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DUBAI'S *still got* SOUL

Former MediaCorp Radio Gold 90FM DJ Steven Shalowitz is on a round-the-world journey after leaving Singapore. This week, the Chicago resident finds out if Dubai really is a soulless city.

I CHOSE to visit to Dubai to test my hypothesis.

Hearing that the Emirate was simply a soulless desert outpost with nothing more than new, shimmering skyscrapers and shopping malls, I set out to prove that at least a grain of Dubai's history and culture could be found on its sand.

There's no doubt that the construction zones — with labourers toiling 24/7 to complete ambitious projects including the world's tallest tower and the planet's largest shopping emporium — are astonishing.

And then there were the smaller efforts like the US\$550-million (\$920-million) underwater hotel, which didn't hold too much interest for an aquaphobe like myself.

To borrow a phrase used in many other cities where the national bird is the crane: Dubai will be a lovely place once it's completed. Indeed, one shouldn't visit Dubai to see what it is, but to see what it hopes to become.

But that's not why I came.

I was a man on a mission to demonstrate that "Old Dubai" wasn't an oxymoron. I visited Dubai Creek, where *dhow*s (traditional Arab sailing vessels) plough the waterway carrying goods and passengers.

Gliding along the creek, I noticed an unadorned compound that contrasted starkly with the extravagance found in the rest of the city.

I was happy to find a neighbourhood of alleyways: The ideal venue for a kids' game of hide-and-seek.

Known as the Bastakiya — after Bastak in Iran, from which the area's first inhabitants originated — this gem of a quarter dates back to the early 1900s and sits between the British Embassy and the Dubai Museum on the banks of Dubai Creek.

It is now being lovingly restored to its former splendour.

My hypothesis was proving to be correct.

BEAUTY BEHIND THE BUILDING

Walking between the Bastakiya's cream-coloured passages using its wind towers as points of reference, I was amazed at the wealthy legacy ensconced behind the coral and clay walls: Found here are the Architectural Heritage Society, the Emirates Philatelic Association and the Sheikh Mohammed Centre for Cultural Understanding.

Feeling the spirit of the traders who once called the Bastakiya home, I embarked on my own commercial activity in the quar-

ter's boutiques and galleries.

Feeling as if I should have left a trail of crumbs to find my way out, I came across a shop, hidden within the Bastakiya, called XVA.

I passed through the doorways' hanging strips — which gave the sensation of walking through a weeping willow tree — and meandered through the small shop, which featured glossy coffee-table books and the heavy jewellery characteristic of the region.

Hearing voices from several directions, I realised I was inside a larger compound which looked too tempting not to explore. I ventured into an inner courtyard with tables set and was greeted by XVA's owner, Mona Hauser.

Still retaining traces of her southern accent, the Arkansas native had followed her veterinarian husband to Dubai in 1993 when he was asked to care for the Emirate's precious racehorses.

The former university art major-turned-art agent had hoped to indulge her passion by opening a gallery shortly after settling in Dubai. The arrival of the first of her two daughters put those plans on hold.

For Hauser, the Bastakiya was the most interesting part of Dubai and the natural place to locate her gallery. After four years of renovations, Hauser picked up the keys to her dream space in May 2003, christening it XVA — using Roman numerals to spell out the address, 15A.

Starting with the gallery, which features the works of artists from the region, Hauser expanded XVA into a boutique hotel that often plays host to international journalists, diplomats and film directors.

Each of the hotel's nine rooms is individually decorated, with furnishings and amenities all bought locally.

As proud as Hauser is of the works showcased in the gallery, she is equally pleased with the XVA vegetarian restaurant's mix of Middle Eastern and continental cuisine, which is enjoyed either *al fresco* in the courtyard or in a richly-adorned room off to the side.

The unique setting and Hauser's endless creativity mean high-end brands, such as Hermes and BMW, regularly hold launch parties at XVA.

I sat in the courtyard and, before sipping the restaurant's trademark mint lemonade, I toasted my successful mission — while also raising my glass to Mona and others in the Bastakiya who are taking Dubai's history and culture into the 21st Century.



XVA, inside (above) and out (below).



The beautiful, if confusing, streets of Bastakiya.



Life in Dubai revolves around the Creek, with *dhow*s ferrying passengers across the city.