

**KICKING UP A STORM:** A desert safari, racing up and down sand dunes

# The lesser known Dubai



An empty abra (water taxi) looking for passengers by the creek



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In all the noise of the bargaining going on in the souks, I hear the voice of the tour guide yelling at me (politely, for I have paid for the tour) to stop yet again and take a photograph or just stare.

And suddenly my group has gone ahead, leaving me alone in the maze of narrow lanes, which smell of cinnamon and pepper and the occasional red chilli. Oh, but he did warn me. Several times. I was part of a walking tour, having gotten off the hop-on hop-off open top bus that I took to escape the mad shoppers.

I do not expect to see so much commotion and colour in Dubai. A city obsessed with being the biggest and the boldest, Dubai hides its secrets well. The chaos and colours, smells and sounds are tucked away in the narrow by lanes of the old souks lined up along the creek. One minute I'm standing at the entrance of the Dubai museum, and the next, as I turn a sharp corner trailing behind the group, I step into another world, another time. I walk under deep red arches and wooden lanterns that I imagine bring the lanes alive after the world outside has grown dark.

For one crazy moment, I am disoriented — I see tiny shops selling incense sticks, pictures of goddess Lakshmi, and cheerful yellow marigold flowers that belong to shops outside large South Indian temples. Printed ads on the walls seek Tamil bachelors as roommates. Silks and cotton, spices and nuts, silver and gold, carpets and fragrances, lie in careless heaps under the roof of the covered souk.

A short ride across the creek on an open abra (water taxi), with the cold wind on my face, I reach the spice souk. The shopkeepers, seeing that I'm an Indian, ergo not a prospective buyer, turn to the Westerners in my group — "Just smell this, madam...". Someone brandishes a tiny plastic box of "top quality saffron in the world". Further down the road lies the gold souk — over 300 shops with window displays that twinkle, glitter, and beckon.

And for those there for the shopping, the Dubai Shopping Festival, an annual extravaganza, which attracts over two million visitors every year, is on from January 24 to February 24. And for the mall-weary lot, tired of bargain labels and the air-conditioned conformity of shopping, don't forget to visit the souks.

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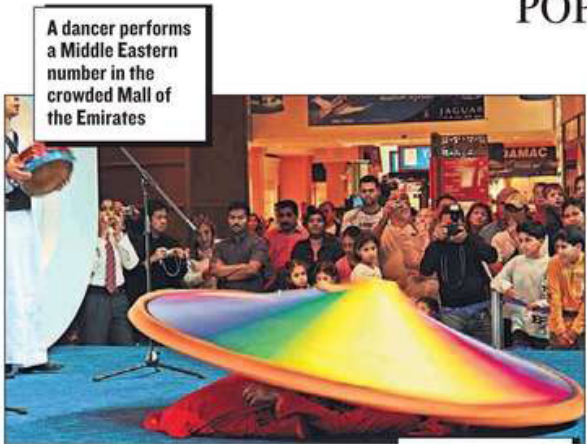
**VISITOR INFORMATION**

- GETTING THERE**  
Emirates Airlines flies Mumbai-Dubai with special fares (starting from Rs 12,000) and discounted hotel rates during the shopping festival. Other airlines, including Indian, have reasonable fares, though only Emirates arranges for a visa along with the ticket.
- WHAT TO DO**  
The open-air hop-on hop-off bus run by the Big Bus Company covers two routes inside the city and stops at popular shopping malls. Tickets are priced at AED 175 (Rs 1,900 approx) and AED 100 (Rs 1,100) for children from 5-15 years, and are valid for 24 hours. The ticket includes a walking tour, Arabian Treasures (seasonal) which covers the souks, entry to the Dubai museum and an hour-long Arabian dhow cruise on the creek. Tickets can be bought online at [www.bigbus.co.uk/dub](http://www.bigbus.co.uk/dub) or at ticket counters at one of the larger shopping malls.
- WHERE TO SHOP**  
The most popular malls are the Mall of the Emirates, Deira City Centre and the Burjuman Centre among others. For details on the festival, visit [www.mydsf.com](http://www.mydsf.com). Dubai also hosts the Summer Surprise shopping binge every August. For more exotic shopping, visit the old souks situated by the creek in Deira.

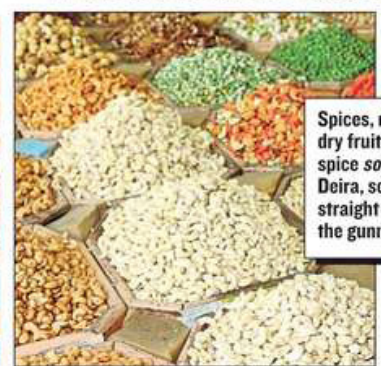
**POPULAR AS A PARADISE FOR SHOPPERS, THIS CITY HIDES ITS SECRETS WELL. WALK THROUGH ITS ALLEYWAYS AND EXPLORE ITS EXOTIC SIGHTS**



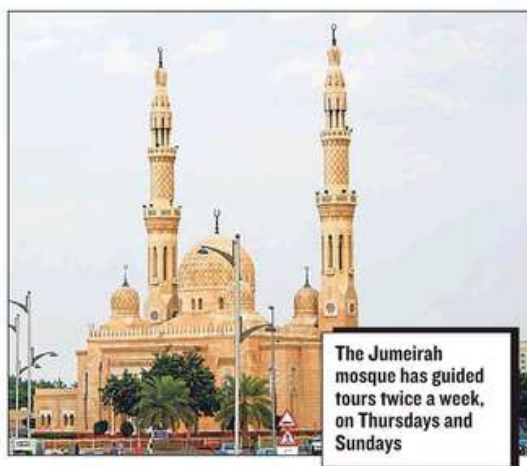
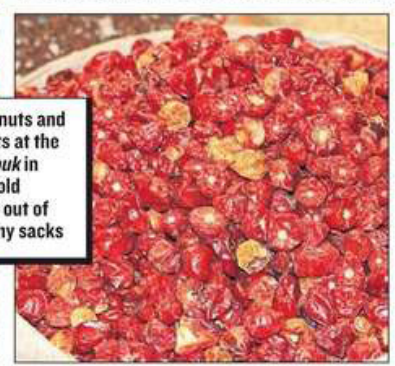
Dubai celebrates Christmas and New Year's with gusto, with an eye for Western tourists



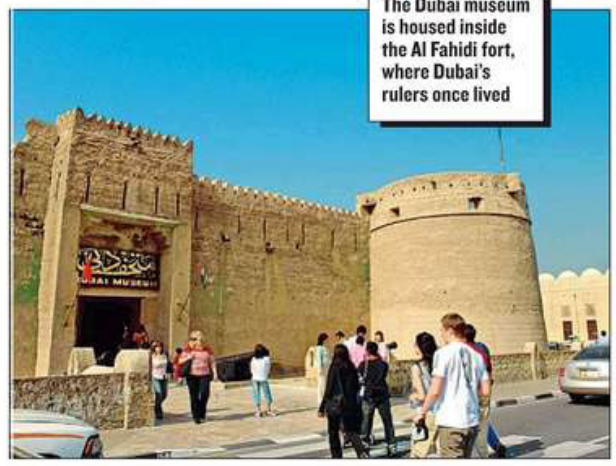
A dancer performs a Middle Eastern number in the crowded Mall of the Emirates



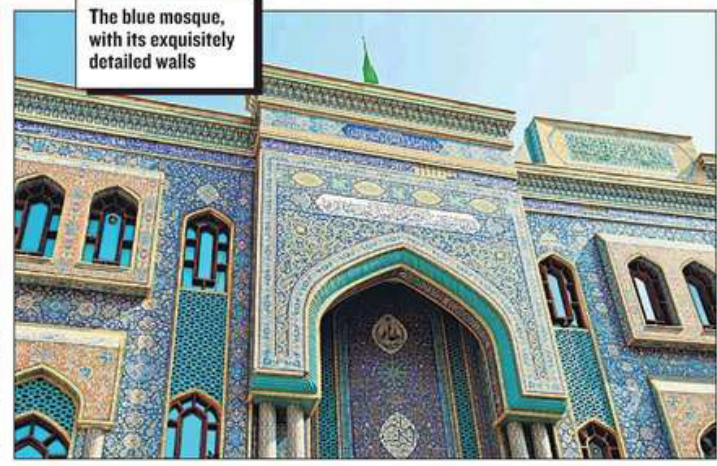
Spices, nuts and dry fruits at the spice souk in Deira, sold straight out of the gunny sacks



The Jumeirah mosque has guided tours twice a week, on Thursdays and Sundays



The Dubai museum is housed inside the Al Fahidi fort, where Dubai's rulers once lived



The blue mosque, with its exquisitely detailed walls



Sunset at a Dubai beach, with the Al Burj (right) and the Jumeirah Beach Hotel