

INTRODUCING DUBAI



Reaching for the sky – the city skyline reflects the mix of traditional Arabian and modern architecture (p39)

The world has never seen a larger construction site. Dubai stretches upwards and outwards – even underwater – paving the desert, colonising the ocean and piercing the clouds.

Aboard approaching airliners, passengers wrestle against fastened seatbelts for an aerial view: traditional wind-towers yield to space-age skyscrapers mushrooming across the desert beside a coastline dominated by bizarre palm-shaped archipelagos that look like something from another planet.

For Dubai's rulers, whose remarkable vision has turned a small town into a major metropolis within a mere half century, there's little concern for earthly matters – no elections, no opinion polls, no accountability – just billions of dollars to spend on making Project Dubai like nowhere else on earth. It's a game of *SimCity* that never ends, a hybrid of *1001 Arabian Nights* and *Futurama*, an anything-goes boomtown where even the sky is no longer the limit.

This unflinching ambition and can-do spirit certainly has its disciples. But Dubai's numerous successes are undermined by protests on building sites, where workers toil in the sun for Dh25 a day – the cost of a pint of beer. The men putting the roof on the Burj Dubai, the tallest manmade structure in history, are being trampled by the gold rush.

But Dubai is not all about manmade islands, multimillionaires and mega projects. Its culture is rooted in Islam and generations of Bedouin heritage, and 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 around 5% 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 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 *abayas* 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 its tolerance of alcohol and pork and 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.

'It's...an anything-goes boomtown where even the sky is no longer the limit'



Family and friends gather at Creekside Park in the late afternoon (p67)

GETTING STARTED

Having invested vast amounts of money into the development of its tourism sector, Dubai is becoming increasingly easy for visitors to negotiate. Crime is rare, almost everyone speaks English and tourists are unlikely to be hassled or ripped off.

While Dubai is a highly developed destination, 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.

Glitzy big-name hotels open in the emirate every few months, and such intense competition in the five-star sector can result in very attractive room rates, especially in summer. Midrange and budget travellers, however, will struggle to find comfortable accommodation for under Dh400 per night. It's always advisable to book beds before you travel, particularly if you are visiting during a major festival or exhibition.

This may sound obvious, but don't enter Dubai carrying any illegal substances. Dubai's drug laws are extremely strict and even a microscopic speck of a controlled substance could see you arrested (see p186).

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 high humidity makes 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. The month of Ramadan 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

As part of its effort to lure tourists to the city, the Dubai authorities have encouraged the development of several major sporting and cultural events. All of these, with the exception of Dubai Summer Surprises, take place between October and March.

January

DUBAI MARATHON

www.dubaimarathon.org

Equipped with a prize fund of a million dollars, the Dubai Marathon attracts the biggest names in long-distance running. For the opportunity to compete with them over 26 miles, you have to register by the

end of the previous year. Less energetic types can enter a 10km run or a 4km 'fun run'.

DUBAI SHOPPING FESTIVAL

www.mydsf.com

Reports of Russian millionaires chartering passenger jets so they can return from the Dubai Shopping Festival with planeloads of purchases are probably exaggerated, but the annual instalment of DSF certainly attracts millions of tourists each year. Don't expect to find stupendous bargains in the malls; the sale prices are rarely spectacular. Do expect to find plenty of live music, kids' events, sporting activities, nightly fireworks over the Creek, and the hugely popular Global Village, which runs for three months from mid-December.

February

DUBAI INTERNATIONAL JAZZ FESTIVAL

www.dubaijazzfest.com

Held in the week following the Shopping Festival, this increasingly popular event is staged at Dubai Media City over three nights. While the mainstream is well catered for, jazz purists may sneer at the choice of performers, with recent headliners including Toto, ELO, Robin Gibb of the Bee Gees, and Roger Hodgson of Supertramp.

DUBAI DESERT CLASSICwww.dubaidesertclassic.com

Until November 2009, when the biggest names on the greens will compete for a US\$10-million prize purse at the first Dubai World Championship, the Dubai Desert Classic remains the emirate's leading golf event. It takes place on the first weekend of February at the immaculate Emirates Golf Club, and has earned a reputation for delivering high drama on the last day of competition.

DUBAI TENNIS CHAMPIONSHIPSwww.dubaitennischampionships.com

Held over two weeks in February and March, the championships consist of a Women's Tennis Association (WTA) event followed by an Association of Tennis Professionals (ATP) event. It's a great opportunity to see some of the best players in the world in a relatively small stadium. Ticket prices – especially for the earlier rounds – offer great value for money.

March**DUBAI DESERT ROCK**www.desertrockfestival.com

Dubai's surprisingly large contingent of Goths can be spotted nervously adjusting to sunlight in the mosh-pits of this annual live rock music event. In recent years, headliners of the two-day festival have included Iron Maiden, Robert Plant, Megadeth and Muse.

ART DUBAIwww.artdubai.ae

The arrival of this ambitious international art fair in 2007 confirmed that art is big business in the Gulf, despite a lack of major galleries. The Madinat Jumeirah provides a suitably glamorous setting for the artists, dealers and gallery owners to mingle in and show off their stuff.

DUBAI WORLD CUPwww.dubaiworldcup.com

The Dubai International Racing Carnival, running from February through to the end of March, culminates in the Dubai World Cup, the world's richest horse race and the city's biggest social event. While there's no betting, many of Dubai's society women take a punt in wearing some of the silliest hats this side of the Melbourne Cup. Godolphin, the

stable owned by Dubai's royal family, tends to dominate proceedings on the racetrack.

June, July & August**DUBAI SUMMER SURPRISES**www.mysdf.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, sales in shopping malls, and Mod-hesh, a springy yellow mascot, draws in plenty of tourists from other Gulf nations.

October**UAE DESERT CHALLENGE**www.uaedesertchallenge.com

This desert rally, the final race of the FIA Cross-Country Rally World Cup, starts in Abu Dhabi and finishes in Dubai. It's held over five days, takes in some challenging terrain, and attracts car, truck and motorbike riders.

DESERT RHYTHM FESTIVALwww.desertrhythmfestival.com

Following the success of the second instalment of Desert Rhythm in 2007, at which Kanye West, Mika, Joss Stone and Madness made their UAE debuts, it seems likely that this two-day music festival will go from strength to strength in the coming years.

November**DUBAI RUGBY SEVENS**www.dubairugby7s.com

Part of the IRB World Sevens Series, the Dubai Rugby Sevens features 16 international squads, a huge number of amateur teams and live entertainment over three days. While England and Australia receive plenty of support from the mainly expatriate crowd, the Arabian Gulf team, consisting of players from Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, Saudi, Oman and the UAE, get the biggest cheers of the day.

December**DUBAI INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL**www.dubaifilmfest.com

Independent and art-house cinema is thin on the ground in Dubai, making this

excellent non-competitive film festival the cultural highlight of the year for the city's cinephiles. There's a focus on cinema from Arab countries and the Indian sub-continent, while visits from the likes of George Clooney, Sharon Stone and Morgan Freeman help get the public excited.

COSTS & MONEY

The rising cost of living almost rivals traffic as Dubai's most moaned about subject. Rapid economic growth and a booming property market coupled with a falling dollar, which the dirham is pegged to, has resulted in annual inflation of around 10%. While the cost of living in Dubai continues to increase, the emirate's expatriates are finding that their dirhams are worth increasingly less in their home countries. Despite this, Dubai remains reasonably good value for tourists from Western countries.

Accommodation is likely to be your greatest expense. In the peak season, between October and April, Dubai boasts one of the world's highest hotel-occupancy rates (around 85%), so despite plenty of competition, rates remain sky-high. If you can cope with the stifling heat, summer hotel rates are a bargain – book in advance and you can get a night in a five-star beach resort for under Dh800. Before booking, check room rates on both hotel websites and online agencies such as [Expedia](http://www.expedia.com) (www.expedia.com), [Lastminute](http://www.lastminute.com) (www.lastminute.com) and [Opodo](http://www.opodo.com) (www.opodo.com).

Visitors on a low budget might struggle. Dubai isn't built for backpackers and there's a chronic shortage of respectable budget hotels. By staying in a dormitory at the youth hostel, taking buses rather than taxis, sunbathing at public beaches and eating at budget restaurants, it's possible to see Dubai for under Dh200 a day. If the youth hostel is full, there

are numerous hotels in Deira charging between Dh200 and Dh300 a night (ask to see the room before checking in and don't take rooms directly above nightclubs), while the Ibis (p159), EasyHotel Karama (slated to open in late 2008) and Fusion (p161) charge around Dh500 a night.

Dubai is more accessible to midrange travellers. For around Dh1000 you can get a room at a moderate hotel such as the Radisson SAS Deira Creek (p152). If you don't have the budget for a beach resort, it's worth considering buying day passes for a beach club (see boxed text, p78). If you're prepared to splash out, rooms at Jumeirah's luxury hotels start at Dh2000 a night during the peak season. A meal for two with a bottle of wine at a top restaurant will cost around Dh700.

To save money when going out, it's worth picking up *The Entertainer*, a book containing hundreds of two-for-one meal vouchers. By asking for local water rather than expensive imported bottles, you'll also save a few dirhams. Women can also take advantage of ladies' nights (usually on Tuesdays), when they get several free drinks or free-flowing champagne just for turning up.

INTERNET RESOURCES

www.timeoutdubai.com Up-to-date event listings, reviews of new restaurants and bars, and excellent coverage of the city's art scene.

www.dubai-eating.com A pale imitation of its London and New York sister sites (many major restaurants are missing), but useful for up-to-date user reviews of Dubai's restaurants.

www.dubizzle.com Spot short-term lets at this handy online marketplace.

www.dubaidonkey.com A busy listings website. Also useful for finding short-term lets.

ADVANCE PLANNING

Unless you're visiting during the summer, it is essential you book accommodation at least a few weeks in advance. Demand continues to outstrip supply and occupancy rates are nearly always high.

Considering how hard it can be to get a hotel room, it's surprisingly easy to book tables at popular restaurants a couple of hours before turning up, although a handful of restaurants always require advance booking. These include Zheng He's (p118), Verre (p107), Rhodes Mezzanine (p119), JW's Steakhouse (p107), Pierchic (p118) and all the restaurants at the Burj Al Arab.

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](http://www.timeouttickets.com) (www.itp.net/tickets) and [Box Office Middle East](http://www.boxoffice.com) (www.boxoffice.com) sell tickets for major events.

SUSTAINABLE DUBAI

Conserving the environment during a period of rapid growth is one of the greatest challenges facing Dubai (see p33). 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.

The Dubai Metro is scheduled to open in September 2009. Until then public transport in Dubai remains an unappealing alternative to taking taxis. The buses are cheap (between Dh1 and Dh4), safe and well-lit, but infrequent, unreliable and slow. However, it's not all bad news. The arrival of air-con bus shelters means taking public transport during the summer is no longer a life-threatening option.

Dubai's recycling centres are badly publicised and often poorly maintained. The skips for newspaper and plastic-bag recycling are often overflowing and the machines that handle plastic-bottle recycling are all too often broken. Some of the better centres can be found at the Ramada, Trade Centre Rd and Umm Suqeim branches of Spinneys, and at Emarat service stations.

HOW MUCH?

- 1L petrol Dh1.50
- 1L bottled water Dh1.50
- Pint of draught beer Dh22
- Espresso coffee in a café Dh10
- Taxi from Gold Souq to Burj Al Arab Dh50
- Entry to Wild Wadi Waterpark Dh180
- Evening desert safari Dh200
- Set meal at a budget Indian restaurant Dh10
- Main course in a top restaurant Dh120
- Two hours of indoor skiing Dh150

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 spend all morning in the shower.

THE AUTHORS

Matthew Lee



When Matthew Lee stepped out of the arrivals hall to start a new life in Dubai in 2004, the soaring July heat almost had him booking a seat on the next flight home. But after getting through his first summer without spending

more than three minutes at a time outside, he grew fond of this strange city. Being *Time Out's* food critic helped – he gleefully piled on the pounds at hundreds of Dubai restaurants before becoming the editor of *Time Out's* guidebooks to the city and the rest of the Gulf. In addition to writing for Lonely Planet, he edits the in-flight magazine of Jazeera Airways. He enjoys riverside walks in his hometown of London, wilfully obscure folk music, aquariums and picnics, and has plans to write the perfect sitcom. Matthew wrote the *Introducing Dubai*, *Highlights*, *Getting Started*, *Background*, *Neighbourhoods*, *Desert Safaris & Day Trips*, *Transport* and *Directory* chapters.

MATTHEW'S TOP DUBAI DAY

I love Fridays in Dubai, when construction workers and CEOs alike head to the Creek for a spot of fresh air. After a wake-up coffee at XVA Café (p113), I'd go there too, and ensure my waterside walk incorporates as many Dh1 *abra* rides as possible – by far my favourite

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activity in the entire city. Once I've admired the beautiful *dhow*s that cling to the Deira side of the water, I'd stroll to Creekside Park (p67) for a picnic lunch, ideally a plateful of Lebanese mezze from Wafi Gourmet (p98). Following a lazy afternoon in the sun, I'd make sure I'm at Russian Beach (p78) before it gets dark, so I can perch on the wall at the end of the breakwater and watch the sun plunge behind the Burj Al Arab (p159) while the call to prayer rings out from the floodlit Jumeirah Mosque (p75). After an indulgent dinner at the dazzling Verre by Gordon Ramsay (p107), I'd pop by Troyka (p127) for a nightcap – and some hilarious Russian cabaret – on the way home.

John A Vlahides



High-end travel specialist John A Vlahides is a former luxury-hotel concierge and a member of the prestigious Les Clefs d'Or, the international union of the world's elite concierges. He studied cooking in Paris,

where he earned a degree from La Varenne, Ecole de Cuisine. In addition to writing about luxury travel for such publishers as Conde Nast, he is the cofounder of the tell-it-like-it-is travel site 71miles.com. He appears regularly on TV and radio; watch some of his travel videos on lonelyplanet.com. When not exploring the Middle East, John lives in California, singing with the San Francisco Symphony, downhill-skiing the Sierra Nevada and touring the American West on his motorcycle. John wrote the *Sleeping*, *Eating*, *Shopping*, *Entertainment*, and *Sports & Activities* chapters.

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