



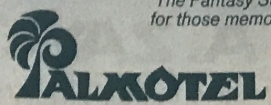
When Special evenings require that Special Touch, think of

# THE FANTASY SUPPER NIGHT CLUB



The elegant night club with the finest nouvelle cuisine, international show **Good Vibrations**, Resident band **Romanticii** and our Arabic Belly Dancer.

The Fantasy Supper Night Club for those memorable moments ...



SHARJAH  
Al Wihda Street, Sharjah - Tel : 352249/355020

Hind Mezaina

## GOOD VIBRATIONS: LIVING IT UP IN SHARJAH'S HOTELS

Not so long ago, Sharjah was the UAE's premier party town. Over the years, I've heard many family friends and friends of friends reminisce about the good old days in Sharjah and read many posts on social media about them.

**"We Sharjah folks rarely ventured across no man's land, there were more pubs and discos in Sharjah than all the other six emirates put together!"**

A.W., Dubai — "The Good Old Days" Facebook group (April 22, 2019)

I have come across recollections like this time and again in print media, too, in back issues of *What's On*, for example. The monthly publication, said to be the first English-language magazine in the Gulf, was established in Dubai in 1979 and found its niche as the entertainment guide for Dubai and Sharjah. By 1981, it also covered Abu Dhabi and, soon after, the rest of the United Arab Emirates and Oman. As it turns out, this entertainment magazine may be one of the definitive historical archives on Sharjah of the late twentieth century.

In the 1980s, *What's On* targeted English-language readers who could no longer be reached simply by word of mouth. Ian Fairservice, the founding editor of *What's On* and also the managing partner and group editor of the magazine's parent company Motivate Media Group, explained his initial business idea in an article in *The National* (June 17, 2009):

"If I wanted to advertise my hotel, I'd have to make 5,000 copies of my own leaflet, drive to Sharjah, which was a long way on not very well made-up roads, and then I'd have to pay money for them to staple the leaflets into the day-old news. And that was the only print advertising that existed in 1978."

By aggregating all those leaflets into a single magazine, Fairservice helped promote Sharjah's party-town status. There was a plethora of Sharjah nightclubs, all located in hotels, including:

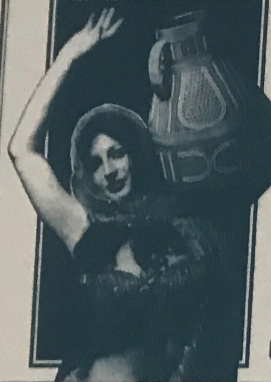
- . Club 58 and Al Khama Room at the Beach Hotel
- . Coral Bar Disco La Belle Epoque at Hotel Meridien
- . Coins Disco at the Palmotel
- . Disco 21 and Queen's Night Club at the Palace Hotel
- . Peaches at the Marbella Club
- . Juliana's at the Holiday Inn
- . Al Matador at Al Andalus Hotel.

The oil boom in Sharjah began in the mid-1970s, several years later than in Abu Dhabi and Dubai. The oil reserves enabled Sharjah's government to create infrastructure serving newly monied locals seeking to establish businesses and international brands aiming to set up shop with local sponsors.

**"Sharjah at the time (mid-1970s) was about to boom, with large numbers of people with high disposable incomes, rushing to take up residence."**  
Mike Hennessy, *What's On* (July 1984)

**Shams  
Al Moulouk**

the versatile  
Oriental Dancer,  
AT MERIDIEN SHARJAH



The fabulous **Shams Al Moulouk** will appear every night at 11 p.m. in our Coral Disco until 15th of February.

Before that enjoy a touch of French Gastronomy in **La Belle Epoque** restaurant. Our D. J. Lawrence will then make you dance the night away with the latest hits.

Don't miss the unique **Shams Al Moulouk**.

For reservations call 356557.

**HOTEL  
MERIDIEN  
SHARJAH**

02

## Sizzling Entertainment at AL MATADOR

featuring Claude Besnou  
with Dora on the mike  
and spectacular floorshow  
by

AZEZA QUTUB and  
ILHAM EZZELDIN  
at AL-MATADOR

**Andalus Hotel**  
HOTELS SHARJAH  
For Reservations Tel: 357805 (5 Lines)



The boom funneled an influx of expatriates from across the world into newly constructed residential apartments and villas. The building of hotels and entertainment venues soon followed: they accommodated international business travelers and tourists, in search of contracts and sunshine, who enjoyed the thrill of visiting a destination that was new, affordable, and off the beaten track. By luring tourists with sun, sand, and the exotic flare of "Arabia," Sharjah's tourism efforts aimed to boost the economy. One of the earliest advertisements for the Sharjah Tourist Centre promoted themed nights like Dishdash and Caftans, Day in the Dunes, and Desert Disco. Even Sharjah's oldest hospital, Al Qassimi, hosted at least one night of revelry: the Razzle Dazzle party.

Hotels in Sharjah and across the Gulf became social centers, for local residents and expats in addition to travelers, who mingled in the array of restaurants, cabarets, discotheques, and concert venues—places to experience the music played back home, the drinks familiar from back home, the food eaten back home. Expats paid to access the memories, and locals paid to experience novelty: the pub lunch, discos playing "the latest sounds—direct from the UK," restaurants serving European and Asian cuisine, oriental nights, a German *Bierkeller*, an Italian pizzeria, and all the cultural festivals, from Indonesian to Lebanese and South African.

Many today consider malls in Gulf countries to be public spaces, and hotels have also served a similar function for expats and locals, predominately men, over the years. Although the venues were limited in number, they offered environments where Sharjah residents could enjoy a cup of coffee or tea in the hotel lobby; order a meal and drink in a restaurant; use hotel facilities that might include a gym, swimming pool, or beach; and then boogie down at night in one of the entertainment venues—if they could afford it, of course. To build a clientele of more than tourists, these hotels also attracted the local community with membership offerings. Before the word "staycation" was a thing, hotel ads promoted weekend package deals and family weekend getaways to the *What's On* readers. Sharjah's hotels fueled a joint campaign for the city to become "the ultimate in business and leisure," a superlative once claimed by Hotel Meridien Sharjah.

Before the idea of dine-in cinema as we know it today existed, Hotel Meridien was screening films with diners every Sunday. Although the films themselves were never listed in the monthly *What's On* ads (which makes me wonder whether the screenings were licensed), there was one advertisement for a special screening of *Trishul* on February 6, 1980. The 1978 Bollywood film, directed by Yash Chopra, starred Amitabh Bachchan, Sanjeev Kumar, Shashi Kapoor, and Hema Malini. Malini was booked as the evening's host.

It's important to note there were cinemas in Sharjah at the time, including Sharjah Cinema and Rivoli Cinema, that screened films in Arabic, Hindi, Malayalam, and English. They offered popcorn but, unlike the hotels, couldn't serve cold beer from the tap. Venues like the Sharjah Wanderers Sports Club also had weekly film nights.

When disco was dying, or really was already dead, in the late 1970s, it found a lifeline on Sharjah's dance floors. The Dune Beat Disco, a mobile disco started by *What's On*, kept it flowing at events and parties with hits by Gloria Gaynor, the Bee Gees, Boney M., and the Village People. The DJs also played the punk-rock numbers dominating the UK charts at the time; but, according to *What's On* (June 1979), "Everyone stops dancing as soon as they come on ... so we don't even carry them with us anymore."

I get the impression that other discos in the city also kept a similarly dated repertoire. They satisfied a crowd holding on to the music of its dance-hall days back home. Don't we all jump to our feet when we hear a song we once loved dancing to? I also imagine the dusty hits were a way to find common ground, to

share memories of pop culture with new friends, and to create new memories in spaces of familiarity and comfort. Nevertheless, people eventually wanted new ways to party. This probably explains the emergence of RamRock. In June 1982, Palmotel organized a "Woodstock-style music festival" featuring local bands and musicians. RamRock, because it took place during Ramadan, was an offer for the non-fasting crowd to party during that month, something I am certain would not pass today.

The parties were not limited to just hotels. Sharjah had its share of desert disco as well:

**"The idea is to avoid hotels and to choose venues, clubhouses, or open areas to 'boldly go where no roadshow has gone before.'" What's On (December 1981)**

We must also remember that it wasn't just Western customers dancing to Western music in these hotels. One hotel would host a club with a live Filipino band and another with an Egyptian belly dancer or disco music. The adverts of the time convey a wide range of music and entertainment cultures, reflecting the multinationalism of these venues' patrons. Local, Arabic-language newspapers also promoted discos, cabarets, and live acts which makes me think: the population may have been less fragmented compared to today.

In 1984, Sharjah's hotels faced a changing market, and even *What's On* reported on the economic downturn in the September issue of that year:

**"Where once the area was flooded with businessmen and entrepreneurs, and later, European package-holiday makers, the world recession has affected Sharjah the same as it has everywhere else. The result is a diminishing market." What's On, September 1984**

By October 1985, the government of Sharjah banned the sale of alcohol and introduced restricted regulations for live acts, greatly impacting nightlife in Sharjah. In the *What's On* directory, the list of clubs in Sharjah became shorter and shorter, until there were hardly any at all. Sharjah's alcohol ban remains in effect today, but there are several dedicated music venues, museums, and art spaces, all playing a role in gathering local communities for a shared experience and playing live music on many occasions. Who knows, maybe the clubs will soon follow, and we can once again dance to "Be My Lover" by La Bouche, just a few years too late.

## Far from the madding crowd



Away from it all, on the quiet Sharjah beach, you'll find the Cottage, the exclusive old-fashioned Pub with a personality of its own. So, after the day is done, and you want to relax with some friends or make it a special evening with someone special - get away from the madding crowd, come on over to the Cottage.

## THE COTTAGE

Newest Sharjah Beach  
P.O. Box 6015, Tel: 336566 Sharjah

04

### COINS DISCO

Open 7 days a week 9pm to late  
• Latest sounds - direct from U.K.  
• Electrifying light show just opened.....  
• Red Rum English pub  
Palmotel  
Al Wahda Street Sharjah  
For reservations telephone  
Nick, Sharjah 355020

05

## Action Packed November



**Explosive Floor Show**  
Rumours every Tuesday, Wednesday & Thursday  
At Le Rendezvous.

For reservations, please call

**Hotel Nova**

Sharjah Beach



**Thrilling Beach Disco**  
Every Thursday, **Only 45 Dhs** including Beach Barbecue & Grand Bonfire! Exciting floor show! **Many prizes** including Gulf Air return Tickets to Bangkok & Hong Kong.

**Sensational Golden Weekends**  
For just **Dhs. 88** with breakfast and **Dhs. 66** without breakfast per person sharing twin room.

P.O. Box 6015, Sharjah, UAE. Tel: 356566 Tlx: 68213 NOVTEL EM.

06

### Images:

01. The Fantasy Supper Night Club, Palmotel, advertisement, December 1982. Images: Motivate Media Group.
02. Shams Al Moulouk, Hotel Meridien Sharjah, advertisement, February 1981.
03. Al Matador, Andalus Hotel, advertisement, November 1981.
04. The Cottage, Novotel, advertisement, March 1981.
05. Coins Disco, Palmotel, advertisement, December 1979.
06. Hotel Nova, advertisement, November 1984.

## ديسكوا

### فندق بالاس

يرحب بكم بفتاح ديسكوا  
الجميد والفرحة من سبعة بالامارات  
مساء الوم العيس الموافق ١٩٧٩/٦/١٤ من الساعة ٩ مساء وحتى الساعة ٣ صباحا  
بروزة طار مع مع كاس الانتاج مارا - عمار الشرير رسية فقط

## مسموح... وممنوع

● هذه صورة من اعلان بالحجم الكبير نشر بجريدة الفجر يوم الخميس ١٩٧٩/٦/١٤م العدد ٤٧٥ وهذا الاعلان كما جاء فيه فعلا « الجديد الفريد من نوعه في الامارات » فهو يدعو افراد هذا المجتمع المسلم بكل جراءة وبهذا الشكل السافر إلى قضاء ليلة من ليالي الجمعة في سهرة حتى الصباح مع كأس الانتاج بالمجان بشرط اصطحاب النساء!

وكان الاعلان حريصا على اظهار اللباس الوطني في المرقص والبار يقصد جذب الشباب للفساد... وفي الوقت الذي تمنع احدى الامارات الخمور يعلن عن دعوة مفتوحة لشربها في اماره اخرى وبالمجان. فيا له من تناقض.

عبدالله احمد  
الشارقة

07

07.

### Translation

Above: Palace Hotel welcomes you to the opening of Disco 21, a new, one-of-a-kind venue in the UAE. Thursday, June 14, 1979, 9:00 p.m.-3:00 a.m. Open invitation, free drink included (only couples allowed).

### Below: Allowed and Forbidden

This is an image of a large advertisement published in *Al Fajr* newspaper, Issue 475, on Friday, June 14, 1979. As advertised, the "new, one-of-a-kind venue in the UAE" is brazenly and openly inviting members of this Muslim community to spend the night before Friday at an all-night party by offering a free drink, provided they are accompanied by women!

The advertisement intentionally showed revelers in traditional Emirati attire at the disco and bar with the aim of attracting youth to sin; and while one of the emirates bans alcohol, it advertises an open

invitation to drink free alcohol in another emirate. Oh, the contradictions!  
—Abdullah Ahmad, Sharjah  
(*Al Azmenah Al Arabiya*, Issue No. 18, July 4-10, 1979)

Long before newspapers were refereeing online comments and social media tags, there was the old-fashioned letter to the editor. A reader of Sharjah-based magazine *Al Azmenah*, Abdullah Ahmad, wrote the above letter about an advertisement he encountered in Abu Dhabi-based *Al Fajr* newspaper, expressing the disquiet shared at the time by other religiously and culturally conservative readers. What made this ad all the more offensive to Ahmad was that a man photographed on the dance floor was wearing a *kandoora*, traditional Emirati attire for men and also a signifier of an Arab Muslim. Beyond the single photo, the reader points out the contradictory

nature of alcohol's easy availability in one emirate versus another. Ease of access tempted "the youth to sin." The angry letter reveals sentiments of the everyday man or woman in UAE society and evinces a freedom of expression, articulated in print in the local papers, that we no longer see today. Letters like this one likely helped bring about stricter rules for advertising alcohol in UAE media and the occasional "No National Dress" sign seen outside bars and nightclubs.

Current UAE advertising media regulation prohibits the promotion of "alcoholic beverages, narcotic substances, tobacco, smoking, or any related goods and services." Today, Arabic-language press stays clear of the topic altogether. English-language outlets imply alcohol with words like house beverages, grapes, and bubbles. DoubleSpeak. —H. M. Images: *Al Azmenah Al Arabiya*.