

## **Rich and Cheryll Odendahl's Trip Report to Bahrain, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates and Oman April 2010**

Our flights to the Middle East were booked on a single reservation at Delta.com, but it had been screwed up when we arrived at the airport. We spent an hour negotiating with the agents in both Detroit and Amsterdam because our flight and seat reservations were lost when KLM changed the code share flight number and didn't bother to inform Delta. We had a similar problem five years ago on a Delta/Air France code share. Persistence pays, and we eventually obtained seats but are going to have to write a letter if we hope to ever receive the frequent flyer miles.

The flight from Amsterdam to Bahrain carefully avoided Syrian and Iranian airspace, but flew smack dab down the middle of Iraq. We watched as the cities of Mosul, Baghdad and Basra slipped quietly beneath the wings, followed by the lights from the oil wells in Kuwait. This felt eerie. Bombings in these places regularly appear in the news. It seems incomprehensible that airlines would go out of their way to fly through what is still often portrayed as a war zone.

Bahrain is an island located in the Persian Gulf. It is connected to Saudi Arabia via a new 26-mile causeway. The economy is centered on oil and natural gas that fund the government and the royal family. There is great fondness for large American SUV's. Suburbans, Yukons and Escalades happily navigate the streets.



Bahrain isn't famous for much of anything. Michael Jackson lived here for awhile after being acquitted of his pedophilia charges. Large groups of foreign construction workers continue to fill in large chunks of the sea to build office buildings and luxury apartments. Crime is not tolerated, and we felt very safe wandering the streets. By day, we toured the city's historical sites and drove out to the oil fields. By night we wandered the ancient maze of shops lining narrow alleyways. Cheryll was loaned a black abaya (robe) and veil to wear for a visit to a mosque. She didn't have to wear a burqa with a full face veil, but many women were fully covered. The tour guide gave Rich an English translation of the Koran (Quran) that he's been studying.

The Bahraini people are very business-like and polite but neither attractive nor the least bit charming. Perhaps this is because the women are kept covered from head to toe and feel no motivation to make themselves up. A recent New York Times article speculated that some of the homeliness and other genetic problems can be attributed to the widespread custom of marrying members of one's extended family. Alcohol is only sold at the international hotels. Saudi businessmen crowd the bars and nightclubs, drinking heavily. The hallways are patrolled by scantily clad Asian women, scouting for men who are perhaps tired of waking up next to their wife/cousin. The punishment for drinking in Saudi Arabia is months in jail and a flogging, so the men come here to party with no fear of retribution. After a few drinks, they were ready to go! Sorry that we can't provide any more details. What happens in Bahrain, stays in Bahrain.

Cheryll was one of only three women on our sold-out flight to Doha, the capital of Qatar. Apparently Middle-Eastern women don't feel much need for air travel. They do drive, and we were concerned about how well they could see through the eye slits of their veils. On arrival, the Immigration Officer said, "Give me your credit card." Uh, OK. We complied and were charged 200 Qatar riyals or about \$57 for tourist visas. No signature was required.

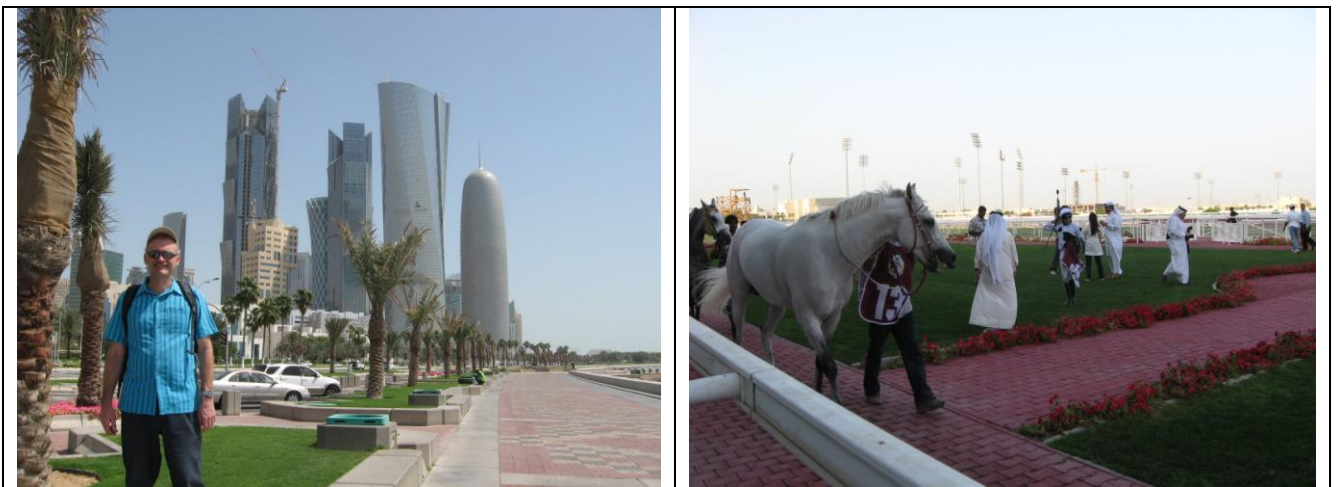


If you ever wondered what happened to the money when you fill your car's tank with gas, Qatar is the answer. Qatar is a hundred-mile long peninsula the juts out of the north coast of Saudi Arabia. The whole country is swimming in oil and natural gas money. The per-capita income is estimated to exceed \$100,000. Some economists believe that this is the richest country in the world. There are huge public works projects everywhere. They have torn down the souq and replaced it with something so sterile and perfect that it feels more like Disney World than an ancient Arabic market. The excellent roads are crowded by a mix of exotic sports cars mixed in with Hummers and other large SUV's. Regrettably, Toyota Land Cruisers are the number one vehicle of choice for a Qatari Sheikh (rhymes with "bake"). The bay is full of jet skis and sport boats wildly driven by Qatari youth with more money than common sense. Gasoline is about 80 cents/gallon.

Most other prices are equivalent to those in the USA. Except for alcohol. For the privilege of entering the smoky lounge of a Swiss-owned hotel, we had to first surrender our passports to the security guard. The place was populated by a bunch of chain-smoking expatriate professionals drinking eleven-dollar beers. Cheryll settled for beer

after she couldn't bring herself to order a \$25 Long Island Iced Tea. The high prices on alcohol are obviously a not-so-subtle form of jizya; the Koran prescribes a tax on non-Muslims who live in an Islamic state<sup>1</sup>. And by the way, Cheryll was the only woman in the bar.

The building boom in Doha has gone completely over the top. The business district has over sixty skyscrapers taller than forty stories including what is probably the world's largest phallic symbol. We have no idea why a country with little more than a million people would need this much high-rise office space. Most of the buildings are sitting vacant. There are huge sports complexes and a brand new grand prix race track. One mall has a rollercoaster, skating rink and, just like Vegas, a Venetian canal. Our friend Ron did the geological work on the massive new shipping port being built south of the city.



It was not camel racing season, so Thursday evening, we went to the weekly horse races. We circled the place and were baffled when we couldn't find the betting windows. In the snack bar we met a horse trainer from South Africa who explained how it all works. Unlike anywhere else in the world, there is no betting allowed and admission to the manicured facility was free. The King puts up millions of dollars each year for prizes. The various Sheiks own the horses. They compete for \$10,000 for each of the eight races on Thursdays. We suspect that the horse owners are the same guys competing to outdo each other to build the largest skyscrapers downtown.

The Qatari high standard of living is made possible by a large population of foreign workers who wait tables, clean rooms, pick up garbage and labor on the massive construction projects. In fact, Qatar's citizens only make up 20% of the population. That means that for every native Qatari, there are four foreign workers. Most of them are men, and Qatar's population is over 75% male. Foreign laborers typically pay over \$1000 to obtain a two-year work visa and a plane ticket. Their passports are routinely

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<sup>1</sup> The Jizya was mandated by the Quran Surah 9, verse 29: Fight those who believe not in Allah nor the Last Day, nor hold forbidden that which hath been forbidden by Allah and His Messenger, nor acknowledge the religion of Truth, (even if they are) of the People of the Book, until they pay the Jizyah with willing submission, and feel themselves subdued.



confiscated by their employers upon arrival. Most earn a dollar or so per hour. They are not allowed to leave until their employers issue a letter of satisfaction. Some activists argue that they are effectively indentured servants.

The construction continues as fast as the oil and natural gas flow, but oil has dropped from almost \$150/barrel in 2008 to around \$80 today. Consequently, the construction boom has slowed somewhat and many workers have been laid off. An interesting side effect of the economic contraction is that thousands of cars have been abandoned at airports across the Middle East. When skilled tradesmen lose their jobs and return home to Pakistan, India, Bangladesh or Nepal, they typically park their mortgaged cars at the airport and leave the keys in the ignition; never to return. Defaulting on a loan in Qatar brings a stiff jail sentence, so returning your car to the lender is not an attractive option.



On April 1<sup>st</sup>, we rode a bus to Al Khor, a seaside town an hour north of Doha. Naturally, Cheryll was the only woman on the bus in both directions. There we strolled along the beach and wandered through the fish market. The town seemed very prosperous, and most of the locals appear to live in large, brand-new houses. It was a warm, sunny day with a high around 90 degrees Fahrenheit. We enjoyed a frosty beer at a seaside tavern. Just kidding! April Fools! There is no beer for sale in Al Khor.

Unlike Bahrain, Qatar takes the rules very seriously. Fines are stiff, and traffic laws are obeyed to the letter. There are no hookers patrolling the hotels. The streets are uncluttered. We didn't see a single dog, much less any droppings. Foreign workers can be jailed and deported for illicit relations or getting pregnant. The foreigners may far outnumber the citizens, but it is quite clear who is in charge. The Qataris exude a clear sense of superiority<sup>2</sup>. The US State Department website says that tourist visas on arrival will no longer be available starting next month. If tourists really want to see the place, they'll have to apply for permission in advance at a Qatar embassy in their home country. It appears that with this much oil money, there is no need to encourage tourism. If you ever wondered what happened to the money when you fill your car's tank with gas, Qatar is the answer.

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<sup>2</sup> This was written shortly before a Qatari diplomat was arrested on a plane from Washington to Denver after sneaking a smoke in the lavatory and then joking that he was in there to ignite his shoes.

Our final stay was in Dubai, one of the seven United Arab Emirates. It's a huge city sprawled across a barren section of the desert. Only about a third of the economy is based on oil, so the government is using other means to attract investment and business. And what a business there is! They've built a series of luxury residences on man-made islands shaped like a palm tree in the Persian Gulf. It's capped by a luxury Atlantis resort and water park with rooms starting at \$400/night. The Burj Khalifa was recently completed. It's the world's tallest building with 200+ stories. The Burj Al Arab (Arabian Tower) claims to be the world's only "seven-star" hotel. It costs \$70 just to walk into the lobby. That's about the same as we paid for our basic, but entirely adequate room at the Ibis Al Rigga. We settled for pictures of the Burj Al Arab from the beach.



Rich's favorite stop was at the Mall of the Emirates. But wait; "Isn't Cheryll the mall rat of the Odendahl family?" you ask. Yes, Cheryll is the shopaholic, but the Mall of the Emirates is no ordinary mall. In addition to 450 stores, it houses a ski area boasting the world's only indoor "black diamond" run. It was 100 degrees outside, but the ski conditions inside were perfect. It only took a few runs to master the one-minute trip down the groomed slopes, but Rich especially enjoyed the six-minute chairlift conversations on the way up. Between runs, he rode with some expatriate schoolgirls from Great Britain, a lad on school holiday from Ireland, a family from Australia, teachers from both Germany and Canada, an Iranian businessman, a Dutch engineer engaged in oil exploration in Oman, and a boy from Afghanistan who was in town for his uncle's wedding. Apparently, the uncle owns a villa on the palm islands, having made his fortune in an Afghan gem mine. Everybody was very friendly. This was such a fascinating slice of just what drives Dubai.

We've previously reported that the food in China is quite unlike what is found in Chinese restaurants in the US. We made similar observations of Italian food in Italy versus America. This was not the case here. The food was the same as that served by Middle Eastern restaurants at home. Lebanese food is the most popular, and we enjoyed kebabs, shawarma and falafel. The fresh-baked Iranian bread was the best.



Dubai was in some ways the most tolerant of the areas that we visited. Ladies were wearing shorts and sleeveless tops. Women are seated in a special reserved section on the buses and in the brand-new metro system. Hookers hung out in the hotel bars and on the street, but drinking in the open and public displays of affection are definitely illegal. It was hilarious watching the professional ladies attempt to pick up the Sheiks without engaging in anything that could be considered overt solicitation.

Dubai has taken on more construction than it can afford. We guess that they figured building skyscrapers would make it the financial capital of the Middle East. Build them and they will come! Maybe. The economy is just not expanding as rapidly as had been hoped. Countless office and apartment buildings sit vacant, and the previously skyrocketing real estate prices are starting to moderate. The holders of the sub-prime loans will probably end up taking a beating. Or perhaps the oil will have to flow for a few more years to pay off the mortgages. We can hardly wait to find out what gas costs when we get home! These new offices and apartments may be empty for decades.

We made several side trips from Dubai. One day we drove two hours across the mountains and crossed the border into Oman (counts as another country visited). There we went for a cruise on a traditional wooden dhow along the rugged coast with stops for swimming and snorkeling. Another day we rode the public bus for two hours to the capital of Abu Dhabi. Abu Dhabi is similarly pristine, and has the third largest mosque in the world. It can accommodate 41,000 worshippers for prayers. Abu Dhabi is not, however, suffering from the same delusions of grandeur that you'll find in Dubai. One evening we went four-wheeling through the sand dunes to watch the sunset and enjoy a barbecue dinner, a belly dancer and what will probably be both our first and last camel ride.

Our last day, we went up to the recently opened observation deck at the Burj Khalifa to enjoy the panorama. We bought some overpriced beers to toast the conclusion of a fascinating vacation. Just kidding! There is no alcohol for sale at the Burj Khalifa. We can't believe you fell for that twice. Before the trip, our friend Kathy suggested that we have our picture taken in front of the Burj Khalifa holding beers and making out. We



chickened out after reading in a local newspaper that a British couple has lost the appeal to their conviction for kissing in public. They are to be fined \$272, spend a month in jail, and then be deported. Thanks Kathy.



We were spoiled on this trip because everything was so clean, safe and honest. It was a real treat to be able to get into a cheap taxi and know that we would be taken where we wanted to go without having to negotiate. We'll miss the excellent roads and the free public toilets that are cleaned after every use. It was a good trip, but we see little reason to return to this part of the world. Unless, of course, we feel an urge to visit the money that we spend to fill our gas tanks. Then we'll go back to Qatar.

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**8 The Dubai Mall**  
*— The world's premier lifestyle and shopping destination*

With over 1,200 retail outlets, 2 department stores - Galeries Lafayette and Bloomingdale's, a Fashion Avenue dedicated to haute couture and a dazzling 220-store indoor Gold Souk, The Dubai Mall is the world's largest mall.

It is host to several world-class attractions including the Guinness World Record-holding Dubai Aquarium & Underwater Zoo, an Olympic-size ice-rink, a SEGA theme park and KidZania, an 'edu-tainment' role-playing concept for children. The Dubai Mall has over 160 global dining options, and is adjoined by the 5-star The Address Dubai Mall.

