

REMAKING MECCA

As it prepares to host Expo 2020, the commercial hub of the Emirates is in the grip of a construction frenzy, fuelling the seemingly never-ending expansion of shopping and leisure options for both locals and tourists.



DANAE MERCER

A Dubai-based author and editor of an international luxury magazine

During summers in Dubai, when the heat edges first past 30 and then 40 degrees Centigrade, residents do one thing en masse: they shop. They visit large luxury malls as soon as the sun goes down, sometimes to buy from Bulgari, Montblanc or Omega, sometimes to simply break in new Louboutins.

The major malls battle with “come visit me” attractions – the Mall of the Emirates features a ski slope, the Dubai Mall has won acclaim as the largest mall in the Middle East (with an entire section dedicated to luxury shoes), the Ibn Battuta Mall – themed around the travels of a 14th-century Moroccan explorer and scholar – holds the promise of stepping into an oriental world. All have individual cinemas (often with “platinum level” tickets that include reclining chairs and table-side menu service), restaurants and enough attractions to fill not just hours, but even days.

Yet these humongous malls weren’t enough. In the summer of 2014, Dubai officials announced plans to build the Mall of the World, billed as the biggest shopping mecca on Earth, capable of handling some 180 million visitors each year. When complete, this centrepiece of the “world’s first temperature-controlled city” will feature the planet’s largest indoor theme

park and a seven-kilometre European-inspired covered street network.

When the mall was announced, United Arab Emirates residents were intrigued but not terribly surprised. In Dubai, “new” is the new black. It’s the big thing – the buzzword, the drive, the pulsing trend that stretches through everything the city does. And for visitors, particularly those with expendable income, this means Dubai is constantly changing. The city will always have its winding souks, filled with gold, spices, and hordes of tourists. It will always have its sleepy *abras* (traditional wooden boats) crossing the glimmering Creek as yachts bob in the harbour; and it will always maintain its love of luxury. But against this backdrop, there comes a constant wave of new attractions, both big and small.

HIGH PERFORMANCE

To experience what’s new in Dubai on the “small scale”, look no further than Dubai’s food scene, where brunches reign supreme. These lavish all-day affairs tend to feature free-flowing champagne alongside food cooked by Michelin-starred chefs. Popular classics include the Grand Friday Brunch at Madinat Jumeirah’s Mina A’Salam, which offers room after room of decadent dishes set alongside a manicured waterfront. At the Westin Dubai’s Bubblicious, fusion-food, hidden rooms and outdoor cabanas tempt the decadent diner.

The latest trend is fine dining flavoured with a side of entertainment. At Shangri-La Hotel Dubai’s The Act, a regular rotation of shows takes the stage, with performances ranging from the acrobatic to the slightly burlesque. Given that the team behind The Act is the same lot who created the salaciously infamous The Box in London, this is no big surprise. The interiors are decadent (plush red velvet and vaguely Victoriana), while a special VIP area surrounds the main stage.

Across town, at Pacha Ibiza Dubai – the satellite of the notorious Spanish island dance club – any mix of acts performs on a given night. Visitors might see ribbon-dancers and *Great Gatsby*-esque couples on stage, or sinewy singers and acrobatics flipping from the space’s



DUBAI IS A CITY INTOXICATED WITH THE NEWEST AND THE BEST. FOR TRAVELLERS, THIS MEANS NO TWO VISITS NEED EVER BE THE SAME

high ceiling. The menu offers deluxe treats such as dim sum filled with blue lobster and white truffle, and succulent Wagyu beef.

Even The Ivy Dubai – sister space of the iconic London venue – has dipped its toe in the mix, offering interactive operatic performances.

As with anything new in Dubai, it’s hard to say how long this trend will last, but given the positive reception so far, dinner theatre and nightclubbing seem set to continue.

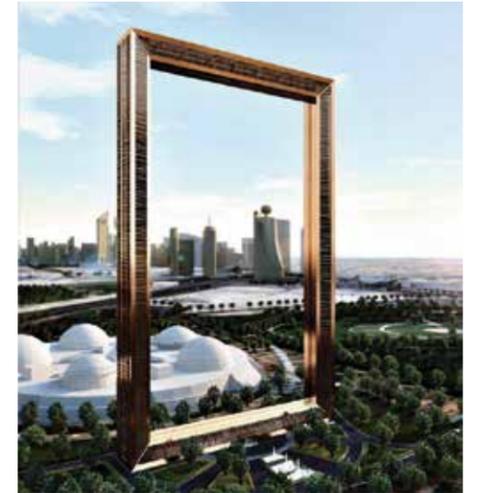
CONSTANTLY SHIFTING

Food is one thing, but change in Dubai is happening most obviously in the world of new buildings, parks, walkways and leisure attractions, as the city prepares to host Expo 2020.

FROM TOP LEFT

Pacha Ibiza Dubai, a satellite of the Spanish island dance club, was designed by David Alayeto. It presents any mix of acts on a given night. Dubai Frame – 150 metres high and 93 metres wide – will be unveiled later this year.

COURTESY PACHA IBIZA CLUB / DUBAI FRAME



An “old” attraction that will get a touch-up will be the Dubai Miracle Gardens, which opened in 2013. Entering this oasis is a bit like falling down Alice’s rabbit hole, with over 45 million flowers strewn across elaborately manicured constructions – giant flower pots pouring streams of roses into waiting pools, flowers in the shape of flags, a Ferrari car decorated in flowers. There are plans for a butterfly garden, featuring 10,000 live butterflies. To top it off, there’s the Dubai Rainforest, which will allow visitors to explore the jungle (in the middle of the desert, of course) before relaxing at a rainforest spa, complete with hydrothermal treatments, rock pools and steam baths.

Later this year, the Dubai Frame will be unveiled. Measuring 150 metres high and 93 metres wide, with glass lifts and walkway, the impressive gilded frame is designed to allow visitors panoramic views of the city. From one side, there are views of old Dubai – stretching across the creek, including the souks – and from the other side, there’s the “new” Dubai, including the Burj Al Arab Jumeirah and the Burj Khalifa.

Just on the horizon is Aladdin City – three lamp-shaped and interconnected commercial towers along the creek in old Dubai, something right out of Aladdin and Sinbad. Meanwhile, Bluewaters Island, set to emerge next to Palm Jumeirah, will house the Dubai Eye – expected to be the world’s largest Ferris wheel – alongside shops and entertainment.

Taken together, these new developments add to the city’s constantly shifting skyline and lifestyle. Dubai is a city intoxicated with the newest and the best. For travellers, this means no two visits need ever be the same. ☺