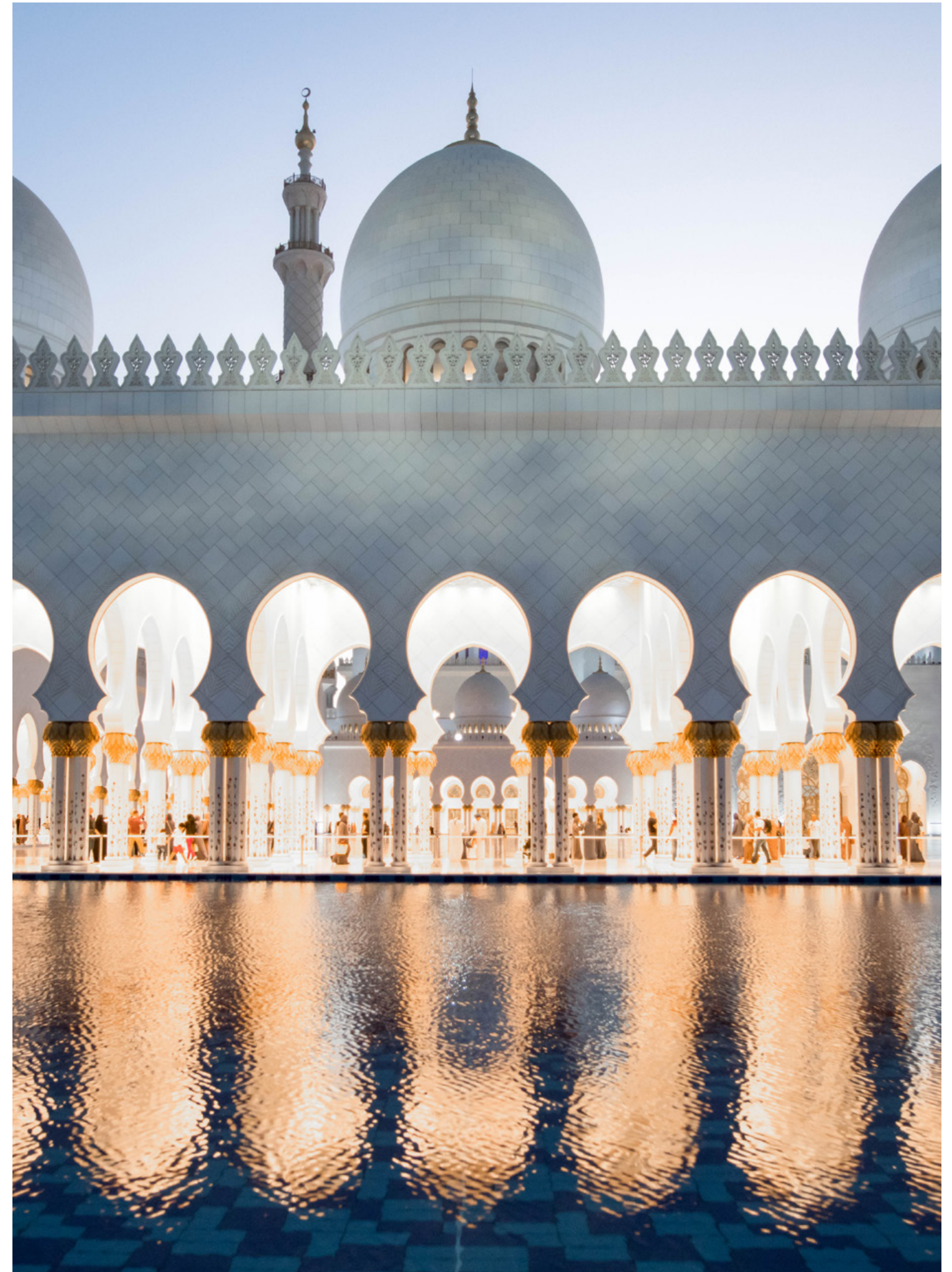


#ABUDHABI #ADRENALINE

# Shifting sands

Abu Dhabi's heart beats strong in its voluptuous dunes, turquoise lagoons and bird-filled wetlands. But your pulse is best taken at its high-speed attractions. *By Emily McAuliffe*





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HERE'S A SHRIEK AS OUR WHITE Landcruiser starts skidding sideways down a steep slope. From the passenger's seat, I had been filming the four-wheel drive ahead of us as it kicked up an impressive cloud of sand and dipped behind a dune. But I had to hit pause on the recording to grip the dashboard.

It felt like our driver had lost control, but he hadn't – and nor had any of the other drivers who were seemingly hitting the accelerator like hotheads in the distance. In fact, they're skilled 'dune bashers', trained to push vehicles to their limits on a thrilling trajectory up, down and across Al Khatim desert's steep dunes, which are constantly at the mercy of the wind.

Despite the ever-shifting terrain, our drivers effortlessly weave their way back to our starting point, where red rugs and tables laid with crisp white tablecloths sit on the sand, ready for us to enjoy a cold beer and barbecue under the stars.

The expansive and undulant desert is one of Abu Dhabi's best-known attractions, with dune bashing in cars and open-air buggies one of the most thrilling ways to feel the freedom that comes from being immersed in nature's powerful beauty. And then there's that fiery orange sunset.

But Abu Dhabi – capital of the United Arab Emirates – isn't all about the sand. And contrary to popular belief, the city is also far more than a place to stretch your legs at the halfway point of a long-haul flight.

**GET YOUR MOTOR RUNNING**  
Things move fast in Abu Dhabi. Not least the development of the city itself, which sprung out of a sleepy desert landscape in a matter of decades, following the discovery of oil in 1958. Along with its oversized shopping centres and highrises stacked along the largest of its 200 islands, Abu Dhabi is home to the Yas Marina Circuit, which lights up screens around the world as part of the Formula One Grand Prix.

When we drive onto Yas island, it's clear that it's the city's adventure hub. We pass the racy red rollercoaster of Ferrari World, Etihad Arena and signs pointing to CLYMB – the world's tallest indoor skydiving flight

chamber – as we make our way to Pier 71 for a waterfront lunch at Lighthouse, before backtracking to the F1 track.

Sliding doors that read 'drivers only' open as we step inside a cavernous building where rows of polished Ferraris, Porsches and Aston Martins are parked. Though these speed machines are available for hire (with or without a driver) to zip around the F1 track, that's not what we're here for.

Instead, my travelling companions and I head upstairs to don a black jumpsuit, gloves, shoes and a shiny white helmet. Visors down, we rev our go-kart engines and inch forward to our starting positions on the grid, before hooning around the track, trying to out-do each other's lap times. Though we're far from becoming stunt drivers for *The Fast and the Furious* (which, as a side note, was filmed in Abu Dhabi – movie number seven – including outside the opulent Emirates Palace), we leave pumped with adrenaline.

A 10-minute drive from the F1 track is the world's largest indoor theme park, Warner Bros World. Pushing through the turnstiles, I look in awe at the central plaza's high domed roof painted with wispy clouds, which gradually change colour to mirror the intensity of the

midday sun, before shifting to a soft pink at sunset. The air is cool and there's a city-like buzz as we walk through rows of buildings lit with neon lights. I line up for the Green Lantern simulator – an immersive 4D-theatre experience that feels like falling into another universe – but chicken out at the Scarecrow Scare Raid in Gotham City (where screams can't be

heard, apparently). If you're committed to testing out the 29 rides and five themed 'lands', you can easily spend a day here.

#### BACK TO NATURE

Though Abu Dhabi plays on its glitz and glam and proudly flaunts its desert location, it holds a few secrets up its sleeve. Firstly, the city's abundant white sand and turquoise water beaches rival those of the best beach resorts around the world (Abu Dhabi sits on an archipelago in the Persian Gulf). And secondly, it has an intricate mangrove system that serves as an avian and marine sanctuary on Jubail Island.

We opt for a one-kilometre walk around Jubail Mangrove Park with our guide Fawaz, who explains the significance of the 'coastal guardians' and points out the scuttling red-claw crabs that help provide oxygen to the tidal shrubs. As we make our way back to the cafe and reception area along a raised boardwalk, I spy the rainbow-hued canoes pulled up on the sand beside a deep channel, and make a mental note to join a kayak tour on my next visit. Fawaz explains that the experience takes visitors to the end of the island, where flamingos can sometimes be spotted in the distance. Pink flamingos against turquoise water? I'm sold. 🦩

OPENING SPREAD: Al Khatim desert © Emily McAuliffe; Sheikh Zayed Grand Mosque. THESE PAGES, CLOCKWISE: Pool at the Park Hyatt © Emily McAuliffe; Emirates Palace © Reinhard Westphal; Louvre Abu Dhabi © Emily McAuliffe. Icon © Adrien Coquet/Noun Project

#### TRAVEL FACTS

GETTING THERE  
[etihad.com](http://etihad.com)

ACCOMMODATION  
[mandarinoriental.com](http://mandarinoriental.com)  
[abudhabi.park.hyatt.com](http://abudhabi.park.hyatt.com)

EXPERIENCES  
[yasmarinacircuit.com](http://yasmarinacircuit.com)  
[wbworldabudhabi.com](http://wbworldabudhabi.com)  
[park.jubailisland.ae](http://park.jubailisland.ae)

INFORMATION  
[visitabudhabi.ae](http://visitabudhabi.ae)



#### LOUVRE TIME

The first universal museum in the Arab world, its sci-fi building designed by Pritzker winner Jean Nouvel, the Louvre Abu Dhabi features works curated chronologically, making a walk through the gallery feel like a journey through time. The collection itself, a compilation from French institutions and pieces from Abu Dhabi, highlights the connections and universal themes among global cultures and eras. [louvreabudhabi.ae](http://louvreabudhabi.ae)

