

Understand Dubai & Abu Dhabi

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How has the ripple effect of the global economic downturn affected these tiny emirates?

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This has to be one of the most astonishing rags-to-riches stories anywhere in the world.

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All that building, all that progress and all that ambition has inevitably had an enormous impact on the region's fragile ecosystem and environment.

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From their iconic skyscrapers to cutting-edge contemporary art, Dubai and Abu Dhabi reflect a spirit of innovation.

Dubai & Abu Dhabi Today

Most visitors to Dubai and Abu Dhabi won't notice anything amiss – and so they shouldn't. Although the global credit crunch hit developers hard, and some questionable new projects have been quietly shelved, this has not dulled the shine of the glossy shopping malls and iconic skyscrapers. Both emirates continue to be a global example of modern Arab cities that remain friendly with the West, something that is particularly meaningful these days, given their location in one of the most volatile regions in the world.

Best on Film

Mission Impossible Ghost Protocol (2011) Tom Cruise scales the Burj Khalifa in this latest 'Mission' thriller.

Syriana (2005) This political thriller starring George Clooney and Matt Damon was partly shot in Dubai.

Duplicity (2009) Spy-themed comedy features exterior shots of Dubai.

Naqaab (2007) Bollywood suspense thriller largely shot in and around Jumeirah Beach.

Best in Print

Arabia (Jonathan Raban; 1979) Fascinating author's travels through recently independent emirates.

Dubai: the Story of the World's Fastest City (Jim Krane; 2009) Balanced look at Dubai's rags-to-riches story.

Dubai: The Vulnerability of Success (Christopher M Davidson; 2008) An in-depth study of Dubai's post-oil development.

Dubai: Gilded Cage (Syed Ali; 2010) Scholarly and critical examination of Dubai's turbo-speed metamorphosis.

Windtower: Houses of the Bastaki (Anne Coles and Peter Jackson; 2011) Stunning coffee-table book about old Dubai.

Tourism versus Tradition

Tiny but turbocharged, Dubai continues to be a highly developed tourism destination offering superb shopping, lodging, eating, sports and relaxation beneath nearly year-round sunny skies. Crime is rare, almost everyone speaks English and tourists are unlikely to be hassled or ripped off. Having said that, Dubai and Abu Dhabi are still conservative by Western standards, and behaviour such as kissing in public, drunkenness or swearing is not tolerated. The most recent figures released by the UK Foreign Office reveal that the United Arab Emirates (UAE) is the country where British visitors are most likely to get arrested while visiting. In other words, Dubai or Abu Dhabi may not be the perfect destination for that honeymoon or stag weekend.

Ethnic Hierarchy

There have long been rumblings of criticism about the rigid social, cultural and economic divides between the Emiratis (who make up around just 10% of the population), expatriate Westerners on short-term work visas, and workers from the developing world, particularly India. At last there are signs that these boundaries are blurring, at least at some level, with Westerners encouraged to own property and increasing numbers of educated Indians taking up prominent posts. India is Dubai's largest trading partner: in 2010 non-oil trade between the two countries reached a record Dh183 billion, and this is a trend set to continue.

Human Rights

The government has attempted to address criticism received about human-rights issues. In its 2011 World Report, the international human-rights organisation Human Rights Watch applauded new UAE labour regulations to curb exploitative recruiting agents who