

Dubai is on the rise again. And this time it's promising boutique hotels and art galleries among the glitz and skyscrapers. But will it seduce travel snob **Amanda Hyde**?

PHOTOGRAPHS BY **MARCUS WILSON SMITH**

I arrive in Dubai in a storm. Wind whips the sand into a whirling frenzy so that the emirate's towers climb from the clouds like a lost city, a dream. A rising sun hits mirrored glass, and vermillion ribbons of cloud flutter from the skyline. I've heard the place called many things, but pretty isn't one of them. Still, at 7am on a January morning, this neon-infused new dawn looks like something you could only see through rose-tinted spectacles.

That strange, futuristic kind of beauty – mixed with copious amounts of winter sunshine, of course – goes some way to explaining the British love affair with Dubai. More than one million of us visit every year, outspending other nationalities by two to one. Until recently, though, I wasn't planning to become part of that statistic. Everything I knew about Dubai – from the malls full of flash designer labels to the gigantic gilded hotels – put me off. To spell it out, I was snobby about the place. Why bother with somewhere where the beaches were fake, the museums were non-existent and the dress code was *Footballers' Wives*? Then my friend Lynn moved there. Out of the two of us, she is generally the snobbier, but two years on, she was coming round to the place: 'Come and visit,' she told me over the phone. 'You'll be surprised. Dubai is changing and you might quite like it.'

She sent me snippets of news reports about the emirate's financial crash, she highlighted buried quotes about its aims to attract a different type of tourist. And then she found the straw that broke the camel's back: a beautiful new 90-room hotel among the 1,000-room mega-resorts, decked out in tawny greys and cool aqua – and barely gilded at all.

'Alright, you win,' I emailed her. Then, secretly thrilled at the idea of winter sunshine, I booked a long weekend.

The hotel Lynn had suggested, One & Only The Palm, sits at the end of Palm Jumeirah island – a man-made landmass shaped like a date tree surrounded by the crescent-moon symbol of Islam (which also conveniently acts as a breakwater). When the island was finished in 2006, it was set to become the Next Big Thing, with 15 resorts spread along its trunk and crescent, its fronds home to swanky, low-level housing complexes. But it was completed just as the economic crash hit. The world watched on TV as hundreds of ex-pats left their cars at the airport, their lives at the check-in desk. Palm Jumeirah lay abandoned; until last year, only one hotel, the Atlantis Resort, had set up home on the shipped-in white sand. Even now, you can't miss its salmon-pink towers on a largely low-level horizon.

Four years, however, is a lifetime in Dubai. Building has resumed on the island, and scores of concrete skeletons edge the highway. Crowds of workers stand outside them, their faces >

All-time high:
the world's tallest
building, Burj Khalifa,
dwarfs the city's
other skyscrapers





Monday morning blues: commuters descend to Dubai's new – and very space-age – metro at Khalid Bin Al Waleed station

wrapped with scarves to protect them from dust and heat. Driving from the airport, I worry that Lynn's tricked me, and I've booked a holiday on a building site. But as the taxi wends its way to the far western tip of the island, things start to look up. A promenade stretches along one side of the road, busy with joggers admiring the view to the Arabian Sea. Opposite them, a row of nearly-there hotels gleam brand new in the sunshine, and straight ahead, Dubai's jagged skyline is in full view over the water.

'Too far,' says my driver impatiently, as we finally pull up at the entrance to the One & Only. But for me, it's perfect: a Babylonian sprawl of palm trees, pools and Moorish villas, regarding the mainland with detached superiority (though it's only five minutes away by free boat transfer).

Lynn has to work, so I spend the afternoon splashing about in my private pool, watching businessmen bark orders into their phones from sunloungers on the beach (the sand is shipped in, but the sunshine is agreeably real). Then, as the sky fades to indigo, I stroll along the coastline, counting the lights as they go on in the tower blocks across the water. I'm heading to dinner at Jumeirah Zabeel Saray, a hotel that opened with a big fanfare just before I arrived. After 15 minutes, I'm face to face with a humongus, domed and arched wonder: if big is beautiful, then this place is a vision. Still, tucking into a cheeseburger under the outsized chandeliers of its Imperium restaurant, I'm underwhelmed. I'd been expecting more of the 'new and improved' emirate but this place is proof that the glitz won't go all at once. I'm glad to wander home along the sand afterwards.

It's only later in my trip that I start to appreciate how walkable Palm Jumeirah island is. By contrast, much of the mainland is a computer-game landscape of fast-running traffic jams, in which cars sluice left and right without signals or adequate space. On one disastrous mission, I attempt to wander the two kilometres from my boat transfer drop-off to the buzzy, restaurant-strewn Walk at JBR. Before I know it, I'm accosted.

'You from the One & Only?' asks a security guard, as he bars my way along the beach.

I nod.

'Turn back then – you can't get anywhere from here. This is The Westin.'

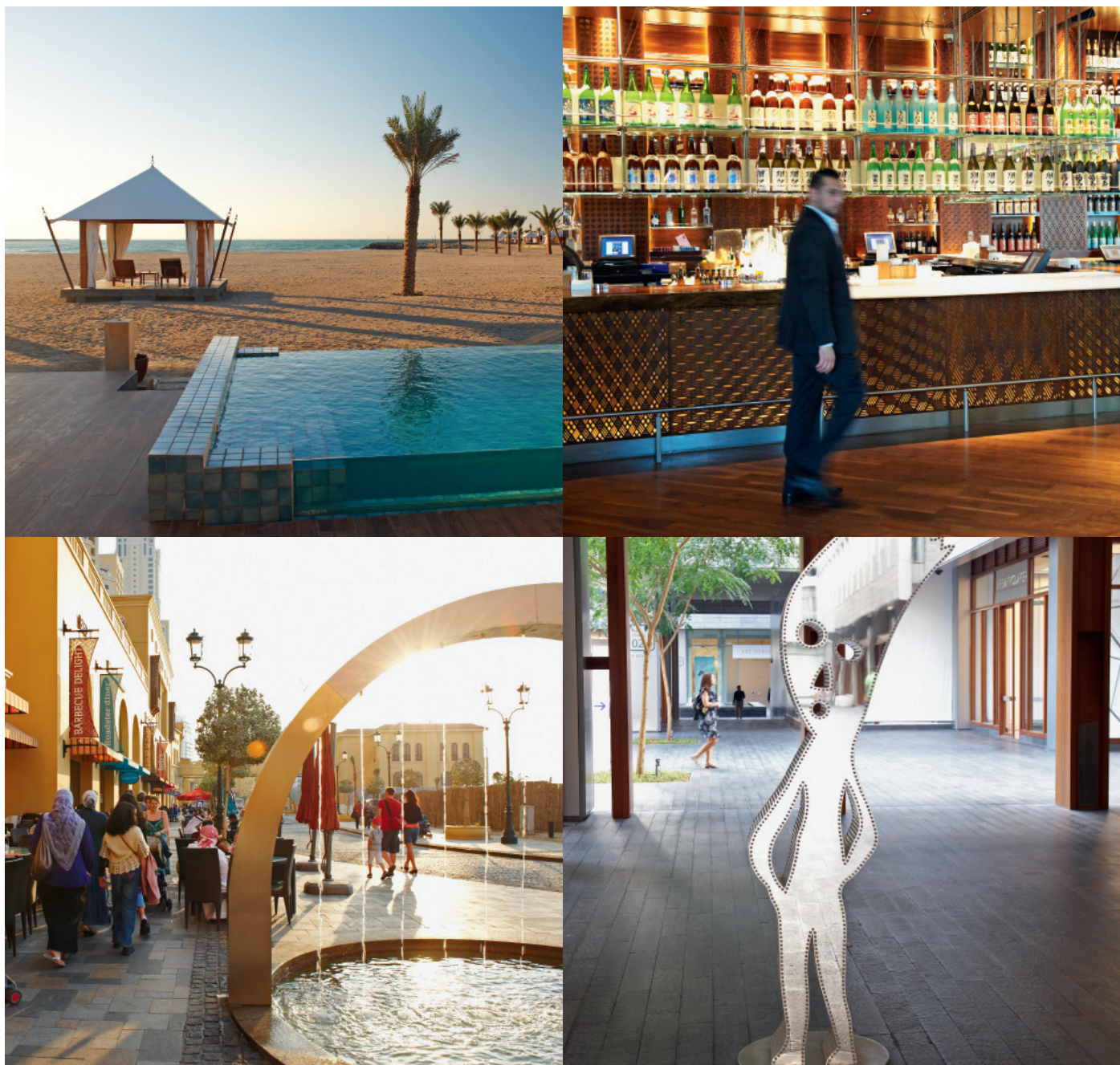
'I can walk from here,' I reply, showing him my map with its pedestrian routes picked out in yellow. He shrugs helplessly and lets me go.

I initially put his reaction down to over-zealous guarding of the hotel grounds, but minutes later, attempting to cross several lines of traffic from a sidewalk that's little more than a pile of rubble, I realise he was trying to do me a favour. Car horns sound a concerto of amused beeps, as I battle to make sense of a map that was outdated almost the moment it was printed (the continuous building makes it impossible to rely on guidebooks, or even GPS systems). Pedestrianism is so unusual here that when I finally find a landmark – Dubai Marina – a friendly bellboy stops me to ask worriedly if I'm OK.

My detour works out well in the end though – the marina is so lovely that I stay for a drink. I hadn't planned to visit, remembering this area from three-year-old news reports about the sliding economy. At that time, the skyscrapers looked like half-unwrapped chocolate bars, their mirrored windows coming to an abrupt halt midway up. Now, the buildings are finished and the harbour is busy with super-yachts. Its coffee shops have a continental air, populated by MacBook-toting freelancers and mums in sunglasses. This is more like it, I think.

Just as I settle, latte in hand, on a seat by the water, the call to prayer sounds out between the towers. In the restaurant next door, huddles of men suck contentedly on sheesha, their faces turned to a ➤





Sunset strip: clockwise from top left, the last rays of sun light the sand at Banyan Tree Al Wadi's Beach Club; a whole lotta bottles in the bar at Zuma restaurant; modern art in DIFC, the financial district, home to several art galleries; walking The Walk at JBR

weak winter sun. Stuck-up traveller that I am, I feel a thrill of excitement. I'd expected Dubai to be homogenised and uniformly Western, and though it's hardly *Lost In Translation*-land, it's much more foreign than I imagined. There are times on my trip when I realise with a jolt just how far from home I've travelled. It's not malls and resorts I will remember, but lines of men collapsing towards a setting sun as they bend to pray on Palm Jumeirah's promenade, or being taught the words to a Syrian pop track by a taxi driver as a warm breeze floods through the car's windows.

Abandoning any more ill-fated walking expeditions, I finally make it to The Walk at JBR the following day – by cab. I find the retail equivalent of a United Nations summit. Finished last year, and bordering a custard stretch of sand that's the best beach in the city, it has Asian art galleries, Islamic banks and British and American chain stores. Keen to stop for lunch, I'm bewildered by the choice of restaurants – sushi, Chinese, Lebanese, Italian, Mexican, Indian... Even fish and chips. Spinning around between pseudo-Victorian lampposts and pseudo-Greek columns, I'm appraised by groups of coiffured yummy-mummies and yacht crews in pristine white

Bermuda shorts. I decide I'm far too self-conscious to dine alone here and, anyway, this was exactly the kind of well-meaning ersatz I'd planned to avoid. If you're going to do fake, you may as well go the whole hog, I think. And with that, I jump in a taxi to Atlantis.

You might remember this hotel from its opening celebrations two years ago, when Kylie Minogue and Lindsay Lohan were shipped in to watch a million fireworks explode above its turrets (nobody does OTT like this 1,500-room wonder with its 'lost city' theme). Despite the fact that two years is practically ancient here, the guests keep coming, and day visitors stream in for the aquarium and waterpark. Being both gigantic *and* gilded, Atlantis isn't really my thing, but it's just opened a posh spa to attract snobs like me. I'm going out to dinner with Lynn, and after seeing the groomed ladies at The Walk, I'm resorting to a treatment to keep up with the local talent.

I navigate a kid-filled, glittering lobby and enter the spa, seemingly a set from *Raiders of the Lost Ark*. Pampering palaces are springing up all over Dubai, and Atlantis has had to go some way to mark itself out from the competition. In the tunnels to the treatment rooms, walkways float above fountain-strewn pools, >

Pay-per-view: right, tourists in the observation deck on the 124th floor of Burj Khalifa, and below, the dizzying view they've paid £70 a piece to see. Opposite, the view from the appropriately named Palm Promenade; specs appeal in Dubai Mall

torches blaze from the walls, and gigantic stone ammonites adorn the ceilings. Thanks to its impressively themed interior, this place is big on hen parties (when the richest of Dubai's ex-pats have been known to hire it out in its entirety for treatments of up to four hours each). I opt for a 150-minute 'face and body experience', in which therapist Johanna buffs and polishes me until I gleam. 'You look a million times better now,' she says when it's all over and she's ushering me out of the door. Perhaps I should have visited before I braved the appraising eyes of The Walk's grooming police.

Still, I'm a new me when I meet Lynn, who's waiting by the Gate Village, the cluster of galleries and restaurants in Dubai's financial district (DIFC). 'You remember when I moved two years ago, and I told you there was nothing here but office blocks? There were a couple of galleries before, but now the whole scene's exploded,' she says as she shows me round the area's spotless squares, expensive Middle Eastern paintings shining out from polished windows. It's how Canary Wharf would look if the bankers moved out and the Tate Modern moved in.

I haven't seen Lynn since she moved here, so we catch up over dinner at Zuma, the posh sushi restaurant (there are branches in London and Miami, too) that's helped put the Gate Village on the map. Around us, suited groups of men get louder with every round of *sake*, watched inquisitively by a scattering of women with big caramel hair and small designer dresses.

'Men still outnumber women seven to one in DIFC,' says Lynn. 'So some of my girlfriends have started coming here on their evenings out to see what's on offer.'

It seems only right that in one of the most consumer-focused places on earth you can shop for a man like you'd shop for a jacket. There's one square metre of store for every person here, but it's not *all* about the retail therapy, thank goodness – at Dubai Mall, the world's biggest, friends meet up to gossip at the many cafes that edge its perimeter and overlook its highlighter-blue fake lake. There are plenty of new attractions here, too – all of which come with superlatives (the aquarium has the 'world's largest viewing panel'; when the lights go on during the fountain show, it's the 'brightest spot in the Middle East').

There's also the 'world's tallest building', attached to the mall and opened to the public last year. The spiky tower of Burj Khalifa soars to 828m, and resembles a syringe injecting a sickly, smoggy sky. It's impossible to get a perspective on it, since you have to crick your neck to a full 90° to even see the top. Travelling to the observation deck (36 levels below the building's highest point) takes a whole minute (in an 'elevator with the longest travel distance in the world', of course).

There's only a short queue for tickets when I arrive, although I suspect the crowd of people massing outside the lift for the Armani Hotel, on level 39, are hoping to avoid the extortionate £70 entrance fee to do it properly. Either that or they're curious about Dubai's first designer hotel, which opened a year ago in a flurry of very un-Dubai, understated beige. Versace, Elie Saab and even Victoria Beckham are rumoured to be jumping on the bandwagon soon, too, opening up their own fashion hotels here. (Personally, I can't think of anything worse than staying in a place where you >



Here it seems only right that girls can shop for



a new man like they would shop for a jacket



Water features: clockwise from top left, motorboats and mega-yachts in Dubai marina; the belly of the beast in the shark tank of Dubai Mall's aquarium; you really can compare the meerkats at this stall on The Walk at JBR; the glittering lobby at One & Only The Palm

have to glam-up for breakfast.) Aware that I'd feel intimidated just popping my head into the lobby, I stick with my original plan and squeeze into an elevator full of local families, middle-aged tourists and skiving businessmen, ready for our ascent. As the floors fall away, the cabin's fake starry ceiling accentuates just how close we're getting to the heavens (and I learn that you can do the trip for a much more reasonable £16 if you book 48 hours in advance).

Eventually, we tumble out onto floor 124 and head to an open-air viewing platform ringed with glass walls. Kids and photographers form a circle around its edges, but there's a line of pale adults a metre away, too frightened to go nearer. With the £70 entrance fee firmly in mind, I'm determined to see everything, and tiptoe towards the glass. The city unravels beneath me, dissolving to sand much more quickly than you imagine it to from the ground, where the towers seem to go on forever. There's also a spectrum of blue from pools and fountains scattered between the skyscrapers, and finally the briny, green-grey of the sea beyond. It's fascinating – a reminder of how quickly this sheikhdom has grown from nothingness.

It leaves me excited about a treat I've planned for the final night of my trip. Worried that my ideas about the city would prove founded, I'd opted for a two-centre break and would be heading off to a new resort that comes Lynn-recommended: a Banyan Tree in fellow emirate Ra's al Khaymah.

On the road the following afternoon, the city soon melts to an unending series of sandy undulations speckled with scrub. The traffic falls away, too, until it's just us and a steady procession of trucks. By the time we reach Banyan Tree Al Wadi, I'm trapped in a cycle of fragmented snoozes and head-nodding awakenings. When I meet my first fellow guests, I wonder if I'm still dreaming – Yahoo and Google are Arabian owls, hand-reared by the hotel's staff. I've arrived during feeding time, and I watch as they savour a gourmet white-mouse dinner.

Banyan Tree's desert camp is all about reconnecting with nature after a dose of Dubai's man-made world. Guests can learn falconry here, or ride through endless sand dunes on the hotel's horses. But I'm tired after all my plodding about – instead, in true snob style, I'm after the private sands of its beach club, >



Market force: shoppers through Dubai Mall, the world's largest, with 1,200 stores to drink up your dirhams

20 minutes down the road. I'll share its peninsula with just 12 other, equally snobby, tent dwellers.

Settled on my terrace, I tuck in to my own gourmet supper. Between courses of tortilla soup and wagyu beef, I run and dip my feet in the sea, aware I'm returning to a wintry UK tomorrow. It's very pleasant, but it's not the escape I'd hoped for: Ra's al Khaymah has noted its neighbour's success and now the coastline is sprouting ugly, copycat resorts. I'm surrounded by half-finished buildings – I suppose this is what Dubai looked like a few years back.

Now, it's finding its feet *and* a personality. Plenty of fakery remains, as proved by my spa questionnaire: 'Have you had plastic surgery in the last week?'. But the galleries, boutique hotels and alfresco cafes have diluted the glitz with a touch of sophistication. Snobs beware: like me, you might actually like Dubai. ■

New to Dubai and coming soon

Hotels

Built with business guests in mind, the new **Ritz-Carlton DIFC** (00 971 4372 2222, www.ritzcarlton.com) is a great city base for tourists too, with huge, light rooms, a 24-hour restaurant and exemplary service. On Palm Jumeirah, the finishing touches are being put on a wedding cake-pretty **Kempinski** (pictured below; see www.kempinski.com).

atmosphereburjkhalifa.com). Or there's the UAE's outpost of **The Ivy**, opening imminently at the Emirates Towers hotel (00 971 4319 8088, www.jumeirah.com). And kids will love the **Hard Rock Café**, coming soon to Dubai Festival City shopping mall (see www.hardrock.com).

Attractions

Spiderman and the Incredible Hulk come to Dubai in a **Marvel theme park**, scheduled for later in 2011 (no details as yet). More cultured visitors will soon be able to check in to the **Museum of Middle East Modern Art** (literally, as 60 hotel rooms are planned); it's scheduled to open this year.

Restaurants

If you have the stomach for it, you can now eat one floor down from the viewing platform at Burj Khalifa, in the new **At.Mosphere** restaurant, 'the world's highest' (00 971 4888 3828, www.atmosphereburjkhalifa.com).



Get me there

GO INDEPENDENT

Emirates (0844 800 2777, www.emirates.com) has direct flights to Dubai from London, Manchester, Birmingham, Newcastle and Glasgow, from £420 return; **Virgin Atlantic** (0844 874 7747, www.virgin-atlantic.com) flies direct from London and Manchester, from £420; and **BA** (0844 493 0758, www.ba.com) flies direct from Heathrow from around £370.

WHERE TO STAY

One & Only The Palm (00 971 4440 1010, thepalm.oneandonlyresorts.com) has doubles from £300, room only. For a bargain stay, check in to **Byblos** (00 971 4448 8000, www.bybloshoteldubai.com), a little hotel in the city centre, which has a swimming pool and spa, and

rooms from £70, room only. **The Banyan Tree Al Wadi** (00 971 7206 7777, www.banyantree.com) has tents from £550, room only. Shniqi spa at **Atlantis** (00 971 4426 2000, www.atlantisthepalm.com/spa.aspx) has treatments from £50.

GO PACKAGED

Western & Oriental (0845 277 3310, www.wandotravel.com) can tailor-make a trip to Dubai combining three nights at One & Only The Palm with two at Banyan Tree Al Wadi, from £1,075pp, room only, including flights from Heathrow. Or try **Virgin Holidays** (0844 557 3865, www.virginholidays.co.uk), **First Choice** (0871 200 7799, www.firstchoice.co.uk) or **Carrier** (0161 491 7670, www.carrier.co.uk).



MAP: SCOTT JESSOP

