sand and windstorms during the daytime hours abate at night. Nights in the desert are crystal clear, even when total darkness prevails during the new moon. Regardless of the time of month, nowhere else are so many stars so visible with such clarity, brilliance, and sparkle."[5] So to avoid the obstacles of storms and daytime heat, the Bedouin often move at night during the cool hours before sunrise under the moon and stars.

Centuries of migration through desert terrain have honed spatial perceptions. When moving by day, the Bedouin are guided by an acute awareness of subtle changes of hue and form, wind direction and humidity, the terrain and scents of the desert. At night, they depend on their gathered knowledge of astronomy to navigate the desert vastness, as well as shadows cast by moonlight and the changing sounds and feel of the land surface underfoot.

When they encamp, the Bedouin vary the orientation of their tents in response to seasonally shifting conditions. During the dry winter and early spring, when sandstorms are most frequent, tents are turned against the winds, and must be strong enough to withstand the storms' gale forces. Inside the tent, "the sturdiest and heaviest artifacts are located on the side of the prevailing winds; beds and the weight of people on them, which contribute to the structural reinforcement of the windward side, are located precisely in response to wind resistance."[6]

The Bedouin's portable tent is especially suitable for a nomadic existence. A lightweight, tensile structure, it is easily put up and taken down. Sewn together of 2-foot-wide strips of woven or felted hair or wool, it is usually black or gray with white cotton edges to prevent raveling. Guy ropes pull outward while six to eight poles push upward to stretch the fabric tightly over a hump-shaped space. When clustered with other raised tents in the encampment, the impression is of camels at rest on the ground.

Inside, the tent space is organized for ritual gatherings as well

as for protection. Local customs emphasize hospitality so all tents are arranged for the traditional feeding of visitors. "The tent of the sheik, or chief, is the largest. It has a spacious guest area with a small hearth for making coffee, where the men gather to talk, eat, and smoke. In front of this seating area, the tent is left open facing whatever direction is most convenient at that campsite and for the current weather. . . . Cooking takes place on a larger hearth in the women's part of the tent or just outside it."[7]

The Bedouin attach symbolic meaning to their tents. The tents are carried from one campsite to another on camelback. Once the group has arrived, women, who design, make, and own the tents, do all the work of erecting and dismantling them. Yet when a marriage takes place, the groom is said to "build a tent over his wife."[8]

The symbolism of the tent is carried into modern urban life. Ali al-Ambar, a Saudi ethnologist, is quoted as saying, "The first thing any Saudi does when he builds a new home, even in a big city, is to put a tent in the garden, or a figurative version of it in the house" for the traditional *majlis,* a social gathering for conversation and counsel, and for the powerful, an official audience.[9]

The ultimate symbolic expression of the Bedouin tent occurred during the visit of Libyan leader Colonel Muammar al-Qaddafi to Brussels for a meeting in 2004 of the European Commission. Instead of accepting the invitation to stay in the elegant Val Duchesse palace, Belgium's residence for visiting dignitaries, he pitched his black desert tent on the manicured lawn. Here he slept under the watchful eyes of his blue-uniformed female bodyguards.

Moving from One Dwelling to Another

While some people are nomads carrying their dwellings with them, others travel on a regular basis from one permanent dwelling to another. Lisa Heschong describes the common tradition of