



INFO SHEET

Culture in Dubai

Behind Dubai's wow factor, is a city with history and culture that is still rooted in Islam and trade. Arab culture and folklore is expressed through music and dance; vibrant souqs and rich art, as well as traditional sports such as falconry, camel racing and dhow sailing which are still popular in Dubai to this day.

It's possible to see the traditional side of life here – in the bustling souqs, from a local wooden boat on Dubai Creek, and in galleries, museums and cafes throughout the city.

Souqs

Dubai is famous for its traditional souqs (markets) – Arabian-style covered outdoor bazaars with a warren of lanes and central courtyards. Nothing compares with the atmosphere and chaos of the souqs – the colours and textures, the cacophony of sounds and the shop owners bargaining for customers. Unlike in the modern shopping malls, bargaining is the norm here. Some of the best include the [Deira Gold Souq](#) for gold and jewellery; the [Deira Spice Souq](#) for exotic herbs and spices; [Bur Dubai Souq](#) for textiles and trinkets; and [Madinat Jumeirah](#) or [Souq Al Bahar](#), a modern take on the souq where you can find just about anything.

Dubai Museum

This wonderful museum should be your first stop for exploring Dubai's history, culture and traditions all under one roof – the 1799 Al-Fahidi Fort, considered the oldest building in Dubai and once the seat of government and residence of Dubai's rulers. It tells the Dubai story through displays of old-time fishing boats and traditional dwellings, instruments and hand-crafted weapons, traditional costumes and jewellery and galleries charting Dubai's exponential growth from tiny trading post to megalopolis.

Bastakiya Quarter

Traffic fades to a quiet hum in the labyrinthine lanes of the historic Bastakiya Quarter, teeming with restored wind tower houses built nearly a century ago by wealthy pearl and textile merchants from Persia. Typical houses are two storeys, with a central courtyard with rooms opening onto it, and decorative arches featuring intricate carvings.

The Sheikh Mohammed Centre for Cultural Understanding operates guided Bastakiya walking tours, but the compact area is also easily explored on an aimless wander. They also host breakfast and lunches through the week - the perfect place to enjoy a traditional Emirati meal while chatting with an Emirati host about UAE culture, customs and religion.



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Abra cruising

Every day 15,000 people cross Dubai Creek (the Creek) on abras, traditional wooden water taxis. You can cross the creek from the Deira to Bur Dubai side for just one dirham (25 cents) or you can hire an **abra** for a personalised cruise, with the wind in your hair and seagulls in your face. If the boat captain speaks a little English you might learn a lot about the Creek and those who work on it.

Art galleries

In recent years Dubai has become a focal point for contemporary Arabic and Persian art. Dubai's small art district, in the Al-Quoz area, is home to cutting-edge galleries including **Gallery Isabelle van den Eynd**, **Third Line** and **Meem Gallery**. In the Bastakiya Quarter you'll find beautiful examples of traditional Arabian arts at the excellent **XVA Gallery**, with a courtyard cafe, and **Majlis Gallery** with sculptures, ceramics, glass and furniture. Head to Sheikh Zayed Rd to visit **Art Space**, with local and international exhibitions, and **B21**, a modern art centre in a converted industrial warehouse.

Dhow wharfage

Dhows are long, flat, wooden vessels used in the Indian Ocean and Arabian Sea, and they've docked at the Creek since the 1830s when the al-Maktoum family established a free-trade port, luring merchants away from Persia. You'll see them precariously loaded with everything from air-conditioners to chewing gum to car tyres, almost all of it re-exported after arriving by air or container ship. Try to chat to the sailors – if you find one who speaks English he may regale you with real-life pirate stories.

Al Ahmadiya School and Heritage House

This renovated 1890 courtyard house once belonged to Sheikh Ahmed bin Dalmouk, the founder of Al-Ahmadiya School (now a museum which you can also visit), and offers a rare opportunity to peek inside a wealthy pearl merchant's residence. Built from coral and gypsum, its rooms wrap around a central courtyard flanked by verandahs.

Sheesha Courtyard

Smoking sheesha is Dubai's most relaxing traditional pastime and palm-filled Sheesha Courtyard is the most enchanting place to enjoy it. Sheesha, also known as a hookah pipe, is both the act of smoking the fragrant flavoured tobacco and the long-stemmed, glass-bottom pipe you smoke from. Sit back and relax on the cushions and puff away!



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Jumeirah Mosque

All of Dubai's mosques are closed to non-Muslims – except this one. If you want to learn about Islamic religion and culture, this splendid, intricately detailed mosque (stunningly lit at night) is open during guided tours operated by the [Sheikh Mohammed Centre for Cultural Understanding](#).

Heritage and Diving Village

A traditional heritage village, located near the mouth of Dubai Creek in the Shindagha district, features potters and weavers practicing traditional crafts, as well as exhibits and demonstrations of pearl diving. The area also includes the official residence of Sheikh Saeed Al Maktoum, Ruler of Dubai (1912-1958). The house, which dates from 1896, houses a rare collection of historic photographs, coins, stamps and documents that record Dubai's history.



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