

SAUDI ARABIA - ONE WOMAN'S EXPERIENCE

by Ilse Adams (aka Edie Adams)

It all started in 1979 on an ordinary day in the hospital where I worked as a Ward Clerk. Our hospital in St. Petersburg, Fl was one of a chain originating in California and would be opening a hospital in Saudi Arabia. Personnel from each hospital would be chosen to go to Saudi Arabia and get the new hospital ready to open.

We were given applications-that is if we wanted to go-and right then everyone decided they would like the chance to go. I filled mine out that day and handed it in. Wouldn't it be exciting to go?

I thought about it all that night but I realized my chances were slim. I was an older woman of sixty. Women over forty seldom had a chance to be chosen for anything, but it didn't hurt to hope!

I didn't even know where Saudi Arabia was, so I went to the library to see what information I could find. The library to see what information I could find. The library didn't have much but I found the location. It was on the other side of the world!

Rumors flew around the hospital all week. It was hard to keep my mind on my work. All the time I kept hoping and wishing I'd be one of the people picked.

We were told that if we were considered, we would have to go to California to be interviewed. The final okay on the people to go was up to the Saudi Government officials.

It was early in the morning 20 days later that my supervisor came by and told me to be ready to go to California the next day.

It was unbelievable! I had to keep telling myself that it didn't mean anything--it was only an interview.

Twelve of us arrived in California to be interviewed, briefed in Saudi Arabian customs, living conditions, sign contracts and in a haze we headed home.

We thought that was it but for two weeks we did not hear anything except to be ready to go on a day's notice. Just the excitement of even being chosen was almost more than I could bear.

I didn't want to tell my kids about it until I knew for sure. It would mean I would have to close up my house and take care of a lot of things if I was really to go.

The suspense was unbearable. It was tough going to work every day and have everyone ask when I was leaving. I wasn't even sure I was going.

And then it came! The call I had been hoping and waiting for came at 3.00 p.m. while I was finishing work. I was to leave in three days!

So much was put into those three days; physical exams, last minute shopping for necessities, good-byes to friends and worst of all good-bye to my children. Two of my children lived in different parts of the U.S. It was hard to say good-bye to them on the phone. My daughter in Florida was to take care of my house, mail, bills, etc. It was a tall order on such short notice.

Packing to go was really work. Our luggage was not to exceed 44 pounds, which wasn't much for a six month's stay. Even a toothbrush added weight at that point.

At last I was on my way. We were a group of sixteen--London was an overnight stop and then we boarded the plane that was to take us to our final destination--Saudi Arabia. The plane was not very crowded. There were a few men wearing long white outfits that looked like a shirt going all the way down to their ankles. Their heads were covered with a red and white checkered kerchief worn in a distinctive manner. There was a thick round black rope on top of the kerchief. We were already wearing long cotton skirts and long-sleeved high neck cotton blouses, as we had been told this was the way to be properly dressed for our arrival.

It was five o'clock in the afternoon when the pilot announced we would be landing at the Jeddah airport in about 30 minutes. We looked at each other with the sudden realization of how far away we were from home. At the pilot's announcement, several olive-skinned women traveling with the men got up from their seats and came back in a few minutes wrapped in thin black material from head to toe.

The plane landed with no trouble and as we got up to leave we heard the strange sound of Arabic music. It was different from the music we were used to and sounded mysterious to our western ears.

The airport was crowded with many men--most all of them dressed in the same long white shirt. Some of the men who were handling the baggage wore dirty-looking skirts wrapped around them and had turbans on their heads. We learned later these people were from Pakistan, India or Yemen and were allowed to work in Saudi Arabia. We stared at them. They stared at us.

Finally, we got through passport clearance, (we had to stand in a separate line only for women) claimed our baggage, and were taken to a hotel in Jeddah for the night.

It was a nice, modern hotel and our room had a colored TV. When we went down later for a snack before turning in, we heard that the notorious Idi Amin was staying at the hotel. We did not see him but we did see his children with their guards. In the morning we had breakfast but no ham or bacon with our eggs, as that is forbidden food in Saudi Arabia.

There were five cars waiting to take us to Taif where we would work and live for the next few months. There was a lot of building going on in Jeddah, but in between the buildings were large open spaces full of all kinds of garbage. The city of Jeddah sprawled out in different directions and was a much larger city than we expected. We passed innumerable wrecked cars lying deserted along the road. Our driver said no one would take them as stealing is such a bad crime in Saudi Arabia that a thief would have his hand chopped off.

Taif was up in the mountains, 6,000 to 8,000 feet in elevation. It was a long ride of four to five hours, and as we drove up the escarpment it seemed dreary and desolate. In the distance among the rocks, we could see a few isolated square houses and once we saw a scattering of camels. Otherwise, no trees, no flowers- just sand and rocks.

Along the way we had become friendly with each other and since we had to share living quarters, I was lucky to get two nice roommates by the time we got to the hospital. It was late when we arrived at Taif and drove up the mountain to the hospital. We were given a quick tour of the hospital and grounds and then assigned to living quarters. In the morning, we were to report at 8:00 a.m.

The hospital was not ready for patients, and the opening was scheduled for the first week in June. That meant we had five weeks to get it ready. It had been standing empty for over a year. Wild cats and dogs had roamed and lived in the hospital and living quarters. There were still some on the grounds and we were warned not to try petting them as they were rabid. The dogs were especially frightening--they came in packs and would come within a few feet of us and howl. After a week or two, many of them disappeared as the authorities shot several near the grounds.

The hospital was surrounded by mountains. The area was noted for its climate-it was never too hot or too cold. Taif was the summer home of the King and royal family and when Riyadh, the capital of Saudi Arabia became unbearably hot, they left the capital and came to Taif. We could see the King's summer palace on top of the highest mountain and on the left was Prince Sultan's palace on another mountain top. At night, when the palaces were lit up, it was

a beautiful sight. From the hospital window we could see a Sheraton Hotel which was about a 35 minute walk. Women were not allowed to drive in Saudi Arabia so we had to figure distances in terms of whether we could walk to it or not. The main part of the town of Taif was about a 40 minute ride down the mountains.

Getting the hospital ready to open was heavy physical work. We divided into teams. Some scrubbed tubs and toilets. Others washed down beds with sterile solutions. The waxing machines were too heavy for us so that work was given to the men who had come before us. Central Supply which held all the materials used for patient care was a difficult assignment. The walls and all shelves from ceiling to floor had to be washed down with Germicide. It was hard to believe some of the staff doing this hard manual labor, were highly specialized technicians. Everybody took turns working in the laundry, which was nobodies favorite. We folded sheets and towels to music to make the work less dreary. The towels made our noses itch. In the midst of all this we were suddenly notified to roll down our sleeves and tidy ourselves up to go to the hospital lobby.

Prince Sultan had come to see how the hospital was shaping up. He was a tall, heavy-set man with a good natured smile, and he was surrounded by body guards and servants. Huge trays with tiny glasses of sweet tea mysteriously appeared and were passed around to everyone. Following were more trays-piled high with cookies. Prince Sultan moved across the lobby shaking hands with us, one by one. He had a white head covering called a Gutra with black rope like bands on his head. Over his long white outfit which was called a Thobe, he wore a full gold robe edged in gold braid. We stayed a few minutes as he thanked us for coming and then went back to work. It had been a refreshing break that we really enjoyed.

Our recreation was very limited. Since we were way up in the mountains, there was nothing near the hospital. The closest place we could walk to was a little shed about a quarter of a mile down the road from the hospital entrance. We nicknamed it the "7-11". An old man and his two sons ran the store, which carried a small stock of all kinds of things. When the old man heard Westerners were coming, he stocked up on Pepsi. They don't sell coke in Saudi Arabia. After work, we would walk down to the "7-11" and sit at one of his outdoor tables and have a Pepsi. He would bring out a wooden box and mount a T.V. set on it so we could watch the news. At 9:00 p.m. the British BBC would come on with the news. There was not much news of the United States. Our American hostages were still in Iran and we waited hopefully for news of their release. It was at these times that we felt homesick and lonely.

Three weeks had gone by and we were at a stopping point. The hospital was spotless but we still waited for the Doctors to come. We greeted about 20 British nurses who had arrived to help staff the hospital. We laughed with each other over the British expressions which were new to us. To the British, a toilet was the "Loo". To us it was the "John". Going out for a few

minutes was to "nip out". The apartment was a "flat". When something was missing, maybe it was "pinched". The next day 28 Philippine nurses arrived. Surprisingly to us, their English was well spoken. With all the new people arriving, we received two new roommates. One girl was from Thailand and the other, a Chinese girl from the United States. Now we were five in the three bedroom apartment. To share with four strangers took some doing.

As we grew to a larger group, we became a little more organized. We also grew a little more restless. Living on the hospital grounds was pretty confining. Since we could not drive, the hospital bought two small buses and arranged a schedule to take us down the mountain to the main part of town. There we would be able to shop and for the first time see other people. That was our introduction to the Suq (pronounced Sook).

Suqs are shopping bazaars and the most intriguing place you could ever imagine. It was a haphazard maze of tiny shops jammed together in little, narrow, twisting streets winding first to the left and then to the right. There were no real sidewalks but here and there were a few paved areas. In the middle of the Suq was a Mosque where the Saudis and other Arabs went to pray when they heard prayer call.

The shops had all kinds of goods, imported from all over the world. Beautiful fabrics from Japan and France were stacked up to the ceiling. There were plenty of radios, cameras, clocks, household goods and children's clothes.

Men sitting cross-legged behind big burlap bags would measure out pungent spices. In between all this were gold shops-full of 18k or 21k jewelry. At first we didn't believe it was real gold, there was so much of it-but it was real and it was fascinating to see rows of these shops with open doors and no police or guards of any kind. There were also open stalls selling fresh bread that was piled high on carts or planks. The bread smelled so good, we ignored the flies on it and bought some. It tasted as good as it smelled.

We had to shop together in groups of two's and three's as it was not the custom for women in Saudi Arabia to shop alone. The shopkeepers stared at us in amazement when we appeared. We were the only women in the huge market place with our faces uncovered and not wearing long black wraps. The children looked at us in awe-they didn't know what to make of us. If we smiled and said hello they broke into fits of giggles. The women for the most part ignored us but the men were very obvious in their stares and a few waggled their eyebrows in our direction. Some old men looked at us disapprovingly as they thought we were shameful to show our faces.

It was in the Suq we were able to cash our paychecks and receive Saudi Riyals in exchange. The Bank and money exchange was crowded with men from different countries who had

come to Saudi Arabia to work. Our eyes widened as we watched men casually stuff big wads of money into pockets. No police were guards in the bank and there was no secrecy as large sums of money was spread out in full view of anyone standing by. Not being used to this, we stuffed our money in our bags and went to shop.

The language barrier gave us a little trouble as we had picked up very few Arabic words, but sign language worked remarkably well. To walk through the Suq teeming with people wearing bizarre and unfamiliar clothing, and speaking a language that was so foreign to our ears, was like being in a fantasy.

The Suq fascinated me. As long as I was in Saudi Arabia I never got over the magnetic attraction it had for me. The sights and smells were something I would never forget.

Finally, the hospital was ready to open. Doctors had arrived. Equipment had been tested. Everything else was ready and so were we. To open the hospital officially meant that the King had to visit. This was a Military hospital for the armed forces. The head of the hospital was an Army General and second in command was the Colonel. Our company was merely getting it started and in five years it was to be totally staffed and run by Saudi Military. While we waited, the hospital put out policies and procedures so there would be regular hospital routines for us to follow when patients were admitted.

In the meantime we tried picking up a few words in Arabic. It was a hard language. We couldn't rasp our throats the way the Arabs did. Our pronunciation sent them into gales of laughter. But we persisted and could at least say hello, goodbye and where does it hurt?

At last, there were notices put up throughout the hospital to let us know of the King's impending visit. Would we be allowed to see him? No one knew for sure. There were several false alarms about his visit, but finally it was definite. King Khalad was to arrive the following afternoon.

Everyone rushed to pick out their best uniform, polish their shoes and wash their shoelaces. All the girls did their hair.

Surprisingly we would be allowed to take pictures. Usually it was forbidden as this was a military hospital. We lined up for instructions. We were told to stay at our stations in the hospital and the King would make a tour through the units.

The next day we were all at attention. At one o'clock in the afternoon a big bus came up the hill and pulled in at the side of the hospital. Soldiers in olive drab got out. Then a second big bus arrived. The men that got out wore air force uniforms and were carrying flags and

musical instruments. They marched in formation, then lined up in front of the hospital entrance and stood erect with their instruments at their side. A red carpet was laid in front of the hospital and a long runner to the front area. We waited and waited. The General and hospital administrators stood at the front entrance. Finally about 5 o'clock cars started to arrive.

As each car pulled up and a dignitary stepped out the General went up to greet them. We could feel the excitement in the air. Prince Sultan made his appearance followed by his body guards. Several other Arabs wearing black robes trimmed in gold braid arrived.

Suddenly the band started to play and the soldiers on the grounds snapped to attention and raised their hand in a salute. Two bright red shiny cars with the top down, sped up to the front of the hospital. The cars were crowded with soldiers wearing red berets and holding machine guns. Then came the King's car, a long sleek black limousine, followed by two more red cars with the top down and soldiers holding machine guns.

The King stepped out of the car and moved slowly up the red carpet as the General greeted him. He was a tall man with a gentle, serious expression. As he approached the hospital entrance two servants came up beside him waving incense burners. The King went through the hospital and visited the few patients that had been admitted. he gave each one a gold watch and wished them a speedy recovery. Then he went to the Mosque to pray. His armed guards lined up outside and waited.

It was a short visit, but it was the most impressive occasion we had ever witnessed. Within the space of forty minutes, it was all over. The King was whisked away guarded by the red cars in front and in back. They left as suddenly as they had come.

That night we had a big celebration. Everyone gathered outside where there were tables set up in back of the hospital. There was to be a sheep feast which is a typical Arab celebration.

Out of the hospital cafeteria came a procession of Pakistani and Indian workers carrying huge round trays on their heads. The trays were covered with tin foil. When they were placed on the tables, the foil was torn off to reveal a whole roasted sheep surrounded by rice. We pulled the meat off with our fingers and rolled the rice in little balls in our hand, Arab style. There were heaps of pastries filled with spinach. Trays of fancy pastry and little cups of tea were everywhere. It was a real Arabian feast and just about the most exciting day of my life. From then on, the hospital was officially open.

Our contracts were up and we were asked if we wanted to re-sign and stay to work for another year. I thought about it.

There had been many problems. There had been lonesome times. Mail was very slow. We were not allowed to drive. The lack of privacy and freedom was frustrating.

Was I still fascinated by it all? Would I do it again? You bet I would and I did! But that's another story.....

Six months had gone by since I had arrived in Saudi Arabia and it was now October. With the end of our contracts we were given 30 day's leave. Since I had signed a new contract I was to return to work November 25th.

In the last two months my daughter and I had been planning to vacation together. Arranging this by mail took time but by October, we were set. We met in Greece to spend ten delightful days there and then went to Cairo, Egypt. The Pyramids were all and more than we expected. All together, we had a fantastic time. Then--it was over. With much regret we parted--she to go back to the U.S. and again I was on my way to Saudi Arabia.

Back at the hospital I was assigned to work in the out-patient clinic. It was through the clinic that all patients had their first contact with the hospital. We screened each patient and their problems and then assigned them to the appropriate doctor. This sounded easier than done. What an experience was in store for us.

As soon as the doors to the clinic opened we found Saudis on every side of us. All wanted to be seen by the doctor and of course with each one it was a dire necessity. As we tried to take patient information we found many stumbling blocks. We had to work through interpreters and never knew if they were repeating what we said or what they decide don. Most patients were unsure of their age. Trying to restrict their medical complaints took lots of diplomacy. Now that the hospital was open, they wanted to see every doctor we had for every part of their body. Besides themselves, they also brought their wife or wives, children, father, mother, sister and any other relative they had. To add to our difficulties, we had trouble identifying or recognizing our patients. They all wore long, white thobes. They all had red and white checkered Ghutras on their heads. They were all dark skinned and almost all had beards or at least a mustache.

It was even harder with the women. They had stood in back of the men as husbands or sons registered them. Wrapped in black from head to toe we could not tell one from another. Sometimes we were distracted as we saw rows of ten to fifteen gold bracelets on each of the women's arms. Finally, we took to looking at the women's feet. By their shoes we could sometimes distinguish who was which.

Because men and women cannot mingle in Saudi Arabia, the women had a separate room where they sat until called. We would pick up a chart and stick our head in the door and shout their name. Our pronunciation was so bad the women didn't always recognize their name and at first they were too shy to respond.

One of our biggest problems after we started knowing our patients was to get them to come on time and also on the right day. Time meant very little to the Saudi. If we gave a patient an appointment at 10:00 a.m. he might show up at 2:00 p.m. and think nothing of it. Some patients came days or weeks late. I could never figure out why there were so many watch and clock shops in the Suq when time meant nothing to them.

Each day things improved and within a short time we were seeing one hundred patients a day. It was fun to finally recognize our patients and we slowly started to feel at ease with them.

The children were beautiful as all children are. The little girls were always dressed in long, frilly elaborate dresses as though they were going to a wedding. I never saw a little girl dressed any other way whether it was 8 in the morning or late at night. The boys wore thobes like their father's but sometimes they wore play clothes.

In Saudi Arabia it was always the father who was in total charge of the family. If he was unable to bring the women and children to the clinic, then it was up to other male members of the family to bring them. There were times when a man refused to have the doctor take care of his wife as he objected to having any other man see his wife's face. Without the husband's permission, the wife could not be admitted to the hospital or have any surgery performed. A son, brother, or other male figure could take the husband's place if he was not available. It was a different culture than any of us had ever been exposed to.

The hospital had grown quickly since it opened. Housing on the hospital grounds was becoming overcrowded. In desperation, the hospital administrator leased buildings in town. For the first time, western women would be living in a Saudi neighborhood. It was exciting to wonder what it would be like. So far, we had only been allowed to go to the Suq for two hours. We wondered what the living quarters would be like and how we would get to the hospital.

Obviously, the administrators had considered more than we realized as we started to move immediately. We were four women to an apartment. It was a new building but it had been put up in a hurry as housing is scarce and very expensive in Saudi Arabia. Two bedrooms had balconies but they were useless as dirt flew up and covered them. One room had a big picture window and the least popular room had only an opening on the shaft. The kitchen

was very nice as was the full bathroom. The other bathroom had only a sink and toilet with a shower stall. As there was no place for the water to go when the shower was on, the bathroom flooded. We found also that the water from the shower could soak the electric outlet so we decided not to use it. A wise decision.

We found that moving downtown gave us freedom, however it was limited. We had to be in by midnight. Our building had a Somali guard in the Lobby and NO MEN WERE ALLOWED IN! At 12 midnight the guard locked the front door and if anyone came in late he took their name. At the beginning, since he didn't know any of us, he ended up with a list of Elizabeth Taylor, Minnie Mouse and a few other funny names. The guards were Muslim and disapproved of our independent ways. There were times when they wouldn't open the door if it was after twelve. There was a constant tug of war between us.

A block away we found a small supermarket and this was the first real grocery shopping we had been able to do. It was fun looking at the things that were imported from all over the world. I bought some canned butter after checking out the Irish, French and Swedish butter the store offered. There was pickled garlic, mango pulp, caviar, Hummus paste and some things we couldn't figure out. Fruit was expensive and celery was almost a luxury, selling for about \$11 American dollars. There was a lot of yogurt, which I thought delicious and cheap. But the eggs were so dirty we wouldn't touch them! On the way back to the apartments we were pestered by some small boys throwing rocks at us. They were not used to seeing women with their heads and faces uncovered.

I had become acquainted with several Saudi patients who came to the clinic frequently. One day I was invited to a Saudi wedding. I was really excited and wanted to go. Abdullah said he would come for me at 8:00 p.m. and I could bring a friend. I put on a long black skirt and black blouse with long sleeves. Abdullah had brought me a veil to wear. On top of this, I wrapped a long black scarf. Looking at me from a distance, I could be a Saudi woman.

Abdullah picked my friend and me up at 8:00 p.m. and drove slowly into town. We sat in the back, which was proper. Abdullah spoke very good English, but he didn't always understand what we said. He was expecting to go to the U.S. to study.

The wedding did not start until 11:00 p.m. and lasted through the night until 6:00 in the morning. Abdullah was disappointed when I said we could not stay that long. As it was, we had to get permission to go. We pulled up in front of a large building that Abdullah said was rented for the wedding at a cost of \$5000 Riyals. He could not go in with us but he would pick us up at the entrance whatever time we gave. Remembering that we had to work the next day, we settled for 2:00 a.m.

As we entered the house a woman at the door greeted us and then let out a piercing scream that went right through me. I looked to see what happened, but I found out later that it was a "cry of joy" that we had come. We walked down a narrow hall and into a large room that was full of folding chairs arranged like a theater. In the farther area was a stage. On the right side of the stage sat the bride wearing a beautiful white satin wedding gown with a long white train. Her headdress sparkled. Several women sat upon the stage with her. Women kept coming in (no men were allowed) and would go up to the bride and kiss her five times on the cheek and then go sit out in the auditorium. In the meantime, several little girls dressed in elaborate long dresses came up to us and just stood there, staring. We were the only pale-faces in the crowd. Two girls kept passing candy and tea in little glass cups.

All of a sudden, the women started to leave their seats and file through a side door. I was curious, so I got up and got in line. We went up two flights of stairs and then to the left was a big room. The women were sitting in circles on the floor. There were rugs spread out and in the middle of each circle of women were many platters of food. The women reached over and helped themselves. They rolled the rice in their right hand and gulped it down. There were no knives or forks. I watched for a few minutes and went back down. When they were finished eating (by this time it was almost 1:00 a.m.), everyone went back downstairs.

Four women came in and went up to the stage. They brought out an assortment of drums and started to beat them and sing in a high pitched wail. Several women went up to the stage and started to dance. As they danced, every one clapped in rhythm and gave money to the musicians. Suddenly, there was a commotion in the rear of the hall. A boy of about twelve had snuck in to watch.. The women were enraged. They beat on him and threw him out. The dancing continued and by 2:00 a.m. we had had enough. Without seeing the groom or any ceremony, if there was one, we left.

Time passed and with it Taif was changing. Streets were being laid. Old houses were torn down to make way for new, modern ones. In the middle of town, the Saudis were having a huge, new Mosque built. The little shops and boothes were putting in glass enclosures and doors instead of rolling down the battered old metal that closed from over their heads like a garage door. I didn't like seeing the little town change. I hated to see it try to modernize and be like every place else in the world. The charm was in the funny old ways.

Ramadan was approaching. This was a holy time for the Arabs, and usually lasts a month. At the start of Ramadan, soldiers fire a cannon. From then on, all Muslims must fast all day, refraining from eating, drinking or smoking 'til sunset. At that time, another cannon is fired and the people can break the fast. At the end of Ramadan there is a big celebration that reminded me of Christmas. Everyone is happy and many gifts are given-toys for the children. We were happy to see it end also as during Ramadan we had to be careful and not

drink , eat or smoke in front of any Muslim-otherwise we were told we would be severely punished.

Within a short time my contract was up again. This time I thought about it, but I missed the United States. I missed my children. I missed the freedom I was used to. It was hard to leave. There were friends to leave behind and I had grown fond of many. I was still intrigued by the Saudis, but the first excitement was gone. I was disappointed to find we were unable to get to really know the people. The culture forbid it. We were there only to work. It was impossible to travel to other areas of Saudi and see the country. Still--it was an adventure I would not have missed for anything. I will always remember it as the high point of my life's experiences. So, with much joy, I headed for home- the U.S.A.