



**ARCHITECTURAL
OPULENCE:** The
clubhouse at Dubai
Creek Golf Club (this
page); the Burj Al
Arab hotel (opposite),
with the Madinat
Jumeirah resort in
the foreground. The
hotel stands more than
1,000 feet from the
ground to the tip of its
mast-like spire.



OVER THE TOP

A GOLFER'S JOURNEY TO THE STRANGE
OTHERWORLDLY LAND OF DUBAI

BY DAVID OWEN

PHOTOGRAPHS BY PRESTON SCHLEBUSCH

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HECKING IN TO the Burj Al Arab, Dubai's iconic "seven-star" hotel, which looks like an enormous sailboat about to ground itself at the edge of the Persian Gulf, just about did me in. Two porters took my suitcase and my golf bag and disappeared, and then I couldn't find the registration desk. Because there is no registration desk, I learned eventually. A young man led me to a sitting area and asked if I wanted tea, then took my passport and disappeared. Two other young men arrived. They led me up a soaring escalator, past a computer-controlled, illuminated water fountain (which periodically erupts 100 feet into the air, or roughly a sixth of the way to the peak of the lobby's ceiling) and into an elevator.

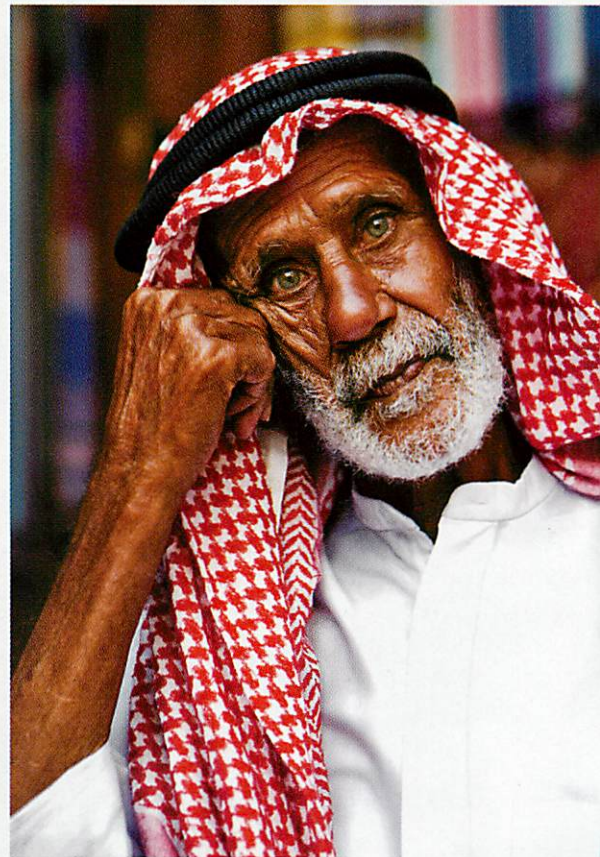
The Burj is the tallest hotel in the world, more than 1,000 feet from the ground to the tip of its mast-like spire. My room was on the 20th floor, which is the equivalent of the 40th or 50th floor in a conventional high-rise because all 202 guest rooms are duplex suites, with curving marble staircases. My suite, at roughly 1,800 square feet, was one of the smallest; the largest one, the Royal Suite, has a movie theater and a private elevator, and is almost five times the size.

Smiling attendants awaited me at my door: a young man bearing icy towels for the back of my neck; a young woman with a plate of dates; a waiter holding two frothy fruit beverages in slender glasses; my butler, whose name was Raj; and several others, perhaps 100 others. Someone took my credit card. Would I like anything laundered, dry-cleaned or ironed? The toiletries in my bathroom were by Hermès, and they were so numerous and enormous (the shaving kit must have weighed a pound) that if I'd wanted to pilfer them I'd have needed an additional piece of luggage—which was also supplied, compliments of the hotel, in a drawer in my dressing room. Would I care to select different bedding (from the 12-page "pillow menu" on my bedside table) for my sheik-size bed? The view from the floor-to-ceiling windows on both floors felt like the view from an airplane, or the space shuttle: I looked down, through heavy mist, toward the World, a Mercator-inspired arrangement of artificial islands, under construction. The Burj stands more than 1,000 feet from shore, on its own tiny island, partly to discourage sightseers (who aren't allowed to cross the guarded causeway) and partly, I was told, to keep the building from casting shadows on sunbathers.

Distributing gratuities to my army of attendants was exhausting. How do rich people manage it? The first assignment I gave to Raj—even before I asked him to show me the 18th-floor spa and health club (which has a vanishing-edge swimming pool that seems to blend into the gulf), the Al Muntaha restaurant (which protrudes from the 27th floor and serves custom-made cocktails at \$20-40 apiece), or the roof-top helipad (from which Tiger Woods once hit golf balls)—was to take me to the ATM in the upper lobby, so that

GOLF IN THE KINGDOM (from top to bottom): A golfer putts on one of Dubai Country Club's oil and sand "browns"; the entrance to the Montgomerie Dubai; the gardens of Souk Madinat Jumeirah, a major shopping center.





LAS VEGAS OF THE MIDEAST: The lobby of the Burj Al Arab (large photo), where all 202 guest rooms are duplex suites; an aerial view of Sheikh Zayed Road, a highway in southern Dubai. Locals nicknamed it "refrigerator row" because the positioning of skyscrapers resembles a line of appliances; a local man at a market.



OASIS OF GREEN:
An aerial view of Dubai
Creek Golf Club,
the course closest
to the heart of the city.



I could refill my pockets with cash. As we set out, my concierge (each floor has its own) asked me to sign a credit-card slip, which he had filled in for 5,000 dirhams—about \$1,400. He explained that the one-night rate for my room was “3,600 dirhams, plus-plus-plus,” and that five grand ought to hold me till morning.

BEFORE VISITING DUBAI, I hadn’t really known what or where it was. Now I can tell you that it’s both a city and a state, and that it’s on the southeastern spur of the Arabian Peninsula, east of southern Saudi Arabia and northwest of Oman. A nonstop flight from New York City lasts almost 13 hours and crosses Iran. (The route map shown on cabin video screens during the flight looks like a graphic from a CNN story about trouble in the Middle East.) Dubai is the second-largest, in terms of land area, of the seven semi-independent hereditary sheikdoms that constitute the United Arab Emirates; the largest of those sheikdoms is Abu Dhabi, whose central city is separated from Dubai’s by 90 or so miles of blowing sand. The actor Will Smith recently played 18 holes in Dubai in the morning, grabbed a helicopter on the roof of the Burj, and played 18 holes in Abu Dhabi in the afternoon.

Oil was discovered in Dubai in the 1960s but contributes only a small percentage of the emirate’s income; the economy’s main elements are a mix of no-questions-asked international commercial activities, frenetic real-estate development and tourism. Dubai’s visitors come from northern Europe (“Our golf season begins when Scandinavia’s ends,” I was told), the United Kingdom, other Arab countries and Asia, among other places. This past June, my wife’s brother, who lives in Moscow, took his (Russian) wife and their two young

children to Dubai for a two-week vacation. "It's sort of the latest place for Russians to go, after Turkey, Thailand, Greece, etc.," he told me, by e-mail, from his beachfront hotel. "It has a little more cachet than those other places, but our hotel is still less than \$200 a night. We came here because we wanted the kids to be able to swim a ton, and in places like Greece and Cyprus the water is still relatively cold. Here, it's like swimming in your bathtub." At Wild Wadi Water Park, just over the causeway from the Burj, the water is chilled, to keep swimmers from feeling poached.

DUBAI IS GROWING so fast that no one knows what its population is. I heard a million, I heard two million, I heard whatever. The number of "nationals," or native Emiratis, is no more than 200,000 or so, a small minority. At least half the people in the country are laborers and low-level service workers from India and Pakistan, who toil long hours in brutal conditions for low wages, live 10 to a room in company-owned "labour camps," and must leave the country when they can no longer work. Construction continues all night, under lights, and is seemingly going on everywhere, all the time, all at once. The most ambitious current project is the Burj Dubai, which is intended to be the tallest building in the world. ("Burj" is Arabic for "tower.") It will be almost a half-mile tall, more than twice the height of the Empire State Building, and it will be the centerpiece of a vast commercial and residential development, called Burj Dubai Downtown, which will include many dozens of lesser high-rises, an artificial lake and the world's largest shopping mall.

Change in Dubai occurs so rapidly that it can't be charted on an ordinary time scale. When I played a round on the Majlis Course, at Emirates Golf Club—home of the Dubai Desert Classic, which Tiger Woods won in early 2006—my foursome included Maurice Perry, who is the director of development design for Jumeirah, a worldwide builder and operator of luxury hotels, among them the Burj Al Arab. He was born in Australia in 1945 and has lived all over the Far East. ("Have you played golf in the Philippines? You must!") He has a trim salt-and-pepper beard and a golf swing that you would offer your house as collateral for, if he would agree to lend it to you for your member-guest. Perry was wearing a golf shirt with the eagle-and-lion logo of the Singapore Island Country Club, to which he once belonged. I asked him where he was living now.

"Here in Dubai," he said.

"And how long have you lived here?"

"Six weeks."

Perry's apartment is in a three-year-old building in a densely developed section of a man-made waterfront, called Dubai Marina, which will eventually contain more than 200 high-rises; it was desert at the turn of the millennium. I met British expatriates in Dubai who talked about the early 1990s as though they were a vanished golden age, when everyone knew everyone and

NEW MEETS OLD
(clockwise from top left): Water taxis take locals from Deira to Al Karama, a residential district; the Jumeirah Mosque at dusk; tapas at the Al Muntaha restaurant in the Burj Al Arab hotel; the camel is the desert's traditional means of travel; Boudoir restaurant at the Dubai Marine Beach Resort; the Palm Jumeirah, a man-made resort and residential island rising out of the Arabian Gulf, took five years to create.



DUBAI IS GROWING SO FAST THAT NO ONE KNOWS



SKI DUBAI IS A LOT LIKE THE REST OF DUBAI: AFTER YOU'VE GOTTEN PAST THE NOVELTY YOU C

hung around in the same restaurants after work. Occasionally, I met someone who had been in Dubai longer, all the way back to the 1980s or 1970s, when the emirate was just a bump in the desert known for its pearl diving. Meeting someone like that was like running into a New Yorker in Central Park who could remember when Manhattan was bought from the Indians.

Dubai's first golf course was built in 1971. It's part of Dubai Country Club, which was founded as a social refuge for expatriates (then mainly British) living and working in Dubai. The course is entirely sand. "Fairway" is distinguished from "rough" by rows of painted wooden stakes: If your ball lands inside the stakes, you get to place it on an LP-size circle of artificial turf, which you carry with you, and if it lands outside the stakes you play it as it lies. The putting areas are called "browns" and are made of oil-hardened sand with a thin layer of fine sand spread on top. After holing out, you drag a push broom behind you in circles around the flag, to remove your footprints (and, occasionally, the helical track of a passing snake).

I played 18 holes with a member, a 50-something French-

Lebanese named Fadel, who told me that he had lived in Dubai for two years and that he was in the business of importing rough-cut diamonds from Africa. Playing golf on sand is very, very hot, and we drank water at every opportunity. Between shots, Fadel practiced his English on me, and I practiced my French on him: *Je bois, et je bois, et je bois, mais je ne pisse jamais* ("I drink and I drink and I drink but I never piss"). When we had finished, I returned my turf disk to the head pro, an Australian, and joined Fadel in the bar, which, like much of the rest of the club, looks appealingly sand-blown and down-at-the-heels, like something from the last days of the British Empire. We both ordered grapefruit juice and ginger ale. Cocktails were available, as they are in restaurants and hotels throughout the city, but it is illegal to drive in Dubai with any alcohol whatsoever in your bloodstream, and the penalties for violators are severe: heavy fines, mandatory prison terms, deportation. Even so, Dubai has one of the highest traffic-fatality rates in the world, mainly because the roads are as crowded as

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DUBAI: A GOLFER'S GUIDE

There are 162 holes of golf in Dubai, and a lot more on the way. Here's a list:

■ **Al Badia Golf Course.**

The 7,250-yard Robert Trent Jones II design has 11 lakes and is less than two miles from the airport.

■ **Arabian Ranches Golf Club.**

A terrific test designed by Ian Baker-Finch—but they call it the Desert Course for good reason. Most enjoy-

able for straight hitters.

■ **Dubai Country Club.**

Dubai's first golf club. The 18-hole Al Awir course and nine-hole Creek course are 100-percent grass-free (see main article).

■ **Dubai Creek Golf Club.**

The closest course to the city, recently redesigned. Tough closing holes are round-ruiners, so be careful. (In Dubai, "creek" is used in the British sense, meaning "tidal inlet.")

■ **Emirates Golf Club.**

The clubhouse looks like a cluster of Bedouin tents. The 7,185-yard Majlis course is the principal home of the Dubai Desert Classic. The 7,100-yard Wadi course is scheduled to reopen in October after a makeover by Nick Faldo.

■ **Jebel Ali Golf Resort.**

Just nine holes, but Tiger Woods (who loves Dubai) has played here.

■ **The Montgomerie Dubai.**

Designed by Monty and Desmond Muirhead, the course has the widest fairways in the city and the biggest green in the world (par-3 13th). If you can swing it, stay overnight in one of the 19 fabulous suites in the clubhouse.

■ **Nad Al Sheba Club.**

Nad Al Sheba is famous for its racetrack—horseracing is the No. 1 sport in the U.A.E.—but there's also an 18-hole golf course, and it's fully illuminated at night, when you don't need sunscreen.

■ **Hotel:** The cost of a nice room at a hotel in

Dubai ranges from \$168 a night at the Crowne Plaza Hotel Dubai to as much as \$2,200 a night for a suite at the Burj Al Arab.

■ **Flight:** There are direct flights on Emirates from New York's JFK to Dubai International Airport. The trip takes about 13 hours going there and 14 hours coming back. A round-trip business-class ticket is about \$6,900

■ **Green fees:** A round of golf can cost as little as \$25 at Dubai Country Club to as much as \$170 at the Montgomerie Dubai.

■ **Exchange rate:** 1 dollar = 3.6734 dirhams. D.O.

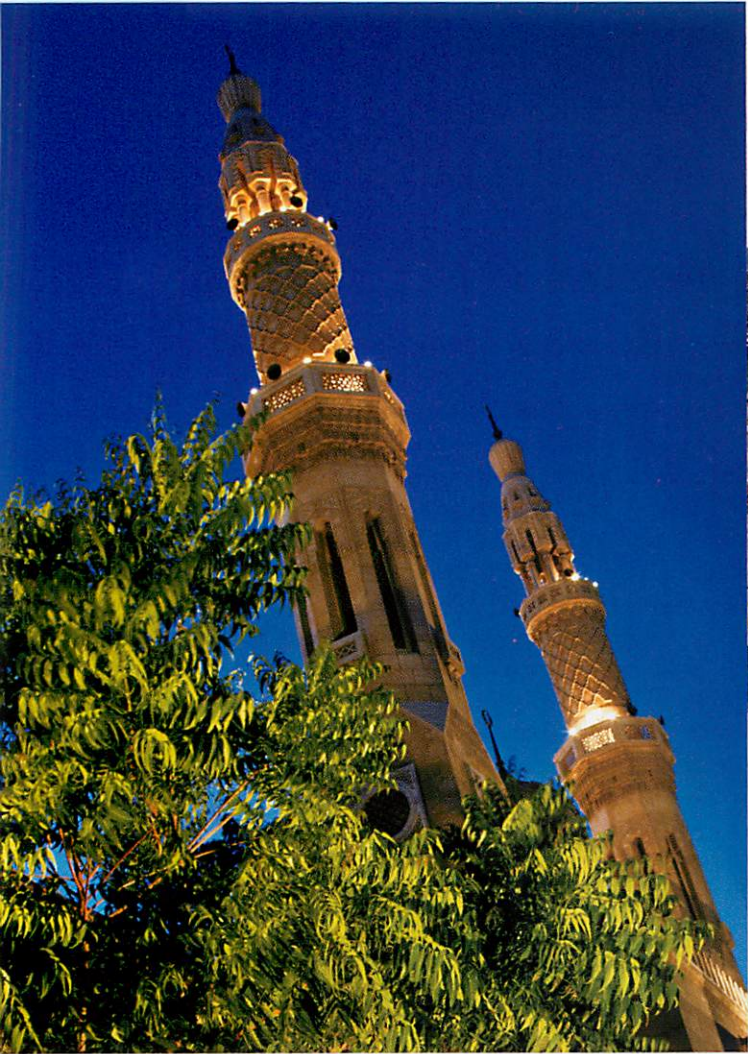


TALL WONDER: Construction of Burj Dubai at night. It will be the world's tallest building (2,650 feet) when complete.



ILLUSTRATION BY: JOYCE PENDOLA

To see more images of Dubai, visit GolfDigestIndex.com



ITS POPULATION IS. **I HEARD A MILLION, I HEARD TWO MILLION, I HEARD WHATEVER.**



HELP WONDERING WHETHER PEOPLE HAVEN'T SIMPLY **LOST THEIR MINDS.**



SKIING IN THE DESERT: There's year-round snow on the slopes of Ski Dubai, which offers the world's first indoor black run.



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L.A.'s, and the taxi drivers and the rich young nationals are legendarily reckless.

The first grass golf course in Dubai, the Majlis at Emirates, wasn't built until 1988. Now there are 10 courses, with more on the way. I played four—the Desert Course at Arabian Ranches, Dubai Creek, the Majlis and the Montgomerie Dubai—and liked them all. I commented to someone that building a course in a baking desert must be extremely difficult, and he said, “No, deserts are easy, because you can shape the sand into anything you like.”

What's hard is growing grass. The topsoil has to be imported, and keeping things green is a permanent challenge. During the hottest weeks of the summer, the Montgomerie, which has 160 acres of turf, uses 2 million gallons of irrigation water a day. The 18th fairway is a blob-shape island, surrounded by a man-made lake. On the day I played, the water in the lake was green, and workers were raking thick scum from one end and loading it into garbage bags. All courses in Dubai are irrigated with processed waste water, and this water, in the 90-degree heat of midday, seemed on its way to turning back into waste. (Drinking water in Dubai is desalinated seawater.)

The Montgomerie was designed by Colin Montgomerie and Desmond Muirhead, and it's bordered by one of Dubai's toniest neighborhoods. As my playing companions and I drove along the hand-laid brick cartpaths (labor costs so little in Dubai that brick is cheaper than concrete), they briefed me on the real-estate market: About 40 percent of houses surrounding the course are occupied by their owners; smaller villas go for \$3.5 million to \$4 million, and the ambitious ones go for \$10 million or more; the largest house on the course has 25 bedrooms and 70,000 square feet of interior space and is owned by the King of Swaziland (where the Gross Domestic Product

per capita is about \$5,000, and the average life expectancy at birth is 33.2 years); the second-largest house on the course is owned by a Nigerian, occupation unknown. One of my playing companions said that a friend of his had bought a house next to the Montgomerie and had been moving his furniture into it when a man approached him and asked him what he would take for the place. He named a ridiculous price, the buyer offered cash, and he moved his furniture back out.

One persistent mystery in Dubai has to do with what the people who buy real estate actually own. Only nationals can own property, except in a few designated zones, and even there the issue is ambiguous. Virtually all real-estate deals with foreigners are 99-year leases—although that isn't a disincentive for the kinds of people who roam the world with suitcases full of hard currency.

DUBAI'S NO. 1 sport is not golf (which only a few dozen nationals play). It's shopping. The main tourist event of the year is the monthlong Dubai Shopping Festival, in early winter, featuring deep discounts at retailers throughout the city. The festival has been so successful that the city has created a second shopping festival, called Dubai Summer Surprises, in the hope of generating more trade at a time of the year when outdoor temperatures sometimes top 125 degrees.

One evening after golf I took a taxi to the Mall of the Emirates, the largest shopping mall in Dubai (for the time being). On the way there, my cab passed a row of car dealerships, which in Dubai are huge. (Daytime temperatures are so high that cars can't be displayed outside, so the dealers have vast, air-conditioned showrooms.)

When I arrived at the mall, a large crowd had gathered in the central atrium. The reason for the excitement: a stage, a drum kit, a runway and a big sign that said, “Tommy Hilfiger Fashion Show and Personal Appearance.” When the show was over, Hilfiger appeared, looking like a natty member of the 43rd form. He was making his first visit to Dubai, to open the first of 25 stores in the Persian Gulf.

The Mall of the Emirates looks like every mall you've ever seen, with lots of the same stores. The food choices are familiar, too: McDonald's, KFC, Subway, Dairy Queen, Johnny Rockets.

My Russian sister-in-law told me that prices at the malls in Dubai are lower than in Europe but higher than in the United States—important considerations for someone from a country that has yet to evolve the concept of the anchor store. A little farther down the corridor I passed a discount underwear shop, inside of which I saw two Muslim women wearing black abayas with full head-and-face covering, shopping for bras.

At the far end of a long corridor I came to Ski Dubai, the city's famous indoor ski slope, which The New York Times travel section called “Dubai's marquee attraction.” Actually, if you've seen snow before and don't work in the refrigeration business, Ski Dubai is unlikely to impress. The total run is just 1,200 feet, and the ambience is less Aspen than Discovery Zone, especially in the dank changing area, where customers are fitted for skis and identical red-and-blue insulated coveralls. Ski Dubai is a lot like the rest of Dubai: You're amazed that anyone had the money and the moxie to pull it off, but after you've gotten past the novelty you can't help wondering whether people haven't simply lost their minds. One of the many mega-construction projects underway is an amusement park called Dubailand, which will be bigger than Disneyland and Disney World combined. I passed the site, and saw mainly roads, parking lots, glare and blowing sand. It looked like the end of the world.

Oil revenues account for 6 percent of Dubai's income. Dubai's ruler, Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, has been praised for building an economy that doesn't depend on oil, but Dubai is as oil-dependent as any other prosperous country. Its economy is based on jet fuel and unlimited air-conditioning and the transmutation of seawater into hotel showers, and as the global oil market exhausts itself Dubai will feel the consequences every bit as painfully as Saudi Arabia or the United States.

Nevertheless, there's something appealingly Utopian about Dubai. I asked every British and American expatriate I met whether anyone, native-born or otherwise, had ever given them a hard time about—well, about Iraq, for instance. The answer was always, No, never, not a whisper. We are all brothers of the fast buck—that's the real theme in Dubai. And who knows? Maybe that (and golf) will turn out to be the secret of world peace. ☒