Since the discovery of oil, in the 20th century, Dubai was culturally transformed into a new era. The lavish new constructions have stolen the stage from the historic architecture of Dubai. Today, the history and spirit of Dubai lives on in its museums. The Dubai Museum is the forerunner of these cultural institutions, and its exhibits explore every aspect of the city's history and traditions.

The city's flagship museum is housed in the Al Fahidi Fort, an 18th-century structure built over the Dubai Creek. A visit to the Museum is a must on every Dubai itinerary. Housed within the beautifully restored Al Fahidi Fort, which was erected around 1787 to defend the city against invasion and was opened as a museum in 1971. The museum's diverse collection of exhibits offers a fascinating insight into the rich history and cultural heritage of Dubai.

Artistically designed static displays, hands on exhibits, hologram-like movies and information cases lead you gently through the lives and times of the city and its people, from the third millennium B.C. to the present day. The domestic and commercial life of bygone era is vividly presented in realistic life size dioramas. These provide re-creations of a labyrinthine souk and typical homes, as well as tableaux that bring to life the occupations, costumes and social customs of the day. Other exhibits focus on ancient artifacts, life in the desert and Dubai's enduring relationship with the sea.

**A Brief History of Dubai**

Although the early history of the area is not very well documented, archeologists discoveries suggest that, as long as four thousand years ago, small fishing communities lived along the coast of the Region on the site of modern Dubai. It is also believed that the natural sheltered harbor afforded by Dubai Creek was a busy port of call on the ancient route between Mesopotamia and the Indus Valley.

In recent years, archaeologists have unearthed hundreds of artifacts, including pottery, weaponry and coinage that point to civilized settlements dating back to the third millennium B.C.

These historic finds have been carefully preserved and are now permanently housed in the Archaeological Section of Dubai Museum.

Modern Dubai, however, traces its origins to the 1830s. At that time, the small fishing village on the Shindagha peninsula at the mouth of the creek was settled by a branch of the Bani
Yas tribe, originally from the Liwa oasis to the south, led by the Maktoum family who rule the emirates to date.

By the late 1870s, Dubai was often referred to as the principal port on the region coast and, by the turn of century, was reputed to have the largest souks in the Arabia. Pearling, which was the mainstay of city’s prosperity for many years, succumbed to the development of the cultured pearl in the 1940s. But Dubai’s enterprising merchants bounced back, developing a thriving trade in gold and other commodities.

Life in these early days is vividly portrayed through several exhibits at the museum, including individual sections on Pearl Diving, The Souk, Traditional Houses and the Creek.

**Archaeology**

Since 1964, when Islamic monuments from the Umayyad period were discovered in the Jumeira area, Archaeological excavations in Hatta, Al Qusais and Jumeira have continued to give glimpses of a civilization dating back over 5,000 years. From 3,000 BC, the highly populated Dubai area was a centre of construction, agriculture, craftsmanship and art.

Although archaeological finds at Hatta date back to 4,000 BC, Al Qusais is thought to have been the largest community living in the region, and during 2,000 and 1,000 BC and up to the Hellenic Age, craftsmen here were skillful in making earthenware, bronze and copper utensils.

The archaeological findings in the stone tombs in Jima Valley in the Hatta area indicate that these tombs from 2,500 – 2,000 BC were re-used in the 55th century AD.

The archaeological excavation of a whole Islamic city in Jumeira from the Umayyad period have revealed that Dubai was a visual link in the old trade routes between Oman and Iraq during the early days of Islam in the 5th and 6th centuries AD.

**Commercial Life**

The museum’s realistic lifesize static displays provide an insight into the traditional occupations of Dubai. Those have included dhow building, fishing, pearl diving and trade. Indeed, the export of fine pearls was major factor in Dubai’s rise to prominence as a trading centre.

The Creek has always been the lifeline of Dubai, providing a safe harbor to mercantile and fishing vessels, as it does even today. Visitors to the museum can view splendid dioramas depicting the old dhahm and bustle of commercial life along the banks of this fabled waterway.

Souks have been often referred to as the real heart of Arabia, and nowhere is this more true than in Dubai. The city’s famous souks have, since the 19th century, attracted merchants and traders from as far afield as India, Iran, the eastern coast of Africa and beyond. At the museum, you can experience all the atmosphere of a souk in 1950s, as you stroll through a labyrinth of herbs and spice stores, pottery, jewellery and carpentry workshops and rows of shops, including tailors, grocers, textile merchants and date sellers.

**Domestic Life**

Traditional Dubai houses are considered to be among the finest examples of Region architecture. The earliest houses were constructed with humble building materials, including the leaves and trunks of palm trees (areesh), rocks and earthen clay. The flourishing pearl trade brought greater prosperity in the latter half of the last century, however this gave way to houses built of stone and adorned with magnificent wind towers, the world’s earliest form of air conditioning.

Built to withstand the harsh climate of the region, the typical Dubai house featured a large high-walled courtyard (hawi) that is unaffected by external air currents, as well as a wind tower (barjeel). The towers were rectangular or square and were built on top of the main rooms of traditional houses. Cross walls were built between the corners, giving
four triangular openings to catch the breeze to create a cool
down draught into the interior of the house.
The Dubai museum contains fine examples of such
architecture, including a mosque and an Islamic school.
Visitors will also get a glimpse of the social life, games and
costumes of the day.

Architecture
The architecture of old Dubai was influenced by the
environment, the teachings of Islam, and by social structure.
There are four categories of architecture; residential (houses,
tents and huts); religious (mosques); defence (forts and
towers); commercial (markets). Local builders in the past
understood the environment. They built wind towers and air
vents and used readily available materials such as the sea
stones and mud with limestone cement the stones together.
Shell stones used for building walls, were cut from the banks
of the Creek and left for drying and desalination.
Houses were linked by arrow sandy lanes, which provided
shade. Old houses consisted of a zigzagged entrance leading
to the inside courtyard surrounded by verandahs. The (majlis)
was the main entrance facing outward with windows. The
courtyard was designed to provide ventilation and light, and
the walls were beautifully decorated with gypsum.
Traditional huts were made from the date palm. Its trunk
formed the structure and the walls and ceilings were covered
with netted fronds tied with ropes.

Life in the Desert
The desert is the traditional habitat of people throughout
the Arabian Peninsula. The Bedouin, who were the earliest
inhabitants of the region, once lived in strong tribal
communities and roamed the blazing sands with their camels,
in search of food, grazing and trade. Sheep and goat herders
scratched a living on the arid mountainsides. Cultivators
tended date palms whenever the merest trace of water could
be found.
The camel, the ship of the desert, was then the primary mode
of transportation and the Bedouin’s main source of milk,
meat and wool. For accommodation, these proud nomadic
people erected tents made chiefly of wool and animal hide.
Clothing was simple and utilitarian, consisting of a flowing
garment and headdress that offered protection against the
harsh desert sun and fine grains of blowing sand. Jewellery,
consisting mostly of bead necklaces and silver ornaments,
was favored by the Bedouin women, while the male costume
was characterized by a dagger (khanjar), which was used both as a weapon and a traditional fashion accessory.

Dubai museum featured a section devoted to the Bedouin lifestyle. This offers interesting insight into the habitat, life and customs of these desert people.

**Life on the Sea**

Life in Dubai has been inextricably linked with the sea. The aridity of the desert occupations and fishing rapidly developed as an important economic activity. The birth of a fishing industry, soon led to the development of boat building, net-making and pearl diving and Dubai’s enterprising traders sailed the oceans in search of markets for their products.

Pearl divers risked life and limb to gather oysters from the sea bed, often diving for more than two minutes at the time, with little more than nose-clip and a heavy stone to weight them down. Such was the renown of Dubai’s pearls, that pearling continued to be mainstay of the city’s prosperity, until the development of the cultured pearl in the 1940s led to a collapse in demand for the natural variety.

Examples of early dhows and boats can be seen in the courtyard of Al Fahidi Fort, while inside the museum visitors will be enchanted by an impressive diorama of pearl divers at work, along with the tools of their trade.

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