

# COLUMBIA DAILY SPECTATOR

Posted by

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## The Real Dubai

One of my favorite Facebook wall-to-walls of all time was an exchange between the scion of a military-contracting corporation and the heir to an eight-figure banking empire. Let's call them 'Terrance' and 'Philip.' Since the original conversation cannot be located, I'll have to do my best to reconstruct it from memory:

T. 'I'm back from playing polo in Montego Bay. The fields are laser-flattened. What do you want to do this weekend?'

P. 'Charter my father's private jet to Dubai? There's this new club on the waterfront I think you'd like.'

T. 'Can we chopper it out to Westport and then fly out? You know how I hate ground transportation.'

P. 'Yes.'

A day later status updates were filed, and thirty-six hours after that the photos were posted, the travelers were back, and the rest of the trip vanished like a handful of sand. Dubai's opulence is a subject tackled in Christopher Davidson's new monograph, *Dubai: The Vulnerability of Success*, but, as the subtitle indicates, its fragility and ephemerality are also defining characteristics of this once sleepy, dusty town on the Persian Gulf.

It's a miracle that Dubai even got to this point, and – as a historian – Davidson's impulse is to use the past to explain the present, so his book starts at the beginning, the very beginning. Why so comprehensive? I wondered. Surely there must be a wealth of literature on this most morbidly fascinating of city-states. 'Actually, there isn't,' said Davidson, in a clipped Britannic accent. I bid him start at the very beginning. 'I'd lived in Dubai when I was younger,' he continued. 'When the time came to do a Ph.D., we discovered that there was nothing written in English.'

'So it's the only work of its kind?'

'Yes. There's the advantage of its being a pioneering study.' I mentioned some theories of Rashid Khalidi, pre-eminent historian of the Levant. 'I don't buy into that theory at all.' The conversation was, like the book, full of surprising revelations: 'Dubai only gets about three to four percent of its income today from oil. They've diversified with great success, expanded into areas like real estate and finance.' Is it actually like the Dubai of clubs, indoor ski slopes, and artificial islands? 'It's not really so glamorous – journalists tend to paint a picture of the extremes: the Monte Carlo-like area; the poor Indians and Pakistanis. But the vast majority of it is people in the middle.'

Diversification and a solid middle-class: whither, then, the vulnerability? ‘The heart of the matter,’ Davidson told me, ‘can be answered in three questions: One, where did the political and economic systems come from; Two, what are they trying to do; and Three, how would the government achieve stability?’ I gave up and asked for the answers; this is, after all, the Anglophone world’s foremost authority on Dubai. ‘One, mostly from Britain ... the dynasties that rule today are the same as established in 1820. Two, they’re trying to break their reliance on oil income ... Three, now the big foreign protector is gone; the government, up until this point, has been able to modernize without making concessions to democracy, but, should any of its myths be exposed, it would be vulnerable ...’

The historian tends to use the past to explain the present; what about using the present to predict the future? Davidson demurred. I asked him about the education system. ‘It’s true that there’s no proper knowledge economy,’ he said. ‘Most faculty are Western. There’s a large dependence on foreigners. There’s just no motivation for students to get skilled jobs.’ Apocalyptic? Hardly – people have been saying the same about the United States for several years. For its thoroughness and groundbreaking insights, Davidson’s book is highly recommended, but for its academic tone, this recommendation is for a narrow audience indeed. Still, casual readers can pick up a few pages and go home knowing more about ‘the real Dubai’ than Terrance or Philip ever will.