

DUBAI LIFE & TIMES

Through the lens of Noor Ali Rashid



An aerial photograph of a coastal area. A creek flows from the top left towards the center. The land is sandy with scattered palm trees. In the lower-left quadrant, there is a large, rectangular building with a flat roof and several windows. The overall scene is a mix of natural and built environments.

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Previous pages: Dubai creek – the reason for the city's existence. Rooftop aerials and a few modern buildings hint at the changes to come but, for the most part, in 1961, the banks of the waterway were still lined, as they had been for a century or more, only by the old wind-towered houses.

Most of the old buildings have gone, the wharfage has been improved, the Bedford trucks have been replaced by Nissans and Toyotas, and the abras now have powerful motors rather than oars – but the dhows have hardly changed at all and still make their voyages to the ports of the Gulf, the Indian subcontinent and East Africa.

WHILST THERE HAD been a settlement on the site of present-day Dubai for centuries, the city's modern history began in 1833 when a branch of the Bani Yas family of Abu Dhabi, led by Obaid bin Said and Maktoum bin Buti, left Abu Dhabi to settle in Dubai. Attracted by the creek, a rare haven on the southern shores of the Arabian Gulf, the small community of some 800 souls lived by trading in fish and pearls. It was a modest existence, but it established Dubai as an entrepôt port and formed a secure basis for the commercial development that was to come – and still continues today. The town received a further boost to trade in the early years of this century when its practical fiscal policies found appeal with the merchants of the Persian ports on the eastern coast of the Gulf, who were disenchanted with new customs duties imposed by the Shah. In a fine demonstration of the effect of punitive taxation, they moved lock, stock and barrel (an appropriate analogy, since trade in firearms also formed an important part of the commercial activities) to the more congenial environment of Dubai. Now, nearly a hundred years later, multinational businesses are doing the same – and for much the same reason.

The ubiquitous Land Rover – along with the Bedford truck – formed a vital part of the logistics system. Roads were still uncommon – the first in Dubai was constructed in 1964 and it was not until 1967 that there was a surfaced link to Sharjah – so four-wheel-drive vehicles were essential.

A prime site on the banks of the creek in the mid-60s, at which time the Carlton Tower was built. As oil revenues began to come in there was a frenzy of construction as the infrastructure was built to meet the developing needs of the fast-expanding city. Just a few years before, children had played on the creek's sandy foreshores, where now there rose modern buildings.

