

MIDDLE GROUND

For those who have been separated from loved ones on the other side of the world, Abu Dhabi might just be the perfect midway point for a sun-drenched reunion, writes Emily McAuliffe.

Why hadn't I stopped here before? Having flown across the world from Australia on many occasions, I'd always made the trip, bleary-eyed, in one or two hops, intent on reaching my destination as quickly as possible. This usually meant a nip to the Middle East, oblivious to the beauty beyond the airport.

Case in point: Abu Dhabi – a city that's not just a stopover, but, as I quickly discovered, a destination in its own right, with plenty of great food, culture, sun, soft sand and turquoise water, swirling around its 200 islands.

Architectural marvels

Ruler of the Emirate of Abu Dhabi from 1966 and president of the UAE upon its formation in 1971, Sheikh Zayed's extraordinary impact on the region is remembered through his eponymous Sheikh Zayed Grand Mosque. Grand is not an understatement – standing 100 metres at its highest point, it's one of the largest mosques in the world.

Like all women entering the mosque, I cover from head to toe (note: mosques are the only place in the city where women need to cover their hair, wrists and ankles), and walk through a corridor of tall, white-marble pillars decorated

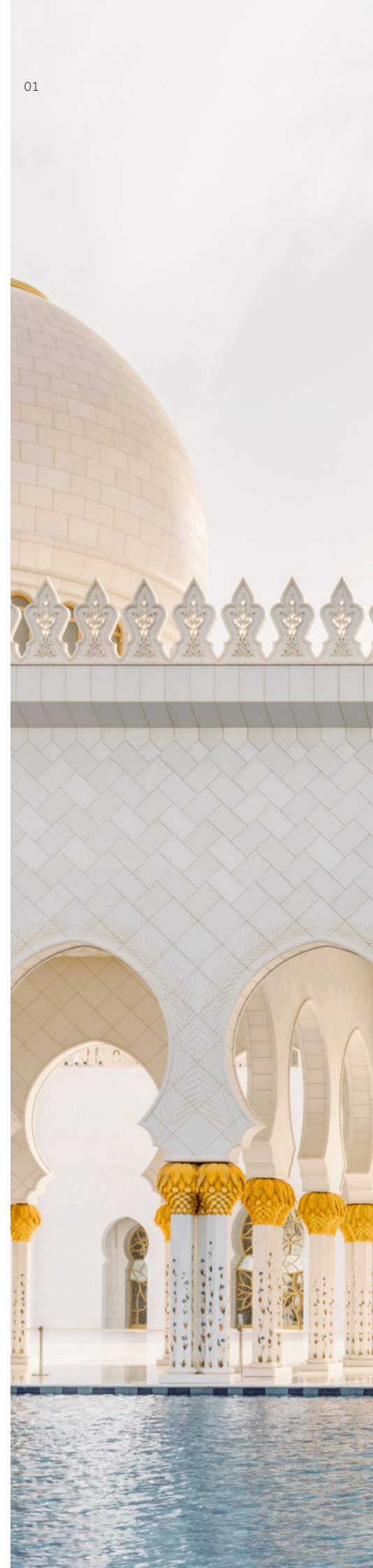
with jasper and amethyst. To my left, the central courtyard is so shiny it reflects the minarets, like a shallow pool of water.

The mosque is just one example of Abu Dhabi's spectacular architecture. On Saadiyat Island, known as the city's cultural precinct, the Louvre Abu Dhabi showcases the work of Pritzker prize-winning architect Jean Nouvel. The low, domed building has a permanent exhibition that cleverly combines the history of civilisations across the world, along with temporary exhibitions, which display art loaned from French museums including Musée du Louvre, Musée d'Orsay and Centre Pompidou.

Like the grand mosque, the Louvre is best visited at dusk, as the sun seems to burn bigger and brighter in the UAE. Before entering the gallery, I stop to watch gravity gently pull the glowing orange orb into the water. Behind a soft haze, the sky fades from dusty pink to deep purple, resembling a pastel painting. It's as though I'm surrounded by art, inside and out.

Glittering in gold

Abu Dhabi's glitzy inner-city skyline is impressive, but a visit to Emirates Palace is where I appreciate the depth of the city's opulence. Turning into the palace's long driveway, the earthy-coloured





01 Sheikh Zayed Grand Mosque is grand in the extreme © Nessa Gnatoush/ Shutterstock 02 The Louvre Abu Dhabi showcases the work of Pritzker prize-winning architect Jean Nouvel © Agnieszka Kowalczyk/Unsplash 03 Dinner by the beach at Saaidiyat © Angieszka Kowalczyk/Unsplash 04 Emirates Palace © Reinhard Westphal 05 Al Khatim desert © Emily McAuliffe



Arabesque-style building – which cost US\$3 billion to build – sprawls before me, hiding the private marina and 1.3 kilometres of private beach that sits behind it (many of Abu Dhabi’s hotels have access to a private, white-sand beach, including the Park Hyatt on Saadiyat Island).

Inside, the hotel practically glows. Chandeliers made from Swarovski crystals gleam overhead, and 24-carat gold – 34 tonnes of it, to be precise – decorates the ceilings, pillars and other ornaments (a 24-carat gold facial is also on offer at the spa).

I criss-cross the hotel, padding across thick carpet from Persia to one of the palace’s many restaurants, Vendôme, and sit down to a buffet of traditional food – think dips and flatbread, tabouleh, juicy meat and sticky sweets.

Desert thrills

Second to dining inside a palace is dining under a desert moon, so, on my final night, I’m chauffeured to Al Khatim desert, a 90-minute drive east of the city. Despite its plentiful turquoise beaches, Abu Dhabi is best known for its vast desert, where sand shifts and ripples in the hot wind, creating an undulating and ever-changing landscape. Throughout my four-day trip, I’d been asking locals what they love most about Abu Dhabi, and the answer is



The birth of Abu Dhabi

Abu Dhabi is the capital of the United Arab Emirates. It sits on an archipelago in the Persian Gulf, connected to the mainland by a bridge and surrounded by the clearest of water. The city was transformed from an arid, and relatively unknown town, into a sophisticated metropolis thanks to an oil discovery in 1958.

Today, this cosmopolitan city is UAE’s cultural heart filled with fascinating heritage museums, luxe architecture, enchanting Arabesque style and award-winning five-star properties.



04



05

unanimous: the desert. And the best thing to do here? Dune bashing.

Today, my Landcruiser isn't just a form of transportation; it's part of the fun. A group of camels lazily watch as we pull up alongside a row of four-wheel drives. We quickly jump out to haul ourselves up a steep, sandy peak to get a glimpse of the dunes rolling to infinity before us. We're signalled back to the car and, before long, we're careening across the dunes at high speed, sliding sideways down slopes and hurtling nose-first into sandy valleys.

Our driver expertly corrects the vehicle at the last second, and returns us to a barbecue area, where low white-clothed tables sit on red rugs in the sand. We dine surrounded by the silence of the desert, and it's as though we're in the middle of nowhere, when really we're in the middle of the world. Could there be a better halfway point? ♦

Travel file

Accommodation
abudhabi.park.hyatt.com mandarinoriental.com

Information visitabudhabi.ae