ARABIAN WONDERLAND

Manama, Bahrain. This is a tale of a very different Arab sheikhdom from Kuwait. Let's start with drunk Saudis.

A drunk Saudi is a very amusing spectacle. Saudi Arabia is the most uptight, rigidly repressed place on the planet. What the map above doesn't show is a causeway enabling Saudis to drive to the island of Bahrain, the Arabian Wonderland, where they proceed to unrepress themselves.

Sober, Saudis are arrogant putzes sneering at American infidels. Smashed, they are still obnoxious but very friendly. They keep saying, "My friend," and talk nonstop in increasingly unintelligible English until they pass out. This upsets the hookers, for an unconscious customer, no matter how rich, is of no use to them.

Bahrain has a history as old as civilization - which began in Sumer in present-day southern Iraq. Sumerian cuneiform tablets, dated before 2,000 BC, called Bahrain *Tilmun*, revered as the land where the hero of the Sumerian Gilgamesh flood myth, Ut-napishtim (the prototype for Noah, the Hebrews learning the story during their Babylonian Captivity from 597-538 BC), gains

immortality.

For subsequent civilizations of Assyria, Babylonia, and Persia, Bahrain was *Awal*, a trading crossroads between Mesopotamia and the Indus Valley civilizations of Harappa and Mohenjo-Dara in present-day Pakistan.

After Alexander conquered Persia in 334 BC, Bahrain became part of the Greek Seleucid Empire (see the history of Kuwait from last week), known as *Tylos*, a Hellenization of Tilmun. Fascinatingly, the Greeks believed that natives of Tylos were the original Phoenicians, that colonists from Tylos/Tilmun established the Phoenician capital of Tyre (in present-day Lebanon) prior to 1000 BC.

More fascinating, however, is that Tylos became Christian. After the Seleucid Greeks came the Sassanid Persians, founded by a guy named Sasan around 200 AD. While Zoroastrianism was their state religion, they encouraged a competitor to Roman Christianity to flourish called Nestorian Christianity.

This was founded by the Archbishop of Constantinople, Nestorius (386-451), who argued that Jesus had two distinct natures, human and divine. Since Mary provided the human part, she could not be called *Theotokos*, "Mother of God." Condemned as heretics, Nestorians fled to Persia, headquartering their church in Tylos.

From Tylos, Nestorian Christianity spread throughout Persia, India, Tang Dynasty China, and even among the Mongols. They were allowed these missionary activities by the Arab Moslems, who had taken over Persia in the mid-700s, because the Arabs had problems of their own on the island they called *Bahrain* - Arabic for "two seas," for all the freshwater springs on the island plus the ocean surrounding it.

A Bahraini Persian, Hamdan Qarmat (*ca.* 850-930), denounced Arabs for saying drinking wine was sinful. He advocated an Islam based on reason, denounced as an un-Islamic superstition the Arab worship of a stone (the meteorite called *al-Hajar-ul-Aswad*, the Black Stone, for which the Kaaba temple in Mecca was built, and towards which all Moslems pray), led an army of his followers - "Qarmatians" - to sack Mecca, took the Black Stone back to Bahrain, and forced the Arabs to pay an enormous ransom for it.

Under the Qarmatians, Bahrain became hugely wealthy, and has been rebelling against uptight orthodox Islam ever since. The Bahrainis were happy to form an alliance with the exploring Portuguese in the 1500s to protect them from the new rulers of Persia, the Safavids, and with the British in the 1800s to protect them from the Ottoman Turks and Saudi bandits.

When the al-Sabah family became rulers of Kuwait (see the link above), the rival al-Khalifa family moved to Bahrain, which by the late 1700s had become a backwater. Under the al-Khalifas and

with formal British naval protection, by the mid-1800s Bahrain was flourishing as the Persian Gulf's main trading center. Merchants from all over the world were welcomed to live and prosper.

Bahrain became the most cosmopolitan and tolerant Arab land in the Middle East. The discovery of oil in the 1930s just made it even more prosperous. When Lebanon went belly up with its 1975 civil war, Bahrain replaced Beirut as the Middle East's financial hub.

Granted independence from Britain in 1971, Bahrain needed a more powerful protector than the Brits when the Ayatollahs took over Persia-Iran in 1979 and began fomenting rebellions against the Al-Khalifa rulers. President Ronald Reagan was only too happy to have a Defense Cooperation Agreement between Bahrain and the US. The US Navy Fifth Fleet and Central Command (NAVCENT) is headquartered in Bahrain. President George W. Bush designated Bahrain a "Major Non-NATO US Ally."

The contrast between Bahrain and Kuwait can be stark. Both are small super-rich Arab sheikdoms (technically Kuwait is an Emirate ruled by Emir Sabah al-Jaber al-Sabah, while Bahrain is a kingdom ruled by King Hamad bin Isa al-Khalifa). Both are US allies. Both despise the Iran of Ayatollahs and espouse a moderate Islam.

That's what they have in common. Kuwaitis are almost as insufferably arrogant as Saudis, Bahrainis are the easy-going opposite. Of Kuwait's 2.7 million population, half are foreign workers whom the Kuwaitis treat like dirt. Of Bahrain's 750K, one-third are foreigners who love working in Bahrain as they are treated fairly and decently.

Kuwait is a pain in the neck to do business in, with its maze of regulations and bureacracies. Bahrain is one of the most pro-free market countries in the world, ranking #13 (out of 179) in the Index of Economic Freedom. Kuwait is #42.

Bahrain is genuinely pro-American, Kuwait reluctantly so. Kuwaitis actually resent that we saved their country from Saddam. Bahrainis are grateful that we protect them from Iran - and the Saudis.

There is no booze in Kuwait, not even for foreigners in expensive hotels. A smuggled bottle of Jack Daniels costs $150. The only fellow I know who was able to successfully bring a bottle of booze into the country carried it in the sling of his broken arm.

Bahrain's night clubs and bars are legendary across the Middle East. At Club F1, Barnaby Joe's, Rock Bottom, and many others, the booze flows freely, hookers of every nationality abound, and Saudi hypocrisy is on full display.

It's great fun to watch. As for me personally, I was so thankful to have a pint of Guinness on draft with a hamburger for lunch after the parched wilderness of dry Kuwait.

For all of Kuwait's fabulous wealth, there's very little to show for it. The symbol of Kuwait remains these "golf ball" structures:

Compare that to this Bahraini office building/condo complex:

Or the amazing Bahrain World Trade Center (yes, those are electricity-generating windmills in the center):

The symbol for Bahrain are not such buildings, however. It is a tree. Known as the *Shajarat al-Hayah*, the Tree of Life, it is a mesquite tree that mysteriously thrives in an utterly barren desert with no known source of water.

Bahrainis revere the Tree of Life for it symbolizes them and their country - flourishing and free amidst barreness. They espouse a truly tolerant and moderate Islam, and are our friend and ally. May the Arabian Wonderland live long and prosper.