

The Best of Dubai

In Dubai, just about everything is meant to be the biggest and the best. And it's no joke: Here you'll find the world's tallest building, the largest man-made islands, the richest horse race, the biggest shopping festival, and soon the most extensive entertainment complex, the most massive mall, and the biggest hotel.

People who live here will tell you that Dubai is always changing—that's an understatement. Dubai is growing so fast that it hardly seems recognizable from one year to the next. The city's only competition these days seems to be with itself. Who can keep up? Construction cranes everywhere work relentlessly to continue raising a modern metropolis out of the desert sand.

Once completed, the Palm Island Deira will be twice the size as the Palm Jumeirah. Mall of Arabia will eclipse Mall of the Emirates, which is already the biggest shopping center outside North America. The 25-story Ski Dubai will soon be dwarfed in size by the Snowdome being built in Dubailand, which itself will house the largest collection of theme parks on the planet. Asia-Asia will take over as the world's largest hotel.

Each project is bigger, bolder, and significantly more expensive. The skyline is being filled with more architecturally daring high-rises. The land is being carved with new canals and marinas. The sea is being gifted with new artificial islands. In other words, nothing is constant. If Dubai has a core identity, it lies in its dynamic entrepreneurial spirit and not in its layout. Tomorrow there will undoubtedly be even more audacious plans to turn fantasy into reality.

1 Most Unforgettable Dubai Experiences

- **Doing a Desert Safari.** A journey into the timeless Arabian Desert will seem a world removed from modern Dubai, a chance to drive on the dunes, ride camels, eat authentic Arabic food, and watch belly-dancing under the stars. See p. 104.
- **Going to Wild Wadi.** This dazzling water park is pure fun, with rides and activities for kids and adults alike. It's the perfect place to cool off during Dubai's hot days. See p. 102.
- **Skiing in Dubai.** Unusual and utterly impractical, Ski Dubai is nevertheless one of the fantastic attractions in Dubai. Spend your day skiing, snowboarding, or throwing snowballs in freezing cold even as the outside temperature might be sizzling. See p. 105.
- **Taking a Dhow Cruise.** Cruising the Dubai Creek by day or night is an excellent way to view the old city up close and see the new city rising up in the distance. A dinner dhow cruise is an especially enchanting experience. See p. 103.
- **Shopping.** Dubai without shopping would be like Belgium without chocolate, as the two just go hand-in-hand. Wander Dubai's glittery tax-free malls, and don't forget to also

visit the traditional Eastern markets—especially the Gold Souk—where bargaining is expected.

- **Spending a Day at the Beach.** Most people are surprised by just how beautiful Dubai's beaches are, with

powdery white sand and turquoise-colored water. There is a range of excellent public and private beaches in Dubai, with many offering water-sports and activities for kids.

2 Dubai's Best Events & Seasons

- **Best Season in Dubai: Dubai Shopping Festival.** As long as you don't mind crowds, Dubai Shopping Festival is a thrilling time to visit the city, with people from around the world and special events taking place day and night. See p. 109.
- **Best Sports Event: Dubai World Cup.** The world's richest horse race, at the end of March, is the culmination of a 9-week horse-racing festival and brings in celebrities and jet-setters from around the globe. See p. 107.
- **Best Time to Come to Dubai: November to March.** Most people

prefer the temperate days of "winter," and this is when the bulk of outdoor activities and special events take place.

- **Best Thing to Do in Summer: Stay Inside.** With extreme humidity and temperatures routinely more than 100°F (38°C), summer is too hot to be outside. This is the perfect time to visit the malls, and **Dubai Summer Surprises** is a 10-week festival offering deeply discounted hotel, restaurant, and store prices, as well as children's entertainment and educational activities. See p. 109.

3 Best Dubai Structures

- **Best Hotel Tower: Burj Al Arab.** Designed to resemble the billowing sail of an Arabian dhow, the iconic Burj Al Arab extends 321m (1,053 ft.) to the sky. See p. 68.
- **Best Skyscraper: Burj Dubai.** The world's tallest building, Burj Dubai dominates the skyline with its thin silver steel structure and can be seen for miles. See p. 14.
- **Best Man-Made Islands: The Palm Islands.** The three artificial islands

shaped like palm trees sit off the coast of Dubai and are considered by some to be an Eighth Wonder of the World. See p. 14.

- **Best Traditional House: Heritage House.** Like other structures of its time, this 1890 Arabian home was made with coral and gypsum and has a central courtyard surrounded by rooms, some of which face the sea. See p. 101.

4 Best Things to Do for Free (or Almost) in Dubai

- **Take an Abra Ride on the Creek.** The traditional way to cross the creek is by water taxi, known as an *abra*. These little motorized boats connect Deira and Bur Dubai and have been ferrying passengers back and forth for decades. The price is negligible. See p. 104.
- **Go to the Beach.** Dubai has a number of excellent public beaches. They are clean, safe for swimming, and family-friendly.
- **Walk in Creekside Park.** Creekside Park offers waterfront pathways, botanical gardens, playgrounds,

picnic sites, and a children's educational theme park. See p. 103.

- **Window-Shop.** You don't have to spend any money to enjoy Dubai's incredible array of shopping, although I cannot promise that you won't decide to loosen your wallet. A walk through the souks (traditional

markets) is as much a cultural as a shopping experience.

- **Visit Bastakiya.** There is no cost to walk through the historic quarter of Dubai, a fascinating (if idealized) representation of what Dubai looked like at the beginning of the 20th century. See p. 100.

5 Best Way to Spend a Day Outside Dubai

- **Desert Safari.** Sign up with a tour operator offering desert safaris close to Dubai. Options include half-day, full-day, and overnight excursions, and the most popular are evening dinner safaris. See p. 151.
- **In Sharjah.** Explore the traditional souks and Arabian homes in **Heritage Area** (p. 143), view the personal art collection of Sharjah's ruler at the **Sharjah Art Museum** (p. 144), and

learn more about Islam at the **Sharjah Islamic Museum** (p. 144).

- **In Abu Dhabi.** Walk along the waterfront **Corniche** (p. 134), visit the extraordinary **Emirates Palace hotel** (p. 137), and see the enormous **Sheikh Zayed Grand Mosque** (p. 135). Abu Dhabi also has beautiful beaches, dazzling malls, and an impressive cultural arts center.

6 Best Splurge Hotels

- **Al Qasr** (☎ 4/366-8888; www.madinatjumeirah.com), Madinat Jumeirah. This extravagant resort in Madinat Jumeirah resembles an ornate Arabian palace. It sits on its own island surrounded by waterways, lush gardens, and the re-creation of ancient Gulf architecture. See p. 68.
- **Bab Al Shams** (☎ 4/832-6699; www.jumeirahbabalshams.com) is a serene desert resort located 45 minutes outside Dubai, ideal for escaping the busy city and immersing oneself in uninterrupted relaxation. Even when fully booked, the resort has the feeling of being mostly empty with an unobtrusive staff that caters to your needs. See p. 74.
- **Burj Al Arab** (☎ 4/301-7777; www.burj-al-arab.com), Jumeirah Beach. The famous luxury resort dominates the Dubai coastline, pampering guests in two-level suites with floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking the

sea and a range of over-the-top amenities fit for kings and queens. See p. 68.

- **Fairmont Dubai** (☎ 4/332-5555; www.fairmont.com), Sheikh Zayed Road. Arguably the most refined hotel on Sheikh Zayed Road, the Fairmont houses some of the most upscale dining and nightlife options in town. Elegantly appointed guest rooms boast panoramic views of the city or the Gulf. See p. 66.
- **Grosvenor House** (☎ 4/399-8888; www.grosvenorhouse-dubai.com), Dubai Marina. The stylish tower overlooking the Dubai Marina blends Arabian touches with contemporary design. Guests have access to the excellent beach club at the nearby Le Royal Méridien. See p. 70.
- **Shangri-La** (☎ 4/343-8888; www.shangri-la.com), Sheikh Zayed Road. Gracious service is the hallmark of

this spectacular hotel, which attracts business elites, visiting celebrities,

and travelers with a strong sense of style. See p. 66.

7 Best Beach Resorts

- **Hilton Dubai Jumeirah** (☎ 4/399-1111; www.hilton.com), Jumeirah Beach. An excellent choice for families, the stylish Hilton features one of Dubai's most enticing beach clubs, spas, and selections of kids' activities. The city's trendiest restaurant, Bice, is located here. See p. 71.
- **Jumeirah Beach Hotel** (☎ 4/348-0000; www.jumeirahbeachhotel.com), Jumeirah Beach. Once you check in you'll want to stay put, as this outstanding resort features Jumeirah's most extensive beach club, health club, and kids' club, as well as an unbeatable selection of restaurants, bars, and cafes. See p. 71.
- **Le Méridien Mina Seyahi** (☎ 4/399-3333; www.lemeridien.com/minaseyahi), Jumeirah Beach. Kids and adults alike will love this sprawling beach resort, which offers

fun-filled water- and land sports, sparkling pools, landscaped gardens, and a casual selection of restaurants and bars. See p. 71.

- **One&Only Royal Mirage** (☎ 4/399-9999; www.oneandonlyroyalmirage.com), Jumeirah Beach. This exquisite resort extends along 1km (¾ mile) of beautiful beachfront and sits amid 60 acres of flowering gardens and fountain-filled waterways. If you're looking for an ultra-refined beach vacation, stay at the Royal Mirage. See p. 73.
- **Ritz-Carlton** (☎ 4/399-4000; www.ritzcarlton.com), Jumeirah Beach. The elegant Ritz-Carlton enjoys a privileged view of the Arabian Gulf and features luxurious guest rooms that blend classic European and Arabic design. Service is outstanding. See p. 73.

8 Best Moderate Hotels

- **Arabian Courtyard Hotel & Spa** (☎ 4/351-9111; www.arabiancourtyard.com), Al Fahidi Street in Deira. This distinctly Arabian-style hotel sits across from the Dubai museum and is an excellent base for exploring the city's old quarter. See p. 61.
- **Orient Guest House** (☎ 4/351-9111; www.orientguesthouse.com), Bastakiya. Situated in a restored Arabian villa in the historic Bastakiya neighborhood, this boutique hotel offers 24-hour butler service, promising guests personalized attention. This is a distinct alternative to the city's predominantly high-rise hotels. See p. 63.

- **Novotel** (☎ 4/318-7000; www.novotel.com), next to the World Trade Centre. You'll discover one of the city's best values at this French-chain hotel, a simple yet stylish choice conveniently located off Sheikh Zayed Road. See p. 68.
- **Towers Rotana Hotel** (☎ 4/343-8000; www.rotana.com), Sheikh Zayed Road. You shouldn't expect luxury here, but you will find comfortable accommodations and friendly service in an excellent location on Sheikh Zayed Road. See p. 67.

9 The Most Unforgettable Dining Experiences

- **Al Nafoorah**, Emirates Towers (☎ 4/319-8088). Dubai's top Lebanese restaurant offers an opulent dining room leading to a lovely outdoor terrace facing the Dubai skyline. Service is as inspired as the cooking, focused on seafood and authentic Lebanese cuisine. See p. 91.
- **The Beach Bar & Grill**, One&Only Royal Mirage (☎ 4/399-9999). A personal favorite, this is where to come for an inspired lunch or romantic dinner on the beach. Fresh seafood and grilled steaks are served in the Moroccan-designed dining room or out on the beachfront deck. See p. 88.
- **Benjarong**, Dusit Dubai (☎ 4/343-3333). The Dusit Dubai's signature restaurant serves outstanding Royal Thai cuisine from a la carte or set-course menus. Service is among the best you will find in Dubai. See p. 85.
- **Bice**, Hilton Dubai Jumeirah (☎ 4/399-1111). The trendy Italian restaurant packs with a "who's who" of Dubai who come dressed to kill. Fortunately, the food is not lost on the scene, with outstanding classic Italian dishes prepared by Chef Andrea Mugavero. See p. 88.
- **The Exchange Grill**, Fairmont Dubai (☎ 4/311-8316). Few restaurants take steak as seriously as the Exchange Grill, modeled after New York's Oak Room. The chef serves 1855 USDA certified Angus as well as the world's most expensive beef, Mayura Station Gold Wagyu. Expect to spend a pretty penny, and to spend it in style. See p. 84.
- **Shabestan**, Radisson SAS (☎ 4/222-7171). Although Persian food is widely available in Dubai, Shabestan offers the best. The exotic dining room is reminiscent of a sultan's palace, and evenings bring live Persian music and a romantic ambience. See p. 80.
- **Verre**, Hilton Dubai Creek (☎ 4/227-1111). London-based Gordon Ramsay holds the most Michelin stars of any chef, and you can experience his impeccable modern European cuisine at Verre, an elegant dining space characterized by minimalist decor and refined service. See p. 76.

10 Best Shopping in Dubai

- **Best Boutique Mall: Emirates Towers Boulevard**. The elegant Boulevard features two floors of stylish shops, restaurants, and bars. It's smaller and more exclusive than Dubai's other shopping centers. See p. 113.
- **Best Shopping Center: Mall of the Emirates**. The largest shopping center outside North America offers world-class department stores and retail outlets, extensive dining and entertainment options, and Ski Dubai, the incredible indoor ski resort. Shop and ski, as they say. See p. 116.
- **Best Modern Souk: Souk Madinat Jumeirah**. This idyllic re-creation of an Arabian souk in the sprawling Madinat Jumeirah complex features boutiques selling Arabian art, sweets, jewelry, and upscale souvenirs. See p. 112.
- **Best Traditional Souk: Gold Souk**. The enormous gold souk features every size, shape, color, and quality of gold you can imagine. Jewelry is sold

by rows and rows of vendors, and bargaining is an important component of the shopping experience. See p. 112.

- **Best Persian Carpets: Persian Carpet House.** This trusted dealer sells

high-quality carpets from Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Kashmir, and elsewhere in the region. Bargaining is expected. See p. 117.

11 Best Cultural Experiences

- **Bastakiya.** This restored historic neighborhood of meandering lanes, traditional Gulf houses, and ornate wind towers characteristic of early Dubai also has a number of restaurants, shops, and galleries. See p. 100.
- **Dubai Museum.** The Al Fahidi Fort-turned-museum represents Dubai life in its pre-oil days with re-creations of a souk, early Arabian homes, mosques, and date gardens. There are also exhibits of desert and marine life. See p. 100.
- **Jumeirah Mosque.** Although non-Muslims are typically not allowed to

enter mosques in the UAE, the beautiful Jumeirah Mosque is an exception. Cultural tours are offered 4 mornings a week through the Sheikh Mohammed Centre for Cultural Understanding. See p. 101.

- **Spice Souk.** This traditional market close to the Gold Souk offers a glimpse of Dubai as it once was, a place with winding alleyways of stalls packed with exotic fragrances, Arabic seasonings, herbs, perfume oils, and other delights. See p. 101.

12 Best Nightlife

- **Best Bar to Watch the Sunset: The Terrace.** The sun sets over the Dubai Creek and city skyline, which stretch out majestically before the Terrace deck, an excellent place to unwind after a day of seeing the sights. See p. 128.
- **Best Bar with a View: Vu's.** Appropriately named, Vu's offers a stunning panorama of the city from the 51st floor of the Emirates Towers hotel. See p. 127.
- **Best Champagne Bar: Cin Cin.** A beautiful crowd gathers to admire one another in this glamorous champagne and wine bar, with an equally exclusive cigar bar located next door. See p. 129.
- **Best Cocktail Bar: Buddha Bar.** A killer sound system plays the avant-garde lounge beats of the Buddha Bar

music series, as the jet-setting bargoers sip exotic cocktails in a mesmerizing setting. See p. 126.

- **Best Happy Hour: Barasti.** Western expatriates and visitors pack the beachfront deck at this casual hotel beach bar. Theme nights ensure that Barasti never gets dull. See p. 127.
- **Best Live Music Venue: Rock Bottom.** This is as close as Dubai comes to a dive bar, with live bands playing rock 'n' roll and party music into the wee hours. See p. 127.
- **Best Nightclub: The Apartment Lounge + Club.** Local and international DJs rock the house at Dubai's most exclusive club, a two-room "apartment" featuring a sleek martini-style lounge and a raging dance floor. See p. 125.

- **Best Outdoor Show:** *Jumana–Secret of the Desert* celebrates the history and culture of Dubai in a stunning outdoor show that takes place in the Al Sahra Desert Resort of Dubailand. See p. 124.
- **Best Pub:** **Irish Village.** Special events often happen at the Irish

Village, where a large expatriate crowd packs the festive outdoor area every night of the week. See p. 128.

- **Best Wine Bar:** **Agency.** This chic wine bar houses roughly 400 types of wine, offering frequent wine promotions and tastings to the glamorous patrons. See p. 129.