

## RIYADH REVISITED

By Martha Nell Beatty

My first visit to Riyadh, capital of Saudi Arabia, was almost ten years ago. I had been back three years ago and was stunned by the changes then. This time though I didn't expect to find much new. After all the building boom was winding down three years ago; explosive growth was over. The infrastructure was soundly in place, having followed the second five year plan quite accurately. Even the national bird, the "crane," had almost disappeared from the skyline in 1985.

I was in for a surprise.

Once again, I was stunned by the magnificence of Riyadh's King Khaled Airport. When it opened in 1985, KKIA was the largest airport in the world and covered 225 square kilometers. Incredibly, at that time the only airline servicing the airport was Saudia, the national airline.

When we left the King Khaled Airport, it occurred to me that this was one airport in which I did not mind waiting. It is very spacious with good acoustics and the sound of

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water running through the lovely fountains is soothing. Just looking up at the soaring ceilings made me feel good--what fine architecture should do.

Driving the twenty-two miles into the city, I was amazed at the development that had occurred along that freeway. Residential areas, the gigantic King Faisal University, and office complexes had sprung up out of the desert. On the sides of the road shrubbery and trees, including palms imported from the States, had been planted making the drive in from the airport more attractive.

Still the same was the unoccupied block of ten to fifteen highrise apartment buildings built for the Bedouins. The apartments were constructed with the idea that the Bedouins would be lured into the city with promises of fine modern apartments into which they could move. These people of the desert wanted none of this highrise city living and, consequently, the apartments built for them in Riyadh--and other Saudi cities--have sat unoccupied for years.

What struck me when we reached Riyadh was the number of new government buildings. Many were completed; others not. They were being built on a grand scale and, in some cases, were brilliantly conceived.

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The next day I had a tour which truly overwhelmed me. In three years a row of princely palaces had emerged on one of the roads leading to the desert. One gorgeous palace after another. When you consider that there are over 5,000 princes in The Kingdom, it's no wonder that there are so many, many palaces.

On out this road there is the new, extradorinarily impressive Diplomatic Quarter. The most incredible structure in the Quarter is the Saudi's Towaiq Palace, which overlooks the Wadi Hanifa from its plateau location. This building includes three fiberglass tents that jut out from the sides of the Palace. Also incorporated into Towaiq Palace is the many splendored Heart Tent which is used for diplomatic functions, such as the reception given for Prince Charles and Lady Di.

Eighty three countries will eventually be represented in this Quarter with buildings done by architects from the home countries. The United States Chancery designed by the late William Caudill of CRS of Houston is a tremendously impressive building.

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One of the remarkable feats in the creation of this Quarter was the planting of 7,000 palm trees. A nursery in the compound will be responsible for growing an additional 600,000 trees every year.

Also near the Diplomatic Quarter is the King Saud University, which has 24,000 students. They are all male for education in Saudi Arabia is still segregated. Interestingly, after almost 25 years of Saudis going abroad to study, many now want to stay in their own country. In fact, the Saudis are importing professors from the States to teach at their universities. Perhaps it is because of the fine facilities and staff that they are staying or maybe it is also an expression of their pride in their own country.

A renaissance has occurred in Saudi Arabia--in Riyadh in particular. Probably it is the closest to Italy's Renaissance that the world has known in the last 500 years. Here you have a vast amount of money in the hands of a government that wants to build monuments to its success; it wants to produce splendor. It should be safe to say that never in the modern world can one or will one ever again see such extraordinary development, such building programs.



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The princes have been taken care of beautifully--but so have the ordinary people. If the Bedouins did not want what was offered, they have at least been given the opportunity to have clean, modern, pristine living quarters. In the spending of vast sums of monies for their grand schemes, the government has not let any of the populace suffer.

Then there is the King Fahd International Stadium, which opened in March of this year. A fantasy rising out of the desert, a great work of art, it is an incredibly breathtaking structure. Its soaring, shimmering tent-like construction reminds one of the splendid Haj Terminal in Jeddah. Like the Haj Terminal, its white roof is made of teflon coated fiberglass; in this case there are 24 poles topped by tall finials which support the "tents."

We were privileged to have a complete tour conducted by a local celebrity, Anwar Qahtani, a commentator for the Saudi's Channel 2 news. He took us first into the Royal Pavillion, which also includes the VIP area. Here was something truly out-of-the-ordinary.

Glorious chandeliers in the entry follow the pattern of

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marble in the floor--or perhaps it is reversed. In one of the lounges, the chandeliers mimic the pattern of the rugs, which were made in the British Isles. In the lounges, the furniture is gilt with velvet upholstery, the walls are moire. Even the kleenex boxes (every Saudi living room has a kleenex box on the coffee table) are gold. There are four royal bedrooms and a sauna and jacuzzi in one of the bathrooms--which also just happens to have 24-carat gold fixtures.

The VIP boxes have t.v.'s for every front-row seat as well as phones from which one can call anywhere in the world. Just below the boxes is a beautifully landscaped area, a pleasant and colorful sight in the foreground.

The turf itself is quite remarkable--made from 24 tons of soil which was flown in from Kenya. It is irrigated from a vast underground lake. Keeping grass fresh and green when it is exposed to the direct sun, which gets up to 120 degrees in the summer, is no mean task.

The broadcast control room is another mind-boggling situation. It was Sony's largest project to that point--coming in with a price tag of \$50,000.00.

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The questions in our minds as we toured the marvelous 70,000 capacity stadium were: "Will it be truly used? Will all this grandeur, all this efficiency be realized?" An international youth soccer meet is to take place here next year, but that is the first major event slated. And when we heard that there are individual stadiums for the four soccer teams in Riyadh, we wondered all the more about the use for this project.

And, of course, the problem is compounded by the fact that there are no tourist visas for Saudi Arabia. Here it is the twelfth largest country in the world in area and the only way a foreigner can travel to The Kingdom is for business, family visits or religious pilgrimages. Here is a country resplendent with its newly constructed public buildings and palaces and private villas, yet so few of the world's population can come and appreciate all of this miraculous development. The infrastructure is well in place, the pieces have been put together and it is all there waiting to be seen and admired.

This development in Saudi Arabia is remarkable when you consider the following facts:

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- \* The country was only founded by Abdul Aziz in 1933.
- \* The discovery of oil was just 50 years ago when the well, Dhahran Seven, first produced oil to the wonderment of the small, stalwart group of Aramco men and their Saudi coworkers.
- \* The modernization of the daily life of the Saudis didn't come about until after World War II.
- \* The first five-year program, when development of the infrastructure began in earnest, didn't commence until 1973.
- \* All of this development has been based on the importation of foreign labor which built the structures and which stayed on in some instances to make things work. Those in menial jobs have come without families and with only the hope that they will build a financial base for a sound future when they return to their homelands. They have lived spartan lives and worked very hard. These men from Korea, the Phillipines, Indonesia, Pakistan, etc., have been the backbone



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of the financial success of this country.

No other country has come from a feudal, tribal state to total modernity in such a remarkably short period of time. No other country has ever accomplished the feat that was begun by the visionary King Abdul Aziz.

Possibly it is a xenophobia or a fear of Western influence that keeps the Saudis from developing tourism, from opening up the country. They have a deep-felt need to protect their closely intertwined moral and religious beliefs.

It is admirable that the Saudis still want to protect their society, for many countries have almost given up their integrity in bowing to Western tastes and mores. The Saudis are trying to stand firm and to maintain their identity.

But maybe someday this country, the size of all of Western Europe, will find that it is possible to welcome the interested visitor and to share with that visitor the wonders that have developed in such a short time.

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