

Squiz the World goes to... The United Arab Emirates

Each fortnight, we give the world globe a spin, and see where we land. Then we take the kids of Australia on an audio excursion to visit that country and its people.

I'm Christie Kijurina, and today on Squiz the World we're visiting a country where robots race camels through the desert, where people ski and meet penguins indoors while it's scorching hot outside, and where giant skyscrapers rise beside ancient traditions that stretch back hundreds of years.

Can you guess? ... Strap yourselves into the Squiz Kids Super Fast Supersonic Jetliner as we take off and take a squiz at The United Arab Emirates.

JUST THE FACTS

The United Arab Emirates, or UAE for short, sits on the eastern edge of the Arabian Peninsula in the Middle East, where desert sands meet warm blue water. It shares borders with Saudi Arabia and Oman and stretches along the coast of both the Persian Gulf, sometimes called the Arabian Gulf, and the Gulf of Oman. And where those waters meet sits one of the most talked-about places in the news lately: the Strait of Hormuz.

Does that name sound familiar? Imagine a giant highway suddenly squeezing into one narrow tunnel... that's the Strait of Hormuz. Huge oil tankers and cargo ships carrying fuel and goods from around the world must pass through this narrow stretch of water. Because the UAE sits right beside it, when this sea gate gets busy or blocked, the whole world pays attention. It's one of the reasons this small country is often part of very big global conversations.

The UAE is made up of seven areas called emirates, which you can think of as seven mini-kingdoms working together as one country. Each emirate is ruled by a leader called a Sheikh, a word that can mean leader, elder or tribal chief.

Each Emirate's capital has the same name as the emirate. The capital is Abu Dhabi, while Dubai is the most populous emirate and city, famous for its towering buildings, giant highways and buzzing airports. The rulers of the seven emirates work together on big national decisions like defence and foreign affairs, while each emirate also looks after many of its own local rules and services. That's one reason different parts of the UAE can feel surprisingly different — from giant modern cities to quieter, more traditional places.

"The UAE's southern and eastern edges stretch into the Rub al Khali (roob al KHAH-lee), or Empty Quarter, one of the largest sand deserts on Earth, and a place so remote it earned that name for good reason.. But this country is more than dunes. There are

mountains in the north and east, hundreds of islands along the coast, and oases where underground water allows farms and date palms to grow in the middle of the desert.

Now for a surprising fact: the UAE has no permanent rivers at all.

So where does the water come from? Some comes from underground water stores and seasonal rainfall, but much of it comes from giant desalination plants that remove salt from seawater to make fresh water for homes, schools and cities."

Oil helped transform the UAE incredibly quickly, especially in Abu Dhabi, which has some of the world's largest oil reserves. But places like Dubai made a big bet that the future couldn't rely on oil alone, investing heavily in tourism, airlines, business and giant building projects to attract people from all over the world. And that helps explain why the UAE feels like such a fascinating mix of old and new, a place where ancient desert landscapes sit beside futuristic cities rising from the sand.

Now that we know where the UAE is and how this desert nation works, let's explore the people, traditions, beliefs and everyday life that make the Emirates such a fascinating place to live...

LET'S GET CULTURAL

Before giant skyscrapers and shopping malls, life in the UAE looked very different. Long ago, many people living inland were Bedouins: desert communities who travelled across harsh landscapes with camels, following water, trading goods and surviving in one of the toughest environments on Earth. Hospitality mattered enormously. Visitors were welcomed with food, shelter and stories, because out in the desert, kindness could make all the difference.

Along the coast, life centred on fishing and pearl diving. Before oil was discovered, pearls were one of the UAE's biggest industries. It was exhausting and risky work, and many old forts and watchtowers were built to protect trade routes, ports and precious water supplies. Even today, traces of this older world and its hospitality still shape everyday life.

Traditional clothing is still commonly worn too. Men often wear a long white robe called a kandura, sometimes with a tassel called a tarboosh (which is kinda like a necktie), while many women wear a flowing black abaya. But you'll also see jeans, sneakers and everyday Western clothing, especially in cities. Dressing modestly and respectfully is generally seen as important. And here's something fascinating: although the UAE has Emirati traditions stretching back hundreds of years, most people who live there today weren't born there.

The UAE has one of the highest expatriate populations in the world, meaning people move there from other countries to live and work. Families from India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, the Philippines, Britain, Egypt, Australia and many more places call the

UAE home. Becoming an Emirati citizen, though, is quite rare. Most Emiratis are born citizens, and citizenship is not usually something people can easily apply for. Some people may gain it through family connections or special approval from rulers or government leaders. Why does that matter? Because Emirati citizens often receive benefits that many expats don't, including things like government-supported healthcare, education, housing help and employment support. Meanwhile, many expatriate families live in the UAE on visas linked to jobs, study or family members.

Religion also plays a big role in life in the UAE. Islam is the official religion, and mosques are an important part of many neighbourhoods and daily routines. But because the UAE is home to people from all over the world, you'll also find churches, Hindu temples, Sikh gurdwaras (gur-DWAH-ruhs) and other places of worship. The UAE wants to welcome workers, visitors and businesses from other countries and this can help people feel at home. Some nearby countries take a stricter approach to religion, so the UAE's openness to different faith communities sometimes raises eyebrows across the region.

So, whether your family has lived in the Emirates for generations or arrived from somewhere else in the world, one thing many kids still have in common is school. So what's it like to be a student in the UAE? Let's find out...It's....

TIME FOR SCHOOL

One of the coolest things about school in the UAE is that your classmates could come from all over the world. In some schools, kids sit beside classmates whose families come from India, Egypt, Australia, Pakistan, Britain, the Philippines and many other places. Because people move to the Emirates from all over the world, schools can feel incredibly international.

"School in the UAE usually runs from Monday to Friday, with the school year beginning around late August and stretching across three terms. Uniforms are common, and because temperatures can get seriously hot, the school day often starts fairly early. On especially warm days, sport or outdoor activities might happen indoors or earlier in the morning before the desert heat really kicks in.

And while schools may look familiar in some ways — classrooms, playgrounds, homework and school assemblies — there are also differences. Emirati citizens can attend government schools for free, one of the benefits of citizenship, while many expatriate families choose private or international schools. That means some kids follow different international curriculms, depending on where their family comes from or what kind of school they attend."

"Even in very international schools, students often learn some Arabic and about Emirati culture and history too. So while maths class might feel familiar, you could also find

yourself learning greetings in Arabic or discovering traditions that stretch back hundreds of years.

And lunchtime? That can be a mini world tour all by itself. One lunchbox might hold sandwiches or fruit, another rice and curry, another noodles, wraps, hummus or flatbread. Schools in the UAE have also been encouraging healthier eating in recent years, with limits on some sugary drinks and junk food."

The UAE is also big on preparing kids for the future. Because the country wants to grow industries beyond oil — things like science, technology, engineering, robotics, artificial intelligence and even space exploration — many schools place a strong focus on STEM subjects and digital skills. After all, a country building futuristic cities probably needs plenty of future engineers, scientists and inventors.

And once the school day is done? Plenty of kids swap classrooms for football pitches, cricket fields, horse riding, swimming, martial arts or even desert adventures... which sounds like the perfect excuse for...

SPORT TIME

What do Formula 1 cars, robot camel jockeys, falcons and cricket bats all have in common? Somehow... the UAE. This country LOVES hosting the world and mixing ancient traditions with futuristic fun. Big sporting events regularly land in the UAE. Formula 1 cars roar around racetracks in Abu Dhabi, while tennis, cycling, horse racing and football tournaments attract athletes and fans from all over the world. And because so many people living in the UAE come from different countries, sport looks different depending on who you ask.

"But long before giant stadiums and roaring race cars, sport in the UAE looked very different. Take falconry for example, the ancient practice of training falcons to hunt. Long ago, Bedouin people relied on these fast-flying birds to help find food in the desert. Today, falcons are still hugely respected and are even the UAE's national bird.

And then there's camel racing. Yes, actual camel racing. Camels thunder across desert tracks at surprising speeds, but here's the futuristic twist: today many races use tiny robot jockeys, controlled remotely by trainers driving beside the track. "

And if watching sport isn't enough, the UAE also loves adventure. Think dune bashing across giant sand dunes, skydiving over palm-shaped islands and giant mountain ziplines. And if that sounds big, bold and just a little bit over the top... wait until you hear about some of the record-breaking things this country has built. It's time for

BELIEVE IT OR NOT

If the UAE had a motto, it might be: go big... then go a bit bigger. This is a country that seems to love giant ideas. Take the Burj Khalifa, the tallest building in the world. It

stretches a dizzying 828 metres into the sky, so tall that on misty mornings, the top sometimes pokes out above the clouds.

And because the UAE can get seriously hot, many giant attractions are indoors. Dubai is home to one of the world's largest shopping malls, a place so enormous it feels more like a mini city than somewhere to grab new socks.

Then there's Ski Dubai: an indoor ski slope where people can ski, snowboard and even meet penguins, while outside temperatures can soar above 40 degrees. For a country built in the desert, the UAE has become very good at dreaming big and keeping cool.

After all that skyscraper spotting, skiing in the desert and giant adventures... I'm hungry. We've made it to...

DINNER TIME

In the UAE, dinner tells the story of deserts, oceans and people from all over the world. Long before giant cities appeared, food in the Emirates was shaped by the land and sea. Inland Bedouin communities relied on foods that could survive harsh desert life, including dates, rice, camel milk and meat. Along the coast, fishing and pearl-diving communities ate plenty of seafood fresh from the Gulf. Over time, traders travelling through the region brought spices and flavours from places like India, Persia and beyond, meaning dinner in the UAE became a tasty mix of many influences.

One dish you'll often find is machboos, a fragrant rice dish cooked with spices and often served with chicken, lamb, fish or seafood. Think of it as a bit like a giant family rice feast packed with flavour. If you've got a sweet tooth, there's luqaimat (loo-KY-mat) — little crispy dough balls drizzled with sticky syrup or date molasses. Imagine tiny doughnuts with extra crunch and sweetness. And because the UAE is home to people from all over the world, dinner can change wildly depending on where you are. One night might mean Emirati food, the next Lebanese grilled meats, Indian curry, Filipino noodles or Japanese sushi.

You might even spot the now-famous Dubai chocolate, a modern sweet treat invented in Dubai that mixes chocolate, pistachio cream and crunchy pastry inspired by Middle Eastern desserts. It recently exploded across social media, turning a local idea into a worldwide food craze. Yum!!!

THE S'QUIZ

This is the part of the podcast where you get to test how well you've been listening.

How many emirates make up the United Arab Emirates? [seven]

What is the name of the tallest building in the world found in the UAE? [Burj Khalifa]

True or false: Dubai chocolate is an ancient traditional Emirati dessert eaten for thousands of years. [False, it's a recent social media trend]

That's all we have time for today. Thanks for staying curious about the world, and joining me on this incredible trip to The United Arab Emirates.

Now get out there, and have a most excellent day. Over and out.