

WALKING WITH MIGRANTS

TRACING HUMANKIND'S JOURNEY
FROM AFRICA, PAUL SALOPEK IS CHRONICLING
A STORY FOR THE AGES:
THE MASS MIGRATIONS IN WHICH
MILLIONS OF PEOPLE ARE SEARCHING
FOR A BETTER PLACE.



BY PAUL SALOPEK
PHOTOGRAPHS BY JOHN STANMEYER

WALKING WITH

ETHIOPIA 2013

Following our forebears

Paul Salopek (at left) and his guide Ahmed Elema begin day two of the author's global odyssey at the village of Herto Bouri, where the first people considered anatomically modern abandoned their familiar African horizon to explore the unknown world.







DJIBOUTI 2013

The ultimate risk

Migrants are intercepted and detained by the Djiboutian Coast Guard after trekking from Ethiopia, Somalia, and Eritrea and paying boat captains to carry them across the Red Sea to seek work in Yemen, Saudi Arabia, and beyond. Every year hundreds die during this journey.

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FOR NEARLY SEVEN YEARS I have been walking with migrants. ¶ In the winter of 2013 I set out from an ancient *Homo sapiens* fossil site called Herto Bouri, in the north of Ethiopia, and began retracing, on foot, the defining journey of humankind: our first colonization of the Earth during the Stone Age. ¶ My long walk is about storytelling. I report what I see at boot level along the pathways of our original discovery of the planet. From the start, I knew my route would be vague. Anthropologists suggest that our species first stepped out of Africa 600 centuries ago and eventually wandered, more or less aimlessly, to the tip of South America—the last unknown edge of the continents and my own journey’s finish line. We were roving hunters and foragers. We lacked writing, the wheel, domesticated animals, and agriculture. Advancing along empty beaches, we sampled shellfish. We took our bearings off the rippling arrows of migrating cranes. Destinations had yet to be invented. I have trailed these forgotten adventurers for more than 10,000 miles so far.



DJIBOUTI 2013

Search for a signal

Migrants in the Horn of Africa gather in darkness on Djibouti city’s Khorley Beach. Using black-market data cards for their phones, they hope to capture a cell signal from neighboring Somalia to keep in touch with loved ones they’ve left behind.



Today I am traversing India.

Our modern lives, housebound as they are, have changed almost beyond recognition since that golden age of footloose exploration.

Or have they?

The United Nations estimates that more than a billion people—one in seven humans alive today—are voting with their feet, migrating within their countries or across international borders. Millions are fleeing violence: war, persecution, criminality, political chaos. Many more, suffocated by poverty, are seeking economic relief beyond their horizons. The roots

of this colossal new exodus include a globalized market system that tears apart social safety nets, a pollutant-warped climate, and human yearnings supercharged by instant media. In sheer numbers, this is the largest diaspora in the long history of our species.

I pace off the world at 15 miles a day. I mingle often among the uprooted.

In Djibouti I have sipped chai with migrants in bleak truck stops. I have slept alongside them in dusty UN refugee tents in Jordan. I have accepted their stories of pain. I have repaid their laughter. I am not one of them, of course: I am a privileged walker. I carry inside my rucksack an ATM card and a passport. But I have shared the misery of dysentery with

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JORDAN 2013

Escaping civil war

Refugees who fled their homes in Syria when fighting started in 2011 travel around Jordan to find work wherever they can—here picking tomatoes in Gowera village, just north of Aqaba.



them and have been detained many times by their nemesis—police. (Eritrea, Sudan, Iran, and Turkmenistan have denied me visas; Pakistan ejected me, then allowed me back in.)

What can be said about these exiled brothers and sisters? About the immense shadowlands they inhabit, paradoxically, in plain sight?

Hunger, ambition, fear, political defiance—the reasons for movement are not truly the

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question. More important is knowing how the journey itself shapes a different class of human being: people whose ideas of “home” now incorporate an open road—a vast and risky tangent of possibility that begins somewhere far away and ends at your doorsill. How you accept this tiding, with open arms or crouched behind high walls, isn’t at issue either. Because however you react, with compassion or fear, humankind’s reawakened mobility has changed you already.

THE FIRST MIGRANTS I encountered were dead. They lay under small piles of stones in the Great Rift Valley of Africa.

Who were these unfortunates?

It was difficult to know. The world’s poorest people travel from many distant lands to perish in the Afar Triangle of Ethiopia, one of the hottest deserts on Earth. They walk into these terrible barrens in order to reach the Gulf of Aden. There the sea is the doorway to a new (though not always better) life beyond Africa: slave-wage jobs in the cities and date plantations of the Arabian Peninsula. Some of the migrants’ graves doubtless contained Somalis: war refugees. Others likely held deserters from Eritrea. Or drought-weakened Oromos from Ethiopia. All had hoped to sneak across the unmarked borders of Djibouti. They became lost. They collapsed under a molten sun. Sometimes they dropped from thirst within sight of the sea. The columns of exhausted travelers walking behind hastily buried the bodies.

How long have we been depositing our bones like this on the desolate trails of the African Horn? For a long time. From the very beginning. After all, this is the same corridor used by the first modern humans to exit Africa during the Pleistocene.

One day I stumbled across a group of scarecrows hiding in the scant shade of some boulders—15 lean Ethiopian men who seemed to pretend that if they didn’t move a muscle, they would be invisible. Some were manual laborers. Most were farmers from the Ethiopian highlands. The annual rains, the farmers said, had become impossibly erratic. Sticking it out on their sun-cracked fields meant slow starvation. Better to chance the ocean of white light that is the Afar Triangle, even if you never returned. They were pioneers of sorts, new climate change refugees.

A recent World Bank study calculates that by 2050 more than 140 million people in sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia, and Latin America could be tumbled into motion by the catastrophic effects of climate change. Ten million climate refugees could swell the trails of East Africa alone. In Ethiopia the tide may reach 1.5 million people—more than 15 times the emigrants now straggling annually through the Afar Triangle to reach the Middle East.

Inching north up the Rift, I was forced to consider the urge to leave a familiar world that was falling apart, a home where the sky itself was against you. All around me snaked the invisible battle lines of an intensifying range war between the Afar and Issa pastoralists—two competing herder groups whose shallow wells were drying up, whose pastures were thinning from a relentless cycle of droughts. They shot at each other over the ownership of a papery blade of grass, over a cup of sandy water. In other words, over survival. Here was the source of our oldest travel story. Drastic climate change and murderous famines, experts say, likely helped drive the first pulses of humans out of Africa.

How strong is the push to leave? To abandon what you love? To walk into the unknown with all your possessions stuffed into a pocket? It is more powerful than fear of death.

In the Afar Triangle I stumbled across seven unburied bodies. They were women and men clustered together. *(Continued on page 60)*

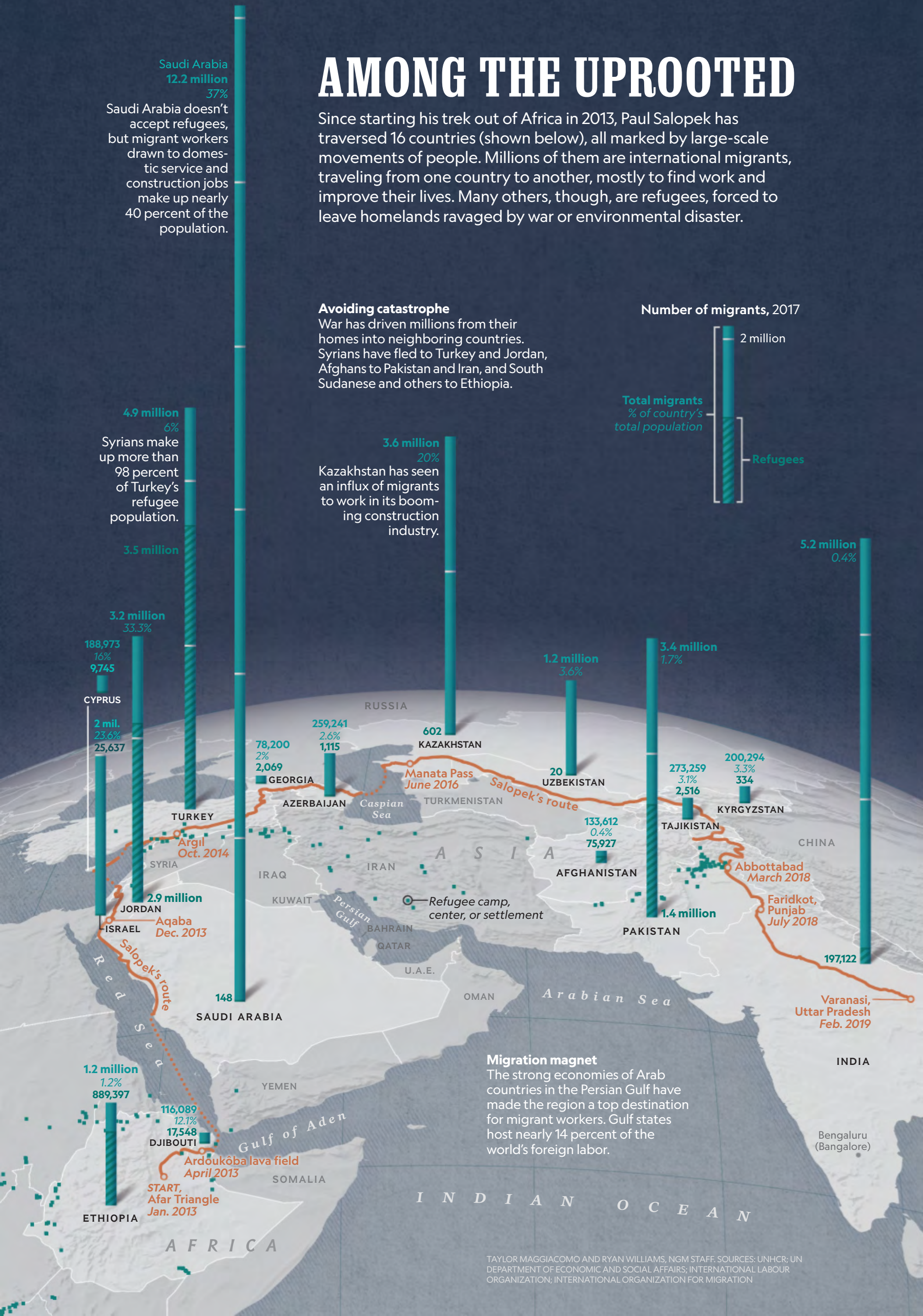
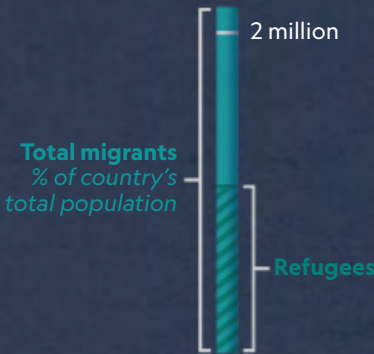
AMONG THE UPROOTED

Since starting his trek out of Africa in 2013, Paul Salopek has traversed 16 countries (shown below), all marked by large-scale movements of people. Millions of them are international migrants, traveling from one country to another, mostly to find work and improve their lives. Many others, though, are refugees, forced to leave homelands ravaged by war or environmental disaster.

Avoiding catastrophe

War has driven millions from their homes into neighboring countries. Syrians have fled to Turkey and Jordan, Afghans to Pakistan and Iran, and South Sudanese and others to Ethiopia.

Number of migrants, 2017



Migration magnet

The strong economies of Arab countries in the Persian Gulf have made the region a top destination for migrant workers. Gulf states host nearly 14 percent of the world's foreign labor.



TURKEY 2014

Refuge from ISIS

Five-year-old Ahmed breaks down in tears after arriving safely in Turkey with his family. In a three-day period, some 150,000 Syrian Kurds entered Turkey at multiple places along the border to escape ISIS. Today Turkey harbors 3.7 million Syrian refugees.



TURKEY 2014
Stranded but sheltered
Rain clouds cast a shadow over Nizip 1, a camp where more than 30,000 Syrian refugees make do in tents provided by a Turkish governmental aid agency. Each unit has a small kitchen, bedding, and a TV. People share toilets and showers.





THE SHIFTING PATTERNS OF MOVEMENT

MIGRATION WAVES

WHEN EMIGRATION IS HIGHER

Black indicates more people leaving a country than foreign-born residents staying.



WHEN IMMIGRATION IS HIGHER

White indicates more foreign-born residents in a country than people leaving.

The ebb and flow of people across borders has long shaped our world. Data from the past 50 years of international migration help us understand why people make the choice to leave and where they go. Less than 10 percent of these migrants are forced to flee; most are seeking a better life and move only when they can afford to. Global migrants totaled fewer than 100 million in the 1960s, and although the number has increased substantially since then, it remains a fraction of the world's 7.6 billion people today.

258 MILLION PEOPLE IN 2017 LIVED OUTSIDE THEIR COUNTRY OF ORIGIN.

3% OF PEOPLE WORLDWIDE ARE MIGRANTS; THE FIGURE HAS HELD FOR 50 YEARS.

ALBERTO LUCAS LÓPEZ, RYAN WILLIAMS, AND KAYA BERNE, NGM STAFF

POVERTY IMMOBILIZES, MONEY MAKES MOVING POSSIBLE

Bangladesh. Millions fled conflict in the 1970s, and in the 1980s millions more began to leave for work in the Gulf states. Remittances from overseas fuel the economy.

Mexico. Higher incomes have encouraged many to seek U.S. jobs. Factors such as a weak U.S. market and stronger border enforcement after the 9/11 attacks slowed migration.

Vietnam. Economic growth since the end of the war, in 1975, has spurred in- and out-migration. Nearly half the four million Vietnamese living abroad are in the U.S.

STRONG LABOR MARKETS DRAW MIGRANTS

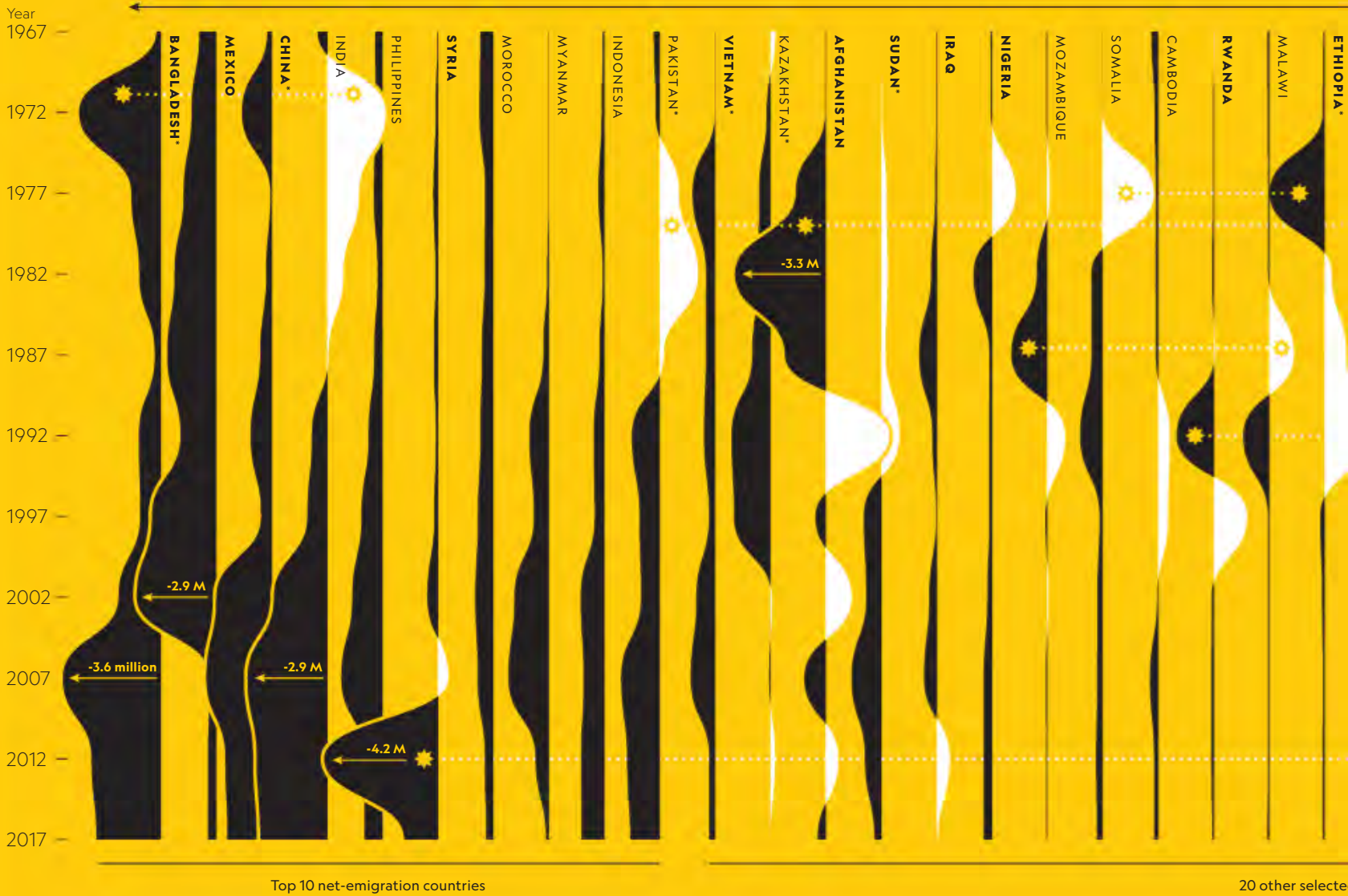
Thailand. Migrant workers and refugees are attracted to Thailand's wages and unfilled jobs. There was a brief outflow in 1992 of refugees who went home to Cambodia.

Spain. Economic growth, rising demand for labor, and integration into what became the EU led to a surge in migrants from developing countries in the 1990s.

Saudi Arabia. oil boom brought in migrant workers to the country. The 1990s saw revenues and on undocumented

HIGHER EMIGRATION

More people leaving a country than foreign-born residents staying



Charts track net emigration (black) or immigration (white), 1967 to 2017.

Nation in conflict **Destination**

Larger refugee crises shown above

INSTABILITY FORCES PEOPLE OUT

Syria. Unrest and civil war have pushed millions into countries such as Turkey, Jordan, and Lebanon. Syria's outflow in 2012 is mirrored in Turkey's inflow.

Afghanistan. The Soviet Union's 1979 invasion sent millions into Pakistan and elsewhere in the region. Many later returned, only to face further violence.

Sudan. Refugees from neighboring countries have contributed to Sudan's inflows, but cycles of civil war in the mid-1990s created greater net outflows.

Iraq. Instability following the 2003 U.S.-led invasion displaced millions of Iraqis. More recently, Iraq has taken in some 250,000 refugees from war-torn Syria.

Nigeria. A v in the 1980s arrivals and departures. groups such are spurring

U.S. The 1970s brought foreign workers to the kingdom. As oil dwindling, a crackdown on migrant workers.

U.A.E. Oil wealth, political stability, and a construction boom in the 2000s drew foreign workers. But soon after that, when oil prices fell, many of them left.

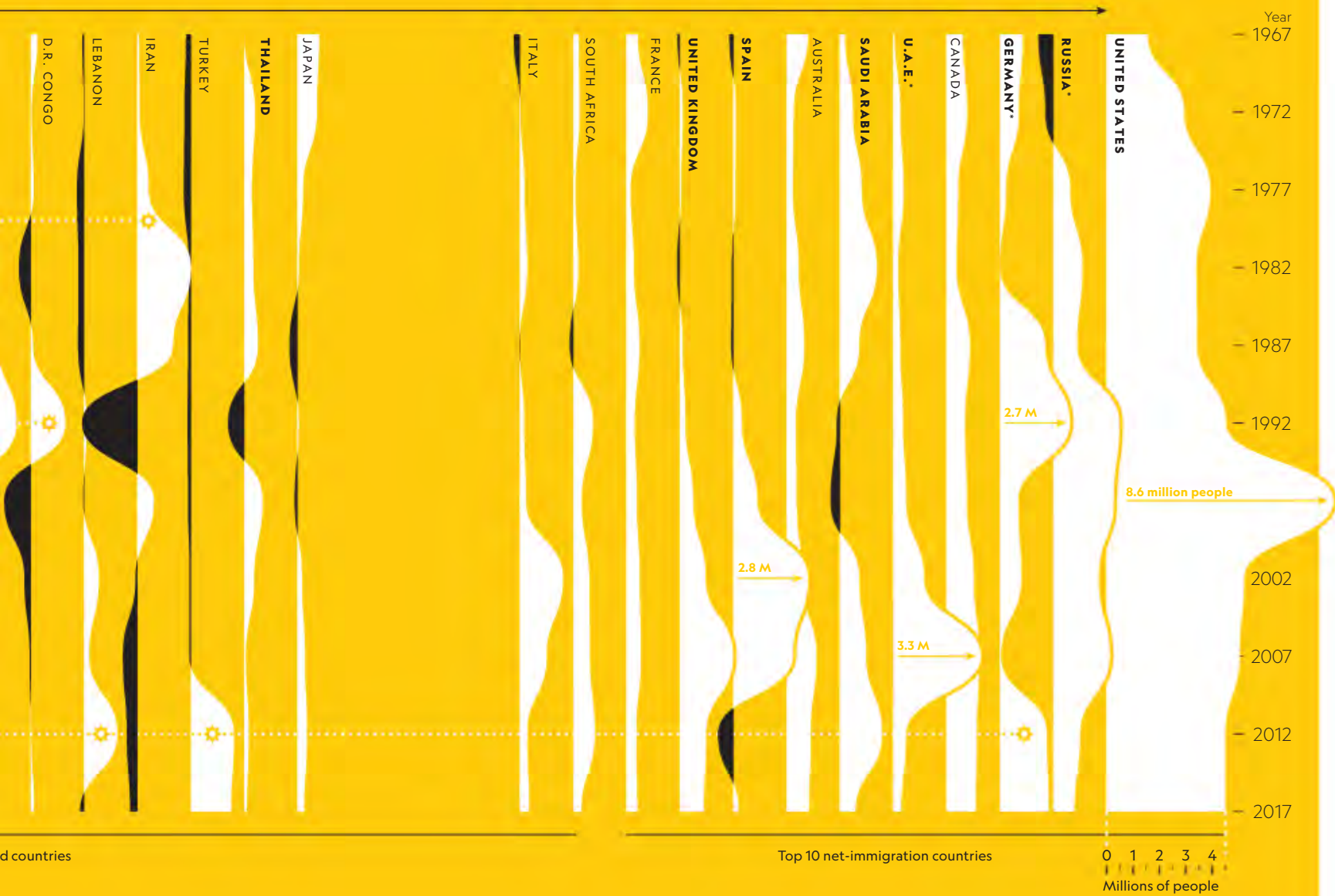
Germany. Millions of Eastern Europeans arrived when the Iron Curtain was lifted. The next surge came in the late 2000s as the robust economy drew migrants and refugees.

Russia. An exodus was reversed in the 1970s with the discovery of resources such as oil and gas. The 1991 Soviet collapse brought new arrivals from former republics.

United States. Some 1.6 million new jobs came with a strong postrecession economy in the 1990s. In 2002 a slowdown slashed both jobs and immigration.

HIGHER IMMIGRATION

More foreign-born residents in a country than people leaving



Rwanda. A violent uprising curbed migrant prompted. Today terrorist as Boko Haram outflow.

Rwanda. Nearly two million Rwandans fled during the genocide that took some 800,000 lives in 1994. The conflict fueled war in the Dem. Rep. of the Congo.

POLICIES SHIFT MIGRATION FLOW

China. An end to “whites only” policies overseas that had long blocked migration, and emigration reforms at home in the 1980s opened the world to Chinese workers.

Ethiopia. The government outlawed emigration in 1981 after famine and revolution forced people out of the country. Many returned once the regime fell, in 1991.

United Kingdom. A change in policies in the 1990s eased restrictions on immigration and asylum. By 2002, a skilled immigrant could get a visa without a job offer.

*NET MIGRATION DATA BASED ON CURRENT COUNTRY BORDERS. SOURCES: WORLD BANK; IOM; UNHCR; ILO; MIGRATION POLICY INSTITUTE; PEW RESEARCH CENTER; SONJA FRANSEN AND HEIN DE HAAS, INTERNATIONAL MIGRATION INSTITUTE



**UZBEKISTAN
2017**

On the move for work

Men driving from their homes in Uzbekistan to seek jobs in Russia pause to pay homage to Daud-Ota, revered in tradition as a patron and guardian, who is buried in a nearby necropolis.



They lay faceup, mummified atop a dark lava field. The heat was devastating. The little wild dogs of the desert, the jackals, had taken these travelers' hands and feet. My walking partner, Houssain Mohamed Houssain, shook his head in wonder, in disgust. He was an ethnic Afar, a descendant of camel herders, the old kings of the desert. His people called the recent waves of transients *hahai*—"people of the wind"—ghosts who blew across the land. He snapped a picture.

"You show them this," Houssain said angrily, "and they say, 'Oh, that won't happen to me!'"

One of the unlucky migrants had squeezed under a ledge. Doubtless he was crazed for shade. He had placed his shoes next to his naked body, just so, with one sock rolled carefully inside each shoe. He knew: His walking days were over.

WALKING THE CONTINENTS teaches you to look down. You appreciate the importance of feet. You take an interest in footwear. This is natural.

Human character, of course, is mirrored in the face. The eyes reveal sincerity, lying, curiosity, love, hate. But one's choice of shoes (or even lack of it) speaks to personal geography: wealth or poverty, age, type of work, education, gender, urban versus rural. Among the world's legions of migrants, a certain pedal taxonomy holds. Economic migrants—the destitute millions with time to plan ahead—seem to favor the shoe of the 21st century's poor: the cheap, unisex, multi-purpose Chinese sneaker. War refugees escaping violence, by contrast, must trudge their wretched roads in rubber flip-flops, dress loafers, dusty sandals, high-heeled pumps, booties improvised from rags, etc. They flee burning cities, abandon villages and farms. They pull on whatever shoes lie within reach at a moment's notice. I first began to see such eclectic piles of footwear appearing outside refugee tents in the highlands of Jordan.

"I wake up to these mountains," cried Zaeleh al Khaled al Hamdu, a Syrian grandmother shod in beaded house slippers. Tiny blue flowers were

INDIA 2019

From farm to city

About 2,800 apparel workers, mostly women, are employed by Indian Designs Exports Private Limited, in Bangalore. More than 70 percent

of such workers have left rural communities, mainly in northern India, for jobs in the city. The company manufactures clothing for Gap, Columbia, H&M, and other brands.





tattooed on her wrinkled chin and cheeks. She waved a bony hand at the alien peaks around her. “It feels like these mountains, I am carrying them on my back.”

Heaviness. Weight. The crush of despair. The mountainous burden of helplessness.

This is the badge of the war refugee. Or so our televisions, newspapers, and mobile phones would inform us. The stock media photo of the

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war-displaced: columns of traumatized souls marching with heavy steps, with slumped shoulders, along a burning road. Or families jammed into leaky boats on the Mediterranean, their gazes sagging with anguish, sunk in vulnerability. But these snapshots of refugee life—seen through the lens of the rich world—are limited, misleading, even self-serving.

For weeks I walked from tent to dusty tent in Jordan. At least half a million Syrians languished there—just one aching shard of some 12 million civilians scattered by the bloodiest civil war in the Middle East. War steals your past and future. The Syrians could not go back to the contested rubble of their homes—to Idlib, Hamah, or Damascus. Nobody else wanted them. They were stuck. All they owned was their miserable present.

Many toiled illegally on farms.

They eked out another breath of life by picking tomatoes for \$1.50 a day. When I plodded past, they waved me over. They jauntily fed me their employers’ crops. (Residents of a poor nation, Jordanians spared little affection for their even poorer Syrian guests.) They poured gallons of tea with wild thyme down my throat. They shook out their filthy blankets and bade me sit and rest.

“Here, we only dream of chicken,” one man joked. He’d eaten grass to survive in Syria. In one tent a young woman stepped behind a hanging bedsheet and reemerged in her finest dress—pink with silver stripes. She was daz- zlingly pregnant, and her beauty passed in a

clean hush through my chest, into the molder- ing tent, before blowing unstoppably out into the desert.

What I’m trying to say is this: Whatever else refugees may be, they aren’t powerless.

They aren’t the infantilized victims usually featured in the political left’s suffering porn. They resemble even less the cartoon invaders feared by right-wing populists and bigots—the barbarian hordes coming to take jobs, housing, social services, racial iden- tity, religion, sex partners, and every- thing else vital and good in wealthy host countries. (Since Neolithic times, the earliest populations of Europe have been overrun and utterly trans- formed by waves of immigrants from Central Asia and the eastern Mediter- ranean. Without such interbreeding, modern “Europeans” wouldn’t exist.)

No. The refugees I have walked among are bearded pharmacists and girl goat- herds. Shopkeepers and intellectuals. That is, supremely ordinary beings grappling with mea- ger options. Remembering their dead, they cup their hands to their faces and weep. But often they are incredibly strong. And generous.

“Please come, mister,” a Syrian teacher whispered in Turkey, guiding me from a refu- gee camp classroom out into the open air. Her students had been drawing decapitations and hangings as part of their art therapy. She noticed I had fallen silent. She was worried about *my* emotions.

A thousand walked miles to the east, in the Caucasus, a family of ethnic Armenian refugees from Syria hollered, “Don’t come in please!”— making me wait outside their dilapidated home while they hastily set a table they couldn’t afford. They recently moved into a house that once belonged to ethnic Azerbaijanis, a local population ejected during the decades-old Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. I found the Azer- baijanis 120 miles later. They refused my money in a refugee camp café.

“We have been waiting for peace so long,” Nemat Huseynov, the café owner, said. He had owned many sheep when the conflict began in 1988. It goes on, despite a cease-fire in 1994.

Huseynov stared at his big, work-swollen shepherd’s hands splayed palm down on the worn tablecloth.

Home.

You cannot always choose your shoes on a long walk.

The world's refugees and migrants don't demand our pity. They just ask for our attention. Me they pitied because I walked on.

"MAY I PRACTICE my English?"

It was the teenage boys and girls of Punjab. Last year. Mile 7,000 of my slow journey. The scalding back roads of India's breadbasket.

Five, 10, 20 youngsters a day emerged from their houses, jogging to catch up after I slogged past. Sweating, puffing, unused to exercise, they unlimbered their English vocabulary and syntax for a few hundred yards before peeling off. They were studying for the International English Language Testing System exams. High scores were essential to meet the English-proficiency standards required for visas to New Zealand, Australia, the United Kingdom, Canada, and the United States. There was nothing lighthearted about these exchanges that were as old as the Stone Age—"Who are you?" "Where do you come from?" "Where are you going?"—because it was homework.

Faridkot was a town marooned in a sea of wheatgrass. About 100 private English-language schools there were preparing tens of thousands of young Indians to abandon their homeland. The fields of Punjab were already taken. There was little future in farming. Successful students aimed to join the 150 million migrant laborers who vault frontiers to find work. Punjab was undergoing an evacuation.

"The only ones who stay behind are those who can't afford it," said language-school owner Gulabi Singh, looking startled at his own information. The average cost of emigration: \$14,000, or 23 times the annual median income in India.

I had just arrived from Central Asia. A walking partner in Uzbekistan slipped regularly into Kazakhstan to work without papers at construction sites. He carried scars from police encounters. In Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, I met migrants who flew to Moscow to punch cash registers or inhale poisons at nightmare chemical plants. The Afghans along my route were eyeing every continent to flee the war. And so on.

Yet here is the secret of this epic of human restlessness: It is probably the people who stay behind who will change the world.

Internal migrations—rural-to-urban stampedes—sweep up 139 million citizens within

India. In China the figure approaches a quarter billion. In Brazil, Indonesia, Nigeria, Mexico, everywhere, the trend is the same. Three-quarters of the humans now stumbling across the planet are circulating within their own borders. New middle classes are being born. Old political dynasties are tottering. Megacities are exploding—and imploding. Stunning innovations collide with colossal disappointments. Entire systems of knowledge (traditional farming), accumulated over millennia, are being jettisoned. Urbanization is cracking apart old gender and religious norms. Environmental resources are in free fall. Chaos, longing, violence, hope, tearing down, building up, experimentation, astonishing successes and defeats. Nothing can stand in the way of this unprecedented force of yearning. By comparison, the hysteria in the global north over international migrants seems a pale sideshow.

Walking India, I joined human torrents streaming along roads. I saw them jamming bus stands. Packed atop trains. The hardworking poor ceaselessly coming and going. Sooner than later, the world must learn to harness the extraordinary energy behind such mass aspiration.

The migrant steering the course of our species' destiny this century saw me coming from afar. People always do. She couldn't have been 18. This was in a village of stray cows in Bihar, one of India's poorest states. I was bound for Myanmar. She strode up and boldly shook my hand.

"This place is very, very boring," the Bihari girl declared within a minute. "My teachers are boring. What do I do?"

I laughed.

Ambition and intelligence shone in her eyes. Soon enough she would be shouldering her way into one of India's metastasizing cities, testing her mettle against hundreds of millions of other dislocated villagers. There would be no wall high enough to contain her.

Where will she end up? Where will we? Nobody knows. The important thing on this road we share is to keep walking. And not be afraid. The way ahead may be uphill. I suggest doing your homework. Her shoes were sturdy. □

Follow National Geographic Fellow **Paul Salopek's** walk around the world at outofedenwalk.org and natgeo.com. **John Stanmeyer** has been documenting parts of Salopek's journey for the magazine.