

# Memories of Dispatch 1 - A foreigner arrives

Before we start, we need to go to the beginning.

We need to return to Day 1 of Week 2 of my life as a foreigner in Yemen. I'm sitting in a dilapidated cargo office at the international airport in the ancient city of Sana'a, on a mountain plateau some 2,000 metres above the sea, without a clue of what might await.

Some one million souls live in Sana'a. It's among the oldest inhabited regions on Earth. The only things I'm reasonably certain about on this warm morning is that both the Queen of Sheba and Osama bin Laden come from Yemen, and I'm likely the only person in the country wearing a Team Canada cap.

On a wall is an already-dated poster advertising a regional airline. Pictured, as if looking through an airliner cockpit, are popular global destinations like New York's Statue of Liberty and the World Trade Center's Twin Towers.

"Fly with us and see the world," says the ad, innocuously. Nobody has bothered to replace it by this day, some six months after Sept. 11, 2001, that fateful day when a generation's defining moment crashed into our memories.

I'm waiting to collect my family's cargo sent from Canada. Over his shoulder a clerk wears a dirty mushadda, a red-and-white checkered shawl. He's pleasant, and proudly asks if he should write my form in English or Arabic.

"English," I say.

"Are you American?" he then asks.

"Canadian," I respond.

He smiles and nods, "Canadian okay. Better than American."

I glance again at the airline poster and recall a meaningful visit I once had with a friend in New York City.

Before long a manager explains to me that I need to return "tomorrow" because the cargo office is closing. It's just 11:30 in the morning, I protest. A stranger comes to my aid, and after some hours of paper shuffling, a dozen signatures, several dips into my pockets for well-worn Yemeni currency, my bins of personal belongings are released to me.

"I am the computer," is the parting comment from another clerk, at my last stop, while he prints my file in a large ledger.

With the help of a Korean doctor friend, I get my load onto the rooftop of beaten Toyota 4x4. My driver-friend is still learning to navigate the English language, but he skillfully drives the load through the city's dusty and exhaust-filled streets.

Our vehicle meanders through strange scenes. There are goats and women in head-to-toe, shapeless black baltas, and men in dirty white robes, mushaddas on their heads, and jambias, ceremonial daggers, around their waists. Some faces are worn as old maps, and look significantly older than the average lifespan, which I've read is just 56 years.

Looking at the vehicles, I see why Yemen's rate of traffic deaths is among the world's highest. I'm told there are 14 streetlights in Sana'a. It seems that half don't work. Hundreds of other intersections operate on a kind of first-honk, first-drive basis.

We reach home safely, to Jean, my wife, a Canadian obstetrician whose heartbeat is to help save some of the many Yemeni women who die in childbirth.

Jean and I live on a typical side-street. It's paved coarsely, but like many roads, it has no name. It's not posh, but our flat, the ground-level of a typical multi-story Yemeni home, has a western-style flush toilet. We're thankful.

Please, come in.

Here in the front hall is where we'll put our big Canadian flag. And there, a rather striking photo of a Yemeni shepherd girl holding a lamb from Yemen's countryside. Around the corner, our office will have posters of Martin Luther King and his thoughts on freedom. It's hung near our wall-to-wall world map.

There's the stairs up to the landlord's, "Dr." Ali, a pharmacist with one wife and four kids, a family you'll get to know more of in at least some pages.

This is the beginning of my life as a somewhat bewildered Canadian in Yemen. Soon, the Iraq War will break out. Also, soon, terrorism and death will pound on our door in a much more personal way. Joys will also come. That flat on a street with no name will become the first home of our first child.

Now, several years on, I've chronicled over 100 newspaper columns from five continents. Jean and I have two children. Our world map still takes a wall in our study, but now our home is some 10 degrees west and 15 degrees south, in Africa, in the Kampala capital region of Uganda.

What has remained constant is something that my New York City friend told me that visit long ago, when he showed me the slums where he grew up. "You have to look past what you see to know what it's really like here."

I'm still learning this. Whether you're in the poverty-infested streets of New York or Sana'a or Kampala, or in the rich mansions of Beverly Hills, people are people, sometimes meeting during those rare moments when paths cross, but often not.

As Booker T. Washington said, our challenge is to "bring the strong, wealthy and learned into helpful touch with the poorest, most ignorant and humblest, and at the same time make one appreciate the vitalizing, strengthening influence of the other."

My journalist's critical eye has often kept me from fullness of this appreciation. But I hope that reading this collection is still a worthwhile time for you, a chance to meet some of our humble fellow travelers who sojourn off the beaten track.

And I hope your reading experience is not just worthwhile, but entertaining, like you're sitting in front of an open window with a fresh breeze blowing, able to pause, look out, and say, "I enjoyed that."

**Thomas Froese**

**January, 2008**

Introduction to *Open Windows: A journalist's dispatches from Arabia to Africa and Beyond*