

## cheat of the week

Use trade paint at home instead of domestic paint, especially on large surfaces – even in the most delicate shades it will give a more thorough depth of colour and last far longer before fading



why live in

## Al Falah: a rich blend

With its fringe of shiny high-rise apartment blocks surrounding schools, villas and shops, this section of Al Dhafra is home to one of Abu Dhabi's favourite restaurants, the ever-popular Lebanese Flower. **Rose Dakin** reports

Every neighbourhood for kilometres around claims to be near Lebanese Flower, one of Abu Dhabi's best known restaurants. However, this part of Al Dhafra – widely referred to as Al Falah, after its main shopping centre, actually contains it.

Known for its classic Beirut fare, shisha garden and energetic waiters, it's a culinary institution on the island. But according to Mohammed al Koul, who works at a travel agency on the ground floor of an apartment building nearby, there are trade-offs to being next door to delicious grilled meats and crisp falafel: the traffic. It's the one thing about the neighbourhood that makes the residents complain, he says, because all the drivers stop and place their orders from their cars, as the waiters run back and forth into the restaurant. It's not unusual to see cars lined up three deep at peak times. Nearby, other famous food establishments attract smaller crowds: Caesar's Confectionery does a brisk business in fresh cream cakes, and Barka's Omani Sweet Work, a branch of Oman's biggest sweet shop, is on the same block.

One neighbour who does appreciate Lebanese Flower, or *Zahrat Lebnan* in Arabic, is Zahraa al Hitti, the manager of Al Arjun Art Gallery; like many in Abu Dhabi, she simply enjoys its food. At her gallery, situated modestly in a villa behind the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research on Najda Street, paintings and calligraphic art line the walls. In the evening the gallery holds workshops in calligraphy and talks on art. At its inauguration last autumn "many of the neighbours came to see the art space, but some did not, and they should come".

Another establishment for artistic self-enrichment is Gulf Fine Arts Institute, on Al Falah Street (also known as Passport Road or 9th Street) next to Fathima Supermarket.

The Institute, established in 1991, offers music, dance, instrument and painting classes. In the middle of a recent weekday, a class in Bharatanatyam South Indian classical dance was in full swing, with about 10 primary school-age students stomping and gracefully extending their limbs.

Fathima Supermarket and Lulu are the two main options for grocery shopping locally.

Johanna Abraham, who works at the cash register at Fathima Supermarket, says that most customers are Pakistani or Keralan. Al Falah Plaza, just behind the Muroor Road branch of Costa Coffee, is bustling with men in Pakistani shalwars and Emirati kandouras, as well as Sudanese women in hijab. Several Filipino families are eating at the McDonald's. Selma al Tayib, a Sudanese woman who has



The high-rises that line the main streets surrounding the neighbourhood of Al Falah are a mix of old and new. Rich-Joseph Facun / The National

lived in Abu Dhabi for three years, says, "I go to [Lulu] in the Plaza and to the Sudanese Social Club, which is right next to my apartment. Some evenings it is open for Sudanese people, and it's like a picnic outside. I bring my daughter."

The Sudanese Social Club's gate is locked in the middle of the day, but at around 7pm it opens and families come to sit in the garden.

Al Tayib says that, while she knows quite a few Sudanese people living in the neighbourhood, she doesn't know her immediate neighbours, who are Filipino.

Janina Singun, a Filipina nurse, lives in the same building. "I work six days a week, and then I work overtime, so I don't know my neighbours or even my neighbourhood very well," she says, walking to the shops to replenish her bare kitchen. "But there are many Filipinos in my building, and the Philippine embassy is one small block away."

On Najda Street, tall apartment buildings line the road on each side of the Ministry of Higher Education. On the ground floors of the buildings, the ceramic tiles and plumbing fixtures of builders' supply shops are on display.

Linda Wuying, who works for the Taiwanese Eastman Building Materials company, has been living



Boys relax after school near Al Falah Street.

here for seven years. "There aren't many Chinese people in the neighbourhood," she says, so she often goes to Khalifa Street or Madinat Zayed, to the Chinese restaurants there. For sport she goes to The Club.

There is no dominant nationality in the area. Extended Emirati families live in many of the villas in the inner streets. The Euro Hotel Apartments houses transitional workers looking for permanent housing, and some European and American faces can be

seen there and at the local Starbucks. At certain times of day the streets are overflowing with children and young families – no less than 12 schools offer education ranging from preschool to college.

Abu Dhabi Women's College, which has 2,000 Emirati students, occasionally holds events that are open to the public. At a recent talk by the German photographer, Andreas Gursky, about half the audience consisted of the public and students from the

Men's College. Between the schools, villas, and mosques, the date palms and shrubs are nicely overgrown. The palette of the inner blocks is a dusty beige – but it's not as dusty as it used to be, according to Mathias Cyril, who works at Caesar's Confectionery.

"I have been here for nine years. When we first came, most of the other shop doors were empty. It was just dusty streets. Now they are all occupied."

View more photographs at [www.thenational.ae/houseandhome](http://www.thenational.ae/houseandhome)

## What the residents say

## Connie Belanon, Philippines

You can trust people here, that is the main thing. My husband forgets to lock his car every now and then, and it is never a problem. The only problem is that there is no recreational park within walking distance for my two kids to play..

## Rashid al Muhairy, UAE

It used to be nice and peaceful here but now it is crowded. Developers built these tall apartment buildings that block the sky. There is a lot of traffic at certain times of day.

## \* the facts

## Restaurants

Lebanese Flower, Momo Lebanese, and Sagar Restaurant. There are also branches of Costa, Starbucks, Baskin-Robbins, McDonald's and Subway on Muroor Road. Bakeries include Lebanese Flower Bakery and Al Khalifa Bakery.

## Schools

Abu Dhabi Women's College has more than 2,000 students, all Emirati. There are 11 nursery and primary schools: Pearl Primary, Sunrise English Private, Leens, Little Flower Private, the Philippine National School, Al Suqoor Model School, Pioneers International, Little Buds Nursery, ABC Nursery, Abd Al Jaleel Al Faheem Primary, and Islamia English School.

## Property prices

According to Afrah Ahmed at LLJ Property, a one-bedroom apartment costs Dh160,000 per annum. A three-bed apartment rents for between Dh250,000 and 300,000, and a villa starts at Dh400,000.

## Al Falah



Source: Google Maps

outdoors

## In this business 'anything is possible'

## The tree designer is back at work on a UAE project

It's an odd title, tree designer; one that conjures up an image of something akin to a gardener and well... God. How does one plan in advance the design of a thing that grows naturally?

In fact, it's a misnomer. Gary Hanick does not design real trees but rather metal sculptures that look so authentic they're often mistaken for the real thing. It's a unique profession and this NatureMaker design business is the only one of its kind in the world. So how did it come about?

"It's a long story," says the 54-year-old, who has lived in California for more than 32 years but is originally from New York. "My partner, Bennett Abrams, was a sculptor and a

naturalist. It all started on a whim really when, during a snowstorm over 23 years ago, we found a fallen branch which was covered in ice. We decided to drag it back to the studio and do something with it. After that we began reconstructing trees and turning them into art."

Shortly afterwards they were approached by their first client, Macy's department store in San Francisco, who wanted them to create a visual display for one season, a type of forest canopy of 10-foot-tall elevated trees. "It was a great success," says Hanick. "It led to other clients and before we knew it we'd set up a small business together in the woods in California. It just grew and grew."

"He was the artist and the visionary; I was the businessman – the brains behind the operation."

When Abrams died five years ago, Hanick assumed both roles. Nature Maker now has a studio in San Diego and employs 35 people including

designers, sculptors, welders, engineers and painters. They travel the world working on upmarket commissions and, despite the worldwide recession, continue to be inundated with jobs for residential and commercial clients. "We work in airports, malls, atriums and private homes around the world," says Hanick, who is most proud of a recently completed project at the Grand Hyatt hotel in Moscow in which the company had to re-create 78 trees six to eight metres tall on the 62nd floor of a 124-storey building.

"The challenge was not just to recreate the trees authentically but to reconstruct them," he explains. "When we got there we found that the lift went only as high as 58 floors and, as result, we had to transport the trees in sections and physically carry them three floors up. Although the design and sculpture of the trees took three months, the project was put together in just two weeks."

Hanick has been coming to the UAE for many years and has worked on a number of local projects. In 1995, he took on a series of tree sculptures that attempted to recreate a forest effect at Deira City Centre in Dubai. In 2000 he was commissioned to do an installation for the Sheikh Zayed Private Academy for Girls in Abu Dhabi and more recently he has worked on the Le Reve penthouse project at Dubai Marina. He's now working on an eight-metre tall, eight-metre wide tree for a private client in Emirates Hills, and hopes to have it finished by July.

"We find that palm trees are popular in the Gulf region, but this is a Banyan tree, which is a type I'm particularly fond because of the amazing detail in the bark," says Hanick. "It's for the grounds of a large family villa which has a very grand entrance with a giant rotunda. The tree will be one of the first things you see when you enter the grounds

and it provides a real 'wow' factor. It has two swings and seating around it and I'm told the family does a lot of entertaining, so I can imagine it will be used."

The unique sculptures start at US\$100,000 (Dh367,304).

"Sometimes people know exactly what they want, but it's not always viable. Often we have to suggest ideas. Each project provides its own challenges. People forget that a tree not only has to look believable, it also has to be able to support the weight. "In all sincerity, I love coming to the UAE. I flit in and flit out and I always find it so dynamic. I've seen an incredible growth here in the last 15 years. "I really believe that the only limitations you put on anything are those imposed by yourself. That's one of things I love about coming to the UAE – the belief that anything is possible."

\* Erin McCafferty



A NatureMaker tree is constructed. Sandy Huffaker for The National