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Western Promises

Young Saudis have an all expenses-paid ticket to study in Vancouver, and they're getting more than just a university education **By Remy Scalza**

Education

BY SAUDI

Arabian standards, Trad Bahabri, a 21-year-old from the capital city of Riyadh, may be a good driver. By Vancouver standards, however, he is not. One afternoon during Eid, the holiday that marks the end of the Muslim holy month of Ramadan, Bahabri is driving north on Knight trying to get to Richmond. This is the wrong direction. He eyes oncoming traffic, slams on the brakes, and makes an abrupt U-turn in his Chrysler 300, a hulking new sedan with an imposing metal grille. "Saudis like American cars," he explains. "We don't have to worry about the gas." By the time we finally crest the Knight Street Bridge, other drivers have begun to stare. It's not just his driving skills that are attracting attention. To mark the holiday, Bahabri is in traditional Saudi dress: a flowing white robe known as a *thobe*, which he stayed up late ironing, and a brilliant red and white-checked head scarf, or *shemagh*. The shem-



Cultural intersections Part of a Saudi baby boom, Trad Bahabri is one of 4,100 students here thanks to a \$420 million-scholarship program

agh spills over the headrest and flaps around when the window is rolled down.

Bahabri stops in an industrial part of Richmond near Ikea and parks behind a drab cinderblock building with a sign strung above the doorway: Saudi Students Society of British Columbia. Later in the day there will be a feast to commemorate the end of Ramadan. A small crowd of

men—some in thobes and shemaghs, and just as many in jeans and hoodies—is already gathering out front.

They file inside, remove their shoes, and climb the stairs to a room decorated with posters of King Abdullah. The group is having trouble sourcing enough pita bread to feed the 300 guests expected. Someone hands Bahabri, who has volunteered to help

cook for the party, a tiny cup of strong Arabic coffee and a paper plate of Timbits. "At home, Ramadan is the best month of the year," he says, pausing to give a friendly *salaam alaikum* (peace unto you) to a new arrival. "But it's hard to get in the spirit here."

Since 2007, Saudi Arabia has been exporting something besides oil: its brightest students. The King Abdullah Foreign Scholarship Program sends young Saudis abroad to earn bachelor's and advanced degrees at universities around the world. There are already 62,000 Saudis studying in 24 countries. The Saudi government has a few criteria: it encourages coursework in areas like math, engineering, and physics; students must return home after they complete their degrees; and men can come alone, but women must be chaperoned by male relatives.

As might be expected from an oil-rich country, the Saudi government has spared few expenses. Along with tuition, a full year of language training, medical insurance, and yearly trips home, students get a monthly stipend of \$2,700.

After the U.S. and Britain, Canada has emerged as the most popular destination, with more than 10,000 Saudi students already here and another 5,000 or so spouses and

“Since 2007, Saudi Arabia has been exporting something besides oil: its brightest students”

children. Sixty more students arrive each day, and many of them choose Vancouver, thanks to mild weather and a strong university system. More than 4,100 Saudis now study here under the scholarship program, which gives a hefty financial boost to local language schools, not to mention our cash-hungry universities. “This is very big news in the ESL business,” says Michael Weiss, director of UBC’s English Language Institute. Weiss estimates that the language institute alone receives more than \$1.5 million a year from Saudi students. Indeed, the sums gushing into Canada are staggering: this year, the Saudi government will spend an estimated \$420 million on the scholarships, up from \$380 million last year. By 2015, that figure is expected to top \$700 million.

Officially, this baby boom generation will bring Western expertise back home to the Gulf. “Upon graduation, returning scholars will represent a blend of the very best academic knowledge the world has to offer, as well as an understanding of a broad variety of the world’s many different customs and traditions,” Dr. Faisal Mohammad Al-Mohanna Abaalkhail, the cultural attaché to the Saudi Arabian embassy in Ottawa, wrote in an email. Unofficially, there’s another motivation: to lessen Saudi Arabia’s dependence on oil. Even the most optimistic estimates predict crude reserves will last only 50 years. “The Saudi regime realizes the need to prepare for a future in which their country won’t be able to rely on exporting

massive amounts of oil, either because they run out or because climate-change policies take the global economy away from fossil fuels,” explains Michael Byers, a UBC political science professor who focuses on international relations.

Besides the homesickness endemic to foreign students, Saudis face unique hurdles in Vancouver. University admission standards are more exacting than Saudi equivalents, and years after arrival many students remain stuck in English-language and college-prep classes.

Saudi students face another challenge: going home. Twenty-year-old Abdulaziz “Zizo” Almohammadi arrived in January. He just started a bachelor’s in marketing at Kwantlen University and works out at Steve Nash Fitness World. In a text from his BlackBerry, he explains: “We can’t imagine how we used to go outside when it’s 50 degrees! Or feel weird talking to strange women! Or not be able to go to the mall any time cuz sometimes it’s ‘women and families only.’” Intended to show young Saudis the world, King Abdullah’s program has also brought their homeland into sharper focus, leaving many students in an uneasy limbo between cultures and countries.

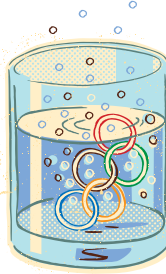
Back in the kitchen at the Saudi Students Society in Richmond, Bahabri, who’s in his second year of a computer science degree at SFU, lifts the lid off an industrial-sized pot on the stove. “This is the real stuff. You can’t get this here,” he says, stirring a simmering blend of spiced eggs,

cheese, onions, and tomatoes, a Saudi staple called *shakshouka*. The kitchen is crowded with a platoon of volunteers chopping, mixing and shouting instructions in Arabic. A student lugging a stockpot of ground beef elbows Bahabri out of the way.

By the time feasting begins, Saudi teens and young men from places like Abbotsford and West Van have packed the student centre. They sit cross-legged on the floor, in front of a long plastic sheet adorned with season’s greetings in Arabic.

“This is what I miss most about home,” Bahabri says, stuffing a pita with shakshouka. After a while, the room becomes quiet except for the sound of eating. When the pita supply runs out, someone brings out hot dog buns from the Real Canadian Superstore.

Olympics



Hangover Cures

What we need for this post-Olympics winter is a good old-fashioned crisis

By Steve Burgess

LITTLE KIDS LOVE Christmas. They lie awake listening for the clatter of reindeer hooves on the roof and the “ho, ho ho” of the jolly fat man. But

what if Santa came back every night? Those same kids would dread the clatter of reindeer hooves and the booming voice shouting down the chimney: “Hiya kids! Got nothing for ya. On Dancer! On Prancer!”

For awhile, that appeared to be the principle behind the Olympic countdown clock. Months after the closing ceremonies it sat on the lawn of the Vancouver Art Gallery with the same readout: 0000; 00:00:00. In February 2007 the clock started ticking off the seconds to what then seemed an impossibly far-off date with the world in 2010. Once the Games began, it counted up the days, hours, and minutes until the grand finale. Afterward it just sat, a digital shelf offering up two rows of stale doughnuts. Like January visits from Santa, the message of the Olympic Clock repeats every day: “Sorry, suckers. Got nothing for ya.”

Finally, this October, somebody wised up and the clock was moved—split in half, in fact, with one part headed for Whistler and the other to the refurbished BC Place. And yet what the clock represented is still very present. Everywhere you look in the city you’ll find reminders that this isn’t the winter everyone was waiting for. Robson Square, last February’s throbbing civic heart, has been a construction zone for months. BC Place looks like a bald guy with his hat off. The former parking lot on the corner of West Georgia and Cambie that was home to the Canada Pavilion is, well, a parking lot. Down by the new convention centre, the

four-armed Olympic Torch sits like a dead campfire. Some have called it beautiful; some have said it looks like a memorial to fallen pipefitters and furnace-duct repairmen. Instead of escalating excitement, we have only memories of past glory. It all evokes comparisons to Edmonton and its City of Champions sign along the highway. Erected in the heady days of great Oilers and Eskimos teams, the sign should probably now be fitted with a device that triggers mocking laughter as you drive by.

It's understandable that we face a collective let-down this post-Olympics winter. Last year at this time we were both excited and nervous, bracing for God knew what. Then Hurricane 2010 struck full force and for two weeks we hung on for dear life. In the end it turned out pretty well.

The release of tension may be part of the letdown. During the Second World War, Winston Churchill wrote that "nothing in life is so exhilarating as to be shot at without result." We survived the Olympics and now life seems a little *too* quiet. Perhaps what Vancouver needs this winter is some trouble. A Middle East peace conference perhaps. Or maybe just a big sign on the edge of town reading: "Hey, Al-Qaeda! You're Not So Tough." Anything to remind us that for a couple of weeks there, our sleepy burgh was quite the little hot spot.

Not that we have escaped potential Olympic-related troubles. The largest of all 2010 mausoleums is located on Southeast False Creek, that lovely, state-of-the-art Echo Valley known as the Olympic Village. It

was intended to be a model community, and indeed it is. Today the Olympic Village boasts roughly the same number of inhabitants its tabletop architectural model had. The potential civic debt load from the condo project represents just the sort of unnecessary burden that was predicted by thoughtful critics (none of whom were smashing windows or holding up signs behind the CTV broadcast booth). The Olympic Village could go on generating nasty headlines and protests for a while yet.

All told, though, our Olympic hangover is relatively mild. Pity South Africa, now dotted with mammoth, nearly useless stadiums from the 2010 FIFA World Cup. It only wishes its white elephants were modern, eventually saleable condos. While it's fair to argue about spending priorities, there's no doubt the Canada Line and Sea-to-Sky Highway left our region with tangible long-term benefits. As for those gloomy reminders visible around town, pretty soon we'll have our Robson Square rink up and skating once more. BC Place will have a fancy new toupée. Every now and then they'll find an excuse to light up the Olympic furnace ducts.

As for the now-two Olympic clocks, a city official says they will be used to herald future sporting events. But why limit them to a snowboard festival in Whistler or a Lions game? We could use them to count down the days, hours, and minutes until the HST referendum on September 24, 2011.

Now that's a competition that will sell T-shirts. **vm**

DR. ALASTAIR CARRUTHERS & DR. JEAN CARRUTHERS

answer your questions about today's cosmetic advances & issues

Alastair Carruthers, FRCPC



COSMETIC DERMATOLOGIST

Jean Carruthers, MD, FRCSC



COSMETIC SURGEON

“ I try to take good care of my skin and I am reluctant to do an anti-aging skin-care regimen. I keep hearing about antioxidants. Should they be part of my anti-aging regimen? ”

— Lisa M. Whitworth, BC

Antioxidants protect our bodies from harmful “oxygen free radicals” that cause skin sun exposure, infrared radiation, cigarette smoke, and pollution. There is now evidence that antioxidants play an important role in anti-aging skin-care and many other medical conditions.

Common antioxidants include vitamins C, vitamin E, vitamin B3, coenzyme Q10, flavonoids, and polyphenols.

Antioxidants can be applied to the skin in the form of a cream, ointment or serum or taken internally through our diet or as a supplement. Foods high in antioxidants include brightly coloured fruits and vegetables, some vegetable oils and nuts, soy, and green tea. When taken internally they have been shown to reduce wrinkles, prevent skin cancer, and improve skin texture. The optimal dose and combination of antioxidants has not been determined yet.

When applied to the skin antioxidants have been shown to improve the skin by preventing sun damage, reducing wrinkles and pigmentation, improving skin texture and even reducing the risk of skin cancer.

Vitamin C is one of the most widely studied anti-oxidants for its anti-aging properties. Many forms of vitamin C in face creams are less effective because they are present in a form that is not readily absorbed by skin and can be quickly neutralized by oxygen. It is important to pick an effective and stable form of vitamin C like the one present in OR Ferulic, by SkinCeuticals. This daily cream contains high concentrations of Vitamin C, E, and Ferulic Acid. When used together these antioxidants provide substantial protection that works well with your daily sunscreen.

A combination of antioxidants, sunscreen, vitamin A cream and Intense Pulsed Light treatments can dramatically improve the quality of your skin.

The consultation with an experienced cosmetic physician can establish an ideal and personalized anti-aging skin-care regimen specifically for you.

— BEAUFORT BROMBERG, MD, FRCPC
— JEAN CARRUTHERS, MD, FRCSC
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Want your questions answered?

Send your questions to: ASK THE CARRUTHERS c/o Vancouver Magazine
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You could be published in the next issue!



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