

Dear All,

I had promised to write about my experiences in Yemen to you when I return. The first day I landed in Sana'a I thought of writing, but then I decided that whatever I would say would be very reactionary in nature so I decided to wait for a while. I share my thoughts and emotions throughout my recent experiences so you can read the email when you are on break☺ If you are not interested, I won't be offended, I know all of you have a lot of work, but I made a promise to keep in touch, so this is an attempt to keep it.

Not a week had passed and already I missed the freedom to be able to walk out to a café buy a Newspaper or a new book and sit and read. My only consolation was watching the 50 satellite channels which I decided in the very first week were a waste of time and only expressed a strange attitude in the Middle East. This attitude which I am now more aware and sure of reflects all the tensions in life in the Middle East. It is like going through the whole exercise of modernity and then postmodern life but in a compressed fashion. What is sad about the changes in the culture is that rather than being selective and conscious of the choices that they make women are falling prey to a consumer culture and a greater percentage of them are finding freedom in becoming models and going out to parties and dressing up like a cosmo or a vogue girl. The vision of a woman's value and place in society is so deformed. The greater majority of women distribute themselves between the traditionalist camp, where they are super fanatic or the modern camp, that only follow the patterns of western life. It is true that there are a few that are seeking to think and create their own sense of identity but the conflict and tension is so huge that the effort to reconcile different standards and concepts of life seems to go in vain. Although everyone is happy that women are becoming more visible in politics and democracy is being spread in the Middle East, the reality of what is taking place is so sad. I was chatting with girls from university and they were telling me how their profs. force them to vote for one of the parties or the other, otherwise he/she would fail them. Strangely the more Islamist parties seem to have so much more social activity than the secularist or "democratic" parties that many of the young women prefer to vote for the Islamists even though they feel like their freedoms might be restricted because of their choice. I would think of the current experiences here and then of the UK and what I learnt at Fawcett about voting patterns for women in the UK and all I could think of was proper education for an actual change. The more I spend time with people from different backgrounds I wonder why our education systems are so divorced of giving the individual a sense of responsibility for the future of a society, why our education is not focused on knowing and learning about the truth but on vested interests, why is it taking so much time for values other than that of a patriarchal order to be transmitted in our educational systems?! I mean I know these might be naïve questions, because we all know it depends on who is in control and how but it is just so puzzling for me that why

is it that this cycle of violence continues and is perpetuated even by women.

In the midst of all this, I decided to start studying French while I waited to hear back from jobs. I can't say I have learnt much but I know I can find my way if I ever get lost in France☺ Before my course was complete, an opportunity came up to go to Yemen's largest island called Socotra to visit some friends who live in the island. It was a great trip! It is a Yemeni island, but doesn't feel or look anything like the rest of Yemen. It is in the Arabian sea, a largely protected environment, with wildlife entirely unique to it. On my way there the pilot of the Yemeni airlines came up to me, and after first offering me a job as an air hostess and realizing that I had other career plans in mind he invited me to the cockpit to see the island as the plane lands. It was a beautiful view; from amongst the clouds you suddenly see this piece of land surrounded by beautiful waters. So we landed and unlike what most people told me, it has a proper airport. The airport although small is nice, clean, with high ceiling, fan and nice marble flooring. It is much more beautiful and welcoming than Sana'a international Airport. I have decided that someone really needs to talk to the Yemeni president about doing something with Sana'a airport, something like building a new one☺

The road to Hadibou the capital is asphalt and you drive across an oasis full of palm trees and then along the sea with beautiful rocky indents and shores. Seriously, if I was a man I would have just stopped in the middle of the way and spent a day or two getting to Hadibou. The Bahá'í couple that live there and were hosting me are quite old but full of life. They were so cute, in the airport they helped me get my stuff and then we all sat in a Land Cruiser that I thought was going to fall apart. As we approach the houses in the city the road becomes rocky and I realize why there were no other cars but four wheels drives at the airport. Any low car would basically not make it on the rocky roads. The house was super simple, but I had the privilege of being in one of the only houses in the island with a shower, closed roof bathroom and oh a proper toilet. You know when the house was built I was told by the Socotrans that they used to come visit the toilet of the house to see the shower and proper toilet with flush. They had never seen one before that. My hosts were super great, really.

Unlike the rest of Yemen it is quite clean probably because there isn't enough junk to fill up the streets, neither is the population as much. The thing I loved was being able to walk to the market place without being starved at. That was a luxury I was never privileged to have in the rest of Yemen. It was such a great feeling not to feel like you didn't know how to hide your body because it is the body of a woman. The Socotran men never said anything, never even turned and looked at you, they went on doing their own thing. Of course all of this is true, until I hit the market place. Strangely enough people from other parts of Yemen who were in the market (I could tell by their accent) started

giving me a hard time, harassing and teasing. I began to wonder what had happened that people living in other parts of Yemen had lost respect for women. How come they had forgotten that we were all beings created by God and they have no right to commit such acts, neither is it respectful or dignified to commit such acts?! I just prayed that the Socotran's wouldn't learn from the rest of Yemen.

The social life of the Socotrans is very interesting. Everyone knows everyone. They are in general very kind to each other, but I noticed how most people in the country have divorced and remarried many times. Even the women divorce and remarry without being shy about it. On the one hand it is interesting to see such a degree of autonomy where a woman who is not happy with her husband asks for divorce and gets it. But on the other hand it is sad because it means great confusion for children and it also means that there is something definitely wrong with the way they understand marriage and how and when they get married.

You must be wondering by now what I was up to in the island?! I did roam around, but I primarily had classes for junior youth and children. The material I used are prepared by NGOs and the focus is on empowerment and personal development.

Three boys used to come in the mornings for junior youth classes. Then by 10 in the morning they would leave to go to school. I would then help in preparing food and spend time chatting with the old couple, reading and exercising. At two, just when I had begun to enjoy my afternoon nap, 4 girls would come for junior classes that would go on until 4 in the afternoon. While I would be teaching them, the kids would start assembling outside the house waiting until I would open the door to welcome them in for their classes. They were all Socotran, very cute, with different personalities and attitudes. The children didn't even though old enough to draw and color didn't know how because they had never been given a chance to do so. Teaching is a great experience. I always wondered why profs. At university went through the pain and agony of handling so many students who thought they now everything about the world and don't really know much at all?! I got my answer there. I think rather than empowerment and development of skills I taught them Arabic. They don't speak Arabic, they speak Socotran which is a mixture of Hemyari (one of the oldest languages of the Middle East) and Swahili. They are being taught Arabic in schools but they are not taught very well. In the evenings I always had visitors, who were the locals who had come up to see this new girl. I started to be less interesting to them, when news spread that I only came from Sana'a so I was a Yemeni. If I was from somewhere that was foreign they would have come more often.

Fortunately while I was there I spent time with neighbors, particularly their children and youth and learn about how they think and feel about the world. It is sad that due to satellite they are getting wrong messages

about the reality of life, those images coupled with the lack of experience and proper/developed education lead to a growing misconception about the rest of the world. For example, unfortunately the same prejudices, and carefree attitude that is spreading in the rest of the world is spreading there too. All the girls and women in Socotra want to become thin. Most of them are, but the others think they should go on a diet, although they don't realize that they are healthy and do so much labor at home, outside and under the sun that they get their exercise and are quite fit. Politics is being introduced to the island in a way that they didn't know before. All the main Yemeni parties have offices there and do their activities, but what I could tell about their activities was that there is no sense of unified identity with the rest of Yemen. Like I said they consider themselves as Socotrans, not Arabs, not Yemeni, just Socotrans. When I would ask them what and who was a Socotran what was being Socotran or having a Socotran identity, there was as silence and then inability to explain anything. It indicates an active rise in prejudice and people trying to create some sort of an identity for them, separate from everyone else, in order to be in control of what they think, feel and act. In a way it is scary to me, because you see their identity creation based on stereotypes that they know of certain peoples. For example one of the junior youth I was teaching asked me if I prayed in English (they all want to learn English in the island so they can work in tourism). I said yes. Then he says but people in America pray in English and that has impact because they hurt people and they don't worship God. After being shocked for a second, I asked him what he thought praying was. He said that he learnt from the classes we have had together that prayer is conversation with God. Then I asked him if he thought one could converse with God in a language he cannot understand? He said no. So I explained that if someone's language is English, then praying in English makes sense for him/her because then they can understand what they are saying in their conversation with God. Then I asked him who told him that Americans are bad, that they don't pray right and that is why they fight all the time? He said the leader in his mosque, his grandfather and the elders in the family. I said well tell them that they should be careful, because Muslims have fought with each other for ages (I gave him examples of recent wars) does that mean that they haven't been praying right or that it is the fault of the religion they follow. Then I explained that whenever anyone said something to him, he needed to investigate to make sure it was true. He was happy with our discussion and asked me to teach him an English prayer. I wanted to share this example with you, not to suggest that I helped him change his mind, but to share with you the simple and subtle ways that these young minds are being corrupted and filled with hatred.

On a jollier note, I want to say how beautiful the natural beauty of the island is. They have a coral reef which is protected and people can go diving. Unfortunately I couldn't, but I got to see some of the things under water. I just wish I had taken a camera with a zoom with me. There were so many beautiful sceneries, even the mountains behind

Hadibou which are usually in view from the window in any of the houses were different and beautiful every hour. I used to walk out and much as I could to look at the mountains. Most of all the experience was so centering. Most of all the experience helped me in my spiritual growth, in a way that I can't explain. I had time to look at human life, how we have complicated things, how even though we don't realize it we have comforts that other people don't have. What was nice to see is that it doesn't bother them that they don't have a toilet or electricity comes on from 5 in the afternoon until 5 in the morning. In a way many of them live the real life. They do their best without worrying about having more and more material things. In some ways because they can't but mostly because there is a feeling of content and happiness with their way of life! It was so great to be part of that. I also learnt the value of education. How reading and writing could open your eyes to many realities, how it can give you the power to speak and to think! I thought so much of one of the articles I had to read for the women's rights class at LSE. In the article the author explained how the start of all the women's right movements came with education and how important it was. I was so grateful to be able to read and write properly to be able to comprehend and think of things at different levels. The girls there can't really understand and speak Arabic properly. They can't read it well. They never have a chance to share deeper thoughts or concepts. Their life revolves around the day when they get married, and even then it is a series of divorces and childbirth, with no personal satisfaction or growth. I know this because I asked them. I asked what they felt what they thought, and they were clear and direct in their answers. My greatest challenge was to see how the younger ones never get a chance. One of my junior youth students was not learning well so after giving her many chances and explaining things many many times. I asked her what should I do to help her learn. She said you should beat me. I was not only shocked but also so sad; that this is the language she is being told and taught is effective for learning. Of course I didn't beat her and then we had a long chat about learning and the purpose of learning but I could still tell it would take her some time before she would accept what I said.

One of my greatest discoveries in the island regarded Persians. I have finally come to the conclusion that Persians have a really hard time not having fruits to eat. I mean to the point that it is a preoccupation to try and find good fruit. Since I have been back, I noticed the large quantities of fruits that Persians consume. You know in England, Switzerland or even Pakistan, people walk with one Banana in hand, or an apple or a slice of watermelon and that is their fruit for the day. Persians have fruits between their meals and not in small quantities. I am talking two three bananas a day, three four apples, half a watermelon per person and the list goes on. Of course it all depends on the season, because they don't like to eat frozen fruits, it must be fresh. I say all of this because in Socotra, the island has no fruits of its own,

just dates. The trees there are very short with a huge trunk and no edible fruit. The reason for that is, four months in the year they have these crazy winds that would basically break or pull out any long trees and destroy any fruit, so through natural selection there are no fruits to eat. Now they are beginning to import fruits from the rest of Yemen to the island. The Persians living there would only complain about the lack of fruit, they even planted some stuff in their yards. You can't get much to eat though. So after observations at the island and then in Sana'a and all other places where I have spent time with Persian families I have come to the conclusion that Persians NEED fruits for survival☺ I think any diet for Persians would be reverse of the usual diets for the rest of the world, i.e. the diet would require reduced fruit consumption.

Once I was back in Sana'a the day after I got fever and then spots all over me and realized that I had measles. So I was in the house and resting for a while. Now I am up and running. Tension in the Middle East seems always to be on the rise, but people on the ground only care for money. The Iraqi channel is now called Al-Hurra, which means the free one. It is sponsored by the US and I wish I could show you the drastic difference between the channel now and what was running during Saddam's time. Last week while I was browsing, they had a show by an American chef in a casino in Las Vegas. The food looked good and I am sure would taste good, but all I could think in the back of my mind is how different things were from the reality of daily life in Iraq. The rest of the Middle East is sitting and watching. There are rising tides of people at both extremes of the spectrum, but people are being left constantly on edge because of so many unresolved issues and problems. The consequence is that now more than ever, there are clashes and you can feel the tension if not directly, then you do indirectly.

This is all I have to share for now. I hope to start work soon, to get experience but also to be able to serve and hopefully add something to the debates and conflict resolution.

I hope you all have a great springtime. London really begins to smile in spring. Over here we continue to have incredible amounts of sunshine unfortunately sending some your way will be difficult.

sincerely

martha