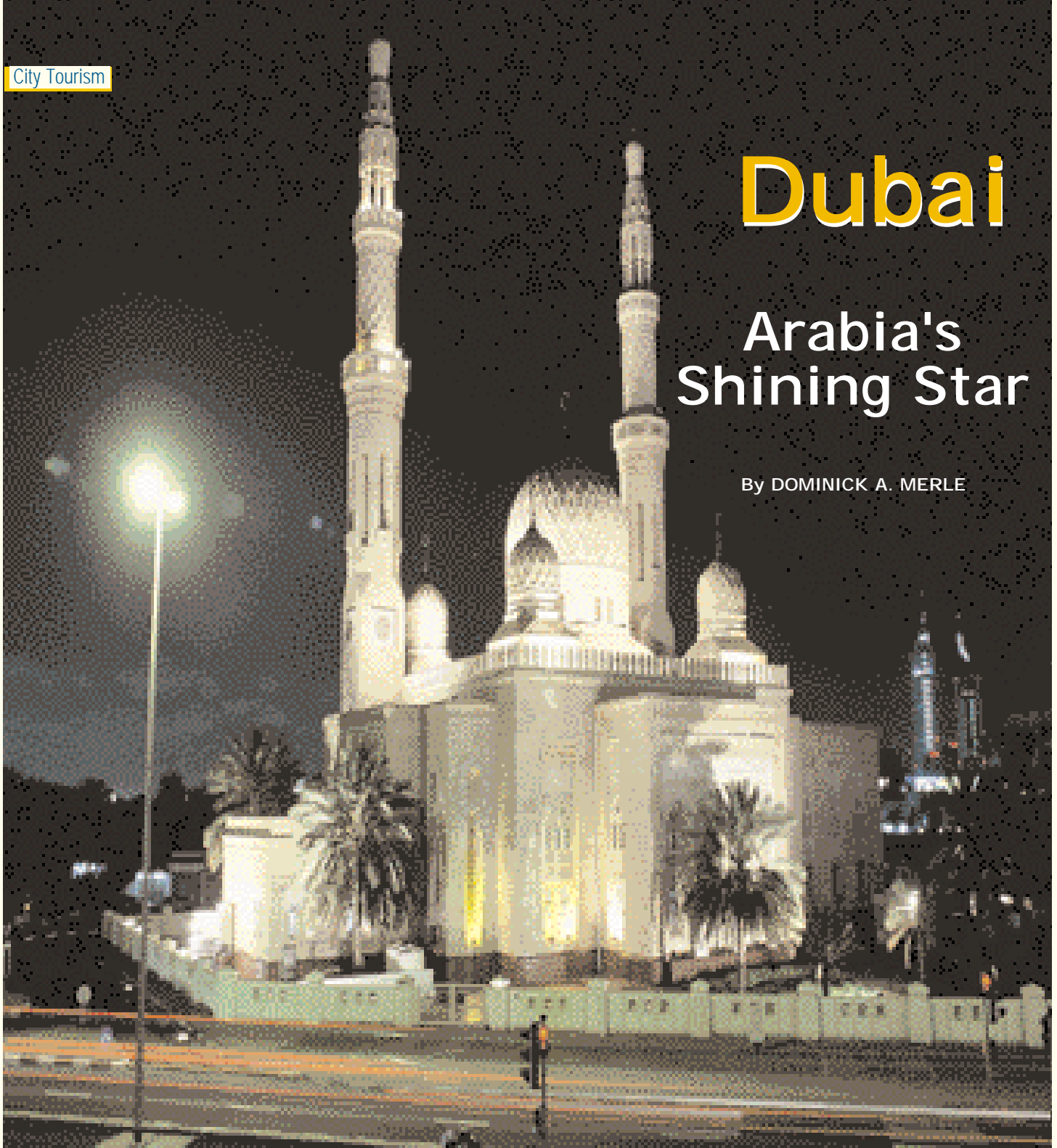


# Dubai

## Arabia's Shining Star

By DOMINICK A. MERLE



Night view of Dubai's most important mosque.

الغروب فوق مسجد دبي.

DUBAI, United Arab Emirates - Practically no unemployment, sunshine all year round, 125 different nationalities getting along together just fine, one of the lowest crime rates in the world and gas so cheap that taxi drivers take long afternoon siestas in their cabs with their motors and air conditioners running.

Is this the future, the past, or a page in a storybook? None of the above. It's today, and it's smack in the center of the world's hotspots. Welcome to Dubai, the shining star of the seven desert micro kingdoms that make up the oil-rich United Arab Emirates which,

altogether, would be roughly the size of Maine. Yet Dubai is thriving almost beyond belief with five-star hotels often turning away guests. It seems to be immune to the horror going on all around it, at least as of this writing. The daily buzz here is usually centered on

what the next mega-project will be.

"There's a rumor going around that something really big is in the works," said Marwan Al Marri of Dubai's Tourism and Marketing Division, "so we're looking around for clues. Unlike your country, when an ➤



**The Burj Al Arab is shaped like a sailboat and stands on a man-made island in the Arabian Gulf, linked to the mainland by a causeway. It is taller than the Eiffel Tower and only a little shorter than the Empire State Building. The sail façade features a double-skinned Teflon-coated woven glass fiber screen. A dazzling white by day, it becomes a canvas for a rainbow of spectacular light displays at night. Wherever you are in Dubai, you can't miss it. Suite rates range from about \$300 to \$10,000 a night.**



The falcon, a prized bird in the United Arab Emirates.

الصقر، الطير الغالي في الإمارات.

announcement is made here, work has already begun."

And it doesn't stop, he could have added, because construction goes on around the clock with projects often completed ahead of schedule. Of course, it helps when money is no object, as many developments are financed by the ruling sheiks who wake up every morning richer by another \$250-million or so in oil money in the till. That's a cool billion every four days.

"Yes, it's nice to have money," Marwan concurred, "but it's even better when you do something good with it."

The ruling sheiks often conceive the projects and then make those dreams come true, either by bankrolling them or offering huge tax incentives to private developers. For the architects, it's another dream come true as they are not hamstrung by budgets.

As a result, Dubai's downtown core looks like something out of a James Bond movie, with skyscrapers twisting upwards in futuristic shapes, resembling an abstract painting more than a city. The most impressive structure of them all, and some say the most outlandish, is the all-suite Burj Al Arab hotel,

routinely described as the most luxurious hotel in the world. One can easily tire of hearing the expressions "the most" and "in the world" while in Dubai, but being second best is not even in the vocabulary for the local wheelers and dealers.

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But bigger fish are coming to the Gulf. In fact, they will become a part of the Gulf. One project well underway is simply called "The Palm." It involves the creation of two massive palm tree shaped islands that will increase Dubai's shoreline by about 100 miles. When finished, there will be over 60 luxury hotels, 5,000 villas, 5,000 apartments, marinas, restaurants, shopping malls, and health

spas. The islands are being constructed from rock and sand transported from the nearby desert areas.

The Palm has already been hailed as "The Eighth Wonder of the World" and because of its immense size and unique shape, is said to be visible from space. Completion is targeted for 2007.

Then there is "The World," scheduled for completion in 2008. This mega-project consists of 250 islands strategically positioned to form the shape of all the countries in the world. The view from above will be a colossal map of the globe with the Arabian Gulf as its background!

Each island will be developed in a theme reflecting the actual land that the island's shape is based on. The Spanish section, for example, may have a few castles and Canada may have some igloos. Each island will range between 250,000 to 900,000 square feet. Access to "The World" will be by marine transport only.

### But wait - there's more!

A development in the heart of the city, scheduled for completion in 2007, will incorporate the world's tallest building and what is already being hailed as the first "seven-star" hotel (what happened to six?). The building, to be known as the Burj Dubai, will replace Taipei's 101 tower as the tallest, and will be constructed in such a way that if any other building dares go higher, Dubai can up the ante by adding a few more floors. I saw the foundation being laid and it was enormous.

Nearby, in the shadow of the skyscraper, you will enter the world's largest mall with an astonishing five million square feet of retail space, complete with a few ski slopes to relax between shopping.

Scheduled for completion in 2006 is International City, a residential, commercial and tourist development set over an incredible 800 hectares of land. It will include, for example, a replica of Beijing's ➤

Forbidden City smack in the center.

For the young and young at heart, there will be Dubai-World, an amusement park eight times larger than Disneyland.

And then, of course, the project that Marwan has been hearing "rumors" about.

I had read about the boom in Dubai before coming here, but was unprepared for the vast undertakings in progress. I was also flabbergasted by the ethnic mix, and the fact that Arabs represent less than 20 percent of Dubai's estimated 1.2-million population.

At least 60 percent of the residents are of Indian origin, mostly from the Kerala region. There are also more Filipinos, Russians and Chinese than Arabs. One day I talked to eight different employees at my hotel and they represented as many countries.

"Everybody respects each other, no matter where they come from," Marwan said. "Hostility is rare."

I tested his remarks by talking to a number of recent immigrants from various lands, and was unable to find one dissenter. All appeared to be content in this booming Arabic city of a hundred tongues.

We made brief stops at two other emirates during our stay: Abu Dhabi, the wealthiest of them all, and Sharjah, an up and coming star. Each was less than an hour's drive from Dubai over 10-lane divided superhighways.

Abu Dhabi, with a predominantly Arabic population, looked like a mini-Manhattan, with modern skyscrapers clustered together. If the ruling sheiks in Abu Dhabi ever decide to compete in the "world's best" categories, they can dip into their oil money and raise the barrier for all.

Sharjah is one of the more conservative emirates, but because of its proximity to Dubai is beginning to have its own mini-boom in construction, so within a few years it may be difficult to see where Sharjah leaves off and Dubai begins.

Dubai attracts about five million visitors a year, but relatively few North Americans.. Most are from Britain, Germany and Russia on the European continent, along with residents from African and Asian countries. They come for the sunshine practically guaranteed year-round with little rain (although June through September can be uncomfortably humid), for the world-



A view of Dubai's downtown core from the water.

دبي منظر من جهة الماء.

renowned duty free shopping (although bargains are becoming harder to find), for the quality of the resort complexes and for a taste of Arabia with a cosmopolitan lifestyle. But if you're looking for camels and sleepy desert villages, you took the wrong plane.

*(Dominick Merle is a travel writer and consultant based in Montreal)*

### TRAVEL TIPS:

We flew Malaysian Airlines nonstop from Newark to Dubai. Arab Emirate Airlines also flies nonstop to Dubai from JFK. Check with your travel agent for other carriers offering nonstop or one-stop services.

No visas are required for North Americans; only a valid passport. No health certificates are necessary.

Lightweight clothing is suitable for most of the year. Dubai's dress code is relaxed, but

care should be taken not to wear clothing that may be considered inappropriate or revealing, especially when visiting mosques. While the official language is Arabic, English is widely spoken and understood.

Normal tourist photography is fine, but it is often considered offensive to photograph Muslim women. When in doubt, ask for permission.

Service charges are included in most restaurants; anything additional is up to you. Hotels are plentiful and plush.

We stayed at the Royal Mirage ([royalmirage@royalmiragedubai.com](mailto:royalmirage@royalmiragedubai.com)), The Grand Hyatt ([dubai.grand@hyattintl.com](mailto:dubai.grand@hyattintl.com)) and the Mina A'Salam ([info@madinatjumeirah.com](mailto:info@madinatjumeirah.com)). The best buys continue to be gold and carpets. The opening prices are often vastly inflated, sometimes as much as tenfold, so bargain with a smile and a little knowledge. ■