

# A Five-Star Ghost Town at the End of 'The World'

By Tim McGirk Monday, Oct. 19, 2009



A single model home sits amid the World's unfinished islands off the coast of Dubai  
Jorge Ferrari / EPA

"I want to see the world," I told a boatman in Dubai Creek, and pulled out my map. He waved me on board his little wooden boat with no hesitation. I could have told him I wanted to sail up the river Styx, and he would have agreed. Times are tough in the Persian Gulf emirate, and my Bangladeshi boatman had spent hours chugging up and down the creek looking for a fare. It was his bad luck that his passenger appeared to be crazy.

"The World," I repeated. Again he nodded, this time rolling his eyes slightly. He tried distracting me, asking me if I wanted to visit the Ali bin Abi Taleb mosque or ogle the colossal white yachts lining the waterfront like beached Moby Dicks. I pointed out our route — down the creek to the harbor and into the Arabian Sea. There, three miles offshore, was a cluster of 300 man-made islands shaped like a map of the globe. Each was named after a country or a city. The massive archipelago stretched across six miles and supposedly had been constructed with more than 5,000 tons of coral, making it the largest artificial reef on the planet. "See?" I said. "This is the World." ([See 10 things to do in Dubai.](#))

The boatman shook his head madly. "Not possible," he muttered. With sign language — the universal drawing of the finger across the throat — he made it clear that no matter how much money I was offering (and frankly, it wasn't much), he wouldn't sail into the maze of islands. The World was a pet project of Dubai's ruler, Sheik Mohammed bin Rashid al-Maktoum, and it was patrolled by security guards in fast boats. Illegal Bangladeshi immigrants and nosy foreign reporters entered at their peril.

Depending on your point of view, the World is either the apex of mankind's ingenuity or a cautionary tale about the feverish excesses of Dubai's 21st century boom. Each island was selling for \$15 million to \$50 million, by invitation only: its developers were pitching the spits of land to tycoons, sportsmen and celebrities. But when Dubai's property market imploded last year, dropping more than 50%, cheeky headlines in the international press suggested that "the end of the World" had arrived. One dealer was quoted as saying that the multibillion-dollar project had been postponed "indefinitely." ([See pictures of Dubai.](#))

In promotional materials, the World looks impressive: a scattering of computer-generated islands lush with palm trees and peppered with lavish hotels and villas. Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie were supposedly interested in buying Ethiopia, although a representative for the couple later denied the deal. An Irish investor (who committed suicide in February, after his company went broke) planned to build a theme resort on Ireland; never mind that the gulf's extreme heat would turn a pint of Guinness into a bubbling black stew. Only one island, reportedly belonging to Sheik Mohammed, ended up occupied, its palms shading a large mansion. The 299 others are barren smears of sand. From his lonely vantage point in the eye of the World, the sheik, a horse-racing enthusiast and multibillionaire, recently waved aside Dubai's financial crisis — economists say the emirate is \$80 billion in the hole — as a "passing cloud."

The World is one of many architectural fantasies in Dubai that now appear to be shimmering mirages. The emirate boasts the 2,684-ft. Burj Dubai, the world's tallest skyscraper; a man-made island shaped like a giant palm; a ski slope in a shopping mall; and an 18-hole golf course (unfinished) in the middle of the desert that will slurp down a million gallons of water a day. But the dozens of giant cranes that once littered the skyline have migrated elsewhere. Dubai today has the feel of a futuristic, five-star ghost town blasted by sandstorms.

With a relieved wave, the boatman let me off at a souk filled with Indians, Pakistanis, Filipinos and Yemenis — the immigrants who built Dubai and keep it ticking. But even there the mood was grim. The best-selling items were suitcases. At the rate of 5,000 a day, workers are heading home. Once, the world came to Dubai. Now all that's left of the World in Dubai is hundreds of empty islands.

<http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1929221,00.html>