



FROM CAIRO TO BEIRUT

In the Footsteps of an 1839 Expedition
through the Holy Land

SUNIL SHINDE

FOREWORD BY TONY WHEELER
CO-FOUNDER OF LONELY PLANET

PROLOGUE



"You *must* be David Roberts," said the Bedouin.

In the Middle East, one often hears the street vendors shout a provocative word or two to grab your attention. They seem to have figured out the right combination of words and names to hook any nationality. I was used to hearing, "Hi there India!" or, "Hello to Shah Rukh Khan!" But here was a Bedouin who looked like Jack Sparrow – kohl-lined eyes, pointed beard, tight fitting black clothes, black bandana, referencing my favorite Orientalist painter. What are the chances?

I was in Petra. My 14-year-old daughter Rhea and I had chosen the desert ruins of Jordan for our father-daughter spring-break trip in 2015. I had found a spot to settle down and sketch in front of the incredible façade of Al-Khazneh, arguably Petra's most recognizable monument. Rhea had chased down a stray puppy and was attempting to teach him to sit on command. A steaming cup of sweet tea sat beside my open sketchbook and the ancient courtyard I was sitting in was bathed in glorious morning sunlight. Tourists were starting to arrive, their heads craned at impossible angles, drinking in the sight of the monument carved into the pink limestone cliffside. Bedouin children wearing mismatched bathroom slippers flitted between the tourists, displaying a knack for salesmanship far exceeding their age. My pencil hovered over an unfinished sketch of the Khazneh as I struggled to depict the Corinthian columns carved twenty-one centuries ago. The Bedouin had been patiently squatting next to me long enough that I had forgotten he was still there.

"You *must* be David Roberts," he repeated. "Look." He placed in front of me a print wrapped in cellophane. "Did you make this?"

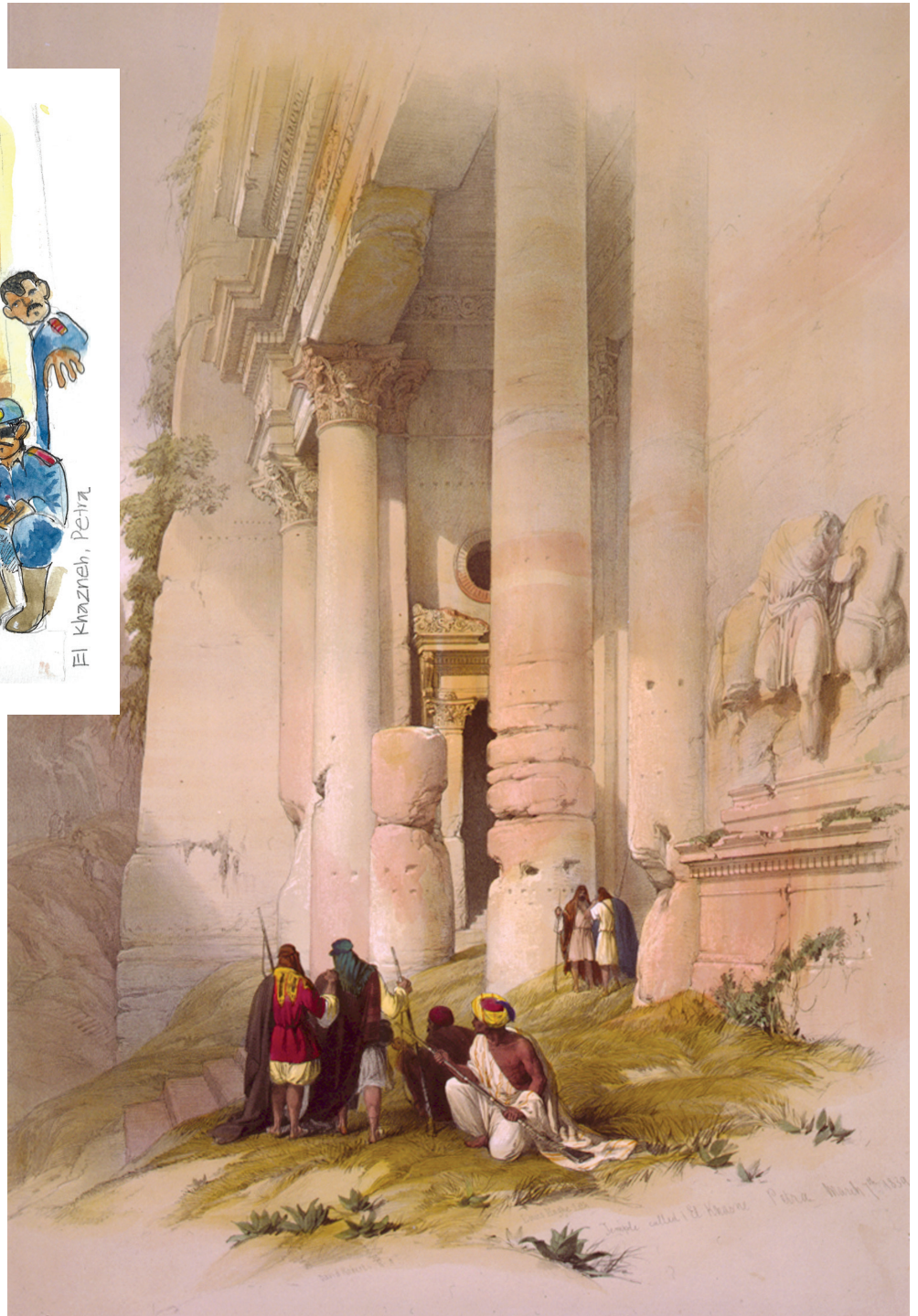
I was aware of the painting, which was made by David Roberts during his own visit to Petra in 1839. The print showed Khazneh as Roberts saw it when he sat in this courtyard himself. Other than one or two prominent details – a broken column of the portico was lying askance, and a brook ran in the middle of the canyon floor – it seemed as though nothing had changed in the last 175 years. In fact, I was consciously imitating the very angle and composition of Roberts' painting in my travel journal. I admit that I was somewhat irritated to be caught red-handed in the act of copying, but the Bedouin's words lit a bulb in my head. The bulb burned bright all day as we roamed the city "half as old as time."

I had accidentally discovered David Roberts on an earlier trip to Egypt in 2006. I had been sitting in the courtyard of the Temple of Edfu when a local enticed me into buying a postcard booklet from him. Flipping through the postcards, Ahmet, our Egyptologist guide, paused on one that depicted the sunny courtyard of a ruined temple, framed by giant crumbling columns. Sand choked the entrance, the walls were disintegrating – but despite being devoured by the desert, the scintillating beauty of the temple and its evident antiquity was unmistakable. To my amazement and delight, Ahmet pointed out that I was sitting in the very courtyard that was shown in the postcard. On closer inspection, I could make out details in the painting that I could trace in front of me on the walls of the temple. Until that moment, it had never occurred to me that places shown in such paintings existed anywhere outside the artist's imagination.

For the rest of the trip, I spotted David Roberts' paintings reproduced frequently on kitsch souvenirs – calendars,



TEMPLE CALLED KHAZNEH, PETRA
RIGHT: BY DAVID ROBERTS, R.A.
MARCH 1839
ABOVE: BY SUNIL SHINDE, JANUARY
2018



postcards, mugs, keychains, wall hangings, booklets, and even papyrus. I asked Ahmet to identify the locations amidst the tremendous pharaonic sites of Upper Egypt that were depicted. Roberts had an unmistakable style. His compositions captured monumental architecture set against glorious landscapes and accentuated by vividly colored figures in the foreground. His choice of location, composition, treatment, and color scheme inspired my own formative art palette. I did not know it then, but I was already on the trail of David Roberts.

Back in the warmth of our hotel room in Petra in 2015, Hillary Clinton had just announced her candidacy for President of the United States and I was browsing David Roberts on the internet. I read a line that caught my attention: Roberts traveled to the Orient, funding the trip himself, *with the express purpose of sketching*. That sounded like somebody I saw every morning in the mirror. After several years of toting expensive digital cameras around with me on my travel adventures, I had switched to sketching as a means of documenting my experiences. Without the digital paraphernalia to lug around, I packed light, traveled slow and sketched fast. It seemed like David Roberts had pioneered this style of travel all those years ago. Curious, I dug further – Roberts used his travels to build a portfolio that he would later publish. His seminal work – *The Holy Land, Syria, Idumea, Arabia, Egypt, and Nubia*, lavishly produced volumes of lithographic prints based on the eleven months he spent in the region – was popular with two very diverse audiences. Art lovers adored the color and the drama of his works, while archaeologists and anthropologists used them to study nineteenth century Palestine.

How much fun would it be to follow David Roberts' footsteps through the Near East, I thought. I was so excited by the idea that I threw it away. If it were any good, it would come back knocking, as good ideas do. So, I switched off the bulb that had burned bright all day and went to bed.

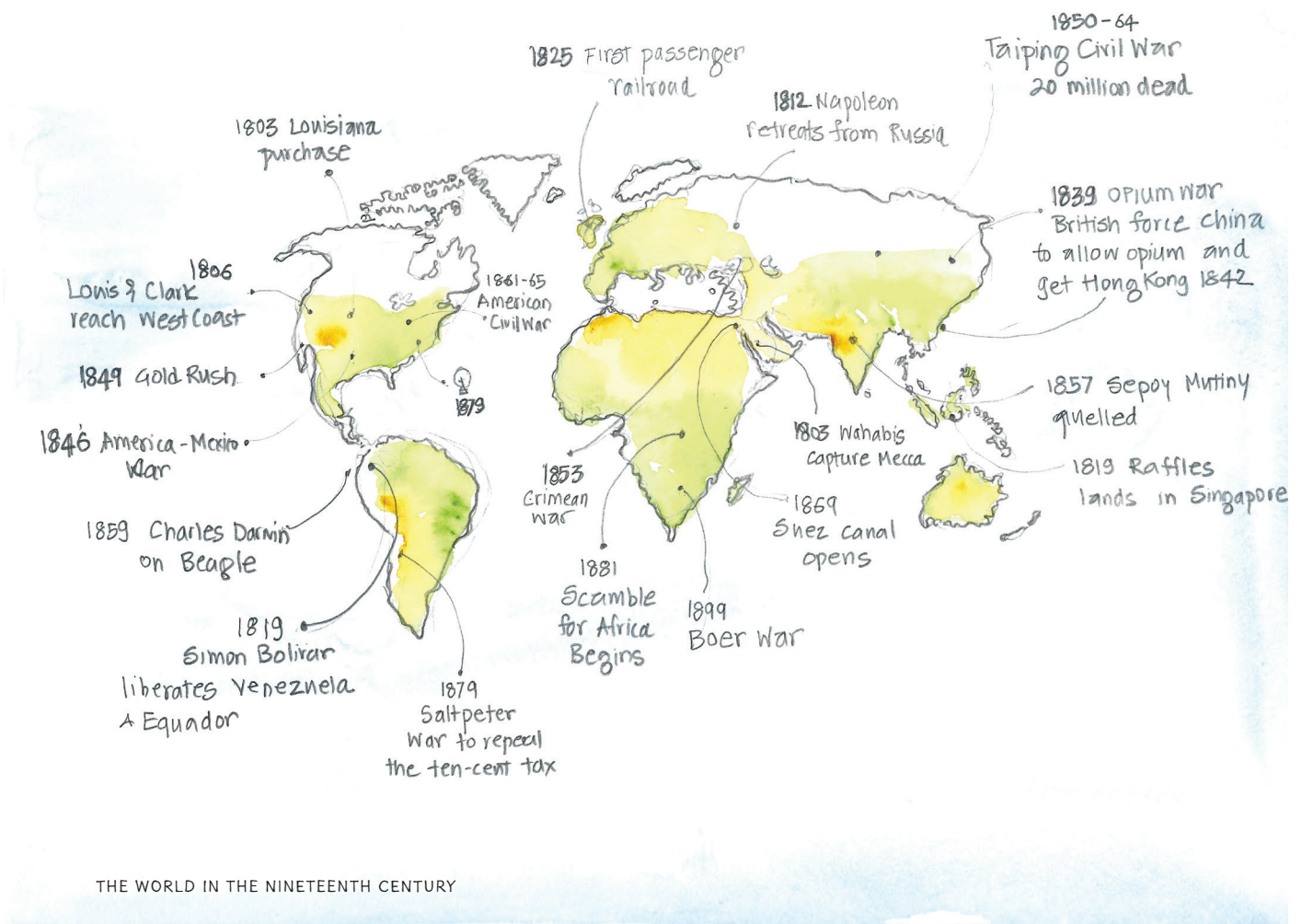


VIEW FROM UNDER THE PORTICO OF TEMPLE OF EDFOU
BY DAVID ROBERTS, R.A. 23RD NOVEMBER 1838

Two years later, I was driving Asha – my younger daughter, then 9 – to her school. The fall colors of the Pacific Northwest were enveloped in a dense fog, the car stereo was tuned to NPR and the newscaster announced the liberation of Raqqa from the clutches of ISIS. Raqqa had been the last remaining city in Syria under ISIS control. With the threat of ISIS neutralized in the region, at least temporarily, the last piece of the jigsaw of my Near East journey fell into place.

Raqqa is four hundred kilometers (two hundred fifty miles) northeast of Ba'albec, which was as far north and east as David Roberts had reached in his expedition of 1839. Ba'albec was too far away from Raqqa for the victory over ISIS to impact the day-to-day situation, but the bulb had lit up again.

I was on a sabbatical. A calendar jam-packed with back-to-back business meetings had been replaced by soul-fueling activities. A second cup of *masala* tea in front of a roaring fire. Dropping



off my daughters at their schools. Late morning naps. Afternoon runs to the grocer for fresh produce. Playing tug with Oscar, our golden retriever. Whipping up spicy recipes for the family. Devouring half a book in a single sitting at the neighborhood bookstore. Returning the next day to finish it. If I wanted to undertake an extended journey, there wouldn't be a better

time. I realized I had a narrow window to make things happen if I moved fast. So, I moved fast.

I traced David Roberts' itinerary onto a map. Roberts had arrived in Cairo in Sept 1838; after obtaining the necessary permissions and equipment, he chartered a cutter with a crew at £15 per

month. He hoisted a Union Jack onto its mast and sailed up and down the Nile for ten weeks, living out his fantasy of being an explorer in an unexplored land. Roberts scouted and sketched the ruins of ancient Egypt – temples, courtyards, statues. Some of the sketches he made happened to become the last documentation of two-thousand-year-old monuments that disappeared under Lake Naseer a century later.

When Roberts returned to Cairo in December 1838, he procured a *firman* for his journey onwards into the Holy Land. Despite a plague in Jerusalem, clouds of war in Syria, and unrest amongst the Egyptian civilians, Roberts started out from Cairo in February 1839. He traveled east across the Sinai Peninsula, stopping at the ancient monastery of St. Catherine before heading over the tip of the Arabian desert to the ruins of the lost city of Petra. From there he crossed the desert and biblical sites of Palestine, passed through the walled city of Jerusalem, and traveled up through the Syrian wilderness to explore the Roman ruins at Ba'albec before finally reaching Beirut three months later, in May 1839.

David Roberts prodigiously sketched the sights and scenes he came across during this journey. Very few Europeans had laid their eyes on the landscape Roberts navigated in 1839 and no independent professional artist had ever documented it. Upon returning home to London with several sketchbooks containing detailed images of the Holy Land, Roberts published them. His depiction of the Holy Land set him apart from the horde of explorers, scholars, treasure hunters, historians, antiquarians, amateur archaeologists, and adrenalin junkies who made similar journeys in early nineteenth century. His book, the title shortened in modern times to *The Holy Land and Egypt*, was published in two three-volume sets in the 1840s and became an instant bestseller. Until the advent of the camera, Roberts' work was considered the most accurate visual guide of the region.

I made up my mind to retrace Roberts' footsteps from Cairo to Beirut. The plan was to follow his route as closely as possible with the intention of standing in as many places he had stood, to sketch what he had sketched – and what he had missed.

The journey came together in a few days because it was several years in the making. Within six weeks of the Syrian Defense Force liberating Raqqa, I was in Cairo, at the starting line.

Operation David Roberts was a go.

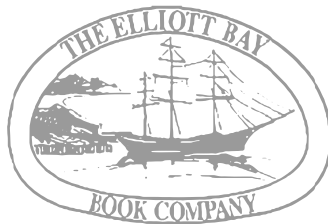
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