

In the family way

The annual family reunion – begun in childhood and continued as adults – can be as rewarding and comforting as it can be fraught and tense. Two writers detail their experiences

**LUCY FENNINGS
DUBAI**

I've just hung up the phone after a conversation with my parents in Dubai. I can remember exactly what my Dad said, because he says it every time we talk. 'Sweetheart, we miss you. It's ghastly here; boiling hot, hasn't rained for weeks, traffic's unspeakable, pool thermostat's on the blink. I can't wait to see my baby. We must spend more time together; will you let me take you out for a quiet drink when you come out?'

Aside from the fact that I miss my parents, too, certain words lend added appeal to the prospect of seeing each other again: hot, pool, drink, out, together. While my visit to Dubai – one of the two or three I've made every year since my Dad started working there about 16 years ago – won't be a family holiday in the conventional sense, it is a reunion. We've become used to going for long periods without contact; when I chose to go to Glasgow University, people would comment that it was a long way from home – but it didn't make any difference to me, since my family was some 3,500 miles away.

When I arrive at Dubai airport, late at night, my parents will be there, eagerly waving from a sea of

people. We'll hug, the requested bottles of duty-free champagne clanking between us. My Dad will be excited, nervous tension amplified by the stress of negotiating my suitcase through the abandoned trolleys and kamikaze taxi drivers in the short-term car park. I'll watch him heave it towards the car, and wonder which of his jokes will be first to make me cross. On the way back to my parents' home suburb of Satwa, tempers are sometimes lost when I fail to disguise my distaste for a daring overtaking manoeuvre, or, worse, fall silent and clutch nervously at my seatbelt. Dad may curse but my mother, carefully groomed hair puffing slightly in the humidity, will beam, cheerfully resigned to her role as family peacemaker.

Buildings loom – some familiar, some new – their street-light-orange bulks twinkling against the night sky, and the air is moist with water from ticking grass sprinklers. When we pass local lads hanging out by the Al Mallah restaurant on Al Dhiyafa Street, football shirts

fluorescing under the neon lights, I know we're on home turf.

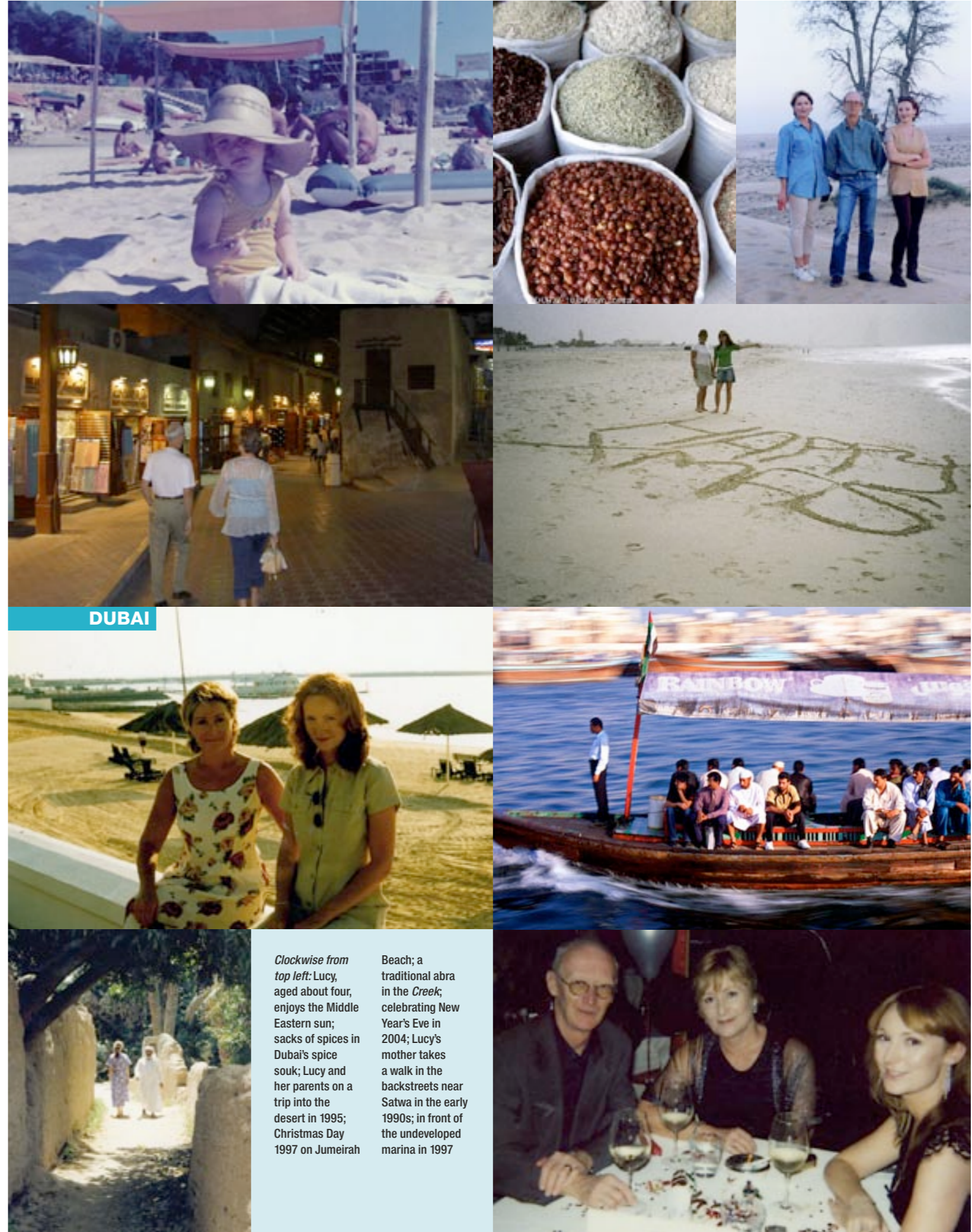
Back in the flat, over a vodka nightcap, we cover the essentials: who they ran into shopping at Spinneys, who eloped with an Emirates stewardess, whose Range Rover ended up in the Satwa roundabout fountain, which roads have been dug up again to relay electricity cables. If I ask how work is going, the response is usually 'same, same'. The same can't be said of Dubai.

Fifteen years ago, Satwa was the equivalent of London's low-rise, tree-lined residential suburbs – but with minarets and palm trees dotted amongst its quiet streets. When I slid

open the balcony door, there was a chorus of birdsong. Today, sadly, this is likely to be accompanied by the thundering roar of heavy-goods vehicles, as the district has become a pit stop on the route between the old city centre and the new commercial zones that are morphing the desert horizon into a series of vertical exclamation marks.

I've never set foot in most of these, preferring to revisit favourite haunts,

My mother will beam, resigned to her role as family peacemaker



DUBAI

Clockwise from top left: Lucy, aged about four, enjoys the Middle Eastern sun; sacks of spices in Dubai's spice souk; Lucy and her parents on a trip into the desert in 1995; Christmas Day 1997 on Jumeirah Beach; a traditional abra in the Creek; celebrating New Year's Eve in 2004; Lucy's mother takes a walk in the backstreets near Satwa in the early 1990s; in front of the undeveloped marina in 1997

catch up with friends at the Agency wine bar or go to one of the beach clubs in Jumeirah with my parents. I enjoy this time with them – no longer the mortified teenager whose Dad would turn up to the same bars as me, and jam with my friends on his Fender. We often go down to the Creek in the evening, snacking on street-stall samosas before strolling through the gold and spice souks, or visiting the Bastakiah district with its beautiful restored buildings and atmospheric wind towers. We'll chat as we stroll, poking fun at each other, debating future plans to move back home, the latest nonsensical building project or the appalling typos in the local press. Differences in opinion are traditionally resolved with a bout of sulking and a quick change of topic.

Dining out is a feature of our get-togethers, especially at Christmas. According to my mother, the oven in the apartment is 'total crap', so, after a Christmas Eve sundowner on our balcony, watching the sky fade from rich cobalt to apricot, we'll go to Gordon Ramsay's Dubai outpost, Verre, and drink more than necessary before wobbling home to unwrap our presents with a bottle of that duty-free champagne under a fake tree. The next day, we'll walk along the beach to blow the cobwebs away, enjoying the solitude of the deserted shore, a line of shells dividing the dry and wet sand.

Almost as soon as I've settled into our home-from-home routine – hot, pool, drink, out, together – complete with fatherly overprotectiveness, latent-teenager strops and motherly exasperation, it'll be time to pack up and head back to London. My parents will drive me to the airport, and I'll leave them there, waving from a sea of people. A few weeks after I get back, I'll call them. And I know exactly what my Dad will say.



Clockwise from top left: Southwold pier; the Lord Nelson pub; beach huts on the seafront; the Purdy family outside a rented house in 2004; a fish hut on Southwold's riverbanks; drinking Adnams bitter in Dunwich in 2002

RUFUS PURDY
SOUTHWOLD, SUFFOLK

The walls in my parents' hallway are covered with photographs. Black-and-white snaps from the 1950s of my Mum and Dad as toddlers vie with 1980s images of my sisters and I in all our sallow-faced adolescent glory. Every birthday, every wedding, every camping trip between my birth and my little sister leaving for university has been recorded for posterity by my dad's trusty Pentax. But there are far fewer photos from the past 10 years. Apart, that is, from our annual family get-together in Southwold.

Southwold, on the Suffolk coast, makes an ideal focal point for a family driven apart by the ambition of its younger members. We have been coming here for around 15 years now – first parking up on its seafront promenade on a day's excursion from a cold and damp

caravan in the Norfolk broads. Being there just seemed to make sense. We ran about on the long pebbly beach, hurling pieces of driftwood for our dog and letting waves break all over our rolled-up trousers. Afterwards, we bought ice creams from one of the town's tiny shops and stocked up on sweets from Purdy's newsagent on the high street – a coincidence not lost on us. That afternoon, my Dad booked a property for the next school holiday. We've been coming ever since.

Every year, usually at Easter, bags are packed and thrown into the boots of four different cars, and five people begin a journey that will culminate in a reunion at the Lord Nelson pub on the seafront. From there, once the hugs and greetings are done with, it's the same old routine. Cases are carried into whichever house has been rented for the week, bedrooms are allocated,

and the pile of food and alcohol on the back seat of Mum and Dad's car is decanted into cupboards, fridges and freezers. Games are stacked up on the table, the dog sniffs its way warily around skirting boards and stories are swapped as the kettle boils in the kitchen for our first cup of tea together since December.

What follows over the next few days are a host of traditions, honed over the years and rarely deviated from. Whether the sun beats down or the sky over Sole Bay merges darkly into the North Sea, we always head first to the beach. We walk along to the end, five pairs of feet crunching in the pebbles, passing the town's famous multi-coloured beach huts, and then swing right to stroll along the banks of the river, beside which boats, beached and howling like phantoms as the wind whistles through their ropes and wires, stand alongside tumbledown

huts selling glistening fish and tubs of vinegary cockles. This bleak yet beautiful point, one of my favourite places in the world, where the fenland of East Anglia – dense with coppery rushes and scored with silvery waterways – spills into the sea is the eerie environment evoked in Crabbe's 'Peter Grimes' – 'The bounding marshbank and the blighted tree/The water only, when the tides were high/When low, the mud half-covered and half-dry/The sunburnt tar that blisters on the planks/And bankside stakes in their uneven ranks.'

Although many rituals are observed – fish and chips from the high street, pints of local Adnams bitter at nearby Dunwich, skimming stones in the shadow of the pier – walking dominates our days here. As the dog tears about, covering its paws in thick, salty mud, we pad along behind, moving quickly from

'how's work?' and 'have you been watching...?' to life's bigger dilemmas. This year, both mine and my little sister's break-ups dominated our walks, our parents taking it in turns to stride ahead or hang back with one or other of us, offering sage advice and concerned looks. Next year, I suspect, we'll be concerned with my Dad's ailing health. In the past, we've used these long parades over sand and stone, through gorse-specked scrubland and fields of pigs, for everything from making last-minute decisions about wedding celebrations to coming to terms with death in the family.

Were it not for Southwold, I doubt we'd be as close a unit as we are. It provides a space in which we can come together and find out what stage our increasingly diverse lives are at. At the family home, where we all congregate at Christmas, things are different. There it's harder for my sisters and I to avoid reverting to the sullen teenage roles we occupied for most of the time we lived together. Slouched shoulders and insouciant faces are common then, especially when we've all been cooped up together for several days, but Southwold is something else entirely. Whichever house we stay in

is not impregnated with all the memories – good and bad – that underlie family life, and this makes it easier for us all to feel like the independent people, with shaky lives of our own, that we are now. How strange that a little seaside town in Suffolk acts as the forum in which we can laugh together, cry together, agree wholeheartedly, fall out over minor issues, make up and, ultimately, show how much we all love each other. But, then, how lucky, too. ■

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PHOTOGRAPHS: ALAMY/AXIOM; PHOTOS: LUCY FEENINGS; RUFUS PURDY