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OFF-PLAN SPECIALIST

FIRST-TIME INVESTOR PLAY BOOK

Purchasing Property In The UAE

THE UAE OFF-PLAN REAL ESTATE GUIDE

A Plain-English guide to off-plan real estate: how the market works, what to expect at every step, and how to invest with confidence as a resident or overseas buyer.

DUBAI & ABU DHABI PROPERTY MARKETS

OFF-PLAN BASICS

PROCESSES

PAYMENT PLANS

BROKERS

EXIT STRATEGY

PORTFOLIO

Introduction

The UAE, Dubai in particular: is one of the most active property markets in the world, built around freehold ownership for foreign buyers, no personal property or capital gains tax, and a fast- growing population of residents and businesses relocating from abroad. Off-plan property is the entry point most investors use, because it comes with payment plans, government-backed capital protection, and in many cases a route to UAE residency.

This guide breaks the market down into six parts. Each section is written so that a new investor can read it once and walk away with a genuine, working understanding of how the mechanics, costs and returns fit together, not just headline numbers.

How to use this guide

Let's make this simple.

Many people assume buying property in the UAE is complicated. It isn't, once someone walks you through it in plain language. This guide takes you from your first search through to selling, renting, financing, or leveraging your investment into a portfolio, whether you're a UAE resident or investing from overseas. By the end, you'll understand how the market is structured, what each step of a transaction involves, what protects your money, and how experienced investors turn one purchase into several. No jargon left unexplained, no step left vague.

Off-Plan Fundamentals

What Is Off-plan Property?

Off-plan means buying a property before it has been built - sometimes before construction has even started, sometimes mid-way through. In exchange for buying earlier in the construction cycle, you gain access to instalment-based payment plans and, in many cases, the ability to finance the remaining balance once the property is handed over. A typical handover timeframe is 2 to 4 years from the date of purchase.

Developers offer this structure because pre-selling funds the construction itself. In return, buyers are usually able to enter at a lower starting price than a comparable ready (secondary market) unit, and to spread payment across the build period instead of paying in full upfront.

2-4 Years
TYPICAL HANDOVER TIMEFRAME

2,900
OFF-PLAN PROJECTS ACROSS THE UAE

4 X
ACCEPTED METHODS TO PAY A DEVELOPER

Off-plan Vs Ready (Secondary Market)

Off-plan is purchased directly from a developer before or during construction, using a payment plan. Ready property is complete, transacted on the secondary market, and typically paid for in full or via an immediate bank mortgage. Both are valid strategies. Secondary market purchases generally have more buying fees involved in the initial purchase compared to off-plan direct from developer.

Who can buy property in the UAE?

Property ownership in the UAE used to be reserved for UAE and GCC nationals. That changed emirate by emirate, opening the market to international investors:

Dubai
Freehold Opened in 2002

In May 2002, Dubai's then-Crown Prince Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum issued a decree allowing non-GCC foreigners to own freehold property for the first time. This was formalised into Law No. 7 of 2006, which named the first designated freehold areas. Dubai is now one of the most established and liquid freehold markets in the world.

Abu Dhabi
Freehold Opened in 2019

Abu Dhabi amended Law No. 19 of 2005 in April 2019 to allow foreign nationals of all countries to fully own freehold property, not just long leases. Within nine designated investment zones, including Yas Island, Saadiyat Island and Al Reem Island. A newer, fast-growing market compared with Dubai.

IMPORTANT NOTICE:
Freehold ownership for international buyers only applies inside designated freehold / investment zones within each emirate, not the emirate as a whole. Outside those zones, non-GCC foreign nationals are generally limited to long leasehold rights. Your broker will confirm whether a project sits inside a freehold zone before you commit.

Today, both UAE/GCC nationals and international investors of virtually any nationality can buy freehold property in Dubai's and Abu Dhabi's designated zones, as either a resident or a non resident of the UAE.

Where Do I Start My Search?

The UAE has close to 2,900 off-plan projects on the market at any given time (roughly 2,376 in Dubai and 212 in Abu Dhabi alone, with the balance spread across the other emirates). Without a clear filter, that volume of choice becomes overwhelming fast. Before you start browsing listings, choose one priority from each of the three categories below. That combination becomes your search brief.

Stage 1: Property Type

What are you buying?

- Apartments
- Townhouses/Villas
- Commercial Properties

Stage 2: Purchase Type

How are you buying it?

- Off-plan, direct from the developer
- Off-plan Re-sale, from an individual
- Ready Property (Secondary Market)

Stage 3: Strategy

Why are you buying?

- Rental Income
- Capital Appreciation
- End-use (to live in it)

WHY THIS MATTERS

Having a clear picture upfront lets you filter thousands of options down to a handful worth serious research, and gives your broker something concrete to work from instead of guessing what "a good investment" means to you.

Finding Your Investment

Working with professionals

The advised way to search the market methodically is through a licensed broker in the UAE someone with market expertise who gives you a non-biased opinion. Yes, you can search the market yourself. But a good broker isn't just there to walk you through a brochure. They help you understand the numbers behind a project, the government planning around a location, RTA approvals affecting future connectivity, and the on-the-ground context that never makes it into a listing. Brokers transact daily, working with both tenants and buyers. That constant exposure builds a working knowledge of buyer behaviour and what actually rents or resells well. Insight that helps you choose not just the right project, but the right building, floor and unit within it.

A BROKER'S ACTUAL JOB

To understand your requirements thoroughly: budget, timeline, financing capacity and long-term goals to then match you to the investment that fits you best, rather than the one that's easiest to sell.

Choosing The Right Broker

Dubai alone has tens of thousands of RERA-licensed brokers. Recent estimates range from roughly 18,000 to over 30,000 active licences. That's a healthy market, but it can also overwhelm your search if you don't know what to look for. A broker who builds a good rapport with you isn't automatically the best broker. Look for this combination:

Trustworthy And Transparency

Upfront about pricing, risks and developer track record, not just the upside.

Low-Pressure And Numerical

Leads with numbers and comparisons, not urgency or pressure tactics.

Knowledge And Connected

Deep project knowledge plus a network across developers, banks and property managers.

FUN FACT

Brokers in the UAE do not earn a salary. They work on 100% commission, paid only on completed transactions. That means a broker who works with you exclusively is fully incentivised to get your deal right. Speaking to multiple agents about the same project can backfire: to win your business, some will talk down a genuinely good project just to seem more "honest" than the competition.

"Speak to a few brokers, then commit to working with one from start to finish."

The No. 1 rule - because they're also the ones who'll help you rent, sell, refinance or expand your portfolio later. It's a long-term relationship, not a single transaction.

Broker Vs. Developer Agent

You can also buy directly through a developer's in-house sales agent. It's worth understanding how that relationship differs from working with an independent broker before you choose.

Independent Broker

- Paid 100% Commission only on completed transactions - fully investing in getting it right for you.
- Shows you options across multiple developers and projects
- Will point out a project’s weakness, not just its highlights
- Stays involved long-term; renting, selling, refinancing, visas, portfolio strategy
- Paid by the developer as a referral fee - costs the buyer nothing

Developer Sales Agent

- Paid a base salary plus commission - incentivised to sell their employer's inventory specifically
- Represents one developer's product only, by definition
- Sales-pitch focused; limited time per client, often high-pressure
- Relationship typically ends once the sale closes - you're a transaction, not a client
- You are left to find your own agent later for renting, reselling or managing the unit

WHAT HAPPENS AFTER YOU BUY DIRECT?

As an overseas investor especially, you'll likely need help renting the unit, reselling it, financing it or applying for a visa off the back of it. A developer agent typically isn't the one who provides that ongoing support, you'll need to build a new relationship with a broker at that point anyway.

The Off-plan Buying Journey

Every off-plan purchase follows the same broad shape, regardless of which route gets you to the unit. There are three common entry points: a brand New Launch (via an EOI or a Registration process), buying from existing inventory still available after launch, or catching a Cancellation on a sold-out project.

Reserve your interest

Pay a refundable EOI, or simply register your details (depending on the method the developer is using for this launch)

Allocation Date - Unit Selection

A 15–30 minute live window where full pricing and unit details are revealed and you choose from real-time available inventory.

Booking Form And Downpayment

Once you've selected a unit, you receive a Booking Form and pay the down payment plus 4% DLD fee and admin fee (less any EOI already paid).

Sales Purchase Agreement (SPA)

Signed within 30 days of securing the unit, the official contract between you and the developer.

Oqood Issued

Your interim, legal proof of ownership arrives by email and in the Dubai REST app.

Payment Plan And Handover

You continue paying per the milestone schedule until handover, when your Oqood converts into a full Title Deed.

Method 1+2 - Launches

New Launch: Two Common Methods

Developers only publish a starting price at launch: usually the lowest entry point, available on just a handful of units that sell out almost immediately. Prices rise from there based on built-up area (BUA) or plot size, location, views and floor level.

Method 1

Expression Of Interest (EOI)

- A small, 100% refundable fee paid to the developer, typically AED 50,000–500,000 depending on the project and ticket size
- Collected 1–2 weeks prior to the Allocation Date; places you in a queue for a chance to select a unit
- Once you select a unit on Allocation Day, your EOI is applied to it and becomes non-refundable
- If you don't select a unit, your EOI is fully refunded

Method 2

Registration Process

- No funds required upfront just documentation: passport copy, phone number, email, address and full name
- Registration is open for a limited window with a hard deadline
- You're then given a specific date and time slot for your Allocation (your broker can attend on your behalf, often virtually)
- If you don't complete payment immediately after selecting a unit, it recirculates back into general inventory and you lose the unit

HOW TO PREPARE FOR EITHER METHOD:

The Allocation window is only 15–30 minutes, with other investors selecting from live inventory at the
same time. Walk in with your top 5 unit preferences ranked in order, your budget confirmed, and payment ready to move the moment you select. Hesitation costs you the unit.

Method 3 - Cancellations

Cancellations And How You Pay

When a Sold-Out project frees up a unit

If a buyer on a fully sold project doesn't proceed, their unit is released back to the market and shared with every broker simultaneously. Demand is immediate, these units can sell within minutes. To act on a cancellation you need passport/ Emirates ID documents and full payment (booking fee or down payment, plus 4% DLD and admin fees) ready to send the moment it becomes available. From there, the process (Booking Form, SPA, payment plan) is identical to Methods 1 and 2.

METHOD	WHO CAN USE IT	NOTES
Physical Cheque	UAE Residents only	Traditional method; requires a UAE bank account
Wire Transfer	Residents & international investors	Most common method for overseas buyers
Payment Link	Residents & international investors	Debit/credit card link sent to you - quickest, easiest option
Crypto Payment	Residents & international investors	Not all developers accept it - confirm in advance

WHERE YOUR MONEY ACTUALLY GOES

Your EOI, DLD fee and admin fee are paid directly to the developer's account. Your down payment and every scheduled instalment on the payment plan, however, go into a separate, government-regulated escrow account. Not the developer's operating account. More on exactly how that protects you on the next page.

Buyers Protection

How Is Your Money Protected?

This is the part most first-time buyers never get explained to them, and it's the reason off-plan buying in the UAE is far safer than it sounds.

The Escrow Account: Your Safety Net

Under Law No. 8 of 2007, every off-plan project must have its own dedicated escrow account, held at a UAE Central Bank-licensed, RERA-approved trustee bank. Every buyer's payment plan instalment for that project (from every buyer) is deposited into this single account. The developer cannot access it freely; funds are released only in stages, as an independent trustee certifies that construction milestones have actually been met. Misusing escrow funds carries criminal penalties, including imprisonment and fines starting at AED 100,000 imposed on the developer.

There's a second layer of protection before that: under Law No. 9 of 2007, a developer must already have at least 20% of a project's construction cost funded (in cash or bank guarantee) before they're even allowed to start marketing or selling it.

THE 4% DLD FEE, EXPLAINED:

The Dubai Land Department (DLD) charges a transfer fee of 4% of the purchase price on every transaction. Other emirates, such as Abu Dhabi, charge a 2% ADM fee (Abu Dhabi Department of Municipalities). This is Abu Dhabi’s equivalent to DLD.

Buyers Protection

The Oqood (Pre-Title Deed)

The Oqood is the legal proof that you own an off-plan unit, before a full Title Deed can exist.

When you receive it

Once you've secured a unit, paid your down payment (typically 10–20% of the price) plus the 4% DLD fee, and both you and the developer have signed the SPA.

Where to find it

Delivered by email, and always accessible through the official Dubai REST app, linked to your Emirates ID or passport details.

What happens at handover

Once construction completes and your final payment is made, the Oqood automatically converts into a full Title Deed, permanent proof of ownership.

WHY IT MATTERS BEYOND OWNERSHIP

Your Oqood is also the document that unlocks visa eligibility, you can apply for a UAE investor or Golden Visa as soon as you hold it. Covered next page in depth.

Visa Eligibility For Investors

Property ownership in the UAE can also open the door to residency. There are two distinct routes, and understanding the difference matters for how you structure your purchase.

	2-YEAR INVESTOR VISA	10 - YEAR GOLDEN VISA
Minimum Value	No minimum for a sole owner on a Dubai-registered property. If jointly owned, each owner needs a minimum share of AED 400,000.	AED 2,000,000 for a sole investor. If jointly owned, each owner must hold a minimum of AED 2,000,000 under their name.
Renewal	Renewable indefinitely, for as long as the property remains in your name.	Renewable indefinitely, for as long as the property remains in your name.
Physical Presence	You must enter the UAE at least once every 6 months (any visit length, even 24 hours, is sufficient).	No requirement to enter the UAE at all: no limit on how long you can stay away or how long you stay if you're in the country.
Family Sponsorship	Available for spouse and dependents.	Available for spouse, children, and in many cases parents.

You Can Stack Multiple Properties

Golden Visa eligibility is not limited to a single property purchase. What matters is the total value of real estate held in your name, not any one unit's individual price.

Worked Example:

If you own four studio apartments each valued at AED 600,000, your combined real estate holding equals AED 2,400,000 - comfortably clearing the AED 2,000,000 threshold and making you eligible for the 10-Year Golden Visa, even though no single unit meets the minimum on its own.

Resale Of Off-Plan

Reselling Off-plan Properties

You are not required to hold an off-plan unit until handover - it can be resold (sometimes called an "Off-plan Resale") before construction completes. The exact terms vary by developer and are set out in your Sale and Purchase Agreement (SPA), but the general mechanics are consistent:

ELIGIBILITY REQUIREMENTS

- Minimum payment threshold - most developers require a minimum percentage of the purchase price to have been paid (commonly 30-40%, sometimes up to 50%) before they will approve a resale.
- Developer No Objection Certificate (NOC) a formal approval from the developer is mandatory before any resale can be registered; without it, the transfer cannot go through.
- Assignment / transfer fee - typically 2–5% of the original purchase price, payable to the developer, on top of the standard DLD/ADM transfer fee due again at the point of resale (BUYERS PAY THIS)

In short: you can exit at any point once the minimum payment threshold in your specific contract has been met: it's a developer-by-developer, project-by-project figure, so always confirm it in the Sales Purchase Agreement (SPA) before you buy if an early exit is part of your strategy.

Financing Your Investment

Mortgage terms in the UAE differ significantly depending on whether you are a UAE resident or a non-resident buyer, and rates and loan-to-value (LTV) limits move with the market: the figures below are current directional ranges, not fixed guarantees.

	UAE RESIDENT	NON-RESIDENT
Initial Rate	Roughly 3.5% – 5.5%, typically fixed for 1–5 years	Roughly 4.2% – 6.0%, fixed intro periods or variable
Reversion Rate	Variable, tied to EIBOR + approx. 1.0% – 2.25%	Variable, tied to EIBOR + approx. 2.0% – 2.5% or higher
Loan To Value (LTV)	Up to 80% for expats, up to 85% for UAE Nationals, on properties under AED 5,000,000 (caps step down on higher-value properties)	Typically capped between 50% and 65%; expect a down payment of 35% to 50%, with off-plan financing generally sitting at the lower end

What is EIBOR

The Emirates Interbank Offered Rate is the benchmark rate UAE banks use to price variable loans. Most mortgages start on a fixed "teaser" rate for a set number of years, then revert to a variable rate calculated as EIBOR plus the bank's margin, so your rate can move up or down after the fixed period ends.

Using Off-plan Payment Plans To Your Advantage

Off-plan payment structures are a genuine financing strategy in their own right. Because most projects only require you to pay a portion of the price during construction: with the balance due on handover, that handover balance is generally the portion eligible for mortgage financing in full.

Choosing Your Asset Class

The UAE market is broadly split into three property types, and each behaves differently depending on supply, demand, and who the buyer ultimately is.

	RESIDENTIAL APARTMENT	TOWNHOUSE & VILLAS	COMMERCIAL
Supply Vs Demand	High supply, generally matched by strong demand from the influx of new residents	Very low supply relative to demand as more families relocate to the UAE seeking long-term homes	Limited supply of Grade A office space relative to business relocation demand
Key Value Drivers	Location, size, developer, views, floor & price per sq. ft.	Masterplan location, position within the community, built-up area (BUA), plot size, developer reputation, views	Location, building grade, tenant covenant strength, price per sq. ft.
Best Suited For:	Rental income; waterfront/ scarce locations can perform strongly on both appreciation and yield	Both appreciation and rental demand - scarcity of supply supports pricing power	A numbers-driven investment with strong, stable income
Typical Lease Term	Annual residential tenancy	Annual residential tenancy	3–10 years, often with a ~5% annual rent escalation built in

Commercial: The Numbers-Driven Investment

Off-plan commercial property lets investors use the same instalment payment plans as residential, while offering exposure to a segment with structurally limited new supply. Businesses continue to relocate to the UAE for its low-tax environment and status as a regional hub, keeping demand for Grade A office space strong.

Commercial assets in strong locations are currently delivering net yields of roughly 9–15% (with select constrained, high-demand pockets trending higher) consistently ahead of residential net yields - combined with longer 3–10 year tenancies and rent reviews that are commonly negotiated with a 5% annual increase, giving a more stable, contractually-locked return than residential leasing.

Branded, Hotel And Serviced Residences

Beyond standard residential and commercial units, the UAE has a well-developed market for hospitality-linked residences. These look similar on the surface but carry meaningfully different ownership rights, usage rules, and return profiles.

	BRANDED RESIDENCES	HOTEL APARTMENTS	SERVICED APARTMENTS
Ownership & Usage	Standard freehold title deed. Live in it year-round, lock up and leave, or rent independently or via an optional rental pool.	You own the unit, but usage is strictly commercial, most require enrolment in a mandatory hotel rental pool, limiting your own stays to a set number of days per year.	You own the unit; management leases it via corporate or short-to- medium-term channels. Personal use rules vary, but it functions primarily as a managed income asset.
Services & Amenities	Five-star service, dedicated concierge, valet, and access to hotel facilities often under names like Armani, Bulgari, or Four Seasons.	Full hotel operations: daily housekeeping, room service, front-desk check-in, all managed by a hospitality operator.	Essential hospitality services: weekly housekeeping, maintenance, security, with a functional, corporate focus rather than ultra-luxury branding.
Costs & Returns	Highest upfront price, carrying a 25–35% brand premium, plus higher annual service charges offset by strong long-term capital appreciation and resale liquidity.	Moderate entry cost versus ultra-luxury branded stock; Income is passive but dependent on Dubai's tourism performance, net of a significant operator revenue share.	Attractive rental yields targeting mid-to-high tier business executives, with service fees positioned below branded luxury tiers.

HOW TO THINK ABOUT THE CHOICE

Branded residences suit buyers who want a genuine lifestyle asset with the flexibility of full ownership. Hotel apartments suit investors comfortable trading personal-use flexibility for hands-off, operator-managed income tied to tourism cycles. Serviced apartments sit in between a more functional, corporate-income asset with lower brand premiums and moderate service costs.

Building A Portfolio

A portfolio isn't several identical studios. It's a deliberate mix of unit types, locations and strategies, each doing a different job.

Successful investors rarely put all their capital into one project. Instead, they diversify and they use financing strategically to multiply what their capital can hold, rather than paying every unit off in full.

Buy off-plan, pay with your own capital during construction

Your initial investment covers the payment plan up to handover.

Finance the remaining balance at handover

By now the property has typically appreciated and is ready to rent, whilst rental income helps cover the new monthly mortgage instalment.

Release equity once appreciation has built up

Refinance to release a portion of the paper profit in cash, without selling the asset.

Redeploy that equity into a new off-plan purchase

No fresh capital from your own pocket required. Repeat the cycle to grow the portfolio.

THIS AMPLIFIES RISK AS WELL AS RETURN

Leverage works in both directions. Appreciation and rental demand are never guaranteed, and equity-release amounts depend on bank policy and your residency status. Non-residents in particular should expect more conservative release ratios than the illustrative example on the next page. Model your own numbers conservatively with your broker and bank.

Case Study: Numbers In Action

Instead of buying one AED 5,000,000 unit outright, the buyer purchases two townhouses at AED 5,000,000 each (AED 10,000,000 combined) on a 50/50 payment plan. Their AED 5,000,000 capital covers exactly the 50% due during construction across both units. (BASED ON NON-RESIDENT BUYER)

STAGE	PER UNIT	COMBINED (2X UNITS)
PURCHASE PRICE	AED 5,000,000	AED 10,000,000
PAID FROM OWN CAPITAL (50% to HANDOVER)	AED 2,500,000	AED 5,000,000
FINANCED AT HANDOVER (50%, EG 4.54% / 25 YRS)	AED 2,500,000 = AED 13,953/Mo	AED 5,000,000 = AED 27,906/Mo
VALUE AFTER + 30% APPRECIATION	AED 6,500,000	AED 13,000,000
PAPER PROFIT	AED 1,500,000	AED 3,000,000
ANNUAL RENTAL INCOME	AED 280,000	AED 560,000
MONTHLY CASH FLOW (RENT - MORTGAGE)	=AED 9,380	=AED 18,760

THE RE-INVESTMENT STEP

Releasing an illustrative 80% of the AED 3,000,000 combined profit frees up AED 2,400,000 in cash - enough to cover the 40% down payment on a new AED 6,000,000 property on a 40/60 plan, without adding a single dirham of fresh capital. Repeat the cycle to keep growing the portfolio.

TREAT THIS AS AN ILLUSTRATIVE, NOT A FORECAST

The 4.54% rate reflects a Property Finder mortgage calculator example as of 30 July 2026 and will vary by bank, profile and timing. Appreciation, rental yield and achievable equity-release ratios (especially for non-residents) are not guaranteed and should be independently modelled before you commit capital.

Key Terms: Glossary

Off-Plan:
A property purchased before construction is complete, often before it has started.

Sale and Purchase Agreement:
the binding contract between buyer and developer that sets out payment schedule, resale terms, and handover date.

Escrow Account:
A regulated, third-party account holding buyer payments; the developer can only draw funds in line with verified construction progress.

BUA:
Built-Up Area - the total internal floor area of a property, commonly used alongside plot size for villas and townhouses.

DLD:
Dubai Land Department - the government authority that registers property transactions and charges the 4% transfer fee.

LTV:
Loan-to-Value - the percentage of a property's price a bank will lend, with the remainder due as a cash down payment.

ADM:
Abu Dhabi's Department of Municipalities and Transport - equivalent authority to the DLD, charging a 2% registration fee.

EIBOR:
Emirates Interbank Offered Rate - the benchmark rate UAE banks add a margin to when pricing variable-rate mortgages.

Oqood:
The interim registration of an off-plan unit with the DLD prior to the final title deed being issued at handover.

Freehold:
Full, transferable ownership of a property (and in some cases the land), available to foreign nationals in designated freehold zones.

NOC:
No Objection Certificate - a developer's formal approval, required before an off-plan unit can be resold or transferred.

Net ROI / Yield:
Annual rental income after costs, expressed as a percentage of the property's purchase price.

READY WHEN YOU ARE

Your next step is a conversation, not a contract.

Every investor's numbers, timeline and risk appetite are different. Nothing in this guide is financial, legal or tax advice. Figures are illustrative, market conditions change, and rules like fees, visa thresholds and mortgage rates should always be reconfirmed at the time of your purchase. Use this guide as your foundation and then bring your goals to a licensed broker to build a strategy around them.

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