

Charmaine's Diary

12th April 2010

Monday

Day four in Dubai and I'm still trying to get my head around this city. Mind boggling to think that where the most incredible buildings now stand, was stark desert only forty years ago. What's also mind boggling is that the local Emiratis are so outnumbered; I see signs around the city proclaiming "195 languages to practice your language on". An adventurous start to a Monday morning as we are picked up by jeep and driven to the desert for a dune buggy safari. Having only passed my driving test last December I'm a little nervous but two minutes in the buggy and I'm getting notions about being the next Jenson Button. What a thrill! Hide from the sun in the afternoon. Talk to Mum on the phone and she tells me that the nation is mourning the death of Gerry Ryan. Watch the tribute to him on the Late Late Show on RTÉ Player – very sad. Later take a trip to Satwa, an area in Dubai that is like a step into the streets of India itself. Playing around with the idea of getting a dress made, we look at some materials and talk to some tailors but decide in the end that the timeframe is too tight. Do a quick tour of the newly opened Dubai museum before dinner. Five Irish carnivorous friends and I taste the delights of a cheap and cheerful Indian vegetarian restaurant. They are suitably surprised that a vegetarian meal can be so delicious. Take an abra, a traditional passenger ferry, across the Dubai creek. Home to early night's sleep.

Tuesday

Wake up like excited kids in anticipation for the day ahead. We go to the Atlantis Hotel on the Palm to go swimming with dolphins! We are paired up with *Black*, a 6 year old male who the trainer tells us is very popular with the lady dolphins. *Black* gives us a little peck on the cheek, dances with us, spins us around and even gives us a lift on his belly. Fascinating experience. Next stop is the Aqua Park where we brave all the slides including the *Leap of Faith* which has us drop near vertically for 27m at 35km/hr. We later retreat to the adjoining private beach to soak up some rays. As we travel back to the apartment that night we notice, for the first time since our arrival, the labour buses. These buses are loading up workers to transport them back to their camps, camps that are kept well out of sight to the visitor. We look out of our cab, and the workers look out of their bus, both of us probably wondering about the other. The reality is we will spend more on dinner that night than one of the labourers will earn in a month. These workers are what makes Dubai possible. They have built Dubai. Dubai is a great place in which to holiday but when you scratch beneath the surface, even just a little, it becomes uncomfortable.

Wednesday

A catch-up day. Emails, articles, phone calls, laundry. Before dinner my brother takes us around the DIFC (Dubai International Financial Centre) – a bit like the IFSC at home in Dublin – and shows us where he

works. I come from a family where everything revolves around food and my brother has lined up a different culinary delight every night. Tonight is a fine-dining vegetarian restaurant in the most exquisite setting. Divine.

Thursday

Travel the hour and half from Dubai to Yas Island in Abu Dhabi. The Abu Dhabi Rose of Tralee committee has organised a special VIP tour of the new Formula 1 Circuit. We are driven around the track learning the speeds at which the F1 drivers take corners, the science that has gone into the type of track surface selected and the careful management of the team pits. Very exciting. Later attend the Abu Dhabi Rose selection ball. Delight in the opportunity to catch up with Clodagh Fleming, the 2009 Abu Dhabi Rose, who went on to be chosen as the Dubai Rose and with whom I spent time with in Tralee. My brother organises a table of his Dubai friends to come down for the night to lend their support. Great fun.

Friday

A late start after a late night. Meet with some friends from Ireland who show us the spots in Abu Dhabi – the Grand Mosque which boasts the largest carpet in the world as well as the largest chandelier (it's not Waterford Crystal. I asked), the Emirates Palace hotel, the most leaning building in the world which leans more than the Leaning Tower of Pisa at an angle of 18 degrees, and a building in the shape of a round coin that stands upright. Back in Dubai we go on a very unusual handbag shopping adventure to see if the "genuine fakes" of the Karama suburb tickle our fancy. We are first shown an ordinary shop and then invited to view the collection of the "secret shop". After waiting on the side of the street to be given a signal, we enter a closed shop, pass through a kitchen, up a stairway, through another shop where a shelf turns into a door which has some sort of magnetic technology for security. Hilarious. There are four of us plus the retailer "Elvis" whose haircut did the name justice. Some of the girls with me indulge but I am happy to stick with my Newbridge leather bag for now.

Saturday

My brother and his girlfriend have been unbelievably generous and fun hosts and it is with sadness that we say our goodbyes in the morning. Board the 15 hour flight to Sydney. Watch a string of movies that leave me inspired: *Invictus* (the true story of how Nelson Mandela paired up with the captain of the South African rugby team to unite their country), *By the People: The Election of Barack Obama* and *This Is It: Michael Jackson*.

Sunday

Bleary-eyed, we arrive into Sydney airport to be met by Tom O'Keefe of the Sydney Rose Centre at 6.30am. An absolute saint. Catch up on a few hours sleep. Tom later takes us to a traditional Irish pub where a weekly trad session is taking place. Romy Farrelly, the 2009 Sydney Rose, arrives in with her family and I couldn't be happier to be reunited with this vibrant woman who was my roommate and great friend in Tralee last August.