

Family alaeja

The Magazine
for Retired Aramcons
ISSUE 02
AUTUMN / WINTER 2010

NORTH OF THE BORDER

3rd Ukaramcons Reunion
gets the Scottish treatment



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FILIPINOS - THE FRIENDLY PEOPLE

Smiling eyes and a greeting that is warm and genuinely caring.

RETAIL THERAPY

Where else in the world but Saudi Arabia...!

ABHA AND ROSES

The Asir (meaning "inaccessible") is one of the most interesting parts of the Kingdom.

TAPPIN' THROUGH RETIREMENT

The cacophony of one hundred girls tapping in unison down 3rd street like a well-oiled machine.

Alaela (Family) is produced for annuitants, families and friends of Saudi Aramco and Aramco Overseas Company (AOC) as well as its associated companies by AOC B.V.

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Message from the MD

As Saudi Aramco's President and CEO, Khalid Al-Falih said at the 2009 KSA Reunion Welcome Dinner, "... all of us agree...that Saudi Aramco brings a whole new dimension to the concept of extended family."

Those words encapsulate the very essence of what Alaela is all about, the Saudi Aramco family. That family includes you, our readers, who have been incredibly supportive of this new publication, reflected in the number of positive e-mail responses and praise for the first edition. I could fill the whole of this message with examples, but the following two will give you a flavour of the comments sent:

"The first issue is a beautiful combination of stories and photos/pictures and you can be proud that all your efforts have resulted in such a fantastic product. I am certain that all recipients of this issue will be as pleased as I am." (G. Kortekaas)

"I hereby congratulate you on 'a job well done.' It is a magnificent publication with interesting articles and beautiful pictures." (C. Bogaert)

It makes me proud to see such wonderful reactions to the hard work of our staff and we intend to continue this great work with each subsequent issue.

So, welcome to the second edition of Alaela and a personal thank you to all who contributed their stories to this issue. The photos from the reunion in Edinburgh reflect the enjoyment that was surely had by all attendees, while recollections of trips to Abha and Afghanistan brought out the traveller in me.

I hope you gain as much enjoyment from reading this issue as you did the first, and would like to take this opportunity to wish you and your loved ones a momentous 2011!

Ahmed M. Alzayyat
Managing Director, AOC



A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'A. M. Alzayyat', written in a cursive style.

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“Haflas” Brighten Season for Aramcons in U.S.A.

Retirees from Saudi Aramco and its affiliates, along with their kids, capped 2010 with get-togethers stretching from Florida to California.



Nearly 400 people turned out for the “granddaddy” event, the 27th biennial Annuitants Reunion, held October 1-4 in Orlando, Florida. Hostess Éva-Kinga Farnsworth titled the gathering Orlando Hafla 2010.

Attendee Abdulaziz F. Al-Khayyal, senior vice president of Industrial Relations, called it a **“wonderful theme. A hafla is always a happy event, when family and friends gather for fun and fellowship.”**

Janny Slotboom, from The Netherlands, agreed. **“You become family when you get overseas,”** she said. **“The people you meet become your family.”**

She attended with her daughters Monique and Arleen, both of whom were born when Janny and her late husband Hans lived in Tapline communities in northern Saudi Arabia from 1965.

Across the country in San Francisco, some 70 folks who attended Aramco schools in the 1940s and 1950s gathered for the biennial “Geezers” reunion, held November 5-7. A banquet in Chinatown highlighted the affair, organised by Linda Killian Walsh, daughter of Lou and Mary Killian, a 1953 Dhahran School graduate.

Annual fêtes brightened the holiday season in Texas.

The Ladies of Arabia luncheon in Houston on December 4 featured “Coming Home,” a DVD of the 2009 Annuitants Reunion in Saudi Arabia. “I cried, of course,” said Judy Thomas, who co-hosted the party with Alice Hastings-James.

Nearly 70 people attended the Texas Hills Aramcons Christmas Party near Austin on December 9. “I had a wonderful time seeing old friends . . . and meeting new folks who have recently retired,” said Judy Walker, who hosted the event with her husband Bill, Fred and Martha Goff, and Jack and Ellen Meyer.

A party by the ASC/Aramco Retirees Luncheon Group of Houston, organised by Verne Stueber, drew a happy crowd of 50 on December 14.

The success of that gathering — like Saudi Aramco reunions everywhere — came from “sharing with family and friends,” summed up by a smiling Mike Sawran who, kitted out in his trademark Santa cap, attended with his wife Linda.

Caption: Mike and Linda Sawran, and Carol Gonzales, are dressed for the occasion: the annual ASC/Aramco Retirees Luncheon Group holiday gathering in Houston on December 14.

Customary practice!

Travel to and from Abqaiq for me generally involved using the King Fahd Causeway. One such trip back to Saudi in 2001 was eventful, to say the least.

Words Philip Findlay

I arrived one early October morning by Gulf Air and picked up my '75 Blazer from the airport car park. My car had previously been the property of AAA and before that the property of a North American family, by the name of “Fachetto” (or a derivative there-of). The same person had been a Technical Advisor to the Industrial Security Department, in Abqaiq.

The vehicle had been used by his wife, obviously mainly around camp, until his retirement. I had noted two extra fuel fill points to the left and right side with small tanks to the inside of the rear compartment. These were lockable and I never ever had keys for them. I did not know how, or if, they were connected to the main tanks, or even if there was fuel in them. On reaching the causeway on the morning of arrival, it was quiet and I expected a quick clearance and run down to Abqaiq. However, as luck would have it, one of the Saudi customs guys took an interest in the tanks mentioned previously; asked me about them and I told him what I knew. He disappeared with my passport and keys. Back came a six-man crew. The crew supervisor was brilliant; he explained (grinning) that

they wanted to thoroughly check the vehicle and hoped I wouldn't mind. I grinned stupidly in reply. When he found out I had no keys to the fill caps, he explained that they would tear them off with pipe wrenches. I asked if I could collect my 200 pack of Embassy Regal and explained that I would flee to a safe distance, just in case there was a spark while they did so! I sat on a curbstone for two and a half hours while a crew (of trainees it seemed) shoved cameras down doors, in the engine and combed the vehicle for contraband. The supervisor popped over to update me every half hour and to assure himself I wasn't losing my cool. Losing my cool! I had my smokes and a new cigarette lighter, excellent, balmy weather, access to water, a (albeit dodgy) toilet . . . how could I lose my cool? It was the friendliest experience I've ever had with Customs Agents anywhere in the world! I'm not suggesting that I get searched that often, but these guys were a lot more fun than the humourless drones I meet in airports today. Eventually, I got clearance and was thanked for my patience. I could see their point of view. The tanks could have had alcohol or drugs in them, I suppose. And if they'd found any, I could have been deported! Take nothing for granted in the land of the sand!

From Prevention to Possibilities!

Words Martin Wingrove



As those of you who read the last issue may recall, my regular contribution to *Alaela* is not a diary of events, but rather a personal reflection of some of the key happenings in Saudi Aramco's world over the past six months.

Of course the most high profile issue which has affected the oil industry over the past few months was the Macondo well incident in the Gulf of Mexico. As Saudi Aramco president and CEO Khalid A. Al-Falih told delegates to the Oxford Energy Forum in London,

“The global petroleum industry faces trying times, with negative public perceptions of the industry to the fore.”

Referring to the Gulf of Mexico tragedy and its possible ramifications in particular, he referred to the incident as a “wake up call,” the lessons of which “must be transformed into meaningful actions.” This is a message taken to heart and is already being promoted throughout the Company, with proactive oil spill drills held on a regular basis. The latest, organised in Egypt

by Aramco Overseas Company in early November, involved 150 representatives of Saudi Aramco, AOC, Vela and ASC working on page 2g with Egyptian National Authorities, the Egyptian Navy, Oil Companies and Response Contractors to combat a spill scenario off the coast of Alexandria (see photo).

But the potential for spilled oil isn't the only issue which hit the headlines and received the attention of Saudi Aramco. As Mr. Al Falih noted during a speech in Montreal, “our planet's population will grow in the coming decades and consequently we will have to meet the world's increased energy needs and do so in a responsible manner.” So, sustainable energy “Access” is only part of the story; we must not forget the vital importance of “Energy Acceptability.”

Of course a major “acceptability” issue, which receives publicity (and also, increasingly, worldwide legislative attention) is the impact of fossil fuel use, in particular CO₂ Management, which was the subject of a Symposium in October, hosted by Aramco Services Co. (ASC) in Houston. Saudi Aramco is actively pursuing Carbon Utilization. This concept states that carbon should be removed for its commercial properties and is consistent with the Company's mandate to produce hydrocarbons for profit. Saudi Aramco has a precedent for this

“waste to profit” concept, with the Kingdom's Master Gas System. In the 1940s and 1950s, the Kingdom night skies were lit up by waste gas being burned off. Thanks to years of infrastructure development, that same gas is collected, transported, and used for energy generation and petrochemicals — improving the environment and creating jobs!

Carbon Utilization has two simple objectives. The first is to develop novel low-cost technologies for CO₂ capture from fixed and mobile sources. The second is to develop methods to convert CO₂ into valuable chemical intermediates for commercial use.

Saudi Aramco's approach to achieve this goal is to support major industry carbon management initiatives and selectively support original external research that supports the commercial utilisation of carbon.

Leading scientists and academics from around the world gathered to explore innovative ways to reduce CO₂ emissions. A major focus was the capture of CO₂ from mobile sources, since the transportation sector is a major source of CO₂ emissions. In addition, these researchers discussed exciting developments in the goal of converting captured CO₂ into valuable materials.

In addition, and perhaps to the layman, surprising for an oil and

gas company, other current Saudi Aramco initiatives are focusing upon evaluating renewable energy opportunities. At the forefront of this is solar energy, which was the subject of the “Saudi Solar Energy Forum” held recently at the Saudi Aramco Conference Center Plaza.

In fact Saudi Aramco has already taken steps to harness some of this power. Installation of a 10MW system in Dhahran at North Park 4 has been approved, with smaller installations being evaluated in Hawiyah, Farasan, and Yanbu' Bulk Plant. In addition, the Saudi Aramco Joint Venture in Japan (Showa Shell) has built a solar cell manufacturing facility and is currently looking at opportunities to invest in a new solar manufacturing plant in The Kingdom.

Finally, I would like to conclude with two notable anniversaries during the past 6 months:

Saudi Aramco joined the rest of the country of Saudi Arabia in celebrating Saudi Arabia's National Day, which commemorates the 80th anniversary of the founding of Saudi Arabia in 1930, and the formal unification of the Kingdom on Sept. 23, 1932. Special events were also held in The Hague, where the King Abdulaziz Center for World Culture was on display for over 300 special guests; and Houston, where representatives of ASC and a number of Saudi students from U.S. universities, wearing traditional Saudi dress, joined in celebrations.

The Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) is 50 years old this year. The anniversary celebration went to Saudi Arabia from Oct. 18-20 during the International Energy Symposium. ■

New Beginnings

ANDREW MULLEN



Andy Mullen retired from Saudi Aramco (August 2005) and AOC in mid-July 2010, after a 32-year association starting back in 1978, when he went to work for various Project Management contractors working on Aramco Projects. In 1990 he became a regular Aramco employee working for the Inspection Department as a Mechanical Inspector and then as a Field Supervisor.

During these years, he travelled the length and breadth of Saudi Arabia, working in Riyadh, on the East-West Pipeline, Buraidah, Yanbu' and Shaybah, as well as Al-Jouf, Turaif, Najran and Jizan.

"I have seen so many changes during the years; I remember when I first arrived seeing herds of camels and donkeys in downtown Al-Khobar, but probably the biggest changes, were the Bahrain Causeway and of course the Dhahran grass golf course," recalled Andy.

As the age of 60 and retirement from Saudi Aramco approached, Andy just wasn't quite ready and decided a move to Holland and a position with AOC was a

great opportunity. "Not only did I continue to work for the Company, but I also managed to travel around much of Europe. Together with my partner, Margo, (who also worked 15 years with Saudi Aramco and 2 years with AOC) we enjoyed every minute of it: the country, its people and especially my co-workers."

Apart from my memories of Saudi Arabia, the thing I will remember and treasure forever was the fantastic send-off from my colleagues at AOC. On my last day at the office, they managed to give me a wonderful surprise, they didn't just say goodbye, they actually managed to hire a Piper — in full Scottish Regalia and bagpipes — to play me out of the office one last time." ■

Andy and Margo can be contacted at:
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PATRICIA CROMBERGE



With the date of March 31, 2011, marked as her final day of work, Patricia can look back on her 32-year career at AOC with nothing short of pride. She joined AOC, The Hague, in November 1978 as a temp in Personnel and on January 23, 1979, officially became an employee assigned as Project Secretary on the BI-1212 Berri Desalting Project. In late 1982, Patricia was promoted to Executive Secretary to the Vice President of Finance and Director of Industrial Relations.

During this time she assisted the Director of Industrial Relations, resulting in regularly arranging, coordinating and attending Saudi Aramco's Executive Committee and Board Meetings for the next 18 years, travelling around the globe.

It also meant being involved in the organisation of the many Joint Venture signing ceremonies, the first in London in November 1988 (Shell/Motiva), and other Aramco events, including in January 1995, the state visit to South Africa by then Minister of Petroleum, Mr. Hisham Nazer and then Saudi Aramco President, Mr. Ali Naimi. Due to the downsizing of AOC in 1986/87 besides Personnel, Patricia was afforded the opportunity to get involved in PR and Law issues and arranged all of AOC's social events.

In 2000, Patricia assisted in the setting up of what would become the Chapter 8 Unit within HR, while

in 2002, she arranged the AOC 50th Anniversary celebrations, along with the first Saudi Aramco-sponsored dinner with OPEC in Vienna. In 2004 Patricia was asked to set up the Expatriate Recruitment Unit (Staffing Services) and in October 2007 the Unit moved to new offices in London.

Returning to Holland in October 2008 saw Patricia named New Building Project Team Coordinator, which meant a close involvement with the architect to design AOC's new office building in The Hague. She was then named Supervisor Facilities Services in August 2009.

With such an event-filled career, Patricia is looking forward to having the time to do whatever takes her fancy: walking, quilting, reading, redecorating and rearranging her house, catching up with friends, going to the movies and travelling. "I will miss my colleagues and AOC friends, although many of them have already retired! I will miss the challenges given to me over the years but will not miss the hard work it entailed!" she says laughingly. ■

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3rd Ukaramcons Reunion Gets the Scottish Treatment



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Words Tom Henderson

The 3rd Ukaramcons Reunion was held over four days in Edinburgh, Scotland, beginning on Thursday, July 29, and finishing on Sunday, August 1. Between two evening meals and a golf tournament, the reunion dinner took centre stage on Saturday evening, July 31.

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On Thursday afternoon, around 60 guests booked into the Holiday Inn, Edinburgh City West and congregated in the lounge, greeting friends from years gone by and those they had met at the last reunion in Maidenhead, Windsor. The excitement was already beginning to build and the level of conversation rose as the afternoon progressed.

Most had travelled a long distance by car but none more so than Louis Rotter, who drove all the way from Hungary to be at the reunion. Others had flown in from The Netherlands, Orkneys, Portugal, Saudi Arabia and Spain. After such long journeys most elected to eat at the hotel, which had put on a special evening menu, with the dinner conversation carrying on into the early hours of the morning for some.

Others went to bed at a reasonable time — as they were involved in the 3rd Ukaramcons Golf Tournament early on Friday morning — and were up for breakfast at 7:30 a.m.

As the golfers left for the course, other guests arrived for breakfast, before going sightseeing and shopping in Edinburgh. The weather was kind to us once again and the conditions for playing golf were very good. The Tournament was held at Silverknowes Golf Course — beside the Firth of Forth just east of the Forth Railway Bridge — which is well known and one of many tourist attractions in Edinburgh. With a number of prizes to be won in the modified Stableford Competition, co-sponsored by AOC UK Ltd. and etvideo (the hosts), the golfers set off down the first fairway in good spirits. The course was undulating and very open with excellent fairways, where only a few holes were lined by trees, but the greens

were fast. Needless to say, the scoring was not good but all who played thoroughly enjoyed their day.

By late afternoon more guests had arrived and one could hear screams of delight as old friends were reunited. Slowly but surely the Ukaramcon group was beginning to take over the hotel! In the evening nearly 70 people went to the Lauriestone Farm Toby Carvery. The Toby Carvery is a popular eating house and in the past has always given us a good meal and excellent service. The staff were very friendly and the manager kept his staff back an extra 30 minutes past the normal closing time, to accommodate the group who were waiting for their transport back to the hotel at 11 p.m.

Saturday morning was beautiful, just what was required for a final day of sightseeing. Edinburgh castle was a favorite tourist spot as well as the Princes Street Gardens with its floral clock





Images on previous page:

1. Una Tennie and Sue Harry
2. Tom Henderson (Host), Gil Hunter and Charlie Stewart (Piper)

Images on this page:

3. Ann Wingrove and Andrew Mullen
4. Kathleen Coffey, Noirin Azzouni and Linda Dudhill
5. Fiona Digby-Ovens, Shona More and Eileen Henderson (Hostess)
6. Dave Harry, Ivie Rennie, Allan Fox and Martin Wingrove
7. Tom Henderson (Host), Rita and Dave Howlett with Allan Martin in the background





AOC's new publication, *Alaela*, was officially launched at the dinner. All those who contributed to the first issue, many of whom were at the reunion, were given a formal recognition of their efforts. This included Eileen and I [Tom Henderson], Lynne Hampson, Penny Walker and Colin Knight.



and beautiful borders. Others visited the Falkirk Wheel, Royal Botanic Gardens and The Royal Yacht Britannia to name a few. And of course, there was the last minute shopping! The reunion dinner kicked off at 6 p.m. and as everyone came up the staircase to the reception room, they were offered a welcome drink before being greeted by me, as host for the evening. Each lady was given a large single red rose by their hostess, Eileen Henderson. In the background, Charlie Stewart played the bagpipes as the crowd congregated and talked about their excursions.

At 7 p.m. everyone was called to their tables and once settled, welcomed with the customary Salam Alaikum. It was so nice to see so many faces that have attended past reunions and I expressed my hope that those who had come for the first time have enjoyed themselves and would come to the next.

With a few items to be addressed before dinner, we moved quickly on to the results of the Golf Tournament, announcing the prize winners and presenting the prizes. Next on the agenda was a report on the website and I pointed out that the website (www.ukaramcons.co.uk) might be closed down due to a lack of information, as it was difficult to keep it interesting without their participation. It will remain open until the beginning of 2011, in

the hopes that content picks up, otherwise only the e-mail address would remain available.

Martin Wingrove, Assistant to Mr. Ahmed Alzayyat, Managing Director of AOC, was then introduced and spoke a few words, finishing his speech by presenting Eileen and I with a letter from Mr. Alzayyat which thanked us for our endeavours and ensured AOC's support for the next reunion in 2012.

Finally, AOC's new publication, *Alaela*, was officially launched at the dinner. All those who contributed to the first issue, many of whom were at the reunion, were given a formal recognition of their efforts. This included Eileen and I, Lynne Hampson, Penny Walker and Colin Knight, as we'd helped to critique the pre-production of the magazine during various stages of development, and as such, were presented with a first copy. A few photos were then taken of those involved with the first issue.

With the speeches over, dinner was served, after which bouquets were bestowed upon Martin and his wife as a token of appreciation for everything AOC had done for Ukaramcons in 2010. Flowers were also given to Eileen for her continuing support while organising the event and to Carmel Philp, who gave her time to set up the gifts for the evening.

Martin surprised us then, by announcing it had been Eileen's birthday on July 29 and that it was my birthday that day, so while his wife Ann came forward with a token birthday cake, the entire reunion group sang a rendition of Happy Birthday!

Charlie Stewart gave us his own surprise when he presented, on behalf of all those who attended, a Scottish Quaich to me for my efforts in putting the reunion together. My thanks were heartfelt and I pointed out that the real success was created by those who attended — without them none of this would have happened!

A commemorative gift provided by AOC for each guest, along with copies of *Alaela* were distributed, and the night flowed into the following morning with plenty of reminiscing and laughter. Sunday morning meant tearful good-byes and a quick exchange of contacts with many vowing to return in 2012. ■

INTRODUCTORY REMARKS – MARTIN WINGROVE



“Thank you, Tom, for your introduction and thanks to you, Eileen and the rest of the team, for your hard work in putting this reunion together. After the last reunion in Windsor, meeting old and getting-ever-older-friends, it is great to see how many of us have made it here for reunion number three!”

Before starting with my remarks I must first of all pass on regrets from Mr. Alzayyat, the Managing Director of AOC, who unfortunately had a business commitment which changed his plans at the last minute. I should also apologise that he went “low-bid” by sending me on his behalf again!

And in my own defense, it's not as easy as you may think to come up with something to say, particularly as I think I used up all the good stuff last time; reminiscing about some of the memories that we UK Aramcons still recall fondly from the 1980s. Nostalgia at its best. But this evening I want to talk about the more recent past and present — and perhaps look into what the future holds for UK Aramcons.

And, while pontificating about life in general and what to say this evening in particular, I thought of how there are those spells in life when you look back and for long periods, sometimes years, where nothing at all seems to have happened... and then, there are those times when everything happens all at once! Well thankfully for me, in preparing this speech, a lot has gone on within the last few years. So for the next few minutes I'd like to dwell on some of those things that have happened since we last met.

First of all there was the tourist trip which many of you took to visit Saudi Arabia, early last year [2009] I think it was. In fact I still go over

a couple of times a year myself and things are certainly changing — most noticeably with the number of shopping centres in Al Khobar — remember when for those in Abqaiq there was only the Al-Farhah souq and I believe Rahima had something similar (did 'Udhailiyah have anything??). Now though, it seems there is a new mall springing up on every corner. But although the ambience and choices abound, I still look back fondly at the bargains that could be had if you risked the traffic of the Khobar highway to hit King Khalid Street or the dark depths of the Shula Mall!

And each time I go, I realise that there are still a lot of things that I personally would love to be able to bring back with me — things like a full tank of petrol for less than a fiver; a zero in the tax column of my pay slip; and can you believe it is still SR13 for a haircut (no rise in the last 10 years the barber told me when I was over there last December). And I hope those who visited managed to take in a Saudi fast food joint! I always do and swear you can't beat a shawarma for SR5 — where I now live in The Hague they cost four times that price — and don't taste half as good!

And this reunion, which started with just a few old friends from Abqaiq meeting up, has turned into the major gathering we see today; more than 150 people from all parts of the Aramco family. So it is appropriate that the reunion coincides with the launch of Alaela magazine and which has been written by and for ex-Aramcons.

Leafing through the pages I can see the names of several old friends such as John Snell and Randall Baker to mention just a couple, and even an article by yours truly. This publication is a great initiative to go with the UK Aramcons website, so please join in and share your own experiences and memories.

That covers the past and the present, but what of the future? Tom has, as many of you know, promised to organise one of these events in each of the four home countries before passing the reins over to a younger man; which leaves just Ireland and Wales to go. But he couldn't do this without financial support. So I'm delighted to have with me a letter of support from AOC's MD for the next reunion in 2012.

Well, that's about it from me. Mention of Alaela reminds me that the theme of this year's reunion is family. So in closing I would like to leave you all with the thought that, whether from England, Ireland, Scotland or Wales and whether we lived in Abqaiq, Dhahran, Ras Tanura or 'Udhailiyah, we are all members of the UK Aramco family. So let's show our appreciation to Tom, Eileen and their able team, for bringing the family together again and here's to many more such gatherings in the future!" ■



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3rd

UKARAMCONS

GOLF TOURNAMENT RESULTS

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Longest drive on Hole #14: Andrew Mullen

Nearest the pin on Hole #8: Nobody was able to hold the green!

Fourth place with 18 points: Dave Harry

Third place with 21 points: Janet Scott

Runner up with 25 points: Allan Martin

Winner of the 3rd Ukaramcons Golf Tournament with 28 points: Murray Welsh

Consolation prize presented to the player who got the most exercise: Bill Davies

Coordinator: Tom Henderson



Filipinos — The Friendly People

Words Alison Hooker

Smiling eyes and a greeting that is warm and genuinely caring: that's the first experience that most Aramcons have of Filipinos.

They are probably a unique national group within our community, permeating as they do through professional, technical, supervisory and unskilled roles, characterised by their cheerful dispositions and can-do attitudes. We meet them on a daily basis — in the office, in the commissary, at the clinic and in our homes — but we probably don't know a great deal about their lively culture and what makes them the wonderful people they are.

This situation was recently addressed by the Dhahran Women's Group, who hosted a morning event, showcasing and celebrating the diverse heritage of this vibrant people, who make such a daily difference to our lives. Using multimedia, including IT and the performing, visual and culinary arts, women from the Dhahran Filipino community revealed some of the richness of their history and

traditions. Spokeswoman for the group, Rowena Rahman, said that the presentation aimed to address the mix of both traditional and modern in her culture "as this is actually a good thing and further celebrates diversity, not the dissolving of one's traditions."

Archaeology suggests that the Philippines has been settled by aboriginal peoples since 5,000 BC, and has grown from a diversity of different ethnic and cultural influences.

By the time of the Spanish Conquest in the 16th Century,

the 7,108 islands had fully functioning communities called "barangay," named after the ships used by the Malays who had emigrated to, and colonised within, the islands. These barangays, each containing several families, had a strong social structure, headed by a patriarchal chief who could claim unswerving loyalty as he carried responsibility for the welfare of everyone else. These ancient social systems survived through Spanish rule to the present day, making the family the strongest unit in Filipino society. This commitment to family and community underlies the economic migration of 11% of its population from the Philippines — as the remittances workers send home have become a pillar of the country's economy.

Traders from China and India, and migrants from Indonesia also had an influence on the development of Filipino culture, and the Spanish colonisation (exercised partly from Mexico) in the period between 1565–1898 was followed by a brief American sovereignty — briefly interrupted by the Japanese Occupation in WWII — until Independence was granted in 1946. This diverse heritage is reflected in the 78 language groupings with more than 500 dialects in the Philippines, but communication is generally focused through the one national language of Tagalog, which is a combination of other

languages including Malay, Chinese and Spanish. Today one will also hear a large number of English words throughout any Tagalog conversation.

Despite Spanish rule and American Occupation, most ethnic and tribal cultural expressions continued and have been assimilated into the wider culture to be shared at festivals and feasts that celebrate the camaraderie of community: what the Filipinos call "Bayanihan." This camaraderie originated with the tradition of neighbours helping to relocate a family by getting enough volunteers to literally carry the whole house on bamboo poles, moving it to its new location. At the end of the day, the relocated family would express their gratitude by hosting a small fiesta for everyone. The members of the Dhahran Women's Group were treated to their own Barrio Fiesta and sampled typical delicious foods including Lumpia, Pancit, Empanada, Puto and Cassava cake.

The good humour of the Filipinos leaves a lasting impression, and it is innate to their personality, often being an important coping mechanism within difficult circumstances: beneath the joviality lies a resilient spirit that strives to overcome the worst of situations. Modern Filipinos like to compare themselves to the bamboo that sways and bends with the wind



(whatever its strength), but never breaks. Like the bamboo, which thrives in the harshest environments, Filipinos survive the most trying of times. Their humour is also expressed as intrinsic optimism, which believes the future will always be brighter.

Aramcons have a great affection for our Filipino community, wherever they encounter them. One lady shared enthusiastically: "I have to spend much time at the hospital, which, if it were not for the kindness and wholehearted care of the Filipino professionals, I would approach with far less ease and peace of mind." Another man testified that his son's Maths tutor, who works by day as a House Maid, was "a thoughtful, intelligent lady with a warm heart and a gift for engaging young people." Others applauded the diligent and cheerful work ethic of those Filipinos they encountered in their workplaces, and the commitment they gave to whatever task they were addressing.

The Filipino Heritage Event at the DWG was a long overdue tribute to the thousand smiles of a people that have made life in Saudi Aramco, for all Aramcons, a wonderful experience. The Aramco community continues to be blessed by the intrinsic ability of its Filipinos to share the essential quality of a human heart: love and compassion. ■

Recollections of a First Year

Words Joanne Sweeney

Just over a year ago, in December of '08, I was preparing, with much trepidation, to fly off to Saudi and take up my new post with Aramco. To say I was nervous would be a massive understatement, yet here I am in the UK (having spent the Christmas holiday with my family) and looking forward to my second year back in Saudi.



When I was told that the transition would be easy, I'll admit to having grave doubts. There was no need; the work has been challenging sometimes, but the support I have received has been amazing and I know that whatever is thrown my way, I will manage.

Work aside, I have had a great social year with a network of new friends from far-flung places, as well as the UK, many of whom I will keep forever. Weekends tend to be away in Bahrain, where there is a large community of UK expats.

Back in Saudi, outside the Aramco Community, women must respect the Saudi values which dictate that they should cover up with the abaya (a thin black garment similar to a bathrobe), though many westerners do not cover their hair. Most of us do go out two or three times a week to shop for food and sometimes clothing, (Watch those prices! Not cheap!) or jewellery (Watch those prices! Amazingly cheap!). Regularly scheduled Company buses take us to the shops.

I have had the greatest year and am so glad that I made the move. The tax-free system is ideal and the lifestyle is easy.

I have enjoyed most of the things I have always done in the UK, such as regular visits to the gym, jogging and swimming.

There is even a lush golf course for those who like it. You can find pleasant places to eat out and to be honest, it is cheaper and easier than cooking at home.

To add to all this, there are frequent get togethers to which we receive friendly invitations as well as excursions organised through Aramco. (Haven't tried one yet, have been too busy enjoying everything else!)

Take a word or two of friendly advice and jump at any opportunity that you have to join Aramco. You will not regret it! ■



And they call it “Retail Therapy?”

Words Alison Hooker

Where else in the world would expat ladies go shopping wearing a shapeless black robe and armed with a prayer schedule but in Saudi Arabia? In this contradictory retail environment, the need to plan your rest breaks around prayer time becomes an art in itself! Throw in a couple of ‘Id holidays, the fasting month of Ramadan, and a few “first customer of the day” bargains, and the act of shopping becomes a skill worthy of tertiary-level certification.

Despite all that, shopping remains one of the favourite past-times of Aramco wives. Each sortie out on a shopper's bus promises an adventure of some kind, worthy of retelling over several coffees with friends or on the weekly blog! From the glittering glass and marble of the over-sized shopping malls, to the broken pavements and dusty concrete of Al Khobar's backstreets, the valiant expatriate ladies doggedly pursue their retail mission, with a fixed determination to exercise that old credit card!

Shopping hours themselves take a bit of adjusting to: most mornings one can shop without interruption between 9:30 and 11:30 a.m., and a well-timed bus journey to a mall will give you time in a coffee shop to catch up on the gossip with your girlfriends before the stores begin to open. Evening shopping usually requires a bit more planning, with stores closing twice for the sunset and evening prayers, between 4 and 11 p.m.. Once you are "in the know," you can plan to be inside one of the bigger supermarkets during prayer (from which you will be unable to leave until the checkouts re-open after prayer) or having a meal in a restaurant, which will darken its lights and not attend to you during the period. And the prayer time changes by a few minutes from week to week — hence the need to consult your trusty schedule! Just as you think you are getting used to it, Ramadan and 'Id happen, and day-time opening hours become much more unpredictable — but, if you have the stamina, most malls and stores will be open for festive late night shopping from 8:30 p.m. until 2 or 3 a.m.!

The contradictions are continuous: while the halls of the malls throng with veiled ladies, black cloaked to protect their modesty, what they apparently wear underneath is glamorously displayed in store front windows, ranging from sensuous, glittering evening gowns to suggestive and luxurious lingerie. And while the Saudi men have obviously been well-trained by their mothers to accompany their wives into these havens of femininity, it's a bit more daunting for some of the more conservative expat wives to take on the obsequious over-attentions of the male sales staff keen to appraise madam's desired level of décolletage!

Depending on your point of view, it's either great fun or a bit humiliating being told what kind of beauty products you require by the handsome, well-groomed and over-scented young men in the cosmetics stores — especially when they insist on loading you with free samples which illustrate their instant appraisal of what they think you need...revitalising, age defence, wrinkle cream, etc.!

Another contradiction is the levels of trust one experiences: because there are no changing rooms in the stores themselves, some stores will allow you to take clothes — without paying for them — to the nearest bathrooms to try them.

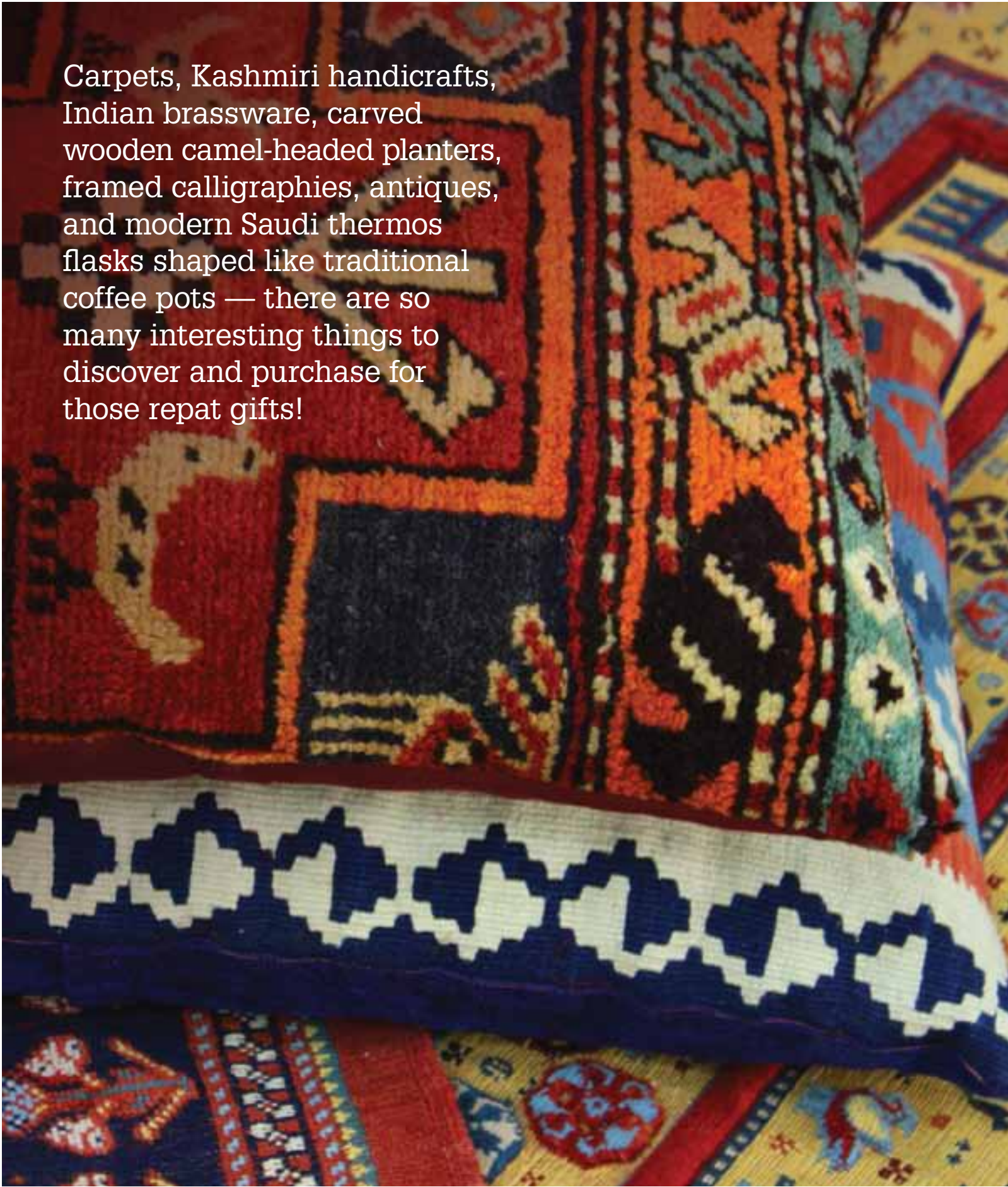
Other stores have door security so stringent they won't even allow empty recyclable shopping bags to be taken into the store. It is also common for people to leave valuable items for repair at dingy-looking downtown businesses in return for a scribbled receipt, and to collect them in mint condition just days later. And the best cheese bread in town comes from a tatty, hole-in-the-wall bakery that wouldn't get a second look in suburban UK!

Al-Khobar itself is a curious procreating mix of ostentatious showrooms, hotels and mosques, and dusty side streets, and it certainly makes for a much more authentic shopping experience than the malls. Saudi bling, antique and modern, competes alongside the gold and silver souqs where gems, pearls and the ubiquitous Saudi diamonds can be sorted through at leisure. And beautifully crafted heirlooms can be designed and manufactured for madam and sir for any occasion. Carpets, Kashmiri handicrafts, Indian brassware, carved wooden camel-headed planters,





Carpets, Kashmiri handicrafts, Indian brassware, carved wooden camel-headed planters, framed calligraphies, antiques, and modern Saudi thermos flasks shaped like traditional coffee pots — there are so many interesting things to discover and purchase for those repat gifts!





framed calligraphies, antiques, and modern Saudi thermos flasks shaped like traditional coffee pots — there are so many interesting things to discover and purchase for those repat gifts! And the experience is totally enhanced as you dodge the taxis, race the road crossing timer and try to find your way back to where the Aramco return bus is parked — in itself an act of ingenious detection.

For those who prefer less adventurous retail therapy, the “Mall Day” is an important camp institution, when outside vendors are invited to participate in a market-style environment; under the auspices of community groups such as the Women’s Group, Saudi Aramco Employees Association (SAEA) or Art Group. This event also gives local craftspeople the opportunity to market their wares, and for expats to be able to purchase their holiday decorations and distinctive gifts to take or send home. In recent years, it has been encouraging to also see local ladies marketing their own handmade products and crafts, ranging from soaps and natural cosmetics to handmade chocolates and beautiful and individual jewellery pieces reflecting a unique Middle Eastern style. These are popular occasions, always well-supported by the community, and as Dhahran Women’s Group (DWG) Mall Day organiser Kanwal Starlin observed, vendors themselves vie for the opportunity to participate, supporting local charities by paying for a market stall and often donating items for subsequent charity auctions. The festive atmosphere on these occasions is usually augmented by bake

sales and coffee stops, allowing shoppers the chance to catch up with friends and recharge their batteries while making a decision about some of those tempting but more expensive items!

There are some places that have become part of the retail urban legend for expats in the Eastern Province. One of these is “Desert Designs,” a purpose-built design centre and home furnishings store that to visit provides a cultural experience in itself. This remarkable family-owned business promotes both Saudi heritage and Islamic handicrafts from areas including the Arabian deserts, Iran, Oman and Northern Africa. Heirloom and souvenir seekers will discover tribal arts such as rare carpets and Bedouin weavings; traditional silver jewellery; antique weapons and maps; and collectables such as Saudi doors, chests and furniture. Innovative designs and a workshop full of talented craftsmen have recycled old window frames and doors into attractive, desirable and useful pieces of furniture, cleverly retaining the inimitable Arabian styling. There aren’t too many Aramcons who go home these days without a future family heirloom from Desert Designs! The addition of “Cafe Arabia” has made it an even more inviting place for a Thursday morning date with the husband (although he might choose to leave the credit card at home!!)

When I first arrived here, I was amazed at the range of “things” expats went home to shop for, but now you can find most things you need if you really look between

Al-Khobar and Bahrain. The advent of the huge shopping malls with their myriads of western chain stores helped, and large modern supermarkets with increasing numbers of familiar overseas brands testify to the global market and provide a welcome alternative to the limitations of the Dhahran commissary.

No stay in Saudi is really complete without a visit or two to an authentic market, be it for vegetables, fish and fruit in Dammam or Al Oatif, or even camels in Al-Hasa!

There the sights and smells serve to remind us that we are living in a modern society with a rich, ancient eastern culture. As well as cheap, fresh produce, here you have the opportunity to engage with the local people going about their normal routines, and get to practice your Arabic haggling over prices and quantities. Saudi Arabia is certainly at once one of the most challenging, frustrating and rewarding retail experiences an expat can have!! ■



Abha and Roses

Words Anne Hedgethorne

Autumn 1993

Last month my friend Alison and I flew with an Aramco group to the Asir province in south-west Saudi Arabia on the borders of Yemen. The Asir (meaning “inaccessible”) is one of the most interesting parts of the Kingdom, consisting as it does of the *Tihama*, a coastal plain belt bordering the Red Sea, and a vast escarpment that rises ten thousand feet above sea level and which is so massive that its outline can be distinguished from outer space, as well as countless wadis, plains and fertile valleys. Its altitude ensures that the region receives heavy rain from the Red Sea coast, making it one of the wettest, and greenest, parts of Arabia.

The renowned Arabist Charles Doughty had explored here in the late 1800s, Harry St John Philby in the 1930s and in 1946 before his trek across the *Rub'al-Khali*, months travelling by camel and donkey in the Asir.

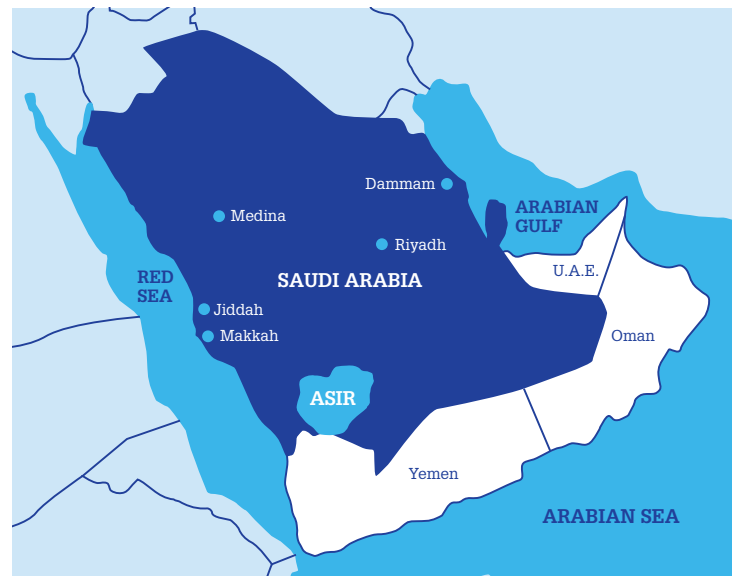
Scenically at least, I was in for a surprise. In direct contrast to our hot and sticky existence on the sea-level plains of the Eastern Province, the Asir enjoys a year-round temperate climate with low humidity, and it was a delightful change to breathe such cool, glittering-bright, almost effervescent, mountain air and see distant horizons stretching away below. I was also quite amazed to learn that spring gives birth to acres of meadows bursting with wild flowers. And that not only do wild olives, prickly pears and juniper bushes grow here in abundance, but that there are also coffee bean fields, banana and almond groves, and mahogany stands — and all this in Saudi Arabia!

Because of the Asir's unique characteristics, in 1401 Hijra (1980 in the Gregorian calendar), most of the region was declared a National Park with its wildlife becoming protected. The result, along with the creation of some museums and a rather attractive craft village, has for the first time in Saudi Arabian history, spawned an embryonic domestic tourist industry. It's a good endeavour to encourage interest in Saudi culture and customs, but is run with enough simplicity to satisfy anyone who fancies himself a 'traveller' rather than a mere tourist, who prefers a touch of the barely-chartered and his journeys to have bite and challenge beyond the norm. Speaking of bite, I didn't find quite so delightful the encounters with ubiquitous colonies of free-roaming mountain baboons in search of food. In some instances I should have preferred the visitors to be more protected than the wildlife. Apparently in the colder months, bands of one hundred or more baboons may raid farms, gardens and rubbish tips in search of food. With no natural predators, the baboons have proliferated to pest proportions, although steps are being taken to find a method of management.

Centuries before roads were built, mountain trails across the escarpment carried the frankincense and spice caravans from the markets and ports of the Yemen and the Oman on to Asia Minor and beyond; the Asir's inhabitants shrewdly increased their income by levying tolls on those cumbersome processions and anyone who owned a water well could end up very comfortably off. Even in 1970 there were only 170 kilometres of paved road in the Asir, hence its inaccessibility to all but intrepid, and eccentric, English explorers.

By 1985 another 4,000 impressively-engineered kilometres of road had been completed, thus allowing conventional travellers to penetrate its wild and roughhewn mountainous interior.

Sometimes the high roads we travelled climbed the escarpment, hugging the mountain on one side and falling away down seemingly-bottomless ravines on the other. Looking down from the bus and seeing — snaking through the middle of these gorges and



sweeping away into the distance — a lower tier of slender roadway soaring over even deeper chasms, and supported on towering spindly knitting-needles of columns disappearing into the depths below, made the achievement even more breathtaking. At times we were so high that black kite and raven sailed on the thermal currents beneath us.

Above some of these remote and barren expanses — with their silhouetted serrated peaks marching off with giant strides into the pearl-grey misty distance — I felt the same sense of soaring above a magical land of myth and legend as Abu the Thief must have felt as he flew across mystic lands on his flying carpet in *The Thief of Baghdad*. The air sparkled with crystalline clarity and at times a hazy vapour

The fortified houses and buildings of the countryside in this area are architecturally unique. Shaped like pyramids with the tops sliced off, each dwelling stands three or four stories high. They are made of stone and mud plaster, the walls are whitewashed and the rows of slates embedded on the top of each horizontal stone course to allow floodwater to drain away from the walls which are painted a traditional green. Doors, windows, frames and shutters are often picked out in different colours. Clinging to mountain sides or nestling in wadis they are a photographer's dream, or they were... for the first two hours.

descended to cloak the mountains with its gauzy veil and tint the peaks — in turn with hues of now silver, now sepia, now sable and on to ultramarine, indigo and charcoal — as they melted away into the horizon. It seemed as if the peaks would stride on and on in never-ending procession right across the world. But then we'd coast down or grind up through a village or town and a ramshackle urban world and more prosaic scenery would take over.

Abha has a slightly wild frontier-town atmosphere. Until the Taif Treaty of 1935 this region belonged to Yemen as part of *Arabia Felix*.

It certainly has a tangibly raffish air that I've not encountered anywhere else in Saudi. I bought an old dagger in the market at Khamis Mushayt. Its leather belt is woven around the sheath and has been very well worn. There seems to be a higher value placed on the new and my old dagger cost a lot less than the modern knives and daggers bought by some of the others on the trip.

Women's costumes are equally picturesque and dramatic but I could only catch glimpses of them from the bus as we drove through the countryside. When working in the fields and on the hill terraces they wear brightly-coloured patterned dresses with wide-brimmed straw hats, only covering themselves with the black abayahs or cloak when in town. Looking from the bus it was hard to believe that I was in Saudi Arabia, we could have been anywhere in Asia or the South Americas.

After a horribly early start one morning, we embarked on what turned out to be a fourteen-hour bus trip across 330 kilometres of the escarpment travelling from Abha to Taif. The fortified houses and buildings of the countryside in this area are architecturally unique. Shaped like pyramids with the tops sliced off, each dwelling stands three or four stories high. They are made of stone and mud plaster, the walls are whitewashed and the rows of slates embedded on the top of each horizontal stone course to allow floodwater to drain away from the walls which are painted a traditional green. Doors, windows, frames and shutters are often picked out in different colours. Clinging to mountain sides or nestling in wadis they are a photographer's dream, or they were... for the first two hours.

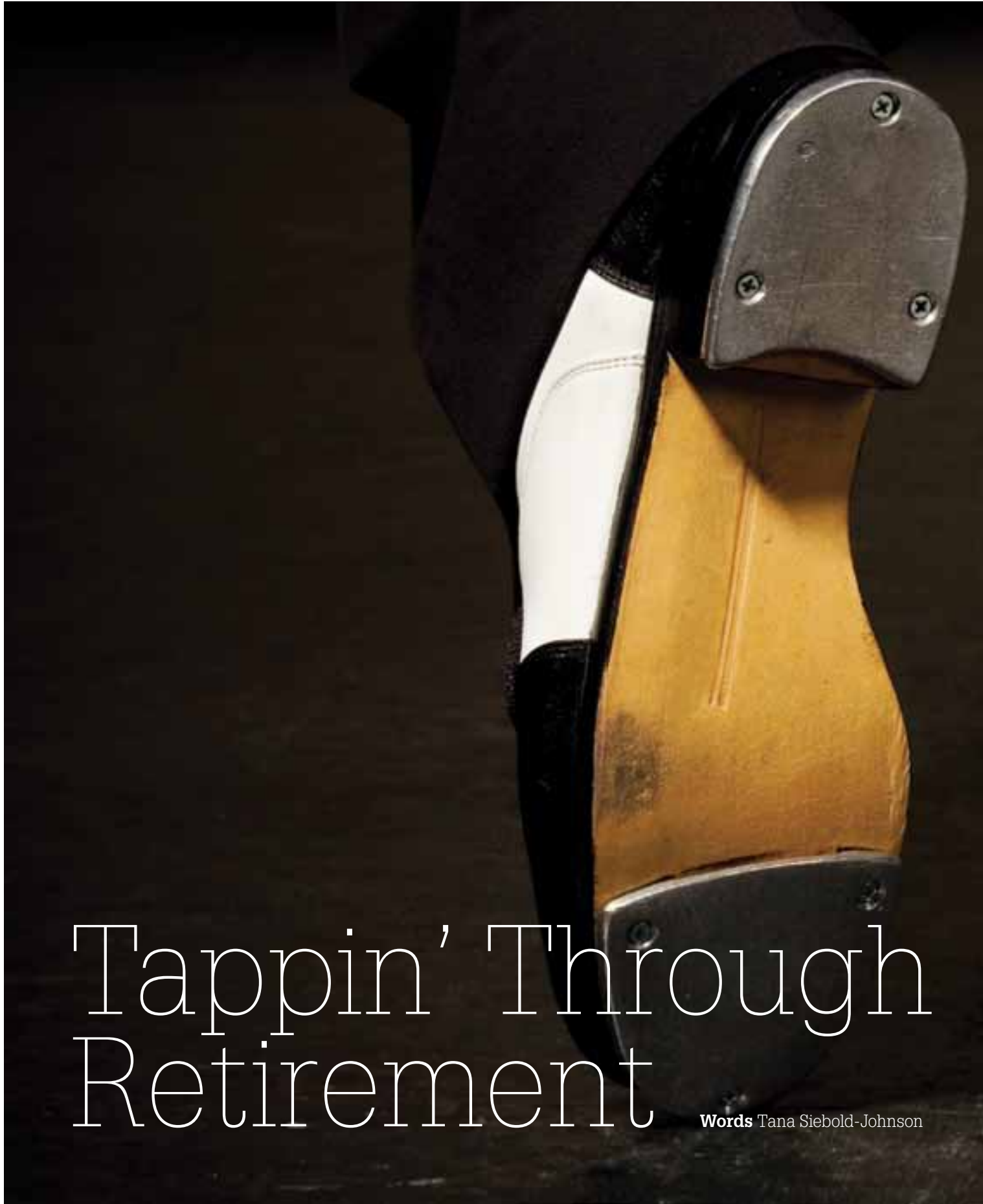
Fortunately for the grinding weariness of the day's trip, a large part of the day's hilarity came from within the bus. Well-sprung, air-conditioned and spacious, the bus had its own toilet on board which at the start of the drive gave a semblance of luxury. However, as it would with fifty-plus people on a fourteen-hour trip, its container quickly reached capacity. But when, between hair-raising near-misses, our urbane and courteous driver was requested to empty it, his response was, "They filled it up, let them empty it". As none of us knew how and he was not inclined to show us, we drove for several hours with scarves over our noses, kicking and fighting to be off first at every stop for a lungful of fresh air until, just as the bus neared Taif, he agreed to empty it.

Nonetheless I couldn't help but enjoy the drive in this stinking portaloos and throughout the long fetid day adventure piled upon adventure. To begin with our driver was not at all conversant with the gears and part of the reason that the normally nine-hour trip took so long was that we crawled along for hours in third gear at less than thirty miles an hour while any other traffic on the road screamed past. At one point a long stretch of road was segmented by several short tunnels, each having at its entrance a large sign in both Arabic and English with the exhortation "Turn On Headlights." Not willing to follow instructions, our bold driver hurtled through several tunnels in utter Stygian blackness. At the next tunnel entrance several passengers, having lost their sang-froid, yelled. "Driver, pl-e-a-s-e turn on the lights." He turned on the interior overhead seat lights. The hair-raising experience of being lost and finding ourselves at a dead end and of a twenty-point turn at the top of a precipice in a space no larger than the bus is not one I would wish to repeat. ■

NOTE: "Abha and Roses" will be concluded in the Spring/Summer 2011 issue of Alaela.

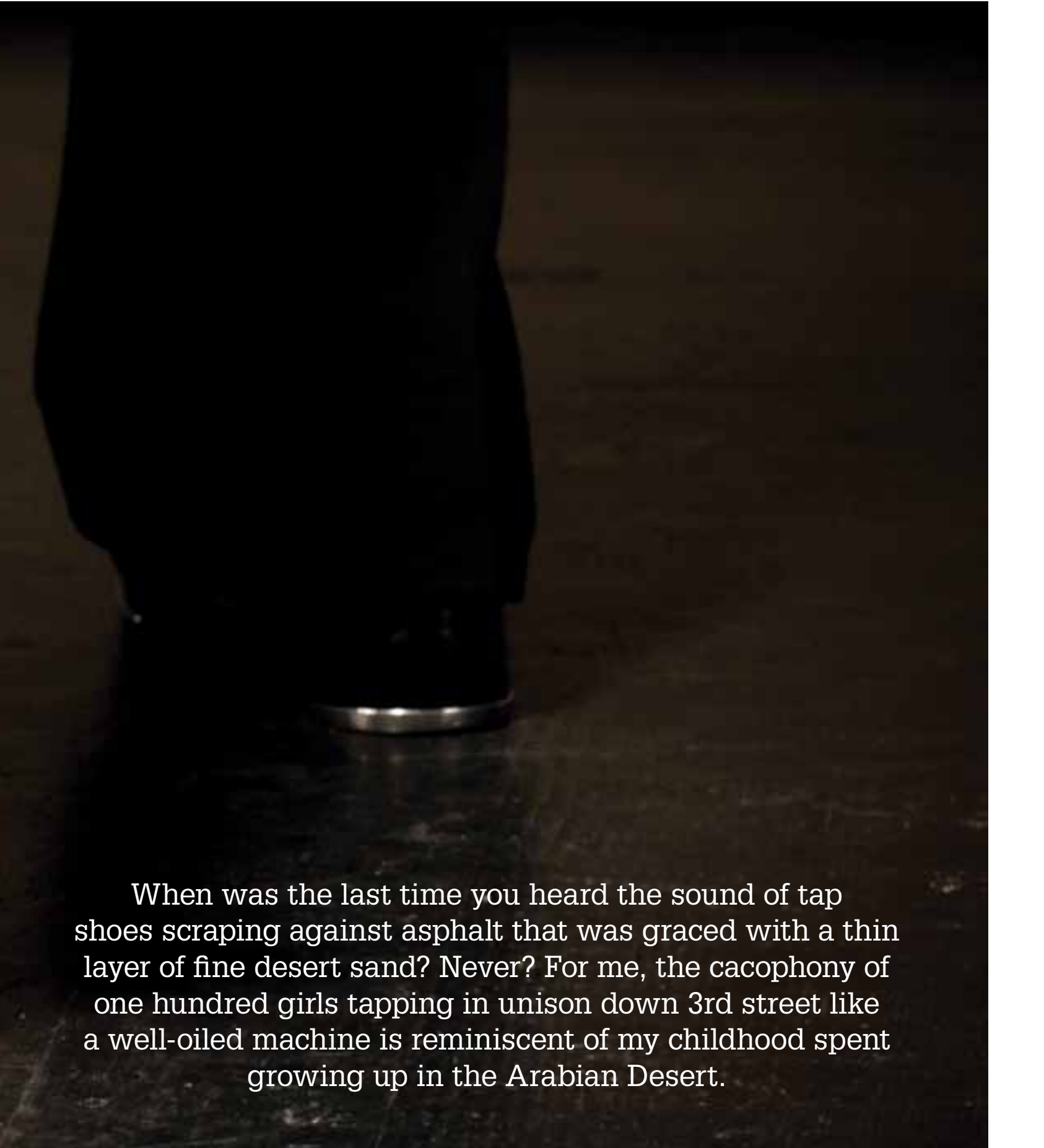


1. The halfway point
2. A village in a valley near Abha
3. A mountain baboon
4. Pomegranates in a fruit market



Tappin' Through Retirement

Words Tana Siebold-Johnson



When was the last time you heard the sound of tap shoes scraping against asphalt that was graced with a thin layer of fine desert sand? Never? For me, the cacophony of one hundred girls tapping in unison down 3rd street like a well-oiled machine is reminiscent of my childhood spent growing up in the Arabian Desert.

For those who lived in Dhahran, Saudi Arabia in the 1980s and 1990s, you may remember this particular sound too. It may have been your sister or your daughter or the girl next door who was excited to say that she was a “K’s Tapper,” and you may have seen her tapping down the street during the Aramco Employees Association (AEA) Parade, hands on her hips, enthusiasm in her feet!

Perhaps you went to see *Jazz On Tap*, *Steppin’ Out*, *Showin’ Off*, *We’re Gonna Make A Lot of Noise*, or one of the other big productions put on in the Junior High Gym once a year by K’s Dance School. The gymnasium overflowed with people who could not wait to see what dances would be performed or what ostentatious outfit Kay would adorn herself in that year (from cowgirl to Cruella Deville, nothing was too wild or outrageous)! Who was the woman

behind one of the biggest events in Dhahran each year? She is my mother, and I have never been more proud to be her daughter than I am today as I watch her tap through her retirement with fabulous feet.

My husband said it best. After seeing my mother perform in the production of *Oklahoma* recently, he looked at me and said,

“Once people retire, most seem to wilt like a dying flower. Your mother is blossoming instead! Her passion and zest for life seem to grow and it is absolutely amazing to watch.”

It truly is an honour to be Kay’s daughter, and to have had the front row seat to such a talented,

inspirational woman my entire life. She epitomises what it means to live your passion. If we only have one opportunity to go through this life, with no regrets, living life to the fullest, my mother has done that and more! Most people do not get to live what they are passionate about, and instead it is tucked away inside, desperate to be brought out into the open. That is exactly what my mother inspires in the students that she has taught for over 30 years — to be the best dancer that they could possibly be, to live with arms thrown wide open with excitement and to let that enthusiasm travel all the way down to their dance shoes. I have never seen students work as hard as they did for my mother when she was teaching. Whether she was teaching the Arabian princesses to tap dance in their weekend palace, on a disco dance floor with liquid gel that rolled beneath your feet when stepping upon it, or in the miniscule garage converted to a dance studio at our house on Sandrose Court, the girls gave it their all for her, each and every

lesson. She demanded perfection in each dance performed, and it was evident.

This motivation has carried over into the various schools that Kay has taught at since returning to the USA. Whenever I attended a dance recital, I could always pick out which numbers were choreographed by my mother. There is a special pizzazz, a magical quality that she is able to infuse into her dancers, and it shines through each and every number. In Dhahran, Kay choreographed no less than 50-60 numbers per dance recital, so that each class performed two dances, if not more! When you start to imagine the magnitude of putting together a show like this every year, and the dancers improving their skill set as they advanced, it is truly phenomenal. As a young child, I did not appreciate the undertaking that my mother put upon herself. I was able to flit in and out of the dance studio, popping in to take a class, watch the older kids learn time steps and





1. Fedoras used to great effect during this performance!
2. K's Tappers gather for group photo after a performance
3. Chaps and zoot suits!

wings, assist my mother while she was teaching the younger students, and just enjoy the process. To her, it meant hours of preparation while I was at school, and she carried it off with such style, as if it was effortless!

Having my mother as a dance instructor meant that I was privy to many exciting opportunities that most can only imagine! I was able to accompany her as she taught the princesses of Saudi Arabia at their palace outside of Dhahran. We were whisked off to the palace in a limousine by a personal driver, ferried across the sands to their door, and oh my — to be inside a palace and dance with princesses! I was twelve years old at the time, and the princesses were near to my age. They were extremely gracious, with manners simply unmatched. After each dance lesson, I was invited to join them at the large table sitting low upon the floor, and we were served all kinds of Middle Eastern delicacies alongside a tall glass of creamy Labneh (yoghurt). My mother sat with the staff at another table while I perched upon the cushions with the princesses, laughing and chatting with them. A girl can only dream of such things!

With such a “star” in the family, my father Wayne and I have been backstage hands on this adventure with my mother, letting her shine brightly while we bask in the glow of everything she has accomplished. She adores when we join her in the limelight, and I have danced with her several times onstage through the years, while my father is currently performing with her onstage at the community theatre in Sarasota, Florida. His comedic magic act as the “Great Salami from Laugh-ganistan” leaves us all rolling in our seats. His timing and delivery of jokes is impeccable! From my perspective, both of my parents have missed their calling as my mother should have been



choreographing on Broadway and my father should have been a stand-up comedian.

While Kay is no longer teaching dance, she is now trying her hand at acting and singing, with recent performances in *Anything Goes* and *Oklahoma*. She will also be dancing in the upcoming production of *The Producers* in Sarasota. Most importantly, she continues to inspire and encourage her family, as well as those around her with her enthusiasm for the performing arts. My daughter will be old enough to be in tap shoes soon, and it will make my heart just soar with happiness to join my mother and my daughter by donning a pair of tap shoes, and let our feet simply “tap happy!” ■

FROM BANDE AMIR TO THE BLUE MOSQUE

During the twelve years I spent with Aramco (1975-1987) I most certainly did take advantage of the opportunity to travel the world, mostly with the DOG (Dhahran Outing Group). When I arrived in April of 1975 however, I had no idea I would travel to so many amazing countries — Nepal, Tibet, Afghanistan, Malaysia, Thailand, Indonesia, Hong Kong, Egypt, Pakistan, India, Sri Lanka, Kenya, Canada, the U.S. — and more. But the most memorable trip for me was Afghanistan in November 1977, over 30 years ago.

Words Sandra Hoadley

My first impression of the Afghan people was their warmth, hospitality and obvious pleasure in welcoming western tourists — which became more and more evident as the days went by.

To make sure we saw as much of Afghanistan as possible some of us signed up for all the day trips — *Bamiyan*, *Mazare Sharif*, *Kunduz*, the *Khyber Pass* and the beautiful lakes of *Bande Amir*, to name a few.

Banyan was a one hour light aircraft journey to see the extensive ruins of ancient towns and fortresses — one being the Red City. Truly beautiful scenery but a bit of a hairy flight that was difficult for some, including myself!

We also spent a lot of time wandering around the beautiful *Shrine of Harzrat Ali* in *Mazare Sharif*, also known as *The Blue Mosque* — an outstanding example of classic Islamic architecture, every inch covered with gleaming cobalt blue and turquoise tiles inscribed with verses from the Qur'an. Local legend credits it

with the mystical power to turn white any dove alighting in its courtyard.

As we continued exploring the wonders of *Mazare Sharif* we noticed crowds of people waiting to enter a doorway — a doorway to something like an arena where a judo-style contest was about to begin. As soon as we were spotted, there was no hesitation in us being invited in, with everyone running around trying to find us chairs to sit on, as guests of honour.

Mazare Sharif is a major market for karakul and traditional Afghan carpets — and of course, close to all Aramcon's hearts is a bit of shopping while away! We certainly did ourselves proud buying so many rugs between us that when we boarded the plane to fly back to Dhahran, our seating had to

be rearranged because of the extra baggage on board.

But the most amazing side tour was our journey to *Kunduz* to see a game of *Buzkashi*. *Kunduz* was a 148 mile journey by road from Kabul, through the *Hindu Kush Mountains* — and the snow. This was on the day before we were due to return to Dhahran and so there were only about eight of us who decided to go. We had to leave fairly early in the morning for our long journey through the mountains and had to stop at one stage to fix snow chains on the wheels of our mini-bus. But I in my element really — just loved being a tourist in such a remote and beautiful part of the world. The *Buzkashi* game was pretty amazing. It felt as though we were in the middle of a film set with the horses and their riders looking so



very majestic. A bit daunting however to find they were playing with a dead calf but even so, it was a wonderful experience that I would not have missed for anything.

But the real fun began when we headed back on the road to Kabul, expecting to arrive in time for dinner and a warm bed in readiness for our departure the next day. But somewhere along the way, high up in the mountains we became snowbound and could go no further. Very exciting as far as I was concerned, but a bit worrying for our very nice tour guide chap. Luckily he knew where to take us and we ended up in a 'hotel' — a hotel with no food and no electricity or hot water after 8 p.m.! This turned out to be brilliant as our guide had no alternative but to take us along the road, on foot, to a little village — and into the warmth of a *Chai Khana* (tea house) in the hope of getting some food.

As quoted in the tourist publications at the time,

“The most typical characteristics of Afghan society are the Chai Khanas, or tea houses, which abound everywhere in the country. Often beautifully decorated, the Chai Khanas are the central gathering place for every town and village in Afghanistan. In them, one can enjoy a nourishing Afghan meal... and just sit and relax in the exotic atmosphere.”

I would add to this description 'a place where one can find somewhere to sleep for the night' as was evident when we entered. We were welcomed with much excitement by our hosts and very quickly served with delicious chicken and hot tea. By the end of the evening, we were all the best of friends and were asked to leave our passport photos to be pinned to the wall. Everyone then walked us back to the hotel by lamplight. Very early the next morning we were greeted by all, to say goodbye and see us safely back on the road. There was a lot of shrilling going on — it was just wonderful. And in answer to your question, yes, we did make it back just in time to pack and catch our flight later that day! A truly amazing journey that I shall never forget. ■

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Image on previous page: Bande Amir

1. An Afghan child
2. Bamiyan — our transport
3. Kids at the Blue Mosque
4. The Blue Mosque
5. Chains on!

VOYAGE OF THE THANE – *Part II*

The first part of our voyage was from Scotland to the Mediterranean. After spending three years there, the next stage was to go through the inland waterways of France, Belgium and Holland, returning to sea to visit Germany, Denmark, Sweden and Norway, finally returning to the west coast of Scotland.

Words Dave Thompson

We returned to the Thane at Agde in the South of France in late summer 2003 and set off along the River Herault, to join the Petit Rhône to the River Rhône. Our departure was timed to allow the current to be at a minimum so the Thane with its 20HP engine stood a chance of making headway. We passed through the Camargue region seeing its famous wild horses, as well as passing through "etangs" (inland sea water lakes), used for commercial oyster production, and joined the Rhône near Arles, which was to be the start of lots of Roman ruins, history and towns along the river.

A bit further north was Avignon with its famous broken bridge or "pont," the Popes' palace, and Roman remains. At this point the river was wide with the occasional 6,000-ton barge plying its trade. We passed several nuclear power plants and experienced going up what was once the largest rise of any lock in the world (the largest is now on the Yangtze in China), at Bollène, 200 metres long with a single lift of 26 metres! It was spectacular and impressively smooth. We passed some of the famous vineyards of the Côtes du Rhône, spending time at Lyon, the gastronomic capital of France, and then we joined the River Saône. We visited Macon, Chalon-sur-Saône and at St Jean-de-Losne we left the Thane for the winter.

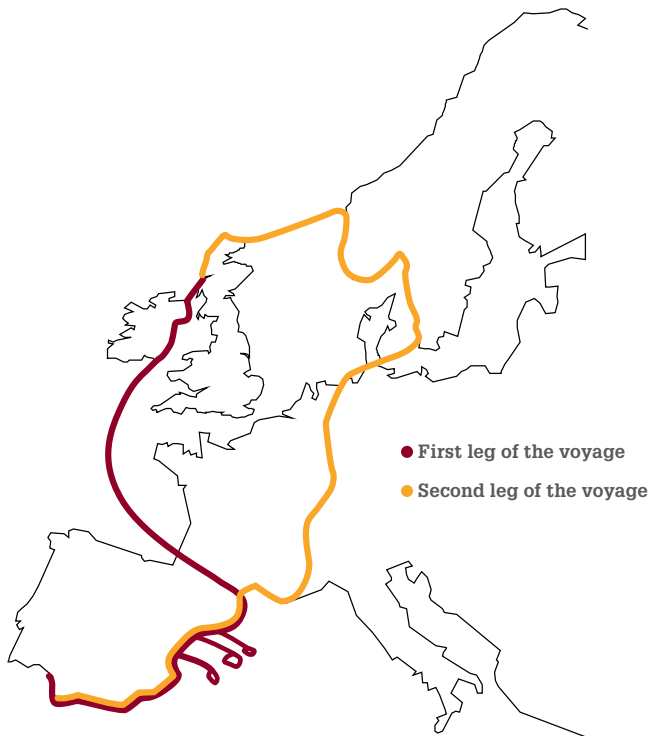
The following year, Ron Tomasina, another ex-Aramcon, and I caught a ferry to Zeebrugge with our bikes and cycled through rural France to rejoin the boat at St Jean-de-Losne. Julia joined us and we continued along the Saône to the Canal de l'Est, now having to contend with narrow canals and lots of locks, but pleasant countryside. We passed through Verdun, the site of horrific battles in both world wars, continued through the Ardennes

to the Belgian border to join the river Meuse, passing through Namur and Liège to enter Holland near Maastricht, where we were immediately checked out by Dutch customs! We passed through many picturesque Dutch towns and villages, including Maastricht and Utrecht, while having to contend with commercial barges up to 140m long and push barges up to 285m long with tonnage up to 27,000 tons! We finally arrived at the pretty village of Spaarndam, near Haarlem, where we left the boat over the winter.

We had travelled 900 nautical miles from the Mediterranean and gone through 233 locks. We were locked out!

Now in cooler climes, we returned to Holland in June 2005 and after a clean up and stepping the mast, we were ready to sail again. We travelled along the North Sea canal to Amsterdam, after a couple of days sightseeing, passed into the Markemeer and Isjelmeer (formally the Zuiderzee) seeing many original Dutch sailing barges under full sail. A couple of days later, we dipped our toes into the North sea and set sail for the Friesian Islands (the area in the novel, *Riddle of the Sands*) in shallow waters, strong tidal streams, and continually shifting sandbanks. We arrived at Terschelling during a folk festival, then continued past Ameland, Schiermonnikoog, to arrive at the German island of Borkum. It was heavily fortified by the Germans and used as a rocket testing site by von Braun in WWII for the forerunner of the





V2. After waiting for a fair wind we set sail for the Elbe estuary to the Kiel Canal, arriving 24 hours later. Two days were spent transiting the canal built by Kaiser Wilhelm, and meeting a few deep sea ships, before arriving at Kiel where we were welcomed at the British Kiel Yacht club, operated by the British military as part of their training programme. We were lucky enough to enjoy an air show at the naval airbase next door and upon entering Kieler Fjord we had a spectacular “ships parade” of tall ships from all over the world, as part of Kiel sailing week.

We were now en route to Denmark but had one last German anchorage in a river estuary at Maasholm, where we were sure Carruthers in the Riddle of the Sands had anchored. The following day we made our landfall in Denmark at Sønderborg, and then continued coast hopping to Egå near Århus, the second largest city in Denmark, and where the Thane was to stay during the winter.

The following year saw us leaving Århus to circumnavigate the Danish islands. We travelled southwards to the islands of Samsø, Fyn, Æro, Langeland and Lolland before going to Copenhagen where we enjoyed the sightseeing and

the multitude of things they can do with herring! We then sailed to the north of the island into Roskilde Fjord and to the medieval capital of Denmark, Roskilde. There in the UNESCO world heritage listed cathedral, 20 Danish Kings and 17 Queens are interned, going back 1,000 years. In the Viking museum, not only are traditional Viking ships preserved but there is also a Viking research centre, a harbour with copies of Viking ships and a shipyard making new ships. We then sailed to Helsingør — with its Kronborg castle mentioned in Shakespeare’s Hamlet — and from where Helsingborg in Sweden is readily visible across the water.

Sweden was our next stop and after a 13-hour sail we arrived at Falkenberg. We spent several weeks sailing around the islands to the north of Gothenburg, including Orust and Tjorn, famous for all the boat builders based there. We now also had to get used to extremely careful pilotage due to the sheer number of islands, and exposed rocks requiring continuous attention, in addition to tying up to rocks overnight.

These seas can freeze to a metre thick in winter, so we had to ensure the boat was well winterised before leaving her. Fortunately it

**Images on previous page:**

1. Copenhagen waterfront
2. An old Norwegian sail-maker
3. An excellent anchorage - Norway

Images on this page:

4. Grimstad (Norway)
5. Gullholmen (Norway)
6. Preikestolen (*Pulpit Rock*) overlooking The Lysefjord Norway

was a mild Swedish winter and we returned in June 2007 to set off for Norway. We spent 5 days to reach Larvik in Norway, after spending several anchorages tied to rocks along the Swedish archipelago, in wonderfully remote and quiet pools. As we sailed towards Kristiansand the landscape was distinctly different to Sweden, with many more trees and we eventually rounded the most southerly point of Norway at Lindesnes, marking the exit from the Skaggerak into the North Sea. It is a dangerous area due to shallow water and exposure to westerly winds and seas, so we were relieved not to have any heavy weather in such a notorious area. It was not long before we were into sheltered fjords and had a pleasant stop at Stavanger, with its oil support industry and its excellent oil museum. We also took a trip and spectacular walk to climb the famous Pulpit Rock.

We were now sailing through fjord country passing Haugesund, across the Hardangerfjord to Bergen where we spent several days stormbound and enjoying the smoked fish. We finally set sail to our last Norwegian stop at a small harbour at Bakkesund, the nearest place to Shetland. After a favourable weather forecast, we set sail at 1900 hours — just

after Midsummer Day — with an easterly wind. The seas were moderate with a 6 ft swell and 3/4ft waves but with a following wind, the boat's motion was dreadful and we were pleased to reach Lerwick 36 hours later feeling distinctly queasy.

Although Shetland is part of Scotland, we felt distinctly odd in that we were the only British yacht there among the 20 or so in the harbour. There were yachts from Denmark, Sweden, Holland, Norway, Germany, Iceland and even two from America! Shetland has much to offer and we explored Jarlshof, dating back to the Stone Age and Viking remains. The prehistoric Mousa Broch is one of the best preserved of its kind, and Scalloway was the secret WWII base for the "Shetland Bus" taking refugees from Norway to Shetland and returning with ammunition. The RSPB site at Sumburgh Head was home to thousands of puffins, guillemots, auks and cormorants.

After a 10 hour sail from Lerwick, we tied up in lashing rain at the tiny dock on Fair Isle, a small island (permanent population 70) between Shetland and Orkney, famed for its knitted sweaters, birdlife and outstanding cliff scenery, which

we explored. A couple of days later we set sail for Orkney, where we spent a few days exploring the World Heritage sites of Orkney's Neolithic heartland, including Maeshowe, a Neolithic chambered tomb considered to be one of the finest architectural achievements of prehistoric Europe, the Standing Stones of Stenness, one of the earliest stone circles in Britain, dating back to 3,000 BC, the ceremonial Ring of Brodgar, a magnificent circle of originally sixty stones erected more than 4,500 years ago, and Skara Brae, a truly awe-inspiring sight and the best-preserved prehistoric village in northern Europe.

We left Stromness at 0500 hours to catch the tide and shortly passed the Old Man of Hoy with the Scottish mainland now in sight. After a long sail we anchored in remote Loch Eriboll and rounded the infamous Cape Wrath the following day, in wet and windy weather. We continued southwards anchoring in Loch Clash, Loch Laxford, Badcall Bay, the Summer Isles and Loch Hourn. We were now in familiar waters with the Inner and Outer Hebrides clearly visible in good but cold weather. Our final stop was at the Port Appin Hotel, where we moored for the night and enjoyed a celebratory

dinner before finishing our trip the next day at Loch Creran.

The Thane had been away from UK waters for eight years. During that time we had experienced the Irish Sea, a calm Bay of Biscay, the beauty of France and the Canal du Midi, the western Mediterranean from France to Gibraltar, Morocco, the Balearics, and then through the European waterways of France, Belgium, Holland, Germany, Denmark, Sweden, and Norway. We walked in the Sierra Nevada Mountains of Andalusia, the Pyrenees and the Tramuntana Mountains of Majorca, and explored the flatlands of Holland.

We met interesting people from all over the world, and exchanged experiences. We travelled a total of 7,400 nautical miles, having experienced not only the different European cultures, but also history from the Stone Age to the present, the warm Mediterranean climate of southern Europe to the near Arctic of northern Europe. It had been a truly wonderful and exciting experience, one we shall never forget. ■

THE TREE

.....

The tree on rugged ground alone,
bends with winds directions prone,
To ease the strain it feels, it sways,
waiting for those windless days.
The breeze, then rustling through its crown,
as petals flutter to the ground,
Will hail the time of peace and sun
and days no longer winter hung.
Yet as it bends it also grows,
its strength within its passion throes,
Can it outlast this winter strain,
'til sunlight dries its leaves again?
And gentle drops of morning dew,
shine speckled on the landscape hue,
Yet now those boughs so heavy hung,
with snow so cruelly aimless flung,
Of wind that blows that weary strain,
holds out that cry of summer's 'frain.
Awaiting, standing proud and tall,
can it outlast this dark cloud's fall?
What can it do but wait and bend
and hope soon winter's at an end.
And then as spring allays the fears,
lamina, flora's vernal spears
Will high towards those solar rays,
God bless such hope of summer days.

.....

George Carruthers
April 1988



In Memoriam

Dr. Michael Kudzo Agamasu

June 6, 2010



Dr. Michael Kudzo Agamasu passed away June 6, 2010. Dr. Agamasu worked at Saudi Aramco Medical Services Organization in Dhahran as an OB/GYN Consultant for 12 years and retired in May 2008.

He is survived by his wife, Hawa; sons Victor and Delalie; daughters Samira and Enyonam; grandchildren Harrison-Kwame, Eva and Michael; his mother; and two brothers.

Correspondence may be sent to Hawa Agamasu at 18 Arran Close, Cosham, Portsmouth, PO6 3UD, UK;
or to Samira Agamasu at inmemoryofmichaelkudzoagamasu@yahoo.co.uk

Rick Hospers

August 30, 2010



Rick Hospers, 73, passed away Aug. 30, 2010. Mr. Hospers received his Master of Science degree in mechanical engineering from Delft University of Technology in The Netherlands in his early 20s.

He worked as an engineer and valve specialist for Aramco Overseas Company in The Netherlands for many years before retiring in 2002.

He is survived by his wife, Vivian Hospers; and two sons, Alex Hospers and Raymond Hospers.

Correspondence may be sent to Oliver Hardystrook 35, 2726TX, Zoetermeer, The Netherlands

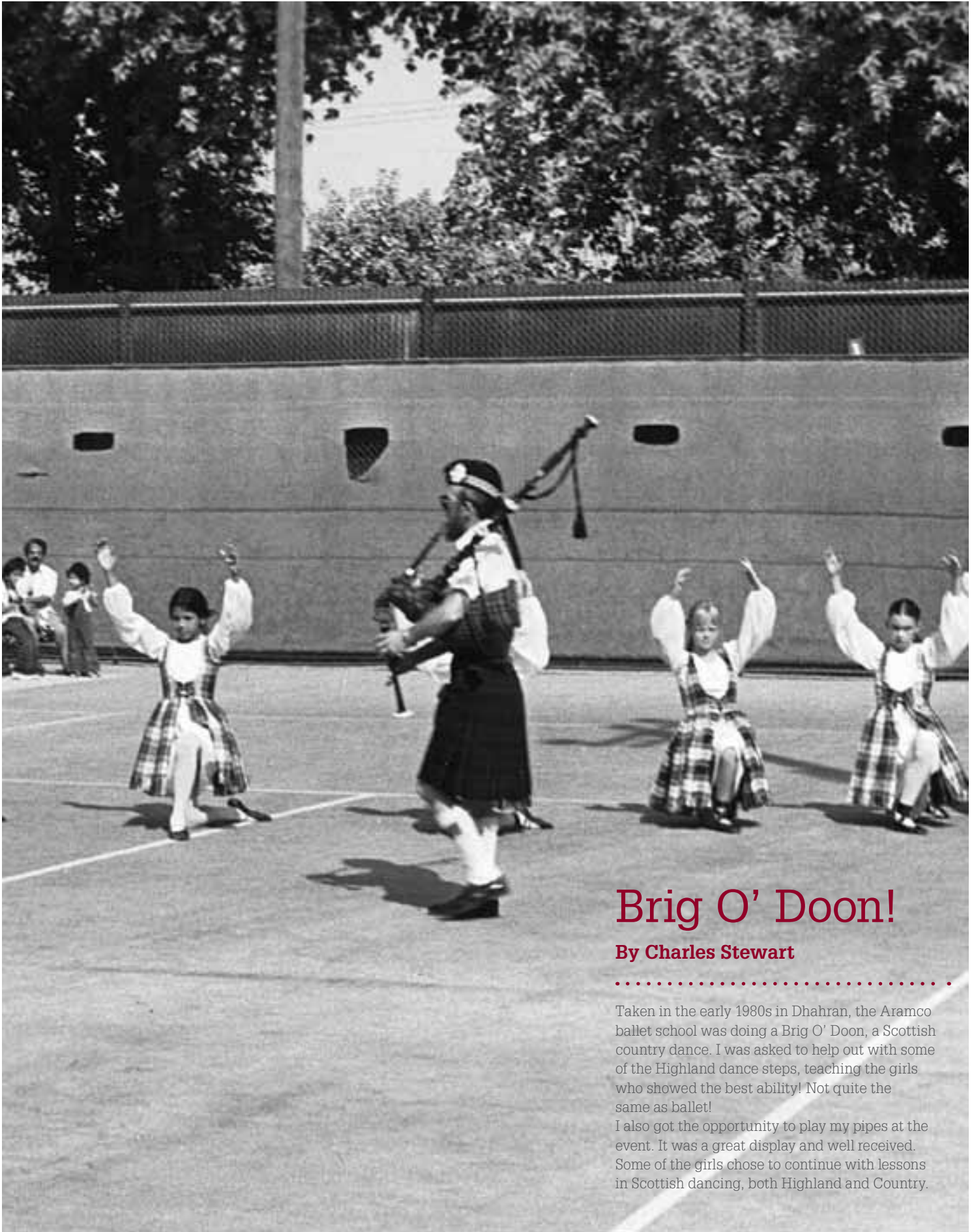
Arthur Bernard Coulter

July 21, 2010



Arthur passed away on July 21, 2010. He is survived by his children Timothy, Sandra and Deborah Coulter-Allen. He joined Aramco in 1947 and left the Company in 1963, having served several years as chief geologist.

Correspondence may be sent to Timothy Coulter at 51 Albury Road, Aberdeen AB11 6TN, UK



Brig O' Doon!

By Charles Stewart

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Taken in the early 1980s in Dhahran, the Aramco ballet school was doing a Brig O' Doon, a Scottish country dance. I was asked to help out with some of the Highland dance steps, teaching the girls who showed the best ability! Not quite the same as ballet!

I also got the opportunity to play my pipes at the event. It was a great display and well received. Some of the girls chose to continue with lessons in Scottish dancing, both Highland and Country.

Become an energy champion!

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The National Energy Action (NEA), supported by Saudi Aramco, is an organisation that promotes energy efficiency in the UK.

For more information on volunteering opportunities with the NEA in your local community, please contact aocpublicrelations@aramco.nl.



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Saudi Aramco



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