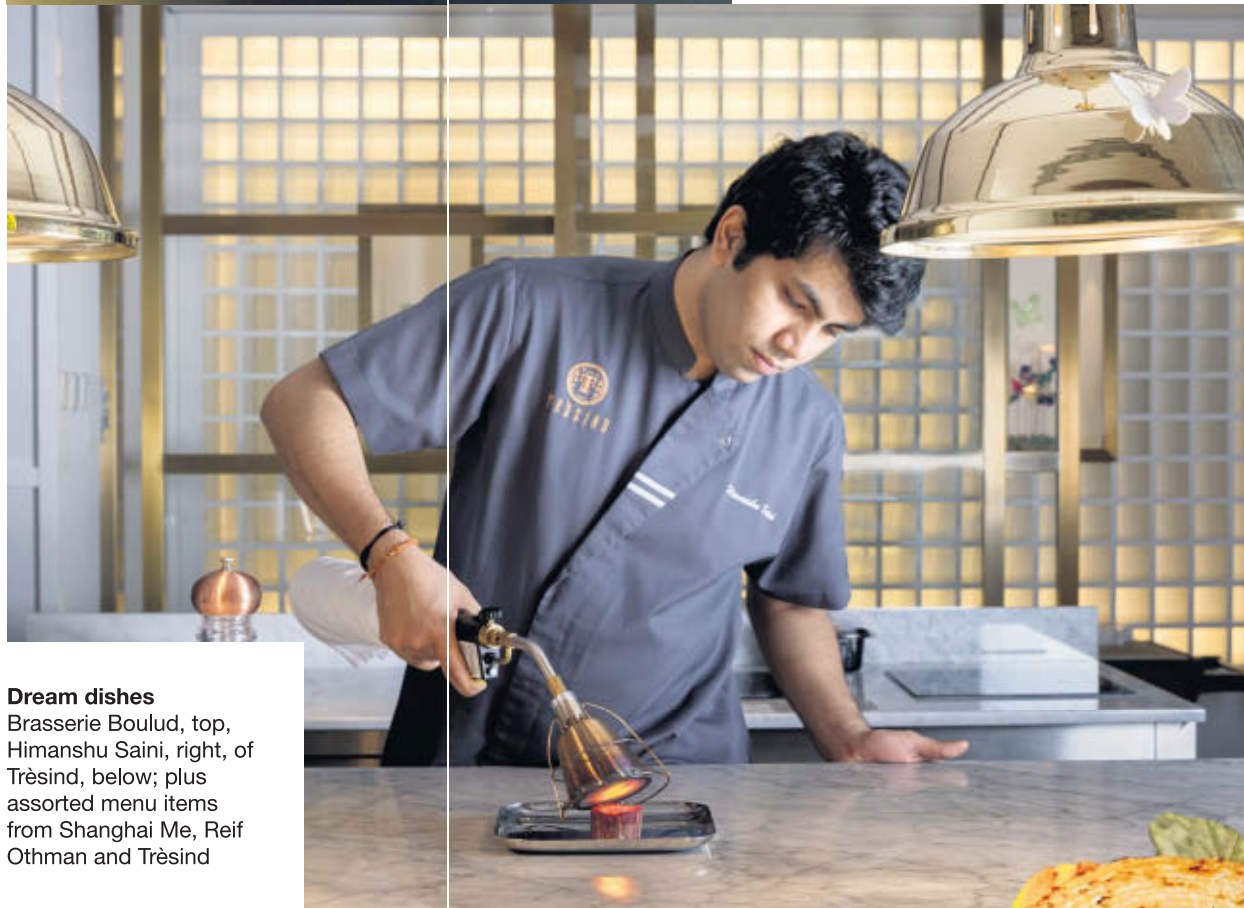


BROUGHT TO YOU BY BEST AT TRAVEL

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Dream dishes
Brasserie Boulud, top; Himanshu Saini, right, of Trésind, below; plus assorted menu items from Shanghai Me, Reif Othman and Trésind



BOOM TOWN: WHY DUBAI IS AT THE TOP TABLE FOR FOOD LOVERS

Sarah Hedley Hymers takes you on a tasting tour of the emirate, where the ever-expanding restaurant scene has earned its spot on the world culinary map

The gut-busting volume and diversity of restaurants in Dubai feeds my obsession with dining. From affordable street food to blow-the-budget brunches, I've done a lot of eating here over the years. As yet more enticing venues open their doors, seemingly undeterred by the pandemic, 2021 looks set to be the emirate's most delectable year to date.

New to the scene is the Middle East's first-ever L'Atelier de Joël Robuchon, in DIFC (Dubai International Financial Centre), presided over by Robuchon's protégé, executive chef Axel Manès. The time-honoured menu is packed with Robuchon's signatures, including his elevated poached egg, *l'oeuf de poule mollet et friend*. After being cooked *sous vide* – sealed in a vacuum bag and cooked in water – the perfectly soft and tasty hen egg (as the original French name translates) is given a fried pastry crust and accessorised with square-cut gems of smoked salmon and a shimmering *quenelle* of caviar. Diners get 10 grams of Oscietra in the Dubai dish, simply named 'Le Caviar'.

Not on the menu is Robuchon's famous mash, but – as the *maitre d'* tells me – "the restaurant would not open without it". These in the know request this simple yet sumptuously buttery dish of nutty French *kette* potatoes pureed with milk, salt and a pound of butter for every two pounds of potatoes.

Other exciting Dubai openings include Brasserie Boulud, serving legendary chef Daniel Boulud's crowd-pleasing BB burger

turbo-charged with peppery rocket, confit tomato and molten raclette cheese.

Neighbouring Taiko, an outpost of the acclaimed Amsterdam original, crafts contemporary Japanese cuisine. Here, melon gets a stunning makeover, from humble fruit to signature dish, as watermelon sashimi dressed in salty miso-soy and black sesame seeds.

Both restaurants are in the recently launched Sofitel Dubai The Obelisk, a monument-styled hotel pointed directly at foodies.

While these already-famous arrivals turn heads, established homegrown chefs continue to develop a loyal following. A rather plain space at the back of Trésind restaurant in Dubai's Voco hotel provides the blank canvas for Trésind Studio, the 20-seat dining room where talented chef Himanshu Saini serves marathon 13- to 15-course tasting menus.

With each new instalment comes a fresh look; for the fifth, the windowsills have been filled with pot plants echoing the fashionably "plant-biased" degustation with dishes ranging from a smoky charred corn waffle to a crisp turnip tart scattered with flowers and micro herbs. The earthy truffle consommé served with skewers of soy-glazed king oyster mushrooms is a master of disguise, looking every bit like chicken until I sunk my teeth into it to discover its musky moreish secret. Only a few dishes come with meat or fish, and there's a fully vegetarian menu, too.

Despite Dubai's growing appreciation for

clean green cuisine, the emirate retains its appetite for meat and, concurrently, a trend for posh beef sandwiches is raging. Revered Dubai chef Reif Othman leads the way. From his earlier days at Zuma Dubai, he's now slicing a more affordable Wagyu across his eateries, including Reif Japanese Kushiyaki at Palm Jumeirah's new Food District, a licensed dining hub housing 13 homegrown concepts under one roof. His 'Wagyu Katsu Sando', a toasted sandwich of juicy panko-crusted beef with tangy tonkatsu sauce is even available on Deliveroo.

Another homespun favourite, Shanghai Me, with Shane Macneill at the helm, offers a Wagyu beef sub in an upscale, theatrically Chinese setting. His beef is breaded, fried and sandwiched between neat toasted fingers topped with wisps of spring onion and edible gold leaf.

Nearby, there's a sherry revolution going on in the well-stocked cellar of Boca, a Euro bistro serving its fair share of farm-to-table creations. After polishing off a locally grown black and red radish salad, picked that morning, I was first introduced to Fino La Cala, a sherry crafted by master blender Gonzalez Byass and Albert Adria, Ferran's brother and former pastry chef at iconic El Bulli. While being coached on its unusual notes of almond and nori, I was struck by how it took a move to Dubai to develop a taste for a drink I'd designated for Christmas holidays in old Blighty. With the celebration of a new year approaching, now is certainly as good a time as any to raise a toast to epicurean innovations of Dubai.

At Trésind Studio, in a 20-seat dining room, Himanshu Saini serves marathon 13- to 15-course tasting menus

COMING SOON...

Clap

Bairut's contemporary Japanese restaurant is the late-dining venue *du jour* in the Lebanese capital. The company aims to recreate that vibe at the heart of the fine dining scene at DIFC, Dubai. Clap is due to open any day now. claprestaurant.com

The Arts Club Dubai

Charles Dickens was a founding member of the original London club, still going strong. DIFC's high earners are already signing up to the Dubai offshoot, set to open this month, containing three new restaurants, including a European brasserie. theartsclub.ae

Sushisamba

With flavours of Japan, Brazil and Peru, Sushisamba will debut in Dubai in late 2021. Diners will enjoy 360-degree views from its prime Palm Jumeirah location, with the eatery situated high up on the 51st floor of the new Palm Tower. sushisamba.com

Trésind Studio

Trésind is a portmanteau of the French for 'very' and 'Indian', a nod to the French cooking techniques applied to Indian ingredients. Continuing the brand's play on words, the latest menu is named 'Le Jardin' and will run until Spring 2021, when the studio will once again be reborn for a new season of surprises.

'Humans have lived around what is now Dubai for thousands of years'

You don't have to look far beneath the surface of Dubai's ultra-modern cityscape to find its deep cultural roots. Experience that culture for yourself, says **Eliot Beer**

A gleaming torus of steel and glass, the recently-completed Museum of the Future has become one of the icons of Dubai. Designed in part by artificial intelligence and built using robots, it is one of the most advanced buildings in the world. It is symbolic of Dubai's ambition and achievements.

Underneath the shining structure is an unobtrusive grassy hill, most visitors probably won't think twice about it. But the hill is as much a part of the museum as the steel and glass – it is there to symbolise its roots, its place in Dubai's history and heritage. And although it may not be obvious, the same is true for all of the ultra-modern developments across the city.

Humans have lived around what is now Dubai for many thousands of years (visitors can see recently-excavated Iron Age artefacts at the Saruq Al-Hadidi Museum near Dubai Creek). The common thread running through every stage of Dubai's development has been trade: from the earliest movement of spices, cloths and frankincense between the Arabian peninsula, Persia to the north and India to the east, to pearls and gold later.

The arrival of European influences starting around 500 years ago simultaneously boosted trade along the Arabian Gulf coast and gave the region a minor role in the jostling of empires. Various European powers aimed to secure their trade routes through and around the peninsula, but, with little interest in

it otherwise, failed to leave an impression like they would in India and beyond. As such the small states and settlements of the region were free to develop naturally: in the case of Dubai, it remained a small pearling and fishing settlement until the early 20th century, populated by local Bedouin people as well as merchants and traders from India and Persia, and centred around Dubai Creek, where traditional dhows would anchor.

Successive rulers continued to develop this focus on trade, encouraging merchants from the wider region to settle in Dubai, and developing industries beyond pearls. After playing a leading role in the establishment of the United Arab Emirates, Dubai's rulers quickly established the emirate's place as the free-trade centre of the new country. This foundation of multiculturalism, openness, trade, and a focus on the future is what the modern Dubai is built on. Today the city is home to people from hundreds of countries, all of whom have added something of their own cultures to the mix.

There are many ways to enjoy Dubai's traditional culture and a great place to start is Al Fahidi Historical Neighbourhood, near to Dubai Creek. Here you can see how life in Dubai used to be, the

You'll see wooden dhows, the ships used for trade between Dubai and its neighbours for centuries

peace of narrow winding streets and shady courtyards – as well as exploring Dubai's history more fully at the Dubai Museum.

As you stroll up the creek from Al Fahidi, you'll see wooden dhows making their way through the water, to the dhow wharves on the other side – the same type of ships which have made trade between Dubai and its neighbouring countries possible for centuries. Further up the creek you'll find the Textile Souk, and a short abra ferry ride across the water will take you to the Spice and Gold Souks, all traditional markets, at the heart of Dubai's trading culture. While these have been modernised over the decades, in the most important ways – the trading itself – they are largely unchanged.

There are also plenty of excellent museums and period-accurate houses which are well worth a visit. But if you want to want to experience Dubai's living, breathing cultural heritage, just go for a walk through the city – you'll find it all around you.



Far from the madding crowd The peaceful and narrow winding streets of Al Fahidi Historical Neighbourhood

I'm plunged into darkness before emerging into a shark-filled lagoon

Joanna Booth holds on tight to her bikini and boxes her fears as she forsakes holed-up cabana life for high-octane hedonism

Adam?" The voice is polite, but puzzled. Almost perturbed. I open my eyes. A young man is standing over me with a look of concern on his face. I can't blame him. I am lying motionless at the bottom of a water slide, my eyes tightly closed, with one hand clamping my nostrils shut and the other clutching my bikini for dear life.

Two realisations dawn on me, in order of importance: that my supine position is beginning to draw an embarrassingly large crowd, and that I am, after all, not dead. As I scramble to my feet and scuttle away, a third epiphany follows. That if I am going to enjoy my trip to Dubai, I need to change my attitude. I'm a bit of a scaredy-cat when it comes to adrenaline sports. Bungee-jumping and sky-diving are a hard no, and I feel a bit sick at the thought of even the smallest zip-lines. But water slides are my most inexplicable *bête noire*. Even the most pedestrian make me fear for my life.

But here I am at Aquaventure, Dubai's famously thrill-packed water park. The temptation to simply flop on the private beach is almost overwhelming. But when you're in a 17-hectare aquatic attraction, holed up in a cabana with a book seems to be rather missing the point.

So I swallow my fear and have a go. And while I don't quite conquer my terror enough to tackle the infamous Leap of

Faith – where a near vertical drop sees riders plummet nine storeys in three seconds at speeds of up to 60km/h – I do manage to take on dual racing loops, the world's largest tube, and a slide where I'm plunged into pitch-darkness before emerging into a shark-filled lagoon, mercurially within a protective fireglass tunnel. I feel giddy with excitement. And I haven't drowned, died, or – worst of all – lost my swimwear.

Don't look down
The Aquaventure waterpark includes a slide from which you emerge into a shark-filled pool – thankfully there is a perspex screen between you and the predators



Dubai is not a destination to approach half-heartedly. Sure, you can find a quiet sun lounger by an exquisite hotel pool and lift nothing more than a lazy finger now and then to summon a cocktail, chilled fruit or the nice man who cleans your sunglasses because even that now seems to be beyond your strength. And you should absolutely carve out an hour or three to wallow in that kind of inactivity. But to really understand what makes Dubai unique, you need to get out and feel the boundless energy that has seen it conjure experiences and attractions that take titles for being the fastest, tallest and largest in the world. Dubai is a land of superlatives, and to feel its magic, you need to embrace that eccentric excess.

Want to sightsee? Sure, there is an open-top bus tour, but why would you when you can take a helicopter instead? We soared above the Palm Jumeirah, peering down at the luxurious residences set on its sandy fronds, circled the curving sail of the Burj Al Arab and, even in flight, felt dwarfed by the erupting spire of the stratospheric Burj Khalifa.

And while you're here, why on earth wouldn't you ride the 22mph, ear-popping lift to the top of the world's tallest building? The surrounding skyscrapers look like Lego blocks far below; the distance to the ground itself is dizzying. On the advice of an expat

friend, we bypassed the queues for the official observation deck and stopped one floor below at the lounge bar, where I couldn't decide whether it was the cocktails or the altitude that was making me light-headed.

Even going shopping, that quintessential Emirati activity, comes with a side of adrenaline. I headed to Dubai Creek to flex my aching muscles in the souks, took a tip from a taxi driver to locate some of the city's hidden gems – and toyed with the idea of a trip to Ski Dubai, the real snow ski-park right at the heart of Mall of the Emirates.

But instead, I decided to turn up the heat and head for the desert. My companions had reservations; deserts bring out the post *manqué* in me and I'm liable to start banging on about 'beautiful austerity' and 'silence so pervasive it's almost audible.'

So it came as a crashing relief to everyone that in the spirit of Dubai I booked to go dune-bashing, an activity that destroys any sense of tranquility so pervasively that there could be none of that nonsense. Instead, it was all roaring engines as we ploughed up the apricot faces of giant dunes and careened down the other side, and as we skidded, lurched and rocked I actually let out an involuntary "whoop". And that's when I knew I could truly say: I did it the Dubai way.

HOW TO DO IT THE DUBAI WAY

- Aquaventure day passes start from **£45**. atlantis.com
- Dubai helicopter tours start from **£138**. viator.com
- Tickets to the Burj Khalifa observation deck are around **£26**
- High tea at a window table in the Atmosphere

- starts from **£66** without alcohol, but if you're an early riser then there's a mere **£15** minimum spend during Coffee in the Clouds between 7am and 9am. burjkhalifa.ae; atmosphereburjkhalifa.com
- A two-hour slope pass at Ski Dubai is **£43**. skidxb.com
- Dune bashing starts from **£25** at arabian-adventures.com

