

48 HOURS IN DUBAI TRAVEL

Firearms? Check. Supercars? Check. Beer? Maybe. MAXIM samples the hottest stopover city around

Call it the Dubai Dilemma. To stop over or not to stop over? So many travellers fly to Europe and Africa via this tiny Arab emirate that it's become famous as somewhere to break up the journey, rather than a destination in its own right. I decide to put it to the test by spending 48 hours there – will Dubai have enough attractions and activities to keep me entertained?

HANDY PHRASES

- **Hello/Welcome:** "Marhaba"
- **Thank you:** "Shukran"
- **Do you speak English?:** "Titkallam Ingleezi?"
- **No, I wasn't looking at your daughter/girlfriend/wife:** Just run, mate.

TRIGGERS WITH ATTITUDE

What's the first thing you want to do when you get off a 14-hour flight? Shoot a gun? Me too! After dumping my bags at the swish Radisson Blu Hotel in Media City, I head straight to the Jebel Ali Shooting Club. Ten minutes later I'm yelling, "Pull!" and joyously blasting skeets out of the sky with a double-barrelled shotgun. I hit eight out of nine targets, which is something of a miracle given I had the wrong eye closed for the first four. What can I say – I'm a lethal weapon.

Next, we head inside, where my instructor produces a Smith & Wesson revolver. I empty six shots into a target from seven metres away and wonder whether it's too late to try out for the



Olympics... then he hands me the 9mm, Czech-made CZ 75 – the recoil nearly throws me across the room. Dangerous things, these guns.

After a quick change into my finest attire back at the hotel, I'm off to spend the evening checking out one of the Emiratis' favourite pastimes: horse racing. The futuristic-looking Meydan Racecourse is



the world's largest integrated racing facility (room for 60,000) and home to the world's richest horse race (the \$US10 million Dubai World Cup). In true Dubai style it looks more like a concert venue than a racecourse, with an elevated private access road for exclusive use by horse-mad ruler Sheikh Mohammed.

Entry is free and there's a wide range of spectators, from poor immigrant workers to wealthy expats to Emiratis. While betting is forbidden, there are cash prizes for predicting winners on the Pick Six game card. As is the case with most racing venues, the dress code is on the smart side. Although, on reflection, the fascinator was a mistake.

Halfway through the night, Sheikh Mo

himself makes an appearance, strolling nonchalantly into the winners' enclosure to greet superstar jockey Frankie Dettori. What surprises me most is the lack of

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security. No SWAT teams, no armed guards, no bulletproof Sheikh-mobiles. I guess that's what happens when you don't charge people income tax and give them free health care, free schooling, and interest-free loans. Something to think about, Julia Gillard.

Before succumbing to a tsunami of jetlag, I take a stroll along The Walk at JBR, an outdoor shopping and dining promenade near Dubai Marina. It's a Thursday night – the start of the weekend in Dubai – and it's packed. I've never seen so many supercars in one place. Global Ferrari Crisis? Not here, buddy.

DAY TWO

Looking at Dubai's glittering skyline today, it's hard to believe that, until the 1960s, camels and donkeys were the only mode of transport. And then you get in a taxi. At which point it becomes clear that the automobile is still something of a novelty. Driving in Dubai is an extreme sport. I'm surprised Red Bull doesn't sponsor it. Everyone appears to be competing in their own individual rally.

For my Dubai driving debut, I decide to bypass the roads and instead head to Dubai Autodrome, a 5.4km-long racetrack where they offer a variety of driving experiences from go karting to hot laps



"So, girls will like me when they see me in this, right?"

in an Audi R8. I opt for the full-on F1-style single seater: 135kW, top speed of 230km/h, 0 – 100 in four seconds. Like most blokes, I reckon I'm a reasonable (read: awesome) driver, but a racetrack is a humbling environment. Even with traffic cones indicating where to brake and turn, and a slower Audi TT leading the way, I still can't keep up.

At the end of the 20-minute session I'm mentally exhausted and drenched with sweat. But it's some of the most fun I've ever had sitting down (with pants on). I ask the instructor how close it is to being in an actual F1 car, expecting him to say maybe 50 per cent. "Less than 20," he



The erections in Dubai are a sight to behold



"Would a private rendition of 'Rock the Casbah' be out of the question?"

replies. I leave with a newfound respect for F1 drivers and a tiny machismo boost.

It's easy enough to think Dubai is all skyscrapers and supercars but on a city tour that afternoon I discover another side to it. We start in the historic Bastakia Quarter, which contains restored 100-year-old wind tower houses built by wealthy pearl merchants. From here we cross Dubai Creek in an abra, a traditional wooden water taxi, and pass precariously stacked wooden cargo vessels called dhows that still ferry goods from India and Oman.

Entering an area called Deira, we explore the narrow, cinnamon-scented laneways of the Spice Souq, where enthusiastic stallholders preside over sacks of colourful herbs. From here it's a short stroll to the Gold Souq, a covered arcade containing hundreds of wallet-threatening jewellery shops. Thank God I'm not here with m'lady.

I finish up at Dubai Mall – the world's largest – with 1200 stores, an Olympic-size ice rink, and more than 160 food outlets. For a shopping-phobe like me it feels like air-conditioned hell, but it's hard not to be impressed by its sheer scale.



In a city that thrives on building the biggest and the best, there's still one structure that eclipses everything else. The 829m-high Burj Khalifa isn't just a bit taller than all the other buildings in Dubai – it's a *shitload* taller. It's so tall it actually looks fake, like someone has photoshopped it onto the horizon. Going up is a surreal experience. The lift has just two buttons: "G" and "124", and the views from the observation deck are intoxicating.

For my last night in the city I decide to splash out. I kick off proceedings with a cut-throat shave at upmarket men's grooming emporium 1847 and emerge with a face smoother than a trophy wife's Botoxed forehead. Suited and booted, I head to high-end Argentinian steak house Gaucho, where I enjoy an incredible Churrasco-style sirloin steak washed down with several super-strong caipirinhas.

From here, things get a little blurry. I spend a couple of hours bar hopping between hotels before eventually stumbling into Cirque du Soir, a Cirque du Soleil-inspired club in the Fairmont Hotel. For the rest of the night I dance with

DRINKING IN DUBAI

Islam forbids alcohol, but over-21s can still drink in Dubai. Any venue associated with a hotel can serve booze and, while expensive compared to everything else (40c for a can of Coke), it's similar to Sydney's ridiculous pricing scheme (around \$7 for a beer). To save money, stock up in Duty Free and look out for Happy Hour. Dubai is the most tolerant Arab emirate by far but it's still a Muslim country, so public drunkenness, swearing and overt PDAs are a no-no.



"Dude, can you believe the clarity of those new HD screens?"

dwarves, lycra-clad women on stilts, and moustachioed men with tridents. All in all, it seems an appropriately bizarre way to round off my trip.

ENDNOTES

I'm on my way to the airport and am now the proud owner of a throbbing hangover and a worrying handwritten love note from a dwarf. During the painful commute I also realise I've barely scratched the surface of Dubai. I never got to the beach. I didn't go jet skiing, wakeboarding or kitesurfing. I didn't ride a camel, smoke a shisha pipe or go dune bashing. And I saw just a tiny fraction of the city's bars and clubs. Point being, Dubai isn't just a stopover – it's a destination, dammit, and well worth spending more than 48 hours in.