

E-mails from the edge

AT FIRST glance, flying in to Jeddah at night is like flying into any port city in the world. Row upon row of street lights make up a patchwork grid that looms out of the surrounding blackness and stretches into the distance.

But as you get a little lower, this grid becomes studded with green neon splodges - the multitude of minarets that are too many to count - where every street corner and every soukh boasts its own mosque. Welcome to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

The heat hits you as you get off the plane. At midnight the temperature has fallen to around 32C; but wait a few hours and it will be back in the 40s.

But why worry? Every room in every building has air conditioning and the short walk from building to air conditioned car is bearable, though not so good if you are wearing glasses which steam up in the humidity.

This is a Holy Land, and you are never allowed to forget it. Jeddah is the port of entry for millions of people from all over the world who make their pilgrimages to Mecca and Medina, and 'In the Name of God', is a phrase you will find at the top of every official letter, in every annual report and on internal memos.

The Saudis are gentlemen in the truest sense of the word. Can they all have gone to charm school as part of their education? English is widely spoken and is the language of business, but it is as well to learn a few helpful phrases and to understand some of the basics of Islam, for you cannot escape it, and you would do well to comprehend what are the driving forces behind any business venture in the Kingdom.

Walk into a room and say Salaam as you enter and you might get a few muttered Salaams in return. Say Salaam Aleikum and everyone will give you a full greeting, for to invoke the name of the Prophet is not something anyone would ignore.

There are no women allowed in the offices. Instead there is a plethora of expats from India, Pakistan, Sudan, Palestine, Philippines and Bangladesh as well as Europeans and Americans. Now you understand why English is the lingua franca of business.

Hierarchy

There is also a rigid racial hierarchy which is all pervasive and in Western terms is very un-PC. To be a Bangladeshi is to be at the bottom of the pile.

He may well work 28 12-hour days on the trot followed by 28 12-hour nights and for this he might be earning little more than £200 per month. But he will be rich in Bangladeshi terms by the time he returns home. Terms for European ex-pats are considerably



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better, although many are finding that since Gordon Brown changed the rules in last April's budget, the tax-free salary they proudly negotiated is suddenly liable to UK tax if they did not come out before the April 6th deadline. It is all based on what the market will stand.

Lifestyle

The lifestyle is good, or bad, depending on your point of view. There are no cinemas, concerts or theatres, for the Prophet never approved them. Radio was only introduced after the all-powerful Ulema or religious police were given a demonstration how it could be used to transmit the Prophet's message throughout the Kingdom, and today you can hear readings from the Koran 24 hours a day, thanks to Radio Mecca. Satellite TV is everywhere, though, and the endless round of dinner parties and barbecues combined with Red Sea snorkelling and scuba diving, interspersed with all the other activities going on, leaves little time for boredom.

There are many anomalies and quirky happenings. All women have to wear an abaya and cover from head to toe but, in the soukhs there are huge businesses which sell Gucci, Red or Dead, Yves St Laurent, Donna Karan and all the designer clothes which the Arab women wear under their abaya and then leave the abaya at the door when they go home. Food in the supermarkets is of the best quality and the fish market at 5 o'clock in the morning is just heaven.

So are the sunsets. They are over extremely quickly and the sun sits over the Red Sea like a huge red ball and then, in one stride comes the darkness.

It takes only a couple of minutes for the sun to set.

Working in Saudi Arabia is to be commended as an experience not to be missed. And despite the harsh climate, it sure beats the English summer!