



Signe
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JAN BLADEN

Leadership | Integrity | Passion

Signe gets candid with Jan Bladen, a key figure in the creation of the country's two financial centres, to discuss his expeditions, ambitions and more

MAN OF A KIND

Playing an instrumental role in founding the country's financial hubs, Jan Bladen executes the masterstrokes of life with unwavering leadership, integrity and passion. Signé gets candid with the polo enthusiast, discussing his expeditions, ambitions and more

Diksha Vohra

Despite being European by origin, Jan Bladen feels Dubai is home. He established two of the most well known financial hubs in the region – Abu Dhabi Global Market (ADGM) and Dubai International Financial Centre (DIFC) – bringing his leadership skills and expert knowledge of financial markets to the Middle East. However, Bladen credits the success of these to the country and the teams behind these revolutionary projects. Interestingly, he has also walked the roads less travelled, climbing Mount Everest and completing the Lunana Snowman Expedition in Bhutan. Signé provides a deeper insight into the classic appeal of this global citizen.

Hailing from the West and moving to the Middle East wouldn't have been easy. What brought about this shift and how has your experience been so far?

I was raised in the Far East, Middle East, Europe and Africa. I hold dual nationalities, have three mother tongues, and have now spent over 20 years living in the Middle East. In addition to this, my spouse is an Arab and my kids speak Arabic at home. As a result, I actually feel more at home in this region than anywhere else. From a business perspective, this cultural awareness also allows me to blend international management practices with local and cultural understanding.

In terms of your involvement in the establishment of the DIFC and ADGM, how different were these projects and which was a bigger challenge?

I was honoured to have been able to contribute towards the establishment of both over the last 10 years. ADGM is regarded as an essential element of Abu Dhabi's long-term strategy of economic diversification, as set out in the Economic Vision 2030 and will initially focus on private banking, wealth management and asset management. The city is naturally looking to capitalise on its oil wealth, political stability, financial services and global investment portfolio to attract international firms.

Over the past decade, Dubai has managed to attract some of the biggest names in finance to the DIFC. I believe that at the core of what makes the DIFC appealing is its regulatory framework and the Dubai Financial Services Authority (DFSA), an internationally respected regulator. The DIFC has already become the financial hub for the region, and it is, normally, quite challenging to unbalance a hub's hold once established. Once recognised, financial centre incumbents tend to grow on their own accord as new companies are attracted to an existing network.

Both ADGM and DIFC were challenging in different ways just as both were amazing experiences as well. In both cases, Strategy Conception and Execution, Structuring, Performance Excellence and Governance leadership were core requirements. I believe that, in time, the two UAE financial centres will complement each other, making the UAE the undisputed financial hub of the region.

Tell us what the DFSA is about and what did you oversee as its founding Chief Operating Officer?

The DFSA is the independent regulator for all financial and ancillary services conducted through the DIFC. Its regulatory mandate covers asset management, banking and credit services, securities, collective investment funds, custody and trust services, commodities futures trading, Islamic finance, insurance, an international equities exchange, and an international commodities derivatives exchange. The DFSA is also responsible for the regulation and supervision of persons in the DIFC in relation to anti-money laundering, counter-terrorist financing and sanctions compliance.

I spent nine years co-leading the establishment of the DIFC as the founding Chief Operating Officer of the DFSA. Within this role, I led corporate strategy, business planning, budgeting and governmental funding. I also constructed and oversaw the departments of finance, risk management, human resources, information technology, corporate communications, and corporate administration.



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Since you have lived in the Middle East for 20 years, has the Arabian culture influenced your leadership approach?

In terms of leadership, I believe that part of my success in the Middle East can be owed to my ability to understand the regional culture and merge it with established international management practices. This allows organisations to take the best of both worlds and create practices that satisfy international standards, while staying true to the family and cultural values of the region. This merging of Middle Eastern and Western perspectives to create effective culturally adapted governance practices is key to the future success and growth of the region. However, the most important element is the true value of trusted relationships and handling all stakeholders effectively.

Tell us about how polo became one of your prominent passions.

Second to family comes my passion for horses and sport, but most notably polo. I'm an active playing member of the Desert Palm Polo Club in Dubai and a former member of the Guards Polo Club. I've played for Team Great Britain in the UAE and most recently reached the finals in the Dubai Beach Polo 2015 tournament, held under the patronage of H. H. Sheikh Hamdan bin Mohammed, Crown Prince of Dubai.

My parents had horses in South America many years ago when they were based in Caracas, Venezuela, and my first memories of horse riding are from our time in North Africa. As such, I was always raised around family dogs, horses and the outdoors. The passion continued at boarding school in England, where I headed the school stables and oversaw the management of some 15 to 20 horses for several years. This passion for polo, however, truly kicked off upon my arrival in the UAE some 15 years ago, when I met Mr. Ali Albwardy. He is one of the world's leading polo patrons and as you might expect, he has the very best of facilities here in Dubai; fantastic horses, outstanding polo fields, and an internationally recognised club and team.

Nothing quite matches the adrenaline experience, the relationship and teamwork with your horses, the frustration of missing a ball and the satisfaction of winning a tournament. The game is fast, competitive and the horsemanship skills are demanding. Polo has been described as like “trying to play golf in an earthquake”. Looking back at the last few years I can honestly conclude that a passion for polo was the binding agent for many of my friendships.

How would you compare the Lunana Snowman Expedition with the Mount Everest one?

My outdoor education started at boarding school and included my first

Mount Everest Base Camp expedition. Putting tents up during a strong gale, forgetting to dry firewood, getting lost on mountain tops, and dealing with blisters are – believe it or not – all good memories of a happy childhood at school.

My hardest and most enjoyable outdoor challenge was in Bhutan. The Lunana Snowman Expedition through the Kingdom of Bhutan is described by the Lonely Planet as “one of the most difficult high altitude treks in the world”. The expedition is a long and challenging trek, and entails travelling to a remote and rarely visited region of the Eastern Himalaya. Actually, far more people have climbed to the summit of Mount Everest than completed this unique expedition and traverse of Bhutan! It is a 29-day trek crossing the north of Bhutan along the border with Tibet, covering 356km and crossing eight Himalayan mountain passes and peaks. Very few Westerners have ever visited the remote district of Lunana due to its inaccessibility – one can only get in and out by crossing mountain passes over 5,000 metres that are frequently blocked by snow. The mountain views throughout this trek are spectacular. Many peaks along the Bhutan and Tibet border are unnamed and unmapped, including several mountains over 7,000 metres such as Gangkhar Puensum, which counts as the world's highest unclimbed mountain. One of my mountain guides once said: “Take nothing but memories and leave nothing but footprints.”

What comes to your mind when you hear the following?

ADGM: Political stability, regulatory independence, financial strength, judicial certainty, and cultural discretion.

Business in Dubai: International reach, outstanding infrastructure, physical security, business-friendly, and visionary leadership.

What is your favourite car? The Bentley Continental GT Speed.

What are your dream holiday destinations? Argentina for polo and asado, Milan for good food, and Mykonos for fun. But all involve good friends and family.

Given a chance to flee to a deserted island, what would be three things you wouldn't go without? A good friend, fishing tackle and a boat ... just in case I changed my mind and wanted to leave.

Where in Dubai do you like to dine?

La Petite Maison in the DIFC has become a cornerstone establishment in Dubai's international cuisine. The food is consistently outstanding and its staff have started to become friends over the years. Down-to-earth good food, good wines, good service and a great smile – what more do you want at the end of a hard week? ■