

Dubai's newly opened Coffee Museum houses both traditional Arabic and international coffee implements including beans from African and South American countries (bottom).



DUBAI SPILLS THE BEANS

SIPPING COFFEE FROM AROUND THE WORLD AT THE U.A.E'S FIRST COFFEE MUSEUM

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It is a sobering thought that I owe my productive existence to a bunch of dancing goats in faraway Ethiopia. Without my morning cuppa of joe (or three), I can barely be called a sentient human being even though I am up and about through the day.

Now, about those goats: Legend has it that centuries ago in Ethiopia, a goatherd named Kaldi noticed his goats getting rather frisky after eating a particular kind of red berries. A brew made of the same red berries apparently helped monks at a local monastery stay awake through night-time prayers. Few hundred years later these berries found their way to the port of Mocha in Yemen, where locals roasted them and made a beverage—the earliest version of coffee as we know it was born.

Beginning sometime in A.D. 1400, the coffee juggernaut rolled unstopped from Yemen to countries like Egypt, to Turkey and Europe though the

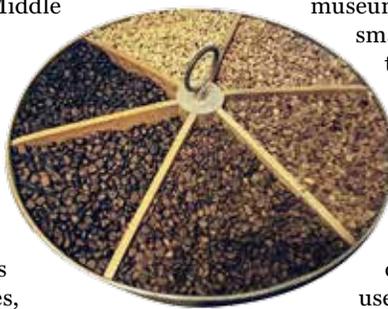
Ottoman Empire, and then to South America. Coffee beans are said to have travelled to India in the folds of 17th-century Sufi saint Baba Budan's garments. On his way home to Chikmagalur, Karnataka, from a pilgrimage to Mecca, he came across the beans in Mocha and carried some back.

While I already knew some of these facts about my favourite beverage, I have just learnt a lot more at the newly opened Coffee Museum in Dubai, the first of its kind in the Middle East. It is housed in a refurbished traditional Emirati home tucked away in the heritage Al-Bastakiya neighbourhood, also known as Al Fahidi Historical District. Filled with quirky cafés and vibrant art galleries,

this area in old Dubai, which was established by Persian pearl merchants in the 19th century, is an ideal setting for this museum that was built up over seven years.

A heady aroma of coffee greets me as soon as I step in. It is late afternoon and a caffeine hit is long overdue; my longing for a cup only intensifies thanks to the scent wafting in the air. However, the tour comes first and instead of my nose I follow Mahmoud Bawardi, who is a public relations executive at the museum, into the majlis—a small sitting room near the main entrance.

Inside, Bawardi explains the uses of the various Arabic coffee implements on display. There is a massive iron griddle called *al mehmas* used for roasting beans





Salam serves Ethiopian coffee to visitors at the museum (left), pairing the strong concoction with *kholo* or roasted wheat; Festooned with quirky coffee posters (middle), the museum's in-house café serves fresh brews from across the world (right).

and a mortar and pestle for grinding known as *al menhas*. As with all other exhibits on the ground floor, the *dallah* has pride of place here as well. This traditional brass coffee pot with a curved, beak-like spout is still used across the region to brew and serve coffee, especially to guests. Poured into dainty ceramic cups known as *fenjan*, Arabic coffee is thick and bitter and usually served with dates instead of sweeteners like sugar. Bawardi also tells me that according to the norms of Arabic hospitality, the *gahwa*, Arabic for coffee, keeps flowing, the *fenjans* refilled until the guest shakes the cup to indicate they've had their fill. The hospitality I'd received in Dubai so far notwithstanding, this concept alone is enough to make me want to settle down here.

Arabic coffee is not the only kind of coffee one can taste at the museum. In the adjoining room, I am welcomed with a smile by Salam from Ethiopia (or, Salam the Coffee Princess, in her words). She has a *dallah*, known as *jebena* in Ethiopia, and several ceramic *fenjans* neatly arranged on a table in front of her. My first thought is that she looks like she stepped out of the painting hanging on the wall behind her—that of an Ethiopian lady in traditional costume serving coffee out of a *jebena*.

Her Ethiopian coffee shot is fragrant and flavourful, with more than a hint of cardamom, and I reach out for a second

cup. But first, I must taste some of the popcorn in the bowl near the *jebena*, or the *kholo*, roasted wheat grains eaten to balance the strong taste of this coffee.

The adjoining central courtyard has an over six-foot-tall, custom-built Egyptian coffee machine that looks almost like a small throne attached to the wall. Abdulhamid Awad, the barista from Egypt, explains that in his country coffee is made in an *ibrik*, a metal pot with a long wooden handle, which is placed on a bed of sand heated by burning charcoal. The process seems complicated but I imagine people will go to quite a length for that perfect cup of coffee.

The lower level of the two-storey museum has three more rooms divided into Middle Eastern Antiques and International Antiques. Between them, there is an interesting display of coffee implements and utensils, used for roasting, grinding, brewing and serving. The collection is small but varied, from vintage European coffee tins to Yemeni clay pots and Turkish coffee bean roasters with folding handles. My particular favourite is the room with the hand grinders.

The sight of all these grinders immediately takes me back to childhood memories of my grandmother using a cast-iron handheld grinder—probably of antique value today—as the aroma of freshly roasted coffee beans tickled my senses making me long for the day I would be

allowed to throw away my glass of milk for a tumbler of frothy filter *kapi*. In the room, I linger in front of a pretty Delft blue painted piece from Holland, complete with windmills and streams, and a couple from Germany fashioned out of copper bullets, made during the Second World War when metals were scarce.

A single gallery on the museum's second floor is filled with literature and posters, including one that earnestly extols the "medical benefits of being addicted to coffee." As if I need such urging, I could easily spend few hours in this room, with its exquisite maps of coffee regions and charts detailing the 'shrub to mug' process.

Hanging from the skylight here are miniature flags of coffee-growing nations and I look for the Indian tricolour, spotting it as I walk to the last stop of my tour, the small café across the corridor. It stocks samples from around the globe and the barista fixes me a cup of his finest Colombian. A floating poster in front of me says 'Roasting Coffee, Brewing Harmony.' Ah well, what better reason than world peace to imbibe this drink of the gods? ■

ESSENTIALS

Open Sat-Thu 9 a.m.-5 p.m.;
entry free; coffeemuseum.ae;
+9714-3538777.