

FROM DUBAI WITH LOVE

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BY FLO

I made the decision to come to Dubai 16 years ago and I left only last year. I spent 15 years in a sandpit, and I am the first being surprised that I stayed such a long time. But life was good, business was good, and I met the love of my life, and so time flew by and for the most part I have been very happy.

In 2004, I was in my twenties, thirsty for adventure and exoticism. Dubai felt new and unknown. We hadn't seen yet too many savant documentaries on how the Asian workers were treated on the construction sites. I didn't know much really, and I hadn't even seen a photo of the city when I signed my employment contract with a local company for which I interviewed in Paris ; one month later, I was there, in Dubai, working 6 days a week (yes, I didn't know that when I signed). It was remote and there was a vibe of mystery very "Lawrence of Arabian"-esque. I was going to Internet cafes once a week to get a poor and slow connection to France. It was exciting and I was decided to make it work.

It was a young country loaded with cash, ready to spend it on phantasmagoric real estate projects. Locals were welcoming and tolerant. Malls were popping up like mushrooms. Business was



new and thriving, careers were fast-tracked, salaries tax-free, and hospitality from the local population made the life as a young female expatriate seem like a dream. First and foremost: safety. Nobody would ever insult a woman or touch her butt in a mall. Gallantry second: Arab men being true gentlemen with women, paying the bill, opening the door, being overall very respectful, it was a breeze to be feminine, to go out with heels, and to feel safe and respected. And finally, something that I have never stopped loving: the sun everywhere and all year long. Yes, too hot and burning the skin for 4 months a year each year; but how good are the next 8 months! Sunglasses every day, flip-flops each single week- end,



barbecue season, camping season, beach season... October through to April or May were always amazing, filled with parties, afternoons or early mornings at the beach to see the sunset or the sunrise, camping trips in the middle of the endless red-sand dunes, travels to Asia as soon as we had a long week-end of 4 days... And then, Ramadan once a year, another ambiance was falling like a veil on the city: quiet and peaceful, Dubai slowed down. Everybody out in the streets after Iftar. Too much food, sweet and fat. Apple-flavor shishas. Dates and lentil soups. The lingering sound of the call to prayer from the nearby Mosque. Less

working hours even for the private sector. Ramadan is always a parenthesis in the very busy and very impatient Dubai.

Five years after I arrived in Dubai, I wanted to leave. I had travelled in the Middle East and the Arabic Peninsula; I had been to Africa and many Asian countries. I wanted a change of scenery. I was hesitant because it was 2008, the international economical crisis. And then life decided for me, because then, I met my future husband. He had just arrived in Dubai, so I buried my desire to leave because my desire to stay with him was stronger. We got



married few years later and welcomed our kids shortly after.

Life as a family with young kids in Dubai was a new chapter in our lives. We had 2 young boys and we had help at home, which felt strangely a burden sometimes, because it is strange to live with someone who is not part of your family. But then this is also extraordinarily precious in the freedom that it enables you to have : to work and to travel as much as you need and know your household is in good hands ; to go out in the evenings in the spur of the moment, without needing to plan ahead ; and when you're

lucky and when you treat the person taking care of your kids and your home with respect and kindness, this person becomes somehow part of your family too.

But even that luxury I got tired of. It's been almost a year now since we left Dubai and I was happy to leave, relieved even. I didn't need to have someone else in my household anymore, because the kids are older and now, they can analyze and understand what they see : I wanted them to become more autonomous, learn how to tidy their rooms, walk on the side pavement, cross a street (it doesn't happen in Dubai, it is the city of cars), ride a bus. Also, we had travelled to many beautiful places, before having the kids and after with them. We loved Sri Lanka and visited the island several times. Overall, we felt we had explored enough around us, and this was time for a change of climate. I also was starting to be fed up with the heat. I was craving freshness and crisp air.



There were more important reasons motivating this desire to leave though: the economy was not as good as it used to be, the ambiance was getting tense. In the last year we spent there, I had my own small company, so I faced the system in its expensive complexity. I still had some beautiful projects I worked

on, but I could tell many businesses were struggling and the Dubai I knew 15 years ago was gone and left room to a mature city, struggling like any mature economy to maintain a single-digit growth. Some friends were sacked, and there is no safety net whatsoever in Dubai for expats. I also felt the need to go back to a country with more human rights and freedom of expression. Few scandals splashed the royal family of Dubai in the past years and reinforced a strange feeling in me: I felt ill-at-ease with staying in a monarchy where I had very little rights over my business and my livelihood. Perhaps also the very negative image of Dubai that circulating amongst mainstream French medias over the past 3-4 years has influenced the way I looked at my city, that I still dearly love but that I needed to take distance with.

We waited for the right professional opportunity for my husband before leaving our entire life there; and it was disheartening to leave behind our very close friends. When you're expat, you tend to recreate a new family where you settle because your other family is far away. This is what we felt when we left, leaving our heart brothers and sisters, and we miss them every day. But we're also happy and excited by our new challenge. For the past months, we are writing a new page of our story in the US. Land of the free and home of the brave, here we are.

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