



Photos by Glen Petrie/Special Contributor

A fountain in Dubai Mall is typical of some of the city's excesses, including the 1,200-store mall, the world's largest, and a social center.

# Biggest name in excess

Dubai mixes Vegas hype and Muslim culture, defying Mideast stereotypes

By GLEN PETRIE  
Special Contributor

A woman floats into Dubai's chic Cin Cin lounge on mile-high legs and killer heels, Saran-wrapped in a scant belt of white silk. "From Russia with love," quips an admiring expat at the bar.

The place swims with what look to be supermodels, turning male heads draped in white cloth ghutras. The men snap their fingers to order more Johnny Walker Gold. A local Emirati sitting next to me wears a white floor-length dishdasha and tosses back Corona beers at a pace I can't match.

I have been in Dubai three hours, and I feel as if I'm in a James Bond movie but I've lost the plot. Of all the preconceptions about the United Arab Emirates I carried with me, libertine was not one of them.

Is this not the place where tourists have been jailed for kissing in public, where sex outside marriage is illegal and intoxication a punishable offense?

"Dubai is an international city," the Emirati says. "You can do anything here you would do in Europe." He offers the most useful tip of all: "Just remember, there is a time and a place for everything."

That's something we would do well to remember in the West, I tell him. In Dubai, the place for alcohol is in a few specially licensed nightclubs and bars at the posh hotels — like this one in the Fairmont — that stand like shiny sentinels up and down the main thoroughfare, Sheikh Sayed Road.

He shares iPhone photos of his city: yachts and Gulfstream jets and the smiling face of



A man-made lake sits at the base of the Burj Khalifa, the world's tallest building.

Tom Cruise. So this isn't a Bond film I've stumbled into, but *Mission: Impossible*.

The next morning I head to the world's tallest building, Dubai's 2,716-foot Burj Khalifa, on which Cruise crawled like Spider-Man in the film *Mission: Impossible — Ghost Protocol*.

I rise in an elevator at a rate of 30 feet per second to the observation deck, a little more than halfway up. Below me sprawls the modern miracle that is Dubai. It's as if Aladdin unleashed his genie to conjure a city-size theme park, the theme being modern development.

## Business-minded

"There are two key insights into Dubai," I was told by a Canadian expat with several years' experience here. "One, what's good for business is good for Dubai. But more importantly, this is one of the few states in the region with a

government that is actually interested in raising up its people."

With free education, health care and subsidized housing, Emiratis enjoy a high standard of living, in stark contrast to some neighboring countries. The discovery of oil in 1966 turned a scruffy desert trading village into a state-of-the-art metropolis in a generation. But the oil is limited. And the forward-looking Maktoum family, the rulers of Dubai since they founded it in 1833, invests in making Dubai a state that can sustain itself through trade, transportation and tourism.

At the Burj Khalifa's base is a vast lake, a blue mirage that defies the blistering sand that extends to the horizon. Water is more precious here than oil, and Dubai expensively distills 275 million gallons a day from the sea.

Animating the lake is a larger replica of the Las Vegas Bellagio's dancing fountains. The reference to Vegas is not incidental. Dubai is like Las Vegas without the gambling and the shows, but with beaches.

On the shores of the lake is Dubai Mall, the world's biggest with 1,200 stores. Malls have become a fulcrum of social life in Dubai, thanks to air conditioning and diversions. Dubai Mall features a giant aquarium ("the world's largest acrylic viewing panel") teeming with 33,000 species. For a fee, you can don a wet suit and swim with its sharks and rays.

Everything in Dubai seems to have a plaque declaring it an entry in the Guinness Book of World Records. "Of course," said a tour guide. "If it was second-best, who would



The Burj Khalifa is striking in the nighttime skyline. There is an observation deck about halfway up the 2,716-foot-tall building, accessible by an elevator rising 30 feet a second.

come?"

The temperature suddenly drops, and I'm walking past an Olympic-size skating rink. Young girls with their heads draped in *shelas* slide about precariously.

At the Mall of the Emirates, I peer through another vast acrylic panel at a ski resort the size of three football fields, covered in real snow. It is packed with kids, squealing with delight.

Dubai has the world's glitziest hotel, the sail-shaped Burj Al Arab, built because His Highness Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid al-Maktoum wanted an icon the whole world would recognize. The city has the world's longest driverless commuter train, a classy transit rider's dream. There are sprawling manmade islands shaped like palm trees, a busy cruise ship port and the fourth busiest airport in the world by international passenger traffic.

## Muslim culture

None of this fits with my vague perception of Islam as a faith — indeed a culture — of modesty. To learn more, I book a spot at "Open Doors, Open Minds" at the Sheikh Mohammed Centre for Cultural Understanding, founded by the sheikh in 1995 to create a bridge between Islam and other cultures. A similar program is run at Jumeirah Mosque, one of the few that welcome non-Muslims.

In a courtyard-style home in the historic Bastakia Quarter, I join several tourists on cushions around a buffet of traditional Emirati food. The charming moderator, educated in the United States, gives an alternative view of Islam — that Islam is first and foremost a religion of peace and even, once upon a time, of

democracy.

The issue of women's rights quickly dominates the discussion. Using a volunteer from the audience, he demonstrates the female style of dress and explains how it evolved to suit the harsh environment of heat, sun and sand. He tells us that Dubai's women, most of whom are university educated, have free choice, including what to wear.

Mall traffic bears him out: Young women in traditional dress, with only their eyes visible, mingle with those who channel Britney Spears. Girls too scantily dressed, however, are asked to leave. Any woman can wear a bikini at the beach, but not on the streets.

Modesty is central to Islam, yet with 90 percent of its population being expatriate

workers, Dubai is accustomed to other ways of thinking. Certain behavior, like public displays of affection, remains unwelcome. The Canadian expat told me that cases such as the 2010 arrest of a young British couple accused of kissing on the mouth in a restaurant are rare, but also that if you go too far, you'll force the police to take action.

Accused of not being democratic enough, and by its Islamic neighbors for not being strict enough, Dubai struggles to balance global engagement with Islamic fealty. If the cultural exchange programs are meant to help bridge Islam and the West, I feel the city itself does the same, proving that Islam and modernity are not mutually exclusive.

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The Burj Al Arab hotel is shaped like a sail because Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid al-Maktoum wanted an instantly recognizable icon. And, of course, it's on a man-made island.