

Al Dhafra

دائرة الثقافة والسياحة
DEPARTMENT OF CULTURE
AND TOURISM



ABU DHABI TOURIST GUIDE
TRAINING & LICENSING PROGRAMME

Section

11





**H.H. Sheikh Hamdan bin
Zayed Bin Sultan Al Nahyan**

HH Sheikh Hamdan bin Zayed Bin Sultan Al Nahyan is Abu Dhabi's ruler's representative in the Al Dhafra Region, making him the most influential figure directing government policy in Al Dhafra. He is the Chairman of the Environment Agency – Abu Dhabi and Chairman of the UAE Red Crescent. Sheikh Hamdan is the son of the late H.H. Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan, founding father and first President of the United Arab Emirates.

In an interview with Oxford Business Group, Sheikh Hamdan was asked **“How can Al Dhafra best leverage tourism as an economic contributor?”**. Sheikh Hamdan's answer was,



“Tourism is a booming industry in the emirate, and Al Dhafra offers a wide range of opportunities in its development due to its natural and historical assets. Al Dhafra is nature’s beautiful gift; it is where the desert meets the sea. It is home to the historic oasis town of Liwa, which is situated at the mouth of a large desert known as the Empty Quarter. In pursual of further success, we have also rebranded the region to reflect its rich cultural history. Now known by its ancient name of Al Dhafra, we can promote our great heritage and highlight our distinctive history. This will also raise awareness of our traditional values and culture, which we view as essential for the prosperity, happiness and success of future generations.”

Source: <https://oxfordbusinessgroup.com>
Source: <https://wam.ae/en/details/1395303146386>



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Al Dhafra

1.1 Iconic Landmarks	6
a.Al Dhafra Fort	6
b.Qasr Al Sarab Desert Resort by Anantara	8
c.Desert Islands Resort & Spa by Anantara	10
d.Sir Bani Yas Church & Monastery	13
e.Bab Al Nojoum, Bateen Liwa Resort	14
f.Dalma Island	14
1.2 Sustainable Tourist Attractions	16
a.Arabian Wildlife Park	16
b.Animal breeding, rehabilitation and relocation	18
c.Al Marzoom Hunting Reserve	20
1.3 Outdoor Adventure – Land / Desert	22
a.Tel Mor'eeb	22
b.Emirates National Auto Museum	24
1.4 Sea and Water	26
a.Sir Bani Yas Island Cruise Beach stopover	26
b.Sir Bani Yas Island Watersports Centre	27
c.Mugheirah Bay Waterfront	28
d.Mamsha Al Mugheirah	28
e.Mirfa Beach	28
1.5 Festivals & Events	30
a.Al Dhafra Festival	30
b.The Liwa International Festival	31
c.The Liwa Dates Festival	31
d.Al Dhafra Arabian Horse Championship	32
e.The Mother of the Nation (MOTN) Festival	32
f.Al Dhafra Watersports Festival	35

a. Al Dhafra Fort

Al Dhafra Fort is the gateway to Al Dhafra, the largest region in Abu Dhabi, which encompasses some of the emirate's most significant forts and cultural sites

Built in 2017, Al Dhafra Fort embodies Abu Dhabi's fortification architecture and sits in proximity to the historical site of Hosn Al Sirra, approximately 30 km east of Madinat Zayed.

Al Dhafra forts and defensive buildings are an essential part of the regional tangible heritage. The historic buildings erected from the 19th century, or earlier for some of them, form a coherent defensive belt defending the water access and the tribes against their enemies. These landmarks share common architectural features and are visible testimonies of the tribal lifestyle at that time that are worth to be preserved.

The Al Dhafra Fort itself is thus a living monument and memorial to the history of Al Dhafra and the defensive architecture of the region.

Visitors to the fort are invited to tour the exhibition space that tells the story of Al Dhafra, the customs and way of life the desert nature of the land gave rise to, and the values its people still hold to this very day.



b.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 area. It is on the edge of the Rub' Al Khali or Empty Quarter Desert which has the biggest sand mass in the world and is 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.

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, campfire 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.



c. Desert Islands Resort & Spa by Anantara

Emirati splendour meets an oasis of green overlooking the ocean. Desert Islands Resort & Spa by Anantara invites you to immerse in wadi adventures and discoveries. Embark on family wildlife drives. Explore ancient ruins and rock formations by horseback. Find new passions with falconry, land sailing and archery just some of the many activities on offer.

Source: <https://www.anantara.com/en/desert-islands-sir-bani-yas>

Anantara Sir Bani Yas Island Al Sahel Villa Resort

With only 30 villas spread through lush savannah, Al Sahel is one of the best Abu Dhabi luxury hotels that invites you to lose yourself to nature's beauty. Wake up to the sight of wild gazelle. Embark on desert drives in a wildlife sanctuary. Explore the flavours of Africa, inspired by our unique surrounds.

Sir Bani Yas Island is a protected reserve just off the coast of Abu Dhabi, founded by the late His Highness Sheikh Zayed Bin Sultan Al Nahyan. Home to free-roaming wildlife, including the near extinct Arabian Oryx, the island offers a distinct escape from the world, located in natural grasslands in the interior of the island.

Source: <https://www.anantara.com/en/al-sahel-sir-bani-yas>

Anantara Sir Bani Yas Island Al Yamm Villa Resort

Anantara Al Yamm is an all-villa sanctuary reminiscent of an Emirati fishing village. Beachside barastis overlook mangroves and the dazzling Arabian Gulf. Hide away poolside or get out and explore, kayaking the waters or riding across the island by horseback. Snorkel protected reefs and immersed in the majesty of nature at our resort in Abu Dhabi.

Source: <https://www.anantara.com/en/al-yamm-sir-bani-yas>





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 Sir Bani Yas Church & Monastery.

e.Bab Al Nojoum, Bateen Liwa Resort

Located within the Marawah Marine Biosphere Reserve, Bab Al Nojoum – Al Mugheirah Resort offers an eco-friendly glamping experience. It features 20 Airstream cabins and 20 additional one- and two-bedroom cabins, each with private plunge pools, BBQs, and fire pits. Guests can enjoy cycling and walking trails, a swimming pool, a restaurant, and an educational centre focused on mangrove conservation. Activities include kite flying, fishing, horse riding, and wildlife spotting, offering a memorable connection with nature.

Bab Al Nojoum – Bateen Liwa

Set in the Liwa Desert, Bab Al Nojoum – Bateen Liwa provides a luxurious desert escape with one-, two-, and three-bedroom villas, each with a private pool and desert views. The resort blends Emirati heritage with modern amenities, offering private patios, BBQs, and exclusive dining. Guests can experience a range of desert activities, making it an exceptional destination for relaxation and adventure in the UAE's vast dunes.

f.Dalma Island

Dalma, which lies 26 miles off the coast of the Western Region of Abu Dhabi, is one of the oldest inhabited islands in the area, with archaeologists finding evidence of human life dating back a whopping 10,000 years. The island's abundant supplies of fresh water, as well as the numerous date plantations, sustained the local population throughout the years, but these days there's a small town with various shops and a mall. The Delma Museum is worth a visit, playing host to numerous interesting artefacts found on the isle. Delma has been designated by the government as a potential tourist destination, with hotels and other facilities proposed to be constructed there in the future.

To visit the island of Dalma, you can go by road to Jebel Dhanna (Ruwais road from Abu Dhabi). At Jebel Dhanna is the port of the Dohb (the ship that carries passengers and cars to the island of Dalma), where a ferry operates between 7am and 7pm. There are non-scheduled flights, (almost every day except Friday) from Abu Dhabi International Airport to the island.

For more information, visit:

<https://dalmaisland.com>



1.2 Sustainable Tourist Attractions

a. 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.

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 those 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 4x4 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.



b. 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.



c.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 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 experience are used to support the conservation programmes that take care of the Houbara, rabbits, and other species in the desert.

- Entry fees: **AED 1050**
- Hunting fees (includes preparation of the hunting sites, preys and the accompanying hunter): **AED 1050**
- Safari vehicle rent: **AED 1575**
- Accommodation (including half-board meals): **AED 1050**
- Hunting Houbara: **AED 1260**
- Hunting rabbits: **AED 1500**



1.3 Outdoor Adventure - Land / Desert

a. Tel Mor'eeb

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.



b.Emirates National Auto Museum

Whether you are a resident or a tourist, the Emirates National Auto Museum is a must-visit place if you are in Abu Dhabi. The museum is home to around 200 vehicles from the personal collection of His Highness Sheikh Hamad bin Hamdan Al Nahyan. His Highness had a penchant for cars, and when his collection became so large, he decided to give a part of it to the community. Today, the museum has some of the biggest, oldest, longest, and most expensive car collections in the world.

The museum contains a vast collection of classics and modern vehicles, from American cars and off-road vehicles to the Sheikh's rainbow collection of Mercedes. Apart from this, the Emirates National Auto Museum also has various automobile memorabilia like a gas pump from a 1980 western gas station and old automobile plate numbers and signs.

Source: <https://www.uaedriving.com/blogs/emirates-national-auto-museum-in-abu-dhabi>





a. Sir Bani Yas Island Cruise Beach stopover

A nature-based destination home to stunning wildlife, a range of family-friendly adventure activities, five-star boutique hotels, luxury villas, purpose-built stables and historical sites, Sir Bani Yas Island is one of eight islands making up the desert islands of Al Dhafra. Awarded the World's Leading Sustainable Tourism Destination at the 2014 and 2018 World Travel Awards, more than half of this incredible island is made up of the Arabian Wildlife Park, one of the region's largest wildlife reserves home to more than 17,000 free-roaming animals, including Arabian oryx, gazelles, giraffes, hyenas and cheetahs.

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.



b.Sir Bani Yas Island Watersports Centre

Desert Islands Watersports Centre is located on Sir Bani Yas Island, next to the Desert Islands Resort and Spa. 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 snorkellers 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.

c. Mugheirah Bay Waterfront

Mugheirah Bay Waterfront, located in Al Dhafra where the desert meets the sea, offers a diverse range of retail, leisure, and lifestyle experiences. Visitors can enjoy stunning waterfront views at top-notch eateries, explore the splash park, or perfect their skills at the skate park. The bay also features multi-purpose courts for basketball, football, and volleyball, providing ample opportunities for fitness and fun.

Source: <https://visitabudhabi.ae/en/where-to-go/marinas-and-plazas/mugheirah-bay>

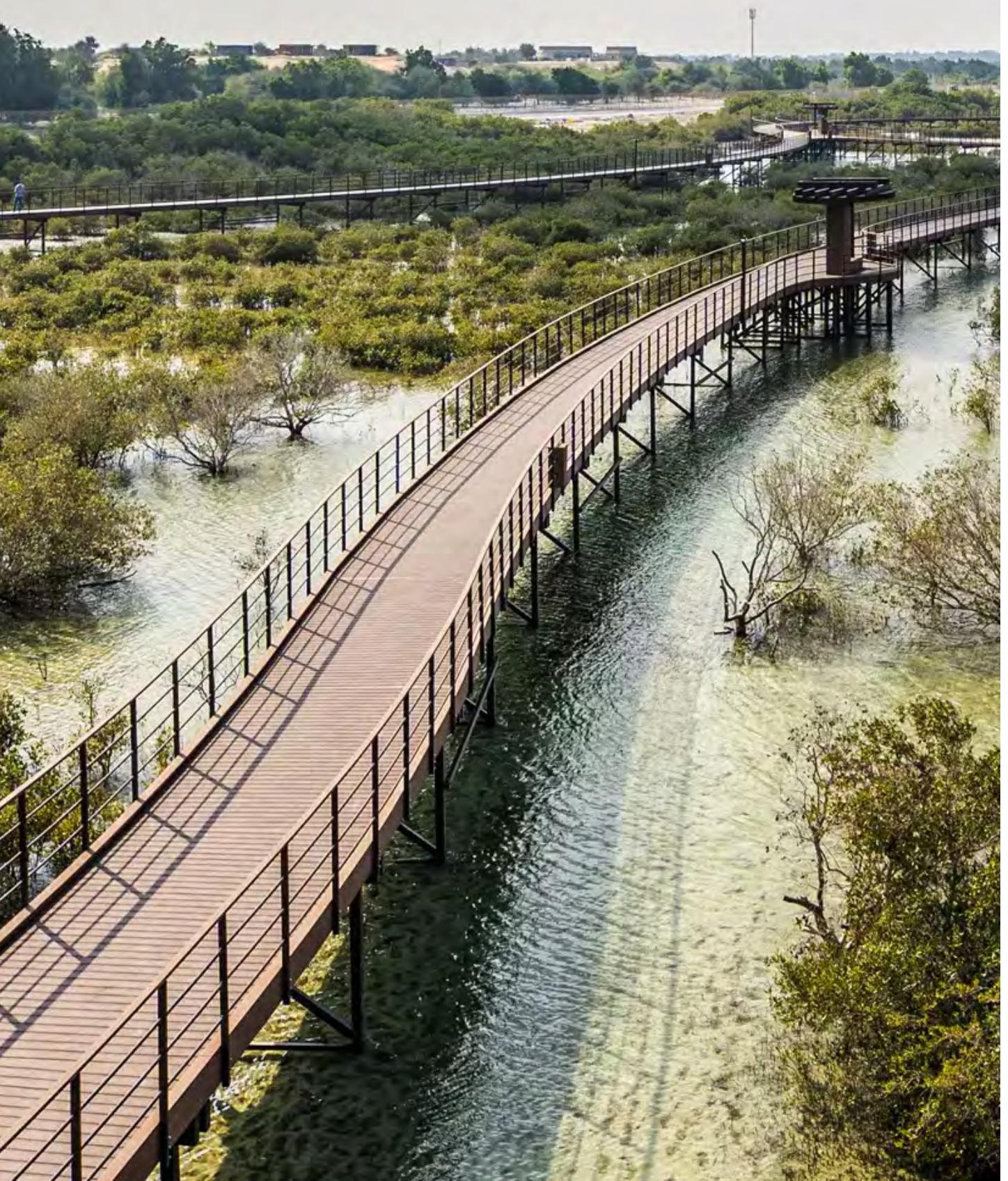
d. Mamsha Al Mugheirah

Mamsha Al Mugheirah is a scenic boardwalk in Abu Dhabi, nestled between natural mangroves, offering stunning views of the turquoise sea and local wildlife, including the black heron and dugong. The development promotes sustainable tourism and environmental conservation, featuring educational centres and observation towers to raise awareness about the local ecosystem. It provides a peaceful setting for a stroll, allowing visitors to explore diverse ecosystems, and is conveniently located near Mugheirah Bay for dining and relaxation.

Source: <https://visitabudhabi.ae/en/where-to-go/marinas-and-plazas/mamsha-al-mugheirah>

e. Mirfa Beach

Mirfa beach, located in Mirfa city, 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 champions from all over the world, along with 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'.



a.Al Dhafra Festival

At the edge of the Rub' Al Khali (Empty Quarter) desert, surrounded by towering, sand dunes, Al Dhafra Festival demonstrates the community and cultural practices that have defined Bedouin life for generations.

At the heart of the festival are the mazayna, or camel beauty contests, that involve tens of thousands of camels from across the Arabian Peninsula. They focus on purebred breeds from the Asayel (pedigree) and Majaheem (dark-skinned) lineages.

Hundreds of people come to Al Dhafra Festival to exhibit and compete in events that bring alive aspects of the Bedouin lifestyle. It includes purebred Arabian horse racing, Arabian Saluki dog races, falconry and handicrafts such as Khoos (palm frond) weaving and Talli (embroidery). Other activities include a beauty contest for sheep, date palm and packaging competitions, as well as traditional Emirati performing arts.

The festival is held near Madinat Zayed, the largest town in the Al Dhafra Region.

Source: <https://abudhabiculture.ae/en/experience/heritage-festivals/al-dhafra-festival>

b.The Liwa International Festival

The Liwa International Festival is an annual celebration held at Tal Moreeb, one of the world's tallest sand dunes, standing 300 meters high. This festival attracts hundreds of 4x4s, RVs, dune buggies, and adventure enthusiasts for an unforgettable winter experience in the desert.

Centred around the Liwa Village attraction, the festival offers an exciting mix of adventure, culture, and entertainment. Attendees can enjoy high-energy events like Monster Jam, car stunt championships, and camel racing, as well as family-friendly activities such as hot air balloon rides, live music concerts, and a giant Ferris wheel.

Visitors are encouraged to extend their experience with authentic desert camping options, including RV rentals, luxury desert tents, or public camping areas for those bringing their own equipment.

c.The Liwa Dates Festival

Held in Liwa City, the Liwa Date Festival is an annual event that introduces date producers to modern agricultural practices and facilitates the exchange of expertise on the best ways to produce the highest quality date.

The festival includes various agriculture and heritage activities, and is one of Abu Dhabi's most significant events and tourist attractions, highlighting the many ways dates have impacted the cultural, heritage and economic life of the country. It provides a great place for visitors to learn about dates and to sample the most popular date varieties grown in the UAE.

d.Al Dhafra Arabian Horse Championship

The annual event has long attracted many horses, making it one of the biggest championships worldwide – with 550 horses taking part in its most recent edition.

Supporting the Emirati owners in the Al Dhafra region, as well as privately owned studs all over the UAE, the Al Dhafra Arabian Horse Championship also honours local handlers in the UAE and allocates many valuable prizes for them.

The event is classified (C) by the European Arabian Horse Beauty Organization (ECAHO), and participation is open to all private stud owners in the UAE.

The championship is be held at Al Mughira Beach Al Marfa city, a charming location which adds additional value to the event as it combines the beauty of the majestic Purebred Arabian horses with the natural beaches that meet the sea.

e.The Mother of the Nation (MOTN) Festival

Named in honour of Sheikha Fatima bint Mubarak, this popular annual entertainment event takes place at locations across Abu Dhabi, and since 2023, at Al Mugheirah Bay in Al Dhafra. It features a unique mix of global and local brands, interactive experiences, live entertainment, and diverse dining options, creating a lively and welcoming atmosphere for families and visitors alike.





f.Al Dhafra Watersports Festival

This festival takes place every year on the borderline between land and sea in Al Mirfa City, promising locals and visitors 10 days of pure thrills with watersports and athletes from all over the world. The activities include heritage marine races, kite-flying, boat races, windsurfing, camping, beach concerts, and other exciting activities and surprises.

The festival is organised by the Cultural Programmes and Heritage Festivals Committee Abu Dhabi in collaboration with the Abu Dhabi Sailing & Yacht Club and the Abu Dhabi Sports Council.

The festival features varied and diverse races, swimming, beach volleyball and beach football, as well as a number of exceptional heritage activities that are closely related to the marine environment, in addition to sporting events and prizes. The emirate's [maritime heritage](#) is honoured through a Traditional Market, children's activities, heritage performances, and competitions such as dhow sailing races.

Source: <https://dct.gov.ae/en/events/partner.events/al.gharbia.watersports.festival.aspx>

Abu Dhabi Tourist Guide
Training & Licensing Programme

Al Dhafra