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Stranger in a Strange and Dusty Land

An Ex-Business Journal Reporter Reflects on Life In a Dangerous Land Halfway Around the Globe

Editor's note: Julie Poucher Harbin, along with her husband, David, and young daughter, recently gave up life in Oceanside to move to Afghanistan, where her husband is managing a USAID contract to build health clinics and schools in and around Kabul. This is her first column since arriving there in late June.

KABUL, Afghanistan — I've tried several times to write something since my family and I arrived in Kabul six weeks ago — a couple of weeks after I left the San Diego Business Journal and my home in Oceanside to start a new life here at the other end of the Earth.

When you move anywhere, there's a period of adjustment, and your first impressions aren't necessarily the same ones you have six weeks later.

At first, you might feel like you don't belong because you have no friends, you aren't familiar with the office politics, and, if you moved really far away, the actual politics of the new place.

In the beginning, everything you see is in sharp focus and in color. Later, it's kind of blurry and faded as you get used to your surroundings.

When I look back on it, that first day in Kabul was harrowing, although the sights and sounds have almost become commonplace now and don't inspire nearly as much fear.

I was already on edge in June after a sleepless night flight from Istanbul via Baku on Afghanistan's national airline, Ariana — the airline that the U.S. Embassy warns against flying. The ride was choppy, the male flight attendants smoked, but the service wasn't bad. As soon as we cleared passport control, a group of unknown Afghan men descended on us in the dusty baggage hall. Before we knew it they had picked up our suitcases and were pushing them through customs.

I hastily and awkwardly threw a long scarf over my head, while I closely followed the men (not knowing who they were or if we could trust them) and all our possessions out the door.

'We Stick Out As Foreigners'

A negotiation for payment followed. They weren't employees of the airport. They argued for \$2 a bag, but we wouldn't go over \$1 — the going rate in Istanbul. There is no "posted" rate and there are no official airport baggage handlers.

"We stick out as foreigners," I thought as our group of five sweated in the blazing sun in Western clothes and looked nervously around the traffic circle. Our ride was late. When we were finally on our way, all I could think about was the reports I'd heard that there had recently been rocket attacks on the airport road (the road from the airport into the city).

One thought kept going through my head: What were we doing here?

There were no lines on the road to separate the lanes, and there were very few traffic lights, just overwhelmed police holding stop signs. Cars, pickups, colorful Pakistani trucks, horses, donkeys and pedestrians all “shared” the road. If you wanted someone to get out of the way, or you wanted to pass someone, you honked. The Indian music blaring on the radio was the accompaniment. It almost made me long for San Diego-style traffic.

Now, I long for other things San Diego: to walk freely in my neighborhood without a male escort, to be able to exercise, to wear short sleeves in public, to get an espresso at Vigilucci’s, to see the sun set on the Oceanside pier, and to grab a “Double-Double” at In-N-Out Burger.

A Kabul ‘Double-Double’

I got the nearest thing to a Double-Double the other day at the coalition military base at Bagram, two hours out of town; Burger King also recently arrived at Bagram.

U.S. military personnel, including some contractors I’ve talked to, ask me what life is like on the “outside,” i.e. in Kabul, because they are not allowed off base for recreation (although some have been “on convoys” from Bagram to Kabul). They talk about missing their families, and about R-and-R travel opportunities in the region.

For recreation, I tell them that we foreigners either go to each other’s houses for parties (or to watch \$2 pirated DVDs), or we go to restaurants. I told them about the Thai place, the Chinese restaurant, the pizza places that deliver OK pizzas, the Croatian restaurant, the German beer garden, and the American-style restaurant called B’s Place (where a Kabul for Kerry meet-and-greet was held in June).

I don’t need to tell them about the poverty in which most Afghans live in Kabul and throughout the country. They can see it in the mud-walled village called Bagram right outside the base.

Neither do I need to explain the dicey security situation. One contractor from Kellogg, Brown & Root said he didn’t sleep well on nights he didn’t hear a rocket attack on the base.

That said, my husband and I, as nongovernmental organization workers, don’t live on the kind of island city that is Bagram.

Our plain, boxy, underlit, two-story house in Kabul has an 8-foot wall around it. And, we have unarmed guards, like most aid agencies.

One of our neighbors, who is a “commander” (don’t ask me of what), has armed security and gets a police escort when he leaves his compound in his shiny Toyota Land Cruiser. (Later, I found out that a commander is some kind of powerful, un-elected community leader.)

Guards With AK-47s

Another of our neighbors comes over regularly with her malnourished children to fill their buckets with water. However, guards with AK-47s flank most houses on our street in this leafy suburb, which was formerly inhabited by the Taliban.

With the Taliban out of power, international companies, international organizations, commanders and restaurants have moved in. Rents run from \$2,000 monthly on the low end to more than \$10,000.

How safe are foreigners here right now? Tensions have escalated and the security situation has

gotten worse in the run-up to the October presidential elections. Election workers as well as aid workers have been killed, with pitiful investigations by the government into their deaths. Last week, there was a warning by coalition forces and the United Nations that a suicide bomber could hijack foreigners' cars. Every other day now it seems the U.N. staff and aid agencies issue warnings limiting travel within the city.

In recent weeks there's been a spate of rocket attacks, with one fatality, in Kabul — likely by Taliban loyalists who don't want their country's election to go forward.

But the big news that even caught President Bush's attention the other day is that 90 percent of Afghans have registered to vote despite intimidation tactics — death threats and in some cases, murder, by the Taliban.

Life in Kabul is certainly different without the Taliban. The entrepreneurial spirit is alive and well, and business is booming. Some say that the local business community and its protectors won't let the security situation deteriorate. It's in their interest to keep the locals and the thousands of internationals spending money in their shops.

One guy, who runs a jewelry and souvenir shop in the city's Intercontinental Hotel, which was the only hotel foreigners were allowed to stay in during the Taliban regime, is delighted with the big crowds of internationals and well-heeled Afghans who now turn up at the \$11 Friday brunch at the hotel. He said that foreign visitors to this communist-era edifice used to be few and far between, and the Taliban officials who actually lived there bought only one thing for their wives. He pointed to a severe-looking, ornamental whip. Myth? Maybe. But it's a good story.

And, I have digressed.

My editors at the Business Journal asked me to write how life in Kabul differs from life in San Diego, so here goes.

Kabul Vs. San Diego

- In Kabul, there is plenty of beach, just no water. The few swimming pools that exist quickly turn brown from the dust.

- In Kabul, the utilities are unreliable. The water is undrinkable and the power goes out almost daily. There are no underground sewers — just open ditches that line the sides of the roads. There's talk that 30 percent of the air people breathe here has fecal matter. In San Diego, the utilities are fairly reliable; people just complain about the bills.

- Many people in San Diego are on the Atkins diet, or other diets that may or may not be working, which means limited or no bread. Everyone in Kabul could be said to be on the anti-Atkins diet, as there is plenty of rice and bread to go with the chicken and beef. Yet, there are almost no fat people visible. (Caveat: Life expectancy is somewhere in the 40s.)

- Women in Kabul — covered up. Women in San Diego — not.

- Fusili pasta at Trader Joe's in San Diego — 99 cents. Fusili pasta at Supreme, one of a handful of heavily guarded and gated stores that cater exclusively to foreigners — \$6.20 (although a new Italian grocery store just opened and promises to give Supreme a run for its money).

- San Diego is not trying to enlist Kabul as a sister city, but has chosen Jalalabad, to the east, which is considered more unsafe for foreigners.

And I could go on ...

So, what is the same?

There's a sizable military presence in both San Diego and Kabul, there's at least one golf course (but guess who has more sand traps?), small businesses are thriving, and there is no point in watching the weather forecast in summer.

In both places, the weather is fairly predictable and it hardly ever rains. San Diego — most every day sunny and pleasant, while a little cooler on the coast. Kabul — very hot, dry and dusty every day.

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