

**QATAR NATURAL HISTORY GROUP FIELD TRIP : FRIDAY 26
OCTOBER 2007**

NORTHERN FORTS OF QATAR

Leaders: Fran and David Gillespie

Meeting place and Time: 10.00 am at the left turn to Zubara from the main north road to Al Ruwais. The turn is clearly signposted. Look out for the landmark of the tall communications tower and the police station with Qatari flag flying, just before the turn.

There is a U-turn in the main road just past the Zubara turn. We'll meet on the left hand side of the Zubara road a short distance past the junction.

Allow about 45 minutes to reach the meeting place from Doha. There are detours near Landmark Mall because of the roadworks.

Bring : Picnic lunch, plenty of water, hats, suncream. The lunch stop will be at Qalat Al Rakayat, the third of the forts on our tour, where there is some shade.

Vehicle : You will need a 4xD vehicle for part of our tour. Anyone without 4XD, just turn up anyway and we'll ask for volunteers with space in their vehicles. We've never left anyone behind yet!

Tour: All the information is in the attached Field Trip Notes. Please print them out and bring them with you.

Membership: Genuine out-of-town visitors are welcome. But if you being along friends who are resident in Qatar please ask them to fill out a membership form and pay the QAR 30.00 subscription. The Membership Secretary, Seta Mekikjian, will be present with membership forms and a cash box!

Vehicle Levy: The usual QAR 10.00 per vehicle levy is payable; you will be given a coloured, numbered sticker to place inside the back windscreen of your vehicle. David will collect your QAR 10.00 and distribute the stickers.

Children : Children are welcome, but please keep them under control, especially if they climb on the ramparts of the forts, which of course they always do!

Archaeological sites: Some of the places we will visit are unexcavated archaeological sites. Please do not pick up or remove any pottery fragments or anything else from these sites.

QATAR NATURAL HISTORY GROUP

THE NORTHERN FORTS OF THE QATAR PENINSULA

The places we will visit are titled in **bold**.

The northern littoral of Qatar bristles with forts [Arabic *qalaf*], and nowhere are they more frequent than between Al Zubara and Al Ruwais, where the ruins of defensive structures lie along the shoreline only metres from the sea, besides occupying many sites within 2 km of the coast. On the stretch of coast we are visiting today there are at least ten ruined forts.

These forts should not be viewed in any sense as a co-operative defence system against attack from the sea or by hostile bedouin tribesmen. Rather, they were individual symbols of power and prestige, and would have been visible for many miles both to people on land and to the crews of ships out at sea.

In any case the forts, being built partly of sun-dried mud brick, could not have withstood any serious assault. A few shots from cannon such as the one which stands today outside Zubara Fort would have blown gaping holes in the walls. However, their solid construction could easily have held out against sustained rifle fire.

The forts vary considerably in size. Some are little bigger than a modern villa and would have been the HQ of the local chief, whereas some of the giants such as the former Al M'rair, which lies not far from the road which runs past the Zubara ruins, or Al Ruwaidah in the far north-west, are comparable in the grandeur of their scale to any Roman fort in Europe.

Although each fort is unique in its construction, they have several features in common. All were built of rough limestone blocks or sea rock [*faroush*], quarried locally, to a height of approximately 2 metres. Above this, solid walls of small mud bricks were constructed, and the whole surface was then given a thick, smooth coating of mud or sometimes powdered limestone mixed with water. Obviously such a style of building required constant maintenance, and they soon fell into ruins after they were gradually abandoned during the first decades of the last century.

Each fort had a combination of round and rectangular or square corner towers, apparently at the whim of the builders. The original fort at Al Thaqab had 3 round and 1 rectangular, whereas Al Rakayat, less than 3 km away, has 3 rectangular and 1 round corner tower.

The principal families of this flat, desolate coast, almost empty today, were the Al Na'im [Al Noaimi], Al Bin Ali, Al Jalahima, Al Kuwari, Al Hajri, Al Manai and Al Kubaisi.

QALAT AL ZUBARA 1

The original small Zubara fort dates to the mid-18th century and was built to guard the rapidly growing town. It lies in the heart of the ruins, within the 18th century walls. As the town expanded a much longer wall had to be built in the 19th century and a section of this has been reconstructed. The fort failed to deter frequent assaults on Al Zubara, which was attacked by the Persians in 1780 and 1782, and sacked and burned to the ground by the ruler of Muscat in 1810. More burnings and rebuildings followed, and the town was not finally abandoned until the 1930s. One of the reasons for the constant attacks was that the inhabitants of Al Zubara regularly supplemented their income from trading and pearl fishing with piracy. And that's putting it mildly.

QALAT AL ZUBARA 2

The modern fort at Al Zubara which forms such a conspicuous landmark was built in 1938, on a previously unoccupied site, in response to the continued claims of Bahrain on Zubara. In the previous year the Bahrainis had constructed a fortification on the Hawar islands not far away, also territory disputed by Qatar and Bahrain. The fort at Al Zubara garrisoned the frontier police force. Its presence was a constant source of humiliation to the Al-Khalifah rulers of Bahrain, who had placed an embargo on trade and travel with Qatar as a result of the dispute over Zubara, resulting in considerable economic damage.

When David and I came to Qatar in 1985 the police were still there, and hospitably supplying tea and invitations to view the fort to visitors. Our children were impressed when told that dangerous prisoners were incarcerated in the upper rooms of the corner towers, reachable only by ladder, whereas lesser felons enjoyed the freedom of the courtyard during daylight hours!

We had long been forestalled, as guests of the police, by the pioneer archaeologist Geoffrey Bibby, on his first visit to Qatar with the Danish Expedition in 1957. In his best-selling book *Looking for Dilmun*, published in 1970, he recalled:

'...a little later we pulled up at a more modern fort, a white-washed stone building with the maroon flag of Qatar flying above it. It was a police post, and we were greeted by the police detachment as a welcome break in the monotony of their lonely watch. Our escort had many friends among the little garrison, and we were immediately given mugs of hot sweet tea, to last us while coffee was brewed.'

In 1986 the fort was handed over to the Department of Museums and Antiquities to be restored and used as a museum for the display of archaeological discoveries from the city of Al Zubara. 21 years later things are beginning to happen. It has recently been given an electricity supply and floodlighting, in case anyone should fancy a visit in the middle of the night. There are plans to build a magnificent new museum behind the fort, with displays of archaeological finds from the north of Qatar, and also a cafeteria, children's play area and gift shop, but these have been put on hold. The fort itself will be given a face-lift and the rooms, which presently house temporary displays, will be left empty. Next year, insha'allah.

NB There are public toilets [basic but clean] behind the caretaker's residence adjacent to the car park. Ask him for the key.

QALAT AL M'RAIR

This large fort, now badly damaged by recent bulldozing and barely visible, lies 1.5 km east of the walls of Zubara. It was built in 1768 by the Al-Jalahima tribe who had migrated to Qatar from Kuwait, together with the Al-Khalifah, in 1766. The following year a 2-km-long ship canal was built, linking the fort to the sea. In 1783 the two tribes, which were branches of the Al Utub, were among those who joined forces to oust the Persians from Bahrain and the Al-Khalifah went on to become the ruling dynasty of the island.

In September 1878 Al M'rair was the scene of lively goings-on when the Qataris from the capital, fed-up with constant acts of piracy against their shipping by the Al Na'im, marched north, intent on giving the Al Na'im a drubbing. The force was led by the ruler Jassim bin Mohammed al-Thani in person, and the Al Na'im were holed up in this fort, and also Zubara fort, and besieged. Al Na'im in Bahrain appealed to the British for help for their kinsmen, but the British refused to take any action, evidently considering that the pirates deserved whatever they got. Finally the Turks, who had had a military presence and a *qadi* in Qatar since 1872, intervened and negotiated a surrender by the defenders of the fort, some of whom were deported to Doha.

After leaving the modern Zubara fort we drive north, passing the high security jail on our right. A few kilometres north of Al Zubara town is a small coastal satellite settlement, Al Furaihah, dating to the early 19th century, inevitably with its own fort, which is currently under excavation, along with part of Zubara town, by archaeologists from the Department of Museums and Antiquities. This season's excavations will begin in December.

Behind the Al Arish radio station, which we pass on our left after a few kilometres, are the ruins of a large coastal village, Al Khuwayr, which was once the base of the famous chief of the Al-Jalahima, Rahmah bin Jabir, who terrorised Gulf shipping for 40 years until his death in battle against the Al-

Khalifah of Bahrain in 1826. The village was called Khaur Hassan in his time. He had a small fort here, built of white sea rock, but I have not succeeded in locating the remains. His followers lived in barasti huts made of woven palm fronds. Offshore are two long reefs, with a natural channel between them down which his ships could sail as far as Al Zubara. Rahmah had a narrow channel cut through the outer reef so that his ships, when pursued by enemies, could slip through to safety, the enemy not daring to approach the reef too closely.

QALAT AL THAQAB N 26° 01.983' E 51° 07.028'

This Hollywood affair, evidently someone's fanciful idea of what a fort ought to look like, was built in the last 6 years and bears no relation to the original Qalat al Thaqab which now lies, totally destroyed, beneath it. Most regrettably, no excavations were carried out on the site beforehand. The potsherds and fragments of Indian glass paste bangles that used to litter the site suggested a 19th century date. British archaeologists led by Beatrice de Cardi, who visited Al Thaqab in 1973, thought that some of the buildings around it were much older. There is a deep well to the west of the fort, inside a barbed-wire enclosure, which J G Lorimer mentions in his *Gazetteer of the Persian Gulf* as in use in 1911. It is still in use today, albeit the water is pumped out rather than hauled up in buckets.

QALAT AL RAKAYAT N 26° 03.077' E 51° 07.836'

About three km to the north-east of Al Thaqab is another small fort, Al Rakayat, reconstructed by the Department of Museums and Antiquities in 1988. It was selected for reconstruction because it was less ruinous than the other forts and therefore easier to conserve. Unlike Al Thaqab, the restoration was sensitively done and what you see here bears some resemblance to what the original fort may have looked like. The remains of the original fort can be seen in the courtyard.

Before reconstruction it was partially excavated, and in the date store a number of coins were found, including a 19th century 'fils' from a Baghdad mint, presumably contemporary with the construction of the fort. An intriguing find was a coin from the Abbasid period, bearing an Arabic inscription, 'There is no god but God, and Mohammed is the prophet of God,' and a date which translates as 1315 AD. It was found near the surface, and may simply have been an old coin in the possession of a 19th century inhabitant of the fort.

NB. DO NOT ATTEMPT TO WALK ON THE ROOF HERE – IT IS FULL OF HOLES AND THE BEAMS BELOW ARE CRUMBLING.

QALAT AL RUWAIDAH N 26° 04.782' E 51° 08.699'

Going north again we come to the huge fort of Al Ruwaidah, the ruined walls of which slope down to the sea. From the size and length of the walls it is clear that

a comparatively large population must once have lived here, to build and maintain a structure of such size. The remains of buildings are visible within the fort, and there are two associated settlement areas. The fort has round towers on two opposing corners and another pair set along the outer walls.

The fort was besieged and captured in 1795 by the Saudi commander Ibrahim bin Ufaysan, who attacked Zubara and other towns in Qatar because they had sheltered refugees from the Bani Khalid who were fleeing the Saudi occupation of Al Hasa. In 1973 Beatrice de Cardi's survey team found that although the majority of the potsherds dated to the 18th century, some fragments suggested that the site had been occupied as early as the 10th century.

The mangroves which now fringe the shore are a success story. This is one of 28 planted mangrove sites around the coast of Qatar, the only natural mangrove forests being on the east coast around the bay of Khor Shaqiq. The few trees which were installed here about 15 years ago have seeded and are now spreading rapidly. They create their own complex eco-system and are home to many wading birds. Look out for herons, egrets and others.

AL JUMAIL

The picturesque ruined village of Al Jumail with its attractive mosque is beloved of painters and photographers. It is also a popular spot for Qatari families, who come on Fridays to picnic among the homes of their ancestors. This is what a senior educationalist from the Al Kubaisi family had to say about it in 1992: 'On weekends we go to picnic at Al Jumail, where we try to explain to our children how life was in the past. My mother explains to me, and I explain to our children. It gives a feeling of belonging to a village for which today there is no function, whereas in the past it had a great importance.'

Beatrice de Cardi records [you guessed it] yet another ruined fort to the north-east of the village.

Our tour ends here, and you can return to Doha by going a short distance on to Al Ruwais and taking the main road south. Al Ruwais has a busy fishing harbour, worth a visit [turn left at the pearl oyster roundabout] and there is an attractive old semi-ruined mosque, with a curious cone-shaped minaret, on the shore line a short distance past the harbour.

Fran Gillespie

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For those who would like to know more about the notorious Rahmah bin Jabir, this account was published in 1837, not long after his death in battle against the Al Khalifah. It is included in a luridly illustrated best-seller of the time: *The Pirate's*

Own Book: Authentic Narratives of the Most Celebrated Sea Robbers , edited by Charles Ellms.

THE BARBAROUS CONDUCT AND ROMANTIC DEATH OF RAHMAH-BEN-JABIR.

The town of Bushire, on the Persian Gulf is seated on a low peninsula of sand, extending out of the general line of the coast, so as to form a bay on both sides. One of these bays was in 1816, occupied by the fleet of a certain Arab, named Rahmah-ben-Jabir, who has been for more than twenty years the terror of the gulf, and who was the most successful and the most generally tolerated pirate, perhaps, that ever infested any sea. This man by birth was a native of Grain, on the opposite coast, and nephew of the governor of that place. His fellow citizens had all the honesty, however, to declare him an outlaw, from abhorrence of his profession; but he found that aid and protection at Bushire, which his own townsmen denied him. With five or six vessels, most of which were very large, and manned with crews of from two to three hundred each, he sallied forth, and captured whatever he thought himself strong enough to carry off as a prize. His followers, to the number of two thousand, were maintained by the plunder of his prizes; and as the most of these were his own bought African slaves, and the remainder equally subject to his authority, he was sometimes as prodigal of their lives in a fit of anger as he was of his enemies, whom he was not content to slay in battle only, but basely murdered in cold blood, after they had submitted. An instance is related of his having put a great number of his own crew, who used mutinous expressions, into a tank on board, in which they usually kept their water, and this being shut close at the top, the poor wretches were all suffocated, and afterwards thrown overboard. This butcher chief, like the celebrated Djezzar of Acre, affecting great simplicity of dress, manners, and living; and whenever he went out, could not be distinguished by a stranger from the crowd of his attendants. He carried this simplicity to a degree of filthiness, which was disgusting, as his usual dress was a shirt, which was never taken off to be washed, from the time it was first put on till worn out; no drawers or coverings for the legs of any kind, and a large black goat's hair cloak, wrapped over all with a greasy and dirty handkerchief, called the keffee, thrown loosely over his head. Infamous as was this man's life and character, he was not only cherished and courted by the people of Bushire, who dreaded him, but was courteously received and respectfully entertained whenever he visited the British Factory. On one occasion (says Mr. Buckingham), at which I was present, he was sent for to give some medical gentlemen of the navy and company's cruisers an opportunity of inspecting his arm, which had been severely wounded. The wound was at first made by grape-shot and splinters, and the arm was one mass of blood about the part for several days, while the man himself was with difficulty known to be alive. He gradually recovered, however, without surgical aid, and the bone of the arm between the shoulder and elbow being completely shivered to pieces, the fragments progressively worked out, and the singular appearance was left of the fore arm and elbow connected to the shoulder by flesh and skin, and tendons, without the least vestige of bone. This man when invited to the factory for the purpose of making an exhibition of his arm, was himself admitted to sit at the table and take some tea, as it was breakfast time, and some of his followers took chairs around him. They were all as disgustingly filthy in appearance as could well be imagined; and some of them did not scruple to hunt for vermin on their skins, of which there was an abundance, and throw them on the floor. Rahmah-ben-Jabir's figure presented a meagre trunk, with four lank members, all of them cut and hacked, and pierced with wounds of sabres, spears and bullets, in every part, to the number, perhaps of more than twenty different wounds. He had, besides, a face naturally ferocious and ugly, and now rendered still more so by several scars there, and by the loss of one eye. When asked by one of the English gentlemen present, with a tone of encouragement and familiarity, whether he could not still dispatch an enemy with his boneless arm, he drew a

crooked dagger, or yambeah, from the girdle round his shirt, and placing his left hand, which was sound, to support the elbow of the right, which was the one that was wounded, he grasped the dagger firmly with his clenched fist, and drew it back ward and forward, twirling it at the same time, and saying that he desired nothing better than to have the cutting of as many throats as he could effectually open with his lame hand. Instead of being shocked at the uttering of such a brutal wish, and such a savage triumph at still possessing the power to murder unoffending victims, I knew not how to describe my feelings of shame and sorrow when a loud roar of laughter burst from the whole assembly, when I ventured to express my dissent from the general feeling of admiration for such a man.

This barbarous pirate in the year 1827, [*It was actually 1826. FG*] at last experienced a fate characteristic of the whole course of his life. His violent aggressions having united the Arabs of Bahrene and Ratiffe against him they blockaded his port of Daman from which Rahmah-ben-Jabir, having left a garrison in the fort under his son, had sailed in a well appointed bungalow, for the purpose of endeavoring to raise a confederacy of his friends in his support. Having failed in this object he returned to Daman, and in spite of the boats blockading the port, succeeded in visiting his garrison, and immediately re-embarked, taking with him his youngest son. On arriving on board his bungalow, he was received by his followers with a salute, which decisive indication of his presence immediately attracted the attention of his opponents, one of whose boats, commanded by the nephew of the Sheikh of Bahrene, proceeded to attack him. A desperate struggle ensued, and the Sheikh finding after some time that he had lost nearly the whole of his crew by the firing of Rahmah's boat, retired for reinforcements. These being obtained, he immediately returned singly to the contest. The fight was renewed with redoubled fury; when at last, Rahmah, being informed (for he had been long blind) that his men were falling fast around him, mustered the remainder of the crew, and issued orders to close and grapple with his opponent. When this was effected, and after embracing his son, he was led with a lighted torch to the magazine, which instantly exploded, blowing his own boat to atoms and setting fire to the Sheikh's, which immediately afterwards shared the same fate. Sheikh Ahmed and few of his followers escaped to the other boats; but only one of Rahmah's brave crew was saved; and it is supposed that upwards of three hundred men were killed in this heroic contest.
