

Like Las Vegas, its soul sister in the West, Dubai is an endlessly undulating beige-sand field of dreams, a desert city giving life to mirage — no matter how surreal or grandiose in scale. As the rest of the world has known for some time, Dubai is running on empty as far as oil goes. The gross domestic product has been replaced incrementally by resorts more fantastic than the next, by offices and residences of nerdy architectural (or failing that, *aerial*) significance. The region's repositioning has been the life's work of Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid al-Maktoum, Dubai's visionary ruler and de facto CEO who aims to create what he has called "a pioneering global city." The muezzin call audible to Western ears has been "If you build it, they will come." They are still coming, to this Oz célèbre, which remains a compulsory stop for a caravan of bankers and dealmakers and tourists, even in these unfocused economic times. No income tax, no capital-gains tax, and no sales tax cleverly guarantee enough of the will stick around and spend awhile.

The *bigger-better-badder* braggadocio advertising Dubai's futuristic skyscape — its status as Gulf imperium — extends to its run-away shopping scene. After all, what is the Arab souk, historically, but a mall without the air conditioning? The souk has come a long way fast in this part of the world, and in November, the Dubai Mall, heralded as the "world's biggest," with more than 1,200 retail outlets massed over 12 million square feet, showed a third of its hand with a partial opening. (Dubailand's Mall of Arabia — opening date somewhere in the hazy distant future due to a recessionary construction slowdown— aims to snatch that title away, promising a Jurassic theme park stalked by more than 100 animatronic dinosaurs.)

Shopping here is as much a national sport as falconry or camel-racing, whether one is on the lookout for Dior handbags, limited-edition timepieces with enough brainpower to do your taxes, or real estate. In the Emirates, almost one third of the population visits a mall at least once a week. All of which means expectations remain high for the Dubai Mall. On opening day in November, there was a three-hour wait for parking (many ultimately abandoned their cars out front) in lots so labyrinthine that special machines issue tickets to ensure no one mislays his or her Mercedes.

Still, most of the clothing stores had yet to move in; Two major department stores are no scheduled to open for some time — Galeries Lafayette, in early 2009, and Bloomingdale's, a full calendar year after that. But one could go ahead and subject one's person to the Clarins spa's "whitening from the Alps" treatment as consolation — and buy heaps of jewelry: Arab and Indian customers prefer the rich 22- and 24-karat yellows, and the region is known for its adrenalized gold trade and reasonable pricing — which explains the indulgent assimilation of yet another gold souk in town at the Dubai Mall.

Outside, the waterfront promenade was, for the most part, still a bulldozed cranescape. It was a perversely captivating sight, an ant farm teeming with yellow hardhats when viewed neon drink in hand from the Latin-themed Calabar on the banks of a screensaver-blue infinity pool at The Address, an apartment complex at the foot of the almost finished Burj Dubai, the world's-tallest-tower-in-waiting.

Until the new mall's batteries fully charge, local trends are still being micro-managed by the Mall of the Emirates, which averages 2 million visitors a month and bustles like a Victorian railway station right through its midnight closing. In a culture where the women are covered head to toe in the raven-black *abaya*, handbags assume that much more importance. Harvey Nichols is where everyone gets their medium-size Zagliani bags, imported from Milan and looking something like rounded-off Birkins (if Birkins were smelted in acid colors like metallic blue). The selection of Zaglianis is said to rival that of London.

"They inject the snakeskin, crocodile and ostrich with Botox!" one awed Dubai resident tells me. "That's what makes the bags so soft." (In fact, it's silicone that gives them their smooth-jazz quality.) Philipp Plein's gold-studded pants are also voguish; if you can practically hear the bling, it is flying off the hangers in Dubai.

At the more affordable end, a Chocolate Fondue Cascade like the one for 199 dirhams at the mall's Home Centre is a gleamingly decadent fixture of every boozy Friday brunch in town. And the Abdul Samad Al Qurashi perfumery will confect reasonably priced custom fragrances from alcohol-free essences stored on the wall in baroque drugstore bottles from the Czech Republic. (The guys behind the counter are delighted to demonstrate the strength of the wood-chip air fresheners with a blowtorch!)

Most every mall in Dubai is vacuum-packed with standard-issue high-low stuff, allowing for subtle variations in the designer lineup. These are duly recorded in any up-to-date edition of the *Dubai Complete Residents' Guide*, sold at bookstores and the property of every competent hotel concierge desk.

One will find, among so much else, a Manolo Blahnik store and Richard Mille watches at the Dubai Mall (to soon be followed by a John Lobb and Tom Ford for Men); brand-finicky Ounass and Lanvin at the luxe-y if generic Emirates Towers; and Vivienne Westwood, Marni, Dries Van Noten, Villa Moda and hitherto under-represented art galleries at the Gate Village's outdoor emporia, cooled by air conditioning generated by the Dubai International Financial Centre's office buildings above (or the "DIFC" in the local shorthand, and the site of Dubai's newest Ritz-Carlton, opening in June).

Personal shopper Kelly Lundberg (WWW.divine.ae; 971-50-396-2296) was an Emirates Airlines stewardess, and with her pink croc ledger, she still emanates a stewardess-y briskness, which is exactly what one needs if one is to target the Dubai shopping scene with any efficiency. When she started her business six years ago, locals assumed this Edinburgh native in a Diane von Furstenberg wrap dress with a meringue-tipped Annie Lennox punk 'do and French manicure would help carry their bags.

Not so. Lundberg can map a reasonable route and advise on a car and driver to best avoid traffic. (Dubai is still one big construction site whose residents complain about regularly losing their way home amid the shuffling red cones and yellow flags; visiting a luxury mall like BurJuman or the textile, spice and old gold souks in Deira demands patience.) She will also introduce you to worthy freestanders like the avant If boutique in Umm Sequiem (for Yohji Yamamoto and Junya Watanabe) or squire you to the trustiest pashmina vendors, the tailors in Satwa and Burj Dubai, who will skillfully replicate one's favorite dresses and suits.

Lundberg says she prefers the Gold and Diamond Park near the Mall of the Emirates to the old gold souk, not just because you won't kill yourself in traffic getting there, but because a) it's blissfully air-conditioned, b) it showcases far more contemporary designs, and c) Panky at Monili and Nick at Cara Jewellers can competently copy just about anything, especially engagement rings.

That said, the souks offer a carbon-dated, historic authenticity; here one glimpses the stately elderly ladies in metallic-finish "Gulf burqa" masks. There are other surprises: The most desirable items in the gold and spice souks turn out to be housewares — espresso cups or flare-spout thermal coffee flasks at the store Parcham. Assemble an entire Lawrence of Arabia outfit, or debate whether that life-size plush tiger that roars when its paw is lifted — \$30 before negotiation — might fit in an overhead luggage compartment. Across the creek at the textile souk, one generally wants only the souvenirs, the jangly belly-dancer belts, the curled-toe slippers.

But pastiche has become the new authenticity, and monumental grandeur a sort of house style trumpet-blasting a new millennium's prosperity. The Egyptian-temple-pillared Wafi was the first Dubai mall of pharaonic proportion and so reputed for luxe that, in 2007, masked members of the Pink Panther gang rammed two Audi automobiles through the front windows of jeweler Graff and got away with \$3.4 million of diamonds.

I am accompanied to Wafi by my friend "The Billionaire," a chubby Jaquet Droz watch lashed to his wrist, its reverse discreetly engraved "No. 1/1." He insists the most coveted watches in the world are funneled to Hong Kong, Singapore and Dubai — which is where the *real* connoisseurs live, he says. On top of there being no tax, one can negotiate 15 to 20 percent off at stores like Ahmed Sediqqi & Sons, A. Lange & Söhne and De Grisogono, where there might be \$10 million of watches on a sales floor at any given time. Buben & Zorweg down the hall sells the \$3,000 watch-winding boxes that keep these babies young and fit.

"Pen and watch collectors will collect to the outer limit of their finances," he observes, as a salesperson at Montegrappa slips on a navy blue glove to hand over the limited-edition "Aphrodite" pen, filigreed with precious stones. At Caran d'Ache, there are \$19,000 gold fountain pens spangled with watch gears, a twinning of the vices. A Segafredo espresso bar nearby revives the sticker-shocked soul.

Memoires, across from the Galliano-gown-stuffed Etoile Nights boutique, is like the set of an Edgar Allan Poe short story as adapted for the big screen. The women who work here are trussed in corsets, bustles and plumed hats; the men strut the floor in Edwardian frock coats. The furnishings are Venetian bordello: fringed lamps, jet chandeliers, stuffed peacocks and gilded swans, mostly repro 16th- to 19th-century antiques jumbled up with creepy hologram portraits from Russia.

The Billionaire mentions that Wafi "has a new extension — but there's a *newer* new extension around that's harder to find." One always feels one is probably missing something, somewhere, in all of these expo-size malls. Lost, we end up inside Kitson L.A., validating its presence in Dubai with a paparazzi-picture mural, a collage memorializing the antics of Posh Spice and Courtney Love at the original Robertson Boulevard storefront. Just a guess, but there is probably more of a local audience for the sequined baseball jackets and the tattoo clothing next door at Ed Hardy by Christian Audigier than Kitson's "I Only Date Models" T-shirts.

A sign flags the presence of AKS photography studio on the lower level of Wafi's Arab-inflected Khan Murjan market. AKS is like a regionally appropriate Olin Mills operation: Pose for stylized portraits bundled up like a Bedouin amid Persian carpetry and such props as a stuffed falcon. Sling a dummy rifle across the chest, if that's your pleasure. Pressed for time, we head into Wafi Gourmet, a high-end Lebanese food store and restaurant offering shisha pipes on the outdoor terrace, and inside, intricately packaged olives, marzipan fruits, and figs stuffed with almonds and pistachios — the madeleines of the Gulf.

Because every change of venue in Dubai is a trek, food suddenly matters. At the ancient souks, Jafer Biman Ali Cafeteria slices a coconut open for five dirhams — and there is no more compelling refreshment than its "Pome Grenade" juice. On a more exalted plane, Zuma has exported its signature sea-bass sashimi and black cod with miso from London to a slick space at the DIFC, where the Parisian tea salon Ladurée is also expected soon. But the critical mass of spiffy restaurants is at the Mall of the Emirates: Almaz by Momo inside Harvey Nichols; St. Maxim's bistro; Butcher Shop & Grill for steak; Salmontini for seafood; Après for cocktails; the Emporio Armani Caffé for snacks. And Sezzam at the base of the ski slope, artfully divvied into "Flame," "Steam" and "Bake" sections.

Souk Madinat Jumeirah around the corner from the Burj Al Arab also merits a shout-out, for its noisy zoo of fashionable bars (Bar Zar, The Agency, Trader Vic's) overlapping with restaurants out back (Anar, Pisces, P2 and The Meat Company), where, for 50 dirhams, one can tour the man-made canals of this Vegas-y complex in a canopied *abra* — a Dubai water taxi. (For the more authentic diesel-choked, experience, pay 1 dirham to the boatman in the old part of town when crossing the creek between the old souks.)

Souk Madinat's shopping, though direly touristy, holds up at this old-timey Arab-styled market with its arched beams and lanterns, especially if you dig souvenirs and shell carts and embroidered slingback Espadrilles — and you are someone who might pay to have your hands embossed with henna or your entire cell phone upholstered in rhinestones.

In the unyielding heat of the desert, the differences between the malls are ultimately reduced to the *experiential*. Just add water — pure and simple, or transfixed as ice — and the superficially deluxe is suddenly subliminally restorative and finally more persuasive. The otherwise unmemorable Times Square Center mall is somehow redeemed by the presence of Chillout, Dubai's first sub-zero lounge, entirely hewn from ice imported from Canada. In what is essentially a giant walk-in freezer, mango mocktails (there isn't a hotel in the vicinity, hence no alcohol) are poured into ice-molded martini "glasses" by a bartender from Uzbekistan.

At Wafi, the atrium is a-swirl with fake snow at Christmas. And of course, at the Mall of the Emirates, \$50 famously gets you Chamonix-worthy skiwear and equipment for two hours of schussing (or klutzing) around a mainly deserted 400-meter-long faux-snow slope.

Dubai Mall's new Olympic-size ice rink offers little in the way of surprise (unless Amy Winehouse's "Rehab" on the sound system counts), as the official-and-everywhere portrait of Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid al-Maktoum blinks tolerantly on the LED widescreen overhead. It's surprisingly warm out on the ice, and people are skidding around in shorts.

Where the Dubai Mall trumps all others (its KidZania and Sega Republic theme parks only arrive next year) is with its stunning aquarium, which shames the one at the Atlantis complex on the Palm Jumeirah whose owners were finally forced to free its controversial main attraction, a 13-foot whale shark. Stoic giant groupers, their heads maned by schools of golden trevallies, cruise this 10-million-liter tank with the world's largest viewing platform. Pay the 50-dirham admission to stroll the tunnel, where the world's single largest school of sharks in captivity has decided to sardine themselves so close to the acrylic paneling, one can almost reach up and touch them.

In the run-up to opening day, the tiger sharks rather uncompanionably killed at least 40 smaller reef sharks and caused minor injuries to a couple of divers working the tank. Be that as it may, a brochure promises shark dives with qualified instructors. A worker manning the Discovery Centre upstairs, where playful Humboldt penguins interact with shrieking children through the glass, insists that the Great Chain of Being is no longer disrupted and divers can "avoid consequence" by scanning a microchip injected just below the fin indicating whether that shark has been fed.

For those who don't aspire to play underwater Poseidon, new to the Marina is the cobblestoned Walk, a people-gawking strip like Miami Beach's Collins Avenue where the shops are landscaped into elevated plazas. Plaza One, right across the street from the Ritz-Carlton in the Dubai Marina is the most A-list: A Saks Fifth Avenue for Men sells fashions for the flashier dresser; Just Cavalli, Manzari furs and Aiyanna

lingerie might cater to that guy's wife. ("Lingerie is *massive* here," says personal shopper Kelly Lundberg. Don't let those priestess-y black abayas mislead you. "Who knows what goes on behind closed doors?" she adds, recalling the noise that accompanied the opening of Agent Provocateur inside the Saks at BurJuman.) Zadig & Voltaire exudes a casual chic rarely observed in these precincts. But the street-level Boutique One (the original is in Emirates Towers) is the most fabulous, curated like Colette in Paris with the most arty coffee-table books, Elie Saab evening dresses and Missoni bikinis.

There are less precious places, certainly, to drop one's dirhams: Karama, a district where the fakes are found. Dubai Outlet Mall on Route 66. But Dubai isn't really about the bargains. It might not even be about shopping. It *is* mostly about the show. And the show goes on. •

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The "Jumeirah Janes" may not care for the nickname, but these acquisitive expat wives who reluctantly followed their husbands into the parched desert of Dubai are famously responsible for its raging mall culture. Originally confined to the women of Jumeirah (one of the earliest expat suburbs), the term has been remapped — as has so much of Dubai — to include an archipelago of neighborhoods all over: Satwa Sheilas, Deira Dorothis, Marina Marys, Palm Island Paulinas, and so forth.

They come here to get their exercise, at the Mall of the Emirates (and lately, at Festival City and Ibn Battuta), in the early hours of the morning before the shops have opened, in their Juicy Couture track suits, powering through shopping centers that are nothing so much as climate-controlled Habitrails to these "mall-walkers" of Dubai. Janes may also be reliably spotted at the informal "coffee mornings" at any of the French-accented patisseries around town, where (relative) old-timers impart sage advice to the recently transferred on how to replicate the comforts of the West. (In winking *hommage*, Gourmet Station, the first in a chain of upscale food stores set to open in February, has plans to stock a "Jumeirah Jane" coffee blend.)

Experience life as a local and have a cab drop you in the cradle of Jane civilization, Jumeirah Beach Road, something like Venice Beach's Pacific Avenue in Los Angeles, with its cross streets dead-ending at the ocean. Bougainvillea reaches over the gates of Jumeirah's sand-colored villas, hinting at a stubborn grandeur within. But Beach Road isn't just split-levels, strip malls and the Dubai Zoo: It's a hand mirror to the survivalist soul of a community, the one-after-another clinics on a mission to renovate face and body, the home-decorating shops with tinted windows and blinds drawn so as to better shade the Thai-silk headboards inside from a murderous sun.

As if to acknowledge the area's creeping Californication, a Coffee Bean & Tea Leaf opened in Jumeirah Centre. But expensively blonded Jane — her fair-lady crow's feet shielded by satellite-dish sunglasses, a Louis Vuitton handbag drooping from her wrist — prefers to lunch instead at Sumo Sushi in the Town Centre or in the Lime Tree Café's cactus garden.

Come late afternoon, the scene shifts to the nail spa at the Rossini-opera-set Mercato Mall, and thence to Etoile at the Mall of the Emirates, an evening-dress outfitter that keeps Lacroix and Galliano in wide circulation at the nightly charity galas. The Jumeirah Janes prove that with a little ingenuity, a desert posting needn't be a social sand trap.

In this boom-chicka-boomtown, whose residents are mostly foreigners, an effusion of malls offers imported tax-free creature comforts, welcoming everyone from curious honeymooners stopping en route to trendy Indonesia to the Russians, who defrost on the beaches by day and by night stock up on designer clothes (cheaper than at home) at these malls with their midnight closings. After all, Moscow

is a mere five-hour bungee-hop by jet and is almost in the same time zone. The Chinese have started showing their faces, too, especially during the twice-yearly Dubai Shopping Festival (mysdf.com), with prices deflating by as much as 75 percent in August.