



Arabia, Unfaded

Exclusive Resorts Member **David Axelrod** travels to Dubai and Oman and discovers surreal landscapes, eclectic culture, and exquisite cuisine.

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From top left: The Burj Al Arab is one of Dubai's most iconic and innovative hotels; writer, photographer, and Club Member David Axelrod in the UAE.

TAKE ME TO DUBAI

I wanted to see Dubai for myself. I wanted to gawk at Lamborghini cop cars, ski indoors, and island-hop across artificial archipelagos. If Dubai really was the futuristic fantasyland I'd heard it was, I was determined to peel back its extravagant facade and capture the hidden truth within its desert mirage.

Member Vetted



After hopping off a 14-hour nonstop flight from Seattle in a daze, I barely knew where I was until I stepped out onto my hotel balcony. The world's tallest building, the marvelous Burj Khalifa, sliced infinitely into the night sky, ablaze in shimmering light.

Our tour guide described Dubai as a destination “where people can enjoy the whole world in one place.” And judging by the breakfast buffet at the Palace Downtown hotel, that description proved accurate. Sundry spreads of international cuisines surrounded a castle of fruit. It was such a beautiful display, I almost felt guilty digging in.

But self-indulgence is nothing to be ashamed of in Dubai, certainly not at The Dubai Mall, which houses every store you've ever heard of, and then 100 more. The enormous shopping space is hardly the only superlative on Dubai's résumé, as the city can claim a World Record for the longest list of World Records: World's largest aquarium. World's most expensive cocktail (24-karat gold flakes, diamond glass). World's biggest burger and pizza.

Our guide regaled us with rumors of the Sheikh's two pet white tigers, plans for Dubai's upcoming 7-D movie theater, and statistics about coveted complexes of mega mansions. My favorite was “Greece,” a massive development of replica homes built in the Cycladic style... “all *completely* sold out.”

The most baffling stat of all was that none of this existed 30 years ago. Dubai shot up out of thin sand, which is arguably its singular allure. There's something inspiring about the speed and magnitude of the city's growth. Nonetheless I found myself wondering: *Are these skyscrapers even occupied? That fountain show synced with the lights on Burj Khalifa was certainly impressive, but wait... where did all the water come from?*

DUNES + DECADENCE

A dune-bashing excursion to a private, tented desert camp provided the perfect escape. Our driver, Mafud, picked us up at the Palace in a caged Toyota 4-Runner. At the edge of the desert he pulled over to partially deflate the tires. Blasting a playlist of alternating Emirati dance anthems and techno remixes of American pop hits, we charged into an ocean of sand. Mafud grinned as we bounced against the SUV doors and each other, screaming in equal parts joy and terror—whipping, dipping, and nearly flipping over seemingly every dune in Arabia. Pulling into our private camp, protected behind a curtain of dunes, we felt relieved (and a bit queasy). Our chef prepared a feast of kebabs and assorted salads. We ate on cushions under a canvas canopy in profound serenity and felt like displaced nomads—giddy and comfortably lost, sinking into our starry oasis.

ALL ABOUT ABU DHABI + OMAN

Our day-trip to Abu Dhabi proved equally surreal. The Louvre Abu Dhabi, a geometric marvel designed by French architect Jean Nouvel, was the first museum I'd ever visited with a lifeguard on duty. Its signature dome, designed to mimic the sunlight passing through palm fronds, made the museum itself arguably more impressive than its collection of masterpieces (from da Vinci, Gauguin, and Van Gogh, to name a few). What's more, Abu Dhabi's main at-

traction, the iconic Sheikh Zayed Grand Mosque, boasts all the grandeur of the Taj Mahal despite being built just 12 years ago.

For a final Arabian excursion, we flew 45 minutes to Muscat (the capital of Oman) to experience the oldest independent Arab state. Muscat rolls like fog over the Al-Hajar Mountains in clusters of white, clashing against the sapphire gulf. Wandering through Mutrah Souk at night, the glitz of Dubai became a distant memory. Oman delighted us with its craggy desert landscapes, soft pastel palette, peaceful aura, and genuinely warm people.

While Oman felt completely untapped, the Emirates felt like a rocket counting down to launch. In both countries the contrast of religious tradition and technological advancement made for a strange but fascinating dichotomy. Arabia may have seemed like a mirage, but it's not fading any time soon.

Experience

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From left: The applauded Louvre Abu Dhabi; exploring a sea of sand dunes with private guide, Mafud.

