



A smiling shopkeeper selling Agal

Soaking in the Souqs of Sharjah

Sharjah is the third largest emirate of the United Arab Emirates (UAE), both in terms of size and population. It would not be a stretch to call this the cultural capital of the UAE. If there is one thing that binds Indians to the Arabs, that is the markets. We love our 'bazaars' and they love their 'souqs'.

Vasudevan Raghavachari

O riginally a *souq* (or a *souk*, *suk* or *shouk*) was an open air temporary market where merchants from faraway towns came in their caravans and spread their wares outside the village. The term was commonly used in North African and Arabic regions. Similarly, *souqs* sprung up in Sharjah as well, during its many centuries of existence.

Prior to coming here, the few *souqs*

that I had visited were all in Dubai and I loved them, one in particular stood out where the delicious aroma of spices wafted and tickled my olfactory nerves. That was all a long time back. For now, we will stick to Sharjah!

Let me take you on a virtual tour of the *souqs* of Sharjah that I found interesting.

Al Arsa

This is perhaps the oldest *souq* of

Sharjah. Strategically redeveloped now, it evolved near the port. *Arsa* or *Arssa* means vacant land. Apparently, there was a vacant lot between the council building and Bait al Naboodah (Naboodah family house) where traders and merchants congregated to do their business. Al Naboodah was one of the richest and prominent pearl traders of his time.

Now it is a covered *souq* but not an air-conditioned one, so as to give the

Souq Saqr is a great place to shop for spices, dry fruits, *oud* (agarwood) and *sheesha* (hookah)

visitors a sense of travelling back in time. The heritage authorities have renovated the Arsa Souq in the now heritage precincts of Sharjah, just next door to the perfectly restored Naboodah house, which has been converted to the Sharjah Heritage Museum. Generally, the shops sell antiques, souvenirs, clothes, footwear, accessories and other knick-knacks. On one side is a large space with benches and a café where one can rest their tired feet after shopping. This is not a big *souq* but is historically very important. Some of the lanes are still being renovated and some shops were closed, perhaps I came in too early to look at the *souq*.

Blue Souq

Officially known as the Central Souq, Blue Souq is an air conditioned *souq* built about 40 years ago and is probably the first modern *souq* in the region. I particularly liked the apt nickname of the Blue Souq because of the distinctive blue tiles on the outside walls and domes. The Blue Souq houses about 600 shops in its two long buildings of two stories, connected by walkways.

The architecture and the intricate design retain the Arabic look and feel. The high vaulted ceilings provide a sense of grandeur when you walk in the main corridor. There were several gold jewellery shops in one section. I had a brief conversation with an Indian shopkeeper and he said that the prices were at least 10 to 20 pc lower than in India. The jewellery section connects to the clothing, which gives way to premium accessories and so on. The first floor has Persian carpets, rugs and souvenir shops amongst others.

The second building has sections for apparels, Arabian perfumes, travel accessories, etc. It was meant to be and has perhaps achieved its status as a one-stop modern *souq* for all your



(Above) Arabic sweet called Burma with Pistachio; (Below) Souq Al Jumaa, the Friday market

shopping needs. When it first opened, it was a big hit with the neighbouring emirates of Dubai and Abu Dhabi till Dubai started building huge modern malls. Blue Souq still attracts a lot of local visitors and tourists.

Al Souq Al Shanasiyah

Al Souq Al Shanasiyah literally translates to The Market of Merchants from the state of Shanas. This is perhaps the newest and the smallest of all the *souqs* built over one of the oldest *souqs* bearing the same name. Nearly 6,000 square metres has been redeveloped into a market wearing the 1950s look. As per Shurooq (Sharjah Investment and Development Authority) the foundations of an old

souq was found here; hence the decision to build a new one at the same location. There are just 17 shops but owing to its location in the heritage district between Corniche and the Al Hisn Fort, it is expected to be popular.

I could already see it was popular with youngsters and, of course, the omnipresent tourists.

Gold Souq

When visiting this *souq*, there should be a notice saying keep your credit cards under a tight leash. The Gold Centre, as it is formally called, was opened in 1996 and is located about three kilometres east of Al Nakheel Oasis. There are 47 international and local jewellery shops. I saw a couple



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some even come from other emirates because items are cheaper in the Iranian market of Sharjah.



(Above) Fish market auction in action ; (Below) Narrow lanes of Al Arsa

of Indian brands too. There were a lot more gold shops here than in the Blue Souq and thereby a lot more glitter. The prices were right but there were fewer footfalls. In fact, if one wants to avoid crowds while doing jewellery shopping then this might be a better option.

This location is generally not on any packaged tourist itinerary, perhaps, due to the fact that Dubai Gold Souq outshines this by several notches.

Iranian Quarters

On the Corniche street, close to the Heart of Sharjah lie Souq Saqr, an

Iranian *souq*. Persian merchants set up shops in late 18th century in Al Shuwaiheen area of Sharjah making it more than 200 years old. This is a great place to shop for spices, dry fruits, *oud* (agarwood) and *sheesha* (hookah). Of course, where else than the Persian Quarters for the Persian carpets and hang on... I am told that it is quite okay to bargain a bit in these shops. I have not tried and anyway I am not great at bargaining, so you do it at your peril.

While shopkeepers may have lost some business to the malls, many say that there are loyal customers;

Fish Souq

Officially called the Al Jubail Souq, it is not too far from the Blue Souq. I have been to fish markets in many places but I have never seen the catch being auctioned in such an organised manner. I call this 'fish exchange' (as opposed to stock exchange) for the fishy business. The Al Jubail auctioneers set the price of the fish at a rate that is beneficial to the fishermen. There is a ring in the middle of the hall where the sellers and buyers congregate, under the supervision of official auctioneers, to out-shout each other and negotiate a price, thus loosening their purse strings a bit or a lot depending on the type of fish.

The jovial director, an ardent lover of Bollywood music, said the number of fishing *dhow*s (sailing vessel) that are permitted out to the sea every morning, are regulated to ensure that the marine life is not exploited to the point of no return. He also declared proudly, spread over a million square feet, this was perhaps the biggest meat and vegetable market in the Middle East and several tonnes of fish change hands each day!

It is normal to have a lot of noise in a fish market, but I was surprised at how much noise could be generated in the auction hall filled with just about 50 people. One can have a bird's eye view of the proceedings from the viewing gallery on a higher level.

Two things set this place apart from other fish markets I have visited. Firstly, the trading ring was being cleaned every few minutes owing to strict



(Left to right) Souvenirs and artefacts shop in Al Arsa; All that glitters is gold : The Gold Souq

sense of hygiene and cleanliness and secondly, since the catch was fresh, there was no rotten smell. There was of course a little bit of marine smell, which was not too bad.

On two opposite sides are the retail markets, with its 370 shops, where the locals get fresh produce. On one side are the meat shops and a section with an army of workers using the latest equipment to clean and slice the fish and on the other side are green grocers. I enjoyed walking through the aisles and also picked up a few boxes of Iranian dates at the recommendation of our Iranian guide. One of the highlights for a tourist is that the *souq* is open from 6:30 in the morning to 11:30 at night (yes you read that right), except for Fridays.

Souq Al Jum'aa

Jumaa in Arabic means Friday. While driving to Khorfakkan to enjoy the pristine beaches, we brace ourselves to pass through a particularly rough hill terrain of Al Hajjar Mountains just before the Sharjah-Fujairah border, a large roadside market comes to the view and the guide proudly says with a glint in his eyes "We are now at the Friday Market". "Why not?" I thought, except the only incongruous thing was that it was not Friday and the market was fully operational.

The guide with a superior smile, expecting a barrage of questions said that it all started out as a Friday market. The story goes that a farmer from Dibba, Fujairah used to sit at the

Al Dhaid – Al Masafi roadside under the shade of a tree to sell his farm products to travellers. Over time more and more farmers and traders joined them and eventually it was legalised by the ruler. This is another full-fledged market where you can find all household goods, potteries, fruits and vegetables. A couple of shops even sold ready-to-plant palm trees in their nursery.

I enquired at one of the carpet shops if these were Persian with a wicked smile, fully knowing that these were synthetic. The shopkeeper was taken aback and said sheepishly that a lot of them were from China.

Roadside markets everywhere

Apart from the regular *souqs*, every building in Sharjah, except the office and high rise residential buildings, has shops opening to the road. What you can't find in the malls or *souqs*, you will find here.

I saw some unique shops selling hundreds of types of *agal* or *iqal*. An *agal* is a thick black rope worn on the head to keep the *keffiyeh* (traditional Middle Eastern headdress) in place. It is said that in olden days it actually doubled up as a rope to tie things when needed. Depending on the country, it may be made of goat hair, camel hair or silk. Now, mostly, it is a mark of dignity and honour.

So, the calling is clear, when in Sharjah, soak up the *souqs* to experience an authentic cultural fare and on the side, hone your bargaining skills too! ■



How to Reach

Indians require the UAE visa that can be arranged from an authorised hotel or travel agent in the UAE. There are many flights from many cities in India to Sharjah or Dubai. Air Arabia, the latest entry into the fray, is a low-cost airline with HQ in Sharjah and flies from 13 Indian cities.

Where to Stay

Sharjah has hotels to cater to all budgets. Radisson Blu is close to the heritage area. Hotel Royal Tulip-The Act is close to the Al Noor mosque. Oceanic Resort in Khorfakkan with its own private beach is a great place to stay and serves a great lunch buffet.