

Climb mountains, fight stereotypes

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Hiking journey opens eyes and horizons

Women say trip to Austria helped change ideas about UAE, Emirati females and themselves

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DUBAI // Four Emirati women who have just returned from a hiking trip to Austria say their journey not only helped them break down stereotypes about the UAE but also taught them a valuable lesson about themselves.

"We are really not that different," said Salwan al Shaibani, a Dubai-based risk manager and member of the group. "We are just as willing to take chances, challenges and be as independent."

As foreign as their environment was to them, everyone they spoke to knew about the Emirates

The women pulled on backpacks to undertake the 80-kilometre five-day hike south-west from the capital, Vienna, to the market town of Bad Goisern. One of the aims of their journey was to tackle preconceived ideas about their country and, in particular, female Emiratis.

"During our hiking journey, we came across people from small villages who were surprised to see Emirati females hiking by themselves without a guide," Ms Shaibani said.

The stereotypes, she said, are probably a result of restrictions on past generations that the media blew out of proportion.

"It can be frustrating how some view us as completely unapproachable, so we are telling the world we can be conservative and traditional but open at the same time," she said.

The tour was organised by Journey Through Change, a Dubai life-organising company run by Hala Kazim, 47.

"I wanted to show the ladies and men in our communities, there are more things to life," said Mrs Kazim. "This was not just a walking trip: I exposed them to different cultures, showed them how to absorb the beauty around them, and counselled them as we walked."

The group, composed of women from their mid-20s to 40s, hiked through mountainous terrain, past green fields, farms and villages. And as foreign as their environment was to them, everyone they spoke to knew about the Emirates.



Left to right, Maha Jabi, 32, Salwan al Shaibani, 39, and Aida al Busaidy, 27, hiking in Austria. Courtesy of Hala Kazim

"Even in the small villages, there was not one person we met that did not know about the UAE," Mrs Kazim said.

Aida al Busaidy, a communications specialist based in Dubai, said: "A few years ago I would have been surprised that almost 99 per cent of the people we met knew about the Emirates but today the UAE is very well marketed globally."

The women carried a UAE flag with them, which they took out for photo opportunities along the way.

"It was one of the most astounding experiences I have had," said Mrs Kazim. "I made the girls meet, talk and take pictures with people and it was so easy for them. No one could believe we were the first Emirati women to do something like this."

El-Sayed El-Aswad, a professor in the department of sociology at UAE University, praised the women for travelling to a western country while maintaining their identity and traditions.

"This was their way of saying: 'Look, we are Emirati women, we are not oppressed or abused – we are great.'"

Miss al Busaidy said the trip signified a small step towards something bigger. "The hike opened our minds and is just the beginning. As soon as I arrived back home, a number of Emirati women expressed interest in going on a similar trip for the same reasons."

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