

William Atkins: Immeasurable Worlds [C1]

Un terzo della superficie terrestre si considera deserto, ovvero uno spazio vuoto, arido e inospitale. Il giornalista inglese William Atkins abbina storia e reportage per mostrarci la vitalità di otto deserti, fra i più estesi del mondo, in un viaggio appassionante dal Kazakistan al Nevada.



From early history to today's pop culture, the desert is a place where we [seek](#) something infinite, something eternal; where we step out of the human populated world into a spiritual, magical realm. From the 3rd century on, early Christian hermits known as the Desert Fathers travelled into the Western Sahara, where they formed the basis of Christian monasticism, following the example of Jesus' life of poverty, austerity and [self-denial](#). In modern TV series, such as Breaking Bad, the desert is a place of freedom, possibility and [lawlessness](#).

[DESERT QUEST](#)

Award-winning British writer William Atkins decided to travel to eight of these vast arid spaces: the [Empty Quarter](#) of Oman, the Gobi and Taklamakan deserts of northwest China, the Great Victoria Desert and

Maralinga in Australia, the [man-made](#) desert of the Aral Sea in Kazakhstan, the Black Rock and Sonoran Deserts of the Southwest United States, and the Egyptian Eastern Desert. The result is the book *The Immeasurable World*, a combination of history, [travelogue](#), journalism and nature writing that describes Atkins' [quest](#) to understand these marginalised places and their [allure](#). To find out more, Speak Up met with Atkins. As he explained, being a pale-skinned [redhead](#), he'd carefully prepared for the heat and the dryness. What he did not expect, he says, was just how full of life, movement and human stories the desert was. **William Atkins (English accent):** 'Desert' is one of those words that is [freighted](#) with meaning. We have an idea of the desert as a dry place, a dead place, and a place of exile and a place of escape. But one of the revelations for me was that the desert is a living place, and not only is it a living place, it's an extraordinarily rich and diverse and varied and exciting and stimulating place, and it's not this dead [void](#).

GREAT EXPLORERS

Before travelling, Atkins spent time in the British Library reading about historical figures associated with the desert. Among them were famous people such as T. E. Lawrence, better known as Lawrence of Arabia. There were lesser-known figures, too: Mildred Cable, for example, was a Protestant Christian missionary who travelled to China's Gobi Desert in the 1930s and co-wrote a book about it. **William Atkins:** [Unlike](#) some of those great explorers of the early 20th century, Mildred Cable was not someone who was [passing through](#). She made the desert her home and she produced absolute [reams](#) of writing and some of it contains some of the best descriptive writing of deserts that I know. And also she was reiterating the classical Christian relationship with the desert: she went there to find God, but she also went there to do important work and to fight the devil, [as it were](#).

ESSENTIAL GUIDE

While some of the research was done in advance, much of the writing was done while in the desert, says Atkins, where he always travelled with a guide.

William Atkins: I find walking [to be very conducive to](#) the imagination and to ideas and to language. The guide is absolutely crucial; without human guides in the desert you're dead. The camel was a companion... [we rely on](#) them to keep us alive. I spent some time with camels in the [Empty Quarter](#) in the Arabian Peninsula and in the Gobi Desert and I came to think of the camel as possessing some of those desert characteristics, which is a sort of [stubbornness](#). They're their own bosses.

NO EXTREMES

The desert offers a multi-sensory experience. The absolutes we expect, such as silence and darkness, do not exist, says Atkins. **William Atkins:** The discovery I made was, there is no darkness; even without a moon, the light is extraordinary. The [counterpart](#) of that is silence. I remember being in the Taklimakan in northwest China or the [Empty Quarter](#) in the Arabian Peninsula, and [lying down](#), maybe fifty miles from the nearest camel farm, one in the morning, looking up into the sky and yes, it's light, but also there's noise, and the noise primarily is yourself breathing. And there's no real [lifelessness](#), either. In those big sandy deserts, there's constant movement and things are changing constantly. You wake up in the morning and the sand is absolutely [dotted](#) with footprints of the various beasts that have been [hopping](#) and [slithering](#) around you during the night.

POLITICAL SPACES

We may not think of the desert as a political space, but some of the most politically-significant events occur in these supposedly marginal places, says Atkins. Over the last twenty years, at least eight thousand Spanish-speaking migrants have died trying to cross the Sonora desert on the US-Mexican border. And dead zones exist as a result of [man-made](#) desertification in Kazakhstan and Australia. **William Atkins:** You have the US-Mexico border, central in the evolution of American politics in the last twenty years. Then you have the Aral Sea in Kazakhstan, which is a [man-made](#) desert. The same is true of the Great Victorian Desert in southern Australia and the Maralinga nuclear test zones, which is where the British government tested their

nuclear bombs in the 1950s and 60s. Those latter places are profoundly damaged. The Aral Sea was once the second-largest internal [landlocked sea](#) in the world and was [drained](#) by the Soviet Union in the 1960s primarily in order to divert water for the irrigation of cotton. If you walk along the former [seabed](#) you walk past the [wrecks](#) of boats and the bones of camels because it's receded so much. The same is true of Maralinga; around the test zones where they [let off](#) these nuclear bombs, really nothing grows, and the [budgerigars](#) that migrate across Australia would [circumvent](#) these places. They would not go near them.

A BRIEF GUIDE TO EIGHT DESERTS

The [Empty Quarter](#) of Oman A sand desert covering most of the southern third of the Arabian Peninsula, Rub' al Khali or the [Empty Quarter](#) is 1,000 kilometres long and 500 kilometres wide. The terrain is covered with sand dunes of heights of up to 250 metres. While few people live in the [Empty Quarter](#), it does have some luxury hotels. Among them, the five-star Qasr Al Sarab Desert Resort in Abu Dhabi, UAE (pictured). **The Gobi and Taklamakan deserts of China ** [Neighbouring](#) deserts in northwest China, the Gobi experiences extreme temperatures of -40°C in winter and 45°C in summer. The Taklamakan is a sand desert with very little water. Crossing it is [hazardous](#). The present population living around the desert consists largely of Turkic Uyghur people. **The Man-Made Desert of the Aral Sea in Kazakhstan** An endorheic lake (a [drainage basin](#) that retains water with no [outflow](#) to other external bodies of water) between Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan began [shrinking](#) in the 1960s as the Soviet Union used its water for irrigating cotton. By the 2010s it had largely dried up. **The Great Victoria Desert and Maralinga in Australia** The largest desert in Australia consists of small [sandhills](#), grassland plains, areas of [pebbles](#) and salt lakes, and is mainly inhabited by Indigenous Australians. Maralinga, in southern Australia, is ordinarily quite green. However, British nuclear testing in the 1950s and 1960s has contaminated the earth. **The Eastern Desert in Egypt** Stretching between the Nile river and the Red Sea, the Eastern Desert consists of a [mountain range](#) and wide [plateaus](#), and has been an important trade route for centuries. Coptic Orthodox monasteries here are

the oldest in the world. The Monastery of Saint Anthony has its origins in the 4th century. The Monastery of Abu Fanah (pictured) dates to 601. **The Black Rock and Sonoran deserts of the United States** The Black Rock Desert in Nevada is a region of lava beds and vast flat playa desert. The Sonora Desert on the US-Mexico border is the hottest in both countries. The number of deaths of migrants trying to cross the Sonora has been rising rapidly. Hostile US immigration policy has been [blamed](#) for worsening the situation.

Glossary

- **as it were** = per così dire
- **lifelessness** = assenza di vita
- **dotted** = punteggiata, disseminata
- **slithering** = scivolare
- **budgerigars** = pappagallini
- **Neighbouring** = vicini
- **pebbles** = ghiaia
- **self-denial** = abnegazione
- **lying down** = giacere
- **circumvent** = aggirare, evitare
- **man-made** = artificiale, fatto dall'uomo
- **passing through** = transitare per
- **stubbornness** = testardaggine
- **hazardous** = pericoloso
- **drainage basin** = bacino di drenaggio
- **lawlessness** = assenza di leggi
- **Empty Quarter** = Quarto Vuoto
- **quest** = ricerca, missione
- **landlocked sea** = mare chiuso
- **wrecks** = relitti
- **shrinking** = rimpicciolire
- **seek** = cercare
- **we rely on** = dipendere da
- **outflow** = sfogo
- **mountain range** = catena montuosa
- **allure** = fascino
- **redhead** = dai capelli rossi
- **Unlike** = a differenza di
- **to be very conducive to** = essere propizio per
- **counterpart** = omologo, corrispondente
- **hopping** = saltare
- **seabed** = fondo marino
- **sandhills** = dune

- **travelogue** = diario di viaggio
- **plateaus** = altopiani
- **let off** = far cadere
- **freighted** = pregne, cariche
- **reams** = risme, gran quantità
- **drained** = prosciugare
- **blamed** = incolpare, accusare
- **void** = vuoto