

**DUBAI**



**DUBAI**  
GILDED CAGE  
SYED ALI

YALE UNIVERSITY PRESS  
NEW HAVEN AND LONDON

Copyright © 2010 Syed Ali

The right of Syed Ali to be identified as author of this work has been asserted by him in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

All rights reserved. This book may not be reproduced in whole or in part, in any form (beyond that copying permitted by Sections 107 and 108 of the U.S. Copyright Law and except by reviewers for the public press) without written permission from the publishers.

For information about this and other Yale University Press publications, please contact:

U.S. Office: sales.press@yale.edu yalebooks.com  
Europe Office: sales@yaleup.co.uk www.yaleup.co.uk

Set in Janson Text by IDSUK (DataConnection) Ltd

Printed in Great Britain by Hobbs

Map by Martin Brown Design

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Ali, Syed.

Dubai : gilded cage / Syed Ali.

p. cm.

ISBN 978-0-300-15217-3 (cl : alk. paper) 1. Dubayy (United Arab Emirates : Emirate)—History. 2. Dubayy (United Arab Emirates : Emirate)—Economic conditions. 3. Dubayy (United Arab Emirates : Emirate)—Politics and government. 4. Foreign workers—Legal status, laws, etc.—United Arab Emirates—Dubayy (Emirate) 5. United Arab Emirates—Emigration and immigration—Economic aspects. I. Title.

DS247.D78A44 2010

953.57—dc22

2009044743

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1  
2014 2013 2012 2011 2010

# CONTENTS

<b>Preface</b>	vii
<b>Introduction</b>	1
<b>CHAPTER 1</b> The Roots of Dubai	14
<b>CHAPTER 2</b> Becoming a Global Brand	32
<b>CHAPTER 3</b> Iron Chains	81
<b>CHAPTER 4</b> Living in 'Fly-By' Dubai	110
<b>CHAPTER 5</b> Guests in Their Own Homes	135
<b>CHAPTER 6</b> Strangers in Their Own Lands	164
<b>CHAPTER 7</b> This is the Future?	186
<b>Notes</b>	194
<b>Select Bibliography</b>	216
<b>Index</b>	230

For Eli, Sami and Noura

## PREFACE

IN FEBRUARY 2009, the *New York Times* published a front page article titled, 'Laid-off foreigners flee as Dubai spirals down.' One eye-opening assertion the article reported was that three thousand cars had been abandoned at Dubai International Airport, some with maxed-out credit cards inside and notes of apology taped to the windshield. The author of the piece asserted that, due to the economic crash, parts of Dubai, once hailed as the economic superpower of the Middle East, were looking more and more like a ghost town.<sup>1</sup>

This article, more so than similar articles being published in the local press at the time, sent government officials into a tizzy. They lambasted the critical press coverage, and denied that the economy was in a downward spiral. Or that three thousand cars had been abandoned – their official count was eleven. Officials said that more work permits were being issued than were being cancelled, implying the population was actually continuing to grow, and that talk of Dubai's demise was simply false, rumours spread by those jealous of Dubai's success.

## DUBAI

As I am putting the final touches on the book before it goes to print, Dubai is in the midst of a recession, like much of the rest of the globe. The property market for which Dubai had built much of its fame has gone the way of Miami: down, down, down. It was a bubble six years in the making that was going to burst at some point, because that is what bubbles eventually do. The market had risen largely as a result of speculation. The timing of the bust though had more to do with global currents, specifically the major problems in the US and UK banking industries which led banks to largely stop lending, putting Dubai in a credit crunch that it could not immediately escape from. In fact, the city was in danger of defaulting on billions of dollars worth of loans that were coming due in 2009–10, and had to be rescued by Abu Dhabi, which gave Dubai and its state-owned companies USD 20 billion in bailout monies.<sup>2</sup>

While Dubai's phenomenal growth in the past decade led many in Dubai to believe that its meteoric rise would somehow not be subject to economic laws of gravity, the naysayers who think that Dubai is simply a house of cards are equally wrong. Dubai is not a mirage, and it is unlikely that it will revert to the sleepy regional city it was before the boom. In the pages ahead then, I will not be addressing the downturn as a central story line, though I feel it is important that I do at the least acknowledge it. What the book is about, as you will see, is the various factors that account for Dubai's rise to international prominence, and their unforeseen effects, and the ways that Dubai's system of temporary visas for foreigners shapes living and working conditions for foreigners and citizens both.

### **WHY I WROTE THIS BOOK**

I initially came to Dubai to do research on the adult second-generation children of expatriate, foreign, workers. Expatriates



## PREFACE

account for more than 90 per cent of Dubai's population, and live there in a state of 'permanent impermanence'. That is to say, no matter how long they have lived and worked in Dubai, they cannot get permanent residency (like a US 'green card'), and it is exceedingly difficult to become a naturalized citizen. Their children, even if they are born in Dubai, are citizens of their father's (or sometimes mother's) country of passport, even if they themselves have never been there. They always remain foreigners in their homes – both in their countries of passport and the place where they actually live.

These second-generation expatriates who I encountered were all by definition at least middle class, as there is a minimum income requirement for expatriates to bring their family members, and most were living quite well. I was interested in what to me was an odd situation where a huge group of people can grow up in a place they cannot legally call their own. My intention was that the book was to revolve around their experiences. It was to be the story of a privileged class of people who were legally invisible and permanently temporary, but who for the most part had no real problem with that as generally they were leading the good life.

At this point I should note that Dubai is ruled by a benign autocrat, Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, who fashions himself more as a CEO than a king. While he is often described glowingly as the 'CEO Sheikh' in the press, the fact remains that Dubai is a kingdom where essentially the law is what this sheikh says it is. It is not a free society. But visitors and even residents in Dubai can be forgiven for missing this fact since Dubai advertises itself as an open place, and the usual trappings of a control-obsessed dictatorship are missing here. While I was in Dubai I went about my daily routine of interviewing people and asking wide-ranging questions, writing a blog with no attempt to mask my identity, and generally going about as if no one were paying attention.

## DUBAI

Well, that was a mistake – there are people, many people, who are paying close attention. Towards the end of my stay in Dubai, the state security police showed up at my door, took me in for a day’s worth of questioning, told me politely but firmly that they disapproved of my research, and that I was being deported and was banned from returning to Dubai. (I wrote about this in more detail in a piece for the *Guardian*.<sup>3</sup>) In a place like Syria or Iran there is a good chance that I would have ended up in jail for an unpleasant extended stay. But Dubai is different. People want desperately to be in Dubai for the opportunities it offers, so the worst thing Dubai can really do is make them leave. Among dictatorships and democracies, this makes Dubai different.

Interestingly, many people, Emirati national citizens as well as expatriates, do not have a problem with this kind of ‘Big Brother’ treatment. Indeed, many welcome it. Some of the responses to my experience posted on my blog blamed me for the trouble I got into, and basically said that it was good the government kept a close eye on things.<sup>4</sup> This made me rethink the idea of Dubai as a free-wheeling economically and socially *laissez faire* oasis in the middle of the socially conservative and politically repressive Middle East. It is to a degree ‘freewheeling’, especially in comparison to its immediate neighbours. But there are limits to the tolerance that authorities in Dubai have, and you do not know what those limits are until you bump up against them. By then it is too late.

This book then has its beginnings in that realization, which made me reconsider the original project and expand its scope. In the pages that follow I will discuss the ways that Dubai’s rulers have purposely crafted a strategy to build wealth without the benefit of oil (which makes them different from the other Arabian Gulf states), how Dubai has lured a massive population of foreign workers and how it keeps them in line, and how it keeps its citizen population happy in spite of being made numerically, socially and

## PREFACE

politically irrelevant. Again, this is not a democracy, so citizens have no say over how the show is run.

### HOW I WROTE THE BOOK

I came to Dubai in the summer of 2006. My timing was quite fortunate, as I arrived right in the middle of a massive population influx, and just as Dubai was becoming a household name in the United States. (Dubai was already a recognizable brand name in the rest of the world.) Had I gone a year earlier, I might have seen a slightly more relaxed Dubai. In fact, I was scheduled to go in 2005, but delayed for a year because of the birth of my son. Had I gone a year or two later, I would have been there at the absolute height of the boom, but research would have been difficult, as taxis were nearly impossible to find, with people often waiting for more than an hour.<sup>5</sup> This may seem trivial, but you can't meet people in a mall unless you can get to the mall, and taxis were my way of getting to the mall.

This book was over four years in the making. Since my initial thought for the project was a study of second-generation expatriates, and since there had been nothing at all written about them, I needed to do primary research using the ethnographic method. Ethnographies generally involve a combination of participant observation and in-depth, open-ended interviews. That is academic speak for hanging out and having long chats.

The purpose of hanging out is to get a feel and a sense for how people live their lives, their patterns and rhythms, and to try to find out interesting stuff, stuff that people themselves often take for granted and do not pay much attention to. The hanging out occurred at people's houses, parties, restaurants, bars and nightclubs, and shopping malls. I was in Dubai from

## DUBAI

early June until late October 2006, the hottest time of the year, so the air conditioning in malls was a great attraction for hanging out there. I also conducted more than fifty open-ended interviews with second-generation expatriates at their homes, places of work, and more often than not in coffee shops in malls. I recorded and transcribed most of these interviews and for others I took notes. Sometimes parents or friends chimed in with their two cents, or tuppence, if you like. I also interviewed (chatted with, really) nearly every taxi driver I took a ride with (I took a lot of taxis), and one prostitute. As her time was literally money, and as I was not going to pay, that interview was particularly brief.

The chatting and hanging out gave me a good sense for a lot of the social dynamics in Dubai. I complemented this primary research with a thorough examination of the scholarly literature on Dubai and the Arabian Gulf states which have had similar experiences with expatriate labour. These states are also called the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), and they include the United Arab Emirates (Dubai is one of seven emirates with the capital being Abu Dhabi), Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar and Oman. I will refer to these countries collectively as the Gulf from here on. While I draw upon it, the scholarly literature on the Gulf, and particularly on Dubai and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), I found to be somewhat limited for my purposes.

The bulk of the information that I base my analysis on, in addition to the ethnographic material, comes from newspapers and magazines from the region and from the international press. As important as the press, perhaps even more so, are the numerous blogs written by residents of Dubai. These bloggers do a great job of picking up, analysing and critiquing news items written in the local and international press, and the various debates I read greatly shaped my own thinking. I also kept in

## PREFACE

touch with many of the people, friends, actually, with whom I hung out in Dubai to keep current with how things operate on the ground. This was particularly important, as things change rapidly in Dubai, and often things that appear in the press are not a good indicator of how things actually are.

That, in short, is the background of how this book came to be. After the following requisite section, where I thank all those who need thanking, the story of Dubai properly begins.

### **WHO IS RESPONSIBLE FOR THIS BOOK**

Spending four years researching and writing a book means I incurred many debts. The first and most important are to the people in Dubai who gave generously of their time, who took me to dinner, driving in the desert, out to play soccer (sorry, football), and generally let me hang out with them though they hardly knew me. I am deeply grateful to them, especially Vishul, Carole, Deepak, Miriam, Sheela, Jay, Pritim, Kristin, Stanley, John, Jinu, Asifa, Mark and Abmo. I cannot thank them enough, and unfortunately I cannot thank them by their real names.

There are others that I can thank by name who helped greatly at various stages of planning and writing. James Onley reviewed the manuscript for Yale University Press and provided excellent criticisms and suggestions. My wife, Eli Pollard, also read and commented astutely on the manuscript. My best friend, critic and taskmaster, Michael Uzendoski, kept me on track throughout the research and writing process, even while he was in the Amazon jungle in Ecuador. My mentors in and out of graduate school, Murray Milner, Jr, Karen Leonard and Milton Vickerman have been instrumental in shaping my intellectual development in general and with various parts of the book. Mike Davis, Shehzad Nadeem, Sharon Hays, Biao Xiang, Christopher Lee, Peter

## DUBAI

Gottschalk, Simon Cole and Nick from Mafiwasta have also been very helpful with advice and criticizing parts of the book. My college mate and life mentor Bill Seto came to stay with me for a few weeks while I was in Dubai, which gave me cause to play host, and see and experience things in Dubai in a new way. He's also a very smart fellow and played an important part in the ethnographic research and forced me to rethink many of my assumptions about Dubai.

Emotional support is also essential to the act of writing. My wife, Eli, and our children Sami and Noura are of course my everything. My parents, Abul Hasan and Safia, my sisters, Hafsa and Hajira, and my wife's parents, Joe and Nancy, were also of great help and support throughout. Bob Barry, Eric Jean and everyone in the pottery studio helped me keep on track in life, and critically keep up my potting skills, which oddly benefited greatly from my stay in Dubai, even though I had no time to do pottery there. Susanna Jones and Jessica Rosenberg gave me great distraction and company at the office and cheered me on every step of the way. My chairperson, Hildi Hendrickson, was very supportive, and accommodating with my teaching schedule.

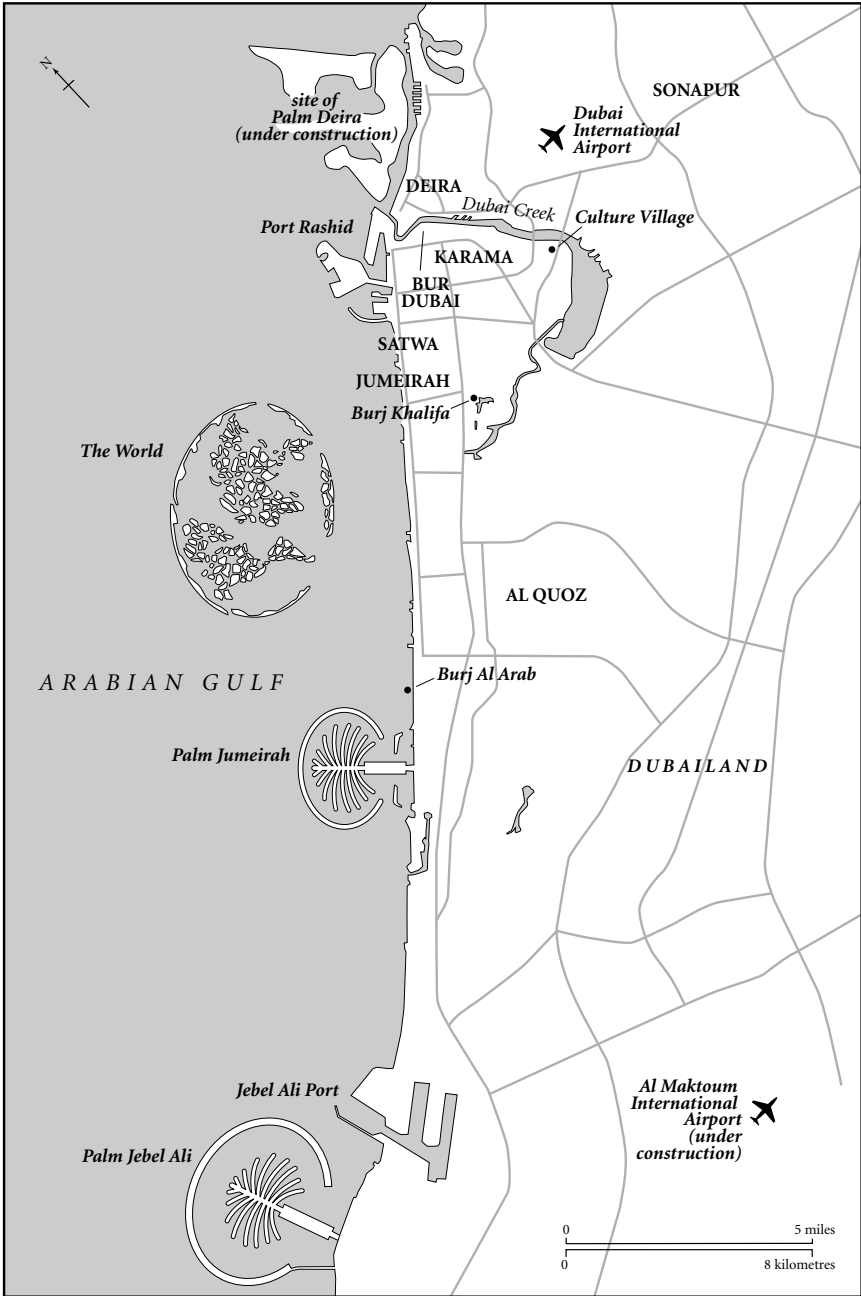
I am indebted to the Fulbright Middle East, North Africa and South Asia Regional Research Program of the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs of the US Department of State, which funded the research. In the very original incarnation of my research project I was going to follow migrant workers from Hyderabad, India, to Dubai to do a kind of 'before and after, here and there' study, but the Government of India rejected my proposal. (That year they either grossly delayed or rejected every Fulbright project, leading to a mini-snafu reported in the Indian press.<sup>6</sup>) Fortunately, Gary Garrison of the Council for International Exchange of Scholars graciously allowed me to focus my research efforts in Dubai, even though the terms of

## PREFACE

the programme required study in multiple nations in that region.

Above all I am grateful to my editor, Phoebe Clapham, who was instrumental in shaping this book. She gave me a simple directive: the book should be lively and analytical, but should not be dragged down by lengthy theoretical discussions and literature reviews that too many academics find satisfying, but that the general intelligent reader (you) would likely find dull and off-putting. While these kinds of discussion have their place in academic journals, they generally do not make for good reading, and in any case would not have added much to the analytical value of this book.

To help make this a better book Ms Clapham poked and prodded and praised; when sticks needed to be swung she swung them, and when carrots needed to be dangled she did so. Where sections of the book worked, she helped to make them better; where they did not and would not, she counselled me to abandon them – something that writers too often find very difficult. To the degree the book succeeds, all praise is to her. To the degree it fails, well, that alone rests with me. Without her guidance, it is likely I would have stayed in my academic comfort zone and written a monograph interesting perhaps to specialists, but not to you.





# INTRODUCTION

Dubai is:

*'Manhattan-on-speed'*

*'A skyline on crack'*

*'Capitalist dream on steroids'*

*'Part Disney, part Scheherazade'*

*'A hallucinatory pastiche of the big, the bad and the ugly.'*

THESE LINES ARE from recent journalistic meditations on Dubai, a city that has become central in the global imagination as the soaring cost of oil from 2001 to 2008 fuelled its latest economic boom, and the plummeting cost of oil since 2008 has just as dramatically ground its construction projects to a snail's pace. In just a few short years, Dubai has morphed from being a Middle Eastern/Indian Ocean regional city into a global megalopolis, a primary destination for companies, migrant workers and tourists on the 'New Silk Road'.

## DUBAI

As the superlatives in the quotes above indicate, Dubai does things boldly. Dubai is purposefully branded through ever-newer, ever-grander, iconic construction projects (mostly built by government-owned or -backed companies) such as the Palm Islands, the sail-shaped Burj al Arab (formerly the world's tallest hotel), an indoor ski slope attached to the Mall of the Emirates, the Burj Khalifa (the world's tallest building) and the Rose Rayhaan, the world's tallest hotel, which was officially opened just a few days after the Burj Khalifa in early January 2010. Other projects in the works were even bigger and grander, but due to the recession these mostly have either been shelved or had their construction extremely delayed. Chief among these megaprojects is Dubailand, a complex planned to be more than twice the size of Walt Disney World with multiple theme parks, Universal Studios, a Sports City including a Manchester United soccer school, an ICC global cricket academy, a Tiger Woods golf course, luxury villas and hotels, and on and on. Very little has been built, however, and nothing has been completed.

Dubai's branding also extends to major investments in sporting events, attracting the biggest stars for some of the largest purses in tennis, golf and horse-racing. Dubai's government also brands itself abroad through purchases of landmark properties, heavy advertising and even sponsorship of sporting teams (by government-owned Emirates Airline) such as European football clubs Arsenal, AC Milan, Paris Saint Germain and Hamburger SV.

Alongside the often-fawning descriptions of its constructed wonders, Dubai has also attracted scathing media criticism. It is infamous for its exploitation of construction workers, who account for nearly one-fourth of the population and generally earn the equivalent of USD 150–200 per month for work weeks of six 10- to 12-hour days, often more. These workers live in labour camps on the edge of the desert, many in the world's

## INTRODUCTION

largest (of course) and largely squalid labour camp, Sonapur. Until just a few short years ago, Dubai was also well known for ‘employing’ child camel jockeys (some as young as three), though robots have recently replaced these children. The plight of maids, who are arguably in a worse position than construction workers as their work lives are hidden behind closed doors, has been taken up by human rights organizations, most notably Human Rights Watch. And Dubai is a major centre of human trafficking, as can be seen by the incredibly large number of prostitutes from a variety of countries, visible in the clubs and bars of hotels, in brothels in apartment buildings, and working the streets.

In short, Dubai is a fascinating case study in light-speed urban development, hyper-consumerism, massive immigration and vertiginous inequality, where first-world wealth for citizens and professional expatriate workers is created through third-world wages of Asian labourers in a forest of construction cranes reclaiming the desert and the sea.

Dubai is a new city, and a unique brand of global city: a city of transients. In this book, I argue that Dubai’s stories – history, economic development, culture – are dependent on the ‘permanent impermanence’ of expatriate foreign workers who comprise *more than 90 per cent* of the population and who, for the most part, live in Dubai on three-year renewable visas. Among global cities, this makes Dubai unique – nowhere else in the world do you find such a high proportion of impermanent residents.<sup>1</sup> This structured impermanence of Dubai’s three-year visa system that regulates the lives of expatriates is the key to understanding much of the social and economic dynamics of Dubai. In other words, the story of the expatriates *is* the story of Dubai.

In spite of the glut of attention Dubai has garnered in recent years, what we know about Dubai, and the oil-rich Arabian Gulf states generally through the mass media is fairly narrow: that

## DUBAI

there is incredible wealth and consumer excess alongside equally incredible horrible living and working conditions of labourers, that there is lots of oil, and the ‘fact’ that the region is a breeding ground for terrorists.

Scholarly studies, oddly, have also been somewhat myopic in their discussions of Dubai. Many studies from the 1980s onwards have been focused on political developments, stemming from the transition from British colonial oversight to the formation and consolidation of the United Arab Emirates (in 1971), as well as foreign relations with other Gulf states and Western countries. Other studies have had more of an economic focus, examining especially the impact of oil on economic development, while a handful of studies have paid attention to the social aspects of the economic boom, looking at the expatriate labourers brought in to actually build up Dubai and other places in the Arabian Gulf. Recently there has been more scholarly attention paid to Dubai’s economic and political development, as well as to an assessment of Dubai’s architectural achievements.<sup>2</sup> Still, there is a paucity of scholarly studies examining one of the economic and social ‘hotspots’ of the early part of the twenty-first century.<sup>3</sup>

This book analyses how Dubai has become a global city and the living and working conditions of the people responsible for this transformation. The story I tell here has four distinct layers, but, as the book shows, these layers are all interconnected in complex ways. First, I examine how Dubai’s unique – for the conservative Muslim Arabian Gulf – brand of consumerism is constructed, how it is designed to retain current residents, and how it also attracts by design new workers and, especially, tourists and new property owners. Second, I examine the foundations of ‘Brand Dubai’, looking at its infrastructural developments and investment strategies, and the ways Dubai manages its public relations, such as through censorship of the media. Third, I tell the story of how the