

with Francoplaque Photographs, mainly provided by Cedric : <http://plaque.free.fr/as/uae>



My name is Cedric Sabine and I first went to the United Arab Emirates in May 2001 for work. At that time, I was working 5 weeks in Sharjah and then 5 weeks off at home in Scotland. Three of the seven emirates Dubai, Sharjah and Ajman are effectively joined together as one long city and I was able to observe plates from all seven emirates as well as many of the neighbouring countries. I relied on the Europlate book Registration Plates of the World to identify many of the plates I was seeing and quickly realised that not only was the book out of date but that new styles of plates are a regular feature of the emirates. The name of the country is the United Arab Emirates but it sometimes seems as if it is more like the un-United Arab Emirates plate wise. Whatever spare time I had from the job, I devoted to trying to understand the system in the UAE and to track down plates for my collection. As the months went by, I started to understand the system a little and was sending regular reports to Europlate, of which I am a member. The plate collection was only increasing very slowly due to the difficulty of finding any plates left on vehicles in scrap yards (breakers yards) as they are all returned to the police upon license expiry. The police in the 5 emirates I tried were not prepared to give out any expired plates for collecting either. Occasionally, in some small country scrap yard, I would find an old plate or two, the odd plate appeared at the side of the road and I even found an old man in a junk shop with a couple of old plates. I did however learn much about the geography of the emirates during my travels !



By the beginning of 2004, my circumstances had changed dramatically and I moved to the UAE to live, selling my entire plate collection as I was becoming a bit of a nomad. I had been away for only one year but the plate scene, particularly in Dubai, had changed very dramatically and I once again set about trying to understand the new system, my interest in plates not having diminished at all. It was about mid 2004 that I realised that the Europlate and ALPCA archives, as well as some peoples websites, had some major omissions and errors. I foolishly decided to try to find out the true history of UAE plates as I suppose I am a nosy bugger at heart and don't like to see so much incorrect information out there in the greater plate world. Over the last few months, I have learned much but still have a long way to go before I can say I know the history of the UAE plates. However, I hope you find my notes of interest and welcome comments and UAE plate pictures from all of you.

Until 1971, the UAE did not exist as a country, having originally been a collection of warring tribes controlled, if that is the right word, by the British and called the Trucial States. The tribes were either desert dwelling nomadic camel and goat herders or coastal dwelling pearl fishermen and traders. The tribes were little more than extended families and motorised vehicles really were very rare indeed. Plates are known to have been used from the 1940s onwards. These early plates were either a simple painted Arabic number at first or later with the name above the number. By the end of the series, private vehicles were black on white and taxis were white on black. Sheiks and other close ruling family members almost certainly had white on red plates and commercial vehicles may have had white on green plates. An Abu Dhabi plate exists from this period in black on yellow but it is not known what the significance of this is. The ruling family of each emirate are also the government, each emirate being an absolute monarchy. Particularly in the 1970s and 1980s, it was very difficult to determine the difference between a royal household plate, a government plate and a hand-painted often low-numbered (or with a special number) private plate. The system for commercial vehicles is taken directly from the old British 'hire and reward' system. That is to say that a commercial vehicle owned by a company and used exclusively for carrying goods in connection with that company's business has private plates but a vehicle used for carrying goods belonging to other people and companies has green "hire and reward" plates. This system has continued right through to the present day.

By about 1962, money was being generated from early oil revenue and there were plans to make a proper country – The United Arab Emirates. The seven emirates, as we now know them, were being developed and vehicles were starting to become more common. The old BOAC flying boat base in Sharjah had become a Royal Air Force base and life was becoming more modernised.

At this time, rectangular cast aluminium plates with all Arabic script were introduced for each emirate, with the emirate name above the class of vehicle and the serial number. Private vehicles had black on white plates, taxis had white on black plates, vehicles

belonging to the municipalities had different coloured plates for each town such as white on blue for Dibba in Fujairah emirate, black on red for Ajman, white on green for Khor Fakhan in Sharjah emirate and green on orange for Fujairah town. Some emirates had different plates for local government vehicles such as the semi-circular white on green plates in Fujairah, some had plates for their private armies such as the Sharjah Emiri guard and various royal households had white on red plates. Vehicles for hire and reward may have used white on green plates during this series. Royal household plates were white on red and often with the emirate name and a number only. Motorcycle plates were almost certainly small versions of the private plates. A Dubai plate exists, probably from this period, in a quartered style with at top left the serial number, at top right Dubai, at bottom left the number of passengers and at bottom right the word passengers. Little is known of this plate but it is thought to be black on white and for a 20-seat bus. Dubai also had separate plates for their fledgling water department and the ports authority. Plates were also created in about 1969 that are thought to be cast aluminium for (literal translation) Council For Coming Together After Fighting. I have chosen to call this the Council for Armistice and it was the series of meetings that forged the agreements between the seven tribes to form the United Arab Emirates. The vehicles of the British Political Agency had painted metal plates with the Union Jack flag in colour with the serial number below in both scripts. This 1962 series was to last until 1970 when the numbers of vehicles required a more rapid method of manufacture. In fact in 1969, Sharjah adopted a painted flat metal plate with the vehicle class and emirate name above the number. Known colours are black on white for private and white on black for taxis but it is thought other colours for other classes probably also existed.

In 1970, just before independence from Britain, simple and somewhat crudely pressed metal plates were introduced for each emirate. The left side of the plate had letters or the full emirate name above the number, both in English, while the right side of the plate had the same in Arabic, being separated by a vertical divider. By about number 20000, Abu Dhabi started using a horizontal divider also. Private vehicles were black on white, taxis were white on black, hire and reward vehicles were white on green and royal plates were white on red. Dubai had white on blue dealer plates with Dubai over Test over the number to the left side and the Arabic equivalents to the right side, separated by a vertical divider. During this series, Dubai introduced long plates with a reduced height and extended width but otherwise identical format. Little is known of other plates from this period and the 1962 series continued to be valid. Indeed, plates from the 1970 series are known to have still been valid and in use in 1985 although, with the introduction of the 1986 series, they were all withdrawn by 1987. Nothing is known about motorcycle plates during this period. It is not known if diplomatic plates were issued during the years 1971-1976.

The words used on these plates were Abu Dhabi, Ajman, Dubai, Fujerah, R.A.K, SHJ and U.A.Q.

In 1976, a new series of plates was introduced in all emirates except Dubai where they continued with the 1970 series until their own unique series in 1978, more of which later. In what is now called quartered Arabic style, the plates were divided into 4 sections by vertical and horizontal bars. The two top sections were in Arabic and the two bottom ones in English. The two left sections were United Arab Emirates and the name of the emirate and the two right sections were the serial number. Before this series was replaced, Abu Dhabi had reached 6-digits. These first plates had squarer corners, skinny letters U.A.E with periods and a hole in the bottom left corner. From about 1980, the later plates had rounded corners, fatter, shorter letters with no periods and no hole in the corner. The letters/words used for the 6 emirates were:

ADH then AD	Abu Dhabi
AGM then AJ	Ajman
F	Fujairah
R	Ras Al Khaimah
SH	Sharjah
A	Umm Al Qwain

There are many possible spelling for each emirate name and I have chosen in the above 6 names to use what are perhaps the most common spellings today. Over the years, different spellings have been used on several emirates' plates.



There has been very considerable debate over the years but I am now absolutely certain that these are correct. I now have pictures of the very early plates from Ajman being AGM and, perhaps less than a year later, they were changed to AJ. Indeed, one collector has an export plate with the letters AGM beaten flat and AJ painted over the top. All the pre-1980 Abu Dhabi plates are ADH with the post-1980 plates being AD and there are no other plates that can be Umm Al Qwain unless it is the A plates. I have also spoken to collectors who visited the UAE in the early 1980s and who physically obtained 'A' plates from the police and breakers yards in Umm Al Qwain. This was happily before the days of the police being paranoid about giving out old expired plates.

Colours for this series were black on white for private, black on green for 'hire and reward' (now including taxis), white on red for dealers and white on blue for export. The blue colour of export plates and the green colour of 'hire and reward' plates show considerable variation over different batches. Reflective backgrounds and/or reflective white lettering first appear during this series.

As the years passed, it became more common to see stretched versions of the 1976 series and by 1980 this had become the standard Utsch of Germany one line plate with the English words to the left and the Arabic words to the right with both versions of the number in the middle. Sample plates first appear during this series and some of these are in the wrong colours or have numbers that are much too high. There is a suggestion that the first batches of plates in 1976 were manufactured in the USA rather than by Utsch in Germany and about 100 un-used surplus plates seem to have been liberated into collectors' hands when the change took place in 1980. Consecutively numbered and in 4 batches, these were from A (private), AJ (private), F (private) and RAK (motorcycle).

It is during this time that plates start to become more common from the royal households. Hand-painted, usually all-Arabic, and in a very wide variety of styles, some of these are still of the same style today, albeit in Plexiglass (Perspex). For example, RAK uses black on yellow plates with crossed white and red flags, the Arabic words Ras Al Khaimah and a number. Umm Al Qwain uses white on red plates with a crescent moon and star motif, the Arabic words for Umm Al Qwain and the number. Dubai uses plates that are red on white to the left with the Arabic word Dubai and white on red to the right with the Arabic number. Almost no two plates, even today, are quite the same in any emirate. Various Emirates have used special numbers or normal plates in white on red for their royal vehicles. These have ceased issue now and in Abu Dhabi, Ajman and Sharjah there seem to be no special plates for royal vehicles, normal 2-digit numbers being reserved for them. The capital of the UAE is Abu Dhabi and it is thought that official vehicles of the UAE government first started to have different plates during this series. Abu Dhabi plates existed, generally in the long format, hand painted with an additional H or M. These letters may have stood for Hospitality and Ministry. Probably by about 1980, these plates had developed into the styles still currently used. Hospitality plates are used on those vehicles that are for carrying VIPs. They are in all Arabic with the words United Arab Emirates in white on red above the word hospitality and a number in white on blue-green. They had previously been white on blue and before that white on green for the bottom half. Vehicles belonging to the Ministry of the Interior that are used for carrying VIPs have, in all Arabic, the words Ministry of Interior in white on light blue-grey above the number and the word hospitality in white on dark blue-grey. In the middle of the plate is the UAE seven stars and falcon logo. Diplomatic plates were black on white with orange panels in the two lower corners. In the centre of the plate were the letters U.A.E. below the Arabic equivalent, with C.D. and the Arabic equivalent below. On the lower left panel were an Embassy code number and the serial number, with the Arabic equivalent in the right hand panel. Consular Corps and United Nations plates were similar but with C.C. (black on yellow) or U.N.O. (white on blue).

Originally The UAE army had been made up of the 7 private armies that the seven emirates had had for centuries. During the early 1970s, the UAE army was formed from these seven separate institutions but it is not certain if UAE army plates existed in the 1970 series or only during the 1976 series. Plates were stencilled in white on red with the Arabic word Army above a serial number. A number of variations exist to this standard plate with known examples having a logo in the middle of senior officers' one-line plates or the name of the place where the vehicle is allocated in black on white at the lower left of the plate. Some early Army plates were embossed rather than stencilled. Early Airforce plates first originated during this series when the British Royal air Force base in Sharjah became the first UAE Airforce base. So fast has been the progress in the UAE that this base is now completely redeveloped as a small part of downtown Sharjah. A very good museum in the original control tower and offices is all that remains. In dark green on white, they were all Arabic, with the number in the center of a pair of wings above United Arab Emirates. Later plates were white on blue-grey with the Airforce roundel between the number and the lettering. It is not known when the UAE Navy started but it is probably after the introduction of the 1986 series of plates. These Navy plates are stencilled dark blue on white. Various Emirates have National Guard units and these have white on red stencilled plates with the name of the emirate and National Guard above a three digit number all in Arabic.

In 1978, Dubai decided to go it's own way and it has stayed that way until today. The 1978 series of plates is, in design, a continuation of the 1970 series but using Utsch machines and blanks. Dubai has until today stayed true to the original colours of black on white for private vehicles, white on black for taxis, white on green for vehicles for hire and reward and white on blue for export. It is not known what plates were used for dealers from the introduction of this series until 1990 when black on white plates with the dealer's name and a number to show which of that dealer's plates it was. Before 1998, dealer plates had reverted to a standard Dubai format but in purple on white. From 1976 to perhaps the early 1980s, Dubai was the only emirate to have ever used Temporary plates for vehicles awaiting their assigned plates. In white on red, they had five sections with, on the top line, TEMPORARY, DUBAI in both scripts and the Arabic for temporary. On the lower line was the number in both scripts. As the years progressed, Dubai developed most rapidly of the seven emirates and quickly reached 6 digit numbers for both the private and the hire and reward series. Shortly thereafter, for both types of plate, they changed the system so that plates over 100000 had the left side in black on yellow. In 1992, vehicles over 200000 received plates in red on white that had the addition of an embossed outline of the Al-Fahidi fortress. This is one of the original 1800s Sheik's palaces that has been turned into the Dubai museum in the middle of Bur Dubai. In 2001, vehicles over 300000 received similar 'fortress' plates but in black on white. Since the start of this series, Dubai export plates have changed almost yearly, the only consistent things being they are some shade of white on blue. The recent plates have been very similar looking but each time the series restarts from 1, there is some small difference.

Once again, in 1986, the 6 Emirates changed the design of their plates with most of them adopting a 3-part design. For all of them, the left side of the plates lost their horizontal dividers and became one single section. Ras Al Khaimah decided to use printed, rather than embossed lettering on these plates although the numbers remained embossed. Fujairah and Sharjah decided to lose the horizontal divider completely, Abu Dhabi started the introduction of four series for private vehicles with the left side of the plate in white on green, white on red, white on blue or white on grey to indicate vehicles in each range of 100000 numbers. They changed the dealer plate to brown on white and included the last two digits of the year in small numbers to the bottom left of the plate. They also introduced a large blue oval on the left side of hire and reward plates for the lettering. Since this time, each emirate has changed the plates on more than one occasion. Ajman plates now have a castellated frame around the names and this section (only) is coloured yellow for vehicles over 100000. Sharjah has plates with the left side coloured orange for vehicles over 100000. Fujairah has now introduced plates with 5 sections with the Arabic for United Arab Emirates across the top above the numbers in both scripts, UAE stacked vertically and FUJ with the Arabic for Fujairah. Ras Al Khaimah has introduced plates with a graphic of a typical watchtower on it. As time progresses, more and more small changes are being made, particularly to the dies used for the numbers and lettering,

at a seemingly ever more rapid pace. Some emirates have changed from the letters, in Arabic, UAE to using the Arabic name in full. For this series of plates all 6 Emirates started using dated revalidation stickers to show the month of license expiry that is supposed to be, but by far from always is, stuck on the rear plate. Sharjah ceased the use of these stickers in 1998 when they very briefly introduced a very modern looking plate for private and hire and reward vehicles with Sharjah in Arabic above the western only number above SHARJAH. This was withdrawn after only one year for some reason. These plates were in the format 1-23456 for vehicles over 100000. In 1998 also, Sharjah changed their dealer plates from white on red to red on white. In 2002, they changed this again to purple on white. Ras Al Khaimah has recently introduced 6-digit plates in an otherwise normal format. Sharjah are the only Emirate to have their normal plates with the wheelchair symbol for disabled drivers. In 2004, they introduced white on green plates for taxis that have fare meters continuing with the black on green plates for those that don't have meters.

All 7 Emirates are extremely aggressive when it comes to ensuring that plates are returned when the vehicle is sold, transferred or de-licensed. These surrendered numbers are quickly re-issued. In the early 1990s, important people could obtain special and interesting numbers such as 99999 etc and this system has developed, in each of the Emirates, to a system where such numbers are sold at a fixed price or put up for auction. Ras Al Khaimah holds the world record for an auction in 2004 where the number 1 fetched 2.6 million US dollars from an undisclosed buyer. This was however, almost certainly the Sheik himself.

Dubai continued with its 4 series of plates until 2001 when a most beautiful design was introduced incorporating a printed graphic of the world's only 7 star hotel, the Burj Al Arab. Burj Al Arab means Meeting of the Arabs in Arabic. This was placed between a series number and the serial number. There was no series number for the previous plain black on white plates, 1 for the plates with the yellow left side, 2 for the red on white fort plates and 3 for the plates with the black fort. Subsequently, the 4 series was also introduced. In January 2004, these plates ceased issue and were replaced by a broadly similar design but without the Burj Al Arab graphic. This plate is not nearly so good looking in my view. On 22nd May 2004, this series was also replaced by plates, again broadly similar in design, which had the series number replaced with a letter. Plates with no series number became A, 1 became B, 2 became C, 3 became D and 4 became E. Such is the growth in Dubai that in July 2004, series F plates were introduced. The visitor to Dubai who is interested in plates is faced with an initially confusing plate scene, as the Burj Al Arab series, the number series and the letter series are still common on the roads. I estimate that the first two of these will have disappeared completely by January 2006 and July 2006 respectively as the licenses come up for renewal. As of writing this story in January 2005, the F series has reached about 60000. Other Dubai plates have been changed with a more modern die for the Arabic words but they retain the same colours. A Transfer plate has been introduced for vehicles being exported from Dubai to another Emirate. Similar to a normal export plate, it has the left side in black on yellow. The series letter plates are, to my mind, very plain and boring and sadly there is a rumour in the UAE that by the end of 2006, this will be the standard design for all 7 Emirates plates.

Currently military plates have changed from stencilled to embossed, are all white on red and now have the words armed forces in Arabic over a 5-digit western number. There is a space for the application of a coloured sticker to denote the branch of the services. The only known colours are white for royal guards, mid-blue for the Airforce and no sticker for the Army. High-ranking military officers are reported to have single line plates in a similar style but with a 4-digit number and the UAE seven stars and falcon logo between. Diplomatic plates are now red with a white hexagon in the centre. The embassy code number and serial number are on the hexagon in black in both scripts. The red portions of the plate have CD and UAE in both scripts. CC and UN plates are the same but yellow and blue respectively. Vehicles belonging to the UAE government that are used on official duties have plastic plates that are red on the top and black, silver and green on the bottom. Along the bottom is the Western number, the word ceremonies in Arabic and the number in Arabic. In the middle of the plate is the falcon with boats logo. Previously, several Emirates used special plates on their police and ambulance vehicles. Abu Dhabi had white on blue plates with the numbers and Abu Dhabi police. These were later followed by plates that were similar but light blue-grey over dark blue-grey. Sharjah had plates that were white on blue above blue on white with the words Sharjah Police above the number. RAK had a similar style of plate to Abu Dhabi. All emirates except Dubai, which has no special plates on its police vehicles or ambulances, now use a common series of white on dark blue plates with the words on the left side, in Arabic, Ministry of Interior Police and the emirate name. On the right side is the Arabic number above a divider above the western number.



I am afraid that in this short article, it has not been possible to detail all the more unusual variations of plates that have appeared in various emirates particularly since 1986. These however generally follow the broad pattern for that emirate with only detail differences to things like the positioning of the elements and the dies used. The full story of ALL known UAE plates now takes up nearly 11 A4 pages when split into the 7 Emirates.

This history still requires much more research particularly with regard to everything pre-1986. I have yet to try to find old pictures here in the Gulf that will help and am still trying to find old men with long memories to ask about so many different things. I suspect it will remain "a work in progress" for as long as I am here. For me to have got this far, people sending me photos of their plates and copies of their photos has most wonderfully assisted me. To all these people I say a tremendous thank-you: you have helped greatly! Some of your photos have been included here and I apologise for not being able to mention everyone individually. To all those other people reading this, please send me any picture(s) you have of UAE plates, old, new, good or bad as **every** photo helps. If anyone has any questions about UAE plates, I am also happy to answer those questions. I am also happy to be told I have made mistakes and any corrections anyone can make will be incorporated in the 'final' history. I will even try to answer questions about other Gulf States plates.

I can be contacted by email at sabinesubbing@hotmail.com (remove blanks) or at P.O.Box 13342, Dubai, UAE.

