

United Arab Emirates

إتحاد الإمارات العربية

Magical silence is interrupted only by the whisper of shifting sands or the shriek of a falcon above the cinnamon dunes that roll towards Saudi Arabia. Towards the horizon, a caravan of camels ambles in ancient rhythms towards the setting sun. This is the desert. This is the very soul of the United Arab Emirates and it still exists – alongside many other realities.

First came oil and wise governance. Then unification under Sheikh Zayed under whom cities, infrastructure, culture and education all thrived and the UAE stepped onto the world stage as a powerhouse. Its city-states became towering and alluring destinations. Sharjah held fast to its deep Muslim faith and deep connection with its heritage. Abu Dhabi, holding the seventh largest oil reserves in the world, became the governing hub of the country. And Dubai? It went ballistic! Bending to the vision and the will of its charismatic ruler, Sheikh Mohammed, a vast city bloomed in the desert.

'Futuristic' can't describe the cities of the UAE. 'Hedonistic' can't describe the pleasures of sprawling resorts and brilliant beaches. 'International'? There are 180 ethnicities living within its border. Towering minarets, ancient souqs and mosques, the Bedu living their solitary lives: they all remain. But it's the present and future of the UAE that draws the world's peoples and fortunes, and it's fervently hoped that this future also affords some sort of 'bridge' between the Arab cultures and those of the West. A future in which they are ineluctably bound together, for the greater good of all.

FAST FACTS

- **Official name** United Arab Emirates
- **Capital** Abu Dhabi
- **Area** 83,600 sq km
- **Population** 5.9 million
- **Country code** ☎ 971
- **Head of State** (President) Sheikh Khalifa bin Zayed al-Nahyan
- **Annual number of tourists** 9.1 million
- **Stereotypes** Local sheikhs giving a royal wave from their limo
- **Surprises** Local sheikhs fanging in a Ferrari down Sheikh Zayed Rd



HIGHLIGHTS

- **Dubai** (p375) Cruise across Dubai's lively creek in an *abra* (traditional wooden boat) – no matter the time of day, it never looks the same.
- **Abu Dhabi** (p406) Pay your respects to Sheikh Zayed, the 'father' of the UAE, then peek into the city's future at the Cultural District exhibit at Emirates Palace.
- **Sharjah** (p396) Amble among the historic wind towers in the atmospheric Heritage Area, then take Sharjah's artistic pulse in the adjacent Arts Area.
- **Al-Ain** (p421) Lose yourself in the labyrinthine lanes of Al-Ain's shady date-palm oases.
- **Liwa** (p417) Wonder at the spectacle of the shifting sands drifting across the roads in the desert of Liwa.
- **Dibba** (p428) Count the coloured doors as you kick back in the low-key fishing town of Dibba.

ITINERARIES

- **Three days** With only three days, concentrate the first two in Dubai, following our Dubai itinerary (p372). Keen to see more of the country? Spend just one day in Dubai ambling around the souqs and the Bastakia Quarter in the morning, then hop on the Big Bus Tour (p383) for an entertaining overview of the other city sights, including Burj Khalifa (p379) and Burj al-Arab (p380). Early the following morning, catch a bus or a cab or hire a car and head to Abu Dhabi. Here the two must-dos are the brand-new Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan al-Nahyan Mosque (p408) and Emirates Palace (p408), with its fascinating exhibit on the future Cultural District on Saadiyat Island. In the late afternoon join a desert safari (p412) and experience sublime scenery while camel riding, sand boarding and enjoying a desert-camp barbecue. Return to Abu Dhabi, then cut east to Al-Ain (p420) on the third day to wander among the date-palm oases, engaging museums and beautifully restored forts and heritage sites.
- **One week** Follow the three-day itinerary but spend two days each in Dubai and Abu Dhabi before steering towards Al-Ain. On day five, head on over to Fujairah (p424) on the East Coast and up the gorgeous coastal road to Dibba (p428),

past ancient forts and the country's oldest mosque, all set against the backdrop of the mighty Hajar Mountains. Spend a couple of nights here, taking a break from the driving by relaxing on the lovely beach or snorkelling to see turtles and clownfish. Wrap up your week with a stop in Sharjah (p394) to explore the fascinating arts and heritage quarters before returning to Dubai.

- **Two weeks** Extend your stay in Dubai to three days, spending a night at the Bab al-Shams Desert Resort & Spa (p392) and enjoying the buffet dinner and show at the Al-Hadheerah restaurant. From here, you're off to Abu Dhabi, followed by an adventurous trip into the remote desert and Liwa Oasis (p417) with its scene-stealing combo of sublime dunes, date farms and solitude. Get there by following the road towards Hameem, stopping by the kooky Emirates National Auto Museum (p417) along the way. For an unforgettable experience, spend a night at the Qsar al-Sarab (p422), then take the mesmerising drive to Mezaira'a and on to the divine dunes around Moreeb Hill (p420). Take your time heading back to Al-Ain, then swing by Hatta (p392) before steering towards Fujairah and the East Coast beaches. From here head north to Ras al-Khaimah and on to Khasab on the Musandam Peninsula (p234) to explore the fjords and mountains. Finish up by driving south along the western coast, ticking off the emirates along the way: Ras al-Khaimah (p402), Umm al-Quwain (p401), Ajman (p399) and Sharjah (p394) before returning to Dubai.

CLIMATE & WHEN TO GO

The best time to visit the UAE is between November and March when daytime temperatures hover in the mid-20s, although nights can be a little chilly (around 13°C). What little rain there is tends to fall between December and March when cloudy and bleak conditions and choppy seas are a possibility. If you don't mind the mercury climbing up to 35°C, you may find October and April tolerable as well since humidity is low and evenings balmy. A trip to the UAE in high summer (June, July and August, when the temperature hovers in the mid-40s), however, is simply a bad idea – the only advantage being heavily discounted