

## Arabian Sand Castles Reinventing Dubai for the Tourist

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For centuries, Dubai, located on the Arabian Peninsula, has been a crossroads for people and goods traveling between Asia, Europe and Africa. Recently it has been a stopover for those traveling by air between Europe and Asia. From these somewhat humble beginnings, Dubai has developed into a destination in and of itself. In doing so, it has entered a competition to attract people away from more traditional holiday destinations such as Europe and America to a region better known in the West for political strife and desolate desert landscapes. A recent *Conde Nast Traveler* article stated "more than a shopping stopover or a beach holiday, Dubai is a phenomenon: a Muslim, Arab society reinventing itself with all the ethnic diversity, economic energy and architectural ambition of early 20th century Los Angeles, Manhattan and Chicago" (*Khaleej Times*, 14 Oct. 2003).

Economic development in Dubai is moving toward an emphasis on privatization, diversification, and liberalization. The movement to develop Dubai into a global tourist destination is being led by the Dubai government through direct investment and incentives to attract private developers. Incentives such as reductions of excess regulation, licensing and the removal of bureaucratic barriers coupled with an elastic labor market make Dubai very attractive to developers. The tourist industry and other service industries in Dubai are viable because of their ability to attract foreign labor, which makes up 90 percent of the workforce. Increasingly foreign investors are beginning to see great potential in a region that is becoming more stable politically and economically. In the early 1990s, Dubai attracted only about 30,000 tourists a year. In 2003, that number is expected to reach 5 million. The goal that Dubai has set for itself was to reach 15 million tourists by 2015. Some estimates now say that the goal to reach 15 million tourists will likely happen by 2010 if not sooner (Eqarat.com). Last year, Dubai topped the list of global tourism destinations with 31.15 percent growth according to the World Tourism Organization (ameinfo.com). This rapid growth in tourism has been accomplished in part by the launching and rapid expansion of Emirates Airlines.

Launched in 1985, Emirates' fleet has grown to over 50 aircraft flying to 67 destinations in 47 countries. More than 100 new jets will be delivered to Emirates by 2012. From April 2005, it will add one new aircraft every month for the subsequent seven years. (*Gulf News*, 26 Oct. 2003) The United Kingdom is one crucial market for Dubai. Currently there are 93 weekly flights between the United Kingdom and Dubai, most of which are operated by Emirates Airlines. As the airline adds new destinations to its routes, Dubai will surely become even more diverse (Eqarat.com).

There are a number of important aspects that make Dubai unique among tourist destinations. One aspect is the sheer volume of tourist developments being built. Already, Dubai is home to 280 hotels, 35 of which are five-star hotels, with many more planned or under construction. Related to the proliferation of hotels is the abundance of shopping malls. Dubai is known as the "Shopping Capital of the Middle East" with six major shopping malls of 50 stores or more and 26 smaller shopping malls of less than 50 stores (*Dubai Explorer*). Another important aspect is the outrageous, global attention-grabbing nature of the developments and events that aim to put Dubai in a category with London, New York and Hong Kong as a tourist destination. Thirdly, the integration and overlapping of the tourist spaces with the other primary spaces of the city has created a series of unique shared spaces that further reinforce the cosmopolitan nature of the city and blur the boundaries of work and leisure. Dubai, with a population of just over a million inhabitants, will continue to see the tourist population playing a significant role in the life of the city.

The social, ethnic and economic diversity of Dubai is reflected in the city's infrastructure of hotels, shopping malls and new mixed-use developments. Many hotels in Dubai cater to specific markets. The market is reflected not just in the demography of the hotel guests but also the type of restaurants, nightclubs and bars housed in these hotels. These various facilities not only serve the tourist population but also residents since almost all

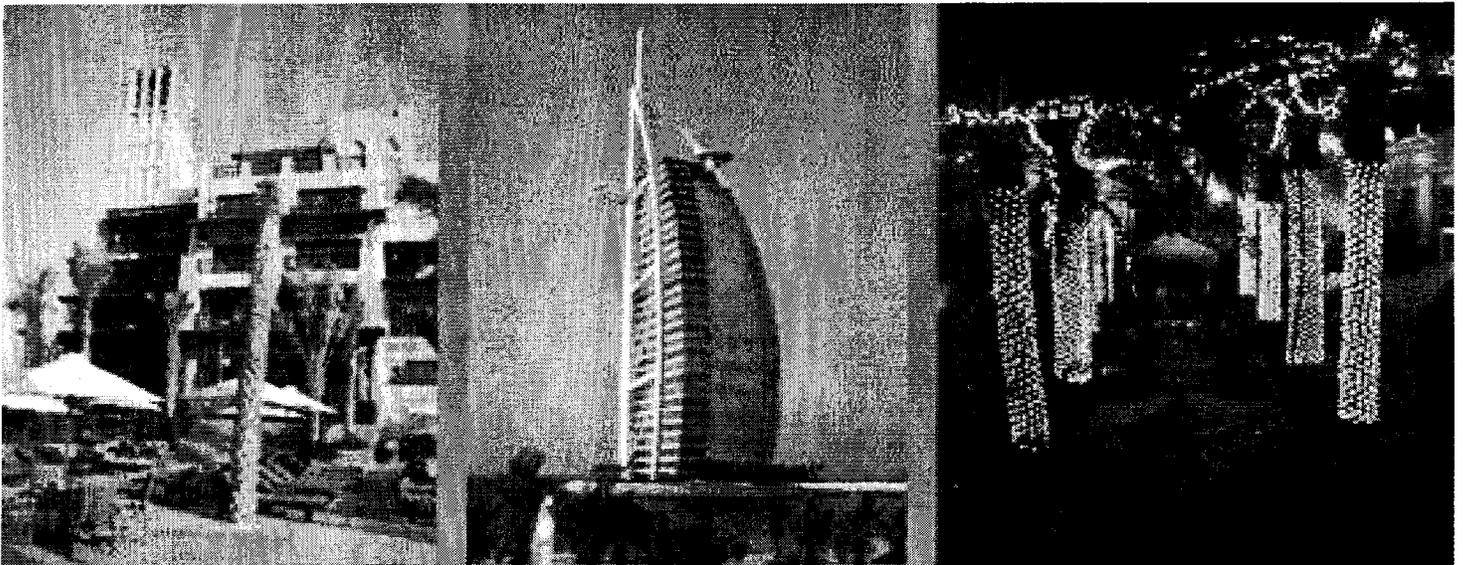
fine restaurants and nightclubs or bars in Dubai are associated with hotels. An exception to this are the restaurants located in shopping malls that serve both the local population and the tourist. Residents are encouraged to patronize the hotel restaurants and clubs through promotions and other events. Many hotels offer loyalty memberships that provide considerable discounts on meals and use of their spas, salons, gyms, pools, beaches and other facilities. The hotel has essentially replaced the health club or country club as a place to spend leisure time for a large segment of the local populace.

### DUBAI: A CITY OF “CITIES WITHIN CITIES”

Much of the new large-scale development under way in Dubai has purposefully integrated tourist infrastructure with the city's residential infrastructure. One such project that epitomizes this trend is Dubai Festival City. This large-scale, mixed-use development located on Dubai Creek is currently under construction on 1,600 acres of previously vacant land. It is located only four miles from the old town and two miles from the international airport. “It will provide a unique sense of place and bring life back to the traditional heart of Dubai – the creek” ([dubaifestivalcity.com](http://dubaifestivalcity.com)). When completed, it will be the Middle East's largest mixed-use development. It will include 15 development zones with offices; various shopping and leisure facilities, including a main *souk* (market) with 250 shops offering international and local goods; 20,000 residences of various scales; parks; an 18-hole golf course designed by Robert Trent Jones; a marina designed to be the same size as that of St. Tropez; and other features. What makes this development significant is that it is also being created as a signature attraction for tourists. With the local community who will live or work in Dubai Festival City, the tourist will make up a

significant portion of the population who will occupy this “city within a city.” A business hotel is planned in the 50-story signature office tower, a resort hotel will occupy prime real estate on the creek, a convention hotel will be located near the airport, and a golf resort will be located on the golf course. On the other side of the city along the beach, the mixed-use development of Dubai Marina promises to integrate residences for 40,000 people with resort hotels and shopping as a “city within a city.” And, between these two developments, there is the recently unveiled plan to build the world's tallest building, the Burj Dubai, which will also integrate hotel, offices, residences, a shopping mall, entertainment, leisure activities and open park space all within yet another “city within a city.”

Because of the enormous diversity in the population and the commercial development that serves those populations, Dubai is struggling to define a cohesive identity. The emirate markets itself to the outside world as bridge between East and West providing the best of both Western and Arab cultures. This hybrid identity is often reflected by “West” being associated with modern and contemporary design and “East” being associated with traditional design. It has been said “the city combines the comfort and conveniences of the Western world with the unique charm and adventure of the Middle East” ([Emaar.com](http://Emaar.com)). The hybrid nature of Dubai's identity focuses on the desire to achieve the correct mix of tradition and modernity. This not only describes the tourist infrastructure but the social and cultural aspect of the emirate. Many of the developments that cater to the tourist population present an idealized image and lifestyle of Arabia. Similar to the fantasy worlds created by Las Vegas hotels, these new “theme” hotels are self-contained environments that evoke romantic notions of the Orient by integrating various Islamic motifs and iconography in a purely decorative way. They operate as a microcosm of the city offering restaurants, bars, nightclubs and shopping and leisure activities



*Madinat Jumeirah*

*Burj al Arab*

*Royal Mirage*

in a single controlled environment. Here the architecture and design reinforce tourist and expatriate expectations in a sanitized fiction of Arabian Nights.

These developments are inwardly focused oases of controlled activity with each trying to distinguish itself from the other yet attempting to address the issue of their cultural context through iconic representation. The design of the Madinat Jumeirah complex echoes the seafaring heritage of Dubai and is adorned with ornamental wind towers that evoke the image of the old historic city of Dubai, where wind towers were once used as an air conditioning device. It, too, is designed to integrate the tourist population with the residents of Dubai. When its final phase is completed in 2004, the complex will include two hotels with a total of 592 rooms, 300 residential villas, 120 retail outlets, over 20 restaurants and a large amphitheatre. Other hotels in Dubai take visitors on a "tour" of Islamic architectural heritage. The Moorish influenced Royal Mirage resembles a Moroccan palace, and its neighbor, the Ottoman-inspired Arabian Court, integrates hotel and residence. The Al Maha Resort is the first Arabian eco-resort. Designed as an oasis, it is built in the middle of a 25-square kilometer desert reserve with camels, falcons and the rare Arabian Oryx. The resort is built in the style of a Bedouin encampment but offers luxury accommodation unimaginable by the Bedouin forefathers. Another hotel planned in the collection of outrageous developments is the Hydropolis, the world's first underwater super luxury resort hotel due to open in 2006. It is being constructed at a cost of \$500 million and will include 220 suites.

If there is a single building that typifies the image of Dubai, it is the Burj al Arab. Besides being the tallest freestanding hotel in the world, it is also the world's first seven-star hotel, designed to be the pinnacle of luxury. *Conde Nast Traveler* described it as "the hotel aficionado's Mount Everest" (*Khaleej Times*). Built on its own man-made island 200 meters offshore, the Burj represents the image of a billowing Arabian sail yet is very high tech and modern. It is the epitome of the integration of high-tech modern with a flashy Arabesque interior. It was designed to create an architectural icon for the city, much as the Eiffel Tower is to Paris. Opened in 1999, the hotel already has achieved the status of appearing on every Dubai license plate. At any hotel shop and souvenir stand, one can buy miniature crystal versions of the Burj in all sizes. Its image appears on countless items and in numerous advertisements and promotional materials.

Palm Island Jumeirah and Palm Island Jebel Ali are two developments that are being built to accommodate the expected growth of the tourist industry. Built to look like a palm tree and supposedly visible with the naked eye from the surface of the moon, both of these manmade islands will extend 5 kilometers into the Persian Gulf and each will add an extra 120 kilometers of beaches. Each island will also include 40 luxury hotels as

well as shopping, theatres, restaurants and office spaces. The Palm Jumeirah will include some 2,000 luxury villas, and the Palm Jebel Ali, the larger of the two islands, will include some 2,500 luxury villas. Sultan Bin Sulayem, chairman of the Palm Islands developers, stated that the sheer demand for beachfront hotel rooms in Dubai had sparked the building of the Palm Islands. When completed, the islands will sit on 100 million cubic meters of sand and rock. It is said that if all the materials were placed end to end, a wall 2 meters high and 1/2 meter thick would circle the world three times. The island will also include over 12,000 palm trees (Palmsales.ca).

With the success assured for the Palm Island projects, another outrageous island "complex" is under development. Called The World, it will include a series of 200 islands positioned to form the shape of the world map. It will be located about 5 kilometers off the coast and be accessible only by boat. Each island will vary in size and will be themed to show a close similarity to the country it represents.

## SHOPPING TOURISM

Beautiful beaches and guaranteed sunshine attract most of the European visitors, but Dubai's shopping draws most of the visitors from the Middle East and Asia. Dubai is famous for its duty-free shopping and for having the lowest prices for gold jewelry anywhere in the world. The shopping mall now competes with the *souk* (market) as the preferred place for leisure shopping. The shopping mall provides air-conditioning, Western clothing stores, restaurants and parking convenience that the traditional *souks* of the city center cannot provide. Most new developments incorporate at least some form of shopping mall. In spite of its artificiality, the shopping mall is the most public and social space in the city and so a great deal of care goes into the design and theme of each mall to attract the preferred clientele. Borrowing design ideas out of a Las Vegas guide to architecture, the "theme" shopping centers incorporate motifs as diverse as the pyramids of Egypt, Italian cities, and the traditional Arabian *souk* ornamented with wind-towers.

Shopping in Dubai has become a major tourist attraction. Once a year, Dubai hosts a month-long "Shopping Festival" with sales discounts and a Global Village with merchants from all over Asia, Africa and Middle East. It is a true event dedicated to consumerism with all the novelty of a world's fair. The new Mall of the Emirates, planning to open in 2005, promises to be the largest shopping mall outside North America. It will have 350 shops and be spread over 2.4 million square feet. It will also include a 400-meter long indoor ski run using real snow. Peter Walichnowski, the chief executive officer of the project, stated that he "hopes the Middle East will choose Dubai over traditional destinations such as Europe and America for their special shopping and leisure needs" (ameinfor.com).

## EVENT CITY

In developing as a global destination, Dubai is not only relying on world-class hotels, restaurants and shopping. It has also focused on creating world-class events such as the Dubai World Cup, the richest horse race in the world. Dubai is also a destination for professional golf and tennis. The Desert Classic is on the European PGA tour and the ATP men's and women's tour comes to Dubai every year and is becoming a showcase for the top names in tennis. While horse racing is connected to the very heart of Arab culture, golf and tennis are associated with a desire to attract Western visitors.

## BETWEEN EAST AND WEST

The local Muslim population is exposed to increasingly Western influences brought about by businesses that cater to expatriates and tourists and the Western entertainment industry. A new and unique hybrid culture is emerging that preserves aspects of Arabian culture, such as social and moral conduct, religion and a lifestyle that is built around social relations and family, yet embraces Western design, products and personal freedoms. The young generation, whose members are largely bilingual in Arabic and English, listen to American and British music and watch American television and movies; eat American fast-food; shop for jeans and other Western clothes at shopping malls; go to nightclubs such as the Hard Rock Café to dance; drive American, British, German or Japanese cars; are educated in Western-style schools; smoke American cigarettes; and go to pray five times a day. Most Emirati men still prefer to wear the traditional *dishdasha* (robe) and *gutra* (headdress), and most Emirati women still wear the *abaya* (robe) and *shayla* (headscarf) in public over their Western clothes. National dress is the single most visible element of the Emirati identity. Yet, it has become very common to see young Emirati men wearing the traditional *dishdasha* with a New York Yankees baseball cap. The icons of Arabian culture are limited and have become so over promoted that they are becoming almost something of a cliché. What is admirable of the local Emirati population of Dubai is their optimism for the future in the face of radical change.

There is superficiality in much of the physical development happening in Dubai. The Emirate tends to impress with scale rather than innovation (*Time Out*, p. 24). Part of this

superficiality also comes from the fact that the local population has played such a minor role in the development of their country, except for a handful of visionaries such as Sheik Mohammed al Maktoum, Dubai Crown Prince and UAE Deputy Ruler. The city's new architectural icons that support the tourist infrastructure and business infrastructure alike are designed by foreigners, constructed by foreigners and eventually staffed by foreigners. Dubai could become irrelevant to its Emirati population if the needs and desires of the tourist population supplant the needs and desires of the local population. Cultural and artistic institutions have been slow to develop. Dubai, like America, has become a consumer society. The hotel and the shopping mall have essentially become the space where all the residents of Dubai, whether temporary or permanent, come together. They are the quintessential spaces of Dubai. The new and novelly designed shopping mall or hotel continually attracts people in a never-ending quest to find the next best thing. "The impact of tourism will have the most dramatic short term impact. Tourist and consumers want unique experiences and new things to consider, explore and enjoy. They are looking for the next horizon and how they can add more to their shopping experience" ([dubaifestivalcity.com](http://dubaifestivalcity.com)). What seems to be happening in Dubai is that the local population is spending its leisure time as a tourist in its own city. The beach, the restaurants, the shopping and the spas have become the preferred past time outside of work where every weekend becomes a mini vacation.

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