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What \$3 Billion, More or Less, Buys: A Hotel Fit for Kings

By OTTO POHL

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ABU DHABI, United Arab Emirates, March 10 - At roughly \$3 billion, the Emirates Palace in Abu Dhabi, which just opened to the public, is said to be the most expensive hotel ever built. A billion won't buy what it used to, of course, but three seems to do just fine.

Although it has fewer than 400 rooms, the hotel features 128 kitchens and pantries, 1,002 custom-made Swarovski crystal chandeliers (requiring a full-time staff of 10 just to keep them clean) and what Willy Optekamp, the hotel's general manager, says is the world's largest dome over the lobby.

"Think about coffee," he says, and obviously he has. "We serve coffee on a silver tray with rose petals, crystallized sugar, a linen napkin, marzipan croissants, a bottle of imported water and the coffee. The ladies get a rose."

The hotel has nearly 150,000 cubic yards of imported marble, plans for 20 restaurants and a layout so sprawling - 60 acres of interior space - that the staff will soon be equipped with golf carts to navigate the corridors. "Some of them are over a kilometer long," Mr. Optekamp says. "If a maid goes to lunch, she may never make it back."

While war and civil unrest make headlines elsewhere in the Middle East, a number of small countries rich in oil remain peaceful places primarily consumed with disposing of their enormous surplus of cash, which has multiplied with the rapid increase in

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Otto Pohl for The New York Times
The royal entrance to the Emirates Palace in Abu Dhabi, with part of the hotel beyond. The sprawling hotel has 60 acres of interior space.

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world oil prices. The Emirates Palace, owned by the government of Abu Dhabi, is perhaps the ultimate case in point.

The \$3 billion price tag is actually an estimate. But a few hundred million is a rounding error for this tiny emirate: with 92 billion barrels in proven reserves, every time the price of a barrel of oil rises by a dollar, as it has in the last few days, Abu Dhabi could build 30 more of these hotels.

During turndown service, the staff puts a sachet of lavender between the sheets to perfume them. When they are done, they tuck the lavender under the pillows so the fresh scent will waft over the guest at night. The hotel, which is managed by an upscale German hotelier, Kempinski Hotels and Resorts, has bath butlers standing by to prepare one of seven baths listed on the bath menu. If you're prepared to go off menu, you can get your tub filled with champagne for a few thousand dollars.

Pool and beach service includes roving staff members to clean sunglasses, cool guests with soothing sprays of water and supply fruit sticks. Near the milelong private beach, two pools meander for the length of several football fields, interspersed with Jacuzzis.

Rooms, which range from an almost embarrassingly modest \$625 a night to \$13,000 (subject to a 20 percent service charge), come with floors of inlaid marble and soft carpeting. Recessed ceiling lighting almost imperceptibly illuminates a muted color scheme inspired by the desert sands outside.

As with any new enterprise, there are still a few kinks to work out. Connecting doors between many of the suites are not soundproof, leading some early guests to complain about overhearing the neighbors. Staff members still get lost in the maze of hallways, and everyone is looking forward to the delivery of the golf carts, 45 in all.

The chief architect, John Elliott of Wimberly Allison Tong & Goo, a London architectural firm, has considerable experience designing palaces, having done one for the Sultan of Brunei. Since the Emirates Palace was first envisioned as a place where government conferences would be held and only later was expanded into a hotel, Mr. Elliott feels that describing it as the world's most expensive hotel is inappropriate. "Everybody would be stunned if you said that Buckingham Palace wasn't cost effective," he said.

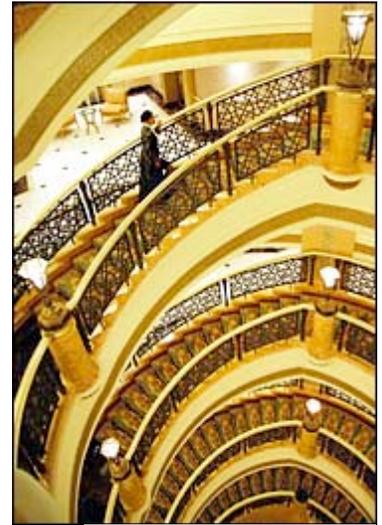
Six ruler's suites on the top floor of the hotel are to be used only by royalty visiting from other Persian Gulf countries. A special Arc de Triomphe-style entrance is reserved for their motorcades.

Guests are still something of a novelty. In fact, with the hotel only beginning to take reservations, almost all of the people in the lobby are employees. Even when the place is full, staff members will outnumber guests by six to one.

A day after the official opening, Ronald Schröter sat in the lobby cafe, looking stunned. "It's a little crazy, isn't it?" he said, looking for support to his girlfriend. Visiting from Germany on vacation, the two had come to have coffee and a look around. Mr. Schröter, the owner of a sports store, admitted that he had not even bothered to ask about prices. "This is for kings," he said, gazing at the golden ceiling arches.

Rather than the last word in luxury accommodations, however, the Emirates Palace may just be the start of the discussion. Mr. Elliott, the architect, says he is already in secretive talks with several sheiks in the region. "Other rulers have seen the palace,"

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Otto Pohl for The New York Times
A stairwell at the Emirates Palace, the opulent hotel in Abu Dhabi.



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