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## **A Critical Evaluation of the Potentiality of Tourism and Destination Development in Failaka Island**

Cody Morris Paris

### **Introduction**

Failaka Island is located approximately 20 km off the coast of Kuwait City and 50 km from the Iraqi coast. It is one of the largest Kuwaiti islands in the Arabian Gulf with a landmass of 43 km<sup>2</sup>. Failaka Island has a rich history and rugged natural landscapes. It possesses the most important ancient sites in the country, including remnants of the Bronze Age Dilmun Civilization. Alexander the Great's general Nearchus established a settlement on the island in the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC, which lasted for over 200 years. The name of the island is thought to come from 'fylakio', the Greek word for 'outpost' (Lawler 2013). Archeologists have excavated several important Greek sites, as well as early Christian and Islamic settlements.

Failaka Resort was opened on 16 March 1982 and built on approximately 5 million square m<sup>2</sup> of land adjacent to the coastline. The resort included 472 private chalets, of which 213 were for daily rental and the rest for annual rental. The resort was short-lived, however, as it was abandoned in 1990 due to the Iraqi invasion (See Plate 15.1). Today it resembles the rest of the island structures, with many of the chalets displaying bullet holes and other scars of war. During the Iraqi invasion, two thousand residents were forced from their homes and the island was used as a military base. The Kuwaiti and US military have also recently had a large presence on the island, and in 2002 the island made international news when US marines were gunned down by militants with reported ties to Al-Qaeda (Schmitt 2002).

The development of Failaka Island is an integral part of Kuwait's future tourism development plans. The planned development of Failaka Island, as a central focal point in the tourism strategy for Kuwait, concerns the goal to create an 'iconic' destination that will move Kuwait onto a competitive plane with other leading Gulf destinations, such as Dubai, Abu Dhabi, and Qatar, for international long-haul, regional and domestic tourists. Accordingly, there has been some progress nation-wide, especially in terms of recent economic reforms and a rejuvenated proposed

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mega-project development strategy: the 'Kuwait Vision 2035'. This plan will attempt to remove bureaucratic barriers to the private sector, increase government agency effectiveness and access to land, among other high impact reforms (Al-Jazzaf and Al-Mutairi 2009) (see also see Chapter 11: Kuwait: Why Tourism?). The plan's main aim is to address economic pressures felt since the start of the global economic recession in 2008 by decreasing the country's dependence on oil. Nonetheless, planning directives for the development of Failaka Island actually date back to the 1960s, though hampered by the political and economic landscape of Kuwait. The magnitude of the more recent development plans, however, also poses a challenge of balancing the large-scale development of the island and the preservation of the natural environment and historical richness of the island. Nonetheless, although the last decade witnessed the re-emergence of large-scale development plans, they have been held-up by bureaucratic deadlock, disagreements between the government and the private-sector investors, and the global economic recession.

The chapter initially highlights the island's heritage and then the implications of the Iraqi invasion on tourism development. The mid-section of the work then examines other emerging concerns relating to the development of Failaka Island as a tourism destination. The latter section of the main body of the chapter, attempts to focus on the how Failaka Island can develop as a tourism destination through pursuing a sustainable pathway addressing the preservation of its complex history and culture.

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PLATE 15.1: Resort on Failaka that was abandoned during the Iraqi Invasion. Cody Morris Paris (7 May, 2012)

### **Failaka Island heritage**

Failaka Island has a lengthy history of settlement and trade dating back four thousand years. There is a large-scale ongoing archeological mission on Failaka that is working to excavate, document, and preserve sites. The Kuwaiti Department of Antiquities and the Museum of the National Council for Culture, Arts, and Letters commissioned several international archeological missions. More than 180 different sites were identified and mapped. Recently a Danish team uncovered the earliest settlement on the island, a Mesopotamian settlement dating back to around 2000 BC that has provided evidence that the island was home to an important trading post of Mesopotamian merchants (Lawler 2013). The Dilmun civilization emerged around 2300 BC in the surrounding islands of Bahrain (UNESCO 2012) and by 1900 BC had extended to Failaka Island, either driving out or succeeding the Mesopotamians on the Island (Lawler 2013). Archeological excavations have uncovered Dilmun Barbar temples that suggest a strong cultural similarity between Failaka and Bahrain during the early 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium BC (Hojlund 2012). During this time, Failaka was an important hub of the Dilmun civilization. Archeological evidence also indicates encounters with the Sumerians from Mesopotamia, Harappans from the

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Indus Valley, and Magans from Oman. Archeologists have excavated a large Dilmun temple and are currently working on a nearby Palace (UNESCO 2013). There is even some academic debate over whether Failaka Island is the Garden of Eden from the Babylonian epic and biblical story of Gilgamesh (Tetreault 2013).

In the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC, Nearchus, Alexander the Great's general, had established the island as an outpost for Alexander's army (Arun 2007). A Greek colony was located on Failaka Island between 325 and 150BC and was part of the Ptolomeic era maritime trade route. Reportedly, Alexander the Great named the island Ikaros due to its similar size and shape of the Aegean Island of the same name (Lawler 2013). Recently, French archeologists discovered a fort surrounding a well, with a well-preserved quintessential Greek temple inside. The fort and temple had been built by Antiochus I, a 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC ruler of the Seleucid Empire, and has elements of both traditional Ionic design combined with Persian Archaemenid style, a rare fusion of Greek and Eastern cultural influences. Surrounding the fort and temple, a larger port town grew until the end of the 1<sup>st</sup> century BC (Lawler 2013). This temple is one of the best preserved and excavated sites on the island.



**PLATE 15.2:** Greek Temple on Failaka Islands. Cody Morris Paris (7 May, 2012)

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Failaka also was home to a small Christian community, possible Nestorian, until the 9<sup>th</sup> century AD. Two churches were excavated in the center of the island at the Al-Qusur (Bernard and Salles 1991) and other excavations uncovered early Islamic settlements dating from the 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> century AD (Pieta et al., 2009). However, there is still a lot of work required to uncover the more recent history on the island. Several teams of archeologists are working at sites dating from the 17<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> century that show evidence of a Portuguese Fort and/or a possible base used by Arab pirates to attack the lucrative trading and shipping lanes emanating from Basra (Lawler 2013). At present, Failaka is host to archeological teams from several countries including Poland, France, Denmark, and Italy, some of whom have been enticed to Kuwait as their work in such places as Iraq and Syria has been disrupted due to political volatility and conflict (Lawler 2013).

### **Failakawans and the Iraqi invasion**

During the modern times, Failaka supported a population of several thousand residents. Prior to the Iraqi invasion, the main village of Az Zawr was considered one of the oldest continuously inhabited locations in Kuwait. The local population was largely comprised of fishermen and their families had a strong identity tied to the island itself. Many Kuwaitis who can trace their roots to the island share its name, al-Failakwi. The inhabitants on Failaka Island developed small towns, schools, and seaports for fishing. One particularly notable structure, included on the UNESCO World Heritage application, is the Sheikh Ahmed Al Jaber Rest House. This building was built in 1927 with a unique design not seen elsewhere in the Gulf (UNESCO 2013). During Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in 1990, the island was attacked by Iraqi forces and around 3,500 residents had to resettle on the mainland. Failaka became a military outpost for about 1,400 Iraqi soldiers. During the short occupation of Failaka, the Iraqis removed and/or destroyed some of the most important archeological artifacts from the Greek Temple (see Plate 15.2). They also mined the area, preventing scientific access for many years after the occupation (Tetreault 2013). Beaches were also turned into minefields.

The scars from the conflict are clearly visibly today, over 25 years since the invasion. The village, Az Zawr, itself is full of bullet-ridden and bombed out structures (Plate 15.3). These

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'memorabilia of warfare sites' (Smith, 1998) are central components of the 'tourist gaze', particularly as they are significantly located in close proximity to the ferry port where visitors arrive. These remnants are clear reminders of the political role of the Island in the Gulf's contemporary history, and the complex heritage landscape of Failaka Island. These sites are often visited by day trip visitors, many of whom can be observed taking photos of (and posing next to) these visible reminders of the war. These sites could be categorized as potential 'dark conflict sites' (Stone 2006) that have yet to have gone through the dark tourism commodification process. The motives for visiting these types of sites vary according to the intensity of their relationship to the conflict (Stone and Sharpley 2008). The lack of any interpretive infrastructure to aid in visitors 'consumption' of these sites could pose a potential safety hazard for some visitors, as well as diminish the seriousness of the conflict that occurred on the island. Future development plans, as well as research concerning tourism on Failaka island, will need to consider how best to provide visitors with a socially acceptable educational and memorial experience of the island and its recent history. This would help to ensure that visitors are afforded the opportunity to reflect upon and contemplate the meaning of these sites.

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**PLATE:** 15.3 Reminders of the Iraqi invasion and occupation of Failaka within the context of the post-invasion era. Photo: Cody Morris Paris (7 May, 2012)

After the Allied forces reclaimed the island in 1991, many of its original inhabitants remained in Kuwait City and surrounding areas. While some former residents visit Failaka Island often, officially there are no permanent residents currently. This may have to do with existing infrastructural damage on the island. Many of the older Failakawans still revisit the island, some nearly every weekend, which could be considered a form of domestic ‘nostalgia’ or ‘memory’ tourism (Bartoletti 2010). After the Kuwaiti liberation in 1991, the government gave each of the islanders 150,000 dinars for their old homes. According to one Failakawan nineteen families kept one home and about 300 Failakawans usually return to spend the weekends. Some of the homes have been rebuilt and appear to be occupied, but this a very small number (Calderwood

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2010). In fact, there is significant potentiality in terms of domestic tourism, which is arguably an economically sustainable form of tourism.

The recent development plans, which include, in addition to large-scale tourism and entertainment developments, plans for a permanent population of about 5000 residents including both Kuwaitis and foreigners, mostly to work and 'give life' to the island. Some of the former residents view the new development plans wearily, as one stated: 'We don't agree with any development on the island because anything new is going to bring more people. They're going to destroy the calm, what a problem it is going to be' (Calderwood 2010). Any plans to 'give life' to the island should attempt to understand and take into account the 'embodied memories' and nostalgic emotions (Marschall 2012) of Failakawans. Future development plans will need to consider both issues related to material manifestations of memory and nostalgia (Marschall 2012) including land ownership, repossessed buildings, farms, and rebuilt buildings, and the socio-psychological and symbolic significance (Park 2010) of the island's heritage.

### **Developing Failaka Island into a tourist destination: emerging concerns**

The plans to develop Failaka Island have been around since the early masterplans for the island in 1960. The most recent plans emerged in the last decade, but have been slow to come to fruition for a variety of reasons related to bureaucratic deadlock and conflicts between private sector investors and the government. Additionally, there are land ownership issues that need to be settled as some former residents still own homes on the island and there are currently two small military bases on the island.

A major tourism redevelopment project on Failaka Island was unveiled in 2003 by Dizatt and the Kuwait Islands and Mega Projects Development Team. The project was estimated to cost up to USD\$5 billion and due to the size of the proposed project, a build-operate-transfer (BOT) tender was created. For this project, three separate BOT contracts were to be tendered (Ali 2004). The project plans included the construction of tourism facilities, hotels, chalets, and entertainment venues. Initially fifteen investor groups submitted expressions of interest in the project. The government was seeking out one primary investor to oversee the project (Arab News, 2003). Another project on the southern part of the island included the construction of a



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five star hotel, spa and five hundred chalets. This particular development, estimated to cost USD\$138 million, was spearheaded by the government-owned Touristic Enterprises Company and a private real estate company. The third major project was the development of Heritage Village, a residential and tourism complex (Ali 2005).

In 2005, the press started to report on roadblocks facing the developments. One of the major issues was a disagreement between private developers and the government authority overseeing the projects. The developers wanted the government to build the infrastructure on the island and extend the 20 year BOT to a 30 year BOT. They argued that 20 years was not enough time to make the investments profitable. On the other hand, the government wanted the investors to build most of the infrastructure, with the government only contributing the power generation (Taqi 2005). Another issue was the size of the main project, with the private investors indicating that the project was far too large to be overseen by just one investor. In midst of the turmoil that stopped any progress for the projects, Dizatt was suddenly dissolved by the Council of Ministers in June of 2005. The Mega Projects Agency (MPA) was then charged with overseeing the project on Failaka Island, as well as several other major development projects including Bubiyan Island. The first order of business was to salvage the project on Failaka island through extending the bid deadline for the nine interested investor groups, creating a separate BOT concession for power and water to the island, and considering extending the BOT period up to 50 years; though this would mean a change of law, which is unlikely in the current political climate (Jabr 2013). The MPA was steadfast regarding the requirement for the investor group to keep the overall project as a single project, rather than to break it up. The rest of the infrastructure requirements were kept intact, including building ministry buildings, a military barracks, and making the island more accessible by expanding the marine transport facilities (MEED 2005).

While the new agency allowed a little flexibility, the project has not seen a lot of progress. The only project that has seen any work has been the continued development of the Failaka Heritage Village, which is an educational visitor attraction that celebrates its history and natural beauty. The heritage project, launched with the support of the late Emir Sheik Jaber and the 'Father Emir' Sheikh Saad, was focused on renovating and restoring the palace of the late Emir Sheikh Abdullah Al Salim Al Sabah, the ruler of Kuwait between 1950 and 1965. In 2004 the

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development of the heritage village begun under the control of Masharee Al Khair, a charitable organization in Kuwait funded by the Kuwait Projects Company, one of the largest holding companies in the MENA (Middle East and North Africa) region. With powerful backers, the project made great progress. The village has made consistent improvements and expansions, including restored traditional houses from the 1950s, a horse stable, a fleet of catamarans, restaurants, a small hotel, and a recreational-based beach offering water sports, and mini golf. The village has become a popular weekend getaway for overnight and day visitors from the mainland. Due to the natural and manufactured attractions on Failaka Island, it has become one of the most visited 'tourist attractions' in the country, although most visitors are Kuwaitis and resident expatriates. The rest of the island has seen little progress in midst of the political schism and deadlock in the National Assembly, global economic crisis, and the ongoing conflict in Iraq.

The combination of the historic sites and the items recovered by the archeological missions can provide substantial content for the establishment of a museum on the island. Several of the archeologists working at the site viewed the future development plans for Failaka Island as a trade-off of potential benefits and negative impacts. On one hand, there was consensus that tourism development could bring recognition, exposure, and preservation of the sites, especially if the development proceeds in a responsible manner. On the other hand, however, they saw large-scale modern development plans as being potentially destructive of already uncovered sites and an obstacle to future research and excavations. Alarmingly, as many sites were not fully explored this would lead to a significant historical loss. Within the recent 'mega-development' plans put forth by the government there was a lack of plans for the development of museums or other cultural/heritage sites based on the island's rich history, or even for steps to be taken for the preservation of the important historical sites uncovered on the island.

In addition to posing a threat to the heritage sites of the island, proposed large-scale developments on Failaka Island and other coastal areas in Kuwait pose an environmental threat as well. Research has been undertaken to develop a comprehensive assessment of the island's coast was undertaken resulting in a coastal zone management map and guidelines for future coastal development of Failaka Island (Al-Sarawi *et al* 1996). However, in Kuwait there are no adequate coastal management policies or dedicated institutions responsible for coastal

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management (Baby 2013), and thus no planning for long-term sustainable coastal development. There is a lack of central planning, oversight, management, and enforcement of the coastal areas in Kuwait, which have undergone significant, changes due to both human activities over the last few decades and the geographic location of the Island at the mouth of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers and tributaries. While there have been some improvement in the regulations and law in regards to the environment over the last decade, some experts have stated that the advances are still inadequate and that the current framework and judiciary system lack a desired capacity in environmental law (Baby 2013). Failaka Island was the longest consistently inhabited place in Kuwait, with a history extending four thousand years, partly due to its abundant fresh water and arable land. During the last century, as the Kuwaiti population has become concentrated and sprawled along the coast, Failaka Island has seen its access to freshwater disappear, as the island shares the same water table as Kuwait City. Any future development of the island would need to incorporate desalinization and/or piped water from the mainland. Future developments on the island and other coastal areas in Kuwait will also need to take into consideration threats posed by sea level rise due to climate change. According to a study by Neelamani (2014), Failaka Island could face high levels of coastal inundation with just a small rise in sea levels.

The large scale \$USD 5 billion Failaka Island project has failed to proceed beyond the planning phase due to legislative changes in 2008, the global financial crisis (Egbert, 2009), and the lack of reforms to address remaining issues with the PPP and BOT process in Kuwait. In 2010, 42 companies participated in contract bidding for the project. However, due to the challenges within the current BOT system no contracts were awarded. The challenges faced by the proposed development could turn out to be opportunities for a more environmentally, socially and culturally responsible development plan to emerge.

### **Transformation and sustainable ways forward**

Within the vacuum created by the stalled five billion dollar development plan for Failaka Island, several people have started to lobby for the protection for all of Failaka Island. Calls for the island's history to be preserved and for archeologists to continue their research and excavations have intensified. One of the most vocal proponents of protecting the island is the

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Director of the Department of Antiquities and Museums, whose efforts have drawn the research teams from more than a half dozen countries to the island and the government has set aside more than USD\$10 million dollars to fund their work. Another huge step toward preservation and conservation was evident when the National Council for Culture, Arts and Letters submitted an application to UNESCO on 27 February 2013 for the recognition and listing of the areas of Sa'ad and Sae'ed as a World Heritage Site (UNESCO 2013). These areas are where most of the archeological sites are actually located. While still several more steps are required in the review process before the sites can be listed, this is an important way forward in ensuring that future developments on the island incorporate the preservation and conservation of these sites. According to the statement of integrity on the World Heritage Site application:

Since the liberation of Kuwait in 1991, the island remains significantly underdeveloped, giving way to current policies of cultural tourism to further shape future scenarios for the Island, and support strategic development projects aligned with keeping the island as an archeological record (UNESCO 2013).

In February 2014, as part of the country's five-year plan for the travel and tourism sector, the Partnership Technical Bureau (PTB) announced that the development of Failaka Island was a top-priority in achieving the goal of attracting one million international tourists (Navdar 2014). Taking its direction from the Kuwait National Development plan, the PTB is moving forward with the planned public-private partnership development of the island. While the project will still be overseen by various government bodies, including the Ministry of Public Works, the 'handing over' of the project to the PTB represents a renewed focus on the private sector being involved in the plans. After an assessment period of 27 months in late 2013, when the PTB was assessing and surveying the island's land ownership, farms, repossessed buildings and other properties, and archeological sites, the PTB published an extension of the request for proposals for advisory services to develop a new master plan for the island. The renewed Kuwait Failaka Island Project (KFIP) appears to be progressing more responsibly than previous plans for the island. According to the PTB website (PTB 2014):

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The government of Kuwait is planning the implementation of the Kuwait Failaka Island Project (KFIP) as a PPP. The project will transform Failaka Island into a premier, state of the art leisure and tourist destination. *Preservation and promotion of the Island's outstanding heritage and archeology are drivers of the project. Cultural facilities will be integrated with regular tourist and leisure facilities such as hotels and leisure parks.* This will comprise of the developments of hotels suited for week-long stays as well as a town center for commerce, food & beverage, retail and other activities.

At a recent meeting of the Supreme Council for Planning and Development in December 2015, plans to develop establish economic free zones on the five of Kuwait's main gulf islands, including Failaka. According to the proposal, the free zones would provide an economic and cultural gateway to the norther Gulf, and would reflect the Amir's plans of transforming and diversifying the economy of Kuwait. Establishment of the free zones would also, as suggested in the proposal, limit the dependence on government funding and open up the project to local, regional and international private sector investment (KUNA, 2015). The plan to diversify the countries economy and reduce the reliance on oil production has also is more urgent with the global declines in oil prices resulting in a 68% fourth quarter decline of Kuwait's foreign trade surplus from the fourth quarter of 2014 and a 2016-17 draft budget that forecasts a USD\$40.2 billion deficit (Arabian Business Staff Writer, 2016).

Given the current economic climate, there is a chance that planning and projects maybe entered into a bit hastily. The value of Failaka Island as a tourism destination stems from its potential as a heritage site and potential as a small island destination. For the long-term *sustainability* of tourism development on Failaka Island a deliberate plan will need to ensure that the construction and operation of hotels and other tourist infrastructure prioritize an environmentally friendly agenda. Moreover, the preservation of the social continuity of the island's heritage must also be given due attention. This includes, not only the preservation of the archeological heritage sites, but also the representation of the tangible and intangible aspects of the island's more recent past.

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## **Conclusion and research implications**

This chapter argues that tourism development on Failaka Island faces multiple economic, environmental and social challenges, but also provides the most practical and reasonable potential for developing a large-scale tourist destination to drive international, regional GCC and domestic tourism demand. The development of Failaka Island into a large-scale tourism destination is a central component of the recent government initiatives to expand the tourism sector within Kuwait. The focus on developing the island is not new, with plans extending back to the 1960s. However, the island has since faced a whole series of challenges, from the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait to failed and stalled plans in the last decade, including a multi-billion US dollar development plan.

While many obstacles concerning the island's development have been highlighted in this chapter, together with bureaucratic logjams and the recent economic world crisis, for any planned development to come to fruition there needs to be a clear economic framework in place to support investment (infrastructural or otherwise) and subsequent change. There is some hope that the Kuwait Vision 2035 will allow the state to move past the economic obstacles that have stalled its development thus far.

The failure of the planned \$USD 5 billion development to move the island's development agenda beyond the planning process could actually prove to be an advantage in the long-term. Recently, there has been a much stronger level of support for preservation, conservation, and research into the island's heritage sites. It is hoped that that the historical and cultural sites of the island will be a key focal point for the destination and for sustainable development. However, even if the development process does not reach full fruition, the island's important historical sites and fragile desert island ecosystem will be seriously threatened.

Future studies should focus on assessing the prospects and success of incorporating heritage and environmental preservation and conservation into the developments on the island. With a particular focus on domestic tourism, resident surveys could provide useful information into the current domestic tourism activities, behavior, attitudes, and expenditures that would assist the planning and marketing of the island domestically. Additionally, surveys and interviews of

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current Failaka Island visitors could provide insights into travel motivations and behaviors of visitors. Another area that needs further consideration is the BOT system, public-private partnerships, and the wider political-economic landscape in Kuwait, particularly in the context of the development tourism and other non-petroleum economic sectors.

This chapter illustrates potentialities of the development of the tourism projects on Failaka Island and ways in which these can contribute no doubt to the wider diversification plans for the Kuwaiti economy. The future for tourism development in Kuwait can be viewed optimistically, where the strategic development of the tourism industry represents an opportunity to emerge as a progressive economic power where public-private partnerships can create a foundation for a sustainable economic future. While it may be inevitable for Kuwait to diversify its oil-dominated economy, there is not yet a sense of urgency for this to happen (see Chapter 6: (No) Tourism in Kuwait). Thus, there is still time for Failaka Island to adopt a progressive development pathway and if this is done right, then Failaka could be transformed into a leading heritage/historical destination in the Gulf.

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