



*Dubai, on the Arabian Gulf, has reinvented itself as a centre of commerce and a top tourist destination. Mark Llewellyn visited for an update on progress.*

Slipping Champagne while settling into my oversized business-class seat aboard an Emirates Boeing 777 and trying to master the intricacies of the 600-plus channel entertainment system, I was impressed to hear over the PA that our cabin crew spoke English, Arabic, Mandarin, Korean, Spanish, Italian, Swedish and German. So many nationalities on one plane? But, as I was to discover once I arrived in Dubai, this was a fairly accurate representation of the cultural makeup of the Emirate itself.

Although predominantly Arabic and with a large number of residents from the Middle Continent – India, Pakistan and Bangladesh – Dubai's recent and spectacular growth has attracted ex-pats from every corner of the globe. In its bid to become one of the essential trading capitals of the world, Dubai has openly encouraged massive development and investment and now enjoys representation from virtually every major international corporation.

Dubai culture has deep Islamic roots and locals tend to be both hospitable and courteous. Some Islamic traditions have been relaxed enough to allow for a less complicated meeting of East and West. For example, you can now drink alcohol in hotels – one month after

my visit, Dubai hosted its first-ever beer festival – and even the dress code has been relaxed. About the only exception is during the holy month of Ramadan when Muslims commemorate the revelation of the Holy Koran. During Ramadan visitors are required to refrain from eating, drinking and smoking in public places between dawn and dusk. The timing varies from year to year, so if this bothers you, check with your travel agent to confirm when it occurs.

Originally a small fishing settlement, Dubai was taken over in the mid 1800s by the Bani Yas tribe. The tribe's leaders, the Maktoum family (who still rule the Emirate), encouraged traders from India and Persia to set up shop and it quickly became a major trading post for the region. Oil was discovered in 1966 and the income from this enabled the then Ruler, the late HH Sheikh Rashid bin Saeed Al Maktoum, to develop his vision of a modern city with a proper social and economic infrastructure. He realised that the oil would run out sooner or later and determined that Dubai's future should rest with commerce, business and tourism. And his vision appears to have been sound, as today just 15 percent of Dubai's income comes from oil.

Although Dubai the Emirate is quite tiny, at 3,900 sq km,

Opposite page:  
Construction along the busy Sheikh Zayed Highway.

Above: Boats on Dubai Creek





Madinat Jumeirah is styled to resemble an ancient Arabian citadel.

much of it is taken up by desert and even mountains. Dubai the city seems intent on gobbling up desert as fast as it can in its quest to become the city of the future. In fact it's the incredible sight of such massive construction that many visitors will remember most. Seemingly endless building projects along the short coastline stretch from one end of Dubai to the other. Perhaps the most striking example is Dubai Marina, where a new twisting, turning waterway has been dug out and allowed to fill with water. New roads wind around the site and, to either side, scores of new skyscrapers are going up, growing out of the sandy landscape like giant concrete cacti. This is a development so vast that your mind simply can't grasp what your eyes are telling you. And this is but one of many such developments, each of which is on a mind-boggling scale.

And imagine the vision behind the three Palms developments. Not enough sandy coastline for all the new hotels? Not a problem. Simply build some more coast. Many people would struggle to come to terms with the sheer audacity of this, but in truth it really works. Between them all, the Palms add more than 120km of beaches – up from around 15km. They are so large, in fact, that they can be seen from space. And then there's The World, a collection of man-made islands being constructed 20km off the coast and designed to

look exactly like, well, a map of the world. Each island is being developed by (and for) the mega-wealthy and no doubt the homes and resorts there will eclipse any that this world currently has to offer.

Despite these radical transformations, old Dubai still offers a fascinating glimpse of its trading past. At Deira, visitors can explore a labyrinth of alleys, wind towers (ingenious natural air-conditioners), mosques and shops which sell everything from electronics to textiles, clothing and antiques. The souks, or markets, are most definitely worth a visit. The spice souk will reward you with bright colours and exotic scents, while the Gold Souk is the site of some very serious purchases. Dubai operates a duty-free policy and gold is sold by weight. If you aren't of a mind to buy, though, it's still a great place to see sparkling gold jewellery hanging in shop windows – chains, rings, earrings and bracelets – much of it of ornate Indian and Arabian design.

If, however, it's the flashier side of life that attracts you, then Dubai has plenty on offer. Take a taxi to the Mall of the Emirates, reputed to be the biggest indoor shopping centre outside the U.S.A. with more than 400 shops and boutiques representing probably every major fashion and retail chain in the world. Remember, too, it's all duty-free, so there are some very good buys to be

found. The Mall of the Emirates is also where you'll find an indoor ski field. Yup, you heard right, 40°C outside and a Swiss-style mountain resort inside complete with cute chalets, pine trees, snow to ski on and chair lifts to whisk you to the top.

And Dubai is not just a paradise for shoppers. There are several world-class championship golf courses to play at as well, there is Wild Wadi, an aquatic water park for thrill-seekers... and so it goes on. So much to do, and so little time. For me, though, it seemed silly not to explore the desert on the doorstep. Alpha Tours runs daily late-afternoon trips into the desert from Dubai. A fleet of four-wheel-drives Toyotas takes tourists out of town along superb sealed roads for about 80km before turning off into the sand dunes. There we were treated to superb driving skills as our drivers wrestled the Land Cruisers over monstrous dunes at impossible speeds dune-bashing, which is at once slightly terrifying and immensely good fun.

As we climbed out of the 'Cruisers after the drive, I was awed by the immense beauty of the desert, unmarked apart from wind ripples and glowing orange in the late-afternoon sun. What a perfect setting, I decided, as we made our way to the ubiquitous 'Bedouin camp' to be fed and watered and then entertained by a belly dancer. Touristy it may be, but the atmosphere of the desert and the many happy faces of my tour companions couldn't be denied. That it was cooler than the city and noticeably less humid increased my pleasure still further as night closed in.

When it comes to choosing accommodation in Dubai you are spoiled for choice. Every major hotel chain is here, each endeavouring to provide bigger and smarter accommodation than the competition. Taking it from the top, the sail-shaped Burj al Arab is still the world's only seven-star hotel and offers breathtaking levels of opulence and luxury. And so it should, with rates for a suite starting at US\$2000 a night. It is a spectacular looking building though, and even if you won't be staying it's worth a look.

Slightly more budget-friendly is the nearby One and Only Royal Mirage, which has everything the luxury traveller could wish for under one roof, while further along the road, Madinat Jumeirah is a collection of hotels, spas, restaurants, bars and shopping malls contained within a single massive complex linked together by Venetian-style waterways.

I stayed at the Grand Hyatt, a huge hotel with 674 spacious and luxurious rooms with views over Dubai Creek and the city skyline. Beyond its spectacular foyer, there are no less than 14 bars and restaurants. Also within the hotel's 15 hectares of landscaped grounds is the Grand Spa, a tennis centre, a 450-metre jogging track and the Kidz Club for children under 12. Here too is the most beautiful outdoor pool complex with a pool bar.

Just across the Creek, more or less opposite the Grand



Deira Gold Souk



Dune-bashing in the desert



Belly dancer, Bedouin camp.



The Grand Hyatt Dubai is set within 15 hectares of beautifully landscaped grounds.



The Lounge at the Park Hyatt

Hyatt, is the much more intimate Park Hyatt, a luxury waterside retreat right next door to the Dubai Creek Golf and Yacht Club. The 225 guest rooms and suites are beautifully decorated in soft, relaxing tones. The hotel's proximity to the water and the yacht club ensures a high level of tranquillity, despite being close to the heart of the city.

Dubai, then, is an easy place to get along with. The climate is subtropical, although temperatures can get uncomfortably hot from May to October. Arabic is the main language, but English is widely spoken, and it is one of the most service-oriented destinations I have ever visited. Not only is it an admirable stopover for travellers on their way to England, Europe or Africa, it is also a first-class holiday resort.

Personally I can't wait to return, although I have a suspicion that, with the unrelenting pace of development, I won't even recognise the place. 📍

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