

A reflection on impressive Shibam

I never thought that watching a sunset from a nearby lookout over the ancient city of Shibam while the call of prayer ran out was going to be such a moving moment for me. I was finally able to visit this fabled city on my latest trip to Yemen in March 2021. Yemen's famed walled mudbrick city as it stands today has been constructed from 1532 AD onwards; however, the city existed since the 4th Century AD -predating Islam's spread in the Arabian Peninsula around the 7th Century AD. The city suffered many ill fates from flash floods and attacks of marauding tribes but it survived, and some of its structures date to the 10th and 12th century while the city encompasses over 500 dwellings now. The nickname "***Manhattan of The desert***" was given to Shibam when the Anglo-Italian explorer who wrote dozens of books on the Middle East and Arabia Frey Stark passed through it in the 1930's. That naming is owed to the unique mudbrick skyscrapers smack inside Wadi Hadramaut. In 1982 the city gained its UNESCO World Heritage site status. It was magical to aimlessly navigate through the alleys and pathways of Shibam in the late afternoon while absorbing so many angles of this "living museum"; and the greatest reward was an impromptu musical performance in front of the central "*Jameh Mosque*" completed in the 10th century AD. Standing out as the only foreigner in town that day, I was invited to watch the musicians and the dancers and to photograph people around. From town we drove up to the southern fringe of the valley and after a short climb uphill, we reached an ochre-colored fort from which tourists who visit Shibam catch the magical views of sunset over the city while watching several soccer fields where young boys kicked their balls.

