

Harza Stories
My Summer of 1976
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March 28, 2020

(Note: While this pre-dates my Harza tenure, I believe it qualifies as a foreshadowing of things to come.)

The summer after getting my BS degree at Illinois, I was fortunate to get a 12-week internship with the Danish Hydraulic Institute (DHI) in Copenhagen. Was provided accommodation at a university dorm in the city - Otto Monsted's Kollegium - strategically located across the street from the Carlsberg Brewery - and settled in for an enjoyable summer in the Salty Old Queen of the Sea.

About mid-way thru the summer, the Institute won a contract with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia to investigate potential new harbour sites on both the Arabian (not the Persian!) Gulf and the Red Sea coasts of the Arabian Peninsula. Seems the Kingdom was investing heavily in new university housing and the existing port facilities were not up to the task of importing all of the materials.

I was offered the chance to go to Saudi and join a DHI field crew conducting bathymetric surveys as part of the siting studies. I readily accepted, and immediately impressed the Danes by throwing a party the night before departure, oversleeping and missing my scheduled flight to Saudi via London.

I was re-routed on a later flight through Rome, where the connecting flight to Dhahran was delayed due to a jetway problem which allegedly had more to do with a labor dispute and work slowdown than an actual technical issue. (To this day, that Rome airport connection is my only time setting foot on Italian soil).

The Institute had arranged for my original flight into Dhahran (on the Arabian Gulf) to be met by representatives of a local Brit affiliate - the Algosaibi Diving Corporation (just googled them - still in business!). With the communications capabilities of that era, there was no easy way to inform them of my revised itinerary, so they left when I didn't come off the expected flight.

That entitled me to a free night's stay on the floor of the airport terminal, to await the opening of Algosaibi's offices so I could call them and get picked up. I was informed by the DHI team leader in Dhahran that the Arabian Gulf field work had been completed, and that I would be conducting surveys on the Red Sea instead.

After kicking around the oil-refinery town of Al Khobar for a day or so, where I splurged on a genuine counterfeit Seiko wristwatch, I was bundled into a taxi for an overnight drive of some 6 hours to the capital, Riyadh, about halfway across the Peninsula. At some point, the taxi pulled over to help another motorist with a flat tire, and I can still remember the 360-degree view of oil well flares on the horizon like the numbers on a clock - spectacular against the blacker-than-the-inside-of-a-cow desert sky.

Cooled my heels in Riyadh for a week or so, drinking Pepsi (no Coke - Arab boycott ya know) and awaiting further instructions. Was introduced to a tall, distinguished Arab in traditional dress - Abdul-Aziz - who would drive me in a Toyota land cruiser hauling a small camping cum office trailer (they called it a caravan) to Jeddah, our base of operations for the Red Sea survey work. That was a 2-day journey, along stretches of desert that made Arizona look positively lush, and tens of kilometers of perfectly straight road that really impressed this native Illinoisan. We overnighted at the Saudi version of a rest stop, with camels about equal in number to automobiles, and slept under the stars on raised wooden platforms akin to bunk beds.

The road to Jeddah passed through the mountain resort town of Taif (where allegedly the King and his court summered to avoid the heat) and from there to a checkpoint outside of the city of Mecca. The guard looked in our vehicle, saw the blond-haired blue-eyed Caucasian, and immediately directed us to the bypass road, since only practicing Muslims can enter Mecca - the rule to this day as far as I know.

Pansic Summer of 1976 (cont.)

It was in Jeddah that I met the Chief of Party, Jens Korsgaard, a native Dane who had left Denmark and was on loan from Han Padron Associates in NYC. By this time I was also joined by Arvid Peterson of DHI, and David Boone, another DHI intern from Canada. I watched Jens in action on several occasions, including negotiating the rental of a decrepit, listing tub of a vessel called The Assab, which became our luxury cruise ship home for the next three weeks. Jens taught me the value of time, when he splurged on a \$100 H-P calculator to do our bathymetric and location calculations from the survey data. When I suggested this was an extravagance, he replied "This project is costing over \$1000 a day - we can afford it."

Worth mentioning at this point, that Saudi Arabia at that time was devoid of alcohol or movie theaters. Good restaurants in Riyadh and Jeddah, but not much else. Also, gasoline was dirt cheap and dispensed full-service by the character placidly smoking a cigarette all the while. Also learned the concept of "Insha'Allah" - God willing. No bothering with seat belts in the automobiles - if you were destined to die in a car accident, no seat belt would stop it. Conversely, if - Insha'Allah - you were to survive the accident, then the seat belt wouldn't have played a role. The trip from Riyadh to Jeddah was - Insha'Allah - accident-free.

The caravan/office trailer paralleled the nearshore position of the Assab as we conducted surveys at several sites south and north of the main Jeddah port. The open lands surrounding Jeddah were managed as principalities, with a Royal family member having administrative purview over his region. One afternoon, we were visited by two sons of a local prince who brought a large dish of rice and fish as an offering of local hospitality.

I once again demonstrated my cultural sensitivities by taking some of the food onto my own separate plate (it is meant to be eaten communally from the main dish) and shoveled it into my face with my left hand (which is meant to be reserved for alternative uses toward the posterior end of the body). My behavior was excused, no doubt, as something to be expected from a clueless foreigner such as myself.

The blue waters and coral reefs of the Red Sea coast of Jeddah were indescribably beautiful, but a general fear of sharks kept us from enjoying it fully. The off-hours were confined to shallow-water wading along the sandy reefs playing with the manta rays.

The bathymetric surveys were conducted from a Zodiac inflatable boat, under a makeshift sunshade, with a low-tech sonar sensor and on-board battery powered recording equipment - one device for recording the depths along the transect, the other for marking the concurrent lat/long location. And, oh yeah, the periodic electric shocks administered by the confluence of electronics and standing water in the floor of the Zodiac.

We plotted up the charts back on board the Assab, putting our expensive H-P calculator to good use, and after a few weeks I was dispatched back to Copenhagen to hand-deliver the results of our work. But there was to be one final parting gift from the Kingdom to help me remember my visit.

In order to comply with Saudi immigration rules for departure, I was required to leave my passport with the airport authorities the day before my scheduled departure. But I soon learned that a passport was needed in order to secure a hotel room. The Arabic word for "no" or "not" is "mafi." So I was informed that "mafi passport means mafi hotel room." I was graciously accommodated overnight at the home of a local contact, and departed as scheduled the next day.

After a two-day stop over in Greece, where I visited the Acropolis and the Oracle of Delphi, and splurged on Retsina wine and gyros, I delivered the goods to the DHI office in Copenhagen. I returned the US shortly after, and continued my studies for my MS at Illinois.

The punchline to this whole story - the Saudi government ended up hiring a British logistics specialist who reorganized their existing port operations to gain the necessary efficiencies to accommodate the increased import volume, and the new harbours were never built.

But I had the adventure of a lifetime at the tender age of 21.