GULF LIFE

{ IN D I A }
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{ L O S T  C I T Y  F O U N D }
The pearling town swallowed by Qatar’s shifting sands

Gulf Air
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Find #2: copper alloy fitting
Find #3: rare tobacco pipe
First came Mada’in Saleh in Saudi Arabia, then the fabled city of Ubar in Oman, but could Al-Zubarah be the Gulf’s greatest lost city yet?
THE YEAR IS 1810 at a busy port on the Arabian Gulf in what is now Qatar. The harbour front is teeming with activity as dhows of all sizes crowd alongside, loading and unloading their cargo. Some have sailed here from as far away as India, laden with exotic merchandise such as silks, spices and precious stones. Wealthy merchants inspect the different goods on offer, haggling with the ship captains, but they also barter their own treasure – valuable local pearls.

This scene was once typical in the settlement of Al-Zubarah, at that time home to as many as 9,000 people and one of the most important trading posts in the entire Gulf. Yet, within a year, it was burned to the ground and fell into a decline from which it never recovered. Less than a century later, it had been engulfed, not by water, but by sand. Only now is the buried city being revealed, thanks to a multi-million dollar project led by the Qatar Museums Authority (QMA). Using the latest technology, archaeologists are uncovering Al-Zubarah’s secrets and shedding new light on an elusive chapter in Gulf history.

“In its heyday, Al-Zubarah was rich and influential,” says Professor Alan Walmsley, the project’s director for archaeology. “It was a strategic location on the trade routes between East and West, particularly because of its proximity to the pearling beds.” Pearls were among the Gulf’s most lucrative commodities and enabled Al-Zubarah’s inhabitants to adorn their homes with expensive imported goods from as far away as China. Archaeologists have now unearthed some of these items, and are using them to piece together a jigsaw image of the people who once lived and worked in the lost city.

Extending over 60 hectares, Al-Zubarah was built in what appears to have been a relatively short period during the second half of the 18th century. Much of it was laid out on a grid and it is now considered by experts to be one of the region’s TOP Decorated plaster from a sheikh’s palace; LEFT An expedition crossing Qatar’s shifting desert sea
THE SHIFTING SANDS OVERWHELMED FIRST THE STREETS AND COURTYARDS, AND THEN, ONE BY ONE, THE WALLS AND ROOFS WERE SWALLOWED UP

best surviving examples of Arabian urban planning. Geophysical surveys and radar tracking have revealed the outlines of streets lined with residential courtyard houses, mostly single-storey buildings of rendered beach stones, with flat roofs supported by wooden beams. It is a measure of Al-Zubarah’s wealth that the wood used was often imported from India or East Africa.

Based on the evidence they are uncovering within the houses, archaeologists have identified different types of rooms, from kitchens to sleeping quarters. They have also discovered several grander residences that would have been occupied by the wealthiest families and a souq. The most impressive structure found so far is a palatial compound with nine interconnected courtyards, probably the home of one of Al-Zubarah’s senior sheikhs. Beyond this, the entire city was bounded on its landward side by a large defensive wall, extending 2.5km in length, with 22 watchtowers positioned at regular intervals.

Yet it was not from the land but the sea that the enemy eventually came. In 1811, during a period of political upheaval, Omani boats arrived offshore and proceeded to open fire with their cannons. Much of Al-Zubarah was destroyed in the bombardment and ensuing fire, and many of the inhabitants fled. Although the city continued to be occupied for almost another 100 years, it rapidly dwindled in size and prosperity. The abandoned houses were soon buried under the shifting sands, which overwhelmed first the streets and courtyards, and then, one by one, the walls and roofs were swallowed up.

Al-Zubarah remained lost from view until the 1980s, when Qatari archaeologists undertook the first excavations there.

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QATAR’S LOST CITY

But the scale of its survival has only become apparent since 2009, when a 10-year partnership between the QMA and the University of Copenhagen started. Now there is a community of 70 conservation experts, comprising up to 15 nationalities, working on the site from October through to March every year.

Each scrape of an archaeologist’s trowel yields yet more fascinating information. Streets that have lain buried for more than a century can now be strolled along once more, while the walls and doorways of houses have been uncovered and are protected against further deterioration. The thousands of objects discovered include sections of moulded plasterwork, metal handles and hinges, coins, cannons and fragments of storage jars, incense burners and porcelain. “Each item is carefully recorded and labeled,” explains finds manager Holly Parton, “and the best examples of these will be selected for display in the new National Museum of Qatar [set to open in December 2014].”

As the most complete and best-preserved pearling settlement surviving anywhere in the world, Al-Zubarah is especially rich in artefacts associated with the lost pearling industry. These include the heavy stone weights that the pearl divers would hold on to as they dived into the waters of the Gulf in search of their precious cargo.

For most, a visit starts at the impressive fort located just outside the actual archaeological site and built in 1938. It is currently under careful restoration, with natural materials being used as much as possible. Later this year, the site will be opening more fully to the public, with interpretation tools including apps that will provide visual reconstructions of how the bustling port looked in its prime.

“Once they have the opportunity to open up to the past, young Qatars are fascinated by what is here,” explains outreach officer Nasreen Mohammed. “Al-Zubarah is providing new generations with a lost connection to their history.” Much more than a living example, the site is expected to be a key element of Qatar’s new National Museum of Qatar.

For more information, please visit qma.org.qa

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Digging up the past

OPPOSITE The street grid and city layout surviving anywhere in the world, Al-Zubarah is especially rich in artefacts associated with the lost pearling industry. These include the heavy stone weights that the pearl divers would hold on to as they dived into the waters of the Gulf in search of their expensive cargo.

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أطلانتس تحت الرمال

في البداية كانت مدائن صالح في السعودية، ثم جات مدينة عبار الأسطورية في عمان.
اليوم، هل من الممكن أن تكون الزبارة في قطر هي أعظم مدن الخليج الضائعة وسط الرمال؟ نحاول هنا الإجابة على هذا السؤال.

جيمس باري