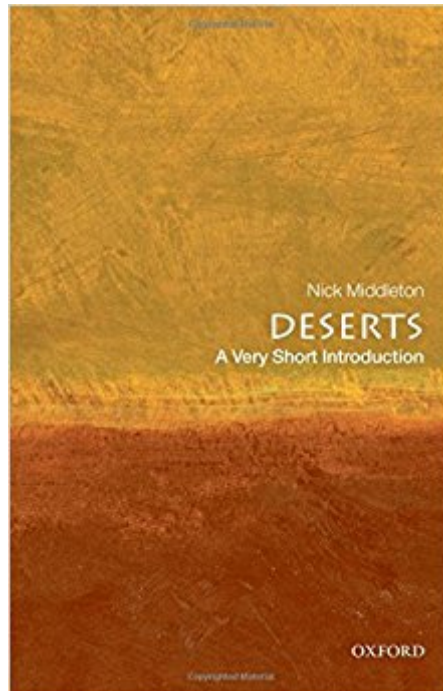




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Deserts: A Very Short Introduction (Very Short Introductions)



Synopsis

Deserts make up a third of the planet's land surface, but if you picture a desert, what comes to mind? A sandy wasteland? A drought-parched dust bowl? An alien landscape devoid of all life forms? In this marvelous Very Short Introduction, geographer and popular science writer Nick Middleton reveals that deserts are places of immense natural charm and rich biodiversity. Typified by drought and extremes of temperature, they can be harsh and hostile, but Middleton shows that many deserts are also spectacularly beautiful, and on occasion they can teem with life. The author highlights how each desert is unique, describing their frequently fantastic life forms, extraordinary scenery, and long history of ingenious human habitation. Written by a respected scientist who enjoys a wide following for his Going to Extremes television series on National Geographic, Deserts tells you everything you ever wanted to know about these extraordinary places and captures their importance in the working of our planet.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Nick Middleton teaches at Oxford University where he is a Fellow of St Anne's College. In addition to many scientific publications, he has written such popular books as *The Last Disco in Outer Mongolia* and *Ice Tea and Elvis: A Saunter through the Southern States*. In 2002, he won the Royal Geographical Society's Ness Award in recognition of widening the public enthusiasm for geography through his travel writing.

My introduction to *A Very Short Introduction to Deserts*, as it were, was *Classics: A Very Short Introduction*). I have now read five, and they are all 5-star quality. I chose to leave the lush green hills and dales of Western Pennsylvania, and have lived in deserts for almost three and a half decades (in Saudi Arabia and in New Mexico). Thus, I felt I knew something about them. And this was somewhat confirmed when I commenced Nick Middleton's informative and well-written work. It did not seem as substantive as some of the other works, and that was because I DID know something about deserts; but Middleton would prove to me a bit further on that I was just a beginner. For example, although I had traveled far more than most expatriates in the Rub Al Khali (the Empty Quarter) of Saudi Arabia, Middleton provides an impressive picture of a large "star dune" in the Rub Al Khali that I had never seen; and within the paragraph he has segued into the white, pure gypsum sand dunes of the Chihuahuan desert of New Mexico. Middleton writes in that dense clipped style that this series favors. Much information is conveyed in one paragraph: for example, a succinct explanation of a particular physical phenomenon. There are four main factors that create deserts: Atmospheric stability, continentality, rain shadows, and cold ocean currents. Of the earth's land mass, one quarter is desert, and another quarter is semi-desert. Deserts are not tightly delimited in geographic space: there is a large degree of "fuzziness," both in terms of space and time. The author moves from one desert to the other, in a very balanced way, citing similarities and differences. Some of the other deserts I have been to, for example the Namibian, Australian and Saharan. Others not, for example, Chilean and those of Central Asia. His erudition of all of them is impressive. He describes, and has a picture of the dragon's blood tree, which is uniquely endemic on the Yemen island of Socotra. He discusses the desert "truffle" that erupts after a rain, and informed me that they extend all the way from the Arabian Desert to Morocco. The diurnal range of temperature (that is, from high to low) in continental deserts is normally 20 c, and could be as extreme as 35 c. The (nearby) Sonoran desert of the American Southwest has 100 days in which the temperature is below 0 c. And Luderitz, in Namibia, in one day in April, 2006, received six times its annual rainfall of 16.7 millimeters. In addition to "factoids" such as the above, the author is equally good at explaining various concepts such as the adaptation of animals (and humans!) to the land of little rain, and that includes developing concepts such as "potential" evaporation. Given the hardships of life in the desert (and

we are not talking about the air-conditioned one that I live in), why do people stay, and herd those sheep and goats? Middleton says that a study of herding that was done in Syria and Jordan during the 1990s indicated that the income from 300 sheep, a middle-size herd, was greater than a government civil servant. And then there are all those night stars, and the freedom from a bureaucratic boss! One of my indexes of a good book are the number of pages on which I have underscored a passage, now so convenient (and even reversible!) with Kindle. About every other page contained an underscored passage. 5-stars.

As advertised

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