



# Arabia's guilty pleasure

Dubai's reckless abandon with the planet's resources make it a great stopover for trips back to Europe from Hong Kong.

IF FOX NEWS decided to sponsor a kind of anti-political correctness theme park, it would probably look something like Dubai – which is to say that the city is both an abomination and an incredibly fun place to visit.

## CROWNING GLORY

In the good old days before the worldwide economic meltdown, visitors to Dubai could be forgiven for wondering what this city did to become so rich. There is no apparent industry here, no resources left to exploit and precious little sense of what generates such tremendous wealth. Of course, we now know that modern Dubai is in fact a bankrupt hedge fund built on a property-fuelled Ponzi scheme. And the Burj Khalifa is its crowning monument.

But don't let all this put you off. Dubai is a guilty pleasure. Its mad, over-the-top exuberance makes it a wicked place to visit and, for expats in Hong Kong, it's a

particularly convenient stop-off on the way back to the UK. Indeed, you can fly via Dubai to most of the international airports in Europe, including Manchester, Newcastle and Edinburgh – and for less than the cost of flying to Heathrow on Cathay.

Of course, the effect of the Emirate's financial problems has hurt some of its newest tourist attractions. The Burj Khalifa demonstrates this admirably. Besides being the world's tallest building, it's also the world's tallest structure ever built, standing almost 200 metres above the Warsaw radio mast (which collapsed in 1991), and is home to the world's fastest lifts and the world's highest mosque and swimming pool. And it is not just a little bit taller than the world's next tallest building – it's a mind-boggling 320 metres taller than Taipei 101, or exactly twice the height of IFC2.

I learned all this from Wikipedia, because the HK\$200 you pay to visit the viewing gallery affords no such information. There are



no tour guides and the lift – the fastest in the world! – doesn't even show you the floor numbers as you whizz by them. You might as well be in the Hopewell Centre.

And when you get to the 124th floor (thanks again to Wikipedia) and look out over the city there are no signs to tell you what you're looking at. It might be more than 100 metres above the Empire State Building's observation deck, but as tourist attractions the two aren't even on the same planet. Indeed, it's tempting to say that it isn't worth going up, especially if you're paying for the whole family, but it's one of those obligatory experiences that you suffer for the sake of saying you did it. There isn't much to see, frankly, and if it's a dusty day, which most are in the desert, you can see even less. But good luck trying to tell the kids it's a waste of time.

The building also has something of an identity crisis thanks to its completion in

such troubled times. In the rush to spare the Emirate from bankruptcy, Abu Dhabi's Sheikh Khalifa stepped in and promised to cover Dubai's gambling (ahem, investment) losses. In return, Dubai's Sheikh Mohammed changed the tower's name from

Burj Dubai to Burj Khalifa, though none of the signage anywhere in the city actually reflects this. For all practical purposes, it is still called Burj Dubai.

Luckily, most of the city's attractions pre-date the financial crisis and are far more impressive than this needle-thin skyscraper.

## SNOW DUNES

Ski Dubai is a good example. This place bills itself, quite justifiably, as an indoor ski resort. It is a mammoth-sized construction with five runs that vary in difficulty, height and steepness, including a 400-metre slope that drops more than 60 metres, making it the world's first indoor black run, and a 90-metre quarter pipe for snowboarders to embarrass themselves on. There's also a nursery slope for beginners and professional instructors from all over the world who can be booked easily.

And if the kids don't fancy the skiing there's still plenty for them to do at the 30,000 sq ft of Snow Park (which is, obviously, the world's biggest indoor snow park). They can go tobogganing, race down a twin-track bobsled ride, have a snowball fight, build a snowman or play in a snow cavern filled with interactive experiences and other kid-friendly stuff. It even snows from time to time.

To complete the resort experience, there's the St Moritz Cafe at the bottom of the slope for a bit of apres-ski entertainment, the Avalanche Cafe at mid-station, both with views of the slope, and a pro shop where you can buy all the gear you need – though pretty much everything is provided, with the exception of hats and gloves.

In short, you shouldn't miss this experience even if you're only in town for a day. And if you're there for longer, go every day. When you bore of the skiing, there's a feast of shopping and eating to explore at the Mall of the Emirates, which is part of the same complex.

Another must-do attraction in Dubai is the Wild Wadi Water Park, which is truly a whole day's entertainment and just as much fun for adults as it is for kids.

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Needless to say, the Wild Wadi knocks Ocean Park into a cocked hat. It includes a temperature-controlled (warmed in the winter, cooled in the summer) wave pool, multiple water slides, two artificial surfing machines and an 18-metre waterfall that goes off every 10 minutes, as well as two gift shops,

three restaurants and two snack stands, where you can pay with a kind of wrist-mounted Octopus device to save you from having to keep an eye on wallets and purses.

There are two different types of water rides – the Master Blaster rides, where you sit in a rubber ring and get blasted uphill, and the Ring Rides, where you mostly slide downhill in the traditional style.

Some of these are truly awesome. The Rushdown Ravine takes riders on a whopping 170-metre downhill slide, while the Jumeirah Sceirah is the tallest and fastest free-fall water slide outside of North America, rising to 33 metres with riders reaching speeds up to 80 km/h.

The surfing simulators shoot out more than seven tons of water a second in a thin sheet across moulded foam structures to produce a realistic wave that you can body-board, knee-board or surf – or, more likely, face-surf.

## OLD DUBAI

Apart from these set-piece attractions, Dubai has plenty of other opportunities for diversion and entertainment. The old town is home to a collection of souks or traditional markets, which are dotted around a picturesque creek and reveal the city's history as a free port and trading hub.

These old markets are still alive with the sights, sounds and smells of Arabia – though some more than others. The spice souk is probably the best for photo ops,

while the gold souk is just a collection of sad-looking jewellery shops selling the kind of bright-yellow gold favoured by Indians, Arabs and gangsta rappers. Even so, this part of town is definitely worth a visit, if only for the picturesque boat ride across the creek.

The Dubai Museum, on the other side of the creek, is also worthwhile. Housed within the beautifully restored Al Fahidi Fort, which dates to around 1790, it depicts everyday life in the days before the discovery of oil and recreates scenes from the riverside, traditional Arab houses, mosques, the souk, date farms and desert and marine life. Also on display are artefacts from several excavations in the emirate, recovered from graves that date back to the third millennium BC.

The desert also offers plenty of fun. Most hotels in the emirate will help you book excursions into the dunes, including quad biking, camel rides, wadi and dune bashing in four-wheel-drive vehicles, and, most popular of all, a desert safari, which comprises most of the above, as well as an overnight stay in a traditional Bedouin encampment, complete with dinner cooked over a campfire and belly dancing.

With numerous shopping malls and luxury hotels, there's no shortage of things to do in the evenings, with dinner options that vary from the food court to upscale restaurants run by celebrity chefs such as Gary Rhodes.





The fanciest hotel of them all is the Burj al-Arab. Built on its own artificial island, the Burj is a beautiful piece of architecture that contrasts almost exactly with monstrously hideous hotel it contains – perhaps the tackiest interior design ever conceived. Imagine if Donald Trump and a Premiership footballer were given the entire investment banking bonus pool from 2007 and allowed to let their imaginations run wild and you're somewhere close. Indeed, the hotel is so ghastly inside that tourists are only allowed to enjoy it from the outside, which is perhaps only the second sensible decision the owners made

– the first was contracting the design of the building to Tom Wright of Atkins, a British consultancy.

For the record, the interior was designed by Khuan Chew, of KCA International, a London-based design company that also fitted out the Four Seasons in Hong Kong, among many other places. In her defence, she says this on the company website: “We do not believe in imposing a ‘house style’ on clients ... Whilst a contemporary solution may be our own personal preference, we recognise the importance of achieving a solution that is appropriate to the needs and preferences of the client.”

Which we hope is a mealy-mouthed way of denying responsibility for the monstrosity in Dubai.

Still, if you can get past the security barrier the Burj al-Arab makes for a compelling bit of sight-seeing – in the same way that car crashes do.

Dubai itself has that appeal too. This is a city where the global economy crashed in truly spectacular style. From the Burj Khalifa's viewing gallery, visitors can survey a city full of madcap schemes that have either come to a halt or ground to a crawl. To the east there's The World, an offshore real estate development that comprises dozens of small islands arranged in the shape of a map of the world; a one-and-a-half mile long grandstand at the new racecourse; a huge palm-shaped development jutting out into the Persian Gulf; the Queen Mary II sitting in a dry dock waiting to be re-born as a nightclub and a vast lagoon surrounded by the skeletons of half-finished buildings.

Great tracts of desert are staked out for other projects that barely got going before the financial drought struck, including a truly huge development called Dubailand, which aims to have the largest collection of theme parks in the world and underpins Dubai's ambition to become a full-scale tourist centre for the Middle East, and the world.

Needless to say, that project is on hold right now, but Dubai still has plenty to offer visitors – and at more affordable prices than you might ever see again. And, frankly, the planet's doomed anyway so we might as well enjoy using up the last of the oil.

