

## One year later: on being a librarian in Saudi Arabia

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Two key lessons learned; time doesn't fly when you are walking to work in 34°C/93°F heat carrying a heavy laptop and chemistry textbooks but, thankfully, I've only done that once or twice since I've been here and . . . anti-perspirant is a lie. The air conditioned buses on permanent 15 minute loops around key routes on the campus are a way more sensible way to travel even if, on the bus, people of diverse cultures have different perceptions of personal space, specifically what to do with their legs, than others.

There is a summer and a winter. In winter things cool down to the low 30s and droll people start to complain that it is a bit nippy but it can feel cool when you are used to a feeling of being constantly grilled, or as they would say here broiled.

It's still strange: the constant heat and blue sky, the weekend starting on a Thursday evening, working on a Sunday, the accents, the languages, the overwhelming choice of food at lunchtime, not being able to see the faces of some people you are talking to.



### **The University Library has been awarded an ALA architecture award**

The library work, though, is only strange in how familiar it is. The tyranny of the alarm clock, Excel sheets (I'm used to the American date format now), budget deadlines, overpriced databases,

complex and detailed expense claim forms (usually rejected at least once), the weekly, two weekly and monthly meetings, some for Collections and Information Services (CIS) staff and some for all staff or 'other' . . . and the gossip. Occasionally we're shown films, highlighting elements of team building, at afternoon break time. I've seen Miracle (the American ice hockey team winning Olympic gold in 1980) and most of Moneyball. From these films I've learned, among other things, that you don't necessarily get the best out of people when you set out to humiliate them.

I haven't made as much progress in learning Arabic as I would have liked. Everybody speaks English so the language isn't often heard. I've been to some classes and it is not as daunting as I had first thought although the 28 letter alphabet, read right to left, with 4 written variations for each letter depending on where it comes in the word can be a bit off putting. Fewer Arabic, than English, words are necessary to make a meaningful sentence though. I can understand a few words on the television and say a few basic phrases but I must try harder.



### **Tombs at Madain Saleh**

I've been to Madain Saleh, a World Heritage site, about seven hours' drive from the university. Thankfully I didn't drive, but a brave colleague did and skilfully avoided potholes, camels and oncoming overtaking cars who believe that you should react to them by pulling into the hard shoulder. There are no tourist visas here and no commerciality. We had to get government permits to visit the site. After Petra in Jordan (think Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade) Madain Saleh is the largest conserved site of the civilization of the Naboteans. It features amazingly well preserved monumental tombs with decorated facades dating from the 1st century BC. If Saudi Arabia does slowly open up to tourism, and this is now being discussed, to counter the economic dependence on oil, this will become one of the most famous tourist sites in the world.

This adventure has worked out, so far, and it might not have. At the risk of sounding like some starry eyed intern, KAUST university library is an exceptional (in a good way) place to work and has exceptional levels of commitment and service to its users. We have ongoing performance evaluation where we formally record our goals, contribution objectives, learning activities and propose learning plans to assist us in completing these activities. This performance evaluation is conducted with a senior subject specialist and my line manager, the manager of our CIS. In the last

year, thankfully, I have completed my goals and will now move on to a new set. As part of the library staff's learning activities which are directed towards our planned learning objectives I've had the opportunity to travel to conferences/workshops in Charleston (Issues in Book and Serial Acquisition), Prague (IATUL Workshop on Information Literacy and beyond for E-Research Support) and Doha (Research Based Librarianship Summit). I hadn't realised how big Saudi Arabia was until I flew across it. It took about three hours to get to Doha mainly flying across 'the empty quarter'. Somebody told me that Saudi Arabia was the only country with no rivers. I didn't see any.



### **The library is LEED certified, providing ample natural lighting**

KAUST is doing well. According to the 2015-2016 QS (Quacquarelli Symonds) world university ranking, KAUST is the top ranking university in the world in citations per faculty. Alongside the Times Higher Education World University Rankings and the Academic Ranking of World Universities, the publication is one of the three most influential international university rankings. QS assesses the information using Scopus and now that we have standardised the name of the university and the vast majority of our faculty have ORCID IDs the numbers are starting to come through. We were also ranked number one in the world for percentage of international students and percentage of international faculty.

We're getting a new library discovery system and redesigning our library website and all staff have an input. It helps that our staff numbers are relatively small (25) compared to other libraries I've worked in. We've had a couple of days on a 'retreat' with 'Courageous Conversations' as a theme where staff members are encouraged to be completely open with each other in order that we might move out of polite zones to somewhere more imaginative and creative. One of the exercises involved one-on-ones with every staff member telling every other one thing they were doing well and one thing they could change or do better. Nobody was looking forward to that, but it worked out and nobody, as far as I know, lost any friends and we are less polite in a good way.

We have visitors too. There's been a jazz festival where I saw the smoothest 25 piece swing band. They looked as if they should have been in a club in a film with Cary Grant and Grace Kelly. Their singer, who put the 'K' in cabaret, opened with "a little number by Freddie Mercury called 'A crazy little thing called love' in the style of . . . Michael Michael Bubl ", and that's exactly what it was. The Globe Theatre came in January and performed Hamlet. The 'always interesting' Nobel prize winner James Watson gave a talk about the discovery of the double helix. Kip Thorne, the physicist, gave a lecture on the scientific accuracy of the film Interstellar (he casually mentioned that he had

to meet Steven Spielberg the following week to discuss some technical aspect of a new screenplay). There is something inspirational about seeing these people and then going back to your desk, like being at an ongoing fascinating conference where the theme is inspiration and imagination and knowledge. And, as with any conference, we get some less impressive speakers too, mumblers reading their powerpoint slides, but not too many.



### **The beautiful marble walls of the library light up in the evening**

Ramadan will last for most of June and there will be celebrations when it is over. Last year the university laid on a meal for all staff in the centre of the campus which conveniently is just outside the library. I hope it happens again.

For all this the compromises are still there: being very far away from friends and family, restrictions on what we can eat and drink (and for women what can be worn and driven), the incessant heat (although that's hard to explain to people from Britain and Ireland), and working on a Sunday which I realise now will always feel like Sunday, a little slower and wider than other days.



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