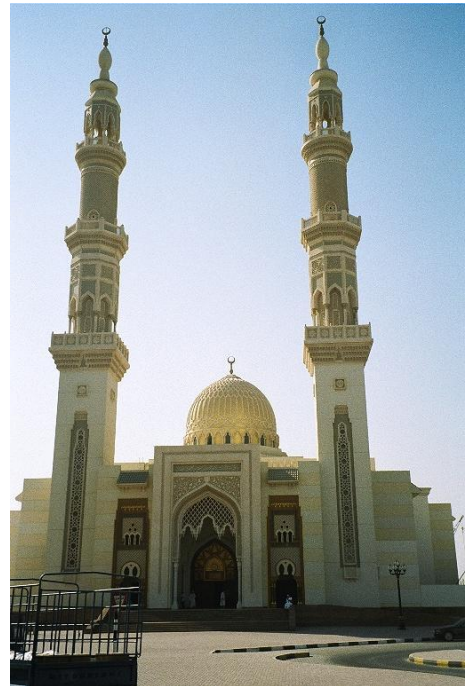


Travels while living in the United Arab Emirates



Michael Pierre de Villiers

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Title page: Abu Dhabi city Qasr Al Hosn Fort (originally a conical watchtower circa 1760 to defend the only freshwater well, enlarged to a fort, later became a palace), desert sunset south of Abu Dhabi city, Sultan of Oman's Royal Squadron in 2003 (yacht Zinat al Bihaar and pleasure craft Al Noores), a mosque at Sharjah and dhow at Telegraph Island.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Michael Pierre de Villiers was born in Durban, South Africa. He was trained to World Meteorological Organization class one meteorologist and multi-discipline weather forecaster in the South African Weather Service where he reached the rank of Director. He served on a weather ship in the South Atlantic. He served on World Meteorological Organization expert teams and was World Meteorological Organization rapporteur for the Africa region. He was also a commercial pilot and flying instructor. More recently he was a weather forecaster in the United Arab Emirates, then in England. Now retired.

M. P. de Villiers
PhD MSc MDip (FRMetS CMet retired)
2025-06-02

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Introduction

I arrived in Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates (UAE), 16th January 2002. My wife arrived in April. First of all, one has to submit a police application and get one's temporary residence visa changed to a permanent residence visa. Your whole being hinges on this. You cannot get a driving licence, liquor licence, buy a car, etc. You have to pass a blood test before you get your residence visa. If you have acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS), or Tuberculosis (TB) you're out. The police simply arrive and remove you to a hospital until they can get you on a flight out. One's blood test is also necessary to get a driving licence. Your blood type goes on your licence.

The first few weeks were a time of very mixed feelings, sadness, relief and uncertainty whether we had made the right choice. It was much more of an emotional experience than I imagined it would be. There were so many memories and strangely, one generally remembers only the good memories and tends to forget the reasons one made the change. It required a lot of mental adjustment.

When I arrived at Abu Dhabi and during the latter part of winter, it was still quite cool. The locals regard a 25°C maximum as mild, but on the cold side. As expected, desert nights can be cold. Down to 10°, but the very dry air it felt much colder. The weather is always hot. However, in summer day temperatures stay around 40°C to 47°C and night temperatures never lower than 28°C. It is also very humid. The surface Gulf Sea temperatures begin to climb from winter 30°C to summer's 35°C. Swimming in the sea is like a warm bath. Great. Even in winter it is still great. In late summer it was amusing to hear a radio presenter saying soon it will be winter, cool enough to go to the beach. I never liked swimming on the Highveld where the water was always cold and when one got out the high evaporation rate due to the dry air made one feel even colder. Much better in humid Durban. The weather is generally cloud free for days on end.

This article is composed of notes and mostly of letters written to others while living in the United Arab Emirates, mainly to my mother in Durban, hence it is often written in the present tense and some comments may be dated. While in the UAE, the revered founder of the UAE, Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan died on the 2nd November 2004.

Getting settled

Four weeks after arriving in the UAE I had still not seen a camel. Saw more in South Africa at flea markets where children can have camel rides. Perhaps that is why they are called flea markets, because where there are camels there are fleas. I had not even seen Camel cigarettes, but I am sure you can get them somewhere. Here you can get practically everything. And do the people here smoke! One did not realise what a difference the anti-smoking law in South Africa made. It was like in the 60's here. No matter what you do you still get home smelling of cigarette smoke. It was banned in our office, but nearly everywhere else you go there is smoke. Of course, smoking the more pleasant-smelling shisha (hookah) in restaurants is a custom, so

how can one ban smoking in restaurants.

Life is also much more relaxed than I thought it would be and you are free to do as you please. People dress as they like, although the norm is conservative. It is also a slower way of life than in South Africa and bureaucratically thorough, but it all gets done in the end. A big plus is no minibus taxi's and it is safe to walk at any time, day or night, whether male or female. Everything is kept clean. As with all of the Emirates one has to obey basic rules and regulations. Break them and the consequences are drastic. Justice is fairly swift with no ducking and diving by lawyers. The word of Sheikh Zayed is law. He is regarded as a great, fair and generous ruler and is highly respected by all. There is no parliament, voting, etc. He is the Emir, or ruler of the Abu Dhabi Emirate and also the overall Emirates ruler. Literally it means that his family, and the families of the other Sheikdoms that make up the United Arab Emirates, are government. This means there is no western style democracy, but makes the place safe.

Prayer time here is a new experience. They pray at numerous times during the day and it is taken very seriously. At prayer time they flop down all over the place. At the Mosque just down the road and visible from my window, they spill out of the building and into the street and all the traffic has to stop. I think they prefer it outside. I think the inside is often empty. In winter it is also probably still a lot cooler outside. There are Mosques everywhere. They were originally very simple affairs. The word mosque comes from the Arabic masjid, which means place of prostration. Any structure or space can be used provided it is ritually pure. That is, all traces of dirt are removed, such as animal fat, wine, blood, urine and excrement. In the desert even a marked off square can be used. Often all that is used is a prayer mat. It is important that all prayer must be done facing toward the Kabah in Mecca. With time, Mosques have incorporated the domes from the early Byzantine Christian churches and then later the tall minarets were added during the rule of the Turks and the Ottoman Empire. Place to carry out ritual washing (wudu) must be provided so that one is clean before going to pray. Apparently, you must wash again if you fall asleep, burp, pass wind, visit the toilet, or bleed from a wound before praying.

No 2nd, 3rd and 4th wife prospects as yet and no fingering the merchandise before purchase. You're allowed up to 4 and you must be able to support them. Far too expensive I'm afraid. My number one wife will have to manage on her own I'm sorry to say. I still can't get used to the women's attire here. They look like black versions of Casper the Ghost. Some you can't even see the eyes. They have a black covering over the whole head. The best is seeing one of these driving a big Merc. Looks like the grim reaper bearing down on you. How does she see where she is going? It definitely restricts visibility. I saw one nearly get wiped out, blissfully driving into a main road, I am sure without seeing anything. Cars swerving all over the place. Although, it must be said, there is a marked tendency for drivers to be oblivious of everyone else. Having so much money, I suppose it is just like buying another camel. It is also amusing to watch them in the supermarket tasting fruit and vegetables before buying. They partially lift the veil and the food simply disappears. You do not even see the mouth. Some of them even have metal contraptions over the mouth and around the eyes. A sort of facial chastity belt I suppose. Most amusing is one of these totally covered faces wearing spectacles.

The main mode of transport is either via your own car, or taxi (mainly Toyota Corolla, or Nissan Sunni). About 10 000 of them in Abu Dhabi (true). Very cheap. Streets are confusing. Not because of layout, or anything like that, but because taxi drivers do not refer to them by their real names, or even know the real names. The real names are too long to remember, such as Sheikh Rashud Bir Saeed Al Maktoum the 2nd Street, so they give them names such as



Cannon Street.



Also on the centre isle in Cannon Street.



The view from our 15th floor flat to the north to the Gulf Sea coast.

Cannon Street, because it has a large white ornamental cannon the size of a building in the centre island, along with some other statues. Or Defence Street, Electra Street, etc. Buildings are all big and fancy. Plenty of glass, etc. Our 15th floor flat provided by my employer building in the Al Rumaithy building on the corner of Fatima Bint Mubarak and Al Falah streets, was known as the Subaru Building, because the Subaru showroom is on the ground floor and they have a big sign on the side of the building, which the taxi drivers can see at a distance. My employer soon moved us to 501 Al Muhairy, on the corner of Shari' al-Subeeti and Dharyah streets. It was known as the Al Dirham Gift Shop building. Roads around all large city blocks are all 3 lanes each way.

Main highways between most cities are also 3 lanes each way and lit all the way. The road between Abu Dhabi and

Dubai has a fancy iron and concrete fence the whole way to keep camels off the road. Alongside this road there is a camel race track. The locals are very keen on camels. They even have an annual camel beauty pageant. To be truthful, it is to choose the best thorough bred camel. It is also an opportunity to buy and sell for breeding.

To get back to camel racing, there was considerable furore about the use of underage Asian children as jockeys. The smaller and lighter the better. The UAE had banned this practise. They now use a small remotely controlled robot, with a (painless) whip, mounted on the camel's hump. The robot is attired in the owner's racing silks (colours). Camel owners often follow their camels and operate the robot from their sport utility vehicles, which they race alongside the camels on a separate race track. Often with half their body out of a window while shouting at their camel. It has to be seen to be believed.

When driving, if you hit a pedestrian and they are injured and go to hospital, apparently you go to jail until they get out. Rather callously, it is better if they are killed, because you then only go to jail until the legal aspects such as insurance is sorted, which is a few days. One has to have comprehensive insurance here. Which you can only have until your car is 5 years old then you can only get balance of 3rd party. I can only gather that this is to encourage one to get a new car. Accident liability is decided on site by the police. This can be tricky, because the Nationals are usually never wrong, so I have been told.



Creek scene on the Abu Dhabi west coast.



Dhow construction at the creek.

I did a lot of walking. Europeans here do not walk, so it took me a while to realise that all the hooting was passing taxi's trying to attract my attention, because they thought I wanted, or needed, a ride. The locals do not believe all the places I have walked. Walked to a small harbour where their Dhows are kept. On another occasion to where they build them in a separate west coast small harbour, or creek, where you can watch them at work. The area has a lovely smell of wood.

They have big supermarkets and Malls here, but they are a newer development than in South Africa. The shops have everything, nearly all imported and at a price. Plenty of retail therapy for the stressed. The Marine Mall has a strong South African influence. It even has a Woolworth's and Trueworths. The big supermarket here is the French Carrefour, a la Pick 'n Pay Hypermarket and is managed by a South African. It carries a lot of SA food, but expensive. The even bigger Carrefour in

southern Abu Dhabi, opposite the Al Bateen airport has a South African resident butcher. You can get Biltong (jerky) and Droewors (dried sausage). Pricey, but OK. Even the cinemas are like the South African version. Films are heavily censored. I have heard that the South African film distributors (such as Ster and Nu Metro) are here as well. Some of the new movie places automatically block cell phones. I can see where this is a bonus, because they are fonder of their mobiles than in South Africa.

You reach the Marine Mall along a causeway. On the island is the biggest flag I've seen. The UAE flag is a landmark that can be seen for miles and gives a good idea of the wind (land or sea breeze). There is also a tethered balloon that people go up (and down) in. Sometime later, as part of a birthday present for my wife, we went up in it (and down). Great view.

Licensed to drive

Got my driving licence on the 12th February. To do this one has to go to the licence place, with reams of documents, residence permit, work letter, passport, passport copies and South Africa driving licence. Took 4 hours. First took a taxi to the suburbs to the licencing place at 7:30. Driver dropped me off at the wrong building. I was told to wait until 9:00. Saw action so joined in. Had my eyes tested and then they said I must do the Signals test. I said there is something wrong here, I was told only an eye test and a blood test were needed to convert my licence. Great consternation then they realised I was in the wrong building. The eye test is really sophisticated. You hold a card up to each eye in turn and read a big letter on an eye chart.

They have a great way of doing the driving tests, so I am told. One soon becomes aware that there is a lot of hearsay in this part of the world. The examiner goes out in a car with 3 students. A bus follows loaded with others. They all get a turn to drive. If you pass you get back in the

bus, if you fail you get out and find your own way home. Toward the end the examiner gets tired of all this and you are lucky if you drive a block before he fails you.

Anyway, went to the correct building. First you have to have your application filled in Arabic. I'm not so good at that. But wait! They have a line of counters with groups shouting for your business. They type and fill in the form for you at a cost (Dirham (Dhs) 20). Then you go for the eye test. Already done that. So they send you for the blood test. You have to get into a taxi and go all the way back to the city to the Blood Bank. That was a breeze. I gather it pays to go and give blood beforehand and they give you a certificate of your blood type. If you give blood twice, or more they then pay you Dhs200 per blood donation. Back into a taxi to the suburbs (all trips total about Dhs30).

Now the fun starts. you are told to go to counter 5. You wait there and finally they notice there are a lot of people, so they tell you to go to counter 1, where the guy has been sitting doing next to nothing. Takes ages and numerous telephone calls, for the official to fill in the form and enter it on a computer. All very pleasantly done. Then you are told to sit and wait until your name is called for photographs. You have already handed in 3 photos, but now the photo must be on a PC for your licence card.

You have to listen carefully, because when an Arab speaking person calls out your name, it has the vaguest resemblance to sound of what you are used to hear. You sit for your picture and then finally get a receipt for your Dhs200 already paid. And you wait and wait. Then they call a whole batch of names and you have to again listen carefully and you get your licence card. Then it is back into town in a taxi to home. Arrived back at 12:00.

The taxis are interesting. The blood bank is about 1 km from where we live and about the same distance to the licencing place. But the trips on the meters cost me Dhs 7.50, 10.50, 6.0 and 5.50. The Dhs 10.50 trip from the licence place to the blood bank was interesting. The driver was most proud that I was his first passenger in his brand new car. Tells me for the 1st week he has to drive slowly. He tells me this while in the slow lane doing 120 kph in a 60 kph zone. Also tells me there is something wrong with the meter, which I can see and he must have it fixed. Still charged me Dhs 10.50. Going back to the licence place the driver was a happy talkative chap. Told me last week he had two accidents.

The drivers do have some lovable habits. The driver on the first trip to the licencing office had a cold and persisted in sniffing. When it became too bad, he would use tissues he had on the dashboard. With one hand, while driving, he would roll one into a sausage shape had insert it in his nostril. On another occasion, while driving to the Iran Souk (an open market) we were stopped at a rather long traffic light. I noticed that our turban and nightshirt attired driver had no shoes on. I noticed because he had lifted one foot in front of him and he was gently massaging his toes and removing skin from the sole of his foot.

Then you still have to buy a car. That is a whole new experience. Can't register it until it is insured, need your passport and residence visa, driving licence, letter from employer, etc. It goes on and on. Maybe, I'll just get a bicycle and even forget the option of a camel.

Liquor licence and pork

19th February. I now have my liquor licence. One has to have a licence to buy booze here. You

must have it with you when you go to buy, as well as any time you are transporting booze and go to a hotel, etc. Licences are valid for a year and have a monthly maximum you can spend. I got the lowest limit which is Dhs500 per month. Much more than adequate for us. Each page has a month on it and the supplier must fill in how much you bought as well as when and where.

Meat is very expensive as, along with nearly everything else, it is imported. Pork is a big no. To the Islamic people it is the foulest of foul. You can get it, but at special shops only. If a shop has a pork section (and they are very rare) it has to be totally separate from the rest of the store, in a separate room and all preparation must be separate. A colleague has taken me to two different shops where one can obtain pork. Whatever you do, do not mention opening a pig farm.

Still going for long walks. Went to the west coast of the island the other day. Took me 2 hours to walk there and back. Very pretty little bays there, but of course I did not take my camera. It is also where the Crown Prince has his Diwan (it means government ministry, or court of the crown prince).

The Islamic calendar and Eid Al Adha

The holidays here are set according to the Islamic calendar, which has less days in the year than the Gregorian calendar. There are 354, or 355, days in the year and their calendar begins at 622AD, the year of the Prophet Mohammed's migration from Mecca to Al-Madinah. Holidays, therefore, do not occur at the same time every year. In fact, they get earlier each year due to their calendar being shorter than the Gregorian and a full revolution of the earth around the sun. Holidays are also based on the sighting of the moon and are often confirmed less than 24 hours in advance. This can be a nuisance making holiday bookings I suppose.



The goat braai (barbeque).

22nd February 2002. Friday was part of a 3 day Islamic holiday known as Eid Al Adha. It might also be known as goat braai, or barbeque, day. The religious holiday is to celebrate Abraham not having to sacrifice his son, but being allowed to sacrifice a goat instead. During the morning I chanced to look out of the window and there below in an open paved area, fires had been made and cooking was in progress. I then noticed pools of blood and two white goats lying flat on the paving.

While I watched, a man arrived with two more white goats. Deals were obviously struck, because two other men separately led the goats off and tethered them. Elsewhere, two other goats were tethered. Later I watched while they held the goats down, slit their throats and held them in that position while their blood drained away. The one goat's blood formed a pool on the paving, the other one, the blood spread across the paving and into the street gutter. The knives were not that sharp either, because a lot of sawing was done. They were then left to twitch their last. The goats were then suspended from the lintels of two nearby car garages and proceeded to skin and dissect them, then on to the fire.

All told, about 8 goats were slaughtered. By early afternoon the eating was over and it was hard to see, from a distance, where there was blood. In the heat of the day, it had already turned to dark patches on the paving. However, close up the next day one could see caked pools of blood, the smell of an abattoir and the arrival of flies. As I see it, Halal is nothing more than brutal slaughter.

Talking to the locals at work, at this religious event it is normal to make goat sacrifices. However, one is not allowed to do it in public, for the very reason that it is unhygienic. But, when I asked what would have happened if I had reported it to the police, I was told that they would have probably done nothing and maybe have joined in having a bite to eat.

Have motor car can travel

Bought a motor car yesterday (19th March 2002).



The Hyundai Accent 1500 at the InterContinental Hotel marina.

Basic Hyundai Accent 1500. Essentially need transport that is all. No expensive 4x4's for us. Not into dune bashing. So I will be able to fetch my wife in Dubai in the limo. In any event cars stand out in the open here. They are not into garages. When the ashtray is full you buy a new one. The sun and heat plays hell with cars. It is fairly common to hear about resprays after 5 years, if kept that long. The heat and sand does not have a good cumulative effect on cars. Parking is in the streets. If there is no parking, you park astride the dashed white line in the middle, also on the corner if necessary.

I have seen cars left with the engine and air-conditioning running while the person goes inside to do business. There was an article in a newspaper recently where the person came out to see someone driving off in his car. He gave chase in another car and caught the person. There was general public indignation at this brazen action. I laughed and had great difficulty in explaining that in South Africa, this would have been accepted as a gift and is also known as affirmative shopping.

Driving in Abu Dhabi is not as bad as in South Africa. One thing is you have to know where you are going. If you are on the wrong side of the road, that is, the place you want to be is on the other side, it could be a few kilometres away by road. U turns at intersections are not only a necessity, they are encouraged. It is the only way to get to the other side of the street. The roads are 3 lane each way but with wide and high islands with wrought iron fences running the length of the block. If you are on one of the highways, you could be in another Sheikhdom before you can turn around and come back. I went shopping one morning and took a wrong turn to come home. I wound up going in the opposite direction and was nearly half way to the airport (32 km) from town, before I reached an interchange to come back. Lesson: make sure you have a full tank of petrol and plenty of water. The heat is debilitating. The air-conditioning only works as long as there is petrol. In the old days it was lost in the desert on a camel. Now it is lost in a desert city in a car.

All busses, trucks and bigger must stay in the right-hand lane. No overtaking allowed. If you are in a faster bus, you have no choice but to travel at the speed of the slowest vehicle in that lane, until it turns off. What often happens is that the faster person behind hoots and flashes lights until the slower vehicle moves into the emergency edge lane to let you through. It is also not done to thank the other driver when they let you passed. Less strict in the Dubai Emirate. There they can use the two right hand lanes. Cars are allowed in all 3 lanes. But, if you are in the bus/truck lane and going at the speed limit and a lorry comes belting at you from behind, you are expected to move into an inner lane to let them through.

If you are in the innermost lane doing the speed limit and an Arab in his big limo comes belting at you, you are expected to move out of his way, or else he sits on your tail with hand permanently on the hooter until you get out of the way. One learns that the lower the number plate number, the more important the person.

If you are in a narrow side street and the lane on the other side is blocked, it does not matter if you have the right of way on your side as opposed to oncoming traffic on the other side. Rather it is a case of who gets to the bottleneck first. Of course, the old rule of who has the newest car also comes into effect. Always go for the person with the new car, they will give way and 4x4's rule.

Also, it is nothing for a wealthy Arab to stop outside a small shop and call the proprietor out to place his order and then sit and wait for him to bring it to the car. Of course, the proprietor knows on which side his bread is buttered, so if he happens to be serving you, you must expect to be left waiting until he has seen to his roadside client.

If you exceed the speed limit through one of their permanently mounted speed traps, nothing happens. No cop stops you, nothing. You do not even get a postal notification. But when you go to re-register your car at the end of each year you are presented with all your speeding fines and they must be paid before you can re-register. There is also a Dh10 fine for each month of late payment. One is expected to telephone a special number to hear if you have any fines and then pay them. In neighbouring Sultanate of Oman, I hear it is actually illegal to drive a dirty car. There are lots of other quaint customs.

The Emirates are close to a tectonic plate fault and earth tremors can be felt. At 00:06 for 37 seconds on the 11th March 2002 there was one off the east coast that reached a level of 5.1. It occurred at 10 kilometres below the surface and 20 kilometres out to sea west-north-west of Fujairah.

Trip to catch sailfish

24th March 2002, went out deep sea to do some sailfish fishing. A colleague had arranged for some of us forecasters to go out on a day trip with an American guy named Greg, who operates a fishing charter boat and regularly telephones us for forecasts.

Not a good idea really, because I came straight off a night shift. A Belgian colleague came in early so I could get off in time. Anyway, I picked up three colleagues (two from South Africa and one from Australia) and off we went to the marina at the really swank InterContinental Hotel. They change the carpets in the lift daily. The lift we were in, to go down to the marina level, said "good morning it is Sunday." Which was correct.

After all the hellos and greeting our US of A captain and one other fellow fisherperson, a young woman from Pretoria in South Africa who could not speak Afrikaans (!), we were off. On the way to the fishing area we passed oil rigs, which we duly thanked for our presence in the UAE, a French aircraft carrier and a dhow. By the way, we also have UAE nationals, a Canadian and Indians in our office.

The trip out was OK. But, typical of weather forecasters, they cannot organise an orgy in a brothel, or a booze-up in a brewery. The wind blew at 15 to 20 knots, it turned cloudy and later it rained. All this I knew was going to happen, but I went anyway.

The wind waves became bigger and choppier. Well, I was first to be sea sick and then one of my South African colleagues became sick. I was reminded of a quote attributed to Spike Milligan, the best cure for sea sickness, is to sit under a tree. After a sea sick pill from our new friend from Pretoria and a digestive biscuit, I began to feel better, but was I tied and bored! All there was to see was water. Theo was as sick as a dog and looked yellow the whole trip. Pity, because he was the one that said he was looking forward to the trip like an excited child.



Catch of the day.

Now and then, there would be a bite, but the fish would get away. Eventually we caught two fish. One was small and one about five feet across. Each person would have a turn trying to reel them in. The fish would be brought aboard for photographs and then tossed back in the water.

I spent most of the time steering the boat and changing speeds at the commands of Greg. The idea is to maintain slow forward

movement while keeping the stern on to the person reeling the fish in. If it started to get away, by not continually reeling in, you turn the boat to parallel the direction of the fish and let it run while again trying to reel it again, then turn stern on again to bring it in again. All this is done while ignoring the direction of the wind waves. Staying upright is more exercise than aerobics.

Well, we came in an hour early. I went to bed at 6:30 pm and surfaced the next morning at about 10:00 am.

First booze purchase, local holidays and business hours

25th March 2002, went to buy booze today, clutching valuable permit book in hand. Very nice well stocked little shop, but the prices! They have Chateau Cardboard Box from South Africa, but only in 3 litres, not 5 litres as in South Africa. Beer comes in packs of 24 only. So, twenty-four 330 mls Amstels for me and two 3 litre dry white for the ever loving wife came to a few Dhs and Fls short of Dhs 200. That is about R630, £33. I was tempted to say I was not intending to buy shares in the business, but I bit my tongue and was very friendly. They appreciated it and were very friendly in return. No doubt sure they will see me again. No wonder they are non-alcohol drinking here. On the other hand, a 2 litre Coke is only Dhs 4 and petrol is dirt cheap.

We most certainly do not have Easter here. Thursdays and Fridays are the equivalent of Saturday and Sunday. It makes working with non-Muslim countries difficult, because essentially there are only 3 days in the week when both parties in the world are in the office at the same time. And then there is west/east time difference, so the working day is even shorter. (Since we left the UAE they changed their weekend to Friday and Saturday, Friday still being the equivalent of the non-Muslim country's Sunday).

The government and banks work from 07:30 to 14:30. So the window of opportunity is even smaller. Shops work from about 08:00 to 13:30 then 16:30 to anywhere between 20:30 to 23:00. Some shops stay open from 08:00 to 23:00. You have to get used to who does what (even within the same market) to avoid wasted trips and when I was on foot that could mean a few hours wasted.

Wife arrived, have car, will travel



Hazy Burj al Arab.

with all the Dhows busy loading and offloading and travelled under the Creek in the road tunnel.

We then went to their heritage and pearl diving museum. Very interesting and worth visiting. Pearl diving along this part of the coast was their main trading activity before oil was discovered. On the way south-west home to Abu Dhabi, I detoured for her first sight of the Burj Al Arab Hotel (The Arab Tower Hotel). The hotel is amazing. It is hollow inside and is built in a triangular shape. We did not go in. They charge Dhs200 each to go in and we still had to get back to Abu Dhabi. By this time the southerly wind off the desert had picked up and

Wife arrived from England at Dubai on the 11th April at about 08h00 following what she described as the most trouble free trip she had for ages. Sailed through all the formalities of collecting luggage, her visa and customs, all in about 45 minutes. She said she was geared "to practice the new 'humble me' for all these stern Arabic gentlemen. Only to be met with the utmost curtsy and smiling faces". It was my first trip to Dubai in our new car.

I took 13 days leave to show her around. Dubai is a very busy place, well known for traffic problems. It is best to get in early and leave late to avoid the traffic congestion. Dubai and Sharjah are practically on top of each other so it adds to the congestion. After meeting her at Dubai airport we visited the Creek

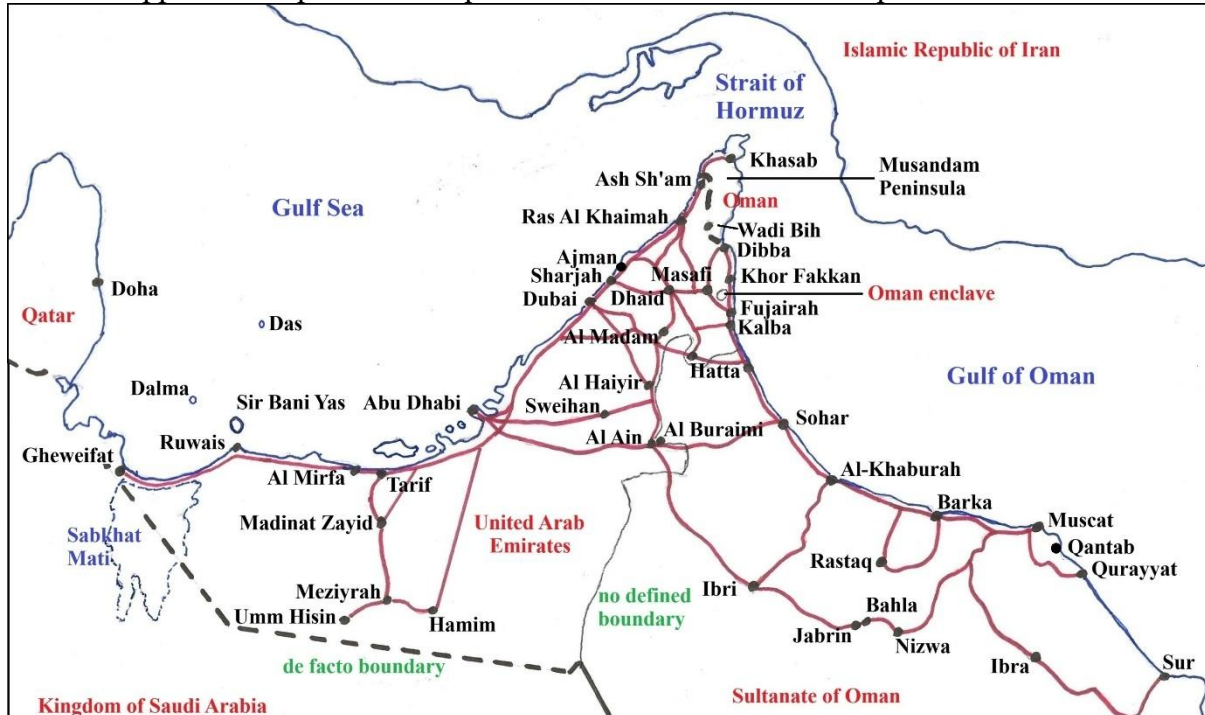


A replica wind tower mentioned on the next page.

we had the beginning of a dust storm, hence the hazy appearance in the photograph. It got worse. On the drive back to Abu Dhabi, we had dust swirling across the road while the wind tried to push the car to the right.

A few days after my wife's arrival we went to the Abu Dhabi Heritage open air Museum. In general, it was a bit of a disappointment. The idea is good, but they do not seem to have followed through and done the job properly. The most interesting feature was a reproduction of a wind tower that were used to provide cooling ventilation in desert houses long ago. Read more about this later.

It is now opportune to provide a map with the names of most of the places we visited.



The UAE and northern Sultanate of Oman. The Hajar Mountains extend from the Musandam Peninsula at the Strait of Hormuz, south and south-eastward following the coast into northern Oman. The Empty Quarter is the area to the south and south-west of the UAE.

Trips south and west



On the way to Al Ain. Jebel Hafeet in the distance.

We went to Al Ain on the 16th. It is about 160 kms inland on the Oman border and near the eastern mountains. Spent the day there and visited various places of interest. Went to the top of Jebel Hafeet, the nearby 1100 metres (~3600 feet) mountain. Jebel means mountain. The general altitude above sea level around the mountain is flat and only about 200 metres (~650 feet) above sea level. You can drive all the way to the top of the mountain. The winding road is truly amazing. Really was a good site and view. Very barren and interesting.



Two views of the desert toward the Gulf from the top of Jebal Hafeet and the access road.

We also went on a trip westward along the coast to toward Saudi Arabia and Qatar. At about 150 kilometres we stopped at a coastal town called Al Mirfa (or Al Mifra) depending on which road signs and maps you believe. It gets confusing, because they do not worry too much about English spelling consistency. Still, we are grateful. it would be a lot more difficult if it was all in Arabic. Seen below part of Al Mirfa and its beach.



From there we headed south through oilfields (no photographs allowed signs) into the desert to Madinat Zayed (Madinat, means town or city). Once passed the oil fields, on the way back, we took photographs of the desert. The contrasting sand colours are amazing.



In the desert in the Madinat Zayed area. Sometimes the sand was almost white.

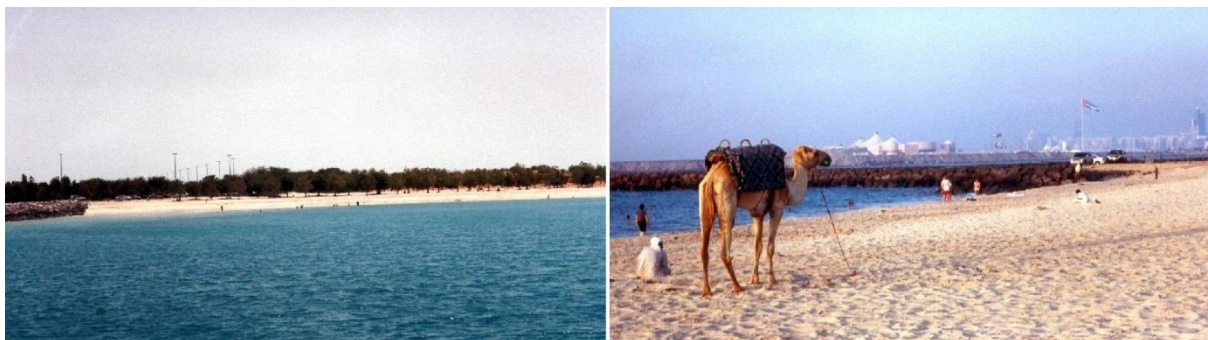


We had our travels curtailed when, 2 months after of getting our new car in April, a kindly Afghanistan gentleman drove his big mechanical horse cab into the side of our car, which was parked in our home parking area. He should not have been there with his mechanical horse. I could have gladly sent him to Allah much sooner than he anticipated. I was not pleased. He simply stood there and said "No

English, sorry". Lent me his cell phone to call the police though. Vehicles may not be removed until the police arrive. They assess the situation and immediately allocate blame. You then take the documents he gives you to the insurance company and that is it. If you are not to blame it does not cost a cent. No excess, nothing. The other person gets ticketed and his/her insurance pays. I eventually got the car back. It was beautifully repaired by the Hyundai agents, but an inside door panel was not available. After a month of waiting, I kicked up a fuss. Suddenly they had a panel. Went out to the place and it was the wrong panel. They still thought maybe I would like three panels the same and one different. I politely informed them that they were wrong and they need to get their A into G, or I communicate with Hyundai Korea about it. I eventually got the correct panel.

Going to the beach

The beach we used is a public beach as opposed to the numerous beaches which belong to clubs and hotels. It is situated on the far north-western part of the island beyond the Marine Mall. With white beach sand, palm trees slightly in from the water and lining the beach, deep blue sea and no waves, it reminds one of those that one typically sees in tropical island holiday brochures. There are also cordoned areas exclusive for Emiratis. Areas for women only have high barriers extending into the water so that they are not visible to anyone else.



The beach in the NW (right) and seen from the rock pier (left). Camel rides available.

The most curious sight is watching the pseudo-Arab women swimming. Pseudo-Arab women are the Pakistani women who dress in the UAE Arab national dress, that is, the black burka attire. We soon became used to other women swimming in full attire. Of particular interest was the Pakistani husband, ever loving wife and mother-in-law of husband, or mother, that arrived to swim. The wife was in her burka outfit, papa western attire and mother-in-law in coloured robes similar to the burka. Husband stripped down to shorts and waded in with a fully attired wife. She bobbed in the shallows looking like a black inflating and deflating balloon. The voluminous mother-in-law also waded into the shallows fully attired. Mother-in-law did not stay in long. She soon staggered and floundered out of the water like a whale leaving its natural habitat and flopped down on the sand at the water's edge where she remained until nearly dry. She then moved under a palm tree near to us. Husband and wife eventually came out and camped near the water's edge and son, or son-in-law, ordered mother, or mother-in-law, in an unintelligible language, to bring something down to them. Mother, or mother-in-law, was not impressed. She complied with much muttering and mumbling in their direction as well as in our direction. After husband and ever-loving wife had sun dried, the husband dressed and they all traipsed off to the car and left.

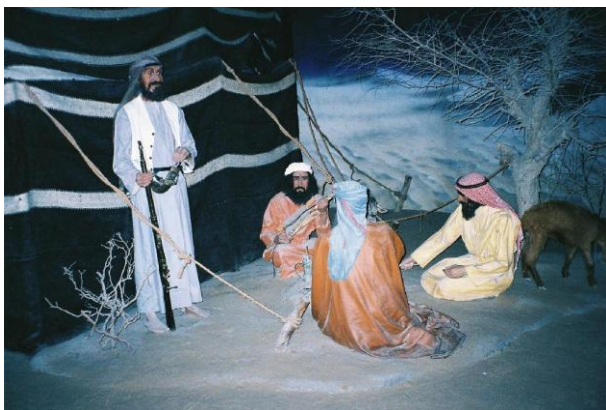
On another occasion, not long after arriving in the UAE, I was swimming, my wife was seated

on the beach, when I noticed an Asian man casually walking along the beach stopping to talk to various women, including my wife. A police car arrived. Two policemen walked across the beach straight to the man and took him away. Now, on previous visits to the beach, we had wandered about the fact that there was always an Arab man dressed in traditional Arab dress that was always seated well back from the beach under the shade of trees. Turns out, as soon as there is anything untoward, he is on his cell phone and calls the police.

Reconnaissance trips and visitor trips



Dubai Creek and the Al Fahidi Fort Museum.



A diorama: around a camp fire with a Shisha just visible and a man with a musical instrument. Another with a rifle and a khanjar (traditional curved dagger).

One day in June we did a day trip to Dubai to visit the creek and the Al Fahidi Fort that has been converted into a museum. The fort, in the old Dubai area and the oldest building in Dubai, dates back to 1787. The museum opened in 1971, the year that the United Arab Emirates came into existence. It has dioramas (replicas of a scenes) such as depicting early desert life, historic exhibits and displays recreating historic Arab houses, mosques, souks (markets) and date farms. One can also watch and listen to traditional Arab dance and music. Most interesting. Well worth the visit.

During July and August, we did day reconnaissance trips from Abu Dhabi to plan for husband and wife friends from South Africa in October and my youngest son later in October and November. Getting a visa is very involved. All entries and exits are strictly controlled with reams of paperwork. I needed to provide an employment and salary letter, a copy of my employment contract from my employers, plus original contract, copies of passports (my own and visitors), plus Dhs100. For my son, I had to provide a letter saying that he is my son and give parents names. A birth certificate is an asset. Fortunately, I have birth certificates for all close family. Getting a visa takes a minimum of 3 days. One also has to appear in person before an official who gives final approval. The trick here is to let the wife go in. All women get preference before men, which drastically reduces waiting time, because most applicants are men. The company helps with processing. One then has to send a copy of the visa to visitors before departure. This must be shown to the airline when checking in. I have to hand the

original in at the relevant airport at least an hour before flight arrival. Abu Dhabi airport is 35 km from the city and Dubai airport is about 160km from Abu Dhabi. Upon arrival visitors must collect it at the visa counter before going through immigration. I had to book and pay for my son's flight through an agent in South Africa.

Ras Al Khaimah



Ash Sha'm with the northern end of the Hajar Mountains in the Oman enclave.

On Sunday (28th July) we went along the coast to the east passing Dubai (very modern and commercial) and Sharjah (next to Dubai and poorer relation, with badly signposted roads) then through small Ajman to Ras Al Kaimah (more rural, slower pace), to Ash Sha'm in the far north of the Ras Al Kaimah Emirate in the Musandam Peninsula near the Strait of Hormuz and the northern end of the Jebel Hajar (Hajar Mountains), then inland to the Khatt Springs (hot mineral springs). Not much to see there with a small fort ruin.

We left early in the morning and arrived back in the evening having travelled over 600 kilometres. All in all, a very picturesque and interesting place with the mountains that come right down to the coast, the small fishing bays and the remains of forts dating from the 1600s to 1800's.

There were plenty of camels wandering around in this neck of the woods, or rather desert. They appear to have a darker ridge on the back and hind legs. Also lots of donkeys and goats wandering around. In one small place we went through in the far north, there were even cows wandering along the streets and among the people.



Dhayah Fort and Hajar Mountains in the background.

Most impressive was the Dhayah Fort in Ras Al Kaimah Emirate near to Ash Sha'm. It is the only remaining hill fort in the UAE. Located on a 70 metres hill surrounded by date palm gardens, the mud-brick fortress was built around 1800. It was the site of an 1819 battle between the local Qawasim tribes and British troops. It was restored in the late 1990s.

The mostly mud and palm wood reinforced forts were generally attacked, won and demolished, by British troops in 1819 and 1820. There is the story that on one occasion the British were holed up in a fort and sent a message back to headquarters that they were OK, but heaven help if it rained.

Driving still requires great awareness. 4x4's rule, mine is bigger than yours. Speed limits are for the plebs and serfs. We witnessed an amazing scene on the highway one day on the way back from Dubai to Abu Dhabi. A police car with lights flashing come up behind us. I moved

from the left to central lane and it sped past. To our amazement there was an Arab driven 4x4 behind flashing its lights and hooting at the police car to get out of his way, which it did. Also on the same road a 4x4 had gone off a perfectly straight and good 3 lane road. Rolled through the crash barrier and came to rest a crumpled mess. Looked like too fast and possibly a blow out, or lack of concentration, possibly because the driver was on a cell phone. Sometimes, I think they have to have them surgically removed before going to bed each night. Indicators and mirrors are superfluous. In fact, we saw one taxi driver, driving along with his head scarf hanging on his outside driving mirror where he had placed it to dry.

Fujairah

Our next trip was over the Hajar mountains to explore the east coast in the Fujairah Emirate area. Being on the edge of the Arabian Sea and on the edge of Monsoon activity and occasional tropical depression, it gets more rainfall and is a greener area.

We finally went to Fujairah on Saturday the 10th August. A colleague falling ill foiled the first attempt and I had to work in his stead. The second attempt had to be aborted when the kitchen geyser sprung a leak and water ran in streams down the wall and into cupboards.

Armed with maps we thought it would be easy to get there, inshallah (God willing), even though we have been here long enough to know that this is not the norm. Roads between towns and cities are being built faster than they make maps. Even having a map that is only a year old is no guarantee that it is accurate. Another consideration, is that Arabic places, translated to English, is very much a phonetic process. Words are spelt as pronounced. Different pronunciation by different people means different spelling. If you have three different maps you could easily see three different ways of spelling a place name in English. Even when you get on the road you will often see a new way of spelling places on the road signs. Sometimes with Al added in front, sometimes not. One does not complain. It is very considerate that they have signs in English.

The first problem on the road was near Sweihan (or Siwehan), about 60 kilometres from Abu Dhabi. We arrived at a traffic circle with a big road board, but not one road leading off the circle was marked with the place we were going, or any other place marked on the map along the way. Eventually I had to ask for directions at the local municipal building. It turned out that straight ahead was the correct choice and the place we were heading was Al Haiyir, or Al Hayer.

Forty kilometres further on we came to another traffic circle and could see the flyover road we wanted to be on, but could not fathom out how to get onto it and no roads signs of any use whatsoever. After a number of circuits around the traffic circle we stopped. Traffic police were parked nearby in their red and white patrol car. They had no doubt been viewing our erratic behaviour with interest. After walking across to the police car with map in hand, and by the use of various hand movements, pointing to the map and shrugging of shoulders, I managed to let them know we were from Abu Dhabi, or Abu Zabi, and we wanted to go to Fujairah. With one word of "come" I was left standing at the side of the road watching the police car speed around the traffic circle and disappear under a narrow tunnel. I had to run back to the car, dive in, throw the map and my reading glasses on my wife's lap, start the car, seat belt on, all in one action and race after the already vanished police car. Coming out of the tunnel we saw the police car three vehicles ahead at a stop street. It then sped off to the left. We eventually

followed and found the car stationary at an on ramp, marked Dubai. Not where we were going, but the cops should know. With a wave of thanks, we were off. About 10 kilometres further on we found a turnoff marked East Coast. Close enough. We were going to Fujairah on the east coast so this must be the correct road. We had a good laugh about that.

The rest of the trip was a breeze, although on the way back we had some moments of uncertainty, again because we could not see the place names we wanted. But by looking for familiar landmarks, seen on the way out, we did all right. At one stage when we did not know which way to go and had pulled off to the side of the road, a lorry that I knew came from Abu Dhabi came past, so we followed it. Fortunately, at a crucial point further on I recognised the turn off we wanted, because the lorry carried on past. Apparently, it was on its way to Al Ain and not Abu Dhabi. We had a good laugh about that as well.

The roads, complete with streetlights all the way, are wonderfully made, smooth and wide. Except they have a quaint way of putting humps in the road, especially at the towns along the way and before traffic circles, which they love and are also large circular race tracks. Mostly the humps are signposted and marked, but to keep one alert, sometimes they have neither. The humps are necessary. Speed limits are 100 kph, or 120 kph, on the open road and 60 kph in the towns. However, the locals see no difference between driving at 140 to 160 kph on the open road and through the towns on the way. One driver, in a pick-up truck, curiously drove at about 80 kph on the open road and then at about 120 kph through a town, taking the humps in his stride. In between one travels through desert that changes from a barren rocky moonscape to red rippled sand dunes, some in a pile of about 60 to 100 metres (100 to 300ft). Bizarrely, here and there one sees some trees growing out of the sand dunes. Must be subterranean water near the surface.

Talking about sand. On the way to Sweihan we passed kilometre after kilometre of huge Lorries carrying sand from one part of the desert to another part of the desert. Why this was so escaped us. From the road we could see where they were collecting the sand and where they were taking it. The sand at the one place looked the same as the sand at the other place. Very mysterious. The road had also been deeply grooved by the lorries. The grooves, being wider than the width of the car, made uncomfortable driving.

There were camels all over the place. Although they seem wild and wondering at random. Apparently they all belong to someone. How they know whose is whose I do not know. If you hit one with your car, it is automatically your fault and you pay for hitting the camel and then worry about repairing your car, assuming you survive. Possibly this is a case of possession being 9 tenths of the law. They possessed the land before there were cars and before foreigners



Passing through the barren rock Hajar mountains.

came on the scene. Once we saw a camel in the middle of the road eating hay on the other side of the central road barrier. We surmised that the hay had fallen off a passing lorry.

Before passing through the mountains and a short distance before Masafi, one arrives at the Souk Al Juma, or the Friday market. It consists of about ½ a kilometre of stalls on either side of the road where they sell all sorts of local products, fruit, pottery, handicrafts, antiques and carpets. Fascinating, but a real tourist trap. The same things can be bought for less at small villages in more rural areas.

The east coast is fascinating. To get there you drive through a pass in the Hajar Mountains. The mountains consist of bare, craggy and starkly beautiful piles of rock devoid of any growth. It's not so much a range of mountains, but rather like rows and rows of sharp rocks.



At Al Bithnah Fort, prior to restoration.

Almost through the mountains on the eastern side, next to a wadi (valley), are the remains of rock, coral and mud constructed Al Bithnah Fort which was built sometime after 1735. The wadi was a strategic pass through the mountains. The fort was built for the protection of the locals and taxing traders in passing camel caravans. At the time of our visit the track to it was almost untraversable. Heavily restored since 2008, recent photographs reveal it looks unbelievably modern.

Then one arrives at the blue Gulf of Oman with little white beach coves, pale yellow mud brick villages and mountains coming straight down to the sea at places. At times the road runs right next to the beach and at others it passes through little passes hewn out of the rock.



Fujairah Fort.

Fujairah is a small rural place with a seaport to the south and an oil refinery with offshore ship loading facility to the north. It has one tall skyscraper building that is a landmark for miles around. It, with the sea to one side and the mountains behind means one cannot get disoriented. Almost in the middle of the city, in a palm orchard and about 3 kilometres from the beach, is a restored mud and stone fort dating back to 1500 to 1550. It was rebuilt between 1650 and 1700. During the 1800's British warships fired upon it. Apparently because the Sheikh refused to

come on board so they bombarded the Fujairah coastline.

We stopped at the Madhab Spring Park on the edge of the town to have a picnic lunch. The climate of Fujairah is very much like Durban in January and February, although somewhat hotter and just as humid. As long as one sat still and ate slowly, one did not begin to pour with perspiration. The park has sulphur baths, but we did not partake of the waters. Close by is their Heritage Village Museum. From there we went to the Corniche (esplanade) to get our first



Bidiya Mosque circa 640 with one of the watchtowers undergoing restoration.

curved cove-like harbour with a sandy beach, complete with palm trees and surrounded by mountains. On the far side of the harbour from the container port, is the very expensive Oceanic Hotel.

A bit further north, at Bidiya (or Badiyah), surrounded by two ruined watchtowers on nearby hills, is the oldest mosque in the UAE. Made of stone and mudbricks, since covered in layers of whitewashed plaster, the original structure is thought to be about 1,400 years old. It's a small strange four dome heavily restored structure. Each dome looks as if cooking pot lids have been stacked on top of each other. Not anything like the more modern traditional Mosques with their big Byzantine Christian domes and Ottoman minarets. The village of Bidiya is one of the oldest settlements on the East Coast, having been inhabited since 3000 BC.

close up look at the Gulf of Oman. Disappointingly, the water looked like the water in any other ocean, except it is rather flat. There were no shipwrecks, no drownings, in fact nothing to laugh at, at all.

Further north along the coast is Khor Fakkan (careful how you pronounce it). Khor means creek. It has a container port in a picturesque



A wadi near Al Halah.

In the north between Dibba at the northern tip of Fujairah and inland Masafi, near Al Halah, we came across strange sheer and narrow constructed wadi's seemingly sunk into the ground with olive palms growing in them. Seen in the photograph on the right. The farmers build the earthen walls to catch any water that ever flows through the wadi. From above one does not even know they are there. It is only when one is almost on top of them that you notice them. Masafi is the name and source of a well known brand of bottled spring water in the UAE.

Liwa Oasis

September 2nd we finally did a trip south to the Liwa Oasis area bordering Saudi Arabia in what is called Rub al Khali (the Empty Quarter). The Empty Quarter being a large and empty expanse of desert devoid of anything except sand. The Liwa Oasis is also not an oasis in the true sense. That is, a waterhole in the middle of the desert surrounded by palm trees. No, it is

a collection of towns, or villages, with irrigated fields extending in a crescent shape over a good few hundred square kilometres. It is clearly visible on satellite images. To get there one has to first go west along the coast to near Tarif, then inland to Madinat Zayed in the desert, then onward to the Liwa area

We left Abu Dhabi at about 7 a.m. and headed out passing the airport to a traffic circle and turned off to Tarif. After a while we came to Al Masreq. There all road signs stopped without any indication of the correct road to take. Once again, we were at a loss as to which way to go. We retraced our way to the circle and back toward Abu Dhabi to the road to Al Ain and then went toward Al Ain until we came to the turn-off to Tarif. This route we knew from a previous trip along the west coast to Al Mirfa.

On the way inland to Madinat Zayed the morning land breeze became stronger and stronger until we were driving in a dust storm with the visibility down to less than one kilometre at times. The road is a new one and in the blowing dust and near surface sand labourers continued with their roadside work scarves wrapped entirely around their heads with only their eyes



showing. Once again along the road we saw lorries apparently moving sand from one part of the desert to another part. In the middle of nowhere we saw bulldozers piling up sand here and levelling it there. Very curious. Another curious thing that we have seen on other roads is a road sign that says "beware of road surprises." As yet we have not been able to work out what are these road surprises and what constitutes a road surprise.

After passing Madinat Zayed the wind dropped, visibility improved and about 10 a.m. we arrived at Meziyrah (or Mizarah) in the middle of Liwa. It is a small place. Its greatest claim to fame is that there is a big palace on top of a nearby hill. This is the where the Bani Yas tribe originally came from before moving to Abu Dhabi and is the ancestral home of Sheikh Zayed, the ruler of Abu Dhabi and the UAE. We drove up the long hill to the palace, but of course without an invitation, you are not going to get in. On the way down we stopped and my wife picked some nearly ripe dates off a palm tree. Nice. Although, they tasted like any other dates.

There is not much to Miziyrh (or Mazaira'a or Mazaira), so we drove out to the western end to Umm Hisin to see what was there. Apart from the Abu Dhabi National Hotels (ADNH) Rest house, the new Liwa Hotel high on a hill and the usual mud fort there was nothing of interest, so we headed out to the east to Hamim (or Hemeem, or Hamien, etc.). We had read that the tar road ended there and there were very big red sand dunes.



Different coloured sand dunes nearing Liwa Oasis.



Encroaching sand dune.

On the way we saw another fort off to the left and there were biggish red sand dunes with irrigated fields extending right up to the base of them. See the photograph on the left. The contrast between the red of the dunes and the sudden change to flat green irrigated fields is quite remarkable. Apparently in the Liwa area ground water is not far below the surface and it is an easy matter to sink a borehole and obtain water for irrigation.

We reached Hamim, which is a small collection of houses and 4x4's wherever you look, but there was no end to the tar road that we expected from the map and no big dunes. In fact, the tar road became a tarred highway that disappeared into the distance northward toward Abu Dhabi. We'd seen lots of these before so we turned around and headed back to Meziyrah.

As a consolation prize, we stopped at the fort we had seen on the way out. Meziyrah Fort was in the process of being restored using the old traditional methods and "ingredients." Mud bricks are used for the walls, which are then plastered over with mud. The roofs and upper floors are made by using beams made from palm tree trunks. Across these are laid palm tree fronds and on this the mud floor, or roof is laid. The walls are about half a metre thick, but the watchtower walls are about a metre thick. The walls are thicker in the towers to withstand the vibration from canons when they were fired. In the walls at parapet level are downward pointing slits so



Liwa Shah Fort being restored/renovated and showing the ceiling structure.



Pit stop on the way home.

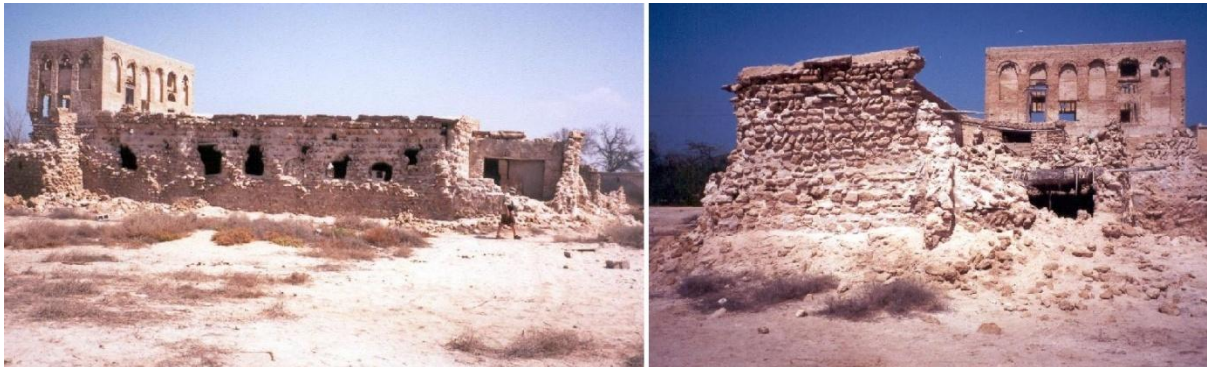
that the defenders could fire their guns down on the attacker, even when they were quite close to the wall. Very interesting to see. A worthwhile consolation prize.

On the way back in the middle of nowhere we stopped at an Abu Dhabi National Oil Company (ADNOC) petrol station, but we were informed that they had no unleaded petrol. This would not have been funny if we did not have enough petrol to get back to Mizerah. We learnt long ago to refuel long before you really need to refuel. Rules of desert driving are to have plenty of fuel, bottled water and a charged cell phone. We always kept 1 litre bottles of frozen water in the refrigerator. When we leave home, we take two bottles with us in a cooler box with our picnic lunch. One we keep loose in the passenger cabin. Even with air-conditioning, it slowly melts and we constantly have cold water throughout the day.

We had seen a public garden at Madinat Zayed on the way out, so on the way back we stopped there to have a late picnic lunch. The place was deserted apart from some of the staff sitting outside. After limited Arabic and sign language, I established that we can go in and picnic. We carried our folding chairs and cooler box in, found a suitable place in the shade to settle and eat. After that it was back to Abu Dhabi through the desert on the 4 lane black top and home by late afternoon.

18th October 2002, we took our visitors from South Africa back to Dubai airport in the early morning and then very early the next morning we had to go back again to pick up my younger son. It was rather hectic with the visitors. They were only here for 10 days and we tried to show them as much as possible. Because Mathew was with us for a longer time it was easier. All in all, five weeks of visitors.

Of course, while our friends were here (8th to the 18th October 2002) and while my son was here (19th October to 15th November) we had to do all the tours that we had previously reconnoitred. We should be well qualified as UAE tour guides. We stayed at the Ras Al Kaimah Hotel and the Fujairah Beach Motel with our friends and at the latter with my son. Arranging bookings is very different from elsewhere in the world. One can haggle prices via e-mail and no deposits are necessary. It is accepted that your word is your bond and you will arrive. Everyone is friendly and extremely courteous and seemed to know who we were when we arrived before we introduced ourselves. A pleasing experience.



Ruins at Jazirat Al Hamra.

We tried to visit new places on these later visits. One of them was to the ruins at Jazirat Al Hamra that is on the northern part of the east coast near Ras Al Khaimah. It was a pearl fishing village. There was a time when pearl diving was the mainstay of the UAE's economy. Original building material was farush (a shell and coral mix), burnt coral limestone, sand bricks and wood (from palm trunks and fronds). Originally the settlement was on an island accessible only at low tide. Now with reclamation in the area this is no longer so. The inhabitants have also moved to newer accommodation nearby.

Another new place we went to with my son, is Hatta, part of the Dubai Emirate. Situated somewhat high in the Hajar Mountains, on the way to Fujairah, it was a useful place to get away from the summer heat and humidity at the coast. To get there one drives briefly through Oman, although there are no border posts. However, one needs to make sure one's car is insured for travel in Oman. From there we tried a new route to the coast. On the map it is marked as



The watchtower at Hatta.

under construction. The map was correct. We reached a point where the road stopped at the mountainside. The reason being that they were still busy constructing a tunnel through the mountains. We had to turn around and go all the way around to another route to Fujairah. My son was extremely worried about us travelling along this incomplete road and kept on saying we must turn back.

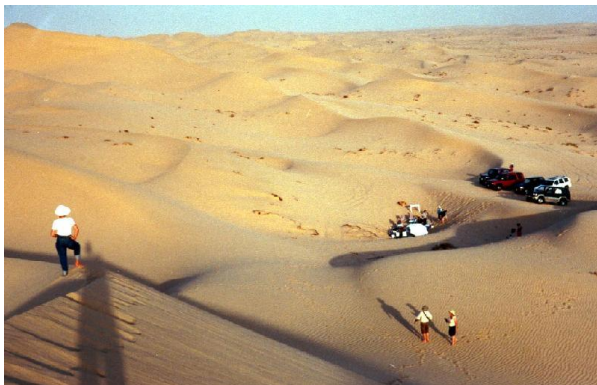
Another new place we visited with my son, is the Wadi Al Hayl Palace ruins, which are in the mountains about 25 kilometres from Fujairah. The last 4 kilometres of the road are rough gravel and stone. Supposedly for 4x4s only, but we managed it easily in the Hyundai Accent. The palace, fort or castle, the guide books are never sure which is which, dates back to about 1670. The present building possibly date from 1830. It consisted of bedrooms, meeting rooms, a kitchen and warehouses. Surrounding the palace are the ruins of stone houses where the villagers lived. Nearby is a fenced off cemetery. Also nearby on a hillside, is a watchtower and



The remains of the palace at Wadi Al Hayl.

lower down in the wadi is an irrigated area where date palms grow and where crops were cultivated. Here and there we found old pieces of broken pottery, which we left where we found them. Fortunately, the place has not been restored to its pristine glory, as is the local want. It was very quiet and peaceful. Sitting there, having a picnic lunch in the shade of the palace wall, one could imagine the people going about their daily lives all those years ago.

Earlier in October we went to our first desert braai. We, along with our friends from South Africa, went with Australian friends, a colleague and his wife, in their 4x4 Land Rover Discovery and other couples. We left in a convoy of 5 vehicles at 3 pm and drove about 80 kms along the road to Sweihan where we turned off into the desert. Before going onto the soft sand,



The desert camp site seen from the top of a sand dune. And sunset.

we had to let the tyres down to soften them enough for the soft sand and then went over dunes until we found a suitable dip to set up our camp. After spending the last of the daylight climbing the dunes and taking photographs, it was time to light our disposable charcoal packs, light the log fire and start the serious business of cooking with refreshment. After that we sat talking, looking at the clear star lit sky while watching meteors burning in the Earth's atmosphere, passing satellites and aircraft. Some stayed the night. We arrived home about 11 p.m. Magical.

The weather was getting cooler and much more bearable. Cooler air from the north was beginning to invade and the winter rains (ha ha ha) may start.



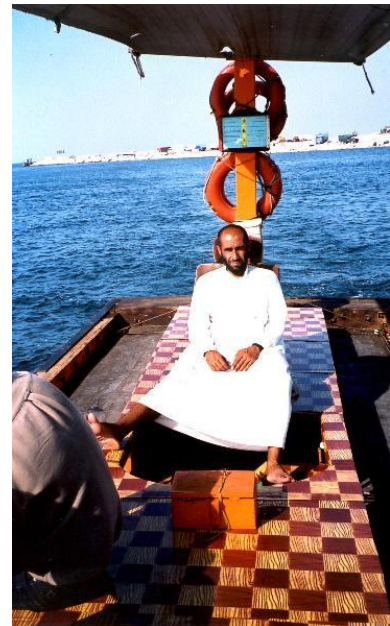
Abras on the Dubai creek with sunroof.

There is a central raised section where the passengers sit lined facing outward on each side. Usually about 20 passengers at a time. It is a cheap way of getting from one side of the creek to the other. However, we hired the use of one for ourselves for an hour at Dhs40. This was kindly organised by the waiter at the creek side restaurant where we had lunch. I suspect he gets a kickback. Dhs30 is a more reasonable price, but what the heck, it was all organised.

We made an interesting arrival on board the boat. We simply climbed over the rail at the side of the restaurant and dropped about 2 feet onto the bows of the floating thing which was pushed against the creek wall. The exit was the same in reverse. The driver (can't call him a helmsman) reclines in a chair and steers the craft with his foot stuck in a hole where there is a small helm and he uses his foot to steer. At regular intervals he spits over the side.

On the 25th October, along with my son, we spent the day in Dubai. My wife's eldest son arrived on Thursday evening from the UK. He was here for a few days on business. We did all the tourist things with him in Dubai and went up the creek (without a paddle) on an Abra (as in Abracadabra). The Dubai creek is a big inlet, the remains of a river. An Abra is a water taxi. The taxi is basically a small flat

deck motor boat with a



Out host and helmsman.

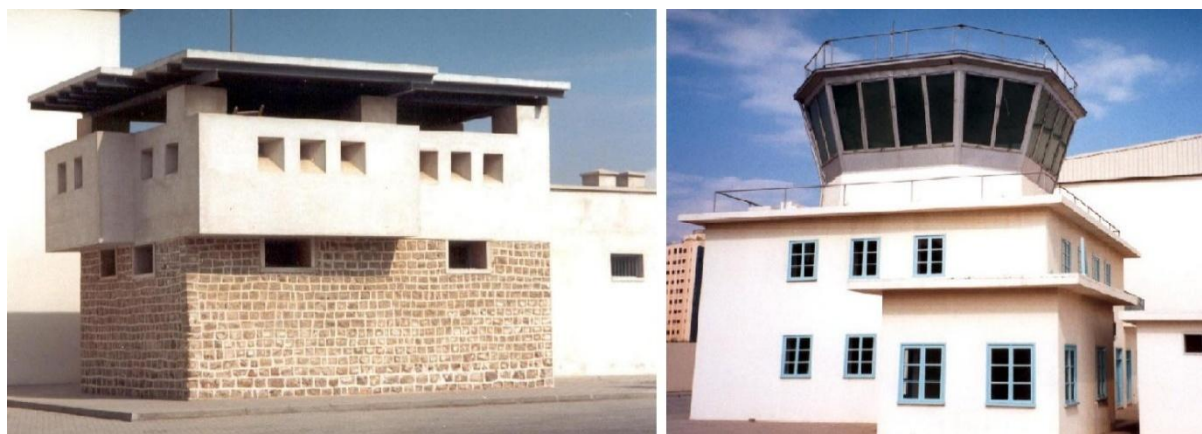
Took my son to a desert braai, went to the east coast via Hatta in the mountains and spent the night at Fujairah on the east coast before returning via the Wadi Al Hayl Palace, which is not far inland from Fujairah. Also went to Dubai and into the desert to Al Ain. We spent a lot of time at the beach which I think was good for him. Not only did he get the benefit of the salt water, but also sunshine and exercise. I think he gets too much nightlife at home. The weather was now much cooler. Only gets up to the low thirties during the day and the low twenties at night. We also saw some cloud now and then. Had a few early morning spots of rain one day, which my son slept through. Winter is here.

15th November 2002, we took my son to Dubai airport early in the morning for his return to

South Africa. He left at 0340 UAE time (2340 UTC) and arrived in SA at 1010 SAST (1210 UAE time). We did invite my sister now in Cape Town to visit and offered to pay for my mother to visit from Durban. However, my mother did not want to travel and my sister had her own business to run.

Sharjah old airport

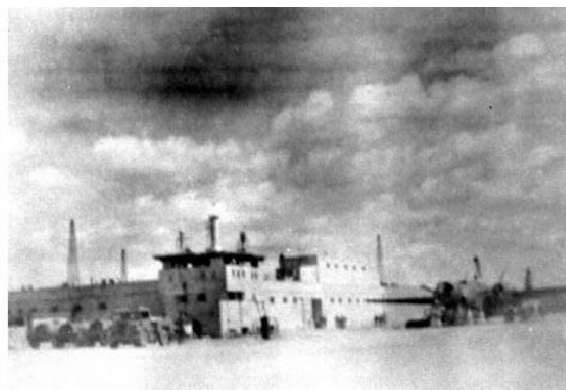
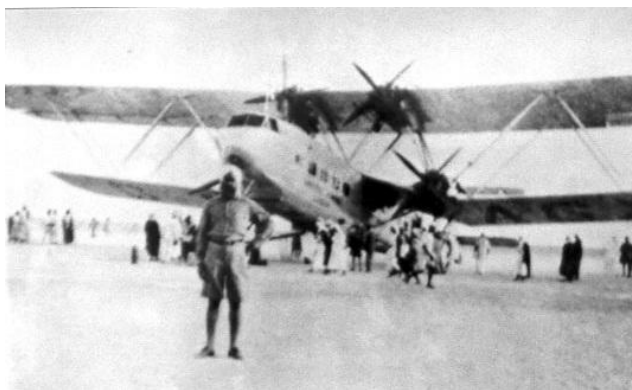
Late in November, we finally made the trip to the Sharjah Al Mahattah Museum with friend and Darryl colleague Darryl (also a colleague in South Africa) and his wife. Whoop-de-do I can hear you say. I wanted to see the museum, so that is all that counts. The museum includes the Aviation Museum. It is located in the restored fort and rest house. This and the control tower, are all that remains of the old airport. Today the rest house and control tower stand, in the museum grounds, near to Shari' al-Malik Abd al-Azeez Street, or King Abdul Aziz Street (take your pick). A portion of the street was once the airport runway. Identified by a very straight section of the road.



Part of the restored rest house//fort and control tower that was built after WWII.

The comfortable and romantic fort-cum-hotel was built in a couple of months during the summer of 1932 to house night stopping passengers and aircrew flying between the UK and India. In the summer heat and humidity, this was some feat. The fort and rest house was needed because the airport was about 22 kilometres from Sharjah and the passengers were not allowed into the town without permission from the Sheikh. A British officer who surveyed the site stated that “electric light, fans and a Frigidaire are essential.” All building material, fittings and furnishings were brought by ship from India.

The route was operated by Imperial Airways, a forerunner of British Airways. In 1932 the first of the new Handley Page HP42 aircraft landed at Sharjah. Imperial airways owned 8 of the aircraft, named, Hadrian, Hannibal, Hanno, Helena, Hengist, Heracles, Horatio and Horsa. Hanno is reputed to be the name of the first HP42 to land at Sharjah. The 10400 kg (13 ton) four engine aircraft, nicknamed the flying banana, was the world's biggest civil airliner at the time. It cruised at 168 kph (105 mph) with a maximum speed of 192 kph (130 mph), carried a crew of 4 and 38 passengers. However, on the eastern routes it was fitted to carry 20 passengers (and more fuel, no doubt). In about 7 days the aircraft flew from London to Karachi. Across the Middle East the aircraft flew from Cairo to Gaza, Rutbah and Baghdad. From there the passengers and crew spent the night at Basra, had lunch at Bahrein and then landed at Sharjah for the night. The following day the flight went westward over the Hajar Mountains, across the Gulf of Oman and on to Gwadar (Kay, 1995).



Photographs of photographs in the museum. A circa 1932 Handley Page HP42 at the airport and the fort/rest house World War II circa 1940. The Royal Air Force aircraft is a Vickers Wellington medium bomber.

Ramadan and Christmas

Later November and early December we experienced our first nearly month long Ramadan. This means fasting during the day. That includes everyone. If we wanted to eat and drink, we had to do it in the privacy of the home. No eating or drinking in public, or at the office. It came to an end about the 6th December. To celebrate they had three days holiday (Monday - Wednesday) then the weekend off (Thursday and Friday). Then because Eid was on Saturday, so they also took off until and including Monday. Next, they take Christmas and New Year off. The shops are full of Ramadan decorations and sales. They were also already putting up Christmas decorations. I think it is great the way they cater for all and take the opportunity to celebrate. Not much work is done, but that is a bonus.



Buildings lit for Ramadan with artificial palm trees lit and installed for the occasion.

During Ramadan a lot of buildings are lit up with lights like a Christmas tree, or more appropriately Ramadan Tree, except there are not so many trees here. There is a big celebration at the end of Ramadan, Eid al-Fitr, the breaking of the fast, this year on the Friday 6th December. This was close to the 2nd December UAE national day, so there was a big combined celebration with feasting and a firework display on the Corniche that was the biggest I have ever seen with fireworks going up to about 500 feet in the sky. The whole thing sounds like a thunderstorm in progress.

Ramadan can be regarded as the Muslim equivalent of Christmas. It is a time of goodwill and kindness to those less fortunate and introspection. To a foreigner the goodwill and kindness is very apparent. A lot of time is spent in prayer. A lot less work gets done because of the extra

praying and reading of the Quran. Government workers also work a shortened work week. Instead of the usual 35 hour week, they work about 30 hours. Large companies and department stores offer all sorts of special bargains as part of their goodwill and kindness. It is a good time to buy electronic items such as laptops, DVDs and VCRs. The last two are now history. Everyone in the office was provided free packed meals at the end of each day's fast.

The problem is that they go without food and water from sunrise to sunset, although the sick, very young and elderly are exempt, if need be. This can lead to some strange driving behaviour particularly late in the day and especially when they are hurrying home to break their fast. The evening becomes a time of feasting, but also a time when families get together.

Eid Al Adha, the festival of sacrifice, follows. This occurred on Tuesday the 11th February 2003. Monday 10th to Wednesday 12th were declared holidays. Including Thursday and Friday weekend, this made a 5 day holiday. Once again, we had the barbequing of goats in the open courtyard/parking lot below our apartment on all days, but particularly on the 11th.

The 10th was Hadj day, the important day when everyone goes to Makkah (Mecca). As it is such an important occasion, the President His Highness Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan had all his friends and relatives around to visit him. To do this he sent 3 Boeing 737's and an Airbus A300 from part of his personal Amiri flight to fetch them and take them home afterward. This meant flights of not more than about 150 kilometres and some shorter. The Amiri flight is essentially his private airline consisting of at least the above aircraft, plus a Boeing 747-400 executive jet and a Boeing 747SP.

Hadj. Before going to Makkah, Muslims have to prepare themselves. This includes cleansing themselves physically and spiritually. This includes the removal of all jewellery and make-up and bathing. Clothing is simple. Some wearing simply seamless robes and scandals while the women wear a head scarf. Spiritually they pray to Allah and cleanse themselves of all thoughts of discord.

The first day is spent at the Holy Mosque in prayer. The Prophet Mohammed always used the right side of his body, that is hand and foot first. So when stepping through the Gate of Peace into the marble courtyard of the Holy Mosque, one always steps with the right foot first.

When the prayers are over one goes to the Kaaba. This is the sacred centre of the mosque. It is a stone structure thirty-five feet square and fifty feet high with a single door six feet above the marble floor with a huge black velvet gold embroidered cloth is draped over it. The cloth is woven specially woven each year and after the Haj pilgrims can pay a lot of money for a piece of the cloth as a souvenir. This is where Ibrahim (or Abraham) dedicated the building to the worship of a single God. This is the building to which Muslims all over the world bow down and pray five times a day. In a corner of the Kaaba is the Black Stone. This stone, framed in silver, was kissed by Mohammed when it was placed in position and symbolises the Muslim love of God. Pilgrims then pray while circling the Kaaba, always keeping the Kaaba on the left.

The inside of the Kaaba is the most sacred spot in the world and only very special pilgrims are allowed inside. No hoi poloi allowed. The door is reached by means of portable steps. It is gloomy and visitors spend time praying, sometimes praying in each corner.

After this, pilgrims go to the Station of Ibrahim in the Holy Mosque where they prostrate themselves twice. In bowing to God they acknowledge that the Kaaba ritual is not a form of

idol worship, or worship of the building, but means of acknowledging that there is only one God, Allah.

Pilgrims then leave the Holy Mosque and go to the Well of Zamzam and the Mas=ʿa, or running place. It was from the plains near Makkah that Ibrahim with his wife Sarah and son Isaac went on to Palestine, while his other wife Hagar with his son Ismail remained behind. Hagar was persecuted by Sarah and Ibrahim gave her permission to stay. Thus the Jewish and Christian faiths developed from Ibrahim and Isaacs descendants, while the Muslim faith developed from Ibrahim via Ismail.

The place is important because Hagar reportedly ran around the rocky place in the boiling sun looking for water for her young son. The event is commemorated by doing seven round trips along a course to the well where water was found and which still flows. It was run or walked in the past, but there were so many casualties from heat stroke and heart attacks, that an air-conditioned walkway was constructed. There are now signs that tell men where to run and where to walk, while women are instructed to walk. The mountain spring can no longer be seen, but hundreds of water taps have been built into a marble vault where pilgrims can take of the water and sprinkle water on themselves. This ends the first day=s rituals all of which are done on this day and all others with the males and females segregated.

Then it is on to the Valley of Mina and Mount Arafat. This is where Adam and Eve joined after their wanderings and where God ordered Ibrahim to sacrifice his son Isaac as a test of faith, but at the last minute allowed him to sacrifice a goat instead. It is also where the Prophet Mohammed gave his last sermon, four months before his death. Pilgrims walk up the steep slope and stand in the desert heat for six hours and pray, or read from the Koran. Of course pilgrims faint and are carried off on stretchers to medical vans where they are attended to. At dusk they move off the hill to the plain between the valley and the mount where they once again pray.

On the final day they pass along the road to Mina where there are stone pillars. Seven sets of stones are cast at these pillars. This is where Ibrahim the Devil tried to convince Ibrahim not to sacrifice his son and Ibrahim drove the Devil away. Casting of the stones is symbolic of chasing the Devil away and each is symbolic of cleansing one=s self of a sin, temptation, bad thought, or burden endured by the pilgrim.

Now cleansed of all sin, the pilgrims go to the Mina plain where a sheep, goat, or camel can be bought for ritual slaughter symbolic of the sacrifice made by Ibrahim. The animal is held with its head toward the Holy Mosque Kaaba. Its throat is slit and the blood allowed to drain away before being skinned. A novel way has been developed to skin the animals quickly. The professional butcher cuts a thin slit in the leg of the animal and then pumps air through the slit and the animal grows in size. While the air spreads throughout the animal between the skin and the flesh, the hits the body with a strong stick to help distribute the air. The process separates the skin from the meat and makes it easier to skin. This marks the beginning of four days of celebration. As a close to the pilgrimage their plain clothing is exchanged for shining white robes for the men and colourful dresses for the women. What is left over from the feasting is usually given to the poor.

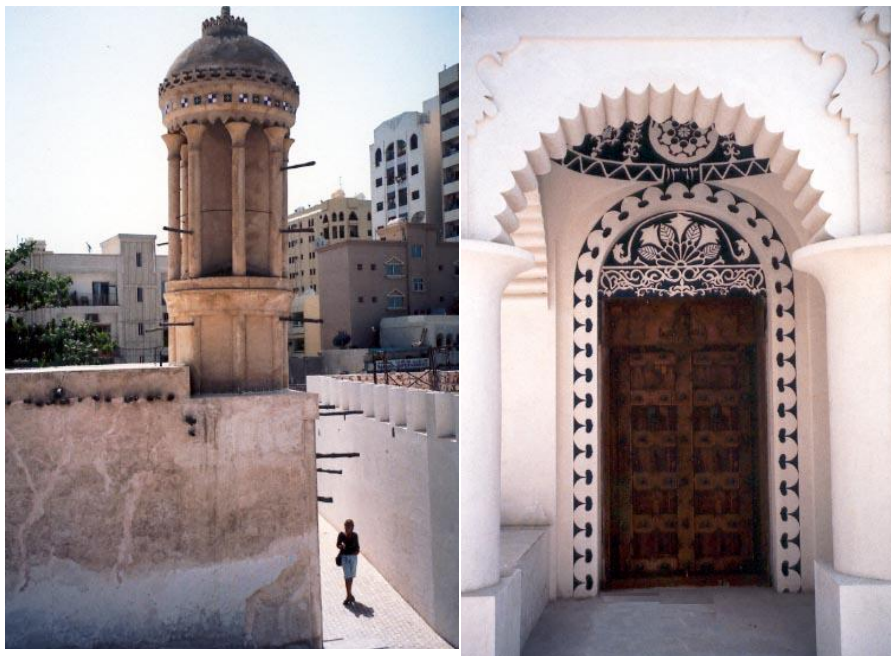
The weather was now “cold” 28-30°C during the day and “freezing” 15°C at night.

Travelling again. Wind towers and Wadi Bih.

20th to 22nd February 2003 Thursday to Saturday we went to spend two nights at the Ras Al Khaimah Hilton with friends. He is a Scotsman and an avionics technician at the UAE General Civil Aviation Authority. She is Singapore Chinese. Being a colleague, they lived in the same building. The Hilton had special rates of Dhs 290 per night for a double room and included a buffet breakfast. The intention was to drive through Wadi Bih in the mountains to Dibba, then returning roundabout to the south avoiding the mountains.

We drove up independently from Abu Dhabi on Thursday. Our friends went by a much longer and roundabout route via Fujairah, while we followed the direct route through Dubai and Sharjah. We stopped at Sharjah where I wanted to pay another visit to Al Mahattah Aviation Museum to retake photographs that had previously not come out well. My wife sat in the car. I said she doesn't know the spiritual experience she is missing. She said it would be too sinful to experience it again.

On the way, we went to the old quarter of Sharjah where a number of old buildings have been preserved and restored, in particular I wanted to see the wind towers that were used to provide cooling ventilation in houses. They are named "badgir" (wind catcher) in Farsi and "barjil", or "barjeel" in an Arabic version of Farsi. I had seen a crude copy of one at the Abu Dhabi Heritage Museum. I have my doubts whether they were the genuine original article. Genuine examples are near impossible to find due to the less sound buildings, made mostly from farush (a mixture of shell and coral limestone), sand bricks, palm trunks and fronds. Having been replaced by modern buildings with air conditioning. I heard that there were preserved structures in the old quarters of Sharjah and Dubai. Some of the new buildings include ornate wind towers and ornate doors.



A Sharjah wind tower and an ornate doorway.

The early genuine towers were square and open on four sides to catch any wind. Inside there are four cross panels that form four V shapes facing an opening. Cooler air entering is then funneled downward to a windowless room below where it displaces hotter air and provides some relief. Possibly about 3°C to 5°C cooler. In Stevenson screen shade temperatures of around 40 to 47°C, this is better than

nothing.

In an experiment, a small balsa wood model consisting of a 14 x 14 x 8 cm room, with a 5 x 5

x 10 cm wind tower above one corner of the room, covered with clear plastic, was constructed. To observe the wind flow through and around a wind tower and in the room below small, thin and flat pieces of tissue paper were strategically placed. Cotton wool fibres were also tried. Using the jet from an electric hair dryer simulating the flow of air passing the wind tower, the air flow inside the tower and the room could be observed (de Villiers, 2003).

Then it was back on the road to Ras Al Khaimah. We arrived at the rural, peaceful and picturesque town at about 1 pm and had a picnic lunch on the barren beach next to the harbour entrance near to the building housing the marine radar for the approach to the harbour. We then checked into the hotel and after unpacking headed a short distance back down the coast to do some late afternoon bird watching at an area of mud flats and offshore islands. We saw Flamingos, Grey Herons, the usual waders, plenty of gulls and Crab Plovers.

The following day, from Ras Al Khaimah, we went to Wadi Bih in Mike's Galloper 4x4. Amazing scenery. During the night, at about 4 am in the morning, we heard some thunder (two claps of thunder). While at breakfast at the hotel there was some light rain. So there was concern that it might not be possible to drive through the wadi. Rain that falls in the Hajar mountains can cause flash floods in the wadis. However, we decided that it had not been enough rain to be serious.



High above Wadi Bih before a steady descent.

The first part was a tarred road from Ras Al Khaimah almost up to the Emirates check point. Then it was onto a graded sand road to the Oman check point, but as we were not going north into the Musandam Peninsula part of Oman, we bypassed the check point. Almost immediately we began a steep, winding climb. The view was almost 300 metres straight down into the Wadi. One does not realise how quickly one has ascended. Then the road steadily climbed to the top of the pass which is about 1000 metres above sea level. There was overcast low cloud, so by the time we reached the top of the pass we were in the cloud with mist and drizzle and the temperature down to about 17°C. Then it was a less rapid, but steady descent down into the wadi.

Once in the narrow wadi we were surrounded by vertical cliffs rising over 300 metres on either side. At times we experienced some light rain. We could see waterfalls forming in crevices where the rain was being carried down from higher up in the mountains. In places the water was beginning to cross the road into the dry wadi bed. The guide books warn about falling rocks during rain, so we were on the lookout for this as well. Other than me seeing a rock roll down onto the road ahead then into the dry wadi bed, no other rock falls were seen. In any case if it happened there was nothing we could do about it.

The road was mostly compacted sand, which was wet from the rain, which could be very slippery if one travelled at speed, not that one can in the confines of the wadi. Occasionally, the road was rock and gravel where it crossed the wadi bed and where sometimes, in the very narrow sections, the road was part of the wadi bed. These were the areas where the wadi gorge

was no more than about 15 metres to 20 metres across with sheer cliffs on either side and a real danger area if there was a flash flood and rock fall. Due to the rainy and overcast weather and the deep narrow gorge it was very gloomy and awe inspiring. It was so eerily gloomy that taking photographs required use of the flash, or time exposure, with poor results. Once we came out of the gorge, we could see from the large pools of water in places on the road, that the rainfall on the eastern Gulf of Oman side of the mountains had been considerably more than we had experienced in the west at Ras Al Khaimah.

We had a picnic lunch on the beach at Dibba. The weather was overcast and windy with occasional light drizzle. The locals must have thought we were crazy. Then we drove back to Ras Al Khaimah around the mountains via the normal four lane route through Masafi.

Saturday we drove through Al Dhaid, Al Hayer and Sweihan back to Abu Dhabi. On the way we drove through light rain and later a dust storm. It was evident that the southerly desert wind had blown strongly in the region over the last few days, because at Sweihan one lane was closed off and sand had been piled up ready for removal. Closer to Abu Dhabi we drove through thick sand still lying across the road.

Al Ain Aerial Fiesta

During March we also went to the Al Ain Aerial Fiesta 5-14th of the month. I heard about it in the office. One of the hot air balloonists called about the weather. I then made enquiries at the Al Ain Air Traffic Control and found out that the following day there was parachuting, a UAE Air Force display with BAe Hawk 60 jet trainers, Pitts Special aerobatics and wing walkers, starting at 3:30 the following afternoon and ending with a firework display.



5th March, we packed a picnic lunch, left about 12:30 getting there at about 2 pm. We had our lunch at the airport garden park. It seems that nearly all airports in the UAE have garden parks. Abu Dhabi International Airport has a very good one and Al Ain was not at all bad. At 3:30 we presented ourselves at the fair ground come air display area, only to be told by an official that the gates open at 3:30, but nothing happens until 5 pm and that he knows nothing about an air show. He has been here every day and not seen anything like that. Well, we have been here long enough to know that that does not mean anything, so to kill time we decided to drive to the top of nearby Jebel Hafeet (as if we had not been there enough before) and we returned in time to see two parachutists land. When we bought our entry tickets they clearly showed 3-30pm.

Seated in the specially erected stand we then watched a few fly passes and climbing breaks of the Hawks. Then it was a long wait before the Pitts Special was announced. Nigel from the UK was good, if a bit hairy. The flying that is. Do not think, in fact I was sure, some of his act would not be allowed in the UK. He became dangerously low at times and some manoeuvres were toward the crowd. Definitely a no no. Then another long wait before the wing walkers in biplanes. Well, all they did was stand strapped in a brace above the wing and assume various leg and arm poses, none of them indecent, while the aircraft swooped around trailing smoke. Then there was another long wait, while I think they decided the wind was too strong for the

tethered hot air balloons. Then there was a kite flying display. At last we had the grand finale. Leather boys on their scramblers and quad bikes who raced around kicking up sand, up ramps and jumping gaps. Then, to me, was the highlight of the evening. A skedonk was driven off-centre toward a ramp. A skedonk is South African slang for an old and battered car. The idea being to lift the car on one side and drive along on two wheels. Instead, it promptly flipped over onto its roof. No roll bars of course. Took them a while to get the driver out. What surprised me was that all the acts, apart from the UAE Air Force, were from the UK, where one expects a slick and quality presentation.



The fun fair at the Al Ain Aerial Fiesta.

By now it was practically dark. We did a tour of the fun fair and then believe it or not we decided to go to the top of Jebel Hafeet again to see how the lights of Al Ain looked from above. But before that my wife wanted Kentucky chips. So we drove around Al Ain looking for a Kentucky store, but we wound up in a dodgy looking backyard motor town. We would have been shitting ourselves in a similar area in South Africa, but here it was a joke. We then went to the top of the mountain. While we were there, we saw the

firework display far off at the airport. No flying then and well clear of flammable material. Then it was home again and an hour and a half later at 10:30 we were home. We never found a Kentucky store until we were nearly back in Abu Dhabi.

Back to day-to-day life

The iniquitous, so far month long second Iraq war, which began with air strikes on the 19th March 2003 and on the ground on the 20th, continued. The war did not affect us apart from a decrease in the number of flights to the airport. All flights to Europe fly a nearly great circle route over Iraq. These had to be diverted. This made the route longer and more costly. Some flights were temporarily cancelled. The SARS (severe acute respiratory syndrome) coronavirus



The dust storm seen from our flat. I was at work and arrived home to take this photograph after the worst of the storm.

epidemic, courtesy of China was in full swing in April. It also had an effect, because many west/east flights pass through the Middle East.

The weather was getting hotter again. Temperatures were now into the low 40's with hot southerly desert winds and a dust storm on the 12th March. The humid northerly Shamal to add to the hot weather (and cold beers) would start next month. I lie. Actually, I was already sitting at my home computer with a beer next to me and Ros in front of her computer with a glass of dry white wine. Standard emailing procedure.

Sunday April 13th 2003. I assumed it was now Easter. We saw chocolate Easter bunnies, etc.,

in the supermarkets. We did not have a western calendar, so we did not know the exact dates. Only one Islamic calendar with Friday marked like a Sunday in western calendars.

Car smacked again

Our car was hit for the second time in less than a year. Again, not our fault. We were warned when we bought the car, here it is not if you will be involved in a traffic accident, but when. They drive like they are on a Dodgem track. So we were without a car for about 2 weeks again. I was tempted to make a trip to Iraq and pick up a second-hand tank. Getting the car sorted was a piece of cake. To recap. The police decide on the spot who was not to blame and give accident reports. The guilty person gets an extra piece of paper. Namely, a fine for causing the accident. One piece of paper, good. Two pieces of paper, bad. You go to your insurance company to show them the car so they can take photographs and give them to the police. Takes literally minutes. Then you take the car to the agent and leave it there. All done in a few hours. We should get the car back in about 2 weeks and they are apologetic about the long delay.

In this instance the police arrived, said good evening, although it was early afternoon and for some reason, decided that we must all go to the traffic police station to do the paperwork. So they pocketed car registration cards and licences (when driving one must have these with one). My wife was driving so they took hers and said we go. We said we do not know where we go. They said follow, so we follow. This was a little disconcerting, because they drove up to 100 kph in a city 60 kph zone and we had to follow. So technically we could be fined for speeding.

When we got there, we had to pass the jail to the office. Not encouraging. In the office I tried to point out that their drawing of the scene of the accident was not quite correct, I was told, mafi mushkila (no problem), not your fault. The other guy, a Pakistani bank employee mildly protested when they said he was to blame, but they simply drew a circle around the yield sign drawn on the accident form and said your fault, galas (which means finished, that's it). Like the South African finish en klaar (finished and done in South African bilingual slang, or done and dusted). After saying shukran, ma'al salaam (thank you and goodbye) we were out of there.

Every year you have to re-register your car. We were prepared to take a picnic basket along. It has to go to the testing ground with proof of re-insurance for a year (no monthly insurance premiums), passport and residence visa, plus photocopies and car registration card. You pay Dhs100 plus any outstanding fines, if any. The car and engine must be clean so that they can see oil leaks, etc. They then test the car and check for dents for which you must have a police report. No police report and you can't get the car repaired. Any of the above not done, no re-registration. If the car is less than 2 years old the road test is left out. They destroy the old registration card and you get a new credit card type registration card. Took us about 30 minutes to get it done.

The police do at times try to improve road safety and impose fines. Given that not using indicators, cutting in front in lanes and from side streets, not waiting at roundabouts and not obeying speed limits is normal, it is interesting what victims had to say.

Motorists claimed that the fines are another sign of life becoming more expensive in Sharjah following rent hikes. Obviously, safety is not an issue with these drivers. Another person, employed as a driver, who had been fined Dh300 for three accidents, the last two in the previous week, was indignant because he had now been fined for not giving way to cars at a roundabout.

The fact that his driving was probably atrocious is not to be considered. A taxi driver paying a fine at the police station for causing an accident was upset because the police said he did not keep enough distance from the car ahead and to cap it all, he also has to pay for the repairs. I can understand his frustration, because taxi drivers in the UAE take it for granted that there should not be gaps anywhere and they must be filled at all costs and at any speed.

Another trip to Fujairah

Later in May 2003, we decided to do a day trip to Fujairah. We have done the trip numerous times before. However, this time we were going on a new route via the recently opened tunnel. Remember from when with my younger son visited and the road ended at a hole in the wall? Recently, it was stated that the tunnel was now officially declared open. At 1.3 kilometres long it is billed as the longest tunnel in the UAE. This was strange, because to our knowledge it was the only tunnel in the UAE, except for the short underpass under the Dubai Creek.

To get there one goes via Hatta and turns to the left shortly after passing the Hatta Fort Hotel, then takes the turning to the right at the second village. The one with the RAK Bank. Suddenly one is on a four lane highway. Well, we arrived at the tunnel and dutifully took pictures of the entrance and then drove in. A sign says turn on car headlights, on lowered beam. Do not know why they bothered, because on the trip through and the return trip, we were the only one with lights on. It is beautifully made and well lit with extractor fans, telephones and traffic lights at regular intervals. Interestingly, the tunnel is curved and not far into the tunnel one cannot see where one entered, nor the exit ahead.

Exiting on the Fujairah side one can immediately see the coast about 10 kilometres ahead and far below. About 2 kilometres after leaving the tunnel there is a concrete covered section of the road about 100 metres long in a spur between two mountains. Presumably in case of rock falls. The road reaches the coast immediately south of Khor Kalba, cutting the drive from Abu Dhabi to Fujairah from 3 hours to about 2½ hours. Probably more beneficial from Dubai.

Once in Fujairah we found an ideal spot to picnic. Green grass, a big shady tree and right next to the beach. Do not know how we have missed it before. My wife took a picture of the site as we were sure no one would believe us. We then tried the toilets at the airport (not good) and headed home the same way. About 640 kilometres just to look at a tunnel and picnic. Someone has to help the economy by using this petrol.

To the Saudi Arabia border and back

During the last week of July 2003, on the holiday Wednesday to celebrate Shaikh Zayed's accession to the presidency of the UAE, we drove west along the Gulf coast passing Jebel Dhana to Sila and Gheweifat. We went for no other reasons than it is the furthest west one can go and we had not been to that corner of the UAE. Go any further west and one is in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. The border is 384 kilometres from Abu Dhabi by road. The 4 lane highway hardly changes direction and with the little amount of traffic, it was an easy day drive. Especially as I drove there and wife drove back.

We had been warned that there was nothing to see. I suppose, in a way, this is true. It certainly is empty, flat and barren with endless sand. Nevertheless, it was interesting. The coast is dotted

with pretty and small fishing settlements with clean sandy beaches and deep blue sea under a sunny sky. Lovely. We stopped at Jebel Dhana. Jebel Dhana is a small mountain, more like a big hill with the closed industrial town and port of Ruwais (or Ar Ruways) with an oil refinery and oil storage tanks next to it. Without a permit one cannot get into the place. It has since grown into one of the two large ADNOC petroleum ports. Jebel Dhanna Ruwais is the onshore port while the offshore port is on Das Island. We viewed the hotel and then went to the little harbour where the ferries sail to Dalma and Sir Bani Yas islands and of course come back again.



Ruwais harbour and ferries. On the left are cormorants on what appears to be a semi-submerged pipe.

Sir Bani Yas Island is 9 kilometres (~5.5 miles) offshore. The island is the largest natural island in the United Arab Emirates. It is the largest wildlife reserve in Arabia and an important nature conservation site. An Arabian version of the Kruger National Park. Complete with a resort and spa with 64 rooms and private lodges, restaurants, business facilities (powered by wind turbines and solar panels) and safaris, it is home to thousands of free to roam animals and birds, some extinct elsewhere in the world. Animals include the Arabian oryx (similar to the Gemsbok in South Africa), Somali ostrich, Somali Giraffe, Sudan cheetah and the striped hyena. It also has acres and acres of planted trees and other plants.



Passing Sabkhat Matti.

that were formed by tectonic plate movement.

The sand becomes much whiter in places while one travels west. The entire coast from Abu Dhabi to the Saudi border is interspersed with salt flats, but when one gets to the Sabkhat Matti nearing the border they become widespread and create large shimmering mirages in the distance. The sand is so soft that if one gets two wheels off the tarred road one is almost certain to get stuck. Sabkhat means a salt encrusted plane. Of course, there are various spellings of the word. Sabkhat Matti is among the largest depressions in the Arabian Peninsula area

Wilfred Thesiger, in his book *Arabian Sands*, during his 1947 to 1948 second crossing of the Empty Quarter by camel, describes the Sabkhat Matti flats as being a dirty salt crust that caused such a glare it seemed to stab into his skull. The expedition skirted as far as possible to the

south to avoid most of the flats. To stop the camels from slipping on the greasy surface, they fastened knotted cords under their feet. However, at times they broke through the crust into the liquid black mud below. If they had sunk in to their knees, the camels would probably have been lost (de Villiers, 2018).

Sila, about 20 kilometres from the border, is a sleepy little place off the main road with a small



Saudi Arabia border ahead.

fishing harbour. We stopped to have our picnic lunch on the open Gulf side of the harbour, but it was too hot, so not for the first time, we picnicked inside the car with the engine running and the air conditioning on.

The border post is not much to speak of. It was very quiet when we arrived. Even the duty-free shop was unattended. It also appeared to be siesta time at the nearby village of Gheweifat.



A Sila restaurant that sells Kwaliti ice cream.

Back at Sila there is a big truck stop area off the main road that is popular with the lorry drivers. It would appear that after clearing the border post they make this their first rest stop in the UAE. There is a petrol station, a small hotel and a scattering of dubious eating-places and small shops.

On the way back, we stopped in at Al Mirfa. A place we had visited before, as wife wanted to get pictures of the pretty little beach on her digital camera. As far as I can make out the main attraction at Al Mirfa is a big canning factory.



A salt pan on the coast nearer to Abu Dhabi.
Plus water = quicksand.

Nearer to home we stopped so that I could get a close-up picture of a salt pan. I took one and then decided to get another closer to the pan. The next instant I broke through what looked like a solid crust, almost up to my knees. My first thought was that I am now in trouble. The car was out of sight behind some scrub bushes with the engine running, windows closed and radio playing. My wife is not going to hear any calls for help. I managed to extricate myself, but it was with difficulty that I managed to retrieve my sandals. Fortunately, back at the car, we still had water left and I managed to clean myself

down and put on spare shoes that were in the boot of the car. The sandals were placed in a plastic bag, gooey sand and all and were washed when we arrived home.

Visit to the Sultanate of Oman

On the spur of the moment, we decided to spend a long weekend in Muscat (Wednesday 24th to Friday 26th August in the UAE/Oman calendar) the capital of the Sultanate of Oman. All in all, we did about 1400 kilometres travelling, but well worth it. The place is great. Clean, good drivers, no hooting, no spitting. The people are very friendly and polite. We had most pleasant contacts with the hotel staff, shop owners and the police. One is struck by how old is civilisation through seeing the old forts and castles and how parts of it look like the Mediterranean coastline due to early Portuguese architecture influence. When we got back home, my wife immediately wanted to go back.

The place is not like the UAE in that the nationals do as much of the work as possible. From small shop owners to the police and the ordinary army soldier. Even the taxi drivers are locals. They do not bring in expatriates at the drop of the hat. Expats that are there are there because they are really needed.

Oman was then ruled by Sultan Qaboos bin Said Al Aid (now deceased) who ousted his ultraconservative and reclusive father in 1970. His extensive modernisation programme brought Oman into the modern world (Kay, 2001). At the same time, he has maintained the long political and military relationship with the United Kingdom. Evidence of this relationship can be seen in small things such as the way the people drive and the bus time-tables on the bus stop poles, even in the remotest of areas.

Early Wednesday we drove from Abu Dhabi to the border at Al Ain where we cleared customs and immigration. The car boot was inspected, presumably looking for illegal alcohol. This was the start of our circular route that would take us west of the Hajar Mountains via Ibri and Nizwa to Muscat. We spent two nights at Muscat. The second day seeing Muscat and then on Friday headed up the coast east of the mountains, via an inland loop to Rustaq, then northward to Sohar, before heading inland again to Al Ain and back to Abu Dhabi. Oman is at least about 5 times bigger than the UAE, so the part we saw was but a small part of the country.



Bahla Fort partly restored and a date palm garden.

Our first stop was at Bahla, not far from Nizwa. The place is most renowned for its fort with its 12 kilometre wall, parts of which we saw from the road. It is possible that the fort, the largest I have seen in this part of the world, was originally built in pre-Islamic times. It was undergoing restoration, sponsored by UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization) who has it on its list of world heritage monuments. Unfortunately, restoration in the UAE and Oman usually also means renovation to its original pristine glory. I hope not. However, it looks like it in the photograph. The place is also famous for its pottery. Somewhat

irrelevant when there is so much history to be seen.

We spent time driving around the fort exploring the narrow little lanes with its very old mud houses, some still well maintained and in use, while others are slowly eroding. It gave one a wonderful sense of being both in the present and the ancient past. It was a pity we did not have more time to soak up the atmosphere of the place.

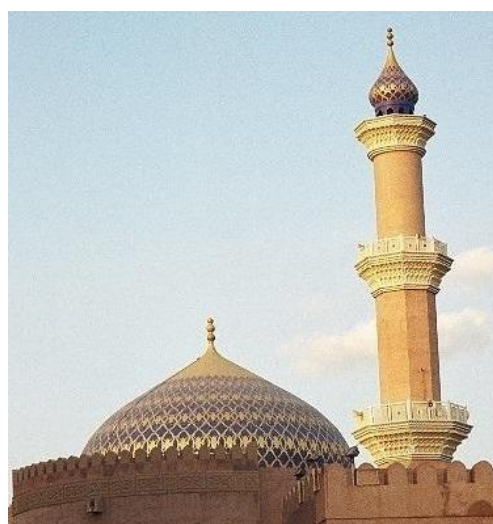
Unfortunately, a bit further on we missed the turn-off to Jabreen Castle, which was really a palace built in the 1600's. Apparently it is a good example of Islamic architecture with beautiful wooden inscriptions and paintings on the ceilings. We visited it on our next trip. See later.



Nizwa Fort and mosque.

It was here that we had our first example of the friendly people. We temporarily and knowingly, parked in the only place we could nearby the fort to get some photographs. Unfortunately, there were police cones blocking off the area. But we were only going to be there for a few minutes. We had no sooner exited the car than a police car arrived. The policeman very politely told us he needs this parking area to be empty in 15 minutes time and how long were we going to be there. I said if he did not mind, we would be 5 minutes and then we would be out of there. He actually thanked us for our consideration. I could not help myself, but I had to point out to him that it is us who must thank him.

Nizwa is another pretty little town with a round fort and a mosque with a very ornate dome. We stopped nearby for a picnic lunch, packed before we left home and kept cool in our cool-box. Nizwa was the capital in the 6th and 7th centuries (Kay, 1992). The fort dates from the mid-1600s built on a structure from the 1100s (Muscat, 1999).



A view of the mosque dome that dazzled in the sunlight.

It is worth mentioning some of the tips we were given when travelling in Oman (Muscat, 1999). Essentially, they are the same as in the UAE. Do not point directly at people and do not show the soles of your feet or shoes, such as when seated or lying down. Public displays of affection between sexes are definitely frowned upon. It is not polite to smoke in public. No smoking signs are placed where appropriate. Consumption of alcohol is only legal to drink in licensed establishments, or in private such as at home. Dress conservatively, especially women. Always ask permission before taking photographs of people, especially women and best not to photograph anything that can be construed as military. Also, when westerners hold up a hand with palm outward it means wait, hold on, whoa. In the UAE and Oman, it means go away. To ask someone to wait, one holds up a hand with fingers and thumb pinched at the tips.

From Nizwa we drove on toward the coastal road that would take us to Muscat. Nearing Rusayl

and the coastal road, shown below, we came across an ornate Omani Transport bus stop shelter. Seen below. Across the road in a valley were these two watchtowers, one in the valley, one on the ridge with the Hajar Mountains faintly in the background.



Once on the coastal road south we easily found the Holiday Inn where we had booked accommodation a few days before our departure from Abu Dhabi. After getting settled, we ventured out in the dark for an exploratory cruise before dinner.

The following day we explored further afield to the Al Busteen area and old Muscat. We found the Marine Science and Fisheries aquarium my wife wanted to see some distance south-east of Muscat. She particularly wanted to see the section with local fish. However, it was closed for the weekend. This is supposed to be a very good aquarium with fish native to Omani waters. We also found the Omani Museum, but arrived an hour after it closed. So that's another two items for next time. It is a problem that hotel accommodation is cheaper over the weekend, but tourist sites are closed.



Muttrah Fort behind the Muttrah corniche and one of the quaint old-style 1800s corniche buildings. Reputedly it was/is a merchant's house.

There are three forts close to each other in old Muscat, all built in the later 1500's during the Portuguese occupation. The Imam of Oman's troops forced the surrender of the Portuguese in 1650. Muttrah fort is on a hill. Meanwhile, Al Mirani and Al Jalali forts flank the Sultan's palace and guard the entrance to the old and small Muscat harbour. Seen on the next page. Al Mirani was photographed on the landward side. Al Jalali was photographed looking to the east across the harbour. A lengthy line of island rock extends northward from the fort. This with a rocky peninsula on the western side of the bay/harbour protected it from rough sea. They were built on earlier Omani fortifications and renovated by the Portuguese later in the 1500s (Muscat, 1999). Apparently, they are still used by the police and military. We then drove along the old and quaint part of the corniche. Please let them not restore it. The rest of the corniche next to the harbour is modern with gardens and parks.



A mosque with Al Mirani Fort behind. The Sultan's palace to the distant right and Fort Al Jalali to the east on the right of the harbour entrance.



Old Muscat. Al Mirani in the distance and the high roof of the Sultan's palace protruding into the sky. Hyundai Accent parked on the right. Our lunch time spot on the left.

From there we went to a shopping centre, where we bought food for our lunch which we ate on the nearby beach seated on our ubiquitous collapsable chairs and table. Then it was back to the hotel for a rest and a TV film watched in bed before venturing out in the evening to have a night picnic under the stars on the same beach we liked so much earlier. A tranquil afternoon and evening. Then to the hotel pub for a drink or two and watching the locals, then bed.

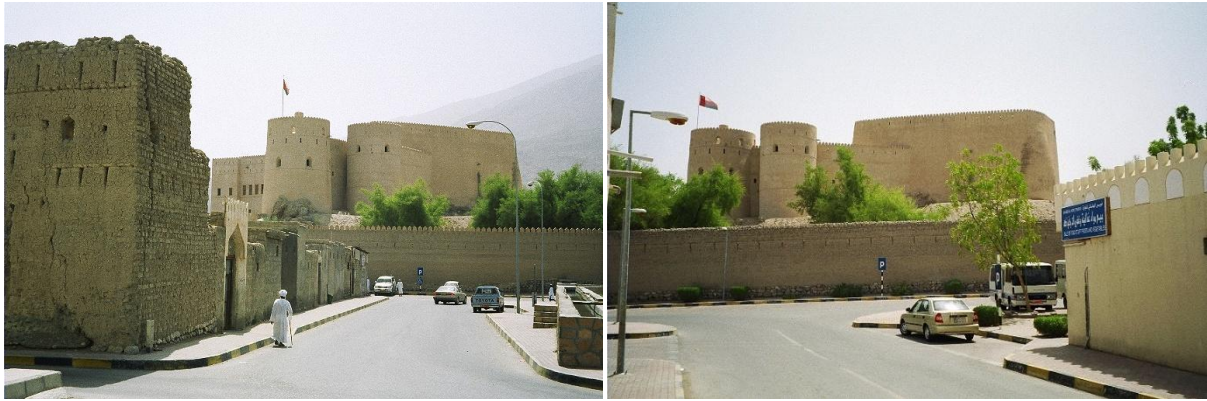


Barka Fort.

On the last day we headed north along the coast detouring to the coastal village, or small town, of Barka, again with a fort. Apparently, it was famous for its bullfights. It was Friday market day. It was all bustle on the beach where the fish catch had been brought ashore.

We then detoured, inland this time, to Rastaq with an imposing large fort that had been extended with time. Nearby is a hot spring. In the Middle Ages, was the Omani capitol. From what we saw, a clean and tidy place.

While parked to look at the fort, a friendly Omani shopkeeper who wanted to know where we were from, explained the best place to park and see the fort, where to go in and what to see and then added that when we were finished, we must buy something to drink from him.



Two views of restored Rastaq Fort and an unidentified old structure in the left photograph.

We were running out of time. Back at work the next day, So we continued north, stopping for a picnic lunch on the corniche at Sohar, then inland to Al Buraimi/Al Ain border post and home.

Back in Abu Dhabi

During November buildings and streets were again illuminated in preparation for the Eid al-Fitr celebration of the breaking of the fast on Wednesday the 26th November at the end of Ramadan. Below are three extraordinary illuminated building. Later, in December there was the usual Christmas display in the Abu Dhabi Mall.



Return to Oman

26th to 29th December, we did the Oman thing again. Spent two nights in Muscat and one night in Fujairah. This time with sister-in-law. She visited over Christmas and the New Year. A similar outbound route as before via Al Ain/Al Buraimi, except this time we stopped at the Jabrin Castle just before Bahla in Oman, on to Muscat then north to Sohar, then via Hatta back into the UAE to Fujairah. From there a return trip north to Dibba and a venture into Wadi Bih, before back to Fujairah and home to Abu Dhabi.

Jabrin Castle is the best castle we have seen so far. Some of the upper rooms have beautiful painted designs on the ceilings and inscriptions on the wooden beams. A large date cellar still has the markings of dates stored there in years gone by. The castle is huge with numerous floors and two separate stairs for the servants.



Jabrin Castle with a portion of painted ceiling with inscriptions on beams.



It is a rather barren area that we passed through, as can be seen in the photograph below with two camels. We had to stop so that sister-in-law could take photographs. In the background are two wooden posts supporting electricity cables. Behind them part of the Hajar Mountains.



Once in Muscat and unpacked at the hotel we took sister-in-law to see the sights. This time we also had a closer look at the Oman International Bank which is not far from the hotel. Its claim to fame is its large entrance door inlaid with 24 carat gold. Seen on the left.

We also visited the Ministry of Heritage and Culture Museum. Most interesting, particularly the photographs that the way places looked long ago in Muscat and Jabrin Castle. The guide was friendly, courteous and most informative. Learnt a lot. He even came with us to the door to say goodbye. Of course we had to picnic at our now favourite beach.

We also went exploring eastward along a coastal road with no destination in mind where we found a small fishing village, Qantab. Very quiet and peaceful. Two views shown below.



On the way north along the coast, before turning inland to Hatta, we stopped at Sohar where I visited the whitewashed White Fort while the wife and her sister considered visiting the Wali's office. Here a wali is a governor and not what we usually think of as a wally.



To the Wali's Office and the view north from the top of the White Fort.

Sohar is the supposed birthplace of Sinbad the Sailor. Some sources say Baghdad. Sinbad is the mythical/fictional hero of seven fantastical sea voyages in the 8th and 9th centuries AD in the Arabian Sea and northern Indian Ocean as far as East Africa and south Asia. Somewhat like Gulliver's travels. From here we went inland to Hatta then to overnight at Fujairah.



Inside Wadi Bih.

The next morning, we drove north to Dibba and nearby Wadi Bih, driving a short way into it to show sister-in-law what we had travelled through. The road, such as it is, goes through the gap between the rock faces slightly to the left ahead of the car.



Al Hayl palace, again.

On the way home, not far inland from Fujairah, we stopped at the mud-brick and plaster Al Hayl Palace that we visited on one of our reconnaissance trips in October. An excellent example of the traditional Arabian architecture of the time. This time seen from a different view uphill near the watchtower.

Trip to Liwa Oasis



On the second to last day of sister-in-law's stay we drove down to the Liwa Oasis for the day. On the way there we noticed the roadside had been planted with a kilometres long line of trees. To water them kilometres of piping, presumably plastic, had been laid to irrigate them. Also presumably to limit sand being blown across the road when the trees are taller. The urge to again photograph the desert could not be resisted, including a big sand dune seen at Liwa.



This is when the car decided to breakdown at the far western end of the oasis in the desert and on the edge of the Empty Quarter. Petrol poured out under the car in the vicinity of the petrol tank each time I tried to start it and when I put my arm under the car to find out where it was coming from, I burnt my arm on the exhaust pipe. The scar on my wrist was a long time memento. The scars on my legs from Wankie, about 30 years ago, had nearly cleared, so now I get a new one.

Where we broke down sounds rather desolate, but even though we were at the very end of the road at the western end of the oasis with desert all around us, bizarre as it sounds, we were still on a bus route to the region. While standing there an Abu Dhabi bus came along, turned around at the road end and went back the way it had come. With modern technology the way it is, we could also have used the cell phone and called for an Abu Dhabi taxi. However, what with sister-in-law having to go back to the UK soon, I was worried.

With the help of a farmer nearby, who came to us and asked what was the problem, we eventually managed to get a tow from a passing lorry driver, but not before trying to wave other lorries down and getting a friendly wave in return when they passed by. We were towed about 40 kilometres to a ramshackle roadside garage, which at first looked like a ramshackle foodstuff store, as they like to call them here.



The friendly mechanic, who was quite a character, asked what was the problem. After pushing the car over a concrete pit in the desert sand he started the engine. Once again petrol poured out. Asked if he can fix it he said mafi mushkila (no problem). A reassuring, but standard answer in this part of the world, which nevertheless made me feel better. But then he added inshallah (God willing), a standard answer in this part of the world that had the opposite effect and me worried again.

The car over the pit. Me with wound dressing from the first aid kit kept in the car.

In less than 30 minutes they had the back seat out, opened a cover where they could get at the fuel pump, reconnected a loose fuel lead

from the pump and put everything back together again. Of course, my driving was blamed for the car breaking down, because we had been on a rough and sandy desert road before the breakdown. However, it appears that the connection must have been working its way loose for some time. Needless to say, I was not impressed as the car was less than 2 years old, religiously serviced according to the manual and serviced exclusively by the Hyundai agents. I had a word with them about it when it went in for its next service.

A remarkable thing about our adventure was that when I earlier tried to reward the farmer for helping us, he would not accept anything. The garage man also stopped me from paying too much to the guys who towed us. Then he did not want to accept payment for fixing the car. But we paid him anyway. His only request was that we send him a copy of my group photograph. I later duly posted a copy to the address he gave me.

Altogether the whole incident set us back about 2 hours, so it was about 3 pm before we finally found a spot to have a late picnic lunch seated at our table and chairs at the roadside, where the passing lorry drivers again hooted and waved at us.



An accepted way to stop for a picnic lunch with friendly waves from passing lorry drivers. Mafi mushkila (no problem). The restored/renovated Meziyrah Fort in February 2004.

The wife and I were back in the area in February 2004 when we stopped at the now restored Meziyrah Fort. During our previous visit to Liwa, in October 2003, it was still in the process of being restored. Reputedly built in the late 1800s or early 1900s. Very much isolated and

visible from the main road when we were there, now considered semi-urban.

After our late lunch, we headed back on the 2 hour drive to Abu Dhabi along the straight road from Hamim at the eastern end of the Liwa Oasis. On the way back about 40 to 50 Camels crossing the road around sunset held us up. When you watch them, one comes to realise that they are really fascinating. They were in no hurry and with no supervision soundlessly made their way across the road. Their big padded feet made no noise. Now and then one would stop, look back and wait for a companion to catch up, before plodding on again.



Camels in the early evening light. The illuminated circle is a road sign lit by the car lights.

The Dubai Shopping Festival



February, 2004, we went to the Dubai Shopping Festival with husband-and-wife Australian friends. He was a lecturer at the ADNOC. In the Emirate of Abu Dhabi you can get any brand of petrol as long as it is ADNOC. In the other Emirates you can get any other brand of petrol as long as it is their emirate brand, or BP, or Shell. In Oman it is mainly BP and Shell.

We left Abu Dhabi at 3 pm and returned at about 1



A roving coffee seller.

am. Must say I was not particularly impressed. There are lots of different nationality pavilions (including South Africa) at the international village, but most of them have very little national wares and most of each pavilion is packed with Indian goods. In fact, the place was almost wall to wall Indian with the India pavilion being the biggest. Lack of national ware included the South Africa pavilion, where we spent most of our time telling our Aussie friends that this was not South African and that was not South African.

Having said that it was interesting seeing stuff for sale that did appear to be from Middle Eastern places such as Iran, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, Afghanistan and further afield to Morocco and Russia, Thailand and Malaysia. Beautiful material from Morocco, intricate wood carved furniture from Iran and of course Iranian (Persian) carpets from one person magic flying carpet size to jumbo jet flying carpet size. Well, not really that big.

Khasab

Late in March, 24th to 26th, we went for a two and a half day trip northward to Khasab in Oman at the Strait of Hormuz, on the northern tip of the Musandam Peninsula, with our Australian friends, although we travelled separately. The place is about 300 kilometres from Abu Dhabi. It is known as the Norway of Arabia because of all the Fjord-like inlets in the area.

We left home at about 3pm, passing through the emirates of Dubai, Sharjah, Ajman, Umm Al Quwain and Ras Al Khaimah. After going through customs at the Omani border we reached Khasab after dark at about 8 pm. So we did not see much of the last 40 kilometres in Oman where the road is almost on the sea with the cliffs on the other side. We had a good look at that coming back on Friday.

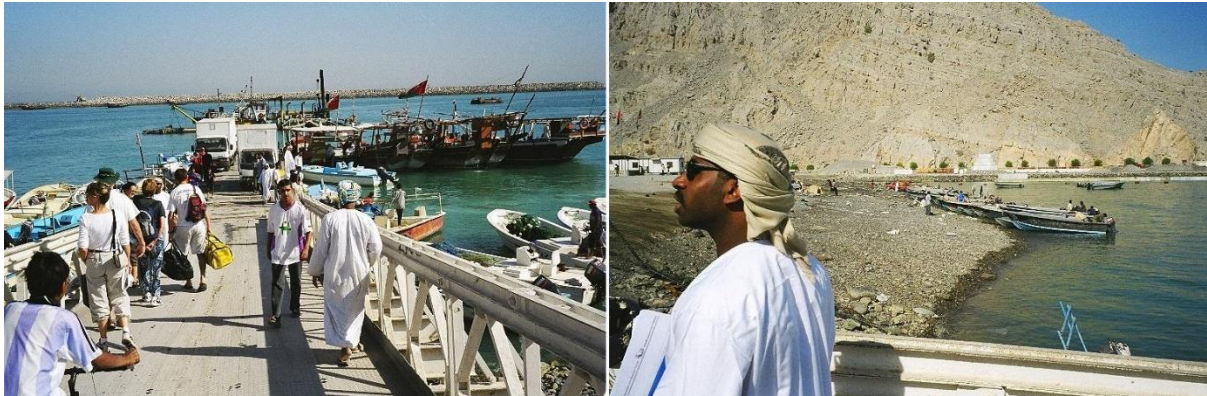
Khasab is a small place with a population of about 10 000, three hotels, a small airport and obligatory mud fort being restored. The newest and plushest hotel being the Golden Tulip Khasab Resort (owned by a Dutch hotel group). It was fully booked when we tried to arrange accommodation. It is also the only place one can get an alcoholic drink. Consequently, we had our evening drinks and dinners there. We stayed at the Khasab Hotel, which is more like a motel. Then there was the Qada Tourist Hotel, which is bottom of the market. Accommodation is expensive and way overpriced. Dhs200 (Omani Riyals 20) per night for a double room was the cheapest and the Golden Tulip started at about Dhs420 (Riyals 42). That is, prices varied from about South Africa R340 to R840 plus, depending on the exchange rate. British pound rate at the time was ~6Dhs = £1. By 2025, the Dirham was stronger against the pound at ~4.9Dhs = £1.



Two views from the Khasab Hotel.

The following day we went off sailing in a dhow to see a fjord named, Khawr Ash Shamm. Khawr is a different spelling of khor, although pronounced the same, which means creek, or inlet, or fjord. As I have said before, spelling is phonetic and differs from region to region.

Upon arrival at the wharf, our guide and owner of Musandam Sea Adventure Tourism happily pointed out the Iranian smugglers to us. They arrive in the morning in small outboard motorboats after a three hour trip across the Strait, bringing commodities such as goats and return in the afternoon with cigarettes and electronic goods. Everyone knows about it. It is openly written about in the press and by tour guides. Meanwhile an Omani patrol ship positioned off the harbour entrance also ignored them.



Boarding our dhow. We had to clamber across two dhows to our vessel. Our guide and owner with smuggler motorboats in the background beached to the left of the pier.



The place is very stark and fascinating with amazing striations in the rock faces which drop straight down into the sea. Seen on the left. Some of the rock formations look like animals, or mythical creatures.

All over there are cormorants that have lived in the region for ages. Many of the ledges and rock outcrops have piles of guano on them that are a foot or two deep. Dolphins regularly swam alongside the dhow.



Lots of cormorants at the water's edge. The white patches are guano. Dolphins shepherding the dhow.

While lounging on deck on carpets and cushions, being supplied with fruit and cool drinks, we drifted past little fishing settlements that are only accessible from the sea and have populations of about 100. One had only ten houses. All are supplied with electricity, carried at great expense by cable over the mountains. Weekly, a water tanker boat brings fresh water. Daily, it is about an hour by motorboat to Khasab for the children to go to school, for those going to work and of course to do shopping.



Passing to almost inaccessible settlements, Qanah left and Nadifi right.

Our only stop was made at the now deserted, barren, remote and small Telegraph Island so that one can look around, or snorkel and scuba dive. The island is so named because the British built a telegraph station there in 1864. It was part of a telegraph link from India to London. A submarine cable came from Karachi (Pakistan) to the island and then to Basra, in Iraq. Must have been a boring place to be. The island has the remains of stone houses and one raised stone base that looks like it could have been a very small fort, or defensive position.



Approaching Telegraph Island. A flat base structure can be seen on the highest rock outcrop with remains of a structure to the left. A dhow is tied to the rock on the left. On the island on the right with our dhow and two others docked bows first. One had to walk a plank to get ashore. Not as risky as it sounds. The island is about 150 x 100 metres.



Back at Khasab, we had a late lunch and then headed inland and up a mountain side to view Khawr Najd. Seen left. The view from about 500 metres up (~1500 feet) and almost straight down into the water is quite something. In the evening, we did a night trip of the sights and sounds of Khasab, which took about half an hour and then it was off to the Golden Tulip for the important stuff. Drinks and food.



Late the following morning we went to the Friday market, which was still closed when we arrived. We did a quick look at the fort in the process of being restored. Then we made a leisurely trip back to Abu Dhabi.

Now we could next to the sea that we could not see on the way to Khasab in the dark and the fort at Bukha midway along the coastal road in Musandam that we had not even noticed.

Back home

The crash of a Kish Air Fokker 50 about 4 kilometres short of Sharjah airport, on the 10th February that killed 43 out of 46 on board, raised a point that has not been mentioned in the press here, but elsewhere in aviation circles, Holland for example. It was suggested that the engines propellers going into reverse had similarities to the crash of a Luxair Fokker 50 that crashed on November the 6th 2002, while on final approach to Luxembourg Airport.

The Iranian Kish Airline is one of many that earn a good living by operating what is known as the Visa Run. There are many people working in the country that do not have residents' visas and so should not be working. However, they do so on a visit visa, but every month they have to get their passport stamped as leaving the country and then return to get their new monthly visit visa. It is done with the knowledge of authorities who make money out of the issue of visas, as well as the many in the business of flying them in and out. Kish Airline actually lands at a small island near the Iran coast where the expats wait for word that their visa is ready. Some Airlines, I heard, simply fly out to Muscat, do a touch and go and come back. It is all a farce really. In the first place, visitors should not be working. In the second place, the practice should not be allowed.

There are thousands of Asians that are illegally in the country. Regular sweeps are made to round them up, also once every few years an amnesty is declared and those illegals who respond are sent home without the huge fines that they can't afford, or prison. When arriving at Abu Dhabi airport for a night shift, as staff, we enter through a different security area from passengers, etc. I would often see lines of illegals with shackled legs and shackled to each other that had been rounded up and were being deported. We once saw an Indian that was walking at the side of the road with his bicycle, when a car came out of a side road and hit his bike,

which was badly bent. The driver got out and tried to help and call the police which he has to do. Even though the Indian was in the right, he simply picked up his bike and walked off. The inference being that he was an illegal and could not afford to have the police showing an interest in him.

The aircraft crash also raised questions about aviation safety in the UAE. There were rumours, probably a myth (there are lots of both here, rumours and myths), that there are flights going out of here that are overweight to the point that they barely get airborne and once airborne cannot climb above 1000 feet for considerable time. Either until, by sheer luck they gradually get enough airspeed to climb, or they burn off fuel and the weight decreases. Once again, as in Africa, the finger seems to be pointed toward Russian and Ukrainian crews and aircraft.

It has led to some amusing reporting in the Gulf News (28th February, 2004). "The plane took off from Fujairah Airport, which has only one landing strip with mountains at the one end and the sea at the other. It was tracked by ATCs as travelling 25 miles overland before flying over the sea at less than 500 feet. Normally, an aircraft flies three-five miles before flying over the open sea." The question is, how and why did the runway to sea distance change because the aircraft was overloaded. The report went on to say "The overloaded aircraft barely managed to avoid hitting a large cargo ship about five miles away from the shore."

In the same report it mentioned a violation in the form of an unannounced cargo aircraft arriving at 3 am with 36 live ostriches. Advance warning must be given because "when the aircraft lands and the engines are switched off, the live cargo may die in a matter of minutes. So any cargo must be handled swiftly." Why? Is the live cargo attached to life support systems powered by the engines? The report does not clarify that interior cabin air conditioning ceases when the engines are stopped and outside heat quickly heats the aircraft.

It was also stated that the radar at Fujairah has not worked for two months (most likely mythical) and "air traffic controllers (ATCs) have to use all their experience to guide aircraft in, using only eyesight, or help them take off." I would prefer them to use the radio as well to guide them in and help them take off. Generally poor journalism.

Another piece of news in this largely crime free country was the arrest and conviction of a Pakistani in Al Ain who confessed to robbing and poisoning 5 taxi drivers who died and another 3 who survived (Gulf News, 1st March, 2004). He claimed his intention was not to kill them, but to render them unconscious. He was also charged with adultery and absconding. He confessed that he was jobless and absconding. He was sentenced to death and deportation. Notice, deported after death. Only Emirati are allowed to be buried in the UAE. Employment contracts include a clause that the company pays insurance to repatriate your body and family members, in the event of death.

A characteristic of all crime reports is that the police swing swiftly into action and get their man/men, or woman/women. All criminals confess. Expatriates' punishments are usually fined and deported, jail sentence and deportation, or death and deportation. If you are an expatriate the criminals full name is given and possibly your photograph. If you are a national, or Gulf Community Country (GCC) national, initials only are given. That the police get their suspect is also not surprising, because there is apparently a very big plain clothes force. An expat I know talked about an altercation he had and a person who had been watching the whole thing eventually came across and identified himself as a policeman. Apparently, prisons here are out in the desert somewhere. If you try to escape, so be it. The logic being that you are not likely

to survive in the desert. Probably another myth.

We went on holiday to the UK in August. When we left Abu Dhabi, on the trip to the UK mentioned above, my memory of the departure terminal was one of cigarette smoke, noise and babble with an Abu Dhabi Aviation Service official talking so loudly into his mobile radio that I wondered why he bothered to use it and another person placidly contemplating the scene with one finger up his nose. We were welcomed home at the airport terminal by the cigarette smoke, noise, babble, a man shouting to his wife in the ladies toilet and a cleaner placidly contemplating the scene with one finger up his nose. One of my wife's plants did not survive the stay away. The doves were immediately back on the window ledge and eating the seed she puts out. Life was back to normal.



We began the routine of doing day trips and picnics when we were not working, such as back to Al Ain and the top of Jebal Hafeet where facilities at the top have been revamped and extended considerably for the tourists.



For my wife's birthday in September, we went up in the tethered hot air balloon. It is located next to the Marina Mall on Al Kasir Island that was extensively added to while we were there, plus another larger island dredged from the sea next to it. Most

enjoyable and an excellent view of Abu Dhabi. We went up again after dark to see the night lights then repaired to a restaurant to dinner.

Referring to the images below; In the image top left, looking south-eastward, the balloon's

shadow can be seen on recently dredged reclaimed land with the Abu Dhabi skyline in the distance. The large UAE flag, next to the mosque (centre of the photograph), is limp in the calm air. The edge of the newly dredged Lulu Island to the north-east, is visible in the top left of the image. It is seen in more detail in the image below left. The tent domed Marina Mall, car park and causeway are visible in the top right image. In the distant top right of the image the five-star Emirates Palace is under construction. More about this later. The marina, in the below right image, is situated next to the car park and the reclaimed land with a causeway on the opposite side that leads to the mosque and flag in the top left image. One can drive along the cause way to the flag. Each parking bay has a tent like dome to provide shade an keep the car cool (or less hot) while shopping.



Mentioning the innovative parking bays reminds me of my amazement of seeing the circular escalators at Madinat Zayed shopping centre and Gold Souk (market). The only one I have ever seen in my travels. The Gold Souk has the biggest collection gold jewellery shops imaginable. Photographs on the next page.

The shopping centre was less than a block from the flat we were moved to later in our stay, the Al Falah Gift Centre building on the corner of Shari' al-Subeeti and Dharyah streets. Real building name, Al Muhairy. Between our home and the shopping centre is the Abu Dhabi central post office. I was parked outside while my wife went inside to post a parcel. When she returned to the car, she realised she had left her handbag with bank cards, etc., behind. Panic stations à la South Africa. When she had gone in to queue, she had naturally been ushered to the front of all the men queued, such is the custom. She placed her bag on a lower ledge in front of her. When she hurriedly returned, she found her bag had been politely pushed to one side and otherwise left untouched.



The shopping centre left and one of the pair of circular escalators with a mirror image one on the other side of the balcony. In the foreground of the image on the left is an Abu Dhabi taxi. All Abu Dhabi taxis must have the gold markings on their four corners.

Abu Dhabi was continually expanding, part of which can be seen in the photographs from the balloon. Apart from Lulu Island, Dredged land reclamation was also happening on the other side of the Marine Mall for residential accommodation. Khalifa City was being built on land between Abu Dhabi city and the Abu Dhabi Zayed International Airport.



The Marina Mall Al Kasir Island development and Khalifa City building in progress.

Most interesting was the construction of a cricket stadium with smaller satellite cricket pitches alongside the road to the airport and next to Khalifa city.





Here was this rich green grass field within a stadium surrounded by desert sand. with the surrounding desert sand cricket “fields.” Most bizarre. These were intended to be irrigated and grassed.

Best of all was the well-advanced construction of the massive five-star luxury Emirates Palace Hotel where our beach where we swam had disappeared. Roads had been altered with a long boulevard created that led to an entrance arch. The hotel opened in February 2005 (not long after our departure

from Abu Dhabi). The design of the hotel is a mixture of Islamic architecture and modern design construction. Apparently, the colours of the buildings reflects shades of the desert sand. Cost of the hotel complex around 11 billion dirhams. At the current rate of ~6Dhs = £1, about £1.8 billion.



The Emirates Palace Hotel seen from Al Kasir Island & the entrance arch and road works.



As usual the Abu Dhabi Mall had a Christmas display.

A few days before Christmas 2004, I wrote in an email; “As I sit here typing this letter it is yet another sunny and cool winter’s day in Abu Dhabi. Wisps of high Cirrus cloud drift in the wind with two distorting and fading jet contrails crossing the sky. It is cool, maximum temperatures are barely reaching 26°C and sometimes 30°C, down to 18°C to 16°C on some nights. Being winter we now get our patchy winter rain and thunderstorms (blink and you miss it). For the first time in decades small soft hail fell in Dubai. We had people telephoning us at work to ask where they could drive to in the UAE to see the hail and show the children.

The sad news was that this was our last Christmas in the Emirates. Later in January 2004 we moved from the heat of the desert to the cold of England where I was offered work. We had expected to be here for about four more years, but this offer came up, which will enable us to be

closer to family members and my wife really misses the grandchildren.

It is with sadness that we made this move. It was an unique and interesting living in the UAE. We left with a wealth of fond memories and anecdotes of life here. Most of all we were going to miss the friendly, tolerant, relaxed and peaceful environment. In particular the feeling of being safe at all times. Such as; walking home in the early hours of the morning after a lengthy dinner with friends, or anywhere at any time of the day or night; leaving one's car at the airport for weeks while away on holiday and never worry about it being stolen; or one's home broken into. Unfortunately, these were things we were used to in South Africa.

After our return from England, around late November or early December, I received an email, or telephone call, I cannot remember which, from a company in England asking if I was still interested in working for them and how soon could I start. I had a month's leave due in January, part of which we planned to spend travelling to the far south of Oman to Salalah. I was able to negotiate my resignation with my leave due forming the last part of my notice period. Most important, was successfully obtaining the ancestry visa from the British Embassy in Abu Dhabi. This proceeded swiftly, because I already had all the necessary documents for myself and my wife. They were same that were needed for our move to the UAE.

Then followed disposing/sale of unneeded assets, including the car shortly before departure and arranging forwarding of our other possessions, except two large suitcases and aircraft carry-on luggage. The contents of which were carefully selected. They had to suffice until out ship freight arrived about 6 weeks to 2 months later. We opted to ship our stuff this time as opposed to airfreight that we used when we arrived. It was cheaper and we could transport much more. We had to rough it a bit before we left, because our possessions were packed on the 15th, five days before departure.

There were administrative details that had to be sorted before they let you leave the country. Including being met at the airport with your final clearance papers, before you go to check in for the flight and which have to be handed to the Immigration desk in the departure hall. These had to be handed to us at Dubai International Airport, because we were flying direct to Birmingham on Emirates.



21st January 2005, waiting to depart at Dubai International Airport and climbing from Dubai passing west of Abu Musa Island in the Gulf Sea in an Emirates B777-300ER.

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