

DUBAI

THE BEACON OF THE 21ST CENTURY

A 52' & 3x30' documentary film
Directed by Jérôme Fritel
Produced by Yami2 & ARTE France

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PRODUCTIONS

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DISTRIBUTION

PITCH

“The most inhospitable place on the most hostile land imaginable”—that’s how the British described the city of Dubai shortly before their withdrawal and the creation of the United Arab Emirates in 1971.

In the space of 50 years, this port of pearl divers and smugglers—whose inhabitants once subsisted on dates and camel milk—has transformed into one of the most prosperous, open, and futuristic cities on our planet.

More than just a tax haven or a giant duty-free zone, the city-state has become THE economic and financial capital of the emerging world, rivaling the Asian tigers—Singapore and Hong Kong—and positioning itself as an alternative to Western cities like New York, London, and Paris.

As the host city for the 2021 World’s Fair, COP 28 in 2023, and major sporting, cultural, and commercial events, it has become a must-visit destination not only for heads of state and government, financial, industrial, and tech gurus, as well as stars of architecture, fashion, film, and sports.





Beyond its spectacular financial and economic success, Dubai also captivates the world's youth through “soft power” skillfully disseminated on social media, which has transformed its name into a luxury brand: the “Dubai way of life.” It now markets itself as the true embodiment of the American dream for an entire generation. But at what cost? Dubai reveals a darker side: that of an autocratic regime that concentrates all powers—political, economic, and judicial—in its own hands.

A brutal dictatorship, where corruption and family ties replace the rule of law, ready to use any means necessary to silence its critics—especially if they come from within the Emir’s inner circle.

At a time when Dubai is being held up as a model for the reconstruction of Gaza, it is important to question the nature of its regime, its influence, and its sustainability. How did Dubai become the beacon city of the 21st century? As the purest embodiment of capitalism, was the Dubai model designed to endure and be exported, or is it in danger of being swept away by the sands of history?

SYNOPSIS

According to the official narrative, in Dubai, the dream of a better life—based on hard work and merit—has become a reality.

The world's new Mecca of commerce continues to attract ever-increasing amounts of international capital—both legal and illegal—as well as the headquarters of multinational corporations and an expatriate workforce from every continent. Workers from India, Pakistan, Nepal, and Bangladesh; domestic workers from the Philippines; Western financiers and businesspeople; Iranian oil traffickers; Russian oligarchs; VIPs and international influencers... Today, the city is home to 4 million residents, more than 90% of whom are of foreign origin. This human capital has no rights whatsoever, except the right to work—anyone without a contract must leave the city within 30 days—and, for some, the right to earn (a lot of) money.

Against a backdrop of rampant real estate speculation, the city-state continues to build more and more skyscrapers, highways, giant shopping malls, and artificial islands, all while investing heavily in technological innovations such as cryptocurrencies and artificial intelligence.

Promoted by highly paid VIPs who serve as glamorous ambassadors, the city welcomes nearly 20 million tourists each year who come to experience this “Disneyland for adults,” where turquoise-water beaches sit alongside artificial ski slopes, luxury boutiques, and the wildest architectural creations.

To newcomers, Dubai boasts the merits of its magic formula: prosperity, diversity, and security. Citizens from all over the world are welcome in this 21st-century Tower of Babel—provided they stay out of politics. Here, there are no elections and no freedom of speech. The Emirate of Dubai, one of the seven emirates of the United Arab Emirates, is ruled like a private kingdom belonging to its leader, Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, who inherited it from his father, and before him, from his grandfather and great-grandfather.

Bolstered by nearly two centuries of political and familial stability, “Sheikh Mo,” as he is nicknamed, has allowed his “business model” to flourish without any constraints or countervailing power. There are no taxes, no levies, and no regulations in this city, which is run like a private enterprise, where political leaders behave like businessmen and where the status of citizenship has been erased. Residents are treated—depending on their background, wealth, and role—as investors, employees, or slaves.

Like a true CEO of “Dubai Inc.,” “Sheikh Mo” rules his microstate with an iron fist. Surrounded by his inner circle, which functions as a board of directors, he has created a unique model of development: capitalism without democracy. A system that embodies all the contradictions of the 21st century. It combines entrepreneurial boldness with glaring inequalities, technological innovation with human exploitation, open trade with financial opacity, urban modernity with political conservatism, and a disastrous ecological footprint with the promotion of green technologies.

As evidence of the enthusiasm this model has generated, the population has doubled over the past fifteen years, reaching 4 million residents, more than 90% of whom are foreigners. By 2025, the “Make it possible” motto, so dear to the founding fathers of the United States, will no longer be played out in the West but in the East. It is as if a wave of a magic wand had reversed the course of the world and transformed a small, oil-less port city into the ultimate showcase of global capitalism.

As an outpost of capitalism without democracy, Dubai shows us today what the world would become if money alone dictated the rules of the game.



IMAGES

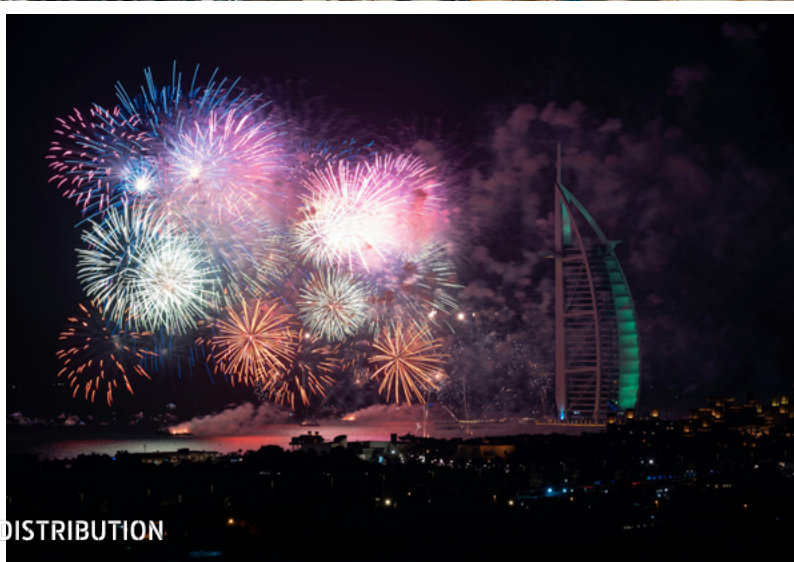
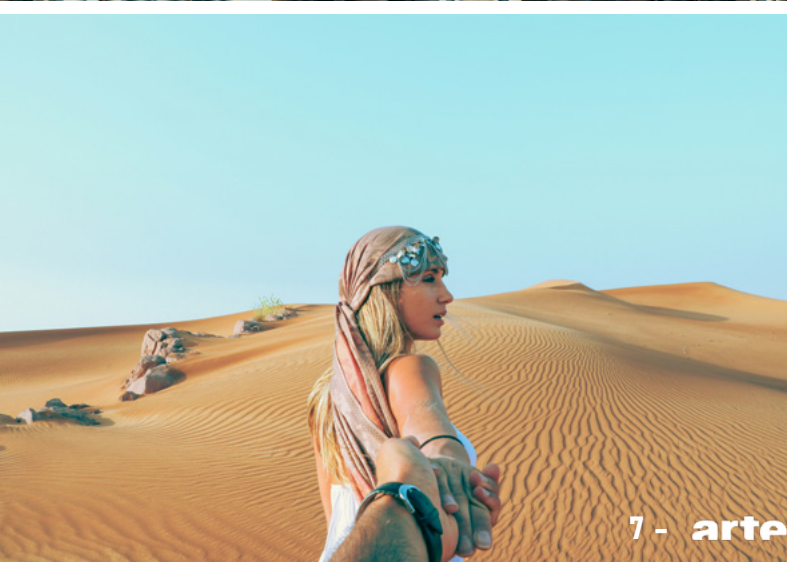
Symbolic of Dubai is Sheikh Zayed Road. This immense ten-lane avenue stretches across the city for about 50 kilometers, from the southern border with Abu Dhabi to the northern border with the emirate of Sharjah. In a distant and extravagant echo of the conquest of the American West, buildings have sprung up along Sheikh Zayed Road like concrete and glass mushrooms at a breakneck pace, symbolizing a fierce determination that neither economic crises, epidemics, wars in the Middle East, nor international criticism have hindered.

Today, Sheikh Zayed Road is the backbone that holds this private city-state—built on sand—together with an iron fist. Traveling along it is not merely a journey through the past fifty years; but also to explore in depth how the city emerged from the desert—through tens of billions of dollars, real estate speculation elevated to a dogma, daring architectural gambles, hundreds of thousands of workers reduced to the status of modern-day slaves, and Hollywood-worthy publicity campaigns—all driven by an unwavering faith in the future.

Using archival footage, on-location filming, and animation, we reconstruct the development of Dubai through Sheikh Zayed Road. The city becomes a giant stage on which our key characters unfold their stories. Officials are filmed in their professional settings—government palaces, 50th-floor offices, and massive shopping malls—symbols of opulence.

The other characters in our story—the anonymous people who keep the machine running day and night, and those who speak out against abuses and injustices—are filmed in sequences using a handheld camera to visually bring to life this duality between the official image and reality. Some sequences are filmed outside the emirate for security reasons.

Finally, numerous influencers and celebrities have popularized Dubai's image through their videos shared on social media. We also use this footage to introduce some of our characters and stay true to the DNA of a city that markets itself as a luxury product through the screens.



SPEAKERS

- **Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum ("Sheikh Mo")** – Ruler of Dubai since 2006, Vice President of the United Arab Emirates.

- **Sheikh Ahmed bin Saeed Al Maktoum** – CEO of Emirates since 1985. He built the global aviation hub that has made Dubai an indispensable crossroads.

- **Mohamed Alabbar** – Founder of Emaar Properties. Builder of the Burj Khalifa and the Dubai Mall, symbols of Dubai's urban transformation.

- **Ahmed bin Sulayem** – Chairman of the DMCC since 2002. He has made Dubai the global capital of gold and commodities.

- **Sheikh Hamdan bin Mohammed Al Maktoum ("Fazza")** – Crown Prince since 2008, with 15 million Instagram followers.

- **Alex Hirschi ("Supercar Blondie")** – Australian automotive influencer, 10 million followers. A global showcase for Dubai's automotive luxury.

- **Anwar Mohammed Gargash** – Minister of State for Foreign Affairs (2008–2021), then diplomatic advisor. Architect of the UAE's international influence.

- **Ahmed Naser Al-Raisi** – Emirati general, former president of Interpol (2021–2025). Facing allegations of torture; a symbol of the tension between a glamorous image and human rights.

- **Princess Haya** – Daughter of the King of Jordan, now a refugee in London. She reveals

the hidden side of the Emirati monarchy: surveillance and deprivation of liberty.

- **Hervé Jaubert** – Former French officer, a fugitive now living in Miami. He took part in Sheikha Latifa's failed escape attempt; his story reads like a spy movie.

- **Radha Stirling** – British lawyer, founder of "Detained in Dubai." Defends expatriates who are victims of judicial abuse in the UAE.

- **Matthew Hedges** – British doctoral student, arrested in 2018 on espionage charges, convicted, and later pardoned. Illustrates the opacity and judicial authoritarianism of the UAE.

- **Niels Troost** – A sanctioned Swiss trader who relocated his Russian oil operations to Dubai. A symbol of the circumvention of international sanctions.

- **Patrick Moody** – British ambassador to the UAE (2018–2023), former anti-money laundering expert. Navigated the balance between strategic partnership and human rights concerns.

- **Khalifa Belhoul** – CEO of the Dubai Future Foundation since 2018. Leading the Museum of the Future; embodies Dubai's technological ambition.

- **Caroline Receveur** – Entrepreneur (fashion, cosmetics), based between Paris and Dubai.

- **Jazz and Laurent Correia** – Reality TV couple living abroad, with millions of followers. A symbol of the new wave of influencers drawn by tax benefits and lifestyle.

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