Summary

Chapter 1: As night falls, a caravan of four hundred camels and one hundred people begins its long journey through the Arabian Desert. The camels are carrying bags of spices and incense on their backs. These come from India and Somalia and the caravan is taking them from the city of Qana to the Mediterranean coast to sell. They will then make their way to the markets of Europe. Two boys, Yazid and Hassan, are travelling with the group. For Yazid this is his first trip but Hassan, who is older, has made the journey before. The older boy tells his friend about the journey they are about to undertake. They will travel for about ten hours a day, mainly at night when it is cooler, and the outward trip will take more than three months. Then they will have to return to their home city. They will stop at villages and sometimes cities to sleep and so that the camels can drink. It is a difficult journey because they will have to cross mountains and the very dry, hot desert. Yazid’s uncle, who is a very important person, tells his nephew about some of the spectacular sights they are going to see. One of the most impressive is the city of Marib with its famous dam. The city has become very rich because a lot of caravans stop there and pay for services.

Spices from the East: Spices have many uses. Arab people put cardamom in coffee and ginger in hot milk. The Egyptians put cinnamon with dead bodies. Pepper is a very important spice for trade today.

Chapter 2: The caravan has been travelling for twenty days when it arrives outside Marib. It is a large city with thousands of houses enclosed by high walls. In the short rainy season, water comes down the adjacent mountain and collects at the dam. It is then used to irrigate the land and so the city is surrounded by green fields. There is some mystery as to who built the dam and when work on it was started. However, there was certainly a dam there in about 790 BCE (Before the Common Era). It was continually damaged and rebuilt over a period of a thousand years until in 570 CE an earthquake destroyed it completely. The people left the city after that. As they are approaching the city, Yazid’s uncle tells his nephew about the dangers the caravan has to face from bandits hiding in the mountain. Also he informs the young boy that the caravan must always stay as close as possible to the mountains as that is where the water is.

The Queen of Sheba: Queen Bilquis lived one thousand years before Yazid and Hassan made their journey across the desert. She was a very rich, influential woman and she had a lot of contact with other royalty in the region.

Chapter 3: One night, the back section of the caravan is attacked by bandits. There are about twenty of them and they are on horseback. A fight breaks out and the bandits steal five camels, with their cargo, and kill three men before help arrives from the rest of the caravan. Yazid suggests they follow the bandits into the mountains but his uncle knows it would be too dangerous. He decides to find the nearest resting place, known to the traders as a caravanserai. These were big open places with high walls. They contained shops and places for the men to sleep and the camels to drink the huge quantities of water they needed. The traders are happy to rest a while but their thoughts are with their dead friends. However, business must carry on and Yazid’s uncle pays for their stay in the caravanserai and sends the two boys to buy food at the shop. They return with some bread and fruit and the group settles down to eat.
Chapter 4: The group has now been travelling for several weeks and are about to leave the city of Narjan and move northwards across a rocky desert. Although it is autumn, the temperature reaches 35 degrees Celsius in the day. One morning, the group awakes and notices that the sun is not shining and that the sky is orange. Hassan tells Yazid it is a sign that a sandstorm is on its way. The sky darkens and the wind gets stronger until the storm hits the caravan. It lasts several hours but finally stops and the group can move on. They are on their way to a land called Nabatea. Yazid’s uncle says the Nabateans are very rich because they are experts at finding water. This means they can live in very dry areas and many caravans stay in their cities. He adds that the biggest city in Nabatea, Petra, is the most beautiful in the land. After a difficult walk through a narrow mountain pass, they arrive at Petra. Yazid is amazed by the beauty of the place, and by one building in particular. Although Petra was an important city, there were many more such as Hegra and Obodat.

Chapter 5: The journey is coming to an end and soon they will see the Mediterranean Sea. Everybody is exhausted when they arrive at the caravanserai by the shore. The next morning, people from many different countries begin to trade with the men from the caravan. Yazid’s uncle tells the boys to go down to the sea and look at all the ships. Yazid is a little worried by his uncle’s appearance as he believes his uncle maybe ill and not just tired. He goes with Hassan to the port where they see ships from around the world being loaded with bags of spices. A man invites them to eat. During the meal he questions them about their journey through the desert and implies that the there isn’t much of a future for the old-fashioned desert caravans. He believes the future form of transport will be by sea as it is cheaper, easier and less dangerous. Suddenly, a man from the caravan runs up to the group. Yazid’s uncle is seriously ill. Yazid returns to his uncle’s bedside to learn that his uncle is dying. The sick man wants Yazid to return home to Qana with the camels and the money earned from the spices. The boy agrees and the next day his uncle dies and is buried.

Chapter 6: After 30 BCE, when the Romans captured Egypt, the importance of the camel desert caravans declined. The use of ships became more widespread and the Roman port city of Alexandria became the main centre of trade on the Mediterranean. Then, between 300 and 400 CE the Nabateans abandoned their principal city of Petra for reasons that are still unknown. Some theories suggest the city suffered a large earthquake and many of the buildings and dams were destroyed. Many years later, when Islam became established in Arabia and later in North Africa, trade in the region declined. Later, Islam revived the camel caravans. This time they weren’t transporting spices but people. Millions of people travelled to the religious centre of Mecca by camels. Nowadays, of course, people go by plane and car.

Background and themes
The spice trade: Spices were first used about 3000 BCE. The story is set in the time of the Nabateans. They inhabited part of Saudi Arabia from about 950 BCE to about 300 CE. Today, we take spices for granted as we can buy them in supermarkets almost everywhere. However, in ancient times they were highly valuable commodities which the Romans and Greeks, and later the Europeans, paid high prices for. The spices were used for cooking, medicines and for perfumes.

Coming of age: At the beginning of the book, Yazid is a young, inexperienced boy. He has never been very far from his home. By the end of the book he is a different person. He has seen danger and death, has endured hunger and tiredness and has taken on the responsibilities of his dead uncle. In all, he has become a man.

Change and progress: Throughout history new ideas and ways of doing things have been introduced. Some are proved successful and adopted for a time. Then they become obsolete and are replaced by new ideas. For hundreds of years, the ancestors of Yazid’s uncle used camels to transport goods across the desert. Then, a new more efficient way was found: the use of ships.
The camel: There are a lot of references to camels in the book. The camel is known as ‘the ship of the desert’ because it has been used, and still is used, as the favoured means of transport in hot, arid climates. Camels are perfectly adapted to these environments and are able to carry people and loads long distances. Apart from their use as transport, they provide milk and their meat can be eaten.

Discussion activities

Chapter 1

Before reading

1 Discuss: Tell the students that the book they are about to read is a historical account of a journey. Then, put them in small groups and ask them to discuss the following: Do you like reading about history? Do you like films that are about history? If you could go back to a time in history, which would you choose and why? Are there any famous historical people that come from your country and what are they famous for?

After reading

2 Pair work: Write the following words on the board: noise, job, coffee, evenings, fire, dangerous. Have the students talk and write in pairs to say how these words were used in Chapter 1.

Chapter 2

While reading (p. 10, after ‘An hour later, I can see the high walls of a big city.’)

3 Write: Write museum on the board and explain that this is something found in a typical city. Put the students in pairs and ask them to write down all the structures they know in English that can be found in a city. Then write their suggestions on the board, adding some of your own.

Chapter 3

While reading (p. 17, after ‘No Yazid. We can’t.’)

5 Role play: Put the students in pairs and tell them they are going to act out a conversation between Yazid and his uncle. Yazid is a brave boy and wants to fight the bandits, but his uncle knows that would be a stupid thing to do. See the Discussion activities key for an example start to the conversation.

After reading

6 Quiz: Put the students in pairs and tell them they are going to do a quiz. Give them three minutes to study the information about camels on pages 20–21 and then tell them to close their books. Ask them to write the answers to the following questions: 1. How much weight do most camels carry on their backs? 2. How many months of the year do camels work? 3. How many teeth does a camel have? 4. How heavy can a large camel be? 5. How many years can a camel live for? 6. How many litres of water can a camel drink in ten minutes? 7. How long does a mother camel carry her baby? 8. How many years does a young camel stay with its mother?

Chapter 4

While reading (p. 24, after ‘A sandstorm is coming this way,’ he says.)

7 Discuss: Write the following words on the board: lightning, earthquake, tsunami, hurricane, flood, volcano, forest fire,
tornado. Tell the students that they are all types of dangerous natural phenomenon and make sure they know the meaning of each one. Then put students into small groups to discuss the following questions: *Do any of these happen in your country? In which countries do they often happen? Can you think of any very big disasters? Which do you think is the most dangerous and why? What is the best thing to do in an earthquake / a hurricane / a flood?*

**After reading**

8 **Write and guess**: Write *Yazid and his uncle were looking to the south.* on the board. Elicit which word is wrong from the students (north not south). Now students choose a sentence from Chapter 4 and rewrite it changing one word. Students move around the classroom, reading out their sentences and the other students have to identify and correct the mistake.

**Chapter 5**

While reading (p. 30, after ‘I can hear a lot of different languages.’)

9 **Discuss**: Put the students into small groups to discuss the following questions: Why do you think it is important to learn a second language? Which two languages would you like to speak? Which language do you think is the most difficult to learn and why? What is the best way to learn a language?

**After reading**

10 **Write**: Put the students in pairs. Tell them there are nine words in Chapter 5 that describe how a person can feel. Tell them to find and write down the words. The pair that finishes first wins.

**Chapter 6**

While reading (p. 37, after ‘Now people study the old buildings, and visitors from other countries can enjoy them.’)

11 **Discuss**: Put the students in groups and ask them to discuss the following questions: Do you like to visit old buildings when you go on holiday? Are there any famous old buildings in your country and what were they used for? What do you think is the most beautiful building in the world? What are the good things and bad things about living in a town with many famous buildings and many visitors?

12 **Write**: Tell the students they have to write a summary of pages 36–37. The summary must be exactly fifty words long, not one more or one less. The students then read their summaries to the rest of the class and they vote for the best summary.

13 **Game**: Put the students into small groups. Ask half the groups to write ten questions about Chapters 1–3 and the other half questions from Chapters 4–6. When they’ve finished each group reads out their questions and the other groups have to write their answers on a piece of paper. The group with the most correct answers wins.