

Big, bigger, biggest

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Michelle Wranik charts the rivalry between Dubai and Abu Dhabi.

Much like the rivalry between Sydney and Melbourne, there has always been a hint of competition between Dubai and Abu Dhabi, two of the biggest and most important of the seven emirates making up the United Arab Emirates. They're a bit like Serena and Venus Williams. Everyone thinks they want to knife each other in the back – especially during Wimbledon – but we'll never know for sure. Who will win the trophy in the competition between Dubai and Abu Dhabi? Time will tell.

Dubai

Rather like Vegemite, Dubai is either loved or loathed but there's no denying the flashiest city in the United Arab Emirates has grabbed the world's attention. In the same way that Paris Hilton sashays past a crowd of paparazzi, Dubai knows how to work the camera.

Unless you're a hardened sceptic, it's hard not to be impressed by all the man-made grandeur, especially when you gawp at the sheer scale of any of the skyscrapers lining the city's 12-lane artery, Sheikh Zayed Road. Size limitations and subtlety simply weren't in the rule book. In fact, the book was probably binned. You can imagine the group of dishdasha-wearing Arabs standing around a proposed design, shaking their heads and mouthing the word "bigger".

Wowing the world with structural icons is what Dubai does best. Take the Burj Al Arab, with its sky-high helipad, for example, or the Atlantis Hotel on the phantasmagorical palm-shaped island, Palm Jumeirah, which has some rooms facing an 11-million-litre aquarium packed with exotic fish.

Dubai also blitzes its competitors with the shopping. The Mall of the Emirates is the showpiece, with about 450 retailers and an indoor ski slope. Affectionately called "Moe", or "more of everything", by locals, this mall was once the biggest in the world. But as Dubai likes to trump even itself, Dubai Mall, with its 8.3-metre-high aquarium and underwater zoo, now holds the lofty title. To boot, it's built in the shadow of the Burj Dubai Tower, the world's tallest building, and overlooks the world's biggest fountain ... you get the point.

Such scale, wealth and outrageous excessiveness can be off-putting but there's something rather intoxicating about the idea of a desert megalopolis. Especially one ruled by such a charismatic leader: Sheikh Mohammed Bin Rashid al Maktoum. When it comes to the cool stakes, the Sheikh has a manicured finger firmly on the pulse. He's on Facebook. And Twitter. He mingles with the in-crowd at the Royal Ascot horse races, looking dapper in a top hat. He has even recently released a book of poetry.

Despite the infamous sex-on-the-beach scandal, in which two visiting Britons were sentenced to three months in prison, expats have found Dubai rather intoxicating, too, giving the city a global feel and no shortage of nightlife. Foodies won't be disappointed either, with Michelin-starred chefs such as Nobu Matsuhisa, Gordon Ramsay and Pierre Gagnaire all opening restaurants. And thanks to many generations of Indian and Pakistani expatriates, you can find some of the tastiest curries and thalis at rock-bottom prices in Karama or Satwa – both grungier, though character-filled suburban areas.

It's in these lesser-known areas where Dubai hides most of its surprises. Like parts of the beachside Umm Suqeim or Jumeirah, where there are small mosques on every corner, ramshackle fishermen's huts and a well-loved sailing club. Or the scruffy commercial district, Al Quoz, where the number of art galleries sprouting up suggests a city ready for a cultural renaissance.

The labyrinth of souks in Deira, on the eastern side of Dubai Creek, also offers a glimpse into the city's past. The muddled rabbit warrens of stalls manned by Indian and Persian merchants sell everything from tacky magnets to fine silk, gold and spices. Walking along the creek at night when the calls to prayer sound in unison from the surrounding mosques feels worlds away from glacially air-conditioned shopping malls. There's even a Little India of sorts, in the form of Hindi Lane – a chaotic alley behind the fabric souk, packed with stalls selling flower garlands, incense and statues of Hindu idols.

For those who fail to see beyond the fancy facade, Dubai is the epitome of gaudy. But scrape beneath the surface and that's where the similarity between Paris Hilton and Dubai begins and ends. It's not as synthetic as it looks.

Abu Dhabi

Abu Dhabi is not a city mentioned in the same breath as Dubai, New York or Paris but that's all set to change. It might be lesser known but it's the capital of the United Arab Emirates and, since hitting the oil jackpot in 1958, is the richest city in the world, sitting on billions of dollars worth of reserves.

Abu Dhabi is smaller and far more reserved than its show-pony relative. There are far fewer skyscrapers, no glitz and, from the immediate look of it, no glam. Connected to the mainland by two bridges, it's spread out in a T-shape that leads to The Corniche – the main drag lined with tailors, cheap Lebanese restaurants and beauty salons. The Corniche curving around the aquamarine-coloured shoreline has few cars and even fewer people. In the height of summer, it can feel more like a sleepy coastal town than a bustling capital city.

What Abu Dhabi doesn't have, however, it is building. From its rather humble Bedouin beginnings as a peaceful, pearl-diving island, it is rising like a sandy phoenix, quietly evolving into a capital of culture.

Today, one of Abu Dhabi's islands, 27-square-kilometre Sadiyaat, is shrouded in a cloud of dust kicked up by cranes and construction workers. But by 2013, Sadiyaat – or the "island of happiness" – will host an eye-popping collection of museums, galleries and universities, including the Louvre and the Frank Gehry-designed Guggenheim, five-star hotels, championship golf course and a luxury marina designed for super-yachts. Then, of course, there's a concert hall by architect Zaha Hadid and the Sheikh Zayed National Museum, with the British Museum on side to consult on the project. It's all going to cost squillions but when you're sitting on coffers lined with oil, that's pocket change.

On nearby Yas Island, another mega project is under way. The formula one racing circuit (with an accompanying Ferrari theme park) will be finished in months, ready to host the first race of the season in November.

Meanwhile, I ask a friend who knows the city intimately: what else is there to see in Abu Dhabi? He hesitates before responding. "Well," he begins, "this is a question put to me often and, alas, people tend to go away disappointed. There isn't a huge amount for tourists to do."

He isn't all that wrong. Stopping off at the tourist information centre, two Emirati men leap to their feet, seeming genuinely surprised to see us. They pour cups of fragrant Arabic coffee and hand over free maps with all the points of interest circled in blue ink. And you could feasibly see them all in a day.

The biggest circle of ink points to the Sheikh Zayed Bin Sultan Al Nahyan Grand Mosque. Despite its feigned nonchalance for competition, Abu Dhabi didn't cut corners when it came to this towering shrine to Islam, maybe even catching a little bit of the biggest-and-best bug from Dubai. Driving towards the city, it's unmissable, with 80 dazzlingly white marble domes and minarets looming majestically, much like the Ivory Tower in the film *The Neverending Story*.

The whole thing has cost more than \$500 million, a good portion of that going towards the Persian carpet covering the interior, classed as the biggest in the world. With mosaic-tiled fountains, even the ablution sections look more like a five-star hotel bathroom than an area where Muslims wash before praying. Then there are the nine Swarovski crystal chandeliers, one of which weighs 9.5 tonnes and is said to be the biggest in the world.

Next stop is the Emirates Palace, billed as one of the most lavish hotels in the world. Some might even say this \$3 billion showpiece was built as a not-so-subtle reaction to Dubai's seven-star Burj Al Arab hotel. With almost ridiculously resplendent interiors rightfully earning it the "palace" tag, it's frequented by slack-jawed tourists and has some of the city's best restaurants.

Abu Dhabi's serene island existence and pearl-fishing roots are still tangible when walking around the Dhow Wharf, where an army of old wooden Arab fishing vessels bakes in the sun. They're used to haul in fish such as hammour, native to the Gulf waters, with a host of Arabic restaurants nearby to try it. One of the most famous, Al Arish, was opened by the much-loved late ruler of the UAE, Sheikh Zayed.

Aside from the endless desert, the eastern mangroves fringing the city offer ripe kayaking and camping opportunities on tiny, uninhabited islands. Socially, Abu Dhabi doesn't have as much to offer as Dubai but it was a coup when the world music festival WOMAD rolled in to town this year and the spectacular Red Bull Air Race is always a draw.

It might be a while before it's anywhere near Dubai's league but give it time. Abu Dhabi is aiming high – even for the stars, perhaps. Especially if the rumours about it buying into Richard Branson's Virgin Galactic are true. Abu Dhabi: the first emirate on the moon. Leaving Dubai, quite literally, in the dust.