

# Dubai's New Heritage District

## Keeps The Aura Of Ancient Arabia Alive

By **Habeeb Salloum**

For years, Dubai's Creek, a meandering 14 km (8.7 m) waterway, which divides the city into Bur Dubai, the old section, and Deira, the so-called new district (today, there are many newer districts) was the city's most famous landmark. Lately, the lure of the Creek has been greatly enhanced by the renovated 'Heritage District', located in the Shindagha area of Bur Dubai at the mouth of the Creek. Much of Dubai's history is preserved in its collection of forts, mosques, palaces and other historic monuments - on the itineraries of the organized city tours.



A projected view of Atlantis

مشروع أطلنطس

The Diving and Heritage Villages are the heart of this re-born district. Much has been done to restore the area to its former glory, but work is ongoing. Thirty-two traditional homes are being rebuilt and plans are well underway, along the

creek side, to complete a number of promenades, punctuated with traditional cafes. The Diving and Heritage Villages feature potters and weavers practising traditional crafts, as well as exhibits and demonstrations of pearl diving.

Visitors travel back in time to experience a taste of the city's past, its culture and legacy. The heritage district, along with the Creek, has become one of Dubai's most important tourist attractions. ➤



Jumeirah

الجميرة



Montgomerie Clubhouse

نادي مونتغمري



Burj Al Arab and Jumeirah Beach Hotel

برج العرب وفندق شاطئ الجميرة



Flower Garden

حديقة للورود

The Creek, responsible for the city's origin and for centuries its life-blood, is a world of the old dominated by the new. Along its shores a great many abras (water taxis) and dhows (Arab sailing ships) are anchored or sailing the smooth waters. On the Bur Dubai side the skyline is spiked by minarets and wind-towers - an ancient method of natural air conditioning; while on the Deira shore, the towering modern 20th century edifices look down on the busy waters.

As I stood on the edge of the Creek on the Deira side, dreaming about Dubai's romantic past, the living tokens of the mysterious Orient across the water drew me like a magnet. We could have crossed the Creek by an abra, costing less than 50 cents, but we chose a traditional four-wheeled taxi which sped us quickly over the Creek - spanned by the Garhoud and Al Maktoum bridges - another is under construction - and, at its mouth, the Shindagha Tunnel. It dropped us off in the Bastakiya district of old Dubai, with a large concentration of traditional courtyard houses with wind towers. For an hour we wandered through its narrow alleyways examining the handsome old homes with their beautifully carved doors

and unique wind-towers. It was a walk back in time, to the era before oil wealth transformed Dubai into one of the most modern and beautiful cities in the world.

The few remaining, mostly renovated, wind-towers give Bur Dubai its uniqueness. They are a symbol of an age when men with very limited resources tried to tame their harsh environment. Called badgeer or alfajes, they were introduced to Dubai in the 19th century by Persian merchants who settled in the Bastakiya and the nearby Shindagha districts of the city.

Every face of these square, breeze-catching structures is hollowed into a v-shaped concave with arches, pillars and intricate plasterwork. In appearance, they are like medieval louvres and were designed to trap the wind from any direction then funnel it through a hollow shaft to the rooms below.

The air, as it passed down, increased in velocity, terminating just a short distance above the floor. In the hot summer months, cushions were placed beneath the shaft on which the family and guests relaxed, dined or slept. During the winter months, to keep out the cool air, the vents were blocked with wooden plugs.

Before modern fans and air conditioning, the wind-towers were a very effective method of keeping homes cool.

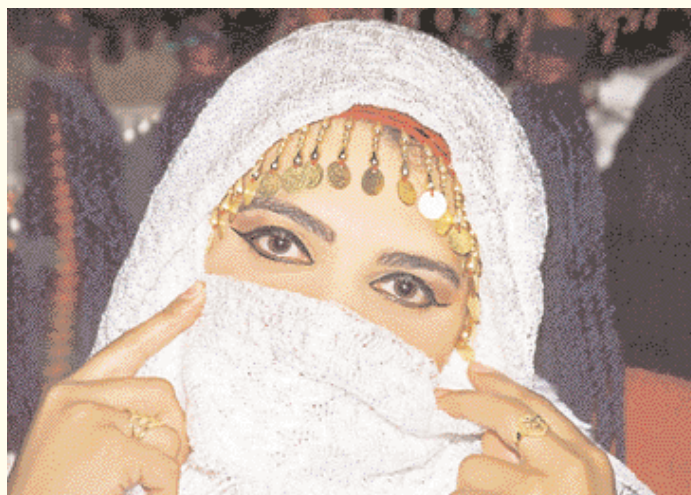
From the reincarnated wind-towers, we strolled to the Shindagha district with its Diving and Heritage Villages. Spread over an area of 3,500 sq m (4,186 sq yd), the Heritage Village offers visitors an overall glimpse of life in the Emirate of Dubai and acquaints them with the traditional arts, crafts and architecture of the UAE. Traditional handicrafts can be bought at the numerous shops that make up the souk (market) inside the Heritage Village.

The optimum time to visit the Heritage Village is during the annual Dubai Shopping Festival held from mid-January to mid-February when a dozen Arab countries return to their authentic Bedouin folklore. The ethics of the Arabs such as chivalry, generosity, hospitality, kindness and pride, as they were practised in the past, are celebrated in dance, poetry and song. It is a taste of old Arabia extended to visitors from all over the world.

In the Village during the Festival, the swish of Arab national dress, the clinking of the bangles, the sparkle of traditional jewellery, the smell ➤



Heritage Village - Coffee Roasting Ceremony القرية التراثية - تحميص القهوة



Heritage Village - Bedouin Bride القرية التراثية - عروس بدوية

of henna, the chatter of people buying traditional medicine, the aroma of freshly baked bread intermixed with that of freshly roasted coffee, the twinkle of kholed eyes, enshrouded with the sound of laughter, traditional craftsmen at work weaving carpets and baskets, all evoke pleasant memories from an Arab culture thousand of years old. Amid this atmosphere, one easily travels back to ancient Arabia - to the time when that land was a realm of mystery and romance.

Walking on a tiled pedestrian promenade we came to the focal point of the Heritage District - the totally renovated Sheikh Saeed Al Maktoum House - once the ruler's residence and centre of administration. Built from coral covered with lime and plaster, it features carved teakwood doors and windows, ventilating screens with floral and geometric designs and lattice screens. Located next to the Heritage Village, it showcases the history and development of the Emirate of Dubai, dating back to 1896. A symbol of the finest traditional Arab architecture, it opened its doors as a museum in 1996.

Standing on one of its balconies, we surveyed the appealing panorama. Below us there was a huge open space paved with coloured tiles of elaborate design. Beyond, along both banks of the Creek, the ancient blended well with the ultra modern.

Abras and dhows vied for attention with stunning newly built sky-reaching structures. It is a kaleidoscope of contrasts of postcard beauty. This charming scene and the lure of the Heritage District have had a great hand in making Dubai an international business and tourism centre which draws over 5 million visitors annually. ■

## IF YOU GO

### Facts About Dubai:

- 1) Dubai has good connections with the rest of the world. Some 106 airlines operate from the city to almost 160 destinations worldwide. The airport has been expanded and has become one of the world's inter-continental transit centres, processing some 22 million passengers. By 2010 visitors are expected to reach 60 million.
- 2) Most western European, American and Canadian citizens can enter the UAE without a prior visitor's visa, they can obtain their visas at the entry points.
- 3) Autos rent at a reasonable price. A small auto, fully insured, costs about \$30. per day - less if you bargain. Roads are excellent, but beware of huge traffic jams and two legged tigers driving autos.
- 4) The U.S. dollar is equal to 3.67 UAE dirhams. The rate has remained the same for over two decades. Exchange cash or traveller cheques at the money exchangers - they do not take commission.
- 5) A great way of seeing Dubai is to take a tour of the Creek by traditional dhow. Some of Dubai's major landmarks can be viewed from this waterway.
- 6) Major international hotel chains are well represented in Dubai. However, there are other very reasonably priced and excellent abodes to be found throughout the city.
- 7) In peoples' eating places, one can dine for as low as \$4, but the average cost of meal in good restaurants and hotels runs from \$20 to \$50.
- 8) The best time to travel to Dubai is during the

month-long 'Shopping Festival' with its street parties as well as its shopping sales and bargains, held in a carnival atmosphere.

9) No travellers should leave Dubai without going on a desert safari with its sand dunes, camel rides and desert feasts.

10) For other activities, attend some of the horse racing and camel racing events held during the cool winter months.

11) Dubai is a shoppers' dream world - its more than 30 huge modern malls offer the products of literally all the nations on the globe. The most popular gifts visitors take back home are: Arabian coffee pots, silver and wooden miniature dhows, gold jewelry, Persian carpets and Arabian curved daggers.

12) Important sites not to missed in the Heritage District are: the Dubai Museum, housed in Al Fahidi Fort and exhibiting life size dioramas depicting Dubai's history; and the historic Sheikh Obaid bin Thani House and Bait Al Wakeel, the first office building in Dubai, now housing a museum.

### Notes:

All prices quoted are in U.S. dollars.

Photos for this article are supplied by Dubai Department of Tourism and Commerce Marketing

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