

diversions

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WING IT: You don't everyday get to see Palm Jumeirah from the top. With views this stunning, you'll be going Live on Facebook in no time. Photos: Kiran Prasad



Want to pay Dh13k to fly over Palm Jumeirah sometime?

Road travel isn't passé. But if you've had it with traffic to Sharjah, treat yourself. Round up the folks, chip in the monies and board one of these seaplane flights. Fleetingly, you even get to be taller than Burj Khalifa

Sarwat Nasir



One, two, three — all systems go? the pilot asked. “Yes, ready for take-off,” I responded.

After another system and weather check, the pilot next to me pulled the lever and the plane took off — not from the airport or private runways, but from the sea.

I was onboard a Seawings seaplane and we were about to do a 40-minute tour of Dubai, with breathtaking panoramic views of the emirate. I wasn't really co-piloting the plane, but having the seat next to the pilot makes you wish you really were flying this bird.

After taking-off from the Seawings base at the Jebel Ali Golf Course and Resort, it wasn't long until we were flying over the Palm Jumeirah Islands at an altitude of above 1,500ft. We've all seen pictures or videos of the beautiful palm tree-shaped island, but to the naked eye, it's mesmerising.

My two colleagues and I from the *Khaleej Times* had opted for the Jebel Ali Gold option, priced at

Dh13,500, which meant that the entire nine-seat plane was ours for the duration of the trip.

“Those are the World Islands right there. You can see the shape of the world,” our friendly pilot, Stefan, said into the mic. He had handed over the co-pilot headphones and mic to me, so I could hear him pointing out the famous landmarks of Dubai.

“If you look closely, you can see the continents. There's Africa,” he pointed with his finger.

We flew by Downtown Dubai next and the tall buildings looked stunning. An aerial view of the skyscrapers offers you another perspective of the city — for me, it made me recall the outstanding progress the emirate has made in such a short period of time. It was difficult believing that just 20 years ago most of these iconic landmarks weren't there.

“This is my one of my favourite parts,” I heard Stefan say through my headphones, as we passed by the Burj Khalifa.

I stared with absolute admiration. “It's unbelievable, isn't it?” The pilot said. “And if you really focus, you can see the shape of the World Islands further into the distance.”

Stefan, who is from Canada, has been a pilot for 16 years. He said that the experience of flying over Dubai “feels magical”.

Last but not least, we flew over the Deira Creek and then circled back to the Seawings base. The sight

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of the Palm and World Islands again on the way back was another treat.

“Are we landing?” I asked the pilot, unwilling to accept the trip was already over. “Yes, it's been 40 minutes!” the pilot laughed.

While landing, the pilot pointed out large sea turtles in the sea that are under the protection of UAE's conservation planners.

“Look! You can see them swimming,” Stefan said. “When you've been flying for as long as I have, these small things become very noticeable. Hope you enjoyed the trip.”

“And thanks for co-piloting with me,” he playfully added.

So, whether you're a UAE resident or just visiting, the seaplane tour is a must, because you haven't fully “seen Dubai” unless you've seen it up close from an aerial point of view.

According to the senior manager of the commercial team at Seawings, Mithu Agarwal, the seaplane

operator has seen double-digit growth in their passenger numbers every year over the last 10 years.

“In the past couple of years, we have also diversified into offering other unique experiences to our guests through our lifestyle channel,” he said.

He said, residents and tourists feel it is a special experience. “We get excellent referrals from our guests”. According to Agarwal, “Apart from families and couples, we also get many requests from corporate organisations who are looking at entertaining VIPs, planning a team event or organising product launches. It's an exciting and unique experience and makes any event memorable. We are also seeing an increase in demand for charters to different destinations in the UAE and Oman.”

There are more affordable options for residents or visitors who are interested in taking a tour on one of these flying machines. The Seawings Silver Seaplane tour is priced at Dh1,695 per adult and Dh1,440 per child. The company also offers combination packages, for example, a seaplane tour followed by an Exclusive Yacht Charter. This is priced at Dh2,975 per person.

For more information, check out seawings.ae.

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Sarwat, when she's not reporting, plays the piano. On weekends, she's at karaoke

