

May 8, 2005

The Oz of the Middle East

By SETH SHERWOOD

Correction Appended

DOWN gleaming silvery escalators they glided, eyes afire and credit cards in easy reach. As a warm Tuesday night hung languidly over the Persian Gulf, a multicultural pageant of shoppers, diners and drinkers fanned out into the majestic, wintry-cool shopping mall beneath the Middle East's tallest building, the 1,163-foot Emirates Office Tower in Dubai.

Indian matrons in colorful saris and Middle Eastern women in black veils strolled through the pristine, white marble corridors, pausing to consider the worthiness of Gucci totes, Bottega Veneta shoes and Cartier diamonds. White-robed Middle Eastern businessmen, fat gold watches glittering from the edges of their sleeves, talked into green-glowing cellphones. Three Arab men in baggy jeans, looking like cast members from an Al Jazeera version of "The O.C.," chatted warmly with three young European-looking women in spangly tops. Just behind them, boisterous British expatriates in business suits tried to push into the fray of Ladies' Night at an overpacked bar called Scarlett's.

Outside, night-shift taxis and BMW's streamed down crowded highways, cruising near the soaring, sail-shaped Burj Al Arab, which bills itself as the world's highest hotel - snaking around the rising foundation for the world's tallest building (the Burj Dubai, which at more than 2,300 feet, will surpass the current pretender, the 1,667-foot Taipei 101, when it opens in 2008), and skirting the construction sites for two competing retail projects, each of which insists it will be the largest shopping mall in the world.

From out there, the illuminated Emirates Office Tower, rising silently over the throbbing music at Scarlett's, and its nearly identical neighbor, the slightly shorter Emirates Hotel Tower, looked like flaming arrows shooting toward the stars.

Bigger, taller, grander, richer, only. Dubai, one of the seven city-states of the United Arab Emirates, has already undergone an extreme makeover, in less than a decade, that would awe the most ambitious builder. And as it continues trying to write its own chapter in the record books, travelers from all over the globe are coming to luxuriate in otherworldly thread counts and truffle-loaded restaurants at the five-star hotels; romp in the surf at fine white beaches (bikinis allowed); dance to tunes spun by international D.J.'s in myriad nightclubs; and fill shopping bags, unhindered by sales taxes, at dozens of malls and the gold souk, the largest gold market in the world.

"Dubai will shock anyone who isn't from Las Vegas, Nev.," said Ole Bech-Petersen, 35, a Danish advertising executive, who pronounced himself "completely seduced" after his first trip to Dubai in March, when he stayed at the plush Emirates Hotel Tower, dined at the Burj Al Arab's underwater restaurant and made impulse buys in the gold souk and the new Mercato shopping mall.

Cynthia Moureto, a retailer in her 20's from Manhattan, sampled Dubai with her sister in February and came away equally impressed. "We'd heard from people that it was a very up-and-coming city full of great shopping and wonderful hotels, lots of tourists, lots of new business opportunities, lots of action, lots to do," she said. "They were right." She and her sister soaked up treatments at the Shangri-La hotel's spa and partied until the wee hours with an international crowd at the Trilogy nightclub.

Some 5.45 million travelers passed through the gates of this Middle Eastern Xanadu in 2004, a 9 percent jump over the year before and a nearly 20-fold increase from a mere decade earlier, according to Pascal Maigniez, the director of the Paris office of the Government of Dubai Department of Tourism and Commerce Marketing. Two-thirds came on business, bound for places like Internet City, a five-year-old office park with offices of hundreds of technology companies including Microsoft, Oracle, I.B.M., Siemens and Sony. But more and more, Dubai is a tourist destination.

"When I first started going to Dubai, no one had heard of it," said Sandra Morgan, 42, who lives near London and has visited seven times in the past few years. "Now everyone wants to go." She likes the array of ethnic restaurants, the long beachfront and good values - especially in jewelry - and feels a friendly vibe. "The service is great," she said, "the hotels are first-class, and there are so many shops."

Joining the pleasure seekers and international executives are the fortune seekers, rich and poor, who fly in from India, Pakistan, Iran, Lebanon, the Philippines, Europe, Australia and South Africa. Only a fifth of Dubai's resident population of 1.2 million is made up of citizens. The other 80 percent are expatriates, including an underclass of foreign workers in construction and menial jobs, and though Arabic is the official language, English, the language of commerce, holds this global gumbo together. Only a third of Dubai's residents are female.

To accommodate the arriving masses, Emirates Airlines is spending \$19 billion to scoop up 45 of the world's largest passenger planes, the new Airbus A380.

Concerned that Dubai is running out of beachfront, its crown prince, Sheik Mohammed bin Rashid al-Maktoum, is having three palm-tree-shaped islands created on sand being dredged from the Gulf and held in place by enormous plastic membranes. Plans for the property include opulent apartment towers and as many as 100 new hotels, including Hydropolis, billed as the earth's first underwater resort. Also coming is an archipelago of artificial islands resembling a map of the earth, covered with plush part-time residences for far-flung millionaires and billionaires and called simply The World.

"It's like Sea Monkeys!" Laurence Thorpe, a frequent business traveler from Australia, shouted one evening between sips of Stella Artois beer in a deafeningly loud beachfront club-restaurant called Boudoir. (Sea Monkeys are a novelty powder, really dried brine shrimp, that transforms into swimming creatures in water.) "You start with nothing, just sand," he said, as a sea of well-off Lebanese travelers and expatriate professionals danced around him, toasting in Arabic and French. "You add water and - presto - instant city!"

Actually, you add oil. Petroleum has underwritten Dubai's boom. But its reserves will be depleted within a decade, and the country's rulers have deliberately diversified the economy. Oil now accounts for just 8 percent of national income. Tourism brings in 17 percent.

Dubai is a metropolis of bone-white apartment blocks, green palm trees and amazing, odd juxtapositions. Thudding jackhammers mingle with the call to prayer. At Nad al Sheba racetrack, old-world camel racing by day gives way to glitzy thoroughbred action by night (the \$6 million purse for one annual race in Dubai is, of course, the world's richest). Cruising the city by taxi on a five-day visit in February, I was reminded of the hot, flat sprawl of Tampa or Houston - until I glimpsed a fully veiled woman driving alongside my cab and saw two men in checkered headdresses pulling their Lamborghinis parallel to chat. Glossy financial magazines share rack space with titles like International Falconer.

Buried deeper among the commercial towers and retail palaces, you can still find traces of the old Dubai, a sleepy fishing and pearl-diving village that grew into a modest city in the 19th century, fueled by trading and, some say, smuggling. Hidden in the Bastakiya neighborhood, where Arab and South Asian laborers pay a few coins to be ferried on traditional timber boats across Dubai Creek, are the city's oldest building, a late-18th-century fort holding the Dubai Museum, and its newest cultural innovation, its first gallery district.

A local art scene is "finally getting there," I was told by Sana Khan, a New Jersey transplant who manages XVA, a gallery, cafe and guesthouse in a converted barjeel, a traditional mansion with a rectangular open-air tower and a courtyard soaring wind tower.

Dark hair pulled back and wearing a loose-fitting black dress, she shuffled around an art-book-lined office while in the nearby exhibition area some middle-aged British women admired grainy photographs of Parisian street scenes and pocketed invitations to an opening for an Iraqi textile artist. But for a city of its size, Dubai still has surprisingly little cultural life.

The city has worked at image-building by holding golf and tennis tournaments featuring the likes of Tiger Woods and Venus Williams, and playing host to an international film festival and meetings of the World Bank. But overwhelmingly, a trip to Dubai is about sun and sand, food and partying - and above all, shopping.

The merchandise hunt reaches a glittering zenith in the gold souk, a network of streets where 400 storefronts drip with gold necklaces, earrings, watches, brooches, rings and toe rings. With the heat, the 24-karat cornucopia can be so exhausting to absorb that roving men with trays of Fanta sodas and bottled water - freelance waiters, basically - do good business offering refreshments to the sweating tide of dumbstruck international shoppers. The market's shadier dealers approach strolling tourists with unsubtle come-ons like "Hey, Boss, Bulgari-Tivoli-Gucci-Movado?"

The nearby spice souk, where the merchant stalls are crowded with large bins of fragrant saffron, coriander and other exotic ingredients, is considerably more tranquil.

Eventually, however, all roads lead to the malls - 40 of them, purveying everything from Korean toys to luxury cars and struggling to differentiate themselves from one another. Wafi City Mall works at rising above the crowd with an Egyptian theme, featuring ersatz pyramids and sphinxes; the planned Ibn Battuta Mall, named for an Arab explorer, will borrow architectural elements from countries he visited, including Persia, China and India. The developers say that it will also hold the world's largest maze.

On a busy afternoon at Mercato Mall, a colonnaded fantasyland modeled on a Renaissance-era Mediterranean village, the retail fever was epidemic. Emirati boys in white dishdashas and new baseball caps queued up for "Meet the Fockers." Heavily made-up Iranian women in black chadors fingered sunglasses and flashy scarves in a clubwear boutique. Russian tourists, arms well tanned from days at the beach, swiped credit cards at Cerutti and Nine West.

The city was celebrating what seemed a redundant event: the 10th annual Dubai Shopping Festival, basically a giddy month of sales and giveaways that rakes in more than a billion dollars a year, drawing feverish interest with a series of raffles with lavish prizes like a personal fleet of 10 Nissans. "One World, One Family, One Festival," ubiquitous signs declared, appealing to humanity's universal desire for a Chanel pantsuit.

At the Mercato's noisy Starbucks, two Libyan hipsters sat down with their lattes, visibly tired. "We've been mall-hopping all day," said Sufian Swed, a 24-year-old from Tripoli who was working in Dubai. He added with a laugh, "It's kind of sad." His friend, 29, an import-export specialist named Mohamed Abdulsaloum, surveyed the afternoon's haul: a nutrition book and some sweaters. "I think they bump the prices up two weeks before the festival and then knock them down and call it a discount," he said. Then they pulled out the day's main score, two Dubai Shopping Festival souvenir coins. Each one represented an entry in a drawing to win 100 kilograms of gold.

The festival's heady atmosphere can inspire outlandish behavior. One afternoon I watched a line of contestants hurl squadrons of paper airplanes into a slowly revolving convertible in hopes of driving it home. And at my hotel that evening, I held the elevator door for a college-age Middle Eastern woman loaded down by bags bursting with huge boxes of Kellogg's Corn Flakes.

"You came all the way to Dubai to buy cornflakes?" I asked in disbelief.

She shot me a confused, slightly offended look. "I love cornflakes," she said at last.

To fuel the legions of global power shoppers, Dubai bursts with restaurants. The slick Asha's, owned by the famous Indian singer Asha Bhosle, serves upscale Indian food. Fine French cuisine comes courtesy of another celebrity, the foul-mouthed former Scottish soccer player Gordon Ramsay, who landed three Michelin stars for the London restaurant that bears his name before starring in his own British reality television series, "Hell's Kitchen."

Downscale dining, though harder to find, can be more interesting. At Ravi, in a neighborhood of working-class South Asians and Iranians, men in long, loose shirts sit elbow to elbow devouring rice, curries and soft nan, the hand serving as spoon and fork. If you go there, order the succulent cubes of grilled mutton tikka - the waiter will resign himself to seeking real cutlery when he sees you're a stranger in town. At the waterside Fatafeet restaurant, couples smoke fragrant apple tobacco from the long tubes of billowing shisha pipes while families feast on tabbouleh and pomegranate juice.

Many Dubai vacationers bring children, who play at the beach and hurtle downhill on water slides at the Wild Wadi Water Park. In a challenge to a typical tourist reaction in Dubai - that the whole place is an overgrown Disney World - an immense patch of sand near downtown is now being transformed into a new \$19 billion theme park, Dubailand, described on its Web site as "the biggest, most varied leisure, entertainment and tourism attraction on the planet."

At twilight at the week's end, you can almost hear the shouts of "Thank God it's Thursday." With no work on Friday, the Muslim Sabbath, Dubai goes into session as the Middle East party capital. From cheesy populist clubs animated by Filipino cover bands to the exclusive Skyview Bar at the Burj Al Arab hotel - where admission requires reservations days ahead and a cover charge of \$45 (170 dirhams, at 3.75 dirhams to the dollar) - the Arabian night promises conviviality for every social stratum. Yet until the Maktoums build something along the lines of a liquorland - not likely in Islamic Dubai - alcohol is generally restricted to hotels, which can seem more like towering night life complexes where some people happen to sleep.

Amid the hullabaloo one Thursday at MIX, a huge club in a playful curvy-silver space that suggests both Frank Gehry and Dr. Seuss, the young expats bouncing to Nelly and 50 Cent didn't even notice T-Bone, a popular London D.J., as he slalomed through the mostly Anglophone crowd, the only black man in the place, and sidled up to the densely packed bar to wait for his turn in the D.J. booth.

Across town, in the Moroccan-themed Tangerine, a 20-something woman in a white miniskirt hung on to the sleeve of a 60-something man in an ill-fitting tweed blazer as both leaned jauntily against a wall. Whatever they spoke about, mouth to ear, was obliterated by the deafening, chest-crushing hip-hop beat that resounded off the carved wooden screens and mosaic tile floor.

In a dark corner nearby, a beanpole-like bald man from Liverpool looked at the odd old-young crowd and ersatz North African décor and made a remark that is probably repeated at least once every day in Dubai. "The whole thing is totally fake," he said to his date, "but no one seems to care."

Visitor Information

Getting There

Emirates, www.emirates.com, the national carrier for the United Arab Emirates, operates flights from Kennedy airport to Dubai International, with one stop. As of late April, fares in May started at \$1,138. International carriers like Air France and Alitalia have one-stop flights to Dubai from New York. Continental, in partnership with Emirates, offers flights from

Newark that connect through London or Paris. Fares start at \$1,072.

Getting Around

Dubai has three main areas. Deira, the easternmost section of the city, is home to the major souks, the airport and several top hotels. Bur Dubai is the catch-all term for the many districts in the city's geographical and commercial center. Jumeirah, the coastal strip in the southwestern part of the city, contains many luxurious beachfront hotels.

Taxis are the most efficient means of getting around. Clean and abundant, they congregate at city hotels, malls and landmarks, and they can be hailed on the street. Fares operate according to the meter. Expect to pay \$2.50 to \$4 (prices based on 3.75 dirhams to the dollar) to cruise around Bur Dubai, \$5 to \$8 to go from Bur Dubai to Deira and \$8 to \$13 to make the trip from Bur Dubai to Jumeirah.

Numbered street addresses in Dubai tend to be vague or nonexistent. Fortunately, taxi drivers know the locations of nearly all the hotels, malls and major points of interest that travelers visit. If your destination isn't one of these, try to take along a map and a phone number for the driver.

Security

The United Arab Emirates maintains good relations with the United States. Still, it's perhaps worth noting that three of the Sept. 11 hijackers were from the emirates, and the country's proximity to reported terrorist hot spots - notably Saudi Arabia - has caused some Western governments like those of Britain and Australia to issue general warnings about travel in the region.

Where to Stay

With dozens of five-star hotels available and scads more on the drawing board, the city is a head-spinning buffet of gargantuan lobbies and stratospheric thread counts. In this country, three- or four-star hotels provide the "budget" option.

Madinat Jumeirah, (971-4) 366-8888, online at www.madinatjumeirah.com, the most discussed mammoth property of the last year, is a sprawling seaside complex containing two Arabian-themed hotels, 29 luxurious guest houses, a recreated traditional souk, a network of canals and more than 45 restaurants and bars. Double rooms from \$520.

Dubai Marine Beach Resort and Spa, Beach Road, Jumeirah, (971-4) 346-1111, www.dxbmarine.com, is an oceanfront property with some of the hottest restaurant-clubs in town. **Sho-Cho** is a futuristic sushi lounge, while the bar-restaurant **El Malecon** is a slice of old-time Havana decadence. Boudoir, a sultry French restaurant, becomes a throbbing party scene in the wee hours. Doubles from \$219.

The two modern **Emirates Towers** buildings, Sheikh Zayed Road, (971-4) 314-3555, www.emiratestowershotel.com, define the Dubai skyline and cater to a very upscale business clientele. The shopping arcade has many high-end clothing and jewelry stores, trendy bars, and a slew of restaurants. Doubles from \$333. The chic 50th-floor restaurant and lounge, Vu's, (971-4) 319-8088, offers a wonderful panorama of the city.

The **Ibis World Trade Center**, at the Dubai World Trade Center, off Sheikh Zayed Road, (971-4) 332-4444, www.ibishotel.com, with only three stars, is practically a flophouse by Dubai standards. In other words, there are no butlers or helipads. Still, it's extremely clean, centrally located and served by a couple of restaurants and bars. Doubles from \$79.

Where to Eat

The array of nationalities in Dubai translates into an abundance of global cuisines. Ethnic foods from nearby countries - especially India and Lebanon - should not be missed.

At **Asha's**, Waficity Pyramids, (971-4) 324-4100, www.ashasrestaurants.com, the stylish Bombay lounge interior is the right complement to the contemporary Indian cuisine. Choose between the traditional menu (samosas, kebabs) and the fusion menu, which includes a tandoori-smoked salmon appetizer (\$9) and a duck breast cooked in cardamom and honey (\$17).

Al Nafoorah, (971-4) 319-8760, in the lower level of the Emirates Towers, is an elegant Lebanese restaurant serving delights like lamb makenak (sausages in lemon juice, \$5), lubia bil zaite (marinated green beans with tomato, garlic and olive oil, \$4.50), and a mixed grill with three types of meat kebab (\$12).

The British celebrity chef Gordon Ramsay runs **Verre**, in the Hilton Dubai Creek, (971-4) 212-7551, a discreet haven of contemporary French cuisine. Start with quail breast cooked with wild mushrooms (\$18.50) and move to Tasmanian salmon with seared scallops and caviar velouté or roasted lamb (each \$35).

The **Wharf**, in the Mina A Salam hotel. (971-4) 366-6152, overlooking one of the faux (but charming) canals in the Madinat Jumeirah complex, the Wharf specializes in imaginative seafood dishes like crab and lobster salad with avocado and tomato salsa (\$16), tuna carpaccio with pan-fried foie gras (\$17) and roasted red snapper risotto (\$25).

Where to Dance

Club life starts after 11 p.m. most nights, and places generally stay open until 3 a.m.

Tangerine, Fairmont Hotel, Sheikh Zayed Road; (971-4) 311-8100.

Trilogy, Madinat Jumeirah; (971-4) 366-6917.

MIX, Grand Hyatt Dubai; (971-4) 317-2570.

Where to Shop

The Egyptian-themed **Wafi City Mall**, (971-4) 324 4555, www.waficity.com, has what is probably Dubai's most comprehensive mix of upscale stores, fine dining, cool cocktail lounges and entertainment - as well as a spa.

The Mediterranean-style **Mercato Mall**, (971-4) 344-4161, www.mercatoshoppingmall.com, one of the newest additions, has 90 shops and restaurants and a lively, young atmosphere. Stores include Diesel, Mango, Polo Jeans, Fleurt and Cerruti.

For a less corporate retail outing, hit the dazzling gold souk in the Deira district (and haggle like crazy if you plan to buy) or the crowded street-level shops in the Al Karama neighborhood. You'll see all your favorite brands counterfeited with varying degrees of skill.

What to See

The **Burj Al Arab**, (971-4) 301-7777, the world's tallest and arguably most luxurious hotel - chauffeured Rolls-Royce, anyone? - has become so iconic that its distinctive shape graces Dubai license plates. Rather than pay some of the world's tallest prices for a suite (they start at \$1,467 for the smallest), go for a drink at the Skyview bar (which still charges \$45 for the privilege, plus two drinks and canapés). Reservations, (971-4) 301-7600, are vital.

Camel racing takes place at Nad Al Sheba racetrack, (971-4) 336-3666, starting around 7 a.m. on Thursdays and Fridays in the winter and spring.

Dubai Museum, Al Faheidi Fort, Bastakiya, (971-4) 353-1862, is in a building from the late 1700's, and contains a recreated Bedouin village and exhibits on desert Arab life over the centuries. Admission is 80 cents.

SETH SHERWOOD is a freelance writer based in Paris.

Correction: *May 29, 2005, Sunday:*

Because of an editing error, a capsule guide on May 8 with an article about Dubai referred incompletely to flights between that emirate and the United States. In addition to flights that make one stop, Emirates airlines operates daily nonstop service between Kennedy International Airport and Dubai.