

Section 5

Emirati Culture and Traditions

GRASP | ABSORB | APPRECIATE



Section 5: Emirati Culture and Traditions

Through your work on this section you will be gaining the following Abu Dhabi knowledge:

- Traditional Emirati dress
- Family life and traditional housing
- Shopping and traditional sports

You will also be able to:

LO9 - Recognise and name key items of national dress and understand their origins

The UAE is a wealthy and modern country, rich in heritage and with a unique culture. This diverse history and the strong foundation of the Islamic faith are an integral part of the artistic, social and cultural life of the Emiratis. In this section, we will look at some key aspects of Emirati culture and traditions.

Traditional Emirati dress

A very clear outward demonstration of traditional values and the importance of cultural heritage in UAE is what people wear. The origins of the Emirati dress are under-pinned by a strict code established over the centuries. It immediately identifies an individual as being a part of that culture and accepting of its values. The design of the clothes reflects two main things: the climate and the requirements of Islam. As well as modesty and adaptability to the weather, the dress code also reflects other important aspects such as the status of the person, the time of day and the religious setting, the gender and family position of the individual.

National dress for men

Below are some items of national dress commonly worn in the UAE by Emirati men:

- **Kandura** or **dishdash** is a long white garment. This may be changed a number of times a day to go to different events (work, prayers, dinner etc.). A typical *kandura* would cost between 150 and 250 Dirhams to get tailored. Actually, in summer the *kandura* is usually in white or any other light colors like sky blue and beige, but in winter the material is changed to a thicker fabric and in dark colors like gray, dark blue, and brown. In the past, men had to work outside the house as traders, pearl divers, fishermen, and farmers. That is why the *kandura* fit their needs as they were exposed to the sun all day.
- **Tarbusha** - this is an extra to the *kandura*, rather than a necessity and is like an ornamental tassel or decorative tie. It is made of hundreds of cotton threads tied together
- **Ghutra** is the head dress worn by men. The most popular colours are plain white, or white with red checks. The checked material is traditional to the Bedouin as the material is very strong. It was useful for protecting the face and head against the desert elements, such as sand storms. There are two ways of wearing the *ghutra*; either 'open' with the black cord known as the *eqal* on top (this is a more formal way of wearing the *ghutra* and often worn in the workplace) or, less formally, the *ghutra* can be tied around the head without the *eqal* which is called *Hamdaniya*
- **Eqal** is the black cord that can be used to fix the *ghutra* headscarf in place. This was also used by the Bedouin to tie their camel's feet down during the night while they were travelling
- **Ghah'fayah** is usually worn under the *ghutra* and is not visible. It is usually white in colour with designs woven in to the fabric
- **Bisht** – for special occasions, important dignitaries or Sheikhs may wear a *bisht*, which is a robe worn over the *kandura*. It is made of camel hair and has embroidered edges made with gold threads. The colours of the *bisht* can vary, being either black, brown, beige, cream or grey in colour
- **Faneela** is a vest-like undergarment worn under the *kandura*
- **Woozar** is a piece of white cloth which is tied around the waist under the *kandura*
- **Na-aal** is traditional footwear - sandals

National dress for women

Below are some items of national dress commonly worn in the UAE by Emirati women:

- **Abaya** is the long, elegant, flowing black gown worn by Emirati women. It may also be placed on the head. The *abaya* is traditionally completely black because this color is not transparent and it covers in a modest way. Now many modern styles have colourful embroidery around the collar or on the sleeves. *Abayas* are either tailor-made or ready-made with a vast number of designs available and a thriving industry of Emirati women *abaya* designers! Women may wear local or western styles of clothing under their *abayas*
- **Shaila** or **Shayla** is the piece of material, like a scarf, used to cover the head and sometimes the face. Although the material is usually black, it is possible to see through it because it is thin
- **Neqab** is a veil worn by women over the face. The *neqab* leaves the area around the eyes clear although it can also be worn with an eye veil
- **Burqa** is a metallic coloured cloth mask that partially covers a woman's face and upper lip in a horizontal H shape ¹ which is specific to the UAE
- **Jelabia Mukhawara** is the traditional flowing gown worn by women. Some wear it on a daily basis and others wear it for special occasions. It comes in a great array of colours and is sometimes decorated with *telli* (embroidery)

Did you know? Hijab is **not** an item of clothing. It is the concept of modesty and includes behaviour as well as a dress code for both men and women

Did you know? A growing number of women are setting up their own fashion businesses and designing modern outfits in the traditional style. An increasing number of women are studying fashion design, according to Zayed University. High-end brands such as Dolce and Gabbana, Givenchy and Christian Dior have introduced *abayas* into their collections for the discerning UAE customer!

¹ Source: www.thenational.ae/uae/heritage/history-project-the-burqa-1.303584

Family life and marriages in the UAE

Islam teaches that family is at the heart of the Muslim community, and parents and children have important roles and responsibilities within that family. For the nomadic people, tribal structure was arranged around extended family connections and all possessions were organised according to this. Who married whom was a strategic decision taken by the older members of the family and not left to chance.

Traditionally, marriages were arranged to strengthen tribal ties and create strong relationships within and between families. Marriages would be arranged between tribes in order to create beneficial new associations or to heal rifts. They were a political tool for gaining power or maintaining wealth and status in a community. It was not necessary for the couple to have met in advance.

Marriage is still key to family structure in the region and is the legal contract for a relationship between man and woman. Sex outside marriage is illegal and family is still a guiding influence on the choice of spouse. Marriage may still be arranged by families but it is less likely to be between people who have never met before. The average age for people to marry is 25, older than a few decades ago, as many young people wish to focus on their careers and academic pursuits before committing to marriage.

The marriage process, relationships and divorce are based on the writings in the Quran and the texts of the Prophet. There must be free consent on both sides to the marriage and the prospective bride and groom must meet the correct criteria. As a note of respect and honour to the woman and as a sign of commitment, the groom agrees an obligatory dowry or *mahr* which should be given to the bride. There is guidance laid down on the minimum and the maximum amount which should be offered.

The announcement of marriage and the celebrations attached to it are strictly defined but usually include a marriage feast for all the friends and family of the bride and groom. These events will be segregated and be in honour of the couple's long and happy marriage.

A Muslim man can marry more than one woman under Sharia law, if he can demonstrate that he can look after his wives financially and treat them equally. This is also part of a strict code of social and religious conduct. A clause can be added to the marriage contract to stop a man from marrying another wife.

A husband is the only one who can instigate divorce proceedings but he must do so with dignity and respect. There is guidance on how he may do this, known as *talaq*. A wife has to have a good legal reason to seek a divorce and for there to be a court hearing. The rights of the wife are called *khula*. The husband is obliged to support financially a divorced wife and any children from the marriage. The husband can claim custody of his sons when they reach the age of ten.



Emirati houses

Lifestyle, climate and the available building materials are major influences in the architectural style of traditional houses.

Traditional houses - The traditional design of houses includes an inner courtyard with living quarters opening onto it. The courtyard hides daily activities from outside eyes and is kept cool by the circulation of air. The central courtyard is also for the social and communal use of the family, including cooking. The need for privacy, ventilation and communal spaces is also reflected in modern architecture and demonstrates the challenges of the desert climate and the importance of Islam on everyday life.

The *majlis* or public sitting rooms are set away from the courtyard so that privacy is maintained. A wall is often placed immediately behind the entrance gate of a house to prevent passers-by from seeing inside. Decorative details are used throughout the home and include ornately-carved wooden outer doors, delicate wooden lattice-work on windows, and patterns on the walls modelled on traditional Islamic designs.

Beit Al Shaar - the traditional tent - the long, low, black tents of the Bedouin are known as *beit al shaar*, or “house of hair”. These are made of woven goat/sheep hair with a line of tall central poles and shorter poles supporting the outsides. The tent is designed for nomadic desert life –it can be packed up and ready to move within an hour. Tents can be up to thirty metres long and privacy is important. The communal living area is divided into two sections by a woven curtain known as a *ma'nad*. The women's area, the *maharama*, is private but the *mag'ad* or 'sitting area', for the men and reception of guests, is open.

To help ventilation and provide more privacy, there are pieces of material rolled up along the sides of the tent which can be dropped into place when required. This also provides additional shelter from sand storms or unwanted wildlife. Another tent is designated for use for cooking and storage.

Areesh (Barasti) houses - The Bedouins consider *barasti* or *areesh* houses as their second home after the tent. *Areesh* houses are used during the summer season as these shelters are airy and allow good ventilation. They are made of palm fronds and have two parts – the main area for sitting and sleeping and a smaller area for cooking, storage and animals. Palm fronds have traditionally been used as a construction material in the fishing, pearling and trading settlements on the coast.

Barasti or *areesh* houses are built on frames of wood ie mangrove pole or split-palm trunks. Palm fronds are used for interior screens and roof thatch.

Barjeel houses - The Wind Tower - This clever piece of engineering was introduced in the area at the beginning of the 20th century. The *barjeel* functions rather like a non-electrical air-conditioner and is used during the summer months to provide relief from the heat. The tower is about five metres high, open on all four sides, and is designed to catch and direct the breeze into the room below through vertical shafts. Water is sometimes sprinkled at the bottom of the tower to cool the air further.

Permanent stone houses - Permanent stone houses were made from sun-dried mud bricks with roofs made of palm tree leaves. Winter houses were built near coastal areas, while summer houses were found mainly around palm tree farms. They were also located on the northern Emirates, where rocks are found by the mountains and collected as building materials. Walls are thick to preserve the temperature in winter or summer.

Souks and traditional shopping

Souk is Arabic for a marketplace or bazaar, and they have always been the centre of trade and for exchanging news, attracting visitors, tourists and locals. *Souks* have a long history in the life of the region, from the dhows sailing in from the Far East and India, to the spice sellers from Persia and the Portuguese looking for the perfect pearl. The *souk* is laid out according to the different trades and items or services they offer. Usually, the most important merchants such as those selling spice, incense and gold were closest to the Mosque. The *souks* in modern day Abu Dhabi include the traditional bazaar and the modern shopping mall featuring the latest brands. They still provide a huge array of goods and services but the style of bargaining is changing. Read more about souks and traditional shopping in Section 10 in the shopping section.

Carpet Souk - The *souk* offers carpets from around the world and they come in a wide range of sizes, materials, designs and colours. The material affects the price so, for example, silk is more expensive than wool. The technique and origin also affects the price so hand-made carpets from Iran are more expensive than machine-made from Turkey.

Madinat Zayed Shopping Centre & Gold Centre - The Madinat Zayed Shopping Centre & Gold Centre has over 400 shops selling gold and other jewellery. There is a wide range of styles available, from simple, classic designs to opulent, ornate Arabian wedding jewellery.

Fish Souk - The fish *souk* is in Mina Zayed Port. Early every morning, the fishermen load their catch on to the quayside and prepare for buyers. These may be wholesale or private but the main aim is to buy and sell the fish when it is at its freshest. The delight of buying fish from the *souk* is that visitors can buy the fish and someone from the market will grill or fry it for take-away!

Al Mina Fruit & Vegetable Souk - This market is situated close to the Fish *Souk* and sells a range of fruit and vegetables both imported and locally grown.

Date Souk - Located in Al Mina, local farmers come here to sell a vast variety of their fresh dates

The Souk at Central Market - The *Souk* at Central Market has more than 250 shops offering a wide selection of products. It is styled on a traditional Arabian *souk* with the emphasis on displaying and selling traditional and regional products ranging from jewellery, carpets, antiques to traditional tailoring. However, it also features modern clothes, imported goods and diverse restaurants.

The Souk at Qaryat Al Beri - The waterside *souk* at Qaryat Al Beri is based on the concept of an old Arabian *souk* but also features local and international retail brands, coffee shops and restaurants. Water taxis or *abra* travel around the *souk* via a network of canals.



Traditional sports

Traditional sports such as falconry, hunting with Salukis (a breed of dog) and camel racing are important parts of the cultural heritage of the region, dating back centuries and are still very popular with Emiratis and tourists. These traditions are kept alive by various organisations which promote and develop the sports today.

Falconry and the Abu Dhabi Falcon Hospital

The falcon is a national emblem for UAE and the ancient sport of falconry is still celebrated as an important part of Emirati culture. It is believed to have first emerged in Central Asia, before coming to the Arabian Peninsula from Persia in 3500 BC. It was associated with status and wealth and was a popular pastime for royalty. It also provided the perfect setting for an event or gathering in the desert. However, the Bedouins also saw that the falcon was a perfect hunting weapon for their desert lifestyle and adopted the practice to supplement their diet.

The saker falcon and the peregrine falcon were the most popular hunting birds, trapped along the coast during their autumn migration, trained for hunting, and then released after a season. They hunted for *houbara*, a large bird of the bustard family that lives in arid habitats across northern Africa and Southeast Asia. *Houbara* are brown with black wing markings, greyish neck and a black ruff along the side of the neck.

With urbanisation and economic development after the discovery of oil, the falcon's place in the Bedouin lifestyle was no longer necessary for food and falcon populations struggled to survive. However, as a result of government support and interventions, the status of the falcon is taken very seriously in modern day UAE and the sport of falconry is recognised as a vital part of the culture.

It is now illegal to use falcons to hunt for food and falcons are closely monitored. UAE is one of the only countries in the world to issue falcon passports; they were introduced in 2002 to combat illegal trade in falcons and enables falcons to travel with their owners.

The UAE is the leader in research into conservation of falcons. A captive breeding programme is reducing the number of birds taken from the wild, while the Environmental Research and Wildlife Development Agency (ERWDA) is satellite tracking released birds to monitor the migration and birds' survival rates when freed after the hunting season has ended. Captive birds are strictly monitored with passports (owner page, falcon page stating sex, species, origin, ring number, micro-chip number) visas to travel and health certificates. Wild birds are not allowed to be touched.

To take care of the needs of falcons, the Abu Dhabi Falcon Hospital (ADFH) was opened on 3rd October 1999. The ADFH is the first public falcon hospital in the United Arab Emirates and the largest falcon hospital in the world. More than 11,000 falcons are received for examination and treatment annually, with falcons being brought to it from not only the UAE, but also from other countries such as Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Bahrain. As well as being a veterinary facility, the ADFH has expanded in the fields of education and awareness, training and research. The ADFH started its own falcon breeding centre in 2011. It is now a fully-fledged specialised avian hospital for all kinds of birds and poultry.

Did you know? So highly prized is the falcon that Etihad Airways allows falcons to travel in Business Class! ²

² Source: www.seatguru.com/airlines/Etihad_Airways/pets.php

Hunting with the Saluki and the Saluki Centre

Hunting with Saluki dogs was a traditional part of Bedouin culture used by the nomadic tribes to supplement their diet with small prey or even gazelles, and as desert companions. They have a special place in the culture and traditions of the region and evidence of their domestication has been found as far back as 6000 BC. This probably means they are closely related to the wolf.

Salukis are famous for their hunting prowess, speed, intelligence, stamina and loyalty to their handlers. Bedouins traditionally hunted with a pack of two to six Salukis and trained the dogs to hunt with falcons as part of the team. The falcons would spot and hover over the prey, while the Salukis sped off towards the target and the hunters followed on their horses or camels. They were called 'sight hounds' because of this ability to see the falcon or prey at long distances.

Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan strongly believed in the importance of supporting the cultural heritage of the region and founded the Arabian Saluki Centre in 2001³. The Centre honours the desert traditions of hunting, training and breeding Salukis and invites visitors to learn more about their unique traits. It also aims to maintain the purity of the breed, prevent inbreeding and guide Saluki breeders in other parts of the world.

Camel racing and the Al Ain racetrack

Camels were pivotal to traditional family and community life in harsh desert environments. They were the primary source of transport, shade, milk, meat, wool and hides for the Bedouin but, with urbanisation and economic development after the discovery of oil in the 1960s, their status diminished. With his strong belief in the importance of traditional values and recognising the danger of losing touch with the cultural heritage of the region, Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Nahyan supported the growth of camel racing, investing large amounts of money in the sport.

With the help of this royal patronage, the sport of camel racing has gained structure and become an established national pastime, with modern racetracks, stables and breeding programmes. Betting is illegal, but buying and selling of the camels and the prize money is significant. There are estimated to be over 14,000 active racing camels and the whole industry supports many jobs. The latest technology is utilised to monitor and improve all aspects of the sport.

Did you know? Camels are raced once they are two years old. Racing camels can reach 65 Km/h at the gallop. Two main breeds are raced: the Omani, which is very light, and the Sudania.

Traditional crafts

Traditional handicrafts and arts in the Emirate of Abu Dhabi have been handed down from one generation to another. Making items for the household was usually the job of women.

Khoos - The traditional Bedouin craft of palm-frond weaving

The settlement of nomadic tribes around the oases meant that the use of palm fronds in construction of the camp and household implements was commonplace. This heritage in the skill of weaving has led to the development of a craft industry that uses palm materials to make a whole range of items such as baskets, fans and floor coverings. The palm frond item used to cover food is known as al *machaba*. The hand fan made from palm fronds is known as al *mahfa*. The larger floor mat made from palm fronds used for sitting on is known as *Haseer*. The smaller floor mat made from palm fronds used to place food on is known as al *mishab*.

³ Source: <https://www.abudhabi.ae/portal/public/en/homepage/culture-and-recreation/sports/hunting-with-saluki-dogs-in-uae>

Sadu - The traditional Bedouin craft of weaving

The cloth produced from *sadu* was essential to nomadic life, providing soft furnishings and decorative accessories for camels and horses and the covering for dwellings. Like *khoos*, this craft derives its raw materials from the local environment, such as goat or sheep hair, and is woven either on a hand loom or on a small ground loom. The untreated wool is gathered from the domestic animals and then washed, spun and dyed using indigenous plant extracts such as henna, saffron, cactus and indigo. The woven product may then be used for an array of purposes such as camel trappings or tents. Floor cushions, decorations, carpets and rugs were also woven using the same technique. The individuality of each piece comes from the history and traditions of the makers.

The craft was a very communal task among the women and this aspect is still celebrated. Weavers gather in small groups and, as they start spinning and weaving, they narrate family events and sometimes sing songs or recite poems. These gatherings are considered the traditional means of passing on the tradition to new generations, as girls learn the weaving skill by watching, and then start with simple tasks such as sorting the wool before learning more complex skills.

Spinning thread for *sadu* was often done by Bedouin women using a hand wheel rather than a treadle. This meant that they could spin just as easily while travelling on the back of a camel as they could in the comfort of the family tent.

The place of *sadu* in the cultural history of UAE is unique and it was listed under the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) List of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2011.

Telli - the form of elaborate and colourful embroidery using twisted coloured threads, commonly used to adorn the bodice and sleeves of the Emirati traditional dress. Gold, silver and brightly-coloured strings are woven on a wooden block to produce the *telli*. These embroidered robes are worn on special occasions and feasts such as the special ceremony that marks a young girl's memorisation of the Holy Quran. *Telli* is found exclusively in the UAE and Oman.

Pottery - The earliest pottery finds in the UAE date from the third millennium BC. Traditional pottery forms still in use today include the *hib* for storing and cooling drinking water, the *burmah* for keeping milk fresh and the *chirr* for storing dates and dried fish. Incense burners made of clay remain highly popular.

Jewellery

The history of jewellery or personal adornment in the region goes back to at least the Bronze Age. Styles and materials change over time but its popularity as a sign of your place in society has not diminished. Nomadic people would wear their wealth as close to their body as possible as they travelled around and a sign of outward wealth would also proclaim your status. Depending on the physical requirements of your lifestyle, jewellery could be worn on ankles, necks, heads, wrists, hands and/or feet so was extremely portable.

As the trading routes on the Arabian Peninsula grew, the use of precious metals and pearls became more widespread. Highly-skilled craftspeople were valued and techniques were handed down through generations. The layout of the souks reflected this and whole sections are still dedicated to gold and silver jewellers.

The UAE is very proud of this rich history of jewellery and is famous for the quality of craftsmanship. Many materials are used in jewellery today including pearls, precious stones, shells and silver but gold still has particular significance in the region.



Traditional jewellery at
Al Ain National Museum

Knowledge Bank: Emirati Culture and Traditions

National dress and its origins

Based on the requirements of Islam and the climate, the dress has its origins in a strict code that includes status, religious event, time of day and gender.

National dress for men

- **Kandura** or **dishdash** - a long white garment
- **Tarbusha** - similar to a tie
- **Ghutra** - head dress worn by the males
- **Egal** - the black rope that fixes the ghutra (headscarf) in place
- **Ghafiyah** - usually worn under the ghutra and is not visible
- **Bisht** - a cloak for special occasions
- **Faneela** is like a vest worn under the *kandura*.
- **Woozar** is a piece of white cloth which is tied around the waist under the *kandura*
- **Na-aal** are the traditional footwear

National dress for women

- **Hijab** - is the concept of modesty including the dress code for both men and women
- **Abaya** - long flowing black gown
- **Shela** or **Shayla** - a scarf used to cover the head and face
- **Neqab** - a veil worn by women over the face leaving the area around the eyes clear. It can also be worn with an eye veil.
- **Burqa** is a metallic coloured cloth mask that partially covers a woman's face and upper lip in a horizontal H shape ⁴ which is specific to the UAE.
- **Jelabia Mukhawara** - flowing gown that is worn by women daily or for special occasions

Family life and marriage in the UAE

Islamic law underpins the structure of family life and marriage in the UAE and there is a strict code of conduct. Marriage is the only legal bond for the relationship between a man and a woman.

Source: <https://u.ae/en/information-and-services/social-affairs/marriage>

Traditional houses

Beit Al Shaar – the tent - long, low, black tents of the Bedouin known as *beit al shaar*, or “house of hair”.

Areesh (Barasti) houses – the summer house of the Bedouin, made of a wooden frame and palm fronds.

Barjeel houses – The Wind Tower - like a non-electrical air-conditioner and was used during the summer months to provide some relief from the heat.

Permanent stone houses - made from sun-dried mud bricks with roofs made of palm tree leaves.

<https://dreamingin arabic.wordpress.com/interesting-snippets/traditional-houses/>

⁴ Source: www.thenational.ae/uae/heritage/history-project-the-burqa-1.303584

Falconry and the Abu Dhabi Falcon Hospital

- **Falcons**

- The price of falcons can be over AED 500,000
- 60% are bred and imported from Austria and Germany
- The average lifespan of a wild falcon is 15-20 years and 10-14 years in captivity
- They can breed once a year and lay two to five eggs
- Falcons are the only animals allowed to travel in the cabin on Etihad Airways and First and Business Class passengers are allowed up to two falcons each
- The falcon is the official emblem of the Abu Dhabi government

- **Abu Dhabi Falcon Hospital**

- Opened on 3rd of October, 1999
- The first public falcon hospital in the UAE and the largest falcon hospital in the world
- More than 11,000 falcons are treated annually
- The ADFH has expanded in the fields of education and awareness, training and research
- It treats all kinds of birds and poultry
- It manages the Abu Dhabi Animal Shelter for cats and dogs
- It has its own houbara breeding farm to feed the birds

Hunting with Salukis and the Saluki Centre

- **Fast facts about Salukis:**

- Salukis are very fast, agile and graceful in motion, typically 24-29 inches (60 -74 cm) tall at the shoulder and weigh between 40 and 65 pounds (18 to 30 kg)
- Their sleek bodies have a very low ratio of body fat. Despite their small, narrow heads, they possess strong jaws so can exert a powerful grip on prey
- Their legs are built for maximum acceleration and their feet have thick springy pads which help them on long distances over sand
- The Bedouins used henna or nut oil to harden the Saluki's feet to avoid injuries while hunting in the harsh desert. Their paws can dig tunnels to get at prey
- Salukis are different colours, ranging from pure black to red, sandy and white. The colour is an indication of lineage
- Their fur is silky and normally short with a single layer coat for surviving the heat of the desert. This lack of undercoat means they never develop a typical dog smell
- When they hunted with the Bedouins, the Salukis would eat the same as their masters. Their diet was also supplemented with rice, dates, olives, meat and milk ⁵

⁵ Source: <https://www.thenational.ae/uae/hunting-with-hounds-salukis-could-be-a-bedouin-s-best-friend-1.529281>