

# Past AND PRESENT

Abu Dhabi is expanding so rapidly that its past remains a nostalgic memory. **Lauren Rosewarne** compares Abu Dhabi's past and present...



Interior of Sheikh Zayed Mosque.  
© Abu Dhabi Tourism Authority



## PAST

Long before oil and long before electricity, Bedouin tribes reared livestock, fished the abundant Arabian Gulf coast and feasted on the fruits of inland oases. It was during this period that Abu Dhabi was a fledgling fishing village, where date farming and pearl harvesting supplemented income.

Strategically positioned at the midpoint between New York and Tokyo, Abu Dhabi has a long history of international trade, notably with India and the Far East. Its tactical location proved both friend and foe with control of the waters fiercely contested by both the Portuguese from 1498 until 1633, and the British from the early 1600s until 1971.

Although archaeologists have unearthed evidence of settlements dating back some 7500 years to the third millennium BCE, it took several thousand years for Abu Dhabi to put itself on the international stage.

In the late 1950s oil was discovered off the Arabian Gulf coast and Abu Dhabi was swiftly catapulted into the world economy. In only 50 years, a sparsely populated fish-and-fruit hamlet has become one of the wealthiest cities in the world.

## PRESENT

Uncovering 10 percent of the world's oil reserves on its doorstep delivered Abu Dhabi an overabundance of riches and its provincial past quickly became folklore. And yet, unlike its glitzy neighbour Dubai – a two-hour drive north-east – Abu Dhabi has paced itself in becoming a tourist destination. Of course, in hosting its first Formula One Grand Prix in 2009 on Yas Island, Abu Dhabi is clearly waging a fierce battle for the region's tourist dollars.

As the UAE's economic and political capital, Abu Dhabi is also home to Etihad, a new airline that has not only rapidly earned industry acclaim, but also connects Abu Dhabi with over 30 cities worldwide.

With year round sunshine, Abu Dhabi is the perfect destination for a summer holiday anytime of the year. With more than 700 kilometres of beaches, the city provides a perfect backdrop for water sports including sailing, swimming and snorkelling.

Diverse terrain – including an archipelago of over 200 islands, desert sands, rocky mountains and lush green oases at Liwa and Al Ain – provides endless opportunities for outdoor recreation. Take your adventures that little bit further and incorporate a visit to the big cats at the Abu Dhabi Wildlife Centre or drop in on the Arabian antelope, oryx and gazelles at the Al Ain Zoo.

Over 67,000 square kilometres of bright shiny skyscrapers provide an insight into how seriously the city takes its architecture but, high-rises aside, Abu Dhabi is also home to some stellar examples of Arab-Islamic architecture.

Opened in 2007, Sheikh Zayed Mosque – named after the UAE's first president and home to his burial site – draws design inspiration from mosques as far away as Pakistan and Morocco. Enormous enough to accommodate 40,000 worshippers, the mosque houses both the world's largest carpet and the world's largest chandelier.

Of equal architectural importance is the 220-acre Emirates Palace hotel complex. Sitting on 1.3 kilometres of private beach and cushioned by some 85 hectares of landscaped gardens, the Emirates Palace is an attraction in a league of its own. The complex showcases 114 gilt domes, a 42 metre-diameter mosaic and a 20-kilogram solid gold finial. Also on offer are a multitude of entertainment options including 12 restaurants and bars, a Thai-Moroccan themed spa and four leisure tennis courts.



Yas Marina Circuit, Yas Island  
© Aldar

Despite its rapid expansion, relics of Abu Dhabi's rich cultural history still dot the landscape. The 200-year-old Al Maqtaa Fort, once used as a watch house, offers visitors a museum and a selection of craft stalls. While the Hili Archaeological Gardens, only 10 kilometres from Al Ain, boast an expanse of beautiful gardens and is home to the region's largest selection of Bronze Age and Iron Age sites.

Of course, it would be remiss for a visitor to neglect splendours of the retail kind. The city centre is home to more than 18 shopping malls with the crowning glory being the Abu Dhabi Mall, only minutes away from the city. Raymond Weil and Tiffany & Co cater to those seeking sparkly souvenirs, and if apparel, homewares and cosmetics are on your shopping list, 220 international brand stores ranging from Adidas to Bang & Olufsen are available.

While the slick and cosmopolitan 21st century incarnation of Abu Dhabi appears a very different place to pre-1950s living, some things remain surprisingly similar. No, the Abu Dhabi of old did not offer events such as the 2010 Gourmet Abu Dhabi Festival, which features a host of Michelin-star chefs, but the ready supply of local and high quality seafood has been spoiling visitors since long before the discovery of oil and the development of skyscrapers. Indeed the natural splendours of Abu Dhabi continue to thrive, while the new phase of Abu Dhabi's progress continues to inspire. **w**

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Arabic teapot sculpture.  
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