

An Arabian Dream

By Lawrence Tân JJR 69

I remember during the 80s, looking for opportunities to work in the Middle East seemed to be a trend. The pay was lucrative due to the bonuses for working in that region of the world. I had that chance when Galler Associates Inc. won a contract from Lockheed International. I basically did two tours which together last about a year and a half. However, I felt it was much longer than that. I wrote this piece partly to chastise a schoolmate in Europe who tried to impose his point of view on our entire forum.

Last night, I had a terrible nightmare and woke up all sweating and short of breath. I have to admit that it was so bad that I am still scared. Of course like in any dream, things are not always clear; I saw unrelated abstract images superimposed in a very strange configuration. The whole thing did not really make any sense. I always thought that I have been living in a free country for almost the last three decades...And suddenly I saw a Mutawa hovering over a small pattern that looks like a spider net. Taking a closer look, at the extremities of the network is a myriad of personal computers or workstations.

In the early 80s', I signed up for an opportunity to work in Saudi Arabia. I always love to have a chance to work overseas to learn and open my mind on other cultures. This contract was short enough, about one year to start with, and if I don't like it, I don't have to continue. The compensation was another reason for working in Saudi Arabia; the bonus was of course very attractive. Since Saudi Arabia was categorized as a hardship area, we were all exempt of the taxes if we stayed and worked there for at least eleven months. The plan was for me to go there first, and when we had all the logistics nailed down, Jacqueline would come and join me working there. It would be extremely lucrative for both of us working there. However, it did not work out the way we planned...



My company flew me over there on a British Airways first class ticket due to the long flight to the Middle East, with a one night break in London. It could have been a Boeing 747, I took a seat upstairs and dozed off after a few rounds of Gin and tonic. The drinks were all complimentary in First Class. Actually I wanted to get myself drunk and get some sleep. I was awoken when the plane had to land in Halifax, Canada because there was a passenger who had a heart attack. The plane took off again and this time it is a true non-stop leg to Heathrow airport.

All the accommodations were booked ahead for me; I took a courtesy bus back to the Hotel. I had the whole morning so I went and took the Hotel bus to Piccadilly and hung around there. I did some window shopping, the price tags looked the same as in the States except that they were in pounds, two and a half times as much as it would be in US dollars. Two years ago, I went back to visit London, I purposely passed by Piccadilly with my family. It seemed like nothing much have changed, except this time I did not see the youngsters with the colorful spiky hair. Maybe it is no longer in fashion after over twenty years. A strange feeling picturing myself there standing on the same platform, same sidewalk; I was a young man then.

Next day, I flew on the Saudi Arabian Airlines from Heathrow to Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. I got there pretty late at night. My boss, Bob Hurley was there to pick me up. He was a relatively young fellow, may be just about five years my senior. I worked for him before on another project prior to this assignment, we worked together pretty well, and therefore I was selected for his team. He drove me back to the Lockheed compound where we secured a few villas for our team. We were Lockheed subcontractors for the project. Eventually, we had around twelve of us. Those who brought their wives got to occupy an entire villa. Those singles like us share one villa which could accommodate up to four persons. Each villa had a common area and a kitchen



and four tiny bedrooms. Just like in college. But sometimes we were worse than the college kids. Each villa had a houseboy who took care of the vacuuming and dishwashing while we were at work. There were also free laundry services. All we had to do is stuff all the dirty clothes in a bag or most of the time we used pillow cases and mark them with our villa and room numbers. There were a few personality conflicts that flared up every now and then. It was really too close for comfort. One guy liked to have all the windows opened; another guy liked them closed. When we all gathered and watched TV in the evening in the common area, I liked to fall asleep there on the sofa and started to snore

and spoil the climax of the 'R' rated movies. After a few times, my co-workers woke me up when they started to sense that the best part of the movies were to come up.

There was really not much in the compound, a lot of grouchy people because they had been without women for months, a basketball court, a swimming pool and a ping-pong table. After work, I usually hang out in the pool and eventually, I built up my six-pack. But it did not take long after I came back to the States before the six-pack turned to one bag! Most of the nights when I could not sleep, I went out to the gate to hang out with the Pakistani guards and learn some Urdu. The highlight of the week was Thursday night, the Bingo night. I just could not wait, just feeling like going to a date and if I missed it, then it was going to be another long week to wait. In our location, we had two company cars to share to go to the shopping center to get some groceries or to go to the souk, the marketplace. The store close by that we usually went to was like a K-Mart, they had foodstuff and clothing and other convenience stuff. Or we could go to the souk where it was like an area of a couple of blocks, always filled with people in the evening, people of various Middle Eastern origins; sometimes you could tell by the way they dressed, local Saudi, Pakistani, Yemeni, Sudanese

and etc... We used to go to the souk to pick up souvenirs like brassware or music cassettes that cost around 6 Reals (\$US 1) a piece. Dating is absolutely prohibited and women were not allowed to drive. If a Mutawa stopped you in traffic and caught you driving with a woman on the passenger seat, you would be asked to prove that she was your spouse. You could be fined or put in jail for violating these laws. Local women had to be covered from head to toes including their faces with a shadora. Western woman did not have to cover their faces. Men could not show up in the streets in shorts and if you wore a shirt, it better be all buttoned up. The Mutawa were not in uniforms, they used to carry a stick, a sign of authority, which they used to remind people who inadvertently violated the religious and cultural laws. When you go out, you better be conforming to the unspoken rules or a Mutawa can appear at any time and you can get into trouble because the Police worked with them very tightly. It seemed like it was a bad thing to talk to foreigners, people were always shy from contacting us.



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Going to the supermarket was such a trip. Safeway was there, and as in States, it was always plentiful except for any product that has pork, which is prohibited by Islam.

However, everything there was so much more expensive. A pint of milk would cost as much as a gallon in the States. We always had to consult the daily newspaper to avoid the published prayers time, or we could be stuck in the store for a good ten to fifteen minutes when its doors were temporarily closed, most of the lights turned off, the registers shutdown and all the clerks disappeared. We would just walk up and down the aisles waiting...In general, Riyadh was pretty safe as crime was always severely punished. There was one day in the week that we would never want to venture out to the souk. On that particular day, the local authority would clear a parking lot in the souk and turned it into an execution place. If any foreigners were caught wandering there, the authority would make sure that they sit in the front row to witness these executions in



which the punishments would befit the crime; from hands chopping to heads chopping. Believe it or not, on one occasion when I went down to the souk, I was pinched by a guy! I drove down to the marketplace with a co-worker one evening looking for some music cassettes. We went our separate ways and would meet up after an hour to head home. As I have mentioned before, the place was filled with people; I was doing some windowshopping there when suddenly I was pinched in the butts! I turned around and could not identify the culprit. All around me was a sea of men in white robes and turbans. Then a few minutes later, I got pinched again and when I turned around, I saw a guy looking at me smiling. He had a gold tooth! I was so scared

and walked away as fast as I could and tried to locate a policeman...

On another occasion, I was in a clothing store just browsing around when a big dude in a white robe came over smiling, saying something I did not understand and stuck his big hand out as a sign of friendship. I hesitated and then shook his hand. What a mistake! He did not want to let go of my hand and instead he wanted to drag me into a closet. I was fighting and screaming on top of my lungs for my friend, who supposed to be in a store next door. He finally let go of me and I just dashed out of that store like a lightning! That experience truly scared the daylight out of me! It was fun for a while making money being there, eventually money could not compensate the boredom that you had to put up with in there. I bailed out of there as soon as the contract was over. I am still sweating from my nightmare of the cultural polices....This time they are donned with a keyboard instead with a stick...

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