



## SMILE, YOU ARE IN SHARJAH!

Outpost Iraq Dubai sat down with Khulood Qayed, Ethics and Compliance Manager for Shell UAE to know more about life in Sharjah.

**Outpost:** What do you love about Sharjah?

**Khulood:** I love the fact that Sharjah still has a heritage feeling. There are parts of it that have maintained a lot of the "Old Sharjah". Growing up, Dubai was not the hub for our shopping. It used to be Sharjah. As children, for Eid preparations we used to go from Dubai to Al Wahda street in Sharjah to do all of our shopping. We used to stay there till 3 am or 4 am and as children that was a luxury. That Al Wahda street, you probably wouldn't be shopping there but that was a real hub for us. That is the first thing that comes to mind – the feeling of nostalgia that I had as a child. The other area is the first theme park in the UAE called Al Muntazah. It has been revamped now. Of course, then there is the Gold souq and the Blue souq which is considered one of the landmarks of Sharjah. It is very traditional. When you are walking you don't feel it is very cosmopolitan, its not very modern. There is a lot of maintenance of that heritage. I love that there are a lot of cultural events and places to visit. There are museums that I take my children to and they are very affordable and educational. There are so many museums in Sharjah and I would say I'm guilty of not going to all of the museums. I've been to a couple only, but I know sometimes traffic is a deterrent. The other thing is that you still have the ability to go and shop for things that you don't find elsewhere. UAE nationals still need a very traditional market for certain things and many people still go to Sharjah for that. For example, my father still goes on Fridays, to get specific things from Sharjah. So, it still maintains that kind of space. I also think Sharjah is a good gateway for people to explore the other Emirates due to its location. It gives to access to all the other Emirates. There is yet another part of Sharjah –Kalba. The way it is divided geographically is interesting for people to see.



The Blue souq of Sharjah is located between King Faisal road and Khalid lagoon.  
Photo courtesy: Flickr/Bertrand DUPERRIN

**Outpost:** How would you introduce a city like that to somebody who is not from there? I understand there are expats living in Sharjah as well but for a person who doesn't know anything about it? Is there a myth-buster you have for Sharjah?

**Khulood:** Lots of people think that it is more conservative. I wouldn't say it is conservative. It is more (committed to) preserving culture. It preserves culture a bit more than other Emirates. Once you pass the traffic that is! (laughs!)

**Outpost:** How different is it from Dubai or Abu Dhabi, since those are the Emirates that people in the Shell community know of?

**Khulood:** I would say that it is not a city that is built on huge shopping malls. So, you have to be ready to explore things that are different than what you see in Abu Dhabi and Dubai. There is still a lot of small shops on streets that you could still go to. But many of the streets are difficult to navigate through. Visitors would feel like they are transported a little back in time. So not everything is blingy or new. It is slightly different. People feel that it is more family oriented, I hear that a lot! The reason I moved to Sharjah is to make sure that my children grow in a community with their cousins. The feeling of family is preserved to a certain degree this way. But that is a personal choice, not saying that it's not there in Dubai and Abu Dhabi but I would say that it is something that you do see quite a lot over here.

**Outpost:** Do you think it offers a more authentic Emirati experience living there?

**Khulood:** Some people might consider it more authentic. For example if you look at Dubai, expats live in particular neighbourhoods and Emiratis live in particular neighbourhoods. So, they feel they are living an



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expat life. If you look at the outskirts of the city, I wouldn't say that it is quite Emirati but it is a lot more like how we used to live earlier. Sharjah is more traditional as my children are forced to speak Arabic more than my cousins who live in Dubai. These are the aspects I like.

**Outpost:** Any must see – must do sort of place or experience that you would recommend in Sharjah?

**Khulood:** I recently went to the Rain Room with my children which is an art exhibition installed maybe an year ago. You have to book in advance, and they allow a group of 6 every time you go. The room where the art exhibition has rain but when you walk in slowly, it stops and it doesn't touch you but continues around you. It is very interesting. My children loved it. They actually want to go there every month now. I thought this was a very nice art installation. There is a list of a lot of museums that you can go and have a look at. Some of these museums are specifically for children.

**Outpost:** Tell us where in Sharjah can one go to explore some natural beauty.

**Khulood:** In Sharjah, there is an area called Al Dhaid which is a complete blast from the past. There is another place on the way called Masafi which is a part of Ras Al Khaimah but has borders with Sharjah. If it's not raining in Sharjah, if you go to Al Dhaid, it might just be raining there on certain occasions. So we make these day trips to just see the rains sometimes and it happens quite often. It is the start of the mountains so that is why it does have quite a lot of rain from time to time. The city has a nice beach and they are revamping it to make it more accessible for families. There are more mountains and more villages that people would like to explore. Kalba also has a beach that is very different in terms of the sand. There are nice traditional restaurants all over on the beach side. I know people cherish this (quality) about Oman but the problem is that once people come to Dubai, I find it rare that people leave to even cross the bridge (to Sharjah). They don't even go to the Deira side and that is where there is so much to explore. I would say that the different Emirates are not

The Rain Room at Sharjah Art Foundation. The installation is permanently sited in Al Majarrah, Sharjah. Picture credit: The National



advertised as much and that is why people don't think they want to go there. There is a possibility that the traffic is a deterrent. But if you choose a Friday to travel (Sharjah side), there is no traffic. Choose your days and you will make the best out of going there.

**Outpost:** I read of this word "Sharjawi". What is it?

**Khulood:** *Sharjawi* is just a way to describe someone who is from Sharjah. *Sharjawi* is to describe a man and *Sharjawiya* for a woman. There is a very popular place that says "Smile, you are in Sharjah". It is something we grew up seeing. It is in both English and Arabic and is done in flowers. As children, we used to see it all the time on both sides of the bridge. One side says *aibtesam* which means smile and the other says *Shariqah* (Sharjah). This is next to the Blue Souq. It is something very typical (of Sharjah).



"Smile you are in Sharjah", an iconic sign on Sharjah's roundabout next to the port  
Photo credit: WSCC.co.uk

There is also a place in Sharjah called Al Majaz Waterfront which is nice in the winters. They have shows in the evening. There is a festival called Light of Sharjah during which the lights are dimmed in the evening and a show is projected over the lake. I was lucky to see it the first time it ever happened. They have a dancing fountain too, but a smaller version than the one at Dubai. I wouldn't say go there specifically for that. But when there are exhibitions, or specific festivals, then this is a place that I would recommend.



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Al Majaz  
waterfront  
Photo credit:  
Almajaz.ae

**Outpost:** What are some of your memories of growing up in the UAE and visiting Sharjah.

**Khulood:** As children, we had limited number of parks to go to. Going to Al Majaz waterfront now, it think of the corniche of Sharjah at the time. It was a nice green area where people would go with their tea/coffee and have a picnic. We used to go there and see the fountains. It used to be the only fountain in the UAE. We would walk by the corniche or sit there, have our coffee or tea and if we were lucky we would go to Al Muntaza theme park. People who would visit the UAE from other countries knew that this is what you would do there. It was 'the' thing. There weren't many people back then. The first mall in Dubai was Al Ghurair Centre and this was the mall that we would sometimes buy things from. But then for majority of things like entertainment you would always go to Sharjah. I would say, always ask someone from Sharjah about the best times to go in and out of the city because we know!

**Outpost:** So what are the best times to go to Sharjah?

**Khulood:** Go on Fridays! If you go in and come back before 5 pm, you will be fine. Traffic will start piling up after 5 pm on a Friday. For a day trip that would be ideal to just go in and out. If you are trying to go to Sharjah during a weekday, then normally try to go before 4 pm. And then coming back from Sharjah, you would not have a problem. But don't try going to Sharjah at 6 or 7 pm that is when you are going to be stuck. Avoid the peak hours which can be from 6 in the morning till 10. People who just want to visit should just avoid the peak times of traffic.

**Outpost:** Any more recommendations?

**Khulood:** There is Al Qasba which was an extension of the corniche and has nice restaurants. You could go for a boat ride with your family. There is also the Sharjah Eye and another nice beach in the Al

Mamzar side of Sharjah. There is also the Old souq connected to the Blue souq and the Rolla market in the same vicinity. It is similar to Naif market here in Dubai. There is an area where this restaurant is called the Aquarium Boardwalk. Next to it is a fish restaurant called *Sammach* which translates to Fisherman in Arabic. A big mall by Majid Al Futaim is coming up and is called Al Zahia shopping mall. Then there is the Kalba Corniche side along the Fujairah border.

**Outpost:** The Sharjah Book Fair which has been around since 1982. What does it mean to the locals?

**Khulood:** I don't think there is any UAE national who has not been to the Sharjah Book Fair. It was a very important thing for us before iPads! Every child wanted to go there and our schools started to take there as well. It is huge. They like to link to the theme of 'culture' that Sharjah likes to maintain. Back then there were limited number of English language books and we would read Archie comics. I am very happy that the book fair continued to grow and flourish. They like to do more activities for children to encourage them towards reading.

**Outpost:** What would you recommend buying from the Old Souq?

**Khulood:** We would buy things that are traditional for us. Sometimes people have corners in their house that have traditional things from the UAE. There are specific designs of floor mats called *Haseer* that we would buy from there. There are some typical Emirati things that we put stuff in, or for food, things that are not very common any more and traditional things to decorate the house or sometimes for the National Day. We no longer use such things now, but they are still available there. Eating from traditional cafeterias or small traditional restaurants is so much more common in Sharjah as compared to Dubai. Another very typical thing – People buy fish from there in the UAE. My dad says that he likes that everyone sells it at the same price. Behind the Blue souq area, there is a small birds market. There is also a market that sells different animals. All this reminds me of my childhood.