

old dubai

by Mariska Katz, photographs by Nicole Katz

Like Hollywood Boulevard or Times Square, Dubai's Sheikh Zayed Road is perpetually buzzing with activity. Here, however, the commotion is not from curb crawlers or theatregoers. In this Gulf oasis, the non-stop action is made by oblong metal giants helping to build what developers hope will one day be the world's most famous skyline. On the city's main boulevard—named after the late Emirati visionary and former president of the United Arab Emirates His Highness Sheikh Zayed—cranes relentlessly swivel around still vacant construction sites that will eventually be filled by the highest (and costliest) buildings in the world.

As Dubai continues its celestial expansion, hordes of rosy-cheeked Europeans and Americans pack onto jumbo jets to lay their hands on tax-free threads in malls the size of small cities. Unless you are a Las Vegas resident—that other bastion of manmade urban excess—the idea of artificial islands mere kilometres from snowcapped artificial mountains may leave you feeling overwhelmed. And while the primary reason for a trip to Dubai may be to slip into the repetitive cycle of sunbathing and shopping, it is highly likely that first time visitors will begin to wonder what the city looked like barely a century ago when pearls, dates and wool were still considered its main cash crops.

Located on the banks of the Dubai Creek is the camel-coloured 100-year-old village of Bastikiya. The recently renovated cluster of 58 buildings allows visitors a chance to escape their flawlessly manicured hotel lobbies and slip into a time when the phrase 'Gulf architecture' connoted authenticity.

Buildings in this former Iranian settlement are flanked in simple gypsum walls, traditional Emirati wind towers, and wooden doors made from Zanzibar teak. While Bastikiya is now home to a number of galleries, museums and restaurants serving local cuisine, just ten years ago this idyllic village featured more wild goats than art.

According to Ahmed Mahmood Ahmed, a Dubai native and head of the Historical Buildings section in Bastikiya, "This area was about to be demolished when the Dubai municipality declared it a historical zone in 1996." For Ahmed, the conservation tactics, which are nearly complete, are simple: "We want the village to look as though it never changed."







It was precisely the municipality's devotion to accuracy that made it easy for Arkansas native Mona Hauser to choose Bastikiya as the location for her XVA gallery/café. "To me it's the soul of Dubai," says Hauser, while sipping on a glass of her café's mint-infused lemonade. "There is more integrity here than in the rest of Dubai."

Hauser was one of the first to move to Bastikiya. Her successful operation also houses one of the city's most chic accommodations; discreetly situated above the gallery, XVA rooms are ideal for high-end travellers seeking an updated, yet elegant Gulf experience. XVA guests can even hire the gallery's private *dhow*, a traditional wooden boat, for their own personal tour of Dubai Creek while eating food prepared by Hauser's staff.

Just metres away from XVA, Ahmed sits in the corner office of one of Bastikiya's finest traditionally restored buildings. He openly admits that his sights are set on Bastikiya achieving UNESCO World

Heritage status; however, it's not the only reason he's devoted his life to its preservation. "I wanted to do this for my future family. I wanted them to see the style of Dubai's past. You can see glass towers all over the world, but Bastikiya is what makes Dubai special. This is what we are here to say. This is what we are trying to do."

