



I look like I've gone burka but no veiled threats to report

In the Middle East, women would look naked without one on. But here it's a little harder to spot a woman fully covered from top to toe. This week, *Bulletin* Go Girl and Surfers Paradise reporter **Shannon Willoughby** borrowed a Hijab and took a stroll through the streets of the Gold Coast to discover people's reactions. What she found may surprise you.





LIFE is different on the other side of the black veil.

The nondescript, dark figure, associated with terrorism and oppression, provokes much reaction.

On Thursday, I spent three hours in the traditional black garment.

Surprisingly, for every stare, every snide remark and every mother telling her child I was 'ridiculous', there was a gesture that made up for it.

And thank God, or Allah, or simply the kindness of some people, because I was pretty nervous.

As I stepped out into public view at Broadbeach, an elderly lady waved to me.

Dressed in a pink top and carrying an even brighter pink handbag, she cautiously smiled as her hand moved quickly through the air.

She was excited, like she was waving at a celebrity, but also a bit nervous, like she was hoping I wasn't going to strike her down.

My initial apprehension melted as she continued to wave.

Happily, I waved back, conscious not to let too much of my wrist show. Traditionally, women wear gloves.

Before this jaunt through various suburbs of the Gold Coast, the Muslim women I spoke with warned me to be careful and not to do it alone.

I had a photographer Kate Czerny with me . . . at a distance.

The woman in pink waved while I waited for Kate to arrive. Our first stop was Broadbeach.

When Kate did spot me, she took a step back and nearly dropped her camera.

Not only was I wearing the hijab, the full body gear, but I had also been given the niqab, the piece de resistance.

The niqab is a two-ply veil – the first layer a thicker sheet, that has a slit in the eye area so you can see, the second a sheer cloth that covers the whole face.

Basically, I can see you, but you can't see me.

With Kate a fair distance in front, I continued on, watch-

ing as people stared back at me.

Coming down Surf Parade, passing the trendy restaurants, one man commented on my outfit. "Nice dress. You look good in it," he said.

Another man made a 'woo-hoo' noise. Yes, I am hot – boiling, in fact.

I kept walking, pretending not to hear. When we entered The Oasis I overtook an old man on the escalator. I was keen to get inside into cool air.

He saw Kate with her camera gear a few metres behind and said under his breath: "Quick, take a photo of that."

He pointed at me like I was an animal in the zoo, an attraction not to be missed.

Our next stop was Surfers.

I walked through Cavill Mall, looking at the tacky tourist shops.

Do Muslims collect fake Aboriginal artefacts? I didn't care – I couldn't just

wander aimlessly. People stared, but it wasn't as bad as in Broadbeach.

I figured, being a top international tourist destination, they were used to seeing women like me wandering the mall (although, I don't know how many Muslim women are 180cm tall and carry a large camel-coloured handbag).

I bought a bottle of water and headed to the beach.

I hobbled down the stairs to the sand, past the bikini-clad girls and men in boardies.

As I moved, so too did their heads. They stared briefly, until moral conscience kicked in.

They then forced themselves to stare at the ocean, trying not to burst out laughing in front of me.

I could see their heads moving up and down and their lips were pursed.

They nudged their friends – 'get a load of this'.

One Gold Coast Muslim man told me that wearing a hijab on the beach in Surfers Paradise was like wearing a bikini in the Middle East.

He was on the mark.

The children weren't so morally conscious – they were still being reminded by their mothers not to stare.

One teenager yelled out 'ninja' as I walked past. This was followed by a round of laughter from his mates.

Behind my veil, I was laughing too. I've never been called a ninja before – and, let's face it, it's unlikely I ever will again.

My time on the beach was up. I was melting and there was sand in my black shoes.

I headed through the mall and back to the car park, now used to all the stares. It was on this trip I heard one child tell his mother how silly I looked.

She snapped: "That is not silly. That is ridiculous."

To her, perhaps.

Many historians say the veil was worn by women before Islam came into existence – used to keep men and women cool in the harsh climates of the Middle East (although having spent 10 minutes on the beach, I beg to differ).

The Islamic faith adopted the practice. For a Muslim woman, a veil is used to cover the body.

They believe they should walk and dress in a way that doesn't draw sexual attention.

In light of the threat from terrorism, several international governments have banned headscarves and full-face veils in public, on the grounds of security community harmony and integration.

Many Muslim women want people to know why they choose to wear the garments.

And, some stress, it is not about protecting themselves from rape.

Last year, the nation's most senior Islamic cleric Sheikh Taj Din al-Hilali likened women who didn't wear the hijab to uncovered meat and implied that uncovered women were inviting rape.

His comments drew criticism from within the Islamic community, and many women who wore the garments were too scared to leave their homes in fear of retaliation.

Asking a woman to talk about why they choose to cover their body is like asking a Hindu about their God of choice. It's something they feel very strongly about.

Just as women who wear the hijab believe covering the head and the rest of the body is mandatory, Niqabis – those who wear the veil over the entire face – believe the face veil is as important.

"It is up to me whether I choose



to wear this," said one Muslim woman, who wears both the hijab and the niqab.

"I never used to wear the niqab, but I have grown as a person within Islam and I wear it out of respect for my faith. It is about modesty."

But, in Surfers Paradise, modest people are few and far between.

Farther north, the reaction was different again. I headed to Woolworths in Australia Fair.

Another Muslim girl I spoke with, who chooses only to wear the hijab, told me that she had once been abused there.

This woman, who also did not wish to be named, does not wear the face veil any more – after she and her husband were insulted.

"People think it is my husband who makes me wear the niqab, but it's my choice," she said.

"But still, people don't understand this and they call my husband a persecutor and a bad man for pressuring me to wear this. I follow my faith by wearing the hijab."

Two Asian ladies laughed at me in the toiletry aisle, and an old woman turned her trolley after she saw me standing alone in the spaghetti lane.

Some people moved out of my way, like I was diseased. But no one uttered any word of insult.

A couple in the fruit-and-veg section apologised profusely after they nearly touched me and the lady at the checkout was polite – almost to the point where I felt like a nursing home patient.

She packed my bags, helped me with the card machine (because I was not used to having so many layers draped over me and I found it hard to press numbers) and wished me a pleasant afternoon.

Without the gear, I am if lucky anyone talks to me.

My next stop was a crowded food court – and no, I wasn't going to eat anything – with the niqab on, I don't think I would know how.

I sat down behind a family with a disabled girl.

I could hear the mother whispering to the kids that 'some Muslims cover their face'.

"But why," the kid kept asking.

"Because it's part of their faith."

But the practice does not solely belong to Islam.

Throughout history, different variations have been worn by Christian and Jewish women, like Mary, mother of Jesus.

Veiling was practised in ancient Greece and throughout the Mediterranean, and is still practised today in Western societies – brides, nuns and widows often wear veils.

Hindu women also sometimes wear a veil.

After my rest in the food court, I decided I had had enough.

I said bye to Kate, jumped in a taxi and headed back to work.

The taxi driver, a young guy, was smiling: "It's hot today. You must be bloody hot in that outfit."

A day sweltering under the hijab was far better than a day being abused by anyone.

Clothing and other cultures

Afghanistan:

Women in Afghanistan wear the burka. The burka comes in many variations, but in its most conservative form, it covers the face of the person wearing it, leaving only a mesh-like screen to see through. The Taliban regime required women in Afghanistan to wear them outdoors.

Iran:

Women in Iran are expected to wear the chador, a full-body cloak, outdoors. Depending on how it is designed, and on how the woman holds it, the chador may or may not cover the face.

Saudi Arabia:

These women wear a modest dress that is composed of an abaya (a loose robe), the hijab and the niqab. The Saudi niqab usually leaves a long open slot for the eyes which is held together by a string or narrow strip of cloth. Abaya and hijab are required, while the niqab is optional.



Shannon's hijab and niqab draws a few stares on Surfers Paradise beach



Confusing the locals in Cavill Mall



Shannon under cover at Broadbeach



Stepping out on Surfers beach



And inspiring a double take or two