

Oman 2012

My team went on a geological field trip to Oman. On looking around, one thing I noticed was the abundance of camels. I was also intrigued by the peoples' clothes. They were mainly dressed in traditional garb. The men wore long, white dishdashas and embroidered fezzes. I had a surreal moment looking at an Omani scare-crow dressed in a dishdasha. Not just because of its clothes, but also because gardens were so rare in this dry country.

Although some women were dressed in black in the office, people outside of the city centres were colourfully dressed. Very few women had their full faces covered but they used scarves to cover their hair. Some women even wore makeup.

The buildings had flat roofs, I expect this is because they do not worry much about water settling with their arid climate. The houses were built to look like miniature forts and the tops of the water tanks were crenulated, so they looked like turrets. The graceful, curved lines of the mosques stood out compared to the fort-like houses and businesses. I also noticed that this was a very clean country, even the modest houses had no litter near them.

The people were very friendly as my friend Rhonda, who had lived there, had told me to expect. Still, I was surprised that people walking on the street always waved to those in cars whether the occupants were Omani or not. They seemed to be a laid-back society and I also noticed a lack of traffic lights for many of the routes we took on the field trip. This made the place feel like a holiday destination.

Our hotel was in Muscat and it was nice but I was unnerved that at night man would come to turn down the bed, straighten up and replace towels while I was there, but understood that was the way they did things

We had dinner at the Indonesian restaurant at the hotel and when the roving guitar playing musicians came to our table, one of my team mates requested Pink Floyd's "Wish You Were Here". He was amazed when they played it without missing a beat.

The field trip was good, and this was the first time we ever had dates as field trip snacks, yum!. We visited outcrops, drove through wadis, one with water, and saw Diana's Viewpoint, a view that Princess Diana enjoyed on a visit in 1986. In addition to taking in the geology, I learned that the stories of Sinbad the Sailor originated in Oman.

Our drivers were all Omani and did not speak much English. They wore colourful head dresses and I had been told the patterns were family specific, the way tartans can be in Scotland. I asked our driver for the name of his head dress and after some time he finally responded "Cotton" so something may have been lost in translation. I had assumed there was an Omani word for the head dress.

They would set up a canopy each day for us to sit under and served very delicious lunches, usually consisting of humus, pita bread, a curry dish like aloo gobi, meats and fruit. One of the canned drinks was called "Pocari Sweat" and it proudly claimed to contain constituents to replace sweat, I am not making this up. They also had sapolilla ice cream but called it something different.

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We went through a military check point to get to one of the field trip locations and we were briefed that we might need ID, so I put my passport in my backpack but promptly forgot. This precipitated a tense encounter at the airport when I could not initially recall where I put my passport. But it came back to me eventually.

On our last day, which would have been our Friday off if we had been in the office, we took a part of the afternoon off and went on a dolphin watching cruise. We did not see any dolphins, which was predicted by one of the guys working in the Oman office. But we did see the Qantab Arch at sunset. My team leader was originally kicking around the idea of us visiting a traditional goat market that has existed for hundreds of years. But come on, goats? Really? My neighbour had a goat. So I was very glad when the plans changed to dolphins but as Keeb later observed, at least we would have seen goats had we gone to that market. I assured him we had seen enough goats in the field – they had thick, long coats so I can only assume they smell even stronger than our Trinidadian short haired variety. I did not get near enough to test that theory.

We also visited a souk for ½ an hour (15 minutes of which were spent trying to get cash out of the cash machine). This bazaar had stalls selling angled daggers as well as pashminas, jewellery and clothes. I bought a Christmas ornament but because this is a Muslim country, the images were gazelles rather than traditional Christmas motifs.

I was glad I had the experience of seeing that country.