

# United Arab Emirates: A Distinctive Blend Of East And West

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After many years transiting Dubai and Abu Dhabi en-route to SE Asia but never outside the airports, this year my destination was primarily Abu Dhabi.

Capital of the UAE, it is the cultural, political and economic heart of the country. The largest of the seven emirates, its wealth shows in high rise commercial buildings, luxury hotels, shopping malls and vast projects. A five year plan will see the completion of major cultural museums

including Guggenheim, a Louvre and Maritime Museum. For now, the Heritage Museum across the causeway is a well set out open area of courtyard houses, wind towers, demonstrations of traditional skills, irrigation systems and displays of artefacts and pictures. Nearby is a new conference

hall and the Marina Mall, a large air conditioned shopping mall with boutiques, supermarket, restaurants and cinemas. Despite recent rapid growth the long history of traditional old world hospitality and friendliness to visitors remains. Facilities for children in hotels, public parks and



Al Ain Palace

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elsewhere are excellent. It is clean, safe and an attractive blend of East and West with something for all, attracting increasing numbers of tourists. It is easy to see why.

The Corniche esplanade has paved walkways, seating areas, fountains and gardens, a pleasant place to take a stroll especially in the early evening. The Clock Tower has long gone, but a new icon is the 220 meter high flag pole where the national flag can be seen over most of the city. At the western end the enormous Emirates Palace, a luxury hotel and much more. International meetings including those of heads of state take place regularly and a large theatre presents international shows. In one of the vast galleries I enjoyed an extensive exhibition of "Islamic Art" with more than 500 artefacts.

Close by is the 325 room Hilton International Hotel overlooking the Corniche. There are eight restaurants, five swimming pools, a private beach, sports facilities and children's playground. Executive floor rooms, well worth the supplement, have an exclusive lounge with a splendid view of the bay, serving breakfast, afternoon tea, and evening meal, a pleasant place to relax.

Shopping malls are spacious with international designer label boutiques and a good selection of food outlets. Gold is competitively priced with the biggest concentration in the Madinat Zayed Gold Market. On the outskirts is the newly completed Grand Mosque of Sheikh Zayed. One runs out of superlatives. There are 80 domes, 75 Swarovski crystal chandeliers and a single carpet 7,000 square metres weighing 47 tonnes which took hundreds of Iranian artisans 12 months to weave. It accommodates 40,000 worshippers. Guided tours are available at specific times.

Orient Tours offer a wide range of tours throughout the Emirates. Beyond the City an Orient Tour can be arranged into the desert which includes driving sand dunes, a camel farm, and a barbecue around a camp fire.

I took the whole day excursion to Al Ain, travelling on the new desert motorway with irrigated farm land on both sides. The backdrop of rugged mountains forms the boundary with Oman. There is a long history. The abundance of water



Sheikh Zayed Mosque/Abu Dhabi

مسجد الشيخ زايد/أبو ظبي



Unification of Emirates Monument

نصب وحدة الإمارات

encouraged settlement. Inhabited for thousands of years it was part of the original caravan route from Oman. There are restored forts, a camel market, museum and a small zoo. As yet not much visited I am sure this will change as tourism increases. A Hilton Hotel with all facilities adds much to the enjoyment of a somewhat remote desert area.

Sharjah with Orient Tours included the renovated 1820 Fort a favourite residence of the then ruling family. As a Heritage Museum it helped me learn much about the history and culture. In each of the museums

we visited, early 20th century photographs were displayed showing the lives of Arab people in the country before the recent explosion of development. A short walk through narrow alleyways led to the old souk "Al Arsa" with its traditional covered stalls and shops.

In a park opposite the King Faisal Mosque, a monument commemorates the Unification of the Arab Emirates. The mosque's spacious beautiful architecture brings peace and tranquillity to the area.

I ended my visit with a few days in Dubai staying at Le Meridian Hotel. Close to the

airport and convenient for stopovers it was surprisingly quiet. There are three swimming pools, choice of restaurants and a shuttle to the creek. The Royal Club rooms offer similar services to those I enjoyed in Abu Dhabi.

A half day city tour with Orient Tours was comprehensive, visiting the Creek, palaces, souks and the Jumerah Mosque. Built in the Fatimid tradition it is a splendid example of modern Islamic architecture and very photogenic. The Creek, bisecting the city for six miles still the starting point for cargoes to India and East Africa. The Heritage House and Fort are now home to the Dubai Museum with colourful tableaux of domestic and commercial life of a bygone era in the city and desert.

The Big Bus Company operates open top double deck buses on two routes throughout the city. Hop on and off at your leisure all day with free admission to museums and a river cruise in a dhow included.

On my last evening Orient Tours arranged a dinner cruise on a traditional dhow. The Creek was a romantic setting to enjoy a meal with dozens of illuminated dhows

passing effortlessly by; an excellent way to have an overview of the various sections of such a large city.

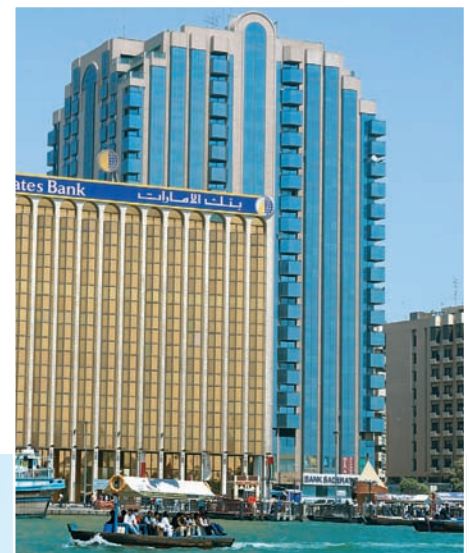
The quick short hotel transit to catch my morning flight home was convenient. Virgin Atlantic flights both ways were comfortable with excellent cabin service. Premium Economy offers greater leg room with extra facilities while, to be really pampered Upper Class provides even more including full length beds, and use of executive lounges.

With direct flights, a safe environment, luxury hotels and a different culture the UAE is a good choice for a holiday. It offers a distinctive blend of east and west that can appeal to everyone, whether seeking the adventure of a new cultural experience, an action – packed holiday or simply a relaxing escape. In the summer months temperatures are high but hotel prices are cheaper. ■

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Hilton Hotel/Abu Dhabi فندق الهلтон/ أبو ظبي



Dubai Creek خليج دبي



مسجد الملك فيصل/الشارجة  
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