

INTERVIEW

Power point

Sheikh Sultan bin Ahmed Al Qasimi, the deputy ruler, on the emirate's dynamic plans for growth

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ARTS & CULTURE

Sharjah Biennial 15

The Arab world's most influential contemporary art festival showcasing work from over 150 artists

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TRAVEL

Gulf in class

From mangrove forests to 'ghost' villages, enjoy the charms of an authentic travel experience

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A cultural
capital

SHARJAH

How Sharjah
is rooting progress
in tradition and heritage

INTRODUCTION

An emirate on the march

Increasing numbers of travellers, investors and foreign firms are drawn to the attractions of Sharjah, where progress is rooted in heritage, tradition and a respect for nature

Bathed in glorious streams of illuminations, the man-made wonders of Sharjah stand as shining symbols of a cultural powerhouse. With its dazzling light festival among a raft of spectacles driving a growing tourism industry, the emirate is on course to shed its reputation as a hidden gem of the Arab world.

From Sharjah's eponymous capital in the west – with its splendid mosques and Al Majaz Waterfront – to Khorfakkan and Kalba in the east, imaginative nightly displays depict past, present and future in a blend of illumination, colour and music.

Centuries after the city of Sharjah became known as a prosperous port on Mediterranean

and Indian trade routes, the festival's huge popularity plays its part in boosting the emirate's international reputation.

Half a century of evolution since the discovery of oil and founding of modern Sharjah, a remarkable transformation has been underway in the third-largest of the UAE's seven emirates.

Despite a changing world, it remains committed to a fundamental mission to root progress in heritage and tradition. And more travellers with a sense of adventure and curiosity are being drawn to this emirate to benefit from that objective.

Visitors discover the varied riches of a country that defines perfect tourism as "authentic,

meaningful and sustainable", complementing the familiar bustle of neighbouring Dubai rather than seeking to compete.

The splendour of Islamic architecture is just one feature of the Sharjah experience. The fruits of passionate respect for nature are another, demonstrated by conservation projects to nurture ancient mangrove forests in its eastern enclaves or creating havens for rare species, notably the endangered Arabian leopard at Al Hefaiyah in the foothills of the Hajar Mountains.

The 12th annual light festival, the biggest event of its kind in the Gulf, began with a lavish opening ceremony at the University City Hall on February 8 and runs until February 19 this weekend.

A technique introduced this year allows spectators to interact with projections and two monuments have been added: Al Hiss Fort, a museum in the capital that was once home to Sharjah's ruling family; and the Kalba Clock Tower on the emirate's east coast.

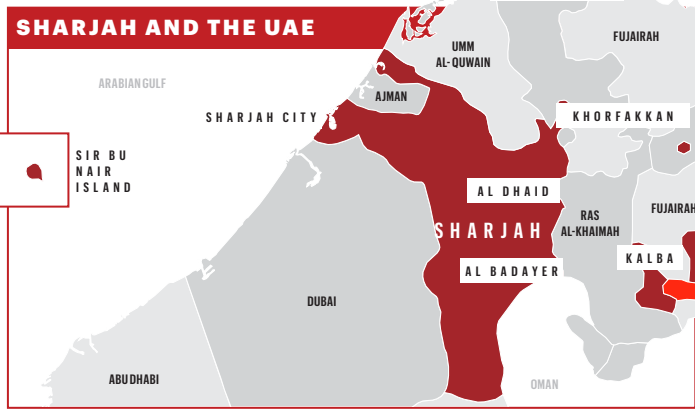
The event coincides with the start of Sharjah Biennial 15, which is being staged until June in venues across the emirate and showcases 300 works by more than 150 contemporary artists from more than 70 countries.

Xposure, the leading showcase for photography in the Middle East,

CULTURE AND HERITAGE ARE CELEBRATED, INTEGRATED AND DEVELOPED

featuring prominent names in the craft, is just finishing. With further exhibitions planned this year, Sharjah's position as the region's pre-eminent cultural hub is assured.

In a wide-ranging interview, Sheikh Sultan bin Ahmed Al Qasimi, Sharjah's deputy ruler since 2021, outlined plans to develop the emirate as a commercial and industrial hub to match its status as a centre of culture. He said the ruler, Sheikh Dr Sultan bin Mohammed Al Qasimi, had given emphasis to investment in human capital, presiding over significant advances in culture, science



and healthcare. As well as encouraging art, literature, photography, architecture and forums for communications, the deputy ruler added that Sharjah had accomplished progress without sacrificing a distinct Arab and Islamic identity.

"In Sharjah, culture and heritage are not only preserved but also celebrated, integrated and developed," he said.

The restoration of historic landmarks – among them the Mleiha Archaeological Centre – and the integration of traditional architecture in new buildings, and such developments as the Heart of Sharjah renovation project, are cited as examples of cultural heritage being used to create a sense of identity, pride and continuity.

The deputy ruler said Sharjah and the rest of the UAE would be major forces in achieving growth, reaping the rewards of decades of economic diversification to reduce dependence on oil exports.

"Our efforts to attract foreign investment and promote industries such as tourism, technology and renewable energy have also helped to create a resilient economy," he said.

Challenge had been confronted head on. Unlike many nations, the UAE had not suffered shortages of basic necessities during the Covid-19 pandemic. "In 2023, we will continue to focus on developing the tourism industry, promoting sustainable development and investing in cutting-edge technologies that keep us at the forefront of innovation," he said.

Among a slew of global acknowledgements, Sharjah takes pride in the virtues of an emirate with a population that has grown 2,200-fold since 1950 and is estimated by the World Population Review to have just under 2.2 million inhabitants.

The honours tell their own story: it was awarded Unesco's Arab Capital of Culture in 1998, and in 2019 was acknowledged as World Book Capital.

When the UAE hosts Cop28 in November, delegates will be aware of Sharjah's contributions to the environment: whether that is the expansive conservation zones on the east coast or the pioneering sustainability innovations of the BEEAH Group in waste management, renewable energy and hydrogen-powered vehicles.

As this gem glitters even more, it's no wonder the world is starting to take notice. *Colin Randall*

THE  TIMES

COUNTRY REPORT

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ECONOMY

LOOKING AHEAD WITH CONFIDENCE

Sharjah is poised for significant growth in 2023 with a diversified economy and strengths in international trade and logistics, manufacturing, green technology and culture and tourism



Building for the future The Al Majaz Waterfront district; inset, Sharjah Sustainable City

Sharjah's strategic location makes it a major hub for international trade and logistics as well as being a hotbed for advanced manufacturing. Regarded as a pioneer in the use of green technology and the creative industries, it is also leading the way in sustainable living and eco-tourism.

While other nations are urgently pivoting to a post-fossil fuel world, Sharjah has been preparing for this reality for decades. As a result, Sharjah boasts the most diversified economy in the Gulf Cooperation Council, with some 96 per cent of its GDP arising from non-oil related activity.

There is plenty more still to come. Even as major economies in Asia and the west face the prospect of recession in 2023, the UAE – and Sharjah in particular – is looking ahead with renewed confidence.

Sharjah's deputy leader, Sheikh Sultan bin Ahmed Al Qasimi, explains: "The Middle East and North Africa region is poised for significant economic growth in 2023, with the UAE and the emirate of Sharjah expected to be major drivers of this growth.

"In particular, the health and wellbeing sector is expected to see 7.3 per cent annual growth, to reach \$4.7 billion (£3.8 billion) by 2024. Some 43 per cent of Sharjah's 2021 budget was earmarked for developing and improving its infrastructure, including roads, to support the mobility and logistics sector. The culture and

tourism sector is also a priority, with investments forecast to reach \$20.3 billion (£16.4 billion) by 2027."

The emirate's economic strength is underpinned both by long-term strategic investments and by a business-friendly environment which promotes innovation and entrepreneurship. Sharjah is home to 35 per cent of the UAE's manufacturing businesses. This strength is underpinned by a network of six efficient free zones offering zero rates of income and corporation tax levied on companies which operate from there. The zones also encourage international investment by permitting 100 per cent foreign ownership of businesses located within them.

The Sharjah Investment and Development Authority (Shurooq) is the arm of government charged with delivering economic diversity and bringing in foreign investment.

It's involved in many projects, including the groundbreaking green living project Sharjah Sustainable City, which will comprise more than 1,100 residential villas in a fully integrated and net-zero community – the first of its kind in the emirate.

"This project is designed to improve the quality of life for residents without compromising the needs of future

generations, as well as presenting opportunities to conduct research and analysis on how we can minimise our carbon footprint in other areas," says Ahmed Al Qaseer, CEO of Shurooq. "Sharjah Sustainable City is not just a property development, but part of a global movement to adopt a sustainable lifestyle that suits the future of our world."

Shurooq is also spearheading an ambitious drive into tourism. The Sharjah Collection – a group of boutique, eco-friendly hotels – has been developed by the organisation.

It has created the popular Al Qasba and Al Majaz waterfront entertainment districts, and this year has a number of new projects underway in the east coast cities of Kalba and Khorfakkan.

The latter will include a high-end waterfront destination centred on 3km of pristine sands and, inland, a centre for adrenaline sports called Adventure Mountain. "We have been developing several projects that will enhance our eastern coastline into a hub of activity and tourism and provide prime tourist attractions for the area," adds Al Qaseer.

Billed as a "futuristic hub of learning", the House of Wisdom is a magnificent library and cultural landmark in the city of Sharjah that cements the emirate's status as a hub for literature and a cradle of culture.

Built under the auspices of Shurooq, Al Qaseer explains: "The vision behind the House of Wisdom is to create an engaging space where individuals can access and share knowledge through the expansive library and facilities, foster creativity and innovation, as well as promote community engagement.

Al Qaseer adds: "We are very excited about all the future opportunities and possibilities because, at Shurooq, we challenge our limits – our challenges don't limit us." *Andrew Saunders*

WE CHALLENGE OUR LIMITS – OUR CHALLENGES DON'T LIMIT US

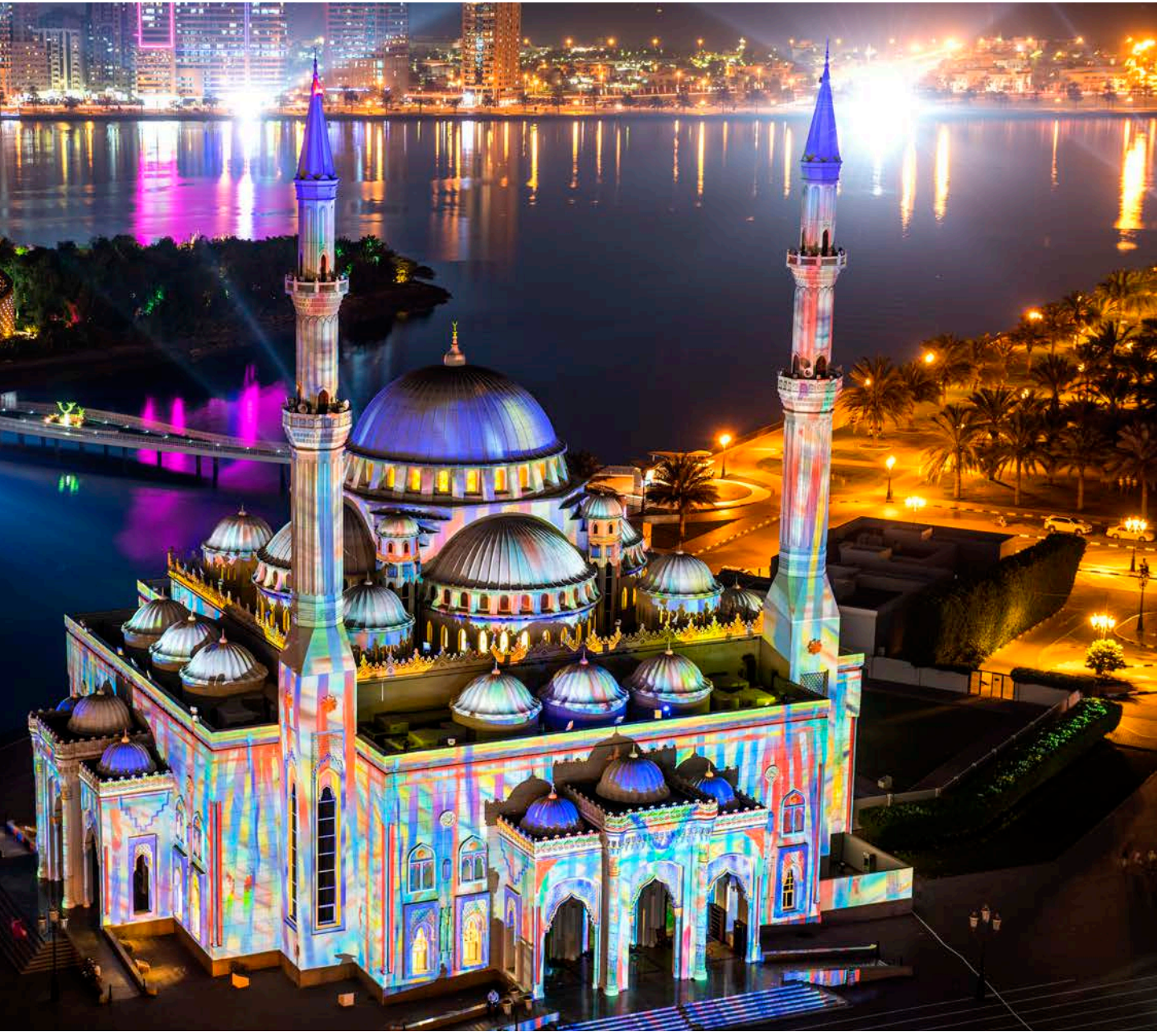
TRIP THE LIGHTS FANTASTIC...

Established in 2010, the Sharjah Light Festival (SLF) has grown from what its organisers call "a small spark" to a shimmering countrywide gala celebrating the best the emirate has to offer.

Combining historical landmarks with modern innovations and technology (see above), Sharjah's rich heritage is on show with a blend of illumination, music and storytelling. The annual light show attracts hundreds of thousands of visitors each February (running this year until the 19th), transporting viewers on journeys through nature, urban landscapes and the evening sky.

Lit up on the right is Al Noor Mosque ("noor" means "light" in Arabic) standing resplendent against the backdrop of the Khalid Lagoon.

As sustainability has grown in importance globally, this has become part of the SLF agenda. All the lights and projectors used have passed certification for environmental compliance, while surrounding lights are switched off – saving up to 60 per cent of the power in the area.



SHUTTERSTOCK

COURTESY OF SHUROOQ

Start-up as you mean to go on

A focus on developing an environment that encourages entrepreneurs has investors flooding into Sharjah

Although better known internationally as a cultural and intellectual centre of the Middle East, Sharjah has over the last decade developed a reputation as a regional start-up hub. The third-largest emirate in the UAE is home to a growing number of tech, education and green start-ups and was rated in the 2022 Global Startup Ecosystem Report – which analyses and ranks 1,000 cities in over 100 countries – as one of the top challenger hubs in the MENA

(Middle East/North Africa) region. Sharjah is now snapping at the heels of big names like Tel Aviv, Cairo and Dubai, an achievement that is thanks in no small part to the vision of Sharjah's ruler, Sheikh Dr Sultan bin Mohammad Al Qasimi. His ambition to build an economy fit for a post-oil future is based on applying the power of innovation and entrepreneurship to create sustainable value and prosperity. The Sharjah Entrepreneurship Centre (Sheraa) is a key part of this

Pioneering a sustainable quality of life

From our roots in Sharjah, to our growing presence across the region, BEEAH Group has achieved ground-breaking milestones, including the region's highest landfill diversion rate, the region's first commercial scale waste to energy plant and the first AI-integrated platinum-certified green building in the Middle East. Our businesses continue to innovate, so that, together, we can shape tomorrow's sustainable, smart cities, today.

progressive economic strategy. Founded in 2016, it was charged with the task of building the kind of entrepreneur-friendly ecosystem that lies at the heart of every successful start-up hub, and doing it as fast as possible. It's a journey as much as a destination, says Sheraa CEO Najla Ahmed Al Midfa, but the impact on Sharjah has been striking. "Looking back seven years, the tech start-up scene was very nascent when we began, so we had a blank sheet of paper. It has been really great to see how a city that wasn't known for tech entrepreneurship is now finding its own niche on that canvas." It's a niche that is growing fast. In the seven years since Sheraa opened its doors, more than 120 start-ups have benefited from support grants, contacts and mentorship. Between them, they have generated almost \$190m in revenue, raised \$130m of investment and created 1,400 jobs. Building on Sharjah's strong academic pedigree – it has 10 universities, serving a population of 2.2 million – it's a highly inclusive scene, says Al Midfa.

"We're really proud that 51 per cent of our start-ups have a female founder, and that we have founders aged from 18 to those in their fifties. That inclusivity is something we have been very intentional about." Sheraa is primarily aimed at stoking the entrepreneurial fires of local start-ups such as fractional property investment platform Baytuki, biodegradable disposable cutlery business Palmade and zero-waste cleaning pioneer Kyma (see below). But Al Midfa says that Sharjah's increasingly high profile means Sheraa is getting traction elsewhere too, as news spreads of the emirate's business-friendly free-enterprise zones, its support for SMEs and its ready access to the neighbouring



Taking the long view Sheikh Dr Sultan bin Mohammad Al Qasimi, ruler of Sharjah

large Arabic-speaking markets of Saudi Arabia and Egypt. "We started by taking Sharjah students and graduates on their own entrepreneurial journeys, but then we began to get more inbound interest from elsewhere in the UAE and beyond," she adds. And nothing states the emirate's place as a business hub more clearly than the annual Sharjah Entrepreneurship Festival. What began as a way to celebrate the pick of local entrepreneurial talent has evolved into a major international event. "It's no longer just held by the Sharjah Entrepreneurship Centre, it's a platform to enhance Sharjah as an entrepreneurial hub globally." The latest festival, held last December, included presentations from the likes of Steven Bartlett, creator of the influential podcast *Diary of a CEO*, and former Google X chief business officer Mo Gawdat; as well as entrepreneurs from Sharjah and beyond; plus a growing cohort of venture capitalists and investors. Investors increasingly recognise the opportunities, says Al Midfa. "One of the things we did at the festival last year was investor matchmaking. The venture capitalist ecosystem is small but growing – there are maybe 15 but we know them all well and they do look to us as a source of deal-flow." So, while others chase the glory of billion-dollar unicorn start-ups, for Sharjah it's about impact as well as cash value, concludes Al Midfa. "Our goal starting out was never 'we just want more unicorns'. It wasn't just arbitrary valuations that we were interested in, it was how can we build businesses that will truly make a difference, not just in Sharjah, but across the nation, across the region and, ultimately, across the world."

Andrew Saunders



A SUSTAINABLE SUCCESS

Three Sharjah-based female entrepreneurs with a passion for sustainable living are hoping to spark a "refillution" in the emirate and beyond. With Kyma, their start-up zero-waste cleaning business, they've come up with a range of household cleaning products in just-add-water tablet form, eliminating the scourge of all the plastic bottles that are thrown away when they could be reused. "If you walk through the

cleaning section of a supermarket, within around a month, all the bottles on the shelves will end up in landfill. We decided that simply wasn't acceptable," says CEO and co-founder Farida El Agamy (above, centre) who set up the business in 2019 with friends Dima Samaan (left) and Samar Sayegh (right). It took two years of research and development to come up with the right synthesis of chemicals to turn liquid bathroom cleaner or

disinfectant into biodegradable, non-toxic tablet form. Kyma products went on sale in January 2022 and within weeks the company was winning repeat orders. But it's not only revenue that matters to El Agamy and her co-founders – every return means less plastic going to landfill. Plans for 2023 include more products and new markets. "We're looking at Saudi Arabia and we're also eyeing up Egypt – we are affordable and convenient for urban populations who don't have a lot of storage space in their homes," says El Agamy. Support from the Sharjah Entrepreneurship Centre and the wider business community has been vital, she adds. "There's an amazing ecosystem of people here and the traditional part of the economy is big enough to play a huge role in fostering innovation." In fact, El Agamy thinks that the blend of the established and the novel is Sharjah's unique selling point for start-ups. "The combination of disruption, innovation and tradition here is interesting. It is going to be what shapes the next 10 or 20 years."

AS

DRIVING UP GROWTH IN EVERY SECTOR

Sheikh Sultan bin Ahmed Al Qasimi is Sharjah's deputy ruler. Here, he explains how he wants to grow the emirate as a commercial and industrial regional hub and build on its reputation as a cultural centre of the Arab world

Cultural, social and economic development in Sharjah has been driven by Sheikh Dr Sultan bin Mohammad Al Qasimi, the ruler of Sharjah. How would you summarise his vision?

Sheikh Sultan has placed an emphasis on investing in human capital while creating a safe and family-first environment – as shown with Sharjah receiving Unicef's official designation as the world's first recognised Child-Friendly City. Under Sheikh Sultan's leadership, Sharjah has witnessed significant development in culture, science and healthcare. The emirate has become a global centre for culture and education. Sheikh Sultan has also made efforts to foster dialogue among peoples, establishing art, books, photography, architecture and communication forums that are among the best in the Arab world.

Sharjah has experienced rapid development while holding on to a distinct Arab and Islamic identity. How do you balance the pursuit of modernity with the value of tradition?

In Sharjah, culture and heritage are not only preserved but also celebrated, integrated and developed. The city's restoration of historic landmarks such as Al Hisn Fort and the Mleiha Archaeological Centre, the integration of traditional architecture in new buildings and developments such as the Heart of Sharjah project, and the promotion of traditional customs and practices alongside modern ones through events such as the Sharjah Heritage Days and the Sharjah Light Festival, are examples of how the city is utilising its cultural heritage to create a sense of identity, pride and continuity. Sharjah is also a city of innovation, actively investing in technology and its integration in the daily life of its inhabitants.

The Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region will be one of few to record significant economic growth in 2023. Will Sharjah and the UAE avoid



the inflation and recession that loom over Europe and the US?

According to recent statistics, the MENA region is poised for significant economic growth in 2023, with the United Arab Emirates and the Emirate of Sharjah expected to be major drivers of this growth. Both have been working for decades to diversify their economies and reduce their dependence on oil exports. Our efforts to attract foreign investment and promote industries such as tourism, technology and renewable energy have also helped to create a resilient economy. One of the key factors that sets the UAE and Sharjah apart is the foresight to face any challenge head on. Unlike many other nations, the UAE did not suffer from a shortage of basic necessities during the Covid pandemic. In 2023,



Big plans (above) Sheikh Sultan bin Ahmed Al Qasimi, deputy ruler of Sharjah

The old and the new (left) Mleiha Archaeological Centre is built around an ancient preserved tomb

we will continue to focus on developing the tourism industry, promoting sustainable development and investing in cutting-edge technologies that keep us at the forefront of innovation.

What advantages does Sharjah offer as a base for investors? How are you working to advance diversification of the economy and which sectors offer the greatest potential?

Firstly, we have a strategic location at the crossroads of Europe, Asia and Africa, which makes us an ideal hub for trade and commerce. Secondly, we have a stable and business-friendly environment, with six strategically located free zones that offer 0 per cent corporate tax and 0 per cent personal income tax. Recent reforms now allow for 100 per cent foreign ownership of businesses, as well as long-term and freelance residency and citizenship. Furthermore, it's been named among the safest cities in the world. In terms of diversifying our economy, we are actively working to develop new sectors such as creative industries, advanced manufacturing, culture and tourism, mobility and logistics, health and wellbeing, green technology, agri-food technology and education. Lastly, advanced manufacturing is a key sector in Sharjah, as the emirate is home to more than 35 per cent of the UAE's manufacturing industries.

This year, the UAE will host COP28. To what extent does Sharjah, and the UAE more broadly, offer a model for sustainable development and environmental protection?

The United Arab Emirates, of which Sharjah is a part, has made significant efforts in recent years to promote sustainable development and environmental protection. Sharjah, in particular, has been recognised as a leader in these areas, and has made a significant commitment to environmental protection and biodiversity preservation. New construction in Sharjah has been required to adhere to green building requirements, including the use of environmentally friendly materials, energy and water efficiency, and the integration of renewable energy production since 2009.

The UAE has retained its position as the No. 1 market for start-ups in the MENA region. How is the government working to support start-ups and to foster a culture of entrepreneurship, and to create the next souq.com or Careem in Sharjah?

This emirate is rapidly emerging as a hub for entrepreneurial talent, thanks to its strategic location, favourable investment climate and commitment to supporting start-ups. With institutions of higher education, research and innovation parks, and incubation centres such as the Sharjah Entrepreneurship Centre and the Sharjah Start-up Studio, start-ups and SMEs already account for 94 per cent of all operating companies, contributing over 60 per cent of GDP. Obtaining licensing packages for start-ups and online traders has never been easier in Sharjah. With the help of online procedures offered by free zones like Sharjah Media City and Sharjah Publishing City, companies can get their official papers and start operating with just a few clicks.

CALENDAR OF CULTURE

Sacred Words Highlights of exceptional calligraphy from the Hamid Jafar Quran Collection can be seen at the Sharjah Museum of Islamic Civilisation until March 19. The exhibition includes more than 50 rare examples of Quran manuscripts spanning 14 centuries.

Seeing the light Exploring the power of light in her sculptures and installations, British artist Chris Wood creates sculptures made from coated glass called dichroic. Originally developed by Nasa to protect its astronauts from radiation, dichroic produces a spectrum of rainbow-coloured projections. Wood's installation, *Liquid Light*, will go on display at the Maraya Art Centre from February 27 to August 3.

Exchanging ideas The Expo Center in Sharjah's capital hosted the International Government Communication Forum last September. The two-day gathering brought together over 160 senior public officials, thought leaders and experts. Topics for discussion included Sharjah becoming the first city in the Arab world to implement a four-day working week. This year's forum, a must-attend event, will also be held in September.

Connecting the world Taking place at Al Mahatta Museum until September 3 is *Sharjah Air Station: The First Landing 90 Years Ago*. The exhibition shines a light on the region's first airport, which became a crucial international link.

Readers welcome The 42nd Sharjah International Book Fair plans to build on last year's incredibly successful event when it welcomed more than 2,200 publishers from 95 countries. Big-name attendees last November included Mohammed Alnaas, a Libyan author and winner of the 2022 International Prize for Arabic Fiction. This year's event will also be held in November.

Built environment Sheikha Hoor Al Qasimi, the president of the Sharjah Architecture Triennial Foundation, and the triennial's curator, architect Tosin Oshinowo, have announced the title of the 2023 Triennial as *The Beauty of Impermanence: An Architecture of Adaptability*. It begins on November 11 and runs until March 11, 2024.



By design Tosin Oshinowo, curator of the Sharjah Architecture Triennial

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Writing a new reality

Sheikha Bodour Al Qasimi, daughter of Sharjah's ruler, tells **Gabriella Griffith** how books are essential for a bright future

The power of reading is very much part of the fabric of Sharjah. Speaking at the emirate's annual International Book Fair last November, Sheikh Dr Sultan bin Mohammed Al Qasimi, Sharjah's ruler, said the gathering was "an opportunity for children, youth and families across the UAE to enrich their learning in arts and sciences, and forge close connections with cultures across the world through books". This wider appreciation for literature is something that his eldest daughter, Sheikha Bodour Al Qasimi, has not just embraced but made her own, becoming the second female and first Arab president of the International Publishers Association (IPA) – a two-year term that has just come to an end.

"For an Arab and Muslim woman to become president of the IPA is in and of itself a very clear message about the changing face of publishing, and indeed the world," says Sheikha Bodour, who last month was made president of the American University of Sharjah. "Today's readers want more diversity, original voices and local stories. I have tried hard during my tenure to push the diversity

and inclusivity message at every opportunity."

After she took up the IPA post in 2020, the job changed dramatically as she steered the industry through the Covid-19 crisis. But she believes the pandemic helped to herald some much-needed change.

"It certainly slowed down our industry and even forced some publishers out of business," she explains. "That was the downside, but it was also a much-needed wake-up call for publishers in general. The pandemic accelerated a shift in business models and publishers' mindsets, especially those less diversified in product delivery and channel distribution."

Encouraging the industry to take action on the climate crisis was an important part of her brief too. The role of publishers goes far beyond information dissemination about the environment and climate change, she argues. "We use ships to deliver books, paper and other resources. My recent message has focused on the need to unify our position on decarbonising our industry, starting from how we do our day-to-day business to all the other stages of book production and delivery."

Part of the enduring legacy she leaves at the IPA is the 2030 Accelerator – a one-year project



Success story Sheikha Bodour is passionate about the role of reading

launched in October 2022 to support early-stage ideas to boost the industry's sustainability.

But Sheikha Bodour's passions extend far beyond. In 2017 she set up the Kalimat Group, a publisher focusing on bringing diversity to the Arabic book scene. It was inspired by her youngest daughter who complained about Arabic children's books being boring and old-fashioned: "I knew she was right and I wanted to do something about it. That conversation led to the creation of the Kalimat Group and our mission is to create books to help build a progressive society."

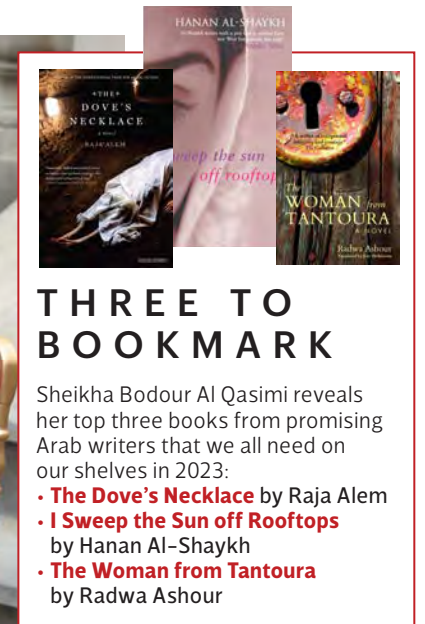
The Sharjah International Book Fair, now in its 42nd year and held every November, is the world's third largest and attracts big-name authors from the Arab world, a legacy that Sheikha Bodour is extremely proud of. Looking to the future, she believes the Arab publishing industry has incredible potential and that the large market

of young readers will inspire the next generation of exciting writers and publishers into the sector.

"I think we will see a massive shift in the quality and quantity of Arab books in the years to come," she says. "Having said that, there is a need for Arab publishers to encourage more translation and ensure they have more diversity in distribution channels so Arabic literature can take its rightful place on the global stage."

Believing wholeheartedly in the role of books in society, Sheikha Bodour has looked beyond Sharjah, personally donating to rebuild libraries and bookstores in areas such as Beirut after the port explosion in 2020 and Gaza in 2021.

"Books allow the reader to sit quietly and dive into new realities and stories away from their current situation," she says. "Books can also give a fresh perspective and a sense of normalcy which accelerates the healing process."



THREE TO BOOKMARK

Sheikha Bodour Al Qasimi reveals her top three books from promising Arab writers that we all need on our shelves in 2023:

- **The Dove's Necklace** by Raja Alem
- **I Sweep the Sun off Rooftops** by Hanan Al-Shaykh
- **The Woman from Tantoura** by Radwa Ashour

GOLD STANDARD

House of Wisdom is a state-of-the-art cultural hub with lifelong learning at its heart, says **Virginia Matthews**

In 8th-century Baghdad, the original House of Wisdom was a focal point for the finest minds of the time. International philosophers, scholars and scientists came together to translate Greek into Arabic and pore over breakthroughs in medicine and maths.

While maintaining the library's time-honoured role as a treasure trove of knowledge, Sharjah's stunningly reimagined House of Wisdom is on a mission to redefine learning and cultural discourse for the modern age.

The award-winning architectural landmark opened in 2020 to commemorate Sharjah gaining Unesco World Book Capital status in 2019. With a generous use of natural light and a tranquil central courtyard, the House of Wisdom closely echoes the Islamic architecture of the past. It is also surrounded by *mashrabiya*, a decorative golden lattice work used widely in the Gulf which gives privacy and shade to those within.

The frontage isn't the only thing that impresses. The building boasts a dedicated educational area for children, while *The Scroll*, a 36m spiralling sculpture at the front of the building, "honours the lasting power of books", declares the library's director, Marwa Al Aqroubi. It's also a decidedly 21st-century space. More than 105,000 titles in varied languages and formats are backed by an on-demand book "espresso machine" for printing and binding, together with futuristic 3D print facilities, an e-library, lecture halls, exhibition spaces and a café.

Promoting what she terms "shared learning and innovative research within a beautiful setting", the new design, says Al Aqroubi, combines the best in "traditional and digital information resources, interactive learning and modern education".

It's already a destination in its own right – "school parties in search of project material, pensioners looking for titles from the past, or groups of friends



Grand designs The spiralling Scroll sculpture stands tall in front of the lattice-clad library

meeting up for coffee" are among the regular customers, says John Blythe, who led the project for UK architects Foster + Partners.

"While our mission was to celebrate the growing importance of national libraries as focal points for culture and learning, it was also very important to make the building relaxing and welcoming to all," he says.

In contrast to the often-static library monoliths of the past, the House of Wisdom will continue to develop over time, adding in new services such as enhanced digitalisation as smarter technology comes on-stream.

"The legacy will be to fuel enthusiasm for reading and create an experience at a state-of-the-art cultural hub that people will want to frequent, as well as foster cross-cultural interactions between individuals and groups from diverse backgrounds," says Al Aqroubi. "The House of Wisdom is cementing Sharjah's position as a cultural melting pot by delivering the highest international standards and exceptional services."

Ahmed Al Qaseer, CEO of Shurooq, the development force behind the project, says: "The objective is to provide a platform for lifelong learning, education and personal growth, within an inspiring setting of architecture and art."

Waste not, want not

With climate change at the top of the global agenda, a Sharjah company is leading the way in the waste-to-energy revolution. By **David Prosser**

Sharjah-based Beeah hopes to solve two toxic problems at once. Each year, the emirate produces tens of thousands of tonnes of rubbish that currently have to be dumped in landfill sites. It is also conscious of the urgent need to reduce carbon emissions generated by energy production, as part of the United Arab Emirates' commitment to reach net zero by 2050.

Beeah believes the solution to both these challenges lies in using waste to produce energy – opening the region's first waste-to-energy plant last May. Currently Sharjah manages to divert 76 per cent of all waste from landfill into recycling – with the aim of the new plant to raise that to 100 per cent.

“There is immense potential for waste-to-energy in the Middle East,” declares Khaled Al Huraimel, group CEO of Beeah. “Not all waste can be recycled and reintroduced into the circular economy, so without doing something differently, cities will

always rely on landfills that will continue to grow. Waste-to-energy helps solve this persistent problem while contributing to the clean energy mix.”

Beeah's new plant, less than 30 miles from Sharjah City, underlines the potential of being a sustainability pioneer. Once it is at full operational capacity, the plant will be capable of processing 300,000 tonnes of waste that would otherwise end up in landfills. A recent facility launched by Beeah in 2022 has a robot with AI vision that can segregate different types of waste.

Using this waste to power the plant – rather than fossil fuels – will add 30 megawatts of low-carbon electricity to the Sharjah grid, enough to power the equivalent of 28,000 homes. Sharjah also aims to become the first city in the Middle East to achieve zero waste to landfill.

That is crucial, given that the Gulf Cooperation Council countries currently produce more waste per

person than anywhere else in the world. Now the plant is ready to take the rest of this waste, Beeah is focusing on new challenges.

“Zero emissions vehicles (ZEVs) have a key role to play in achieving net-zero emissions targets and are a focus area for cities to be future-ready,” adds Al Huraimel. “We believe hydrogen-fuel vehicles are a key part of the ZEV transport ecosystem of the future, as they offer similar benefits to conventional vehicles, such as fuelling up on the go.”

It's an argument attracting attention all over the world, given that hydrogen-powered cars produce no carbon emissions at all. But the question is where the hydrogen fuel will come from. Currently, the vast majority of hydrogen is derived from fossil fuels, which undermines the green value of switching to it as a fuel source. However, as Al Huraimel points out, it is also possible to use certain types of waste to produce hydrogen.

To this end, Beeah has forged a partnership with British company Chinook Sciences to construct the first waste-to-hydrogen plant in the Middle East, complete with an on-site fuelling station. The plant

will process unrecyclable plastic waste, along with other scrap, to produce hydrogen at the grade required for the fuel cells that power ZEVs – and in quantities sufficient to power a large fleet of trucks.

The project is part of a broader strategy for the UAE to secure a 25 per cent share of the global market for low-carbon hydrogen by 2030. That plan was unveiled at the Cop26 United Nations Climate Change summit in Glasgow in 2021 – and the UAE will be able to provide an update on its progress when it hosts the Cop28 conference in November this year.

Beeah will supply the ZEVs for Cop28, having signed the UN's ZEV Declaration last year. That agreement commits the UAE, along with 200 other signatories, to ensuring all new van and car sales are ZEVs by 2040.

Al Huraimel expects Beeah and the UAE to contribute to further progress in the climate change fight at Cop28: “We look forward to sharing insights on our vision for sustainable, smart cities of the future, including zero-waste strategies, waste-to-energy innovations, digital platforms that create new efficiencies and the smart built environment.”

66
THERE IS IMMENSE POTENTIAL FOR WASTE TO ENERGY IN THE MIDDLE EAST



TOMORROW'S WORLD

Rising from the Al Sajaa desert, the headquarters of Sharjah's environmental management specialist Beeah closely resembles the dunes that surround it.

Opened in April 2022, the 9,000 square-metre building is a statement of Beeah values – a construction that is part of its environment, rather than a structure imposed upon it.

Designed by the renowned architect Zaha Hadid, in one of her final projects before her death in 2016, Beeah's headquarters stands as a proof point for the company's ambitions.

The building is powered by a solar array and meets the LEED Platinum standards, the highest certification awarded by the world's most widely used green building system, with net zero emissions.

It is constructed from recycled materials and includes an on-site water treatment facility to minimise consumption.

Configured to make the best use of natural light, the building also includes a central courtyard that helps provide natural ventilation.

Crucially, the headquarters is also technology-enabled. Meeting rooms feature integrated cloud collaboration tools so that staff can work together whether they are on-site or remote.

The company has created a digital twin of the building, a virtual replica of its structure and system, so that it can track performance data in real time. Using AI, this digital twin can also run simulations, based on variables such as the building's occupancy rate, temperature and light preferences, to determine what is necessary to maximise energy efficiency.

It's a project that proves what is possible with imagination and innovation, says CEO Khaled Al Huraimel: “This serves as a blueprint for the smart, sustainable cities of tomorrow.” **DP**

Walking the walk
Beeah's spectacular HQ (far right) has ultra-green credentials



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UNIVERSITIES & INNOVATION

OPERATION FUTURE-PROOF

A culture of entrepreneurship and innovation as well as world-class universities and research institutions are fuelling developments in Sharjah, says **Virginia Matthews**

Last month's successful lift-off of the Sharjah Sat 1 satellite from Cape Canaveral in Florida was a graphic symbol of the emirate's growing confidence and appetite for innovation.

Built by a team drawn from the University of Sharjah (UOS), the Sharjah Academy for Astronomy, Space Sciences and Technology (SAASST), as well as international collaborators, Sat 1's to-do list includes the study of solar energy, X-ray emissions and the impact of auroras on earth's electrical grids – all at an orbit of 340 miles.

Weighing less than four kilos and equipped with state-of-the-art sensors and cameras, the low-earth mini satellite's life span is expected to be little more than around three years.

Yet the successful launch – watched closely by a group of dignitaries led by the deputy ruler Sheikh Sultan bin Ahmed Al Qasimi – will significantly boost the university's capacity to handle more sophisticated STEM projects in the future.

UOS has established the College of Computing and Informatics and the Sharjah Oasis for Technology and Innovation – along with SAASST – to become a premier research and educational institution specialising in the fields of astronomy, space sciences and technology.

Hamid Al-Naimiy, the chancellor of the UOS, declares: “Our space engineers have acquired valuable research experience to embark on new satellite projects to explore the universe.”

Sharjah is also home to a clutch of world-class universities and research establishments which includes the American University of Sharjah and Higher Colleges of Technology. With ever-deepening links to academic giants such as Harvard, MIT and UCL, the emirate's goal of becoming a Silicon Valley-style international innovation hub is well underway.

From next-generation 3D-printed houses and street furniture to the SkyWay suspended rail initiative, which is aiming to beat traffic jams by taking to the skies, Sharjah's well-funded research programmes are turbo-charging its ambition to diversify the economy and attract foreign investment.

The “culture of entrepreneurship and innovation among students and the faculties ... also contributes to the region's economy by attracting international students and faculty members,” says the deputy ruler, who also acts as president of UOS.

And while space exploration is still the final frontier for many in the



We have lift-off
The launch of Sat 1 on January 3 was a pivotal moment

scientific community, the overall aim, the deputy ruler adds, is to “establish research projects which serve humanity on the ground”.

This is backed up by Al-Naimiy, who says: “In the coming years, the Internet of Things, robotics, nanotechnology, digitisation and quantum computing – including artificial intelligence, deep learning and 3D printing – will lead to the creation of important innovative products that will become an integral part of our daily lives.

“Innovation is crucial in serving humanity and improving our standard of living.”

Established in 2016 by royal decree by Sheikh Dr Sultan bin Muhammad Al Qasimi, the ruler of Sharjah, the Sharjah Research, Technology and Innovation Park promotes research and development as well as supporting enterprise activities and closer collaboration between industry, government and academia.

At the heart of the emirate's innovation drive is Sharjah's University City, a Cambridge-style educational hub and innovation cluster offering undergraduate and post-graduate degrees in fields such as engineering, medicine, business, law and architecture.

Ranking as the world's largest integrated educational complex, the modern classrooms, state-of-the-art labs and high-tech research facilities match those to be found anywhere in the region.

“In addition to its academic offerings, University City plays a vital role in promoting innovation and economic growth in the region,” the deputy ruler concludes.



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PROPERTY

DREAM BIG AND BUILD A BETTER WAY OF LIFE

Investment in property has grown hugely in Sharjah and now developers are using the emirate as a base for more ambitious plans

Sharjah's property market may seem modest in scale and less high-profile than that of neighbouring Dubai. But as fast-growing local developer Arada has proved over the last six years, size is not everything when it comes to architectural innovation and creating new communities that are built to last.

The combination of stable prices, strong investor interest and a post-pandemic bounce makes the emirate both a great place to invest in property and a springboard for founding a lasting and ambitious real estate business. In the first nine months of last year, Sharjah recorded more than 65,000 transactions worth some \$4 billion (£3.24 billion), about a quarter of which came from investors beyond the Gulf countries.

"We saw a gap in the market in Sharjah to really create destinations and lift the bar on residential accommodation," says Arada group CEO Ahmed Alkhoshaibi. His firm is best known for Sharjah's game-changing city-within-a-city development of Aljada, a sprawling, 24 million sq ft mega-community capable of housing 70,000 people, and with schools, health facilities, its own transport system and even an Olympic-standard skate park.

The pace of development at Aljada hasn't stopped – a central business and entertainment district was recently added to the multitude of shops and restaurants already in place. "We've never had a year where we have grown less than 30 per cent. But our plan when we launched was never to focus just on Sharjah," says Alkhoshaibi.

Other developments have followed, such as Hayyan and Al Mamsha by Alef Group; and Maryam Island and Kalba Waterfront by Eagle Hills.

Sharjah Sustainable City, created by Diamond Developers and Sharjah's investment and development authority Shurooq, is an interesting model in its own right. All the water within the city will be re-treated and used to water the plants, while residents will be encouraged to plant and harvest their own food – with the excess being sold on the open market. But it is Arada that continues to

forge ahead. New territories were always going to be added to the home base, the first and most natural being Dubai just a few dozen miles down the road. "Sharjah is a great market, but Dubai is huge. You can sell to the whole world there," says Alkhoshaibi, adding that London and Australia are also potentially on the radar as future destinations.

And now the time has come for Arada to make some characteristically bold first moves. Not only has it snapped up the last remaining seafront plot on the famous Palm Jumeirah artificial archipelago – a purchase Alkhoshaibi described as a "no-brainer" because of its desirability – but it has also announced its very own development in Dubai, in the shape of 294 super-luxury villas in the prime location of the Jouri Hills, part of the Jumeirah Golf Estates, whose PGA Tour-hosting course is a beacon for fans of the game the world over.

INNOVATION IN ARCHITECTURE

OLD WAYS AND NEW IDEAS

Tradition is being blended with modern technology to design buildings that are ideally suited to dry climates

What can architecture and construction learn from the desert truffle – an edible subterranean fungus that grows in the most arid regions of North Africa and the Middle East?

More than you might think, according to Faysal Tabbarah (right), associate professor of architecture at the American University of Sharjah, and curator of the UAE National Pavilion at the forthcoming Venice Biennale's international architecture exhibition, which begins on May 20.

"The desert truffle shows that an arid landscape does not necessarily mean a complete absence of food," he says. "The architectural analogy we can take from this is that neither is there a complete absence of

construction material. If you know how to read the landscape, you can find food, and the same applies to construction material."

Tabbarah's vision for the Venice Biennale looks at reframing the way we think about the interaction between the built environment and arid landscapes.

It's a message that has increasing resonance worldwide, as droughts become more widespread and concerns over climate change prompt architects and the construction sector to seek not only more energy-efficient buildings but also less environmentally costly ways of building them.

His research into the traditional buildings found typically in the agricultural regions of the eastern

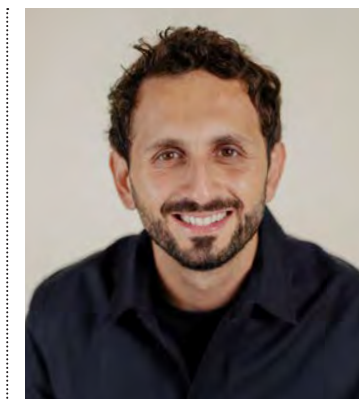


However, Arada will not be turning its back on the Sharjah market where it made its name. Recent changes in the law allow foreign investors to buy freehold rather than leasehold properties in some Sharjah districts, a move that will attract a great deal of new interest, says Alkhoshaibi. "It will definitely increase foreign direct investment, especially for non-Arabs," he says. "I am confident there will be good growth for certain nationalities that were not able to get freehold before."

Proof of that ongoing commitment is the firm's latest Sharjah project, a luxury forest-living development called Masaar. Featuring a "green spine" with over 50,000 trees irrigated by recycled grey water, the master plan was recognised for its cutting edge thinking at the Middle East Design Awards 2022. The 1,416 homes of Phase 1 are due to be completed this year and are already selling strongly, says Alkhoshaibi.

But while its footprint may be expanding rapidly, the Arada approach will remain the same – to create vibrant destination communities and models of modern urban development that stand comparison with the best in the world. "Wherever we go, we build strong foundations there. We don't just do one project – we build a team, invest, grow and let it continue growing," Alkhoshaibi concludes. **Andrew Saunders**

COURTESY OF ARADA, IMAGE
COURTESY OF NATIONAL PAVILION
UAE LA BIENNALE DI VENEZIA
IMAGE BY AUGUSTINE PARADES



thin glass and steel of more modern structures, traditional thick stone walls have a thermal mass that helps buildings stay cool in the daytime and warmer at night. This reduces the need for active cooling via energy-hungry air conditioning systems, as well as limiting the amount of materials that need to be shipped in from outside.

Precise details of the planned installation for the Biennale pavilion are still under wraps, but Tabbarah hints that it will involve "highlighting how building practices in arid environments can provoke alternative futures".

"It's not saying that we should just build like we did 100 years ago, but that there are some lessons that can be amplified with the proper integration of technology."

Whatever Tabbarah and his team come up with is sure to be worth taking in – there may not be any desert truffles on offer but there is bound to be plenty of food for thought. **AS**

Open your heart to the joys of Sharjah

Whether you come for the shifting sands and towering peaks of the burnished desert, or the exotic souks and cool, coral-lined alleyways, you'll cherish the emirate's passion for ecotourism and culture, from arts to science

‘Smile, you are in Sharjah’ is a sign that spells out a warm message in floral form at a roundabout located in the centre of the city. Coined in the 1970s, the phrase encapsulates the spirit of this sunny and welcoming municipality. For the open-minded and curious, the third largest of the UAE's seven emirates offers a unique slice of Arabia, combining both contemporary and traditional experiences.

Beyond the sands and skyscrapers of popular stereotype, an altogether different adventure awaits travellers who arrive here. To cross into this emirate is to find the simpler charms of a quietly authentic travel experience – environmentally sustainable but also incredibly rewarding. A stroll around the older areas of Sharjah city is a good way to start. Guided walking tours offer glimpses of a bygone age before oil and gas transformed this part of the world's economy, life and architecture.

The Heart of Sharjah is the biggest heritage restoration project in the Arabian Gulf. Here, traditional Emirati houses made of coral – and separated by a labyrinth of narrow alleyways that channel cool air – have been turned into art spaces, cafés and high-end accommodation.

In this heritage district, the Chedi Al Bait hotel assembles a cluster of coral houses that once belonged to prominent local families. It is about to be enhanced by a new wing of 12 rooms converted from another home previously owned by Emiratis. The atmosphere of this magical and historical place has been hailed as a “quiet solitude of heaven” bang in the middle of a city.

Meanwhile, the stunning Al Noor Mosque, one of many spectacular places of worship in the capital, leads tours – on Mondays and Thursdays at 10am – with an English-speaking guide. Sharjah is the only emirate in the UAE to bridge the Arabian Gulf and the Gulf of Oman. Once you hit the road out of the capital into the desert, more delights await visitors who come with a sense of adventure.

The emirate's fascinating history is evoked in the Mleiha

Archaeology Centre and Buhais Geology Park. Moreover, there are more than 30 museums, including those devoted to Islamic civilisation, the oceans and calligraphy, and an array of art galleries and design spaces. From now until June, the Sharjah Biennial is showcasing modern works by more than 150 artists at venues around the emirate. The emirate takes pride in accolades that bear witness to its cultural strides. Sharjah city was named by Unesco as Cultural Capital of the Arab World in 1998 and World Book Capital in 2019. A third honour – the emirate's designation as Capital of Islamic Culture for 2014 by the Islamic World Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization – triggered heavy investment in 21 new science and arts projects, Islamic gardens and monuments.

As well as exploring Sharjah's heritage and vast desert expanse, visitors can browse in modern souks or traditional Arab markets, and choose between street food and gourmet Emirati cuisine. Meanwhile, niche hotels focus on ecotourism. The Sharjah Collection comprises four boutique properties across the emirate with an emphasis on engaging with nature.

Two new additions coming on stream this year seek to underscore this authentic offer rooted in heritage and nature.

The first, Nomad, represents a first-of-its-kind tourism project from the same team. It consists of 20 airstream trailers that move around the emirate periodically, setting up in whichever landscape that is suitable at that time of the year. The environmentally friendly features of the trailers will leave minimal impact behind as the goal is not to negatively affect the flora and fauna of the areas.

The second involves the renovation of Najd Al Maqсар, an abandoned mountain village close to Al Rafisah Dam.

On cool evenings in the desert, there is live music and dance in pop-up cafés amid a breathtaking landscape of shifting reddened dunes, striking rock formations and corrugating sands.

The only question that remains is... what are you waiting for?

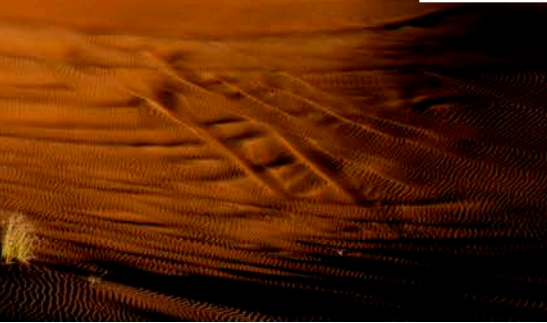
Colin Randall



Fascinating vistas
Clockwise from top left: Heart of Sharjah; the dunes and mountains of the desert; ghost village of Al Madam; the promenade at Khorfakkan; steps up to the Najd Al Maqсар heritage village; the tranquil Chedi Al Bait



COURTESY OF SHARJAH TOURISM. SHUKHRAAT GAFUROV



EAST COAST

MAINTAINING A GULF IN CLASS

Visit the emirate's two flourishing enclaves with their sandy beaches and coral reefs, and get close to nature in the indigenous mangroves, rich in biodiversity

Separated from the rest of Sharjah by another of the UAE's seven emirates lies a historically peaceful retreat from busy city life.

The east-coast Sharjah enclaves of Khorfakkan – which translates as the Creek of Two Jaws – and Kalba still offer tranquillity on the shores of the Gulf of Oman.

But they are no longer sleepy outposts. Heavy government investment has funded a new motorway, reducing journey time from the capital to 45 minutes.

Restaurants, cafés, heritage projects, souks and a new museum have quickly appeared. Street art flourishes and mountain-side walking trails have made Khorfakkan a magnet for adventure travellers.

Both cities await the opening of a series of hotels. Yet this determined development programme has not robbed the east coast of its traditional attractions of beautiful white-sanded beaches and coral reefs.

Kalba, 21 miles south of Khorfakkan, has the new Khor Kalba Mangrove Centre, designed by British firm Hopkins Architects.

A nature trail encourages visitors to explore a rich biodiversity from the indigenous mangrove forests and mudflats to rescued wildlife including turtles, stingrays, gazelles and the rare Arabian-collared kingfisher.

Close to the border with the emirate of Fujairah, kayaking is a popular activity at Al Qurum Nature



Stillness in motion Take in the nurtured beauty of the nature park's surroundings at Khor Kalba with a laid-back kayaking trip

Reserve, where 500 hectares of reputedly the oldest mangroves in the Arabian Peninsula thrive under protected status.

Until the government acted in 2012 to save the mangroves, they were endangered by human activity, crab hunting and spear fishing. Although kayaks and paddleboards are now denied entry to the mangrove channels, visitors can edge close enough to the forest to observe the flora and fauna of an internationally acclaimed wetland.

Everywhere on Sharjah's east coast, a balance is struck between visitor needs and a firm commitment to conservation. The delicate nurturing of nature remains reassuringly central to the eastern Sharjah experience.

CR

ADVENTURE



MARS ON EARTH

Savour the stark contrast between the red sands and glittering sea, but don't miss the opportunity to visit an abandoned village gradually succumbing to the desert

The natural world lies at the heart of the Sharjah experience. The capital is bounded on one side by the Arabian Gulf and another by the desert, its saffron-red sands resonant of images of Mars.

A stark illustration of what lies beyond the capital can be found in the ghost village of Al Madam. Forty miles southeast of Sharjah city stands the eerily impressive spectacle of abandoned homes lining a single street that leads to a mosque where worshippers no longer gather. The houses, built decades ago, look robust enough. But they have been uninhabited, the interiors invaded by wind-driven sand, since their former occupants – members of the Kutbi tribe – were forced out by the encroaching desert or, as some believe, evil spirits.

As the sands slowly swallow the so-called “buried village”, groups of photography enthusiasts head there to capture memorable images, profiting from the gentler light and shadows at sunset. Al Madam exemplifies Sharjah's natural wonders and challenges, particularly where the desert meets the rocky Hajar mountains.

Further towards Sharjah's east coast enclaves of Khorfakkan, the Al Rafisah Dam welcomes kayakers while nearby Wadi Shees attracts intrepid visitors who like to hike and bike on survival tours.

Closer to Sharjah city, guided tours from the Mleiha Archaeological Centre reveal traces of early mankind alongside the plant life and minerals that have served humans for thousands of years.

The Big Red, a dune that lives up to its name, has unbeatable views of the desert landscape but is also a powerful magnet for those keen on quad biking and sand skiing. Located in Sharjah too are immense wildlife reserves including the newly opened Sharjah Safari, the world's largest outside Africa. Elsewhere, there is also a project to rehabilitate the Arabian leopard.

As ever, conservation plays a critical part at the heart of the Sharjah travel experience, rooted in a sense of place.

CR



THE BIG RED IS A MAGNET FOR THOSE KEEN ON QUAD BIKING AND SAND SKIING

The prints of darkness

The Xposure International Photography Festival has been shining a light on the impacts of climate change by going to the ends of the earth – and beyond

In a world where frivolous sound and video can encroach on many aspects of our lives, it's important to be reminded about the raw power of an image which can still stop people in their tracks.

Many such captivating pictures have been on show at the Xposure International Photography Festival being held at Expo Centre Sharjah which ends today – February 15. A renowned global platform for the industry, it provides a stage for

photographers and independent film-makers to showcase their work and share ideas.

The state of our planet is often explored at Xposure and this year was no different. Esther Horvath is a multiple award-winning photographer and veteran of 15 scientific voyages to the Arctic and Antarctic. She presented images from her time on the MOSAiC Expedition, one of the most important explorations of the Arctic in recent times.

The largest polar expedition in history, it involved hundreds of experts from 20 countries. The German research icebreaker vessel Polarstern set sail from Tromsø, Norway, in 2019 to spend a year drifting through the Arctic Ocean.

The purpose was to take the closest look ever at the Arctic as the epicentre of global warming and gain a better understanding of climate change.

The Hungarian-born photographer lived for three months in 24-hour darkness aboard the Polarstern. And if the brutal environment wasn't challenging enough, imagine being a photographer missing the most important component you require.

"Light – what we actually need for photography – does not even exist here," she declares. "During the polar nights, the only light we had came from our ship and the headlamps of the participants, and on a clear day from the moonlight. I was fascinated by this darkness: it was the most beautiful thing I'd ever experienced."

Horvath was commissioned to take pictures of the Polarstern head on: "I didn't realise this would be one of the most challenging pictures to take, because I couldn't even get there!"

Eventually, the sea ice froze over and, using her tripods to test whether the ice was solid enough to walk on, she managed to get far enough away to capture the shot of the vessel.

As much as her photography is about capturing the moment and the beauty of the Arctic, she feels it's also vital for her work to highlight the trip's scientific significance. "This is why this expedition was so important, to understand the processes of the Arctic Ocean and to be able to have better data for future climate prognoses," she says.

CC

LIGHT - WHAT WE NEED FOR PHOTOGRAPHY - DOES NOT EVEN EXIST HERE



ESTHER HORVATH, THAT IS APOLLO 14, ANDY SAUNDERS

Out of this world
Esther Horvath's photograph of the Polarstern; Conservation Summit at Xposure; Andy Saunders' digitally restored image from the Apollo moon programme



Parminder Bahra

The exhibitions at Xposure are not limited to images shot in this world alone.

British author and science writer Andy Saunders is also one of the world's foremost experts of Nasa digital restoration.

His digital enhancement techniques of the original Nasa Apollo moon mission images reveal detail that was previously not visible. At Xposure, he presents an exhibition of remastered images from the Apollo moon programme that were shot more than half a century ago. Saunders says he wants "people to feel like this is as close as they can get to walking on the moon themselves".

Visitors also have the opportunity to explore work from Carlton Ward Jr who uses photography to highlight the plight of the panther in his home state of Florida. Driven to extinction elsewhere in the US, it is the last surviving big cat east of the Mississippi River.

Ward Jr and his team manage a network of photography and video camera traps throughout the critical habitat of the Florida Wildlife Corridor. Their purpose is to inspire a public and political movement to conserve the region.

This is just a snapshot of the multiple exhibitions at Xposure. The event continues to build on earlier editions and attract critically acclaimed artists from across the globe.

Opening the 7th edition, Tariq Saeed Allay, director general of the festival's organising body, the Sharjah Government Media Bureau, says: "Since its inception, this festival has served as a reminder that beauty exists amid chaos, and what makes our journey sustainable is Sharjah's unwavering vision and commitment."



ART AS A BALANCING ACT

"I'm always on a quest," declares Shaikha Al Mazrou, a Sharjah-born artist whose work is sought after across the globe.

These quests are not always solo adventures. A regular visitor to Sharjah's industrial sector, Al Mazrou works with local metal workers to create her art.

"She engages with workers who are making metal sheets for skyscrapers and she's like, 'I want you to make a sculpture,' and they're like, 'What? How are we to do this?!'," says Asmaa Al Shabibi, co-founder and director of art gallery Lawrie Shabibi, which represents Al Mazrou.

The artist likes to grapple with materials such as steel and glass, bending, tearing, slicing and sometimes exhausting each other to the point of submission. "We defeat one another in the most playful way," she says.

Last year, Al Mazrou exhibited one of her largest works to date, *Red Stack* (above), at the international art event, *Frieze Sculpture 2022*. Set in London's

Regent's Park, the work consists of giant bright red pillows nestled atop one another. They look soft and inviting but this belies the rigid folded steel from which they are created.

This gets to the heart of Al Mazrou's work: "I'm interested in the dichotomy of meaning, I imagine the metaphor of a string pulled in opposite directions, that moment of tension. It's a dialogue between the forces of repulsion and attraction: this creates two states, tension or letting loose."

Al Mazrou is yet to create an artwork for a public space in Sharjah, but says it is "fertile ground". One place that has caught the artist's eye is the Kalba Ice Factory on the eastern coast of the emirate. Back in 2015, the Sharjah Art Foundation began converting the former ice factory into a space for exhibiting art installations.

"Sharjah has played an instrumental role in shaping the art and cultural scene in the Arab world. The emirate represents a leading role as a patron of arts while preserving its own history and heritage," she says. **PB**

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BIENNIAL

THE ARAB WORLD'S CREATIVE CURATOR

A visit to an exhibition aged 22 was life-changing for Sheikha Hoor Al Qasimi. Since then, the daughter of Sharjah's ruler has transformed the emirate into an international capital of the art world fusing contemporary with traditional



Valued voice
Sheikha Hoor Al Qasimi curates 2023's biennial

Sharjah's status as an internationally respected hub of creativity is being reinforced as works by more than 150 artists go on display at the emirate's contemporary art biennial.

Running until June 11, more than 30 major new commissions are among exhibits at multiple locations, ranging from a vegetable market to a disused power station.

The 15th edition of Sharjah Biennial marks a significant new step in the career of Sheikha Hoor Al Qasimi, daughter of the emirate's ruler, and regarded as one of the most significant voices in Arab art.

She is curating the event having taken the place of one of her mentors,

Okwui Enwezor, who died in the early stages of planning.

A passionate art-lover from childhood, Sheikha Hoor drew lasting inspiration from a visit as a 22-year-old, newly graduated from London's Slade School of Fine Art, to the Documenta 11 exhibition in Germany in 2002.

Enwezor, an acclaimed Nigerian-American contemporary artist, was its artistic director and says the experience was "life-changing", encouraging her to devise ways of displaying art in her own country so people did not have to travel to the West to see it.

Sheikha Hoor became director of the biennial 20 years ago and began work on turning her vision into reality.

The 30th anniversary edition is entitled *Thinking Historically in the Present*. With artists from more than 70 countries taking part, it is regarded as the Arab world's most influential art festival.

After Enwezor's death from cancer in 2019, Sheikha Hoor took over as curator, incorporating many of his ideas in preparing the event.

Taking place in 19 venues across five cities and towns in the emirate, the biennial is a strong statement about notions of power and the formation of identity.

In the east coast enclave of Kalba, visitors are getting a glimpse inside the gaping inner belly of the newly refurbished Ice Factory. At its centre, a monumental sculpture evokes the makeshift structures of Jamaican fishing villages but which, without reference, feels like a portal to another dimension.

The work, *Nu Colossus*, by Nari Ward, constructed of roughly cut, long wooden panels, entices the viewer to get closer and to ask questions around issues of contemporary culture as well as lost traditions.

Sharjah Art Museum, a venue in the capital, houses a thoughtfully curated selection of works that shine a light

CC

SHARJAH BIENNIAL IS REGARDED AS THE ARAB WORLD'S MOST INFLUENTIAL ARTS FESTIVAL



The big picture
From above: *Burden of Proof* by Barbara Walker; Okwui Enwezor; Amar Kanwar's multimedia artwork *Peacock's Graveyard*

on ongoing, sometimes forgotten and painful human struggles surrounding race, migration, displacement and exploitation. Kimathi Donkor's paintings of the Brixton riots in the 1980s still feel poignant today and Robyn Kahukiwa's works summarise the Maori experience in New Zealand.

Sheikha Hoor says the wide variety of venues reflects both her "reputation for saving old buildings from demolition" and a determination to spread out the event from Sharjah City to other areas of the emirate.

"Okwui saw Sharjah Biennial's 30-year anniversary as an opportunity to reflect on the role biennials serve in the ecosystem of contemporary art, particularly the Sharjah Biennial itself and the broader Foundation that grew from it," she says.

Amar Kanwar, an Indian multimedia artist, is presenting *Peacock's Graveyard*, a seven-channel video intended to "interweave poetic fables of death and life".

He warmly praises both Sheikha Hoor and Enwezor, who was only 55 when he died. "The Sharjah Biennial is interesting and inspiring in quite a few ways," he says. "But it is also a homage to Okwui."

Colin Randall

SHARJAH

THE TIME IS NOW



Sharjah Seaports, Customs & Free Zones Authority (SSCFZA) was established by emiri decree in 2020. As per the decree, SSCFZA shall function as the governing authority for following entities - Hamriyah Free Zone Authority, Sharjah Customs and Sharjah Airport International Free Zone Authority.

- One of the most diversified economies in the **MENA** region.
- Considered as the cultural capital, industrial hub and educational hotspot of the **UAE**.
- Stable and integrated infrastructure.

FILM & TV

Moving pictures

With increased demand for more representative media, a new generation of Arab film-makers is putting Sharjah on the silver screen

Arab television producers and film-makers are, at last, getting their chance to shine.

Audiences across the region have long been served a diet of Western entertainment, but the advent of streaming services such as OSN Group and Netflix has created opportunities for a new generation of homegrown talent.

Viewers are lapping up new and original Arabic content such as *AlRawabi School for Girls*, *Secret of the Nile* and *Mo*.

In Sharjah, the increased demand for such content is a boon for Mohammed Hassan Khalaf, director general of Sharjah Broadcasting Authority (SBA), and a passionate advocate for Arabic language and content.

“In a life full of technological, technical and media developments, the great challenge is to remain yourself and to be proud of your culture and language, because that is how you transmit your identity effectively to others,” he says.

“When presenting themes for the Arab consumer, we should not forego our authenticity. Arabic drama should not be an imitation of the West.”

And... action
Behind the scenes on the award-winning epic film *Khorfakkan*



SHARJAH BROADCASTING AUTHORITY

Owned by the government of Sharjah, SBA broadcasts television and radio, and also runs the on-demand app Maraya, through which all its content is available to digital users. SBA effectively has two roles: to work as a public broadcaster and to develop new content that reflects Arab values.

On the latter, Khalaf is particularly proud of the epic film *Khorfakkan*, which was screened in Portugal in October and has since won a number of awards. Based on a book by Sheikh Dr Sultan bin Muhammad Al Qasimi, the ruler of Sharjah (pictured above on set), the film tells the story of the then emirate's heroic resistance to the Portuguese invasion in 1507.

“*Khorfakkan* was a massive undertaking that set a precedent for new Emirati and Arab productions that shine a spotlight on the values of Arab civilisation,

and that promote cultural dialogue between Arabs and the rest of the world,” Khalaf says.

“But it also sought to showcase Sharjah's experience in the film industry; it is a pioneering historical film produced at international levels.”

SBA has also had success with *Sharjah Safari*, a three-part documentary series that aired at the end of last year, showcasing the work of Sharjah Safari Park, the largest safari park in the world outside Africa. Telling the story of how the park protects, cares for and breeds endangered animals, it has proved popular with viewers, and also highlights Sharjah's allure as an alternative tourist destination for international travellers.

It is a good example of how SBA marries its duties as a public broadcaster with its efforts to develop new content.

“The production of *Sharjah Safari*

is in line with the authority's objective to highlight the emirate's leadership in a number of growth sectors that strengthen its status as a premier international travel destination,” says Khalaf.

Abdulla Al Kaabi, an Emirati film director, tells stories that are deeply connected to Arab culture. His first movie, *Only Men Go to the Grave*, was self-financed and critically acclaimed. “Sharjah has forever been a cultural oasis for all artists in the UAE,” he states.

Al Kaabi agrees that strong audience demand exists for Arabic content – but that fellow Emirati film-makers urgently need the support and the resources to match that ambition.

“It's really important that we document via film the imagination of film-makers,” he declares, “to give the audience a chance to live the stories that take place here.”

Khalaf hopes the success of SBA – and the growing popularity of Arabic content more broadly – will encourage younger generations to enjoy locally produced television and film alongside that which comes from the West.

A partnership with social media company Snap is already helping SBA to reach new audiences.

Part of the challenge will be to encourage young people to make such content for themselves. SBA is increasingly training young Emiratis hoping to pursue careers in the industry. In one recent project it worked with 60 Sharjah students looking to develop their media skills.

Such initiatives are all about building on SBA's success, says Khalaf. SBA's mission is “to foster an environment that promotes the role of the local media as a tool to create a positive impact on society, by encouraging local talent and stimulating creativity and innovation”. **David Prosser**

SHARJAH MEDIA CITY

MAESTROS OF MEDIA

An innovative new free zone authority supports companies in the creative industries. Its chairman, Dr Khalid Omar Al Midfa, explains how nurturing young, local talent has already seen financial – and artistic – benefits

“Sharjah is the capital of the Arab world from a cultural point of view,” says Dr Khalid Omar Al Midfa, chairman of Sharjah Media City, known as SHAMS.

SHAMS was launched to provide a hub through which talent from the worlds of media and the arts can combine their resources and develop.

“We aim to utilise the knowledge and the abilities of people in our creative industries so that we can propagate that culture, both within the emirate and beyond.”

The media city is a tax-free zone, where talent in sectors ranging from graphic design to film-making can co-locate, collaborating on projects and learning from one another to upskill and commercialise their creative capabilities.

“We've created the starting point from which entrepreneurs can launch their businesses,” Al Midfa explains.



SHARJAH IS THE CULTURAL CAPITAL OF THE ARAB WORLD

Some 13,000 firms on the ground in Sharjah Media City are now growing quickly, often commissioning work from their peers.

It's an ecosystem that offers exciting opportunities to up-and-coming talent determined to forge a career in the creative industries.

For example, one recent initiative, the Emirates Entertainment Experience, saw young film-makers invited to training, workshops and mentoring provided by a panel of leading professionals in the industry.

More than 3,000 film-makers took part in the project “that aimed to develop the film industry's infrastructure and to nurture young Emirati and Arab talents”, Al Midfa adds.

Many of those taking part had a hand in the production of a new film, 218: *Behind the Wall of Silence*, a suspense drama that subsequently picked up nominations and prizes last year at the



The bridge of prize
Amal Mohamad won at the Septimius Awards in Amsterdam for 218: *Behind the Wall of Silence*

COURTESY OF SHARJAH MEDIA CITY (SHAMS)

Septimius Awards in Amsterdam for independent film-makers.

The success of the project reflects the determination of Sharjah Media City's leaders to support a creative sector that generates both cultural and commercial benefits.

“We consume a great deal of content in Sharjah but we get most of that content from elsewhere,” says Al Midfa. “If we create a content-producing

industry here, we think it will create jobs and add value.”

Success breeds success, he adds. One recent open day event saw Sharjah Broadcasting Corporation commission five separate projects from production companies based in Sharjah Media City.

“That's how we work with other entities in Sharjah and create value for the whole community.” **DP**



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CONSERVATION & HERITAGE

MAN ON A MISSION TO HELP UAE’S MARINE LIFE

How a senior diplomat’s love of the ocean – and turtles – inspired him to champion conservation, fishing sustainability and biodiversity in Sharjah

It was a chance meeting with an ocean turtle while swimming that helped persuade Sheikh Fahim bin Sultan bin Khalid Al Qasimi to become an unlikely social media hero. “I grew up by the sea, living in the United Arab Emirates,” he explains. “You can’t help but be by the ocean, growing up in it, on it or beside it. I’m a free diver, I surf and I sail.”

Two years ago, while free diving near the island of Sir Bu Nair, a Persian Gulf environmental reserve that belongs to Sharjah, Sheikh Fahim came across a stricken turtle. On closer inspection, he saw that a discarded fishing line had cut into its flipper, so he took it to the Turtle Rehabilitation Project at the Burj Al Arab hotel for treatment.

Despite the turtle having its flipper amputated, Farah, as he named it, recovered sufficiently to be released into the wild. “To coordinate the rescue of this turtle was fascinating and quite special for me,” explains Sheikh Fahim. “The problem was it was the second turtle that I had been in the process of saving in the space of a year. It made me think, how big is this problem?”

As executive chairman of the Sharjah Department of Government Relations, making him the emirate’s

senior diplomat, Sheikh Fahim “went down the rabbit hole of turtles” and realised there was a lot of work to do.

Dubbed the “turtle sheikh” by one journalist, he “ended up working between all of the agencies, at a UAE level, trying to discuss what can be done to save turtles”.

Before long, Sheikh Fahim was asked to become the ambassador of the Dubai Turtle Rehabilitation Project, which he accepted. News of his work with turtles travelled across social media, and he was soon inundated with messages from people who had come across injured turtles across the UAE. “I realised I was playing this coordinator role and that there had to be a better way to do it.”

Sheikh Fahim decided to help set up a freephone number, “800 TURTLE”, and a coordinating team to direct rescues across the UAE. “I think it saved more than 50 turtles in 2022,” he says. The initiative has helped make him a champion of marine conservation, biodiversity and sustainability.

Sharjah has two coastlines, hugging the Gulf of Oman into the Arabian Sea in the east and the Persian Gulf in the west. Sheikh Fahim explains that the ruler of Sharjah, Sheikh Dr Sultan bin Mohammed Al Qasimi, has instigated

Deep dive
Sheikh Fahim bin Sultan bin Khalid Al Qasimi, above and top right, has become a passionate advocate for marine conservation

dedicated conservation sites and built centres with the Environmental Protected Areas Authority to ensure the fauna and flora of the emirate are protected.

“We have a lot of biodiversity that we are trying to protect. The east coast is a rich and vibrant part of our sea. You’ll see tuna migrations, mahi mahi fish, lots of sea turtles – especially green and hawksbills – parrot fish and lots of black tip sharks. They are awesome,” he says.

Sharjah has recently established a College of Marine Sciences and Aquatic Biology at the newly inaugurated University of Khorfakkan. It is currently collaborating with the UK’s University of Exeter – renowned for its marine science research – to develop a bachelor’s programme and establish a centre for marine research in the emirate.

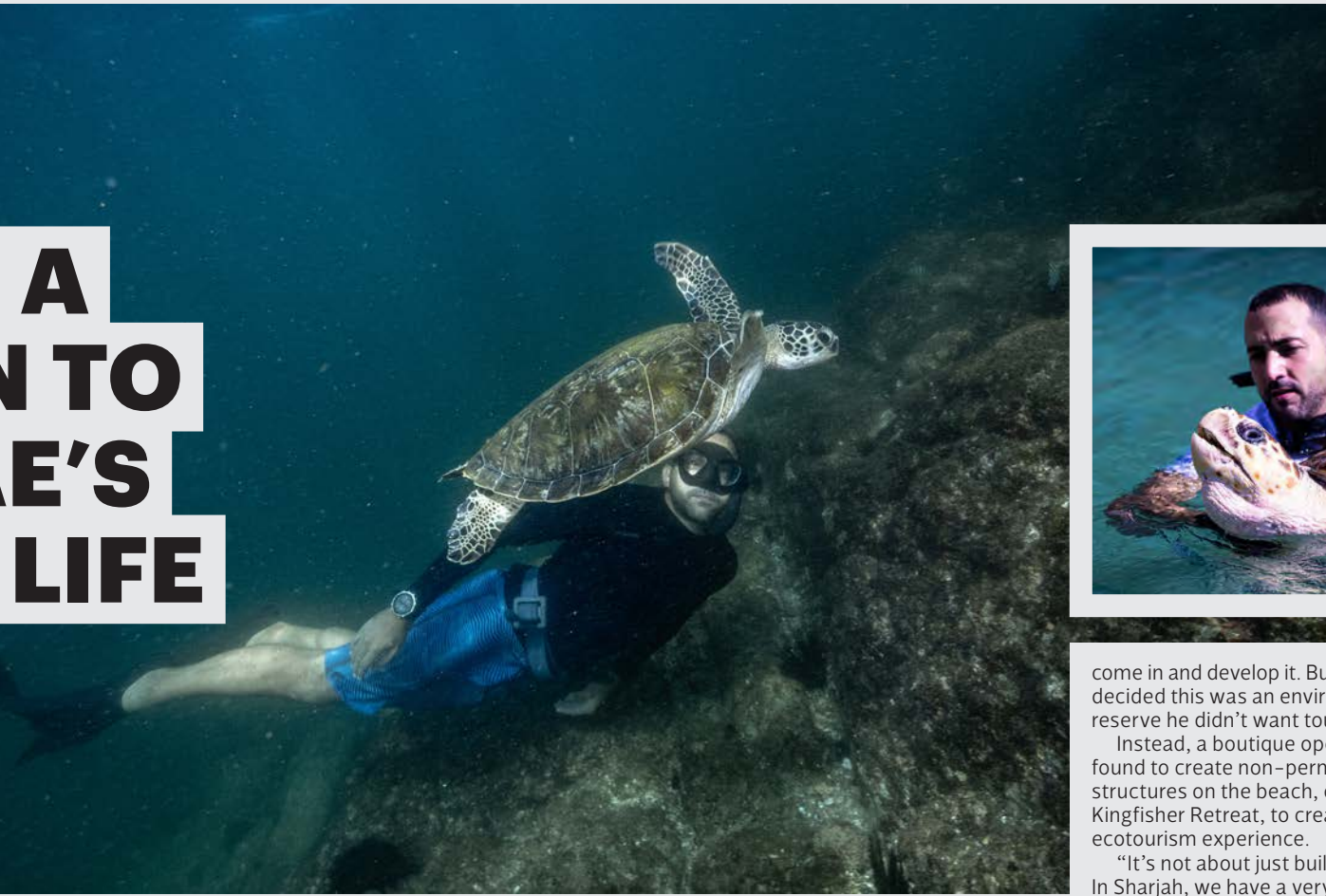
“It is going to be a very important asset, focusing on the unique needs of our region. The oceans have always been a core part of Sharjah’s history and now our economy, going forward,” says Sheikh Fahim.

He’s keen to point out the emirate’s sound ecological credentials and the importance of a triple bottom line.

“We have a beautiful coastline in Kalba in the east and we had a lot of interest from tourism companies to



WE DON’T ASK ENOUGH QUESTIONS ABOUT WHERE OUR FISH IS COMING FROM



come in and develop it. But His Highness decided this was an environmental reserve he didn’t want touched.”

Instead, a boutique operator was found to create non-permanent structures on the beach, called the Kingfisher Retreat, to create a tented ecotourism experience.

“It’s not about just building upwards. In Sharjah, we have a very different approach – and we get very different tourists because of it. And that’s a good thing,” adds Sheikh Fahim.

He is also a co-founder of online seafood trading platform Seafood Souq, which ensures that seafood is fully traceable to the place and fishery that caught it. “When I ask a waiter where a steak comes from, they can probably tell you the cow’s name. The same does not happen with seafood. We don’t ask enough questions about where our fish is coming from and the practice people have; that’s where the idea came from.”

Seafood Souq has been recognised by the United Nations and highlighted as a case study in sustainably harvesting the ocean and digitising the seafood supply chain. The trading platform also works with fisheries in developing regions to help them achieve the UN Sustainable Development Goals to achieve better and sustainable futures.

“A third of the world requires fish for their income or their livelihood. How do we empower them to earn wealth by using better practices? We’re getting fishermen more bang for their buck by catching less and giving them access to new markets,” says Sheikh Fahim.

“That’s the unique part of our business: we’re much more than a tech company where you can trade fish.”

Parminder Bahra

THEATRES OF DREAMS

Two neoclassical amphitheatres are playing a major role in the cultural and societal development of the emirate.

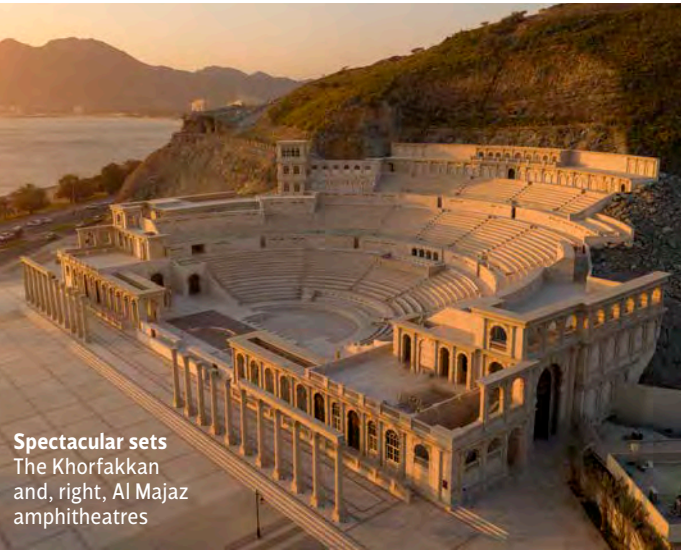
Nestled at the foot of the Al Sayed mountain and overlooking the Gulf of Oman on the eastern coast of Sharjah, the Khorfakkan Amphitheatre is a beautiful and elegant open-air venue that takes its cues from Roman and Middle Eastern architecture.

It opened to the public just two years ago, adding a new chapter to Sharjah’s long-standing tradition of being a centre of art and culture. Leading artists from around the globe are attracted to this magical

venue. More recently, veteran Kuwaiti singer Nabil Shuail, dubbed the “Gulf Nightingale”, performed there. He took to the stage last month, where he was joined by newcomer and fellow Kuwaiti Mutref al Mutref to perform an evening of traditional songs.

Across the other side of Sharjah on the Persian Gulf is the Al Majaz Amphitheatre, another majestic outdoor venue. Set on an artificial island on Lake Khalid, it has built a reputation for hosting top international artists.

Artists who have taken to the stage here include British singer-songwriters Lewis Capaldi and Emeli Sandé. Meanwhile, looking ahead to March 11, Grammy award-winning



Spectacular sets
The Khorfakkan and, right, Al Majaz amphitheatres

British singer-songwriter Seal will perform at the venue.

Al Majaz hosts music artists from a variety of countries and genres, including classical music and opera. Its exhibition space, Gallery X, is hosting an exhibition by American photojournalist Steve McCurry, one of the world’s most celebrated in his field, which runs until March 30.

PB



SAIF landing for businesses

Airport free zone’s tax breaks and trade links prove attractive to thousands of firms, says **Rhymer Rigby**

When Sharjah Airport International Free Zone, known locally as the SAIF Zone, was established in 1995, just over 50 companies chose to locate their services at its base in the city of Sharjah. From those modest beginnings, the SAIF Zone has become a thriving business metropolis that hosts 8,000 firms from 165 countries. British and European investors are of key importance and account for a quarter of the

companies in the zone. What are the attractions? Companies that set up in the zone benefit from a 0 per cent corporate tax rate and 0 per cent income tax. Reforms in the UAE now allow for 100 per cent foreign ownership of businesses too, as well as long-term and freelance residency and citizenship. As the name suggests, next door to the SAIF Zone is Sharjah Airport – the Middle East’s second largest airfreight hub. It has five cargo terminals equipped to handle all

types of freight – from perishables to pharmaceuticals. It also hosts 45 scheduled airlines and has direct connections to more than 65 destinations.

Sharjah’s strategic position – with coastlines on both sides of the Arabian Gulf – means it can serve the fast-growing economies of Asia and get to Europe quickly. For maritime freight there is access to the Indian Ocean and Arabian Gulf with four convenient ports. Road infrastructure is excellent from this stellar location, with Dubai about 17 miles due south.

In recent years, transport links have improved considerably. “The logistics ecosystem has been strengthened by increased investment,” explains Saud Al Mazrouei, director of SAIF Zone. “There is a focus on improving global connectivity with multi-modal logistics facilities, logistics process digitalisation and warehouse automation.”

SAIF Zone has also taken a bespoke approach to the businesses that locate there. Al Mazrouei says: “Different industries have different needs and you have to adapt and change your model.”

Strong engagement with private sector partners has been key as well. “If you are working with a Fortune 500 company, you need to work in a completely different way than if you are dealing with a small to medium scale business. The former need a lot of effort to make sure things run smoothly, to help them grow. The moment they grow, everything grows around them. The supply chain grows, the businesses around them benefit, there is a whole economic cycle.”

A recent example of this is the Gold & Diamonds Commodity Park. With the UAE now the largest and fastest growing hub in the jewellery sector, this was launched three years ago with the goal of positioning Sharjah as



Reaping the benefits Firms from a range of sectors – from food processing to precious metals (below) – are based in the SAIF Zone

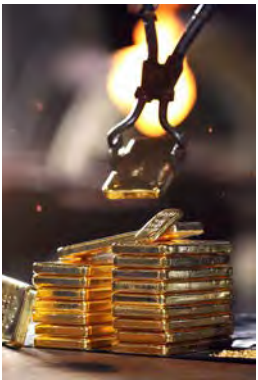
an ideal location for the gemstone and precious metals industry.

In the first half of 2022, its trade in polished diamonds expanded by more than 50 per cent and its overall trade reached \$19.8 billion (£16.1 billion) in the first half of 2022. In the SAIF Zone there are now 25 gold refineries with investors from Italy, China, India, Egypt and Jordan.

Dev Shetty, an Indian entrepreneur and the founder and CEO of Fura Gems (see full interview below), is one such beneficiary. His company chose to locate in the SAIF Zone just under four years ago.

Looking ahead, the SAIF Zone’s focus includes adopting a sustainable lifecycle approach to reflect the increased importance and awareness of environmental, social and governance considerations.

Al Mazrouei adds that he hopes the zone will continue to “bring people and markets together in a single dense space, leading to economies of scale and an increase in economic activity that benefits the public and private sectors equally”.



JEWEL IN THE CROWN

Fura Gems made headlines last September when it unveiled a stunning ruby in the UAE. The Estrela de Fura gem (estrela is Portuguese for star) weighs 101 carats.

It is currently regarded as the “world’s largest gem-quality rough ruby”, possessing exceptional colour and clarity. The extraordinary stone was sourced from the company’s mine in Mozambique. When the mine’s master sorter spotted it, he immediately called Dev Shetty, Fura’s founder and CEO, and said: “I think we’ve found something amazing.” Gemstone experts have since hailed it “a once-in-a-century” discovery. Fura Gems is a colour gemstones and marketing company located in the SAIF Zone in Sharjah. The business specialises in gems such as rubies, emeralds and sapphires. As well as mining in Africa, Fura also operates in South America and Australia. The stones it

produces are sold uncut via an auction platform, mainly to jewellery manufacturers in Thailand, India and Colombia.

So why the UAE? Shetty, an Indian business entrepreneur, says that given the company’s geographically dispersed operations, Sharjah is a “strategic location with a world-class infrastructure”.

However, that’s not the



Rare gem The Estrela de Fura, a “once-in-a-century” discovery

only reason: “The UAE has a well-established yet rapidly growing gems and jewellery industry,” he explains.

Shetty says that from his experience specialised free zones like the SAIF Zone in Sharjah offer an attractive business environment, with no taxes and a robust regulatory framework.

“For a mining start-up like Fura the SAIF Zone provided a solid platform,” he says. He adds that since its foundation in 2017, Fura has tripled in size, having moved to three warehouses in the SAIF Zone with 12,000 sq ft of space.

Shetty lists the reasons for choosing Sharjah as the location for his business base as VAT exemption, as well as safety and support from the SAIF Zone authorities. He adds: “Compared to Abu Dhabi and Dubai, these large set-ups can be operated more economically from the SAIF Zone with comparatively lower rentals and manpower costs while not compromising the quality of services and infrastructure.” **RR**

A FRICTIONLESS ECOSYSTEM

A joined up and collaborative approach to the management of seaports, customs and free zones gives Sharjah the advantage in swift movement of goods, says **David Prosser**

Sharjah’s strategic location gives it a vital geographical advantage – which it has certainly capitalised on. As the only emirate in the UAE with shorelines on both the Arabian Gulf and the Gulf of Oman, Sharjah is ideally positioned to support maritime trade.

Its three ports have become one of the UAE’s leading trade gateways. They handle more than 10 million tonnes of bulk and general cargo annually, process 2.5 million 20ft equivalent units (TEUs) of containerised cargo, and around 52,000 roll-on-roll-off units. Some 6,500 vessels load and offload each year in the ports.

Significantly, a single government department and chairman now oversee both the ports and the tax-free zones alongside them – the Hamriyah Free

Zone Authority and the Sharjah Airport International Free Zone (see articles below and left).

“There is a synergy in having economic zones such as the free zones and gateways to trade, in our case the seaports, coming together under the same umbrella because the two thrive on one another,” explains Sheikh Khaled bin Abdullah bin Sultan Al Qasimi, the chairman of the Sharjah Sea Ports, Customs and Free Zones Authority.

Even on their own terms, Sharjah’s three ports perform crucial but different roles. Hamriyah is a deep-water industrial port, Sharjah Container Port is an import-export port with an Arabian Gulf hinterland and Khorfakkan Port is a growing transshipment port.

Hamriyah is in the zone

Already a magnet for a diverse range of industries, the seaport initiative is targeting further foreign investment

Anyone can set up a company in the free zones in 60 minutes,” says Saud Al Mazrouei, director of the Hamriyah Free Zone Authority (HFZA). This gets to the heart of what makes the HFZA so attractive, particularly for foreign investors.

Like the SAIF Zone, HFZA was established 28 years ago to drive growth and develop the non-oil sector in Sharjah.

However, it’s quite different to the airport zone. Located on Hamriyah’s deep-water Arabian Gulf port, it is an industrial behemoth that is home to 6,700 companies from more than 160 countries. These range from energy giants to steel producers and e-commerce businesses.

Largely as a result of HFZA’s success, Sharjah now has the most diversified economy of any emirate within the UAE, with 96 per cent of its GDP arising from non-oil-related activity.

HFZA is divided into six sub-zones – an accelerator hub and then areas serving oil and gas, industrial manufacturing, food, maritime and logistics.

All sectors are equipped with a range of solutions, including office space, warehouses and industrial plots. A key draw is access to a 14m-deep port and a 7m-deep

inner harbour with strong connectivity to other parts of the UAE and beyond.

The ultimate goal is to make HFZA – already the second largest free zone in the UAE – a natural base for heavy industry that wants to service the region or to export.

Together with the SAIF Zone (see other page) and four other efficient zones across the emirate, Sharjah’s free zone model helps make the emirate home to 35 per cent of the UAE’s manufacturing businesses.

All of this is supported by a location serving both east and west, fast custom clearance, excellent connections via air, sea and road and world-class digital infrastructure.

Furthermore, HFZA offers the same regulatory and tax reforms as the SAIF Zone, which are designed to create an attractive business environment.

This applies particularly for foreign investors. Benefits include permitting 100 per cent foreign ownership, 100 per cent repatriation of capital and profits, 100 per cent free transfer of funds, and exemptions from personal and corporate income tax. Companies are also allowed to hire 100 per cent expatriate workforces and long-term and freelance residency and citizenships are available.

But combining with Sharjah’s free zones enables a frictionless logistics and cargo ecosystem. “The leadership can look at the bigger picture, combine the requirements of both entities, and implement schemes that give both an edge in their individual capacity,” adds Sheikh Khaled.

Collaboration is supported by physical links as well as organisational co-ordination. The three ports are connected to Sharjah International Airport – and to one another – by land bridges, thus playing a pivotal role in regional supply chains.

The experience of operating company GulfTainer is vital in this regard. The UAE company runs all three ports with international activities spanning the Middle East and North America, where it was the first Middle Eastern company in the logistics sector to win competitive tenders in the US.

The United Nations Conference on Trade and Development expects global maritime trade to grow at an average rate of 2.1 per cent a year between 2023 and 2027. One challenge will be to ensure this growth is sustainable.

GulfTainer aligned its business model with the UN Global Compact principles in 2017. It operates hybrid rubber-tyred gantries, which eliminate carbon emissions while operating on a mains power supply, and the company is



Working together Sharjah’s free zones and busy seaports play a pivotal role in regional supply chains

working to eradicate single-use plastics across its operations.

Sheikh Khaled is excited about the opportunity for further growth. “Free zones and ports that are in proximity to airports are blessed with a strategically advantageous location. It enables swift movement of goods and fast access to global markets at minimal cost,” he says. “This is a distinctive advantage of Sharjah’s free zones, which can effectively provide investors with access to more than 3.5 billion consumers globally.”



Cutting edge Hamriyah offers the best services and facilities to firms from around the world



HFZA OFFERS A SAFE AND FLEXIBLE INVESTMENT ENVIRONMENT

investment environment offered by HFZA.”

Businesses that have set up in the free zone include ATS Terminals, an Indian company which specialises in warehousing services, supply chains, distribution, transportation and freight services. It recently increased its storage capacity of liquid chemicals from 42,000 cubic metres to 72,000 cubic metres, its third such expansion.

Another significant investor in the industrial zone is ArcelorMittal, the second largest steel producer in the world. In 2021, it acquired the assets of a pipe and coating mill located in HFZA and leased 1.3million sq ft of industrial land.

Johannes De Schrijver, CEO of ArcelorMittal Projects, cited Sharjah’s strategic location and the favourable business environment offered by HFZA as major reasons for the investment.

Recently, HFZA has also been positioning itself as a key hub in global supply chains and a regional centre for e-commerce. This was partly as a result of the pandemic. As businesses scrambled to keep essential supplies flowing, particularly from Chinese factories to the markets of the West, HFZA’s warehousing, connections and geographical location came to the fore.

“HFZA has enhanced its attractiveness in the region by offering cutting-edge services to the e-commerce industry and developing competitive packages and incentives,” says Al Mazrouei.

“Furthermore, the world-class warehousing facilities and HFZA’s strategic location with its easy access to global markets, have turned it into an attractive hub for e-commerce, boosting the number of e-commerce businesses operating in the free zone.” **RR**



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A global celebration of local arts

The Irthi Contemporary Crafts Council is on a mission to bring the work of Sharjah’s artisans to the world, celebrate a nation’s heritage and give a voice to women through their expertise



WE GIVE THE WORLD A CHANCE TO EXPERIENCE AND EXPLORE OUR HERITAGE

ISLAMIC BANKING

BANKING ON A NEW MODEL

In the fast-changing world of international finance, Islamic banks are challenging traditional institutions with targeted services and a focus on innovation

In just a few years, Islamic finance has gone from a niche facility to an industry that is challenging conventional banking across the Arab world. Recent data from S&P Global Ratings suggests the sector is now worth \$2.2 trillion worldwide – and that it is expanding at rates of up to 12 per cent a year. Demand for Sharia law-compliant products in banking, insurance and investment appears robust, particularly in the Middle East, but also in other Islamic countries around the globe. Ahmed Ibrahim Saad, deputy CEO of Sharjah Islamic Bank, expects that trend to continue, particularly as the region moves on from the pandemic. “We expect Islamic banks’ asset growth to continue to outperform conventional peers,” he says. “Consumers now consider Islamic banking products to

be a viable and ethical alternative to conventional finance.” It’s an interesting argument. There is a growing global appetite for financial products with strong environmental, sustainability and governance (ESG) credentials. Islamic finance has long eschewed association with the sectors ESG-conscious consumers seek to avoid, including alcohol, tobacco and gambling. And their approach to saving and borrowing may be attractive to those who worry about the fairness of traditional banking practices. Sharia law does not permit interest payments and other prohibited practices include *gharar* – undue uncertainty or risk. Sharia scholars are required to approve Islamic finance products. The best known of these products are probably *sukuk*, the Islamic finance equivalent of bonds; and *takaful*, the



COURTESY OF IRTHI CONTEMPORARY CRAFTS COUNCIL, SHUTTERSTOCK

Weaving magic
Left, modern dress with traditional elements, and below, the art of *safeefah*



is acting manager, curation and design, at the council. “Building connections and also empowering women from its base in Sharjah, it operates a pioneering council of creative, cultural and commercial initiatives designed to empower women through craft.” The council is taking crafts out of the tourism realm and connecting local artisans with international designers, such as Cartier, to create products that weave ancient handiwork into contemporary items. In addition to working directly with local women, giving them the tools to earn sustainable incomes from their skills and acting as a broker for significant projects, the council also works to document

tangible and intangible craft heritage, creating publications to give an account of a culture that relies heavily on storytelling. “Our efforts have led to Sharjah’s recognition as a city of crafts and folk art by Unesco,” says Nasri. Support includes a training and production hub, which assists 413 artisans in expanding their talents in crafts such as *talli* (hand-woven braids), *safeefah* (weaving palm fonds to create baskets and other items) and *faroukha* (a hand-woven tassel that hangs from the necklines of men’s *kanduras* – traditional garments). “Our social development programmes offer vocational training and assistance in finding

new markets for artisanal skills through commercial collaborations and artisan skills exchange programmes,” explains Nasri. Cartier is far from the only international brand to work with the council. Lebanese designer Nada Debs worked with Irthi to create a series called *Zenobia*, which brought together the craft of *talli* with Lebanese marquetry to reimagine the traditional vases and vessels carried by Bedouin tribes. “It united the journeys and expertise of craftsmen and craftswomen from two different worlds at a time when the crafts market in Lebanon was in dire need of support after the August 2020 blast in Beirut,” says Nasri. Another project is the *Thaya* collection, focused on *safeefah*, which included a partnership with the artistic collective Studio Lél (based in Peshawar, Pakistan). Bahraini designer Hala Kaikow and Dubai-based designer Ghaya Bin Mesmar. Also included in this collaboration are Emirati designer Abdallah Al Mulla, American designer Jennifer Zurick and Palestinian artist Dima Srouji. “These collaborations start from a common goal, of looking into the vernacular for inspiration, while also aiming to produce a long-lasting impact on economic and crafts sustainability for local craftswomen,” Nasri says. To bring the work to a wider audience, the council exhibits at Milan Design Week, Design Miami, the London Design Fair and more. “The sophistication of Emirati crafts has inspired hundreds of creatives in the art, architecture and design fields,” says Nasri. “We give the world a chance to explore our heritage and the crafts that define our nation,” she adds. **Gabriella Griffith**



Sharia-approved Islamic banking products offer an ethical alternative to conventional finance

Islamic finance equivalent of insurance. As the first bank in the world to convert to an Islamic approach, Sharjah Islamic Bank has been well placed to ride this wave of interest in Islamic finance. It is part of a broader group of nine Islamic banks and 17 Islamic “windows” – Islamic divisions at commercial banks – in the UAE that collectively look after \$163 billion of assets. The key to further success is innovation, says Saad, with the bank now focused on digital transformation. This involves developing more products – and on serving small and medium-sized enterprises as well as a consumer audience. In the digital space, for example, Sharjah Islamic Bank has recently

introduced digital onboarding, enabling new customers to access products and services without having to visit a branch of the bank. New products such as SIB Digital and SIB Business include salary advance facilities and a profit-bearing account for digital-only customers. In the SME sector, Saad points to the need to tap into Sharjah’s 60,000 SMEs in the most diversified economy in the region. “Sharia-compliant business financing options, including working capital financing, term financing and trade financing help start-ups and SMEs to grow and expand their operations,” he says. In other words, Islamic banks are taking on the conventional banking sector on their own ground. With a broader array of products and services, an embrace of innovation and a potentially important ethical edge, Islamic banking is going mainstream. In this sense, the advances made by Sharjah Islamic Bank represent important progress in expanding the Islamic finance economy worldwide. And Saad sees that work playing out more broadly, as the bank continues to support businesses in industries such as travel, tourism and hospitality, which showcase Islamic strengths and values. “With its booming Islamic banking and Islamic cultural tourism, Sharjah plays a major role in expansion of the global Islamic economy,” he says. **David Prosser**

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