

## Party at the Palace: Part Two

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Photo Paul Linden

You might think a limo drove us through the palace gates where I left you last week, but in fact we traveled in an SUV.

North Americans aren't the only ones who can't be sporty enough. The love affair with the SUV is strong in Arabia, too, but over there bigger really is better and so the Toyota Land Cruiser—so huge it's more like a Land Dominator—is the sport utility vehicle of choice.

The one that picked us up was plush and leathery but I was too busy gawking at the garden-like grounds to

care. Money can buy almost anything, including lovely lawns that look like golf course greens where sand once sifted. Even exotic flowers will grow in extreme temperatures when they have a personal gardener assigned to them like a celebrity might have a personal trainer.

Arriving at the villa's circular drive was like pulling up to the Hilton. Everything was shiny and people emerged from nowhere to open the car doors and to usher us inside.

Adorning the entrance like a fig tree might delicately shade the corner of a foyer, a tower of gifts stood, reaching for the 10-foot ceiling. At least a dozen boxes of varying sizes, all wrapped in the very conspicuous Toys-R-Us paper that was complimentary at said store, were gathered as one massive present, from one very wealthy family.

I am sure our attendant moved quickly down the hallway not because she was nimble, but rather because she knew that the awe-struck Westerner in tow was taking in every inch of marble, crystal chandeliers, and excessive artwork she could.

When we finally reached the party place, even my children slowed down,

dazzled by the dizzying array of activities laid out before them. Before I could consider where to start, my daughter rushed to the cotton candy stand while my son ran to the popcorn trolley. If those choices didn't appeal to them, they could make their way to the Hagan-Daz booth.

In case the kiddies got bored, jugglers, clowns, and face painters were employed to keep them busy. Or the children—all fifteen who were invited—could just jump for joy in the huge bouncy castle or watch the professional puppet show.

And for the adults, a lovely sitting area was assembled, complete with couches anchored by antique rugs and coffee tables set with sweets.

It was there, on the raised portion of the patio, that I met the Shaikha.

Unlike her younger sister, who wore an academy award winning gown and enough make-up for the stage, the Shaikha was simply attired, in a long-sleeved, floor length, green dress. She wore little make-up and truthfully looked rather bored, or maybe just tired.

Of course the fact she was pregnant with child number seven or eight might have had something to do with the fact she didn't smile much. Myself, I'd be crying.

It was suggested that perhaps I'd "prefer" to sit with the other "Western" mothers and their children.

Since none of the royalty seemed keen to speak with me and given there wasn't a wine bar, it was the best option.

And that was my only contact with the Shaikha, who encircled by her elders and daughters, stayed out of the way of the party, even when her son was the ultimate center of attention as his five-foot long cake was delivered and his six candles blown out.

When dinner was served at seven, maids in matching uniforms brought out a buffet worthy of a wedding. Skewers of freshly barbequed chicken, salads, breads, buns, pitas, croissants, dumplings, egg rolls with dips, samosas, and endless desserts were delivered to a long table.

And just to be sure the kids were appeased, bags of MacDonald's, filled with happy meals, chicken burgers, and fries were overturned and literally dumped upon the already brimming table. Bottled water and every kind of pop, along with a variety of freshly squeezed juices finished off the feast.

We were full when our driver returned us to the palace gates, where this time the machine gun bearing guard who had welcomed us with a smile no longer looked so happy.

Much to my husband's relief, they had no intentions of keeping me, but rather seemed in a hurry to get rid of us.

And truth be told, while wealth has its wonders, I was ready to return to what matters most—real life with real people who really love us.