

Kabul Journal
by
Guy Fipps

Chapter 9 – Stopover in Dubai

February 28, 2006

Dubai is difficult to describe in a few words. *Is Dubai the Las Vegas of the Middle East?* Well maybe, if you factor in the strict Islamic laws and customs of the region. But Dubai is several different cities at the same time.

Landing at the airport at 11 pm, I was once again amazed at the sheer size of the airport and the number and variety of planes parked everywhere. We were lucky on this Air France flight. We parked at a gate and walked directly into the terminal without a long, people-mover bus ride like I rode when I passed through here on my way to the States. These people-movers are large, rectangular vehicles without seats. Packed standing, you hang on like in the New York subway to keep from being thrown into your fellow passengers as the bus sputters along.



Still, it is a very long walk through the ultra modern terminal, all glass and steel; multi-level walkways and glass partitions provide dramatic views. Six moving sidewalks help reduce the effort in reaching the exit. Customs is quick and efficient, no paperwork required, just hand over your passport and wait a moment while the customs official swipes the bar code through the computer reader.

The drive from the airport could be right out of a William Gibson cyberpunk novel; taxis with videos showing commercials, billboards line both sides of the airport road and occasionally overhead, some with video as well, demanding you buy this and that, and the amazing modern architecture of the sky scrappers. These works of art aren't packed closed together like buildings in other cities, but are deliberately spaced apart so that you can get the full effect. Steel, glass and other colored metals, twisted and curved in shapes that defy my imagination, even though I'm use to the new downtowns of Dallas and Houston.

Dubai has one of the world's largest shopping malls which also has an indoor ski slope. Mega resorts hug the Persian Gulf, one costing \$4 billion to build. Tourists from Europe flock down in the winter months to enjoy the mild climate and white sand beaches. People from the region fly in for the day to shop. Fine restaurants and overpriced hotels are everywhere, Dubai must have more 5 star hotels than any other city in the world. Commerce and banking have quickly transformed the small, dusty desert town into a major force in the world. Watch out Houston, Chicago and New York, Dubai is rising quickly and impatiently.

My Mission and Hotel

I am actually on a mission here in Dubai. Instead of flying straight back to Kabul in the morning, I'm staying over, looking for an irrigation dealer to provide the equipment and supplies we need for Zia's project (see Chapter 7 - *Mission to Zia's*). I'm to meet the irrigation dealer tomorrow at noon.

I'm booked at the Intercontinental Hotel which turns out to be an expensive and questionable choice. They had upgraded me to a suite, usually a bad sign. The room was appropriate for Dubai, an ultramodern efficiency apartment with a balcony, built in TV and all the rest, but reeking of tobacco. The Middle East is still a smoker's paradise, and non-smoking rooms seem to be in short supply.

It wasn't until I threaten to change hotels that they switched me to the Presidential Suite. This monstrosity of a hotel room normally rents for \$7,000 a night, "*but of course at no extra charge for you,*" says the manager; a full kitchen and downstairs reception area with 24 foot ceilings and seating for 45 people. I quickly retire upstairs to the bedroom; the room has only a slight tobacco smell. When I get up in the night, I curse the long walk to the bathroom.



Wednesday, March 1, 2006

The next day, they move me to a regular room just next door. The top floor room has a tolerable smell of tobacco, two balconies that I can open and further air out the room, and a spectacular view of Dubai Creek.



The irrigation dealer, Cherian and his nephew Muneer show up about 30 minutes late due to traffic. Dubai's traffic can be really, really bad. The city-state is planning a light rail system. Yes, Dubai is a city-state, almost hard to imagine in our modern world.

We go to a nearby seafood restaurant to eat lunch and talk business. Fresh fish and most other commodities are flown into Dubai daily. The fish lie in a bed of ice, numerous varieties, closely packed together on a 12 foot long table. Wild salmon from Alaska I easily recognized, some of the others I don't. You pick out the fish, whole with head still intact and eyes looking at you, and they cook it to your specifications. Likewise, you pick out the fresh vegetables, no seasonal shortages here.

Cherian is originally from India. He left India as a young man to join his brother in Beirut and the unparalleled opportunities there when it was the banking center of the Middle East. He fled to the United Arab Emirates when the Lebanese civil war broke out. He has operated *Arid Land Development Co.* here for the last 20 years, specializing in Nelson irrigation products.

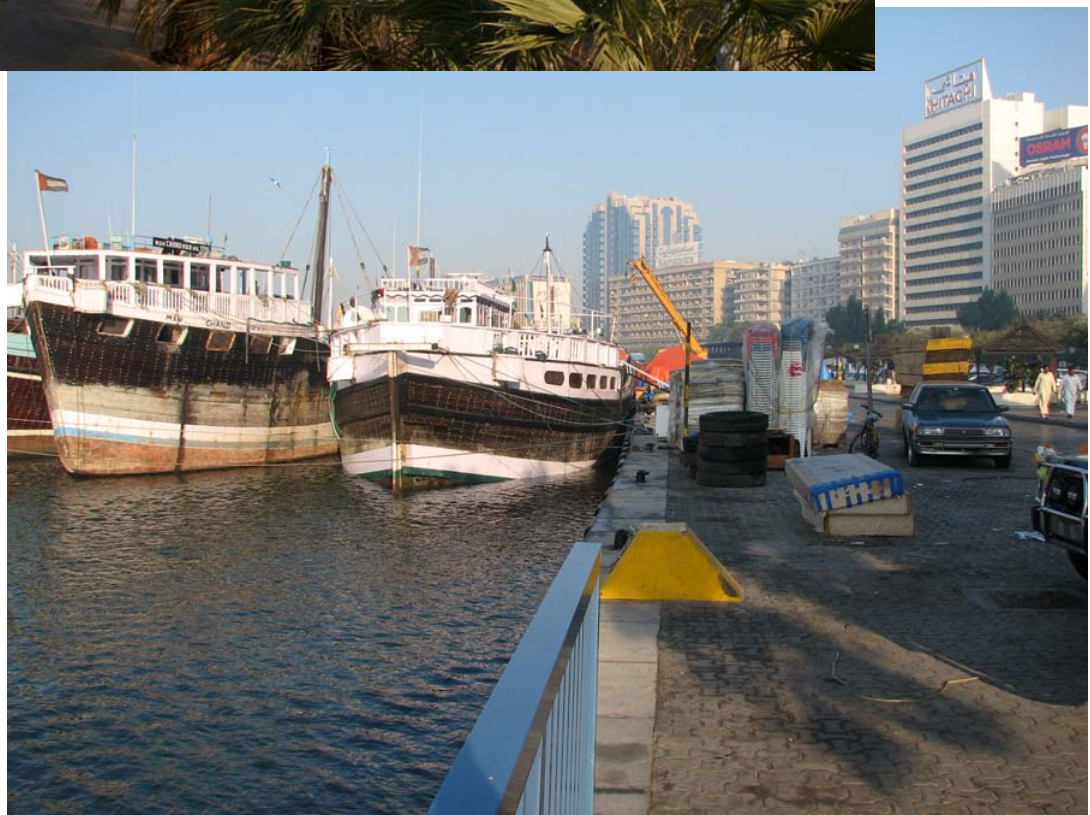
I hope that they enjoy our conversation, because it becomes quickly evident that they do not handle the materials we need for Zia's. In spite of their website and literature, they deal only in landscape irrigation systems, like all the other dealers here. But they are good hosts and insist on showing me around. They drive me to the coastal resort area, a part of the city that looks almost exactly like Scottsdale except for the shoreline. They show me a hotel that is shaped like a giant sail and sits on its own artificial island.



The Other Dubais

They drop me off back at the hotel around 4 pm. After a quick change of clothes I'm off for a hike through the city. First it's along Dubai Creek. This is the reason Dubai exists. A natural port and an ideal location on the planet. Traders have come through here for thousands of years, taking goods back and forth between Europe, Africa and the East.

The small boat docks are still located along the Creek, I stop to look at the boats from Africa as they unload and load their cargo. Just down the Creek is the large cargo vessel port on the Persian Gulf.





Dubai still uses its ancient water taxi system to transport people between the old cities on each side of the creek.

From the taxi station, I walk across the street and into a different Dubai. Commerce, commerce and commerce; shops and store fronts packed closely together, and crowded sidewalks with everyone in a hurry. Everything that is manufactured or produced in the world probably can be found here; it must be seen to be believed. Then there's the *Gold Souq*, shop after shop on both sides of a wide walkway of gold and diamonds. Armed guards testify to the value of the goods displayed here.



More amazing to me, after life in Kabul, is that I can freely walk the streets. It's safer here than any large city in the US. No one bothers you, no beggars asking for money, no kids selling you worthless junk. Freely walking the streets; Arabs, Africans, people from the Far East and Europe. Anglos like me are the minority, but do not necessarily stand out. It's interesting that in Dubai, United Arab Emirates "Nationals" are a minority as well, comprising only 27% of the population.

As I walk the streets, I see another Dubai. Large numbers of people, under-employed and unemployed. Dinky little shops with sales and profits which must be really meager. People working hard and trying to make a living, but just getting by; dirty kids who should be in school; all just a few blocks away from the ultramodern city.

Perhaps Dubai will be successful, as was the United States, in proportioning out some of the wealth and opportunities to the larger population. Perhaps Dubai, through its pragmatic capitalism can be some sort of model for the rest of this volatile region. Tolerance is what makes Dubai special.

Thursday, March 2, 2006

My room comes with a private 4-wheel vehicle ride to the airport. Why the 4-wheel vehicle on the streets of this desert city, I haven't a clue. I'm catching the *United Nations Humanitarian Flight* back to Kabul.

While I wait in Terminal 2, a small terminal with flights to Baghdad, Iran and Afghanistan, I'm strangely devoid of emotions. No anticipation or dread, no excitement or regrets. I'm on my way back to Kabul.

"Honor, duty and love of country" were the arguments the Pentagon used in recruiting me for this assignment. *"American soldiers are dying in Afghanistan because there is no rural economy, because there is no work, they accept pay to hunt American soldiers. Irrigation and water resources are a key factor to bring about a stable Afghanistan."*

I don't know what to think, but I'll give it another go. If it was just me, maybe not, but I know that Dr. Fipps is up to it and is probably the best person considering how things are at this moment in time.

I have an advantage in Afghanistan; I can choose which hat to wear. There's me as the Senior Advisor at the Embassy, then there's Dr. Fipps who has the experience and technical knowledge which seems to be especially needed in this water-dependent and water-short nation. As the Senior Advisor for Water, I get in to see ministers and other high government officials; as Dr. Fipps I get out of Kabul, trading my expertise for missions outside the wire with the military.



Our flight is 45 minutes late, but the passengers don't seem to mind. When boarding is finally announced, there is no rush to the gate like on most flights in most airports. People get up slowly from their seats, gather their carry-ons and make their way.

Two people-mover buses take us out to the airplane. The other passengers are quite and somber as we board the airplane. Perhaps it's just not me that is strangely devoid of emotions and doesn't know what to think as we return to Afghanistan.