

For those of you who were unable to attend the Embassy Briefing meeting back in January, I am delighted to have the opportunity to introduce my wife, Sharon Wardle, and myself, Peter Millman, to RGBB Newsletter readers.

I have taken over from Gareth O'Brien as Head of the Commercial Team here in Riyadh, while Sharon has a new, Kingdom-wide role as Deputy Director for Trade and Investment, working to the Director, Carma Elliot, in Jeddah.

We arrived here from a freezing, wet London in early January and were made to feel very welcome and at home straight away. Not only because it was freezing and wet here too, but also when we discovered on our first morning that the RGBB had a Board meeting scheduled at our house for a couple of days later!

But seriously, our first impressions of the Kingdom have been very positive and in stark contrast to some of the images of Saudi Arabia portrayed by unbalanced media coverage back in the UK. In fact, one of our early challenges is to find better ways to communicate some of these positive messages back to the UK business community. UK firms need to be more alive to the tremendous opportunities here across a surprisingly diverse range of sectors, while keeping a more rational perspective on wider security issues. I hope this is one area where we can work closely with the RGBB and its Business Development Committee. I know that Chris Maybury is working hard to spark some fresh interest and enthusiasm for the Special Interest Groups and he has our full support in this.

A bit of background about us: Sharon is a career diplomat and has served full postings in Moscow and Beirut and

shorter stints in India, Bangladesh, Congo and Poland. From 1996 she was London-based and was involved in various UK Trade and Investment HQ jobs, including UAE Country Manager and, most recently, Head of the Near East & North Africa Unit. Sharon also took a couple of years out from the Civil Service on secondment to the British Consultants and Construction Bureau, a trade organisation representing some 300 UK firms operating internationally.

My background is a mix of private sector – I spent 10 years in various sales and marketing roles in the travel industry – and, more recently, the public sector. I joined the Department of Trade & Industry in 1990 and am currently on loan from the DTI to the FCO. I have done a variety of trade jobs at the DTI, mostly focused on support for major infrastructure projects overseas across a number of sectors including telecommunications, education & training, petrochemicals and construction. During that time my geographical focus was almost exclusively on China and South East Asia, so this part of the world is still very new to me.

Collectively, the RGBB has a vast wealth of knowledge and expertise in doing business here and is therefore a valuable resource for us and for British business visitors. We will continue to nurture the close co-operation between the RGBB and the British Embassy that has been built up over time. This, combined with the support of our excellent commercial teams across the Kingdom, should help us in our shared aim to see British business interests flourishing here.

Sharon and I have already met a good number of RGBB members, both socially and in a business context. We hope to meet very many more of you over the coming three years.

NEW ARRIVALS



WHERE ARE THEY NOW?

One thing about working in the Middle East is that you just can't get away from some people. Not surprisingly, a goodly number of ex-Riyadh ex-pats are still around the region and still in touch.

Just in Doha for example, drive around the streets for an hour and you could easily bump into Martin, Max, John, Greg, Leslie, Mike, Chip or Claudio, all of whom at some time or other have done their bit with the RGBB.

Shaw for example, writes: "With Doha being so small, there's a great game to play, before you leave the office you tell your mate a complete stonker of a rumour and dash home to see if you can beat the rumour home to the wife!" [That by the way, is just about the only extract from his latest missive that I could put into print - but it sounds like he's having a good time!]

Not to be out-done, Fletch sends in about 50,000 words, in typical Max style, which could fill the magazine by itself! [Sorry Max - just no room this time - give me a call about publishing your memoirs]

All our Doha correspondents confirm there's a warm welcome from the friendly Qataris if that's where you're thinking of going, but they caution, good hotel accommodation is hard to find, as are the sort of compounds you might be used to, and a lot of things are much more expensive, so sort it all out before you arrive.



The best guess population estimate for Doha is about 650,000, with about 170,000 Qataris and 5000 Brits. With that mix, the things to do are quite different from what you might be used to. Huge amounts of cash have been injected into the local economy with the Asian Games now less than 20 months away. There's also activity of course on the Qatar - Bahrain road link and a suggested road and rail link to Abu Dhabi. Sounds like quite a bustling sort of place.

One last thing, I promised Shaw a quick plug for his club in return for the free tea & biscuits, so if you want to see what he's up to, check it out on www.doha-club.com

