


June 27, 2025 · The Journal / Travel Inspiration

Insider's Guide to Dubai

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Travel Advisor

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Image courtesy of Jumeirah Burj Al Arab

Dubai is bold and flashy, where ultramodern towers rise beside traditional souks and desert dunes. You can spend the morning at a luxury beach club, the afternoon skiing indoors or

shopping at one of the world's biggest malls, and end the day with rooftop cocktails overlooking the skyline. Expect polished hotels, over-the-top attractions, and a constantly evolving city. Read on to find out where to stay, what to do, and how to plan your time in Dubai.

Need to know



Image courtesy of Dar Al Masyaf

Dubai is modern, safe, and easy to explore. While most of the city is relaxed and tourist-friendly, expect to remove shoes at cultural sites and dress modestly in traditional areas or some other emirates (the UAE is a federation of seven emirates). Friday is the main prayer day, so expect slower mornings, especially around mosques. VoIP services like WhatsApp calls, FaceTime, and Skype may be blocked or restricted. Book ahead for the best restaurants, guided tours, and big-ticket attractions, especially during peak travel months.

Currency: The currency is the UAE Dirham (AED). Credit cards are widely accepted everywhere, though it is handy to carry some cash for small vendors or markets. Tipping around 10 to 15 percent is common in restaurants and for service staff.

Languages: While Arabic is the official language, English is widely spoken and understood. The locals are warm and welcoming, and showing respect through polite greetings and basic Arabic phrases is appreciated.

- **Key phrases:** thank you (*shukran*), please (masc: *min fadlak* / fem: *min fadlik*), yes / no: (*na'am* / *la*), excuse me / sorry (*afwan* / *asif*), how are you? (*kaifa haluk?*), I don't speak Arabic (*ana la atakallam al-'Arabiyya*)

Airports: Dubai International Airport (DXB) is one of the busiest and most connected airports in the world, especially if you're flying Emirates. Direct flights from major US cities (plus nonstop options from Europe, Asia, and beyond) make it an easy access point. You can also fly into Abu Dhabi (AUH), just over an hour away, and drive or transfer in.

Transportation: Most high-end hotels offer seamless pickups. It's worth booking a private transfer for comfort and ease, especially after a long-haul flight. Taxis are often cheaper and just as reliable as Uber. Pricing may vary by zone. Dubai isn't made for walking, but the metro system is efficient and air-conditioned.

Best time to visit: From October to April, the weather's warm but easy to enjoy, perfect for rooftop dinners, desert adventures, and beach days. June to August is sweltering, but hotel deals are strong and the city shifts to air-conditioned malls and waterparks.

- **Ramadan:** Visiting during Ramadan offers daytime reflective vibes and nighttime celebrations, but don't eat, drink, or smoke in public during daylight hours. Ramadan is the ninth month of the Islamic calendar, based on the lunar cycle and 11 days shorter than the Gregorian calendar, so exact dates change yearly.

Ideal length of stay: A two- to three-night stopover is perfect for a quick hit of the highlights. For an extended visit, five to seven nights lets you unwind in style, explore beyond the city, and really enjoy the mix of glam and tradition.

Signature dishes and drinks:

- **Shawarma:** Spiced, slow-roasted meat wrapped in warm pita with garlic sauce and pickles. It's Dubai's street-food staple.
- **Machboos:** A fragrant, spiced rice dish cooked with meat or seafood, often infused with saffron and dried lemon.

- **Luqaimat:** Sweet, deep-fried dough balls drizzled with date syrup or honey. A popular Emirati dessert that's perfect alongside Arabic coffee.
- **Harees:** Slow-cooked wheat and meat porridge, traditionally served during Ramadan and festive occasions.
- **Camel meat:** Increasingly popular in fine dining, served as tender steaks, burgers, or slow-roasted delicacies.
- **Karak chai:** A rich, spiced milk tea brewed strong and sweet.
- **Cocktails:** While Dubai isn't exactly famed for its cocktails, many high-end bars add subtle local touches (like saffron or rosewater) to classic drinks.

What to wear: Dubai's warm climate calls for breathable fabrics. Pack modest daytime wear including long sleeves and knee-length bottoms. Evenings are polished but relaxed; wear chic dresses or smart shirts. During Ramadan, dress conservatively and respect local customs.

Laws and local rules: Dubai and the rest of the Emirates are well policed and generally very safe, but it's best to be aware of customs and expectations for your visit.

- **Alcohol:** Permitted in licensed venues, avoid drinking or open containers in public.
- **Language:** Offensive language and gestures are taken seriously and can result in fines.
- **Driving:** Renting a car and driving are straightforward, but be prepared for traffic cameras, automated steep fines, and fast-paced driving.
- **Medications:** Certain painkillers, ADHD treatments, and more medications may be banned. Bring a prescription and check with UAE authorities before traveling.
- **Photography:** Avoid taking photos of people (especially women), government buildings, and airports without permission.
- **LGBTQ+ travelers:** While many international hotels are welcoming, same-sex activity is illegal. Discretion is advised, and trans travelers may wish to carry supporting documentation for smooth immigration clearance.
- **Female travelers:** There's a pink-roofed taxi option driven by women for women and families, and most mosques offer free or rental abayas at the entrance. Some public beaches have family-only or women-only days, especially near Jumeirah. There are also women-only metro cars, gym classes, spas, and more.

Where to stay

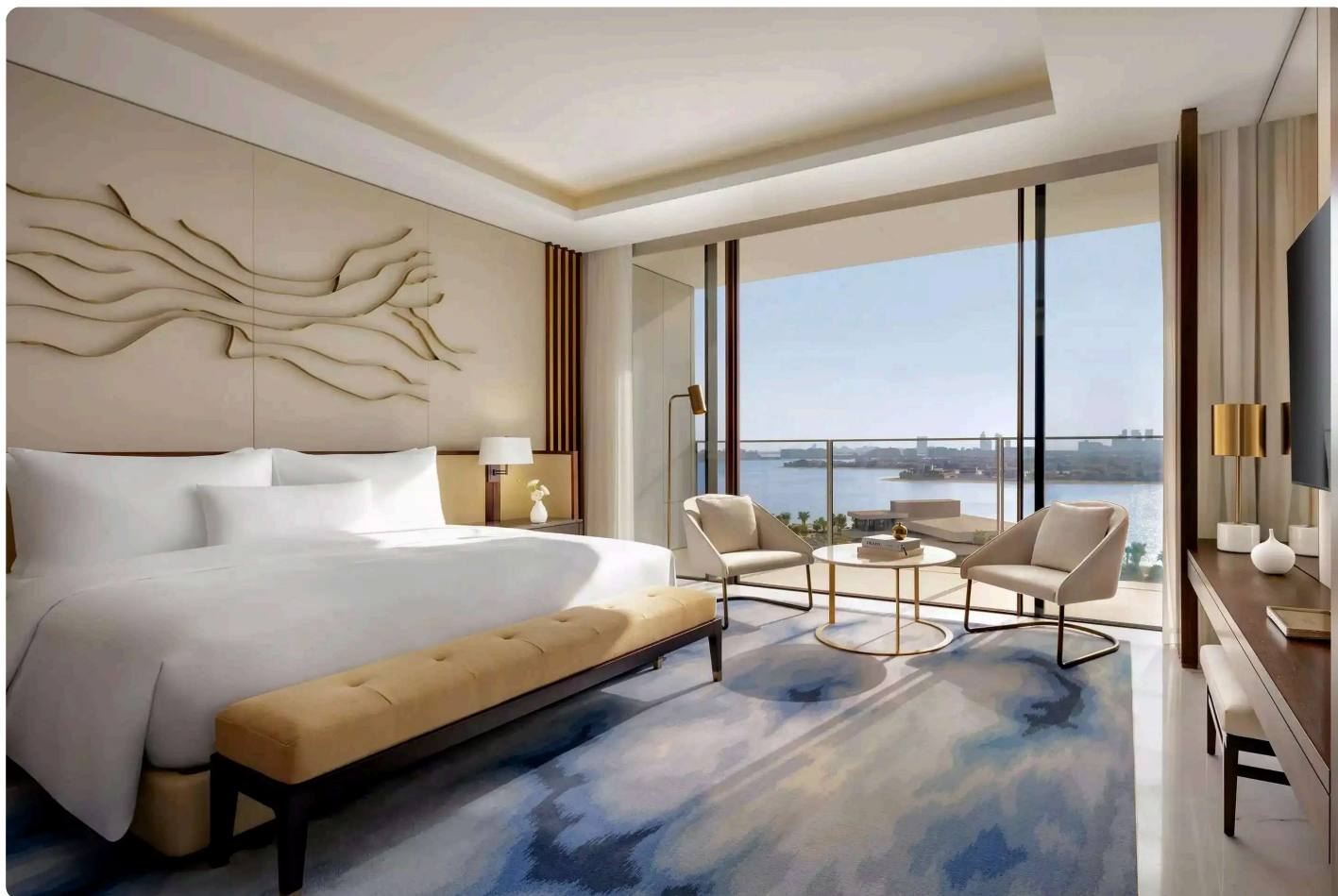


Image courtesy of Atlantis The Royal Dubai

Dubai is shaped by its neighborhoods, each with its own pace and perspective. In Dubai City, the energy is high and the skyline higher, with luxury shopping and rooftop pools. Just beyond, the desert offers a cinematic shift to golden dunes, quiet stargazing, and lantern-lit dinners. In Old Dubai, abra boats cross the Dubai Creek, spice-scented souks wind through Al Fahidi, and the city's roots feel close. And then there's Palm Jumeirah and the Marina, polished locales for yacht days, sleek resorts, and sunset cocktails by the water.

Jumeirah Marsa Al Arab: Sleek, sculptural, and right on the water. Rooms are airy and modern, with floor-to-ceiling views of the Gulf and details that feel custom-fit. It's polished, exclusive, and made for travelers who want the best of Dubai with a sense of calm and privacy.

- **Fora's Jumeirah Passport to Luxury** partner perks include a \$75 food and beverage or spa credit, a welcome amenity, daily breakfast, an upgrade, and extended check-in/out whenever possible.

Dar Al Masyaf: A more residential, low-key take on Dubai's high-end scene. These stand-alone villas are spread throughout the Madinat Jumeirah resort's palm-lined waterways. Each

summerhouse feels private and calm, with interiors that nod to traditional Arabian style.

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Jumeirah Burj Al Arab: Iconic and indulgent, this stay is anything but subtle. Think gold-trimmed everything, a fleet of Rolls-Royces, and a private butler for every suite. Expect sky-high views, one-of-a-kind dining, and service that goes above and beyond.

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Atlantis The Royal Dubai: Bold, full of energy, and built for the spotlight with infinity pools, celebrity chef restaurants, and sculptural design. The rooms and suites are sharp and dramatic, with sweeping sea views and serious wow-factor.

- **Fora Reserve perks** include a \$100 hotel credit, daily breakfast, an upgrade, and extended check-in/out whenever possible.

Atlantis the Palm: Big, fun, and built with one of the world's largest waterparks, kid-friendly dining, and dolphin encounters. Rooms are spacious, bright, and comfortable with views of the Gulf or the skyline. Facilities and rooms were also thoughtfully designed for accessibility.

- **Fora Reserve perks** include a \$100 experience credit, an upgrade, and extended check-in/out whenever possible.

Cruising to and around Dubai



Image courtesy of MSC Cruises, MSC World Europa

Cruising through the Gulf is your front-row seat to Dubai's skyline, calm turquoise waters, and a mix of modern cities and centuries-old ports. Confirm which cruise port you'll be docking at, but most will dock at Dubai Cruise Terminal at Port Rashid. Most itineraries include Abu Dhabi, Doha, and Muscat, among other cities in addition to Dubai. It's especially popular with European travelers chasing winter sun and comfort without the need to repack every night.

Luxury lines like Regent Seven Seas and Oceania weave Dubai into longer one-way or world voyages, making it an effortless extension to a broader adventure. MSC is the leader in the region; it has the most round-trip itineraries from Dubai. Try their Yacht Club suites for a premium "ship within a ship" experience. Their sister brand, Explora Journeys, will debut in the region for the 2026/2027 season.

Notable cruise lines

MSC Cruises: Stylish and family-friendly, MSC blends European flair with affordability. The vibe is lively and social, with a wide range of entertainment and a global crowd. Upgrade to the Yacht Club for a more refined experience with private areas and butler service.

Explora Journeys: Ultra-luxury with a modern, boutique feel, plus wellness-focused spaces, curated experiences ashore, and longer port calls. Explora offers a relaxed, resort-style pace that's ideal for younger luxury cruisers and seasoned travelers alike.

- **Fora Perks** include a €300 Journey Experience Credit per stateroom on all sailings 7 nights or longer.

Oceania Cruises: A favorite for foodies and culture lovers. Oceania offers small- to mid-sized ships, destination-rich itineraries, and a refined but unstuffy atmosphere. Expect excellent cuisine, elegant design, and port-intensive voyages.

- When you book with Fora, you'll enjoy exclusive benefits that vary by sailing.

Regent Seven Seas Cruises: Fully all-inclusive and highly personalized, RSSC is known for luxury without limits. Spacious suites, fine dining, and unlimited shore excursions cater to travelers who value comfort and convenience over flash.

- When you book with Fora, you'll enjoy exclusive benefits that vary by sailing.

Silversea: Intimate, elegant, and destination-driven. Silversea specializes in immersive itineraries and all-suite accommodations with butler service. It attracts travelers who want to explore off-the-beaten-path destinations in comfort and style.

- When you book with Fora, you'll enjoy exclusive benefits that vary by sailing.

History and culture



Dubai's story is one of rapid transformation, but its roots run deep. Long before the skyscrapers and supercars, the coastal settlement on the Arabian Gulf was a small fishing and pearling village inhabited by Bedouin tribes. The ruling Al Maktoum family established Dubai as a trading port in the 19th century, and its natural creek made it a key stop on trade routes between India, Persia, and East Africa. While oil played a role in the city's rise, it was Dubai's strategic reinvestment into trade, tourism, and innovation that shaped its future.

Today, neighborhoods like Al Fahidi preserve elements of Old Dubai, with wind towers, courtyards, and calls to prayer echoing from nearby mosques. You'll still find Emirati traditions alive in daily life, from falconry and Arabic coffee rituals to Eid celebrations and Friday family gatherings. Landmarks like Jumeirah Mosque offer non-Muslim visitors a respectful way to learn about Islamic culture, while the Dubai Opera and Museum of the Future reflect the city's global-facing ambitions.

Cultural celebrations & events

- **Ramadan (dates vary by year, based on the Islamic calendar):** A meaningful time, with a slower daytime pace and vibrant evenings. Restaurants may adjust hours, and public eating/drinking is restricted during daylight. That said, travelers can enjoy Iftar buffets, cultural programming, and a unique, reflective atmosphere.
- **Eid al-Fitr (end of Ramadan):** A joyful, city-wide celebration marking the end of fasting. Expect major sales, family outings, fireworks, and packed restaurants (book reservations well in advance).
- **Dubai Shopping Festival (December–January):** A retail extravaganza with pop-up markets, mall-wide sales, concerts, and fireworks. A fun time to visit for shopping enthusiasts, but hotels and dining spots can fill up quickly.
- **Dubai Food Festival (February–March):** A citywide event that celebrates Dubai's booming food scene, from fine dining to street eats.
- **Al Marmoom Heritage Festival (April):** Set in the desert outskirts, this festival is a window into Emirati tradition with camel races, falconry, music, and food.
- **UAE National Day (December 2):** The streets light up in red, green, black, and white. Expect parades, fireworks, live music, and a patriotic buzz across the city. Major public areas will be busy, so book early and plan for road closures.

What to do in Dubai



Dubai doesn't do things halfway. From sky-high thrills to deep cultural dives to desert escapes, here's what to do across the city.

- **Burj Khalifa:** Catch golden hour from the 148th floor of the Burj Khalifa, the world's tallest building, with cocktails and panoramic city views.
- **Mall culture:** Dubai Mall and Mall of the Emirates have VIP concierge services, personal stylists, and tax refund kiosks. Request private appointments at designer boutiques. At Dubai Mall, there's also an indoor waterfall and aquarium.
- **Gold and spice souks:** Come prepared to bargain for deals on everything from jewelry to exotic oils. Visit early morning or evening for thinner crowds.
- **Al Quoz:** Wander Alserkal Avenue in Al Quoz, Dubai's creative pulse filled with cutting-edge galleries, indie film screenings, and neighborhood cafés.
- **Ski Dubai:** Yes, you can ski in the desert at the Mall of the Emirates, which brings year-round snow, tubing hills, and even penguin encounters.
- **Scuba diving:** Dive 60 meters down at Deep Dive Dubai, the world's deepest pool, complete with submerged rooms and sunken cityscapes.
- **Museums:** Take a private tour of the Etihad Museum for a sleek, interactive look at the UAE's history. Then head to the Museum of the Future, Dubai's architectural marvel with immersive exhibits on innovation, climate, and human potential.
- **Jameel Arts Centre:** Worth a stop for its striking architecture and rotating contemporary exhibitions along the waterfront.
- **Madinat Jumeirah:** Glide through Madinat Jumeirah by abra, where canals link luxe hotels, open-air souks, and postcard views of the Burj Al Arab.
- **Dinner at Atlantis:** Book a table at Atlantis The Royal for a blowout dinner with seafood, celebrity chefs, and over-the-top everything. For the adventurous, savor a tasting menu underwater at the Michelin-Starred Ossiano in Atlantis The Palm.
- **The Dubai Fountain:** Catch the fountain show outside Dubai Mall for choreographed water, light, and music on a massive scale. An even bigger upgrade is on the way.
- **The desert:** Spend a night in the desert with camel rides at sunset, falconry, and dinner under the stars.

Water experiences

- **Yacht charters:** Cruise the sleek coastline on a private yacht from Dubai Marina. Enjoy Champagne at sunset, a catered lunch with friends, or a DJ-fueled party.
- **Jet ski:** Hit the water and race past some of Dubai's most iconic sights along Jumeirah Beach, from the sail-shaped Burj Al Arab to the Atlantis and the curve of the Palm.

- **Waterparks:** Aquaventure at Atlantis The Palm has record-breaking slides, zip lines, shark-filled lagoons, and lazy rivers that wind through the resort. Over at Wild Wadi in Jumeirah, it's all about wave pools, high-speed rides, and a laid-back vibe.
- **The beach at JBR:** A buzzing waterfront spot with beach loungers, casual eats, camel rides, and paddleboarding, all with skyscraper views just steps away.
- **Kite Beach:** A local favorite with a chiller vibe. Great for kitesurfing, beach volleyball, or a post-workout smoothie.
- **Nikki Beach Dubai:** Poolside glamour with a DJ beat. Expect white daybeds, flowing cocktails, and a scene that's equal parts stylish and social.
- **Palm West Beach:** Low-key luxury with chic cafés, shaded loungers, and calm waters with views across the marina that's ideal for a slow, sun-soaked afternoon.
- **Seabob tours or e-foil surfing:** Go full James Bond with these next-gen water toys that let you glide above or dive beneath the surface at speed.
- **Snorkeling and diving:** While Dubai's natural reefs are limited, you'll find shipwreck dives and artificial sites just offshore, great for a half-day adventure.

Sample itinerary

- **Day 1:** Take a private orientation tour through Old and New Dubai. Visit the Jumeirah Mosque, the historic Al Bastakiya district, and take a traditional abra ride across Dubai Creek to explore the Gold and Spice Souks.
- **Day 2:** Soak up the sun at the beach or the Aquaventure or Wild Wadi water parks. Head to the Dubai Mall for shopping, and take in the views from the Burj Khalifa.
- **Day 3:** Venture to Abu Dhabi to visit the Sheikh Zayed Grand Mosque, local outputs of the Louvre and Guggenheim, and cap it off with high-speed thrills at Ferrari World.
- **Days 4–5:** Trade the skyline for sand dunes with an overnight stay in the desert. Ride camels at sunrise, try falconry, go dune surfing, and wind down with stargazing and stillness only the desert can offer.
- **Days 6–7:** Head back to Dubai for one last night, and toast the trip with a stop at the nightly fountain show outside the Burj Khalifa.

Where to eat in Dubai



Image courtesy of Atlantis the Palm

Dubai's dining scene is as bold as its skyline, with tasting menus, beachfront grills, and global flavors with a Middle Eastern twist.

Trendy and elevated eats

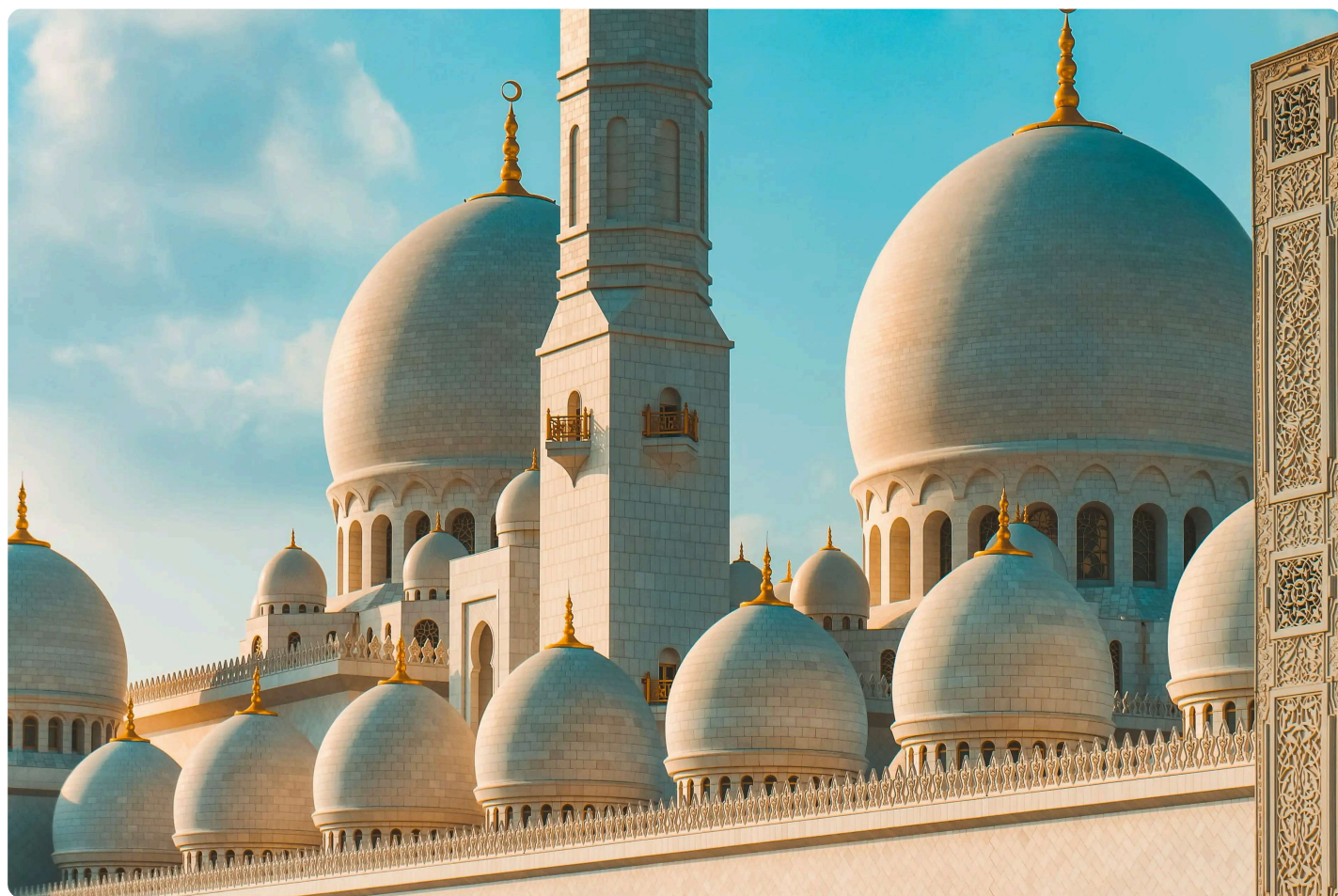
- **Gaia:** Modern Greek food meets understated elegance at this go-to in the Dubai International Financial Center area (DIFC).
- **Clap Dubai:** Tokyo lounge meets Beirut rooftop at this loud, luxe rooftop eatery in the DIFC serving upscale Japanese dishes.
- **CÉ LA VI:** High-rise and high-style pan-Asian plates with sweeping skyline views from the Address Sky View.
- **Studio Frantzén:** Nordic-Japanese fusion in a sleek, elevated space at the top of Nakheel Mall. Expect design-forward plating, bold flavors, and a fashionable crowd.
- **Trèsind Studio:** One of Dubai's most awarded tasting-menu experiences, Trèsind balances progressive chef-driven Indian cuisine with intimacy and theatrical detail.
- **Nobu by the Beach:** The iconic Nobu experience with a laid-back, toes-in-the-sand twist at Atlantis The Royal. Upscale sushi meets beachside calm.

- **3 Fils:** Casual on the surface, culinary powerhouse underneath. This waterfront gem serves inventive, flavor-packed dishes without the fuss or the fanfare.
- **Orfali Bros:** A homegrown favorite in Wasl 51, blending global techniques with Middle Eastern flavors. Casual yet inventive, buzzy but unfussy.

Cultural and local eats

- **Arabian Tea House (Al Fahidi):** Tucked into the historic district, this Emirati café charms with its shady courtyard and traditional décor.
- **ASMA:** Modern Levantine cooking with heart. It's fresh, approachable, and perfect for post-shopping bites in the Dubai Mall.
- **Al Safadi:** A reliable go-to for Lebanese comfort food.
- **Azal Mandi:** Yemeni dishes in a warm, no-frills space.
- **Bastion:** French brasserie on the beach. Elegant but approachable, with a menu made for long, sunlit lunches and seaside dinners.
- **Ariana's Persian Kitchen:** Romantic and richly layered, this spot inside Atlantis The Royal brings Persian cuisine to the spotlight.

Day trips from Dubai



There's more to the UAE than just Dubai. These easy day trips offer everything from culture-rich cities to mountain escapes to see another side of the Emirates.

Sharjah (30–45 min): Known as the UAE's cultural capital, Sharjah is home to calligraphy houses, heritage districts, and standout museums with a more traditional, laid-back pace.

Ajman (35 min): Head to the country's smallest emirate for a breezy beach day. Don't miss the palm-lined corniche and museum tucked inside an 18th-century fort.

Abu Dhabi (1 hr 15 min): The capital is where art, architecture, and spiritual landmarks converge. Don't miss the Sheikh Zayed Grand Mosque or a visit to the Louvre Abu Dhabi.

Ras Al Khaimah (1 hr 30 min): Escape to the mountains at Jebel Jais for hiking, ziplining, and cooler temperatures.

Al Ain (1 hr 45 min): A true oasis town with ancient roots, Al Ain blends culture and calm with camel markets, hot springs, and UNESCO-listed gardens.

Desert escape (45 min–2 hrs): Just outside the city, swap skyline views for sand dunes, with options for luxury resort stays, camel rides, or a sunset dinner.

Trips to add on



Image courtesy of The Oberoi Udaivilas, Udaipur

Dubai serves as both a luxe launchpad and a strategic layover. With Emirates' extensive global network, it's the perfect gateway to these standout destinations.

Maldives (4.5–5 hr flight): A serene counterpoint to Dubai's vibrant energy, the Maldives is ideal for honeymooners or anyone craving peaceful overwater escapes.

India (3–4 hr flight): From Rajasthan's royal palaces to Kerala's tranquil backwaters, India offers a rich, sensory contrast to Dubai's modern indulgence.

Seychelles (4.5 hr flight): These Indian Ocean islands promise pristine beaches and crystal-clear waters, perfect for a nature-focused follow-up to Dubai's glam.

South Africa (8 hr flight): Combine Dubai's luxury with Cape Town's safari thrills or wine country calm, great for travelers wanting to balance adventure with comfort.

Thailand and Southeast Asia (6+ hr flight): Whether it's Bangkok, Bali, or beyond, Dubai is an ideal mid-journey stop with warmth, relaxation, and first-class service before continuing on.

If not Dubai



If you're drawn to Dubai's glam hotels, coastal vibe, and larger-than-life feel but want a fresh spin, these destinations bring a similar mix.

Las Vegas: For clients craving a city that never sleeps, Vegas delivers with over-the-top hotels, chef-driven restaurants, nightlife, and shows. It's flashy, fun, and always turned up.

Miami: Where beach life meets art, fashion, and Latin flavor. It's stylish, sun-soaked, and perfect for travelers who like their city stays with a creative edge.

New York City: No beach required. For travelers chasing culture, couture, and nonstop energy, NYC matches Dubai's sophistication, just at a faster pace.

Baha Mar, Bahamas: A polished resort hub with ocean views, luxury shops, and casino action all in one place. Ideal for travelers who want the high-end experience with toes in the sand.

St. Barth's: Boutique, beachy, and effortlessly chic. It's more low-key than Dubai, but just as detail-driven, perfect for design lovers and jet-setters who like their luxury understated.

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Please provide some details about your trip.

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