

# CAMELS and CRIME SCENES

## *A Lesson on DNA in Abu Dhabi*

BY MITCH MORRISSEY

In the 1970s, Abu Dhabi, the cosmopolitan capital of the United Arab Emirates (UAE), began its extraordinary climb to international recognition. This southwest Asian federation is generally thought to be the richest country in the world, and the Persian Gulf city of Abu Dhabi has seen its population grow from about 25,000 in 1960 to approximately 900,000 today.

To compete with the modern world's centuries of progress, Abu Dhabi invested dramatically in its infrastructure, systems, and institutions. It formed partnerships with organizations throughout the world to import cultural and scientific advances. The Guggenheim Museum, New York University, and the Colorado School of Mines are examples of the high performance Western partners that have joined with Abu Dhabi to accelerate its progress.

When Abu Dhabi decided to build the finest crime lab in the world, it researched the best administrative practices and how to manage the new resources it was building. Even though Denver's new Crime Lab has not been built, Denver has developed award-winning programs in its Cold Case Project and DNA Burglary Project and has achieved national and



Denver District Attorney Mitch Morrissey, Forensic Anthropologist Mool Verma, and Denver Police Department Crime Lab Commander Gregory LaBerge in front of the Abu Dhabi Forensic Evidence Department.

international recognition for making advancements in law enforcement technology. Because of this track record, Abu Dhabi turned to Denver for guidance and instruction.

In October 2010, the Commander of the Denver Police Department Crime Lab, Gregory LaBerge, Forensic Anthropologist Mool Verma, and I, as the Denver District Attorney, were invited to provide the instruction they needed.

We looked forward not only to providing training on DNA and forensic matters, but also to explaining how the key to the success of Denver's program is the triangle of cooperation among the Denver Police Department, the Crime Lab, and the Denver District Attorney's Office. The extremely high level of cooperation and collaboration among these three entities is rare in the United States and has been the foundation for achieving our common goal of fighting crime.

Our trip was paid for by the government of Abu Dhabi. Each of us taught

classes every day for a week. Our students were young forensic scientists, attorneys, and judges—all determined to excel and understand the information the team from Denver was providing. Every day I would face a room full of white-robed, bearded men and a few women who were scientists or crime scene investigators. Through interpreters of varying ability, I would discuss forensic science and the law, issues around DNA in prosecution, as well as familial searching with DNA. Mool and Gregg delivered separate lectures geared toward their areas of expertise. Mool's classes were on basic hair examination and Gregg focused on forensic DNA statistics.

We discussed the plans for the Abu Dhabi Crime Lab with our hosts. Thanks to a local bond initiative, Denver has finalized plans for its own new Crime Lab, but Abu Dhabi's process differed from ours in one significant way: we have a strict budget, they have unlimited resources. It's amazing what millions of dollars can do to focus in on a problem.

The people we met were gracious and eager that we understand their culture. Abu Dhabi is a shining new



A camel race in Abu Dhabi.

city that grew out of the desert thanks to massive hydrocarbon resources. Without a gradually evolving culture, there are not many tourist sites. We visited desert tombs and the Heritage Village, where we saw an interesting re-creation of a Bedouin village, representative of the predominant lifestyle of the area until the early 1960s when oil was found and construction of the metropolitan area started. Down the road is Dubai—another impressive new city.

For the most part, people in Abu Dhabi spend a great deal of time escaping the heat in icy cold shopping malls. We visited the Palace Hotel, one of the few seven-star hotels in the world, and noted that the ATM in the lobby dispensed gold bars.

We also visited the Sheikh Zayed Grand Mosque, which is the most imposing religious and national landmark in Abu Dhabi. It also is arguably one of the most important architectural treasures of contemporary UAE society and one of the most beautiful in the world. It was initiated by the late President HH Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan, who is fondly thought of as the father of the UAE. The 22,412 square-meter Mosque site is equivalent to five football fields, and no expense was spared in both the exterior and interior design and decoration.

We discovered another popular activity when we were invited to the camel races. We watched in amazement as gangling camels careened around a track. Each animal had a

computer strapped to its back, serving as a mechanical jockey. A few years ago, “the old days” in the high-speed history of Abu Dhabi, young Pakistani boys were employed as jockeys, but the practice was abandoned in the face of widespread outrage. The viewing stands were completely empty—the audience raced their cars alongside the track honking horns and yelling at the camels. Wagering is against the law, as is camel doping. In fact, the largest section of the crime lab in Abu Dhabi is where the testing is done for banned substances in racing camels.

This center of great wealth has attracted hundreds of thousands of ex-patriots from around the world. Mool’s fluency in Hindi came in handy on a daily basis. The core Arab ruling class is relatively small compared to the vast number of workers from other countries. A city and country of great opportunity, Abu Dhabi has welcomed this multicultural workforce and provides a tolerant environment. Most women dressed conservatively, but there was a visible minority that had a Western look. Other religions are permitted and alcohol is allowed, although not widely available.

For the team from Denver, it was an honor to be asked to advise the prosecutors and scientists of Abu

Dhabi. It was a tribute to the vision of Denver’s leadership and voters that our reputation for fighting crime using advanced techniques and interagency cooperation is now internationally recognized. **D**

*Mitch Morrissey has served as Denver District Attorney since 2005. He is internationally recognized for his expertise in using DNA as a tool in solving crimes, and he regularly speaks on the topic.*



Mool Verma and Gregory LaBerge in front of the Sheikh Zayed Grand Mosque.

The Abu Dhabi skyline.

