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Moving to United Arab Emirates

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Table of Contents

- **Introduction**
- **Chapter 1** Introduction to the United Arab Emirates
- **Chapter 2** Visas and Residency
- **Chapter 3** Finding Accommodation
- **Chapter 4** Cost of Living
- **Chapter 5** Employment
- **Chapter 6** Finance and Banking
- **Chapter 7** Healthcare
- **Chapter 8** Education
- **Chapter 9** Transportation
- **Chapter 10** Culture and Lifestyle
- **Chapter 11** Setting Up
- **Chapter 12** Relocation Logistics
- **Chapter 13** Leaving the UAE
- **Chapter 14** Key Considerations: Pros and Cons
- **Chapter 15** Navigating Bureaucracy
- **Chapter 16** Leisure and Recreation
- **Chapter 17** Understanding Local Etiquette
- **Chapter 18** Social Life and Making Friends
- **Chapter 19** Family Life in the UAE

- **Chapter 20** Working in Different Industries
- **Chapter 21** The Real Estate Market
- **Chapter 22** Understanding Expat Rules and Regulations
- **Chapter 23** Tips for Successful Integration
- **Chapter 24** Language and Communication
- **Chapter 25** Coping with Climate and Environmental Conditions

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Introduction

Welcome to the United Arab Emirates, a land where skyscrapers touch the sky and malls are as vast as small towns. This book is your guide to navigating your move to this unique and vibrant country, where tradition meets modernity in the most extravagant ways. Are you ready to trade your winter coat for something more breathable and embrace the glittering sands of the Arabian Peninsula? Let's dive in!

You may already have experience moving from one country to another, or perhaps this is your first time considering an international leap. Either way, relocating to the UAE requires more than just packing your bags and booking a flight. You'll need to navigate through a labyrinth of paperwork, choose the right part of one of its stunning emirates to call home, and find the perfect opportunity to launch or continue your career. But don't worry, we've got you covered with practical tips and insights that cut through the noise.

While we've packed this guide with as much useful information as possible, one thing is crucial to remember: laws, regulations, and circumstances in the UAE are as dynamic as its skyline. By the time you settle in, a new skyscraper might very well have changed the cityscape, and regulations often keep pace. Use this book as a roadmap, but for the latest on visas, work laws, or the right way to navigate bureaucracy, always refer to official channels or consult with experts. Think of this guide as your friendly co-pilot, not the autopilot.

Our goal here is to make your transition not just survivable, but enjoyable. You'll find just the right amount of humor to spice up the somewhat daunting process of moving. After all, life is too short to be taken too seriously! So, prepare yourself for some chuckles along with the serious bits. Expat life in the UAE is quite the adventure, and the experience varies greatly depending on which of the seven emirates you choose to call home, so weigh your options wisely.

In these pages, you'll learn about everything from the nitty-gritty of obtaining the right visa to the peculiarities of local traffic rules (like that sneaky Salik toll gate). We will explore the high-stakes world of Dubai's rental market, the delicious eclectic food scene, and how to handle the sometimes peculiar challenges of desert living. And while some people might think of the area as a tax-free shopping paradise—it's so much more than that.

So, buckle up and keep this book handy as you embark on what promises to be an exciting chapter of your life. Here's wishing you an enriching experience in the UAE, filled with fascinating stories to share with friends and family back home. Enjoy the

ride!

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CHAPTER ONE: Introduction to the United Arab Emirates

So, you're thinking of moving to the United Arab Emirates. Fantastic choice! Or perhaps a slightly bewildering one, depending on what images the name conjures up. Maybe you picture towering skyscrapers piercing the desert haze, impossibly luxurious hotels, or vast shopping malls where you can ski indoors while it's scorching hot outside. You wouldn't be entirely wrong, but like any destination worth its salt (or, in this case, sand), the UAE is a place of surprising contrasts and complexities, wrapped in a fascinating blend of deep-rooted tradition and hyper-modern ambition.

First things first, let's get the name straight: *United Arab Emirates*. The 'United' part is key. This isn't a single entity like France or Japan, but a federation, a team of seven distinct emirates that banded together back in 1971. Think of it less like a homogenous country and more like a close-knit, sometimes competitive, family of states, each with its own ruler, its own character, and its own set of priorities. While they operate under a federal umbrella, particularly for things like defence and foreign policy, stepping across an emirate border can sometimes feel like entering a slightly different world, with variations in local laws, costs, and overall vibe. Understanding these differences is crucial, because choosing *which* emirate to call home is probably the first major decision you'll make.

Let's start with the big cheese, the capital, **Abu Dhabi**. If the UAE were a corporation, Abu Dhabi would be the chairman of the board, holding the majority shares thanks to its vast oil wealth. It's the largest emirate by land area - seriously, it accounts for about 87% of the UAE's total territory - and it carries a certain gravitas. It's home to the federal government, numerous embassies, and the stunning Sheikh Zayed Grand Mosque, a structure so breathtakingly beautiful it might make you momentarily forget the eye-watering summer heat. Abu Dhabi often cultivates an image that's perhaps a touch more measured and traditionally grounded compared to its flashy neighbour, Dubai.

Life in Abu Dhabi is often described as being slightly more relaxed, perhaps more family-oriented, than Dubai. While it boasts its own impressive skyline, world-class attractions like the Louvre Abu Dhabi, and Formula 1 racing glamour on Yas Island, there's a sense that it's not trying quite so hard to grab the world's headlines. The pace can feel a little less frantic, the development perhaps more planned and deliberate. It's a major business centre in its own right, especially in energy and finance, but it also places a strong emphasis on culture and preserving heritage. If you're looking for a blend of significant career opportunities, high living standards, and

a slightly more sedate (by UAE standards) pace of life, Abu Dhabi might be your sweet spot. Don't mistake sedate for sleepy, though; there's plenty happening, it just whispers its sophistication rather than shouting it from the rooftops.

And then there's **Dubai**. Ah, Dubai. The emirate that needs no introduction, the one that put the UAE on the global map for many people. If Abu Dhabi is the chairman, Dubai is the flamboyant CEO, always pushing the envelope, chasing the next big thing, and ensuring everyone knows about it. It's the land of the Burj Khalifa, the world's tallest building (for now, anyway - Dubai likes a challenge), sprawling malls, man-made islands shaped like palm trees, and enough gold in the souks to make a dragon blush. It's a global hub for tourism, finance, real estate, logistics, and increasingly, technology.

Dubai operates at a dizzying pace. Construction is constant; the skyline you see today might look subtly different next month. There's an infectious energy, a 'can-do' spirit that attracts ambitious professionals and entrepreneurs from every corner of the globe. It's undeniably cosmopolitan, with a vast array of restaurants, bars (in licensed venues, of course!), and entertainment options catering to almost every taste and budget. However, this dynamism comes with its own set of characteristics: life can be fast-paced, traffic can be legendary (though the Metro helps), and the cost of living, especially housing in prime areas, can be steep. Dubai is a city of superlatives, constantly reinventing itself. If you thrive on energy, ambition, and having literally everything at your fingertips, Dubai is likely calling your name.

Just a short drive from the dazzling lights of Dubai lies **Sharjah**, the federation's cultural heartland. Recognized by UNESCO as the Cultural Capital of the Arab World back in 1998, Sharjah takes its heritage seriously. This emirate boasts a wealth of museums (ranging from Islamic civilization to classic cars), art galleries, heritage areas, and educational institutions, including prominent universities. It consciously cultivates a more conservative and family-friendly atmosphere compared to Dubai. For instance, Sharjah has stricter regulations regarding alcohol - it's largely dry, with sales and consumption heavily restricted even within hotels. The dress code is also generally expected to be more modest.

Many expats choose to live in Sharjah for its more affordable housing options compared to neighbouring Dubai, commuting across the border for work. Be warned, though: this commuter belt lifestyle comes with a significant trade-off in the form of notoriously heavy traffic during peak hours. The Sharjah-Dubai commute can test the patience of even the calmest soul. However, if you appreciate a slower pace, value cultural pursuits, seek a more traditional environment, or are looking for relatively lower rents, Sharjah offers a distinct and worthwhile alternative within the central hub of the UAE. It's a place that prioritizes substance and heritage alongside development.

Next up is **Ajman**, the smallest of the seven emirates, nestled along the coast

between Sharjah and Umm Al Quwain. For a long time, Ajman was perhaps overlooked, overshadowed by its larger neighbours. However, it's been steadily developing, carving out its own niche. It boasts a significant free zone that attracts numerous businesses with its competitive setup costs and streamlined processes. The emirate is also gaining popularity as a residential location, offering significantly lower living costs than Dubai or Abu Dhabi while still being within commuting distance (traffic permitting, naturally).

Ajman offers a more laid-back, less pretentious atmosphere. You'll find pleasant beaches, a developing corniche area, and a sense of community that can sometimes feel lost in the sheer scale of the bigger cities. While it might not have the headline-grabbing attractions of Dubai or the cultural heft of Sharjah, it provides a comfortable and increasingly modern living environment at a more accessible price point. Think of it as the practical, down-to-earth sibling in the emirate family, quietly getting on with things and offering solid value. If budget is a major factor, or you prefer a less overwhelming urban experience, Ajman deserves serious consideration.

Heading further north along the coast, we find **Umm Al Quwain (UAQ)**. This emirate often feels like a step back in time compared to the hustle and bustle elsewhere. It's one of the least populated emirates and retains a distinctly traditional character. Development here has been much slower and less dramatic, which for some is precisely its appeal. UAQ is known for its rich history, with archaeological sites dating back millennia. Its landscape features serene mangrove forests along the coast, providing important habitats for birdlife, and it's long been associated with fishing and traditional boat building.

Life in Umm Al Quwain is quiet. Very quiet. If you're seeking tranquility, a genuine escape from the urban sprawl, and a glimpse into the UAE's pre-oil past, UAQ offers it. Entertainment options are more limited, and the pace of life is decidedly slow. It's perhaps less common as a primary destination for expats unless their work is based there, but it serves as a peaceful residential base for some who commute, or a weekend escape for those living in busier emirates. It's also home to a popular waterpark, Dreamland Aqua Park, which provides a splash of modern fun amidst the traditional surroundings. UAQ is the quiet neighbour who enjoys their peace and heritage.

Then we have **Ras Al Khaimah (RAK)**, the northernmost emirate, which has been actively raising its profile in recent years. RAK offers a compelling mix of stunning natural landscapes and growing economic opportunities. It boasts the UAE's highest mountain peak, Jebel Jais, part of the rugged Hajar mountain range, which has become a major centre for adventure tourism, offering hiking, camping, and the world's longest zipline (for those brave enough!). RAK also has beautiful beaches, terracotta-coloured deserts, and lush mangroves, making it arguably the most geographically diverse emirate.

Beyond tourism, RAK has a strong industrial base, particularly in ceramics (RAK Ceramics is a global name), pharmaceuticals, and construction materials. It also has successful free zones attracting a range of international businesses. The lifestyle in RAK is generally considered more relaxed and outdoorsy than in Dubai or Abu Dhabi, and the cost of living tends to be lower. It's gaining popularity with expats seeking a balance between career opportunities, natural beauty, and a less hectic pace of life. If the concrete jungle feels overwhelming, RAK's mountains and beaches might be the perfect antidote. It's the adventurous, nature-loving member of the family.

Finally, we arrive at **Fujairah**, the only emirate situated entirely on the Gulf of Oman coast (the eastern side of the peninsula), separated from the others by the Hajar Mountains. This unique location gives Fujairah a different character. It has a major port that's strategically important, particularly for oil exports, as it bypasses the Strait of Hormuz. The coastline is known for its excellent diving and snorkeling opportunities, attracting water sports enthusiasts. The presence of the mountains creates dramatic scenery and slightly different climatic conditions compared to the western coast.

Fujairah retains a more traditional feel compared to the western emirates. While undergoing development, particularly in logistics and tourism, it doesn't have the same level of urban sprawl as Dubai or Abu Dhabi. Life here moves at a more measured pace, influenced by its maritime heritage and mountainous backdrop. It can feel somewhat isolated due to the mountain range separating it, but road connections are excellent. For expats whose work is tied to the port, related industries, or the growing tourism sector, or for those who simply love the ocean and a more rugged landscape, Fujairah offers a distinct lifestyle away from the main population centres. It's the rugged, sea-faring cousin, gazing out towards the Indian Ocean.

Understanding these seven distinct personalities is your first step. Your experience of the UAE will be heavily influenced by whether you land in bustling Dubai, stately Abu Dhabi, cultural Sharjah, laid-back Ajman, tranquil Umm Al Quwain, adventurous Ras Al Khaimah, or coastal Fujairah. Each offers a different flavour, a different cost structure, and a different rhythm of life.

Beyond the personalities of the individual emirates, the physical landscape of the UAE shapes life here more than you might initially think. Yes, there's sand. Lots of it. The iconic rolling dunes of the Empty Quarter (Rub' al Khali) stretch into the southern parts of the country, offering opportunities for dune bashing, desert camping, and contemplating the sheer vastness of it all. But it's not just desert. The coastline along the Persian Gulf (or Arabian Gulf, as it's locally known) is dotted with cities, beaches, and mangrove forests. To the east, the rugged Hajar Mountains provide a dramatic contrast, offering hiking trails, cooler temperatures, and stunning vistas, particularly in RAK and Fujairah. This geographical variety means weekend escapes can range from beach lounging to mountain trekking, all within a few hours' drive.

Now, about that weather. Let's not sugar-coat it: summers are hot. Seriously, fiercely hot. From roughly May to September, daytime temperatures regularly soar above 40°C (104°F), often accompanied by high humidity, especially near the coast. Life adapts accordingly; you'll move rapidly between air-conditioned homes, air-conditioned cars, and air-conditioned malls. Air conditioning isn't a luxury here; it's a fundamental utility, possibly more important than running water (okay, maybe not, but it feels like it in August). The upside? Winters (roughly November to March) are absolutely delightful – sunny, warm, and perfect for outdoor activities. Rainfall is scarce, but when it does rain, it can sometimes be surprisingly intense, briefly transforming the landscape and occasionally causing localised flooding because, well, the infrastructure isn't always designed for downpours.

Governing this diverse federation is a unique system. At the top sits the Federal Supreme Council, comprising the rulers of each of the seven emirates. This council elects the President (traditionally the ruler of Abu Dhabi) and the Vice President (traditionally the ruler of Dubai, who also serves as Prime Minister). While there's a federal government handling national issues, each emirate's ruler retains significant power within their own territory, overseeing local government, economic development, and social affairs. This explains the variations in laws and regulations you might encounter between emirates. The ruling families are highly respected, and their influence permeates many aspects of life. This structure has provided remarkable stability and allowed for consistent, long-term planning and development, a factor often cited as a major positive by businesses and residents alike.

The UAE's economic story is one of dramatic transformation. While oil and gas, primarily from Abu Dhabi, laid the foundations for its wealth, the country has made massive strides in diversifying its economy over the past few decades. Visionary leadership recognized early on that oil wouldn't last forever (or at least, shouldn't be the sole reliance). Today, sectors like tourism, aviation (think Emirates and Etihad airlines), international trade and logistics (thanks to major ports like Jebel Ali in Dubai), real estate, financial services, and increasingly technology and renewable energy are vital components of the GDP. Dubai, in particular, has positioned itself as a global business crossroads, leveraging its strategic location and world-class infrastructure. Free zones – designated areas with special tax and regulatory regimes – have been instrumental in attracting foreign investment and businesses across various industries. This constant push for diversification means the economic landscape is dynamic, creating opportunities but also requiring adaptability.

And what about the people? This is perhaps one of the most unique aspects of the UAE. Emirati citizens, while holding all the key positions in government and strongly influencing the national identity, actually make up only about 10-15% of the total population. The vast majority – close to 90% – are expatriates, hailing from over 200 different countries. This creates an incredibly diverse, multicultural environment,

particularly in the major cities. Walk down a street in Dubai, and you'll hear dozens of languages spoken. Your colleagues, neighbours, and friends are likely to come from all corners of the globe.

This melting pot makes the UAE a relatively easy place for newcomers to blend in, as almost everyone is from somewhere else. English is the de facto language of business and daily life in most urban areas, although Arabic is the official language, and learning even a few basic phrases will be greatly appreciated (and occasionally very useful). While rooted in Islamic tradition, the UAE generally adopts a tolerant approach towards other cultures and religions, allowing freedom of worship within designated spaces. However, respect for local customs, traditions, and laws, which are influenced by Islam, is absolutely essential. Topics like appropriate dress in public places, behaviour during the holy month of Ramadan, and restrictions on alcohol are things you'll need to understand and navigate carefully (we'll delve deeper into these in later chapters). Despite the cultural mix, or perhaps because of it, the UAE consistently ranks as one of the safest countries in the world, with very low crime rates, which is a major draw for many expats, especially families.

So, that's the UAE in a rather large nutshell: a dynamic federation of seven distinct emirates, blending desert landscapes with futuristic cityscapes, powered by a diversifying economy, and populated by a truly global community, all living under the umbrella of traditional values and modern ambitions. It's a place of immense opportunity, dazzling sights, and unique experiences, but also one that requires understanding, respect, and a willingness to adapt. Consider this your orientation - the basic lay of the land before we start getting into the nitty-gritty of actually making the move. Up next, we tackle the thrilling world of visas and residency permits - don't worry, we'll try to make it less painful than it sounds!

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