

The Shifting Sands

From the golden sands rises a city of epic proportions. Shiny and new, it dangles an "Under construction" sign around its neck as it rapidly expands. This is Dubai

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DUBAI AT ITS peak was the global media's darling. The shimmering city that rose rapidly from the Arabian sands could do no wrong. Working under the ruling family's mantra "Build it and they will come," the metropolis appeared from nowhere and became a city of superlatives with the world's tallest building, the world's largest shopping mall, the world's fastest elevators and at its peak, up to 40 percent of the world's construction cranes to build it. Expats flooded in to take advantage of high salaries and the tax free status.

Incredible multi-billion dollar projects were announced one after the other. Rumors about what was to come ranged from a beach with under-sand cooling to an underwater hotel. The emirate already had an indoor ski center, with

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CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT:
The Burj Al Arab, The Dubai Marina, Ski Dubai, The Palm



temperatures of -1 degree Celsius contrasting with the broiling 40-degree plus temperatures outside, and an island in the shape of a palm tree lined with million dollar villas. Projects deemed unrealistic in other nations queued for a place in the Arabian sun.

Dubai was a city of excess. Expatriates on high salaries lived lives of luxury that they could not afford in their home countries. I remember being invited to a “construction party” in a villa on the Palm Jumeirah. My friend’s multi-million dollar villa had been handed over. They immediately ripped out every fixture and fitting, to be replaced with higher quality brand names. The party was in the interim, while the bath sat on their stretch of private beach, a bar served cocktails next to a pile of rubble, and revelers

made small talk around the only acceptably complete element; the swimming pool.

Then came the financial crisis. Construction ground to a halt. Expats fled under the weight of redundancies, leaving behind excessive loans and fast sports cars. “We knew it couldn’t last,” sneered the media, flipping from their prior platitudes.

The recession hit the United Arab Emirates hard, particularly Dubai which had invested heavily in tourism as a replacement for dwindling oil reserves. The city is, however, bouncing back in style. With the resumption of ambitious projects, albeit on a more sustainable scale, Dubai continues to court the tourist dollar and a more conservative breed of expatriates are moving in.

In a city where the expat population heavily outweighs the locals, the local culture is easily hidden. Many suggest Dubai transitioned so rapidly from a pearl fishing, largely nomadic lifestyle to an oil-rich state that its heritage has been left behind. There may be some truth to this, but underneath the glitz lies a strong Emirati culture few visitors see. Even residents are largely excluded from close involvement with the local culture. There is a sense that 85 percent of the population are the hired help, there to aid the Emiratis in building their futures. The lure of an international lifestyle of glamour overcomes most objections.

In With the New

Dubai can be geographically divided into two parts - old Dubai and new Dubai. New Dubai is the center of the Western expat community. It is the home of beautiful waterside apartments, luxurious villas, upmarket shopping malls, swanky resort hotels and architectural marvels. There is little evidence of Emirati culture here, aside from occasional bursts of Middle Eastern architectural design - intricate Arabic-style filigree replicated on an apartment block or squared off villa roofs modeled after wind towers.

Modern architecture has reached its zenith here. It kicked off with the Burj Al Arab, undeniably an iconic masterpiece. The self-proclaimed seven-star hotel shaped like a ship’s sail stands on a small artificial island connected to the coast. It boasts a seafood restaurant encircling an aquarium, a personal butler service, and hefty pillars decorated with 22-carat gold. It does not, contrary to popular belief, have a tennis court. The super-high tennis match between Roger Federer and Andre Agassi was a clever publicity stunt for The Dubai Duty Free Tennis Championship, the court reverting to its former occupation as a helipad once the media

had been and gone.

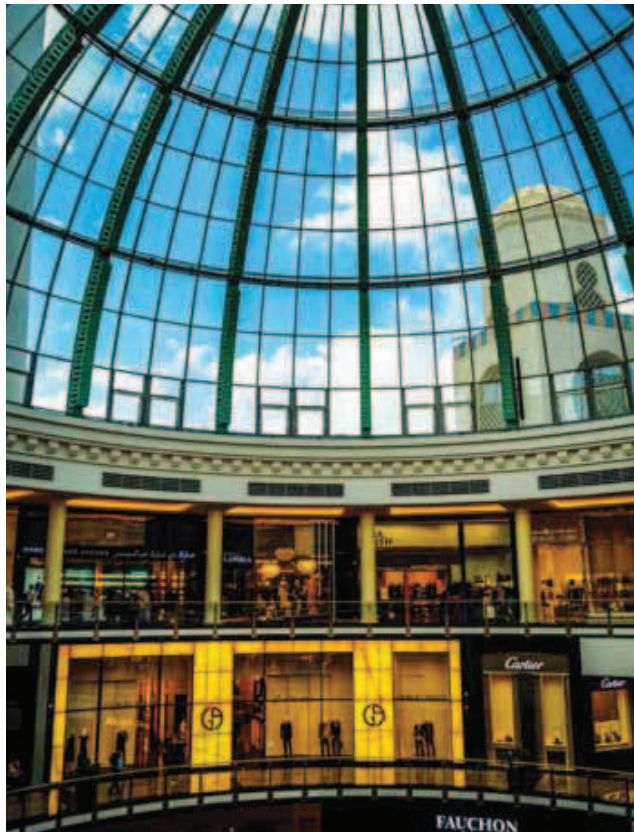
Nowadays, the Burj Al Arab has competition in the form of the Burj Khalifa. At over 828 meters, the Burj Khalifa is the world’s tallest building. Stretching needle-like into the open sky, the building dwarfs the structures in its shadow. Combined with the mammoth Dubai Mall, this area known as Old Town is a popular center, particularly at night when the palm trees drip with white fairy lights, leading to a plethora of restaurants covering every style of cuisine. The Arabic influence is subtly felt in the outdoor cafes serving strong Turkish coffee and refreshing glasses of lemon and mint juice.

The Dubai Mall, with its 1,200 or so retail outlets, is a testament to the Gruen Transfer. In mall design, the Gruen Transfer is the moment when consumers enter the mall and, surrounded by an intentionally confusing layout, lose track of their original intentions. The mall is filled with glazed-eyed shoppers who no longer remember where they are, who they are, or where they left their cars.

Inside the mall, the Olympic-size ice skating rink, Sega Republic indoor theme park, 22-screen cinema, “waterfall” (a fountain), and Kidzania, an award-winning children’s

HANDY THINGS TO KNOW

- There is a dress code for shopping malls. Dress modestly, covering shoulders and knees to avoid offense. Leave your transparent boob tube at home.
- Public displays of affection are not acceptable. Hand-holding will pass, tonsil hockey will not.
- Pornographic material, drugs and anti-Islamic material are not allowed through customs. Banned drugs include codeine, so check your cold and flu medication carefully. A runny nose in jail is not recommended.
- There is zero tolerance for drinking and driving, and the public consumption of alcohol is illegal. Keep your beer in the bars.
- Homosexuality is illegal. Be discreet.
- Technically, sex outside marriage is illegal. Sharing a hotel room is questionable but the tourist dollar is mighty strong.
- Never make a rude hand gesture. Ever. Unless you want to experience a Dubai prison.



Mall of the Emirates



Abra crossing the creek

PLACES TO STAY

Atlantis

Atlantis is tacky-fabulous. The interior is decked out in pink and purple making you feel like you have stumbled into a children's playroom, but the service is top notch with prices to match. The Aquaventure water park makes it all worthwhile, although you hurtle through the plastic tube in the shark tank so fast that it's hard to keep your eyes open. Indicative rate: US\$420 per night. www.atlantisthepalm.com

Kempinski

The Kempinski hotel is situated inside Mall of the Emirates, so convenience is the key word. The hotel is uber-trendy, as are the spa and Mosaic Chill; the hotel's landmark terrace bar around the rooftop pool is a super swanky place for a sundowner's beverage. If you really want to splurge, and experience bizarre contrast, book a ski chalet overlooking the indoor slope at Ski Dubai. Indicative rate: US\$350 per night. www.kempinski.com

One & Only Royal Mirage

On the shores of the Gulf, the One & Only Royal Mirage is a stunner. Think intricate arches, domes and towers, infused with rich green courtyards and vibrantly colorful gardens. Palm-shaded pools, reflecting waters and cooling fountains – all the extravagance you would expect from a well-established premium Dubai beachfront hotel. Indicative rate: US\$660 per night. www.royalmirage.oneandonlyresorts.com

Note: Yes, there are budget hotels. They are just not as much fun. Try around areas like Al Barsha, Bur Dubai or Deira for cheap and cheerful.

edutainment center, ensure distraction at every turn. The centerpiece is the Dubai Aquarium, one of the largest tanks in the world with the world's largest viewing panel, holding more than 33,000 living animals. Emirati men in crisp white *kandoura* and Westerners in jeans and t-shirts, stand side-by-side at the rope barriers, mesmerized by the underwater world.

The best views of the Burj Khalifa are from Dubai Fountain attached to the mall. Over 6,600 incandescent lights, 25 color projectors and numerous plumes of water are choreographed to music. The performances draw large crowds of photographers. The fountain was named through a competition that attracted 4,000 entries; 15 entries suggested the winning "Dubai Fountain," leaving 3,985 asking why they bothered entering.

What Ski Dubai lacks in imaginative naming, it makes up for in engineering genius. Located inside the Mall of the Emirates, Ski Dubai offers 22,500 square meters of alpine fun, consisting of a ski slope and a dedicated snow play area, with activities ranging from skiing to zorbing (rolling down the slope inside a transparent plastic ball). Locals in traditional dress are provided with long down jackets while Westerners jump into ski pants and jackets, to go over their shorts. The magic of snow is most evident in the wondrous faces of local children who have never seen winter before.

I was at the opening, where the ruling family expressed the same wonder. Many of the accompanying entourage refused the offer of warm socks and boots, never having experienced cold before, but were quick to accept once they had entered the chilled environment, their sandals scant protection in the -1 Celsius temperature.

For additional lessons in engineering, look no further than Dubai Marina, a suburban

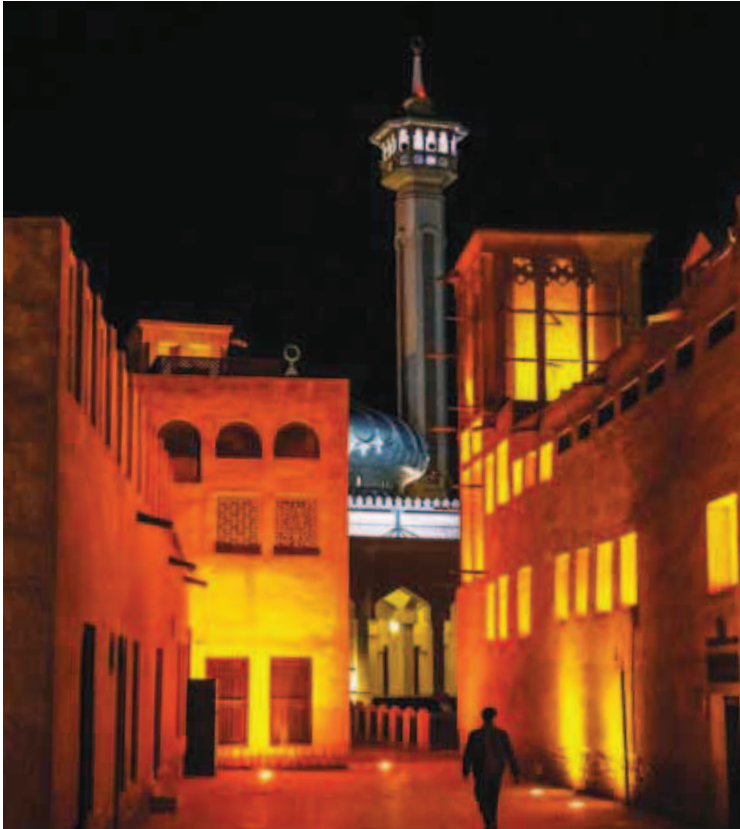
district carved out of the desert. Not so long ago this area was a barren stretch of sand, a few lonely hotels littering the beachfront. Now Dubai Marina is a prime residential area, with an array of glittering towers lining the banks of a manmade canal. This central waterway runs three kilometers, giving water frontage to the 200 or so residential towers that house the largely expat population. Every apartment, mine included, comes with a pool and gym at the very least. The waterfront is crammed with restaurants, featuring the scent of apple flavored tobacco wafting from the *shisha* cafes, with Emiratis, Indians, British and Russians mingling freely.

But Still Keeping the Old Dubai

This is new Dubai. Old Dubai is a little harder to find and much less Western. This was the original heart of the city and the local culture is more evident. The districts of Bur Dubai and Deira were established long before Dubai found oil. They squat facing each other across an expanse of water called the Creek. From the downtown Dubai glitz it is hard to imagine the quiet pearl-diving and trading town that once sat on these shores.

Deira is still a center of commerce, and this is where the major *souqs* (markets) can be found. The spice *souq* is lined with sacks of multicolored herbs and spices, wafting their aromas across passers-by, while the gold *souq* is home to more than 300 purveyors of jewelry. Estimates suggest around 10 tons of gold is present at any given time here. In the back rooms of hidden apartments a similar weight of fake Rolex watches and handbag knock-offs wait.

On my first visit here I accepted the whispered offer to view brand-name handbags and was whisked away, a secret knock



Al Bastakiya



Barjeel (Wind Tower)

letting me enter an apartment jammed with a comprehensive selection of bags and watches to rival the wares of Ben Thanh Market. There is no shortage of men lurking in the *souq* hoping to show these less than legal wares.

One of the most authentic experiences available in Dubai is an *abra* ride across the Creek. These small traditional wooden boats ferry people over the water for a mere one dirham (US\$0.27), paid directly to the captain. On the Bur Dubai side, the textile *souq* waits, clothed in pashminas, rugs and carpets imported from as far away as Afghanistan.

Behind this *souq* sits the diminutive, yet fascinating historic district, Al Bastakiya. This is one of the oldest residential areas in the city of Dubai, dating from the 1890s when it was *the* place to live. Oil led wealthy residents to other districts and the area was partly demolished to make way for the Ruler's Court. It was not until 2005 that Dubai began to see the value of its past, initiating a restoration project.

What makes Bastakiya unique is its architecture. Every house here features the *barjeel* (wind tower), which acts as an air conditioning system, with the number of towers indicating the wealth of the owner. Several of the properties are now cafes and art galleries, rarely open, while the rest sit dormant, hidden down narrow alleyways and quiet lanes. This area, more than any other, highlights the pace of Dubai's development.

City of Dreams

In many ways, Dubai is a city of dreams. Architecturally this is certainly so, but it can also be seen in the luxurious lifestyle of those who call the city home. The consideration for some may be the status of women. There are no special considerations for non-Muslim

women in Dubai. Local women wear *abayas* (a loose black robe) and *hijab* (head covering) but no such requirements are placed on others apart from a modicum of modesty in public spaces such as shopping malls. Expect to be treated with respect and you will not be disappointed. Arabian hospitality demands no less. While outsiders may not have a lot of direct contact with the local culture, there are precious moments where the cultures join. This may be in the eyes of a henna artist during a heavily-touristed desert safari, or in a shared smile with a local child running amok in a shopping mall.

A Saudi woman initiated conversation with me on the metro. She was keen to explain how lucky she is, to be born in a place where women are revered and need never lift a finger. Her smile was so genuine that I could not bring myself to shake her beliefs by asking about women who want more than this.

Strongly Islamic, Dubai is still the most liberal of the Arabic states. The tax free status affords a higher standard of living for the majority and this has led to an impressively multicultural environment. Arabic mingles with English, Farsi, French and Tagalog in the workplace and on the streets. Nine months of perfect weather is also not to be sneezed at.

Bio: *Giselle Whiteaker, originally Australian, is an inveterate expatriate. She has lived in Japan, South Korea, the UK, and Vietnam. She now, at least temporarily, calls the United Arab Emirates home, but she travels so frequently that she sometimes forgets where she lives. Giselle is the editor of two lifestyle and property magazines - Exclusive Home Worldwide and Property Scene, and regularly writes for Etihad Airways' in-flight magazines amongst others.* ■

WHERE TO DINE

BUDGET

Wild Peeta

Wild Peeta serves modern Emirati street cuisine, the recipes influenced by the rich cultural diversity found across the UAE. From *Khaleeji shawarmas* (spit-roasted meat and pickles in pita) to *karakccinos* (local tea) and beetroot ketchup, this casual eatery creates unique flavor combinations with a local twist, using the freshest ingredients. Choose from the menu, or create your own *shawarma* for a culinary adventure.

www.wildpeeta.com

MID RANGE

Mezza House

There is plenty of Arabic food available in Dubai, but this may be the best. A tribute to the traditional cuisine of the Levant region, showcasing the delicacies of Lebanon, Jordan, Syria and Palestine, Mezza House is nothing less than mouth-wateringly spectacular. Whatever you choose, make sure you get the *fattoush* here, a traditional Arabic side salad packed with taste.

www.mezzahouse.com

HIGH END

Pier Chic

Pier Chic has to be one of the most romantic spots in Dubai. It's a shame you can't smooch in public. Set on stilts at the end of a pier on the beach in front of Al Qasr Hotel overlooking the Arabian Sea, with spectacular views across the ocean to the Burj Al Arab, Pier Chic offers an extensive a la carte seafood menu. Small portions, but exquisite flavors.

www.madinatjumeirah.com