

Review: Jill Koolmees, *My Desert Kingdom: Finding a Life in Saudi Arabia*, Random House, Sydney, NSW, 2004

Pages: 314

Unique Perspective of the Heart of Islam

The author does much to profile the Desert Kingdom given her relatively short stay of three years. She no doubt had plenty of time to research and observe as a foreign woman.

A weakness is she is not fluent in Arabic, also, restrictions of movement under Sharia law would have prevented her from gaining a true knowledge of life there. Finally, as a kaffir, she would be unable to truly penetrate a Muslim's life.

Another issue is her ignorance of Christianity, Islam, and history, e.g:

1. The Crusades were a horrible affair and wanton violence against innocent Muslims.

Notwithstanding they were Roman Catholic in nature, these were carried out after the Muslims had wiped out anything like Christianity from the Middle East up to Spain in the preceding three hundred years!

2. Christianity condones slavery [p70].

It does not; the term used is "servant", and the relationship is analogous in some ways to a modern employer/employee relation.

3. Islam and Christianity have much in common [p210].

Christianity's Jesus, gospel, morality are all diametrically opposite of Islam's; Allah has no son, the Bible is claimed to be corrupted, and the Trinity a pagan belief (although Allah mistakenly defines it as God, Jesus, and Mary).

4. The deluded author repeats the lie of an Islamic "golden age". [p220]

The author somehow still claims, “most Westerners remain profoundly ignorant about Islam” [p290].

Of course, as a secular humanist and subjected to *dawa* propaganda it's hard to blame her. What is interesting is even as a pagan she perceives superiority of Christianity over Islam in regards to freedom of thought and living. However, she can't seem to bring herself to condemn Islam outright as a false religion as it deserves (maybe to salvage her book project).

Sections on social events, trips, etc., can be passed over without any loss.

Foreword (pp. xiii-xi)

The author lived in the Kingdom from October 1997 to June 2000 with one short break.

I) The Price of Admission (pp. 1-11)

Young Indonesian women are hired by Arabian families as housekeepers.

Foreign workers often have money troubles with unpaid wages and work permit delays.

II) Paradise (pp. 12-38)

Jill's husband worked at King Fahd University of Petroleum and Minerals (KFUPM). Her living compound Ferdaws (“paradise”) was one kilometre away. In 1938, Standard Oil tapped the largest oil reserve nearby, which was eventually nationalised under Saudi Aramco.

The author sums up the pragmatic approach of foreign workers: “It is restrictive, but on the compound you can do what you like. And the money I earn gives me independence”. [p 26]

No public display of any other religion is allowed; wearing crosses is forbidden.

Women can't drive.

Jill would often be called “kaffir” by passers by.

Many expats couldn't bear the level of corruption and oppression.

III) The Gulf (pp. 39-60)

The *muttaween* are Saudi religious police.

Saudi newspapers include the daily prayer schedule.

Respiratory infections are common due to the dust.

Women walking alone is considered provocative.

Towns are filled with old houses of sun-dried bricks.

IV) Hard Labour (pp. 61-82)

In 2000, 5-7M expats lived in the Kingdom, making up 95% of the private sector, though the vast majority are unskilled labour.

The Saudis lament that every inch of highway and brick has been laid by foreign hands.

Labourers must pay for permits and visas, so often borrow money at usurious rates which can take a year and half to repay.

Prince Faisal ibn Abdul Aziz brought his slave when visiting New York in 1944. [p72]

Employers can neglect to pay workers for months and physically abuse their servants.

Many young Indonesian maids are shipped home pregnant and in disgrace.

All new arrivals must surrender their passports and are given internal passports, and *iqama*, which must be carried at all times.

“Saudi Arabia is a first-world economy grafted onto a third-world base.”
[p77]

The Saudis like to scapegoat foreign workers for their social ills, e.g., heroin from Pakistani smugglers, and alcohol from British bootleggers.

V) Oasis Dreaming (pp. 83-96)

During Ramadan, at the end of the day a mad rush ensues to get home in time to break their daily fast.

In the 1980s, the Kingdom wished to become a wheat exporter, which was counter to their natural competitive advantage paying four times the cost of importing from the US or Australia. Irrigation was costly and wasteful as most was lost to evaporation.

Each year, Saudi cities use two gigitalitres of water, half of which is desalinated. Two-thirds of households have no sewerage mains connection and simply pump sewage out into the desert.

VI) Black Bags and Precious Pearls (pp. 97-120)

English usage is quite common.

Expatriate women often resort to “retail therapy”.

Some female teachers are forced to wear an *abaya* in order to work; “It was about as attractive as a decorated garbage bag ... I looked like one of Macbeth’s witches”. [p100]

Saudi government does not mandate the *abaya* for non-Muslim women.

“Like most Westerners, I regarded the *abaya* as a form of oppression”. [p101]

Abayas can trip going up stairs and catch on doorknobs.

‘Salma’: “I don’t like the *abaya*, but I like the *hijab* (“shield”) because this is what Islam wants the woman to wear”. [p113]

Hala is modesty.

Q24.31 is ambiguous over whether women must cover their faces.

Saudi girls having affairs under the cover of the veil is common.

Most Saudi women if they work are in Islamic studies, nursing, and social science. Half of graduates are unemployed, with barriers of transportation (a male family member must drive her) and accommodation (living separately).

The *thobe* industry is enormous. Pants are cut seven inches above the ankle to imitate Muhammad.

VII) Royal Flush (pp. 121-134)

The Sauds were ousted from Riyadh in 1891 by the rival al Rashid clan.

In 1902, Jeddah, Medina, and Mecca were ruled by the Hashemites and Ottoman overlords. Theodosius II closed Epidaurus in AD426, leaving the Temple of Aesculapius at Pergamon (“fortress”), western Anatolia, as the centre of pagan worship. German archaeologists discovered the temple in 1927.

On 15/1/1902, Abdul Aziz ibn Saud stormed the Musmak fortress in Riyadh and took power.

As King, Abdul fathered 43 sons and unknown daughters.

Desert Arabs were mostly illiterate, but only 5% of Saudis are still nomads.

Oil money began flooding in in the 1930s.

One Saudi plan is to buy back al-Andalus from Spain.

Two days without water in the desert is fatal.

Saudi princes run the cabinet, army, major corporations, and the media. They also appoint the religious council (*ulema*).

An agreement to station US troops in Saudi Arabia during the 1991 Gulf War is said to have driven Osama bin Laden to declare *jihad* against the House of Saud.

VIII) Heat (pp. 135-152)

Life becomes more nocturnal during May due to the heat.

August temperatures can reach 50°.

The British made treaties with King Abdul in 1917 and 1922 to oppose the Ottoman Turks.

IX) Riyadh (pp. 153-168)

Riyadh means “gardens”.

Riyadh’s Grand Central Mosque is next to Chop Chop Square which hosts Friday afternoon executions.

X) Love and Marriage (pp. 169-192)

Dr Kamal Al-Sobhi Al-Harbi (*Arab News*, 12/12/97) “For fear of spinsterhood, a woman aged twenty or over should accept any suitor.” [p173]

Bachelors are disdained as wild cards.

Almost all Saudi marriages are arranged, with 39% between first cousins.

The birthrate at the time of writing was 6.25 per woman.

Polygamy in Arabia predates Islam.

A man may divorce a wife by saying so just once. The divorce rate is said to be from 20% to 70%.

While homosexuality is forbidden, almost all expat male can tell of being propositioned by a hopeful Saudi. [p187]

Arabian etiquette demands that after coffee is served and incense lit guests must leave.

XI) God's Country (pp. 193-220)

'Khalifa': "I am so proud to be Muslim, so proud to live in this country where God chose to send his messenger. And I am proud of my language, Arabic, because this is the language that God chose to reveal to us the Holy Quran." [p195]

Women Arabs stay at home to pray.

Ubiquitous phrases are: "Alhamdulillah" ("may God be pleased"); "Allah yubaarikfi" ("may God bless you"); "Insh'Allah" ("If God will"); "Wallahi!" ("by God!").

Each printed mention of Muhammad must be followed by the acronym PBUH, and the same verbalised after every spoken mention.

Music and dance is seen as un-Islamic, and eating or drinking during Ramadan is a criminal offence.

Families increase food budgets between \$800 and \$13,000, and hospitals report a rise in admissions with overeating diseases. [p200]

At Eid Al-Fitr, Muslims congratulate each other on making it through.

Muhammad was born into a pagan tribe, yet Islam teaches everyone is born a Muslim (which is why they speak of "reversion" rather than "conversion" to Islam)!

The author mistakenly believes Jews and Christians face Jerusalem when praying. She also repeats the dawa propaganda that the Torah, Psalms, and Gospels became corrupted, Jesus was not divine, and Muhammad descended from Ismail via Abraham. [p201]

Few Western ex pats show interest in becoming Muslim, despite the great encouragement from the Saudi government; financial and dawa centre materials.

Muhammad ibn Abd Al-Wahhab (b 1703) established the Saudi Wahabi school of Islam: “Every innovation is an error”. [p203]

Large Shia communities in the east and Hashemites in the south are considered heretics.

Muttaween work for the Committee for the Promotion of Virtue and the Suppression of Vice. They can issue fines, order public lashings, and imprison people.

“By no stretch of the imagination was there freedom of worship in Saudi Arabia”. [p207]

The author describes herself as, “a lapsed Christian”, who, “espouses humanist values”.

While she claims Islam and Christianity have much in common (“monotheism, fasting, prayer, pilgrimage and alms”), she “found it hard to reconcile Muhammad’s roles as man of religion, secular ruler and military leader. I grappled with the contrast between Christian instruction to ‘turn the other cheek’ and the Islamic idea of *jihad*.” [p211]

One imam declares, “Muslims should ‘harbour enmity and hatred for the infidels and refrain from taking them as friends’.” [p214]

The Kaabah is 12m². Muhammad ‘cleansed’ it on AD630, or 8AH.

At the Grand Mosque on the eighth day of Dhurr Al-Haj, Muslims circle the Kaabah seven times in a counter clockwise direction, after which they travel to Mina 10km away to sleep. The following day they visit the Plain of Arafat where Muhammad delivered his last sermon.

Muslims sacrifice animals provided by the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia Project for Utilisation of Sacrificial Animals.

The *haj* is “an exercise in survival”: “when you’re circling the Kaabah with 100,000 other pilgrims, it’s everyone for himself”. [p218]

The deluded author repeats the lie of an Islamic “golden age”. [p220]

XII) Progress Without Change (pp. 221-235)

Saudi debt is 100% of GDP and the country relies on oil for 90% of its export earnings.

Male unemployment is 27% and female circa 95%. The government plan is “Saudi-isation”; replace foreign workers with domestic. Problems include: there are far too many religious studies graduates; foreign engineers are cheaper, more reliable, compliant and diligent; punctuality is not part of the nomad culture; Saudi society is highly corrupt.

During the 1970s oil boom, the Saudis turned to the West for expertise.

Wasta (“custom”) is a system of influence and favour.

XIII) The Information (pp. 236-255)

There is little western media presence in the country.

The Najran region of the south is home of the Yammi tribe, Ishmaelis of the Shia. These follow Aga Khan (1800-81) who claimed to be a descendant of Muhammad via his son-in-law Ali and daughter Fatima.

XIV) On the Road (pp. 256-281)

Buraydah is the heartland of Wahhabism.

William Charles Doughty (1843-1926) spent two years in Arabia (1876-7) and said all his days there were evil but one.

Taima was capital of Babylonia from 553-543 BC under Emperor Nabonidus.

The Nabateans controlled Arabia from 100BC-AD100, but in AD106 were absorbed into the Roman Empire.

The ruins of Medain Saleh (al Hijr in the Qur’an) is meant to be a warning of disaster. It is also known as the Petra of Arabia.

Khaybar was the last Jewish resistance to Islam, with 20,000 inhabitants. Muhammad accused them of scheming, and in 628 he attacked from Medina with 1,600 men. After a month the town surrendered. Jill claims “Muhammad was merciful to the Jews.” [p275], yet killed the Banu Nadir chief, enslaved, freed, then ‘married’ his daughter Safiyya the same night!

Medina is also off limits to non-Muslims.

XV) Maasalamah (pp. 282-292)

The author claims, “most Westerners remain profoundly ignorant about Islam” [p290], yet excludes herself for some reason.