

## Traditional Kuwait

Kuwait is best known as the little oil country that Iraq invaded in 1991 which led to the Gulf War. It's also known for its oppressive heat that limits activities during the day as most people escape to air conditioned homes. Braving the heat there is more to see than just the oil fields in this traditional country which I was able to do via a local friend I met in Lebanon named Yousef.

Because he was a local, a good person and had in-depth knowledge of the country, Yousef was a great host. He could tell what country a person was from just by how they were dressed; people from the UAE would have collars, while people from Saudi would have a particular outfit on, etc. Having lived in Kuwait, he knew the history of the country and good places to visit. He also had a car which is important because public transport is pretty limited in Kuwait, probably because most people have cars.



Kuwait Towers are the most prominent structures in Kuwait City and are related to the heat as well. The tall white spires have a couple of protruding blue spheres, one of which contains water. There are several other tall buildings in Kuwait City including a telecommunications towers and buildings related to financial and oil industries, including oil rigs with fire escaping from their tops. However, a lot of the views are limited by a steady haze which is caused by the immense heat.

The oil money has been spent on investments throughout the country. In fact, houses that are only twenty years old may be torn down to build new ones. Many large malls have been constructed as well. One can forget they are in Kuwait and instead think they are at The Mall of America with large malls full of stores such as American Eagle and Dunkin Donuts.

People from throughout the world have been attracted to Kuwait because of its wealth. Many from the subcontinent or Southeast Asia immigrate and although they earn a living wage they are definitely below the locals economically. They seem to be below them socially as well. However, there are more foreigners than locals in this country so if they ever gained political power it might cause upheaval.

Despite the desert and the heat, Kuwait does make an attempt to promote vegetation and water activities. The aquarium in Kuwait City is a popular attraction and illustrates some of the

land animals but also water animals common in the nearby Persian Gulf. There are many land animals including mice, scorpions, lizards and large yellow snakes. But, in fact, it is an aquarium so it also includes the sea animals such as lion fish and sharks. One area was specifically designed for penguins and included an employee who spoke English describing the life of penguins.

A complex near the center also includes a planetarium with a variety of exhibits and shows but most are in Arabic. Despite this limitation, I got the general idea of the show by looking upward at the presentation. The National Museum describes ancient history and moves to the modern era with multiple exhibits of vases and coins, mostly from a nearby island that was heavily destroyed in the 1991 war.

One of the few historical places is the old central market which is covered to keep out the immense heat. The nearby fish market has fresh seafood and is located next to a series of small restaurants. Sitting down to eat in the courtyard, there is an attempt to help cool off customers. One way is overhead water pipes that release mist as well as large fans that blow some of the heat away.

Yousef invited to the men only practice of dawani, which is a combination of smorgasbord and political debate. It's usually in a side room of someone's house. A male servant from the subcontinent started the feast by serving us biscuits. When he returned fifteen minutes later, he brought an onslaught of food, including vegetables, shwarma and other meat. There was really too much food for us so the servants could eat the rest and then anything left beyond that was given to people that needed food. The rest of the time was spent drinking Coca Cola and talking politics.



The practice of dawani is just one part of the more traditional culture in this part of the world. One such policy is a strict no alcohol policy which is punishable by not just a measly fine but by prison time. Women are allowed to work but men still hold positions of power. Gender relations in the more traditional Muslim countries can be confusing for Westerners not use to it. In the more western countries of Turkey and Lebanon, men and women converse freely. However, in Arabia and Iraq there is a process for men and women who are interested in each other to actually speak with each other. The gatekeeper is generally the oldest male in the

women's family. For instance, when I was at a birthday party in Iraq, I needed to talk with the woman's uncle until he was satisfied with my character. He then coyly said, "Oh by the way this is my niece" knowing that I wanted to talk to her but trying to keep the tradition. I could then talk to her, but the real barrier wasn't that I was western but that I wasn't Muslim. She told me that Christian and Muslim religions were close and that I should convert to Islam but that was a bit too much of a commitment for a woman I just met. In this part of the world, a Muslim woman dating a non-Muslim man in a nonstarter.

Another part of Islamic tradition in Arabia and really throughout the Middle East is to feed solo travelers. The tradition goes back to when Bedouins traversed the desert and upon



meeting others, they were given food and water to help navigate the rest of the journey. I actually made an effort to look like a tourist by wearing shorts, snapping pictures and just looking lost. Going to parks or places where people generally eat, I was quickly waved over by locals who fed me. Yes, I realize that I was using their culture against them for free food. In fact, I figured that I received about \$1,000 worth of free food, drink, transport or

accommodations on this trip. Despite the nightly news, the Middle East was extremely accommodating to me, an American.

This traditional culture was obvious in Kuwait. There were only a couple of negatives while traveling in Kuwait. One, as noted several times, is the heat. The second is the immense number of automobile accidents from overly aggressive drivers. Every time Yousef showed me around we saw at least one accident. Other than that, the country is growing and seems content and confident in the direction it is moving.