



# CITY OF GOLD

MICHELLE BALMER RETURNS TO DUBAI IN SEARCH OF THE CITY'S GOLD STATUS AND FINDS A MORE AFFORDABLE FACE TO THIS GLITTERING METROPOLIS

I arrive in Dubai greeted by a pale pink morning sky. A hint of the desert winter cools my cheeks as I cruise in a taxi down Sheikh Zayed Road.

This is my first visit to my former home, since I left four months ago. Now I'm in Dubai as a tourist, and for the next four days I'm on a mission to see what new attractions and value the city holds now.

A lot has changed in Dubai and its surrounds. Buildings that were skeletons of concrete and steel just a few months ago are now adorned with glass windows and shiny metal panels. Most noticeably nearing completion is the Burj Dubai – the world's tallest tower – ascending from the desert floor. The official height of the building – rumoured to be just under one kilometre – remains 'highly confidential'. And, even though the impressive structure won't be ready until 9th September 2009, it has already been crowned with a needle and a strobe light that warn aircraft of its presence.

You don't need a strobe to notice the Burj Dubai from the ground. The tower is visible from many parts of the city, including the window from my hotel room at the Holiday Inn Express Safa Park. For years much of Dubai's accommodation has focused on super luxury resorts that were out of reach for many tourists. Fast-forward to 2009 and the luxury resorts still remain, but price-wise there has probably never been a better time to visit Dubai. Coinciding with the opening of several mid-range hotels, including the Holiday Inn Express, plus the Ibis and Premier Inn, Dubai Tourism is promoting 'affordable luxury', in a bid to continue to lure the visitors that the city has worked so hard to attract.

'Affordable luxury' is a campaign with substance, backed up by 'hot deals' at many hotels across the city. Since my departure last year there have been reductions even in daily room rates in the luxury sector. Typically, daily hotel rates do fluctuate according to occupancy and

season and, while there are no official figures available, the rates of some hotels have dropped.

Dubai – just like the rest of the world – has been affected by the economic downturn leading to a number of construction projects being postponed, though this shouldn't deter visitors. In fact, with competitive hotel rates and many exciting projects already complete, Dubai Tourism still remains positive about projected visitor numbers. In the first quarter of 2008 the majority of Dubai's visitors were from Europe, with Ireland and United Kingdom dominating this group. The up-scale hotels, world-class

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Opposite page: The Burj Dubai. This page, clockwise from top left: Chandelier in the gold souk; A boat docks in Deira; Arab man haggles at Dubai Global Village; The Park Hyatt.

golf courses and designer strip malls that are finished retain a serious 'wow' factor, especially the world's largest shopping centre, Dubai Mall – which has a floor space that equals 50 football pitches. But, for now, the only sure thing is that, with substantial savings in hotel costs, tourists can splurge on leisure activities or eating out at one of Dubai's 500 restaurants and fine dining venues.

Hotel restaurants are where you should head if you fancy a glass of wine with your meal – in Dubai alcohol can only be served at these licensed establishments. I decide on The Westin Mina Seyahi Hotel, one of the latest beach hotels to open its doors. This is a fine example of a property on a mission to come up with clever and creative promotions in their bar and dining outlets. In case you're thinking boring hotel bites, think again – The Westin is a foodie's destination. At Spice Emporium I sample Asian fusion food unlike any I have ever tasted. In the restaurant's open kitchen, French Chef Alain Allaire merges Thai, Malaysian, Japanese, Chinese and Vietnamese flavours to reveal a delicious crab meat in an intensely fragrant broth, while I sink into one of the luxurious



upholstered chairs and sip champagne. In between courses I am surprised with a shot of miso soup before being presented with an elegant platter of wafer thin layers of salmon sashimi along with his signature dish, which features delicate Chilean Sea bass.

If you're interest in marine life goes beyond sashimi and sea bass on a restaurant menu, it's worth a visit to the aquarium Lost Chambers at Atlantis, The Palm. Underneath the extravagant hotel is an aquatic zoo that's home to 65 000 marine species including a 150-kilogram grouper. One of the main attractions

has been the four-meter-long whale shark named Sammy who feeds on 26 kilograms of krill each day. Getting to the aquarium at the colossal salmon-coloured Atlantis hotel involves a drive onto the Palm Jumeirah, which is one of Dubai's most famous construction feats. Either side of the main road that runs along the trunk of the palm-tree-shaped island, lie fronds that reveal rows of waterfront homes with manicured gardens and security gates that scream exclusivity.

However, if serenity and low-key luxury are more your style, make your way to the Park Hyatt at Dubai Creek.

## DUBAI ADVENTURE

Step off the typical tourist trail and consider some of Dubai's adventure activities. Blue skies, sand dunes and the Arabian Gulf offer a plethora of options for those seeking an adrenalin rush. Dubai also boasts year-round sunshine, with a mean annual rainfall of less than 26 days, and sea temperatures from 20 – 32 degrees Celsius.



### AERIAL ADVENTURES

The only way to appreciate the massive scale of Dubai's construction projects is to go with one of Dubai's reputable aviation operators.

Hover over Dubai in style with **Falcon Aviation Services**. Helicopter flights depart from Dubai Festival City. Tel: +971 2 444 0007; [www.falconaviation.ae](http://www.falconaviation.ae)

Offering an alternative to helicopter tours, **Seawings** operate a Cessna 208 Caravan float plane. Tel: +971 4 883 2999; [www.seawings.ae](http://www.seawings.ae)



### AQUA ADVENTURES

Water activities are a great adventure option any time of year.

Swim with Indo-Pacific bottlenose dolphins at **Dolphin Encounter**, Atlantis The Palm. Tel: +971 4 426 1000; [www.atlantisthepalm.com](http://www.atlantisthepalm.com)

Try an introductory kiteboarding lesson or continue with your IKO certification with **Kitepeople**. Tel: +97150 455 9098; [www.kitepeople.net](http://www.kitepeople.net)



### DESERT ADVENTURES

Desert safaris with an extreme edge.

Quad bikes and twin dune buggy rides are just some of the desert experiences on offer from **Blue Banana**. Tel: +971 4 436 8100; [www.bluebanana.ae](http://www.bluebanana.ae)

Float over a lunar landscape of desert dunes with **Balloon Adventures Dubai** (end September to end May). Tel: +971 4 285 4949; [www.balloon.ae](http://www.balloon.ae)



**Opposite page, from far left:** Guardian statues at the Egyptian-themed Mall; Aerial view of the city. **This page, clockwise from top left:** Dubai Mall; Arabic heart boxes at a street stand.



This Arabesque haven of white-washed buildings topped with blue domes is a hot favourite. You can't beat the Park Hyatt's Amara Spa for pampering in an Arabian Nights atmosphere. The spa's signature scent of sandalwood, frankincense, myrrh and amber wafts in the air as you walk past flickering lanterns under arched doorways to get to the open-air relaxation room of the spa. From there your meditative state begins. If you spend the rest of the day lounging by the pool and find sunset is looming, there's a relaxing bar along the terrace, with views to a marina crammed with million-dollar yachts.

A cab-ride back across the creek and off Sheikh Zayed Road is Neos, the latest swanky new bar that's a must-see. Occupying the 63rd floor of The Address,

Downtown Burj Dubai – winner of 'Best new hotel' at Germany's World Hotel Awards – Neos is currently the highest bar in Dubai. The views of Burj Dubai and the surrounding Downtown Burj Dubai project are jaw-droppingly impressive. 180-degree views lead your eye out toward the Arabian sea and over Dubai's staggering number of skyscrapers.

Looking down onto the buildings, I contemplate Dubai's massive growth and ponder its future. Five years ago many of the buildings below my window were simply architectural models and renderings, and now they stare back at me at almost full scale. Dubai's construction boom has certainly cooled but as summer looks set to bring further 'red-hot' hotel deals, Dubai remains a viable destination on the Irish holiday-makers map. **A**

**TIPS** Ramadan is expected to commence around 20th August 2009 for one month and is subject to the sighting of the moon. During the holy period, Muslims fast from dawn until dusk and visitors should also refrain from eating and drinking in public during the day. Some restaurants do close down during this period but many based in hotels, remain open as usual. Many hotels offer meals after sunset, to celebrate the breaking of the fast.

## travel file

### GETTING THERE

Etihad Airways flies to Abu Dhabi from Dublin ([etihadairways.com](http://etihadairways.com))

Emirates Airlines flies to Dubai from Glasgow, Newcastle, Manchester, Birmingham and London ([emirates.com](http://emirates.com))

### NEW AFFORDABLE HOTELS

#### Holiday Inn Express Dubai,

Safa Park

Tel: +971 4 511 9333

[www.hiexpress.com](http://www.hiexpress.com)

(Note: There are two other Holiday Inn Express hotels located in Dubai)

#### Premier Inn Dubai

Tel: +971 4 885 0999

<http://global.premierinn.com>

#### Hotel Ibis

Deira City Centre

Tel: +971 4 292 5000

[www.ibishotel.com](http://www.ibishotel.com)

(Note: There is an Ibis at World Trade Centre and two new Ibis hotels are expected to open in Dubai approximately mid-late 2009)

### LUXURY HOTELS

#### The Westin Mina Seyahi

<http://www.starwoodhotels.com/westin>

#### Park Hyatt Dubai

Tel: +971 4 602 1234

<http://dubai.park.hyatt.com>

### RESTAURANTS

#### Spice Emporium

The Westin Mina Seyahi

Tel: +971 4 511 7115

<http://www.starwoodhotels.com/westin>

### BARS

#### Neos

Downtown Burj Dubai

Tel: + 971 4 436 8928

<http://www.theaddress.com>

#### The Terrace

Park Hyatt Dubai

Tel: +971 4 602 1234

<http://dubai.park.hyatt.com>

### ACTIVITIES

#### The Lost Chambers

Atlantis the Palm

Tel: +971 4 426 1000

[www.atlantisthepalm.com](http://www.atlantisthepalm.com)

#### Amara Spa

Park Hyatt Dubai

Tel: +971 4 602 1234

<http://dubai.park.hyatt.com>