

City Tourism

فندق أوشينك في خور فكان.
Hotel Oceanic in Khorfakkan.

Sharjah

An Example of Islamic-Arab Tourism Development

Sharjah - Dr. ALAA AL-HAMARNAH

By car it takes less than 30 minutes to travel from Dubai to Sharjah, but it is indeed a journey to another world. During the past 15 years, Dubai has been developing into a cosmopolitan and post-modern metropolis. This new character of the city is reflected in its international image, architecture, lifestyles and population. International tourism plays a major role in re-shaping and re-modelling Dubai.

The city is becoming a synonym for the trendiest, most modern and technically advanced, the most luxurious and sophisticated, the biggest and the tallest. The hotels of Burj al-Arab and Hydropolis, the artificial islands of the Palm and the World, the entertainment complex of Dubailand and the Dubai Tower are landmarks not only of Dubai, but also of international architecture. For cities located near this city-phenomenon, it is most difficult to develop and maintain an individual image and identity, and to sell themselves on the world's tourist markets.

The Emirate of Sharjah has succeeded in marketing itself as the most Islamic and Arabic tourist destination in the UAE. This success is based on a long-term tourist development strategy that aims, on the one hand, to increase the number of tourists and revenues, and on the other, to maintain the Islamic and Arab character of the Emirate. Sharjah benefits from its unique geographic location on two coast lines: the Arab Gulf on the east and the Arab Sea on the west. It is the only federal emirate in the UAE that has access to the both coasts. The capital, Sharjah City, is located on the east coast and is the centre of social, political, cultural, economic and tourist activities. Twenty one out of the emirates 23 hotels, are located here. Outside Sharjah City accommodation is only

available on the West coast at Hotel Oceanic in Khorfakkan and Motel Breeze in Kalba.

The Oceanic Hotel is one of the oldest in the UAE. It was built in 1974 as a part of the very first tourism development initiative in the country. Eight years later, the first five- star hotel was opened: the Sharjah Holiday Inn, which is currently managed by SAS Radisson. This real estate, owned by Kuwait, is the only upper-class Hotel in Sharjah City that combines the facilities of a beach resort with the advantages of city-business accommodation. The other two upper-class hotels, Rotana and the recently opened Millennium, are clearly city-business hotels. The primarily three- star beach hotels and resorts of the city were built in the late 70s and the 80s. Renovations and re-classifications of the beach hotels have been a permanent policy of the Department of Tourism, which was established in 1996.

The construction of more city hotels reflects the focus of tourism development, which aims to establish the Emirate as a cultural and MICE destination without ignoring the leisure and sport potentials of the beaches. The re-construction and renovation plans of the city's old downtown serve this aim as well. The comprehensive restoration plan of the old downtown area is unique in scale, form and goals for the entire Gulf region. The traditional architecture of

courtyards and towers as well as the use of coral as a construction material, give the district its specifically local Arab and Islamic character. The re-construction resulted in the establishment of the heritage and arts area of museums, multifunctional buildings, theatres, handcrafts markets, a fort, mosques etc. The traditional downtown area has been transformed into a first-grade tourist attraction and a popular venue for various cultural events. For example, the National Museum of Sharjah hosts an exceptional collection of paintings with oriental themes as well as an excellent collection of modern art complimented by the extremely successful annual theatre festival. The restoration efforts are visible on the East Coast as well, especially in the town of Kalba, where an old fort and the house of the ruler's dynasty were exquisitely renovated.

Aside from the heritage and arts areas, an Islamic-Arabic architectural style dominates the new buildings in Sharjah City. The Jamrah Market, the University City and numerous mosques mark the "new ethnic" architecture, which merges various "oriental" architectural styles and elements. The domination of this new ethnic architecture in the urban space has re-shaped the city's picture and image in a way that is diametrically opposed to the nearby futuristic urban space of Dubai. The ➤

City Tourism

renovated old buildings in Dubai's Bestakya and Shandaga quarters give the impression of an insertion into a futuristic space that seeks on one hand, to replace the post-modern city in an Arabic setting, and on the other, to round out the tourist infrastructure with "traditional oriental" elements.

The maintenance of the conservative lifestyle and Islamic values in the public sphere of Sharjah is another pillar of the tourism development strategy: the ban on alcohol, bars, night clubs, and public beaches. The mixture of the preservation of heritage and the organization of cultural events, the new ethnic architecture and the conservative lifestyle give Sharjah its special flavour and make it a successful model for the development of culturally-sensitive tourism. The Emirate has its own image and identity. Sharjah offers an Islamic-Arabic space for international tourism. Tourists coming for leisure have the opportunity to enjoy, to an extent, an Arab holiday rather than a cosmopolitan holiday in Arabia.

To cope with the general trend of tourism development in the country as well as the entire region, Sharjah has been developing other types of tourism: MICE-tourism (Meetings, Incentives, Congress and Exhibitions), sports and leisure tourism. The new International Expo is a step in further developing the MICE potential of the Emirate. The organization of the annual F1 boat race placed Sharjah on the map of internationally exclusive sport events. The launch in October 2003 of the national air carrier "Air Arabia", with its hub at Sharjah International Airport, increased the touristic competitiveness of the Emirate.

The geographical location of Sharjah City gives it the possibility, of developing one-day tourist programs and special tourist events for millions of Dubai's international tourists, and to benefit from Dubai's entertainment and shopping infrastructure by offering special programs for its



To the Heritage Area.

إلى منطقة التراث.



The Post-Modern Dubai.

دبي ما بعد الحداثة.



The fort of Kalba.

قلعة كلبه.

own tourists. On the West Coast, Khorfakkan has the potential of becoming the "Arabic" destination for the future post-modern resort in Al-Aqah. The Emirate of Fujairah is planning a first-class leisure and sports resort in Al-Aqah, about 15 km north of Khorfakkan. The first five-star hotel-resort, "Le Meridian Al-Aqah", is already in operation. The small town of Kalba, near the UAE-Omani boarder, has the potential of developing into a short-trip culture destination as well as a cheap deep-sea diving resort.

The tourist development strategy of Sharjah evinces a successful model in terms of

preserving an identity, establishing a distinct image of its own, and establishing a firm basis for economic activity. The fact that more than 400,000 tourists, spent more than one million nights here in 2003, confirms the success story of the Arabic-Islamic Emirate of Sharjah near the post-modern and cosmopolitan Dubai. ■

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