

A Day Trip

At the end of our last day of filming in Dubai, the production joined the government of this city-state to celebrate completion of the first major western film to shoot here. The President's beachfront palace was transformed into a private club where the Emirates' elite and a raggedy bunch of film crew were thrown together to violate every prohibition in Islam.

I'm not much of a party person but I was determined to stretch my limits for this one. I lasted 'til 3:00 a.m. Many of our crew stayed to watch the sun rise.

As determined as I'd been not to wimp out on the wrap party, I was equally resolved not to waste our last day off in Dubai nursing a hangover.

I awoke around 9:00 a.m., not feeling too much worse for wear, grabbed a quick breakfast and got in my car. I had only the vaguest idea of where I was going. I only knew I wanted to see what lay beyond the gates of Oz.

I drove south, past the desert, through the mountains, along the Gulf.

In Bernardo Bertolucci's *The Sheltering Sky*, Debra Winger's character poses the question, "What's the difference between 'travelers' and 'tourists.'"

A tourist, her companion says, is someone who thinks about going home from the moment he arrives, whereas "a traveler might not come home at all."

Nicola was more of a traveler than I was. Journalism wasn't a job for her, it was a passport. She went places simply to see them and frequently changed her return ticket because she felt she hadn't explored enough. She had the ability to completely disconnect from where she lived in order to inhabit where she was. It was a spirit I admired, if not one I could always fully embrace as I'd gotten older and more "responsible."

I used to travel alone a lot in my youth. I'd get in a car and drive for days, weeks, the entire summer, stopping someplace and imagining I lived there. Film locations were more like being with a tour group. But in my earlier years, I'd sometimes fly off on my own when the movie wrapped, to explore places like Cairo, Beijing, Bangkok.

I knew nothing about Oman except the name of its capital city and its national religion. Was it friendly to westerners? Was it dangerous? Was it even interesting?

I didn't care. I just wanted to get lost.

Border crossings still excited me. Real borders. Land borders. Where your destination is just over the horizon.

International travel usually involves airports and passage through passport control opening to a world of duty free shops in temperature regulated lobbies. There is no sense of entering someplace with a different landscape, a different culture. All you know is you're not in the air anymore and people are speaking English with an accent.

The border patrol office at Oman was empty except for one man behind the customs desk. Unfortunately, bureaucracy is the same everywhere and he sent me back to the Dubai side to get an exit visa and an entry stamp. Or was it an entry visa and an exit stamp? I also had to buy car insurance.

With all my stamps affixed I made a u-turn at the Welcome to Dubai sign and returned to Omani customs. I was still the only visitor there. The man at the counter asked the purpose for my visit.

"Just a day trip," I told him.

At that, the customs agent, who hadn't really looked at me, looked at me.

"Enjoy your trip," he handed me my passport with a smile that seemed to say I-know-you're-CIA-but-what-the-hell.

About thirty minutes from the border kiosk, I left the highway and drove along narrow paved roads through small towns that had the single-story architecture Dubai had bulldozed for highrises.

I hadn't thought to bring water so I stopped at a store with a hand-painted sign above the door – in Arabic, of course - and a picture of an ice cream bar in the window. It was the commercial centerpiece in a village that had a banana stand, something that might have been a laundry and not much else. It was then I realized how ill prepared I was for this journey. I had no Omani money and they didn't take credit cards. I also didn't know a word of Arabic. The shopkeeper stared. I put the water down with a helpless shrug and started to leave.

"Dollar?" he said.

I pulled out a dollar and he smiled.

"OK," he said.

Outside the store, a group of boys in traditional dress had gathered. One touched my pants and I restrained an instinct to guard my wallet. The biggest boy put his hand in the air and grinned. I gave him a high five. They followed me back to the car like I was a rock star. Or at least an oddity.

I cruised along the side roads, passing through villages and neighborhoods that might never have seen a westerner. I was struck by how clean they were. No candy wrappers, paper bags or drink cans. Funny to notice the absence of something. The noon call to prayer sounded and I passed solitary figures on rugs laid down along a sidewalk or dirt track.

I was hungry and four hours' sleep was catching up to me. I drove until I spotted a store with men in dishdashas sitting outside, drinking coffees. I parked my car and walked in. The customers turned in unison.

The man behind the counter was stern. I pulled out a couple of dollars and pointed to a pastry. He shook his head. Resigned, I started back out. He followed me to the door. The men outside shuffled in their seats as I exited. The proprietor exchanged words with them.

The proprietor shouted something in Arabic. He shouted a second time.

I listed my options: keep walking, run, turn around.

I turned back to him.

He went into his shop and came out a moment later with my pastry.

"Salaam Alekem," he said with a slight bow.

"Alekem Salaam," I bowed to them all, pressing my hands together.

I'd met a charming Omani Prince and his sister at the wrap party and he'd given me his phone number.

"Call if you ever get to Muscat," he said.

I had the Prince's phone number in my shirt pocket. But I decided against going all the way to Muscat. I'd seen one modern Arab city and it was what I was trying to get away from. Another time, perhaps.

I drove another hour through outlying towns with more goats than people, past date farms and olive orchards, then rejoined the highway and headed back to Dubai.

It was a day trip and I had to return to my tour group. But for a few hours I was a traveler again.