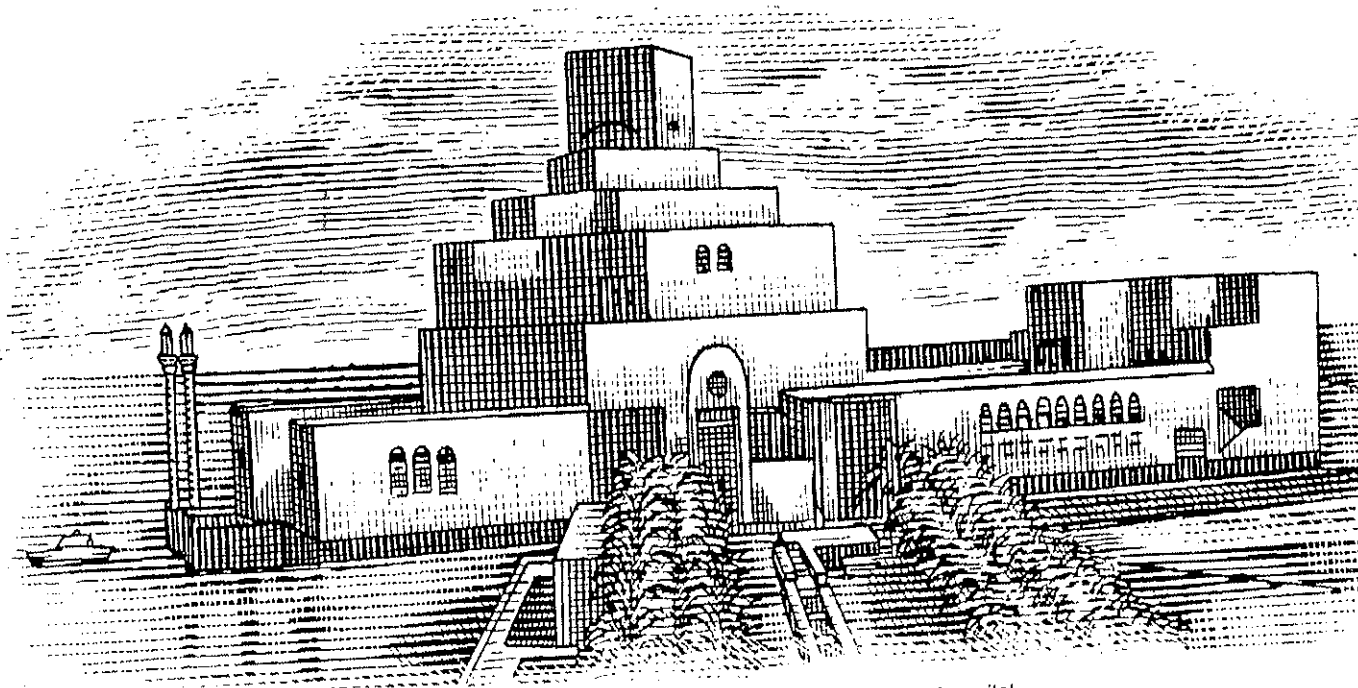


CULTUREWATCH

THE STATE OF THE ARTS AROUND THE WORLD

EDITED BY STEPHEN WALLIS



The I. M. Pei-designed Museum of Islamic Art in Doha, Qatar's capital

The Urbane Traveler

A CONNOISSEUR'S GUIDE TO THE NEW MIDDLE EAST

Christie's international director of Asian art—and frequent Persian Gulf visitor—**AMIN JAFFER** turns his expert eye to the region's most sophisticated riches.

The Persian Gulf is not an area that's immediately associated with cultural travel. For a start, its leading cities—Dubai and Abu Dhabi, both in the United Arab Emirates; Muscat, in Oman; and Doha, in Qatar—are currently in states of extreme flux, transforming from coastal trading towns into 21st-century metropolises. As they establish their identities, they serve multiple purposes, as petrol producers, free ports, and centers of recreation. Long unconstrained by budget or imagination (indoor ski slopes in the

middle of the desert, manmade islands shaped like palm trees), these cities have not been immune to the current economic situation: The building boom is letting up; expats are leaving jobs. But this needs to be seen in light of the tremendous increase in the region's overall wealth during the past decade.

Today, culture has assumed fresh importance here, with interests in museums, art education, heritage conservation, and creation and sale of contemporary art. In my work, I've experienced in the Gulf's traditional and new cultural and I've compiled this deliberately selective and person

to the area after years of quarterly visits. I hope travelers will find that it takes them well beyond the standard gilt and glitz.

DUBAI

Formed in 1971 as a federation of seven hereditary emirs, the UAE holds the world's third largest reserves of oil, which underpin an impressive and increasingly diversified economy. Dubai is the New York of the region, fueled by ambition and wealth, drawing talent and labor from Europe, the Middle East, and Asia. Despite the downturn, the place is still rocking. The chic restaurants are full, and the nightclubs remain packed with the attractive global young who have made their fortunes here.

The real treasure of the city—and my favorite area—is its historic center, Bur Dubai, specifically Bastakiya, an enclave of maze-like lanes and traditional coral and limestone houses that have been converted into art galleries, restaurants, and shops. Some of these buildings are distinguished by wind towers—open-sided structures designed to capture and circulate cool air. One such is **XVA**, a coral-clad courtyard-house hotel with an authentic atmosphere and a mix of antiques and modern furniture. Mona Hauser, XVA's owner, also runs an art gallery with a delightful courtyard café, and she is a wonderful source of information about the art scene in Dubai and Emirati life in general.

For a complete cultural immersion, the nearby **Sheikh Mohammed Center for Cultural Understanding** arranges walking tours of historic Dubai and serves breakfasts and lunches where visitors sample traditional foods in the company of charming locals. At breakfast, the *lugaymat*, spheres of pastry doused in date syrup, are particularly good. The **Dubai Museum**, located not too

far away in the city's oldest building, the Al-Fahidi Fort, displays interactive installations that explain the city's history.

Dubai is at its most interesting in March, when art collectors and dealers pour in for **Art Dubai** at the **Madinat Jumeirah Resort** hotel. Only on its fourth year, it is already a leading contemporary fair, one complemented by the **Global Art Forum**, a three-day series of panel discussions focusing on the Middle East. Around the same time, during the **Creek Art Fair**, the alleys of Bastakiya provide a backdrop for concerts, films, and exhibitions by emerging artists from the region.



The Dubai Museum in the Al-Fahidi Fort

Dubai's established galleries, representing artists from the Middle East and beyond, are clustered around the Gate Village complex in the financial district, a 20-minute drive west of Bastakiya.

Dubai

STAYING PUT

- Atlantis, the Palm** Rooms, from \$790. Crescent Rd., Palm Jumeirah; 971-4/426-2000; atlantisthepalm.com
- Burj Al Arab** Rooms, from \$2,450. Jumeirah Beach Resort Complex, Al Sofouh Rd.; 971-4/301-7777; jumeirah.com
- Desert Palm** Rooms, from \$383. Al Awir Rd.; 971-4/323-8888; desertpalm.ae
- Jumeirah Emirates Towers** Rooms, \$953. Sheikh Zayed Rd.; 971-4/330-0000; jumeirah.com
- Madinat Jumeirah Resort** Rooms, from \$815. Jumeirah Beach Resort Complex, Al Sofouh Rd.; 971-4/366-8888; jumeirah.com
- XVA** Rooms, from \$136. Bldg. 15A, 84 Sikka St., Bastakiya, Bur Dubai; 971-4/353-5383; xvagallery.com

AT TABLE

- Al Mahara** Dinner, \$180. Burj Al Arab, Jumeirah Beach Resort Complex, Al Sofouh Rd.; 971-4/301-7600; jumeirah.com
- Asha's Contemporary Indian Cuisine** Dinner, \$50. Wafi Pyramids Bldg., Wafi; 971-4/317-6833; ashasrestaurants.com
- Buddha Bar** Dinner, \$60. Grosvenor House W. Marina Beach; Al Sofouh Rd.; 971-4/317-6833
- Manvaar** Dinner, \$40. 20 B St., Karama; 971-4/336-8332
- Pars Iranian Kitchen** Dinner, \$68. Al Dhiyata St., Satwa; 971-4/398-4000
- Pierchic** Dinner, \$115. Madinat Jumeirah Resort, Jumeirah Beach Resort Complex, Al Sofouh Rd.; 971-4/366-6739; jumeirah.com
- Rare** Dinner, \$122. Desert Palm, Al Awir Rd.; 971-4/323-8888; desertpalm.ae

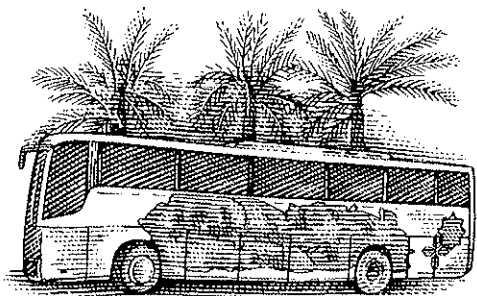
SHOPPING

- Bateef** Burjuman Shopping Mall, Trade Center Rd.; 971-4/355-2853

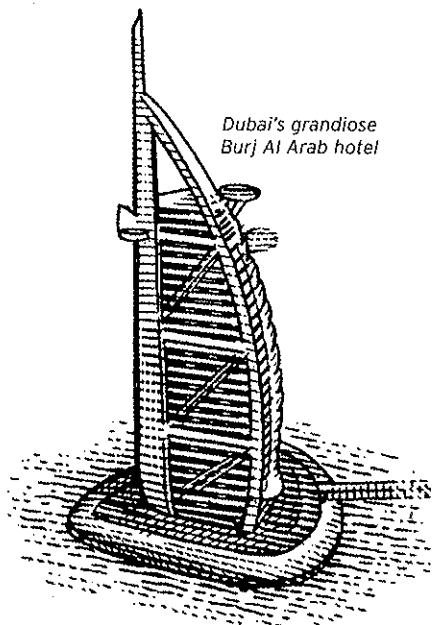
- Gold Souk** 402 Al Jahra Bldg., Khalid Bin Waleed Rd., Bur Dubai; 971-4/352-6867; dubaigoldsouk.com
- Mall of the Emirates** Sheikh Zayed Rd., Al Barsha; 971-4/409-9000; malloftheemirates.com
- Princess** Meena Bazaar, Khalid Bin Waleed St.
- Souk Madinat Jumeirah** Madinat Jumeirah Resort, Jumeirah Beach Resort Complex; Al Sofouh Rd.; 971-4/366-8888; jumeirah.com

CULTURE

- 1x1** 4 Al Quoz; 971-4/348-3873; 1x1artgallery.com
- ArtBus** Tickets, \$25. artinthecity.com
- Art Dubai** March 17-20, 2010; 971-4/323-3434; artdubai.ae
- Artspace** Bldg. 3, Gate Village, Dubai International Financial Center; 971-4/323-0820; artspace-dubai.com
- B21 Gallery** 1 Al Quoz; 971-4/340-3965; b21gallery.com
- Creek Art Fair** March 2010
- Cuadro Fine Art Gallery** Bldg. 10, Gate Village, Dubai International Financial Center; 971-4/425-0400; cuadroart.com
- Dubai Museum** 62 A St., Bur Dubai; 971-4/353-1862
- Empty Quarter** Bldg. 2, Gate Village, Dubai International Financial Center; 971-4/323-1210; theemptyquarter.com
- Global Art Forum** March 17-19; 971-4/323-3434; artdubai.ae
- Jam Jar** 17A Al Quoz; 971-4/341-7303; thejamjardubai.com
- Palm Jumeirah** 971-4/390-3333; palmjumeirah.ae
- Sheikh Mohammed Center for Cultural Understanding** Al Mussallah Rd., Bastakiya, Bur Dubai; 971-4/353-6666; cultures.ae
- Third Line** 3 Al Quoz; 971-4/341-1367; thethirdline.com



The Jam Jar gallery's ArtBus



Dubai's grandiose Burj Al Arab hotel

Among them are **Cuadro Fine Art Gallery**, which shows an eclectic international mix; the **Empty Quarter**, with contemporary photography from both local and international talents; and **Artspace**, for modern and contemporary Arab art. Younger, cutting-edge galleries are in the

Al Quoz industrial area. There, the **Third Line** and **B21 Gallery** display contemporary Gulf art, while the **Jam Jar** and **1x1** specialize in emerging South Asian artists. The district can be a nightmare to navigate; hotels have copies of the city's ArtMap, compiled by the Jam Jar, but the easiest option is to take the **ArtBus**, also run by the Jam Jar.

In Bur Dubai and in Deira, across the Dubai Creek—traversed in a ten-minute ride on a commuter water bus, or *abra*—it is worth visiting the city's celebrated markets. In the **Deira Old Souk**, adjacent to Bastakiya, a mishmash of 20th-century shops offer excellent pashmina, kaftan, and textile bargains and recall the markets of India. One find in the Meena Bazaar, just across the street, is **Princess**, which sells clothes inspired by Indian and Middle Eastern fabrics and forms but fashioned for

Western tastes. On the other side of the creek is the **Spice Souk**, a perfect place to stock up on fresh aromatic herbs as well as teas, incense, dried fruit, and nuts. (While not part of the souk—it's instead in the nearby Burjuman Shopping Mall—**Bateel** is among the finest purveyors, carrying superb dates and Arabic sweets; the date jam is particularly good.) From the Spice Souk a maze of lanes leads to the early-20th-century **Gold Souk**, now sadly modernized but still bursting with stall after stall of sparkling, high-quality gold, sold by the gram, according to current international prices. Behind the souk, around Sikkat Ali Khail Street, is a cluster of perfume stalls selling *attars* (spicy Arabic scents), *oud* (fragrant woods), and Western-style perfumes. One should be prepared to haggle while exploring the pedestrian lanes in this most genuine part of town. For a less



Shopping in Dubai's souks

Dubai is the New York of the Middle East, fueled by ambition and wealth.

Postcard from Syria and Lebanon

Please go back to America and tell your friends we are not part of the axis of evil." I heard this from every Syrian I encountered, from doyen to doorman, over the course of my 12 days in the country. Clearly, vibes of fear and alienation had moved in both directions, from the U.S. to Syria and back again. Virtually the only American I saw there was former president Jimmy Carter, whom I stumbled across in a Damascus souk prior to his visit to the West Bank.

That chance sighting was emblematic of the trip and the times—Obama in Cairo, elections in Lebanon and Iran, George Mitchell in Syria—and made absurd the warning I had received from individuals and guidebooks not to discuss politics. It was all anyone wanted to talk about, and reason enough to visit.

But the primary motivation for my trip was the area's unparalleled wealth of archaeological and architectural treasures. Guidebooks and the life of Gertrude Bell can provide the details of these visual feasts, but what is not described anywhere in the conflict-focused press is the elegance and

refinement of the infrastructure now available to visitors traveling to this part of the world.

During my sojourn I stayed in two of the best hotels I have ever experienced, satisfying in every sense, their ambiance and authenticity combined with excellent service and personalized attention to detail. One of them was **Al Mansouriya Palace** (from \$400; 963-21/363-2000; mansouriya.com), in Aleppo, Syria, a former private residence in the Old City comprising nine suites set around a courtyard. I also loved **Hotel Albergo** (from \$270; 961-1/339-797; albergoberuit.com), in Beirut, an adamant upholder of the long-standing but now mostly lost role of this town as the "Paris of the Middle East"—sublime, cozy, and with the aura of a great hostess's confident hand and eye behind every choice.

Another surprise: I ate three of the most memorable meals I've had in decades. At **Narenj** (dinner, \$20; Medhat Pasha; 963-11/541-3600), in Damascus, a church tower sits to the left of the restaurant's terrace and a mosque's minaret to the right—that's Syria in a nutshell. And at **Fadel** (dinner, \$50; Naas St.; 961-1/339-797), in the mountainous town of Bikfaya, outside Beirut, I dined under pine trees perched high above the sea. Finally there was Beirut's austere, urban, and urbane **Balthus** (dinner, \$40; Ghandour Bldg., Ave. des

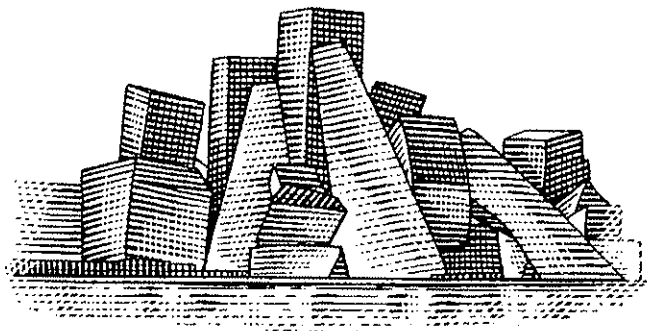
Français; 961-1/371-077), the creation of Frida Nahas, who is as chic and sumptuous as her restaurant. There, French nouvelle cuisine meets the Lebanese devotion to pure, fresh flavors, with ingredients like crunchy purslane and dishes like rose sorbet.

Alice Agar, of the hip London tour operator **Black Tomato** (877-815-1497; blacktomato.co.uk), arranged my trip and connected me to May Mamarbachi, the woman behind the Damascus-based bespoke travel company **Berola Travel & Tourism** (963-1/123-0042; beroiatravel.com). Mamarbachi proved to be a force of nature, whose taste and character pervaded every individual, location, and experience she recommended.

Between all the intoxicating beauty and the inspiring conversations with locals, I also found some world-class retail resources. In Damascus there's **Tony E. Stephan** for hand-loomed silk (149 Hamidiyeh Bazaar; 963-11/221-2198), while in Beirut, there's **Nada Debs** for contemporary home decor (Bldg. E-1064, Moukhalsieh St., Saifi Village; 961-1/999-002; nadadebs.com), **Orient 499** for clothing and modern home items (499 Omar Daouk St., Hammoud Bldg., Mina el Hosn; 961-1/369-499; orient499.com), and **Milla M** for Jill Sander-esque women's clothes (1051 Bloc D, Saifi Village; 961-1/990-336; miliam.com). —CATHRYN COLLINS

challenging but still atmospheric shopping experience, especially for traditional Islamic wares, there's **Souk Madinat Jumeirah**, a historic-looking covered market that opened in 2004 at the Madinat Jumeirah.

Chic restaurants are everywhere in Dubai, from **Buddha Bar** in the Grosvenor House to **Pierchic** at the Madinat Jumeirah's Al Qasr hotel. But the most authentic offerings are east of the city in the Wafi, Satwa, and Karama neighborhoods, each of which is filled with Arabic, Indian, and Iranian hole-in-the-wall spots. Among the best is **Asha's Contemporary Indian Cuisine** in Wafi. Owned by Bollywood chanteuse Asha Bhosle, the restaurant makes a black *daal* as well as mango- and chili-infused cocktails that are local legends. **Manvaar**, meanwhile,



A Frank Gehry design for an outpost of the Guggenheim on Abu Dhabi's Saadiyat Island

traditional boat in the region) and is one of the tallest hotels on the planet. A challenge to the aesthetically sensitive, its garish interiors are still a must-see; rather than staying there overnight, it's best to just dine among the fishes at the grand aquarium restaurant **Al Mahara**, accessed by a three-minute elevator ride that simulates a submarine journey. Equally surreal is the nearby **Palm Jumeirah**, a

ins. As with the Burj Al Arab, it's better to look at than to stay in. I much prefer to spend the night at **Desert Palm**, a cluster of buildings, many of them in Arabian or colonial styles, set in a verdant oasis 20 minutes south of the city—skyscrapers far in the distance. The hotel has 24 luxurious suites and villas, the latter of which feature private pools and enclosed gardens that let out on to a vast 150-acre estate. The spa overlooks polo fields, providing views of galloping horses during treatments (ask for a facial from Maria); and the best way to start the day here is with a horseback ride around the grounds. The chef at the hotel's **Rare** restaurant makes a fantastic pan-roasted hammour fillet with broad beans, roasted plum tomato purée, and homemade tagliatelle, and the wine cellar is possibly the best in the city. (For

Culture has assumed fresh importance, led by interests in museums, education, conservation, and contemporary art.

in Karama, serves authentic Rajasthani food. For Iranian, it's the kebabs at **Pars Iranian Kitchen**, located off a delightful garden behind Rydges Plaza in Satwa.

Dubai made its name as a duty-free port and a shopping district. Today the city's malls compete in outrageousness, with improbable entertainments and experiences. A visit to the **Mall of the Emirates**, though not a profound cultural outing, is a rite of passage for anyone coming to the city—and not just to see Ski Dubai, the renowned indoor snow theme park, with its ersatz Alpine setting and après-ski activities, but to people-watch as well. In a region where climate makes it difficult to stroll outside, malls provide a platform for promenade and display, like the piazza of an Italian town in the hour of the *passaggiata*. (For Westerners, the offerings at the mall itself are fairly banal, representing the same brands as those found at home.)

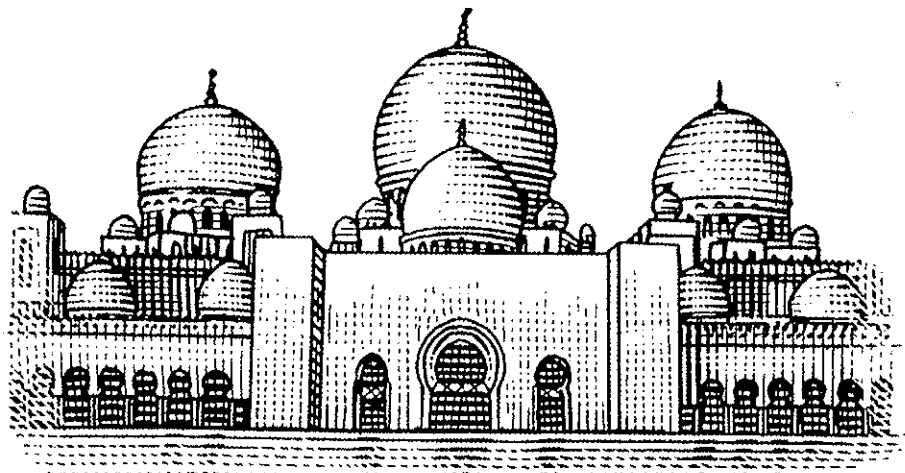
Pending the opening of Hydropolis, the world's first underwater hotel, the curious might want to head to the now-familiar **Burj Al Arab**, which was inspired by the shape of the sail of a dhow (the

luxury tourism and residential complex, so named because it consists of artificial islands configured to resemble the fronds of a palm tree. (It will eventually be joined by the World and the Universe, meant to resemble a map of each.) Its latest attraction, **Atlantis, the Palm**, is a gargantuan 1,500-room hotel themed on the famed lost city, complete with (brand-new) ru-

business travelers, **Jumeirah Emirates Towers**, in the financial center, remains the top hotel in town.)

ABU DHABI

Whereas Dubai represents the marketplace, Abu Dhabi—the largest and richest of the emirates in the UAE—stands for government. Protected from the some-



The recently constructed Sheikh Zayed Bin Sultan Al Nahyan Mosque in Abu Dhabi