
Saffron, Sand and Steel Doors

A working chef's guide to kitchens in the Middle East

Ari Lepisto

Nordic chef · 30+ years from Tokyo embassies to Mogadishu and the Arctic

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Before you pack

Let me be straight with you: I have not run a kitchen in the Gulf myself. But the company I worked for in Mogadishu was headquartered in Dubai, and for seven years I hired, trained and worked beside cooks from India, Pakistan, Nepal and the Philippines – the countries that staff a large share of Middle Eastern kitchens. This guide is built on what the region asks of a cook, and on the official rules you need to know before you sign.

The Middle East is one of the biggest hospitality job markets on earth. Luxury hotels, airport and airline catering, mega-projects, camps for construction workers and contractors. The opportunities are real. So are the traps.

The Gulf rewards people who read their contract twice and never hand over their passport.

Why the Middle East, and why not

The good

- **Volume and variety.** Huge hotels, many outlets, every cuisine on earth under one roof.
- **Packages.** Many jobs include accommodation, meals, transport and annual flights home. In several Gulf states there is no income tax on salaries.
- **Career speed.** New openings constantly need sous chefs, chefs de partie and supervisors.
- **A crossroads.** You will work with people from forty countries and learn something from every one.

The honest part

- **Heat.** Summer is brutal. Kitchens and staff transport are air-conditioned, the walk between them is not.

- **Long days.** Six-day weeks are common. Read the contract for hours, days off and overtime.
- **Rules and culture.** Alcohol, dress, behaviour and Ramadan working hours follow local law and custom. Respect them.
- **Contracts vary hugely.** A good hotel group and a bad subcontractor are two different worlds.

The paperwork, without the panic

Each country has its own system, so check with the official labour ministry of the country you are going to. The United Arab Emirates is a good example of how the rules are meant to work:

- **Recruitment fees:** in the UAE it is illegal to charge workers a recruitment fee. The employer is meant to cover recruitment and travel costs.
- **Your passport stays yours:** confiscating a worker's passport is prohibited in the UAE.
- **The employer sponsors your visa.** Do not travel on a visit visa to "start working while the papers are done".
- **Get the contract before you fly,** in a language you understand, matching the offer you were given.

If someone asks you for money to get you a Gulf job, they are not your recruiter. They are your first problem.

Inside a Gulf kitchen

- **Brigades are big and international.** Clear hierarchy, clear stations, English as the common language.
- **Standards are high.** Municipal food-safety inspections are strict. Logs, labels and temperatures are checked.

- **Halal is the norm.** Know the rules for pork and alcohol in cooking, and how separate preparation areas work where allowed.
- **Ramadan changes everything.** Daytime service drops, then iftar and suhoor bring enormous volume. Plan for it.

How to get hired

- **Target established hotel groups and caterers.** They follow the rules because they have reputations to lose.
- **Show volume and banqueting experience,** plus international cuisine and hygiene standards.
- **Clean CV and documents:** attested diplomas and certificates may be needed for the visa.
- **Ask the right questions:** salary breakdown, accommodation, transport, days off, overtime, contract length, flights, end-of-service benefits.

Red flags

- Any fee charged to you for a job, visa, training or medical.
- A request to hand over your passport "for safekeeping".
- A different contract waiting for you on arrival.
- Vague answers about salary, housing or hours.

Last word

The Gulf can be a career accelerator and a good way to save money – if you choose your employer carefully. Read everything, keep copies of everything, and remember that the best kitchens there are full of people who came the right way and stayed because they were treated right.

If you want help finding the right kitchen, here or anywhere else, get in touch. I recruit cooks, service staff, supervisors and

kitchen leaders for restaurants, hotels, resorts, embassies and remote sites across the Nordics, Japan and Asia, Africa and the Middle East. The employer pays my fee. Candidates never pay. Always.

Ari Lepisto · Ari Lepisto Hospitality Recruitment
hello@nordicbrigade.com · +358 44 975 4619 · Helsinki,
Finland

Facts in this guide were checked in October 2026, using UAE government sources as the example. Rules differ by country: always confirm with the labour ministry of your destination and your employer before you travel. This guide is general information, not legal, tax or immigration advice.