

Challenging Misconceptions



“I want to come with you to the South Pole”, Dana Al Hammadi told British polar explorer and environmentalist Robert Swanson. A few months later, she became the first Emirati to set foot on Antarctica.



lecture on the South Pole by Robert Swan, founder of the annual International Antarctic Expedition 2041, and when he finished, I asked if I could join him," she recalls.

World's coldest place

Soon Dana was on her way to the earth's coldest place along with 66 environmental enthusiasts. Upon arriving, her first observation was that there was nowhere to sit – the ice had been melting away. It was a shocking manifestation of global climate change, and the next sight was even more



It's been three years since Dana made headlines with the 20-day expedition, but the impact it has left on her is fresh as ever; an experience that continues to inspire women every day. "Everything happened at once. I was thinking of doing something unique and special, to go out of my shell, and I was reading about Elham Al Qasimi, the first Arab woman to reach the North Pole. She inspired me to do something similar."

When Dana learnt that no woman had been to the South Pole yet, she knew that time was ticking. It was her chance to make an outstanding accomplishment. "I attended a





alarming.

‘I saw with my own eyes mountains as tall as high-rise buildings covered with the water. This was proof that the sea levels were rising due to increasing temperatures, which was possibly causing the floods around world.’

Because of its scientific importance, Antarctica has been referred to as the thermometer of the world; any change

there affects other parts of our planet. Around 90 percent of the world's ice and as much as 70 percent of the world's fresh water is locked in this continent's ice pack.

More than a personal ambition

A mother of five, Dana was fortunate to get the support of her family and friends, and her children even helped prepare her luggage. ‘Without the support of your family,

you cannot do it. At the beginning, most people were against my idea and thought it was crazy, but when I came back with proof that I had completed the trip, they were very pleased and proud’.

The expedition was far from being easy and Dana had to adapt in unexpected ways. For example, she had no idea she would be temporarily blinded due to rough sea conditions.





‘It happened because of the high sea waves during the voyage, and all I could see was whiteness for 48 hours. I remember not being able to read my ticket. Eventually, when I arrived at the airport, I regained my vision and was deeply thankful to God’.

The one thought that kept her going during such difficult times was her desire to prove that Arab women had the strength and courage to achieve things. ‘I wanted to break the stereotypes about our culture. I had to prove it. If I failed and went back, I would feel very bad, not only for myself only but for everyone. I was doing it for my country.’

Back in the UAE, Dana naturally felt compelled to share her story and make a difference. The country had already been ranked as having one of the world’s highest ecological footprints per capita, and most of the drinking water consumed comes from the sea.

Although stopping climate change entirely is now impossible, the effects can certainly be slowed down – mainly by increasing awareness. ‘We have to educate people, from as early as school, as well as through the media. I have changed all my habits and educated my children and friends.’

‘In Antarctica, we used the minimum to live and had no luxuries.

We must be grateful for having a convenient life; other parts of the world don’t. I now appreciate that we are weak creatures. I have become more patient and take the time to pause and reflect’.

She also attempted to convince UAE authorities to sign the 2041 treaty, an initiative that seeks to raise awareness about preserving the Antarctic environment after the international treaty banning mining and drilling in the South Polar Region expires in 2041.

‘I tried and created a group of four to work on this. We communicated with agencies in Europe but we are not government officials, so unfortunately it stopped somewhere, although I recently heard that a UAE official is trying to move forward with the treaty.’

Forty six countries comprising around 80% of the world’s population have already acceded to the treaty, but none are Arab, which means if the UAE decides to sign, it would be the first Arab nation to do so.

Empowering women

Following the expedition, Dana travelled to London to become a certified trainer for the Women’s Leadership Program, an initiative that promotes women in leadership roles across all industries. Those who participate also commit to mentor and empower women in their countries to advance the next generation of emerging women leaders.

Indeed, Dana has been giving lectures to women all over the UAE, in both schools and colleges, including the Higher Colleges of Technology’s Abu Dhabi Women’s College, which she graduated from.

‘Arab women are typically perceived as weak and shy. I try to motivate

them so they can engage in the culture and become productive in the society.’

So inspiring was Dana’s triumph, that two Arab women have already followed in her footsteps. In 2011, Sahar Al-Shamrani became the first Saudi woman to join the Antarctic expedition, and a year later, Zeena al Towayya became the first Omani woman to go on this adventure.

‘I met Sahar Al Shamrani during an interview with MBC. She was a producer with the TV channel and was keen on making this trip. So I arranged the voyage with Robert Swan and supported her press conference’.

Traveling for Dana is a way of life. Even before her Antarctic journey, she would often travel and has so far been to dozens of destinations, from South Korea and Australia to Kenya and the Maldives. ‘I would like to visit South Africa next. I heard the food there is great and would like to go on a safari because I didn’t get the chance in Kenya.’

When she’s home, Dana can be found enjoying her biggest passion of all – horse riding – which she spends a few hours doing almost every day. Occasionally, she takes her skill to the next level by participating in local championships.

‘Being on a horseback takes you out of the world; it washes your mind and makes you more patient, giving you mental and physical strength. You won’t believe how many times I fell off the horse but I always persisted.’

It is persistence, after all, that makes the ultimate difference between a successful and an average person, as Dana has shown the world.

- Heba Hashem