



**Arab Media Watch**  
for objective British coverage of Arab issues

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**Monitoring Study:**

**British Media Reaction to Dubai's "Sex on the Beach" Case**

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**Table of contents:**

Introduction	2
They deserve what they get	3
Inferences about Dubai	3
Comparisons with Britain	4

## Introduction

It was reported on 16 October 2008 that British citizens Michelle Palmer and Vince Acors were found guilty of having sex on a beach in Dubai, and sentenced to three months imprisonment.

Among the British national daily and Sunday press (excluding the Financial Times), six columnists - writing a total of seven articles in five newspapers - commented on this news, and none sided with Palmer and Acors. The Daily Express was the only daily tabloid to comment on this story, the Sunday Express was the only Sunday newspaper to do so, while the Independent was the only daily broadsheet not to do so.

Ross Clark had the most to say, with a commentary each in the Times and Daily Express. These two newspapers had the most to say, publishing two commentaries each, together accounting for 57% of total commentaries. A full breakdown follows:

<u>Newspaper</u>	<u>No. of articles</u>	<u>Authors</u>	
Times	2	Ross Clark Bronwen Maddox	
Daily Express:	2	Ross Clark David Robson	
Sunday Express	1	Julia Hartley-Brewer	
Guardian	1	Lucy Mangan	
Daily Telegraph	1	Simon Heffer	
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<b><u>Total:</u></b>	5	7	6

### **They deserve what they get**

Ross Clark wrote in the Times that "the most shocking thing about the case of Michelle Palmer and Vince Acors...is that they themselves appear to be shocked" (17 October). He wrote in the Express on the same day:

"Palmer and Acors...ought to have known that Dubai is an Islamic nation keen to maintain standards of public behaviour with the application of sharia law."

He added:

"What we have no right to do is to try to lay down the law in a sovereign state in the Middle East."

He also felt there were more serious implications, writing in the Times:

"They haven't just been stupid, they have been thoroughly irresponsible. There is no better recruiting sergeant for al-Qaeda than the sight of Westerners trying to thumb their noses at the laws of Islamic countries."

Sunday Express columnist Julia Hartley-Brewer (19 October) took it less seriously:

"I hope the sex was good enough to make it all worth the hassle."

Daily Express columnist David Robson (18 October) noted the leniency of the three-month sentence:

"Perhaps the court only really found them guilty on the lesser charge of kissing, otherwise they would have thrown away the key."

### **Inferences about Dubai**

A couple of columnists suggested what the case meant for Dubai. Guardian columnist Lucy Mangan felt that Dubai was "keen to rid its beauty spots of the sight of pallid English flesh undulating in the moonlight" (18 October).

Bronwen Maddox, chief foreign commentator at the Times, wrote (17 October):

"For 15 years Dubai has had it both ways: as the gleaming playground of the Gulf and as a conservative Arab society run on Islamic principles."

She noted that Dubai "could be a model of modernisation for its Arab neighbours, or it could provoke anger and even become a target for the Islamic terrorism that it has notably been spared."

She argued that this case has tweaked the balance between "gleaming playground" and "conservative Arab society run on Islamic principles...a notch more towards Arab values."

## **Comparisons with Britain**

A couple of columnists spoke up in favour of the United Arab Emirates' right to good discipline in its public order. Daily Telegraph columnist Simon Heffer wrote (18 October):

"It is a lesson in the stupidity of offending against the customs of other countries when we visit them, something I wish we were hotter on here."

Ross Clark in the Daily Express (17 October) noticed parallels between public order in the UAE and Britain:

"If we aren't going to respect the laws in a moderate Islamic country such as Dubai how do we expect to impress on foreign visitors the duty to obey our laws?"