

FANTASTIC VOYAGE

FROM THE FABLED TALES OF THE GREAT ARABIC EXPLORER IBN BATTUTA TO WORKS OF FICTION, THE HUMBLE WOODEN DHOW HAS BEEN PART OF MARITIME LIFE FOR CENTURIES. CLAIRE MALCOLM GETS OUT ON THE WATER WITH A FAMILY OF MASTER BOATBUILDERS FOR A LOOK AT THE PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE OF DUBAI'S DHOW INDUSTRY

The dhow has been described as the most graceful of sailing vessels. A familiar sight along the Dubai Creek, the billowing white sails have long since been replaced by diesel engines, but the dhow's familiar curved wooden shape is still at the heart of creekside life.

For centuries, dhows plied the trade routes from Arabia to Africa and India, blown along by monsoon winds and carrying exotic cargoes of dates, spices and gold from port to port.

These days although the destinations remain the same and Dubai has retained its position as probably the busiest dhow port on the Arabian Peninsula, the cargo has changed. Take a wander along the Deira side of the creek and watch boats being loaded with everything from mattresses and refrigerators to tyres and even cars.

A thriving commercial business, the demand for dhows has not as yet been completely superseded by more modern crafts and the traditional skills of dhow building are still very much alive in the city.

FAMILY BUSINESS

Salem Al Khattal comes from a long line of boatbuilders, and the family still operates a dhow yard on the banks of the creek in much the same style as in Saeed's grandfather's time. But nautical life as they know it is about to undergo a dramatic change as the area ▶





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is subject to massive redevelopment as part of the Dubai Festival City project, and they are due to move to a new location within the next few months.

Salem has a full-time job with the Dubai government but also devotes a hefty portion of the working day to the family business, along with his three brothers and their father Saeed.

They are all passionate about the dhow industry and Salem invites me to join him for a glass of *chai masala* on the deck of their latest project, the largest dhow they have ever built. As workmen hammer, plane and paint around us, he regales me with tales of days gone by.

"My father was a captain when he was 12 years old, and it was normal in those days. When I was 11 I travelled with him one summer," he says.

"I told him that I needed to go to sea and wanted to learn to captain my own ship. He said that I had to learn from the bottom. 'See those men loading the dhow? Go and help them load the cargo, and then I will teach you,' he told me."

They embarked on the seven-day voyage to Somalia, and Salem spent the entire journey watching his father navigate their route using a compass and sextant – "There was no GPS or modern technology then!" – and learning the role of a captain.

"He let me sail back under his supervision and was very proud that I did it," smiles Salem.

His first solo voyage saw him captain a loaded dhow to Pakistan. Before they sailed he took his seaman's card to the government office to get the

classification changed to captain status, but they refused, saying he was far too young. His father intervened on his behalf however, and the newly appointed Captain Salem sailed off on the four-day trip.

"When we arrived, the customs officers asked for the captain and I said with a big mouth, 'I am the captain,'" he recalls.

"All the customs guys were laughing and telling everyone that there was a special captain here from Dubai, it was a real surprise for them to have a boy captain on their shores," he recalls.

DHOW TALES

The tradition of boatbuilding in Dubai is a long-standing one and the Al Khattal boatyard has been operating since Salem's great-grandfather's day. "We have been here a long time, before the city, when it was just the desert and the sea," he says.

The Al Khattal family have always been a coastal people and were originally part of the pearl diving industry which, in its heyday, was a major economic driver for the UAE until the emergence of the Japanese cultured pearl industry in the 1940s.

The maritime calendar was dictated by the seasons, as Salem explains, "We would send the dhows off pearl fishing for three months and then straight on to Iraq to buy dates. The date cargo would then be sold in India, and the boats would be at sea for many months.

"Quite often the dhows would sail back from India to Africa, where they'd sell a cargo of roof tiles in Mombassa

for example, and then with the monies they would buy wood, coffee and other items to bring back to the UAE."

Salem's father is a master seaman whose nautical record has covered many countries and created a lifetime of precious memories and anecdotes.

"One time my father was sailing to Aden in Yemen and his dhow was caught in a storm which flung the boat against the rocks off the island of Kuria Muria near Salalah (Oman), severely damaging it," he says.

"He stayed there for four days and the islanders took care of him. When he was rescued he gave them the entire contents of the ship as a thank you."

But Salem is aware that the dhow building heritage of which he and his family are so proud is under threat from a combination of technological advances and the dwindling number of family businesses.

"I find it very sad that there are no longer many local families doing this. Maybe it will die out. Thankfully my sons are already showing an interest and I want to preserve this business for them and for the future," he says.

SEA OF CHANGE

As the conversation moves from reminiscences to real-time Dubai, Salem explains how the business has changed over the years and the focus today. "Before, we built them for pearl diving, but now it is for trading, and we build and operate our own dhows."

"We occasionally build yachts as well, but not the traditional racing dhows," he adds. ▶



"We always say we build a dhow with one leg on the shore and one leg in the water"

DHOW LINGO

- The word dhow is not Arabic. It was adapted by the British from the Persian word 'dawn', a term used for sailing vessels. What makes a dhow different from other boats is the triangular sail – lateen – that is surely an archetypal image from the region.
- The hull – halkal – is usually made of teak wood which is very water-resistant and long lasting, and the wood is left in its natural colour with only minimal decorative painting on the upper deck. Originally they used shark oil as an anti-erosion measure.
- The newer dhows have a fibreglass construction used for the shell but on the all-wooden boats it is typically only the mast – dukal – that incorporates fibreglass, to strengthen it.
- The racing dhows have sails made from nylon combinations or silk, whereas traditionally they were made from cotton.
- Dhows are indigenous to the coast of the Arabian Peninsula, India, and East Africa.
- Crew sizes range from 12 to 30 persons, depending on the size of the dhow, and often several members of one family work and live together on board.
- These days navigation is done using the latest GPS systems and through satellite communication. Traditionally, the captain would use a compass and sextant, as well as an instrument called a kamal which determines latitude by finding the angle of the Pole Star above the horizon.

The operation is purely a family affair. All four brothers are involved and Mohammed manages the dhow yard while Salem is in charge of dhow operations and overall safety. Saeed, their father, is still a regular fixture at the boatyard where he is usually found sitting on his chair at the side of the water, keeping a close eye on the action as it unfolds.

The dhow they are currently completing, and on which we are sitting as the sun dips down over the horizon, is already booked for a trip to Somalia as soon as it is judged seaworthy.

"We make contracts with trading companies and our cargoes are varied. We transport anything from foodstuffs to cars. We sometimes transport livestock into the country and may even bring in things like charcoal from Mogadishu," Salem explains.

Despite modern boatbuilding methods and competition from super containers Salem confirms that the business is a profitable one. "If I compare the dhow trade with construction for example, I know how much more money I can make," he grins.

"We are literally building one dhow after another. I can't recall a time when we didn't have anything to do!" he laughs, reinforcing his point.

The yard employs 130 skilled workers, brought over from Pakistan and India, and trained to work on dhows, which requires special techniques.

"A real seaman knows the weaknesses of a newly built dhow and we are able to spot any problems before we launch our boats into the sea," says Salem.

As head of the family, Saeed Al Khattal reserves the right to name each dhow that rolls off the dock. He points out a boat, moored just off shore. "This one is called Muwafiq and is named after my grandfather's original pearl fishing dhow. It means 'lucky' or 'safe.'"

With the imminent relocation of the business to a temporary site at the Al Hamriya Port, is the government actively supporting the traditions of dhow building?

"Sheikh Mohammed, the ruler of Dubai, gives us a lot of encouragement and we are being taken care of, but the

industry is still disappearing step by step as less families continue with the business," says Salem.

OPEN WATER

Advances in navigation technology have given the Al Khattal family greater control over the movement of their vessels, as Salem explains. "We operate it like a chess game, and we have ten dhows in international waters at any one time.

"We check the weather for the next seven days on the internet so we can issue instructions accordingly. It's very different from my father and grandfather's time!"

According to Salem there are still pirates on the high seas, particularly off the coast of Iran and in Iraqi waters. "But we know where they are, so we can sail around them. We tell the captain not to use the radio, and we rely instead on Thuraya satellite communication, it's much safer," he smiles.

Closer to home, working dhows are the only seagoing vessels that are allowed to enter into the safe harbour of the Dubai Creek, a remnant of times past.

DHOW KNOW HOW

The dhow building process still follows original principles but has incorporated modern techniques and materials to deliver a more durable product.

"Nowadays we use steel for the framework whereas before it was 100% wood," says Salem.

"We use teak wood and a special seasoned wood from Pakistan. Teak is normally used for furniture. It is very hard-wearing and durable once waterproofed, with a natural oil which protects it.

"This dhow is the largest we have ever built and so far it has taken 18 months from the bare bones, but most projects take an average of 12 months," he adds.

The sea trial takes place once the engine and propellers have been fixed into place, and reaching an average speed of 10-12 knots with a cargo weighing up to 1,30 tonnes on board, you definitely want a seaworthy vessel.

"We always say we build a dhow with one leg on the shore and one leg ▶



"This business is like a baby. First you hold it and see it growing, and then, much like a teenager, you have to let it go. And that's the same with our dhows"

in the water," explains Salem as he talks through the process.

He is also working on a revolutionary new design which will put a new low maintenance, quick to produce and cheaper dhow into the mix.

Dhows weighing over 150 tonnes need international registration, and this handicaps the steel/wood combinations produced in the region. Salem's design will bring the dhow weight in at around 138 tonnes, thus eliminating the need for international registration, which is not given to wooden dhows, and hopefully open up new markets for the family business.

The idea is under government approval and he is already working on his prototype dhow - time permitting - after extensive research in India where he visited all the shipyards to gauge the cost-effectiveness.

His enthusiasm and love for the industry is easily summed up, as he explains, "This business is like a baby. First you hold it and see it growing, and then, much like a teenager, you have to let it go. And that's the same with our dhows."

ALL ABOARD

The Dubai International Marine Club (DIMC) is the centre for traditional dhow racing in the emirate.

Since the 1980s, Dubai's deputy ruler, Sheikh Hamdan bin Rashid Al-Maktoum, has been personally involved in the promotion of this most

traditional of sports, establishing an annual competition that treats both Emirati and international watersports fans to a stunning display of seamanship and team effort.

As many as 80 boats take to the water for a visually impressive spectacle with more than a hint of drama. The large white sails - *lateen* - are hoisted to the sounds of a traditional tribal chant, hoping to catch the wind that will propel them ahead of their rivals.

The dhow racing season begins in September and brings together teams of UAE nationals for a highly competitive tournament that stretches across nine months of the year. It's not only a question of prizes, but also of national pride and a link with the seafaring heritage of the country and its people.

Unlike modern yachts, dhows are not able to fast track and depend on the changes in wind direction, and it takes a highly skilled team to successfully navigate their dhow to the winning buoy and attractive prize purses of up to US\$136,000 for the most high-profile races on the calendar.

"The sport is almost as popular as horseracing here, and there are certainly more youngsters getting involved these days," explains Sultan Hareb, a regular competitor. "It's important that we recognise and acknowledge the achievements of our forefathers and learn from our elders, but the increased participation of younger generations is

also bringing a new element of competition to the sport."

The highlight of the season is the Sir Bu Na'air race that traces the 54-nautical mile route originally used by the pearl diving dhows. The race begins at an island that was formerly a stop-off point for dhow returning to Dubai after many months at sea.

Salem Al Khattal's life revolves around the water and not only through the family business. A former Formula One Powerboat Racing champion with 12 years experience under his belt, he is also a professional diver and watersports fan, as he explains.

"I love the sea, and treat my family business as a hobby as well. It is something my father and brothers are also passionate about. I'm proud to be carrying on with the heritage and traditions, but sadly I don't have time to race anymore, but boats are still part of my life!" ■

DHOW DATES

The season will start this month and carries through to May 2007, with races taking place most weekends in Dubai as well as in Abu Dhabi.

The Dubai International Marine Club (DIMC) at Le Meridien Mina Seyahi is the official body that oversees races and ensures that the competition specifications are met.

FORTHCOMING FIXTURES (2006):

Dubai Traditional Dhow Sailing - 22 ft dhows
30/09/06, Mina Seyahi, Dubai - 1st heat
07/10/06, Mina Seyahi, Dubai - 2nd heat
14/10/06, Mina Seyahi, Dubai - 3rd heat

If dhow racing doesn't fit into your vacation schedule, DIMC also hosts a number of other sailing events, with the national sailing championship kicking off in November and wooden powerboat, catamaran and jet-ski events throughout the season.