



هيئة أبو ظبي للسياحة  
Abu Dhabi Tourism Authority

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ABU DHABI

EXPERIENCE THE MAGIC



Liwa is the stuff of Arabian dreams. Set among spectacular dunes, it offers a step back into an ancient world of Bedouin living and desert trekking. The area's vast unspoiled tracts of sand and oases have changed little over the millennia and offer visitors an opportunity to experience a rarely seen landscape and culture.

### A Brief History

Lying some 170 kilometres to the south of Abu Dhabi city and surrounded by one of the world's least hospitable environments, the fertility and vegetation of the Liwa oasis provided sanctuary and salvation for Bedouin tribes over hundreds of years.

The availability of water not only provided sustenance for humans and their livestock but also irrigation for the cultivation of date palms and other crops. It attracted both settled communities and nomadic herders and traders.

Liwa grew up not as a single town or village, but as a string of small settlements scattered over an extensive oasis area. It lies right on the edge of the Rub Al Khali - famously known as the Empty Quarter - the greatest area of unspoiled and uninhabited desert on the Arabian



Peninsula.

Liwa is the ancestral home of the great Bani Yas tribe, whose strength in numbers, military prowess and loyalty to allies brought many other tribes to them, seeking protection and security. Many of today's most prominent UAE citizens, notably Abu Dhabi's ruling Al Nahyan family, are descended from the Bani Yas.

In 1761, fresh water was discovered on Abu Dhabi island (later to become Abu Dhabi city) and Bedouin began to settle there. This eventually led to the relocation of the Al Nahyans and the family have remained rulers of the emirate ever since.

Those Bedouin who remained in the Liwa continue to pursue a traditional way of life little changed for generations, albeit with many modern comforts. Since the late 1970s, the government has been helping to create employment opportunities for these local tribesmen through the cultivation of new date groves.

New settlements have established at Beda Zayed, Medinat Mohammed and Mafaa, where the government drills wells, builds irrigation trenches and provides diesel pumps

for extracting water. The Al Bujer Garden, maintained by the Forestry Department, provides date palm starter kits and land is allocated to any member of an emirati clan who may wish to make a living in this most ancient and traditional way.

### Liwa Today

Once a five day camel trek from Abu Dhabi city, Liwa lies a leisurely three hours' drive south of the capital via an excellent highway.

Modern Liwa is a 150 kilometre crescent of small towns, villages, plantations and farms. The scenery is green with flourishing fields of fruit, vegetables, cereals and palm plantations. This flourishing agriculture is possible thanks to vast reserves of underground water. In recent years it has been found that an enormous lake lies under the sands. Some 100 million gallons per day are currently being pumped out.

The government has invested in the latest agricultural technology to make the best of this valuable resource. Besides the social purpose of supporting the local Bedouin community, the success of this policy also serves the dual aim of greening the desert and lessening the emirate's



dependence on imported foodstuffs.

One truly astonishing feature of an area so far inland is its fish farm. Using underground water with similar salt levels to the Arabian Gulf, the bulti fish is farmed in a number of pools near Khanur.

## Rub Al Khali - the Empty Quarter

The contrast between the lush greenery of the oasis and surrounding desert is remarkable. Farms back right up against towering dunes. Liwa is the UAE's entry to the massive and daunting Ruba Al Khali, a vast sea of sand stretching southward into Oman, Yemen and Saudi Arabia. While there are deserts in the world with a greater overall expanse of arid terrain, it is reckoned that the Empty Quarter may be the largest of all in terms of the sheer quantity of sand.

The spectacular desert landscape covers a total of some 650,000 square kilometres, more than the combined land areas of France, Belgium and the Netherlands. It is more than 1,000 kilometres in length and 500 kilometres wide, with daytime temperatures that reach the

mid-50s centigrade and dunes that tower more than 300m high.

Although now uninhabited, archaeologists have recently found it contains what they believe to be the lost city of Ubar, a once wealthy trading post that gave way to desertification more than 2,000 years ago. Since that time, however, the Empty Quarter has presented a formidable natural barrier, even for the local Bedouin. While some hardy tribesmen did indeed traverse the desert in search of water and pasture, very few outsiders have successfully explored this massive area of sand. The most renowned was Sir Wilfred Thesiger who navigated the Empty Quarter on two expeditions in the early 1940s, as recounted in his book "Arabian Sands".

To this day much of this great desert is impenetrable, even for 4x4 vehicles. Passage through the sands can only be accomplished on foot and even camels would be unable to make a straight line traverse.

There is no better base for exploring the Empty Quarter than Liwa. Even on the fringe of the desert close to the populated areas, the majestic high dunes are nothing short of





spectacular. The landscape, almost completely devoid of vegetation, is all the more dramatic with the changing colour of the sand at sunrise and sunset.

### **Desert Wildlife**

The desert supports a considerable diversity of flora and fauna. Among the wildlife surviving in this harsh environment are dhabi and reem gazelle, sand fox, hare, houbarra bustards and Arabian oryx, though sightings are relatively rare.

Much life in the sands is nocturnal and tracks provide mute evidence of the abundance of invertebrates in particular, but also reptiles and small rodents. Some indigenous wildlife is adapted to survive without drinking. Moisture must be obtained from prey or plant material. Infrequent fog, particularly during the winter months, provides sufficient moisture to sustain the vegetation through the longer-lasting hotter part of the year, but even then drought may result in many individual plants succumbing

### **Tours and Safaris**

Most Abu Dhabi tour operators offer excursions to Liwa and into the Empty Quarter with knowledgeable driver/guides. Safaris may include visits to Bedouin camps and date plantations, camel rides and the exhilaration of tearing up and down the sand dunes in 4x4 vehicles.

While a day trip can provide an excellent taste of this fascinating and beautiful region of Abu Dhabi emirate, a longer stay is highly recommended. A number of tour operators offer overnight safaris, allowing visitors to enjoy the tranquillity and romance of an Arabian night under the stars at their leisure.

Camping in these astonishing surroundings is a memorable experience that will stay with you for a lifetime. Rising early from your tent to views of a sunrise over these magical dunes is awe-inspiring. Watching the sun go down is just as moving, as the sands shift from golden yellows to burning reds and misty blues. Under sparkling moonlight, the scenery could just as easily be lunar mountains as tumbling desert sands. Longer safaris, lasting two or three nights are also available.

As an alternative, the 66-room five-star Liwa



Hotel offers a luxurious overnight option.

## Self-Drive Off-Roading and Camping

More adventurous visitors may choose to explore for themselves. This is perhaps the best way to get out and enjoy the camping and picnic opportunities of this untouched wilderness.

Four-wheel drive vehicles can be hired from most car leasing agencies in Abu Dhabi. But a word of warning is required here. It's dangerous to set off into the desert alone. Such trips should always be made in convoy with at least one other vehicle in case of breakdown or one vehicle becoming stuck in the sand.

The driving around Liwa is varied and spectacular. It encompasses desert, oasis and sabkha (salt flats). Dune bashing is immensely popular with Abu Dhabi residents and visitors alike. The stunning sands offer a great opportunity to test your vehicle to its limits.

Rearing up and charging down the mighty dunes is as exhilarating for passengers as it is for drivers.

Alternatively, just enjoy the peace and quiet of the timeless desert. Find an isolated spot, pick

a dune and set up camp for the night.

Even if you don't have the necessary convoy to travel into the desert itself, camping sites are largely unrestricted. Just turn off the road or dirt track and pick your spot. One particularly good area can be found on the minor, paved road that runs past the Liwa Guesthouse to Moreeb Hill. This is around 12 kilometres long, and runs over salt flats into some of the best dunes in the area, leaving campers and four-wheel drive enthusiasts spoiled for choice.

Moreeb Hill is a huge dune reaching 300m, the same height as the Eiffel Tower in Paris. It is perhaps the best known dune in the area and a popular site for hill-climb races, where powerful 4x4s burn up to the top in an effort to set the quickest time. But it can also be tackled by any enthusiastic amateur. This is also a great spot to try your sand-boarding skills. Boards can be picked up in most sports stores in Abu Dhabi.

## Essential visitor information

Abu Dhabi & the United Arab Emirates

Abu Dhabi is the name of both the capital city of the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and the largest of the seven individual emirates that



make up the country. The UAE was created as a federation and became a unified independent sovereign state in 1971. Besides Abu Dhabi, the largest constituent of the UAE in both area and population, the other emirates are Dubai, Sharjah, Ajman, Umm Al Quwain, Ras Al Khaimah and Fujairah. The Ruler of Abu Dhabi, Sheikh Khalifa bin Zayed Al Nahyan, is also the President of the UAE. He succeeded his father, Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan, as both Ruler and President when the latter passed away in 2004.

## Business Hours

Sunday-Thursday is the working week, with the weekend on Friday (the Islamic holy day) and Saturday. Most banking, embassy and other official business is conducted in the morning/early afternoon. Shopping hours vary but many smaller outlets take a long lunchtime 'siesta', opening from around 09:30 to 13:00 then again from 16:30 to 21:30. The major shopping malls stay open throughout the day but don't open until about 14:00 on Fridays.

## Climate



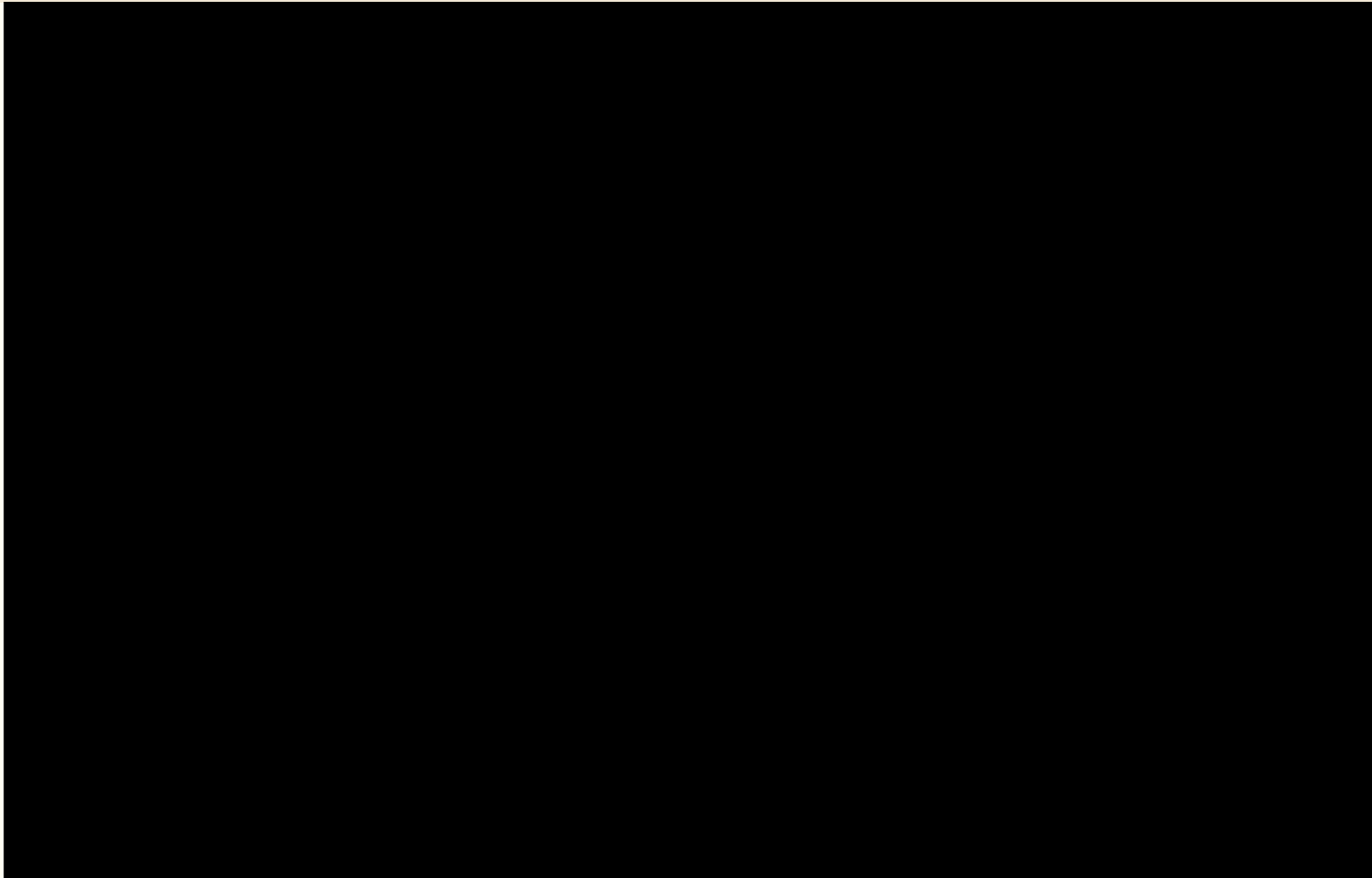
Abu Dhabi has a sub-tropical arid climate with year-round sunshine. Temperatures range from 10°C - 30°C in winter and can reach as high as 48°C in summer. Rainfall is infrequent, usually confined to a few winter showers.

### Customs Allowances

The duty free allowance for each visitor entering the country is 2,000 cigarettes or 400 cigars or 2kg of tobacco and a 'reasonable amount' of perfume. Non-Muslim adults may also bring in two litres of spirits and two litres of wine. Visitors are not charged customs duty on personal effects they bring into Abu Dhabi.

### Dress Code

Lightweight summer clothing is suitable most of the year, but some warmer garments may be needed for the winter evenings and strong air conditioning. The attitude to dress in Abu Dhabi is relaxed, but visitors (men as well as women) should show respect for local culture and customs in public places by avoiding excessively tight or revealing clothing. Context is important. Bikinis and beachwear are perfectly acceptable in the appropriate environment (but not in the



city centre)

### Electricity

220/240 volts AC 50Hz. Socket type is square three-pin 13 amp (as used in the UK). All hotels are able to supply suitable adaptors as required.

### Food & Drink

Every type of regional and international cuisine is available in Abu Dhabi, but pork products are prohibited by Islam. Alcohol is available in hotels and certain clubs, but not elsewhere. Tap water is safe and bottled water easily available.

### Getting There

Abu Dhabi International Airport is some 7 hours from Western Europe and 10 hours from the Far East. Currently undergoing a massive expansion project, it offers a full range of services including an award-winning Duty Free operation, VIP meet and assist service, car hire desks and efficient city transfers by taxi, shuttle bus or hotel limousine. Abu Dhabi is home base to Etihad Airways, one of the world's fastest growing carriers. A total of some 50 airlines link the emirate to all quarters of the globe. Al Ain,

the emirate's second city, also has a modern international airport, which mainly serves regional destinations

### Getting Around

Apart from organised tours, most visitors rely on taxis in the urban areas. These are plentiful, inexpensive and can be flagged down at the roadside. Al Ghazal, NTC and Fast Cars run fleets of more upmarket vehicles that can be booked in advance. Bus services link Abu Dhabi with Al Ain and Dubai and there is a shuttle from the city centre to the airport. There are many reputable car hire companies (including well known international names) with offices around Abu Dhabi and Al Ain and/or at the airport. Car hire may also be arranged via the hotels.

### Health

No health certificate or special immunisations are required, unless you have visited a country infected by cholera or yellow fever within 14 days prior to arrival. The quality of healthcare in Abu Dhabi is high and most common medications and health products are

available from local pharmacies, often without a prescription.

## Language

The official language is Arabic, but English is widely spoken and understood. A wide range of European languages are spoken within the hospitality industry.

## Money, Currency and Credit Cards

The UAE Dirham is linked to the US dollar at a rate of around US\$1 to Dhs.3.67. There are no exchange restrictions and the currency is freely convertible. Abu Dhabi has an extensive network of local and international banks, as well as many specialist foreign exchange outlets which offer the most competitive rates. All major credit cards are accepted, though cash may secure better bargains in the smaller shops.

## Newspapers and TV

There are three daily English language newspapers: Gulf News, The Khaleej Times and Gulf Today. Some international newspapers and magazines are available in hotel bookshops and

supermarkets. Most major hotels offer a range of satellite TV channels. Local channels also have English-language broadcasts.

## Passport and Visa Requirements

Citizens of most developed countries, including Western Europe, North America, Australasia, Japan etc, are granted free visit visas on arrival. Holders of passports from other countries must secure visas through a UAE-based sponsor, such as a hotel or business contact, prior to travel. Passports must be valid for a minimum of 6 months from date of arrival.

## Photography

Photography of military installations, government buildings, police facilities, airports and other sensitive locations is prohibited. Photography of local women without their permission is not permitted.

## Religion

The UAE is an Islamic country and Islam plays an integral role in the life of its citizens. Prayers take place five times per day. The dates of the

Holy Month of Ramadan and other Islamic festivals depend on the lunar calendar and move back by about eleven days per year. During Ramadan, visitors should refrain from eating, drinking and smoking in public during daylight hours. Hotels cater to their non-Muslim guests by opening restaurants not exposed to public view. Other religions are respected and Abu Dhabi's cosmopolitan population support many places of worship, including Christian churches.

## Safety

Abu Dhabi benefits from one of the lowest crime rates in the world. It is a safe destination enjoying political stability. Normal precautions should be observed.

## Telecommunications

Staying in touch is easy. Telecommunications provided by the state owned Etisalat are excellent. Mobile phone reception is generally good in the main population centres. Most major hotels offer in-room high speed internet connections in addition to well equipped business centres.

## Time Difference

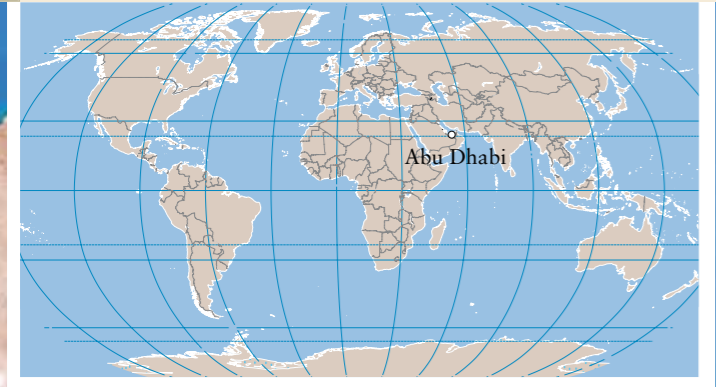
GMT + 4 hours.

## Tipping

Hotel restaurants add a 16% service charge to the menu tariff which is incorporated into the customer's bill. An additional small tip will be greatly appreciated, but is optional. Outside hotels 10% is adequate. Taxi drivers do not expect a tip, but will be pleased to keep any change.

## Women Visitors

Female visitors, whether travelling alone or in a group, experience no special restrictions of dress or behaviour in day-to-day life in Abu Dhabi. Women play a full and active part in the life of the country and foreign women visitors can be assured they will be readily accepted and welcomed.



UNITED ARAB EMIRATES