

THE ADVENTURES OF EMIRATI BROTHERS

When brothers Mohamed and Peyman Al Awadhi wanted to go on vacation, they took to social media to find out from their followers where they should go. This turned into the ingenious idea of "social travel" and led to the success of their TV show *Peeta Planet* that airs on Dubai One. Mohamed chats to **umuma** about what makes their way of travel so unique.

By Christine Grové

Mohamed and Peyman Al Awadhi are proud Emirati brothers who were born and raised in Dubai and attended university in the United States. After completing their degrees and working abroad, they returned to Dubai and opened "Wild Peeta" - shawarma restaurants in 2009. The key to the success of their relatively small business was use of social media to interact with and draw customers into their stores, and become loyal to the brand. Wild Peeta also asked for and incorporated feedback from customers.

So when they wanted to take a vacation, it was only natural for Mohamed, 39, and Peyman, 37, to turn to their social media networks for suggestions on where to go, what to do and eat, where to stay, and more. Essentially this allowed for their social media followers to plan their trip. Thus, the concept "social travel" and the idea for a travel show driven by social media was born: "Peeta Planet".

“Are people more similar than they are different? And we ended with the answer: absolutely!”

umuma: What is it about connecting with the locals in each country that makes for a better trip, as opposed to trip advisor websites?

Mohamed: Trip advisors are very congested, there is an overload of information. It's very difficult if you want to travel to somewhere like Thailand and you want to figure out which hotel to stay at, there is a lot of disinformation of conflicting views, which makes it difficult to

know whose opinion to trust. With Social Travel we tap into this huge human algorithm, instead of typing in a search on Google which is a computer algorithm. People always want to share what's on their minds and if you have a good relationship with them they will answer you with real information. You get real insight. There's nothing in it for them - if I stay in hotel "A" versus hotel "B", there's nothing in it for them, as opposed to a hotel that might pay for ads on a trip advisor website. Locals know those places intimately. Personally when I travel to a country I want to go to the lesser known places, the holes in the walls, the places where the locals hang out - to truly get to know the country and the culture.

umuma: Do you ever meet the people who suggest things to you on social media?

Mohamed: Yes we do get to meet the followers. We often reach out to the different bloggers and travel writers who know the places very well and we will meet up or even feature them in the show.

umuma: Describe a specific memorable or eye-opening experience you had while on one of your trips?

Mohamed: We started our journey with the question: "Are people more similar than they are different?", and we ended that with the answer: "absolutely!" We travelled to some of the furthest countries, like Buenos Aires in Argentina, which is tremendously far away, but I still felt a deep connection to the people and their culture, in fact I felt more connected than ever! Another time, we were in one of the largest slums in Africa - Kibera in Kenya, and the people live in tremendous hardship, as they are first, second, third generation slum dwellers. Yet we saw that at our core, despite our economic status, or where we come from, we are all

similar. We all want security, we all want what's best for our children, to learn and have self-development, we all want food security. That was really eye opening.

umuma: You dress in your traditional Emirati attire on your trips, tell us about the intention behind this?

Mohamed: We are trying to make a statement. Western media usually portrays people who dress like us in a negative light, or very one-dimensionally. However this is how we dress at home – it's not something we wear on occasion – this is our national dress – and we think that's a great thing. If you think about it, everyone is wearing trousers, t-shirts and Converse. But places like India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and the gulf countries, are the few remaining countries still wearing their traditional, ancient, ethnic dress, and we are proud of that. So we decided: why not travel the world dressed like this unapologetically? And if anyone sees us and asks us why we are dressed that way, it would hopefully spark a conversation about culture, food, entrepreneurship etc. We want people to see us not as some stereotypical person wearing a Kandora, but as just another, whole person – I sound a bit different, and dress a little different, but I am just like you. And that's our goal.

umuma: What inspired you to travel in the first place?

Mohamed: My own personal theory is that it's partly passed down to us in our DNA from our ancestry. I come from the Bedouins who moved constantly, and I'd like to say that travel is in my genes. I constantly want to move, walk, see what's over that next mountain. I want to meet different people, different cultures. For me it is an enlightening experience to be able to go around the planet. I want know what people

on the other side of the world are doing! What do they sound like? What do they eat? We have a very finite amount of time in our lives and it's up to us what we do with that time.

“So we decided: why not travel the world dressed like this unapologetically?”

umuma: What is your message to other UAE locals and residents?

Mohamed: I think it's all about the journey. We live in a country where there are 200 nationalities, and that certainly helps us to experience other cultures, but people who live in the UAE see the diversity at face value, and don't dig into it and connect with it. I spend my time in the UAE, hanging around neighbourhoods where there are restaurants and shops that represent foods and products from all over the world, The UAE is one of the few countries on the planet like that. You can go to the US and you can go to the China towns, but I have not seen a country where 85% of the people are expats. There is so much to explore while you're over here, but also, travel broadens your mind, and gives you a wider perspective about those cultures.

umuma: What's next for Peeta Planet?

Mohamed: We are filming season two. Long term we want Peeta Planet to run for many seasons, and why not? We are so accustomed to watching Western travel show. Why can we as Emiratis not make our own travel shows, and why can't that be a hit? And hopefully we can make it a big success. ■