



## Desert Places

By Robyn Davidson

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In 1992 Robyn Davidson traveled through a year's migratory cycle with the Rabari, pastoral nomads of northwest India, whose grazing lands and trading and pilgrimage routes are quickly being destroyed by new political boundaries, atomic test sites, and irrigation. Sleeping among five thousand sheep and surviving on goat's milk, flatbread, and parasite-infested water in a landscape of misery and haunting loveliness, she endured exhaustion, malnutrition and disease. But she gained an understanding and the trust of a fiercely courageous people with a disappearing way of life. Displaying a writer's acute eye for detail and a traveler's keen appreciation for the beauty to be found in the earth's most desolate landscapes, Davidson explores with ruthless honesty her own desert places even as she immortalizes these "keepers of the way" and a culture about to die. Fans of Bruce Chatwin, Peter Matthiessen, and Mary Morris will find themselves enthralled by the passion and beauty of this account by a woman traveler who "may be one of the great adventurers of our time" (The Boston Globe).

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### Editorial Review

#### Amazon.com Review

As Robyn Davidson writes in *Desert Places*, the Thar, a 230,000-square-mile expanse of formidably dry country in northwestern India, is a harsh land of "granite outcroppings, naked but for a few gullies of monsoon forest or a single, white-painted elephant stationed on a summit eternally surveying the farmlands below." Among the people who populate the Thar are the Rabari, who are quickly becoming modernized and dispossessed, wanderers on the fringes of urban civilization, people who are at home nowhere. After making a false start as a book of adventure travel, *Desert Places* becomes a work of cultural ecology and of amateur anthropology, reporting on the final days of a traditional nomadic culture once utterly at home in an inhospitable land.

#### From Publishers Weekly

Inspired by an enchanting encounter with camel herdsmen at a Hindu festival in Pushkar, travel writer Davidson (Tracks) took a magazine assignment to accompany the nomads of Rajasthan (a region in western India) on their yearly migration cycle. Arriving in Jodhpur on the eve of the Gulf war under the aegis of her friend Narendra, a prince who equips her with an entourage of servants and an obstreperous camel-keeper named Chutra, Davidson soon discovers that the ancient culture of the nomads (who are known either as Rabari or as Raika) is slowly being eradicated, faced with diminishing grazing lands, new political boundaries and the spread of subsidized agriculture and Western culture. This book, as breathtaking but circuitous as the adventures it chronicles, begins to gather steam when Davidson is finally accepted by a dang (a migratory group) and sets off to follow them across the desert. She spends a few months sharing the shepherds' life of extreme deprivation, traveling 30 miles a day on a diet of little more than fetid water and camel's milk, sleeping two hours a night and battling illness and exhaustion, before deciding to return to Jodhpur on foot?which proves an even more perilous journey that ends when her camels die after eating poisonous weeds. By the book's end, Davidson's romantic vision of the peripatetic life has given way to a bitter account of her own dashed expectations and of the exploitation of India's nomads. Although her understanding of nomadism as an emotional and geographical phenomenon remains only partly digested, this book will nevertheless prove absorbing to even the most sedentary of bookshelf-travelers.

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#### From Library Journal

The nomadic way of life is on the brink of extinction. In this work, Davidson, an author (Tracks, LJ 2/15/81) and Australian journalist who resides in England, vividly recounts her stay among the Rabari, sheep- and camel-herding nomads in northwestern India. Davidson ate, slept, and walked endless sunbaked miles with them. She does not remain clinically aloof from her traveling companions but tells of getting poked, prodded, taken advantage of, and laughed at. Neither cynic nor sentimental, she was at times disgusted with the earthy Rabari, whose behavior, she notes, was a baffling mixture of aggression and passivity. At other times she was deeply moved by their kindness and spiritual equanimity. Since her travels with the Rabari consisted of several fragmentary journeys rather than one long trip, her account lacks a certain sweep and sometimes seems repetitive. Nevertheless, her book is valuable for its detail and insight. Highly recommended for public libraries and anthropology and South Asian collections. ?Mary C. Kalfatovic, Telesec Lib. Svc., Washington, D.C.

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