

# Gulf Team

Double the family fun with a twin-centre trip to Dubai and Abu Dhabi, writes **Joanna Booth**

As any parent will tell you, kids love superlatives. They're forever asking what the biggest, fastest, most extreme version of absolutely anything is. And the only place I've found as committed to these titles as my nine-year-old is the United Arab Emirates. With the world's tallest building, largest fountain and fastest rollercoaster, the UAE looked set to impress.

But on our half-term family holiday, I was keen to explore beyond the record books and find a more authentic side to this Gulf state. Could our week split equally between Dubai and Abu Dhabi provide calmer and more cerebral entertainment alongside its big-ticket thrills?

## DUBAI: SPLASHES AND SAFARIS

Speeding along Sheikh Zayed Road in the shadow of skyscrapers, my son Dexter craned his head to look for supercars. He wasn't disappointed; he spotted more Ferraris, Lamborghinis, McLarens and Rolls-Royces during a week in the Emirates than he'd ever seen in London.

Yet these may not always be the most exciting vehicles in Dubai, as we discovered at the Museum of the Future, an intriguing exploration of what tomorrow might look like. Inside the astounding, curved building, its façade decorated with swooping Arabic script, we played with a robot dog and had a coffee made by a bionic barista before starting our fictional journey to 2071. As well as exploring the global potential for space travel and ecological protection, the exhibits envision a future Dubai complete with flying cars and a mosque with a levitating tower.

The next day, I felt like I was about to take off myself. Aquaventure is the world's biggest water park, and after enjoying the 'low thrill' rides – my favourite was bobbing down a channel through the shark tank on a rubber ring – I agreed to try a 'moderate' option. But with my terror levels matching my husband and son's exhilaration, I then left them to ride the high-octane slides and instead enjoyed the loungers on the white-sand beach and a cocktail at Wavehouse, where we reconvened for lunchtime poke bowls. By the end of the day, we'd all ticked off a ➤





CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Aquaventure water park, Dubai; writer Joanna Booth and family; Banyan Tree Dubai, which is next to the Al Ain Dubai Ferris wheel

credible number of the park's 105 experiences before dinner at Gastronomy, a fittingly huge and luxurious buffet at neighbouring Atlantis The Royal.

Yet our real Dubai highlight came at what must be its lowest-rise attraction: exploring the Desert Conservation Area with Platinum Heritage. With our guide Riyaz at the wheel of a vintage 1950s Land Rover, we spotted Arabian gazelles and oryx – the national animal of the UAE – among the dunes. After a thrilling display of falconry, we headed to a desert camp for an evening of Bedouin cuisine and musical performances where the only 'supercars' in sight were the camels traditionally used as transport in these desert dunes.

### ABU DHABI: THRILLS AND CHILLS

The Abu Dhabi skyline may not be as high-rise as its neighbour's, but it's more high-concept. Architects of international renown have been given free rein (and generous budgets) to create jaw-droppingly

## what's new

✿ Dubai has been named a Certified Autism Destination, with training for tourism staff, new sensory guides and the addition of 'hidden disability' lanyards at visitor attractions.

✿ If Only is giving agents a chance to win a holiday to Saadiyat Island, based on bookings made by June 30. Find out full details at: [ifonly.net/agents/incentives](http://ifonly.net/agents/incentives)

✿ Disney has announced its first theme park in the Middle East. It will be located on Yas Island, Abu Dhabi, and operated by Miral, which also runs Ferrari World and Warner Bros World.

beautiful and creative public buildings. Many of these are to be found in the cultural district on Saadiyat Island, but the most famous has to be the Sheikh Zayed Grand Mosque. Dexter was blown away by this extraordinary structure – the first mosque he's been able to enter as a non-Muslim – with its soaring white minarets, expanses of marble, huge chandeliers and ornate carpets. Visiting with our guide, Peter, meant we learnt and understood far more of the cultural and religious context than we would have independently, and his lively commentary really held our son's attention.

This also held true at the Louvre Abu Dhabi in the Saadiyat Cultural District. The slatted, Jean Nouvel-designed dome holds a host of treasures and, with the help of a guide, we were able to pick out a handful of choices that fascinated Dexter, from Egyptian sarcophagi to contemporaneous historical editions of the Qur'an, Bible and Torah.

After a double dose of culture, we threw in some family-friendly ➤

WHERE  
*to*  
STAY

### BANYAN TREE DUBAI

With the brand's reputation for tranquil spa stays, this property wasn't my first thought for a family-friendly option. I couldn't have been more wrong. Set on a beautiful beach and with extensive pools in its grounds, the elegant, 179-room resort was a welcome respite from Dubai's fast and furious pace. Staff were exceptional, from front-of-house who engaged with my son every day, to the restaurant team who combined genuine warmth with swift service. Even the smartest eatery – the in-vogue pan-Asian Demon Duck – has a kids' menu, and while mealtimes tended towards the calmer end of family dining, we never felt out of place.

[banyantree.com](http://banyantree.com)

### RIXOS MARINA ABU DHABI

In the more tranquil emirate, we opted for a livelier stay. The huge, high-rise Rixos sits on a curving white-sand beach on Breakwater Island, next to the Marina Mall and near the Corniche and downtown. It features a vast heated pool complex with swim-up bar, sports facilities and a newly expanded kids' club. Rooms are classic luxury in style, and the vast lobby is crowned with a chandelier. The brand's Turkish roots are evident in the main Terra Mare buffet, where mezze, simit and baklava are among the international fare. Service was responsive and personal, and a new ultra-all-inclusive package also covers dining at the Italian and Asian à la carte venues.

[rixos.com](http://rixos.com)



thrills on Yas Island, the epicentre for leisure attractions. We chose Warner Bros World Abu Dhabi, the world's second-largest indoor theme park, twisting and turning on a *Road Runner*-themed rollercoaster and piloting the Batmobile on the thrilling Knight Flight simulator.

Then it was time for a different take on Emirati nature as we swapped the desert for the mangroves. There are 60 square miles of mangroves in the UAE, much of it in Abu Dhabi, and we kayaked through the Jubail Mangrove Park learning about this unique habitat as we paddled.

One of our favourite experiences here was also the most unusual: a visit to the Abu Dhabi Falcon Hospital. These high-value birds – they can cost up to \$200,000 – are understandably well cared-for, and we were able to watch one undergoing



ABOVE: Louvre Abu Dhabi, which showcases artworks from around the world

a minor medical procedure, visit their moulting quarters and even hold and feed Farhan, a beautiful female gyrfalcon. Her name means 'happy', and that's certainly how this twin-centre trip, combining classic family thrills with fascinating cultural discovery, made our whole family feel. **TW**

### BOOK IT

**Gold Medal** offers three nights at Rixos Marina Abu Dhabi and four nights at Banyan Tree Dubai, both half-board, with return Etihad flights from Heathrow, departing August 9, and private transfers, from £4,077 in total for two adults and one child. [goldmedal.co.uk](http://goldmedal.co.uk)

### TOP TIPS

- Combining Abu Dhabi and Dubai is easy; the interline agreement between Emirates and Etihad makes it simple to book open-jaw tickets to fly into one and out of the other.
- Travelling between the two is quick – it's a 1.5-hour drive along the multi-lane E11 highway. A 30-minute rail link is due by 2030.
- Suggest school holiday dates based on your clients' tolerance for heat: Christmas and February half-term will be in the 20Cs, Easter and October the low 30Cs, while summer temperatures can hit 40C.
- Make a long-haul family holiday less daunting by adding a stopover in the UAE – airline promotions can offer free or discounted hotel nights.



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