

Frontier Hospitality In Saudi Arabia

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By Martha Nell Crow

Who invited you to the Kingdom?" was the first question I was asked by the Saudi Airlines reservation agent when I called to book myself to Saudi Arabia. I explained that my husband was there on business and his sponsor had invited me. My reservation was taken care of immediately.

The Kingdom (as Saudis refer to their country) is the only major country in the world that does not issue tourist visas. You may travel to Saudi Arabia

The bedouin and the refinery pipes symbolize Saudi Arabia, a conservative society that is changing because of its oil wealth



only to visit relatives, make a pilgrimage or conduct business — and the latter only if you are invited by a company or sponsor.

A woman almost never travels there alone unless her husband or another close male relative is already in Saudi Arabia on business. Since women are not allowed to work there except in a few professions such as nursing and teaching, few are granted business visas.

The no-tourist policy sounds isolationist, but could also be considered realistic. The country does not have the facilities to accommodate western-style tourists at the moment. (Of course, there have always been Moslems taking pilgrimages to the holy cities of Mecca and Medina, which are forbidden to non-Moslems.)

Although hotels — along with everything else — are being built at a staggering rate, their number is barely adequate to handle the influx of businessmen from all over the world. Other tourist facilities simply do not exist.

Six major airports are currently under construction, and when the Riyadh Airport opens in 1985, it will be the largest in the world. Reports indicate a tourist city is being planned in the south, while in the northwest there are archaeological sites that rival Petra. Some of the finest diving in the world is in the Red Sea.

Since Saudi Arabia was never subject to Europe-

an colonization, it has been isolated from the Western world for many years. And even now the rulers are concerned about controlling the Westernization of their conservative people.

Once in their country, I found the Saudis to be consummate hosts. Hospitality is an integral part of the Arab life, the Bedouin tradition. There is a definite form to business meetings. No one approaches a business meeting in a rushed or impatient manner. A meeting starts with the offering of coffee or tea. As the drink is being enjoyed, inquiries are made as to the person's health, his family, his day. Then, and only then, is business attended to.

Even picking up the mail at the post office has developed into a social ritual for my husband. Every day he is invited in the back by an official for a drink of tea. Although this man barely speaks English and my husband barely speaks Arabic, they communicate with each other in some basic way, each helping the other learn a few words in an unfamiliar language.

Going to the grocery store is the same. The grocer spends 15 minutes teaching my husband Arabic and my husband reciprocates with equal time in English. The events of the day are discussed before my husband gets his groceries from an amazing array of fine imported foods.

The ultimate expression of Saudi hospitality is in private entertainment. Since night clubs, movies, bars and theaters are not permitted because of Islamic law, social occasions assume great importance.

Although most Saudi entertainment is done in the home, my husband has been invited to feast in the desert. The men and boys (no women attend) sit on splendid rugs spread on the sand and dine on a whole roasted lamb, goat or small camel presented on mounds of rice. The meal is eaten by hand — right hand only — although forks are often offered to Westerners.

Even though women are rarely present at these social functions, I was invited to several including the opening of an auto maintenance shop. Magnificent Persian rugs were spread over the cement floors, chairs were lined up along the edges of the rugs, and coffee and cakes were served. Our hosts included 35 Koran memorizers, reciting in their own voices

Shops and businesses close three times a day when the call to prayer rings out

forms and ready to go to work the next day.

Westerners in Saudi Arabia must adjust to the different pace of life, and the pervading attitude of "Inshallah," meaning "as Allah is willing." The Saudis take it to mean quite literally that you cannot plan to do something in the future with any certainty, for the unexpected could always interfere.

In addition, the Saudi day has many interruptions. Businesses close for several hours midday as in most Mediterranean countries. But only in Saudi Arabia do businesses close three times a day for prayer. When the muezzin in the minaret announces prayer time, shops and businesses must turn out customers, lock their doors and pull their prayer curtains. Business also slows down during the holy month of Ramadan when Moslems fast from dawn to sunset.

Westerners function best by being patient. They must learn not to rush pell-mell, but to understand that probably as much gets accomplished here as in the States but without without the same stress and anxiety.

The Saudis have other outstanding qualities. Take loyalty and trust. A Saudi will not even deal with you if he doesn't feel that you are

someone in whom he can have faith. Once accepted, you are honored as a friend. Business deals are consummated with handshakes while contracts, brief and concise, are often completed without lawyers.

When you live and work there, you feel the spirit of a frontier country and have the particular pleasure of experiencing its growth. The city of Riyadh alone has gone from a population of about 15,000 15 years ago to over one million now. And the Saudis display qualities we think of as belonging to the tradition of the American frontier: friendship, warmth, hospitality, trust, loyalty.

In addition, Saudi Arabia is a place where you can walk the streets safely, since Islamic justice, as we have seen recently, is swift and severe in dealing out "eye-for-an-eye" punishments.

Because of the absence of crime, Westerners learn not to cringe over paying cash for almost everything. Everyone carries around great wads of riyals. One day my husband was on his way to the bank with approximately 50,000 riyals (about \$15,000) in a paper bag. He stopped off for lunch at the Inter-Continental Hotel and simply plunked the paper bag on a chair next to him. Never once was he concerned.

I saw a man driving to the bank with a tray of riyals next to him in the passenger's seat. The man was in an accident and leaped out of the car to discuss the situation with the other driver, leaving the tray of money unattended — and perfectly safe.

When I returned to San Francisco, I found that I had become very relaxed about my possessions. I was in the bank one day and set my purse on the counter, turning to talk to someone. A lady said, "You had better watch your purse."

I answered, "I'm sorry but I just returned from Saudi Arabia and got used to not worrying about things."

"That's what you get for going to an undeveloped country," she said, and started me thinking about the ways in which the Saudis were undeveloped — and