



## The Immeasurable World: Journeys in Desert Places

*William Atkins*

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**The Immeasurable World: Journeys in Desert Places** William Atkins

**In the classic literary tradition of Bruce Chatwin and Geoff Dyer, a rich and exquisitely written account of travels in six deserts on five continents that evoke the timeless allure of these remote and forbidding places.**

One-sixth of the earth's surface is classified as desert. Restless, unhappy in love, and intrigued by the Desert Fathers who forged Christian monasticism in the Egyptian desert, Will Atkins decided to travel in six of the world's driest, hottest places: the Empty Quarter of Oman, the Gobi Desert of North China, the Great Victoria Desert of Australia, the man-made desert of the Aral Sea in Kazakhstan, the Black Rock and Sonoran Deserts of the American Southwest, and the Sinai Desert of Egypt. Each of his travel narratives effortlessly weaves aspects of natural history, historical background, and present-day reportage into a compelling tapestry that reveals the human appeal of these often inhuman landscapes.

## The Immeasurable World: Journeys in Desert Places Details

Date : Published July 24th 2018 by Doubleday (first published June 5th 2018)

ISBN :

Author : William Atkins

Format : Kindle Edition 400 pages

Genre : Nonfiction, Travel, Environment, Nature, History, Science, Natural History

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## From Reader Review The Immeasurable World: Journeys in Desert Places for online ebook

### Bronwen Griffiths says

I love visiting deserts and love reading about them. William Atkins is a fantastic guide. A mix of the personal - including meetings with local people - plus historical and political context makes this an engrossing read. I was particularly moved by his account of Maralinga, site of the British nuclear tests in the 1950's.

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### Eric says

\* Truly fascinating exploration of the world's deserts. It is really quite astonishing how humanity has thrived and survived in such a climate.

\* I received a free copy of the book in a Goodreads giveaway.

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### John says

An unusual travelogue based on the writer's travel through some of earth's most inaccessible places -- deserts. An interesting combination of history, geography, literature, and even some philosophy. In total he visits 8 deserts on 5 continents.

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### Geoffrey says

(Note: I received an advanced electronic copy of this book from NetGalley)

When reading the book's summary, one I admittedly may be a bit off-put by the prospect of reading about a man's wanderings through some of the most barren places on the planet. However, following Atkins as he travels from the empty quarter to the American southwest to the Taklamakan in Central Asia is anything but a slog. Far from it, one will encounter lands that are all quite similar, yet also unmistakably distinct with their physical characteristics, inhabitants, and their histories. "The Immeasurable World" will not only spark an interest in the deserts of the world, but feed it a little more with each passing chapter. By the time it's over, you'll definitely begin to see why the author couldn't help but keep venturing off into these sparse, quiet lands.

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### Sharron says

The content warrants a 4\* rating but sadly the prose does not. If only the same material had been written by Paul Theroux or William Langenweische.

## Paul says

Atkins is the latest one to be drawn to those impenetrable places, deserts. He joins an illustrious list of explorers and people who are seeking something amongst the arid sands. The geographer definition of a desert is somewhere that has less than 250mm of rain per year, but for those that know what to look for, they can be places of riches and places where life is right at the edge, but they are not lifeless if you know where to look. Atkins is not fully sure what he is seeking though, his partner of four years had accepted a job overseas and he was not going with her. Seeking some clarity of mind he heads out to the Empty Quarter on the Arabian peninsular a place made famous by the travel writer Wilfred Thesiger. In his book Arabian Sands, he went searching for those that still carried out the age-old Bedouin life and where others saw unforgiving wilderness, Thesiger found timeless peace. Standing in the mountainous pink dunes, he is humbled by the vastness of the place and by the people who know these places so intimately that they are never lost.

The Great Victorian Desert in Australia has been Aboriginal lands for millennia. The UK government with collusion from the Aussie PM used it for numerous nuclear tests. These were on ancient Aboriginal land and the fallout caused many health problems and displaced people who had no idea of what was really going on. Even though it echoed to the most powerful blasts that we humans can make it is still a place that has spiritual significance to the people that still choose to live there. The next two deserts are in Asia; the Gobi and what is left of the Aral Sea. These utterly different places have been used as a method of defence to protect China for people trying to enter the country and the other a site of a massive environmental disaster. Stepping once again in the footsteps of travellers before him, in this case it is the Cable sisters, where he discovers a place that is tense and edgy. Standing in the desert that once was the Aral sea is quite a surreal experience and he learns how the waters that once contained sturgeon now hold no life and how the demands for irrigation drained this once great freshwater sea.

Next place to visit is the continent of America where Atkins visits two deserts are on the list. First up is the Sonoran Desert. It is a harsh and baked environment that borders Mexico and is a focus for those wanting to cross and realise their own American Dream. Very little of it is fenced to keep people out as the desert is pretty effective at doing that, and Atkins joins those that are trying to keep people out as well as those who are there to offer some humanity to those that have made the attempt to cross. The polarised views of each camp make this a tense place, very different to his next desert, which is the Black Rock Desert and the festival that is the Burning Man where he has offered to help out. The contrast between this place with its liberal perspective on sex, nudity and drugs and the previous location is stark. These places are both very different to his final location though, St Anthony's Monastery in the Eastern Desert of Egypt a place that revels in its isolation from the pressures of the modern world and brings Atkins full circle to the spiritual and intangible elements of the desert.

Even though deserts are some of the least populated places in the world, this is still a series of stories about the people that inhabit them, however, scarce they might be. I particularly liked the chapter on the Australian Great Victoria Desert, a place that was taken from its rightful inhabitants and is slowly being returned having been contaminated. It makes for painful reading. It is as much about Atkins though, he is using the vastness of the desert to clarify his mind and as a support for the pain that he went through at the end of a relationship. Whilst this is a travel book, there is history, poetry and philosophy in amongst the drifting sands. His prose is lucid with hints of melancholy and this book contains some of the best maps I have seen in a travel book yet. Well worth reading for a modern take on deserts.

### **Rose says**

This is a book about the author's wanderings through the deserts of the world. We learn how each desert looks as well as a bit about the people that live in each. I found this book fascinating and if you think this book would be dry, well, I think you would be surprised at how the author describes the deserts and keeps you wanting to read more.

I would like to thank Netgalley and the publisher for providing me with a review copy in exchange for my honest and unbiased opinion of it.

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### **Yasmin says**

Elfin-looking William Atkins treks across various deserts in search of what? That is the pervading question of this book. It wasn't immediately clear to me why he embarked on the journeys he did, other than finding books about deserts in a monastery library. Monasteries and monks are definitely his cup of tea. The journeys are interesting, the deserts and their histories are fascinating. It's been a long time since I saw shamals referenced anywhere. Shamals were an important part of the desert I spent five formative years living with or rather beside, perhaps both. I was closer to Oman than any of the other places he traversed. The book is lightweight, but a very good read.

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### **Susan Csoke says**

An intriguing story of one mans travels through five continents and eight deserts. Thankyou Goodreads for this free book!!!!

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### **Diane says**

I won this book in a Goodreads first-reads giveaway.

An interesting, eye-opening, thought provoking and immersive book about several of the worlds deserts, how they are different, yet the same.

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### **Tory says**

I almost gave this book 4 stars instead of 5 because I could not 'categorize' it. It combines history, theology, philosophy, politics, science, travelogue, literature, poetry ..... about 8 deserts around the world. Atkins starts the book in the Empty Quarter, Oman, with the Desert Fathers of early Christian monasticism, then moves on to the Great Victoria Desert, Australia, The Gobi Desert and the Taklamakan Desert, China, and the Aralkum, Kazakhstan, providing descriptions and insights into the culture and history of this deserts. In the United States, Atkins considers the Sonoran Desert and the plight of refugees attempting to cross the border in Nogales as well as the Black Rock Desert and the cultural phenomenon of Burning Man. In the last chapter, Atkins comes full circle back to theology, at a monastery in the Eastern Desert, Egypt. I enjoyed the

maps at the beginning of each chapter, so that I had a better understanding of where each desert was located, and the few black & white photos sprinkled throughout the book. I would have enjoyed more pictures of the desert landscapes, though I know I can Google them on my own.

This book was not an easy or fast read, but worth the effort.

I received this book as a giveaway (thank you Goodreads and Doubleday!).

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