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Practical guide to relocating to the UAE

REGIONAL OVERVIEW

The UAE (United Arab Emirates) is a small country on the Arabian Peninsula, sandwiched between Saudi Arabia, Oman and Yemen to the south. It is a member of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), an EU-like organisation that provides a framework for an open market and the free movement of people. All GCC citizens are able to relocate across the GCC without hindrance.

All GCC countries are Islamic and are governed by Islamic law. The Emirate of Dubai is widely accepted as the most liberal and tolerant place in the GCC.

The UAE is a relatively young country, established in 1971. It is a Federal system of seven States called Emirates (each one is ruled by an emir), the capital being Abu Dhabi. The other Emirates are Dubai, Fujairah, Ajman, Ras al-Khaima, Umm al-Quwain and Sharjah.

According to the official 2009 census, the population of the UAE is 5,671,112. However, since the financial crisis many ex-pat workers have left. The most populated city is Dubai and more than 88% of the population live in urbanised areas.

CULTURE

The UAE, like all GCC nations, is an Islamic country. The judicial system is based on Sharia law. This fact should be remembered at all times by ex-pat residents. None of the GCC countries have democratic political systems. Each Emirate is ruled by its own ruling family but a Federal Government governs across the country, which is populated with members of each Emirate's ruling families.

Abu Dhabi is a conservative Emirate in comparison to Dubai, which is recognised as being the most liberal Emirate in the GCC. Whilst it is technically illegal for tourists to drink alcohol, Dubai has hundreds of bars, restaurants and nightclubs where alcohol is consumed freely by tourists and residents. Residents must carry an alcohol licence in order to legally consume alcohol. In practice, however, many do not and they risk arrest by doing so.

Any ex-pat resident or tourist will be judged under the laws of the country, irrespective of their circumstances and anybody entering the UAE or other GCC country should be made aware of this. Public displays of affection are frowned upon and kissing in public is illegal. Men and women are advised to dress modestly when in public, particularly in malls where many local families congregate. Whilst beach wear is perfectly acceptable on the beach, it is advisable to keep it confined to the beach. No nudity is tolerated anywhere – not even in the changing rooms of gymnasiums where members are advised to protect their modesty by changing in cubicles.

Prayer day is Friday and it is a non-working day for almost everybody except those working in cafes, shops etc. Muslims pray five times a day and Friday is a particularly religious day when lunchtime prayers are very important.

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Whilst the moral code may appear strict to individuals not used to being in a Muslim environment; the vast majority of the local indigenous population are extremely tolerant and welcoming to westerners.

Almost everybody in the region speaks English to a greater or lesser degree and English is the default business language. If you decide to learn Arabic you will receive a very warm response from Arab nationals. Interestingly, there are significant differences in the kind of Arabic spoken across the Arab world and the further away one gets from the Gulf – the Levant for example – the bigger the differences.

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

All GCC countries are free of income tax. However, most countries operate smaller, less noticeable forms of taxation. Dubai charges a government levy on meals in restaurants and a hefty tax is levied on alcohol. For this reason, alcohol is very expensive in the UAE. There is no VAT on general goods and no council tax. Dubai installed a road tax system in 2008 and there are now several road tolls known as SALIK across the city. Drivers using the main highways are automatically charged every time they pass under a SALIK road toll.

All UK citizens are advised to seek advice from a financial adviser or tax consultant before committing to relocation to a new tax regime. Laws governing the taxation of non-residents change frequently so it is important to get up to date advice from HMRC.

Salaries in the marketing and communications industry remain competitive on an international basis. Typically, most individuals should be commanding a similar salary to that earned in London but without paying tax. Sadly, the days of the ex-pat package are long gone so the streets are no longer paved with gold.

Apartments and villas are now reasonably priced in Dubai since the housing market collapsed during the recession. The price of accommodation in Abu Dhabi is still comparatively higher and we would advise that anybody moving to any GCC country research the cost of living.

It is also worth noting that there is no welfare state for ex-pats in the region so 'public' services must be paid for. School fees vary and again, parents need to consider the cost of fees before relocating. Health insurance tends to be provided by most employers and it is essential to have healthcare because there is no national health service in the UAE.

VISA REQUIREMENTS

Your employer will sponsor you either within or outside of a free zone. All costs for the visa will be met by your employer. We advise serious caution if your employer is asking you to pay for your own visa.

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You will need to provide evidence of your degree certificate before your visa is issued and we advise all ex-pats to have their degrees attested by a lawyer as soon as possible. If you do not have a degree, check with your potential employer as to whether or not your employment can proceed. Most government organisations in the GCC refuse to hire anybody who does not have a degree – except in exceptional circumstances.

You will need to undergo blood tests as part of the entry procedure, which includes an HIV test and x-rays for TB. Once complete you will receive an Employment Card (labour card) and a residency visa. The whole process should take between four to six weeks.

RELOCATION

Relocating to the region is easy. The flight is only seven hours from the UK and the region is designed to accommodate ex-pats. Ordinarily, upon arrival, you will be collected from the airport and you will be put up in a hotel for, typically, two weeks. The cost of this is usually borne by the employer and it provides you with ample time to meet with real estate agents who will help you find an apartment or villa.

Many landlords will ask for a year's rent up front – this is normal practice in the GCC. However because of the recession and the impact on house prices (and rental demand) some landlords will accept four pre-signed post-dated cheques.

The majority of employers will provide rent cheques and agency fees (typically 5% of the annual rent) as a loan so you do not need to worry about finding a year's rent immediately. The requisite monthly rent amount will then be deducted from your salary over twelve months.

LOGISTICS

The UAE and other GCC countries can be bureaucratic. Banks, real estate agents and utility suppliers like to have vast reams of paperwork and evidence provided such as salary certificates, passport copies and passport photos. Candidates are advised to bring twenty passport photos with them when they move here.

A bank account can take several weeks to open, however during these weeks most employers will pay the individual in cash until the bank account is set up.

Once you are a resident you will no longer be legally allowed to drive using your UK driving licence and you will need to attend the Roads and Transport Authority (RTA) to apply for a UAE driving licence.

The UAE is not a country that is designed for walking and taxis are increasingly expensive, so it is highly advisable to buy a car. Second hand cars are easy to find on www.dubizzle.com