

As I stepped off the plane at King Abdul Aziz International Airport in Jeddah, I immediately felt like I had entered into a different country than the rest of Saudi Arabia. I had left the brand new (and sterile) Dammam airport behind and was now stepping into one of the world's most diverse airports. I quickly recognized various Arabs and Africans, and I overheard people speaking in French, Russian, and Japanese. Over the next three days, I had the opportunity to explore and learn about the most cosmopolitan and liberal Saudi Arabian city. For over 1300 years, visitors from all over the world have traveled to Jeddah on the western coast of Saudi Arabia. In 647 C.E., the caliph Uthman ibn Affan established the city as the main port of entry for pilgrims to Mecca. The city quickly became an important economic center in the Muslim world. Because of the city's religious and economic importance, people from all over the world have settled there.

I was in Saudi Arabia as part of a study tour for twenty American teachers sponsored by Saudi Aramco Oil Company and the Institute of International Education (IIE). We spent twelve days in November exploring Dhahran, Shaybah, Jeddah, and Riyadh, while we learned about Saudi history and society and the oil industry. Although the American media often portrays Saudi Arabia as either the source of the world's oil or the source of terrorism, visiting Jeddah quickly makes anyone realize how much more there is to Saudi Arabia.

After collecting our luggage, a police escort safely led the bus to our hotel. The drivers in Jeddah are notorious for their recklessness. In the first ten minutes, I saw a driver take a right turn from the far left lane right in front of our bus and another vehicle. New York City traffic seemed surprisingly safer at that moment. We soon reached the hotel, where we relaxed outside next to the beach. Like true Jeddahis, we stayed up late discussing politics and our experiences in Saudi Arabia while we enjoyed tea and a sheesha (a traditional Middle Eastern water pipe.)

We began the next day with a visit to a center for children with disabilities. The center works with young children (both males and females) to age twelve. The mostly female staff helps the children adjust to their disabilities and prepare them to enter into Saudi society. We also visited a party for the children. There were boys and girls interacting and an American style clown making balloon animals.

In the afternoon we visited the Khadija bint Khowailid Center for Businesswomen at the Jeddah Chamber of Commerce and Industry. The Chamber of Commerce recently allowed women to vote in the last board elections, and two women surprisingly won seats. It was the first time in Saudi Arabia that women had participated in an election. The director of the center, Nadia Baeshen, spoke to us about the center's programs to connect new Saudi businesswomen. She also described some of the local crafts business ventures that some of the women had opened up. It was exciting to hear about women becoming more actively involved in the Saudi economy. But as Baeshen continued to speak, it became increasingly clear that only upper middle and upper class women seemed to be involved with the Center. There were unfortunately few resources to reach out to women from working class families.

That evening there was a special dinner planned for our group. As we were sitting in this over-the-top guest room that someone described as "Baroque meets Turkish and Egyptian," the Editor-in-Chief of the Arab News, Khaled Al-Maena, was introduced as the host of dinner. He immediately began speaking about the Saudi Arabia that Americans do not know and the United States' policies in the Middle East since the beginning of the Cold War. Because of the United States' insistence on containing Communism, the United States has made shortsighted decisions to support awful regimes and religious parties that opposed Communism, regardless of what type of states emerged or what other beliefs the peoples had. He made it clear that the United States

policy in the Middle East since the end of the Cold War has not improved, and that the United States government still does not understand that all Arabs want is the right to make political decisions for themselves. Instead, the United States has manipulated and supported governments in a way that has left Arabs feeling politically impotent. This is the reason that many Arabs are unhappy with the United States government. But he also added that Arabs, for the most part, love America. They want to experience American culture and live in the United States. He also talked about the way in which the American media has presented an incomplete view of Arab politics. Instead, they have focused on the radical and extremist fringe of Arab society that does hate America and have presented it as the mainstream Arab view of America. I also had the chance to talk with Ebtihal Mubarak. She is an upcoming young reporter for the Arab News. She has written a series of excellent articles on Al-Harbi, a teacher who received a jail sentence and physical punishment for supposedly criticizing Islam. The case was recently dropped. The dinner ended up being one of the most enlightening experiences of my trip.

On my last day in Jeddah we visited Dar Al-Hikmah Girls College, which is one of the most prestigious colleges in Saudi Arabia. A young female student spoke with us and described her experiences as a female, Muslim student. She was only nineteen but was already graduating in the spring. She spoke with amazing poise and was especially thoughtful. Her description of how Islam has positively shaped her educational experience was especially provocative. She described the emphasis that Islam places on education and how her religion has pushed her to pursue her studies.

Afterwards we attended a lunch where Nahid Taher, an economist, spoke. Her talk was about the overall state of the Saudi economy, its challenges, and the government's plans. Her openness about the challenges facing the Saudi economy and the dangers in joining the WTO was refreshing. She described the significant debt that Saudi Arabia has from the collapse of oil prices in the 1980s and the need to make better use of oil revenue now that prices have increased again. She was not simply describing all the positives. She was also clear about the need to develop microfinance, expand education for the working class, and the problems with retaining businesses in the new shopping complexes and office towers. Economists normally like to talk about new office spaces and mega malls, but Taher also pointed out that those buildings need functioning business.

That evening I went to the old city in Jeddah. The director of the Jeddah Historical Preservation Society led a tour of the city center. After the tour, we visited the Naseef house, where he gave a short talk on the history and development of the city. We then climbed up to the roof, where we could look out over the entire old city. I then explored on my own. I saw the gate to Mecca, from where all the pilgrims left. I also saw the gate to Medina and other sites. The old city was also filled with immigrants. There were Filipinos, Thais, Pakistanis, Indians, and different Africans all over. As I walked, I thought about how refreshing it was to see the other side of Saudi Arabia and gain a more complete picture of Saudi society.