

# Born to be wild

Sell the Middle East's wilder side with Laura French's guide to the region's best animal encounters

[@laurafrench21](#)

**T**hink Middle East, think glittering cities filled with glossy skyscrapers, gold-bedecked hotels and extravagant entertainment complexes. True - but that's only one side.

Nature reigns just as supreme in this diverse region, with an array of creatures found among its sprawling deserts, grassy mangroves and crystal-clear waters. So if you're not already selling its wilder side, you might be missing out.

Read on for some of the best wildlife experiences from across the region, to help you widen its appeal and sell to those after a nature-filled break that's less window shopping, more wildlife-spotting.

## ▶ VISIT A TURTLE RESERVE, OMAN

Is there anything more endearing than watching tiny baby turtles waddle along the shore? At the Ras Al Jinz Turtle Reserve (in the village of Ras Al Hadd, eastern Oman) visitors can see exactly that, witnessing eggs hatching and turtles nesting against a backdrop of rugged mountains and lush-green oases.

Early-morning and night-time tours are available for clients wanting to see this natural phenomenon. There's also an interactive museum for those interested in learning more, plus lodging for visitors wanting to stay overnight.

Suggest going between May

and September to catch nesting season, and reassure clients it won't be too scorching; summer temperatures average between 24C and 36C in the area.

**Book it:** Emirates Holidays can tailor-make a six-night tour combining a stay at Ras Al Jinz with three nights in Muscat, and one each in Nizwa and at Wahiba Sands, from £2,685, based on two sharing. The price includes Emirates flights and chauffeur-driven transport. [emiratesholidays.com](#)

## ▶ SPOT ORYX AND GAZELLES, DUBAI

With its distinctive snow-white body and ginormous, spiky antlers, the Arabian oryx is one of the most recognisable species

in the region. It went extinct in 1972 but has since been reintroduced to the Arabian peninsula, and there are now about 1,000 in the wild.

The largest free-roaming herd can be found in the Dubai Desert Conservation Reserve, where you'll also find gazelles (a smaller, daintier antelope), desert monitors (an endangered lizard), ospreys, the Arabian red fox and the rare Arabian wildcat, which looks similar to a domestic tabby.

Al Maha, A Luxury Collection Desert Resort & Spa, is in the reserve and offers half-day, 4x4 drives out on the dunes in search of these creatures, alongside guided nature walks and other wildlife-focused activities, making it a worthy add-on for those [→](#)



**LEFT:**  
Dubai Desert  
Conservation  
Reserve

**RIGHT:**  
Ritz-Carlton  
Ras Al  
Khaimah



→ wanting to explore beyond the glitz of the city.  
**Book it:** Caribtours offers three nights' full board at Al Maha, A Luxury Collection Desert Resort & Spa, from £1,899 per adult, based on two sharing a Bedouin Suite. The price includes flights, private transfers and up to two activities per day per guest. [caribtours.co.uk](http://caribtours.co.uk)

▶ **GLIMPSE WHALES AND DOLPHINS, OMAN**  
Oman is a hotspot for wildlife, with leopards, ibex, oryx, gazelles and more stalking its mountains and desert dunes, but it's in the water that things really heat up.  
More than 20 species of whale call its inky depths home, including humpback, sperm and blue whales, while dolphins and killer whales are regularly spotted bounding around near the shore. Dive hotspots can

“  
**More than 20 species of whale call Oman's inky depths home, including humpbacks, sperm and blue whales**

be found around Muscat and the Hallaniyat Islands (off the southeastern coast), but for clients who'd rather see these creatures from above, suggest a boat trip from the capital. The Al Bustan Palace in Muscat throws in a complimentary sailing trip for all guests, making it an excellent recommendation for marine enthusiasts.  
**Book it:** Gold Medal offers three nights' B&B in a Deluxe Mountain View Room at the Al Bustan

Palace from £839, including Turkish Airlines flights from Gatwick, private transfers and a dolphin-watching cruise, valid for travel from May 9-June 13. [goldmedal.co.uk](http://goldmedal.co.uk)

▶ **WATCH A FALCON SHOW, RAS AL KHAIMAH**  
The falcon is the UAE's national symbol thanks to a history dating back more than 2,000 years, when Bedouins would use these colossal creatures to help with hunting.

Today, falconry is still popular, and various desert camps in the region offer a chance for visitors to experience it.  
Among them is The Ritz-Carlton Ras Al Khaimah (set in the Al Wadi Nature Reserve), where on-site falconers lead an interactive flying show featuring desert eagle owls, Harris's hawks and other huge birds, while

teaching guests about Bedouin life and the history behind this nature-rich peninsula.  
**Book it:** Kuoni offers three nights' B&B in an Al Rimal Pool Villa at The Ritz-Carlton Ras Al Khaimah from £1,329 per person, based on two sharing. The price includes Emirates flights from Gatwick and private transfers, and is valid for selected departures between May and August. [kuoni.co.uk](http://kuoni.co.uk)

▶ **VISIT A WILDLIFE PARK, ABU DHABI**  
Little more than 150 miles west of Abu Dhabi sits Sir Bani Yas Island, a nature haven where the crowning glory is the Arabian Wildlife Park. Here, more than 10,000 animals – spanning hyenas, cheetahs, giraffes, ostriches, gazelles and the Arabian oryx – roam free along the sandy plains, with 4x4



→ drives offering visitors the chance to go out and glimpse them all.

Desert Islands Resort & Spa by Anantara, set on Sir Bani Yas Island, offers guided nature walks in addition to the drives, leading visitors past towering giraffes, diving osprey and other creatures doing their thing in remote surroundings, making it a good base for those wanting to get closer to nature.

**Book it:** Lusso offers five nights' half-board in a Deluxe Sea View Room at Desert Islands Resort & Spa by Anantara from £1,670 per person, based on two sharing. The price includes transfers and Etihad Airways flights on selected dates until October 31. [lussotravel.com](http://lussotravel.com)



## ▶ DIVE IN THE RED SEA, JORDAN

The Red Sea is up there with some of the world's best diving destinations, and short flight times plus impossibly clear waters make it an excellent alternative to the likes of Asia, the Maldives and beyond.

For especially vibrant sea life and ultra-colourful coral, look no further than Aqaba in Jordan, says Sally Emden, marketing manager at Dive Worldwide. Regular companions include hawksbill turtles, stripy lionfish, yellow-mouthed morays and blue-spotted rays (huge, flat beasts marked out by their luminescent dots), and it's a good option for beginners thanks to excellent shore dives, warm waters

and relatively few tourists to interrupt the views.

**Book it:** Dive Worldwide offers a Learn to Dive in Jordan package from £1,725 per person, including seven nights' B&B accommodation, Padi open-water course, transfers and return flights. [diveworldwide.com](http://diveworldwide.com)

## ▶ KAYAK IN THE MANGROVES, AJMAN

Clients looking to get off the beaten track? Suggest the little emirate of Ajman, home to the Al Zorah Nature Reserve. Here, 60 species of birds waddle and flit among bottle-green mangrove forests and mirror-like lagoons, which stretch for an

impressive one million square metres.

The best way of experiencing its creeks is from a kayak. Quest For Adventure offers two-hour trips during which clients can paddle serenely past flamingos, kingfishers, ospreys and other wildlife, with nothing to distract but the sound of water gently swishing.

**Book it:** Kayaking tours with Quest For Adventure, which start at £36 for adults and £28 for children, can be booked at local hotels including the Fairmont Ajman. [questforadventure.net](http://questforadventure.net)

## ▶ RIDE A CAMEL OVER THE DUNES, ABU DHABI

Have you even been to the Middle East if you haven't ridden a camel? Plodding along marbled sand dunes to a backdrop of burning orange sky is a feeling like no other – and doing that in the Rub' Al Khali, the largest uninterrupted sand desert in the world, is the stuff of bucket-list dreams.

Premier Holidays recommends adding a stay at Qasar Al Sarab Desert Resort by Anantara for those wanting to experience it at its best. The resort offers a camel trek taking guests out to explore the area at sunrise, when the only interruption is the tip-tapping of camel hooves kicking up the dust.

**Book it:** Premier Holidays offers three nights' B&B at Qasar Al Sarab Desert Resort by Anantara from £539 per person, including transfers from Abu Dhabi beach resorts, based on two adults sharing.

[trade.premierholidays.co.uk](http://trade.premierholidays.co.uk)



**TOP:** Desert Islands Resort & Spa by Anantara

**LEFT:** Al Zorah Nature Reserve

PICTURES: SHUTTERSTOCK; NEIL CORDER; JOANNA SKLADANEK