

DESTINATION REPORT

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YOUR TRAVEL SNAPSHOT: Destinations included in this guide

Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates

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Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates

INTRODUCTION

Prior to the discovery of oil in 1958, the emirate of Abu Dhabi was basically a poor, rural wasteland. Today, it has one of the highest per capita incomes in the world. The emirate is characterized by three political or geographic divisions: the city of Abu Dhabi, Al-Ain and the offshore islands.

The city of Abu Dhabi, the seat of government of the U.A.E. and the nation's second largest city, is quite modern and clean. Date palms nestled between the glass and steel high-rises give the city a bit of soul, but it is still primarily an administrative and business center. However, it is emerging as a highly desirable destination. There's a vibrant downtown with interesting streets and abundant sidewalk cafes.

Abu Dhabi's coastal area consists primarily of swamps and salt flats, but as you go inland, the view becomes classic desert: Nomads tend their sheep (often by truck or four-wheel-drive vehicle) among the oases, date palms, sand dunes and gravel pits.

LOCATION

The Abu Dhabi Tourism Authority opened a tented cruise terminal at Mina Zayed, the United Arab Emirates' main port.

On the site of the authority's former visitor information center, the facility can accommodate 1,300 passengers.

The authority plans to build a permanent cruise terminal eventually, although no timetable has been set.

SIGHTSEEING

There's plenty to see in this booming city. Abu Dhabi is becoming a city of superlatives.

The Ferrari World theme park on Yas Island was inspired by the high-performance Italian sports car. It is the world's largest indoor theme park, and it houses the Formula Rossa, the world's fastest roller coaster: zero to 150 mph in 4.9 seconds. Passengers wear goggles to avoid getting sand and insects in their eyes.
<http://www.ferrariworldabudhabi.com>.

Another theme park attraction is Yas Water World. <http://www.yaswaterworld.com/en>.

The world's largest chandelier (weighing 10 tons) and the largest hand-knotted carpet (composed of almost 2.3 million knots) are at the enormous Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al-Nahyan Mosque (also known as the Grand Mosque). And if you check into the posh Hyatt Capital Gate, you'll be staying in the world's most inclined tower, leaning a record-breaking 18 degrees off center.

Saadiyat Island, just next to Abu Dhabi city proper, is being developed into a residential, commercial, cultural and leisure center. Plans are in the works to create a Louvre (the only one outside of Paris), a Guggenheim (designed by legendary architect Frank Gehry), a Marine Museum, an Arabian History and Heritage Museum (named after Sheikh Zayed) and a state-of-the-art Performing Arts Center, all slated for development along the city's waterfront. Most of Saadiyat's attractions are in various stages of construction. In fact, Abu Dhabi could be the world's largest building site. As you speed along the new 10-lane causeway linking Saadiyat to downtown Abu Dhabi, a forest of cranes greets the eye as far as you can see.

Attractions also include the Cultural Foundation, an old fort and many newer palaces owned by local sheikhs.

The Corniche (a coastal road) runs about 8 mi/12 km along the Persian Gulf—it's a lovely boulevard and a great place to stroll, bike or relax. People-watching is itself a fun activity there, especially since the population is a mix of many nations, including Egypt, the Sudan, Lebanon, India and the Philippines. The city also has an attractive city park with beautiful flower gardens.

Be sure to tour the Emirates Palace Hotel and its spectacular grounds as well as the magnificent Grand Mosque, which is open for tours daily. It can accommodate up to 10,000 worshippers and is a must-see for its stunning design and architecture.

Other activities include boat tours, the Heritage Village, an exhibition depicting life in the region prior to the oil era, a carpet souk, or any of several megasize shopping malls.

Outside Abu Dhabi proper, there are safari adventures to the dunes of the Empty Quarter or day trips to the historical oasis of Al Ain.

AMUSEMENT PARKS

Yas Waterworld

You'll find more than 40 rides and other attractions at this water park, and you can choose whether to go fast or slow. Daily 10 am-7 pm. AED 240 adults, AED 195 children. Yas Island, Abu Dhabi. Phone 2-414-2000.
<http://yaswaterworld.com/en>.

SHOPPING

If you are in need of souvenirs or just like weaving, visit the government-run Women's Craft Center just outside town.

There are also multiple shopping malls in the area.

Calendar

If you are visiting Abu Dhabi in late March or early April, be sure to check out the annual Abu Dhabi Music and Arts Festival. It showcases artists from both Western and Eastern cultures with performances, educational programs and gala events. <http://www.admafestival.com>.