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**FOUR ENTREPRENEURS  
ON THE PERKS AND  
PERILS OF BUILDING A  
BUSINESS GROUND UP**

(From left) Jamie Atherton, Sabrina Salhi, Karen Osman and Fathi Alsharif



# HOME IS WHERE THE BRAND IS

IN CELEBRATION OF THE UAE'S ENTREPRENEURIAL SPIRIT, WE TALK TO FOUR ENTERPRISERS ABOUT WHAT IT TAKES TO BUILD A BUSINESS FROM THE GROUND UP

BY KAREN ANN MONSY

**T**here's something to be said for home-grown brands. Sure, huge retailers come with the (much-appreciated) advantages that mass production and distribution bring, but, as anyone who feels any sort of attachment towards a particular city, region or country will testify, there's always a little extra love – even pride – when you're looking at what that place has helped create. Suddenly, your favourite coffee shop or clothing brand or handicrafts store means just a bit more, because there's a shared connection now.

The constant demand for innovation means businesses are having to put up a tough fight for survival, though. We speak to four of Dubai's own entrepreneurs about how they came to feature in the city's storyline – and what it's taking them to not just survive, but thrive.

## 'When you're an entrepreneur, you learn — and you learn quickly'

Prior to coming to Dubai 14 years ago, Karen Victoria Osman worked in publishing and teaching English. After seven years of working for a hospitality company in Dubai, the time seemed ripe to revive an old dream: that of being her own boss.

PHOTO: ENCHANTÉ STUDIOS



*Karen Osman,*  
FOUNDER,  
TRAVEL INK

“Entrepreneurship is not a sprint — it’s a marathon, and the ability to keep going will come from how well you nurture your ideas”

— *Karen*

Giving up the safety of a corporate job caused some apprehension, but, in the end, it boiled down to working towards a place of no regrets. “Not having children or a mortgage gave me a huge level of flexibility at the time that’s paying off today,” says the 39-year-old, who simply followed the old advice of ensuring she had six months’ worth of savings in the bank — in case the attempt went belly-up — and then ‘just went for it’.

Determining a “real need for good quality writing within the luxury hospitality space”, Karen went on to start Travel Ink in 2011. At the time, it was a one-woman show, with the entrepreneur doing everything from the writing to the client servicing and invoicing. Today, she has several writers helming a range of projects — mostly in the digital realm.

There are two things she did in those days that, she says, really helped her stay in the game: she joined a network group, and got a business coach. “It’s impossible to do everything by yourself, so I fell back on people who’d been there and done that before,” she explains. “Dubai is very entrepreneurial in spirit, so the advice is plentiful. It’s a huge learning curve, but you learn — and you learn quickly.”

There is a certain perception of the modern entrepreneur that Karen is inclined to question: that of their supposed predisposition for adventure and risk. “I think calculated risks would be a more accurate description,” she says. As for the ‘all day at a coffee shop with a laptop’ image, Karen says it’s not necessarily untrue.

“I have nothing against big retailers — but I’m not a fan of fast fashion. There’s no emotion or depth”

— *Jamie*

“The beauty of being an entrepreneur really is that you can work from anywhere, as long as you have a laptop and WiFi. Having said that, it can be a negative if you have a tendency to work too much.”

Finding that elusive balance between work and life is one that the Englishwoman has had to learn well, considering she is also an award-winning author, who is currently working on her third book in three years. Her second novel, a psychological thriller called *The Home*, will be out in paperback in October. With targets of penning 1,000 to 5,000 words a day, and young boys to look after, Karen says discipline is everything. “Plan your day out the day before — even down to what you’re going to wear. Also, do whatever you can to nurture your creativity. Entrepreneurship is not a sprint — it’s a marathon, and the ability to keep going will come from how well you nurture your ideas.”

### ‘Passion gets people talking’

British expat Jamie Atherton’s clothing brand, I’ll Write You Letters (you just know there’s a good story behind a name like that) is only a year old — but the concept and idea have been

“banging a wall inside [his] head, trying to get out for the last 20 years” — ever since he was sketching sneakers in art class at

*Jamie Atherton,*  
FOUNDER, I’LL WRITE YOU LETTERS



*Sabrina  
Salhi,*

FOUNDER,  
UNVEILED DXB



school. “The name itself comes from the term *Tegami Kaku Yo*, a Japanese idiom for when you say goodbye to a friend,” he explains. “I’ve been heavily inspired by Japanese streetwear brands and designers – such as Nigo and Hiroshi Fujiwara – since I was a kid.”

The whole concept is built around Jamie’s own memories and inspirations. He tells of “a lovely sweat in a thin golden fabric” that they have – the colour, design and texture of which reflect a time when he was with a good friend. “We were together on a bus and I glanced out of the window and saw fields and fields of sunflowers – a lovely bright summer’s day in the UK. I’d never felt so content.”

That emotion is at the heart of each one of his designs at IWYL – and it’s how Jamie defines keeping things real and ‘human’. “I have nothing against the big retailers,” he says, “But I’m not a fan of fast fashion – there’s no emotion or depth. And it’s passion that gets people talking.” Having said that, he isn’t unaware of what he’s up against in the market. “High street retail may be challenging, but when you see all these ‘Hypebeast’ kids queueing for hours outside Nike to purchase the latest \$500 colab sneakers, you start to see the power of premium streetwear.”

The journey to joining the fray has been intense, he admits. “You just can’t stop,” he notes. “There’s no 9 to 5.” In fact, for Jamie, who lets us in on what a day in his life looks like, it’s more like 4am to whenever. “I’m typically up by 4am to ride my bike. I take my four kids to school and am at work at a digital advertising company I run by 8.30am. I’m home by 6.30pm, but work for IWYL only begins after putting the kids to bed and dinner with the wife. Things can get pretty hectic, so once every couple of weeks, I’ll stay up through the night to get any loose ends finished up.” The ex-national team triathlete admits it’s not a very healthy practice, but he echoes the same song of unwavering commitment that every entrepreneur has ever sung: “If it needs to get done, then it needs to get done,” he finishes.

### **‘Entrepreneurship forces you to face yourself head-on’**

It’s part of Business Studies 101: if you’re starting a brand, have a USP (unique selling point). As founder of the region’s first ladies-

“The world seems to be regurgitating this narrative that says you’re not autonomous until you work for yourself. That’s a myth” —  
*Sabrina*

only events platform, 30-year-old Sabrina Salhi will tell you: a USP isn't the only factor – but it's a most fundamental one. "It's what sets you apart," she says. "And it's how well you execute or take advantage of it that gives you the edge."

An Algerian raised in the UK, she founded Unveiled DXB in April this year – a concept that creates "safe spaces" or alternative evening entertainment options where women can be themselves in a strictly female-only environment. It was listening closely to her large social network in the city that led Sabrina to believe this was a huge niche that had been overlooked to date – and, judging by the enthusiastic response from the first event, she was right on the money.

The main challenge, for her, was mental. "Because you're doing a lot of things yourself, entrepreneurship forces you to face yourself head-on. You can't shift the weight to anyone else – everything rides on you, and you have to take full accountability. So, it's a real mental game to be constantly renewing your vision and staying as disciplined as possible."

Despite taking the leap herself ("it was a now-or-never moment," she recalls), Sabrina does not believe entrepreneurship is for everyone. "It takes a certain kind of person to be able to deal with some of the negatives of this journey, such as the solitude (for the time that you will be working on your own)." Indeed, while entrepreneurship is certainly having its moment in the spotlight right now – "with people making a living out of encouraging others to just 'follow their dreams'" – she believes that it's also being unnecessarily glorified. "The world seems to be regurgitating this narrative that says you're a failure if you're working for somebody else, that you're not autonomous until you work for yourself."

That's a myth, she declares. "Maybe instead of a leadership role, you're more comfortable as a team player... People are built in different ways. Some don't enjoy the huge amount of stress that comes with starting a business, others ride off that buzz. If you do what you enjoy, that's all that matters."

And how do aspiring entrepreneurs balance passion with profitability? "Find out where your passion overlaps with your skills – that's where you'll find profitability," says Sabrina. "There's no point in having one without the other."

### 'The only way to survive is to keep pushing forward'

For Jordanian expat Fathi Alsharif, it was while he was recovering from an injury that the dream to ditch the corporate life for one on his own terms began to take shape. He co-founded GEEKS, an on-demand and automated IT support provider, in 2014 – and there's been no looking back since. He, too, believes people need to be given a more realistic picture of what entrepreneurship entails.

**"Homegrown brands have less boundaries and more room for creativity. They're not bound by old practices that were scripted ages ago" – Fathi**

*Fathi Alsharif*  
CO-FOUNDER,  
GEEKS



### 3 Don'ts for the Uninitiated

- Don't think people are going to buy your product — even though you believe it to be the most amazing one in the world. It takes time and, in the early days, a lot of hard work for little reward.
- Don't underestimate the power of marketing. Build the brand in the right places with as much budget as you can afford.
- Don't do what everyone else is doing. If you want to stand out, you've got to look at what people are doing and try and make it 'better'.

— Courtesy: Jamie Atherton

"The only stories that stick are the successful ones when, in reality, it's a grind involving endless hours of hard work," he says.

His life as his own boss is not that glamorous, he offers candidly. "To be honest, a lot of it is spent in front of the computer screen. I am a geek at heart and a lot of times, I roll up my sleeves and immerse myself in codes (although I usually like to go to the gym afterwards to balance out sitting all day).

But it's been four years and counting, and Fathi believes the only way to survive in the cutthroat world of entrepreneurship is through persistence and "pushing forward even when times are tough". The mistakes

will be ever-present during the lifecycle of a business – but the crucial point is to learn from them. "You start thriving once you use that knowledge to build the right foundation to help you move forward in a more efficient and scalable way," he says.

According to him, the beauty of homegrown brands is that they have less boundaries and more room for creativity. "They are not bound by old practices that were scripted ages ago," he points out. "Plus, homegrown brands have the opportunity to innovate and learn from the mistakes of global chains."

Anyone who signs up for building a brand from scratch, however, must prepare for their work-life balance to go for a complete toss – as Fathi found out in due course of time. "My work-life balance took a really big hit when I started out – but being an entrepreneur comes at a cost. If you want it to work, you need to work harder than everyone else and put in as many hours as possible." The 32-year-old ensures he doesn't burn out by engaging in pursuits outside of work – including taking off on short trips every once in a while to "disconnect and recharge", and playing guitar and football.

There's no one that he'd deter from following the same path – not even those who don't have entrepreneurship in their DNA. "That's because the journey in itself is worth it all – and the knowledge you gain by doing it, even if it fails, is priceless." **W**

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