

# Desert Nights

DUBAI IS MUCH MORE THAN A STOPOVER DESTINATION – AND HAS MUCH GREATER DEPTH THAN THE POMP AND THE CEREMONY THAT SURROUNDS IT. **CHARLEY LARCOMBE** SHARES RECOMMENDATIONS FROM HER FORMER HOME.



## THE DIFC

I know you shouldn't really have favourites, but... the DIFC, Dubai's financial district is *my* favourite place for cocktails and dinner, art and brunch, or just for a wander and a wonder!

During the day all the banking worker bees are inside some of the most iconic skyscrapers of the Dubai Downtown skyline, from the spear-like Jumeirah Towers piercing the limitless blue sky, and the Gate Building which acts as the doorway to the finance area, to the glass-framed plazas of the world's major banks and hedge funds. If, like me, you can while away an hour gazing at architecture then make this an early morning start point. After 10, the art galleries also come alive in the area and they're good for a nosey around too – in particular Opera Gallery in Gate Village. The curator Sylvain Gaillard is one of the coolest guys in DXB with an easy manner, the latest trainers on his feet and a smart watch on his wrist – and always ready to talk art, without any condescension.

He'll tell you the best restaurant in

the area is La Petite Maison, because he goes there so often for lunch with artists and clients, and it's just across from the gallery – but he's in fact wrong as it's actually *my* favourite restaurant; Roberto's. It's a mouth-wateringly good Italian with a DJ spinning in the evenings, encouraging the post-work crowd to stay on and order the burrata, the black squid pasta and another bottle of the recommended red. This place has a special place in my heart because it also has a killer view of the twinkling Burj Khalifa lit up at night, and hands-down makes the best vodka martinis in Dubai. Scratch that: I mean, the world.

Also, if you're there for work, check out becoming a member at the Capitol Club. It's a great space, right in the thick of the action with a decent restaurant, a humidor (if you're there often, maybe worth investing in some post-brokering-deal cigars!) and access to private meeting rooms.

If you're looking for a smart dinner (all the big names such as Zuma are there), smart cocktails and smart conversation, DIFC is the winner.

## THE OLD TOWN

This has evolved quite a bit since I was last in town, so I'll have to explore just like you! However, good places to start are the spice and gold souks for the sights and sounds of Arabia and the Bastakiya area where the rich merchants used to live. Stop for fragrant tea and *shawarma* for lunch before catching a *dhow* boat ride up Deira Creek. The bright lights of this city take all the credit, but it's this saltwater creek which put Dubai on the map; this was a gateway for traders, way before the discovery of oil.

There are also a few museums and cultural stops such as Sheikh Saeed Al Maktoum's house. The grandfather of the current Dubai ruler's palace is now a museum of photos and snapshots of the Emirates' history.



## THE DESERT

It is quite frankly, mind-blowing. 15 minutes tops out of the centre of the city and you're on the open road with nothing but the tarmac cutting through the sand dunes. You must see it! If you're only in Dubai for a stopover, don't go to the beach, the restaurants, even the old town – go to the desert. It's just awesome. And I have a couple of recommendations on how best to see it.

One, book a balloon ride. I was treated as a Christmas present and the trip left me lost for words... which is a bit of a problem as a writer. However, watching the sun rise from 3,000 feet and seeing the desert surprisingly come alive before you is a once-in-a-lifetime experience. The undulating dunes are home to the elegant oryx, long-limbed gazelles and the proud camels – and the miles and miles of desert really puts things into perspective. Remember to dress warm because it's chilly before the sun hits the sand – no, really – and be prepared for a bumpy landing; I thought it was hilarious, but that may have been nervous delirium. Try [ballooning.ae](http://ballooning.ae) for all the details.

Secondly, go on a desert safari. They're a little cheesy but good fun. You'll be picked up from your hotel and driven out into the dunes for some dune-driving in the 4x4s. The drivers are great, but if you're a little nervous sit in the back seat, not upfront, because you do go careering down those dunes with the feeling that you could topple over at any moment. You'll have an opportunity to

stop for photos – obligatory jumping in the sand shot a must – before heading to a 'traditional' camp in the middle of nowhere. There are camels to ride, shisha to smoke, henna to have tattooed and a surprisingly good meal of usual Middle Eastern kebabs, baba ghanoush, dolmas etc. Then there is cultural entertainment from across the Arab peninsula, including extraordinary belly-dancers with undulating hips and flashing eyes.

Lastly, if you have a few days, check in to Anantara's Qasr Al Sarab resort in the middle of the Rub'Al Khali desert in Abu Dhabi's Empty Quarter. It's a beautiful five star resort with all the usual trimmings of great dining, great rooms, great spa, but there are one or two things here which take it from somewhere special to stay, to somewhere special to remember.

Ask for a private dinner one evening out under the stars. You lay on tapestried cushions and Bedouin-woven carpets with shadows cast by the lanterns as company. The waiters then bring you a feast fit for a king. And because there is zero light pollution, the stars are like nowhere else on earth; they look like they literally kiss the sand on the horizon.

Also, the drive to the resort itself is incredible – you turn off the Al Salam highway and then there's a couple of miles of winding road through the sand to the hotel, gasping as you round every corner, crest every dune. The sand isn't just yellow; it's burnt sienna, glowing embers orange, even deepest purple. It's a work of art.

## THE BEACH

Obviously there are great stretches of beach, accompanied by big-name beach clubs (Nikki, Nasimi, Zero Gravity) whether along the mainland, or out on the man-made Palm. I would personally recommend instead going down to Kite Beach. The wind picks up in the afternoons and that's when you'll see the surfers and kite surfers head out on the water – it's the beach for all the active guys and gals; less 'seen-and-be-seen', more 'Just Do It'. There's a beautiful running track there too, which takes you all the way up to Jumeriah, 10km up to the other end of Dubai. In this area – called Umm Suqeim – there are restaurants aplenty, with many hip-ly converted from storage units and silver airbuses. The queues in particular for Salt, go round the block at lunchtime.

Further up the way is Sunset Beach where you can take the quintessential photo with the Burj Al Arab in the background. Either go early morning for a surf – rent a board from the guys at Surf House Dubai – or at sunset.

For easy sun-beds, play areas for the kids and enough restaurants to appease every member of the family, go to JBR. But beware; the traffic getting down to the strip can be a bit of a headache.

## THE DAY TRIP

On a cultural bent, I would say you MUST drive the two hours to Abu Dhabi purely to see the Sheikh Zayed Mosque. White towers and domes are perfectly offset against the cloudless sky and mirrored in the reflective pools surrounding this mosque. One of the largest of its kind in the world, it can accommodate 40,000 worshippers. Even if you aren't religious, let alone Muslim, I defy you not to feel spiritual whilst you wander the halls and marble walkways.

Remember that this is a place of worship so always adhere to the codes. Ladies, you will be given an abaya (essentially a robe-like dress) when you enter so you are covered, including your head but go there dressed demurely already, ideally with your wrists and ankles covered. They are more lenient towards what guys wear, but again, show your respect by covering up.



## THE BURJ KHALIFA

This sneaks in! You can go up the 160-storey building during the day or for dinner with a view, but it's just as beautiful at the base. Go at night to watch the mesmerising fountain display (it's by the same guys responsible for the Bellagio Fountains in Vegas) and look up to the light show playing across the Burj Khalifa. Without fail, I well up with tears when the sound of Italian singer, Andrea Bocelli's voice plays out of the speakers and the water spray seems to move like choreographed dancers. The area also now boasts the Dubai Opera House, another triumph for Dubai's city landscape.

There are obviously the yachts to rent (go to Dubai Marina), the legendary brunches that make Singapore's look positively prison canteen-like (I think Bubblicious at the Westin still tops the charts), and the endless shopping – including the world's largest mall.... Check it all out and soak it up, but there is so much more to see and enjoy in this metropolitan city. Stay a few days. It's more than worth it. **E**

