

# Tolerance of Arabia

**F**ifteen girls died when a school in Mecca was set ablaze in 2002. The mutaween – or religious police – reportedly stopped the pupils from fleeing because they were not wearing the abaya, essential for all Saudi women when in public.

This is just one incident in a long list of alleged human rights abuses against women in the country. Lucy Misch, a single British fitness instructor, recently visited Saudi Arabia to challenge Western portrayals of the country being intolerant towards women – by teaching risqué pole dancing as exercise.

Misch was invited to the country by one of the kingdom's richest and most high-profile families after a Muslim woman attending her London classes recommended them to relatives back home. 'In a country where alcohol is outlawed and homosexuality is punishable by death – often beheading – I really didn't know where the law would stand on pole dancing,' says Misch. 'But I've always been adventurous. When else would I get a chance to visit Saudi? I decided to go for it.'

The 27-year-old had already challenged perceptions when she swapped the strip club for the living room to launch Britain's first pole dance exercise club in 2004. 'This woman, so many miles away, wanted the same thing

## Saudi pole dancing: JENNI MARSH reports on a woman who faced great risks to bring pole dancing to the strict Muslim kingdom of Saudi Arabia

as my clients in London, an exhilarating workout and to get fit,' says Misch. 'She loved that it was a feminine exercise and something she could feel sexy doing.'

For a non-Muslim Briton, entering and exiting Saudi Arabia is arduous. A male sponsor must accompany unmarried women and a visa is required to leave the country.

But with the permission of her mahram [a family member], Misch's host, Qahtani, wielded her status. Visas were fixed in days, first-class flights arranged and Misch was whisked through Riyadh airport with the immunity of a diplomat.

**W**orking mother Qahtani, 36, has a 12-year-old girl and a boy aged seven. She is unusual in Saudi, where only 15 per cent of women work. She is also the sole wife of her husband, Mohammed, something of a privilege in the country.

Under the guise of 'fitness equipment', Misch had shipped Qahtani three X-Stages worth £500 each – the first such poles ever allowed into Saudi Arabia – to be installed in a mirrored room set aside as a studio. Qahtani practised for two

hours each day, learning to climb the pole, do the splits upside down and create movement and fluidity.

'There's no cheating with pole, it's punishing,' says Misch. 'Qahtani did yoga and thought she was strong but her lower back was her weakness. Once you're spinning around the pole, you have to be completely strong. If you come off at high speed, it can be extremely dangerous.'

The pair trained in tight-fitting Lycra gym wear – a massive change from the abaya worn in public.

'There is a huge contrast between public and private,' says Misch. 'Women can't drive, yet we spent our days by the pool in bikinis. Not all women are chained to the cooker or the downtrodden race some media portrays. In fact, often the matriarch is the head of the family.'

After two weeks, Qahtani donned high heels and sports gear to put on a show for her family. 'They thought it was great, although the children were worried Mummy was going to fall off the pole,' says Misch.

But when Misch returned to Britain, she faced criticism from Saudi Muslims

after pictures of the pair wearing abayas on the pole appeared. One woman said: 'I found your photos disrespectful towards women who wear the hijab with dignity in Saudi and who would never step next to a dancing pole knowing its hideous roots.'

'The shot we took on the pole in the abaya was a stunt,' says Misch. 'Qahtani wanted to make a point.'

'One of my biggest frustrations is the pole is always associated with strip clubs when, in fact, it dates back to Indian mallakhamb – a male-dominated sport that challenges gymnasts to master feats around a wooden pole – or the Chinese pole, where circus acrobats perform stunts such as the flag, where they hang straight from the rod supported only by their hands.'

Misch is trying to distance pole dancing from seedy striptease connotations but concedes it's no mean feat. 'It was great to find a couple receptive to my ideas, and in Saudi Arabia of all places,' she says.

'When I got on the plane home, a woman wearing the full abaya sat next to me. She just had the slits of her eyes showing. I made eye contact and understood there was a real person underneath.'



**Behind closed doors:** Pole dancing has become a popular exercise in Britain, above. Saudi women out and about in the capital, main picture. The picture posed in the abaya, inset

## Rich v poor: A different way of living

Lucy Misch's Saudi clients were riding the wave of Saudi's oil boom. Upon her arrival she was met by a chauffeur driving a Land Rover Sport with the petrol tank filled up for just £5.

Her base for the fortnight was a 100-room palace with 50 servants. She was given her own wing and entourage.

'I never saw the kitchen,' says Misch. 'I was told if I wanted food to call the maid. We ordered from a menu every night and ate nine courses. If I left out my skinny jeans while I took a shower, they'd be washed and pressed straight away. I couldn't fit into them they were so tight by the end of the trip.'

Inside the gated compound, which covered a square mile, was a bowling alley, an aquarium, an Olympic-sized swimming pool with an electric roof that rolls back to create an open-air oasis, a spinning room and a gym.

While Misch concedes her brief immersion in Saudi culture was at a very privileged level of society, Qahtani and Mohammed's openness made her more receptive to parts of their culture, particularly the abaya.

However, at the opposite end of the social scale, Saudis were queuing for basics such as water.

The country is in the grip of rising inflation and sacred days such as individual weddings have been replaced by mass celebrations (pictured) where up to 400 couples marry at the same time to save money. The huge ceremonies are usually sponsored by Saudi royalty.



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