

# CALLOUT



## Salaam alaikum from Riyadh!

The Kingdom.

For some of us it has been a second home for a decade. For some of us, it was home for a while. For some of us it is where we are currently camping. For some of us, it is the occasional business trip. For the rest of us, it is just the stuff of folklore.

And now, it is home to our brand new office. So what say we all live, or relive, the KSA life for a day.

*Marhaba habibi!*

## Straight From the Camel's Mouth

7:00 AM at Hanakiya Street, Villa Number 11. This 10-bedroom edifice located in a swanky Riyadh neighbourhood is home for our comrades in Riyadh. Deep in the recesses of the villa, an alarm goes off. And rings.



And rings some more. It fails to produce the intended effect on the room occupant, but it does wake up everyone else at the villa. Some good-natured door-banging later, a sleepy-eyed Sayan finally opens the door. And grins. It's just another morning in Riyadh.

## Cosa Nostra

What happens when the number of bathrooms in a house are half the number of bedrooms? Correct. *Bathroom Blitzkrieg*. Legend has it that one particular bathroom battle was so fiercely fought that in the end, the door had to be replaced.

"Juice *kudi*, chai *kudi*" fusses Nasser the legendary cook-cum-caretaker. Nasser loves to prepare king-sized meals and lovingly force-feed them to our consultants as though it were their last. "*Korchu korchu*", he insists, "a little more, just a little." Nasser's ministrations are singularly responsible for collective and irreversible weight gain among our entire KSA clan.



Stuffed to bursting, everyone gathers around to leave for work. Edwin is spotted crooning in Malayalam to the five cats that prowl the villa. We hear the cats in KSA go *miyaan* instead of *meow* and look like this.



Enter Mustafa—the formidable Sudanese chauffer with loads of attitude and a swagger to boot. This much-loved octogenarian speaks only Arabic, with a smattering of English, so conversations are short. But without Mustafa, getting anywhere in Riyadh is *mushkila mushkila* as he likes to say.



## All in a day's work

Of course the clients love us, and as PC put it "we have built credibility beyond credentials." Touché. So naturally we're treated like family at the client office we operate out of.



After the daily brainstorming and update meetings, we respectfully wait in suspended animation as

morning prayers or *salaah* are relayed via speakers. We use the break to click some snazzy pictures for



Callout. Lunchtime is always eventful—it usually starts with a scramble to grab a table at the mall housed in the same building. Food is bountiful, with

plenty of options to choose from (some more cause for irreversible weight gain)



After a hard day's work, we have to perfectly time our exit, lest it clash with Mustafa's prayer time. Then some catching up with folks back home and Nasser's inexplicably lavish dinner. Dinner and postprandial banter is usually intense political discourse – ideas are bandied, viewpoints are shared, opinions are argued, and the occasional plate is hurled. (Okay, we made up the last bit).

## Errors and omissions

Linguistic nuances make for interesting client situations. Like the time when, in the middle of a critical strategy meeting, a senior member of the client team suddenly announced that he needed to pray. A brief period of stunned silence was followed by the sudden realisation that he simply needed to pray. Meantime, Raghu has been fondly and inadvertently christened Raju because the "guh-s" and "juh-s" are a tad mixed up in Arabic. What's in a name when it comes to client love, eh? Speaking of, one time, a client lovingly insisted that one of the consultants finish his plate of what was a particularly unappetising variety of cookie. A week later, some of the ghastly cookies were discovered stashed behind a painting and were stinking up the room!

## Brothers-in-arms

Our Riyadh setup is not an office, it is a brotherhood. Where there is remarkable camaraderie and all that it entails—jokes, leg-pulling and our favourite—pranks! Like the time one rookie was dispatched all over Riyadh to find "date palm ointment" for someone's "arthritic mother" only to discover that the said oil and said mother were both entirely imaginary. Or the time when Karthik (fondly called Kaatu) discovered that someone had used



the white board in the common room to publicly proclaim "Cleanliness is next to Kaatu-ness". Another time, we were feeling adventurous and got home an ostrich egg to discover that ginormous eggs made ginormous omelettes and couldn't be finished in a sitting!

## Cooling off

No movie screens, no local watering hole, and the only dates you can truly enjoy are the edible kind—so whatto do? We deal with it just like self-respecting Indian would do—we *cricket the heck outta it*.



Enter the rampaging Malinga—our Edwin who grinds to a halt at the crease and hurls the ball like there is no tomorrow. Cut to Vivine whose reflex catches are a sight to behold. Ramki's cricket is pro-league stuff, Sayan has a jaw-dropping spin loop and Raghu has spectacular batspeed. PC is also quite committed to the cause of cricket and even broke a finger once to prove it. Then there is Amartya the Chinaman bowler and Harsha-the-sledger-Prakash who can deliver quite the mouthful. And while we are on the subject of nicknames, Amartya also goes by the name Teelu and Sayan is called Zee (explanations on request).



We also love weekend movie screenings, with movies hand-picked in turn. And we love eating out at everyone's pet joints in turn. Like we said, food is plentiful, be it Kudu (the McDonalds of KSA), Indian summer (everyone's favourite), Lahori Khabay—with divine Pakistani food and Indian Spice where for some biz-zare reason the food color sticks to people's hands after they have been licked clean!

## Aliom Going Mataar!

Soon it is time to visit home. Passport. Check. Five gallons of the intoxicating Al Marai Chocolate milk. Check. Dates for everyone back home. Check. Goodie bag from Lulu mall. Check. Pit stop at Azizia mall for something for the missus. Check. Full compliance to all behavioural codes lest we run into trouble with the *mutawah*. Check. (Innocuous joke about the perils of living in the restrained realm. Check!)



Mustafa is given the usual brief "*Aliom going Mataar!*" (*Aliom* =today, *mataar* = airport) and Mustafa nods. *Maafi Mushkila* he says...no problem!



Big *shukran* to all at KSA- Ramki, for the extremely thoughtful photography (*you get us*), Amartya, Edwin, Sayan and Raghu for precious soundbytes, Harsha for digging into his photo archives, Vivine for letting us in on Saudi's best kept secrets and PC for some really clever reactions to our pokings and prod-dings.

And that's a wrap, *Inshallah* see you soon!

## In Other News

Balasubramiam Ramani (Bala) and Anant Shroff have joined us as Senior Consultants in Mumbai and Delhi.

## Changing Colours

Okay, so we had said that the new Avalon colour palette is coming soon and hold your breath and all that, but the drumroll has gone on a little longer than expected, so...well hold your breath some more.