Chapter 25
Dubai 2008

Monday, November 10, 2008, en Route from Dubai to Houston

I've just finished three days and four nights in Dubai, attending the Summit on the Global Agenda of the World Economic Forum. They flew me there on Emirates Airlines, from Houston since Emirates doesn't serve Detroit, and now I'm on my way back. I'm in business class, along with many others who attended the same event, since the Summit included about 700 people from all over the world, and many of them, especially from the US west coast, seem to have flown through Houston.

The World Economic Forum is the organization we've all heard of for quite a few years, the one that organizes the meeting of business and political leaders in Davos, Switzerland, every year. It is led by a Swiss named Klaus Schwab, and I now know that it does much else besides, including regional and industry summits several times a year all over the world. This summit, though, was apparently special in its size and ambition, intended to tackle all the world's most important problems by bringing together the "best minds" from the academic, business, government, and nonprofit worlds to address 68 topics ranging from financial crisis to the role of women in society.

Each topic is being addressed by a Global Agenda Council of 8-10 experts who will meet four times during the year to discuss it and … I'm not sure what – produce a report, perhaps. Three of these meetings are to be "virtual," meaning by teleconference, and we've already had one in September. Only one of the meetings is in person, and that's what we've just done. Hosted and paid for by the government of Dubai, 700 of us were put up in luxury hotels and spent two days meeting in groups large and small.

The avowed purpose of all this is to provide direction to the people who attend the next Davos meeting this January, so that they will do more than just schmoose, I guess.

Several in our group who discussed this were doubtful that this would accomplish anything, but one of the Davos regulars with whom I shared a car to the airport today was very pleased with the meeting and sure that it would make a difference. Other purposes are more obvious. One is surely to enhance the reputation of Dubai, which is already famous for its building of islands and structures such as the world's tallest building. It wants to be taken seriously as a world city.

Another purpose is for people to "network." This was explicit in the conference program, in which both breakfasts and lunches were listed with the adjective "networking." I, and some of my academic friends who attended, are most comfortable talking to people that we know, and so we often dined together. But it is also true that I met some people I never would have met otherwise, and my conversations with them may well influence my future thinking and my work. I can see how it might have behooved me to take the networking function more seriously. I'll say more about that later.

Getting back to my usual format of writing about my trip, I started last Wednesday morning by flying to Houston. That was the day after the presidential election, so I naturally talked with the driver of my limo to the Detroit airport about its outcome. She had strong views and had voted for McCain. Her strongest reason seemed to be the importance of the military in today's world, including the experience that her fiancé had had in the first Gulf War. Oddly, her fiancé himself, she said, had voted for Obama.

My flight to Houston was on Continental Airlines, and I was in first class. That didn't mean a great deal on such a short flight, though to my surprise it included a decent lunch. In Houston I had a more-than-four-hour connection, due to my own risk-averse booking, since I didn't want to risk being late for the Emirates flight. That gave me time to do quite a lot of e-mail in the lounge, and I was pleased to get mostly caught up, for the first time in days.

The 14-hour Emirates flight was every bit as nice as I'd expected. The business-class seats recline fully, so I slept long and well, able to roll onto my side just as I would in bed. It's a wide-body plane, with three seats between the two aisles and two seats outside them. Mine was (and is now) a window seat on the left. There's a low partition between the two seats with a movable panel that rises out of the top, so that you can have it down for conversation or up for privacy. At the back of the seat is a sort of shell that stays put when you recline the seat, so you are also separated from the person behind you. I've seen that arrangement on Northwest business class as well, but this shell is more vertical and seems less intrusive on the person behind.

The back of the shell also houses a large video screen for viewing by the person behind. So, each of us is in our own space with a large video screen in front of us. That, in turn, can be controlled any of several ways. The screen itself is a touch screen, though it's far enough away that you don't use that feature much. Second there is a remote that pulls out on a cable from the side wall of the seat. It has its own tiny video screen, plus lots of buttons on the front, and game controllers on the back, all of which light up. And finally, also on the side panel, is a medium sized video screen, maybe eight inches diagonal. It is

designed to be removed completely from its perch, and its touch screen can be used to control almost everything, including both the entertainment and the seat itself. It is how you reposition various parts of the seat, and apparently, though I haven't done it, you can ask it to remember the settings that you like. There are also small, illuminated buttons elsewhere on the seat itself to take you directly to positions for sleep, eating, and takeoff, plus a couple I don't understand.

The entertainment system has hundreds, perhaps thousands, of channels. There are several hundred movies, several hundred TV shows, music including dozens of channels of classical, and lots of games. It's incredible, and it works reasonably easily and well most of the time. Each seat is provided with noise-canceling headphones, something I've read about but had never experienced. I may have to buy some of these for myself, since they really do make a difference. They block out the airplane noise, and I presume that they block out crying children and talking, though I'm not sure I've had any of that around me.

The Dubai airport, which I had been through once on a previous trip making a connection, is new and very modern. It also seems to be much bigger than it needs to be, with lots of excess space. I know that they plan to grow, as they are trying to grow Dubai itself into a world hub for transportation, finance, commerce, and what have you. As we got off the plane, there were people stationed every few yards with signs directing those of us with the World Economic Forum where to go, and we were assisted through immigration and customs quickly, then loaded into cars to our hotels. I rode with a woman who turned out to be a high executive in AT&T.

Dubai is one of seven "emirates," each one like a small country ruled by a hereditary sheik. Some years back, in 1971, the seven joined to form the United Arab Emirates, or UAE, which is therefore the country that Dubai is a part of. The capital of UAE is Abu Dhabi, which is also the emirate that has the most oil and is therefore richest. Dubai, I was told, doesn't have much oil, but it did a deal with Abu Dhabi to become the commercial capital of UAE, using Abu Dhabi's money, while Abu Dhabi would be the political capital. That seems to have worked superbly, so far.

The city of Dubai is on the coast of the Arabian Sea. It was once a small fishing village, perhaps as recently as half a century ago. But it now is full of modern skyscrapers, parks, and highways with as many as six lanes each direction. They're building a "metro" elevated above ground that will provide public transit and hope to ease traffic congestion, which is fierce.

Welcome, from trip

The public symbol of Dubai these days is a hotel, the Burj al Arab, that is on an island just off the coast and is said to be the tallest hotel in the world. What's distinctive, though, isn't its size but its shape. It is shaped like a sail, and much of the side facing the land looks like it is covered with some kind of white fabric, which enhances the impression. It is said also to be the most luxurious hotel in the world, which I expect would be hard to verify or contest. None of the participants in the Summit stayed there, as far as I know.

Burj al Arab Hotel, from trip

The group stayed in several hotels that were near to the Jumeirah Conference Center, where our meetings were held. My hotel was the Jumeirah Beach Hotel, which as it happened was the one closest to the Burj al Arab. The Jumeirah Beach must have been the most impressive hotel in Dubai before the Burj al Arab was built. It rises gracefully in two curves that meet in a central atrium, and each curve has rooms only on the seaside,

Jumeirah Conference Center, from Web 2025

with unobstructed views of the Burj al Arab. When I arrived late at night, the Burj was dark – I guess its windows also look out on the sea, not the land, and it was late enough not to be lit by floodlights. But when I opened my drapes in the morning and looked out, it was a stunning sight.

Jumeirah Beach Hotel, from Web 2025

My room had everything you usually find in good hotels these days, although it took me a while to find the hairdryer, which was wired into a drawer of the desk. There was internet access, which I used, though the cost was about $10 for one hour or $50 for 24, so I didn't use it much. The bathroom had both a bathtub and a large shower, both a toilet and a bidet, and both bars of soap and bath gel. It even had a small bottle of sunscreen, which I used on my last day when I went out. The closet had a small safe, which was just big enough to hold my new Mac Book Air, along with my camera and passport case. A pleasant surprise was a small, simple alarm clock, which did so little that it was very easy to use.

The hotel is considered a "resort hotel," and it is mainly intended for families spending time at the beach with their kids. In addition to the beach itself, it includes a water park and various rides. I only caught a glimpse of all of that, but I did see people in swimwear in the corridors of the hotel, always modestly covered.

The meetings were not to start until afternoon on Friday (I had arrived on Thursday night), so I ate the breakfast in the hotel that was included with the room. I'd been told that there were 22 restaurants in the hotel, which might give you an idea of its size, but the ground floor had the main one, just off the lobby overlooking the beach. It was a buffet, with the stations of food distributed over three adjoining rooms, only one of which contained pork. Since Muslims don't eat pork, you might think they'd put the pork room at one end so that the Muslims could easily avoid it, but it was in the middle.

When I arrived for breakfast, the hostess took my name and room number, then assigned a waiter to me who addressed me by name for the rest of my visit. I ordered juice and coffee from him, then went to get a plateful of food. While I was doing that, a voice greeted me from behind, and it was Jim Anderson, a fellow trade economist from Boston College who I knew would be part of my group at the Summit. (Pat will find it interesting that Jim is now the William B. Neenan Professor.) He invited me to join him at his table outside, and I said I would. But when I returned to my table, I realized that I

didn't know how to find my waiter to tell him I was moving. So instead, I found Jim again and said I was going to stay inside, since it was simpler.

Later in the morning, Jim and I met again when we went to catch the shuttle bus to the conference center. Throughout the conference, there were busses stationed at the front of the hotel to take us back and forth. They'd leave every twenty minutes, but there was always one there, so you could wait in the air-conditioned comfort of the bus until it left – never any waiting outside. I was glad of that, since I don't like the heat, though admittedly it wasn't all that hot, probably just the low 90s during the day, and in the 70s in the evenings.

At the conference center they gave us each a very nice black carrying case with the conference materials. These included a loose-leaf notebook with two pages for each of the 68 Global Agenda Councils, explaining their issues and listing their members. It also included a paperback book, almost two inches thick, with a page for each of us showing our pictures and telling a little about us. Our pictures were also shown on our nametags, which we wore on an elastic string around our necks. Finally, the materials included a hardbound book, telling the story of Dubai. I haven't read it yet.

The conference center had two large halls that we used. One was filled with chairs facing a low stage with giant video screens on either side that showed the person talking, since they'd have been hard to see from the back of the room. The other was partitioned into 68 small areas where our groups met. This could most easily have been done in a rectangular grid, but it wasn't. The partitions formed clusters of various sizes, and the spaces between the clusters wound their way through the room so that you could never see too great a distance, even though the room was large. The areas formed by these partitions had openings rather than doors, but each also had a white board on a wheeled pedestal that could mostly block the entrance to the area and provide some privacy for the group. Along the edges of the large room, there were tables and people dispensing coffee and other drinks, as well as pastries and small sandwiches. All very well and conveniently organized.

The first day, after an opening plenary session in which Klaus Schwab and the ruler of Dubai both spoke, we spent the afternoon in our group discussing what we thought were the problems and solutions on our assigned topic of trade facilitation. There were two groups dealing with trade: ours, which was narrowly defined as dealing with the problems of getting goods across borders; and a second on the Global Trading System, which was much more general. My own group was chaired by Bob Lawrence, of Harvard. The other was chaired by Ernesto Zedillo, a former president of Mexico who is now a professor at Yale.

The plan of the meetings was that we would all draft our ideas that first day, then on the morning of the second day parts of each group would go around to other groups to interact. However, Bob and Ernesto decided that first afternoon that our two groups should meet together, since our issues were so related. We did that, therefore, first on the second day. We had a very good meeting, but it rather messed up the system, since

people from other groups who wanted to talk to us found us crowded together with no room for visitors. This was probably a mistake.

The first evening, dinner was at my hotel, outdoors, and we were expected to talk to each other. I sat with Jim and talked mostly to him. Then I went to bed, as did he. The second evening, they took us an hour away, out into the desert, by bus – all 700 of us, lots of buses, and with a police escort. The destination was some sort of old fort that is being developed as a tourist attraction. If there was much to see, we didn't see it, but they did have several booths and other areas where people were doing touristy things for us, such as palm reading (I didn't), henna tattooing (I did, on my calf), riding camels (I didn't), holding a falcon (I did), and smoking a hookah (I didn't).

With falcon, from trip

Dinner was again a buffet, with lots of different cuisines, some Arab but many not, being prepared before our eyes there on the desert. Many tables were set for us to eat at, but the legs of the tables were only about six inches long. We were expected to sit, cross-legged I think, on cushions. That was a challenge for many of us, who tried with only partial success to squeeze our legs under the tables. The food was good, but it was hard to appreciate in that position.

At my table I sat next to Jim, with another fellow I didn't know on the other side of him. When we'd finished eating, Jim got up to get dessert, and I introduced myself to the

Evening event, from trip

Performers, from trip

fellow. He turned out to be the head of a fair-trade nonprofit company in Switzerland.

Fair trade is something I've become increasingly interested in, so I moved over to Jim's cushion and talked to him at some length. At such length, in fact, that at some point he pointed out that we were missing the "cultural show." Sure enough, I had turned sideways on the cushion to talk to him, putting my back to the place beyond the dining area where everyone else was now standing watching a show. We got up and got there just in time to see lots of Arabs ride away on horses. Horses are a big thing here, Arabian horses, I presume, and I'd missed it. There wasn't much more to the show, just some young men twirling some sort of sticks that turned out, when they finally stopped, to be fake rifles.

I haven't mentioned how the Arabs here, some of them at least, are always dressed. They wear white robes and white headpieces, with just a circle of thick black rope on the tops of their heads. My impression was that pretty much all Arab men are dressed like this in Dubai, although I can't be sure that all the other men who are not dressed like this are not Arab. But most of them aren't. The country has far more non-Arabs than Arabs, the non-Arabs having migrated here from India and other places to do most of the work of cooking, serving, construction, etc. My impression is that most of the citizens of Dubai, the Arabs, dress in the white robes to set themselves apart.

Women? There were lots of women among the delegates to the conference, but they were mostly dressed in western style. And there were plenty of women serving us, also usually dressed in western style. I saw very few women that I presumed were Arab, with head scarves or more complete coverings. I suppose it's possible that the local female citizens were there and indistinguishable from us by their clothes. But I think it more likely that they were staying home. I'm told, by the way, that there are three times as many males as females in Dubai. I'm sure that's because most of the guest workers, especially those doing construction, are males.

The last day of the conference ended with another networking lunch, after a morning plenary session in which each group's messages, distilled into eight "clusters," was presented to the whole body. In the case of our two trade groups, our several bullet points were reduced to a phrase advocating an open trading system.

Back at my hotel, I bought a ticket for an outing on the "Big Bus." These are double-decker buses, with upper levels open to the air but covered. They follow one of two circuits around the city. At various points, one can get off, look around, and then board another bus when it comes, at intervals of 20 minutes. The two routes intersect a couple of places, so you can switch between them, and the tickets also include admission to a museum and a boat ride. Unfortunately, I only had about four hours, so I couldn't do all this. But I did manage to see most of the city's high points. These, as I now look back at the photos I took, were not too wonderful. I got a much better feel for the city than I'd had before, but there really was very little worth seeing.

Bus tour, from trip

Bus tour, from trip

Bus tour, from trip

Hotel Atlantis, The Palm, from trip

The tallest building in the world might be worth seeing, once it's done. It is very tall, of course, and very skinny, narrowing to a thin spire near the top that looks like it may hold some very small offices. It looks fragile, but I don't suppose it is.

Burj Dubai, now Burj Khalifa, being built, from trip

We did drive out on another of Dubai's famous features: Palm Island. This is a large man-made island in the shape of a palm tree. A central road, reached by a bridge that forms the trunk of the tree when seen from the air, runs between many "fronds" that branch off from it. Each frond is a narrow, curved peninsula, full of beach-front villas. The design apparently assures that every villa on the entire island is a beach-front property, looking out across the narrow strip of water that separates the fronds. Pictures I've seen of the island from the air had it looking green, but these must have been before the villas were constructed. Now, all the land of the island is being used by the villas. At the top end of the island is another giant hotel. All of this was rather interesting, but it might have been beautiful only from the air. From our bus, it was just a slightly unusual residential district.

Palm Island, from Web 2025

On Palm Island, from trip

Hotel Atlantis, on Palm Island, from trip

At the end of my tour, I tried to visit the gold market, which I'd heard someone mention as worth seeing. It was at one of the stops of the Big Bus and was mentioned by the tour guide. I got out and looked, but I was never sure that I had found the right thing. I'd expected a street full of small shops selling gold jewelry and chunks of gold. All I found was a very large building festooned with gold and the sign Gold Land. Inside it was indeed lots of small shops, but while there was certainly plenty of gold jewelry, there was lots else, and no sign of chunks of gold.

By this time, I was near to the end of the time that the Big Buses would be running, so I took a taxi back to my hotel, intending dinner and an early bed. (I got up at 5:00 AM this morning.)

Gold Land, from trip

I first went to the main buffet restaurant, where I'd had breakfast the first day. The price of the dinner buffet, I was told, was about $80. That seemed steep, so I decided to look at some others of the hotel's many restaurants. I found an American one nearby, but it was only a little cheaper, and for American food. I asked about where I could get Arab cuisine and was directed to a Lebanese restaurant. It looked good, but it would have cost even more than the buffet. I returned to the buffet and got to eat more than my fill of lots of different things.

As I ate, I read, and I also listened to the music that a small trio was playing in the center of the restaurant. The trio had a guitar and a keyboard, but it was dominated by the sound of something like an accordion, played by a seated woman. The music was all familiar western tunes, recognizable and pleasant. Then, as I was finishing my coffee, a thin male voice joined in, and it was beautiful. I suppose it was one of the men in the trio, but it started so hesitantly that I wondered if it was somebody in the audience. I never found out, but I stayed longer than I'd intended, listening to it.

I mentioned networking. I did meet and talk to a variety of people at the Summit, usually at meals but also during transportation. Some were ones I'd met before but wouldn't have said that I knew. A woman from Columbia University, for example, whom I'd met at a conference there, but I talked to her more here. For several years she was a member of the Appellate Body of the World Trade Organization, essentially that body's supreme court. Another was Ernesto Zedillo, whom I mentioned above and who was President of Mexico 1994-2000. He's now a professor at Yale, specializing in trade, and I thought I might have met him before but wasn't sure. He acted like he knew me, though, and seemed even to know my work, which was gratifying.

At meals I met people from other groups. One was a neuroscientist of some sort, who explained to me why we function so much better and more quickly standing up, doing things we might have doubted we could do. Another was a journalist with Bloomberg

News, American but based most of his life abroad, and trained at Michigan. At lunch yesterday, we discussed the future of state universities with faculty – I think they were deans – from MIT and Northwestern.

Today I shared a car to the airport with a man who was younger than all of these, probably in his forties, and who has been a regular at both Davos and many of the other World Economic Forum events. He told me his name and the name of his publication, Seed, which deals with innovation. By happenstance, on the plane I was reading an issue of the Economist from September and came across mention of him and his publication. He is evidently a rising star.

Seated next to me during this flight has been a woman from the Bay area. She also attended the Summit and before long I learned that she is the CEO of Mozilla, the nonprofit company behind the Firefox web browser. With my new interest in nonprofits, I had a good time talking with her for a while.

I can't help wondering, therefore, whom I might have met if I'd actually tried. Perhaps if I'm invited to attend this event again next year, I will. They do plan to hold these summits in Dubai each year for several years at least, but I wonder whether trade will continue to be viewed as important enough to give it attention. I suspect we may need a crisis in the trading system to raise its profile for that to happen.

As for Dubai itself, I'm certainly glad to have seen it. It is growing so rapidly and seems so very prosperous that I wonder whether it may be riding a bubble that is about to burst. The boom in Dubai is most visible in real estate, and you'd think the world's financial problems would get in the way. There was no way I could tell how much of the recent building is occupied. It won't surprise me if, a few years from now, Dubai will be known as a boom town that reached its zenith right about now and then went bust.

More Photos from Trip:

Indoor ski slope, from trip

Beach, from trip

From trip

From trip

Al Fahidi Fort, from trip

From trip

From trip