

DUBAI

The spectacular stopover option

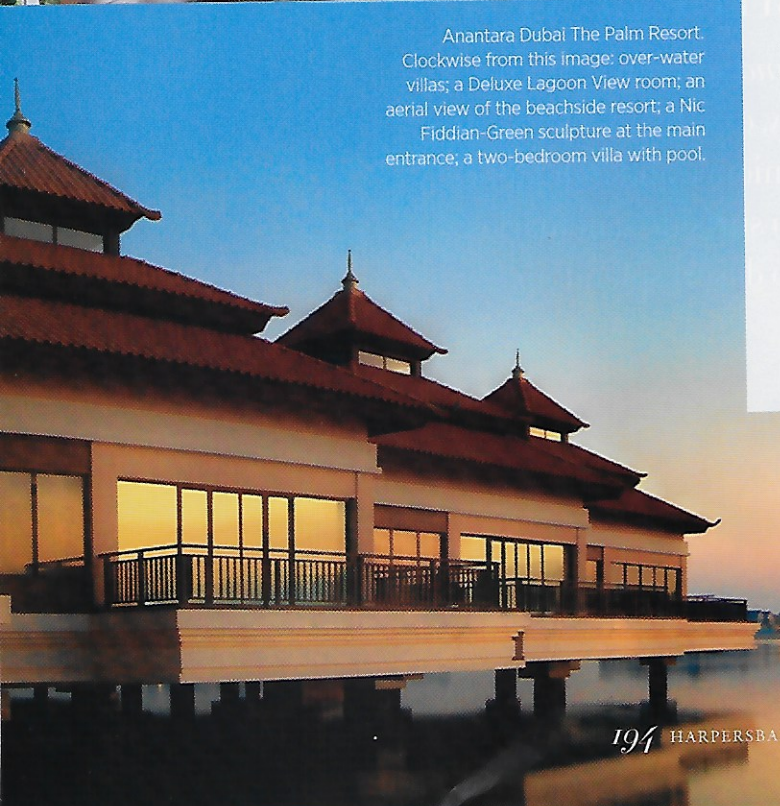


Build it ... and they will come. It's a strategy that has paid off for Dubai, the modern metropolis made up of futuristic skyscrapers, ostentatious hotels, artificial islands and shopping malls the size of cities. But with its reputation for tourists lying by the pool, soaking up the sun and partying has also come a reputation for being an adults-only Disneyland.

That's certainly set to change in 2016, as Dubai remarkets itself as a kiddie nirvana, with five new mega theme parks set to open. IMG Worlds of Adventure will be divided into four zones — Cartoon Network; Marvel; IMG Boulevard; and the Lost Valley — Dinosaur Adventure zone — while Dubai Parks, opening this October, will contain three theme parks: Motiongate, Bollywood and Legoland.

And then there's Dubai Safari. Due to open in late 2016, this new wildlife attraction is located on a disused landfill site and will soon become one of the most impressive zoos in the world — a world-class habitat for wildlife you'll get to see via jeep, trams and bikes. Situated opposite Dubai Safari, on 65 hectares, is Per Aquum Desert Palm, one of the most chic family-friendly resorts we've ever encountered. There are lush green polo fields (it's also home to Dubai Polo Club); a mix of open-plan apartment suites, villas and private residences hidden behind stone walls; majestic Nic Fiddian-Green equine sculptures; white-stone swimming pools; and lounges built around polo fields ... handy for a bird's-eye view of whatever international tournament happens to be scheduled during your stay.

Anantara Dubai The Palm Resort. Clockwise from this image: over-water villas; a Deluxe Lagoon View room; an aerial view of the beachside resort; a Nic Fiddian-Green sculpture at the main entrance; a two-bedroom villa with pool.



Per Aquum's villas are perfect for families who want a piece of the Dubai action but on their own terms. A 20-minute drive from the city center (and 15 minutes from the airport), you're away from the hustle and bustle, so the kids can visit the stables, book a horse ride or frolic in the infinity pool that sits alongside Epicure, Per Aquum's casual dining lounge, while Mum and Dad scoot off to the Polo Bar for a chilled champagne (or three). Dubai's skyline and its theme parks glitter on the horizon, but it's an arduous task leaving these lush surrounds, so your day ends up being about early-morning horse rides, bird watching, and hours spent lazing by the pools and sipping cocktails.

If you're flying from Australia to Europe via Emirates, our tip is to impress at Per Aquum for the first three days, then fulfil parental duties and appease your junior thrill-seekers by shifting digs to Palm Jumeirah, the world's largest artificial island. The "Palm" consists of a trunk (connected to the mainland by a 300-metre-long bridge), a crown with 16 fronds and a surrounding crescent island that forms an 11-kilometre-long breakwater. Here you'll find luxury hotels alongside theme parks such as Aquaventure (part of the Atlantis resort). A 15-minute drive away is Wild Wadi Waterpark and the indoor winter ski resort Ski Dubai.

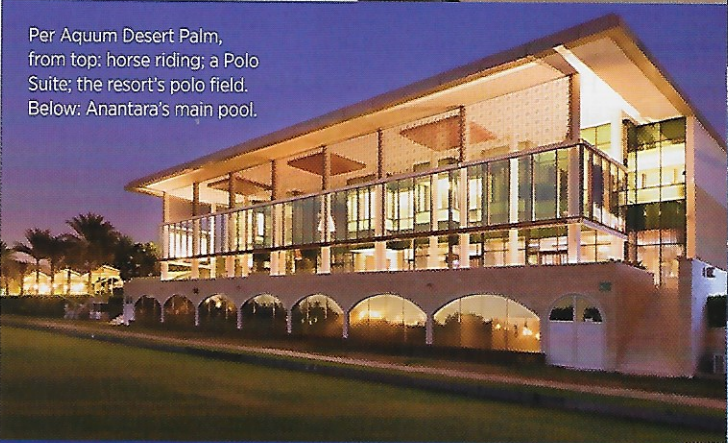
Temperatures sit between 25 degrees Celsius in winter and anything between 30 and 50 degrees in summer, so the manmade beaches come in handy. In summer, a sea dip is on par with a hot bath, so it's probably best to stick to the hotel's chilled pools. Anantara The Palm Dubai Resort is particularly loved by families for its overwater villas and lagoon pools, but there are children's play areas, a kids' club and a tweens' club to keep junior distracted while you zip off to the spa.

Because, culturally, Dubai sits smack-bang between East and West, the mix of cuisine here is mind-blowing and, unlike with most other cities, some of the most amazing restaurants can be found in its hotels. Anantara is no exception. The must-book here is Mekong, a Thai, Vietnamese and Chinese fusion; or the meat-lover's mecca Bushman's Barbecue. Or if you're there on a Friday (the first day of the Arabic weekend), brunch is a big deal — an all-inclusive affair that spans 24 hours — so make sure to book Crescendo.

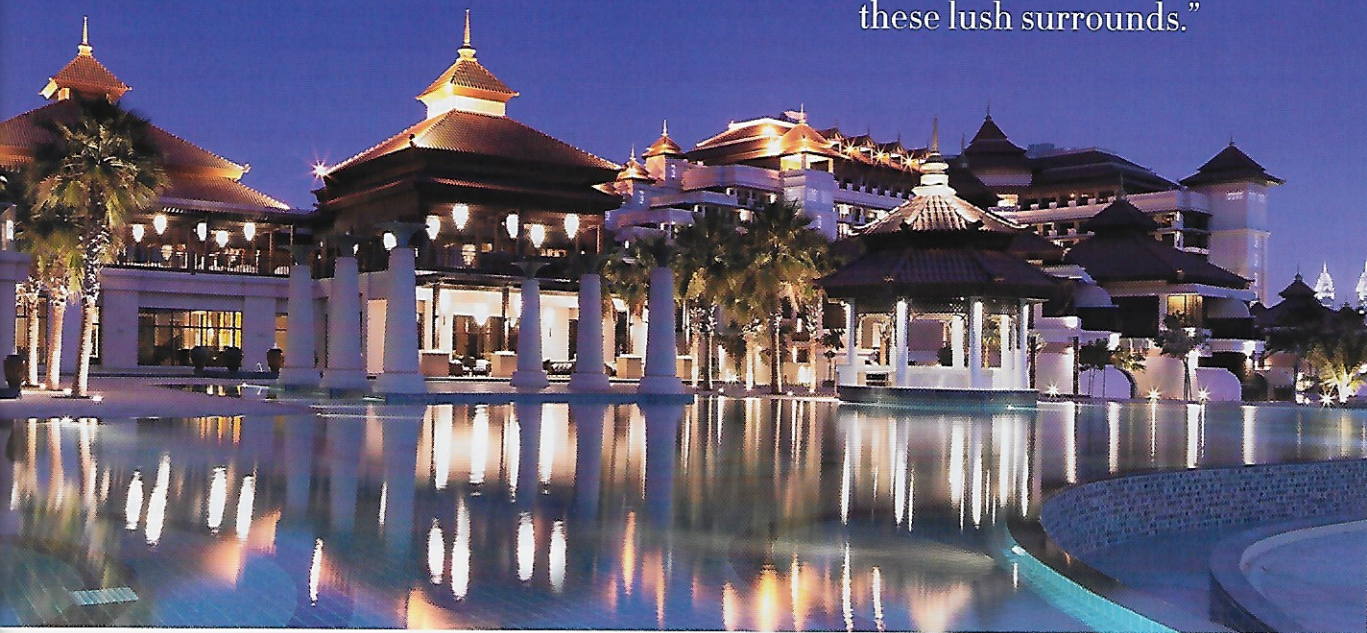
Stopping over in Dubai long enough to unpack your suitcase looks like it's no longer an option exclusively for the 18+ set. Pick the right hotel in Dubai and you'll never bother attempting that 24-hour trek to the city center in one stint ever again. — EUGENIE KELLY



Per Aquum Desert Palm, from top: horse riding; a Polo Suite; the resort's polo field. Below: Anantara's main pool.



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