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## Looking for Mammon in the Muslim World

FROM *Slate.com*

I REALIZE I'M LATE TO THE PARTY: Dubai is long past its media moment. The flurry of breathless write-ups — in Sunday travel sections and glossy lifestyle magazines — has come and gone. We're on to the next destination already. (Laos. Yemen. Low-altitude space orbit.)

Still, I remain determined to see Dubai for myself. It's too curious to ignore. What sort of mania drives this small, lonely desert outpost to begin construction on the tallest skyscraper in the world? To carve an indoor ski slope from the side of a shopping mall? To pour dirt into the ocean, forming man-made island chains into a Mercator projection of Earth?

There is profound wackiness afoot here. But I wonder: Is something more interesting happening, too? Because I can't help but find reason for hope in this crass spectacle. The cultures that produced Dubai and Las Vegas surely must have *something* in common. If the Arab world's starry-eyed dreams are just like ours — full of schlock, gluttony, and elaborate theme hotels — perhaps we can get along after all.

I'm not saying that out-of-control capitalism will defuse the clash of civilizations. But I'm eager to find out what it looks like when Islam gets mixed up with reckless expansion and tacky greed. These are the sorts of ambitions the West has no difficulty understanding.

The clichés begin springing to life the moment I arrive in Dubai's gleaming airport. Whirring along on the people-mover, I pass an

endless stretch of ads for high-rise condos and high-tech office parks. Each promises greater swank than the last. None has been fully built yet. The ads are conceptual drawings: crosshatching sketches in the outlines of seventy-story towers, newly dug harbors, bustling helipads . . .

At the end of this gantlet, I'm deposited in a cavernous immigration chamber. I fall in line behind a crowd of South Asian men, here to get jobs as construction workers. (Someone has to build all these shiny developments.) The men in front of me are Bangladeshi, I gather from the passports they clutch nervously in their hands. They all wear matching bright yellow T-shirts and cheap baseball hats bearing the words MID-EAST STAFFING. These impromptu uniforms were no doubt handed out by some wrangler from the employment agency — here to usher the newest subcontinental fodder through the bureaucracy.

International-arrivals halls offer interesting first impressions of a place. (I remember the last time I flew back to Washington, D.C., from a trip abroad. As I stood in the snaking line at Dulles, waiting to be admitted into America, I noticed the overhead televisions were all tuned to Fox News. The customs clerks behind the desks wore police-type uniforms, with badges and epaulets. A sniffer dog wandered among us, at the end of a leash.) Here in Dubai, the immigration clerks are all women in abayas — those long, loose black cloaks. They cover their hair with headscarves, of course, and some wear a face veil, too. While the tough guys in D.C. look you hard in the eye as they grill you on the purpose of your trip, these women make only fleeting eye contact (if any) as they quietly stamp our passports.

My hotel (after an air-conditioned cab ride through choking traffic) turns out to be a tad more Western-friendly than I'd have preferred. Across the street are a McDonald's and a KFC. The lobby bar is packed with drunken Brits watching soccer by satellite. (Though alcohol is technically a no-no in the United Arab Emirates, restaurants and bars attached to hotels are allowed to serve it.)

The only hint I'm somewhere unfamiliar is the gold-colored arrow affixed to the desk in my hotel room. It points to Mecca — unless perhaps a Hindu maid has unknowingly shuffled the room's furniture, in which case the arrow might well point toward some

alternative holy shrine. (Jerusalem. Stonehenge. Jim Morrison's grave.)

Around dawn, I'm awakened from my fitful, jet-laggy sleep by the sound of prayer. It blasts from a loudspeaker mounted atop a nearby mosque. I love this sound — the calm, low voice intoning "*Allahu akbar*," or "God is great."

But while I strive for respectful tolerance in all things religious, I take issue with the final line of the morning prayer. It makes a controversial claim: "*A-alaahu khayrun mina-naam*": "Prayer is better than sleep." I've no doubt Muslims truly believe this as they chant it each morning (still bleary-eyed, not yet having enjoyed their first sumptuous gulp of Moroccan tea). But me, I could never pledge fealty to such a notion. I honor the infinite by yielding myself to the spirit realm of dreams. (Also, I'm really lazy.)

When I finally rouse myself, I stumble out into the ninety-five-degree heat of a winter afternoon. I'm in the older Bur Dubai neighborhood, far from the glitz of the modern towers just down the coast. Here, the winding streets are lined with squat, humble buildings — cramped storefronts at ground level, apartment balconies with drying clothes flapping in the wind above.

The architecture and feel are not unlike what you'd find in some poor Third World cities. But there are no beggars here. No homeless families. If you're a local, you're taken care of by your fantastically rich government. If you're an immigrant . . . those construction sites are hiring.

Since it's my first day, I decide to visit the Dubai Museum for an overview of the city's history. As it turns out, there's not much history to speak of (though I'll have more on this). It's certainly astonishing to look at pictures taken before oil was discovered in 1966. They show a tiny settlement on the banks of a twisting creek. Some of the houses are little more than tents. The creek is shallow and dotted with sandbars.

When I go back outside, I walk the lovely promenade of this same creek and marvel at the changes. Water taxis float a steady stream of workers from shore to shore. The creek has been dredged to improve shipping, and dhows loaded with commercial goods crowd the teeming docks. Beyond, glass office buildings and five-star hotels rise from the sand.

As the sun sets, I walk back to my hotel, the sound of evening

prayers echoing out from the mosques. In my room, I slip on BBC World. They're showing footage of a massive blimp, circling the skies above London. On the side of the blimp is an advertisement. It's the logo of the Palm — a new island development here in Dubai. Luxury homes are available now . . . though, of course, construction has not yet been completed.

Before diving into the plate-glass heart of modern Dubai, I decided it might be wise to establish some context. I wanted to learn more about the Bedouin culture that once existed here before the construction cranes and money-chasing expats arrived. Thus I found myself, on a weekday afternoon, catching a taxi to the Falcon Center.

The guidebook says the Falcon Center is a complex devoted entirely to the noble sport of falconry. (Falconry was a staple of the ancient Bedouin desert lifestyle and remains a hobby for some Emiratis.) In my head, I'd pictured a giant aviary bustling with high-intensity falcon training. Falcon obstacle courses. Midair targets, with falcons violently attacking from every angle. A miasma of shrieking and clawing. As it turned out, the Falcon Center (located on the sandy outskirts of town) was just a large building with some retail stores inside. These stores sold falcons (and falcon accessories).

When I wandered into one, I found several live falcons perched on stands, their heads covered by tiny leather hoods. The birds were silent, occasionally grooming a loose feather with a talon. As I leaned in closer for a better look — emboldened because the falcons couldn't see me, and thus were unlikely to shred my face to ribbons — a shopkeeper quietly entered from a backroom.

"Would you like some tea?" he asked. I was not expecting this, but tea sounded lovely. So, he returned to the backroom and emerged with a teapot and some elegant little glasses, which he filled. I thanked him, took a sip or two, and then began to pepper him with questions. What were the specs on these falcons? What exactly were they capable of?

By way of response, he pulled out his cell phone, punched some buttons, and held the screen in front of my face. On the small display, I could make out a film of a falcon flying in the desert, its wings pumping up and down. A few seconds in, the bird swooped

and totally blitzkrieged a helpless animal that appeared to be — I swear to God — some sort of small antelope.

At this point, I realized: I must have a falcon. I inquired as to the cost. The shopkeeper explained that this depends on the size of the falcon and its skill. But in general, they'll run you about five grand apiece.

Which is clearly worth it, when you think about it. I had my eye on the fierce-looking bird in the corner. I planned to name him Shrieky. I'd haul him out on my balcony in D.C., turn him loose, and wait for the freshly killed game to pile up. Perhaps a neighbor's Shih Tzu. Or infant.

Of course, I couldn't really justify purchasing a falcon. (Nor did I relish the thought of getting it through customs. Or keeping it fed — the shopkeeper had now begun to place raw chicken drumsticks in the falcons' talons, and they were munching away with wet, flesh-ripping sounds.) So, instead, I opted for perhaps the oddest souvenir I've ever bought: a falcon hood.

It's leather, with little rawhide straps to tighten it over the bird's eyes. I'm not sure what I'll use it for, though it might come in handy. ~~But I felt I had to buy something after this shopkeeper was so kind and hospitable.~~

Hospitality — along with falconry — is one of the proud pillars of Bedouin society. (It's the Bedouin people who roamed these deserts for centuries and who are the root source of Gulf Arab traditions. I'm talking here about the countries of the Arabian Peninsula, such as the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and Qatar. They have a history and mood distinct from other parts of the Arab world.) In fact, based on my reading and my visits to Dubai's museums, I'd argue that Bedouin culture boils down to the following elements: hospitality; falconry; camels (and camel racing); fancy, engraved daggers; deserts (and desert wandering); and covering up your women.

And that's about it. When you're a nomad on a constant hunt for water, there's not so much time for dabbling in the delicate, non-functional arts. It's all about weapons and animals.

As for the Bedouins' manner of dress, it's fascinating to me that Emirati men still wear their traditional long, white robes. (They're called *dishdashas* — and *wow* is that a fun word to say.) Nearly all

U.A.E. nationals — even the ruling heads of state — continue to resist trousers and other Western clothes. It's a little bit ~~weird~~, and it speaks to serious cultural pride. I suppose if your people survive in the harsh desert for millennia, you don't let some pansy foreigner tell you what to wear.

You do, however, tell your women what to wear. And I have a few raw chicken bones to pick on that score:

1. It seems horribly unfair that the men's *dishdashas* are white, while the women's long cloaks (called abayas) are black. I ask you: Which would you rather wear beneath a blazing desert sun? If Arab culture weren't otherwise so progressive on gender issues, I might say this was a clever means of discouraging women from leaving the house.
2. The unfairness becomes crystal clear when you go to the beach here. The Emirati women keep their abayas on. Meanwhile, their husbands strip down to tight, short bathing suits — exposing their flabby stomachs and hairy backs.
3. I'm fine with the headscarf that covers the hair. (This seems not unlike wearing a yarmulke.) But the face veil is fundamentally different and, in my view, not okay. One cannot happily contribute to society when one has no face. The veil transforms women into a pair of downcast eyes. And again, it seems, more than anything else, like an enticement to stay at home.

I realize some Muslim women will talk about the face veil as an empowering, female-driven choice. This seems like the same kind of empowering, female-driven choice that sorority sisters make when they choose to become bulimic together.

All of which brings me back to falconry. At one of the museums, I saw an old photo of a sheik with his prized falcon. The caption read, "The key to falconry is the relationship between the falcon and the falconer," which seems reasonable enough. The text also observed that the falcon was wearing one of those little leather hoods, and in parentheses it noted the Arabic word for these masks: *burqa*.

Suddenly, the thought of those birds, forcibly hooded, tied by the ankle to their master's wrists, gave me a small chill.

On a glaring, scorching afternoon in downtown Dubai, I wiped the sweat from my brow, turned to my friend, and said, "Wanna go skiing?"

We'd been considering this idea for a while. The enormous Mall of the Emirates features an indoor slope. And skiing inside a mall just seems like a very Dubai thing to do. Besides, I'm always up for a new sporting adventure: I've tried surfing in Baja, cricket in India, and skeet shooting in West Virginia, but I've never shooshed a graceful S-turn next door to an H&M.

The tricky thing about skiing in a desert is that no one owns the proper clothes. And indoor snow may be man-made, but it's still cold and melty when you fall. Luckily, Ski Dubai includes a rental parka and snow pants with your lift ticket. (They do not, however, include hats and gloves. That's how they getcha. Although I'm secretly pleased that I now own "Ski Dubai" mittens.) All told, the clothes, equipment, and ticket cost \$45 for two hours on the slope. Which is not bad, given what it would cost to get to the nearest outdoor skiing.

Once we'd suited up, we walked through a revolving door into an enormous, chilly warehouse with fluorescent lighting. A four-person lift sped us to the top of the slope. And just like that, with a dig of my poles, I was on my way down — trying hard to avoid the three-story wall to my immediate left.

Ski Dubai offers two short runs side-by-side — a gently undulating beginners slope and a steeper hill for the more experienced. If you tuck, you'll reach the bottom of either one in about twenty seconds. Nothing here will rev your engines if you've skied for real before. But I will say this: Having grown up in New England, I've definitely seen worse snow and lamer trails.

Also, I've had a few "yard sales" before (wipeouts so disastrous that my hat, goggles, skis, and poles were strewn across the slope). But Ski Dubai, with its mid-mall setting, offers a unique opportunity for the reckless skier. Should you lose control wildly enough, it is possible to explode through the window of a T.G.I. Friday's.

On the slope with us were mostly expats. (Not surprising, as 80 percent of Dubai's population is foreign-born.) At one point, we shared a lift with a pair of European teens who go to high school here. These kids told us they come to the mall nearly every weekend to snowboard. Which suggests that there's not a whole lot to do if you're a teenager in Dubai. By that point, I'd navigated the expert run three times, and already I was getting bored of it.

As for locals, I don't think I spotted any Emiratis on skis or snowboards. But there was an adorable scene going on in the little

"snow park" at the bottom of the slopes. Emirati girls and boys — wearing loaner parkas over their *dishdashas* and *abayas* — were riding inner tubes down a tiny hill. Small children, some of them no doubt encountering not just snow but *coldness* for the very first time, were having a cheerful snowball fight. Also, there were Arab guys who work there adjusting bindings all day and operating the chairlift. Yeah, that's right: Dubaiian ski bums. (And they've already got that aloof, barely tolerating the tourists thing down pat.)

Everyone I've met in Dubai tells the same basic story to explain why wacky ventures like an indoor ski slope have come to exist in this once-quiet corner of the world. As the tale goes, Dubai's royal family realized early on that their oil riches (not nearly as vast as those of neighboring emirate Abu Dhabi) would at some point run dry. So, with great foresight, these sheiks decided to broaden Dubai's economy with a two-pronged strategy: First, they would create a friendly business environment — where Westerners could feel comfy and secure as they grubbed after Arab wealth. Second, they'd transform Dubai into a world-class tourist destination.

With not much indigenous culture to promote, it would take some modern sort of attraction to bring in foreign visitors. But how on earth do you lure rich tourists to a desert in the middle of nowhere? It seems like an impossible problem . . . until you remember that someone's already solved it. Viva Las Vegas!

Of course, the nominal draw in Vegas is the gambling. (Which isn't gonna happen in an Islamic country.) But is that what's really bringing people to the Strip — even folks who could make a short drive to an Indian casino back home in Connecticut or wherever?

I'd argue that it's more the sheer nuttiness of Las Vegas that packs 'em in. Its replica Eiffel Tower, and the indoor Venetian canals, and the scale model of the New York skyline. It's the over-the-top excess that truly fascinates us all.

This is the brand identity Dubai is cribbing from. The announcement of each new fantastical project (man-made islands in the shapes of continents; the tallest tower in the world; a theme park where the theme is to aggregate theme parks) keeps Dubai in the news. And it all sounds so very strange that we simply *must* see it for ourselves. Hey, that's what brought *me* here.

In another shrewd marketing move, Sheikh Mohammed keeps the media abuzz with a lineup of international events. (Just during my ten-day visit, there were an automotive rally, the Special Olym-

pics, and an exhibition tennis match between Bjorn Borg and John McEnroe.) Other than a twelve-night run of shows from Barbra Streisand (which really isn't out of the question), how else might Dubai emulate Vegas? I suppose it could ~~be~~ — but, like gambling, that would never fly with an Islamic government in charge.

Or would it? Before I left, I got this e-mail from an acquaintance — a guy who works on Wall Street and has done business in Dubai:

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few steps into the lobby. I got flagged down by a woman in a business suit. "Are you here for the press conference?" she asked me.

Well, no, to be honest. But what self-respecting journalist turns down a press conference that falls in his lap? Moments later, the woman was ushering me into a function room filled with TV cameras and notebook-flipping journalists. I grabbed a pen and a pad of paper from the table by the entrance, found a seat near the front, and settled in to figure out what the ~~hell~~ I was reporting on.

Turns out it was the announcement of a major business deal. A deal involving a vitally important resource here in Dubai. No, not oil. Water.

According to the suits up on stage (they represented a private equity firm and a water-supply company — both based in the United Arab Emirates), there is a potential water crisis looming in this region. The scare stat: MENA (the Middle East and North Africa) contains 5 percent of the Earth's population, but only 1 percent of its accessible fresh water. The equation is particularly grim in Dubai, where the population is exploding in the middle of a desert. An estimated \$17 billion will be invested in water supply over the next decade — mostly in desalination projects. An executive from the water company explained that "it's the vision of Sheikh Mohammed to make Dubai a world center for desalination excellence."

When the Q and A session began, I made my exit and headed to the calligraphy exhibit. (Which was mind-blowing, by the way. If you have a moment, check out the work of Mounceer Al-Shaarait.) But given the dire forecasts I'd just been listening to, I couldn't stop thinking about Dubai's insane growth. Is there any way this pace is sustainable?

There's ongoing construction literally everywhere you go. Neighborhoods are being invented from thin air. New buildings sit eerily empty, with no inhabitants. By day, you can see which towers are missing plates of glass at random intervals. (They look like badly paxulating LCD screens.) One street has a row of skyscrapers without tops. (These look like deadheaded flowers in a window box.)

I am firmly convinced that a real estate crash is due. The rate of expansion just doesn't make sense and seems driven more by the royal family's fantasies (they're the money behind much of the construction and bare-brained theme-park-type ideas) than by a genuine level of demand. Besides, there's no price-boosting short-

I was walking into the Fairmont Hotel on Sheikh Zayed Road — planning to view an art exhibition of Arabic calligraphy — when, a

age of land here — there's just more empty sand waiting beyond the city's edge.

Meanwhile, the traffic grows unbearable. (As a Pakistani cab driver told me: "Traffic! Every people is headache!") The foreign labor force gets exploited. (Fliers taped to the side of phone booths advertise for "Filipina bed-spacers." I thought this sounded racy, until it was explained to me that it refers to women working coordinated shifts so they can use the same bed.) The expansion rolls on, with little indication of a prudent central plan or a grand design.

One day, I was walking with a friend when — glancing around at the honking traffic, the construction cranes, the rebar, and the miserable, hot dust — my usually upbeat pal suddenly spoke from a deep chasm of ennui. "I want to call in the airstrike," he said.

Of course, we instantly saw the inappropriateness of this, on all sorts of levels (and here I should admit I'd had similar thoughts). But we couldn't shake our basic disgust with Dubai. Which suggested it was time for a break.

So, we rented a car and hit the open road. After twenty minutes of driving, the city faded out and the desert began. After an hour, we pulled over at a rest stop. It was like we were in *Lawrence of Arabia* — if Lawrence had a rental car. There was nothing here but a lonely power line and a few brave outcroppings of scrub.

Eventually, we reached our destination: an ancient oasis in the town of Al-Ain, at the Oman border. As the guidebook notes, this trip once required a five-day camel trek. Now it's a ninety-minute scurry in a Honda Civic. (Soon, no doubt, the relatively nearby Rub' Al Khali — the vast Saudi desert known as the "Empty Quarter," in my view perhaps the most romantically desolate place left on Earth — will be tamed by paved highway and power lines, too. Progress sort of ~~is~~ sometimes.)

We parked the car and took a walking path into the heart of the oasis. It was the precise opposite of downtown Dubai. A lush forest, thick with date palms. Leaves rustling in a gentle breeze. Precious shade now suddenly abundant. It's not difficult to imagine the joyous miracle this would have seemed to a thirsty Bedouin coming in from the desert. No desalination machines necessary here.

Granted, there is a Pizza Hut a few hundred yards away, which does dampen the natural wonder of it all. But Al-Ain is a delightful little town. No skyscrapers. No cranes. No expats in pinstripe suits.

Instead, there's an outdoor market where people sell goats from the backs of pickup trucks.

On the heels of a week in Dubai, it's a true oasis, in every sense.

Through a friend of a friend, I was put in touch with a guy named Ahmad who lives here in Dubai. Ahmad graciously invited me to dinner at Al-Hallab, his favorite Lebanese restaurant. Over scrumptious grape leaves, hummus, and chicken with garlic paste, I asked him to tell me his story.

Ahmad is a Palestinian refugee. He was raised in Lebanon and then went off to college in the United States, earning a degree in engineering. He lived in California for a while, started his own business, and married (and later divorced) an American woman. Things were going okay. Until 9/11 happened.

Living in the United States suddenly became uncomfortable, he says. In the weeks after the attacks, Ahmad became frightened to let his mother leave the house — because she wore clothes that marked her as a Muslim. "Who knows what some cuckoo was going to do," as he puts it. He also found it harder to do business. "They'd rather deal with a guy named Jim than a guy named Ahmad," he claims. (If you doubt there is truth in this assessment, consider the Dubai Ports World debacle — in which some fairly naked racism drove a Dubai-based, Arab-owned firm out of America.)

The irritations accrued, and Ahmad decided it was time to move back to the Middle East. He chose Dubai, because it seemed a perfect compromise — Islamic, with a big dose of Western tolerance and First World amenities. He's now launching his own technology business here. He dreams of making millions and using his riches to fund education grants for other Palestinian refugees. As the baklava desserts arrived at our table, and the Emiratis around us sucked on their hookahs, I asked him if he felt Dubai might be viewed as a hopeful vision of a cooperative future between the Arab world and the West.

To my surprise, this question occasioned anger. "Dubai isn't a good example," Ahmad said dismissively. "It ducked the problems of the other Arab countries," he argues, because it never suffered from the same kind of "Western interference." Britain pulled out of the emirates around the same time that oil was discovered, and — armed with riches and independence — Dubai was left to make

its own way in the world. If anything, according to Ahmad, Dubai is a vision of what might have been had the West stayed out of the Middle East from the start. At this point, of course, there's no erasing bitter history and, take-home message, we're all ~~sc~~.

This isn't quite what I'd hoped to hear from Ahmad. Yes, in some ways, Dubai is a grotesquerie: Hordes of white guys in suits trying to get their paws on Arab money; a monarchy with comic, megalomaniacal ambitions; a semi-indentured labor force; social problems swept under the rug in the name of profit. Still, I see things happening here that I like to pretend are good signs.

Look at the "Letters to the Editor" sections in the local newspapers. Every week, someone complains about the skimpy attire on the beaches. Someone else writes that this is what happens when you welcome heathen foreigners into your country. Another person chimes in with some words about harmonious diversity. And so on. It's a never-ending argument — and, granted, the stakes are sort of low — but if this leads toward a dialectically achieved compromise (instead of, say, a fatwa), then hey, we're making progress.

To me, here's what's promising about the cultural dynamic in Dubai: It throws very different people together within a peaceful and prosperous setting. That, I think, can be a good recipe for breeding tolerance. Even watching the TV commercials here gave me some perspective I think we're missing back in the States: I saw happy Arab families, traditionally attired, smiling as they were enjoying processed-cheese spread together. I can't remember seeing this kind of humdrum, positive portrayal of Arabs on American television. The fact that Westerners here are exposed to this everyday snuff, and the other way around (Arabs having nonterrible interactions with Westerners), should, over time, cement a mellower coexistence.

Of course, sometimes the two different Dubais bump up against each other in unsettling ways. One afternoon, I got lunch at a bistro on the ninth floor of the Fairmont Hotel. (By the way, this was the third-nicest hotel I saw in Dubai. The second-best was the One & Only Royal Mirage, and champ was the Burj Al Arab — the sail-shaped tower that is the one truly beautiful, iconic creation Dubai has given the world. I had a drink in the Burj Al Arab's top-floor bar and was not disappointed by the view or by the stylish clientele.) This restaurant had windows overlooking the outdoor ter-

race of the hotel pool. But the windows were one-way glass. A pair of gorgeous, sunbathing European women by the pool did not realize this, and they began admiring themselves in what they thought were harmless mirrors.

This came as a delight to the American businessman sitting at a table next to the windows. The women came toward the glass until they were no more than two feet away from his widening eyes. As the gals leaned in toward him and peeled their bikini tops back from their cleavage to check for tan lines, the man literally choked on his glass of water and performed a perfect spit take. It was like a Benny Hill episode come to life. And it was hilarious to everyone in the restaurant who saw it . . . save for the nearby pair of Muslim women covered in black from scalps to shoe tops. Okay, it was a tad awkward, but it was still no big deal — and that's the idea.

Of course, perhaps I'm naive, and these two worlds haven't a prayer of ever finding middle ground. I hate to end on a bleak note, but I have to share my most depressing moment in Dubai.

I was on the chairlift at the indoor ski slope. I was sharing a ride up with a pair of snowboarding teens, and I asked where they were from. Turned out one was from Britain and the other from Holland, but they went to high school together in Dubai. Their parents were expats who had moved here for work.

"What do you think of Dubai so far?" the U.K. kid asked me, making small talk. I told him I was still making up my mind. "You grow to hate the locals," he said. I raised my eyebrows. "For one thing, they can't drive."

I smiled at this, as I must admit I'd seen my share of inventive maneuverers on Dubai's crowded roadways. But I fear I emboldened him to get nastier. Because now this little blond twit (with apple cheeks and wire-rim eyeglasses, wiping his snotty nose with his snowboarding mitten) unleashed some good old imperialist invective. "And they should really treat us with kindness and respect," he said, in his pipsqueak British accent. "They're rather cheeky. You know, if we went home tomorrow, this whole place would turn back to sand."

At that point, to my relief, the lift ride was over, and we went our separate ways. But I was left to ponder his comment. Ignoring the incredibly insulting assumptions embedded in what the kid said, I wonder if some Emiratis wouldn't gladly make that trade.