

Kuwait Experience...

Maltese photographer, Kevin Casha travels to the Middle East

It was with great pleasure and enthusiasm, albeit with slight trepidation, that I accepted a cordial invitation from the Kuwait Photography Centre to go to the Middle East state to teach photography. Egyptian art photographer and friend, Ayman Lotfy, had given me the contact, but he had little more information on photography in the State of Kuwait, an emirate of some 3.4 million people in the north-east of the Arabian Peninsula.

Naturally, my first instinct was to have a look on the internet, but most of the photography sites came up in Arabic language and, as yet, I am not very good at that. Eventually I started corresponding with Mohammed Al-Attar who was my Kuwaiti contact and main organiser of the tuition. We managed to arrange dates, get my visa hastily completed, and set up a programme suited to the Kuwaiti students' needs and expectations.

Flying in through Dubai airport, I landed in Kuwait eager to see this country for the first time, and more eager still, to meet its people. Following quite a long trip, I was speedily settled in a comfortable hotel in Hawally and politely left to my own devices for that first evening. The Kuwaitis did not know my character well, (as yet!), and being always stimulated and enthralled when visiting new places, I certainly did not feel like staying in my hotel room. So, I decided to venture out by myself, making certain to memorise a landmark – a mosque – just outside my hotel. This would certainly help me to find my way back. I was subsequently quite intrigued and fascinated with the area, which definitely was not touristy, but that more than suited my tastes. I prefer seeing the real life much more than the 'unnatural and commercial' feel of the tourist haunts.

It was quite late when I retraced my steps back to the hotel, keeping the mosque ever present in my mind. Soon I arrived near what I thought was my landmark, only to find out that my hotel had moved! Or so I thought, anyway! I spent the best part of the following hour confusingly going around the area, asking people (who knew very little English), the way back to my hotel, which did not seem to be all that popular. Anyway, to cut a long story short, I finally managed to retrace my steps and realised that, unfortunately for me, a lot of the mosques in the area look surprisingly similar!

So it was a deep sleep that I woke up from the next day, when Ali Al Attar and Mehdi, who were helping me with logistics, turned up to meet me and work out the details for the course and workshops. I must say that I hit it off straight

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away with these two, and, for me, it turned out that the highlight of my stay was the sincere friendship and hospitality of the all the Kuwaiti people I met.

I was quickly whisked off to see the course venue – the super Gulf Science University in Kuwait City. I must say, the Kuwaitis know how to build their universities, (might be their friendship with the Americans and their oil revenue helps!) I could not ask for more, as I was shown around the campus and the lecture hall, which were fully equipped with all the necessary equipment and infrastructure. After sitting down with Ali and discussing the final details regarding my logistics and equipment requirements, it was time for a quick tour of Kuwait City.

I fell in love straightaway (photographically, I mean!) with the characteristic old Al Mubarekiya market, or 'souk', and vowed to return with my camera to take some shots of the location and its characters. After having a short pause, enlivened with some strong tea (like myself, the Kuwaitis love their tea, which is traditionally served in a pot on sizzling charcoal), I was whisked off to see the modern business district with its high towers and impressive shopping malls. It seems that the Kuwaitis are somewhat obsessed with building ever bigger and higher malls and skyscrapers.

It was intriguing and interesting to see the Kuwaiti way of dress. The islamic dress code is not compulsory, but many of the older Kuwaiti men prefer wearing what is termed the *dish dasha*, an ankle-length white shirt woven from wool or cotton. It is also common for the males to wear very elegant and impeccable versions of the dish dasha during official or ceremonial functions and occasions.

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Only the minority of women still wear the abaya, a black over-garment, similar to the burka, which covers most parts of the body. This attire is particularly well suited for Kuwait's often hot and dry climate. Still, today, western-style clothing, (albeit in a very subdued form), is also fairly popular among Kuwait's youth.

I was naturally taken to the prominent Kuwait Towers landmark, designed by Swedish architect, Sune Lindstrom. The towers have a unique blend of traditional minaret and modern architectural design, and still purposely bear many bitter scars of Saddam Hussein's savage invasion of the oil-rich principality in 1990. Justifiably, the Kuwaitis will not easily forget the ravages and cruelty of that invasion. In fact, most families still tell heart-rending stories of relatives and friends who were forcibly arrested by the Iraqi aggressors and, unfortunately, never seen again.

My Kuwaiti tours apart, the time soon arrived for me to give my first scheduled lecture at the university. Naturally, I did experience some butterflies, but, at the same time, I felt well prepared and confident. As is my norm, I arrived at the lecture hall 30 minutes before time and started getting increasingly anxious as I was the only one there!

I soon got to realise that the Kuwaitis are not very strict with time. In fact, they are quite relaxed and seemed mystified at my panic and worries when we did not begin on scheduled time!

Finally, matters eventually got under way and I began trying to establish a working relationship with the participants. The class was mixed with most of the students being in the 20 to 30 age bracket, the majority of them quite good at English. For the few who did not know the English language, there was an interpreter. It took me a while to get used to the segregation of the male and female students, as well as to their initial shyness to ask questions, but, as time wore on and I got to know them better, I felt the bond between us was growing, and their shyness subsided.

The students were keen to learn, and I could actually gauge that the females were much more eager and wishful to practise and participate in the various workshops that I had programmed. After overcoming their initial shyness, I was bombarded with questions throughout the rest of the sessions. It was what I wanted, because if a tutor fails to establish a working relationship with his students, a course is bound to fail. Being friendly but firm, authoritative but approachable, entertaining as well as instructive, are all essential traits of gaining the trust and respect of one's students. The Kuwaitis wanted mainly hands-on training and practice and that was what I strove to give them.

It is definitely not easy to establish this, especially when different cultures combine, but from the way the participants reacted, combined with their outright enthusiasm and friendliness, I felt that, this time round, I did a fairly good job.

It was a hectic seven days which followed where I tried to combine the tuition hours with sightseeing, doing some travel photography for my own satisfaction, as well as getting to know the students and all my newly found Kuwaiti friends. The more time passed, the more I found myself at ease with the Kuwaiti people and intrigued, as well as fascinated, by their pride and culture.

Okay, not all was rosy as after a hard day's schedule, I usually like to take time out and relax with a drink in the evening, and this predominantly Muslim state does ban all alcohol. Alcohol is in fact illegal in Kuwait. One cannot under any circumstances bring alcohol into the country, nor can one buy or sell alcohol in Kuwait. The penalties for trafficking and usage are very severe.

So it took me some effort to forget alcohol and settle down to taking milk shakes and fruit juices instead of my odd glass of wine or scotch! Food wise, there was no problem, as the Kuwaitis relish their predominantly fish and meat cuisine, and one can also find all sorts of European food as well.

I eventually did manage to go back to the humble souk with Ali and two of my students. I was a bit wary at first, as my Kuwaiti hosts had warned me that most of the shopkeepers would not like to have their pictures taken. Still, out went my camera, and I managed to surprise them as I quickly got into my usual stride of 'shoot first ask questions later' and as the reaction was friendly, I ended up having a field day – even managing

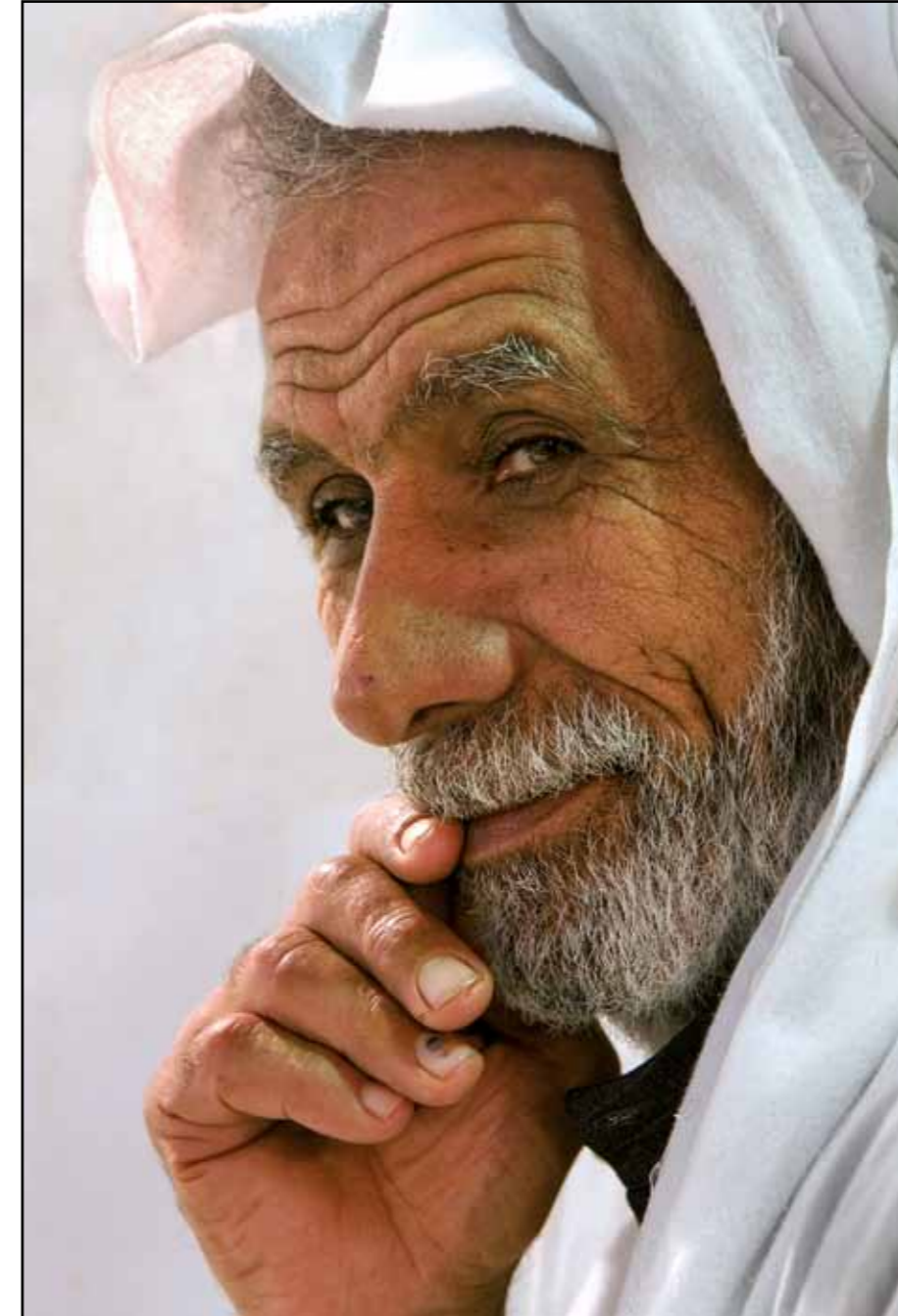


to pose the shopkeepers with their wares and making them turn towards more beneficial lighting! So much for them taking offence! They even ended up telling me to take pictures of their friends as well and it ended up quite a party with me showing the images on the camera monitor and the Kuwaiti shopkeepers offering tea! Plenty of back slapping and laughter made me realise that the entire world is similar and when people are not feeling threatened, they react with kindness.

I was also taken to tour the giant Al Hamra Towers, which are currently under construction. When the project is finalised, the Towers will be amongst the 10 highest skyscrapers in the world and, at 412 metres, the highest building in Kuwait. It was an exhilarating experience going all the way up in the elevators together with the workers. The view from the top was breathtaking and it felt similar to looking down at the ground from a helicopter. The previous towering skyscrapers, which I had seen from street



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level before arriving at the towers, looked like fragile toys from atop this gigantic marvel of engineering.

The workshops and lectures went well, except for one instant when I tried to teach them how to pose groups. I usually select students at random and then position them into groups making out they are family, friends, fiancées, etc. But this time I had to hastily change my methods as I realised that men and women can't mix together unless they are relatives. So I did get somewhat shocked looks when I tried to pose the students together!

Anyway, no harm done, and I also learned some more of the Muslim people's customs and religion. It was also great to see the enthusiasm when I set up two studios for portrait photography. It was a little difficult to get people to pose but my hosts quickly arranged to get me Lebanese models for the workshops.

Alas, the week flew by, and the course ended with the presentation of certificates and prizes to the most promising students as well as TV and radio interviews with me.

It was touching to see that most of the students were genuinely sad to see me leave as they obviously crave events and contact such as this. I was touched by their messages of farewell as well as their pleas for me to come back again and revisit them soon.

I am pretty sure that I will not forget them and that they will not forget me, and I look forward to going again, not only to try to teach the little I know, but to be again in the midst of such genuine, friendly people, who today I proudly call my friends.