

# Three faces of Abu Dhabi

The largest of the United Arab Emirates packages wealth of experiences on Arabian Peninsula

**By Katherine Rodeghier**  
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ABU DHABI, U.A.E. — Sama and I have a deal. I promise to hang on tightly when she rises from kneeling and she promises not to pitch me into a sand dune.

I stroke Sama's long neck as she joins the other camels striding through this slice of the Empty Quarter,

## GOING PLACES

The dunes of the Liwa Desert look like mountains of buttercream frosting, their peaks and dips changing color as the sun moves across the sky from dawn to dusk. Tinted a soft peach in the morning, they fade to dusty khaki at midday and burst into flaming Dreamsicle orange just before sunset.

At Qasr Al Sarab Desert Resort, early morning and late afternoon make for the best desert adventures. White-robed men help you into saddles on camels and lead them on gentle treks through the valley. During falconry demonstrations, the royal birds soar over the dunes, their keen eyesight leading them back to their trainers and a treat of raw meat. On desert walks, learn about native wildlife while climbing dunes under robin's-egg-blue skies. Thrill-seekers go dune bashing in four-wheel drive vehicles, pitching sideways as they plow over dunes sending up roostertails of sand. For a blissed-out beginning to the day, there's desert yoga at dawn.

When darkness descends and silver stars prick the black velvet sky, make your way to a Bedouin tent. As you sit on tasseled cushions, waiters in gold and black vests bring platters of Emirati



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Visitors pass under the atrium of Emirates Palace in Abu Dhabi city. The landmark was the most expensive hotel ever built when it opened in 2005.

The desert is just one of three destinations I discovered in the capital of the United Arab Emirates. With a much larger land mass than its better-known neighbor, Dubai, this emirate has not only an expanse of towering dunes, but white beaches fringing luxury resorts and a city of shining skyscrapers and glitzy malls packed with designer fashions.

### The Desert

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**For more information:** Abu Dhabi Tourism & Culture, visitabudhabi.ae

foods to share: lamb, lobster, rice, fish, hummus, pickled vegetables, dates.

### The City

Approaching from the desert, Abu Dhabi City might be an Arabian Oz, its emerald, black and silver skyscrapers rising along the Persian Gulf. Richer and more conservative than Dubai, the playground of the U.A.E., Abu Dhabi City is the nation's government and financial center.

Among its most striking structures is Emirates Palace, the most expensive hotel ever built when it opened in 2005 at a cost of \$3 billion. As with most hotels here, it's a social center for residents and visitors alike. They come to admire the Middle Eastern architecture, Persian carpets and marble floors mirroring the gold trim of a soaring

**Camels and their handlers await trekkers for a sunset ride at Qsar Al Sarab resort in the Liwa Desert.**

### Abu Dhabi

**Getting there:** Etihad, the national airline, flies nonstop from Chicago to Abu Dhabi.

**Language:** Arabic is the official language; English is widely spoken.

**What to wear:** Western dress is common, but shorts and spaghetti straps are frowned upon. Women are given robes and scarves to wear inside the Grand Mosque.

**When to go:** November to May is high season. Winter highs average 77 degrees, summer 104.

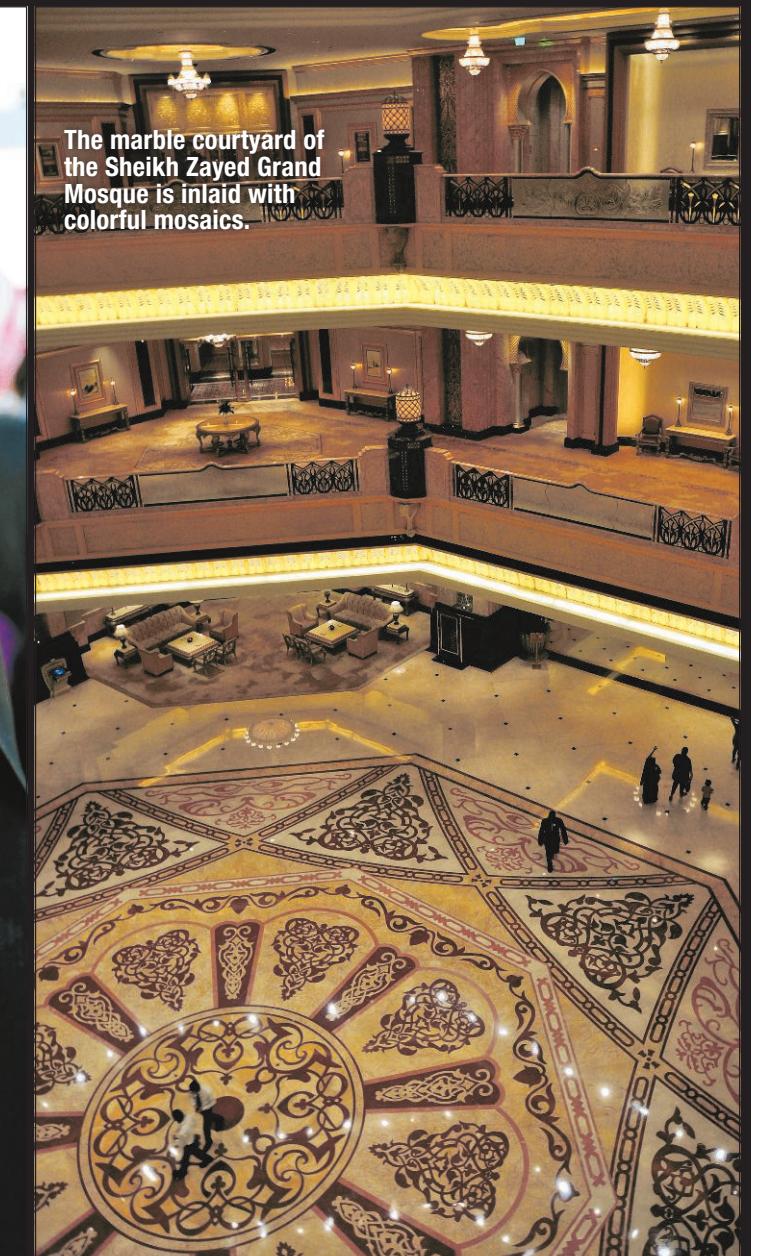
### Where to stay:

- Qasr Al Sarab Desert Resort by Anantara, designed to resemble a tribal fort, lies in the Liwa Desert about 90 minutes from Abu Dhabi airport. Winter/spring rates from about \$415, qasralsarab.anantara.com.

- Jumeirah at Etihad Towers, a skyscraper in the central city, has winter/spring rates from about \$240, jumeirah.com.

- Park Hyatt Abu Dhabi, on Saadiyat Island, has winter/spring rates from about \$300, abudhabi.park.hyatt.com.

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PHOTOS BY KATHERINE RODEGHIER

atrium. Have high tea or lunch on the Le Vendome terrace and order Palace Cake with flecks of gold on the frosting.

The city's malls also serve as gathering spots since shopping is a national pastime for wealthy Emiratis. You'll see them stroll through Abu Dhabi Mall or Marina Mall in chic Western wear or their national dress: pristine white robes and headdress for men, silky black robes and scarves for women.

Black robes stand out in stunning contrast to the gleaming white marble of the Sheikh Zayed Grand Mosque, the city's biggest visitor attraction. With four 328-foot minarets rising above 57 marble domes, it looks like a giant white

bird nesting among the bridges connecting the city's islands and mainland. It's the country's largest mosque. Up to 40,000 worshippers fit in a white marble courtyard inlaid with semiprecious stones and mother of pearl, and a prayer hall where Swarovski crystal and Murano glass chandeliers hang over the world's largest hand-woven carpet.

Superlatives are common in Abu Dhabi, and Ferrari World is no exception. The world's largest indoor theme park is all things Ferrari and it isn't just for kids. Among restaurants, auto displays, shops and rides is the world's fastest roller coaster.

You'll need goggles as the coaster reaches 150 mph, accelerating as rapidly as the cars on the nearby Formula 1 track.

### The Beaches

Corniche Road, like Chicago's Lake Shore Drive, runs along miles of beach and manicured waterfront with city skyscrapers building in a wave behind it. It's the most popular beach for residents. You'll see Emirati families playing in the sand and couples sipping coffee at beach side cafes.

The newest beach area is a half-hour from the central city on Saadiyat Island. When completed, more than half a dozen luxury hotels will



The beach on Saadiyat Island stretches for six miles along the Persian Gulf. Just a half-hour from Abu Dhabi city, it has the ambience of a retreat to a tropical resort.

See **FACES** on page 19

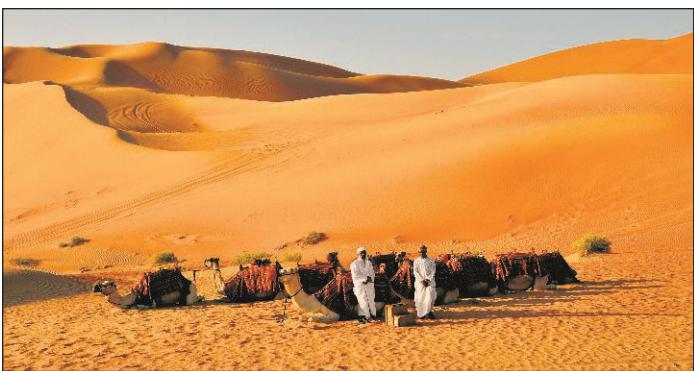


PHOTO BY KATHERINE RODEGHIER

**Dunes rise over valleys in the Liwa Desert, part of the world's largest uninterrupted sand desert.**

## FACES from page 10

sit on six miles of white sand. Two have opened: a St. Regis and a Park Hyatt.

Stay at either and the pace of the city gives way to the indolence of a tropical resort. Sit under palm trees or a beach umbrella between dips in the blue-green water of the Persian Gulf.

Away from the beach, Saadiyat is a forest of construction cranes as the island transforms into Abu Dhabi's cultural showplace. A trio of world-class museums designed by Pritzker-prize-winning architects is in the

works. First to open in 2015 will be the Louvre Abu Dhabi designed by Jean Nouvel. Perched over the water, it will showcase a permanent collection along with loans from the Louvre and 11 other French museums. British architect Norman Foster is at work on the Zayed National Museum, his design inspired by the feathers of a falcon, and Frank Gehry will bring his sinuous silver walls to the Guggenheim Abu Dhabi.

- *Information for this article was gathered on a research trip sponsored by Abu Dhabi Tourism & Culture.*