**Afar, far away**

*Matthew Parris describes the harsh conditions of life in North Africa, and suggests what may*

*be in store for the region and the nomadic* (*wandering*) *people who live there.*

At the beginning of this month I was in a hellish yet beautiful place. I was making a

programme for Radio 4 about one of the world’s most ancient trade routes. Every year,

since (we suppose) at least the time of the Ancient Greeks, hundreds of thousands of

camels are led, strung together in trains, from the highlands of Ethiopia into the Danakil

depression: a descent into the desert of nearly 10,000 feet, a journey of about 100 miles.

Here, by the edge of a blue-black and bitter salt lake, great floes of rock salt encrusting

the mud are prised up, hacked into slabs and loaded on to the camels.

Then the camels and their drivers make the climb through dry mountains back into the

highlands, where the slabs are bound with tape and distributed across the Horn of

Africa. The camels drink only twice on their journey, walking often at night, and

carrying with them straw to eat on the way back. Their drivers bring only dry bread,

sugar and tea.

Travelling with the camel trains in mid-winter, when temperatures are bearable, I found

the experience extraordinarily moving. But my thoughts went beyond the salt trade, and

were powerfully reinforced by the journey that followed it—to another desert, the

Algerian Sahara.

These reflections were first prompted by a chance remark that could not have been more

wrong. Our superb Ethiopian guide, Solomon Berhe, was sitting with me in a friendly

but flyblown village of sticks, stones, cardboard and tin in Hamed Ela, 300ft below sea

level, in a hot wind, on a hot night. An infinity of stars blazed above. The mysterious

lake was close, and when the wind changed you could smell the sulphur blowing from a

range of bubbling vents of gas, salt and super-heated steam. On the horizon fumed the

volcano, Hertale. With not a blade of grass in sight, and all around us a desert of

black rocks, the Danakil is a kind of inferno. How the Afar people manage to live in

this place, and why they choose to, puzzles the rest of Ethiopia, as it does me.

“But,” said Solomon, scratching one of the small fly-bites that were troubling all of us,

“if we could return here in 50 years, this village would be different. There will be

streets, electricity, and proper buildings. As Ethiopia modernises, places like this will be

made more comfortable for people. Hamed Ela will probably be a big town.”

And that is where Solomon was wrong. As Ethiopia modernises, the Afar will leave their

desert home. They will drift into the towns and cities in the highlands. Their voracious

herds of goats will die. Their camels will no longer be of any use. The only

remembrance this place will have of the humans it bred will be the stone fittings of their

flimsy, ruined stick huts, and the mysterious black rock burial mounds that litter the

landscape.

There is no modern reason for human beings to live in such places. Their produce is

pitiful, the climate brutal and the distances immense. Salt is already produced as

cheaply by industrial means. If market forces don’t kill the trade, the conscience of the

animal rights movement will, for the laden camels suffer horribly on their journey. The

day is coming when camels will go down there no more. In fifty years the Danakil will

be a national park, visited by rubbernecking tourists in helicopters. Camels will be

found in zoos. Goats will be on their way to elimination from every ecologically fragile

part of the planet.

Even in America, deserts are not properly inhabited any more. Unreal places such as

Las Vegas have sprung up where people live in an air-conditioned and artificially

irrigated bubble, but the land itself is emptier than before. Tribes who were part of the

land, and lived off it, have mostly gone, their descendants living in reservations. The

wilderness places of North America are vast and exceptionally well preserved; but they

are not part of many people’s lives, except those of tourists. We are becoming outsiders

to the natural world, watching it on the Discovery Channel.

Those who call themselves environmentalists celebrate this. “Leave nothing and take

nothing away,” read the signs at the gates of nature reserves. Practical advice, perhaps,

but is there not something melancholy in what that says about modern man’s desired

relationship with nature? Will we one day confine ourselves to watching large parts of

our planet only from observation towers?

I have no argument against the international development movement that wants to see

the Afars in clean houses with running water and electrical power, and schools, and a

clinic nearby—away, in other words, from their gruesome desert life. All this is

inevitable.

But as that new way of living arrives—as we retreat from the wild places, and the fences

of national parks go up; as we cease the exploitation of animals, and the cow, the camel,

the sheep, the chicken and the pig become items in modern exhibition farms, where

schoolchildren see how mankind used to live; as our direct contact with our fellow

creatures is restricted to zoos, pets and fish tanks; and as every area of natural beauty is

set about with preservation orders and rules to keep human interference to a

minimum—will we not be separating ourselves from our planet in order, as we suppose,

to look after it better? Will we not be loving nature, but leaving it?

They say there is less traffic across the Sahara today than at any time in human history,

even if you include motor transport. The great days of camel caravans are over. As for

the inhabitants, the nomads are on a path to extinction as a culture. Nomadic life does

not fit the pattern of nation states, taxes, frontiers and controls. And though for them

there is now government encouragement to stay, their culture is doomed. Amid the

indescribable majesty of this place—the crumbling towers of black rock, the scream of

the jackal, the waterless canyons, yellow dunes, grey plateaus and purple thorn

bushes—I have felt like a visitor to a monumental ruin, walked by ghosts. There are

fragments of pottery, thousands of cave paintings of deer, giraffe, elephant, and men in

feathers, dancing . . . but no people, not a soul.

In the beginning, man is expelled from the Garden of Eden. In the end, perhaps, we

shall leave it of our own accord, closing the gate behind us.

From *The Times,* February 25, 2006 (slightly adapted)

**QUESTIONS**

**1.** What is surprising about the writer’s **word choice** in the first sentence? **2**

**2.** The word “floes” (paragraph 1) usually refers to icebergs.

Explain how it is appropriate to use it as a metaphor to refer to the appearance of the

rock salt deposits. **2**

**3.** Explain how any **one** example of the writer’s choice of descriptive detail in paragraph 2

emphasises the hardships of the journey. **2**

**4.** Explain **in your own words** the contrasting impressions the writer has of the village

in Hamed Ela (see paragraph 4) **3**

**5.** Explain what the word “fumed” (paragraph 4) suggests about the volcano, apart from

having smoke coming from it. **2**

**6.** Explain why the sentence “And that is where Solomon was wrong” (line 30)

is an effective link between the paragraphs 5 & 6. **2**

**7.** The writer tells us “There is no modern reason for human beings to live in such places”

(paragraph 7). Explain **in your own words four** reasons why this is the case.

Look in the next three sentences for your answer. **4**

**8.** How does the writer use word choice effectively to describe the behaviour of tourists in paragraph 7? **2**

**9.** Explain in your own words, how the writer develops the idea of Las Vegas being “Unreal” (paragraph 8). **3**

**10.** What tone is created in paragraph 9? Use evidence to support your answer. **2**

**11.** How does the writer use sentence structure in paragraph 11 to clarify his argument?

**2**

**12.** Explain **in your own words** why “the nomads are on a path to extinction as a

culture” (paragraph 12). **2**

**13.** Explain any reason why the final paragraph (lines 78– 79) works well as a

conclusion to the passage. **2**

**Total (30)**