

CITY SPRINT

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Desert bloom

Scott Snowden
on two cities in the
UAE that have their
publicity engines
on 'maximum'

Fifty years ago, Abu Dhabi was not much more than empty desert punctuated only by the occasional palm tree. Bedouin tribes still roamed, sustaining themselves by harvesting dates, pearls and fish. Then oil was discovered and everything changed. Ten years later, the United Arab Emirates was born, forged from seven territories - called emirates - including Abu Dhabi and Dubai.

Contrary to what many still think, Abu Dhabi is actually the capital city of the UAE, not Dubai. In fact, mentioning the other city is a sure-fire way to upset local residents, such is the competitive nature between the two emirates.

Dubai was built at an unprecedented rate, never before seen anywhere in the world. So awesome was the expansion that the emirate's economy couldn't sustain it. Abu Dhabi on the other hand, is being built at a substantially slower pace. Consequently, the city is not as developed as its Emirati adversary, with some tower blocks appearing shabby. But, most of the oil is here and so this is where the money is. So much so, that it recently had to come to the financial rescue of its rapidly expanding emirate

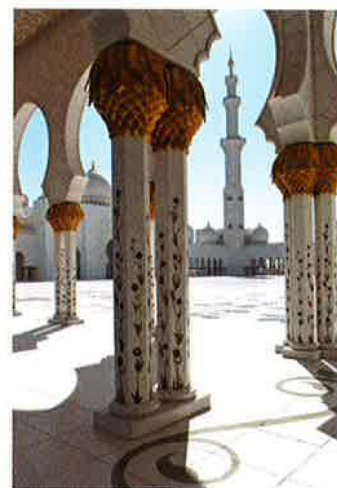
neighbour. Add all this up and you have an almost adolescent-like rivalry.

Both cities, however are taking giant steps to cement themselves as global centres of commerce, not only with indigenous industries like the emerging airline giants Emirates and Etihad or even the relentless refinement of fossil fuels, but as the infrastructure is slowly established, so grows the attraction for other businesses to make a base here.

Construction is obviously a critical element and it can be seen here on an unparalleled scale. A high priority is also being placed on the travel and tourism industry, with new hotels, bars and restaurants opening almost every week. Consequently, there are many interesting places to relax and dine.

Within Abu Dhabi you can find almost any international dish imaginable, except, oddly, traditional Emirati food. Consequently, the closest thing to local cuisine is freshly caught seafood from the Arabian Gulf. One establishment that offers an impressive marine menu is the Fishmarket, located on the private beach of the Intercontinental Hotel. Here you can scan the impressive array of seafood available and construct your

Clockwise from left: Abu Dhabi's striking skyline; the Palace Suite at the Emirates Palace; the Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan mosque in Abu Dhabi



meal under the supervision of helpful staff who happily offer guidance on what flavours complement which fish.

Another outstanding aquatic eatery is Finz, which can be found at the Beach Rotana Hotel. This is also by far the best quality five-star hotel in Abu Dhabi within the price range of mere mortals. But if unlimited opulence represents an irresistible urge, a visit to the Emirates Palace is a must. Not only is this a very, very exclusive hotel, it's a national landmark. Inside, the décor is dazzling, with a prominent theme of gold running throughout. Regardless of whether you find the interior artistic or excessive, sitting in one of the bars sipping coffee and people watching is a pleasurable and entertaining experience.

The UAE is not a group of countries that are centuries old. However, many customs do date back many hundreds of years and efforts are being taken to focus on these and create museums and cultural centres that show what life was like just 100 years ago.

Long before the city of Dubai was even dreamt of, the only settlements to be found were Bedouin encampments, and a trip to one of the Heritage Villages

This picture and below:
Dubai's spectacular Burj
Al Arab Hotel



offers some insight to what life was like before the era of engineering. Located near the mouth of the Dubai Creek in the Shindagha district, the Heritage & Diving Village offers a re-creation of ancient coastal village life, complete with *barasti* (made from palm leaves and mud) homes, an old coffee house and a small souq where you can buy handicrafts and souvenirs.

However, Dubai is also not without its grand and arguably gaudy attractions. The self-proclaimed seven-star hotel, the Burj Al Arab, features a stunning 180m-high atrium, a unique 'leaping salmon' fountain and some striking, exuberant, interior décor. Even if you can't afford the minimum US\$1,000 per night for the most modest of rooms, the Skyview bar is worth a visit. Despite looking like a set from the Seventies series *Buck Rogers in the 25th Century*, it offers breathtaking views over the city and some equally breathtaking prices for drinks.

Dubai is undoubtedly the home of the five-star hotel. There are currently more than 60, with another 27 being built. Sadly, though, construction of the colossal offshore artificial islands has significantly restricted the movement of water along the coastline. However, the Hilton Dubai Jumeirah Resort looks out onto the city's last unspoiled stretch of beach. Here, sun worshippers and

surfers often gather as waves from the Arabian Gulf crash onto the soft, white sand. Here there's also a 'strip' full of cafés, diners and all manner of eateries that's very popular with expats. There are no bars, however, as these must be contained within the grounds of a hotel to conform with Islamic law.

As the infrastructure grows and the dream that the Middle East might become an epicentre for both pleasure-seekers and professionals is slowly realised, the profile of these two cities increases. Despite instability in other Gulf areas at present, you'll be hearing a lot more from Dubai and Abu Dhabi. **BT**



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