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Date: Sat, 14 Nov 2009 18:00:03 +0000

Seven-star family time in Dubai

BY WYNN HORN, FOR THE CALGARY HERALD NOVEMBER 13, 2009

STORY

PHOTOS (1)

Kids of all ages will love dune-bashing in the desert.

Kids of all ages will love dune-bashing in the desert.

Photograph by: Wynn Horn, For the Calgary Herald

I have occasionally been accused of having my head in the clouds, so when I woke up in a hotel room on my first day in Dubai, it was no surprise to find myself literally floating in the air. From my double-digit hotel floor I could see nothing but uncharacteristic clouds and two lone skyscraper spires poking eerily through the sea of cumulus. It seemed a fitting introduction to this renowned city of miracles. I have occasionally been accused of having my head in the clouds, so when I woke up in a hotel room on my first day in Dubai, it was no surprise to find myself literally floating in the air. From my double-digit hotel floor I could see nothing but uncharacteristic clouds and two lone skyscraper spires poking eerily through the sea of cumulus. It seemed a fitting introduction to this renowned city of miracles.

"It's kind of fun to do the impossible" read the quirky message that greeted me on a billboard at Dubai airport's spanking new Terminal Three. And if any place knows about both fun and the impossible, I figured it had to be Dubai.

Dubai is the world's fastest-growing tourist destination, with six million total visitors – 800,000 of them British, for whom Dubai is a very popular family destination. But, these days, Dubai is also reaching further afield. Luckily for Canadians, that means flights can now be found for as little as \$1,400 per person, and spectacular beach-side hotels like Atlantis and Jumeirah Beach Resort are matching with incredible deals of their own. It's no coincidence that Emirates Airlines has just diverted its giant A380 airliner from New York to Toronto, to meet Canadian demand.

My assignment? To determine whether Dubai is indeed a fabulous family holiday destination for Canadians. Based on my experience as both a

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mom and a writer, I give Dubai seven stars. Following are my top seven picks...

1. Desert safari: I admit I was a little hesitant about an Arabian Adventures dune bashing adventure. Too tame? Too scary? In fact, the Sundowner dinner safari turned out to be much better than expected. Older kids will love the thrilling rides up and down sand dunes as part of a cavalcade of white SUV's, steered vertically, sideways and almost upside down steep and slippery sand dunes by incredibly well-trained drivers. I loved the stunning desert landscape bathed in sunset hues. Kids will love the desert 'camp,' complete with camel rides, belly dancers and henna painting, and a buffet dinner under the stars, seated on huge Arabian-style cushions... Yes, this was 'touristy,' but the dune ride was thrilling, and I highly recommend it for families with older kids who don't scare easily. See <http://www.arabian-adventures.com/>

2. Wild Water: The Wild Wadi water park next to Jumeirah Beach Hotel boasts two dozen rides and attractions, including the "Jumeirah Sceirah" (33 metres high with speeds of up to 80 km/h!) and the super-scary "Tunnel of Doom." If you stay at the iconic, family-friendly Jumeirah Beach resort, you get free admission to Wild Wadi, plus early admission. See: <http://www.wildwadi.com/> I also highly recommend a day at Atlantis Resort's Aquaventure. This 42-acre water park sends bathers through a series of rapids, waterfalls, waves and meandering rivers. You can also swim with the dolphins, an expensive 30 minute once-in-a-lifetime experience. Rates: all day, CDN \$56, children, CDN \$47. (Tip: A Sundowner pass is CDN \$28 for adults and children.) www.atlantisthepalm.com.

3. Abra ride: Abras – traditional boats used to transport residents across Dubai Creek – are a great, authentic experience, even if the benign-sounding Dubai Creek is actually surprisingly choppy and busy. Board on the Deira side and disembark at the textile market on the Bur Dubai side. Tour companies also offer dhow dinner cruises or custom abra cruises to sites like the Ra al Khor Bird Sanctuary. If you stay at the amazing Madinat Jumeirah resort, you will travel around the resort's extensive waterways by abra. Not a guest? You can now take an abra tour of the resort from the Souk Abra stations near Toscana and Barzar at Souk Madinat Jumeirah. See www.jumeirah.com.

4. Souks: For an amazing glimpse into everyday Arabic life, Dubai's spice and gold markets are not to be missed. I was truly surprised at the the hustle and bustle and trade going on – this is no manufactured tourist attraction, it's the real deal, and a real education for kids. Near the souks, lining Dubai's harbour for miles, are colourful, rickety dhows (boats) loading and unloading cargo - everything from fridges to ketchup, Tang, and sacks of nuts for – and from – Iran and North Africa. Take a walk along the harbour and vote on which dhow looks least seaworthy.

5. Heritage: Highly recommended is the Dubai Museum and Dubai Heritage Village. The museum isn't far from the Bastakia Quarter so history buffs can make a day of it. Dubai Museum's exhibits are incredibly well-done, with realistic tableaux depicting life for early Dubai fishermen and pearl traders. Don't miss it, even if you don't usually like museums, but come early before the tour buses.

6. Shopping: Dubai Mall is one of the world's biggest (1,000 stores; 30 million visitors so far) and a destination in its own right. I loved the location near the five-star Address hotel. The mall sits in the shadow of the Burj

Dubai, the world's tallest freestanding building, and fronts the world's largest fountain light show (bigger than Vegas' Bellagio). However, I liked The Mall of the Emirates best, perhaps because I was there on a Friday – the start of the weekend – and the mall was filled with strolling Emirati families. But the real surprise was the prices – the Canadian exchange rate made shopping such a bargain that I regretted buying clothes before I left Canada. A tip: Save some money for shoes; they're a bargain.

7. Swimming and Kids' Clubs: This, alone, will occupy children for many hours a day. Most hotels have a dedicated childrens' pool – Jumeirah Beach Hotel boasts five pools, including a family pool and a kids' pool, plus a Sinbad Kids Club with brand new play areas. At Atlantis, they offer a Kids Club and Club Rush. See www.jumeirah.com or <http://www.atlantisthepalm.com/thingstodo/clubrush.aspx>.

Since I was in Dubai in May, several new family activities have popped up – no surprise. Here are a few that sound worthwhile...

Stargate: This brand new theme park/playland is home to several futuristic-looking domes, including Mars, a three level padded playground with air shooters and curly tube slides and tons of space for kids to tear around. The Earth dome houses a roller coaster, a massive arcade, go-carts, a 3D movie theatre, ice rink and – natch – a really big food court. See www.stargatedubai.com.

Dubai metro: Dubai's public transport addition is apparently a stunner. Not only is the Metro clean, cheap, fast and efficient, it will also be an exciting experience for little ones. The last station of the monorail is Aquaventure station – riding suspended across the water offers a great view of the Atlantis Hotel and the famous PalmJumeirah islands. See www.dubaimetro.eu.

Burj Dubai: The tallest tower in the world, an 800-metre-plus icon, opens in January 2010 and the viewing platform on Level 124 promises to be a high-priority family attraction. Just wait until you tell the kids the Burj elevator will be travelling at a speed of 10 metres per second, on a journey of about 60 seconds, up to a floor-to-ceiling glass observation deck, open-air deck and telescopes. See www.burjdubai.com.

Atlantis tours: Atlantis now offers daily guided Back of House Tours that sound fascinating. Led by a guide, guests above the age of six experience the work being done by 150 full-time marine animal specialists. Kids can also take part in feedings, including the anchovy/ coral tank, the giant groupers, moray eels, piranhas, and a Shark Lagoon hands-on feeding of ravenous cow rays. See www.atlantisthepalm.com.

If You Go: Dubai Department of Tourism & Commerce Marketing (<http://www.dubaitourism.ae/>) + Emirates Airline, www.emiratesair.com + Time Out Family & Kids Guides, www.timeoutdubai.com

Tell the kids they get to fly on one of the world's biggest airplanes – the A380 – at Mach 0.85, or about 900 km/h at cruising altitude! Fly the A380 direct with Emirates from Toronto. See www.emirates.com. Or fly Air Canada, switching to Emirates in Frankfurt. Roundtrip flights can be found for as little as \$1,300 per person.

Currency: 1 CDN dollar is 3.48 AED OR 1 AED Dirhams is .2872 to the Canadian dollar

A tip: You may not find fantastic hotel deals on Dubai hotel web sites – many still claim they haven't been forced to lower their rates. Find the best deals through a good travel agent or tour operator, who can negotiate bulk deals for airline seats and rooms.

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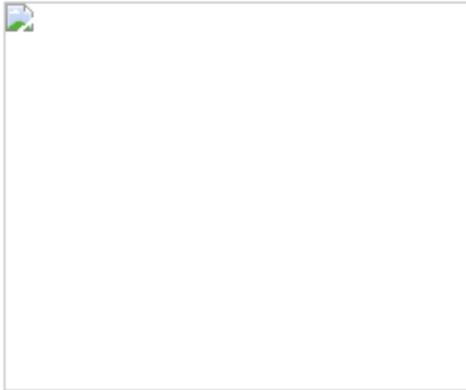
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