

Out of the blue – reflections of Dubai

“Why on earth are you going there? You’ll hate it.” Friends were not encouraging, but I was going to an important meeting.

“Hello”, dark blue eyes locked with mine and I felt reality tilt and reset itself. I was not expecting that.

Dubai takes you by surprise. It is a city where there should not be a city. Some of it is glamorous. It is a gilded building site, a sandpit full of expensive cars and shiny toys. Like a modern paradise garden, everything is reflected in still pools or mirrored tiles. But in the land of mirage, which view is real?

Famous for its skyline, it is all about the building. Think of a shape and build it. Go higher. Twist it like barley sugar and cover it in stardust. Make it glitter. Dream the impossible and make it happen. Put a ski slope in the desert, with real snow and penguins - no problem. Build the earth, or the solar system, in the Gulf and sell it off - done. Bring the nations of the world to this sliver of ancient desert to gawp and gaze and get rich. In that shuddering region, see how safe and tolerant it really is. Defy politics; defy geography; defy belief. Create rain, air-condition the bus stops and put phone chargers in the palm trees – of course. There is plenty of oil but no fresh water, so let the people drink the sea.

Come and party! Move from beach to bar to bed. Ignore the Arabian Desert which licks your heels, threatening to reclaim the city with every sandstorm. The Dubai Museum tells another story, of nomadic herders, gold

traders and pearl fishers who made quiet lives in the 'empty quarter'. Simple homes had wind towers with canvas sails to catch the breezes from the creek; the desert was able to support some life. But the medieval settlements have been overwritten in a generation. Out of the blue of the Arabian night, a futurescape has materialised. The wooden dhows on the creek are for tourists now, not fishermen. Celebrities, engineers, financiers and entrepreneurs have come. And they need workers, teachers, hoteliers, diplomats, doctors and nurses, to support them. The pace of change is a whirlwind which slices and splices a thousand and one lives into a surprising and uncomfortable storybox.

"I'm just going outside to warm up", I stepped onto the tiny balcony of a modest apartment to escape the fierce air-conditioning. There was the hum of traffic from the highway, the soft stew of the drains and the heat, of course, like something solid. But there was also the sound of half a thousand hammers from the building site below. Hundreds of square feet of pool deck were being landscaped. Sand was shovelled, palms were planted and pools were tiled in every shade of blue. I watched the walls being prepared for the rolls of mosaic. At the beginning of June, it felt dangerous to be outside during the middle of the day; the pavements had melted my shoes. But more than a hundred men, in blue overalls, worked on regardless. Clink, clink, uncomfortable clink.

Rumours are rife. Ten years ago, when the money stopped flowing, Dubai's development stuttered. If the oil runs out, or we stop needing it, how

will they keep the desert at bay? If the earth continues to heat up, life in the futurescape will be intolerable and the people will retreat. What will happen to the glittering toys in the sandpit? Will the desert gradually creep back when no one wants to play anymore?

“This is more like it”, it was dawn and we were at an oasis outside the city. Birds gasped in the buzzing heat. Sand grouse hid. There was the flicker of shrike and a dazzling bee-eater. Flamingo gathered on shimmering pools and, not far away, the tawny dune rippled into the heat haze. Natural Dubai pre-dates us and it will out-live us.

I felt splintered by impossible Dubai. My expectations had been overturned. It is a place of hope and no hope, of spinning ideas and spiralling dreams, nightmares and fairy tales. It reflects the best of us and the worst of us.

“Goodbye”, the meeting was over and I staggered home to a new version of normal. At the beginning of the desert summer, in one of Dubai’s glittering towers, my first grandchild was born. So, I too have joined the storybox of that sapphire city. Connected now, in a most unexpected way, I left a bit of my heart there. They said I would hate Dubai, but I will go back very soon.