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An excerpt from *Berlitz Pocket Guide: Dubai*, a 30,000 word travel guide by Matt Jones, first published in 2006.

Dubai: Introduction

From the back-lot trailers of Hollywood to the changing rooms of British football's Premiership, a once unfamiliar word has entered the lexicon of the rich and famous. That word is 'Dubai'.

If you can't find the city on a map, open a newspaper or glossy magazine and the chances are you'll find it there. Dubai will be in the story about the famous footballer who has bought a house on a property development that's visible from space, or the two Hollywood stars who fuelled rumours of a romance by checking into the world's tallest hotel together.

Few people had heard of Dubai in the last decade of the 20th century. Now, even among the talk of the town, the town is the talk. In the mid-1990s, if anyone knew anything about Dubai, it was that the emirate had oil and an airport with luxury cars in the duty free. Today, however, this economically-diversified, rapidly expanding, cleverly-marketed hub for business and tourism in the Middle East has become a global destination of choice for the likes of the Beckhams, and Brad and Angelina. Bayern Munich and Chelsea come here to train – any excuse will do.

In Dubai, you can watch Tiger Woods play golf, the Williams sisters play tennis and Frankie Dettori ride home the winners – all on the same winter's day. You might even squeeze in a gig by a rock legend or contemporary chart topper. Dubai has its own international film festival and hosts the headquarters of world cricket, which moved here in 2005 after 96 years in the hallowed home of the sport, Lord's in London.

For a city that was little known when many of its longer-term expatriates began their contracts here, it all seems so, well, unlikely.

But that's Dubai. The ambitious, alluring starlet of world tourism – the world's fastest growing destination in 2002 – has worked for decades to become the overnight success everyone's now hearing about, cosmetically enhancing her skyline and her coastline to become more attractive to the jet-set, package holiday visitors and MICE delegates.

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A former hardship posting, Dubai is becoming the Monaco of the Middle East. You never know who you might see in the next car at traffic lights, or bump into in an elevator at the latest luxury hotel. The white-haired man at Arrivals who looks like Bill Clinton probably is Bill Clinton.

On The Map

Should you turn to a map instead of the gossip column, property section or sports pages of your daily newspaper, you'll find Dubai on the northern shore of the Arabian peninsula at around 25°N 55°E. Sometimes shown as 'Dibai' or 'Dubayy' on maps, a spelling that's closer phonetically to how the locals pronounce it, Dubai is the capital of the second largest of the seven emirates, or sheikhdoms, that comprise the United Arab Emirates (UAE).

Located north-east of the federal capital, Abu Dhabi, on the southern shores of the Arabian (or Persian) Gulf, Dubai faces Iran and has an eastern land border with Oman. The emirate covers 3,885 sq km (1,500 sq miles) of flat coastal plain and rolling desert dunes, with barren mountains – the foothills of the Hajar range – in the distant east, around the Dubai enclave of Hatta.

Toasting the Coast

At 72 km (45 miles), Dubai's natural coastline is relatively short. In the Jumeira district, in the south of the city, its fine, sandy beaches are packed with the luxury resort hotels that have helped establish Dubai as the Middle East's second most popular tourism destination, Egypt being the first. Further along the coast at Jebel Ali, the biggest man-made port in the world – capable of handling seven million containers from 125 shipping lines in 71 berths – has helped maintain the city's historic credentials as a strategically-located centre for trade.

With space for new crowd-pulling resorts rapidly running out, the Dubai coastline is being dramatically extended thanks to the creation of three artificial Palm-shaped islands, a man-made archipelago of smaller islands shaped like a map of the world, and a new waterfront district bordering Abu Dhabi emirate. These mind-boggling land reclamation projects, undertaken by local property developer Nakheel at the instigation of the former Crown Prince, Sheikh Mohammed Bin Rashid Al Maktoum, who succeeded his brother as ruler of the emirate in 2006, have but one aim: to enlarge the playground for the 15 million annual visitors expected in Dubai by 2010.

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Dubai's central location and expanding tourism infrastructure aren't all that's luring visitors from northern and southern hemispheres, however. A year-round holiday destination has got to offer great weather – and Dubai does. The city is blessed with 12 months of sunshine. It's true that in summer, from June to September, the mercury can hit 48°C, with high humidity on the coast, which does limit the time anyone can spend outdoors. But from October to May, Dubai's arid, sub-tropical climate is extremely pleasant, with maximum daytime temperatures ranging from 24-37°C, with low humidity and limited rainfall.

Mall Talk

Another major draw is shopping – Dubai is the proverbial paradise. All the world's major brands are represented in an ever increasing number of stylish contemporary or themed malls across the city. Mall of the Emirates on Sheikh Zayed Road, Ibn Battuta Mall in Jebel Ali, the BurJuman extension in Bur Dubai, the Italian-themed Mercato Mall in Jumeira, and the atmospheric Souk Madinat Jumeirah on the coast are recent additions to perennial favourites Deira City Centre, Wafi Mall and the chic Emirates Towers Boulevard.

Dubai Mall, which is set to cover 836,000 sq m (nine million sq ft) in the Burj Dubai development on Sheikh Zayed Road, and the similar size Mall of Arabia, in the new Dubailand attraction, will vie with each other for the title of 'world's largest mall' when they open in 2008.

Historically, Dubai was a 'City of Merchants' even before oil was discovered in the emirate in 1966. As far back as 1894, Sheikh Maktoum Bin Hasher Al Maktoum used low customs duties to entice merchants from Iran, Baluchistan and India to settle in the city. In the early years of the 20th century, Dubai grew prosperous on trade – in pearls and gold, in particular.

But the massive wealth that many associate with the modern Gulf only came to Dubai after 1969, when oil production began. Peaking at 410,000 barrels per day in 1991, oil production has been in decline ever since. In fact, experts predict that Dubai's oil reserves will run out by 2010.

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They built this city on oil, but facing a future without income from 'black gold', the ruling Maktoum family ordered a strategic shift in Dubai's economy away from its decades-old dependence on hydrocarbons to business, commerce and tourism. Key to this strategy for 21st century growth has been the creation of business free zones, such as Dubai International Financial Centre (DIFC), Dubai Internet City, Dubai Media City, Knowledge Village and Dubai Studio City. Major global players have relocated their regional offices to Dubai, pushing the number of nationalities resident in the city to 200 and the overall population to between one and two million (up from 689,420 in 1995), of which expatriates are in the majority, outnumbering Emiratis by more than eight to one. This restructuring of the economy has been so successful that by 2006, the non-oil sector contributed 94 percent of Gross Domestic Product (GDP).

Brand Dubai

Modern Dubai is a vibrant destination for leisure or business, one of a number of new 'city brands' that's compared favourably to Singapore, which it has emulated in so many ways, from shopping festival to land reclamation. Admittedly, it's undergoing some growing pains, traffic congestion among them – what was once a 15-minute cross-town journey by car can now take more than an hour – but planned improvements in public transportation, including an elevated Dubai Metro light railway, will accompany the ambitious projects that are being realised before visitors' eyes. One such project is 'the world's tallest building', the 700m (2,296ft) plus Burj Dubai, which is being constructed on Sheikh Zayed Road and is due for completion in 2008.

Dubai is the gateway to the Emirates. Notable attractions for day trips from the city include the recently established Dubai Desert Conservation Reserve, with its herds of protected oryx, and the inland oasis of Hatta. The neighbouring emirate of Sharjah, with its 'Blue Souk', heritage quarter, art galleries and aircraft museum is less than an hour's drive along the coast, while the less prosperous emirates of Ajman, Umm Al Qaiwain and Ras Al Khaimah, further north, provide a glimpse of what life in Dubai must have been like long before its name entered the lexicon of the rich and famous.

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