

A World Apart



For the utmost in luxury and exclusivity, settle your own corner of The World.
Roger Norum reports on Dubai's latest smorgasbord of real estate offerings.

Depending on whose history you choose to believe, it was either Anaximander, Hecataeus or Eratosthenes that devised the first recognizable map of the world. The maps drawn by each of these Greek philosophers reflected a specific worldview, but back then, of course, gross geographic distortions were commonplace: North America was nonexistent, Libya was nearly as large as Asia itself, and the Black Sea emptied east into the Pacific Ocean. After all, Ptolemy and al-Idrisi didn't have Google Earth.

The tradition of world mapmaking has since evolved in leaps and bounds. Except that now we're no longer drawing maps on parchment or desiccated ox hide, but on the face of the Earth itself. This isn't any Borges novella. It's reality. And it's for sale.

It is no understatement that The World is easily the most talked about real estate development project in modern history, and one of the most ambitious since the building

of the pyramids or the Great Wall of China. A cluster of 300 artificial islands designed in the shape of a world map set several kilometers off Dubai's coast, The World is poised to become the most exclusive and sought-after luxury community ever, offering vast residential and leisure opportunities, and luring those of means with azure waters, sub-tropical breezes, year-round sunshine, and the creation of a knot of private islands settled exclusively by celebrities, glitterati and the über-wealthy.

The impetus for Dubai's new development came from His Highness Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid al Maktoum, who realized that the city was rapidly running out of beachfront property. The Sheikh came to Sultan Ahmed Bin Sulayem, who had been a fundamental driver of the success of Jebel Ali Port and Freezone and key government advisor. "He said to me that with all this tourism we're running out of beach. Have someone design an island," explains Bin Sulayem. "The conversation took five minutes." And so The Palms

The Palms and The World, which will be visible from the moon.

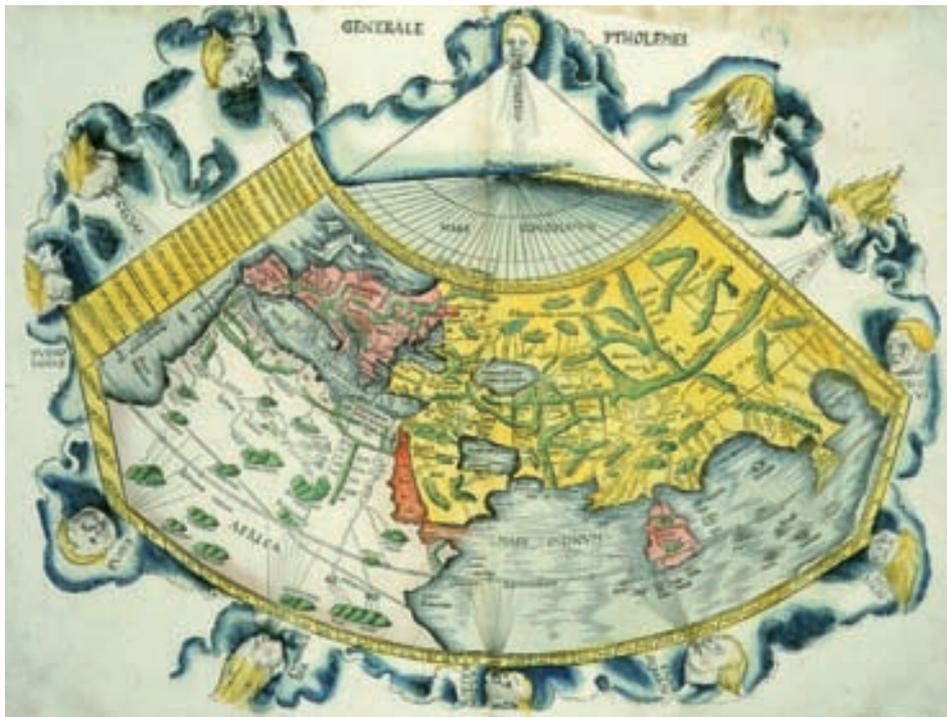
and The World were born, land reclamation projects that, when completed, will have multiplied Dubai's ever-important beachfront by more than twenty-fold, according to Bin Sulayem. An added touch of resplendence: the final collection of islands will be so big it will be visible from the moon.

Island property will be divided into four categories: private homes, estate homes, dream resorts, and community islands. Those islands intended for private, individual sale are around the perimeter of the atlas to maximize privacy and offer unencumbered open vistas, with ample space for mega-yachts. Other islands will proffer any permutation of world-class resorts, boutique hotels and spas and a clutch of exclusive villas, as well as high-brow restaurants, shops and other amenities.

The total population of The World is expected to hover around 150,000, reaching 250,000 during peak



Arabic map of the world created in the 12th century.



Ptolemy's map of the world from the Geographia, 1513.

seasons, but you won't find skyscrapers shooting out of the sand on these islands.

Aesthetics has been a very important consideration throughout the planning process. According to head consultant and architect Luis Ajamil, "Most developments on The World will be low rise—three to four stories—but if there is anything higher, it'll be iconic."

Much like Venice, that other great marvel of engineering that rose out of the sea, the islands will be connected by a series of channels, canals, and waterways, and serviced by a network of 24-hour water shuttles and ferries. The travel time from any one island to another will be between four and 15 minutes, depending on whether you want to get from France to Spain or from New York to New Zealand. Moreover, all 300 islands will only be accessible by marine or air transport, with world-class marinas for berthing boats, yachts and cruise liners.

Despite some initial skepticism from critics over whether the individual islands would sell, investors and wealthy would-be owners have jumped at the opportunity, with invitation-only sales that have led to over half of The World already being owned by early October 2007. These price tags are not for the faint of heart, mind you. “Greece” was sold for \$15.5 million, while “Tokyo” fetched \$45 million. So what inspires people to spend this kind of cash on an island?

Bin Hu, a Chinese developer and long-time devotee of Dubai, shelled out \$28 million for the 322,000 square foot “Shanghai” as a homage to the real Shanghai, where he currently lives. It might seem a large chunk of cash for a modest plot of land, but given that Shanghai currently has the most expensive real estate in China—a 3,000 square foot waterfront flat there recently sold for a whopping \$16 million—getting the entire island comes in at quite a bargain.

For the moment, Bin Hu is hush hush about his development plans for his personal “Shanghai”. But others have publicly announced plans and even begun preliminary sales of their soon-to-be-finished island properties. Irish business consortium Larionovo is developing an Irish-themed resort on its plot of land, The Island of Ireland. “Ireland” will offer a series of exclusive villas and apartments, a 20,000 square foot spa with infinity pool and what promises to be the biggest and best Irish bar in the world—set into the walls of a reconstructed Irish castle.

Larionovo’s design will reference ancient and modern aspects of Irish architecture and culture, with features



Nakheel chairman Sultan Ahmed Bin Sulayem announcing a property deal at a news conference in New York.



Hussein Al Yasiri, client relations, The World; an official translator; You Zhen Gao, Consul General of China; Hamza Mustafa, Director of The World; Bin Hu, the new owner of the island of “Shanghai” on The World.

including a recreation of Northern Ireland’s lunar-like Giant’s Causeway and landscape courtyard areas evoking the wide Georgian squares of Dublin.

Other developments include “Thailand”, where the minimalist Jasmine Gardens will consist of several hundred Thai-inspired flats, stilt houses and beach villas built in elegant Asian teak and surrounded by lush gardens and elegant lily ponds—just meters from the beach. Here, traditional vaulted thatched roofing, wooden screens, louvered shutters and blinds made of strips of bamboo allow air to naturally circulate throughout the structures, with cool water streaming into a central fountain that recalls the sights and sounds of a tropical waterfall.

As a global investment hotspot, Dubai’s allure is crystal clear. In addition to inexpensive office space and negligible taxes, the city’s airport is just a few miles from the city centre; there is very little crime; its primary coastal boulevard is easy to navigate; flights take around seven hours from London; and winter temperatures rarely fall below 20°C (about 70°F). But the real appeal of The World is that unrestricted freehold land ownership for foreigners means that owners will only be limited by their imagination in terms of what they can build.

To that end Nakheel is keen to remain as flexible as possible to the needs and desires of buyers. Hamza Mustafa, Director of The World, puts it this way: “If I have an interested buyer who is reluctant to buy unless he has Singapore, we will build him Singapore. That’s not an issue.” Yet while owners and developers will indeed maintain creative freedom over their islands, there’ll be

no place for any white elephants, as Nakheel hopes to discourage structures that might threaten the delicate environment of The World.

“We are very selective in who we sell to; it is important that we sell to the right people with the right development,” says Chris O’Donnell, Nakheel C.E.O. “We work closely with developers on their master plans, and if someone wants to build a 15-story building, we say ‘go to the mainland’.”

But with all this new construction, what of The World’s ecology? The initial announcement of the development raised a few red flags among environmentalists. But Nakheel strongly believes in respecting the environment; the firm is downright dogmatic about its green thumb, especially when it comes to its offshore projects. After an extensive environmental baseline study that evaluated water quality and the health of the marine environment, Nakheel has enlisted five independent researchers to monitor the ecology of the islands and their surroundings throughout the land reclamation project.

National Geographic marine biologist Joseph Valencic has made countless dives over the past several years around The World to survey the pre-existing bottom conditions and document marine life. Valencic’s pre-construction research noted that with no suitable bottom substrate for attachment, marine life was minimal on the sites of both The World and Palm Islands.

According to Valencic, for sub-aquatic creatures, “trying to live there was like being tossed in a washing machine loaded with Brillo pads. However, the natural



The World’s marinas will have plenty of space for visiting mega-yachts.



The cluster of 300 islands will have a peak population of 250,000.

oval-shaped rock breakwater established to protect the islands of The World project also provides the largest artificial reef on the planet. This permitted an incredible explosion of marine growth.”

The new rocky breakwaters of The World now provide local marine life with respite from their challenging natural surroundings. “Even species once thought near extinction are beginning to slowly reappear,” Valencic says. Rather than destroying previously existing ecosystems, The World is creating 300 new habitats.

Shaun Lenehan, senior environmental manager on The World, puts it bluntly: “If you haven’t got a great beach with clean water, who’s going to buy it?” To that end, Nakheel is offering financial incentives to island owners proposing green development projects, encouraging initiatives such as energy-saving lighting schemes, optimized placement of buildings to minimize sun radiation and ‘smart’ water systems that use recycled water in soil irrigation and cooling systems, cutting water usage in half. “It’s the latest fashion in Dubai to be as green as you can,” Lenehan states. “This is a great way of getting owners involved in environmental issues.”

But for how much longer will one be able to buy into the world’s most distinctive, most environmentally responsible archipelago of luxury islands? With more than half of the properties already sold, it would seem not for long. For those who desire a home in this oasis of exclusivity, the possibilities are virtually limitless. To paraphrase an age-old Afghan proverb—one that might well have been heeded by the early Greek mapmakers—“What you see in yourself is what you see in The World.”

How Do They Do That?

Architects, surveyors, builders, and oceanography experts have been working in concert around the clock for more than five years to construct The World—an astonishing man-made version of the planet.

Physical construction of the islands is being carried out by a fleet of 30 ships—30 percent of the world's largest marine dredges—that scour the Arabian Gulf seafloor and pump in layer upon layer of sand to raise the islands out of the water.

Before construction of any buildings can get started on the islands, the land must be foundationally sound enough to support such construction. Structural improvement of the sub-aquatic floor is achieved through a process known as vibrocompaction, whereby loose sands are densified to create stable foundation soils. Vibrocompaction is performed with specially designed vibrating, torpedo-shaped probes 12 to 16 inches in diameter.

Once the probe is inserted deep into the sea bed, vibrations are sent through the probe, causing the sand to settle and thicken. Sand is then added from the ground surface to fill the void. The combined action of vibration and water saturation by jetting rearranges loose grains into a more compact state, and the compound becomes as strong as any man-made concrete.

After land reclamation is complete, families of backhoes, excavators, dozers, and tractors are deployed across the islands to begin foundation and infrastructure development through a process known as terraforming, which allows developers to quite literally reshape the land by relocating sand beds to custom build geographic features such as private beaches, coves, harbors and marinas.

Once the islands become fully operational, a centralized network of utility plants located at service hubs spaced around the islands will provide essential services to residents of The World.

Fresh water and electricity will arrive from the mainland via underwater pipes and cables to island hubs. All inter- and intra-island utilities will also be placed underwater and distributed via a flexible network that can grow and change according to the needs of specific islands, with recycling systems in place to enable efficient utility consumption across all islands.

Central water and power plants will be based at two sites on opposite ends of The World, with waste water treatment and reuse systems on each island to create a sustainable waste utility system. Each island will be responsible for its individual connection to central distribution and collection water and power plants.





Some Key Numbers

Size: Approximately 931 hectares
(9.3 million square meters)

Length of extra beachfront created by the building of
the islands: 232 kilometers

Average distance between each of the islands in the
archipelago: 100 meters

Average depth of water in the channels between the
islands: 15 meters

Amount of sand moved to create the islands:
326 million cubic meters

Amount of rock needed to build the 27-kilometer
breakwater: 34 million tonnes