

EXCURSIONS TO AL QUA A DESERT HELP PEOPLE RECONNECT WITH THE STARS

Emirates' darkest spot throws up brightest Milky Way



The Milky Way as seen from the Al Quaa Desert on May 24. (AP)

Al Quaa Desert, UAE: The gleaming skyscrapers and bright lights of the UAE draw the eyes of all who travel there, a sign of the Arabian Peninsula nation's rapid, oil-fuelled development over the last decades into a major hub for commerce and tourism.

But something has been lost over that period: a clear vision across nearly all of the country's inhabited lands of the stars in the night sky that once guided Bedouin across the shifting desert dunes of its vast interior, known as the Empty Quarter.

A group of volunteers from the Dubai Astronomy

Group recently has been helping people reconnect with the sight of stars and the Milky Way by taking them on night-time excursions to Al Quaa Desert, one of the darkest spots remaining in the Emirates.

"It causes us to appreciate our existence in this galaxy," Sheeraz Awan, the general manager of the astronomy group, said as he guided participants through a weekend view of the stars in late May.

Light pollution

The UAE ranks among the world's most light-polluted countries, along with sev-

eral other Gulf Arab states whose populations largely live in major cities.

A 2016 scientific study concluded "humanity has enveloped our planet in a luminous fog" and suggested 99 per cent of the Emirates population could not see the Milky Way from their homes because of artificial lights.

That illumination ranges from street lights on roadways to the LED show thrilling tourists at Dubai's Burj Khalifa, the world's tallest building. Abu Dhabi plans to build a \$1.7 billion version of the Sphere, the Las Vegas attraction, on its Yas Island.

In Abu Dhabi, capital of the UAE, authorities have acknowledged the light pollution problem, coming up with what it calls a "Dark Sky Policy" in 2024 on lighting and other issues across its entire emirate.

In Dubai, increasingly more buildings have LED displays and LED billboards have become more common. Authorities in the emirate did not respond to a request for comment, though Dubai also is home to the Al Qudra Lakes, a rural area with fewer areas of light pollution.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 2 ►

Bright spot in sky from Emirates desert

► FROM PAGE 1

The desert is easily reachable by vehicle, about 100km south-east of Abu Dhabi along a major highway to the oasis city of Al Ain, then another road south far out into the desert.

Despite overhead road lights on the stretch known as Razeen Road, with a heavily lit prison along the way, the desert stretches just beyond in total darkness, unburdened by the bright illumination of the city. Razeen Road finally jogs east, but an automatic gate opens to allow drivers onto an unpaved road leading deeper

into the desert.

Kilometres further along, past those camping in the dunes and enjoying some of the last good overnight weather before the UAE summertime high temperatures of around 45°C, the astronomers gathered dozens of people to see the stars.

They weren't alone. Several labourers beneath heavy blankets slept nearby in the back of a pickup truck under the stars. Under one small LED lamp signalling where to park, a Solifugae — better known as a camel spider — ate another camel spider after a long strug-

gle. The creature ran briefly toward a journalist and a volunteer before the vibrations of an approaching car sent it scurrying back into the darkness. Everyone around then carefully watched their steps.

Staring at stars

On carpets laid out for the weekend excursion in May, families speaking Arabic, English and Russian looked up at the sky. The half-moon slowly set over the horizon. Soon, the outline of the Milky Way could be seen by the naked eye.

"When you look toward the east, can you see that faint

cloud?" Awan asked. "That, ladies and gentlemen, is the Milky Way."

He used a laser point to highlight the array of stars, drawing one woman to exclaim: "Ay ye ye!"

The Dubai Astronomy Group volunteers described this as one of the best times of the year to see the galaxy. Several gasped as they spotted meteors occasionally streaking across the sky, easily visible in the darkness without the interference of urban lights.

Some gathered around telescopes to look at individual stars. Others lay flat on the cold

desert sand, getting tips on how to make their mobile phones take long-exposure pictures to see the galaxy gleaming overhead. Over time, people slowly drifted to their cars and started the drive back to the UAE's lighted highways and cities.

For a moment, they had engaged with the night in the same way as Bedouins before them. "When we look at this Milky Way, we're kind of involved in an activity, which is not new," Awan told the stargazers. "It's something that people throughout time have been engaged in."

AP