

life behind the veil



Kate Bowen reflects on her year On Track in Central Asia.

Having just trained in development, I wanted to find a role where I could put my knowledge into practice, and I had a very clear interest in Middle Eastern or Central Asian countries. I was drawn to Interserve's commitment to professional standards and was not quite ready for a long-term Partner commitment, so I was delighted to discover the On Track programme.

After interview I was offered and accepted a one-year position seconded to an NGO working in Central Asia. I was to be the Technical Adviser to the management of a disability and deaf education

project in the eastern region of the country. I arrived in the country's capital and within a few days began one-to-one language training. An understanding of the importance of learning the local language was also something that drew me to Interserve. It made such a difference in building relationships. The small amounts I learned were appreciated and extremely helpful.

After a month in the relatively liberal capital, I moved east to a more conservative and rural city. I lived in a spacious compound with very high walls (the norm for all nationals) which were topped with barbed wire

(the norm for all foreigners). I lived with three other single women, and we had a dog and two guards. Outside our compound were open sewers and children playing. The children used to throw stones at foreigners; now they just shout names at us, identifying us as outsiders.

My daily work took me to a school for a few hundred deaf, blind and mentally disabled children. Just a small percentage are disabled from war injuries, more from untreated diseases that escalate to permanent disability, and perhaps the majority have congenital defects due to

generation after generation of intermarriage. This is one of the few schools in the country where boys and girls are educated together. As they are seen as not normal, they are exempt from some of the national rules governing schools and share classes up to Grade 1, after which they are taught in single sex classes but in the same school. The hearing teachers teach in Sign Language, as do the deaf teachers for whom it is their first language.

Cultural adjustment

My daily attire was a shalwar kameez (trousers and tunic) and a large chadar (scarf) that covered not only my head and shoulders but also my back down to my thighs. There are dress differences across the regions. In some areas, much smaller, almost nominal head scarves can be worn, but in the region I was in, the adherence to veiling is much more strict. Eastern women still wear the burqa when outside their home compounds. The more forward thinking families permit their women to be uncovered in their places of work and therefore seen by their male colleagues. Many long for the time when they will not have to wear the burqa.

The conservative customs of the city meant that I was not to drive and I was not to walk anywhere alone. I was not to greet any male unless he greeted me first, nor to offer my hand unless he did so first. I was not to be in a room with any man on my own, nor to laugh loudly or blow my nose in public.

Shopping, for foreign women, consists of making a shopping list for the guard and leaving him to go out and get it or sitting in the car on the bazaar road, sweating and being stared at, while the driver does your shopping for you. Kidnapping threats are regular occurrences as are random bombings in the bazaar areas.

Despite such prohibitive social practices, there are no restrictions on hospitality, which embodies the Persian saying that guests are God's

friends as well as the Arabic proverb, 'A house that receives no guests, receives no angels'. We were always welcome at our friends' and colleagues' homes for meals at tables

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filled with freshly killed halal meat, vegetables, freshly milked yoghurt and cups and cups of green tea. If the neighbours cooked too much they would send round a plateful to us. And so we learned to do the same.

The people there know the importance of spending time with one another. Their culture speaks of the value of human beings not human doings: Take off your watch and sit cross-legged on the rug; do not be embarrassed about silences – speaking the same verbal language is inconsequential; sharing time and space is a blessing.

A year of challenge, a year of blessing

There were hardships to the life: rare hot water and sporadic electricity; extreme heat in summer and no heating in winter; limited social options with other foreigners; no sport but what you could rouse yourself to do in your own room. And yet what a valuable year: learning about my own capacity to deal with an extremely different culture; learning a new language; living a very simple, time-consuming life where the tasks of cooking, cleaning and washing leave little time to think of the television you do not have. A year to learn how to continue to be vibrant in my faith without the support of a local Christian community. How to minister to and encourage one another (my housemates and I) in our spiritual lives and in the trials of a life lived so contrary to what we were used to. How to survive such solitude from all the mod cons and social options of European life.

To say there were not times when I felt ashamed to be a woman, that I took on that spirit of shame which is so prevalent in that situation would be lying. There were times when I wanted to dance in the rain and laugh out loud, to wear jeans and walk barefoot, to run up a hill, to be in male company of any sort without someone thinking ill of me.

It was at these times I had to look to the Lord and remember what he thinks of me: that I am not pure or saved by anything that I have done of my own merit or can ever do, but through the sacrifice of Jesus I can come to him as his daughter. When my love is wanting, he gives me more to pass on. When my spirit is weak, he gives me strength to persevere.

God took me to Central Asia for the year, and he was with me in all his abundance throughout. He blessed and protected those I left behind and has brought me back again, filled with ever more determination to give my life as a living sacrifice. I expected a desert and I got an oasis.



Kate with some local girls

Prayer pointer

- ♦ Pray that women in Central Asia might begin to live life free from shame and oppression.
- ♦ Pray that the staff and children at the school would continue to benefit from Christian workers.
- ♦ Pray for Kate and others enriched by short-term mission as they discern God's calling for the next stage of their lives.