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Insider city guides 2016: Dubai

Danae Mercer Published: 27 March 2016



Dubai: an already frenzied city gone into overdrive (John McIntosh/Getty)

Dubai is a city that loves change — and no wonder, given that in the past 50 years it has shot up from little more than desert to lay claim to a mountain of superlatives: the largest mall, the tallest building, the largest manmade marina, the most spectacular artificial islands. The most superlatives? Possibly...

The announcement that Dubai had been chosen to host Expo 2020 sent already frenzied development into overdrive. Luxury hotels and innovative restaurants are springing up left, right and centre, a canal is being built to connect the Dubai Creek with the Arabian Gulf, and a 500ft-high picture frame telling the story of the emirate is due to open later this year.

Dubai continues to be a city where the improbable is possible, and what's new, what's exciting and what's next is all that really matters.

The new district: Kite Beach

The Jumeirah Corniche — which runs for nearly nine miles along the beachfront from the Burj Al Arab to the Dubai Marine Beach Resort — has just had a £19m revamp, and Kite Beach is at the

centre of it. It has hipster pop-up restaurants, a 2½-mile running track, a large skate park, an outdoor trampoline park and endless stretches of neatly groomed sand. Arrive before 10am to bag a prime spot; loungers can be rented for the day (£6).

The beach is named after its popularity with kitesurfers, who converge here in the afternoon, when the wind picks up. Want to give it a go? Dukite offers one-hour taster sessions for £67, or a more comprehensive course with eight hours of instruction for £541 (dukite.com). If you've already mastered the sport, you can hire equipment (£48 an hour or £133 a day; dukite.com). For a more leisurely dose of watersports, there's also stand-up paddleboarding (£10 an hour; seaworlddsf.com).

To refuel, grab a shaded table by the funky cluster of beach shacks that make up Kite Beach Kiosk. Our tips? Falafel burgers laced with punchy garlic mayonnaise (£10; parkhouse.ae), followed by frozen bananas pimped with date syrup and chocolate sauce (£3; wannabananasnack.com).

Shopping

If you're heading to the Dubai Mall, the world's biggest, brace yourself: it truly is huge, intimidatingly so, and it gets very, very busy. This is not the place for a gentle mooch: you need a strategy. First off, arrive before noon, when the crowds start to swell, and have at least an idea of which of the 1,200 outlets, ranging from ultra-luxe to tourist tat, you want to dip your toe into. Level Shoe District, the largest shoe store in the world, is as bank balance-imperilling as it sounds (levelshoedistrict.com). Kinokuniya is an enormous bookstore with half a million tomes, great affordable regional art and an airy Japanese cafe.

The Ibn Battuta Mall is a unique venue based on the travels of a 14th-century Arabian explorer. In "Egypt", you'll find sporty brands such as Nike; "Persia" has your high-street Forever 21 and H&M. The decorations alone are worth a wander (ibnbattutamall.com).

A breezy area in the Jumeirah Beach Residence, the Beach has a real Santa Monica Boulevard feel, with little restaurants, a jogging track, a cinema and sun worshippers reclining on any exposed space. Shops tend to be boutique and expensive, with a few mid-range brands thrown in. Check out S*uce on Sea for a range of quirky small designers: think one-piece cossies decorated with pineapples (prices start at about £230). Or hit Sephora for make-up experimentation (thebeach.ae).

Nightlife

Dubai loves ladies' nights. In fact, if you're the right gender, it's possible to drink free, or at least cheaply, every night of the week (ladiesnightsdubai.com). On Tuesdays, the chilled-out, trendy Media One Hotel offers three free drinks (wine or spirits) at its Q43 bar and restaurant (mediaonehotel.com). Get there by 6pm and grab a standing table near one of the windows for views of the sun setting across Palm Jumeirah.

Want swanky boats and sea? Head to the Yacht Club for pre-dinner drinks on the terrace and soak up the waterfront views (dubaimarinayachtclub.com).

Theatrical nightlife has been big lately. Check out the circus-influenced acrobatic performances at Pacha Ibiza-Dubai. Book a dinner table next to the stage to enjoy the show, then stay on after the tables are cleared away and dance late into the night (minimum spend £75pp, or £105pp by the stage; club entrance free; pacha.ae).

Brunching is a Dubai institution that brings nightlife into the day, with all-you-can-eat-and-drink weekend afternoons. Running from noon through to 4pm, these gluttonous parties can easily cost £100 — but the best are well worth it. A favourite is Bubblicious, which joins three of the Westin's restaurants to create a multi-room buffet offering sushi, an oyster bar, a dedicated chocolate table and 10 live cooking stations (£105pp for brunch, including free-flowing sparkling wine; westinminaseyahi.com).

Adrenaline

Skiing in a mall in the desert — it's brilliantly bizarre, and definitely worth a go. The Alps it ain't, but at nearly 250,000 sq ft, Ski Dubai makes a pretty good fist of recreating the experience, with real snow and five runs of varying difficulty, the longest extending for 1,300ft and dropping 200ft. With outerwear (except gloves) and skis provided, it's easy enough to stroll in after you've been shopping and buy a multi-entry day pass (£60; theplaymania.com). Snowboarding and ski lessons are also available.

Atlantis the Palm's Aquaventure is perhaps the most eye-catching water park around, with a shark-filled lagoon, Aquaconda — the world's largest waterslide — and the truly terrifying Poseidon's Revenge. When you recover your senses, there are lovely views of the surrounding Palm Jumeirah and the Arabian Gulf (day rate £50; atlantisthepalm.com).

They're even better from 13,000ft. Sign up with Skydive Dubai and you'll be bundling out at the dropzone over the Palm in tandem with a skydive instructor and enjoying a face-distorting free fall of about a minute before gently floating in to land. Book at least a month ahead, as slots fill up quickly, and be prepared for last-minute changes, depending on the weather (£385; skydivedubai.ae).

Clever classics

Burj Khalifa

At nearly 3,000ft, with 160 storeys, the world's tallest building will be a constant presence during your stay in Dubai. You have several options for scaling it, with most of the crowds making for the At the Top viewing platform (from £24; burjkhalifa.ae). At.mosphere, the fine-dining restaurant on the 122nd floor, is a more refined alternative, with red accents, highly polished wooden tables and floor-to-ceiling windows. If your budget doesn't quite stretch to the £170pp minimum spend needed to bag a window table for dinner, head to the adjacent lounge — the minimum spend for a table with the same view drops to £48pp. With a 2½-hour time slot, and Bacardi-watermelon El Sueño cocktails on the menu, you won't struggle.

Gold souk

You don't need to worry about buying a fake in the 300 or so government-regulated shops of Dubai's gold souk (goldsoukdubai.net), but be prepared for enthusiastic street vendors and throngs of shoppers winding between stacks of elaborate gold jewellery. Go after 4pm, when the crowds are at their thinnest, and take a calculator to separate the price of the gold (non-negotiable, priced by carat) from the mark-up on the craftsmanship of the piece (negotiable, sometimes by up to a third). Barter hard and use cash or a speedy exit to help your case.

For a cheaper, quieter but ultimately less atmospheric experience, head for the Gold & Diamond Park (goldanddiamondpark.com).

Out of town

A good desert excursion from Dubai will feature dune-bashing, a Middle Eastern feast, stargazing and some fun (if inauthentic) belly dancing. Arabian Adventures offers all of this on its excellent days out in air-conditioned 4x4s (£72pp; arabian-adventures.com). A bit sedate? Sign up for its Rides and Slides trip, which includes camel rides, sandboarding and a car to take you back up the dune after each descent (£52pp for a half-day).

A trip in a hot-air balloon is one of the best ways to see the real beauty of the desert. Book with Balloon Adventures, which will have you in the sky for about an hour as the sun comes up, with the Al Hajar Mountains in the distance and oryx striding imperiously over the sands below (£190pp; ballooning.ae).

For an authentic camping experience, try Platinum Heritage, which swaps modern cars for 1950s Land Rovers and offers evening bonfires and cooking demonstrations. In the morning, you'll sample authentic dishes such as balaleet — a salty-sweet breakfast noodle dish flavoured with cardamom — in the company of a local Bedouin (£173pp; platinum-heritage.com).

Things are altogether more luxurious at the Al Maha Desert Resort & Spa. Hang out in your private pool, watch protected oryx and gazelles wander the Dubai Desert Conservation Reserve, or head to the spa for a fig and date body scrub and oil massage (suites from £560; al-maha.com).

Restaurants

Tom & Serg

This bustling cafe in the urban district of Al Quoz serves amazing salted caramel French toast, as well as really good coffee, in an urban-trendy environment. Grab a couch, order the flat white and bed in for a couple of hours.

Mains from £8; tomandserg.com

Enigma

Set in the newly opened Palazzo Versace Dubai, Enigma has a rota of visiting Michelin-starred chefs

serving up signature dishes for a limited period. The innovative cuisine — think sautéed truffle and mushrooms with smoking moss — is served in a softly lit, curtain-shrouded room.

Tasting menu from £145; enigmadx.com

Baker & Spice

An unassuming restaurant in Souk Al Bahar, with great salads and a top veggie lasagne. The best thing, though, is the view, which takes in the dancing Dubai Fountain and the Burj Khalifa beyond. You can't book, so get there by 6pm for that all-important outdoor table.

Mains from £13; bakerandspiceme.com

Marina Social

Jason Atherton's hot new dining spot in the InterContinental has dark-wood interiors and cracking views of Dubai Marina. The six-course tasting menu includes dishes such as black truffle risotto topped with crispy parmesan.

Mains from £13, menus from £87; marinasocialdubai.com

Bu Qtair

This laid-back seaside cafe on the Jumeirah Beach Road serves no-frills, superfresh fried fish. You can expect to queue for up to an hour at this Dubai institution, but once you're dipping flat Indian bread into spicy coconut fish curry, you'll know it was worth it.

Market price £15-£20 for two

Hotels

XVA Art Hotel

Brash, rather than boutique, is the signature style of most Dubai hotels, but the XVA Art is something of an exception. In a sleepy spot in the Al Fahidi Historical Neighbourhood, it's all tree-shaded courtyards, traditional barajeel wind towers and striking art. (It has a gallery.) The 13 air-conditioned rooms are understated, and seven of them have private terraces.

Doubles from £68; xvahotel.com

Vida Downtown Dubai

The Vida has a chic urban vibe, with a minimalist colour scheme and coffee-nursing millennials tapping and swiping away in the buzzing lobby. The cool, unfussy feel extends to the rooms, decorated in shades of white, cream and brown, with abstract art and floor-to-ceiling windows framing the frenzy beyond. Here for the shopping? The Dubai Mall is a short distance away.

Doubles from £131; vida-hotels.com

Four Seasons Resort Dubai at Jumeirah Beach

Five stars, two outdoor pools and an amazing beachfront location — what's not to love about this exclusive resort in Jumeirah? Rooms are huge, with standalone oval tubs. Opt for a beach-facing one for amazing sunsets. *Doubles from £164; fourseasons.com*

InterContinental Dubai Marina

Opened in mid-2015, this is one of the slickest hotels in the city, with a distinctly cool vibe. Marina-facing rooms are the ones to bag if you want to watch the sleek yachts skimming past, while the pool is best enjoyed in the morning, when it catches the sunlight. There are no less than nine restaurants and bars. Our favourite? The funky gin bar, Ginter, for a fruit-infused G&T.

Doubles from £147; ihg.com/intercontinental

The discovery: RTA ferry

Don't be deceived by the humdrum name: these sleek modern vessels offer great comfort, as well as endless photo opportunities, on their hour-long tours. Highlights include Dubai Marina, Jumeirah Beach, the Burj Al Arab and Palm Jumeirah. Top tip: buy a silver (second-class) ticket, not a gold one, as you'll all end up out on the deck (£10; dubai-ferry.com).

A local's view

Natalia Shustova is a lawyer, fashionista and social influencer (shoestova.com)

I love shopping in the Dubai Mall, but the city's outlets are absolutely amazing, too. I recommend the Dubai Outlet Mall for great shoes, even if it is a 20-minute drive out of town. You can get a taxi there and back (dubaioutletmall.com). Much closer is Priceless, in Al Maktoum Road, Deira, which stocks everything Harvey Nichols and Bloomingdale's do. They have fabulous prices, such as shoes reduced

from £950 to £40.

I take friends to the Blue Marlin Ibiza beach club because that's where I spend all my weekends. It's a great spot, with international DJs such as Luciano and Kenny Glasgow. I'd recommend Friday for an amazing beach party, or Saturday for relaxed sunset cocktails (£14; blumarlinibiza-uae.com).

I also love Ripe Market, an artsy outdoor food and craft market where you can find everything from handmade tutu skirts to customisable wedding photo books (Fridays in Zabeel Park; ripeme.com).

The trend: beach clubs

Crowded public beaches have sparked the city's love of pay-for-the-day private clubs. New to the scene is Cove Beach, at the Jumeirah Beach Hotel, with fab views and a central location (£60 for a sunbed; covebeach.com). Linked to the Jebel Ali Golf Resort, Purobeach UAE has a lava-stone pool, cabanas and DJs (£48 for a sunbed, including £39 food-and-drink voucher; purobeach.com). Riva Beach Resort is still the one to beat, though. Arrive before 11am and breeze past the pool to snag a lounge on the beach. From there, you can enjoy free water, ice lollies, chilled towels and, of course, Dubai's endless sunshine (£33 a day on weekends; riva-beach.com).

Danae Mercer was a guest of the Four Seasons Resort Dubai, the InterContinental Dubai Marina and the Vida Downtown Dubai

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Marie Gooljar

2 days ago

When countries from the Middle East like Dubai invest in other countries it integral that the rules of that country are followed. The United Kingdom is one of the most we'll renowned feminist countries in the world. The Middle East is renowned for not backing females & maybe that's why it invests financially into the United Kingdom to gain some of these feminist values and take them back to their societies. It's a great place for a holiday.

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