

city
spotlight.

Arabic excess

SURROUNDED BY LAVISH EXTRAVAGANCE AND O.T.T. LUXURY, **ROWENA CARR-ALLINSON** VISITS ABU DHABI TO FIND OUT IF THE EMIRATES CITY REALLY IS SET TO RIVAL DUBAI'S REPUTATION AS THE MIDDLE EAST'S MOST OPULENT DESTINATION

Abu Dhabi, the lesser known neighbour of Dubai, is the capital of the United Arab Emirates. Set on a series of islands seamlessly joined by bridges, jutting into the Persian Gulf, it's one of the world's largest producers of oil and in full bloom with luxury hotels being built along its sandy shores.

Although it's probably unfair to compare it to Dubai, it's impossible

not to. Both are states within the United Arab Emirates, both are looking to tourism to diversify and both have a similar thirst for glitz and glamour. Abu Dhabi, however, is going down a 'quieter' route.

Without going to the length Dubai has, Abu Dhabi's ruler Khalifa bin Zayed Al Nahyan, also the UAE's President, has his heart set on putting his state on the map.

The aim is to attract beach lovers and shoppers, of course, but also

to become a cultural centre for the Middle East and redefine luxury. The first step? Abu Dhabi secured the world's second Louvre museum (opening in 2012) and the new Guggenheim museum, designed by world famous architect Frank Gehry.

There's no doubt that Abu Dhabi's unique selling position is going to be luxury. All Khalifa bin Zayed Al Nahyan's endeavours are unequivocal, from the opulent Sheikh Zayed Mosque to the

Emirates Palace, the world's second seven-star hotel, rivalling Dubai's legendary sail shaped Burj Al Arab.

Intrigued, and never one to forgo an indulgent trip to a lavish hotel, I set out for my first taste of Abu Dhabi with my other half. Having been to Dubai a few years ago, we planned to discover another of the seven emirates, one still in the throws of early growth.

Going for luxury all the way, we travelled on Abu Dhabi's three year

old airline, Etihad, in the business class cabin. I've never had a flight quite like it. Though I've had the luck of flying business before, I'm mostly accustomed to economy and I'm only too aware of the discomforts of flying. This was the first time I was sorry to arrive. Watching just one movie and flicking through a few magazines somehow kept me busy for the six hour journey from London. Perhaps it was the delicious dinner worthy of a gourmet restaurant, or the high tea – a good cuppa, but most of all a fantastic cream and jam scone. The best part? Being treated like royalty, rather than cattle! It doesn't come cheap, but if luxury is your bag, Etihad's business class cabin is in a class of its own.

A WORLD OF EXCESS

Arriving in Abu Dhabi is like disembarking on another planet. The moist heat delivers a potent blow; even at night the heat is stifling and the humidity mind boggling. The throng of people, a mix of visitors, businessmen and locals swathed in white robes, give an instant exotic feel only slightly

hindered by the Costa Coffee I spy out of the corner of my eye.

Our first stop: the Emirates Palace. Much has been written about this huge hotel but nothing prepares you for its reality. This is the most expensive hotel ever built at an extraordinary \$3 billion. It took three years and 20,000 people to put it together. The hotel's statistics are impressive: 222 acres of landscaping, 114 domes (some

thrown in – 86,114 square feet of 22 carat gold leaf to be precise. Plush carpets and sky high ceilings – some even high enough for rows of indoor palm trees – twist and turn forever.

On arrival, the very international staff greet us with Arabic coffee and dates, an age old tradition in Abu Dhabi where 40 million date trees are cultivated. After being led to our room at the tip of the west wing,

“THE MOT DU JOUR IS EXCESS: 20,000 FRESH ROSES ARE USED DAILY AND THE PATISSERIE KITCHENS USE TWO GOLD BARS FOR DECORATION YEARLY”

almost 200ft high, one million square feet in total and 1,002 Swarovski crystal chandeliers. The Grand Atrium's claim to fame is that it's higher than the dome of St Peter's Basilica in Rome and covered in 20 carat gold finial. It may not be your cup of tea but one can't fail to be impressed. The endless corridors give the palace an *Alice in Wonderland* side, with heaps of marble, gold and glitz

we are given the low down on the butler service and in-room gadgets. The *mot du jour* here is excess, no expense has been spared. As well as the marble, gold and crystal, 20,000 fresh roses are used daily, while the restaurants' patisserie kitchens use the equivalent of two gold bars for food decoration yearly. In addition to the 302 rooms, there are 92 suites, including the eighth floor suites which are dedicated to heads

Marina Mall seen from the Emirates Palace



WRITER PROFILE

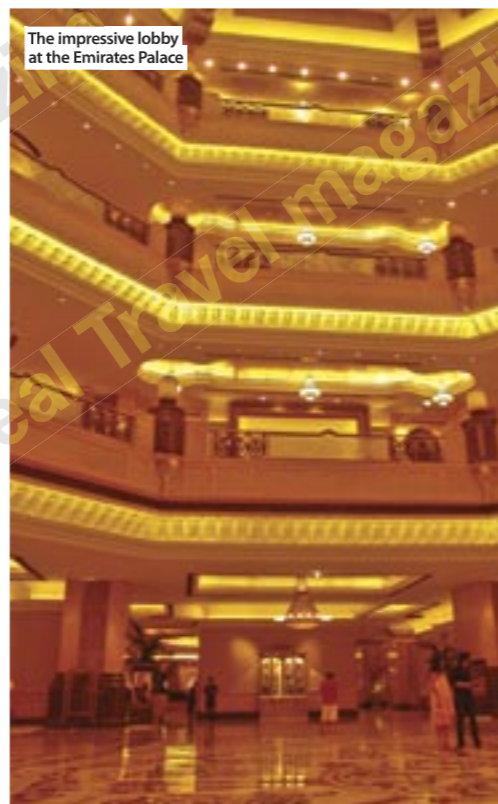
NAME ROWENA CARR-ALLISON

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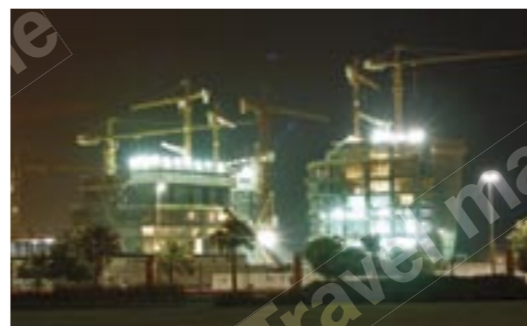
INFO Rowena first got the travel bug back in 1997 when she spent a few months working in Tanzania after finishing her degree. Since then she's been everywhere from Buenos Aires to Bangkok, Miami to Maui.



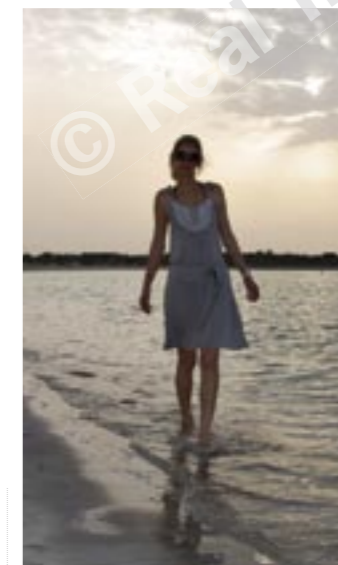
The bed Tony Blair stayed in



The impressive lobby at the Emirates Palace



Inside the Marina Mall



infobox.

Rowena travelled with Cadogan Holidays from Heathrow, with Etihad Airways, staying at the six star Emirates Palace with her partner for five nights. Prices start at £1,072 per person for five nights B&B, and includes flights and transfers (based on two adults sharing). www.etihadairways.com

ACCOMMODATION

Emirates Palace, Abu Dhabi
00971 2 690 9000
www.emiratespalace.com

GETTING AROUND

Rowena hired a car from Dollar Abu Dhabi.
00971 2 6419002
www.dollaruae.com

SUGGESTED TOUR OPERATORS

Cadogan Holidays
0845 615 6793
www.cadoganholidays.com

VISAS

UK passport holders don't require a visa to enter the UAE.

VACCINATIONS

Hepatitis A+B, rabies and tetanus are recommended for all visitors to the United Arab Emirates.

FURTHER INFO

www.visitabudhabi.ae

of the Gulf Cooperation Council states. Very, very important people like French president Nicolas Sarkozy and George Bush have been invited there, too.

Apparently, when Tony Blair stayed he requested a smaller suite thinking his was too vast. He opted to downgrade to a 600sq metre suite on the sixth floor with three bedrooms including a master suite so large the king size bed appears dwarfed. With cinema-style plasma screens, views, sparkling chandeliers and all the trimmings, the giant warren-like suite probably meant he didn't see Cherie for days!

The sixth floor is the place to rub shoulders with celebrities, politicians, royalty, pop stars, as well as sporting stars like Boris Becker and the Brazilian football team. The VIPs even have their own entrance, a grand gate on the east wing allowing them to come and go free from prying eyes.

The Emirates Palace is doing its utmost to raise Abu Dhabi's profile. With concerts by Jon Bon Jovi, Elton John and Justin Timberlake, who gave an outdoor beach concert in front of 40,000 people, it's working. The hotel hosts operas and art exhibits, too.

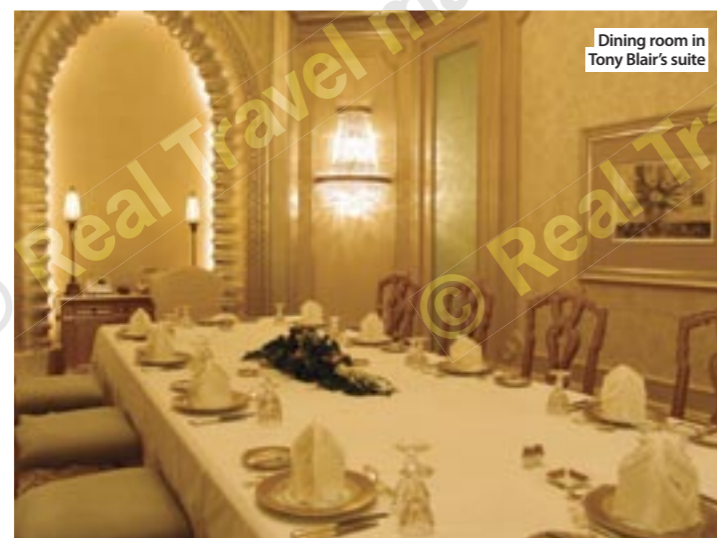
During our visit, the Picasso exhibition is in full swing: 180 odd pieces, including some of his most recognisable work. As I stroll around the free exhibit after breakfast, I wonder what can possibly be left in the Picasso museum in Paris?

“APPARENTLY WHEN TONY BLAIR STAYED, HE REQUESTED A SMALLER SUITE, DOWNGRADING TO A 600SQ METRE SUITE WITH THREE BEDROOMS”

With a total of seven restaurants to choose from, the Emirates Palace has also staked its claim to the top spot in gourmet Abu Dhabi. We sample the Sayad restaurant with its Pacific Rim seafood menu boasting local glazed hamour fish and lovely nibbles such as mini lobster nachos. The underwater theme – all frosted glass walls and blue tones – gives the place an edgy look that wouldn't be out of place in New York.

Other options include the Italian restaurant Mezzaluna, Le Vendome Brasserie for French, the Diwan Auberge, the Lebanese restaurant, the Anar for Iranian and outdoor pool eateries. The Caviar Bar, I was glad to discover, also serves up sandwiches and snacks that won't require a second mortgage.

As for having a relaxing drink, the hotel has the Cuban-themed Havana Club where it's all about the cigars and the Latin music, or the



Dining room in Tony Blair's suite

Embassy, sister to London's nightclub. The recommended options in town all seem to be at big international hotels. With strict Muslim alcohol licensing laws, it's a case of sticking to the big names which are famous for their weekend brunches. Jack, a newly arrived expat, confirms: "Every weekend the done thing is to meet up for long brunches. The hotels all put on incredible spreads with buckets of bucks fizz!"

At the Hilton, expats gather at Hemingway's, a legendary live jazz bar. Right next door is the new Cinnabar club, the new place to be. With its pumping music and plush décor, cool Waterlicious cocktails and beautiful people up for a party, it's the sleekest option in town.

But, one should be aware. We've all read about the Briton convicted of lewd behaviour in Dubai, and it's easy to forget that the laws in the UAE are very different to those back home. Respecting local laws and traditions is crucial. Public displays of affection, for example, are illegal. The upside is that as a visitor you feel totally and utterly safe.

CULINARY HEAVEN

Trying to find Abu Dhabi's culinary gems, we headed to the Shangri La Resort across town in Qaryat Al Beri. This brand new development area near the grand mosque is set to see several new high-end hotels in the next few years but so far only the stunning Shangri La is completed.

Sofra, one of its restaurants, has the most comprehensive buffet I've ever seen. Regardless of whether you fancy curry, sushi or grilled seafood, steak or Chinese, you'll find it there. It's hard not to have a little of everything, so I did – grilled giant prawns, sushi-grade tuna and fantastic chicken in lemon and garlic. Its best feature? The incredible desert station which had everything you could dream of: sweets, delicate coffee mousses, chocolate parfaits and ice cream with a thousand topping options.

Being carnivores, we also had to try Chamas at the Intercontinental where we were bowled over by the novel Brazilian meat fest concept. Fifteen different kinds of succulent cuts are served non-stop, from barbecued style chicken to bison. After dinner, we stopped upstairs at the All Black bar overlooking the marina for a cooling caipirinha while the live Brazilian band did their thing.

With just three days in town, we crammed in the highlights, including a guided tour of the new Sheikh Zayed Mosque which is open to non-Muslims. The giant 22,000sq metre building is a vision in white marble with four 107m high minarets, 82 domes and 1,048 outdoor columns, and inside: the world's biggest Persian carpet at 6,000sq metre. The giant sparkling chandeliers alone are said to have cost a cool \$8 million. There clearly seems to be no end

to the funds spent to create Abu Dhabi's iconic landmarks.

We rented a car: a challenge. The maps in Abu Dhabi are mostly wishful thinking. Sites still in construction are marked already, while the scale isn't quite accurate. Navigating was tricky, but all part of the experience.

Finding our own way, or rather losing it, enabled us to stumble across the Dhow Wharf at the east end of the Corniche, near the port. In search of the Iranian souq but foiled by the map, we were able to see a rare authentic sight in the city:

“A MARRIAGE BETWEEN TRADITIONAL ARAB VALUES AND WESTERN LUXURIES GIVES ABU DHABI A SPLIT PERSONALITY BUT ALSO ITS CHARM”

ancient fishing vessels, tangled in a maze of netting, lined up against a backdrop of skyscrapers. However, you needn't necessarily get lost; taxis in the city are extremely cheap. The fare from the Emirates Palace to the nearby Marina mall was just a few pence. But, don't forget to make sure the counter is on at all times, otherwise some drivers can get creative with prices.

With its crazy water features and brilliant views of the city skyline, the Marina Mall is worth a stop. The 300 odd shops include all the usual suspects: from Zara to Forever 21, as well as designer brands like

Burberry, Louis Vuitton and Gucci. Shying away from the US style food courts, we picked up a meal from Carrefour's deli counter, finding everything from samosas to sushi.

At the Abu Dhabi Mall there's more deluxe shopping for jewellery, clothes and souvenirs, too, with both local boutiques and big international names like Mango, Puma and Lacoste – plenty to keep fashionistas busy.

There's so much more to do beyond the town centre, but we ran out of time. The inland oasis of Al Ain, its theme parks, surprisingly green gardens, hot springs and historical landmarks, is a must, as is big game fishing or 4x4 driving in the sandy dunes, known to locals as dune bashing. It's become a real favourite, as has camel racing and desert picnics.

And of course there's the beach. At the Emirates Palace, over one kilometre of the softest white sand was imported from Algeria. The water is like a warm, crystal clear bath. For something cooler,

hit the chilled pools. The new public beach runs two kilometres along the Corniche, with separate areas for men, women and families, volley ball pitches and a Dunkin' Doughnuts. Yet another example of the clash of cultures that Abu Dhabi embraces.

This slightly surreal marriage between traditional Arab values and Western luxuries gives Abu Dhabi a split personality, but it also lends it its charm. Everything is possible here, in a land where veiled women drive huge Hummers and entire beaches are imported from a different continent. My one regret is not having been able to interact with locals. The UAE's population being mostly foreign, it's rare to come into contact with its citizens, who are set apart from the crowds in ivory towers. The divide between western expats, eastern workers and locals is flagrant and a little disconcerting.

Without becoming a copy of its famous neighbour, Dubai, it's clear that Abu Dhabi is set to become a real rival. The combination of enthusiasm and seemingly limitless funds means it's definitely not the last we've heard from the tiny luxurious emirate. As for the next hot destination in the Emirates, locals are already whispering Fujairah is one to watch. ■