

Saudi Adventure – Camping, Mountains Down To Red Sea

by Irma Kackert

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At age 66 I was working in Al Hada hospital, doing Hydrotherapy, in the city of Taif, Saudi Arabia, lived in an apartment on the hospital campus, and had made friends in the past 18 months with other “ex-pats” working there also. They were from many other countries, doctors, nurses, technicians, and all were interested in exploring the mountains and deserts of this country, and in snorkeling and diving in the Red Sea. We had a group of about 19 people who had gone on many hiking, camping, exploring trips together, called ourselves the Adventure Club. We only had two 9 day trips together as a large group, but on 3 day weekends we often went out with two, three or four – whoever was not on call, or scheduled to work in their department that weekend. We all took cameras and photographed camels, villages, Bedouins and scenic beauty. Two of the men had an old map showing a trail from the 8500 foot elevation of the Asir mountain range (where Taif is located) down to the tihama area, the flat land at sea level. They wanted to drive a car down the area – explore and see if they could find the way. Pat had the use of a GMC Suburban auto. This was the weekend selected to make the trip, we got together, planned it, found who was free, and could make the trip. We always had to take our own water and food, cooked with a small propane stove, or over campfire. Virginia, in our group, could not go, was on call in the traction/orthopedic department all weekend. I could be off Thursday and Friday, our regular weekend, Pat and Tony and Dr. Russell were all free, so we four made the camping trip.

WEDNESDAY, AUGUST 12

Awoke early, but did not go out to swim, as I usually do every morning, because the pool was being shocked with chlorine, a maintenance procedure. I did my morning patients, using the Hubbard tanks, and exercising patients in the indoor pool, in the afternoon. At 4:45 I was finished, went out to the bus stop, Pat was there to pick me up, go into Taif, get food for the weekend, pick up Tony, then drive back to Al Hada and to Dr. Russell’s apartment. He had invited all of us to a dinner he made, baked potato, hamburger and vegetable casserole, I brought a can of fruit cocktail for dessert. We did not have to wash dishes, for the Pakistani houseboys do this for the doctors. We loaded things into the car, left about 6:30 p.m. What a treat to be going out with the Adventure Club again, exploring. Sorry Virginia and another nurse could not be with us. We drove south, to city of Al Baha, arrived there at 10:45 p.m., looked for a little shop for milk, got it, I also bought a pack of the non-alcoholic beer “Mousy”, that is sold in Saudi Arabia – no alcohol allowed. We then drove up the mountainside to the juniper forest, found the same spot where we had camped before and put our mats down on the ground all in a row, got ready for sleep. I changed in the car, wore green surgery pants and a sweatshirt. It was cloudy but the moon soon broke through, and stars appeared. During the night I felt chilly, I had my warm cap in my pillow, put it on, and felt better. We all talked a bit, then turned over and went to sleep. Forgot to say that before we laid down, Tony (who is British) made tea, bread, butter and jelly. He called it “tea and butty”, it tasted good.

THURSDAY, AUGUST 13

This is my good friend Jessie Van D’s birthday – I hope she received the card I sent to her back in the United States. I awoke about 5:45 a.m. feeling a little chilly, but not too bad, it gets cold in the mountains at night, we are about 9000 feet elevation here. A lot of moisture was in the air, pillow and blanket were quite damp. Pat made coffee for all, brought a cup to me before I was out of the bedroll, he is so thoughtful. After arising, we all took separate walks away from camp, for our “morning constitutional”, found private areas in bushes or behind huge rocks. This is primitive camping, used a cup of water to brush teeth, breakfast was dry cereal with milk, bread and coffee. After eating I hung all the blankets on low trees, to dry out. I walked up to the edge of the escarpment, noted the beautiful view below, could see the baboons (which are native here) in the juniper trees to my right. I stood quietly on the big rocks, soon they came from the trees to a rocky point, jutting out from the cliff, a big clear area directly across the chasm from me, not too far away and in plain sight. First there was an old one, with the long grey hair around his face and on upper part of his body, short brown hair over balance, and hairless bright red buttocks – just like I have seen many times

in a zoo. He looked at me, studied me a while, then others started coming out in view. There were 3 more big, old ones and finally there were about 50 in view, all sizes, a couple of females carried a baby on their back!!! What a neat sight. They looked me over carefully, then went down the chasm, scrambling hurriedly. I ran back to camp and told the men to come, see baboons, they did, and soon spotted the pack on another rocky point, further away than where I had seen them, but still in view. Pat had field glasses, all took turns using them, so everyone got a look at baboons today. We tried to see them the last time we were here, heard them calling out, but did not see them.

We then packed up, left the campsite neat, and started up the mountain on the terribly dusty, rocky little road. At the very top it was a great sight to note the tiered mountains, this was done so crops could be planted, rains held back by the rock walls, to nourish the crops. We stopped on top, took pictures, looked at the map again, started down. Pat found a road leading down, dusty, twisty, and scary. It was steep, with many switchbacks, very narrow. We made it down in 40 minutes, came to the bottom and the road (such as it was) ended right in the dry riverbed, called a "wadi" here, was very rocky. There were many old, stone houses along here with people living in them, tiered areas for crops were noted, just up from the sides of the wadi, high enough to be out of the water during winter rains. Rock walls outlined the areas for crops, just like we have seen on the sides of mountains. What a lot of work it took, through hundreds of years, to build these low walls, dividing plots of land, they were beautiful to look at.

We stopped for lunch, under a tree next to the road, some children were playing nearby. I talked to them with the greeting "marhaba", but they were shy and ran. Their father, seeing the incident from his house, came out and we talked to him. He was very friendly, wanted to know how we got down the escarpment, and if we wanted to sleep at his place for the night. We thanked him, took pictures, his name was Mousa. Leaving, we drove on through the rocky river bed, sometimes didn't know which way to go, when there were two tracks, but the men followed the compass reading they had set, in direction of the Red Sea, and drove through the river beds all the rest of the day. About 6:00 p.m. we decided there was no chance to hit a main road before dark, so decided to find a campsite. We had come to a fair-sized village named Al Kiwa, we did not find it on any map. Suddenly we came upon an oasis, there was a very small stream, with water flowing for about a block, seemed to just come up from the ground, had very small fish in it and hundreds of frogs, then it disappeared in the ground again. We marveled at this sight, out here in the desert/mountain country. There was a sandy knoll just a bit away from the rocky road, but near the water, we made camp here. As we did this a small water truck stopped at the oasis, and pumped their tank full of water, then pulled away. This is how Bedouins, living in these remote areas, get water, the truck delivers it to them. On our drive today we had passed a few camels, had seen many goats and sheep, also donkeys. There were some water birds, all black and with long legs, standing in shallow water of a river bed, what a neat sight!!! It is like a safari, in mountains of Saudi Arabia.

We set all camp things out, Tony started cooking, I offered to help but he said no, for I had made ready our "hors d'ourves", crackers spread with cheese, for everyone. We drank the Mousy beer with them, surely tasted good. Tony made hamburgers, mashed potato, cooked frozen mixed vegetables, I peeled the fresh green onions I purchased this morning at the open market in Al Baha. I forgot to write that we went there before taking off down the escarpment. It was truly the real old way, rural Arabs selling their crops and buying what they needed. There were beautiful tomatoes, green peppers, carrots, cabbage, okra, obergines (eggplant), squash, potatoes, green beans, chili peppers, grapes, peaches, melons. These were all local crops, then from other areas were apples, oranges and bananas. Handwoven baskets were for sale, I bought one. There were meat stalls, where the whole sheep (dressed) hung from hooks, the merchant cut off the parts a customer wanted, weighed them and put them in a plastic bag. It was truly picturesque, I enjoyed the time spent there.

We had three folding camp chairs to sit on while we ate. Tony sat in one, Pat and Russell in the others, I was on a mat. Suddenly Tony fell through his, the canvas split, he sank way down, was stuck, with a very pained expression on his face. I laughed so hard the tears rolled down my face. Russell took his picture, helped him up, he then joined me sitting on the mat. Tea or coffee was our after dinner drink, we discussed the day and the fun of the collapsing chair episode. I washed the dishes, which is my usual job when we camp. The mats were all laid out, with ground cover underneath, and bedrolls readied. The men found dead wood, probably from previous flood stage, when winter rains occurred, and made a big bonfire. I always love

a campfire, we sat around it, each one told a story from our childhood, or something exciting, or that we had really enjoyed in the past. Then other stories evolved, we had great conversation, time passed quickly. We were now down in a valley and the air was warm, different than last night when we slept at about 9000 feet elevation. I didn't need a sweatshirt tonight, slept in a sleeveless t-shirt and the green surgery pants from O.R. My mat was laid between Tony and Pat's, Russell's was next. The moon was covered by clouds for a while, broke through, then was partly covered and some stars were visible, what a wonderful feeling, lying out under the sky!!! We talked a bit, my eyes soon got sleepy, I said good night to all, closed eyes and thanked God for such a nice experience.

FRIDAY, AUGUST 14

Awoke about 4:30 a.m., heard a Bedouin water truck go by and saw all its brightly colored lights, (they decorate the trucks like a Christmas tree) it stopped at the pool of water, filled up and went on. I guess the sound of the truck awakened me, the men were still asleep, many stars were in the sky above, it was like a velvet blanket studded with diamonds and I always enjoy camping in desert or mountains, enjoying this beauty of nature. I shut my eyes again, dozed a little, but was awake when Russell got up about 5:45 a.m.. Soon Pat was up too. Russell made coffee for us, tea for Tony, mine was brought to my mat, drank it sitting in the bedroll. When I got up and walked to the car for toothbrush, noted a camel was drinking from the little stream, and closer to us a Bedouin was taking a bath in it. How interesting to see these signs of life in the remote area. There was no car in sight, the bedouin must be afoot. After he wrapped his white top and skirt around himself, he walked past our camp, shouted at us. Russell understood him, he wanted a ride in our "sayarrah", our auto, if we were leaving. We weren't ready to do that yet, he walked on. The camel sauntered away, after finishing his drink.

We each took our little separate walk away from camp, brushed teeth, washed faces, and had breakfast of cereal and bananas. Following this I walked down to the water again, sat on a rock and dangled my feet - let the little minnows nibble at my toes. The frogs floated around, seemed to look at me. Two little boys in white thaubes and caps, and their sister, in a blue dress, passed by with a big flock of sheep and goats. The children have to do this, so the animals can find enough dry plants to eat each day. The boys stopped and talked with me, Russell took a picture with his Polaroid camera, gave them one. The little girl ran on past us, was very shy. At this time in Saudi Arabia, little children living in remote areas, do not go to school. This changed in years ahead, many schools were built, and better roads were ordered to be built, by the king, so all could be educated. Later on, as we were driving, we saw the group higher on the mountain, the flock grazing on dry shrub. I don't know how the animals survive on this sparse food, but they do.

We closed our camp, taking any trash with us, packed everything in the suburban again and started over the stony river bed, to try and find our way out, and to the highway running parallel to the Red Sea shore. All morning we bounced along. Sometimes there was a road (as such) sometimes the track disappeared, sometimes there were turns or tracks from other cars that had crossed our path – didn't know which to follow. Tony and Pat shared the driving. A couple of times found that we were heading into the mountains again, and would turn around to find another way. After about two or three hours, the stony trail gave way to desert sand, we had come lower and lower, down the mountain range.

Now we were in the "tihama" area, the flat, sandy land at sea level, it is directly across the Red Sea from Sudan, Africa, and in past years people from this country did emigrate to the Arab peninsula, settled here, the customs of that country are evident now. We saw the cone shaped huts, made of grasses, that one sees in Africa, black-skinned people were living in them, many huts were scattered about, life was evidently carried on here, like tribal living in Africa. Slaves were brought from Sudan, many years ago, to serve the wealthy merchants and traders in Arabia, these people are probably descendants. At one time we were sort of "lost in direction", a truck passed us, it stopped, the men came to our car. They were friendly, Russell and Pat talked to them, they guided us to a trail we should take. Of course, this disintegrated into a bunch of tracks after a while, and Pat just had to choose one, hoping it was the right one. We saw many camels in this sandy area, munching on the thorny branches of the acacia trees growing here (the thorns are 2 to 3 inches long, camels eat the whole branch), the animals roam free, but have a brand on them, so

Bedouins can identify them as their property. Some Brahma cattle were sighted a couple of times, probably belonged to Bedouins. There were the regular Bedouin style tents noted once in a while, the old-style ones low and long, made of black goat hair, which is twisted into a yarn, and woven into cloth. There is a separation cloth hung in the middle, inside, one part is for men only, one part is for women and children. These are disappearing in Arabia, Bedouins now buy a higher, wider tent from the tentmakers in the local souk. Near the tents were seen pens for lambs, made of sticks, rushes and branches, each had a metal tank nearby, as tall as a child of age ten, or so, containing water, brought by the water truck. This has to serve family and animals, water is precious. The sun was very hot here in the desert, there were few trees around.

Driving on, we came to a spot where water must be close underground, an oasis, for we saw green vines growing atop small sand dunes, many kinds of birds flew about, I noted bird nests shaped like hanging baskets, that hung from branches of trees in this area, the nests are used over and over, each year. Once a flock of large birds ran on the ground, in front of us, about eight to ten inches tall, had a crest on their heads, like a peacock. I said, this was so much like Africa, I expected to see a giraffe, or an elephant dart in front of us. Sometimes the sand was so soft, I thought our car might get stuck, but we managed to get through. We made many stops to take pictures, of all the interesting things, and places, we saw. Finally, at about 1:15 p.m. we came to the asphalt highway near the Red Sea!!! I was so excited I gave each of the men a hug, for bringing us through mountain and desert. We could see the sea, but the terrain ahead was soft sand, they turned the car into a track once, but we were almost stuck, so turned around and followed the asphalt road to town of Al Lith, which is on the shore. Near Al Lith there was a paved road into the town, and a tarmac path to the sea, we hoped there would be a beach here, but were disappointed, had to walk across about 500 yards of mossy coral, in shallow water. I had my rubber sandals, so walked out on that sharp coral to the reef, and deeper water, but didn't see any fish there. I walked back, we decided to drive on all the way to Shoiba beach, closer to Jeddah and Taif, where we camp often, and could go into the sea and snorkel.

Driving on, we stopped for gas, at one of the few stations found on a main highway, when finished, the car wouldn't start. This happened quite often, the men said the starter was on "dead center" again. After discovering this, they pushed it, got started, Tony started to enter the highway again, killed the motor. Then they had to push it backward a bit, push forward, it started!! We drove on, feeling happy this didn't happen while driving on those rocky tracks, or loose sand. Russell took his turn at driving for a while, and we arrived at Shoiba beach, on the Red Sea. Being so dusty from our long drive, down the escarpment and across desert sands, we took a swim in the comfortable water, the temperature reaches about 84 F in summer. We found friends, also employed at Al Hada hospital, at the beach for the weekend, it was good to see familiar faces. Snorkeling for a short time, saw all the beautiful fish and the corals in this area, looking down as you float along, it is like viewing a flower garden under the sea, so beautiful. Our suits dried quickly, in the hot air, and after toweling off, we drove on the 2 ½ hour trip up the new escarpment road, to Taif. I sat in the front seat, and made tuna fish and tomato sandwiches for everyone, ate them as we traveled.

I had offered to wash the dusty car, when we reached Taif, since I could not share the driving, (no woman may drive a car in Saudi Arabia), offer was refused. Then when we arrived at our friend's home, where the camping materials were stored, and the suburban was emptied of those articles, we decided to wash the car there. We had watered their garden for six weeks, when they were in Europe. Virginia and another friend Sheila, were at their garden when we arrived, they were glad we were back safely. We four travelers washed the car, it needed it badly – Pat has to use it, in his job, he transports workers in the morning to their departments.

Russell drove now, the few miles to Al Hada campus, it was about 6:30 p.m.. Arriving at the gate, he asked the guard permission to drive right to my apartment, so I would not have to carry my things up "cardiac" hill. We call it that, because it is very steep, doctors have permission to drive to the apartment buildings, where they live. We single women live in separate buildings, and are let off at the gate, we walk to our apartment. The men helped me assemble my mat, blanket, fins, snorkel, mask, etc., and carry it inside, I thanked them all for the wonderful exploratory adventure, I enjoyed it so

much, a wonderful treat!! I really saw Saudi Arabia, the old culture, as not many Westerners have seen it. I invited Russell, Pat and Tony to come for dinner on Sunday night, when Virginia will be my dinner guest, we will share memories of this trip with her.

LATER: I kept renewing contracts at Al Hada hospital, left there December 30, 1984 and returned to U.S. I spent the next 20 years teaching hydrotherapy classes, part time, and traveling around the world. I am typing this on computer, in October 2006, at age 90.

Irma M. Kackert