

Surviving Globalisation



A Newsletter from John Alexander

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December is a good month to escape the Scandinavian cold, and this year it was a trip to Jordan. Apart from the benefits of immersing oneself in a new cultural experience is the added bonus of meeting people from so many other cultures. Here are a few cultural insights and some new words to add to an ever-expanding global vocabulary.

Jordan

The phrase most spoken in Jordan must be 'Ahlan wa sahlan' which means 'welcome'. But it is a phrase, like phrases in all cultures, imbued with deeper meanings and cultural insights. "Ahlan" means "family, kinfolk," and "Sahlan" means "easy." So really it means 'come in relax, make yourself at home, be part of the family.' It is a phrase much in keeping with Middle Eastern hospitality. As a visitor you cannot say 'Ahlan wa sahlan' – this is reserved for the host. The visitor replies: 'ahlan beek' (or 'ahlan beeki' for a woman). 'Thank you for allowing me to be part of your family.'

A more poetic – and perhaps more accurate translation of 'Ahlan wa sahlan' – would be: "May you arrive as part of the family, and tread an easy path (as you enter)." In Swedish the equivalent is 'hey', which loosely translated, means 'hi.' Arabic, which might sound harsh to the unaccustomed western ear, is rich with poetic subtlety. When you greet someone in Arabic, you are saying 'may peace be with you'; 'good morning' is actually 'may your morning be filled with abundance and light.' ('Good afternoon', the same.) And when you ask how someone is, you are actually asking: 'what is your colour?'

Arabic is the official language of 25 countries, stretching from Morocco in the west to Iraq in the east. Yet like all languages Arabic is rich with dialects and accents. Most people in the Middle East can understand Egyptian Arabic, thanks mainly to the Egyptian film and television industries – everyone follows the Egyptian soap operas on TV. 'But', said Ahmed, our Jordanian diving instructor, 'there are big differences from country to country, from region to region. No-one here will understand anything from Morocco – it may as well be a foreign language.' Ahmed (from Aqaba) looked at his assistant, Mohamed, and said: 'I hardly understand anything this guy says. You know – he has that snobby dialect from Amman!' Mohamed laughs and says: 'The trouble with you Aqaba types is that you've never learned to speak properly.' Accents, dialects and cultural differences - I guess it's the same everywhere.

Curaçao

At the sacred site of the Lost City of Petra, we meet Nicole from Curaçao and her daughter Helene.

‘Curaçao?’ I ask, ‘Is that Dutch Antilles?’ ‘Not any more’, says Nicole. And I get a brief history of Curaçao from someone who knows.

In May 2009, the people of Curaçao (population about 140,000 people) voted for the dissolution of Dutch Antilles. Curaçao becomes officially an autonomous associated state under the Kingdom of the Netherlands – a separate country like Aruba. Nicole and Helene have a somewhat Venezuelan countenance (I’ve met a few Venezuelans from different college courses – one of whom was very proud that at the time Venezuela ranked as the second most corrupt country in the world. ‘They must have bribed someone’, she laughed. ‘We are without doubt *the* most corrupt country in the world!’)

Anyway, Curaçao in the Caribbean is not far from the Venezuela mainland, and part of what is referred to as the ABC islands: Aruba, Bonaire and Curaçao. People speak English, Dutch, Spanish and Papiamentu - most people on the island (says Nicole) speak Papiamentu, the local *creole* language (See www.papiamentu.com). Many people can speak all four languages.

‘We have a big carnival for New Year,’ says Nicole, ‘It is a celebration of our local music – *tumba* (upbeat), *tambu* (sad) – what we call *muzik di zumba*. You and your wife must come to visit. *Bon bini*.’ A tempting offer, particularly when you discover that the local dance of Curaçao was considered so erotic by the Catholic church, they tried – unsuccessfully – to have it banned. In Sweden for New Year, we watch TV and listen to poetry.

Rumania, Sweden, the World... ‘our way is the right way.’

In December the King of Sweden presents the Nobel Prize for Literature to Rumanian author Herta Müller. In her work Herta Müller is deeply critical of the present day regime of Rumania – 20 years after the fall of Ceaucescu and the old school communists are still running the country, she laments.

Swedish Radio contacts the Rumanian ambassador in Stockholm for a comment. The ambassador is a woman about the same age as Herta Müller, also as forthright and articulate. ‘Herta Müller is correct of course,’ says the ambassador. ‘Our country faces many problems and we have not yet freed ourselves of all the shackles of the past. But we are trying. Reforms are being made. No-one ever wrote the manual on how to make the perfect society. You can’t take up a book that says do this and everything will be perfect. It is a process, it takes time...’

The Rumanian ambassador is right, I think. There is no manual. Only culture. A set of values we share and try and uphold, and in every culture we convince ourselves – ‘this is the right way to live together in a society.’ Culture is like a pathway, and in every country we are convinced we are travelling in the right direction. But there are

many paths, and many scenic routes, and time at least to enjoy taking a few different directions now and again.