

16.01.2026

FRIDAY

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The reset
that actually
lasts

What it really takes
to build habits
that last beyond
the New Year

24

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Travel choices that
make sense all year



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LET'S TALK

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After the resolutions

The new year has arrived. Has it landed gently for everyone? I'm not sure. Personally, it doesn't feel dramatically different. The calendar has turned, the days look much the same, and the familiar urge to announce bold resolutions is already losing its shine. We do this every year. We promise ourselves reinvention. Whether the momentum survives February remains to be seen.

This is the first issue of Friday for the year, and before anything else, it's worth saying this clearly: reader response continues to shape what we do. In the last issue, I mentioned that feedback would guide our next steps. We meant it. Some of your favourite sections are back. The crossword has returned. So has the letters page. More changes are coming, thoughtfully and steadily. Please keep telling us what works, what doesn't, and what you'd like to see more of. This magazine is at its best when it listens.

January has a way of pulling us back to habits. Or the lack of them. We all know the pattern. Resolutions arrive with confidence and fade quietly. Routines stall. Motivation thins out. That isn't failure. It's human nature. Our cover story looks at why habits that endure are rarely built on enthusiasm or force. We spoke to experts across disciplines who share a clear view: lasting change comes from consistency, structure, and modest daily choices that hold once the noise fades.

Community has always been integral to how *Friday* understands life and ambition. One of our features looks at how, in Dubai's fast-paced success culture, three women stepped away from corporate certainty to build something quieter and more meaningful. Anul Mundra, Jen Blandos, and Reema Mahajan speak about purpose, belonging, and why community has become a more honest measure of impact.

We also turn our attention to Pantone's Colour of the Year, Cloud Dancer. In fashion, designers treated it as a working neutral. Easy to wear. Just as easy to overdo. In interiors, the shade favours texture and restraint over statement. Quiet, liveable, and designed to recede rather than perform.

Elsewhere, we feature a moving new book that captures the lived histories of Abu Dhabi's seniors, preserving voices that shaped the emirate patiently and without recognition.

This issue is about paying attention to what endures!

— Krita Coelho, Editor

WE'RE LISTENING...

Beyond the spectacle

The Andrew Zimmern piece (*Friday*, December 26, 2025) stayed with me long after reading. It resisted spectacle and chose restraint, something that's rare today. The idea that curiosity moves at walking speed, and that food carries ethical weight when handled with care, felt especially timely. It didn't appear like nostalgia or moral posturing, but a clear look at responsibility, dignity, and storytelling in an age obsessed with speed. Food journalism needs more of this patience and fewer performances.

Anil Jain

Stories that have staying power

Could *Friday* consider a regular section that revisits past interviews or features, reflecting on how those ideas hold up today? A second look, with time and perspective, would add depth and continuity to the magazine.

Prasanna Kumar

With all the love and support you've shown us over the year, we're bringing back our readers' letters section. Let's start with you telling us about the habits you want to build in the new year. Write to us about anything that's on your mind, share your thoughts, send in your requests, or even mail us a random picture you love. You'll find us at friday@gulfnews.com

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ON THE COVER
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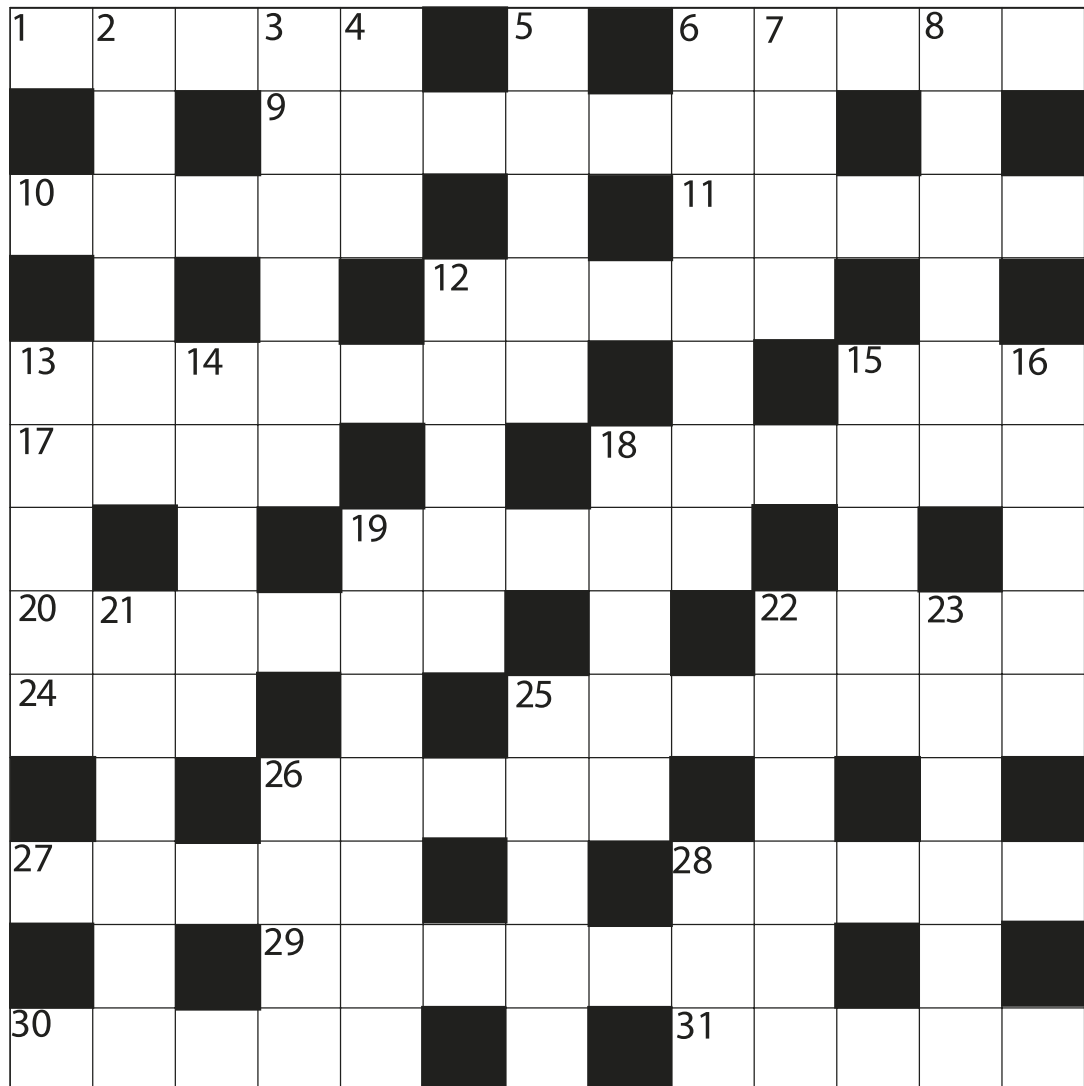
CRYPTIC PUZZLE

ACROSS

- 1** One's own little drug-store (5)
6 Granted, it's a wicked deed by Charlie (5)
9 Art or craft of the snooker player? (7)
10 Strange argot no longer in use (5)
11 Didn't exactly rush to escape! (5)
12 Footwear a drunkard got out for a sailor (5)
13 Pretend to be discerning? (4,3)
15 Vehicle needed in one's job, usually (3)
17 She lets in the light (4)
18 The blockhead gets these sorted, by order! (6)
19 Punished, some fine day (5)
20 Beat down the old woman with the bad leg (6)
22 Fair maid's forename (4)
24 It's changed, but not significantly (3)
25 Realm of Rex and Dominic? (7)
26 He has seniority and will perform for money (5)
27 No major figure in a centre for divorces (5)
28 Directors sounding bored (5)
29 Not one can be found therein! (7)
30 Written, perhaps, by a non-U deputy (5)
31 Cuddly boy? (5)

DOWN

- 2** Sour, hard-hearted, fearsome fellow (6)
3 Replacements for broken spears (6)
4 Very good house for the titular head (3)
5 Beastly article tots are upset



- about (5)
6 Bent on a career in crime? (7)
7 One islet or eight? (4)
8 Be sure to wander in the darkness (6)
12 Nominal issue, perhaps (5)
13 Questionable strength? (5)
14 Near St. Pancras, they get cross! (5)
15 It's hairy, having to carry a
 deadhead! (5)
16 Such radio you can get to be mates with (5)
18 Start to live on drink (5)
19 Baffled, again, when there's all that water about (7)
21 How the RAF man is apt to shoot a line (6)
22 Overlook the admixture of gin with mineral (6)
23 Tied up, being low on wine (6)
25 His minced steak is sheer poetry! (5)
26 Many an individual gets cheated (4)
28 In between, it can easily be lost (3)

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ACROSS

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9 Bureaucracy (3,4)
10 Degree (5)
11 Edition (5)
12 Horse's cry (5)
13 Transfixed (7)
15 Secret agent (3)

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19 Dairy product (5)
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22 Meat (4)
24 Affectionate tap (3)
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26 Nozzle (5)
27 Sneak (5)

- 28** Viper (5)
29 Tempo (7)
30 Condition (5)
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- 2** Band (6)
3 Trial (6)
4 Golf peg (3)

- 5** War-horse (5)
6 Witty remark (7)
7 Net (4)
8 Winning suit (6)
12 Approaches (5)
13 Bend (5)
14 Vote (5)
15 Temptress (5)
16 Shouts (5)

- 18** Servant (5)
19 Incapacitate (7)
21 Vegetable (6)
22 Seller (6)
23 Affirm (6)
25 Ancient symbols (5)
26 Chair (4)
28 Craft (3)

Solutions will be given in the next issue of *Friday*.

January 2026: A quiet beginning

This January isn't asking for declarations or dramatic reinvention. It's a slower, more intentional opening to the year, shaped by clarity, restraint and inner alignment



The new year doesn't begin with noise, it begins with clarity. The kind that comes from within. January 2026 is the quiet ignition of something greater: a year that calls for presence, precision and profound purpose. You don't need resolutions. You need resonance. This is the month to get back into alignment, not by forcing action but by remembering who you are when all distractions fall away.

There is a heightened cosmic current moving through the first weeks of January. It's not loud but it's powerful, guiding you to reconnect with your instincts, your wisdom, your truth. You may find your senses sharpen, your dreams more vivid, your inner voice clearer. Listen to it. You don't need to explain your process to anyone. In fact, the more private you are, the more potent your progress becomes.

Let this be the month where you don't announce your moves, you make them. Whether it's about work, relationships or your home life, if someone isn't directly involved, there's no reason to share. The universe is amplifying the energy of secrecy and focus. What you protect will grow. What you nurture in silence will multiply.

If you feel restless or uncertain, don't

CELESTIAL REFLECTIONS

Danesh Kumar is a psychic reader and holistic healer offering intuitive guidance and energy alignment.

Based between Mumbai and Dubai, he helps clients transform their energy and achieve inner harmony through in-person and virtual sessions.



panic. This energy is also designed to test your patience. Don't overreact. Don't spiral into overthinking. Stay solution minded. Breathe, observe and let the clarity come to you. You're not here to fix everything. You're here to stay centered and aligned as the answers unfold. The first few weeks are for recalibration, not reaction.

You don't need to write your intentions this time. Instead, take a few moments each morning to absorb the Sun's energy and each evening to sit quietly with the Moon. Let the cosmos speak to your soul through light and stillness. These quiet energetic exchanges will anchor you in all the right ways.

By the end of January, the pace picks up. Profound changes will start to arrive, especially around abundance, work and

new opportunities. The efforts you've made in silence will begin to move. You'll feel things shifting in your favor. This is a cosmic reward system that knows exactly when to deliver.

Spiritually, here's what to do this month:

1. Clean your home with sea salt water to clear stagnant energy.
2. Take sea salt showers to refresh your aura.
3. Light a candle or incense when meditating or centering yourself.
4. Avoid gossip, oversharing or justifying your decisions to others.
5. Speak less, listen more. It's a month for clarity, not noise.

And as you step into 2026 remember, this is a powerful year. Expect progress, meaningful shifts and new openings in your personal and professional life. But don't ignore your health. This is a year to prioritize wellbeing, make space for recovery and remain steady. You will be tested, emotionally and energetically, so stay calm, don't react and trust that every delay is divine.

The year ahead brings growth, opportunity and expansion. But only if you're centered. Move with purpose, protect your energy and let the universe meet you where your soul already knows to go. ■

RESET. RETHINK. BEGIN AGAIN.

A page to return to when weeks get crowded

This page is meant to be cut out, pinned up, or kept close.
Come back to it when the calendar fills faster than your head can keep up, or when the week feels busy before it has even begun.

RESET

- ✓ Before the week takes off, give yourself a pause.
- ✓ Not a reset that asks you to start over, but one that helps you clear the noise.
- ✓ Close what doesn't need to be open.
- ✓ Tidy what's in front of you.
- ✓ Decide, calmly, what actually needs your attention right now.
- ✓ A reset is simply choosing where to begin.

RETHINK

- ✓ Busy does not always mean productive, and full days don't always mean forward movement.
- ✓ Rethink the habits you're running on autopilot.
- ✓ Rethink what you say yes to without thinking.
- ✓ Rethink the idea that everything needs to happen today.
- ✓ When something keeps draining your energy, it's worth questioning why.

BEGIN AGAIN

- ✓ Begin smaller than you usually do.
- ✓ With something you can repeat even on tired, messy days.
- ✓ One habit. One choice. One boundary that makes the week easier to handle.
- ✓ If you miss a day, begin again without turning it into a failure.
- ✓ This is how consistency actually forms.

KEEP THIS CLOSE

- ✓ You don't need a perfect plan or a dramatic overhaul.
- ✓ You need space to adjust as life shifts around you.
- ✓ Reset when things feel cluttered.
- ✓ Rethink when something no longer fits.
- ✓ Begin again as often as needed.

Pin this up. Come back to it when needed. Nothing more.



After 15 years on stage, stand-up comedian Nitinn Miranni reflects on jokes that bombed, hecklers who shaped him, the pull of live audiences, and why comedy is less about punchlines and more about reading the room

First joke that ever worked on stage

The first joke was actually me introducing myself. I went up on stage to a mixed audience and as soon as I said, “Hey guys, my name is Nitinn,” the Arabs and Egyptians started laughing out loud. I was a bit taken aback but continued with my set. After the show, I asked one of the Arab audience members about the cause for laughter and he said that Nitinn means “very bad smell.” Since, I always address what my name means on stage and ask people to come smell me after the show to make sure I’m not Nitinn.

Joke that bombed the hardest

There are many jokes that have bombed over the years, and some still do to this day. Most comedians will agree we all have that one joke that bombs every time, yet we keep saying it because we love performing it on stage.

Heckler moment you’ll never forget

I love hecklers because they put a comedian to the test. One favourite was a Mumbai show where the heckler was an NRI, speaking in accents and giving the weirdest answers to every question.

Another was a gentleman who kept walking in and out of my show like it was a park. I ended up having a fun banter with him, only to find out he was the title sponsor. Check out the “NRI Heckler” video and “The Amul Macho” video on YouTube.

Dubai crowd or Mumbai crowd

Now that I live between both cities, and given how much the crowds have merged, they’re actually quite mixed. I’ve done shows in Mumbai with Dubai audiences and shows in Dubai with Mumbai audiences. That said, I do like getting paid in dirhams.

One word to describe a live audience

Necessity. It’s the only time the audience is truly uninterrupted and realises the value of 90-plus minutes of being fully present. I always advocate live shows, especially now that I’m touring with my poetry and storytelling show, Kuch Alfaaz.

Topic you secretly love pushing

My favourite part of any show is discussing desi parents and relationships. I’ve often been told after shows that I should consider being a therapist because I decode nuances down to a T.

Clean comedy or edgy

Edgy can be clean. And having started my comedy career in Dubai, I understand the difference, and how to capitalise on it.

Writing jokes at night or during day

I wish that were up to me. I tend to write a lot when I’m on a flight. Something about being on an aircraft clears my mind and expands my perspective.

Funniest incident offstage

After a corporate event, a gentleman came up to me, clearly upset, and said, “You know, you shouldn’t do these jokes because I’ve heard Nitinn Miranni do them before.” That’s when his friend said the person he was talking to was Nitinn. He now attends most of my shows in Dubai.

A comedian stereotype that’s true

We are obsessive observers and always working.

And one that’s wrong

Not all of us are depressed or broken inside. Many of us have overcome things and use the stage to talk about them.

MC, stand-up, or acting — which feels most like you

Honestly, it all feels like an extension of the same mic. That said, I’m really enjoying being a storyteller, writing and reciting poetry. It’s a cathartic experience to speak my truth without needing validation.

Biggest laugh you’ve gotten

I’ve been lucky to perform for over 4,000 people at Dubai Expo. Having those numbers laugh and cheer was the best feeling ever.

Something that makes you nervous

I get nervous if I’m not feeling nervous before going on stage. It pushes me to work harder and reach new audiences. I always say, you become a comedian the moment a joke doesn’t work. How you come out of that moment is what makes you an artist. ■

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EMIRATES LITFEST RETURNS

Emirates Airline Festival of Literature returns with a week-long programme of talks, performances and special events spanning business, science, food, journalism and family-friendly sessions. From boardroom insights with a hostage negotiator to conversations on love, language, culture and conflict, the festival brings together global thinkers, bestselling authors, chefs and educators. With paid highlights, free fringe events and flexible passes, it's designed for curious minds of all ages and interests, making it one of Dubai's most anticipated cultural gatherings of the year.

When: January 21–27, 2026 | Various times

Where: InterContinental Dubai Festival City

For more details: Visit litfesttickets.emirateslitfest.com



YEAR OF HORSE

SHI Hospitality marks Chinese New Year 2026 with a week-long celebration across its signature venues MOLI, SHI and MEI. Inspired by the Year of the Horse, each restaurant presents an exclusive set menu rooted in tradition and shaped by its own culinary identity, from contemporary flavours at MOLI to refined classics at SHI and indulgent modern plates at MEI. The experience is elevated with festive desserts, a live duck station throughout the week, and rotating cultural performances including lion dances and live Gu Zheng music.

When: February 16–17, 2026 (menus available all week)

Where: MOLI, SHI & MEI, Dubai

For more details:
Visit shihospitality.com

PORSCHE RACE WEEKEND

The Porsche Carrera Cup Middle East returns to Dubai Autodrome for a weekend that blends high-octane racing with a relaxed, festival-style atmosphere. Expect close wheel-to-wheel action on track, alongside interactive Porsche displays, racing simulators, live entertainment, curated food and beverage options, and dedicated kids' zones. It's designed to be as much about socialising and soaking in automotive culture as it is about the racing itself.

When: January 24–25, 2026 | All day

Where: Dubai Autodrome, Dubai

For more details: Visit event.porschedubai-uae.com/en/carrera-cup-2026



DUBAI MALL FASHION

Dubai Mall Festival of Fashion returns this January, bringing together designers, stylists and industry insiders through immersive masterclasses, live fashion moments and exclusive brand-led experiences. Confirmed hosts include Cedric Haddad, Maram Zbaeda and Mariam Khairallah, with brand partners such as Temperley London, Level Shoes and Armani Beauty shaping the festival's creative direction.

When: January 29–30, 2026 | Timings to be announced

Where: Dubai Mall, Downtown Dubai

For more details: Visit www.dubaimallfestivaloffashion.com



KIDS MILKSHAKE FRIDAYS

Black Tap Dubai Mall turns Fridays into a playful treat for young food lovers with its Kids Friday Milkshake Masterclass. Designed for children aged nine and under, the hands-on experience lets little guests enjoy a kids' meal before stepping behind the counter to create and decorate their own mini milkshake, guided by Black Tap's in-house specialists. Set against neon interiors with views of the Dubai Fountains and Burj Khalifa, it's a fun, creative way to elevate family dining.

When: Every Friday, 1pm–5pm

Where: Black Tap, Dubai Mall, Downtown Dubai

For more details: Visit blacktap.com/location/dubai-mall or follow @blacktap.dubaimall

NEW KIDS' CLUB

Jumeirah Beach Hotel unveils a newly renovated Kids' Club in collaboration with OliOli, bringing a fresh, creativity-led play experience to young guests. Designed for children aged 4 to 12, the space blends learning with fun through hands-on workshops, from Scribble Bots and clay creations to light, colour and craft-based activities. The reopening of the upgraded family pool is the icing on the cake.

When: Daily | Hotel operating hours

Where: Jumeirah Beach Hotel, Jumeirah, Dubai

For more details: Visit www.jumeirah.com/jbh



TOPGOLF TURNS FIVE

Topgolf Dubai celebrates its fifth birthday with a month-long lineup of games, prizes and interactive challenges. From exclusive promotions to the Topgolf Passport experience, guests can explore the venue, collect stamps and unlock chances to win major prizes, including a Bahrain Grand Prix Paddock Experience. Golden Balls add surprise instant wins throughout the month, while the celebrations peak with a high-energy birthday party featuring live entertainment and special packages. It's a full-swing celebration designed for groups, regulars and first-timers alike.

When: Until January 29, 2026

Where: Topgolf Dubai

For more details: Visit topgolfdubai.ae



25 JUMP STREET OPENS

25 Jump Street officially opens with a street-wide celebration that brings live music, roaming performers and a first look at Dubai's newest cultural, culinary and nightlife destination. The launch weekend invites visitors to explore a curated mix of licensed restaurants, bars and entertainment concepts, all activated with high-energy performances.

When: January 16 from 8pm & January 17 from 8.30 pm

Where: 25 Jump Street, One Central, Dubai

For more details: Visit 25jumpstreet.ae



SONGS OF BULBUL

The Arts Center at NYU Abu Dhabi, in partnership with the Bagri Foundation, presents Songs of the Bulbul, a critically acclaimed dance work by Aakash Odedra. Blending classical Kathak with contemporary movement, the solo performance draws on a Sufi myth of a nightingale whose final song becomes a meditation on freedom, sacrifice and transcendence.

When: Sunday, January 18, 2026 | 7.30 pm

Where: The Red Theater, The Arts Center at NYU Abu Dhabi

For more details: Visit nyuad.nyu.edu/arts



FAMA X CD ELAN

THE COLLAB EDIT brings together heritage craftsmanship and modern luxury in a tightly curated shopping exhibition by FaMa and CD Elan. Hosted in an intimate, upscale setting, the showcase features over 36 premium fashion and lifestyle brands, spanning avant-garde couture, festive occasionwear and fine jewellery. Designed for discerning shoppers, the edit offers access to runway-ready pieces and bespoke finds in a relaxed, gallery-style format that encourages discovery, conversation and unhurried browsing.

When: January 24-25 | 11am-8pm

Where: Shangri-La Dubai

For more details: Call 050 837 7699



DIY PIZZA WEEK

The Coop House marks Pizza Week with a hands-on dining experience that puts guests in charge of their own pie. From January 19 to 25, diners can build their pizza using the restaurant's artisan bigah dough, choose from eight-plus toppings, and watch it bake inside a traditional wood-fired dome oven. Guided by chefs and designed for all ages, the experience adds theatre to the table, with flames, rising dough and fire-finished pizzas served fresh from the oven. It's pizza slowed down, made interactive and meant to be shared.

When: January 19-25, 2026 | Restaurant hours

Where: The Coop House, Mirdif City Centre, Dubai

For more details: Visit thecophouse.com or enquire in-store



A family strategy

Instead of individual resolutions, one family borrowed a page from the playbook of an automotive brand, using a lean planning tool to align travel, volunteering, money, and time around shared priorities, turning vague New Year intentions into a plan they could actually live with and return to together.

By **Bonnie Jean Feldkamp**



I don't make New Year's resolutions, but I do set goals. I take time to reflect on the previous year to look at what I'd like to build upon, what I'd like to scrap and what could use a tweaking in the new year. My husband does something similar.

This year, instead of just setting individual goals I thought we could make family goals, too. It felt like another way to bring us together instead of operating in individual silos, each of us firing off in different directions. I wanted to see where our goals overlapped and prioritise those as family goals we all worked on together. The thought was that if we're all rowing the same boat, so to speak, we can support one another.

I mentioned this to my husband who exclaimed, "A family Hoshin!" I had apparently spoken to his soul.

My husband is a manufacturing manager with expertise gained from his time with Toyota. Hoshin Kanri is a strategic planning tool used in lean manufacturing. Hoshin translates into English as "direction needle," like a

compass, and Kanri means "management." It was developed in Japan in the 1960s and Toyota recognised its value. Today it's considered a foundational process meant to align everyone in an organisation with a shared vision, focusing on common goals and continuous improvement.

My husband sat down at our living room table with his spreadsheet ready. We started with a brainstorming session of things we'd like to do and what we hoped to accomplish in 2026. Our 10-year-old son was included in this session as well. My husband stressed that nothing would be squashed at this stage; we would simply shout out our goals for the new year and write them all down.

Afterwards, we categorised items and quickly noticed a few common themes. We all wanted to travel and explore more, both in our own region and by taking a few trips. We all also wanted to volunteer more often in our community and make improvements on our house.

Our older children, siblings and parents live in different cities, so we

PHOTOS BY XSHUTTERSTOCK



prioritised our travel around the people we'd like to visit. Also, the 10-year-old wants to visit at least one National Park, so we looked at ones that were closest to our home for possible weekend excursions.

For our volunteer goals, we listed the organisations we're most passionate about and tend to donate to in our community and researched how to get more involved as volunteers.

From there, we developed a strategy to execute. What does a budget look like? How much do we need to save each week to facilitate travel? What work do we want to do on the house and what do we need to budget for that? We looked at our son's school calendar as well as how many vacation days work allowed. Then, we identified the best times to plan our travel and volunteer hours. We signed up for volunteer orientation in January for an organisation that required it and recognised the volunteer hours we've already put in other places to see where we could build on those.

Going through this process already makes me feel like we've accomplished so much. The family Hoshin took abstract wishes and made concrete plans that we can actually execute.

It also helped us see where we've already been successful in the previous year. It helped really identify what we value as a family. The things we work on together will only strengthen us.

Will there be deviations? Of course — life happens and things change. This is where weekly check-ins come into play. We'll touch base each week with our plans and see what is working, what needs to be adjusted and how we can stay on track.

It's nice to dream together. There's no reason we have to silo all of our hopes and dreams for the new year and toil away on them individually. We are a family and we love each other. How awesome to sit down and dream together, know what's in one another's heart and then support one another in making it happen. I'm so grateful that I live in a family that can be trusted with my hopes and dreams.

I think we just started a new tradition. The annual family holiday Hoshin.

— **Creators.com**

Know someone doing something genuinely good out there? Someone building, fixing, helping, or quietly changing things for the better? Tell us about them. Write to friday@gulfnews.com

Change, without the *rush*

The habits that endure are rarely built on enthusiasm or force. Experts explain how consistency, structure, and modest daily choices create change that holds once the noise fades

Start with stability

January rarely begins with a clean slate for the body. It begins with carry over. Fatigue lingers. Sleep feels unsettled. Energy drops without an obvious reason. People return to work expecting momentum and instead struggle to focus or maintain routines they were eager to restart. According to **Dr Adenike 'Omo' Dairo**, General Physician and Founder at Mentra, this gap between intention and capacity is one of the main reasons habits fail before they have time to take hold.

"January is usually a mix of fatigue, disrupted sleep, lingering colds or flu, body aches, and general low energy," she says. In Dubai, the transition can feel especially abrupt. Cooler weather, travel, late nights, and the sudden return to routine all arrive at once. Many patients come in with the same concern. "They often say they just don't feel like themselves yet." That underlying imbalance is easy to overlook when the focus is on restarting exercise plans or tightening diets.

Small disruptions to basic health habits quietly undermine follow-through. Dr Dairo says dehydration, irregular meals, and poor sleep have a much bigger impact than people realise. Skipped or delayed meals lower energy and increase irritability. Poor sleep affects focus and emotional regulation. Dehydration adds headaches and fatigue into the mix. "When the body feels off, even simple habits feel harder to stick to," she says. What looks like a motivation problem is often a physical one.

January also brings a familiar pattern of



overcorrection. From a medical point of view, Dr Dairo sees the consequences quickly. "I see a lot of injuries and exhaustion in January," she says. Patients go from very little activity to intense exercise or strict diets almost overnight. The body does not adapt well to that pace. Pushing too hard too quickly often leads to injury, illness, or burnout, which then sets people back further than where they started.

Stress compounds the issue, even when people do not consciously recognise it. Dr Dairo explains that stress often shows up physically rather than emotionally. Headaches are common. Neck and shoulder pain increase. Digestive issues flare. Sleep becomes lighter or more fragmented. Some patients notice palpitations or worsening of existing conditions. "Many patients don't label it as stress," she says. "But the body makes it clear." When stress is ignored,

people tend to push harder, adding strain instead of support.

Before making lifestyle changes, Dr Dairo encourages patients to understand their baseline. The most useful information usually comes from simple questions rather than complex plans. "I usually tell patients to start with the basics," she says. How are you sleeping? Are you eating regularly? Are you drinking enough water? What does your energy look like across the day? These markers give a clearer picture of readiness for change than ambition alone. Simple checks such as blood pressure or weight trends can also help track patterns over time. "You don't need to overcomplicate it," she says.

From her experience, a healthy start to the year looks calm rather than corrective. It involves returning to regular sleep, eating properly, and moving consistently instead of intensely. Recovery is treated as essential, not optional. "It looks realistic," Dr Dairo says. The patients who make lasting progress tend to ease into change rather than trying to fix everything in January.



Designed to hold up

The problem with most January goals is not a lack of ambition. It is the assumption that life will cooperate. New routines are usually planned during a calm moment, shaped by optimism and intention, then released into weeks filled with meetings, travel, fatigue, and family demands. When momentum fades, people often blame motivation. In reality, the structure was never strong enough to begin with. According to **David Ribott**, founder of Ribott Partners, habits last only when they are designed to survive pressure.

“Most January goals fail because they are built on optimism, not design,” Ribott says. “People set outcomes like getting fit or being more productive without defining the smallest repeatable behaviours that make progress inevitable. When the first real week hits, the plan collapses, shame kicks in, and they abandon it.” What disappears at that point is not discipline, but momentum. Ribott believes momentum comes from systems that reward consistency rather than perfection.

In his work with senior leaders, Ribott starts by stripping away fantasy schedules. Habits are designed around the calendar clients actually live with, not the one they aspire to. Non-negotiables such as peak meeting blocks, commute times, and family commitments are mapped first. Only then are habits introduced. These are deliberately

small, flexible, and able to survive disruption. Simple contingency rules play a central role. “If my last meeting ends late, then I do a 10-minute reset, not a 60-minute workout,” Ribott says. Recovery days, travel versions, and weekly reviews are built in so the habit bends instead of breaking.

Motivation plays a far smaller role than most people expect. Ribott sees professionals fail not because they lack desire, but because their days are already overloaded with decisions and interruptions. Under stress, the brain defaults to what feels familiar and easy. Motivation-based plans hold only when life is calm. Structure holds when it is not. Ribott focuses on discipline supported by clear cues, reduced friction, and pre-decided defaults that protect priorities when energy is low.

Making habits repeatable often requires making them smaller. Ribott encourages people to shrink the habit until starting feels almost effortless. Anchoring a new habit to something already established increases

Falling off-track does not require starting over. Ribott advises treating lapses as deviations rather than failures. A brief review helps reset the system.

consistency. After coffee. After school drop-off. After closing the laptop.

Removing unnecessary steps matters too. Laying out equipment, pre-packing meals, or writing the first line of an email lowers resistance. Over time, repetition does more than create consistency. It shapes identity. When a behaviour becomes automatic, it no longer feels like discipline.

Environment plays a decisive role in whether habits stick or fade. Ribott describes it as the silent driver of behaviour. “Your calendar is a values document,” he says. “If the habit is not scheduled, it becomes optional, and optional always gets crowded out.” Workspaces influence focus in the same way. Cleaner surfaces, fewer notifications, and single-task defaults reduce distraction. Boundaries reinforce consistency.

Falling off-track does not require starting over. Ribott advises treating lapses as deviations rather than failures. A brief review helps reset the system. What happened. What got in the way. What is the smallest next step. Returning to the minimum version of the habit for a few days rebuilds consistency without pressure. He also follows a firm rule. “Missing once is human,” Ribott says. “Missing twice is a pattern.” The solution is rarely a new goal. It is a tighter operating system that matches real life.



Structure over motivation

The language of change is often emotional. People talk about feeling inspired, driven, or ready to reinvent themselves. What rarely gets discussed is how fragile that energy can be once everyday life resumes. Meetings overrun. Sleep suffers. Small decisions pile up. Motivation fades quietly. According to **Roh Hafez**, Life Coach at The Hundred Wellness Centre, long-term habits succeed not because people feel inspired, but because they stop relying on inspiration altogether.

“Motivation is inherently inconsistent,” Hafez says. It fluctuates with mood, energy levels, and external circumstances. While motivation can help spark change, he believes it is a risky foundation for anything meant to last. “Long-term habits are sustained not by how motivated we feel, but by how clearly we define the desired outcome and how consistently we apply structure and discipline to support it.” When structure replaces emotion, habits become more stable.

Well-designed routines are central to that shift. Hafez points out that most daily behaviours already operate without motivation. People brush their teeth or get dressed for work without negotiation. “They do it because it is routine,” he says. When actions are repeated in the same order, at the same time, friction drops. Over time, the behaviour moves out of conscious decision-making and into habit. “Eventually the habit becomes automatic,” Hafez says, “and most importantly, easy to maintain.”

Environment plays a decisive role in whether this process succeeds. Hafez describes surroundings as either supportive or obstructive.

When the environment encourages a behaviour, repetition becomes natural. Keeping a musical instrument within reach increases the likelihood of daily practice. Spending time with people who prioritise fitness makes showing up feel normal rather than forced.

On the other hand, environments that add friction quietly sabotage consistency. “If you need a car for every errand,” he says, “it becomes harder to embed movement naturally into daily life.” The habit itself may be well intentioned, but the setting works against it.

Decision fatigue is another overlooked barrier. Hafez explains that habits requiring constant choices rarely survive. Wanting to eat well without planning means repeatedly deciding what to eat, when to shop, and



how to fit it into the day. Each decision drains mental energy. Over time, fatigue sets in and opting out becomes the default. “Reducing choices through preparation

and structure significantly improves consistency,” he says. Fewer decisions mean less resistance.

Simplifying goals follows the same logic. Hafez encourages breaking ambitions down until they feel almost too small to resist. Large goals often trigger avoidance because they feel heavy before they begin. Small actions lower that threshold. “When daily steps feel manageable rather than overwhelming,” he says, “resistance decreases and repetition becomes natural.” These actions may feel insignificant in isolation, but repetition allows them to compound into real change.

One of the most effective structural shifts Hafez recommends is also one of the simplest. Setting aside ten minutes each day for planning and reflection can dramatically

improve follow-through. “This intentional pause creates awareness,” he says. It allows people to notice patterns, adjust expectations, and recommit before habits drift.

Planning turns scattered effort into something more deliberate. Reflection strengthens commitment without pressure.

Across his work, Hafez sees the same pattern. People who struggle are often working harder than necessary. They rely on bursts of motivation, make too many decisions, and place habits into environments that do not support them. Those who succeed take a quieter approach. They remove friction. They repeat the same actions. They design their days so habits run automatically.

Habits that last rarely feel transformative in the moment. They feel ordinary. They are supported by routine, shaped by environment, and protected from decision fatigue. Hafez believes that when structure is in place, change no longer depends on how someone feels that day. It depends on systems that keep working regardless. Over time, those systems do what motivation never could.



Eat without extremes

Every January, eating plans arrive wrapped in urgency. Calories are slashed. Food groups are eliminated. Discipline is framed as the deciding factor. A few weeks later, the same people feel exhausted, frustrated, and convinced they have failed. **Deepti Palija**, Nutritionist at HLZ (Heart Life Zone), says this pattern has little to do with motivation and everything to do with biology.

“When you tell yourself you’re cutting out carbs or eating only 1200 calories, your body hears a scary message,” she says. The body responds as if it is under threat. Cravings intensify. The brain becomes preoccupied with the very foods being restricted. January adds another layer of strain. Financial stress after the holidays, disrupted routines, and new work demands all arrive at once. Energy is already low. Willpower is depleted. “There’s nothing left for fighting your cravings,” Palija says.

The numbers support what she sees in practice. Ninety-five out of one hundred people quit restrictive diets within a few months. Women tend to drop out sooner. Hormonal shifts triggered by severe restriction make adherence harder and energy levels lower. “Real change isn’t about eating perfectly,” Palija says. “It’s about working with your body, not against it.”

Her approach starts by reframing the question entirely. Instead of asking what to remove, she asks clients to focus on what they can add. More vegetables to rice rather than cutting rice out. A date with almonds before dessert rather than banning sweets. Enjoying treats intentionally instead of

eating them in rebellion. “When you add good things instead of removing bad things, your body stops feeling threatened,” she says. Cravings settle. Eating well becomes something people want to do rather than something they force.

Routine plays a central role in making this approach work. January promises often fail because people attempt to change everything at once. Palija encourages changing one small thing and repeating it until it becomes automatic. Eating at consistent times stabilises blood sugar and reduces erratic hunger. “When your body knows what to expect, cravings calm down,” she says. Lunch timed to digestion, lighter dinners, and breakfast at the same hour each day are not rigid rules. They reflect how the body functions best.

The real shift happens when eating well becomes unremarkable. Palija sees success when habits stop requiring constant thought. “That’s when January’s promise becomes real life,” she says.

Overeating is another moment where long-term habits are often derailed. Most people respond with guilt and punishment. That cycle fuels further overeating. Palija takes a different view. “Notice it, learn from it, and move on,” she says. The next meal becomes simple and supportive. Vegetables. Protein. Whole grains. No restriction. No compensation. Understanding why overeating happened matters more than judging it. Stress, boredom, or emotional hunger often sit underneath the behaviour.

Supporting the body after overeating also

matters. Warm water with ginger, lighter meals, and gentle movement help digestion recover. “You’re helping your body, not punishing it,” Palija says. This approach changes the relationship with food. Choices replace shame. Consistency replaces cycles.

When it comes to habits that last, Palija favours simplicity over novelty. Vegetables at lunch and dinner remain the most reliable predictor of long-term health. Eating at the same times daily stabilises energy.

Drinking water, especially before lunch, improves mood and hunger cues. These habits endure because they are forgiving. Missing once does not equal failure. You simply return to the habit at the next opportunity.

One of the most damaging myths Palija challenges is the idea that eating struggles reflect weak willpower.

“Willpower isn’t a character trait,” she says. It runs out under stress and fatigue. Making healthy choices easier matters more than trying harder. Environment plays a role. Nourishing foods visible. Snacks planned. Sleep and stress managed.

She also points to gender differences that explain why aggressive diets fail women faster. Severe restriction disrupts hormonal balance, slows progress, and increases frustration. The issue is not effort. It is how the body adapts under pressure. Sustainable change comes from support rather than control.

“The real reset isn’t restriction,” Palija says. It begins with rest, regular meals, reduced stress, and kinder self-talk. Habits that last are built quietly, through daily choices repeated over time. That kind of consistency outlasts January every time.





Sleep sets everything

Lifestyle resets often begin with energy and intention. People plan better meals. They schedule workouts. They promise themselves more discipline. What quietly disappears first is sleep. According to **Jasmine Ceus**, Pediatric Sleep Consultant at Medicare Hospitals & Medical Centres, that trade-off is where most long-term change starts to unravel.

“Sleep is usually the first thing people sacrifice because they see it as flexible time,” she says. When someone decides to eat better or exercise more, those extra minutes are often taken from sleep. The problem, she explains, is that sleep does not deliver instant, visible results in the way a workout or diet change does. Its value is underestimated. “In reality, sleep is the foundation that supports every other healthy habit,” she says.

Poor sleep does not fail loudly. It fails quietly, through erosion. Ceus explains that when sleep quality drops, the brain stops functioning at full capacity. Decision-making becomes harder. Mood shifts. Self-control weakens. “That’s why, when you’re tired, it’s harder to say no to unhealthy food, harder to stay motivated, and harder to stick to routines,” she says.



What makes sleep difficult to prioritise is the assumption that fixing it requires major lifestyle change. Ceus pushes back on that idea. “You don’t need huge lifestyle changes to sleep better,” she says. Improvements often come from small, repeatable adjustments. Going to bed twenty minutes earlier. Putting the phone away before sleep. Keeping the bedroom dark and cool. Avoiding caffeine later in the day. None of these changes feel dramatic on their own. Done consistently, they create meaningful shifts.

“Small changes, done consistently, really add up,” she says.

Consistency, she notes, matters as much as duration. Many people focus on total hours slept and ignore timing. Ceus believes this misses the point. “Going to bed

and waking up at the same time every day trains your body clock,” she says. Irregular schedules disrupt sleep quality even when total hours seem adequate. A consistent seven hours often feels more restorative than an irregular nine. The body responds to predictability.

Busy periods expose how fragile sleep habits can be. When stress increases, sleep is often the first thing cut, even though it is most needed then. Ceus encourages treating sleep with the same seriousness as work commitments. “Treat sleep like an appointment,” she says. That means setting

a clear wind-down time, preparing for the next day earlier, and keeping work or stress out of bed. Protecting sleep does not remove stress, but it improves the ability to cope with it.

Asked which habit delivers the greatest return for the least effort, Ceus does not hesitate. A consistent bedtime routine sits at the top of the list. Repeating the same calming actions every night signals the brain to slow down. Dimming lights. Putting devices away. Reducing stimulation. “Doing the same calming things every night tells your brain it’s time to sleep,” she says. The simplicity of the routine is what makes it powerful.

Ceus sees sleep as the anchor habit. When it is stable, other behaviours become easier to maintain. Hunger cues improve. Emotional regulation strengthens. Energy becomes more predictable. The desire to rely on willpower decreases because fewer decisions feel overwhelming. From her perspective, lasting change rarely begins with effort. It begins with recovery.

Habits that last tend to follow this pattern. They are built on repetition rather than intensity. They rely on structure rather than motivation. Sleep fits that model perfectly. It does not demand perfection. It demands consistency. Ceus believes that when sleep is protected, everything else has a better chance of sticking. “Sleep supports every other healthy habit,” she says. When it is treated as essential rather than optional, change stops feeling like a struggle and starts feeling sustainable.

Why habits quietly fail

The appeal of a dramatic reset is easy to understand. New routines are announced with conviction, calendars are reset, and expectations rise fast. What rarely gets attention is the quieter work that follows. The habits that last tend to form without drama, built through repetition, structure, and small decisions repeated on ordinary days. According to **Dr Olivia Pounds**, a Clinical Psychologist at The Hummingbird Clinic, sustainable change depends far more on how the brain manages effort than on how motivated someone feels at the start.

“Habit formation and habit maintenance are skills deeply influenced by executive functioning, emotional regulation, learning style, and self-talk,” she says. These are not abstract ideas. In clinical practice, they show up in everyday behaviour. Dr Pounds often begins by looking at how a person approaches basic tasks. Do they leave things until the last minute. Do they struggle to initiate tasks. Do they abandon routines after missing a single day. Do they rely on looming deadlines to feel motivated. Patterns like these reveal how planning, follow-through, and inner dialogue operate, all of which shape whether a habit survives beyond its first attempt.

January intensifies these patterns. The pressure to begin the year strongly is often framed as motivating. Dr Pounds sees the opposite effect. “Many people start the year with an underlying fear that they will not be able to sustain change,” she says. That fear alone can reduce motivation before a habit has a chance to form. From a psychological standpoint, the brain prefers efficiency. Well-established habits require less mental energy. New habits demand attention and cognitive effort. When pressure and self-criticism are layered on top, the brain can interpret the change as threatening.

This creates an internal push-and-pull. People try to force motivation while feeling overwhelmed. “This often results in an internal battle,” Dr Pounds says, one that is difficult to sustain. When the habit fades, the experience reinforces negative beliefs about capability and follow-through, making future attempts feel heavier from the outset.

Self-criticism is often mistaken for discipline. Dr Pounds describes it as a poor long-term motivator. “When people are self-critical, they often enter a psychological threat mode,” she says. Stress responses



Initiating the task is often the hardest step. Starting, even briefly, helps the brain engage. Acknowledging the effort reinforces the behaviour and reduces the pressure to perform perfectly.

activate. Drive increases temporarily. Hypervigilance sets in. The short-term effect can look productive. Over time, it becomes exhausting. Burnout follows. Disengagement becomes likely.

What supports endurance instead is a different tone altogether. “Habits are more likely to be sustained when they are aligned with personal values and approached with compassion rather than perfectionism,” she says. Reducing pressure gives the brain space to build neural pathways gradually.

Motivation itself is often misunderstood. Some people struggle to access it due to neurobiological factors. Conditions such as depression or ADHD can disrupt

dopamine systems that support goal-directed behaviour. Emotional exhaustion can feel similar. Avoidance becomes more frequent. “The brain is tired and perceives the effort to engage as too great,” Dr Pounds explains. In those moments, she encourages shifting focus away from outcomes and back toward values.

If a goal is going to the gym, the underlying value may be health or mental well-being. Acting in line with that value does not require intensity. “Going for five minutes or taking a short walk still counts,” she says. Initiating the task is often the hardest step. Starting, even briefly, helps the brain engage. Acknowledging the effort reinforces the behaviour and reduces the pressure to perform perfectly.

Restarting a habit after it fades can feel harder than starting from scratch. Dr Pounds attributes this to memory and anticipation. “The brain recalls the cost of sustaining the behaviour and then anticipates failure,” she says. This lowers self-belief before the habit resumes. She reframes restarting as resilience. Repeated small actions gradually shift the work from conscious effort to automatic behaviour.

The inner dialogue that sustains change is neither forceful nor urgent. “Sustainable habit change is not about intensity or how quickly you can get there,” Dr Pounds says. “It is about consistency and compassion.”



Built to be repeated

The most common fitness mistake is not a lack of effort. It is starting with the wrong premise. January routines are often built on motivation, urgency, and the idea that change should feel dramatic from day one. A few weeks later, life intervenes. Work runs late. Travel disrupts rhythm. Energy dips. The routine unravels. According to **Alex Savva**, WELLFIT's Director of Performance and Training, habits last only when they are designed to survive ordinary weeks rather than ideal ones.

"Most plans fail because they rely on motivation instead of systems," Savva says. Motivation, he explains, is emotional and short-lived, especially when schedules fill up. Many people also begin with unrealistic expectations, packing in too many sessions or too much intensity at once. When the plan collides with real life, the first disruption feels like failure. At that point, people tend to stop altogether. "Sustainable fitness needs flexibility, not perfection," he says.

The idea that progress requires constant intensity is one of the most persistent myths in fitness culture. Savva takes a more restrained view. Real benefits, he says, require far less than most people assume. Three to five hours of total movement per week, spread across the week, is enough to improve energy, mood, strength, and long-term health. What matters most is consistency. Volume matters less.

Savva also watches closely for early signs

of burnout. Constant exhaustion, lethargy, and a growing sense of dread around training are signals that the system is breaking down. When that happens, he advises replacing a hard session with something restorative. Recovery-focused work such as mobility, sauna, or ice baths can keep the habit intact while allowing the body to reset.

January brings another predictable error. People try to make up for lost time. Savva sees this every year. "People train as if they never stopped, instead of respecting where their body is now," he says. The result is excessive soreness, fatigue, or injury, often within the first two weeks. The body adapts quickly, but only when it is allowed to. "January should be about re-entry, not punishment," he says. The goal is to rebuild rhythm, not prove something to yourself.

Designing routines that survive busy weeks requires restraint. Savva encourages people to focus on a minimum effective routine rather than an all-encompassing plan. Everyone should know their non-negotiables. That might be two short strength sessions and one cardio session per week. When time becomes limited, the solution is to reduce volume rather than frequency. Three sessions still happen. They are simply shorter. Thirty to forty-five minutes replaces an hour. During travel or intense work periods, routines scale down while preserving fundamental movements that align with long-term goals. This

protects the base rather than resetting progress each time life gets busy.

On the question of consistency versus intensity, Savva is unequivocal. "Consistency wins every time," he says. "Intensity creates short-term change, but consistency creates long-term adaptation." The body responds to repeated signals delivered over time. A moderate routine maintained for months

outperforms an intense routine followed for two weeks and then abandoned. Fitness, in his view, is cumulative. It is built through steady work and commitment rather than dramatic bursts.

For those who have stopped and want to restart, Savva advocates humility. Start at sixty to seventy percent of what you think you can do, not what you used to do. The early focus should be on movement quality, breathing, and rebuilding the habit itself. Nutrition and hydration routines should return alongside training, not later. Sessions should end with people feeling better than when they started. Progress should feel almost too easy at first. That ease is not a sign of weakness. It is a signal that the habit has room to grow.

Savva also encourages people to seek guidance rather than guessing their way back. Support from coaches and experts reduces friction and lowers the risk of injury or burnout. Habits that last are rarely impressive in the beginning. They are quiet, repeatable, and forgiving. Over time, that consistency does what motivation never can.



Less works better

January often arrives with expectations that do not match physical reality. After weeks of late nights, travel, and disrupted routines, many people return to work assuming motivation should switch on immediately. Instead, focus feels scattered and energy runs low. **Dr Falak Sayed**, Staff Physician in Emergency Medicine and Occupational Health at Cleveland Clinic Abu Dhabi, explains that this dip is not a failure of discipline. It is the body recalibrating.

“In the UAE and Gulf, January often follows a period of late nights, social gatherings, travel, and irregular routines,” she says. “Many people also return from long-haul trips with jet lag. These disruptions affect sleep quality and mental focus, making motivation feel low.” She stresses that this response is physiological, not personal. The body needs time to return to structure before performance stabilises.

What often gets labelled as laziness is frequently rooted in overlooked physical factors. Dr Sayed points to vitamin D deficiency as one of the most common issues she sees in the region. Despite abundant sunshine, limited outdoor exposure during working hours leaves many people depleted. Dehydration is another frequent contributor, particularly in air-conditioned environments or after outdoor activity. Iron deficiency, thyroid imbalances,

unstable blood sugar from irregular meals, and chronically poor sleep quality also play a role. These conditions quietly erode concentration and stamina, making even small habits feel harder to sustain.

Stress adds further strain. Long working hours, extended commutes, and constant digital connectivity keep stress hormones elevated. Dr Sayed explains that this has a direct impact on habit-building. “High stress disrupts sleep and appetite regulation,” she says. “Without adequate recovery, especially sleep, the hormones that regulate motivation and consistency become imbalanced.”

In a culture that values productivity and self-discipline, the instinctive response is to push harder. Dr Sayed believes this often backfires. “When the body is already fatigued, stressed, or sleep-deprived, increased effort can lead to burnout, injuries, or repeated setbacks,” she says. More intensity does not compensate for low reserves. In these situations, restoring energy and balance produces better outcomes than tightening routines or adding demands.

The body usually signals when this reset is needed. Dr Sayed lists the early warning signs she encourages patients to take seriously. Frequent colds, persistent fatigue, irritability, headaches, and poor focus are common. Increased reliance on caffeine, sugar cravings, and difficulty sleeping often

follow. “These are signs that the body is under stress,” she says. “They indicate a need for recovery, hydration, and rest, not more pressure.”

Before introducing new habits, Dr Sayed advises prioritising one foundation. “Sleep should come first,” she says. “Establishing consistent sleep and wake times, even on weekends, has a powerful impact on energy, mood, immune health, and weight regulation.” Consistency matters more than occasional catch-up sleep, which often disrupts the body clock further.

In the Gulf, small changes can significantly improve sleep quality. Reducing late-night screen use lowers stimulation before bed. Avoiding heavy evening meals supports digestion and rest.

From a medical perspective, Dr Sayed sees sustainable change as a process of support rather than force.

Energy stabilises first. Focus returns gradually.

Her advice reframes how people approach January resets. Sustainable habits are not built through intensity or self-criticism. They are built through consistency, recovery, and attention to basic health signals. “When sleep and recovery are prioritised, everything else becomes easier to maintain,” she believes. For many people, the most effective change begins by doing less, not more, and allowing the body to set the pace. ■





From sunset meet-ups and cultural exchanges to coffee conversations that turn strangers into friends, XpatzHub helps expats not just live in Dubai, but truly belong.



that blends social experiences, business networking and wellness-led gatherings. From sunset meet-ups and cultural exchanges to coffee conversations that turn strangers into friends, XpatzHub helps expats not just live in Dubai, but truly belong.

She gathered 70 people she already knew into a group for WhatsApp and Facebook. “As initiatives took shape and were shared across social platforms, word spread organically. People invited people and soon close to 80,000 people registered in the very first year,” said Mundra.

Mundra took XpatzHub to the next level expanding its vision to embrace a multicultural focus. “Today, the community has grown to over 410,000 members across Instagram, Facebook and Telegram and our database is made up of unique email IDs and mobile numbers,” she said.

“In the beginning, people did not take communities seriously,” Mundra said. “They thought it was just a platform to chit-chat. But I always believed in the power of belonging.”

“Expats come from different parts of the world, often without family or deep-rooted support systems. XpatzHub was created to bridge that gap and turn a foreign city into a home away from home. When the right people come together, meaningful things happen,” she added.

One of Mundra’s initiatives is her pledge to empower 1,000 women business owners. “Through XpatzHub, women get help to secure their business license, start a business and learn marketing completely free of cost. So far over 400 women have received help from us. Our goal is to reach the 1000 mark by the end of December 2026.”

Today, Mundra’s definition of success has definitely shifted. “It is no longer about KPI. It is about walking into a room and seeing people who found their tribe because of something I created.”

Her long-term vision is clear: to make XpatzHub a complete solution for expats so that when someone moves to the UAE for the first time, they have a trusted point of contact from the moment they arrive in the emirates.

Anul Mundra Building belonging

Anul Mundra had a high-flying corporate career until it abruptly ended.

Her entire department was outsourced to India, and she was made redundant with six months’ salary in hand. Then Covid hit.

Like millions around the world, Mundra suddenly found herself at home, navigating uncertainty. But instead of retreating, she leaned into something she had always been good at: bringing people together. A natural social butterfly, she began educating people on how to manage work-from-home life during the pandemic. What started as informal conversations quickly turned into something much bigger.

“Expatriate life can feel transactional,” said Mundra. “You meet people all the time, but meaningful connection takes intention.”

That insight became the foundation of XpatzHub, a lifestyle-driven platform

WHEN

COMMUNITY

STEPS IN AS THE CORNER OFFICE

In Dubai’s fast-paced success culture, three women stepped away from corporate certainty to build something quieter and far more powerful. Anul Mundra, Jen Blandos and Reema Mahajan reveal how purpose, belonging and community have become the new markers of ambition and impact

WORDS BY ANJANA KUMAR PHOTO BY SHUTTERSTOCK

Dubai has never been short on ambition. But for a growing number of women, success is no longer measured by corner offices or corporate titles. Instead, it’s found in connection, purpose and the quiet satisfaction of building something meaningful from the ground up. Meet Anul Mundra, Jen Blandos and Reema Mahajan, three women from vastly different professional backgrounds who walked away from corporate careers to create community-led initiatives that now shape the social and professional lives of thousands of residents across the UAE. Their journeys are as personal as their voices.

Jen Blandos

The power of ecosystems

If there's one woman who embodies the notion that a career can be a life and a life can be a career, it is Jen Blandos. An entrepreneur since 2002, Blandos never set out to build an empire; she simply followed the intersections of joy, challenge, and opportunity. Looking back now, she admits that had you asked her a decade ago whether her work would become her life's purpose she "probably wouldn't have thought about it that way." But the truth is, she was building not just businesses, but ecosystems of support long before the world knew it needed them.

What began as a quiet Facebook group in the early days of Covid-19 quickly evolved into something much bigger: a thriving global community born from urgent questions women were asking in

real time: How do I replace lost income? Pivot my business? Find clients in chaos? Blandos realised this wasn't idle chatter it was demand for community, infrastructure and real support.

In 2020, she professionalised Female Fusion, secured a formal DMCC licence, and launched a paid membership model treating it like a business from day one, not a hobby. "I saw early on that the community could burn out its founder long before it became sustainable," she says, a problem she solved by designing systems, boundaries, and clear pathways for growth.

Under Blandos' leadership, Female Fusion has evolved into one of the UAE's largest and most respected professional communities for women entrepreneurs, boasting tens of thousands of members across 30+ countries and offering masterclasses, toolkits, workshops, curated networking experiences and even a

Female Fusion has evolved into one of the UAE's largest and most respected professional communities for women entrepreneurs, boasting tens of thousands of members across 30+ countries.



first-of-its-kind verified business directory for women-owned businesses.

This work is far from social, it's practical, purposeful and transformational. Female Fusion doesn't just connect women, it gives them real platforms, visibility and opportunities to scale their ventures and grow their impact. From online strategy sessions to in-person coffee mornings, Blandos has architected a space where women don't just grow businesses they grow lives.

Her daily rhythm blends strategy calls with hosted coffee mornings, mentorship sessions with curated networking experiences, all while honouring the balance most founders fight for: time with family, creative space, and intentional rest.

And woven into this journey is her personal story of resilience. Blandos is a two-time cancer survivor, having first diagnosed over a decade ago and again in 2025. It is a testament to her courage, grit and relentless commitment to living on her terms. Today, Blandos is not just an entrepreneur she is recognised as a builder of ecosystems, a connector of leaders, and a force for change whose work continues to shape the landscape of women's entrepreneurship in the UAE and beyond.

Reema Mahajan

Where women find home

Reema Mahajan didn't set out to build one of Dubai's most influential women's communities. It started with a need to belong.

Armed with a decade of corporate experience and an elite education from IIT Delhi and IIM Bangalore, Mahajan walked away from a conventional career to build something rooted in purpose.

She moved to Dubai with her family. New to the city and navigating life as an Indian woman abroad, Reema noticed a gap in women getting support that went beyond business cards. She therefore started Indian Women Dubai, initially as a small Facebook group.

"Community isn't about numbers," she said. "It's about showing up again and again."

What followed was organic growth fuelled by trust.

Today, the community empowers and connects over 150,000 Indian women across the UAE, which include homemakers, entrepreneurs and women navigating corporate careers.

Today, Indian Women Dubai empowers and connects over 150,000 Indian women across the UAE, which include homemakers, entrepreneurs and women navigating corporate careers.

From mentorship and entrepreneurship support to cultural celebrations and lifestyle gatherings, the platform supports women across careers, life stages and personal reinvention. From power breakfasts to festive celebrations, Reema's events are warm, inclusive and unmistakably lifestyle-driven where saris meet blazers and conversations move seamlessly from career growth to personal reinvention.

"Women don't just need networks," Mahajan added. "They need safe spaces where they can be fully themselves."

"In a foreign city, a community becomes your family," said Mahajan.

What next? "The plan is to expand the community and welcome women from other parts of the world to make it more global."

A NEW DEFINITION OF SUCCESS

What unites Anul Mundral, Jen Blandos and Reema Mahajan is not just courage, it is clarity. Each woman recognised that the traditional corporate ladder no longer aligned with who they were becoming. In its place, they built ecosystems of connection, support and shared growth proof that community is not a side project, but a powerful business model in its own right.

In a city known for speed and scale, these women remind us that sometimes the most meaningful impact starts with a single conversation and the bravery to step away from what's safe.

And that, perhaps, is the most luxurious lifestyle of all.

How to wear the year's quietest colour

Cloud Dancer is Pantone's Colour of the Year for 2026.

Designers treated it as a working neutral, making it one of the easiest trends to wear — and one of the easiest to overdo

Cloud Dancer is Pantone's Colour of the Year for 2026. It's a shade of soft, neutral white and you've probably already worn something close to it. It shows up in jackets, knits, shirts and shoes without making a fuss. The interest lies in how it's styled. When it's handled with restraint, it looks current. When it's pushed too hard, it starts to look like a styling exercise.

The wearable edit

Designers approached Cloud Dancer as structure rather than spectacle. On recent runways, the colour appeared most convincingly in tailoring, knitwear, and foundational separates. It was never loud. It was precise.

Miuccia Prada addressed this shift in a recent interview, saying, "Clothes today need to be quiet enough to stay relevant. If something only works as a statement, it fails the wardrobe test." That thinking defined how Cloud Dancer was used. Blazers replaced black. Shirts replaced cream. Trousers softened darker looks without demanding attention.

In workwear, the colour worked best as a neutral substitute. A Cloud Dancer jacket over charcoal trousers. A white knit under a grey suit. Texture mattered more than contrast. Matte finishes kept the look

Cloud Dancer's success depends on placement. Stylists have been clear about this. The colour reflects light differently depending on skin tone and texture.



grounded. Crisp poplin and brushed wool avoided any bridal or clinical association.

Off-duty dressing felt even more natural. Relaxed knits, cotton shirts, and lightweight jackets made the colour feel familiar. Jonathan Anderson said in a recent fashion feature, “Everyday clothes should absorb personality through wear. If they look perfect all the time, they don’t belong to real life.” Cloud Dancer excelled here because it softened with use rather than deteriorated.

Evening dressing required discipline. The strongest looks relied on cut and movement rather than shine. Bias-cut skirts, tailored coats, fluid dresses worn with minimal styling. The colour supported the silhouette instead of replacing it. Anything glossy or overly styled tipped the balance too far.

Who it flatters and how

Cloud Dancer’s success depends on placement. Stylists have been clear about this. The colour reflects light differently depending on skin tone and texture. Worn near the face, it can illuminate or flatten.

Victoria Beckham spoke about this directly while discussing colour placement in her collections. She said, “I like women to decide where colour sits on the body. Not everything needs to frame the face.”

Deeper skin tones often benefited from wearing Cloud Dancer close to the face, especially in structured shirts or knits. Fairer or cooler undertones tended to look better when the colour appeared lower on the body or broken up with warmer shades nearby.

Jewellery choices affected the outcome. Warm metals echoed the softness of the colour. Sharper silver tones created definition.

Accessories first

Accessories became the gateway for readers hesitant to commit. Shoes, bags, scarves, and belts allowed experimentation without overhaul.

Hermès framed colour in accessories as longevity rather than trend. A brand representative said in a recent magazine interview, “A colour should live with the leather, not sit on top of it.” That philosophy explained why Cloud Dancer worked so well in structured bags and refined footwear.

Shoes grounded outfits without leading them. Loafers, ballet flats, minimal boots. The colour read as modern when kept clean and understated. Bags followed the same logic. Structured silhouettes held authority. Slouchy styles risked looking temporary.

Scarves offered flexibility. Worn loosely,



they introduced light near the face without overwhelming it. They also aged well. A good scarf rarely feels dated, even when colour trends shift.

Jewellery stayed restrained. Fine chains, enamel accents, subtle stones. Cloud Dancer did not need competition.

Menswear gets it right

Menswear embraced Cloud Dancer with clarity. The colour appeared where simplicity already ruled. Shirts, knitwear, jackets, and footwear carried the tone without excess.

Daniel Lee described his approach to menswear colour in a recent interview, saying, “When the shape is right, colour doesn’t need explanation.” That philosophy suited Cloud Dancer perfectly. A crisp shirt under a neutral jacket. A fine-gauge knit with tailored trousers. Nothing forced.

Footwear followed suit. Leather sneakers, loafers, minimal boots. The colour felt intentional because it replaced darker neutrals rather than competing with them.

High fashion vs real life

On the runway, Cloud Dancer appeared layered, sculptural, sometimes exaggerated. In real life, it became edited. Dries Van Noten articulated this divide clearly when he said, “The runway is about emotion. The wardrobe is about reality.” Designers used Cloud Dancer to set mood on the catwalk. Wearers distilled it down to something practical.

Street style reflected this restraint. Tailored coats replaced dramatic shapes. Knit sets replaced structured dresses. The colour appeared once in an outfit, not repeatedly. Celebrities translated the shade with similar clarity. Zendaya was photographed recently in Cloud Dancer tailoring with minimal styling. Her long-time stylist said in a fashion interview, “The look worked because the colour stayed quiet. The confidence did the talking.” That sentiment defined the season.

Investment or impulse?

Cloud Dancer draws a clear line between pieces worth investing in and those best kept affordable. Investment pieces benefit from structure. Coats, jackets, tailoring, and leather goods age well in this shade. As the colour softens with wear, it gains character.

Tilda Swinton reflected on wardrobe longevity in a recent interview, saying, “Clothes should gather memory. If they only look good once, they aren’t worth keeping.” A well-cut Cloud Dancer coat or blazer fits that philosophy. ■



Living with white

Pantone's 2026 Colour of the Year, Cloud Dancer, favours texture and restraint over statement — quiet, liveable, and designed to fade into the background

White has never been this controversial. In a culture tired of maximalism and saturated hues,

Pantone's 2026 Colour of the Year, Cloud Dancer (PANTONE 11-4201) — a soft, luminous white — landed with mixed reactions. Some designers praised its calming influence; others called it unremarkable or even “Pantonedead.”

Whether you love it or roll your eyes at it, Cloud Dancer feels less like a trend colour and more like a design language. It's a backdrop that demands sensitivity, more than domination. Used well, it dissolves into a space, lets materials take the lead, and creates rooms that feel lived-in rather

than staged. The real trick is not plastering everything in white and calling it done. It's about living with a colour that's inherently quiet, letting it be the frame for texture, life, and human presence.

The quiet version

Cloud Dancer isn't bright optic white. Pantone describes it as an off-white with gentle depth and warmth, a “lofty” shade meant to evoke serenity and clarity.

For designers this year, the conversation around white has shifted dramatically. It's no longer about pure brightness or clinical cleanliness. It's about softness, nuance, and the way light plays across surfaces.

Alexandra Angle, founder of Angle Interiors, told *House Beautiful* in 2025,

“White isn't flat. It's a spectrum. The trick is to find a white that reacts to light and feels alive through the day.”

That's exactly what Cloud Dancer delivers: a shade that changes from early morning coolness to soft afternoon warmth without ever feeling stark.

Texture is the real power here. On plaster walls with a matte finish, Cloud Dancer almost feels breathable, like air made visible.

On boucle upholstery, it feels tactile and intimate. On polished stone or glass, it reflects light and enhances architectural lines. What this really means is that you can't decorate around Cloud Dancer, it's a canvas for material expression.

And materials matter.

Where it belongs at home

Not all whites feel right everywhere. Cloud Dancer especially rewards contexts where light and texture are leveraged.

Living Rooms: In social spaces, Cloud Dancer works as a calm stage. It's not meant to compete with furnishings; it elevates them. Joanna Gaines, speaking to *Architectural Digest* in 2024, said, "A room should invite people in, not intimidate them." When walls, trim, and ceilings speak the same soft white language, a sofa in rich linen or a coffee table in aged wood can breathe. Used here, the colour fades gracefully into the background, letting people and objects take centre stage.

Pair Cloud Dancer with natural fibres, artisanal weaves, or sculptural ceramics and you've created a room that feels intentional, not empty.

Bedrooms: The colour really earns its calm reputation here. Designers talk about white bedrooms like they're sanctuaries. Ilse Crawford, in a *Wallpaper* interview, asserted that bedrooms should restore you emotionally and physically. A soft, warm white like Cloud Dancer helps deliver that, especially when layered with plush throws or textured rugs.

Use it on walls and ceilings to visually expand the room. On bedding, its subtleties add a zen quality. And because it's not stark white, it avoids the jarring feel that standard whites sometimes give in low light.

Dining spaces: Strangely, white often works best in places where colour might be distracting. A dining room wrapped in Cloud Dancer becomes a setting for conversation and food. Table linens and dishes in cream or stone feel at home against it. Good lighting, warm, layered, and soft, makes all the difference.

Home offices: This is one of the more under-talked rooms for 2026's shade. In a workspace, too much colour can be stimulating in the wrong way. Cloud Dancer reflects light without glare and feels neutral without sterility. It supports focus and lets desk accessories and books register without competing.

Small changes, big shift

Here's what designers and brands are saying about using Cloud Dancer without repainting every wall.

Small interventions create disproportionate impact:

- Soft furnishings: Linen slipcovers, textured throws, boucle cushions in Cloud Dancer tones
- Window treatments: Light-filtering drapery that plays with daylight shadows
- Ceramics and glassware: Objects in soft white that bring continuity across shelves and tabletops



Designers talk about white bedrooms like they're sanctuaries. Bedrooms should restore you emotionally and physically. A soft, warm white like Cloud Dancer helps deliver that.

- **Lighting:** Lampshades in off-white that diffuse warm light beautifully

Luxury homes curator Michael Smith told *Elle Decor* in 2025, "Accessories are where colour feels intentional rather than imposed." A Cloud Dancer vase on a mantel, or a sculptural lamp base, pulls the room's palette together without overwhelming it.

Even minimalist objects matter. Hermès Maison's design team said in *Financial Times* How To Spend It that objects become meaningful through context: "Colour should reveal material, not disguise it." That's crucial here, Cloud Dancer enhances material depth rather than dominating a room.

Material matters more than shade

Cloud Dancer might be "just off-white," but how it sits in a room depends deeply on what it's paired with.

Fabric: In linen and cotton, Cloud Dancer feels lived-in and breathable. A linen sofa in this tone reads softer than slick leather and feels more inviting.

Stone and wood: Against natural stone, the shade reads warmer; against light wood, it takes on a gentle glow. Designers often use it as a neutral backdrop that lets wood

grain, veining, and texture sing.

Glass and metal: Glass with a matte finish or soft etchings takes Cloud Dancer into sculptural territory; paired with warm metals like brushed brass or aged bronze, it feels warmer and less flat.

Processing materials this way is what B&B Italia's design lead emphasised in a 2025 report: "Colour is never separate from material. The same tone can feel completely different depending on how light is absorbed or reflected." That's the difference between trend decor and lasting interiors.

Will it age well?

Here's the honest part. Cloud Dancer is not a high-saturation hue you'll tire of fast, but it's also not meant to be the colour of your room forever in isolation. Designers are saying it's best used as a foundation rather than a headline.

French designer India Mahdavi remarked in *Vogue Living*, "I don't believe in timeless colours. I believe in colours that age gracefully." In other words, a colour that accommodates shifts in style without dictating them tends to serve a space longer. That's Cloud Dancer for you.

Yes, neutrals have had a tough time in recent trend cycles. Many voices predicted richer earth tones, greens, or blues would displace white in 2026. But the choice of Cloud Dancer underscores something deeper: after years of over-stimulation, people want spaces that feel like a reset.

Used as a structural base, Cloud Dancer allows you to rotate accent tones, update textiles, or shift art without repainting. A room built on this neutral feels adaptable, ready for brights tomorrow, for soft pastels next year, and for deeper tones whenever you choose. ■

MEMORY BECOMES A MAP

A new book captures the lived histories of Abu Dhabi's seniors, preserving voices that shaped the emirate quietly, patiently, and often without recognition

It's 11am and the café in a Dubai mall hums with the low buzz of conversation, but at our table, the energy is distinctly different - lively, purposeful, and exciting insights punctuating every few sentences. Mehnaz Anshah and Sadia Anwar, co-founders of Uhibbook publishing house that has made storytelling its art and advocacy, are talking animatedly about their latest project, *Story Lines* - a deeply human and heartwarming book that captures the stories of Abu Dhabi's senior residents.

Flip through the excellently produced book and you will discover stories that are captivating, insightful and engaging, and which offer a quaint, vivid window into a bygone era. From tales by a 72-year-old pearl diver who has crafted a

personal maritime museum at his home to an elderly woman who recalls family walks on the beach, and sleeping under the stars; to the gentleman who helped set up Abu Dhabi's first open-air theatre, where residents watched 16mm Indian and American films beneath the night sky.

As cappuccinos cool untouched between us, Dubai-based Indian expat Mehnaz opens the conversation explaining how they produced the book. "We didn't want to just write about seniors," she says. "We wanted people to see them, to understand the richness of their lives, their experiences, their humour, and their resilience. Because the truth is, we live in a world that often overlooks older people."

Sadia, also an Indian expat, nods in agreement. "Exactly. It started as a project on community engagement, but it became something much bigger; a way to challenge ageist stereotypes and bridge generations through storytelling."

We wanted people to see the seniors, to understand the richness of their lives, their experiences, their humour, and their resilience."

MEHNAZ ANSHAH, Co-founder, Uhibbook publishing house



They felt that while interacting with seniors directly was meaningful, putting their stories into a book would really amplify the impact allowing people to see seniors in a different light.

That, in essence, is the spirit behind *Story Lines* - a collaborative initiative between their publishing platform and Abu Dhabi's Authority of Social Contribution (Ma'an). The book gathers the personal stories of seniors living in Abu Dhabi — Emiratis and expatriates — told in their own voices. Each story, intimate and vivid, shines a light on lives lived fully, dreams pursued, and lessons learned, forming a literary mosaic of shared humanity.

Seeds of empathy

The idea, as Mehnaz tells it, didn't begin as a book at all. "A few years ago, we were exploring how storytelling could be used for social impact," she says. "Our presentation was about how stories help us see people beyond labels, beyond stereotypes."

WORDS BY ANAND RAJOK

Age as a stereotype

"In every society, older people tend to be boxed into categories... frail, dependent, passive," Sadia explains. "But the truth is, they are vibrant, witty, and have so much wisdom to offer. We wanted to capture that through storytelling, not in an academic way, but as real, personal narratives."



Ma'an, which focuses on social well-being and inclusion, saw potential in that idea. They had gathered data suggesting that many seniors in Abu Dhabi felt isolated, even when surrounded by family or caregivers. "They wanted to do something that would engage seniors more meaningfully," says Mehnaz. "That's when they reached out to us. They said 'you know, you're already using stories to

It started as a project on community engagement, but became something much bigger; a way to challenge ageist stereotypes and bridge generations through storytelling."

SADIA ANWAR, Co-founder, Uhibbook publishing house

connect generations; maybe this could work in the social space too'."

It did, and thus was born *Story Lines* — out of empathy, imagination, and a shared belief that everyone deserves to be heard.

Cosmopolitan in its approach, the work includes Emiratis and expats "because that's what the UAE is all about". That diversity became one of the project's quiet triumphs - the platform giving speakers a sense of connection.

Story access

"The data existed," Sadia says, "but access didn't."

They tried knocking on doors — literally and figuratively. Eventually, persistence paid off. Through a mix of official networks and personal outreach, they began connecting with seniors. "And once we found them," Sadia says, "it was magic. They were so eager to talk, to participate. They wanted to be part of something, to be seen and

heard.”

Mehnaz agrees: “What struck me was how they came alive when they realised someone was listening. Their eyes would light up. You could see the pride in their faces when they talked about their youth, their families, their work. It was beautiful.”

Sense of belonging

The stories range from poignant to playful. There’s the retired teacher who still writes poetry in Arabic and English, the Indian expatriate who built his career in the oil industry, the Emirati grandmother who raised a large family while managing her own business, a British nurse who arrived in the UAE in the 1970s and never left.

Each voice is distinct, yet together they form a shared narrative of belonging, of people who helped shape the country’s story in quiet, meaningful ways.

“One of the Emirati gentlemen told us how he missed the smell of the desert after a rain,” Mehnaz recalls. “An expat woman said she still dreams in the language of her childhood. These are small details, but they’re deeply human. They remind us that beneath all our differences, we’re the same.”

The project, she says, also opened unexpected doors. “It became a model for how storytelling can be used in community development. We’ve had educators, social workers, and even corporations reach out, asking how they

can use similar storytelling methods to connect with their communities.”

History lives in everyday people

As our conversation winds down, I ask the two women what they’ve personally learned from this experience. Mehnaz smiles thoughtfully. “Patience,” she says after a moment. “And humility. You realise how much history lives in everyday people. Sometimes, we chase big stories and overlook the quiet ones — but it’s the quiet ones that stay with you.”

Sadia nods. “And the importance of presence,” she adds. “When you sit with someone older and give them your full attention, you’re giving them something priceless: dignity. That’s what *Story Lines* is really about.” ■

VOICES FROM THE PAST

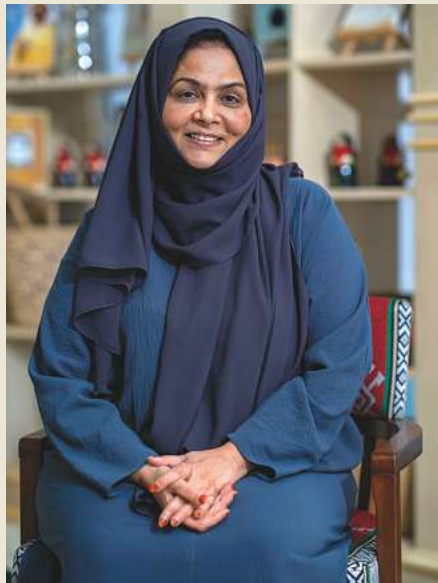
Snapshots from Story Lines

CAPTAIN OF THE SEA

YUSUF AHMAD TALIB AL ALI

Known affectionately as Grandpa Yusuf, the 72-year-old former *nokhada* (ship captain) has spent a lifetime with the sea. Beginning pearl diving at the age of 15, he mastered skills ranging from fishing to trade. In his home in Bani Yas, he built a personal heritage museum filled with models of ships, tools, and traditional homes.

“I created this museum with my own hands — from design to planning to implementation. It’s one of my children,” he says. Soon to be registered with Abu Dhabi’s Heritage Authority, the museum will join the emirate’s official cultural landmarks — a living tribute to Grandpa Yusuf’s lifelong passion for preserving the past.



WHEN THE LIGHTS WENT OUT

SULTANA ABDULLAH

For Sultana Abdullah, power outages in the Abu Dhabi of yore weren’t an inconvenience; they were opportunities to connect.

“When the power went off, we’d all head to the beach. Families would sit together, share stories, and enjoy the cool breeze. Abu Dhabi was synonymous with safety, and I think it still is,” she recalls.

She remembers people sleeping on the seashore until dawn, nights filled with laughter, storytelling, and the quiet comfort of community.

CINEMA ON THE SAND

AHMAD AL KHOURI

Born in 1952, Ahmad Al Khouri remembers a childhood where children went to school barefoot.

“My father once bought me a pair of shoes from the only shop in town. But I loved walking barefoot; the sand was so soft,” he says.

Ahmad also helped set up the city’s first cinema, Cinema Al Shaada, showing 16mm films under the open sky.

“It was just four walls and sand. People would sit under the stars, watching Indian and American films. Those nights were pure magic,” he remembers.



THE STORY EVERYONE WILL BE READING



THE WAIT WON'T BE LONG

WATCH THIS SPACE

THE GULF NEWS ANNUAL SUBSCRIPTION CAMPAIGN

VEGANUARY

done right

Ten vegan recipes driven by flavour, texture and comfort, without substitutes or strict rules. This is plant-based cooking you'll reach for in January and return to long after

DARK CHOCOLATE AVOCADO MOUSSE

PREP TIME: 10 MINUTES | COOKING TIME: NONE
SERVES: 4

INGREDIENTS

Ripe avocados, 2
Cocoa powder, ¼ cup
Maple syrup, 3 tbsp
Vanilla extract, 1 tsp
Pinch of salt

METHOD

Blend all ingredients until completely smooth.
Chill for 30 minutes before serving.



MUSHROOM AND WALNUT RAGU

PREP TIME: 15 MINUTES | COOKING TIME: 40 MINUTES | SERVES: 4

INGREDIENTS

Mushrooms, 400g, finely chopped
Walnuts, ½ cup, finely chopped
Onion, 1, diced
Garlic, 3 cloves
Tomato paste, 2 tbsp
Crushed tomatoes, 1 can
Olive oil, 2 tbsp
Dried oregano, 1 tsp
Salt and pepper, to taste
Cooked pasta, to serve

METHOD

Cook onion in olive oil until soft. Add garlic, mushrooms and walnuts and cook until moisture evaporates. Stir in tomato paste and oregano, then crushed tomatoes. Simmer gently for 30 minutes. Season and serve over pasta.

SWEET POTATO, QUINOA AND AVOCADO BOWL

PREP TIME: 15 MINUTES | COOKING TIME: 25 MINUTES | SERVES: 2

INGREDIENTS

Sweet potato, 1 large, cubed
Olive oil, 1½ tbsp
Quinoa, 1 cup, cooked
Avocado, 1, sliced
Lemon juice, 1 tbsp
Salt and pepper

METHOD

Roast sweet potato with olive oil and salt until caramelised. Assemble bowls with quinoa, sweet potato and avocado. Finish with lemon juice and seasoning.



CHICKPEA AND SPINACH SHAKSHUKA

PREP TIME: 10 MINUTES | COOKING TIME: 25 MINUTES | SERVES: 3

INGREDIENTS

Olive oil, 2 tbsp
Onion, 1, sliced
Garlic, 2 cloves
Paprika, 1 tsp
Cumin, 1 tsp

Crushed tomatoes, 1½ cups
Chickpeas, 1 can, drained
Spinach, 2 cups
Salt, to taste

METHOD

Sauté onion and garlic in olive oil until soft. Add spices and tomatoes. Simmer for 15 minutes. Add chickpeas and cook 5 minutes more. Fold in spinach until wilted. Serve hot with flatbread.

PHOTOS BY SHUTTERSTOCK



ROASTED CAULIFLOWER TACOS WITH CHIPOTLE SAUCE

PREP TIME: 15 MINUTES | COOKING TIME: 30 MINUTES | SERVES: 3-4

INGREDIENTS

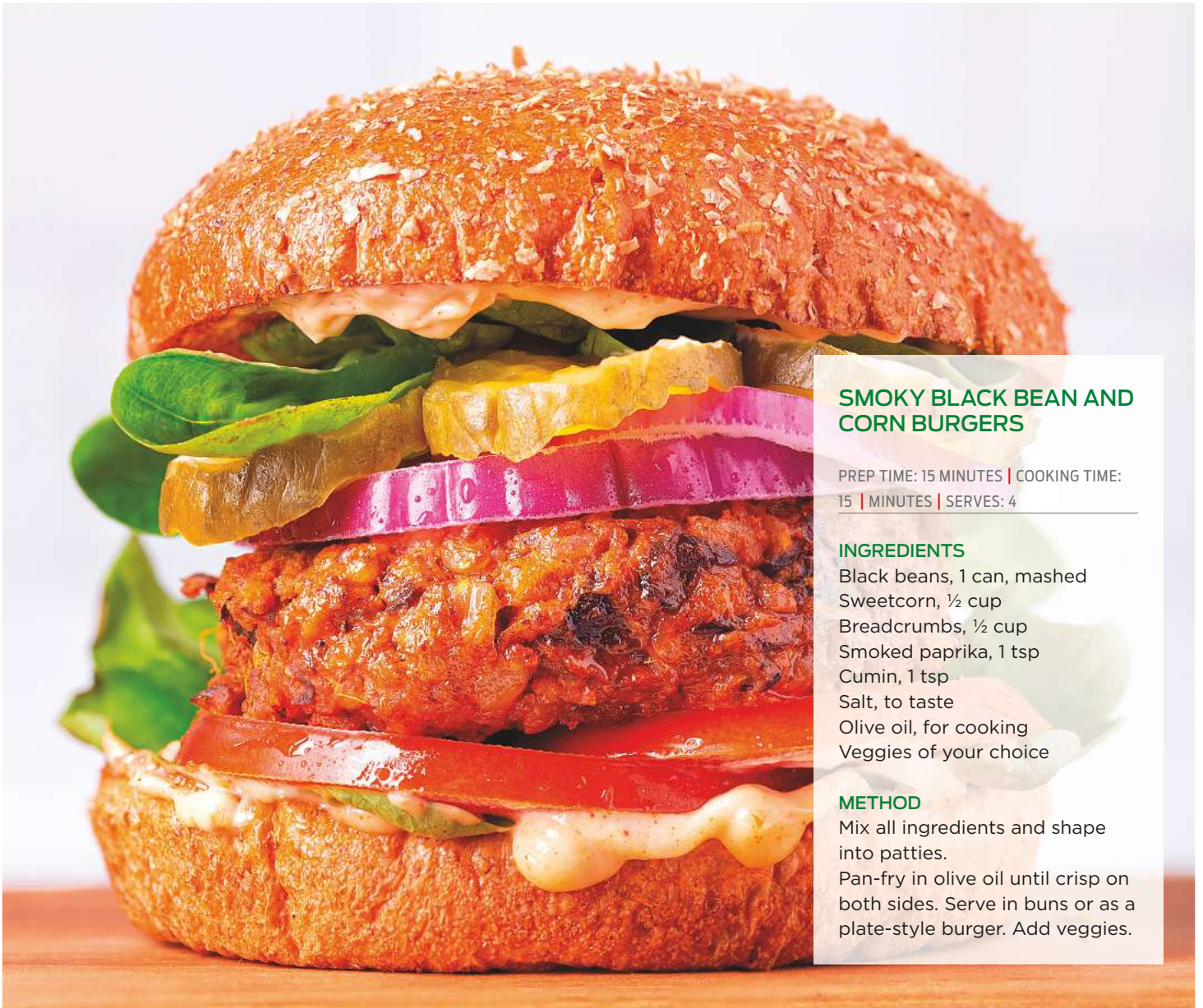
Cauliflower florets, 1 medium head
Olive oil, 2 tbsp
Smoked paprika, 1 tsp
Cumin, 1 tsp
Salt, to taste
Small tortillas, 8

For the sauce

Vegan mayonnaise, ½ cup
Chipotle paste, 1-2 tsp
Lime juice, 1 tbsp

METHOD

Roast cauliflower with olive oil, spices and salt at 200°C until browned and tender. Mix sauce ingredients. Warm tortillas, fill with cauliflower and drizzle generously with chipotle sauce.



SMOKY BLACK BEAN AND CORN BURGERS

PREP TIME: 15 MINUTES | COOKING TIME: 15 MINUTES | SERVES: 4

INGREDIENTS

Black beans, 1 can, mashed
 Sweetcorn, ½ cup
 Breadcrumbs, ½ cup
 Smoked paprika, 1 tsp
 Cumin, 1 tsp
 Salt, to taste
 Olive oil, for cooking
 Veggies of your choice

METHOD

Mix all ingredients and shape into patties.
 Pan-fry in olive oil until crisp on both sides. Serve in buns or as a plate-style burger. Add veggies.

CRISPY TOFU WITH CHILLI, GARLIC AND SESAME

PREP TIME: 15 MINUTES | COOKING TIME: 20 MINUTES | SERVES: 2

INGREDIENTS

Firm tofu, 400g, pressed and cubed
 Cornflour, 2 tbsp
 Vegetable oil, 2 tbsp
 Garlic, 3 cloves, chopped
 Red chilli, 1, finely sliced
 Soy sauce, 2 tbsp
 Maple syrup, 1 tbsp
 Rice vinegar, 1 tsp
 Sesame oil, 1 tsp
 Sesame seeds, 1 tbsp
 Spring onions, sliced, to serve

METHOD

Toss the tofu with cornflour until lightly coated. Heat oil in a wide pan and fry tofu on medium-high heat until golden and crisp on all sides. Remove and set aside.
 In the same pan, add garlic and chilli and cook briefly until fragrant. Stir in soy sauce, maple syrup, vinegar and sesame oil. Return tofu to the pan and toss until glossy and well coated. Finish with sesame seeds and spring onions.





VEGAN PAD THAI

PREP TIME: 20 MINUTES | COOKING TIME: 15 MINUTES | SERVES: 3

INGREDIENTS

Rice noodles, 200g
Vegetable oil, 2 tbsp
Firm tofu, 200g, sliced
Garlic, 2 cloves
Tamarind paste, 2 tbsp
Soy sauce, 2 tbsp
Brown sugar, 1 tbsp
Bean sprouts, 1 cup
Peanuts, crushed, to serve
Lime wedges, to serve

METHOD

Soak noodles until pliable. Fry tofu until golden and set aside. Stir-fry garlic briefly, add noodles, tamarind, soy and sugar. Toss quickly. Return tofu, fold in sprouts and serve with peanuts and lime.



LEMON OLIVE OIL CAKE

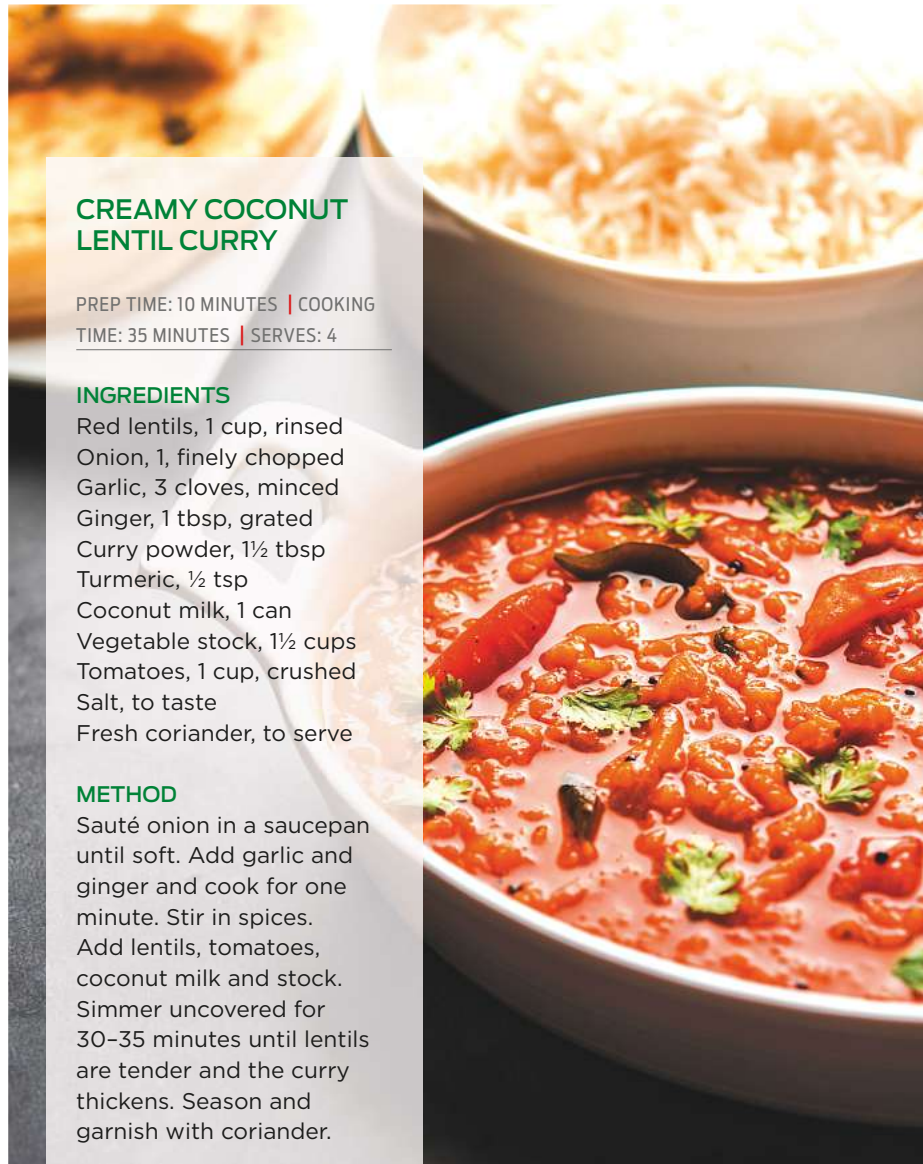
PREP TIME: 15 MINUTES | COOKING TIME: 40 MINUTES | SERVES: 8

INGREDIENTS

Almond flour, 2 cups
Sugar, $\frac{3}{4}$ cup
Baking powder, $\frac{1}{2}$ tsp
Olive oil, $\frac{1}{2}$ cup
Plant milk, $\frac{3}{4}$ cup
Lemon zest and juice, 1 lemon

METHOD

Mix dry ingredients, then whisk in wet ingredients. Bake at 170°C for 40 minutes until set. Cool completely before slicing.



CREAMY COCONUT LENTIL CURRY

PREP TIME: 10 MINUTES | COOKING TIME: 35 MINUTES | SERVES: 4

INGREDIENTS

Red lentils, 1 cup, rinsed
Onion, 1, finely chopped
Garlic, 3 cloves, minced
Ginger, 1 tbsp, grated
Curry powder, $\frac{1}{2}$ tsp
Turmeric, $\frac{1}{2}$ tsp
Coconut milk, 1 can
Vegetable stock, $\frac{1}{2}$ cups
Tomatoes, 1 cup, crushed
Salt, to taste
Fresh coriander, to serve

METHOD

Sauté onion in a saucepan until soft. Add garlic and ginger and cook for one minute. Stir in spices. Add lentils, tomatoes, coconut milk and stock. Simmer uncovered for 30–35 minutes until lentils are tender and the curry thickens. Season and garnish with coriander.

FEBRUARY

Nepal

February is well suited to cultural and nature-led travel in Nepal. Clear skies improve visibility in the Himalayas, while cities like Kathmandu and Pokhara remain comfortably cool. UAE travellers often combine heritage sites with short treks or wellness retreats. It's an appealing option for travellers seeking meaning and scenery over luxury.

Why UAE travellers love it: Spiritual depth, mountain air, and a complete change of pace.



Tunisia

Tunisia offers mild winter weather in February, ideal for exploring ancient ruins and historic medinas. Sites such as Carthage and El Djem are easier to navigate without summer heat. Its North African location keeps flight times reasonable from the UAE. The destination suits travellers interested in history with fewer crowds.

Why UAE travellers love it: Rich history, Mediterranean flavour, and less tourist pressure than Europe.



A year of travel

Where to go in 2026, and why timing matters

For travellers based in the UAE, planning a year of holidays is rarely spontaneous. Weather, flight duration, visa ease, and school breaks all shape where and when people go. In 2026, outbound travel from the UAE is expected to remain strong, with residents

balancing shorter regional escapes with fewer, more intentional long-haul journeys.

Besides, shoulder months, climate advantages, and destinations that offer more than one experience in a single trip are gaining favour. Here's a month-by-month guide to travelling smarter in 2026.

JANUARY

Oman

January is one of the most rewarding months to explore Oman from the UAE. Cooler temperatures make it ideal for road trips through Musandam, hiking in Jebel Akhdar, or desert camping in Wahiba Sands. The short travel time suits long weekends and

spontaneous breaks. For UAE residents, Oman delivers nature, culture and quiet without the logistics of long-haul travel.

Why UAE travellers love it: No flights required, familiar comforts, and dramatic landscapes just hours away.



The Philippines

The Philippines enters its dry season in January, making it a strong alternative to more crowded Southeast Asian destinations. UAE travellers are increasingly drawn to islands such as Palawan and Cebu for beach-focused holidays with a softer pace. Flight times are manageable with one connection. It appeals to those seeking tropical scenery without the resort-heavy feel.

Why UAE travellers love it: Tropical beauty without the crowds, and good value for longer stays.



WORDS BY FRIDAY TEAM PHOTOS BY SHUTTERSTOCK

MARCH



Spain

March is a quieter, more refined time to visit Spain. Cities like Barcelona and Seville enjoy mild spring temperatures, perfect for walking tours and outdoor dining. UAE travellers often favour this month to avoid Europe's summer congestion. It works well as a city-focused escape before peak travel season begins.

Why UAE travellers love it:

European culture without peak-season chaos or heat.



Türkiye

March is a sweet spot for travelling to Türkiye from the UAE. The weather is cool but comfortable, ideal for sightseeing in Istanbul or exploring historical sites without the summer crowds. Cappadocia begins to stir after winter, offering clearer skies and fewer visitors. With frequent flights and short travel time, it's an easy, high-reward escape.

Why UAE travellers love it: Close, familiar, and endlessly versatile for short breaks.

APRIL

The Netherlands

April brings spring colour to the Netherlands, particularly around tulip fields and canals. Amsterdam is lively without being overwhelming, and day trips into the countryside are at their best. UAE travellers often combine



the city with nearby European destinations.

Why UAE travellers love it:

Compact sightseeing, iconic visuals, and easy rail connections.

Uzbekistan

Uzbekistan comes into its own in April, with comfortable weather for exploring Silk Road cities like Samarkand and Bukhara. For UAE travellers, it offers cultural depth without long flight times. The



architecture, food and history feel immersive. It suits travellers looking for something less mainstream.

Why UAE travellers love it:

Heritage travel that feels undiscovered yet accessible.

MAY

Croatia

May is a great time to visit Croatia, before summer tourism peaks. Coastal cities such as Dubrovnik and Split offer warm weather without the crowds. UAE residents often combine city exploration with island hopping.

Why UAE travellers love it: Coastal Europe without August pricing or crowds.



Armenia

Spring brings greenery and festivals across Armenia. Yerevan is a compact cultural base, with easy access to monasteries. Short flight times from the UAE add appeal. For travellers seeking authenticity and value, look no further.

Why UAE travellers love it: Affordable, close, and culturally rich.

JUNE

Japan

June offers a calmer window in Japan before peak summer travel. While the north remains pleasant, cities are less crowded than in cherry blossom season. UAE travellers often focus on food and contemporary culture at this time. It suits those who prefer depth over spectacle.

Why UAE travellers love it:

A quieter Japan with the same cultural payoff.



Slovenia

Slovenia is gaining attention among UAE travellers seeking nature-led European travel. June brings long days and mild temperatures around Lake Bled and Triglav National Park. The destination combines alpine scenery with small-city charm. It's ideal for active, scenic holidays.

Why UAE travellers love it:

Green landscapes and outdoor space rarely found closer to home.



JULY



South Africa

July aligns with South Africa's dry season, making it excellent for safari experiences. UAE travellers often combine game reserves with Cape Town for a balanced itinerary. Cooler temperatures offer relief from the Gulf heat. It's a strong choice for longer summer breaks.

Why UAE travellers love it: Wildlife, wine, and weather relief in one trip.



Ireland

Ireland in July offers long daylight hours and mild weather. Road trips through coastal routes and the countryside are popular. For UAE residents, it provides greenery and open landscapes rarely found closer to home. It suits travellers seeking slower, scenic travel.

Why UAE travellers love it: Fresh air, open roads, and a cool, cool summer.

AUGUST



Tanzania

August is peak wildlife season in Tanzania, particularly in the Serengeti. The dry weather improves visibility and safari conditions. It appeals to nature-focused travellers seeking scale and drama.

Why UAE travellers love it: Bucket-list safaris with world-class wildlife viewing.



Switzerland

August is ideal for alpine travel in Switzerland. Mountain rail journeys, lakeside towns and hiking routes are at their peak. UAE families often choose Switzerland for its safety, cleanliness and outdoor appeal. The cooler climate makes it a classic summer escape.

Why UAE travellers love it: Predictable quality, family-friendly travel, and cooler weather.

OCTOBER



Austria

October is a refined time to explore Austria. Vienna's cultural calendar, coffee houses and museums feel especially inviting in autumn. UAE travellers often pair it with neighbouring countries. The pace is slower and more atmospheric.

Why UAE travellers love it: Culture, calm, and classic European charm.

SEPTEMBER

Hungary

September brings a relaxed rhythm to Budapest. Thermal baths, river cruises and café culture are best enjoyed without the crowds. UAE travellers appreciate the balance of culture and affordability.

Why UAE travellers love it: European charm at gentler prices.



South Korea

Autumn foliage defines South Korea in October. Seoul blends historic districts with modern neighbourhoods, while nearby parks offer colour-filled escapes. UAE travellers are increasingly drawn to its food and design culture. It's well suited to shoulder-season travel.

Why UAE travellers love it: Seasonal beauty with strong cultural identity.



Malaysia

Malaysia offers a city-and-nature combination in September. Kuala Lumpur's urban energy pairs well with rainforest escapes and island resorts. Flight connectivity from the UAE is strong. It suits travellers seeking variety without complexity.

Why UAE travellers love it: One trip, multiple experiences, easy logistics.

NOVEMBER



Laos

November marks the start of the dry season in Laos. Luang Prabang offers a calm, heritage-rich experience along the Mekong River. UAE travellers looking to disconnect favour its slower pace. It's an understated alternative to busier Asian destinations.

Why UAE travellers love it: Quiet luxury, culture, and mental reset.

Morocco

November brings comfortable temperatures across Morocco. City exploration, desert excursions and coastal stays all work well. UAE travellers often favour this month for cultural depth without peak-season pressure. It suits both short and extended itineraries.

Why UAE travellers love it: Close-to-home exoticism with year-round appeal.



DECEMBER

Germany

December travel to Germany revolves around festive markets and winter culture. Cities like Munich and Cologne offer atmosphere without excessive travel distances. UAE residents often combine Christmas markets with shopping and dining. It's a classic seasonal escape.

Why UAE travellers love it: Festive Europe without extreme cold or complexity.



Norway

Norway appeals to UAE travellers seeking winter landscapes and Northern Lights experiences. December offers snow-based activities and dramatic scenery. It's best suited to travellers comfortable with cold-weather itineraries. Early planning is essential due to limited daylight and high demand.

Why UAE travellers love it: Arctic drama and once-in-a-lifetime winter scenery.



WHEN DO YOU BOOK?

A quick guide for UAE residents planning 2026 trips

South Africa – July
Book: 10–12 weeks ahead

Oman – January
Book: 2–4 weeks ahead (earlier for long weekends)

Ireland – July
Book: 8–10 weeks ahead

The Philippines – January
Book: 8–10 weeks ahead

Switzerland – August
Book: 12–14 weeks ahead

Nepal – February
Book: 6–8 weeks ahead

Tanzania – August
Book: 12–16 weeks ahead

Tunisia – February
Book: 6–8 weeks ahead

Hungary – September
Book: 6–8 weeks ahead

Spain – March
Book: 8–10 weeks ahead

Malaysia – September
Book: 6–8 weeks ahead

Türkiye – March
Book: 4–6 weeks ahead

Austria – October
Book: 8–10 weeks ahead

The Netherlands – April
Book: 10–12 weeks ahead

South Korea – October
Book: 8–10 weeks ahead

Uzbekistan – April
Book: 6–8 weeks ahead

Laos – November
Book: 6–8 weeks ahead

Croatia – May
Book: 8–10 weeks ahead

Morocco – November
Book: 6–8 weeks ahead

Armenia – May
Book: 4–6 weeks ahead

Germany – December
Book: 10–12 weeks ahead

Japan – June
Book: 10–14 weeks ahead

Slovenia – June
Book: 8–10 weeks ahead

Norway – December
Book: 12–16 weeks ahead



NEW YEAR, NEW DELUSION

The first month on the calendar expects discipline, clarity and self-control. **Krita Coelho** responds by attempting to flex a long suppressed resolution

January shows up every year assuming you've got your life together. It expects organisation, motivation, and emotional stability by week two. Clean slate, fresh start, new year, new you.

I am none of those things. What I am, however, is someone who has decided that this is the year I enter a women's bodybuilding contest.

Pause. Breathe. Laugh if you need to.

Yes, a bodybuilding contest. No, I don't know what possessed me. Do people have faith in me? Absolutely not. Do I have faith in myself? Also no. What I do have is a long history of questionable life choices made right after New Year's, usually when my brain is still reeling from December's excess.

I think the idea crept in because I spend an alarming amount of time around competitive bodybuilders. My Gen Z best buddy competes. I've watched the prep, the misery, the macros, the mood swings, the existential crises triggered by rice cakes. I've been there for the struggle. I've nodded supportively while secretly thinking I could never do this.

Naturally, this led me to think: I should absolutely do this.

Let me be clear. I do not have his commitment. I do not have his willpower. I do not have his ability to say no to dessert with the moral strength of a monk. What I do have is boredom with the usual New Year resolutions. Eat better. Exercise more. Cut sugar. Drink water. I've done these. I'm

doing these. They don't scare me anymore. Apparently, fear is now my benchmark for personal growth.

At work, they think I'm a star. This is purely because I go to the gym consistently. Consistency, it turns out, is very convincing. My diet, however, is chaotic at best. I eat well until I don't. I balance protein with feelings. I maintain my weight through what can only be described as negotiation. Am I fit? Debatable. Am I strong? Sometimes. Do I qualify to stand under stage lights in a skimpy bejewelled bikini with confidence? That remains to be seen.

My boss is deeply unsettled by this plan. Not by the discipline or the challenge, but by the visual. The tan. The muscle. The pose. The real possibility that I might show up to work one day casually discussing glutes while mentally practising a front double biceps (which, to be clear, is not what women's posing actually looks like). I've never seen professional concern manifest so quick.

My gym friends know me better.

They didn't show support. They laughed. Proper laughter. The kind that takes a moment to recover from. I am now the punchline in several ongoing jokes. Every time I lift something heavy, someone tells me I've already won the whole thing. And when I skip cardio, someone makes a note for my "competition prep". This is friendship.

As I write this, my family remains blissfully unaware. I'm saving that conversation for when I have more information. Or confidence. Or visible muscle. Or all three. I can already hear the questions. Why? Are you okay? Is this a phase? Have you lost a bet? Right now, I have no answers that would satisfy them.

What I do know is this. Starting again in the new year doesn't have to look sensible. Sometimes it can be just plain ridiculous. At other times it looks like choosing a goal so absurd, you can't hide from it. Going back to work after the holidays is easier when you're secretly training for something no one expects of you, including yourself.

Will I actually do it?

I don't know. Will I quit dramatically halfway through? Possibly. Will January judge me for trying? Definitely. But for now, I'm back at work, back at the gym, and back to starting again, armed with protein powder, misplaced confidence, and a plan that terrifies everyone involved.

Including me.

Got a New Year story you still talk about? Send it to friday@gulfnews.com. The one that stays with us wins a special gift, and the best stories may find a home on our website [gulfnews.com/friday](https://www.gulfnews.com/friday)

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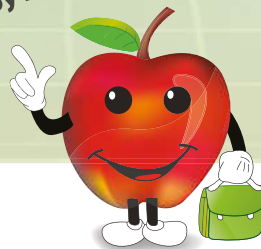
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