

Bedouins between bling-bling

## Dubai as barely anyone knows it

Away from the skyscrapers, there is another world in Dubai - full of sand history and courageous women.

From Anna Stockhammer

7 a.m., the sun is beating down from the sky and Hugo is reading the desert newspaper. He is looking for tracks that animals have left in the sand overnight. “75 percent of the wildlife here only comes out in the dark,” he explains as Sally lands on his arm. Sally is a buzzard weighing 830 grams. She only ever flies a little way ahead and then back to Hugo. Not necessarily because she likes him so much, but simply because he feeds her chicken meat. “It’s the easiest way for them to get a meal. Buzzards aren’t very affectionate otherwise,” says Hugo and gives Sally a quick peck on the back.

In the past, the Bedouins relied on the birds to put food on the table. People sent the “wolves of the air” out into the desert to hunt.

Today, there are no more Bedouins in Dubai. Only about an hour's drive away is the 828-metre-high Burj Khalifa, the tallest skyscraper in the world. You have to stretch your neck to see its top. It seems as if it is touching the clouds. In this city of 3.3 million inhabitants, investors and influencers also want to aim high. With its luxury stores and tax exemption, Dubai is the epitome of bling-bling.

Even in the desert, the luxury apartment is ready for stressed Europeans, Americans or Asians. At the Al-Maha resort, an employee removes the fine sand from the infinity pool. The turquoise against the beige of the dunes looks surreal. How deep they had to dig to pump the water out of desert holes is not revealed. “Our guests appreciate relaxing in the water and at most being disturbed by a gazelle,” says the boss. Even in the spa with its fig scrub treatment and sauna (in the desert!), everyone is always keen to offer what is “insta-gramable”.

Hugo and his bosses Pete and Rob from “Sand Sherpa” take a different approach in the same nature reserve. The Desert Conservation Reserve behind the green barbed wire fence makes up five percent of Dubai's land area; the dunes are dotted with green bushes and trees. In a visitor center, a plastic Arabian hare tells the story of the desert. About the 130 different bird and 270 insect species, for example, or the national animal, the white oryx antelope, which was still hunted until the 1970s.

Pete and Rob were not born in Dubai, but grew up here. “When the desert was still right on our doorstep,” says Pete. At the visitor center, they and their company welcome school classes and guests. The bigger part of the educational work they want to do is the twelve camping tents on car trailers.

Sand dust swirls up and Pete and Rob drive their guests into the middle of the desert in two converted Pinzgauers. The tent trailers are already there, along with three-stone fireplaces, camping chairs, showers and toilets. Then the full desert program: the falcons, buzzards and owls fly, sparks fly from the flint, in the evening the UV flashlight shines on the backs of scorpions, in the morning the screeching of the animals tears you out of your tent - yes, the desert can be deafeningly loud.

The “Sand Sherpa” team wants to show “where Dubai comes from, what it once was, what it still is to some extent and how the nomads have dealt with nature in a sustainable way”. The reserve is the first of its kind in modern Dubai; it has existed since 1999 and only because the Al-Maktoum ruling family meant well. Many things in Dubai depend on the favor of the sheikhs. For example, an 80-kilometer mountain bike trail winds its way through the reserve because one of the sheikh's sons is an enthusiastic cyclist.

The family's history goes back a long way, says Sophie from the Al Shindagha Museum. She guides visitors through the many small houses along the river that divides the town and tells them about the small fishing village, pearl divers, trading ships and finally the discovery of oil in the 1960s.

There are almost no Emirati in Dubai today; around 90 percent of the people who live here are foreigners. Just like Linda. Born in Germany, she worked as a manager in a luxury hotel in the Emirates, then came corona and the 33-year-old discovered the desert on camelback. She decided to set up a riding school, the Arabian Desert Camel Riding Center. “Hold on and lean back,” she warns. The desert ship named Faris rises, swaying.

Camel riding and especially camel racing are popular sports in Dubai. Camels can run at speeds of up to 65 kilometers per hour and a fit animal costs around 10,000 euros. For a long time, camel racing was only practiced by men. Linda was the first woman to take part in a major race and promptly set up Dubai's first women's team for camel riding. She was also able to reach Emirati women and bring them to the riding school, otherwise the Emirati tend to keep to themselves, is Linda's impression.

Back in the city: Dubai is hard to grasp. Depending on which neighborhood you go to, it looks different, old buildings next to new ones, veiled people next to scantily clad ones, culture next to super modernity. Farida has seen the skyscrapers shooting up from the ground. She grew up in Dubai and, together with her sister Arca, founded Frying Pan Tours, culinary tours to hidden, authentic restaurants, snack bars and the Arabian markets, the souks.

The sisters are also among those who want to show that Dubai is more than just bling-bling. “Dubai has changed rapidly,” says Farida thoughtfully. You can tell that it's not always easy to see how the contrasts are becoming more and more pronounced.

She leads her small group to a covered garden in front of a restaurant. Nimble employees hand out small pieces of the cheesy, fibrous Arabic dessert kunafa. The first bite clears your head, for a moment it doesn't matter what intangible country you've landed in.

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### Travel tips

**Emirates** currently flies twice daily from Vienna to Dubai.

There is a huge selection of hotels, tours and activities in the metropolis: **25hours Hotel** in the modern part of the city (from 137 euros), Arabian Boutique Hotel in the old part of the city (from 224 euros);

**Sand Sherpa** tour: around 230 euros

**Al Maha Resort & Spa** in the desert reserve: 776 euros (prices per double room per night)

**Arabian Desert Camel Riding Center:** Information at [www.adcrc.me](http://www.adcrc.me)

**Al Shindagha Museum:** Details at [www.alshindagha.dubaiculture.gov.ae](http://www.alshindagha.dubaiculture.gov.ae)

Bookings for the **food tours** at [www.fryingpanadventures.com](http://www.fryingpanadventures.com)

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