ARABIAN ADVENTURE

My wife, Alice, and I visited Saudi Arabia from January 13-25, 2024. It was my 118th country, and her 99th. We flew on Lufthansa from San Francisco to Frankfurt, Germany -- an eleven-hour flight -- then connected for another six hours in the air to Riyadh, the Saudi capital and largest city, home to 7.6 million people.

The first day in SA was on our own. (Thankfully, our 'jet lag' was minimal.) We stayed at the Rosh Rayhaan Hotel, a modern lodging in the heart of the glittering city. We walked to the Kingdom Centre, Saudi's tallest skyscraper, and enjoyed its summit observation deck (99th floor) for some amazing views. Later, we took two Uber rides (each for about 60% of what we would have paid in the U.S.), and also toured the National Library. The following day, we met up with our Wild Frontiers (head office - London) tour group. We had a total of eleven participants -- another couple from California, a woman from Seattle, a woman from Serbia, and other members from the UK, Canada, and Australia. There were three medical doctors and three Ph.D.s in our group -- a very widely-traveled and experienced party, fit, and mostly in their 60s and 70s. Some members had even visited over 125 countries!

Our tour leader was Dario Ghirlanda, a tall and lean half-Italian and half-Ethiopian man, age 41. He had been directing tours for the past twenty years, mostly in Italy, and spoke several languages -- but oddly, Arabic was not one of them. (We did, however, have three local Arabic-speaking guides, each for a few days.) During our stay here, I did pick up a few words in Arabic: *Marhaba* = Welcome; *Inshallah* = If God Wills It; *Salaam Alaikum* = Peace be upon you; and *Mashallah* = God's Blessings!

Saudi Arabia has a population of 36 million, with half of the people age 25 or under. Temperatures in the city the day we arrived were 83/61 F., but a cooler wind the next day dropped the temps by about 15 degrees, which was average for that time of year. Summers here, however, can be brutal -- 120 F. and even with occasional sandstorms, with such high winds that the desert sands can actually blast some of the paint off of cars!

The money here is the rial (SAR), and it is worth 27 cents US. Tipping is not practiced. Gasoline is sold by the liter, but comes out to about $2.40 US per gallon. Saudi Arabia is a huge country, about the size of Alaska and California combined.

There was construction going on everywhere, it seemed, as the country is modernizing at a dizzying rate -- spending more than $1 trillion US -- to meet the national goal called Vision 2030. There is even a Metro subway system being built. The Saudi monarchy and its government is diversifying away from their previous strict dependence on oil, and is now focusing on vast infrastructure improvements, the latest technology upgrades, new education facilities, state-of-the-art hospitals, futuristic sports complexes, tourism resorts, upgraded air and rail systems, international finance centers, and the expanded generation of solar energy. We saw many mega-shopping malls and other modern consumer temptations, similar to those when we visited the neighboring United Arab Emirates back in 2017. Saudi Arabia is racing ahead to become a world leader in many new and expanding fields, and everyone -- at least in the cities -- seemed to have the finest cell phone and the latest model car.

The downside of all this expansion in the capital was traffic gridlock, with incessant horn-honking and terrible air pollution (Riyadh suffers the 5th worst in the world). Sidewalks for pedestrian walking was severely limited, as were any peaceful green parks with shading palm trees and water pools. Apparently, city real estate is sadly seen as too valuable to 'waste' on such things as sidewalks or parks. Hence, we do not have a carefully planned and green-zoned London, Paris, or Vienna here! We basically noticed very much a 'car culture' in Riyadh, reminiscent of Los Angeles, where people will drive even if only for a few blocks, rather than simply walk.

Almost everyone here spoke English, and all public signs throughout the Kingdom were in both Arabic and English. In the capital, we saw only about half of the people wearing the traditional Saudi clothing -- the black *abaya* for the women, covering everything but their eyes, and the long, crisp white *dishdashi* gown, with proud headdress (the *keffiyeh* and *agal)* for the men. (This would change, however, once we went north and around the rest of the country, where almost everyone was dressed traditionally.)

Although we heard the Islamic call to prayer five times each day, we saw scant evidence of such regular worship. Perhaps prayer was done inside the mosques, but I saw only a few instances in the evenings of men in public prostrating themselves on their prayer rugs in the streets near their shops. Friday is the weekly Muslim 'holy day,' so perhaps that is when the devout are most worshipful towards Allah. Every hotel room in Saudi has a folded prayer rug and a copy of the Quran in a drawer, and a marker on the wall to give the proper prayer direction to the holy city of Mecca. Since modernization, stores can now voluntarily close for 15-20 minutes during prayer times when they occur within business hours, whereas prior to 2019, such closures were mandatory. We noticed few stores in the shopping malls we visited closing during calls to prayer.

Saudi Arabia was one of the safest countries I have ever visited! No crime, no drugs, no alcohol, no graffiti, no homelessness, no violence. The Saudis were extremely gentle and friendly, very helpful and polite, and provided excellent hospitality -- seeing as such has long been an important part of their culture. The visitor to any home, shop, or office is always offered a small cup of lightly-colored Saudi coffee (laced with cardamom) and a little bowl of dates upon arrival.

Western-style foods and buffets were always available at the excellent hotels we stayed in throughout the Kingdom. This is for the comfort and convenience of the many mostly European and American businessmen coming and going. Of course, other Arabian foods are also offered, such as *shawarma* (spiced grilled chicken or lamb with tomatoes, cucumbers, and yogurt); *kibbeh* (bulgar wheat rolls stuffed with spiced ground lamb or beef, then deep-fried and served with yogurt); *falafel* (grounded up chickpeas with spices, then deep-fried); and *kabsa* (rice with spiced grilled chicken, nuts and raisins). Lamb *kabobs,* grilled on a spit -- with a yogurt dipping sauce and French fries -- was also a popular, fast snack. The food in Saudi Arabia was very fresh and tasty, and is prepared with the utmost safety and purity under the Quranic dictates called *Halal*. Unlike other Middle Eastern countries I have visited, we never worried about getting any gastric upsets or related illnesses here! The Saudi spices were mild, and each meal always began with plenty of warm pita bread. Certain foods, however, were forbidden (*haram)*, such as pork. Only beef or turkey bacon here at Western breakfast buffets!

Seeing as the Quran boasts that the humble date is the 'perfect food,' it comes as no surprise that Saudi Arabia is the world's largest producer of dates. There are 38 million date palms here, growing over 400 varieties of the sweet fruit. Like honey, dates never spoil, and are known to still be perfectly edible even after 80 years!

Saudi Arabia also has the largest desalination plants in the world, to provide fresh water distilled from nearby salty sea water. This rendering is used for tap water, so while it is perfectly safe to drink (being carefully treated), almost everyone prefers drinking bottled water here due to the slightly odd taste of the tap water. As a result, tap water is used mostly for bathing, washing dishes, doing laundry, etc. We had at least a dozen different brands of bottled water on our tour. I was surprised that Saudi had so many deep artisan wells to provide these! The problem, however, is the huge amount of waste of empty plastic water bottles everywhere, some as discarded litter -- even though littering is illegal and can be fined. I was also surprised that Saudi had some visible rivers -- as well as many water oases areas, where towns and cities naturally took root and grew over the centuries. Substantial swaths of green grasses and crops, using modern farm irrigation, were also a surprise, and were a welcomed visual relief -- from lengthy vistas of rocks and sand -- on our deluxe motor coach rides. It even rained one night during our sojourn! We were informed that the past season had been blessed with above-average precipitation, which was especially good for the many herds of wild camels wandering throughout the Kingdom, foraging for any fresh greenery to eat.

Since 2019, non-Muslim tourism has finally been welcomed, with Americans and citizens from certain other developed countries eligible for a quick e-visa (costing $123 US) upon arrival at any Saudi airport.

In that same year, modernization allowed Saudi women to finally drive a car alone, as well as leave their house without being chaperoned by a male relative. Women can now work outside the home or for the government, as long as they are dressed modestly -- hair covered, with long-sleeved gowns lengthened to the feet. They are no longer required to wear an *abaya*, though largely outside the major cities, girls still began wearing one at age 12. (Curiously, the Quran makes no mention of women having to wear an *abaya*. It only says that women need to cover their hair and dress modestly when in public. The standard black *abaya* was introduced in the 1800s, as a male Muslim way of demonstrating dominance over their women.) Non-Muslim female tourists are encouraged to dress modestly too, but they only need to cover their hair with a scarf, etc. if they go inside a permitted mosque. There is still, however, a separation of the sexes for all mosque entrances, as well as for prayer rooms in public buildings like train stations, shopping malls, etc.

2019 also saw the first movie theaters being allowed in the Kingdom. But in a bow to Islamic traditions, all films are censored for any kissing, hint of sex, or nudity. Such scenes are carefully cut out. This is also true for the Internet and for all television programming in Saudi Arabia.

In another concession to modernity, since 2019, the public cutting off of the right hand for thievery has been rescinded. But public beheading for murder or other serious crimes is still permitted.

The current ruler of Saudi Arabia is King Salman. He is 88 years old, and unfortunately suffers from poor health. His seventh son, however, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, is actually in charge, and it is he who has initiated all of the recent modernizations in Saudi Arabia. 'MBS,' as he is widely referred to, is 38 years old and married, with five children (3 sons and 2 daughters). He is very popular with his people. Portraits of both him and his father are proudly displayed throughout the Kingdom in shops, homes, on billboards, and in government buildings. MBS's tricky 'balancing act' -- as de facto ruler -- is to bring about all necessary changes for his people, while adhering to certain strict Islamic traditions and dictates as prescribed in the Quran by the Prophet Muhammad.

Saudi citizens receive free education, free health care, and financial assistance in buying a home. They pay a 15% tax on all purchases, but the current levied income tax is expected to be repealed soon. Saudi Arabia is the world's 15th wealthiest country, due largely to its oil production and export. The government gives each citizen 1000 rials free each month ($270 US), much like Alaskan citizens in the U.S., who get an annual stipend from the oil companies drilling on the state's land.

Foreign workers here are mostly brought in from Egypt, India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh. In Saudi Arabia, they can earn more than ten times what their home countries can pay! But their labor contracts are finite (6 months to two years), and they must leave when they expire. Foreigner laborers are not encouraged to stay. In fact, wives are discouraged from coming to SA with their men, and -- if they choose to bring their children -- they must pay a fine each month of 500 rials ($135 US), per child, for the privilege.

The Saudis are generally an extremely clean people, washing not just for prayers five times a day (ablutions), but also in their overall grooming and personal hygiene. The public toilets here (two versions: the Western 'sitting' one and the Asian 'squatting' one) were amazingly immaculate, and every toilet was cleaned by an attendant after each use. I also noticed that the clothing on both men and women was always fresh and clean. The popular fragrance you notice in SA is called *oud*. It is made from resin rendered from a special kind of rare Middle Eastern wood, then turned into incense to be burned, scented oil, or perfume/cologne. It is very pleasing and refreshing, and the smell is said to be both welcoming and spiritually uplifting.

Did you know that Muslims use a different calendar than the Western Gregorian one? It is actually the year 1445 H (for *hijri*, or migration) for Muslims, now in our year 2024. This 'time tally' began in the year 622 A.D., and is based on the traditional Islamic lunar calendar, which also prescribes: when the yearly *Haj* (or pilgrimage) to Mecca occurs (June this year); what exact times are used for the five daily prayers each day; and when the Muslim month of fasting -- *Ramadan* -- occurs (March this year). 622 A.D. was the important year when Muhammad and his followers migrated from Mecca to Medina and established the first Muslim community (*Ummah*), an event commemorated as the *Hiraj*.

After viewing the Masmak Fortress, the Murabbah Palace, and the Ad Diriyah UNESCO World Heritage site in the Kingdom's capital, we drove northeast through Ushaiqer to the huge camel market outside of Buraydah. We saw hundreds of the noble beasts for sale at auction. You could buy a female camel for $2-3000 US, or a (much larger) male for $5-8000 US. The purchases were hoisted up by craned 'cradles' into the backs of waiting pick-up trucks. While waiting, if the males were ready to breed, they expelled a large, hanging organ from their throat -- resembling a huge, thick tongue -- then drooled copious amounts of saliva. If the female was pregnant, her tail was down, signifying that she was unavailable for mounting. But if her tail was up, it was a signal that she was ready for coupling. In a later city, we ate at a popular restaurant chain called Baby Camel. Naturally, we had the specialty of the house, cut into chunks and served up on beds of rice with a side salad and pita bread. Camel tastes similar to beef pot roast meat. In Jeddah, we also tried camel's milk, which is very popular and commonly sold in the marketplaces. It is safely refrigerated, hence it is cool and refreshing, very rich like cream, and is naturally packed with many beneficial vitamins and minerals. It also has a slightly salty aftertaste.

We continued northeast to Hutaymah Crater, an extinct volcano with a huge lower salt basin, and hiked part way around it. We proceeded next to Ha'il, a pleasant oasis city, which boasts its own airport. From here, we diverted north to Jubbah to view the amazing 5000-year-old petroglyphs, carved into the mountain rock faces by early tribal inhabitants -- yet another famous UNESCO site.

A real highlight of our trip came next as we drove west: the 2000-year-old ruins of a large Nabatean settlement, with dwellings and tombs carved directly out of the sandstone rocks and mountains. Another famous UNESCO World Heritage site, these ruins have been dubbed "Petra II," after the first Petra ruins in Jordan -- also built by the Nabateans -- which Alice and I saw in 2016. Located just outside the beautiful oasis town of Al Ula, the ruins are in an area called Hegra. We drove around there in 4WD jeeps for most of the day. It was quite spectacular! This area is also the #1 tourist destination in all of Saudi Arabia. Here, we saw a few other foreign visitors from Europe, but no Americans. (On our entire trip, we saw only two other small tour groups: one from France on a similar bus tour, and one from the U.S., staying at one of our same hotels -- The Archeological Institute of America.) That evening, we visited the enormous, famous Elephant Rock at sunset.

Going south now, we enjoyed my second favorite highlight of the trip -- the holy city of Medina, where the mosque/tomb of the Prophet Muhammad is located. The second holiest site in all of Islam (after the Kaaba in Mecca, where we were forbidden to venture, our being non-Muslims), Medina was very, very impressive!

First, we visited the Quba Mosque, where the Prophet helped built this, the world's first mosque, in 622 A.D. It has since rebuilt and modernized, but the faithful still flock here on pilgrimage. Muslims from all over the world -- alone, with their family, or in tour groups -- were witnessed praying here during their *Umrah*, which is a quicker and more affordable Muslim pilgrimage rather than the yearly -- often with two million participants -- 'official' pilgrimage to Mecca, known as the *Haj*. (Devout Muslims are asked to make the *Haj* at least once in their lifetime if possible, and if they can afford it.)

It was here that I was gently approached several times by strangers and asked what country I was from. When I answered, they seemed amazed! More than one pilgrim in the crowd shyly touched my arm, with some even tenderly embracing me, murmuring: "May Allah bless you! You are my brother! We are all one people, through Allah's love and mercy." Needless to say, I was really touched by such spontaneous demonstrations of faith, compassion, and sincerity. Saudis will regularly place their hand over their heart when meeting you or speaking with you, as yet another sign of their caring and honesty.

We went to dinner our first night in Medina at a fancy hotel restaurant overlooking the incredible Prophet's Mosque, with its ten soaring minarets. At sunset, while we were walking for our buffet meal, the call to prayer was given. The beautiful voice of the muezzin echoed off the canyons of the very clean, modern and converging, hotel-lined streets: *"Allah 'akbar...*(God is great...)*"* Hundreds and hundreds of white robed *Umrah* Muslims -- men and women, young and old -- poured out and made their way reverently into the mosque compound to prostrate their faces to the ground in humble submission to God. Those that couldn't fit inside the vast square simply went down on their knees on the streets. It was the most awesome show of faith I have ever witnessed -- a universal plea for peace and unity with The Divine! What I felt was even more impressive than the shows of faith I had experienced on several occasions at the Vatican and inside of St. Peter's basilica in Rome. I had chills of emotion!

The following morning, we revisited the Prophet's Mosque. As non-Muslims, we could only enter the compound up to a certain point, but it was quite thrilling nonetheless. The actual tomb of Muhammad rests under a green dome in the complex. Even if you are a Muslim, however, you must nowadays (and only once a year) reserve a special time 'on-line' and get an official 'pass' to view the actual tomb. This new system was designed to help avoid the crowded crush of frantic, emotional devotees who sometimes in the past accidentally injured each other in their zeal to be nearest to the beloved Prophet's remains.

There is a special water called *zam zam*, which is piped underground from a sacred well near the Kaaba in Mecca, hundreds of miles away, all the way to the Prophet's Mosque here in Medina. I got to drink a cup of it, retrieved for me (my being a non-Muslim) by our local guide, Fatimah Al Zimam. age 35. (As an aside, she was one of 27 children by her father's two wives, Muslim men being permitted to having up to four wives -- but only if they can afford it, and treat each wife equally.) The water was very refreshing, tasting like a cool countryside well water. *Zam zam* is carefully tested by the Government three times a day to ensure its safety and purity. Pilgrims drink it, then fill their water bottles with the holy water to take home -- similar to the holy water taken away at Lourdes in France for devout Catholics. *Zam zam* is said to cure illnesses and diseases, and devotees claim that it can also answer your prayers after you drink it. This special water is also sold in large ten-liter containers at the airport for transport home. Curiously, it is even sold in the U.S. on Amazon.com!

Of the world's one billion Muslims, 85% are Sunni, and 15% are Shi'ite. Almost all Saudis are Sunni, and most Shi'ites are from Iran. The two sects have competing views as to whom was the true successor to the Prophet Muhammad after he died, but both sects (often violent with each other throughout history) are peacefully welcomed to make the *Haj*, and visit all of the sacred Islamic pilgrimage sites in Mecca and Medina.

The Prophet Muhammad is a rather controversial and contradictory figure, when analyzed from a non-Muslim perspective. He was involved in violence and revenge with non-believers, and was also tainted with accusations of pedophilia and incest with his cousins. But one especially admirable thing he did do was to request being buried in an unmarked grave, so as not to be considered a person worthy of any kind of undue veneration. Allah alone should be worshipped and obeyed, he preached to his followers. But -- as you may have realized -- immediately after his death, the Prophet became virtually a cult unto himself, and Muslims are tempted to almost divinely revere him -- such as building his massive tomb complex as a place of pilgrimage in Medina -- an act totally against his fervently expressed desires.

It is also important to remember that some extremist Muslims are fanatic over any criticism of the Prophet (e.g. the 2015 massacre in France at Charlie Hebdo over a single cartoon mocking Muhammad), or over any perceived disrespect of the holy book, the Quran (e.g. the death *Fatwa* issued against author Salman Rushdie over his novel, "The Satanic Verses.") Such crazed fanaticism is a sad blot on the overall more peaceful and gentle message of Islam.

We continued our tour by taking the high-speed train (300 km/hr., or 187 mph!) for 90 minutes from Medina to Jeddah, the oldest city in Saudi Arabia, an ancient port on the Red Sea, population 6 million. It was warmer, mid-80s F., and quite humid here. The old part of the city, *Al Balad*, is famous for its maze-like winding lanes, UNESCO souks, and classic, historic architecture -- the latter featuring beautifully carved wooden window blinds and protruding balconies, both designed to keep people comfortable, and to catch any cooling sea breezes. We enjoyed fresh fish and prawns here for our meals, and walked parts of the breezy waterfront Corniche promenade. Jeddah also has a huge and excellent museum, the Al Tayibat City Museum for International Civilization, mostly highlighting the Golden Age of Islam, when it led the world -- in fields such as medicine, mathematics, architecture, engineering, astronomy, the natural sciences, art, music, literature, poetry, and more -- from the 8th-13th centuries, while Europe mostly wallowed in the Dark Ages.

We flew home from Jeddah via Istanbul (a 4-hour flight) on wonderful Turkish Airlines, then continued on that carrier non-stop back to San Francisco (another 14 hours in the air). The food, entertainment, service and comfort were quite commendable on both flights, even in economy class! We traveled through 11 time zones, basically a half-way around the world.

So what did our adventure cost, in total, you ask? A somewhat hefty $22,000 U.S. for both of us, but absolutely worth the expense. I would be truly happy to return to Saudi Arabia again! I took 440 photos and made 7 brief videos (mostly 30-second panorama shots). A week after our return, I gave a rousing, 90-minute, digital slide show presentation of my 150 best photos to my loyal English Conversation Group (mostly foreign graduate students from the local CA University here) at the Davis Public Library.

People have asked me: Why did you choose Saudi Arabia to visit? Well, first of all, we knew no one who had ever been there. I had previously toured most of the countries in the Middle East -- with the exceptions of Iraq, Yemen, and Lebanon, each who was experiencing dangerous warfare of some sort -- so when I heard that SA was finally opening up to non-Muslim tourism, I jumped at the chance. The exotic culture and romantic mystic of Arabia had called to me, even as a boy, so off I had to go!

Of all my 118 countries seen so far, my adventures here reminded me of visiting Iran-Afghanistan-Kashmir in 1977; China in 1982; the U.S.S.R. in 1984; South Africa in 2005; Vietnam in 2012; and Cuba in 2015. Each of those countries was an amazing 'eye-opener' for me -- places I had read about in history books, and countries that also featured prominently in recent news reporting. I knew that I had to see such places for myself! Saudi Arabia has now been added to that special list. Plus, with Islam being the world's fastest growing religion -- now at one billion members -- while Christianity, at 2.5 billion members, is actually in decline -- I wanted to learn more about exactly what appeals to the Islamic community. I discovered that the vast majority of the Muslims I observed and interacted with were peaceful and loving human beings, and not blood-thirsty terrorists, as the media often highlights.

So, what about current Israeli and Saudi relations? The Jews were actually living in Arabia long before Islam was even founded. In the Quran, the Jews are respected as 'People of the Book' -- that is, as in the Old Testament of the Bible, especially the Torah. Adam & Eve, Noah and his sons, Moses, Aaron, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Sarah, Hagar, Elijah, Ezekiel, King David, King Solomon, and others are referred to (as is John the Baptist, Jesus, his mother Mary, and his Apostles) as revered and inspired holy people. The Quran, in fact, gives honor to both Christians and Jews as believers in One True God.

Before the horrific surprise attack against unarmed Israelis -- killing 1200 innocent men, women, and children -- on October 7, 2023 by terrorist Palestinian members of the radical Muslim sect, Hamas, from the Gaza Strip, Saudi Arabia was on track to formalize relations with Israel. Although, as Muslims and Arabs, SA publicly had to indicate support for a future free Palestinian state, privately we were told that SA will resume its diplomatic commitment to Israel once the current Israeli-Hamas conflict is settled. This is Saudi Crown Prince MBS's vision for ultimate peace in the Middle East. I would add that of all the Middle Eastern countries I have visited, the three that are the most modern and forward-looking are: Israel, the U.A.E., and Saudi Arabia. These are the truly enlightened leader nations -- in that historically troubled region -- which will try to bring about positive changes for lasting peaceful coexistence between the Arab and Jewish communities.

As for what comes next in my world travels, my wife and I are returning to Scotland for two weeks in mid-July. Next year, we are looking into doing some nature trekking around the remote Australian island of Tasmania...

THE END

by Jack Karolewski

February 16, 2024