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Tamara Hinson reports
from a Faremine
fam trip to Dubai

» A NOSE FOR ADVENTURE

I'm standing in the middle of the Dubai desert, about to get on a grumpy-looking camel, and I can't say I'm particularly reassured when its minder tells me that the bandana over its mouth is to stop it spitting at me. It might be hot, dry and dusty but a wad of camel spit isn't the kind of liquid hydration that I need. We're not the only things suffering in the heat – when we arrive at the desert camp in our convoy of 4x4s, our drivers leap out and pop open the bonnets, slotting in various gadgets to help the engines

cool. And the vehicles were certainly pushed to the max, as we'd zoomed over the towering sand dunes at lightning speed.

Luckily, bar a spot of sand boarding, the remainder of the evening was less adrenaline fuelled. Inside the mud-walled camp, we watched traditional dancers twirl around a stage, occasionally dragging awkward-looking onlookers up for some ▶

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Gold souk



The fam trip group



Madinat Jumeirah



Atlantis The Palm's Royal Bridge Suite



Poseidon's Revenge at Aquaventure



Crowne Plaza Dubai Deira

dad dancing, and feasted on a sumptuous buffet. The silence of the desert provided a real contrast to the bustle of Dubai, where construction has been ramped up in preparation for hosting the six-month-long World Expo in 2020.

One of our first stops on the trip – hosted by Anthea Malik from online reservations agency Faremine and supported by Emirates and Travelcube – was the gold souk, a dazzling explosion of shiny jewellery. Luckily, there were also plenty of (albeit fake) sunglasses for sale, piled alongside mountains of (equally fake) handbags. We also checked out the fragrant spice market next door, weaving around gravity-defying piles of dried lemons, frankincense and saffron. I was curious about the baskets of blue spheres and discovered that they were balls of indigo that could be thrown in the washing machine to help keep jeans blue.

The gold souk and spice market were two of my favourite areas, places that felt a million miles from the shiny, spotless perfection of downtown Dubai, even though they are easily accessible from it. We left Old Dubai on one of the wooden abras, which serve as water taxis.

Sadly, my salary doesn't quite stretch to pure gold (although I did splash out on an indigo ball), so we headed to the Dubai Mall for another spot of retail therapy. It's one of the world's largest shopping centres, covering 12 million square feet, and even the car parks are

works of art – spotlessly clean and with large vases of fresh flowers. Inside, I was surprised to spot a Waitrose and an HSBC, but the fact that they were just metres from Chanel and Tiffany & Co was a reminder that this isn't your average shopping centre.

Later, we checked out the view from the observation deck on the 124th floor of Burj Khalifa, the world's tallest building, following an ear-popping ride in an elevator that sped us skywards at 10 metres a second. Since October, guests have been able to visit the previously inaccessible 148th floor – 555 metres above the ground.

It is just one of several reasons why Dubai has a lot to offer this year. October also marked the opening of the nine-mile Jumeirah Corniche, a scenic running/walking track that stretches from the area behind Dubai Marine Beach Resort & Spa to the Burj Al Arab. Phase one of the ambitious Dubai Tram project launched in November, while the UAE's first adventure rope course will open later this year. The 25,000sq ft Wire World Meydan Adventure Park will comprise 70 obstacles set in a forested area.

At some point, IMG Worlds of Adventure, a theme park inspired by superheroes from the Marvel comic books, will open, although there are rumours of major delays and IMG will only confirm that it will open at some point within the next decade.

Meanwhile, Dubai's top-notch connectivity continues to increase. At the start of the month, Emirates

added a second A380 from Manchester, taking daily services on the route to three. On August 1, the airline will operate a third daily service from Birmingham, boosting capacity on the route by 42%.

Dubai's variety of hotels means there is no shortage of choice. And, as always, there are more to come. One of the headline openings for this year will be the five-star fashion-brand tie-up, Palazzo Versace Dubai, where Gold Medal is offering three-nights' half-board from £829 in mid-June, including flights.

Our fam group checked out three very different properties, suitable for a range of clients.

● MADINAT JUMEIRAH



Location: A mile-long private beach adjacent to the Jumeirah Beach Hotel, Burj Al Arab and Wild Wadi Water Park.

Venue vibe: Traditional, luxurious – and huge. The resort comprises four very different mini-resorts, connected by two miles of man-made waterways. There are 40 restaurants and bars, 75 shops and 19 swimming pools – one of which is the largest in the UAE.

It's got more character than many Dubai resorts, with Arabic architecture and meandering waterways. I particularly liked the Dar Al Masyaf Arabian Summerhouses, which offer guests access to private pools, along with 24-hour butler service and a complimentary happy hour with

drinks and canapés served every evening in their private courtyards.

Wow factor: The sheer variety of accommodation. Guests can opt for a room in Mina A'Salam, the resort's beautiful boutique hotel, or splash out on a villa in the Dar Al Masyaf area – Liverpool footballer Steven Gerrard is just one celebrity known to have stayed in this part of the resort.

Fam feedback: "Madinat Jumeirah is absolutely stunning. The rooms are beautiful and the atmosphere is magical. I loved the abra boat ride there and think this would appeal to guests as a different mode of transport for accessing the resort's different areas," says African Pride's Ainslie Buck.

Book it: From £196 per night in Mina A'Salam with faremine.com.

● ATLANTIS THE PALM



Location: The tip of Dubai's Palm. **Venue vibe:** This luxurious 1,539-room hotel

has a lost underwater kingdom theme. There are 20 restaurants, ranging from upmarket Nobu to Saffron, with its theatrical cooking stations and enormous variety of international cuisines. Even the Kids' Club is enormous, with an underwater theatre, a tech-filled Command Centre, Play Zone, rock-climbing wall, an arts and crafts area and an outside play area.

Wow factor: The £25,000 a night Royal Bridge Suite and the enormous Lost Chambers Aquarium, which is home to

65,000 marine animals, cared for by a team of aquarists, water-quality technicians and 'aqua chefs'. Even more impressive are the plans for the The Royal Atlantis Resort, which will open in 2016 and will comprise 250 luxury residences and an infinity pool 90 metres above ground. The Aquaventure Waterpark is also pretty impressive, with highlights including Poseidon's Revenge, where the floor disappears and you plummet at 40 miles per hour, and the Leap of Faith, where you speed down a Perspex tube that runs through a shark-infested tank.

Fam feedback: "Atlantis has a relaxed feel, but maintains the high levels of quality and service synonymous with Dubai. It's incredibly family friendly with great restaurants serving a high quality of food, from pizza to curry. It is a resort with everything for a fabulous family holiday," says Faremine's Anthea Malik.

Book it: From £210 a night with faremine.com. **TW**



● CROWNE PLAZA DUBAI DEIRA

Location: Deira, Dubai's

business district. **Venue vibe:** A no-frills 300-room business hotel ideally located for those visiting Dubai for work. Although it has not been recently renovated, the rooms are large. When guests aren't at business meetings, they can use one of the two well-equipped gyms (one each for men and women) and the surprisingly large rooftop pool. Dining options include Italian restaurant Briosso and Harry's, where guests can fill up on pub grub while watching sports on one of nine screens.

Wow factor: The large pool, for its great views over Dubai. **Fam feedback:** "I liked the Crowne Plaza for the comfortable rooms, great pool and sports bar," says Howzat Travel's Carl Sutton. **Book it:** From £77 per night with faremine.com. **TW**