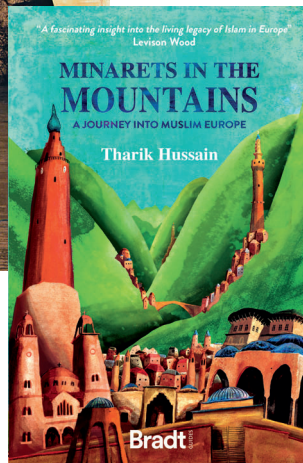


The Stari Most bridge in Mostar, Bosnia and Herzegovina



# Europe's Hidden Muslim History

British travel journalist Tharik Hussain has spent decades traversing the globe, reporting everywhere from Saudi Arabia and Bahrain to Thailand. But some of his most astonishing discoveries have been closer to home: uncovering landmarks of Islamic importance in England, or stumbling onto Muslim villages in rural Bulgaria. The former inspired him to launch the UK's first Muslim heritage trails; the latter led to his eye-opening new book, *Minarets in the Mountains: A Journey into Muslim Europe*



**Your literary guide for this journey was 17th-century Ottoman explorer Evliya Çelebi, who was quite a prolific traveller. Why have we not heard of**

**him much outside of Turkey?**

I don't think those perspectives are valued in the same way as the kind of white colonialist perspectives we see in most historical travel writing. It's up to those of us who think that Evliya and Ibn Battuta's perspective is as important, if not more important, to bring those voices to the fore. Both of them covered extensive ground – in Ibn Battuta's case, something like three times the distance of Marco Polo – and yet, because

the dominant culture has been a Western literary tradition, these voices are so quiet in popular travel literature.

**How has your perspective as a Muslim traveller shaped your writing?**

To be honest, I was massively affected by the Western perspective – it's the literary tradition in which I grew up and that I fell in love with. But then when I started to explore the heritage of travel writing, it actually began to dawn on me that this perspective was born out of the wealthy elite, and the colonial class going off and exploring. Most of the literature I was reading is actually an evolution of this tradition; consciously or unconsciously, we've inherited some of this as well.

Becoming conscious of it is the first thing. We have to add our perspectives. It's about balance. When people say to me, "Oh, you're talking about decolonising travel writing, are you suggesting you're offering an unbiased perspective?" Of course not, I'm not pretending that for one minute. I'm giving you the Muslim perspective. I'm being very transparent about that, and I'm saying you need to put it next to the other ones – because for too long that Muslim perspective on Europe's Muslim heritage has been amiss.

**You wrote, "As a family of Muslims living in Europe at a time when Muslims are made to feel like outsiders, [Bulgarian Muslim] villages offered a tantalising prospect: the chance to meet indigenous versions of us." For you this is a personal story, about understanding your place in the continent you call home.**

For a very, very long time, when I was growing up, I felt like I didn't belong here. This whole journey I'm on at the moment began 20 years ago, with a nine-hour layover in Larnaca, Cyprus. I found this mosque that was allegedly built on the site of the tomb of an aunt of the Prophet (PBUH). Why did I not know that the first generation of Muslims were in Europe? In other words, Islam was in Europe immediately, and all I was hearing was, "You don't belong here, you've just turned up here, you're new."

From that moment, every time I travelled in Europe, I went out of my way to find this heritage. And of course, I'm looking for belonging, I'm looking for identity. It dawned on me that there are 1,400 years of hidden heritage. The more I looked, the more I realised: Nobody's going to tell me about it. I'm going to have to tell myself. Eventually, I made the decision to tell the world

**One of the most interesting things about your journey is how much of it was serendipitous, which makes you realise how much there must be all around us. What are Europeans – and not just European Muslims – missing out on by not knowing this part of their own history?**

Apart from the richness, they become susceptible to the far-right narrative, that Europe is Judeo-Christian. It's actually Abrahamic. If they're not getting this exposure, they're going to start arriving at conclusions.

**What part of the world are you hoping to turn your lens on next?**

The south of Spain, Britain, America and the Silk Road through the eyes of Muslim travellers of antiquity. But the one that's closest to my heart is Bangladesh. Having been born there, I really want to explore what it means to be Bangladeshi in a way that I don't think has been done. Bangladesh is like me: it's middle-aged and starting to come to terms with who it is. I think it'd be a great narrative to explore. 