

Movie magic

Glamorous Dubai has a knack for pulling in repeat visitors, but **Tracey Davis** discovers the magic of a first-time visit

Landing in Dubai is like flying into a film set. Even at night, the city sparkles like it's dusted with diamonds. I fully expect to see Tom Cruise scaling the Burj Khalifa, à la *Mission Impossible: Ghost Protocol*. A seven-hour flight, minimal jet lag and an international (read: no culture shock) vibe, it's no surprise that Dubai is a big hitter for travel agents. I'm on a whistle-stop fam trip with 15 agents, many of whom are visiting the emirate for the first time.

Like the *Truman Show*, Dubai looks like it's been designed purely for our entertainment. A city of superlatives, it has a reputation for building the biggest and the best of everything. Gilded five-star hotels, shopping malls with ski slopes and shark tanks, plus endless space-age structures, it's easy to see why Dubai is called the 'Vegas of Arabia'. The best way to find your bearings is to get up high. And at 830m tall, there's no place higher



FIRST-TIME ACTIVITIES

Dubai Frame

Standing 150m tall, the gold-trimmed giant picture frame is more than just an Instagram opportunity. Ride the glass lift to the top and walk across the glass-floored bridge for an incredible view of the city. Back on *terra firma*, don't miss the Frame's immersive exhibition showcasing the emirate's evolution and the Future Dubai Gallery. From £10. thedubaiframe.com

AYA Universe Dubai

Dubai is all about experiences – and there's none more weird and wonderful than AYA Universe. In Wafi City mall, AYA is an immersive experience that's the epitome of Dubai. Using light, music and sensory effects, 'travellers' receive a passport to explore the different chambers of the AYA Universe. From £21. aya-universe.com

Desert safari

A desert safari is a must-do on a Dubai holiday. Go dune-bashing in a 4x4, spot desert wildlife such as Arabian oryx and gazelle, or ride a camel over the dunes. After dark, settle down for a Bedouin-style feast and traditional belly-dancing under a blanket of twinkling stars. From £128. platinum-heritage.com



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: Dubai Mall; wind tower in the Al Seef District; Museum of the Future **PICTURES:** Shutterstock/Sanoop.cp, Sergii Figurnyi

than the Burj Khalifa. Judging by the queue for the lifts, even after 14 years as the 'world's tallest building', it still holds plenty of allure for visitors. Whizzing up to the 125th-floor viewing platform, I get a falcon's-eye view of the city, spotting the silvery streak of Dubai Creek, the fronds of The Palm and the Dubai Frame as the view extends across the Arabian Desert.

HIDDEN HISTORY

A 20-minute drive from the airport is the Al Seef District on the banks of Dubai Creek. Emulating a traditional Emirati village, its labyrinth of low-rise sandstone houses, wind towers and narrow alleyways lined with stalls selling local handicrafts feels like Old Dubai but is still within easy reach of the main sights.

We're staying at the Al Seef Heritage Hotel Dubai, Curio Collection by Hilton. It's a mid-range hotel set in desert palazzo-style homes, with access to the pool and gym at the neighbouring Canopy by Hilton Dubai Al Seef (the more design-led option). Our rooms are spread across several buildings – I get lost more than once – and are stylishly rustic; think polished stone floors, beamed ceilings and shuttered windows from which an enrapturing call to prayer drifts in each morning.

As much as I love the glitzy futuristic side of Dubai, I was keen to learn about the roots of the emirate. We're

“Judging by the queue for the lifts, even after 14 years as the 'world's tallest building', the Burj Khalifa still holds plenty of allure

close to the Al Fahidi Historical Neighbourhood, the oldest part of Dubai, where you can learn about its pearl-trading roots in the Dubai Museum in Al Fahidi Fort. Afterwards, we stop by the Sheikh Mohammed Centre for Cultural Understanding, where Emiratis explain their culture and customs over a traditional lunch.

LEISURE TIME

If shopping was a sport, Dubai would have Olympic-level facilities. Across from the sprawling Dubai Mall is Souk Al Bahar, an Arab-style shopping mall that largely sells Persian carpets, antiques and local handicrafts. It also houses Time Out Market Dubai, which opened in 2021. It's a collaboration between the leisure magazine and local restaurateurs.

There are 17 outposts of the best Dubai restaurants, each serving their signature dishes. I try the famed soft-shell crab sushi from Reif Japanese Kushiyaki. ➤

ASK THE agent

“Dubai is a supremely easy city to explore. Dubai Metro stops at all the top attractions, while the monorail connects the Palm Jumeirah. And boat rides across the creek are only a dirham (about 20p).”

Ash Hussain,
founder, fly360.com



DESTINATIONS

MIDDLE EAST | DUBAI

TOP TIPS FOR DUBAI STOPOVERS

A third of the world's population lives within four hours of Dubai, and it is one of the key stopover hubs between the UK and Asia and Oceania. Plus, Dubai's airport is only a 15-minute cab ride from Downtown, so clients could be gazing up at the Burj Khalifa within an hour or so of landing.

12 HOURS

If your client has a 12-hour stopover, they can still get a sense of Dubai. Suggest they hop in a cab and head straight to Downtown, and prebook tickets to the Burj Khalifa to get their bearings from up high. Back at sea level, cross over the street to Dubai Mall, where they can shop, wave at the sharks in the Dubai Aquarium, have dinner and catch a performance by the Dubai Fountain, before whizzing back to the airport.

24 HOURS

With a 24-hour stopover, clients can see a little more of the emirate. Book a Downtown hotel with a pool. Hop on the metro to Bur Dubai, cross Dubai Creek in an *abra* (boat) and visit Bastakiya, one of the oldest neighbourhoods in the city. With dusty sandstone buildings, mosques and wind towers, it's the complete antithesis to dazzling Downtown.

48 HOURS

A 48-hour stopover will feel like a mini-break. Book a hotel on the Palm Jumeirah and relax overlooking the Arabian Sea. After ticking off the main sights on day one, clients can try one of Dubai's giant water parks, such as Wild Wadi, or a four-hour desert excursion and go dune-bashing in a 4x4 on the second day.



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Dubai's skyline; Dubai Frame; Sheikh Mohammed Centre for Cultural Understanding; dune-bashing
PICTURES: Unsplash/Ahmed Aldaie, Shutterstock/phoelixDE



It also has three bars hosting live music and DJs, as well as a wraparound terrace overlooking the Dubai Fountain and the Burj.

MYTHS AND LEGENDS

Dubai is renowned for its fantastical hotels. The matriarch, of course, is Atlantis, The Palm, the dazzling pink palace on Palm Jumeirah. It's worth noting that guests have free access to the Aquaventure Waterpark – officially the world's largest – and Lost Chambers Aquarium.

Friday brunch is a Dubai institution. To celebrate the start of the weekend, hotels and restaurants put on lavish spreads fit for royalty. Reassure clients concerned Dubai might be dry, like other parts of the UAE, that this isn't the case. Alcohol flows freely in hotels, restaurants and nightclubs – bottomless champagne brunches are popular – although it's illegal to drink in public areas, including the beach.

Dubai is largely made up of expats, and therefore cosmopolitan, so the dress code varies. Skirts, shorts and T-shirts are acceptable in most places, but the UAE is an Islamic nation with modest local dress, so it's respectful to cover your shoulders and knees when visiting malls, mosques and souks. However, there's no need to cover up on the beach or by the pool.

“To celebrate the start of the weekend, hotels and restaurants put on lavish spreads fit for royalty

Naturally, you can't come to Dubai and not hit the beach. Blessed with Persil-white sands and aquamarine seas, many of Dubai's waterfront hotels have private beaches. There are also several public beaches within easy reach of Downtown, including Palm West Beach, where I spend my last afternoon. Wandering along the mile-long boardwalk lined with palm trees, restaurants and beach bars, I watch as the sun melts into the Dubai skyline – which may well have grown once more by the next time I visit. **TW**

BOOK IT

Classic Package Holidays offers four nights' half-board at the Al Seef Heritage Hotel Dubai, Curio Collection by Hilton from £1,948 for two people, including flights with Emirates in May. classic-package.co.uk