

The desert chameleon

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Pace maker ... Sheikh Zayed Road, Dubai.
Photo: Wayne Walton/Lonely Planet

Sean Mooney finds echoes of an older, quieter Dubai in its souks, wharves and wind towers.

We've been in town only a day or two but already we're suffering from lobby fever. After weeks in the mountains and deserts of south-eastern Arabia, you'd think some opulence and airconditioning would be just the ticket. Instead, we're keen to discover what lies beneath Dubai's shiny sun-baked crust.

Sure, we've marvelled at the big, bold and brassy in this most aspirational of cities but there's only so much gigantism one can take. The world's tallest building, the biggest shopping centre, the largest aquarium, those crazy palm-shaped man-made islands rising out of the sea - we've seen them all. We've watched children skiing down snowy indoor slopes, their parents dressed in faux fur, drinking schnapps beside heatless plasma-screen fires. We've spied families in plasticky gondolas cruising chlorinated canals. Wandered through the Daliesque 1539-room Atlantis Resort, which looks like the set for a slick casino heist movie.

Except there are no casinos in Dubai, despite its resemblance to Las Vegas. The Muslim beliefs of the Emiratis (who now comprise no more than 10 per cent of the city's population of about 1.8 million) mean that gambling is illegal, though that doesn't extend to horse racing.

Horses are the great passion of Dubai's ruler, Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, who is the founder of the famous racing stable Godolphin (with two horses in last week's Melbourne Cup).

Despite the fact that Islam is the official state religion of the United Arab Emirates, its most populous city is awash with booze - not to mention well stocked with prostitutes. You can even order a decent pork-based meal in many hotels. Thus does the globalised, monetised and, some would say, compromised nature of Dubai manifest itself. Put simply, if you have the cash (or credit), anything goes in the Middle East's most chameleonic city.

We leave the resort, only to have a wall of hot desert air throw us back against the glass doors sliding shut behind us. In our haste, we forget one of the golden rules of the wallet-aware traveller: don't catch a cab outside your hotel. Ever. The gleaming minivan that glides up to the kerb is a cut above the city's taxi fleet of orange-and-white sedans, a fact that should have immediately triggered an alarm. Before we're out of the driveway I ask the driver where the meter is. "Under the seat," he assures me with a share trader's smile. "Only it's turned off today. Where do you want to go, boss?"

"Somewhere real," I say, "like the old part of town." "Sixty dirhams (\$16), flat fee," the driver replies. "Sixty?" I shriek. "Should be more like 16 from here!" "Fifty," he shoots back without missing a beat. Nope, stop the cab. We're getting one with a meter. "But sir, ask anyone at the hotel, they'll tell you." I bet they will, I think, and we jump into the heat haze, barking with laughter at our own stupidity like mad dogs in the midday sun.

We soon flag down a run-of-the-mill cab on the shoulder of a busy flyover. "Take us somewhere beautiful," I beg the driver. "Ah, pretty girls," he says. "Dirty or clean?" Um, neither thanks. More like somewhere in the city with a bit of history, like the old town.

"Hmm, then you'll want Sheikh Zayed Road," he whispers. "Some of the buildings there were built 30 years ago!"

And there you have it. Dubai in a nutshell. If the cabbies had their way, the main drag of this desert metropolis - once called Defence Road, now officially known as the E11 - would be World Heritage listed. It's where the modern Dubai miracle began and if you look back at shots of the highway taken in the past few decades you'll appreciate the speed of the city's rise from regional backwater to world playground.

We follow the road for a while, marvelling at the glass-and-steel phalluses that have sprung up. We watch a driverless train glide along the first operational line of the city's new rail system. When it's completed next year, Dubai Metro will replace the Vancouver SkyTrain as, you guessed it, the world's longest fully automated rail network.

Some further discussion and 12 dirhams later we're dropped in Deira, one of the older neighbourhoods on the eastern side of Khor Dubai, the creek that snakes its way through the city's sands. As we step out of the cab, we're greeted by the sound of the mid-afternoon call to Asr prayer and that fishy, oily, teaky smell that always seems to hang around working waterways. Now this is more like it.

To reach the water's edge we must navigate a maze of bundles, boxes, packages and piles waiting to be loaded on to the hundreds of wooden trading ships, or dhows, moored three abreast along the creek's chaotic right bank. Clothes, food, water tanks, televisions the size of small fridges, chrome-covered hero-brand bicycles ("export quality") are stacked high waiting to be shipped to other Gulf ports and beyond.



Much of the cargo they have brought to Dubai will be sold in the nearby electronics, gold, perfume and spice souks. As we walk along the creek, seamen from many countries recline, eat, talk, work and sleep on the cluttered decks of these ocean-going semi-trailers.

Often stripped down to grease-stained dhotis, these leather-tough men move around oily generators, walls of cooking pots, gas tanks and bundles of fishing nets. A wiry Iranian is squatting under a rope draped with drying rags. He's cooking over an open flame and, upon seeing us, waves a fish fillet in the air, gives us a cryptic smile, then returns to his task. Other men yell greetings or simply laugh as we pass by.

There's an especially subcontinental feel to this part of the city, with the streets, shops and cafes filled with Indians, Pakistanis and Bangladeshis. Collectively, they comprise an estimated 70 per cent of the city's population. Their sweat has fallen on every work site in town; they have built this city from the ground up. Indeed, we feel like we're crossing a river somewhere in south Asia when we board one of the 150 or so open-air wooden ferries, or abras, for the trip to Bur Dubai Station.

By avoiding the airconditioned "water bus" that we're told "businessmen and nice ladies" prefer to use, we get to the other side of the creek for a quarter of the price. Abra passengers sit on either side of the driver, who often negotiates the busy waterway with one bare foot on the steering wheel, a mouth full of paan and his eyes on the horizon. I follow our pilot's gaze to the reflection of the setting sun in the glass of some waterfront skyscrapers. Turning in the opposite direction, I mistake the funnels of a cruise ship docked near the mouth of the creek for more mega-towers, until one of them sends up a great plume of black smoke.

We end up outside the Bur Dubai textile souk, which is heaving on a Friday evening (Dubai's weekend is Friday and Saturday). Again, you could be in Mumbai or Kolkata and there are all the hawkers, hagglers and hasslers you'd expect in a decent souk. We stop for a freshly squeezed juice in a slightly claustrophobic laneway, then happen upon a long queue, which we initially think might be for a movie house until we notice that everyone has bare feet. We realise that this must be the Shri Nathje Jayate Temple, the city's only Hindu-cum-Sikh house of worship.

A waterside stroll on this side of the creek proves quite a different experience to one on the crowded dhow wharves of Deira. We pass the traditional facades of restored buildings, with their decorative panels and wooden windows. An atmospheric eatery known as Baytal Wakeel beckons with its wooden balcony extending over the creek. A grand building surrounded by wrought-iron gates turns out to be the Royal Court, or Diwan, and next to it is the city's Grand Mosque.

Turning south, away from the creek, we enter the historic Bastakiya quarter. With our desire for atmosphere and excitement sated by the creek, we hope the area's labyrinthine lanes lined by traditional courtyard houses will give us an insight into Dubai's past. Bastakiya was established at the end of the 19th century by wealthy traders from Bastak, Iran, who brought with them the wind towers that still cool many of the restored buildings. It is, in fact, the last wind-tower quarter left standing on the Arab side of the Gulf.

The remaining fragments of the old gypsum and coral city wall in this quarter are more than 200 years old.

The "heritage village" vibe of this area will not be to everyone's taste, with its over-renovated guest houses, galleries and cafes ("now proudly brewing Starbucks Coffee") but we're pleased to find a part of Dubai that acknowledges its debt to the past. Nearby Dubai Museum also does a fine job of that. Situated in the city's oldest building, Al Fahidi Fort (built in 1787 of sea rocks, palm tree trunks, clay and manure), it's an excellent museum that gives a comprehensive and entertaining overview of the past five millennia of human habitation of the region.

Our most authentic encounter with history comes unexpectedly. Peering into an open courtyard, I come face-to-face with an Emirati man who introduces himself as Masood Rashid Al-Suwaidi. He's keeping an eye on the Ayal Nasir Society for Arts Traditional Heritage, an unassuming series of rooms in which old furniture and faded pictures vie for space with Emirati artefacts such as exquisite antique drums. We ask him if there are plans to preserve and display this historical treasure trove. He smiles as though he's been asked this question a thousand times and then hands me his card.

"If you know of any businessman willing to invest in the history of Dubai, please ask him to contact me." In a wealthy city fixated on the future, it seems there's not a lot of money trickling back to the past.

Sean Mooney travelled courtesy of Emirates Airline.