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Dubai, Where Too Much Is Never Enough

By SETH SHERWOOD

Pity the cartographers and guidebook publishers striving to capture Dubai's juggernautlike sprawl. With every month bringing announcements of audacious new hotels and leisure concepts — a huge artificial coral reef studded with World War II planes and pounds of gold is being built for scuba divers — today's top draws can easily become tomorrow's fire sales. Dubai travel guides and maps, their shelf life shorter than eggs, can pretty much go straight from printing press to pulp plant.

For the moment, Dubai's marquee attraction is the much-touted 25-story, 1,300-foot-long ski run inside the new Mall of the Emirates. But even more dazzling is the après-ski scene afforded by the 400 shops and restaurants in the 6.5 million-square-foot mall. For luxury goods, follow the black robes of Saudi billionaires' wives to the Rivoli, Harvey Nichols and Yves Saint Laurent boutiques. For nourishment, join the D & G-wearing Lebanese women crowding the Giorgio Armani cafe.

During his decades of travels, the 14th-century explorer Ibn Battuta traversed North Africa, [Egypt](#), Persia, [India](#), [China](#) and [Andalusia](#). Thanks to the new Ibn Battuta Mall — "the world's largest themed mall" — 21st-century shoppers can make the same trip in an afternoon. Containing 250 outlets spread through six architecturally distinct zones based on the countries Battuta visited, the place is a history lesson and retail blitz in one. Each zone quietly raises important questions: Did the ancient Persians actually shop at Woolworth's and the Athlete's Foot? How was Hindu history influenced by the Sunglass Hut? Such issues are probably best mulled over KFC in the medieval Tunisian food court before heading to the Ming dynasty Imax theater.

The most picturesque new shopping experience unfolds under the forest of half-built 21st-century towers in the Dubai Marina (off Sheikh Zayed Road at Interchange 5). Calling itself "the [Middle East's](#) answer to the French Riviera," the vast seaside city-within-a-city is still years away from its goal of housing 70,000 people in some 200 buildings. But the palm-fringed Marina Walk, where valets park Lexus S.U.V.'s while their owners stroll among its shops and cafes, is already drawing throngs.

The marina's current hot spot is Chandelier (971-4-366-3606), a minimalist-cool Lebanese restaurant and self-proclaimed "oyster lounge." Inside angular white interiors suggesting a Middle Eastern version of [Miami](#), crowds of dolled-up Russian couples and black-veiled Arab women sporting diamond jewelry dine on tapaslike mezze dishes (14 to 30 dirhams, or \$3.75 to \$8 at 3.75 dirhams to the dollar).

Dubai Marina is also home to the city's hippest new hotel of the moment, the Grosvenor West Marina

Beach (971-4-399-8888; www.starwood.com; doubles from 1,500 dirhams). Packed into the 45-story building are 217 rooms and 13 restaurants and bars. The Indian fusion cuisine and ethno-chic décor at Indego come courtesy of Vineet Bhatia, who scored a Michelin star for his Zaika in [London](#). For diners demanding royal treatment, the restaurant Mezzanine is run by Gary Robinson, a former personal chef for Prince Charles, the Prince of Wales. In the Buddha Bar, a branch of the famous Parisian D.J. lounge, a massive cross-legged statue of the establishment's namesake V.I.P. watches boisterous young professionals unwind to global house music.

Vladimir Lenin would no doubt take a dim view of the chandeliers, gilded Corinthian columns and shamelessly capitalistic amenities in the 138-room Hotel [Moscow](#) (Al Makhtoum Street, 971-4-228-8222; www.moscowhoteldubai.com; doubles from 960 dirhams), opened in 2004. But anyone with an appreciation for 19th-century Slavic kitsch will enjoy the czarist decadence.

Finally, just when you were about to abandon your search for a luxury hotel offering falconry, along comes Jumeirah Bab Al Shams Desert Resort and Spa (Dubai Al Ain Road, 971-4-832-6699, www.babalshams.com, doubles from 700 dirhams, or \$80). In the dunes outside of Dubai, the 150-room fortress-style hotel offers a five-star version of old-world Arabian life. The rigors of recreational activities like falconry can be soothed, for example, in the one of three pool. And after a hard day of camel riding, your derriere will welcome the Satori spa.

But because this is Dubai, bigger fish are always lurking on the horizon waiting to swallow the current leaders. In 2008, the present crop of top hotels will have to contend with offerings from two mega fashion designers, in the form of the Palazzo Versace and Armani Hotel Dubai, as well as an underwater hotel, Hydropolis.

Similarly, the mall wars will escalate considerably in coming years with the arrival of world record aspirants like the Mall of Arabia (featuring some 1,000 shops spread over 10 million square feet) and the Dubai Mall, a 12-million-square-foot monster in the same development as the forthcoming world's tallest building, the Burj Dubai.

Even the Middle Eastern snow monopoly at the Mall of the Emirates is set for a challenge. The Dubai Sunny Mountain Ski Dome, set for completion this year or next, will house an entire indoor mountain range and a ski mountain with a very unusual twist: It will revolve.

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