

## Strange Customs

While we were in Bahrain, a small country in the Persian Gulf, our guide took us out to eat an Arabic meal. I am glad we had a guide! The language barrier, and the unfamiliar menu items would not have created a great experience otherwise. But with our guide, the meal was amazing. I want to eat Arabic right now, just thinking about it.

After that experience, our group felt like we were pretty comfortable eating in public places in Arabic countries.

So when we were in the United Arab Emirates, and were invited to a meal, we weren't worried at all. Despite some weirdness in the ordering process, everything went well. Our food came, and it was reasonably close to what we wanted.

Then came the end of the meal, and a strange gentleman in a funny red hat came to our table. We couldn't understand his gestures, but he began to lay very small cups in front of each of us. And like something from Willy Wonka, he tipped his giant, convoluted, shiny silver coffeepot, and poured a teaspoon-full of coffee in every one.

And then he waited. So we smiled and began to sip the coffee.

And he waited. Not knowing what to do, we started handing him the cups back. He began stacking them.

And still he waited.

So we thanked him, and then he thanked us, and turned. And as we watched, he placed each of OUR cups down in front of other customers. And they began to drink from them, without a sign of reluctance.

At this point, all of us Americans were horrified. What strange custom was this?! What other dishes did this restaurant not see fit to wash?

We chalked it up to a cultural misunderstanding. Until we asked some of our other Arabic acquaintances about this custom. They too were shocked. So, um, where DID that custom come from?