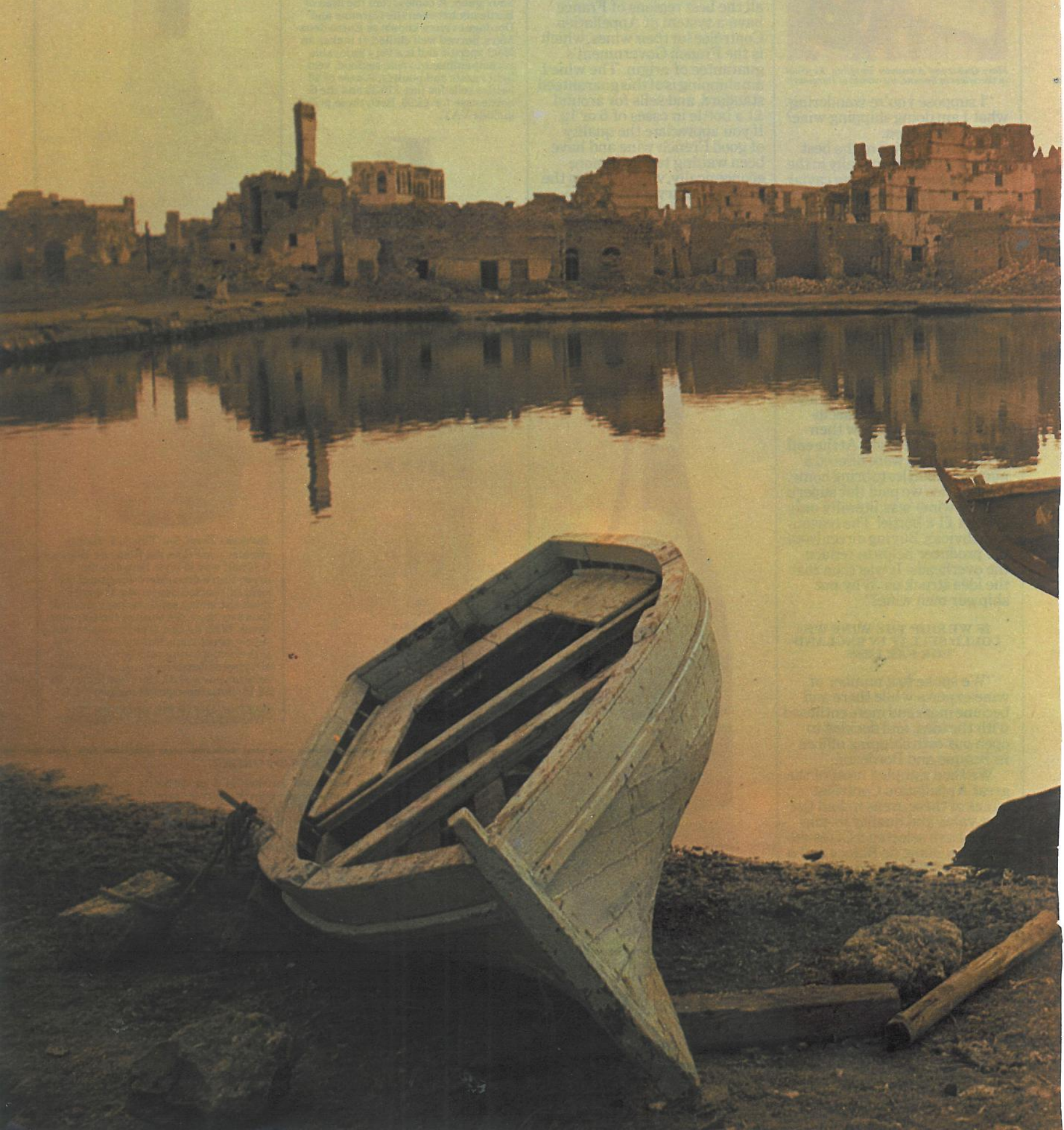
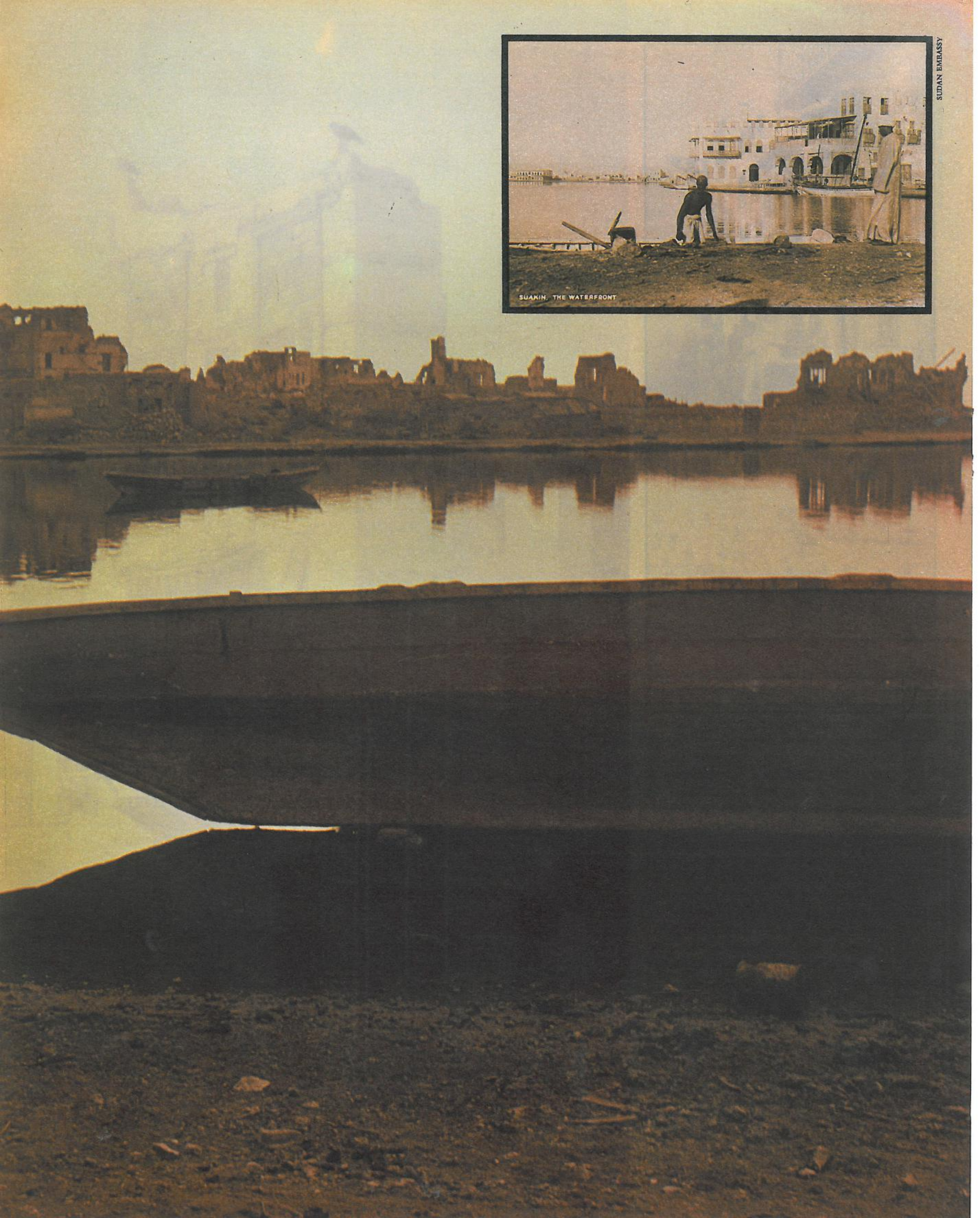


Superstitious tribesmen give the place a wide berth. It is the city of Suakin, bleak and abandoned, its halcyon days as a rich slave trading port long since gone. Suakin was once the most important city on Africa's Red Sea Coast – the eastern outlet for the Nile Valley, the meeting point of African pilgrim routes to Jeddah. During its time it was governed by Kitchener and besieged by Dervishes. *James Fox* reports from the city whose fortunes rose and fell over 500 years; photographs by *Donald McCullin*

THE DEAD CITY OF SUAKIN





SUAKIN, THE WATERFRONT



Above: Suakin's boom years of pilgrimage and flamboyance. Right: now, the ghost town of 1974

The Venetian magnificence of Suakin island resembled nothing else on Africa's Red Sea Coast or in the Nile Valley. When Kitchener lived in Suakin, as Governor of the Red Sea Littoral in 1886 – a few months after the deaths of Gordon and the Mahdi – he lived in some splendour, surrounded by Islamic inscriptions in a palace of coral and Java teak, built for the Turkish Governor. His verandah, two storeys high, had the benefit of whatever cool breeze came up the short estuary, over the coral reef from the Red Sea.

Any wind is a relief in the temperatures of a Sudanese summer. Such a verandah is like shade in the open desert. It is now the only verandah in the only habitable building on Suakin island. The Ministry of Culture in Khartoum had the Palace opened for us and on the verandah we slept in luxury and caught the breeze, travellers to the dead city.

Nowhere else on the island is safe. Even in this building, to walk carelessly through the airy rooms and darkened passages could lead to a disastrous fall into the muddy cellars below the floorboards.

From this vantage point you can see the haunting landscape of Suakin's ruined grandeur. You get a sense of the town's isolation by looking out

on to the desert plain that stretches towards



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the Red Sea Hills, where the Mahdists unsuccessfully laid siege to the town in the 1880s and 1890s.

In terms of Suakin's history and its 500 years of wealth and importance that was unrivalled along the Red Sea coast of Africa, it is as if Manhattan had been evacuated because of some catastrophe of science fiction. Like Manhattan, building space was limited, property expensive and Suakin's merchants built upwards. They adorned their three and four-storey palaces with Venetian style balconies, richly carved wooden shutters, ornate panelling and later painted baroque ceilings. One merchant, Shennawi Bey, built a house of 200 rooms in 1881, with slave quarters and dungeons.

The Arabic words of welcome on Kitchener's gateway into the town ("Peace be to all who enter here") belied the business of the day - which up to the 1870s was slavery as much as anything else.

And the show of wealth in these buildings concealed the flaw in their structure. Not only were they built on coral foundations, they were built mostly of coral bricks, too soft to stand the ravages of tropical rainstorms for long, if left unattended.

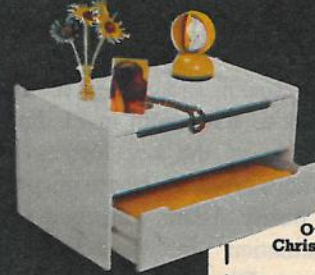
For this reason, Suakin's physical decline was as swift as its final economic collapse had been sudden.

Partly for reasons of superstition the local Beja and Hadendowa tribesmen and the visiting Bedouin give the place a wide berth. They say that ghosts, as well as falling masonry, drove the last residents away in the Thirties and Forties. Many of these were servants of the wealthy families who held on to their properties in case some miracle of economics might revive the commerce that rallied briefly in the 1920s but whose end was in sight in 1905.

Little remains of Aydhah, Suakin's ancient rival to the north, which was sacked in the 14th century, leaving Suakin under Egypt's control as the main port on Africa's Red Sea Coast. It was also the shortest route to Jeddah across the water to the Arab peninsula, and the routes of the Muslim pilgrims from Africa converged at the tiny island on their way to the Holy City. Indeed, apart from the prison for long-time servers, which is the town's only source of economic activity, the quarantine station at the mouth of this remote channel, still used during the pilgrimage season, is Suakin's only link ➡➡➡



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Vincent Van Gogh

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with the past. It is the cheapest, and some say the holiest route to Mecca and for both requirements offers discomfort and inconvenience.

For 500 years Suakin's fortunes rose and fell. It was the eastern outlet for the Upper Nile basin, linked by camel with Sennar. It was also the Islamic gateway to Christian and pagan Africa, and for this half century Egypt and Turkey took turns to suck the lifeblood that these two near-monopolies provided.

When the Turks took over control of the Red Sea Ports from Egypt in the 16th century a Portuguese visitor to Suakin said that the harbour was "able to contain 200 ships and galleys without number", and compared it favourably with Lisbon. Caravans of several thousand camels worked the interior right up until 1880. They travelled on two main routes - westwards to Berber and the Nile Valley, and southwards to Kassala and the Eritrean highlands, or to the grain growing areas of Al Qadarif and Equatoria province beyond.

Nor, as a 17th century writer shows, was the town entirely dependent on the trade routes: "In this place is the pearl fishing and for tortoisés for which there is great traffick,

and from whence the Grand Seigneur draws a considerable revenue."

After Egypt, in the mid-19th century, bought the island from Turkey in exchange for Jeddah, the despotic Khedive frightened traders from Suakin and as the slave trade declined, its economy began to slip.

This was a mild recession compared to the blows that finally severed Suakin from all commercial activity. First it lived through the most dramatic moments in Sudan's recent history. It provided a backcloth for Victorian heroism and the bloodletting that Britain indulged in for 20 years to put down the Mahdist rebellion.

Gordon landed at Suakin in 1877, as Governor General of the Sudan and built the causeway to the mainland, before moving to Khartoum. Three years before, he took a camel from Suakin and crossed the Nubian desert to Khartoum in 21 days.

One of the key leaders of the Mahdi's crusade - whose purpose was to purify Islam and end foreign domination in the Sudan - was Osman Digna, a native of Suakin, and a part-time slave trader. The Mahdi made him Emir of the East and he mobilised the Beja and

Hadendowa warriors against the Egyptians and the British, and then laid siege to Suakin for more than 10 years, occupying towns along the route to Berber and cutting off the town from everything except the sea.

The Beja are people of fierce Ethiopic beauty who still carry their "long two 'anded swords" that Kipling records in *Fuzzy Wuzzy* and dress in cotton pantaloons. Their enormous heads of hair earned them their nickname from the British soldiers who fought them.

"The Fuzzy was the finest o' the lot", wrote Kipling.

We never got a ha'porth's change of 'im:

'E squatted in the scrub an' 'ocked our 'orses,

'E cut our sentries up at Suakin, An' 'e played the cat an' banjo with our forces.

Valentine Baker Pasha landed at Suakin in 1883 with Egyptian troops, half of whom were slaughtered by the Beja in the first engagement. Those who could, fled the battlefield with Baker Pasha, wisely, among them. But the Beja was punished the following year when Sir Gerald Graham landed 4000 British troops at Suakin. At the battle of Tamai, matching their swords against British rifles, they nevertheless broke a British square, which Kipling salutes as a unique event.

There is a badly faded picture of Osman Digna in the Turkish Palace at Suakin, standing with his officers, small, bearded, and, as the caption says, "redoubtable". Even after these defeats, he held control of the hinterland, towards the Red Sea Hills well into the 1890s, keeping Suakin under steady siege. It remained the only town never penetrated by the Mahdists.

The wars were bad for trade. The customs receipts for 1901 were only half those of the previous year and the 1902 figures were lower still. Hope and trade came back in 1905 when the rail link from the Red Sea to the Nile Valley was completed, with Suakin as its terminal. Twelve hundred pilgrims had left for Jeddah in 1905 - 4000 left a year later. Two Egyptian banks opened agencies in the town, the old companies reopened their branches.

But Suakin was already obsolete. The harbour was no longer what Richard D'Anville described in 1730 as "the safest asylum for navigators on the Coast". The coral which had been growing up slowly over the

years had created a narrow, winding passage through the reefs, making the harbour dangerous to steamships and only navigable in daylight. Vessels often ran aground. Insurance rates were high. The nearest deep sea anchorage lay 19 miles away. Worse still, the town's water was drying up - in 1909 photographs, water sellers can be seen in the streets.

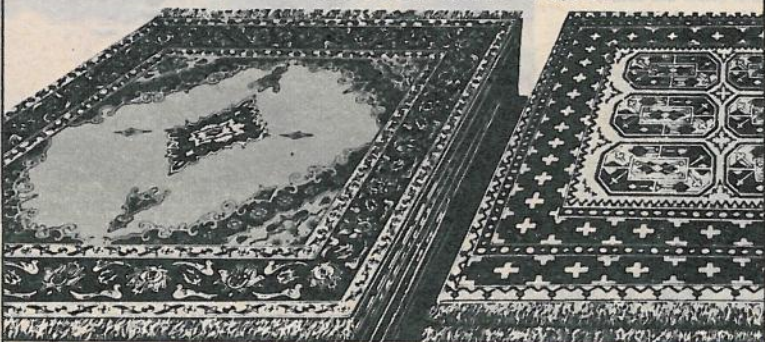
Port Sudan to the north was a natural harbour, with a straight channel through the reef which opened on to a series of basins and which provided easy access for ocean-going vehicles. When it opened in 1909, Suakin had lost half its export trade, and much of its commerce with the Nile Valley. Then the blows rained down. In 1912 the provisional headquarters and the army garrison were moved to Port Sudan. Between 1923-25 Port Sudan was linked by rail with the Blue Nile, undermining Suakin's caravan trade. In 1923 the National Bank of Egypt closed. In 1924 Eastern Telegraph shut its Suakin station.

By 1940 only 18 of the houses were still occupied and by 1946, the island's population was 350.

Ever since, there has been talk of reopening Suakin to cope with the overflow from Port Sudan. But for the moment the island is silent. There is no trace of movement in the near or middle distance except for the far-away figures of the prisoners working in the salt pans in the early morning. Not one detail of this romantic landscape has changed, either on the coral coastline, or towards the Red Sea Hills that rise out of the sweltering barren scrub country that the soldiers had to cross. It is the most evocative, lonely scenery. On the mainland are the graves of the British soldiers who died here. A photograph shows them playing cricket to while away the time between attacks.

The tribesmen are right to avoid this place. You soon begin to feel uneasy walking through the empty rooms, picking up traces of the past. A pigeon starting from the rafters in such silence is very loud and sudden and can make you bolt in fear of crashing beams. The loosened shutters have worked up a dirge of morbid intensity over the years, as they swing and bang in the evening breezes. Even the hundreds of mangy and aggressive cats, who have taken over the town, have a ghoulish quality. They live on tropical fish, which they catch with a vicious and uncanny skill from the edges of the lagoon.

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