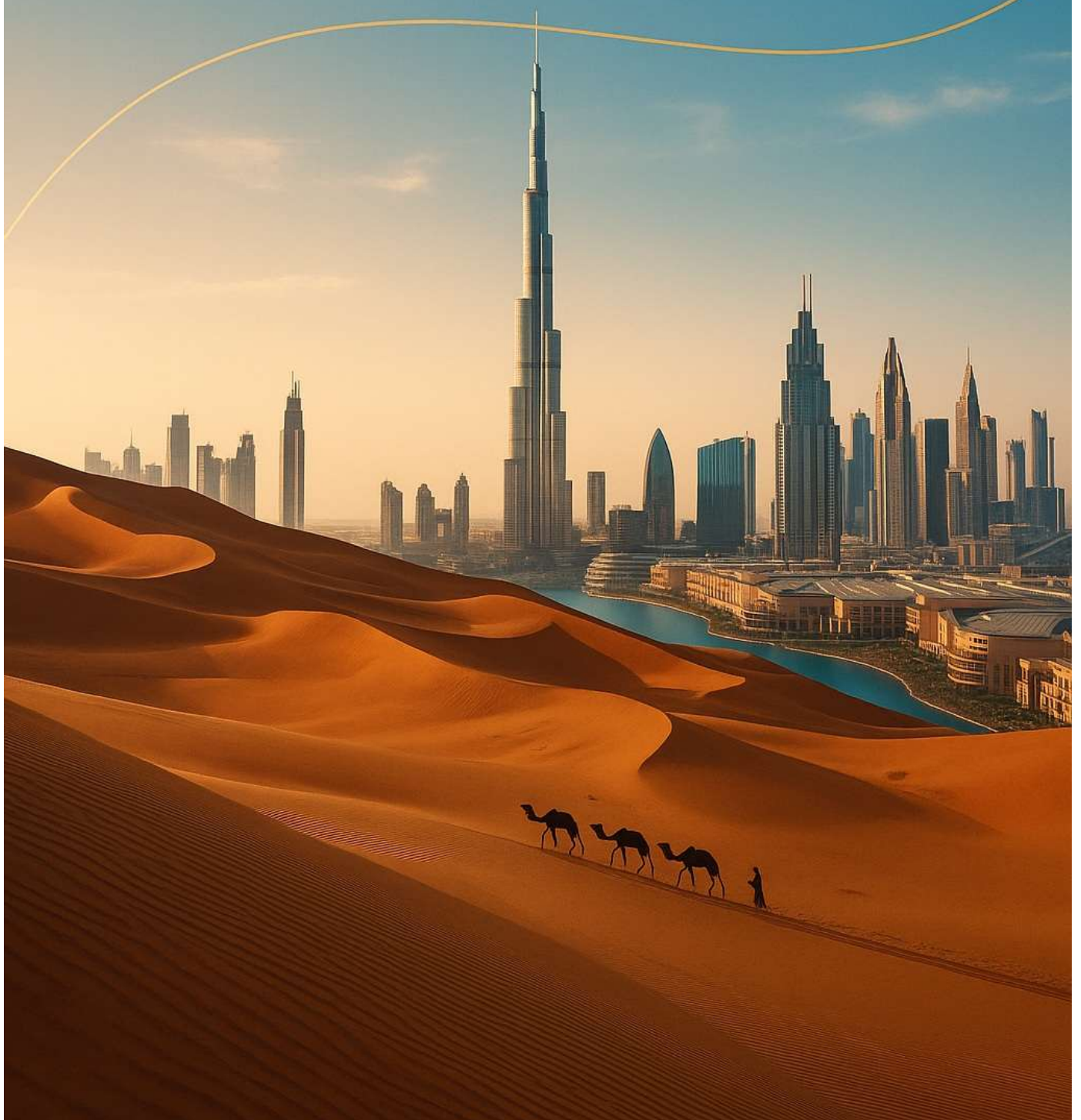


DUBAI

Desert meets Destiny



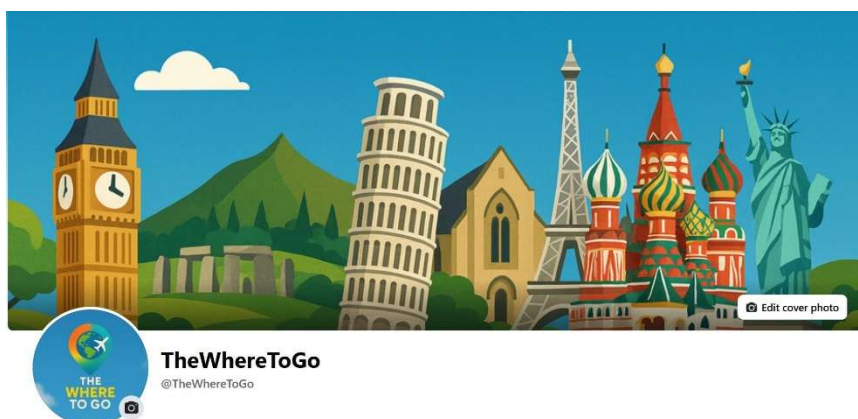
The inside cover for your information.....



Dubai – Desert Meets Destiny is just one of a series of documentary travel guides under 'The Where To Go' banner. You can also find curated videos of the different places visited in Dubai on my YouTube at www.youtube.com/@thewheretogo. Please feel free to like and subscribe.



You will also find up to date information about my worldwide travels on my dedicated Facebook page at www.facebook.com/TheWhereToGo.



Introduction

Dubai's story begins over 5,000 years ago, when mangrove swamps dominated the landscape, later inhabited by nomadic Bedouin herders who cultivated date palms and forged early trade routes. By the 16th century, it emerged as a pearl-diving hub, with Venetian merchant Gasparo Balbi documenting its thriving industry in 1580.

The Al Maktoum dynasty, which still rules today, established Dubai in 1833 after seceding from Abu Dhabi, laying the groundwork for its independence and future prosperity. The discovery of oil in 1966 transformed Dubai's destiny and funded its rapid expansion. This is a city that has grown from 34,000 residents in 1960 to nearly 4 million today, 88% of whom are expatriates.

Dubai is a city of contrasts. It dazzles with paradoxes—luxury supercars patrol streets where camel races now feature robot jockeys. Skyscrapers tower over desert dunes, while artificial islands like Palm Jumeirah redefine coastal engineering.

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Dubai International Airport (DXB)



When arriving by air your most likely arrival point is Dubai International Airport opened in 1960 as a modest airstrip with a compacted sand runway and a tiny terminal. It was originally a refuelling stop for flying boats en route to Karachi and Australia. Its first asphalt runway was completed in 1965 enabling jets like the ill-fated Comet to land. The 1970s brought transformative upgrades, including a three-story terminal and advanced navigation systems, setting the stage for Dubai's aviation ambitions.

By 1985, the launch of Emirates Airlines and Dubai Duty Free marked DXB's rise as a global hub, and by 2014, it became the world's busiest airport for international passengers handling. It still holds that title today handling just under 100 million passengers per year to over 250 worldwide destinations. Rumours that DXB is closing are somewhat premature since the replacement airport (Dubai World Central International Airport) is nowhere near ready and full completion is not likely till 2045



Dubai World Central International Airport (DWC)

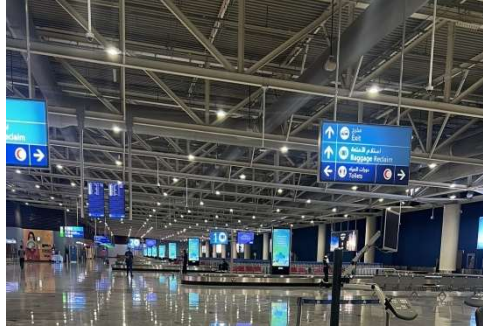
On the other side of Dubai is Dubai World Central International Airport (DWC) or Al Maktoum International Airport which is intended to be Dubai's future aviation hub after which Dubai International Airport is likely to close although, despite much media speculation, this is a long time in the future. DWC opened as a cargo airport on June 27th 2010, and the passenger terminal opened on October 26th 2013 with Flynas and Wizz Air as initial carriers.

Following my flight from Saudi Arabia to the airport in June 2025, I can tell you that this place is one great big building site with a (temporary) airport terminal (shed?) attached. DWC has faced criticism as a 'white elephant' due to low passenger numbers, but the £25 billion expansion plans will certainly address this. The proposed expansion will see it becoming five times bigger than DXB with five parallel runways, 400 aircraft gates and the capacity to welcome 260 million passengers.

The proposed look...



The actual look...



Dubai Mall



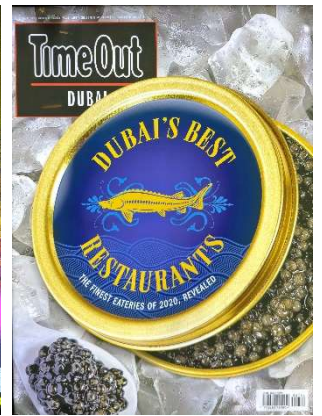
Dubai Mall is one of the largest and most visited shopping centres in the world. It opened in 2008 and covers over 1 million square metres equivalent to 50 full sized football pitches. The mall has over 14000 parking spaces and entertains over 100 million visitors each year. The mall contains are over 1,200 stores, an indoor theme park, an Olympic-sized ice rink and one of the world's largest aquariums which holds 10 million litres of water and a Guinness World Record for the largest acrylic panel.

The mall offers high-end fashion boutiques, mainstream brands, luxury watch retailers and specialised stores.....there's even a Waitrose, an M&S and a Primark (heaven forbid). The mall is also a central link in Downtown Dubai's pedestrian network, connecting Souk Al Bahar and the Dubai Opera district. Adjoining the mall is the world famous Burj Khalifa and the wonderful Dubai Fountains but, be warned, the mall is a very very long walk away from the metro station that bears its name.

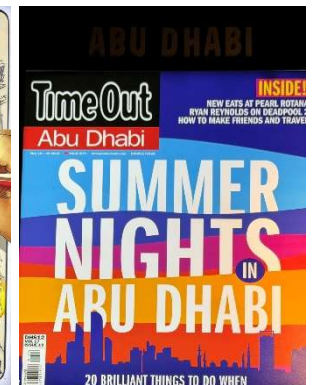
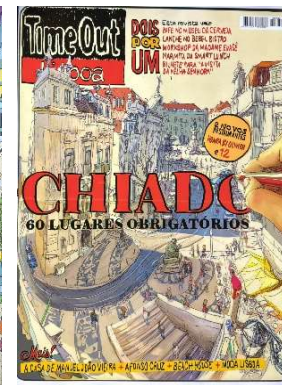
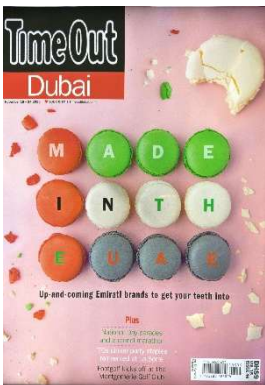


Time Out Market

The Souk Al Bahar is situated directly across the water from Dubai Mall adjoining the Dubai Fountain promenade. You can literally walk there via the footbridge next to Dubai Mall's Fashion Avenue exit. Inside you will find some more quaint shops and classy restaurants as well as the Time Out Market which is a particular favourite of mine. The Time Out Market is a food hall concept curated by the editors of Time Out with each vendor selected because they represent the 'best of the city.'



The result is a lineup of well-known Dubai restaurants, top chefs and standout independents under one roof. The space is large, open, and communal. There is no table service, you order what you want, and you sit wherever you like. The place is lively and loud with a long balcony directly overlooking the Dubai Fountain as well as the Burj Khalifa. This is an amazing place to spend an evening, enjoy the fountains and take in the view from the mall to the opera house.



Dubai Fountain

The Dubai Fountain is a choreographed water and light show set on the Burj Lake, in front of Burj Khalifa and next to The Dubai Mall. It is one of the most popular attractions in the city and makes use of high-pressure water jets capable of shooting streams up to around 1460 feet (140 metres). The fountain operates with a mix of Arabic, pop, classical and global music with each performance carefully mapped.

The Dubai Fountain was unveiled in 2009 and has recently reopened following an extensive renovation to replace the 6,600 lights and 25 projectors with something even more spectacular. The entire show is free to watch and plays every half hour during the evenings to vast crowds gathered along the promenade and the bridges surrounding the lake.



Burj Khalifa



Towering above Dubai Mall (and the rest of Dubai for that matter), the Burj Khalifa was started in 2004 and eventually inaugurated in 2010. The building was originally named 'Burj Dubai' but was renamed to honour UAE President Sheikh Khalifa after Abu Dhabi's financial bailout during the 2008 crisis. The building is 2722 feet (830 metres) high with 163 floors. The skyscraper held the record of the tallest building in the world since 2009, surpassing the Taipei 101 Tower which held the record since 2004.

Designed by Skidmore, Owings & Merrill, its Y-shaped structure mimics the Hymenocallis desert flower, blending Islamic architectural motifs with futuristic engineering. The lifts in this building are the fastest in the world and the observation decks on the 124th, 125th and 148th floors offer unforgettable views especially around sunset. There is also a really nice restaurant and lounge on



Dubai Opera

Next door to the Dubai Mall and the Dubai Fountain is the famous Dubai Opera which opened on August 31 2016 with a sold-out performance by Plácido Domingo. The Dubai Opera House was conceived by Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum and developed by Emaar Properties using a design by architect Janus Rostock who pays homage to Dubai's maritime heritage with a building resembling a traditional dhow with a glass façade that glows like a lantern at night.

The project was initiated in 2013 and was completed in just three years which is in stark contrast to the Sydney Opera House which took 14 years to build!!! Dubai Opera was initially envisioned as part of a grand cultural complex in Dubai Creek which was designed by Zaha Hadid in 2008 and shelved because of financial constraints. The project was originally designed to include a 2,500-seat opera house, an 800-seat playhouse, a 5,000 square metre art gallery, a performing arts school and a luxury 6-star hotel.



The Opus by Zaha Hadid



The UAE may be known as 'the promised land for renowned architects with ambitious designs' but you would be hard pushed to find much evidence of the work of Zaha Hadid in this place. There's the Sheikh Zayed bridge in Abu Dhabi and the Beeah Headquarters in Sharjah as well as Aljada Central which is nearing completion and the Signature Tower in Dubai which has just been started after a considerable delay.

So, this afternoon I am taking a break from my work to go and see the Opus (previously called The Void) which is situated in Business Bay. The building is part residential and home to the ME hotel. The Opus is described as a sculptural and emblematic landmark which was completed in 2020. It features a cube-shaped structure comprising two separate towers linked by a four-storey atrium and a three-story bridge.



The ME is the only hotel with both architecture and interiors by Zaha Hadid. This was one of her last designs before she died in 2016. Dame Zaha Mohammad Hadid was an Iraqi-British architect, artist and designer. She was born in Baghdad and studied mathematics at the American University of Beirut before moving to London to study architecture. Many of her designs never got beyond the sketch phase and were never actually built.

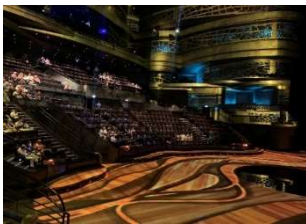
In 2004 she became the first woman to be awarded the Pritzker Architecture Prize which is widely considered to be the Nobel prize for architecture. In 2012, she was made a Dame for services to architecture. Besides the Heydar Aliyev Centre in Azerbaijan, her other major works include the London Aquatics Centre for the 2012 Olympics, the Evelyn Grace Academy in Brixton and the Al-Janoub Stadium for the 2022 FIFA World Cup in Qatar.

If you find yourself in the Business Bay Centre of Dubai, then please go and visit this place if only to recline on those amazing sofas and enjoy the interior of this wonderful hotel.



La Perle

La Perle is rightly considered to be one of Dubai's top entertainment attractions. It is a live entertainment show created and produced by Franco Dragone who is best known for his work with Cirque du Soleil which should give you a clue. The performance is located in Al Habtoor City on the main Sheikh Zayed Road and close to the canal.



La Perle is housed in a 1300-seat purpose-built theatre featuring a fusion of acrobatics, diving, aerial feats and special effects, blended with multimedia projections, music, dance and lots of water!!! The storyline draws inspiration from Dubai's cultural heritage, blending fantasy and futuristic visuals with music and performance.



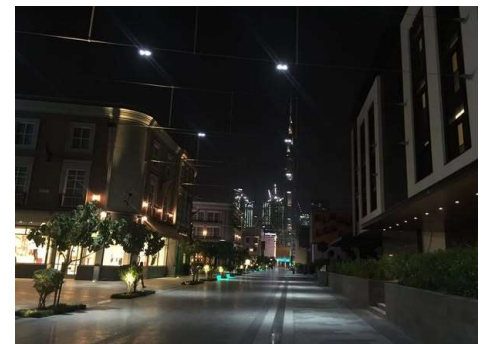
The theatre is intimate and immersive, with seats arranged in a 270-degree layout for a close-up view. For me, on my many visits to see this show with numerous friends and family, the centrepiece is a water stage with over 2.5 million litres of water, allowing performers to dive from great heights and disappear below the stage. Unusually, patrons are respectfully encouraged to use their cameras, so I hope mine gives a flavour of the spectacle.....but you really need to go to get the full impact.



City Walk

The Dubai Mall and City Walk are the two malls closest to where I am often hotelled (is that a word?) when I am staying in Dubai. City Walk is described as a 'vibrant urban lifestyle destination that blends shopping, dining, entertainment, and art in a walkable, contemporary setting.' City Walk is located close to Downtown Dubai and the Burj Khalifa.

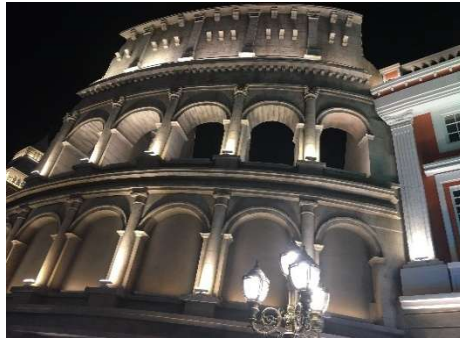
It offers a unique open-air design with tree-lined avenues, modern architecture and stylish boutique stores. The area is home to upscale fashion brands, concept cafes and gourmet restaurants, making it a popular spot for residents and tourists alike. It also features some striking street art and a cinema with some amazingly comfortable seats, which is my excuse for missing the middle of that film we went to watch.



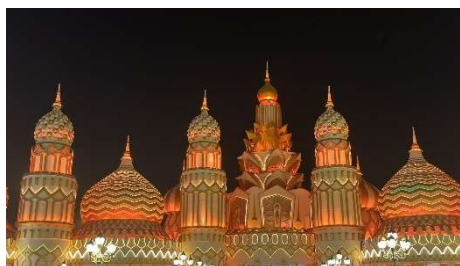
Global Village

My first visit to see the Global Village took place in 2021 so it is nice to see myself back in 2025 enjoying the spectacle of so many beautiful and memorable countries. For those who don't know, Global Village is Dubai's seasonal cultural theme park that blends markets, street entertainment, food and travel into one massive open-air venue. Global Village was first launched in 1996 and has since grown into one of the most popular cultural events in the UAE.

The venue operates every year from roughly October to April with the main attraction being the country pavilions packed with trading stalls which sometimes bear some resemblance to the country itself. As such, you can walk through miniature versions of Turkey, India, Egypt, Thailand, Africa, and dozens more, buying snacks, spices, carpets, tacky souvenirs, and lots more beside.



There are evening shows on the main stage featuring dance troupes, music, acrobatics and sometimes fairly loud pyrotechnics. There's also a funfair area called Carnival with rides ranging from tame to frightening as hell. Food is a major reason to visit and there are many of street-food vendors representing different regions from Thai noodles to Yemeni honey and Palestinian knafeh to Turkish ice cream.



Museum of the Future



The Museum of the Future is a striking symbol of innovation and architectural brilliance. The work on the museum started in 2016 with intended completion in 2019 although it did not officially open until February 2022. The museum was designed by architect Shaun Killa and is a torus-shaped structure, covered in stainless steel and inscribed with illuminated Arabic calligraphy by Emirati artist Mattar bin Lahej.

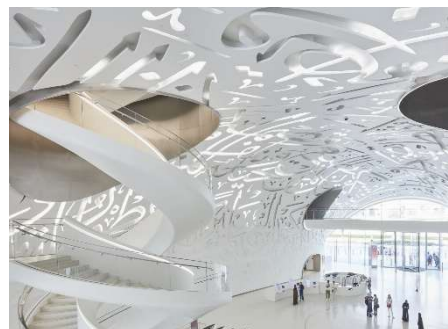
The calligraphy features quotes from Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum celebrating vision, knowledge, and the future.....

'The future will be for those who will be able to imagine, design and build it, the future does not wait, the future can be designed and built today.'

'We won't live for hundreds of years, but we can create something that will last for hundreds of years.'

'The secret of the renewal of life, the development of civilization and the progress of humanity is in one word: innovation.'

Unlike traditional museums, this one doesn't preserve the past but sets out to imagine the future. Exhibits explore themes like space exploration, climate change, artificial intelligence and human health, using immersive and interactive experiences. The museum acts as the headquarters for the 'Great Arab Minds' initiative attracting thinkers, pioneers and innovators from the Arab world.

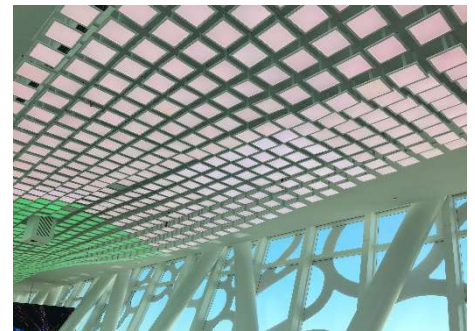
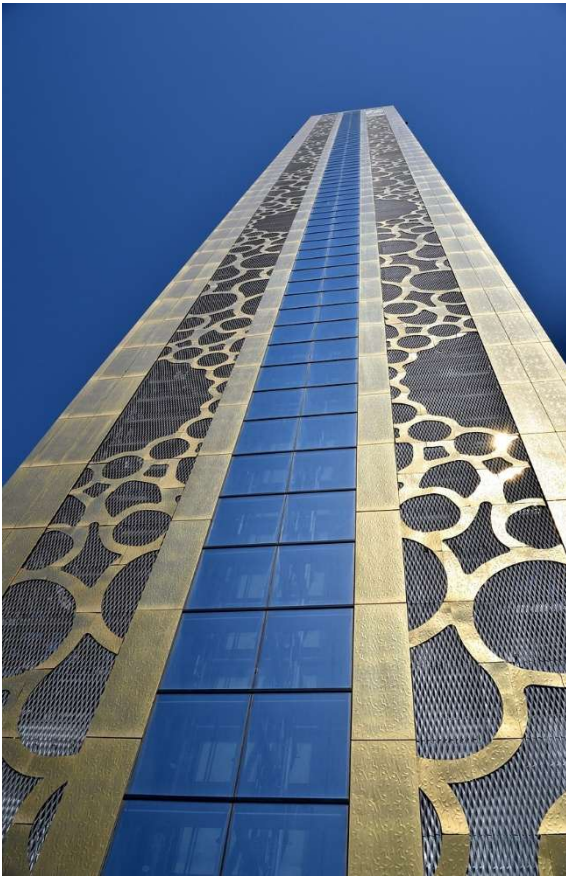


The Dubai Frame

I first visited the Dubai Frame in January 2018 shortly after it had opened as Dubai's latest tourist attraction. The Dubai Frame is a massive architectural structure located in Zabeel Park. Standing nearly 500 feet (150 metres) high and 300 feet (93 metres) wide, it literally frames stunning panoramic views of both Old Dubai to the north and New Dubai to the south..... symbolising the city's past, present, and future.

The concept was first proposed in 2009 by architect Fernando Donis, who won an international competition held by the Dubai Municipality. However, the project faced controversy when Donis later alleged that his design was used without full contractual agreement. Construction began in 2013, and the frame officially opened to the public in January 2018.

The structure consists of two vertical towers connected by a large sky glass bridge. An unusual feature is its electrochromic glass, which changes transparency depending on sunlight intensity. The sky deck offers a transparent glass floor that becomes opaque underfoot, adding an adrenaline rush for visitors. Inside, exhibitions highlight Dubai's transformation from fishing village to futuristic metropolis.



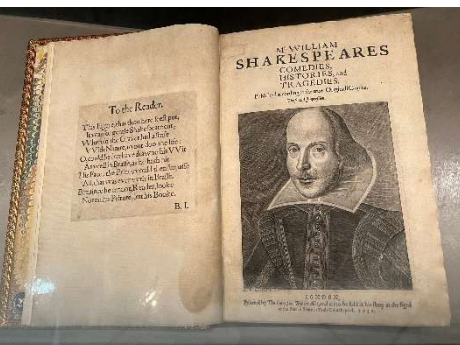
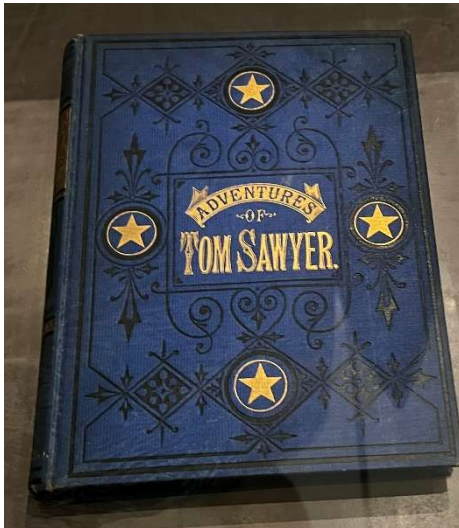
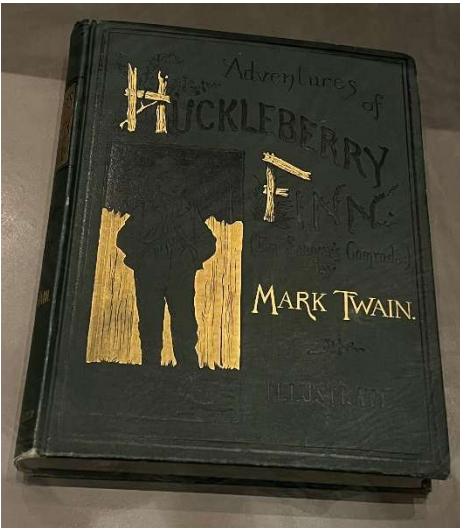


Dubai Library

The Mohammed bin Rashid Library is located in Al Jaddaf next to the Creek Metro Station and overlooking the Dubai Creek. The library is situated over nine floors and houses over one million titles available across multiple languages in both physical and digital forms. It also consists of study rooms, spaces for exhibits, a cafe, courtyard, bookstore and a 550-seat theatre.

The top floor offers a programme of rolling exhibitions and a permanent exhibition featuring Quranic manuscripts, writing tools, ancient maps and a literature display of old works including William Shakespeare's second folio containing 36 of his plays.

You will also find first editions of the Adventures of Huckleberry Finn and the Adventures of Tom Sawyer by Mark Twain as well as the two-part novel Don Quixote which was published in 1605 and 1615. Entrance is free and there is a genuinely nice coffee bar downstairs where you can take a well-earned break from all those books.



Dubai Creek



The Dubai Creek, which is known locally as Khor Dubai, is a natural seawater inlet which divides the city into Deira and Bur Dubai. The creek was historically the heart of Dubai's trade and pearling industries. In the early 20th century, it became a bustling hub for dhow traffic, with traders from India, Africa and beyond anchoring along its banks.

Today, the Creek offers a link between old and new Dubai with its bustling ports, traditional dhows and boats zigzagging across the water. The best way to enjoy the Creek is to hop aboard an abra which is a very affordable wooden water boat/taxi where you can soak up the panoramic views of minarets and skyscrapers while preparing yourself for the onslaught awaiting you on the other side.

Things could have been very different because the area had originally been earmarked for a vast development by Zaha Hadid including an opera house, arts gallery, performing arts school and a themed hotel. The project was extremely ambitious and has since scaled down to the Dubai Creek Harbour project with plans for the Dubai Creek Tower which is set to rival the Burj Khalifa in height.

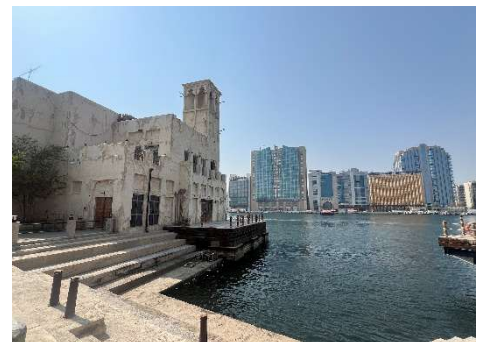
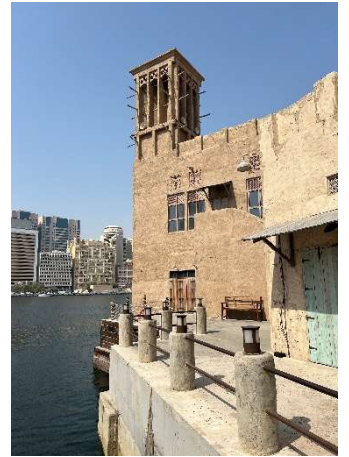


Dubai Old Souk

On the other side in Bur Dubai is the Old Souk with its shaded alleyways, narrow lanes, packed stalls and world charm. The area offers an indulgence of bright colours and exotic spices. The whole experience is intensely sensory and wonderfully chaotic. Offering a stark contrast to the city's gleaming malls, this is the heart of traditional commerce with vendors selling silk, wool, cashmere, perfumes, spices, souvenirs and dry fruits.

This isn't just shopping but an immersive cultural experience in the art of bargaining with vendors who are masters of their craft.... pleasantly welcoming, extolling virtues and welcoming negotiation with good-natured charm. Visiting the Old Souk isn't just shopping but rather an immersive cultural experience, connecting you directly to Dubai's mercantile soul and offering a tangible link to the emirate's vibrant past.

The architecture is functional, featuring covered walkways designed to shield from the sun, with traditional wooden beams and arches. Bargaining is expected and part of the cultural interaction but please approach it with good humour and respect and take advantage of some incredible photo opportunities, unique souvenirs and a truly authentic, bustling Middle Eastern market atmosphere unmatched by modern malls.



Al Fahidi Fort

Situated in the heart of the Al Fahidi Historical Neighbourhood (formerly Bastakiya) and next door to the Old Souk area is the commercial heart of Old Dubai and the Al Fahidi Fort, which houses Dubai Museum. The Al Fahidi Fort is the oldest existing building in the city and was built in 1787. The fort was once the residence of the ruling Sheikh, an administrative centre, a garrison for troops, a weapons arsenal and a prison.

The fort was built to protect the town from potential attacks by neighbouring tribes. It is a classic example of traditional UAE fort architecture built primarily from coral rock, shell rubble and limestone, bonded with traditional lime mortar. The fort opened as Dubai Museum in 1971 showcasing Dubai's history and offering a glimpse of everyday life before the discovery of oil in the UAE.

The Al Fahidi Fort makeover project was launched in 2021 by His Highness Sheikh Hamdan bin Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, Crown Prince of Dubai, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Defence of the UAE.



Queen Elizabeth II

Transiting home via Dubai and decided to spend the last few days of my holiday on the Queen Elizabeth 2, or QE2 as she is commonly known. For those who have never stood in awe of this wonderful ship, the QE2 was the flagship of the Cunard Line for nearly 40 years. She was built in Clydebank in Scotland and made her first voyage in 1969.

She was operated as a transatlantic liner and a cruise ship till 2008, regularly travelling from her home port of Southampton to New York taking around five days to complete the journey. In 2008, the QE2 was purchased by a company in Dubai, and then rumoured to have been sold for scrap after a bid to return her to the UK (to be moored alongside the O2) fell through.



The ship was eventually opened as a luxury hotel in Dubai in 2018 and let me tell you, this is the height of luxury!!!



Summary

Dubai is a city of extraordinary contrasts which seamlessly blends ancient heritage with futuristic ambition. From its origins as a pearl-diving hub documented by Venetian merchant Gasparo Balbi in 1580 to its meteoric rise fuelled by oil wealth, Dubai has evolved into a global metropolis with iconic landmarks such as the Burj Khalifa symbolizing its architectural audacity.

Cultural and artistic endeavours thrive alongside modernity. The Dubai Opera, resembling a traditional dhow, hosts world-class performances, while the Museum of the Future, clad in Arabic calligraphy, envisions humanity's next frontiers. Architectural marvels such as Zaha Hadid's Opus and the Dubai Frame, framing panoramic views of old and new Dubai, highlight the city's design-forward ethos.

Yet, Dubai honours its roots. The Mohammed bin Rashid Library preserves literary treasures, while heritage sites such as the Old Souk and robot-jockeyed camel races reflect its Bedouin legacy. Whether aboard the historic QE2 luxury hotel or exploring avant-garde hubs like City Walk, Dubai offers a dynamic tapestry of past, present and future—a destination where desert meets destiny.



The outside cover if you enjoyed this guide.....



Dubai – Desert Meets Destiny is just one of a growing series of documentary travel guides collated under 'The Where To Go' banner. The following titles are presently available or coming really soon.....

