

BUILDING CASTLES OUT OF SAND

It's the home of the tallest building, longest metro and biggest shopping malls on earth and is the manifestation of fearless vision, a touch of eccentricity and no-holds-barred creativity... Welcome to Dubai

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Forty years ago Dubai was a low slung village along a small salty creek. Today the creek is still there – longer, deeper, wider and bustling – and the glistening skyscraper city of Dubai now attracts tourists and real estate investors. Here, if you can think it, you can build or buy it.

When Dubai's ruler Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid al Maktoum said he would write on water, nobody imagined he'd build massive palm-shaped islands and another collection resembling all the continents of the world from reclaimed land. Just over a decade ago, where these developments now adorn the coastline was the open expanse of the Arabian Sea. Now, the world is literally in Dubai.

"The word 'impossible' is not in the leaders' dictionaries," Sheikh Mohammad is noted as saying, and his revered father Sheikh Rashid felt the same. The Bedouins living along Dubai creek were perplexed when Sheikh Rashid ordered the creek to be lengthened, deepened and widened – and then had to build bridges over it. Before, they could easily cross the stream with their camels. But Sheikh Rashid was a visionary and the bigger creek soon attracted traders from other lands.

Then, when Dubai struck oil in the mid-60s development took off. The ultra modern city literally rose from the desert to become a sparkling icon of the Middle East, a benchmark of success and prosperity and the manifestation of that belief that nothing, absolutely nothing, is impossible.

Not only is the world's most incredulous city built entirely on sand, but there is not a drop of surface water either. Yet, Dubai is a green garden city, with every plant drip irrigated with desalinated water which also runs through all the city's water pipes.

From the same desert sands emerged Burj Khalifa, the world's tallest building with the footprint of a flower. At 828m or 200 floors, Burj Khalifa is named for Sheikh Khalifa bin Zayed al Nahyan, President of the United Arab Emirates and Emir of Abu Dhabi. The building sways by design, and as you ascend to the 124th floor viewing deck (at 452m), in a lift that takes under a minute, you have to equalise your ears.

Stepping out onto the open air viewing deck, you look down on all the surrounding skyscrapers of the city. So tall is the majestic, magnificent, spired Burj Khalifa, it can be seen 95km away.

This is how far Dubai has advanced since 1979, when the plain, Lego-like World Trade Centre at 139 floors was the tallest building around by far. Now the gleaming city has 65 towers that are all taller than 200m and it boasts the world's biggest skyline. Iconic in design on this renowned skyline are the twin Jumeira Emirates Towers at 350m and 305m respectively. This hotel and office complex is primarily a business hotel with every conceivable luxury for the travelling executive.

Possibly more renowned and recognisable is Burj al Arab, built on an island of land reclaimed from the ocean. Designed to resemble a traditional Arab dhow with full sail, Burj al Arab is the world's only 7-star all-suite hotel. What this really means is that it's unclassified in terms of luxury and service, and at over 320m tall remains the second tallest hotel on earth.

Roger Federer and Andre Agassi famously played ▶

Dubai Marina is unlike any other marina in the world, encrusted with dozens of elaborate high rise towers. Seen from Jumeira Palm, the marina could easily be mistaken for a 'down town' skyline.



Still under construction, the Infinity Tower located in the Dubai Marina is twisting a little more each day and has locals guessing how much further it will go. The final plans for the building have not been made public.



The world's only seven star hotel, so named because it surpasses all star gradings, Burj al Arab's aerial helipad is where Federer and Agassi also played tennis.

tennis on the hotel's lofty helipad, and Tiger Woods has driven a golf ball off it too. Another unique Burj al Arab special was its 27,321 cocktail. That was the price of the cocktail in local Dirhams, making it around R55,000! While on the menu, it was ordered just twice and drunk only once, as the guest felt the first attempt to mix the cocktail wouldn't taste as good as the second.

The high price of the 27,321 cocktail reflects the height of Burj al Arab – 127 floors or 321m tall.

Nearby, the Jumeira Beach Hotel is designed to look like a breaking wave, while the Dursit Thani Hotel in the city is built in the form of a skyscraper arch and illuminated blue at night. Also lit blue, Grosvenor House on West Marina Beach looks like a rocket set for lift off. The Dubai Marina, which is encrusted with elaborate towers, is what locals have nicknamed "the twisted building".

Still not complete, bets are on to see if the Infinity Tower will twist a full 360 degrees by completion.

Dubai works hard and plays hard too, so entertainment is also on a grand scale. There are constant international sporting events, the world's richest horse race, camel racing, motor racing, desert dune bashing and more. Still, Dubai is arguably best known for its phenomenal shopping and its shopping malls are also built to be remembered. Wafi is a huge pyramid and the interior depicts ancient Egypt replete with Pharonic statues, Dubai Mall is a mega shopper's paradise of 1-million m² with more than 1200 shops and every international designer label imaginable showcased there.

Ibn Battuta is named for the Arab explorer and is a study in fine mosaic, while the Mall of the Emirates is not just a super-sized shopping experience but also houses Ski Dubai. Here, when the temperature tips 45 degrees in summer outside, you can ski inside down 3000m² of real snow slopes.

Built on the crescent of reclaimed land surrounding



The two Jumeirah Emirates towers stand out on the skyline of Dubai because of their unusual shape. The luxury business hotel has 400 suites and stands strategically in the commercial heart of Dubai, right on the famous Sheikh Zayed Road.

Palm Jumeira, is Atlantis – reached by an undersea connecting road. It appears as a gateway to the Arabian Sea, but is actually a vast hotel and entertainment complex built to resemble the fabled lost city of Atlantis. Here, there's an entire underwater city, dramatic water rides and a marine aquarium that's home to 65,000 sea creatures. You can even sleep underwater at Atlantis.

Dubai is without doubt a city of superlatives, a playground for all ages in a setting that is crime-free, meticulously clean and well ordered. But despite the enormous wealth and prosperity, the old Dubai can still be seen. Along the creek, wooden boats from India, Iran and further afield ply their trade. The souks buzz with activity and the Emirati go about their daily lives, men robed in pure white head to toe, women in black and bling.

There are just over 2-million people in the city, and most of them are from the rest of the world, but there's plenty of space for everyone to enjoy the multi-faceted Dubai – a fantastical city, built by the hands of over 100 nations and so too for all to enjoy. ●

fact file

For general information see www.dubaitourism.ae; Shopping see: www.thedubaimall.com; Burj Khalifa see: www.burjkhalifa.ae Burj al Arab see: www.jumeirah.com; culture see: www.cultures.ae

Burj Khalifa holds many titles: it's the world's tallest building, tallest free standing structure, has the highest number of stories and the highest occupied floor and observation deck, as well as the elevator with the longest distance to travel and the highest service elevator in the world.

