

Section 10

Al Dhafra: Iconic Landmarks

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Qasr Al Sarab Desert Resort by Anantara



The Qasr Al Sarab Desert Resort is a luxury, five-star destination which can be found in an isolated spot in the Liwa city. It is on the edge of the *Rub'a Al Khali* or Empty Quarter Desert which has the biggest sand mass in the world and an area that has been used as a location for recent *Star Wars* films. The Resort is in the Al Dhafra region of Abu Dhabi, approximately 200 kilometres and two hours' drive from Abu Dhabi city.

Sometimes known as The Mirage Palace, its overall design resembles a sandcastle but the separate Royal Pavilion Villas are more like palaces, with private pools and a butler service. The Resort offers a range of facilities including:

- Anantara Asian and Arabic spa
- fitness centre
- tennis court
- swimming pool
- kids' club
- business centre
- library

The hotel has several restaurants, including Al Waha for international food, and Suhail, a seafood restaurant. Mediterranean food is served at Ghadeer, which is accessed by a romantic, candle-lit bridge. A four-course champagne dinner in a private Bedouin tent with a butler and a fire pit for the winter months can be booked for special occasions.

The Resort's construction costs had to include the running of power and water supplies from Abu Dhabi city as it is so remote. It was designed to look like a desert fort (*Qasr*) with turrets, torches and palm-lined courtyards. The luxurious interiors feature desert and earthy colours with soft furnishings made with local fabrics, giving it a very Middle-Eastern atmosphere. Guest rooms have balconies overlooking the spectacular sand dunes.

There is a huge range of desert activities to enjoy, including camel trekking, dune bashing (off-roading on sand dunes), desert fat biking (riding bicycles with thick tyres across sand dunes), horse riding, camp fire barbecues, full moon experiences, archery and many others. For the less adventurous, there are tours of Liwa city, dawn walks, desert yoga and, in the winter months, falconry and saluki shows.

Since opening, the resort has won numerous awards including United Arab Emirates' Leading Desert Resort and the Middle East's Leading Desert Resort three times each.

Sir Bani Yas Church & Monastery

Buried for centuries, a church and monastery discovered in the early 1990s on Sir Bani Yas Island illuminate the evidence of early Christianity in the region. Open to the public, this is the UAE's only known ancient Christian site.

A church, a monastery and a series of courtyard houses, dating to the 7th and 8th centuries CE, were discovered at the site. The church was identified by the presence of plaster crosses and its plan, which resembles ancient churches known from elsewhere in the Arabian Gulf.

Hundreds of artefacts found at the site reveal that the people there used the sea for food and also kept cattle, sheep and goats. Glass and ceramic objects indicate that the inhabitants of the settlement traded widely across the Arabian Gulf and into the Indian Ocean.

Now, almost two decades since its discovery, and more than a thousand years since it was built, the public can visit the

DID YOU KNOW? The hotel is more than happy to shuttle its guests around by buggy to beat the heat of the summer!

Further your knowledge

Latest video on resort:

<http://qasralsarab.anantara.com/video.aspx>

Hotel website:

<http://qasralsarab.anantara.com/>

Knowledge Bank: Qasr Al Sarab Desert Resort by Anantara

Overview

- Qasr Al Sarab Desert Resort by Anantara is a five-star luxury resort located in the Liwa city in the Al Dhafra Region of Abu Dhabi
- Liwa is situated on the edge of the *Rub' al Khali* or Empty Quarter, the largest uninterrupted sand mass in the world which has featured in recent Star Wars films
- Qasr Al Sarab is 200km from Abu Dhabi city and approximately a two-hour drive
- The resort is sometimes referred to as The Mirage Palace
- The separate Royal Villas are designed to look like palaces, with private pools and butler service
- The resort features the Anantara Asian and Arabic Spa, a fitness centre, tennis court, swimming pool, kids' club, business centre and a library
- Dining options include international cuisine at Al Waha, Suhail, a seafood restaurant and Mediterranean food is served at Ghadeer which is accessed by a romantic candle-lit bridge
- The resort offers a four-course champagne dinner for two in a private Bedouin tent with a personal butler and a fire pit to keep visitors warm in the winter months

Architecture and design

- The resort is designed to resemble a fort (*Qasr*) with turrets, torches, arches and palm-lined courtyards
- The Middle-Eastern luxurious interiors feature desert and earthy colours and the soft furnishings are made from local fabrics
- Guest rooms have balconies that take in the view of the desert dunes
- When constructed the cost included the running of power and water supplies from Abu Dhabi city

Awards

- Since its opening, Qasr Al Sarab has been awarded worldwide tourism awards such as:
 - Middle East's Leading Desert Spa Resort 2015
 - United Arab Emirates' Leading Desert Resort 2015, 2014 and 2013
 - Middle East's Leading Desert Resort 2012, 2011 and 2010 ¹
 - A place on the Condé Nast Traveller UK's 2010 Hot List

Desert activities available to visitors:

- Dawn dune walks
- Camel trekking
- Dune bashing
- Desert yoga
- Horse riding
- Desert fat-biking
- Full moon desert experiences
- Camp fire barbecues
- Archery
- Mountain biking
- Desert drives
- Tour of Liwa City
- Falconry and saluki show in cooler months (subject to weather conditions)

¹ Source: www.worldtravelawards.com/profile-29500-qasr-al-sarab-desert-resort-by-anantara

Section 10

Al Dhafra: Sustainable Tourist Attractions

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Arabian Wildlife Park



The Arabian Wildlife Park is located on Sir Bani Yas Island, in the Al Dhafra region of Abu Dhabi. It is 250km from Abu Dhabi City and takes two and a half hours to drive, followed by a ferry crossing from the jetty. Alternatively, private flights are available with the Seawings Company. You can charter a seaplane which will depart from Yas Island and take you along the coast with beautiful views of the skyline. This journey takes approximately one hour and ten minutes.

The wildlife park covers more than half of the island and extends to 1,400 hectares. It was established in 1971 by the late Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan who had a desire to protect endangered species and preserve the island's plants and animals. Today, the park has grown into a wildlife sanctuary for over 10,000 free-roaming animals.

The focus of the park is to create a fully-functioning ecosystem for the animals and birds, which is as close to what happens in the wild as possible. It is now home to many species, both native to the island and endangered species which have been introduced to the area. These include the Arabian rock hyrax, the beisa oryx, ostriches, giraffes and striped hyenas. Cheetahs have been introduced to the island to provide an additional predator in order to control the park's animal population naturally.

Visitors have a choice of staying at one of the hotels or villas on the island and can enjoy activities such as:

- Nature and wildlife drives in 4 x 4 vehicles with the island's expert guides
- Horse riding on Arabian horses from the reserve's own paddocks
- Mountain biking – a blue route for a scenic gentle ride and a purple route for a more dramatic and strenuous ride
- Land sailing in a wheeled vehicle powered by wind through the use of a sail
- Culture and history tours
- Nature walks with tour guides
- Falconry
- Archery
- Snorkelling
- Visiting one of the island's 42 archaeological sites that have been uncovered
- Visitors should contact the island to book activities

Animal breeding, rehabilitation and relocation

There are some endangered and almost extinct species that the park's conservationists and vets breed and rehabilitate with extraordinary success.

The striped hyenas were first introduced to the island as a natural form of population control. This species is classed as vulnerable worldwide and extinct in the UAE by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN). The first pair of hyenas successfully bred and have their own family. They now scavenge and hunt for themselves and do not require feeding. This process is known as 're-wilding'.

The northern cheetah is also classed as vulnerable worldwide and completely extinct throughout the UAE by the IUCN. Male and female cheetahs were introduced to the island and, like the hyenas, they have successfully bred and have their own families. They now hunt and feed themselves and can be seen chasing prey around the park. This is another example of a successful 're-wilding'.

In the early 1970s the Arabian oryx was extinct in the wild in the UAE. The founder of the park, Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan, wished to ensure its survival and arranged to have three female and two male oryx from Al Ain Zoo placed on the island. The plan was successful and visitors can now see around 500 Arabian oryx roaming freely around the reserve. This has enabled the Arabian oryx to be re-introduced in the wild in the Umm al Zumul region of Abu Dhabi.

The Arabian tahr is a small, stout mammal resembling a goat. They are found in the Hajar Mountains on the border of the UAE and Oman but are classified as endangered by the IUCN. The park is therefore undertaking a captive breeding programme to ensure the survival of the species. Currently, the animals are living in a specially-constructed area that looks and feels like their natural habitat. They will then be moved to a larger habitat so that visitors can learn more about them and will finally be moved to an even bigger enclosure so they can adjust and re-wild under supervision. Once this has been done, they will be released into the wild under the supervision and direction of the island's specialist staff.

DID YOU KNOW? Breeding of the Arabian Oryx has been so successful that visitors can see over half the world's remaining population now roaming freely on Sir Bani Yas Island.

Further your knowledge

Browse the seaplane tours available on the Seawings website:

<https://seawings.ae/tours/abu-dhabi-tours/>

Knowledge Bank: Arabian Wildlife Park

Overview

- The Arabian Wildlife Park is located on Sir Bani Yas Island, Al Dhafra region, and stretches over more than half of the island (1,400 hectares)
- It is a two and a half hour drive from Abu Dhabi plus a boat transfer to the island
- The late Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan had a vision to protect endangered species and the island's plants and animals
- Sheikh Zayed established The Arabian Wildlife park on Sir Bani Yas Island as a reserve in 1971
- Today, the park is a wildlife sanctuary for over 10,000 free-roaming animals
- The focus of the Arabian Wildlife Park is to create a functioning ecosystem for the animals and birds that mimics what happens in the wild as far as possible
- The park is home to the Arabian rock hyrax, the beisa oryx, ostriches, giraffes and the striped hyena, among others
- Cheetahs have been brought onto the island to provide a natural predator in order to control the park's population naturally
- Visitors to the island can enjoy activities such as:
 - Nature and wildlife drives in 4 x 4 guided by the island's expert guides
 - Horse riding on Arabian horses from the reserve's own paddocks
 - Mountain biking – a blue route for a scenic gentle ride and a purple route for a more dramatic and strenuous ride!
 - Land sailing
 - Culture and history tours
 - Nature walks with tour guides
 - Falconry
 - Archery
 - Snorkelling

Breeding and relocation

- There are some endangered species that the park's conservationists and vets breed and rehabilitate

Striped hyenas

- The striped hyenas were the first predators to be introduced to the island as a natural form of population control
- The hyenas are classified as vulnerable worldwide and extinct in the UAE by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN)
- The first male and female hyenas have successfully bred their own family
- The hyenas now hunt and feed themselves which is known as 're-wilding'

Northern cheetah

- The northern cheetah is classified as vulnerable worldwide by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN)
- The northern cheetah is completely extinct in the wild throughout the UAE
- Male and female cheetahs were introduced to the island and, like the hyenas, have successfully bred and have their own family
- The cheetahs now hunt and feed themselves which is known as 're-wilding' and can be seen chasing prey around the park

The Arabian oryx

- In the early 1970s, the Arabian oryx was actually extinct in the wild in the UAE
- The late Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan arranged to have three female and two male oryx from Al Ain Zoo placed in the nature reserve to try and bring them back from extinction
- The plan was a success and visitors can now see 500 Arabian oryx roaming freely around the reserve

Arabian tahr

- The Arabian tahr is a small stout mammal resembling a goat and can be found on the Hajar Mountains on the border of the UAE and Oman
- The Arabian tahr is classified as endangered on the Red List by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN)
- The Arabian tahr is now living in a specially-made camp that looks and feels like their natural habitat
- The Arabian tahr will soon move to a larger enclosure which also mimics their natural environment so visitors can learn more about them
- Eventually, the tahr will move into an even bigger enclosure so they can adjust and re-wild under supervision
- The tahr will then be released into the wild under the supervision and direction of the island's specialist staff

Information for visitors

- Visitors can drive two and a half hours from Abu Dhabi and then board a boat transfer to the island
- Visitors can also charter a private seaplane through the Seawings Company
- Visitors should contact the island to enquire about booking activities and the best times to visit

Al Marzoom Hunting Reserve



The hunting reserve is located at the heart of Al Dhafra region, an hour's drive from Abu Dhabi City. The reserve is a natural sanctuary which offers a unique experience for falcon lovers, with visitors able to try traditional hunting with falcons. It is considered the first reserve in the world to offer the experience of hunting Houbara bustards using traditional methods.

The initiative focuses on assuring the sustainability of desert wildlife and a respect for nature, while also allowing for a pleasurable and legal hunting experience inside the UAE. Abu Dhabi has been enforcing very strict rules for hunting and, because falconry is considered one of the main elements of national heritage, the government established seasonality for this practise. The reserve is aiming to maintain Emirati identity and traditional sports, and to turn the reserve into a living museum where visitors experience the tradition of hunting.

The Al Marzoom Hunting Reserve receives falconry lovers during the hunting season from November to February, and it operates seven days a week, with two hunting trips daily (morning and evening). Visitors form groups of five persons and are accompanied by an expert hunter. Camels are used as transportation along with safari vehicles inside the reserve, which has a vast area of 923km². Visitors can be assisted by the expert hunter to hunt rabbits and Houbara using falcons only. After that, visitors can enjoy a memorable stay in the camps in the middle of the desert. The fees paid for this unique lifestyle experience are used to support the conservation programmes that take care of the Houbara, rabbits, and other species in the desert.

Entry fees: AED 500

Hunting fees (includes preparation of the hunting sites, preys and the accompanying hunter): AED 500

Safari vehicle rent: AED 600

Camel rent: AED 300

Accommodation (including half-board meals): AED 800

Hunting Houbara: AED 2,750

Hunting rabbits: AED 1,000

Further your knowledge

<http://52.18.113.220/>

Section 10

Al Dhafra:

Outdoor Adventure
– Land / Desert

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Tel Moreeb



Tel Moreeb, which means literally 'The Hill of Horror', is located in Liwa city in Al Dhafra region. It is considered by many to be the world's tallest sand dune, at over 300m high and with a 50° incline to the top. For that reason, motor sports enthusiasts have made it their prime destination. Every February, the region's most powerful four-wheel drives, quad bikes and dirt bikes compete in the Moreeb Track championship, which is part of the Liwa International Festival. It is well worth the trip to Al Dhafra if you think you can handle the constant humming of super-modified engines and loud music and crowds. The large flat area at the dune base is the camping area where competitors, spectators and visitors enjoy their stay in the heart of the desert.

Further your knowledge

<https://visitabudhabi.ae/en/what-to-see/iconic-landmarks/tel-moreeb>

Section 10

Al Dhafra: Sea and Water

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Desert Island Beach Stopover



The Abu Dhabi Desert Island Beach Stopover is the first location of its kind in the Arabian Gulf. The cruises stop on Sir Bani Yas Island, in the Al Dhafra region of Abu Dhabi. It is a destination for both large cruise ships and smaller, local vessels that provide stopover trips to the island from Abu Dhabi City.

Passengers can disembark at Sir Bani Yas Island and enjoy a relaxing day on the desert island beach. If passengers wish to discover the island, there is a dedicated welcome centre where they can book excursions to a variety of destinations on the island. The stopover can also include a barbecue lunch, cocktails and beachside massages. Over half of Sir Bani Yas Island is made up of the Arabian Wildlife Park, home to more than 10,000 free-roaming animals. You will find more information on the Arabian Wildlife Park in the Sustainable Tourism part of this section.

Passengers on the Desert Island Beach Stopover can take part in adventure activities, beach and watersports, and join excursions such as the traditional Al Serdal Pearl Diving experience or embark on cultural heritage tours of the archaeological remains on the island. Visitors can even go horse-riding on Arabian horses.

Visitors can relax on the 1.2km stretch of sandy beach which is just for cruise passengers. The beach has areas for VIP guests and families and, in total, there are 2,000 guest sunbeds and umbrellas. Cabanas, provided for VIP guests, can accommodate up to four people. The whole beach area is served by its own exclusive bar/restaurant which has three buffet and grill stations. There is also a spa area with an Aqua Gym and floating mats plus 20 indoor and outdoor fresh-water showers.

DID YOU KNOW? Sir Bani Yas Island houses the UAE's only discovered Christian monastery which visitors on the island stopover can book a trip to see.

Knowledge Bank: Desert Island Beach Stopover

Overview

- Abu Dhabi Desert Island Beach Stopover is a location with a beach stopover, for both large and small vessels, on Sir Bani Yas Island in the Al Dhafra region of Abu Dhabi
- It is the first location of its kind in the Arabian Gulf
- Passengers can disembark and enjoy a relaxing day on the desert island beach
- A dedicated welcome centre can help visitors to book excursions
- The island stopover can include a barbecue lunch, cocktails and beachside massages
- Over half of Sir Bani Yas Island is made up of the Arabian Wildlife Park. The park is home to more than 10,000 free-roaming animals

What to see and do on Sir Bani Yas Island

Passengers on the Desert Island Beach Stopover can enjoy:

- Adventure activities
- Beach and watersports
- Unique excursions such as:
 - traditional Al Serdal Pearl Diving experience
 - cultural heritage tours of the island
 - horse-riding on Arabian horses
- Relaxing on the 1.2km stretch of beach exclusively for cruise passengers, which features:
 - VIP, family and standard sections
 - sunbeds and umbrellas
 - VIP cabanas
 - a spa area
 - indoor and outdoor freshwater showers
 - three buffet areas and grill stations

Sir Bani Yas Island, Desert Islands Watersports Centre



Desert Islands Watersports Centre is located on Sir Bani Yas Island, next to the Desert Islands Resort and Spa, in the Al Dhafra region of Abu Dhabi. It is operated by Al Mahara, a diving specialist, and promotes diving and marine activities.

Activities available for visitors include:

- Sailing lessons
- Diving expeditions and certification
- Kayaking
- Stand-up paddle boarding
- Deep-sea fishing
- Snorkelling
- Catamaran sailing trips

Guests are likely to see flying fish, sea birds, sea turtles and possibly flamingos while taking part in the above activities. Divers and snorkelers can also explore the island's coral reefs.

The Watersports Centre has a three-metre deep dive pool where visitors can try out scuba diving for the first time. For more experienced divers, the Professional Association of Diving Instructors (PADI) certificate can be taken.

Visitors can purchase scuba diving gear and other marine sports products in the onsite store. The Amwaj restaurant and lounge offers tasty tapas with a sea view from the terrace.

Activities are priced individually. Visitors are advised to go to the centre's website for full information on opening hours and prices.

DID YOU KNOW? SUP originated in Africa where warriors stood on their canoes and used their paddle to move forwards to carry out surprise attacks.

Knowledge Bank: Sir Bani Yas Island, Desert Islands Watersports Centre

Overview

- Desert Islands Watersports Centre is located on Sir Bani Yas Island, next to the Desert Islands Resort and Spa, in the Al Dhafra region of Abu Dhabi
- It is operated by Al Mahara, a diving specialist, and promotes diving and marine activities
- The Watersports Centre has a three-metre deep dive pool where beginners can try out the sport or more experienced scuba divers can take full Professional Association of Diving Instructors (PADI) certification
- Guests taking part in watersports activities are likely to see flying fish, sea birds, sea turtles and possibly flamingos
- The Centre also features the Amwaj restaurant and lounge. Visitors can enjoy tapas with a sea view from the terrace
- Visitors can purchase scuba diving gear and other marine sports products in the onsite store
- Divers and snorkelers can explore the island's coral reefs

Activities/facilities

Visitors can try the following activities:

- Sailing lessons
- Diving expeditions and certification
- Kayaking
- Stand-up paddle boarding
- Deep-sea fishing
- Snorkelling
- Catamaran sailing trips

Mirfa Beach



Mirfa beach, located in Mirfa city in Al Dhafra region, is the home to the annual Al Dhafra Watersports Festival. The beach is Al Dhafra's only developed beach. It's almost never crowded and there is a small town nearby where you can buy supplies for camping or a day of enjoying the turquoise waters. The annual Al Gharbia Watersports Festival, encouraging visitors to explore this undiscovered area, gathers together champions from all over the world, along with the local enthusiasts keen to take part in adrenaline-inducing watersport competitions including kiteboarding, wake boarding and surf-ski kayaking. Camping facilities are provided for participants and visitors, with live evening entertainment, kids' play areas and a 'Sunset Souk'.¹

¹ Source: <https://visitabudhabi.ae/en/explore/sea/beaches.and.beach.clubs/mirfa.beach.aspx>