

Chapter 33

Doha 2012



Journal of Trip to Doha, Qatar, Apr 21-27, 2012

Friday, April 27, 2012, *en route* from Amsterdam to Detroit

I had no time to write this during my trip, not because the trip itself had me so busy but because the timing of the trip – at just the end of the semester – had me with lots of work to do back home. One was a thesis defense that I attended by Skype on Monday and spent most of the time before then reading the thesis. Another was grading papers for my course, which I hadn't managed even to start while at home.

My trip to Doha was to attend UNCTAD XIII, the thirteenth conference of the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development. It's an institution based in Geneva, with close to 200 member countries. It meets every four years in a different place to decide its agenda for promoting economic development for the next four. In between the meetings its sizable staff does things, including gathering data on trade barriers. I've made several trips to Geneva over the years for smaller meetings about that topic. For this meeting, I was one of three speakers on a panel talking about nontariff trade barriers.

UNCTAD booked my travel and would have put me in business class if I'd been willing to fly Lufthansa, with which they have an arranged low fare. I wasn't willing, though, and asked for them to book the closest to business class they could get on Delta without going over the Lufthansa fare. That meant being in what these days is called Economy Comfort on both flights between Detroit and Amsterdam, but plain old economy between Amsterdam and Doha (a six-hour flight). In fact, the flight from Doha today was not only economy, but a middle seat – about as far from business class as you can get. Economy comfort, which I'm in right now on an aisle, is better, but only by having a bit more leg room and ability to tilt the seat back further.

On arrival in Doha, my first surprise was that the plane did not pull up to a jetway at the terminal, even though this is a pretty big airport in the only big city in a reasonably rich (from gas and oil) country. Instead, we disembarked onto stairs and into busses that then drove 15 or 20 minutes to get to the terminal.

In the terminal, after immigration and customs and getting money from an ATM (the value of which I had little idea of, as I'd neglected to look up the exchange rate beforehand), I looked around the terminal for an information desk that might tell me how best to get to my hotel. I saw none. But next to a door leading outside, there was a podium with a few men gathered around and a couple of signs, one of which said UNCTAD XIII. I went over and asked if they could suggest how to get to the Gloria Hotel, where I was staying.

There was confusion for a few minutes, as I don't think they had heard of that hotel, but also, they were dealing with another passenger who had gotten there first. After a bit, a young man said that a ride would be arranged and to please wait. I waited, wondering if anything would happen, and if it did, what it would cost me. Eventually, he took my bag and started outside. I quickly asked how much this would cost, and he told me it would be free. Then I saw that the car to which he was leading me and the other gentleman also had the sign for UNCTAD XIII. That became very familiar over the week, as there was a huge fleet of cars and busses with this sign, providing free transport for everyone attending the conference.



Gloria Hotel, from Web 2025

The ride to my hotel was easy. For me, at least. For the driver it was more of a challenge, since even though he had GPS, he had a hard time finding my hotel. At one point he had gone down a narrow side street apparently expecting to find it. Instead, he got to a place where we could see my hotel a couple of blocks away, across some vacant land. He had to turn around and find a second side street to get me there. I've since had a similar problem trying to walk back to my hotel when taking a slightly different route from what I'd used before. I could see the hotel not far away, but I couldn't find a path to it that was passable, even on foot. This is because there is so much construction going on, and streets that you'd expect to go through are blocked with construction materials or just torn up.

The Gloria Hotel is small compared to many others in Doha, only fifteen stories tall and not very spread out. The reception is not a tall counter like one usually sees, but just three nice wooden desks with comfortable chairs opposite for the guests to sit in while registering for the room. The clerks were very friendly, and someone even came over and handed me a glass of orange juice to drink during the process. It didn't take very long, though, and I didn't have time to finish it.

A pleasant young man, a bellman perhaps but I'll call him the concierge, took my bag and ushered me to my room on the 15th floor. As he left, I wanted to give him a tip, but all I had in Qatari money was what had come out of the ATM, and I was pretty sure that it was all way too large. I offered him US money, but he declined, saying he would not be able to exchange it. (I did, eventually, have some smaller bills and understood their value, so I gave him a tip when I saw him again a few days later.)

Now I need to help you understand what sort of people I was dealing with. Qatar is an Arab country, ruled by a Sheik and adhering pretty strictly to Islamic laws and customs, at least for Muslims. The Qatari men are always dressed in white gowns (not sure what to call them) that come down to their feet, plus distinctive white headdresses that sweep back from their foreheads and seem to be held in place, or perhaps just ornamented, with a black circular braid. There is some minor variation on this costume, but not much. They all dress, and therefore often look, very much alike, including with their black mustaches and sometimes beards. This being Qatar, they are everywhere.

The Qatari women are much less prominent, partly because they are dressed all in black covering all but their faces, sometimes all but their eyes, and sometimes simply all – apparently the black cloth is thin enough that they can see out while we can't see in. There also don't seem to be nearly as many women as men, but I suppose that is because most women don't go out much. No wonder. And it is the men who are clearly running the show. As I understand it, the country's oil and gas income is shared with the citizens, so they don't have to work for a living in quite the usual way. When I say they are running the show, I mean that they are standing around and giving instructions, but never actually doing much. (Ok, I suppose an observer might say the same of me.)



Qatari man in traditional dress,
from Web 2025

All of which had meant that I've had very few interactions with Qatari men, and none at all with Qatari women. The people I've dealt with – working in the hotel, in shops, driving busses, etc. – are none of them Qatari. They are people from other poorer developing countries who come here to work, send money home, and eventually (I presume) return to their home countries.

I learned that clearly my first full day when I took a taxi to the convention center, site of the conference. It was not possible to get a taxi at my hotel, because it is on a side street that taxis don't come down. I walked to a larger street where I was soon able to hail a cab. As we rode, I talked a bit with the driver, and one of my first questions was whether he was Qatari, since it didn't seem like one ought to just assume from his dress that he was not. He laughed and said no, a Qatari would never drive a taxi. I'm sure that he told me what country he was from, but now I can't recall. I think it was another Arab country, but presumably a much poorer one.



Qatari woman in traditional dress,
from Web 2025



Qatar National Convention Center, from Web 2025

I'd asked in the hotel for a map of the city, so that I could find my way around. They apparently didn't have them to give out, which is unusual for a hotel, but they xeroxed one on two sheets and taped them together for me. I asked in the hotel for them to show me where we were and where the convention center was. They seemed unsure of the latter, and they finally marked an area near the edge of the map that said something about education center, not convention center. I wasn't very confident that they had it right, though it turned out that they did.

Doha is built on a crescent of a bay, opening out into the Persian Gulf. My hotel, along with many others and what passes for the old part of the city, is near the shore at the south end of this crescent. From there you can look across the bay to the north end, where a large cluster of much taller and more impressive buildings is located. To the extent that anyone might want a photo of Doha, it would be of that portion, from across the bay. Some of the buildings have interesting shapes.



Doha Qatar City Center, from Web 2025

But I never got close to them. My trips to and from the convention center always took me along the shore just halfway around the bay, then perpendicular to the shore out a few miles into what would have looked like desert if it weren't built up. That's how the taxi took me that first day, and the busses each day after that.

The taxi driver had no trouble finding the convention center, which was on a main road. But apparently he had never taken anybody there before, because he had no idea where to drop me. As we approached, there were roads leading to the impressive looking building, but they were blocked to normal traffic. We went past the building where he asked an attendant, and they directed him into a giant parking structure that was adjacent to the

center. Inside it was still not obvious what to do, as now there were no attendants, and the signs seemed only to say, “no entrance.” He proceeded through the structure, slowing almost to a stop frequently because of speed bumps, and eventually came out the back of the structure none the wiser. So, he found his way back around to the front again, asked again for directions, and repeated the start of what we had done before. This time, though, he stopped at some point, got out and managed to find someone to explain what to do. He was told to drop me there, and I would be able to walk into the convention center. He did, and the person who had advised him then advised me to go straight in, then down a flight. I did that, but found myself at what was an exit, not an entrance. The person who wouldn’t let me enter said to go back upstairs and cross over to the other side and down again. That worked, though it was remarkable how few signs there were to help. There were plenty of signs saying what not to do, but few saying what to do.

Anyhow, after all this confusion I entered a wide underground passageway leading to the convention center. It had moving sidewalks on each side, as well as a broad space between them, but before I’d taken even a few steps toward them, a sheik-dressed Arab pulled up in a large golf cart to give me and a couple of others a ride. He whisked us to the other end of the passageway, where escalators led up to the center. I realize now that this was one of the few times that I ever saw a Qatari doing work. I suspect that was because driving a golf cart is fun.

Inside the convention center, I found a large room with a row of desks for registering the conference participants. It was clearly set up to handle masses of people, but I was arriving mid-morning on Monday, and I may have been their only customer. They had my name in the system, took my photo, and very quickly produced a plastic badge for me to wear with my name, my picture, and a bar code. From then on, I would occasionally have to stop for attendants who would scan the bar code, look at a display screen where my picture would come up, and check that I was legitimate. I got the feeling that they mostly compared the picture on the badge to the picture on the screen, which were of course the same, rather than comparing either picture to me.

The convention center was large, the size of a football field or more, and three stories tall. Each floor had various rooms, both very large and smaller, for different pieces of the conference. There were large electronic displays showing the day’s program. Looking at one, I saw that a session was in progress on the Global System of Trade Preferences, or GSTP. I’d never heard of that, but from its name it interested me, as I know it will you, so I found it and went in. [I see now, in 2025, that GSTP is an entry in my Glossary, so I must have learned about it at some point.]

It was a large room, one side of which had a rectangle of tables at which representatives of various countries were sitting, being called on by a chairperson to make statements. The rest of the room was filled with chairs for an audience. There were plenty of empty ones, so I sat down and listened. Each chair had a listening device for simultaneous translation, which I needed since every speaker except the chairperson was speaking something other than English. I listened for while, but the statements being made seemed to be just formalities, nothing with much substance.

At some point, a member of the audience in the row ahead handed me a sign-up sheet. It was half filled with the names and countries of others in the audience, and I added my information and passed it along. A few minutes later, a woman came over and quietly asked me where I was from. I said the US. She said, “The United States?” I said yes. “Of America?” Yes. “Oh, you can’t be here. This meeting is only for members of the GSTP.” Which turned out to be a group of only developing countries. I left.

Looking for something to do, I looked at my phone and found that there was wireless. I checked my e-mail and found a message from my UNCTAD friend, Alessandro, who had first invited me to this meeting. He asked if I was in town and wanted to meet. I said sure, and I joined him and two others in a sandwich shop where they had just finished lunch. We chatted about the session I would be in on Wednesday, and he told me about a session that I would be welcome to attend at 9:00 on Tuesday morning that sounded worthwhile. He also told me where to find the busses that would take me to the convention center. They have a meeting point just outside his hotel, the Best Western, and he showed me on Google Maps that it was just a couple of blocks from my hotel. I then decided there was nothing more I wanted to do there that day, so I went looking for the bus that would take me back to my hotel.



Alessandro Nicita, from Web 2025

The front of the convention center was all glass, and from the first floor I could see outside to a road that didn’t have much going on, except a single bus and a car. I supposed the bus must be what I was looking for, but I couldn’t see what door I would be allowed to use to get out there. Some were locked, and others were guarded. I tried one of the latter, and was told that no, this was not a bus for me. The buses for me were in the parking structure where I had entered. Apparently, the bus and car I was seeing outside were for VIPs. I’d noticed several places in the convention center that were marked as reserved for VIPs.

Feeling doubtful, given my introduction to the parking structure earlier that day, I headed back to it. This time, though, I found a sign. Just before the rank of registration desks, there was a sign saying Busses and pointing to the right. This led me up an escalator to an exit where I found not just one bus but more than a dozen. I asked for the bus to the Gloria Hotel and was put on one with just one other passenger. He was a young fellow from Germany, and we had a nice chat on the ride back to the hotels. His hotel wasn’t the Gloria, but it was close by.

Back in the hotel, I finished reading the dissertation and attended the defense by Skype. There were four professors attending, two by Skype.

I ate dinner in the hotel that evening, as I had the evening before and would again the rest of the week, as well as all breakfasts and a couple of lunches. The restaurant had a buffet that was always decent. Some of the food may have been Arabic, but most of it wasn't. There was Indian, Chinese, Italian, and perhaps American. Not much adventure there.

For Tuesday, I had been invited to a "working lunch" that would include an address by Pascal Lamy, Director General of the World Trade Organization, plus several others talking about trade. I first attended a longer session on trade issues run by the same organization (the International Trade Centre of Geneva, where I'd given a talk in February), and then went to find the working lunch. Looking it up on the displays, I saw that it was to be in an auditorium. That seemed odd, for a lunch, and sure enough, the room was indeed an auditorium with no place to eat. And no food. I double-checked the program, and it insisted that lunch would be provided. I sat through a two-hour program, wondering just when and how we would be getting food. At the end, they informed us that food was waiting outside the auditorium in the lobby, and sure enough, there was a buffet cordoned off from the rest of the lobby where we all went to eat. The food was fine, and perhaps a bit more distinctively Middle Eastern than what I'd had at my hotel. But we had to eat standing up, which I hate.

There was one dish that I thought looked like it might be good but didn't recognize. It looked rather like a large fig, stuffed with something. Turned out it was a whole stuffed eggplant, but no bigger than a goose egg. It was delicious.

After lunch I again headed back to my hotel, and this time I think I was the only passenger in the bus. These are full sized busses. I feel that my carbon footprint must have been huge on these trips.

I spent a little time on my presentation for the next day, but mainly spent the afternoon, evening, and part of the next morning grading papers. The presentation was essentially something I had given several times before to different audiences, so there wasn't a lot to do on that.

On Wednesday morning I met with Alessandro and the other speakers for coffee. One of the speakers was Bernard Hoekman, our former student who is now pretty high up in the World Bank. We all discussed a bit more about our session. But mostly, the others wanted to talk about various initiatives that their organizations were trying to squeeze donors funding. I took my leave and went back to grading papers, which I finished, thankfully, just before our noon session was to start.

This too was to be a lunch session, and this too would be a buffet with the food out in the lobby. Only this time, they fed us first. Not necessarily the right move if you want to keep the audience, or for that matter the speakers, awake.

The session was chaired by somebody named Guillermo from UNCTAD, who introduced us, called on a couple of administrators to speak, and then had the three of us do our things, me first. This all went well, including Q&A at the end, and we were on track to finish as scheduled at 2:00 PM. But then Guillermo started calling on people who had been in the audience to come up and speak on a totally different topic. When the first one came up and started projecting slides, Bernard looked at me and said we've been hijacked. I motioned to Guillermo, asking if we should leave, and he motioned back – or I think he did – not to. So instead, Bernard and I continued to sit on the podium for close to half an hour as one speaker after another came up and made presentations. Eventually, Bernard suggested that I sneak out and he would follow. I did, but I'm not sure he managed to. He was closer to Guillermo, after all.

I noticed something odd about that auditorium that I will have to keep in mind in my next life as an architect. The only aisles were at the far left and far right, none in the middle. When I'd attended a session there the day before, I'd arrived earlier, and I'd deliberately moved toward the center of one of the rows. But most people don't do that. For our session, which wasn't very well attended, the entire audience was within a few seats of those two aisles, except for a few sitting down front (who turned out to be speakers for the second session). There was nobody in the middle, even though that is where all of us speakers were facing.

This wasn't all bad. When we got to the Q&A, it was very easy for the guy handling the portable microphone to hand it to those who wanted to speak, since they were near the aisle.

So how should an auditorium be designed? I had lots of time to think about this as I waited through the extra presentations. Clearly there needs to be at least one aisle in the middle. Or if that feels awkward too, because then the speaker would be talking to the aisle, then two aisles cutting the room into thirds.

After I got away from the session on Wednesday, I was eager to get back to the hotel to calculate and post my grades, which had been due on Monday. I did that, but not before I was interrupted several times as I left the session. First – and this was actually before the session – I was approached by a man who looked somewhat familiar but whose facial expressions made clear he was coming to see me. He started by asking how my wife had liked the cheese. That helped. In Geneva in February, I had gotten advice from several people about what cheese to take home to Pat, so he was clearly one of that group. He then proceeded to say that DFID (that's the British development aid agency) wanted me to come to London to give this same talk. We looked at our schedules and I think we settled on a date in June when I may do that. I learned later from Bernard that this guy – whose name I still didn't catch – is a liaison between DFID and the ITC.

As I left the area of the session, heading for the bus, I heard somebody behind me saying hello to "Meena". Since I have had a student whose name sounds like that, it caught my attention, and I looked around. It wasn't my student, nor anybody whom I recognized.

But she recognized me and was trying to catch up to me to say hello. I'm still not sure where I knew her from.

As I turned away from her, thinking to make my escape, I came face-to-face with a middle-aged Indian fellow whom I did recognize as the man behind CUTS. I've forgotten what that stands for, but I'm sure the T stands for trade, and I get e-mail from them with updates and discussion of trade topics just about every day. Whatever his name is, he's quite a self-promoter, and he seemed much more delighted to see me than he would have been if he'd known I forgot his name.

So, on this my last day at the conference (it continued through Thursday, but I saw no reason to attend), and after feeling out of place the first day, I now felt appreciated.

Through the week I had asked a few people what would be good to see in Doha. All had mentioned the Museum of Islamic Art, which was close to my hotel, and I'd seen it from the bus. And one mentioned the Suk. That seemed to be the closest they have to an old section of the city that might be interesting, so I walked there on Wednesday night. It was worth seeing. I gather that a suk is a market, but that this one is the largest and is distinctive because it is in a complex of what appear to be old stone buildings, quite charming. It was probably built recently to look that way, but no matter. It was full of shops with lots to see. One section had many dozens of tiny shops selling animals, presumably as pets: kittens, birds, turtles, bunnies, even one dog. It was all very interesting, but I saw hardly anything that I wanted to buy. It wasn't really geared to tourists, but rather to locals and especially guest workers wanting to buy for their daily needs.



Suk from Web 2025

There was one thing that I had hoped to buy, and that was postcards. My concierge friend had said that the hotel had ones that he could sell me, but that there would be better ones at the Suk. Maybe I just didn't find the right section of the market; perhaps there's whole section of card shops that I didn't see. But I only found one that had even a few cards, and I picked out three with camels that I wanted to buy.

They were 4 rial each, for a total of 12. I still had mostly the money from the ATM, and I had no 1's. I gave the man two 10's. He asked if I didn't have something smaller, and I said – truthfully – no. He then spent several minutes digging through his desk, his pockets, and a cabinet across the room, trying to find change. The best he could come up with was a 5 and two 1's, not three. Perhaps he was hoping that I'd accept that, but I didn't. I suggested that he should give me all three postcards for 10 rial. But he also refused. In the end, I took back one of the 10's and his two 1's and gave him back one of the cards.

This was not the first time I'd had someone find it difficult to make change. Since the amounts are not large, I find it odd.

Anyhow, back in the hotel I told my concierge friend that I'd like to buy 15 cards. He brought out what he had, and I started to make selections. But it turned out that he had exactly 15, so that was that.

On Thursday my flight was to leave Doha at 11:59 PM. I didn't have a lot to do, so I slept until I awoke, at 9:00 AM, instead of using my alarm. After checking out, I walked over the Museum of Islamic Art, which the morning concierge, an older Indian man, directed me to. As I started out, he said "Sir, do you have a hat? You'll need one. The



Museum of Islamic Art, from Wikipedia 2025

sun is very hot.” I thought that I’d lost the hat that I bought in Machu Picchu, so he told me where to find a store to buy one. Very thoughtful. But as I walked, I looked in my bag and found my hat, so I was fine. This prompted me to put on sunblock as well. He’s right, even a short walk in that sun would probably have an effect.

The museum was worth seeing. I’m not all that fond of museums, especially of art. But Islamic art is different. There were very few paintings or sculptures. Instead, the museum was filled with objects that have a practical purpose, sometimes day-to-day and sometimes religious, that have been made with attention to intricate beauty. An ordinary thing, like a pitcher, for example, has been made in a marvelous shape that is nonetheless practical, and then inscribed or otherwise decorated with intricate repeating patterns. It’s never gaudy, always tasteful. And very beautiful.



Islamic art, from Web



Islamic art, from Web



Islamic art, from Web

As I understand it, the religion does not permit images of living things, especially people, in religious contexts, and while these are permitted in other contexts, the culture just doesn’t tend that way. Instead, it is all geometric patterns, painstakingly and intricately created and repeated, covering the entire outside surface of all sorts of objects, using carving, etching, painting, colored clay in pottery, and so forth. For my taste, it’s wonderful, and far better than paintings of saints, rich people, and battle scenes.

Because of the incredible amount of work that obviously went into making these often-everyday objects, it struck me that this must in part have reflected how very low wages were in the middle ages when these were made. Labor cannot have been very productive, so spending a lot of time on these pieces wasn’t much of a waste. No wonder, with our high wages today, that art consists of just dripping paint onto a canvas.

This brings me to about the end of my trip. I spent the rest of the day reading and doing e-mail in the hotel lobby until it was time to leave. The ride to the airport was free, provided in a hotel van. These are very hospitable people, whoever they are.

One thing I forgot to mention: the hotel elevator. As I said, my room was on the 15th floor. The first time I went up without the concierge, I watched the numbers on the electronic display work their way up, waiting to get to 15. Instead, it stopped at 14. I was the only passenger, so I waited for someone to get on, even though that would have been surprising. No one did. Before the door closed, I looked out into the hall and saw that the doors to the rooms were numbered 1501, etc. The elevator was saying the wrong thing but doing the right thing.

I soon realized what must have happened. They built the hotel, and ordered the elevator, without realizing that guests don't want to be on the 13th floor. When they realized that, they renumbered the floors and rooms 13 and 14 as 14 and 15. Simple. But I suppose the elevator, with its electronic display of room numbers, had already been made, so they didn't change it. The displays on the ground floor, showing where the elevator is, have the same problem.

I think that's all. I got only an hour or so of sleep on the flight from Doha, and just an hour more on this flight before I started writing this. I think I better try to sleep.

