

HOW TO VET A DEVELOPER IN DUBAI

Track record, delivery history, financial backing, and the questions to ask the sales office.

A practical framework for buyers who want to know exactly who they are trusting with two-to-four years of payments.

Edition 2026

Why This Guide Exists

When you buy off-plan property in Dubai, you are not really buying property — not yet. You are buying a developer's promise to build something, deliver it on time, and stand behind the specification. That promise is only worth what the developer's track record makes it worth.

And yet, vetting the developer is the single most skipped step in the entire Dubai off-plan process. Buyers spend hours studying floor plans, debating views, comparing payment plans — and minutes, if any, asking who is actually behind the project. By the time the doubts emerge — usually 18 months later, when handover is suddenly pushed back — the contract is signed and the leverage is gone.

This guide is the antidote. A structured framework for vetting any Dubai developer before you commit. It covers what to look at, where to look, and exactly what to ask the sales office. None of it requires special access or expertise. All of it requires patience — and a willingness to slow down long enough to ask the questions before, not after.

The developer is the asset until the asset is built. Vet them the way a serious investor would vet any other asset — carefully, in writing, and with the same rigour you would expect them to apply to a buyer.

Who this guide is for

- First-time off-plan buyers about to commit to their first project.
- Investors who have noticed that the same developer keeps appearing in their shortlist.
- Overseas buyers who cannot easily visit completed projects in person.
- Anyone who has been told the developer is 'world-class' without ever being shown the proof.

Chapter 1: Why Developer Quality Matters More Than You Think

It is tempting to focus on the property — the apartment, the view, the floor plan, the price. These are tangible. The developer is abstract. And yet, the developer determines more of your eventual outcome than almost any other variable in the transaction.

What the developer actually controls

Once you sign an off-plan contract, the developer effectively controls:

- Whether the project gets built — full stop. Cancelled or stalled projects do happen.
- When the project gets built. Six months late or two years late are very different outcomes.
- What gets built. Final specifications can differ — sometimes substantially — from the original brochure.
- How the building runs after handover. The developer manages the building, sets initial service charges, and influences the owners' association for years.
- How easy your resale is. A respected developer's projects trade more easily; a struggling developer's projects can trade at meaningful discounts even when fundamentally identical.

The asymmetry of developer risk

Here is what makes developer risk particularly insidious: when a developer is good, you barely notice them. The project delivers on time, the specification matches the brochure, the building runs well, and your investment performs. The developer's quality is invisible — it just feels like things going well.

When a developer is poor, you notice them constantly. Delays you cannot control. Specification reductions you cannot challenge. Building management issues that erode your asset value year after year. The pain is concentrated, and it is largely irreversible. Once signed, exiting an off-plan contract from a struggling developer is expensive and slow.

That asymmetry — invisible upside, painful downside — is exactly why vetting matters so much. You are not trying to find the best developer. You are trying to make sure you do not end up with one of the worst.

The 'invisible quality' rule

Good developers are quiet. They deliver, the buildings work, the buyers move on with their lives. Poor developers generate noise — complaints, court cases, social media threads, news stories. If a developer's name produces a long list of grievances when you search for it, that is data. If it produces nothing, that is also data — silence usually means delivery.

Chapter 2: Understanding the Developer Tiers

Dubai's developer landscape is not flat. There are clear tiers, each with its own risk and reward profile. Recognising which tier a developer sits in is the first step in calibrating how much vetting matters and how much it should change your willingness to commit.

Tier	Characteristics	Buyer Implications
Tier 1 — Major established developers	20+ completed projects, government-linked or publicly listed, strong financial backing, household names in Dubai.	Lowest delivery risk, broadest secondary market liquidity, but priced at a premium. Less price flexibility.
Tier 2 — Established mid-market developers	5–20 completed projects, often private but well-capitalised, recognisable in the industry though less in mass-market.	Moderate risk, often the sweet spot for value. Verify recent delivery records carefully — quality can vary by project.
Tier 3 — Newer or smaller developers	1–5 completed projects, often privately owned, sometimes backed by parent groups from other industries.	Higher risk, sometimes higher reward via aggressive launch prices. Vet meticulously, demand stronger contract protections.
Tier 4 — Debut developers	No completed projects, only an under-construction launch or a stalled history. Often new branding or unknown ownership.	Highest risk. Only consider with deep parent-company backing and a willingness to walk away if questions go unanswered.

Tier is not destiny

A Tier 1 developer can deliver a disappointing project. A Tier 3 developer can deliver beautifully. Tier is a starting point for assessing risk — not a final answer. A buyer who falls in love with a Tier 1 project and skips proper due diligence is taking the same risk as a buyer who skips it for a Tier 3 project. The questions are the same; only the urgency varies.

The 'big name' assumption

Many buyers assume a recognisable developer name is sufficient protection. It is partial protection, not full. Even Dubai's largest developers have had projects that delivered late, projects that missed specification, and buildings that ran poorly years after handover. The 'big name' assumption is a starting bias, not a finishing answer.

Match your vetting to the tier

For Tier 1 developers, your vetting is mainly confirming what is already largely true: track record, delivery, financial strength. For Tier 3 and Tier 4 developers, your vetting is doing the work of establishing whether you should trust them at all. The depth of the question is the same; the answers carry different weight.

Chapter 3: Investigating the Track Record

Track record is the single most useful data point about any developer. A developer with ten completed projects has ten chances to have proven themselves — or ten chances to have shown patterns of weakness. Either way, the evidence exists. Your job is to find it.

What to ask the developer directly

- Can you provide a complete list of every project this entity has completed in Dubai, with addresses?
- Which projects are currently under construction, and what is the percentage completion of each?
- Have any projects been cancelled, stalled, or transferred to another developer in your history?
- What is the original ownership structure of this developer entity, and has it changed in the past five years?

Any developer should be able to answer these questions immediately, with paperwork to back them up. Hesitation, vagueness, or "let me get back to you" on these basic facts is a meaningful signal in itself.

Where to verify what the developer tells you

The DLD project registry

The Dubai Land Department maintains a public project registry. You can search for any developer and see their registered projects, completion status, and escrow details. This is the most authoritative source available — and it is free to access.

RERA Trakheesi system

The Real Estate Regulatory Agency licenses developers and brokers. You can verify that a developer holds a current licence, and you can sometimes find historical information on registered projects.

Independent visits to completed projects

Nothing replaces the discipline of visiting two or three of the developer's already-completed buildings. Walk the lobby. Check the lift maintenance. Look at the pool area. Talk to a security guard or concierge if possible. You will learn more in 60 minutes of physical inspection than in 60 minutes of brochure reading.

Online searches with the right keywords

Search the developer's name with terms like 'delayed', 'handover issues', 'cancelled', 'court case', 'refund', and 'complaint'. Genuine controversies usually show up in news coverage, expat forums, or court records. A clean search is reassuring; a noisy one is data worth weighing seriously.

Property Finder and Bayut secondary listings

If the developer's completed projects are trading actively on the secondary market at reasonable prices, that is implicit endorsement. If their projects sit on the market for months at heavy discounts, that is implicit warning.

The two-project rule

Before committing meaningful capital to any developer's off-plan project, visit at least two of their already-completed buildings — different ages if possible. How a developer's earliest building is ageing tells you what to expect from their newest one in ten years. The visit costs only a couple of hours; the insight is irreplaceable.

Chapter 4: Auditing the Delivery History

Track record tells you what a developer has built. Delivery history tells you whether they built it on time, to specification, and without major issues. The two are different — and delivery history is the one that matters most for off-plan buyers.

The questions delivery history answers

- Did the developer's past projects deliver on or near their original handover dates?
- How large were typical delays? Six months is normal; two years is a pattern.
- Were finished projects substantially aligned with their original specifications?
- How well have the developer's buildings held up over the years post-handover?
- Has the developer ever had a project cancelled, sold to another developer, or significantly restructured?

How to investigate delivery on a specific project

For each of the developer's completed projects you can identify:

1. Look up the original launch date and the actual handover date. Compare them. A 6-month delay is unremarkable; a 24-month delay is a pattern marker.
2. Look at the original marketing material if archived (Wayback Machine, social media archives) and compare it to the delivered product. Have specifications been reduced?
3. Speak to owners in completed projects. Online forums, expat groups, and chance conversations during your visits are all useful sources.
4. Check the building's current condition. Well-aged buildings reflect well on developers; quickly-deteriorating ones do the opposite.
5. Look at owners' association reviews and any history of legal disputes between owners and the developer post-handover.

The patterns that matter most

Three patterns are particularly worth flagging:

Repeated delivery delays of 18+ months

A single delay can be explained — supply chain shocks, regulatory changes, contractor failure. Repeated large delays usually indicate a developer with structural issues in their delivery model, not isolated bad luck.

Significant specification reductions at handover

Some specification flexibility is normal and contractually allowed. Wholesale substitutions — premium materials replaced with basic ones, branded appliances replaced with unbranded equivalents, promised amenities not delivered — are a pattern of stretching contract clauses beyond their reasonable interpretation.

Post-handover building neglect

Developers sometimes continue managing buildings for years after handover. If their managed buildings consistently show poor maintenance, neglected common areas, or contentious owners' associations, expect the same dynamic in any new project.

Delivery is the truest indicator

A developer can have a beautiful sales presentation, an articulate CEO, and a strong brand — and still deliver poorly. Conversely, a developer with modest marketing can have a quietly excellent delivery record. Bias your judgment toward delivery data and away from marketing impressions. The former predicts; the latter persuades.

Chapter 5: Understanding the Financial Backing

Delivery is hard partly because it is expensive. A developer mid-project still needs cash flow to pay contractors, suppliers, and staff — sometimes for years before the project completes. When that cash flow falters, projects stall. Knowing the financial backing behind a developer helps you understand how robust they are likely to be when things get difficult.

The categories of financial backing

Government-linked and sovereign-backed

Some major Dubai developers are wholly or partly owned by the Dubai government or sovereign wealth funds. These developers typically have access to substantial capital reserves and the implicit support of the emirate. Delivery risk on their projects is meaningfully lower — though not zero — than on independent developers.

Publicly listed

Developers listed on the Dubai Financial Market or DFM-affiliated exchanges have transparency obligations: audited financials, public disclosures, debt levels visible, governance structure documented. This transparency is itself a form of protection — and the financials tell you something about their stability.

Strong private backing

Many credible mid-tier developers are privately held but backed by major business families, conglomerates, or institutional investors. Verify the parent group: a developer backed by a respected, well-capitalised family business has more stability than one with no clear parent backing.

Foreign-developer subsidiaries

Some developers in Dubai are subsidiaries or joint ventures of established international developers — particularly from India, Saudi Arabia, China, or Europe. These can be excellent partners when the international parent is genuinely strong. Verify the parent independently.

Independent / opaque ownership

The riskiest category. Independent developers with no clear parent backing, opaque ownership structures, or recent name changes are the ones to vet most carefully. Some are excellent; some have collapsed. Without backing, you are betting purely on the developer's standalone strength.

What to ask about financial backing

- Who is the ultimate owner of this developer entity?
- Is there a parent group? Is it publicly disclosed?
- How does the developer fund construction — primarily from buyer payments, primarily from balance-sheet equity, or via project finance?
- Has the developer ever needed to halt or significantly restructure a project due to financial issues?

- What other ongoing projects does the developer have, and what is the total committed construction value?

Some of these questions may be politely deflected by the sales team — financial details are not always publicly disclosed. The willingness to engage with the question, however, is itself informative.

Developers proud of their backing usually share enough to reassure. Developers reluctant to engage are often reluctant for a reason.

The over-extension test

Sometimes the issue is not weak backing but over-extension. A developer with strong backing but 20 simultaneous projects can still face delivery risk on any single one, simply because their resources are spread thinly. Ask how many projects they have active, not just their financial strength in the abstract.

Chapter 6: The Questions to Ask the Sales Office

The sales office is the front line of your interaction with the developer. The questions you ask there — and the answers you receive — tell you a great deal about how the developer will treat you over the next 2–4 years. Walk in prepared. The questions below should be asked of every off-plan project, of every developer, every time.

Track record and delivery

The Question	Why You Are Asking
How many projects has this developer completed in Dubai, and where are they?	Established the baseline of experience. Vague or evasive answers here are the strongest possible early signal.
Of those, how many delivered within 6 months of their contractual handover date?	Tests for delivery reliability — the single most predictive metric of future delivery.

Can you take me to one of your completed projects this week?	Tests willingness to be transparent about delivered quality. Refusal is informative; willingness is reassuring.
What is the developer's record on specification — has any project been delivered with substantially reduced specifications versus original brochures?	Forces an honest conversation about what gets compromised when budgets tighten.

Financial backing and stability

The Question	Why You Are Asking
Who is the parent company or ultimate owner of this developer?	Establishes whether there is institutional backing behind the brand name.
How many projects does the developer have under active construction right now, and what is the total committed value?	Tests for over-extension. Many simultaneous projects can stretch resources thinly.
What percentage of this project has been pre-sold? When is the project expected to reach the next escrow milestone?	Gives you a sense of buyer confidence and construction progress in concrete terms.
Is this project independently insured or bonded against developer default?	Some major developers offer additional protection; the answer reveals their internal risk management approach.

The project itself

The Question	Why You Are Asking
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Who is the main contractor on this project, and what is their track record?	The developer's delivery depends heavily on the contractor. A weak contractor undermines even a strong developer.
What is the current construction status — excavation, foundations, structure, MEP, or finishing?	Specific construction status tells you how realistic the handover date is.
When is the next major milestone, and what does it unlock from the escrow account?	Reveals how the developer's cash flow is structured — and how reliant they are on incoming buyer payments.
What happens if the project is delayed by 12 months — what specifically am I entitled to?	Forces the sales team to articulate the contract's protection clauses out loud — a useful sanity check.

Specification and finishes

The Question	Why You Are Asking
Will what I see in the show home be exactly what I receive at handover?	Forces an honest answer about specification flexibility. 'Of equivalent quality' substitutions are common.
Are the appliances, fixtures, and finishes specified by brand and model in the SPA?	If yes, you have legal recourse. If no, the developer can substitute freely within their interpretation of 'equivalent'.
What are the kitchen and bathroom specifications — exactly?	These are the two areas where specification reductions hurt most. Get them in writing.
What common-area amenities are guaranteed in the SPA versus shown in the marketing material only?	Some amenities shown in renders are aspirational; only contracted ones are guaranteed.

Post-handover and ongoing

The Question	Why You Are Asking
Who will manage the building after handover?	Often the developer themselves for the first few years. Their management quality directly affects your asset value.
What is the expected service charge per square foot at handover, and how was that figure calculated?	Developers often quote optimistic initial figures that rise after owners' associations form.
What is the Defects Liability Period (DLP), and what does it cover?	Standard is 1 year for general defects, 10 years for major structural. Confirm both apply to your unit.
What are the developer's policies on short-term lets and tenant restrictions post-handover?	Important if your strategy depends on flexibility of use. Some buildings prohibit Airbnb-style lets entirely.

How they answer matters as much as what they answer

Pay attention not just to the answers but to how they are delivered. Confident, specific, documented answers are reassuring. Vague reassurances, deflections, and 'don't worry about that' responses are all data. A sales team that respects your questions is selling a developer that respects buyers. A sales team that dismisses them is showing you the future.

Chapter 7: The Red Flags Worth Taking Seriously

Not every concerning answer is a reason to walk away. Some are simply prompts for further investigation. Others are genuine red flags — patterns that, when present, have repeatedly preceded buyer disappointment in the Dubai market. Recognising them is half the work of avoiding them.

1. No completed projects in Dubai

A developer with zero completed Dubai projects is asking you to bet on potential, not evidence. This is sometimes the right bet — particularly with strong parent backing — but it should always be priced accordingly and contracted protectively.

2. Recent name change or brand restructure

Some developer entities rebrand for legitimate marketing reasons. Others rebrand to distance themselves from a troubled history. Search the previous name as well — what you find may be more revealing than what appears under the new one.

3. Inability to identify the parent or ultimate owner

In Dubai's regulated environment, ownership of a developer entity is usually traceable. A sales team that cannot answer this clearly, or deflects with vague references to 'private investors', is showing you that the structure may be more opaque than it should be.

4. Heavy reliance on incoming buyer payments for cash flow

Some developers fund construction almost entirely from buyer payments, with little of their own capital committed. If pre-sales slow, the project can stall — even with no other underlying problem.

5. Multiple simultaneous launches across different areas

A developer with 5–8 active launches at the same time is over-extending their resources. Operational quality almost always slips when too much is happening at once. Concentration of focus is a virtue, not a constraint.

6. Aggressive price escalation between launch phases

Some price escalation across launch phases is normal and reflects market dynamics. Aggressive escalation — 20%, 30%, 40% increases between phases over short periods — can be a tactic to manufacture urgency rather than a genuine market signal.

7. Sales-team pressure to commit on the day

Genuine projects do not need pressure tactics. If the sales experience involves countdown timers, 'last unit at this price', or 'this offer expires tonight', the project is being sold rather than offered. Walk back, sleep on it, and return later — if the property is still right, it will still be available.

8. Negative coverage in mainstream media

Court cases, regulatory actions, or major delivery disputes covered in mainstream Dubai or UAE press are serious signals. Forum posts and social media complaints alone are less authoritative — but when concerns appear in the actual press, the pattern is usually real.

9. Project escrow account not in a major UAE bank

Genuine project escrow accounts sit in established UAE banks. If the escrow arrangement looks unusual — a small bank, an unfamiliar entity, or no escrow at all — the protection you think you have may not exist.

10. Reluctance to share completed-project addresses

This is the simplest test. A confident developer is proud of their portfolio. A reluctant one usually has projects they would rather not invite scrutiny on. Sales teams that struggle to produce a list of completed projects with addresses are telling you something important.

Red flags compound

One red flag from this list is not necessarily a reason to walk away. Two or more, especially in combination, almost always is. Patterns are the indicator — single incidents can be misread; clusters of warning signs are usually telling you what they appear to be.

Chapter 8: Putting It All Together

By this point you have a framework. The final step is using it consistently for any developer you encounter. Here is a simple sequence to follow before committing capital to any off-plan project.

Step 1: Identify the developer tier

Tier 1, Tier 2, Tier 3, or Tier 4? This calibrates how much vetting matters and how aggressively you should push for contract protections.

Step 2: Audit the track record

Get the full list of completed projects. Visit at least two. Search the developer's name for controversy. Verify with the DLD registry.

Step 3: Investigate the delivery history

How many projects delivered on time? How many delayed, by how much? Were specifications honoured? Are old buildings ageing well?

Step 4: Confirm the financial backing

Who is behind this developer? How robust are they? How many other projects are they running simultaneously?

Step 5: Conduct the sales-office interview

Walk in with the questions from Chapter 6. Ask all of them. Note both the answers and the manner in which they are delivered.

Step 6: Run the red-flag check

Cross-reference everything you have learned against the red flags in Chapter 7. How many are present? Where there is one, look harder for others.

Step 7: Decide with conviction or walk away

If everything aligns and you have confidence in the developer, proceed — but proceed with documented protections in the contract. If anything is unresolved, walk away. There will always be another project. There will not always be another two-to-four-year commitment of your capital.

Vetting a developer is not paranoid. It is professional. The same discipline that protects you from the worst projects is also the discipline that gives you conviction in the best ones.

A Final Word

Most off-plan disappointments in Dubai trace back, in retrospect, to a developer-vetting step that was skipped. Not because the buyer was careless — but because they were excited, time-pressured, or charmed by a particularly polished sales experience. The vetting framework exists to give you a steady, repeatable process that survives even those conditions.

The best off-plan buyers are not the ones who find the cheapest projects. They are the ones who consistently filter out the developers who would have disappointed them — and then commit confidently to the ones who would not have. That filtering is what this guide is designed to help you do.

Approach every off-plan conversation with the same patient discipline this guide describes. The projects that survive the questioning are the ones genuinely worth your money. The projects that do not are not failures of opportunity — they are protections you have given yourself.

Trust, in property as in life, is earned through evidence. Developers worth trusting will gladly provide it. Developers not worth trusting will resist providing it. The conversation that emerges is the one worth listening to.

Vetting a developer right now?

If you are weighing up a specific developer and want an honest, unhurried second opinion, get in touch. The first conversation is genuinely a conversation — no pitch, no pressure, no expectation to move forward.