

# *the wizard of jaws*

***Ninety-six hours in  
Dubai with the  
Instagram dentist.  
By Brennan Kilbane***



photographed by ysa perez



**d**ubai in June is so hot that the ocean water is a constant, low-broiling Jacuzzi temperature. It is so hot that you can see the humidity rising from the pavement, making you feel like you're underwater, the scenery jiggling with stress. It is so hot that I am sweating all the time, even when I am wearing a bathing suit and short sleeves. My forearms are never not slick. It's exceptionally hot in Dubai in June, and it's also nighttime.

Michael Apa does not seem to notice that we are in one of the hottest corners of the world and wears head-to-toe Brunello Cucinelli, plus a blazer, as we make our way through Dubai International Airport, escorted by an Emirates attendant. The second-best perk of traveling with Apa is enjoying a privilege known as Emirates Invitation Only, VIP status bestowed by the airline to an elite group of global citizens. (The first-best perk is living on his dime, which, just wait.) At JFK, 13 hours ago, we skipped to the front of the yearlong security line and boarded the plane 45 minutes before anyone else. When we landed, we breezed through customs and toward a caravan of black Benzes. Apa says he's heard that only nine Americans have been afforded Emirates IO status; I'm going to venture a guess that he is the only dentist. (The airline will not confirm or deny any of this.)

Just as the laws of airport bureaucracy do not immediately apply to Apa, neither do the laws of nature, which, in Dubai in June, at night, dictate an instant-armpit-wetting 91 degrees and 66 percent humidity. Apa does not so much as break a sweat, even under three layers of fabric. He doesn't seem to sweat under anything. For the next several days, as he does every month, he'll dive into the mouths of African princesses and Instagram influencers. There is no time to sweat.

Unless you're me, in which case, you do not stop until you have been indoors for at least an hour. It's exceptionally hot in Dubai in June, and it's also nighttime, and tomorrow morning Apa is going to work, so we head to the hotel, check in, and go to sleep.

As one of the world's premier cosmetic dentists, which sounds hyperbolic but is actually just a factual statement, Apa works out of two hubs. The first, in New York City, caters to celebrities like Chloë Sevigny and the Olsen twins, and anybody else who can afford boutique dental treatment. The second, in Dubai, opened in 2015 and serves foreign dignitaries and the region's social media stars looking to get their teeth cleaned. Apa spends a week each month at the Dubai office to see such VIPs and otherwise manage his remote team.

Apa trades primarily in cosmetic dentistry—he is particularly famous for his style of veneers, or porcelain chips that are affixed to your actual teeth. Traditionally, this requires filing down the real tooth so it's thinner and shorter and a fake tooth can fit over it. The dentist builds a mold and sends it to a ceramist; they make the veneers and send them back; the dentist bonds them to your mouth. Like any custom service, you can even choose the color you want; in this case, you have a selection of pre-decided shades that range from classic eggshell to retina-searing peppermint Tic Tac.

Apa's approach is different. While other top cosmetic dentists also now work to preserve as much of the original tooth as possible, he goes a step further.

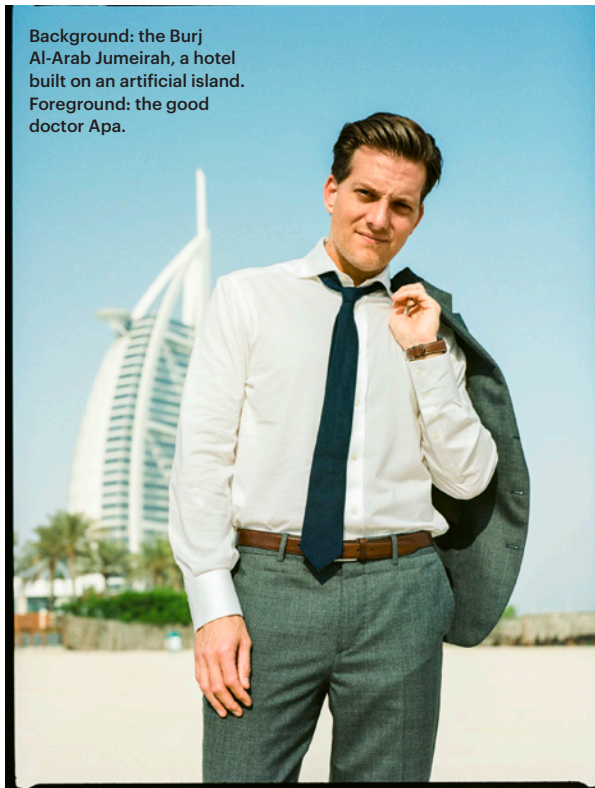
Each porcelain veneer is handmade in his New York or Dubai office by a ceramist who custom-blends the porcelain according, in part, to the patient's desire and Apa's direction, for the most natural-looking finish. No two patients will have the same smile. "The work is beautiful," says Lana Rozenberg, a New York City cosmetic dentist. "We used to think big, white teeth were beautiful, but now we're looking for real. [That trend] has been in the making for some time, but Apa really brought it to a wider audience."

This description is, of course, a heavy-handed bastardization of the process, which is very technically sophisticated and extremely boring to talk about or listen to. So I will just say that the difference between going to a regular cosmetic dentist and going to Michael Apa is like buying a Louis Vuitton handbag at Barneys versus having Nicolas Ghesquière handcraft a bag in front

of you and sew it to your palm for permanent usage.

Maybe the most fascinating thing about Apa is his outsize social media presence, which combines the egomaniacal dentist trope with 21st-century Instagram thirst trappings: outfit posts and celebrity patients alongside self-produced video interviews and self-attributed inspirational quotes. Kyle Richards, a New York City Apa patient and *Real Housewife of Beverly Hills*, discovered his work through the Instagram Explore feature. "I kept stalking his page," she told me; she ended up direct messaging him. Also: "He exudes confidence," she said, which struck me as an unusual commendation to pay a medical professional. To say Apa's brand is all about his craft would be to ignore all the people who are tuning in to see him personally. He is the charismatic leader of a cult all his own, and, you know, he's also a dentist.

**Michael Apa looks like a Ken doll** and acts like a Ken doll with a job. He's hot not in a rugged way, but in a perfect way: His eyes are weapons of boyish charm; even when buried under \$10,000 worth of clothing, his body is noticeably



Background: the Burj Al-Arab Jumeirah, a hotel built on an artificial island. Foreground: the good doctor Apa.

## Most of contemporary Dubai was built in the last 20 years.



sculpted, the cumulative result of months of militant training sessions and years of declining wine with dinner. In the early days of his career, when he was trying to generate buzz for his practice, several excited publicists tried to brand him as the "hot dentist." He says they wanted him to be the first Bachelor but ultimately got him on an episode of a VH1 show about lifestyles of the rich, which he says garnered the attention (and business) of Dubai's royal family. And thus Apa's Middle Eastern practice was born. "He is considered the king of teeth here," says beauty mogul and patient Huda Kattan, who lives in Dubai and is the effusive owner of an Apa-brand smile. According to Kattan, you can barely tell the difference between her actual teeth and her veneers, which were handcrafted to look like ideal versions of the former.

The morning after we arrive, Apa rises at 6 A.M. to work out at his gym, which is located in an adjacent hotel. If you're me, it's a 10-minute walk through several cable-knit blankets of humidity. If you're Dr. Apa, you drive an optic-white Mercedes Benz G-Wagon basically around the block. It's a company car that comes with its own driver. I call it the Tooth Wagon because it seems funny and looks like a molar.

G-Wagons, Apa tells me, are the unofficial mascots of Dubai. He tells me that His Highness Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, the Ruler of Dubai, drives one. When Apa first started practicing in the UAE, he took Ubers to and fro, but it was an unflattering look in a city that still operates on a fierce caste system. Cars are status symbols everywhere, but in Dubai, they are literally ranked according to influence: The fewer digits you have on your license plate, the higher in society you are. Sheikh Mohammed has "1"; Apa has four digits, which is still pretty good, but in case that's not good enough, he also has a G-Wagon that resembles a lunar rover. Together with a photographer, publicist, and assistant, Apa and I drive to his office, past stuccoed McMansions and waterborne hotels.

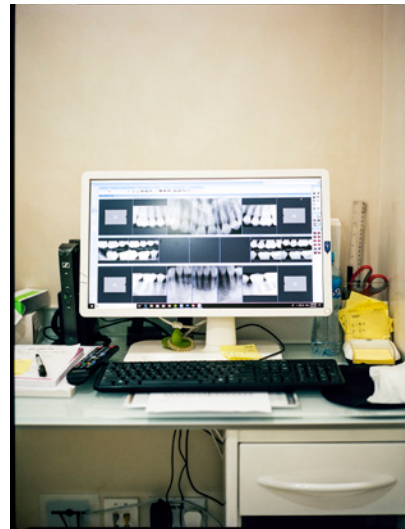
Around us, glass spires shoot skyward out of the desert floor. When Dubai began to run out of oil in the past few decades, the emirate poured its capital into creating a flourishing tourism industry—meaning most of contemporary Dubai was built in the past 20 years. Recently, an enormous canal was carved through downtown Dubai for the explicit purpose of commercial transportation, and the implicit purpose, a lifelong resident tells me, of selling more waterfront property. Man-made archipelagos rose from the sea—two in the shape of enormous palms, one designed to look like a world map, where development compa-

Above left: part of downtown Dubai. Above: the author's encounter with a falcon during a desert tour. (Falconry is very big in Dubai.)

nies can purchase nations and turn them into a Utopian global society. (Just kidding! More hotels.)

Nothing in Dubai is fake. The snow that congeals over multiple ski slopes in the Mall of the Emirates is so real you could write a poem about it. The brand-new islands are so real, you could build hotels on them. The landlocked beach installed in a forthcoming gated community is so real, you could sink your feet into its imported white sand and forget you are not at the real beach...until you look up. Everything in metropolitan Dubai is coated in a thin veneer of something like deceit, which makes the experience of being here very unsettling.

Apa's office is in Jumeirah Beach, the East Hampton of Dubai. Everything is white and trimmed in gold—every table, every custom office chair, every office manager named Mahsa Nikdar dressed in wrinkle-free white separates and gilded on her wrists and neck. She looks like the child of Nicole Scherzinger and Naomi Campbell, and on Saturday, she is one of four incredibly attractive faces that greet



Apa's ceramists work out of studios in his New York City and Dubai offices. Above: teeth stuff.

you at the door, a visual onslaught of hospitality and mascara. Tropical house music blares at club-bathroom volume, and Diptyque candles furnish almost every available surface, which creates a disorienting blend of Ibiza party vibes and French decadence.

Every morning at 8:30 A.M., Apa's staff gathers in the white-gold conference room for a briefing on the out-of-town visitors and wealthy regulars who will stop by that day. For anybody who consumes situational workplace-reality television, it is eerily familiar: Seven or eight of the hottest dental professionals in the business making casual jokes about how deep one royal patient's entourage runs, laughing heartily, complaining about air conditioning in the room, and thus being hot on various levels. Everybody is both severely attractive and an expatriate with a compelling backstory. I will list some of them for you:

Mahsa Nikdar is the most beautiful woman God ever created. She moved to Dubai 13 years ago to work as a buyer for Saks Fifth Avenue, and journalists have written about her closet.

Hayley Cartmell is from Wales and moved to Dubai to get in touch with her birth father. She now lives in Oman, but Apa flies her into town when he's here. The office's electrical mainframe is powered by her laughter, which ricochets up from reception, through the office halls, and into the hearts of everybody present.

Tarek Hafez, a man, is brain-meltingly handsome, and also a dentist.

The dental professionals are there because Apa is at the top of their game. The nondental professionals are surprised to find themselves in the

dental industry but assure me that they wouldn't have it any other way. They were seduced by the house music and stayed for its charismatic DJ.

**Some 6,800 miles west**, in a town in upstate New York with roughly 99 percent fewer marble statues and indoor ski slopes, Michael Apa was born and raised. He was, in his own words, "chubby and a skateboarder and kind of an outsider" who idolized his older brother, who was his antithesis. Around the time his brother left for college, his father, an insurance adjuster, was made partner at one of the firms where he worked, which doubled his earnings, says Apa. Suddenly, they had an in-ground pool and a used Porsche, achievements that made a big impression on Apa when he was growing up. "I was the one who my parents were like, 'Good luck in life, we hope you figure it out,'" he says. But after his dad's promotion, Apa was struck by a sense of economic possibility.

Dentistry had always appealed to Apa—his grandmother worked in a dental office, and he has warm memories of going there—but it wasn't until career day in high school that he glimpsed his professional horizon. His local dentist gave him a taped lecture by celebrity cosmetic dentist Larry Rosenthal, whom Apa was completely taken by. "I knew I wanted to move to New York and practice with Larry Rosenthal," he says. And he did. About a decade after that, he bought Rosenthal's practice. (Rosenthal still works there.)

At one point, I offhandedly refer to Apa as the "James Bond of dentistry" to one of his publicists, because, you know, everything about him, but she worries aloud that he won't like that characterization. The man is very sensitive about trivializing his work. Everybody talks about the Aston Martins and the martinis when they talk about Bond. Fewer people talk about how good he is at his job.

Apa is good at his job. He is the best, says Richards, and he is so brilliant, says Kattan, and he is everything you want from a guy you're paying \$20k to give you a celebrity smile. Plus, his hair swoops like a perfect dollop of toothpaste, says a New York-based beauty editor and patient. Apa often uses the word "passion" to describe the love of his craft, a word derived from the Latin "*pati*," to suffer, which, yeah, kind of. He describes a near future in which his offices circle the globe and he treats patients at each location, thereby eradicating any semblance of a normal home life. "Some people can go to work, leave it at the office, take a trip with their family, really and truly enjoy themselves. I'm not like that," he says, his eyes suddenly heavy. "This is the only thing I enjoy. I don't really enjoy being away from this for too long. And I'm not saying that as a positive." What he is saying is, that's the price you pay to be the best.

**Then there's this Ferrari monologue.**

Apa is frustrated that people aren't understanding his essential passion thing, because his Instagram is all veneers and Ferraris, which he collects and stores at his home in the Hamptons. The depth of his Ferrari collection could be conservatively described as a shitload. Despite this, and despite all of the Instagram posts of the Emirates lounge and the Chloë Sevignys and the unconscionably expensive cars, he is frustrated that people do not "get him."

He expresses this during a meeting with his Dubai-based social media team—a three-person outfit responsible for shooting content and strategizing about posting it—and subsequently delivers a lecture about the history of Enzo Ferrari, a person I did not know existed and now know far too much about. Enzo began making cars 70-some years ago to publicize his racing business, only to create the most exclusive buying experience of all time. Apa logs countless hours meeting with his Ferrari dealer, going to an Italian town called Maranello, where Ferraris are born and raised, and attending brand events with hopes of earning the privilege of buying a car. "They write it all down," Apa booms to a room of four people. His hands are folded across his chest, and he is testing gravity by leaning back as far as possible in his white-gold office chair. "When the time comes to sell 499 cars, they open the books. And you have to be one of those 499 people."

One hundred hours later, he is still speaking: "Think about getting behind the wheel of that car. That's this experience.... Not only am I trying to get people into this office; I'm trying to get people to appreciate the craftsmanship of everything that we do in their mouth. That is why I love Ferrari. Every single thing about the car, the engine, the way it sounds, the way it drives, it's all perfect. They almost went bankrupt multiple times. There's a story about when Enzo Ferrari brought Ford Motor Company to Italy to sign a deal. They had all these big power lawyers from Ford, huge money. Enzo had no money; he had this local lawyer. You can see this all in the museum. He had this purple pen, ready to sign. He read one thing in the contract and in Italian said, 'I don't want to do this.' And they got up and left. Think about that. On the verge of bankruptcy, Enzo walked away—and then beat Ford at Le Mans three times in a row. My point is, it's not always a numbers game; passion will always yield a better product. That's what people don't understand when they see me post a video of a Ferrari on my Instagram page. Anyway."

Anyway. (Also, there's a Ferrari museum?) Apa doesn't feel like people take him seriously. Is it a fool's errand to seek professional acclaim on the same social media app that awards hotness with sponsorship deals? *Forbes* reported on Kylie Jenner's cosmetics fortune this year, attributing much of her success to Instagram; nowhere did they mention the quality of the product she is selling. Because Jenner isn't selling lipstick; she's selling everything else.

So is this guy. Apa is plenty cognizant of his social media portrait, which paints a rococo-era lifestyle in the palette of the digital age and depicts a man who flies on a plane with a shower, and who collects million-dollar sports cars like stamps, and who wears custom Italian sportswear to the gym, and who is also a dentist. And yet he feels misunderstood. Why does everyone think he's a Ferrari-driving, first-class-flying, Brunello Cucinelli-wearing dentist? His three social media strategists and I are confounded. How could they not?

**He is everything you want from a guy you're paying \$20k.**



The desert expanse seen from the driver's seat of an SUV mid-dune-bash

**In a string of relentlessly** scorching days, it is the most relentlessly scorching day. The morning of our final interview, I travel from hotel to G-Wagon to Apa's office, because it is the lifestyle to which I am now accustomed. The horizon melts in the distance.

Nikdar is there at the front, wearing an outfit that would bring tears to your eyes. Everybody, like always, is in high spirits—including Apa, which is even more of an achievement, since he didn't sleep the night before.

At the top of the professional totem pole, the air is thinner and it's harder to breathe. "Sometimes I get this terrible anxiety," he says. "I can't sleep and my heart is beating out of my chest. Thinking about going to sleep sometimes makes me anxious." He speaks glowingly of his wife, Lisa, and his dogs and stepchildren and how grounded they help him feel. How all he wants to do is be the best. How work is his lifeblood and everything else falls in line.

"It's like, there's becoming this loss of passion for craft," Apa says. "And [dentistry] is a craft. You know you're gonna spend most of your adult life at work—it's just how it is. So you might as well be the best. Be as best as you can. And I think that that is some of the struggle I go through with trying to be excellent and really trying to—I don't want to say be human, but be present for the people I appreciate in my life. And patients. That's lumped together. That's always my struggle, and hopefully people who are wildly passionate have that struggle." A pause. "Does that make sense?"

"That makes sense."

"All right."

And the interview is over.

**The evening before our departure**, the publicist, the photographer, and I go dune-bashing. This has nothing to do with Apa, who is still working when we are picked up by a tourism company and driven to the desert. We bound through the dunes, like a roller coaster that is also a Ford Explorer. Everybody is screaming except for the driver, who is surfing the sand as if he has done it every day of his life. Perhaps because he has.

"You get to do this all of the time?!" I shout between swells.

"Yes." He enunciates the period.

"And you—ahhhhhhhhhhh!—and you love it?!"

"I do," he replies, as the sunset rains over the desert, the sand now a deep, abiding pink, like cotton-candy mountains against the amber horizon, and he means it.