

Dubai: Emirate Of Extravagance



Dubai exudes opulence and extravagance. Its largest structures rise like a colossus out of the desert sands. Their size is only matched by their architectural creativity and beauty. Some are of such massive proportions that they remind one of a modern day Migdal Bavel; an attempt to reach into the heavens... to satisfy the god-sized egos of its creators.

However, despite its opulence and dazzling architectural accomplishments, despite hosting the world's wealthiest people, this Islamic kingdom harbors a dark secret: an underbelly of almost a million laborers who exist as veritable slaves.



Imagine a stretch of barren desert transformed into paradise for the wealthy, its streets lined with hundreds of opulent mansions that stretch as far as the eye can see.

Until the 1960s, the tiny coastal kingdom of Dubai consisted mainly of windswept sand dunes traversed by camel, and a few trading ports on the coastline. Now it is a land where “bigger,” “better,” and “elite” are the operating principles; where an artificial peninsula composed of millions of pounds of sand stretches out from the coast in a designer pattern, graced with imposing, palm-lined boulevards. On an exclusive man-made island rises an establishment whose luxury is rivaled by none—the world’s only seven-star hotel.

Dubai real estate developers delight in building the most outlandish projects, and cost seems to be no object. The goal is to impress the world with the immense, expensive, and often garish developments. Extravagance and Dubai go hand in hand.

Dubai, a geographically small sheikhdom on the southeastern end of the Persian Gulf, is a study in contrasts. It hosts two worlds living side by side. The Arab Emirati natives are governed by strict Islamic law. Many of them dress in traditional flowing white robes with white keffiyehs held in place by *aghals*, which look like double-coiled black ropes sitting on top of the head. Women wear long black robes called *abayas* combined with the hijab headscarf. The other world is of secular, wealthy, fun-loving expatriate Westerners, including over 100,000 British, as well as innumerable tourists, who patronize the hundreds of upscale bars, restaurants, hotels and entertainment venues.

Then there are the 900,000 Indian and Southeast Asian workers who often labor for years under very difficult conditions, sending money to their families back home in Malaysia, the Philippines, Bangladesh, India and elsewhere. Dubai enforces few protections for the working class, and laborers often find themselves trapped when employers confiscate their passports.



Dubai's location (blue) in relation to the rest of the Middle East.

If you are thinking, “Of course they’re wealthy! They have plenty of oil over there,” think again. Oil is just the beginning of the story of Dubai, and with careful planning and the wielding of absolute power, its ruler Sheikh Mohammed has crafted it into one of the world’s wealthiest financial centers, where oil accounts for just 5% of the economy. Learn about the incredible riches of this tiny nation, as well as its darker side.

The Al Maktoum Dynasty

The sheikhdom of Dubai was first founded in the early years of the 19th century by members of the Bani Yas tribe. Its location on the coast of the Persian Gulf and its proximity to Iran, less than 100 miles across the waters, led to its status as an important trading port. Seafaring vessels from around the Gulf area and the Indian sea made it a regular stop, bringing a measure of financial success to the merchant class. Piracy was also a common practice among the inhabitants of Dubai and the other sheikhdoms of

what is today known as the United Arab Emirates. Due to losses suffered from the piracy, the British Empire entered into a treaty with the locals in 1820 that aimed to reduce the pirate activity.

In 1833, the Al Maktoum family, led by Maktoum bin Butti, conquered the area easily and Sheikh Maktoum established the monarchy that rules Dubai to this day. Over the years, the Al Maktoums and the British entered into a closer and closer relationship. Dubai’s extremely favorable location as a trading port made it a desirable destination for merchants from Persia, India and even East Africa. It also hosted a very lucrative pearling industry, which further drove the local economy.

Despite previous treaties, piracy in the Persian Gulf continued to plague the British. Finally, in 1853 they signed a new “perpetual maritime truce,” promising to stay out of local politics in exchange for a reduction in piracy. Any disputes that arose among the local tribes would be referred to the British for mediation. The sheikhdoms that signed the truce, including Dubai, became known collectively as the Trucial States.

Dubai’s economy continued to flourish, and in 1892 it entered into another treaty with the British, becoming a full protectorate. Great Britain agreed to protect the small kingdom from all foreign aggression. In return, the sheikh agreed not to cede territory to any foreign entity except the United Kingdom and not to enter into a relationship with any foreign government without British consent.

By the early 1930s, however, Dubai was in trouble. The discovery of a process to make artificial pearls resulted in a gigantic plunge in the pearling industry (no pun intended). Additionally, the whole world was suffering the ravages of the Great Depression. Dubai entered a period of political instability, but the British helped prevent the undermining of the monarchy.

In 1968, the British announced their intent to leave the region within a few years. The seven emirates that made up the Trucial States, each ruled by a hereditary emir



United Arab Emirates today. The patchwork map of the northern emirates is the result of tribal allegiances to various emirs pledged in the first half of the 20th century. Each tribe was allowed to align itself with the emir of its choice.



Until the 1960's, Dubai was a sleepy fishing town and port.

who was essentially an absolute monarch, joined together to form a federation called the United Arab Emirates. In December 1971, Dubai joined with Abu Dhabi, Ajman, Fujairah, Sharjah, Umm al-Qaiwain and, a few months later, Ras al-Khaimah, to cooperate on national security, judicial matters, monetary policy and other areas of mutual benefit. Each emirate is still autonomous and largely controlled by its particular emir, whose word is law.

Culture Clash

The story of modern Dubai really begins in 1966, when oil was discovered. The black gold pumped out from under the Gulf waters infused Dubai’s economy with unprecedented wealth, ushering in a new era of prosperity. The government began investing massive amounts of money on infrastructure, setting the stage for Dubai’s entry as a major force into the global economy.

Despite all the benefits that oil brought to Dubai, its

