



Mattawi, Abeyas, Expats: Daily Life in Saudi Arabia



By Mary Cunningham, MD

This is the second and concluding article about the author's four months in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia.

I COULDN'T DRIVE.

My husband could have. However, once we saw how the Saudis drove he said there was no way he would get behind the wheel there!

The roads are absolutely chaotic. Red lights often seem to be there just to be run through very rapidly, and when the road narrows there is a mad race to see who can squeeze through first. There are lots of roundabouts and the Saudis go every which way — no signaling, just shoving in between cars where there is no space. In a few weeks, most new cars have dents in them.

We let the drivers from the compound take us wherever we wanted to go, or rode the twice-daily buses from the compounds to go shopping.

The religious police

A mattawa is a religious policeman. I have no idea how many there are in Saudi Arabia but there seem to be many more mattawi than regular police. They usually have fairly long, quite straggly beards, their thobes (the long white garment worn by male Saudis) are usually a little shorter than average and expose the ankle, and they usually do not wear an igaal (the black rope-like band worn over the khaffiya, the all-white or red-and-white scarf worn over the head).

I wore the long, black abeya when I went out, with a headscarf around my neck in case I ran into a mattawa who might insist I use it. That never happened, though blonde or redheaded nurses were sometimes told, "Cover your head!" The abeya was not a bad idea — you could put it on over your grungiest clothes and go anywhere, with no need to change. It almost made the hospital guards fall to the ground laughing, though, when I wasn't working and wore the abeya — I kept stepping on it going up steps!

I was told by Marge, one of our nurses who has lived for many years in Riyadh and by Ali one of our EODs, that many men became mattawi because their fathers were. But many are men jailed for petty crime, like pick pocketing, or breaking and entering, and who are sent to religious school after serving their time. They are paid by the government, given a car and serve as religious police, or teach in the religious schools. Ali says they are usually inadequate — and often inaccurate — teachers.

Marge notes that in Riyadh the mattawi used to carry thin sticks (some still do) with which to whip people around the ankles — like women not wearing a scarf to cover all their hair. Sometimes, in public places, they chase men into the mosques for prayers, which are intoned five times a day. In Jeddah, however, we didn't see this in the shopping malls or the airport, because Jeddah is much more liberal than Riyadh, the capital of Saudi, and the "Protector of the Two Holy Mosques."

Westerners generally live in enclosed compounds. A mattawa and his family lived in ours

His wife, on seeing my hairy-chested husband in the swimming pool, would grab her children by the hands and flee. The mattawa once complained to the compound management about the dress of westerners. He was told it was really a western compound where Westerners could dress as appropriate for their countries. Despite this, the mattawa continued to live there because he had free rent.

Rules for women — and exceptions

All sorts of rules apply to women in Saudi Arabia. Yet, for some women the rules do not seem to apply. I was there for four months and never did figure these things out! Women, for example, are not supposed to work with men. They can work in back offices where they don't have to see or be seen by men. They may be able to work around men if accompanied by a husband or brother. Saudi Airlines cannot employ Saudi women as flight attendants.

Yet, a Saudi woman at the hospital ran a department and had both men and women working for her. She wore the abeya and scarf, but she was the boss. A Saudi woman intern from Riyadh lived in our compound and, of course, worked with both men and women at the hospital. A number of professional women at the hospital worked with men all the time. Are women in the medical field somehow exempt? I never found out.

Women are not supposed to be outside alone — they are to be accompanied by a husband or male relative. But two women together can go to the shopping malls. Often lone women can be seen shopping and the mattawi don't seem to bother them. Perhaps this is tolerated because men don't like to shop, or because it's women's work.

Saudi women are not supposed to drive, either. If one were to sneak off in the family car, her nearest male relative would have to answer to the police, because he is supposed to be in charge and responsible for actions of women in his household. One of our American paramedics talked to one of the city police in Jeddah about this. Oh, yes, he would arrest the woman and the male relative would be responsible. "But," said the paramedic, "how come when I go out into the desert I see Bedouin women everywhere driving around in trucks?" "Oh, but you don't understand," replied the policeman. "*Those* women carry *guns!*"

The freedom women have seems to depend very much on the attitudes of their husbands. Some are veiled from head to foot, patter along with their gruff husbands, not daring to look left or right. Others may work, dressed in beautiful western suits as long as they have long jackets, long sleeves and pants, and very modest blouses. They may wear no head-covering at work, but wear the abeya and scarf to go out on the street. Most women now wear no type of face covering.

Women who have an illegitimate child or who are charged with adultery (there must be three witnesses to the crime) can be beheaded. I believe they could also be stoned to death, but I never read anything about stoning in the papers.

Our nurses told of a 19-year-old brought by her family to the hospital when it was still private. She was seen for abdominal pain, first by the medicine assistant, then by the surgery assistant. Finally, an x-ray showed a fetus with the head on the perineum. She delivered about an hour later. The next day, her family took her away and left the baby in the nursery. Because the delivery was at a private hospital, it did not have to be reported to the religious police.

It was unclear if the family brought her to a private hospital to protect her life, simply did not realize she was pregnant, or whisked her home to be executed by her father for disgracing the family — which would be his right, or duty.

Punishment for crime in Saudi is harsh and applied much more quickly than it is here. The courts operate under Sharia, the Muslim religious-based law. Murderers and drug dealers found guilty are taken to what is known colloquially as Chop-Chop square and beheaded. Beheadings usually occur after the Sabbath services, and the public is free to attend.

Westerners are encouraged to view the proceedings at the front of the crowd. I didn't know anyone who ever went, but a Libyan taxi driver told us he had gone to several.

A thief is punished by having his right hand cut off — it used to be just whacked off, but now it is done surgically! The right hand is used for eating and shaking hands, as the left hand is unclean; so the thief is at a great social disadvantage forever after.

Women in well-to-do homes usually have servants, often from the Philippines, and sometimes treat them like slaves. Several Saudi women were in jail while we were there, for beating servants to death.

Anyone, man or woman, if hired to come to Saudi to work, cannot leave without the employer's written permission. Thus, a young servant abused by the woman of the house cannot just quit and go home. She also can't be hired by someone else unless released by her employer. And so, on rare occasions, abuse can result in the death of an employee who has no way to escape.

Drugs and alcohol

Alcohol and drugs were, of course, prohibited in Saudi. Restaurants served what they called "Saudi Champagne," a fruit juice concoction mixed with plain or carbonated water. All sorts of non-alcoholic beers and wines were available in supermarkets — some of them not too bad. We wanted no problems and would gather with friends around 5 p.m. for hors d'oeuvres and small cokes.

Some people in the compound had a store of bootleg alcohol. Others made their own booze. Western embassies used to hold monthly parties at which alcohol was served, but it was risky to drive home after drinking. Embassies were generally closed while we were there because of terrorist threats.

Drug abuse is not unheard of — young males know where to find both drugs and alcohol. We had a young male "very top VIP" brought in one night in shackles. He was full of cocaine and maybe other drugs and very combative. He was hospitalized for several days before transfer to a drug rehab facility. The transfer had to be very secret. He could not be flown because he might be seen and recognized at the airport. One night at midnight, our ambulance with the ED chief on board drove the patient to Taif, several hours away.

We were told a wealthy Saudi in Jeddah had a fully equipped English pub in his basement and regularly gave parties there for up to 200 guests. He paid off the local mattawa every month.

"Expats" and "executives"

The expat is a foreign worker in Saudi Arabia. Taxi drivers, chauffeurs, middle management and laborers are typically expats. If all expats were to leave within 24 hours, the country would collapse. It is very important to most Saudi men to be bosses, "executives" in charge of something. A proper title must be associated with work. At the hospital, we didn't have Officers of the Day (OD)— we had *Executive* Officers of the Day (EOD).

A Saudi man may own a store or a farm, but management is done by expats. Working in banks seems to be ok, probably because banks serve men and western or more liberal Saudi women. Women tellers could not interact with men. So the tellers are men, except at the few women's banks where women customers go who don't want to deal with men.

There has been an effort at "Saudiization" in the workplace, but things move along very slowly. Thousands of unemployed young Saudi males are angry at the government and get into much trouble — I'm sure this is a pool that the terrorist and extremist organizations draw on heavily. Yet, these angry young men won't do the work that needs to be done.

The stability of the country is at risk. As much as Americans criticize the royal family, if they are driven out of power, who will take over? Probably the extremist Wahabi clerics or worse. The royal family needs to reform the governing process. I believe Prince Abdullah would make more rapid strides at modernization and political change, but is resisted by many princes.

I fear for the future of Saudi Arabia. It is a fascinating though often very frustrating place. It is remarkable that a country of poor, mostly illiterate nomads could become a wealthy, more or less modern nation in about 50 years. Much of the generation now running the country can still remember a childhood in the tents. I had a truly incredible experience in Saudi Arabia and would be happy to go back again — but sadly, with the world situation, that is no longer possible.

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