Oman, UAE & Arabian Peninsula

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Weaving between the sites of modern and ancient Arabia, this itinerary highlights the best Peninsula experiences feasible in the least amount of time. If focuses on three Gulf cities and then offers a relaxing contrast to the urban pace in the wilds of Oman.

Begin with two days in Doha, with its skyline of modern architectural gems. Loiter with falcons in Souq Waqif and visit the Museum of Islamic Art to understand that the Gulf is built on ancient values.

Fly to Dubai, a city obsessed with the newest, biggest and best, for a two-day stop, including that totem of superlatives, Burj Khalifa. Spend a day in Abu Dhabi, the UAE’s cultured capital, visiting Sheikh Zayed Grand Mosque – proof there’s more to the Emirates than shopping.

For a complete contrast, fly from Abu Dhabi to Muscat. See how 40 years of ‘renais-sance’ has created a modern nation underpinned by respect for heritage – evident during a four-day tour of Nizwa and Bahla. Allow three further days to forget history by hiking at Jebel Shams, camel riding across Sharqiya Sands and watching turtles return to the beach of their birth at Ras al Jinz before returning to Muscat.
Many people visit one of the Gulf capitals as a stopover en route to somewhere else. There are more than enough diversions and experiences on offer, however, to make it worthwhile to combine these city states as a destination in their own right.

Spend four days in each of the five main Gulf cities, flying between each. Begin in dry, traditional Kuwait City. Learn here the sensory vocab of Arabia – the haggling in Souq Marbarakia, the haunting call to prayer and wafts of sheesha from outdoor coffeehouses. Add to the Arabian lexicon by tracing similarities between Peninsula cultures at Tareq Rajab Museum and leave time to explore the urban landscape of high-rise towers – the quintessential icons of Gulf modernity.

Oil is responsible for Arabia’s rapid propulsion into the 21st century: see how in nearby Bahrain, home to the Oil Museum. Enjoy the glamour associated with black gold at the Formula One racing circuit. Pearls gave the Gulf its former livelihood: buy a string at Gold City in Manama or dive for your own off the Hawar Islands.

Fly to neighbouring Qatar, renowned for its commitment to hosting international sports. Doha also boasts one of the most spectacular modern skylines in the world built on reclaimed land. Visit Khor Al Adaid in southern Qatar and watch the inland sea get its own back as it encroaches into the dunes.

Abu Dhabi, the cultural and political capital of United Arab Emirates, is another city reliant on reclaimed land – which becomes obvious on a walk along the beautiful Corniche. Punctuate your high-voltage city tour with an escape to Liwa Oasis, where life moves at the pace of a camel’s stride.

If you miss the dynamism of the urban experience, then the best has been kept until last. Spend four days in and around Dubai, discovering what makes it the region’s most internationally famous city. Cook with chefs, shop with sharks, view the city from the world’s tallest tower and dine underwater in the Gulf’s most can-do city.

The Gulf Experience
They may share the same Peninsula, but arid Kuwait City in the north and subtropical Salalah in the south are so different in character they may as well belong to different continents. Explore the diversity of Arabia by spending three days in each of the five main conurbations of the Gulf, enjoying the modern miracle of these virtual city states.

With the city-centric part of the journey over, escape from Dubai at the start of week three to the starry skies and apricot-coloured dunes of Al Ain. Allow time to wander through souqs of grumbling camels and listen for the ghost of intrepid desert explorer Wilfred Thesiger, commemorated in the fort museum.

End week three by crossing the border via Buraimi to Ibri in Oman – the land of 1000 towers and fortifications, cresting mountain tops and looming over wadis. The building of towers in the region has been a tradition for millennia, as pre-Islamic burial towers at Bat testify. Continue through the castle towns of Jabrin and Bahla to Nizwa, where the mighty Jebel Shams looms over the heritage city.

Begin week four taking a break from the vertical in the ultimate horizontal bus ride – crossing the edge of the Empty Quarter on the flat and utterly featureless highway to Thumrait. The descent into Salalah, Oman’s southern capital, after 10 hours of stony-plain monotony is sublime, especially during the rainy season when the desert turns green. End week four among frankincense trees near Mughsail and see where the precious resin was traded at Al Baleed and the ancient harbour of Khor Rouri.

With a car, begin week five skirting the Arabian Sea from Salalah to Hasik and the remote coast road north. Pause for a night or two of wild camping, or press on to the frontier town of Duqm for unexpected five-star luxury in the new resort developments in the booming port town. Complete a lap of Masirah to understand the true meaning of the term ‘desert island’ before continuing along the edge of the Sharqiya Sands to Ras al Hadd. Spend a day in Sur, where the lighthouses of Ayjah guide dhows to safe haven, before heading to journey’s end in the hospitable city of Muscat.
If the intensity of Dubai begins to take its toll, a trip into the neighbouring Emirates and Oman provides an enjoyable antidote. Oman’s Musandam Peninsula makes a good weekend break, but with an extra day or two, a mini-tour of northern Oman is possible.

From Dubai head north to Sharjah, a hub of heritage and Islamic arts. On day two, wind through the northern Emirates to the Shams–Tibat border and enter Oman’s fabled Musandam Peninsula. Enjoy the spectacular drive along the cliff-hugging road to Khasab and time your arrival for a dhow cruise in Musandam’s celebrated khors (creeks).

Spend day three in a 4WD, exploring Jebel Harim and Rawdah Bowl with its ‘House of Locks’. Return to Khasab and on day four take the ferry to Muscat: entering Mutrah harbour at night is a magical experience. Visit Mutrah Souq and Muscat’s old quarter and on day five meander west via Nakhal and Rustaq with their magnificent forts and pause for a swim at Sawadi. Stretch to an extra day by overnighting in the growing town of Sohar.

Kuwait is a fascinating country to explore, but as a conservative, flat, dry state, hemmed in by travel-restricted neighbours, it doesn’t offer many opportunities to let your hair down. For the complete antithesis of life in Kuwait City, take the following trip to Oman and the UAE.

Fly to Muscat and enjoy the tolerant, cosmopolitan nature of the city. Spend a day at a beachside hotel and enjoy the novelty of a sea with waves, followed by sundowners and dancing in a nightclub. On day three be reminded of what mountains and orchards look like by hiking in clear fresh air, blissfully devoid of humidity, on Jebel Akhdar.

On day four, fly to Salalah, where the subtropical climate, summer greenery, cooler climate and casual atmosphere will remind you of Africa. On day five, visit the spectacular blowholes at Mughsail in a landscape untrammelled by oil pipelines and nodding donkeys. On day six, swap the rural idyll for the urban wild side by flying into Dubai for extreme shopping, dining and partying. On day seven, button up the collar for the journey back to Kuwait City.
Map Legend

Sights
Beach
Bird Sanctuary
Buddhist
Castle/Palace
Christian
Confucian
Hindu
Islamic
Jain
Jewish
Monument
Museum/Gallery/Historic Building
Ruin
Shinto
Sikh
Taoist
Winery/Vineyard
Zoo/Wildlife Sanctuary
Other Sight

Activities, Courses & Tours
Bodysurfing
Diving
Canoeing/Kayaking
Course/Tour
Sento Hot Baths/Onsen
Skiing
Snorkelling
Surfing
Swimming/Pool
Walking
Windsurfing
Other Activity

Sleeping
Sleeping
Camping

Eating
Eating
Drinking & Nightlife
Drinking & Nightlife
Cafe

Entertainment
Entertainment

Shopping
Shopping

Information
Bank
Embassy/Consulate
Hospital/Medical
Internet
Police
Post Office
Telephone
Toilet
Tourist Information
Other Information

Geographic
Beach
Hut/Shelter
Lighthouse
Lookout
Mountain/Volcano
Oasis
Park
Pass
Picnic Area
Waterfall

Population
Capital (National)
Capital (State/Province)
City/Large Town
Town/Village

Transport
Airport
Border crossing
Bus
Cable car/Funicular
Cycling
Ferry
Metro station
Monorail
Parking
Petrol station
S-Bahn/S-train/Subway station
Taxi
T-bane/Tunnelbana station
Train station/Railway
Tram
Tube station
U-Bahn/Underground station
Other Transport

Note: Not all symbols displayed above appear on the maps in this book

Routes
Tollway
Freeway
Primary
Secondary
Tertiary
Lane
Unsealed road
Road under construction
Plaza/Mall
Steps
Tunnel
Pedestrian overpass
Walking Tour
Walking Tour detour
Path/Walking Trail

Boundaries
International
State/Province
Disputed
Regional/Suburb
Marine Park
Cliff
Wall

Hydrography
River, Creek
Intermittent River
Canal
Dry/Salt/Intermittent Lake
Reef

Areas
Airport/Runway
Beach/Desert
Cemetery (Christian)
Cemetery (Other)
Glacier
Mudflat
Park/Forest
Sight (Building)
Sportsground
Swamp/Mangrove
OUR WRITERS

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Oman Jenny Walker has written extensively on the Middle East in Lonely Planet publications, is a member of the British Guild of Travel Writers and a Fellow of the Royal Geographic Society. She has a long academic engagement with the region (undergraduate dissertation, postgraduate thesis from Oxford University and current PhD studies at NTU on perception of Arabic Orient). Associate Dean and an executive at Oman’s leading engineering college since 2008, Jenny has travelled in 120 countries from Mexico to Mongolia. Jenny also wrote the Plan, Understand and Survival Guide chapters (with the exception of the Hajj).

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UAE Born and raised in Germany and educated in London and at UCLA, Andrea has travelled the distance to the moon and back in her visits to dozens of countries, including several in North Africa and the Middle East. She’s authored or contributed to some 90 Lonely Planet titles, including the last edition of this guide, the Dubai & Abu Dhabi city guide and the Pocket Dubai guide. After years of living in LA, Andrea now happily makes her home in Berlin.

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