

Sharjah: Air Outpost (1937)

This fascinating early documentary by [Paul Rotha](#) and narrated by [Stuart Legg](#) describes an Imperial Airways flight landing in [Sharjah](#), in today's United Arab Emirates, in 1937. The plane is a [Handley Page HP42 biplane](#).

Although Dubai (home of Emirates Airlines) and Abu Dhabi (home of Etihad) are more famous today, Sharjah was one of the first airports in the region and had an RAF presence for many years. The airport was a stop-over between Basra in Iraq and Karachi in Pakistan for planes flying from the UK to India and Australia. At the time of this movie, it took four days just to get from London to Sharjah, since planes were much slower and did not fly at night.

The video appeared via The National, a UAE-based paper, in [a June 2010 article "When Sharjah Ruled The Skies."](#) The article has a link to a [full-screen version](#) of the video.

Title: : 24 hours at the airport and city of Sharjah on the Persian Gulf. Made with the cooperation of Imperial Airways.

There are 25,000 miles of air routes in the British Empire. The safety and comfort of these routes depends largely on a network of over 80 airports, scattered through four continents.

Ground services for fuelling and overhauling aircraft, for collecting and sending out weather reports by radio, for handling freight and mail, and for providing accommodation for passengers of every nationality are an essential factor of modern flying. Many of these airports have been built in the most remote parts of the world, often hundreds of miles from the nearest source of supplies.

Such an airport is Sharjah, on the south coast of the Persian

Gulf, midway between Basra and Karachi, a section of the Indian-Australian route which crosses the marshes of the Euphrates delta, the sun-baked deserts of Arabia, and the barren wastes of Baluchistan. 1700 miles of desolate and almost uninhabited country, over which our airliners fly as safely and regularly as we take our daily ride to the office.

Sharjah is a hot and desolate spot on the edge of the south Arabian desert. The airport has its own engineering shop, radio office and meteorological station. In charge is a European station superintendent.

The airport is built in the shape of a square fort, as a precaution against possible but improbable raids by wandering tribes of Bedouins.

Two miles distant across the glare of the desert is the Arab city. Until recently, a centre for pirates who were active up and down the Gulf. Sharjah is still peopled by Arabs of the same Jawazmi tribes, by religion fanatical Wahabbis, but today it is ruled over by a sheikh who is friendly to the British government.

To the city come camel caravans from Muscat and from distant Mukalla. They are bringing merchandise to trade in the market or for shipment by dhow to nearby ports along the coast and across the Gulf of Persia.

At the southern end of the city is the palace of the Sheikh, Sultan Bin Saqr, a huge medieval building with battlemented walls. Here in the gateway, a council is held each day to discuss local affairs and to settle disputes amongst the people.

The city has a population of some 15,000 Arabs, with a sprinkling of Indian and Persian merchants. Until recently, gun-running and slave-dealing with Africa were a profitable business. Today, the chief labour of the people is boat-building and pearl fishing.

The oyster banks of the Persian Gulf begin here at Sharjah and stretch 300 miles northward along the coast northward to Bahrain and Kuwait. They produce the finest pearls in the world. Cows and sheep, camels and goats are traded in the market. In the crowded and dark bazaars, lentils, coffee and rice, and dried eggs stained with cochineal are bought and sold.

Today as on every day, a merchant from the city is carrying to the airport across the burning desert such fresh food as the markets can provide.

"Hanno left Bahrain at 8:30 GMT. Captain Robinson in charge. With today's wind she should be here about 5:30. If she's at all late, Mr Smith, we'll need flares and floodlights for night landing. Will you please have them ready?"

"Yep. I'll see that's done."

"And Wilcoxson, would you ask the aircraft for the names of the passenger?"

"Avaz Khan. Six sahibs coming tonight. I'll come and inspect the rooms in half an hour. Aeroplane coming half past five."

"Bota cha, Sahib" (6:05)

At once preparations begin for the arrival of the airliner. She's eastbound for India and Australia, four days out from England.

Provisions are bought from the storehouse to supplement local supplies. Living rooms are got ready and bed are made up, because Sharjah is a night stop.

All through the hot afternoon, donkeys bring cans of water from a well in the desert to fill the tank in the courtyard. Water to provide baths for the passengers and crew.

Arab merchants have brought parcels of pearls for shipment by

air to dealers in Bombay and Calcutta. In the days before the air route, pearls were sent by sea or by long journey overland, but now native merchants always make use of the airliners to carry their wealth.

From now until the airliner departs at dawn tomorrow, the station superintendent will have no time for leisure. He must inspect the bedrooms to see that everything is in order; supervise the food, and attend to a multitude of other details.

Outside on the airport itself, another part of the organization is at work. A mobile beacon is wheeled into position. The six thousand-candlepower floodlight is uncovered in case the airline should be delayed by headwinds and so just fail to make Sharjah before sudden nightfall. Mobile petrol pumps are got ready, so that the refueling of the airliners tanks can begin as soon as she lands.

The radio office in the port keeps in contact touch with the airliner as she approaches down the Gulf.

“Met! Surface wind and barometric pressure, please!”

“Right! Surface wind Northwest- 8 miles. Barometric pressure 1014.2 millibars”

“Surface wind Northwest 8, pressure 1014.2. Thanks!”

In the cool of the evening, half an hour before sundown, everything at the airport is ready for the machine.

The Persian petrol boys pass the last few minutes with a game of cards. But their ears are alert for the aerodrome bell, which is the signal that airliner has been sighted.

“gello! gello!”

The Arab guard provided by the Sheikh turns out to open the gates of the compound. If anything should happen to the

airliner, each man is liable to be punished in Arab fashion by the loss of eye or limb.

The Hanno has arrived. Passengers and crew alight. They gossip of the day's run, of things and places seen on the way. This morning they were in Baghdad. Yesterday in Alexandria.

"The Coronation was marvelous...the Palladium has a new crazy show – the craziest one ever...the most nasty epidemic you could believe...my dear, I never seen such a... in my life."

For those who live at the airport, they bring news of home 4000 miles away, but only four days distant by air.

"Warbler was in the club the night before I left. He asked to be remembered to you all. He's in fine fettle, whacking the old ball further and straighter than ever."

Each passenger is shown his room and handed a card giving the time of tomorrow's departure, the places at which stops will be made for meals, and all other details of the day's flight. While those in the port are preparing to eat and sleep, the engineers out on the desert aerodrome are beginning to overhaul the airliner. In the gathering dusk and far into the night, the work of testing the engines and checking the controls goes on.

The first stage of tomorrow's flight is a 450 mile hop across empty desert and shark-ridden seas.

Weather conditions must be discovered. A balloon is released from the roof of the meteorological station. A small electric light is attached to the tail and from observations of the speed of its ascent, the force and direction of the wind at different heights can be calculated. Information of the greatest importance to pilots on tomorrow's run.

Dawn breaks over the desert.

The End