

# KUWAIT (1989)

by Rutherford

While living in Twickenham in January 1989, I received a telephone call from Dr Izzy Fahreel, the wealthy Iraqi owner of a business based in Kuwait I had met the previous week when he had flown to London to interview and review the portfolios of several photographers in advance of a major advertising campaign. (To the evident frustration of Tim Mitchell, Director of the Charles Barker agency, the recruitment process eventually came to naught when, after meeting with several photographers, Izzy Fahreel's Art Director refused to work with any photographer he had not worked with previously.)

However, having learned during our meeting that I had a background in photo retail and wholesale, Izzy Fahreel invited me to Kuwait for two weeks as a consultant to identify and propose solutions to the problems currently plaguing his photo retail and wholesale business. He explained that, if he agreed with my analysis, he was prepared to offer me a two-year contract to implement my proposed solutions. I explained that, while I was happy to come to Kuwait for two weeks to investigate the source of the problems, I would be unable to accept any contract unless I knew that my wife was prepared to live in Kuwait – therefore, if, at the end of the two-week consultancy, he wanted me to be in a position to give a definitive answer, he would have to send three airline tickets – not one. Confused as to why my wife's preferences should have any bearing on my decision, he refused, and we terminated the conversation.

He called back the next evening with the same offer, only to hear me repeat the same reply, and again we terminated the conversation without agreement. He called back the next evening, and the next, and the next, and the next, and the next. After a week of calling every evening (by the end of which, he had spent more in long-distance charges than the cost of the two extra tickets he had consistently refused to provide), he finally gave in and sent us three return tickets for Kuwait – via Bahrain.

The offices of his company (from which he controlled not only a photo retail and wholesale business, but a photofinishing laboratory, an oil pipeline company and a chain of opticians) was located at the foot of the famous Kuwaiti water towers and next door to the US embassy.

During our visit, we were assigned a nice apartment overlooking the Arabian Gulf and a car and driver. While I spent two weeks visiting the retail shops, investigating their organisation, and speaking to its employees, customers and suppliers in an effort to identify the strengths and weaknesses of the two businesses, my wife visited schools and supermarkets and tried to get a sense of what it would be like to live there.

Kuwait was the cleanest place we had ever seen. While garbage is taboo in Muslim cultures, with its enormous oil revenues, Kuwait had the means to take this to an extreme. In a visit to a shopping centre, we noticed that, within seconds of anything being thrown in a rubbish bin, it was removed by a worker who appeared as if from nowhere wearing rubber gloves and using tongs. Similarly, in every public convenience, there was a worker perched on a stool in a corner who would wash down the walls and floor immediately after anyone used it.

Kuwait was my first experience of a caste-based society. At the top of the hierarchy are the Kuwaiti nationals who either work (half days) for the government or (due to a law requiring all companies to be owned by Kuwaitis) were 'hired' by foreign investors to 'own' their companies. Below them were the western (European and North American) senior managers; below them, Arabs from other states (Egyptians, Lebanese, Libyans etc) and, at the bottom, Pakistanis or Bangladeshis. Not realising just how clearly delineated these strata were, we regret that we inadvertently put the Egyptian driver assigned to us in an impossible position when we insisted that he join us for dinner in a restaurant.



Kuwait City's water towers  
photograph by [Everett](#)

One of the Kuwaiti ‘owners’ of the business (having signed that day’s pile of papers and so had nothing else to do), was kind enough to take me to visit the *Souk Al-Mubarakiya* to look at carpets and camels.

The evening before I was due to present my report, my wife and I discussed our impressions of the country in order to decide whether, in the event I was offered the contract, I should accept it.

To compare the advantages and disadvantages, we made a list:

#### ADVANTAGES

- A good job (I was currently unemployed)
- Senior management experience
- An excellent tax-free salary which would enable us to save a considerable amount of money
- Annual return airline tickets to anywhere in the world
- The opportunity of a unique life experience
- Attractive perquisites (a spacious apartment on the Arabian Gulf and a luxury car and chauffeur)
- A beautiful (and exceptionally clean) country
- A good Canadian school for our daughter
- Good quality food

#### DRAWBACKS

- The requirement to surrender possession of our passports
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Although we agreed that the single drawback made us slightly uncomfortable, we agreed that there was nothing nefarious in the practice which we learned was widespread in the Middle East, we nevertheless simultaneously and intuitively (and inexplicably) agreed that I would turn down the job if offered.

The next day, after reading my report, I was offered the job. When I politely declined, I was first offered a higher salary, then a better apartment and then a better car. When it became evident that nothing he offered could induce me to accept the post, he suggested that perhaps we didn’t like the country. I told him, no, that we liked the country very much. When pressed for an answer as to why then, I was unwilling to accept the post when (as he knew) I was currently unemployed in Britain, I was unable to offer him the rational explanation he demanded and to which he reasonably entitled. Concluding that I must be mad, he dismissed me and we flew back to London that afternoon, still confused as to the basis of what was, even to us, an apparently irrational decision.

Unable to find adequate jobs on our return to the UK, six months later, we returned to Toronto where we were fortunate to return to the jobs we had left two years earlier – my wife to her job as a primary school teacher with the Toronto Board of Education and I to Humber College to resume teaching photography.

The following summer, we saw on the news that Iraq had invaded Kuwait and that the Iraqi military forces had taken all westerns working in Kuwait hostage, transporting them to Iraq where they were used as “human shields” around Iraqi military installations.

Hearing this, my wife and I looked at each other and simultaneously said, “That was why”.

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Stuart Lockwood with Saddam Hussein, 24 August 1990 Baghdad, Iraq