

IMAGES, IDEAS, and REFLECTIONS

Periodical Letter #30
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from
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Wadi Rum, Jordan

By the time you receive this letter, I'll be back in Shamper's Bluff, just back. But, I'm not sure that I'll be any more at home here than I was all of February in my beloved Namaqualand region of South Africa's Northern Cape province where, collectively, I've spent between seven and eight years of my life. Or in many ways, no more at home than I was in Israel and Jordan during January, when I was first visiting my long-time Israeli friend Susan Meyer and then travelling for a couple of weeks with her and Danny Hadas, another friend. Together we were leading a group of seventeen, composed almost entirely of people I know well, nearly all having previously participated in workshops with me in Canada and other countries. Their congeniality and collegiality made me feel right "at home" all the way from Israel's Paran and Wadi Ashosh to Jordan's Petra and Wadi Rum. And then there were the Bedouins!

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The BEDOUINS of Wadi Rum

(A "wadi" is a place where water runs only during periods of rainfall, a valley.)

(Wadi Rum, known also as the Valley of the Moon, is a valley cut into the sandstone and granite rock in southern Jordan, near the border of Saudi Arabia and about 60 km to the east of the city of Aqaba. With an area of 720 km² it is the largest wadi in Jordan and is controlled by Bedouins. Parts or all of several major films were shot here, including Lawrence of Arabia, Prometheus, and Dune.)

Susan, Danny, and I visited Wadi Rum together for the first time early in 2020 and in that short visit both the desert scenery and our two Bedouin guides, Ahmad and Falah, had a profound impact on me. I knew then that I had to return. And so we went back – accompanied by our 17 friends and fellow travellers – and were welcomed and treated throughout our stay at [Rum Planet Camp](#) with enormous generosity both as a group and as individuals. Several days later I hugged Ahmad, Falah, and my new friends, wiped away my tears, and boarded our bus. I was leaving home, knowing how unlikely it is that I will ever return. I cannot describe to you what I was feeling, only indicate its enormity and depth. I will never forget these friends. *(Ahmad and Falah are on the left.)*



Poking around on the internet one day since, I came across this brief, but perfect summary: *“With hospitality being a crucial part of Bedouin culture, guests are welcomed and treated like family. Generosity and kindness are the known traits of Bedouins.”*

The name or term “Bedouin” refers to nomadic Arabs of southwest Asia and north Africa and, although today many Bedouins live in settled communities, others are partly nomadic, and some still wander the deserts with their animals and tents, moving about with the seasons and available resources and guided by knowledge of the land acquired over countless generations.

This year on our first day in Wadi Rum we were driven many kilometres into the desert for a delicious mid-day meal in the tent of a nomadic family, our first meal in Wadi Rum and a rapid plunge into Bedouin culture.





The family donkey is the perfect size for the little girl and her two brothers.



At Rum Planet Camp a Bedouin woman makes a flat bread almost as thin as tissue paper. Tear off a piece to dip in olive oil and za'atar and the moment you taste it you'll go back for several more pieces. (Photo: Susan Meyer)

Please click on [WADI RUM](#) to see images of this remarkable desert, a UNESCO World Heritage site and on [Rum Planet Camp](#), a small camp that provides comfort, not luxury, and puts emphasis on learning about Bedouin culture and the desert.

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A Chance Encounter in Petra

Before we went to Wadi Rum, we spent a day in the ancient city of Petra. Prior to my previous visit (2020) I'd been unaware of the length, scale, and magnificence of the siq (deep narrow canyon) leading from the entrance to the huge, sculpted rock facade known as "The Treasury." This time Danny Hadas, Judith Fisher, and I decided to go slow, pointing our camera lenses ahead, behind, and far above us as the light bounced from rock face to rock face. Finally, after nearly three and a half hours of picture-making, we had traversed the kilometre to the bend in the siq that provides the first glimpse of the fabled art piece.

However, all was not well. A new light-weight winter jacket caused my shoulder bag to slip constantly, throwing me badly off balance, and eventually affecting my ability to hold my spine straight. I felt as if I were going to tumble over to the right. So just beyond the Street of the Facades, I told Judith and Danny to go on without me, and relaxed in an unoccupied chair beside a tent where I could buy a cup of tea. A few minutes later when I was feeling better, I began stretching and doing other exercises to straighten my spine. Little did I anticipate that this painful and annoying physical experience would create the circumstance for a meeting in which I would feel "touched by the holy."

Once I was standing straight again, I began photographing the colourful rock formations and large rectangular, vertical excavations (ancient tombs) nearby, probably moving no more than 10 metres during half an hour. Then a woman who had been selling her crafts at a stall along the gravel street below me walked into the one of the openings, dropped some goods, and strolled over to me. "Are you photographing the tree?" she asked (the tree was a greyish-green shrub less than a metre tall) and then continued, "I am Bedouin. My parents lived in Petra, but we all live in the village over there now," pointing to the settlement in the distance, and "we have always used this kind of tree for different medicines." And so our conversation began.

She asked me about my home. I asked her about her family – her husband (a soldier doing training abroad,) her children (five, the eldest a girl about to graduate from high school) and then she added, "I'm so proud of her; she's taught me how to read and write both Arabic and English, and she's going to university to study languages." "Will she work while she's at university?" "No, I don't want her to work, I want her to study!" What's her name?" "Sharla or Charla," she replied, but I didn't ask for the spelling. Then after a pause, she continued, "actually I have seven children."

"I didn't believe in the Corona (Covid-19) until my dearest friend, closer to me than my sisters, became sick. She had two children and was six months pregnant with a little boy. She was in the hospital for 14 days, and then she and her baby died. She was 26. Her two children live with me now and I love them every bit as much as my own."

For me, a parallel! I told her about a long-time friend of mine whose oldest child and only son died of cancer at the age of 47 (leaving behind his wife and their three children) and that, only a very few years later, my friend's elder daughter, also in her 40s, was one of the first persons murdered in the 2020 mass shooting in Nova Scotia, her two children locked in their house with two neighbouring children until police rescued them hours later. My friend's daughter-in-law, a widow with three children, immediately became the mother of five.

On hearing this, the Bedouin woman rose from the rock where she was sitting and said, "Wait here. I'll be right back," and she hurried down to her stall, which she had left standing unattended. In a few moments she returned with a multi-stringed necklace of tiny colourful rocks and glass beads and a matching wrist band. As she passed them to me, she said "These are a gift for your friend. Please tell her that there is a Bedouin woman in Petra who cares."

Next, she held up a large square piece of flowing black fabric with intricate designs in red, silver, and blue woven into it – a scarf. "This is for you," she said, "please let me tie it on you." So, I bent toward her and she wrapped the scarf around my head in the form of a keffiyeh, which I wore for the next three days and have worn many times since. I was honoured and I was deeply moved.

Although I wanted to reciprocate in some meaningful way, I knew that anything that smacked of payment would be wrong, wrong, wrong. So, after a few more minutes of conversation, I asked her if I could make a small contribution to Sharla's education. At first, she waved her hands in a "No, no" response, but when I twice reiterated that this was a gift for her daughter, not for her, she accepted the \$50 that I had in my wallet.

Half an hour later, after she had returned to her stall and I had continued to make pictures among the rocks, I realized that I didn't know her name, nor have a photograph of her for my friend in Nova Scotia, so I went to her stall and asked if I might have both.



Nasima, the woman of Petra who cares.

NAMAQUALAND

On January 25 I flew from Tel Aviv back to Amsterdam and next morning began the long flight almost due south to Cape Town. Twelve hours later my checked bag was one of the first pieces of luggage to appear on the carousel and I raced through immigration and customs, emerging in the arrivals area to a big hug from my long-time friend Helmut Kohrs.

Next morning we headed up the N7 highway to Kamieskroon, 500 km north, stopping en route at Piketberg to visit Colla Swart, Helmut's mother-in-law, whom I met on Sept. 18, 1980, when I visited Namaqualand for the first time, and who became my teaching partner in the Namaqualand Photographic Workshops, which were held during the incredible spring wildflower season (August-September) from 1982 through 2006. For years Colla and I scoured the large network of secondary and farm roads in search of the best displays of flowers and became the undisputed authorities on what was blooming where and when in Namaqualand. However, we sometimes kept our discoveries secret and frequently were able to take workshop participants to fabulous areas that few or no tourists ever visited.

Then, from 2007 through 2019 Colla's daughter Maryna and her husband Helmut and I led two-week wilderness camping trips every March to the Namaqualand coast and to the Richtersveld, the remote mountain desert in the northwest corner of the region.

After I'd returned to the Swart/Kohrs family and the little Kamieskroon Hotel this year, I followed my usual routine of taking a brisk five to seven kilometre walk along the old road that runs behind the hotel (part of the original highway from Cape Town to Namibia,) beginning sometime between 4:15 and 5:30 a.m., the exact time depending on the phase of the moon, because I love walking in moonlight.

I had great conversations, much laughter, and the sharing of photographs with two groups of friends from Cape Town (all of whom I'd met on past workshops and/or camping trips) who came to visit for a few days and I spent three energizing days of camping at the coast with two other friends – hiking the white sand dunes, the long curving beaches, and the vast rocky coastal stretches where huge breakers smashed against gigantic boulders. (*See some photographs on following pages.*)

Although nearly everybody in Namaqualand speaks English, Afrikaans is the working language of the region and, because I hadn't heard or spoken the language for four years, I was a little worried about my ability to function. However, I was soon greeting the occasional other early-morning walker and ordering breakfast items in acceptable Afrikaans and grasping rapid-fire conversations well enough for people to realize that "Ons moenie skinder oor Freeman in Afrikaans nie." ("We mustn't gossip about Freeman in Afrikaans.")

Nevertheless, the entire time I was in Namaqualand I regularly replied "Yes" to a question by using the French "Oui," rather than the Afrikaans "Ja." This reminded me of a time when the reverse was true – when I spoke far better Afrikaans than I did French and was constantly tossing Afrikaans words into French sentences. (My French teacher at the time quickly acquired a basic Afrikaans vocabulary.) Apparently, this linguistic reversal is typical of most people learning a third or fourth language. They will flip into the first or second acquired language until fluency is achieved in the one being learned, never into their mother tongue.



After a huge breaker, Hondeklipbaai



Tide line and kelp, Boulderbaai, Namaqua National Park



Coastal dunes, Namaqua National Park



Abandoned and scattered clutch of ostrich eggs, coastal dunes, Namaqua National Park



Coastal dune, Namaqua National Park

WORKSHOPS

Last October I completed 50 years of facilitating/teaching week-long workshops in photography and visual design in eight countries (Canada, South Africa, New Zealand, Australia, Israel, France, the United Kingdom, and the United States.) Along the way I've had several excellent teaching partners, André Gallant of Saint John, New Brunswick (my partner since 1996) being with me the longest, and Colla Swart of South Africa coming in second.

This year will mark a decade of INSCAPE, an annual workshop on consciousness and spirituality with David Maginley, ably assisted by resource persons Marjorie Nea of Virginia and Acadian sculptor, Marie-Hélène Allain. For about the same length of time I've also been offering one-day workshops at my home in Shampers Bluff, and two years ago I began facilitating artists' retreats in the 11-hectare/27-acre Kingsbrae Garden in St. Andrews, New Brunswick. Taking everything together, I guess I can call it a career.

The capacity of most workshops with two instructors has been and still is 12 persons, but six when I'm the sole facilitator, and one to three for the one-day workshops at my home.

On average, approximately 30-33% of participants are repeaters, some returning quickly, others after many years. A few return because they claim to be slow learners, others come for a "refresher," and some admit that it's because of the workshop "ambience." This is especially true of INSCAPE, where intense group and one-on-one discussions invariably

produce caring and trust that produce long-lasting feelings of community. (The participants of INSCAPE 2021 have been meeting once a month by ZOOM ever since for up to three hours.)

Somebody asked me recently if I'm planning on creating on-line workshops. Although I frequently give ZOOM presentations, I quickly replied "No." For me the reason is simple: I love the human interaction of in-person workshops, whether they last for a week or a day.

What's fundamental about in-person workshops, but seldom mentioned or even recognized, is that the participants or "students" are forever teaching the teacher, just as much as the other way around, and that this informs and elevates the quality of instruction. This "upward" educational flow frequently occurs in situations that the internet can't replicate – in field trips, during lunch and dinner conversations, and when four or five participants get together with their instructor(s) over a mug of beer or a glass of wine. Equally important are the ideas, knowledge, and valuable design and technical information that workshop participants share with each other. It's a big bonus and it's free.

Also, to be completely frank, I'm not interested in sitting on my butt any more than I already do. On in-person workshops everybody gets exercise.

Please check my website www.freemanpatterson.com for information about and the dates of this year's workshops. As of March 1, INSCAPE has just two openings left. The two artists' retreats at Kingsbrae Gardens in St. Andrew's are fully booked. However, if six persons (photographers or other visual artists) are interested in an early August retreat, I may well be able to reserve the KIRA facilities. (Please contact me right away at freemanpatterson23@gmail.com if you're interested and include your phone number.)

There are currently openings on both the Sept. 3-9 and Oct. 8-14 workshops in St. Martin's with André Gallant and me, and I'm open for creating one-day workshops for one to three persons at Shamper's Bluff during July, September, and October when I'm not facilitating a week-long event. I always tailor these workshops to the specific interests and needs of the person or persons attending.

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"Creativity is imagination having fun" *Albert Einstein*

"You can't use up creativity. The more you use, the more you have." *Maya Angelou*

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Imaginer, rêver, créer! Stel jou voor, droom, skep! Imagine, dream, create!

FREEMAN

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