

The maestro

Starting a business requires a lot of time, energy and passion. Emirati entrepreneur Ali Alsloom certainly isn't lacking in this department. The determined UAE national is on a mission to become the cultural ambassador of the UAE

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One must appreciate Ali's beginnings to understand what made the young Emirati so dynamic today. Raised by extremely forward-looking parents, Ali gained his understanding, fascination and love for the world from his father. "My father is the inspiration in my life," Ali says. Ali's father was an educator but thought the most important thing for his son to learn was the diversity and wonders of the world, and so took him on frequent international trips. Ali is heavily influenced by his mentors; he says having inspirational leaders like the late HH Sheikh Zayed is one of the greatest things about being an Emirati. Ali produces a picture of him playing at the Al Jazeera Sports Club as a child; he now chairs the place in his spare time. Among his treasures, he has an old booklet showing his father in a team photograph from years ago.

On his father's advice, Ali studied hospitality and tourism at the University of Florida, an experience he remembers fondly and one that encouraged him to learn about different cultures. "The time that I spent in America was priceless," he says. "It was my youth." When he returned to the UAE, his true stripes showed. "When I arrived back, I had a great bachelor's degree and I gave it to my dad. He said: 'Great. Now you have to start from zero.' 'Excuse me?' I asked. He said, 'What do you

Ali Alsloom can't sit still. He barely takes a breath when he talks, and his enthusiasm is highly infectious. "Have you ever met anyone like me?" he asks, flapping his arms around. The answer is fairly obvious: no. "I'm very hyper, I get it from my dad," Ali says, gesticulating as he explains how he came to be one of the UAE's most dynamic young businessmen. Ali is on a mission to educate the world about UAE culture. He is one of the most enthusiastic and engaging people you will meet in this country.

Ali speaks multiple languages, including Korean, and runs three companies going on four, all falling under an umbrella company called Maestro. "Maestro creates new small to mid-sized businesses," he says. "It's called Maestro because lots of people keep telling I'm a master at what I'm doing. I like to be adding value to things around me."

Ali is possibly best known for his interactive website www.ask-ali.com, an idea he had a few years ago to give visitors and expatriates an opportunity to get to know the UAE better and to have one-on-one contact with a local, by typing questions into a website. "I answer all of the enquires myself, here on my Blackberry," Ali says. The questions vary from the practical (where is the Philippines labour office in Abu Dhabi?) to the comic (how many camels are there in the UAE?).

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want to do?’ I replied: ‘I want to be the general manager of a hotel’. He said, ‘You will be, but you have to be a doorman first’. So Ali signed up as the doorman, an invaluable experience he will never forget. “Behind the desk I got two reactions – people either looked at me like I was some kind of freak, or would say: ‘Can I take a picture with you?’” Ali says. “I was either an icon of pride or something odd.”

With the amalgamation of his international and local experiences, Ali’s mission became to prove that Emiratis are capable of doing great things. “We can do anything we want to do. It doesn’t matter if we wear the *kandoora*, or are Muslims. We are capable of work, because we are a Muslim nation that’s been known for years for creating great things. As an Emirati, we are lucky to have such an incredible icon as Sheikh Zayed, who managed to turn the desert green. This idea just keeps coming into

my head – what if I can inspire other people like that.”

After a hiatus away from the UAE to take care of his father, Ali returned to work for the Abu Dhabi Tourism Authority. In the end, Ali wanted to do things his own way, so he started his tour company, Embrace Arabia, which offers tours by UAE nationals. “Embrace Arabia is one of those moments where you

feel it’s time to ‘unleash your DNA,’” Ali says. “This is a phrase from Mr Reg Athwal, my business partner. It’s all about finding what your real talent is. It takes time to figure out what you’re really good at.”

Ali is at heart an entrepreneur. He cites people like Larry Page of Google when he speaks of inspiring businessmen. It’s this entrepreneurial streak that’s driven him to set up his most exciting project yet – the innovative OneTVO, an online production company. “The goal is to film everything that happens in a day in the life of Abu Dhabi,” he says. “Everything you need to know is on video.” It’s a revolutionary attempt to take the internet to the next level and connect with people in an entirely visual way. Want to Google something? Write in about a rental car company, and you’ll get a video showing you the place and the guy that will rent the car to you. Ali reckons it’s an idea that will stick.

When he’s not trying to rework the internet, Ali stays close to his most devoted mission: to introduce the world to the UAE through the eyes of an Emirati. When Ali came up with Embrace Arabia, he asked, “How many tour companies in the UAE offer Emirati guides?” As it turns out, none to be exact.

When you ask Ali what is the most misunderstood thing about Emirati culture is, he replies: “Nothing is really understood about Emirati culture.” This highlights the importance of Embrace Arabia. “We provide the full package – intercultural training and workshops. We do tours of the Sheikh Zayed Grand Mosque and the Cultural Foundation.” The company is hosted by four locals, who take corporate groups and curious tourists to various locations around the UAE. “My mission is to welcome every newcomer and enrich their experience,” Ali says. If Ali’s enthusiasm is anything to go by, he should have no problem succeeding. ■



IMAGES, TOP TO BOTTOM: Ali frequently lectures internationally, here he enjoys a ride in an Abu Dhabi branded taxi cab in London; Ali giving a tour for Embrace Arabia