

Tying the knot

THE INVITATION ARRIVES IN A CLASSY LEATHER-BOUND BOX, THE GILDED CARD SITTING BESIDE THREE GOURMET CHOCOLATES AND A MINIATURE EDITION OF THE QURAN. THIS IS THE START OF AN EMIRATI WEDDING IN ABU DHABI

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Arab bride with henna on her hands during the solemnisation ceremony.



Twinkling floral patterns are illuminated on the wall panels of the expansive hotel hall, casting the room in a pink glow. Dozens of glass-topped tables are set with fine ceramic tableware and slender white candelabras, their bases ringed with white roses. White leather sofas line the stage, the crisp colour scheme softened by muted grey cushions that whisper comfort.

A large table groans under the weight of mounds of sweets flowing over the top of cut-glass chalices, and a chaise longue awaits the arrival of the bride. The scene is set.

A wedding in Abu Dhabi is guaranteed to be a night to remember, every detail planned and executed in line with generous Arabian hospitality. Legally, the couple has already wed. Months earlier, the marriage proposal known as *al khoutbeh* initiated the process.

Once the bride's father had approved and the families agreed on the details of the marriage contract, it was registered in Abu Dhabi's Sharia court to ensure the marriage met legal requirements. The couple attended court, along with their legal

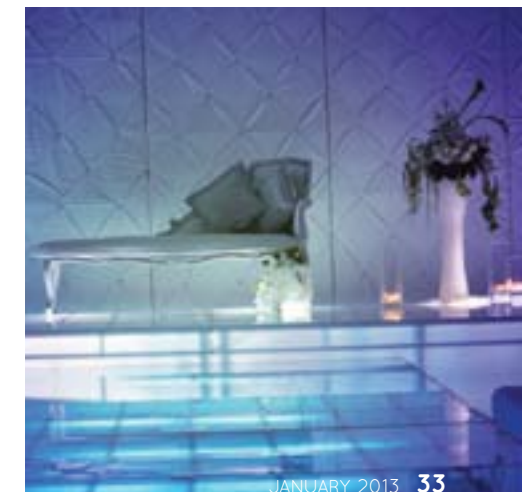
guardians and two male Muslim witnesses, and the fathers of the bride and the groom each signed the marriage contract.

With the legal obligations taken care of, the preparation begins. In Bedouin tradition, the bride was seen only by family members for the forty days preceding the wedding, but this custom is losing ground in the modern world.

As in the West, the pre-wedding preparation phase is all about the bride. A Western bride-to-be will head to the spa for a pampering day with her bridesmaids; the Arabian bride was traditionally anointed with special oils and perfumes. She would be doused with cleansing and conditioning oils and creams and her hair washed with extracts of amber and jasmine. Modern times mean modern methods, and salons across Abu Dhabi offer a constellation of specialised services and tailored packages for brides-to-be.

Laylat al henna is one of the most magical pre-wedding rituals that has stayed largely the same over time. A few days before the wedding, the bride's female family members and friends gather for a night of celebrating, =>

Every detail is meticulously planned to create a glittering evening spectacular





The setting for an outdoor wedding at Emirates Palace

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dancing and singing. The bride makes her grand entrance amidst a cacophony of drums, tambourines and ululating.

The bride takes her seat on a mountain of cushions and throws. Family members approach to give blessings and gifts. The bride's hands and feet are decorated with henna in elaborate, swirling designs. The henna is left on overnight to ensure a deep colour for the wedding celebration.

Some time before the wedding, the official religious ceremony takes place, attended by family. From this point the wedding devolves into the *walima*, two gender-segregated yet related ceremonies, which may be held in different locations on different days. In Abu Dhabi they are often held at one of the custom built wedding halls or a luxurious hotel, such as the Ritz-Carlton, the Park Hyatt, Aloft at the Abu Dhabi National Exhibition Centre, or Emirates Palace, which hosts large-scale local weddings on average twice a month.

Even the most humble wedding will not see fewer than 300 guests, and that's just on the bride's side. Often wedding attendance will reach numbers upwards of 600 and the biggest weddings may extend over three days. Wedding invitation cards don't mention an RSVP date; guests are always welcome. Mohammed Alaoui, communication manager at Emirates Palace, confirms an average of 700 to 800 guests at the weddings held there.

As in the West, UAE weddings are oriented towards the bride. The groom's celebration is secondary, although he pays for both. "The groom pays but the bride can decide whatever she wants," explains Olivier Dolz,

founder of Olivier Dolz wedding planning. "We talk about the entertainment, the catwalk, the dance floor, the colours, the lights, whether she wants fireworks... all of these things." Every detail is meticulously planned to create a glittering evening spectacular.

In the UAE, it's important to remember that for the bride the wedding ceremony signifies far more than marriage – it's a coming of age celebration. "This is the lady entering into the community and family," explains Olivier. "She is being presented to the community as a woman. She is no longer a child and this is the social event that celebrates this."

So the pressure is on the families to create a wedding to outdo all other weddings. Olivier has planned numerous weddings in Abu Dhabi and compares the glamour of an Emirati wedding with those of royalty in Europe. "It is big, it is beautiful and a lot of attention is paid to the details," Olivier explains. "The décor is important, the food is important, the details are important and the dress is amazing." According to Olivier the average cost of this kind of wedding is AED 400,000 (US\$109,000).

Emirati weddings start late. Family members greet guests at the door before they enter the hall. Big name family weddings may be graced by the presence of royalty, which demands adherence to specific protocols set by the office of the Sheikh or Sheikha attending.

At an Emirati wedding, instead of a head table there is a head couch, gracing the end of a catwalk-style stage called the *kosha*. This is a relatively new addition to the Emirati wedding scene, emerging within the last fifty years.

The *kosha* is designed so that the bride models her dress as she makes her entrance. Parading above the gathering, she will slowly make her way to the couch, posing along the way to ensure everyone sees her sparkling wedding gown from every angle.

The *kosha* is the subject of fierce competition among brides, often extending forty metres or more into the room, competing in scale with the Paris Fashion Week catwalks. Olivier rates the *kosha* as the second most important aspect of the wedding, the first being, of course, the dress. The food, laden on groaning buffet tables, comes in third.

At some receptions, the bride's entrance on the *kosha* is broadcast live on big screens, which might also show parts of the ceremony taking place in the men's hall. But this is strictly a one-way affair. The women are free to let their hair down, removing their abayas and shaylas on arrival if desired, so proceedings are kept discreet. Underneath the abayas, wedding guests wear a dazzling array of designer gowns, superseded only by the bride's dress.

"The gowns were amazing; it was like being at a Hollywood event," described one wedding attendee. For more traditional women, there is a special abaya design made from chiffon, decorated with crystals, embroidery and lace.

Despite the elegantly laid tables and extravagant centrepieces, most Emirati weddings have a free seating arrangement. "As you don't have to say whether you will attend, it can happen that you have 600 guests on the list but 700 may show up," says Olivier. The constant hum of the assembled crowd generates the excitement that turns the wedding into a full scale event.

At some point in the evening, an announcement is made that the groom will be entering the female celebration, accompanied by male family members. This allows female guests to cover. The men make their way into the hall and official photographs are taken around the plush sofa on the *kosha*. Only the official photographer is allowed to take photographs. Once the wedding cake is cut the couple departs together, leaving the guests to straggle out the door in the wee hours of the morning.

Should you be fortunate enough to be invited to a wedding in Abu Dhabi, accept immediately. It is bound to be spectacular and will give you incomparable insight into modern Emirati culture, combining traditional rituals with contemporary styling. 🌟