

It's Not So Much the Heat, but the Humidity

My Omani taxi driver asked me what the temperature was outside. I told him I heard it was going to be 48 (118 degrees Fahrenheit). He disagreed and said it would be 50 (122 degrees Fahrenheit). I told him it only felt like 48, but he said it felt more like 50. In the middle of this “heated” debate, I realized that either way it was well over 110 degrees and it was unbearably hot. I often get asked now if it was a dry heat or was it humid. Does it matter? Its 120 degrees!

The Arabian Peninsula has more than sand, hot temperatures and oil, although there is plenty of all three. Cities like Dubai, Doha, and Bahrain City are largely business and shopping centers, with astounding development as they continue to reap the rewards of oil money. Other areas are more traditional and a trip into the rural areas of the countries of the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Oman will illustrate their history.

Despite being a modern city, Dubai, in the UAE, has several historical places. The

Dubai Museum provides a detailed look at the history of the area and includes a history of the UAE. Included are Arabs historical role as traders, traditional foods and housing, the oil and water industries and the importance of falconry. The Sheikh Saeed Al Maktoum House allows a look at how the wealthy lived and also includes old coins and weapons. Taking a trip across Dubai Creek via *abras* (water taxis), one can visit the souqs (marketplaces) of



Dubai. However, they are average as Dubai has many department stores that overwhelm the traditional souqs.



One of the main activities in Dubai is escaping from the heat. Most people sit and sweat during the day. People carry sweat rags and just wipe the sweat of their brow every few minutes. In the middle of the afternoon, one to four, many shops close because many people are napping. Beaches are also a possibility. The wind sail-shaped Burj al-Arab Hotel is built on an artificial island near the Jumeira Beach and has become a symbol of the UAE's increasing economic power.

Furthermore, the government plants trees on the side of main roads and waters them once a week in an attempt to provide some shelter from the heat.

Doha, Qatar and Bahrain City, Bahrain are somewhat similar to Dubai. They are somewhat stale due to recent expansion but safe, organized and easy to navigate. Some historians think Bahrain is the Biblical Garden of Eden as it was at one time a lush island surrounded by desert and archeological evidence suggests that the people were bigger, lived longer and were buried with snakes. One can see these graves while visiting Bahrain.

A couple of hours south of Dubai are the cities of Al-Ain and the Omani border town of Buraimi. Al-Ain is an oases town and the date palms allow some protection from the sun. There is a livestock souq that sells goats and cows but also Persian cats. Other sites include a small fort and museum, but just walking around the city is enjoyable too. It's hard to get lost as the theme-styled roundabouts, including the coffeepot and clock tower, are good guides. Crossing into Oman, the main thing to see in Buraimi is the bus to move onward. The bus goes through the rural Omani countryside and one can see several mosques and forts located in the rocky countryside. In these areas, people basically live the same way as they did in Biblical times.

Visiting old friends, Kevin and Larissa, who were teaching in the small town of Mulladah, Oman, allowed me a close look at traditional Omani life. The town has a population of around 200 and was not signposted so the bus driver helped by telling me when to get off the bus. Kevin and Larissa stayed in an apartment above a grocery store and visiting the store, I had the chance to interact with locals. Women are not allowed to work in many professions, however, working at a grocery store is allowed. The front seats of the buses are reserved for women and they must also wear appropriate clothing. The female Omani wardrobe is more varied than one may expect as small alterations to the outfit allows for personal uniqueness yet is still acceptable to wear under Islamic custom. Some women wore what seemed like masks, exposing just their eyes, while others had just a head scarf. Furthermore, outfits with lace were worn by younger women, while older women had all cloth. The women at the grocery store and I did have a conversation; however, when Kevin and Larissa arrived, they were mobbed by the locals as there is a real curiosity of Westerners.

Entertainment was somewhat limited due to the prohibition of alcohol. A health club in Mulladah served alcohol, but only to non-Muslims and only after gaining a government license. They also had entertainment, female Russian dancers and Chinese singers. The health club itself was quite extensive and included a golf course, which is all sand, but golfers are given a patch of turf to tee off on and the "greens" were packed sand. There was also a sauna, which involved simply walking out of the air-conditioned health club, into the 120-degree heat and then proceeding to a small, heavily windowed building. In addition to serving alcohol, the club also had access to pork products which is forbidden in Islam. Kevin went here to get Christmas ham and was taken to a back room, where he picked out the ham he wanted. After paying for the ham, he was told to go back home, change clothes, come back after an hour and the ham would be waiting for him at the back door. He said it felt like one of the dodgiest deals he's ever done in his life.



Moving on to the capital of Muscat cost only one dollar by shared taxi, even though the city was an hour away. It's easy to travel in a country when the cost of gas is seven cents a gallon. Muscat has many of its activities revolving around water as it located on the Arabian Sea. It is subdivided into several districts with Mutrah, and the actual city of Muscat located by the water. Mutrah feels like a small fishing village on the Mediterranean. It has a good souq with real frankincense and spices and is a good place to watch boats go in and out of the harbor. The walk to the actual city of Muscat to the east is made easier by parks that have date palms that can be used for shade. This walled city contains historical buildings such as the Al-Alam Palace and Oman-French Museum. A couple of forts sit on top

of the rocky outcrops, overlooking both Mutrah and Muscat.

The district called Ruwi feels more like a city. It has busy streets as well as the bus station and numerous banks and businesses. The National Museum explains the nation's history as well as culture, by detailing marriage rituals and the importance of frankincense. The Sultan's Military Museum requires a military escort and the soldier doubles as a guide. My guide was quite knowledgeable. Although it is a military museum, it probably does a better job of describing the nation's history than the National Museum. On display are numerous photographs of the military, along with military equipment, an old Quran, and an astrolabe, which predates compasses and was also used for navigation.

My trip to the Arabian Peninsula ended with a man I had just met in Mutrah driving me to the airport some thirty miles away for free. As I was waiting for my plane at the airport, some locals shared their Kit Kats with me. This type of generosity and curiosity was typical of the trip. Although I don't miss the heat or alcohol prohibition, I do miss the hospitality and the exotic nature of Arabia. I wouldn't mind paying seven cents for a gallon of gas either.