

Black Gold Tour to the Persian Gulf

We hear on almost a daily basis that oil remains one of the world's most precious and sought-after commodities, and that the most extensive reserves of this natural resource lie in the Middle East. This past November, ten educators (four college-level and six high school-level) traveled with PIER Outreach Director Greta Scharnweber to Qatar and the U.A.E. for a field study tour designed to look into this assumption and explore a variety of topics related to oil in the Middle East and beyond. It focused broadly on the rapidly developing economies of the Arabian Peninsula, touched upon oil and energy issues, and focused most significantly on educational and cultural exchange.

The study tour was a follow-up to the week-long "Black Gold: The Geopolitics of Oil" PIER summer institute attended by 30 educators in July 2006. It featured academic and professional speakers from a variety of disciplines, and the group investigated topics such as the impact of oil's discovery on culture and society in the Persian Gulf, the environmental impacts of the oil industry worldwide, current and future issues in the oil economy, and the political ramifications of the energy sector in the Middle East and beyond.

Drawing upon their experiences in the summer program, the study tour visited Qatar first, exploring its natural attractions such as the inland sea (Khor al-Adaid) and its surrounding desert, as well as cultural/historical heritage sites in and around Doha, including the Qatar National Museum, the historic dhow fishing port, several old markets, and Doha's beautiful waterfront Corniche. Next on the agenda was the Qatar Foundation's Education City. It has a campus-like environment where several U.S. universities have established satellite campuses, including Cornell, Georgetown, and Texas A & M. Coeducational university education in Qatar is a new endeavor, and the Yale group learned much about Qatari students' experiences at these experimental campuses. A highlight of the Education City tour included a visit to the studios of the BBC's high-ranking program, "The Doha Debates," where the show's producers discussed their efforts to create a public forum for dialogue and free speech in Qatar, highlighting Qatar's growing reputation for journalistic strength in the Arab world. Finally, a visit to the U.S. Embassy helped to shed light on U.S.-Qatari relations and U.S. policies related to energy and commerce in the region.

After four days in Qatar, the group journeyed to Dubai, U.A.E., for the final five days of the journey. While the bulk of the tour was based in Dubai, side trips to Abu Dhabi and Sharjah helped to broaden the group's perspective of the country. Within Dubai, site visits to Zayed University (the national women's university), the Latifa School for Girls, and the Rashid School for Boys introduced the travelers to some of the finest educational institutions in the region. Walking tours of the Bastakia quarter in old Dubai, modern art galleries, the colorful traditional souqs of Deira, Hindi Lane, a mosque visit in Jumeira, and a visit to the Dubai Museum helped the group get to know the many sides of Dubai and the Emirates at large. A presentation by Paul Dyer at the Dubai School of Government (a Harvard affiliate institution) was instrumental in understanding the exponential growth of Dubai as a new metropolis in the Arab World. Day-to-day interactions with people working in Dubai helped shed

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From top to bottom: Vanessa Del Giudice of Barrington High School, RI, shops for Indian scarves in Dubai; Sue Troupe of Brookfield High School, CT, asks a question of Qatari tour guide; the PIER group outside of the Qatar National Museum.

light on what is becoming a major crisis in the region – the precarious plight of the millions of Asian guest workers who now outnumber Emiratis or Qataris by a factor of five to one. Perhaps the most memorable highlight of the trip was a group dinner with several members of the ruling Al-Nahyan family of Abu Dhabi, organized by AMIDEAST.

As follow-up to this field study, participants presented on their reflections on December 7 in a PIER Hot Topics workshop, and will also help to host a July 2007 delegation from Oman, the UAE, and Saudi Arabia in collaboration with the Teacher Preparation Program at Yale University. Most of the teachers have incorporated knowledge from the program into their classes, and some are presenting in their colleagues' classrooms as well.

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