

Dear Herald,

"What do you mean you've never been to Dubai?" asked my friend, clearly perplexed. "You're Pakistani, you have to go there for the shopping if nothing else." When I inquired about the connection between my nationality and to-die-for duty-free, I was shot a killer look implying that if I had to ask, I'd never know. Later, my driver expressed similar disbelief when I

DUBAI DEBAUCHERY

informed him that I was off to Dubai for the first time. "Bibi, they have the best georgette dupattas and stereotypes there. You absolutely have to go," he added. Subsequently, everyone ranging from my maid to my tailor extolled the virtues of Dubai. "It's what Karachi could have been," moaned one. "Many say it's the Las Vegas of the East," quipped another. And so it was that I found myself boarding Emirates flight 601, looking forward to a grand weekend.

But first, allow me to clarify. It's not as if I've been living under a rock, unaware of the delights that Dubai offers. Nor am I the reactionary type, refusing to tour the UAE simply because our local 'Dubai *chalo*' mantra is too cliché. The fact is, I tried visiting Dubai previously but they rejected my visa application. Apparently, women under the age of 30 travelling unaccompanied pose a serious risk of 'immorality'. "But what's immoral about you buying Fendi at a discount?" asked my oh-so-naïve Rubina Aunty. Well, plenty. But that's not what the UAE authorities were worried about.

Arriving in Dubai, I barely had time to marvel at the slick lines of Sheikh Zayed Road, the clean slant of the Emirates Towers or the glinting façade of the Fairmont Hotel. Instead, noticing a green passport peeking out from my bag, my taxi driver announced that he hailed from Gujranwala before launching on a rant. "Why have you come to Dubai? Who told you this was a nice place to visit?" he demanded, distraught. "This is no place for a good Pakistani girl," he bellowed, the taxi swerving unsteadily across the brand new fly-over, lined with pretty petunias.

Desperate to cling to my notion of the city as a haven for discounts, discos and fine dining, I tried to ignore the taxi driver when he started off about Dubai-style debauchery. "If the qibla for the rest of the world is towards the West," he barked, arms flailing in every direction, "the qibla for Dubai lies in

the East." Not leaving much up to the imagination, my enraged compatriot began railing against the city's "prostitution problem", as he put it. "Those ladies of the night, you know, *tauba*, the bad women, they're everywhere," he reported woefully. Advising

me to look as unattractive as I could while in the city, he then gave me pointers on how to avoid being propositioned with the dreaded question: "How much?" Tip one: no "double, double lipstick" (by which, I eventually ascertained,



two: no smiling. Tip three: let any man who comes within 10 feet know that I am from Pakistan (that somehow being a guarantee of my chastity and good intentions). "And don't for one minute forget that everyone here is evil."

Before that harsh indictment could register, the taxi driver explained why he believed Dubai to be an unparalleled den of sin. "Only a few days ago, two local women got into my cab. They seemed to be good women, *hijab*-wearing and all. I could tell that they were rich because their scarves were sequinned and they wore lots of scent, you know, the foreign type. They wanted to go to the Burjuman for shopping. But suddenly, right here in the back seat, they started doing the most filthy filthy, dirty dirty things with each other. Two women! With each other! One even took her *hijab* off," he gasped, the last detail practically sending him into a tailspin.

Before I had to respond, my destination appeared and I fled from the cab, mumbling thanks for the good advice. Looking forward to mocking this man of morals, I met up with an Islamabad-based friend of a friend for dinner. Stumbling through introductory small talk, I asked him if he was married. "I am. But not in Dubai, if you know what I mean," he responded with a sleazy wink and tatty cackle. Perhaps the cabbie wasn't crazy after all. ■

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