

# KUWAIT SOUL



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parallel zero



Wafra. A horse at a stud farm pictured in front of a recreation of Rome's Colosseum. Kuwait has long been one of the most important centres for the sale and export of purebred Arabian horses, one of the fastest and most resistant breeds in the world.

## **A nation balanced between materialism and Islam**

Wedge between Iraq and Saudi Arabia, Kuwait is one of the world's smallest and richest countries. Rarely in the spotlight, the emirate found itself centre stage in 1990 and 1991 during the first Gulf War, the first ever such conflict to be fully televised. But why did a strip of desert completely lacking in any attractions become so hotly contested thirty years ago?

The answer can be found in its history: a strategic natural port, Kuwait was effectively created by the British to block Iraq's access to the sea. At that time the economy was based on the trade in pearls, spices and incense and the population was composed largely of Bedouins and fishermen. These were the very same who decades earlier had fled drought and camped along a watercourse near an ancient kout, a mud fort, that is the origin of the name "Kuwait" and the city that was created in that very location. True riches arrived with oil, the first reserves of which were discovered in 1934 and then came independence from Britain sixty years ago on 19 June 1961.

Today Kuwait is still a place of extremes: summer temperatures reach record levels and only two per cent of the country's land is suitable for farming. Oil refineries contribute to the terrible air quality that has a heavy impact on the health of the country's population. The latter, in fact, is composed of Kuwaiti nationals, who number 1.5 million, and migrant workers (migrants make up the majority and number almost 2.5 million), most of who are Asian or Egyptian. In recent years the country has enjoyed huge economic wealth and developed a rather extreme vision of the capitalist model: a reality in which a materialism of almost dystopian levels blends with strong Islamic traditions. These two morally conflicting forces can cause depression and neuroses: an interior emptiness, often taboo in Kuwaiti society, sometimes finds its response in extreme consumerism.



Kuwait City. An actor and crew during the filming of a satirical video depicting a politician promising four wives in exchange for votes. Previously censored, this group recommenced filming recently. Kuwait is in first place among the Gulf States on the Index of Press Freedom 2016 compiled by Reporters without Borders. Nevertheless, the fact that the country is ranked 103rd out of a total of 179 countries shows that journalists still face restrictions when reporting particular topics, including Islam and the royal family, which are still the subject of censorship.



Kuwait City. A flight simulator at the Kidzania theme park, where children can role-play at doing adult jobs. Multinationals from all over the world are present here with their brands.



Al Shaheed Park, Kuwait City. Visitors at an art installation. Many people from Southern and South East Asia, Egypt, the Middle East and Africa move to Kuwait to work in domestic service, construction and healthcare. Non-Kuwaitis make up 60% of the workforce.



Kuwait City. Two young women take a selfie at the opening of an art exhibition. In spite of censorship, cultural awareness is growing in the country. Also on the rise is the phenomenon of cosmetic surgery, not only for women.



Along the Salmi Road 70, near the Saudi Arabian border. Plastic bags caught up in a wire mesh fence. At weekends, the Kuwaiti population love to go camping in the desert. Unfortunately, not everyone respects the environment; the wind blows away abandoned waste, which often gets caught up in fences.



Kuwait City. A cheetah in a private home. Mohammed (not his real name) always dreamed of keeping exotic animals as pets: after having raised a lion for 3 years, he now takes care of two cheetahs that roam freely around the sitting room in his home. Keeping wild animals is illegal in Kuwait, but is widespread among the population.



Al Ad'ami, Kuwait. A vintage American car transformed into a flowerbed at a seaside resort in the south of Kuwait. This area is visited mainly during holidays and at weekends.



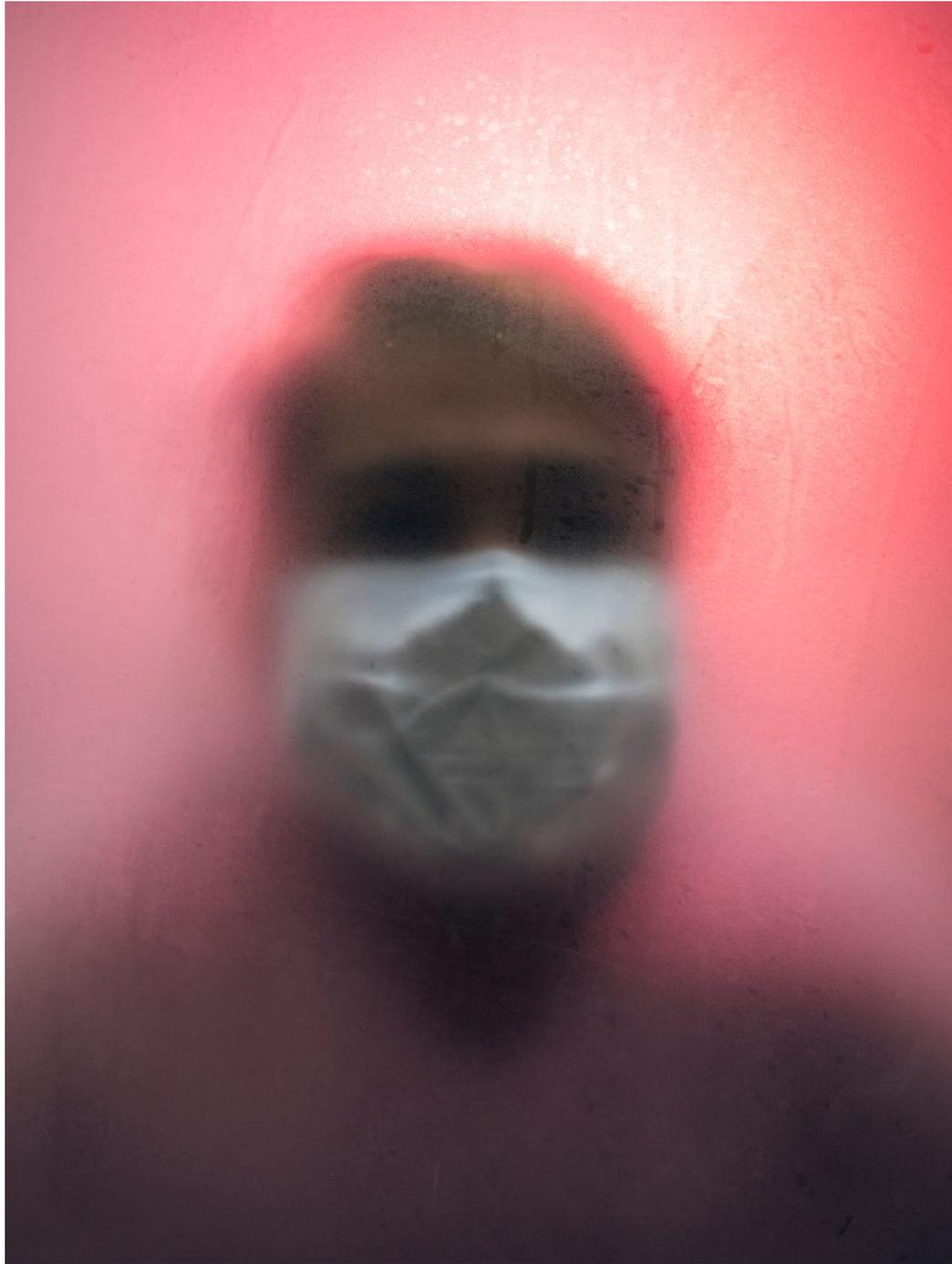
Center for Contemporary Art (CAP), Kuwait City, Kuwait. An installation by artist Shurooq Amin. Some days after opening, the exhibition was shut down by the Kuwaiti Ministry of the Interior.



Blue Lake Farm, Abdali, Kuwait. A family at the farm near the Iraqi border. Just 2% of Kuwaiti land is suitable for agriculture. This lack of vegetation drives Kuwaitis to seek out green spaces and farm tourism.



Subiya, Kuwait. On National Independence Day (25 February) Kuwaitis celebrate in the desert with a big kite-flying event. In 1961 Kuwait was the first of the Gulf Emirates under British rule to obtain its independence. In 1962 it introduced its Constitution and one year later the national assembly was sworn in.



Kuwait City. A Filipino shop assistant at a "Luna & Beau" pet grooming store.



Fintas, Kuwait City. Luxury cars in a shopping centre car park. Vehicles were the leading import in 2018 in Kuwait (16.4% of total imports) for an overall business volume of 3.6 billion US dollars.



Kuwait City, Oxygen Gym. Kuwait's most famous body builder, the winner of the 2017 Arnold Classic international competition. Gyms in Kuwait are some of the world's best equipped. Bodybuilding is popular not only among young people.



Kuwait City. Two women sit talking on their phones in a specialist jewellery shop for babies at the Avenue's Mall.



Kuwait City, Al Shaheed Park. Worshippers at prayer inside a mosque situated in Al Shaheed Park, the country's largest green space. 75% of the resident population is Muslim. Of Kuwait's 1.3 million native population 99.98% of people follow Islam.



Kuwait TV, Kuwait City. The national news on state television's Channel 1.



The desert alongside Road 70 that connects Kuwait City to the more remote area of the country situated to the west and the border with Iraq and Saudi Arabia.



Kuwait City, Mayadeen Public Shooting Range. A woman practices at the shooting range. Shooting is a popular activity among Kuwaiti women.



Kuwait City, National Evangelical Church, Kuwait. Kuwaiti preacher Amanuel B. Ghareeb in his church. Ghareeb was the first Arab in the Gulf to become the head of a protestant church. According to the latest estimates, from December 2019, there are 290 Kuwaiti Christians. In spite of the presence of a small community of Christian citizens, a law introduced in 1981 forbids the naturalization of non-Muslims.



Salwa Sabah Al Ahmad Hall, Kuwait City. A wedding venue during a celebration. In Kuwait women and men celebrate weddings separately. On the wall is a portrait of the former emir Jabir Al Sabah, who died recently. Kuwaiti Arab society can be divided based on class, tribe, national, sectarian and family lines. At the top of the hierarchy is the royal family, the Sabah clan, which follows the Sunni branch of Islam.



Kuwait City. An Indian man cradles his son at the top of Kuwait Towers, a three-tower complex designed by Danish architect Malene Bjorn as part of a water storage and distribution project.



Camel Racing Club. A group of camels wait for a race to begin. The jockeys are small robots that can be controlled remotely by the camels' owners.



Sheik Al Saleem Cultural Center, Kuwait City. A woman at the controls of a space shuttle simulator at the Sheik Al Saleem Cultural Center, an educational theme park recently built by the government for families. Kuwait has the highest literacy rate of the Gulf States and is the cultural capital of the Persian Gulf.



An immigrant worker operates the lighting at a concert organized in the area of Shuwaikh, the industrial area of Kuwait City.



Kuwait City. Inside the headquarters of the Arab Fund for Economic and Social Development, situated in the Shuwaikh area.



Kuwait City. A woman poses at Luna & Beau, a pet grooming shop. In spite of the notable restrictions, Kuwait is the most liberal country in the region and women are not obliged to wear a veil. In 2013, eight women were elected to the country's parliament.



Salmi. Camels wander in the desert in the south of the country, not far from the border with Saudi Arabia.



Camel Racing Club. Young Kuwaitis watch one of the camel races that the Camel Racing Club organizes each week.



Blue Lake Farm, Abdali. A woman walks through a field of flowers.

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