

Dubai

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Feb. 1-4, 2013

Dubai is a fascinating destination. The country is part of the United Arab Emirates—there are seven different emirates which have banded together. The largest of these are Abu Dhabi, the capital, and Dubai. Abu Dhabi has more oil resources while the economy of Dubai is based more on business and tourism.

Dubai is a country of “est”. They have the largest shopping mall in the world (complete with an indoor ski slope!), and the Burj Khalifa which is the tallest building in the world (I went to the top in the fastest elevator in the world – it took 30 seconds to climb 125 floors to an observation tower). Everything seems over-the-top. Hotels are opulent, and construction seems to be going on everywhere. I stayed at the Atlantis Hotel, located at the top end of Palm Island, a man-made series of sand islands that jut out into the gulf and from the air look like a palm tree. Even the public transportation is luxurious—the metro line has first and second class cars; the first class cars have leather seats, and each train has a separate car designated for women and children only. There are special pink taxis with women drivers, also designated for women and children.

The population of the emirate is now 75% expatriate—local citizens represent only 25% of the population. Most of the people are workers who come from India and the Philippines, with some Europeans and Americans who work for foreign companies. The locals have some extraordinary benefits— free housing (and it looks very nice), free education (even at foreign schools), and no income tax. No wonder they love Sheik Mohammed, the hereditary ruler.

While the resort hotels accept Western-style dress, much of the country is still somewhat conservative. Men wear traditional white robes, and women wear black burkas which are basically robes covering street clothing when out in public. Inside the shopping malls are uniformed women who patrol the corridors, passing out dress code requests for women whose skirts or sleeves are deemed too short.

Dubai is on the edge of the desert, and while there I was able to go 4-wheeling in the desert dunes, a popular pastime for tourists and a good contrast to the city and beaches.

The service on Emirates Airlines was excellent, and they have an extensive route system connecting their Seattle gateway with the Middle East, Asia and Africa. They also have some good stopover packages—with a 3 or 4 night stay en route to another destination, you can experience much of what Dubai has to offer.