

THE UNKNOWN SAUDI

Alex Williams

Thinking back to the time when I first knew I'd be travelling to The Middle East, I feel a little shameful. My total knowledge of The Middle East could have fitted comfortably into a thimble. Sure, I could name a few of the countries, but I also thought that I would be living in a mud-brick house on a dirt street with camels wandering past. Plus I was quite confident that I was about to travel to one of the most dangerous places in the world and I was therefore very brave. (Sigh). The reality is that my family's and my time in The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia was going to be a wonderful, safe and exciting life changing event for which we are eternally grateful.

The first ten months in Riyadh, while I was there on my own, passed by in a bit of a blur. I learned the basic rules of survival, like where the best supermarket is, when the prayer times were, what to do to avoid confrontation with the Mutawa (religious police) and not to drink Laban. But it wasn't until I had to start thinking again as a family man that I was able to piece it together into a more full life. Finding a school for the girls was fun. From that experience I found that there is a sub-network of families in operation. The expatriate community is roughly half families, a quarter single men and a quarter single women, and there is not a great deal of linking between the families and the single men. So when I needed to find out about the choices for schooling, I spoke with a family man who readily directed me towards a school. With the schooling question answered, the next priority was to get my accommodation upgraded. It was during this exercise that I began to learn one of the fundamental differences between the Arabic culture and western culture. The Arabic people love families and focus very much on family concerns. So when I approached the company management to get my accommodation upgraded, I found that there was very little resistance to the request. The main question came down to the standard of accommodation I was eligible for. Here I was facing another learning opportunity because, whereas the Arabic culture has a greater appreciation of family life than western culture, they also have a much stronger focus on social status than we do, especially we in Australia. My accommodation choices were tied into my level at work, and great effort was put into ensuring that I did not overstep that boundary. Being fairly easy going this didn't bother me too much, but I did find it interesting. It was only a week before the family arrived that I moved into a three-bedroom apartment that was bigger than our home in Australia and situated in a compound that

provided almost everything a comfortable existence required. We had a gymnasium, large swimming pool, tennis courts, a library and games room and we were situated in one of the more affluent parts of Riyadh. This gave us ready access to more shops, restaurants, shopping centres and entertainment venues than we could possibly need. With the family about to arrive, life was looking pretty good.

Donna and the girls arrived in Dhahran in the middle of the night after the tedious flight from Brisbane. Wanting to keep the potentially negative experiences to a minimum, I flew from Riyadh to Dhahran to meet them. We then flew on to Riyadh where our friend Nick drove us back to the compound. With the regular holidays home or abroad and the visits made by family, expats spend many a boring hour at the airport. A funny/scary thing happened one time when I was returning from Oz. I thought the taxi driver was going rather quickly down the freeway, taking me to my compound. This was confirmed when I glanced over at the speedo to discover that we were cruising at 160 kph. This was quite common for the trip to or from the airport. Donna's natural approach was to be quite cautious about this whole, new experience. But I was to find during those first few weeks that she had come to the other side of the world with a commitment to herself to give this a big chance to work. We had been victims of 'The Recession We Had To Have' in the early nineties and this Middle Eastern experience was one of those opportunities that come by very rarely, and Donna wasn't about to waste it.

In those first few weeks, while everything was still a blur for Donna, I introduced her to as much of life in Saudi as was possible for me to do without overwhelming her. We went to the desert for picnics; we went shopping; we went to restaurants; we went visiting with friends; we drove to sightseeing places outside Riyadh. Donna met the other ladies who lived on the compound and immediately struck up friendships that have lasted to this day. She also started to gather tidbits of information, which were eventually to lead to her establishing herself firmly in the hierarchy of compound life. Donna loves craft and Donna loves to shop and she was soon able to offer guidance to the other ladies on both subjects. Women who had been in Riyadh for many years were coming to Donna, asking about which were the best shops, the best deals or for information about how they could find a shop that sold a particular craft requirement.

Two of our favourite activities became going to The Turkish Restaurant for an evening meal and going to Bartha to wander through the exotic markets that abound there. The Turkish Restaurant is a well-established landmark for westerners in Riyadh. They had a mixed grill that was just the best value for money. And if you were really feeling peckish you could have this with a special fruit juice that is simply the best concoction of juices, whipped into a frenzy and served for a ridiculously low

price. The hot bread with sesame seeds is beyond description. A trip to the Turkish Restaurant became a regular outing for us, and anyone else who wanted to come. Many enjoyable evenings began at the Turkish Restaurant.

A trip to Bartha usually entailed a hair-raising drive through the inner-city traffic, a desperate search for a parking place anywhere within walking distance and then hour after hour of wandering along the myriad of alley ways, arcades, laneways and market stalls, surrounded by a milling throng of exotic smells, colours, textures and languages. One night while wandering through Bartha, I had a particularly interesting experience. We were in The Antique Souq, marvelling at the many ancient items on offer, when I asked Nick if he knew what a particular piece of equipment was used for. I heard a female voice say something about coffee, but thought that it must have been another conversation. I mentioned it again and again I heard a female voice. I finally came to realize that the fully covered Saudi lady standing nearby was telling me what the object used to be used for, which was for the Bedouin to roast coffee beans over a fire. What made this strange was that the lady spoke to me at all, even though she was looking in another direction. Men and women who are not close family or married are not supposed to talk to each other. The fact that she was speaking English was inconsequential, as most Saudi's, except for the very poor, are able to speak English. We spent a couple of minutes talking about the antique item while looking away from each other and all the while the antique store owner simply pretended that nothing was happening. It was a bizarre situation, but one for which I am very grateful, fleeting though it was.

Much of our Saudi experience emanated from contacts made at the girls' schools. Donna ended up getting a job at the first school, working as a teacher's aide, a physical education teacher and a computer teacher. All of this was technically against the law, but in the early days of our stay the authorities easily overlooked this sort of thing. The school itself was unregistered when we first sent the kids there. The standard of education was wonderful but the authorities didn't know the school existed. The situation suddenly changed when there was a crackdown by the authorities on unregistered schools.

During the 12 months that I was in Riyadh without the family, my main form of recreation on weekends was walking and camping in the desert. I was a victim of many instances of plans agreed with other people falling by the wayside in the early days, so I learned to become totally self-sufficient with regards to providing for my own weekend entertainment. For a number of months I went to the desert to walk and explore on my own, before eventually being introduced to a kindred spirit, Nick, who became a close friend to the whole family. The most common recreational activities for westerners on weekends was to lounge around the compound swimming pool,

playing tennis, having bar-b-ques and parties, none of which greatly interested me. I wanted to take the opportunity to explore the desert, so Nick and I went out nearly every weekend to walk, explore and eventually to camp in the desert. Nick bought a tent, but we only used this once. Firstly, it was next to impossible to hammer the pegs into the rocky ground and secondly, there were no insects in the desert. This meant that sleeping under the stars was the way to go, and what a magic experience that is.

Throughout our stay in The Magic Kingdom we had some wonderful experiences with the Arabic people. Donna found herself tutoring two of the Royal Princesses in their English, being chauffeured to and from their palace each afternoon in a Mercedes. This led to our girls and Donna being invited to a party for the princesses' mother. Donna told me that it was like a scene from an Arabian Nights movie, with lots of exotic food, decorations and ladies, many with their ladies-in-waiting. I attended a wedding celebration for one of the young Saudi fellows at work. This was, to be polite, less than an exciting outing. My friends and I arrived at the allotted time and drove around to the back door of the reception place. This was the men's entrance. We entered and were greeted by the wedding party, being the groom, the groom's male family members and the wife's male family members. Everyone was smiling and we proceeded down the line shaking hands and doing the polite little bow. We found a seat amongst the myriad of sofas that were arranged around the room and tried to make small talk with the other guests. Trays of ceremonial coffee were passing around, which we each had only one of. It was awful. The groom, who had a permanent smile planted on his face, was sitting in the place of honour, with father and father-in-law on either side. The guest formed what seemed like a never-ending stream of greetings and I'm sure they were repeatedly cycling through. I felt sorry for the poor groom. Eventually, at roughly eleven o'clock at night, the food was served in another room. We all moved into that room, sat down on the floor, eight around each setting and began to eat. The food consisted of a side of roasted lamb in a bed of rice with lots of herbs, spices and vegetables. For twenty minutes we filled ourselves before washing up in the washroom at the end of the room, then retiring to the original room for a final cup of coffee. The women, I am led to believe, have a wonderful time at weddings. All together, we learned that the Arabic people are lovely people, ever willing to offer friendship. We also learned that the best of the Arabic people are the Bedouin, the traditional desert people. Possibly the crowning experience in the whole five wonderful years was the morning tea we spent with a Bedouin family, sitting on the floor in their tent in the middle of the desert, with the exotic scent of the acacia log burning in the fire, drinking sweet tea and eating dates and goat cheese while Donna had her hand hennaed by the Bedouin ladies and the girls played outside with the Bedouin children and the goats.



Compound living can be a drama all by itself. I was warned very early in my stay about some of the dangers involved with compound living, but as I was living in a small group of villas in the early days, I wasn't to experience the problems until after Donna and the girls arrived. It was only then, after we moved into one of the family compounds, that I began to understand. There were too many people with too much time on their hands living in too close to one another. We heard a funny story about an expat family living in Kenya who encountered severe problems because one lady thought that another lady had a bigger fridge than her. That might sound absurd, but the niggly problems that pop up can be that silly.

The compound life is a strange mixture of difficulties coming from living in close proximity to others in combination with the wonderful feeling of community that just doesn't happen in the modern Australia. The comradeship, friendship, support and good times that we gained from the other expats are some of the experiences that we sorely miss. The excitement of international travel, the new and exotic places that we visited, the cultures that we touched on are others.

A good example of how the expats help each other is in how you find out about special places around town and about social events that are happening. The local television is next to useless for information about this sort of thing and the local paper is limited in the type of information it gives, just as the local papers are at home. The way you find out about special shops, good restaurants, Christmas celebrations, Australia Day celebrations, which shops are selling Christmas trees under the counter, is by the expat network. As you might expect, the women are the best at it, passing information over the seemingly endless morning coffee and cake. Through Donna's contacts over morning coffee and cake we learned about, and were invited to, the ANZAC Day commemoration at the Australian Embassy. We went to a garden party at the British Embassy through an invite from one of my managers. A story that one of my daughters will be able to tell her children is how, at the age of seven, she asked the British Ambassador to The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia to hold her cup of tea while she climbed on to the garden wall so she could sit comfortably and take in the ambiance.



A recreational activity that everyone became involved with, usually over the dinner-party table or a glass of homemade wine, was the discussion of past, upcoming and

planned holidays. One of the very real differences between the expat community and the community at home in Sydney or Melbourne is that everybody in the expat community is employed, and employed in very well paid jobs. Everyone has at least one international trip per year, but most people take two or three, even if it is only to Bahrain or Singapore. We were at a dinner party one night when the subject of upcoming holidays came up and one of the couples told us that they and their children were planning a cruise on a yacht in the Greek Islands. Another couple mentioned that a yacht cruise off the coast of Turkey was also worth considering. They had done it the year before and could recommend it. Donna and I were at that time planning a family holiday in Western Europe, but we took note for future holidays. To be honest, one of my favourite times and places was the two day stopover in Singapore on the way to and from Brisbane.



Why are the expats in Saudi Arabia? This is a reasonable question. I don't know the real figures, but I would guesstimate that up to half the workforce in Riyadh are from countries other than The Middle East. Why are they there?

Many of the people from the Philippines, Sri Lanka, Thailand and many other third world countries are doing jobs that the Saudi people see as menial and therefore below them. Most of the nurses, for example, are from the Philippines, as are many of the mechanics and electricians. Most of the street sweepers and road builders are from Sri Lanka and northern Africa.

The westerners, being mainly from South Africa, Great Britain, Australia, New Zealand, Canada and the USA, hold a high percentage of the middle management and senior technician positions. What do we bring to the country? In general terms, the expats from Australia perform an important function in Saudi Arabia. We bring with us skills and experience that is in short supply in Saudi. We bring up-to-date ideas and 'best practice' from industry throughout the rest of the world. We are there to guide, teach, train, manage, set up infrastructure, and not least, to get the work done. We are there, whether we realize it or not, to help Saudi Arabia continue on its progression into the modern world. It has come a long way since King Abdul Aziz brought it together early last century, but it still has a way to go.



What did it cost us as individuals and a family to live for five years in The Middle East? It cost us time with our wider family. It cost us time away from the

daily ebb and flow of life in Oz. It cost us some frustration with language and ethnic customs. It cost us some difficulty in maintaining contact with the advance of technology and with the intimate details of the various crafts and hobbies that the family members pursued.

But in return for these costs, we received the honour of learning about other peoples, whom it is unlikely we would ever have had contact with in Oz. We learned about Australia's place in the wider world. We learned about the excitement of international travel. We were able to teach the children about the world in a much more effective way than could be achieved at home. We visited places that we would never have been able to visit otherwise, like London, Paris, Rome, Venice. We were able to live a life with very few rules, where you lived more by your wits than by the rules of convention or authority. We made many friends from all over the world. We learned that there is a big and interesting world out there, waiting for Aussies to drop the blinkers that come from living on an island and to go out and greet the others. We learned that we are a lucky country, but maybe not quite to the extent that we like to think. We also learned that life is meant to be lived.

We despair for The Middle East peace process and hope that the peoples of this magic part of the world can once again learn to live together. After all, they are all Children of the Book.



Alex Williams was born in Melbourne in 1957, making him 46 years of age. He had a standard eastern-suburbs upbringing through the 60's and 70's, finishing his schooling at Mitcham High School. From there he drifted into a drafting job for six years, before deciding that computers were more interesting. Working with computers eventually led him and his family to KSA for five years, which were the best, most educational and mind opening years of his life to date.