



Divine Abu Dhabi

Capital of the United Arab Emirates, the city sits on a T-shaped island jutting into the Arabian Gulf, so offers seaside relaxation as well as desert charm

When Emirati men get together, they don't take their dogs to a pub – instead, they meet up under the setting sun with their falcons.

Falconry is an important part of Bedouin culture, and keeping these prized members of the family in tip-top condition is a priority.

That's why at Abu Dhabi Falcon Hospital there are perches full of stunning birds with speckled chests and dappled wings. Few are injured, most attend for a checkup. Microchipped and

ringed, they wait patiently in the leather hoods that keep them calm.

On a two-hour tour (falconhospital.com, £34), you get to watch closely as the vets trim beaks, clip talons and repair broken feathers with superglue. Look away if you're squeamish as a peregrine or huge gyrfalcon munches on a frozen quail.

With their falcon passports, these birds of prey (mostly larger females) are so revered, they don't travel on Middle Eastern airlines in cages, they

get their own seats!

Abu Dhabi once thrived on pearl diving, but, since 1958, its oil and gas reserves have created immense wealth. Dubbed the 'Pirate Coast' in the 19th century, the area became a British protectorate to prevent disruption of the trade route to India.

Today ruled by Sheikh Khalifa bin Zayed Al Nahyan, English is widely spoken and –

incredibly – the three-pin UK electrical plug is still used, so there's no need for travel adaptors. Enjoy pristine beaches, stylish hotels, good food and blazing all-year sun.

A cool, tranquil oasis in the heat is the majestic marble Sheikh Zayed Grand Mosque (szgmc.ae). Here there's room for 40,000 worshippers, and it's exquisitely decorated with

Great For

Food Lovers

Lunch at an Al Fanar Restaurant & Cafe to experience 'Abu Dhabi in the 1960s' and sample the leqaimat dessert of crunchy fried dumplings with date syrup (alfanarrestaurant.com).



Great For

Fun-loving Families

Ferrari World Abu Dhabi on Yas Island (ferrariworldabudhabi.com) is a theme park with the world's fastest rollercoaster – the Formula Rossa, which hits 240kmph in 5 seconds. Flying Aces also has the tallest loop. Eek!



WORDS: BEVERLEY WATTS. PHOTOS: ALAMY, GETTY IMAGES/ROBERT HARDING WORLD IMAGERY

Great
For

Spirited Adventurers

Try kayaking with Sea Hawk Water Sports (sea-hawk.ae). An experienced guide takes you paddling through protected mangroves where shrimps and seabirds breed, and there's a beach-swimming stop.



floral inlaid designs and the world's largest hand-knotted carpet. Book a free guided tour, take a large headscarf, and dress in dark loose-fitting clothes. You'll be loaned an abaya (long robe) to wear if you haven't quite got it right.

The best view of Abu Dhabi, which means 'father of the gazelle', is from the Observation Deck At 300 on the 74th floor of the Jumeirah At Etihad Towers hotel (jumeirah.com, £17). The city is growing fast, and the skyline rapidly changing with new curved and angle-tipped towers shooting up like a quirky Manhattan.

Enjoy High Tea as you take in the 360-degree panorama,

or head down for the luxury buffet, £41, at the beachside Rosewater restaurant. I sipped a lemon-and-mint drink with my king prawn platter. Tourism by-law allows hotels to serve alcohol, but being drunk in public is illegal.

A must-see is the opulent

The menu offers Arabian favourites such as camel-meat burger

Emirates Palace hotel, where the penthouse floor is reserved exclusively for royalty. The gold decor is set off with 1,000 Swarovski crystal chandeliers. I dined at Mezlai, where the menu offers Arabian favourites such as camel-meat burger, but I opted for the local Harmour

fish, £31, and rocket salad dressed with honey and pomegranate vinegar.

For a coastal view, don a life jacket at the Emirates Palace Marina and take a speedboat tour with The Yellow Boats,

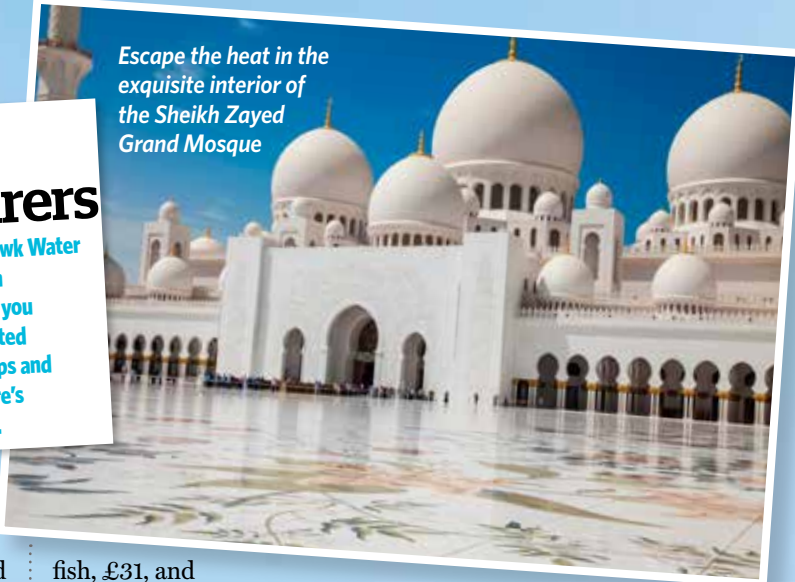
from £41 (theyellowboats.com/locations/abudhabi). The UAE is home to many expats: my skipper was Daniel from the Seychelles. We passed a floating Asian fishing village, the anchored flotilla loaded with mesh nets. If you're lucky, you'll see hump-backed

dolphins and sea turtles.

Abu Dhabi residents love Lamborghini and Ferrari cars, but local men also cycle around in dishdasha tunics and red-checked ghutra headdresses. Public transport is efficient (visitabudhabi.ae). The airport shuttle bus is AED 4 (82p).

Go on a Desert Safari (arabian-adventures.com, from £65). You'll ride a camel, get a henna tattoo, eat under the starry night sky and enjoy a 'dune bashing' ride in a 4x4 Toyota Land Cruiser. It's OK to scream – everyone does, even the gyps.

Escape the heat in the exquisite interior of the Sheikh Zayed Grand Mosque



HOW TO GO AND WHERE TO STAY

Pegasus Airlines (flypgs.com/en) flies to Abu Dhabi from London Stansted via Istanbul three times a week, from £118 one way. The Southern Sun Abu Dhabi hotel costs from £60 a night (tsogosun.com/southern-sun-abu-dhabi) and is home to the Blu Sky Lounge & Grill and the Balcon night-time terrace bar for amazing sushi, steak and cocktails.