

SHEMAIL: Valerie Green learns those Arab henparty secrets

Darlene knows how to travel in style



NO-ONE knew quite what to make of her — a single girl roaring all over the Yemeni countryside on a motor bike, bearing paints, sketchbook and camera and (in polite Arabic) talking her way into communities everywhere.

But Darlene Wilkerson is a most unusual traveller and fashion designer!

She has studied ethnic fashions and art forms in Afghanistan (just before the Russian invasion), she has designed and sold Batik fashions in California, she has had intricate floral cut-out fashions designed and made by native women in Bali has sold these Indonesian (and some Japanese) fashions to women in the Middle East, and is now preparing her first collection of ethnic fashions in Oxford!

Fateful

The Yemeni trip she made most recently proved by far the most fateful. For it was there she met her present husband, a Polish graduate of Oxford University who was in the Yemen to carry out research into bee-keeping!

Westerners are rather thin on the ground in some small Yemeni villages, so it was perhaps inevitable that the bee-keeper and the designer and teacher — Darlene had originally been invited to the Yemen to teach art at a secondary school — should run into one another!

Admired

Darlene, who hails originally from California, is now writing a lavishly illustrated book on Middle Eastern art and fashion.

The walls of her Longworth home are covered with brilliant paintings of Yemeni villagers, and attractive ethnic jewellery.

But the dresses that form the main part of her collection are made from a rough weave Moroccan cotton, fringed at hem and cuff, cut on the cross of the fabric, and trimmed with fringed, deep sashes. Their attraction lies in their cut and in their colouring, and many of them have matching little shawls.

Another part of her collection features the flower-applique tops and pants or skirts she designed and had produced in Indonesia. She found these were greatly admired by the Yemeni women she met, though because of their rather daring see-through quality, the women (heavily veiled for most of their daily life) could only buy them for wearing at

private women-only parties.

Darlene was privileged to be invited to a number of these parties, where rich spicy food was served, but where the conversation frequently centred on men and sex!

When she first arrived in the country she was equipped with a crash helmet and had plans to travel as widely as possible, on her days off.

When her helmet was stolen only three days later, she realised there was nowhere to buy a replacement. She also discovered that there were many military checkpoints around the country, where she was expected to be able to produce detailed documents about both herself and her motor bike, whenever she was stopped after dusk.

Designs

After a while she became accepted as something of an eccentric, though was always careful to dress modestly and in a way that wouldn't offend religious susceptibilities.

She usually wore long cotton tunics over silken or cotton trousers.

Since arriving in Oxford last summer she's been full of inspiration from her travels for fresh designs.

Some of her work will be on display at the Randolph Hotel on April 15 to 17 at The Designer Road Show being held in aid of Sir Michael Sobell House.

Darlene, wearing one of her new dresses and holding a Yemeni basket.