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PHOTOGRAPHED BY TOM SCHUTYSER

IT WAS A HOT NIGHT IN THE NILE DELTA IN 1326. WHEN THE INVETERATE TRAVELER IBN BATTUTA CLIMBED WEARILY TO THE BREEZY ROOF OF HIS LODGING, he was pleasantly surprised to find set out for him "a straw mattress and a leather mat, vessels for ritual ablutions, a jar of water, and a drinking cup." For the 14th century, these were four-star accommodations.

Without such places to rest in safety and relative comfort, Ibn Battuta's famous 28-year journey across Africa and Asia might never have taken place. Indeed, it was not until the Islamic era, beginning in the seventh century CE, that long-distance travel became a matter of at least as much routine as risk. Essential to this change was the spread of systems of traveler's lodgings, from Spain to China, which opened the world to innumerable merchants, pilgrims and others who, like Ibn Battuta, were driven by sheer curiosity.

Today, the evocative ruins of sturdy, walled roadside caravanserais still dot the landscape, from the deserts of North Africa to the highlands of Iran and even as far east as the humid lowlands of Bangladesh. Other lodging compounds, known as *khans* and *funduqs*, can still be found crammed into the old quarters of cities in the Middle East and Central Asia, most now dilapidated and variously used as cheap housing, parking lots or commercial storage. For these buildings, official protection from decay or demolition is rare, but, despite this, a few have been restored. No one knows for sure how many remain.

SPINE OF THE SILK ROADS



On a plain now pockmarked by archeological looters, the walled city of Resafa, Syria welcomed centuries of merchants throughout the early Islamic era, before it was eventually abandoned in the 13th century after the Mongol armies swept through. At the center of the prosperous, wool-producing city, an early caravanserai hosted traders from Palmyra and Damascus to the south; Turkey to the north; Persia, Central Asia and India to the east; and the Mediterranean coast to the west.

"They don't have the religious significance of a mosque, or the political importance of a palace, so they don't merit preservation in the same way," says Olivia Constable of the University of Notre Dame, who is one of the few scholars to delve deeply into the historical economy and architecture of the caravanserais and khans.

The buildings were more than just early roadside hotels, she explains. As their name suggests, caravanserais accommodated whole caravans en route, while khans were substantial compounds built in towns alongside markets (*souqs*). *Funduqs* (the word still often used today for "hotel" in Arabic) tended to be more like boardinghouses, also often built near markets. All three were, to varying degrees across continents and centuries, vibrant centers where peoples, religions and ethnicities mingled. In particular, caravanserais



The largest khan in today's best-preserved city of khans—Aleppo, Syria—is the Khan al-Jumruk (Customs Khan), which was built in the late 16th century as a typical, two-story plaza of shops and consulates below merchant residences. At its center, the small, domed mosque still stands.

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were probably more like airports today, resembling small towns in themselves, with places to sleep, eat, shop, pray, meet and mingle while livestock rested, awaiting the next stage of the journey. Here you might make an unexpected profit on a load of exotic goods, trade rumors of bandits or tax collectors, or just savor tea with your own countrymen in a distant land.

By the 19th century, steamships and trains began to render caravanserais and khans obsolete. But for more than a millennium, they were essential to the vibrancy, prosperity and cosmopolitan character of the medieval world, the vertebrae that formed the spine of the storied Silk Roads.

"At each of these stations between



Cairo and Gaza," Ibn Battuta noted, "travelers alight, and outside each khan is a public watering hole and a shop where he may buy what he requires for himself and his beast."

Less well known is the fact that the khans were also the centers of trade in cities. During the 15th century, there were more than 300 khans in Cairo alone. And in mercantile hubs like Alexandria in Egypt and Aleppo in Syria, a stranger could

Like hotel meeting rooms today, spaces for conversation and negotiation, such as this one on the Khan al-Jumruk's second floor, were essential to a khan's commercial success.

Most khans and caravanserais were entered through a single gate, below, made tall and wide enough for loaded camels to pass. Once through this gate into the Khan al-Tamathili, near the port in Tripoli, Lebanon, travelers found some 74 rooms like this vaulted one, lower, for storage, stabling and sleeping.



usually find one staffed and run by people from his own land, or even from his own city. Built in what might be called an early international style, most caravanserais and khans were remarkably similar in appearance and design, whether you were in Morocco or India. That generic look was probably no less comforting to tired travelers then than a Holiday Inn logo is today.

Visitors would approach plain high walls and enter a rectangular courtyard through a single gate, tall and wide enough to allow loaded camels to pass through. Just inside the gate, a scribe might jot down your name, your hometown, the nature of your goods and the number of your livestock. Many compounds had second stories to lodge the human visitors, leaving the ground floor to house goods and animals. Good ventilation, running water, clean latrines and private rooms were among the amenities guests could expect from a good caravanserai or khan. This simple and efficient design proved both durable and adaptable over the centuries, and it was itself a remarkable melding of East and West.

In the Mesopotamian epic of Gilgamesh, composed in the third millennium BCE, the hero makes a journey to obtain the elixir of immortality. Along the way, he finds rest at an inn: It's the first known written reference to a lodging-place for travelers. But the true roots of the caravanserai, as part of an organized system

of trade, date to the fifth century BCE, when the Persian Empire built the 2500-kilometer road from Sardis to Susa. It necessarily included, at regular intervals along its length, stables with feed for horses, camels, donkeys and other beasts of burden, as well as housing for the caravaneers who guided them. The effort required immense organization in a vast land filled with mountains, deserts and bandits. "Royal stations exist along its whole length, and excellent caravanserais ... free from danger," wrote an impressed Herodotus.

In the later Greek-speaking Mediterranean world, inns called *pandocheions*—"accepting all comers"—were widespread. (It was at a *pandocheion* that the Good Samaritan mentioned in the Christian New Testament left the traveler who had fallen among thieves.) *Pandocheions* were a motley lot, sometimes little more than ramshackle taverns, and often considered unsavory places.

In the Byzantine centuries that followed, Christians began to make pilgrimages throughout that empire, and the quality and reputation of *pandocheions* gradually improved. Some of the inns that catered to pilgrims did so for free. Beginning in the seventh century, Islam picked up both this tradition and the word: the Arabic *funduq* has its roots in *pandocheion*, and the Umayyad caliph Umar ibn Abd al-'Aziz in 719 instructed the governor of Samarkand to build caravanserais throughout his lands and provide travelers with free room and board for up to two days and two nights. Such organization and patronage not only facilitated the flow of trade, but also helped rulers collect taxes on it and keep an eye on strangers as well.

In their architecture, these medieval caravanserais drew variously on the designs of square Roman forts, Persian palaces and





Left: One of the only khans not built for commerce, Tripoli's Khan al-Saboun (Soap Khan) was constructed in the early 17th century as a barracks, but it was soon adapted as a center for the city's soap industry, which is today beginning to reclaim its legacy.

Right: Where once horses, camels and mules might have been tethered, a courtyard in Aleppo's 17th-century Ottoman Khan al-Wazir (Vizier's Khan) reflects the traditional design.

Opposite: Once specializing in the product its name suggests, Aleppo's Khan al-Zeit (Olive Oil Khan) has a fountain at its center.

use them, rent a nearby shop and stay for the short or the long term," says Katia Cytryn-Silverman, an archeologist at Hebrew University who has studied khans. "And they were often in the heart of the city."

One of the oldest and best preserved of the ancient urban khans lies at the center of abandoned Resafa in central Syria. Today, it is hard to imagine that this desolate desert spot was once an eastern anchor of the Roman Empire, and that its tumbledown white stone walls once dazzled in the sun, built on an economy based largely on a prized local wool. During the Byzantine era, pilgrims visited the nearby tomb of St. Sergius and the cathedral built to commemorate him. The khan may date to the sixth century, but there are no written records.

Later, the city became a favored one under the Umayyad Dynasty and the khan became the city's economic center. But in the 13th century, the Mongols destroyed Resafa on their westward march, and it was never rebuilt. Tourists now wander past the unornamented khan, half-buried in its own rubble, on their way to see the more impressive remains of the basilica. Yet this low-slung caravanserai, on what was Resafa's main street, still exudes a solid and pragmatic air, as if loaded camels might yet emerge from the arched gate and pace down the road carrying bales of fine wool to Constantinople or Damascus.

Keeping caravanserais from deterioration—and keeping the ewers filled, the straw mattresses fresh and the feed-boxes replenished—required organization and money. Rulers, charitable foundations, and religious and merchant groups all ran

DESIGNS OF CARAVANSERAI AND KHANS DREW ON MOSQUES AND VILLAS, FORTS AND PALACES TO CREATE A PRAGMATIC AND NEARLY UNIVERSAL DESIGN THEME.

caravanserais, khans, funduqs and other varieties of lodgings. Constable has found legal records in the Middle East that show that caravanserai managers were explicitly expected to take good care of the building and ensure clean latrines, access to water and security.

When that societal support crumbled with the coming of industrialized travel in the 19th century, the khans and caravanserais became relics. In Cairo, most have been demolished. In the cities of the Levant, however, particularly Lebanon and Syria, a number survive and, in a few, a handful of modern merchants keep the buildings and the institution alive.

In the old Phoenician port of Tripoli, in today's Lebanon, Mohammad Amir Hassoun proudly works out of a corner office in a 600-year-old khan not far from the city's high citadel. Long a center of trade and later of learning—once boasting a library with 10,000 books—Tripoli derived much of its wealth from olive oil and soap. For generations, Hassoun's family traded in traditional soaps, but in the early 20th century, factory-made soaps drove his grandfather and others out of the business and, with their departure, the city's Khan Al-Saboun (Soap Khan) went into decline. Hassoun grew up knowing nothing of soap-making; he sold gold jewelry. But after his shop was robbed one night in 1985, his great-uncle encouraged him to restart the family business. He now owns several shops, a small factory and fields where he grows herbs and aromatics. Now he says he's able to make a decent living while maintaining a family tradition and

making a local, organic and sustainable product. "Villagers can stay on their land, and we even feed the pits from the apricots we use to their animals," he says.

Although Hassoun shares ownership of the khan with other families, it is still a ramshackle affair, receiving neither government help nor charitable donations. Water drips from the roof onto rubble scattered on the second-floor arcade. But Hassoun's success has drawn other merchants, who now cluster in shops along the first floor—part *petite renaissance* and part backward glimpse to the time when khans were "a vital part of the urban fabric," says Constable.



One of few khans to be restored in Lebanon, Tripoli's Khan al-Khayyat (Tailors' Khan) is also an unusual example of a khan that may have been built not around a courtyard, but by roofing over a much older street.

Central Asian family houses to produce their pragmatic, universal design theme. Local masons could use local materials—mud brick, fired brick or stone—to create a structure, open to the sky but protected by high walls, that looked similar whether it was near the Mediterranean coast or the Hindu Kush.

By the ninth and 10th centuries, caravanserais dotted the hills of Muslim Spain, the deserts of Iran and the mountainous borders of China. At times, they inspired poets, including Omar Khayyam, who in the late 11th century used the caravanserai as a metaphor for the transience of life:

Think, in this batter'd Caravanserai
Whose Portals are alternate Night and Day,
How Sultan after Sultan with his Pomp
Abode his destined Hour, and went his way

In urban settings, the walls of the khans also ensured protection and increased privacy as well. Some khans were simple compounds; others were elaborate, nearly palatial, establishments, with intricately carved columns and marble courtyards. "Merchants could

On the other side of the Lebanon and Anti-Lebanon mountains, east from the Mediterranean, the Syrian city of Aleppo boasts dozens of khans amid the twisting and narrow alleys that make up the city's famously labyrinthine suq.



ways khans adapt to their times. On the second floor, a cloth merchant named Ali Khour walks from his small curtain shop down the hall to a corner room with high ceilings. Here, he says, visiting merchants of old spent their evenings talking, drinking sweet tea



the Nile Delta, Benjamin of Tudela marveled at the multicultural feel of Alexandria: "Merchants come thither from all the Christian kingdoms," he wrote, mentioning lands as far away as Norway and Ireland.

When they arrived, they went to a khan set aside for their countrymen. These compounds allowed foreigners to speak their own tongue, eat their own foods and practice their own religion. Over time, some Islamic governments in the region insisted that Christian merchants reside exclusively in these khans—which were often locked at night. This made it possible both to keep a watchful eye on the foreigners and ensure their safety.

Ibn Jubayr, who visited the Mediterranean port of Acre

during the Crusader era, noted that at the entrance to one khan are stone benches, spread with carpets, where are the Christian clerks of the customs with their ebony inkstands ornamented with gold. They write Arabic, which they also speak... The merchants deposited their baggage there and lodged in the upper story. The baggage of any who had no merchandise was also examined in case it contained concealed (and dutiable) merchandise, after which the owner was permitted to go his way and seek lodging where he would. All this was done with civility and respect, and without harshness and unfairness.

Even at the height of the Crusades, Venetian and other European merchants continued a lucrative trade with their Muslim counterparts, often selling timber and iron and buying silks and spices. In the Khan al-Jumruk and many other khans, there are hints of European influence in the architecture—a curved stairway here, a neoclassical balustrade there.

Unlike Aleppo, Damascus started smartening up its suq back in the 19th century and kept going. But if you look closely behind the façades on the old Roman main street—now called Straight Street—you will encounter the medieval city, in both restored and faded splendors.

The most impressive restoration is the Khan As'ad Pasha, a massive, multi-domed building dating from 1751 that was restored in 1990. It is constructed around an expansive courtyard with high

ablaq columns—built in alternating layers of black and white stone—and a circular fountain at its center; the courtyard was open to the sky but is today covered with a modern glass skylight that helps illuminate an art gallery.

More typical of the remaining urban khans in Damascus is Khan al-Zeit (Olive Oil Khan), just a few alleys away. This 500-year-old khan is small, even intimate, with a graceful arcade and an enormous tree shading its fountain. Today it hosts stores selling women's clothes. Here, the bustle of the Damascus suq recedes as birds chirp in the branches above the sunny stone courtyard.

Until a half-century or so ago, camels and horses were stabled in an area behind it, says Maher Almisski, who owns a nearby shop. He is proud to show off the khan, but he adds that the shop owners worry that one day it may be turned into a single commercial space, forcing them to move out.

Even as urban khans around the Middle East are demolished, left to decay or turned into boutique hotels or historical monuments, Constable says that scholars and governments may be waking

to their importance. Caravanserai "helped forge that world" that preserved classical learning, tied East with West and made the medieval Middle East a dynamic, wealthy, multicultural region. The loaded camels may be gone, but the weathered walls still testify to that long era's bold and roving spirit. ☉

Italianate motifs in Aleppo's Khan al-Olabia reflect the cultural cross-fertilization that took place over centuries when each khan and caravanserai helped shape the geography and economy of transcontinental trade.



Custodian of the museum-like upper quarters of Aleppo's Khan al-Nahaseen (Coppersmiths' Khan), Madame Jenny Poche, left, is a descendant of Bohemian crystal traders. Above: Along the perimeter of the square of Aleppo's main mosque, recently restored merchant housing shows traditional woodwork. Above right: Restoration returned a quiet elegance to Aleppo's Khan al-Shibani, which now hosts cultural events and a permanent exhibition about urban restoration efforts in the historic Syrian city.

In the large compound called Khan al-Jumruk (Customs Khan), textile merchants move rolls of carpets and bales of

cloth in and out of the shops under the arcades, much as they have for more than 400 years. The courtyard is large enough to contain its own mosque. Above the entrance are finely carved details dating from the 17th century.

Today, the tangles of electrical wires, the glare of fluorescent lights and the echoing rumbles of Korean-made trucks small enough to pass through the narrow alleys are all reminders of the

or coffee and playing chess and backgammon.

As he prepares coffee on a small stove at his desk, Khour tells how he journeys on the modern Silk Road—a flight to Dubai—to buy the Chinese textiles favored by his customers. The khan, he says, is in disrepair, and he's not sure how much longer he'll be able to hold out in the face of global competition.

Another short walk from Khour's shop lives another tenacious holdout, Madame Jenny Poche. Diminutive and elegant at 71, dressed in black and smoking a long cigarette, she speaks in French-accented English. She gestures for me to be seated in her drawing room. A liveried servant hands out coffee

in small china cups. We might be in an 18th-century townhouse in Brussels. Madame Poche explains that her family's life in the khan began in the early 19th century when her great-grandfather—a crystal merchant from Bohemia—arrived to seek his fortune. That put him near the end of a tradition that began in 1539, when the khan was built as a home for Venetian travelers, who used it as a base for their trade throughout the Middle East.

The vibrant days when foreign traders lived in Aleppo's old city are forgotten by all save a handful of such people as Madame Poche. But scholars are gradually discovering that khans, and especially the ones for foreigners (*fondacos*), formed a practical cornerstone for more than a millennium of relations between Europe and the Middle East. Two centuries before Ibn Battuta slept on the rooftop in



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