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VIVA REPORT

**Expats
turning
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Convert

Despite the scare stories in the West, more and more expat women are turning to Islam. **Johanna Payton** met three converts

“Each woman who has converted to Islam has her own story,” says Sherifa Madgwick, from the Sheikh Mohammed Centre for Cultural Understanding in Dubai.

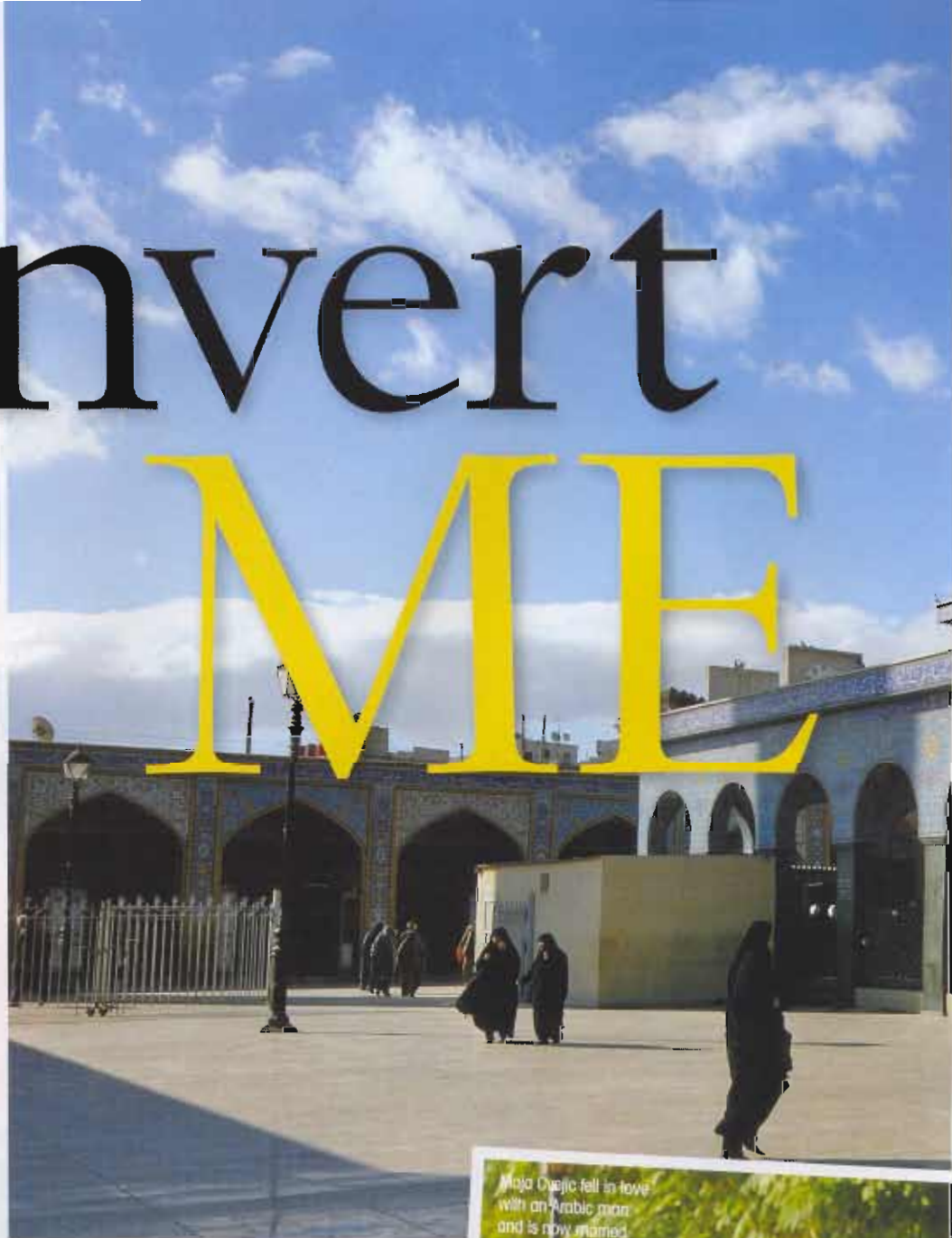
Sherifa converted 15 years ago after moving to Dubai from the UK. She says: “When I was given the Qur’an, I found something that made sense to me.”

Her story is echoed by hundreds of Western women here. Islamic sources say there are now four female converts to every male. So just why are modern women choosing a religion that is often accused of treating them badly? Some convert for love, others because of Islam’s emphasis on family and some to escape unwanted male attention.

Mrs Iman Ismail Abdullah Al Hashemi, of the International Women’s Cultural Forum, says she has seen an increase in conversions. “Every month, 60 to 70 women become Muslims.”

Converting to Islam in a Muslim country may make sense, but reactions back home can be harsh. Mrs Iman says, “I have known families who won’t allow their children back into their homes.” If expats marry for love it doesn’t always mean their new extended families will accept them either. Layla, 31, a British expat convert, found this to be the case. “Initially, I converted for my husband, but his family still wouldn’t speak to me for six months after I married him.” Outcast, Layla was so depressed that she suffered a nervous breakdown. Eventually her husband’s family accepted her, but she says, “My first months as a Muslim were really tough”.

But the difficulties people might face still haven’t slowed the conversion rate. We spoke to three other expats to find out what made them make the change.



“I THOUGHT MUSLIMS WERE EXTREMISTS”

AUSTRALIAN MAJA CVEJIC, 32, BELIEVED THE SCARE STORIES TILL SHE FELL IN LOVE.

“I grew up in Belgrade under communism. Religion was discouraged and so we weren’t taught about it at school. I thought Muslims were extremists and their lifestyle was ‘backwards’ compared to the West. However, when my sister got a job in Dubai in 1996 and I flew out to visit, I was soon proved wrong.

On my next trip, I became even more hooked with the country – though not in the way I would have expected. My sister had been invited to a friend’s house and she took me along. While I was looking forward to hearing my sister’s news, someone else soon caught my attention. He had black eyes, long eyelashes and I was captivated. We spent ages





I started at twice a day and built up to five. I learnt Arabic so I could fully understand what I was reading in the Qu'ran and I started to wear the abaya, which I not only found kept me cool but stopped me from worrying about what to wear.

By the following September I was married, happily converted and settled in my new life. My friends still weren't sure about my choices. They accused me of being brainwashed and joining a cult. One even asked me if I'd become a terrorist.

Hopefully they now know I couldn't be happier. I have a healthy marriage and I'm definitely not my husband's prisoner."

Reading the Quran had a profound effect on Samira



staring at each other across the room but as a brazen Australian woman I wasn't going to leave it at that, so I walked right up to the gorgeous Arabic guy and introduced myself.

We hit it off immediately. I flew home but we kept in touch and met up whenever we could. We would talk about all manner of things, including our beliefs, but we were too busy falling in love to worry about the differences in our religions.

Eighteen months later we knew we wanted to get married and finally accepted that religion was an issue. My fiancé wanted his children to be raised as Muslims although he never expected me to change.

Back in Australia, I read books full of "true stories" of women married to Muslim men, which scared me to death. I also listened to tapes that said Muslim husbands should "censor" what their wives read and wore. When I told my partner he was outraged and sent me books about the real Islam.

Over time my belief system started to shift. I visited a mosque in Melbourne and soon found that Muslim women weren't downtrodden but held in the highest respect.

Then the world took a turn for the worse on 11 September, 2001, and my flight for Dubai left two days later. My mum and friends phoned me begging me not to get on the plane. I was terrified but I knew I couldn't let this stop me from being with my fiancé and having a future together.

While I arrived in Dubai, the horrors of what had happened in America set me back about six months. I was tentative about committing to Islam, but I knew that I didn't want to be without a religion and from what I'd already learnt, I was sure that it was the right religion for me.

As an Australian woman who was as partial to a glass of chardonnay as anyone else, converting wasn't easy. I also grumbled to my fiancé about having to pray five times a day, so

“WHEN I HEARD THE CALL TO PRAYER I FELT AT PEACE”

SOUTH AFRICAN SAMIRA HATTINGH, 26, WAS BORED WITH LIFE SO SHE CAUGHT A PLANE TO DUBAI.

The name on my birth certificate is Michelle Hattingh. I come from a middle-class South African family and was christened as a child, although we were never religious. When I was 20, I was bored with life in South Africa and dying for something new. I longed for adventure, so I got a job at Dubai Duty Free.

It was the first time I'd been exposed to different nationalities and I felt a bit out of my depth in my new home.

My friends and I used to go out all the time. I wasn't lonely by any means, but I →

felt that there was always something missing and when I heard the call to prayer for the first time I was drawn to it.

I didn't have any Muslim friends, but my housemate had a copy of the Qur'an. The chapter dedicated to women had a profound effect on me.

I wanted to learn more, so I went to a local bookshop and found a huge book on the Prophet Mohammed (PBUH). It took me months to read and it completely changed my outlook on life. I cried at the end and went to the Islamic centre in Karamia where I converted immediately.

I had never felt so peaceful as I did the first time I prayed. Covering my hair made me feel safe and protected and Muslims around the country suddenly became my extended family.

Two years after converting, I met Ahmed, a Palestinian Muslim, at work. We got married in June 2005 and had our beautiful daughter, Aisha the following year.

Islam changed my life for the better. When I converted I got a very warm feeling and I've only had this feeling twice since then - when I got married and when I gave birth. I'm calmer and have more self-respect."

“CARING FOR MY SICK PARENTS TOOK OVER MY LIFE”

GERMAN NOURA DAPPER, 46, KNEW THAT LOSING HER PARENTS WOULD LEAVE A BIG HOLE IN HER LIFE BUT SHE DIDN'T KNOW HOW TO PREPARE FOR BEING ON HER OWN.

In 1998, when I first came to Dubai, I was Iris Dapper, a German businesswoman. I'd always been interested in the Arab world and it was a dream of mine to visit Dubai. Even on my first trip I didn't feel like a tourist, I felt like I belonged.

I'd always dreamed of setting up my own business, and even though I knew I could do this in Dubai, I worried about my family. My father had Alzheimer's, my mother, cancer, and my life was consumed by caring for them.

My dad was often confused, but when I told him that there was this chance for me in Dubai he 'woke up' for a short time and told me to follow my heart. My mum also encouraged me to go and get on with my own life. Apart from my parents there was nothing for me in Germany.

My move was scheduled for September 2003 and days before my flight my father died in my arms. I didn't want to leave my mum on her own but when I said I'd stay she wouldn't hear of it. She made me promise that I would go to Dubai and look to the future.

I set up my new medical business in Dubai and my new home was right next to a mosque. Whenever I started to worry about my mum the Imam's call to prayer calmed me down. The more I heard the prayers, the more I became interested in a religion and I went out and bought a copy of the Qur'an.

However, converting wasn't easy. In fact the first four months were horrible due to the reactions I received. I lost a lot of business because my non-Muslim partners were offended by my decision to change my religion, my name and my dress. One partner asked how I could turn to Islam after September 11th. I did not expect people to react in such a stupid way. At

A BEGINNER'S GUIDE TO ISLAM

1 Becoming a Muslim requires a very simple, but meaningful act. The convert must believe and recite the Muslim profession of faith three times, known as the Shahadah, in front of two witnesses.

2 The person must state, "There is only one God, Allah, who created the entire universe, and that Mohammed (PBUH) is his final messenger on earth."

3 The Shahadah is the first of the five Pillars of Islam and sincerely making the declaration means that you are now a Muslim.

4 The Five Pillars of Islam are the obligations that every Muslim must fulfil in order to live a good and responsible life according to Islam.

THE FIVE PILLARS OF ISLAM

- **SHAHADAH:** stating the Muslim profession of faith
- **SALAT:** performing ritual prayers five times a day
- **ZAKAT:** paying an alms (or charity) tax to benefit the poor and the needy
- **SAWM:** fasting during the month of Ramadan
- **HAJJ:** pilgrimage to Mecca

For more details see The Sheikh Mohammed Centre for Cultural Understanding website - www.cultures.ae.

the end of every evening I'd be in tears and questioning whether I had really made the right decision but I would call my friends and they would calm me down.

My mum had always worried I would be left alone in the world when she died. She was happy when I told her I had decided to convert to Islam and through my religion I had found a whole new family of friends who would look after me. I'd never seen her so relaxed. Three days after I returned to Dubai she passed away. The nurses told me she died peacefully, smiling.

As time went on, I felt more confident about fitting my new religion into my life. I used to worry about fitting prayers around my meetings and my tight travelling schedule, but my Muslim friends explained if I missed a prayer I could double up when I had the time. I am now happy to leave business partners to discuss a few points, explain that I was going to pray and then we'd continue our meeting. I still sometimes get the nasty comments, which upsets me but I believe that if one door closes, Allah will open another two."●



Noura found converting to Islam very difficult at first