

# Living in the Sand: An American Girl in Kuwait

Francy Johnson (Entry 19-04)

## Honorable Mention:

Sitting outside the Friday's at Marina Mall, I watch the sun lazily setting over the Arabian Gulf. Ships fill the water as the last glow of sunlight disappears behind the Kuwait skyline; and, for a moment, it feels like I am back in San Diego. Some might wonder what I am doing here, twelve thousand miles from home. Many would find it hard to believe that I first came here out of fear, fear of a people I did not understand and the haunting memories of September 11<sup>th</sup>. I was frightened of the Middle East, of people in hijabs and disdashas, of mosques and terrorists and al-Qaeda. I knew I needed to understand the people so I would not be afraid anymore. Almost two years later, here I am: an American girl in Kuwait, living in the sand and learning more every day.

In 2006, I started a Global Friendship Project with my computer students and students in Kuwait and Egypt. My students shared their perceptions of Kuwait before they began the project. Many thought Kuwaiti's rode camels to school and sat on dirt floors. They were surprised to find out that they go to malls and hang out at Starbuck's just like them. It was a great learning experience and afterwards, I decided to travel to the Middle East with my sons.

We met an amazing girl named Malak who had worked with me on the project. She and her family showed us around Kuwait, making us feel welcome and answering our endless barrage of questions. As we said our goodbyes at the airport, I promised to return one day. Back home I thought about how amazing it would be to come back and teach the Kuwaiti students. There was such an opportunity to share American culture and learn about the Arab culture, finding commonalities and clearing up misconceptions. I continued to stay in touch with Malak and after much contemplation; I decided to come to Kuwait to teach computers at the Universal American School.

I brought my daughter with me for two weeks so she could see where I would be living. Those first weeks were filled with activities, Friday Market, shopping trips, relaxing at the Hilton pool. One day we toured the Grand Mosque and I learned that Islam was not so different from my own religion. Holly didn't like wearing the burqa, but her green eyes sparkled through the black veil like emeralds in the desert sun. Malak and the girls showed Holly around the local malls, while I unpacked my things and hung my American flag.

One weekend the girls took us on a boat trip across the Arabian Gulf to Failaka Island. We stayed at a resort and enjoyed the beach during the day. Holly looked out of place in her zebra bikini amid the conservative swimmers in t-shirts and Burqas, but everyone seemed to except that she was American and did things differently. At night we drank tea and listened to music while the men danced together. It was the perfect weekend.

The next day, we toured the Island. Buildings and homes were in ruin from the Iraqi invasion and bullet holes filled the walls. We went to their Grandmothers house where baby

items lay covered in dust, a cat skeleton frozen in the corner. At their Aunt's home, cases of Pepsi, still full, sat in the driveway covered in a thick layer of dust. The bottles survived but the house did not. The Iraqi soldiers had written "Long live the supreme ruler Saddam Hussein" in Arabic. It was eerie seeing those words, knowing the destruction the Iraqi's had caused and Saddam's ultimate fate.

We returned from the island tan and relaxed. The next day the girls took us to the House of Works War Museum. There I saw the photos I shall never forget: photos of devastation and despair, graphic images of children blown apart by landmines, Kuwaiti's tortured and finally killed, their bodies dipped in acid. I cried when I saw what was done to the Kuwaiti people.

When Holly left the reality staying here hit me. I was 42 years old but I had never lived alone in my life. I looked out the window at night and saw the buildings with Arabic writing and the men and women dressed in traditional clothing. I told myself I had to face my fears or I would never survive, so I went outside and took a long walk. I was the only woman walking alone and it made me nervous. I arrived back at the apartment relieved, but also terrified that I would not be able to make it on my own in this foreign land.

I found it hard to sleep at night, even after taking a sleeping pill. The Muslim Prayer call woke me several times and morning came without a feeling of rest. I was sad and homesick. I missed Mexican food, and unedited movies, and the familiarity of home. I longed for football games and fast internet and honey baked ham. I missed my kids and my dogs and the million stars that filled the night sky back home. I stayed in my apartment most of the time, but forced myself to go out once a day to walk the neighborhood and ease my fears.

Kuwait took some getting used to. A few blocks from my apartment there are crumbled buildings that would be condemned back home, yet flower boxes sit outside the missing windows and clothes hang out to dry. This is where the less fortunate live, yet they smile on the street, hopeful of their future. Starving cats, broken and scared, eat out of dumpsters; the unwanted and uncared for. An old man with kind eyes comes by with a bucket, picking through the scraps the cats left. I hand him money and try not to cry.

The smell from the chicken shops and the lambs hanging in the grocery store made my stomach turn. I couldn't get used to the nightly prayer calls that woke me from my sleep or the honking horns when men drove past. I was surprised when I saw men greeting each other with kisses, and women sitting together at Starbucks. Where were the couples, the public displays of affection, the romance?

Walking helped me get over my fears. Each night, I would venture a little further into the unknown. I started smiling at people and saying hello. Complete strangers would offer me help and give me their cards in case I was lost or needed something. One day on my walk, the intense heat overtook me and I almost passed out. A Kuwaiti man pulled up in his car and offered to take me home. I would never get into a car with a stranger in America, yet somehow I knew that it was okay. The man gave me his card and said if I ever needed anything to call him.

I continue to be inspired by the kindness and generosity of the Kuwaiti people. If there is a hatred of Americans here, I do not feel it. I attended a social gathering focusing on women's rights in the Middle East and realized how strong these women are. Westerners often think of women in the Middle East as victims because they wear the veil, but these women are independent, intelligent, and working towards a better future for all of Kuwait.

The Arab teachers at my school are so generous. They always offer me food, sharing everything they have without hesitation. This is a courtesy that westerners need to develop further. It's not that we are stingy, but sometimes we are too carried away with our own lives that

we forget to think about others. The owner/director of my school Mrs. Alghanim and the business manager Mr. Rashwan are like parents, ready to listen and take care of us while we are far from home.

I developed the cough that westerners get when they move here, unaccustomed to the dust in the air. It later became bronchitis and then pneumonia. My neighbors drove me to the doctors, made me meals and checked on me throughout the day. The pharmacist gave me her cell phone number when she went on maternity leave in case I had any questions or concerns. Mrs. Alghanim made me homemade chicken soup, enough to feed the whole apartment building. She sent the school nurse to my home to check on me along with a maid to make me tea and clean up my apartment. She even provided a breathing machine so I didn't have to go back and forth to the hospital.

I keep busy, tutoring students after school, working with the newsletter club, studying Kuwaiti Dialect at the Aware Center and feeding the homeless cats. On Saturdays, I volunteer at the orphanage, teaching English and holding babies. Each encounter makes me feel like part of the community, enriching my experiences and changing me in ways I cannot fully describe. I still have my American flag up, but now it hangs beside a Kuwaiti flag. I wear a Kuwaiti bracelet the girls gave me and on dress down days, I sport my "I love Q8" t-shirt. I feel a part of both countries now and am honored to be accepted by this community.

In the beginning, I wanted to educate Arab students, so that they would see that Americans are good and never be tempted to fly a plane into a building or strap on a suicide vest. It turns out that I was the one who had the most to learn. I am blessed to work with students who make me smile every day. They call me Miss and bring me chocolates and quickly found their way into my heart. I believe that in some small way, I am positively affecting my student's views of Americans but it cannot compare to the way they have altered my views.

My feelings about Arab people are different now. I see warmth and a welcome spirit in the Kuwaiti people that I find both unexpected and deeply touching. I now notice so many similarities in a culture I once thought was so different. I have grown to admire the strong bonds that men and woman have with members of the same sex. I find something comforting in the call to prayer. I have learned on this journey that the extremists we see on the evening news bear no resemblance to the kindred spirits I have come to know in this country.

I find as I head back home that there are many things I will miss about Kuwait: the leisurely walks along the Gulf, the DVD man with his new releases, the relaxed pace, the orange glow in the sky when the dust covers the sun and the bright warmth of the refinery fires. I will also miss the flavors of Kuwait and the ease of Galabat. Back home, it will be hard to find chicken shwarma, fatoush, warm bread with zaatar, feta cheese sambosas, lemon mint and tea with saffron. I will long for the bowls of tum at the Palm Palace, Kuwaiti Ice Cream, baked potatoes with labneh, freshly squeezed juice, and cupcakes from the Chocolate Bar. It will be strange not to go to Avenues Mall every weekend to pick up my raisin rye bread from Dean and Deluca and browse the showroom at IKEA. I will miss having a maid and getting massages and having someone style my hair every few days. These are luxuries I cannot afford back home.

I have learned so much from my time here that it is hard to fit it into three short pages. My life is so much richer, fuller. I believe that I am more giving, more understanding, and more knowledgeable about this culture. It is hard to know what the next chapter of my life will hold, but I do know that when I look back on my journey, I will be grateful that I paused in the Middle East. Living in the sand, this American girl found a whole new world, rich in culture and tradition. I formed true and lasting friendships; and found strength within myself I never knew I had. Insh'Allah (God willing) the journey will continue.