

typical of them the world over. They arrive thinking they have all the clout and say "Y'all don't know what you're doing, and here I am". The Arabs resent it. They resent the British, too. They won't forget the old colonial days with Hurricanes flying at rooftop level to let them know who's in charge. The French, now, always have the most aggressive ambassador here. He's doing a hell of a job. He is everywhere. The TV comes on, and there he is visiting some shaikh or promoting his country's interests. He'll have meetings set up, and he really works hard.

'At present the classic Miami Beach law is creeping in. Two years ago, no one would have given a \$10 bet that the Marbella Beach Club would have a branch here. It didn't make sense at all. Yet it is practically over-subscribed before it opens. There will be a greater demand for de-luxe facilities like that, and those which don't maintain standards will slowly peter out.

'I explored the possibility of tourism two years ago, and there was a tremendous response from the package-tour operators because there is a mystique about the place. But it's too expensive, even on reduced fares. The minimum package would be about \$1500, and you can't really do it for less than \$2000 to \$3000. For sun worshippers it's a great place. You can see an oasis, *souks*, and the waters - if they are not polluted.

'The future? Banks themselves have little confidence in the area. They don't care to touch another pennyworth of hotels, and I think they are right. Look at Klondikes in the past. They became ghost towns after a short while.'

Shaikh Rashid does not think he has built a future ghost town. Years ago, when he sat on the roof of his palace and counted the *dhow*s as they called at the Customs office next door, he saw shacks surrounded by desert. Some thought it looked like Venice or a 'maritime San Gimignano' that might have inspired Canaletto.¹ To me, it looks like a cardboard Shanghai. Tall, solid buildings cram the waterfront and are squashed together as in every civilized city, regardless of acres of empty land behind them, rising ever higher so that the 39-storey £109 million Trade Centre, complete with ice-skating rink, towers over others in the Gulf. Progress is so rapid that one bedou, visiting after an

absence of a year, thought he had lost his well-developed sense of direction and wandered bemused back into the desert. Shaikh Rashid sympathizes with such disorientation. He did not understand nor believe that men could have travelled to the moon when first he saw it on television.

Sharjah, down the road, tries hard to be more sophisticated and competes with prestige projects which flatter important foreign countries. There are no taxes, no unions, no foreign exchange controls, and no prohibition on land-owning. 'We are the ultimate in the free enterprise system,' says Bert Paff, an American who was the ruler's adviser until 1978. 'There are lots of opportunities here, but we don't want to become just another tax haven with brass plates and post office boxes. We want major international corporations that can stand on their own feet and contribute something to the economy.' Between 1976 and 1978 the number of hotel rooms increased from 249 to over 3000 and official brochures boast, 'Sharjah isn't too good to be true. It only sounds that way.'

It does not to Shaikh Rashid. A few years ago his son Mohamed tried to clarify a dispute in which Sharjah claimed part of its land was being stolen by Dubai for a road. Mohamed, who is also UAE defence minister, flew off in his helicopter but was unfortunately shot down by Sharjah policemen. The helicopter was incapacitated and he had to take an undignified taxi ride home. Nevertheless, he is philosophical. On a desk in his office is a sign, 'It is *nice* to be important *but* it is more important to be *nice*.' Shaikh Sultan of Sharjah, whose degree in agriculture from Cairo University qualifies him as the best educated Emirate ruler, is apologetic. 'It was a mistake,' he told me. 'These disputes are one of our teething problems.' Like the day in 1972 when his older brother, Khalid, was shot dead in a family squabble and Sultan became ruler.

Nowadays, most animosity between the families is relieved in a commercial rather than warlike manner, although federal police had to control the over-excitement when Shaikh Rashid discovered Sharjah had planned a forty-four-storey building to outclass his own mini-skyscraper. The Dubai ruler immediately claimed the land, and construction was halted. Billboards near the site now proclaim mockingly, SMILE. YOU ARE IN SHARJAH.

Shaikh Rashid, having exhausted his urban fantasies with two harbours, two international airports, dry dock, cement factory, aluminium smelter, and wall-to-wall buildings for his 200 000 people, now hopes to attract clean-living world attention by international extravaganzas such as the Dubai International Track and Field Championships. This event was announced in 1977 at a time when they had no athletes, no dates, and no venue, but plenty of money – £1 million in prizes, with £170 000 for the winner of the mile – and American promotional talent in the form of Falconry Sports Enterprises of Chicago. Minor problems seem unimportant, such as the fact that ‘international’ has a limited interpretation if women, Russians, East Europeans, and Israelis are not allowed to compete in Dubai.

Sometimes, to his chagrin, Shaikh Rashid is upstaged. He was not happy when the tiny emirate of Ras al Khaimah, whose ruler is rumoured to be the actual owner of London’s Dorchester Hotel, installed one of the world’s most advanced earth satellite stations capable of operating 972 telex channels and able to transmit colour television programmes live from anywhere in the world. It does seem like overkill, as there are only twelve telex subscribers and 660 telephones, but Ras al Khaimah has a precedent for such ambition. Its airport – funded, like many other projects, by Saudi Arabia, which needs a friend at the mouth of the Gulf but finds Shaikh Rashid too independent and worries that Sharjah has large financial contributions from Iran – has a runway 3760 metres long to take two jumbo jets at a time. But who wants to go there? Since it was opened in March 1976, its five fire engines, control tower, Customs and immigration have been on twenty-four-hour duty. At first, this was in honour of just one flight a week – from Kuwait.

Shaikh Rashid has few personal extravagances. He leads a dull private life, by Middle East standards, and goes hunting in Pakistan rather than in the gamey environs of European brothels. On one of his first visits to London, his ambition was to drive an underground train. Startled officials, accustomed to more sybaritic requests from oriental gentlemen, let him take the controls between Earls Court and Acton.

Now in his seventies, with a well-lined face, an aquiline nose and an almost perpetual amused glint in his eyes, he has open-

house *majlis* most days from nine a.m. until two p.m. He sits on a settee, kicks off his sandals, puts his feet on the table in front of him, and fills a small brass-lined pipe with tobacco from an old brown aspirin bottle. He rarely uses the numerous ornate boxes he has been given by well-wishers. Sitting around the room are guards with ancient Czech rifles. A procession of bedouin with camel sticks, and Western visitors with contracts and hope, wanders in and out. He signs every cheque, sees every agreement.

'It's amazing how he keeps the figures in his head,' whispers his senior aide Humeid bin Draï. 'He is a man of the people, but he does not like publicity - unlike Zayed who wants to see himself on television every five minutes. That's the difference between the two.'

Rashid is the most approachable of money-rush potentates. The Dubai telephone directory lists seventeen numbers for him, including his bedroom, sitting-room, wireless-room, yacht, and garden.

It is the same during the summer in London. Anyone can walk in to see him, almost.

Bodyguards sit both sides of the lift on the seventeenth floor of the Carlton Tower Hotel, Cadogan Place, Chelsea. As the door opens, they tense and observe the visitor. Another man checks credentials.

Suite 1712, with its uninspiring view over Battersea power station, has been rearranged to suit its guest. All the bedroom furniture except a television set is removed, and settees and wicker chairs of varying height and shape are placed along three walls. Tables at the back of the room are covered with pink cloths, cups and saucers, and pots of tea. The bar is filled exclusively with Pepsi-Cola.

In front of a mirrored wall at one end sits Shaikh Rashid, his only concession to London being to discard his sandals in favour of grey socks and black lace-up shoes which he rests on the table next to an ever-present box of coloured paper tissues. Now and again he takes one and, with disconcerting gusto, coughs phlegm into it.

He is here with twenty retainers, one of whom offers coffee from an Arab pot. His wife and family are staying in a house 'somewhere near London airport' says Humeid bin Draï vaguely. From six in the morning until ten, and again from six in the evening until eight, Shaikh Rashid conducts his *majlis*. That morning he greeted, and then chastised, a Saudi who he discovered had tipped the hotel lavatory attendant £10. Conspicuous stupidity is giving the Arabs a bad name. After that he had a long talk with former British foreign secretary, Reginald Maudling. Coincidentally it was the day the politician was to be criticized in the House of Commons for unfortunate business relationships with a convicted criminal, architect John Poulson, so the Arabs thought it politic to deny the meeting. 'He definitely did not see us,' bin Draï told the London *Evening Standard*. 'Perhaps he was visiting someone else. There are a lot of Arabs in the hotel.'

A chubby man of infinite charm, bin Draï's flexible attitude towards truth is based on humanitarian instincts. 'Mr Maudling is a good friend of ours. We did not want to add to his problems by admitting that,' he told me later as we sat with Shaikh Rashid watching a slide show given by two civic dignitaries from Portland, Oregon. It was accompanied by a stirring 'here is our town, and here is our harbour, and here is our wunnerful mayor' type of commentary which the ruler listened to, smiling courteously. He does not understand English, so it was probably beneficial that the projector broke down halfway through.

Shaikh Rashid's liberal attitude has made Dubai the most acceptable resting-place for foreigners on the money-rush circuit, more relaxed than Abu Dhabi, less prissy than Bahrain, not so tumultuous as Tehran.² There is no religious authoritarianism - Christmas Day is a public holiday and the ruler himself laid a foundation stone for the Anglican church. Although expatriate drunk drivers are deported immediately, alcohol is not banned and there is a pub, the Rose and Crown, and a country club three miles out of town which provides a haven of darts playing, drinking and slot machining for expats,