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MAGAZINE

## JOHN KIRK

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# Middle Eastern Food Tour: Frying Pan Adventures

Text: **Tracie Michelle Murphy**

One of the essential characteristics of Dubai, an oil-rich city on the Persian Gulf and the second-largest of the United Arab Emirates, is that it offers a little bit of everything — from world-class resorts and five-star restaurants to pristine beaches and a no-holds-barred nightlife.

It's no surprise, then, that Dubai is a strong contender for hosting the best composite culinary picture of the Middle East. The part that may throw travellers for a loop, however, is that the best way to experience the region's rich tapestry of tastes comes not from a well-appointed, celebrity chef-operated restaurant, but from a lot closer to the ground. In fact, it may just be a walking tour run by two sisters called "Frying Pan Adventures."

Frying Pan Adventures started as an interactive offshoot of Arva Ahmed's food blog, [LiveInAFryingPan.com](http://LiveInAFryingPan.com). With help from her elder sister Farida, Ahmed was able to turn it into a business in 2013. Today the company has served more than 2,100 individuals and is certified by the Department of Tourism and Commerce Marketing.

Ahmed meets her groups at an unassuming intersection in Deira, a neighbourhood in Old Dubai where her family has lived since emigrating from India in 1989. Each participant gets a gift bag with Frying Pan-branded swag (hand wipes, a water bottle koozie) and headsets. It can get noisy on the streets, Ahmed explains, and she doesn't want anyone to miss her trivia-filled narrative over the

next five hours. (Plus, she teases, there will be pop quizzes along the way.) Five hours may seem like a lot of time to spend on one activity in a city as bustling as Dubai, but the two-kilometre trail covers four restaurants, two sweet shops and a spice mart.

The first stop is Qwaider Al Nabulsi on Murraqqabat Street, which specializes in falafel. What sounds like a fairly standard food staple of the Middle East is actually most people's favorite part of the tour, says Ahmed. This is not what you'll find at your average food cart; the falafel mahsi is perfectly crisp on the outside, stuffed with chili paste and onions. With these made-on-the-spot morsels comes either hummus with *tatbeela* (lemon sauce) or *ful mademes* (fava bean dip). After that appetizer, there's *mansaf* — lamb over rice with yogurt — a Jordanian dish you learn to eat traditionally: with your fingers.

It's a short walk up the street to Samadi Sweets, chock full of pastries featuring pistachios and dates. The treats are washed down with Arabic coffee (*gahwa*) while Ahmed demonstrates serving rituals going back to ancient desert tribes.

The next few gastronomical gems are along Rigga Road. Asail Al Sham and Arbel Iraqi Restaurant serve Ahmed's guests a taste of Syrian ice cream (*boozah*) and Egyptian pizza (*feteer meshaltet*), respectively. At Soarikh, you take a peek at a famous Iraqi dish: carp slow-roasting over a wood fire (*masgouf*). Then there's a visit to Ahmed's trusted spice retailer, where guests can stock up on high-quality saffron called "Sargol" (which isn't actually yellow, it's red — just one of many fun facts you'll remember after the tour).

But no one is done walking, talking and eating yet. There are still two meals to come — the heaviest of the trail, in fact. (Thankfully, Ahmed explains how to reserve stomach space accordingly as you go.) Past the iconic Deira Clocktower is Al Tawasol. Using the skills learned at the first stop, guests dig into roasted chicken, lamb curry and rice without utensils. They lean against pillows on a carpeted ▶



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floor in a private tent reserved for women and mixed groups (only men can eat in the main dining room). Don't bother asking the owners how they get so many flavours into their dishes — they keep the recipes on lockdown, even from Ahmed.

Last is Abshar Restaurant on Maktoum Street. The Iranian venue is more formal than previous stops and offers live music. Oven-fired stone bread (*sangak*) is made onsite to complement a family-style meal of eggplant (*kashk bademjan*), lamb shank in tomato broth (*baghali polo mahicheh*), barberry rice (*zereshk*) and twice-minced lamb (*kabab koobideh*). Finally, mint tea helps clear your crowded gullet for *zulbia*, a dessert of fried batter soaked in rose water.

And if you're lucky, Ahmed might even have one more little delectable edible up her sleeve to take home with you.

On Frying Pan Adventures, there's a wide world of historical consumption — including Jordanian, Iraqi, Syrian, Egyptian, Persian and Emirati eats. You can only scratch the surface in one day, even with a knowledgeable host like Ahmed. But it may be the closest you can come to understanding the storied culinary background of the Middle East — and it's the most authentic dining you can find in Dubai. ■

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Tours are \$415 AED (\$124 CAD) per guest. More information: [www.fryingpanadventures.com](http://www.fryingpanadventures.com).