

I had drawn a series of cargo-hold watches. My job, ostensibly, was to prevent the stevedores from stealing, a function I performed somewhat fecklessly. On the last day in Manila, after I'd stood a seventy-two-hour watch, another huge crate slipped overboard and crashed to the deck. Out poured about five thousand copies of *The Short Stories of Guy de Maupassant* intended for Manila's public schools. The stevedores seemed confused as to whether these were worth stealing. By now I was beyond caring. I frowned and told the foreman, "Good book. Go for it."

At sea in those latitudes, temperatures on the ship's steel decks could reach 115 degrees. During lunch breaks, I'd climb down the long ladder to the cooler (refrigerated) deck at the bottom of Number Two Hold. There were no fans, no fans—oh, I mean tons—of Red Delicious apples hanging away, a chipmunk in paratop in the lovely dark chipmunking night. I emerged belching and blinking into the heat, picked up my hydraulic jackhammer, and went back to chipping away at the general decades of rust and paint.

I remember standing in the crew's nest as we entered the misty Panama Canal, and the strange sensation as the four-thousand-ton ship rose higher and higher inside the lock. I remember dawn coming up over the Straits of Malacca, pagamuffin kids on the dock in Sumatra laughing as they pelted us with bananas; collecting dead flying fish off the deck and bringing them to our sweet, fat, toothless Danish cook to fry up for breakfast. I remember sailing into Hong Kong harbor and seeing my first tank; steaming upriver toward Bangkok, watching the sun rise and set fire to the gold-leafed pagoda roofs; climbing off the stern to throw a wriggly rope ladder into a small span, paddling for dear life across the commerce-mad river into the jungle, where it was suddenly quiet and then suddenly loud with monkey-chatter and bird-shrieks in the moonlight lambent on the palm fronds.

Looking back, as I often do, these ports of call seem to me reachable only by freighter. Mine was a rusty, banged-up old thing, but I suppose there's no reason a shiny new container ship wouldn't do the trick.

MAUREN DOWD

A Girls' Guide to Saudi Arabia

FROM *Vanity Fair*

I WANTED TO KNOW ALL ABOUT EVE. "Our grandmother Eve?" asked Abdullah Hejazi, my boyish-looking guide in Old Jidda. Under a glowing Arab moon on a hot winter night, Abdullah was showing off the jewels of his city—charming green, blue, and brown houses built on the Red Sea more than a hundred years ago. The houses, empty now, are stretched tall to capture the sea breeze on streets squeezed narrow to capture the shade. The latticed screens on cantilevered verandas were intended to ensure "the privacy and seclusion of the harem," as the Lebanese writer Ameen Rihani noted in 1930. The preservation of these five-hundred houses surrounding a souk marks an attempt by the Saudis, whose oil profits turned them into bling addicts, to appreciate the beauty of what they dismissively call "old stuff."

Jidda means "grandmother" in Arabic, and the city may have gotten its name because tradition holds that the grandmother of all temptresses, the biblical Eve, is buried here—an apt symbol for a country that legally, sexually, and sartorially buries its women alive. (A hard-line Muslim cleric in Iran recently blamed provocatively dressed women for earthquakes, inspiring the *New York Post* headline SHEIK IT!) According to legend, when Adam and Eve were evicted from the Garden of Eden, they went their separate ways, Adam ending up in Mecca and Eve in Jidda, with a single reunion. (Original sin reduced to friends with benefits?) Eve's cemetery lies behind a weathered green door in Old Jidda.

When I suggested we visit, Abdullah smiled with sweet exasperation. It was a smile I would grow all too accustomed to from Saudi men in the coming days. It translated into "No way, lady."

"Women are not allowed to go into cemeteries," he told me.

I had visited Saudi Arabia twice before, and knew it was the hardest place on earth for a woman to negotiate. Women traveling on their own have generally needed government minders or permission slips. A Saudi woman can't even report harassment by a man without having a *mahram*, or male guardian, by her side. A group of traditional Saudi women, skeptical of any sort of liberalization, recently started an organization called My Guardian Knows What's Best for Me. I thought I understood the regime of gender apartheid pretty well. But this cemetery bit took me aback.

"Can they go in if they're dead?" I asked.

"Women can be buried there," he conceded, "but you are not allowed to go in and look into it."

So I can only see a dead woman if I'm a dead woman?

No wonder they call this the Forbidden Country. It's the most bewitching, bewildering, beheading vacation spot you'll never vacation in.

Hello—Good-Bye!

Saudi Arabia is one of the premier pilgrimage sites in the world, outstripping Jerusalem, the Vatican, Angkor Wat, and every other religious destination, except for India's Kumbh Mela (which attracts as many as 50 million pilgrims every three years). Millions of Muslims flock to Mecca and Medina annually. But, for non-Muslims, it's another story. Saudi Arabia has long kept not just its women but its very self behind a veil. Robert Lacey, the Jidda-based author of *The Kingdom* and *Inside the Kingdom*, explains that only when revenues from the hajj pilgrims fell drastically, during the Depression, did the Saudis allow infidel American engineers to enter the country and start exploring for oil.

Before 9/11, Saudi Arabia was in fact gearing up to welcome, or at least accept, a trickle of non-Muslim visitors, dropping a kerchief to the world. Crown Prince Abdullah—now the king—was a radical modernizer by Saudi standards. He wanted to encourage more outside contact and to project an image other than one of religious austerity (with bursts of terrorism). The Saudis had already cracked open the door slightly for some degree of cultural tourism. Leslie McLoughlin, a fellow at the University of Exeter's

Institute of Arab and Islamic Studies, led tours to the Kingdom in 2000 and 2001, and both groups included affluent and curious Jewish men and women from New York. But on 9/11 the passage-way narrowed again as Saudi Arabia and the United States confronted the reality that Osama bin Laden and fifteen of the nineteen terrorist hijackers were Saudi nationals.

The news cut to the very character of the Saudi state. Back in 1744, the oasis-dwelling al-Saud clan had made a pact with Muhammad bin Abdul Wahhab, founder of the Wahhabi sect, which took an especially strict approach to religious observance. The warrior al-Sauds got religious legitimacy; the anhedonic Wahhabis got protection. To this day the Koran is the constitution of Saudi Arabia, and Wahhabism its dominant faith. The royals doubled down on the deal when Islamic fundamentalists took over the Grand Mosque, in Mecca, in 1979. Now, with bin Laden's attacks, the bargain the royals struck with the fundamentalists—allowing anti-Western clerics and madrassas to flourish and not cracking down on those who bankroll al-Qaeda and terrorism—had borne its poison fruit.

Three years after 9/11, in 2004, the Kingdom decided to give the tourism business another try, this time hiring a public relations firm to get things rolling. The website of the resulting Supreme Commission for Tourism was "a disaster," one Saudi official abashedly recalls, shaking his head. The site noted that visas would not be issued to an Israeli passport holder, to anyone with an Israeli stamp on a passport, or, just in case things weren't perfectly clear, to "Jewish people." There were also "important instructions" for any woman coming to the Kingdom on her own, advising that she would need a husband or a male sponsor to pick her up at the airport, and that she would not be allowed to drive a car unless "accompanied by her husband, a male relative, or a driver." Needless to say, there would be no drinking allowed—Saudi officials even try to enforce no-drinking rules on private jets in Saudi airspace, sometimes sealing the liquor cabinets. Finally, belying the fact that Arabs consider hospitality a sacred duty, there was the no-loitering kicker: "All visitors to the Kingdom must have a return ticket." After New York congressman Anthony Weiner kicked up a fuss, the anti-Semitic language on the website was removed.

Now, six years later, the Saudis are trying yet again. But they aren't opening their arms unless (with a few exceptions) you are part of a special tourist group. "No backpacking stuff," says Prince Sultan bin Salman, the tall and chatty former astronaut who is the president and chairman of the Saudi Commission for Tourism and Antiquities. "You know, high level," he goes on, and involving only "fully educated" groups.

You still have to accept all the restrictive rules. And it won't be easy getting in. Visas these days for Westerners are so scarce that even top American diplomats have a hard time obtaining them for family members. The Kingdom recoils at the thought of the culture clash that could be caused by an invasion of French girls in shorts and American boys with joints. A sign at the airport warns: DRUG TRAFFICKERS WILL BE PUT TO DEATH.

Saudis fret that the rest of the world sees them as aliens, even though many are exceptionally charming and welcoming once you actually breach the wall. They are sensitive about being judged for their Flintstones ways, and are quick to remind you of what happened to the shah of Iran when he tried to modernize too fast. Not to mention their own King Faisal, who was assassinated in 1975 (regicide by nephew) after he introduced television and public education for girls. This prince-and-pauper society has always had a Janus face. Royals fly to the South of France to drink, gamble, and sleep with Russian hookers, while reactionary clerics at home delegitimize women and demonize Westerners. Last winter, a Saudi prince found himself under arrest for allegedly strangling his servant in a London hotel. (He has pleaded not guilty.) The Kingdom didn't have widespread electricity until the 1950s. It didn't abolish slavery until the 1960s. Restrictions on mingling between unrelated members of the opposite sex remain severe. (Recently, a Saudi cleric advised men who come in regular contact with unrelated women to consider drinking their breast milk, thereby making them in a sense "relatives," and allowing everyone to breathe a sigh of relief.) Today, Saudi Arabia is trying to take a few more steps ahead—starting a coed university, letting women sell lingerie to women, even toning down the public beheadings. If you're living on Saudi time, akin to a snail on Ambien, the popular eighty-six-year-old King Abdullah is making bold advances. To the rest of the world, the changes are almost imperceptible.

"Lots of Attention"

The idea of seeing Saudi Arabia with the welcome mat out was irresistible—even when the wary Saudis kept resisting. I made plans for a Saudi vacation, knowing that the only thing more invigorating than ten days in Saudi Arabia would be ten days there as a woman. Actually, it would be two women: joining me was my intrepid colleague and trip photographer Ashley Parker. I was a little squeamish about boarding a Saudi Arabian Airlines flight with a cross on my forehead. (It was Ash Wednesday.) Some Saudi flights embark with an Arabic supplication, in the words of the Prophet Muhammad. The flight attendants—who are not Saudi, because it would be dishonorable for the airline to employ Saudi women—bring around baskets of Saudi newspapers. A glance at the headlines underscored the fact that we were in a time machine hurtling backward. One article in the English-language *Arab News* was titled "Carrying Dagger a Mark of Manliness." Another warned, "Women lawyers are not welcome in the Kingdom's courts." It was startling to see a thumbnail portrait of a female columnist—my counterpart—in which only her eyes were not concealed by a veil. Reading the airline magazine is like the moment in *The Twilight Zone* when you sense there's something slightly off about that picture-book town. The magazine is called *Ahlah Wasahlah*, meaning "Hello and Welcome," but the welcome seems to be to Versailles, Provence, and Belize. There's no hint that Saudi Arabia itself might be a destination.

The in-flight movies offer a taste of things to come. If you order *The Proposal*, you get a blurry blob over Sandra Bullock's modest décolletage, and even her clavicles, and the male stripper scene and the ~~er~~ joke have vanished altogether. A curtained partition goes up so that Saudi women can nap without their abayas. There's no alcohol onboard, although some veteran business travelers en route to the Kingdom order vodkas at the airport bar and pour them into a water bottle for sustenance along the way. At the airport in Riyadh, the gender segregation ratchets up. There's a Ladies' Waiting Room and a Ladies' Prayer Room. If there hadn't been a Saudi majordomo to come and collect us, we would have been in limbo—a pair of single women wandering the airport with no man to get them out, trapped forever like Tom Hanks in *The Terminal*.

In America, you get chocolates in your hotel room. In Riyadh, you might get a gift bag from your hosts in the Kingdom with something to slip into for dinner—a long black abaya and a black headscarf that make you look like a mummy and feel like a pizza oven. And even then they'll stick you behind a screen or curtain in the "family" section of the restaurant. The big Gloria Steinem advance in recent years is that women now wear abayas with dazzling designs on the back (sometimes with thousands of dollars' worth of Swarovski crystals) or Burberry or zebra-patterned trim on the sleeves.

I respect Islam's mandate for modest clothing. But I don't see why I have to adopt a dress code, as Aaron Sorkin put it on *The West Wing*, that makes "a Maryknoll nun look like Malibu Barbie." Needless to say, Barbie herself was banned in Saudi Arabia, though I did see Barbie paraphernalia for sale in a Riyadh supermarket and a Barbie-like doll, accessorized with headscarf and abaya (and of course not in a box with Ken), in the National Museum gift shop. As for *Hello!* magazine, a recent import to the Kingdom, Saudi censors paste small white squares of paper on the models' glossy thighs.

Soon after our arrival I asked Prince Sultan bin Salman, the tourism minister, about the dress code for foreigners. "Well, the abaya is part of the uniform," he said. "It's part of enjoying the culture. I've seen people who go to India dress up in the Indian sari." Najla Al-Khalifah, a member of the prince's staff in the female section of the tourist bureau, offered another analogy: "You can't wear shorts for the opera. You must dress for the occasion. If you don't like it, don't go." Fair enough, but if you do wear shorts to the opera, you won't get arrested by the roving outriders of the Commission for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice—that is, the *mutawwa*, or religious police.

Being in purdah pricks more deeply when you're dealing with American-owned enterprises—it's as if your own people are in sexist cahoots with your captors. In 2008, covering President Bush's trip to the Middle East, I was standing next to ABC's Martha Raddatz at the desk at the Riyadh Marriott when she angrily pressed the clerk about getting into the gym. He gave her The Smile. How about never, lady? On this trip, at Budget Rent a Car, the man at

the counter explained to me that women could rent cars only if they paid extra for a driver. (And, to boot, it would be dishonorable for a woman to sit in the passenger seat unless a male relative were driving.) When I said I could drive myself, the man's head fell back in helpless laughter. I enlisted Nicolla Hewitt, a gorgeous, statuesque blonde New Yorker on business in Saudi Arabia, to join me in a brief sit-in at the men's section of Starbucks in the upscale Kingdom Centre mall. Her head was swirling with lurid news accounts of a Western woman who had been dragged from a Starbucks for committing the crime of attempted equality. "If I see the bloody *mutawwa*," she said, gripping her latte nervously, "I'm hoofing it."

At various establishments I began amusing myself by seeing how long it took for male Cerberuses to dart forward and block the way to the front sections reserved for men. At McDonald's, dourly observing my arrival, a janitor barred the door with a broom in two seconds flat. At the posh Al Faisaliah Hotel, in Riyadh, I was asking the *maitre d'* why I couldn't sit with the businessmen when he suddenly caught sight of an elegant woman sashaying through the men's section. He made a Reggie Bush run to knock her out of bounds before turning back to thwart my own entrance with a Baryshnikov leap. I did manage a moment of Pyrrhic triumph in the deserted men's section in the lobby café of the Jidda Hilton, ordering a cappuccino, but then the waiter informed me that he couldn't serve it until I moved five feet back to the women's section.

Hotel desk clerks would warn me to put on my abaya merely to walk across the lobby, even when I was wearing my most modest floor-length navy dress, the one reserved for family funerals. "You will get lots of attentions—not good attentions," one clerk said. Not wearing an abaya can be hazardous—but so can wearing one. Signs on the mall escalators caution women to be careful not to get their cloaks caught in the moving stairs. (A Muslim woman was recently choked to death by her hijab while on holiday in Australia; it had gotten caught in a go-cart at high speed.) You soon become paranoid, worrying that if you open the door for room service wearing a terry-cloth robe, you'll end up in the stocks. But the top hotels are staffed by foreign men—something I realized must be the case when my butler at the Al Faisaliah folded my underwear

unprompted. If I were bullied by a Saudi, we'd probably be shuttled to Deera Square—or Chop Chop Square, as it's better known—where the public be-headings occur. It's the one with the big drain, which the Saudis claim is for rain.

Sunny Side of Repression

The first time I traveled to Saudi Arabia was in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks: Prince Saud al-Faisal, the foreign minister, had invited me to come over and see for myself that not all Saudis are terrorists. On that trip, I was more heedless and cavalier. I wore a hot-pink skirt, with fringe, to go to an interview with the Saudi education minister. When I came down from my hotel room, the men in the lobby glared with such hostility that I thought they'd pelt me to death with their dates. My minder turned me back to the elevator. "Go get your abaya!" he yelled. "They'll kill you!" (My Guardian knew what was best for me.) This was right around the time when fifteen Saudi schoolgirls had died in a fire because the *matana* wouldn't let them escape without their headscarves and abayas, a horrifying episode that shook the kingdom. Confronted by carloads of screaming men whenever I wore my own clothes, I added more layers but still got into trouble. I was swathed in black with a headscarf at a mall next to the Al Faisaliah Hotel when four members of the *matana* bore down. They barked in Arabic that they could see my neck and the outline of my body, and they confiscated my passport. All this was happening against the backdrop of a storefront underwear display featuring a lacy red teddy. My companion, the suave Adel al-Jubeir, an adviser to King Abdullah and now the Saudi ambassador to Washington, managed to retrieve the passport and obtain permission for me to leave the mall (and the country), but it took a disconcertingly long time.

With each incident, you feel more cowed and less eager to defy the dress-code/press rules. For this trip, I had an abaya made so I wouldn't have to swelter inside the standard polyester ones in the baking heat. I didn't go for anything as gauzy as Dorothy Lamour's in *The Road to Morocco*. I wanted simple black linen. But the tailor tried too hard to give it a fluttering shape, adding slits so high they could get my throat slit. When I wore it, my minders pestered me to put an abaya over my abaya. It reminded me of Martin Short's

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mischievous question about Hillary Clinton's nightwear: "Does she have a pantsuit on under her pantsuit?"

Still, this time around, I decided to look on the sunny side of repression. Feel guilty about not jogging? Don't even try! Tired of running off to every new exhibition? Lucky you—there aren't any art museums! Can't decide which sybaritic treatment to select at the hotel spa? Relax—the spa's just for men. And you never have to stress about a back-hair day.

The two words you'll quickly learn are *halal* (permissible) and *haram* (forbidden)—the kosher and nonkosher of the Arab world. Since your old pastimes are now mostly *haram*, you'll have to pick up some new vices. Gorge on gamy camel bacon at Friday brunch. (Friday is the Muslim Sunday.) Develop a new obsession with tweezing and threading your eyebrows and blackening your Bedouin bedroom eyes—now literally the windows to the soul. Enjoy a country that is the last refuge of indoor smoking. I went to the cigar bar at the fancy Globe restaurant in Riyadh and enjoyed a "Churchill's Cabinet" stogie for 180 riyals (\$50), with its "lovely notes of leather and cream, hints of coffee, citrus, and spice." To go along with beluga caviar and Maine-lobster snacks there was an elaborate wine presentation, with the waiter showing off the label of a nonalcoholic Zinfandel before nestling it in a silver ice bucket. "It's from California," he said proudly. I fell into tippeling in the morning, starting the day with Saudi champagne, a saccharine apple juice concoction.

You might also want to emulate the spoiled Saudi set and just loth about until the sun sets, watching *The Bold and the Beautiful* or Glenn Beck on satellite TV. (There are no public movie theaters.) The Saudis have a homegrown version of the *Today* show in English, with their own Meredith Vieira in headscarf, promoting bulletcks exercises and colon cleansing, and a hefty Martha Stewart doppelgänger in a babushka, baking dried-apricot sandwiches in flower shapes. It's all very cozy, even if the crawl underneath is crawling with less-than-flattering stories about Israel's treatment of the Palestinians. One night, deciding to take a risk, I smuggled a young Saudi man up to my hotel room to translate some of the scary-looking rants on TV by guys in *thobes* and *kaffiyehs*. Were they trashing the Great Satan? He told me that the serious-looking

bearded guy talking a mile a minute was merely chatting about soccer, and another scowling fellow with intense brown eyes was just praying. Likely story.

Once out of your room, you can stroll through the malls with your girlfriends for some Bluetooth flirting, where Rashid and Khalid detect your cell phone network as you walk by and send text messages that range from chatty to creepy. One of my young married minders said he regularly gets hassled by the *matana* when he's out flirting with female friends: "They say, 'Can I ask who you are with?' and I tell them, 'Oh, she's my sister.' And they say, 'Your sister? Do you laugh like that with your sister?'" There's no date night in Saudi Arabia. The romance strictures here—a few virginial meetings, a peek under the veil, a marriage contract, an all-female wedding reception, and a check of the bloody sheets—make *The Rules* look like the Kama Sutra. In Jidda, there's a Chinese restaurant called Toki, where unmarried girls can show themselves off in front of likely prospects on a fifty-eight-meter catwalk. The prospects are not young men, however, but their mothers, who traditionally made the match with help from the *khatabah*, or yenta, who was sometimes sent over to surreptitiously look under the hood and kick the tires of the bride-to-be. She would give the girl a hug to check the firmness of her breasts and then drop something on the floor to watch the girl pick it up. When the young lady would bend over and her *abaya* lifted ever so slightly, the *khatabah* could see her ankles and infer the shape of the legs and derrière.

"The Time of Ignorance"

Back in the 1940s, when the oil began gushing, Saudi Arabia was the sort of place where the country's first king, Abdul Aziz ibn Saud, traveled in a Ford convertible with his falcons and shot gazelles from the car. The king knew the name of every visitor to Riyadh. Travelers could not move around the Kingdom without the king's express consent, and he personally tracked each one's odyssey. Some Saudis, who had rarely seen airplanes, assumed they were cars that simply drove off into the sky. Prince Sultan bin Salman is a natural choice for tourism czar, given that he was the first Muslim in space. In 1985 he went up as part of an international crew on the *Discovery* shuttle. Trying to find Mecca from space—imag-

ine gravity-free kneeling—was nothing compared with perstading other royals (thanks to polygamy, there are now thousands of them) to consider the desirability of making Saudi Arabia tourist-ready. For one thing, Saudis don't have that fondness for their own history that the British and Italians do. Many pious Muslims look askance at civilizations that predate Islam ("The time of ignorance," as they call it), and they have reservations about archaeological digs that may turn up Christian sites. Archaeology was not fully recognized until the last few years as a field of study in Saudi universities. In other countries, many of the famed tourist sites are what you might call "big broken things"—Machu Picchu, the Colosseum. Saudis don't go for broken, or even slightly worn. You will never see a Melrose Avenue-style vintage store; it would be considered shameful to buy or sell old clothes. It's all about the new and shiny.

Prince Sultan was traveling through Tuscany a few years back, snapping pictures of big broken things and talking to preservation experts, when it hit him: maybe there was a way to get Saudis to appreciate their own ancient heritage. He gathered forty or so mayors and governors who liked nothing better than to tear down their cultural heritage, and showed them that they could develop historic sites where local crafts and fresh produce are sold in a "joy-ions" setting. The cultural education did not begin well. The prince had wanted the officials to see Siena. "And I get a phone call at four A.M. that woke me, and the pilot was calling. He said, 'I'm in Vienna.'" Eventually, the Saudi mayors and governors began to acquire a taste for old stuff. They've done five more trips, and one to Seville was coming up, though maybe they'd end up in Savile Row. (Saudis certainly know the way.)

Prince Sultan is now training native Saudis—who have always left the heavy lifting as waiters, maids, and drivers to a servant class of Filipinos, Bangladeshis, Indonesians, Pakistanis, and Indians—to work as tour guides, tour operators, and hotel operators. He hopes that Saudis will get better at sighthseeing as they travel elsewhere. "Saudis are not trained as good tourists," he told me over tea one night. "They didn't know how to respect the sites, not throw Kleenex at places."

With Prince Sultan's assistance we flew to an attraction we'd never heard of before: the spectacular Madain Saleh, sister city to

Jordan's renowned Petra, three hundred miles to the northwest. After flying across the desert for hours, you suddenly come upon strange and wonderful classical structures. Today they're in the middle of nowhere. Eons ago, at the time of ancient Rome, they stood athwart the Incense Route, controlled by the Nabataean kingdom. An airport is only just being built, so we bumped down in our puddle jumper on what was essentially a cleared track. Our guide barely spoke English, but he was giddy with pleasure at finally having someone to show around. There are more than a hundred sumptuous sandstone tombs here, many of them cavernous, sculpted into solid rock between the first century B.C. and the first century A.D. Only in recent years have the Saudis come to appreciate Madain Saleh's value, registering it as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2008.

They're also restoring the old train station in Madain Saleh to its former glory, with a shiny black engine from the Hejaz railway, like the one Peter O'Toole blew up in *Lawrence of Arabia*. Don't bother asking about T. E. Lawrence here—he's remembered for selling the Saudis out. (Saudis love the movie, though, and spout lines from it like "Thy mother mated with a scorpion.") The guides in Saudi Arabia have a hard time staying on message, veering wistfully toward memories of time spent in the United States, studying in Palo Alto, San Diego, or Boulder. They still obsess about their college sports teams—staying up until all hours to watch games via satellite. At the Masnak Fortress, in Riyadh—the scene of a critical battle for Abdul Aziz ibn Saud—the guide soon lost interest in leading us among displays labeled "Some Old Guns" and "Cover for the Udder of the She-Camel" and began to wax nostalgic about a married woman named Liz in Grand Rapids.

In Abha, a cool, green, mountainous area to the south, near Yemen, we had our sole encounter with an actual Saudi tourist. He was checking out the Hanging Village, where some people of yore had settled on the side of a sheer cliff to get away from the Ottomans. Supplies were lowered down by rope. The Saudi was a paunchy man from Riyadh named Fahad, who liked to be called Jack. Jack, wearing a stained tracksuit, volunteered that he had once lived in Fort Worth. "I enjoy it," he said, taking a drag on his cigarette and giving Ashley and me an appreciative look, "when I see these girls with the smell of the United States."

Peeping Abdul

The charm of Riyadh is that it has no charm. The only visual icon, the one captured in snow globes at souvenir shops, is the city's tallest building, Kingdom Centre, the home of the Four Seasons Hotel and the Kingdom Centre mall. It is owned by Prince al-Waleed bin Talal, the billionaire nephew of King Abdullah who has been called "the Arabian Warren Buffett" by *Time* magazine. (Rudy Giuliani turned down a \$10 million donation to New York from al-Waleed after 9/11 when al-Waleed suggested that U.S. policies contributed to the attacks.) The skyscraper features a V-shaped hole at the top, and Saudis tastelessly joke that it's "the Hijacker Training Academy."

A Jordanian staffer at the Riyadh Four Seasons complained to me that the only things Saudis do are "shop and eat, shop and eat." Or subject you to "ordeal by tea," as I've heard it called. At the ubiquitous malls, women covered in black robes and gloves, with only their eyes showing, shop for La Perla lingerie, Versace gowns, Dior handbags, and Bulgari jewelry. Beauty is a drug for Saudi women, even though they're stuck at home most of the time—or maybe because of that. Saudi Arabia is more than three times the size of Texas and glitters with three times as many Swarovski crystals. "Bling H₂O" water is imported from Tennessee. The shopaholicism pauses only at prayer time, when metal grates come down over the stores. Men, who carry more of the burden of the five-times-a-day obligation, head off to the prayer rooms. The women wander zombie-like among the shuttered shop fronts. The atmosphere is watchful. Once, when Ashley tried to snap some pictures of Saudi women shopping at a lingerie store, a female security guard came running up to confiscate the camera. "Just walk away," a Western woman advised us. "She's a woman—she has no power over you." At last: a fringe benefit of misogyny.

The Kingdom Centre mall has a ladies' floor on top shielded by high, wavy frosted glass, so that men—with all the maturity of Catholic schoolboys in stairwells—can't peer up from below. Signs on the ladies' floor tell women, once inside, to take off their head coverings: that way, a Peeping Abdul can't disguise himself in female garb and wander lustfully among them. On the ladies' floor, you're actually allowed to try on clothes. On floors where the sexes

mingle, you often have to buy whatever you want in different sizes and take it all home to try on. The mere thought of a disrobed woman behind a dressing room door is apparently too much for men to handle. There's something profoundly poignant about seeing little girls running around the malls in normal clothes, playing with little boys in normal ways—you know what's in store for them in just a few years. When I reached puberty, my mother gave me a book called *On Becoming a Woman*. When these girls reach puberty, they'll have a black tarp thrown over their heads.

In recent years, Riyadh has gotten a dash of sophistication. "Oh, my!" says Princess Reema bint Bandar al-Saud, the lovely Riyadh businesswoman who is a daughter of Prince Bandar bin Sultan, the former longtime Saudi ambassador to the U.S. "There's a new restaurant almost every week, and I assure you, the way they look, the way the food is, is on a par with—I wouldn't say the top 10 restaurants in New York or London, but definitely 11 to 50." There's a two-week wait to get a table at B & F Burger Boutique, even though it's just high-end fast food served in a hip decoy. The concrete walls and dim lights evoke SoHo, and gender segregation is more subtle. The women wear abayas with fashionable trim, and the guys trade their white *thabes* for blue jeans. The religious police showed up on opening night; they wanted the music eliminated and the women screened off by bigger partitions. The restaurant obliged only on the music.

Going from Riyadh to the Red Sea is like going from black-and-white Kansas to Technicolor Oz. The main port of entry for hajj pilgrims, Jidda is Saudi Arabia's business capital. "The bride of the Red Sea" is home to many female entrepreneurs, and residents say they are trying to tell the rest of the country to relax. Women leave their abayas open in front, or wear nighties or tight jeans underneath. But the enticing blue mosaic pool at the Jidda Hilton is still only for men. I watched a Saudi man swim while a woman in "full *niqja*" as American businessmen here call it, tiptoed around the edge, chatting with him.

When I asked the concierge about the hotel mosque, he said I couldn't go in unless I was a Muslim. Later, Prince Saud told me that I could simply have asked the emir of the region for permission. (Like the emir's listed? Men in the Kingdom often reflexively say, "No, no, no"—*La, la, la!*—to women because it's the

safer answer. But an essential point about Saudi Arabia is that everything operates on a sliding scale, depending on who you are, whom you know, whom you ask, whom you're with, and where you are. Drinking is not allowed, but many affluent Saudis keep fully stocked bars. "Take off your abaya when you drink your whiskey," instructed one Saudi mogul as his bartender handed us cocktails in his home. Some Saudi men glean the future from coffee grounds, and many Saudi women love horoscopes, but police here stretched a Lebanese TV host and chairvoyant from a pilgrimage and sentenced him to death by beheading for sorcery. (After international media pressure, the execution has for now been postponed.) Non-Muslims are not allowed to enter the holy cities of Mecca and Medina. But Leslie McLoughlin led a tour near Medina prior to 9/11, where he could view the city and the Prophet's Mosque from his hotel.

Saudi Arabia may now be in semi-Open Sesame mode (and it's funny to see how many people have named their camels "Barack"), but the holy sites won't be officially open to non-Muslims anytime soon. On the highway to Mecca, a "Christian bypass" tells the rest of us when to turn off the road; heathens exit here. Perhaps from a distance you'll one day be able to glimpse what is expected to be the second-tallest building in the world, now being constructed by the bin Laden family real estate company. It is a hotel complex that will be topped by a clock six times larger than London's Big Ben. (The Saudis harbor a hope that Mecca time will dislodge Greenwich Mean Time from its current prominence.) For now, even planes must avoid violating the holy cities, keeping safely away from sacred airspace lest infidel's spy from above. There has been talk of building an Islamic, Disneyland-style park on the road between Mecca and Jidda. The Saudis find monkeys and parrots funnier than mice and ducks, so watch out, Mickey and Duffy. And Qatar recently pushed the Gulf states to create a common Gulf Cooperation Council tourist visa, in order to make the region more attractive to cruise ships.

Jidda has many charms. The median strip on the corniche has a magical open-air museum, with large, whimsical sculptures by Miró, Henry Moore, and other artists who created works consistent with Islamic values—that is, no representations of the human form. The neon-fit boardwalk is lined with snack shacks, toy shops, and mini amusement parks. But it's missing the sexy, seedy ele-

ments that make shore vacations fun. Instead of teenagers necking or kids splashing in the water, there are men spreading out prayer rugs on the seawall.

Libertarian Zone

I had bought a Burqini on-line from an Australian company, figuring I'd need one to go swimming. A Burqini—a burka bikini—is a full-body suit that resembles Apolo Ojano's Olympic outfit or the getup Woody Allen wore to play a ~~golfer~~. . . . But as it turned out I didn't have to ~~swaddle myself in one~~, because I discovered a place called Durat al-Arus.

Sarah Bennett, a stunning thirty-two-year-old, blue-eyed California Mormon who converted to Islam and blackened her blond hair, now works in Jidda for a conglomerate. She wears Chanel abayas. Bennett took us to Durat al-Arus, a marina and tourist village where wealthy Saudis and royals have homes and boats. The architecture is 1970s, the colors are *Miami Vice*, and the mood is downright hedonistic compared with that of the rest of the country. It's a rare libertarian zone. Women can drive and wear what they want, and men and women can mingle without fear. I quickly commandeered a BMW from a cute sheikh so I could tool around for a few minutes in a meaningless spurt of emancipation. Then the sheikh, who wore a Jack Sparrow bandana and called himself "the Pirate," took Sarah, Ashley, and me out on his yacht, with a motorboat trailing behind, for some snorkeling in the turquoise Red Sea. He was a Muslim and served us only soft drinks as we made our way to a desolate desert island. But other than that you could wear a real bikini and live the high life: listening to club music booming from an iPod, eating melting butter-pecan ice cream and fresh berries, sipping flutes of sparkling pomegranate juice. With a small shock, I was struck by the sensuality of the scene—it was hard to believe this was Saudi Arabia. My thoughts drifted to the silent movie *The Sheik*, and the moment when Rudolph Valentino drags Agnes Ayres onto his horse in the desert and says, "Lie still, you little fool."

And that, I guess, is why they have the *mutawaa*.

PORTER FOX

The Last Stand of Free Town

FROM *The Believer*

THE CONCRETE BULEVARDS and tidy houses of downtown Copenhagen instill an overwhelming sense of order in Denmark's capital city. There are no beggars loitering in alleyways or vendors hawkking wares on the sidewalks. At night, blaze-orange street cleaners buff cobblestones to a dull sheen while workers blast graffiti off walls with an environmentally friendly jet of pressurized ice crystals. The effect is so soothing that on a spring morning with the sun reflecting off the spires of Tivoli Gardens, Copenhagen appears more like a fairytale kingdom than the largest metropolis in Scandinavia.

So it was with some surprise that Daines turned on their television sets on May 14, 2007, to see fires burning in their capital's streets and gangs of police officers beating their countrymen with billy clubs. The worst of the fighting flared up along Prinsessegade Road in the Christianshavn neighborhood. A column of black transport vans filled in the streets, residents hurled Molotov cocktails, rocks, and fire. Officers retaliated with batons and tear gas, and by that afternoon the seventeenth-century streets had disappeared under a thick cloud of smoke.

The site was a historic flashpoint for violence. Prinsessegade Road marks the northern border of a pacifist commune that has existed in Christianshavn since 1971. That year, a group of squatters overtook an abandoned army base east of Prinsessegade, barricaded their roads, outlawed cars and guns, and created a self-ruling micronation in the heart of Copenhagen. They called the eighty-five-acre district Christiania Free Town, drew up a constitution,