

# A Broad Abroad

## One Women's Journey

By Mandy Rowe

### BOOK EXCERPT

#### **Bizarre Bazaars**

Riyadh was a city with more than its fair share of markets, shops, souqs and malls, but the expat community – especially the women – had an insatiable urge for more shopping. Markets and bazaars popped up at regular intervals in the rec centres of some of the larger compounds, with customers arriving by the busload and shopping as if a war was imminent and they needed to stockpile.

The largest bazaar was held on the first Monday of each month at Kingdom Compound. On the dot of 9.45 the doors would open and a flock of shopaholic women would flood in and race to their favourite stalls. The poor stall-holders, generally the more entrepreneurial expats or the enterprising Indians and Pakistanis, would stand by their wares and brace themselves for the onslaught.

Their tables groaned under the weight of tonnes of merchandise – jewellery, pashmina scarves, carpets, trinkets, Indian clothing, Turkish cushions, Saudi diamonds and more perfumes than in a Thai brothel. Business was brisk. No: business was *manic*.

I visited the bazaars more out of a need to alleviate my boredom than an objective need to shop, but I had never considered them as an outlet for my work until I had the book published. Perhaps a little optimistically, I had ordered an initial print run of 2000: now I had to move them. I was lucky enough to coerce the Jarir bookstore into taking a consignment of 500, which left me with 1500 copies to flog – and that was going to be a tough ask. Setting up a stall and acting like an Indian merchant seemed like an obvious option. So I got on the bazaar circuit roundabout.

But I quickly realised that a stall selling just one item – my brightly-coloured children’s book – was not going to attract the throngs of shoppers I needed to make a buck. The stallholders competed for the money that burned a hole in the women’s purses. I had to expand my range.

I walked around the enormous room on a research mission looking at the other stallholders’ offerings, and realised that I needed a business name. I decided that I’d expand the range with some hand-painted birthday cards and party invitations, and then I included some other little hand-painted stationery items to make the range more robust. The items were selling well – but I really, definitely, needed a brand name.

I called my business Hot Art. I lived in a hot climate and painted with hot colours, so it seemed a natural choice. *Hot Art*. I liked it.

Now that I had a name, I needed a logo. On the back cover of *My Arabian Childhood*, I’d painted a picture of a dallah (an Arabic coffee pot) and a cushion in yellows, oranges and reds. I had the words *Hot Art* added to the image and my logo was born.

Hot Art was in business.

Then came the cushions. I imported a set of bright fabric paints from Australia and had some local tailors knock up dozens of plain cotton cushion-covers for me. Once they were painted and stuffed, they looked great. So they joined the range. In the shops and souqs of Riyadh there was nothing like them – they were modern, bold and daring. And they proved very popular. Then I got the tailors to make me a bunch of about 50 white aprons. I hand-painted each one with the same ethereal image of a coquettish woman with flowing orange hair floating through the sky. Along her outstretched arm I painted the word ‘precious’, which somehow struck a chord with the expat shoppers. Most wore the description of ‘precious’ as a badge of honour, so they clamoured to buy the aprons I sold as ‘Precious Pinnies.’

The precious pinnies soon became my best-selling item: women loved the statement they made and the quirkiness they delivered. I even started personalising them by writing the purchaser’s name across the image in fabric paint, and that made them even more irresistible.

Selling my wares and experiencing a reasonable level of financial success started to become a little addictive. I was struggling to keep the supply matching demand, but as I had so much time available, my cottage industry started to develop into a full enterprise. I was working full-time. If I wasn’t manufacturing, I was selling.

A friend, Rhonda, a born again entrepreneur, taught me a few tricks about micro-retailing. She had her own stand selling seasonal costumes and ballet dresses. While she was an excellent seamstress and could knock up a Hallowe’en costume or fancy-dress outfit in a flash, she had a business plan that increased her range and sales immeasurably. She’d have the local tailors – who charged a pittance – sew outfits to her specifications, then she’d sell them at a 100% mark-up.

Because women were banned from driving in Saudi, Rhonda and I shared taxis to the bazaars. It was ridiculous: we’d stuff all our merchandise in the boot and cabin, and somehow corkscrew ourselves into any tiny remaining space. His cab jam-packed with pink tutus, red cushions, *precious pinnies* and scary Hallowe’en outfits, the poor driver had no way of seeing out of any of the windows. So, like most of the drivers in Riyadh, he drove on instinct and a prayer to Allah.

We’d laugh all the way to the bazaars and, on the return journey, we’d laugh all the way to the bank in an empty

taxi.

Keeping the range of Hot Art products fresh and new wasn’t really a challenge. All I had to do was give the women what they wanted. Everyone here was a bit starved of fun, and certainly starved of anything remotely risqué. The most daring thing available for purchase in the shops was a bottle of dishwashing liquid whose label depicted a woman with bare knees. Shocking!

Rhonda introduced me to the haberdashery souq, a wonderland of lace, threads, buttons and bows. At one of the stalls I came across a range of brilliant tassels, and immediately knew what to do with them. I bought the entire stock – in different sizes and colours – from the astonished trader.

Most of the expat women having already bought a precious pinnie for themselves, sales were starting to slip a little. So I sewed a pair of tassels onto the breasts of the woman I’d painted on each of the aprons, and bingo! Tizzy Tits!

I couldn’t keep up with the demand. I could now not only personalise the aprons with the customer’s name, I could give them a set of swirling, twirling nipple ripples to swing around in their kitchens. The American women would line up for them as if they were buying illicit contraband. (They certainly would have been contraband if the overzealous muftis ever clapped eyes on them.)

The ladies from the northern and midwest states of America erred on the side of conservatism and ordered demure, more subtle tassels, while the broads from the southern states were bolder and louder, and wanted the huge swinging bazookas that could knock over a dinner guest with one decent swirl. Selling the aprons with the tizzy tits was a scream. Typically the women would show a moderate level of interest when I showed them the unadorned aprons, but when they saw my tizzy tits they’d roar with laughter! They’d clean me out every time, and by 11.30 my stocks were so low that I had hardly anything left to sell except a few lame Hot Art bookmarks.

Word of my precious pinnies with the twirling tassels soon spread throughout the community and I learned not to take offence when I’d be confronted by a Southern accent issuing from a brash and eager woman standing at my stall. “Hey, honey; show us ya tits.” Okay, the aprons were selling out of control and the other products were doing really well too, but I had to introduce new items to the range. What else could I include?

I’d already had my English ceramics kiln shipped over from home, and it was fired up in the utility room. Along with the kiln came a terrific mould for a large platter. I made a dozen or so and painted them with an image of three fat ladies reclining on deckchairs with an Arabian building in the background. They all sold, and soon I started taking orders for personalising the platters. I created a desert range with camels, dunes, adobe houses and date palms – and experienced more success.

So now the Hot Art range included soft furnishings, paintings, ceramics, twirling tassels and a few other odds and ends. At each monthly market I was out of stock by the end of the day – my retail venture was turning out to be a little goldmine.

Production became a bit of an issue, and the inside of our villa was starting to look like a madwoman-artist’s studio. There were precious pinnies hanging in the lounge to dry, ceramic platters piled on the sideboard ready to be painted, a mountain range of plain cotton cushions ready for decoration, and cartons of *My Arabian Childhood* awaiting personalisation. Shane was more than tolerant and April and Samuel were very understanding, especially as I’d commandeered their

playroom as a storage area.

After a few months I had a booming business on my hands, and my production schedule was full and much more streamlined. I had a process and workflow pattern now, and I was having so much fun with the yin of my creative side balancing out against the yang of my business side. I even employed a man on a part-time basis to help paint my ceramics.

I’d finally found something that not only filled the empty days but gave me a real purpose and sense of achievement. For the first time while living in Saudi Arabia, I was fulfilled. I was totally content and I was in my element. I reasoned that my products must have been good if they were selling so well, and I genuinely felt that I’d hit my straps as an artist.

I started on a series of large, splashy paintings of flowers in very colourful vases. One of the art galleries in Kindi Plaza took several and displayed them in their window. They sold. Now I was making sales to local Saudi women as well as the expat girls.

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‘Swimmingly’ is a strange word, and I’d always thought it a bit silly. But things were indeed going swimmingly for me. I was busy doing what I loved. The kids were happy in school, Shane was happy in his job and he was also happy that I was happy. Happy wife, happy life...love that concept!

He’d always known that his job in Saudi would have an expiration date, and we were approaching the seven-year milestone, a long stretch in that kind of environment. He loved his job and enjoyed working with Bryan, who was in the same squadron: they’d now been flying together on-and-off for nearly a decade. Shane would say: “When the kids reach high-school age, the time will be right to leave Riyadh.” But that was still a little way off and everything now was rosy. I’ll use that American term again – it was *copasetic*.

It seemed I wasn’t alone in eventually finding a level of comfort in Riyadh – Ellie, Melody, and Sue were also happy and had slotted into comfortable routines. We still had a great social life peppered with barbecues and parties, and there was a solid ‘lunch bunch’ of girls who always had fun creating new dishes from well-thumbed cookery magazines. Things were also getting a little more lively on the compound with the inclusion of a private cinema. Wendy from the zebra-striped villa ran the cinema, and would screen whatever movie she could get her hands on – some old and some even older. It didn’t matter – it was fun.

And our family expanded with the arrival of a gorgeous Dalmatian puppy which had been dumped. It adopted us and bonded our family even more tightly. All we needed was a cat and we would have looked the perfect model of the ideal family. It wasn’t something that I took for granted. I knew we were living a good life in a privileged sector of society and I thanked God (or maybe even Allah) for it.

And to add substance to our utopian existence, I’d formed a special friendship with Princess Maha. She was one of the most elegant, compassionate, generous and caring women I will ever have the honour of knowing. I adored her and felt our association was one of the greatest gifts I could ever have been given. Without Maha, there would have been a gaping cavity in my Saudi life.

When I spent that glorious weekend at her brother’s palace in the desert, Maha had noted my interest in the dates produced on her plantation. They were delicious: their flavour was unmistakable. During the summer months I’d often arrive home to find a box of dates on my doorstep together with a little note from Maha. The fruit was exquisite, and was always eagerly consumed by my family.

Maha's dates and the other fabulous foods of the Middle East played an important part in all our lives – I had blissfully forgotten about most of the things I'd cooked in my previous life. However, I was still receiving my censored editions (think Maggie Beer in a Texta-ed black abaya) of the *Australian Gourmet Traveller*. The recipes and new ideas in that magazine still excited me. One day when I was talking to Maha about a recipe for Peking Duck, she casually mentioned that she'd never tried it. I couldn't resist the urge to cook it, so I organised a dinner in her honour as a thank-you for the date deliveries. It was to be a girls' night, so I invited Robbie and Aruna, my Indian cooking teacher, to join Maha and me.

I fed the kids and prepared a meal for Shane so that he could make himself scarce. Maha would not be dressed in her abaya: he had to secrete himself upstairs so that he couldn't see her.

But I saw her – and she looked gorgeous.

When she arrived and removed her abaya and headscarf, she revealed a most exquisite two-piece ensemble in soft blues, mauves and grey. The fabric was a kind of gauze that I'd never seen before. She'd completed the outfit with a simple grey pearl necklace that looked so elegant and *right*. Maha had a way of always looking as if she'd stepped out of the pages of *Harper's Bazaar*. She had such an abundance of grace and poise that I'm sure she would have looked perfectly splendid in a hessian sack.

Aruna also looked beautiful in her magnificent sari, and Robbie looked resplendent – as always – in a cerise coloured blouse that coordinated perfectly with her glamorous hot pink fingernails: after all she was the queen of manicures. Robbie was good friends with Maha and was overjoyed at the dinner invitation. Being a natural conversationalist, she held court and kept the mood buoyant while I cooked.

I couldn't resist wearing one of my precious pinnies, but I did stick to a conservative number so as not to offend Maha. I presented the duck, which was a triumph, and followed with a rich sticky-date pudding – using Maha's dates, of course. The meal that I'd made from my much-loved source of inspiration was perfect, and I was delighted with the result. Aruna asked for the sticky-date pudding recipe, which I'd borrowed from the great British cook Delia Smith. I'd tweaked it a little and added a few variations, so I had no compunction in calling it my own. Sorry, Delia, but mine's better.

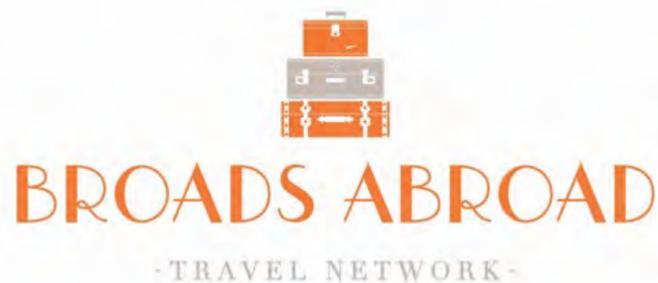
I always take it as a great compliment when someone asks for my recipe. It means that the dish was a success and that my creation will be reborn in someone else's kitchen. The person can modify the recipe as they wish, but the request means that they liked it enough to reproduce it, and I am always happy to oblige.

But Maha was more interested in my apron. She asked if I'd mind teaching her how to paint in a similar style to the flying woman, and of course I took her request as another great compliment. I was now considered a good enough artist to teach others! I blushed and said, "Of course. When would you like to have your lesson?" I was so excited about returning Maha's favour.

The end of the summer break was a time that would probably work well for both of us, so she opened her leather diary and gave me a few options. I thumbed through my own diary and shuffled a few less important engagements to settle on one of the dates she'd given me.

"Okay, this date is good," I said, writing the words 'Painting with Maha' on the page.

It was September 12<sup>th</sup> 2001. Or – as the Americans would now say – the day after 9/11.



Photography and logo provided by BroadsAbroad.net.