

December 2012

### **Travels with Anzie – Dubai – November, 2010**

When someone mentions Dubai, what comes to mind? Before our visit my images involved tall buildings, sand, dry heat, Arabs with beards, and oil wells. Reality altered these pictures quite a bit.

The reason for our visit was two-fold. Brother Tim and his wife, Connie, have lived there for almost six years. Tim teaches Landscape Architecture at the American University in Sharja, the emirate adjacent to Dubai. Secondly, our good friends Sylvia and Axel are in their second year working in Afghanistan. We planned to meet them and share an apartment in Dubai. But first, our trip to Dubai.

#### **Schiphol Airport**

Neither Anzie nor I can sleep much on airplanes. Ours was a 24-hour journey: eight hours to Amsterdam, eight hours to Dubai, a six-hour layover in Amsterdam's Schiphol airport. Schiphol is an amazing transportation hub. It includes at least one hotel, several shopping malls, a museum, a library, a chapel ( The sign says "Meditation Center"), several restaurants.... You can buy a car there! We discovered a rather large room on the second floor where we could sleep. It consisted of many chaise lounges facing a movie screen, on which played a silent travelogue of the Netherlands. The lights were dim. Everyone was quiet. We probably slept for an hour.

After our nap, we commenced to wander. We visited the Schiphol branch of the famous Rijks Museum. Not as interesting as its big brother: The exhibition? Paintings of cows.

We discovered a massage salon that contained a machine we had never seen before. It consisted of a large, pod-shaped plastic capsule. A young man was lying horizontally inside it with his head resting on a padded ring outside one end. His fully-clothed body was beneath a thin, flexible plastic sheet. When the machine started up, a row of powerful water jets hit the outside of the plastic sheet, and slowly moved from his feet, up his legs, his buttocks, back, all the way to his neck. They then reversed direction. Anzie bought ten minutes for ten Euros. She came out of it feeling wonderful.

#### **Dubai**

We arrived at midnight, Dubai time. One would assume that the airport would be pretty much deserted at that hour. Not so. The lines at Customs must have contained 200 people. The TV monitor overhead showed the upcoming flight arrivals – a flight every 15 minutes at least for the next two hours.

The customs officials looked sharp in their white headdresses and white robes with mandarin collars. Anzie always tries to schmooze with the customs officials. It didn't work with these guys. Strictly business.

I was worried that the Duty Free Shop would be closed at this wee hour. Not so. It was thriving. We had agreed with Axel and Sylvia that each of us would buy some happy-making liquid on the way through the airport. It's the only place a tourist can buy the stuff in the Emirates, except by the drink in the hotels.

Brother Tim met us at the terminal exit. It was wonderful to see him! We hadn't seen each other since Mom's funeral in November, 2008. Tim took us to his digs at the American University in Sharja. We entered the University property via the main entrance. We then traveled two kms. along a lighted boulevard. The median and both sides are a flowered garden that replicates the Tuileries in Paris, except for the palms. To think that this was all desert only ten years ago.

We passed the Women's University, the Medical School, the Men's University, before we reached the American U. All of the buildings are white and graced with minarets, arches and other Byzantine décor. Connie and Tim reside in a three-bedroom town house across the street from the School of Architecture, where Tim teaches.

Tim took us on a tour of the campus. Except for the headscarves on the women, the students dress like any you would see on an American campus. The women wear tight jeans; the men wear plaid Bermuda shorts; everyone wears sneakers. As for facilities, the students lack for little. Tim's School of Landscape Architecture offers the latest in computer technology. The Student Union offers three restaurants: Burger King, Subway and a cafeteria that offers a nice variety of quality cuisine. We dined there one evening. It was delicious. We were especially struck by the hummus; it was whipped to a delightfully creamy consistency. The campus also includes a huge sports center with a fitness center, basketball court and an indoor Olympic-size pool. Just across the road from their house lies an outdoor swimming club.

I noted a sign in the men's room that warned against nudity. Apparently Tim had something to do with it. Shortly after his arrival on campus, Tim was taking a shower there *au naturel*. The next day he was called into the chancellor's office. The chancellor cautioned him to respect the Muslim restriction against public nudity. The Arabs take public baths with shorts on.

Tim's school is quite a success story. It began six years ago with him teaching one course. It has now become a minor offering several courses, soon to become a major. Connie has developed a following with her yoga classes.

The next evening the four of us ate a wonderful meal poolside at an equestrian club outside of Dubai. Tim then drove into Dubai to our apartment building on the Dubai Marina. Amazingly, Axel arrived at the same time we did. Together we ascended to our apartment on the 33<sup>rd</sup> floor of this 54-story building. We were surrounded by buildings

of the same height or higher. Recently we were struck by the contrast when we visited the top of the 47-story Latin American Tower in Mexico City – the tallest building in all of Latin America.

Tim told us that, when he arrived six years ago, these buildings around the Marina were nothing but skeletons surrounded by sand. Some of the skyscrapers are still what they call “see-through” buildings, a.k.a., empty. One of the most impressive is helix-shaped. It looks like a tall, twisted deck of cards. Our apartment overlooks a golf course, a metro and a highway cloverleaf.

Just steps away along the marina lie several restaurants offering a variety of cuisines plus a grocery store, Spinneys. Spinneys caters to western tastes. They also sell pork products out of a very inconspicuous, curtained back room. Upon entering I expected to see products either salacious or illegal for sale instead of chops and sausages.

The next day Axel went to the airport to pick up Sylvia. We took a taxi to the Dubai Museum where we met Tim. The three of us walked over to the Dubai Creek. We encountered huge crowds of men all standing on line in these narrow alleys. As it was Friday it was temple day for the eastern religions, Muslim and Hindu. It was also Diwali, an important Hindu and Sikh religious holiday. So, all these men were lined up to visit either the mosque or the temples. Nearby the temples were tremendous collections of shoes. One doesn't enter the temple shod.

We finally reached the Creek, and boarded one of the ancient wooden open motor boats for the ten-minute crossing. When we reached the opposite bank we noted the number of boats rafted together and the amazing amount of supplies that were overloading the docks. The ships were Iranian, as Tim could determine by their construction.

We then entered the Souk, which is a series of souks banded together according to product. The spice souk is a feast for the nose as well as the eyes. We bought a quantity of saffron for next to nothing, compared to our local Market Basket. All of the souks were quiet, since everyone was at temple or mosque. We rounded a corner and what should we come upon?: a Kennedy fire hydrant! Only Allah knows how they would get a fire truck close enough to hook up to it in the middle of the souk. Perhaps they hook hoses directly to the hydrant. Who knows?

Next was the gold souk, the largest in the world. Never will you see so many jewelry shops selling pretty much the same thing.

We continued our wanderings through the souks until it was time for lunch. Tim took us to the top of the Hilton(?) where we celebrated Connie's birthday. And what a celebration it was. We dined on a sumptuous buffet in a rotating restaurant that overlooked downtown Dubai, the Creek, the Gulf, the Palm Island, the islands built in the shape of the world map (So far only Antarctica and Australia are seeing any construction), and another huge uncompleted project that had moved millions of tons of sand into the Gulf for a real estate development. We were joined by Axel and Sylvia and

two other couples, fellow faculty members of Tim's. We expected this to be "dutch treat", and were overwhelmed when Tim treated us all.

The rest of the week was a blur of highlights:

- Started each day with a workout and a swim at the fifth floor Health Club, surrounded by a surreal landscape of skyscrapers that seemed to loom over us.
- Visit to Atlantis, the hotel resort on the tip of the Palm Island. You've probably seen photos of this island, which is in the shape of a Palm Tree. Each of the fronds is a housing development covered with multi-million dollar homes. Legend has it that several artifacts from the ancient Lost City of Atlantis were discovered during the excavation. Some of these precious objects are currently for sale in the hotel gift shop.
- 1 ½ hour water taxi ride from the Dubai Marina to Dubai Creek. Axel, Anzie and I cruised through the Marina, out past the beach resort hotels, past the Palm Island and the Atlantis, right up to the base of the **Burj Al Arab**. I recall the shots of Tiger Woods hitting golf balls off the helipad over 200 ft. above the ground. This hotel is self-designated as seven-star, even though nothing above five stars exists. Since rooms go for as much as \$7000. per night, it should be extra-special. It was the tallest building in the world from 1999 until just last year, when the **Burj al Khalifa** was finished nearby.

Interesting story here: Sheik Moctoum, aka Sheik Mo, and his family run pretty much everything in Dubai. He was overseeing the construction of the new tallest building above, which was to be named the Burj Al Dubai, when the downturn in the world economy hit Dubai. He needed \$60 million to complete the project. Seeing no alternative, he went to see Sheik Khalifa, the head of Abu Dhabi. Now, Sheik Khalifa and the rest of the Abu Dhabians had been sitting on the sidelines for several years as upstart Dubai captured all the news with its incredible, fantastical real estate growth. We can't imagine that the two sheiks met on exactly friendly terms. At any rate, Sheik Mo got his \$60 million on undisclosed terms, except for one. The new tallest building in the world was named after the chief of Abu Dhabi.

- At the foot of the Burj al Khalifa stands the world's largest computerized fountain. It covers a small man-made lake. Designed by WET of Los Angeles, the same company that designed the famed Bellagio fountains in Las Vegas, it is absolutely over the top. The specially designed "shooter" fountains shoot water 200 ft. into the air. The streams undulate with a decidedly Arabic flair – like a belly dancer. The recorded music, along with the synchronized strobes on the Burj make it a not-to-be-missed sound, water and light spectacular.
- The fountain lies between the Burj al Khalifa and the **Dubai Mall**. Covering 440,000 sq. ft. and containing 1200 stores, it is the world's largest indoor mall. It

also contains a very large aquarium. Where else in the world can you shop under the watchful eyes of a Tiger Shark? You'll find no Marshalls or TJ Maxx here. If your tastes are more in line with Gucci, Cartier and Tiffany, this is your kind of place. Of course, you'll also find Subway, McDonalds and just about every other fast-food franchise known to the U.S. consumer.

In the world of “-est” Dubai has taken over from Texas. It's got the tallest, the largest, the mostest of many things. Could it be the proverbial “flash in the pan”? Brother Tim suggests that it could all be history within thirty years. Why? The answer is water. Dubai gets all of its fresh water through desalinization. The resultant salt is poured back into the Gulf. Over the years the salinity of the Gulf has increased alarmingly. The Palm Island gives evidence: the greenery that edges the “fronds” has turned brown. Water from aquifers? The level of aquifers have decreased dramatically. Recently DEWA, the local water authority announced the construction of major reservoirs. However, the announcement makes no mention of water sources from which to supply the reservoirs.

Oil was discovered in Dubai only in the 1960's. Before that the emirate relied on pearls, fish and the port for income. The oil is pretty much depleted. Now Dubai's GNP is tourist-based. Without water, the future is bleak. Let's see how they resolve this conundrum.

Thank you, Connie and Tim, for being such wonderful hosts.

Love to all,

Chuck & Anzie

P.S. – Please check out our slide show attached.