

by Libby Fisk

I love to travel, and have done so extensively. But by far my favorite place to go is the Middle East. From the emotive refrain of the Adhan (the call for prayer), to the labyrinthine souqs, there is nothing like the energy of this region. Having already been to Egypt, Jordan, and Lebanon, I decided this time to journey to the Arabian Gulf.

The first day of my memorable adventure began after arriving to **Bahrain**, with a meet and greet with our tour guide and group over breakfast at the hotel. We then proceeded to the Old Palace, a pastel pink building with a beautiful dome, where the king and his cabinet meet weekly. Next, we made our way to the house of one of Bahrain's longest-serving rulers, Sheikh Isa bin Ali Al Khalifi. The residence is on an island called Muharraq, and its décor and architecture showcase the style of the period. Then we explored Fort Arad, a 15th century fortress built in the Islamic traditional styles of the time.



After leaving the island, we stopped at a charming little bakery for some sugary snacks (I had the Luqaimat – which are sweet dumplings) before heading to the Bahrain Fort ruins and Museum. A UNESCO World Heritage Site, where humans have inhabited this area since about 2300 BCE. The site used to be the capital of the Dilmun Empire, and excavations here have revealed urban structures of seven civilizations. The museum took about 45 minutes to walk through and was filled with hundreds of artifacts.



Our last stop of the day was the House of Qu'ran, an extensive Islamic museum. The building itself is exquisite, engraved with Arabic script. We spent quite a while here, admiring the ancient gold and copper pottery, the Islamic art, and the extensive collection of the Muslim holy book. The museum houses many copies of the Qu'ran, including manuscripts which date back to the 7th century, and some written on parchment, rice, peas, and grains. After the museum, we returned to our hotel for a delicious dinner, and then went back to our rooms for some much-needed rest.

The next morning, we headed off to the Al Fateh Grand Mosque, an architectural work of art in the Islamic style. We arrived right before the Adhan (the call to prayer) began and were able to witness the way Muslims worship. My favorite part of this site was the Islamic Center for non-Muslim visitors, where people of all faiths can ask questions and learn more about both the mosque and the Islamic religion. (Photography is allowed here, but you are urged not to take pictures of anyone praying.)



We stopped for a short lunch, and then continued our journey toward the Al Jasra Handicraft Center. On the way, we got a quick look at the Al Jasra House, a traditional-style house made of coral stones and palm tree trunks that was the birthplace of Sheikh Isa bin Sulman Al Khalifa. At the Handicraft Center, we wandered around, admiring the pottery, baskets, fabrics, and more, all created using local traditional methods. Afterward, we enjoyed a dinner of authentic Bahraini cuisine at one of Manama's best restaurants and soaked in as much as we could on our last night in this country.

The following day, after a quick breakfast, we boarded a flight to Doha (**Qatar**). After checking in to the hotel, we had the rest of the day free to explore the bustling city on our own, from its traditional markets, to its shiny high rises, to its shopping centers.



Our next morning started with a visit to Katara Cultural Village, which is designed to look like an old Arabian city, complete with cobbled walkways, artists selling their wares, and even an amphitheater. Later, we made a quick stop at the Equestrian Club to see the majestic Arabian horses.

After the Equestrian Club, we toured the fantastically designed National Museum of Qatar, which actually incorporates the palace of Sheikh Abdullah bin Jassim Al-Thani into one of the exhibits. Aside from all its incredible pieces, the museum itself is a work of art, with curving walls, uneven ceilings, and artifacts in glass cases suspended in the air.



We stopped for a quick lunch and then continued on with our day at the Museum of Islamic Art. We wandered this stunning museum, taking in its 14 centuries of art of this region. Our last destination of the day was the Souq Waqif (the Old Souq), a traditional market that sells anything from garments to spices, and even Arabian falcons. This is a great place for picking up souvenirs. From here, we returned to our hotel for dinner.

Bright and early the following day, we set off to Al Zubarah, a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Al Zubarah was a center for pearl fishing and trading in the 18th and 19th century, and its walls and other

buildings are still relatively well preserved today. Next up was the Sheikh Faisal Museum, where we saw Islamic textiles, manuscripts, and art, as well as ancient coins and other artifacts.

Later, after a short lunch, we made a detour to the Al Shahaniya camel racetrack. We learned that the camels were at times ridden by child jockeys, because they were less likely to weigh the animals down. Today, robots jockeys are positioned on top the camels, often with speakers to encourage the camel. As you can imagine, this was really something to see, and a fun little diversion from the more serious sights.



Our last stop was the Barzan Towers, more than 100-year-old watchtowers which have been recently restored. After our busy day, we headed to dinner at a restaurant near our hotel and feasted on Machbūs – Qatar’s national dish – as we prepared to bid farewell to this delightful country.

We set out for **Kuwait** City the next day. After a short flight, we arrived, and first stopped at Beit Dickson (an authentic Kuwaiti cuisine restaurant) for our first meal in this new land. Next up, we went to the Bait Al Othman Historic Museum, an old house that has been converted into a museum showcasing Kuwait’s history. We passed by the Parliament building and the Seif Palace, later stopping at the Grand Mosque for some pictures.

The best part of this day, however, was the Souq Al-Mubarakiya (Souq of Kuwait), the oldest street market in the country. Here, we wandered the open-air market for hours, breathing in the wonderful culture and bartering for anything from silk rugs, to traditional garments, to antiques, to hand-crafted jewelry. Our day ended with a visit to the Kuwait Towers, a group of three sky-high towers, where I took some great panoramic pictures overlooking the city. The towers are even prettier at night when they’re all lit up. We ended the day with dinner at the hotel restaurant, and then headed back to our rooms.

The next morning, we boarded a flight to **Abu Dhabi**, thus beginning the **UAE** portion of our trip. We toured the Sheikh Zayed Grand Mosque, a stunning Arabic-style structure. We made a quick stop at the famous Emirates Palace, then the impressive Etihad Towers, then enjoyed a drive up Corniche Road (the sea-side promenade), which runs along the city’s coast. We later arrived at Qasr al-Hosn, an 18th century fort that was home to the country’s emir until 1966.



We made a short detour through a date’s market, and then ended our day with a tour of the Louvre Museum, the largest museum in the Arabian Peninsula. Here, we explored the museum’s vast collection, which includes art from all over the world, including from such notable artists like Maunet and Gauguin. Next, we made our way back to our hotel, where we had dinner, then headed back to our rooms to recharge.

After breakfast the next day, we drove to the pretty garden city of Al Ain, and then walked around the Al Ain Museum, where we saw artifacts dating back to the Bronze Age. On a lighter note, we stopped by a camel market, and got an up close and personal look at these interesting animals. Later we explored Hili Architectural Park, a remarkable site over 5,000 years old, which includes tombs and settlements. From here, we drove to Dubai, where we had dinner, then checked in to our hotel for the night.

Our first morning in **Dubai**, I was in awe of the grandeur of the city. We saw the breathtaking Burj Al Arab Hotel, which is built in the shape of a ship's sail, and is said to be the most luxurious hotel on earth. We ventured to the top of the towering Burj Khalifa – the tallest building in the world, and marveled at the Dubai Fountain. Next, we toured the white stone Jumeirah Mosque, which welcomes visitors of all faiths.



We had a quick lunch, and then visited Al Bastakiya, the oldest part of the city, where we strolled the winding streets, and saw the houses adorned with wind-towers. We stopped by the Dubai Museum, located in Al Fahidi Fort, which houses artifacts as far back as the Bronze Age. Dinner this night was a fantastic 5-course meal accompanied by the majestic sights of the city on a dhow cruise along the Dubai Creek.

We said our goodbyes to Dubai the next morning and boarded our flight to Muscat (**Oman**). After lunch and hotel check-ins, our first stop of the day was the Bait Al Zubair Museum, where we saw ancient weaponry, tools, and garments. Next up was Al Alam Palace, one of the official residences of the sultan. Later, we haggled for treasures at the Muttrah Souq before returning to our hotel for dinner.



The next day began with a visit to the Grand Mosque. The Islamic-style mosque is stunning, and is large enough to hold 20,000 people. Later we toured Nizwa, one of the oldest cities in Oman. Here we saw castles, forts and towers, like the stunning Jabreen castle, and Nizwa fort. The ancient town is a UNESCO World Heritage Site. We spent some time wandering the Nizwa Souq, where I shopped and sampled some of the local foods. After the souq, we went back to our hotel and prepared for a new day of adventures.

This morning, we left Nizwa and headed to Mudhaybi, an ancient archaeological site. We had a lunch at a traditional Omani restaurant, followed by a short tour around Ibra Village, one of the oldest cities in Oman which still has the remnants of old castles and mosques, as well as a souq.



After lunch, we made our way to Wahiba Sands, where we would be staying the night. Here, we took in

the sights of the ocean of dunes surrounding us. The dunes were spectacular, changing color with the position of the sun. We toured a Bedouin home, and looked out into the night from just outside our tents, soaking in the silence, darkness, bright stars, and utter peace that can only be found in a place like this.

We left Wahiba Sands the next morning and headed to Wade Bani Khalid, a gorgeous desert oasis surrounded by mountains. It was hot, so I and a few other group members took a short dip in the refreshing waters. From here, we went on to visit Sur, one of the world's oldest port towns. Next, we drove to Wadi Tiwi, another dazzling oasis full of lush banana and papaya plantations. Our last stop of the tour was the Bima Sinkhole, a crater where a long staircase leads you down to the turquoise waters. We dipped our feet in and relaxed as the fish swam up to us and gently nibbled our toes.

Back in Muscat, the group said their goodbyes over dinner at a local restaurant. We reflected on our adventures over traditional Omani cuisine, and then went our separate ways.

A few takeaways I have from traveling to this part of the world are: to be aware whether or not photography is allowed, particularly in mosques. Also, as these are Muslim countries, modesty is the norm. Men and women must wear sleeved shirts and cover their legs. Even in the areas where there is swimming, it is typical to wear a shirt over your swimsuit. Women are expected to cover their hair in holy places. All in all, this was a fantastic trip. From the food to the sights to the accommodations, this tour was even better than I hoped it would be. The cuisine that we feasted on was remarkable with an amazing array of flavors and tastes of the various influences that compose the Arabian menu, from Hindi to Turkish and Persian to Lebanese and freshly caught sea-food; we could not have been more royally treated! Our hotels have always been very satisfying, modern and large in some cities while boutique and abundant with character in other cities. This comprehensive journey exposed me to an entirely alien culture to me and the opportunity to visit 5 nations in one tour gave me this glimpse of the wonders of Arabia.



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