

# Life in Jizan, Saudi Arabia

I have been living in Jizan, down in the southern corner of the peninsula, on the Red Sea, near Yemen, for over a year now, and I still find it difficult to write about. Saudi Arabia is a strange place to live, though not without occasional rewards.

To begin with, as a single man, I cannot even talk to a woman – not even to say hello, or ‘excuse me’! Women in Jizan wear the black abaya, and cover themselves completely; one can only see their eyes. Sometimes we call them Saudi Ninjas!

When they’re walking along, however, occasionally one can see the flash of high heels or converse sneakers. Many stores sell full length, extravagant dresses. We assume they wear them at home, and I have been told they dress up to visit each other! There really does seem to be a separate culture for women here.



Islam is different; Wahabist Islam is another thing entirely. It is the Islam of the Bedu, the desert Saudis, and it is unforgiving and stringent.

This has some practical difficulties – all stores close down five times for prayer during the daylight hours, for 45 minutes or so. If you need to buy something at 12 noon – forget it. Prayer times change every day by a few minutes because they are calculated from each days’ sunrise and sunset. Shopping times are carefully planned!

The eerie chanting call to the faithful arises every morning around 5am, from every mosque in the town (there must be a hundred), amplified. The sound is astonishing, though not always beautiful.

Many things that I take for granted in Japan or Canada are not so easy to find for expats like me. Tools for example. I like to have a basic set of tools in my house for simple repairs - but they are not so readily available here. There are no stores like DYK or Canadian Tire where I could find such basic things as multi drivers...I find bits of things here and there.



*The desert near Jizan*

My students, although they find it very difficult to come to school for 8 am, are generous. Once I was invited to a place called Al Ardh, in the mountains north of Jizan, by one of them.

We went to his family land in the mountains, where we looked across the valley to Yemen, and I saw a standing rock which is mentioned in the Koran. His wife prepared breakfast for us and we ate delicious homemade corn bread, vegetable stew and fresh greens, on the mountainside. The traditional kitchens here use clay ovens like Indian tandoors.

At his friend, Mr. Harisee’s house we met his father, who looked about 80, dressed in a very white thobe, and wore his formal curved dagger to meet us. I was touched at this sign of respect on his part. I was told he was not much older than me (I’m 53!).

I was also told life was hard, here, by one of Harisee’s uncles, an English teacher just graduated from college. I congratulated him, and thought about the long road from this tiny village to the university where he’ll be teaching.

More recently, I went to a mountaintop town called Faifa – but more on that later.

Ian Cochrane

*A sandstorm approaches our compound.*

