

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-01469-4 - Journeys in Persia and Kurdistan, Volume 1

Isabella Bird

Excerpt

[More information](#)

LETTER I

BASRAH, ASIATIC TURKEY, *Jan. 1, 1890.*

A *shamal* or N.W. wind following on the sirocco which had accompanied us up "the Gulf" was lashing the shallow waters of the roadstead into reddish yeast as we let go the anchor opposite the sea front of Bushire, the most important seaport in Persia. *The Persian man-of-war Persepolis*, officered by Germans, H.M. ship *Sphinxæ*, two big steamers owned in London, a British-built three-masted clipper, owned and navigated by Arabs, and a few Arab native vessels tugged at their anchors between two and three miles from the shore. Native *buggalows* clustered and bumped round the trading vessels, hanging on with difficulty, or thumped and smashed through the short waves, close on the wind, easily handled and sailing magnificently, while the Residency steam-launch, puffing and toiling, was scarcely holding her own against a heavy head sea.

Bushire, though it has a number of two-storied houses and a population of 15,000, has a most insignificant appearance, and lies so low that from the *Assyria's* deck it gave the impression of being below the sea-level. The *shamal* was raising a sand storm in the desert beyond; the sand was drifting over it in yellow clouds, the mountains which at a greater or less distance give a wild sublimity to the eastern shores of the Gulf were blotted

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-01469-4 - Journeys in Persia and Kurdistan, Volume 1

Isabella Bird

Excerpt

[More information](#)

out, and a blurred and windy shore harmonised with a blurred and windy sea.

The steam-launch, which after several baffled attempts succeeded in reaching the steamer's side, brought letters of welcome from Colonel Ross, who for eighteen years has filled the office of British Resident in the Persian Gulf with so much ability, judgment, and tact as to have earned the respect and cordial esteem of Persians, Arabs, the mixed races, and Europeans alike. Of his kindness and hospitality there is no occasion to write, for every stranger who visits the Gulf has large experience of both.

The little launch, though going shorewards with the wind, was tossed about like a cork, shipping deluges of spray, and it was so cold and generally tumultuous, that it was a relief to exchange the shallow, wind-lashed waters of the roadstead for the shelter of a projecting sea-wall below the governor's house. A curricule, with two fiery little Arab horses, took us over the low windy stretch of road which lies behind Bushire, through a part of the town and round again to the sea-shore, on which long yellow surges were breaking thunderously in drifts of creamy foam. The Residency, a large Persian house, with that sort of semi-fortified look which the larger Eastern houses are apt to have, is built round courtyards, and has a fine entrance, which was lined with well-set-up men of a Bombay marine battalion. As is usual in Persia and Turkey, the reception rooms, living rooms, and guest rooms are upstairs, opening on balconies, the lower part being occupied by the servants and as domestic offices. Good fires were a welcome adjunct to the genial hospitality of Colonel Ross and his family, for the mercury, which for the previous week had ranged from 84° to 93°, since the sunrise of that day had dropped to 45°, and the cold, damp wind suggested an English February. Even the Residency, thick as its walls are, was invaded

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-01469-4 - Journeys in Persia and Kurdistan, Volume 1

Isabella Bird

Excerpt

[More information](#)

by sea sand, and penetrated by the howlings and shriekings of the *shamal* and the low hiss at intervals of wind-blown spray.

This miserable roadstead does a large trade,¹ though every bale and chest destined for the cities of the interior must be packed on mules' backs for carriage over the horrible and perilous *kotals* or rock ladders of the intervening mountain ranges. The chief caravan route in Persia starts from Bushire *via* Shiraz, Isfahan, Kashan, and Kûm, to Tihiran. A loaded mule takes from thirty to thirty-five days to Isfahan, and from Isfahan to Tihiran from twelve to sixteen days, according to the state of the roads.

Bushire does not differ in appearance from an ordinary eastern town. Irregular and uncleanly alleys, dead mud walls, with here and there a low doorway, bazars in which the requirements of caravans are largely considered, and in which most of the manufactured goods are English, a great variety in male attire, some small mosques, a marked predominance of the Arab physiognomy and costume, and ceaseless strings of asses bringing skins of water from wells a mile from the town, are my impres-

¹ According to the returns for 1889, the British tonnage entering the Bushire roadstead was 111,745 out of 118,570 tons, and the imports from British territory amounted to a value of £744,018 out of £790,832. The exports from Bushire in the same year amounted to £535,076, that of opium being largely on the increase. Among other things exported are pistachio nuts, gum, almonds, madder, wool, and cotton. Regarding gum, the wars in the Soudan have affected the supply of it, and Persia is reaping the benefit, large quantities now being collected from certain shrubs, especially from the wild almond, which abounds at high altitudes. The drawback is that firewood and charcoal are becoming consequently dearer and scarcer. The gum exported in 1889 was 7472 cwts., as against 14,918 in 1888, but the value was more than the same.

The imports into Bushire, as comparing 1889 with 1888, have increased by £244,186, and the exports by £147,862. The value of the export of opium, chiefly to China, was £231,521, as against £148,523 in 1888.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-01469-4 - Journeys in Persia and Kurdistan, Volume 1

Isabella Bird

Excerpt

[More information](#)

sions of the first Persian city that I have seen. The Persian element, however, except in officialism and the style of building, is not strong, the population being chiefly composed of "Gulf Arabs." There are nearly fifty European residents, including the telegraph staff and the representatives of firms doing a very large business with England, the Persian Gulf Trading Company, Messrs. Hotz and Company, Messrs. Gray, Paul, and Company, and the British India Steam Navigation Company, which has enormously developed the trade of the Gulf.

Bushire is the great starting-point of travellers from India who desire "to go home through Persia" by Shiraz and Persepolis. *Charvadars* (muleteers) and the necessary outfit are obtainable, but even the kindness of the Resident fails to overcome the standing difficulty of obtaining a Persian servant who is both capable and trustworthy. Having been forewarned by him not to trust to Bushire for this indispensable article, I had brought from India a Persian of good antecedents and character, who, desiring to return to his own country, was willing to act as my interpreter, courier, and sole attendant. Grave doubts of his ability to act in the two latter capacities occurred to me before I left Karachi, grew graver on the voyage, and were quite confirmed as we tossed about in the Residency launch, where the "young Persian gentleman," as he styled himself, sat bolt upright with a despairing countenance, dressed in a tall hat, a beautifully made European suit, faultless tan boots, and snowy collar and cuffs, a man of truly refined feeling and manners, but hopelessly out of place. I pictured him helpless among the *déshabillé* and roughnesses of a camp, and anticipated my insurmountable reluctance to ask of him menial service, and was glad to find that the same doubts had occurred to himself.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-01469-4 - Journeys in Persia and Kurdistan, Volume 1

Isabella Bird

Excerpt

[More information](#)

LETTER I

HADJI

5

I lost no time in interviewing Hadji,—a Gulf Arab, who has served various travellers, has been ten times to Mecca, went to Windsor with the horses presented to the Queen by the Sultan of Muscat, speaks more or less of six languages, knows English fairly, has some recommendations, and professes that he is “up to” all the requirements of camp life. The next morning I engaged him as “man of all work,” and though a big, wild-looking Arab in a rough *abba* and a big turban, with a long knife and a revolver in his girdle, scarcely looks like a lady’s servant, I hope he may suit me, though with these antecedents he is more likely to be a scamp than a treasure.

The continuance of the *shamal* prevented the steamer from unloading in the exposed roadstead, and knocked the launch about as we rejoined her. We called at the telegraph station at Fao, and brought off Dr. Bruce, the head of the Church Missionary Society’s Mission at Julfa, whose long and intimate acquaintance with the country and people will make him a great acquisition on the Tigris.

“About sixty miles above the bar outside the Shat-el-Arab” (the united Tigris and Euphrates), “forty miles above the entrance to that estuary at Fao, and twenty miles below the Turkish port of Basrah, the present main exit of the Karun river flows into the Shat-el-Arab from the north-east by an artificial channel, whose etymology testifies to its origin, the Haffar” (dug-out) “canal. When this canal was cut, no one knows. . . . Where it flows into the Shat-el-Arab it is about a quarter of a mile in width, with a depth of from twenty to thirty feet.

“The town of Mohammerah is situated a little more than a mile up the canal on its right bank, and is a filthy place, with about 2000 inhabitants, and consists

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-01469-4 - Journeys in Persia and Kurdistan, Volume 1

Isabella Bird

Excerpt

[More information](#)

mainly of mud huts and hovels, backed by a superb fringe of date palms.”¹ In the rose flush of a winter morning we steamed slowly past this diplomatically famous confluence of the Haffar and Shat-el-Arab, at the angle of which the Persians have lately built a quay, a governor’s house, and a large warehouse, in expectation of a trade which shows few signs of development.

A winter morning it was indeed, splendid and invigorating after the ferocious heat of the Gulf. To-day there has been frost!

The Shat-el-Arab is a noble river or estuary. From both its Persian and Turkish shores, however, mountains have disappeared, and dark forests of date palms intersected by canals fringe its margin heavily, and extend to some distance inland. The tide is strong, and such native boats as *belems*, *buggalows*, and dug-outs, loaded with natives and goods, add a cheerful element of busy life.

We anchored near Basrah, below the foreign settlement, and had the ignominy of being placed for twenty-four hours in quarantine, flying the degrading yellow flag. Basrah has just been grievously ravaged by the cholera, which has not only carried off three hundred of the native population daily for some time, but the British Vice-Consul and his children. Cholera still exists in Turkey while it is extinct in Bombay, and the imposition of quarantine on a ship with a “clean bill of health” seems devised for no other purpose than to extract fees, to annoy, and to produce a harassing impression of Turkish officialism.

After this detention we steamed up to the anchorage, which is in front of a few large bungalows which lie

¹ “The Karun River,” Hon. G. Curzon, M.P., *Proceedings of R.G.S.*, September 1890.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-01469-4 - Journeys in Persia and Kurdistan, Volume 1

Isabella Bird

Excerpt

[More information](#)

between the belt of palms and the river, and form the European settlement of Margil. A fever-haunted swamp, with no outlet but the river; canals exposing at low water deep, impassable, and malodorous slime separating the bungalows; a climate which is damp, hot, malarious, and prostrating except for a few weeks in winter, and a total absence of all the resources and amenities of civilisation, make Basrah one of the least desirable places to which Europeans are exiled by the exigencies of commerce. It is scarcely necessary to say that the few residents exercise unbounded hospitality, which is the most grateful memory which the stranger retains of the brief halt by the "River of Arabia."

This is the dead season in the "city of dates." An unused river steamer, a large English trader, two Turkish ships-of-war painted white, the *Mejidieh*, one of two English-owned steamers which are allowed to ply on the Tigris, and the *Assyria* of the B.I.S.N. Co., constitute the fleet at anchor. As at Bushire, all cargo must be loaded and unloaded by boats, and crowds of native craft hanging on to the trading vessels give a little but not much vivacity.

October, after the ingathering of the date harvest, is the busiest month here. The magnitude of the date industry may be gathered from the fact that in 1890, 60,000 tons of dates were exported from Basrah, 20,000 in boxes, and the remainder in palm-leaf mats, one vessel taking 1800 tons. The quantity of wood imported for the boxes was 7000 tons in cut lengths, with iron hooping, nails, and oiled paper for inside wrapping, brought chiefly from England.

A hundred trees can be grown on an acre of ground. The mature tree gives a profit of 4s., making the profit on an acre £20 annually. The Governor of Mohammerah has lately planted 30,000 trees, and date palms to

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-01469-4 - Journeys in Persia and Kurdistan, Volume 1

Isabella Bird

Excerpt

[More information](#)

the number of 60,000 have been recently planted on Persian soil.

It is said that there are 160 varieties of dates, but only a few are known to commerce. These great sombre date forests or "date gardens," which no sunshine can enliven, are of course artificial, and depend upon irrigation. The palms are propagated by means of suckers taken from the female date. The young trees begin to bear when they are about five years old, reach maturity at nine, and may be prolific for two centuries. Mohammed said wisely, "Honour the palm, it is your paternal aunt." One soon learns here that it not only provides the people with nutritious food, but with building materials, as well as with fuel, carpets, ropes, and mats. But it is the least beautiful of the palms, and the dark monotonous masses along the river contrast with my memories of the graceful coco palm fringing the coral islands of the Pacific.

I left the *Assyria* with regret. The captain and officers had done all that intelligence and kindness could do to make the voyage an agreeable one, and were altogether successful. On shore a hospitable reception, a good fire, and New Year's Day come together appropriately. The sky is clear and cloudless, and the air keen. The bungalows belonging to the European firms are dwelling-houses above and offices below, and are surrounded by packing-yards and sheds for goods. In line with them are the Consulates.

The ancient commercial glories of Basrah are too well known to need recapitulation. Circumstances are doing much to give it something of renewed importance. The modern Basrah, a town which has risen from a state of decay till it has an estimated population of 25,000, is on the right bank of the river, at some distance up a picturesque palm-fringed canal. Founded by Omar soon

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-01469-4 - Journeys in Persia and Kurdistan, Volume 1

Isabella Bird

Excerpt

[More information](#)

after the death of Mohammed, and tossed like a shuttlecock between Turk and Persian, it is now definitely Turkish, and the great southern outlet of Chaldæa and Mesopotamia, as well as the port at which the goods passing to and from Baghdad "break bulk." A population more thoroughly polyglot could scarcely be found, Turks, Arabs, Sabeans, Syrians, Greeks, Hindus, Armenians, Frenchmen, Wahabees, Britons, Jews, Persians, Italians, and Africans, and there are even more creeds than races.

S.S. Mejdieh, River Tigris, Jan. 4.—Leaving Basrah at 4 P.M. on Tuesday we have been stemming the strong flood of the Tigris for three bright winter days, in which to sit by a red-hot stove and sleep under a pile of blankets have been real luxuries after the torrid heat of the "Gulf." The party on board consists of Dr. Bruce, Mr. Hammond, who has been for some months pushing British trade at Shuster, the Assistant Quartermaster-General for India, a French-speaking Jewish merchant, the Hon. G. Curzon, M.P., and Mr. Swabadi, a Hungarian gentleman in the employment of the Tigris and Euphrates Steam Navigation Company, a very scholarly man, who in the course of a long residence in Southern Turkey has acquainted himself intimately with the country and its peoples, and is ever ready to place his own stores of information at our disposal. Mr. Curzon has been "prospecting" the Karun river, and came on board from the *Shushan*, a small stern-wheel steamer with a carrying capacity of 30 tons, a draught when empty of 18 inches, and when laden of from 24 to 36. She belongs to the Messrs. Lynch Brothers, of the Tigris and Euphrates S.N. Co. They run her once a fortnight at a considerable loss between Mohammerah and Ahwaz. Her isolated position and diminutive size are a curious commentary on the flourish of trumpets and *blether* of exultation with which the English newspapers announced the very poor

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-01469-4 - Journeys in Persia and Kurdistan, Volume 1

Isabella Bird

Excerpt

[More information](#)

concession of leave to run steamers on the Karun between the Shat-el-Arab and Ahwaz.

[Since this letter was written, things have taken rather a singular turn, and the development of trade on the Karun has partly fallen into the hands of a trading corporation of Persians, the *Nasiri* Company. By them, and under their representative partner, Haja Mahomad, a man of great energy, the formidable rapids at Ahwaz are being circumvented by the construction of a tramway 2400 yards long, which is proceeding steadily. A merchants' caravanserai has already been built on the river bank at the lower landing-place and commencement of the tramway, and a bakery, butchery, and carpentry, along with a *café* and a grocery and general goods stores, have already been opened by men brought to Ahwaz by H. Mahomad.

A river face wall, where native craft are to lie, is being constructed of hewn stone blocks and sections of circular pillars, remains of the ancient city.

The *Nasiri* Company has a small steamer, the *Nasiri*, plying on the lower Karun, chiefly as a tug, taking up two Arab boats of twenty-seven tons each, lashed alongside of her. On her transference at the spring floods of this year to the river above Ahwaz, the *Karun*, a steam launch of about sixty tons, belonging to the Governor of Mohammerah, takes her place below, and a second steamer belonging to the same company is now running on the lower stream. Poles from Zanzibar have been distributed for a telegraph line from Mohammerah to Ahwaz. The Messrs. Lynch have placed a fine river steamer of 300 tons on the route; but this enterprising firm, and English capitalists generally, are being partially "cut out" by the singular "go" of this Persian company, which not only appears to have strong support from Government quarters, but has