

World Cruise Part 5: Sri Lanka to Oman

The World Cruise

Part 5: Colombo, Sri Lanka to Salalah, Oman

Sea Miles Traveled this Leg: 2,763 miles

Cumulative Miles Traveled: 31,964

Sunday, March 26, 2006

Dateline: Colombo, Sri Lanka

Latitude at Colombo 6.57 degrees North, Longitude 79.51 degrees East

Today we docked at Colombo, the capital of Sri Lanka. It has had several names over the centuries including the name, Serendib, which was what the Arab traders called it. The English word, serendipity, meaning the gift of discovering pleasant or valuable things by accident, comes from this Arab name. And speaking of serendipity, the Portuguese stumbled on it by being blown off course and named it Celao, which they borrowed from the Chinese. I'm not sure what the word meant in Chinese, but I suspect it was something along the lines of "hotter than the hinges of Hell". The English came along and modified Celao to Ceylon. Once all the colonizing countries, (the last of which was England) lost interest and went back home, the island became independent in 1948. The locals stayed with the name Ceylon for a while, but then went back to the

original name which was Lanka and added the prefix Sri which means beautiful. You can see the trend here in former British Colonies – Peking to Beijing, Siam to Thailand, Burma to Myanmar, Bombay to Mumbai, and so forth.



The Pinnawela Elephant Reserve

Our plan for today is to visit an elephant orphanage at Pinnawela (pronounced Pin-ah-way-la with the accent on “way”), which is home to approximately 60 elephants who were either injured or orphaned in the wild. The government has estimated that only about 2,000 remain in the wild and they are taking steps to preserve them and their habitat. We also were to have a buffet lunch on the veranda of the River View Restaurant which overlooks the river where the elephants are taken twice a day for their baths to drink and to cool themselves off (to chill out literally). We didn’t see much of the city of Colombo since Pinnawela is 2 hours away and we had no time to dawdle, but we did see quite a bit of the countryside which is pretty much hot and steamy jungle, clinging to steep mountains, above white sandy beaches. It really is beautiful once your sunglasses unfog in the transition from the air conditioned bus to the outside air. Our guide gave us a little background on Sri Lanka en route so I’ll share the highlights here.

Sri Lanka is a multi-ethnic, multi religious island of

approximately 65,600 square kilometers (slightly smaller than Ireland) with a population of over 19 million, 72% of which is rural. It was formerly colonized by the British (wasn't everyone?) who established huge tea plantations and more or less moved in. There are still other vestiges of British colonialism here including much of the old architecture, Morris Minor taxis, and most importantly for tourism, the English language which is widely spoken. Natives of Sri Lanka are called Sinhalese, and the national languages are Sinhala and Tamil.



A local tuk-tuk

Since the British left, there has been some upheaval in the government with a rebel group who call themselves the Tamil Tigers and who want to form a separate government of their own in the northern part of the island. Consequently, there has been bloodshed from time to time, which seems to be the norm when you've got that multi-ethnic, multi-religious thing going on. Since the peace talks of 2002, things have been pretty calm here, but the Tamils are still refusing to work on the tea plantation. This caused labor problems apparently, but tea is still one of Sri Lanka's major exports. Sri Lanka is also a major exporter of gem stones, particularly rubies and sapphires and has provided "bling" to royalty for years. In fact the sapphire in Princess Diana's wedding ring came from here, as did the stones for the Queen Elizabeth II's Crown. The exchange rate is 30 Sri Lankan rupees to the

dollar, so millions of rupees must have changed hands for those two baubles.

We were treated to all sorts of strange sights en route. A common pet for locals are porcupines which we saw (I kid you not) being walked on leashes on our way to Pinnawela. Cobras and pythons are also kept by the locals, but we imagine these to be more for photo ops with tourists than for companionship. The vehicles here seem to all have names which are displayed at the top of their windshields, everything from a tuk tuk named Jesus, to a dumptruck named Amal and a cab named Hare Krishna. Commerce is everywhere, and one of the most thriving forms of it seems to be in seats salvaged from buses and sold along the roadside for furniture. It is not at all uncommon to see water buffalo, both where you expect them – in the rice paddies and where you would not – tied to a telephone pole outside a hardware store.



Main Street
Pinnawela

When we arrived in Pinnawela the elephants had already trooped down to the Maha River for their morning ablutions, so we hurried down a narrow street lined with shops to see them and what a sight it was. The river was shallow and strewn with boulders that created small waterfalls and pools. Scattered up and down the river were about 50 elephants with their mahouts wading, splashing, dunking, spraying, cavorting and in general

having a good time. About 10 of the elephants were babies which was a special treat. We expected that we would be separated from the elephants by some sort of fence, but to our delight, the mahouts



Body Search at
the River

sought us out to come up and pet their charges and have our pictures taken with them for a modest consideration of whatever you had in your pocket and were willing to part with. It was funny that they all started at \$20.00 but usually settled for \$1.00. There were so many cameras clicking away, they had trouble tracking down and collecting from everyone. We actually walked down to the river's edge with a mahout who was tending a mother and a baby maybe 2 years old and perhaps 5 feet tall. We petted the mother and the baby, fed them treats of fruit and bananas (which the locals just happened to have for sale as well) and took pictures to our hearts' content. This was definitely a highlight of the trip and such a memorable experience.



Elephants

Recess on the Maha River Pinnawela

We were amazed at how intelligent the elephants are (Call me crazy, but I swear when you look them in the eye and they look back, you know somebody's home in there). We were also impressed by how much sensitivity they have toward each other. While we were at the river gawking, we saw this demonstrated in real time. Some of the elephants that aren't considered 100% trustworthy in terms of running off (or running amok) have on a leg chain which the mahouts usually wrap around their necks so they don't step on it. But one elephant's chain had come loose from around her neck and was dragging in the water. It got



Taking a Dip
in the Maha

caught between two rocks and she couldn't get free. Another elephant saw the problem and came over and lifted the chain up and out of the crevice in the rocks where it was caught. There was also an elephant who had one of her front feet blown off by a land mine several years ago (presumably planted by the Tamil Tigers) and she's accepted by the herd who seem to more or less look after her. The elephants also take turns looking after the babies. Just downriver from the 50 elephants, locals were doing their laundry in the river. I, personally, would have been upriver of the elephants for this chore, but then it

was not my place to point this out to them.



A Stroll on
Main Street

We were supposed to have lunch, but it was time for the elephants to go back to their enclosure where their own lunch was being served, so I skipped the buffet in order to see the elephants parade through town, which proved to be quite a treat. The road to the river is quite narrow and lined with vendors selling all sorts of leather goods, carved wooden souvenirs, silk clothing, etc. They typically have this merchandise outside their shops, but when the elephants come through, preceded by a uniformed attendant cranking on a siren to warn the pedestrians to clear the street, the shopkeepers scurry around moving



An Amateur
Mahout

everything inside. Apparently elephants are prone to pilfering anything that takes their fancy along their route and are quite adept at snagging merchandise with their trunks as they

parade down the street. And of course once they have it, there is no convincing them to give it back. Gary did not skip lunch, but after I showed him the pictures, he sincerely wished he had.

After lunch we got to see the really small orphaned babies who are not yet weaned being fed their gallons and gallons of milk. There were five of them and each one more adorable than a basket full of puppies. The milk was kept in a 55 gallon drum and poured into what looked like a 2 gallon baby bottle. They get approximately 7 liters apiece 5 times a day. The baby elephant we watched threw back his head and emptied the bottle in a matter of seconds. We also had



Visiting with
Raja

the opportunity to go to the elephant enclosure and walk around with the elephants themselves which is where we met, Rajah, a 62 year old male elephant, who due to behavioral problems we assume, did not get to go to the river. He is a huge male with tusks commensurate with his size, and despite being chained, was really quite friendly so we had our picture taken with him, using the last of our dollar bills for the privilege. Rajah had been shot by a poacher several years ago and was brought to Pinnawela to be nursed back to health. They are keeping him there because with those tusks, he would again be a big target for poachers in the wild.



A Roadside Snake Charmer Performs for Tourists

We retraced our journey back to the ship with our only stop being at a local roadside market where we bought delicious fresh cashews. We are leaving Sri Lanka this evening with still much of it unexplored, so this too will have to be added to our list of places to re-visit. I am particularly intrigued by a city called Kandy where they have a temple called the Dalada Maligawa, also known as the Temple of the Tooth. Supposedly they have a religious relic there which is said to be a tooth which once belonged to Buddha in one of his many incarnations which ended in cremation. One of his teeth was supposedly rescued from the funeral pyre and brought to Kandy. Once a year they have the Esala Perahera Festival where an elaborately costumed elephant carries a replica of the shrine through the streets followed by a parade of hundreds of dancers and of elephants in a Mardi Gras/Disney Electric Light Parade like extravaganza.

Monday, March 27, 2006

Dateline: Cochin, India

Latitude at Cochin 9.58 degrees North, Longitude 76.15 degrees East



The Port of Cochin

Today we docked at the Ernakulum Wharf in Cochin, India which is the capital of the southern State of Kerala. (pronounced Care- a- la with the accent on "a" and set our clocks back half an hour. All of India is on the same time zone and since it's so large that it covers what would be two time zones, we assumed that the "half" hour is their way of compromising between east and west. Cochin still has an old fort and lot of colonial era buildings along the waterfront so it didn't take much imagination to envision ourselves in a James Conrad novel as we entered the harbor teeming with activity. Time has stood still here in more ways than one. We docked next to a freighter where they were still using nets and ancient cranes to offload cargo (no containers here). In this case it was bags of something brown, perhaps tea or coffee, which was loaded into the net by hand, and taken from the net and loaded on a truck by hand, one bag at a time.



Laides in

Saris Greet
the QE2

Since we did not dock until midmorning and we were to leave at 7:00 p.m., this is a very short visit, but one so packed with exotica (at least compared to our realm of experience), that I could go on and on. Our plan for today is to go on a tour to the backwaters of an area called Allepey. This part of India is laced with canals and streams that run for miles and miles (think bayou country in Louisiana). This is also one of the most populous areas of India and there is very little land that has no one living on it or cultivating it. India, like Sri Lanka, has rupees, but the exchange rate for the Indian Rupee is 45 to \$1.00.



Fishing Nets
of Cochin

Cochin was a key port in the spice trade between Arabia and Southeast Asia and consequently became populated with a wide range of ethnic groups and religions (always a recipe for trouble), but have somehow managed a fairly harmonious existence. The Chinese in the 14th Century introduced the trademark fishing nets of Cochin which involve a cantilevered contraption with long wooden arms that keep the nets spread out and pulleys and counter weights to raise and lower it. The Portuguese explorer Vasco de Gama came here in 1498 and many Portuguese followed and built up the port with colonial style buildings and bridges and set up ferry systems. The Dutch came

in and built up levees to create canals, which also created fingers of solid ground, and of course people quickly took up residence atop them. Two different sects of Jews settled here in two different eras, one in the 4th Century A.D. and one in the 15th Century A.D., but most of them emigrated to Israel once it was established as an independent nation after the British pulled out of Palestine in 1948. The British Empire was the last colonial power in India. As in so many other former colonies, they contributed a stable government, tea plantations, those ubiquitous Morris Minor taxis now well past their prime, driving on the left and the English language. India has 25 different languages spoken by over 200 million people each (Hindi is the most widely spoken). English has become the language to bridge the other 24, as well as the language of business and commerce.



A Dhoti
Ensemble

The women here are very brightly bejeweled and dressed in colorful saris, walking with a graceful gait as they move seemingly effortlessly down the streets, even with thirty pounds of whatever balanced on their heads. The men wear western style clothes to some extent, but many have kept to the traditional “dhoti” which is the white sheet-like wrap they wear in lieu of trousers. However, they often wear a western style collared shirt with the dhoti. It is also common to see the dhoti (normally ankle length) tucked up at the

waist to create a diaper-like pair of shorts. On special occasions men may wear a yellow or orange wrap which is called a "lungi" (Sunday best, if you will).

Many of the houses we pass are set behind walls, perhaps four feet high. Very few of these walls are free of advertising, so we think maybe the owners subsidize their monthly mortgage with a little advertising revenue. There is also a scarcity of grass in Cochin. Almost every yard has Gary's favorite landscape feature –bare dirt, with gas stations being the notable exception (we can't quite figure this one out). We were also surprised to learn that Kerala is a hotbed of Communists and has been long before Joseph McCarthy got his shorts in a wad over the Red Threat. Kerala does have elections and they do have a two party system, it's just that one of the two parties is the Communist Party. Thus it seems that Kerala, along with Cuba, is one of the few places left in the world where the hammer and sickle still proudly wave.

Billboards are a prominent feature here, particularly those advertising movies. India has a movie industry actually bigger than Hollywood in terms of volume, (1,000 movies per year) if not quality. Most of the filming is done in Mumbai (formerly Bombay) and thus it is referred to as Bollywood. The plots are very formulaic in the so called *masala* style, which translates as spice (along the lines of soap operas but without any steamy sex or bloody violence, so you may very well wonder how spicy can it be). These movies always conclude with a happy ending, which can sometimes take up to 4 hours to reach. The typical mustachioed male stars appear to be a little beefy side, resembling, I think, the Frito Bandito and the female stars all look like Penelope Cruz in a sari. Needless to say, a Bollywood production is not on our travel agenda.

We drove through Cochin in a bus that looked new and sounded old in that the brakes protested loudly at every stop and the windows rattled, and the air conditioner only occasionally emitted cool air. We were given little paper fans to cool ourselves as we drove, passing all sorts of interesting sights that had us gawking such as

– Women washing their dishes and cookware, mostly made out of tin, under faucets of running water on the curbside every few blocks

– Ragpickers sifting through garbage piles for recyclables, and we think, possibly a snack and change of clothing

– Women in perfectly clean saris working at a construction site carrying loads of bricks on their heads and hauling away dirt by the bowlful (industrial size mixing bowls), also on their heads

– A sign that says “No spitting” and a wall with a sign that says “Stick No Bill” (meaning don’t put up any Bollywood posters here) above a smoldering pile of trash (and so we wondered why it would matter if anyone spit there)

– A camel at a stoplight pulling a wooden cart full of building supplies outside the bus window looking in at the tourists

– A sidewalk store advertising glass, fruit and plywood, with the one next to it selling plastic chairs, rice and shoes.

– A small mountain of fresh coconuts being cracked by hand on a metal pipe with a wedge-shaped spike on the end. The inner coconut is placed in one pile to be processed into

coconut oil and the stuff inside the husk (called coir) is placed in another to be trundled over to a coir factory where it is made into rope and coco mats for plant baskets

– Al fresco everything – hammock weavers, brick makers, bakeries, rug sellers, used sink and toilet sellers – you name it, you can find it being made or sold out on the sidewalk



Typical Tour
Boats –
Alleppey

We were cranking our heads right and left so fast we probably would have had whiplash if the bus were going any faster. You would think with such overwhelming poverty, the people would be more or less bummed out, but this was not the case. Everywhere we went people were smiling and waving to us, talking and laughing. What is fascinating about India is that beyond the poverty and the overcrowded streets, there is a vibrancy and a diversity that's captivating. It is a truly beautiful place with tropical plants (oleander, bougainvillea, lilies, ixora, hibiscus) and trees (the royal poincianas (red-orange), the golden rain (a rich yellow) and the jacaranda (lavender) growing everywhere, but despite its beauty, it is not for the squeamish.



Alleppey
Kerala
Province

Anyway, back to the backwaters tour. Just as we arrived in the village of Alleppey, there were several loud bangs heard out on the river and one paranoid QE2 passenger wanted to know if the locals were shooting at us. The tour guide assured her that they were only testing fireworks (he called them pyrotechnics) for a celebration to be held that evening. The passenger was a little hard of hearing, so her companion repeated what the tour guide had said, only she told her, not to worry, they were only shooting fire-o-glyphics. I was still snorting into my paper fan over this one, when we boarded our boat which took us down a short canal, out



Quirky
Landscaping at
the Lake
Palace Hotel

into a lake and to a very nice hotel called the Lake Palace Resort for lunch. This was something of a shock to our system after all we had seen en route. It was air conditioned, beautifully landscaped and tastefully appointed. The best

feature in my book was the western style toilets. India doesn't have all that many places where you'd really want to go for a nature break, and in fact many only have "eastern" toilets, a.k.a., "squatty potties" (the latter is my term, not theirs) which is basically a hole in the floor, sometimes with porcelain around it, sometimes not, but never with toilet paper and never the least bit aromatic. So when we go adventuring in third world countries, I try to go into camel mode and drink very little liquid.



Canals of Kerala

After lunch we spent two truly fascinating hours cruising the canals of the backwater country. The State of Kerala has 77 rivers, many interconnected by canals, and is billed as the Venice of the East, but this is only true from a waterway perspective. Above the water it is a different world. Tiny houses line the canals, and there is vegetation, in Everglades profusion, but with Louisiana bayou sized trees that shade the canals. There are people everywhere, and again we went into gawk mode. The canals are fresh water (by that I mean they are not saltwater – they don't stay fresh for long around here).



Doing the Dishes

Everywhere you look people are washing clothes in it, washing dishes in it, washing themselves in it (no nudity here – they go in fully dressed and get their clothes and their bodies washed at the same time). Now this is just a hunch, but I don't think this land would perk for septic tanks, and there is no evidence of city provided plumbing (although the city does pipe in fresh drinking water), so we're thinking there are sanitation issues here, but since we're only visitors here, I reserved comment.



Laundry Day

The canals are used like roads with signs pointing to various communities indicating the distance and direction. We saw several villages that were 50 or more kilometers away, but which could be reached by boat via the canals. All along the way there were children playing in the canals and running along the levee after our boat like we were the Pied Piper and they were the mice. They called to us asking for ball point pens of all things, which was sort of refreshing since most of

the waifs we've encountered in other places were asking for money. Our guide told us that pen collecting and trading here is quite a fad (probably like trading baseball cards) and pens with logos from America are especially coveted.



A Luxury
Cruiser

The Allepey backwaters are also a prime vacation spot for well-to-do Indians. There are houseboats that can be rented out here by the day, week, month etc. with captain and staff. However these are far different from the houseboats on Lake Lanier. They are called *kettu vallom* and have a low-slung Chinese junk shape, but with a wide beam and shallow draft, and they are constructed of rattan, bamboo thatch, and teak wood. They vary from everything to the basic fixer-upper model to a luxurious Cleopatra's barge type model, complete with sun deck and Palladian windows. The locals use a streamlined gondola-like



A Snake Boat

utility boat they call a snake boat, which can be paddled or

for the more affluent, motorized. The locals often paddle out to the tour boats, who will throw them a line and tow them along for as long as they want (sort of hitch-hiking). When they get to where they want to go (or else the tour boat goes in a different direction than their destination), they untie themselves and resume paddling.

After our boat tour, we retraced our route, but the sights were anything but repetitious. We just had the opportunity to gawk at the opposite side of the street from on the outbound trip.

Tuesday, March 28, 2006

Dateline: Arabian Sea

Position at Noon Greenwich Mean Time (GMT) + 5 $\frac{1}{2}$, 15.39 degrees North, 74.09 degrees East

33 miles west of Karwar, India en route to Mumbai

Wisdom from the captain: The admonition to “mind your P’s and Q’s” has a nautical origin in that sailors were issued their grog in either pints or quarts. If they happened to overindulge and got rowdy, they would be admonished to curtail their drinking (i.e. mind their pints and quarts, which was shortened to P’s and Q’s.) And while sailors might request their quart beverage in this shorthand fashion, i.e. “I want a Q, please” they usually did not request a pint in the same fashion, since that might confuse things.

Today is a sea day but we were traveling much more slowly than

normal because we need to ensure we time our arrival in Mumbai (formerly Bombay) at high tide so we could get into the harbor. Cochin gave us a small dose of India, but I have a feeling that in Mumbai, we're going to get it with both barrels. We've heard it described in so many ways. One was that it's morbidly fascinating (like a car wreck) in that it's sometimes hard to watch, but you can't look away. We also heard it described as like eating a delicious piece of cake in an outhouse. I.E. It is possible to enjoy it, but you will want to hold your nose. We've also been told there are not enough words, nor ink, nor film (or in our case digital memory cards), nor time to thoroughly capture Mumbai.

We did some homework about India today, including watching a travel film, hoping to learn more before we dock in Mumbai. India has had a long history of occupation and every culture seems to have left its mark, with the British Colonization being the most recent and one of the longest lasting, starting in 1740 and only ending in 1947. As in Cochin, they were preceded by Dutch, the Portuguese, the Arabs and the Chinese, but also by a group called Aryans (not the blue eyed blond variety, but still much lighter skinned than most residents of India) who moved down to the Indian subcontinent from what is today Iran and Pakistan. Their contribution to India was the caste system, and they promptly proclaimed themselves at the top of the food chain. They were called Brahmins. The basic premise was that whatever caste you were born into, you remained there and furthermore, for males, whatever job their fathers had, they were forced to do the same job. At the bottom of the food chain were the "untouchables", who got their name from the belief that if you touched them, you would become diseased. As it turned out, a lot of the untouchables were diseased because they had all the jobs and endured the living conditions that made them susceptible to catch all the latest diseases.

Forehead dots are not caste marks as I have long believed. They were used originally to represent wisdom, the dot symbolizing a “third” eye which would allow you to see more and thus understand more. It was most fashionable among the upper castes and this I suppose generated the belief that the dot indicated upper level castes. Nowadays it is worn primarily as a fashion statement (sort of like lipstick). I have always had trouble with the aesthetics of this dot, but it always suggest a bullet wound to me, or sometimes when the dot smears (relatively few people make them permanent anymore,) they look like a less like a bullet hole and more like a severe head injury, maybe blunt force trauma.



British
Colonial
Influence at
Victoria
Station

Throughout history India was collection of separate kingdoms which happened to occupy the same subcontinent, each under the rule of a Rajah which means “king” in Hindi. When the British took over, they created the new title of Maharajah, which is a step above rajah and means great king (you know how fond the British are of the class system), which meant some kings outranked other kings. Mumbai was originally built on a series of 7 islands, but the islands were linked through land

reclamation and it became the peninsula that exists today. The name Bombay actually came from the Portuguese who called it *Bom Baía* which translates as “good bay” in their language. India is only about one-third the size of Europe, and yet its population is over 1 billion people. One in every six people on the planet lives in India. Mumbai has about 17 million of them.

We have read and heard about so many strange and the exotic things about Mumbai. Here are some samples of the more bizarre:

They have shopping malls as we know them, but they have guards to whom you have to show a credit card or cell phone to be admitted (the assumption being that if you have either, you may actually have money to buy something, as opposed to coming in from the heat to take up residence).

Mumbai has a number of laughing clubs, sort of like Pilates classes or bridge clubs, where people go for therapeutic laugh sessions. From what we understand, no jokes are told, but we assume everyone takes turns laughing (probably a little forced at first) or maybe there is a “laugh master” who kicks things off. Any way, by whatever means, the laughing begins and then everyone starts feeling better and forgets about their problems for a while.

There are groups of people whose job it is to deliver hot lunches to businessmen in town. This may not sound too exotic, but the lunches are made by the spouse at home and the delivery service picks them up from the home and takes them to

a centralized point where they are sorted (sort of like UPS packages) and then taken to various office buildings for an on-time noon delivery. They supposedly never lose a lunch.

And speaking of losing a lunch, there is a place in the city called Towers of Silence where last rites are performed for members of the Parsi religious sect (descendents of Persians who migrated to India over 1,200 years ago and who follow the teachings of the philosopher, Zoroaster). Unlike the Hindus who cremate their dead, the Parsis believe that they should let nature take care of the business of corpse disposal. So they place the bodies of the dead on the roof of selected towers and the local vultures fly in for lunch. Thankfully, this place is closed to outsiders.

Wednesday, March 29, 2006

Dateline: Mumbai, India

Latitude at Mumbai 18.55 degrees North, Longitude 72.50 degrees East



Ballard Pier –
Mumbai Cruise
Terminal

We arrived in Mumbai (formerly Bombay and still Bombay to many

Brits who are having trouble acknowledging the fact that India isn't a British colony any more) at 11:00 a.m. on the incoming tide and docked at the Ballard Pier. Mumbai is the capital city of the State of Maharashtra (we think Maharashtra must mean 3 ring circus in Hindi) and is home to 17 million people, a number that is astonishing since there were 60,000 here only 200 years ago. We grabbed a quick bite of lunch on the ship, speculating that it would probably be safer from a gastro-intestinal perspective. A friend from our dining room, was going to go along with us since her husband wasn't feeling well. Our plan was to grab a taxi and see some of the sights since we have a dinner tonight at the Taj Mahal Hotel and tomorrow we were scheduled to fly to Agra to see the real thing.



A Brass Band
Welcome

We were greeted on the pier by a brass band and young girls in saris giving us each a red rose, as we walked though the terminal and out into the chaos that is Mumbai. A dozen or more taxis were noisily vying for our business and we (foolishly) tried to shop around the fleet to find a taxi with air conditioning, but we had to settle for one whose windows went almost all the way down and whose driver almost spoke English we could understand. The taxis here are all identical, painted yellow and black and accented with dents of rust and paint scraped from other vehicles and fixed structures. The cars are a locally made



Taxis Abound on City Streets

model called "Mahindra" but they look suspiciously like Morris Minors. Horns are the most important navigational feature on the taxis, and are essential to getting from Point A to Point B. In fact we puzzled over a sign we saw on the back of many vehicles which read "Horn O.K. Please". We think the message is that it's okay to honk if you are about to run into the vehicle. Or alternatively, if you get in my way, be prepared to be honked at. Per Rudyard Kipling "only mad dogs and Englishmen go out in the midday sun", but he if he were alive today, he'd have to amend that verse to add "tourists" since it was noon, we were out and it was 96 degrees.



The Dhobi Ghat

We had the foresight to write down the different sights we wanted to see, which was a good thing, because when we stated our first desired destination which was an Indian name, the cabbie was drawing a blank. Our good fortune continued because the driver understood we wanted to hire him for 3-4

hours, but had to be back at the ship at 3:00. We pointed to our list, he nodded and we took off, horn blaring. Our idea was to go to the place the farthest away from the ship and work our way back so our first stop was to be the Dhobi Ghat (both h's are silent) and "ghat" means washing place, and Dhobi is the particular location. There are several "ghats around the city. We were thinking that if the Dhobi Ghat had anywhere near the kind of action that the QE2 launderette had, we may need flak jackets.



A Camel is
Pressed into
Delivery
Service

The drive to the Dhobi Ghat was another one of those head-turning, jaw dropping, finger-pointing rides like we had in Cochin, but double or triple the volume of exotica. Diversity is too paltry a word, but will have to suffice. There is the most abject poverty and god-awful filth side by side with grandest Victorian buildings and the most beautiful gardens and temples you can imagine. The streets are a kaleidoscope of color and sound. There were straw mats on the sidewalk with freshly harvested peppers drying in the sun next to barefoot people and in rags stretched out on the concrete (with no mat) having a midday snooze. There were



Sacred Cows Everywhere

all sorts of people on motor cycles (no Harleys) including families of 4 or 5, but my personal favorites were the women in head-to-toe Muslim dress, (sometimes called chadors, sometimes burqas – always black, always hot) who were driving their Hondas and Suzukis around town. There were indeed cows loose on the streets as advertised – the big Brahmin type with the hump – meandering down sidewalks, nosing through litter looking (we assume) for something green to eat. Cows are considered sacred here (giving rise to the colloquial expression “sacred cow” and we assume, the exclamation, “Holy Cow”). Many of the city’s



UPS' Competition in Mumbai

cows are those once owned by people who can no longer afford them and have just turned them loose. While they are never harmed, they are more or less ignored by the locals, who are often in the same boat (i.e. scrounging around town looking

for food). The tourists, of course, are busy gawking and hanging out of taxi windows taking pictures, present company included. However, the cows are not purely decorative. There is a whole fuel industry that has evolved in that people collect the cow “pies”, shape them into large pancake-looking disks and set them out to dry on irrigation pipes or other convenient heat-retaining



Moving Goods
in Mumbai

surfaces. They then sell dried cow pies for fuel for cooking fires (camping style -no hibachi), which can be seen blazing away on the sidewalks pretty much around the clock. Cow patties should not be confused with the name “Chowpatty” which we saw on this jaunt, which is the name of a local beach touted as Mumbai’s version of Hyde Park in London. Apparently people here are known to mount the virtual soap box and spout political views, recite poetry, break into song, and so forth at will. The beach itself is several miles long and has a promenade along Marine Drive where many of the more upscale of Bombay live and work



Human Powered Deliveries

in an area called Malabar Hill. Chowpatty Beach is also the site where Mahatma Gandhi's funeral was held since it was the only venue large enough to accommodate the masses. As a side note, "Mahatma" was not Gandhi's given name. He was called Mahatma (which means "great soul") as an honorary title by his followers. Several festivals are held at Chowpatty Beach including Coconut Day, a feast marking the end of the monsoon season and the beginning of fishing season. Thousands of locals toss thousands of coconuts into the surf as an offering to the fishing gods to ensure a good catch. Also at Chowpatty is one of several "Nana Nani" Parks which were created as havens for senior citizens of grandma and grandpa age only. Rowdy teenagers, noisy children, love-struck couples, homeless vagrants have to go elsewhere.



Hotel Laundry at Dhobi Ghat

As it turned out, the Dhobi Ghat was a peaceful place, but was

stranger than anything we could imagine (that is, as far as imagining laundry facilities goes) Dhobi Ghat is a 5 football field sized area, open in the middle and closed around the perimeter where the stadium seats would be (sort of shaped like Texas Stadium in Dallas only instead of sky boxes, there are make shift tin roofs held down by old car tires and other odds and ends). This is the laundry where people who can afford it (and actually own a change of clothes) send their laundry to be done. Viewing is achieved from a bridge overpass where you can look down and see the rows and rows of concrete sink-like basins with people scrubbing away by hand. Clotheslines are strung everywhere so once the soap is rinsed out, the workers hang up the day's wash to dry in the sun. On rainy days, we assume they hang it under the tin roofed areas. We were told many hotels send their bed linens here to be washed, which makes us glad we're sleeping on the QE2. And speaking of clothing, we saw even more diversity here than in Cochin. In addition to the dhotis I mentioned that the Cochin men wear (the wraps, that can be turned into loin cloth/diaper shorts), here they also wear sarongs called *murdus* and loose fitting non-collared shirts called *kurtas*.



The Substitute
Tourist Stop
with the
Modest Name

From the Dhobi Ghat we told the driver we wanted to go to see

the Haji Ali Mosque which is supposed to be reminiscent of Mont St. Michel in that it sits off-shore surrounded by water when the tide is in, but I think our cabdriver thought he could show us a nearby Buddhist temple and we wouldn't know the difference. He was right. We only figured this out later when we re-read the guidebooks. Anyway, while our driver waited, we scurried across a narrow street buzzing with traffic to enter the gates of the Babu Amichang Panalal Adishwari Jain Temple (called the Jain temple for short) where we removed our shoes before



Another Use
for Your Head

entering the temple. For a small fee a man offered to watch our shoes and make sure they were there when we came out which was a good investment in these parts – much cheaper than trying to buy them back on the street. The temple was built of marble in 1904 and proved to be very interesting with ornately decorated elephants (statues, not the real thing) outside, incense burning and several worshippers inside praying at the altar where brightly painted idols representing various Hindu gods were displayed. We had to be careful to observe the rules which included the admonishment that we should not turn our backs on the idols once inside. While we thought this odd, the really strange rule was the one that prohibited ladies having their menstrual cycle from going inside. I don't know how this would matter or how they would know if you broke the rules, (or perhaps the idea would be

that only Vishnu would know and bad fortune would befall you) The followers of Jainism (a sect of the Hindu religion) hold all life sacred and many wear veils so as to avoid inadvertently inhaling an insect and consequently killing it. (Strange, but true).



Victoria
Station

After the temple, we went to Victoria Station which is a huge palace-like train station with a wedding cake exterior built in 1888 and still in use today, although for some reason, its name has been changed to Chhatrapati Shivaji Terminus, probably to confuse the tourists. The station was a beehive of activity with trains arriving and departing every few minutes from the many platforms with people hanging out of open doorways and some even riding on top. Adjacent buildings, the Central Post Office and the Municipal Corporation building are built in the same Victorian style and create quite a spectacle in the heart of the city.



Gateway to India

We also visited the Gateway to India which is a huge arch erected in 1924 (sort of a Muslim-Hindu take-off on the Arc d'Triomphe in Paris) which commemorates the visit to India of King George V and Queen Mary in 1911. They were kind of slow getting the commemoration going, but there was a World War in the intervening years after all. The arch was used for a number of ceremonial events including the departure in 1948 of the last British troops, marking the end of the colonial era. Our driver was quite insistent that we stop for a looksee at a local crafts shop, despite our protests that we did not want to go. He finally confessed that he gets 100 rupees (slightly over \$2.00) for every taxi full of tourists he brings by, so to help the guy out we agreed to go and actually made a few purchases of treasures for the library at home.



Prince of
Wales Museum

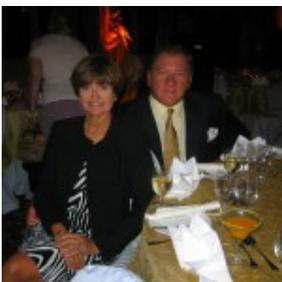
That evening we had a cocktail reception at the Prince of Wales Museum which would have been a lot more enjoyable and interesting if it were air conditioned, but we maintained a stiff upper lip (the British Colonials would have been proud) and sipped our cocktails on the sweltering verandah as if we were born to the ruling class. After the reception we went to the Taj Mahal Hotel for dinner, which was build by a local family, the Tatas, whose dynasty goes back to colonial times.

Mr. Tata reportedly wanted to create a fine hotel where locals would be allowed in. The British had built many posh hotels, but local



Taj Palace
Hotel

people could not darken the doorway. The NOKD (Not Our Kind, Dear) policy was in full force here, just as it was in Shanghai, Hong Kong, Singapore, etc. Several gentlemen from the QE2 broke out their all white tropical formal wear, having been, I suppose, schlepping it around all this time waiting for the appropriate venue. In my book they appeared more like Colonel Sanders than Somerset Maugham, but it's hard to pull off that colonial look when you tend to be more beefy than svelte.



A Formal
Dinner at the
Taj Palace
Hotel

The hotel was lovely – quite grand, and quite elegant in the

old colonial style with glittering crystal chandeliers, a grand foyer with a mahogany staircase, and polished brass and starched linen everywhere. We had a western style meal, but with many Indian accents, Indian entertainment and so forth. As a special touch, they had created decorative and intricate designs on the floor with flower petals at the entrance to our dining room. The ladies toilets at the Taj Mahal Hotel were nothing short of palatial, but I found their Muzak (or whomever provided the background music) selections a little incongruous. An instrumental version of



Floral Art at
the Taj Palace

“Blueberry Hill” was playing softly as I entered the bathroom. And as I finished my business an attendant dressed in an elegant sari dispensed perfumed soap, turned on the taps and provided a fluffy towel for drying my hands to the tune of an instrumental version of “Eleanor Rigby”. We were given small mementos of our visit to The Taj Mahal Hotel which are small carvings of the Hindu god Ganesh, who happens to be a jolly sort elephant, often depicted playing various musical instruments or otherwise cavorting around. You can’t help but look at it and smile, which, in a country with so many problems, is perhaps the intent.

We are not leaving Mumbai until tomorrow night, but since we are flying to Agra to spend the day touring the Taj Mahal and

other sights, much of Mumbai must remain unexplored, at least for this trip.

Thursday, March 30, 2006

Dateline: Mumbai, India

We arose in the wee hours to catch our 2 hour flight to Agra, the capital of the State of Uttar Pradesh to visit the Taj Mahal. We thought we had fully experienced weird and wacky Bombay, but we had only seen the sugar coated tourist version along Marine Drive at night. Our route to the airport took us through the real Mumbai. We at first thought we were imagining things, but quickly came to understand that those lumps on the sidewalks we kept seeing from the bus windows for mile after mile as we rode through the city were actually homeless people (estimated at 2 million) bedded down for the night. Well, actually bedded is a euphemism. They have no beds. We speculated on what they say to each other when they get sleepy. For example, we may say "I think I'll go to bed now." Do they say, "I think I'll go to the sidewalk now?"

Mumbai also has hundreds of beggars who can spot a tourist up to five miles away. Most of them are women and children who have learned to mime the act of eating and holding out a grimy hand to sympathetic tourists. While it would be so easy to give them money, it would be a huge mistake because once you give one of them anything or look as if you might, they will multiply exponentially and literally swarm around you. Gary, being the easiest touch I know, really struggled with this, but he had to put his mean face on or as close mean as he could get, or else we'd probably still be on the streets of Mumbai surrounded by the masses and unable to move as our ship

sailed away.



Cows Strolling
through Agra

The airport was quite chaotic, but we eventually managed to get to our chartered plane, a 737, and take off for Agra, arriving just after 8:00 a.m. Agra is in northern India, only about 150 miles from Nepal, but it was too hazy to see the Himalayas, even if they could be seen from there. Agra seemed to be a microcosm of Mumbai – farm animals roaming the streets, open air haircuts under a convenient tree, carts laden with all manner of “stuff” (propane tanks, shoes in their boxes, coconuts, fresh produce, cow pies, etc.) pulled or pushed by all manner of conveyance (donkey cart, camel cart, horse cart, human cart, trishaw, bicycle, motor scooter, tuk tuks, trucks, etc). As in Mumbai, “US dollar” and at least some English are spoken universally. As in Mumbai, despite the crowded living conditions and overwhelming poverty, the people were smiling and waving to us and the people seemed to get along with each other as well.



Lady Construction Workers

There is a tremendous amount of construction in Agra, but the methods are extremely crude – people carrying mud bricks and excavated dirt on their heads, and people digging manually with a shovel at the high tech sites and with crudely shaped scoops at the low tech sites. Scaffolding is made out of bamboo, lashed together with rope. And of course the “in your face” vendors were everywhere. We finally figured out the best way to shop was to look at the goods through the bus windows while it is parked and open the window and conduct business from there. It is also good to have dollar bills handy since everything goes on sale for \$1.00 (whether it’s one item or ten for \$1.00) once the bus looks like it’s pulling out, and under no circumstances should you expect change. We’ve been to some places where people want to sell you things in a rather aggressive show of tenacious salesmanship – Mexico, China, Egypt, Brazil, Thailand – but I have to say, India ranks up there with the best of them.



The Entrance

Gate to the Taj Mahal

We drove to within 2 kilometers of the Taj Mahal, but then transferred to electric buses which supposedly prevent air pollution from damaging the Taj Mahal, which seems pretty naïve thinking, but we dutifully fought our way through the many vendors that mobbed us and hopped aboard. The word "Taj Mahal" means crown palace, but in this case it is actually a mausoleum, built by a Mughal (meaning descended from Mongols) Emperor named Shah Jehan in 1653 for his wife Mumtaz who died in childbirth at 39, giving birth to their 14th child. Interesting side note: Although his wife was much beloved



Navigating Through the Cows

by Shah Jehan, like other emperors of the day he had a large harem, and thus we can only assume that the Shah must have been a very busy man indeed.

We got off the electric buses and weaved our way through a herd of a dozen or so water buffaloes ambling across our path at the high wall encircling the Taj. We approached the Taj Mahal on foot though the gates of a fortress-like battlement made of red



Working Cows

sandstone, and continued through a beautifully manicured garden from which we could just see the gold dome in the distance off to our right, but the rest of it was concealed by still another gate and battlement. In keeping with their pollution free environment (or maybe they just like to provide tourists something to photograph) we noticed their lawn mower was pulled by a pair of Brahmin cows, who were still taking a break in the shade at the end of our two hour visit.



First Look at
the Taj Mahal

As we crossed through the final gate, the Taj Mahal appeared directly before us, perfectly mirrored in a long reflecting pool, seeming to shimmer in the morning sun. Having it unveiled to us in such dramatic fashion was another moment of major-league goose-bumps. It appears to be ephemeral, almost

magical, and despite being made of marble and weigh however many zillion tons it must weigh, it gives the impression floating there just out of reach. The exterior is fine white marble, semi-translucent with inlaid semi-precious stones such as amethyst, jade, topaz, lapis lazuli, malachite and carnelian in elaborate patterns. Verses from



Inlays on the
Taj Mahal

the Koran are also inscribed in Arabic, and rather than detract from the decorations, the curves and flourishes actually complement the design. There is a central gold (not just gold in color – it's made of gold) dome with four smaller domes and four towers. We were issued shoe covers by our tour operator to actually go inside the building to protect the marble floors. Inside, there is a single room enclosed with decorative screens carved out of marble, but with openings large enough to see through. Directly below the large dome are the elaborately carved (also in marble) replicas of the tombs of the Emperor and Queen



The Reflecting

Pool at the Taj Mahal

Mumtaz. The actual tombs are directly below the replicas and are not open to the public. Shah Jehan died several years after Mumtaz, after having been deposed by his son, Aurangzeb, and imprisoned nearby. He didn't seem to have committed any offense other than stand in the way of his son's ambition to rule India himself, although prison is hardly the right term for where he was kept.



The Red Fort

After lunch at a very nice hotel, the Mughal Sheraton, we toured the site of Shah Jehan's imprisonment in what is called the Agra Fort or the Red Fort, since it is built of red sandstone, although calling it a fort is something of a misnomer. It is a fortress, but is also a complex of palaces built over the centuries by the Mughal rulers where they lived with their families, harems, staff, and soldiers protecting them. It was actually the seat of military and political power in those days and is somewhat reminiscent of Edinburgh Castle in Scotland, but more elaborate with marble throne rooms, audience halls, harem quarters, courtyards with



Inside the Red Fort

formal gardens and perfumed fountains. It is a massive structure, situated on a hill overlooking the river. The rooms where Shah Jehan was imprisoned have a beautiful view of the Taj Mahal itself, just on the other side of the river.

We also visited one of the marble factories that inlay semi-precious stones in marble using the same materials and techniques used by the builders of the Taj Mahal. They actually carve out designs in the marble and then grind stones down to fit the shape required. They then stick the stones into the marble with a secret formula of resin that predates Crazy Glue by several centuries, but is supposedly just as effective.



Dockside Bon Voyage Party – Mumbai

We left Agra around 6:00 p.m. for the two hour flight back to

Mumbai and arrived back at the ship just after 9:00 where Cunard had one more surprise for us. They had set up a welcome back party on the pier right next to the ship with champagne and one of the best rock and roll bands (locals from Mumbai) I've ever heard. I can't describe how bizarre it was hearing the music (authentic renditions) of Roy Orbison, Shania Twain and the Rolling Stones, sipping champagne on Ballard Pier in Bombay Harbor, India shortly before steaming off into the night across the Arabian Sea to Dubai. Actually steaming off is a figure of speech since the QE2 hasn't steamed anywhere in the last twenty years since her retrofit to diesel engines, but somehow the expression, we "dieseled" off doesn't quite have the same ring to it.

Friday, March 31, 2006

Dateline – Arabian Sea

Position at Noon Greenwich Mean Time (GMT) +5, 19.57 degrees North, 68.58 degrees East,

19 miles off Dwarka Point, Northwest India. 241 miles from Mumbai, India 919 miles to Dubai, U.A.E.

We crossed the Arabian Sea today, resting up after the whirlwind tour of India, and headed toward the Arabia peninsula to our next port of call, Dubai. Today we learned the origin of the nautical term "head". In the olden days when ships had no interior plumbing and were sailing vessels, the wind was almost always astern. Thus when they had personal needs to attend to (i.e. call of nature), they would go to the rail at front of the ship to take care of it. Since ships in those days all had figureheads (a.k.a. maidenheads) people would shorten the name to "the head", as in going to the head. We also learned the background of the expression, "melting

pot”, e.g., Mumbai is a melting pot of different cultures. In the olden days when metal was scarce, countries going to war would often call upon their citizenry to contribute household metals (pots, pans, belt buckles, etc.) in order to make bullets. All this metal, regardless of origin, would be thrown together into a “melting pot” to form molten lead, iron, whatever and then be poured into bullet molds. I am sadly disillusioned by this since I always envisioned a melting pot having something to do with chocolate fondue.

Since today is a lazy day, this may be a good point to share just a couple of colorful character profiles, especially since we were just at the pool and ran into one of the oddest of the odd couples on board. We have not been introduced so I will just refer to them by the names we’ve given them which is Mrs. Duck who we think is late 60-ish and Elmer Fudd who appears somewhere north of 90. This couple has been on the QE2 since New York and when we first saw her, we thought that perhaps we had just caught Mrs. Duck in some bad light – sort of a Bad Face Day instead of a Bad Hair Day, although she has those too. After almost 4 months, however, her Bad Face Day continues. We think she must have had a face lift gone bad (maybe got a group rate with Michael Jackson) combined with too many attempts at subsequent reconstruction. While her cheeks are stretched very tight, her lips are always in a Daffy Duck sort of pucker, particularly acute when viewed in profile. It is rumored that she is Italian, but she has uttered nothing remotely resembling any words or phrases in Italian. In fact, we thought she was speaking some little known Eastern European language, but sadly, I think it was indeed English, and she is somehow impaired (not in the physical sense, but in the pharmaceutical sense). She invariably wears orange to most events (not peach, but Halloween or Harley Davidson Orange. She wears Elvis-like jumpsuits with sequins or rhinestones for formal evenings and

then jumpsuits with zippers for day wear. She isn't seriously overweight, but what weight she has seems to have lumped together and succumbed to gravity, and it tends to roll around when she walks, giving the impression that there are some little animals inside the jumpsuit trying to get out. Around the pool she favors animal prints (leopard, tiger, etc.) fashioned into bikinis way too small for her bulk. Elmer looks like a much older and more emaciated version of the cartoon character and much more lethargic. We suspect Elmer to be either heavily medicated or else intoxicated (i.e. maybe he looks at Mrs. Duck and then follows the words of the Country song, "I'm Gonna Drink Her Pretty")

We haven't actually met this next odd couple and they are actually an odd foursome. They definitely belong to that group of people who would be called crazy if they were broke, but since they are apparently quite affluent, they are just called eccentric. The mother and father we have dubbed Daddy and Mrs. Warbucks. They are accompanied by their son (we presume), who looks suspiciously like John Candy, so it could be that reports of his death are greatly exaggerated. Mrs. Candy, his presumptive spouse, isn't at all a match – she's more in the Angelina Jolie look-alike category. In fact she is such a mismatch, that we suspect she may be a Bimbo-de jour. The Warbucks family has 3 suites reserved on the QE2 which go for around 200k per person each for the World Cruise. One of the suites is just for clothes and personal exercise equipment. We assume they get a bargain rate since they take 3 suites every year, but it's still some serious money. Daddy Warbucks has his own car on board (a Rolls of course) and it is offloaded for him in whatever ports he chooses. He also has over 70 suitcases in the baggage master's store room which he needs because he brings his own bed linens and towels aboard and enough clothes for 4 months so he doesn't have to send anything out to the ship's laundry. His suitcases are brought

up as required when he needs fresh towels, sheets or clothes and the old ones are packed away (presumably by his cabin steward). We were also told he dines regularly (and privately) with the captain. The Warbucks home, when they are home is on an island/tax haven country. I don't know if he owns the whole island, but we will try to become chummy and see if he would like to put us into his will.

Saturday, April 1, 2006

Dateline: Arabian Sea

Position at Noon Greenwich Mean Time (GMT) +5, 23.57 degrees North, 60.53 degrees East

**Approaching the Gulf of Oman. 489 miles from Mumbai, India
450 miles to Dubai, U.A.E.**

This was our second of two sea days before reaching Dubai and we would enter the Gulf of Oman shortly after noon today and then pass through the Straits of Hormuz to enter into the Persian Gulf. The captain announced this morning that due to Dubai's displeasure with the U.S. policy of refusing to allow Dubai World Ports to take over from P&O the management of 6 major ports in the U.S., the resort in Dubai where a major wing-ding is planned for Cunard World Cruise passengers tomorrow night has been cancelled by the hotel. The captain went on to say that they were able to pull together a dinner at another venue which is American owned, and while he isn't sure they can provide the same level of luxury, he is sure that McDonalds will provide an very good meal. It was only then we realized that today April Fool's Day and our captain, who does love a good joke or a prank, was "having us on" as the Brits say.

In other April Foolery, there is a video camera that is on the bow of the QE2 which broadcasts images to each cabin 24 hours a day. Some prankster on the captain's staff put on footage of thunderstorms with howling winds and raging seas, making us think this is what we had to look forward to for our day at sea.

The captain made another announcement which wasn't a joke and was very unpopular which was canceling our call at Aqaba, Jordan. The nervous nellys at Cunard have cancelled it (they did the same the last 2 years or so we've heard) over concern over potential terrorist acts. We understand that they have private security consultants (probably ones that the CIA let go who reported WMD in Iraq) who have advised against going there. Anyway the bottom line is, we will not be seeing Petra on this trip. To compensate for missing Aqaba, they are juggling the schedule a little and are substituting a call to Kusadasi, Turkey where we have already been. We are really bummed out about this since we were excited about the side trip to Petra, but have resolved we'll come back with slightly less conspicuous transportation, and see it on our own (ditto for Bali and Bangkok). We suspect that they had the Kusadasi plan as backup for some time since it is no easy matter to make arrangements for docking, immigration, tours, etc. for over 3,000 passengers and crew on a few days notice, plus we are transiting the Suez Canal a day earlier than planned which requires a reservation, plus we will be in Alexandria Egypt a day earlier than planned so all the tours and a special event they have planned for Grill passengers had to be moved up a day. We jokingly made a comment after Cunard cancelled the call in Bali, then the tours in Bangkok, and now Jordan, that if this trend continues, the World Cruise in ten years time will be circling Great Britain.

Any way once we finished our ten minutes of venting with the other passengers, we attended the final enrichment lecture by Nigel West on a secret program code named "Venona", which lasted from 1943, when cryptographers first figured out coded messages that the Russians were sending to 1979, when the Russians found out (from the British turncoat, Kim Philby) that we had figured out their codes and thus changed them. The actual code breaking was achieved by looking at bills of lading provided for the arms and goods we shipped to the Russians during WWII, which they then encoded and broadcast to their armies to let them know what arms and goods to expect. Since the Americans and the British already knew what the bills of lading said, they were able to reverse engineer the code. The Soviets, not realizing their code had been compromised, kept using it throughout much of the Cold War. Now if they could just get these same code breakers out of mothballs (and I suspect nursing homes), and get them working on terrorists communication, we might be able to go to some of these tourist destinations- turned- hotspots that Cunard is skipping this year.

The captain's wisdom of the day is this quote: May you have the hindsight to know where you have been, the foresight to know where you are going, and the insight to know where you are.

Sunday, April 2, 2006

Dateline: Dubai, United Arab Emirates

Latitude at Dubai 25.15 degrees North, Longitude 55.16 degrees

East

Today we docked in Dubai, United Arab Emirates (U.A.E.) at Port Rashid, and were struck immediately by the stark contrast to our last port of call, Mumbai, which you would think would be on another planet altogether. Dubai is one of 7 emirates that chose to band together to form a nation. Bahrain and Qatar are two emirates that chose not to go with the alliance. The major stumbling block in forming the U.A.E. was the fact that each emirate had an emir (or sheik) and nobody wanted to be second fiddle. The way they solved the problem was that the various sheiks formed the Supreme Council of Rulers and they take turns being President, although sometimes they will trade away their turn for other things – like oil for example, which Abu Dhabi seems to have the most of, in addition to being larger than all the other emirates put together. Dubai, however, has become a world class power player with just a little oil and some really smart investments. The rulers of Dubai are the Maktoum family and the title of emir is handed down, typically from father to son, or other male relative if there is no son or he is somehow unsuitable. Nepotism is very common in the emirates and there are Maktoums in any number of important government positions.

The economy in Dubai is booming and its citizens have one of the highest per capita incomes in the world with only 10% of Dubai's economy being petroleum based. Dubai has benefited from a visionary sheik over the last several years who died recently. He is credited with turning Dubai from a sleepy little sheikdom relying on pearls and fishing, with a splash of oil thrown in, to a diversified economic powerhouse in trade, construction, service industries, and last but not least, tourism, which accounts for a whopping 40% to the

economy. Now obviously these tourists are going to want something to tour, so Dubai has gone to work to out-Disney, out-Vegas, out-New York the rest of the world in essentially just the last 10 years. Dubai's population is only around 1.2 million, and three quarters of that number are expatriates, either guest workers who can stay up to 3 years before renewing permits, or property owners who get 99 year permits. Residents of Dubai do not pay taxes, get free education including college and free medical care. Expats do not share in the bounty of the government, but Dubai has set up a number of free trade zones (no corporate taxes) to draw in business. Arabic is the official language, but English is the language of commerce and thus is the real language used. Crime is unheard of here. Locals have all the money they need and expats under the least suspicion of wrong doing get deported, no excuses, no trial.



Dockside
Welcome

We arrived in port around 8:00 a.m. and were greeted by men in the traditional dress (and in this case, dress does mean literally dress in that they are muu-muu like garments, typically white or light colors with long sleeves). In Egypt these are called "galabiyahs", but I'm not sure what they're called here. The men were playing drums (think bongos, not rock and roll or marching band) and doing what we assume were tribal dances that were more swaying than shucking and jiving (but then this is the desert after all – it's hot out

there.) They also had very skinny sticks with a crook on the end like a candy cane (also used to communicate



Dubai
Bagpipers

with camels) which they would tap on the ground and on each others shoulders in time to the drumming. The other dockside entertainment (they took turns) was really bizarre. Picture, if you will, 8 to 10 Arab men in white galabiyahs, playing "Scotland Forever on the Bagpipies" (something definitely wrong with this picture), but it was a nice tribute to the heritage of the QE2 since she was built and launched in Scotland.



Greeters at
the Port of
Dubai

The cruise terminal was sparkling new, built with steel and glass in the shape of a ship with a few shops and free high

speed internet. Dubai is essentially a desert which has been subjected to an all out government funded “greening program”. They use desalinated sea water, which is a very expensive proposition, but here in Dubai money is no object. In fact water costs more per gallon than gasoline so they tell us. Everything is irrigated, manicured and plants are whisked away if they start to wilt or look as if they will shortly meet an untimely demise. The local currency is the dirham and the exchange rate is \$3.56 dirhams to the dollar. However, dollars are accepted everywhere, no matter what you want to buy, and you will even get change in U.S. currency which is something of an anomaly in most parts of the world. If any building does not have covered parking, you will see open lots with rows of umbrellas for the cars to park under.



Dubai Marina

Our plan for today was to take a boat and leave from the Dubai Marina, home of mega-yachts galore, to tour around two of the artificial island projects that you may have read about. A Dubai development company called Nakheel is developing 4 different projects that involve creating man-made islands just off-shore which will be sold and developed into hotels, restaurants, shopping areas, marinas and residences. Dubai already has two of the main ingredients in plentiful supply – pure white sand and gin-clear water. Three of the projects are going to be a self-contained community in the shape of palm trees with the “trunk”



The Plan for the Palm Jumeirah

attached to shore with a causeway atop it. Each “frond” will fan out from the trunk and will be lined with the above mentioned homes and businesses. They are called The Palm, Jumeirah where Donald Trump is building a hotel, the Palm, Jebel Ali, a short distance from the city and The Palm, Deira, which is closest to Old Dubai and is the largest and most elaborate of the three. For example, the Jumeirah project has a total of 16 “fronds” while the Deira project has 40. Construction just to create the islands takes about two years and the first one, Jumeirah was started in 2001. As fabulous as these “Palm” projects are, the real eye-



Gardens at the Nakeel Sales Center

popper mind-blower is the 1.8 billion dollar “World” project. They are creating islands grouped together to form the continents of the world. They start by building a breakwater

that forms the outline of a Mercator (i.e. the globe flattened) map of the world. Then the continents are built with several islands making up each one.



Downtown Dubai

On the drive to the marina from Port Rashid, we drove down city streets that looked as if they were transplanted here directly from Callaway Gardens with carpets of grass you'd swear had to be fake, bordered with huge beds of flowers (not native – all imports). Our route took us down Sheik Zayed Road, which is the main street for glittery opulence and over the top skyscrapers. The glitteriest of them all currently are the Emirates Towers, but this will soon be overshadowed (literally when the sun hits just right) by the new Burj Dubai which was under construction. (not to be confused by the Burj Al Arab Hotel). The Burj Dubai was to be the tallest building in the world, rising out of a flower petal shaped base and will house all sorts of luxury apartments, businesses and services. We also drove past vast walled waterfront compounds, many of which were properties of the sheik, his family or his cohorts, where we could catch a glimpse of opulence beyond even the Beverly Hills scale.



Cranes on Dubai's Skyline

As for the boat tour, you can't really see the shape of things from sea level and our boat was not allowed inside the breakwaters of the two Palms projects we visited, so what we saw was cloudy sky, clear water, a zillion cranes, dredgers, dump trucks, etc. However, we were on a very luxurious boat sipping wine and marveling at the fabulous Dubai skyline, so how bad could that be? The real treat was the visit to the Nakheel Sales center where we saw a mini-IMAX presentation and strolled the grounds around the center, which are fabulous in their own right



Atrium Burj Al Arab Hotel

To wrap up our tour, we went to the Burj al Arab Hotel for tea. This is the famous hotel shaped like a sailboat with a really tall sail. The Burj is a gated hotel, meaning you have to have a reservation there for a meal or a room in order to be allowed in. If you reserve a room, you need to plan on

anywhere from \$1,000 to \$35,000 per night. No photos are allowed in the restaurants since it annoys the celebrities. An open atrium soars upward from the lobby to the very top floor which is visible from the moment you enter the hotel. We got on the escalator to go to the mezzanine where the restaurant for our tea is located and we



The Lobby of
the Burj Al
Arab Hotel

were so in awe of the structure, we almost failed to notice the walls are actually salt water aquariums filled with exotic fish. There are a host of truly elegant shops in the hotel, including one which sells diamond encrusted abayas (the flowing robes that Muslim women wear) and veils that run between \$40k and \$50k each. White gloved waiters provide tea service amid the most unconventional, yet tasteful flower arrangements you can imagine. Tea was an elaborate affair with unctuous waiters serving scones, tiny sandwiches and pastries. Unfortunately we were running late and had to hurry back to the ship to change for dinner. Cunard was hosting a gala World Cruise Dinner at Madinat Jumeirah Resort and we were told it's an event not to be missed under any circumstances. As it turned out – this was good advice.



An Elegant
Evening at the
Madinat
Jumeirah Hotel

We were driven to the Madinat Jumeirah resort where we were greeted by costumed hosts and hostesses in native dress. We were first showered with rose petals and then offered dates to nibble on as we proceeded into the hotel down a luxuriously carpeted (sink up to you ankles type carpet) to a bar area with waiters bearing champagne and delicious hot canapes. The bar was open to an outside terrace with a view of the sun setting on gardens and a canal. We did experience one moment of incongruity in seeing what we thought might be Pringles in the various areas of the bar. A closer inspection did confirm the



A Hunting
Falcon at the
Madinat
Jumeirah

sighting. We did a tasting just to make sure and yup they were

indeed Pringles, but the liquor was flowing freely and the canapés were to die for, so we figured we could forgive this lapse into the bourgeois. We took our champagne outside to see the old fashioned faux souk (market) that had been set up for us to fit in with the Arabian theme. There were live freshly shampooed camels, decked out in their Sunday best glad rags. They were both good tempered and good smelling, which is quite unusual in the real world of camels. The resort provided shishas, also known as water pipes, set up for our smoking pleasure, offering



Henna Tattoo
Artists at the
Reception

both tobacco and apple wood. They had stalls with mounds of fresh spices, incense, figs, dates, and all the other items you might find on the trade route caravans from years ago. They also had falcons trained for hunting for us to admire and pose with, as well as Arabian horses, ready for us to mount and gallop off into the sunset on (however, since everyone was dressed in formal wear, the horses were just petted and admired for the most part). One horse showed an inordinate interest in my glass of champagne and actually got his lips around the rim while I was petting him, so I'm thinking, in addition to oats, he was especially fond of the bubbly. There were also tasseled silk tents with silk cushions to lounge upon while we nibbled our dates, sipped our champagne, considered getting henna tattoos and listened to various

assorted musicians.



Gardens at the
Madinat
Jumeirah

Dinner was an elaborate affair with a world renowned soprano to entertain us who sang several arias. We also had a welcome by the president of Cunard, who happened to be a woman, and one of the Emir's relatives, Sheik so-and-so (sorry I didn't get his name, but with 600 people in attendance, we weren't introduced.) This evening was really one of the trip highlights, although, no disrespect to the Emir, our favorite part was the camels.

Monday, April 3, 2006

Dateline: Dubai, United Arab Emirates



The Gold Souk
in Old Dubai

Today we were to leave Dubai at 1:00 p.m. which gave us very little time for seeing the sights. We did have two specific destinations in mind. Gary wanted to visit the local Harley dealership and I wanted to visit the gold souk and see some of Old Dubai, which we did not visit yesterday. Old Dubai is centered around what is called Dubai Creek, which is really a salt water inlet, perhaps two miles long. We took a taxi, but arrived at the Harley dealership too early since it didn't open until 10:30 and thus Gary was forced to order his Dubai Harley-wear on line. He was also quite distressed to learn we had missed Bike Week



Longshoremen
at the Creek
in Old Dubai

in Dubai by only a single day since it ended day before we arrived. Because time was short, we decided to taxi back to Old Dubai where we made a surgical strike at the gold souk and I bought a small bauble. We then eyeballed the merchandise at

the spice souk. We also spent some time walking around Dubai Creek and looking at the old boats and trading ships bound for Iran. This was a fascinating walk (and a fascinating contrast to the squeaky clean newness of Modern Dubai). There we saw the most dilapidated, paint-peeling, engine-coughing small freighters I've ever seen, none probably not more that 100 feet long, with



Abras Crossing
Dubai Creek

truly colorful characters loading all sorts of cargo – TV's, rice, cooking oil, air conditioners, tires, shoes, cookware, etc. One captain we were chatting with said it takes these vessels two days to reach Iran and then they unload and come back empty (apparently there's nothing in Iran that anyone in Dubai is anxious to purchase). We also enjoyed seeing the small local boats called "abras" that ferry people back and forth across the creek for less than 50 cents.

There is so much here and still so much under development. Here is a sample of what's going on.

Business – Dubai is setting itself up as a high tech business hub, creating a financial and a physical environment to attract the best of the best in selected areas. They have a

business area called Knowledge Village, which is intended to be an education oriented R&D mecca. They also have Media City where all major news, media TV networks (e.g. Reuters, CNN, Al Jazeera, Showtime) and major ad agencies have offices. They also have Internet City which hosts businesses for all things Internet.

Tourism and Leisure – Dubai's goal seems to be to offer the visitors and residents everything under the sun and they seem to either already have it or are building it. Here's a sampling:

Mall of the Emirates featuring 14 movie theaters with monstrous screens and a ski slope called Ski Dubai with fresh snow made daily.

Dubai Festival Park – a resort style city which will also host flagship stores for major retailers

Dozens of world class golf courses, with more springing up every few months.

All manner of water sports including whitewater rafting, water skiing, jet skiing, fishing, canoeing, etc.

Dubailand – which has Disney type attractions, and then some. They also have sports, plus spas and health retreats, shopping etc.

Dubai Mall – which will be largest shopping mall in the world and will be the size of 5 soccer fields. It will feature the world's largest gold souk and will be connected to the Burj Al Arab Hotel by an 800 foot enclosed "travelator"

The city also has ice skating arenas, shooting clubs, hot air ballooning, and anything else you can think of.

Top restaurants of all cultures around the world are flocking to Dubai in droves.

And here's my personal favorite – Camel Racing. We didn't have time to see this, but we are told it is quite the event. Camels are raced with small boys as jockeys around an open track – open meaning the spectators are up close and personal and have to be prepared to move fast in case a camel veers off the track. This would seem to be very dangerous for the jockeys as well, but we learned they are actually stuck to the camel's saddle with Velcro (one strip on the pants, one on the saddle) and after each race have to go to the paddock to get unstuck.

World Class Events – Dubai is busy building and throwing money at world class events to attract the elite in every sport or special event such as

Horse Racing – The Dubai World Cup is now the world's richest horse race.

Auto Racing – the Dubai Autodrome and Business Park – They have some racing now, but are hoping to attract the Formula 1 Grand Prix. The adjacent Business Park will host automotive industry corporations.

Golf – the Dubai Desert Classic is Emirates Golf Club has one of the largest purses on the PGA Tour. Tiger Woods won it this year.

Needless to say, Dubai has easily made our “must revisit” list.

Tuesday, April 4, 2006

Dateline: Arabian Sea

Position at Noon Greenwich Mean Time (GMT) +4, 21.43 degrees North, 59.36 degrees East,

26 miles southeast of Ras al Hadd, Oman, Arabian Peninsula

We learned this morning of some high seas drama that took place yesterday evening around 7:00 p.m. as we passed through the Straits of Hormuz, which are very narrow (only a few miles across at the narrowest point) and all ships entering or leaving the Persian (Arabian) Gulf have to pass through this area. Until the Arabian pipeline was built, this was a huge area of concern for the Western World since all oil out of the Middle East had to pass through here and it would only take one sunken ship of any substantial size to plug up the works.

Anyway, our drama was this. We noticed as we went to dinner there were a number of small craft (Miami Vice Cigarette Boat types) running along beside us, which would veer off sharply from time to time. What we learned today was that these were actually smugglers of some sort, running between Oman and Iran, who were trying to use the QE2 as a shield from radar detection. On radar screens, the small fiberglass boats couldn't be seen due to the bulk of the QE2 – they would simple look like scattered signals bouncing off our hull. What made them veer off was the stern warning from the ship's LORAD – Long Range Acoustic Device. Apparently the QE2 crew gave them a verbal broadcast warning followed by the ultrasonic directed sound blast and the would-be smugglers decided to take their chances in open water.

The Captain also shared some more trivia. In the world of military statue sculpting, there are certain traditions that are observed when the hero being honored is on horseback. If the horse has all four feet on the ground, the person died a natural death. If the horse has one foot in the air, the person died of wounds received in battle. If the horse is rearing with two legs in the air, the person died in battle. However, if all 4 legs are in the air, this will signify a dead horse.

One of the enrichment lecturers today was Kate Adie, a well-known correspondent in the UK for the BBC. She is sort of the Christiane Amanpour of the BBC. She would be doing a series of lectures on her career in journalism over the next several days. Today her subject was “foundlings” – i.e. children not just abandoned by their parents, but turned over to someone for safekeeping. She is really spell-binding so we're looking

forward to her future talks.

We also were treated today to huge schools of dolphins – hundreds in each school who were apparently having some sort of dolphin jamboree and fish round up. Since it was a beautiful day out on deck, we spent most of the afternoon there and were able to see different schools over a period of several hours. We have to rest up for an exciting day in Salalah, Oman tomorrow.

Wednesday, April 5, 2006

Dateline: Salalah, Oman

Latitude at Salalah 16.56 degrees North, Longitude 54.00 degrees East



A Frankincense
Tree

Because we were at a loss as to what Oman offered, we had decided to take one of the ship's tours entitled the Frankincense Trail. Frankincense was something else we weren't knowledgeable about (beyond the Christmas story of the 3 Wise Men bringing gold, frankincense and myrrh), so we decided it wouldn't hurt to go get educated – and we were extremely well rewarded with a really fascinating experience, despite our

first impressions. We docked around 8:00 a.m. and set off on the Frankincense Trail with our guide, Abdulluh, who spoke good English, having been educated in Wales and who told us a bit about Oman, all of which was news to us.



The Coastline
of Oman

Oman occupies most of the coastline of the Arabian Peninsula on the Arabian Sea and is primarily desert and mountains. According to local legend, God divided the world into sea and settled lands with the leftover desolate area designated as the “Empty Quarter” which today is the Arabian Peninsula. Oman is ruled by a sultan, who since 1970 has had the title of King, and the title passes from father to son (no elections required) and the capital is in its largest city, Muscat. Salalah is the second largest city and is a provincial capital of Dhofur, but with only 120,000 people, it’s still pretty small. This part of Oman is only 200 miles



The Empty
Quarter

from the Yemen border and they have a significant problem with illegal Yemeni immigrants (sound familiar?) who look at Oman as the promised land. (which proves it's all relative). The local currency is the Omani rial which is exchanged at 3 rials to the dollar. We didn't get any local money because "dollar" is spoken and understood everywhere, even out here in the middle of nowhere. We do make sure we have a lot of one dollar bills, because the concept of "change" for a \$5, \$10 or \$20 is not understood at all. The terrain is desert with a backdrop of arid mountains – sort of a Baja California look. While everything was pretty brown by my standards, Abdullah assured us that when the monsoon season comes everything greens up beautifully and people from all over the Arabian Peninsula come to spend the summers here. He says it rains every day and to people who are rain-deprived, this is bliss. Our guide said that local people often move into tents in the summer and rent their houses out to people coming down to Salalah for the seasonal wet weather.

Oman is almost 100% Muslim, but not fanatically so. The men wear some western clothes, but most seem to favor the long white cotton shirts (long as in to the ankle) they call "dishdashas" with a draped or pleated turban for their heads, or in some cases a cap similar to what navy ensigns wear, but with elaborate embroidery. The women wear the Muslim abaya, sometimes with a veil covering their entire face, but increasingly with just a scarf for their heads. Abdullah says this is by choice, not by law, since many of the women are shy. (I suspect they don't get much focus on assertiveness and self-esteem building in these parts). Courtship is a difficult process since there is no dating here. At the mosque, men attend with men and women with women. At weddings, parties or other gatherings where there is music, men dance with men and women with women. Consequently arranged marriages still prevail although Abdullah says this custom slowly is changing.

If you wanted to check a girl out, it's okay to send your mother or sister to visit her to see if she's marriage material since with those abayas you can't really see the goods. The marriage age used to be 14, but now all girls have to finish school so it's 17 or 18.



Frankincense for Sale in Salalah

Frankincense, like myrrh, is a source of incense and it comes from the sap of the frankincense tree. There are 3 different qualities of incense in case you find yourself out shopping for it. The best is green and white, the next best is white and the poorest quality is brown. Frankincense only grows in a few places (Oman, Eritrea, Somalia) and requires serious heat in order to thrive. Our first stop on the bus was to see "the frankincense" tree which is a sad looking thing out in the middle of the desert, with the closest structure about 5 miles away, a combination mosque/grocery store. A note on stores here – they advertise groceries and luxuries, but don't be thinking gold and precious stones. Luxuries here are things like soap, toilet paper, and toothpaste. In the wild, frankincense trees are found in "wadis" which are dry creek beds, where they can occasionally get some moisture if it rains. Commercial trees are usually on plantations behind fences and are carefully tended and irrigated. This token tree is for tourists to ogle and fondle. Fortunately the frankincense trail did not end with the sighting of the frankincense tree because we were

feeling decidedly underwhelmed by it all at this point.



The Headland
at Mugsail
Beach

From the tree, we drove past some really beautiful beaches including Mugsail which has a Hilton Hotel and nothing else on it. From there we went to a rocky headland with breaking waves and scenic vistas along the coast. We saw a number of little pyramid shaped mounds on the beach about 6 inches tall and were told that these are crab dwellings, and thus the catching of crabs for supper proves pretty simple. Abdullah told us that we could hear the “music of the water” at a blowhole, however when we got there, the sea had calmed to the point that Abdullah broke the news to us that “the ocean, she is not playing the music today.”



In the Dhofar
Mountains

Then we drove up into the mountains and this is where the fun started. There were loose camels every few miles which created a lot of entertainment for the busload of tourists. Our guide explained that there are no wild camels in Oman, but people turn them out in the mornings to forage for food and then round them up at night. Each camel has an ear marking to show ownership. Most of the camels are owned by Bedouins who have given up the nomadic life for the most part. They still keep camels, but they also have TV's, houses and cars. Bedouins were granted large tracts of land in previous centuries which proved to have oil on it. Their houses are all pretty modest and rustic, to say the least, but then it's probably hard to have a nice subdivision when there are camels in the backyard. They also have large barbecues for which they dig a pit in front of their houses to roast goats, camels and other unlucky beasts at parties lasting far into the night. We had asked about wildlife but were told that other than Bedouin parties, there are only wild donkeys who are descendants of farm animals in times gone by. They also have canaries there and we saw their nests dangling from the rare tree here and there, but no birds.



The View from
Job's Tomb

We continued higher up into the Dhofar Mountains to Job's Tomb, which is supposedly the resting place of Job of the Old Testament, whose faith was tested by God with a series of hardships and disasters. As you will recall, Job never lost

his faith, and thus we have the saying that someone has “the patience of Job”. The tomb is inside a very simple one room open air building made of stone and stucco and actually looks like a mound. It is covered with a decorative heavy silk cloth. To enter you must remove your shoes and women must cover their heads. An attendant is there to provide scarves for any woman who



The Garden at
Job's Tomb

does not have one. Job supposedly came to Salalah in either the 15th or 16 Century B.C. and then died here. The Queen of Sheba has also supposedly been here, but no one seems to have unearthed a tomb for her or any evidence of her passing through. There was also a purported footprint, made by Job, adjacent to his tomb, but it seems to be imprinted on a surface that looks suspiciously like concrete, a substance unknown in Biblical times, and thus there were a few skeptics in the crowd on this one. On our descent from the mountains, we saw still more camels, although they are very hard to see at any distance since they blend into the landscape. This observation gave rise to the pun that they are “camel-flaged”. We were greatly amused by that and got a further chuckle out of one sign that cautioned thusly: “Caution – Smiling camels make biting if scared”. We also saw a camel that had on a bag-like contraption around her udders. Abdullah told us that Omanis drink camel milk and the bag is to ensure that it doesn't leak or any baby camel hangers-on who should be weaned

already sneak a slurp or two. Abdullah reports it is very bland with little taste, so I think I'll forego the opportunity if offered the chance for a sample. He also told us that animals are not allowed in the city and if one should stray there, the owner is fined.



Downtown
Salalah

And speaking of the city (loosely defining the word), we ended our tour there. Salalah is a very tidy city as third world countries go. All houses in are, by law, built in the same traditional Arabic style with one 20th Century improvement. Many of the windows are tinted blue to keep the hot sun out and allow the women inside to see out without being seen themselves. Each house typically is home to 2 or more married children and their families living with the parents since housing is expensive relative to income for those who aren't Bedouins with oil money. The town had a souk, which per our observation had two main products, incense and tailor shops – blocks and blocks of tailor shops. We decided to buy a locally made incense burner from a woman who wore the abaya, with only her eyes and hands showing – but what hands those were. She had her fingers painted black from the last knuckle forward and her long nails were thickly coated with a glittery gold polish. It's a good thing she only wanted a few bucks for her incense burner since neither of us were about to quibble with her over the price. She was way too scary looking to bargain with.



The Sultan's Beach

We had hoped to stroll around the grounds of the Sultan's beachfront home here in Salalah, but he was in residence so we just had a quick peek of the outside. We also took a quick stroll on the beach which was totally empty. There is a lot of room for development should Oman decide to follow in Dubai's footsteps, but we'll have to wait and see on this one.