

Bourne
toWrite...
creative writing
workshops

Living the Dream!

by Lesley Dawson

“Nothing ventured, nothing gained” they say, don’t they? So here I am on my way to Gaza. I have been to Gaza many times before but have always been able to leave when I wanted. This time I was going to stay; I had taken a job with the UN and wasn’t entirely sure what I had let myself in for.

They gave me a UN car which immediately made me the target of every Palestinian and Israeli man, but especially in Gaza. Previously I had driven a car with Save the Children Fund emblazoned everywhere and a flurry of large red crosses attached to every visible surface. This was supposed to prevent Palestinian boys throwing stones at me, thinking I was an Israeli settler. It didn’t always work if someone had a grudge against the Red Cross. Nor was it helpful when I lost my way in West Jerusalem and found myself in Meir Sherim, the ultra -orthodox Jewish district.

The UN, in the specific form of United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) was simultaneously despised and tolerated in Gaza. All five of the refugee camps were administered by UNRWA; food, schooling and health was provided and taken advantage of. Refugees didn’t really want such assistance, but relied on it as a right, although still thought themselves as coming from the villages from which they had fled in 1948.

The three expatriate staff (programme director, English teacher and myself) lived “over the shop” as it were; upstairs from the Nursing College in self-contained flats.

I had a bedroom, a sitting room and a kitchen, all with the stately ceiling fans which just move around the hot air. The best part was a wide balcony where we could sit out and drink red wine in the early evening when all the students and local staff had gone home. The only disadvantage to this arrangement was the Baptist missionaries who also lived at this level in the next block and they looked askance at our drinking alcohol. I didn't discover until months later when visiting patients in a second-floor ward of the nearby Baptist Hospital that our antics caused great hilarity to the more mobile patients who could see across to our balcony. I breathed a sigh of relief that I had never attempted to sunbathe on the balcony.

I soon found out there was not much "social life" in Gaza. We were sometimes invited to eat dinner with local colleagues where one sat cross-legged on the floor, sometimes with a cushion behind you, so you could lean against a wall. The visit of a foreigner meant that all the extended family plus a fair sprinkling of neighbours came by the watch us struggling with unfamiliar food, eaten without the aid of utensils. We soon tired of cooking for each other and the only other option was the UN Strip Club.

Initially a visit here was a breath of fresh air with the opportunity to speak English without careful consideration of one's vocabulary and delivered at normal speed. It was a gathering of many nations as all those working in the Strip congregated to eat western food and drink at the bar. The only problem was that the same people were there every night and conversation soon became boring and repetitious. Once one had watched all the films available in the library, worked your way through the limited menu and sampled all the different gins at the bar, the only thing left to do was buy all your family members tee shirts stamped with The Gaza Strip Club. Still – it was only a six- month contract; surely, I could survive that?