

INTRODUCING DUBAI



Burj Khalifa soars above Dubai's cityscape

JEAN-PIERRE LESCOURET

Aboard approaching airliners, passengers' eyes are glued to the view: traditional wind towers yield to space-age skyscrapers sprouting across an endless desert hemmed in by a glittering coastline.

Welcome to Dubai, the 21st-century Middle Eastern Shangri La powered by unflinching ambition and can-do spirit. The motto: 'If you can think it, it shall be done.' The world's tallest building? Check. Skiing in the desert? Check. Islands shaped like the entire world? Check.

Over the last decade, Dubai has grown into the most progressive and modern city in the Middle East. Under the leadership of its dynamic and daring ruler, Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid al-Maktoum, Dubai has become a centre of finance, tourism and trade. Despite having been hit harder by the global financial meltdown than just about any other place on earth, the tiny emirate is still regarded as a major power player and *the* place to do business in the Middle East.

For visitors, the doom-and-gloom headlines matter little. Dubai is an exciting place to visit with lovely beaches, sophisticated restaurants and bars, world-class shopping, ultraluxe hotels, and skyscrapers that leave you gasping in awe – including, of course, the world's tallest building, Burj Khalifa. But there's more to the emirate than 21st-century glitz and glam. Despite appearances, Dubai's culture is solidly rooted in Islam and generations of Bedouin heritage. It's still alive along the Creek, in the historic Bastakia Quarter and the warren-like souqs. It's this juxtaposition of the traditional past and the hi-tech present that makes it such an intriguing and compelling place to visit.

CITY LIFE

Dubai's success has been shaped by forward-thinking governments, but the achievements wouldn't have been possible without the foreign workforce that has helped carry out their vision. While everyone in Dubai in some way shares in the city's accomplishments, expatriate workers – some of whom were born and raised in the emirate but haven't qualified for UAE

citizenship – find it hard to escape the feeling that they're the 'hired help' in this grand experiment. While buying property in Dubai now allows expats to have an open-ended residency visa, it's still not citizenship – and effectively they have no political voice. Then again, the disparity of wealth in Dubai is colossal and only a minority of expats can even dream of owning a property here.

To local Emiratis, who make up between 5% and 10% of the city's population, Dubai's sudden acquisition of wealth has been a double-edged *khanjar*. The vast majority have a lot of faith in their leaders and appreciate the perks they receive: free health care, education, land, zero-interest loans, and marriage funds. However, Emiratis are facing challenges in the employment market. How can they compete when a foreigner will do the same job for a tenth of the price? Plus the segregated society means that many expat managers don't even know any Emiratis, let alone employ any.

There is also debate about whether the Emiratis' heritage and traditions are endangered as the city becomes increasingly multicultural, or if being a minority helps reinforce Emiratis' sense of identity; many display their roots, wearing national dress such as hijabs and *abeyyas* with pride.

Dubai today is friends with the West; for progressive Arabs it's a shining example of a modern Arab city. But conservative branches of Islam are less than impressed by the city's tolerance of alcohol and pork, and its failure to curb prostitution. How Dubai manages to balance all these factors is just as important as keeping up its spectacular growth. Given the track record of Dubai's leaders over the past few decades, it would be unwise to bet against them.

'Dubai has grown into the most progressive and modern city in the Middle East'

BRENT WINBERNER



Teenagers rollerblading along the boardwalk, Bur Dubai

THE AUTHOR

Andrea Schulte-Peevers



Andrea has travelled the distance to the moon and back in her visits to over 60 countries, but she'll forever cherish the memory of first flying into Dubai. Seeing only the tops of Burj Khalifa and its neighbouring towers soaring above a billowing layer of cottony fog seemed to perfectly symbolise the mystery, surrealism and ambition of this mega city. When she's not gallivanting around the globe, Andrea divides her time living in Berlin and Los Angeles, where she graduated from UCLA. She's authored or contributed to more than 40 Lonely Planet titles and traces her passion for Arab countries back to the three months she spent in Tunisia in the 1980s. Being asked to update the *Dubai City Guide* was a special thrill because it allowed her to get a closer look at this complex destination that's tip-toeing so deftly between tradition and turbo-modernity. Andrea also recently overhauled the United Arab Emirates chapter of Lonely Planet's *Oman, UAE & Arabian Peninsula* guide.

LONELY PLANET AUTHORS

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ANDREA'S TOP DUBAI DAY

My perfect day starts with flicking through the newspaper over a leisurely breakfast in the tranquil walled garden of the Basta Art Cafe (p113) in the historic Bastakia Quarter. Afterwards, I pop into Majlis Gallery (p61) and XVA Gallery (p61) to check out the latest exhibits before making my way to the Creek via delightfully claustrophobic Hindi Lane (p66) and the breezy Bur Dubai Souq (p61). A quick *abra* (water taxi) ride later I'm in Deira, where I stock up on saffron in the Spice Souq (p51) and hopscotch around gaggles of tourists going ga-ga over sparkling baubles in the Gold Souq (p51). Time to take a break from the bustle and spend the hottest hours of the day with a luxuriant massage at the Amara Spa (p142) in the Park Hyatt, followed by a light lunch at Cafe Arabesque (p110). Dipping and nibbling from a plate of inventive mezza at my terrace table, I feel blissfully relaxed as the yachts and dhows plough up and down the Creek. Limbered up and fortified, I'm ready catch the Dubai Metro Red Line at City Centre and head to Dubai Mall (p72) in the shadow of the rocket-like Burj Khalifa. I say 'hi' to my favourite giant grouper at the Dubai Aquarium & Underwater Zoo (p72) before indulging in a healthy dose of retail therapy. When it's 'wine-o'clock', I cab it over to the Jumeirah Beach Hotel to meet friends for a glass of chilled Chardonnay at 360° (p130) with front-row views of the Burj al-Arab (p79). For dinner, I treat myself to a delicious meal at Eauzone (p121) before winding down the day languidly puffing away in the Sheesha Courtyard (p135).

GETTING STARTED

No matter whether you're a trendy urban nomad, a cocky jetsetter, a three-button suit or travelling with the tots, you should find all your needs and expectations met in Dubai. Tiny but turbo-charged, the city-state is a highly developed tourism destination that offers world-class shopping, lodging, eating, sports and relaxation beneath nearly year-round sunny skies. Crime is rare, almost everyone speaks English, tourists are unlikely to be hassled or ripped off, and most of them can obtain a visa on arrival. Room reservations are a good idea anytime except at the height of summer (June to early September) and especially around major holidays and festivals. Otherwise you can keep your advance planning to a minimum (but do have a look at the boxed text, p18).

It's important to realise that the United Arab Emirates is an Islamic country and behaviour that's tolerated in Western countries – such as kissing in public, drunkenness or swearing – may cause offence, or worse, get you into trouble with the law. While it boasts countless settings tailor-made for romance and plenty of good bars and pubs, Dubai might not be the perfect destination if you're planning a honeymoon or a stag weekend. And here's another caveat: Dubai's drug laws are extremely strict and even a microscopic speck of a controlled substance could see you arrested (see p190).

WHEN TO GO

The eye-catching room rates advertised for July and August come with a catch: the scorching heat (up to 48°C) and extreme humidity (as high as 95%) make being outside for longer than 10 minutes extremely uncomfortable. The best time to visit Dubai is between November and April, when the weather is pleasant and there's lots going on. Flick over to p186 for more information on climate. The month of Ramadan (see p189) is a fascinating time to visit if you're interested in Islam, but those planning to indulge themselves in Dubai's restaurants and bars might find the conservative laws imposed for the month too restrictive.

FESTIVALS & EVENTS

As part of their efforts to lure tourists to the city, Dubai authorities have encouraged the development of several major sporting and cultural events. All of these, with the exception of Dubai Summer Surprises (DSS), take place between October and March. For details of major sporting events, see p149. For information about religious holidays, see p188.

January

DUBAI SHOPPING FESTIVAL

www.mydsf.com

Reports of Russian millionaires chartering passenger jets so they can return from

the Dubai Shopping Festival (DSF) with planeloads of purchases are probably exaggerated, but the annual instalment of DSF certainly attracts plenty of tourists each year. Discounts can be as high as 70% and there's plenty of live music, kids' events, sporting activities and nightly fireworks over the Creek to supplement your spending spree. Also see boxed text, p95.

GLOBAL VILLAGE

www.globalvillage.ae

At the hugely popular Global Village you can take a trip around the world in a couple of hours. Running from late November to late February, it features three dozen or more nations (mostly from Asia) who introduce their cultures, customs, food and wares in beautifully decorated pavilions. This and a busy schedule of music, dance, fireworks and other performances draw around 4.5 million visitors every year. Also see boxed text, p95.

February

DUBAI INTERNATIONAL JAZZ FESTIVAL

www.dubaijazzfest.com

This increasingly popular event has doo-wopped in Dubai since 2003. Performances take place over nine days in the outdoor amphitheatre at Dubai Media City and

have featured such heavyweights as James Morrison, the James Taylor Quartet, John Legend and James Blunt.

March

ART DUBAI

www.artdubai.ae

The arrival of this ambitious international art fair in 2007 signalled that art is big business in the Gulf, and the growing number of galleries around town confirms the trend. Madinat Jumeirah (p79) provides a suitably glamorous setting for the artists, dealers and gallery owners to mingle in and show off their stuff.

BASTAKIYA ART FAIR

www.bastakiyaartfair.com

This six-day indie art fair comes courtesy of the tireless folks at XVA Gallery (p61) and runs parallel to Art Dubai in the atmospheric wind tower houses of the historic Bastakia Quarter. Great for keeping tabs on young, innovative up-and-comers.

SHARJAH INTERNATIONAL ART BIENNIAL

☎ 06-568 5050

Held every two years (next in 2011) in the neighbouring emirate of Sharjah, this is one of the most important art events in the Arab world. It has fostered the dialogue between artists, institutions and organisations since 1993 and exhibits works of around 80 artists from around the world from March to May.

AL-AIN CLASSICS FESTIVAL

www.aacf.ae

International top talent – from Zubin Mehta to the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra – perform concerts, opera and plays in the restored Al-Jahili fort in Al-Ain, about a 90-minute drive south of Dubai (see p173).

April

DUBAI FASHION WEEK

www.dfw.ae

For the latest local trends hot off the sewing machine, pay attention to the runway during this glam showcase for regional designers. Names to keep an eye on include the fashion house HSY, wedding gowns by Mariam Al Mazro and

the feminine dresses by Zaeem Jamal. The spring/summer collection is presented at a second event in October.

June, July & August

DUBAI SUMMER SURPRISES

www.mydsf.com

Perhaps the most surprising thing about DSS is that it manages to attract any visitors at all. It takes place, after all, at the sweaty height of the sweltering summer. But a combination of free kids' entertainment and big sales in shopping malls draws in plenty of tourists from other Gulf nations. Also see boxed text, p95.

October

GITEX

www.gitex.com

Find out what gadgets everyone wants for Christmas and snap up some bargains at this international consumer electronics fair held over five days in the Dubai International Convention and Exhibition Centre (DICEC).

SWIM THE BURJ

www.swimburjarab.com

Benefiting the non-profit organisation Médecins Sans Frontières (Doctors without Borders), this charity event draws hundreds of swimmers to complete the 1km circle around the iconic Burj al-Arab hotel. There's one competitive heat and two non-competitive heats for families and relay teams.

MIDDLE EAST INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL

MEIFF; www.meiff.com

Stars, starlets, directors, critics and cinephiles descend upon Abu Dhabi to meet, mingle and present the latest flicks from around the region in a warm-up to the Dubai International Film Festival.

November & December

DUBAI INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL

www.dubaifilmfest.com

This excellent non-competitive film festival has brought a touch of Hollywood glamour to Madinat Jumeirah since 2004. It's a great

place to catch international indie flicks as well as new releases from around the Arab world and the Indian subcontinent.

SHARJAH INTERNATIONAL BOOK FAIR

www.swbf.gov.ae

The neighbouring emirate of Sharjah stages one of the region's most significant book fairs. The 10-day annual event sees about 750 publishers showcasing books (in Arabic, English and other languages) from nearly 42 nations, drawing over 400,000 visitors. Readings, workshops and symposia supplement the exhibits.

UAE NATIONAL DAY

The birth of a nation in 1971 is celebrated across the country every year on 2 December with all sorts of events, from boat parades to fireworks, concerts to horse shows, traditional dances to military parades.

COSTS & MONEY

Dubai is not an inexpensive place to visit, but how much you end up spending very much depends on what kind of traveller you are and what experiences you wish to have. The daily tab for a stay in a midrange hotel, two sit-down meals, using taxis, and spending some money on going to bars and clubs should be somewhere between Dh700 to Dh1300 (per person, travelling as an adult couple). For mere survival, you'll need to budget around Dh200 per day, but this will have you staying in a youth hostel dorm, taking public transport rather than taxis, eating at budget restaurants and limiting your entertainment and alcohol intake.

There are also quite a few things that are free or practically free. It costs nothing to wander through the cacophonous Deira souqs or among the wind towers and courtyard houses of Bur Dubai. Dubai Museum and other historic sites are either free or cost just a few dirham admission. An *abra* (wooden water taxi) ride on the Creek can be had for Dh1. The spectacular dancing Dubai Fountain is free and so are a tour of Jumeirah Mosque, flamingo watching in the Ras al-Khor Wildlife Sanctuary and gallery hopping in Al-Quoz. There are long stretches of open sandy beaches and big parks for picnics and frolicking for the kids. Malls provide plenty of entertainment

HOW MUCH?

1L petrol Dh1.35

1L bottled water Dh1.50

Pint of draught beer Dh25

Dubai Metro ride Dh2 to Dh6.50

Taxi from Gold Souq to Burj al-Arab Dh70

Admission to Wild Wadi Waterpark Dh195

Evening desert safari Dh275

Shwarma Dh5

Set meal at budget Indian restaurant Dh15

Main course in top restaurant Dh120

beyond the shops, especially Dubai Mall, Mall of the Emirates and Ibn Battuta Mall.

And there are ways to stretch your budget even further. To save money when going out, it's worth picking up *The Entertainer*, a book containing hundreds of two-for-one meal vouchers. You'll also save a few dirhams by asking for local water rather than expensive imported bottles. Women can also take advantage of ladies' nights (usually on Tuesdays), when they get free drinks just for turning up.

Of course, if you're a high roller, Dubai has no shortage of luxury hotels, ultraposh restaurants and fancy bars to help you part with your money. Preferred pampering choices include a gourmet dinner at Verre by Gordon Ramsey, a night in a fantasy suite at the Burj al-Arab, a cordoned-off VIP booth at Sanctuary nightclub, being pummelled into a state of bliss at a fancy spa such as the Amara or the Talise Spa, or teeing off at the prestigious Emirates Golf Club.

INTERNET RESOURCES

Dubai City Guide (www.dubaicityguide.com) Decent information on happenings in town.

Dubai Kids (www.dubaikidz.biz) Good source for kiddie stuff around Dubai, plus tourist information.

Lonely Planet (www.lonelyplanet.com.au) For succinct summaries on travelling to Dubai. The Thorn Tree forum allows you to ask questions before you go and dispense advice when you get back.

UAE Government (www.government.ae) Official government site with lots of good information.

UAE Ministry of Information and Culture (www.uaainteract.com) Covers just about every aspect of life in the UAE.

ADVANCE PLANNING

Unless you're visiting during summer, it is essential you book accommodation at least a few weeks in advance, especially if you're keen on staying in a particular place. Dinner reservations are always a good idea, especially on Thursday and Friday nights as well as for Friday brunches. While one day's notice is enough at most restaurants, you should book as much as a week in advance at the most popular haunts.

If you're hoping to catch a major sporting event such as the final of the Dubai Tennis Championships, Desert Classic or Rugby Sevens, it's necessary to book tickets several weeks in advance as these sell out every year. [Time Out Tickets](#) (www.itp.net/tickets) and [Box Office Middle East](#) (www.boxofficeme.com) sell tickets for major events, including concerts.

Treatments at fancy spas such as the Amara at Park Hyatt Dubai should also be booked a couple of weeks in advance, especially on Friday and Saturday. Check the website for treatment menus; some also have a booking function.

Booking tee-off times at big clubs like the Dubai Creek Golf Club a few weeks before you get into town is also a good idea.

SUSTAINABLE DUBAI

Being environmentally responsible in Dubai can be a challenge. Hotel rooms and many offices don't have recycling bins for waste paper, newspapers routinely come wrapped in plastic for no apparent reason, it's impossible to live without air-conditioning for at least half the year, and efforts to reuse plastic bags in supermarkets are nearly always greeted by bemused stares. And unless you're travelling overland from Oman or Saudi Arabia, you'll be adding another shoe size to your annual carbon footprint just getting to and from Dubai. But there are a few things you can do while in the city to make your visit more sustainable.

Taxis may generally be the fastest and most comfortable way to get around, but since late 2009 riding the Dubai Metro, which is cheap, clean and fast, is definitely an alternative. Buses are another option, although while safe and well-lit, they're also quite slow and not always reliable. See [p182](#) for details of public transport.

Recycling bins are increasingly popping up in malls and bus and Metro stations, but there is no household recycling, and recycling centres are badly publicised and often poorly maintained. Some of the better ones can be found at the Ramada, Trade Centre Rd and Umm Suqeim branches of Spinneys, and at Emarat service stations.

When it comes to sightseeing, build your itinerary around more than the major sites and impacted hot spots. Exploring Bur Dubai or Deira on foot, jogging on the beach or picnicking in a park are all fun yet low-impact experiences.

The [Emirates Environmental Group](#) (www.eeg-uae.org) runs several campaigns every year to try to increase environmental awareness. These include desert and city clean-ups, and tree-planting campaigns. If you can't spare a day to pick up litter – you're on holiday after all – you'll help by doing the simple things: turning off the air-con when you go out, switching off lights during the day and resisting the temptation to linger extra long under that rainfall showerhead.

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