

Deserts, diamonds and dolphins

The Arabian Gulf takes on a new perspective when experienced from the water, discovers **Rebecca Barnes**

“When we build something, we look for the biggest and make it bigger – we prefer to be number one,” said our larger-than-life tour guide Dr Norman Ali Khalaf, a born-and-bred Emirati who studied zoology at Durham University in the 1980s. He told us of his love for the cars studded with 300,000 diamonds that can sometimes be seen adding megawatt sparkle to the city of Dubai.

Indeed, if Dubai buildings could talk, they would be constantly outdoing each other to be the tallest, the grandest and the most talked about. It was my first time in the United Arab Emirates, and while the showiness came as no surprise, I certainly wasn't expecting the sail-in to be quite so spectacular, with frontline views of its impressive skyline and landmarks including Atlantis The Palm and the Burj Al Arab – clients will love you for suggesting a balcony cabin on the port side. ➡

Sunrise in Manama, Bahrain
PICTURE: Shutterstock/Jantira Namwong



FROM LEFT: See camels up close in Dubai; Qasr al Watan, Abu Dhabi; the mountains in Oman with road leading to Musandam, Khasab; aerial view of The Pearl Island in Qatar PICTURES: Felicity Millward; Shutterstock/Guillaume Angleraud, Abie Davies, Benny Marty

As our bus wound through streets seemingly paved with gold, we learnt that just a few decades ago, this modest fishing spot had little infrastructure and an abundance of foxes, rabbits, snakes and birds. Following the discovery of oil in 1966, which kickstarted the development of Dubai, there was a wave of development in the early 2000s, when many more ambitious building projects took shape.

"We went from zero to hero and many rich people came," said Dr Ali.

A WILD RIDE

Life in this flashy urban jungle is a world away from the goings on in the port city of Khasab in Oman, where the humble and hardworking Omanis enjoy a slower pace of life. Entertainment includes eating together on the beach under the shade of the trees, with the occasional two-and-a-half-hour road trip to Dubai for weekend shopping excursions.

It wasn't all bright lights and big cities on Celestyal Cruises' new Desert Days itinerary. Apart from fun excursions such as dune bashing and

dining under the stars – which were definitely worth signing up for – nature also plays a part.

On Sir Bani Yas Island, home to a wildlife reserve with some 6,000 animals, delicate gazelles jostled with hardy Barbary sheep for the shade of the *ghaf* trees. This native, drought-resistant plant is perfectly adapted to its environment and can survive for long periods without water.

Camels cantered along the desert sand at Al Marmoom Race Track in Dubai, as if they'd just been let out of the stalls at Royal Ascot.

And while sailing in Oman's Musandam fjord, my emotions were stirred by a playful dolphin that swam alongside our wooden *dhow* (boat) for five minutes, occasionally diving beneath the water to switch sides, almost as if our wake rider was keen to ensure that everyone on board got the perfect picture.

Of course, Arabian culture also featured in abundance. In the island country of Bahrain, our excellent German guide Claudia Hardt – a resident since 2007 after visiting and falling in love with the people and

the country – took us around the ancient fort and the Bahrain National Museum, where we learnt about pearl diving traditions.

FROM GREECE TO GULF

Back on board *Celestyal Journey*, day-to-day life was pretty laid-back. I balanced days ashore with time in the spacious gym and spa – treatments were well priced compared with many ships and my massage was excellent.

Food and drink took inspiration from the destinations visited, but always with a nod to the line's Greek heritage. Worth a mention was the Alchemy Cocktail Menu, with drinks that were like works of art, specially created for the Arabian Gulf sailings.

While the interior design might not be the most cutting edge, most cabins were well planned and spacious, with many featuring sofa beds. My Grand Dream Suite featured a huge walk-in wardrobe and roomy balcony, and also came with a dedicated concierge, thermal spa access and complimentary cocktail events.

Passengers, many of whom were British on this sailing, seemed keen



GRAND VOYAGE

to explore the region in an affordable way. One lady told me enthusiastically how brilliant the itinerary was; and with a route that took in many ports I'd never been to before, I had to agree.

Our penultimate stop before returning to Doha was Abu Dhabi, the capital of the UAE and home of the opulently designed presidential palace, Qasr Al Watan. Smart skyscrapers reached up into the cloudless sky and a distant call to prayer lingered in the air: it was a haunting and ethereal sound and a fitting memory for one of the most interesting cruises I'd ever experienced. ●

BOOK IT: *A seven-night Desert Days cruise on Celestyal Journey, round trip from Doha and calling at Dubai (overnight), Sir Bani Yas Island, Abu Dhabi and Bahrain, departing on December 13, starts at £569, including all meals (excluding speciality dining), soft drinks, Wi-Fi, entertainment and gratuities. Qatar Airways flies non-stop to Doha from London, Manchester, Birmingham, Edinburgh and Dublin.*
celestyal.com

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Celestyal Journey Celestyal Cruises

The 1,260-guest *Celestyal Journey* emerged from a €6.5 million refit in February 2025, which included a new livery, newly treated and painted underwater areas, and an updated power management system to improve efficiency. Its 630 cabins include 149 balcony cabins and a number of spacious suites with concierge service. Eight bars and seven restaurants offer something for every taste: speciality dining venues include Grill Seekers for prime meat cuts and new Asian-inspired venue Pink Moon. For drinks on the go, Fig & Honey serves a tempting menu of fresh juices, smoothies and shakes, while new coffee hangout Cafe Nation is a great meeting spot. Other facilities include two pools, a lounge for live shows, a kids' play area, gym, sports courts and a deck dedicated to wellbeing, where the Sozo Health Spa features a hammam, thermal suite, whirlpool bath and relaxation room with heated loungers.

