



THE OLDER BROTHER

Above: The courtyard of Sheikh Zayed Grand Mosque.

OFTEN OVERLOOKED, THE CAPITAL OF THE UNITED ARAB EMIRATES, ABU DHABI, HAS A LOT TO OFFER. LOOK PAST THE GLITZ OF DUBAI TO FIND A CONTEMPORARY CLASSIC, PACKED WITH THINGS TO SEE AND DO. **GISELLE WHITEAKER** HEADS INTO THE DESERT SUN.

Mention Dubai and many will conjure up images of extravagant architecture rising from the desert sands. Yet, ask those same people about the United Arab Emirates and they appear distinctively uneasy about their lack of knowledge. Dubai had a head-start on marketing itself. “Build it and they will come,” said the Ruler of Dubai, Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum. And they came in droves.

Dubai is the flashy younger brother, the trend-setter in Armani, wearing oversized Bulgari sunglasses and a diamond encrusted Jaeger LeCoultre timepiece on its wrist, which dangles from a Lamborghini, loudly revving its powerful engine to draw attention. The distant cousins: Ras al Khaimah, Umm al Quwain, Fujairah, Sharjah and Ajman look on, emulating Dubai’s style in small bursts.

Abu Dhabi is the older brother. More conservative, this city has learnt from Dubai’s mistakes and takes a measured pace as it recreates itself as a classic city. The hedonistic pleasures are all there, from architecturally resplendent hotels to pumping nightspots and exclusive enclaves such as the Monte-Carlo Beach Club Saadiyat. Yet, amongst the high rises, the top notch restaurants and designer fashion stores, a city of culture lurks. An outpost of the Louvre is on its way and the Guggenheim Abu Dhabi will follow in testament of this outlook.

There’s much to see and do in the Capital and I’m trying to pack it into one weekend. I start at the Sheikh Zayed Grand Mosque, perhaps Abu Dhabi’s finest monument and one of the most-visited buildings in the UAE. The gleaming white spires rise out of the sand as if a mirage. Destined to be one of the great architectural treasures of contemporary UAE society, this may be the most opulent mosque in the world. Composed of elements from a cornucopia of global destinations, as well as home-grown, more than 3,000 workers took part in its construction. A palatial edifice of marble, stone, gold, semi-precious stones, crystals and ceramics, it covers a massive 22,412 square metres.

Dressed in an *abaya*, a loose, black covering from head to toe, as a mark of respect, I stroll through the arches to the courtyard entrance, marked by flowers in natural colours inlaid into the pathway. The mosque can hold 41,000 people, and today with only a smattering of visitors braving the humidity, it is filled with a hushed reverence. The spires point towards the bright blue sky as the sun bakes the glittering marble. At the main hall I leave my shoes to walk over the largest carpet in the world (all 5,627 metres of it). Above hangs a multi-coloured chandelier of immense proportions. The third-largest in the world, it was imported from Germany, its Swarovski crystals reflecting shards of light in the silence.



Top: A pool-side cabana at the Monte-Carlo Beach Club Saadiyat. Above: Guggenheim Abu Dhabi.

sensuous curves and sleek lines. My light, spacious suite is decked in fresh-white, its generous balcony overlooking Yas Marina, a collection of yachts bobbing in the sea's light swell.

I don't have time to dally. My friend Roy is meeting me for dinner, so I freshen up and head to Origins, one of the hotel's many top-notch dining spots. Today there is a special Arabian buffet, the sumptuous spread stretching across every available surface. Plates are piled high with wrapped vine leaves, *fattoush* (Arabian salad) topped with crunchy pita flakes, *falafel* (chickpea patties) and all manner of temptations – and that's just the starters.

Lamb *ouzi*, a delicious slow-baked lamb and rice dish, is at the head of a line of tureens wafting delicious smells into the air as each is opened. There are hundreds of dishes to choose from. I cast aside my diet without a second thought and tuck in to the fabulous fare. Every morsel is delicious and we graze until we can fit no more.

Waking refreshed the next morning, I atone at the gym before heading to the glorious rooftop pool to soak up some sunshine. I hover between lounge and pool, perfectly relaxed, my reverie broken only by staff delivering cool towels and iced water. Thoughts flit through my head of activities I should be sampling. Yas Waterworld, an extensive water park, is a short paddle away, as is Ferrari World, with *Formula Rossi*, the world's fastest roller coaster. I could slip into the hotel's fabulous ESPA for a soothing treatment, or dine at one of the water-side restaurants scattered around Yas Marina. I could shop, dine and play, but in the end the sun decides, ensnaring me in its rays. I am happy right here, so here I shall stay until the sun releases me. There's always tomorrow. ■



After a road-side *shwarma* snack, the grilled beef wrapped in pita delivering a citric crunch via its accompanying pickles, it's time to try a new local delicacy at Bobo Gelati. This innovative Italian-style café is combining the best of two worlds – smooth Italian gelato with the flavours of Arabia. The especially daring can sample the velvety pistachio with camel-milk iced-treat.

Abu Dhabi is blessed with an extensive coastline. The Emirate is in fact a collection of islands linked by bridges. The city boasts broad boulevards, tall towers and myriad malls, and on its perimeter is the Corniche, a busy thoroughfare for both traffic and pedestrians. Running along the coast, the Corniche is designed for a stroll, stretching almost the width of the city. Lined with greenery, palm trees shifting in the slight breeze, it is a pleasant place to take in the local scene. For the more active, Watercooled at the Hilton Beach Club along the Corniche offers a comprehensive array of water sports activities in Abu Dhabi's turquoise waters, from sailing to paddleboarding. The Corniche is punctuated by Emirates Palace, perhaps the most opulent hotel in the city. Resembling a royal palace, this expansive abode is an attraction in its own right.

As the desert sun heads towards the sea I check in to the Yas Viceroy Abu Dhabi. This iconic hotel is the focal point of Yas Island, Abu Dhabi's newest entertainment district. Encased in an eye-catching LED mesh canopy, the Formula One track weaving around its boundary, these 499 five-star rooms and suites embody a contemporary fusion of elegance and momentum, created with



Above: The LED canopy. Opposite page top: Outdoor dining at the Yas Viceroy Abu Dhabi.

For more information on the Yas Viceroy Abu Dhabi hotel see: www.viceroyhotelsandresorts.com/abudhabi



Above: The Yas Viceroy Abu Dhabi's Arabic mezze. Right: Wrapped vine leaves.



The Yas Viceroy Abu Dhabi is the focal point of Yas Island, Abu Dhabi's newest entertainment district.



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Downtown Burj Dubai

Price: AED 8,000,000



Legacy Villa

Jumeirah Park is an eco-friendly family orientated development and one of the most desirable residential communities in Dubai. Jumeirah Park provides all the amenities a family could need, close at hand. A day care centre and play areas delight the youngest residents, while schools from kindergarten through secondary grades offer quality education. A centrally-located community centre contains a department store, post office, bank, shopping centre, and many eateries. All this, and a stunning four-bedroom villa await.



Jumeirah Park

Price: AED 6,150,000



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