

Travel Article

Flying into Dubai's smart, high-tech airport with its extremely famous duty free where Porsches and Ferraris are won by purchasing expensive raffle tickets. Dubai International Airport is amongst the world's top fifty international airports. It is very hard to imagine that a metropolitan city like Dubai with its modern towers and extravagant hotels grew from a few specks of dust, at the edge of a Creek in the Persian Gulf. This is the heart of Arabia. The past of Dubai is very hard to relive but a visit to Dubai Museum is the only place where you can get a good idea of how old Dubai was. Some of the past may just be discernible in the gold and spice *souks* (traditional markets) of Deira.

Dubai is a city where east and west, old and new join together this can be seen just from the traditional markets to the lavish shopping malls. The souks are redolent with cloves, cardamom, cinnamon, incense, dried fruit and nuts from as far away as East Africa and India. The gold souk entails legwork through narrow and winding alleys where the shops are lined up one after the other, with glittering windows, saturated with jewellery and with the lowest prices in the world. It is definitely a rewarding experience. Although when shopping in Dubai you can also do it in the comfort of shopping malls, which are, often being replaced by malls that are more luxurious a few include, "Deira City Centre" and "BurJuman Centre". Amongst Dubai's buildings, are the Emirates Towers. Its silhouettes rise out of the heat and haze. The taller of the two towers is the tallest in the Middle East and their combined height is the third tallest in the world. The smaller of the towers is a fifty-four storey hotel designed for businessmen and it just so happens it is in the heart of the financial district. It just doesn't end there, The Burj-Al Arab or (Arabian Tower) was built on a man-made island in a sail boat shape it is the world's tallest stand-alone hotel at three hundred twenty metres. It's also the world's first seven star hotel. Real Arabian luxury. The Jumeira Beach Hotel is just next door and in the shape of a "breaking wave." Although not a record breaker, it is still one of the most luxurious hotels in the world. A not so common building that people do not bother to see is the Emirates Training Centre and is built as the front half of an aircraft and rumor has it that the CEO has his office in the cockpit!

When roaming on the pavements and roads of Dubai you will pass one of the several police cars. In fact being a policeman in this city is very exciting unlike other places, since half of them drive Mercedes cars and expensive Four Wheel Drive vehicles. Who wouldn't want to be in police force? Even at two o'clock in the morning, people in Satwa are driving luxury and sport cars as if they are parading their wealth. Dubai is the Gulf's Hong Kong mixed with Los Angeles, many cars, traffic and many see Dubai as the hub of Arabia.

Naturally, in a place with a hot and harsh climate, you would think that there would be some shortages of water. I am afraid you are completely wrong! Dubai has absolutely no problem and people seem to take an advantage that there is a lot of water available. In fact you can find the world's most advanced water park in Dubai, its designed over twelve acres and rides that connect for one thousand seven hundred metres.

The Dubai Creek is the first thing that has to be seen as the Creek offers a picturesque glimpse of the trading heritage of Dubai. The Creek can be crossed by *abra* (water taxi) which is a wooden boat that seats about twenty people. An interesting fact to note is that one litre of petrol is cheaper than a litre of water, which costs double the value of petrol. Work in Dubai starts in the early hours of dawn, where newspaper sellers get prepared to start issuing tomorrow's newspaper today. In the morning hours of seven, you will see a crowd of expat parents trying to crusade through the highway trying to drop their children to school.

The afternoon hours are very much quiet when the blazing heat gets even fiercer. The evenings are where everything begins, neon lights and billboards are in full swing. Restaurants are bustling with customers; the souks are filled with dazzled tourists and residents who flock to buy the goods on offer. Traffic is a major problem in Dubai because almost everyone owns a car if not two or three! Cars are cheaper compared to Europe or Asia, infact there is only four percent duty imposed on motor vehicles. For people who want to swim or just enjoy the scenic views there is the Corniche near the Hyatt Regency and opposite the Dubai Gold Souk. Another option includes the Jumeira Beach, even at the early stretches of dawn you can see some enthusiast swimming in the dark and playing football on the beach without the presence of lifeguards. Jumeira Beach Park with its azure seas, palm trees and a long, shady stretch of beach, I personally think that this is Dubai's best used park and of course most popular.

The transport in Dubai is advanced, there are four main companies offering taxi services, the camel coloured Dubai Transport and Metro Taxi's, silver national taxis and Cars Taxi with their blue and red stripes. The U.A.E. has its own national carrier which is Emirates, and like Dubai it has grown very rapidly in the past fourteen years to be voted the best airline for the years 2000 and 2001. Emirates now offer services to over forty-seven destinations.

As you are probably been thinking how did Dubai turn into a rich and prosperous city in just fifty years whilst others take around two hundred! The main reason for this rapid development is due to the discovery of oil but nowadays this is totally opposite. According to the GDP in 1998, forty-eight billion Dirhams (which is the local currency) was from Dubai and only twenty percent of that was from oil.

Arabic cuisine is originally a blend of Moroccan, Tunisian, Iranian, Egyptian and Lebanese. Modern Arabic food in Dubai usually means Lebanese. A must-try item is the "shawarma," throughout the city there are dozens of small cafeteria's and restaurants on the pavements serving the delicacy. Shawarma's are basically Arabic sandwiches filled with pieces of lamb and chicken carved from a rotating spit and added vegetables and "radioactive" pickles. At around three Dirhams, it is inexpensive and well worth a try.

Dubai gained its independence from Britain in 1971 on December 2nd and later the discovery of oil helped and gave a rapid boost in development to Dubai. Abu Dhabi, which is the capital of the U.A.E., has around ten percent of the world's known oil resource.

I have heard that during the Dubai Shopping Festival (or DSF) which is an annual event that takes place in the month of March. It gets so crowded that it takes almost 2 hours to get to Al Riqqa Street from Bur Dubai via the Al Maktoum Bridge. The DSF is far more than a shopping extravaganza, there is a carnival atmosphere including fireworks over Dubai Creek, the Global Village and shows and funfairs. This attracts people from far away as Europe, the Asian Sub-Continent and other Arab countries because of its attractive rates on consumer goods, hotels and airline flights. This year

a new project was announced, it was to make a large mall in the DSF mood and “carnival” atmosphere running for the full year, round the clock. It is expected to open by 2003.

Although the official religion in Dubai is Islam, the U.A.E. is the most tolerant country in the GCC and the practice of religion is welcome but not publicly. Dubai’s plan is to build enough mosques, which residents do not have to walk more than 500 metres! Mostly all U.A.E. nationals still choose to wear the traditional dress. The men wear a “khandura” which is a white full-length shirt-dress that is worn with a white or red checkered headdress or “gutra” and secured with a black cord called “agal”. The women wear a black long, loose robe called “abaya” it is often of flowing fabric and can be open from the front. Some women wear a thin black veil that hides their face and sometimes gloves.

The “Shisha” pipe or water pipe is a popular pastime in the Middle East, it is usually available at local cafés while chatting with friends. Shisha pipes come in a variety of aromatic flavours including apple and strawberry. The smoke is “smoothed” with water creating a relaxing effect. This is a kind of thing that can be experienced only in Dubai.

The Bastikya area contains the oldest heritage sites in Dubai, here you can view the earliest form of air-conditioning which is effectively put into practice in the malls and cinemas. Windtowers or “barajeels” have distinctive structures at the top of buildings, which catches the slightest breeze and cools down rooms and the courtyards.

If you turn on your television in the evening and Jumiera Mosque will be one of the mosques shown during the call to prayer. I think this is probably the best mosque in Dubai and it looks better when it’s lit up.

A must-try experience is the desert safari tour; these tours come in one, two or even a week of camping in the desert. Tours often include an afternoon drive through the desert and dunes with a Toyota Landcruiser and the usual culminates in an Arabian dinner. There is live entertainment including belly dancing and sandboarding. Tents are available for camping overnight. There are other options including cruises along the Creek or city tours where you get an overview of the souks, mosques, windtowers and the thriving commercial areas.

Dubai is slow paced compared to places like New York or London. People generally wake up early, having a long afternoon fiesta and late dinners. Attitude to time is also very unique as opposed to the saying “time is money.”

The weather in winter mornings can be very foggy although the sun invariably burns the clouds away after someone has carelessly crashed by mid-morning. The most pleasant time to visit is in the cooler winter months since the summer humidity can be a killer. Usually sunny weather and blue skies are there almost yearlong. Rain only occurs in the winter months and the occasional sandstorm also known as “shamal,” blinding the visibility.

There are many activities available in Dubai, ranging from jet skiing in the Creek or golfing at the Emirates Golf Club. Especially during DSF there are many sporting events including the Dubai World Cup (horse racing), Power boat racing, Dubai Desert Classics Tournament with players like Tiger Woods, there’s no excuse for not being active! Also a project is being developed to make two “palm islands” off Jebel Ali, so it would be able to be seen from space. Mostly more Five-Star Hotels, Resorts, Spa’s and new housing complexes will open.

The only way to experience the life of Arabia before development is a thorough visit to Dubai Museum that is the oldest building in the U.A.E. The museum itself was

setup in 1971 and renovated in 1995 to add more displays and exhibits. There are holograms and life-like exhibits and even four thousand-year-old artefacts from excavations including, pottery and hunting equipment, this is truly the best way to capture the old essence of Dubai!