



The ultimate destination hotel?

Burj Al Arab

It is likely that you have already read about Jumeirah International's Burj Al Arab hotel elsewhere. Its striking image has been paraded in the world's travel press countless times since opening in December 1999. **Toby Andrews** visited the Burj Al Arab to find out whether its unofficial seven-star rating, growing number of international awards, and entry level \$1,000-a-night price tag can be justified.

It was about 9.00pm on 24 November 1999 that I acquired my first glimpse of the Burj Al Arab. Prominently visible from Dubai's main highway, it lit up the horizon, its sail-shaped façade emblazoned with three sensational colours. I looked on from my limousine with enthralment, intrigued by the structure's purpose. By the time I had arrived at my destination I had managed to establish that it was a hotel, and that it was opening just a month after my return to the UK. This was a hotel I just had to stay in.

Back home, I soon realised that I would need to remortgage my house if I ever wanted to stay at the hotel. Fast-forward two years. One quick call to the mortgage company - and one long argument with the girlfriend - and we were ready to leave for Dubai. I had not told Leah about the Burj Al Arab, nor shown her any pictures. She had no idea why I was refinancing the house and was, unsurprisingly, none too impressed by my apparent frivolity. I knew, or rather hoped, that our trip would change all that.

We reached Dubai at 10.00pm where we were met by an excellent Maharba Personal Guest Representative and a rather balmy 24 degrees. She fast-tracked us through immigration and walked us straight to our chauffeur. Our luggage was loaded into the trunk of the gleaming Rolls Royce Silver Seraph, and Leah finally admitted that this holiday 'might just be worth it after all'.

About ten minutes into our journey, Leah asked what the 'multi-coloured spaceship on the horizon' was. 'That,' I grinned, 'is where we are staying!' She didn't believe me until we began to make our journey across the 300-metre private causeway to the hotel (a causeway that non-residents are obliged to pay \$55 for the privilege of crossing). At my request the chauffeur stopped so that we could hop out and fully savour the approach to the hotel.

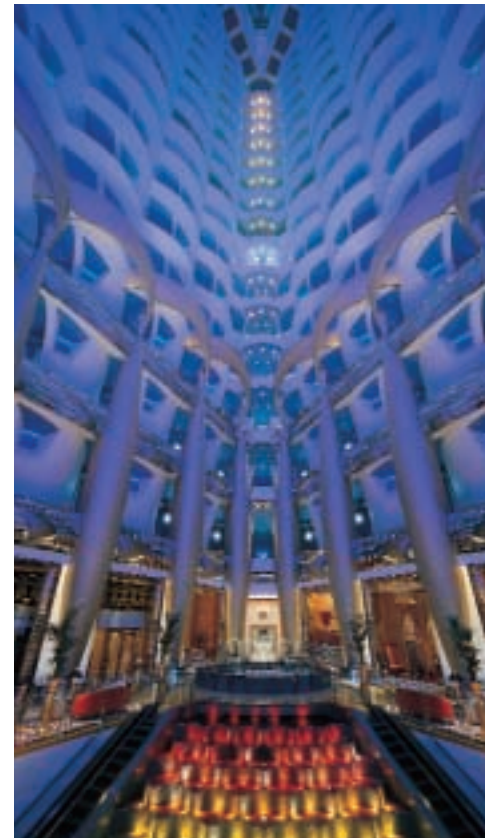
I had expected to be impressed by the 321-metre-tall structure, but now, standing a mere 250 metres from the hotel, I was in awe. Its façade was aglow with wonderful reds and oranges, fires roared in huge Olympic-flame style basins at its base, and a large fountain sent water jets some 100 metres into the air. An awesome approach indeed, only surpassed, perhaps, by an arrival into the hotel by helicopter. It might not be the only hotel in the world with a helicopter for its guests, but it is the only one where you alight on a helipad suspended some 200 metres above the ocean! Maybe next time, I mused.

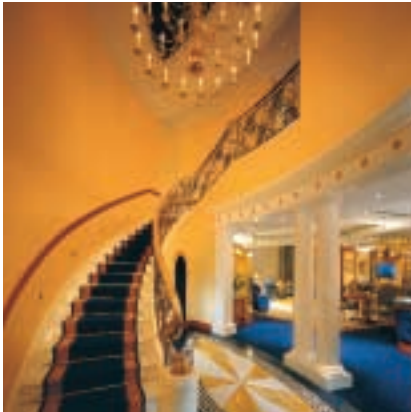
A team of doormen in scarlet and gold livery were ready to greet us. As they saw to our luggage, a charming young lady welcomed us to the hotel, inviting us to take a seat in the lobby. Whilst we waited momentarily, we looked around in amazement at the décor of the lobby and the incredible atrium (the world's tallest), which reaches to the very top of the structure. A pair of escalators delivered people to and from the mezzanine floor above, as a vibrant waterfall spashed down between. The pair of escalators were also flanked by two glass tanks standing one storey high, housing fish of the exotic variety.

Moments later we were escorted to our suite via the aforementioned escalators and a seemingly supersonic lift (7 metres per second). When we had reached our floor, our guide introduced us to our personal butler, who subsequently provided us with a tour of our suite. As with all suites at the hotel, it traversed two storeys, offered panoramic sea views from all of its rooms, afforded more floor space than your average Tesco superstore, and came complete with the finest silk, satin and real gold furnishings. By the time he had finished introducing us to the six-person jacuzzi, our interactive plasma television and our all-knowing-all-doing remote control, and had offered to unpack our luggage, I was suitably over the moon. This is what you get from the hotel's entry-level suite - a snip at \$985 a night. There are larger suites of course, and for those of you requiring two whole floors of the hotel to yourself, you will be needing the Royal Suite (a rather charming \$6,500 a night).

On our first evening we dined more than 250 metres above the sea in the Al Muntaha restaurant (meaning simply 'the highest'), for which there is a six-month waiting list for non-residents. It was clear that I was finally back in Leah's good books, even though our excellent three-course meal with good wine had totalled some £300. At £15 a pop for cocktails and a wine list that had included (a little strangely for a hotel of this standard) Blue Nun at an alarming £55 a bottle, you will understand how effortless it was to spend what we did.

Breakfast was a peaceful affair as we watched the waves break from the Bab al Yam restaurant on the mezzanine floor. A fine buffet was available as was an à la carte menu. A few rounds of toast, a few cold cuts, a smattering of fruit and cereal and a jug of orange juice cost £60 (and to think that we





only had nine days left - best call the mortgage company again).

Dubai is blessed with a lovely climate through the months of October to April, so we spent much of our time relaxing in the sun. Whilst the Burj has a large swimming pool and lounging area at the back of its island, we preferred the private beaches belonging to the Burj's sister property on the neighbouring shore. We also enjoyed taking the privately chauffeured golf cart journeys to and from the mainland. The Jumeirah Beach hotel echoes the shape of a breaking wave and is an equally stunning structure. It has lovely private beaches and a large marina for yacht owners (I'll be sure to remember that if I don't use my helicopter). Aside from pampering yourself silly, relaxing and partaking in the usual watersports, there is not much to do in the way of activities at the Burj or Jumeirah Beach - apart, that is, from the fully themed water park owned by Jumeirah International and situated next to the Jumeirah Beach, complete with waterslides that propel you up hills as well as down.

We stayed at the Burj for four nights and then stayed a night each at two of Jumeirah International's other properties. We also stayed a night each at two other non-Jumeirah luxury hotels before returning to the Burj for the two nights prior to our departure. Whilst the other hotels were all fitted out to the highest standard (like most of the new luxury hotels in Dubai), there is something about a 'Jumeirah Experience' that is different to all of the rest. Whilst engineers and designers had created similarly impressive buildings, I found that something was missing from our experience at the non-Jumeirah hotels.

The other hotels were of five-star quality and boasted the same level of facilities, yet they just did not come anywhere close to creating the same sense of feeling. Where each Jumeirah property felt bold, vibrant and full of life, the others just felt, well, a little empty. It is this feeling, this indescribable 'something' that gives Jumeirah International a serious advantage in an increasingly competitive market.

Each of Jumeirah International's developments are fantastic in terms of architecture, design and service, but their secret formula, a formula that is not easily recreated, can be found in the way that all of these factors hang together in veritable harmony. The enthusiasm and commitment from all of the staff that we came into

contact with was incredible, and it is evident that this is a key factor in the success of the group's operations. Traditionally, brands and brand values are supposed to build up across extended periods of time. Strangely but very impressively, in just ten days of exposure to Jumeirah International's properties, I can whole-heartedly say that I would not choose to stay anywhere but a Jumeirah property during future visits to Dubai.

My pen cannot do justice to the symphony of delights offered at the Burj Al Arab and by Jumeirah International more generally, for it is only through first-hand experience that you will be able to understand what I am struggling to articulate - an experience that you just don't get from any of the other hotels I've ever stayed in. Seven unofficial stars? Definitely. Worthy of the plethora of international awards? Certainly. Worth refinancing your house for? Just ask Leah.



Images courtesy of Jumeirah International
www.jumeirahinternational.com