

The Bird: Flipped and Roasted

Shannon Linden

Originally published by Kamloops This Week

Another Thanksgiving has come and gone, another turkey sacrificed to the feast. I particularly enjoyed this year's meal. The bird was beautifully browned, kids and parents calm, happy, and thankful because—my mom did the cooking.

They eat birds in Abu Dhabi, too. Being a Muslim country, it goes without saying no pigs with apples in their mouths lay laden on the table, but turkey is a-okay. As are other fowl, fish, beef, camel, and goat—you get my drift.

Yup, you can eat the birds over there, just don't flip 'em.

Anyone who has traveled wisely, keen to experience and respect the host country's culture, not to mention avoid getting robbed or mindlessly meandering into the wrong part of town, has likely read some sort of guide.

Take, for example, our trip to Egypt. While we were prepared for much of what we encountered—we were no strangers to Arab countries—we researched the place carefully before we endangered our lives on Air Egypt to get there. Between friends and the Lonely Planet, we ascertained where to go and how much baksheesh (tip money) to bring.

A good guidebook to the United Arab Emirates (UAE) will discuss cultural protocol but no book can give you the facts you figure out by living there. You begin to breathe the place and that's when some assimilation begins.

No, I didn't suddenly start wrapping my hair but I did take great offence to what offended the locals. I knew if it was an insult to Arabian women, it was an insult to me, but some Arabian men disagreed.

We all knew not to order up back bacon for breakfast. Mini skirts and tanks tops were pushing the coverage quota. Questioning the volume of the early morning call to prayer blasting through the loudspeakers strategically located below your bedroom window was cause for deportation (as one British woman discovered) and defaming the Prophet Mohammed in any manner was cause for...well, think Salman Rushdie.



Photo by Paul Linden

But flipping the bird? That ranked right up there.

I'd been told that "giving someone the finger" was considered a disgraceful insult. Now, I'm not the finger-giving type, so, no worries there. But the day some lippy sixteen-year old Emirati boy raised his middle finger to me? Whoa to those who hide behind brave but helpless Indian drivers.

The Toyota Landcruiser was loaded with boys ranging from about eight to sixteen, hooting and hollering, as their poor driver chauffeured them to Marina Mall.

I, on the other hand, was driving in what I thought was a responsible manner, quietly making my way to Carrefour, the super French grocery store located in the mall's basement. It was a sunny Friday morning—the holy day no less—and as I switched lanes, apparently cutting the speeding cruiser off, the teenage passenger decided to give me the finger.

I'm not sure what came over me. To this day, a dear girlfriend who shall remain nameless because she still remains (and would like to remain a little longer) in the UAE, says she can't believe I did what I did. She can't fathom that I wasn't arrested or at least beaten.

I confess—we were on our exit plan. Our departure from the country was months away and something about knowing you're on your way out gives one a brazen, "so let them deport me, I've booked my ticket home anyway" kind of bravery.

I put the pedal to the medal and tore up alongside the parked cruiser. Jumping out—carefully in my heels—I charged up to the vehicle and pointed a shaking finger (not the middle one) at the driver and his shocked passenger.

"This boy," I seethed, "Is rude and disrespectful." Staring him down, I hissed, "Don't you ever treat me or any other woman that way again, do you understand? I'll call the police and then we'll see how tough you are, little man!"

Believe it or not, two things are true: calling the police over flipping the bird is a reasonable threat and in my own meager way, I did my hysterical part for expatriate womankind in the UAE. While an Emirati boy wouldn't dare do such a thing to a local woman, because I was a Westerner, I was fare game.

But my idea of fair game is tasty turkey, topped with mom's homemade gravy.