

'Doesn't your child



Bernadette Bhacker



Bernadette and her son Yousef.

Bernadette Bhacker first arrived in Oman in the early 1980s and today calls it home. Living and working, first as a translator, then as a commercial lawyer, wife and mother, she has witnessed first-hand much of the country's remarkable transformation from an isolated backwater at the easternmost tip of the Arabian Peninsula into today's modern nation state. In a single generation, dramatic gains have been made in reducing child mortality, increasing life expectancy and eradicating disease. The sting in the tail is the rising toll of death and injury from road crashes in a highly motorised society where car ownership is a must and a licence has supplanted a job and marriage as the defining rite of passage. Legislation requires seatbelt wearing by front seat occupants only and is often disregarded.

Returning to Oman in 2000 after a cross-posting to Sarawak, Bernadette was concerned by the fact that 20% of all child deaths in Oman occur in car crashes. She became a passionate advocate for child road safety setting up a non-profit company to develop a film and web-based awareness campaign, Salim and Salimah, Safe and Sound in Arabic and English. As part of the campaign she wrote and directed an award-winning film 'Doesn't your child deserve a safe ride?', with a cast of Omani volunteers in 2005. The following is a snapshot of filming.

'DOESN'T YOUR CHILD DESERVE A SAFE RIDE?'

The helicopter rose suddenly from behind a rocky outcrop. It hovered, dark in the brilliant blue sky, its blades spraying desert sand around us before landing a short way off. Two soldiers in berets and rust-coloured camouflage jumped down and sprinted towards us rifles at the ready. This was not in the script. The Omani at my side grimaced and slid the heavy camera from his shoulder. Weeks of planning had led up to this foray into the foothills of the Hajir mountains to film Omani rally driver, Hamed Al Wahaibi test-driving his new car. Soon the light would fade and with it our chance to shoot final footage for our 'made in Oman' road safety film.

'Don't worry, I'll deal with it', One of the rally team ran out to meet the oncoming soldiers. A few smiles and handshakes later, the helicopter was spinning back up into the hazy summer sky, satisfied that our strange ensemble of vehicles was no threat to His Majesty, the Sultan of Oman, passing

close by in his motorcade. Hamed perspiring heavily like a spaceman in a thick, white and red rally suit and heavy crash helmet grinned gamely, facing the camera again to address an invisible audience in Arabic on the dangers of high-speed driving and importance of seatbelts. 'Just once more in English this time please,' I plead. It is dusk by the time we hit the road home, jaded but jubilant.

Six months earlier making a film had seemed an impossible task. Nothing in my background qualified me for such a task. The adage 'Be careful what you ask for, because you might get it!' was my first reaction to the news that grant funding had finally come through. Writing a script was the easy part but finding a cameraman, actors and suitable locations in a small community with no film culture was trickier. Networking proved to be the answer. Through a friend, I met Gassan a filmmaker at Sultan Qaboos University, a veritable one-man band film unit. Friends, family and casual acquaintances were roped in. Gradually, Omanis came forward to volunteer for the film or to allow their children to take part. In a camera-sensitive culture, just appearing in front of a camera is a novel and daunting experience but all our actors overcame their shyness and taboos to throw themselves into their roles, suffering innumerable 'takes' in the summer heat and humidity, all in the interests of community service.

It was not all plain sailing. Often we were despondent and discouraged by an unexpected setback. At times like those we thought back to our visit to the local intensive care unit. 'Come closer and look,' the doctor had urged as I hung back. The child's tiny body barely ruffled the white bedcover. Hooked up to drips and machines, wisps of dark hair curling onto chubby cheeks, long lashes, chest rising and falling, she looked asleep. 'Thrown out of a car door during a collision in Rustaq. the doctor told us. And then, to the hovering unspoken question, 'She's brain dead, there's no hope for her. We have so many cases, if you can do anything to make people realise.....'

deserve a safe ride?'



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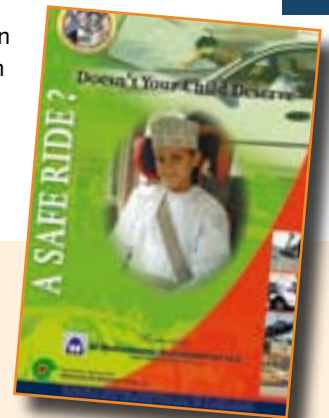
Our modest film project gradually evolved into a full-blown public awareness campaign thanks to the support and commitment of a loose-knit alliance of companies, schools, Omanis and expatriates. Petroleum Development Oman's support was key, enabling us to commission Oman's first country-wide survey of driver behaviour, print brochures in Arabic and English and preview our film to an audience of health professionals, NGOs and media. Other companies bought our Salim and Salimah logo sports bags, key rings, car shades and t-shirts to distribute to their employees. Doaa, Shell wife and mother and event-organiser extraordinaire, came on board to pull it all together.

18 months later, volunteers have screened the film in schools, colleges, clubs, mosques and community groups stimulating debate on child passenger safety and the cultural challenges posed. It is a tribute to all who participated in the project that audiences are convinced by the central message that the law of physics is universal and respects no cultural boundaries. An international film award for the film's universality of appeal and impact underlines this achievement but the last word should go to a young Omani paramedic who, after watching the film commented, 'I don't see this as a film by and for Omanis but as a film for all people everywhere.'

The film 'Doesn't your child deserve a safe ride?' aims to save the lives of children in road crashes by driving home hard that message we are all responsible for each other's safety, that up to 70% of child passengers deaths can be prevented by the use of a properly fitted child restraint, and that we can take control of the environment inside our car. In January 2007, it received Best Communications and Campaign film award at an international road safety film festival.

You can watch clips from the film, read personal stories and download crash facts and safety materials in both Arabic and English at the interactive campaign website www.salimandsalimah.org

If you would like a copy of the film to screen in your community or otherwise are interested in supporting the campaign, contact Bernadette through the website.



Oman child road crash facts*

122 children died in car crashes in Oman in 2005, 20% more than in 2004 which itself registered a 50% increase over 2003

86-93% of Omani children travel unbuckled

94% of children are usually driven by a parent or family member. Half of these drivers admit they make no conscious effort to drive more safely when children are in the car

Most vehicle crashes are predictable and many are survivable. 70% of child deaths and 66% of injuries in crashes can be avoided with proper use of a safety seat

According to the Royal Oman Police, 98% of road crashes in Oman are caused by negligence

30% of drivers do not wear seatbelts, 50% admit they regularly exceed the speed limit by up to 28km/hr, and 60% admit to using a mobile phone while driving

* Taken from Campaign Survey and ROP statistics (details at www.salimandsalimah.org)

Oman provides inspiration for artists

Anina von Winterfeld, Willemina Mansell - van Eeghen, and Ineke van Eden-Bijvank

Anina, Willemina, and Ineke are three very different artists who share a common inspiration: Oman's spectacular landscape, and the hospitality of their Omani hosts.

Anina von Winterfeld

The people and landscape of Oman provide Anina with endless inspiration. The colours of the sea, the white beaches that yield natural treasures of pebbles and shells, and the many shades of the sky's blue are all captured in her collages. The desert sands provide a variety of colours and textures that are contrasted by the black of the rough mountains. From time to time the Wadis flood, and a few days later, new green grass emerges from the dry ochre soil: it could almost be Spring! A weekend of hiking and camping in the Saiyq Plateau, some 2000 metres above sea level, found her breaking a layer of ice from the cool box, and sketching with cold fingers while wrapped in a fleece jacket – in a country where summer temperatures reach over forty degrees. The mountain views and the bright green terrace plantations, dotted with white houses, some in ruins, are now captured in her pictures.

Trips into the desert, with its starry nights, amazing sand textures, and picturesque Bedouin camps also inspire Anina's work. Curious camels appear out of nowhere, and packed carloads of colourfully clad Bedouins wearing beautiful yellow or black face masks visit to observe the strange expats on folding chairs, hundreds of miles from the nearest city.

The spirit of sharing and exchange was evident at her Muscat exhibition when an Omani Calligraphy artist whose workshop she had attended a year earlier approached Anina. "Great picture with the mountains. Do you remember I taught you how to do the mountains that way?" he asked. Anina

recognised him immediately and it was indeed the shading technique (using a crumpled piece of paper that he had taught her) that she had used in the work. Anina, in turn, conducted a workshop where she shared her collage skills with members of the Omani Fine Arts Society. The workshop proved to be another magical Oman experience: two cultures, united by enthusiasm, all hands covered in paint and glue, and no end to the night to be found!

Willemina Mansell - van Eeghen

The Arts Centre in Muscat brings together people from many different nationalities to share their skills. Willemina is an art teacher, and conducts an Acrylic Paint workshop at the Centre, where she challenges preconceived ideas of how "pretty pictures" are created. Participants are encouraged to throw paint onto canvasses on the floor, and then use items such as sponges, rollers, brushes, and corrugated cardboard to modify the splattered paint! An invitation from the Omani Fine Arts Society to exhibit has resulted in a mutually enriching exchange between the two groups of artists, and led Willemina to teach English to a small group of women in Sidab, a small fishing village.

She also teaches at the Al Amerat Day Centre for children with special needs, who love doing simple colourful projects, and eagerly greet the volunteers when they come once a week - it's also very good for their Arabic!

Willemina's own paintings and collages are inspired by Oman's ancient landscape, and beautiful night sky. Tectonic plate movements over 800 million years squeezed together ancient oceanic sediment and rock and created the continental crust that lies beneath Oman and parts of Arabia. Subsequent movements repeatedly submerged the crust beneath the sea, covering it with a multitude of different sediments, shells, and plants that are preserved as fossils. The night sky is free of light pollution from large cities. The moon is omnipresent and spectacular, and plays an important role in Islam, which follows the lunar calendar. Willemina describes her surroundings: "The full moon is quite a spectacle. When you walk on the beach at sunset, you first see the beautiful orange, red and yellow colours, and later pinks and purples against the light blue that will become the ink-blue, star-filled night sky, with the moon looming large. The forts, castles, and quiet villages are beautifully silhouetted against the sky, night and day. Camping in the desert and making trips to the mountains and along the coast is awe-inspiring."





In spite of her obvious love of the landscape, Willemina cites the warmth of Omani people as the highlight of her stay in Oman, with regular invitations into homes to enjoy hospitality and food leading to an exchange of cultures that she finds immensely rewarding.

Ineke van Eden-Bijvank

Ineke's love of the Middle East is evident in her ceramic art. The colours of the Bedouin women and spring flowers in the mountains and in her lush garden, the silhouette of the mosques, and the bright stars of the Milky Way all appear as recurring themes in her work. The crescent moon that lights the cloudless night sky and plays an important role in Islam often appears as a golden crown in her creations.

Life in Oman is the fulfilment of a dream for Ineke. Her love of the Middle East began in Qatar, where she lived as a child, and continued when she was a teenager visiting her father, who was working in Oman. In contrast, she found her vocation by chance. At age twenty, she enrolled in a drawing class that was over-subscribed. She chose a ceramics class to fill in time until the next course, and has never looked

back. She developed a broad skill base in The Hague, and then in London, at classes by various artists with different styles. In Aberdeen, she found limited opportunities to work and began her own studio. These experiences have made her an independent artist with her own style.

Ineke teaches ceramics at the PDO Arts Centre, and at after-school activity classes. She also works with the children at the Al Amerat Day Centre.

The enthusiasm of her students, and the hospitality of the Omani people, are reflected in the positive radiance in her art, with its simple forms and occasionally, a subtle humour. The Omani culture of patience and care for family and community contrast to the hectic individualism evident in Western societies, making for an unforgettable Oman experience.



The Caledonian Society of Oman

Jamie Irvine-Fortescue

The Caledonian Society of Oman was founded in 1976 by a group of Senior Officers serving in the Sultan's Armed Forces. Its objectives are to provide high quality entertainment and to raise funds in this way for donations to Omani and Scottish charities. The Society is open to anyone with an interest in Scotland, and there are currently over 300 members in Muscat, Oman.

Current Chieftain, Jamie Irvine-Fortescue, believes it is important that societies like the Caledonian Society are active in expatriate locations as they help to encourage a pride in one's cultural heritage. He said the Society is pleased to be able to support occasions and symbols that strengthen Scotland's identity as a nation, from abroad.

The most recent function organised by the Society was the Burns Supper on January 25th. This event celebrated the birthday of the Scott's 'National Bard', Robert Burns, who Jamie says is the greatest poet and songwriter to have "ever sprung from the bosom of the Scottish people".

"Here in Muscat," Jamie explains, "we stick to tradition. Our Burns suppers always feature Haggis and this time it came all the way from Macsweens in Edinburgh".



Cutting the Haggis

The Society arranged for a ceilidh band SKALDER to come all the way from Orkney to play in Muscat at the supper. 'Skalder' means a noise or racket and they certainly lived up to their name and kept everyone dancing on their feet all evening.

For further information on the Caledonian Society of Oman see: <http://www.britishschoolmuscat.com/caledoniansociety.htm>

Jamie and his wife Wendy are from Aberdeenshire and they have three children; Camilla, Sophia and Alexander. Jamie has spent 22 years in the Oil and Gas industry both in the North Sea and Middle East and is currently working with Petroleum Development Oman.

Oman to Holland by car

Mark, his wife Marie Bernadette, and sons Foppe, Wybe and Melle, travelled overland last summer from Oman to the Netherlands. The Koper's were accompanied by the Dedden family. Many other families have made this trip over the years.

Mark Koper



Even before we came to Oman we had heard good stories about the trip from Muscat to Holland by car and we liked the idea of making The Big Journey ourselves. It just took a while for the initiative to mature into a final decision.

During our fourth year in Oman, the Middle East was stable and peaceful, so we decided to go for it. We bought a car, arranged insurance, had our documents translated from Arabic to English and had the translations certified by the Embassy. After endless discussions we decided to go via the Balkan route: Oman – Abu Dhabi – Saudi Arabia – Jordan – Syria – Turkey – Bulgaria – Romania – Hungary – Austria – Germany and finally to Holland. We collected roadmaps and Lonely Planet guides for all the countries we would pass through, arranged our visas and made sure we had cash in the different currencies we'd need. Preparing the car for such a long trip was a major task and included having a special 'bra' made to protect the engine from sand! There was a lot to do but we did it and set-off on time on July 1st.

We travelled to Jordan with the Dedden family who were leaving Oman and driving back to Holland. Having heard stories about problems when travelling through Saudi Arabia, it seemed safer to travel together for the first three days. As it turned out, Saudi was no problem whatsoever. The stories didn't reflect the reality and we resolved to be more careful with opinions based on hearsay. We were a bit nervous as we drove up to the border, but when the customs officers looked in the car and saw our eldest son, Foppe, in his Dutch football team shirt, passports were forgotten. The world championship was going on and the topic of discussion turned to the tactics

of the Dutch coach! The officials were well informed and, like all men, football experts. Van Nistelrooy, Van Basten,Van Heesch (my wife's maiden name) "Are you Family and what does "Van" mean?" Pleasantly surprised, we took the time to chat and were given a warm "Welcome to Saudi".

The Saudi people are easy going and friendly, the roads are fine, except for some bad spots at truck stops. Saloon cars are loaded with anything from livestock to fridges - stacked a metre and a half high, directly on the roof. There are plenty of fuel stations with shops en route and our biggest surprise was a shop in the middle of Saudi selling Dutch stroopwafels.

For the women in the party, four in total, Saudi was very relaxing because women aren't allowed to drive! But in the hotels ladies were only allowed to swim after 7 pm – at the same time that the pool closed! Going out for dinner was also an experience. We didn't know if women were allowed in restaurants but decided to take the gamble. Whoops! Wrong choice, but dinner on the terrace was no problem as men and women can dine together, just not inside the restaurants. Afterwards the men enjoyed a Sisha water pipe, coffee and dates; again, no ladies allowed!

Camping gear was left behind in Oman as we had decided to take it easy and stay in hotels. Besides, our memories of camping in Europe included rain and muddy camping sites. Not a place we wanted to be with three boys and a limited supply of clean clothes. How could we know that the whole of Europe was suffering from a heat wave that July? With the help of the Lonely Planet Guides, lunchtime was used to look



Koper family in Apamea.

for a place to stay for the night. We enjoyed hotels over the whole spectrum: 5 star luxury in Istanbul; an old monastery in mid Turkey, where we would have loved to have spent a week; the Baron Hotel in Aleppo, founded in the days of the Orient Express and managed by the same staff as in those days; a Louis XV hotel with golden chandeliers; a Gasthof in Germany, where we enjoyed the evening with the local elderly on the terrace, and at the other end of the spectrum, the hotel in Ar Ar. The kids renamed this truck stop hotel in the middle of Saudi Arabia The Ar Ar Hilton. Take a tip from us: don't ask for clean sheets!

During the first half of the trip there were no tourists, but on a visit to the underground city at Capadocia we found that being chased by hundreds of Japanese in an underground tunnel is not the best thing, particularly if you have claustrophobia and need to leave fast. Another Turkish delight is Goreme; an area that looks like a Flintstone city with cave houses in the volcanic rocks.

LUNCH TIME WAS USED TO LOOK UP A PLACE TO STAY...



East European countries stole our hearts. Beautiful and varied landscapes where the horse and cart rule the road contrasted with bustling, modern cities. In Romania we passed Count Dracula's castle, but faced with 400 steps up the mountain in 36-degree heat the team decision was to put the telephoto lens on the camera and move on. The heat wave had more impact than we anticipated. In Budapest it was too hot to walk, so we decided to be real tourists and take a city tour in an open bus. In half a day we saw the Budapest highlights, didn't get tired and had time for ice cream and drinks. After the bus trip we drove out of the city straight into a thunderstorm and considered ourselves blessed after spending all afternoon in an open top bus! We will go back to Budapest some day to enjoy the beautiful city and its friendly people.

On the 25th of July after ten thousand kilometres and 970 litres of fuel we crossed the Dutch border. We'd done it! Now, we look back at an unforgettable, fascinating and beautiful adventure that, without doubt, we would do again tomorrow.

We flew back to Oman, but that was only because our home in Holland needed a car!

Mark, Marie Bernadette,
Foppe, Wybe and Melle Koper.

The full diary of the trip can be viewed at:
www.kopertjesinoman.waarbenjij.nu

Sunsets, turtles and doing the shopping

Andrew Caley

When most people are asked about what it is like to live in Oman, they fall into raptures about sunsets on the beach, watching in awe as giant turtles haul themselves out of the sea to lay their eggs and generally going on about what a splendid and beautiful place Oman is. And, of course, they are right.

But living in Oman - in my case in Muscat - isn't all about camping trips and taking coffee and dates with Bedu people. Most of the time it's about the home life, getting the kids to school, doing the shopping and socialising. Normal life, in other words.

If you work for PDO - as I did - "home" for most people is a house on what is known as "the camp". This description tends to conjure up images of compounds and security gates, but that isn't the case here. The camp is more akin to a housing estate for expats. It ranges over hills and valleys on a spit of land, called Ras Al Hamra, overlooking the sea and - if your house faces in the right direction - the mountains. The houses are a mixture of two-storey or bungalow family houses, and apartment-style accommodation for single folk. All are comfortable, light, furnished and - of course - air conditioned. Most people tend to employ a maid or "house boy" - either part-time or live in - for domestic help.

Pauline and Olivia Caley at sunset in Oman.



Life on the camp is relaxed and child friendly. In the evening scores of people - both expats and locals - can be found walking around exercising, taking in the warm air and superb views. The area in which the camp is set is - relatively speaking - green, lined as it is with trees and shrubs. It is, in short, a nice place to live.

Not only is it a pleasant environment, but also is only a stone's throw from PDO's offices, which means either a five-minute drive to work, or (for non-persperational types) a short bike ride. Most people, it has to be said, drive - usually in the ubiquitous 4x4.

A car, though, is essential. The local shops in Qurum may only be 5-10 minutes away by car, but in the summer heat of Oman (45C - in the shade) it is one heck of a walk with your shopping bags. And your frozen peas would be very sorry at the end of it. The shops in Qurum - pronounced Kurum - are pretty good. You can get most things you want at the supermarkets- though not alcohol, obviously - and the range of small shopping centres feature some of the familiar High Street names, such as Next and Mothercare. Further a-field, half an hour by car, a larger shopping complex plays host to Marks & Spencer, Toys R Us and Carrefour amongst other big brand names. Though the main joy of shopping in Oman is the markets - or souqs. You don't get to haggle at Marks'! A car is also useful for dropping the kids to school - although there are some school buses laid on to some schools. The PDO junior school is on the camp itself.

The social life in Muscat - for PDO people at any rate - revolves around "the club". The Ras Al Hamra Recreation Centre, to give it its full title, is a coastal complex set on the camp. Here you can eat, drink, swim - in the sea or pool - dive, sail, work out at the gym, do arts and crafts, watch sports on the big screen, take in a film, take part in or go to theatrical productions, play golf, tennis, snooker, table tennis, badminton, football, or hockey, amongst others. The club also plays host to events, balls, concerts, parties and fayres. There is also a book, video and CD library - and a well-stocked "Bulk Store", where you can purchase alcohol for consumption at home. All this for a modest monthly membership fee.

Many people I knew in Oman were on their second or third posting there. When you asked them why they came back the answer was invariably: the lifestyle, the people and the place. Would I go back? Yep, when can I start?