

A Tribal Feast, In The Desert Of Saudi Arabia

by Irma Kackert

This is Irma Kackert relating a story from one of my journals, that I wrote while I was working in Taif, Saudi Arabia. I worked there nearly 5 years, was employed by the Saudi government in a new hospital, named Al Hada, which was for the King, the military, and the royalty. The average citizen could not be admitted, unless he had a letter from a Prince. There was another hospital in town, for average citizens, and a separate building for women patients.

I was among a large group of "ex-pats", or employees from many countries, who desired to seek out the country, take photos, and meet with the people. The Bedouins were tribal people who lived in the deserts, some in tents, others in clusters of adobe block houses. They had flocks of sheep and goats which they walked daily, to eat the sparse grasses, or little bushes, and leaves of the acacia trees: this was the food for the animals. They also had camels, if they were lucky, and milked these animals for their family use. Our group, which we called the Adventure Club, consisted of about 14 men, women and children, and several of the men had autos. On the weekend, Thursday and Friday, we would drive places, camp out, sleep on the ground, cook over a very small propane stove, or over a campfire, and explore the country. We had to carry our iquama (our permission to be in the country) with us at all times. On this adventure there were two men and myself, and we were searching for the Wells of Zubayda, or cisterns, which had been made hundreds of years ago, to provide water and resting places for pilgrims, making the trek to the holy city Medina. The Muslims make this trip once a year, if they are able, across the desert on foot or animal.

WEDNESDAY DECEMBER 7

At work today, we took the pediatric patients (children) out for a picnic, to the play area of the Rehabilitation Center. A tent top was put up, for shade, we had lunch there after they had played on the equipment and in the sand. None of the patients were ambulatory, we used their wheelchairs and small pull carts. The dietary department prepared a nice lunch, chicken, egg salad sandwiches, lettuce, tomato, cucumber slices, grapes and cookies, and we helped them as they ate. After returning to the Rehab department and placing the children, I helped Patricia give a hydro treatment to Mahya, the female patient with the huge decubitus, then worked in P.T department with other little patients. Raja, who has been my patient for several months, is walking now, with a walker. I am so happy to see her progress.

After work, I prepared my essentials to go to the desert for the weekend, clothing, sleeping bag, warm sweat suit, cap, and some food. Each person brings food for the meals, sometimes we prepare meat at home, take our ice chest and a couple 5 gallon cans of water. We don't sleep in tents, just on mats, on the ground. At 6:30 p.m. I took my things over to the married couple's apartments, to my friends George and Marie and their children. Lloyd and Pat met me there, we loaded the car, and set off. Driving north on the Road to Riyadh, we traveled a couple of hours and in the dark, missed the road to Ashayra, had to turn around and find it back away. Pat had gone too far on the main highway. He

turned into the desert track, drove for awhile, then at a rise in the road, turned off, and we made camp. Using our little stove, heated chili that Pat had made, and ate. We also had fruit, cookies and coffee. We carry "instant". The ground here was more little rocks, than sand, so we cleared away the bigger ones before we laid down our thick mats and sleeping bags. It was quite cold, as the desert gets at night. I slept with my sweat suit on, in the sleeping bag, and wore a wool knit cap; I was comfortable. During the night Lloyd got up, put his mat in the back of the suburban and slept there, for he was cold, did not have on enough warm clothing. This is my third year of camping out here, in desert and mountain, I have learned to bring warm things for nights out. In the morning, when it was light, we discovered we had camped right near a Bedouin camp! As we ate breakfast, an older man and a young boy, who drove the small truck they rode in, came to greet us. They were friendly, I learned enough Arabic since I've been working here, to respond to their "salaam alaykum", and "marhaba". A little later another man walked over to us, greeted us, shook hands, then went back to the camp.

TUESDAY DECEMBER 8

After a breakfast of cereal, bananas, milk and coffee, we packed up, drove through the village of Ashayra, and out into the desert, headed for the Wells of Zubayda or "Bir Zubayda". They had been described to us by locals of Saudi Arabia who worked with us. There are no maps, desert roads, or signposts, you travel by compass, the sun, and descriptions of mountains that are named and described. About 20 minutes after Ashayra, a Toyota truck passed us, driven by a young Arab man, carrying a sheep in the bed of the truck. He stopped ahead of us, greeted us, shook hands, and asked us to come to his "al bayt" his house. I suggested to Pat that we accept, and all agreed. I like to visit their homes and learn how they live.

We followed him, he turned into a Bedouin camp! My wish was going to be granted, I had just said to Lloyd, "I still want to visit a Bedouin camp". This turned out to be a special visit! He escorted us to a huge tent, all open on one side exposed to the south, the ground inside was covered entirely with (later found there were 40) beautiful Persian rugs, each about 8 x 10 feet. The modern Bedouin tents are two parts: the top is supported by poles, and ropes to the ground, the separate walls are lined inside with colorful material, and attach to the top by looping onto wooden buttons all around. We were seated on the rugs, across from 4 Arab men, two were quite elderly, one of the younger ones was smoking the shisha pipe, and offered it to Lloyd. This is a token of hospitality. He accepted, took a puff, found it kind of strong. Pat refused it, I took a picture of the event, the men did not object to being photographed but one must ask permission to take photos of women. The young man who invited us was named Mohammed Al Otaibi, and he could speak a little English. We were served tiny cups of "gowah" (coffee) and also small glasses of "chai" (tea) which was very sweet and flavored with mint. Soon more Toyota and Nissan trucks drove up, bringing more tribal men, they would enter the tent, and greet each other with the typical greeting of embracing the shoulders and touching cheeks. When they came to us, they shook our hands, then all would be seated again, until more men arrived. Some asked questions, where did we work, what did we do. When I replied I worked at Al Hada hospital, they were very pleased, all were hospitable and asked many questions.

Through the open side of the tent we could see tents for the women and girls, situated quite far away. They did not come where the men congregated, little boys were among the men, but no girls. There was another tent top, near the large gathering, young men there prepared the hot water for tea, and the coffee. Another tent nearby was for the 3 Afghanistan men (I knew their country by the turbans they wore) who were the cooks. They were bringing cases of tinned tomatoes, 100 lb. bags of rice, bags of onions, various cooking utensils, large round metal platters, a chopping block, and 5 foot long ladles of steel. Standing near this tent were 5 huge round black kettles, supported on metal frames, with firewood under them. Later I learned this was brought, in the back of a small truck, from a wadi area. This is the name of a watercourse that comes after heavy winter rains, bushes and small trees will grow along it, then the water dries up in the hot weather and the trees die and dry up. This is gathered and used for firewood. From the activity we observed, I gathered there was going to be a feast of some kind, Mohammed had observed us in the desert and invited us to be guests and participate. This is true bedouin hospitality.

They allowed us to wander about, watch the activity going on, and take many pictures. Another truck drove into the cooking area from the desert, in the back was a young camel. Mohammed motioned toward it and spoke "jemel mort, baden ak!" , camel dies, then we eat. So now I was going to taste camel meat, something I had always wanted to do since I came to work in Saudi, but never had the opportunity. I walked with some of the men, back to the large tent, Lloyd went to watch the slaughtering, done in the eastern way. The Afghan cooks slit the throat, bled the animal, dressed and cut the meat into large pieces for cooking. The meat, much of it on the bone, was dropped into two of the large kettles, where the water was already boiling. Lloyd related they threw in 3 handfuls of coarse salt, cut onions and canned tomatoes. This cooked for about 4 hours, when the meat was done it was removed to another kettle, with a fire under it and a little oil in it. Then a 100 pound sack of rice was put in the boiling water where the camel meat had cooked.

As we again sat down in the tent, more and more men arrived in their Toyota and Datsun trucks. They were of various ages, many elderly. They wore the brown capes with gold braid trim, over the traditional white or grey thaube, the cape is worn at special events. All had the regular red and white checked gutra on their heads, the regular headgear for men. In summer Arab men may wear a white gutra, and white thaube, but in winter grey, brown or black thaube, of heavier material, is worn. As the sun gets higher in the sky, the desert warms up in winter months, but as it goes down the nights become quite cold. The faces of the men were handsome, dark skin, flashing eyes, some had a beard or mustache neatly trimmed, and one man had used henna to make his beard a little reddish. Some were clean shaven. Their dark eyes gave one the impression they noted everything going on, nothing was missed. They gazed at me intently: a woman in their midst, with light hair and skin, and blue eyes, in their culture the women do not associate with a group of men. . I was a guest and accepted very well by all, they asked questions about my work, why I was in Saudi, even how old I was. Since I was approaching age 70, I was not abash about telling my age. They appreciated the fact that I had learned some Arabic as I worked with their people.

I asked the ages of different men, saying "kam omrak", some were in their 30's and 40's, the eldest was a white bearded, wrinkled man who said he was "thamanaseen" (80) seemed very proud of this. Another, who asked many questions, said he was 70. His eyes twinkled!. There were some who came in wearing a white thaube, with cuff links of gold. Also 4 or 5 men had on the black or white garment, and wore a leather shoulder holster and a pistol. One of these was quite friendly to me, would motion to sit, when I had risen to greet a newcomer, sat next to me and as the sun beamed into our area he said "shemps mafee" (no sun). Many of the men then moved toward the back wall of the tent structure, into the shade. The tent must have been 40 feet long. He showed Lloyd and Pat his pistol, later they told me he said it had silver bullets. I was going to take his picture but as I got the camera ready, several men leaned forward, shook their heads and said "la la". We wondered if the men with guns were of a security force? It is illegal here, to take pictures of any military or police.

By interrogation, with my limited Arabic, I learned this was a gathering of the bedouin Al Otaibi tribe, a powerful one. It was a special occasion, but I could not determine the reason. By noon there were over 50 men present in the large tent, this number I got from one man who said "khamseen rajul henna, kulu al Otaibi bedu" (fifty men, all tribe of al Otaibi Bedouin). One of the men drove a truck in, that had a hoist in the bed, such as for lifting the front end of an auto. He worked at putting up 4 or 5 high poles in a rectangle, then strung wire and light sockets all around the top. There was a large pile of rugs lying nearby, evidently this party would go on into the night. Pat was curious about the generator for the electric lights being strung, asked the man the source of power for them. He was then shown the arrangement in the truck bed: A chain going down through a hole in the floor of the bed, could be attached to a rear wheel, the truck jacked up, and as the engine turned the wheel, it generated power for electricity. This was quite ingenious!

As we sat we were offered several servings of "gowah" (coffee) from the large brass pots, in tiny china cups with no handles. You are supposed to accept several times, the coffee was followed by servings of sweet tea, very delicious. These are the usual Arab hospitality drinks, guests are served the same in all homes in the cities. Several times, between these servings, I arose and wandered about, observing the cooking preparations. Wood from the wadi was constantly added to the fires under the pots, to keep them blazing. I took numerous pictures, felt I was so lucky to be a guest here, then would wander back to the large tent. A young boy near me was curious about my camera, and I let him take a picture of men in the tent.

About 2:00 p.m. I felt we should be driving on, as we wanted to reach the birka Zubayda before dark, and I suggested to the man next to me we should be leaving. He said "la la, akl jemel, baden arooh" (no no, eat camel then go). Also I asked him how long until we would eat, he said about ½ hour. So we stayed, and I'm glad we did. In about 20 minutes men came toward the tent, with large round stainless steel platters on their heads. These were loaded with piles of rice, and chunks of camel meat still on the bone. A covering of very long, thin white strips of muslin, had been placed on the carpets, in front of the guests. The platters were placed on these strips, and about 4 or 5 guests ate from each platter. What a feast! Stainless steel bowls of water were placed near each platter, men drank from them. I have eaten rice and lamb before, when a guest at dinner in homes, knew how

to eat with right hand, no silverware. I started eating with my hand, rolling rice and meat into a small ball with fingers and palm of hand, then placing it into my mouth with aid of my thumb. Mohammed brought 3 spoons to our platter, but I refused, and ate the whole meal with my hand, Arab style. I would put some rice in front of me, then pull some meat from the bone, put it on top of the rice. The meat was very good, tender, and tasted a lot like beef. Sometimes one of the men eating with us would pick small pieces of meat off, and put it in front of me. This is the way men do, when I am eating at the home of an Arab family where I am a guest. I eat with the men, the women eat in a separate room. While all were eating, five water cans with 3 spigots on each, had been set up on low stands. The water truck for the bedouin tribe came to them and filled each can. When guests were finished eating they went to the water cans, turned on the spigot, and washed their hands. There was a box of Tide detergent at each can, and a couple of towels hung on bushes.

The guests left, soon after eating, and we started to give our thanks and say we must leave, but Mohammed took me by the arm, motioned toward the women's quarters, said "inti shouf nessa" (come and see the women). So I walked with him to the women's tents. Men are not allowed to go there. The first tent was the abode of the younger women, who had girls and small babies around them. Each woman was introduced to me, shook hands and said "salaam alaykum". I was given the name of each one. They were wearing the face veil, with eyes showing, the traditional covering of women in desert and mountain. Their eyes were heavily outlined with the black kohl, and made them look very beautiful and seductive. Each one had on a beautiful fancy dress, of bright colors. The girls were gowned prettily too, and their hair was dressed neatly, either in braids or twisted atop their head, with colored ribbons. The sleeping mats for all were stacked in a corner, and piles of dresses lay on top.

After this Mohammed took me the adjacent tent, where four older women sat on carpets. A tray of rice and camel meat was in front of them, ready to eat. Again, I was introduced to each one. The oldest, who appeared to be in her 60's, said "mafee shouf" – she could not see. I wondered if she was diabetic, for Mohammed had me feel her wrist and hand, which were puffy, and he mentioned "suker" (sugar). Could it possibly be diabetic blindness? Since I had told them I worked at Al Hada hospital and the Rehabilitation Center, they get the idea that you can help them with illnesses. Mohammed stood beside one lady, who held a baby, said this was his sister. Her husband came in, next to her, he was Mohammed's cousin. It was all right for these 2 men to be in the women's tent, they were family. After this brief visit with the women, we departed and walked back to the large tent to join the rest of my group. They had been taking a lot of pictures. I did not take pictures of the ladies, as they must get permission from their husbands. While I was visiting the women, Lloyd and the others walked around again, he said the Afghan men killed 4 sheep and dressed them, preparatory to cooking them the same way as the camel. So there would be another feast, at the night time gathering. I had often heard about the dancing Arab men do, at these evening feasts, got just a glimpse once as we passed through a small village.

We gave our thanks to Mohammed and the few men still in the large tent, and departed, very grateful for the opportunity to participate in this feast in the Saudi desert. The bedouin men all knew about the bir Zubayda, and pointed out the direction we must take. They had

been very interested in the compass Pat has, and as he studied it, they quoted "januub arooh" (go south). There are no road signs, or even proper roads out in the desert, just tracks from the bedouin trucks, so one must rely on sun or compass, for direction. We found the wells, and small structure there, arrived about 4:00 p.m. We looked around, took pictures and noted the cisterns were completely empty of water, winter rains had not started yet. Once before when a group of us came, there was water and a bedouin water truck was filling up. A young Arab boy drove up in a Toyota truck (they drive them as early as age 8), and greeted us. We talked a bit, found his name was Abdulla al Otaibi, so we were still in the area of the Otaibi tribe, of olden days. This was a rich and powerful tribe, in the Arab peninsula.

Driving away from the wells, we continued crossing the desert in a northeast direction, watching the compass for guidance. The sand was firm in most places, we did not get stuck, as has happened several times. About 5:30 p.m. we stopped and set up camp for the night, wanting to organize a campfire spot, pick up wood, and start our meal before dark. It was beautiful, quiet, and peaceful, with vast expanse of sky colored in the west by the setting sun. Sleeping out under the stars, that glittered brightly against the dark sky, is a real treat and makes one feel life is worthwhile. It was quite cold, but in my sleeping bag and a blanket on top, I was very comfortable. What a treat we had, to participate in culture of another country.

Typed on computer by Irma Kackert ---- Age 87