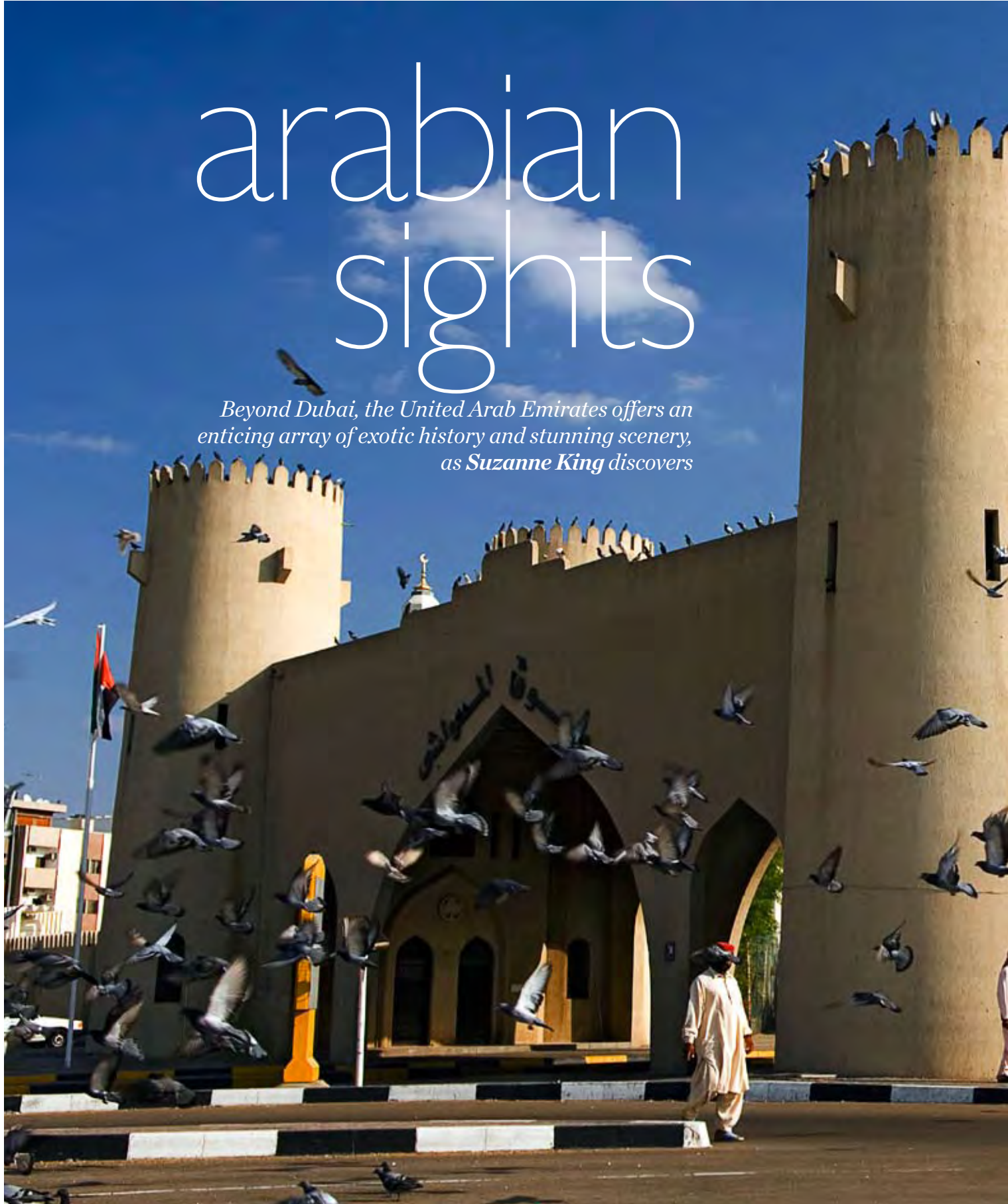


arabian sights

*Beyond Dubai, the United Arab Emirates offers an
enticing array of exotic history and stunning scenery,
as Suzanne King discovers*





On our first day in the United Arab Emirates, my phone beeps twice in a matter of minutes with messages from two of the local mobile network operators. 'Welcome to United Arab Emirates,' says the first. 'Welcome to Oman,' says the second... Confusing.

Most people are a little hazy about their Arabian Peninsula geography. Headline-hogging Dubai has so dominated in recent years that many people don't realise it's just one of seven emirates that go to make up the UAE, along with neighbours Abu Dhabi, Sharjah, Ras al-Khaimah, Fujairah, Ajman and Umm al-Quwain. (Oman is not part of the UAE but borders it.)

At the start of the trip, trying to remember all seven emirates in one go is like trying to recall the names of all seven dwarves – one gets forgotten. Usually it's Umm al-Quwain. Which proves prophetic in a way, as it ends up being the one we never get to see – the day we drive from Ras al-Khaimah to Sharjah the road is busy so we take a detour, and next thing you know we've missed an emirate.

Missing things can be easy here, especially given the phenomenal rate of change. Sights that are there one day can easily be gone the next – something you read about in a guidebook may have been transformed into something else by the time you visit. Wilfred Thesiger, the British traveller, writer and prolific photographer who famously

spent years exploring the region in the 1940s, pointed out that after oil was discovered in Abu Dhabi and Dubai in the 1960s, the changes that occurred in the space of a decade or two were as great as those that occurred in Britain between the Middle Ages and the present.

But, for the rush to embrace the 21st century, the glimpses of a different past are still there to be found – or being recreated, as the Emirates start to appreciate tourists’ interest in all things historic. On the edge of Fujairah city, we find the 17th-century fort – not so long ago, little more than a pile of rubble – it now sits handsomely high on a hill, its pristinely restored walls silhouetted photogenically against a backdrop of blue sky and Hajar mountains. (The old town at the foot of the hill is, we’re told, ‘not ready yet’ – but, for now, just a few stumpy ruined walls show where it was... or will be?)

Whichever emirate you’re in, forts are the places to head to if you want to get a feel for how life used to be here, as many of these defensive structures have now been transformed into museums showcasing local heritage. They’re designed to ensure that the local children understand their roots, and Ajman Museum, one of the best, comes complete with a series of dioramas recreating traditional village scenes. I’m spooked out after taking a walk through the deserted souk display – there, a noose inexplicably hangs from a roof beam and the final scene shows an incompetent waxwork barber with his perturbed waxwork clients dripping blood from cuts on their scalps.

Safer to stick to rooms like the one devoted to pearl fishing, once the major source of income along this stretch of coast. Until the Japanese discovered cultured pearls, over 1,200 pearling boats used

to work the oyster beds, with divers using nothing more high-tech than clips on their noses and weighted ropes to guide them down to the sea bed around 40 metres below.

The emirate that guards its heritage most fiercely is Sharjah, where the bustling harbour is full of traditional blue-painted boats that ply trading routes between here and Iran, and modern skyscrapers surround a renovated old town that’s helped earn the city the UNESCO title of Cultural Capital of the Arabian Peninsula. We check out the jewellery, carvings, pashminas and more in the Souq al Arsa, before heading on to the Sharjah Museum of Islamic Civilization. Here, the joys of having a guide come into play. Without the doughty Bianca at our helm, we’d doubtless have agreed with the ready-for-their-lunch guards that the museum was closed. But, refusing to take no for an answer, Bianca determinedly whisks our little group through the doors for a whistle-stop tour of this beautiful museum, taking us at breakneck speed round two galleries of Islamic art and making sure we get to admire

“In the souk, waist-high sacks are filled with cardamoms, star anise and pretty pink rosebuds”



the glorious dome at the centre of the building, decorated with a gleaming mosaic of the night sky and signs of the zodiac.

If I hadn’t been sure about the benefits of a tour guide before, moments like this made a convert of me. It was thanks to Bianca, too, that we discovered the delights of a fresh lime and mint juice (the most refreshing thing to drink in the afternoon heat), learned just which fruit to buy in the date souk (the Saudi dates were the stickiest and sweetest), and came home armed with 1,001 fascinating facts about UAE life.

We also found ourselves wandering the deserted, rubble-filled streets of Jazeerah Al Hamra in Ras al-Khaimah. Once a fishing community, it became a ghost village when the advent of oil money allowed the residents to abandon it en masse and move to swankier new homes inland. It wasn’t the prettiest place we’d ever seen, but its fascination lay in the fact that it was here at all, its traditional coral stone buildings neither bulldozed to the ground nor completely restored, but remaining as a rare example of a genuine old



PREVIOUS PAGE: A gateway in Al Ain, Abu Dhabi’s second city. **CLOCKWISE, FROM LEFT:** The Hajar Mountains; spices at the souk; the gold souk, Deira quarter. **ABOVE, RIGHT:** Water taxi on the Dubai creek in Deira, Dubai.





We cross the creek on one of the many *abras* (water taxis) that shuttle constantly from shore to shore, and explore the textile souk on the other side of the river, before strolling the streets of Bastakiya, the oldest part of the city, where we poke our noses into the courtyards of the restored coral stone buildings that now house appealing little cafés and attractive art galleries.

For many, the attraction of this part of the world is the lure of near constant sunshine. And the UAE is awash with swish hotels in which you can bask around the pool. For our final night, we stay in one of the luxe-est of the lot: the Emirates Palace in Abu Dhabi, famous for the extravagance of its décor, with acres of Italian marble, lashings of gold leaf on every available surface and 1,000-plus Swarovski crystal chandeliers hanging from the ceilings.

After a time, you get a tad blasé about bling, but what does blow us away is the exhibition showing plans for the new cultural district that's taking shape on Saadiyat Island. Designed to turn Abu Dhabi – richest by far of the emirates – into a global cultural hub, it will include the world's largest Guggenheim, to be designed by Frank Gehry, a new branch of the Louvre courtesy of Jean Nouvel, and a Performing Arts Centre from Zaha Hadid.

If you come expecting the Arabia of fairy tales and old films, you'll be disappointed: there will be no camel trains of nomadic Bedouins trekking from oasis to oasis ('Now all our Bedouins are sedentary,' says our guide), no dashing sheikhs galloping across the dunes (they are in the cities, on their mobile phones). But come without expectations, and you'll find plenty to fascinate. So much about the UAE is contradictory, under construction – it's what makes it so intriguing.

village. Perhaps it's the *djinn* (genies) who've saved it (it's said to be the most haunted place in the UAE) – but it's anyone's guess how long they can keep the developers at bay.

Because, like its neighbours, Ras al-Khaimah has grand plans for its tourist future, with nearly two dozen five-star hotels slated to open in the next five years. The draw of this northernmost emirate? Spectacular mountain scenery, access to the beautiful Musandam Peninsula next door (actually part of Oman) and, if you venture off the beaten track, unspoilt desert.

In next-door Fujairah, it's the beaches, the mangroves and offshore reefs that provide the major lure. Sharjah appeals to the family market, though, given its status as the strictest of emirates (even the hotels are alcohol-free, and the beaches are fully dressed affairs), most westerners

choose to visit its sights from bases in Ajman, where they can sunbathe on beautiful white sands and then relax over a cocktail at the end of the day.

And what of Dubai, aka 'Manhattan on speed' or 'Las Vegas on acid'? The surprise for us here, as we roll into the town with all our preconceptions, is how much of the city doesn't fit the popular image. Yes, the mega malls and towering skyscrapers are there, the slender, spiralling Burj Dubai stretching so far above the rest it makes them look positively squat. But down by the creek that lies at the heart of the city we enjoy wide-eyed window shopping among the glittering displays of the gold souk, and explore the spice souk, where waist-high sacks are filled with cardamoms and star anise, preserved lemons and pretty pink rosebuds, and the local shopkeepers hold up handfuls of frankincense for inspection.

Explore the Emirates

Suzanne King travelled with Greenbee Specialist Travel and Etihad Airways on an itinerary based on this 7-night private journey, which takes in the region's highlights. Prices start from £1,595 per person:

Day 1 Fly from London to Abu Dhabi for two nights.

Day 2 Abu Dhabi. Tour of the city, including the Grand Mosque.

Day 3 To Al Ain. Visit the Jebel Hafeet Mountains.

Day 4 To Ajman. Enjoy one of the best beaches in the UAE.

Day 5 Sharjah. Visit to Sharjah.

Day 6 To Ras al-Khaimah. Stay at the Cove Rotana Resort.

Day 7 Visit to the Hajar Mountains and Khatt Hot Springs Spa.

Day 8 Fly back to London.

Weather-wise, the best time to go is November to April – low humidity and daytime temperatures ranging from mid-20°Cs to low 30°Cs.

Greenbee Specialist Travel can also tailor-make trips and short breaks to the UAE, Oman, Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Syria and Tunisia. Please visit greenbee.com/shortbreaks for information. All prices are correct at time of going to press but offers are subject to availability and prices may change. Refer to greenbee.com for latest availability and prices.