

# DESERT SAFARIS & DAY TRIPS

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## DESERT SAFARIS

It may be one of the most unurbanised countries in the world, but the United Arab Emirates is extremely proud of its Bedouin heritage and its people retain a strong affinity for the desert.

In the pre-oil age, life was harsh for Bedouin tribes in what was then the Trucial States. Food and water were difficult to obtain and living conditions were very simple, and uncomfortable at the height of summer. Bedouins would live in tents made from goat or camel hair, dig for water, and use falcons to hunt for birds and hares to supplement their basic diet of dates and camel milk. Those living on settlements had to pool their resources in order to survive, and a sense of community spirit imbued Bedouins with the qualities of hospitality and generosity. Soon after the discovery of oil, the government built modern houses, roads, schools and hospitals for Dubai's desert-dwellers, but the traditions and culture of life in the desert – from falconry to song and dance – remain intact.

A trip to the desert is an essential part of any Dubai holiday. If you can get some distance from the main road, the emptiness, enormity and tranquillity of the landscape can be breathtaking, with the yellow ochre dunes rippling gently in the wind and undulating as far as the eye can see. The country's biggest sand dune, Moreeb Hill, is in Liwa, on the edge of the vast expanse known as Rub'

Al-Khali, the Empty Quarter. If you've read *Arabian Sands*, Wilfred Thesiger's mesmerising account of his journeys across the Empty Quarter and experiences living with nomadic Bedouins, a trip to Liwa will bring the book to life. That middle-of-nowhere satisfaction offered by the Empty Quarter is harder to come by when you're close to Dubai, although there are plenty of quiet spots alongside the road to Hatta.

Many organised desert safaris are a little disappointing. The tour operators usually hire drivers rather than guides and they often know next to nothing about Bedouin culture or the desert environment. It's disappointing, but don't let this put you off. Even a personality-free tour of the desert will show you what's underneath all the new developments, and emphasise just how remarkable the city's rapid growth has been.

## ACTIVITIES

### Camping

There are no commercial campsites in Dubai but pitching up in the desert is a popular local pastime and great fun. If you've got a 4WD, the possibilities are fantastic. You can head to the windswept sand dunes of Liwa, the wadis near Hatta, the mountains of Ras al-Khaimah or the beaches of Fujairah. If you don't have a 4WD, you can still find some beautiful spots within walking distance of well-paved roads.

## DUBAI DESERT CONSERVATION RESERVE

Move over Dubailand – the largest project in Dubai to date, at least in terms of square kilometres, is one we hear practically nothing about. At 225 sq km, the [Dubai Desert Conservation Reserve](http://www.ddcr.org) (www.ddcr.org) accounts for five percent of the emirate's total land. It's a national park, where the primary goal is to protect the desert's biodiversity.

Dubai's approach to environmentalism is characteristically commercial. The DDCR is managed and funded by an airline – a major supplier of climate change – and its super-luxurious resort inside the reserve. But Emirates, who initiated the project, have done a spectacularly good job on the DDCR and now other countries are studying Al-Maha as a model for luxury sector eco-tourism. Since its establishment in 1999, the reserve has reintroduced mountain gazelles and sand gazelles to Dubai's desert, and the Arabian oryx, which almost disappeared completely a few decades ago, now number over 300 and love nothing more than sitting next to Al-Maha's infinity pools.

The DDCR is divided into four zones. In the first zone, all human intervention is prohibited, and in the second only very limited operations are allowed to take place. The third zone is only open to resort guests and the fourth is open to a small number of desert tour operators including [Arabian Adventures \(p169\)](#), [Alpha Tours \(p169\)](#) and [Lama Dubai \(p170\)](#). If you can't afford a villa at Al-Maha – and very few people can – going on a tour with one of these companies is the only way you'll get in.



## THE FRAGILE DESERT

An unfortunate consequence of the rapid growth of Dubai's tourism industry is that the desert is being damaged. It is an extremely fragile ecosystem and home to hundreds of species. In the parts of the desert where topsoil has been damaged by 4WDs, very little lives or grows. The Bedouin people have always had a huge amount of respect for the desert, but the desert is getting scarcer as the development of Dubai continues apace. The biggest problem is pollution. Hundreds of camels die every year due to eating plastic bags carelessly dumped in the desert. The lumps of calcified plastic frequently found in the stomachs of dead camels can weigh up to 60kg.

By supporting the [Dubai Desert Conservation Reserve](#) (p166) and limiting the area that desert safari companies can operate in to the environs of Al-Awir, the government is taking important steps to protect the environment. To do your bit, stick to tracks wherever possible when driving off-road and avoid damaging vegetation. Don't drive in *wadis* because these are important sources of drinking water and can be polluted by oil and grease from cars. And take your rubbish home with you.

It should go without saying that a camping trip between May and September is likely to be extremely uncomfortable – summer nights in the Emirates are hot and humid. Make sure you are adequately equipped. You should carry a fully-charged mobile phone for your safety, all the necessary maps (and navigation equipment if you're going off-road), sunscreen, insect repellent and plenty of water. If you go camping in December or January, make sure you're prepared for cold night-time weather.

Some of the best destinations for camping are Huwaylat, a tiny village surrounded by *wadis*; Qarn Nazwa, a rocky outcrop in the desert; Jebel Rawdah, a mountain near the Omani border in an area known as 'Death Valley'; and Khor Khalba, renowned for its beautiful mangrove forests and excellent bird-watching. It's worth picking up Darius Zandi's excellent guide *Off-Road in the Emirates*. It has the most accurate, up-to-date and detailed directions of any of the guides around.

## Off-Road Driving

Off-road driving in the desert, sometimes known as dune-bashing, is hugely popular in Dubai. At weekends, the city's traffic-tired workers zip down the Dubai–Hatta road and unleash their pent-up energy on the nearby sand dunes. The best known of these dunes has been nicknamed 'Big Red', and this ruby-red heap of sand halfway to Hatta is heaven for petrolheads. Pitting your 2½ tonnes of machinery against this giant clenched fist of a dune is thrilling, although you won't be doing the environment any favours (see boxed text, [above](#)).

All the major car hire companies (p179) can provide 4WD vehicles. Expect to pay in the region of Dh800 for 24 hours in the company

of a Toyota Land Cruiser or a Jeep Cherokee, plus CDW (Collision Damage Waiver) of Dh100, an extra Dh20 for personal insurance, and an extra Dh50 if you require comprehensive insurance. For more information on car insurance, see p179.

If you're driving off-road for the first time, you should ideally travel as part of an entourage, with other cars and drivers providing safety in numbers. You'll also need up-to-date maps (Explorer Publishing's *Off-Road Map*, Dh30, is as detailed as they get), a tow rope, a spade, a shovel and plenty of water. Don't be overambitious – even if you're an expert off-road driver, your car may not be able to handle the biggest bumps.

We strongly recommend a few hours of training before you drive off-road for the first time. Knowledge of the basics will give you the confidence to drive safely on unpredictable terrain.

## OFF-ROAD DRIVING INSTRUCTION

On all courses drivers must be over 25 and hold an appropriate driving licence that is valid for at least another year.

**Al Futtaim Training Centre** (Map pp56–7; ☎ 285 0455; www.traininguae.com; Al-Garhoud, Deira) One-day desert driving courses are Dh300 per person or Dh450 for two people. Additional passengers are charged at Dh150 per person. The centre doesn't provide training vehicles, so you'll need your own car.

**Arabian Adventures** (Map pp72–3; ☎ 303 4888; www.arabian-adventures.com; Emirates Holidays Bldg, Sheikh Zayed Rd) This company runs desert driving courses to help get you off the road safely. A half-day course taught by an experienced desert driver costs Dh1990 and a full-day is Dh2890, and these prices cover four people in the vehicle.

**Emirates Driving Institute** (Map pp56–7; ☎ 263 1100; www.edi-uae.com; Near Al-Bustan Center, Al-Qusais, Deira) The EDI's desert driving courses are very thorough

and offer fantastic value for money. A full-day course in one of its vehicles costs Dh200 (Dh250 on Fridays) and includes lunch. There's a maximum of four students per class.

## Camel Riding

If you're on your first trip to the Middle East, a short camel ride is pretty much compulsory. It's cheesy, clichéd and ever-so-slightly uncomfortable, but a souvenir shot of you and your humped pal will delight your family back home and do wonders for your Facebook profile. If you visit during the Dubai Shopping Festival, it's likely you'll find a couple of sad sack camels moping around Heritage Village (p58) to provide tourists with photo opportunities. Pretty much all the desert safari operators, as well as Al-Hadheerah restaurant at Bab al-Shams (p160), can arrange for you to spend a couple of minutes on a camel's back. If you'd like to develop a more meaningful relationship with a camel, many of the tour operators listed in Organised Tours ([below](#)) can arrange one-hour rides in the desert.

## Sandboarding/Skiing

Where else in the world can you ski on snow in the morning and ski on sand in the afternoon? Sandboarding and sand-skiing are very similar to snowboarding and skiing, only slower, slipperier and scratchier. While sand-skiing has yet to really take off, sandboarding now has its own world championships – do a search on YouTube for the dazzling highlights.

To start sand-slaloming, **Desert Rangers** (Map pp72–3; ☎ 340 2408; www.desertrangers.com; Dubai Garden Centre, Sheikh Zayed Rd) organises sandboarding safaris (adult/child Dh195/135) most mornings of the week. **Net Tours & Travels** (Map pp56–7; ☎ 266 6655; www.nettoursdubai.com; Al-Bakhit Centre, Abu Baker al-Siddiq Rd) runs regular sand-skiing trips (adult/child Dh190/165).

## ORGANISED TOURS

At first glance, there's little to choose between most of the desert safari operators in Dubai. They all offer daily half-day trips that begin in the middle of the afternoon and end at around 10pm. These rarely stray from a time-tested formula: an hour or so of dune driving, a visit to a camel farm, and a buffet dinner with all the anticipated extras – belly dancing, *sheesha*, henna tattoos and camel rides. Most companies also offer full-day tours, adding the Hajar Mountains or Hatta to the usual half-

day schedule. If the weather's pleasant, we suggest you spend a little extra (but much less than the cost of a night in a hotel in Dubai) and opt for an overnight safari – there's nothing like sleeping under the stars.

Although tour operators require a licence from the DTCM (Department of Tourism and Commerce Marketing), sometimes it feels like everybody with a 4WD is whizzing people across the dunes near Al-Awir. There are so many operators now it's possible to find desert safaris for under Dh150, but be warned – you hear stories about bigger problems than merely chewy kebabs and ungainly Eastern European belly dancers, which, by the way, are both to be wholly expected. If you opt for a cut-price tour, you're likely to return home in one piece (although you might want to check when booking that the driver has passed the off-road test and been certified by the police), but you're very unlikely to have any burning questions about Bedouin culture satisfactorily answered.

Knight Tours is the best option if you want to learn about Bedouin life. It can arrange falconry demonstrations on request. Otherwise Alpha Tours, Arabian Adventures and Lama Dubai have the edge over the competition because they have access to the less crowded sands of the Dubai Desert Conservation Reserve. The following tour operators are all reputable.

**Alpha Tours** (☎ 294 9888; www.alphatoursdubai.com) Alpha Tours is one of the few operators allowed access to the Dubai Desert Conservation Reserve and its Bedouin camps are particularly well maintained. It offers half-day (adult/child Dh260/190) and overnight (adult/child Dh350/250, minimum five people) tours, which both include dune driving, a visit to a camel farm, and dinner with belly dancing, *sheesha* and henna painting.

**Arabian Adventures** (Map pp72–3; ☎ 303 4888; www.arabian-adventures.com; Emirates Holidays Bldg, Sheikh Zayed Rd) Part of the Emirates group, Arabian Adventures is one of the most dependable tour operators in town, although it doesn't offer discounted prices for children. The standard desert safari (Dh310) kicks off at 2.30pm daily and includes a visit to a camel farm, a brief dune drive, access to the Dubai Desert Conservation Reserve, and a dinner including *sheesha*, camel rides and a belly dancer. The full-day desert safari (Dh325) departs on Tuesday and Friday and covers the *wadis* of the Hajar Mountains as well as Fossil Rock. The overnight safari (Dh450) includes everything

## BEATING THE DRUM

Here's an environmentally friendly, social and entertaining way of seeing the desert – join a drum circle. **Dubai Drums** ([www.dubaidrums.com](http://www.dubaidrums.com)) hosts regular full-moon drum circles (adult/child Dh150/50) in desert camps. These sessions are led by Atsu, a Ghanaian master drummer, and usually last several hours and occasionally until the early hours of the morning – look out for the near-legendary all-nighter events. Drums and a BBQ dinner are provided.

offered in the standard desert-safari package, plus tents, sleeping bags and breakfast the following morning.

**Hormuz Tourism** ([Map pp54-5](http://Map pp54-5); ☎ 2280668; [www.hormuztourism.com](http://www.hormuztourism.com); Bin Jarsh Bldg, Fish Roundabout, Deira) Most companies run three or four different tours. Hormuz offers no fewer than 48 Dubai days out, so if you fancy crab hunting, hot air ballooning or horse riding you're in luck. The bestseller, of course, remains the bog-standard desert safari (adult/child Dh180/130), but the company also does overnight safaris (adult/child Dh350/275), camel riding (adult/child Dh225/150) and sand-skiing (adult/child Dh160/120).

**Knight Tours** ([Map pp72-3](http://Map pp72-3); ☎ 04-343 7725; [www.knighttours.co.ae](http://www.knighttours.co.ae); Al-Wadi Bldg, Sheikh Zayed Rd) Knight Tours is the only operator we could find that employs Emirati guides. The company's owner is a UAE national with Bedouin roots and his company's philosophy of giving tourists an authentic experience can make a real difference if you want to learn about activities such as falconry and camel breeding. Half-day (adult/child Dh220/110) and full-day (adult/child Dh450/225, minimum four people) tours end up at Knight's attractive 'Bedouin Village', where guests can smoke *sheesha*, get henna tattoos and try on traditional dress. Knight earns bonus points for ditching the belly dancing – it's never been part of the culture in this part of the world and doesn't belong in a Bedouin camp.

**Lama Tours** ([Map pp64-5](http://Map pp64-5); ☎ 334 4330; [www.lama.ae](http://www.lama.ae); Al-Sayegh Bldg, Oud Metha Rd, Bur Dubai) Lama provides the full gamut of desert tours and has access to the Dubai Desert Conservation Reserve. Its safari (adult/child Dh245/185) includes dune driving, camel rides, *sheesha* and a buffet dinner. The company also offers overnight desert safaris (adult/child Dh380/220), tours of the Hajar Mountains (adult/child Dh280/220) and East Coast trips (adult/child Dh200/100).

**Net Tours & Travels** ([Map pp56-7](http://Map pp56-7); ☎ 266 6655; [www.nettoursdubai.com](http://www.nettoursdubai.com); Al-Bakhit Centre, Abu Baker al-Siddiq Rd) One of the longest-established tour operators in the region, Net Tours offer sand-skiing in the region, Net Tours offer sand-skiing (adult/child Dh190/165) and half-day camel treks (adult/child Dh330/240), as well as the usual half-day (adult/child Dh275/200), full-day (adult/child Dh320/220) and overnight (adult/child Dh425/330) desert tours. The overnight trips include breakfast and a Hatta excursion.

**Orient Tours** ([Map pp56-7](http://Map pp56-7); ☎ 282 8238; [www.orienttours.ae](http://www.orienttours.ae); Al-Garhoud Rd, Deira) Having been around for quarter of a century, Orient is the granddaddy of the Dubai tourism industry and can be relied upon for an efficient, if predictable, whiz around the desert. It's one of the few Dubai operators that organises trips to Liwa upon request (Dh1800 per car, minimum two cars per trip). The half-day (adult/child Dh290/205) desert safari includes the usual dune drive, camel farm, sandboarding and dinner, while every Tuesday a full-day trip (adult/child Dh310/230) includes a visit to the village of Falaj al-Mualla.

## DAY TRIPS

Dubai's relentless drive to create the tallest, longest, biggest and best versions of just about everything has made it the pin-up boy of 21st-century urban development. But while the mad scientists of the city get ever closer to complete domination of the Guinness Book of Records, some of the villages and towns a short drive away resemble the dioramas of yesteryear at the Dubai Museum. Get some distance from the city and pass tiny roadside mosques, date palms burdened with fruit, camels wandering down the middle of highways, and pristine white-sand beaches with barely a hotel in sight.

These couple of day trips are selected to add another dimension to your Dubai experience. To the southeast, Al-Ain is a temperate, convivial and verdantly green city, and to the east, the coastal road between Dibba and Fujairah boasts some of the most spectacular scenery in the Emirates. To find out more about what the United Arab Emirates has to offer visitors, see Lonely Planet's *Oman, UAE & Arabian Peninsula* guide.

## THE OASIS RETREAT

The UAE's third city is a breath of fresh air. Compared to Dubai, life in Al-Ain seems

uncomplicated and un rushed. There are no skyscrapers here, no megaprojects, no big shopping malls – and no attitude. People are genuinely friendly and welcoming and are determined to show visitors why they are so proud of their city.

It's the birthplace of Sheikh Zayed, and Al-Ain has benefited from his patronage and passion for greening the desert; it's famed for its lush gardens and date palm oases, as well as its myriad forts, fascinating museums and lively markets. The desert is never far from this capital of the eastern region of Abu Dhabi emirate. The winding road up Jebel Hafeet – considered one of the best roads for driving in the world – offers a magnificent view of the Empty Quarter in Saudi Arabia, as well as a hotel perched on a precipice. In summer, temperatures up here can be as much as 10°C lower than the temperature in Dubai. Buraimi is across the border in Oman and is nowhere near as affluent, a telling indicator of what the presence of ample reserves of oil can do for a national economy.

If you visit Al-Ain in early summer, one of the things you will be struck by is the enormous number of date clusters hanging off the palms that line many of the streets and parks. The ubiquitous date palm has always held a vital place in the life of Emiratis. For centuries dates were one of the staple foods of the Bedouin, along with fish, camel meat and camel milk. Not a great deal of variety you might think, but consider the fact that there are over 80 different kinds of dates in the UAE. Dates are roughly 70% sugar, which prevents them from rotting, making them edible for longer than other fruits. Apart from providing a major foodstuff, the date palm was also used to make all kinds of useful items. Its trunk was used to make columns and ceilings for houses, while its fronds (called *areesh*) were used to make roofs and walls.

Al-Ain can be confusing for the visitor to navigate. Its small population is thinly spread over a large area and it can take up to an hour to drive across the city. There's never any traffic, but all the streets look the same and there are an absurd number of roundabouts – hundreds of them – hindering your progress every hundred yards or so. To make matters a little easier, the local authorities have erected brown signs throughout the town directing traffic to hotels and major tourist attractions.

The **Al-Ain Palace Museum** (☎ 03-764 1595; Zayed ibn Sultan St; admission Dh3; ☞ 8.30am-7.30pm Tue-Sun,

3-7.30pm Fri), situated on the edge of the Al-Ain oasis in the centre of town, is a good place to start your exploration of the city. The majestic fort was the birthplace of the UAE's late president, Sheikh Zayed, and is one of the best museums in the country. Don't miss Sheikh Zayed's *majlis*, and be sure to check out the display of photographs of Al-Ain in the 1960s – it's unrecognisable. There are many splendid rooms, decorated as they probably used to be, and beautiful, verdant gardens.

It's also worth briefly visiting the charmingly old-fashioned **Al-Ain National Museum** (☎ 03-764 1595; Zayed ibn Sultan St; admission Dh3; ☞ 8.30am-7.30pm Tue-Sun, 3-7.30pm Fri). Highlights include impressive archaeological displays and artefacts from the 3rd millennium BC tombs at Hili and Umm al-Nar. There are also some black-and-white photos tracing the development of Al-Ain, Abu Dhabi and Liwa from 1962 to the present day, beautiful silver Bedouin jewellery, traditional costumes and a beguiling circumcision display.

A wander through the atmospheric **Al-Ain Oasis** is a highlight of a visit to the city. With its shady stands of date palms, labyrinthine paths and traditional *jalaj* systems, it's a great place to spend an hour or so, particularly in hot weather, when it stays deliciously cool. It's also a great place to relax, as the only thing disturbing the extraordinary tranquillity of the oasis is the regular call to prayer from the small mosques within its boundaries. Note that the entrance to the oasis that is near the museum and fort closes at sunset; you will need to use one of the two other entrances after this time.

Don't leave Al-Ain without driving up **Jebel Hafeet**. This majestic, jagged 1160m limestone mountain rears out of the plain south of Al-Ain. Near the top of the mountain is the **Mercure Grand Hotel** (☎ 03-783 8888; [www.mercure.com](http://www.mercure.com)), where the views are great but the food is lousy. To get to the mountain, head south from the clocktower roundabout and turn right at Khalid ibn Sultan St, then follow the signs.

On your way back to Dubai, pop into the **Hili Gardens & Archaeological Park** in Al-Ain. The main attraction is the Round Structure, a building dating from the 3rd millennium BC. It has two porthole entrances and is decorated with relief carvings of animals and people. Although this structure is locally referred to as a tomb, it may not have been a tomb at all. No bones were ever found here, just remnants of pottery, and there are suggestions that it may have been a temple. The

## TRANSPORT: AL-AIN

Distance from Dubai 160km

Direction Southeast

Travel time 90 minutes

**Car** From the centre of Dubai, take the exit next to the World Trade Centre in the direction of Za'abeel. From here, there are plenty of signs directing you all the way to Al-Ain.

**Public transport** Al-Ghazal run minibuses between Al-Ain (Dh20) and **Bur Dubai Bus Station** (p178) every hour from 6.30am to 11.30pm. Al-Ain's bus station is off the Al-Murabba (coffee) roundabout opposite the Lulu Centre. A taxi to or from Dubai will cost around Dh150.

nearby **Hili Fun City** (☎ 03-784 5542; admission Dh10-15; ☎ 4-10pm Sun-Wed, 9am-10pm Thu-Fri, Sat closed, Tue-Wed women only) has to be seen to be believed. It's the ultimate antidote to Dubai's brilliant ambition: a dilapidated, dirty, weed-ridden, archaeology-themed 'fun park'. Most of the rides collapsed years ago; parts of the roller-coaster are scattered on the ground below, yet it continues to charge an admission fee and attract the odd glum-looking family. Photographers will have a ball trying to capture its uniquely apocalyptic atmosphere. Astonishingly, it's still described as 'the Disneyland of the Middle East' on some of Al-Ain's tourist literature.

## Eating

**LUCE Ristorante** (03-768 6686; InterContinental Al-Ain; mains Dh55; ☎ 7.30pm-2am) LUCE eschews the staid atmosphere of most Al-Ain restaurants for a smart, colourful and clubby vibe. The menu of pizzas, pastas and salads will please most tastes, but conversationalists be warned: the music gets loud when the DJ comes on at midnight.

**Al Diwan Restaurant** (☎ 03-764 4445; Khalifa St; mains Dh22; ☎ 11am-2am) A big, bright eatery, with floor-to-ceiling glass windows overlooking the busy street, Al-Diwan is popular with locals, who love the delicious Iranian and Arabic cuisine. Grilled kebabs are its speciality and the juicy, garlicky *shish tawooq* is particularly good.

**Grand Café** (☎ 03-766 0226; Khalifa St; sandwiches Dh10-16; ☎ 10am-midnight) This brightly painted 1950s-inspired coffee lounge serves excellent coffee (Dh10), popular continental breakfasts (Dh14 to Dh16) and the best toasted cheese-and-tomato sandwiches we've ever tasted. It

also has wireless internet access (Dh10 per hour).

## Sleeping

**Al-Ain Rotana Hotel** (☎ 03-754 5111; alain.hotel@rotana.com; Zayed ibn Sultan St; d Dh450; ☎ ☎) If you decide to stay the night, the central Al-Ain Rotana is the best choice in town with plush, spacious rooms equipped with all the mod cons and the city's best eateries, including the reliable Trader Vic's.

**Hotel Mercure Grand Jebel Hafeet** (☎ 03-783 8888; resa@mercure-alain.ae; Jebel Hafeet; d Dh430) The best time to stay at the Mercure is in summer, when temperatures at the hotel, located 915m up Jebel Hafeet, are noticeably cooler than those in Dubai. The swimming pool is fantastic, while the rooms are very ordinary and the restaurants disappointing.

## THE COASTAL DRIVE

An early start is required if you're going to see the coast in one day and have some time to relax on the beach. If you do this excursion on a Friday, you can catch the bull-butting (opposite) in Fujairah on the way home, although the beaches are likely to be much less crowded during the week.

At first, the road from Dubai to Fujairah is strangely desolate, a dune landscape punctuated only by power poles. But the scenery completely transforms when the grey, jagged Hajar Mountains come into view. The road slices through this dramatic scenery until it reaches the coast, where the Hajars become a stunning backdrop to the glorious blue of the Arabian Sea and pristine stretches of beach, although development is starting to take its toll on this once clear stretch of sand.

About 30km before Fujairah on the road from Al-Dhaid, you'll drive through famous **Friday Market** (Souq Al-Juma) in **Masafi**. Contrary to its name, the market is actually open every day from 8am to 10pm. Here you'll find rugs, fruit and vegetables, household goods and some souvenirs, and though the quality of goods isn't high, it's worth 30 minutes of your time.

The charming fishing village of **Dibba**, also known as Ras Dibba, is enshrined in Islamic history as the site of one of the great battles of the Ridda wars, the reconquest of Arabia by Muslim armies in the generation after the death of the Prophet. Today, Dibba is unique in that it's the only town ruled by two sheikhs

## BULLFIGHTING, FUJAIRAH STYLE *Terry Carter & Lara Dunston*

We knew we had arrived at the site of the Fujairah bullfights when we saw what appeared to be a thousand Land Cruisers abandoned at odd angles at the side of the road. It was 4.30pm on a Friday afternoon and the bullring was surrounded by local Emiratis (both men and women) four-deep around the ring, which measured about 100m across. We'd been to bullfights in Mexico, Spain and Portugal, but had never seen anything quite like this, and it felt more than a little surreal. While you could sit happily in the stands and order a *cerveza* (beer) at a Spanish bullfight, with little risk of coming face to face with the sad, snarling bull, here you passed the bull on your way to the ring, praying to any god who'd listen that the knot in the rope securing the bull to the utility truck was secure.

There's no fanfare here, no picadors, no matadors, and no deaths as a metaphor for life. The contest is blunt-horned bull against blunt-horned bull. They push each other around until one exits the ring or loses the will to fight and wanders off. One tradition has it that the Portuguese introduced bullfighting to Fujairah, though other sources say that the bullfights predate the arrival of Islam. A more colourful legend holds that long ago two young men came into conflict over their desire to marry the same woman, so their families decided to let battling bulls settle the matter.

It's kind of ironic that in this version of the bullfight, spectators are at more risk than the bull, as the second fight of the afternoon proved. The two black bulls were tied up on opposite sides of the ring when the MC, a national guy with a megaphone and voice of sandpaper, introduced the next fight. The handlers released the bulls and they were soon in the centre of the ring butting heads, their powerful necks straining. The weaker of the two bulls started going backwards and the more powerful one pushed harder and harder, sending both bulls out of the ring and into a group of national men sitting on a picnic blanket. Dirt, drinks and *dishdashas* flying in all directions, the two bulls made their triumphant exit from the ring. Bulls one, locals nil.

To witness this spectacle, look for an unassuming dirt area on the southern outskirts of town, just before Al-Rughailat Bridge. The butting takes place between 4pm and 7pm on Fridays, and not during Eid al-Fitr, Eid al-Adha or Ramadan (see p185).

and a sultan, because Dibba is actually comprised of the three seaside villages, Dibba Muhlabb (Fujairah), Dibba Hisn (Sharjah) and Dibba Bayah (Oman), and you can walk or drive freely across the Omani border. With its palm-fringed beach and low-rise buildings with colourful painted doors, it is a joy to wander around. The town's new mosque, spectacularly sited in front of the mountains, is one of the most impressive on the East Coast.

The reefs and waters between Dibba and Khor Fakkan offer some of the best diving and snorkelling in the UAE, with world-class coral and marine life. One of the reasons locals and expats maintain an almost religious devotion to the Sandy Beach Hotel & Resort (p174) is the fact that it is built in front of Snoop Island (named after its resemblance to the cartoon character), a lovely, safe reef where guests can snorkel. The **Sandy Beach Diving Centre** (☎ 09-244 5050; www.sandybm.com; Sandy Beach Hotel & Resort; ☎ 8am-5pm) offers a variety of dive trips catering to experienced divers and novices, and knows the coast inside out. Tanks and weights are included in the dive price. If you have your own equipment, a trip to the reef costs Dh75 for the boat trip or Dh50 for beach entry, while a single boat dive including all equipment costs Dh250.

The small fishing village of **Badiyah** (also split Bidiyah and Bidiya), 8km north of Khor Fakkan but in the Fujairah emirate, is one of

the oldest villages in the Gulf. Archaeological digs show that it has been settled continuously since the 3rd millennium BC. Today, it is known mainly for its **mosque** (☎ 7am-10pm), a charming earth-coloured structure of stone, mud brick and gypsum built between 1446 and 1668. The building's roof, with its four pointed domes supported by an internal pillar, is particularly distinctive and its simple interior has a lovely contemplative feel. Thought to be the oldest mosque in the UAE, it now functions mainly as a tourist attraction. Non-Muslims may enter if they are appropriately dressed and have taken off their shoes, but women must cover their heads. The mosque is built into a low hillside along the main road just north of the village. On the hillside above and behind it are several ruined watchtowers, from which it's possible to admire what must be the most picture-perfect view in the UAE, featuring the Hajar Mountain range to the west, the gloriously blue ocean speckled with small islands to the east and a small palm plantation with *falaj* directly below.

Heading 8km back south again is **Khor Fakkan**, home to one of the most attractive harbours and busiest shipping ports in the UAE. With a fabulous white-sand beach and a bustling Corniche with beautiful gardens, which is popular for morning and afternoon strolls, it's only the 'dry' aspect of Khor Fakkan (it's part of the

## TRANSPORT: EAST COAST

**Distance from Dubai** 130km

**Direction** East

**Travel time** 90 minutes

**Car** Take the E11 towards Sharjah and then head in the direction of Al-Dhaid, on the E88. At Masafi you can take the E89 road heading north to Dibba or south to Fujairah. We recommend going north first to Dibba and then driving south along the coast.

**Public transport** Minibuses leave from the Deira taxi and minibus station (Map pp54–5) every half hour and cost Dh25. It will cost just over Dh200 if you go by taxi. A taxi from Fujairah to Al-Aqah beach costs around Dh75. Unfortunately there's no public transport leaving Fujairah to Dubai.

conservative Sharjah emirate) that makes it less appealing to international tourists.

The town of Fujairah itself is unlikely to delay your journey back to Dubai. But the 16th-century **Fujairah Fort**, which sits on a small rocky outcrop overlooking Fujairah's old village and date palm oasis, is floodlit at night and looks splendid. The old village is also being restored and reconstructed, and it's possible to walk around the site and take a close look at the architecture of some of the buildings, which really are quite beautiful.

## Eating

**Taj Khorfakkan Restaurant** (☎ 09-237 0040; off Corniche, Khor Fakkan; mains Dh22; 🕒 11am-midnight) Traditionally decorated in a Raj style, Taj serves up home-cooked Indian and Chinese dishes, with the spicy chicken tikka masala (Dh20) and myriad biryanis (Dh15 to Dh28) proving popular. The restaurant is opposite Al-Safeer Centre.

**Waves** (☎ 09-244 9888; Fujairah Rotana Resort & Spa, Al-Aqah Beach; mains Dh60; 🕒 noon-5pm & 7-10.30pm) For an excellent lunch overlooking the beach, the Fujairah Rotana Resort's restaurant is the best bet on the coast. Expect unfussy, perfectly cooked meat and fish dishes and a wide-ranging wine list.

## Sleeping

Many people camp on the stretch of beach next to the enormous Le Meridien, providing an incongruous contrast in accommodation choices.

**Fujairah Rotana Resort & Spa** (☎ 09-244 9888; fujairah.resort@rotana.com; classic room Dh650, ocean front room Dh800) In stark contrast to the enormous Meridien hotel next door, the low-rise Rotana fits congruously into the mountainous landscape. Unsurprisingly, activity centres around the giant-sized swimming pool and the fantastic beach. It's worth spending the extra money on the ocean front rooms – these open straight out onto the beach. Most water sports are free of charge to guests.

**Sandy Beach Hotel & Resort** (☎ 09-244 5555; www.sandybm.com; d Dh400, ocean view Dh550, 1-/2-bedroom chalet Dh600/800) Located 6km north of Badiyah, near the village of Al-Aqha, this refreshingly old-fashioned beach resort is beloved by European and Arab expats who prefer its laid-back charm to the ritzy Meridien up the road. The high-ceiling rooms in the hotel wing are basic but spacious, if just a tad run-down. The chalets are popular with families, who put the private outdoor barbecues to good use in the evenings. There's a verdant garden and a children's playground, but most people come for the cream-sand beach (beachcombers will love the seashells), the diving, and snorkelling around Snoopy Island.

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