

Let's Go to the Mall (For a Book Fair)

September 30, 2009

By Edward Nawotka



AL AIN: In the United Arab Emirates book fairs have traditionally been held outdoors in what amount to open air bazaars, so in 2006 when the Abu Dhabi International Book Fair was moved indoors to the city's new high tech exhibition hall, it was a break from the norm. Today, KITAB — the organization responsible for the fair — is introducing the use of an entirely new venue: the shopping mall.

The UAE is famous for having some of the most lavish shopping malls in the world, including, notably, one with its own ski slope. KITAB knows the Emirati like to shop, and in March promoted the launch of the ADIBF with the UAE's first BookCrossing event, one that was held in Abu Dhabi's Marina Mall. This weekend it is going one step further, launching the inaugural "Al Ain Reads" book fair which will be hosted at the new Al Bawadi Mall in Al Ain.

"The city is home to United Emirates University and we had lots of requests from students and teachers to bring a book event to the city," said Irum Fawad, publicity director for KITAB. "The mall is brand new and is an easy place for people to get to and park, so it made sense to host the inaugural event there."

Al Ain Reads takes place from October 4th through the 10th, with some 25 exhibitors set up to offer books for sale in both English and Arabic. The focus of the fair is to convey the message that "reading is fun" and the fair is targeting numerous special events at children, including lessons in the art of illustration and readings with professional storytellers. Among those (nonprofessional) storytellers scheduled to read are the German and Swiss ambassadors to the UAE. Visitors are also invited to bring a book to leave at the "book exchange counter," and pick up another left by a fellow reader.

KITAB, with the support of the Zayed Giving Initiative, have also sponsored a KITAB Bus, which will travel to Al Ain for the fair and be parked outside the mall. The bus will be filled with shelves of books and serve as the venue for the children's storytelling sessions. After Al Ain, the bus will move on for a week to Al Gharbia, and continue to tour throughout the Emirates.

“Our focus for the bus is primarily in the Western emirates, where they have few book fairs or festivals — unlike in, say Dubai or Sharjah, which already have well established book events,” said Fawad.

Asked if the seductions of the shopping mall might prove too much of a distraction for children, Fawad laughed. “What child doesn’t like to go to the mall?” she said. “It’s fun, and if we can connect fun with reading, then we’ve accomplished our goal.”