

# JEWEL IN THE CROWN

Once consigned to the shadow of extravagant Dubai, neighbouring Abu Dhabi is fast becoming the Middle East's hottest tourist destination. Paul Ewart discovers why.







This page, clockwise from top left: Sheikh Zayed Grand Mosque is the largest in the UAE; Qasr Al Sarab resort is an oasis in the Liwa desert; Yas Hotel is perched above a Formula One racetrack; Abu Dhabi has spent more on infrastructure development than any other city in the UAE. Opposite page: The Gehry-designed Guggenheim in Abu Dhabi will be the world's largest.

During my first visit to Abu Dhabi three years ago, about halfway through the 90-minute taxi ride from neighbouring Dubai, my driver turned to me and asked, “Why go to Abu Dhabi? There’s nothing there.” Fast-forward to the present day and Abu Dhabi has arguably stolen the crown. The city was recently named the Middle East’s Leading Destination at the World Travel Awards and was listed in the top 10 destinations to visit in Frommer’s and Lonely Planet’s 2010 travel guides. So, how did Abu Dhabi, the capital of the United Arab Emirates (UAE), come to rival Dubai as a tourist destination? In part, Dubai’s expansion plans contributed to its financial downfall. Dubai’s skyscrapers were built in rapid

succession, and just five years ago it had a quarter of the world’s tower cranes. From 2001 to 2008, the seven-state UAE’s real gross domestic product (GDP) grew by an annual average of 14.8 per cent – one of the world’s highest growth rates. Dubai’s real GDP, however, grew by 21.9 per cent over the same period. Immediately post-GFC, UAE building projects totalled around A\$253 billion, with Dubai’s totalling nearly A\$140 billion. This eight-year boom turned Dubai’s sand dunes into a glittering metropolis boasting the world’s tallest building, the Burj Dubai (now Burj Khalifa), at 828 metres high, and one of the world’s largest shopping malls, The Dubai Mall, which opened in November 2008.

## Abu Dhabi is planning to lead the way with Masdar City, the world’s first carbon-neutral, zero-waste city.

Dubai was hit hard by the GFC and in early 2009 the dream began to unravel. Half of the UAE’s construction projects, believed to total A\$655 billion, were put on hold or cancelled. Among the casualties in Dubai were Trump International Hotel and Tower; four theme parks, including Dubailand, planned to be the world’s biggest; and The World Islands, an archipelago of man-made islands in the shape of a map of the world. The frenetic expansion of Dubai on the back of speculative investment ground to a halt.

### TALE OF TWO CITIES

Meanwhile, 127 kilometres south-west in Abu Dhabi, things couldn’t have been more different. Because Abu Dhabi’s economy relies on oil and gas whereas Dubai’s heavily depends on tourism, it is less volatile. Plans for office buildings, homes, hotels and even airports continued to be executed in Abu Dhabi, including the construction of Khalifa Port, the expansion of Abu Dhabi International Airport and the proposed rail link between Abu Dhabi and Dubai.

The government-backed Abu Dhabi Plan 2030, which aims to make the city

a modern, thriving place to live in and to visit, includes initiatives to fuel GDP growth of seven per cent until 2015 and six per cent in the following 15 years. Implementation of the plan has begun with construction projects such as the 382-metre-high Central Market residential tower and The Landmark multi-use skyscraper (324 metres high). According to reports from GulfBase (which tracks the Gulf Cooperation Council stock markets) earlier this year, Abu Dhabi has spent more on infrastructure development than any other city in the UAE.

Many cultural ambitions form part of Abu Dhabi’s grand plans. At the forefront are the Sheikh Zayed National Museum, the Guggenheim Abu Dhabi (designed by Frank Gehry and due to be completed in 2014) and the Louvre Abu Dhabi (opening in 2013). Abu Dhabi’s Guggenheim, which at 42,000 square metres will be the largest in the world, will exhibit Arabian, Islamic and Middle Eastern art, while the Louvre will showcase art and archaeological finds from around the world.

These buildings will all be located within the Saadiyat Island Cultural District and together they will form the

world’s largest concentration of premier cultural institutions. The district will also house the Performing Arts Centre and Maritime Museum (both due to be completed in 2018) and Manarat Al Saadiyat, a visitor and exhibition centre.

While the oil-rich UAE is the last place you’d expect to see low-carbon living, Abu Dhabi is planning to lead the way with Masdar City, the world’s first carbon-neutral, zero-waste city and the headquarters of the International Renewable Energy Agency. The A\$25-billion project will be home to 50,000 people, 12,500 businesses and a university.

### SPOILED FOR CHOICE

Though these attractions will be the city’s main drawcards, Abu Dhabi also offers opulent hotels and spas, international restaurants, golf courses, designer shopping, desert and water activities, theme park thrills and professional sports.

The enormous Emirates Palace hotel remains a favourite; the new Yas Hotel is the only one in the world to straddle a Formula One racetrack; the Aloft hotel features ultra-sleek design; and the luxe Qasr Al Sarab resort (‘Mirage Palace’) in the Liwa desert, 90 minutes’ drive from Abu Dhabi International Airport, enjoys spectacular desert views.

There’s more luxury accommodation on the way too. The Grand Canal Abu Dhabi, a waterfront resort complete with Venetian canals and a retail and dining piazza, is due to be completed at the end of the year. It is being constructed at ▶



a cost of A\$563 million and will be the second largest hotel in the emirate. Adjacent to the towering Sheikh Zayed Grand Mosque, this large resort will offer 500 spacious rooms and suites, 85 individual land-bound villas and 10 luxurious overwater villas, each with mooring for private yachts.

### CULINARY HOT SPOT

Abu Dhabi is a cultural melting pot – a heady mix of Arabic, European, American, Indian and Asian cultures, thanks to the substantial expat population. This is reflected in the city's dining options, ranging from the super-cheap to the outrageously expensive.

Dubai lured renowned international restaurant chains, such as Nobu and Zuma, to its shores and Abu Dhabi is doing the same. Celebrity chef Marco Pierre White opened his Steakhouse & Grill in the Fairmont Bab Al Bahr hotel in the plush A\$245-million Between the Bridges resort development. London-based Hakkasan restaurant, which recently opened in the Emirates Palace hotel, is a Michelin-starred Chinese restaurant that will provide stiff competition for Nobu.

### FROM SOUK TO SEA

Shopaholics will love Abu Dhabi. There are about 20 malls offering designer labels such as Chanel, Gucci and Burberry, as well as souk-style outlets. Central Market, a development opening soon in the CBD on the site of Abu Dhabi's original souk (which was destroyed by fire), will house a souk with more than 300 shops.

Adventure junkies should look to the 250 kilometres of desert stretching into the Empty Quarter, a three-hour drive from the city, which is home to Moreeb Dune, the UAE's second highest sand dune. Here you can choose from camel riding, four-wheel-drive dune bashing and mountain biking.

If you prefer the sea to the desert, explore the marine life in the warm waters of the Persian Gulf. Abu Dhabi is made up of more than 200 natural islands, but the focus at present is on three of them: Bu Tinah Island, recently short-listed as one


of the Seven Wonders of Nature finalists; Saadiyat Island, which is being developed into seven distinctive districts with 29 hotels and an upscale cultural district; and Yas Island, home to the Yas Marina Circuit, which opened in November last year in time to host the inaugural Abu Dhabi Grand Prix.

### FAST-TRACKING SPORTS

For those wanting to fuel their love of speed, Ferrari World Abu Dhabi, the world's first Ferrari theme park, opens on Yas Island this month. It features more than 20 attractions, including Formula Rossa, the world's fastest 'racing' roller-coaster, which comprises two competing carriages racing along a pair of twisting parallel tracks. This state-of-the-art ride accelerates from 0 to 100 kilometres per hour in just two seconds, reaching speeds of up to 240 kilometres per hour and a height of 52 metres.

Investing in sports has been a foundation strategy to help Abu Dhabi meet its target of attracting 2.3 million

hotel guests a year by 2012. It has certainly raised the emirate's profile as a host for major sports events. Last November, the inaugural Abu Dhabi Grand Prix attracted 50,000 visitors to the city, while this year's Abu Dhabi Golf Championship attracted 27,000. Abu Dhabi's major sports events portfolio continues to expand, with news that the city will be the first Middle Eastern port to host part of the Volvo Ocean Race in January 2012.

It's the combination of Abu Dhabi's modern, innovative blueprint for infrastructure development and its wealth of activities for adventure seekers and culture vultures alike that has cemented its position as the new jewel in the crown of the Middle East. Though Dubai may no longer reign, its proximity to Abu Dhabi means that visitors can experience the best of what both cities have to offer. 

**Getting there** • V Australia flies direct from Sydney to Abu Dhabi from February 2011. To book your flight, visit [www.vaustralia.com.au](http://www.vaustralia.com.au) or call 13 82 87 (in Australia).

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Right: Opening this month on Yas Island, Ferrari World Abu Dhabi theme park celebrates the speed, aerodynamics and technical innovation of the Italian sports car.

# ABU DHABI UAE

Discover a wealth of activities in this multifaceted city.

## RICH DIVERSITY

If water sports don't float your boat, immerse yourself in Abu Dhabi's history and culture.



**VISITOR CENTRE**  
Meaning 'a place that provides enlightenment' in Arabic, Manarat Al Saadiyat is a 15,400-square-metre visitor centre on Saadiyat Island that brings the vision for the island alive. Free entry. [www.saadiyat.ae](http://www.saadiyat.ae).



**WATER SPORTS**  
Go island hopping around Abu Dhabi via jet ski for an exciting alternative to the usual city sightseeing experience. From A\$83 for one hour. Empros, InterContinental Hotel Beach. [www.empros.ae](http://www.empros.ae).



**GRAND MOSQUE**  
Visit Sheikh Zayed Grand Mosque, an Islamic architectural treasure containing one of the world's largest chandeliers, between Maqtaa and Musaffah Bridges. Free one-hour tours at 10am most days. [www.visitabudhabi.ae](http://www.visitabudhabi.ae).



## ABU DHABI THREE WAYS

Exotic Arabian nights with options for all budgets.

	BUDGET	MID-RANGE	LUXURY
EAT	A firm favourite with the locals, Al Arab's adventurous multicultural menu offers dishes for around A\$6. Defence Road, opposite Al Wahda Mall.	Ushna restaurant in Souq Qaryat Al Beri serves Indian vegetarian food and has a no-kids policy. Meals from A\$60. Between Maqtaa and Musaffah Bridges.	Marco Pierre White's latest venture, Steakhouse & Grill at Fairmont Bab Al Bahr, offers more-ish English fare for around A\$150 for a meal. Between Maqtaa and Musaffah Bridges, <a href="http://www.fairmont.com">www.fairmont.com</a> .
SLEEP	Park Inn's funky rooms and balconies overlook Ferrari World, the Formula One racetrack and the sea. Rooms from A\$89. Yas Island, <a href="http://www.parkinn.com">www.parkinn.com</a> .	The Tital Liwa Hotel is a spacious, well-appointed desert hideaway with rooms from A\$210. Edge of the Empty Quarter, <a href="http://www.danathotels.com">www.danathotels.com</a> .	The Yas Hotel, the first in the world to straddle a Formula One racetrack, has 499 luxurious rooms and eight restaurants. Rooms from A\$1,038. Yas Marina Circuit, <a href="http://www.theyashotel.com">www.theyashotel.com</a> .
DRINK	Heroes bar in the Crowne Plaza Hotel buzzes with live music and serves great pub grub. Drinks from A\$6. Hamdan Street, <a href="http://www.crowneplaza.com">www.crowneplaza.com</a> .	The stylish terrace at InterContinental's Yacht Club is the hottest watering hole in town. Drinks are from A\$12. Bainunah Street, <a href="http://www.ichotelsgroup.com">www.ichotelsgroup.com</a> .	Shangri-La's rooftop Pearls Bar serves delicious cocktails, starting from A\$10, that you can sip while DJs spin chilled-out tunes. Between Maqtaa and Musaffah Bridges, <a href="http://www.shangri-la.com">www.shangri-la.com</a> .

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