



HUNGER GAMES TO BI

The Hunger Games, the bestselling franchise of films, will soon go on American and Dutch entertainment will open in 2016 at a new venue.

Uncovering secrets of the desert

Rob Garratt

"Dubai has nothing. No culture, no history, no character. It has no heart, no spirit, no traditions ... all spin and no substance, a city built on sand."

So begins *Beyond Dubai* – before setting out over the next 286 pages to prove its opening paragraph completely wrong.

Those deliberately provocative words are said by the protagonist's fiancée, named Freyah. It's an effective literary device – the narrator works on enlightening his better half, and the book works on drawing in its readers.

The book, written in a novelistic tone, but labelled on the jacket as "travel/history" is a blend of fact and fiction. So my first question to author David Millar is whether this contrary, Dubai-baiting person actually ever existed.

"I had a really lovely girlfriend who became a really lovely wife," says Millar, then admits that he changed her name. "She's a bit shy about being in the book – but we did go through the same experiences I've written about."

Did she really dislike Dubai so much? Did he really drag her to all these historical sites to

convince her to move to the Middle East? And did it work?

"It was something I was trying to do in real life," he admits. "But it's also something I'm trying to do with the book – make people realise there's more history than most expats and visitors realise."

Desert trails

The idea for *Beyond Dubai*, which was released in August, came to Millar midway through a 10-year stint in the UAE working in the oil industry, which ended two years ago.

Millar, who has a doctorate in glaciology, was initially fascinated by Dubai Creek – once a river, but where was its source? – and began wondering about the desert's hidden secrets.

Millar filled his weekends by jumping into his Jeep Wrangler and driving off in search of signs of civilisation. Somewhere along the way he started writing accounts of these excursions, and then collected his notes into a book, which has now been published by Melting Tundra.

The 58-year-old says "around 75 per cent" of the events described in the book are true. In print, for example, he only accepts the Dubai posting after obtaining a written promise that he would "not be required to stay longer than six weeks". In reality, Millar always planned to remain in the UAE for at least two years.

"I honestly didn't realise there was any archaeology to the place when I arrived," he says, speaking from the home he retired to in western Canada.

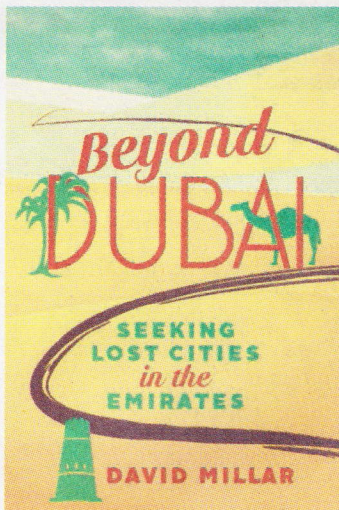
"Sometimes you find a little heritage site, but they aren't promoted to tourists – it's like a little secret."

Fact of fiction?

Part travel memoir, part history



David Millar and his book, *Beyond Dubai*. Courtesy David Millar



book, *Beyond Dubai* is written in a conversational tone, with researched chapters devoted to subjects ranging from the Ice Age to the *Arabian Nights* to the adventures of Wilfred Thesiger.

The original idea, Millar says, was to write a history book but the result was "way too boring".

Instead, the history lessons are interspersed with the first-person account of his and Freyah's adventures – combining several years of real-life road trips into one continuous narra-

tive, littered with anecdotes and observations about modern life in the Emirates.

Some are insightful, others are likely to raise a smile among hardened expats.

Others anecdotes may strike readers as flippant, or even odd – a danger of telling your readers about a place they have already developed hardened impressions of.

Others just seem clichéd: "Jumeirah is where it's all happening," Millar claims. "The place which many western expats regard as the hub of Dubai life."

Conflicting impressions

The overall impression is less of a considered take on the UAE, more one expat's subjective experience. Clearly, writing this book was a more liberating literary experience than Millar's background as a science journalist, or his other book credit as co-author with three family members: *The Cambridge Dictionary of Scientists*.

"If you're an expat spending time in Dubai, I hope this book will make your stay in the Emirates a bit more fulfilling," says Millar. "The average expat may never learn Arabic, and doesn't necessarily meet many Emiratis – but can find all this history in just a couple of hours' drive."

One can't help agreeing with the author. The overall message to take away from Millar's book is how much hidden history there is in the UAE – and how very easy it is to find if only you make the effort to look.

● *Beyond Dubai* (Melting Tundra) costs Dh40 and is available on Amazon

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A new book mixing fact and fiction will enlighten readers about the UAE's unseen treasures