

2012 UNITED ARAB EMITATES

We were slated to have a 7-hour layover in Dubai on our return from Sri Lanka. Dubai was not a sought after destination in my book but since we were there, we decided to spend the night and see what we could.

The United Arab Emirates (UAE)¹ lies on the Persian Gulf near the Strait of Hormuz². The strait is important because 20% of the world's oil passes through it from Bahrain, Iran, Iraq, Kuwait, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the UAE. There are seven Emirates, each a small independent kingdom in the UAE. The Federation was formed in 1971 between Dubai, Abu Dhabi, Ajman, Fujairah, Sharjah, Umm al-Quwain and Ras al-Khaimah. Combined, their oil reserves are ranked sixth largest in the world.

Our instructions were to go to Autobase Rental Car for our transfer to the hotel. There was no one there. However soon someone appeared and called for the car. We later learned we could have had a free transfer if we had used the hotel van. When we got to the Landmark Riqqa Hotel³ we were advised we might prefer their newer one nearby. We were transferred by the hotel van and checked into a tourist class hotel but it is quite comfortable.

Dowell went to work arranging the sightseeing for tomorrow. Many tours were sold out, including the one that takes you to the top of the tallest building in the world. We settled for an all-day tour in a private car with guide to see most of the Emirates. We had to pay in cash so I loaned Martha my ATM card and they hiked the two blocks over to get the cash.

This hotel has no bar or alcohol, so we sat in my room and downed the bottle of wine I bought at the Duty Free in Colombo. Then we had dinner in the coffee shop. The other choices were a very loud disco and the buffet.

Monday, February 6. Mohamed picked us up at 8:30. We will see all the Emirates except Abu Dhabi, which is north of us.

Dubai⁴ was a small town with very limited infrastructure when Sheikh Rashid bin Saeed al-Maktoum⁵ came to power in 1958. Within a few years he had dramatically changed the city, by improving the police force, schools and building a hospital. He established a reliable water⁶ and electricity system. He dredged the artificial estuary port known as The Creek and built the International Airport. When oil was discovered in 1966 many people were attracted to the city and the great building boom began.

On 2 December 1971 the federation of Arab states was formed with Abu Dhabi as the capitol, and each of the states ruled independently by its king. There is no parliament or other elected body.

Dubai grew from a town of less than 200,000 in 1975 to 1.78 million today. Only ten percent of the population is Emirati, the rest being foreign workers. A native is given free housing, schooling and medical services. He pays no taxes and has free utilities. The foreigners must pay but the cost is very reasonable. Oil makes up the difference. If an Emirati wants to work he usually ends up with a government job.

Our first stop was at The Creek. Totally artificial, it provides Dubai with a port. We could see the buildings of Old Dubai across the water.

¹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United_Arab_Emirates

² <http://www.worldatlas.com/aatlas/infopage/hormuz.htm>

³ <http://www.landmarkhotels.net/landmark-hotel-riqqa/overview.php>

⁴ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dubai>

⁵ http://www.uaecabinet.ae/English/Presidency/Pages/president1_2.aspx

⁶ With a desalination plant

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Mohamed's father came from Yemen many years ago. Mohamed talked of how his father used to have a hard life living in a tent in the desert with a camel for transportation. The rich lived in mud huts. Now everyone has cars. When a crime of rape, drugs or murder occurred the old Arabian rule was to hang the perpetrator. Now Dubai is free from crime.

No gambling for money is allowed. When people bet on the camel races they receive prizes instead of awards

We stopped at an open-air museum where there were some old boats and you could see what the mud buildings of old looked like.

Even the bus stops are air-conditioned in Dubai.

He pointed out the sail-shaped Jumeirah Burj Al Arab Hotel,⁷ the only seven-star all suite hotel in the world. The King of Dubai owns it. You not only have your choice of a luxury car, but also a helicopter is available for your use. There is a submarine to take you to a seafood restaurant. All this for a mere \$3000 or so a night!

There are so many unique buildings in Dubai but it was very difficult to photograph them. The customs area is built to look like a cruise ship.

The Burj Khalifa⁸ is the tallest building in the world. 2723 feet high it opened on January 4, 2010. The elevators move at a 3-floor a second speed. In the movie Mission Impossible IV,⁹ Tom Hanks climbs to the top of the building.

We spotted the curious twisted Dynamic Tower¹⁰, where each floor rotates on command of its owner so he can turn his apartment for whatever view he wishes.

Mohamed tells us that there was so much building going on at one time that 20% of the world's cranes were here. Now many of them are still for even in Dubai there is a recession going on.

Three huge artificial islands were built by dredging up sand. Two are shaped like palm trees and the third is a round island called the world.

We drove out on one of the palm islands where on every frond the houses or apartments are waterfront property. People from all over the world snapped up these properties when they were built. Tiger Woods has a home here.

When we reached the "fruit" part of the tree, there is the curious Atlantis Hotel¹¹ built with an onion dome shaped hole through it. Four stories of it are underwater where you can view the fish in the sea. It has a water park with a 27.5-meter drop in it.

Mohammed's favorite hotel is the Al Qasr¹² with golden Arabian horses prancing through its approach. It looks like an Arabian palace. We weren't allowed to pause for the security guards moved us along.

⁷ <http://www.jumeirah.com/en/Hotels-and-Resorts/Destinations/Dubai/Burj-Al-Arab/>

⁸ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_tallest_buildings_and_structures_in_the_world

⁹ <http://www.missionimpossible.com/>

¹⁰ <https://www.google.com/search?q=dynamic+tower+dubai&hl=en&client=firefox-a&hs=yzU&rls=org.mozilla:en-US:official&prmd=imvns&tbm=isch&tbo=u&source=univ&sa=X&ei=Kh1BT5zRGajz0gGvyPzYBw&ved=0CFAQsAQ&biw=1293&bih=912>

¹¹ <http://www.dubaishortstay.com/hotel/atlantis-the-palm-dubai.asp>

¹² <http://www.accommodationnear.com/beach/dubai.htm>

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He pointed out the palace of the second wife of the King of Dubai. The first wife has an equally imposing residence.

In short Dubai was overwhelming!

The next emirate was Sharjah¹³ ten miles south. This city is much more normal and it is cheaper to live here. The King enforces rent control. Many live here but work in Dubai. It is much more conservative than Dubai. No shorts and no alcohol are allowed. Mixing between unmarried men and women is illegal.

We stopped at the Sharjah Central Souk¹⁴ for a much needed bathroom break and to buy some water. The mall was shaped like a train of cars on the outside, but inside looked much like any mall. However the stores were different. One whole area was filled with rug dealers. I found a pillbox that I liked but its opening \$70 price was much too high.

Vanity license plates are for sale and one low number sold for 52.2 million DH. Only 350 DH goes to the government, the rest to charity. Obviously the King has #1, but any low number carries much prestige.

Ajman was the next emirate and it is the smallest. Mohamed had to pray so he left us off at a small museum. It had one area where there were dioramas of people getting shaved or trading in goods that was interesting. The whole complex was in a mud building reminiscent of traditional days.

At last it was time for lunch. Mohammed told us there was only time for fast food and took us to Hardee's¹⁵ for lunch. I was so disappointed. Since all the American fast food is here I would have rather had a Subway¹⁶.

Mohammed fills our head with facts. The Arab world is planning a single currency similar to the Euro. The King meets with tribal leaders at a meeting called the Diwan¹⁷

Umm al-Quwain¹⁸ is the smallest of the Emirates. In 2003 it only had 62,000 inhabitants. It had somewhat the feel of a small village. Unfortunately the Museum was closed.

We drove across the desert to Ras al-Khaimah¹⁹ whose name in English is The Top of the Tent. The Al Hajar Mountains²⁰ loom in background and the sand has a reddish color. We are near the border of Oman.

There are no high buildings here, although there were some mansions.

Our goal was the Camel racetrack²¹. This is a unique part of Arab heritage. There are more than 15 racetracks in the UAE. This one was built in 1990 and is considered the best track in the country.

In the afternoon many trainers bring their camels here to work out on the 10-kilometer oval track.

¹³ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sharjah_%28emirate%29

¹⁴ <http://www.lonelyplanet.com/ united-arab-emirates/the-northern-emirates/sharjah/shopping/market/central-souk>

¹⁵ <http://www.hardees.com/>

¹⁶ <http://www.subway.com/subwayroot/default.aspx>

¹⁷ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Diwan>

¹⁸ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Umm_al-Quwain

¹⁹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ras_al-Khaimah

²⁰ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Al_Hajar_Mountains

²¹ <http://www.rakpedia.com/sightseeing/camel-race-track.html>

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Draped in blankets, these sleek animals don't look like their wild counterparts. Some of them cost thousands of dollars.

I wish we could have seen an actual race. There is a radio controlled robot jockey on each camel controlled by a pursuing car. The winner may get a car for a prize if he wins.

It was a fascinating but long and tiring day. Time to head for home! We drove back to the hotel getting there about six.

We went in search of a drink and found a hotel about two blocks away with a bar. Then it was time to head for the airport.

Our 16-hour flight didn't leave until 11:20 P. M. I fell asleep before we reached full altitude. I woke up as they were serving ice cream for desert. I don't know if it was the ice cream or the food we had in Dubai but my stomach was very unhappy for the rest of the trip. The stewardess gave me some Tums but they didn't help.

We reached Atlanta at six in the morning. I went home and crawled into bed for most of the next two days.