

# TRAVEL

## There is a Time for Hunting

BY JANET GRAHAM

"Hand me the cartridges," said Jesus-son-of-Jesus.

Reluctantly, I leaned across the front seat of the car and gave them to him. Jesus-son-of-Jesus was a tall, dark-eyed Arab, whose name in the local lingo was Aissa Ben Aissa. I knew he had been a terrorist in the Algerian revolution—though now, he assured me, he was a pacifist at heart. I wasn't convinced as I watched him in the back seat, a shotgun resting on his white burnoose.

"Many wild boar in these forests," he said with pride. I knew that all too well: I'd seen pictures of the monsters being hunted in northern Algeria. Beaters would first flush a jackal. Then the boar would chase through the forest, fifty yards or so behind it. I hoped Aissa wasn't planning a foray.

I have always loathed hunting and killing, a reaction, no doubt, to my upbringing in a Scottish Highland country house where shooting and killing were a way of life. The massive slaughter of game was as natural as breathing to my father and brothers, uncles and cousins. I found it horrifying.

So I certainly hadn't traveled to Algeria with the idea of going on any hunting expeditions. I had just spent a week as a peaceful tourist, wandering around the dusty alleyways of Bou Saada, a pretty oasis town on the edge of the Sahara. There were gazelles in the hotel garden, shy and beautiful. I had tried creeping up to them with a camera—but one click and they'd flick away into the shrubbery. I'd passed happy days strolling in the market, kibitzing over the sidewalk games of dominoes and backgammon; taking camel rides down the dry river bed of the Wadi; watching the belly dancing (now respectably renamed *Danses Folkloriques*). I woke to the distant cry of the muezzin calling the Moslems to prayer; I fell asleep to the seductive wail of the Sahara flute coming from the hotel bar.

It was in the hotel bar that I met Aissa, a cousin of the hotel proprietor. Hearing I was a foreigner, he asked if I'd like to go with him and his friend

Hamed on a sightseeing trip up into the snow mountains of the Aures. "You may go, madame," the proprietor assured me. "My cousin has a very good character. You will be quite safe."

It was all so well meant. "In our country," they had said, "the traveler is king; hospitality for us is like prayer." They felt, hospitably, that my visit wouldn't be complete without a little hunting. So I became involved in something I detested. Arab politeness must have rubbed off on me; I just couldn't bear to spoil their fun by refusing them.

You cannot escape talk of hunting in Algeria. You hear of rock paintings in the southern Sahara, drawn by cave men artists in the days when the Sahara was dense jungle, roamed by panther, giraffe, rhinoceros, and elephant. It was here that the Romans collected thousands of wild beasts for their gladiatorial combats. Now there is an abundance of boars, stags, cranes, quail, gazelles, and other game. "In the past seven years no one has shot it," the tourist director had explained. "We've been shooting only at each other."

With Aissa's shy friend Hamed at the wheel, we drove through the towering Gorge of Kantara, which Hercules is supposed to have cleft with a twist of his heel. As we climbed higher, it began to snow heavily. "We cannot stop to hunt here now," Aissa sighed. "The car might get snowed in." He put away his gun and got out his flute. While he played the weird, rhythmical tunes, Hamed sang Arabian Nights ballads about desert lovers, moonlight trysts, camels and oases and damsels in disguise. This suited me much better, and I was relaxed and happy until Aissa said, "Never mind about the boar, madame. Later on, nearer to the desert, we will go after a jackal."

When we came to signposts, I tried to decipher the names, printed in French as well as Arabic. Aissa and Hamed could neither read nor write. I tried to check direction by the North Star and saw the constellation of Orion the Hunter, with his broad shoulders and sharp sword, hanging above us in the sky.

The road went downhill, over the icy steppe, where the sparse grass blew in the desert wind. Aissa got out and looked sharply in all directions. In the distance I could hear the eerie sound of the jackals baying.

"Good. No police patrol tonight. We can go on."

"Why would they stop you?"

"Hunting by headlights is forbidden, madame. But, of course, we all do it; it is the best way." He commanded Hamed to swerve the car from side to side across the road, causing the headlights to sweep the surrounding dunescape, searching for the bright eyes of game.

A baby owl fluttered against the windshield and fell stunned into the road. We stopped for Aissa, the great hunter, to dispatch it with his shotgun. I turned my eyes away, hating it, hating men with all their reasonless blood-letting.

There was no shot. Aissa was getting back into the car. He held the baby owl tenderly and made a nest for it at the back of the car. "It is only a little hurt; it will recover," he told me gently.

The car sped along, zigzagging across the road. The bitter wind whistled through the open windows. Occasionally we passed a nomad encampment, its fires flickering in the distance.

Seeing me shiver, Aissa grew concerned. "We will stop at one of the tents and ask them to give you coffee," he said. A few moments later we were walking fifty yards toward the light of an encampment. The watchdogs barked fiercely, and Aissa called out in guttural Arabic that we were friends. An old man shuffled out of the tent.

"He says, 'Peace be on you; you are welcome,'" Aissa told me. "Go inside to the women, and they will make you coffee. We men may not enter; we will wait for you here."

I crouched my way into the tent, lit only by one guttering candle. At one end an old crone with hennaed hair sat tending a wood fire. A younger woman lay in a heap of ragged blankets. I sat on the straw floor of the tent beside her, astonished at her heavy silver bracelets and the purple swastikas tattooed on her cheeks. She pointed at something beside her in the blankets. It was a newborn baby, swaddled stiff as a board, its wizened face blackened with kohl. An older brother and sister came in and stared at me, touching the material of my dress with wonder. With their strange, beautiful faces and bright, exotic clothes, these Bedouin held, for me, all the romance of the desert. But it was a fair exchange. To them I was equally fascinating: the Thing From Outer Space. The grandmother made coffee, then took a huge brass pestle and hammered a glistening

Janet Graham is a freelance writer who lives in England.

cone of sugar into lumps. We drank together, the strong, sweet brew warming me as Aissa hoped it would. I thanked them in sign language and crept out again, leaving them my flashlight as a parting gift.

Aissa shook his head sadly as we walked back to the car. "They are very poor," he said. "And the old man told me the jackals have been coming at night and killing their sheep. If they cannot sell their sheep, they will have no money to buy flour, and they will starve." Well—perhaps the chaps were right to go jackal hunting after all.

We drove on, swerving the car as before. Suddenly Hamed pulled on the brakes. In the blaze of the headlights two fiery red eyes shone out of the grasses beyond the dunes.

"A jackal?" I whispered.

"No, with those red eyes it must be a fox. You can always tell: a jackal's eyes are like blue flames."

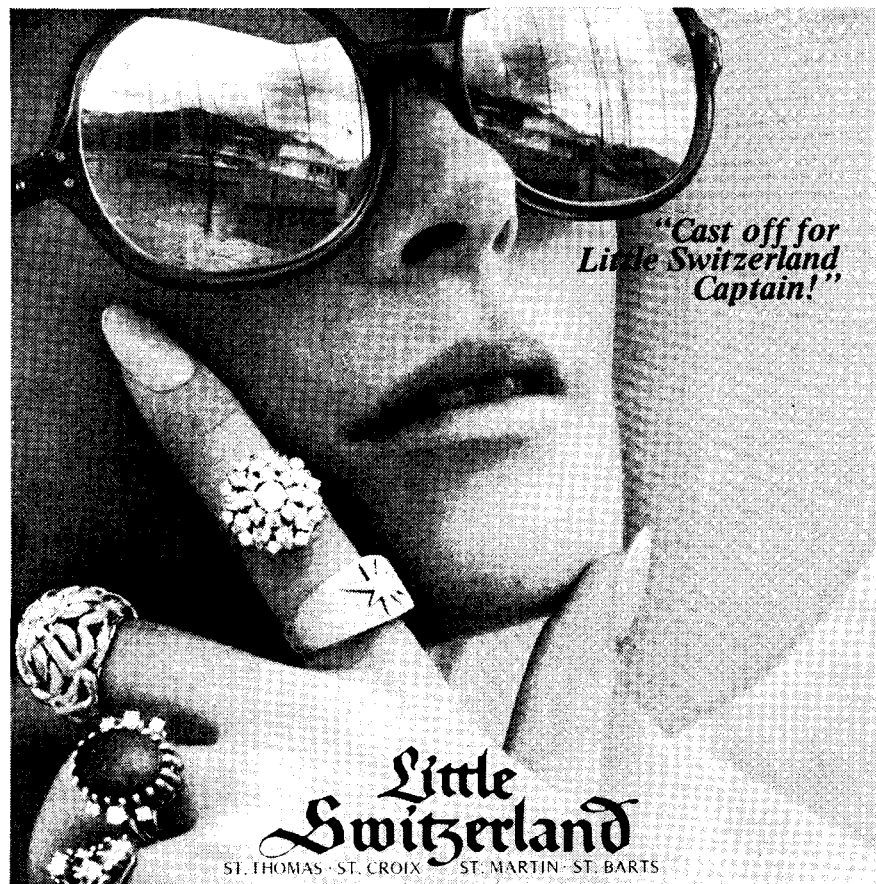
Quietly we left the car and moved toward the gleaming eyes. The fox twisted away and then stopped frozen again, the bright eyes staring. I found I was holding my breath and my heart was banging with unbearable primitive excitement. Aissa shot and missed. I will never forget the pungent, acrid smell of gunpowder, the night wind, the distant nomad fires, the moonlight on the white sand dunes, the belt of Orion, and that thrilling breath-holding stillness . . . suddenly, to hunt at night for food for hungry people, or to protect the flocks from predators, seemed exciting, satisfying, natural, right, and marvelous. It was a moment of astonishing discovery.

When we returned to the car without our prey, I felt disappointed, bitterly cheated of the kill, utterly amazed at the fierceness of my own feelings.

We stopped again. This time the eyes in the headlights were bright blue. A jackal, for certain. Aissa shot and the eyes disappeared. Got him. Ten minutes later he bagged a hare. We took it back to his courtyard, made a fire, and roasted it. It was a feast for us all and for Aissa's and Hamed's children, who seldom ate meat. It had been a good night's hunting.

The next day I was back peacefully shopping, strolling, visiting, and gossiping in the women's quarters. But just for that one evening I had glimpsed the brave excitement of a man's world in which I had no place. I thought often again of the cave paintings and of primitive Man the Hunter, from whom we are all descended, like it or not . . . who hunted not in anger but for food and for our protection.

And the morning I left for home, I saw Aissa pick up the baby owl and set it free. □



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# EDITORIAL

## The Schools in Perspective

In a period of pervasive public disenchantment with the fruits of education, it is sometimes useful to look to the past for perspective on the contemporary scene. Americans have always had sublime faith in the power of education in theory, but at the same time they have frequently been highly critical of their schools as public institutions.

Henry Steele Commager, in an October 1950 *Life* magazine editorial, wrote: "No other people ever demanded so much of education as have the American. None other was ever served so well by its schools and educators." And he paid graceful homage to the success of the public schools in meeting the historic demands that society made upon them: to provide an enlightened citizenry, to create national unity, and to Americanize the millions of foreign-born who came to these shores annually after 1840. But then he asked: "If, through the 19th and well into the 20th Century, American schools performed such magnificent service, the question remains: do they still serve the nation well? And is education still the American religion?"

Professor Commager's words have an antique flavor today, when revisionist historians are pointing out the class-conscious nature of the education enterprise and are denying that the schools ever served the newcomers as well as our national myths would have it. But he might almost have been writing in 1973 when he added: "The American mind today seems deeply worried about its school system as it never has been before. In the vast literature on education there is more discontent than complacency, more blame than praise. There is an uneasy feeling that the schools have somehow failed to do their job."

In 1950 the nation was on the brink of a vast, postwar upsurge of concern about its schools and faith in their capacity to serve all the people. The Supreme Court decision of 1954 promised to undo generations of racial injustice. James Bryant Conant's study *The American High School Today* seemed to be a blueprint for schools in the dawning space age. Membership in

PTAS was booming, and the National Citizens' Commission for the Public Schools, through the example of its nationally known members, was making it fashionable for rising young business and professional men to become involved in local school affairs. Before the end of the decade the National Defense Education Act provided a formula for making massive federal funds available to local school districts for the first time.

As the rancorous debates of the McCarthy years gave way to a new sense of national purpose, it seemed in the 1960s that we were going to solve our domestic problems of racism, poverty, and deprivation by facing up to them directly. And clearly America's triumphant faith in education as an instrument of social progress was emerging stronger than ever. But a funny thing happened on the way to realization of the American Dream: the nation's domestic problems refused to go away. They proved far more resistant to easy solutions than we had anticipated. Lavish federal funds and remote goodwill were not enough. It appeared, as the decade of the Sixties waned, that a whole generation of liberal social theory had been tested and found wanting.

Meanwhile, criticisms of the schools were mounting. The bright promise of the 1954 Supreme Court decision gradually faded as the pace of desegregation lagged in the South and resegregation increased in the cities of the North. It became progressively clearer that even with more money and a multiplicity of special programs, the schools were not meeting the educational needs of most disadvantaged children. And the innumerable programs for children of the poor, to which so many advantaged youngsters devoted their time and energy, appeared to have little lasting effect, at least on academic performance.

As the focus of public attention turned ever more sharply on the shortcomings of the schools, it became progressively clearer that even the affluent suburban schools were shortchanging, if not actually damaging, their students. We became more aware of the power of the schools' hidden curriculum, which so often teaches conformity and order and acceptance, even while the educational rhetoric places primary emphasis on creativity, independent thinking, and academic self-sufficiency.

The response was a new wave of re-

form, both within the system and outside of it. Innovation became the most fashionable subject of conversation among schoolmen, and new programs sprouted like wild flowers in a summer meadow. The changes that ensued were not, to be sure, very basic—not much changed for the children in the classroom. Many of the changes did, nevertheless, help to make the school environment less constraining and more humane. The very process of innovating also brought more pervasive awareness of the need for reform and an element of excitement to often dreary classrooms.

But the most distinctive reflection of the decade of the Sixties was the changing attitude of the younger generation toward society and its institutions. The growing sensitivity of young people to the nation's social crisis during the early years of the decade, their idealistic, often fumbling, sometimes destructive, and always impatient efforts to combat injustice are the true hallmarks of the decade. Their alienation from a society that supports a destructive "nonwar" on the other side of the world and their rejection of the cant and hypocrisy that are so often a part of our public life exerted a powerful influence not only on their own generation but on their elders as well.

Now the mood has changed. We seem to be suffering a national hangover after a decade-long binge of hope and despair. It is as if the experience of the Sixties had convinced us that there is no solution to the social ills that continue to plague us. A cooled-off economy is hard-pressed to provide jobs for new college graduates; the Ph.D. market has shrunk dramatically; federal funds for educational experimentation are hard to come by; and the new generation of students gives evidence of being ready to accept the system, with all its imperfections, in order to acquire the skills that lead to "success." And this, it appears, is just what the Nixon administration wants.

The nation failed in the Sixties to achieve its many social and educational goals. We learned that the task of reform is far more difficult than we expected. Despite the frustrations, however, significant progress was made. But if we lose faith in the ability of man to make his institutions more responsive to human needs, we will have to defer the American Dream once again.

JAMES CASS