



What to Expect on my Cultural Tours & Professional Missions

This brief guide both articulates and answers the concerns - big and small - that niggle at you, your family, friends, business colleagues, and curious onlookers as you prepare to engage with a Middle East and/or North African country on one of my 'boutique' Tours or Missions.

You've done your homework and know that engagement with the Middle East & North Africa (MENA) region offers opportunities worth exploring. You know it will expand your professional, and personal, capacity in positive ways.

But maybe you've never, or only briefly, visited an Arab country.

And maybe you wonder if group travel will give you space to make your own discoveries at your own pace.

Maybe you are not sure how Arabs and Islam are related, and if you'll be able to tolerate aspects of the culture that you do not like – or whether it will tolerate you!

Or else you know the Arab region well, but you're not entirely confident how to answer people who keep asking if it's a safe destination - especially for women.

All these concerns, and more, I endeavour to answer here.

I want you to approach the MENA region with full confidence and this guide aims to ensure that you do. So you can go forth and be exceptional.



What We Do

My Tours & Missions let you explore the complex and diverse realities of the MENA countries in a secure and comfortable manner.

Your exploration is assisted by the itinerary, by expert guides in country, and by me as an Cultural Anthropologist and Arab & Islamic region educator who speaks Arabic and French.

We visit the iconic locations of each country and get involved in a cross-section of gender neutral and female-only environments.

We visit heritage sites, museums, recreation areas, retail outlets and traditional markets so we can grasp both general and explicit keys to what matters to, and motivates, the population.

As appropriate to the Tour participants or the Mission purpose, we meet male and female leaders in government, business, and a range of people in education and community development.

I teach you how to use some basic Arabic expressions that will get you in a bit deeper with the locals and give you those extra insights that remain valuable to you for the rest of your life.



What's Special about my Tours & Missions?

1. My profound knowledge and extensive experience of Arab societies and Islam.
2. My exceptional access to people at all (well, most) levels.
3. My pre-tour preparation documents that tell you what to pack, what to swallow, and what to wear.
4. The quality of the people who join my tours.
5. The age range of 40 – 88 for tours; 28 – 70 for trade missions; and 22 – 40 for new graduates, entrepreneurs, and career changer missions.
6. Staying more than one night in most locations.
7. Learning exactly what Islam is about and why it is identified - wrongly - as the root cause of terrorist activity worldwide.

Personal Safety

I encourage independent exploration and freedom of movement whenever and wherever it is appropriate.

That does not mean that I urge participants to leave the group whenever they feel like it.

To understand what 'appropriate' means we need to explore how Arabs view independence, and independent action.

Arabs value family networks and social connection very highly.



They generally crave social connection and rarely, if ever, report feelings of desire for greater privacy and especially not for solitude.

Arabs generally regard solo activities as anti-social and counter-cultural, and their common instinct tells them that someone seeking privacy is someone up to no good!

So seeking to be alone in any setting in an Arab country is completely counter-intuitive to your average Arab.

In certain contexts, independent action and walking about alone is likely to arouse curiosity.

It may also bring unwanted, or even negative, attention.

It's likely that the same applies in your own country. The difference is that you instinctively know how to read the contexts in your country and how to behave appropriately.

It's not in any way 'normal' for Arab men to be discourteous or offensive to a female.

Conduct yourself with dignity, with our help learn to read the contexts for certain behaviour, and you'll receive a dignified response everywhere, every time.



Destination Arrivals

For Missions I sometimes – but not always - ask that participants arrive on the same flight into our destination so that our official reception at the airport is dignified and our transfer to the hotel efficient and prompt.

For Tours, I recommend arrival at least on the same day as the tour commences to expedite transfer to our hotel and settling in.

If you are unable to join us on the designated days, I will still arrange your transfers, but you may have to pay an extra fee for this courtesy. Just ask.

I give you arrival and departure instructions AFTER full payment of the Tour/ Mission Fee.

What to Wear

The theatre and costume of the MENA countries is as fascinating as in any other region of the world.

I know you want advice on your own wardrobe in an Arab country and Iran - or more precisely, on what you will be **obliged** to wear.

Only Saudi Arabia requires that you dress in certain clothes.

In all other Arab countries you may dress as you please.



But as you dress for your own comfort, keep in mind that Arab, Berber, and Persian Muslims all consider it immodest to expose chest, upper legs and upper arms.

For them, lack of modesty equates to lack of dignity.

Lack of dignity draws indifference at best, and at worst it inspires some more negative responses.

If you're NOT looking for negative experiences, modest clothing is a good start.

Some people of course do object to Muslim women being all covered up with headscarves and face veils on the presumption that such women are oppressed by their cultural milieu and that their individualism is suppressed by a patriarchal system.

While they're not wrong to assume patriarchy, the clothes Muslim women wear are as much a product of local history and fashion combining into small 'p' politics as are **your** clothes and mine.

Fashion universally reflects the social politics of the day. Like other art forms, fashion responds to trends and social movements to make a textile and style statement.

At best fashion statements reflect the beliefs and values of the person wearing them.



At best, fashion styles reflect and raise self-esteem of the wearer.

To observers from other 'cultures' it can appear differently.

For example, some in the Western world might see the current preference of pre-pubescent and young teenage girls for short shorts and drapery off-the-shoulder tops as laden with sexual connotations.

Yet it's true that those girls feel 'on trend' and comfortable in these clothes because they 'read' the fashion style differently.

When you understand that codes of behaviour and fashion differ across the world and across time and generations, you realize that the sensitive person changes style as s/he moves through different contexts.

Traveling to another country requires dressing for another context.

Men and women in the Arab countries also dress for comfort and dignity. Fashion dictates what that looks like, in different places at different times, and in different generations.

In extreme circumstances women may be forced against their will to dress in a certain way. This is the case for some in Saudi Arabia and for many in Iran.

But even in Muslim societies that impose dress styles, there's plenty of scope for free self-expression.



Meeting Women

Misconceptions about gender segregation, and poor information sources that report MENA countries as being inhospitable towards women, have been major impediments to Western men and women engaging with the region in dynamic ways.

Men who visit Arab countries are often warned not to talk to, or even look at, Arab women, and almost universally advised NOT to shake a woman's hand or engage her in any way.

Nonsense.

Ultimately Arabs do not expect a non-Arab male to be discourteous to an Arab female any more than we expect Arab males to be discourteous to us.

Remain sensitive, be sensible, don't flirt, and you can enjoy a neutral exchange and business or working relationship with both genders.

Eating and Drinking

In Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Libya, and Iran consumption of alcohol and pork products is outlawed and none are available for purchase – except by Jews (in Iran).



In other Arab countries, alcohol and pork products in all their variety are available in special outlets but they should be consumed in private or in designated areas, such as hotels or restaurants that have a liquor license.

Professional Development

You may have done a few Professional Development programs over the years. Some can seem a bit generic, while others inspire remarkable breakthrough moments and personal transformations.

It seems a universal truism, however, that fellow participants in a PD program come up with stuff that takes your own thinking in new directions.

My Tours & Missions provide just that.

They give you superb professional development through the nature of the itinerary, the input of experts, and the shared perspectives of fellow participants.

We see the iconic locations of the country and talk to the locals and ask questions – especially questions that pertain to your particular professional and casual interest.

As an anthropologist I help you explore the underbelly of why people do what they do.

I help you better understand what you're seeing and experiencing and ensure your cultural competence is grown and enhanced.



Will it challenge me?

Undoubtedly.

Out of all my tours and missions (Syria 2006, 2010, 2011; Saudi Arabia 2007; Kuwait 2008; UAE 2012; Oman 2012, 2013, 2014; Morocco 2012, 2013, 2014; Iran 2014, 2015, 2016), on average 5 out of ever 12 participants were jolted into a new perspective on the world.

That new perspective resulted directly in a project, or inspired new ideas, which in turn resulted in an unexpected project – from business deals to art exhibitions, from coffee table books to performance art festivals.

Anyone who has organized or participated in trade missions to anywhere in the world will acknowledge that this level of real outcome is extraordinary for first time visitors to the Arab region.

Why Women Only?

Women commonly confide in me their uncertainty about joining my Tours or Missions for two main reasons:

- 1) Women-only sounds a bit house-wifely or banal
- 2) Fear that the other participants will be more educated/ more important/ better read/ more organized/ or fitter than them!



When I dig a little deeper I find that many women worry that a female-only Tour or Mission:

- a) Might lack the status, stature, or access to all things that a mixed Tour or Mission offers,
- b) May be over their heads and they'll be the only one asking 'stupid' questions or feeling out of their depth.

So know this.

My Tours and Missions put you, as a woman, in touch with FAR more than any mixed gender tour or mission could ever do.

As women, we have access to both male AND females domains, as well as settings where children are educated and cared for.

NOTHING is off limits to females on my Tours and Missions - with the only exception of the male toilets!

An all female group attracts the most positive attention at all levels of society and is applauded by the government and business communities.

And if you're media hungry, articles about my MENA region tours and missions have appeared in Brisbane Courier Mail, the State Library of Victoria Newsletter, the National Geographic website, the Australia Arab Chamber of Commerce & Industry Newsletter, the Australia Institute of Export Newsletter, Hali Art and Textile magazine, Vive women's magazine, Middle East Times International, El Telegraph, Saudi Australia Bulletin, and more.



Tour and Mission participants and I have appeared on ABC TV and ABC Radio National, Al Jazeera, Saudi TV, Kuwait TV, Syria TV, Morocco Radio and TV, and other local Arab media (press, radio, television).

You may well find yourself invited to speak about your visit at professional meetings, book clubs, and prestigious public venues.

I encourage and support you in this, no matter what it is you want to say about your trip.

Testimonials

I can confidently say I have a new and abiding interest in all things to do with the region, all things Islamic and Middle East in general since my trip. I find myself focusing on articles on the Middle East in the papers where I did not feel involved previously. I have a new awareness. I feel the trip has humanised what has always been demonised to me.

I know that I will go on to read about, talk about, travel to and promote understandings of this region as best I can. I am concerned that we see so very little of the positive sides of the Middle East in Australia. I have been concerned for a long time but am now even more convinced that we see a really blinkered view of this part of the world.

Having read about the “classical world meets eastern decorative traditions” character for many years, and having planned to visit it at least twice before -- both attempts failing for various reasons -- it was great to finally get there. Loved it, loved it, loved it!



To have such privileged access to places, people and ideas was such a unique experience. I also loved the access to expertise on the bus! Such a great relaxed way of learning, as questions and info arose spontaneously as we visited sites, saw things out the bus window, and met with people.

Fiona Hill provided great leadership throughout the trip and prepared us with the right amount of information to give us security and background. She impressed our hosts with her command and use of Arabic, and us with her cultural sensitivity. It was a great broadening experience for me and in many ways one of those 'trips of a lifetime'.

I can't think of anyone who could provide the same level of access in Asia as Fiona Hill does in the Arab region. Her knowledge of the Arab countries, her ability to move comfortably with people at all levels, and her pre-tour briefing materials and meetings made the visit completely unique. The quality of the people (on the tour) made the trip work so well, and each one added value to the experience.

Fiona Hill is so knowledgeable about the Arab world, speaks Arabic, and helps you really understand what you are seeing.

Fiona's tour includes more diverse local colour and more independence of venue than any other I have ever travelled with, and it gives the confidence and ability to wander around solo occasionally for those who desire.

*As women, the daily explanations of what to expect and how to interpret what we experienced were **INVALUABLE** and meant that we entered every situation with a positive, accepting and enthusiastic attitude, which was returned in every encounter.*