



A Date with the Dates

Dates are a quintessential part of life in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Here is a story of an Indian falling in love with the delicious treats.

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An overnight flight had gotten me somnolent as I dragged myself into the Royal Tulip Act hotel in Sharjah. At that moment all that I craved for was 40 winks on a comfortable mattress. Groggy eyed I handed over my passport to the receptionist wanting to get over with the formalities at the earliest when I

noticed a towering Arabian coffee pot in a corner. Also called *dallah* it was surrounded by small cups or *finjaan* and a tray of juicy, fleshy dates. The entire setup was so tempting that I couldn't restrain myself from a cuppa.

I poured myself the unsweetened *kahwa* (Arabic coffee) when I was told by the hotel staff to savour the drink with the dates. Biting into the

dry fruit and sipping the burnt umber drink I felt a sudden wave of relaxation spreading across my entire being. It was the perfect remedy for the long sleepless night.

Date palm holds cultural importance in the life of Islamic followers. The UAE has been recognised as the leading cultivator of date palms in the world in 2009 and has found a spot in the

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Guinness Book of Records. Every part of the tree is used and nothing goes to waste. Hand fans and brooms are made from the palm leaves; wicker is used to make bags, foot mats; while palm fronds are artistically altered for roofing and fencing; the palm fibre is transformed into sturdy ropes and the trunk goes into the making of doors, shutters, pillars, poles, etc.

Mozghan Hashemi my guide in Sharjah originally hails from Iran. She tells me sugar is never added to Arabic coffee since the dates lend sweetness to the brew with subtle hints of spices. Cardamom and saffron are added to the decoction to prepare the dose of caffeine, which is consumed umpteen times on a daily basis by the locals. Some of the dates are stuffed with nuts (almonds, walnuts, cashews, pistachios and pecans), chocolates and cheese. When I expressed my desire to take home the stone fruit, Mozghan told me to go for the ones that are in their original form and haven't been altered. An advocate of the Iranian variety she tells me she prefers them over the elongated Saudi variety.

Long, plump, dried, small, soft, hard, shrivelled or fleshy, dates are available in various shapes and sizes. Packed with fibre and potassium the little delights are available in yellow, brown, mahogany and red hues. The executive chef at Golden Tulip Hotel in Sharjah, Sunil Nautiyal, tells me over dinner that dates are low in cholesterol and a good source of proteins. The best natural dose for your vitamin intake as it has B1, B2, B3 and B5 as well as A1 and C vitamins. The iron content ensures you aren't anaemic. The fruit is power packed with natural sugars that ensures your energy levels are high.



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The nomadic Bedouins would sustain on camel's milk and dates for long periods in the desert. The invert sugars of dates as found in honey complement the camel's milk. Nautiyal adds that it is healthy to have pancakes with date syrup. The treacle is also poured over a *gulab jamun* like Arabic sweet called *luqmat al qadi*.

The date palm tree is first said to have been cultivated in ancient Mesopotamia. The Islamic Prophet Muhammad said that whoever has seven Ajwa dates every morning would be protected from poison and witchcraft. The Ajwa variety from Saudi Arabia is the costliest of all and the prophet has stated that they are from paradise. He has also encouraged breaking fast during Ramadan by first consuming these edible fruits. This ensures you don't eat food in a hurry; it replenishes the depleted sugar levels and aids digestion. The date palm has been mentioned 22 times in the Quran.

The UAE alone claims to grow 120 different varieties of dates or *tamr*, as they are called in the Arabic language.

On a sunny day at the Sharjah Heritage Museum I met Shamsuddin an Indian working in the emirates. He tells me his grandmother in Kerala gives mashed dates (soaked in water) to kids when they suffer from stomach ailments. He adds that Emiratis have three dates with water first thing in the morning, which keeps diabetes at bay and cures digestion disorders.

One evening I walked into Souq Al Jubail, a wet market in Sharjah where Abdul Rehmananan, an immigrant from Kerala was busy selling different varieties of dates from across the Middle East. I bought a packet of Omani dates, the perfect antidote for my anaemic mother and dollops of date syrup to enjoy in those lip smacking summer smoothies back home in India. After all don't good things come in small packages? ■