

ATLAS
OF
LOST
CITIES

A Travel Guide to
Abandoned and Forsaken
Destinations

AUDE DE TOCQUEVILLE

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Abandoned and Forsaken
Destinations**

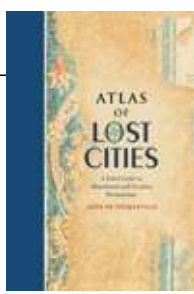
AUDE DE TOCQUEVILLE

Illustrations

KARIN DOERING-FROGER



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INTRODUCTION

“The catalog of forms is infinite. For as long as forms have yet to find their city, new cities will continue to be born. The end of the city begins at the point where forms exhaust their variety and come apart.”

—Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities*

One November day on my way back from Agra, the city famous for the Taj Mahal, I stopped off at Fatehpur Sikri. At the gates of this city built by a Mughal emperor in the sixteenth century, the tumultuous din of Indian life melted away and the bare stones were engulfed by silence. I was struck by the spatial harmony, by the refined architecture of the palaces, courtyards, and terraces, which are all of the same pink color, by the mineral purity of this city perched on a hill at the heart of an immense plain. My thoughts then turned to those who had once invested these walls with life: Akbar, the universal thinker and founder of Fatehpur Sikri, conversing with Jesuit priests in the main courtyard; the women of the harem leaning over their balconies to watch the sun go down; the guards dozing in gloomy recesses. On a large door of Mughal design I came across some calligraphic inscriptions executed by artist-philosophers. One of them proclaimed: “The world is nothing but a footbridge. Cross over without stopping to erect your house there.” During the course of my stroll, I became enchanted by this city that time, in depriving it of its perfumes and wall hangings, had rendered more beautiful still.

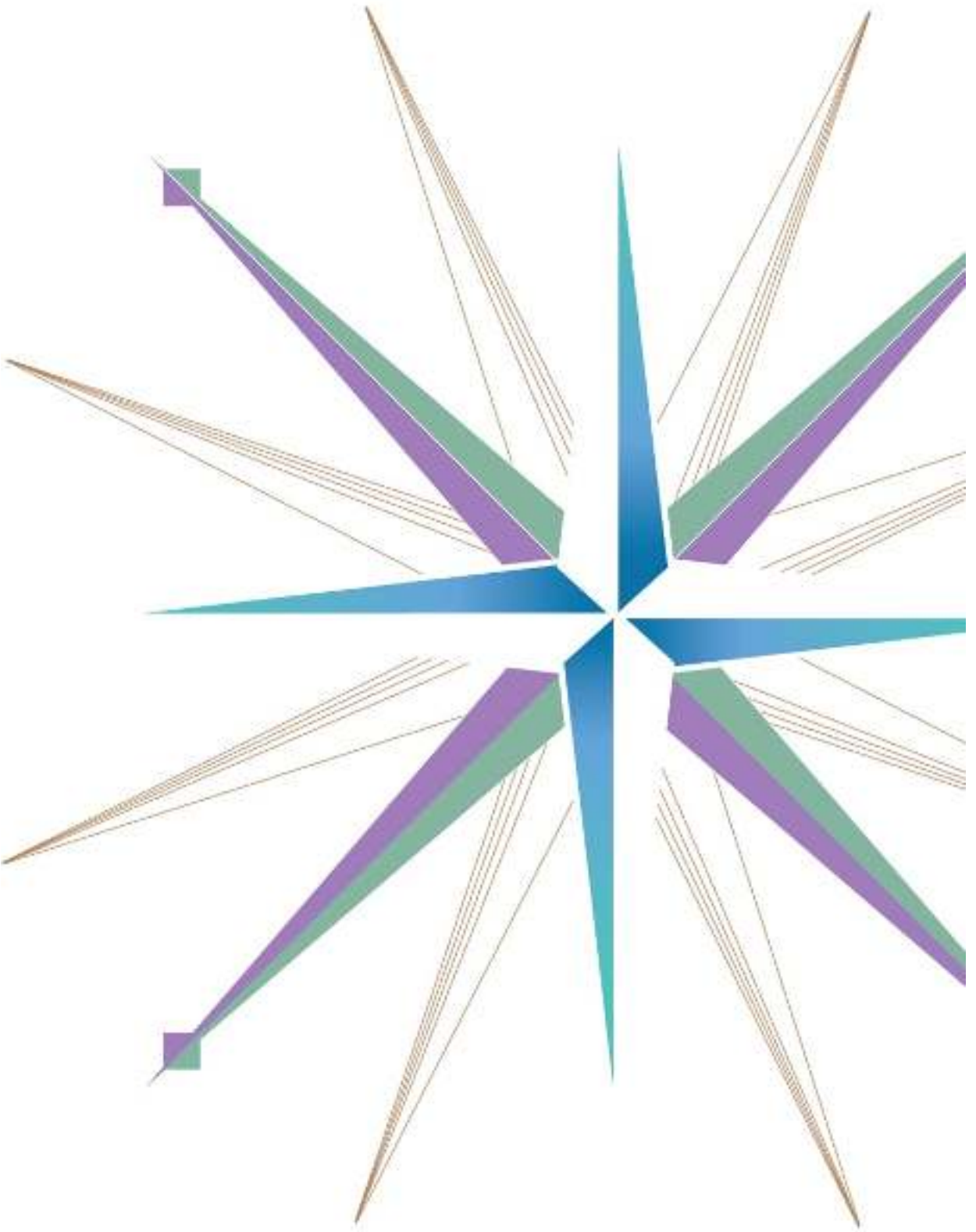
How to explain the magic of Fatehpur Sikri? How to explain the magic of an abandoned city? For as I am of cities, which can be seen as open worlds in a state of perpetual metamorphosis, I am even fonder of dead cities, where the imagination can run free. For the very reason that somewhere no longer exists, it can be transformed into the ideal city, the city of one's dreams. Like fictional characters, cities are born and develop. They undergo various cycles before dying and are eventually resurrected beneath our feet. While passing through Fatehpur Sikri, I discovered a tomb of overwhelming beauty. This wonderful confection of white marble, mother-of-pearl, and ebony wood had been made for Akbar's personal adviser and embodies the emperor's lifelong veneration of a man who had taught him wisdom. For a moment, history commingled with my wandering thoughts. The lost city is thus poetry, dream world, and a setting for our passions and meanderings, a kind of metaphor for our lives. While our fascination with lost cities derives largely from the way they mirror our own existence, there is sometimes another reason: they also attest to the folly of the world, to the violence of nature and the violence of mankind. Here, poetry and reverie play no part. What we feel is simply bewilderment at that which is beyond our control. Such is the case with cities that are destroyed while bustling with activity, entombed beneath the debris of war or swept away by a nuclear

blast, victims of destruction individual or collective, natural or historical. I cannot help wondering about the motivation of the busloads of tourists who pass through Pripyat, which was evacuated in haste following the Chernobyl nuclear disaster. Are they fascinated by the misfortune that can befall a place—unique like ourselves and also, like ourselves, capable of being wiped out in an instant? From what obscure depths does this empathy with disaster spring? Human beings are complex creatures. These cities that suffer a tragic fate have one thing in common: they all inevitably return to nature, giving rise to the poignant sight, whether at Pripyat or Agdam, Kantubek or Kadykchan, of vegetation forcing its way between stones, cracking asphalt, and smothering misshapen beams. Nature takes its revenge, showing how cities can be extinguished as suddenly as shooting stars.

Happily, most lost cities have known a gentler kind of existence, their histories unfolding over several millennia. Belying the inscription at Fatehpur Sikri, no sooner did mankind begin to settle one place than he raised his house, constructing places of exchange and creativity in a variety of forms—trading centers, medieval cities protected by ramparts, capitals of the arts during the Renaissance, industrial cities in the nineteenth century—settlements glorious or vulnerable, born of chance, of need for protection, of ambition, each one with its own history, images, and fate, which could be the departure of a king, the end of a civilization or era, or the failure of a project. Some cities have had a number of lives, one such being Bam, which was repeatedly rebuilt over the course of the centuries and, having been devastated by an earthquake, is now defying the desert all over again. In ancient times cities were the result of a drawn-out cycle of construction and destruction. This is perhaps why their history pervades the walls long after the city has been abandoned. “Alas, the shape of a city changes faster than the human heart,” lamented Baudelaire. For those antique settlements built with an eye on other, pre-existing cities, similarities abound, for example Rome’s multiple satellite cities scattered around the perimeter of the Mediterranean. And yet Mari, Leptis Magna, and Pompeii each have their own individual charms deriving from the patch of earth on which they are built and the luminosity of the skies above. Strolling across the paving stones of Djémila, at the heart of a landscape of mountains and ravines, how can the visitor not be bewitched by these stones that evoke a sense of the eternal at the heart of an Algeria that has been given a rough ride by history? I also experienced that magic moment when the past imposes itself on the space around us, in Yemen, when I was on the trail of Henri de Monfreid. One morning I visited Ma’rib, which lies on the edge of a desert so dry that it smells of dust. Of this city that was once an important halt on the Incense Road nothing remains but a heap of ruins watched over by goats. A little boy appeared from nowhere and taking me by the hand, led me to a dilapidated wall. There he showed me a stone bearing an inscription in Sabaeen. Suddenly these ruins took on a new dimension, assuming the colors and decoration of a time before the opening up of the maritime route brought about the demise of the land route. When a city disappears, a part of history dies with it. To rediscover its traces is to bring the past back to life. Our fascination with these lost cities perhaps stems from some ingrained detective instinct. Each birth is a surprise and each death an enigma, as demonstrated by the brief and frenzied adventure of Sanzhi and Wanli in Taiwan, which sprang from the minds of developers crazy about futuristic design; by Seseña in Spain, which died before it had had chance to live, thanks to the megalomania of one man; and by the somewhat surreal Jeoffrecourt, a mock city dumped in the middle of the Picardy plain as a location for urban guerilla warfare exercises and about whose birth and death it is impossible to be certain as it does not actually exist. Telling their story took me on an adventure. Discovering these places brought home to me that the demise of a city is just as momentous an event as its emergence, and even more importantly that a city is as much a mental space as a physical one: on the one hand it shapes our innermost beings; on the other we make it the

object of our fantasies.

~~When the torch of a Shi Cheng diver resurrects a stone lion submerged under the waters, when a little boy points out a Sabaean inscription, we are transported all of a sudden to a different time, one that is simultaneously beyond time. We are liberated from all ties and are moved to find in this secret beauty the echo of our unaccomplished lives.~~







EGYPT · 27°50'N, 30°50'E

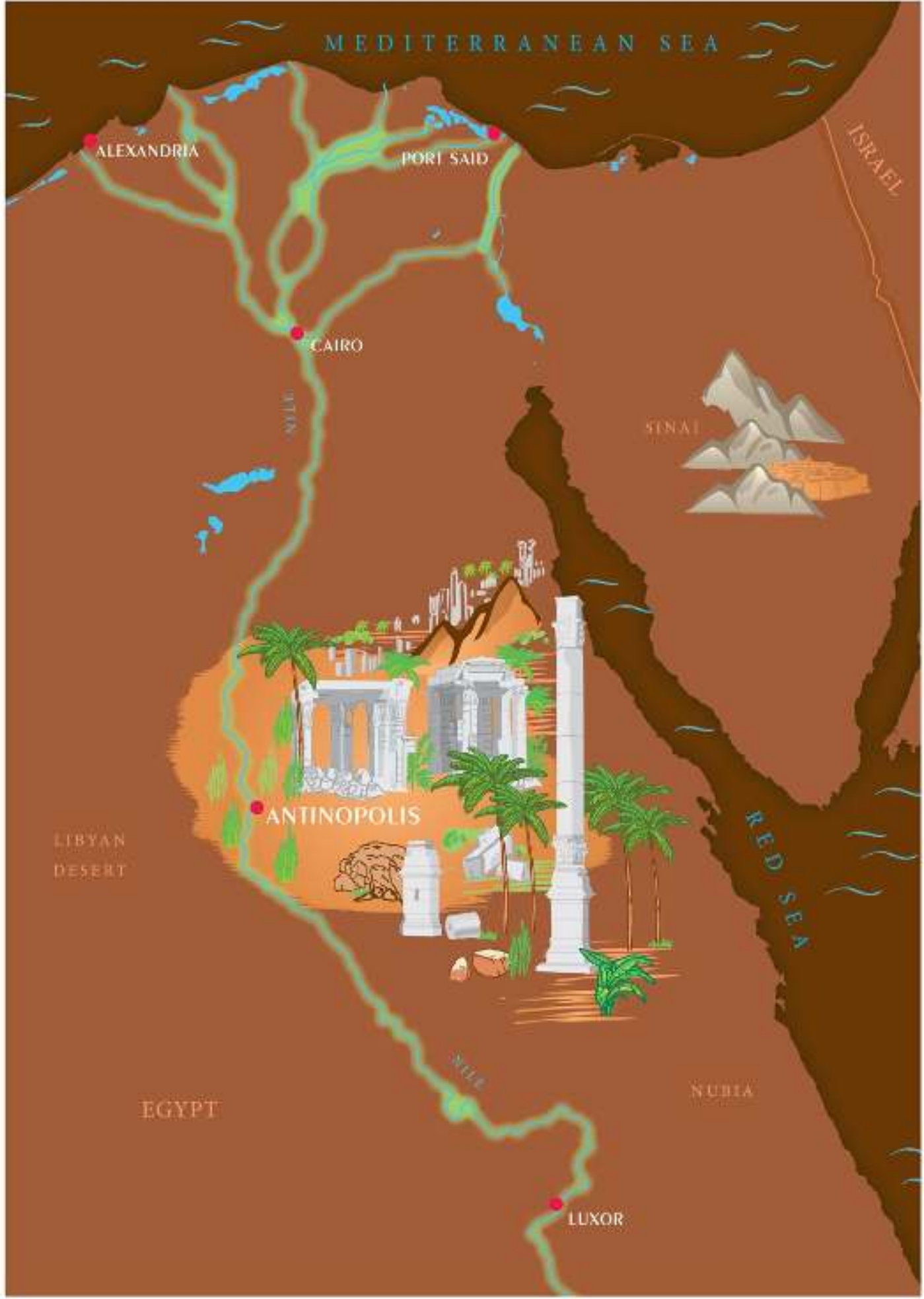
ANTINOË

IN MEMORIAM

“On the first day of the month of Hathor in the second year of the two hundred and twenty-sixth Olympiad,” writes Marguerite Yourcenar in her novel *Memoirs of Hadrian*, the beautiful Antinous, Emperor Hadrian’s beloved, drowned in the waters of the Nile. It is the autumn of A.D. 130 and the emperor is visiting the Roman province of Egypt. The day on which Antinous drowns is also the “anniversary of the death of Osiris, the god of the dying,” an occasion ritually celebrated with an outpouring of tears and lamentation. Was it an accident? Suicide? Tradition has it that the ephebe was sacrificed in order to preserve his royal lover from a dire prophecy. The drama unfolded some five hundred kilometers upstream from Alexandria, “not far from a semi-abandoned pharaonic temple.” Hadrian immediately decided to transform this sanctuary into a “place of pilgrimage for a new Egypt” in order to ensure that Antinous—assimilated with Osiris—would be venerated in the Greek manner “with games, dancing, and ritual offerings.” Yourcenar describes how Hadrian led his architects along the stony hills, explaining his plan for the construction of an outer wall forty-five stadia (more than seven kilometers) long, and marked out the position of the triumphal arch in the sand.

This is how the city of Antinoë, dedicated to Osiris-Antinous, the last of the Egyptian gods, revered throughout the Roman Empire until the advent of Christian civilization, sprang into life. Prospering on the tax on merchandise destined for Rome, the city remained the administrative center of Middle Egypt until its destruction by the Arabs in 619. Never to rise again, the once prosperous city shrank to the size of a modest village (the present-day El-Sheikh Ibada) on whose outskirts the almost intact triumphal arch and the tall portico of a theater could still be admired by the scholars on Napoleon’s 1799 expedition to Egypt.

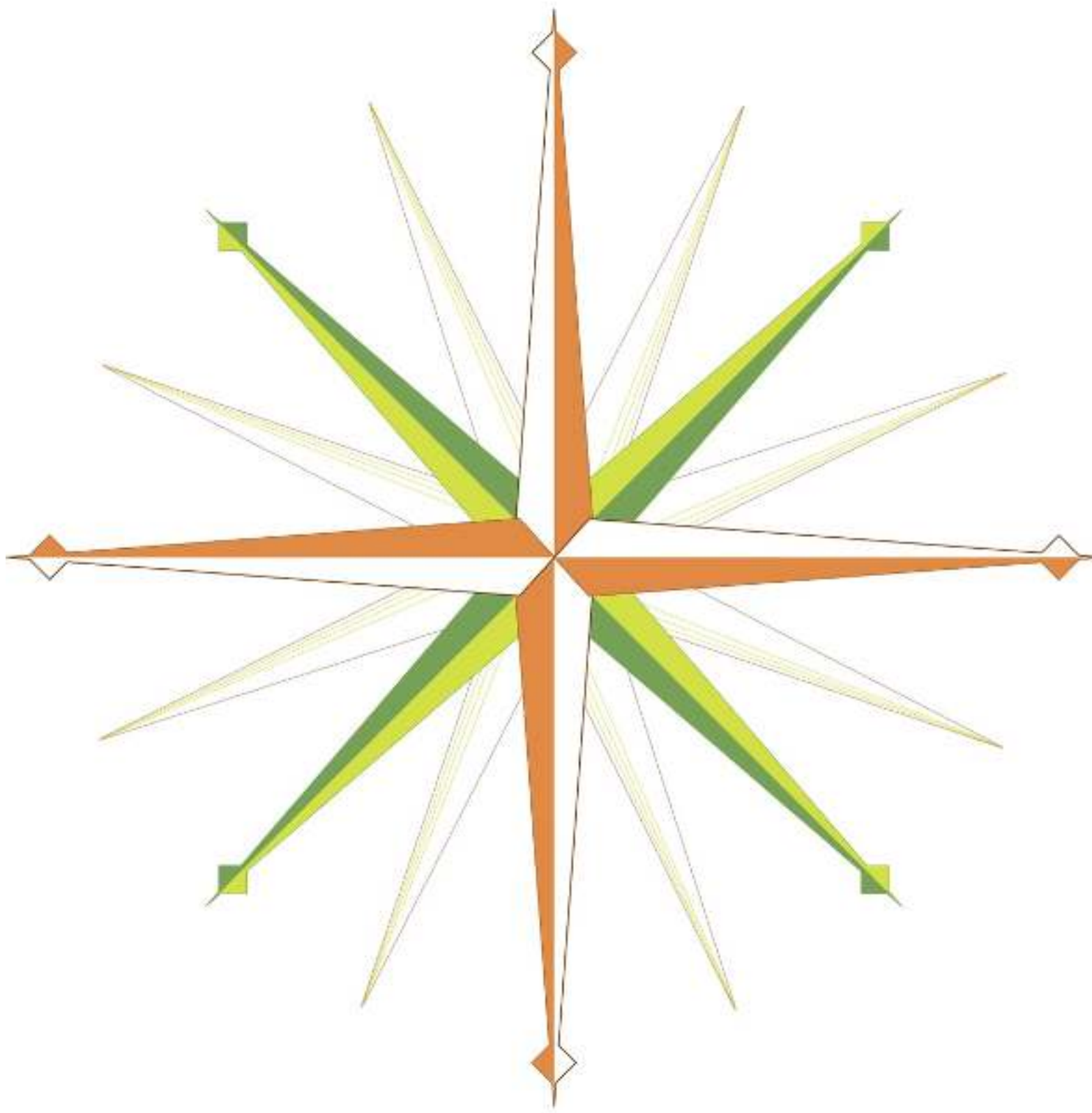
By the time the Dijonnais archaeologist Albert Gayet undertook an investigation of the site a century later, there was nothing left. The stones had been reduced to lime and employed in the construction of sugar factories or used to fertilize the fields. Gayet describes the remains of the city in his notebooks: “on the shores of the Nile and bordering the desert [...] straddling both plain and desert, [the city] describes a vast parallelogram whose traces can still be discerned, beneath the accumulation of sand stopped by the city walls, at the foot of the stony hills that hug it to the east. Between these hills and the ancient ramparts extends an arid zone a kilometer wide on average, giving no hint of the presence here of antique tombs.”



For almost twenty years, the archaeologist labored—with passion for his discoveries and bitterness at his chronic lack of resources—to uncover from the sand what he described as an Egyptian Pompeii. First of all there was the famous temple of Ramesses II, whose inscription designating Isis by the near-homonym “Henti-nou-an” provided, he believed, the key to Hadrian’s act.

This was followed by the excavation of the enormous, simultaneously Egyptian, Greco-Roman, and Christian necropolis surrounding the temple, from where he extracted a multitude of mummified corpses and a veritable treasure trove of costumes and fabrics dating from the Byzantine era. Gayet dreamed of opening a museum in Paris dedicated to the site. In the meantime, he exhibited his finds at the museum designed and opened by his friend Émile Guimet, thereby triggering a short-lived craze for all things Byzantine around 1900. More concerned, however, with presenting his finds in a lyrical manner than with scientific rigor, Gayet had a tendency to mix together different places and periods, and, to the great regret of the researchers who pored over the forty mummies and five thousand objects and textiles that now lie long forgotten in the stores of the Louvre, he failed to adequately document his discoveries. In 2003 a group of Italian archeologists resumed rigorous research at the site—now covered over again by sand, concealing all but a few temples (including that of Ramesses II) and sections of wall. Despite the disappearance of Gayet’s excavation notebooks, they are trying to restore Antinoë to the state it was in at the beginning of the twentieth century.

In 2012, by means of modern ground-penetrating radar and magnetometry, the researchers succeeded in precisely mapping the city without any digging. This led to the discovery of a long-buried ancient wharf. Unfortunately, their work was interrupted by the recent political disturbances. As things stand today, with the remains threatened by pillaging and systematic destruction in order to extend both the village and the fields, the future of this city born of tragedy remains highly uncertain.





TUNISIA · 36°51'N, 10°19'E

CARTHAGE

CARTHAGO DELENDA EST

“**C**arthage must be destroyed.” This famous phrase attributed to Cato the Elder encapsulates almost to the point of caricature the unshakeable desire of the Romans to crush their great rival. Scattered today around the modern city of Tunis, the remains of ancient Carthage give little indication of the power of a city that for centuries defied Rome and dominated the Mediterranean. The best way to gain a sense of its former glory is to read Flaubert. Having immersed himself in the ancient texts and spent time in Tunis acquiring a feel for the place, in his book *Salammbô* the writer tells of the revolt of the barbarian mercenaries employed by the Carthaginians during the First Punic War. In keeping with the fashion of the day, Flaubert paints a picture of a highly sensual Orient. If the work is novelistic in style, however, the facts on which it is based are very real and describe the bellicose destiny of the city that Strabo nicknamed the “ship at anchor.” This image seems extremely apt when one stops to consider the geography of Carthage, which was founded in 814 B.C. on a peninsula almost entirely surrounded by the sea on one side and a lake on the other and only connected to the continent of Africa by an isthmus. Almost inevitably, its history is intimately bound up with the water and in particular the Mediterranean Sea, which was the main focus of attention in the ancient world. According to the latest hypothesis, Carthage was founded by Phoenician colonists from Tyre, the Phoenicians being skillful navigators and prodigious traders. Before long, the newly established trading center grew so powerful on the back of maritime commerce that it outdid its mother city. From the sixth century B.C. onward, thanks to its monopoly on maritime relations with the Orient, it expanded continuously, reaching Tripolitania in one direction and the Atlantic on the other, forming alliances with the Etruscans and then the Romans. At its peak between the fifth and sixth centuries B.C., this city of almost four hundred thousand inhabitants dominated the sea and played a leading political, economic, and religious role in the ancient world.

This was not at all to the liking of Rome, whose initial relations with Carthage had nevertheless been peaceable, and thus the historic rivals became mortal enemies. From 264 B.C., the antagonism between the two powers was played out in the Punic Wars, the background to Hannibal’s brilliant strategy. After more than a century of steadily increasing tensions, the hostilities culminated in the siege of Carthage in 146 B.C. The city defended itself heroically for three years but in the end was completely destroyed by the Romans. Rebuilt by its new occupants, it remained a cultural and

religious center after the Roman Empire started to go into decline in the middle of the third century and until the seventh century was regarded as a promised land by Germanic and subsequent Byzantine and Arab invaders.

Dismembered in the ninth century, the ancient site now displays few signs of its former glory. The massive outline of the Cathedral of St. Louis, built on the site where Louis IX of France was presumed to have died during the Eighth Crusade, seems somewhat out of place among the ruined walls shaded by cypresses. As for the view of the sea hemmed by mountains, it is spoiled by the inescapable presence of modern Tunis. To rediscover the ancient Phoenician trading city, a better course of action would be to lose oneself in old maps—or else to reread Flaubert.





ALGERIA · 36°18'N, 5°44'E

DJÉMILA

A ROMAN BEAUTY

For Albert Camus, Djémila is the perfect metaphor for the indissolubility of death and the splendor of the world. In *Noces* (Nuptials), he sees this city of the ancient kingdom of Numidia as a “great city thrown out by the lugubrious and solemn stones at the mountains, the sky, and the silence.” The city, claims the writer, is inhabited by the wind alone, which “pounces fitfully on the remains of the houses on the immense forum that extends from the triumphal arch to the temple.” The artist’s sense is clear: the precipitous landscape of the southern Atlas Mountains lends the grandiose ruins a tragic air, making the site one of the most enthralling places in the entire region.

The triumphal arch described by Camus was more or less all that was visible of the ancient city when the Duke of Orléans stopped off there in 1839, before Djémila had been excavated. Filled with admiration, the prince wanted to have the monument transported back to Paris. Although this project was abandoned, for reasons unknown, it led to an initial exploration of the ruins. A century passed, however, before proper excavations, facilitated by the construction of a long, winding road providing access to the site, were undertaken. These digs enabled archaeologists to finally uncover the history of Djémila. This history is doubly fascinating, first because of its longevity. Founded in around A.D. 90, this city, which originally bore the Berber name of Cuicul and which testifies to the might of the Severan dynasty of the second century A.D., was in turns Roman, Christian, Vandal, and Byzantine. And second because it is situated on a narrow plateau bordered by ravines, at the intersection of the roads from Sétif to Constantine and from the sea to Aurès, and therefore offers a rare example of the adaptation of Roman town planning to a mountainous environment. Strolling today among the parched vegetation and paved streets delineated by colonnades, the story of the city’s development can be read like an open book: to the north, the first city, ramparted against belligerent local tribes and centered on a still impeccably paved forum where the large temple of the capitol rubs shoulders with the curia and the basilica; next, outside the original walls, a second forum, luxurious thermal baths, and, built into the slopes of a hill, a three-thousand-seat theater. In the third century the city numbered some ten thousand inhabitants, who can be imagined going about their business, perambulating from the *domus* to the temples and the two covered markets, whose counters are still in place. In the fourth century a final, Christian, district was added, with two churches and, most conspicuously today, a remarkably well-preserved circular baptistery decorated with mosaics.

What brought about Cuicul’s downfall remains a mystery. Broken statues, evidence of a fire, and

the absence of precious metals among the ruins suggest the city may have been pillaged. However, the seventh century Cuicul must still have been an impressive sight, for the newly arrived Muslim renamed it Djamila, the “fair,” and respectfully abstained from building there. Algerian historians complain that our own era has fewer scruples. They are currently trying to protect Djémila from unforeseen peril: a major music festival held each year among the ruins.

MEDITERRANEAN
SEA

JAZA
NATIONAL PARK

TRAGUEN
DAM

LIBYAN
DESERT

DJÉMILA

SÉTIF





NAMIBIA · 26°41′S, 15°14′E

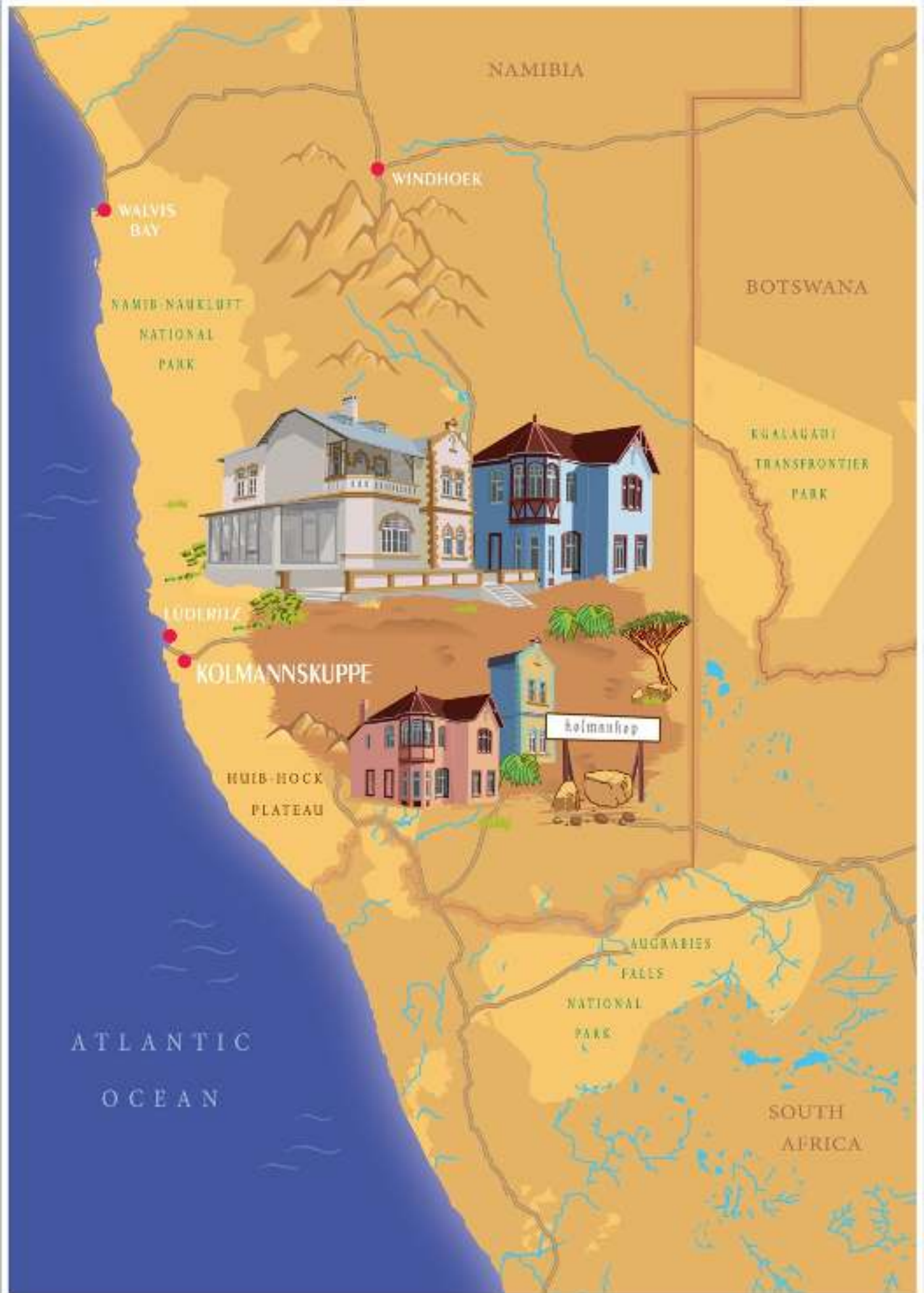
KOLMANNSKUPPE

ENTOMBED IN SAND

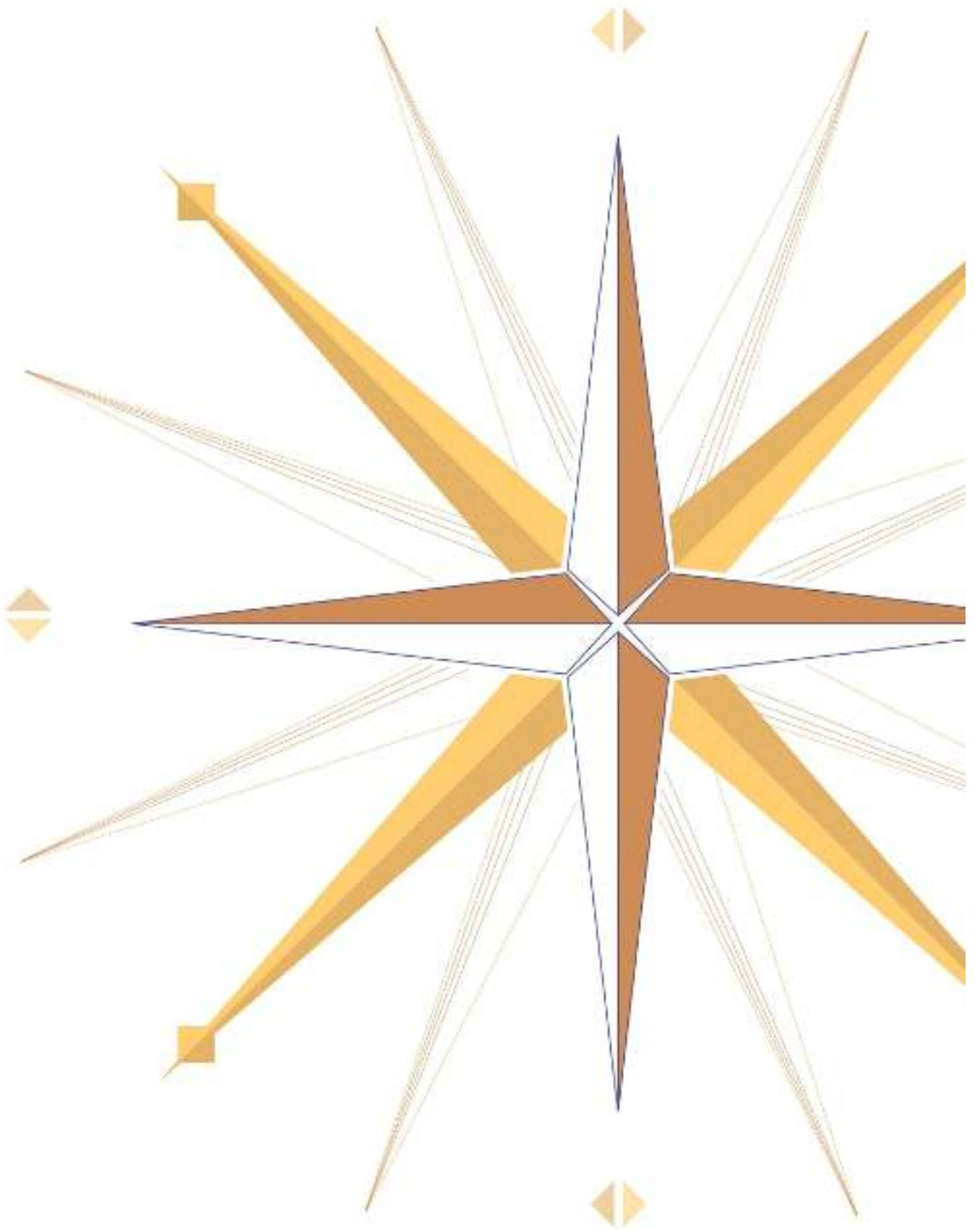
Be warned: do not venture into this city if you are afraid of ghosts. Terrified travelers claim to have encountered the spirits of the dead flitting through its abandoned houses, which disappear a little deeper under the sand each day. Located a few kilometers from the port of Lüderitz, the only inhabited city within a 130-kilometer radius, Kolmannskuppe is *the* place to see in the Namib Desert. However, would-be visitors have to apply for the appropriate permit, which is issued on an individual basis. Without this magic key, there is no hope of entering the 26,000-square-kilometer desert zone, which is bordered by the Atlantic Ocean and extends from Lüderitz in southwestern Namibia to Oranjemund, the border of South Africa, for it is out of bounds to the general public. The reason for this is purely economic: the ground contains diamond deposits, and the authorities therefore choose to keep the area under close control. Indeed the city of Kolmannskuppe (Kolmanskop in Afrikaans) would not have existed but for the diamonds that made it prosperous—and were responsible for its decline.

In 1908, when what is now Namibia was the German protectorate of South-West Africa, a black worker employed on the construction of the railroad between Keetmanshoop and Lüderitz casually picked up a stone that turned out to be a diamond. As soon as the news got out, people flocked to the place. Amid the frenzy, a new town popped out of the ground like a mushroom. Within the space of a few years it had become one of the most prosperous in Africa. Connected to Lüderitz by a tramway, Kolmannskuppe had its own casino, theater, schools, swimming pool, businesses, and a department store selling all the latest goods from Berlin. It even had a hospital that was one of the first on the continent to be equipped with an X-ray machine! The most select merchandise was imported from Germany and France, and water, which was more expensive in Namibia than beer, was shipped in at great cost. It should be remembered that money was no problem, and it is even said that the streets were swept every day in order to clear them of the sand that obstinately returned on the wind. However, all the commodities and comforts of this colonialist paradise, this “little Germany,” were reserved for the engineers and managers of the German company to whom exclusive rights of diamond extraction had been granted. The black workers who did the toughest jobs were housed with their families on a separate site or, if single, accommodated in dormitories. The First World War, which saw the administration of South-West Africa pass to South Africa under a League of Nations mandate, made no impact on the prosperity of Kolmannskuppe. At its peak in the 1920s, the town boasted more than one thousand inhabitants, almost three hundred of them European. During the following decade

times were less good: adversely affected by the discovery of new deposits in the Oranjemund region and an ensuing fall in price, the former “pearl of the desert” declined as its diamond seams dried up. The end was close. Gradually the population drifted away, although it was not until 1956, the year the hospital closed for good, that the last remaining residents packed their bags and left.



Once deserted, the township sank into oblivion until 1990, when the Namibian government and the De Beers company, partners in the exploitation of the prohibited zone, decided to turn it into a tourist site. The idea was a good one: the buildings emerging from the dunes, the wooden façades faded by the sun, and the interiors invaded by the sands transformed the place into one of southern Namibia's major attractions. Guides were trained to tell visitors about the history of the town and a small museum was established in the former casino, where precious stones could also be bought as souvenirs. This return of life to Kolmannskuppe in no way detracts from the strangeness of the place, however. A number of houses have been restored and refurnished in the simultaneously elegant and functional style of the Wilhelminian era, giving the impression they might have been abandoned yesterday. Others have been preserved exactly as their occupants left them, with wallpaper and pictures still clinging to the walls, with baths and kitchens still in place, with counters still visible and the stores and machinery in the workshops—only with everything having been exposed to the ravages of time and sand. Everything here is as if locked into an eternal process of gradual decay, and it is difficult not to succumb to the ambiguous charms of this aesthetic of chaos.



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