

# Some like it hot

**There's more to Dubai than high rises and shopping malls. Jessica Hudson, Scott Dunn's representative on the ground, shares her inside track on its unexpected highlights, from an ultra-exclusive desert safari to an organic farmers' market**

**W**hile most of us tend to think of Dubai as a place to go shopping and chill out by the pool, Jessica Hudson, who has spent much of her life in the emirate, insists there's much more to discover if you know where to look.

As Scott Dunn's ambassador in Dubai, Jessica tries to direct visitors towards the less well-known experiences that only the expat community and local "emirati" know about. "Instead of staying in your hotel complex or only venturing out to visit a mall, I always recommend starting with a trip to the historic Al Bastakiya district near Dubai Creek," she says. "It has beautiful traditional buildings with wind towers made from coral bricks. It's a great

Sheikh Mohammed [the Emir of Dubai and a highly regarded poet in his own right] often comes to. He sits down in the sand with everyone else and talks and listens to the poems."

Jessica is also enthused by Dubai's burgeoning art scene, which is mainly centred around Alserkal Avenue in the former industrial neighbourhood of Al Quoz. "The area is a bit like New York's Meatpacking District, with lots of old warehouses and pop-up galleries. They do special art nights with street food and street markets – it's a lot of fun."

Jessica first lived in Dubai as a child when her father's work as an architect took him there in the 1980s. She returned ten

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place to go for a walk and browse the shops and art galleries."

Indeed, while Dubai is sometimes accused of being as much of a cultural desert as a geographical one, Jessica is quick to challenge this assumption. "There are all kinds of cultural events going on in Dubai throughout the year," she says. "In March, for example, there's a literary festival that attracts amazing authors from all over the Arab world and beyond. About 50,000 people attend and there are events all around Dubai, including a wonderful poetry reading in the desert under the stars, which

years ago, drawn by the glorious weather, cosmopolitan community and positive attitude. "There's an exciting feeling about Dubai right now," she says. "The city recently won the bid to host the World Expo in 2020, which should mean that a lot more people will visit. I just hope they make an effort to look beyond the skyscrapers and mega-malls. There are so many lovely spots to hang out in, from cafés and boutiques to beach clubs and farmers' markets. It really is a very special place."

Here, Jessica outlines her top ten experiences to be enjoyed in Dubai •

ILLUSTRATIONS  
DAN WILLIAMS



**THE BOAT TRIP**  
*Dhow racing*

Whenever we want to hire a boat in Dubai, the company we use is Xclusive Yachts. It has all kinds of boats, ranging from Sunseekers to beautiful wooden Turkish gulets, which have a big teak deck with cushions. You can sail around the outside of the Palm Jumeirah and visit the World islands [a man-made archipelago created to represent the globe]. Once a month there are amazing dhow races, where you can see the emiratis in their flowing white dishdashas racing their dhows along the coastline. There might be 50 or 60 dhows all sailing together – it's incredible to witness, especially when you're alongside them on a boat.

INTERVIEW  
DAMON SYSON



**THE TRADITIONAL PURSUIT**  
*Camel racing*

Camel racing is a big tradition in the UAE. There's a huge racetrack off the Dubai Al Ain road where they race early in the morning at about 5am or 6am, before it gets too hot. In the past, the jockeys were young boys, but now they use little robot jockeys instead. There's a great grandstand from which you can watch all the action – and see the local camel owners driving their Nissan Patrol Jeeps alongside the track, filming the race with their phones, hooting their horns and trying to make the camels race faster.

**THE BAR WITH A VIEW**  
*Mercury Lounge*

If you're looking for a fun place to enjoy a sundowner, head to the Four Seasons Resort at Jumeirah Beach, Dubai's newest hotel hangout. They have a stunning rooftop bar called the Mercury Lounge, with the best views of Dubai's dramatic skyline lit up at night. It's definitely the place to be seen at the moment. They play great music and serve cool, arty cocktails with caramelised popcorn on top. Everything they do has a bit of a different twist. Then you can head downstairs for dinner at Sea Fu on the beach, for their melt-in-your-mouth black cod – the perfect evening. Another great place to go for a cocktail is 40 Kong, which is on the rooftop of the H Hotel, on the 40th floor. It's got an incredible view of the skyline, brilliant DJs and a really good vibe. The Cove Beach Club is another favourite with locals. It stocks every type of rosé imaginable and has a fantastic restaurant.



**THE BOUTIQUE**  
*O'de Rose*

One of my favourite places to shop in Dubai is O'de Rose in Umm Suqeim, not far from the Burj Al Arab. It was set up by a Lebanese fashion designer and her cousins in a residential villa that's been converted into a boutique. They sell beautiful clothing, accessories, art and homewares from all over the region – anything from hand-painted Moroccan teacups to silver trays with beautiful Arabic calligraphy, or stunning Syrian side tables inlaid with mother-of-pearl mosaics. It's always my go-to spot for a special present. It's not cheap, but everything in there is really well chosen.





#### THE ORGANIC FARMERS' MARKET

### Ripe Food & Craft Market

In Dubai, pretty much all the food is flown in from places like Australia and America. A few years ago an Englishwoman called Becky Balderstone set up Ripe Food & Craft Market, which is based in Zabeel Park, not far from the Creek. It started small but it has grown to become a really popular weekend destination. It's a bit like Borough Market, but as well as all kinds of organic and home-grown food supplied by local UAE farmers, you can also buy beautiful craft items that you won't find in shops, such as engraved bags from Lebanon and locally made dresses. It's very popular with families and has become a real community hub – they have a petting zoo and arts and crafts activities for the kids, and open-air yoga for the grown-ups.



#### THE BEDOUIN EXPERIENCE

### Platinum Heritage desert safari

There are quite a few operators offering desert safari packages in Dubai, but if you want something more exclusive, there's a company called Platinum Heritage, which is based in a 280-acre private desert conservancy owned by one of Dubai's ruling family. It has a fleet of really cool 1950s Series 1 Land Rovers that you can drive around the dunes with the roof off, feeling like James Bond, and extremely knowledgeable guides who teach you fascinating facts about the local flora and fauna. There are also about 300 white Oryx deer that you can get right up close to, and a Bedouin camp where they cook lamb in underground clay ovens and you can sleep out under the stars. It's a really special experience.



#### THE ADRENALINE RUSH

### Skydive Dubai

With a runway and drop zone situated adjacent to the Palm Jumeirah, Skydive Dubai takes you up in a small plane from which you skydive over the Palm Islands, which is an amazing way to see Dubai from the air. You get an incredible view of the whole of the Palm Island beneath you. Last month the company also organised Dream Jump Dubai, a fortnight of extreme base-jumping from the top of one of the tallest towers in the Dubai Marina. It built a jump platform at the top of the tower, 400m high, and 600 adrenaline junkies braved the jump. It was amazing to watch, and apparently another Dream Jump Dubai event is planned for next year.



#### THE FAST FOOD TRUCK

### Salt

One of the nicest things to do in Dubai is to walk, jog or take a bike ride down one of the beach promenades, where you'll find cafés, restaurants and beach clubs. The Walk at Jumeirah Beach Residence is probably the most famous, but Kite Beach, just down the coast, also has a really nice promenade with great views of the Burj Al Arab [Dubai's iconic sail-shaped hotel]. The big draw here is Salt, which is Dubai's version of the street food trucks you might find in New York or London. It's based in a silver retro Airstream trailer, and it has become *the* place to go. It only serves burgers – chicken or wagyu beef sliders – which sounds bizarre, but they are the most delicious burgers you'll ever taste. All the emiratis go there: it's a real Dubai institution.

#### THE CULTURAL ITINERARY

### Dubai Museum and Bayt Al Wakeel

Dubai Museum is located in the oldest building in Dubai, an old fort that has been converted really nicely. It's a great place to learn about the history of Dubai through old films and rare footage, right from its very early days when the local economy was focused on pearl diving. After your visit, go for a traditional lunch at Bayt Al Wakeel, which is a fantastic little restaurant in the Al Bastakiya area. It's basically a wooden deck overlooking the Creek where they serve tasty salads, seafood and Arabic dishes. You're literally suspended over the water so you can watch the abras, which are little water taxis, going past, and the dhows arriving laden full of spices and wares from India. The restaurant is also right next to the abra landing, so after lunch you can hop over the river and visit one of the souks or hire an abra privately to take you all the way up the Creek to the lagoons, where there are flocks of flamingos. It's a really lovely boat ride and a great way to get a different view of Dubai.

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#### THE BIG BOYS' TOYS

### Water Adventure

Dubai is famous for doing things bigger and better, and Water Adventure Dubai is a perfect example. It has a top selection of all the latest water-based boys' toys including jet surfing, hoverboarding and flybiking, as well as something called a Seabreacher, which is the shape of a shark, about 12ft long, travels at speeds of more than 40mph and can jump 18ft out of the water and then dive 5ft under the surface. That's the latest craze. And of course if you prefer something a little bit more leisurely, they also have paddleboards and kayaks.

