

# THE SMILES LINGERED. FOOD DIDN'T!



The more closely you experience a new culture, the more likely you are to acknowledge its heritage and lifestyle. **Tania Banerjee** realised this when she came face-to-face with the warmth of Emirati hospitality.



Maitha Essa, our gracious host

In the crowd of expats in Abu Dhabi, its citizens are hard to spot, more so if they are women. Yet, here I am, under the gleaming lights of an ornate chandelier, sitting on a plush sofa in a centrally air-conditioned house of an Emirati woman. She has graciously opened her home to welcome us, 6 Indian women, in the holy month of Ramadan. Dressed in a Mukhwara lace outfit with fancy *telli* — an esteemed type of local embroidery — our host, 26-year-old Maitha Essa, greets us in her 2-storey pastel-toned house.

Proud of her heritage and very passionate about dispelling the myths of 'Middle-Eastern' culture, Maitha stays with her mother and three siblings.

As we make ourselves comfortable, I spot a sparkling silver tray with six glasses, filled with maroon liquid: the *vimto* — a Ramadan special fruit cordial. Maitha graciously offers us the drink and starts telling us the



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history of *majlis* — the art of hosting guests in separate living quarters. “*Majlis* refers to a living space that is designed to host guests. This practice was originally started by the Bedouin: the desert people. They used to allow strangers into the *majlis*, where they were hosted for 3







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days, without asking who they were or their origins! They wanted tired strangers to have a place to sit, eat and be comfortable. However, this was limited to the *majlis* premises only,” says Maitha.

“But not all Emiratis were Bedouin. Under the leadership of the late ruler of Abu Dhabi, Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan, tribes from the seas, plains, mountains and the deserts united to form the UAE. The country later adapted to the culture and rituals practised by the Bedouin. Thus, hosting strangers became an integral part of Emirati culture,” our host continues.

Maitha almost abruptly pauses for a delightful Arabic coffee session. She takes the fine-porcelain coffee pot with her left hand and deftly slides the fingers of her right hand into the 6 coffee cup handles. While serving us the coffee, she makes sure to fill only a quarter of the cup.

As if instantly reading my mind, Maitha explains, “We always fill these coffee cups only to a quarter. It signifies that the guest is welcome to stay as much as they want. And just in case you want more coffee, you simply shake the cup.” Mansoor, Maitha’s brother, offers us a platter of dates — a staple accompaniment to coffee in UAE to balance its bitter taste.


As we relish the coffee flavoured with cardamom, Maitha stands up with the pot in her hand, closely observing us. The coffee server is

always the youngest member of the family, so Maitha isn’t allowed to indulge in a cup unless we are done. I stretch my coffee cup forward — a gesture indicating that I am done with coffee, for the moment.

For dinner, we sit cross-legged on the luxurious white carpet spread on the floor. On a smaller round carpet of date-palm leaves, the home-cooked meal is served, in exquisite Indian crockery. Steamed rice is accompanied by *saloona*, a soupy stew made with chicken and vegetables, and *fareed* — thin *raqaq* bread, layered with the *saloona*, a preferred dish during Iftar, meals eaten after sunset during Ramadan.

*Fareed* is a light dish but *saloona* is mildly spicy, thanks to *bzar* — an Emirati spice mix. I am surprised to find yoghurt at the end of my meal, just the way it is served in India.

Emiratis have a special way of communicating the closure of a meeting — by presenting the guests with an olfactory treat. In a clay container called *midkhan*, raw agarwood chips called *oudh* are placed on burning charcoal.

We are mesmerised to see how Maitha places this *midkhan* carefully under her hair and headscarf, letting the fragrant smoke perfume her hair and clothes. She then passes the *midkhan* to us, concluding the last ritual of the evening. My first experience in an Emirati home ends with an ever-lasting curiosity for this culture. 



A part of the rituals we learnt



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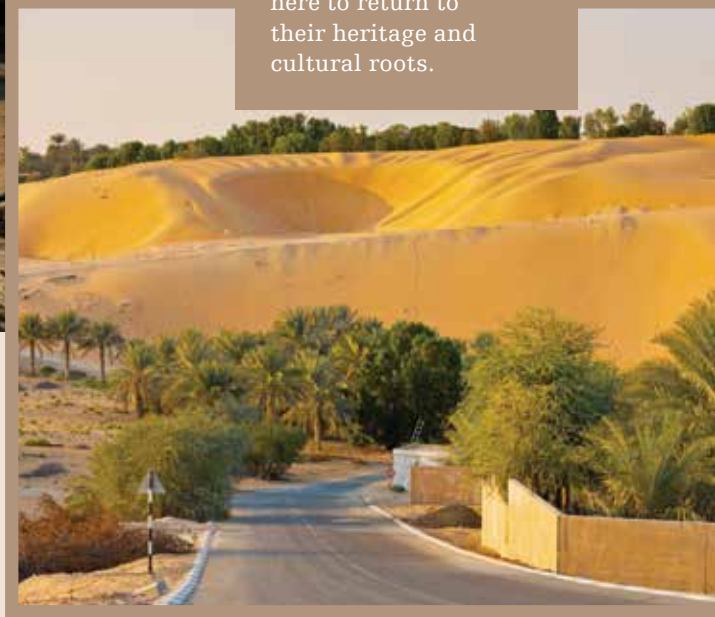


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