

Holiday Greetings to all my friends.
In Arabic: As salaam alaykum
(Peace be upon you) in 2009!

ARABIAN NIGHTS & DAYS

One of the world's fastest tourist attractions, The United Arab Emirates has all of the right ingredients for my unforgettable vacation. I am willing to "risk" visiting a mysterious and often regarded as a forbidding part of the world. I learn that over the last few decades it has been the site of two major wars, an Islamic revolution and great economic developments.



The United Emirates is a constitutional federation of seven emirates: Abu Dhabi, Dubai, Sharjah, Ajman, Umm al-region, Qaiwain, Ras al- Khamah and Fujairah. Although there is an increased sense of one nation, each of the seven maintains its own identity and self-rule. Crescent-shaped, the group is located in a southeastern corner of the Arabian Peninsula. It shares borders with Iran and Saudi Arabia with a long coastline along the Persian Gulf and a short coastline on the Gulf of Oman. The UAE is about the size of Rhode Island; it is part of the world's largest desert. More than 90% of the nation lies less than 1,000 feet an above sea level.

The Emirate's history is a true rags-to-riches-story. This small country was almost unknown to the rest of the world until the 1950's and 1960's when Western Oil Companies discovered huge deposits of oil. Before that time, most of the people eked out a livelihood from the desert and the shallow waters of the Persian Gulf. In the early 1990's, Sheik

Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum realized that tourism would be the cornerstone of the economy of the Emirates. He knew that one day their modest oil reserve would run out. Dubai and the other Emirates had no World Heritage sites, cultural attractions or natural wonders. So he built a world of fantasies.

In the amazing span of about 25 years, the Emirates have developed from a Third World to a First World status. The land glitters with towering skyscrapers, seven-star luxury hotels {some on man made islands} and super malls with 500 shops. In 2008, the world's largest building will rise



more than 2,600 feet. Every new project is an attempt to outdo the last.

The Emirates are considering a single currency. Disney may build Peninsula "Disneyland" and the Guggenheim Museum plans a branch in Dubai. The people enjoy one of the highest standards of living in the world. In fact the quality of life is on the par with many nations of Europe and North America. Yet they are friendly, hospitable and generous.

Students from the Gulf attend universities in England and America in the hope that when they return home they will bring new skills with them.

The state religion is Islam and its Muslim identity unifies the UAE. It is said that you are never

more than a quarter of a mile away from a mosque.

Five times a day the melodic tones of the murzzin calls the faithful to prayer.

(It is a recorded message now.) On hearing the muezzin's call, the faithful enter a mosque take off their shoes, kneel, facing the city of Mecca and pray.

To me, it defines the day and reminds me that I am in Arabia. I have noticed when I sleep in beds in the Middle East I always face Mecca.

The Arab nations are tolerant toward other religions. There are many Christian churches in the main population centers. Dubai has two churches; Saint Mary's Catholic and the interdenominational Holy Trinity Church. There are Hindu Temples and Jewish Synagogues.

The UAE was a major financial center used by al-Qaeda as transferring money to the hijackers on 9/11; two of hijackers were UAE citizens. The UAE cooperated with the U.S. in freezing accounts tied to the terrorists. Our Congress, in March 2006, stopped the proposed takeover of American seaports by Dubai Ports World. The U.S. Congress cited security reasons for its action. However, the UAE is firmly an ally of the Western nations, and is making sure this outrage will never happen again.



Residents of the city of Dubai often joke "that they go to bed at night only to wake up next to a skyscraper in the morning." The city uses 15-25% of the entire world's cranes.

Dubai seems intent on displaying its newfound riches and ambition to the world – malls

are the most elaborate and buildings must reach skywards at unprecedented highs. Architects vie with each other in erecting the grandest boutique hotels. Instead of a town even in the mid 1900's where there were few landmarks, now billboards set forth the next large construction with the sense of the utmost urgency.

Entering the town down an eight-lane highway, it is impossible not to note the most landmark.



The billowing sail is the Burj Al Arab hotel, the world's tallest hotel. It boasts 28 double-height stories. The sail, made out of double-Teflon-coated glass, is dazzling white during the day; it becomes a background for great light displays at night.

Other buildings include the Sheraton Hotel with its 'golf ball' - topped tower; a golf and yacht club that suggests a miniature Sidney Opera House. The sail is a Dubai motif found on many buildings including the National Bank. The convex glass reflects the Creek and its passing river traffic. Soon the British luxury liner Queen

Elizabeth 2 will lend its grandeur to the scene as another hotel.

A giant project off the coast of Dubai City is the construction of at least three enormous artificial landmasses. Taking sand dug up from the bottom of the Persian Gulf, workers are creating what are really peninsulas connected to the mainland. Each resembles a palm tree and is a setting for future homes, apartments, restaurants, shopping malls and theme parks. The beaches will stretch more than 320 miles.



The World Islands - 300 artificially created islands in the shape of the world.

An even more ambitious plan is "the World" consisting of three hundred artificial islands. Altogether, these will form a huge map of the world. What are these islands selling for? Some of the richest people in the world are buying their piece of the world at the average price of \$US25 million each!

Is it true that in the Muslim country they celebrate Christmas? Yes, indeed they do. Startled, we see bright-colored lights and green wreaths on buildings. Decorated giant Christmas trees are festooned with traditional red and green holiday decorations; and gingerbread houses complete with snowmen stood in corners of every mall and hotel. We could listen to familiar Christmas music as we strolled along. The scene reminded us of our Christmases at home. And "Yes, Virginia, there is a Santa Claus " upstairs.

Also upstairs in the mall in the city of Dubai is an amazing indoors 22,500 square meter mountain scene with real snow. (It runs all year, but it adds a festive air at Christmas.)



Real lakes and trees border the mountain slopes. Five ski runs vary in different heights and 60-meter drops give patrons a thrill. Parents and children toboggan, rock climb, ski and make snowmen. Tow lifts carry passengers up and down the mountain.

Those sports fans can appreciate the fact that while they are dressed in winter clothes we are very warm even in the shade outside. The project is called "the world's largest indoor refrigerator."

Dubai Creek is the natural seawater inlet that cuts through the center of the city. It is the historical part of Dubai where we take a cruise in a dhow.

We step into the flat, open deck and find a seat on a bench. The engine soon belches black smoke. Everyone passes his or her fares down the bench to the driver. The driver steers with his feet and we sail from one dock to another in less than five minutes.

On the trip we view Dubai's trading heritage and see other



dhow bound for distant places to unload their goods.

The souks or traditional markets are popular with bargain hunters as well as sightseers and photographers.



An Emirati woman at a Dubai shopping mall

Walking through them we see shops selling everything golden from 24-carat bars to rings and elaborate necklaces at low prices. The souks drip with gold. Also featured are spices such as dried lemon, powdered vanilla, cardamom and curry and mysterious roots of every color.

The spices yield to the heat. The scent of exotic spices fills the air. The fish and meat markets bustle with activity, too. On another street shop owners sell the latest electronics, home appliances, carpets, traditional coffee pots, loaves of unleavened bread and hubble-bubble pipes. (It's hard work to just stroll through the areas without entering any shops!)

The Emirates have proven themselves up to embracing new ways and still preserve their traditions.

The traditional Bedouin heritage of the UAE art forms are the same as those that have been practiced for centuries – poetry, dance and music. The most distinctive and significant art is architecture.

There is culture in the Emirates – you just have to find it.

A must see is the Dubai Museum. From the outside the

entire museum is a replica of the remains of an ancient castle, possibly the oldest building in the Emirates. The building served in the past as the ruler's residence, a jail, and an ammunition dump. The builders used the material on hand – chunks of coral and shells held together by lime.

We enter through a small door in the gigantic solid teak gate into a large courtyard of various old boats and a couple of cannons. Wind towers on the corners of the two-storied building provide ventilation.



Once we are inside it feels as though you are walking through the lanes of ancient Dubai. A goldsmith or an iron worker at work, little boys running with friends, a lady carrying a pot of water, or a man pulling his camel. Wax dolls and the necessary light and sound brings to life the history of Dubai. In many ways these scenes impress me the most.

An impressive historic museum in the country is at al-Husn located in the emirate of Sharjah. The palace, built in 1820, housed the ruling Sharjah rulers. In 1969, the emirate's current leader, a student in Egypt, rushed back from Egypt when he learned of the plan to raze the building. On returning home he found only a few walls standing. He decided to restore the building himself. He collected old photographs and consulted elderly relatives making sure every detail was just right.

The museum preserves the rooms in which several generations of the family ate and slept. Much of the furniture is from India. This includes beautiful wooden four-poster beds

elaborately carved and raised above the floor to prevent insects from becoming unwelcome guests.

Do you need a blessing or a lucky charm? For the past five thousand years, people throughout the Middle East, India and Africa, too have used henna to paint intricate patterns on the hands of brides. It is an art especially attractions or natural wonders, important for women because it symbolizes festivities and celebrations.

Also, painting the skin became a way a way to cool the body down in the desert.



Henna is derived from the plant we know as henna. Powder from the plant mixed with water becomes a thick paste. The artist fills a cone and allows a smooth flow of the henna paste to make intricate designs.

It is fun when a woman paints my hand with a lovely array of flowers, leaves, geometric and flourishes. Henna tattoos leave a stain that is reddish brown or even black. In order to keep the stain as dark as possible, I must keep it on my skin as long as possible. Then I peel it off. The color on the skin can last almost a month so I use a rubber glove to preserve the color as long as possible.

Horsing is favorite sport of the Emirates and we enjoy dinner one night at a racing event. The world admires Arabian horses for their beauty and speed. Since we can't use money for betting, we use paper ballots to note our choices. Some names of the horses are very exotic and include some American names. (Was that in our honor?)

Excitement rose as the horses race around the track and the winner comes in first. If the horse we choose wins, our names appear on huge TV's in the lobby.



We also witnessed a most unusual sight – camels at their daily practice runs for races. Camels can reach a top speed of about 25-mph on a track between 3-1/2 to 6 miles in length. In the past, the human rights groups sharply criticized the sport for its use of small boys as jockeys. Now trainers sit on the sidelines in cars and work devices that give directions to the camels. We are happy to learn that both the camels and horses receive good care.

The Emirates Wildlife Society manages one of the only a handful of world urban protected areas. The Al Khor Wildlife Sanctuary dubbed “Flamingo” is home to thousands of birds that migrate every year.

After walking to a little shack facing the marshy land, we view the flamingos in all their glory.



We turn our backs on the beautiful flamingos and are amazed at the superb view of Dubai's skyline. The sanctuary is startlingly close to the skyscrapers.

In the West, we tend to treat the Middle East as a remote land, especially a country such as the Emirates of Arabia. As late as 1955, guidebooks warned visitors not to travel to the Arabian Peninsula for a number of reasons: lack of adequate hotels; a poor transportation system; and few dramatic sights to attract tourists.

Wow! It's not the story now! The Emirates are full of adventure and sights. Today there is something for everyone – from the largest mall in the world where every store you can imagine is in it to camel races. The skyline of Dubai shimmers in the sunshine and is constantly changing, but you realize that you are still in the middle of a desert.

We are not as different as we think. The Emirates are the center of ideas and commerce. It is an important ally of the United States, and the heartland of a major world religion.



MY NEW YEARS WISH FOR ALL!

Here's wishing you a year of fun

Here's wishing you good health and wealth

And always joy, love and laughter
On your trip around the sun!"

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