

# Sudan, Egypt, Bosnia and other interesting locations!!

What it's really like to go international –

the Good, the Bad and the Ugly??

By: Peter Welch, President & Founder, Sox International Inc.

The do's, the don'ts and the funny side!!!

After returning from Sudan (Khartoum) a few weeks ago, Matt asked me if I could put together a little article about these experiences and I very quickly agreed. I've certainly given this plenty of thought, and I am very pleased to have this opportunity to expose the reality of these overseas locations that is often at odds against the perceptions portrayed in the news media. For fear, however, of this article being perceived as somewhat somber or political, rest assured I'm sure you'll be very bemused at some of my stories to the point of total belief. However, I think it is also important to strike the right balance and put these countries and its people in the right perspective; for after all, we are a group of senior financial executives. Furthermore, if I were to use this article simply to bring out amusing moments, I think it would do a great disservice to our FENG members especially those like me who have experienced internationally first-hand. To those members considering international work, a certain mind-set and attitude is critical but be certain of one thing, you will change over time.

For as I thought about this, it occurred to me that not only Sudan but Egypt (Cairo) as well as my experiences in Bosnia can also be brought into this reflection of what happens on the other side of the world. What life is actually like working in these somewhat interesting and controversial locations? Let me also say that despite the often preconditioning that we have towards these other countries and its peoples, we are usually so far from the truth and the reality of what they're really like.

I have been blessed with seeing and experiencing a lot, and without a doubt it has changed me. Do I still possess personally some prejudices and biases, absolutely yes (and to some degree, they have been reinforced)? For to deny this would almost be akin to denying my humanity, none of us are perfect? But have all these experiences changed my opinion of the world in its present state, along with all the various political and other initiatives being conducted by various governments worldwide, the answer is also an unambiguous yes.

Regarding the reference to news media, I refer very directly to Sudan, and of course Darfur being very much in the news of late. For the sake of immediate clarification, the few weeks I spent in Sudan were in Khartoum only. However notwithstanding this statement, I must confess that given all the negative exposure in the news I was

very pleasantly surprised at what I saw in Khartoum first-hand. This same feeling of surprise came over me, both when I arrived in Cairo a little while ago now (during a period when Arab and Israeli conflicts were again becoming active and anti-American sentiments were starting to run high) and then later in Bosnia-Herzegovina. In Cairo, for example, we were told not to come to work one day because students were protesting and driving by in a car (obviously not looking Egyptian) could evoke some reaction.

Now don't get me wrong. I am not suggesting that all these countries should be viewed through rose colored glasses. I think, however, that an important distinction needs to be made between the governments and the ugliness that is the really the target of our anger versus the actual people that were born there and live and work in that country that is after all, their home. Unfortunately, many times, the press and media coverage tarnish all with the same brush. Within a very short time, those of you who choose to work internationally will quickly develop a different perspective.

Talking of different perspectives, both in Khartoum and Cairo driving is an experience all to itself. In Khartoum, the driver, depending on his mood and the direction in which he was going would either drive on the right side of the road and make a U-turn or drive on the wrong side of the road, and then cut across. Sometimes they would drive on the sidewalk, which by the way was nothing more than sand and dirt all in an attempt to get somewhere faster. Intersections were very amusing. Cars from all directions would enter the intersection at the same time, and then buses and SUVs would push their way across, followed by the three wheeler taxis (American lawn-mowers with two seats and a cover) and finally, the donkey carts in which the poor donkey was constantly whacked with a stick of some kind to compete for speed albeit not very.

This however was an improvement on Cairo. Unlike Khartoum where you have the main roads that are tarmac and all side streets are dirt and sand and plenty of pot-holes and ditches, Cairo had mostly all tarmac roads but driving could only be described as Egyptian. For example, you have a two-lane road approaching a traffic light, so far so good but now, another two or three lanes on the wrong side of the road also form awaiting the light to turn green. At that moment, and amazingly enough, the now 4-5 lanes suddenly merged back into two all as a result of various finger signals between the drivers. Just imagine doing this in New York City!

The Egyptian minibus is another sight to behold. Passengers are not only inside but hanging on the outside (standing on the footplate) as well as on top of the minibus hanging on to the luggage bars. Yes it is true; they do not wear seat-belts.

When we as financial executives and/or consultants make decisions to live and work overseas whether for short or long-term periods, we cannot afford to be politically naïve. We must also be willing to start seeing the world and perhaps America as well

from a different perspective. It can be a real eye-opener!! You may experience for the first time, the results of America's (or Britain's) initiatives overseas (good and bad), or perhaps that of other countries, and you will hear viewpoints that can be very critical at times of everything you may consider sacred, i.e. the American way of life. Remember and never forget you are a guest in every country in which you work and are never there to preach American or British dogma.

Let me give you a good example. In Bosnia-Herzegovina I had the honor to arrange a conference between department heads (30 + years Soviet-regime veterans) and senior officials within some municipalities that I was responsible for under a USAID project. This was the first of its kind, and the intent was to enhance communication. As both an American (actually British as well) and an entrepreneur I was able to explain the American business model contrasting it with their approach, without, for one second, indicating any disrespect to the system and approach that we were there to encourage change within. My approach was that of being an honored guest and not to tell them what they should do, just to make observations and comments. In essence, you need to become a quasi-diplomat.

Another thing, in Bosnia-Herzegovina, very unlike other countries in which I've worked, you could only refer to the local language and never mention Serb or Croat. As both a stranger and a guest you had to display complete neutrality to the terrible history of internal strife that was present everywhere. Only about ½ mile from my hotel they found another unexploded land-mine which by the way can't be located with metal detectors. If you worry about such things, then never work in these locations as most countries in one form or another have a history you don't want to know the details about?

This brings me to another point. During the period that I was in Khartoum, several times I saw convoys of Sudanese troops all wearing dark-green military uniforms. A question flashed through my mind was whether any of those troops were involved with the killings in Darfur? Yet, at the same time, another thought crossed my mind that all the Sudanese people I was either working with or had met were extremely kind and nice people; I liked them a great deal.

In every country that I have worked, I have found that for the most part besides the obvious language and cultural differences, that we are all identical. What do I mean by this? In many countries today, given the behavior of those governments that country is given a certain label. It is that label that is frequently referenced by the media and the press that greatly contribute towards our perception here in the States of its peoples.

However, when you travel to and work in those countries you find many, many regular folk just simply trying to economically improve themselves and build a family. Having worked in Egypt as well as Dubai (UAE) and Sudan, it is very hard not to feel

emotionally for the Arab people that apart from a minority of extremists (not to be political here) are a very warm and wonderful people. These will be the things you learn and the feelings that emerge after long exposure to other peoples and cultures. You will no longer form an opinion based on CNN!!

I fully realize that there is a big difference between being a consultant and taking a full-time job overseas. However, regardless of that distinction, I think that every American or British ex-pat should never go overseas trying to make other countries become American or just like England. Whether you are a CFO or a consultant, you have a great deal to contribute with all your years of experience but in both cases, the local management and employee's, will quickly resent any attempt to indoctrinate. There is an enormous difference between training the local staff on an alternative methodology, taking into account local and cultural differences, versus simply telling them to do it another way, i.e. the American way. These comments, of course, have nothing to do with for example, transitioning an overseas company to either GAAP or IFRS for mandatory reporting purposes.

Not that long ago I also had an opportunity to spend a few months in Georgia and experienced the people and culture of a country that gained independence from the former Soviet Union. To this day I can still remember some very interesting observations regarding the democratic process that would perhaps surprise many of us here in the West. To the degree that nostalgia was expressed for the good old days under the Soviets would perhaps surprise many who see freedom as such a major goal to have been achieved at any price. To an American, figuratively speaking, standing in the wheat fields of Kansas, one might raise eyebrows upon hearing such statements and become very indignant and regard them as such an outrageous opinion. One has to however stand in the shoes of those that make such comments, and I think if positions were reversed, the same utterances would occur but with an American accent. And, by the way, if you'd personally heard that comment and negatively reacted, would have been a big mistake. When you work overseas, you have to learn to keep your mouth shut, very tightly at times; this is not easy, but you are not there to be political. Additionally, your colleagues would be greatly offended and angry if you showed disrespect to their opinion. Again, in whose shoes are you standing?

It is a shame, but it is true that there is an unfortunate transition in which both current and perhaps the next-generation as well, have to undergo great difficulties and hardships to realize the fruits that probably only their children's children will reap. Remember that when the seeds of democracy are sowed, they're often marketed from the perspective of what can be achieved through democracy and freedom that unequivocally is correct. However the reality is that the existing generation finds itself in a position whereby such lofty goals may never be achieved truly in their lifetime. And so it is not surprising that a certain level of discontent and frustration sets in.

Such gargantuan change and dislocation is also compounded by the fact that the entire economic process and cycle has to be effectively replaced and overhauled; a task that can never be achieved within any perception of a short period. Here, we measure things in decades not years. It is effectively the equivalent of having to process reengineer an entire country; an interesting thought you must admit.

Now let me make a little step backwards here. I have just stated that nostalgia for the old regime is in a way not surprising; and yet, this statement was made against a backdrop in which in the early 90s (15 odd years ago), around 12:30 a.m. one morning, Soviet troops were ordered to open fire on a group of students demonstrating for democracy and many were killed. The point I am making behind these comments is that you cannot live and work internationally without becoming immersed and involved in the feelings and sensitivities of the people around which you work.

So how do you deal with working and living in an overseas location and maintain a balance, relative to the opinions and perceptions you brought with you on the plane, against the change or metamorphosis that you'll experience by directly first-hand seeing and feeling the real people of that country. You'll have to find out first-hand for we're all different!

Oh, not forgetting an important aspect of overseas working, food poisoning /stomach-flu. I've had food poisoning in Egypt and Bosnia and stomach-flu in Sudan. In Bosnia, I had the experience of going to the local hospital and being given morphine through an IV-drip, decided not to ask if the needle was clean. In Egypt, I was in bed for 3-4 days and in Sudan I also had a mild bout of malaria as well. It's all part of the international experience.

Finally, please don't follow the path of so many before you that work overseas and never bother even learning how to say, 'thank you' and 'please' in the local language. I've repeatedly heard from so many people in these countries that they delight in a foreigner making the effort to use local words; it shows respect. They'll never tell you but they feel hurt and offended when you can't make the effort. It all boils down to the right attitude and mind-set. Personally, I know quite a few Georgian words and several expressions in Arabic; it can be a lot of fun if you try as that guest in a foreign country. My goal is to pick up Russian words and phrases; that next project!!