

# Dubai: today's Florence

By WAQĀS AHMED

GLOBAL CORRESPONDENT, FIRST

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A phenomenal city-state, run by a powerful ruling family whose multi-faceted interests and visionary leadership manifest in the commissioning of grand and glorious works of art and architecture, the creation of a thriving economic hub and the attraction of the best foreign practitioners from all fields and regions. While this description aptly fits 15th century Florence during the rule of the Medici, it is equally applicable to the 21st Century Middle Eastern Emirate of Dubai. Over the past four decades, Dubai – now the most populous Emirate in the UAE – has emerged from a small pearl fishing village to become arguably the world's most vibrant international hub for trade, art, sports, education, healthcare, technology, media, logistics, real estate, finance, hospitality and more.

The Italian city-state of Florence under the Medici became the birthplace of the European Renaissance – a period which saw exceptional breakthroughs in art, science and philosophy. The culture created by the Medici in Florence attracted the best artists, scientists, philosophers, merchants, poets and architects from around the world. Artists such as Da Vinci, Michelangelo, Verrocchio and Botticelli, composers such as Isaac and Agricola, and philosophers including Pico della Mirandola and Machiavelli flocked to this magnificent city-state to seek their fortunes and, in turn, contribute to its vibrancy and brilliance.

Modern day Dubai has a similar attraction for the ambitious and talented. Since the turn of the millennium, Dubai's population has more than doubled due to the influx of foreigners who – coming from over 200 nations – now account for 84 per cent of the population. As well as hundreds of thousands of young (80 per cent are younger than 40) professionals and manual labourers, these include leading sportspeople (such as Rodger Federer, David Beckham, Andrew Flintoff and Tiger Woods), businessmen (such as Donald Trump), Fashion Designers (such as Giorgio Armani) as well as many artists and scientists. Of course today the influx is of companies and organisations, as much as it is of individuals. Its geographic location together with its well-earned international stature has meant that most major international organisations, corporations, associations and bodies now have an office in Dubai.

Ever since its spectacular emergence, Dubai has always strived to accomplish the biggest and best in

every field and sector. Thanks to the international talent recruited by the ruling Al Maktoum family, the Emirate has broken many records including the world's tallest building (Burj Al Khalifah), the world's most lavish hotel (Burj Al Arab), the world's biggest shopping mall (Dubai Mall), one of the world's largest man-made islands (Palm Island) and even the world's first indoor ski slope (Ski Dubai). Despite being the most expensive city in the Middle East, it has also been ranked as the region's best place to live.

Dubai's development mantra has consistently been 'diversification, diversification, diversification'. Special free-zones and cluster hubs have been developed for all fields of activity including health (Dubai Healthcare City), finance (Dubai International Financial Centre), media (Dubai Media City), sports (Dubai Sports City) and technology (Smart City). Flagship exhibitions, conferences and trade fairs concerning almost every economic sector imaginable are hosted in Dubai throughout the year. World-class fashion boutiques, art galleries, educational institutions and think-tanks have been established. Dubai has become an architect's heaven and its cityscape contains a myriad of architectural designs, some traditionally inspired while most exhibiting the modern dynamism the city has come to represent. This policy of rigorous diversification has allowed the economy to grow at a remarkable average of 10 per cent a year since 2000.

Not only does the Ruler of Dubai (who is also Vice President and Prime Minister of the UAE) play host to these various activities, he has himself been described as a 'new age Renaissance man', demonstrating accomplishment in various fields. In addition to being one of the leading statesmen in the region, Sheikh Mohammad bin Rashid Al Maktoum is one of the finest Nabati poets of his generation, as well as a world champion equestrian, a commissioned army officer, and among the region's most influential business leaders. He is also an avid patron of the arts and one of the leading active philanthropists in the world. His multiple talents and interests as an individual – not unlike Lorenzo de Medici who was a talented poet, painter, diplomat, hunter, jousting and horse breeder – are perhaps what inspire his multi-dimensional vision for the Emirate.


While still with close links to the Church, the Medici propagated the revolutionary idea

of humanism - a philosophy that focused on individualism and freethinking. Similarly, the Al Maktoums are careful to keep Islamic principles entrenched in Dubai's values and laws but nonetheless adopt a relatively moderate, secular and open-minded approach to its socioeconomic development. Both city-states struggled to maintain the balance, being frequently taunted by both religious and secular extremists. Dubai though, seems to be succeeding. Despite being a stone's throw from some of the most dangerous places in the world, it is considered one of the world's safest places and it is often referred to as 'the Las Vegas without the casinos'.

For Dubai, parallels have also been drawn with Muslim economic, cultural and intellectual epicentres from the past such as 11th Century Abbassid Baghdad, 12th Century Fatimid Cairo, 13th Century Ummayyad Cordova, 15th Century Safavid Isfahan, and 16th Century Mughal Agra. Here too - under the vision of ruling Caliphs, Sultans and Emirs - magnificent buildings were built, beautiful art commissioned, scientific breakthroughs made, vibrant trading hubs developed and a lasting culture formed. But being a city-state, the analogy of Renaissance Florence is perhaps more relevant regardless of the few differences.

A frequent criticism of Dubai is that it has become culturally soulless, extravagantly materialistic and economically unsustainable. But one must be careful not to over-romanticise history and instead recognise that Florence under the Medici would have faced similar cynicism by many of its contemporaries. But

all glorious civilisations have indeed fallen; often as a result of the extravagance that once allowed them to flourish. Dubai itself seemed invincible until the recent global financial crisis when its financial markets collapsed and property bubble burst. But the Emirate is recovering and in many respects remains 'the world's fastest city'. Moreover, to retain its own heritage and avoid the dilution or even complete extinction of its indigenous culture, Dubai Culture and Arts Authority Dubai Culture further looks to leverage the cultural diversity of its expatriate population and foreign influences to foster creativity.

Florence's principal accomplishment was the successful export of its cultural and intellectual mores to the rest of the region. Can the Dubai model and the ideas it generates catch on and spread through its region? The recently conducted Arab Youth Survey indicated that young Arabs in the region want their nations to emulate the UAE, thanks to Dubai in particular which has won a global reputation as a symbol of dynamism, relative freedom and opportunity. Moreover international investments made by Dubai's government-related entities (GREs) such as Dubai World, Dubai Holding and the Investment Corporation of Dubai are ensuring Dubai's footprint is left in Europe, Africa, Asia and the Middle East. But Dubai is yet to generate its own groundbreaking philosophical ideas, technological inventions and artistic masterpieces - tools that will be pivotal to securing the Emirate's legacy as the 21st Century's Renaissance capital of the world. 

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Dubai has come to symbolise a dynamism and diversity that was once synonymous with Renaissance Florence