

# Traveldiary Brigitte & Heinz

Dubai (UAE): a first glimpse of the Arabic world



## Chapter 34

April 2019

## Dubai (UAE): a first glimpse of the Arabic world

So far, we haven't been to any part of the Arabic world at all. Though, we've visited some Islamic countries, they were all in Asia. In the South Pacific, we've experienced how rewarding and eye opening it can be, to adapt for a while to the code of conduct imposed by denominations, in order to dive into the local culture.



After we sniffed an Emirates flight from Singapore to Europe that included a free stopover in Dubai, we felt that's our chance to get at least a glimpse of the Arabic world. So, we opted for a 6 days stage in Dubai, the United Arab Emirates' most populous member state.



Dubai, or the United Arab Emirates respectively, were created upon independence from the UK in 1971. The Emirate of Dubai had an impressive population growth: from ~80,000 in 1971 to ~ 4,2 million in 2018. About 2,8 million live in Dubai town, the rest in the metropolitan area of the 4.114 km<sup>2</sup> big emirate.

Since 1836, Dubai is ruled by the Maktoum dynasty. The ruler of Dubai, currently Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, traditionally is also the prime minister of the United Arab Emirates, and he currently acts also as vice president of the UAE.



## Dubai: totally different than expected

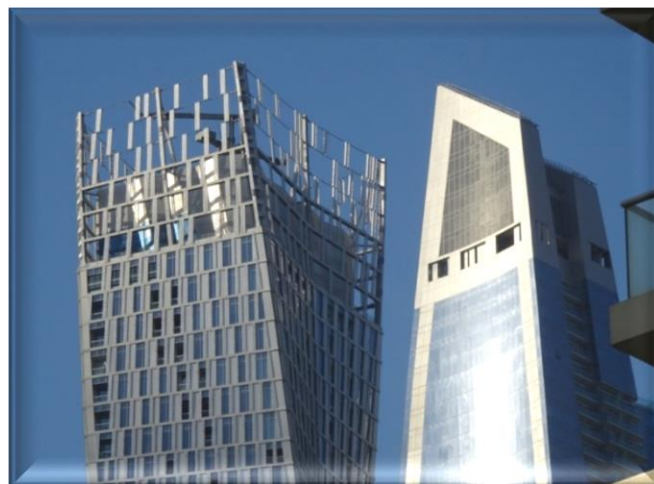
On April 14<sup>th</sup>, 2019, an Emirates flight yields us through the night from Singapore to its home-base Dubai. We're full of excitement, whether our prejudices about the Arabic peninsula melt into thin air or prove true.



First of all, it rains! The airport is ultra-modern, but not “gilded” and we are received by the muezzin’s early morning prayer audible from loudspeakers. We observe the people. Nobody stops to pray and almost nobody wears traditional clothing. Only the immigration officers wear a white, ankle-long loose garment known as Kandora or Dishdasha. The odd female officers wear an Abaya, a long, black flowing coat and head scarf.

The Asian taxi driver diminishes our illusion to mingle soon with lots of traditionally clad Arabs, by stating that Dubai hosts 200 immigrants for each Emirati! Maybe that’s slightly exaggerated by an excess zero, but we really don’t spot many black and white robes, and almost no head-scarfs among the crowds.

We experience the city of Dubai even more modern than expected. Soon, it becomes apparent that the money rather goes into even more flashy buildings than into flashy cars. While waiting to cross the wide highways cutting through the huge town, we observe way more budget-brand cars like Dacia than pompous coaches.



The number of tall skyscrapers is staggering as anticipated. Dubai has the highest density of skyscrapers in the world. No other city has more 350m+ buildings. Therefore, the 328m tall Al Yaquob Tower, a “Big Ben” look-alike, hardly stands out. The array of skyscrapers in different shapes, incorporating architecture with modern Western and Arabic elements, is a true feast for the eyes.

April is ideal for visiting. Temperatures are presently in their high twenties, so it’s not too hot to walk. Though, the sheer size of the city forces us to resort to public transport and taxis regularly. Dubai has an excellent metro- and bus system, but unfortunately, the English metro-maps are out of print everywhere. With our travel-guide in one hand and the Arabic map in the other, we manage to use the metro, though it’s by far not as easy as in China and Japan! Obviously, tourists are meant to go by taxi. In Dubai, everybody speaks English, so it’s very easy to get help and to go around anyway.



## Al Maktoum Dynasty: making multiculturalism a true success

The United Arab Emirates are home to more than 200 nationalities. Meanwhile, 95% of Dubai’s population consists of immigrants. Eye striking are people from the Indian subcontinent, Asians and Westerners. No other country has a bigger percentage of foreigners than the UAE. About 70% are male. The idea of a harem emerged in a time with a lack of males (war), to warrant every woman a male who looks after her. In today’s Dubai, time would be right for the opposite case, to warrant every man a woman who fulfils his dreams...

Most immigrants are young and extremely polite. Even in a crowded metro, there is always somebody “slightly” younger than us, offering his seat - making us feel older. Though our excursions never bring us out of the city boundaries, we realize regularly that we’re again more than 40km from our hotel. Dubai is a vast city indeed!



With immigrants from so many parts of the world, eating out is certainly a highlight. We’re pleased to find all our Asian favourites again and not even expensive. Pakistani and Indian cuisine is omnipresent, and the array of freshly pressed fruit juices is just unbelievable! Almost any fruit and vegetable anybody can imagine squeezing, can be ordered freshly juiced. Thereby are many exotic varieties, but also better-known ones like apples, grapes, strawberries, or carrots and fennel. More often than we’re thirsty, we find and order such ice-cooled delicacies. When we see tourists sipping a tinned or bottled drink, we feel almost sorry for them.

Strolling through this multi-million city makes it hard to believe that Dubai had less than 80,000 inhabitants 50 years ago. This tremendous growth is all to the vision and drive of Dubai’s ruling Al Maktoum Dynasty. The current ruler Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum develops this progressive vision even further. He invested the petrol-dollar wisely to give the Emirate a future for the time when the black gold dries up. Transforming the sparsely populated desert patch into a multimillion-city has already exceeded the expectations of many.



The Sheikh’s own website (<https://sheikhmohammed.ae/en-us>) consists of many true wisdoms and gives insight in further ambitious projects that might sound like those of a fantasist. But then again, the Sheikh has long proven to be no dreamer, but a maker!

Sheikh Mohammed is highly respected among Emiratis and immigrants alike. He is regularly seen driving around Dubai – he doesn’t need a bodyguard. Within his family, however, he seems to have manlike problems as anybody else may have. We heard of rumours that some of his wives and 30+ children were trying to escape his fairy-tale palace...

People in fear of so-called “mass-immigration” should take a look at Dubai, where real mass-immigration became a success story. Today, the entire economy depends on immigrants; from the helping hand up to the board of directors. On oil, on the other hand, Dubai doesn’t depend anymore. In 2019, only 4% of the GNP comes from oil revenue. Dubai’s economy steams now predominantly due to international enterprises (finance- and service industry, transport, research, IT and much more) taking advantage of the city’s favourable business climate and of course the building industry.

Islam is mainly guiding and restricting the lives of Emirati and foreigners with Muslim belief. Religious freedom is warranted in the constitution.

Tolerance is big, at least as long non-Muslims don’t associate with Muslims and don’t do anything considered un-Islamic in public, like kissing.

Theoretically, unmarried couples like us would not be allowed to share a room. However, among foreigners of no-, or non-Islamic faith, this doesn’t seem to be a problem. The only thing we recognised was that our website was not accessible. Though, we could alter it, we were not allowed to download and watch it! Apart from Vietnam 15 years ago, this has never ever happened before!



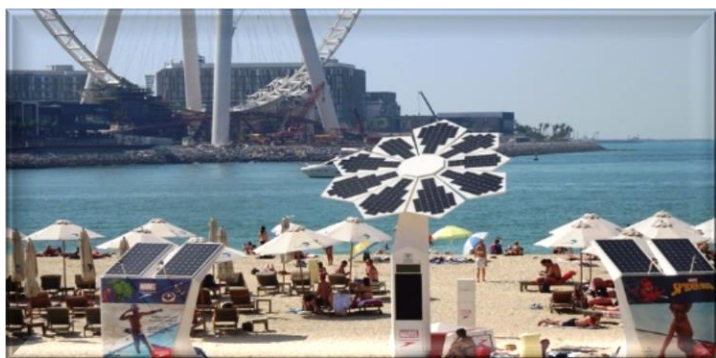
## Bikinis and Bourkas: a world of contrasts

Despite the uncountable mosques, we don't feel like being in an Islamic country while walking the streets. We feel more like being in a Western country with some Islamic facets, even more so, when we explore the Dubai Marina. We stroll along the water of the nicely landscaped inlet flanked by modern high-rise apartment



buildings. Wooden barges and yachts cruise the harbour. After a while, we reach the seashore of so-called JBR Beach, flanked by countless skyscraper hotels. Here, we see a city-beach full of contradictions. Western ladies sunbathing in tiny bikini tops and t-strings, contrasted by a few Arabic women, walking the promenades in their black chador, or even burka.

Sure enough, the beach offers everything, if not more, package tourists and beach holiday makers look for. There are rows of sunbeds and souvenir stalls. Furthermore, playgrounds, a big Ferris wheel (under construction) and other fun fair equipment. There are no trees, but solar-panel covered "smart-palms". Here, tourists can recharge their smart phones and connect to the internet. The white sand beach is intermitted by green sun lawns and everything is kept spick and span, even the promenade is being swept regularly. There are plenty of showers and toilets. Along the road behind the beach, branches of shops and restaurants from all over the world are awaiting customers. We happily sit into a Canadian Tim Hortons muffin- and coffee shop and watch the world going by.



What tourists can't find in the boutiques of their luxury hotel, will most probably be available at the world's largest shopping centre; the Dubai Mall (350.000m<sup>2</sup>



selling space). It's more than one kilometre from the front- to the back-entrance, but it's all nicely air-conditioned. If you look for your favourite outlet from home, there's a big chance that you find it at Dubai Mall too. If you get tired of shopping, you may recharge at the same fast-food chains you find all over the planet. Amused, we watch Dubai Mall's advertisement video for the fashion shops, aimed at well-heeled black clad Arabic women. We guess, they all wear expensive brand fashion under their black robes.



Even if you don't want to buy anything at the Dubai Mall, you can still spend days at this shopping and entertainment paradise. Among other things, there is an ice rink, a huge aquarium teeming with sharks, manta-rays, and other creatures of the ocean. You also find a tall waterfall, museum and cinemas. After wandering outside, we just hit the next major highlight: Dubai Fountain, an 800 million Dirham project (Euro 194 million) with uncountable jets splashing water up to 150m. Witnessing the choreographed nightly dancing water with its light- and sound effects, is really delightful.

## Dubai's landmarks: only the sky is the limit

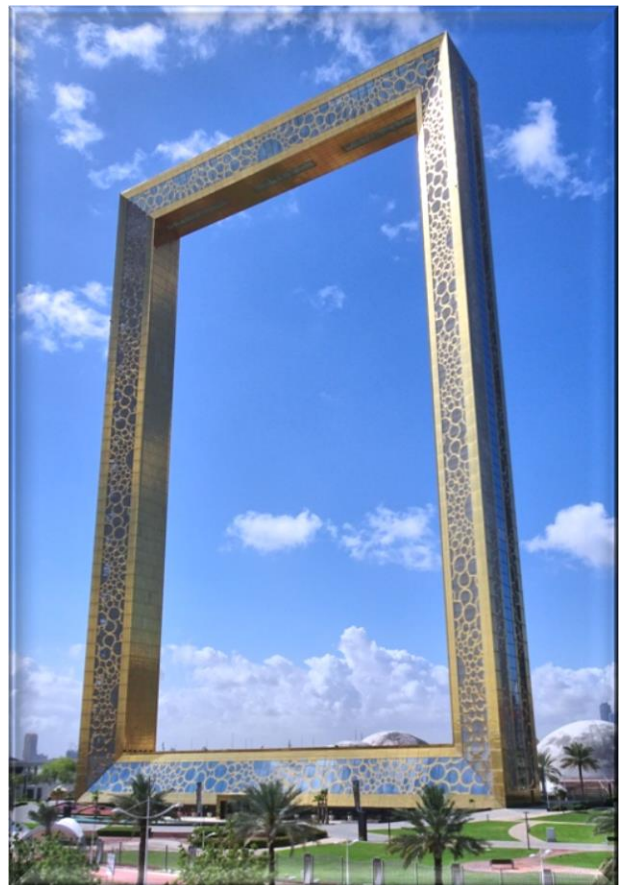
Just across the impressively large artificial lake with the dancing fountain there is Dubai's biggest landmark, which is since 2010, at the same time the highest building in the world: the 829.8m tall Burj Khalifa.

Dubai loves to remain on top. A much taller structure, Dubai Creek Tower, is already rising towards the sky. Initially, the future landmark, designed by Spanish-Swiss Top Architect Santiago Calatrava, was meant to be around 1,000m in height and completed for the World Expo 2020.

However, after Saudi Arabia and Kuwait got projects of similar height under way, Dubai Creek Tower was re-designed and topped up a bit. Unofficial sources are meanwhile talking about a modest 1,350m+ structure!

Well, we went up to more modest heights. To us, already "The Frame" is more than just breath taking. This new landmark resembles a giant gilded picture frame. It is smartly placed between the modern and the old part of Dubai.

A high-speed elevator brings us up to the 93m long enclosed viewing bridge that spans 150m above the nil. Walking across this platform, where the floor suddenly becomes transparent, is thrilling - technical finesse make it possible. Several people around us emit a cry and step backwards, as it feels as if the floor would vanish under our feet. We glue our eyes to the side-windows and enjoy fabulous views over the city to the sea to one side, and over more newly built areas and construction sites to the glimmering desert on the other side.



We would be tempted to make an excursion to the sand dunes. Despite checking a lot of agencies, we don't find an excursion that focusses on the beauty of the desert, instead of only entertaining and thrilling tourists. We're neither keen to go sand-bashing in a 4x4, nor to race around the dunes in a quad-bike, ride a camel, get our hands painted with a Henna tattoo, nor do we want to have a traditional tea ceremony among hordes of tourists – we only just wanted to see the sand dunes! None of the tours offers just that, admiring the dunes is not even on "the program". So we give it a miss and remember the lonely dunes we've visited in Australia and southern Africa.

## Old town and Souks: partly built for, and keen for tourists

Even in a fast growing, ultra-modern city like Dubai, there are still some corners with traditional flair left, or newly built in the old style respectively, for the sake of tourism.



We alight from the Metro at Al Ghubaiba Station to explore the shores of Dubai Creek. Here, in the Bur district, we find a lovely very long promenade along the river. It's midweek and we are almost the only ones enjoying the seemingly endless rows of low, square and nicely ornamented Arabic houses. They appear like brownish or white clay houses, but are all newly built from modern materials. Every now and then, we see an Arabic wind-tower or come across a generous clean plaza. The houses are not inhabited though some of the basements house a restaurant or souvenir shop. It's all part of the Al Shindagha historic district, a huge

open-air museum. Now, almost everything is closed, and the few tenants outnumber the even fewer tourists. When we return on the weekend, we like it even more. Everything is bustling and we mingle with the immigrants from all over the world, who enjoy this unique backdrop with the old style houses on the river. Also here, the (traditionally clad) Emirati are only eye striking because they are so few.

More pristine, but also far more touristy, is the Deira District across the river that is teeming with boats. Many people traverse the Dubai Creek with one of the uncountable wooden ferries. We truly enjoy to ramble about those corners of the old Arab quarters, where tourists are few, but life still goes on like in the good old days. What a contrast to the highly praised Souks, theoretically the traditional markets, all teeming with tourists and even more so with vultures.



We don't need to walk far, to be back in those areas of Dubai, where construction cranes dominate the skyline. An army of workers still extend the city in lightning speed despite the atrocious heat of up to 50°C in summer. The conditions and salaries for the labourers are not always up to the standards they should, and cases of abuse have become public. Meanwhile, the government tries to countersteer and introduced severe penalties for misbehaving companies.



## Dubai's unique palms: a bonanza for real estate agents

Just transforming even more desert into concrete desert, would be just too simple for the ambitious Sheikhs. Luckily, the world has more than enough star-architects keen to draft some more extravagant projects in exchange of a small multimillion tip. Nowadays, you don't need to travel far to see the world, it was built as an island group shaped like a world map, some 10km offshore of Dubai downtown. Everybody with enough pocket money has the chance to buy one of these islands, or countries respectively. Dubai makes it all possible.

Palm shaped artificial islands, connected to the mainland with their trunk, are another of Dubai's extravaganzas to reclaim land. A visit to Palm Jumeirah gives us an excellent insight in what dimensions the Sheikhs think. The 5.5 km long monorail was only built to give access to poor tourists and to those immigrants who are not allowed to drive a car, because they neither have good education nor a good job. As unbelievable as it sounds, that's how Dubai tries to limit its ever-growing traffic.



However, this artificial palm-shaped island is expected to provide housing for so many well-heeled residents that an 8-10-lane's access highway was built. Even near the impressively big Atlantis Resort, on the crescent that acts as water-breaker to protect the "inner palm leaf islands", we wait a good while, until we can cross the road. But from the shore, we can then admire the entire complex of the Atlantis Hotel The Palm. It's built in Arabic style and held in pastel pink, cream and green. It is optically separated by a huge curved archway in its middle. As impressive as this giant building is, as impressive it is to know that 3,500 staff are in care of the guests residing in the 1,500 rooms. Those willing to pay ~5,700€ a night, can even stay in a 165m<sup>2</sup> underwater suite. Well, for that money, we rather prefer to enjoy a few months of comfortable travelling...



Later that day, we take a tram and the bus to stop by at Souk Madinat Jumeirah. This complex has lots of shops and restaurants but is in fact a hotel, as are the eye striking Burj Al Arab and Jumeirah Beach Hotel.

For a whole week, Dubai excites us with its modern extravagant architecture and its uncountable skyscrapers. There is a lot of wealth and lavish things around, but the town has also down to earth quarters with modestly priced markets, shops and restaurants. Those looking for top notch restaurants or western fare will also find it. We are very happy to eat some cheap and healthy Asian and Indian food, and to enjoy the variety of freshly squeezed fruit juices. Furthermore, we love our hotel, where we get the luxury of a four-star resort at the last-minute price of 165 Dirham (40€) per night.

Arabic culture? Well, we adapt a bit to the Islamic conduct of behaviour, but around us we see a fascinating multicultural melting pot. We have seen many multi-ethnic places, but Dubai is by far the most multicultural city of all. In fact, the local Emiratis account now for less than 5% of the population. Today, the Emirate of Dubai depends much more on its immigrants and tourists than on its oil reserves. The foresighted Sheikhs made immigration a success story indeed.



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Brigitte & Heinz



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