

Dubai to Southampton, March-April 2019

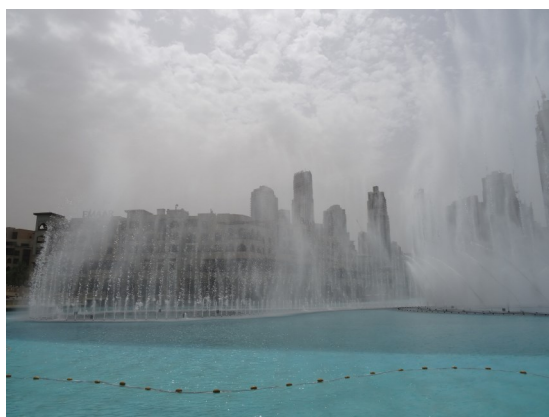
We are currently (Sunday March 31) cruising north in the Red Sea, having been on board the Queen Mary 2 for six days since leaving Dubai. The segment of the World Voyage that we are on will take us to England in a total of 20 days.

We left home on March 21 and flew overnight to Paris and then on to Dubai where we arrived very late on Friday night. We had two full days to explore Dubai before boarding the ship last Monday. Having spent several days in Dubai a number of years back we didn't feel obliged to "do everything" on this visit and used it as a relaxing jet-lag recovery period.

When we awoke on Saturday we were also able to get a good look at our location and from our room we could see the city (with the world's tallest tower, the famous Burg Al Arab Jumeirah hotel—in the shape of a sail—and hundreds of other skyscrapers) as well as the seafront of the Persian Gulf and the outline of the Palms Islands. It was relatively cloudy so our views were not perfect but we certainly got an excellent perspective on this ultra-modern city from our perch on the 62nd floor.



We decided to have a rather lazy day, so we took the hotel shuttle bus to the Dubai Mall, supposedly the largest in the world – this town seems to like superlatives! Indeed, the mall is huge and we perhaps covered a tenth of it during our four hours there. We walked past a giant aquarium (with its walk-through tunnel) which was over two storeys high and had a very large collection of fish. Outside the mall (at the opposite end to the main entrance) is the Dubai Fountain, which again claims some fame as largest or most spectacular, etc. and stands directly in front of the world's tallest tower at close to 2500 feet. We saw the 1pm "performance" which was indeed spectacular both in size and the configurations that the hundreds of fountain heads produced. We could only imagine how it looks when illuminated at night.



The shopping mall itself has four floors and about every store you could imagine from all over the world. The entrance is flanked by Cartier and Tiffany (as opposed to Sears and JC Penney!) and the ground floor has

every other high-end jeweler, exclusive watch and men's and ladies' apparel shops. These stores never seem to be very busy but perhaps turn a profit with just a couple of sales a day. Other floors have somewhat less expensive and exclusive stores but almost every one was recognizable from either the UK or USA. Huge sections of the broad hallways were dedicated to cafes, restaurants, ice cream parlors – and coffee shops (there are six Starbucks within the mall). This mall, currently the largest, is one of dozens in the city, with more being built all the time—in stark contrast to the situation in the US where malls seem to be closing every day.

On Sunday we chose the Hop On/Hop Off bus around the city of Dubai. There are about six route options and we chose probably the two most popular – the Red Route that takes in the older part of Dubai (old is a relative term here as the area was completely desert until 100 years ago) and the Blue Route that took us along the Persian Gulf coast where many of the more luxurious homes and hotels are situated. Both were fascinating, particularly with respect to the continuing construction and the ever-changing landscape of each area.

We were told that there is indeed a "Grand Plan" for Dubai, put forward by the past three rulers, for a "sustainable region"

that is a financial center as well as a retail tourist destination – all this to offset the oil revenues which built everything in the first place and which are now anticipated to run out in 2040. This was an interesting projection since the last time we were here this was expected to occur by 2020. The overall plan is NOT to build the biggest, tallest and grandest – but this just seems to come along as an integral part.

“Sustainable” is perhaps best exemplified in the fact that over 98% of the water comes from desalination of the Persian Gulf – thus accounting not only for the support of millions of people but also the many green and beautifully landscaped areas in this sandy desert. The UAE is also transitioning from an almost 100% gas-generated electricity supply (in 2010) to both nuclear and solar, as well as other sustainable forms of generation. Again, seeing the city at night, in particular, suggests that this is an enormous task – but not beyond the imagination and commitment of this rich region.

It is difficult to capture the highlights of a one-day bus tour but the overwhelming picture is of prosperity and an architecture that is innovative and BIG. This contrasts with the somewhat old-fashioned wooden ferry boats that are constantly taking passengers across the Dubai Canal in the older part of town and, of course, with the alleyways of the souks. We got off the bus for a drink near the Old Souk



and strolled through narrow streets (successfully warding off the store keepers) until we emerged near the canal – and conveniently near the next bus stop.

This being a Muslim country, there are also hundreds of mosques, many of them very beautiful with their sandstone construction and tall minarets. The fact that the UAE is a Moslem state and follows Sharia Law explicitly does not, how-



ever, describe the multi-cultural nature of the country. Foreigners (“Ex-pats”) are welcomed and indeed are perhaps a majority – but

can stay only a few years before having to return home. There are other restrictions of ownership, etc but the main driver for the influx are the free trade zones, tax incentives and the abundance of jobs. This makes for a rich cosmopolitan mix which shows in language, skin color and dress. The local “Emirati” typically wear traditional dress but this is complemented by just about any other form of attire imaginable.



On the Gulf coast are the exclusive hotels, of which the Burg El Arab is the most well-known and iconic in Dubai, and endless resort and entertainment centers – including an indoor ski slope! The beaches are very popular of course and the waters of the Gulf are always warm – appealing on a day like today in March where the temperature and humidity were draining on Ohioans.

So, we experienced a good sampling of this amazing city and arrived back at our hotel

exhausted, despite having spent most of the day sitting on a bus, trying to get the “perfect” photos (but failing) and admiring everything about this busy, modern and extremely clean city.



The unique architecture of Dubai

.....and the building continues



On Monday we began our 20-day cruise to Southampton and didn't have time for much exploration after the obligatory safety drill and, as we set sail, our first dinner on board. On Tuesday morning we had a “Piracy Practice” to prepare us for the next four days of sailing alongside several countries where acts of piracy have been experienced over the past several years. The protocol to be followed in the event of a possible encroachment is to sit in an inside corridor and leave stateroom drapes closed with lights off. In addition, the outer decks will be off limits. In fact, the latter is to be enforced from dusk until dawn for the four nights that we are in the potentially dangerous waters. So, no midnight strolls for a few nights!

In the late morning and again at 3pm we attended lectures by on-board experts. The first, on the influence of Arabs and Islam from the 7th to the 20th centuries, was very good and we intend to take in others in the series by the same speaker. The afternoon lecture – on the maritime importance of the Arabian Sea and Indian Ocean – had a lot of interesting information but was a little less coherent.

In between the lectures we squeezed in some lunch and I took a 3 ½ mile walk on the track around Deck 7 – 3 laps equal 1.1 miles. The temperature was in the seventies and the breeze created by the movement of the ship made the walk very pleasant. There was virtually no wind and the seas were almost calm as we entered the Gulf of Oman. Overnight we had left the Persian Gulf, through the Straits of Hormuz; this was also through calm seas so no need for our sea-sickness patches so far! To complete our daytime activities, we enjoyed afternoon tea in the traditional English style.

Tuesday was also the first of several “Gala Nights” on this cruise so we will be dressing formally in tuxedo and evening dress, rather than the slightly less formal jacket (for men) – tie optional – on every other night. Almost everyone in the dining room wore formal dress and only the occasional suit was seen. Certainly, all the women were in their finery.

Overnight, we had left the waters of the UAE and were now following the coast of Oman in a southwesterly direction. We were generally only about 25 miles from the shore but couldn't see land.

Wednesday was again warm and sunny (80F) after another calm night at sea, both from the standpoint of the ocean waves and piracy activity. There were, however, about four lookout posts around the open deck with sailors standing next to water guns and spending most of the time staring through their binoculars. Clearly, they take the potential for piracy very seriously – which we found an encouraging sign.

The second lecture in a series on Arabs and the Muslim World covered the 20th century in the Middle East, beginning with the “carving up of the spoils” of World War 1 by the Russian, French and British. The states thus formed, with no particular regard

to religion, culture or history, have basically stayed intact, with the additional post WW2 addition of Israel, Jordan and the Palestinian Authority. The speaker described the various factions that now exist within each country boundary and, when viewed from this angle, it is not difficult to see why the region is a continuing source of conflict. Perhaps, also, it is a little ironic that the Middle East is home to virtually all the remaining monarchies where the ruler has supreme or very significant power as opposed to being more of a ceremonial head of state – as all remaining monarchies in Europe.

On Thursday we were docked by the time we went to breakfast. We had passed the city of Salalah, Oman on our starboard side and were now in its newly developed port some ten miles out of town. Salalah (sounds like a Fifties singing group) is at the southwesterly tip of the Sultanate of Oman, near the border with Yemen, and several hundred miles from the capital of Muscat. It is the second largest city in the country, was its capital at one time, and has a population of less than one million. The whole country is sparsely populated, being slightly larger than Italy but with a population of 2 ¼ millions. The area around Salalah, stretching along the coast to Yemen, is unique to the Arabian Peninsula in that it has a monsoon season and hence is relatively fertile. At this time of year, it is not at its greenest but many of the main streets are beautifully landscaped and we saw a number of farming areas where tropical crops (mainly banana) were growing.

Tourism is relatively new to the country and essentially confined to Muscat and, more recently, the area around Salalah, where a number of resorts are being built along the coast. We were told, however, that the country is not interested in mass tourism at this time and will be well regulated. We were also told not to expect too much from our local guide – although he turned out to be a useful source of information and extremely friendly. His English was excellent.

We drove by bus from the port (site of the construction of a huge gas pipeline, reflecting the country's continuing oil wealth, and skirted the city to our first stop, a green oasis at the foot of a mountain range where a natural spring creates a pleasant stream below a large cave in the hillside. Other than that, it didn't have anything of significance – simply a nice place to visit in what is otherwise arid desert.



A few miles further on we stopped at a 200 year-old fort (Taqah Castle) built at a strategic location overlooking the Arabian Sea. We were able to stroll through the small rooms surrounding a small inner courtyard

and climb to an upper level but not, unfortunately, to the top of the walls. The English signage was well written and informative and depicted military life at the fort when Salalah and the surrounding region was home to the Sultan.



If I understand things correctly, Salalah was the capital city until the present Sultan came to power in the 1970s – by overthrowing his father! The son is revered in Oman and stands in direct contrast to his father who was, by all accounts, a tyrannical dictator.

On our drive we passed the summer palace of the previous and current ruler, and where the younger was a virtual prisoner until the coup. The school where

he was educated sits right across the street from the palace (neither of which we could enter) although both appear to have been given recent renovation and the outer walls are a beautiful cream sandstone.

After the fort, we drove to the ancient city – and the reason why Salalah became such an important location. There has been human habitation here for many millennia, but a stone-built city has existed since about 5000 BC. It was a major trading port until the first few centuries AD based upon a single commodity – frankincense. Apparently, the climate for growing good frankincense is restricted to only a few places on earth and, of course, the best product is grown right here in southwest Oman. Consequently, at its zenith, Salalah was the point at which spices and animals from the east (as far as China) and food and other riches from Egypt and further north were brought to be traded for the local product. A glance at the map clearly shows just what a major crossroads this city is between Europe, the Middle East, Africa and Asia.

At the old city, which has been under archaeological excavation on and off for 100 years, and with a major Italian team still working, we first viewed a short video about its history and then were free to walk amongst the ruins and parts which had been partially reconstructed. The city sits a hill overlooking the Arabian Sea and, with its defensive walls, must have presented traders with an impressive sight as they approached from all points of the compass. The only entrance from the sea led directly into the main market where goods were exchanged and, presumably, where fresh supplies for the return journey were procured.



As the demand for frankincense decreased, so did the need for this trading center and it appears that Salalah became less important as a world hub. It still maintained its strategic position, of course, and presumably was involved in regional conflicts even before the major battles fought in this region in both World Wars. In fact, as the lecturer on board pointed out, the entire coastal region of the Arabian Peninsula was portioned to European countries after World War 1, much of it to Britain. The English influence is as strong here as in the UAE and perhaps even more so. Even the central (larger) portion of the peninsula (Saudi Arabia – a country formed as recently as 1932) was “conceived” by the Allies and its relationship with Britain continues to be very strong.

Our final stop was at the souk where we could wander through the incense-filled streets and make any necessary purchases.

For reasons that escape me, we passed by all the incense, perfumes and pashminas and returned to the bus empty-handed. I can only assume that the 85F temperature and high humidity contributed to our failure to support the local economy.

We passed a number of wedding tents and were told that weddings could last for several days and would be attended by up to several thousand guests! Interestingly, these tents were filled with men (only, NO women) and each pays a small amount to attend presumably to defray costs and provide a nice gift for the couple. Exactly what the women, including the bride, are doing while the men are feasting was not clear. Surely it can't take days to get ready?

As we said, this part of Oman does have some heavy rains and much of this, it seems, is put to use in landscaping. The dozens of roundabouts that we drove by were usually green and beautifully landscaped.



In addition to the four stops we made, other shore excursions here in Salilah made visits to the site of Job's tomb and the supposed place where the Queen of Sheba came (and stayed?) when getting her frankincense. Either my bad planning or poor understanding of the tour itineraries (which I suspect had a good deal of "flexibility") caused us to miss these—so obviously we must return!

On the drive back to the ship were given a little more information on the social aspects of this country. As with the UAE, the oil wealth is "passed down" to the population in the form of free education and health care and, in Oman, a government grant of land to all males as they reach the age of 23. I got the impression that taxes for most are virtually unknown but how the oil magnates' wealth is partially redistributed was not clear. Perhaps the government itself is a major owner of the wells. Perhaps it is simply a manifestation of the Muslim creed to be charitable. Whatever the method, it is providing the population with a high standard of living – but begs the question as to what will happen when the oil ultimately dries up.

After dinner on Thursday, we did something that we have never done on a cruise by attending the 10:30 show in one of the theaters on board. A four-soprano group, backed by a 10-piece band, sang popular and operatic pieces in a tribute to the "Royalty" of both genres. Hence, there was a very good mix of songs ranging from operatic arias to Dolly Parton. We both enjoyed it and managed to stay awake throughout.

We sailed from Salalah at 4pm and were soon under the dusk to dawn indoor curfew as we sailed from Oman, along the coast of Yemen and through the Gulf of Aden. Of course, we didn't see any of this as a result of the security measures but the captain mentioned as we left Salalah that through the Gulf of Aden we would be sailing in close convoy with other ships. Whether this was necessary for security or merely as a result of the very busy sea lanes through the Gulf was not clear. Perhaps some of both.

Friday was the first of three days at sea as we sailed between the Saudi Peninsula and northeast Africa and on to the Red Sea and our next port of call at Aqaba, Jordan. During the noon broadcast from the bridge, the captain said that we were still in convoy with a Russian ship providing the military "escort" at this time.

We attended another lecture, this time on Egypt, Ancient and Modern, which was another interesting and informative talk. One of the more surprising facts (to me) was that for 2200 years after the last Dynasty of Ancient Egypt, the country was either ruled by or occupied by a foreign power. The Greeks, Romans (who brought Christianity—still practiced by 10% of the country), Byzantines, Ottomans and Turks all took a turn before about a century of British rule. That ended abruptly in 1952 with the arrival of Nasser and his presidency and led to the expulsion of the British from Egypt and, following the Suez Crisis of 1956-7,

control of the Suez Canal to Egypt. I remember the fear of a large scale war was daily news in Britain at the time but the crisis ended with Britain's withdrawal and the fall of the prime minister. A fact I had forgotten (or perhaps never knew) that the lecturer mentioned was that this crisis threatened the normally good Anglo-USA relations, as The United States were prepared to use force to bring about the end.

Saturday was another day at sea. We had entered the Red Sea overnight and were now traveling in a northwesterly direction towards the Gulf of Aqaba. We were now out of the "Special Security" zone and most of the day we were sailing between the Yemen, on our starboard side, and Eritrea in North Africa. We attended another lecture, this time on Israel through the ages, with a good deal of discussion about the British Mandate following World War 2 and the subsequent granting of a State of Israel for the first time in 2000 years. This required chopping up the former Transjordan into Israel, present-day Jordan and Palestine – hence prompting over 60 years of conflict of one degree or another and two subsequent wars in which Israel took even more territory than had been allotted in 1948. The final lecture in the series today (Sunday) discussed the Israel-Palestine conflict and, although he saw some progress towards resolution over the 40+ years he has been studying it, the speaker did not believe that an end is anywhere close.

Currently we are between Saudi Arabia (we passed close to Jeddah and Mecca overnight) and Egypt and will go ashore in Jordan tomorrow.

So, once again we are traveling through (or, on this trip, near) exotic lands that we never expected to visit and we feel privileged to be able to make the journey and experience first-hand the culture, history and geography.

More as the ship's internet access allows!

Molly and Bob