

Experiencing Culture: My Personal Journey to Kuwait

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Second Place Winner

My personal journey to Kuwait started more than four years ago on a cold, snowy February day in the English seaside town of Dover, the day I signed my contract, the day a new chapter in my life began. In applying for a job as teacher of English at one of Kuwait's British schools, in some ways I had taken a step into the unknown. Much of my knowledge about the Middle East came from the Western media: I remembered the war to liberate Kuwait and how the country later became a launch pad for the overthrow of Saddam Hussein. I knew of Kuwait's reputation as a tax free haven with huge oil wealth. I had some awareness of Islam: although my religious studies at school had focused on Christianity, I had started to learn about the Gulf's majority religion; I was eager to gain a greater understanding and see for myself the reality of life in a Muslim society. Having travelled for much of my life, lived in four other countries, and visited parts of the world far off the beaten track, I considered myself to be open-minded, adaptable, flexible and ready for an adventure. Although a little apprehensive, as well as being excited, the day I flew to Kuwait for the first time in August 2005, deep down I was confident that I would be able to adapt to a new way of life and integrate into a new culture. Born in London, one of the most diverse, cosmopolitan and multicultural cities in the world, I was raised for four years in racially divided South Africa. I was taught from an early age that it should not matter whether someone is young or old, rich or poor, white or black, European, African or Asian, Western or Arab, Christian or Muslim. Rather I was shown by my parents and teachers that essential human qualities, like kindness, compassion, wisdom, modesty and generosity, can be found in people of any background from any part of the world.

As soon as I arrived in the Gulf I was determined to learn as much as possible about the local language, culture and religion. Following a reception for new teachers at the AWARE Centre I registered for a beginners' course in Arabic. Although a little daunted by the prospect of learning a language written from right to left in an unfamiliar alphabet, I felt that with some hard work and the help of my excellent teachers I could make progress. Within weeks I was singing bass in a choir, playing the violin in an orchestra and working out at a local gym frequented mostly by Arabs. In my first two years as an expatriate I saw as much as I could of the Middle East and the wider Muslim world. My travels took me to the UAE, Bahrain, Jordan, Oman, Lebanon, Qatar and Turkey; more recently I visited Egypt. Having successfully completed the four available levels of Arabic at the AWARE Centre I had, in my second year, to look elsewhere to pursue my studies. I still often visit the AWARE Centre, however; it is there that I have acquired so much of my knowledge and understanding and met so many Arabs and Westerners. I have been on a day trip to the desert camp, watched the camel races, toured Kuwait Bay by boat, attended diwanias, lectures and film screenings, sampled Arab cuisine, taken courses in Cultural Awareness and Islam and participated in a tour of the Grand Mosque. I have been struck by the many similarities between Islam, Judaism and Christianity, how so much more unites the three great monotheistic religions than divides them, and how Muslims' understanding of Christianity and Judaism far exceeds understanding of Islam in many Western countries.

After two years in Kuwait I was to face the greatest challenge of my adult life. During the school's summer holiday my parents, who had long experience as expatriates in North America, Europe and Africa, and had already visited me twice in the Gulf, had just finished making plans for a third visit when my mother was rushed to hospital. Although I took great comfort from the time I spent at her bedside at every opportunity during the school year which followed, returning to Kuwait at the end of every holiday was

heartbreaking. Having never even been to a funeral before, I was totally unprepared for my bereavement nine months after my mother's cancer diagnosis. Like my father, she was my inspiration for my life as an expatriate in the Middle East, a life for which both my parents have always had so much enthusiasm and which they have done so much to support. During the nine months of my mother's illness I experienced the ultimate downside of living overseas: the trauma of being away from loved ones at the most difficult times. Since then I have had to come to terms with the realization that my mother's third visit will never happen and that she will not be here to see how my personal journey finally ends. Yet, in my grief, I am comforted by the knowledge that the very happy memories of my parents' two visits to Kuwait will be with me forever.

No amount of careful research and planning can prepare any expatriate fully for the reality of living in the Gulf. From the moment I landed at Kuwait International Airport in the sweltering heat four summers ago I was on a steep learning curve. Gradually during that time the myths about the region which so often prevail in the Western media have been dispelled. There are three main misconceptions which I would like to address. The first is that as Kuwait lies in the Middle East, which is often seen as a troubled part of the world, with its history of terrorism and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict still unresolved, it must be dangerous to live here. While it is important to take sensible precautions as people should anywhere in the world, I have never felt safer than in Kuwait. In fact, with many people out and about even very late, with Muslims going to the mosque early in the morning, with some shops open 24 hours, in many ways I feel safer here than I would at night in my home town in the UK. The second misconception is that of supposed hostility towards non-Muslims. From my experience of living in Kuwait and visiting eight other predominantly Muslim countries, I strongly refute that suggestion. As a non-Muslim and non-Arab, far from being met with hostility I have encountered only warm-heartedness, hospitality and generosity. Even those Muslims and Arabs opposed to the foreign policies of some Western governments would never dream of holding individual Westerners personally responsible. The final misconception concerns the position of women in society. When I first arrived in Kuwait the stereotype of women subservient to men across the Arab and Muslim world was fresh in my mind. I soon learned not to judge by appearances. An early example of this was when I made my first visit to the local dental clinic; on arrival I turned instinctively to the male medic assuming him to be the dentist. I then realized that in fact the female medic was the dentist and the male medic her assistant. Since then I have seen many other examples of women holding senior positions in Kuwaiti society.

Kuwait does have its frustrations, of course, but which country does not? Most of these, I believe, are trivial and deserve to be met with a shrug of the shoulders and the feeling that being an expatriate inevitably involves making compromises in adapting to the local culture. There are two personal frustrations, however, to which I would like to draw attention. The first is smoking, which is much more prevalent than in many other parts of the world and can make conditions deeply unpleasant and unhealthy for non-smokers. The second is that some motorists show, through their reckless driving, complete disregard for the safety of pedestrians and other road users. Even for non-drivers life can be hazardous with pavements often non-existent or blocked by cars and pedestrian crossings widely ignored. I am lucky enough to live a few minutes walk from my workplace, but getting around at other times can be a challenge. Occasionally, if I am in a hurry or if the bus service has closed down for the night, I take a taxi but mostly I walk or use the public buses. Bus travel in Kuwait is an experience in itself and although I generally feel safe, it does have its moments. I have lost count of the number of times my bus has screeched to a halt from high speed and I have clutched the handrail nervously, half expecting to hear the sound of another vehicle crashing into the back. So far, thankfully, that has not happened and to this day I am an avid bus traveller.

What advice would I offer a Westerner moving to Kuwait? Firstly, enroll in an Arabic course; progress may feel frustratingly slow at times, but with some persistence you will find that your efforts pay off. Even with my background in languages I have had to work very hard, but it has been worth it: I can now read and write in Arabic and have a basic understanding. Secondly, remember that in the eyes of the local people you are an ambassador for your country; their view of your homeland will be shaped in part by what you say and do. So, when you see behaviour of which you disapprove, the best response is not to judge but instead to set a positive example yourself: avoid smoking in the presence of non-smokers, drive safely and with consideration for others, put your litter in the bin, treat the maid or the cleaner with the respect and

politeness which you would show in the West. Finally, try to learn as much as possible about the way of life here; listen to what local people say, observe what they do, and aim to fit in; be open-minded, think positively and focus on the many aspects of life here which you enjoy.

The most rewarding aspect of being an expatriate in Kuwait is being able to see a side to the Middle East which is so far removed from the stories of violence, terrorism and political instability so often heard in the West. When I am in the UK and tell my family and friends about Kuwait, I tell them about a nation which is fiercely independent, but also outward-looking and tolerant; a nation which is deeply patriotic but also humble enough to draw lessons from others and learn from its mistakes; a nation rooted in its traditions but adapting to the modern world and embracing democracy; a nation proud of its cultural identity but where people of different races, religions and nationalities mix easily; a nation eager to tell expatriates about its culture and religion but which is unfailingly warm-hearted and hospitable to people of other origins and other religious beliefs; a nation with a majority Muslim population but where churches exist and Christians can worship freely; a nation which quite rightly expects expatriates and visitors to respect local customs but which is forgiving of any faux pas; a nation where many people are fluent in English but where any attempts by expatriates to speak Arabic are met with delight; a nation where young people study English with an alacrity rarely seen in learners of foreign languages in many Western countries. That is the Kuwait I have come to love over the past four years; that is the nation and those are the people I hold in such deep respect, admiration and affection; that is the culture I have experienced on my personal journey to Kuwait.

