Impressions about Dubai: A Narrative Account

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By

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The author made a personal trip to Dubai, United Arab Emirates in February of 2016, and paid visits to major landmarks of this City and a Chinese mega market. This essay is the descriptions of those attractions and her perspectives about their success.

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When the planning of our Dubai trip was at full swing, the massacre by the ISIS sympathizers in California occurred. Afterwards, many of our friends tried to dissuade us from going there. Honestly, we had the same concern in our minds. However, living in New York City many chaos infested streets and frequent mishaps during subway rides had somewhat prepared us with the ability to keep our poise in the state of panic and still get on with our lives. On a cold and windy day in February, we embarked on this journey.

Our flight was fewer than 30% filled. It was not clear to me whether this was a result of inclement weather or the topsy-turvy effects of the recent tragedy. Regardless, there was an upside of being in a flight with low occupancy, because we could rest in a “spacious” seat (without paying the price of “first class”) on an overnight long-haul flight (15 hours)! In this sense, I considered myself fortunate. A journey with a lucky start may be regarded as a good omen for the trip, isn’t it?

For recent years, Dubai never ceased to “dazzle” the world with its numerous top records. We were drawn to the 7-star "Burj Al Arab Hotel"; the world’s largest "Miracle Garden"; or the tallest free standing architecture of "Khalifa Tower." But besides the abovementioned tourist sites, what else should I know about Dubai prior to my arrival? Armed with the strength of media search and journal research, it turns out my “discovery” of Dubai went unexpectedly well. My knowledge of the region was instantly confirmed upon landing; however, my expectation and fascination were further enhanced by the sights and sounds of this magnificent city.

To be exact, Dubai is not only a city, but also one of the seven emirates of the United Arab Emirates (UAE), which gained independence from United Kingdom in 1971. The remaining six emirates are: Abu Dhabi; saga; Ajman; Fujairah; Sarjah; Ras al-Khaimah and Umm al-Qaiwain
with Abu Dhabi as the capital. UAE’s oil reserves hold the seventh place in the world, and its economies, known for its ease of doing business, ranked the 1st in 2014 in Arab world.1

In terms of area, Dubai is not the largest among the seven emirates, and its oil production accounts for below 4% of the country’s total, but its achievements in trade, technologies, and tourism tops other emirates, and has earned a respectable status among some of the most advanced cities in the world.

It was already late at night when we arrived at Dubai International Airport, so I anticipated very few arrival passengers needed to be cleared by Customs. After going through those seemingly endless corridors of conveyor belts, we came to the arrival hall. I was stunned by the sight of a huge crowd of fellow passengers, which reminded me of the scene of my hometown subway stations! I guess it is not necessary to contest the accuracy of the report “In 2015, 14 million travelers came to Dubai for sightseeing.”2

According to UAE’s government statistics, there are only 16% of its population are nationals, which means there are 7.8 million expatriates out of the 9.2 million people in that country.3 This report could be, sort of, verified by seeing the lines of people waiting for the customs officials to check their travel documents that night. There were much fewer and shorter lines marked as “for nationals”. Although the nationalities of those waiting on the numerous “foreigners” line may vary, the rules of conduct were unified and followed suit without any chaos. The officials checked everybody’s credentials thoroughly and courteously. Nevertheless, the progress of the lines seemed not moving as fast as I wished. While standing on the line, I couldn’t help but thinking that the Middle East may be full of confrontations and problems; I saw harmony and peace in Dubai, at that moment, at that airport.
Right outside the airport, I was once again awed by the length of the long queue that was orderly formed by the transportation service people waiting patiently to pick up their customers, even at 2am. That sight brought me back to the conversation I had with my travel agent in NYC who was confident about my safety when I had doubts about the late arrival time in Dubai. Despite being the very few that did not have any arrangement for land transportation, the airport staff was able to usher us quickly into a taxi to our hotel.

When calling for taxi cabs in Manhattan, I often flagged down those with Pakistani-decent drivers. After flying halfway around the world to Dubai, the first time I was in a taxi, I re-lived the same experience! However, in my opinion, this Pakistani driver spoke English more fluently than those I met in New York. Out of curiosity, I asked him how to say the English equivalent of the word “please” in Arabic. He paused for a while, then said: [You do not need to speak Arabic to be understood here. English is also our national language] I can attest to this fact. For my entire stay in Dubai, I actually did not meet a single person who did not understand English.

The taxi driver was extremely eager, along our way to the Hotel, to share what he knew about Dubai. When the car pulled into Sheikh Zayed Road on which our hotel was located, he said, [This is the heart of Dubai, as banks, trade centers, and government offices, are located along this long strip] While he was talking, my eyes had been occupied with a slew of high-rise buildings. Nevertheless, my attention was also called for numerous “work in progress” constructions in the adjacent neighborhood of those tall towers. In fact, according to a news report, massive construction projects, amounted to US$53.6 billion, are presently being executed in Dubai. 4 Certainly the preparations for hosting 2020 World Expo 5 account for a big share of those undertakings. However, there are also many unrelated expansions or renovations.
Our room was located on the sixtieth floor of a downtown hotel, so we could enjoy an excellent panoramic view of Dubai. When I looked out of the window, the gorgeous landscape of this modern city, one that’s been featured in many tour books was now appearing in front of my eyes! This moment I felt the line between reality and dream was so thin, and the feeling alone was worth the expectations about the trip. This vivid imagery, looking out from the window, also served as the “tour map” pointing to the various attractions where I will be experiencing in the subsequent days.

**Dubai Mall**

We had no plan of going shopping spree in Dubai, so the well-known Dubai Mall had not been on our list of attractions. However, when our itinerary started to roll, it was the first place we made a stop at after getting off hotel’s shuttle bus, because through the pathways in the Mall, we were able to catch Dubai Metro. Out of this necessity of transportation, we actually had to go to the Mall every time when metro was our method of transit. Then, one day we decided to take a close look at this Mall to find out whether we could figure out why this place could attract 80 million visitors in 2014.

Starting the operation in 2008 as the 2nd largest shopping mall in the world, the Dubai Mall is located at Downtown and occupies 3.77 million square feet. It boasts: 1200 stores; Fashion Avenue with the largest collection of brand names of clothing around the world; Souk of jewelry shops, traditional Arab clothing and handicraft stores, etc. Meanwhile, as a magnet for young visitors, the attractions being provided are: the world's largest "acrylic aquarium panel"; rarely seen "underwater Zoo"; Olympic sized ice rink; Gigantic dinosaur statue; a 3-D 2400-seat cinema, etc. All of the above mentioned facilities already make contributions to the tremendous amount of visitors. In addition, a huge crowd is also due to the visitors of Khalifa Tower, and
Dancing Fountain, because the lower level of the Mall is the access to those two sites, since all of them are the projects of Emaar Properties.

Burj Khalifa

It is always my hobby to visit all the tallest towers around the world, so ever since this description “330,000 cubic meters of concrete and 39,000 tons of steel rebar were used to reinforce the concrete. All of this rebar laid end to end would stretch over more than a quarter of the Earth” had met my eyes; I started to make eye witnessing its greatness my travel goal. At long last after its grand opening in 2010, I finally had a chance to stand in front of this 163-stories epic structure. Although I had visited all of its predecessors as the tallest building in the world, I was still completely taken by this masterpiece of architecture. While the cost of $1.5 billion or 22 million man-hours may sound astronomical, its achievements and flamboyance
seem to make the spending justified. This tower’s height and appearance, especially with LED line lights and laser effects at night, are already dazzling, but, in my opinion, its surrounding setups, i.e. Dubai Fountain, work wonders as adding icing to the cake and make it no comparison in the world.

**Dubai Fountain**

Water dance may not be a rare performance, but, in Dubai, it coexists with the world tallest tower, so is very unique and absolutely fantastic. Costing over US$200 million to construct, and launching in 2009, this world largest chorographical fountain, with 900 feet long, five circles, and 2 central arcs, is set on a 24-acre manmade lake, which is in front of Burj Khalifa. Several times a day, it is scheduled to dance with music or songs, through the whole lake. Besides beautiful movements, its water can spray to as high as 450 feet. It’s really amazing and immensely enjoyable to watch it.
Miracle Garden

In an arid desert land, like Dubai, it takes a miracle to nurse a garden with blooming flowers. In this sense, miracle seemed happening, because Dubai boasts the world’s largest garden with over 45 million flowers. Opening on February 14th of 2013, and costing US$ 11 million to build, this garden has the word “Miracle” on its name. Unfortunately, due to the impact of the hot weather for a great part of the year, each year it is open from November to April only.

Taking a joyful tour around the area of 72,000 square meters, I was extremely entertained by a slew of flower characters featuring: hearts; arches; pyramid; peacock; all kinds of animals; movie celebrities; icons of different cities such as: Big Apple; Eiffel tower; windmill, etc. There
are Ferrari car with a driver built by flowers; a running floral clock; a small bird house with the bird tweeting every 15 minutes; a birthday corner with today’s date being presented with flowers for those people who are celebrating birthdays in the Garden. The above sketchy descriptions are just a fraction of all the features showing in the Garden.

Categories of flowers may cover the whole spectrum of the flower universe, but there is one thread in common: I did not see a withered leaf or flower through my walk! In any garden, this kind of success is an ultimate challenge. How did Miracle Garden achieve this goal? I, as an avid gardener, was dying to know the formula. That question was my takeaway, along with a mindset of “love” “beauty” and “happiness”, when I concluded my journey of this garden.
**Burj Al Arab Hotel (Burj Al Arab)**

Having been inaugurated to the world in 1999 as one of the most expensive and exotic hotels, this ship-shaped "Burj Al Arab Hotel," was regarded as the main vehicle which put Dubai on the map of the world. Naturally, hoping to have my picture taken in front of the hotel was one of my driving forces for coming to Dubai. I lamented that when we were in Dubai, the hotel, along with its high end restaurants, was still beyond my reach, financially.

It is located in the man-made island, around one thousand feet from Jumeirah beach, and is connected to the land by a private bridge, which is reserved for Hotel’s guests and its restaurants’ customers. It has a helipad near the roof 10 so some guests can get access through helicopters. Since it is not open to the general public, its design and features remain as mysteries to me. Fortunately, I could see it afar when I looked out of the window from my hotel room. Sometimes it looked to me like a tall ship going out for sailing, and away from this popular City.
Dubai Metro

In a metropolitan city, public transportation provides the best way for people to get around. I live and work in New York City, so subway is essential for me. Therefore, it has become my habit of checking out the local public transportation, if available, wherever I traveled to. In Dubai, the next day upon our arrival, taking the prestigious Metro Link was already part of our schedules.

It is not exaggerated when using the word “prestigious” to describe this transportation system, because its milestone holds a record on the Guinness World Records. Completely driverless for a total length of 47 miles, Dubai Metro, aka RTA system, is the world’s longest fully automated transit and it is also the first urban metro in the Middle East.

Costing US$ 7.8 billion, RTA system was opened to traffic in 2009, and is divided into red and green lines. Red line, with 29 stations, runs horizontally across all the city hubs, while green line, with 20 stations, goes north-south direction and leads to the outskirts of Deira. There is an intersection between these 2 lines.

There are blue and purple lines being planned to construct, so RTA system is still expanding. Considering the short five years since its availability, this system has achieved much more than the counterparts of other countries did. Besides what was described above, another praiseworthy service is that its trains actually have special cabins for women and children only. As far as I am concerned, this kind of arrangement has not been spotted in other countries.

Dubai Creek and water taxi (Abra)

“Dubai Creek” runs northeast-southwest through the city. One end of Dubai Creek is a business district Bur Dubai; the other end is an area called Deira, and tens of thousands passengers pass this Creek every day. It represents a natural aspect of Dubai, because there are
no man-made efforts, unlike other tour sites of Dubai, to make the existence of its beauty. Strolling along the bank, or its surrounding park is another kind of enjoyment in Dubai. Besides, taking the water taxi is quite an experience.

Abra, a traditional wooden boat and is known as water taxi, is used to transport people across the Creek. One way takes 5 minutes and costs 1 AED (US 30 cents). Each boat has the capacity of 10 people. Whenever it is filled, the boat leaves, so no timetable is followed. Being convenient and inexpensive are the traits of this service.

**Dragon Mart and International City**

From my readings, these two sites are not listed in any travel books about Dubai. They called my attention when I was surfing the Internet. According to the online literature, they seemed very interesting, so we made an effort to experience these unique facilities in Dubai.

Both of them are located in the Al Warsan region. It is out of RTA loop, so we had to take a taxi. The driver was a young man from Nepal, who also spoke English fluently. According to him, he once was the resident of "International City", so, from his stories, my knowledge about these two locations was a bit enriched even before arriving there.
International City, occupying 8 million square meters, is a country-themed architecture of residences and business. For the project of residences, there are the following 12 districts: China, England, Emirates, France, Greece, Indonesia, Italy, Morocco, Persia, Russia, Spain, and Thailand, with roughly 70,000 residents. The buildings looked gorgeous, so we wished to get out of the car walking around some areas in IC, and then continue with this taxi to Dragon Mart (Not walking distance, and no shuttle service). However, everywhere was labeled as “no stopping”, and the driver could not find a parking space at all. Speaking of parking spaces, IC is one of the worse areas in Dubai, later I learned. Regretfully, we had to head to Dragon Mart without stopping, after a few rounds of circles.

Dragon Mart and Dragon Mart II, whose structures are adjacent to each other, are joint ventures of Nakeel Company and Chinamex Trade Promotion Center to make the facilities available, and they are regarded as the business project of International City.

Dragon Mart, a 1.2 km long dragon-shaped structure, opened its operation in December of 2004. A sculpture representing Chinamex logo forms the centerpiece of the fountain facing the main entrance. It spreads across 150,000 square meters, and includes showrooms, shopping areas, restaurants and warehouses. There are over 3000 manufacturers, stores in Dragon Mart, and they represent Chinese wholesalers in Dubai. It gets tens of thousands of visitors every day. The great success of operation led to the establishment of Dragon Mart II.

Occupying 175,000 square meters, Dragon Mart II opened its door on February 9, 2016 and Vice President and ruler of Dubai attended the ceremony. It has 2-storey wholesale and retail businesses with 570 shops, 250-room hotel, Cinema, a food court, Geant Store, and a parking for 4500 cars.
With these two Marts in operation, it is safe to say that they bring Chinese products and China’s investments in Dubai to fruition. It’s true that Chinese investors were the hands which rocked the cradles, behind the scene, of flourishing Dragon Mart, and China has become an important trade partner of United Arab Emirates. However, in my humble opinion, Dragon Mart would not become a real Chinatown, as being predicted, any time soon, because essential components of a Chinese community—Chinese residents and proficient use of Chinese language—seemed lacking there from my own experience.

When I loitered in those two Marts for more than half a day, I encountered very few Chinese people, either working or shopping (Most Asians were from south Asia). Whenever I intended to speak Chinese to store salespeople, they were completely lost, so I had to finish the conversations in English. I was not happy for my findings, but I have to admit that I did not do a thorough research at this aspect, and my samples and timeframe were very limited. Nevertheless, I was glad to see the Chinese enterprises thrive leaps and bounds in Dubai.
Journey adjourned and my takeaway

After a short, but very fruitful 8 days, we waved goodbye to this vibrant city, along with those friendly faces in Dubai, and concluded our explorations. The seeds for this trip were originally planted simply because of the attraction of landmarks. Most certainly those places contributed greatly to the enjoyment of this journey. I harvested, however, far more than what I expected.

It seems strange to describe the profound impact this trip had on my perspectives about immigration. As stated earlier, Dubai is comprised of a large population of foreign workers and non-natives. Those expatriates or service personnel I came to interact with in this journey provided me with different concept of immigration experience. In short, I found the attitude of the people in this land towards the opportunity to live in a wealthy and politically stable city in
the midst of a turbulent world to be extremely positive and refreshing. Those people are mostly very content with having the ability to earn a decent, but basic, living with a relatively uneventful life. This is a stark contrast to the myriad of complaints we often hear from the streets of New York City, the renowned multiethnic microcosm in America.

In comparison, the American equivalent of foreigners or expatriates, who enjoyed so much of what America could offer, seem to be living in a constant state of discontent and regret. America has one of the most generous social welfare systems in the world, but it has been misused by many disgruntled immigrants, who benefit tremendously from welfare but still hold grudge against the American society. Based on my experience in this journey to Dubai and its vicinity and some literature I read, I venture to say a great majority of people in Dubai seem to be happy and satisfied with just the easy access of transportation, food, and a comfortable living.

Such a striking difference led me to have this provocative thought: Are those of us Americans lacking the capacity to be appreciative? A constant reflection of appreciation for the good things you have gotten is what I learned most from this trip, and I really appreciate this opportunity.
Cited References