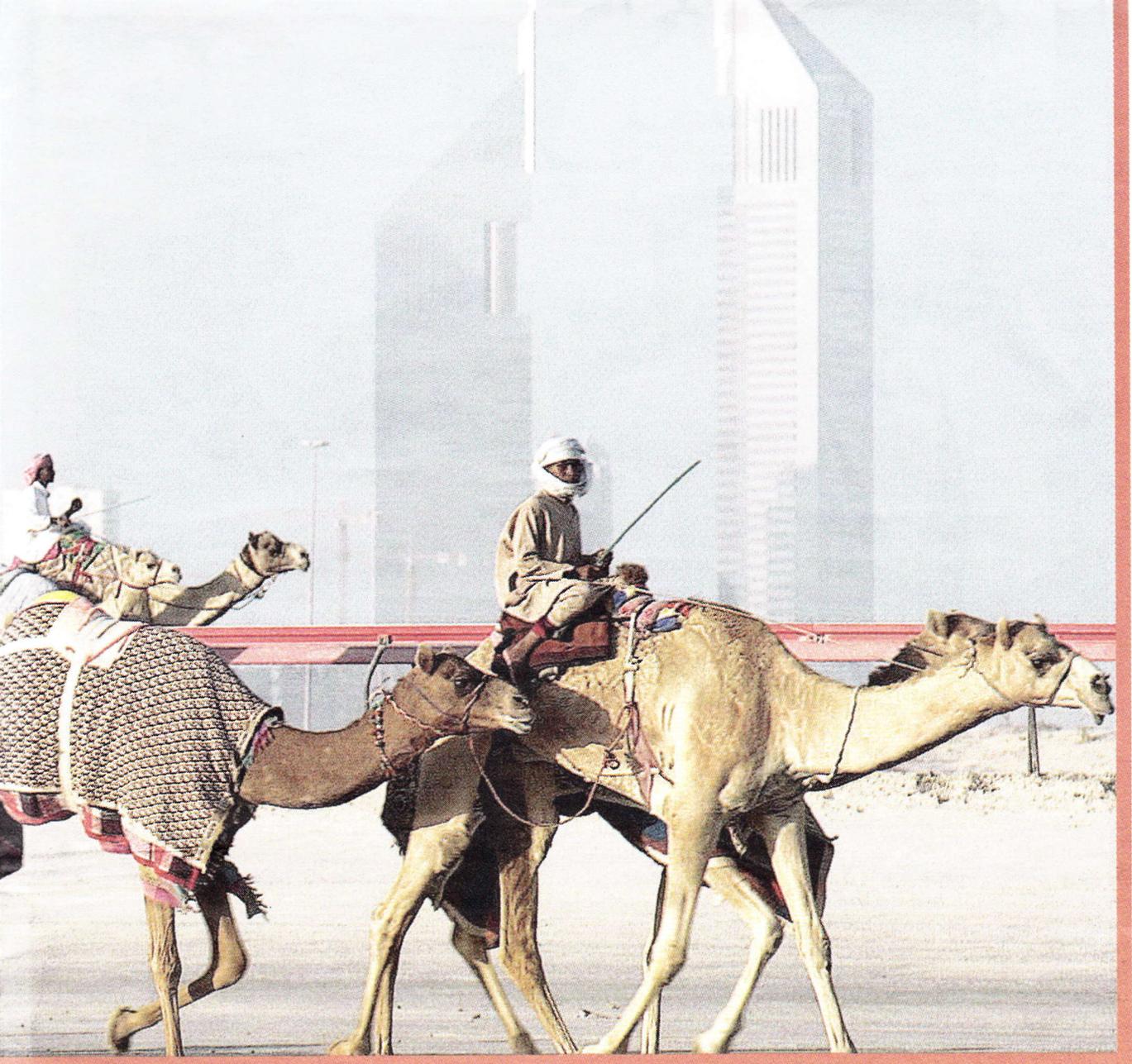


# BUY

Agog at the scale and speed of its development, **Philip Watson** revisits Dubai after five years and finds that it is fast becoming the Arab centre of the modern world

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# BUY DUBAI

Above: Camels exercising at Nad Al Sheba racecourse

Left: the seven-star Burj Al Arab hotel. Photographs: David Cannon/Getty Images and Kamran Jebreili/AP

**t**ravel around Dubai and you'll soon spot giant advertising hoardings that gnomically promise "the future of history", "from sand to innovation" and "everything you can imagine is real". They are promoting a plethora of building developments, yet they also stand as perfect slogans for a city that is at once surreal, bizarre, fascinating and futuristic. Outside a new "traditional Arabian-style" apartment complex I spot a billboard that reads: "The Old Town of Dubai - soon to be completed."

Dubai is one of seven small sovereign city states that make up the United Arab Emirates,

and it has seen phenomenal growth in recent years. Its population of 1.3 million is not much larger than that of Dublin, but it is growing at six per cent a year. A staggering €80 billion worth of building projects are either under construction or planned for the near future, and GDP is increasing at 13 per cent annually. This makes Dubai the world's fastest-growing city.

Everywhere you look there seems to be a new hotel, shopping mall, office tower, residential block, theme park, sports facility or business centre. People talk of the 1950s, when the city was a small trading port of just 6,000 inhabitants, as if they were prehistoric. The author Martin Amis

had a line about the US that seems well suited to today's Dubai: "It's the cutting edge of the present."

It is the scale and the ambition of the development that astound. As well as the iconic Burj Al Arab, an ostentatious seven-star hotel, the tallest in the world, which resembles a spinnaker filled with wind, there is a miraculous range of projects that very nearly justifies Dubai's claim to be "the eighth wonder of the world".

There are three enormous Palm islands being built off the coast by Nakheel, a construction company partly owned by the government. With peninsulas that resemble the fronds of giant palm trees and causeways that mimic the trunks, the islands will have hotels, marinas, shops, water-sports facilities, and a range of luxury "signature villas", many of which were purchased off-plan and have been resold many times. Several English footballers, including David Beckham and Michael Owen, are reported to have bought Palm villas, although it's rumoured they received discounts of up to 90 per cent to do so. The biggest island is Palm Deira, which will be 8.5km (five miles) wide and stretch 14km (8.5 miles) into the shallow Arabian Gulf. At 80sq km (30sq m), this development is larger than Manhattan.

Then there is Nakheel's The World project, a collection of 300 islands created four kilometres offshore that form a mosaic map of the world (Ireland is said to have been bought by a Dutch businessman planning to build a palatial home for his wife), and a clever pattern emerges. Dubai's coast is just 70km (43 miles) long; these developments push that to 1,500km (900 miles).

Dubai has a pioneering, can-do culture in which all is possible. The cash-rich, aggressively business-minded sheikhs who rule the city don't have to worry too much about laws, regulations and the inconveniences of democratic consultation. If the numbers add up, and the project makes commercial sense, the Maktoum family, who have controlled Dubai for 170 years and are led today by the entrepreneurial and visionary Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, can green-light a development from idea to instigation in a matter of weeks.

In Dubai, everything is a superlative. Currently under construction is the "guaranteed tallest building in the world", the Burj Dubai. The tower is expected to be at least 750m (2,460ft) tall, but its exact height is being kept secret in case New York's new Freedom Tower tries to eclipse it. What is known is that the skyscraper is designed so that additional structures can be added to reinforce its paramount position, and that the first Armani hotel will be housed within it.

On the edge of the city, work has recently started on Dubailand, the world's biggest theme park. This colossal development will incorporate six themed "worlds of wonder", housing such attractions as animatronic dinosaur parks, medieval castles, and life-size replicas of the Taj Mahal and the Hanging Gardens of Babylon. Dubailand will have 55 hotels, including a sci-fi space hotel, and the largest shopping mall on earth. It will dwarf Walt Disney World - and be twice as large as the existing city itself.

At the back of the massive Mall of the Emirates shopping centre, and on the edge of the desert, there is Ski Dubai, the world's largest indoor



Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, ruler of Dubai, at Royal Ascot races with his wife, Princess Haya Bint Al Hussein, an Olympic showjumper who previously trained in Ireland. Photograph: John Crofts Photography

snow resort. It has an alpine-style hotel, fir trees, chairlifts and ski runs graded from green to black. There are plans for a second ski resort, with a revolving mountain. Work will start soon on the five-storey Hydropolis, the world's first underwater hotel.

Add it all up and Dubai can, of course, be tackler than an episode of *Footballers' Wives*. A visit to the screamingly opulent, primary-coloured, gold-leaf-columned, €800 a night Burj Al Arab – which is not easy, as you have to make a reservation in advance and pass through a checkpoint at the start of the causeway that leads to the hotel – is like a journey into interior-design hell.

Tourism is the most important engine of Dubai's expansion, and Dubai Inc will seemingly stop at nothing to make it the 21st century's number-one holiday destination. In addition, the Maktoums are well aware that any number of business and service sectors can be attracted to a city in which sales, income and corporation taxes are low or non-existent. They were also quick to realise that Dubai's oil fortunes were finite. Unlike Abu Dhabi, its larger and even richer cousin along the Gulf coast, Dubai's oil supplies, discovered in 1966, are expected to be exhausted within the next 10 years. Diversification and innovation were needed.

Today, very few areas of human endeavour are not being lured to Dubai, many of which are housed in "free-zone" cities within the city. There is an Exhibition City, Festival City, Maritime City, Textile City, Media City, Aviation City, even a Flower City. An Aid City provides for the storage and rapid distribution of international aid; a Healthcare City aims to be a global hub for medical provision, education and research; and a Humanitarian City will facilitate the activities of various international NGOs and UN agencies.

To keep pace with this influx of activity, a €4 billion building programme is taking place at Dubai airport to increase its capacity from its current level of 25 million passengers a year (in 1980 it was just 2.8 million) to 70 million. A second, even larger airport is being constructed 40km (25 miles) along the coast at Jebel Ali, which will be able to handle 120 million passengers a year (65 million travellers currently pass through Heathrow every year). Emirates, the national airline, is taking delivery of one new

aircraft every week for the next five years.

As fast as "Mushroom City" is growing – locals talk more pejoratively about the "Dubai bubble" – and as much as the building work often takes place around the clock, the supply of housing simply cannot keep pace with the frenzied demand. Residential developments can sell out within hours of being announced, and whole new districts appear to spring up overnight.

The previous time I visited Dubai, in 2001, for the Dubai World Cup, the world's richest horse race, Dubai Marina had just been launched on the western fringe of the city. There was nothing there except a man-made harbour and the desert. Five years on it's a soaring metropolis of hotels, offices and apartment towers that will eventually house 150,000 people.

Inevitably, perhaps, the Irish have had a slice of the development action. Ever since a team from the ground-breaking Shannon duty-free operation set up a similar venture at Dubai airport, in 1983, Irish workers have made a good living in the emirate. Irish workers are employed as builders, engineers, surveyors and agents in the construction industry; others work in growth sectors such as IT, banking, business software, healthcare, horse racing and internet development.

Enterprise Ireland, which set up an office in the city in 2002, estimates that there has been a five-fold growth in Irish company investment in Dubai in the past decade. About 1,500 Irish people live in the emirate. In addition, it's estimated that 25,000 Irish holidaymakers visited Dubai last year (a threefold rise since 2003), and increasing numbers of Irish people are investing in property in the city.

Dubai has several Irish pubs, including one in the transit hall at the airport. Dubai Irish Society and Dubai Celts GAA club are very active in the city; for the past 16 years a Dubai Rose has entered the Rose of Tralee competition.

Next week Aer Lingus launches a non-stop, three-times-a-week service from Dublin to Dubai. It's the airline's first long-haul destination outside the US, and 70,000 passengers are expected in the first year.

Irish investors and tourists are attracted by the guaranteed sunshine, an average winter temperature of 24 degrees, first-class hotels, golf and leisure facilities, great shopping, fine restaurants

**WHERE TO STAY** There are several chic hotels along the main Sheikh Zayed Road, and the more central Bur Dubai is more affordable, but there's really only one place to stay in Dubai: beside the wide, sandy beaches of Jumeirah. Hotels here include the vast One & Only Royal Mirage, which recently provided a backdrop in the film *Syriana*. There is also the more formal Ritz-Carlton or the smaller Jumeirah Beach Club. Out in the desert you can stay at the mega-luxurious, conservation-award-winning Al Maha resort.

**WHAT TO DO** For some kind of perspective on the modern city, wander around Bastakia, a restored residential district built at the turn of the 20th century that has traditional houses with air-cooling wind towers. Don't miss out on a desert safari. Many companies offer packages, from desert driving courses to dune-bashing followed by a barbecue, camel rides and belly-dancing in a Bedouin-style camp. Horse racing and breeding play an important role in Arab culture; races take place every Thursday at the Nad Al Sheba track. Occasional camel races take place here, too.

**WHERE TO EAT** Dubai is a crossroads between East and West, and you can sample food that ranges from Lebanese to French, Vietnamese to Moroccan. The British celebrity chef Gordon Ramsay has an outpost called Verre at the Hilton Dubai Creek. For a memorable splurge, try the sleek, glass-encased Bateaux Dubai boats, which offer night cruises along the creek that show off the stunning architecture of downtown Dubai and serve excellent meals. And for potentially the most flashy – and expensive – meal you're ever likely to eat, make a reservation at the Al Muntaha restaurant, at the top of the Burj Al Arab.

**NIGHTLIFE** Dubai's nightlife has exploded in recent years, with bars such as the Rooftop Terrace at the One & Only Royal Mirage hotel, the outdoor bar at the Jumeirah Beach Hotel and the Buddha Bar at the new Grosvenor House hotel being hip and happening most nights. For a more clubby vibe, head to Trilogy, spread over three floors at the Souk Madinat Jumeirah.

**SHOPPING** The prices of many goods in the tax-free maze of malls, markets, hotel shops, souks and "shopping festivals" are actually about the same as you would pay at home. Gold, diamonds, textiles, fabrics, bespoke shirts and suits, antique carpets and rugs, and some electronics are the exceptions, especially if you haggle. Basic rule: never accept any of the first three "best prices" you're offered.

**WAY TO GO** Holidays in Dubai are available from many Irish travel companies, including Sunway (01-2311893, [www.sunway.ie](http://www.sunway.ie)), Escape 2 (01-8085464, [www.escape2.ie](http://www.escape2.ie)) and United Travel (01-2159300, [www.unitedtravel.ie](http://www.unitedtravel.ie)). Prices for a week in the summer (when temperatures can be as high as 40 degrees) start at about €900 per person sharing, including Aer Lingus flights, transfers and accommodation, rising to nearer €1,800 for winter months and stays in luxury hotels. For a tourist information pack, call 00-44-20-78390580 or see [www.dubaitourism.ae](http://www.dubaitourism.ae).

and vibrant nightlife – all just a seven-hour “short long-haul” flight away. They also seem drawn by the opportunity to make money – tax-free.

There is a darker side, however, to this commercial and lifestyle paradise. For some, Dubai’s relentless striving for money, property and possessions renders it vulgar and soulless. The god here often seems more Mammon than Muhammad. There is no real culture as such, just one consumer opportunity after another. It’s like living in Liffey Valley shopping centre.

Other people I spoke to complained about the traffic (although new roads, bridges and a monorail are about to be built); restricted internet access (to stop, among other things, gambling, which is banned, and pornography) and media censorship and control (criticism of the Dubai royal family is strictly forbidden). Even though kissing is not permitted on UAE television, and licentious photographs in western magazines are blacked out, prostitution is widespread.

People who have bought holiday homes in Dubai have also criticised shoddy workmanship, poor management and delays in completion. A few have fallen prey to rogue agents and lost money. Some expatriates I spoke to were also quietly fearful of an attack by Islamic militants. They are aware that holiday resorts in such places as Bali and Sharm al-Sheikh have been hit by terrorists, that Dubai allows US warships to use its ports and that it is an Arabic country becoming increasingly westernised.

Then there is the plight of the 250,000 mainly Indian and Pakistani building workers, many of whom work long hours in extreme conditions for wages as low as €100 a month. Many live in basic out-of-town barracks, from where they are bused to and from work. They are granted only temporary visas, and their families are not allowed to join them. Wages often go unpaid; employers

deduct spurious charges, fees and penalties, and time off, holidays and insurance are inadequate.

These workers are certainly making more money than they could at home, and, as some residents argue, they are free to leave if they find the conditions intolerable. But there have been countless cases of abuse. The Maktoums recently announced that the ministry of labour and social affairs would crack down on employers who took advantage of their workers and that they were considering permitting employees to form and join trade unions.

In the meantime, it is hard not to conclude that Dubai is being built by – and getting rich from – poor, indentured, often exploited men from the Indian subcontinent.

Everything in Dubai is, after all, at the behest and in the gift of the ruling Maktoums. It is a largely benevolent dictatorship in which most people seem happy, in which profits are reinvested rather than appropriated and in which crime is low. Yet there is no universal suffrage, no right to vote out those in power. For most, the Faustian pact is crystal clear: you trade political rights for financial and lifestyle rewards. Those returns, for sheikhs and residents alike, are only likely to increase.

Over the past few years, Dubai Inc has started to look further afield than its Palm-islanded shoreline and invest abroad. Dubai has recently spent billions buying the British shipping company P&O and the giant leisure group Tussauds, as well as investing in the German-American car giant DaimlerChrysler. It has also established a tax-free financial centre and soaring stock market.

It is the start, many think, of a burgeoning Dubai empire, of, as was suggested in a recent article in the *Guardian*, a nascent city not so much “the modern centre of the Arab world, more the Arab centre of the modern world”.

## THE IRISH IN DUBAI

“Dubai is a perfect example of how things can work in business, of how an enlightened government can make a place tick and of how different nationalities can mix and live harmoniously together,” says Colm McLoughlin, a native of Ballinasloe, Co Galway, who has worked for Dubai Duty Free for 23 years and is now its managing director. “I work for the government, yet I have great freedom to do what I think is right and full support to be as innovative as possible.”

John O’Kelly, a director of Powerhouse Properties, a brokerage and management company, agrees. “I love the speed of things here and that everything is new and modern and works very, very well,” he says. O’Kelly, who is originally from Carlow, has lived in the city for 19 years. “Dubai is a vibrant trading city that enables people from all over the world to meet, do business and get things done. It’s like the cities and staging posts that sprang up along the ancient Silk Road.”

Nowhere is that pinnacle of expansionist aspiration more evident than at the construction site of the Burj Dubai. Variously described as “tangible proof of Dubai’s central role in a growing world” and “a symbol and beacon of progress for the entire earth”, the silvery, glass-sheathed concrete building has a design based, it’s said, on the geometries of an indigenous desert flower and the patterning systems of Islamic architecture.

Less prosaically, with a workforce of many thousands, one of its 160-plus storeys is being built every week; it’s expected that Burj Dubai will be completed by the end of 2008. And its motto? “History rising.” ♦

Aer Lingus begins flights from Dublin to Dubai on Tuesday. The first Dubai Property Show is at the RDS in Dublin today