

Dubai: a shopper's paradise

Booming, oil-rich city is luring outsiders. That's likely why it feels so hollow

DUBAI, UNITED ARAB EMIRATES

En route to Africa, I'm in filthy-rich Dubai, where the favourite pastimes are making tall buildings and shopping. Yes, Dubai is the tourism prom queen of the Middle East, the sparkling fashion girl everyone wants to date.

In just 40 years, since oil's discovery here, this city has gone from rags to riches. It's as opposite as imaginable to Yemen, from where I'm coming. The fact that Yemen has named 2005 its "Year of the Tourist" only makes it look more longingly to her glittering cousin, and wonder if her day will ever arrive.

Of course, Dubai gets no travel warnings. And now with a \$5 billion facelift, Dubai's international airport, which is like a giant mall, has room for more gold watches and pearl necklaces. Or get a raffle ticket for a Ferrari or Porsche or Rolls-Royce. They're on display. Or take the draw's winnings in \$400,000 cash.

If you ignore the warnings from foreign affairs in Ottawa, and somehow do get to Yemen's gate in Sana'a, expect less. Less than in Saskatoon. If Dubai's airport is Beatlemania, then Sana'a International is the Swinging Udders. Its latest excitement is getting green paint over orange. That hasn't helped it get close to the 21 million people that poured through Dubai's airport last year.

It seems Yemen, which has just issued its first credit card, needs a shopping blowout. Recently, the 10th annual Dubai Shopping Festival had a whopping three million folks come from around the world to shop, shop, shop as a global village. Sorry, 'Ladies Only' day on Mondays is discontinued. But visit the daily Treasure Hunt and everyone wins. Get some jet-skis.

Or win a stay at Dubai's City Centre. It has a view, because, you know, nobody does buildings like Dubai. Pisa, Italy may be planning a second leaning tower, but for \$900 million Dubai is erecting the world's tallest building. By 2008 you can stand in the Burj Dubai and swoon from 123 floors. That's 700 metres. All to give tower envy to Toronto and that sky-needle on the lakeshore.

Which brings us to what Yemen does have. Great buildings. Tourist estimates for Yemen in 2004 range wildly, from 10,000 to government claims of over 150,000. Whatever the number, many visit just to see the mud-stone architecture. In the highlands of Sana'a, think giant gingerbread houses. No surprise that Sana'a's historic quarter is a UN World Heritage Site. These buildings, found only in Yemen, are now even in a promo-trailer for the new Tom Cruise movie War of the Worlds.

It's one of several recent screen highlights for ancient Arabia Felix. French actress Emmanuelle Beart, the heroine in Mission Impossible I, was just on Yemen's island of Socotra for the popular French TV series The Unknown Land. It films how personalities adjust after they're dropped in some offbeat place for a week.

Yemen also now claims to be the first country in the Arabian Peninsula to make a full feature film. New Day in Old Sana'a is a 90- minute movie about a young man marrying for love rather than arrangement. The \$2.5- million cost of the film, produced almost completely in Old Sana'a, was raised locally. Cast and crew are also almost all Yemenis.

When it's shown in film festivals, this movie will help bring Yemen --often an embarrassment to other Arabs -- to the outside world. This is good. Especially for Dubai. Folks can see it here in their own Dubai Film Festival, and be reminded of Arabian culture's soul.

Yes, Dubai has oil. Five times what Yemen pumps. And while Yemen has strained under the weight of civil war, Islamic extremism and government corruption, Dubai has managed itself smartly, diversified its economy and attracted outsiders. In fact, only one in five of the 3.5 million residents across the United Arab Emirates, are now native citizens.

Which is likely why when I travel through Dubai, it feels so hollow. It's like being surrounded by heaps of gold that's been spun by Rumpelstilskin. It makes you wonder if folks aren't trapped like the princess in that fairy tale. And if their spirits wouldn't do better if some of this stuff turned back into straw again.

Waterloo Region Record
April 9, '05