



In the United Arab Emirates

Alan J Cook

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Written during a holiday in the UAE from 25 October to 8 November 1992

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Preface

My trip to the UAE towards the end of 1992 was a revelation. I'd never visited any part of Arabia and I immediately fell in love with this area.

During my visit, I wrote some of my observations, typed them and placed them in a folder where they stayed until March 2024 when I found them and decided to do something useful with them - hence this small book.

The photographs taken during this visit were on transparency film which I recently digitised.

Since those days of more than thirty years ago, I have visited the UAE a few times and always felt at home there. However, it has now been many years since my last visit and Dubai has changed out of all recognition since. During my visit in 1992, I stayed in a villa in Jumeirah and spent many hours on the nearby beach. I understand that nothing is left of that area as I knew it as it is the home of some massive hotels and tourist attractions nowadays and the little fisherman's hut nearby where I sat on the beach will have been destroyed long ago.

Having enjoyed my short visit(s) to Arabia, I was fortunate enough to find work there in November 2000 when I took a job in Kuwait. After living there for a little short of two years, I found myself unemployed for a time before heading for Arabia again, this time to spend three enjoyable years working and living there until leaving at the end of July 2006.

I don't know how much I'd enjoy returning to the Arabia I once knew as modern development has changed so much - and not always for the good, I'm sure. I certainly wouldn't recognise most of the places I once knew quite well so maybe returning wouldn't be a great idea as, although memories fade, I still have the love of this region in my heart, as well as my photographs and the stories written in this book. I wouldn't want to lose my love of Arabia so I'll treasure the memories and photographs that I'm sharing with you in this little book.

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It was dark as I crossed the creek on the Abra. An Abra is a small wooden hulled boat with a flat open deck, powered by a small diesel engine. It carries about 25 to 30 passengers seated on a raised box-like centre section running almost the full length of the deck. Needless to say, perhaps, but there were no handrails or other safety devices. The engine and steering wheel were located inside a small well in the deck of the vessel; the engine sitting on the main frame of the hull. The wheel pulling on two ropes guided to the rudder through a series of small pulleys across the open deck.

The small dingy cockpit was illuminated by a small naked electric lamp. I could see the needle of the oil pressure gauge on the engine registered not a lot above zero. Maybe it was stuck. I hoped so or the engine wouldn't last much longer.

Part way across the creek, the young man who was piloting the



small craft left the steering to its own devices and wandered around collecting fares. It cost only half a Dirham to cross.

The little craft lurched as it hit a wave set-up by the wash of a Dhow motoring downstream to the sea, maybe on its way to Iran or India or to some other far flung destination.

The young man quickly returned to the wheel and, using his toes again, put us back on course before collecting the fares from the remaining passengers.

Arabia is still something of a magical place. I've just visited the United Arab Emirates where, based in Dubai, I was able to explore a land not on everyone's list of tourist resorts. A land where there are the usual tourist attractions of sun, sand and sea, but also where you can immerse yourself in a different culture far removed from the tourist beaches of Europe.

Despite some modernisation and air conditioning it is still possible to see old buildings that have wind towers used for cooling purposes. Sadly, many of them have been destroyed in the name of progress but they are around if you look hard enough for them.

Some areas of progress are worthwhile. Malaria, for example, has been largely stamped-out whereas it was once a high-risk area. Roads, in the main, are superb, enabling the traveller to cross hundred of miles of desert in air-conditioned comfort with never more than a passing thought for the hostile environment outside the car .

It is quite a humbling experience to travel from the aggressive, unfriendly shores of criminal England to a place that many people still



Abras by the side of Dubai Creek

regard as a third world, backward country, to find a welcome in an honest, almost crime-free society. A society where you can walk in the darkest, dingiest alleys and back streets, at night, without fear of being



mugged or murdered. A place where even your children can feel safe.

We drove our tented Toyota onto the garage forecourt. Parking next to the Pepsi machine to replenish our stock of cold drinks, we eased our limbs out through the car doors. My companion wandered off to the lady's room whilst I fed the machine with Dirhams (some ladies will do anything to get out of paying!). I got into conversation with the attendant and his friend who were sitting in the shade of the forecourt's canopy on little chrome-legged stools. I was asked if I'd like some tea to drink. I couldn't refuse, nor did I want to. I accepted their friendly hospitality with some trepidation. My companion returned from her excursion to find me sipping scolding hot, black, sweet tea in a shade temperature well into the thirties (deg. C) . No problem! My companion took some photographs of us as we stood there next to the cold-drinks machine drinking our hot tea.

Shopping in the UAE can take hours - in each shop!

In Satwa High Street is Deepak's fabric shop. If you are into dressmaking and have an hour or two to pass it should be on your 'essential places to visit' list. If you're not into dressmaking yourself, it's still worth buying material and having your clothes made for you in your chosen fabric. Dressmaking and tailoring services in the UAE are ludicrously cheap and to a high standard. Deepak's is a family run business where service, like most shops in the UAE, really counts. Show a serious interest in their stock and nothing is too much trouble. The shop is full of rolls of the most beautiful fabrics you're ever likely to see. One of the more unusual fabrics, of great interest to the traveller, is a material they call 'peach-skin'. Available in a wide variety of patterns and colours this material is almost impossible to crease. Part-way through our visit we were served cold drinks as a matter of routine. This is a hospitable country where you actually ger

served in the shops. The shop is air-conditioned, as are most buildings, but service, hospitality and friendliness are the norm in this delightful place.



Spinneys is a good place to start your shopping. This is a modern supermarket like we have throughout most of Europe. Here, you can buy your picnic food and postcards and, what is more important for the traveller, your 'information' books. Guide books and maps are not

easy to obtain and when they are available tend to be rather expensive. Motivate Publishing produce a series of good books which cover much of this part of the world. The books in their Arabian Heritage series are priced around 60 to 65 Dirhams and are well worth buying. If travelling off the beaten track, or off any track for that matter is your interest, then 'The Green Guide to the Emirates' by Marycke Jongbloed is an essential read.

As a souvenir for yourself to enjoy, Spinneys also sell a package containing a book and two, 3-hour tapes, entitled 'Land of the Emirates'. This is sold in a number of different formats for the differing TV standards (and languages) of various parts of the world, so make sure you buy the correct version for yourself. The cost is about 185 Dirhams. Another useful publication is 'The Official Dubai Guide' produced by the Dubai Commerce and Tourism Promotion Board who publish a range of small, useful booklets.

The Arabs love their roundabouts and make them very decorative. The Al Saqr roundabout in Dubai has a huge statue of a falcon in its centre. The falcon is a symbol of some importance in the UAE



and this roundabout is known somewhat irreverently as the 'Budgie' roundabout to many of the local expat residents.

I climbed out of the taxi and into the heat at the Al Saqr roundabout and walked towards the creek along Al Ghubaiba Road. Sitting on the pavement were a group of five Pakistani men playing a game. I walked past them with the usual British wariness of getting involved but after about fifty yards or so my curiosity got the better of me and I turned round and walked back for a closer look. The men wore their usual national garb of long white shirts, with laps front and back, worn over loose white trousers. Some men were barefoot, others with sandals on their feet.

The game was for two players each having nine tiles. The game involved moving the tiles around intersecting lines connecting three concentrically arranged squares drawn in chalk on the pavement. They soon noticed me being nosy, so I indicated that I wanted to take their photograph. They were quite happy for me to do so. Within a few minutes, space had been made and I found myself sitting on the pavement with them, joining in with their game. They made me most welcome and tried to tell me how to play the game and let me have a go. I failed dismally, of course, but it gave us all a laugh. By now a small crowd had gathered as no doubt watching a European joining in with their game was as good entertainment as the game itself. The atmosphere was one of total friendliness and warmth. At no time was their curiosity and humour directed at me with any malice or ridicule. It was fun. Being in an Arab country, no gambling is allowed so the game was being played for the sheer fun of playing rather than for high stakes. A delightful innocence which isn't often found in our, so called, more civilised and sophisticated society was delightful to experience.



The road to Masafi heads east from the port of Sharjah across some of the most inhospitable terrain on earth. A terrain that has been partly tamed by the ribbon of blacktop that traverses the harsh desert with its baking sand. Nearer to Masafi we see a change in the terrain ahead. We can see mountains of stark hostile rock like devil's teeth pointing skywards.

The Hajar mountains.

The road starts to climb and twist its way through the mountains. Dry wadis, like small gorges, appear, over which the road is bridged. Wadis, just occasionally, flood with torrents of water brought by the rain pouring off the mountainside. But today is all baking hot and parched dry.

We stop the car alongside a stack of pots on the side of the road. A stack of neatly arranged earthenware pots, some plain, some painted.

The stack extends to four shelves, staircase style, propped up against a wall where a sign tells us that we're at the Masafi Pottery Factory. An ambitious use of the word factory, this ramshackle building is one in a terrace used by local tradesmen.

It comprises two rooms plus an entrance hall where there is another staircase-like display stand. Inside, our eyes have to adjust to the gloom after the intense sunlight outside. On the floor, a young lad squats next to a low pile of pots.

In his hand is a piece of wood with a crushed and shaped end with which he dabs paint on the pots to provide them with a simple decoration. At the back of the room, an older man has already



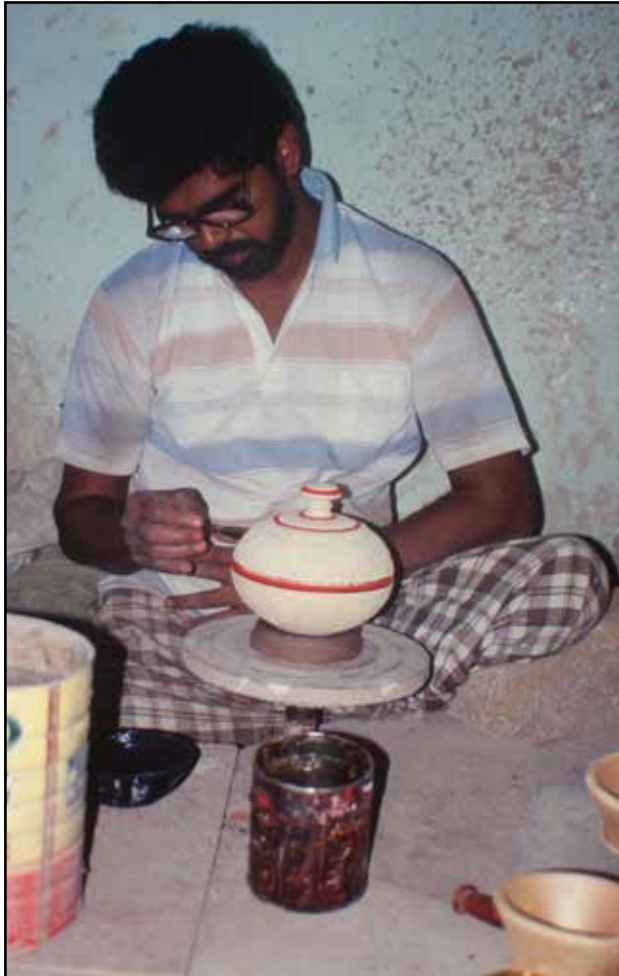


completed his pot on his slowly rotating wheel against which he is holding another painting tool. The rotation causes a ring to be painted around the circumference of the pot. In an adjacent, smaller room, a single bed is made up. Maybe the potter lives here or maybe its just for rest during the hottest part of the day when most businesses close. The pots are attractively simple. Many have a religious significance, like candlesticks and incense burners – and a

pretty money box that has to be broken whenever the cash inside is needed.

Somewhere around Masafi the mountains get in the way of the road and makes us choose which way to go around them. Head northwards towards Dibba or southwards towards Fujairah. It isn't a difficult decision as the roads are connected by the coast road on the other side of the mountains, so enabling us to go right around them. We head north until we meet the coast road near Dibba, then head south. Just after passing through Dadna we stop at the Sandy Beach Motel.

(end of the notes I'd written during my stay there)





Dubai Creek