



# SWEDE on KUWAIT

by EMILY BEERS

CrossFit Games athlete

Marlene Andersson explains

how she's grown to love her

adopted Middle Eastern country.

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Asia's sole female representative at the CrossFit Games, Marlene Andersson wore more clothing than her competitors out of respect for the traditions of her adopted country.



Andersson had to deal with the heat at the CrossFit Games, but she's also had to adapt to summer temperatures above 110 F in Kuwait.

It was 93 F at the StubHub Center.

The heat of the midsummer sun made the Triple 3—3-km row, 300 double-unders, 3-mile run—much tougher than it should have been.

Dry-mouthed, scorching-hot athletes were thankful for the various water stations. But even with hydration stops that also acted as a place for athletes to splash water on their heads, many of the fittest in the world were humbled as their running speed was reduced to a snail's pace. Even multi-year CrossFit Games champion Rich Froning had to walk on more than one occasion.

Needless to say, men were shirtless for the most part, while women wore little more than booty shorts and a sports bra. Except one.

Marlene Andersson, an expat Swede who was Asia's female representative at the Games, remained modestly covered, wearing a T-shirt and capri tights underneath slightly more conservative shorts.

It's not that she wasn't hot; she was. But representing Kuwait—a country that borders Saudi Arabia and Iraq and has a population of 3.3 million—comes with responsibilities the other 41 female competitors didn't have to deal

with. One of these responsibilities was to be mindful of how wardrobe choices might be perceived by the many Kuwaitis watching back home.

Andersson explained the minimalist apparel of her peers isn't seen as acceptable in Kuwaiti culture, and the last thing she wanted to do was offend people in a country that took her in with open arms.

"They have their views about what's decent or not," Andersson said. "What I try to do is at least live a little bit by their rules, so I don't want to act as if I'm a foreigner. I am living in their country, and I want to be respectful of the rules."

So out of respect for Kuwait and her Kuwaiti husband, Andersson chose to wear more conservative clothing than the rest of her competitors at the Games. While fellow athletes looked at her and thought, "Strip down, girl. It's stifling hot," Andersson has grown accustomed to training and competing in layers.

"All of my (Kuwaiti) friends and members of my box—they're all very open-minded people, so they probably wouldn't care whatever I was wearing. It's not like they're looking at the other athletes and cursing them," she said.

She continued: "But I wouldn't want someone to think, 'Oh my God, look at what she's wearing. And because I'm married to a Kuwaiti, I'm just taking my safety measures, just in case, and so nobody can say anything negative.'"

Andersson explained dress varies considerably from woman to woman in Kuwait. She estimated that 30 percent of women in Kuwait City, where she lives, wear a hijab—a veil that covers the head and chest—in public, while others wear headscarves.

"And then some only cover their hair, and then others dress in jeans and a T-shirt," she added.

From a Westerner's standpoint, Kuwait's culture is more modest, but Andersson has discovered people are ultimately just people. Her friends at her gym in Kuwait—Inspire Pure Fitness Kuwait/CrossFit 965—watched the CrossFit Games just like fans anywhere else in the world, and they were similarly awed by the athletes.

"They're watching, saying, 'Look how strong she is. Look how fast she is,'" Andersson said.

"They're just looking at performances, and, of course, they think the girls are hot. They look at that, too, obviously," she added with a laugh.

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—MARLENE ANDERSSON



## SWEDEN TO KUWAIT, VIA THE U.K.

Andersson, now 30, grew up in Sweden and moved to London, U.K., when she was 24 to work at a rehabilitation clinic. She discovered CrossFit while in London and admits she didn't take to it right away. Exhausted after her first session, she told herself she'd never do another, but three months later she decided to try again.

Before she knew it, she was coaching and competing in the sport and soon discovered she was pretty good. In 2014, Andersson won the Asia Regional and secured the event's lone qualifying spot in the CrossFit Games.

While living in London in 2013, one of her clients, a Kuwaiti named Waleed Al-Omar, connected her with Mike Campbell, a New Zealand native and owner of Inspire Pure Fitness Kuwait. Campbell was looking for new coaches and reached out to Andersson in London. She was surprised but flattered by the sudden job offer from a total stranger. Andersson had never been to Kuwait, but the adventurer in her was immediately interested.

"I was just, first of all, intrigued how he heard of me. And then he offered to come to London to do some interviews," she said.

Campbell traveled to London to meet up with his recruit. He explained what she'd be getting into and gave her a chance to ask questions about the small, prosperous country in the Middle East that holds just under 10 percent of the world's proven oil reserves.

"What he offered me was something very different. Work itself isn't different, but everything else was really different," she said.

Andersson had typical Western views of the Middle East and was a bit concerned about the cultural differences she'd experience.

"In Sweden, I saw a covered woman and thought, 'What does her husband do to her? She must be so suppressed. Her husband doesn't think highly of her,'" Andersson said of views influenced by societal and media stereotypes.

To calm her fears, she asked Campbell if she could visit Inspire Pure Fitness Kuwait before making her decision.

"He said no. If I wanted to see the job, I had to take it without going to Kuwait first," Andersson said.

Despite Campbell turning down her request, something told Andersson to put her concerns aside and take a risk. So she accepted the job offer and packed her bags.

## BUSINESS IN KUWAIT

Campbell, 38, moved to Kuwait seven years ago. Because his parents traveled for work, he had been roaming the globe since he was 2 years old, so it wasn't strange for him to settle in a foreign place.

Three years ago, Campbell joined up with a Kuwaiti business partner and opened his strength-and-conditioning facility. One year ago, he added CrossFit to the existing business, and CrossFit 965 was born.

Finance was one of the major reasons he decided to settle in Kuwait. Because most of the country's government expenditures are financed by oil revenue, Kuwait is a tax-free country. Individuals don't have to pay any personal income tax, Kuwaiti-owned businesses don't pay business taxes, and nobody pays for services such as water and electricity.

"Kuwait is one of the most affluent countries in the world. In three years, I was offered the ability to open my own gym several times. I was lucky that I found the right people who had a passionate goal of improving fitness and health," Campbell said.

He laughed when asked why he didn't let Andersson visit Kuwait before making her decision to work for him. He said he wasn't trying to be devious or trick her. On the contrary, Campbell was confident in Andersson and confident in the situation she would find herself in at his gym.

"I hand-select the coaches who are coming here. I hadn't met Marlene before, but a friend of mine knew her," he said. "She's an amazing person. She's got a lot going for her, but I think the No. 1 is she's just so humble. She is completely and utterly humble."

He knew he wanted her. It was just a matter of whether Andersson was willing to move.

"The other reason (for not letting her visit) was that I know they're going to be successful when they get here," Campbell added.

Campbell attributes his ability to guarantee his coaches' financial success to his compensation system and the

Kuwaitis who train at his gym. When a new coach arrives at his facility, Campbell guarantees the coach will very quickly acquire 35 hours a week doing one-on-one personal training. His clients pay the Kuwaiti equivalent of US\$90 per session, and the coach earns 50 percent commission.

Most of the clients at his gym work out with a personal trainer five or six days a week, dropping more than \$500 a week on fitness. Campbell's clients pay a small fortune because they can afford it, and working with a personal trainer has become a part of their culture. Campbell explained fitness is rapidly becoming more important to Kuwaitis, and their expectation is to have a full-time coach helping them reach their goals.

Campbell takes pride in his ability to give his coaches an opportunity to make a good living.

"If you don't look after your coaches, you haven't gotten anything," he said.

Campbell said he's also able to take care of his family very well.

"To be able to go home to New Zealand and look after my mom and dad (is great). I was never given anything I've got from my parents, so the ability to go home and buy my mom a new fridge and freezer and a new TV, it's quite nice to have the ability to do that," he said.

INSPIRE PURE FITNESS  
KUWAIT IS MADE UP OF  
ABOUT 90 PERCENT  
ARABS AND 10 PERCENT  
FOREIGNERS, AND  
EVERYONE INSTANTLY  
WELCOMED THE SWEDE  
INTO THEIR COMMUNITY.



At the 2014 Asia Regional, Andersson won three events and took the region's only spot in the CrossFit Games.



## ADAPTING AND THRIVING

One of the first things Andersson found difficult in Kuwait was the suffocating heat. Summer temperatures are stifling; they generally range from 107 to 118 F.

“The heat and humidity you need to learn how to handle . . . You have to try to stay out of the sun,” Andersson said.

Some other challenges for Westerners include the lack of nightlife and the fact alcohol is prohibited in Kuwait. Food options are also different. For starters, Kuwait’s population is mostly Muslim, so pork and pork products are prohibited. And the country sits on one of the driest deserts on Earth, so many fruits and vegetables have to be imported. Andersson immediately missed the local farmers markets of London, where she bought fresh, local, organic produce any day of the week, but she’s noticed Kuwait has started to change, even in the short time she’s been there.

“There’s a huge boom with gyms and fitness and awareness of food,” Andersson said.

Despite the small challenges of her new country, working and training at Inspire Pure Fitness Kuwait made her feel right at home. Her box is made up of about 90 percent Arabs and 10 percent foreigners, and everyone instantly welcomed the Swede into their community.

“It feels like any other box to me. I don’t get a different vibe. They don’t do things differently. They work just as hard. They push each other the same way,” Andersson said.

Men and women work out together, everyone supports each other, and Andersson’s role as a coach is same as it was in London. And just like any other box, genuine friendships form. Andersson felt a special connection with one local in particular, Beshar Al Awadhi. Awadhi was born in Boston, Massachusetts, but grew up in Kuwait. Awadhi’s mother was one of Andersson’s early clients in Kuwait, and soon Andersson started training Beshar, as well.

It soon became evident dating would be very different in Kuwait. In fact, dating as she knew it didn’t really exist. Andersson and Awadhi didn’t date because it’s not acceptable for a man and a woman to hang out together as a couple in public if they’re not married.

“It’s not considered proper. According to the Quran, that’s how it is,” Andersson said.

“He’s traditional and he follows traditional culture here, so I couldn’t date him unless I was engaged to him,” she added.

Instead, the couple started speaking on the phone quite regularly.

“That’s the only way we could speak. We never went out for dinner or to the movies or anything like that,” she said.

Awadhi isn’t what Andersson considers “ultra religious,” but he has his beliefs and sticks to them.

“He tries to be a good Muslim. You don’t lie. You don’t cheat,” Andersson said. She said Awadhi also follows other traditional Muslim customs such as fasting.

When initially contemplating her future with Awadhi, Andersson had to plan for challenges because she isn’t a Muslim.

“We were very honest about what we expected from each other once we got married. I told him, ‘If we ever get married, you can never expect me to change my faith,’” Andersson remembered. “And he said that he was OK with that. He said, ‘If you don’t want to convert, that’s fine.’ If he thought I was converting for his sake without believing, then he would stop me from doing it.”

Feelings quickly grew strong and they knew they wanted to get married. There was just one thing that needed to be done before announcing an engagement: meeting her parents and asking for their permission.

“He said, ‘I will fight really hard for it, but I want their blessing,’” she said of her husband’s persistence.

It was hard enough on her parents when Andersson decided to move to Kuwait, so she knew it wouldn’t be easy for them to see her build her life in the Middle East.

“They were a little bit shocked, especially because it’s between Iran and Iraq and Saudi Arabia. Kuwait doesn’t have the hottest neighbors on the block,” Andersson laughed.

“They had the same prejudices that I came with, so they were a bit scared,” she added. “My mom even asked me once if they had roads.”

Her parents were similarly confused by Kuwaiti customs regarding marriage.

“In Sweden, you live with someone for 10 years and then you get married, but here you can’t live with someone unless you’re married. It’s the stark opposite,” Andersson said. “And my parents asked me, ‘How can you marry him unless you’ve lived together?’”

Andersson’s father, Stellan Andersson, remembers his daughter dropping the bombshell on him and his wife in October 2013.

“I remember that we tried to argue both of them to consider and not rush. But in this matter we were not successful,” he said.



Courtesy of Marlene Andersson

Andersson and Awadhi met at the gym and courted by talking on the phone before getting married.

But once he spent some time getting to know his daughter’s would-be fiancé, Stellan and his wife, Britt-Marie Andersson, started to come around.

“We met a polite and handsome young man, and he was very open-minded and uncomplicated,” Stellan said. And most importantly, he could see how this man felt about his daughter.

“He was very clear that he loved Marlene and he wanted to marry her,” he added.

Stellan gave Awadhi his blessing, and the couple returned to Kuwait to plan their wedding.

In March 2014, Andersson’s parents traveled to Kuwait for the first time. They spent almost a week there, celebrated their daughter’s marriage, met Awadhi’s entire family and visited the couple’s new home. Stellan could instantly see how happy his daughter was in Kuwait.

“Our belief is that she has a very good life in Kuwait, and she loves Beshar and the work she has in the gym. She has acclimated in a very good way . . . She is not a complicated person,” he said.

Stellan said he is proud of the woman he raised, someone who has the courage to explore the world and embrace a different culture.

“We hope that we, from the beginning, have tried to give her self-confidence and supported her to strive for her visions and goals,” he said.

“She is still the charming girl from little Sweden,” he added.





After moving to Kuwait without a long-term plan, Andersson found love and a permanent home.



Courtesy of Marlene Andersson



Courtesy of Marlene Andersson

## EMBRACING A NEW CULTURE

Despite finding love and qualifying for the CrossFit Games since moving to Kuwait, Andersson admitted the last two years haven't been without their challenges.

"Just being married gets me more into the culture, and I need to understand it and embrace it in a very different way," she said.

One thing she's learned to understand is her husband's definition of "a good Muslim."

"Beshar said, 'No, no, no. If you're a true Muslim, then women are in the highest regard. They're of more worth than men,'" Andersson said. "They really treat their women like queens if they really believe in the Quran."

Religion aside, Andersson and Awadhi have had to work through other cultural differences.

"We were in the airport once, and he met one of his old baseball coaches. He said hello to him and chatted with him and never introduced me to him. In Sweden, you always want to introduce your wife. I got really pissed off at him and told him it was really rude," Andersson said.

"Are you ashamed of me?" she asked her husband.

"He said, 'No, no, no—the opposite. You're the most precious person. I only want you to meet special people. He was just an acquaintance. I don't want you to meet him. He's not important,'" Andersson recalled.

Andersson thought about it and realized it was just a different way of thinking.

"I thought he was rude. He was trying to protect me," she shrugged.

And there have been moments in their marriage that have been difficult for him, as well.

"I don't think he thought he'd marry a crazy Swede," Andersson laughed.

Through the challenges, Andersson has grown to respect and love many things about Kuwaiti culture. One of the pleasant surprises was how friendly the people have been.

"They're a very friendly, generous, helpful culture, and also one thing I love about it is they're about keeping in touch with their families," Andersson said.

"They all meet up once a week—brothers, sisters, aunts, uncles—they really love staying in touch. That's something I really like."

## RISK AND REWARD

Andersson moved to Kuwait in March 2013 with fears and apprehension. After living in both Sweden and the U.K., she assumed her brave adventure to the Middle East would be just that—an adventure. And certainly not a long-term one.

"Two years ago, I never would have thought this would be my life. My plan was to go there and work and maybe stay for one year," Andersson said.

But her plan changed when she discovered she felt at home in Kuwait, a land that has challenged beliefs held since childhood. In Kuwait, she's found love and success—all because she took a risk.

"It proved to me how wrong you can be about things without experiencing them," she said. ■

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Emily Beers is a CrossFit Journal contributor and coach at CrossFit Vancouver. She finished 37th at the 2014 Reebok CrossFit Games.