

Where is Abu Dhabi?

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The invitation

In 1996, my 11th year with The University of Maryland, I happened to be at Headquarters in Heidelberg for one of my infrequent visits. I don't remember why I was there, but I suspect it was to turn in grades and pick up my paycheck. ED members will remember when we had to do that at the end of each term. While I was there, I bumped into David Glaser with whom I had worked a few years back when he was Area Director for the Mediterranean. I did two terms at Torrejon Air Base in Madrid, and we met again when we were both teaching at Rota.

With his usual enthusiasm, David asked me if I would be interested in a unique teaching opportunity at a new Maryland location. I asked where it was and he replied, "Abu Dhabi". I hate to admit it, but while I had heard of it, I did not know where it was located, but it sounded like it was somewhere in the middle east and could be an exotic place. Having seen numerous tourism commercials on TV, I was familiar with Dubai but not with Abu Dhabi. Having been primarily in Germany since 1990, we were ready for a change of scenery. Not wanting to appear geographically challenged, I immediately said yes, and David said I would be hearing from him.

Later that day when I returned home to Landstuhl, Germany, I asked Soonja if she would like to go to Abu Dhabi for 6 months. Adventurer that she is, she immediately said yes, and then asked, "Where is Abu Dhabi"? We dug out our trusty pocket Atlas and located Abu Dhabi, about 100 km from Dubai. That location made it even more exciting and we agreed that we were ready for a change. After some negotiations with Joe Arden and Jane McHan regarding courses to be offered, compensation, housing arrangements, and an agreement to allow Soonja to accompany me, we were off to Abu Dhabi for two terms. We did not want to give up our apartment in Landstuhl and preferred not to pay rent on it while we were away. Fortunately, our German landlady agreed to let us sublet our small

apartment and Jim Briscoe just happened to need a place close to Ramstein for a term or two.

How did this Abu Dhabi program come into existence? Did you know about it?

Jane McHan, area director for Central Germany at the time, had some “connections” in that part of the world and had established a relationship with an educational organization called The Emirates Institute of Technology (EIT). It was a fledgling organization that had been in existence about two years and offered only professional technological courses. They wanted to establish a two-year university degree program and while I am not familiar with the details of how it was put together, a joint EIT/University of Maryland program was established in 1995. I believe Maryland sent two faculty members to teach basic mathematics and English the first year followed in 1996 by myself and Steve Holowenzak, who was finishing up an assignment in the Sinai. I think Steve was teaching math and psych classes. I taught business and management classes.



Getting there and settling in

I was quite surprised when the UAE issued me a ten-year visa authorizing as many 6-months stays as I wanted. Unfortunately, Soonja was not a U.S. citizen at the time and she could get only a 90-day visa. We learned later, what this meant.

We arrived in Abu Dhabi the middle of August to a temperature of 44 Centigrade! Of course, everything was air conditioned. In fact, many of the stores left their front doors wide open and the cool air wafted out into the streets. Not only was it hot, but we never saw a raindrop during the entire 178 day stay!

We were provided with a comfortable fully furnished and of course, air-conditioned, apartment on the 14th floor of a 17-story high-rise building in the heart of the city. Steve arrived a few days later and was given a similar apartment a few floors below us, in the same building. We were a short taxi ride from the school. Taxis were plentiful and the fare was usually about seven Dirhams (less than two dollars U.S.). Most of the taxi drivers were Pakistanis. On one trip I asked the driver why there were so many Pakistani taxi drivers. He replied poetically, “no college, no knowledge. No good jobs.”

The building we were living in was located on a six-lane thoroughfare across from a huge enclosed fresh seafood and vegetable market and a couple of small local markets and restaurants. As seafood lovers, Soonja and I were able to enjoy our preferred diet of fish, shellfish, and fresh vegetables and on occasion, lamb stew. We would go to the market every other day and “negotiate” with the sellers. If you have been to the middle east you know that one never pays the first asking price for anything and Soonja, being Korean, drove extremely hard bargains!



Shawarmas

While we enjoyed the fish, lamb, and fresh vegetables, often for a light evening meal we would walk across the street and pick up Shawarmas at a stand that was set up outside a restaurant. For the uninitiated, a Shawarma is a variation on the Doner, not quite as large and much to our surprise, includes French fries as one of the ingredients. We would get four of them for the equivalent of less than two U.S. dollars. We became Shawarma addicts and must have eaten close to 100 or more during the time we were there. In fact, we were the stand's best customers and were given a whole bag full of Shawarmas as a going away gift on our last day in Abu Dhabi.

Staying Fit in Abu Dhabi

Before leaving for Abu Dhabi, Soonja and I had been visiting the gym a few days a week. We needed a gym or a good substitute, so we created one. Two or three times a week we would walk up to the 17th floor of the

building, walk down to the ground floor, and back up the 14th floor. That was a very solid workout in the non-air-conditioned stairwells.

Teaching at EIT

Some, if not most, of the readers here know that the workweek in the Arab/Muslim world begins on Saturday and ends on Wednesday. Thus, we had to get used to Thursday and Friday being the “weekend” and to teaching every Saturday and Sunday.

The EIT administration insisted that the instructors meet the classes dressed in jackets and ties. Not always the most comfortable in the heat outside, but often not warm enough in the chilly air-conditioned classrooms.

Classes were small (7-10 students) and included children of employees from various embassies, French, Italian etc., local Emirati citizens, and some Palestinians. Unlike other educational institutions in the middle east, our classes were coed. I believe EIT wanted separate classes for men and women, but The University of Maryland would not agree to that. Jane McHan told them that If they wanted an American degree program it would be done in true “American style”. We had no problems communicating as most of the students spoke two or three languages and their English language skills were solid.

As a business and management instructor, I often use group projects in my courses. I had been told that the students would not be comfortable working in mixed gender groups. Given the small classes and the distribution of men and women in the courses, it would have been impossible to have separate male and female work groups. I told the students I was aware of their “preferences”, but we needed to work something out. A quick anonymous survey of the class members in all courses revealed a surprise. They were all, both men and women, perfectly willing to work in mixed groups.

Surprise questions: Do you know Boomer Esiasen? Can I join the United States Air Force or Navy?

At the end of my first class meeting I was approached by one of the local Emirati students and asked if I knew Boomer Esiasen, the famous University of Maryland quarterback who went on to a career in the National

Football League. The student had attended The university of Maryland in the U.S. a few years back and had become a big American football fan. He assumed that I had come from Maryland, had taught on the Maryland campus, and would know Boomer.

One of my students was a Palestinian man in his early 20's. He came to me after class one day and told me that he had heard that foreigners could join the U.S. Military and earn American citizenship that way. He went on to tell me that his real motive was that he desperately wanted to become a fighter pilot. While I did not know much about the program he was referring to I told him that I thought that given he was a Palestinian, it might be difficult for him to join the U.S. military and even if he could, I had some doubts about whether or not he would be allowed to become a fighter pilot. He was a young man with a good sense of humor, and I asked him how badly he really wanted to be a jet fighter pilot. He told me that was his ultimate dream. I then whispered to him that there was another country he should consider, that might be willing to let him fly, Israel! I can't repeat exactly what he said (not in a nasty way) but he told me I had broken his heart with that statement. However, he later quietly told me that he would even consider the Israeli military if he could become a pilot.



Excursions with students

The Emirati students were in their early thirties, a bit older than the rest of the class members and from wealthy families. They were anxious to be helpful, providing cultural hints and taking me on some interesting adventures. Unfortunately for Soonja it would have been inappropriate for her to accompany me on these trips since they were always men-only ventures. One trip (see the photos) was out into the desert in what I think was the most popular vehicle in the UAE, the Toyota Landcruiser, to run up and down the sand dunes. My student had at least two, maybe three, phones in the vehicle and was on them almost constantly. At one point he received a call from a cousin in California. It was a good thing that Soonja did not go with us. I think she would have been carsick after the first hill.





A second trip with another student was to meet with some of his acquaintances at a location in the proverbial “middle of nowhere”. We were at a camel training facility. We sat down on the ground and had lunch, eating whatever was there with our hands. Once again, men only and they would have been extremely uncomfortable had Soonja been with me.

I was asked if I had ever tasted camel milk and of course I had not. A jug was readied for me to take back to Abu Dhabi. When we were driving back, about 15 miles down the road, we discovered we had left the camel milk behind. Shortly thereafter we heard a blaring horn and were overtaken by one of the men in another Landcruiser. We stopped and he got out to hand me the jug of camel milk. They just did not want to see me leave without it! I was given a warning not to drink too much the first time. I never told my student, but neither Soonja or I found it to our liking and most it went down the drain.



Good Connections

We were fortunate to have a “connected” field rep. Michelle was married to a young man named Frank Urbancic, the charges de affaires at the American Embassy in Abu Dhabi. Frank and Michelle were extremely nice to us and great resources, providing us with numerous advantages we otherwise, would not have had. We were invited to a couple of parties at their residence and got to meet some of the ambassadors from other countries along with some of the other embassy employees. Their connections also allowed us to purchase alcoholic beverages which were not readily available in Muslim countries. While things may have changed since the mid 90’s, In Abu Dhabi, one had to have what I called a “reverse liquor license”, not a license to sell but rather a license to purchase, rationed amounts of alcohol in the one liquor store in Abu Dhabi. We were also able to go to the only place where one could get beer or a drink at a bar, other than the tourist hotels. That was the U.S. Marine bar at the embassy. It was open to selected people on Saturday nights. Between the Marines and the Brits, It made for some fun evenings.

An additional advantage of having the embassy folks as our buddies were the shopping excursions. Frank was fluent in Arabic and that gave us an edge when shopping. I distinctly remember our first carpet shopping excursion with Frank, Michelle, and Jane McHan. We were taken to a street where there were about thirty carpet shops lined up one after another. There we learned how shopping in the middle east was conducted. We were shown dozens of carpets in a shop. If we didn't find one we liked, the owner would ask us to wait while he ran to another shop to get more carpets for us to look at. When we found one we liked they would ask us what we wanted to pay for it, in a unique way. They handed us a calculator asking us to put in a number. When we made our first offer, the sellers would groan and put their hands on their hearts telling us how much pain we were causing. From this move the negotiations continued until we settled at a price acceptable to both parties and shook hands on the deal. It was wonderful drama!

After we settled on a few carpets and paid for them with no bills or receipts, I suggested that we put them in the trunk of the car and continue our shopping. Frank explained that we could leave them in the store and come back later to pick them up. I was a bit skeptical since they could disappear with our cash and the carpets and we would be left without any proof of purchase, money, or carpets. Frank then explained to us that the handshake sealed the deal and *IT WOULD BE HONORED*. They would not think of trying to steal anything from us. I don't know with any certainty, but we suspected that all the carpet shops on that street were owned by the same group.



While most of the sellers in the markets were very honest, they were certainly not above taking advantage of a naïve tourist. In one instance we had purchased a few things in a shop and had done some “negotiating”, ultimately paying about two thirds of the first asking price. We had learned that a half to two thirds was about right for most purchases except for gold which was sold based on weight and current world prices.

While we were still in the shop, an older German couple came in and were about to purchase a few of the same items we had. They were given the same “original” price we were, and the man asked his wife, In German, if she thought it was a fair price and she replied that it was OK. The shop owner looked at us with a shoulder shrug and raised eyebrows, clearly indicating that if they were willing to pay the asking price, he was certainly going to accept it and that they should learn something about shopping in the middle east.

Once again, for those who may not have had the pleasure visiting in the middle east, Turkey, or Morocco, one of the popular shopping spots, particularly for tourists are the souks, the open markets, many of which are in what one would call alleys, while some are huge enclosed multi-story air-

conditioned malls. The smaller souks are similar to the open markets around the world. Just around the corner from our apartment building there was a typical souk where one could purchase all the things that tourists are interested in. We thoroughly enjoyed walking through it at least twice a week.

Visiting the Gold souk in Dubai was a mind-bending experience almost requiring that one wear sunglasses to reduce the glare. There were hundreds of gold shops, each one outdoing the next. Soonja enjoyed “shopping” in the gold souk. Yes, I also enjoyed it.



Man Talk

On one of our visits to the gold souk I had enough shopping and told Soonja that she could continue “eye shopping” while I sat down to rest. I walked over to a bench and sat down. Next to me, reading a newspaper, was an Arab man dressed in the traditional Kandura or Dishdasha, the long white robe, and the Gutra headdress. We struck up a conversation and I learned that he had attended an American university and was fluent in the English language. At one point he asked me if I had discovered the three best bargains in Abu Dhabi. I said I was not sure, and he proceeded to tell

me. The taxis are cheap, gold jewelry is priced by the weight with little charge for the labor, and the Russian hookers were beautiful and did not charge very much!! After a while, Soonja came over and sat down with me. He waved her away and said, “this is man talk, a woman should not be included in the conversation.” I was proud of Soonja. She did not move and to this day, I am not sure if he was being a typical Arab man or was just kidding. (see photo)



Visiting Dubai and crossing the creek

For those who may not be familiar Dubai, the city is divided in half by a narrow body of water, Dubai Creek. It is home to one of the most famous and most expensive hotels in the world, the sail shaped Burj Al Arab which was under construction while we were there. The creek is soon to be the home of the tallest man-made structure in the world, the Dubai Creek Tower slated to be 1.3 kilometers high!

The creek is a shopping mecca and an absolute for visitors to the area. While there is a bridge that has been built since our time there, the most popular way to get from one side to the other is on one of perhaps a hundred or more small boats (water taxis) that ply the creek. They are small diesel-powered boats that seat about twenty to thirty people side-by-side on a long center seat. The ride across takes about 7-10 minutes and in 1996 the cost was equivalent to about 12 Cents American. Seating is random as people scurry down to the boats and jump on the nearest one, sometimes jumping across two or three of them to get to the one they want. On our first trip across the creek, we seated ourselves and were ready to go when the boat driver came back to where we were seated and began to holler at the man seated next to Soonja. We had no idea of what was happening and wondered if we had done something wrong. Seats were then rearranged and Soonja and I were given the last two seats on the row: she on the end, and me to her right. The problem was that a woman was not to be seated next to a man that was not her husband because they might accidentally touch each other. For our future creek crossings, we were always given the last two seats on the row. At one point we rented one of the boats for ourselves for a few hours for a complete tour of the creek. (see photo)



Lunch (almost) on an Iranian Dhow

There were many small boats that ran back and forth between Gulf countries, several which came to Dubai to drop off their wares. On one occasion we were walking along the waterfront and a gentleman on one of the boats called to us. He invited us aboard to “talk”. He was the owner/captain of this boat from Iran. He spoke enough English for us to be able to converse for a while and to jointly arrive at the conclusion that while our governments may not always see eye-to-eye, there was no reason that we could not be friends. He invited us to stay for lunch. I looked at Soonja and she gave me a barely perceptible negative head shake. The reason was noticeably clear. Lunch was sitting on the boat about to be slaughtered and prepared (see photo).



The Visa Flights

Because Soonja was only able to obtain a 90-day visa, that meant that she had to leave the UAE halfway through our stay. She had only to set foot in another country, get a passport stamp and could then return for another 90 days. As it turned out, she was not alone. There were so many foreigners in the UAE with these visas that there were two regular round-trip flights each week, from Abu Dhabi and Dubai, to Qatar. The Airport at Doha, Qatar, is quite the place today. In 1996 it was a small airport and one landed, walked about 50 meters across to the customs desk, got your passport stamped, and walked back to board the same plane back to Abu Dhabi! Total cost, about \$90 for the flight and \$27 for the passport stamp.

Improving International Relations – A special Student

About a month before we were scheduled to leave Abu Dhabi, Frank Urbancic asked me if I would be willing to tutor the daughter of his counterpart at the Russian embassy. I immediately said yes, and we arranged a meeting in the coffee shop at the Sheraton hotel. Soonja and I arrived early, and we watched as a man and a young girl approached our table. It was a bit strange because this man looked like Soonja's older brother. We learned that he was of Mongolian descent and was from Uzbekistan. Both he and his daughter spoke English quite well. She was a student at one of the international schools and was having difficulty in an economics class.

We agreed to meet a few mornings a week at, of all places, a small room inside the Russian embassy. Because it was somewhat close to our departure date, I did not have much time left to help. I met the young lady about a half dozen times and met both of them at what was to be our next to last meeting. At that time, he asked me what he needed to pay me for my services as a tutor. He insisted that I was a "professional" and should be paid for my time. I refused any compensation, but he was very insistent. I told him that what we would appreciate more than any compensation, was some authentic small token gifts, souvenirs from Uzbekistan. At our last meeting he came in with a few packages; a bottle of Russian Vodka, a box of candy, a small decorative enamel box and a traditional hat resembling a Fez. He and his daughter thanked us profusely and as we shook hands to leave, I don't know where it came from but I told him that perhaps our meetings and this small exchange would contribute something to the improvement of relations between our nations. He agreed that perhaps that could be. I found this to be a very moving experience.

Leaving Abu Dhabi

As the term drew to a close, we said our goodbyes to the people at EIT, to Michelle and Frank, and a few other people we had spent some time with. Steve was scheduled to leave the day before Christmas eve to meet his daughter in Heidelberg. We were leaving on Christmas day to return to Heidelberg as well. The flights were to depart about 1 A.M. on both nights. We said goodbye to Steve, saw him off in a taxi and were sitting in our apartment when our phone rang about an hour later. It was Steve calling

from the Airport in a bit of a panic. Due to a misunderstanding, he had overstayed his visa by about 30 days (he did not have the same six-month visa I had obtained in the states). He was being asked to pay a fine of the Dirham equivalent of almost \$1000 before he would be allowed to board his flight. Credit cards were not acceptable. We ran out to the nearest ATM and withdrew the cash, jumped in a taxi and met him shortly before his flight was scheduled to depart, handing the cash over a low wall that separated the departing passengers from the rest of us.

We noticed a rather interesting phenomenon at the airport. It requires a little bit of a back-story about the ugly side of what goes on in some of the Gulf nations as well as others as well. There were many “foreigners” in the UAE that the government considered illegals. Some had actually entered the country illegally; others had been hired to work there under what would be considered less than desirable conditions. They were housed, sometimes 8-10 per small apartment, paid low wages, and many had their passports held by their employers. They were forbidden to change employers on their own. If they left the employer that originally brought them there without permission, they were considered illegals and subject to fines and who knows what else.

While we were there the UAE government granted these people amnesty and allowed them to leave the country within a specific time period with no repercussions. Thus, the embassies, airline offices and the airport, were jam-packed with these poor folks trying to get out of the country. They were also trying to take as much “stuff” back to their families and some had large barrels filled with household items. The longest lines at the airport were the lines to pay for excess luggage. Many did not have the money to pay these fees. They would stand by the low wall I mentioned above, and their friends and countrymen would throw bills and coins over the wall to help them pay the fees. Truly a sight to behold.

Our departure was a bit calmer. We had heard that there were high fees on overweight luggage when leaving Abu Dhabi. We had the carpets we had purchased folded up in our suitcases and carry-on bags. To lighten the load, I gave all of my textbooks to the EIT “library” after convincing Jane that it was a nice thing to do and getting her to agree to replace them for me when I returned to Germany. If I had any notes that did not fill an entire

page, I cut off the excess paper. We gave lots of our clothes and shoes to the janitors who cleaned our building common areas. We still thought we might have excess weight.

We arrived at the airport rather early, an old habit I acquired from my father, walked over to the counter, and struck up a conversation with the gentleman checking the tickets and luggage. He was as most of the worker bees in the middle east, not from the UAE. We had a pleasant conversation about the U.S., what we had been doing in the UAE and some other “small talk”. When it came time to check our bags, I kept the carry-ons (they were rather heavy). He suggested that we check them as well. I was straight up with him and told him I did not want to pay the excess baggage fees. He told us that would not be a problem. There would be no charge for us.



Closing on a somber note

We recently learned from Jane McHan that Frank Urbancic died prematurely a few years ago. He had risen in the state department to eventually be appointed Ambassador to Cyprus by President George W. Bush.

Unfortunately, for reasons that are not completely clear to me, this program in Abu Dhabi did not continue beyond the time we were there.

The only thing left to say here is Shukraan jasilaan, شكرًا جزئي , thank you, to David Glazer, Joe Arden, and Jane McHan, for making this assignment possible for us. No, I can't write in Arabic.

Aaron Gewirtz