

matt jones

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Free radicals

*A man who takes his budgies for a walk and Filipino sheepdog trials... On Fridays, there's more life in Dubai's parks than its members-only clubs. **Matt Jones** takes us on a stroll.*

I'll take a public park over the beach any day, and I'll certainly take it over a beach club. For one thing, chlorophyll doesn't get between the toes like sand. For another, it's so much easier to strike up a conversation with a stranger who isn't dressed in trunks that would look tight on Action Man. If you stop and talk to park people, you'll find that generally they're a much more interesting species than the bolder brown narcissi that preen, twitter and flit between the beach blanket and volleyball net.

Take Dr Hongxiang Wong, 53, a sports physiotherapist in Satwa. Here he comes now, walking along the path in Dubai's Safa Park with his wife Lan Lan, 35. A Reiki master and author of books on the subject, apparently Dr Wong is so well known in his native China that he moved to Dubai for a bit of peace and quiet. "Nobody knows me here," he says, cheerfully.

We wouldn't know all this if we hadn't stopped to chat with the Wongs about the birdcage they're carrying. They are, they explain, taking their two budgerigars for a walk.

"This is their world," says Dr Wong of Chi, a male budgie from Pakistan, and Ko, a female from Holland. In Chinese, their names together – Chiko – means "Talks too much", which, apparently, they do.

"We let them fly in one room at home, but the walls are small," says Dr Wong. "So we take them to a different place, let them see grass, trees and [he gestures to a wild bird] their friends. They're happy here."

How, we ask, can one tell a happy budgie from a sad one? "They talk a lot," says Dr Wong. "They move their bodies, jump here, jump there." And does he let them out of the cage? "No. They don't know how to get back home."

(more)

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Dr Wong visits Safa Park once a week, but his wife, a receptionist at a holistic clinic in Jumeira, comes almost daily – with Chi and Ko, of course. “I come with the birds in a baby trolley,” she says. “Small children run behind me. They’ve never seen birds on a baby trolley before!”

Down the Al Athar Road in Jumeira Beach Park, we arrive in time to catch the sheep dog trials – not your ordinary, rural-Britain BBC2-type sheep dog trials, but the Filipino version, which involves an 18-strong flock of health company employees, and no dog.

“Two groups are required. Each has a shepherd agreed upon by the group and the rest are sheep,” explains Floro Salvador, 41, an Al Qusais-based business consultant from the Philippines. “The sheep are blindfolded and the shepherd is expected to put them into the pen one at a time. It’s a sort of relay. The first team in the pen wins.”

Salvador and his colleagues have been in the park since it opened at 8am and intend to stay until five. When we meet them – sitting under a tree where, a few weeks before, another group of Filipinos had been ballroom dancing – they’ve just polished off a barbecue lunch of grilled and stewed fish and shrimps.

“This is not officially a company day out,” says Salvador. “But the park is the perfect place for group games that enhance teamwork. It has all the amenities for relaxation: barbecue facilities, trees for shadow, a sea breeze, toilets and shower.”

With that, he thrusts several of his company’s flyers into our hands. The A4 pages contain information and health tips about aloe sunscreen, nutritional cleansing programs, antioxidants and free radicals – a phrase which, when applied in a different context, perfectly describes the liberated, unselfconsciously chatty and ever-so slightly eccentric frequenters of Dubai’s green spaces. If life is a beach, a happy life is a walk in the park.

Information Box:

Jumeira Beach Park

Beach Road, Jumeira 2

Dhs 5 (Dhs 20 per car)

08:00-22:30 (Saturday: women and children only)

Tel: 04 349 2555

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Safa Park

Al Wasl Road, Al Safa 1

Dhs 3 (Tuesday: women and children only)

08:00-23:00

Tel: 04 336 7633

Creek Park

Creekside, Umm Hurair 2

Dhs 5 (Wednesday: women and children only)

08:00-23:00

Tel: 04 336 7633

Mushrif Park

Al Khawaneej Road

Dhs 3 (Dhs 10 per car)

08:00-23:00

Tel: 04 288 3624

*For further information about Dubai's parks, log on to the Dubai Municipality website:
www.dm.gov.ae.*

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