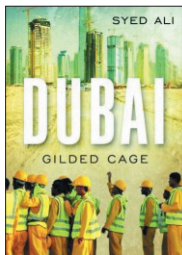


# Beneath the glitter

Author Syed Ali digs Dubai's dazzling surface and reveals strikingly-contrasting lives of the emirate's natives, Westerners and desperate migrants.

## DUBAI: GILDED CAGE



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the same time, they have successfully downplayed its complex policies towards guest workers and suppression of dissent.

In this enormously readable book, Syed Ali delves beneath the dazzling surface to analyse how - and at what cost - Dubai has achieved such success. Mr Ali brings alive a society rigidly divided between expatriate Westerners living self-indulgent lifestyles on short-term work visas, native emirates, who are largely passive observers and beneficiaries of what Dubai has become, and workers from the developing world, who provide the manual labour and domestic service needed to keep the emirate running, often at a great personal cost.

The author picks briskly through the layers of Dubai's society, meeting migrant workers of all stripes to study the Faustian pact that they strike by moving to Dubai, trading away their political rights for a taste of the good life. Young professionals from the West are offered a quality of life and professional advancement that they might struggle to find at home. In return, the visa system is a simple and effective mechanism of government control.

In less than two decades, Dubai has transformed itself from an obscure Gulf emirate into a global centre for business, tourism and luxury living. It is a fascinating case study in light-speed urban development, hyper-consumerism, massive immigration and vertiginous inequality.

Dubai's rulers have succeeded in turning it into a worldwide brand, publicising its astonishing hotels and leisure opportunities. At the

Working around them is the enormous labouring class that is still building the city's skyscrapers, staffing its restaurants and cleaning its streets. Most are brought from the Indian sub-continent and enter into modern-day slavery, tithed to their employers and subject to serious exploitation. Living conditions for many remain appalling. Regardless of this, as Mr Ali points out, Dubai still offers even the most poorly-paid construction workers a salary far in excess of what they might earn in their own countries. And so they keep coming, many aware of the conditions that await, so as to remit their income back home.

The human cost of building Brand Dubai has been extensively picked over in the media. However, the author examines the effect that this "permanent impermanence" has in preventing the population from putting down roots in the city and interacting with each other. Class groups remain distinct and civil institutions rare, achieving the government's aim of suppressing dissent. Instead, Dubai's expatriates are encouraged to work and spend until the time comes to leave. Mr Ali makes little effort to give a sense of the city on the ground. His interest remains with the people he meets and their sense of place in Dubai society.

The question of how sustainable this model of a transient workforce is for the city in the long term is side-stepped. Where the book is particularly strong, however, is in putting the perspective of emirati citizens, who make up a mere 10 per cent of the population, rarely coming into social contact with expatriates.

Mr Ali charts Dubai's decline as the global recession took hold early last year, with the current crisis severely tarnishing the city's brand and exposing a dependence on its neighbour for support. As Abu Dhabi flexes its financial muscle and new work opportunities appear in the capital of the United Arab Emirates, Dubai may face a new task to prevent its transient workforce from drifting up the road.



### About the author

*Syed Ali is Assistant Professor of Sociology at Long Island University, Brooklyn, New York. A sociologist by training, he is keenly interested in understanding diverse people and their myriad lives. His book on Dubai throws interesting light on the different people and their lives in the prosperous emirate.*