



A VISIT TO ABU DHABI

About once a month I visit Abu Dhabi, the most westerly of the Trucial States and one day in July I set off from Dubai early in the morning. It was pleasantly cool and crisp for the time of year and, since the tide was out, it was possible to drive the landrover along the beach for some miles before it was necessary to strike inland.

The drive along the beach was both interesting and beautiful. The sea was as calm as one could imagine it and the tiniest of little waves edged the shore with a silvery thread, contrasting harmoniously with the deep fresh blues and greens of the sea. A small graceful wooden boat was lying off-shore every few hundred yards and in each of them a fisherman was tidying up, attending to his nets and generally busying himself about his boat. The line of the boat with its high tapered stern shaped like a large but immovable rudder gave the impression of great antiquity and at the same time of present usefulness and the brown sometimes naked bodies of the fishermen gave life to the flat blue sea. Here and there along the shore there were small boys and girls - the girls in their long pretty dresses - in little groups and some of the boys were bathing in the sea in the shallows. The early morning sun on the scene seemed to clothe the morning with the quality of the age of Homer and the heroes - and it seemed an ageless and timeless morning, at once giving the impression of the dawn of man's history and of present vital reality.

There is a sandy plateau above the level of the beach and this has clearly in the past been under the sea, for amongst the sand there are innumerable broken shells. Here stand the square cut houses of the fisherfolk of Jamaira; their houses are made from palm fronds and have the advantage of giving shade and at the same time of allowing the breeze to percolate and cool them. Behind the houses there are gardens of date palms, where the dates are at present ripening into a warm golden brown, and rolling dunes of clean white sand.

After several miles of driving along the beach, we - my white-clad driver and I - struck inland over the dunes and between the palm gardens towards the inland Great West Road. We drove along this very dull highway, over gravel plain, over small low patches of sand studded with camel thorn, past the unimpressive series of dunes, which are grandiosely called Jebel Ali, over the salt flats and past strange shapes left in the desert by the effect of wind erosion; then over patches where the water is only an inch or two below the surface and where a thick encrustment of gleaming salt lines the ruts made by earlier vehicles.

Abu Dhabi town is on an island about 90 miles from Dubai and the first view of the island is a white tower shimmering in the distance; and on drawing closer it is seen to be a square cut fort (known as Nagta'a) guarding the causeway, which leads over to the island - this is comparatively modern innovation and only a few years ago the visitor had to drive through a shallow part of the sea in order to reach Abu Dhabi. The car approaches a check point; a sentry of the Abu Dhabi Police presents arms; he is wearing a brown-yellow headcloth (gutra) and he then leaps on to the car, either perching on the bonnet or standing like a postilion behind, and escorts the traveller to the next barrier about a hundred yards further on; other policemen on duty in the fort come out, smile and shake hands and then the barrier is raised and one is free to drive over the causeway. The sea is a deep blue all about tinged with green and it runs swiftly under the causeway; on the right standing in the water is a round tower with an access ladder leading to one of the windows; this tower is no longer used and dates from the still fairly recent days when it was considered necessary to guard the ford.



Once on the island it is not long before the town of Abu Dhabi itself appears and the first thing to meet the eye is the large square turreted and prettily crenellated white palace of the Ruler, Shaikh Shakhbut bin Sultan. It stands there looking very reminiscent of a Beau Geste fort, set amongst the palms with the red and white flag of Abu Dhabi fluttering over it. However in order to reach this potentially oil rich town one has to let the air out of the tyres to enable the landrover to cross the last few hundred yards of undulating sand, which rings the town.

The Agency there is a two storied small but modern building on the seashore and the Political Officer lives there. We settled in there before driving across the sand and between the palm trees to see the Ruler in his meglis. We halted in the yard, facing the great gate of the palace. A policeman's face under the brown yellow headress looked out of the wicket gate and on discovering that it was the 'Mu'tamad' flung the gates open. Just inside the door Shaikh Shakhbut and his brother Shaikh Zaid, who once refused a bribe from the Saudis of £3000 when the Buraimi dispute was at its height, greeted us. We walked across the inside court towards the meglis and the row of policemen in their coloured head shawls were called to attention with a clatter as we all passed. We sat down and Shaikh Shakhbut at once showed that he was in a good mood, as well he might be, having just received a moderately large sum in cash from the Chief Representative of one of the oil companies working in his state. Both the Ruler and his brother were wearing the black gold-edged cloaks - aba - which is the common dress in this part of the world over their long white robes with the little tassel at the neck, which is usual in Oman; round their waists they wore the large curved gold dagger known as the 'khanjar'. On their heads they wore the usual milk white 'gutra' and 'agal', as nearly all Arabs do nowadays.

Soon coffee was brought by the cross-eyed and rather villainous-looking coffee man, who jingled the small round coffee cups before pouring the coffee out of a large pot with a flourish and handing it to us in turn with a servile down and up scoop. After a short time we took our leave as business would not normally be appropriate on the first call. Later we went back to lunch in the palace. Coffee was served as before and then we walked across the inner court to the dining room. Lunch was set out on the floor in the usual Arab manner; mutton lying on piles of straw in a field of fresh green lines - a summer dish; roast chicken in small plates and fried onion cakes and most surprising of all blackberry tart, an innovation apparently prepared by the Bank Manager's cook. We sat on the ground and ate with our right hands and conversation flowed. After a very bonhomous lunch we returned to the meglis for further conversation and coffee. The room is spread with carpets and the chairs are upholstered alternately with red and white and blue and white cloth, an appropriate colour scheme for people who have been in treaty relations with the British since 1820. After this the Ruler accompanied us down the steps of his palace to the car and we returned to the Agency. In the evening the Ruler came to tea with the Political Officer and me and we had further conversations. Finally incense and rose water was offered and the Ruler and Zaid took their leave.

There are still very few signs in Abu Dhabi that the place is potentially oil rich despite the announcement made by Abu Dhabi Marine Areas Ltd that they intend to go into commercial production. The town consists largely of palm frond buildings - barastis - though there are a few buildings of stone, quite well built, which have recently been put up by the Shaikhs. On the shore there are a number of decrepit and derelict old boats and the market is small with very narrow streets as is usual in most markets in the Trucial States. The shops are still all very tiny. The oil company - A.D.M.A. - have built some new offices and a new house for the Chief Local Representative, with whom we dine in the evening.



The Chief Local Representatives house is well done and in the drawing room one has the first glimpse of the luxury, which oil wealth usually brings. There is at present virtually no sign of it in Abu Dhabi town, though a new town plan is being drawn up and it will be interesting to see how rapidly the advent of oil will change things. Meantime Abu Dhabi enjoys a quiet and peacefulness, which is quite refreshing after the hustle of Dubai. I would like to see both places in ten years time.

29.7.60

D.H.

HAW 10/3/45

1	2	3	4	5	6

IOR R/15/6/125

No. of Stage &
total distance.

Route

ABU DHABI.

A coastal town of about 6,000 inhabitants. There is a small fort, and the houses are mostly built of date matting though some are of masonry. There is a small bazaar, and a poor anchorage.

The water supply is from pits and wells, and is not very good. The supplies are practically nil. There is usually no cultivation, and there are very few dates. Small quantities of cloth, rice, coffee, and sugar are imported. There are also about 750 camels and 85 horses.

$\frac{1}{10}$

MAQTA'

10 miles.

Across level sand to a creek called AL MAQTA'. It is nearly 200 yards wide, and contains even at low tide 5 feet of water. In the midst of it there is a fort.

$\frac{2}{24}$

SUQ IBLIS

14 miles.

Due east over bare sandy stretches to a stony eminence consisting of an outcrop of limestone rock, in fantastic shape, above the white sand.

$\frac{3}{52}$

NAHSHILAH (water holes) 28 miles.

The same desert of sand dunes continues.

$\frac{4}{67}$

BUL HUWAIL

15 miles.

THE PRINCIPALITIES

I. ABU DHABI

This principality is the largest in area and only second in importance to Shārjah. It stretches along the coast from the creek of Ghanādhah on the N. to that of 'Odeid on the W., a distance of over 200 miles. Towards the interior the boundaries are ill defined; they are said to extend on the E. to the Bireimi oasis, and on the S. to the margin of the Ruba' el-Khāli desert. The settled population is believed to be between 10,000 and 15,000, while the Bedouins (chiefly Beni Yās and Manāsir) may number nearly 4,000. The ruling Sheikh is Hamdān ibn Zeid el-Khalifah, who succeeded his brother Tahnūn in 1912, and is described as a firm ruler, able to maintain order. During the period of anxiety following the victories of Ibn Sa'ūd of Nejd in 1913, he endeavoured to introduce arms and ammunition on the plea that the Emir might invade his territories (see above). In the same year he negotiated a truce between the Sultan of Oman and the rebel chiefs. He appears to be a worthy descendant of his predecessor Zeid ibn Khalifah, who in 1908 was the most powerful personality in Trucial Oman. The principality consists of the following districts from E. to W.: Abu Dhabi, Dhafrah (including Beinūnah and Līwah) Sabkhah Matti, Mijan, and 'Aqal, with the possible addition of Khatam. It further includes the islands of Arzanah, Dayyīnah, Dalmah, Dās, Qarnein Salāli, Yās, and Zirko.

i. *Abu Dhabi*, the 'home district', consists of undulating sandy desert, with scanty grazing and poor water-supply; there are, however, wells on or near the routes to the Bireimi oasis at *Bul Huweil*, *Masheirif*, and *Juhar*, and at *Silmīyah*, 20 miles SSE. of Abu Dhabi town. *Sūq Iblīs*, about 25 miles E. of the town, is a fantastically shaped outcrop of sandstone forming a landmark on the main Bireimi road. *Sameih*, 6 or 7 miles E. of Khōr el-Ghanādhah, is a hilly place with 7 wells of poor water used as a rendezvous by tribesmen of Abu Dhabi and Dibai when preparing for war. The only village of consequence is *Batīn* on the N. shore of the inlet of the same name, 1½ miles SW. of the nearest part of Abu Dhabi town; it consists of 130 date-branch huts belonging to the Āl Bu Maheir and Sūdān tribes; it has some date plantations with wells, and 50 pearl-boats.

The town of **Abu Dhabi** is situated on the coast, about 88 miles SW. of Shārjah, with a population of over 6,000. It extends for about 1½ miles along the shore, and consists chiefly of mat huts,

with only a few stone buildings; the Sheikh's large rectangular fort, with towers at the corners, is a little distance inland behind the town, and on the outskirts in the same direction is a bazaar of Indian traders from Tatta in Sind. There are some indifferent wells at the back of the town, and shallow pits yield water at a place 3-4 miles distant; formerly water was brought by sea from Dibai. The bazaar has about 70 shops, more than half of which are kept by Persians, and a third by Hindus. The people live almost entirely by pearl-diving and fishing, there being little cultivation, but they own more than 700 camels. About half are of the Beni Yās tribe, the remainder of various other tribes, chiefly Āl Bu Maheir, Sūdān, and Marar. The Persians number 500, the Hindus less than a hundred.

At high tide Abu Dhabi becomes an island, through the connexion of creeks and backwaters. About 10 miles inland there is a ford on the creek called *Khōr el-Maqta'*, connecting the interior of Khōr el-Batīn with the sea at a point 2 or 3 miles beyond the town. Here a fort on a sandbank in the middle of the creek commands the passage to the mainland, which can only be made on foot at low tide.

ii. *Dhafrah*, between the Persian Gulf on the N. and the Great Desert on the S., is bounded on the W. by Sabkhat Matti and the Jāfūrah desert, and on the E. by Khatam. It is a vast region containing at least five known tracts, *Līwah*, *Beinūnah*, *Qufa*, *Taff*, and *Dhafrah Proper*. *Līwah*, the most important, lies farthest inland; it is a narrow belt 175 miles long, running E. and W., and consisting of undulating white sand-dunes, with a series of more than 20 depressions, each of which contains fertile soil and supports the cultivation of a neighbouring village; water is obtained at about 12 ft. *Beinūnah* is a tract of heavy red sand or soil, with scrub and grazing, lying NW. of *Līwah*, and between it and the Gulf. *Qufa*, N. of *Līwah*, is a barren region of sandy ridges, with a few shallow wells: *Taff*, a maritime strip extending the whole length of *Dhafrah*. The tract of *Dhafrah Proper* is E. of *Beinūnah*, and resembles it in character. The inhabitants of the whole of *Dhafrah* belong to the Beni Yās and Manāsīr tribes. The remaining tracts are of less importance. iii. *Sabkhat Matti* is a coastal district W. of *Beinūnah*, extending for a distance of about 30 miles and consisting of a saline or nitrous marsh without wells or vegetation. iv. *Mijan*, W. of the preceding, is a district of stony mounds and firm pebbly tracts, with some grazing in winter, and a good many wells. v. *Aqal*, between *Mijan* and the base of the peninsula of El-Qatar, is a tract of heavy dark sand. vi. *Khatam* lies NE. of *Dhafrah Proper*,