



# Anthony Sattin

Author, Journalist, Broadcaster, and Travel Writer

## INTERVIEW YI-HWA HANNA

**W**hat drives your passion for your work? When I was a student, I knew I wanted to write, but I wasn't sure in what genre. After university, I spent a few years writing in a variety of ways – I even wrote songs for a musical (it never reached the stage) and wrote some new *Winnie the Pooh* stories for Disney! I was also writing short stories, and that felt good, and from that I wrote some longer fiction. But I have never wanted to be constrained by any one genre. History was always a passion and travel became one. I have written history novels, biographies, a travel book... but in the end, everything I write is a story and I think of myself not as an historian, or biographer, or travel writer, but as a storyteller.

### Your main area of interest is the Middle East.

**Why is this so?** I first visited the Middle East in my late teens – it was winter and I wanted to go somewhere warm, and different, but what I found was more than just sunshine. I was fascinated by the history, and I loved the new regional connections, the sense of community, and the landscapes. I still am fascinated by it. With each book I have written on the region, I think 'This will be the last one', and then something else catches my imagination. I have just started another book about Egypt.

### Your latest book, *Nomads*, was named *The Sunday Times's Best History Book of the Year*.

#### What's the greatest lesson you've learned from studying ancient nomadic lifestyles?

In an unexpected way, writing *Nomads* became part of my protest against Brexit, because having spent years reading about the rise and fall of empires and countries around the world and across the globe, the one thing that became abundantly clear was that we all benefit when we have open borders, freedom of movement and of conscience. Protectionism doesn't work. And no matter how high a fence or wall you build, people will always find a way around it if they need to – the Chinese learned this when nomads got around their Great Wall, and so did the Romans when they built walls to keep



out nomad tribes on their eastern frontier. We all benefit from the cross-fertilisation of people. Together we are stronger.

#### You'll be at the Emirates Airline Festival of Literature this month. What do you love about the UAE?

I have been visiting the UAE for decades. I was in Dubai when the Burj Al Arab was completed, but before it opened to the public. I was taken around the hotel by a very proud general manager. And I was in Abu Dhabi making a programme for the BBC about the cultural district when the site where the Louvre now sits was still nothing but water. I love the scale of ambition in the UAE; the pushing at the boundaries of what is possible.

#### How would you describe the Middle East's growth over the past few decades?

In Europe we watch with some envy as the Middle East evolves. The wealth generated from natural resources has fuelled the sort of boom that Europe enjoyed in the 19th century with revenues generated from its empires. But that wealth is being harnessed to some very ambitious visions. I remember a story that HE Zaki Nussebeih told me about watching the Apollo moon landing in 1969 with HE Sheikh Zayed. Some people in the room suspected that they were watching something out of Hollywood, but Sheikh Zayed understood how the West had

advanced and determined that his people should try to emulate that.

**Any favourite regional dishes?** I love it all! From mezze to Egyptian molokhiyya, to a lamb roasted in the sand.

#### If you could travel back in time to any specific place, when and where would you go?

I wrote a book about Florence Nightingale and the novelist Gustave Flaubert travelling on the Nile in 1849, and I think that is a place and a time I wish I could have experienced. Most of the sites we see today were available to them, hieroglyphs had been deciphered (Nightingale learned to read them on the journey down from England), and the first guidebook had just been published, but there were very few visitors.

#### What's the first thing you do at a new destination?

I always go for a walk whenever I arrive somewhere new, or old. You can drive around a place for hours and never get a handle on it. But on the street, you feel the heat or cold, you smell the place, and you meet people. Occasionally it can be a problem. When I first went to China, there was always the risk of straying too far and not being able to find my way back to the hotel or somewhere I knew, nor of finding anyone who could speak a word of any language I spoke.

#### What are three things that you always pack?

I always have a book – in the days when I wrote a weekly book column for *The Sunday Times*, I used to travel with a bagful of books, which I shed as I went along. Now I try to travel lighter, with just one book. I always have a notebook and pen, and I also always pack earplugs.

#### What is your go-to choice of in-flight entertainment?

I prefer to read on a plane, but if that's not possible, I listen to an audiobook or a podcast.

#### What's your ultimate bucket list destination and why?

I have spent at least half of each year away for most of my adult life, and although there are places I have still not visited – Mexico and Japan are high on my wish list – I tend to go back to places. I like the accumulation of experiences in a place, how I get to know people, find my favourite café or restaurant... **BT**