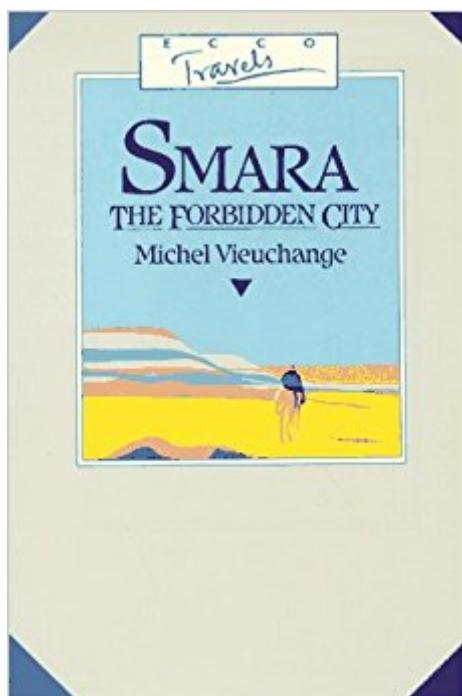


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Smara, The Forbidden City: Being The Journal Of Michel Vieuchange While Travelling Among The Independent Tribes Of South Morocco And Rio De Oro (Ecco Travels)



Synopsis

Travel, Adventure, Journal

Book Information

Series: Ecco Travels

Paperback: 276 pages

Publisher: Ecco Pr; Reprint edition (October 1987)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0880011467

ISBN-13: 978-0880011464

Product Dimensions: 1 x 5.5 x 8.2 inches

Shipping Weight: 13.6 ounces

Average Customer Review: 4.4 out of 5 stars 5 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #2,626,625 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #29 in Books > Travel > Africa > Western Africa: Mali, Mauritania & Western Sahara #245 in Books > Travel > Africa > Morocco #2024 in Books > Travel > Africa > General

Customer Reviews

They say all true stories end in death. Smara, The Forbidden City is a true story. In the fall of 1930, a young Frenchman named Michel Vieuchange staggered out of the Moroccan desert into the town of Tiznit where he collapsed, wracked by dysentery; a few days later, he was dead. Two months earlier, on the evening of September 10, Vieuchange had stripped off his European clothing, draped himself in the costume of a Berber woman, and set off into the unexplored regions of southern Morocco. His goal: discovering the mysterious ruins of Smara, a great walled city that had been built and then abandoned centuries before. Mentioned only as a stopping place for nomads, the city's exact location was not known, and no European had ever laid eyes on it. Vieuchange was determined to be the first. Driven by romanticism, the poetry of Rimbaud and Whitman, and the philosophy of Nietzsche, Vieuchange sought to test himself against the dangers and discomforts of the North African desert in pursuit of a dream. At that time, warring tribes inhabited southern Morocco, and travel there was a perilous undertaking. Speaking neither Berber nor Arabic, Vieuchange wandered for weeks in the desert at the mercy of his guides. When at last he reached Smara, he could stay for only three hours. Was this brief glimpse of a ruined city worth the price of his life? Read Vieuchange's chronicle of his journey, published as Smara, The Forbidden City, and decide for yourself.

Text: English, French (translation)

...over the past three decades I have traveled to some of the cities listed in the book. I found it great reference reading, and a lot of fun, as I passed through the region. Well worth the price and adding to your North African library. BTW - at least one of the grandchildren of an important Moroccan named in the book was to be found in a Smara house referenced. He'll spin a great yarn, to two, over some mint tea that will add to your understanding of the book. Enjoy!

In 1930, Michel Vieuchange undertook to travel to the desert city of Smara in the Western Sahara. Legend was that Smara had been a trading place and stopover for nomadic peoples of the Sahara for at least a millennium. According to this book, no European had ever seen Smara and its very location was uncertain. (According to Wikipedia, however, Smara was sacked by the French Army in 1913 during its campaign against rebellious Arab tribesmen.) In any event, it became an obsession for the Vieuchange brothers, Michel and Jean. They decided that Michel would be the one to go to Smara on a "raid" of sorts, with Jean providing support from French-controlled Morocco. On September 11, 1930, Michel Vieuchange set out from the Moroccan town of Tiznit, which is about 250 miles from Smara. He went with a small party of Moroccans who knew that he was a foreigner but had been told that he was an American looking to open trading relationships. He had the protection of three sheiks who were promised handsome payments. For part of the way he was disguised as a Berber woman. His "raid" was bedeviled by many delays, some occasioned by ongoing "baroud" (warfare) among desert tribes. The travellers alternated between going on foot and riding a camel. Several times Michel was hidden from curious eyes by being stuffed into one of the panniers carried by the camels. Michel reached Smara on November 1. The city, which could house as many as 5,000, was empty. Michel had time to sketch a plan of the city and visit and photograph its two kasbahs and its ruined mosque before his guides hustled him away. All told, he was there for three hours. During the return trip he came down with dysentery. He made it back to Tiznit in wretched condition, and he died on November 30. Throughout his trip, Michel maintained a journal, writing notes in it whenever his traveling party halted about incidents, impressions, the country he was passing through, the scant and awful food and water, and his sore-plagued feet. After his death, his brother Jean turned Michel's notebooks into a book, with rather minimal editing. The result, SMARA: THE FORBIDDEN CITY, is reputed to be a classic of travel writing. Its exotic subject coupled with the circumstances of its author's demise indeed render it unusual, but I find it

to be somewhat less than classic. It is rough and choppy in style. Precisely what is happening or being said is often unclear. That is due in part to the staccato style but also, no doubt, to the fact that Vieuchange himself was in a kind of fog in a strange, harsh land with alien people. On a different level, it was difficult for me to connect with the egotistical romanticism of Michel Vieuchange. The book contains about thirty photographs that Michel snapped along the way, often furtively. They are small, grainy, and often indistinct, a product of the circumstances in which they were taken and what probably was less-than-ideal camera equipment. What would have added considerably to the reader's basic understanding, and therefore is sorely missed, is a map. Just because one wasn't in the original 1932 edition doesn't excuse the Ecco Press from failing to include one in this 1987 paperback. There also are a few typos and other glitches, such as an entire missing page of text (page 112). I suspect the subtitle -- "The Forbidden City" -- is somewhat disingenuous. I get the sense that Smara was not a forbidden "holy" city, off limits to non-Moslems for religious reasons, like Mecca and Medina. Rather, I believe, the "exclusion" of Europeans was due more to the antipathy the Moors and the Arabs of the Western Sahara bore towards Europeans, especially the French and Spanish, on account of their colonialist history. These desert tribes fiercely prized their independence, and they were unwilling to permit Europeans the tiniest toehold. This is supported inferentially by the fact that Vieuchange was prepared to claim, if uncovered as a white foreigner, that he was an American trader. Paul Bowles is responsible for the phrase with which I have entitled this review.

Stumbled onto this small work on a back shelf and bought it for a quick read 15 years ago. I have never stopped thinking about it. It is the personal journal of a young romantic on a personal quest seeking a rumored city lost in the desert of Morocco. The danger, pain and ultimate loss of his life to illness far from home is punctuated by his momentary view of the ruins, which to the true romantic, overshadowed all else. You can put yourself in his place on every page and feel his pain and exhilaration. The book is testimony to his brother who followed his trail to find the truth after his failure to return, and found the journal with the nuns who nursed him till his death. It is truly a gem in the travel book genre.

An amazingly real account from the journals. Steeped in the romantic tradition of solo travel, the account begins in hope and ends in the still silence of illness where no words can be written, though the flicker of hope undoubtedly held on in this man's breast till the end. It is as honest and immediate account of a personal adventure of great risk and pain as can be found in the twentieth

century. All travelers should read and admire.... though none should follow.

The experiences described by Vieuchange are somehow so tangible, that they become like one's own memories or dreams. It could be viewed as a futile, insignificant story, however, there is something in the way Vieuchange throws himself into oblivion for a dream that sleeps in a corner of all of us.

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