

# WHY I WENT TO SAUDI ARABIA -OR- HOW I GOT TO HAVE A FEW DATES AND MEET MY PRINCE

by Edith Campbell



## INTRODUCTION

I'm a high school media director. That means I sit behind a desk, read books, and have answers to all the questions, right? WRONG!! I teach information literacy skills – which means instructing students and staff on selecting, analyzing, organizing, and presenting information –and that manages to sound as boring as what people think I do! Okay, let's rewrite that job description... I work in the information center of a school, and I help students learn to enjoy reading and to locate, analyze, and present information, and I help teachers plan projects. In other words, I help students develop into 21st century learners! To do this, my skills have to be honed, and I have to be excited about teaching students. To keep motivated, one must be exposed to new experiences, so when the chance arose for me to participate in Saudi Aramco's American Educators to Saudi Arabia Program, I could not pass up such a great opportunity. After completing the application process, I was accepted as one of twenty-five social studies teachers and media specialists who would tour the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia from the 17th through the 29th of November 2006. We would visit Dharran, Jeddah, and Riyadh with additional visits to the Fol Resort on the Red Sea and to the Al Hasa Oasis.

## A LITTLE HISTORY

The tour was hosted by Saudi Aramco and organized by the Institute of International Education. These organizations worked together to develop a tour around the themes of culture, global relations, industry, and education. Aramco is a fully integrated international petroleum company with the world's largest oil reserves. In 1933, shortly after Saudi Arabia was unified under Abdul Aziz Ibn Saud, a concession was granted to Standard Oil of California recognizing the potential of oil as an export commodity and a source of revenue to the new country. Standard Oil of California was joined later by several other major oil companies, and the venture became known as Aramco - the Arabian American Oil Company. In 1938 oil was discovered in commercial volume, and both the company and the country began to prosper. Today, Aramco is completely Saudi controlled.

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, with a population of 27 million, is located on the Arabian Peninsula. Although the cultures in the region can be traced to prehistoric times and Islam to 622 AD (1 AH<sup>1</sup>), the modern Kingdom of Saudi Arabia dates only to 1932 AD (1351 AH). The country is an absolute monarchy ruled by sharia law, the sacred law of Islam. The head of government and chief of state since 1 July 2005 is His Royal Highness, The Keeper of the Two Holy Mosques, ABDALLAH bin Abd al-Aziz Al Saud. The Majlis al-Shura, or Consultative Council, advises His Royal Highness on important issues and creates and amends legislation. A highlight of our tour was a discussion on education issues with members of the Council, followed by the opportunity to be the first group of Americans to observe the full Council in session.

Saudi Arabia's economy remains primarily based upon petroleum, which was discovered as the new country was emerging. Arabic is the official language and Islam the official religion. Because the Kingdom is a closed country (foreigners can only enter if they are invited guests of a citizen), it can be difficult to locate and validate certain information. Such information would include economic indicators, useful in describing the income disparity that exists within the country. *Forbes Magazine* (Hollaway, 2003) did report that of the ten wealthiest nations in the world, Saudi Arabia was the only one with per capita income less than \$22,000, indicating a wide gap between the upper and lower income groups. Those at the upper end of the income scale choose private and international schools for their children, while others send their children through the public school system. These public schools are divided into five levels: pre-first level/kindergarten, first level/elementary (two years), second level/intermediate (six years), third level/secondary (three years), and fourth level/higher education (three years). Since religion is seen as a way of life, religious instruction comprises 32% of the curriculum. Social studies instruction includes Islamic and Arabic history, world history, sociology, economics, and local and regional history. A human rights curriculum is being planned for high school and university courses.

## TODAY'S SAUDI ARABIA

At the base of all information is the Qu'ran, the sacred text of Islam. It is the source of faith and wisdom, and it is a guide for living. Visiting other countries makes one realize how much faith systems affect lifestyles. It determines how time is divided, what is valued, how people address one another, how relationships evolve, how life is celebrated, what foods are eaten, and how individuals dress.

As the kingdom grows and develops beyond being an oil based economy, it hopes to do so as a modern Islamic state. Modernization does not necessarily mean westernization. This was exemplified at the International Medical Center. This five million dollar facility combines form and function to influence healing within the context of Islamic beliefs. The eight month old hospital, located in Jeddah, was developed through an association with the Cleveland Clinic Heart Center. Here, male and female colleagues work together to provide healthcare in a full service hospital. The building's architect, Sami Angawi, used Arabic architectural styling throughout the structure. The total person is addressed, not just the physical body. Visitations are strongly encouraged. Healing quotes from the Qu'ran are above hospital beds and in hallways.

Islamic modernization also means steps toward equality for women, although these are often small steps as was seen in the recent decision to allow women to work in lingerie shops (Maha, 2007). So much resistance was met from shop owners and from the Commission for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice that the decision was revoked, despite the interest of hundreds of unemployed young women. Eventually, the ministry withdrew its proposals.

Affluent women are able to become educated and enter the job market in management level positions.



From the library of Safeya Binzagr

We met women business owners and artists, the first women chemists employed at the Nada Dairies, and the first women elected to a Chamber of Commerce in Jeddah, all of whom were quite hopeful about the future. Yet, women throughout the Kingdom may not drive and must be properly covered when in public. Women cannot visit many of the public libraries in the country, and the ones that do allow women strictly limit their access. We were clearly told by Khaled Al-Maena, editor of the *Arab News*, that this is a Saudi issue and that Saudi Arabia should be left alone to solve its own problems. He, and others at the Chamber of Commerce in Jeddah, told us that the way to help is to provide accurate information about their country.

## LIBRARIES IN SAUDI ARABIA

The Saudi Kingdom has over 80 public libraries that are overseen by the Ministry of Culture and Information, and there are academic and special libraries in addition to a National Library. In May 2006, King Abdullah directed authorities to improve the general condition of the Kingdom's libraries and information centers by making use of modern technology and offering information about all cultures. Although Siddiqui (1995) reported that few schools had libraries, our conversation with members of the Consultative Council indicated that libraries are being converted to media centers in public schools and are staffed by media specialists. Media specialists receive their credentials in one of two ways. They may attend a two-year L.I.S. program at a university (required for high school librarians), or they can be a specialist hired to work in libraries. We were also told it is difficult to get students to use the media centers because of a weak literacy tradition that evolved from a rural, nomadic tradition in much of the country.

Visiting school and museum libraries was an edifying experience. Books which can be found in



Old Jeddah

Indiana's school libraries were found in the Saudi schools, often bearing spine labels handwritten in Arabic. While many of the country's libraries have gone digital, the ones we visited had not. At each stop, we were greeted with warm Saudi hospitality. We would be greeted at the door and served one of the many varieties of dates along with cardamom coffee. Custom dictates that we would be welcome guests in anyone's home for three days.

Our school visits were limited to private schools. Here, we found students from countries such as Egypt, Tunisia, Lebanon, and Eritrea being instructed in English. Males and females were separated in these schools as is the tradition throughout the society. Our group would also separate in these schools, with men visiting the boys' areas and women visiting the girls' areas. Every class, facility, and teacher was assigned either to male or female students. When our group reunited and discussed what we had seen, we often found that the accommodations for boys were superior to those for girls.

The school libraries that we visited were very similar to ones we have in the States. They are labeled "school media centers" and are managed by a school media specialist. The level of collaboration between teachers and media specialists ranged from one school in Riyadh where an English teacher used the media center for a lesson on *Seedfolks* because it was the only room with an overhead projector to a school in Dharran where the media specialist was involved in teaching a technology-based research lesson. A majority of the books and all of the signs were in English. At another school in Dharran, the library held such popular novels as *Sleeping Freshmen Never Lie*, *Specials*, *Why Does the Coqui Sing*, *Hush*, and many, many others.

I think we were most affected by the media center at the College Prep Center for Girls in Dharran. Although it has existed as a school for males for years, the component for girls had just opened. The tiny library had a core selection of mainly reference books for students with the collection cataloged by hand and placed in wooden drawers. The media specialist, in her traditional clothing and mild manner, met us with apparent feelings of pride and hesitancy. We left copies of our library journals and promises to keep in touch with her via e-mail. Since it is forbidden to photograph Saudi women, we were unable to take her photo.

Another memorable stop was at the Safeya Binzaqr Gallery where the artist and owner, Safeya Binzaqr, maintained a small private library. She had copies of picture books, mostly in Arabic, available for children to read. While the gallery exhibited only her work, she also maintained a collection of artifacts and leather bound

books relating to Saudi arts and culture that she reserved for researchers.

Many of the Saudis we met told us about the importance of information, the currency of the 21st century, in the development of the Kingdom today. Hussein Shobokshi, CEO of Shobikshi Development and Trading Company and well known broadcaster, told us that the week before we arrived, Bill Gates was in the country to sign contracts with the government to improve e-government, e-education, and e-trade capabilities in the country. When I asked Shobokshi about information literacy in the country, he told us that their main issues with computer access are technical and legislative. He sees the need for a more user friendly platform that will support a population with a high illiteracy rate. Private schools, to keep information accessible particularly on the Internet, have instructions in English. Signage in the larger cities is in English and Arabic, indicating preliminary efforts to educate the masses in English as well. While there are indications of implementing innovations in public school instruction and facilities (school media centers), the exact details of these changes were not revealed.

Most of the young women who were our guides read American books, even the high school student I met at the Diplomatic Quarters in Riyadh read American and British books. One preferred postmodern literature while another read best sellers when she had the time. One of the women mentioned that she was working on a degree, but it was difficult to get advanced research materials because it was written and published in the U.S. She didn't have access to online databases to get articles. She would have friends copy materials for her to use in her research or they would buy the books and have someone who was traveling bring them to her. This young woman and her sister actually grew up in Bloomington, Indiana.



Camel Market, Al Hasa

In addition to the first person information I brought back, I was also able to develop lists of resources by collecting information from my fellow participants, from Aramco sources, and from the many institutions that we visited along the way. The books, websites, and journal titles that I'm adding to my library and listing on my travel blog (<http://arabianknight.wordpress.com>) will provide my student researchers with accurate and reliable information on the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, important because of the pervasive misunderstandings about the Kingdom. Perhaps even more important are the items in the culture kit that I purchased through a grant from the Indianapolis Library Foundation. A true "star" of the kit is Fulla, a Barbie-sized doll created for little girls throughout the Islamic world. She can be purchased in *hijab* (head covering) and *abaya* (long, black traditional dress) with a prayer mat, prayer beads, and go-go boots or a variety of other contemporary outfits which reflect today's Moslem woman. She also has a line of products for little girls which includes magazines, posters, overnight bags, and prayer rugs.

## CONCLUSION

I was able to end my visit with a few answers and many more questions. My level of penetration into the culture was not intense enough or prolonged enough to move me to a profound level of cultural understanding. This experience *was* rich enough to dispel myths, create relationships, and provoke a more meaningful level of questioning to keep me talking about the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in my school library in Indianapolis for a long, long time. It made me take my



The many faces of Saudi Arabia

memorized list of information literacy skills outside the classroom and really see how information and literacy serve us in the real world. While they do affect a country's level of development, they also affect how we come to understand, and thus trust, one another. Librarians play a role in creating that understanding and trust by helping to remove barriers that divide humans around the globe.

Oh, the prince? I met him one evening in a golf club in Riyadh.

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## FOOTNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> The Islamic or Hijra calendar is abbreviated AH, *anno bigirae* or "in the year of Hegira." The Hijra calendar is prescribed in the Qu'ran and begins in the lunar year when the Prophet Muhammad immigrated from Makkah to Madinah.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Edith Campbell has been the media director at Arlington High School for three years. She entered the profession as an IMATE, IPS's "grow your own" media specialist program. Prior to that, she taught world geography, U.S. history, and Afro American history. She holds an M.L.S. from Indiana University and a B.A. in economics from the University of Cincinnati.

