



Desert Kingdom

A former Disney VP is creating an entertainment oasis in Dubai — and it's no Mickey Mouse operation.
By Lisa Sonne

WHILE WALKING ACROSS flat stretches of Arabian Desert in Dubai, American Steve Tight saw nothing but sand in every direction. "I looked down and saw sand drifting across the skeleton of a camel and thought, 'Holy cow, I feel like I'm Lawrence of Arabia.'"

By mid-2008, Tight expects to see quite a different sight in that location — surfers catching waves, swimmers floating alongside manta rays in Caribbean-style lagoons, and people jumping from stilt-supported thatched huts into Polynesian-themed pools. He envisions water scooters dodging geysers and roller coasters rushing through water. The camel bones are being replaced with five-star accommodations on the world's largest landlocked "cruise ship," longer than the *Queen Mary 2*, with a center mast taller than a 30-story building.

This is not the megamirage of a dehydrated desert wanderer. It's a megaproject with Tight as the chief executive officer. He's leading the \$2 billion desert-to-dream transformation to create an entertainment oasis called Aqua Dunya. The aim is nothing less than the biggest and best themed resort in the Middle East — a liquid magic kingdom that rivals Disney's Magic Kingdom.

Tight wants Aqua Dunya, which is a combination of a Western term (*aqua*, meaning water) and an Arabic one (*dunya*, meaning world), to be unique in Dubai, a part of the United Arab Emirates that competes hyperactively for superlatives. The world's tallest building is going up not far from the world's best indoor ski resort and the biggest stained glass mural. There are even man-made islands shaped like palm trees, with the homes placed to spell out

Arabic poetry when viewed from the sky.

Aqua Dunya will be part of a royal project on creative steroids called Dubailand, which is to be unveiled in 2008. "They are tackling a massive mission to develop three billion square feet of land into a tourist mecca in the Middle East, the way Orlando is in the United States. Dubailand is the vision of His Highness, General Sheik Mohammed Bin Rashid Al Maktoum," says Tight, who once practiced saying the full name in the shower so he could be properly respectful when referring to the royal leader. It's just one of the challenges of being a stranger on a strange quest.

To help Aqua Dunya transform from scratch to standout among a very competitive crowd in a short period of time, Tight is drawing on an eclectic background that includes a Stanford University architecture degree, a Harvard MBA, and a California contractor's license. And don't forget the 17 years he spent with Disney, during which he became a senior vice president and helped spearhead the development of Disney Paris and the new Disney Hong Kong.

Like Walt Disney, Tight is starting with a story. "The Arab culture is steeped with stories — Aladdin, the Arabian Nights, Queen Scheherazade, and now the adventures of Rakan — which visitors can share in fantastic ways."

Once upon a time, so Aqua Dunya legend goes, a young Bedouin boy named Rakan lived in the sleepy desert village of Dubai. He yearned for the sea and made his way to the coast to stow away on a tea schooner and see the world. When he returned with Marco Polo-like tales and treasures, he inspired his family to build *The Desert Pearl*, a steam and sailing vessel to rival any of the time, and to carve a canal out to the Persian Gulf. His father was too sick to join his exotic voyages, so Rakan brought back the best of all the paradises to his beloved Dubai and his family. The sands of time buried all these glories until they were "excavated" by the Aqua Dunya team for the world to share.

For tourists to experience the happily-ever-after effect, Tight and his team are combining the graces and glories of the late nineteenth century with the comforts and creations of the early twenty-first century. *The Desert Pearl* cruise ship will be adorned with Arabic tiles and designs, futons, intricate wood carvings, and Persian carpets. The front half of the ship will be an indoor theme park that is temperature-controlled to overcome the 120-degree summer days. In addition to all the water rides, many of Aqua Dunya's initial 36 active attractions will be "dry rides" for variety and to accommodate Muslim modesty in clothing.

"One of the key features of Steve's personality is his understanding, appreciation, and respect for different cultures, and his ability to communicate effectively with business groups from various nationalities," says Ali Bin Suleiman Al Shehri, the Chairman of Al Sharq Developments, the parent company of Aqua Dunya. "I believe that this trait is a key requirement if you want to do business in a city like Dubai, where 120 different nationalities are living and working together."

To go from quasi-wasteland to a world-class water land, Aqua Dunya will take up the area of 150 football fields. Enough water to fill more than 1,100 swimming pools will need to be pumped and desalinated from the Persian Gulf, more than five miles away.

When all is said and done, the complex will have 52 rides and attract an estimated three million visitors a year to its 1,100 hotel rooms, 755 vacation apartments, nine-hole golf course, 3,400 residential units, two theme parks, and 1,800-seat waterfront amphitheater.

"It's very unusual to have the land, capital, opportunity, and vision it takes to try to

raise the bar in theme-park destinations," says Tight. "I didn't want to miss the opportunity." **AW**

American Airlines offers codeshare service to Dubai with oneworld partner British Airways and Swiss International Airlines. Visit www.aa.com for more information.

LISA SONNE has gone swimming with manta rays before, but never in the middle of an Arabian desert. Her last piece for *American Way* was about space travel.



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