

1967 SAUDI ARABIA: a traditional Christmas:

The crew had returned home for the Christmas break leaving me behind in Jeddah to transfer our activities to a new base at Riyadh for the new year, 1968. This was the year I was to be wed, on February 24th. The current contract started in October 1967 and was scheduled to end in April 1968 but because I would be leaving the crew earlier to get married. I volunteered to stay over in Saudi during Christmas.

I had the task of moving our laboratory equipment, our technical stores, aircraft spares, toolkits and a whole lot of personal items up to Riyadh, set up the office, stores and the laboratory in time for the new crew to start work early January. Initially I started to talk with haulage companies, airlines, and shipping agents to arrange their transport. However our agent, Siraj Zahran, came up with a solution. Zahran among many other activities was the Saudi Toyota concessionaire and he offered me the use of a brand new Toyota Landcruiser which needed to be delivered to Riyadh; means of transport solved!!

So at around three o'clock in the afternoon of December 24th I was driving down the Mecca road heading east out of Jeddah for Riyadh just over 1000kms away. The day was clear and warm, around 23C and perfect for driving. My route will take me over the flat coastal plain, around Mecca and up the escarpment (part of the huge Asir mountain range) running down the west coast of Saudi. The road climbs this almost vertical wall of rock rising around 3000 metres to the great central plateau and my first town Taif. From Taif the road crosses the central plateau, a featureless landscape of brown rock and low scrub, some 600kms of boredom before I get to the southern Nafud, the barrier of huge sand dunes which march down the centre of Saudi from the Jordan border to the Rub al Khali, the enormous 'Empty Quarter' which marks, in the south, the boundaries of Yemen and Oman. After traversing the Nafud the road drops down through a dry valley and onto the high plain on which Riyadh, the Saudi capital, is situated.

JEDDAH – TAIF:

About an hour out of Jeddah I reach the western approach to Mecca. Here I depart from the main Mecca road and transfer to the 'Christian bypass' which takes all unbelievers away and around the city and its holy

sites. The road is a two lane hard top running easily across the flat terrain over which large herds of camel are grazing. To the north are a low range of mountains that screen Mecca from the eyes of the Infidel, while ahead is the escarpment, the great western shield of Saudi Arabia, in places rising sheer to over 3000 metres. In the low afternoon light it is an awesome sight and as I get nearer I can make out the course of the road clinging to the side of the cliffs, a serpentine black ribbon with tiny ants crawling up and around its awesome bends with the occasional flash of reflected light off their windscreens to tell you they are convoys of vehicles which shortly I will be joining. The ride up is mainly in second gear with many frantic changes down into first to negotiate hairpin bends and recalcitrant trucks.

The view must have been magnificent, I cannot tell, my eyes were always on the road, my concentration was on its ever upward course that disappeared as it changed direction to appear again on a reciprocal heading, just few feet above my head. An unimaginable number of wrecked vehicles were lying down the scree slopes or piled up in the bottoms of a rocky clefts and spoke of the dangerous driving conditions and maybe the suicidal tendencies of the indigenous drivers. In the land of the cheapest petrol they actually freewheel down some of the slopes to save fuel!! Time and again the road levelled out and I thought I had reached the peak of the ridge only for it to plunge away again into another series of tortuous bends and seemingly impossible inclines. The air up here was clearer and cleaner than over the plain which lay way below me somewhere in the mists and partially obscured by billows of white and pink clouds rolling off the Red Sea.

The top at last and immediately the road turned away from the coast and plunged down through fruit orchards, apple, cherry and plum trees planted out in rows over vivid green grass with other fruits, oranges, lemons, apricots and peaches. Olive trees also abounded in biblical profusion. Interspersed with the orchards were acres of vegetables and stubbled corn fields. It was weird, like driving through Kent. Through this incongruous greenery I drove on into Taif, which used to be the regular winter resort for the house of Ibn Saud.

The Saudi Plateau:

Stopped long enough in Taif to get some basic commodities for my journey and then off again on a modern dual carriageway which took me out and past the airport. At the airport roundabout the dual carriageway road changed into a two lane blacktop diminishing eastward into the monotonous distance until it met the horizon; this was the only time that I have seen the curvature of the horizon on land. Kilometre on kilometre was swallowed up in monotony. Every 40 kms there were refuelling areas. Here you could buy soft drinks, fruit and light snacks in a tiny corrugated iron and tarpaulin lean-to while the truck was being refuelled by way of a hand pump attached to a 40 gallon drum of fuel. Then back onto the black ribbon stretching out in front for ever. Traffic passed me going west fairly regularly, the odd car but mainly huge Mercedes trucks, tankers and some very large articulated units; these were heading back to Jordan to collect more fresh agricultural produce for the lucrative Saudi markets.

Darkness fell quickly and with it the temperature. The wind rose, coming from the north, carrying freezing air from the snow capped mountains of Jordan and Syria and buffeting the truck, seemingly trying to force me off the road.

Total darkness and my world was confined to the limit of the headlamp beams except when I glanced up at the jet black heavens punctuated by the impossibly bright stars. At this altitude with the clear atmosphere the stars were of a brilliance never seen in our polluted night skies. Even the headlamps hardly dimmed their brilliance, only when a sickle moon rose to cast a half light over the bleak landscape did they fade. The moonlight only emphasised the emptiness of the land and I felt very lonely. Hour passed hour the ribbon continued to unwind before me, the wind continued to rise in force and the temperature dropped to a point where even the cabin heater could not fully diminish it.

The Great Nafud:

The moon had passed over my right hand side and was now setting behind me. By the fading light I saw a black wall rising in front of me blocking the horizon from left to right and I thought I was hallucinating. Streams of tiny lights appeared over the black wall and dipped towards me disappearing from time to time before coming again at a slighter

different angle and each time getting bigger and bigger until heading straight at me they roared passed, a convoy of trucks heading west. I then realised that I had reached the edge of the Great Nafud, the great barrier of sand dunes marching from the northern borders down the spine of the Saudi peninsular to the Empty Quarter. The dunes were enormous, reaching 60 to 70 metres in height and the road was laid over these ever moving sands. The course of the road is first sprayed on as a carpet of thick crude oil then hard topped with tarmac. The wind always blowing from the north was always edging the ribbon road south, breaking it up first by huge cracks and potholes then burying it with tons of ever drifting sands. Road gangs continually repaired it as far as they could before it broke away from them completely and then they abandoned it and sprayed a new one.

I had something like 80 to 90kms of this nightmare road to traverse before I could relax. It was now 23.00, I was tired, very cold and very unhappy. I was committed to complete the run over the dunes, I could not pull off the road to rest and was scared of accidentally running off it into the soft consuming sands. I started the nightmare helter skelter ride climbing steeply uphill, the truck jolting across unseen cracks and potholes, sometimes running into sand drifts crossing the road which slowed the truck down with a jerk before it broke through and hit a piece of clean tarmac. To float over the damaged portions of road and through the sand you kept up the fastest speed possible in either second or third gear with the four wheel drive engaged. The blackness was complete, the moon had gone and my world was contained within the narrow limits of the headlamp beams. Many times I was blinded by traffic coming the other way, all driving on high beam, skittering down the dunes towards me while I grimly skittered up the dunes towards them hoping that we would miss each other. As they passed, the wind gusts they created almost blew me off the narrow track. So the nightmare went on, screaming and bucketing up one enormous incline before the nose dips into a black trough down the back of the dune before hitting the bottom and then rising into the lofty heights of the next one, I was freezing cold, sweating, cursing, blinded by other traffic, jolted and bruised and wondering how and when it would all end. And then I realised that the engine was still screaming but our speed was increasing very fast, the road had flattened out, we had come through the dunes back onto the gloriously boring rocky, scrubby desert.

I drove on in a dream, all was quiet, all was flat, level and boring, I was desperate for sleep.

Christmas Eve the Sanctuary:

Through the haze of my exhaustion I detected a rise on my left and on the near horizon some regular shapes, darker than the night sky, blocked out the stars. I turned off the road and bumped over to the shapes – a village!! There were no lights, no movement, no watch dogs, I shut the engine down and walked stiffly through the sand laden gale to the first building, it was deserted and so were they all. I went back to the truck and drove it into the lee of a long building, got out my torch and explored. This building comprised a number of separate small doorless rooms, all were empty and roofless as were the other larger buildings behind them. Other than the howling of the wind around the ruins the only other sound was the ticking of the rapidly cooling truck engine. I went back, got my sleeping bag, primus, water can and some food, entered the nearest building slid into the bag and lit the primus. I had hot Bovril, cream cheese spread on Cream Crackers, some chocolate rounded off with an apple. I was very, very cold so still in my sleeping bag I went back to the truck and started the engine to heat up the cabin and curled up for a well earned sleep. Because I did not know how far it was to the nearest fuel, after about half an hour I shut off the engine.

Even in the shelter of the ruins the truck rocked in the wind and within minutes the cold invaded everywhere. I abandoned the truck and took shelter within the thick walls of the ruined building. At least the wind did not intrude, the floor was soft and as I lay there and shivered, I gazed up at those wondrous stars. I eventually slept a sleep of utter exhaustion. I was relieved when the morning came, the cold sun rose over the distant mountains towards Riyadh. On waking, stiff and cold, I discovered that the soft floor comprised of dried droppings and bedding. That freezing Christmas eve night I had slept in a donkey stable.

Riyadh:

Christmas Day morning. Back to the truck, started the engine and put the heater and fan on to full. I thawed myself out and then breakfasted on Kraft cheese slices and more Cream Crackers washed down with a

hot Bovril drink. Then thankfully warmed and fairly rested started the truck and bounced back across the desert to the road. Towering away over to the west, lit up by the low morning sun, was the awesome sight of the sand dunes of the Great Nufud. I wondered how I had managed to drive over those terrifying mountains in the pitch darkness – maybe it was a blessing that it was dark, what I could not see I could not comprehend. I turned thankfully towards the east and Riyadh. The road continued flat and boring over the scrubby rocky plain until in the distance some low hills appeared to break the monotony. Soon I was driving through them, the road following a broad valley. Villages appeared and went. The valley had large pockets of cultivation stretching up from the road into dried up valleys reaching up into the low mountains. Camels and goats grazed along the road edge, their keepers acknowledging my passing with a nod or a friendly wave.

Driving up this highly cultivated landscape with more and more greenery was pleasant and relaxing. At last I reached the head of the valley when the road suddenly dipped down onto a barren plain with many roads and tracks leading to the city of Riyadh in the distance. Arriving at the outskirts of the city I took the ring road to avoid the centre and picked up the airport road cutting across it and turned up to the Riyadh International Airport and the Sahari Palace Hotel where I had a room booked. Parked the truck in the hotel car park, the time 11.30, the weather clear, sunny and very, very cold – that infernal northerly wind. Went to the hotel reception and booked in. I was tired and very, very dirty. I looked forward to a hot shower and a soft bed in a warm room. The receptionist - “We regret sir that the hotel boiler has broken and there is no hot water or central heating”. My spirits sank, but I did have a room. Back to the truck pulled out my encrusted sleeping bag, encrusted with sand as well as Donkey detritus, and retired to a cold unwelcoming room climbed into bed in the sleeping bag fully clothed and slept.

Woke many hours later and went out onto the balcony, it was dark, the wind had dropped, there was a little warmth in the air and above me someone had the BBC World Service tuned to the Festival of Carols and Lessons from Kings, Cambridge..... HAPPY CHRISTMAS.