

BAHRAIN - 1984

On one of my post-leaves from my work at Al Hada hospital in Taif, Saudi Arabia, I traveled to the island of Bahrain, which lies in the Gulf of Arabia, off the east coast of Saudi Arabia. I had been there once before, spent New Year's Eve and a part of New Year's Day in 1983, while waiting for a connecting flight. I was on a trip to the far East, and Thailand at that time. Now, I stayed at the same hotel, Al Jazir, where I had stayed before., and then made arrangements for some tours of the island. The female guide on the first tour was able to give much information and past history of Bahrain.

We went in a van to the ship building area, where the primitive way of making the Arab dhow is still carried on. The dhow was a sturdy sailing craft, used for hundreds of years in the trade routes here, to Africa, the Mediterranean, and as far as China. Now a motor is used, instead of a sail, but all other features remain the same. Construction is done by hand; the ribs are made from mangrove trunks, which grow in a curved shape, and this wood is found locally. The sides are of teak wood, from Malaysia, cut in narrow strips and held in place on the ribs, by iron nails also made in Bahrain. In past years, wooden pegs were used for this. After the strips are in place, caulking is done, and the deck, railings and superstructure is added. They are beautiful ships, and have been made in the same fashion for hundreds of years. The guide told us that it is possible to go across the Arab Gulf, to Saudi Arabia, by dhow -- I found that interesting!.

Near the shipyard area, we saw construction, by hand, of large wire fish traps. These are woven by hand, a man stands on the bottom circle, after he has woven it, then continues to weave the wire into a high dome shape. When it is shoulder high;, he reaches up and holds onto a strong rope that hangs from a beam above, swings himself out, and finishes the top of the dome from the outside. These are set down on the sea floor by fishermen;,, baited, and fish swim into a funnel-like opening to eat, then cannot get out.

We next drove around on the north side of the island, passed many date palm groves. Bahrain is a sandy, desert-type island with a very warm climate, and an average rainfall of only 1.5 inches per year. But the support for the lush green areas of palms, flowers, and cultivated areas comes from aquifers; these are streams of water coming forth from rocky area under the ground, and also under the sea, supplying fresh, sweet water. The aquifers are channeled into irrigation ditches to nourish the abundant growth. It has been said by scientists and writers, that Bahrain may possibly had been the Garden of Eden, because of it's lush growth in a dry and arid land. On the tour we visited the archaeological dig, done in 1958, which uncovered the cities of Dilmun, five of them. Walls and rooms were still visible, door frames were straight and square, showing strong construction. Many stone tablets were found with inscriptions which were translated; these cities dated back to 2700 B.C. Peoples from Mesopotamia, Persia, and surrounding areas traded at this historic area, on the spice route.

In a nearby village there was a cemetery. It had the rocks standing upright, to mark graves, as is common in Arab countries, but also some Muslims used a new innovation and

covered graves with a cement slab, contrary to old custom. There was one small square structure, dazzlingly white, with gold minarets, built as a marker for a prominent man buried there. Now it is used as a room to wash the body of a deceased, before being wrapped in a cloth and buried in the ground. Right next to this cemetery we saw the native weaver, an aged man, making hand-woven material in lengths suitable for a woman's abaya, or wrap. His loom was inside a makeshift shed, of wood and cardboard, open on one whole side. He sat on the ground with his feet down inside a dug-out space, where the pedals of the loom were. The loom was erected over this hole, it was crudely made of wood and was threaded with thousands of black threads, which extended about 40 feet out along the ground. They lay low on the ground, were tied together and fastened to a long rope which went around a stake, and then back to the man at the loom. The weaver threw the shuttle, with a bright red thread on it, back and forth between the black threads, using the foot pedals to separate the black threads one way, then the other. It was fascinating to watch him. He works every day, from 6:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m., weaves each day about 3 meters of cloth, enough for one abaya (the woman's covering). One length cost 12 to 18 dinars (Bahrain money). During Ramadan, the period when I was there, he works only from 10:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m., because Muslims must fast from food and drink in daylight hours in these 30 days, and they need more rest. A small spinning wheel, crudely made of wood, stood next to the weaver, it is used to spin hair from goats or sheep, into thread. One was seen just like it, in the movie "Ghandi", where this great man sat often and spun.

We then drove north to the tip of the island, where the causeway is being built, that will connect Bahrain with Saudi Arabia, a wonderful, long awaited dream now coming true. This possibly will be completed within the next year, and is funded entirely by Saudi Arabia. I walked into the Gulf waters a little way, found the water very warm, even moreso that the Red Sea, which is on the west coast of Saudi Arabia, and in which I do much scuba diving. On the next part of the tour we were driven around the area of fine streets and gardens, where the ruling Al Khalifa family, and various ministers in the government, have large, beautiful homes.

I spent the rest of the day, after the tour concluded, in the large souq, or shopping area, with the narrow streets, some open stalls, and some closed shops. It was very colorful there, with people of many nations and different style of dress in evidence; many Arab men with the white thaube and red checked gutrah, Pakistani men in their baggy trousers and long tunic, Indian men with a colorful skirt as their garb, and Indian women in beautiful saris. The saris impressed me, and I bought two pieces of material, to wear in this fashion, they are so graceful. Western dress is worn too, and though Muslim faith is the prevailing religion, rules are not as strict here as in Saudi Arabia, and women may drive cars, alcohol is allowed, other religions are allowed to practice their faith in Bahrain. An Anglican Cathedral and a Roman Catholic church were in the same 'neighborhood as a Hindu temple.

The main entrance to the souq is through an arched gate called the "Bab Bahrain" (door to Bahrain). Years ago, this was at the edge of the sea and ships brought merchandise here, to unload into the souq, now it is about three blocks from the water's edge, as land has been dredged from sea bottom, and coral, filling in a large area. This is now built up with modern high-rise buildings, banks, hotels and business establishments. Most of the next

day I spent at the nearby seashore, finding pretty shells and watching fishermen bring the large fish traps to their boats, baiting them, and going out to sea, to put them down in the water. I swam a bit, enjoyed the clear, warm water. At the hotel restaurant, in the evening, I ordered "hamour" for my dinner; this is a type of grouper that is caught locally, and is superb in flavor and texture. I also had time to inquire about riding a dhow across the Gulf, back to Saudi Arabia, when I leave. I had to take a cab to the dhow port, called "Mina Manama", ask the security guard to be admitted and gain information: found that I must be at the port at 6:00 a.m. on the morning I would like to go, if the winds were right, the trip would be made, fare was 4 dinar, no food available on the trip, but I could bring my own, if I wished to eat. I planned to do this, in two more days, even though I already had my air ticket. I like new adventure!

The next day I took a tour again; we were driven to Marrauq Island, one of the group that comprise Bahrain. This was a center for pearl divers, a lucrative trade 80 to 100 years ago. These people live very simply, fishing and the sea was their life. The museum was on this island, and we drove there, to view all the artifacts that had been found during the excavation of the cities of Dilmun, plus other items from the history of Bahrain. It was very interesting: there were bowls, iron spears, stone arrow heads, vases, large vats, burial containers, an entire skeleton of a human as it laid in the ground, figurines, the Dilmun seals, jewels of semi precious type, remnants of China glazed pottery; showing that trade went on to the far East. Also, the pearl divers' equipment, wooden nose clips, leather pads for fingers, since the oysters have sharp spines on their shells, tools to pry them open, baskets to carry them up, and even a dive suit, were on display. Beautiful costumes, worn about 100 years ago, were also on display in glass cases.

Later, we visited the home of a wealthy pearl merchant, built 120 years ago, and now being restored. The Majlis room (where business negotiations, marriage plans for females in the family, etc., were carried on) was especially lovely, with carved wood panels at windows, and lattice work so the breeze could come through. At the tops of the windows were stained glass, curved panels, that must have been brought from Venice, where colored glass art was made. The ceilings were very high, to assimilate coolness in this hot country. In the olden days, people sat around on Persian rugs, with satin and tapestry pillows and bolsters to lean on, there was no furniture in the room. The house contained many rooms, it had three levels, with sleeping rooms and harem accommodations on the upper floors. Servants prepared the food, and took care of the house and occupants. Pearl merchants in this area became very wealthy. The roof beams, of tree trunks, had woven palm mats over them, these were covered outside with a thin layer of cement. The rains were so few, that this must have been sufficient to keep water out.

The last Emir to rule also had a large home, which is usually open to view, but this being Ramadan month, regular opening hours were abandoned at this time. As we drove along the sea, back to the hotel, we were shown the fish traps in shallow water, a different kind. These were many sticks, standing up in the shallows, close together. As the tide came in, fish were carried toward shore easily, and swam around in these shallows, then as it receded, many men would walk, close together, and drive the fish into large nets, held by other men. This is a primitive way of catching their food: I have seen it done in other countries.

On my walks through the souq, I noted, and bought, lovely vegetables such as tomatoes, cucumbers and carrots. They were superb in flavor; also melons were delicious.

My trip across the Gulf water on the Arab dhow began at 6:00 a.m., with my arrival, by taxi, from my hotel. I was ushered to a large, very plain building, at the port, where many Arab people sat, or stood around. There were only two benches in the place, and in the center of the area was a small table, a bench next to it held an aged man, lying down, asleep. I sat at the end of a bench; a family with small children occupied a portion, and one of the young men spoke a bit of English. I learned that I must lay my passport, on the stack of many others, on that table by the sleeping man. Now, I always hesitate to let my passport out of my hands, as it is extremely important to have, especially when the attendant was sleeping! So, I held on to it, until the man sleepily sat up, yawned, and began to go through the stack. Then I rose, asked him, in my Arabic, if he wanted mine too. He nodded, and I laid it down, but kept my eye on it. His job, I learned, was to write a log of passengers wishing to cross on the dhow. Later on, he motioned me to come and pick it up. Next we were shown to the emigration line, where each person went through a check, as to name, etc., passports were inspected, and then stamped for exit. Proceeding to the dock, with luggage, people were allowed to enter the dhow, down a shaky gangplank, and stepping high over the starboard side of the craft. There were no seats, but mats of woven palm were spread over the stern area, and there was a canvas shade over this area also. Women and children were shown there first, then men came and occupied the area also. It was crowded, I had not much room, and an aged man near me, promptly laid down, crowded me and my baggage over a bit. I was the only Western person aboard. There were four women, all clad completely in the black abaya, and their faces were covered. They had small children with them, and on most of the trip, held the smallest one close to them, under the abaya.

Some of the male passengers went to a barrel, with a faucet, and a cup hanging there, and took drinks, during the trip: a few had some snack type food, and ate it en route. I had an apple, and can of juice, but hesitated to eat in front of the Muslims, because of Ramadan. The air was warm, and sky clear; the sea was not too rough and the craft rode the waves well. A young man next to me spoke a bit of English, and after I took a few furtive pictures (not knowing whether passengers would object) I asked him to snap one with me among the passengers, and he obliged. Then I took one of his family.

The Gulf is where the war is going on between Iran and Iraq, and ships have been bombed in these waters. There were planes that flew over us, and a helicopter seemed to stay with us for awhile, but all was o.k.. We passed other dhows twice, going in the opposite direction and bringing passengers from Saudi Arabia, to Bahrain. The trip took about 4 hours.

We arrived at the Saudi shore and port at the city of Al Khobar. There was no gangplank to walk up to the dock, everyone just hopped up as best they could, from the bobbing craft. A man helped me with my suitcase, as I stepped up. It was sunny, and very, very hot. We were shown, and directed toward the immigration building, and to my surprise, women were directed to the head of the line. I had already made out the pink immigration card,

given to me at the office in Bahrain, but the man at the window tore it up and said I would have to make another, in his presence. I was then motioned on through the narrow exit, to the customs counter. Here the man was very stern and thorough, went through everything in the suitcase, even opened my small purse with money, took things apart, went through my journal, a magazine, took out shoes, lingerie and upset everything. Then satisfied, he sent me to the little room nearby, to be "frisked". An Arab lady, entirely covered in black, even the Bedouin type mask, with only eyes showing, felt me up and down, had me take off my Kenya, Africa, hat which I was wearing, and felt through my hair. I guess I must have looked suspicious to them, I never had that kind of scrutiny before, on entering a country, the luggage often lightly inspected by just feeling a bit through it, then marking it to enter. I have heard that they are suspicious of smuggling in drugs, or other items, and I guess I looked suspicious to them. Western women do not usually cross the Gulf on a dhow!

I was then allowed to leave the building, after the job of putting everything back into the suitcase. I walked to the entrance of the port, looking for a taxi. There were none, but I found I was right at the area of the large Gulf Center building in Al Khobar, where I had stayed once before, when I spent some time here. A gentleman who spoke English, said there were no cabs, but his friend waiting there, who worked as a guard at Aramco compound, would drive me to the Dhahran airport, which he did. From there, I flew to Riyadh, and after an overnight stay with Dr. Bill and Danielle Brown (friends from Al Hada hospital), continued on to Taif;, where I work. I felt this was really an interesting country to visit.

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Typed on computer by Irma in 2003