

# THE CHALLENGE OF CHANGE

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**In 2015, Alice took the huge decision to move to Dubai. Here she reports on her experiences of moving to teach overseas.**

## Making the move

During 2015, I entered my fourth year of teaching. I had been through my first Ofsted inspection, worked hard adapting to the new National Curriculum and dealt with the many other challenges we teachers face on a daily basis. I realised I had made a footprint on the school and the pupils within it, but it was time for a change. I was ready for a new challenge. Teaching abroad had always intrigued me and my curiosity was piqued during that year.

Being an only child, and close to my parents, did not make leaving the UK any easier. Mum and Dad were very supportive and understood my reasons for wanting to teach in a completely different culture, yet I knew (deep down) they wanted me to stay. However, I made the decision, and chose to teach in Dubai.

## Background

Dubai was first mentioned by Abu Abdullah al-Bakri (an Andalusian-Arab geographer) in his *Book of Geography*, in 1095. The capital of the Emirate of Dubai (one of seven Emirates that make up the United Arab Emirates), Dubai itself

is a thoroughly modern city with Islam at its heart. The city is expanding daily, and, as a result, so are the schools!

## Settling in

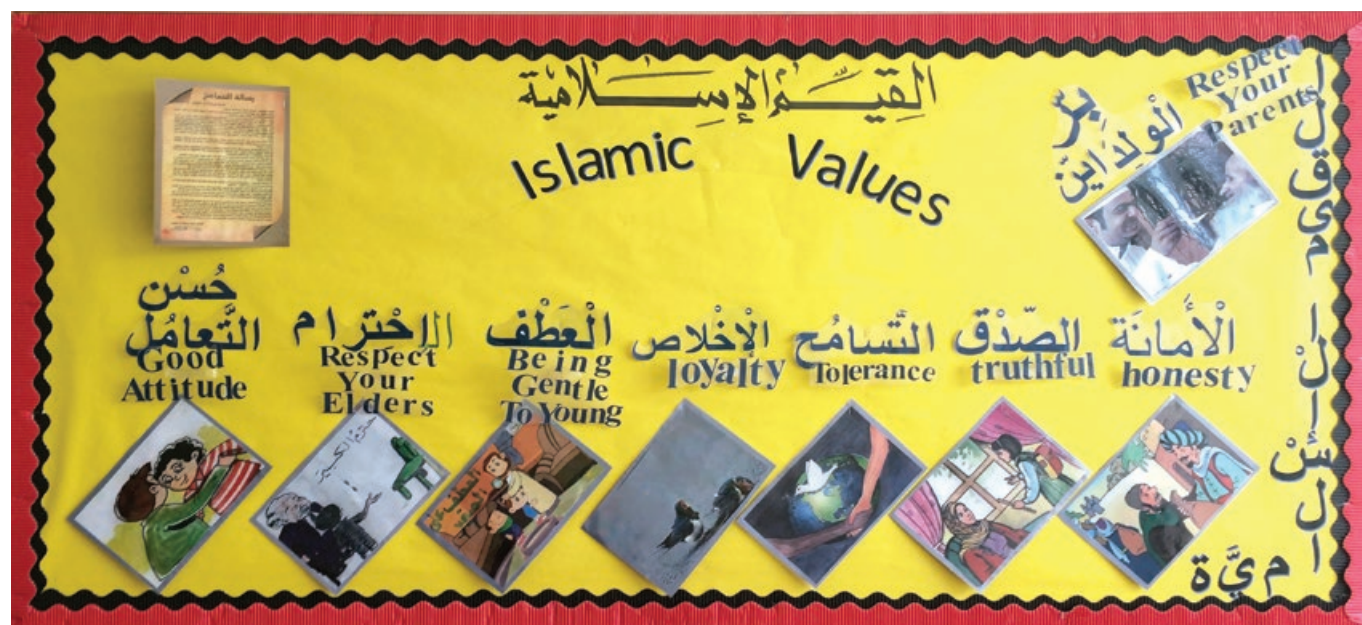
At the time of writing, it is now almost a year since I moved to Dubai. Every day brings new adventures and different emotional responses – some expected, some not. By teaching in Dubai, you are guaranteed to meet people who become your ‘family’ and, as you make Dubai your second home, you cement these friendships for life. People from all over the world choose to ‘settle’ in Dubai. I am just one of the increasing number of teachers from the UK who become ‘expatriates’ in this inspiring city. (The educated and experienced who leave their home countries to find more money, more experience and a new aspect to life have become known as the ‘brain-drain’.) I found it vital to get involved in as many social activities in the first few months of moving here, and the schools help by running induction weeks in the August preceding the school year.

## School life

The majority of primary and secondary schools in Dubai are private. They can choose what curriculum they want to follow, which suits what is, after all, a multi-cultural society. The English curriculum (referred to here as ‘the British Curriculum’) is very highly regarded.

I work at Victory Heights Primary School (an International School in Sports City, Dubai); although it is 7000km away from England, the school has a very British ethos. The pupils thrive, and enjoy coming to school every day. Knowing this kind of school exists in the UAE, I now feel that, when I do return to the UK (as I intend to), I will have been able to keep up with changes to assessments and standards. I must admit, this was one of my concerns about moving to teach in a different continent.

My day-to-day routine is slightly different from that in the UK. In Dubai, schools have specialist teachers for art, music, ICT, PE, Islamic and Arabic (all pupils learn Arabic from Foundation stage), which means I often get daily time slots out of the classroom. There is a dedicated focus on the core subjects plus the ‘Creative Curriculum’ and ‘Social Studies’. These areas encompass history and geography and both subjects focus on the UAE, because the Knowledge and Human Development Authority (which inspects schools in Dubai) requires pupils to have a rich wealth of knowledge about the United Arab Emirates. The photos here show some of the pupils’ work from year 1. By the end of year 1, they should be able to locate the seven Emirates on a map and name each Emirate. In addition, these pupils should be able to explain who the Bedouin people are and discuss their influence on the UAE. Finally, pupils should have a sound understanding of the famous landmarks in Dubai and be able to discuss each one detail.



The pupils in year 1 are required to have a rich wealth of knowledge about the UAE. Photos © Alice Mobley.





Many pupils, whose families have immigrated to Dubai, have a very strong link to their home country. Many will have travelled to other countries with their families so my pupils have been exposed to different environments, climates and cultures from a young age. This makes teaching geography very engaging for the pupils and often creates a lot of discussion. Pupils who are just five or six are able to compare living in different places. In my class alone there are pupils of more than ten different nationalities. As with some multi-cultural schools in the UK, international schools in the UAE can contain as many as 20 nationalities in one class. Ultimately, these pupils are able to learn more about the wider world from each other than from me! Immigration, which is a necessity to the UAE way of life, is actively encouraged and this cultural diversity provides wonderful opportunities for teaching and learning about world geography.

It is clear that the people of the UAE are patriotic about their country: they display flags on houses, in shopping malls and around schools. The National Anthem is played at the start of each school day and all the pupils stand to sing it. We hold whole-day celebrations for National Day (2 December) and International Day of Happiness (20 March). Pupils are encouraged to become involved – they spend the whole day focusing on these special celebrations. I personally feel that pupils are given many opportunities to work collaboratively as well as challenges in which team work is essential to succeed in the tasks.

Initially, I struggled to come to terms with the hierarchy of cultural groups in Dubai. The facts state that 16.5% of Dubai's population is Emirati – meaning the remainder (a huge 83.5%) are expatriates! Moreover, each of the seven Emirates is slightly different: they are governed in

different ways and choose some local laws to follow (e.g. alcohol is illegal in Sharjah, but legal in Abu Dhabi and Dubai). However, because the Emirati population is so small they are highly valued and very well looked after financially. Other cultures are often treated very differently, and (unlike in the UK), equality is not observed. I do wonder how this will affect future generations living in the UAE, especially as more people settle here on a more permanent basis.

### Reaping the benefits

The lifestyle you can lead as a teacher in Dubai is like no other. Teachers with an international contract are provided with living accommodation or an equivalent accommodation allowance, your salary is tax-free, which results in a much higher 'take-home' pay than in the UK, and the school will cover most of your medical costs. The extra spending power means that if you want to travel the world, or save for the future, or go out and enjoy all that Dubai has to offer as a city, you can. There are a lot of interesting places near Dubai that encompass holiday destinations as well as spiritual, cultural and environmental tourist enclaves.

It is safe to say, since I moved to Dubai, my life and lifestyle have been transformed. Although I miss my family and friends every day, living here has been an opportunity that I will never forget.

Alice Mobley taught in an inner-city school in Birmingham for 3.5 years before moving to teach in Dubai.