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## Letter from the Persian Gulf: Faculty Development in Dubai

Anna Lisa Ohm

*College of Saint Benedict/Saint John's University, loh@csbsju.edu*

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## Letter from the Persian Gulf: Faculty Development in Dubai

Just one day into our two-week faculty development sojourn in the United Arab Emirates, our four-member-strong CSB/SJU academic/administrative team saw the writing on the ... Monopoly board.

The Parker Brothers' popular real estate trading game seemed, indeed, the best way to describe the energy, tension and excitement of the fast-paced business and investment whirlwind of Dubai, our first stop among the seven autonomous emirates, or sheikdoms, of this young Arabic nation on the Persian Gulf.

We dubbed our real-life game "Do-buy" in recognition of the emirate's frenetic short-order development from a series of scattered tribal desert villages to flourishing modern urban centers casting attractive shadows in the global marketplace. Remember the board game, by comparison, in which each player, starting at "GO," feverishly tries to accumulate the most properties and collect the highest rents and dividends with every circumnavigation of the board?

Monopoly's famed Boardwalk fades, however, in the real-life glow of Dubai's Jumeirah Road fronting the Persian Gulf where luxury hotels like the Burj Al Arab, the world's only seven-star hotel, rises like a gigantic sailing yacht just 100 meters offshore. Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie vacationed happily there at a reported \$14,000 a night — sans paparazzi. Tourists curious to see the Burj and have a cup of tea there must make reservations five days in advance, pass security controls, and pay \$40 each.

The tea service is British, of course, which includes a light meal of delicate sandwiches and mini-pastries. British influence in this part of the Gulf is historically strong, which explains the tea, the close connections with India, and numerous British English terms odd to American ears, such as "carriageway" (freeway), signage announcing a "height gantry" (clearance) and "speed humps."

The "chance" card you might be lucky to pick here in the desert could include a turn at Ski Dubai, an indoor skiing and sledding hill open year-round in the upscale Mall of the Emirates; a seat at the Dubai World Cup, the richest horse-race event in the world (no betting allowed); or a delicious meal in an Indian, Persian, Lebanese, or

other international restaurant. You might also “advance” on another card to the nearest taxi stand for a reasonably-priced ride back to your hotel — in a pink-and-white model vehicle for ladies only, if you qualify.

The mind-boggling pace of development in Dubai leaves nationals and visitors alike in giddy disbelief, as if flying on a magic carpet over a life-size game board. But Dubai is no game. The staggering amount of new construction — offices, condos, university campuses, medical complexes, media centers, sports facilities, and recreational and tourist facilities — is serious business in the oil-rich UAE, bringing investment opportunities that are turning the world’s attention to this small, ancient Arab state.

Recognizing, however, that oil might run out, the UAE is pushing tourism and trade. Dubai has become a leading tourist destination and logistics hub and the regional headquarters of some of the world’s largest companies, and it is fast becoming a financial center and global education resource.

## Historical Trading Center

Since 16<sup>th</sup>-century Italian seafarers reported on the lucrative pearl market in Dubai, the emirate has been recognized as a trading center and is generally open to the international community. Instead of an income tax, luxury taxes, and utility bills, Dubai offers tax-free zones, duty-free ports and plenty of office space and upscale housing. Halliburton, the giant U.S. company with operations in nearly 70 countries, couldn’t resist the magnetic pull of this “Arab boomtown where free-market capitalism has been paired with some of the world’s most liberal tax, investment and residency laws” (Krane), and announced in March 2007 it was moving its corporate headquarters there.

UAE infrastructure is increasing at an astonishing pace to meet the demand. Dubai already has the world’s largest man-made port, Jebel Ali Port, and the world’s tallest hotel, the Burj Al Arab, and land-filled islands in the shape of palm trees are being created offshore in the Gulf. The world’s tallest office building is still under construction here, the world’s second largest mosque is nearing completion in the neighboring emirate of Abu Dhabi, and construction on the world’s largest theme park, Dubailand, started this year.

A light rail line between Dubai and the UAE capital, Abu Dhabi, is under construction, and hotels, houses, and condos are sprouting up inland as well as on the coast. Cell phone coverage in the whole of the UAE, meanwhile, is 125 percent. One visitor compared the glitz and glamour of Dubai to Las Vegas, and no one — especially the global economy players — wants to be left out of the game.

The seven UAE emirates, Abu Dhabi, Dubai, Sharjah, Ajman, Umm Al Quwain, Ras Al Kaimah, and Fugairah, have been united only since 1971. Our faculty development trip took us to Dubai, Abu Dhabi and Sharjah, and individual group members took brief jaunts into Ajman and just across the border into the state of Oman. The UAE abuts the waters of the Persian Gulf and the Gulf of Oman and shares an extensive border with Oman and Saudi Arabia, the latter frontier marked on the map as an “undemarcated boundary.”

The country is a region of contrasts, from the inland deserts and quiet oases of date palms (numbering more than 40 million) to bustling urban coastal communities and busy port cities. The temperatures rise in June to 115 degrees and reach even higher in July and August, and humidity surpasses 90 percent. Luxurious air-conditioned shopping malls, indoor ski slopes, ice skating rinks, and cooling water parks offer relief from the summer heat for everyone, including American military personnel on R&R from Iraq and Afghanistan and regional and international tourists.

While the UAE population of 4.2 million handily manages over 15 million visitors per year, the real surprise is that only 20 percent of the total population comprises locals, called nationals or Emiratis. (In Dubai, only 7 percent of the residents have Emirati citizenship). The other 80 percent of the country’s population is made up of so-called expats (expatriates), or imported labor on three-year contracts working in every level of the economy. Most are men, generally employed in construction, who come principally from India, Pakistan, the Philippines, Malaysia, Iran, Sri Lanka, and other African and Middle Eastern countries, and from elsewhere around the world.

That tableau, at first blush, was all too apparent for me as I walked into our hotel breakfast room the first morning and offered a cheery greeting in the Tunisian Arabic I had learned during my Peace Corps days. The two Filipino waitpersons on hand stared at me blankly, their *lingua franca* — and that of most foreign workers in the commercial sectors serving tourists and expats — being English. Indeed, an American Fulbright scholar there, whose research project is UAE festivals



A wind tower in the Bastakia Quarter east of Dubai Creek in old Dubai. Open at the top on all four sides, wind towers caught the prevailing breezes and funneled the air down into the house for cooling the rooms below. Such wind towers were common along the coast of Iran. (Photo by Anna Lisa Ohm)

and celebrations, lamented that her Arabic was worse than when she first arrived. She said she had studied Arabic intensely in the States but, like us, encountered mostly non-Arabic speakers in the emirates.

One expat observed that she could deduce with fair accuracy a worker's job from his or her country of origin. She said that Indians, for example, are generally in construction or computers, Pakistanis are taxi drivers, and Filipinos hotel workers. More difficult to categorize, however, are the highly educated expat technicians, managers, and academicians who come from dozens of countries to good UAE jobs in the business, industry, service, medical, and educational economies. While the country's eventual goal is "emiratization" (i.e., to fill these middle- and upper-management positions with national employees), the UAE continues to depend largely on imported labor.

Most of that labor consists of workers in manual and service positions at various sites from five-star air-conditioned hotels to construction projects who often toil under difficult conditions. In March 2007, riots by construction workers over long hours, low pay, withheld wages, squalid labor camps, dangerous worksites, and a high suicide rate drew the attention of the international media as well as UAE authorities.

One expat assured us, however, that the situation was "like anywhere in the world," where most contractors were honorable and only a few occasionally looked the other way or were outright scoundrels. Others agreed, moreover, that despite the challenging working conditions, a three-year contract for a non-union manual labor job in the UAE was clearly better for millions of South Asians than no job at all, since most send their wages home to support their families.

On-the-job satisfaction is a great deal higher for the foreign skilled and professional workers, who generally find their working conditions favorable and the Gulf lifestyle attractive. A Canadian educator, for example, whom I first met at the University of California-Santa Barbara, has worked in Sharjah for six years, five of them at the stunningly beautiful campus of the American University in Sharjah (AUS), the only co-ed liberal arts



Campus of American University Sharjah (AUS), located in the Emirate of Sharjah. AUS, founded in 1997, is the only co-educational liberal arts institution in the Gulf Region. (Photo by Anna Lisa Ohm)

college in the entire Gulf region. Despite the pull of home and family, he envisions his future in the Gulf region, if not in India, Malaysia, China, or Japan, whose cultures have inundated Emirati life.

CSB President Mary Ann Baenninger finds the UAE a pleasant retreat on her occasional visits as a member for the past two years of AUS's board of directors. She attended a board meeting there just prior to our visit.

Another satisfied expat is Satish Gopinathan, a native of India who had worked previously for five years in California's Silicon Valley. He currently manages academic affairs at the Dubai Knowledge Village (KV), an innovative Internet academic learning center, and likes to list the advantages of life on the Gulf: secure, cosmopolitan, family friendly, easy to travel into and out of, and supportive of a business mentality in a tolerant social setting. He notes further that religious tolerance is growing and that the media, while not totally independent, are not as tightly restricted as in other Islamic countries.

In Gopinathan's estimation, the only other Asian city with comparable characteristics — excluding as well his fast-developing native India — is booming Singapore. The Indian economy, he said, while generally robust, is limited by the heavy-handed demands of the state bureaucracy. Gopinathan's high marks for the UAE are clearly justified by the presence of the Knowledge Village center in Dubai where he works. The very entrance to the facility resonates institutional success and, by extension, the development of Dubai as a whole. Visitors step onto a red carpet leading to the entrance that reads, "Red carpet / No red tape / Everyone is a VIP / from KV" — and KV delivers on that mission statement.

The center reinvented itself from an online university to a blended online learning mall featuring specialized training and in the process learned how to negotiate with academics. Its success encouraged Dubai to begin construction on the first phase of a planned International Academic City (IAC) in an attempt, according to Gopinathan, to "make the emirate an education destination." The 16 universities that have full-fledged branches (distance learning centers) at KV have moved to the IAC, where students were scheduled to begin classes in the fall of 2007. Dormitories are expected to be ready in August 2008.

## Women Pushing Outward

Elsewhere in the UAE's academic showcase sits Zayed University, a women's campus we visited in Abu Dhabi (another campus in Dubai) that was founded in 1998 and has been growing ever since. The university is considered a leading center for the advancement of women in UAE society, despite the fact that national women comprise only 13 percent of the 400 students enrolled, while the majority of enrolled students represent 50 different nations. Reflecting on those numbers, it seems that the UAE has become an "education destination."

Indeed, national college students as a whole comprise a small percentage of the country's university populations, reflecting their small numbers as well in the general society. At AUS, 25 percent of the student body is composed of nationals, while the rest come from Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Iran, and elsewhere.

For UAE women, any enrollment at all in the country's post-secondary educational system is remarkable, given Islamic strictures in general on their visible public presence. That they are well represented among UAE natives in national university programs has led at least one expat to judge that "university women [today] are gradually pushing out the walls."

Elsewhere in Islamic Emirati society, however, women generally play a more traditional social role, still trapped indoors by religious demands and conservative cultural constraints. Out of respect for that role, we and other visitors were told to "keep your shoulders and your knees covered."

Expat women, on the other hand, generally receive a "get out of jail" card in many circumstances, including their presence in the country's fashionable shopping malls where they can be seen wearing low-cut halter tops and shorts and smoking cigarettes. Emirati teenage boys also have greater social freedoms and are able to stroll the malls in black jeans and T-shirts, flashing a variety of body piercings and trendy hair styles.

For Emirati women, the distinction renders them socially invisible, especially when compared to expat women working in the highly visible service industry such as hotels, beauty salons, and retail sales. When we asked an expat who had been in the country for 10 years where the Emirati women were, she explained, "They are at home, or at the shopping mall, or at home, or at a relative's, or at home, or perhaps at the university, or at home." A former university English teacher added that the most frequent answer from Emirati girls in her classes to the question of what they did on the weekend was, "Sit with family."

When Emirati women do venture out in public, they customarily wear the national dress, a floor-length black cloak called an *abaya* [shield], and a thin black scarf, called a *shela*, that covers the hair and wraps under the chin. *Abayas* range from stylishly plain to stunningly elegant, the latter adorned by fine materials and trimmed sleeves displaying colorful designs or sparkling jewels and often distinguished by tasteful patterns on the back or front. A full-face veil, we were told, may signal either a woman's deep religious commitment — or her attempt to avoid recognition by family, neighbors, or friends. Women from especially strict Muslim families that discourage, or even prohibit, trips to the mall, for example, may not want to be recognized there.

While this national dress is readily available for purchase by tourists in shops and markets, Emiratis do not like resident expats to wear it when in the country. The dress is unofficially reserved for nationals. An Egyptian who has lived in Dubai for 20 years told us that it was flat-out impossible for an expat to become a UAE citizen.

The connection of Emirati women's identity to citizenship is rooted in the demography of the country, where nationals comprise only 20 percent of the population, and restricting the dress to UAE citizens tends to strengthen their sense of nationality. Here their identity as Muslim becomes secondary.

Males, too, use dress to signal their citizenship. Typical attire for Emirati men is a white floor-length robe (*kandoora* or *dishdasha*), a white head scarf (*gutra*), and a black cord (*agal*) around the head, all a visual projection of the power and privilege of Emirati citizens. And it's highly effective, as the following incident we witnessed reveals: As two young males in national dress were leaving a modern hotel in an inland town, we overheard the Sudanese concierge greet them with, "Good morning, boss!" When I asked him if the young men were really his bosses, he replied, eyes twinkling, "No, but they like it."

Emirati men's dress has other social ramifications as well that set them apart from the expat community. A national male dressed in a *kandoora*, for example, will not be served alcohol in any of the hotel bars that are allowed to sell such drinks. (Sharjah is the only fully "dry" emirate).

Male dress also signals an Emirati man's availability for marriage to national women, who usually marry only fellow nationals. The women are generally wary of contact with non-Emirati men. One national student told us adamantly that, in her view, expat men were impersonal fringe figures and "not men" at all. The practical effect of that feeling is to socially demasculinize nearly 80 percent of the country's current population and, ironically, render expat men as invisible to national women as those women are themselves in the general social fabric.



The dress of Emirati women who live more isolated lives in the desert hinterlands of the UAE has its traditional norms as well, although we saw few examples of it except in museums and some tourist shops. In those displays, the *burqa*, a type of face mask, is sometimes worn with the *abaya* by older women. It is made of leather or stiff linen and leaves the eyes and upper cheeks open while covering the nostrils and mouth, and may have served as protection from the desert wind, sun, sand, and from the smoke of daily cooking fires.

In another museum, we saw a different kind of *burqa*, or cap in this case, used to cover the head and eyes of a hunting falcon to calm and control it between flights. I couldn't resist the Western temptation to equate the purpose of both types of *burqas*.

Indeed, the outlook for women in the UAE as bigger players at the real-life game board is still gray, despite their notable advances in the country's university system where they outnumber and outperform men. During our interviews, faculty members and administrators from the U.S., UK and Canada consciously referred to the students as "girls" and "boys," citing their "immaturity, lack of experience, and dependence on their families."

Families are indeed important in the lives of young Emiratis and exert a strong influence on their decisions and actions, including their choices of academic programs on a university campus. The dean of arts and sciences at AUS, a Minnesotan who taught biology in the States for 30 years, said that engineering is the primary field families choose for their sons, making it a vital part of the AUS curriculum for recruiting purposes. He said career counseling and academic advising at AUS are fairly new concepts.

Zayed University, on the other hand, has a full-time career counselor, who cites some success for women. More than 60 percent of the campus' women graduates are currently employed, most in elementary education, service and sales, and resistance to working in banking (Islam prohibits usury) is beginning to crack.

There are signs as well of cracks elsewhere in the more traditional life of Emirati society, particularly in the institution of marriage, albeit in the context of mixed messages. Consider, for example, one expat told us, the cases of a 24-year-old single female, who is considered a spinster; a 27-year-old university student, who just completed an M.A. degree and is entering the job market after turning down seven marriage proposals; and a 23-year-old university graduate who is giving up her studies to marry a man whom she has never met.

An increase in the number of national women remaining unmarried was substantial enough to attract the UAE's attention 20 years ago. One reason given was the gap in

the educational level between men and women. While young men were often sent abroad for a university education, women previously had little schooling or remained illiterate, having received no schooling at all. To remedy the education gap, the government began to establish national institutions of higher education for women.

Also cited as a cause of the low marriage rate for Emirati women was the expense of a dowry and wedding celebration, driving men to marry expat women whose cultures do not require a dowry. Stepping in again, the government began offering some financial assistance to young adult men and built modest government wedding halls for celebrations. A third less well-documented cause was the preference of national men for young, non-Emiratis as second wives (Islam permits up to four wives only if all are treated equally). We have no statistics for the concern about second wives, only the following example.

The beloved ruler of Dubai and UAE vice president, Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid al Maktoum, took a second, or junior, wife in 2004. His first, or senior, wife, we were told, returned from a *Haj* (pilgrimage to Mecca, one of the five pillars of Islam) more devout and unwilling to uncover (remove the head scarf) and no longer wishing to appear in public. The sheikh chose as his second wife Princess Haya, daughter of the late king of Jordan, Hussein I. She was educated in the United Kingdom, is an avid sports-woman, and appears uncovered and at ease alongside the sheikh at public functions.

## A Thousand and One Contrasts

Old and new, to be sure, but the gap is as comfortable in the UAE as a twenty-first century Emirati student reading fantastic tales from the ancient Middle-Eastern collection of *A Thousand and One Nights*. We brought a copy of that book with us to help bridge the gap, understanding more clearly in the reading the historical harmony between:

— a tattered farmer irrigating a date-palm oasis as if it were 2000 years ago who spoke six languages and had a cell phone that kept interrupting our conversation;

— a crowded spice market, or *souk*, that could have been the background for a 16th-century painting and the fata morgana beauty of the American University in Sharjah;

— the gentle warnings about taking certain photographs, and the caring attention to our every need by service personnel everywhere;

— the injunction against entering mosques, and the explanation about Islam we received at the Jumeirah Mosque in Dubai with a follow-up, no-holds-barred Q&A session;

— the captivating Bedouin at the Sheik Mohammed Center for Cultural Understanding clinging to the old desert way of life by refusing to send his children to school, and such progressive institutions as the Knowledge Village;

— the huge supermarkets in air-conditioned shopping malls where pork products in the back are marked, “Not for Muslims,” and camel milk stands alongside cow’s milk on the dairy shelves;

— temperatures above 122 degrees, and machine-made snow at Ski Dubai in the mall;

— Islamic simplicity, and one of the largest gold and diamond markets in the world;

— sandy deserts, and abundant water, 95 percent coming from desalination plants;

— and the wild enthusiasm for construction, and veiled concerns about over-building and global climate change that could wreak havoc on the coast and artificial islands.

As I reflected on those contrasts upon our group’s return to Minnesota, I became aware of another significant difference: the difference between our own down-home, Lake Wobegon lifestyle and the UAE’s effervescent dash into the first world. I had to ask myself, “Are we too quiet, too downright sleepy here in the pursuit of fishing, hunting, the Vikings, and the Twins?” And consequently, “Which Minnesota son or daughter will be the next expat living in Dubai, teaching at AUS or working at the new medical complex doing cutting-edge research on stem cells or alternative medicines?”

I find myself thinking these days that we just might be too busy playing Monopoly at the lake on a long string of rainy summer weekends while Dubai races tirelessly through the steamy desert past “GO→” collecting \$200 — again, and again ....

*Lisa Ohm is Professor of German. She undertook this faculty development trip in June 2007 with colleagues Kay Wolsborn (Political Science) and Jean Lavigne (Peace Studies) led by Kristi Kremers of the Center for International Education.*

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