

matt jones

Interview – The Photographer, Ronald Codrai

From *The Gulf Today* (Sharjah, UAE), December 21st, 1996.

All it takes is a second

Ronald Codrai returned to the Arabia of his youth to find it a very different world. Matt Jones reports.

Ronald Codrai stands silhouetted in a window of the Dubai World Trade Centre tower, 33 storeys above the city he first visited in 1948. Back then, he would have jumped into a plane to get this particular perspective of the Jumeira coast. Now Codrai has merely to step into an air conditioned elevator.

Dubai has undergone what the 72-year-old photographer says is a “breath-taking transformation” in the years since he first came here with the Iraq Petroleum Company in his early 20s. Gazing down on modern Dubai, he seems to be looking through the modern skyscrapers for the Dubai he once knew.

The Indian-born Englishman is back in town to launch his latest book, *One Second In The Arab World – 50 Years of Photographic Memoirs* (Motivate Publishing), the contents of which are also featured in the United Arab Emirates’ Silver Jubilee Photographic Exhibition at Dubai Chamber of Commerce and Industry until Monday.

Codrai describes himself as “very much an amateur”. He adds, “I take photographs to please myself, whereas a professional would takes photographs to please others.” But in his choice of subjects and execution – composition and lighting – he is as good as any professional. And not only does he please others, he educates and informs as well.

Codrai’s work in the oil industry took him to Oman, Qatar, Lebanon, Syria, Palestine, Iraq and Tunisia, as well as Dubai and the Trucial States, as the UAE was then known. The people he met and the places he visited are included in *One Second*, the title of which comes from the observation that with an average camera shutter speed of 1/100th of a second, the total exposure time needed to capture the 100 photographs in the book represents only one second of the half century he has lived among Arabs. “It’s an unusual measure of time,” he says, sitting now on a sofa in the World Trade Centre Club. “It makes me wonder what I did with the rest of my time.”

(more)

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Codrai says he takes the “George Bernard Shaw approach” to photography. “Shaw said a photographer was like a salmon spawning eggs – you need 10,000 to get a good one,” he says. “My collection amounts to more than 100,000 photos and choosing 100 was very difficult. If I was choosing them today, I would have chosen a different 100.” Codrai describes his Knightsbridge flat as “one of the most dangerous places in London – you open a cupboard and pictures come crashing down.”

Gently insistent on referring to modern Dubai as “Dubayy”, the correct pronunciation of the city in Arabic, Codrai is the quintessential Englishman aboard: respectful of foreign cultures and yet as British as afternoon tea on the lawn. He’s much too polite to admit it, but you sense that while the present offers new subjects to capture on film, for him the past is infinitely more attractive. In the introduction to the book, he admits: “My photographs tend to show the traditional costumes rather than modern dress, and to be of pack animals rather than vehicles, of old bazaars rather than shopping arcades. They are of shepherds, *bedu*, fishermen, ploughmen and herdsman rather than of townies; of the traditional rather than the modern.”

In this, he is similar to that other well-known Englishman in Arabia, writer and fellow “amateur photographer” Sir Wilfred Thesiger. Thesiger stayed with Codrai in Dubai after his legendary crossing of the Empty Quarter and mentions him in his classic travel book, *Arabian Sands*.

Codrai may be a pensioner now, but he hasn’t retired from photography. Before taking the elevator back to the lobby, he pulls a small camera from his pocket. “I always have a little thing in my pocket,” he says, with a glint in his eye. “For capturing the passing moments.”

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