A group of 20 Stetson MBA students took an uncommonly long commute this month to learn about business practices taking place east of their Central Florida classrooms -- almost 7,800 miles east, in the constitutional monarchy of Dubai.

"The Dubai experience has gone beyond everyone's expectations," Dr. Stuart Michelson said in an email from the Persian Gulf state just before the July 4-12 field study trip ended. He is director of the Executive MBA Program and is Roland and Sarah George Chair of Finance.

"Nakheel was unbelievable. It set the bar," said MBA student Mark Snider of Ocoee after a discussion with Nakheel Development leaders and a tour of the company's $3 billion Palm Jumeirah, a 25-square-kilometer island created in the shape of a palm tree, a “trunk” and 17 “fronds” of world-class luxury high-rise hotels, shopping destinations and thousands of residences.

But the bar may have been passed later that day with a tour of Jumeirah's Burj Al Arab Hotel, the second-largest hotel in the world. The group met with the hotel's executive committee for a question and answer session and then toured the palatial presidential suite of the hotel, which soars more than 1,000 feet from an artificial island on the coast.

"This was the ultimate experience," said student Andre Hale of Orlando. "This was exactly what we hoped for; meeting the top management team and the executive board."

The EMBA students visited and met with leaders of financial institutions and industries such as medicine, hospitality, marketing and finance that operate in the multicultural and multilingual United Arab Emirate state where the largest contributors to the economy are real estate, tourism, construction, trade and financial services. This is the farthest any EMBA International Field Study group has traveled in the program's history.

"We've met top executives with some of the largest firms in the world," said Michelson. "We've toured their facilities and experienced how Dubai has addressed hospitality management issues, and how Emirate companies deal with huge construction projects with very short timelines on a grand scale. Even with distinct cultural and religious differences, the people of UAE have worked together to create a huge metropolitan city in a little over 10 years." Michelson and EMBA coordinator Wendy Lowe accompanied the students.

In former years, EMBA students studied commerce in Ireland, Austria and the Czech
Republic. This Middle Eastern academic experience broadened students' views of how a diverse people with unique challenges can be successful by thinking creatively and developing new ways of doing business, said Michelson.