

Traditional Cultures Speak Loudly Sometimes -- Saudi Travel & Behavior: *Hey Dorothy! You're Not in Egypt Anymore!*

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Good day and welcome to Dr. Culture's Road Warrior Survivor Column! Occasionally, this column writes itself. For instance, I heard from the wife of one of our audience members who had visited her husband in Saudi Arabia. She had experienced a "situation" while in Saudi and, well, I'll just let her tell the story...

"One morning, I left my hotel to pick up souvenirs while my husband was at work [in Saudi]. There was a outdoor shopping place nearby and I could see it was jammed with people. It was only a short walk from the hotel so I thought, why not? How was I to know that in hardly five minutes, I would be running for my life?"

"I had only been in the market area for about a minute and suddenly here came two old men running toward me, waving big sticks, and screaming at me! I didn't have time to think – I just ran! They literally chased me back to the hotel. I was terrified. The hotel employees said it was my fault. My fault? They said my dress caused the problem and that I should have worn that ugly, huge black cover-up like all the other women when going out but *there is no way*. My girlfriends say this only proves Saudis don't like American women. Are they right?"

A: Short answer: No. You violated Dr. Culture's most important rule: Before you travel internationally – particularly to the Middle East – do a little research:

- What is right and wrong socially?
- What are important-to-know gender issues?
- What part does religion play publicly? Privately?
- What criminal/terrorist activity is prevalent?
- What gestures are not acceptable?
- What behavior, dress, etc., is appropriate.
- What are 4 useful phrases in their language?

When you have NO cultural knowledge of the region you are visiting, you are walking through a "Cross Cultural Minefield." By answering those questions above, you would have learned that women in Riyadh wear the Abaya (the cover-up you mentioned) and that *you* should as well -- even if you don't like it -- and most American women tell me they hate it. It doesn't matter if you feel it is right or wrong – *it just is*. In fact, walking

into the market in your sundress (as you described), you were viewed probably as some half-naked harlot and/or hooker because in their eyes, you dressed like one!

You find similar outlooks here in the US -- really -- although, obviously, not as brazen. Don't believe it? Try this: find the smallest pair of high-cut "Daisy-Dukes" you can get into. Next get a thin little "hootchie" spandex halter-top, and find some tall spike heels. Then dressed like this, walk into a church on Sunday morning – and wait for the reaction.

Oh, those two Saudi "old men" were probably *Matawa*—or Saudi Religious Police. They'll tell you, they answer only to God and are there to enforce societal Islamic attitudes. Regardless of opinions, the Matawa is still a group of which to be aware while in Saudi. Effectively working in Saudi Arabia requires some knowledge of Islam, history, and US-Saudi contrasting cultural components. It can be a challenge for some Americans, but I have also seen them achieve significant success there and develop life-long friendships.

But thanks for the story – if you had worn an abaya, none of this would have happened and I would have had to work much harder to write this column...

DrC

For more information on competent international management and Cross-Cultural interaction with Saudis, the Arab World, *or any other culture*, all you need to do is contact Dr. Culture directly at drc@drculture.com or thepros@interlinkconsulting.com.