

An open letter on life in Kuwait by an Australian expatriate

Dianne Coady (Entry 20-04)

Honorable Mention:

Hi everyone,

Finally, after six months in Kuwait, I have found the time to give you a snapshot of my time here. From the moment my husband, Gary and I were waiting to check in at the Gulf Air counter at Kuala Lumpur airport, I knew we were heading for some interesting times ahead. The lines were full of women in black abayas and burquas, some of whom I could barely see their eyes. I felt an instant fear in the pit of my stomach and wondered, "What have I got myself into?" As an Aussie woman I had taken for granted my freedom and I felt a trepidation I had never felt before. "Will I be respected? Will I be restricted? How will I cope with this affront to my culture and way of life?"

I had been told that Kuwait was regarded as a very modern country in the Middle East, where women could dress in western clothes and hold positions of power in institutions and stand for parliament. I needed to find out for myself.

Arriving in late August was a challenge, not just due to the searing heat, but the month of Ramadan was about to start. I had vague notions about it from occasional articles I had read in the daily newspaper "back home," but like anything in life, until you experience it yourself, you just don't "know."

I found the food fasting idea no problem but I was shocked that fasting meant no sipping of water either. I couldn't believe that Muslims would go from sun up to sun down without even a sip of water in 49° Celsius heat! Surely that isn't good for one's health! No wonder the roads were even crazier at dusk as people raced home to "break the fast" and celebrate their religion by feasting and praying throughout the night. I was also shocked to discover that no-one was allowed to drink water in public during Ramadan or else you could be jailed! I could understand, that out of respect for the Muslim religion, no-one "should" drink in front of another person so as not to offend them, but I was surprised and found it hard to accept, it was actually a law!

I expected to take some time to settle in to a new apartment, new job and new location and I expected to find cultural differences challenging and interesting, as I had experienced the same process twelve months before by moving to the United Kingdom. I also expected to find the essence of humanity to be the same in Kuwait as everywhere else in the world and ...it was!

Everyone at work and the shopping centres were very friendly and helpful. They seemed to have an empathy for me being new to the country. I found surprises at every turn. I am a secondary school teacher and the children in my school were just wonderful. They were so keen to share what made them proud of Kuwait and they were excited to know about Australia too. Children are joyful beings and

Kuwaiti children struck me as being intrinsically happy and as we say in Australia, “very well brought up,” by their parents. Kuwaiti children’s sense of humour is infectious and they laugh easily and readily. A memorable encounter occurred one morning when my husband and I were trying to refill the gas bottle from our apartment after it had run out. We were driving around our suburb, Salwa, trying to find the right place. Everyone we asked at the Co-operative store and various baccalas (little shops), went out of their way to give us instructions, but, as we can’t read Arabic we couldn’t find the sign and kept driving around in circles, still with no luck. Time was running out as we had been warned the place closed at 12 noon so in desperation, we asked a taxi driver who was so keen to help us with his smattering of English that he flagged down a local passerby and between them, with much hand gesticulating, we tried to decipher where to go. Our knowledge of Arabic was limited to greetings and niceties such as please and thankyou, so we were having trouble “making head or tail” of what they were saying. Then, to our surprise, the passerby, a bearded man in a white dish dasha and white crocheted cap who had just come out of a local mosque, hopped in our car to direct us personally.

This was “above and beyond the call of duty.” We were so touched and heartened by his kindness in giving up his time and going out of his way, literally, to help us. We eventually found the gas place (but without him, I doubt it!) and when we offered to return him to where we picked him up, he shook his head and waved his hand with a huge smile and said something to us in Arabic, which we took to be along the lines of “No problem!” We couldn’t thank him enough saying “Shukrun” over and over and he just bowed his head, prayed and smiled as he went on his way.

Another time, I visited the Grand Mosque of Kuwait for a wonderfully rich Saturday morning AWARE tour with a cheerful and very knowledgeable UK woman who married a Kuwaiti man twenty years ago, and I found the experience of wearing an abaya to enter the mosque, very interesting. After being here six months, I now see that it can be liberating to wear one as you are free to be yourself underneath, without the critical outside examination of others summing you up according to your status or gender. I will never forget attending the Radisson SAS one evening for a British Ladies Society function and witnessing a group of Kuwaiti women entering the spacious female bathroom and makeup area, covered in full black abayas. They were giggling and chattering wildly and I realized they had come from the female wedding party in the Al Hashemi Dow function centre. They smiled at me welcomingly and then proceeded to take off their abayas to reveal the most gorgeous, colourful, sequined and sexy evening gowns with superb designer shoes and handbags to match. They enjoyed preening themselves in front of the full length mirrors, as all women do, checking their makeup and hair and making sure that their dresses were hugging their figures perfectly. They relished advising each other on how to look their best.

I was reassured to witness this spectacle as it made me realize that women are the same the world over. We love a good excuse to dress up and party! I understood that their abayas protected them from unwanted eyes and hence they felt free to be themselves amongst each other. It just so happened that the evening’s lecture for the BLS event was about marriage in Kuwait and I learnt that women and men celebrate weddings separately. It certainly seemed that the women I came across were having a ball!

There are only a few months left in Kuwait before returning back home, reluctantly, for family reasons. I will be sad to go as I have made some lovely friends, plus I have only just scratched the surface of understanding Kuwaiti culture. My experience, as a woman, has been very different to my husband’s, on so many levels. There is so much more to share...maybe another time. The women of Kuwait appear strong and are forging their unique path.

Overall, I leave Kuwait with a full heart, reassured that there is a universal spirit and potential for harmony on this planet. All it takes is an openness and willingness to accept difference, but see the essential sameness, to understand that we humans all feel the full range of emotions and that we all want the same for our children...a peaceful, happy life.