



MELINDA MURPHY and her family went to Dubai simply to visit friends, but it turned into one of the most diverse and fun trips they've ever taken.

Thirty camels pressed their noses to the metal gate, their knobby-knees dancing with expectation. Hundreds of others waited their turn in the parking lot at the **Al Marmoom** racetrack in Dubai. When the gate lifted, the camels took off in a dusty cloud, loping around the track wearing electronic jockeys that resembled monkeys on their humps. The jockeys were controlled remotely by men in giant SUVs, also racing along paved roads on the outside of the incredibly long track; so long, in fact, the only way to see what was happening at the far end was to watch a giant television screen. As one race finished, the next began.

We were the only Westerners around, with no other women in sight. In fact, there were very few spectators at all. Because we were in a traditional place, I was dressed respectfully with knees and shoulders covered, and felt totally welcome. We watched from a glass bridge that spanned the wide dirt track above the starting gate. Men in traditional clothes offered us free mint tea. I knew I was getting a glimpse of a part of Emirati culture most tourists don't see, a heritage dating back more than 1,000 years. Some feel that camel racing is cruel to the animals – or, worse yet, to the children who are often forced to work as jockeys. The UAE, however, was the first country to ban child jockeys (in 2002) and camels are revered there.

After we tired of watching, we walked around to get a close-up look at the animals. Everybody gave us a big smile and was happy to show us their camels, especially our children. One



camel was sporting an orange neck. I found out later that camels who come in the top three spots are rubbed with precious saffron as a reward. By the way, gambling is illegal in the United Arab Emirates, but there is prizemoney to be won.

And so went our first morning in Dubai.

We finished that same day standing below the **Burj Khalifa**, the tallest building in the world. Wide-eyed, we watched with crooked necks an incredible light show that lit up the entire side of the 163-floor building, choreographed to Adele's "Skyfall" in unison with the **Dubai Fountains** which danced rhythmically below. It was quite simply amazing, unlike any light show I've seen. (Check out [expatliving.sg](http://expatliving.sg) to see a video of the show and more.)

That single day perfectly demonstrates the contrasts of Dubai, a country deeply steeped in tradition, which also embraces the newest and most modern of everything.

### The Sand

No trip to Dubai is complete without a desert safari. We chose **Platinum Heritage Luxury Tours and Safaris** as it's one of the only tour operators allowed in the Dubai Desert Conservation Reserve. We met our guide in the city and he drove us about an hour out into the desert. Feeling like real adventurers with scarves tied around our heads, we climbed into a vintage open-air Land Rover, taking off across the sand into the reserve. We

spotted lots of Arabian oryx (a type of antelope), stopped at an oasis, and then wandered on foot for a bit. My kids loved feeling the silky sand between their toes and learning about the desert from our kind and knowledgeable guide.

When we returned, we watched a falconry show then feasted on Bedouin-style food including warm camel milk and camel stew. "Come on, Mom. It might be your favourite food." Why is it that things you tell your kids always come back to haunt you? I took a deep breath and tasted it. Guess what? Both were shockingly good! After dinner, some men did a traditional Yola dance, followed by drum playing and singing, encouraging everybody to join in. My daughter and I got henna on our hands and my son got a henna scorpion on his arm before we all climbed on camels for a short ride through the dark desert under a full moon. It was magical.

### The Surf

Dubai sits on the Arabian Gulf so there is plenty of room for fun in the water. **JBR** is Dubai's version of Sentosa, with an incredible boardwalk that includes dozens of restaurants and thousands of sunbathers. Just off the coast is **AquaFun**, the world's largest floating obstacle course (it spells "Dubai" from the air). We didn't have enough time to try it, and the kids were happy enough playing in the big waves, but it's definitely a spot for families to visit.

Funnily enough, my favourite thing at JBR was a little Turkish ice-cream food cart near the Shake Shack. The vendor did a little comedy act of sorts, a magical game of “keep away” that made it hard to grab your cone. Each kid giggled incessantly as they tried to nab their icy treat.

One morning, we rented self-drive boats from **Hero OdySEA**. Each adult took one kid and we headed off for a 90-minute adventure, passing right by the **Burj Al Arab**, one of Dubai’s most recognisable landmarks, home to a seven-star hotel. We also got to peek at some of the royal palaces only visible from the ocean, and parts of famous **The Palm Jumeirah Island**. The waves were pretty big, which made me nervous at first, but I quickly realised the inflatable boats were stable and our guide JC was good at his job. This was my husband’s favourite part of the whole vacation. The kids? Well, I’m still a bit deaf from my daughter screaming in delight each time we hit a wave.



### The Shopping

Dubai is also famous for its shopping – it has more malls than Singapore! We spent a little time at **The Dubai Mall**, one of the largest in the world with 1,200 stores tucked in the shadow of the Burj Khalifah. Truth? It has the same stuff you can find anywhere in the world and the prices aren’t much better than here.

I far preferred our trip to Old Dubai. We started at the Dubai Museum, a charming, well-done, hands-on museum in the **Al Fahidi Fort** that explains the history of the city in a way that my kids enjoyed. We then wandered through the textile souk and took a *dhow*, a traditional Arab boat, across the Dubai Creek, which is actually a very busy river. There, we wandered through the spice souk, complete with giant gold bowls piled high with saffron and bags of other unfamiliar spices. The kids worked with a craftsman, chose colours and watched as he painted pictures out of sand inside bottles for them. The gold souk boasts window after window draped with eye-popping gold jewellery.

One evening, we explored **Global Village**, a place that’s a bit hard to describe. It’s a giant – and I mean giant – complex that has smaller versions of the world’s best-known landmarks, and architecturally-appropriate buildings representing countries, each hawking wares from that part of the world. There’s a giant street of food from across the globe, too. The real highlight was the wild show of amazing car and motorcycle stunts and daring feats by performers. It seemed a little out of place amidst the professional cultural dances on the stage,

but my kids loved every heart-pumping minute. (This place was my daughter’s favourite!) Global Village is seasonal and just closed out its 24th year with six million visitors, a new record. Imagine what next year’s 25th anniversary will bring!

The granddaddy of all shopping was a trip to another of the country’s seven emirates, **Sharjah**, a more traditional area. There, our friends took us to the **Central Market**, also known as the Blue Souk because of the blue tiles on the outside of the multiple buildings. The labyrinth of hallways is bursting with great deals – everything from jewellery and pashminas to antiques at far better prices than in Dubai. We went to buy a rug, which was actually fun because of Adil, the owner of **Esfahan Exhibition Ltd**. He was a funny, low-pressure salesman who seemed to understand and respect our budget. The best part? He has seven kids of his own so he was patient as ours did somersaults across the carpets.

### Kid Time

We splurged and spent one night at world-famous **Atlantis The Palm, Dubai**. A night at the hotel includes entry to the spectacular water park attached. (Hint: check in at 9am and hit the park when it opens at 10am. You can also use the park the next day, too, even after checkout). There’s no lazy river here. Instead, a bunch of exhilarating white-water rivers are all interconnected meaning you can float a zillion different ways and never quite see it all. The park is also famous for its slides; our favourites were Zoomerango and Aquaconda, two wild family rides. The resort also has lots of restaurants, a massive pool and a small but well-done aquarium. Some choose to swim with sharks or feed rays, but we didn’t shell out for that (or for the pricey underwater room).

Dubai’s has *lots* of water parks and amusement parks, by the way. You could spend a week there and check out a different one every day.



**Adult Time**

We left the kids home one night and headed to **Souk Madinat Jumeirah**, a lovely area dotted with expensive restaurants, high-end shops and fancy hotels on the Dubai Water Canal, a man-made stretch of water with gorgeous views of the Burj Al Arab. The 2km strip was built to feel like something from romantic days gone by and the shops here have more traditional wares than in other malls. If you can't make it to Central Market, but want some Middle Eastern trinkets, this is a good bet. I loved it.

**The Side Trip**

We drove four hours north through several other emirates to **Musandam**, a small enclave of Oman that sits on the Strait of Hormuz and is surrounded by the UAE. The landscape here is dramatically different with craggy mountains jutting out of the sand, reflected by pristine turquoise water. Our hotel, the **Atana Musandam**, was literally in the middle of nowhere with little there other than wild goats, the small town of **Khasab** and a giant hypermarket. The restaurant has a variety of food, but we were partial to the Omani dishes, a bit different to other Middle Eastern food I've had.



We took a *dhow* tour with **Dolphin Khasab Tours** around the fjords, sometimes called the "Norway of Arabia". Our wide, slow-moving boat was draped with Persian rugs and comfy cushions. The scenery was beautiful even though we were in the middle of a sandstorm so the visibility wasn't the best. There were lots of jellyfish in the water, but the captain knew where to take us so we could safely snorkel and spot all sorts of sea creatures. Of course, the real reason to go is to see the wild dolphins playing in the water. What a treat! There are also some off-road mountain tours available in the area, but they weren't appropriate for our friends' six-month-old baby. (Note: If you go, crossing the border can take some time. Women travelling with children apart from their husbands should have copies of their husband's passport and a letter signed by him saying it's okay for you to leave the country with the children.)

**The Verdict**

I went to Dubai not really knowing what to expect. So, what did I learn? Expect the unexpected. It really is a place of incredible diversity. A woman in an *abaya* will be on the beach next to a woman in a string bikini. Camels walk next to giant Land Cruisers. *Dhows* lumber next to speedboats. The best part for me is that our kids got a taste for things they simply haven't seen in Asia and they loved each and every adventure. *EL*

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