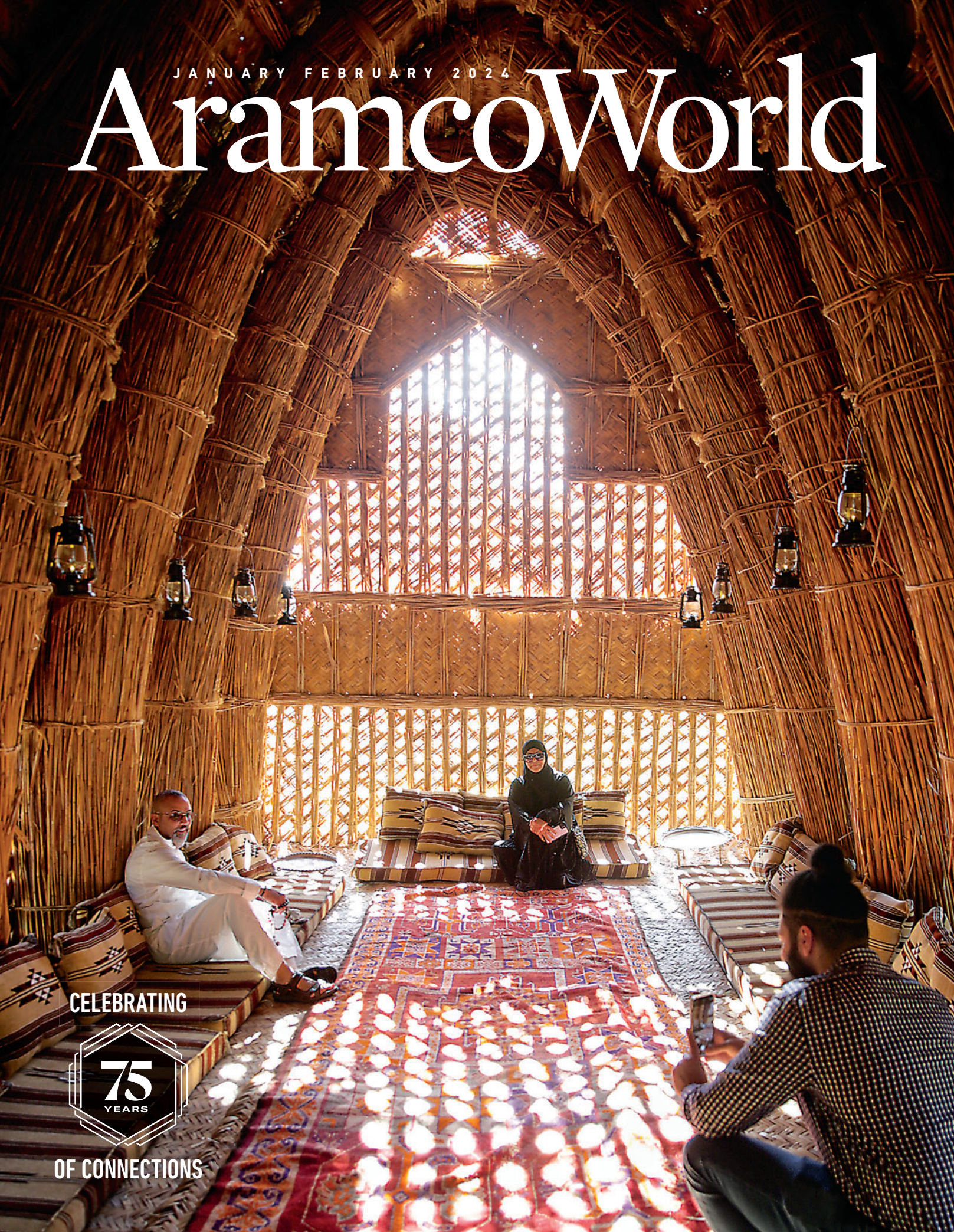
JANUARY FEBRUARY 2024

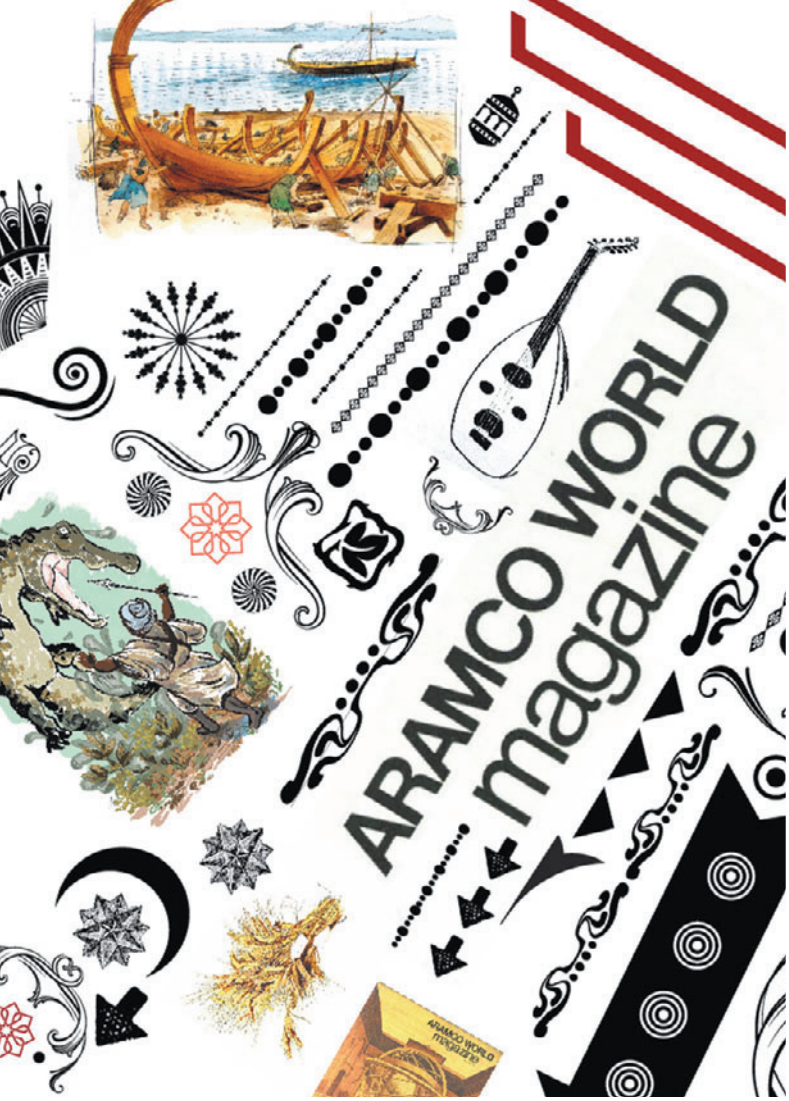
AramcoWorld



CELEBRATING

75 YEARS

OF CONNECTIONS



75 YEARS

AramcoWorld

JANUARY / FEBRUARY 2024 | VOL. 75, NO. 1

aramcoworld.com

2 FIRSTLOOK 4 FLAVORS

We distribute *AramcoWorld* in print and online to increase cross-cultural understanding by broadening knowledge of the histories, cultures and geography of the Arab and Muslim worlds and their global connections.

FRONT COVER Visitors tour the *mudhif*, the centerpiece of the Senan Shaibani Marsh Arabs Project, erected by volunteers on the campus of Rice University in Houston, Texas.

BACK COVER This unique view from a houseboat overlooking the Nile River is highlighted in the precursor to *Egypt: Inside Out*. In *Cairo Inside Out*, photographer Doriana Dimitrova captures serenity within a dense urban area.

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FIRST LOOK

"In the Marshes of Iraq"

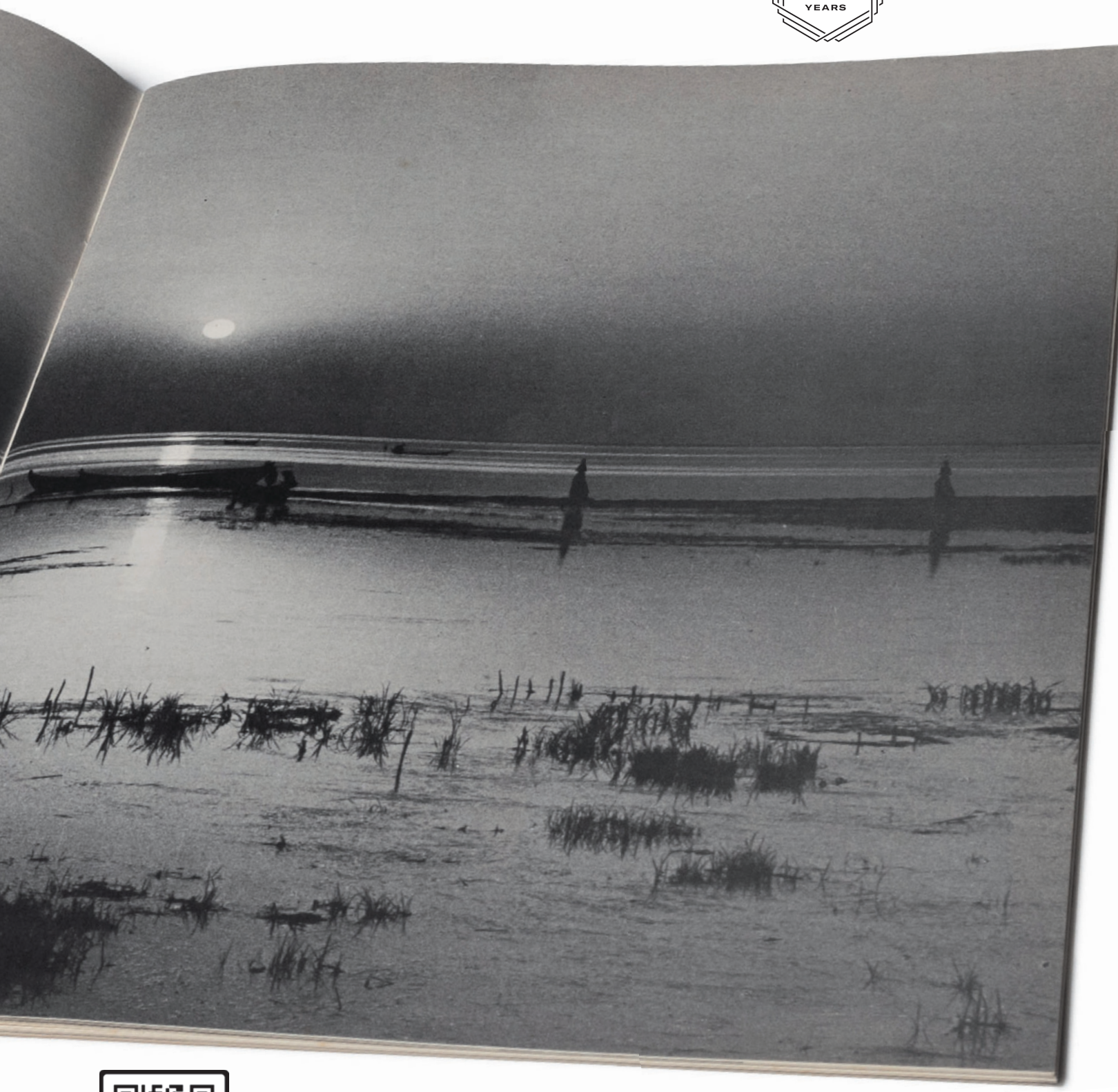
November/
December 1966

Photograph by Wilfred Thesiger

As we celebrate the 75th anniversary of *AramcoWorld* this year, we are looking back at some of the memorable and visual story spreads in the magazine. Later in this issue you will learn about the cultural impact of a simple reed hut like those in the marshes of Iraq and built recently in Houston, Texas. That journey really began in 1964, with the publishing of Wilfred Thesiger's book *The Marsh Arabs*. His travelogue connected the world to a culture and people few had known or experienced. *AramcoWorld* amplified that connection.

"... then I realized that I was looking at great reedbeds.
A slim black, high-prowed craft lay beached at my feet—
the sheikh's war canoe, waiting to take me into the Marshes.
Before the first palaces were built at Ur, men had ...
launched a canoe like this and gone hunting here. ...
Five thousand years of history were here and the pattern
was still unchanged."

— Wilfred Thesiger, *The Marsh Arabs*



Over the years *AramcoWorld* continues to connect readers to the culture and people of the Mesopotamian marshes. Discover those stories by linking from the QR code on this page.

Spicy Mashed Tomatoes (Tomato Bhorta)

Recipe by Asma Khan

Photograph by Laura Edwards

Bhorta or _bharta_ is a generic term used in Bengal to describe anything that has been ground, pounded or chopped into very small pieces. It is a side dish almost like a relish, which is commonly eaten with rice and lentils.

No Bengali New Year celebration in Bangladesh is complete without various kinds of bhorta. If tomatoes are available, this bhorta will definitely be on the table.

Since it has a salsa-like texture, it can be used as a relish for burgers or even grilled halloumi. It's a great accompaniment to barbecued meats too. It can be made in advance and kept covered in the fridge for 24 hours until you are ready to eat.

(Serves 6–8)

- 8 ripe tomatoes
- 4 green chiles, finely chopped
- 2 white onions, finely chopped
- 1 tablespoon oil (preferably mustard oil)
- ¾ teaspoon salt
- Chopped fresh cilantro, to garnish

There is a messy way to roast the tomatoes, using direct heat—either by cooking them on the embers of a barbecue or by holding them in tongs directly in a flame, turning them so they roast evenly. These methods give an added smokiness, but they are not always practical. The easiest way is to heat up a tawa or a griddle over high heat and roast the tomatoes on it until the skins blacken.

Once they are cool enough to handle, remove the skins and chop the tomatoes into small pieces.

Mix the tomatoes with the chiles, onions, oil and salt and serve chilled or at room temperature, garnished with cilantro.

Reprinted with permission from

Ammu: Indian Home Cooking to Nourish Your Soul

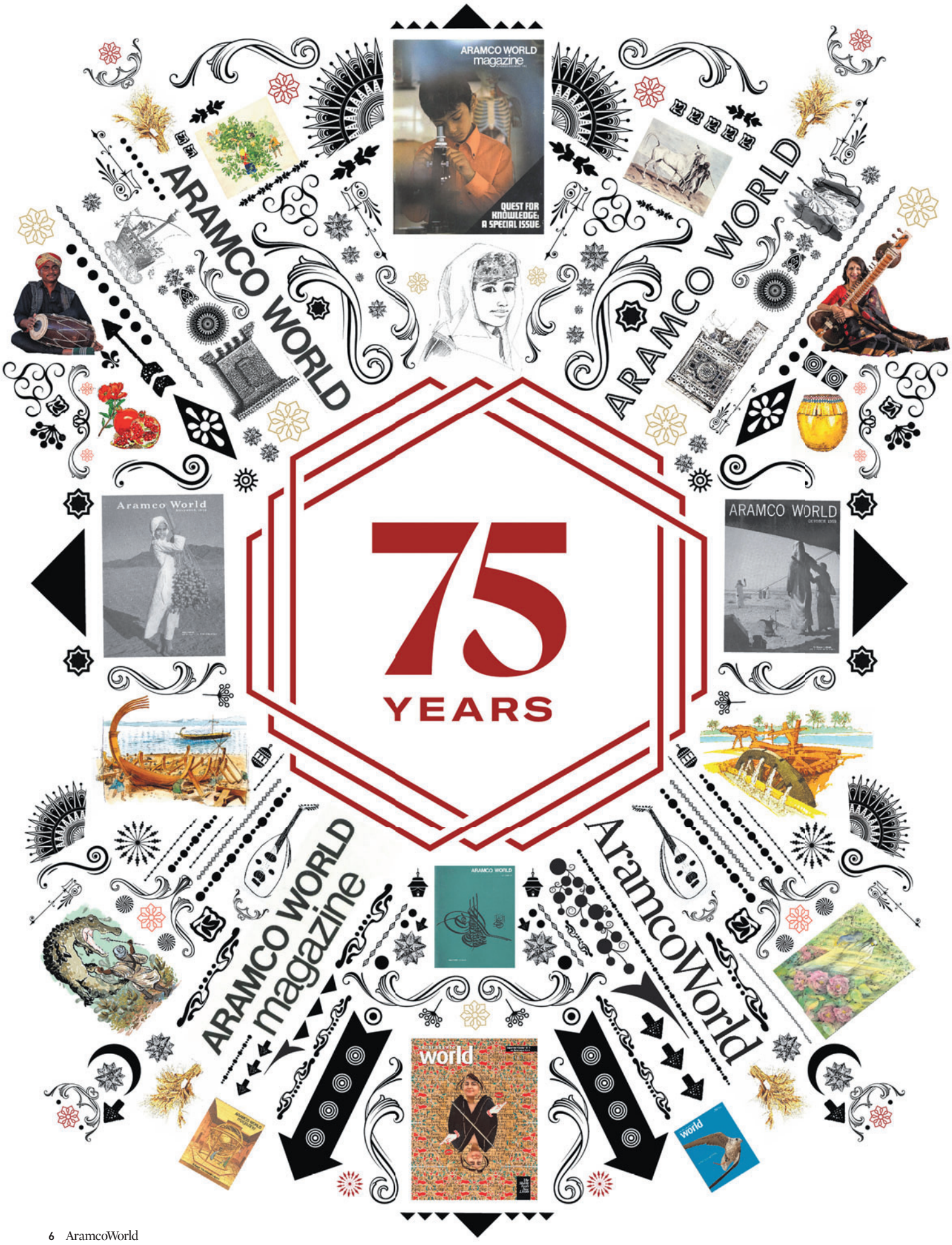
Asma Khan.

Interlink Books, 2022.

interlinkbooks.com.

Asma Khan is the chef and restaurateur of London's Darjeeling Express, which began as a supper club, then a pop-up, before settling in its permanent location to wide acclaim. Khan's food is homage to her royal Mughlai ancestry and the busy streets of Calcutta, where she grew up. An all-women team runs the kitchen at Darjeeling Express, which has been featured in *Time Out*, *Harper's Bazaar*, *The Guardian* and numerous others. In 2015 it was named one of the best restaurants in London by the *Evening Standard*, and in 2017 *Eater* named it one of its most impressive restaurant newcomers.

URSZULA SOLTYS


ARAMCO WORLD
magazine
QUEST FOR KNOWLEDGE: A SPECIAL ISSUE
ARAMCO WORLD
ARAMCO WORLD
75
YEARS
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Reflections on CONNECTIONS

AramcoWorld Marks 75 Years of Transcending Cultural Barriers

Written by J. TREVOR WILLIAMS | *Illustrated by* RYAN HUDDLE

As we celebrate our 75th anniversary this year, AramcoWorld *is launching a six-part series that reflects on the connections and impact the publication has generated over the decades.* AramcoWorld*'s approach to intercultural bridge-building has been integral to its mission since its founding.*

Early in the 1950s the magazine presented those connections through stories of company initiatives, innovations and stories of new experiences. Over the years, the narrative broadened to include what binds us—people, food, histories, arts and science—all to demonstrate common ground among distinct cultures. In the first of the series, we focus on the impact AramcoWorld *has had on some with the closest ties to the magazine.*

—AramcoWorld *Editorial team*

For three-quarters of a century, the magazine has trained its broadening lens on the world.

In Arthur P. Clark's first interaction with *AramcoWorld* in 1958, he immediately noticed a difference from the staid informational pamphlets he and his classmates often received.

His elementary school teacher, who received a free subscription as an educator, showed the magazine to the class, and during a lesson on business-letter writing, he penned a simple missive to its publisher, Aramco, hoping for a bit of intellectual stimulation.

"I was a third grader growing up in a little town in Iowa, and it was just an opportunity to learn about stuff that I didn't know about and receive colorful publications, which were interesting to the eye."

In what would become a decades-long love affair fueled by unquenchable curiosity, the magazine delivered, bringing exotic locales to life through vibrant pictorials and fascinating stories.

Nearly two decades into its journey at that point, *AramcoWorld* had already blossomed from a practical intra-company newsletter into a full-blown magazine focused on external audiences. What started as an exercise in cross-cultural understanding between employees in Dhahran, Saudi Arabia, and the original headquarters of Aramco in New York had extended its mission to the world, building bridges through the sharing of knowledge.

As it celebrates its 75th anniversary this year, the magazine remains intent on continuing this legacy of drawing in

writers, editors, artists and photographers passionate about the power of sincere storytelling to challenge stereotypes, open minds and alter perceptions.

This is the first in a series of articles celebrating this history—how in 1949, a company's willingness to honor partners in the newly tapped oil fields of Saudi Arabia spurred a continuous effort to broaden the lens on a region (and religious heritage) often neglected or misrepresented in modern media.

For a young Clark, the magazine was an awakening.

"*AramcoWorld* was especially fun because it had more than just pictures and stories about products—it had stories about culture and economy and history, all kinds of things that were exciting and new."

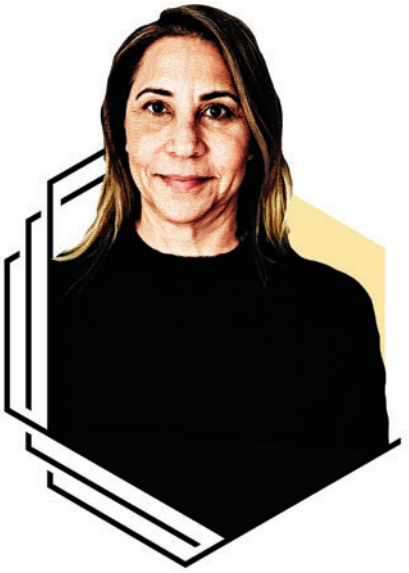
Alma Kombargi, who has held various roles in public affairs at Aramco Services Company for 17 years, had a front-row seat to the development of the magazine after its headquarters made a gradual odyssey. It hopped to various Aramco offices, first in Dhahran and then to Beirut, Lebanon, in the mid-1960s, to the Hague in 1975 and finally to Houston in the 1980s, where Alma landed and where the magazine remains headquartered today.

> "The beauty of the magazine is the broadness of its scope; there are so many subjects out there that represent the Arab and the Muslim worlds in interesting and exciting ways, and each of those areas is a wonder to explore."
>
> —ARTHUR P. CLARK

Her father, longtime Aramco public affairs executive Shafiq Kombargi, played a key role in ensuring that the magazine didn't veer solely into self-promotion, working with strong editors like Rob Arndt to champion its cultural mission to balance out what he saw as unbalanced coverage of the Arab world.

A pet peeve of Shafiq's was what he called the "TV Arab," a caricature he saw as all too common in media and books, especially as relations with the West frayed during the oil embargo of the 1970s.

"He was trying to counter all that by showing the whole world the history, depth of language and the arts of the region," says Alma. "He was very much an Arabist Palestinian and knew a lot about the whole region—there was so little information or magazines about the Arab world. That was a big tool that he used for public affairs."



"Being Arab American—it was very therapeutic to be able to tell our story, especially because of the way we left [Lebanon]."

—ALMA KOMBARGI

Alma is among the four out of five siblings who followed their father into working for the company, perhaps out of deep-seated loyalty, she said: Aramco flew the family to the United States after their father received a death threat during the Lebanese Civil War.

Helping oversee the magazine honors his legacy and makes sense of her immigrant experience, she says.

"Being Arab American—it was very therapeutic to be able to tell our story, especially because of the way we left," Alma says.

That someone like Clark, meanwhile, would go on to become an assistant editor for the magazine is perhaps not surprising. As the son of a local news editor and graduate of the Georgetown School of Foreign Service, he most likely would have found a career with an international outreach.

His passion for the Middle East and the Islamic world was not a given; rather he says the publication helped foster it.

After college, Clark joined the US Peace Corps in Morocco, then went to Egypt for a newspaper job and began writing columns for his hometown paper interpreting life in that part of the world for readers who grew up just like him.

Over the years, Clark says, he both adopted and shaped the unwritten formula of an *AramcoWorld* story as he tackled topics like how Middle Eastern archaeology influenced Agatha Christie or how a Saudi astronaut was changing the face of space exploration.

These stories, as he learned from longtime editors like Rob Arndt and writers like Paul Lunde, had to "breathe," pulsing with life and energy and imbued with empathy.

"The beauty of the magazine is the broadness of its scope; there are so many subjects out there that represent the Arab and the Muslim worlds in interesting and exciting ways, and each of those areas is a wonder to explore," Clark says.

Piney Kesting has experienced this for more than 30 years, during which she estimates she has averaged a little more than one freelance piece a year for *AramcoWorld*, starting with a 1989 feature on *Saudi Arabia: Yesterday and Today*, an exhibition about economy and society she followed as it toured cities across the US.

Shafiq Kombargi provided connections, guidance and administrative support to *AramcoWorld* for more than 35 years along with helping define the message of cultural bridging.

"I love that you can pick the magazine up and disappear into other worlds and step back into your world and it has changed."

—PINEY KESTING

"I saw how interested people were in all the cultural aspect of Saudi Arabia, which to them was linked to oil in their minds," she says, remembering how the inclusion of female artists opened the eyes of Americans. "It sort of plucked away at the misperceptions they had about Saudi culture."

Like Clark, she sees the magazine as a teaching tool and enjoys highlighting human achievement and inspiring readers to be a little more engaged and culturally empathetic by foregrounding their commonalities instead of differences.

A few examples of many, she says, are her profile of California-born calligrapher Mohamed Zakariya and a look at a transformative literacy program started by molecular biologist Rana Dajani in Amman, Jordan.

"I love that you can pick the magazine up and disappear into other worlds and step back into your world and it has changed," she says.

She has also traveled extensively for the magazine, first for a story on the last surviving Cold War sister-city relationship between Seattle and Tashkent, Uzbekistan. The piece transformed her thinking on Central Asia and showed demand for a broader international lens (she later returned to examine art in Tashkent's metro stations).

AramcoWorld's "eager audience," she says, generates more feedback than anything else she has produced.

"I get emails from Africa, Europe and the Middle East from people who will write long thank-yous—'Wow, I never knew about this, and I'm so interested.'"

For the magazine's global shift, Kesting credits Richard Doughty, who joined via a similar path to Clark, intersecting with the latter at Aramco for many years. A photojournalist who supported himself in graduate school by teaching and writing, Doughty positioned himself as a dual threat who could win jobs by keeping publications from having to shell out travel expenses for two people.

In 1989 Doughty landed a photography internship at *Cairo Today* magazine, but before he left for his first Middle Eastern adventure, fellow photographer and "Aramco brat" Wendy Levine told him he should check out the magazine. He grabbed his first gig, photographing and writing a story on a French road rally that traversed Egypt.

As he continued to travel to the Middle East and prepare a thesis on how magazines covered conflict in Palestine, Doughty noticed a tendency, both within himself and other photographers and publishers, to "exoticize" or "other-ize" Arabs.

"They'll wait until the modern-dressed person was out of the frame, and then they'll take a pic of the old man in the robe smoking hashish because it looks like 'old Egypt,'" he says.

Locals, he says, knew instinctively what journalists were doing, and they resented the way narratives were being shaped. The realization spurred a book project in Gaza where Doughty and his collaborators recorded and relayed subjects' own descriptions of his photographs.

AramcoWorld, he would find out, shared an interest in providing context at this level.

"I saw *AramcoWorld* as the place where the Arab world and Muslim cultures were a priori part of an *us* and not a *them*, and I liked that very, very much," he says.

Doughty joined the team as assistant editor in 1994, and went on to become editor in 2014, continuing to inculcate inclusion as the publication's geographic scope, subject matter and readership began reaching even further into the Islamic world beyond the Middle East, from Bangladesh to Indonesia, as well as highlighting stories of migrants bringing their Arab or Islamic culture to third countries.

In the years since the publication marked its golden jubilee in 1998, world events have conspired to bring even more urgency to the task of understanding the Middle East and the Islamic world, yet a deficit remains.

Julie Weiss, a longtime consultant for *AramcoWorld*'s outreach to classrooms, noticed misconceptions about the Middle East and North Africa and a dire need to interpret the region for a larger audience.

"People were just hungry for information—they knew the bare-bones outline of stuff that you might get from the newspapers, but they didn't know anything else," says Weiss, who has switched careers but still works on what's now called the Learning Center 20 years after she was contracted by Doughty.

The Learning Center transforms the magazine's reportage into classroom lessons. With an apolitical bent, *AramcoWorld* articles provided updated yet timeless stories, presenting themes of migration, trade, history and economics that could be adapted to convey specific skills, Weiss said. It also had aesthetic allure.

"What took me was the photography, the visuals," she says.

Evidence of Doughty's fingerprints on the project, each lesson in the Learning Center still beckons readers to practice seeing things differently, peering into a photo to understand the decisions behind its composition.

"We pick a photograph and walk through students analyzing the

"We pick a photograph and walk through students analyzing the photograph. Why is it framed the way it is? What effect does it have on you as a viewer?"
—JULIE WEISS

"*AramcoWorld* helps its readers widen their circle of inclusion."
—RICHARD DOUGHTY

photograph," Weiss explains. "Why is it framed the way it is? What effect does it have on you as a viewer?"

It all stems from a sense of cultural accountability, both subjects and readers, Doughty says.

"*AramcoWorld* helps its readers widen their circle of inclusion," says Doughty, who retired from the helm in 2023. "To me, the widening of our circles of inclusion is a profound spiritual task that is at the core of what it means to be a social human being."

Doughty says it's clear that support from the company, first from the American-founded Aramco and later from its successor, Saudi Aramco, has given space for a deeper examination of cultural topics.

That's part of the allure for Sultan Sooud Al-Qassemi, a writer, art collector and commentator based in Sharjah, United Arab Emirates.

"You have a higher quality of writing, and in many cases, the pieces cut through different disciplines," says Al-Qassemi, whose dream came true in 2018 when he was profiled as "The Modernist" in the magazine after 25 years as a reader. "You might read an article about art that also mentions architecture, tourism and archaeology—cross-disciplinary pieces that you don't see in other publications."

"You have a higher quality of writing, and in many cases, the pieces cut through different disciplines."
—SULTAN SOOUD AL-QASSEMI

In a part of the world where neglect has led to the closure of daily newspapers and art is often a casualty of war, *AramcoWorld*'s seven-decade archive is an invaluable resource for researchers and groups like Al-Qassemi's Barjeel Art Foundation, which protects, restores, exhibits and promotes works from throughout the Middle East.

Al-Qassemi has personal proof from working on his book *Building Sharjah*. Uncovering a brief reference to Gordon Ivory, a British architect active in Lebanon and around the Gulf in the 1960s, kept him from "a wild goose chase" and helped him attribute three to four new buildings to which he could find no other extant reference. That the article was still relevant was fitting for the publication, he says.

"If you pick up a copy of *AramcoWorld*, you can easily come across an article about Ottoman Cairo, Syria, civilizations from a few hundred years ago or read about contemporary art. What I like about *AramcoWorld* is that there aren't timelines. You can read it in a year or two or three, and it is like a time capsule."

Barnaby Rogerson, who runs the small travel imprint Eland Publishing in London, says it's refreshing that *AramcoWorld* can show such "fearless enthusiasm" for the Arab and Muslim worlds while examining impactful legacies of Western travelers and the educational institutions founded by foreign powers.

AramcoWorld, he says, is "up with the angels" when it comes to centering local voices globally.

Rogerson first encountered the magazine many years ago at a since demolished British consulate in Tunisia.

"The consulate had a library on the ground floor much used by students, and there, much to my delight, I came across an article on the great historian Ibn Khaldoun," Rogerson says.

Since then, he has been a reader and frequent contributor, to the point where he wanted to meet up with an *AramcoWorld* team member in London.

"What I like about *AramcoWorld* is that there aren't timelines. You can read it in a year or two or three, and it is like a time capsule."
—BARNABY ROGERSON

With the magazine headquartered in Houston, he expected to rendezvous with a loud and proud Texan. Instead, Clark showed up.

"It was a surprise that when I met my first *AramcoWorld* staff member for a coffee at a street café near the British Museum, that Arthur was a thin, book-loving, scholarlike sage," Rogerson recalls.

Ever since the third grade, *AramcoWorld* has fed Clark's curiosity in the easy, entertaining way that he would dare say nourishes all its readers. "It's educating people without telling them that you are educating them."

J. Trevor Williams is a global business journalist based in Atlanta, where he serves as publisher of the online international news site *Global Atlanta* (*globalatlanta.com*). Follow him on X (formerly Twitter) @jtrevorwilliams.

Ryan Huddle is a Boston-based graphic designer and artist whose work appears regularly in the *Boston Globe* and other leading publications.

A gift shop invites visitors to take a break from the hubbub around Giza's pyramids—and from snapping selfies.

SAVORING EGYPT

AUTHOR AND PHOTOGRAPHER TEAM UP TO HELP TRAVELERS SLOW DOWN

EGYPT INSIDE OUT INSPIRES SPONTANEITY IN THE INFORMATION AGE

Written by J. TREVOR WILLIAMS
Photography by DORIANA DIMITROVA
Courtesy of AUC PRESS

As Trevor Naylor strode through the Square of Miracles in Pisa, Italy, a few years ago, taking in the white-domed splendor of the thousand-year-old cathedral on one side and its famous leaning tower on the other, he was struck by an all-too-familiar sight.

"I was one of a very small number of people actually looking at it. Everybody else stood with their back to the Leaning Tower of Pisa taking a selfie of themselves with that behind it. That was their experience," says Naylor, a longtime publishing executive at the American University in Cairo Press and author of a pair of pictorial books about Egypt that aims to inspire travelers to take the opposite approach.

These oversights of orientation, driven by the speed and convenience of modern tourism, are what Naylor and photographer Doriana Dimitrova seek to remedy in their books, *Cairo Inside Out* (2017) and *Egypt Inside Out (*2020).

Egypt has long been a country where visitors fall into the rhythm of the tourist as they are toted from Giza's pyramids to Cairo's oldest mosques to Luxor's temples on "15-day rattle-arounds." But this approach comes at a cost, according to Naylor.

"That kind of tourism has always existed, and it exists now with the additional horror of people trying to capture it in their hands every minute and let everybody they know see they're doing it 20 seconds later across the world," Naylor says. "All of which reduces the amount of time you're really spending looking at where you are."

When exploring the country together for their books, the duo savors the ripe tension between Egypt's unbroken antiquity and unbridled modernity. Their more recent book follows 2017's *Cairo Inside Out,* a visual journey through a city Naylor has lived in twice and visited often since the 1980s, long before smartphones became the essential travel companion.

Both books invite readers to take a break from tour guides and schedules. Placed alongside Naylor's prose, Dimitrova's photos look outward, placing readers in the Anglo-Egyptian Bookshop in the heart of downtown Cairo one morning or on the Street of the Tentmakers, the only medieval covered market street left in the city, to take in the vibrant array of quilts, bags and other crafts, and get out of the sun.

"There were very few occasions when we took a photograph in a rush, and I think that shows through in the pictures," Naylor says.

While writer Trevor Naylor researched each destination, photographer Doriana Dimitrova waited for Egypt's variable light and shadows to inspire her.

The Street of the Tentmakers remains a working and trading center, which makes observing its activity most exciting.

That, in fact, is the point of their work. Rather than just telling travelers where to go, the inside-out perspective evokes the experience of being there, inviting readers to embrace an almost meditative travel discipline of slowing down to take in the details and complexities of Egypt, moment by moment.

"I just like them to feel what I've been feeling when I was there," Dimitrova says. "With Egypt, you either love it or hate it. There is no other way. I really, really love it, and I do hope that people see my love and feel my love for it."

Digital Distraction

By the time *Egypt Inside Out* was published in 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic had forced digital wanderlust to stand in for physical experience, but Naylor knew the book would help tourists when they came flooding back.

At the outset of the crisis, tourism accounted for about 12 percent of the country's gross domestic product, according to the International Monetary Fund.

On one hand, the more visitors post their curated photos and videos online, the more tourists they inspire to visit, who in turn bring their dollars, pounds and yen. But neat online narratives can also lead to the impression that Egypt's more-than-5,000-year history and cultural weight can be encapsulated in a few fleeting moments.

[The] inside-out perspective evokes the experience of being there, inviting readers to embrace an almost meditative travel discipline of slowing down to take in the details and complexities of Egypt, moment by moment.

Ahmed Abd Al Fattah, who founded Look At Egypt Tours in 2006—the year before the iPhone debuted—has seen the rise of the "Insta-traveler" firsthand. "He comes to take some reels and photos—he will never even listen to when the pyramid was built—he wants to take some pictures and go," Abd Al Fattah says.

Even less digitally engaged travelers are affected by online reviews that can muddle expectations, misleading them about the time it takes to really see the country. The result is that many of these reviews steal the curiosity and spontaneity from the 11.7 million tourists the Egyptian Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities counted in 2022, he contends. "So much information kills the excitement."

Paper Anecdotes

Naylor counts himself grateful to have experienced Egypt for decades before the ubiquity of smartphones. Working in sales and marketing for the AUC Press, Naylor surrounded himself with books about the country for years before he decided to

ABOVE Specialty shops charge large sums for vintage magazines, movie posters and other items for design source material and decoration. Many tourists patronize such shops on their visits to Egypt. **OPPOSITE** The restaurant above Aboudi Bookstore provides an unparalleled vista of Luxor temple.

create his own.

He first teamed up with Dimitrova in the early 2010s to create *A Roving Eye*, which paired black-and-white portraits of everyday Egyptians with expressive colloquial Arabic phrases and sayings.

During their travels for that book, while finding refuge from the heat and hubbub, Naylor shared with Dimitrova an idea that had long been percolating. Years before, he'd been seated at the legendary Café Riche in Cairo, a spot dating back more than 100 years and frequented by novelist Naguib Mahfouz and other key Egyptian figures of the 20th century. As Naylor watched people pass by on Talaat Harb Street from the cafe's dimly lit alcove, the concept had come to him.

> "I wanted to keep it a surprise for me, to see what my visceral reaction would be, being in this moment, enjoying it."
>
> —PHOTOGRAPHER DORIANA DIMITROVA

The idea focused on documenting specific places they knew while also offering a sort of blueprint—not a travel guidebook, he says—that might inspire others to explore the city with a less regimented approach. "What was missing was a book about how people really see Cairo, looking out at it from a cool or hidden place," Naylor says.

He also wanted to preserve and document something of the Cairo he'd come to know. An old hand in the city, Naylor had found himself returning to El Horreya Cafe (literally meaning the freedom cafe) at the Windsor Hotel, which has little changed in interior or furnishings since it served as the British Officers Club during World War I. He came to treasure spending time in these places that seemed bathed in the grandeur of an earlier age. But development brings change, and as Cairo has evolved, the future of the feluccas plying the Nile, the houseboats along its banks and august institutions like the Egyptian Rowing Club has grown more uncertain.

Based on their previous travels together and her own years of living in Egypt from 2009 to 2016, Dimitrova understood why Naylor wanted to capture the character of such places before they disappeared.

"We figured out that we are a good team in that way—he didn't really have to explain it to me," Dimitrova says.

Upon its publication, *Cairo Inside Out* spurred inquiries from readers and bookshop owners about an expanded version focused on Egypt, not just on the city of Cairo. *Egypt Inside Out* was ready three years later, taking the reader on a picturesque journey northward along the Nile, from the Nubian culture and archeological richness of Aswan to the temples at Luxor and all the way to Cairo and Alexandria along the coast.

> "What was missing was a book about how people really see Cairo, looking out at it from a cool or hidden place."
>
> —TREVOR NAYLOR

While Naylor conducted research on each destination included in the books, Dimitrova waited for Egypt's variable light and shadows to inspire her.

"I wanted to keep it a surprise for me, to see what my visceral reaction would be, being in this moment, enjoying it," Dimitrova says. "I take pictures more from emotion rather than thinking about the mechanics of photography."

With both books, Dimitrova and Naylor pored over their captions, distilling descriptions to give even the casual reader experiential insight into shots of ancient temples, centuries-old mosques and street scenes captured from the windows of a moving train.

"Every moment of photography is a human moment; it's not a static, painted picture to go into a travel brochure," Naylor says.

That's the message Naylor hopes people take away from both books, especially as there's every indication that Egypt will continue to be packed with visitors. With the new Grand Egyptian Museum set to operate in 2024, and a recent spate of celebrity visits and pent-up pandemic demand, Egypt's tourism wave could swell even beyond the 46 percent annual increase it saw in 2022, according to Egypt's Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities. Travelers should be ready for crowds—and to embrace the unexpected.

"(Egypt) can force you to slow down because it's not an easy place to travel; things don't happen quickly or on time. There are hurdles along the way, and you have to go with it and see the charm in that—or get frustrated," Naylor says.

Going with a group may bring convenience, but it also might pull travelers toward a fast-food experience of a place that demands to be savored, Naylor says.

To avoid this pitfall, Naylor challenges travelers, in Egypt and beyond, to embrace the moments when things don't go according to plan as opportunities to take a different approach.

"For everything that is fast, there is also a slow equivalent," Naylor says.

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Albania's Resurging Cuisine

Food Enthusiasts Are Pioneering the Return of the Country's Traditional Dishes

Written by
TRISTAN RUTHERFORD

Photographed by
ILIR TSOUKO

As a 15-year-old boy, Bledar Kola left his native Albania to enter Italy on a boat, illegally. "I had no plan or script," Bledar said. "The only thing I knew at that time was that anywhere apart from my homeland was going to be better."

With no family members at his side, once he made it to southern Italy, he embarked on a journey to the United Kingdom that took several months.

He found a way to reach Milan. Soon he took off again, hidden in a lorry, heading toward France. When the driver discovered him, he ended up in a refugee camp near Calais.

Monda Kalenja has been teaching Bledar Kola the intricacies of traditional Albanian cuisine for years. After his return from the UK, Kola has since become the owner of Tirana's popular Mullixhiu restaurant.

After 20 years in the IT industry, Nikolin Kola left to follow in his brother's culinary footsteps. Today Nikolin owns Artizani bakery in Tirana.

Three months later, Bledar entered the UK clinging to the undercarriage of an 18-wheeler. He was injured—his jacket briefly caught when he dropped himself from the moving vehicle—but he'd made it.

At the time, in 1999, Albania's economy had been in free fall for nearly a decade and its citizens could not travel to the European Union without proper paperwork. For Bledar, this was the only way to pursue a better future.

His older brother, Nikolin Kola, who had already joined thousands of their countrymen living abroad, was waiting in London.

Bledar found a job washing pots in a restaurant near London. Soon he stepped up to making sandwiches, salads, pommes frites and anything else the chefs assigned him. "I rushed through the dishes to do this part that wasn't my work," he said.

Two of the chefs encouraged him, and he managed to obtain some culinary training. Over the next decade, he worked his way up, scoring positions at some of London's most celebrated restaurants, including Le Gavroche, a famed French restaurant, the first in the UK to earn three Michelin stars. He even did two stints as a stagiaire (an intern) at Noma, the Copenhagen restaurant that World's 50 Best Restaurants' annual list has dubbed the best in the world five times.

Seventeen years later, in 2016, Bledar returned to Albania with a clear objective. He was going to open one of the country's first gourmet restaurants, Mullixhiu ("the mill" in Albanian, so named because Bledar mills his own wheat).

Working with his brother, Nikolin, who'd moved back to the capital, Tirana, in 2015, Bledar intended to draw on the Eastern European country's 500-plus years of culinary heritage to reinterpret traditional dishes. Yet, with few recipe books available to guide him, that proved to be challenging. Although he knew his homeland had a long culinary history, Bledar kept coming up empty, a situation chefs and culinary aficionados

> **"How can our food survive if nobody knows how to actually make it?"**
>
> —NIKOLIN KOLA

Byrek is known as the street food of the Balkans, dating back to the Ottoman era. The pie is made with phyllo pastry and usually filled with spinach, cheese or meat.

across Albania discovered in the early 2010s, according to *Nutritional and Health Aspects of Food in the Balkans*.

Albania's loss of culinary traditions partially happened because of nearly half a century of communist rule. With government restrictions on consumption of dairy, meat and fat, Albanians often found themselves unable to replicate the dishes that had been passed down through generations, as Albanian American food writer Rose Dosti noted in a 1999 review of one of the first Albanian cookbooks produced in decades.

Albania at a culinary crossroads

With shorelines stretching along the Adriatic and Ionian seas of the Mediterranean and the Albanian Alps (*Bjeshkët e Nemuna*, or Accursed Mountains) sweeping across its inland terrain, Albania boasts 2.8 million citizens, as per government statistics. They live in a region that has been the crossroads of empires for a millennium.

Albanian cuisine's Mediterranean roots reach all the way back to the Illyrians, the Iron Age society from whom Albanians are believed to descend, according to *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Ancient Greece and Rome*. These tribes herded sheep and became renowned for olive and grape cultivation, still a point of pride today.

Albania's natural harbors and position on the western Balkan Peninsula offered the shortest overland route to modern-day Istanbul, making it very attractive to foreign powers. Over the centuries, everyone from the Greeks to the Roman, Byzantine and Ottoman empires dominated the region in turn, with each culture toting in ingredients, utensils and recipes that Albanians adopted, according to culinary anthropologist Arsim Canolli, a professor at the University of Prishtina in Kosovo.

The Ottoman Turks had an enormous impact. According to Encyclopedia Britannica, after conquering Albania in the 15th century, the Ottomans ruled for five centuries. They brought a new culture and faith, Islam, which remains a dominant religion in the country. The Ottomans also left their mark on Albanian cuisine. The empire brought Albanians iterations of dishes like shish kebab, moussaka and liberal use of phyllo dough in various recipes, as noted by journalist Nada Dosti.

Canolli suggested that the influences went both ways. "There is an Istanbul-centric image of Albanian cuisine, as if all [that] Albanians were eating during Ottoman rule were meals cooked by the sultan's chefs," he said. "The reality was quite the contrary. Culinary historians argue that Ottoman and current Turkish dishes were actually influenced by Balkan nations."

Albanians, like other Ottoman-ruled populations, migrated across the empire, he said, bringing their own food practices with them. In addition, Albanians served in high-ranking

positions under the Ottomans, importing Albanian food traditions to Istanbul and other major cities of the time, Canolli explained. "It's right there if you look for it," he said. "You have Albanian dish names in Turkey today such as *Arnavut ciğeri* (the name for this spicy fried lamb or veal dish translates to "Albanian liver" in Turkish) and *Elbasan tava* (known as *Tavë kosi* in Albania, in Turkish the casserole of roux, yogurt, eggs, lamb and rice is named for the central Albanian town, Elbasan). There was also periphery-center influence."

Albania remained under Ottoman control until the early 20th century. After independence in 1912, new ideas flowed in, particularly from neighboring Italy.

Separated by just 45 miles across the Strait of Otranto at its narrowest point, Albania and Italy both enjoyed diets that drew heavily on olives, tomato-based sauce (believed to have become part of Italian cuisine in the late 17th century) and pasta in the form of *pastice* (a baked pasta with feta cheese). The Arbëreshë, Albanian Italians who left for Italy beginning in the 15th century, are also believed to have brought back *jufka* (an egg-based pasta similar to tagliatelle) and other dishes over time.

However, these new, post-Ottoman influences failed to fundamentally alter how Albanians cooked, according to Canolli. They were simply folded into the food culture that Albanians practiced in their own homes, where foodways were perpetuated and handed down, according to *Nutritional and Health Aspects of Food in the Balkans*.

The rise of a communist regime in Albania in 1946 marked an abrupt shift in how Albanians ate. In its efforts to make the country self-sufficient, the communist Albanian government canned, rationed and collectivized food, according to a 2001 United Nations Economic Commission for Europe report.

Dosti pointed out that cookbooks

TOP A version of *Tavë kosi*—baked lamb and yogurt with rice, seasoned with oregano and garlic—is eaten throughout the Mediterranean, but the casserole originated in Elbasan, Albania. **MIDDLE** Albania's influence shows up in dish names in Turkey, such as *Arnavut ciğeri* (Albanian liver in Turkish). **BOTTOM** Cornbread is a staple of many dishes, including *bukë misri me shëllirë*, in which the cornbread is marinated in whey.

became scarce and recipes were lost, and suddenly many Albanians did not have access to the ingredients that shaped regional variations and individual interpretations of recipes. Over more than four decades, food shortages became widespread.

A 1997 NATO report indicated that the fall of communism in 1991 resulted in a surge in unemployment and subsequent emigration. Over the following decade, more than 600,000 Albanians left the country in search of work, according to the Albanian national statistics agency. "We didn't have any farmers," Nikolin said. "It was chaos."

> "We gave chefs awareness to go back and revisit Albanian cuisine."
>
> —BLEDAR KOLA

In the following years, Albanians seemed more interested in finally having access to Italian, French or Nordic cuisine, and the drive to revive their own lost traditions was low, according to Rexhep Uka, who served as Albania's Minister of Agriculture in the early 1990s. Foreign food was deemed richer, newer and more exotic than Albanian recipes. "Albanians have a bit of an inferiority complex," Uka said. "We always think foods from other countries are better."

Both during and after communism, the country's timeless cuisine was scorned, Nikolin said.

Reviving traditional dishes

When Bledar started to move ahead with his plan to open a restaurant upon his return to Tirana, he struggled to learn more about Albanian foods.

Neither he nor Nikolin knew much. By the time Bledar and his brother were growing up in the plains of the Zadrima region in northwestern Albania in the 1980s, local foods bore little resemblance to the more ingredient-rich iterations previous generations had known, Bledar said. Families received wheat bread for three months per year and cornbread for the remaining nine. Because of its scarcity, wheat bread was precious. "We would save anything we didn't eat, whether it was slices or crumbs," Nikolin said. "Even old, stale bread was a commodity."

Some Albanians even credit these bread rations as the inspiration for *papare* ("unseen"), a dish in which stale hunks of bread are soaked in milk, then fried with *gjize,* a salted curd cheese, Nikolin said.

Unable to make progress on their own, the Kola brothers began asking around. They needed a *gjyshja*, an Albanian grandmother, friends suggested, an older person who had the opportunity to learn about Albanian dishes as they'd been served during five centuries of Ottoman rule.

Soon Bledar found his *gjyshja*, Monda Kalenja. She was a daughter of a military cook, and she'd had access to foods and recipes not available to others during the communist regime. In the kitchen at her side, Beldar began crafting pastas and stews and a plethora of other dishes.

But that was just the beginning. While Bledar worked to learn his own country's classic plates, Nikolin started finding other recipes, ingredients and cooking techniques that might help his brother glean a better understanding of Albanian food.

"How can our food survive if nobody knows how to actually make it?" Nikolin said.

Bledar opened Mullixhiu shortly after he connected with Kalenja. His interpretations of Albanian food have proved to be a hit, garnering his restaurant mentions in reputable publications and a recommendation by World's 50 Best Restaurants list of new discoveries as the place to go in Albania's capital. Kalenja is quick to own her influence on the famed chef. "I have been teaching Bledar for years," Kalenja says. "The only thing I never taught him was [layered pancake-like dish] *flija*!"

Bledar's efforts inspired Nikolin. Although he'd spent more than 20 years working in IT, increasingly he devoted weeks at a time to making trips around the country hunting for information about pre-communism Albanian cuisine.

In 2018, the two brothers started a nonprofit, RRNO, aimed at defining Albania's cultural food heritage. That same year the nonprofit held an event in Tirana's *pazari* (market district) with 12 *gjyshet* (grandmothers) and 12 chefs, Nikolin said. Within months the event had inspired a television show called *12 Chefs*, which ran on Albanian television for two seasons.

"We gave chefs awareness to go back and revisit Albanian cuisine," Bledar said. "A year later there were five morning TV shows that involved cooking with grandmothers."

Later in 2018 the two brothers partnered with the Albanian Chef Academy to set up a traditional-food-inspired cooking program. Launched in 2019, they offered students there and at the Instituti Kulinar Royal an extra training module.

The bulk of both schools' programs is devoted to establishing standard culinary skills needed to work in a restaurant, but for two weeks Bledar arranged to teach each class his approach to traditional food. He also brought in *gjyshet* to teach students to roll *jufka*, the ribbonlike pasta of fresh eggs, milk and durum wheat that is dried in the sun.

OPPOSITE, TOP TO BOTTOM: SERGII KOVAL / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO; COSKUN AKSEKERCI / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO; ILIR TSOUKO

ABOVE Rexhep Uka, left, Albania's former Minister of Agriculture, and his son Flori Uka check on organically grown tomatoes at their Uka Farm in Laknas, near Tirana. By growing indigenous and other key ingredients, farms are driving the rebirth of Albanian cuisine. **LEFT** *Mullixhiu* translates as "the mill" and is so named because Bledar Kola mills his own wheat. **OPPOSITE** Paula Bardhi is one of Bledar's culinary school graduates and now works at Mullixhiu. She says *pispili*—a traditional Albanian dish of crispy cornbread and goat cheese—is her favorite meal.

The school doesn't lack students. Paula Bardhi is typical of many recent graduates. Like roughly 60% of the culinary institute's students, she hails from a rural area, in her case Pogradec on the shores of Lake Ohrid near the North Macedonian border.

Bardhi decided to go to culinary school because she was almost certain she would be able to get a job. Bardhi likes Albanian food—her favorite dish is *pispili*, a crispy cornbread mashed with leeks and goat cheese.

However, most restaurants in Tirana hire culinary school graduates like Bardhi as pizza chefs, sushi rollers and chefs de cuisine (kitchen managers).

Last year at Mullixhiu, Bardhi cooked a variety of recipes Bledar created for his restaurant. He said it's hard to pick a favorite from his menu, though customers have regularly praised the *rosnica*. It is a saffron-laced chicken and fried-dough creation inspired by the dish that originated in Përmet, a small town in southern Albania nicknamed the "City of Roses."

The plates included *tave krapi*, a baked carp casserole reinvented

with sliced radishes for scales, followed by *dromsa*, a lime-green porridge consisting of clumps of durum and whole wheat seeds that zings with a sour freshness.

Bardhi also worked at Artizani, the bakery Nikolin opened in 2020, learning to make *lakror,* a meat pie that is an Albanian staple, from two older cooks. This pastry is made of multiple layers of phyllo dough with ground lamb, onions and leeks. Each sheet of dough is oiled and laid according to a specific pattern, according to Kadenja. Due to the complexity, families often make it together, telling each other stories as they add layers to the dish.

Nowadays, Nikolin continues to take regular trips across the country looking for forgotten recipes, ingredients and even grains. He pays farmers to cultivate a particular native corn variety he recently discovered so that he can make *boza*, a drink of fermented corn meal, to serve at his bakery.

Nikolin says their nonprofit organization plans to develop an app to inform chefs what indigenous ingredients are in season, which farmers to buy from and ways to use each ingredient. "The app will help give young chefs a reference point about Albanian cuisine," he said. "We don't want chefs just throwing things together. We're trying to create a framework for our food."

> "We're trying to create a framework for our food."
>
> —NIKOLIN KOLA

More than 20 years after he set out to build a better life in another country, Bledar is grateful that his journey led him back to both his native land and his native food, he said. "At the time, I had no idea or emotion about it," Bledar recalled. He never imagined anything like this.

He and his brother intend to continue their quest. They have a plan, Bledar noted. Their impact on reviving traditional Albanian cuisine is yet to be seen.

Tristan Rutherford is a seven-time, award-winning journalist. His writing appears in *The Sunday Times* and *The Atlantic*. He has been visiting Albania since 2002. **Ilir Tsouko** is a visual storyteller based in Berlin and Tirana, Albania, who focuses primarily on migration, social issues and political events.

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THE NEW YORKER

MEET ME AT THE Mudhif

A community in Houston, Texas, built an ancient town hall of reeds from Iraq's marshlands, creating new and renewed connections.

Written by **ARTHUR P. CLARK**

Photographed by **NICK DE LA TORRE**

Images courtesy of
ARCHAEOLOGY NOW HOUSTON

Iraqi American Israa Mahdi had never seen a mudhif, an ancient reed hall indigenous to the marshes in the southern part of her homeland—until she helped build one on the Rice University campus in Houston, Texas, last summer.

"I never had an opportunity in Iraq to go visit the marshes," said Fadhil, a Baghdad native who emigrated to the United States at age 19 in 2009.

She was among dozens of Arab and non-Arab volunteers who constructed the mudhif, a structure dating back 5,000 years to the time of the Sumerians and the dawn of the written word, that was the centerpiece of the Senan Shaibani Marsh Arabs Project, which opened to the public in September. Before it closed in December 2023, UNESCO inscribed the practice of building the mudhif on its Intangible Cultural Heritage List.

Despite putting down roots and building a family in Houston, Fadhil said she had found "something missing" from her life. The Marsh Arabs Project filled that gap and gave others new insights into her country.

"The mudhif project put the soul back into my life," she said. "It's a great feeling. It makes me proud of my country, proud of my Sumerian history, proud to be here."

Built entirely from *Phragmites* reeds that grow in the marshes between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, the mudhif traditionally serves as a hall for senior male village members to consult with their leader, or *sheikh*, a place to celebrate holidays and hold wakes, and a guesthouse for visitors.

The project was led by two local organizations, Archaeology Now and the Arab-American Educational Foundation (AAEF), and backed by a number of community groups and businesses, including Aramco, publisher of *AramcoWorld*.

For many Iraqi Americans it offered their first look at part of their culture. It also gave other volunteers and visitors insights into an ancient society that has succeeded in sustaining itself but is threatened with extinction today.

"The mudhif is amazing," said Melissa Carroll, a Houstonian

OPPOSITE, TOP Mohannad Neamah, a Houstonian whose grandfather lived in the marshlands of southern Iraq, recites a poem at the opening of the city's first and only mudhif. The event celebrates the effort to preserve traditional construction techniques and knowledge in danger of disappearing forever. **TOP** Israa Mahdi serves dates to guests at the opening. The Baghdad native helped build the mudhif. **LEFT** Faten Al Saedi, left, teaches Lynda Werner how to make bread at the event.

TOP NATURE IRAQ: ABOVE AND OPPOSITE (2) HEATHER MCADOO/ARCHAEOLOGY NOW HOUSTON

who attended an open house with her husband, John Eikenburg, and their son in September. "It's a living-history museum, a living artifact. It tells a story about maintaining a culture."

Retired Houston real estate agent Leslie Cauffman was equally impressed. "It's fascinating," she said. "I wanted to see its architecture, how it was built. It's really natural."

At first glance, the ancient structure standing on a grassy lot next to a huge arts building looked like a mirage. But up close it was certainly real. The volunteers who built it during the city's long, hot summer could vouch for that.

Opening day in the fall featured tours, samples of cuisine from the marshes and *hosa* (celebratory chanting and dancing). Some Iraqi Americans choked back tears as poet Muhannad Neamah, who hails from Baghdad and now lives in Houston, celebrated the structure at the opening and spoke longingly of the "home" that he and his compatriots had left.

The project also included visits to the mudhif by middle school students from Houston schools, a talk about the biodiversity of the marshes and a "Culinary Adventure" evening featuring dishes and drinks from the marshes.

Becky Lao, executive director of Archaeology Now, the Houston affiliate of the Archaeological Institute of America, said the idea for the project took root in 2021 when she learned about mudhifs from archaeologists in the United States and Britain and discovered that some Marsh Arabs live in Houston.

"It's not often that you find a tradition that is 5,000 years old" with ties to the local community, Lao said. "Here we are, anchored in the nation's most diverse city, and we work to tell the stories of the people who fill this space."

ABOVE Reeds are collected thousands of miles away in Iraq. **RIGHT** Master builders, including Iraqi native Azzam Alwash, unload the reeds in Houston. **OPPOSITE** Volunteers from many communities in Houston put in time, muscle and energy to build the mudhif, sometimes late into the night.

The initiative quickly gained support from AAEF President Aziz Shaibani, a longtime Houston resident who became its lead donor. The project is named after his late son, Senan, who was "driven by his love for Iraqi culture," he said.

More than 4,000 Iraqi Americans live in Houston, Archaeology Now said in a grant application for the project to the city. Of those, "six or seven" are Marsh Arabs, said Aqeel Alazraqi, a volunteer who grew up in Nasariyah on the western edge of the marshes and whose family owned a mudhif.

The city gave $10,000 for a Rice University film student to document the project. It will go into a Rice archive "to preserve knowledge of mudhif construction—currently only known to elders in Iraq—helping to preserve heritage, cultural identity and community cohesion," according to the Mayor's Office of Cultural Affairs.

> "If we want to live in our environment as the world changes, we need to relearn our history because the blueprint for our future is rooted in our history."
>
> —AZZAM ALWASH, NATURE IRAQ FOUNDER

The AAEF viewed the project as a way to ensure that "accurate information about Arabs, Arab civilization and religions of the Arab world is portrayed to children, students and adults—the public at large," said Ruth Ann Skaff, AAEF secretary and a volunteer. "It's been electrifying to see people from all sectors of Iraqi life work together on the mudhif project. It was a collective effort, a labor of love."

Volunteer Azzam Alwash, an Iraqi American civil engineer

OPPOSITE TOP NATURE IRAQ; OPPOSITE LOWER (2) AND TOP HEATHER MCADOO

who has worked to protect the marshes through his nongovernmental organization Nature Iraq, said something similar: "The Iraqi hands that built this mudhif are not Sunni, not Shi'a, not Turkoman. They all came together to preserve a symbol of Iraq."

Project organizers teamed up with Alwash early on to help bring the effort to fruition. He called the reed buildings examples of "sustainability before sustainability was a word."

They are living examples of "Sumerian engineering, determined over eons of trial and error," he said. "They knew how to live with their environment. … If we want to live in our environment as the world changes, we need to relearn our history because the blueprint for our future is rooted in our history."

> "We considered the mudhif kind of a sacred place, a very special meeting place."
>
> —VOLUNTEER AQEEL ALAZRAQI

The reeds in the marshes grow up to 7.5 meters (24.6 feet) tall, and bundles of reeds make up the thick columns that form the mudhif's arches. The bundles are aligned in facing pairs set in meter (3.28 feet)-deep holes that are slanted slightly outward. Then they are bent toward each other and bound together at the top, creating a pretensioned arch that gives the building stability—and a spacious, cathedral-like interior.

The ropes that bind the reeds into columns are made of crushed reeds, as are the mats that form the roof and sides of the mudhif. This latticelike work is done mainly by women.

A few families in the marshes ply the mudhif-construction trade. The lifespan of a mudhif is about 15 years.

Project organizers had to clear some daunting hurdles to keep the undertaking afloat, almost from its inception.

When they couldn't locate a local builder or clear a path through government bureaucracies to harvest enough reeds as originally planned, Alwash came to the rescue.

"We're going to do something that's never been done before," he said. The reeds would be gathered in Iraq and shipped to Houston, and a master builder would come from the marshes to guide construction.

Then, just after the paperwork for the builder to fly to Texas was completed, he decided he did not want to leave the marshes. Alwash volunteered to manage mudhif construction. Although he'd never built one himself, he had commissioned three in Iraq.

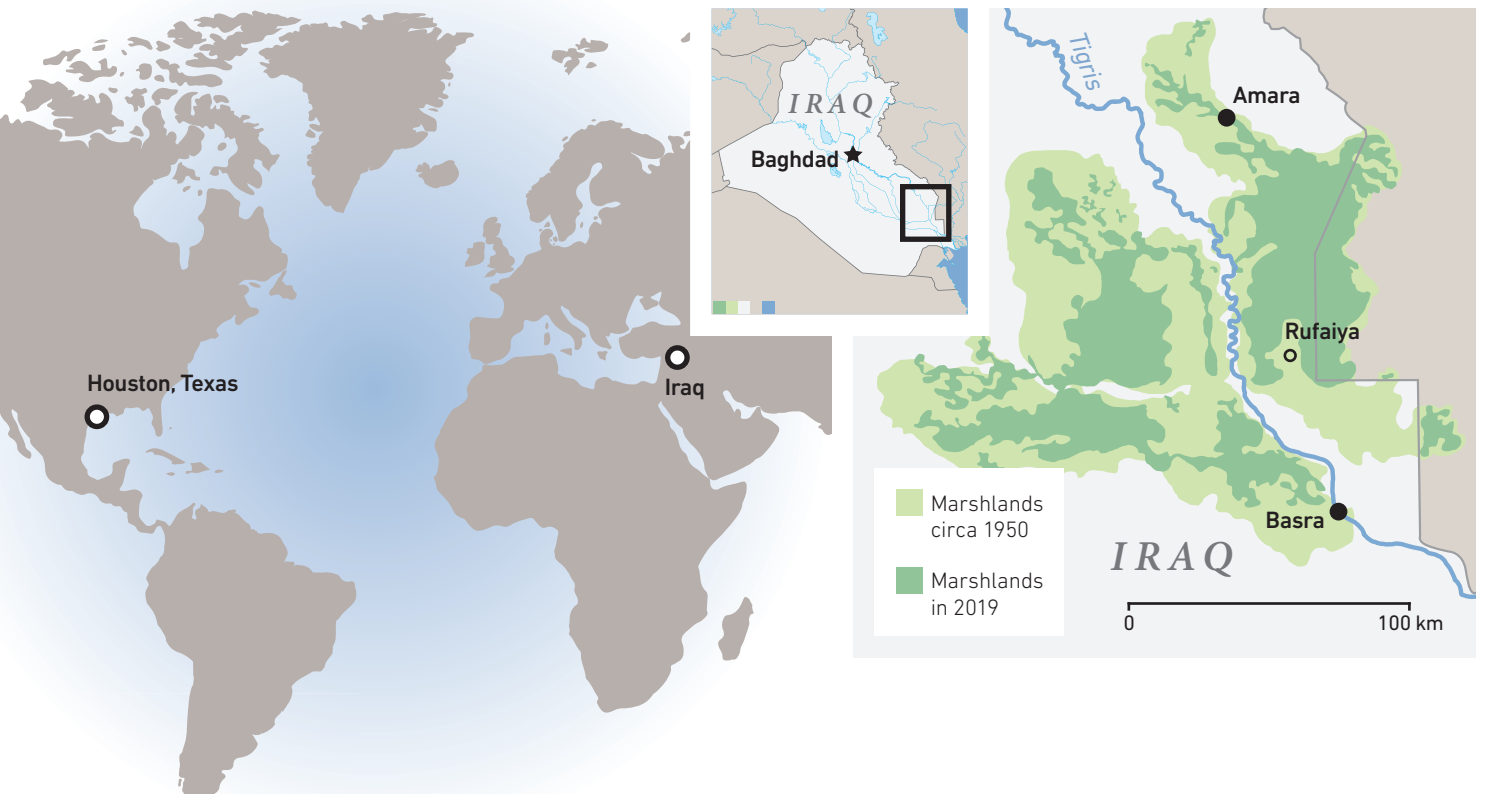
Next, the ship carrying the container of reeds from Iraq caught fire in the Suez Canal and its cargo had to be transferred to another vessel. That snag and other delays meant the start date for construction had to be pushed back.

Finally, when the container arrived in Houston, Customs agents tore apart its contents. The reeds had been packaged in components "like a box of Legos," said Lao, but what arrived was "basically a container of sticks."

Last June, despite heavy rains and scorching heat, the work got going. The task lasted about five weeks, or twice the time it takes skilled builders in the marshes. "We're a bunch of amateurs," Alwash said with a grin. But he still gave the project a "90 percent" grade.

British explorer and writer Wilfred Thesiger would immediately have recognized even the "90 percent" mudhif. "Kicking

OPPOSITE The award-winning *Miracle in the Marshes of Iraq* is screened at the Lynn Wyatt Theater at The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston. The documentary chronicles the work of Azzam Alwash's NGO, Nature Iraq, in helping return the marshlands to their former glory.



OPPOSITE: JOHNNY HANSON

Houstonians learn more about Marsh Arab culture through photographs near the reed structure, essentially an outdoor living museum.

off my shoes, I passed between the pillars. Eight feet in girth, each pillar was formed by a bundle of giant reeds, the peeled stems bound so tightly together that the surface was smooth and polished…," he wrote in *The Marsh Arabs*, a book about his time in the region in the 1950s.

"We considered the mudhif kind of a sacred place, a very special meeting place, not just a place for chitchatting," said volunteer Alazraqi. For him it represents the center of the community and a symbol of the tribe. "If you have a problem you have to go to the mudhif to discuss it and the elders would make a decision," he said.

The mudhif has no door; thus, it is never closed, and the entryway is low so that anyone coming in "must kneel … as a sign of respect to the mudhif."

No one lives in a mudhif, but villagers in the marshes reside in smaller versions of the reed structure called *surefa*s, Alazraqi noted.

The structure is built aligned with the prevailing winds, said Alwash. That helps keep the inside much cooler than outside, where the mercury can exceed 50 degrees Celsius (122 degrees Fahrenheit) in the summer.

The mudhif and the culture it represents are severely threatened.

The project screened the 2011 BBC film *Miracle in the*

"Here we are, anchored in the nation's most diverse city, and we work to tell the stories of the people who fill this space."

—BECKY LAO,
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF ARCHAEOLOGY NOW

JOHNNY HANSON

ABOVE Mohanned Neamah, front, and Azzam Alwash embrace. After so much work in both Iraq and in the US, emotions run high at the opening of the mudhif. "Be proud that this represents you, that you came from the reeds," said Alwash. "Yes, we went out in the diaspora, but this mudhif brought us back together."

Marshes of Iraq, which focused on the work led by Nature Iraq to revive the wetlands after Saddam Hussein's campaign to drain them—to deny rebels a place to hide after the Gulf War—in the early 1990s. He built dikes that shut off water from annual spring floods that replenish the marshes.

That dried up 90 percent of the 20,000 square kilometers (12,400 square miles) of marshes, turning them into deserts of cracked mud. Close to 200,000 people were displaced, according to a Human Rights Watch report in 2003.

The marshes partially recovered after Saddam's ouster in 2003 when, along with Iraq Now, the United Nation's Food and Agricultural Organization and several countries launched projects to revive them.

According to the UN, by 2005 the marshes had been returned to some 40 percent of their total original size in three locations that have been made national parks and regained some of their population. The overall marsh region was named a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2016.

Work to protect the marshes continues, but it's dangerous. Nature Iraq's project manager was kidnapped early last year. He was released after two weeks and had undergone torture. Alwash last visited the marshes early in 2023 but considers it too dangerous now to return.

The drought and upriver dams are still endangering the marshes. Lao fears they "might disappear" soon.

Alwash was more upbeat but stoic: "There is hope. There are solutions [for protecting the marshes] when the political will is available. My fear is that the culture that took thousands of years to develop around the marshes is disappearing."

He told the volunteers that they can keep an ancient heritage alive.

"What makes this project important is spreading knowledge, but more important is the preservation of what it takes to build a mudhif," he said. "Everybody who participated in that work has the knowledge. We preserved it. You are now the custodians of this knowledge, and it's your job to pass it to the next generation to keep it alive."

Arthur P. Clark is a former assistant editor of *AramcoWorld*, editor of *Al-Ayyam Al-Jamilah*, the magazine for Aramco retirees, and is actively involved in the curation of antiquities and archive materials for Aramco. **Nick de la Torre** grew up in El Paso, Texas, and is a multimedia artist in Houston. Nick has more than 30 years of storytelling experience.

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AUTHOR'S CORNER

A Personal Exploration of the `ud: A Conversation With Rachel Beckles Willson

Written by KAY HARDY CAMPBELL

Growing up in London, Rachel Beckles Willson was surrounded by Western classical music. Her mother, a children's book author, played piano at home, and when she wasn't playing, BBC's Radio 3 filled the air with Mozart, Beethoven and Bach.

"I don't think there was any moment in my life when I didn't think I'd be working with music," Beckles Willson recalls now.

Beckles Willson's own skillful playing won her a place at the Royal Academy of Music studying piano performance, and she later became a concert pianist. By the time Beckles Willson obtained her doctorate from London's King's College in 2003, she chose to focus on academia, hoping to balance performance and research. But she let go of performing, as it didn't seem possible to do both.

That is until she discovered the *`ud*, the pear-shaped lute descendant found in the Middle East and North Africa.

Entranced as much by its sound as by its centuries of history, in 2010 Beckles Willson started playing `ud, building enough skill to start performing on the instrument. She also became curious about its origins.

In 2016 she won a fellowship to explore how the instrument has been used around the world. That research resulted in her latest book, *The Oud: An Illustrated History*, an engaging chronicle featuring a wide array of photos, drawings and illustrations.

Today Beckles Willson is a professor of intercultural performing arts at Codarts University of the Arts, in Rotterdam, and Leiden University in the Netherlands. She performs whenever she gets the chance.

AramcoWorld caught up with Beckles Willson to discuss her book, and her personal and scholarly exploration of one of the world's most iconic musical instruments.

Images from *The Oud: An Illustrated History* include, **ABOVE**, a postcard sent from Constantinople in 1929 highlighting two female 'ud performers. **RIGHT** A painted image of an 'ud player on the ceiling in the Cappella Palatina, Palermo, Sicily (1130-ca. 1143), *reproduced from Brenk Beat and Giovanni Chiarmonte (eds.) 2010.*

The Oud: An Illustrated History

Rachel Beckles Willson.
Interlink Books, 2023.

How did you first meet the `ud?

I was writing a book in 2006 about European musical missions in Palestine and met `ud player Nizar Rohana. He showed me his collection of historic `uds. Each one was different. Each had a unique sound and story. I was completely captivated. Whenever I returned to the region working on that book (published in 2013), I would meet with him.

A few years later, I was living in Berlin and had a circle of Syrian friends. Often, when we got together, someone would have an `ud, and everyone would start singing. When I moved back to London in 2010, I decided that I needed to have an `ud in my new home. So I bought one and started trying to play it.

What place does the `ud hold in Arab society?

I think the `ud has a particular symbolism for the Arab world. It's an instrument that people in the Arab world are obsessed with. Many people absolutely love it. It's very much connected, I believe, to identity and probably to male identity in the Arab world. It's a treasured thing, it isn't just an instrument.

How do you explain the origins of this symbolism?

It comes, in part, from its history. The `ud was played at the time of the great Arab civilizations, the caliphate when there were thousands of women, great choirs of women playing the `ud. It was a time of great plenty, of joy, at least in the courts, where we have the sources, and the `ud was there. I suspect it still carries a sense of this past greatness.

Then there's the instrument's physical beauty. Each `ud has the opportunity for wonderful decoration, even calligraphy in the rosette.

Was it challenging to learn to play it yourself?

It's a very awkward thing for a woman to hold. For a small female like me, the standard Arab `ud is very large, making it extremely uncomfortable and difficult. I couldn't get my arm around it. Then it's very hard to hit the right string. You can't see what you're doing when the `ud is in the correct position, which is facing away from you. The `ud slips in your lap until you get the knack. So, there are all sorts of difficulties, in combination with the culture, that expects you to just "get on with" this marvelous instrument.

Your book is not so much an academic work as it is a personal guided tour through a rich woven tapestry of ideas, stories and themes. Why did you write it this way?

We know history isn't a straight line. As the `ud moved through time, there were at least three parallel developments in different countries, which may or may not be connected. So how do you tell three or more stories happening at the same time? It becomes impossible. I approached it more topically with themes while following a broad chronology. The book is intended to engage people who pick it up, look at the pictures and read a chapter or two. They should get something out of it, even if they read just one chapter.

What do you hope readers will learn from your book?

A richer understanding of the instrument and the cultures around it, as well as its history. I hope readers will discover connections between spaces that are sometimes separated.

I also feel passionate about telling the stories of women `ud players, about recognizing that the `ud has a very deep history with women. Currently, it's associated with men, but that is very recent. I was able to source and include several old photographs of women playing the `ud in the book.

As an `ud player yourself, you prefer to play older instruments. Why is that?

I think every `ud player has their preference. I'm very attached to two `uds, both extremely imperfect, both made by Armenians. One is a tiny `ud made by Ali Galip in 1920. The other one is a larger one made by Beirut-based craftsman Leon Istanbuli.

There's something different in the way these two instruments sound, but it's not obvious. Frequently there's something less direct, a little more complex. The sound might not be technically as good as a modern instrument, but it just pulls me.

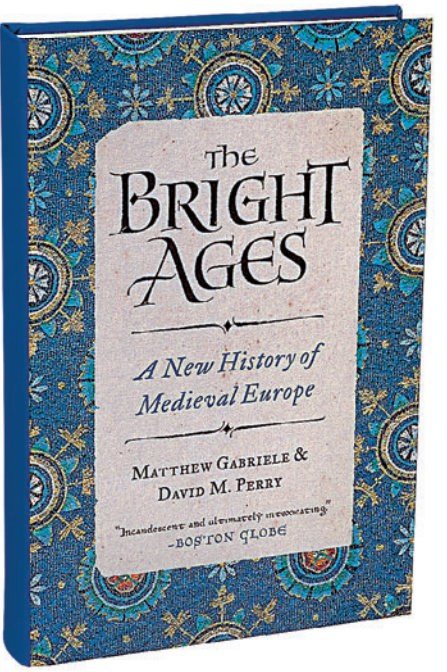
This interview has been lightly edited and condensed for length and clarity.

Read more articles like this online at aramcoworld.com.

REVIEWS

"[T]he story of the 'Dark Ages' and an isolated, savage, primitive medieval Europe continues to pervade popular culture. It was never true, and yet the myth's development and survival has done much harm across the centuries."

—From *The Bright Ages: A New History of Medieval Europe*

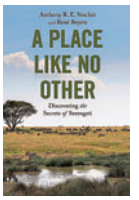


The Bright Ages: A New History of Medieval Europe

Matthew Gabriele and David M. Perry. Harper Collins, 2021.

Renaissance poet Petrarch dubbed the centuries between the fall of Rome in 410 CE and the early Renaissance as the "Dark Ages." Modern historians have long since disproven Petrarch's characterization of the era as brutal, ignorant and static. Expanding on that scholarship, this title offers an even broader geographical perspective that considers how the permeable nature and diversity of interwoven cultures of Europe and beyond contributed to the age's dynamics. The authors give credit to the Arabian Peninsula and other regions for playing key roles in Europe's economic well-being via pre-existing trade networks. There were other exchanges as well. Britain's seventh-century-CE Archbishop Theodore of Canterbury migrated from Tarsus (located in modern Turkey), while 12th-century-CE Andalusian Jewish philosopher Maimonides found stability in Saladin's Egypt. Unconstrained by borders or preconceptions, this eye-opening book finds that the "Bright Ages" encircled a much larger world than Petrarch imagined. —TOM VERDE

Without endorsing the views of authors, the editors encourage reading as a path to greater understanding.



A Place Like No Other: Discovering the Secrets of Serengeti

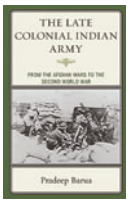
Anthony R. E. Sinclair with René Byers. Princeton UP. 2021.

While on his first research trip to the Serengeti in 1965, Anthony R.E. Sinclair decided to dedicate his life's work to understanding how the expanse of more than 19,000 square kilometers beginning in northern Tanzania functions. Now a professor emeritus of zoology at University of British Columbia, Sinclair joined a group of scientists that would ultimately discover biological principles that govern the plains, savannas, and woodlands of one of the most-biodiverse ecosystems on the planet—principles that govern all the natural world. This volume presents discoveries made during more than half a century of study, from unearthing how the Serengeti, one of the few remaining examples of the last ice age (roughly 2.5 million to 11,700 years ago), has continued to exist relatively unchanged to describing methods used to grasp what prompts annual wildebeest migrations, all the while offering insights that can be applied to repairing habitats throughout the world. —DIANNA WRAY

Beyond the Divide: A Century of Canadian Mosque Design

Tammy Gaber. McGill-Queen's University Press. 2023.

Muslims have been Canada's fastest growing religious community since 1996, and its members, drawn from across the Islamic diaspora, have established mosques across the country. Taking a geographical approach, Tammy Gaber, an architecture professor at Laurentian University, traces the history of Canadian mosques from the 1938 construction of the nation's first to those created in the present day. In addition to analyzing architectural styles employed in various regions, Gaber provides social and ethnic contexts from simple vernacular designs erected in communities near the Arctic Circle to the complex architecture of Islamic centers found in Canada's bustling cities and suburbs. Richly illustrated with dozens of color photos and an appendix of architectural plans for the 90 featured structures, this book is a valuable contribution to expanding scholarship on both mosques and the congregations who sponsor and build them, as well as worship in them. —JAMIE SCOTT

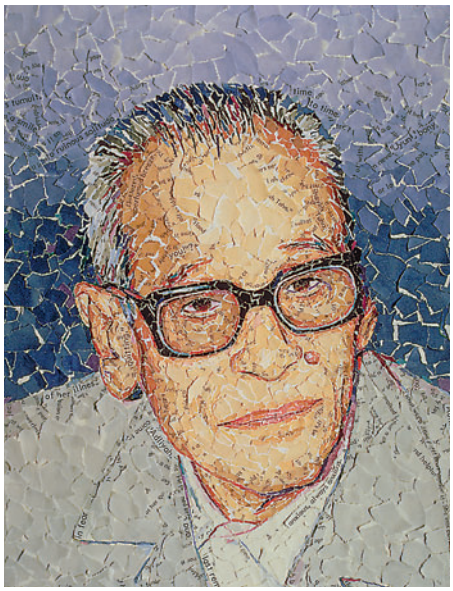


The Late Colonial Indian Army: From the Afghan Wars to the Second World War

Pradeep Barua. Lexington Books, 2021.

Pradeep Barua, a professor of Asian History at the University of Nebraska Kearney, has crafted an engrossing work detailing the history of the Indian Army from its creation at the start of the First Anglo-Afghan War, in 1839, right up to Indian independence in 1947. What started out as a mere internal policing force became a frontier army and then a fighting outfit that would be deployed overseas to the Italian, North African and Asian theaters during World War II. In Barua's deeply researched, fast-paced history, he explains the evolution of the late colonial Indian Army while also taking the time to put the soldiers and the various conflicts into the context of their times. The resulting book shows not only how the late colonial forces were influenced by Indians but also how the modern armies of India and Pakistan were both impacted by this historic force that came before.

—DIANNA WRAY



An Illustrious Literary Career: A Conversation With Novelist Naguib Mahfouz

Written by DIANNA WRAY

"If problems have piled up and are out of reach of solutions, if it is too difficult to remove the gloom of frustration by means of sincere hard work alone, then people must take a new look at their situation."

—From *The Early Mubarak Years (1982-1988): The Nonfiction Writing of Naguib Mahfouz, Volume III.*

"Politics is in everything I write. ... [I]t lies at the heart of all of my thinking," famed Egyptian novelist Naguib Mahfouz once noted. Mahfouz tended to be more subtle in his fiction, favoring nuanced portrayals that focused on how his characters handled events political and personal in their world, but this contention is clear in the first English translations of his nonfiction writings from 1974 to 1994 in the recently published second, third and fourth volumes of Ginko's series of his collected nonfiction.

Mahfouz was a fascinating man. Born in 1911 into a lower middle class Muslim household in Cairo, he started publishing his fiction in 1938. He would go on to produce 35 novels, 350 short stories and multiple screenplays over the course of a 70-year career to great acclaim, and all the while he kept his civil service position, only leaving the job when he retired in 1971, Rasheed El-Enany, a professor emeritus at the University of Exeter's Institute of Arab and Islamic studies, notes in volume two's introduction. (A specialist in modern Arabic literature, El-Enany provides an in-depth essay on Mahfouz to open each volume of the collection.)

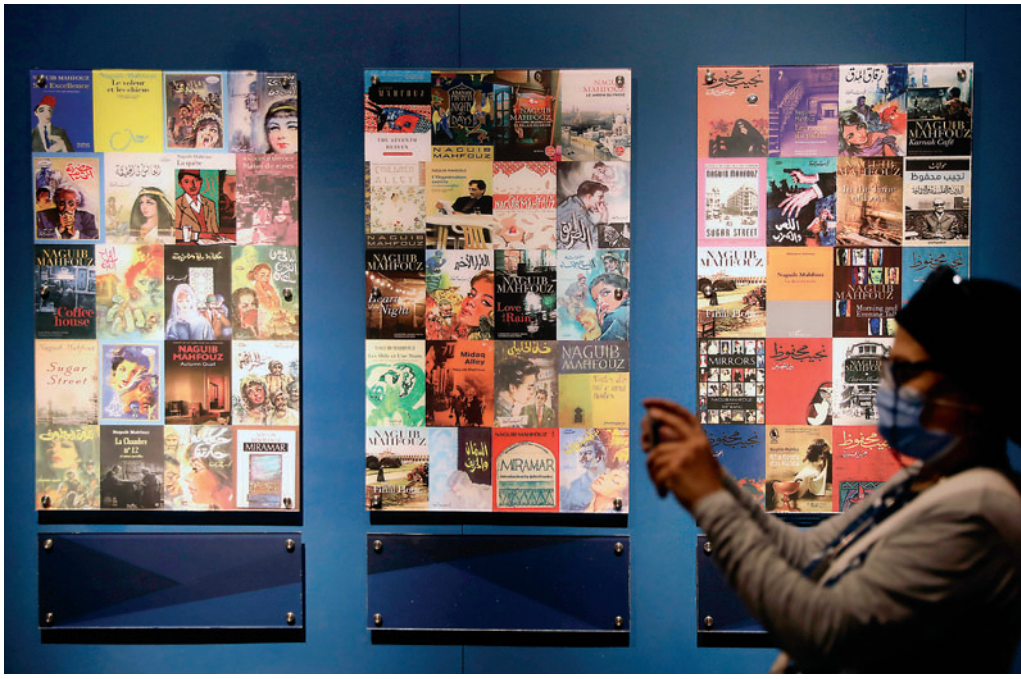
Upon Mahfouz's retirement, the writer continued his regimen of writing one hour each day, but in 1974 he also joined the editorial staff of the daily state-owned newspaper, al-Ahram to produce op-ed essays for a weekly column, wijhat nazar (a point of view). Although these essays were more immediate responses to the goings-on of the world, Mahfouz continued to train his focus on Egyptian daily life and Egypt's continuing development through the final years of the 20th century, the main concerns he dealt with in his fiction. For the next 20 years once a week readers could open the newspaper and get Mahfouz's take on everything from food quality to election law changes to the complexities of international politics, all offered in concise, readable bites of a few hundred words.

Smoothly translated into English by Russell Harris for volumes two and three, and by former assistant editorial director of American University in Cairo Press R. Neil Hewison for volume four, and presented chronologically in an impressive set, these three volumes of Mahfouz's nonfiction hold every al-Ahram column he produced. As such, the books offer a fascinating insight into how the writer processed and responded to the sometimes-tumultuous events his country faced during these times, from the final years of Anwar El-Sadat's presidency to the early years after Hosni Mubarak came into power.

This was a creatively fulfilling time for Mahfouz as his international acclaim grew, leading him to become the first Egyptian and the first native Arabic-speaking writer ever awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature, in 1988. All the while he was diligent about his column, often filing his pieces weeks ahead of time.

Mahfouz's early filing habit led to an abrupt, sickening end to both his column in its original format and the fourth nonfiction volume. On October 14, 1994, a young man approached Mahfouz as the novelist was entering a car and stabbed him in the neck. Mahfouz nearly died and the injury severed nerves controlling his writing hand, but his column continued to run through the end of the month.

This article continues at aramcoworld.com.



TOP: LAUREN URAM; LOWER: AHMED GOMAA/XINHUA/ALAMY

EVENTS

Highlights from aramcoworld.com

Please verify a venue's schedule before visiting.

CURRENT / MARCH

Nature of the Book explores books of the hand-press era (from the use of movable type in Europe in about 1450 to the rise of mechanization in the 19th century) through the myriad natural materials—animal, vegetable and mineral—that went into their making. From essential ingredients like flax, leather, copper and lead, to the unexpected, like wasps and seaweed, the exhibition shows what the use of these materials can tell us about the book, touching on questions of use, process, global trade and economy. Smithsonian, **Washington D.C.**, through March 17.

CURRENT / APRIL

Pearls from the Ocean of Contentment explores new ways of presenting the Museum's world-renowned Edwin Binney 3rd collection of paintings, drawings, calligraphies, and manuscripts from South Asia, Iran and Central Asia by focusing on the regional contours and geographies of India and surrounding areas. The **San Diego** Museum of Art, through April 7.

CURRENT / AUGUST

Dining with the Sultan: The Fine Art of Feasting is the first exhibition to present Islamic art in the context of its associated culinary traditions. It will include some 250 works of art related to the sourcing, preparation, serving, and consumption of food, from 30 public and private collections in the US, Europe, and the Middle East—objects of undisputed quality and appeal, viewed through the universal lens of fine dining. LACMA, **Los Angeles**, through August 4.

COMING / JUNE

Irresistible: The Global Patterns of Ikat explores the global phenomenon of ikat textiles through more than 70 masterful examples from countries as diverse as Japan, Indonesia, India, Uzbekistan, Côte d'Ivoire and Guatemala. Prized worldwide for producing vivid patterns and colors, the ancient resist-dyeing technique of ikat developed independently in communities across Asia, Africa and the Americas, where it continues to inspire artists and designers today. The George Washington University Museum and The Textile Museum, **Washington, D.C.**, through June 1.

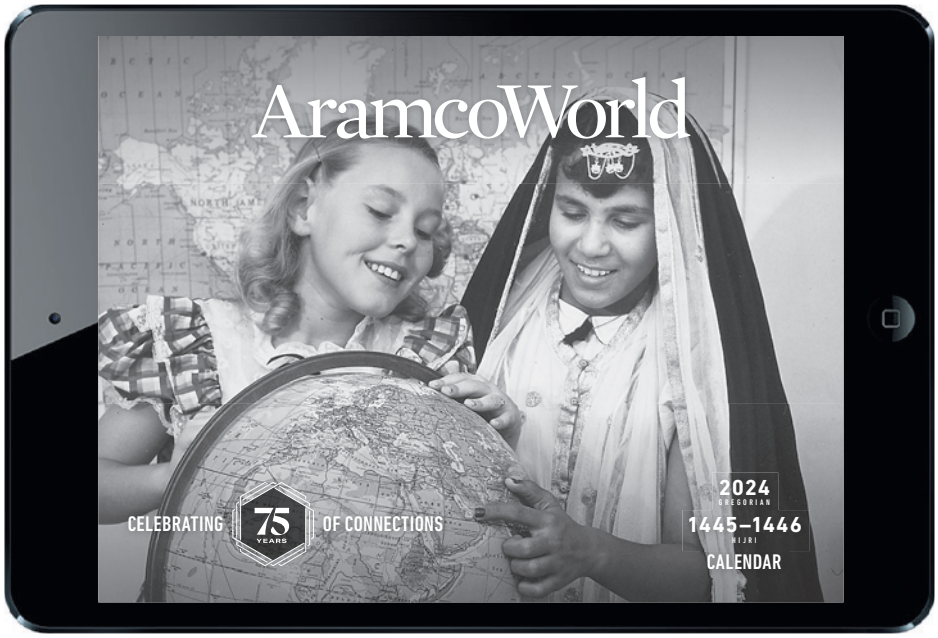
Readers are welcome to submit event information for possible inclusion to proposals@aramcoamericas.com, subject line "Events."

Technicolor Ocean: The Fragile Biodiversity of Indonesia

reflects the expeditions of renowned wildlife photographer Prince Hussain Aga Khan to some of the most biodiverse underwater places on the planet including Lembeh, Bunaken, Raja Ampat, West Papua and southeast Sulawesi. For this exhibition, Khan has collected photographs taken between 2011 and 2023, documenting ocean life that now faces imminent threat. Aga Khan Museum, **Toronto**, through March 31.

A batfish cruises past a large school of black snapper in Raja Ampat, Indonesia, 2015. Photo by Prince Hussain Aga Khan.

2024 CALENDAR



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