

Things & Ink Magazine Blog

Tattoos in the Desert

There are some parts of the Middle East that are almost indistinguishable from Europe. A huge Western ex-pat community, and the shops, bars, hotels, and events built to accommodate them, plus a booming tourism industry in many places, are a major reasons for this - with Dubai in particular fully embracing Western culture.

Qatar, however, is like Dubai's little brother: playing catch-up with the economic, architectural, and cultural changes.

When my husband and I moved to Qatar 1 ½ years ago, we did it completely blind. After plans for a move to Asia fell through, and only a cursory Google of Middle Eastern countries, we applied for a few jobs and Qatar came up trumps. Neither of us had ever visited the region, and we had barely even heard of the tiny thumb-shaped peninsular that is Qatar. So we took a leap of faith, and just two weeks after getting married we had packed our bags, and were on our way to a new life in the desert.

I was terrified. An outspoken, tattooed woman, with a penchant for short skirts and sinking a drink or two; I strongly doubted I would be a good fit for this conservatively Muslim country. Of course I fully intended to respect their laws, religious and otherwise, but I worried about inadvertently offending someone or causing myself problems.

From the very beginning, there was a large amount of pretty uninhibited staring, which I initially put down to being blonde, Caucasian, and female. I quickly realised though that there is a large, mostly male, Indian ex-pat community here too, and that staring is a quite harmless part of their culture.

As it turned out, I really didn't need to worry about having tattoos at all.

I found that curiosity, above all else, abounds here. It is completely fine to have them, and there is no need to conceal them beyond the expected standard levels of decency, but because tattooing is illegal, and there are no tattoo shops in the entire country, knowledge of tattoos is quite limited.

The most frequent reaction I get is one of surprise, followed quickly by the question: 'is that permanent...forever?!' I still get the usual questions about it hurting, even long after healing is complete, and I once had a lengthy discussion about ink entering the bloodstream, but I get the impression that these queries come from genuine interest, rather than judgement – and I have even been asked to model my tats for an amateur photographer!

I'm not sure if it's the relative rarity of a woman with tattoos, the ever increasing Western influence on the country, or the prerequisite need to cover arms above the elbow and legs above the knee, but so far the consequences of being a tattooed woman in Qatar have been surprisingly minimal.

With more tattoos already planned, I can live with the questions, and I don't even mind the staring...most of the time.

Documentaries: Making a Murderer

Over Christmas, like a lot of people, I plummeted into the Netflix *Making a Murderer* vortex with wilful abandon. Living in the Middle East, I had heard a few grumbles about the series on the internet, but was otherwise unaware of details; in retrospect, blissfully unaware.

About a year ago, I delved similarly head-long into a series of documentaries about the West Memphis Three – three Arkansas teenage boys who in 1994 were found guilty of the murders of three younger boys. Two were sentenced to life in prison, whilst the perceived ringleader was sentenced to death.

The murder, trial, and media coverage were all clouded by the so-called ‘Satanic Panic’ that pervaded the US for much of the early 90s. Wearing black, listening to heavy metal, and being interested in belief systems beyond the typical Christianity of the Deep South, meant a guilty verdict was more or less guaranteed. If it wasn’t for film makers Joe Berlinger and Bruce Sinofsky capturing proceedings, that would have been that for the boys.

Fortunately, after the first film aired in 1996 interest in the case built, and over the next fifteen years the tireless support of the public (and some celebrities) led to new DNA evidence. In 2011 the possibility of a re-trial that would potentially embarrass the state led to an unusual plea deal; all three men were freed, but the state maintained their guilt.

I watched in absolute horror and astonishment, feeling elated at their release and total disgust at the injustice of the state’s lack of culpability. Overall though, I felt that this scenario had to be an anomaly, a one off. I was very wrong.

Enter *Making a Murderer*. In 1985, Steven Avery was wrongfully convicted of sexual assault in Manitowoc County, Wisconsin, and spent eighteen years in prison before being fully exonerated by new DNA evidence. Two years after his release, and on the eve of a multi-million dollar settlement from Manitowoc County, Avery was arrested and then tried and convicted of the murder of a young woman. His nephew, Brendan Dassey, was also sentenced to life in prison for his part in the killing.

The confluence of a looming settlement that would have financially crippled the county, and the investigation by officers and prosecutors that had also played a part of the original wrongful conviction, is at the centre of the ten hour series. The documentary raises questions about the trustworthiness of the investigation and its key players, but it has also seen a heavy backlash that claims a lack of impartiality from documentarians Laura Ricciardi and Moira Demos. The two women are also accused of leaving out important trial evidence in order to more convincingly paint the defendants as innocent.

What is clear is that for both men the investigations and trial were not entirely unbiased, and whichever side of the fence you come down on, the takeaway should be that we take a long hard look at our justice systems. In the twenty years since the West Memphis Three case came to prominence, how many more people have not received adequate defences due to a lack of money and resources?

Questionable journalism aside, it is important that these kinds of documentaries continue to be made – that we keep asking questions – because it is not just in the US that you can find yourself in an unwinnable situation.

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