

A city extravagantly catching the world's eye

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changes that have taken place in Dubai over the last 12 years are incredible," she says, though this is her first visit. "It's hard to imagine that not so long ago this area was just desert and water." The blend of ancient and modern architecture and traditional Arab culture fascinate her, but the city's endless traffic congestion is another matter. "I thought Boston was bad," Ceukar says. "Still, Dubai is very clean and safe. And the people are wonderful."

In a race to outshine the six neighboring sheikhdoms that,

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with Dubai, form the United Arab Emirates, Dubai's ruling Al Maktoum family, fueled by oil money, has accelerated its efforts to transform this former fishing village into the most modern, cosmopolitan city in the Middle East. Leading architects and deep-pocketed developers have erected ornate skyscrapers and hotels — notably, the sail-shaped, seven-star Burj Al Arab — that seem to defy gravity and design principles.

Internationally renowned artists have created colossal works, such as glass artist Dale Chihuly's 30-foot-high sea-life tower, which dominates the lobby of the sprawling hotel Atlantis, The Palm. On Dubai Lake at the base of the Burj Khalifa, lighting technicians have created dancing fountains with a sound-and-light show that surpasses the spectacle at Bellagio in Las Vegas. International television crews are everywhere, dogging the footsteps of movie stars and sports celebrities here to see the sights.

For visitors, there is a price for all this extravagance. Afternoon tea at the Burj Al Arab, for instance, is \$80 per person, by reservation only. Add a glass of champagne with hors d'oeuvres and the tab hits \$100. Meals at fancy restaurants will put another sizable dent in a diner's wallet, with lunch for two \$30 to \$100, for dinner \$100 to \$250.

An overnight stay in a luxury hotel can top hundreds of dollars a night. To enjoy the Gulf's golden sand and calm waters, vacationers will want to book a room or suite at a seaside hotel, such as the Dubai Marine Beach Resort (\$178-\$329), the Sheraton Jumeirah Beach Resort (\$288-\$553), or the Hilton Dubai Jumeirah (\$199-\$1,034). Those who prefer to be within walking

distance of Dubai Mall and the Burj Khalifa can stay at the Arabian-style Al Manzil (\$162-\$173) or the elegant The Palace-The Old Town (\$136-\$272).

Though accommodations are pricey, seeing the sights can be a bargain. The most economical way is atop the Big Bus. Double-decker buses with recorded commentaries circulate on two routes, allowing passengers to hop on and off at attractions. The newly opened Dubai Metro, an elevated light-rail line, offers a speedy, low-cost option for shuttling from one end of the city to the other. Taxis, driven mostly by Pakistanis, are widely available and good for short jaunts.

After camel racing and smoking "shishas," or traditional tobacco water pipes, power shopping for gold jewelry and imported luxury goods seems to be the chief pastime in the city, appropriately dubbed "Do Buy" by pundits. Dubai's early history as a crossroads for spice caravans and pearl trading established its reputation as a world bazaar. Marks & Spencer, Carrera & Carrera, Dior, Bulgari, Samsung, and other international retailers offer European fashions, high-priced baubles, and cutting-edge electronics at Dubai Mall and Mall of the Emirates. Art and antiques collectors will find Iranian carpets, Moroccan jewelry, and Yemeni silver-tooled swords at the Khan Murjan Arabian souk at the Wafi Mall. Tourist attractions like Ski Dubai, the world's largest indoor snow resort inside Mall of the Emirates, and Dubai Mall's ice rink and walk-through aquarium tunnel, make mall shopping a fun-filled experience.

To capture the authentic flavor of old Dubai, visitors will want to explore the ancient souks along Dubai Creek, which separates the historic settlements of Bur Dubai and Deira. A stop at the Dubai Museum inside the massive 1787 Al Fahidi Fort on the Bur Dubai side helps put the city's history, culture, and modern development in perspective.

Civilization started here well before the Egyptian pyramids were built. Pottery shards unearthed in the Hatta tombs date to 3,000 BC. For millennia nomadic Bedouin tribes roamed the desert, living in tents and raising livestock. In 1833, tribesmen led by Maktoum Bin Butti put down roots along Dubai Creek and began exporting pearls, shells, and dried fish. By the 1930s, the local population numbered around 20,000.

Sheik Rashid Bin Saeed Al Maktoum, who ruled from 1958-



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Khan Murjan Arabian souk at the Wafi Mall is symbolic both of Dubai's modernity and ancient Arabian tradition. Souks historically were markets outside the city on caravan routes.

90, orchestrated Dubai's emergence as an important trade center. The discovery of oil in the 1960s fueled massive growth, and, by the end of the decade, most of the infrastructure for the modern city was in place. Dubai has been hard hit recently by the global economic downturn, which has left construction cranes idle and buildings unfinished.

From the Dubai Museum, it is not far to the Grand Mosque, where chanted prayers echo from loudspeakers day and night. Behind the mosque, a narrow walkway leads down to the bustling textile souk. "What color do you want? This one is very nice," shout Indian merchants, selling bright sequined dresses and T-shirts, as well as traditional "kandouras," the long white robes worn by Emirati men.

Steps away, the boat landing teems with passengers waiting to board small wooden "abras" that will ferry them across to the spice and gold souks in Deira. The five-minute ride, for one "dirham" (less than 30 cents), offers a fascinating juxtaposition of East and West. Battered wooden "dhows" transporting goods across the gulf from Iran bob on the water



GABRIELA MAJ/BLOOMBERG

The Burj Khalifa is a half-mile high, has 162 stories, and is visible from 60 miles away.

in the shadow of gleaming steel-and-glass high-rises.

Once across, passengers scramble out as the abra thumps against the dock and follow Old Baladiya Road to the souks. In the oriental souk, Iranian shopkeepers entice passersby with large sacks of exotic spices that fill the air with aromas of frank-

incense, ginger, and curry. Several blocks away, an inscription on a high wooden portico proclaims "Dubai City of Gold." Here shop windows lining the wood-roofed gold souk dazzle the eye with rows of 22-carat bangles, full-length arm cuffs, and necklaces resembling miniature chandeliers.

Prices in the souks typically start high, so shrewd bargaining skills are essential. "I make a special rate for you, if you buy today," promises Rupesh, a clerk at Sona Jewellers, displaying a selection of gold bracelets at an inflated asking price of \$137 per gram.

Warm, sultry nights are part of Dubai's allure, and there is no better way to enjoy an evening than to take a dinner cruise along the creek on a luxury dhow. Smiling waiters greet passengers as they mount the gangway of Rikks Floating Restaurant and escort them to candlelit, red linen-covered tables in the boat's polished wood interior. In the bow, the chef has set out a sumptuous buffet dinner featuring such Indian and Middle Eastern dishes as lentil soup, lamb curry, and hummus with flat bread.

After eating, guests ascend to the open-air top deck to view the

If you go . . .

Where to stay

Al Manzil Hotel
Burj Dubai Boulevard
The Old Town
011-971-4-428-6888
Boutique hotel with attentive service, near to Dubai Mall, \$162-\$173.

Atlantis, The Palm

Jumeirah
011-971-4-426-1000
www.atlantisthepalm.com
Grandeur coupled with an indoor sealife marina, panoramic seascape views, water park, and 17 restaurants, bars, and lounges. Deluxe doubles from about \$849.

Where to eat

Margaux

Souk Al Bahar, The Old Town
011-971-4-439-7555
The bistro's premier tables overlook Dubai's dancing fountains, about \$32-\$120.

What to do

Burj Khalifa

The Old Town
011-971-4-888-8124
www.burjkhalifa.ae
The Burj's At The Top ticket office and entrance are located on the ground level of Dubai Mall on Sheikh Zayed Road. Plan to purchase tickets several days in advance. Adults \$28, ages 4-12 \$21, under 3 free.

Dubai Museum

Al Fahidi Fort, Al Fahidi Street
011-971-4-226-0286
Tour the watchtower, then descend into the underground museum where exhibits depict the evolution of Dubai. Adults less than \$1.

Dhow Dinner Cruises

Dinner cruises as well as other excursions, such as desert safaris, city tours, and fishing trips, which can be booked through a hotel concierge desk or directly with the company.

Planet Tours & Safaris

011-971-4-347-3746
www.planettours.travel

city lights. In the distance, the slender form of the Burj Khalifa is barely visible. Up and down the creek, the procession of gaily lit dhow casts a kaleidoscope of colors on the rippling water, a spectacle that rivals the glitz of new Dubai.

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Imagining centuries of traverse and trade in the desert

► **CARAVAN**
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drive sideways on the dune until the car rolls over."

Desert safaris are a big draw for visitors. Dubai-based tour operators offer all-day and sun-downer safaris as well as Arabian-style overnight stays. Most excursions include dune sports, an outdoor barbecue, and traditional entertainment.

Earlier that afternoon, Marwan had picked us up from our hotel in Fujairah, a lesser-known emirate between the Gulf of Oman on the east and the rugged Hajar Mountains on the west. He headed south along the Corniche Road and then west toward the desert, which is located in the emirate of Dubai, an hour's drive south from Dubai city.

We follow the old caravan route through the barren, saw-toothed mountains and wend our way along the ancient "wadis," cavernous dried river val-

leys. As the terrain flattens, abandoned stone houses, once home to nomadic herders, and grazing wild goats dot the landscape.

After an hour and a half, we reach the Margham dunes, which stretch far into the distance. Along the road, racing camels stroll languidly in their large pens on a sheik's camel farm. "One champion camel can cost as much as 10 Ferraris," Marwan says. He stops briefly near the village of Margham to let some air out of the tires before entering the gate of Dubai Desert Conservation Reserve, the UAE's first national park.

The reserve, stretching for 60 miles across shifting sands, was established to protect the fragile desert ecosystem from Dubai's encroaching development and to preserve the Arabian way of life. Tour operators are allowed to use only one of four zones for safaris and dune camps. Wildlife roams freely around the entire tract of



CLAUDIA CAPOS FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

Desert safaris are one of the Emirates' attractions. Camel racing is a big sport, but the camels ridden by tourists are more like the ancient pack animals than their speedy descendants.

desert, and we quickly spot a gazelle resting under an umbrella-shaped acacia tree.

Marwan joins the caravan of Tahoes, and the dune-bashing

begins with a rush. Just before sunset, we park and climb to the top of the nearest mound to watch the sunlight slip away. A chill breeze kicks up stinging

showers of sand. The sun, now a golden orb, sinks out of sight, leaving the desert in solitude.

A camel caravan is waiting for us when we arrive at Al Sahara, a

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Bedouin-style open-air camp. "Lean back," a camel driver shouts as Sandy nearly sends us catapulting over his head when he straightens out his long back legs to rise. Despite the rocky start, Sandy manages to give us a pleasant, sauntering ride around the dunes, and even poses with his driver for a photo afterward.

Inside the camp, guests are seated at low tables on plump, striped pillows and colorful Persian carpets. The aroma of barbecued lamb, curried rice, and hummus mingles with the night air. Music heralds the arrival of a grating belly dancer who whirls around a makeshift stage in arcs of blue satin and sequins.

The bright lights of the camp are extinguished for a few magical moments, allowing everyone to bask in the moonlight. The only sound is the pulsing gurgle of the water pipes, echoing a timeless rhythm of desert life.

CLAUDIA CAPOS

Currents

Latin flavors make a merry mix of gastronomy, culture

Celebrate all things Latin at the inaugural Gourmet Latino Festival June 4-12 in New York. This event features more than 40 world-class chefs, including new Iron Chef Jose Garces, famed wine specialist Steve Olson, mixologists, taster-masters, and authors. It will showcase the regional cuisines, drinks, gourmet coffees, and cultural traditions of Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, Mexico, and Peru, among others. Highlights include grand tasting events, hands-on seminars, and Carnival celebrations. The event takes place in Manhattan's Astor Center. Tickets start at

\$50 per person for individual seminars and \$85 for grand tastings. 917-968-1459, www.gourmetlatinofestival.com

Walk in Rose Kennedy's footsteps

The Rose Fitzgerald Kennedy Greenway Conservancy hosts new guided walking tours this summer that explore Kennedy's former neighborhood in the North End. With a guide from the Boston Women's Heritage Trail Foundation, you'll see the site where the Kennedy clan matriarch lived, visit her first school, and stop at the church where her family worshiped. Another new walking

tour, led by Boston By Foot, takes you around the greenway, where you will learn about the history, horticulture, and future of this mile-long civic parkland. Walking tours run monthly through September, rain or shine. The Kennedy tour is free; greenway tours cost \$10 per person. 617-292-0020, www.rosekennedygreenway.org

Explore Scotland like a champ

Let Indianapolis 500 champion Dario Franchitti's driving itineraries guide you around his native Scotland. Choose from three routes, all created by Franchitti,

that will take you from the west's dramatic coastline to the northern lochs; around southern Scotland, where you'll explore historic Glasgow and centuries-old castles; or from the Highlands region and the rolling hills of Inverness to Edinburgh, Franchitti's hometown. The four-to-eight-day tours take you to some of the race car driver's favorite off-the-beaten-path spots. Arnold Clark Car & Van Rental offers a special rate of \$30 per day for visitors driving these routes. 011-44-845-225-5121, www.cometoscotland.com

KARI BODNARCHUK



GOURMET LATINO FESTIVAL

Masks are optional at the Gourmet Latino Festival's Carnival galas.