

# MIDDLE EAST MAGNET

Everything is on a huge scale in Dubai, discovers Peter Feeney.

**IF DONALD TRUMP** converted to Islam and was dumped in the desert with a cheque book and not much time, he might come up with something like this: a developers' fantasy where coastal ecology and ramshackle souks alike have been bulldozed to build a city of elegant Arabesque glass towers, five-star tourist hotels and traffic jams; a city dedicated solely to profit, part Disney theme park and part Muslim Manhattan, where the sun shines every day and there isn't a solar panel in sight.

Welcome to Dubai.

It's hard to believe that in 1958 this was just a dusty hamlet with no electricity, water or port, and fewer than 40,000 people. Now it's home to more than two million, a significant banking centre and the world's biggest port and airport terminal. Oil has helped, but Dubai has also benefitted from the sagacious leadership of Sheik Rashid and his son, the current Sheik Mohammed. The place isn't perfect, like anything built in haste, but it is politically stable and remarkably tolerant — making it a magnet for investment in a troubled but fast-growing region.

Travel by car (or the new Metro) is recommended — there's nary a pavement in sight and it's a brave pedestrian indeed who would take on the 12-lane Sheikh Zayed Rd. You'll pass a curious vista of groovy high rises alternating with stretches of empty desert and abandoned buildings, half-complete and wrapped in scaffolding. There's a few stalled follies too, such as Dubailand, intended to be the largest collection of theme parks in the world until the latest financial crash nipped this and similar megaprojects in the bud.

I decided on a spot of shopping. Boy had I come to the right place. The Emiratis have elevated the humble shopping mall to a place of secular worship. Shop after shop offered luxury items I'd never heard of that I need



The impressive Sheikh Zayed Grand Mosque.



Dubai Mall has its own aquarium tunnel.

The Mall of the Emirates is so vast you could wander off, get lost and die in some dark corner and not be discovered for months.

for galactic sums of money. For those of us of more modest means if you could shoulder past the scrums of tracksuit-clad Russian tourists you might pick up the latest GAP hoodie for \$100, or a pair of Chuck Taylor Converse shoes for \$75. A highlight for me was watching two Burqua-clad women riffling happily through a bin of lacy racy bras in a lingerie shop.

My guide in this new Mecca to shallow materialism was JJ, a convivial retired New Zealand army officer, now Dubai resident. JJ was typical of the many expats who depart from Dubai airport's less salubrious Terminal 2 to the kind of destinations you'd normally find in a *Tintin* comic. His work was a mysterious pastiche of UN-funded gigs in Afghanistan, consulting for Medivac in Haiti, and assisting Libyan rebel forces in their fight with Gaddafi. Over coffee he shared his beef with Dubai: the way the place is built and run by Third World workers who are bussed in to work six days a week from compounds you'll never find in the tourist guides. There's no minimum wage and an unskilled worker might earn just US\$1 an hour.

But shopping is also about the only place a foreigner like me might get a peek at the principal beneficiaries of this economic apartheid: the native Emirati. Some expats have lived here 10 years and never got to know one. Outnumbered in their own land, at just 18 per cent

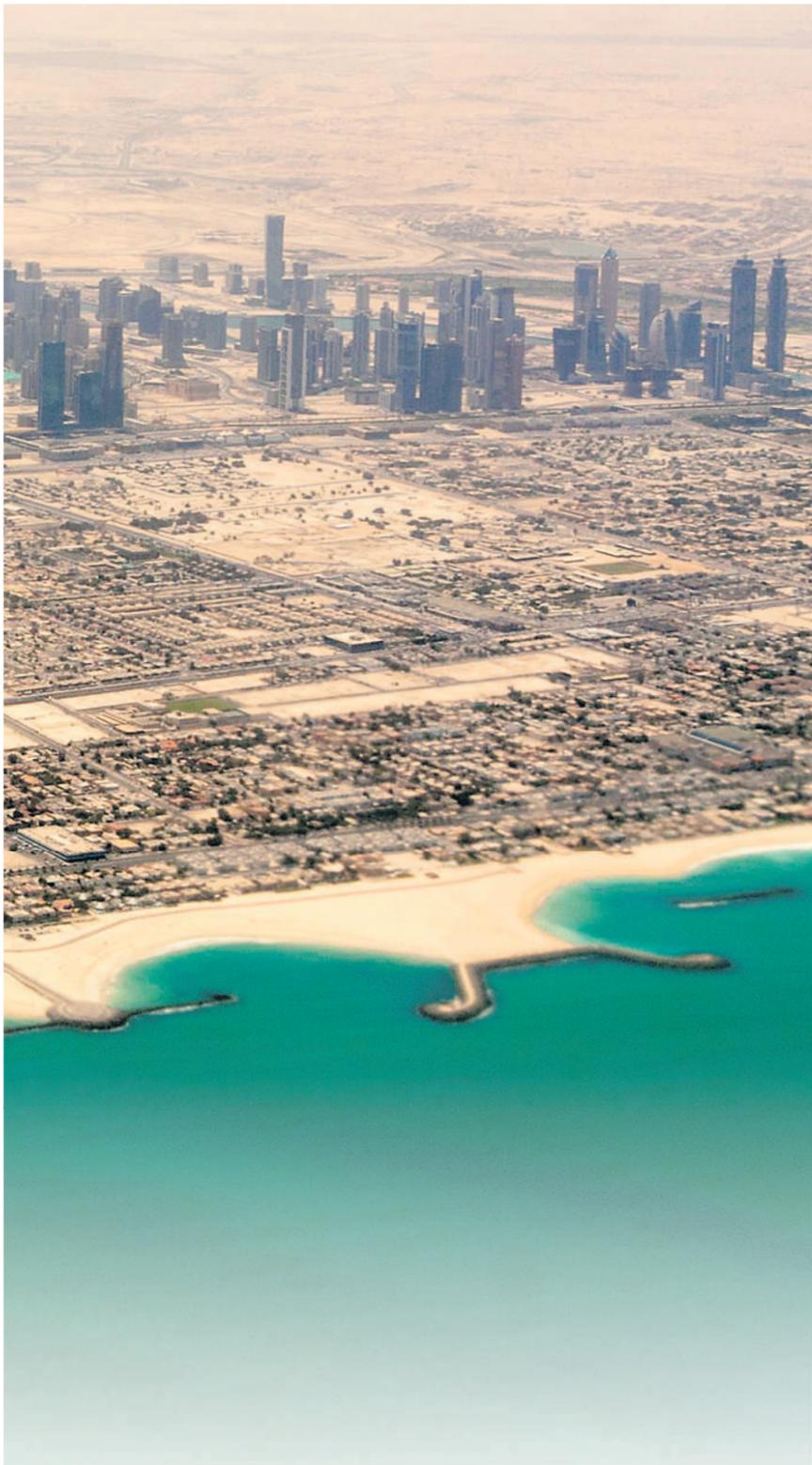
of the population, they're a fabulously wealthy exotic protected species, elegantly attired in their immaculate Kanduras or Abayas. You wait patiently at the check-out for them while ever more parcels of goodies are loaded on the trembling arms of their Filipina nannies.

The Mall of the Emirates is so vast you could wander off, get lost and die in some dark corner and not be discovered for months. And this is only Dubai's second biggest Mall. It had a ski slope but the Dubai Mall, the biggest in the world, of course — the Sheik has to be compensating for *something* — boasts a waterfall and aquarium.

A morning of this and I was ready for a change of scene — Al Karama, the home of cut-price bargains. Al Karama and Deira are part of what is known as Old Dubai, a paradise of cheap knock-off shops where I duly stocked up on cheap Soviet-style heavy metal toys for my children. Next it was a taxi to the wooden arch entrance to the Old Souk and a gander at the wares.

We took an Abra (traditional wooden boat) ride across the Dubai creek to the Spice souk on the other side. Abas depart every few minutes and the fare is — gasp! — 32 cents. In these Arabic markets you'll catch a whiff (literally) of what Dubai was, and how much it has gained — and lost.

On Muslim Holy Day they hot-foot it to the Mosque



The Dubai Metro is the world's second cheapest and features driverless trains.

## Additional Info

### Getting there

Emirates flies from New Zealand four times daily (including two A380 superjumbo services) via Australia to its hub in Dubai.

### Friday brunch

Hundreds of venues offer the traditional expat Friday brunch: highly recommended are the Imperium at the Jumeirah Zabeel Saray Hotel; The Palm (where the ballroom scene in *Mission Impossible Ghost Protocol* was filmed); Bubblicious Brunch at the Westin Mina Seyahi Hotel; Saffron at Atlantis Hotel, The Palm; I could go on ... Prices range from 100dh (\$33) each to more than 600dh (\$200) each. You can choose your package to include soft drinks, regular alcohol or regular alcohol plus bubbles.

### Things to do

Very popular are 4WD drives on the dunes. Packages from \$100 include sand-boarding, a camel ride and barbecue under the stars with a belly dance thrown in for good measure. For different options check out: [www.viator.com/Dubai-tours/Outdoor-Activities/](http://www.viator.com/Dubai-tours/Outdoor-Activities/)

Visit the Burj Khalifa, the world's tallest building. Go on, you know you want to. And if in doubt, you can always head to the beach. Man-made or not, they are stunning.

Finally, if you can, make the drive to nearby Abu Dhabi to see how the other half of the UAE live. Sheikh Zayed Mosque there really is stunning. And of course really, really, really big. Really.

### Some Facts

- The Emirate of Dubai is just 4000sq km, one of seven emirates that make up the UAE.
- Sea water is boiled to make it drinkable and Dubaians use more of it per person than any nation on earth. With year-round aircon and a rampant car culture (one for every two people) Dubai has the greatest environmental footprint in



4WD dune bashing is popular.



- the world (the US comes second).
- Rapid growth has stretched the city's infrastructure: there's no piped sewage system in Dubai, just fleets of tankers that collect human waste and queue for hours to dump it in the city's only sewage treatment plant. There are also no street names for much of the city and, when they are, the same names are often repeated. This can make navigation a little tricky.
- The Metro is the world's second cheapest. All the trains run without a driver and are based on automatic navigation.

and our lot pay homage to the legendary Friday brunch. Customarily this is a lavish affair at one of many licensed premises but my visit coincided with my friends Shanthé and Dan's home-cooked version, topped off with French Champagne. Around midday a mob of expat Kiwis invaded the villa and made themselves at home for the day. And the afternoon ... and the evening ... The next morning, somewhat worse for wear, I was whisked off to the airport, New Zealand, and the colossal come down of family life. My kids' new toys fell apart within minutes, reduced to metal carcasses hefty enough to knock out a 4-year-old if flung across the room. Amid the carnage I reflected on Dubai: outsize, strategically located, breathtaking, frightening, surprising and — for the expats who have made it home — very comfortable. Not to mention safe. And in the turbulent corner of world that is the Middle East just that's an important achievement.

- Peter Feeney flew to Dubai with Emirates Airlines.

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