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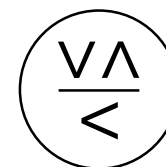
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Uncommon Ltd
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Ta Xbiex, Malta
www.uncommonguidebooks.com

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EDITED BY
SHARMEEN INAYAT



EMIRATES MALL CORNICHE

VIKRAM DIVECHA



As he waved his arm across the water body with a flourish, he christened it ‘Emirates Mall Corniche’. This couldn’t be the name for an artificial lake that sat between a Mall and a Metro station, I thought. I had asked him, an individual who worked in the vicinity, like many others I encountered, if he knew the name of this lake. Nobody seemed to know for sure. I kept receiving irresolute answers. In this case, our friend couldn’t be bothered about someone showing interest in this man-made pit holding still water. It was an eventless body. To dismiss me, he mockingly gave the moniker, which I have borrowed as the title for this text—Emirates Mall Corniche. Despite being intentionally incorrect, his version was generative. The term “corniche” spoke of a pulse that ran along the seafront, where folks are drawn to the sea, sunsets and free breeze. It’s the place for chitter chatter, lingering, socializing, stretching, rolling, napping, ambling—all of which, has come to surround this artificial waterbody.

This lake is located in Al Barsha 1, just off the busy Sheikh Zayed Road (E11) highway. It is approximately half a kilometre in length, with a hard-surfaced walking path circling the lake for around a kilometre. A grass patch skirts the path, opening up generously in certain areas. Mature palm trees are mounted at intervals. From Google Earth one notices the lake is contained within a peculiar shape resembling a boomerang, or arguably an amoeba. South of the lake is the colossal



Mall of the Emirates, famous for housing an indoor ski resort and snow park. To top it up, it is flanked on each end with a hotel—the Sheraton Dubai and the Kempinski. Across the Mall, overlooking the lake, is the Mall of the Emirates Metro station, a busy hub that serves the Mall and the growing Al Barsha 1 residential community. A 200-meter enclosed overhead footbridge connects the Metro station directly to the Mall.

A few years ago, during a residency in a mountain village in Lebanon, I found myself in a rather heated debate about public spaces in Dubai. I was trying to convince a Spanish artist that malls are the dominant public spaces in this part of the world. It is where folks get to walk, find relief from the heat, socialize and even meet partners. He didn't seem to be convinced. Today, the irony produced by this unassuming body of water right outside one of UAE's largest malls would make my Spanish friend smile.

A certain strata of city goers have claimed this lake over time. On weekends, even during the summer, they resist the air-conditioned food courts, discount littered hallways and upbeat ambient music that malls in Dubai constantly seduce us with. When I shifted to Al Barsha1 in mid-2010, this lake wasn't as busy. Today it is a regular with the Al Barsha1 community, folks servicing the Mall, weekend visitors, marine species and migratory birds.

After visiting Dubai Municipality, Al Barsha offices and knocking on a few doors I get to meet Garry de la Pomerai—an individual who works with water. His team maintains the lake. Garry points out that Al Barsha has a series of three artificial lakes, all of which are interconnected. The first is a secluded water body in Al Barsha South, and the second is a public lake located within the Al Barsha Pond Park. These two lakes collect treated sewage water from the city for irrigation, which in turn is fed into our lake by the mall. As the last in this series



of lakes it has an exit pump from which water flows out to the sea. Storm water and excess water from the mall also collect here. Garry does not work on the other two lakes. To improve the quality of the water,

his team regularly magnetize it through a number of pumps placed along the shore. There is marine life in the lake, which I understand was introduced by the municipality early on. Tilapia and minnows populate the lake, the former being invasive in nature. As this reservoir has been turned into a public lake, it demands constant upkeep. A maintenance team cleans the waterline of the lake every day, collecting

marine carcasses, waste, and dirt. Garry clarifies that this lake is called “Emirates Mall Lake” on paper, and it would have been around since the mall was built.

* * *

It’s 7am on a weekday. Hiron (name changed) is sprawled across on the well-watered green grass along the lake. Dressed in his work wear, he has finished his 8-hour night duty at the Kempinski, where for the last two years he has been polishing marble surfaces. Every day, after work he waits here for his bus to arrive. He enjoys the view of the lake, the open air, and the birds that hop around. I identify Hiron’s colleague who is relaxing a few meters away, as he is wearing the same branded uniform. Trucks and large trailers have lined up outside the mall to feed enormous amounts of supplies. The drivers and porters wait by the lake for their turn to offload, while joggers lap and commuters rush towards the Metro station. It gets busier during lunch hours and evenings. One spots many mall employees stepping out to take a lunch or cigarette break through the day. One afternoon, I spot empty safety boots standing on the grass next to a man resting in his overalls. On another, I find a food delivery rider taking a break, while his motorcycle leans on its side stand. Located in the middle of the city, this lake is an easy-to-access oasis.

During the weekend, especially on Jummah (Friday), the lake has a different vibe. Stroll around the lake after 5pm and you will find a gathering every meter, ranging from small groups to a party of more than thirty. Animated conversations fill the air, at times punctuated by shrill laughter. Names are called out loudly, and snacks are passed around generously. As dusk descends the groups keep growing—welcome greetings await for friends who join in. Caps, sunglasses, and hats add to the picnic mood.



During the sweltering summers, paper plates turn into paper fans, while on a breezy day empty Styrofoam cups roll like tumbleweeds across the grass. Everybody is on the grass. Some are seated cross-legged, some stretch out their legs. Other lie down flat, or rest their bodies against each other. Non-productive hours can be so generative when it comes to variations in poses of relaxation. At some point I consider stopping work on this text piece and picking up pencil and paper to create figure studies of folks unwinding around the lake—but my drawing skills have waned since my art school days. How we can flex, twist and turn, specifically while not working, is something I will return to. I found it difficult to persuade people to be photographed. So, during my early study visits, I would sit close to a group and take notes on their activities, then return the following day and take a picture of the spot.

Late evening, Friday, May 2017.

A group of 7 adults are seated in a circular fashion on the grass track running along the lake. Being a weekend, they are casually dressed. There are 4 men and 3 women. They are using newspapers as a tablecloth for their takeaway meals. Next to one of them is a laptop on which a vibrant-looking Bollywood film is playing on the bright screen. The group isn't showing any interest in the movie, which



has become a mere backdrop to their conversation. The tunes from the film are overlaid by the sound of the cars speeding past on the E11 highway, which runs right behind them. Their footwear is grouped together at the edge, where the grass meets the pavement bricks. It seems like the tradition of leaving one's footwear at the door, before one enters a room.

Not satisfied with the outcome, I resorted to taking images from the vantage point of the Metro footbridge, which was a far more removed exercise. Eventually, I got to know one group and started discussing this piece I was trying to write. They invite me to join them. I am served

a large portion of spaghetti. Fizzy drinks and snacks follow. Sitting amongst them I realize this is an active Whatsapp group that surfaces around the lake every weekend. A mix of nationalities, many are single or have families back home. They gather to enjoy a little picnic, finding solace and support amongst each other. Despite knowing the name of the lake now, I come back to my favourite question. One of them labels the lake as singing and dancing park. I learn that many prefer meeting here to other city parks, as playing music is permitted. One neighbouring group regularly brings a portable loudspeaker, from which dance music plays across the lake. It gets the folks to show off their moves, barefoot on the soft grass. After a few weekend visits I notice that there are hardly any children who join these gatherings. But there is a playful mood around. Some nudge each other's bodies, some enjoy long handshakes, while others run around a bit.

As the evening descends, the neon signs reflect sharply on the unruffled water surface. I have never hung around late enough to know how the weekend gatherings conclude or disperse. One unrelated story I picked up occurred in the early hours. A vehicle driven by a likely inebriated driver left one of the nearby hotels and crashed through the railings surrounding the lake, landing in the water. For once the lake wasn't static. Maybe the driver mistook the lake for the dance floor. The vehicle was fished out, but as a reminder a few of the railings are still missing, leaving an opening to the lake. One early morning I walk through the gap, down the angled concrete shore and get close to the waveless corniche. The water is a diluted swamp-green, slightly murky in parts. The negligible breeze produces faint ripples.

Minute bubbles surface and burst silently on the water surface. I look around. It is an immense volume of liquid. At the centre the lake is 2.5 meters deep. I stand there for a while, along with the lake. Week after week, 'Emirates Mall Corniche' has come to witness a lot, drawing so much, and so many.