

AT HOME WITH CO-FOUNDER OF DUBAI'S ARTE SOUKH MIRIAM WALSH



in the middle of the desert and the World Trade Centre was the tallest building here. Everything more or less stopped at Jumeirah 3. They had just finished the Magrudy's centre on Beach Road and it was like our country store. If you wanted a pair of jeans, you had to go to Al Gurair Centre in Deira."

Do you prefer 'old' or 'new' Dubai?

"Probably 'old' Dubai. It was an amazing place. It was small, but my area was vast, because I could travel around easily. I would think nothing of going to visit a friend in Sharjah because I could whizz there and back in a morning. Now, because of traffic, my area has shrunk to a pinprick."

What are your favourite places here?

"I love the depths of the Al Aweer and Al Ain deserts where you're surrounded by silence and pristine sand. And I adore the sunset from the Offshore Sailing Club in Umm Suqeim."

What did you do here before getting involved in the arts scene?

"When I arrived, my daughter, Josie, was a toddler and in 1993 and we had our second child, Justin, so I was busy. But I settled comfortably into being a corporate wife and charity worker with the Arabian Leopard Trust. Then when Justin was 8 and Josie was 10, I went through a profound change. The children were that bit older and they didn't need me in the same way and I began to think: 'but what about me?'"

What attracted you to working with wool and felt?

"I always felt I wanted to do something artistic. But I didn't come from an artistic family and I thought: 'I'm not good enough.' Women are particularly vulnerable to feeling insecure, I think, but at some point you just have to follow your gut feeling. I'm self-taught. I just got the book and the materials one day and did it."

Your shawls are very beautiful. How do you make them?

"On my dining room table! I buy skeins of natural sheep's wool over the Internet from places like Australia and England then I dye them myself. To turn the raw material into felting I take tufts of different colours and lay them out on the table and rub them over with water and olive oil soap. Eventually the fibres entangle. I also add silk sometimes which gives texture and contrast."

These scarves would look at home in Harvey Nichols – are they available anywhere else apart from ARTE Soukh?

"No, I've never thought about going into shops because I'm not very good at commissions. I can make two scarves a day but I prefer to say to people: 'This is what I've got at the moment, I hope you like it.' I absolutely glow if someone puts on one of my shawls and they look good in it. But I'm not in this for the money. I only opened my own bank account this summer. It's taken me 18 years!"

Why did you decide to start ARTE Soukh?

"After I had been making my scarves for a while I tried to sell them at some of the local markets without much luck. The hosts seemed to put so little effort into publicising the events that you'd sometimes get no customers. My friend, Paul Townsend, is a silversmith and felt the same way. So one day we just said: 'Let's do something ourselves.' Our first market was September 2005

Miriam Walsh is the co-founder of ARTE Soukh, a monthly art and craft market that has become an essential part of the Dubai experience for shopping cognoscenti. Thousands of people flock to the event at Times Square to pick up the kind of hand-made, one-off items you just can't buy in malls. Fans include Dubai 92 breakfast show hosts Catboy and Geordie Bird, fashion designer Aisha Ramadan and leading local families. Dutch-born Miriam, 48, decided to set up the souk three years ago when she couldn't find anywhere to sell her own exquisite felted scarves. Miriam invited HELLO! into her home in one of the oldest villas in Dubai to talk about how ARTE Soukh provides the perfect antidote to Dubai's 'bling shopping culture'.

Your villa is lovely, very homely. How long have you lived here?

"It's been 12 years now and it's probably the best thing about being in Dubai for me. The house is single storey and one of 11 in a compound built 45

years ago and it's full of things I have collected over the years from little shops that don't exist anymore. Like my huge Omani camel case made from kilim material and my carved wooden Omani door. My daughter Josie is studying photography and graphic design in South Africa, so there's a lot of her work around here, too. And it's wonderfully quiet. All I can hear are the parrots shrieking and the lizards in the garden."

How long have you lived in Dubai altogether?

"I've lived here 18 years. Our first house was opposite Jumeirah Beach Park. We came to the Middle East because my English husband Stephen got a posting with the company BP. We were due to come shortly after Iraq invaded Kuwait in August 1990 but the British government said it was too dangerous so I delayed it six weeks."

When you finally got here at the end of 1990, what was Dubai like?

"Whatever was happening in the region, it was really quiet here. There were just 13 buildings on the whole of Sheikh Zayed Road, Zabeel Palace was



Above: Artist Miriam Walsh decided to set up ARTE Soukh three years ago in Dubai when she couldn't find anywhere to sell her felted scarves. Among her clients are premiership footballers, designers and beauty queens who have all commissioned work

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at the Crowne Plaza and after a year we moved to the Al Ghazal centre. We've been at Times Square since March. We now have 920 vendors on our books." **What can people expect when they turn up to one of your souks?**

"It's a bit like walking into the kind of crafts market you find in Europe and Australia. You can come for an afternoon's stroll but equally you can buy art for your house or gifts for a friend and find someone who can restore a watercolour all in one place. Everything is handmade in the UAE and no two pieces are the same. There is jewellery in silver, pearls and crystal, fine art, photography, patchworking, quilting, toys and hand-turned wooden objects. I personally like the jewellery made from paper."

Do you have any celebrity buyers?

"English premiership footballers, ambassadors, designers and beauty queens have all bought or commissioned work from our artisans. One man was going out for dinner with a recent Miss India and bought a silver and Swarovski jewellery set from

Chantelle Beaupre. A senior US official here buys jewellery from Paul and fashion designer Aiisha Ramadan has bought a necklace from Kaleidoscope Designs. Dubai 92's Catboy and Geordie Bird love the place and this year started selling their own photography on canvas. They often talk about us on the radio. Leading local families also send representatives to buy things for them."

So are the goods on sale at the souk expensive?

"No, but some people think we are a flea market and expect bargains, which is frustrating. In fact the prices reflect the amount of time it takes for an item to be crafted by hand. Some of our canvases retail at up to Dhs5000, but if anything, that's comparatively cheap, because our artists don't have to pass on gallery costs."

How does the souk make a profit, then?

"It doesn't. We charge people Dhs200 a table, which covers our costs and allows us to put money into advertising and marketing. We also give free tables to charity."

Which charities do you support?

"K 9 Friends, Feline Friends and the Ajman Ladies Group. The group sells traditional handicrafts such as bags and wall hangings made by Ajmani women who have no husbands or income. At their first stall in 2007 they raised enough money to send two children to school for a whole year and they were crying with joy."

So do you see yourselves as an antidote to Dubai's 'bling shopping culture'?

"Yes, a bit. I know I feel all shopped out, so perhaps other people do too! I'd like to think that our customers come to us when they are fed up with walking around malls full of stuff they don't need and can't relate to." **H**

ARTE Soukh's next event is on Friday 12th and Saturday 13th December, from noon-7pm, at Times Square mall.

TEXT BY MICHELE MARTIN
PHOTOS BY FAROOQ SALIK