

## THE DESERT IS CLOSE BY!



Having visited or not, seemingly everyone has an opinion of Dubai; and how intriguing is it, that a place, unheard of just a handful of decades ago, has managed not only to burst on to the travel scene, but dominate, with the world's busiest airport, (130 airlines flying to 260 destinations!), and its magnificent metaphor, the Burj Khalifa tower, currently the world's tallest building. In the lake surrounding the bottom of the tower are some fabulous fountains which 'dance' to music in the evenings. The plumes rise to incredible heights, and with its position adjacent the incredible Dubai Mall (more of which later), this is a great place to get an instant fix of this intriguing city, and surely one of the world's premier tourist attractions.

For all its stunning international glamour, Dubai retains a traditional sector which is found a short and cheap abra (wooden ferry boat) ride across the quaintly termed "creek" - a river really! The spice souk with its old open-fronted stores, could easily be a movie set. Friendly merchants urge visitors to sample their wares -everything from delicious dates (the Iranian ones are my favourite), to brightly coloured "pebbles" which look like some kind of geological sample, but are actually extremely yummy cardamom chocolate. Stock is displayed in open sacks out front, with the vibrant colours of saffron, turmeric and paprika, contrasting the pristine white of rock salt, and the green of dozens of herb varieties. Remember to bargain. Just a short stroll away is the old gold souk where hundreds of merchants sell every possible kind of jewellery in the old-fashioned way: by weight, with a small mark-up for manufacture. The daily gold price is prominently displayed everywhere as a buyer guide. In this part of Dubai, known as Bur Dubai, you will find stalls selling the fabulous local food - the shawarma - think souvlaki but better, and do try it.

The Emiratis retain their mystique - easily done given there are just 200,000 of them in a population of 2.5million. The ladies generally do not work, and the menfolk typically occupy Government positions, meaning a visitor's first encounter with a true local, is often also the last - the friendly Immigration officials at Dubai Airport. Aside from that, sightings are generally a fleeting glimpse of the driver in a mega luxury car speeding along Sheik Zayed Road to and from the luxury villas of Jumeirah, or if it's late at night, one of Dubai's uber cool night spots.



So, most people who live in Dubai are from somewhere else, and 'where are you from?' always figures early in a conversation. With the tolerant influence of myriad foreign cultures and religions, in such a small space, Dubai is an anthropologist's delight, and far from the homogeneous enclave you might expect, and understand.

Luxury hotels (luxury everything actually!) abound, including the opulent six-star Burj Al Arab which is also a favourite afternoon tea spot for those of us who cant afford to stay, but desperately want to take a peek. Among the lowly 5-star offerings, I love Raffles with its iced tiles around the pool! The mid-range tourist hotels, favoured by stopover visitors are excellent, and truly superb breakfasts are the norm in Dubai - wherever you are staying. Curiously, hotel rooms however luxurious, do not have clocks.

Then there are the malls which, whether you are a shopper or not, are impossible to ignore for quantity, design, size - including the Dubai Mall - the world's largest. But these cities within the



city are not just for shopping, because in Dubai, they are also home to stunning restaurants (the best of which are often located in a mall), Metro stations, and all manner of lifestyle attractions, including a ski run in one, and ice skating in another. Some malls are meticulously themed - for example Ibn Battuta which is dedicated to the ancient Arabian Explorer of the same name. None of your "cookie cutter" American malls here! But you will see a large branch of every major department store you've ever heard of, probably

alongside a massive store devoted to elegant, and often bejewelled abayas and accessories, and busy with supremely elegant lady customers. The perfume shops are amazing, stocking not only every known international brand, but many we have never heard of, principally the Oud based fragrances which are so popular in the Middle East. If the smells don't seduce you then the elaborate bottles and flacons will. Elsewhere in the malls you are likely to find sample stands offering such tastings as Moroccan Mint Tea. These are everyday examples of exotic Dubai, except who would look for them in a shopping mall? My favourite mall experience is to go to the lower level of the Dubai Mall and wander the 'street' of mouth-watering chocolate shops, each outdoing the next for opulence and beauty, not to mention product - of which samples are generously offered.

With eating, drinking, shopping all done, it's time for a shot of culture, and I know just the place. The Sheik Mohammed Centre for Cultural Understanding, despite its "dry" moniker is a marvellous place to spend a morning. As the name suggests, Sheik Mohammed created this place to foster understanding of Islam and the Emirati culture. You spend the morning learning lots with your "ask me anything at all" Emirati hosts, then enjoy a superb local meal with them. The cost (to cover the meal) is nominal. The place is a little difficult to find, but worth the effort. [www.cultures.ae](http://www.cultures.ae).