

BACKGROUND

HISTORY

EARLY SETTLEMENT

Little is known about the early history of the area that now forms the United Arab Emirates. However, archaeological remains found in Al-Qusais, on the northeastern outskirts of present-day Dubai, show evidence of humans here as far back as 8000 BC, after the end of the last Ice Age.

Up until 3000 BC the area supported nomadic herders of sheep, goats and cattle; these early inhabitants camped on the coast and fished during winter, then moved inland with their herds during summer (not so very different to what the Bedu did here just a short time ago). The first signs of trade emerged with the discovery of pottery from Ubaid (in present-day Iraq) dating back to 5000 BC. Agriculture developed with the cultivation of the date palm around 2500 BC, which not only provided food and a range of materials for building and weaving, but also shelter for smaller plants grown for food.

Archaeological evidence also suggests that this area, together with present-day Oman, was closely associated with the Magan civilisation during the Bronze Age. The Magans apparently dominated the ancient world's copper trade, exploiting the rich veins of copper in the hills throughout the Hajar Mountains, and near Sohar, in Oman. It's also likely that they traded pearls with people in Mesopotamia (now Iraq), and with the Indus Valley civilisation in present-day Pakistan. However, all records of the Magan civilisation cease after the 2nd millennium BC, with some historians speculating that the desertification of the area hastened its demise.

There's little archaeological evidence of occupation of Dubai during the Iron Age, with the next major habitation of the area appearing to have been by the Sassanid empire. Archaeological excavations at Jumeirah reveal a caravan station dating from the 6th century AD, which is thought to have had links with the Sassanids. A dynasty that ruled in Persia from AD 224 to 651, the Sassanids wielded amazing power over the region during this time, until the Umayyads, an Islamic tribe, uprooted them. Archaeologists seem to think that the buildings at Jumeirah were restored and extended by the Umayyad dynasty, making it the only site in the UAE to span the pre-Islamic and Islamic periods.

With the Umayyads came the Arabic language and unification with the Islamic world. Christianity made a brief appearance in the form of the Nestorian sect, members of which had a monastery on Sir Bani Yas Island, west of Abu Dhabi, in the 5th century. However, it was the arrival of Islam that shaped the future of the region. Unfortunately the early Islamic period from the 7th to the 14th century hasn't been well documented in the UAE. All that's known is that during this period the area was loosely under the control of the Umayyads and their successors, the Abbasids. After the Baghdad-based Abbasid dynasty went into decline around AD 1000, the centre of power in the Islamic world shifted to Cairo, leaving the UAE on the periphery. In the absence of centralised control, the tribes of the Arabian Peninsula asserted themselves in the hinterlands, while the coastal regions were dominated by trading ports such as Julfar, near present-day Ras al-Khaimah, and Hormuz, an island in the Strait of Hormuz.

TIMELINE

c 3000 BC

The Dubai area is populated by nomadic herders of sheep, cattle and goats. The Magan civilisation dominates the world's copper trade and mines for metal near the Hajar Mountains.

AD 700

From their capital in Damascus, the Umayyads introduce Arabic and Islam to the region. The Umayyad Caliphate was the first dynasty of Islam, and lasted from AD 650 to AD 750.

1580

Gasparo Balbi, a Venetian jeweller, tours Dubai to investigate its potential for the pearling trade. He notes in his records that he visits a town in the Persian Gulf called 'Dibel'.

It wasn't until the early Islamic period that the Gulf experienced its first boom in maritime trade, due to its location on the major trading routes between the Mediterranean Sea and Indian Ocean. However, trade soon became the backbone of the local economy as ships travelled as far as China, returning laden with silk and porcelain.

EUROPEAN PRESENCE

Portugal became the first European power to take an interest in this part of the Gulf, attracted by lucrative trade routes to India and the Far East. The arrival of the well-armed Portuguese was a disaster for Muslim traders. The Portuguese wanted a monopoly on trade routes between Europe and India and tolerated no rivals. Local trade dried up to the extent that many coastal settlements were just about abandoned, with tribes taking refuge in oases far from the coast such as Liwa and Al-Ain. While Portugal's occupation lasted until the 1630s, eventually extending as far north as Bahrain, the only evidence of their presence are the two cannons on display at the Dubai Museum (p61).

Next to arrive were the French and Dutch, who infiltrated the area in the 17th and 18th centuries and aspired to control the trading routes to the east. The Brits were equally intent on ruling the seas to protect the sea route to India, and in 1766 the Dutch finally gave way to Britain's East India Company, which had established trading links with the Gulf as early as 1616.

Throughout this time Dubai remained a small fishing and pearling hamlet, perched on a disputed border between two local powers – the seafaring Qawasim of present-day Ras al-Khaimah and Sharjah to the north, and the Bani Yas tribal confederation of what is now Abu Dhabi to the south. The region was also affected by the rivalries between bigger regional powers – the Wahhabi tribes (of what is now Saudi Arabia), the Ottoman Empire, the Persians and the British.

THE TRUCIAL COAST

At the beginning of the 19th century, Dubai was governed by Mohammed bin Hazza, who remained ruler of Dubai until the Al Bu Fasal, a branch of the Bani Yas tribe from Abu Dhabi, came to dominate the town in 1833, severing it from Abu Dhabi. The Bani Yas were the main power among the Bedouin tribes of the interior. Originally based in Liwa, an oasis on the edge of the desert known as the Empty Quarter (Rub al-Khali) in the south of the UAE, the Bani Yas engaged in traditional Bedouin activities of camel herding, small-scale agriculture, tribal raiding and extracting protection money from merchant caravans passing through their territory. At the end of the 18th century, the leader of the Bani Yas moved from Liwa to the island of Abu Dhabi on the coast.

About 800 people from the Bani Yas tribe settled on the Bur Dubai Creek under the leadership of Maktoum bin Butti, who established the Maktoum dynasty of Dubai, which still rules the emirate today. For Maktoum bin Butti, good relations with the British authorities in the Gulf were essential to safeguard his new and small sheikhdom against attack from the larger and more powerful sheikhdoms of Sharjah to the north and Abu Dhabi to the south.

In 1841 the Bur Dubai settlement extended to Deira on the northern side of the Creek, though throughout the 19th century it largely remained a tiny enclave of fishermen, pearl divers, Bedouin, and Indian and Persian merchants. Interestingly, the Indians and Persians (now Iranians) still give much of the Creek its character today.

HISTORY BOOKS

There's lots of terrific stuff out there on Dubai history. While not all of these books are specifically about Dubai, there's some great reading here about the region's history.

- *Telling Tales: An Oral History of Dubai* by Julia Wheeler – A beautiful book of black-and-white photography and interviews with a cross-section of Emiratis reveals what life in Dubai was like before it started resembling a set from a science-fiction movie.
- *Father of Dubai: Sheikh Rashid bin Saeed al-Maktoum* by Graeme Wilson – A photographic and narrative tribute to Sheikh Mohammed's father.
- *From Trucial States to United Arab Emirates* by Frauke Heard-Bey – An insight into a society in transition, including the development of Dubai, by a leading scholar and long-term UAE expat.
- *Seafarers of the Emirates* by Ronald Codrai – This remarkable record recreates the lives of pearl divers, merchants, shipbuilders and seafarers, with photos taken in Dubai in the middle of the 20th century.
- *Arabian Destiny* by Edward Henderson – This wry memoir by a British colonial official includes perceptive observations of the society he lived in: Dubai hasn't simply changed since the 1950s, it's become a different place altogether.
- *Sheikhdoms of Eastern Arabia* by Peter Lienhardt and Ahmed al-Shahi – An insight into how oil wealth altered Arabia, tribal structure, gender relations, and the complex relationship between the ruling sheikhs and their subjects.
- *The Merchants: the Big Business Families of Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States* by Michael Field – A brief sketch of the rise of Dubai as a trading centre, and the role played by its powerful tribal relationships.

Things really began to change around the end of the 19th century. In 1892 the British, keen to impose their authority on the region and protect their Indian empire, extended their power through a series of so-called exclusive agreements, under which the sheikhs accepted formal British protection and, in exchange, promised to have no dealings with other foreign powers without British permission. As a result of these treaties, or truces, Europeans called the area 'the Trucial Coast', a name retained until the 1971 federation.

At the end of the 19th century, Sharjah, the area's main trading centre, began losing its trade to Dubai. In 1894 Dubai's visionary ruler at the time, Sheikh Maktoum bin Hasher al-Maktoum, decided to give foreign traders tax exemptions, and the free port of Dubai was born. Around the same time, Lingah (now Bandar-e Lengeh), across the Strait of Hormuz in Iran, lost its status as a duty-free port. The Maktoums lured Lingah's disillusioned traders to Dubai at the same time as it managed to convince some of Sharjah's merchants to relocate.

At first the Persians who came to Dubai believed that it would just be a temporary move, but by the 1920s, when it became evident that the trade restrictions in southern Iran were there to stay, they took up permanent residence in Bastakia (p61).

More good news for Dubai came in the early 20th century when the Maktoums, probably with the assistance of the Persian merchants, prevailed on a British steamship line to switch its main port of call in the lower Gulf from Lingah to Dubai. This gave Dubai regular links with British India and the ports of the central and northern Gulf – Bahrain, Kuwait, Bushire and Basra. Dubai's importance to Britain as a port of call would remain in place for half a century, marking the beginning of Dubai's growth as a trading power and fuelling the prosperity that would follow.

1833

Approximately 800 members of the Al-Maktoum family leave Abu Dhabi for Bur Dubai and establish power in the emirate under Maktoum bin Butti. When smallpox breaks out in 1841 people relocate to Deira which soon becomes larger than Bur Dubai.

1892

The sheikhdoms sign a treaty with Britain; they'd have no dealings with other foreign powers and receive protection from British armed forces in return. Sheikh Maktoum lures foreign traders to Dubai by declaring they would be exempt from paying taxes.

1930

The worldwide depression precipitated by the Wall Street Crash of 1929, paired with the arrival of a new method of creating pearls artificially, prompts Sheikh Rashid to conclude that the pearling industry is finished.

1940

There is a brief conflict between Dubai and Sharjah following a dispute in the Maktoum family. Hostilities ceased after the British cut off the supply lines and both sides ran out of gunpowder.

1946

Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan al-Nahyan makes his political debut at the age of 38 when he is appointed ruler's representative in his hometown of Al-Ain.

1951

The British government establishes the Trucial States Council, which brings together the leaders of the sheikhdoms that would later form the UAE. It was the first time the leaders had regularly gathered to communicate.

BOOKS: ARABS & THE ARAB WORLD

Dubai may get only the briefest of mentions in these books, but they'll give you a solid understanding of the region in which Dubai is a now a central focus.

- *The Arabs* by Peter Mansfield – This must-read book discusses Arabs, their characteristics, aspirations and future, from the pre-Islamic Arabian nomads, through the life of Prophet Mohammed, to the modern Arab renaissance.
- *Arabia and the Arabs: From the Bronze Age to the Coming of Islam* by Robert G Hoyland – From inscriptions, poetry, histories and archaeological evidence, you learn about Arabia, from ancient Sheba to the deserts and oases of the north.
- *A History of the Arab Peoples* by Albert Hourani – A bestseller when first published in 1991 (updated 2003), this superb book covers politics, culture, society, economy and thought.
- *Travellers in Arabia* by Robin Bidwell – Arabia as experienced by its earliest tourists: Burckhardt, Burton, Palgrave, Philby, Stark, Cox and Thesiger.
- *Arabian Sands* by Wilfred Thesiger – Fascinating accounts of five years spent with the Bedu of the Arabian peninsula in the Empty Quarter in the 1940s.

THE EXPANDING CITY

Dubai was well established as an independent town, with a population of about 10,000, by the beginning of the 20th century. Deira was the most populous area at this time, with about 1600 houses, inhabited mainly by Arabs, but also by Persians and Baluchis, who came from parts of what are now Iran, Pakistan and Afghanistan. By 1908 there were about 350 shops in Deira and another 50 in Bur Dubai, where the Indian community was concentrated. To this day the Bur Dubai Souq (p66) shows a strong Indian influence, and Bur Dubai is home to the only Hindu temple in the city.

The development of Dubai as a major trading centre was, ironically, spurred on by the collapse of the pearling trade, which had been the mainstay of its economy for centuries. The pearling trade had fallen victim both to the worldwide depression of 1929 and to the Japanese discovery (in 1930) of a method by which pearls could be cultured artificially. Sheikh Rashid concluded that the pearling industry was finished, and started to look for alternative forms of revenue. This chain of events heralded a new era in Dubai's trade – re-exporting. Dubai's enterprising merchants began importing goods to sell them on to other ports. In practice, this involved the smuggling of goods, particularly of gold, to India. The goods entered and exited Dubai legally; it was the countries at the other end of the trade that saw it as smuggling.

The Second World War also played a role in the growth of the re-export trade. The war brought much of Dubai's trade to a standstill and this was compounded by a shortage of basic food supplies. The British government supplied the Trucial sheikhdoms with plenty of rice and sugar. Dubai merchants bought these goods cheaply and, finding themselves oversupplied, shipped them off to the black market in Iran.

In 1939 Sheikh Rashid bin Saeed al-Maktoum took over as regent from his father, Sheikh Saeed, but he only formally succeeded to the leadership when his father died in 1958. He quickly moved to bolster the emirate's position as the main trading hub in the lower Gulf, at the same time as the rulers of Sharjah made the costly mistake of allowing their harbour to silt up. Sheikh Rashid quickly improved facilities along the Creek, until January 1940, when war broke out briefly between Dubai and Sharjah.

The origins of the brief conflict stem from a complicated struggle within the Al-Maktoum family. Sheikh Saeed al-Maktoum, the ruler of Dubai, was challenged in the 1930s by his cousin, Mani bin Rashid, who at one point controlled Deira while Sheikh Saeed held onto Bur Dubai across the Creek. Sheikh Saeed gained the upper hand and sent his cousin into exile in 1939. Mani bin Rashid and his followers then settled in Sharjah, too close to Dubai for Sheikh Saeed's comfort. Sheikh Saeed asked Sheikh Sultan of Sharjah to exile Mani bin Rashid, but Sheikh Sultan refused on the grounds that it compromised the traditions of Arab hospitality. After much fruitless diplomacy, a desultory war broke out in January 1940 between Dubai and Sharjah, all of 23km apart. The British tried to quell the war by restricting the import of firearms and ammunition. The rival forces then resorted to using ancient muzzle-loading cannons. The soldiers were sometimes able to recover the cannonballs fired at them and to fire them back. When the ammunition and gunpowder had nearly run out, the rival sheikhs began negotiating again. Mani bin Rashid died peacefully soon after, and the matter was put to rest with him.

In 1951 the Trucial States Council was founded, bringing the leaders of what would become the UAE together. The council comprised the rulers of the sheikhdoms and was the direct predecessor of the UAE Supreme Council. Then it met only twice a year, under the aegis of the British political agent in Dubai. It was around this time that modern Dubai began to take shape. Sheikh Rashid became one of the earliest beneficiaries of Kuwait's Fund for Arab Economic Development, which loaned him money to dredge the Creek (it had become badly silted up, reducing the volume of Creek traffic) and to build a new breakwater near its mouth. The project was completed in 1963, and gold smuggling took off like a rocket, using the trade networks built up through the pearling business. India had banned gold imports after 1947 to stabilise its currency, which sent the price of gold in India soaring. In 1967 the price of gold in Dubai was US\$35 an ounce, while in India it sold for US\$68 an ounce.

PEARLING

The heyday of pearling is laced with romanticism. But unfortunately for those who dove in the depths to collect pearls, it was a life of hardship and the rewards were no match for the dangers involved. Most of the divers were slaves from East Africa and the profits of the industry went straight to their master, the boat owner.

The only equipment the divers used was a rope tied around their waist, a turtle-shell peg on their nose and leather finger gloves to protect their hands from the sharp coral and shells. At certain times of the year they'd wear a muslin bodysuit to protect them from jellyfish stings. The best pearls were found at depths of up to 36m and divers would be underwater for around three minutes. To reach this depth, they held a rope weighted with a stone and tied to the boat, and then were thrown overboard.

The pearl-diving season lasted from May until September. On the ship there would be divers, men responsible for hauling up the divers after each job, a cook, and boys employed to serve food and water, and open the oyster shells. Each boat also had a singer, called the *naham*, whose job was to lead the crew in songs or lighten their mood by singing to them. Many of the songs were about lucky men who had become rich through diving, and the joys of returning home after the diving season.

Back on shore, pearl merchants would grade the pearls according to size by using a number of copper sieves, each with different-sized holes. The greatest market for pearls was originally India, but in the early 20th century the UK and US also became keen buyers. The discovery of the means to make artificial pearls in the early 20th century triggered the demise of the industry. The Dubai Museum (p61) and the Diving Village (p67) feature informative displays on pearling.

1958

After almost 20 years of de facto leadership, Sheikh Rashid officially becomes ruler of Dubai. He had been regent since 1939 but could only assume the position of leader after his father's death.

1959

Sheikh Rashid borrows millions of dollars from the Emir of Kuwait to dredge the Creek so it can handle large ships, enhancing Dubai's reputation as a Persian Gulf trade hub. Dubai airport opens a year later, with plenty of room for expansion.

1966

Eight years after oil is discovered offshore in Abu Dhabi, Dubai makes its own discovery. The arrival of oil persuades traders from across the region to settle in Dubai, spurring a period of rapid economic growth.

1968

The British announce that they will be ending their relationship with the Trucial States by 1971 and local leaders discuss the possibility of a future nation. Dubai starts exporting crude oil and petrodollars flood in, reaching a peak in 1991.

1971

The Trucial States is re-established as the United Arab Emirates. Qatar and Bahrain opt out of the union and declare independence. Sheikh Zayed of Abu Dhabi is named the new nation's first president.

1973

The dirham replaces the riyal as the official unit of currency in Dubai. Until 1966, all the sheikhdoms had used the Gulf rupee. The dirham has been pegged to the US dollar since 1997.

THE ARCHITECTS OF MODERN DUBAI

Sheikh Rashid bin Saeed al-Maktoum

Remembered fondly as the 'Father of Dubai', Sheikh Rashid laid the foundations of the modern city. When he became ruler in 1958, Dubai was a small town with a very limited infrastructure. Within a few years of coming to power, he had dramatically improved the police force and school system, built a modern hospital and a network of roads, and established a steady supply of electricity and water. His decisions to dredge the Creek and construct an international airport provided a huge logistical boost to Dubai's trade-focused economy. The discovery of oil in 1966 enticed people from across the region to migrate to Dubai and tap into the petrodollar boom, doubling the emirate's population between 1967 and 1973. In the last two decades of his life, Sheikh Rashid oversaw the construction of the ports at Mina Rashid and Jebel Ali; the World Trade Centre; the Maktoum Bridge and the Shindagha Tunnel; and the city's first free zone, in Jebel Ali. In 1985 he helped establish Emirates airline, which has been instrumental in fashioning Dubai as a tourist destination.

Sheikh Maktoum bin Rashid al-Maktoum

When Sheikh Rashid passed away in 1990 after a prolonged illness, Sheikh Maktoum officially succeeded his father, although in reality he'd already been working hard to ensure that Dubai's next generation reaped the benefits of the burgeoning economy. Spreading the wealth through education, housing and greater job opportunities, and all the while diversifying Dubai's economic portfolio, his work set a solid platform for the phenomenal growth of Dubai today. In the later years of his reign, his younger brother Sheikh Mohammed began working on a more active (and economically aggressive) expansion of Dubai.

The end of World War II, India's independence and the decline of the British Empire saw the end of Britain's presence in the region and prompted the creation of the UAE. But before withdrawing from the region, the British set in motion the means by which the UAE borders were drawn. The British withdrawal and the discovery of oil accelerated the modernisation of the region. Incredibly, drawing the UAE's borders involved a British diplomat spending months riding a camel around the mountains and desert, asking village heads, tribal leaders and Bedouin which sheikh they swore allegiance to.

THE RECENT PAST

When Britain announced its departure from the region in 1968, an attempt was made to create a nation that included the Trucial States (today's United Arab Emirates), Bahrain and Qatar. While the talks collapsed with Bahrain and Qatar (who both moved on to their own independence), the leader of Abu Dhabi, Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan al-Nahyan (see the boxed text, [opposite](#)), and of Dubai, Sheikh Rashid bin Saeed al-Maktoum, strengthened their commitment to creating a single state.

After persistent persuasion by Sheikh Zayed, the federation of the United Arab Emirates (UAE) was born on 2 December 1971, consisting of the emirates of Dubai, Abu Dhabi, Ajman, Fujairah, Sharjah and Umm al-Quwain, with Ras al-Khaimah joining in 1972. Impressively, the UAE remains to this day the only federation of Arab states in the Middle East.

Under that agreement, the emirs had approved a formula whereby Abu Dhabi and Dubai (in that order) would carry the most weight in the federation, but would leave each emir largely

autonomous. Sheikh Zayed became the supreme ruler (or president) of the UAE, and Sheikh Rashid of Dubai assumed the role of vice-president.

Since federation, Dubai has been one of the most politically stable city-states in the Arab world; however, the fledgling nation has still had its teething problems. Border disputes between the emirates continued throughout the 1970s and '80s, and the level of independence that each emirate assumes has always been the subject of long discussions.

While Dubai and Abu Dhabi had an agreement to cooperate long before the nation was born, the relationship has not been without its difficulties. Achieving an equitable balance of power between the two emirates, as well as refining a unified vision for the country, was much debated until 1979 when Sheikh Zayed and Sheikh Rashid sealed a formal compromise under which each gave a little ground on his vision of the country. The result was a much stronger federation in which Dubai remained a bastion of free trade while Abu Dhabi imposed a tighter federal structure on the other emirates. Rashid also agreed to take the title of Prime Minister as a symbol of his commitment to the federation.

Sheikh Rashid, the driving force behind Dubai's phenomenal growth and 'father of (modern) Dubai', died in 1990 after a long illness, and was succeeded as emir by the eldest of his four sons, Sheikh Maktoum bin Rashid al-Maktoum. Maktoum had been regent for his sick father for several years already, so he continued to follow in his father's footsteps with the expansion of Dubai.

Overseeing Dubai's transformation into a 21st-century metropolis is the third son of the dynasty, Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid al-Maktoum, who was the face of modern Dubai even before he succeeded his older brother as ruler in 2006. Having ruled Dubai as a de facto leader

FATHER OF THE NATION

Visitors to Dubai will no doubt see enormous posters of a smiling sheikh in a pair of Ray Ban-style sunglasses – this is Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan al-Nahyan, the first, and up until his death in 2004, the only President of the UAE. Revered by his people, and often called 'father' by Emiratis, he commanded huge respect across the Middle East.

Sheikh Zayed was born in Abu Dhabi in 1918, and his father was ruler of the emirate from 1922 to 1926. After his father's death in 1927, Sheikh Zayed relocated to Al-ain and spent his time studying the Quran and learning from local Bedouin tribesmen; the knowledge he gained here was crucial to his ability to pull a nation together decades later.

His first taste of politics came in 1946, when he was appointed ruler's representative in Al-ain, where he honed his famed negotiating skills. When the oil began flowing in Abu Dhabi in 1962, it soon became apparent that Sheikh Zayed had the right skills to handle the massive changes that were to come, and the sheikh soon took over from his older brother in managing Abu Dhabi's affairs. Seizing the opportunity, Sheikh Zayed built schools, hospitals and housing for his people, and when the British decided to withdraw from the Trucial States in 1968, he set out to federate the states and create a nation.

The act of pulling together these often-squabbling, sometimes-fighting seven states is key to Sheikh Zayed's legacy. Few thought it could be done, and fewer thought it would last, but for three years Sheikh Zayed negotiated, cajoled and convinced the other states that a United Arab Emirates was the only way forward.

After he became President in 1971 (and was continually re-elected to the post up until his death), the distribution of wealth to the poorer emirates, as well as his handling of an ambitious Dubai, were key in keeping the fledgling nation together.

Sheikh Zayed had an almost obsessive ambition to 'green' the Emirates and to keep tradition alive. Even though in the Middle East it's almost obligatory to praise leaders, both past and present, in the UAE even the most cynical students of Arab politics note that the affection the people have for this leader runs far deeper than that.

1979

Sheikh Rashid is declared prime minister of the UAE. The post had been held by his son, Sheikh Maktoum, who stepped aside to give his father more power.

1985

The Emirates airline is established in Dubai. It initially only flew to Karachi and Mumbai. Today it is one of the 10 biggest airlines in the world in terms of passengers carried.

1990

Sheikh Rashid dies during the first Gulf War and his son, Sheikh Maktoum, takes over as ruler of Dubai. Five years later, Sheikh Mohammed is made Crown Prince of Dubai, assumes de facto rule and is soon seen as the major figure in local politics.

1996

Two major annual events, the Dubai Shopping Festival and the Dubai World Cup, are launched. American racehorse Cigar is the first winner of the Cup. The tallest hotel in the world the Burj Al Arab opens, enhancing Dubai's reputation as a tourist mecca.

2003

The International Monetary Fund and the World Bank recognise Dubai as a financial hub. Sheikh Zayed, the UAE's first president, dies and is replaced by his son Sheikh Khalifa who announces plans for the country's first ever elections to take place in 2006.

2006

Sheikh Mohammed becomes ruler of Dubai after Sheikh Maktoum's passing, and is also confirmed as Prime Minister and Vice-President of the United Arab Emirates. Two years later, US president George W Bush visits Dubai as part of his Middle East tour.

since the mid '90s, Sheikh Mohammed has brought consistency and continuity to Dubai in a period of tremendous social, cultural and economic change. In February 2008 he named his son Hamdan bin Mohammed bin Rashid al-Maktoum, also known as 'Fazza 3', as the emirate's crown prince and his likely successor. The young prince is already tremendously popular – check out his fan videos on YouTube.

ECONOMY

Dubai is the second richest emirate in the UAE, after the capital Abu Dhabi. While most visitors think Dubai became rich through oil, what it's actually done is use its modest oil resources to create the infrastructure for trade, manufacturing and tourism. About 70% of the UAE's non-oil GDP is generated in Dubai, and about 95% of Dubai's GDP is not oil-based. Dubai's reserves of oil and gas were never huge and by 2010 it is estimated that oil will account for less than one percent of Dubai's GDP. In the same year, tourism is expected to create at least 20% of the GDP.

While many analysts believe that Dubai has expanded too far, too fast, and that its economy is heading for trouble, others believe the city has a sufficiently sturdy economic base to survive any bumps in the road – such as the current inflation level (10%) or further strikes by workers on construction sites.

Dubai's main exports are oil, natural gas, dates and dried fish; top export destinations are Japan, Taiwan, the UK, the US and India. Imports are primarily minerals and chemicals, base metals (including gold), vehicles and machinery, electronics, textiles and foodstuffs; the main importers into Dubai are the US, China, Japan, the UK, South Korea and India. Dubai's re-export trade (where items such as whitegoods come into Dubai from the manufacturers and are then sent onwards) makes up about 80% of the UAE's total re-export business. Dubai's re-exports go mainly to Iran, India, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, China and Afghanistan.

Dubai is also home to a huge dry-dock complex, the Middle East's busiest airport and duty-free operations, the region's biggest airline, and large free-trade zones at Jebel Ali, 30 minutes from the city centre, and at Dubai airport. Dubai airport is so busy now that a new airport (mainly catering for cargo) is being built at Jebel Ali. Attracting foreign business to its free-trade zones has been one of Dubai's greatest economic achievements in the last 20 years, with companies enticed here by the promise of full foreign ownership, full repatriation of capital

SHEIKH MOHAMMED – MR DUBAI

Having spent several years as a de facto ruler while he was crown prince, Sheikh Mohammed was the only candidate for the top job when Sheikh Maktoum died in early 2006. He has spoken about managing Dubai as if it were a business, and like the most successful CEOs he has a knack for making the right decision at the right time.

Although he is surrounded by some of the greatest minds in the Gulf, as well as political and economic expertise imported from all over the world, there's no uncertainty about where executive power lies. He has a flair for generating publicity for the city and was deeply involved in the planning and construction of landmark projects such as the Burj Al Arab, the Palm Jumeirah and the Burj Dubai. For the Burj Al Arab project, it's said that the sheikh wanted a design that would be as resonant as the Eiffel Tower and the Sydney Opera House. And it's perhaps from this that we can get an idea of the breadth of what he wants to achieve. His enterprising and frequently audacious efforts to put the city on the map have given Dubai several iconic buildings to choose from.

Aside from handling the day-to-day running of the emirate, in his capacity as Prime Minister and Vice-President of the UAE he strengthens the bond between Dubai and the other six emirates, while his ownership of Dubai Holding gives him control of numerous businesses such as the Jumeirah Group (properties including the Burj Al Arab), Tatweer (Dubailand) and TECOM (Internet City). He's also a keen fan of falconry and equestrianism and runs the Godolphin stable. He is believed to be worth at least US\$10 billion.

Visitors from Western countries may feel uncomfortable with the large-scale portraits of the ruler on billboards and buildings around town. Yet these are not simply the propaganda tools of an autocratic regime; many people in Dubai revere their ruler. Few world leaders are able to drive themselves around town without a bodyguard and without any fear of being attacked. Although dissenting voices aren't tolerated and the local media is uncritical, most people admire the Emirates' leaders for creating a haven of peace and prosperity in a troubled part of the world.

TOURISM & DEVELOPMENT

Sheikh Maktoum realised that oil wealth wouldn't last forever, and so diversified Dubai's economy. In the early 1990s, there were only a handful of five-star hotels in Dubai and the area that is now Dubai Marina was virtually untouched. The announcement of the Burj Al Arab project in 1994 represented a new phase of Dubai's long-term strategy, a bid to become one of the world's major tourist destinations. In 1996 the city launched its two leading annual events, the Dubai Shopping Festival and the Dubai World Cup, and the start of 1997 saw the creation of the Department of Tourism and Commerce Marketing, a body tasked with developing the city's tourism infrastructure at home and its profile abroad.

Over the past decade, a succession of press conferences announcing audacious 'megaprojects' has kept Dubai in the headlines. The curiosity factor has helped tourist numbers skyrocket from just over half a million visitors in 1990 to over six million in 2006. The city hopes to welcome 15 million visitors in 2015.

Dubai's forthcoming attractions, many of which blur the line between the sublime and ridiculous, will ensure the city continues to command column inches. Falconcity of Wonders, a bird-shaped mini-city, will be home to replicas of the Eiffel Tower, the Taj Mahal and the Hanging Gardens of Babylon. The complex will compete for tourist dirhams with an underwater hotel, a park with roaming dinosaurs, a ski slope with a revolving mountain, and perhaps most unusually a large-scale reconstruction of the French city of Lyon.

Unsurprisingly, questions are being asked about whether Dubai's indefatigable ambition and taste for the bizarre will result in a circus sideshow, a Vegas-like theme park that will be shunned by business travellers and a luxury travel sector looking for more sophistication. There is also a concern that short supplies of oil will lead to heavily taxed long-haul air travel, and holidaymakers in some of Dubai's biggest markets, such as the UK and Germany, will choose to holiday closer to home. For the time being, however, tourist numbers keep going up and up.

and profits, no corporate tax for 15 years, no currency restrictions, and no personal income tax for staff.

The Dubai Internet City and neighbouring Dubai Media City have been equally successful in adding a new hi-tech information and communication stratum to the city's economy, as well as gaining credibility by leading the big media players, such as CNN, to base their Middle East operations in Dubai.

Dubai's tourism industry has also exploded (see the boxed text, [above](#)). The city's tolerance of Western habits, profusion of quality hotels, long stretches of beach, warm winter weather, shopping incentives and desert activities have helped it become the leading tourist destination in the Gulf, and local tourism authorities expect to attract 10 million visitors per annum by 2010.

For Emirati citizens all this prosperity translates into benefits of which the rest of the world only dreams: free health care, free education, heavily subsidised utilities and, in some cases, free housing. Dubai's per capita income is around Dh80,000 per annum, while the monthly salary of an unskilled expat labourer is anywhere between Dh500 to Dh1000 per month.

But while the globalisation of the international labour market (read: cheap foreign labour) has made the phenomenal growth of Dubai so attainable, there is one hurdle in the economy that Dubai is seeking to overcome. Dubai is highly dependent upon this expat labour and, at the same time, its citizens are having trouble finding meaningful employment. While the government in the past had made some attempt to 'Emiratised' the economy by placing nationals in the public workforce and imposing local employee quotas on private companies, this hasn't been particularly successful. Rightly seeing this as a major concern, Dubai's new ruler, Sheikh Mohammed, has taken over responsibility for this – and given his track record, meaningful results are expected.

One of the problems he faces with this issue is that private companies are reluctant to hire nationals, often due to the misguided notion that they are lazy. However, one of the key problems is that nationals expect to start on a salary that's far above what the equivalent expat would receive. There is no doubt that Dubai will be dependent on foreign labour and expertise for a long time to come.

GOVERNMENT & POLITICS

Dubai is the second most powerful of the seven emirates that make up the UAE, with Abu Dhabi being both the capital and home to most of the country's oil wealth. In each emirate, power rests with a ruling tribe, which in Dubai's case is the Maktoums. The term emirate is

derived from the term ‘emir’, which means ruler, although the rulers of the emirates are known as sheikhs. As yet, there are no political parties or general elections in Dubai, and even if there were, it would be hard to imagine the Maktoums being deposed, having resided over such extraordinary growth.

Despite Dubai becoming so strong over the last few years, it has had to fight long and hard to preserve as much of its independence as possible and to minimise the power of the country’s federal institutions. Along with Ras al-Khaimah, it maintains a legal system that is separate from the federal judiciary.

Politically, the relative interests of the seven emirates are fairly clear. Abu Dhabi is the largest and wealthiest emirate and has the biggest population. It is, therefore, the dominant member of the federation and is likely to remain so for some time. Dubai is the second largest emirate by population, with both an interest in upholding its free-trade policies and a pronounced independent streak. The other emirates are dependent on subsidies from Abu Dhabi, though the extent of this dependence varies widely.

The forum where these issues are discussed is the Supreme Council, the highest legislative body in the country. The council, which tends to meet informally, comprises the seven emirs. New federal laws can be passed with the consent of five of the seven rulers. The Supreme Council also elects one of the emirs to a five-year term as the country’s president. After the death of the founder of the country and its first president, Sheikh Zayed, in late 2004, power passed peacefully to his son Sheikh Khalifa bin Zayed al-Nahyan.

There is also a cabinet, and the posts within it are distributed among the emirates. Most of the federal government’s money comes from Abu Dhabi and Dubai, so members of these governments hold most of the important cabinet posts.

The cabinet and the Supreme Council are advised, but cannot be overruled, by the Federation National Council, a consultative body with 40 members, half of whom are voted in by a tiny electorate (see the boxed text, [opposite](#)).

The Dubai Municipality is effectively the local government for the emirate, handling everything from economic planning to rubbish collection. Above the municipality is Sheikh Mohammed’s private office, the Executive Office, along with the official administrative body called the Diwan or the Ruler’s Office.

HAWALA: THE BUSINESS OF TRUST

Imagine a money transfer system with quick delivery and minimal or no fees, which is available to people in the poorest countries in the world. This is *hawala*, and Dubai is one of the key centres of this controversial practice.

Hawala is an Arabic term for a written order of payment. It works like this. You hand over your dirhams and the contact details of the recipient to your neighbourhood *hawala* trader. In return you get a code – say, a letter and four numbers. Then you ring up the recipient and give them the code. The trader contacts the people in his network. The next day, maybe two days later, the *hawala* trader’s partner hands over the money, sometimes delivering it to the door of the recipient. The commission taken by the *hawala* traders might be as little as 1% or 2%, even zero if they can make a little profit on exchange-rate differences.

Some newspaper reports say as much as 90% of wages remitted to developing countries from the UAE were sent via this system until recently. Sending Dh100 to India via a bank would yield Rs 1050, while via a *hawala* trader it yields Rs 1130; while this is only US\$2 difference, this amount still goes a long way in India’s poorer regions and is a huge benefit to workers who can only afford to send home small amounts.

The *hawala* system has existed among Arab and Muslim traders for centuries as a defence against theft. It’s a uniquely Islamic system, completely dependent on trust and honour. If a *hawala* trader breaks this trust, he’ll be out of work, as his reputation is crucial to his business.

The *hawala* system in Dubai grew through gold smuggling in the 1960s. Once the gold was sold in India or Pakistan, the traders couldn’t get the money back to Dubai. They found their solution in the growing number of expatriate workers. The workers gave their wages to the gold traders in Dubai, and the gold traders in India paid their relatives.

Since the attacks of 9/11, the system is under increased pressure, as the USA – and its media outlets – has claimed that *hawala* is being used to transfer money to terrorists. *Hawala* operators in Dubai have been subject to further regulations yet there’s no sign that this long-standing alternative to Western Union and the other money transfer giants is under threat anytime soon.

IDENTITY & LIFESTYLE

IDENTITY

The best recent estimates put Dubai’s population at 1.5 million, a giant leap from 183,200 in 1975. Three quarters of the population is male. These statistics apply to the whole of the Dubai emirate, though the UAE is overwhelmingly urban with more than 90% of the population living in cities. The emirate’s population has been growing by as much as 7% a year, and the authorities are planning for a population of two million by 2010. Fewer than 10% of the total population of Dubai are Emiratis; the expatriate community makes up the rest of the population – one of the most multicultural in the world.

In stark contrast to neighbouring Saudi Arabia and nearby Iran, Dubai is a tolerant and easygoing society, with its cultural and social life firmly rooted in Islam. Most religions – Judaism is a noteworthy exception – are tolerated and places of worship have been built for Christians, Hindus and Sikhs. Day-to-day activities, relationships, diet and dress are very much dictated by religion (see the boxed text, [p41](#)). Gender roles are changing, with more and more women wanting to establish careers before marriage. With successful Emirati women such as Sheikha Lubna al-Qasimi (the first female Minister of Economy and Planning) and Dr Amina Rostamani (Executive Director of Dubai’s Media City) serving as role models, women’s contribution to the workforce has grown considerably in the past decade.

There may only be limited ‘bricks and mortar’ representation of traditional Arabic and Bedouin life in Dubai, but the cultural and national identity of Emiratis is strong. The physical representations of the past still exist in the form of the traditional architecture (see [p39](#)) on the Shindagha waterfront in Bur Dubai and Al-Ahmadiya School ([p58](#)) and Heritage House ([p58](#)) in Deira, but to gain a good insight into traditional culture, visit Dubai Museum ([p61](#)) or venture out of the city to the East Coast villages ([p172](#)) or Al-Ain ([p170](#)), where life appears little changed from the way it was before federation.

Take comments you may hear about Dubai being fake and a ‘shopping culture’ with a pinch of salt – shopping is merely a pastime, albeit an extremely popular one. Emirati cultural identity is expressed through poetry, traditional song and dance, a love of the desert and nature, and of camels, horses and falconry, all of which remain popular activities. If you’re lucky enough to be invited to a wedding (and you should take up the offer), it’s a great way to see some of these cultural traditions in action.

Dubai has been very active in preserving and publicly displaying many local traditions. The Dubai Museum ([p61](#)), Bastakia ([p61](#)), Al-Ahmadiya School ([p58](#)), Heritage House ([p58](#)) and the Heritage Village ([p67](#)) in Shindagha all give insights into traditional and cultural life, and the aim of such work is not just to attract and entertain tourists, but to educate young Emiratis about the value of their culture and heritage. Families also make an effort to maintain their heritage by taking their kids out to the desert frequently and teaching them how to continue traditional practices such as falconry.

One matter of great concern to the authorities is the ongoing trend for Emirati men to marry foreign women. One reason for the trend is the prohibitive cost of a traditional wedding, plus the dowry the groom must provide – essentially, it’s cheaper and easier to marry a foreign woman. Another factor is that as Emirati women are becoming better educated, they’re less willing to settle down in the traditional role of an Emirati wife. The issue comes up frequently in the Arabic press – in a culture where women who are still unmarried at the age of 26 are referred to as spinsters, or even as slighting the family’s honour, the growing numbers of single women is a hot topic indeed. The UAE Marriage Fund, set up by the federal government in

THE ROAD TO DEMOCRACY

The United Arab Emirates has recently taken the most tentative of steps towards democracy. Half the country’s Federal National Council (FNC), a 40-person body established to review and debate legislation, is now elected. But the FNC has no real power; it can only advise the government, and only 6689 people have been hand-picked to vote – under 1% of Emiratis and a tiny fraction of the UAE’s total population of over four million – for candidates on a list approved by the government.

While full democracy in the UAE may be decades away, there are plans to grant the FNC some legislative powers and to eventually give the vote to all UAE citizens. In the inaugural elections in December 2006, 382 women were able to vote and one woman was elected onto the council.

HOT PROPERTY

If you bought a house in Dubai in 2002, when foreigners were first allowed to purchase property, there's a good chance your ear-to-ear grin still hasn't faded. This landmark ruling kick-started Dubai's property boom, and prices doubled and sometimes trebled in value over the next few years. However, confusion regarding the ownership of the properties (buyers only received a guarantee of ownership from the developers but no legal freehold rights) persisted until 2006, when a new law was introduced giving owners full freehold rights including title deeds in certain parts of town. Freehold owners are also now entitled to a renewable three-year residency visa.

Unfortunately it's no longer possible to exchange a grotty, cramped apartment in London or Sydney for a sparkling four-bedroom villa in Jumeirah, but prices remain attractive to buyers from Western countries. Bargain hunters may want to look outside Dubai, with freehold property prices in Ajman, Ras al-Khaimah and Sharjah undercutting those in the big city.

1994 to facilitate marriages between UAE nationals, provides grants to pay for the exorbitant costs of the wedding and dowry and promotes mass weddings to enable nationals to save for a down payment on a house. These initiatives have reduced the rate of intermarriages between Emirati men and foreign women to a degree, but not sufficiently to ensure that every Emirati woman has a husband.

LIFESTYLE

Don't be surprised if you hear expats make crude generalisations about Emiratis. You may be told they're all millionaires and live in mansions, or that they refuse to work in ordinary jobs, or that all the men have four wives. Such stereotypes simply reinforce prejudices and demonstrate the lack of understanding between cultures in Dubai.

Not all Emiratis are wealthy. While the traditional tribal leaders, or sheikhs, are often the wealthiest UAE nationals, many have made their fortune through good investments, often dating back to the 1970s. As befits a small oil-producing nation, all Emiratis have access to free healthcare and education as well as a marriage fund (although the budgets don't often meet the expenses of elaborate Emirati weddings). These types of social benefits, and charities operated by generous sheikhs, such as Sheikh Mohammed, are essential to the survival of poorer Emiratis in modern Dubai.

The upper and middle classes of Emirati society generally have expansive villas in which men and women still live apart, and male family members entertain guests in the *majlis* (meeting room). In all classes of Emirati society, extended families living together is the norm, with the woman moving in with the husband's family after marriage, although some young couples are now choosing to buy their own apartments for a little more privacy than the traditional arrangement allows.

Most Emiratis work in the public sector, as the short hours, good pay, benefits and early pensions are hard for young people (whose parents and grandparents still recall hard times) to refuse. The UAE government is actively pursuing a policy of 'emiratisation', which involves encouraging Emiratis to work in the private sector, and encouraging employers to reject negative stereotypes and hire them. In the long term the government hopes to be much less dependent on an imported labour force.

Living with such a large proportion of expats, and an increasing amount of Western 'culture', has seen an increasing conservatism as well as liberalisation in Dubai. This is especially

THE MAJLIS

Majlis translates as 'meeting place' or 'reception area'. The *majlis* was a forum or council where citizens could come and speak to their leaders and make requests and complaints or raise issues. In Dubai the *majlis* system was preserved until the 1960s. In its domestic sense, a *majlis* is a reception area found in all older buildings in Dubai (such as Al-Fahidi Fort, the Dubai Museum and the Heritage House in Al-Ahmediya). Its Western cousin is probably the lounge room. The *majlis* is still an important room in an Arab household and is usually the domain of the male members of the family. It's a place where they can get together and talk without disturbing the women of the house, as most traditional houses still have a separate *majlis* for women.

RACISM IN DUBAI

Notice something weird about the job ads in the classified section of the newspaper? In the UAE, it's quite normal for employers to specify the preferred nationality or gender of applicants in advertisements. Ads often include phrases such as 'Arabs only', 'UK/US/AUS only', or even 'males preferred'. Some employers expect female candidates to send photographs with their application. The open discrimination you'll see in job ads is often reflected in pay. A European can expect to earn more than a Filipino or Indian doing the same job. In 2007 *Xpress* newspaper sent four men, two from India and two from Britain, to nightclubs across Dubai. At several of the clubs the Indian men were turned away by the bouncers while British men got in without any problems.

It's a similar situation when it comes to finding accommodation. Moments after I signed a lease to rent an apartment in Satwa, the (European) estate agent revealed she had good news for me. 'There are no Indians or Pakistanis in your building,' she announced. I asked why she considered this such good news. 'Because you don't get the smell of curry all day,' she replied. Dubai may be one of the most multicultural cities in the world, but it has a very long way to go before it can be considered a true melting pot.

noticeable among young women: some are beginning to dress in Western fashion (usually ones with foreign mothers), others are sticking with traditional dress yet individualising it, while yet others are 'covering up'. One aspect that's not going away is the importance of traditional dance, song and customs. All Emiratis know their traditional songs and dances, and activities such as falconry are being passed from father to son. So is the love of the desert – Emiratis are as comfortable in the sands as they are in Switzerland, where many of them take a summer break away from the heat.

As far as the foreign community goes, there are as many different lifestyles being played out in Dubai as there are grains of sand on Jumeirah Beach. Disposable income plays a big part in how people live. At the top end of the pay scale is the professional and wealthy management class. They can enjoy a good salary package, a nice car, a large villa with a maid and nanny, and a lifestyle that allows them to travel overseas for two months a year to escape the summer heat. Housewives left with little to do at home spend much of their time with other women in similar circumstances. These 'Jumeirah Janes', as other expats call them with a hint of derision, keep the cosmetics and spa industries alive and the coffee shops ticking over during the day. These residents are generally Western, but there are plenty of Indians, Iranians and Lebanese (mainly in business) that fall into this category too.

There is another category of professional expat – the academics, health professionals, media and IT people – who earn much the same as they would back home in gross terms, but with no tax, free or subsidised housing, great holidays and other benefits like schooling and healthcare, they come out ahead in financial terms. These expats are also generally Western, but there are a large number of Indians working in the IT field and Arabs working in the media, health and education sectors. Depending on how many children they have, some families have a full-time or part-time maid or nanny. But not all Western expats are on big salaries. Many aren't paid enough to save money in Dubai, especially since the cost of renting an apartment is now almost the same as in Paris or London.

Dubai has a huge service sector and traditionally workers come from India, Pakistan and the Philippines, but now there are employees coming from other parts of Asia and increasingly Africa too. Working as line cooks and waiters and in supermarkets, these expats stand to make more money in Dubai than at home, usually working six days a week and sharing rooms in cheap accommodation. With rent for a single bedroom around Dh4000 a month – more than most workers in the service sector earn in a month – it's necessary to share living spaces.

There are a huge number of maids employed in Dubai – check the classifieds of *Gulf News*. Indian, Pakistani, Indonesian and Sri Lankan maids are generally paid between Dh500 and Dh800 a month and live in a tiny room in their employer's villa or share an apartment with friends. While the money earned is a fraction of a Western professional's starting salary, it's still more than unskilled work pays at home. Depending on the family, some of these maids become an integral part of their employer's family structure, forming close bonds with the children. Unfortunately, UAE labour law doesn't yet fully cover domestic workers, and a small but significant number of maids are exploited and subjected to violence and abuse.

WASTA

When visiting Dubai, you might hear expats talking about *wasta*. The term translates loosely as 'influence high up' and having *wasta* can grease the wheels in just about every transaction in Dubai. Most Westerners get a little outraged at the thought of a select few receiving favours and special treatment because of powerful contacts – until, of course, they want some help themselves. Then being friends with a local who has *wasta* becomes a very desirable thing. But the funny thing is that those who claim to have *wasta* usually don't and those that do generally don't mention it.

Indians, Pakistanis and workers from other countries in the region go about the hazardous business of construction in Dubai. These men usually work six or six-and-a-half days a week on 12-hour shifts and live in what are known locally as 'labour camps' (compounds) provided by the construction companies. Conditions in the labour camps vary enormously; while some are spacious and comfortable, others cram ten to 15 people into small and filthy rooms.

Estimates vary wildly, but there are as many as 250,000 construction workers living in an area near the Sharjah border known, perhaps ironically, as Sonapur. Its name, meaning 'city of gold' in Hindi, can't be found on any road signs or maps. The better camps in Sonapur

aren't that bad, but much of it is a slum. Workers are sometimes forced to sleep on the floor without mattresses and the usually reticent *Gulf News* has carried reports about people living among flies and pools of sewage. The difference in quality of life between the people who book rooms in Dubai's luxury hotels and those who toil to build them could hardly be greater.

Over the past few years, a number of riots have broken out on construction sites, including the Burj Dubai and Dubai Mall sites, with workers protesting against low pay and bad conditions. Typical pay for construction workers is Dh25 to Dh28 for a 12-hour day and most workers have to pay off large debts to the agents who initially arranged their employment.

The summer heat is extremely oppressive, in some cases reaching 45°C. A Human Rights Watch report from 2006 entitled 'Building Towers, Cheating Workers' claims that as many as 5000 construction workers per month were sent to the accident and emergency department of Rashid Hospital in July and August of 2004 with heatstroke. The government has banned outdoor work in July and August between 12.30pm and 3pm, although some construction firms continue to ignore the ruling. Another serious concern is that the rate of suicides among expatriates from this sector is on the increase.

The response of the expatriate community to the hardships suffered by construction workers has been apprehensive and slow. One nonpolitical organisation trying to make a difference is [Helping Hands UAE](http://www.helpinghandsuae.com) (www.helpinghandsuae.com). If you'd like to donate clothes, food, toiletries, books or CDs to construction workers, see Helping Hands' website for information on collection points.

FASHION

Emirati women have been showing a growing pride and renewed confidence in their own national dress, the *abaya* (black cloak) and *shayla* (black veil), despite the ever-increasing Western influences in Dubai and recent reports in the media from doctors attacking *abayas* for causing osteoporosis and recruiters saying companies won't hire women who cover their faces. The latest trend is for young women to wear *abayas* and *shaylas* playfully embellished with jewels, beads, sequins, embroidery, feathers, lace, tassels and tiny plastic toys. And while Emirati men are occasionally seen in Western dress (women very rarely are, unless travelling outside the country), they're increasingly wearing their *dishdashas* (man's shirt-dress) in smart new colours, such as slate, teal and chocolate.

Hand-in-hand with this development of national fashion is the exciting emergence of several young Emirati and Dubai-born expat or Dubai-based designers, whose designs experiment in a tongue-in-cheek fashion with their own cultural symbols. At the same time, expats living in Dubai seem to be increasingly incorporating exotic Arabic (and Indian) dress into their own style and are wearing giant Bedouin earrings, pendants and bangles, long flowing colourful kaftans, and floaty smocks featuring embroidery, beads, jewels and gem stones.

The older men and women still seem set in their ways, and it's common to see men wearing the white *dishdasha* and a white or red-and-white checked *gutra* (headcloth) with *agal* (a black headrope used to hold the *gutra* in place), while older women still wear a black or gold burqa on their face, whether they're on the street or in the shopping mall.

THE MULTICULTURAL CITY

The majority of Dubai's expatriate population (comprising 90% of the emirate's population) is from India (about 60%), supplying the city with cheap labour as well as filling management and professional positions. Most of Dubai's construction workers and men in low-prestige positions (taxi drivers, hotel cleaners etc) come from Kerala, a southern Indian state, while there are also a lot of workers from the Indian states of Tamil Nadu and Goa. In contrast, most of the Indians in office jobs or managerial positions are recruited by agencies based in Mumbai, while IT guys come from Bangalore. All of the leading Indian mercantile communities – Jains, Sindhis, Sikhs and Marwaris – are also represented here.

About 12% of expats are from other Arab countries (mainly Lebanon, Syria, Jordan and Egypt) while there's also a substantial Iranian community. The first wave of Iranians built the Bastakia neighbourhood in the 1930s. They were mostly religiously conservative Sunnis and Shiites from southern Iran. After the 1979 Islamic revolution, a more affluent and often Western-educated group of Iranians settled in Dubai. There is also a growing community of Filipino expatriates, many of whom work in the hospitality sector, as well as some Chinese, Indonesian, Malaysian and Vietnamese residents. Western expats make up about 5% of the population, with at least 100,000 British citizens and increasing numbers of workers from Australia, Canada, South Africa, Ireland, Germany and France.

SPORT

The traditional Emirati sports of horse, camel and boat racing have been supplemented by the wide variety of sports that the expat community enjoy. Even during the fiercest heat of summer you'll see people playing golf or partaking in a social game of cricket in an empty car park. Just about any sport you can think of has a small group of dedicated enthusiasts finding a way to indulge in their favourite pastime, despite the heat and often relative lack of facilities.

Given the fierce summer heat, obviously the best time to play or watch sport in Dubai is during the winter months when all of Dubai's sports lovers make the most of the marvellous weather. Tennis and golf are extremely popular as are all varieties of football, but water sports are more suitable as a year-round activity. Scuba diving, sailing and kite surfing are all popular as are skateboarding and surfing (when there are waves, that is). For more on these activities, see [p138](#).

ENVIRONMENT & PLANNING

THE LANDSCAPE

Dubai sits on the Gulf, in the northwest region of the UAE. This city is the capital of the emirate of the same name, which is the second largest of the seven emirates that compose the UAE. The emirate of Dubai is 3885 sq km and the city is roughly 35 sq km but will swell to over double this size with the addition of the three Palms, the Waterfront, the World and the Universe, along with Dubailand and the construction in the desert.

Prior to settlement, this area was flat *sabkha* (salt-crust coastal plain). The sand mostly consists of crushed shell and coral and is fine, clean and white. The *sabkha* was broken only by clumps of desert grasses and a small area of hardy mangroves at the inland end of the Creek. Photographs of the area from the early 20th century show how strikingly barren the landscape was.

East of the city, the *sabkha* gives way to north-south lines of dunes. The farming areas of Al-Khawanej and Al-Awir, now on the edge of Dubai's suburbia, are fed by wells. Further east the dunes grow larger and are tinged red with iron oxide. The dunes stop abruptly at the gravel fans at the base of the rugged Hajar Mountains, where there are gorges and waterholes. A vast sea of sand dunes covers the area south of the city, becoming more and more imposing as it stretches into the desert known as the Empty Quarter, which makes up the southern region of the UAE and the western region of Saudi Arabia (you can see the Empty Quarter from Al-Ain, [p170](#)). North of Dubai, along the coast, the land is tough desert scrub broken by inlets similar to Dubai Creek, until you reach the mountainous northern emirates.

PLANTS & ANIMALS

In Dubai's parks you will see indigenous tree species such as the date palm and the neem (a botanical cousin of mahogany), and a large number of imported species, including lovely-smelling

THE GULF – ARABIAN OR PERSIAN?

To avoid causing offence, you must not refer to the body of water off the coast of Dubai as the 'Persian Gulf'. This is an exceptionally sensitive issue in Arab Gulf countries, where the water is definitely, emphatically and categorically called the 'Arabian Gulf', even if the rest of world, including the UN, disagrees.

The term 'Persian Gulf' is banned in Dubai. It is ripped out of school textbooks and crossed out on maps (as is the word 'Israel'), and any newspaper or magazine using these words by mistake can expect to be severely reprimanded. Even historical maps in the city's museums have been altered so the original inscription of 'Persian Gulf' isn't legible.

It's an equally sensitive issue in Iran, which banned the *National Geographic* for using the term 'Arabian Gulf' on a map, although it was in parenthesis below a much larger 'Persian Gulf'. They even banned *The Economist* for using the neutral term 'The Gulf'. Tech-savvy Iranians have also taken their battle to the internet. Do a Google search for 'Arabian Gulf', click on the first result, and you'll see what we mean.

eucalypts. The sandy desert surrounding the city supports wild grasses and the occasional date-palm oasis. In the salty scrublands further down the coast you might spot the desert hyacinth emerging in all its glory after the rains. It has bright yellow and deep-red dappled flowers.

Decorating the flat plains that stretch away from the foothills of the Hajar Mountains, near Hatta, are different species of flat-topped acacia trees. The *ghaf* also grows in this area; this big tree looks a little like a weeping willow and is incredibly hardy, as its roots stretch down for about 30m, allowing it to tap into deep water reserves. The tree is highly respected in the Arab world, as it provides great shade and food for goats and camels; it's also a good indicator that there's water in the surrounding vicinity.

As in any major city, you don't see much wildlife. Urbanisation, combined with zealous hunting, has brought about the virtual extinction of some species. These include the houbara bustard, the striped hyena and the caracal (a cat that resembles a lynx). The Arabian oryx (also called the white oryx), however, is one success story. As part of a programme of the Dubai Desert Conservation Reserve (see the boxed text, p166), it has been successfully reintroduced.

On the fringes of the city, where the urban sprawl gives way to the desert, you may see a desert fox, sand cat or falcon if you are very lucky. Otherwise, the only animals you are likely to encounter are camels and goats. The desert is also home to various reptile species, including the desert monitor lizard (up to a metre long), the sand skink, the spiny-tailed agama and several species of gecko. The only poisonous snakes are vipers, such as the sawscaled viper, which can be recognised by its distinctive triangular head. There are even two remarkably adapted species of toad, which hibernate for years between floods burrowed deep in wadis.

The city is a hot spot for bird-watchers; because of the spread of irrigation and greenery, the number and variety of birds is growing. Dubai is on the migration path between Europe, Asia and Africa, and more than 320 migratory species pass through in the spring and autumn, or spend the winter here. The city's parks, gardens and golf courses sustain quite large populations, and on any day up to 80 different species can be spotted. Species native to Arabia include the crab plover, the Socotra cormorant, the black-crowned finch lark and the purple sunbird.

Artificial nests have been built to encourage flamingos to breed at the Dubai Wildlife & Waterbird Sanctuary (p71) at the inland end of Dubai Creek. In addition to flamingos, ducks, marsh harriers, spotted eagles, broad-billed sandpipers and ospreys all call the sanctuary home – for bird-watchers, this place is a must-visit.

The waters off Dubai teem with around 300 different types of fish. Diners will be most familiar with the hammour, a species of groper, but the Gulf is also home to an extraordinary range of tropical fish and several species of small sharks. Green turtles and hawksbill turtles used to nest in numbers on Dubai's beaches, but today their nesting sites are restricted to islands. Although you won't see them around Dubai, the coastal waters around Abu Dhabi are home to the Gulf's biggest remaining population of dugongs, where they feed off sea grasses in the shallow channels between islands.

PROGRESS & SUSTAINABILITY

There's no shortage of sand in Dubai, so converting it into islands that cost several million dollars each is a very profitable venture. But environmentalists have argued that Dubai's offshore

projects such as the Palm Islands and The World may be causing considerable long-term damage. To create The World, around 33 million cubic metres of sand and shell from the seabed of the Gulf has been dredged and redistributed. Critics claim that this work has damaged the marine environment, with dredging destroying the seabed and plumes of sediment from the construction wrecking fragile coral reefs.

The developers, Nakheel, claim to take environmental matters seriously and employ marine biologists to monitor the reefs. They insist the artificial reefs they're creating, which will include sunken wrecks to entertain divers, will provide a calm environment that sea life can thrive in. The shelter created by the 11km-long breakwater at the Palm Jumeirah, they assert, has resulted in many species of fish returning to the area.

Structures such as the Burj Dubai and Ski Dubai have been criticised for the amount of energy they require to operate, but happily there seem to be more environmentally conscious constructions appearing on the horizon. The world's first rotating tower, 55° Time Dubai, will be powered by solar panels and use recycled water. The Iris Bay tower, meanwhile, will draw in air at night, cool it with water and distribute it as an alternative to energy-sapping air-conditioning systems. A third project, the Burj Al-Taqa (Energy Tower) will use wind turbines and solar panels to produce all its own energy. Dubai could do worse than look to Abu Dhabi for inspiration, because Masdar City will be the world's first carbon-neutral city. Solar panels will provide power for the community of 15,000 people.

Dubai consumes resources at a much faster rate than it can replace them, which is why its ecological footprint is so high (see the boxed text, p37). It won't be easy to reverse the trend and achieve environmental sustainability because the UAE relies so heavily on imported goods. Nearly everything on the supermarket shelves is expensively flown in, and most of what you'll eat in restaurants has been transported from overseas too. There are a few farms in the UAE (including a couple of organic pioneers), but in a country where the economy – and the local mentality – is so urbanised, it will take some effort to entice UAE nationals or expatriates to work in the agricultural sector to lessen the nation's dependency on imported goods. The labour force is also imported, as are the millions of tourists who drive the economy. With the world's biggest airport opening soon in Jebel Ali, Dubai's dependency on aviation, the single greatest cause of climate change, is unlikely to wane.

There will always be a huge demand for air conditioning in such a hot climate. (For information on Dubai's climate, see p182.) Future residential buildings are likely to be more energy efficient, but people have to become less wasteful too, and switch off the air conditioning when they're not at home. At 133 gallons per day, the UAE has the highest per capita rate of water consumption in the world, and rainfall is infrequent. The government has vowed to cut the water consumption rate in half by 2012. Most of the UAE's tap water is desalinated, an expensive and energy-intensive process, but necessary to convert seawater into water clean enough to drink.

THE CREATION OF A METROPOLIS

It may have taken Dubai a little longer than other major cities to get its own metro system, but let's keep a sense of perspective: until the 1960s donkeys and camels provided the only transport around town. As is the case today, *abras* (water taxis) were used to transport people across the Creek. The first roads were only built in the 1960s.

The development of a modern infrastructure started long before the discovery of oil in 1966, although this was the principal catalyst for rapid growth. The first bank, the British Bank of the Middle East, was established in 1946, and when Al-Maktoum Hospital was built in 1949 it was the only centre for modern medical care on the Trucial Coast until well into the 1950s. When Sheikh Rashid officially came to power in 1958, he set up the first Municipal Council and established a police force and basic infrastructure, such as electricity and water supply.

Construction of the airport began in 1958 and the British Overseas Airways Corporation (BOAC) and Middle East Airlines (MEA) launched regular flights to Dubai soon after. Even after oil revenues began coming in, trade remained the foundation of the city's wealth, though oil has contributed to trade profits and encouraged modernisation since its discovery. Work on the Port Rashid complex began in 1967, after it became obvious that the growing maritime traffic could no longer be managed by the existing facilities, and was completed in 1972. The mid-1970s saw the start of a massive programme of industrialisation, resulting in the construction of Jebel Ali Port, the largest artificial port in the world, and the adjacent industrial centre, which was to become a free-trade zone.

It remains to be seen whether the Dubai Metro persuades a large number of people to ditch their private vehicles in favour of public transport. The government is also looking into opening more bus routes and introducing solar-powered *abras* in the future.

ENVIRONMENTAL AWARENESS

There is a disturbing lack of environmental awareness in Dubai. You will often see rubbish left on beaches, in parks or thrown out of car windows. As a result, an enormous number of workers are employed to make sure the rubbish on the streets doesn't stay around to sully the city's image, and the municipality has slapped a Dh500 fine on littering. But people are also throwing rubbish out of car windows in the nearby desert. A trail of plastic bags, soft drink cans and water bottles are scattered along the edge of the sands.

Recycling continues to be a fringe activity. The [Emirates Environmental Group](http://www.eeg-uae.org) (www.eeg-uae.org) has opened a number of recycling centres around the city (see [p18](#)), but these are not always in convenient locations or in the best condition. With the emirate's landfill sites struggling to cope with demand, the government is building an integrated waste-management facility, Dubai Recycling Park, due to open in 2009.

It's estimated that a third of the cars on Dubai's roads are sports utility vehicles (SUVs), which are famed for their capacity to guzzle gas. But petrol is very cheap and many expatriates like to have a big car for reassurance on Dubai's volatile roads. Many drivers, of course, require four-wheel drive vehicles for their off-road leisure pursuits.

While some Dubai residents come from countries where the environment isn't a pressing concern, far too many others are well-informed on the topic of global warming but stop recycling after moving to the emirate. This may be because the facilities are inconveniently located, or perhaps because they're not concerned about the long-term health of a city they're only living in temporarily.

BUILDING THE BRAND

When the Burj Al Arab project was announced, it was a clear message that Dubai meant business; that it would face the challenge of dwindling oil supplies with ambition, innovation and courage. Opening the world's tallest hotel was a marketing masterstroke. Another was publicising a journalist's hyperbole that the Burj was the world's first 'seven star hotel'. The hotel's management never claimed they'd magically exceeded the five-star limit, but they were happy to let the misconception spread and Dubai suddenly became *the* luxury tourism destination. The Burj Al Arab hosted Dubai's greatest publicity stunt to date, when in 2005 tennis stars Roger Federer and Andre Agassi were invited to exchange a few rallies on the tower's helipad. The following day images from the resulting photo shoot appeared on the front pages of newspapers around the world.

Dubai has been very successful at building its brand identity, although the nature of this identity depends on where you're viewing it from. In the Indian subcontinent the city wants to be seen as a land of opportunity, a place where people can make money and pursue their ambitions. In Europe, Dubai's a brave new world, a sun-soaked paradise free of the scourges of bureaucracy, rain clouds and income tax. And in the Middle East, Dubai projects itself as an all too rare Arab success story: a model Muslim state that proves Islam and modernity are fully compatible.

Yet Dubai's proud Islamic identity may be an obstacle when it comes to establishing a strong business relationship with the US. The news that DP World (owned by the Dubai government), through their purchase of P&O, would take control of the management of six American ports triggered a national debate in the States. Opponents of the deal said it created a security risk, implying that Dubai has links with terrorists. A period of intense, and arguably Islamophobic, debate followed. Articles appeared in the US press about the two Emirati 9/11 hijackers and about how Dubai banks transferred funds to the terrorists in Florida, all suggesting that DP World couldn't be trusted. The US Senate threatened to block the takeover and DP World retreated.

The UAE-USA relationship has been further tested by a class-action lawsuit filed by American lawyers against the Dubai royal family. A case alleging that Sheikh Mohammed is partly responsible for the abduction and trafficking of thousands of children to be used as camel jockeys was dismissed by a Miami court, but the case was later refiled in Kentucky – where the Maktoums own stables – against Dubai's deputy ruler, Sheikh Hamdan.

Despite the occasional setback, the Dubai marketing machine shows no sign of slowing down. Tiger Woods has followed in the footsteps of Roger and Andre and hit golf balls off the helipad at the Burj Al Arab; Arsenal play their Premier League football at the Emirates Stadium in London, and 'Dubai Towers' will soon open in Doha, Qatar and Istanbul, Turkey.

DUBAI'S ECOLOGICAL FOOTPRINT

Dubai's transformation from a small town into a major metropolis in the space of a few decades has been remarkable. But such rapid expansion has inevitably had a negative impact on the environment.

According to the World Wildlife Fund (WWF), the United Arab Emirates is the least environmentally friendly country in the world. The WWF measures the ecological footprint of countries by calculating how many global hectares – an area of biologically productive land or sea – is required to sustain the average person. According to their 2006 'Living Planet' report, the average person in the UAE requires the equivalent of 11.9 global hectares, compared to 9.6 in the United States and a global average of 2.2.

The good news is that something is being done about a problem that threatens to embarrass the city. Soon after the WWF's report was released, the government launched an initiative called *Al Basma Al Beeiya* (ecological footprint), which set out a plan for both the public and private sector to make a greater effort to work towards sustainable development.

Being environmentally responsible in Dubai can be a challenge. Many offices don't have recycling bins for waste paper, newspapers routinely come wrapped in plastic for no apparent reason, it's impossible to live without air conditioning for half the year, and efforts to re-use plastic bags in supermarkets are nearly always greeted by bemused stares.

Local Environmental Organisations

The Federal Environmental Agency legislates on environmental issues and encourages communication on these issues between the emirates. There are also a number of NGOs concerned with the environment.

Emirates Diving Association (☎ 393 9390; www.emiratesdiving.com) This association is an active participant in local environmental campaigns, with an emphasis on the marine environment.

Emirates Environmental Group (☎ 344 8622; www.eeg-uae.org) This group organises educational programmes in schools and businesses as well as community programmes, such as clean-up drives.

MEDIA NEWSPAPERS

A few years ago the front pages of the local newspapers were reassuringly familiar. A sheikh said something wise, had a successful meeting or received a message of congratulations and hardly a day went by without a call for Arab unity in the op-ed columns. As an ever-increasing number of journalists leave countries with a free press to work in Dubai, this situation is slowly improving, although critical coverage of the government remains off-limits.

The most reliable local English-language broadsheet is the *Gulf News* (www.gulfnews.com), which despite being toothless in its domestic reporting, features solid coverage of the Middle East and the Indian subcontinent. Its publisher, Al Nisr, also produces *Xpress* (www.xpress4me.com). In spite of its chatty, informal style and irritatingly spelt name, the weekly paper occasionally publishes stories other newspapers won't touch, such as investigating racist door policies at nightclubs (see boxed text, [p31](#)).

The other major English-language broadsheet is the *Khaleej Times* (www.khaleejtimes.com), which until recently had been a relatively independent voice in Dubai media, although its credibility was constantly undermined by dismal writing, spelling mistakes and factual errors. It's now partly government-owned and avoids contentious issues. Its strapline, 'The Truth Must Be Told', is a regular source of amusement for resident cynics.

The government also owns the Arab Media Group, which publishes *Emirates Business 24/7* (www.business24-7.ae), the UAE's first business newspaper. The paper used to be known as *Emirates Today*, which after a lively start changed management, lost dozens of journalists and rapidly gained a reputation for being a government mouthpiece. The best free newspaper is still *7 Days* (www.7days.ae), although after some high-profile scraps with rival publications and a major distributor it seems to have lost its edge. Amusingly published six days a week,

7 Days is still worth a read for its frequently entertaining letters page.

If you're after something more internationally minded, both the *Times* and the *Financial Times* publish Middle East editions. Todayly (www.todayly.com) print same-day editions of many international newspapers including the *Guardian*, *Daily Telegraph*, *Le Monde* and *Sydney Morning Herald* – these are usually available in branches of Carrefour.

MAGAZINES

You'll find dozens of English-language magazines that have been locally produced on the shelves of Dubai's shops. In a city so flush with cash, the magazines with famous names rarely struggle to find advertisers willing to splash out on expensive spreads. The most popular magazines are the titles imported from Europe. ITP, the region's biggest publisher, makes Dubai editions of *Grazia*, *Time Out*, *L'Official* and *Harper's Bazaar*, while Motivate puts out an ultra-gossipy local version of *Hello!* and an electronics mag *Stuff*.

ONLINE

While all the major newspapers and magazines have an online presence, bloggers are making the biggest impact. Websites such as Secret Dubai (www.secretdubai.blogspot.com), An Emirati's Thoughts (www.aethoughts.blogspot.com) and The Emirates Economist (www.emirateseconomist.blogspot.com) often cover topics the mainstream press steer clear of. While *Secret Dubai* has a large following, and its comments pages host some of the bitterest debates in the city, it also has its detractors with many arguing that it isn't respectful enough to the local culture. Secret Dubai was briefly blocked in 2005 by the state internet proxy, a decision overturned after a public outcry. More recently, the entertaining *Sex and Dubai* blog was banned, owing to its frequently risqué content.

THE CENSORSHIP QUESTION

The mechanics of censorship in Dubai are complex and ill-defined. All journalists working in Dubai know that some topics, such as criticism of the UAE's rulers or anything that could be perceived as negative treatment of Islam, are completely off-limits. It's also perilous to write about sex, drugs, alcohol, homosexuality or Israel. At other times the line isn't so clear. Can journalists write about prostitution, domestic violence, human trafficking or drug addiction in the emirate? Possibly, but very few, if any, Dubai editors are prepared to take the risk. Most follow the golden rule – don't write anything negative about Dubai if you want to keep your job.

It's usually self-censorship, rather than direct government interference, that hinders press freedom in Dubai, although the fear of reprisals is very real. Journalists should no longer be sent to prison, though. Hours after two *Khaleej Times* reporters were sentenced to prison for libel in 2007, Sheikh Mohammed issued a pardon and declared that journalists should not be jailed for reasons relating to their work.

Sometimes the authorities order publishers to withdraw offending publications from circulation, but such direct interference is uncommon. In most cases, journalists and editors (many of whom work for government-owned publications) self-censor because their publishers' profit margins are threatened. A publication that upsets the wrong people can soon expect its revenue to dwindle, as so many major advertisers are wholly or partly government-owned, while private companies may fear the repercussions of associating with the wrong people. In other cases, a publisher may find its distributors suddenly pull the plug, or that their license to print a certain title is revoked.

In a democracy, journalists are expected to scrutinise the activities of government and hold it to account. But the UAE is not a democracy, and the vast majority of journalists are guests in Dubai. While the media tries to get its collective head around the emirate's nebulous press-freedom laws, a wider debate about whether Western journalists have the right to impose their values on a culture unused to transparency and openness rages on.

top picks

LOCAL MAGS

- **Ahlan!** Dubai's even gossipier version of *Hello!*
- **Bidoun** Cutting-edge art and culture from the Arab diaspora.
- **Time Out Dubai** Local news, event previews and punchy food reviews.
- **Identity** A stylish interior design and property magazine.
- **Soura** A showcase for work by young Arab photographers.

TELEVISION

Dubai isn't a city accustomed to playing catch-up, but when it comes to TV news in the Gulf, Qatar has stolen a march on the opposition. Al Jazeera is the most popular news network in the Arab World and its English-language service has helped put this small country on the map.

While Dubai's rulers, unlike their Qatari counterparts, haven't bankrolled a home-grown media superpower, they have attracted many of the big names in the broadcasting world to set up Middle East headquarters at Dubai Media City. CNN, Reuters, CNBC, BBC World and Showtime Arabia are all residents. Media City is meant to be free of government intervention, hence its motto 'Freedom to Create'. But this isn't always the case. In November 2007, two private Media City-based Pakistani news channels, Geo News and Ary One World, were temporarily shut down by Dubai authorities, presumably at the request of the Pakistani government.

There are a few English-language TV channels in Dubai, although only a couple – the amateurish **City 7** (www.city7tv.com) and **Dubai One** (www.dubaione.ae) – produce their own shows.

ARCHITECTURE

Surprisingly, for a city with few buildings older than 100 years, the economic boom of the last 30 years has left it an architectural mishmash. But the incongruous blend of traditional Arabian architecture with modern constructions straight out of science fiction make the city a remarkable sight. A boat ride along the Creek takes you from the wind-tower houses in the Bastakia Quarter of Bur Dubai to the pointed dhowlike roof of the Dubai Creek Golf & Yacht Club, via the sail-like National Bank of Dubai. As you'll notice, these modern structures sit comfortably with the traditional architecture of the cosmopolitan city, its contrast representative of other juxtapositions in Dubai – East and West, old and new. Interestingly, much of the city's recent architecture, such as Madinat Jumeirah (but also private residences), sees a return to traditional Arabian forms, although projects such as Burj Dubai show that the cloud-busting skyscraper isn't going anywhere in Dubai but up.

TRADITIONAL ARCHITECTURE

On your wanderings around the city, you'll notice that Dubai's traditional architecture consists of essentially four types of buildings – domestic (residential homes), religious (mosques), defensive (forts and watchtowers) and commercial (souqs). Readily available materials, such as gypsum and coral from offshore reefs and from the banks of the Creek, were put to use. The Sheikh Saeed Al-Maktoum House (p66) in Shindagha is a fine example of this kind of construction. Limestone building blocks were also used and mud cemented the stones together. However, mud constructions suffered badly in the heat and had a limited lifespan, sometimes only a few years. Interestingly, the dimensions of buildings were often governed by the length of timber, mainly from India or East Africa, that could be loaded onto a *dhow*. There were two types of traditional house – the *masayf*, a summer house incorporating a wind-tower, and the *marshait*, a winter house with a courtyard. You'll see both of these in the Bastakia Quarter (p61).

When you explore the lanes surrounding Bur Dubai Souq (p66) and behind Al-Ahmadiya School (p58) in Deira, you'll see that the alleyways are narrow and the buildings close together. The lanes are narrow to increase the velocity of wind, keeping the neighbourhood cooler, while houses, souqs and mosques were built close together to provide maximum shade so that inhabitants could move around town in comfort, protected from the harsh sun.

Wind-towers

Wind-towers, or *barjeel* in Arabic, are the Gulf's unique form of nonmechanical air-conditioning, and scores of original wind-

HOT CONVERSATION TOPICS

- When will the bubble burst?
- Where have all the taxis gone?
- Is the ban on outdoor music destroying Dubai's nightlife?
- Why didn't I buy a house five years ago?
- Could local radio get any worse?
- Will we ever be allowed to use Skype in the UAE?
- Who's the better chef: Gordon Ramsay or Gary Rhodes?
- Will the government abandon the dollar peg?

DUBAI'S NOTABLE BUILDINGS

Burj Al Arab (p75) The Burj was completed in 1999, and is set on an artificial island 300m from the shore. The 60-floor, sail-shaped structure is 321m high. A translucent fibreglass wall serves as a shield from the desert sun during the day and a screen for an impressive light show each night. Until the Burj Dubai arrived on the scene to steal its thunder, it was *the* iconic symbol of Dubai.

Burj Dubai (Map pp72–3) To retain an edge over rival skyscrapers, developers Emaar chose to keep the final height of the Burj Dubai under wraps for as long as possible. Upon completion, it will be at least 700m tall, easily surpassing the 555m CN Tower in Toronto, and it could even rise above the 800m mark. Adrian Smith, the American architect responsible for the Burj's cloud-tickling design, claims that the tower's geometric shapes and spirals are directly influenced by traditional Islamic architecture.

Dubai Creek Golf & Yacht Club (p144) When you cross the bridges over the Creek, you'll notice the pointed white roof of the clubhouse set amid artificial, undulating hillocks. The idea behind this 1993 design was to incorporate a traditional element – the white sails of a *dhow* – into the form and style of the building, and while this motif is becoming overused now, it's ageing well.

Dusit Dubai (p158) Sheikh Zayed Rd features many modern skyscrapers, but few are as eye-catching as this one. The 153m-high building has an inverted 'Y' shape – two pillars that join to form a tapering tower. It's supposed to evoke the Thai joined-hands gesture of greeting, appropriate for this Thai hotel chain, but looks more like a giant tuning fork.

Emirates Towers (p158) Designed in an ultramodern internationalist style, the twin, triangular, gunmetal-grey towers on Sheikh Zayed Rd soar from an oval base and are among the world's tallest. The taller of the two (355m) houses offices, while the other (305m) is a hotel. Balanced by the curvilinear base structure, the curved motif is also repeated in the upper storeys of the buildings. Perhaps the best-loved building in the city.

Jumeirah Beach Hotel (p160) This long S-shaped construction represents a wave, with the Gulf as its backdrop. The glimmering façades of the hotel and its close neighbour, the Burj Al Arab, are achieved by the use of reflective glass and aluminium. The two structures combined – a huge sail hovering over a breaking wave – symbolise Dubai's maritime heritage.

National Bank of Dubai (Map pp54–5) This shimmering building off Baniyas Rd in Deira, overlooking the Creek, has become another quintessential symbol of Dubai. Designed by Carlos Ott and completed in 1997, it combines simple shapes to represent a *dhow* with a sail billowing. The bronze windows reflect the activity on the Creek and at sunset, when the light is just right, it's a beautiful sight.

World Trade Centre (Map pp72–3) As soon as rumours started to spread that they might pull down Dubai's beloved first skyscraper, built in 1979, everyone started to reappraise the city's first icon. The kind of structure *Wallpaper** likes to do photo spreads on – its beehive-like exterior is a form of sun-shading. But who knows how much time it has left?

towers still exist in Bastakia (p61). Traditional wind-towers, rising 5m or 6m above a house, are open on all four sides to catch the breezes, which are channelled down around a central shaft and into the room below. In the process, the air speeds up and is cooled. The cooler air already in the tower shaft pulls in, and subsequently cools the hotter air outside through simple convection. It works amazingly well. Sitting beneath a wind-tower when it's a humid 40°C, you'll notice a distinct drop in temperature and a consistent breeze even when the air outside feels heavy and still. Test out the one at Dubai Museum (p61).

The wealthy Persian merchants who settled in Dubai around the beginning of the 20th century were the first to build a large number of wind-towers in Bastakia. In some houses the tallest wind-tower was above the master bedroom, while smaller wind-towers cooled the living rooms. The merchants brought red clay from Iran, which they mixed with manure to make *saruj*. This was baked in a kiln and used to build the foundations of the wind-tower house. Other materials included coral rock and limestone for the walls and plaster for decorative work. The walls were built as thick as 60cm, so the house could be extended upwards if the family expanded. Chandel wood from East Africa, palm-frond matting, mud and straw were used to build the roofs.

Courtyard Houses

Houses in Dubai were traditionally built around a central courtyard. The courtyard, known as *al-housh* in Arabic, was the heart and lungs of a house. All the rooms of the traditional house sur-

rounded the courtyard and all doors and windows opened onto it, except those of the guest rooms, which opened to the outside of the house. A veranda provided shade, kept sun out of rooms at certain times of the day, and was usually the place where the women did weaving and sewing. For great examples of courtyard houses, visit the Heritage House (p58) in Deira or XVA (p68) in Bastakia.

Barasti

Barasti describes both the traditional Arabian method of building a palm-leaf house and the completed house itself. *Barasti* houses are made from a skeleton of wooden poles (date-palm trunks) onto which *areesh* (palm leaves) are woven to form a strong structure through which air can still circulate. They were extremely common throughout the Gulf in the centuries before the oil boom, though few examples of this type of house survive today. They were relatively easy to build and maintain since, unlike the mud-brick houses you find in the oases around Al-Ain and Buraimi, their construction didn't require water. The circulation of air through the palms also made *barasti* houses much cooler than mud-brick ones during the summer. The courtyard in the Dubai Museum (p61) and the Heritage Village (p67) in Shindagha both contain examples of *barasti* houses.

Mosques

Fundamentally simple structures, mosques are made up of a few basic elements which are easy to identify. The most visible of these is the minaret, the tower from which the call to prayer is broadcast five times a day. Virtually every mosque in the world has a minaret; many have several. The first minarets were not built until the early 8th century, some 70 years after the Prophet's death. The idea may have originated from the bell towers that Muslim armies found attached to some of the churches they converted into mosques during the early years of Islam. The more minarets on a mosque, the more important it is. No mosque has more than seven minarets, the number on the Grand Mosque in Mecca.

A mosque must also have a *mihrab*, a niche in the wall facing Mecca, indicating the *qibla*, the direction believers must face while praying. *Mihrabs* were thought to have been introduced

THE FIVE PILLARS OF ISLAM

Islam is the official religion of Dubai and the majority of Emiratis are Sunni Muslims. Many of Dubai's expatriates also practice Islam, and in some parts of town, mosques have largely Pakistani congregations. The diversity of Dubai's large expatriate population means most other religions are also represented.

Shahadah The profession of faith: 'There is no god but God, and Mohammed is the messenger of God.'

Salat Muslims are required to pray five times every day: at dawn (*fajr*), noon (*dhuhr*), mid-afternoon (*asr*), sunset (*maghrib*) and twilight (*isha'a*). Loudspeakers on the minarets of mosques transmit the call to prayer (*adhan*) at these times, and you can expect to be woken up at dawn if your hotel is situated in the cluttered streets of Deira or Bur Dubai. During prayers a Muslim must perform a series of prostrations while facing the Kaaba, the ancient shrine at the centre of the Grand Mosque in Mecca. Before a Muslim can pray, however, he or she must perform a series of ritual ablutions, and if water isn't available for this, sand or soil can be substituted.

Zakat Muslims must give a portion of their income to help the poor. How this has operated in practice has varied over the centuries: either it was seen as an individual duty (as is the case in Dubai) or the state collected it as a form of income tax to be redistributed through mosques or religious charities.

Sawm It was during the month of Ramadan that Mohammed received his first revelation in AD 610. Muslims mark this event by fasting from sunrise until sunset throughout Ramadan. During the fast a Muslim may not take anything into his or her body. Food, drink, smoking and sex are forbidden. Young children, travellers and those whose health will not allow it are exempt from the fast, though those who are able to do so are supposed to make up the days they missed at a later time.

Haj All able Muslims are required to make the pilgrimage to Mecca at least once, if possible during a specific few days in the first and second weeks of the Muslim month of Dhul Hijja, although visiting Mecca and performing the prescribed rituals at any other time of the year is also considered spiritually desirable. Such visits are referred to as *umrah*, or 'little pilgrimages'.

into Islamic architecture around the beginning of the 8th century, and like minarets they can be simple or elaborate. The *minbar*, a pulpit chair traditionally reached by three steps, dates from the Prophet's lifetime.

Mosques need to have a water supply so that worshippers can perform the *wudu* or ablutions required before they begin praying. Neighbourhood mosques in Dubai are visited five times a day for prayers, with worshippers travelling further afield to larger mosques for Friday prayers.

The Jumeirah Mosque (p75) is based on the Anatolian style, identified by a massive central dome, while other mosques in Dubai are based on Iranian and Central Asian models, which have more domes covering different areas of the mosque. Shiite mosques are identifiable by their exquisite green and blue faience tile work covering the façades and main dome. One stunning example is the Iranian Mosque (p79) on Al-Wasl Rd, while the multidomed Grand Mosque (p67) in Bur Dubai is a variation on the Anatolian style.

MODERN ARCHITECTURE

In contrast to the traditional architecture that was all about function over form, and was built for the environment, modern architecture in Dubai (until recently) has embraced an 'anything goes' ethos with complete disregard to the climate. About 90% of Dubai's architecture can be described as cosmopolitan or international and is built using concrete, steel and glass. However, many architects have recently started to question the thinking behind building glass towers in a country with extreme heat. The huge cooling costs alone are reason to go for designs that better respond to and integrate with the weather and surroundings. Because these cosmopolitan materials absorb heat and transfer it to other parts of the construction, they also cause damage over time. As a result, hi-tech, state-of-the-art materials with greater heat resistance are now starting to be used. Certainly some of the newer housing developments are doing so. Other developments, such as the Jumeirah Beach Residence, consist of dozens of high-rise towers.

Designs that are ageing well – and plenty aren't – are usually the ones produced by established architects, such as Carlos Ott (National Bank of Dubai building). While most of Dubai's new buildings have been designed by international firms, the most significant local architect-designers happen to be members of the Sharjah royal family. Sisters Sheikhha Mai and Sheikhha Wafa al-Qasimini set up their own company, Ibtikari (Arabic for 'my innovation') in 2001 in association with a British architect. Their commissions include both interior design (check out Amzaan boutique, p96) and architecture.

ARTS

British satirist Rory Bremner once said that going to Dubai for its culture was like going 'to Tibet in search of nightlife'. It's really not quite that bad. It will be many years before Dubai can compete with the major European cities when it comes to music, theatre, art, literature and film, but progress is being made.

VISUAL ARTS

At the turn of the millennium there were only a handful of galleries in Dubai, most of which offered little more than clichéd watercolours of Arabian horses, camels and the like. Within the space of a few years, the city has become a focal point for contemporary Arabic and Persian art. With customary foresight, Dubai's decision-makers have recognised the potential of the art market in the region and gone all out to make sure it doesn't miss a trick.

top picks

DUBAI ARTS EXPERIENCES

- **B21 Progressive Art Gallery** (p71) As close to the cutting-edge as you'll find in Dubai. Controversial exhibitions by the likes of Iranian photographer Shadi Ghadirian have caused quite a stir.
- **Meem Gallery** (p71) Mishal Kanoo's smart Al-Quoz space focusing on contemporary Islamic art.
- **1x1 Art Space** (p80) The only gallery in Dubai dedicated to showing Indian art.
- **The Third Line** (p71) Exhibits adventurous, provocative and playful work with an emphasis on female Arab photographers and mixed-media artists.
- **XVA** (p68) A wonderful art gallery, laid-back café, boutique hotel and film club nestled in the wind-towers of Bastakia.

The inaugural Gulf Art Fair in 2007, retitled Art Dubai the following year, brought galleries, artists and dealers from around the world to the plush setting of Madinat Jumeirah to talk business. Dubai's location at the crossroads of the Middle East, the Indian subcontinent and Africa, has helped it become an art industry hub. But it's also Dubai's relative openness that makes it such an attractive location for artists hoping to show their work. All the usual taboos, including anything that could be construed as criticism of Dubai, remain off limits. Nudity is a no-no, but Dubai is still more open than cities such as Tehran and Damascus, where some of the artists come from. Major exhibitions at venues such as the British Museum have fuelled a keen interest in Middle Eastern contemporary art, and Dubai is a lot more accessible to Western dealers than other cities in the region.

Although Dubai's art boom is being propelled mainly by commerce, rather than creativity, there are signs that ordinary residents of the city are becoming more interested in the art world. Much of the credit for the invigoration of the art scene goes to Sheikhha Hoor al-Qasimi, Director of the Sharjah International Biennial, who excited art lovers once again with a vibrant 8th Biennial in 2007. On the theme of 'Art, Ecology and the Politics of Change', 80 artists from around the world put on an engaging and challenging show. Another biennial is scheduled to take place in April 2009.

Perhaps the most surprising thing about Dubai's sudden enthusiasm for art is the development of an art district, tucked away in the otherwise uninviting Al-Quoz area. This featureless congregation of industrial estates along the edge of Sheikh Zayed Rd is home to several cutting-edge galleries including B21 (p71), The Third Line (p71) and Meem Gallery (p71). Art isn't part of the school curriculum in the Emirates and is rarely written about in the Arabic-language press, but it is hoped that these galleries, along with events such as Art Dubai, will inspire a new generation of home-grown artists.

For its second outing in 2008, Art Dubai doubled in size, hosting close to 70 galleries from around the world. Although it's certainly put Dubai on the art map, it's been criticised for being too industry-focused and not doing enough to stimulate a grassroots art movement in the region. Several Dubai galleries (including some that don't participate in the main fair) take part in an annual fringe event, the Creek Contemporary Art Fair. Organised by the evergreen XVA (p68), the Creek Fair pools together the city's independent galleries to give visitors a more representative taste of the city's art scene.

Dubai isn't the only place in the Gulf experiencing an upsurge in art interest. The Qatari government has funded a Museum of Islamic Art in Doha, while Abu Dhabi is opening branches of the Guggenheim and the Louvre on Saadiyat Island. This ambitious and hugely expensive endeavour (the emirate is rumoured to have paid US\$1 billion for the Louvre's name, expertise and paintings) leaves Abu Dhabi open to a charge you could also direct at Dubai: that it's spending millions of dollars on importing culture while home-grown artists receive no help at all. Only a tiny percentage of the artists who exhibit in Dubai were raised in the Emirates and there are no government-funded galleries in the country.

CINEMA

The history of Emirati feature films, for the time being, starts and ends with a single movie. Hani al-Shabani's *Al Hilm* (The Dream) was a light-hearted drama about a young writer's struggle to produce a script and a film, and reflected the challenges many aspiring Emirati filmmakers face. It took until 2005 to produce this single feature-length film. Now there is a small but committed group of Emirati filmmakers planning to follow it up with bigger and better features.

While the **Dubai International Film Festival** (www.dubaifilmfest.com) is arguably the city's cultural highlight of the year, it has been criticised in the past for being preoccupied with Hollywood stars and for not doing enough to cultivate local talent. This is beginning to change. The 2007 festival featured a new segment, Emirati Voices, which featured nine short films by local directors.

Emirati filmmaking talents have other opportunities to have their work screened. The **Emirates Film Competition** (www.efilmc.com) has taken place annually since 2001 and offers cash awards and places at the Abu Dhabi Film Academy to Emiratis who make short films that successfully represent the culture and heritage of the country. The Mini Film Festival (named for its car-making sponsors and not for the length of its films) accepts shorts from across the region and is held every December,

DUBAI INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL

Every December, the Dubai International Film Festival delivers a much-needed dose of culture to the city's blockbuster-weary cinemagoers. Launched in 2004, the festival has two main aims: to create cultural bridges and promote understanding, tolerance and peace; and to develop Dubai as a regional film hub. While some residents have complained that the organisers have an unhealthy obsession with luring star names onto their red carpets (Morgan Freeman, Oliver Stone, Orlando Bloom and Sharon Stone have all visited), there's no questioning the quality of the programming. The 2007 festival saw critically acclaimed movies such as *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly* and *No Country for Old Men* screened several months before their release dates in Europe, while the categories established to promote the region's filmmaking talents – Arabian Nights and Emirati Voices – increase in size and scope every year and give upcoming Dubai directors an opportunity to show their talents off to a wider audience.

and the inaugural [Middle East International Film Festival](http://www.meiff.com) (www.meiff.com), which took place in Abu Dhabi in 2007, incorporated [Hayah](http://www.hayahfilm.com) (www.hayahfilm.com), a short film competition for Emirati filmmakers.

By launching its own film festival, Abu Dhabi hopes to lure Hollywood studios to shoot more movies in the region. Dubai has already hosted George Clooney and *Syriana*, while Abu Dhabi provided the backdrop to Jamie Foxx in *The Kingdom*. Dubai Studio City offers world-class production facilities and it seems likely that more American crews will shoot in Dubai, especially since so many films about the recent Iraq war are in the pipeline. If Studio City does lure the megabucks of the big studios – and there's already word of a Paramount theme park in Dubai – the hope is that some of the foreign expertise will trickle down to local filmmakers. Film schools in the Emirates have already been established: the [Hollywood Film Institute](http://www.hollywoodfilm.com) (www.hollywoodindubai.com) in Dubai and the [New York Film Academy](http://www.nyfa.com) (www.nyfa.com) in Abu Dhabi.

The main challenge facing filmmakers is lack of funding. Although there's plenty of cash swilling around the Emirates at the moment, funding an independent Emirati film is seen as a huge financial risk when an indigenous film culture barely exists. What the industry needs is a film commission, a script fund, and grants for local talent. Until that happens, your only chance of seeing Emirati films is to visit the country during one of the film festivals.

Aspiring filmmakers also have to contend with the country's unpredictable censorship policies. Scenes involving nudity, drug taking, homosexuality and references to Israel are likely to be chopped. Even though it was filmed in Dubai, *Syriana* was cut so scenes depicting south Asian workers being mistreated didn't make it to emirate screens. Most movies make it through with minor cuts, although some films, such as *Brokeback Mountain*, are handed full bans. Scenes of violence, on the other hand, are very rarely cut.

One way Dubai residents sidestep censorship is by purchasing illegal DVDs, usually imported from Malaysia or China. Piles of counterfeit DVDs can easily be found in the alleyways and basements of Karama, although most people living in Dubai have a 'DVD woman' turn up to their front door twice a week with a bag of pirated goods. Although these discs only work half the time, many people are prepared to spend Dh10 and take the risk. Fighting on behalf of the film industry is the [Arabian Anti-Piracy Alliance](http://www.aaa.co.ae) (www.aaa.co.ae), who work with the Dubai authorities to tackle the problem. They're becoming increasingly successful at seizing the discs, and have trained sniffer dogs to help sniff out the problem. Sellers of pirated discs can expect a prison sentence and deportation if caught, with harsher punishments if they're also caught selling pornography.

DANCE

Dubai's contact with East and North African cultures through trade, both seafaring and by camel caravan, has brought many musical and dance influences to the UAE shores. Thus, traditional songs and dances are inspired by the environment – the sea, desert and mountains.

One of the most popular dances is the *liwa*, performed to a rapid tempo and loud drum-beat. Most likely brought to the Gulf by East African slaves, it is traditionally sung in Swahili. Another dance, the *ayyalah*, is a typical Bedouin dance, celebrating the courage, strength and unity of the tribe. The *ayyalah* is performed throughout the Gulf, but the UAE has its own variation, performed to a simple drumbeat. Anywhere between 25 and 200 men stand with their arms linked in two rows facing each other. They wave walking-sticks or swords in front

of themselves and sway back and forth, the two rows taking it in turn to sing. It's a war dance and the words expound the virtues of courage and bravery in battle. You can see the dance on video at Dubai Museum (p61).

The instruments used at traditional musical celebrations in Dubai are the same as those used in the rest of the Gulf. The *tamboura*, a harplike instrument, has five strings made of horse gut, which are stretched between a wooden base and a bow-shaped neck. The base is covered with camel skin and the strings are plucked with sheep horns. It has a deep and resonant sound, a little like a bass violin.

A much less sophisticated instrument is the *manior*, a percussion instrument that's played with the body. It's comprised of a belt made of cotton, decorated with dried goats' hooves, which is wrapped around the player who keeps time with the beat of the *tamboura* while dancing. The *mimzar* is a wooden instrument a little like a small oboe, but it delivers a higher-pitched sound, which is haunting and undeniably Middle Eastern.

An unusual instrument and one that you'll often see at song and dance performances is the *habban*, the Arabian bagpipes. Made from a goatskin sack, it has two pipes attached. The sack retains its goat shape and the pipes resemble its front legs. One pipe is used to blow air into the sack and the other produces the sound. The *habban* sounds much the same as the Scottish bagpipes, but is shriller in tone.

The *tabla* is a drum, and has a number of different shapes. It can resemble a bongo drum that is placed on the floor, or it can be a *jasr*, a drum with goatskin at both ends, which is slung around the neck and hit with sticks.

Traditional music and dance is performed spontaneously at weddings, social occasions and family gatherings. You may be lucky to see a performance if you're exploring an Emirati neighbourhood and come across a wedding tent; otherwise you'll have to visit the Heritage Village (p67) or catch a performance during the Dubai Shopping Festival or Summer Surprises.

CONTEMPORARY MUSIC

You won't find much original music in Dubai. You will, however, find plenty of bored-looking cover bands playing 'Hotel California' for the millionth time.

The good news is that a local rock scene is taking shape, albeit at a cripplingly slow pace. Loosely formed around [Phride](http://www.phride.com) (www.phride.com), a website that connects the Middle East's rock and metal fans, this budding scene has produced a few Dubai bands worth taking notice of. The political ska-punk of Gandhi's Cookbook won't be used in adverts by the Dubai tourist

ARAB POETRY

Just as programmes such as *American Idol* and *The X Factor* dominate TV schedules in Western countries, talent shows get huge viewing figures in the Middle East. But *Millions' Poet*, a widely watched programme made by Abu Dhabi TV, doesn't feature skimpy skirts, temper tantrums or boorish judges. Instead it sees *nabati* poets from across the Arab World compete for a Dh1 million prize.

Nabati, or vernacular poetry, is especially popular in the Gulf. The late Sheikh Zayed, former President of the UAE, and Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid al-Maktoum, Dubai's ruler, are noted writers in this tradition. The Jebel Ali Palm Island project features small islands shaped out of Sheikh Mohammed's poetry. Many Arabic-language newspapers and magazines publish pages of *nabati* poetry.

In Bedouin culture a facility with poetry and language is greatly prized (even now). A poet who could eloquently praise his own people while pointing out the failures of other tribes was considered a great asset. Modern poets of note from the UAE include Sultan al-Owais, some of whose poems have been translated into English, and Dr Ahmed al-Madani, who wrote in the romantic *baiti* style. Palestinian resistance poets such as Mahmood Darwish and Samih al-Qasim are popular, though traditionalists complain that they have broken with the 16 classical metres of poetry developed by the 8th-century Gulf Arab scholar Al-Khalil bin Ahmed. There are currently over 50 well-known male poets in the UAE who still use the forms of classical Arabic poetry, though they often experiment by combining it with other styles. There are also some well-known female poets, most of who write in *tafila*, or prose.

Emiratis spontaneously recite poetry with their friends, during social occasions, public events and even in shopping centres. Young people publish their own poetry, particularly romantic poems, on websites and in student magazines, and produce documentaries about the Emirati passion for poetic works.

board anytime soon (their EP *In the Cesspool of Culture* wasn't very complimentary about their hometown), while Indiephone produce hyperactive rock. The only Dubai band to break into the mainstream is Abri, a soulful funk outfit fronted by Dubai-born Hamdan Al-Abri. Since releasing their debut album, *Sunchild*, they've shared a stage at the Desert Rhythm festival with Kanye West and Joss Stone, and appeared on the cover of *Time Out Dubai*.

Dance music is a different story, and there are plenty of home-grown (although rarely Emirati) house and techno DJs. The Arabic music you're most likely to hear on the radio is *khaleeji*, the traditional Gulf style, recognisable to those familiar with Arabic pop music. Popular singers include Mohammed Nasser, who had a major hit with 'Ya Bint', and Dubai-born Yaseer Habeeb, the first UAE national to have a hit in Europe and the Middle East.

For information on live music, see [p132](#).

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