



## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Perhaps more than any other emirate, Ras Al Khaimah's urban and rural environments convey the aura of authenticity sought by many visitors to the region. The emirate contains numerous sites of cultural and archaeological interest, many of which are underutilized and underdeveloped. Current efforts to revitalize these sites are in their planning stages and as the emirate grows as a tourist destination, it will have to balance the desire to attract tourists with the need to retain the authentic atmosphere that attracts visitors in the first place. This paper proposes a broader temporal and spatial heritage concept than is usually found in the Gulf, and emphasizes continuities between heritage and contemporary Ras Al Khaimah. The paper then makes recommendations for how Ras Al Khaimah, as well as specific sites, can be made more accessible to visitors interested in the emirate's history and culture.

# Preserving and Promoting Ras Al Khaimah's Cultural Heritage

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## Introduction

In the Arabian Gulf, there has been a "heritage boom" over the past decade in the form of heritage-related festivals, museum construction, and popular engagement with and interest in heritage. In scholarly literature, heritage is understood as being constructed by the relatively young states of the Gulf region, and the region's various museums are perceived as carriers of official national, cultural, and historical narratives (Erskine-Loftus et al., 2016; Exell, 2016; Exell & Rico, 2014; Fox et al., 2006).

In spite of the growing interest in heritage within the region, the Gulf is still perceived in many tourist markets as inauthentic and artificial. Ras Al Khaimah presents an opportunity to develop new heritage preservation and cultural tourism practices that combine state-centric narratives with the daily life practices and narratives of ordinary citizens. The emirate's unique natural setting, its variety of physical environments, and diverse array of well-preserved cultural heritage sites exemplify its great appeal to visitors.

Tourism is one of Ras Al Khaimah's major growth industries, and the Ras Al Khaimah Tourism Development Authority (RAK TDA) has identified culture as one of its key themes for tourism development (RAK TDA, 2016). It is the visibility and strength of Ras Al Khaimah's cultural heritage and already-existing sense of authenticity that most sets it apart from other regions in the United Arab Emirates (UAE).

Ras Al Khaimah aims to increase its tourist numbers to 1,000,000 annual visitors in the next few years (RAK TDA, 2016). To take an extremely conservative estimate, five percent of those spending only one hundred dirhams each in the city itself would bring in five million dirhams to local businesses, people, and institutions. This figure does not include the costs of guides and transportation. The likely impact of a well-planned heritage preservation and tourism promotion strategy would be much larger (Kennet et al., 2015; RAK TDA, 2016; Ayres, 2017).

This paper builds upon and reinforces previous studies on potential rehabilitation efforts of key heritage sites in Ras Al Khaimah, which suggest ways to revitalize valuable areas of the emirate, making them accessible to visitors and residents alike (Seif, 2013; Zarifa, 2014), as well as to inform the strategic planning of key municipalities (Kennet et al., 2015). The paper first identifies Ras Al Khaimah's comparative advantages that will

attract tourists interested in Gulf Arab culture. It then proposes a more expansive notion of cultural heritage with which tourists can engage, and discusses how and why the built environment of Ras Al Khaimah city embodies the region's authentic heritage. The paper also describes and provides recommendations for the various sites in and around Ras Al Khaimah city that embody the above principles and exemplify ways to integrate tourism into already-existing local communities and environments in a sustainable manner.

This policy paper is based on field research in the form of site visitations and participant observation from September 2015 and June 2016, historical research in the British National Archives, and extensive exploration of Ras Al Khaimah city and emirate. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with approximately 20 Ras Al Khaimah residents and employees of the Department of Museums and Antiquities, RAK TDA, and Ras Al Khaimah Municipality.

## Ras Al Khaimah: Already an Authentic Experience

Authenticity is a key concept for the Ras Al Khaimah tourist brand, which the Ras Al Khaimah Tourist Development Authority describes in a vision statement as "a compelling destination for visitors seeking authentic cultural, historical, and natural Arabian experiences (RAK TDA, 2016)." The report proposes developing a cultural authentic atmosphere through projects such as a traditional souk, a purpose-built Bin Majid Museum, a historic square and performance space, and other newly-constructed spaces.

In fact, the emirate has achieved this feeling of authenticity without a conscious, planned effort to do so. This distinguishes Ras Al Khaimah from other cities in the UAE and the Gulf region, in that visitors identify authenticity with all parts of the city, rather than specific cultural sites. Field research, including interviews of tourists, student groups, and other visitors to Ras Al Khaimah – all of whom had spent at least a day and a half exploring the emirate – demonstrates that Ras Al Khaimah makes an immediate impression on visitors of all ages and backgrounds. When asked open-ended questions such as "What do you think of Ras Al Khaimah?" most described it as "real" and "authentic" without being prompted to do so. Quotes such as "Ras Al Khaimah has character," "Ras Al Khaimah has personality," and "This is the real UAE" suggest that in addition to constructing purpose-built heritage spaces such

as a "traditional souk," tourism should be better-integrated into the existing environment.

Interviews and conversations conducted with visitors in the course of their time in Ras Al Khaimah suggest their impressions of authenticity arise from the everyday experience of the Ras Al Khaimah urban environment. These contributing factors include:

1. The variety of building structures and architectural styles from different periods of the emirate's history – pre-oil, early modern, and contemporary – mingling together in small spaces. This means that the progression of Ras Al Khaimah's recent history and modernization over the second half of the twentieth century are immediately visible from most locations in the city. In addition, buildings and styles of various time periods are integrated with each other as part of the urban fabric, and continue to be used by ordinary residents of the city in their daily lives. Moving through the urban space of Ras Al Khaimah is an experience in moving from the 1950s to the present.
2. The city streetscape is dominated by locally-owned small businesses instead of international franchises. The businesses and buildings reflect the needs and aesthetics of local residents, while avoiding the standardization of appearances that characterizes other regional cities.
3. The informal use of urban space by residents encourages spontaneous interactions, improves the sense of community, and promotes a feeling of freedom in the urban environment. Family picnics on Corniche al-Qawasim, cricket and football games on the beaches, and multiple pedestrian gathering points in the Old Town all give the city a human scale largely absent in its more-famous neighbors.
4. Private ownership of land ensures that the emirate's landscape and built environment reflects the authentic heritage and life experience of its people. This is especially true in the Old Town, where approximately 57% of the land area is privately-held residential or commercial plots (Cadiz, 2009). This differentiates Ras Al Khaimah from other emirates where significant portions of land are developed by state planning agencies or property development corporations.
5. The close proximity of a variety of natural environments – the sea (including mangroves), the palm oasis and farm belt, the desert, and

the mountains – differentiates Ras Al Khaimah from other regional destinations. The interactions between these environments and their residents have defined Ras Al Khaimah for generations, and should be integrated into visitors' experience.

While Ras Al Khaimah has been commonly described as authentic, that feeling has not translated into an understanding of how to fully experience the city. The same visitors and tourists complained of not knowing what to do in Ras Al Khaimah itself. The lack of information about even well-known sites such as Al Jazira Al Hamra left some visitors confused and disappointed. In addition, several independent tourists (usually expatriates living in Dubai and Abu Dhabi) noted that in spite of the city's relatively small size, it was easy to get lost and that taxi drivers did not know where some of the main sites were located. In short, the Ras Al Khaimah experience is not legible to outsiders, who need a guide and information to take advantage of what the emirate has to offer. In both the present research and similar research undertaken by RAK TDA, visitors complained of poor road signage, lack of information available at historic sites, and the absence of guidebooks or tourist maps for the emirate (RAK TDA, 2016).

## Living Heritage

Ras Al Khaimah's authenticity is the emirate's primary comparative advantage relative to its neighbors. Rather than merely imitating the heritage-related attractions found elsewhere in the Arabian Gulf, Ras Al Khaimah has an opportunity to develop a new concept of heritage for visitors and residents alike, which this paper defines as "living heritage." Spatially, living heritage is integrated throughout the urban environment rather than being restricted to certain spaces. Temporally, living heritage connects the past to the present by incorporating the transition from the pre-oil era to contemporary lifestyles.

Living heritage can be usefully contrasted with the "Heritage Village" model that has long dominated representation of Gulf Arab heritage and culture, in which replicas of pre-oil structures contain static representations of past lifestyles. This model is increasingly seen as too static and unchanging to hold visitors' interests. Heritage villages isolate cultural displays in fixed, controlled locations; their content is remarkably uniform across the region, creating the effect of a generic Gulf Arab culture with little local variation. They consist of displays of state-authorized "traditional" artifacts and buildings (often replicas

or recreations), usually located in areas separate from the daily life of urban residents (Khalaf, 2002; Prager, 2015). Temporally, they are limited to the pre-oil period, which suggests that heritage has little connection to life today.

Rather than limiting representations of the past to heritage villages, hotels, museums, and tourist activities removed from the daily life of the city, the emphasis should be on the integration of heritage and history with the present-day urban environment that visitors identify as "authentic." There is less of a need to create facsimiles of heritage activities and objects when the "real thing" is already present in Ras Al Khaimah and its surroundings.

Therefore, living heritage should encompass not only the pre-oil period, but also the early period of the UAE federation. Living heritage thus connects the past to the present, in a way that the built environment of Ras Al Khaimah city already does; buildings from the 1960s to the present exist alongside each other in a way that is rare in Dubai or Abu Dhabi. Current representations of the past that focus solely on the pre-oil, pre-federation period leave a gap in visitors' understanding of the life experiences of UAE citizens. In Ras Al Khaimah this transition is visible in the built environment. The challenge is to educate visitors about what they are witnessing and deepen their appreciation for what they already experience as authentic.

Other UAE cities are gradually recognizing the cultural value of buildings from the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, and embarking on efforts to document and preserve them (Menoret, 2014; Chebbi, 2016). Many buildings from this period hold great meaning for citizens and long-term residents and are important symbols of the UAE's progress toward modernity; they are a reminder of the time of Sheikh Zayed in Abu Dhabi, Sheikh Rashid in Dubai, and Sheikh Saqr in Ras Al Khaimah. Such structures in Ras Al Khaimah include the Dar al-Shifa Pharmacy building (Figure 1), the Fish Market in Old Ras Al Khaimah, Nakheel Souq, and Nakheel Hotel (Figure 2). A small team of researchers can document these buildings through photographs and oral histories, creating a guide or app to help visitors gain an appreciation for this critical period of Ras Al Khaimah's transformation into a modern city.

For example, the UAE Pavilion at the 2016 Venice Biennale focused on the *sha'abiya* houses built across the country in the 1970s and 1980s, which were the first modern houses provided by the new federation



Figure 1. Modern Architecture: Dar al-Shifa Building, Nakheel



Figure 2. Modern Architecture: Nakheel Hotel



to UAE nationals (Elseshtawy, 2016; Leech, 2016). Some consideration should also be given to the preservation of one or more *beit sha'abi* homes, which are increasingly endangered in other emirates but plentiful in Ras Al Khaimah. They are a testimony to the impact of the UAE federation on Ras Al Khaimah, and as a gift of Sheikh Zayed are a witness to the great leap in living standards that took place after his accession. By the standards of today's homes, the *beit shaabi* are quite humble; thus, they also demonstrate how far the emirate has advanced since the 1970s. A

*beit sha'abi* museum, or representations of the *beit sha'abi* in already-existing museums, would fill in the gap between the 'areesh huts and coral stone houses of the past and the large villas of the present.

Living heritage emphasizes the provenance of objects and stories of individuals. Most existing museums and heritage villages, in contrast, contain objects that could be found anywhere in the Gulf Arab world and thus do not convey a message of uniqueness. Provenance and individuality may be emphasized by integrating found



objects into the displays and exhibits at historical sites (Exell, 2016). For instance, in Al Jazeera Al Hamra, plenty of woven palm-frond mats are still in their original locations on the floors of unoccupied homes; one can also find handbags, shoes, and soft drink bottles from the 1970s. Each of these objects tells a story and invites visitors to contemplate the lives of former residents and communities. Oral histories, with exact quotes from Ras Al Khaimah nationals, have the same effect; instead of relegating history to a generic past, they connect it to particular individuals with lively stories to tell (Lancaster & Lancaster, 2011; Abdulrahman, 2013; Yahyawi, 2007; Zacharias & Topping, Forthcoming). This type of heritage – focusing on the living and the particular, rather than the static and generic – enables visitors to draw lessons from and develop empathy across cultures and places. It also would set Ras Al Khaimah apart from other cultural sites in the region.

Living heritage is further exemplified by Ras Al Khaimah's several private museums and local heritage societies, which set the emirate apart from other areas in the region. The Zayed Heritage Village in Ghalilah and the Ahmed bin Majid Society in Maaridh are just two of the many active private heritage collections in the emirate. Each of them is designed according to the personal interests of the curators, rather than a standardized historical narrative. Integrating them in a sensitive, sustainable way into the tourist landscape – perhaps through a festival of private museums – would demonstrate the diversity and depth of what Ras Al Khaimah has to offer, and set the emirate apart from its neighbors. Temporary exhibitions of objects and artifacts from private museums in the National Museum and elsewhere can further break down the boundaries between "official" heritage and popular narratives.

## Site-Specific Recommendations: Integrating Living Heritage with Daily Life

The second section of this paper discusses various locations in Ras Al Khaimah city and emirate that have potential as sites of living heritage. These sites were selected through extensive field observation and exploration of the built environment of Ras Al Khaimah. Two – Old Ras Al Khaimah and Jazirat al-Hamra – have been designated for historic preservation, with work on the latter well underway. Along with Dhayah Fort and its surrounding areas, these sites are the backbone of the cultural preservation efforts of the Department of Museums and Antiquities, Ras Al Khaimah Municipality,

and RAK TDA (RAK TDA, 2016). Additional sites under study for rapid redevelopment include Hudeiba Fort, Filayah Fort, the "Queen of Sheba's Palace" near Shimal, and Burj Helu in Old Ras Al Khaimah. Therefore, the present paper will be confined to making general recommendations for the Old Town and suggesting other sites with immediate potential for cultural tourism.

## Old Ras Al Khaimah

Ras Al Khaimah's urban core is one of the last in the region to be redeveloped, and has enormous historic and cultural value. Redevelopment presents great opportunities but also grave dangers. The pre-oil urban cores of Gulf cities have met various fates. Abu Dhabi's was demolished entirely; Sharjah's has been turned into museums; Doha's Souq Waqif is popular but clearly a re-creation. Ras Al Khaimah has the potential for a different sort of revitalization – the preservation of existing communities and authentic structures organically integrated into spaces for heritage and cultural celebration centered on the refurbished National Museum of Ras Al Khaimah.

The future of Old Ras Al Khaimah has been the subject of three studies and is currently under study again (Halcrow, 1999; Cadiz, 2009; Seif, 2013). Fortunately, the potentially destructive recommendations of the Halcrow 1999 plan were never implemented. The much-improved Cadiz plan of 2009 contains much valuable data on the layout of the old town, but could be augmented further. First, the organic historic link between Old Ras Al Khaimah and the Gulf should be maintained, with as much unobstructed access to the coastline and Gulf as possible. The view to the Gulf embodies the centuries-old maritime history and trading heritage of the Old Town.

The major obstacle to the redevelopment of the Old Town is private ownership of land and buildings (above 57% of the total space), which significantly raises the costs of any renovation efforts because of land acquisition costs. On the positive side, private ownership has prevented potentially disastrous demolitions and inaccurate restorations. It is imperative that a new model be found to enable redevelopment to move forward while preserving the existing rights and interests of landowners as well as the existing communities living in the Old Town. Development should proceed piecemeal rather than according to a comprehensive plan, perhaps beginning with two or three properties. The appropriate departments should work with the landowners to identify possible uses for the properties – for example, a boutique

Map 1. Sites of interest, Old Ras Al Khaimah

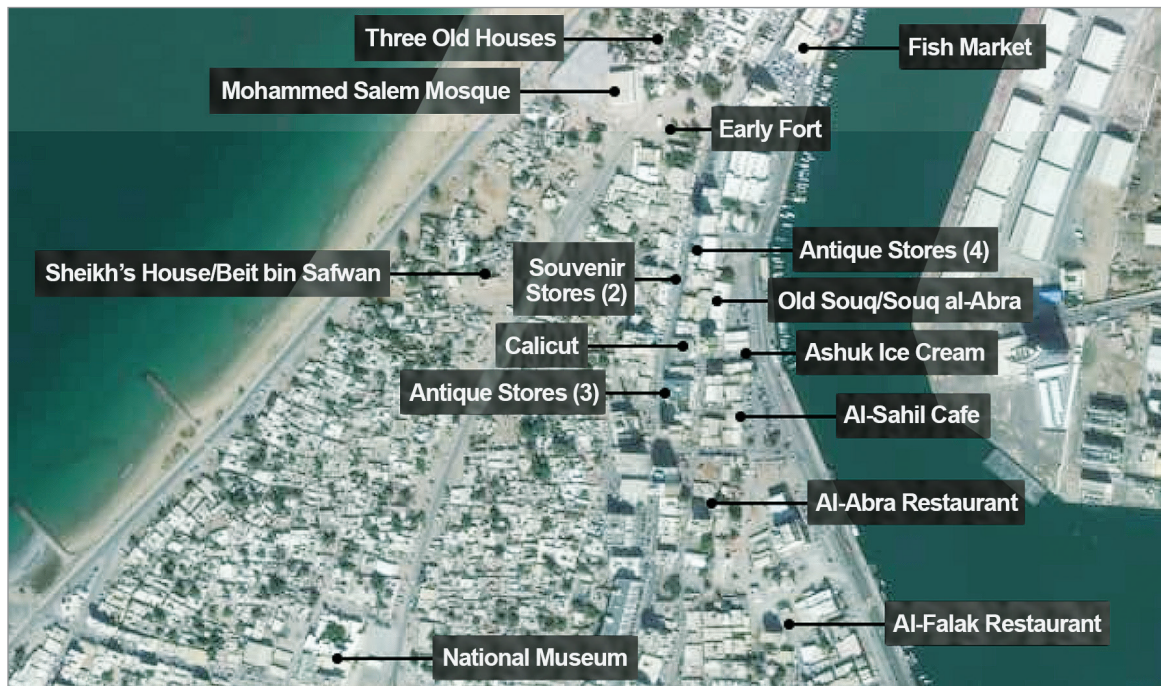


Figure 3. Sheikh's House, Old Ras Al Khaimah Khaimah.



hotel, a cultural establishment, or a café – and develop them at minimal financial risk to the property owners. This approach would likely take time, but would preserve the connections of existing communities to the area.

The Old Town is centered on two north-south axes – first, Mohammed Salem Road through the main commercial area, and secondly, the road from the National Museum to Masjid Mohammed Salem. Current conversations about the Old Town's redevelopment focus on second axis, between the National Museum and Masjid Mohammed Salim. One possibility would

be to alter the course of the road to restore the shape of the Old Town before the demolitions of 1988 led to a road being plowed through the heart of the area. The existing road can be altered both to calm traffic and to create the feeling of entering a much older urban space. This vacant land alongside it presents a multitude of possibilities for heritage-related tourism – perhaps including reconstruction of older structures repurposed as museums, cafes, boutique hotels, or galleries.

However, in the meantime, efforts on the Museum-Mosque road should not detract from already-existing



**Figure 4. Sheikh's House, Old Ras Al Khaimah**



**Figure 5. Home north of Mohammad Salim Mosque designated for preservation**



sites of interest in the more commercial area of the Old Town. This axis contains a number of sites of interest to visitors, residents, and UAE nationals, ranging from the old homes to the fish market, local restaurants such as Calicut and Ashok Ice Cream, and antique stores (see Map 1). While some propose creating a dedicated traditional souk (RAK TDA, 2016), the fact that several stores in the Old Town currently sell Emirati handicrafts should not be forgotten, especially as an interim measure. These stores are barely if ever visited by tourists but contribute to the feeling of authenticity in the Old Town. The feeling of authenticity exists precisely because handicrafts

and antiques are marketed primarily to Emiratis, not tourists. By the same token, the original structures of Souq al-Abra behind al-Manoor Cafe are still standing. If a dedicated traditional souq is created, these other areas should not be neglected; they are of equal if not greater importance to visitors particularly interested in the emirate's cultural heritage.

Likewise, Masjid Mohammed Salim Mosque (also known as Masjid al-Qawasim or simply Masjid al-Kabeer) – a beautifully-restored structure of surpassing significance to current and former residents of the Old Town –



is one of the oldest mosques in the UAE. It could be made accessible to visitors in limited hours so as not to interfere with scheduled prayers. The comparatively humble structure imparts important lessons about the central role of Islam in Ras Al Khaimah's culture and heritage, and offers a stark contrast with perceptions of the UAE as devoted to large, grandiose, and flashy architectural styles.

Finally, in keeping with the aforementioned goal of making heritage more particular and unique, old neighborhood (freej) names can be revived – Al-Ali, Sidroh, Bu Meean, al-Dhuhr, and so on – to bring back some of the old geography and character of the Old Town.

Basic knowledge about the urban fabric of the Old Town and its surroundings should be easily accessible to visitors: for example, that the street passing between al-Qasimiya School and the Museum was the edge of the city until the 1950s, or that Burj Helu allegedly got its name from a nearby sweetwater well.

## Maaridh

The quiet neighborhood of Maaridh, once a separate town in its own right but now fully within Ras Al Khaimah city, also contains a number of sites of interest to more adventurous, culturally sensitive visitors (see Map 2). As such it would be of potential for guided small group tours. Beit al-Serkal (see Figure 6) and nearby al-Za'abi home (with one of the few remaining original *barjeel* in the UAE) along the former Maaridh corniche deserve to be preserved and if possible reconstructed. Beit al-Serkal belonged to a branch of the prominent merchant family that once served as the British "Native Agents" and imported some of the first electrical generators and mechanical water pumps to the Trucial States: a story which shows that modern development was not merely the result of foreign oil companies. Maaridh is also home to three hotels, local restaurants such as al-Habasha and al-Shiraz al-Irani, an afternoon fish market, and a small souq that all appeal to visitors looking for places off the beaten track

## Nakheel and the Palm Belt

The long, fertile belt of agricultural land at the foot of the mountains, stretching from Sha'am to Hamraniya, is one of the distinctive features of Ras Al Khaimah's natural environment. Understanding its role as a destination point for summer migrations from coastal towns and the mountains is key to understanding Ras Al Khaimah's pre-oil social and economic history. Much

of this region is now integrated into the modern urban fabric of Ras Al Khaimah; for example, the atmospheric Nakheel Souq (see Figure 7) is an important gathering point barely noticed by tourists and expatriates. Sites such as Hudeiba Fort, Falayah Fort, and Uraibi House, for example, can emphasize the area's pre-federation history.

Digdagga was the site of the Agricultural Trials Station, founded in 1955 with British assistance, one of the earliest development projects in the region (see Figure 8). The buildings from the Agricultural Trials Station are still standing, and could be used as the site for a small museum on agriculture and/or a weekly farmers' market. Some working farms could themselves be developed to welcome tourists so that families can earn additional income and visitors can interact with Ras Al Khaimah national families.

## Al-Ghubb Mosque

The small mosque on the *seih* of al-Ghubb might seem undistinguished to the casual visitor, but it tells an important story of Ras Al Khaimah's history (see Figure 9). The structure, probably rebuilt sometime in the 1950s or 1960s, has a roof made of repurposed shipping boxes. The labels – "Made in Nagoya," "Made in Hong Kong," "Made in Bangkok" – tell the story of Ras Al Khaimah's global connections in the mid-twentieth century. Museums and histories of the UAE usually portray this post-pearling period in extremely local terms when in fact the region was still actively trading with the rest of the world.

## Making Ras Al Khaimah Legible

This section includes recommendations that can be implemented in the short and medium term, with no changes made in heritage sites or the urban fabric that visitors read as "authentic." Instead, they focus on making the existing urban landscape more legible to visitors and residents by giving them the information they need to understand its past and present.

## Disseminating Information

There is an immediate need for a guidebook to Ras Al Khaimah city with easy-to-use maps that will show visitors how to get to the main sites in the area. This should include the National Museum, Kuwaiti Street, Masjid Mohammed Salim, the Old Town Fish Market, the Maaridh Fish Market, the al-Qawasim Corniche, and the Nakheel and Maaridh souqs, as well as Al

Map 2. Tourist sites, Maaridh



Figure 6. Beit al-Serkal, Maaridh



Jazira Al Hamra, Dhayah Fort, and Jebel Jais. Road signs should be designed and placed with care so that even first-time visitors can find their way to sites without getting lost. Tourists will want refreshments as well, and Ras Al Khaimah has no shortage of good local restaurants, ranging from Al Fanar (Emirati) to Grand (South Asian) and Sahari (Lebanese) and Ashok Ice Cream. Visitors want to eat in local restaurants but lack of information means they avoid them. A restaurant guide can remedy this omission.

## Promoting Ras Al Khaimah's History

Finally, visitors and UAE residents alike often express frustration at the alleged lack of available information on Emirati history and society. There are, of course, numerous books written about the UAE and Ras Al Khaimah, but they are often difficult to find or only available in Arabic. The magisterial *Honour is in Contentment: Life Before Oil in Ras Al Khaimah* is based on oral histories collected from 1997–2004 in the emirate, and should be made available at local bookstores, gift shops, and hotels. So too



Figure 7. Nakheel Souq, one of Ras Al Khaimah's early modern souqs



Figure 8. Agricultural Trials Station, Digdaga



should Graeme Wilson's *Saqr: Fifty Years and More*, and translations of major works by Ras Al Khaimah nationals such as Abdullah al-Taboor, Hamid bin Seray, Najeeb al-Shamsi, and Abdullah Abdulrahman. Anna Zacharias and Jeff Topping's forthcoming book *People of Ras Al Khaimah* tells the stories of over forty longtime residents of the emirate. All of these will find a market among the more educated and interested expatriates and visitors.

## A Cautionary Note

At the same time, the possibilities for attracting more tourists to the urban environment must be balanced with the need to preserve the existing atmosphere that

the same visitors perceive as authentic. The critical challenge will be to maintain the existing character of Ras Al Khaimah while making it more legible for visitors. To achieve this, guided tours of the city should focus on small groups that will not overwhelm existing communities and neighborhoods. Sites within the urban fabric, especially in the Old Town, would lose the feeling of authenticity that characterizes Ras Al Khaimah today, if tourism becomes their dominant industry.

The goal should be to preserve the organic mixing of "heritage" and present-day life that gives rise to visitors' impressions of authenticity. Through careful curation of sites along the principles of "living heritage" outlined



earlier in this paper, Ras Al Khaimah's cultural heritage can be both preserved for future generations and promoted as a viable source of income in the present.

**Figure 9. Al-Ghubb Mosque**



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- to enrich the local public sector, especially education, by providing educators and civil servants in Ras Al Khaimah with tools to make a positive impact on their own society; and
- to build a spirit of community, collaboration, and shared vision through purposeful engagement that fosters relationships among individuals and organizations.

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