

Warehouses host glitzy Dubai's 'hipster' scene

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AFP | Dubai

In the glitzy city of Dubai, known for its mega-projects, futuristic skyscrapers and ostentatious malls, Dana Alhammadi sat in a cosy cafe learning how to make natural beauty products.

The “environmentally conscious” workshop at the KAVE cafe is part of an emerging cultural scene in a city which after years of breakneck development is exploring its alternative side.

If Dubai has a hipster centre, it is Alserkal Avenue, an industrial area full of warehouses large and small that in 2008 became a hub for art galleries, start-up businesses, and quirky retail outlets.

“It’s really nice to know how to get something natural and to stop using a lot of chemicals,” Alhammadi, dressed in a traditional full-length abaya, told AFP.

She was mixing bicarbonate of soda with coconut oil to make a back-to-basics deodorant, jazz legend Nina Simone audible in the background.

“I’m happy that they started such activities and workshops here in the United Arab Emirates,” Alhammadi said.

Home to more than nine million expatriates from well over 100 countries, making up 90 per cent of the population, the UAE



A visitor walks through an art installation on Alserkal Avenue, the heart of Dubai's alternative scene



Works by Zimbabwean sculptor Dominic Benhura at an exhibition entitled 'Between Me and the Stone' at a gallery on Dubai's Alserkal Avenue

prides itself on being a melting pot.

Like other Gulf countries, it uses culture, media and sports events to win global recognition and push its soft power.

It has spent billions of dollars on high-profile museums and mega events, such as the Louvre Abu Dhabi and the Dubai Expo 2020 trade fair.

The oil-rich country also hosts a range of cultural events, ranging from jazz and film festivals to fashion week.

'A culture economy'

With the discovery of oil in the mid-20th century, the UAE transformed from a tiny econo-

my dependent on the pearl and fishing industries to a regional powerhouse and hub for trade and tourism.

Many tourists are drawn by the headline attractions: malls packed with high-end brands, luxury resorts, man-made islands and an indoor ski slope.

But Dubai's ultra-rapid rise resulted in what some see as a lack of cultural authenticity that in other capitals develops organically over time.

Alserkal, which hosts about 500 events a year, generally free of charge, is intended to create that cultural texture.

The project's director Vilma Jurkute said the community

supports 70 projects by young men and women from different nationalities, attracting half a million visitors each year.

“It’s essentially a community of thought leaders in literature, films, theatre, and community development that formed a key pillar of a culture economy for the city of Dubai (and) for the region,” the Lithuanian expatriate said.

Located in a light industrial district and embracing warehouse buildings that range from the sleek to the shabby, Alserkal represents an alternative to what Dubai is best known for, Jurkute added.

“We really are part of the city and we have been for the past decade,” she said.

One of Alserkal's most prominent attractions is its Cinema



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VILMA JURKUTE

ALSERKAL DIRECTOR



Cinema Akil, the first and only art cinema in the Gulf, offers an alternative to standard blockbuster multiplexes



Visitors gather at The Kave cafe, another popular hipster hangout on Dubai's Alserkal Avenue

Akil, the first and only art cinema in the Gulf, offering audiences a different film experience, according to the theatre's deputy director Luz Villamil.

Every night independent films are played in the cinema, whose red armchairs and sofas, posters of old Arab classics and a cosy cafe help it to stand out from Dubai's usual blockbuster multiplexes.

Recent screenings have included “Papicha” by Algeria's Mounia Meddour and “Caper-naum” by Lebanese director Nadeine Labaki.

Next month, Akil will show “You Will Die At Twenty” by Sudanese filmmaker Amjad Abu Alala.

Sometimes, the screenings are followed by debates in the small theatre.

Before it opened there was almost no choice for audiences interested in something other than Hollywood or Bollywood blockbusters, Villamil told AFP.

“The most important thing for

us is to show films that highlight voices that perhaps we feel... don't get represented very much, including Arab cinema and women-focused films.”

'Human interaction'

This more inclusive and lesser-known side of Dubai is what drew French-Tunisian Arabic calligraphy artist “eL Seed” to set up shop in Alserkal Avenue.

“I decided to have my space here to allow visitors the same experience as they would have on the streets... to just push the door and come in,” he said.

His calligraphy is an art form Arabs can enjoy amid the overwhelming dominance of English as the UAE's most commonly spoken and written language.

“Calligraphy linked to graffiti is a language that speaks to many people and allows them to reconcile with their Arab identity,” said eL Seed, who lives between Paris, Tunis and Dubai.

“What interests me is human interaction,” he said.

Law on compulsory receipts sets Germans grumbling

AFP | Frankfurt am Main

In January it became law in Germany that retailers must print a receipt for every last transaction in a bid to fight tax evasion, but shopkeepers, customers and industry groups are already bucking against the scheme.

“Small shops’ cash registers already have electronic chips that tax officials can read any time. Why should we go back to the old system?” asked Christian Koch, owner of Hammett, a specialist crime novel shop in Berlin.

“It’s a pain, of the 50 tickets I print each day I’ll throw 49 straight in the bin,” he added.

Even bakers selling rolls for a few dozen euro cents each must now print a receipt for every transaction -- even when their customer doesn’t want one.

With their high numbers of



Even the German government is divided about the requirement as many receipts are printed on thermal paper that cannot be recycled

small sales each day now generating reams of unwanted documentation, bakeries and snack stands are especially outraged

by the change in the law.

“I’ve already emptied this once,” said a worker at Frankfurt sausage stand “Best Worscht in

Town”, pointing to a bin overflowing with discarded slips of paper during the busy lunch hour trade.

“It’s a really stupid idea for the environment.”

Tax evasion

Obligatory receipts were voted through in 2016, but the law slipped under the public radar until shortly before it came into effect on January 1.

Economy Minister Peter Altmaier asked Finance Minister Olaf Scholz to give up on the plans, especially because receipts printed on thermal paper cannot be recycled.

Since then, retailers’ federation HDE has also written to Scholz, asking him to exempt businesses that issue more than 500 receipts per day on average.

“That’s one receipt per minute

for a shop open nine hours a day,” the group said in the document, seen.

Until now Scholz has resisted all such calls, saying the fight against tax evasion -- estimated at around 10 billion euros by tax officials -- must include preventing shops and restaurants from failing to record transactions properly.

“I don’t think small shops are really trying to get out of paying their taxes,” said Sarah, a shopper at Hammett.

“They should worry more about people like Amazon, make them pay their taxes in Germany,” she added.

Costly transition

German authorities hope to tighten their grip on money flows through businesses where a large proportion of payments happen in cash, making them

more open to tax fraud.

In Berlin, retailers are legally required to install tamper-proof cash registers by October, and many have yet to make the switch.

“It costs close to 1,000 euros (\$1,110) per device, and a lot more if you have to buy a new one,” trades association ZDH said.

That represents a “prohibitive” cost for retailers, especially those like a chain of bakeries with 30 or 40 branches, for example, it added.

The finance ministry retorts that Austria, Italy, Portugal and other European countries get along just fine with obligatory receipts.

But the HDE notes that France plans to gradually phase out the requirement -- except in cases where customers explicitly request a paper record.