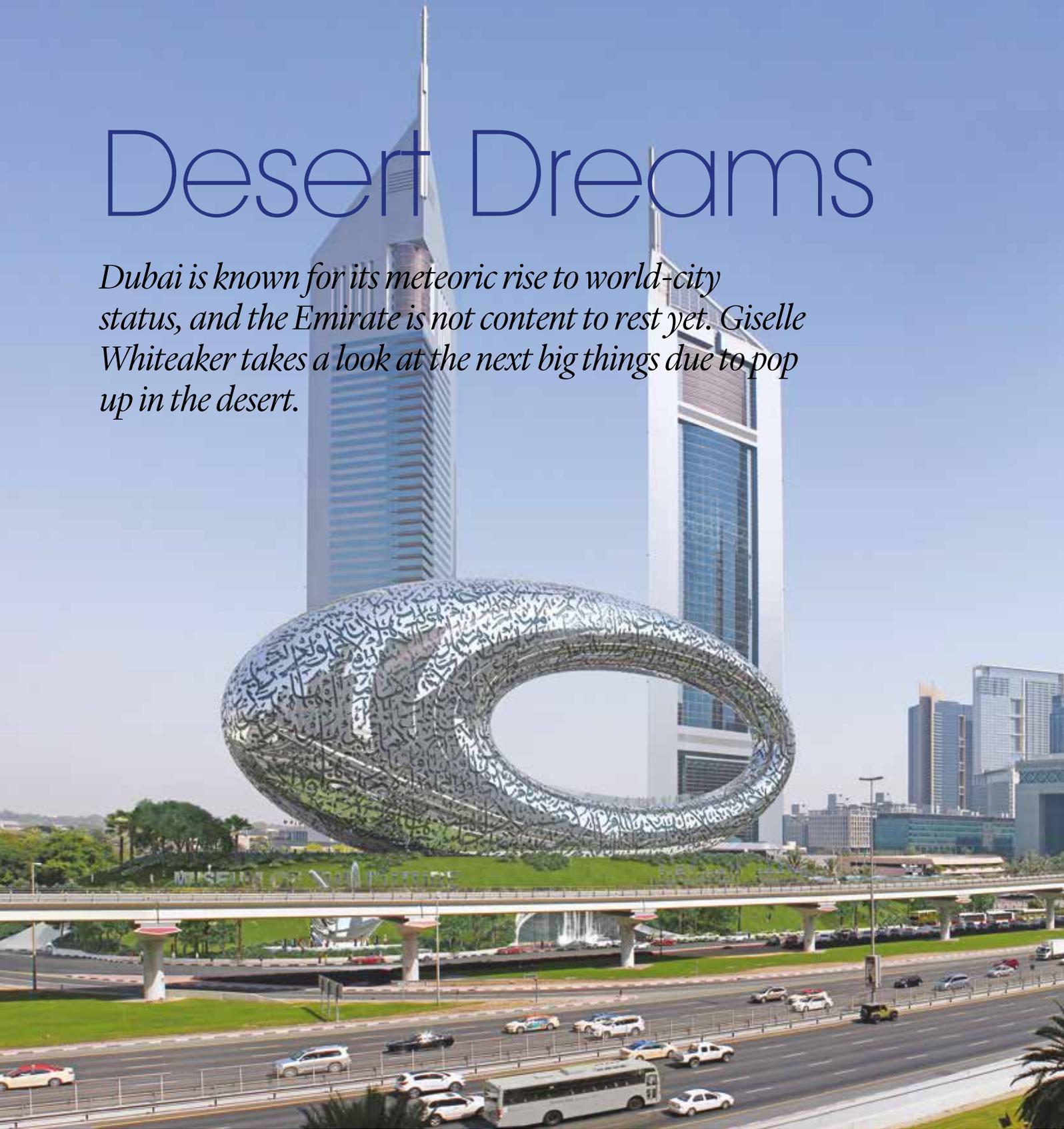


Desert Dreams

Dubai is known for its meteoric rise to world-city status, and the Emirate is not content to rest yet. Giselle Whiteaker takes a look at the next big things due to pop up in the desert.



The talk around the water cooler in Dubai is that the economy is not looking so good. Redundancies seem to be on the rise and a rent decrease has been announced, although it's yet to be evidenced in practical terms. It's not all bad news though; economic stabilisation might halt the surge in the cost of living, which has been creeping up post-global meltdown, and make the Emirate more affordable as a holiday or stopover destination. What is clear is that there's been little or no effect on Dubai's tourism dreams. It's all about bigger, better, more and it's visitors that are reaping the benefits.

Dubai's long been on the resort and sun-seekers' visit lists, with its plethora of superb five-star (and self-proclaimed seven-star) hotels. These edifices are designed to stun and it's something they do well – apart from The Address Downtown which stunned in an alternative way on New Year's Eve, billowing smoke into the sky as fireworks glittered overhead after an electrical fault triggered a fire. Even without The Address on the cards, there's no scarcity of luxury in the hotel scene. You can stay in the palatial Arabian-styled One&Only Royal Mirage, find the lost city of Atlantis on The Palm, gaze over the indoor ski



Museum of the Future



The Green Planet



Dubai Frame

slope at Kempinski Mall of the Emirates or splurge on a night in the sail-shaped Burj Al Arab. You can even bed down in an oasis surrounded by rolling red sand dunes at Al Maha Desert Resort and Spa, with elements of the Bedouin lifestyle embedded in opulence. Name a luxury brand – Armani, St Regis, Bulgari – and if it's not there already, it's under construction, in readiness for Expo 2020. For the more budget conscious, a rash of mid-range hotels have also sprung up across the city, leaving visitors with more spending money to splash out in the city's ubiquitous malls.

Rumours about the economy haven't slowed down the Emirate's ambitious leisure and entertainment industry either. The stalwarts like Dubai Mall's all-dancing water fountain and indoor aquarium in the narrow shadow of the Burj Dubai still pull the crowds – those that aren't gazing over the rooftops from the observation deck on the 124th floor of the Burj Dubai itself – and at Mall of the Emirate's Ski Dubai, punters are still going downhill fast. The traditional dhow cruises along Dubai Creek remain afloat and motorised abras continue to ferry passengers between the *souks* (markets) on the creek's banks. Thousands flock into the desert on safaris, to tear over the sand dunes in 4x4s or slide down them on sandboards and as long as the sun shines, the beaches, and not one, but two water parks, will lure the bronzed bodies of residents, alongside the pasty-white limbs of those from cooler climes.

There's more on the horizon, too, alongside the construction cranes that have long littered the skyline. Meraas, a Dubai-based holding company, recently announced the launch of The Green Planet, the region's first bio-dome that recreates the enchanting world of a tropical forest with its rich biodiversity of over 3,000 plants and animals. The enclosed ecosystem, scheduled to open within the next few months, will offer visitors an immersive expedition into the tropics, inviting them to delve deeper into the secrets of nature and experience first-hand the magnificence of one of the world's oldest living ecosystems. The highlight is set to be a giant 25-metre tree, which is the largest



Abras on Dubai Creek

indoor man-made and life-sustaining tree in the world. Environmentalists will be relieved to hear that The Green Planet's building has received Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) certification.

Meraas is also working on Bluewaters Island, with the first frames of the 690-foot Dubai Eye, billed to be the world's tallest Ferris wheel, one and a half times the size of the London Eye, being installed. Besides the Ferris wheel, the project will house a boutique five-star hotel and offer residential options. The island is anticipated to attract more than three million visitors per annum and it's all due towards the end of this year.

Meraas is not the only developer banking on Dubai's continued prosperity. Dubai Parks and Resorts is set to open in October 2016, containing three theme parks: Motiongate Dubai, Bollywood Parks and Legoland Dubai. In numbers, expect 73 attractions, a 60,000 square feet stage for Bollywood-themed performances and 15,000 Lego models comprised of 60 million individual blocks. The three could have some stiff competition from IMG Worlds of Adventure, due to open on an unspecified date in 2016 after a two-year delay. This 1.5 million-square-foot theme park will feature Marvel comic heroes, Cartoon Network characters and dinosaurs in four zones: Marvel; Cartoon Network; Lost Valley – Dinosaur Adventure; and IMG Boulevard.

Dubai Municipality's latest venture into tourism, Dubai Frame, is another project rescheduled for this year. The

development comprises a 150-metre-high, 93-metre-wide structure built to resemble a huge picture frame, through which landmarks representing "New Dubai" such as Emirates Towers and Burj Khalifa can be seen on one side and "Old Dubai", including the districts of Deira, Umm Harare and Karama, on the other. The building consists of two 150-metre towers, connected by a 93-metre bridge at the top, which serves as an observation deck. The lower rib of the frame will contain the Gallery Museum, designed to tell the story of the evolution of the city.

Further adding to the leisure landscape is the Museum of the Future, scheduled to open in 2017, which serves an interesting dual purpose as both a museum and a research lab. The US\$136 million museum, housed inside an elliptical curved, steel exterior, is billed to be an incubator for ideas and designs, with visitors being able to experience the future through cutting-edge simulations and interactive demonstrations. As well as being a tourist attraction in its own right, the museum will hold scientific conferences and offer advanced courses and specialised workshops on design and innovation covering the latest scientific developments, trends and designs as well as their practical applications. Think robots, holographs, 3D printing and more.

With so much, so close, Dubai's not letting the sand fill its shoes just yet. The city that rose from the desert in just 50 years is still building its future, and a bright, sunny future it is. ■