

Nov 04, 2016 by [Gordon Robison](#)

Buy, Buy, Buy... Dubai ^[1]

Dubai, United Arab Emirates

A former western ambassador to the UAE, now retired and working here as a private citizen, told me a revealing story over lunch this week. A friend of his was coming through customs at Dubai and had purchased two bottles of wine in the arrivals duty free shop. As he approached customs a policeman stopped him.

"You have two bottles of wine?" the policeman asked. The traveler admitted he did, silently cursing himself for having picked up a second bottle with a policeman standing right in front of him.

"Then go back in there and buy two more," the officer scolded. "You're allowed to bring in four!"

As my father used to say, if that story's not true, it ought to be. Apocryphal or not, it captures the essence of Dubai.

I've always found there to be something refreshingly crass about this place. It is American consumer society carried out to its logical extreme. In the United States people are constantly trying to sell you things by convincing you the goods on offer will make your life somehow richer and fuller. In Dubai everyone is trying to sell you stuff because they want your money. Period.

One can argue that Dubai ceased to be an Arab city in any real sense of the term a generation ago. Emiratis only make up about 20% of the population of their own country, and there is anecdotal evidence that in Dubai (the second-largest of the seven sheikhdoms that make up the UAE) that figure may be even lower. The former ambassador says there are 95,000 Brits living here officially, and up to 25,000 more who travel in and out often enough that they have been able to avoid the bother of getting a formal residence visa. That would make the Brits about 12% of Dubai's population.

There are, he says, many fewer Americans. "I can't think of a place I've ever lived where I have a greater sense of personal security," the ex-ambassador told me. "Yet I have these people calling me from the states asking if it is safe to visit."

The city is exploding. This week it was impossible to find a hotel room because of the annual Gitex computer show, the largest in the Middle East. But so crammed is Dubai's calendar of trade shows, mega-events and expositions that even in August, when the temperature is around 115-120f (with 90% humidity) every day the hotels had an 80% occupancy rate, according to one local journalist.

Since my last visit, a mere 10 months ago, construction around the city has surged to such an

extent that large sections of the city now seem locked in perpetual traffic jams. I had to make apologies after arriving late at many of my appointments during a three day stay here because I constantly misfigured the time it took to navigate a city I have visited regularly for 15 years, and like to flatter myself that I know reasonably well. The local radio stations now broadcast US-style traffic reports, the first time I have ever heard such things in a Middle Eastern city.

For better or worse Dubai seems well on the way to shedding most of its Arab identity and achieving what it has long sought to become: the Middle East's first truly world-class international city. CNBC's Arabic version originates from studios here, as does CNN's Arabic-language website. Scanning the radio dial in my car I heard Arabic and English - but also Hindi, Urdu and Tagalog. Dubai is probably the only city with golf courses that figure on both the European and the Asian PGA tours.

Oh yes... and the special of the week in the DVD shop at Dubai airport? *Fahrenheit 9/11* (available in both European and US formats).
