



**COUNTRY GUIDE**  
**EA INTERNATIONAL - MIDDLE EAST**

# COUNTRY GUIDE

## EA INTERNATIONAL – MIDDLE EAST

### THE LEGAL MARKET

The Middle East is fast becoming the jewel in the crown of the international law firm's expansion fuelled by rapidly growing economies in the United Arab Emirates, Oman, Qatar and Bahrain. While the most rapid growth in law firm numbers has occurred in Dubai, many of the leading firms are focusing their attention on equaling this in Abu Dhabi, Muscat and Doha. Driven historically by the region's oil wealth each city has more recently instigated long term plans which will see the region grow into both an international finance and tourist hub. The leading international firms have focused on building their practices in Projects and Infrastructure, Corporate M & A, Finance and Capital Markets, however practices like Real Estate, IP/IT, Telecommunications and Dispute Resolution are also starting to develop considerably.

### SALARIES AND TAXES

Salaries tend to be similar across the region with the leading law firms all offering gross salaries similar to those on offer in the UK or the US (but generally slightly less because of the fall in value of the pound and US dollar relative to Australian currency). In recent years almost all of the leading international firms have moved to all salary or cash packages and away from housing and car allowance components to lawyers more flexibility to deal with their disposable income as and how they see fit. The leading firms also operate under generous bonus schemes similar or identical to those in the UK. Generally salaries will be comparative to London as below with zero tax:

Experience	UK Magic Circle	US Firm
NQ	£60,000 to 65,000	£70,000 to 90,000
1st Year	£68,000 to 71,000	£77,000 to 95,000
2nd Year	£82,000 to 84,000	£95,000 to 105,000
3rd year	£89,500 to 92,500	£95,000 to 120,000

### COST OF LIVING

It is well documented that the entire Middle East has seen high rates of inflation, which has made the region one of the most expensive places to live in the world. However, as there is no income tax, most people are far better off financially than in their home countries. It is also fair to say that working in places like Dubai and Abu Dhabi are no longer "hardship" postings which they may have been even a few years ago, and as such rather than save large amounts of money most expats tend to now live a lifestyle far superior to that at home but in the end this a personal choice. Whether this involves living in a villa with your own pool, having a nanny and your domestic chores taken off your hands, driving luxury motor cars, eating in world renowned restaurants or buying the world's leading fashion labels, it is clear that this shift in lifestyle has out-paced shifts in salary. As such while in a financial sense it is harder to save money than it was in the past, the lifestyle benefits are now of real value when considering a move to the region. In more recent years due to the crash in the real estate market housing affordability of the type utilized by ex-pats has also become more affordable.

# COUNTRY GUIDE

## EA INTERNATIONAL – MIDDLE EAST

### Examples of current costs in Dubai:

Two bedroom apartment in central Dubai: US \$4000 per month

Two bedroom apartment in city outskirts: US \$3000 per month

Loaf of Bread: US \$1.40

Litre of Milk: US \$1.50

Beer: US \$6+

Metro Pass: US \$0.80

Cinema Ticket: US \$8-10

Cappuccino: US \$ 3.50 to 4.50

Meal for 2 at higher end restaurant: US \$200+

## VISAS AND WORK PERMITS

The leading international and local firms will all provide sponsorship for lawyers coming from both the Australian and New Zealand markets. Depending on the jurisdiction this will either occur prior to departure or soon after arrival. Unlike in the UK and Europe it tends to be a slightly more flexible, albeit bureaucratic system.

## LIFESTYLE AND CULTURE

### ABU DHABI

The Capital of the UAE and by far the richest Emirate Abu Dhabi has remarkable plans to rival Dubai as the Middle East's cultural and corporate heart. Given its standing as the centre of UAE governance it is no surprise that unlike Dubai, which lies just one hour to the east, Abu Dhabi is taking a seemingly more structured and considered approach to growth with a view to ensuring the city both expands rapidly but also retains its local heritage.

A city built on, and surrounded by islands, Abu Dhabi is unique in its geography and blessed with accessible beaches. With most of the growth involving expansion onto many of the natural and manmade islands adjacent to Abu Dhabi it is a city that has a real focus on using its natural endowments to its advantage. A perfect example of the projects planned and presently in development is that of Saadiyat Island. Just 500 meters off the coast of Abu Dhabi, Saadiyat is being redeveloped into a massive US\$27 billion mixed use development which will become the cultural hub of the city and house both the only Louvre Museum outside of Paris, and the first Guggenheim Museum in the middle east, as well as residential space for 150 000 people. Further projects within the Abu Dhabi 2030 plan exceed US\$100 billion mark and include Al Reem Island, Al Raha Island, Al Lulu Island, Central Market, Marina Bay and Masdar City projects. Given the present GDP of Abu Dhabi is US\$100 billion it makes these projects all the more remarkable and indicative of what the future holds for Abu Dhabi.

# COUNTRY GUIDE

## EA INTERNATIONAL – MIDDLE EAST

The leading international law firms have all recently responded to this explosion of work in Abu Dhabi with many setting up new offices in the last 12 months and a number planning to do so soon. Most firms plan to grow these rapidly in a similar vein to the Dubai practices and to eventually provide the full spectrum of legal services. As a place to live Abu Dhabi is generally described as more relaxed than Dubai and lacking many of the teething problems which Dubai is experiencing in the form of traffic and congestion. As a city with large streets and boulevards it generally gives the impression of being well organised and with the new public transport systems coming on line in the next few years it should be able to handle the future growth. For the average expatriate Abu Dhabi has less of a night life scene than Dubai and it is fair to say that many describe it as a more family friendly destination, however with Dubai so close most singles tend to simply make the trip across on weekends. Although slightly more conservative than Dubai it is still an excellent choice for singles of both sexes and most firms are only too pleased to discuss how much their single lawyers enjoy the city. It is however struggling to keep up with present levels of growth in housing and schooling which are issues all the firms are well aware of and work hard to overcome. This is expected to ease as new developments come on line in the next 12 to 24 months. Although it has been tougher to find accommodation firms have been able to overcome this.

### DUBAI

For the last 5 years it is fair to say that Dubai has well and truly outshone its Middle Eastern rivals and is a remarkable story of growth. Although not as blessed with the same oil wealth as Abu Dhabi, the Royal family in Dubai have been extremely far sighted in their plans to make the city both one of the most important financial centres as well as one of the most sought after tourist destinations on earth. With the opening of the DIFC two years ago and its continual expansion to house most of the leading firms, this vision of Dubai as a financial centre is being realised. Revenue from petroleum and natural gas now make up just 3% to 6% of revenue for Dubai, with the vast majority coming in trade, manufacturing, and financial services.

With respect to Dubai's plans to become a world renowned tourist destination one only needs to look at successful projects like the Burj al-Arab, the world's tallest hotel and Ski Dubai, one of the largest indoor ski fields in the world, as an indication of what the future has in store. Projects which are presently under construction include: the Burj Tower (which on completion will be the world's tallest building at over 700 meters), Dubai Land (which will be twice the size of Walt Disney World with capacity for 200 000 people daily), "Dubai Mall" (which will be the world's largest shopping mall and feature 1200 retailers), "The World" (a series of 300 manmade islands shaped like the world which is accessible only by sea and has been sold to accommodate resorts and palaces) and the three Palms Projects (Jumeirah, Jebel Ali and Deira, each massive man made islands presently being developed for mixed use.

Dubai has quickly developed a reputation as a truly international city with an increasingly vibrant entertainment and cultural scene. With the rapid ongoing growth in the city it is however still fair to describe it aesthetically as a massive construction site in the middle of the desert (albeit with nice beaches!) however over the course of the next decade as most of these projects come on line this will clearly change.

# COUNTRY GUIDE

## EA INTERNATIONAL – MIDDLE EAST

### MUSCAT

As the capital and largest city in the Sultanate of Oman, Muscat is one of the oldest cities in the Middle East and blessed with a stark mountainous backdrop that also makes it one of the most naturally beautiful cities in the region. Given its geography Muscat has always been a trading hub in the region and with oil and gas this remains to be the case today. Although the legal community is relatively small compared to its neighbours this guarantees those working at the leading firms the very best quality local work. Muscat is a much quieter and relaxed environment than the major cities in the bordering UAE which is seen by many as a distinctive positive for both couples and families who want high quality work with work life balance.

### DOHA

The capital of Oil and Gas rich Qatar, Doha is growing into one of the wealthiest states in the region which is starting to see increased interest from international law firms. Although a handful of firms have had a presence in Doha for some time this is starting to expand. Much like its neighbouring states the Qatari government is actively diversifying the country's reliance on its oil and gas reserves. Much of this is being facilitated by large scale business and trade developments and the Qatari's are also active in developing a number of mega projects. These include the Lusail City project just north of Doha which will ultimately accommodate 200 000 people, the Pearl Qatar project which is open to international investment, and Education City, a 14 square kilometre education precinct. More conservative than Abu Dhabi and Dubai, Doha still retains a more expat feel and in a similar way to Muscat will likely appeal more to those with young families or those who are more focused on immersion into a more traditional Middle Eastern culture. The cost of living is very similar to Dubai and many expats choose to live in compounds with full facilities.

### FURTHER INFORMATION AND USEFUL LINKS:

<http://www.expatswoman.com/>

<http://www.gulfnews.com/home/>

**For more information on living and working in the Middle East contact one of our international experts on +61 2 9266 2900 or Email at [ea@ea-int.com](mailto:ea@ea-int.com) or visit our website: [www.ea-int.com](http://www.ea-int.com).**