

Artful Abu Dhabi

The UAE's capital may be known for its sumptuous hotels, but it's also an emerging cultural destination, writes **Elise Morton**

We're sitting in the elegant Fouquet's

French brasserie, tucking into steak tartare and crème brûlée beneath the intricate, silvery dome of the Louvre Abu Dhabi. After this delectable lunch, my group heads out into the desert to experience an ezba – something between a family farm and a space for storytelling and passing on skills, rooted in Emirati tradition. Our day is a microcosm of what makes Abu Dhabi such an intriguing cultural destination: a beguiling blend of global influences, underpinned by a rich Arab heritage.

PEARLS OF WISDOM

A great place for clients to start their Abu Dhabi adventure is Qasr al Hosn, the oldest stone building in the city. Originally a watchtower built in the 18th century, it now houses a museum exploring the old Emirati way of life. Exhibits trace the history of the Al Nahyan family, the city's founding rulers: from their

nomadic roots within the Bani Yas tribe to the discovery of oil in Abu Dhabi during the 1950s.

A tour of the fort is also a chance to learn about traditional pearl diving. Our guide, Zayed Sultan, reveals that his own grandfather was a pearl diver and that the thriving industry has been crucial to the city's growth. While in the vicinity, clients can pop next door to the House of Artisans to learn about crafts such as Bedouin weaving, Emirati embroidery and boat-building, or check out the latest art exhibitions at the Cultural Foundation.

GRAND DESIGNS

A short drive away, the presidential palace at Qasr al Watan (one of the numerous add-ons agents can earn commission on, sold via Abu Dhabi-based attraction operator Miral) offers insight into the UAE's cultural and political heart. We take a VIP tour with knowledgeable guide Hamad Hajazi, who says the palace is a working government building. "The name means ➤

Louvre Abu Dhabi

PICTURE: Shutterstock/Sergey Bogomyakov

DESTINATIONS

MIDDLE EAST & NORTH AFRICA | ABU DHABI



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Eminence Ahmed El-Tayeb Mosque, Saadiyat Island; Qasr Al Watan palace; sunset in the desert; pool at Park Hyatt Abu Dhabi Hotel and Villas

PICTURES: Abrahamic Family House; Abu Dhabi DCT; Shutterstock/wessam Noufal; Chris Cypert



‘palace for the nation’, symbolising that these doors are open to the public,” he says, as we walk through this stunning example of Arabian grandeur.

With the UAE’s population only about 11.5% Emirati, diversity is a hallmark of this country. A prime architectural symbol of this is the Abrahamic Family House, a groundbreaking complex on Saadiyat Island where a mosque, church and synagogue sit side by side. This symbolic space for dialogue and coexistence opened in 2023 and is, as our guide tells us, meant to be a “welcoming space, both for believers and non-believers”.

MUSEUM MAGIC

When it comes to museums and art galleries, the Saadiyat Cultural District is Abu Dhabi’s beating heart. The star of the show is the Louvre Abu Dhabi, a striking architectural marvel that opened in 2017 and houses a collection spanning millennia. Far from being overwhelming, the works are organised around universal themes that anyone can relate to, such as nature, faith and power. “Art is a universal language that everyone can enjoy,” says our guide, Mohammad Almadhaani. Indeed, even little ones can get involved, thanks to the Children’s Museum and free interactive game The Secret of the Dome Stars.

The Louvre Abu Dhabi has recently been joined in Saadiyat by the technology-inspired art collective teamLab, known for its installations in Japan, Singapore, Australia and beyond. New experiential art space teamLab Phenomena Abu Dhabi plays with a plethora

of colours, lights, shapes and textures. And there’s more excitement in store: by the end of this year, the Saadiyat Cultural District should be complete, adding the Zayed National Museum, Natural History Museum Abu Dhabi and Guggenheim Abu Dhabi to the roster of attractions.

TIMELESS TRADITIONS

If your clients have ever wondered what life was like in Abu Dhabi before the skyscrapers, an ezba experience is their chance to step back in time. This traditional desert outing gives clients a glimpse of how the locals once lived, connecting with the land, the animals and the age-old practices that still thrive in the UAE’s rural heartlands.

Naser Almansoori of Ezba Experience introduces us to falconry. His favourite falcon sits beside us as we munch on sticky-sweet *luqaimat* doughnuts and *machboos* (akin to biriyani), while Naser tells us about camel rearing and traditional irrigation practices that a standard desert safari experience might miss. “The reason [our business] started is because I saw mistakes in desert safaris that do not really represent the Emirati culture,” he says.

Naser’s brother, award-winning coffee expert Seef, gives us an example as he takes us through the proper *gahwa* coffee ceremony: from roasting the beans to learning the authentic way to ask for more coffee.

It certainly leaves a lasting impression of Abu Dhabi’s hospitable, humble culture, and I could still smell the delicious cardamom-coffee aroma long after I’d left those desert sands behind. **TW**

INSIDER insight



Abdulla Yousuf Mohammad,
director of international
operations, Abu Dhabi
Department of Culture
and Tourism

“The number-one reason people come to Abu Dhabi isn’t the weather or the beach, it’s culture and events. High-profile events like the Formula One Abu Dhabi Grand Prix, Public Art Biennial and global music concerts ensure excitement is always on the agenda, while Abu Dhabi’s blend of culture, luxury and entertainment will make your clients want to return again and again.”



Louvre Abu Dhabi

BOOK IT

Pure Luxury offers a six-night stay at the Park Hyatt Abu Dhabi Hotel and Villas on a bed-and-breakfast basis from £1,629 per person. Price is based on two sharing a Standard Park Room, with flights departing Heathrow on selected dates in September and includes 23kg luggage and transfers. goldmedal.co.uk