

HEATHER MUNRO

PROTOCOL OFFICER

Meeting foreign leaders in exotic destinations may sound very glamorous, and it often is, but behind the scenes, a protocol officer is mired in the planning and details that are often taken for granted.

When I started working in Protocol in 2001, I was freshly graduated from university. The week after my last final exam, I packed up my bags and left the Prairies to begin my summer contract as a visits officer with the Office of Protocol in Ottawa, in the Official Visits Division (XDV). I could not have predicted what lay ahead of me. The world of state-visit planning, flag protocol and motorcade compositions was about to unfold.

When I arrived, I settled into my cubicle in a virtually empty office at the Pearson Building. The majority of my XDV colleagues, officers and coordinators alike, were off travelling to all four corners of the globe. Truth be told, I don't think I met most of them until halfway through the summer because of the heavy workload in Protocol that year. With my yearning for travel, it certainly seemed like I had landed in the right place.

A visits officer has myriad tasks to accomplish. There are visits to Canada, where we work with embassies or high commissions abroad to organize the trips of a visiting minister, head of government or head of state at the private, working or official level. For outgoing travel, we work with Rideau Hall, the Prime Minister's Office and a few ministers' offices to help organize travel abroad for the Governor General, the Prime Minister and ministers with an international portfolio, such as Foreign Affairs or International Trade. While such a variety of assignments certainly does give you a chance to work with different government agencies and personalities across the country and abroad, I have learned that the life of a visits officer is not always glitz and glamour.

Invariably, whenever I meet people and tell them what I do, they say, "Wow, Protocol—that must be so glamorous! I'd love to travel the world and visit all of those countries!"

I always smile when I get this reaction, because it reminds me of my own response when I first started work. Most people seem to be oblivious to the fact that beyond the normal 9 to 5, everyday life in Protocol, a lot of our work actually takes place after hours. We are often answering messages on our BlackBerry or laptop at



Heather Munro in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, where she accompanied former Foreign Affairs Minister Maxime Bernier in January 2008.

all hours of the night from a hotel room halfway around the world, or pulling an all-nighter to write and edit a motorcade scenario or create programs that are going to print first thing in the morning. Or we are participating in a conference call that, because of the time difference, is taking place at 10 a.m. in Ottawa but at 2 a.m. for us, or waking up at 4 a.m. to get to the airport and wait on the tarmac for a visitor's plane. While there are glamorous moments, during busy season in Protocol, visits officers often sacrifice time with family and friends, weekends and even holidays for our calling.

All that being said, the life of a visits officer can be exciting. We do see many historic events around the world that we would never be privy to as tourists. For my part, although I've always been working at such events, I've had the privilege of attending ceremonies and addresses that I would never have dreamed of. I will always remember the ceremony in 2001 when Nelson Mandela was awarded honorary Canadian citizenship; the installation of Pope Benedict XVI in St. Peter's Square; the G8 Summit in Scotland, which was sidetracked by the London subway bombings; and the 60th anniversary of the Liberation of the Netherlands in 2005, where I watched our Canadian veterans parade through the streets of small Dutch towns as the local citizens applauded and cheered them on.

These occasions, which most others will only read about in history books, have found a proud place in my own history, my memories, my stories.