

WEDDINGS & CAREERS

A Singaporeans perspective on living in Saudi Arabia

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Having spent slightly more than two years working in the commercial capital of Saudi Arabia amongst young, handsome and well-educated English speaking bachelors, it was a matter of time before I was invited to a wedding.

The invitation was just via an e-mail followed with a call to confirm my attendance. Having just spent my first 3 months in Jeddah, I thought that I had spotted what was an obvious error on the invitation.

“You must attend my wedding reception next week, Sahas – it will be a grand affair, and you will get to meet most of my family and friends” said Mohammed in an excited voice.

“I surely will, Mohammed”, I replied not sure how to highlight the mistake that I had spotted. I decided to put aside my concerns and just be direct about it. “Mohammed, I’m sure it was not your fault. But I assume that you are also inviting my wife” I asked with a quiver in my voice.

The answer came quick and direct – “No I did not make a mistake.” he replied confidently. “Your wife is NOT invited”.

And so began my first practical lesson on Saudi culture. Men and women have separate parties on different days to celebrate their wedding. No woman is invited to attend the bridegroom’s party (not even the bride) and vice versa. The wedding ceremony is kept strictly to a very small group of parents, siblings. This experience awakened my realisation as to why so few Saudis would speak about their families in public.

Mohammed was a Management Trainee in my department till recently, when he was promoted to a Manager’s grade. He came across to me as a young, ambitious and quite an aggressive personality who was focussed in progressing quickly in the company. Having been educated in the US, he came across with a westernised outlook, grounded with Arab values.

I was keen to redeem myself from my previous experience. So I started to speak to my friends and colleagues about Arab culture pertaining to weddings.

“Aah, so one of your boys is getting married!” said David, who was a British expatriate who had spent the last 8 years living in Jeddah. “You must attend it to experience it – the glamour, the Arab warmth and the communal spirit. More importantly, that will be the last time you will get to see Mohammed the way he is” he said bursting out in laughter.

I did not understand what that was all about. When I probed David as to what he meant, he put his comment into context.

You see, Arab bridegrooms spend a fortune on their weddings. The need to pay a dowry, buy a house and furnish it, and also pay fully for the grand wedding cost. All in, it costs SR500,000 (US\$133,000) or more for a Saudi man to get married. This instantly throws him into a huge debt obligation which he will repay for in the next 10 to 15 years.

He also gets sexual liberation in a very conservative society – which does climb up in the personal priority list rapidly.

I was therefore advised that Mohammed will return from his honeymoon a changed man – wanting security, stability and less pressure at work.

Mohammed did return a changed person. Gone were the days when he was ready to pack and leave for an overseas assignment or accepting an added responsibility in his current portfolio.

Well, I did manage to work with Mohammed for the rest of my tenure in Jeddah, and he did show signs of becoming his old self gradually. But David was surely right in warning me on what to expect!

Sahas Sankaran, January 2003

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