



ONE NIGHT IN DUBAI BELLYDANCING AND BASTAKYA



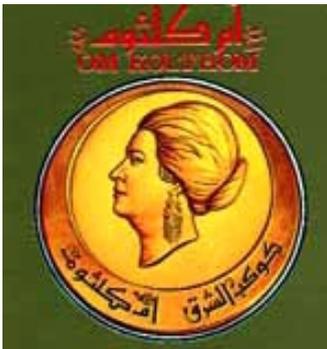
Stopping in Dubai a year ago gave me a snapshot of this interesting city of Middle Eastern flavours and the chance to explore Arabic and Islamic museums and sit in cafes with water pipes next to the busy Dubai creek. The many different styles of dress in Dubai are fascinating, the completely veiled women, the brightly coloured Indian saris, Pakistanis in their traditional dress, men with dyed red henna hair and tightly wrapped turbans, and the Arabs in their white kaffans with either a red and white Yasser Arafat style headdress or a white scarf, both with a heavy black cord ring holding it in place. On the same street with any combination of the above can also be seen more Western style men in suits and even women in mini skirts and high heels.



This time I planned to take in a live belly dancing performance while I was there, and initial research on the Internet seemed to indicate that broadly the most straightforward options were either a show in one of the large hotels or an evening "Desert Safari" where you could eat a Bedouin style meal in the sand dunes and watch a belly dance performance. (www.arabian-adventures.com) Although this sounded fun, I thought it was likely to be very touristy and at between NZ \$100-\$150 per person I felt it could be an expensive way to see a belly dancing performance.



So instead we booked into a Lebanese restaurant called Al Diwan based in the Metropolitan Palace Hotel in Dubai (www.methotels.com) which offered a set menu, belly dance show, singer and Arabic music band. At approximately \$70 NZ per person (excluding alcohol) this was not going to be a cheap experience either, however the advantage was being able to book by email in what was clearly an established restaurant with a regular show.



However we tucked into our Lebanese style cold mezze, a delicious array of dishes which arrived progressively over half an hour or so. The band started at around 11pm and I would have to say was one of the most impressive live Middle Eastern music ensembles I have ever heard. Between the six members of the band there were 3 keyboards, a violin, a very skilled kanoun player, a tabla player and larger floor drum played between the knees. Three of the band members sang at various times and the pieces were full, soaring orchestral sounds with many of the meoldies familiar to us as dancers. Inspired by the obvious skill of the musicians I requested Enta Omri by Oum Kolthum and was hugely moved by the rendition including vocals which I thought was richer and more fuller than any CD version that I had ever heard.

Our food continued to be piled up on the table, with hot meaty dishes, breads, tasty bean platters, giant prawns and fish. By now the locals had also started to arrive and guests included men in their full Arab dress and their covered but unveiled wives. Table groupings also seemed to indicate that a couple of locals had arrived with more than one wife in tow. The water pipes were lit and one of the waiters had the task of carrying around a little pannier of burning coals to feed each pipe as it was puffed.



At around 12pm the belly dancer appeared. She looked Arab in origin and her first couple of pieces involved walking around the stage area and the occasional hip drop or random hip circle that at times did not seem to coincide with the music. There were obvious musical cues which I thought she seemed to completely miss as she was often busy smiling at the band or teasing the drummers. Some moves which she used quite frequently were extending the tip of her tongue as she smiled and a standing shimmy with her index finger tucked coquettishly inside her lower teeth. This was interesting the first couple of times but after a while started to remind me of Doctor Evil in the Austin Powers movies.



By her second set with a larger audience she had obviously warmed up and demonstrated her command of the dance with subtle tummy rolls, intricate hip accents, elegant arms and beautiful barrel turns. She performed a fast cane piece with a fine black cane with silver motifs incorporating some elegant accents. In total she performed for close to an hour and both her costumes incorporated hot pants, the first with a gauzy skirt layer with sequined payettes and the second with long beaded attachments creating a trouser effect. Even with full view of her knee actions – a potential downside of dancing in hot pants style costuming - overall she still presented a relaxed and elegant style.

After the belly dancer had finished and as our enormous platter of fruit and cakes arrived, a singer appeared and performed some lovely and well known Middle Eastern pieces. She was clearly very experienced and worked very effectively with the band with her rich and melodious voice which was very enthusiastically received.

Overall this was an experience that I would recommend for those with a night to spend in Dubai. Booking over the Internet was a plus and while I felt it was pricey compared to other shows that I have seen, the enjoyment of the experience was in its authenticity, the lack of Western tourists, variety of performance, quantity of tasty food and superb quality of the band.

