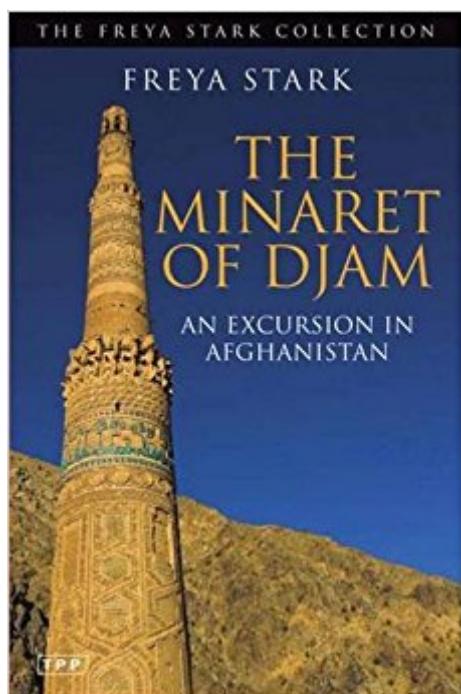


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# The Minaret Of Djam: An Excursion In Afghanistan (Tauris Parke Paperbacks)



## Synopsis

Freya Stark traveled the difficult and often dangerous journey from Kabul to Kandahar and Herat in search of one of Afghanistan's most celebrated treasures, the Minaret of Djam. This magnificent symbol of the powerful Ghurid Empire that once stretched from Iran to India lies in the heart of central Afghanistan's wild Ghor Province. Surrounded by over 6,000 foot high mountains and by the remains of what many believe to have been the lost city of Turquoise Mountain--one of the greatest cities of the Middle Ages--Djam is, even today, one of the most inaccessible and remote places in Afghanistan. When Freya Stark traveled there, few people in the world had ever laid eyes on it or managed to reach the desolate valley in which it lies.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

“The Minaret of Djam is filled with history and introspection but also with people | But the heart of the book lies in Kabul, where Stark looks out over the garden of the British Embassy.

-- The New Yorker\* Praise for Freya Stark: \*One of the finest travel writers of our century.\* -- The New Yorker\* Her books make Stark a remarkable figure under any circumstances. Having been a woman whose roamings through Middle Eastern deserts and mountains put her in the top ranks of the fabled Royal Geographical Society makes her more so.\* -- Richard Bernstein, The New York Times\*...it is beautiful writing that encapsulates not only the history, but the feel, the smell, the sensation and sheer wonder of what she discovers... enriching and enjoyable.\* --London Turkish Gazette\* Freya Stark has rightfully earned a place

among the greatest travel writers of the 20th century. I.B.Tauris is releasing [A Winter in Arabia] alongside seven other works, as The Freya Stark Collection. A timely reminder of an extraordinary woman and a fine writer.\* -- Sunday Telegraph\*It's hard to think of a writer in the travel game who most closely demonstrates the merits of Flaubert's three rules for good writing: clarity, clarity and finally clarity. Re-reading her now, her restrained powers of description shine as brightly as they ever did, and they will continue to shine until the next Ice Age... Her books are more relevant than ever. Besides sheer enjoyment, one should read her for a fresh perspective on the intractable issues dogging Christian-Muslim relations. She was able to see both sides and what she found was similarity, not difference. The greatest woman traveller of the 20th century? I think so.\* --The Times\*This is the stuff that modern adventurers dreams are made of\* --A Hazel Plush, Wanderlust\*Freya Stark was perhaps the greatest, most intrepid travel writer of them all. In the 1960s she travelled through Afghanistan -- not too many years before the Soviets, the Taliban or the current conflict -- but her experiences sound almost impossible to recapture\* --A CNN Traveller\*She was a vivid describer of scenes and landscapes. More, she was a connoisseur of people: she knew how to draw them out and listened closely when they spoke\* -- Claudia Roth Pierpont, The New Yorker

Freya Stark (1893-1993), called \*the poet of travel\*, was the doyenne of Middle East travel writers and one of the most courageous and adventurous female explorers in history. She toured extensively through Syria, Palestine, Lebanon, Iran, Iraq and Southern Arabia, where she became the first western woman to travel through the Hadhramaut. Usually solo, she ventured to places few Europeans had ever been. Her travels earned her the title of Dame and huge public acclaim and her many, now classic, books include Winter in Arabia, Travels in the Near East, Ionia, The Southern Gates of Arabia, Alexander's Path, Dust in the Lion's Paw, East is West and Valleys of the Assassins.

The Southern Gates of Arabia: A Journey in the Hadhramaut (Modern Library Paperbacks) was the first of Freya Stark's books that I've read. It concerned her solo journey in the Hadraumaut (southern Yemen) in the 1930s. The Hadraumaut is still an obscure, and rarely visited place, and was once, when Stark's journey took place, the home of the Bin Laden family. But even they left! Now, its remoteness, and difficulty of access, are the essential ingredients that make it a convenient lair from which Al Qaeda can operate. Of course, the Americans are still in Afghanistan, which used to be their prime base. And that country is the subject of this delightful book. Hit the "fast forward"

button a bit from the '30s; the year was 1968, and Ms. Stark, indomitable and curious as always, at the age of 75, decides to journey to the Minaret of Djam, in the very center of the country. As with the stock market and love, timing is everything. In a decade, these casual wanderings would end, as the country would be consumed by war. But even in 1968 such a journey presented a formidable challenge, but being killed by the natives was generally not one of them. Serendipity helped, along with her connections at the British Embassy, and she and a friend were able to ride in a Land Rover, in the company of a couple who were knowledgeable of the logistical requirements, and delightful hosts. Occasionally they stayed in what passed for hotels along the route, but they often camped. And therein lay the inspirational part: Stark, at 75, taking a bath in a cold mountain stream, and not even mentioning it was cold. There is absolutely no "whining" in this book; mainly it is only the enthusiasm of an inveterate traveler seeking out what is around the next bend. The principal route between Heart and Kabul is the southern one, via Khandahar, on a paved road, built, half and half, by the Russians and the Americans. A more difficult, and less traveled road, is the northern one, via Mazar-i-Sharif. The third one, almost never attempted, is right through the middle, and it is the one Stark took. There were able to stay at Bamian, along the way, which WAS the site of the largest Buddhist statues in the world, until the Taliban blew them up. Stark has a keen eye, and envisioned running into Chaucer along the way, a metaphor for people living in the Middle Ages. She would try to identify the anomaly, perhaps a metal jerry can, that would not have fit in the picture several hundred years before. Stark would have been a wonderful travel companion, quite erudite, and fluent in Farsi and Arabic. She knew the history of Central Asia, and the terminal decline that occurred after the armies of Genghis Khan demolished the previous civilizations. Indeed, the Minaret of Djam, of which so very little is actually known, stood as a mute exclamation mark to that terminal decline. She packed much insightful observations into this short book. Consider: "Even raids and small wars in the long desert summers are a proof and constant reminder of the general fluidity of ownership, and are less indulged in from necessity, I have often thought, than from an unconscious desire to mitigate boredom, which is possibly the basic origin of war." Or, as a brief forerunner to arguments on the necessity of "nation building": "What do you do for security?" an acquaintance had asked in Kabul: 'We give sweets to the children.'" And she is scathing towards inept, unprepared fellow travelers: "No one would think it anything but silly to climb the Matterhorn with a frayed rope or useless shoes; but these young adventurers who have not lifted a finger in study or preparation think it nothing to live off people poorer than themselves..." I really didn't think the numerous black and white photos added to the book. Many were fuzzy, and poorly composed. I would highly recommend the works of Roland and Sabrina Michaud, for stunning color photographs

taken during the same period, particularly Afghanistan, Memoire de l'Afghanistan (French Edition) and Caravans to Tartary. Kudos to the publisher, Tauris Parke, who are in the process of re-issuing all of Stark's work, with the next one slated to be The Lycian Shore (John Murray Travel Classics) which should undercut the current outrageous prices currently being asked for an older edition. Finally, on a personal note, I travelled in Afghanistan only three years after Stark's trip. At least I knew I was "unprepared," and therefore took the road most travelled, via Khandahar, now the stronghold of the Taliban. If I had only known that Afghanistan would become "impassable," probably for the rest of my life, I would have lingered longer than the 11 days. So, from the safety of my "armchair," it was a pleasure to travel again, vicariously, along with Ms. Stark, with visions of future mountain streams, in safer climes. A solid 5-stars.

Already six years passed from the day I visited the Minaret of Djam (Afghans call it "Minar-e Jam"). And since then I couldn't find nothing what may be a symbol of Western Afghanistan. As the part of the former Persian Empire the city of Herat was famous as city of poets. And Minaret of Djam is the symbol of Ghorids Dynasty. Today is too dangerous to visit Minaret. This book for many of you can be the only possibility to touch more than 800 years history. And if you have a friend, who had served in Western Afghanistan, this book might be the best gift.

This is an interesting read; but there are not very many pictures. It is actually quite a dated book, which I didn't realise. It's written in a 'flowery' style, and is obviously more of a travel journal, other than a factual read. A lot of the book deals with Afghanistan in general, with just one or two chapters about the minaret - but I bought it as there is little else available about the structure.

I am a fan of Freya Stark's writing and am trying to read her entire collection of writings. I found this to be a fascinating description of her journey to see this famous minaret in Afghanistan. A good read.

Freya Stark, the unlikely traveler, takes us on a casual journal, an anecdote, nothing more. But it preserves an Afghanistan otherwise condemned by its own history. A knot in the tapestry of too many empires, victim of its own past projected onto the present, Afghanistan, except for sketches like these, has vanished, and only remains in the personal stories of isolated members of its populace, who for better or worse have managed to survive.

She is one of the top explorers/writers. Her travels are never dull, and full of information. I have all of her books.

This book by Freya Stark is written once again in the style that is so much her own with vivid depictions à€œ rather paintings à€œ of the scenery around her. With a minimum of words she manages to draw a full scale picture. This time she takes on a trip through the very heart of Afghanistan in search of the Minaret of Djam, roughly halfway between Kabul and Herat. It seems as if she travelled in a time beyond time, most probably before the Soviet invasion of 1979. She writes in a most pleasant way, taking the reader by the hand to uncover the secrets of the hidden landscapes and remote populations. She was quite an adventurous lady whom I admire greatly, especially when you realize that she travelled in times when roads were still very primitive and when definitively no lady would venture on her own into those remote corners of the world although I suppose that before the Soviet invasion the British were still seen as frequent travelers over there. Strangely enough, Afghanistan was still a pleasant place to be. In any case, this is an adventure by itself for few people have ever seen this minaret and still lesser have crossed the area. She manages to make it through the summer heat, in a Land Rover that serves as sleeping quarters under most primitive conditions, but she always remains optimistic and is so blessed with that British phlegm that makes it all bearable and possible. An admirable woman on an admirable journey, to say the least. But in the end, it is all about the Minaret of Djam, the second tallest brick minaret in the world. Set in the remoteness of the Afghan slopes between the two highest peaks of the Safed Kuh, 3525 and 3416 meter. The minaret stands alone dressed in brick-color against the perfect blue sky which I now can imagine in the light of my travels through Uzbekistan where similar intricate stone patterns have also been used. It belongs to the fertile years of Islamic art from the 11th and 12th century and must be quite a sight. I am surprised though that she didn't climb the one hundred and eighty steps of the double staircase to the top. I would à€œ I think. She mentions a nearby inscription by Sultan Ghiyath al-Dunya, fifth sultan of the Ghurid dynasty, who ruled from 1163 till 1203, and that is all we know of its history. After finishing this most pleasant and interesting book, I needed to investigate further on this Ghurid Dynasty, totally unknown to me. It turns out that it was very short lived, existing for just over sixty years although they had ruled an empire stretching from eastern Persia all the way to northern India. They even conquered Bamyan and Balkh as well as territories beyond the Oxus River. Their capital city was Firuzbuh, i.e. where this Minaret is still standing. I find it exciting to learn that they lost territories to the Khwarizm, of which I heard for the first time on my recent trip to Uzbekistan!

Here too, it was once again Genghis Khan who finally destroyed the cities and probably killed the entire population. Amazingly the Minaret of Djam has survived! In order to make this story complete, I would encourage everybody to read the article ["Minaret and Archaeological Remains of Jam"](#) in which UNESCO puts the minaret on the list of World Heritage in Danger.

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