

# United Arab Emirates

## إتحاد الإمارات العربية

While the United Arab Emirates (UAE) these days appears to be little more than a stage for Dubai to strut its increasingly crazy stuff, there's far more to this fabulous little federation than Disneyesque dioramas. The UAE is a contradictory destination, an Islamic state where the DJs' turntables stop spinning just before the muezzins' morning call to prayer can be heard, and where a traditional Bedouin lifestyle and customs continue alongside a very Western version of rampant consumerism. While many visitors marvel at the fantastic (in the true sense of the word) hotel and real estate projects, the real wonder is how the savvy sheikhs manage to harmonise such disparate and seemingly opposing forces.

For Western visitors, the UAE is a very safe Middle East destination, with the comforts of home and a taste of the exotic. Here you can max out those credit cards at designer clothes shops, laze in front of a gorgeous beach and azure seas, and sip a cocktail as you plan which fine dining restaurant to book and which international DJ to dance to until the early morning. On a less hedonistic stay, you can soak up the atmosphere of the heritage areas, haggle over a Persian carpet, head out to the desert sands for a camel ride under a star-filled sky, or dive the coral-filled waters of the Gulf. Or simply mix up a blend of everything; after all, that's what makes the UAE unique.

### FAST FACTS

- **Official name** United Arab Emirates
- **Capital** Abu Dhabi
- **Area** 83,600 sq km
- **Population** 4.32 million
- **Country code** ☎ 971
- **Head of State** (President) Sheikh Khalifa bin Zayed al-Nahayan
- **Annual number of Western tourists**  
Six million
- **Stereotypes** Local sheikhs giving a royal wave from their limo
- **Surprises** Local sheikhs fanging in a Ferrari down Sheikh Zayed Rd



## HIGHLIGHTS

- **Dubai** (p387) Cruise across Dubai's chaotic creek in an *abra* (water taxi) – no matter the time of day, it never looks the same.
- **Abu Dhabi** (p417) Join the locals for an often steamy stroll along the city's stunning Corniche.
- **Sharjah** (p405) Admire the historic wind-tower architecture in the atmospheric heritage area.
- **Al-Ain** (p431) Lose yourself in the labyrinthine lanes of Al-Ain's shady date-palm oases.
- **Liwa** (p428) Wonder at the spectacle of the shifting sands that drift across the roads in the desert of Liwa.
- **Dibba** (p439) Count the coloured doors as you kick back in the low-key fishing town of Dibba.

## ITINERARIES

Also see the Itineraries chapter (p28) for further UAE itineraries.

- **Three days or less** With only three days, your time is best spent in Dubai. Follow our Dubai itinerary (p383) and check out Lonely Planet's *Best of Dubai* and *Dubai* city guides. Keen to see more of the country? Restrict your Dubai explorations to one day ambling around the bustling creek, surrounding souqs, and historic Shindagha and Bastakia areas. On day two, hire a car and drive to Al-Ain for some sublime desert scenery, date-palm oases, and a beautifully restored fort at Al-Ain Palace Museum. On day three, wander the narrow lanes of Sharjah's heritage and arts precinct, taking in its tiny museums, then shop the souqs.
- **One week** After a few days in flashy Dubai, focusing your time on both old and 'New Dubai', hire a car to explore more of this compact country. Drive to Abu Dhabi (p417) to experience an attractive Arabian city that operates at a much more leisurely pace than fast Dubai (see the itinerary, p421). Get an early start for the drive to the Liwa (p428) and some camel-spotting, spectacular desert landscapes, and date farms. The next day take the back road to verdant Al-Ain (p429) and return to Dubai the next day via Hatta (p402) and Sharjah (p404).

- **Two weeks** With two weeks, you can also explore the stunning east coast of the country. Follow the one-week itinerary above, but from Sharjah, drive along the coast via the interesting little towns of Ajman (p410), Umm al-Quwain (p412) and Ras al-Khaimah (p413) to Oman's Musandam Peninsula (p242), where you should spend a few days. From the Musandam, head south to Dibba (p439), which you could make your base for some east coast exploration, spending time at Khor Kalba (p433), Khor Fakkan (p436) and Fujairah (p433). If you're in the area on a Friday, don't miss the bull-butting event in Fujairah.
- **One month** Extend your stay in each town by a day or two. In Dubai, spend a day on the slopes at Ski Dubai (p391) and another recovering at the Oriental Hammam (p391). Sleep under the stars on an overnight desert safari from Abu Dhabi (p424) and do a diving course on the east coast at Sandy Beach Motel (p438). Laze on the beach for a couple of days at Fujairah's Al Aqah Beach Resort (p439) or Dibba's dramatically located Golden Tulip Resort (p439) then complete your trip with a stay at one of Dubai emirate's dreamy desert resorts, such as Al Maha (p402) or Bab Al Shams (p402).

## CLIMATE & WHEN TO GO

The best time to visit the UAE is between October and November and then February and March, when temperatures hang around the mid-20s and the humidity is under control. While December and January are generally considered the best months to go, the weather over the last couple of 'winters' has been unpredictable with conditions often cloudy, rainy and bleak. See p530 for climate charts.

This is also high season when most of the country's festivals, sporting events, and conferences are held, so you'll be paying rack rates for accommodation in Dubai and Abu Dhabi and will need to book well in advance. The Christmas and New Year period also gets busy, particularly on the east coast when European expat families want to get away.

Avoid the month of Ramadan if you possibly can: *iftar* (breaking the fast after sundown) is fun and it's a great way to

meet locals, and hotel rates are heavily discounted, but erratic business hours, dangerous driving and not being able to eat or drink in public during the day can make it hard going. A trip to the UAE in high summer (July and August) is simply a bad idea – the only advantage being heavy discounted hotels.

## HISTORY

### Early History

While the country doesn't appear rich in physical history, the earliest significant settlements in the UAE date back to the Bronze Age. In the 3rd millennium BC, a culture known as Umm al-Nar arose near modern Abu Dhabi. Umm al-Nar's influence extended well into the interior and down the coast to today's Oman. There were also settlements at Badiyah (near Fujairah) and at Rams (near Ras al-Khaimah) during the 3rd millennium BC.

The Persians and, to a lesser extent, the Greeks, were the next major cultural influences in the area. The Persian Sassanid Empire held sway until the arrival of Islam in AD 636 and another religion, Christianity, made a brief appearance in the form of the Nestorian Church, which had a monastery on Sir Baniyas Island, west of Abu Dhabi, in the 5th century.

### European Arrivals

During the Middle Ages, the Kingdom of Hormuz controlled much of the area, including the entrance to the Gulf, as well as most of the Gulf's trade. The Portuguese arrived in 1498 and by 1515 they had occupied Julfar (near Ras al-Khaimah) and built a customs house, where they taxed the Gulf's flourishing trade with India and the Far East. However, the Portuguese stayed on in the town only until 1633.

The rise of British naval power in the Gulf in the mid-18th century coincided with the rise of two important tribal confederations along the coast of the lower Gulf. These were the Qawassim and the Bani Yas, the ancestors of the rulers of four of the seven emirates that today make up the UAE.

The Qawassim, whose descendants now rule Sharjah and Ras al-Khaimah, were a seafaring clan based in Ras al-Khaimah. Their influence extended at times to the Persian side of the Gulf. This brought

them into conflict with the British, who had forged an alliance with the Al-Busaid tribe, the ancestors of today's rulers of Oman, to guarantee that the French could not take over their all-important sea routes to India. The Qawassim felt that the Al-Busaid had betrayed the region, and launched attacks on British ships to show that they weren't going to be as compliant. As a result, the British dubbed the area 'the Pirate Coast' and launched raids against the Qawassim in 1805, 1809 and 1811. In 1820 a British fleet destroyed or captured every Qawassim ship it could find, imposed a General Treaty of Peace on nine Arab sheikhdoms in the area and installed a garrison. This was the forerunner of a later treaty, the Maritime Truce, which was imposed by the British in 1835 and increased their power in the region. In 1853 the treaty was modified yet again, when it was named the Treaty of Peace in Perpetuity. It was at this time that the region became known as the Trucial Coast. In subsequent decades, the sheikhs of each tribal confederation signed agreements with the British under which they accepted formal British protection.

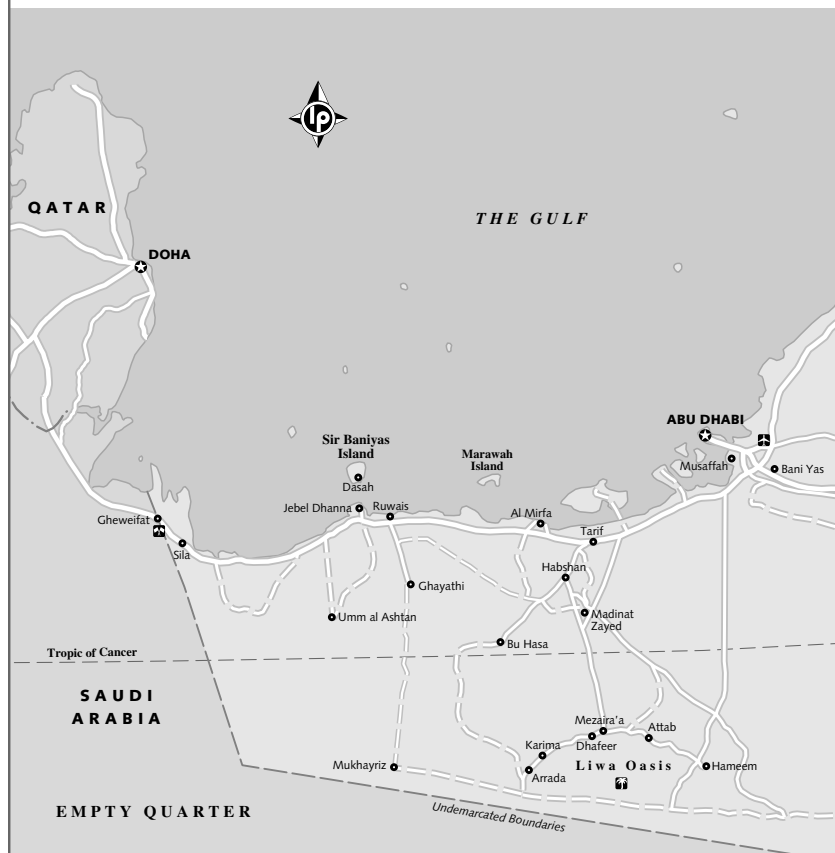
Throughout this period the main power among the Bedouin tribes of the interior was the Bani Yas tribal confederation, made up of the ancestors of the ruling families of modern Abu Dhabi and Dubai. The Bani Yas were originally based in Liwa, an oasis deep in the desert, but moved their base to Abu Dhabi in 1793. The Bani Yas divided into two main branches in the early 19th century when Dubai split from Abu Dhabi.

From 1853 until the discovery of oil, the region was a backwater, with the sheikhdoms nothing more than tiny enclaves of fishers, pearl divers and Bedu. Rivalries between the various rulers occasionally erupted into conflict, which the British tried to subdue. During this time the British also protected the federation from Saudi Arabia, which had ambitions to add the territory to its own.

### Black Gold

After the collapse of the world pearl market in the early 20th century, the coast had sunk into poverty. However, the sheikhs of Abu Dhabi, Dubai and Sharjah had already

## THE UNITED ARAB EMIRATES

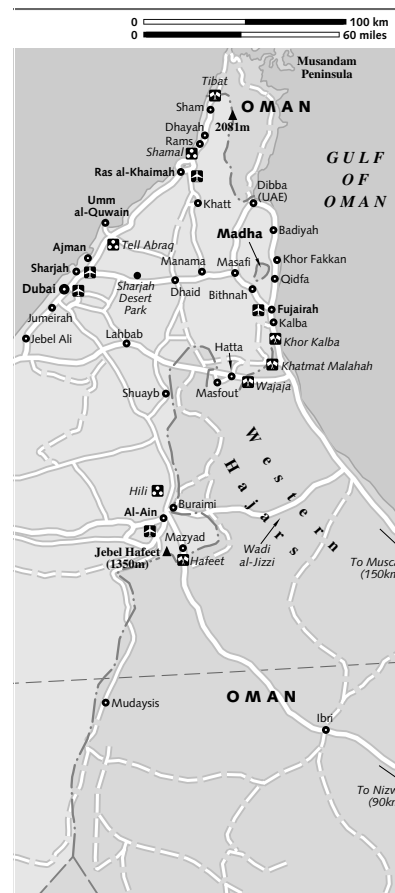


discussed oil exploration in the area, with Abu Dhabi's Sheikh Shakhbut granting the first of several oil concessions in 1939. The first cargo of crude left Abu Dhabi in 1962 and Dubai, which had been busy cementing its reputation as the region's busiest trading centre, exported its first oil in 1969. With the British hinting at an oddly timed exit from the Arabian Gulf in 1971, Abu Dhabi's ruler, Sheikh Zayed, set about negotiating with other sheikhdoms in the Trucial States to create one nation.

### Independence

The British had set up the Trucial States Council (the forerunner to today's ruling council) in 1951, and with the announce-

ment of their imminent departure, the original plan (announced in February 1968) was to form a federation including Bahrain, Qatar and the Trucial Coast. With some tough negotiating by Sheikh Zayed and some odd boundaries formed (such as the Omani enclaves, and Fujairah split between Fujairah, Sharjah and Oman), as well as Bahrain and Qatar deciding to drop out, the new country came into existence when six of the emirates united on 2 December 1971; Ras al-Khaimah joined the following year. While critics said the UAE wouldn't last, and with doubts about its future after the death of Sheikh Zayed in 2004, the UAE remains the only united Arab states in the region.



### GOVERNMENT & POLITICS

'Emirate' comes from the word 'emir' (ruler). In practice, the seven hereditary emirs of the UAE are called sheikhs. Though there is a federal government over which one of the sheikhs presides (the president), each ruler is completely sovereign within his emirate.

Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan al-Nahyan of Abu Dhabi was the president since the country was formed in 1971, a position he held until his death in 2004. Revered by his people, and often called 'father' by Emiratis, he commanded huge respect across the Middle East. Visitors to the UAE will no doubt see enormous posters of Sheikh Zayed in a pair of Ray Ban-style sunglasses, alongside a smiling Sheikh Maktoum bin

Rashid al-Maktoum, who was the ruler of Dubai and the country's vice-president and prime minister up until his death in January 2006. He was the eldest and most introspective of Sheikh Rashid ('the Father of Dubai') al-Maktoum's sons, and was appointed heir to the throne in 1958. Upon his death, the next in line, his younger brother Sheikh Mohammed, took over, and in his year or so in office has had an extraordinary impact.

The degree of power that the sheikhs should cede to the federal government has been a hot topic of debate ever since independence. The forum where these and other issues are discussed is the Supreme Council of Rulers, the highest body in the land, which comprises the ruler of each emirate. There is also a cabinet in which the posts are distributed among the emirates. Most of the Emirates population live in Abu Dhabi and Dubai, so their representatives hold most of these posts. In reality, most of the power in the country is concentrated in these two emirates – particularly Abu Dhabi – as they are the wealthiest in the federation.

The cabinet and Supreme Council are advised, but can't be overruled, by the Federation National Council (FNC). This is a consultative body whose members are now elected. At the last election eight women were elected to the FNC.

### ECONOMY

The UAE has the world's third-largest reserves of oil (with Abu Dhabi alone having 9%); unsurprisingly, this underpins the national economy, contributing approximately 28% of GDP. It is thought that at current levels of production, oil reserves will last for only another century, and, sensibly, the country is looking at other industry to take over from oil in the future. Dubai has handled this with particular foresight and its oil exports now only account for around 6%, with this reducing to a miniscule 1% by 2010. Through its development of healthy tourism, trade, manufacturing and construction industries, Dubai has become the most modern Middle East metropolis.

### PEOPLE The National Psyche

Yes, they wear different clothing and some of them are wealthy beyond our wildest dreams, but that's about as far as the

## BIGGER THAN BEN HUR

Following Dubai's lead, property and tourism developments are popping up all over the country. While the trend is still to go big (as in tall like the Burj al-Arab) others are going big (as in square kilometres like the Palm Island development off the coast). While we're not going to report on some of the sillier ideas that may never see the light of day, here are some that have more concrete (so to speak) foundations.

### Palm Island

Built on reclaimed land, this enormous development has added 120km of beach to the Dubai coastline. In the form of two palm-shaped islands, so far only some residents have been handed the keys to their condos. Looks good from an aircraft, the Sheik's helicopter, or Google Earth.

### Burj Dubai

Currently going up at a rate of a new floor every four days, Burj Dubai (Dubai Tower) is fast headed towards being the tallest building on the planet. Just how tall? No-one's saying, just in case someone else decides to usurp the Burj before it's had its moment close to the sun. Looks good from above where it resembles a *Hymenocallis* flower. From the ground it's just damn tall at the moment.

### Saadiyat Island

Abu Dhabi is turning one of its natural islands into the 'Island of Happiness'. What will make you happy? Perhaps a 'seven-star' hotel, golf courses and a 'Cultural City' (see boxed text, p422, featuring a space by Zaha Hadid and a Guggenheim designed by Frank Gehry. Given the architects, it should look good from any angle.

stereotype of Emiratis (known as 'nationals' or 'locals') stretches. Women, for instance, emerged from beneath their *shayla* (headscarf) long ago to take up educational opportunities and now hold mid- and high-level management positions in government and industry around the country. They wear the *abeyya* (a black cloak that covers the body) and *shayla* out of choice: this 'national dress', as they proudly call it, distinguishes them as Emiratis. And while there's some truth to the stereotype of shopping-obsessed 'Gulf Princesses', young Emirati women continually prove that they can be academic achievers and successful in the workplace. Part of the drive to succeed for the girls is that the vast majority of Emirati marriages are still arranged – there are very few exceptions. However, the young people see each other's photos, talk on the phone and increasingly 'meet' before the wedding night (even if it's via internet chat lines). Both can refuse to marry if they feel the person is not right for them, and women are increasingly doing this, working on their career and putting off marriage until they're in their late 20s,

when many in society consider them to be 'spinsters'.

The men often aren't the autocratic despotic rulers (of household or country) that many expect, either – it's the women who often rule the house in this manner! Emirati men have a strong sense of self-worth, which at times may appear as arrogance, but their business dealings with the outside world dictate that they be shrewd, urbane and open to different influences, while continuing to hold their proud Bedouin and Emirati heritage dear. They may not take these influences into their households wholesale, but the role of the patriarch is certainly changing because of it, and the next generation is going to be different again.

One thing that hasn't changed over decades or centuries is the notion of *wusta* (power and influence) in society. Basically, if you have the right networks (which generally means being born into one of the major tribes) you can get things done – whether it be clinching a massive business deal with the government or getting the best parking place at work. Flaunting *wusta* isn't really

done though: those who have *wusta* don't need to talk about it, while those who do claim to have it, generally don't.

## Lifestyle

The national household is generally the result of an arranged marriage, in most instances to a cousin or blood relative. The vast majority of national families have some type of home help – usually a Filipino, Malaysian or Indonesian housemaid, nanny and/or cook. Emirati households are generally segregated by gender, with separate women's and men's quarters. And while women can divorce their husbands, this is relatively rare. Families are usually large, with up to a dozen family members sharing the same house.

Non-*wusta* types – and that includes the 80% of the population that is not Emirati – have a very different lifestyle to nationals. The contentious 'guest workers' from the Indian subcontinent, Southeast Asia, Africa and more recently China, work for low wages and live in simple conditions, but earn far more than they could at home. They take most of the menial jobs in the country, largely in construction, but also functioning as cleaners, housemaids, taxi drivers and shop assistants, with the goal of saving enough money to buy a house or start a business back home. Conditions for these workers, especially those in the construction sector, has been much written about in the local and international press, and the government's reaction to complaints about conditions and safety have been swift, but generally seen as having mainly been prompted by the bad press.

The skills and training of Indians, and Arabs from elsewhere in the Middle East, have secured them better paid jobs in IT, the media, hospitality, government and the service sector, albeit at lower salaries than nationals. A booming economy in recent years has seen a surge of young people from all over the world, especially from Europe (the UK, Norway, Germany, the Baltic countries and Eastern Europe), South Africa and Australia, coming to Dubai to work in the media, tourism and hospitality industries, simply because the opportunities to gain experience and get ahead and live a multicultural life far outweigh any other disadvantages, such as long hours and few holidays.

Middle managers in the private sector are largely from the West, other Arab nations and India. They are paid well and treated better than the 'guest workers' and compensation comes in terms of income and 'the good life'.

## Population

There are an estimated 4.3 million people living in the UAE; about 20% are nationals. The population has been growing at an average of 5% per year over the past decade, bolstered by a high birth rate and ever-growing numbers of expatriate workers.

## RELIGION

Most Emiratis are Sunni Muslims subscribing to the Maliki or Hanbali schools of Islamic law. Many of the latter are Wahhabis, though UAE Wahhabis are not nearly as strict and puritanical as the Saudi Wahhabis. There are also smaller communities of Ibadi and Shiite Muslims. Other religions are tolerated, and there are a number of Christian churches throughout the country, as well as Hindu and Sikh temples in Dubai.

## ARTS

The revered Bedouin heritage of the UAE dictates that the most popular art forms in the country today are the same as those that have been practised for centuries, namely traditional dance, music and poetry. The only other distinctive and significant art form is architecture (see p54). Though Sheikh Sultan bin Mohammad al-Qassimi of Sharjah has made an enormous effort to raise the profile of theatre, the visual arts and literature (other than poetry) in his emirate, these art forms are still nascent there and in the rest of the country. The announcement of a Cultural City in Abu Dhabi (p422) sees a significant raising of the arts profile in the UAE.

The UAE's most popular television show at the time of writing was *Millionaire Poet*, the local equivalent of *American Idol*.

## Poetry

In Bedouin culture in the UAE, a facility with poetry and language is greatly prized. Traditionally, a poet who could eloquently praise his own people while pointing out the failures of other tribes was considered

**THE UNBELIEVABLE UAE TRUTH...****You can't buy alcohol?**

Partially true. You can, as a visitor, purchase alcohol in bars and clubs that are generally attached to four- and five-star hotels for consumption on the premises. Expat residents need an alcohol licence, which entitles them to a fixed monthly limit of alcohol available from alcohol stores. Except in Sharjah, of course, where even *sheesha* (water pipe used for smoking tobacco) is banned.

**There's no pork?**

Pork is available for non-Muslims in some supermarkets (such as Spinneys) in a specially labelled area of the shop. In many hotel restaurants, pork is a menu item and is usually clearly labelled as such. However the 'beef bacon' and 'turkey ham' that are commonly available are nothing more than a reminder of how tasty the real thing is...unless you're a vegetarian, of course.

**Women don't really need to cover up anymore.**

Absolutely not true. However, all that locals ask is that people dress respectfully, with clothes that are not too revealing – especially true outside of Dubai. Emiratis *will* judge you on how you dress; boys in shorts at shopping malls will be assumed to have forgotten their pants and girls who dress like Paris Hilton will be assumed to have the same morals as the heiress. It's your call.

**Homosexuals are banned?**

Simply being homosexual is not illegal as such, but homosexual acts are – as are any sex acts outside marriage.

**What about those guys holding hands?**

Simply a sign of friendship. It's OK for married couples to hold hands as well, but serious public displays of affection by couples (married or not) are frowned upon and fines and jail terms can result. Really.

**If you're HIV positive you'll be kicked out?**

Yes. As a worker coming to live in Dubai you will be tested for HIV as well as other things such as diabetes. If you are proven to be HIV positive, you'll be deported.

**Dubai is the capital.**

No! Abu Dhabi is. Both are emirates (like states) and both are the capitals of their respective state, but Abu Dhabi is the seat of UAE power. It just looks like Dubai is the capital, and Dubai acts like it's the capital, but Abu Dhabi's too busy counting the oil revenue to care...much.

a great asset. Modern poets of note from the UAE include Sultan al-Owais and Dr Ahmed al-Madani.

*Nabati* (vernacular poetry) is especially popular and has traditionally been in spoken form. These days, sheikhs such as Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid al-Maktoum, Dubai's ruler, are respected poets in this tradition.

There are scores of well-known male poets in the UAE who still use the forms of classical Arab poetry, though they often experiment with combining it with other styles. There are also some well-known female poets, most of whom write in the *tafila* (prose) style.

**Music & Dance**

Emiratis have always acknowledged the importance of music to daily life. Songs have been traditionally composed to accompany different tasks, from hauling water to diving for pearls.

These days, popular local musicians include Mohammed al-Mazem, Mohammed al-Beloushy, Rashed al-Majed, Mihad Hamad and Eda bin Tanaf al-Manhaly. The most popular of all is the female singer Ahlam: nationals pay up to US\$50,000 to have her sing at their weddings.

At celebrations such as weddings or *eid*, traditional dance comes into its own. Clapping and the rhythmic beating of tra-

ditional drums accompanies the dance, which is performed by groups of men with sticks, swords or rifles, or by young girls who swing their hair and sway their bodies in time to the music.

The Dubai Museum (p388) has an interesting audiovisual presentation on traditional dance.

**ENVIRONMENT**

Environmental awareness is increasing at the macro level in the UAE, due in no small part to the efforts of the late Sheikh Zayed, who was posthumously named a 'Champion of the Earth' by the UN Environment Programme (UNEP) in 2005. With his efforts in wildlife preservation, such as Sir Baniyas Island, where several nearly extinct Arabian wildlife species are being nurtured, as well as the ban on hunting with guns over a quarter of a century ago, Sheikh Zayed foresaw the acute threats to the endangered native species of the region.

In Dubai, the Dubai Desert Conservation Reserve (DDCR) comprises 225 sq km, or 5%, of the area of the Dubai emirate and operates as a national park as well as a luxury resort (see p402). The success story of this project is the successful breeding of the endangered scimitar-horned oryx, which is bred successfully as part of the DDCR's programme. Also in the Dubai emirate, the Ras al-Khor Wildlife Sanctuary (p390) is a haven for bird-watchers (the pink flamingos are extraordinary) and has been a reserve since 1985. A breeding centre at the Sharjah Desert Park (p408) is open to travellers, and a wetland reserve, Al Wasit lagoons, is currently being prepared.

Unlike Australia and the USA, the UAE ratified the Kyoto Protocol in January 2005 and has set targets for the reduction of domestic carbon emissions as well as greenhouse gases. In terms of the Emiratis' going green at a micro level, much work needs to be done. Water wastage (all water comes from desalination plants) and littering are major issues and while more public transport systems are on the way, getting residents and visitors out of cars and taxis and onto metros and monorails will be a challenge for Dubai's government.

**FOOD & DRINK**

The UAE's cuisine is extraordinarily multicultural due to the presence of so many foreign workers in the country. Lebanese, Indian and Iranian (also called Persian) cuisines are the most common, and these are eaten both at home and in restaurants. The most popular streetside snack is *shwarma* – meat sliced off a spit and rolled in a pocket of pita-type bread; lamb *shwarma* generally comes with chopped tomatoes, onion and rocket leaves or parsley, while chicken *shwarma* comes with potatoes and hummus. Whether eating at a souq stall or sampling an exquisite degustation menu at a top Dubai restaurant, you'll find something suited to your budget and your tastebuds. There are few opportunities to sample 'authentic' Emirati cuisine but there *are* dishes that are worth sampling if you get the chance. Try *khuzi*, a stuffed whole roast lamb on a bed of spiced rice; *makbus*, a casserole of meat or fish with rice; *hareis*, slow-cooked wheat and lamb; and *umm ali*, a pudding with raisins and nuts. You really must sample some of the delicious local dates too.

Alcohol can only be sold in restaurants and bars in hotels or in members-only clubs, such as golf clubs, which often admit paying guests. Because of the 30% tax on alcohol in the country, prices are expensive but on par with Europe. Expect to pay around Dh22 for a pint of beer. Alcohol is not available in Sharjah or Khor Fakkan.

See Food & Drink (above) for a general discussion of typical Gulf Arab fare.

**DUBAI**

دبي

📍 04 / pop 1.3 million

Glitzy, glam, over-the-top and a little over-exposed, Dubai lives for attention. On the surface it's materialistic beyond anyone's wildest dreams and by treating every visitor like a VIP, visitors respond by spending like VIPs, only to need resuscitating when the next month's credit-card bill arrives. But this is the whole idea. We're talking about a city that virtually invented the 'shopping festival' (Dubai Shopping Festival, or DSF), the simple premise of which was to get people to travel to Dubai and spend money. With myriad shopping malls, flamboyant

### THE DUBAI DREAM

While Dubai continues to sell itself as a dream destination, both for visitors and potential expats – particularly those looking at salaries above Dh15,000 a month plus a nice housing and travel package – many long-term expats are starting to find the dream a little disturbing. A city that was once considered a hardship posting, by the mid-1990s Dubai had become a very liveable metropolis, well, apart from during summer.

As Dubai's growth quickened, prices went up, salaries stayed the same, and many long-timers (the ones who live overseas for the experience, not just the money), were left feeling a little sidelined. Dubai had become what many expats were trying to escape – a big city with big city problems. For some, the traffic problems – both the amount of accidents and the congestion – have made the city almost unliveable. While many contemplate moving house to lessen the daily commute, finding affordable accommodation is almost impossible despite the new annual rent-cap of 7%, not to mention the constant complaints about the building quality of Dubai's new housing projects. While many see public transport projects as the saviour, even a 500m walk to your business can leave you drenched in sweat for much of the year.

A great number of expats who have lived here for more than 10 years pine for the good old days; other newer, younger expats embrace the constantly morphing city proclaiming, 'Where else can you live where things grow and change so fast!'

hotels, a dizzying array of dining options and hip clubs and bars, it's all just too easy. Driven by Sheikh Mohammed, a leader who doesn't understand the word 'no', visitors and potential residents are flocking to this Middle East metropolis in increasing numbers with the promise that Dubai is like no other city on earth. And Sheikh Mohammed is delivering. However, whether you end up loving or loathing its ostentatious nature, under the surface another Dubai exists. Head to the Heritage Village (p389) during Ramadan or the DSF (p442) and you'll witness a different Dubai, where local Emiratis take joy in their songs, dance and traditions. Spend a few fascinating hours by the creek, watching the dhow (traditional wooden boat) traffic and the *abras* weave along the waterway while smoking some *sheesha*. Walk the streets of the tranquil, restored Bastakia area or take a stroll through multicultural Karama or Satwa. You'll find this Dubai a million miles removed from the credit-card frenzy of the five-star hotels. Whatever you end up preferring, Dubai is a fascinating experiment and a city-state that's like no other.

### HISTORY

Archaeological remains found at Al-Qusais, on the northeastern edge of Dubai, prove that there was some form of human settlement here as long ago as 8000 BC, though little is known about the development of

the city until the 17th century, when the Portuguese occupied the area, followed by the French, Dutch and, finally, British. During these occupations, the people of Dubai made their living by pearling, and through a trickle of trade with India and the rest of the Gulf; the rest of the UAE was where the power and prosperity of the region was centred. This changed after 1833, when 800 members of the Bani Yas tribe under Maktoum bin Butti settled in Dubai, turning it overnight into a small town rather than a village.

In 1894 Sheikh Maktoum bin Hasher al-Maktoum (r 1894–1906) declared Dubai a tax-free port, giving birth to what would become the modern-day economic phenomenon of Dubai. By this stage the population had grown to 10,000. Though the pearling trade collapsed around 1930, Dubai's status as the region's major port continued to grow, supported by major works such as the dredging of Dubai Creek in the 1950s so as to allow large trading vessels to use the port. Under Sheikh Saeed (r 1912–58) and Sheikh Rashid (r 1958–90), the city cemented its reputation as the main trading hub in the lower Gulf.

In 1971, Dubai became one of the seven emirates of the UAE and for the next 19 years Sheikh Rashid acted as vice-president and prime minister of the federation as well as being the leader of Dubai itself. The city continued to grow and prosper during these

years. Sheikh Rashid died in 1990, and was succeeded by his son Sheikh Maktoum who steered a steady course for Dubai until his death in January 2006. Now under the leadership of Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid al-Maktoum (commonly and affectionately known as 'Sheikh Mo' by expats), the plans for Dubai Inc are as ambitious as they are audacious.

### ORIENTATION

Dubai is growing at an astounding rate, and its city suburbs now extend to the border with its northern neighbour, Sharjah. In fact, the lower housing prices in Sharjah mean that many people are now basing themselves there and commuting into Dubai each day for work, making the northern roads into the city nightmarishly busy during peak hours. To the south, skyscrapers, shopping malls and construction sites line Sheikh Zayed Rd as far as Jebel Ali, where the city's major port is located, whereas just a few years ago there was nothing but desert between Jebel Ali and the Hard Rock café with its giant guitar was considered to be in the middle of nowhere. The fashionable and affluent suburb of Jumeirah is found along this stretch of coast and is accessed via Jumeirah Rd (also known as Jumeirah Beach Rd and Beach Rd). Sheikh Zayed Rd, with its signature Emirates Towers build-

ings, is the backbone of the city and the major artery to the national capital, Abu Dhabi. After it leaves Dubai it is called Abu Dhabi Rd.

The city was originally built around Dubai Creek, also known as Khor (creek) Dubai, an inlet of the Arabian Gulf. Today, most tourist attractions are found around here. The city is split in two, divided by the creek: Deira is to the northeast, and Bur Dubai to the southwest. The major landmark on the Deira side is the National Bank of Dubai, an impressive modern skyscraper with a golden-brown reflective surface facing the creek. The main square in Deira, Baniyas Sq, is also known as Al-Nasr Sq. Bur Dubai's major landmark is the Diwan (Ruler's Office) on the edge of the creek. There are five ways of crossing the creek: via the Al-Maktoum and Al-Garhoud bridges, the Al-Shindagha car and pedestrian tunnels or on the traditional *abras* that cross the river at all hours of the day and night. A new bridge across Dubai Creek is currently under construction and a monorail will also take people across the creek in a few years.

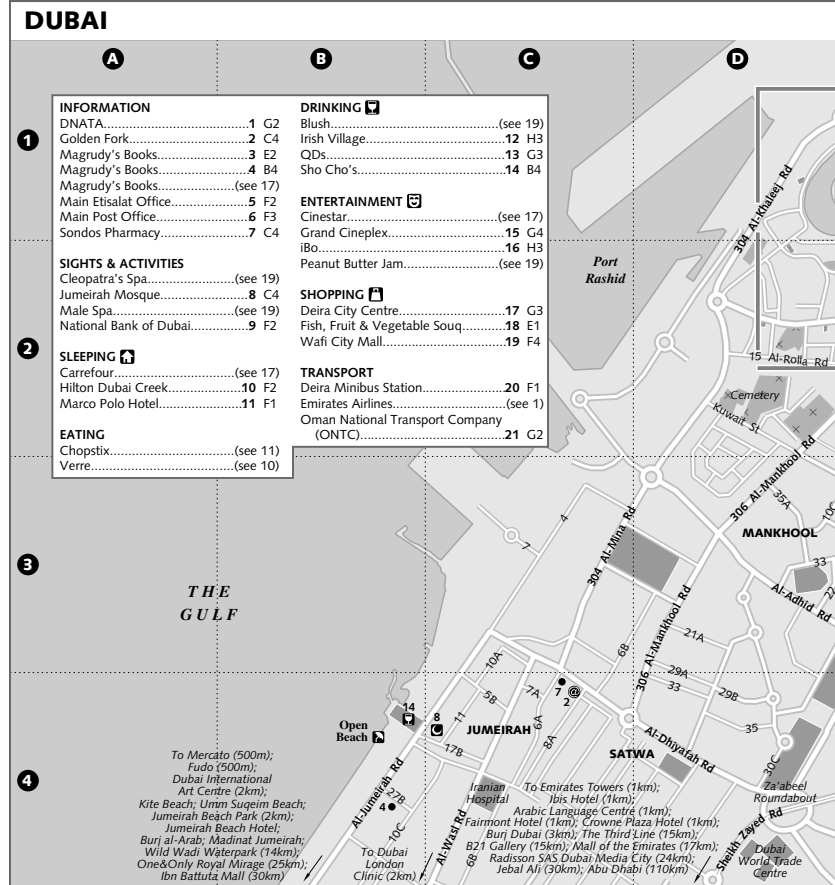
The airport occupies a central position in Al-Garhoud, on the Deira side of the creek. It is a short bus or taxi ride to central Deira or Bur Dubai. There are two major bus and taxi stations: one in Deira and one in Bur Dubai. See p401 for more details.

### DUBAI IN...

#### Two Days

Start with a **Cultural Breakfast** (p388) at the Sheikh Mohammed Centre for Cultural Understanding, for a rare chance to meet locals, eat home-cooked Emirati food and learn about the local society. Next hit the **Dubai Museum** (p388) for an introduction to the history and culture of the Emirates. Wander around the historic **Bastakia quarter** (p389) before having lunch in the courtyard of the **Basta Art Café** (p396). Check out the **Bur Dubai textile souq** (p399) then in the late afternoon catch an *abra* across the creek to explore the **Dubai Souqs** (p399), particularly the glittering Gold Souq. Walk along the bustling **dhow wharves** (p387) on the creek and after another *abra* crossing, wander along the **Shindagha waterfront** (p389) for a quick look at the **Heritage and Diving Villages** (p389), and dinner, *sheesha* and spectacular views at **Kanzaman** (p397).

Day one focused on the old centre, so devote day two to new Dubai, beginning at Jumeirah, with a guided visit to **Jumeirah Mosque** (p389). Grab a bite to eat nearby at **Fudo** (p396) before heading up to Jumeirah Beach to admire the architecture of the **Burj al-Arab** (p389). If it's summer, head for **Wild Wadi Waterpark** (p391). If it's winter, hit the snow, naturally, at **Ski Dubai** (p391), where you can also check out Dubai's largest shopping centre, **Mall of the Emirates** (p399). Start your evening with a sunset drink on the veranda at **Bahri Bar** (p398), followed by a Moroccan meal at **Tagine** (p396), a *sheesha* at the **Sheesha Courtyard** (p397), followed by a nightcap at the **Rooftop Bar** (p398). Magic.



## Maps

The free *Dubai at a Glance* map is available from the Department of Tourism & Commerce Marketing welcome bureaus and hotel concierge desks. Explorer Publishing sells an *Explorer Mini Map* (Dh15), available at bookshops and supermarkets.

## INFORMATION

### Bookshops

**Magrudy's Books** Deira City Centre (Map pp384-5; ☎ 295 7744; Baniyas Rd, Al-Garhoud; ☎ 10am-10pm); Jumeirah (Map pp384-5; ☎ 344 4192; Beach Rd; ☎ 9am-9pm Sat-Thu, 4.30-8.30pm Fri); Burjuman Mall (☎ 359 3332; Trade Centre Rd, Bur Dubai; ☎ 10am-10pm Sat-Thu, 4-10pm Fri); Ibn Battuta Mall (☎ 366 9770; Sheikh Zayed Rd, Jebel Ali; ☎ 10am-10pm Sat-Thu, 4-10pm Fri)

Dubai's most comprehensive bookshop, with an excellent travel section, good books on Middle East history and politics, and gorgeous coffee-table books on the UAE.

### Emergency

**24-Hour Pharmacies** (☎ 223 2323)

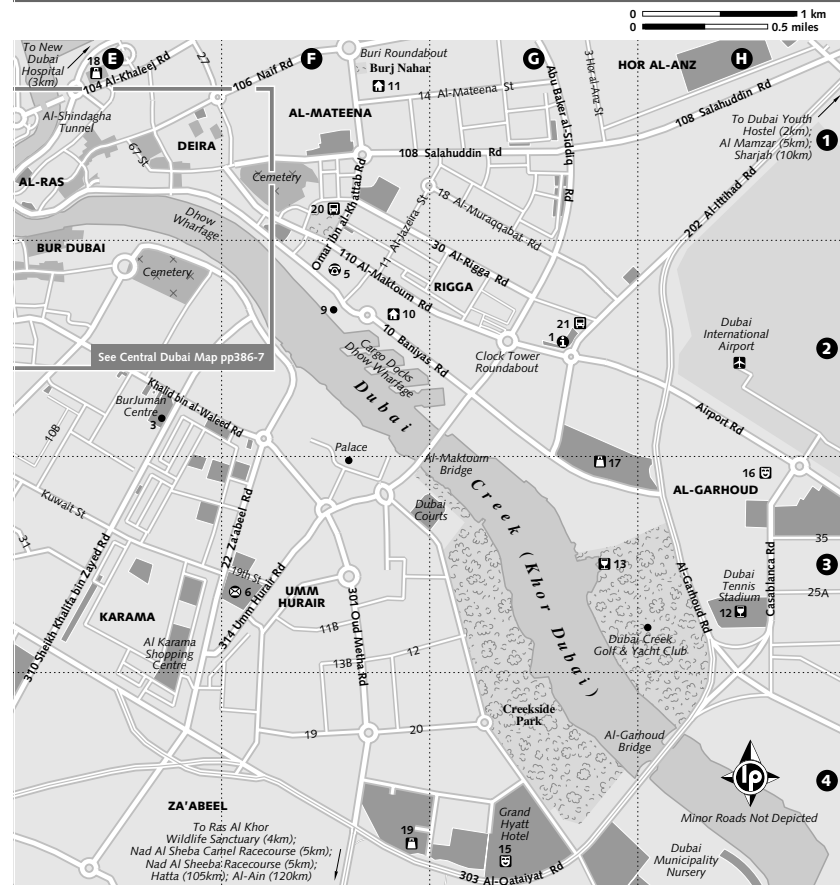
**Ambulance** (☎ 998)

**Police** (☎ 999, 800 4888, SMS 4444)

**Tourist Police** (☎ 800 4438)

### Internet Access

**Al Jalsa Internet Café** (Map pp386-7; ☎ 351 4617; Al Ain Shopping Centre, Al-Mankhool Rd, Bur Dubai; per hr Dh10; ☎ 8.30am-1am) Thirty work stations with high-speed ADSL connection, web cams and head sets; you can also plug in your laptops, and get good sandwiches, juices and coffee.



**Golden Fork** (Map pp386-7; ☎ 228 2662; Al-Maktoum Rd, Deira; per hr Dh5; ☎ 1pm-3am) This fast-food restaurant offers good connections and comfortable work stations, at a bargain price.

### Medical Services

**American Hospital** (☎ 336 7777; Oud Metha, Bur Dubai) This private hospital has an excellent 24-hour emergency department and clinic.

**Dubai London Clinic** (☎ 344 6663; Al-Wasl Rd, Jumeirah) A private medical centre that also has an emergency department.

**New Dubai Hospital** (☎ 222 9171; Abu Baker al-Siddiqi Rd & Al-Khaleej Rd, Hor al-Anz) A government hospital with a decent 24-hour emergency department.

**Sondos Pharmacy** (Map pp384-5; ☎ 346 0660; Al-Dhiyafah Rd, Satwa) A 24-hour pharmacy that will deliver.

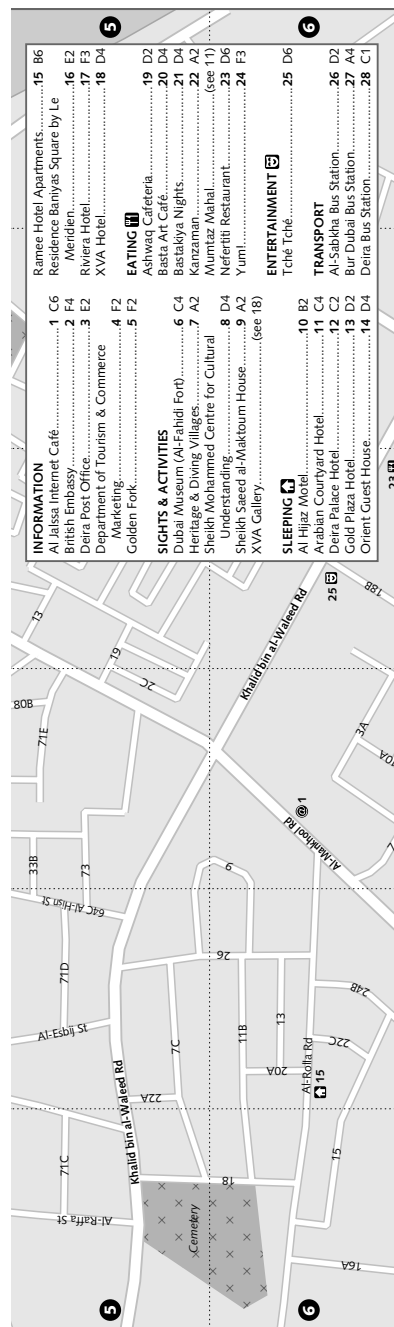
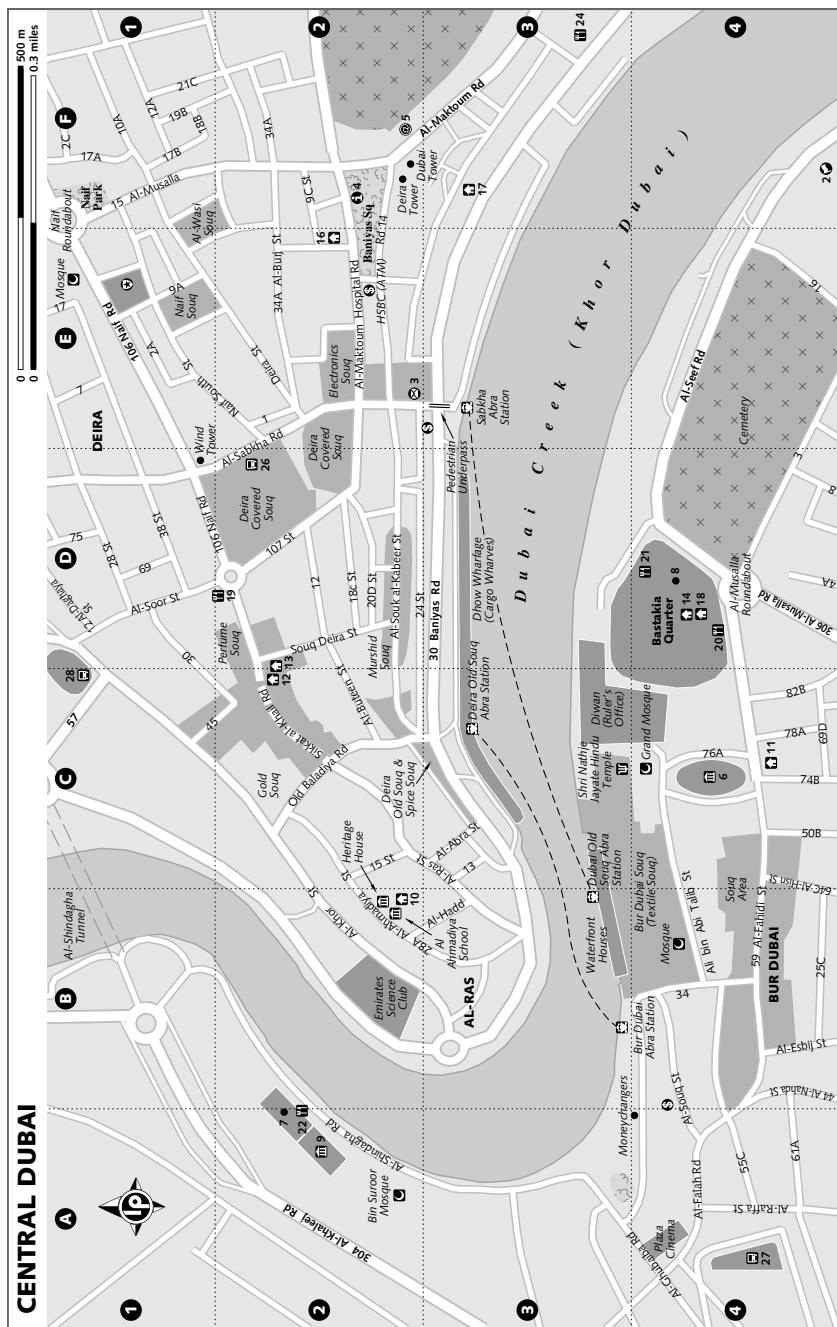
## Money

In central Deira, especially along Baniyas Rd and on Baniyas Sq, every other building seems to contain a bank or a moneychanger. In Bur Dubai there are moneychangers around the *abra* docks. There are ATMs throughout the city, in all shopping malls and in most five-star hotel lobbies.

## Post

**Deira Post Office** (Map pp386-7; Al-Sabkha Rd; ☎ 8am-midnight Sat-Wed, 8am-1pm & 4-8pm Thu) Near the intersection with Baniyas Rd.

**Main Post Office** (Map pp384-5; ☎ 337 1500; Za'abeel Rd, Karama; ☎ 8am-11.30pm Sat-Wed, 8am-10pm Thu, 8am-noon Fri) On the Bur Dubai side of the creek in Karama. Entrance is at the rear of the building.



|  |   |
|--|---|
| <b>INFORMATION</b>   | Ramesh Hotel Apartments.....15 B6         |
| Al Jalsa Internet Cafe.....1 C6                            | Residence Banyanys Square by Le.....16 E2 |
| British Embassy.....2 F4                                   | Riviera Hotel.....17 F3                   |
| Deira Post Office.....3 E2                                 | XVA Hotel.....18 D4                       |
| Department of Tourism & Commerce.....4 F2                  | <b>EATING</b>                             |
| Marketing.....5 F2   | Ashwaq Cafeteria.....19 D2                |
| Golden Fork.....5 F2                                       | Basta Art Café.....20 D4                  |
| <b>SIGHTS &amp; ACTIVITIES</b>                             | Bastakia Nights.....21 D4                 |
| Dubai Museum (Al-Fahidi Fort).....6 C4                     | Kanzaman.....22 A2                        |
| Heritage & Diving Villages.....7 A2                        | Mumtaz Mahal.....(see 11)                 |
| Sheikh Mohammed Centre for Cultural Understanding.....8 D4 | Nefertiti Restaurant.....23 D6            |
| Sheikh Saeed al-Maktoum House.....9 A2                     | Yum!.....24 F3                            |
| XVA Gallery.....(see 18)                                   | <b>ENTERTAINMENT</b>                      |
| <b>SLEEPING</b>  | Tche Tchê.....25 D6                       |
| Al Hijaz Motel.....10 B2                                   | <b>TRANSPORT</b>                          |
| Arabian Courtyard Hotel.....11 C4                          | Al-Sabkha Bus Station.....26 D2           |
| Deira Palace Hotel.....12 C2                               | Bur Dubai Bus Station.....27 A4           |
| Gold Plaza Hotel.....13 D2                                 | Deira Bus Station.....28 C1               |
| Orient Guest House.....14 D4                               |   |

**Telephone**

**Main Etisalat Office** (Map pp384-5; cnr Banyanys & Omar ibn al-Khattab Rds, Deira; ☎ 24hr) Wasi mobile recharge through automatic machines.

**Tourist Information**

The **Department of Tourism & Commerce Marketing** (DTCM; www.dubaitourism.ae; ☎ 223 0000) operates two main **branches** (airport arrivals area ☎ 224 5252, 224 4098; ☎ 24hr; Deira Map pp386-7; ☎ 228 5000; Banyanys Sq; ☎ 9am-11pm) and a number of information desks throughout the city at most of the major shopping malls. They usually stock a free 'Dubai at a Glance' map of the city and a range of free brochures on major attractions. The Deira branch also stocks local bus timetables.

**Dubai National Travel & Tourist Authority** (DNATA; Map pp384-5; ☎ 295 1111; Head Office, Al-Maktoum Rd, Deira; ☎ 9am-6pm Sat-Thu) is the quasi-official government-run travel agency in the UAE. It books accommodation and travel throughout the UAE and abroad.

**SIGHTS Dubai Creek**

Dubai Creek is the colourful and chaotic heart of the city, bustling day and night with working dhows sailing in and out of the inlet (on their way to or from Iran); dhow tour boats taking tourists on buffet and belly-dancing cruises; and bizarre amphibious buses (yep, that's right).

Taking an *abra* across the creek among all the craziness is one of the highlights of a trip to Dubai. Crowded *abras* make the crossing all day, to and from Bur Dubai and Deira, costing Dh1 per person per trip. You can also charter an *abra* for Dh50 per hour from any *abra* station, or an old rowing *abra* for Dh30 per hour from the Creek Park Station or Public Library Station. Most wait at the docks near the Heritage and Diving Village, Al Diwan and Al Seef Rd Park. Depending on where you get on, get the captain to do a length of the creek, taking you to Al-Maktoum bridge and back to Shindagha. Sunset is a sublime time to do the trip.

On the Deira side, take time to explore the dhow wharves, where boats bound for Iran and other ports around the Gulf dock here to load and unload all sorts of intriguing cargo. You'll get to see the colourful wooden vessels up close and may even get invited



aboard by the captain (although women shouldn't accept if alone). Early evening is a great time to do this walk and is also the best time to wander the aromatic **Spice Souq** nearby, and, not too far from there, Dubai's bustling **Covered Souq**, famous glittering **Gold Souq** and heady **Perfume Souq**. On the Bur Dubai side of the creek, take some time to shop for textiles and sequinned slippers in **Bur Dubai Souq** before exploring the labyrinthine streets of the historic **Bastakia Quarter**, home to traditional wind-tower houses, built from 1900 to 1930, that were once the residences of wealthy Persian merchants. Restored in recent years, the neighbourhood is one of Dubai's most atmospheric.

### Dubai Museum

The outstanding **Dubai Museum** (Map pp386-7; ☎ 353 1862; Al-Fahidi St, Bastakia; adult/child Dh3/1; ☎ 8.30am-8.30pm Sat-Thu, 2.30-8.30pm Fri), located in the Al-Fahidi Fort, is without doubt the most impressive in the country and is Dubai's most popular attraction. Dating from 1778, it's the oldest building in Dubai, and was once the ruler's office (now next door in the white Diwan) and residence (now at Za'abeel Palace). Built from sea rocks and gypsum, the fort has three towers (one square and two round), a big breezy courtyard, and an imposing teak door studded with enormous iron nails.

In the courtyard, there are traditional boats, cannons and buildings, including *al kaimah* (a primitive one room *barasti*, or palm-frond hut) and *al areesh* (a summer house made from palm-leaf), with a wind tower (the traditional form of air-conditioning) and *al manama* (an alfresco summer bed). Off the courtyard, within the fort walls, are fascinating displays of musical instruments and weapons, including intricately detailed old silver *khanjars* (swords inscribed with Arabic calligraphy), and wooden bows and arrows decorated with cowrie shells.

Inside the museum, a multimedia presentation charts the extraordinarily rapid development of Dubai, from a small fishing village with a bustling port, to the sprawling postmodern city it is today. The highlight, however, are the life-size dioramas with mannequins that make up most of the museum's exhibits and provide a fascinating glimpse into the social and cultural history

of Dubai. They're wonderfully kitsch and make fantastic use of video and sound to re-create Old Dubai, complete with a dhow dock and old souq from the 1950s, with a traditional coffeehouse, blacksmith, carpentry, pottery and jewellery workshops, textile and spice shops, an Islamic school and a traditional home. There are also splendid displays on the desert and oasis, its flora and fauna, survival in the desert, the desert at night, the Bedu, traditional costumes and jewellery, and the excellent 'under water' sea exhibit on pearling, fishing and dhow boat building.

Any would-be Indiana Jones will also be thrilled with the small but excellent archaeology exhibition featuring many artefacts excavated at Jumeirah and Al Qusais. Look out for the wonderful grey chlorite pots decorated with geometrical designs (they say the straight lines represent the sea and the zigzag lines the sand dunes), dating from the 2nd millennium BC, the exquisite alabaster vessels from the 1st millennium BC, and the stucco decorations dating to the 9th and 12th centuries.

### Sheikh Mohammed Centre for Cultural Understanding

Make the wonderful **Sheikh Mohammed Centre for Cultural Understanding** (Map pp386-7; ☎ 353 6666; www.cultures.ae; admission free; ☎ 9am-3pm Sun-Thu) your first stop in the Bastakia area. Not only will you get the chance to check out one of the most beautifully restored courtyard houses in the neighbourhood (the staff will even let you go up to the terrace roof for fantastic views over the Bastakia) but you can also sign up for a range of interesting activities and tours as part of its 'Open Doors, Open Minds' programme, aimed at fostering greater understanding between Islam and other religions, or for those who just want to learn more about the UAE.

There are enjoyable **Cultural Breakfasts** (Dh50; ☎ 10am Mon) and **Cultural Lunches** (Dh50; ☎ 1pm Sun) where visitors get to meet some locals and learn about local traditions, Emirati customs and social rituals over a traditional home-cooked breakfast or lunch. Not only does the experience provide a rare opportunity to try Emirati food, not available elsewhere in eateries in the UAE, but you also get to meet Muslims (both local Emirati and foreign women married

to Emiratis) and ask those questions you'd always wanted to ask, like why men wear white and women wear black.

**Bastakia Walking Tours** (Dh50; ☎ 10am Sun & Thu), Ramadan *iftar* dinners, and the popular **Jumeirah Mosque Guided Visits** (registration fee Dh10; ☎ 10am Sat, Sun, Tue & Thu) also operate from the centre. The mosque tour is the only means by which you can enter the mosque as a non-Muslim, but it also gives you the chance to learn about Islam, see a prayer demonstration, and dispel some myths.

### Shindagha Waterfront

The historic Shindagha waterfront area is a wonderful place to wander. The creek is lined with a number of restored coral, gypsum and limestone buildings that were once the former fort-residences of Dubai's rulers and are now fascinating museums. The highlight is the **Sheikh Saeed al-Maktoum House** (Map pp386-7; ☎ 393 7139; off Al-Khaleej Rd; adult/child Dh3/1; ☎ 8.30am-10.30pm Sun-Thu, 4.30-10.30pm Fri & Sat), which was once home to the grandfather of Dubai's present ruler, Sheikh Mohammed, and is now a museum of pre-oil times. Built in 1896, the elegant 30-room house is a prototype of the traditional courtyard villa, and has two storeys and four wind towers. Occupied by the ruling family until 1958, it was extensively restored and opened as a museum in 1986. It's now home to a compelling exhibition of photographs from the 1940s, '50s and '60s documenting life on the creek and the development of Dubai, and it's extraordinary to see how very different the place was just a few decades ago.

Another highlight here are the splendid **Heritage and Diving Villages** (Map pp386-7; ☎ 393 7151; off Al-Khaleej Rd; admission free; ☎ 8.30am-10.30pm Sun-Thu, 4.30-10.30pm Fri & Sat), re-creations of traditional villages with *barasti* houses, a camel yard, dhow, a pearling display, a souvenir souq and temporary exhibitions. Quiet during the day, they come alive in the evenings during the cooler months, especially during Ramadan and the Dubai Shopping Festival (see p442). At this time, you'll barely see a tourist or expat in sight. Every night, the villages are crowded with Emiratis who bring their children to see performances of traditional Bedouin dancing and singing, and re-enactments of traditional weddings from around the Gulf

region, along with displays on falconry and Arab horses, and – our favourite – rifle-throwing competitions!

### Jumeirah Mosque

Dubai's beautiful **Jumeirah Mosque** (Map pp384-5; ☎ 353 6666; www.cultures.ae; Jumeirah Rd, Jumeirah; registration fee Dh10; ☎ 10am Sat, Sun, Tue & Thu), with its rose-coloured sandstone and intricately detailed architecture (stunningly lit at night), is the only mosque in the UAE open to non-Muslims. To appreciate its austere interior, however, you have to do one of the fascinating guided visits offered by the Sheikh Mohammed Centre for Cultural Understanding (see opposite). The tour introduces visitors to Islam, the mosque, the Five Pillars of Islam (see p61), and the ritual of prayer, starting outside with ablutions (washing before prayer) through to a demonstration of the prayer inside. A large part of the tour is taken up with an often fascinating Q&A session, where you can ask questions and have those myths dispelled. Prebook as the tour is becoming increasingly popular, and make sure to dress modestly: no shorts, sleeveless tops or tight clothes, and women should cover their back and arms and wear a long skirt and headscarf. There are *abeyyas* and *shay-las* available for loan at the mosque. You will also need to remove your shoes before entering.

### Burj al-Arab

A visit to the **Burj al-Arab** (☎ 301 7777; Al-Jumeirah Rd, Umm Suqeim), Dubai's iconic 'seven-star' hotel, has become almost obligatory. While the ostentatious interior of the world's tallest dedicated hotel is nowhere near as impressive as the striking exterior (inspired by the sails of the traditional dhow boat), visitors to Dubai can't seem to resist taking a peak inside. You can't just wander around – it's necessary to book two to three days in advance for lunch, afternoon tea, cocktails or dinner, and you'll be given a confirmation number to present at the security gate.

Although you won't get to see a suite (for which prices range from Dh3500 to Dh25,000 per night), you will get to watch a 'water ballet' performed by the dancing fountains; be dazzled by a use of gold leaf worthy of Versailles; catch a magnificent

### TOP FIVE CONTEMPORARY BUILDINGS

- **Burj al-Arab** (p389) Dubai's landmark building was inspired by the sails of the dhow and Sheikh Mohammed's desire to create an iconic symbol for the city. Mission accomplished.
- **National Bank of Dubai** (Map pp384-5) Dominates the creek with its shield-like curve, and charms with its golden-hued reflections of creek traffic.
- **Emirates Towers** These two bottle openers on Sheikh Zayed Rd scream 'look at us' and we're always happy to oblige.
- **Dubai Creek Golf & Yacht Club** Refreshingly low-rise, its sculptural form is reminiscent of Sydney's Opera House.
- **Burj Dubai** It wasn't quite finished at the time of writing, however its elegant profile will make the Burj al-Arab a little jealous. Let's hope it gets a better interior design than Dubai's 'old' icon.

view of the Palm Island development and the rest of Dubai from the Al-Muntaha restaurant; whiz up and down the hotel's 27 floors in a panoramic lift travelling at six metres per second; and sip a cocktail in the gaudy Skyview bar. You'll need to dress for the occasion.

### Ras Al Khor Wildlife Sanctuary

Despite the construction of Dubai Festival City close by, Dubai's beautiful pink flamingo population flocks to mangroves at **Ras Al Khor Wildlife Sanctuary** (☎ 338 2324; off Oud Metha Rd; admission free; ☞ 9am-4pm Sat-Thu), at the inland end of Dubai Creek. In fact, bird numbers are on the increase, with some 3000 flamingos dwelling there at the time of research. Wooden hides (viewing platforms) allow visitors to get a close-up view of the birds without disturbing them, and there are excellent, powerful binoculars available if you want to get even closer. The juxtaposition of these elegant birds framed against the Dubai metropolis is dramatic. The best time to visit is between November and April.

The sanctuary is on the way to Nad Al Sheba Horse Racing Club.

### ACTIVITIES Beaches

Sunbathing on Dubai's white-sand beaches with their crystal-clear turquoise waters is brilliant, however most tourists can't drag themselves away from the resort swimming pool, or more precisely, the wet bar. If you want to see how the local expat community plays, it's worth checking out the city's many free, clean public beaches. Wherever

you go take care swimming: the strong currents can be dangerous, not all of the public beaches are patrolled, and there have been a number of fatalities in the past.

The ever-popular **Open Beach** (Map pp384-5) is located next to Dubai Marine Beach Resort and Spa. It's also known as Russian Beach because it gets crowded with Russian package-tourists. On Fridays a large number of male guest workers hang out here on their day off. While it's safe, women won't always feel comfortable in their bikini, but there is a kiosk, showers and toilets.

**Kite Beach** at Umm Suqeim 4 is popular with Dubai's board-loving expats who enjoy kite surfing (hence the name). There are no facilities but women will be relaxed sunbathing here.

**Umm Suqeim**, between Kite Beach and Jumeirah Beach Hotel, has fabulous views of the Burj al-Arab and is popular with Jumeirah's expat families.

On the other side of town, there's a lovely long stretch of narrow white-sand beach at calm **Khor Al-Mamzar**, just before Al-Mamzar Park. While there are no waves, this is one of the prettiest spots to swim, with the Sharjah skyline in the distance. There are also showers and picnicking facilities.

For those who are prepared to pay an entrance fee, the private **Jumeirah Beach Park** (☎ 349 2555; adult Dh5, plus car Dh20; ☞ 8am-11pm), next to Jumeirah Beach Club, is a verdant beach park that gets busy on the weekends, when local families arrive en masse. There are lifeguards on duty, grassed picnic areas, barbecues, change rooms and playgrounds.

### Spas

Dubai's splendid spas are renowned and a day of pampering is a wonderful way to end a trip, especially if you've been sweating it out on the back of a camel on a desert safari.

Get the 'Royal Treatment' (Dh380) at the **Oriental Hammam** (☎ 04 315 2140; www.oneandonlyroyalmirage.com; One&Only Royal Mirage Hotel, Al Sufouh Rd, Jumeirah; ☞ 9.30am-8pm), a traditional Moroccan-style ritual that includes a deep black-soap scrub, or head to **Cleopatra's Spa** (Map pp384-5; ☎ 324 7700; www.waficity.com; Wafi City Mall, Oud Metha, Bur Dubai; ☞ 8.30am-8pm) for a frangipani body wrap (Dh380). Guys can head next door to **Male Spa** (Map pp384-5; ☎ 324 0000; ☞ 9.30am-10pm) for a signature deep-tissue massage.

### Wild Wadi Waterpark

The extraordinarily popular 4.8-hectare **Wild Wadi Waterpark** (☎ 348 4444; www.wildwadi.com; Jumeirah Rd, Umm Suqeim; adult/child day pass Dh165/135; ☞ 11am-6pm Nov-Feb, 11am-7pm Mar-May & Sep-Oct, 11am-9pm Jun-Aug), next to the Jumeirah Beach Hotel, features dozens of water rides and activities, some of which reach speeds of 80km/h. The rides are ingeniously interconnected, based on the legend of Arabic adventurer Juha and his friend, Sinbad the sailor, who are shipwrecked on a lush lagoon, beyond which lies a magical oasis.

There are height restrictions on some rides (children must be 1.1m tall to be allowed on the terrifying Jumeirah Sceirah and Tunnel of Doom), but the little ones love playing with the water cannons and slides at Juha's Dhow and Lagoon, and surfers will enjoy the two Flowriders (artificial waves). The water in the rides is cooled during the warmer months and there are fast-food eateries, making it a good day out. Food and beverages are bought via clever debit card attached to your wrist, and towels and lockers can be rented (Dh10).

During summer, the park is open one night a week (9pm to midnight) to women only.

### Ski Dubai

Who doesn't want to say they skied at a resort in a shopping mall in the desert? Much to the surprise of many sceptics, since its opening in late 2005, **Ski Dubai** (☎ 409 4000; www.skidxb.com; Mall of the Emirates, Sheikh Zayed Rd,

Interchange 4; ski slope day pass adult/child Dh230/180, 2hr Dh140/120, 1hr extension Dh30/20; Snowpark adult/child Dh60/50, private 'discovery' lesson 1hr Dh120, group lessons adult/child Dh165/145; ☞ 10am-11pm Sat-Tue, 10am-midnight Wed-Fri), one of the world's largest indoor snow parks, has been enormously successful. While it's a hot tourist attraction, local Emiratis are heading here in droves to take their kids tobogganing (many seeing snow for the first time) and to learn to ski and snowboard, while expats use the slopes as a warm-up for ski holidays. Ski Dubai has all the bases covered: a snowpark where the kids can build snowmen; a gentle beginners area; a couple of jumps to get airborne; a quarterpipe for snowboarders (Monday freestyle nights are popular with boarders); and a couple of good runs, including the world's first indoor 'black' run for those who like it steep.

There's a quad lift taking skiers and boarders up to two stations, and a magic carpet for beginners, so apart from the shopping mall outside the windows, it is just like a mini ski-resort. There are no chemicals in the snow – it's 'real' snow that falls overnight at around -10°C and is then groomed, with the temperature rising to a comfortable -1°C to -2°C for the day. The best bit about it, though, is that you only need to bring a hat and gloves – everything else is included in the price.

### Camel Racing

Racing of the much beloved camel is a popular sport in the UAE. While it's not your traditional spectator sport – don't expect to seat yourself in a grandstand – a visit to the camel racetrack is worth the early wake-up call just to take in the atmosphere. Races start at around 7am on Friday and Saturday between October and April at the **Nad Al Sheba Camel Racecourse** (☎ 338 2324; off Oud Metha Rd; admission free). Watching these ships of the desert racing at speeds of up to 60km/h is quite a sight and really only matched by the rather erratic driving of the owners who race around the inside of the track in their 4WDs urging on their pride and joy.

While the use of child jockeys was a contentious issue in the past, the practice does not exist anymore in Dubai as robot jockeys are now used (see p57). If you're not in Dubai during racing season, head here around 5pm any day to watch the training.

The camel racecourse is near Nad Al Sheba Racing Club.

### Horse Racing

Dubai's well-patronised **Nad Al Sheba Racing Club** (☎ 336 3666; www.dubairacingclub.com; Nad Al Sheba, off Sheikh Zayed Rd; general admission Dh85), 5km southeast of Deira centre, is home to the world's richest horse race, the Dubai Cup, with its dizzying prize money of US\$6 million. The culmination of the winter racing carnival held from February through to March, it's a very glam event with high-profile jockeys from all over the world competing, fabulously frocked and suited expats, and members of the ruling family resplendent in their crisp white *dishdashas* (men's shirt dress). Gambling is, of course, prohibited, but the members' stand is licensed, and there are different food and beverage packages available.

Other races are held from November to April; the racing schedule varies, so check racing dates and times with **Emirates Racing Association** (www.emiratesracing.com). Book ahead for dinner with spectacular views of the track at the Dubai Restaurant or **Millennium**

**Granstand Views Restaurant** (☎ 332 2277, 336 1410; range of packages available).

Keen racing enthusiasts should not miss the chance to do the **Godolphin Stable Tour** (☎ 336 3666; www.godolphin.com; adult Dh170; ☎ 7am Sat, Mon & Wed Sep-Jun) to check out these world-class stables. Visitors get to watch the morning training, tour the thoroughbred training facilities, have a delicious breakfast in the clubhouse, visit the Millennium Grandstand, then tour the Godolphin Gallery, which has various displays documenting the development of Godolphin stables, and shelves full of trophies.

### Desert Safaris

If you want to get out of the city, **Desert Safari** (Arabian Adventures; ☎ 971 4 303 8888; www.arabian-adventures.com; Emirates Holidays Building, Sheikh Zayed Rd) gives you the opportunity to experience some edge-of-your-seat off-road driving, sandboarding and camel riding in Dubai's gorgeous desert. You can also get some henna done, feast on an Arabic buffet, and join the belly dancer for a bit of a shimmy.

### DUBAI'S ART SCENE

Dubai has a small but vibrant art scene with exhibitions of Middle Eastern art regularly changing. Unlike some big cities where the art scenes can be clicky, in Dubai the galleries are inclusive and their buzzy champagne openings are a great way to meet locals. Email the galleries for more details.

- **Third Line** (☎ 394 3194; www.thethirdline.com; Al-Quoz; ☎ 11am-8pm Sat-Thu, 4-8pm Fri) Dubai's most interesting gallery, run by young curators Sunny Rahbar and Claudia Cellini, opens its adventurous contemporary art exhibitions with splashy champagne launches. Expect everything from digital media by young Emiratis to photography by Iranian female artists. It's off Sheikh Zayed Rd, between Interchange 3 and 4.
- **B21 Gallery** (☎ 340 3965; info@b21gallery.com; Al-Quoz; ☎ 10am-2pm Sat-Thu, 5-8pm Fri) Palestinian artist Jeffar Khaldi shows his own work, as well as wonderful exhibitions of local and regional work, such as Egyptian Youssef Nabil's retro-looking portraits. The gallery is diagonally opposite the Third Line, off Sheikh Zayed Rd between Interchange 3 and 4.
- **Art Space** (☎ 332 5523; info@artspace-dubai.com; 9th floor, Fairmont Hotel, Sheikh Zayed Rd; ☎ 10am-8.30pm Sat-Thu) This refreshing commercial gallery has monthly exhibitions featuring contemporary Middle Eastern art, including Emirati art, such as Mohamed Kanoos's fun pop art.
- **XVA** (Map pp386-7; ☎ 353 5383; xva@xvagallery.com; Al Musallah Roundabout; ☎ 10am-8.30pm Sat-Thu) This peaceful gallery, café and boutique hotel in a restored courtyard house in the Bastakia holds regular exhibitions of art, sculpture and design, with buzzy openings. The gallery is behind Basta Art Café.

Also check the Dubai Cultural Council's website (www.dubaiculturalcouncil.ae) and *Time Out* for details on the latest exhibitions.

### THE DESERT IN DUBAI

If you don't have time to get out of the city to explore the desert but want to experience a bit of the desert in Dubai, head to:

- **Dubai Museum** (p388) Sit down on the sand with the Bedouin (mannequins) around the campfire under the starry sky in the 'Desert at Night' museum display.
- **Heritage and Diving Villages** (p389) Do a couple of circuits on camel-back in the sandy yards at the back of the Heritage Village, then sit down on the ground in a Bedouin goat-hair tent for a cardamom coffee and chat with one of the local guys.
- **Dubai Camel Racetrack** (p391) Admire the Afghani camel trainers – their heads wrapped in their *gtras* Lawrence of Arabia-style – perched atop their beasts as they lead a long train of camels across to the race track for practice. You'll have to turn away from the city skyline to get the sense you're out in the desert, but when you do, you'll find it hard to believe Sheikh Zayed Rd is just five minutes away.

### COURSES

While Arabic is by no means essential to communicate in the UAE – and in fact, Urdu or Hindi would probably be more useful – you'll have a much greater chance of making friends with Emiratis and other Arabs if you can at least learn the lengthy greetings. Many people visit with the intention of learning Arabic but unfortunately many expats leave the country years later with one of their biggest regrets being not having learnt it. If you're keen to say more than *shukran*, enrol in private lessons or courses at one of the following:

**Arabic Language Centre** (☎ 308 6036; World Trade Centre, Sheikh Zayed Rd; one lesson Dh30; ☎ 8.30am-5pm)

**Dubai International Art Centre** (☎ 344 4398; 75b St; one lesson Dh30, course Dh270; ☎ 8.30am-7pm Sat-Wed, 8.30am-4pm Thu) The centre is located near Jumeirah Town Centre.

**Sheikh Mohammed Centre for Cultural Understanding** (Map pp386-7; ☎ 353 6666; www.cultures.ae; Bastakia) Gulf dialect only.

If you've been to see a belly dancer at one of Dubai's Arabic restaurants, and want to learn to shimmy like a pro, sign up for some belly-dancing lessons at the **JW Marriott Hotel's Griffins Health Club** (☎ 348 0000; one lesson Dh30, 10 lessons Dh270; ☎ 8-9pm Mon).

### DUBAI FOR CHILDREN

Toddlers and teenagers alike love Dubai, and who's to blame them? There truly are few cities in the world so child friendly. Little kids love Juha's Dhow and Lagoon at **Wild Wadi Waterpark** (p391), the Storytelling

Tour at **Ibn Battuta Mall** (p399), the snow park at **Ski Dubai** (p391), the life-size dioramas at **Dubai Museum** (p388), Encounter Zone at **Wafi City Mall** (p399) and the playground at **Jumeirah Beach Park** (p390).

An **abra ride** (p387) down the creek will go down well, especially with an ice-cream stop at the end. All top-end and some midrange hotels have pools, and the beach resorts have kids clubs with organised activities. Teens will be just as happy snowboarding at **Ski Dubai** (p391), hanging out at the **beaches** (p390), or escaping from their folks in the **malls** (p399). With its myriad shops, fast-food eateries, cinemas and Ski Dubai, **Mall of the Emirates** (p399) is best for keeping kids busy, while **Deira City Centre** (p399), with the added bonus of a tenpin bowling alley and Magic Planet, comes a close second, followed by **Wafi City Mall** (p399).

### SLEEPING

If you want to centre your energies on Dubai Creek, the souqs and heritage areas, stay in Deira or Bur Dubai. If you're looking for a restful stopover with sun and sand at the beginning or end of your trip, then head to Jumeirah Beach. Keep in mind that you'll only pay rack rates for midrange and top-end hotels in Dubai during the December/January high season; the rest of the time you'll get up to 50% off these rates, especially if you book online.

### Budget

**Dubai Youth Hostel** (☎ 298 8151/61; uaeyha@emirates.net.ae; 39 Al-Nahda Rd, 2 Area; House A YHA members/nonmembers s Dh150/175, d Dh170/200, House B

members/nonmembers dm Dh60/75, s Dh130/150, d Dh150/170; 📞) While it's a fair way from the centre (catch bus 3, 13, 17 or 31), this is Dubai's only hostel and the great-value rooms and good facilities – pool, gym, sauna, spa, Jacuzzi, tennis court and billiards room – make it worth the trek. The spacious spotless en suites in the newer wing (Hostel A) beat Dubai's zero star hotels hands down, although the dorms in the older block (House B) are a bit like boarding school. Breakfast is included but keep snacks handy as there's little close by in the way of decent eating.

**Gold Plaza Hotel** (Map pp386-7; 📞 225 0240; fax 225 0259; Souq Deira St, Deira; s/d Dh175/225) In an excellent location at the entrance to the always-tempting Gold Souq, guests are mainly East Africans here for a spot of trading. The small, simply furnished rooms haven't had a sniff of renovation in years, but they are clean. And while the staff amusingly proclaimed that they had 'no facilities' when we visited, at least there's air-conditioning.

**Deira Palace Hotel** (Map pp386-7; 📞 229 0120; marwan32@emirates.net.ae; 67 St, Gold Souq area, Deira; s/d Dh200/250) This budget hotel, a block from the Gold Souq, has been surviving for years on business from African commercial travellers (coming to do business in the souqs) and the occasional backpacker looking for Deira action. While it's certainly no palace, the location is central and it has big clean rooms with views of the vibrant streets below.

**Residence Baniyas Square by Le Meridien** (Map pp386-7; 📞 224 3888; Baniyas Sq, Deira; d Dh360) These strategically located studio apartments on Baniyas Sq are a bargain. While it feels like you're staying in a private apartment block (with no public spaces or facilities to speak of), who needs a coffee shop or room service when you have a 24-hour supermarket and a string of *shwarma* stands on your doorstep? The staff make up for the lack of facilities with friendly service, and the rooms are clean and have kitchenettes.

**Ibis Hotel** (📞 318 7000; www.accor.com; Sheikh Zayed Rd; d Dh380; 📞) While the groovy egg chairs in the lobby would win this Ibis awards for being the coolest chain hotel in the world, the rooms can be a tad tight if you've been doing some serious shopping. While there is no service to speak of, it's impossible to find a hotel that's cleaner or more comfortable for this price. A last-

minute godsend, the Ibis is located behind the World Trade Centre.

## Midrange

**Al-Hijaz Motel** (Map pp386-7; 📞 225 0085; alhijazmotel.com; Deira; d incl breakfast Dh400; 📞) Smack bang in the middle of Deira's heritage area next to Al-Ahmadiya School, this low-key hotel offers up the rare opportunity to stay in a heritage house, with clean, huge rooms. Book well ahead.

**Ramee Hotel Apartments** (Map pp386-7; 📞 352 2277; rameeapt@eim.ae; Rolla Rd, Bur Dubai; d studio Dh400) Well situated in Bur Dubai – just a 10-minute stroll to the creek and souqs – these clean, spacious self-contained studios are excellent for short stays, with a fridge, microwave, washing machine/dryer and stove-top. While the official rack rate would (amusingly) put this place in the top-end category, you'll only pay these for a few weeks in December/January – you'll generally get a room online for around Dh300.

**Orient Guest House** (Map pp386-7; 📞 351 9111; info@arabiancourtyard.com; off Al-Fahidi St; d Dh550) This new boutique hotel is one of only two hotels in restored old buildings in the Bastakia area (the other being XVA). Each room is individually decorated in a traditional Arabian or Indian style (with big, spotless bathrooms), but guests prefer chilling out in the charming courtyards. Service is personable and the atmosphere intimate, but the highlight is hearing the call-to-prayer echoing through the labyrinthine streets.

**Arabian Courtyard Hotel** (Map pp386-7; 📞 351 9111; www.arabiancourtyard.com; Al-Fahidi St, Bur Dubai; d Dh600; 📞) Situated in an excellent location in the heart of Bur Dubai, overlooking Dubai Museum (and with interesting Dubai Creek views from the top floors), this comfortable hotel has spacious rooms with polished wooden floors, heavy teak furniture, and leather window seats. While there are myriad cheap eats in the surrounding streets (everything from Russian fare to *shwarma*), the hotel has a couple of terrific restaurants, including Mumtaz Mahal (p396), Silk Route (serving tasty Chinese-Thai), and Tex-Mex eatery Barry's Bench.

**Riviera Hotel** (Map pp386-7; 📞 222 2131; riviera@emirates.net.ae; Baniyas Rd, Deira; d incl breakfast Dh600; 📞) This creek stalwart has one of the best addresses in Deira, in the heart of the action. After a sweaty stroll through

the souqs you will probably be wishing you were staying next door at the Carlton Tower with its big swimming pool, but this is still a good choice if you are after creek views.

## Top End CITY HOTELS

**XVA** (Map pp386-7; 📞 353 5383; www.xvagallery.com; Al-Fahidi St, Bastakia; d incl breakfast Dh750) This stylish boutique hotel in a restored wind-tower building in the historic Bastakia is a triple treat with its contemporary gallery and courtyard café. Rooms are decorated in a minimalist style with traditional Emirati touches, like the sheer curtain over the four-poster bed, made from the elegant black cloak sheikhs wear over their *dishdashas* to social functions. An added bonus is that there are no noisy distractions like TV.

**Marco Polo Hotel** (Map pp384-5; 📞 272 0000; www.marcopolohotel.net; Al-Mateena St, Deira; d with breakfast Dh800; 📞 📞) Comfortable rooms at this four-star hotel can be had for half this price outside of high season. While the location is out of the way for those interested in Jumeirah action, it's ideal if you want to focus on the Deira souqs and heritage areas, and beautiful Al Mamzar Beach is five minutes away. While Al-Mateena (one of Dubai's hidden gems) is lined with Iraqi and Persian kebab restaurants, the hotel has several super restaurants, the excellent Chopstix (p396) and Indian eatery Bombay, offering a similar experience to Mumtaz Mahal.

**Radisson SAS Dubai Media City** (📞 366 9111; www.mediacity.dubai.radissonsas.com; Dubai Media City; d Dh950; 📞 📞) This chic new four-star in the heart of Dubai Media City has luxe rooms with all mod cons, including complimentary wi-fi. Attracting young creative types here to do business, it's ideal for travellers who aren't fans of the beach but want to experience 'new Dubai'. There's a fabulous rooftop bar, Tamanya Terrace (p398) and an outstanding Italian restaurant, Certo.

**Hilton Dubai Creek** (Map pp384-5; 📞 227 1111; www.hilton.com; Baniyas Rd, Deira; d Dh1100; 📞 📞) Still one of the coolest creekside addresses, this stylish hotel by Carlos Ott (architect of the Opera la Bastille in Paris) offers its guests relief from the over-the-top opulence everywhere else. The rooms are spacious and beds divine – wonderful to crawl into

after a dégustation menu at the hotel's splendid Verre (see p396). Ask for a room with views of the creek.

## BEACH HOTELS

Dubai's five-star beach resorts on Jumeirah Beach between Umm Suqeim and Jebel Ali are 25 minutes from the Deira Centre in good traffic and up to 45 minutes during peak hour. Taxis cost Dh40 to Dh50, although most hotels provide complimentary shuttle buses from the airport and into Deira.

**our pick One&Only Royal Mirage** (📞 399 9999; www.oneandonlyresorts.com; Al-Sufouh Rd, Jumeirah; d Dh1740; 📞 📞) This Moroccan-style resort is Dubai's most romantic with plush rooms and enormous marble bathrooms. Splendidly set in verdant gardens with trickling fountains, still ponds and gorgeous peacocks wandering about, it's like something out of *The Thousand and One Nights*. There are sprawling palm-shaded swimming pools, a pristine white-sand beach overlooking Palm Island, and an opulent Givenchy spa with *hammam* (bathhouse). Add to that several exceptional restaurants: Tagine (p396), Eauzone and Nina; Dubai's atmospheric Rooftop Bar (p398); and the palm-filled Sheesha Courtyard (p397). You won't want to leave.

**Mina A'Salam** (📞 366 8888; www.jumeirah.com; Jumeirah Rd, Umm Suqeim; d Dh1800; 📞 📞) This magnificent Arabian-inspired resort is situated within the sprawling Madinat Jumeirah complex that also houses myriad restaurants, bars, clubs, a souq, theatre and the opulent Al Qasr hotel. The elegant rooms incorporate traditional touches, such as Bedouin textiles and Arabian antiques, and have balconies with wonderful views of the Burj al-Arab and the sea.

## EATING Restaurants

**Bastakiah Nights** (Map pp386-7; 📞 353 7772; Bastakia, Bur Dubai; mains Dh26; 🕒 10am-11pm Sat-Thu, 3-10pm Fri) While this traditionally decorated restaurant in a restored Bastakia courtyard house serves up tasty Arabic food, the atmosphere is the highlight, especially at night when you can climb to the rooftop for fine views over the old quarter to the creek. The restaurant is unlicensed, and is located near Al-Fahadi roundabout.

**Noodle House** (☎ 319 8757; Emirates Towers Hotel, Sheikh Zayed Rd; mains Dh35; ☎ noon-midnight) Dubai's diners don't mind putting their names down on the door (no bookings) and heading across to the Agency for a drink while they wait for a table. The tasty appetisers, delicious pan-Asian dishes, and generous bowls of noodles are great value by any standards and definitely worth the wait. The Asian beers and New World wines by the glass are also reasonably priced.

**Chopstix** (Map pp384-5; ☎ 272 0000; Marco Polo Hotel, Al-Mateena St, Deira; mains Dh35; ☎ lunch & dinner) Chef Richard's Indian-Chinese heritage is evident in the fusion menu that features both classic Hong Kong-Chinese dishes and some creative variations influenced by his upbringing, and time spent training at the Taj Bengal. The crackling spinach (thin strips of deep-fried spinach sprinkled with sesame seeds and salt; Dh28) is a flavour sensation; the melt-in-your-mouth salt-and-pepper squid the best we'd ever had; dry beef with chilli garlic is truly delicious; and the crispy chilli potatoes heavenly.

**YUM!** (Map pp386-7; ☎ 222 7171; Radisson Deira Creek, Baniyas St; mains Dh36; ☎ noon-1am) Deira's version of Noodle House is popular with local workers and souq shoppers who pack the place out at lunch. The gorgeous displays of fresh vegetables and colourful spices are a good indicator of what to expect: fresh, fast, tasty dishes. The authentic *char kway teow* is our favourite.

**Mumtaz Mahal** (Map pp386-7; ☎ 351 9111; Arabian Courtyard Hotel, Bur Dubai; mains Dh45; ☎ 12.30-3pm & 7.30pm-2am) This atmospheric North Indian restaurant, decorated like a fort palace with heavy, carved teak furniture, serves excellent spicy Mughlai cuisine (we love the smoky tandoor specialities), but diners come as much for the entertainment as the food. The five-piece Indian *ghazal* band with their magical yet melancholy dancers can distract from the food. Settle in for the night; song requests from the Indian expat diners come streaming in around midnight and that's when things really start to heat up. The restaurant is opposite Dubai Museum.

**Tagine** (☎ 399 9999; the Palace at One&Only Royal Mirage; mains Dh70; ☎ dinner Tue-Sun) For those who've visited Marrakesh, this atmospheric restaurant will bring back memories. For

those who haven't we've just saved you an airfare. From the authentic pigeon *pastilla* (sweet pastry stuffed with pigeon and aromatic spices and dusted with icing sugar) to tasty 'Couscous Royal' and melt-in-your-mouth lamb tagine with prunes, the flavours are straight from Morocco. As an added bonus, there are excellent Moroccan musicians, so book a table near them if you're fond of Maghrebi music. Don't leave without tasting the fragrant, fresh-mint tea flamboyantly poured in the traditional style, and checking out the bathroom. Book ahead.

**our pick Verre** (Map pp384-5; ☎ 212 7551; Hilton Dubai Creek, Baniyas Rd, Rigga; mains Dh90; ☎ dinner Sun-Fri) While there have been plenty of over-hyped pretenders to the throne, Gordon Ramsey's Verre (the chef's first overseas venture, which opened in 2001) remains peerless for its outstanding quality of cuisine, its attentive and efficient service, and Dubai's only true sommelier, Luca Gagliardi. While some are disappointed by the apparent simplicity of the food, it's exactly that – the purity, and delicate and clever combination of flavours – that is so impressive. Book well ahead.

## Cafés

**Basta Art Café** (Map pp386-7; ☎ 353 5071; Al-Fahidi St, Bastakia; meals Dh28; ☎ 8am-8pm Sat-Thu) This leafy courtyard café, located in a restored wind-tower house, is one of Dubai's most characterful and makes an ideal spot for refuelling after a Bastakia walk. The fresh juices are renowned and there's none more refreshing than the 'Basta Special' (Dh16) made from fresh lime and mint. The big salads bring the regulars back, with the grilled haloumi, asparagus and mixed lettuce salad (which also includes avocado, green beans and mustard dressing) being a favourite (Dh28). The café is unlicensed.

**Fudo** (☎ 344 8896; 73a St, off Jumeirah Beach; mains Dh35; ☎ 8am-2am) The idea behind this stylish living room-style café actually works – it's the kind of place where you can sink into a comfy sofa and linger a while, grab a quick bite to eat if you're in a hurry, sit down at a long table with a bunch of friends, or settle in for a long night of *sheesha*-smoking. The global menu, spanning Thai, Japanese, Italian and Lebanese, is great, with a wide selection to suit all tastes. Try the crispy

barbecue duck spring rolls (Dh22) and refreshing *som tam* (papaya, shrimp and roast peanut salad; Dh25) if you just want a light snack. The café is adjacent to Mercato Mall, and is unlicensed.

**Almaz by Momo** (☎ 409 8877; Mall of the Emirates; mains Dh40; ☎ 10am-midnight) This atmospheric Moroccan salon is a wonderful place to linger. Drop by at any time of day – there's a breakfast menu from 10am to noon, and delicious *kemia* (Moroccan mezze) all day (try the tangy red capsicum and tomato *mechouia* dip). The afternoon tea from 3pm to 5.30pm includes a selection of fresh Murrakesh Berber pancakes and Maghrebi pastries with Moroccan mint tea (Dh70). Don't leave without sticking your head into the *sheesha* café, and the fine-dining restaurant. The salon adjoins Harvey Nichols, and is unlicensed.

## Quick Eats

These might take the form of a worker's cafeteria where a cook slops curries on a hot plate from a big pot, to an Arabic eatery serving *shwarma* and *felafel* at a stand out front. While they're cheap, they're not always cheerful, and they don't serve alcohol.

**Ashwaq Cafeteria** (Map pp386-7; cnr Al-Soor St & Sikkat al-Khail Rd, Deira; ☎ noon-2am) If you've been shopping the Deira souqs for hours, Ashwaq, on the corner of the Perfume Souq, is the ideal place to refuel. Pull up a white plastic chair, sip on a fresh mango juice (Dh7), try a scrumptious chicken *shwarma* (Dh3.50) and take in the Deira scene.

**Nefertiti Restaurant** (Map pp386-7; ☎ 355 8855; Khalid Bin Al-Waleed St, Bur Dubai; ☎ 24hr) Serving an odd combination of home-cooked Russian food and Arabic cuisine, this busy cafeteria is also a drop-in centre for Dubai's Russian community, who come to borrow the magazines, books and DVDs stacked up against the wall. Try a hearty portion of meat pelmeni (Dh14) or *pirojki kartoshkoi* (potato dumplings; Dh7) or go for an Arabic mixed grill (Dh30). Nefertiti is opposite Four Points Sheraton.

**Al Mallah** (☎ 398 4723; Al Dhiyafah St, Satwa; ☎ 6am-4am) Serving some of the most delicious *shwarmas* (Dh3.50) around, along with excellent Lebanese food, this busy eatery with shady outdoor seating is a great choice for a quick snack.

## Self-Catering

There are supermarkets, big and small, on every street corner in Dubai. The supermarket with the largest variety and the best prices is the colossal **Carrefour** (Map pp384-5; ☎ 295 1010; Garhoud, Deira; ☎ 10am-10pm Sat-Thu, 2-10pm Fri), which has the best bakery and deli counter in town, with barrels of delicious olives and Arabic cheeses, and the best-quality fruit and vegetables. Note, there are many cheaper supermarkets, such as Choitrans, but when it comes to fresh fruit and veg you could feel like you're digging around in a backstreet garbage bin because the quality is so awful. Carrefour also has a huge range of products from Europe, Australia and North America, if you're missing some of your favourites from home.

## Sheesha Cafés

Smoking fragrant *sheesha* (flavoured tobacco, also known as nargileh, hookah and hubbly bubbly) with friends is an integral part of social life in the Emirates, whether it's at a grungy neighbourhood coffeehouse or an atmospheric courtyard café in a luxury hotel.

**Kanzaman** (Map pp386-7; ☎ 393 9913; Al-Shindagha; ☎ 4.30pm-2.30am) There are some experiences that are quintessentially Dubai and this is one of them: joining local Emiratis and Arab expats smoking fragrant *sheesha* under the starry sky, while you watch the dhow cruise boats drift by. Aaahh. If you're peckish try a tangy lamb *shwarma* (Dh5). Kanzaman is unlicensed, and is adjacent to the Heritage and Diving Villages.

**Sheesha Courtyard** (☎ 399 9999; the Palace at One&Only Royal Mirage; ☎ 6pm-2am) Smoke some *sheesha* as you recline on cushions strewn about on Persian carpets in an enchanting palm-filled courtyard, the date palms twinkling above you, and you could be forgiven for thinking you're in paradise.

**Tché Tché** (Map pp386-7; ☎ 355 7575; Bank St, Bur Dubai; ☎ 10am-2am Sat-Thu, 3pm-2am Fri) If the exotic Oriental atmosphere isn't your glass of tea, head here for a *sheesha* with the Arab expats who are keeping it real at this street corner café with Lebanese music videos blaring. It's near BurJuman Mall.

**QDs** (Map pp384-5; ☎ 295 6000; Dubai Creek Golf & Yacht Club; ☎ 6pm-2am) Overlooking Dubai Creek, QDs is a sprawling one-of-a-kind *sheesha* spot that somehow manages to feel

like your regular neighbourhood pub and an exotic *sheesha* café at the same time.

## DRINKING

**Irish Village** (Map pp384-5; ☎ 282 4750; Dubai Tennis Stadium, Al-Garhoud Rd; ☎ 11am-1.30am) While the kitsch Irish-pub façade still has us shaking our heads after all these years, the Irish Village nevertheless attracts a regular Anglo expat crowd, from airline crew to teachers, who come to down beers in the big beer garden by the duck pond.

**Tamanyia Terrace** (☎ 366 9111; Radisson SAS Hotel, Dubai Media City, Jumeirah; ☎ 5pm-2am) The spectacular views at sunset as the lights from the skyscrapers of 'New Dubai' go on are sufficient reason to settle in here for a drink, but locals love Friday's 'Favela Chic' night when Dubai's Latino community turn this rooftop lounge bar into a salsa club.

**Bahri Bar** (☎ 366 8888; Mina A'Salam Hotel, Jumeirah; ☎ 6pm-2am) While most come for the stunning views of the Burj al-Arab, we just love the wonderful veranda covered in Oriental carpets and comfy cane sofas, perfect for sinking into with a chilled glass of white as you watch the sunset. If it's too hot outside, the Arabian-inspired interior is attractive, but we prefer to sweat it out.

**Rooftop Bar** (☎ 399 9999; Arabian Court, One&Only Royal Mirage, Al-Sufouh Rd, Jumeirah; ☎ 6pm-2am) Call ahead and book the corner cushion-covered banquette seat for sunset and settle in for the night. This candle-lit rooftop bar, with its Moroccan lanterns, Persian carpets, and DJ Stickyfinger's Oriental chill-out music, is one of Dubai's most atmospheric.

**our pick Sho Cho's** (Map pp384-5; ☎ 346 1111; Dubai Marine Beach Resort & Spa, Jumeirah Rd, Jumeirah; ☎ 7pm-3am) Long the city's coolest bar for its laid-back vibe, it's during Dubai's winter months when it's really special, when the cool ocean breezes blow and the DJ spins on the wooden deck outside to a background soundtrack of waves crashing on the beach. Simply sublime.

## ENTERTAINMENT

### Nightclubs

With high-profile international DJs hitting town on a regular basis, Dubai's nightlife has become as much of a magnet as its shopping. **iBO** (Map pp384-5; ☎ 398 2206; www.9714.com; Airport Millennium Hotel, Al-Garhoud, Deira; ☎ 10pm-3am)

attracts a casual crowd to its retro interior for the laid-back vibe and interesting music. Super-club **Trilogy** (☎ 366 6917; www.trilogy.ae; Madinat Jumeirah, Jumeirah; ☎ 10pm-3am), Dubai's hottest dance club, attracts top DJs such as Mylo and Armand Van Helden and a mixed crowd of multicultural clubbers to its Deep nights (www.deepnights.net). Buy tickets in advance to avoid long queues.

The clubs of the moment are den-like **Apartment** (☎ 406 8000; Jumeirah Beach Hotel, Sheikh Zayed Rd; ☎ 8pm-3am) and summery rooftop bar-club **360 degrees** (☎ 352 3500; Jumeirah Beach Hotel, Sheikh Zayed Rd; ☎ 5pm-2am), popular for Friday sundowners, but ironically only doable in the cooler months when the temperatures aren't rising about 40 degrees. The seriously glam hit Friday night's **Peppermint Club** (☎ 332 0037; www.peppermint-club.com; Fairmont Dubai Hotel, Sheikh Zayed Rd; ☎ 10pm-3am Fri) while **Blush** (Map pp384-5; ☎ 324 8200; Wafi City Mall, enter through Ginseng bar; ☎ 10pm-3am Thu) is attracting a more down-to-earth crowd for its funky house. The airline crew and hospitality industry staff like to party at **Zinc** (☎ 331 1111; Crowne Plaza Hotel, Sheikh Zayed Rd; ☎ 10pm-3am). Worth a look for something different if you're at the Sheesha Courtyard is adjoining **Kasbar** (☎ 399 9999; One&Only Royal Mirage, Al-Sufouh Rd, Jumeirah), an Arabian Nights-style club attracting a sophisticated Arab expat set.

Entry fees to clubs vary – even in the one night; you can get in for free before 10pm, pay a ticket price after 10pm, then a higher one after midnight. Some clubs are free on certain nights, but when they do charge prices can range from Dh50 to Dh150 for top DJs, but may include a drink. 'Ladies' often get in free. Sign up for guest lists at www.platinumlistdubai.com. Check the listings in *Time Out* for what's on, and buy tickets online (at www.timeouttickets.com, www.boxoffice.com or www.itptickets.com) so you don't miss out.

### Live Music

If you're after live music, sink into a bean bag, get stuck into the barbecue, and enjoy the jam sessions at **Peanut Butter Jam** (Map pp384-5; ☎ 324 4100; www.waficityrestaurants.com; Wafi City Rooftop Gardens; admission free; ☎ 8pm-late Fri).

The stylish **Jambase** (☎ 366 6550; Souq Madinat Jumeirah, Al-Sufouh Rd, Jumeirah; ☎ 7pm-2am) is the place to head for live jazz, R&B and

soul, and the bands know how to work a crowd.

## Cinemas

You can catch English-language flicks, Bollywood movies or subtitled films from the Middle East at the multiplexes at most malls. Ticket prices are Dh35, with some cinemas offering Dh20 tickets before 6pm. **Cinestar** (Map pp384-5; ☎ 294 9000; Deira City Centre) **Cinestar at Mall of the Emirates** (Map pp384-5; ☎ 341 4222; Mall of the Emirates, Sheikh Zayed Rd) **Grand Cineplex** (☎ 324 2000; Garhoud) Located next to Wafi City Mall.

## Theatre

Dubai's performing arts scene has taken off in the last couple of years with the opening of **Madinat Theatre** (☎ 366 6546; Souq Madinat Jumeirah, Al-Sufouh Rd, Jumeirah) and **Dubai Community Theatre & Arts Centre** (☎ 341 4777; www.ductac.org; Mall of the Emirates, Sheikh Zayed Rd), both of which offer a full programme of theatre, classical music, opera, ballet, musicals and comedy.

## SHOPPING

### Shopping Malls

In today's UAE, the mall is the modern-day equivalent of the traditional souq, a place where Emiratis socialise, relax, do business and, of course, shop. While nationals still shop in the traditional souqs in Deira and Bur Dubai (nobody drives a bargain as hard as an Emirati woman!) they've taken malls to their hearts, revelling in the abundance

of multibrand stores, boutiques and cafés on offer. It helps, of course, that Dubai's malls are air-conditioned and offer ample parking and myriad eateries.

The most popular are sights in themselves: Wafi City is housed within kitsch Egyptian pyramids; Ibn Battuta Mall has domes and arches to rival Isfahan's, a life-size Chinese junk, and starry skies; while Mercato is an ersatz Italian city with piazza and arcades.

**Deira City Centre** (Map pp384-5; ☎ 295 1010; Garhoud, Deira; ☎ 10am-10pm Sat-Thu, 2-10pm Fri) Has a Carrefour supermarket, electronics stores, global fashion franchises, an amusement centre and cinema complex. **Ibn Battuta Mall** (☎ 362 1900; Sheikh Zayed Rd, Jebel Ali; ☎ 10am-10pm Sat-Tue, 10am-10pm Wed-Fri) Houses many of the same shops as the other malls, but is distinguished by its extravagantly themed malls-within-a-mall representing the countries that 14th-century Arab traveller Ibn Battuta visited.

**Mall of the Emirates** (☎ 295 1010; Sheikh Zayed Rd, Interchange 4; ☎ 10am-10pm Sat-Thu, 2-10pm Fri) Dubai's biggest, with every kind of store imaginable, cinemas and Ski Dubai (see p391).

**Mercato** (☎ 344 4161; ☎ 10am-10pm Sat-Thu, 2-10pm Fri) With a Spinneys supermarket, fashion boutiques and a plethora of coffee shops.

**Wafi City Mall** (Map pp384-5; ☎ 324 4555; Garhoud, Oud Metha; ☎ 10am-10pm Sat-Thu, 4.30-10pm Fri) Specialising in exclusive boutiques, with several of Dubai's best bars and restaurants.

### Souqs

For a contrast to the exuberance of the malls, visit the city's many traditional

### THE REAL DUBAI

Forget gold souqs, oil wells and cargo-laden wooden dhows: nothing symbolises modern-day Dubai quite like the shopping mall. It's easy to snigger at these exercises in commercial kitsch, but they say a lot about the city and its residents. The mall coffee shops are a great example. You'll see glamorous Emirati women clad in designer clothes and filmy *abeyya* enjoying animated conversation with girlfriends over cappuccinos – hardly the cliché of the silent, sequestered woman many travellers expect. At the next table Emirati businessmen in spotless white *dishdashas* might hold a power meeting over espresso.

This modern-day version of the age-old Gulf custom of doing business over coffee is a potent symbol of how the traditional and modern seamlessly merge in Dubai. Then there are the gaggles of giggling teenage girls sipping soft drinks, chaperoned by brothers who are trying to assert their authority while at the same time being teased by their little sisters' flirtatious friends. Despite their responsibilities, these adolescent boys are as embarrassed by this as older brothers the world over.

These malls are where the true lifeblood of the city flows – be sure to visit at least one during your stay.

atmospheric souqs, located on either side of the creek. Over the last couple of centuries, wares from the Far East, India and the rest of the Arabian Peninsula have been making their way to Dubai by dhow, and into the souqs. Fragrant spices and gold from India, richly textured carpets from Iran, and shimmering silks from China are still traded today, along with electronics, kitchenware and clothes. As elsewhere in the Middle East, everyone bargains: the key is to keep your transaction good-natured and be certain that you're haggling over something you really want.

In Deira, the glittering Gold Souq (p388) is a must-see, along with the tiny Perfume Souq (p388), the aromatic Spice Souq (p388) and the Deira Covered Souq (p388; mainly selling homeware but vibrant all the same). In the same area, the Fish, Fruit & Vegetable Souq is worth a look to see what the locals are eating, while in Bur Dubai, the attractive wooden covered alleys of the Bur Dubai Textile Souq (p388) are a wonderful place to while away an hour. If you want to have some clothes tailor-made, this is where to do it.

### Other Shopping Spots

For cheap electronics and digital products try Al-Fahidi St in Dur Dubai and Al-Sabkha Rd near Baniyas Sq, although the best prices can often be found at Carrefour Supermarket at Deira City Centre. For fake designer goods (usually kept under the counter) and cheap souvenirs, Al Karama is the place to head. Other spots worth trying for souvenirs, carpets and handicrafts, including Bedouin silver jewellery and *khanjars*, are the Arabian Treasures arcade section in Deira City Centre; Baniyas Rd near the *abra* station; the Dubai Museum gift shop; and the shops in the Heritage Village at Shindagha. For carpets, try Deira Tower and Dubai Tower on Baniyas Sq.

## GETTING THERE & AWAY

### Air

**Dubai international airport** (☎ 224 5252, flight inquiries 216 6666; www.dubaiairport.com) The busiest air hub in the Middle East, with a famed duty-free selection. **Emirates Airlines** (Map pp384-5; ☎ 214 4444; www.emirates.com; DNATA Airline Centre, Al-Maktoum Rd, Deira; ✈ 9am-6pm Sat-Thu) There's another office on Sheikh Zayed Rd, Bur Dubai.

### Bus

**Dubai's Roads and Transport Authority** (RTA; ☎ 800 9090; www.rta.ae) operates all buses within Dubai emirate and runs an hourly bus service to Hatta (Dh7, 90 minutes). Bus 16 leaves for Hatta every hour from Al-Sabkha bus station from 6am to 9.35pm.

**Dubai Transport** (☎ Bur Dubai 393 7014, Deira 227 0718; www.dubaitransport.com) runs regular minibus services to other destinations in the UAE. The buses are clean but cramped. Only the Sharjah service returns passengers to Dubai. From other destinations, you have to take a local taxi or bus for the return trip.

The following services operate from 6.30am to 10pm and leave from the Deira minibus station near the intersection of Omar ibn al-Khattab and Al-Rigga Rds, Rigga.

| Destination    | Frequency   | Cost | Duration |
|----------------|-------------|------|----------|
| Ajman          | every 20min | Dh7  | 1½-2hr   |
| Sharjah        | every 20min | Dh5  | 1-1½hr   |
| Fujairah       | every 60min | Dh25 | 2½hr     |
| Ras al-Khaimah | every 60min | Dh20 | 2hr      |
| Umm al-Quwain  | every 60min | Dh10 | 1½hr     |

Dubai Transport (along with Al Ghazal Transport) runs minibuses to Abu Dhabi and Al-Ain from 7am to 10pm, departing from the Bur Dubai bus station on Al-Ghubaiba Rd. It's also possible to catch a bus to Sharjah from this station.

| Destination | Frequency   | Cost | Duration |
|-------------|-------------|------|----------|
| Abu Dhabi   | every 30min | Dh15 | 2hr      |
| Al-Ain      | every 60min | Dh20 | 1½hr     |
| Sharjah     | every 15min | Dh5  | 1-1½hr   |

By far, the most popular service between Dubai and Abu Dhabi is the **Emirates Express** (☎ 800 4848) jointly operated by Dubai Public Transport and Abu Dhabi Public Transport. There are 24 services daily, from 6.20am until 11.40pm, seven days a week (Dh15 one way). Buses depart every 20 to 40 minutes, from the Bur Dubai bus station, taking two hours. You can pick up a comprehensive bus timetable from the bus stations.

### Car

Dubai has scores of car-rental agencies, from major global companies to no-name

local businesses. The former may charge slightly more but you get peace of mind knowing that you can get full insurance and that they'll get you out of a fix if you need assistance. In our experience, Europcar offers the best combination of low prices and efficient service – it will even drop the car at your hotel or home, which other companies don't do.

**Avis** www.avis.com; airport ☎ 224 5219; head office ☎ 295 7121

**Budget** www.budget.com; airport ☎ 224 5192; head office ☎ 282 3030

**Europcar** www.europcar-dubai.com; airport ☎ 224 5240; head office ☎ 339 4433

**Hertz** www.hertz-uae.com; airport ☎ 224 5222; head office ☎ 282 4422

### Long-Distance Taxi

From the Bur Dubai bus station, you can catch a shared taxi to Sharjah for Dh20. To Abu Dhabi, a seat in a shared taxi will cost Dh25. If you decide to engage a cab for yourself, you'll pay around Dh150 in a regular long-distance taxi, which may not have air-conditioning. The plush **Al Ghazal Transport** (☎ Abu Dhabi 02-444 7787) taxis provide a more efficient and comfortable service from Dubai to Abu Dhabi (Dh180), Abu Dhabi to Dubai (Dh275), Dubai to Al-Ain (Dh275), and Al-Ain to Dubai (Dh175). **National Taxis** (☎ 02-622 3300) also travels from Abu Dhabi to Dubai (Dh 225), and Dubai to Abu Dhabi (Dh150).

## GETTING AROUND To/From the Airport

Only the sand-coloured Dubai Transport taxis are allowed to pick up passengers at the airport, and they impose a Dh20 surcharge on top of the metered fare. In total, it will cost about Dh30 to Dh35 to Deira Souq area (from 10 to 20 minutes depending on traffic) and Dh40 to Dh45 to Bur Dubai (around 15 to 30 minutes, again depending on the time of day). Fares to Sheikh Zayed Rd will start at around Dh40 (15 to 25 minutes), and to Jumeirah, Umm Suqeim and the beachside suburbs from Dh50 to Dh60, and take from 20 to 40 minutes depending on traffic. Fares to the airport from these destinations will be Dh20 cheaper, as they don't include the surcharge.

There are two 24-hour municipal **airport bus services** (☎ 800 9090) running every 30

minutes to Deira (route 401) and Bur Dubai (route 402). The fare on both is Dh3 and the round trip takes one hour. These buses stop at centrally located bus and taxi stands at Al-Khor St and Al-Sabkha Rd in Deira, and in Al-Ghubaiba Rd in Bur Dubai.

### Abra

Dubai's Roads and Transport Authority runs the city's *abra* service, operating from early morning until midnight. To cross the creek by *abra* costs Dh1 (pay onboard) and there are three set routes, all ideally positioned for creek walks.

- **Route one** Leaves Deira from the Deira Old Souq Abra Station and goes to the Bur Dubai Abra Station, near the Bank of Baroda.
- **Route two** Leaves Deira from Al-Sabkha Abra Station and goes to the Bur Dubai Old Souq Abra Station in Bur Dubai.
- **Route three** Leaves the brand spanking-new Baniyas Abra Station near Arbiif Tower and Dubai Municipality and goes to the new Al-Seef Abra Station.

### Bus

The Roads and Transport Authority also runs an efficient city bus network, although unfortunately Western expat residents don't use it much and it's predominantly used by low-income guest workers. As a result, women travelling solo may feel uncomfortable. It's best to sit in the women's section at the front of the bus to avoid harassment. From the main bus stations on Al-Ghubaiba Rd in Bur Dubai or Al-Khor St in Deira you'll be able to catch a bus to most destinations in the city. Fares range from Dh1 to Dh3.50 and services are frequent. Numbers and routes are posted on the buses in English as well as in Arabic.

### Taxi

Taxis around town are metered and are thick on the ground. Fares start at Dh3. If you come across a non-metered taxi, it's most likely from Sharjah or a northern Emirate, and it's illegal for the driver to collect a fare from Dubai; if you choose to take one of these, you'll have to negotiate a fare but if the driver tries to rip you off you don't stand a chance with the authorities. Women travelling unaccompanied after dark shouldn't use these taxis.

You can also phone **Dubai Transport** (☎ 208 0808) to book a taxi. If you ask for a taxi at a five-star hotel, you may be shown to an unmarked limo; ask the fare before getting in, as these are often double the price of a standard taxi, or ask for a Dubai Transport taxi.

## AROUND DUBAI

Dubai has two heavenly desert retreats less than an hour from the city that are highly recommended if you want to experience the desert in luxury.

### Al-Maha Desert Resort & Spa

Situated just 65km southeast of Dubai, **Al-Maha Desert Resort & Spa** (☎ 303 4224; www.al-maha.com) is a wonderful eco-tourism resort that is part of the Dubai Desert Conservation Reserve (DDCR). Al-Maha is named after the Arabic word for the endangered scimitar-horned oryx, which is bred successfully as part of the DDCR's programme.

The resort offers 40 suites and two royal suites, all luxurious, stand-alone, tent-roofed structures that come with their own large, chilled private plunge pool. Each suite has a patio with stunning vistas of the beautiful desert landscape and peach-coloured dunes, dotted by the shapes of the beautiful white oryx happily grazing on small tufts of desert grass.

There are myriad activities included in the price, from desert wildlife drives to see the oryx up close, to sunset camel rides where you're rewarded with champagne and strawberries as you watch the sun go down over the dunes. However, the resort really excels at the romantic rather than the social. Private vehicles, visitors and children under 12 are not allowed at the resort, and taking meals at your suite – or at a dining table in the desert – rather than in the dining room is a popular choice. If you can't rekindle a romance here, then sorry guys, but it's probably over.

Transfers can be arranged, or if you're driving, directions can be given upon booking.

### Bab Al Shams Desert Resort & Spa

The Arabian-style **Bab Al Shams Desert Resort & Spa** (☎ 832 6699; www.babalshams.com), just 40 minutes from Dubai, may be less exclusive compared to Al-Maha (kids are welcome

for a start), but it offers a desert experience that's dream-like.

The labyrinthine medina-like layout, with hidden stairways, secluded terraces and lovely courtyards, is simply magical, especially when the candles and lanterns are lit at night. The rustic rooms with traditional Arabian décor are spacious, and the Blooms 'Dead Sea' toiletries are certainly worth finding some space for in your bag.

While the range of activities is limited by comparison to Al-Maha (there's horse riding, camel rides and desert safaris, but they cost extra), the resort makes an excellent retreat for some serious relaxing. The enormous swimming pools (recently expanded) are the main focus of daytime activity, with the attention turning to Al-Sarab bar at sunset for *sheesha*, oud (lute) music, and a view of the falconry exhibition and prettily decorated camels. The traditional Al-Hadheerah Desert restaurant offers the full Arabic experience complete with belly dancer, while Masala restaurant serves up refined Indian cuisine, and Le Dune does excellent casual Italian.

If you do plan on staying a while, there are complimentary daily shuttle buses to Jumeirah Beach Hotel in Dubai (where guests have use of the facilities), and Madinat Jumeirah Souq for some shopping. If you're driving, directions can be given upon booking.

## HATTA

☎ 04

Stunningly situated over several small hills with the spectacular Hajar Mountains surrounding it, Hatta, an enclave of Dubai emirate, is a popular UAE weekend getaway. The drive from Dubai is pleasant in parts, featuring picture-postcard vistas of camels, peach-coloured sand dunes and the occasional lush oasis, all set against a backdrop of rugged mountains. Tiny Hatta was once an important source of tobacco, as well as a vital staging post on the trade route between Dubai and Oman. Nowadays, a 20km stretch of the 105km drive from Dubai takes you through Oman, and while there are no immigration or customs formalities as you cross the borders before Hatta, keep in mind that if you're driving a rental car your insurance won't cover accidents in Oman.

حَاطَا

Hatta's main attraction is its cool, humidity-free climate (compared to Dubai and Abu Dhabi's steamy weather, that is!) and its magnificent mountain scenery. While it makes a good base for off-road trips through the mountains, Hatta itself is a wonderful place to relax.

There is little to do in the town itself. In fact there is little *in* town. Don't expect any shops. If you're after souvenirs, stop at the **Mezereh roadside market**, just over the Omani border on your way to Hatta, for cheap carpets, terracotta pots, candle holders and incense burners. The quality isn't great, but a wander around is enjoyable. If you're after cash, there's an ATM in the National Bank of Dubai on the main Hatta roundabout.

## Sights & Activities

Hatta has some great **bird-watching**, ample **trekking** and **desert safari** opportunities. Ask at the Hatta Fort Hotel (p404) for information about organised tours, but be warned: they're pricey.

Don't miss the functioning *falaj* (irrigation channel) that waters small but lush agricultural plots below the Heritage Village.

### HERITAGE VILLAGE

Hatta's main attraction is the **Heritage Village** (admission free; ☎ 8am-8.30pm Sat-Thu, 2.30-8.30pm Fri), a re-creation of a traditional mountain village with a restored fort with *majlis*, a traditional courtyard house, and various *barasti* buildings dedicated to weaponry, local music, palm-tree products, handicrafts, weaving, traditional dress, social life, and old village society. It's worth an hour of your time, especially on a weekend evening during winter when there are often live performances of Bedouin song and dance.

Hatta was once known as 'The Two Rocks' because of its stone and mud-brick **watchtowers**, built in the 1880s to protect the village from external attack. These have been restored and you can climb one at the Heritage Village for awesome views over the valley. The other is on the road opposite. The turn-off for the Heritage Village is signposted on the main street, about 3km from the fort roundabout.

### HATTA ROCK POOLS

Unfortunately the area's other main attraction, the once-lovely **Hatta rock pools**, a

series of pools and waterfalls that nature has carved out of the rocky bed of a wadi valley, are now in a sad state. Littered with rubbish, often dry, and covered in graffiti, they're rather disappointing, though most travellers still like to see the pools for themselves. The miniature canyon has cold, clear water for much of the year, and if you're lucky to find the pools full, you can leap off the rocks into the icy water – wonderfully invigorating when it's hot. After heavy rain, the waterfalls are quite dramatic. Be warned though, the area is a popular picnic place and can get crowded at weekends. While some would argue that you don't *need* a 4WD to get to the rock pools from Hatta, it's strongly advised that you shouldn't attempt the trip without one, as the drive is very steep in parts and goes through a number of dry wadi beds. The drive should definitely not be attempted in unstable weather due to the possibility of flash flooding.

Although about 20km south of Hatta town, across the border in Oman, access is from Hatta. To get to the pools, from the main roundabout outside the Hatta Fort Hotel, turn right and drive through town, past the shops. Continue straight up the road (passing the Heritage Village turn-off) for 2.6km, then turn south past the new village at the next roundabout, and follow the main road towards the mountains. After 500m, the road forks at a mosque; stay to the right and continue to a second fork at the school, where you turn left. You'll see one of the historic towers on your left. Drive 700m and then take the right turn towards the villages of Jeema and Fay. After 2.7km the road crosses a bridge over Wadi Jeema. Continue for 3km until you come to a sign welcoming you to Oman. Don't worry about a visa as there are no border formalities. Go straight through Fay. After Fay, before the tarmac finishes, take a dirt-road turn-off to the right, continuing south for 5.9km along a particularly steep descent into the wadi after the sign to Al Bon. The track to the pools is on your left. Almost immediately, do a dogleg turn left, continuing downhill for 600m. There are a few spots to park here; the remaining distance (much of it steep) must be covered on foot. When you get to the wadi bed, walk along the stream to reach the pools and, further on, the waterfalls.



### SUBLIME SAND DUNES

Avoid dull drives on drab roads by taking the following routes through stunning desert scenery:

- **Liwa: Abu Dhabi to Hameem** Take pleasure in the peach-shaded dunes dotted with date palm oases. Take the road to Hameem instead of the main route via Madinat Zayed; the turn-off is about 20km out of Abu Dhabi on the Musaffah to Tarif road.
- **Liwa: Liwa Resthouse to Moreeb Dune (Tal Mireb)** Marvel at these enormous apricot-coloured dunes on the edge of the Empty Quarter – the largest you'll see in the UAE. From Liwa Resthouse head to Moreeb Dune; at 287m it's the highest dune in the country.
- **Mahafiz: Sharjah to Kalba Rd** Count the camels, if you can! See how they blend into the camel-coloured sands on this brand-new road that wends its way through camel farms set among the sand dunes; look for road no 149.
- **Al-Ain: Dubai to Al-Ain Rd** Be amazed by the big tangerine dunes on the approach to Al-Ain around Shabat. To truly appreciate them you'll have to pull over to get a look through the roadside greenery.
- **Shwaib: Al-Ain to Hatta Rd** Gorgeous white gazelles graze on desert shrubs on the big red dunes in the grounds of a sheikh's palace at Shwaib. From Al-Ain, take the back road to Hatta via Shwaib, but instead of bypassing the village, drive down into town; you'll see rugged mountains on your right and gazelles on the dunes to your left.

If you don't have your own transport, the Hatta Fort Hotel offers a 4WD safari to the rock pools. A three-hour trip costs Dh675, including soft drinks.

### Sleeping & Eating

**Hatta Fort Hotel** (☎ 852 3211; www.jebelali-international.com; d Dh780; 📶 📺) is the only place to stay and expats love it, packing the place on weekends. Families are everywhere, with kids enjoying the swimming pools and minigolf while parents tee off at the nine-hole golf course, play a few rounds of tennis or have a go at archery. While the hotel exterior and public spaces have a 1960s country-club feel about them (modernist lines, sweeping lawns), the enormous rooms would be more at home in a winter chalet with their bare stone walls and high wood-beamed ceilings. The rooms are wonderfully comfortable, with heavy Indian teak furniture and Arabian touches such as red striped bed throws, all feature private patios with fantastic views of the mountains (perfect for a sunset drink) and we love the attention to detail: flat screen TVs, tea and coffee making facilities with proper china, good hairdryers, and an El-emis 'bath menu'.

Unfortunately, the eateries are disappointing – and we can't suggest you bring your own food to the resort as an alternative as it's not allowed! Café Gazebo (mains

Dh40), overlooking the pool, may be popular with visiting day-trippers, but when we visited the food was awful. Jeema Restaurant (mains Dh30 to Dh80) boasts a 1970s a la carte menu to match the décor (tinted mirror walls and cheap chandeliers), or a dreadful buffet of bad Indian and overcooked seafood.

The only other options for food are a couple of grungy cafeterias on the main street serving *shwarma*, kebabs and juices.

### Getting There & Away

Daily minibuses leave Hatta for Dubai from near the roundabout outside the Hatta Fort Hotel every hour from 6am to 9.35pm (Dh7, 90 minutes).

## THE NORTHERN EMIRATES

### SHARJAH

☎ 06 / pop 679,000

The anti-Dubai. The only thing conservative Sharjah has in common with its glitzy neighbour is that they both have charming waterways. With no alcohol, no *shee-sha* cafés, no revealing clothing and most definitely no cohabitation by non-married couples, thankfully the third-largest emir-

الشارقة

ate has plenty of other activities to keep your mind off the forbidden fruits offered elsewhere in the UAE.

Sharjah promotes itself as the cultural capital of the UAE, and its proliferation of excellent museums, galleries and theatres makes this tag well deserved. Architecturally, the restored central arts and heritage precincts are two of the most interesting neighbourhoods in the UAE, and the city's souqs give it the cachet of being the best place for souvenir shopping in the country, and well worth a couple of days' exploration – perhaps to detox from Dubai's decadent delights?

### History

Like most of the emirates, Sharjah historically relied on trade, fishing and pearling for its livelihood until the discovery of oil. The ruling family, the Qawassims, once ruled both Sharjah and Ras al-Khaimah and, until the British took power in 1809, were the major power in the region. Over the period of British reign, Sharjah was probably the most important of the emirates. The establishment of the first airport in the UAE was a reflection of this, with Imperial Airways flights arriving from Britain from 1932. The present ruler, Sheikh Sultan bin Mohammad al-Qassimi, took over from his father in 1972, the same year that oil was discovered in the emirate.

### Orientation

Central Sharjah surrounds Khalid Lagoon, the city's attractive heart. A leisurely stroll around the lovely lake is mandatory for all visitors. To the northwest of the lagoon are the Al-Khalidia and Al-Majaz areas, home to top-end hotels and restaurants. Across the Sharjah Bridge to the east is the city's old town, home to the heritage and arts precincts, the souqs, and most of the city's cheap hotels. Outside the centre are the anonymous and very ugly industrial areas to the southwest, and the artificially greened suburbs around University City and the airport to the southeast. Central Sharjah is not a huge area, and it's quite possible to walk around the lagoon and through the various tourist precincts; in fact, it's a good idea to do this, because the manic traffic, innumerable roundabouts and hard-to-read street signs make driving a nightmare. The main

road to Dubai, Al-Wahda Rd, suffers peak-hour gridlock from around 7am to 11am, and from 4pm to 7pm every weekday.

### Information

#### BOOKSHOP & INTERNET ACCESS

**Book Mall** (☎ 556 2111; www.thebookmall.ae; Al-Khan Rd, Al-Majaz; ☎ 9am-11pm Sat-Thu, 4-11pm Fri) Enormous bookshop with a small café and reasonable English-language fiction and travel books. Internet access costs Dh5 per hour. It's near Al-Qasba Canal.

### EMERGENCY

**Sharjah Police** (☎ 563 1111)

### MEDICAL SERVICES

**Al Zahra Private Hospital** (☎ 561 9999, 561 3311; Al-Zahra Sq, Al-Ghuair) A centrally located private medical centre with an emergency department.

### MONEY

On Burj Ave (also called Bank St), nearly every building contains a bank with an ATM. Moneychangers can be found on the small streets immediately to its east and west, as well as on Rolla Sq. There are also ATMs in the Central Souq.

### POST

**Sharjah Post Office** (☎ 572 2219; Government House Sq, Al Soor; ☎ 8am-8pm Sat-Wed, 8am-6pm Thu)

### TELEPHONE

**Main Etisalat Office** (☎ 561 1111; Ibrahim bin Mohammed Al-Medfa'a Rd; ☎ 7am-3pm Sat-Wed) It's off Kuwait Sq.

### TOURIST INFORMATION

#### Sharjah Commerce & Tourism Development

**Authority** (☎ 556 6777; www.sharjaturism.ae; 9th fl, Crescent Tower, Buheirah Corniche, Al Majaz; ☎ 7.30am-3pm Sat-Thu) Stocks a free map of the city (also available at most hotels). It doesn't offer any other services.

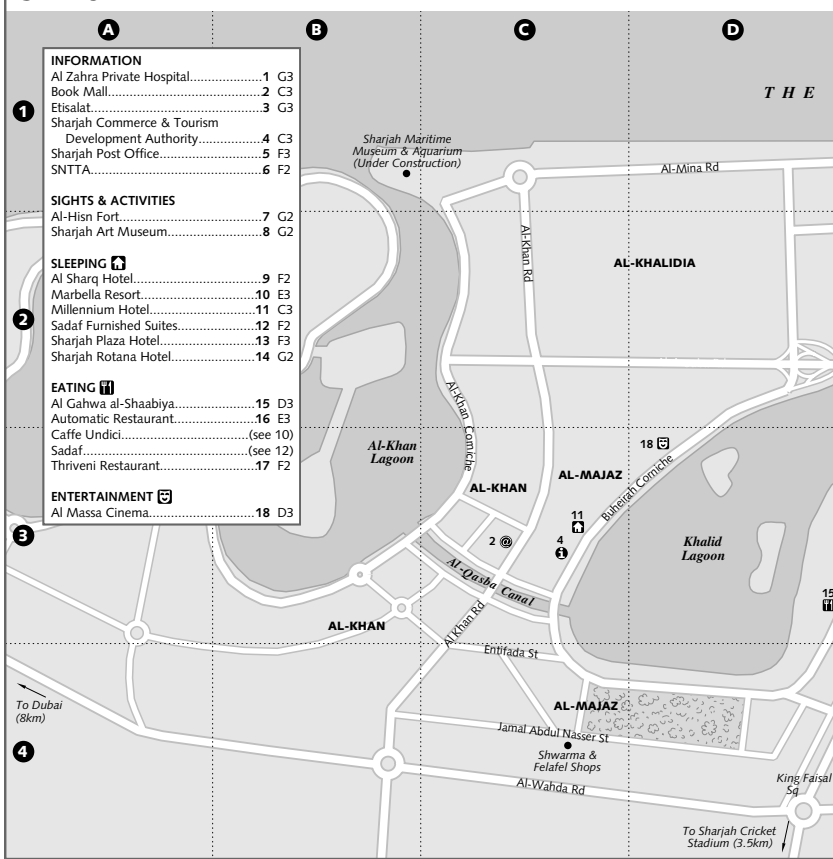
**Sharjah National Tourist & Transport Authority** (SNTTA; ☎ 351 411; Al-Arouba St; ☎ 8am-1pm & 4-7pm Sat-Thu) This huge government-run tourism agency can book transport and accommodation throughout the UAE.

### Sights

#### HERITAGE AREA

The beautiful historic buildings in the Heritage Area, just inland from the Corniche between Burj Ave and Al-Maraija Rd, have been carefully restored and faithfully reconstructed using traditional materials

**SHARJAH**



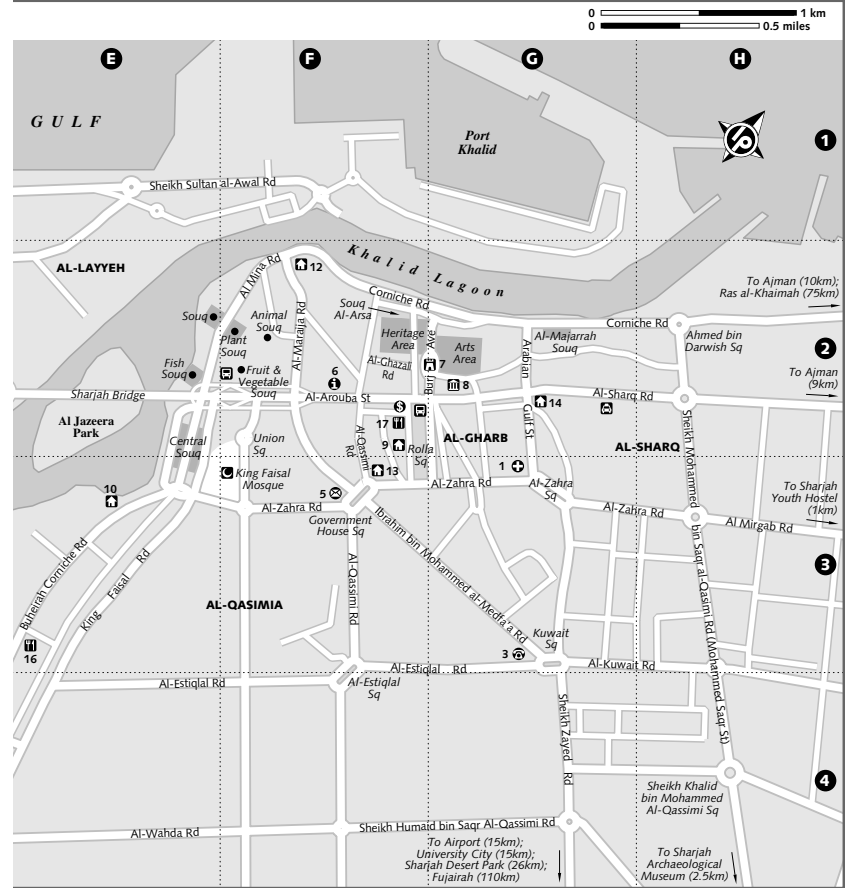
such as sea rock, coral and gypsum. First visit the imposing **Al-Hisn Fort**, with its fascinating historical exhibits inside, before making your way to the atmospheric **Literature Square** and the **House of Poetry**. Across from here is the splendid **Bait Sheikh Sultan Bin Saquer al-Qassimi** (☎ 569 3999; admission free; ☎ 9am-1pm & 5-8pm Tue-Sun, 5-8pm Fri), a traditional house with wind towers set around a courtyard. Inside are wonderful displays of traditional costumes, jewellery, ceramics and furniture.

Walking past the Sharjah National Theatre, you'll come to the **Islamic Museum** (☎ 568 3334; www.sdc.gov.ae; admission free; ☎ 9am-1pm & 5-8pm Tue-Sun, 5-8pm Fri), with interesting exhibits including a large collection of coins from

around the Islamic world and a number of beautiful handwritten Qurans. Next door, the **Sharjah Heritage Museum** (Bait al-Naboodah; ☎ 568 5500; admission free; ☎ 9am-1pm & 5-8pm Tue-Sun, 4.30-8pm Fri) has similar traditional exhibits to Bait Sheikh Sultan Bin Saquer al-Qassimi though without the wind towers, but it is still worth a look.

At the Islamic Museum, Friday evening is women only; at the other museums, Wednesday admission is for women only, all day.

The atmospheric **Souq al-Arsa** (☎ 9am-1pm & 4-9pm Sat-Thu, 4-9pm Fri), with its gorgeously restored *areesh* (palm leaf) roof and wooden pillars, is not far from the waterfront. The oldest souq in the UAE, it has



a wonderful traditional **coffeehouse**, where you can stop for a reviving mint tea and plate of dates.

**ARTS AREA**

Tucked behind the textile shops and souqs on the opposite side of Burj Ave is the Arts Area, home to the country's most impressive art gallery, the **Sharjah Art Museum** (☎ 568 8222; admission free; ☎ 9am-1pm & 5-8pm Sat-Thu, 5-8pm Fri). Showing contemporary art by local and foreign artists, it has a small but interesting permanent collection, a stylish café and helpful staff. It is also home to the world-class Sharjah International Art Biennale (www.sharjahbiennale.com) – widely recognised as an outstanding event

with provocative arts; check it out if you're around when it's on.

The **Bait Obeid al-Shamsi** (☎ 568 8811), opposite the art museum, is a restored house used as an international artists' studio; don't miss the intricate pillars on the upper level. Nearby are the **Very Special Arts Centre** (☎ 568 7812), a workshop and gallery for disabled artists, and the **Emirates Fine Arts Society** (☎ 568 4488), which also displays the works of local artists.

**SHARJAH ARCHAEOLOGICAL MUSEUM**

This fascinating **museum** (☎ 566 5466; www.archeology.gov.ae; Sheikh Rashid bin Saqr al-Qassimi Rd; admission free; ☎ 9am-1pm & 5-8pm Sat-Thu, 5-8pm Fri) is housed in an elegant building set in

manicured gardens, next to the Science Museum near Cultural Sq. The displays, accompanied by audiovisual interpretations, cover the earliest archaeological finds in the emirate (dating from 5000 BC) up to the present day, including coins, jewellery, pottery and weapons. Wednesday afternoon admission is for women only. A taxi here from the centre will cost Dh7 to Dh10.

### UNIVERSITY CITY

A cross between Oxford and Disneyland, this sprawling and somewhat surreal campus is artificially greened, with splendid fountains, expansive lawns and flowerbeds galore. Its architecture is truly stunning and it's a popular stop on most expat's visitor sightseeing tours. Check out the American University of Sharjah, with its Middle-East-meets-the-White-House building, the School of Sharia'a Law, the Sharjah Library, and the University of Sharjah. The city is unlike anything else in the country and is a sign of the importance placed on higher education in the UAE. It's next to Sharjah airport, 15km from the centre of town.

### SHARJAH DESERT PARK

This impressive **park** (adult/child Dh15/free; ☎ 9am-5.45pm Sat, Sun, Tue & Wed, 11am-5.45pm Thu, 2pm-5.45pm Fri) is home to what is perhaps the best zoo in the Middle East. The main attraction is **Arabia's Wildlife Centre** (☎ 531 1999), a breeding centre as well as a zoo. One of the highlights is the indoor aviary, home

to flamingos, Houbara bustards and Indian rollers. The outdoor enclosures house sacred baboons, striped hyenas, Arabian wolves, and the splendid Arabian leopard. The restaurant overlooks an open range area featuring flamingos, Nubian ibex, Arabian oryx, ostriches and sand gazelles.

The **Children's Farm** (☎ 531 1127; ☎ closed noon-4pm) has farm animals such as goats, camels and ducks where kids can feed the animals and watch quails hatching, while the well-planned **Natural History Museum** (☎ 531 1411) has a botanical garden with more than 120 types of wildflowers. There's also a park with café and picnic facilities.

The Desert Park is just past the airport and University City on the Sharjah/Al Dhaid Rd, 26km or 20 minutes from the centre of town. There is no public transport but it should only cost you about Dh50 for a taxi to take you there, wait and return to Sharjah.

### Sleeping BUDGET

**Sharjah Youth Hostel** (☎ 522 5070; www.uaeha.org.ae; Al-Mirgab Rd, Al-Shargan; dm members/nonmembers Dh35/50, s/d 105) This decent youth hostel, about 1.5km northeast of Al-Zahra Sq, has big clean rooms, some with balconies and en suite, and there's a communal area with sofas and TV, a well-equipped kitchen and a washing machine. Single women and families are welcome. Tell the taxi driver that you want *bait shabab* (youth house) near the Old Traffic Police Station.

**Sharjah Plaza Hotel** (☎ 561 7000; www.sharjahplazahotel.com; Al-Qassimi Rd; d Dh250) The main thing this hotel has going for it is that its modest rooms are clean and cheap. Otherwise, the beds are uncomfortable, the bathrooms need renovating, and it's on busy Government House Sq, so street noise is a problem.

### MIDRANGE

**Sadaf Furnished Suites** (☎ 568 6111; www.sadaf.com; Al-Mina Rd; d Dh300) These clean, spacious apartments are decorated like a suburban home from the '80s with lots of mismatched florals and geometric machine-made rugs. They're fully equipped with kitchen (fridge, washing machine, stove and utensils), bathroom and sitting area, and cheaper rates can be negotiated for longer stays.

**Al Sharq Hotel** (☎ 562 0000; www.sharqhotel.com; Rolla Sq; s/d incl breakfast Dh400/500) This small hotel is in the centre of town, close to the arts and heritage precincts, but while it's clean, comfortable and the management are friendly, it's overpriced for what's on offer. It should be a last resort option.

**Sharjah Rotana Hotel** (☎ 563 7777; sharjah.hotel@rotana.com; Al-Arouba St; d Dh450; ☎ ☎) The excellent Rotana is Sharjah's best-value hotel with enormous, comfortable, well-equipped rooms; spotless spacious bathrooms; an expansive buffet breakfast; and interesting views over the city. The location is central, but a cheap taxi is just a hand signal away if you don't have your own wheels.

### TOP END

**Marbella Resort** (☎ 574 1111; www.marbellaresort.net; Buheirah Corniche; junior/2-bed ste Dh690; ☎ ☎) An old-timer on the Sharjah hotel scene, this 25-year-old Spanish-style resort is looking a little worn around the edges but Gulf Cooperative Council (GCC) and Arab expat families love the private villa accommodation, set in lush tropical gardens, with a pleasant swimming pool.

**Millennium Hotel** (☎ 555 6666; www.millenniumhotels.com; Buheirah Corniche; d Dh850; ☎ ☎) The hotel's unrivalled location overlooking the gorgeous lagoon, its plush amenities, and the splendid swimming pool make this an excellent choice if you're planning to spend a lot of time at the hotel. If you're not, then the Rotana represents better value.

### Eating

**Caffe Udicci** (☎ 574 1111; Marbella Resort, Buheirah Corniche; ☎ 7am-1am) Sharjah's most sophisticated café has indoor and outdoor seating, continental breakfasts (Dh22), generous-sized sandwiches (Dh12 to Dh18) and real espresso coffee (Dh12).

**Al Gahwa al-Shaabiya** (☎ 572 3788; Buheirah Corniche; ☎ 8am-2am) This traditional *barasti* coffeehouse, overlooking the lagoon, serves mint tea, local coffee, ginger milk and Arabic snacks. Extremely popular with Emiratis, it's a wonderful place to sit in the evenings, play backgammon and watch the city lights reflected in the water of the lagoon.

**Thriveni Restaurant** (☎ 562 6901; Rolla Sq; ☎ 10am-midnight) This dirt-cheap Indian eatery is usually packed with guest workers from the subcontinent eating thalis (Dh6),

biryanis (Dh7) and curries (Dh7 to Dh11). As is usually the case in workers' cafeterias, women are required to sit in the family area, which in this case is rather shabby but is worth tolerating unless you enjoy being ogled.

**Automatic Restaurant** (☎ 572 7335, 574 1147; Buheirah Corniche; mezze Dh11, shwarma Dh3.50; ☎ 11am-1am) A branch of the famed Lebanese chain, Automatic serves up fresh, reliable Lebanese staples in a bright, clean, cafeteria. The place gets packed with Arab expats late at night.

**Sadaf** (☎ 569 3344; Al-Mina Rd; mains Dh35; ☎ lunch & dinner) Popular with local Emirati families who dine in private booths, this excellent Iranian restaurant chain serves up authentic Persian cuisine – the spicy moist kebabs are particularly good and the 'Zereshk Polo Meat: Iranian rice with Iranian red barberries and meat' (Dh25) is scrumptious.

### Entertainment

**Al Massa Cinema** (☎ 556 3300, 562 4400; Buheirah Corniche) Shows the latest Hollywood blockbusters and odd Bollywood flick.

### Shopping

**Souq al-Arsa** (☎ 10am-1.30pm & 4-10.30pm) Located in the Heritage Area, this is the most atmospheric souq in the UAE and one of the few selling authentic antiques and collectables from pre-oil times, and the early development days. You'll also find good-quality handicrafts, carpets and souvenirs that you'll pay a fraction of the price for than you would in Dubai.

**Central Souq** (☎ 9am-1.30pm & 4-10.30pm) Also called the Best Souq or New Souq, this is one of the best souqs in the country. The bargains are to be found in the little shops on the upstairs balconies, specialising in carpets from Iran, Afghanistan and Turkey, Kashmiri pashminas, and silver Bedouin jewellery from Oman, Yemen, Afghanistan and India. Shop around and compare prices before purchasing, and remember to bargain; start at 50% off the price offered and you'll end up getting something for a quarter of the original price. Head here in the evenings with the locals if you can: only tourists shop here during the day.

Also worth a wander is the glittering Gold Centre, on the corner of Sheikh Humaid

### THE SHARJAH SHUTTLE

With Dubai's crazy rental market price increases over the past couple of years, many workers on lower and middle incomes in Dubai have moved to neighbouring Sharjah to be able to afford to stay in the UAE. This trend has spawned unofficial taxis that ferry workers daily to Dubai as well as some well-organised car pooling for the daily drive. With transport times of up to two hours to get to Sheikh Zayed Rd and up to 90 minutes to get back to Sharjah, what does everyone do in a car with the same people every day? 'Sleep', everyone told us. 'Conversation wears pretty thin after the first month of spending over 20 hours a week with the same people!'



## UMM AL-QUWAIN

☎ 06 / pop 66,000

The sleepy fishing port of Umm al-Quwain offers little in the way of attractions for the visitor compared to other emirates, apart from the chance to experience the closest thing to a pre-oil town that you'll find in the UAE. Its name, 'Mother of Two Powers', refers to the emirate's power over both land and sea, and the town itself lies on a narrow peninsula of sand jutting north from the main road linking Sharjah with Ras al-Khaimah.

The old town and the emirate's tiny business district are at the northern tip of the peninsula, along King Faisal Rd (aka Muroor Rd). Banks are found in King Faisal

أم القيوين

Rd and internet access is available at the Palma Beach Hotel for Dh10 per hour.

### Sights

The beautifully restored **Umm al-Quwain Museum** (☎ 765 0888; www.uqmuseum; adult/child Dh4/free; ☎ 8am-1pm & 5-8pm Sat-Thu, 5-8pm Fri), on the edge of the old town, was once the town's fort. The oldest building in Umm al-Quwain, it was built in 1768 for the ruler of the time, Sheikh Rashid Bin Majid Al Mualla, and served as the residence and seat of government for the emirate's rulers until 1969. Highlights include the ruler's fine *majlis* (meeting room), an archaeological collection and displays of old Bedouin jewellery and weapons, including intricately decorated swords.

Also worth a quick look is the nearby **Umm al-Quwain Soor (Old Wall)** (☎ 765 0888; www.uqmuseum; admission free; ☎ 9am-1pm & 4-10pm). Built in 1820 from sea stones and plaster, it has an impressive wooden gate and several towers.

The sandy lanes of the old town in the area around the museum are worth a wander. There are several crumbling historical buildings crying out for renovation. People in Umm al-Quwain are rather reserved and you'll immediately notice how much poorer it is compared to other emirates.

Bird-watchers should hire a **boat** (☎ 765 0000; Flamingo Beach Resort; per hr Dh180) and head to Jazirat al-Sinniyah (Sinniyah Island), home to the UAE's largest Socotra cormorant colony. Half of the island is a nature reserve, but the other half is home to weekend houses used by wealthy locals, including Umm al-Quwain's crown prince. From September to October and May to June the island is a fabulous place to see bird colonies, including flamingos, migrating.

**Dreamland Aquapark** (☎ 768 1888; www.dreamlanduae.com; adult/child Dh70/40; ☎ 10am-6pm), 10km north of town on the main highway (next door to the Barracuda Beach Resort), is a downmarket (albeit considerably cheaper) version of Dubai's Wild Wadi, yet kids still enjoy its water rides, slides and pools, especially the famous Kamikaze and Mighty-Go-Round.

### Sleeping & Eating

**Flamingo Beach Resort** (☎ 765 0000; www.flamingo-resort.ae; Corniche Rd; Dh400; 🚗) It's a pity to see

### AN UMM AL-QUWAIN XMAS STORY

Twas the afternoon before Christmas and we were in Umm al-Quwain searching for decent places to eat – no mean feat in this tiny emirate – when we came across a small new 'restaurant' that looked inviting. We went inside and were given the usual cheery greeting by a pretty young Filipino woman. We chatted about the menu and she said that the restaurant had only opened a few weeks ago and that she hadn't had a day off since she arrived from the Philippines. She asked if we were Christians. 'Merry Christmas!' she exclaimed. 'You're the first people I've been able to say that to, everyone else here is a Muslim!'

The Filipino girl asked whether the rest of the country looked like this (err, no...) and how far away Dubai was (a two-hour drive). The poor woman admitted that she'd been told she was going to be working in Dubai and couldn't believe that she was stuck in a place that bore no relation to the city she'd heard so much about back home. We left the restaurant feeling sad so we rummaged around the car to find something to give her as a present. We found a boxed Panatone cake given to us by the hotel we just checked out of and Lara ran back inside to give it to her: 'Merry Christmas!' The poor girl shed a tear. And so did we when Lara returned to the car.

We're always hearing about construction workers getting a raw deal in the UAE, but this in many ways was just as heartbreaking.

Terry Carter & Lara Dunston

the glum faces of package tourists downing beers in the characterless bar who probably thought they were heading for Dubai. While it's pleasant enough to sit by the water under the palm trees, there's no reason to actually stay here. If you must, the motel-style rooms are comfortable enough with views of the big swimming pool and lagoon, and there is an Ayurveda spa (treatments from Dh125 to Dh325) and plenty of water sports, including water-skiing (per 30 minutes Dh120), speedboat rides (per 30 minutes Dh120), glass-bottom boat trips (one hour, per person Dh180) and evening crab-hunting trips (per person including dinner Dh160). The facilities are available to nonguests.

**Palma Beach Hotel** (☎ 766 7090; fax 766 7388; Sheikh Ahmad bin Rashid Rd; d Dh550-3650, houseboats Dh1650; 🚗) Taking its inspiration from an Egyptian theme park, with obelisks, mummies, statues of tigers, and faux Roman columns, this bizarre hotel is popular with Emirati and Gulf Arab families, who like to barbecue on the palm-lined beach. There's also a bowling alley and amusement centre, along with a restaurant, *sheesha* café and bar overlooking the water.

**Barracuda Beach Resort** (☎ 768 1555; www.barracuda.ae; Dubai-Ras Al-Khaimah Rd; Spanish haciendas Dh350, cabanas Dh700; 🚗) Renowned across the country for its liquor store (the only one in the country where a liquor licence isn't required, although we understand this won't

be for long), this pleasant, whitewashed Mediterranean-style 'leisure' resort has simple yet spacious, tiled-floor apartments and cabins, a popular 'nightclub' and 24-hour check-in.

**Asis** (☎ 765 1751; Al Hason Rd, old town; dishes Dh5-30), a new cafeteria in the old town, serves up everything from pizzas (Dh15 to Dh30) and burgers (Dh6) to mutton masalas (Dh12) and biryanis (Dh6 to Dh10). Shabby **Al-Anam** (☎ 765 6729; King Faisal Rd; meals Dh5-15; ☎ irregular hr), opposite Eppco and KFC, does spicy curries and biryanis.

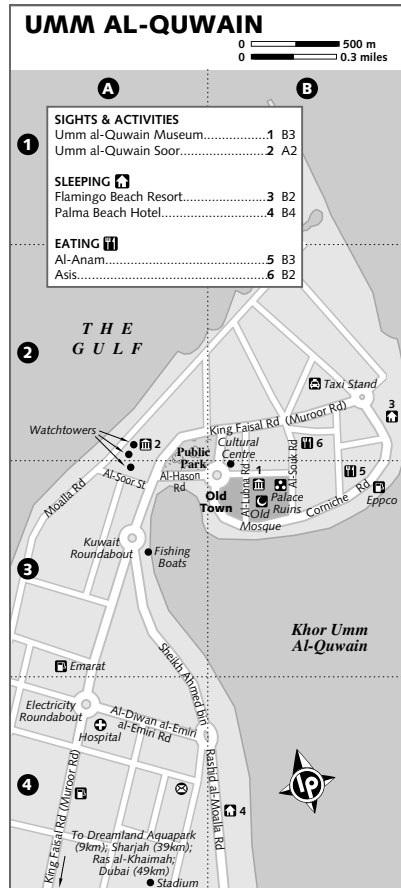
### Getting There & Away

Umm al-Quwain has no bus service. Minibuses from Dubai drop passengers off on the highway opposite the Emarat station. You'll have little luck catching a shared taxi to leave; engaged taxis can be flagged anywhere in town for travel to Sharjah (Dh40), Deira (in Dubai; Dh60), Ajman (Dh30) and Ras al-Khaimah (Dh50).

### RAS AL-KHAIMAH

☎ 07 / pop 208,000

Often overlooked in the tourist brochures, Ras al-Khaimah (usually known as simply 'RAK') is somewhat of an undervalued destination for visitors to the UAE. With its proximity to the hazy Hajar Mountains, the UAE's northernmost and most fertile emirate is often just seen as the gateway to Oman's spectacularly beautiful Musandam



Peninsula (p242), however it has a few surprises of its own. Firstly, while the town itself is a dusty ramshackle affair, the views of the mountains are spectacular and come as quite a surprise after the endless sands and dreary drive to get here. The nearby beaches are as pristine and development-free as you'll find in the UAE, and the Al Hamra Fort Hotel & Beach Resort (p416), 25km south of RAK, makes an excellent base to sample some water sports.

## History

Inhabited since the 3rd millennium BC, Ras al-Khaimah's main city was for many centuries Julfar, a few kilometres to the north of the present-day city. By the 7th century Julfar was an important port of the Sassanian Empire, which was based in Iran and acted as the major power in the region. After occupation by the Portuguese in the early 16th century, Julfar was abandoned and the foundations of the modern city were laid. Ruled by the Al-Qassimi family, which also ruled Sharjah, the emirate was the major power in the Gulf from this time until the British swaggered into the region. It was because of the scars left behind from this earlier British occupation that RAK initially chose to stay out of the federation brokered by the British in 1971. Wisely, its ruler soon decided that the emirate couldn't survive as an independent state and joined shortly afterwards. Today, the emirate's economy is based on agriculture, the pharmaceutical industry and petrochemical industries, and its small reserves of oil.

## Orientation & Information

Ras al-Khaimah has two parts: Ras al-Khaimah proper, the old town on a sandy peninsula along the Gulf coast; and Al-Nakheel, the newer business district on the other side of the creek and harbour. A bridge links the two. The two major roads are Sheikh Mohammad bin Salem St, which leads to Dubai, Sharjah, Umm al-Quwain and Ajman; and Oman St (aka Al-Yayiz Rd), which leads to Oman to the north and the airport to the south (this stretch is called Airport Rd).

You can change money or access ATMs at the banks along Sheikh Mohammad bin Salem St in Ras al-Khaimah or Oman St in Al-Nakheel. The main post office is a red-

brick building on Sheikh Mohammad Bin Salem St. The Etisalat office is on bin Dahir St in Al-Nakheel.

## Sights & Activities

The **National Museum of Ras al-Khaimah** (☎ 233 3411; www.rakmuseum.gov.ae; Al-Hisn Rd; adult/child Dh2/1; ☎ 9am-5pm Wed-Mon Sep-May, 8am-noon & 4-7pm Wed-Mon Jun-Aug), set in an imposing 18th-century fort built of stone and gypsum, and with a wonderful wind tower, was the residence of the Qawassim rulers until the 1970s. The thoughtfully curated collection includes exhibits on the area's natural history, archaeology, ethnography and the Qawassim tribe. Highlights include intricately patterned Iron-Age softstone vessels, 18th-century terracotta urns and other splendid artefacts from Julfar, the biggest port in the UAE from the 13th until the 18th century, and Shamal (see p416).

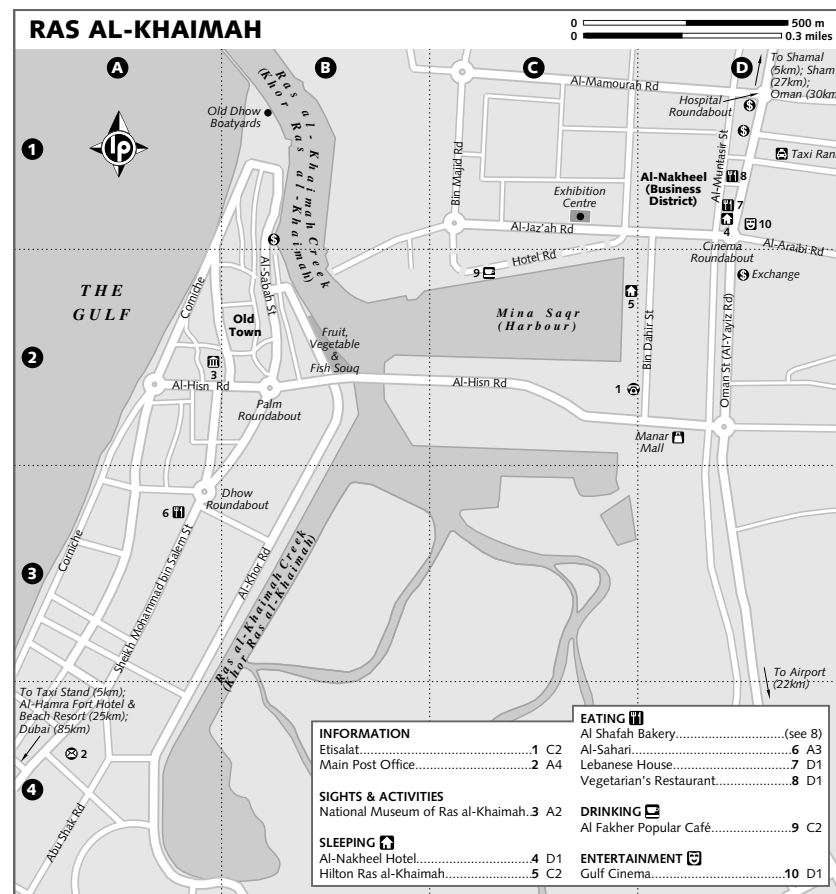
Ras al-Khaimah's ramshackle **old town** is also worth a wander. The small but fascinating textile souq, with colourful traditional dresses on display in the doorways, is especially vibrant at night, when the local Emirati ladies come out to shop.

**RAK Equestrian Club** (☎ 487 6549), 5.5km from the centre of town at the foot of the mountains, offers horse riding in a spectacular setting. There are lessons, treks and pony rides.

**Rock climbing** is a popular activity in this part of the UAE, with the best climbs in the country being near Wadi Bih, starting from the Ras al-Khaimah side.

## Tours

Most visitors to RAK are stopping off in town on their way to the magnificent Musandam Peninsula (see p242) in Oman. If you are one of them, call ahead to book some tours with **Musandam Sea Adventure Tourism** (☎ in UAE 050-750 3001, in Oman 00968 9934 6321; www.msaoman.com), an excellent Khasab-based tour company that runs fabulous half- and full-day dhow trips through the spectacular fjords for snorkelling, dolphin-spotting and traditional fishing villages. It also does fantastic half-day 4WD tours up to the Sayh Plateau and the 2000m Jebel Harim, where you'll see ancient marine fossils and jaw-dropping views over Khor Al Najd. If you are from one of the 34 countries eligible to get an on-the-spot



visa at Dubai airport, then you can also get an Omani visa at the Al Darah passport control (see p445). Everyone else has to apply in advance at the Oman embassy in Dubai.

## Sleeping

**Al-Nakheel Hotel** (☎ 228 2822; hotelnakheel@hotmail.com; Oman St; d Dh170) Shabby, sleazy and noisy, this hotel should only be seen as a last resort. Single women staying here alone (not recommended) should expect that they might probably be mistaken for prostitutes. The dodgy Churchill Pub (open noon to 2am) on the first floor should be avoided unless you're desperate for a drink and dreadful karaoke.

**Hilton Ras al-Khaimah** (☎ 228 8888; rkilton@emirates.net.ae; Al-Jaz'ah Rd; Dh700; ☎) It may be the only decent hotel in town, but this Hilton doesn't meet the chain's usually high standards. The low-ceilinged rooms are claustrophobic, service is slow, the lobby café is terribly smoky, and phone calls appeared on our bill that we never made. The German package tourists that fill the place don't seem to mind though.

## Eating

**Al Shafah Bakery** (☎ 227 1855; pizzas Dh2.50-6; ☎ 8am-midnight) This hole-in-the-wall Afghani bakery, a few doors down from the Vegetarian's Restaurant, does delicious 'pizzas'. Try the cheese and *zaatar* (thyme), or

mutton with cheese. Eat them while they're piping hot, straight out of the stone oven.

**Vegetarian's Restaurant** (☎ 228 8809; mains Dh10; ☎ 7.30am-2.30pm & 6.30pm-11.30pm Sat-Wed, 7am-3pm & 5pm-midnight Thu & Fri) They take their vegetarianism seriously here; the extensive menu offers everything from delicious dosas (from Dh3.50) to tandooris (Dh10 to Dh15) and fragrant curries (Dh8 to Dh10).

**Al-Sahari** (☎ 233 3966; Sheikh Mohammad bin Salem St; mezze Dh2-15, grills Dh13-17; ☎ 11am-midnight) RAK's locals keep coming back to this popular eatery for its friendly service and cheap tasty food. How can you resist the charm of a place that boasts 'our objective is salubrious food and the sweet taste and the special arabic kindness'? The expansive menu features Lebanese staples, a few Emirati favourites, with some 'international' dishes thrown in, from fried Sultan Ibrahim fish (Dh15) and *shish tawooq* (Dh13) to 'Chateau Briand' (Dh30) and 'chicken Maggi soup' (Dh3).

**Lebanese House** (☎ 228 2181; mains Dh20; ☎ 11am-3pm & 6.30pm-midnight) This spotlessly clean Lebanese eatery specialises in simple home-cooked Arabic favourites, including lentil soup (Dh2), fried *kibbeh* (12 pieces; Dh20), and grilled Egyptian pigeon (Dh25). It's next to Al-Nakheel Hotel.

### Drinking

Local guys love the traditional *barasti* coffeehouse **Al Fakher Popular Café** (☎ 228 8334; ☎ 4pm-1am), overlooking the lagoon where they play backgammon, drink coffee (Dh4) and puff on a *sheesha* (Dh5) well into the night. It's near Mina Saqr.

### Entertainment

The **Gulf Cinema** (☎ 222 3313; tickets Dh20; ☎ 1.30pm-10.45pm) shows English-language films.

### Getting There & Around

Tiny **Ras al-Khaimah airport** (☎ 228 8809) is 22.5km south of Al-Nakheel.

There are no bus services within the emirate or to other emirates. The taxi station is on Sheikh Mohammad bin Salem St just south of the Bin Majid Beach Hotel on the other side of the street. A shared taxi to Dubai will cost Dh25, and to Sharjah, Ajman or Umm al-Quwain Dh20. There are

no shared taxis to Fujairah; it will cost you around Dh160 to engage one.

Taxis within the town aren't metered. A trip from the old town to Al-Nakheel shouldn't cost more than Dh10. Agree on the fare before you get in.

### AROUND RAS AL-KHAIMAH

#### Al Hamra Fort Hotel & Beach Resort

This old Arabian-inspired resort (☎ 244 6666; www.althamrafort.com; d Dh750; ☎ ☎), 25km south of RAK, on the edge of the Gulf, gets packed with European package tourists. While rooms are spacious and comfortable with Oriental touches such as *mashrabiyya* screens, unfortunately the interior isn't as impressive as the exterior architecture and has already dated. Set in lush gardens, there are two pools, a pristine white-sand beach, and plenty of water sports, diving and golf on offer. There are several rather uninspiring eateries that could prove frustrating after a couple of days.

#### Shamal

The village of Shamal, 5km north of Ras al-Khaimah, is the site of some of the most important archaeological finds in the UAE. The area has been inhabited since the late 3rd millennium BC and a set of ruined buildings and fortifications spread on a small hill overlooking the village is known as the **Queen of Sheba's Palace**, although it's disputed as to whether she was actually here. Some argue that it was Queen Zenobia from Palmyra (in Syria), who ruled a sizable chunk of the Middle East in the 4th century AD who may have been there. The fortifications were used as recently as the 16th century but unfortunately there's little of the structure left today and to the untrained eye it probably looks like a pile of rubble and small stone wall. The views of the mountains are super though and the village is fascinating.

To reach the site, travel north along Oman St for 4.3km from the hospital roundabout in Al-Nakheel and turn right onto a paved road, where there is a brown sign pointing to the Shamal Folk Arts and Theatre Society (Saqr Heritage Village). Follow this road for 1.5km past the Heritage Village until you reach an oval roundabout. Turn right and follow the road for another 2.3km through a village until you come to the People Her-

itage Revival Association, a new building made to look like a fort. Turn left. Pass through the village, passing a small brown and orange mosque on the left. Immediately after the mosque you'll come to a fork in the road; turn left and continue until you come to a small mountain on your right. You'll see a knocked-down fence and some grey stone steps leading up to the ruins, and a UAE flag at the top.

A taxi from Al-Nakheel should charge around Dh50 to take you there, wait 30 minutes and return. Agree on the fare before you leave.

## ABU DHABI أبو ظبي

☎ 02 / pop 1.7 million

With the oil predicted to run out sometime after 2100 AD, you'd forgive Abu Dhabi for wanting to just sit pretty and count the money. But this attractive, green and distinctly Arab city just appears to be hitting its stride. While not as cosmopolitan or as sophisticated as Dubai, Abu Dhabi also lacks traffic jams and the poseurs that plague its neighbour, making it a much more liveable city if you don't crave clubbing. After closely watching Dubai's phe-

nominal growth, Abu Dhabi has chosen its development projects wisely, and while the laid-back feel might eventually change, the local Emirati flavour of the capital appears certain to remain.

The emirate of Abu Dhabi is huge by comparison to the other emirates, comprising almost 87% of the country's total area. Just as 50 years ago Abu Dhabi was little more than a fishing village comprising a fort, a few coral buildings and a smattering of *barasti* huts, the rest of the emirate is very 'Arabian Sands' with its enigmatic empty desert, dotted with oases such as Al-Ain and Liwa. While the ruling Al-Nahyan family may have become rich from what lies beneath, you get the sense that their connection to the desert and the sea is something that remains more important than petrodollars.

### HISTORY

The Bedouin of the Bani Yas tribe settled on the island of Abu Dhabi in 1761. Early on, the centre of power for the tribe remained at Liwa Oasis, where the ruling Al-Nahyan family was based, but in 1793 the family moved to Abu Dhabi. At this time a haven for wildlife (Abu Dhabi literally means 'Father of the Gazelle'), the

### GULF CUP GONE WILD

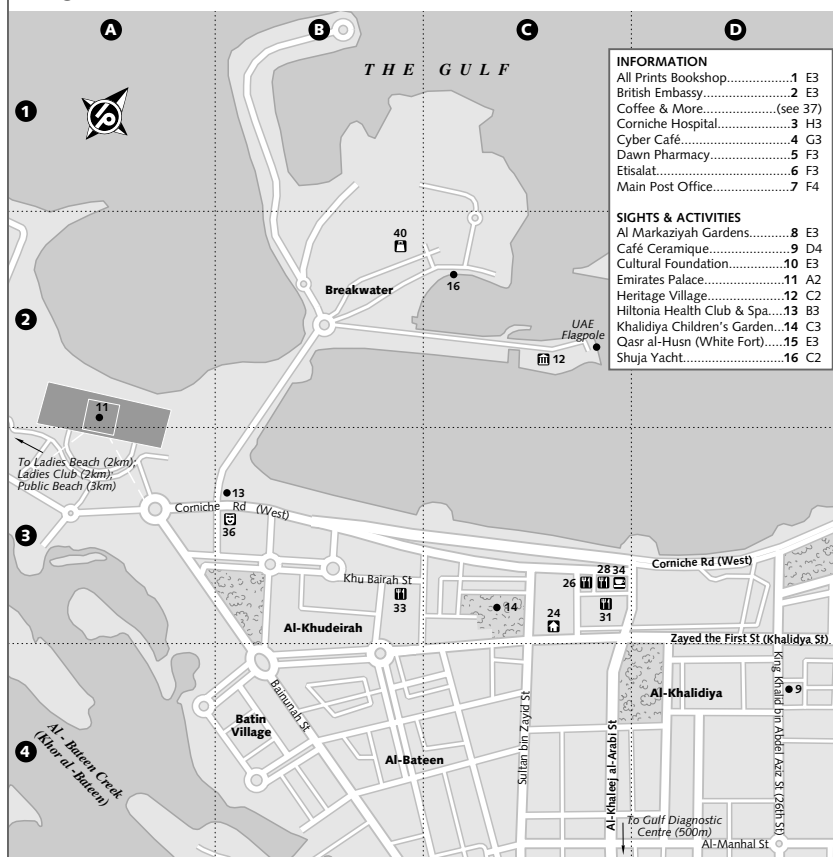
'You don't know just how important this is to us!' said my local Emirati friend in between tokes on his little tobacco pipe. 'We need to win this.' With *this* being the soccer (football) semi-final against highly fancied Saudi Arabia in the 18th edition of the Gulf Cup being held in Abu Dhabi, I wished him luck. Playing at a packed 20,000-seat stadium that night, the UAE did the impossible, scoring in extra time to defeat the strong Saudi team. Soon, across the nation, painted faces and unfurling flags hit the streets. Abu Dhabi's Corniche turned into a slow-motion drag race, with souped-up 4WDs and low-slung sports cars taking turns in burning rubber to the delight of onlookers that lined the waterfront.

These scenes were repeated in the capital a few nights later when the UAE defeated Oman in front of 60,000 wild fans to win the cup for the first time in its history. Instead of celebrating the win in *sheesha* cafés, with their wall-sized TV screens projecting the game, locals downed *sheesha* pipes and ran to their cars at the final whistle, performing a Middle Eastern version of the classic 'Le Mans' start to the celebrations. From the beginning of the Corniche to the Emirates Palace hotel, locals danced on top of, inside, and in front of, their wildly painted vehicles. For hours they burnt rubber up and down the usually tranquil waterfront, while plain-clothed police kept the crowd in relative check.

Along Sheikh Zayed Rd in Dubai a couple of days later, similar victory celebrations drew complaints of how the parade held up traffic. Stern 'letters to the editor' were printed about how laws were being broken and law enforcement officials vowed to bring the law-breakers to justice. And Abu Dhabi is the reserved city?

Terry Carter

## ABU DHABI



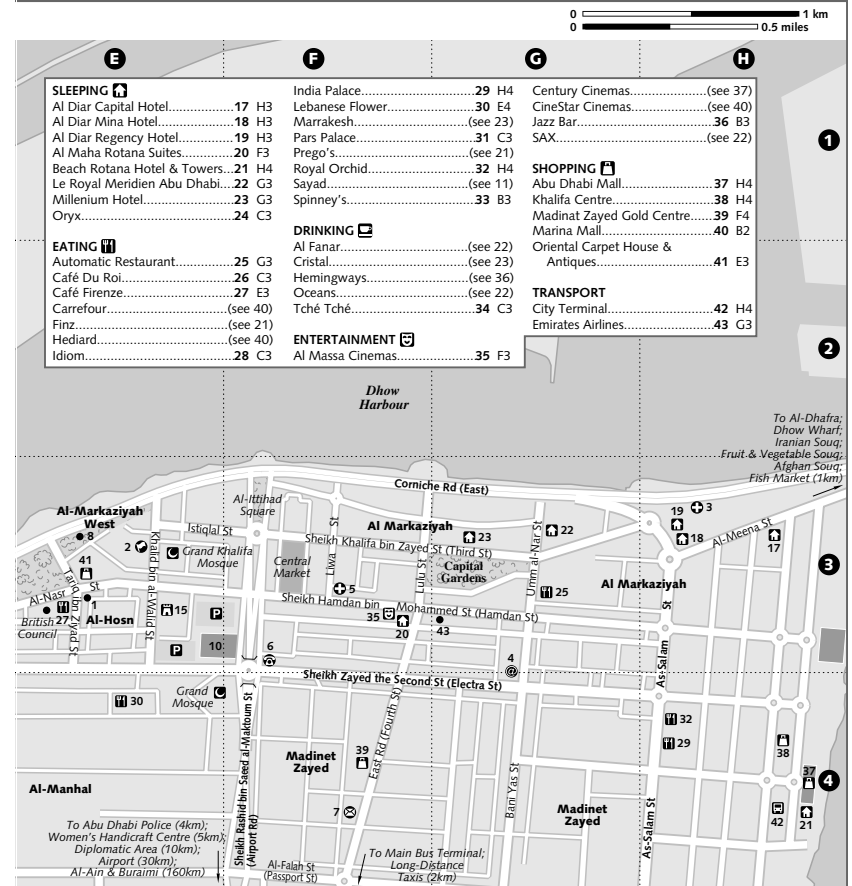
town expanded rapidly during the heyday of the pearl trade in the late 19th century. In 1892 its ruler, Sheikh Zayed bin Mohammed al-Nahyan (known as Zayed the Great), agreed that the emirate would become a protectorate of Britain and it joined the Trucial States. Zayed the Great died in 1909, and under five subsequent rulers the emirate's power and prosperity declined, largely due to the collapse of the pearling industry.

Everything changed in 1958 when oil was discovered, and it is from this date that the development of modern Abu Dhabi can be said to have commenced. The current ruler, Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan al-Nahyan, staged a coup against his brother, then the

ineffectual ruler, in 1966. Sheikh Zayed subsequently used his vast diplomatic skills to be the main player in creating the UAE and became its first president, a role he held up until his death in November 2004. Sheikh Khalifa bin Zayed al-Nahyan, Zayed's oldest son, became ruler of Abu Dhabi and was elected President of the UAE soon after.

## ORIENTATION

The city of Abu Dhabi sits at the head of a T-shaped island. The airport is about 30km from the centre, across the Al-Maqta Bridge, one of two major bridges that link the island with the mainland. Near the bridge is the colossal Sheikh Zayed bin



Sultan al-Nahyan Grand Mosque, near completion at the time of writing. Airport Rd leads into the centre of the city to Hamdan St, the city's main street. You know you've arrived when you see a number of enormous white, iconic UAE monuments in front of you, including a giant coffeepot, incense burner and a perfume sprinkler. On the other side of these is the wide Corniche road, which runs the length of the city. Its waterfront promenade is a favourite jogging/powerwalking route and its many parks are filled with families picnicking and playing with their kids, often late into the night during the cooler winter months. At the eastern end of the Corniche are the *mina* (port), the

Tourist Club area, some five-star hotels and Abu Dhabi Mall. At the western end is Emirates Palace, the public beach and Ladies Beach, the Breakwater, Marina Mall and the Heritage Village.

The main business district of Abu Dhabi is the area bounded by Sheikh Khalifa bin Zayed and Istiqlal Sts to the north, Zayed the Second St to the south, Khalid bin al-Walid St to the west, and As-Salam St to the east. Planned along a New York-style grid system, the city is easy to navigate. The main bus terminal and taxi stand is on the corner of Defence St and East Rd, slightly south of the centre. It's a Dh5 taxi ride to the centre of town from here. Some of the city's main streets have names that are in



more common use than their official ones – use these when giving directions to taxi drivers:

| Official name                         | Common name     |
|---------------------------------------|-----------------|
| Sheikh Rashid bin Saeed al-Maktoum St | Airport Rd      |
| Sheikh Zayed the Second St            | Electra St      |
| Sheikh Hamdan bin Mohammed St         | Hamdan St       |
| Al-Falah St                           | Old Passport Rd |
| Haza'a bin Zayed St                   | Defence Rd      |
| East Rd                               | Muroor Rd       |
| Juwazat St                            | Al-Manhal St    |
| Sheikh Khalifa bin Zayed St           | Third St        |
| East Rd & Lulu St                     | Fourth St       |
| Al-Nasr St                            | Fifth St        |
| Umm al-Nar & Bani Yas St              | Sixth St        |
| Liwa St                               | Tenth St        |

## INFORMATION

### Bookshop

**All Prints Bookshop** (☎ 633 8572; cnr Al Nasr & Tariq ibn Ziyad Sts; ☎ 8.30am–1.30pm & 5–9.30pm Sat–Thu, 5–9.30pm Fri) Abu Dhabi's best bookshop has a large range of books, travel guides (including Lonely Planet guides), phrase books, maps and magazines.

### Emergency

**Abu Dhabi Police** (☎ 446 1461)  
**Police Emergency** (☎ 999)

### Internet Access

**Coffee & More** (☎ 645 2020; Abu Dhabi Mall; per hr Dh15; ☎ 8.30am–11.30pm) Popular café with 15 computer terminals.

**Cyber Café** (☎ 631 2600; 1st fl, Sahara Residence, Sheikh Zayed the Second St; per hr Dh10; ☎ 8.30am–midnight) Above Sea Star garments; enter through the foyer of Sahara Residence.

### Medical Services

**Corniche Hospital** (☎ 672 4900; Al-Meena St, Al-Meena) 24-hour emergency.

**Dawn Pharmacy** (☎ 626 9545; cnr Hamdan & Liwa Sts; ☎ 24hr)

**Gulf Diagnostic Centre** (☎ 665 8090; Al-Khaleej al-Arabi St; ☎ 8am–8.30pm Sat–Wed, 8am–1pm Thu) Highly regarded private medical centre.

### Money

There are myriad banks across the city with ATMs, especially in the centre of town along Hamdan and Sheikh Khalifa bin Zayed Sts. All the malls, and many of the five-star

hotels, have ATMs. Moneychangers are found on Hamdan and Liwa Sts.

### Post

**Main Post Office** (☎ 621 5415; East Rd, Madinat Zayed; ☎ 8am–8pm Sat–Wed, 8am–6pm Thu, 8–11am Fri) Located between Al-Falah and Zayed the Second Sts.

### Telephone

**Main Etisalat Office** (☎ 633 3111; cnr Sheikh Zayed the Second St & Airport Rd, Al-Markaziyyah; ☎ 24hr) Opposite the Cultural Foundation.

### Tourist Information

**Abu Dhabi Tourism Authority** (ADTA; ☎ 444 0444; www.abudhabitourism.ae) At the time of research the new ADTA was opening information desks at Marina Mall and Abu Dhabi Mall.

## SIGHTS

### Qasr al-Husn

Once home to the ruling Al-Nahyan family, this splendid, white **Palace Fort** (☎ 619 5349, 621 5300; www.cultural.org.ae; cnr Khalid bin al-Walid & Sheikh Hamdan bin Mohammed Sts), built in 1761, is Abu Dhabi's oldest building. This is from where Abu Dhabi was governed from the 18th century until 1966. Decorated with gorgeous Portuguese tiles, the imposing main entrance features a small, wooden door spiked with black iron nails set within a larger wooden door. Within the walls there are pleasant courtyards and palm-filled gardens that are wonderful to wander around. Inside the palace itself are intricately carved wooden doors, long corridors divided by delicate *mashrabiyya* screens, and high-ceilinged rooms decorated with painted friezes of birds, peacocks, flowers and calligraphy. Not officially open to the public, the palace will soon be undergoing restoration to return it to its original state – until work begins you can call the Cultural Foundation to arrange an informal tour.

### Cultural Foundation

Abu Dhabi's vibrant **Cultural Foundation** (☎ 621 5300, 621 1958; www.cultural.org.ae; cnr Sheikh Zayed the Second St & Airport Rd; exhibitions & lectures free, films & workshops various prices; ☎ 8am–3pm & 5–9.30pm Sun–Thu, 5–8pm Fri, 9am–noon & 5–8pm Sat) is the city's artistic and cultural centre with a regular programme of live theatre, classical music, ballet, local poetry, music and dance, art

## ABU DHABI IN...

### Two Days

Wander around the palm-filled gardens of **Qasr al-Husn** (White Palace Fort; opposite) first thing in the morning while the air is fresh and the light is clear, then drop into the vibrant **Cultural Foundation** (opposite) to see what's going on. Make sure you check out the local ladies practising their traditional handicrafts at **Heritage Corner** (below) and buy an authentic souvenir from them. Head to **Prego's** (p425) or **Finz** (p425) at the Beach Rotana Hotel for a lovely alfresco lunch in the sun, then laze away the afternoon (when everything is closed) by the pool. In the early evening participate in the carpet-buying ritual, an expat obsession, at the **Khalifa Centre** (p427) and **Oriental Carpet House & Antiques** (p427) then try to convince yourself that you got a good deal while you down some bubbly at the happy hour at **Cristal** (p426). Enjoy dinner and live jazz at the **Jazz Bar** (p427) then walk off the calories with a moonlit stroll along the Corniche with the rest of Abu Dhabi's population. Finish the night at one of the special coffeehouses for *sheesha* with some local Emirati lads.

Spend your second morning at the fascinating **Abu Dhabi Heritage Village** (below) on the Breakwater, taking in the displays of traditional Bedouin jewellery, costumes, weapons and old photographs in the Fort Museum. Have a bite to eat at **Al Dhafra** (p422) on the white-sand beach while you enjoy spectacular vistas of the city skyline. Do some people-watching and shopping at **Marina Mall** (p427) before heading to **Emirates Palace** (p422) to marvel at the mind-boggling amount of gold over afternoon tea. Get a bird's-eye view of the city over sunset cocktails at the revolving restaurant **Al Fanar** (p426) before heading to **Marrakesh** (p425) for a Moroccan feast, Maghrebi music and some belly dancing. If that gets you in the mood for dancing, head to **SAX** (p426); otherwise have a nightcap as you enjoy a balmy breeze at **Oceans** (p426).

and photography exhibitions, and screenings of world cinema. It's also home to the excellent Emirates Film Competition, which provides a rare insight into local culture through short films, and the Abu Dhabi International Pearl Festival (www.ad-pearl.com). Situated in the centre of the city in a modern Islamic-inspired building, with elegant arches and intricately decorated tiled passageways, it's also home to the Abu Dhabi Authority for Culture and Heritage, National Archives, the National Library, an Arts Workshop and Children's Centre. Throughout the building there are small displays of musical instruments, Islamic art, old black-and-white photographs, and a fascinating model of old Abu Dhabi.

A highlight however is the wonderful Heritage Corner upstairs, with a traditionally decorated Bedouin tent with local crafts, textiles and antiques on display. Covered, local ladies sit here and demonstrate their traditional crafts, such as *saddu* (the technique of weaving textiles for carpets and camel bags), *talli* (the embroidering of silver and gold ribbons used to decorate clothes, and other household linen and textiles), and basketweaving with palm fronds to create various baskets, such as *al goffa*

(for carrying women's belongings), *al jefeer* (for dates), and *al makabba* (a pyramid-shaped cover to protect food, ideal for picnics). All crafts are for sale.

Adjacent is Delma Corner, a pleasant café that does delicious sandwiches and juices.

### Souqs

Abu Dhabi's atmospheric old souq on Hamdan St was levelled after a fire a few years ago. Construction is under way to build a fabulous new building complex that will incorporate a re-creation of an old Arabian-style central market. If you're after souq action in the meantime, you'll have to settle for a visit to the fruit and vegetable souq or fish market near the dhow wharf at the *mina*; the Iranian souq selling household goods, and Iranian carpets and crafts; and the Afghan souq for cheap machine-made carpets and red-striped *majlis* cushion sets for the floor.

### Abu Dhabi Heritage Village

On the Breakwater, beside the big flagpole, is the charming **Abu Dhabi Heritage Village** (☎ 681 4455; admission free; ☎ 8am–1pm & 5–9pm Sat–Thu, 5–9pm Fri). After renovations, it's now one

### THE CULTURAL CAPITAL

While Sharjah has its Biennale and Dubai gets Cirque de Soleil, Abu Dhabi's been quietly working behind the scenes to position itself as the cultural capital of the region. While 'Cultural City' sounds like yet another Dubai real-estate venture, it's actually a savvy move by Abu Dhabi to position itself to attract more wealthy tourists rather than the package tours that plague Dubai. With name architects such as Frank Gehry designing a new Guggenheim Museum, Jean Nouvel a classical museum (that may be a satellite of Paris' Louvre), Tadao Ando a maritime museum, and Zaha Hadid a performing arts centre, the nation's capital appears to be spending its wealth wisely.

Of course there will be hotels, housing and golf courses, but it's the sheer scale of the project, based on Saadiyat Island, that has the art world reeling, and Dubai perhaps sneaking a glance over its shoulder...

of the most interesting in the UAE. Set in lush gardens with trickling fountains, it's a lovely place to spend a morning, before it gets too steamy. It offers a glimpse of Abu Dhabi life in the pre-oil days, with a recreation of a souq, a traditional old mosque, a Bedouin encampment with a goat-hair tent and camels, and a *barasti* house. Workshops are held where you can watch craftsmen making pots, blowing glass, beating brass and weaving on traditional looms.

The highlight, however, is a fascinating fort museum with wonderful displays of Bedouin jewellery, traditional costumes, cooking utensils, bronze coffeepots, and old baskets. Don't miss the goat-skin containers used for holding oil and yogurt, and the old brown-and-white porcelain dishes decorated with tiny palm trees and lions. There are some beautiful black-and-white photos of the late Sheikh Zayed, and of Abu Dhabi when it was a fishing village of *barasti* huts, and Qasr al-Husn was the only solid building in the city.

There are also interesting exhibits on pearling tools and pearl-trading implements, well-aged camel harnesses and pulleys used for drawing water from wells, and intricately detailed *khanjars*, swords and powder containers. The large and impres-

sive Heritage Village Theatre is next to the village.

If you're peckish, try some traditional Emirati dishes or Arabic mezze at **Al Dhafra** (☎ 681 8955; ☎ noon-midnight), on the white-sand beach where you can enjoy the splendid city skyline while you eat.

### Women's Handicraft Centre

If you have an interest in traditional crafts, the government-run **Women's Handicraft Centre** (☎ 447 6645; fax 447 6890; Al-Karamah St, Al Mushrif; admission free; ☎ 8.30am-1pm Sat-Wed), in the Women's Union building, is definitely worth an hour of your time. Start with the displays of traditional weaving, costumes, textiles, camel bags and crafts in the Exhibition Hall; there are some products for sale in a small shop here. Then head to the eight workshops out the back where covered old local ladies sit on the floor, gossiping and laughing (and totally oblivious to the German and French tour groups), as they demonstrate their crafts of *saddu*, *talli*, textile weaving, embroidering, tailoring, basket-weaving, palm-tree frond weaving and henna. Take off your shoes before entering the rooms and leave them outside. Male travellers should keep in mind that while you're welcome, in the local culture only male relatives would get this close to women; you should keep some distance out of respect, don't take photos without asking first, and then focus on photographing the crafts rather than the women.

Ask taxi drivers to take you to the Women's Association or the Women's Union; the Exhibition Hall and workshops are at the rear of this compound. A taxi from the centre will cost around Dh7. To reach the centre by car, simply take Airport Rd south from the centre and exit at the small black-and-white sign pointing right to the 'General Women's Union' (it's easy to overshoot the turn-off, so watch the road closely).

### Emirates Palace

You don't have to check in to Abu Dhabi's extravagant **Emirates Palace** (☎ 690 9000; www.emiratespalace.com; Corniche Rd West) to check it out, and unlike Dubai's Burj al-Arab, you're not required to make a booking or spend your dirhams to take a peek. The hotel is so colossal – over 400 rooms and suites, 114 domes, a 2.5km walk around its perimeter –

it's hardly going to get crowded. And nor is your rubber-necking going to disrupt the privacy of VIP guests – the high-security Presidential, Rulers and Royal suites are on floors inaccessible to the rest of the guests, with their own private driveways and entrances. While the enormity of the building impresses, it's the lavish use of marble, gold and crystal (1002 Swarovski chandeliers!) throughout that's the most mind-boggling.

Managed by Europe's Kempinski group and owned by the Abu Dhabi government, the hotel has 2000-plus staff, multilingual welcome ambassadors to personally escort you to your room, and personal butlers to wait on you hand and foot – if you're staying that is. (If you're not, there are state-of-the-art information kiosks around the place in case you get lost.) That kind of personal attention is the kind expected by monarchs, and what would you expect from a hotel that eschewed the seven-star hotel classification adopted by the Burj al-Arab to classify itself as a... 'palace' of course. The palace is located near the Breakwater.

## ACTIVITIES

### Beach Clubs

Private beach clubs are popular with expats in the UAE, especially in Abu Dhabi, and it's worth experiencing a day at a club at least once, even if you decide it's not your scene. Lounging in the sun, enjoying the beach and pools, playing a game of volleyball and sipping a refreshment as the sun goes down is the order of the day.

The most popular is the Hilton hotel's beautifully landscaped **Hiltonia Health Club & Spa** (☎ 692 4205; male/female/child Fri & Sat Dh120/90/40, Sun-Thu Dh110/70/50; ☎ 8am-6pm) op-

posite the hotel on the Corniche. There's a lovely stretch of white-sand beach lined with palm trees, excellent water sports, three swimming pools, a gym and a good restaurant/bar.

Coming a close second is the club at the **Beach Rotana Hotel & Towers** (☎ 697 9302; s/couple/child Fri & Sat Dh100/140/40, Sun-Thu Dh130/200/40; ☎ 8am-6pm). It has a small but pleasant beach, swimming pools and a wet bar/café. Its PADI-registered **Ocean Diving Centre** (☎ 644 1696; www.oceandivingcenter.com; 1hr dive from Dh200) is also very popular.

### Beaches

There is a free public beach, along with a Ladies Beach, at Al Ras Al Akhdar, at the very end of the West Corniche. To get there, continue past Emirates Palace and the Presidential Diwan to the Abu Dhabi Ladies Club and turn right. The beach is at the end of the road, which continues on and connects back to the West Corniche.

### Corniche Cruises

The Corniche is stunning and the city skyline is even more spectacular from the sea.

You can hire a small boat from **Al-Dhafra** (☎ 673 2266; Dhow Wharf, Al-Mina) that seats 10 to 15 people for Dh150 to cruise along the splendid Corniche at any time of the day; sunset is sublime. It also runs popular two-hour dinner dhow cruises, departing 9pm, with a fixed three-course Arabic menu, including non-alcoholic beverages (Dh120 per person).

For a more refined experience, step aboard the elegant **Shuja Yacht** (☎ 695 0539; The Marina, Breakwater; ☎ cruise 8.30-10.30pm, Mon-Sat) for a fresh seafood buffet (Dh 180 per person), including one drink (alcohol

### ABU DHABI GETS REVVING

When Abu Dhabi decided to stage a Formula One (F1) festival in early 2007, the rumours started that the F1 circus could be coming to town. With Bahrain already host to a Grand Prix, it appeared unlikely that the Gulf would get two bites at the F1 cherry. However, betting against the UAE on anything is proving futile, and amid the acrid smoke and ear-bleed levels of noise created by the F1 cars flying along the Corniche, a seven-year contract was inked for Abu Dhabi to host a F1 Grand Prix, starting in 2009. The 5.6km circuit being built on man-made Yas Island, close to Abu Dhabi International Airport, will also host a Ferrari theme park, as well as the obligatory golf courses. With the track already under construction, F1 boss Bernie Ecclestone was circling July on the F1 calendar for the race, until someone whispered in his ear that at this time of year the often 45°C heat would see the race reduced to melting rubber rather than burning rubber...

available); after that you buy your own. Board at 8pm, for an 8.30pm start.

### Desert Safaris

There's nothing like really experiencing the desert, and if you don't have a 4WD a desert safari is the ideal way to do it. Most tours leave Abu Dhabi in the late afternoon, drive out to the desert, take you on an exhilarating 4WD 'dune-bashing', let you have a go at sand boarding, then put you on a camel for a ride over the dunes in time for sunset. You then get to enjoy an Arabic barbecue while you watch a bit of belly dancing. Safaris start at Dh350 per person. The two oldest and best companies offering desert safaris:

**Arabian Adventures** (☎ 691 1711; www.arabian-adventures.com; Hamdan St)

**Net Tours** (☎ 679 4656; www.nettoursdubai.com; Sheraton Abu Dhabi Resort & Towers)

### COURSES

If you're still dying of embarrassment after being dragged up to dance by the belly dancer on the desert safari, you can take **belly-dancing lessons** and learn how to shimmy and shake your hips like a pro at the **Hiltonia Health Club and Spa** (☎ 692 4336; members/nonmembers one lesson Dh20/30, 10 lessons Dh180/270; ☎ 7.40pm-8.40pm Sun) or the **Sheraton Abu Dhabi Resort & Towers** (☎ 677 3333; members/nonmembers one lesson Dh25/30, 10 lessons Dh225/270; ☎ 6pm-7pm Sun & Tue).

### ABU DHABI FOR CHILDREN

Kids love **Café Ceramique** (☎ 666 4412; 26th St, Khalidiya; ☎ 8am-midnight), where they can paint pots and plates (although their masterpieces can take up to a week to be fired). **Abu Dhabi Mall** (☎ 645 4858; ☎ 10am-10pm Sat-Wed, 10am-11pm Thu, 3.30-10pm Fri), with Toy Town, roller coaster and video/laser/virtual games will also keep them busy. The new **Al Markaziyah Gardens** on the Corniche and the **Khalidiya Children's Garden** (admission free; ☎ 9am-noon & 3-9.30pm Sat-Thu, 3-10pm Fri; women & children only) have lots of great playground equipment, including life-size trains and boats they can climb over.

### SLEEPING

Unfortunately, Abu Dhabi doesn't have a youth hostel, and there is no budget accommodation available.

### Midrange

**Al Maha Rotana Suites** (☎ 610 6666; almaha.ste@rotana.com; Hamdan St; d Dh400; ☎) The pick of the midrange stays in town, Al Maha is far superior to all other hotels in this category. These spacious, comfortable studios, with kitchenettes and tea and coffee facilities, are excellent value. Rooms are spotless, bathrooms are big, and the Hamdan St location doesn't get more central than this. There's a good 24-hour coffee shop with internet access downstairs.

**Al Diar Regency Hotel** (☎ 676 5000; www.aldiarhotels.com; cnr Al-Meena & As-Salam Sts; d Dh450; ☎) While the location is good, these gaudy rooms hardly represent a bargain. The rooms are clean, with a small kitchenette: on the plus side, some have good sea views. There's also a gym and sauna.

**Al Diar Mina Hotel** (☎ 678 1000; www.aldiarhotels.com; Al-Meena St; d Dh650) Offering similar rooms to those at the Regency, yet at an inexplicably higher price, this centrally located hotel should be a last resort. If you have to stay here, ask for a sea-view room. Guests can use the gym and sauna at the Regency.

### Top End

**Le Royal Meridien Abu Dhabi** (☎ 695 0583; www.lemeridien.com; Khalifa St; d Dh600; ☎) The city's most luxurious hotel is where Arab VIPs stay when they're in town, so it's not surprising to find X-ray machines in the lobby and police escorts waiting out front, adding to the buzz of the place. The supremely comfortable rooms are plush beyond comparison, with big beds you won't want to leave, and all the creature comforts you'd expect, from enormous towels and bathrobes to high-quality toiletries. The views of the Corniche are spectacular and there are lots of great bars and restaurants to keep you busy, including Oceans (p426), SAX (p426), Al Fanar (p426) and Amalfi.

**Al Diar Capital Hotel** (☎ 678 7700; www.aldiarhotels.com; Al-Meena St; r/studios Dh700; ☎) For a reason that baffles us, this decidedly mid-range business hotel charges top-end prices. While it has decent-sized rooms with all the mod cons, and studios featuring kitchenettes, it's looking decidedly worn around the edges. Only stay here if the other hotels are full.

**Millennium Hotel** (☎ 626 2700; www.millenniumhotels.com; Khalifa St; d Dh780; ☎) The sleek

Millennium Hotel, with its striking foyer, swish champagne bar Cristal (p426) and elegant Marrakesh restaurant (right), is an altogether stylish address. The spacious, comfortable rooms have stunning sea views and the hotel is in a very central location.

**Beach Rotana Hotel & Towers** (☎ 644 3000; beach.hotel@rotana.com; d Dh600; ☎) This glitzy hotel is immensely popular, with one of the buzziest hotel lobbies in the city. Rooms are snug with little extras like fluffy bathrobes and slippers, tea and coffee facilities, and local magazines. While the narrow white-sand beach is popular despite its size, the real attractions are the many outstanding restaurants – Prego's (right), Finz (right) and Trader Vics to name a few – and the hotel's proximity to the adjoining Abu Dhabi Mall.

**Oryx** (☎ 681 0001; www.oryxhotel.ae; Khalidiya St; d Dh700; ☎) Not completely finished when we visited and with construction sites around it, this smart new hotel can get a tad noisy. The comfortable rooms are extremely spacious, however, with flat-screen TVs, broadband internet, balconies and beautiful city views from the high floors. There's a small rooftop pool area with phenomenal vistas, which turns into an atmospheric *sheesha* café after dark.

### EATING Restaurants

**Royal Orchid** (☎ 644 4400, 644 1100; As-Salam St; mains Dh28; ☎ noon-3pm & 6pm-midnight) Perennially popular, the tasty Thai cuisine here is the best in Abu Dhabi. The *gaeng phed lynjee* (duck with lychees in a red curry sauce) is our favourite. The restaurant is rather stylish for an eatery not located in a five-star hotel – there's a fabulous glass walkway in the entrance over a large aquarium – and the service is friendly and efficient. The restaurant is unlicensed.

**India Palace** (☎ 644 8777; As-Salam St; mains Dh30; ☎ noon-3pm & 6pm-midnight) You'll feel as if you're in Rajasthan rather than Abu Dhabi when you eat at this expat favourite with its regal Raj interior and fine North Indian cuisine, including lots of vegetarian options and delicious tandoori dishes.

**Pars Palace** (☎ 681 8600; mains Dh35; ☎ 11am-3.30pm & 6pm-midnight) Tucked away in a Khalidiya backstreet behind Corniche Towers, this excellent Persian restaurant in Orien-

tal surroundings is a hidden gem. Local favourites include the delicious *zerezhk polo-ba-morgh* (chicken and saffron with pomegranate seeds; Dh32) and spicy kebabs (average Dh40). The complimentary home-baked flat bread with sheeps'-milk cheese is scrumptious.

**Prego's** (☎ 644 3000; Beach Rotana Hotel & Towers; mains Dh40; ☎ noon-midnight) The best of Abu Dhabi's Italian restaurants, Prego's offers up authentic, well-executed Italian fare, including delicious handmade pastas (you can see them being made!) and wonderful wood-fire oven pizza and pasta. The fresh-out-of-the-oven breads and virgin olive oil on arrival are scrumptious, and the staff friendly. But while the interior is buzzy and stylish, there are few better experiences than sitting on the outdoor terrace on a sunny day.

**Marrakesh** (☎ 626 2700; Millennium Hotel; mains Dh50; ☎ 7pm-2am) If the exotic Moroccan décor and the authentic cuisine, including delicious tajines and couscous, aren't enough to bring you here, there's an excellent Moroccan band and belly dancer. Evenings here are memorable and go late.

**Finz** (☎ 644 3000; Beach Rotana Hotel & Towers; mains Dh50; ☎ noon-3pm & 7pm-midnight) With a divine waterfront location in a wooden A-frame beach house with verandas over the azure sea, Finz serves up some of the finest seafood in town. Highlights when we visited were the tuna tartare with lemon capers, crème fraiche and oestra caviar; the sesame crusted oysters with miso; and the grilled sea scallops with tomato and basil ice cream. Sublime.

**Jazz Bar** (☎ 681 1900; Hilton Abu Dhabi, Corniche Rd West; mains Dh60; ☎ 7.30pm-1.30am Sun-Fri) One of the city's oldest and most consistently fine restaurants serves up fabulous cocktails, clever contemporary fusion cuisine, and live jazz in a modern Art Deco-inspired interior. The South African bands play on a raised platform behind the curved bar, so it's possible to watch from your dining table or from the cocktail bars up close.

**Sayad** (☎ 690 9000; Emirates Palace, Corniche Rd West; mains Dh70; ☎ 7.30pm-midnight) This swish seafood restaurant at Emirates Palace is a stunner. While the whimsical interior with its fabulous blue-lit interior (designed to make you feel like you're underwater) can be distracting, the creative seafood dishes

easily command your attention. The mixed appetiser plate with tuna carpaccio with foie gras and truffles, lobster salad with sevruga caviar, and veal carpaccio was a work of art. From its champagne trolley and caviar menu to its impeccable attentive service, this is a memorable restaurant that you should save for that last night of the trip or special celebration.

## Cafés

**Café Du Roi** (☎ 681 5096; Corniche Rd West, Al-Khalidiya; ☎ 24hr) Affectionately known as 'Roy's', this neighbourhood café is popular with expats and Emiratis alike, from academics calling in for a gossip over lunch to Emirati guys doing deals on their mobiles. The haloumi and *zaatar* (thyme) croissant (Dh8) is delicious while the decent coffee (Dh10) is still the cheapest around.

**Hediard** (☎ 681 6131; Marina Mall; light meals Dh25; ☎ 10am-10pm) This Abu Dhabi branch of the elegant French chocolatier and patisserie chain, established in 1854, has proven to be popular with Emiratis – the men love to linger and read the paper over lunch, while the wives like to drop in for coffee and petit fours between shops.

**Café Firenze** (☎ 666 0955; cnr Al Nasr & Tariq ibn Ziyad Sts; ☎ 9am-10pm) Beloved by the expat community, the large alfresco terrace makes this a wonderful choice when the weather is cool. It also makes some of the best coffee (Dh15) around, along with delicious cooked breakfasts (Dh27).

## Quick Eats

**Automatic Restaurant** (cnr Hamdan & Najda Sts; ☎ 11am-1am) This Lebanese eatery is a branch of the successful national chain, and while everything on the menu is good, its tangy *shwarmas* (Dh3.50) are some of the most delicious around.

**Lebanese Flower** (☎ 665 8700; near cnr Hamdan & 4th Sts; meals Dh25-28; ☎ 10am-2am) Abu Dhabi's most popular Lebanese restaurant does delicious mixed grill meats and garlicky chicken *shwarmas* (Dh3.50). It also sells fabulous Lebanese sweets and pastries.

**Idiom** (☎ 681 0808; off Corniche Rd West, Al-Khalidiya; ☎ lunch & dinner) Despite being around for a few years, this hip eatery (around the corner from Roy's and opposite Tché Tché), with its minimalist design, is a breath of

fresh air. It does delicious soups (Dh15) and a tasty dish of the day (Dh 35).

## Self-Catering

**Carrefour** (☎ 681 7100; Marina Mall; ☎ 10am-10pm Sat-Thu, 2-10pm Fri) has the best bakery and deli counter in Abu Dhabi, with good-quality fruit and vegetables, barrels of delicious olives and Arabic cheeses and a huge range of products from Europe. North American expats prefer **Spinneys** (☎ 681 2897; Khalidiya; ☎ 10am-10pm).

## Sheesha Cafés

On the grassy verge next to the Corniche at Kalidiya, these outdoor **sheesha cafés** (Corniche Rd West, Al-Khalidiya; ☎ 24hr) are great for soaking up some local ambience. Emirati men, and the occasional group of Emirati women, chat over *sheesha* (Dh20) and Turkish coffee (Dh10) at white plastic tables on the lawn – well into the early hours of the morning.

**Tché Tché** (☎ 681 1994; Abu Dhabi Corniche Tower, off Corniche Rd West, Al-Khalidiya; ☎ 9am-midnight) Offers up a true expat Arab experience – with Arabic music videos blaring from the TV and a long *sheesha* menu. This popular café (with a branch in Dubai) also serves delicious Arabic food and good Turkish coffee (Dh10).

## DRINKING

The most sublime spot for a sunset drink is at the revolving restaurant **Al Fanar** (☎ 695 0583; Le Royal Meridien; ☎ noon-midnight) for spectacular views over the city. Abu Dhabi's swankiest cocktail bar is **Cristal** (☎ 626 2700; Millennium Hotel; ☎ 4pm-2am) where the speciality is champagne and cigars; expats hog the Chesterfields for the two-for-one happy hour from 6pm.

The place to be during the cooler months is reclining on a sofa on the wooden deck at **Oceans** (☎ 674 1094; Le Royal Meridien; ☎ noon-2am Sat-Wed, noon-3am Thu) listening to chill-out music. The most popular watering hole with long-term expats is still **Hemingways** (☎ 681 1900; Hilton Abu Dhabi; ☎ noon-midnight Fri-Wed, noon-1am Sat), for the good Tex-Mex and live music.

## ENTERTAINMENT

There aren't too many places to dance the night away in Abu Dhabi. Your most memorable night in town is the wild Tues-

day Lebanese night at swish **SAX** (☎ 674 1286; Le Royal Meridien; ☎ 10pm-2.30am) where you'll meet a sophisticated crowd of friendly Arab expats dancing to the excellent improvisational band and DJ.

**Jazz Bar** (☎ 681 1900; Hilton Abu Dhabi, Corniche Rd West; ☎ 7.30pm-1.30am Sun-Fri) is the only venue in town to see good live jazz, generally performed by excellent South African bands. Check *Time Out Abu Dhabi* for listings.

Modern multiplex **Century Cinemas** (☎ 645 8988; Abu Dhabi Mall) shows recent Hollywood releases, as do **CineStar Cinemas** (☎ 681 8464; Marina Mall) and **Al Massa Cinemas** (☎ 633 3000; Hamdan St). Tickets at all cost Dh30 for an adult.

You can catch European art films, movies from the Middle East, short films and independent flicks at the Cultural Foundation (p420), along with theatre, ballet and classical music performances.

## SHOPPING

**Marina Mall** (☎ 681 8300; www.marinamall.ae; ☎ 10am-10pm Sat-Wed, 10am-11pm Thu, 2-11pm Fri) The biggest and glitziest mall in town, located on the Breakwater, is shaped like a big-top circus, although its inspiration is supposedly the Bedouin tent. It has several hundred shops, cinemas, a viewing tower, and a snow park is currently under construction.

**Abu Dhabi Mall** (☎ 645 4858; www.abudhabimall.com; ☎ 10am-10pm Sat-Wed, 10am-11pm Thu, 4-10pm Fri) This more elegant mall is smaller but has a small arcade on the ground level selling Emirati clothes, Arabian perfumes and Middle Eastern crafts.

For more souvenirs (*sheesha* pipes, camel-bone boxes, stuffed leather camels, tapestries, cushion covers etc) head to the **Khalifa Centre** (☎ 10am-1pm & 4-10pm Sat-Thu, 4-10pm Fri), across the road from Abu Dhabi Mall, where you'll find a dozen stores selling handicrafts and carpets.

Carpet connoisseurs should head to **Oriental Carpet House & Antiques** (☎ 632 2459; Al-Nasr St), which specialises in handmade carpets from Iran, India, Turkey and Afghanistan.

If you like the idea of purchasing some of the stuff that glitters, try the **Madinat Zayed Gold Centre** (☎ 631 8555; 4th St; ☎ 10am-1pm & 4-10pm Sat-Thu, 4-10pm Fri).

## GETTING THERE & AWAY

**Air**  
**Abu Dhabi international airport** (☎ 575 7500, flight information 575 7611) is on the mainland, about 30km from the centre.

**Golden Class** (☎ 575 7466) provides transport to the city for Dh65.

## Bus

The **main bus terminal and long-distance taxi stand** (cnr East Rd & Haza'a bin Zayed St) is south of the centre. The large buses near the taxi stand leave for Dubai, while buses for the rest of the emirate run from the left (south) side of the building. From 6.30am to 10pm daily buses leave every 10 minutes for Al-Ain (Dh10, two hours) and Dubai (Dh15, 2½ hours). Buses for Liwa (Dh15, 3½ hours) leave every hour; you need to change at Tarif for Madinat Zayed where there's a connection to Liwa. The last bus leaves at 9pm.

The best bus service between Dubai and Abu Dhabi is the **Emirates Express** (☎ 800 4848) jointly operated by Dubai Public Transport and Abu Dhabi Public Transport. These new, large, comfortable buses depart 24 times a day, from 6.20am until 11.40pm, seven days a week (Dh15 one way). Buses leave every 20 to 40 minutes, taking two hours. These buses are best if you have luggage. Pick up a comprehensive bus timetable from the bus station.

## Car

Abu Dhabi has dozens of car-rental agencies, from big international companies to tiny local operations. The former may charge slightly more but you get peace of mind that there's going to be a spare in the boot and 24 hour help if you need it. Europcar offers the best combination of low prices and efficient service in the UAE.

**Avis** (☎ 575 7180; www.avis.com)

**Budget** (☎ 633 4200; www.budget.com)

**Europcar** (☎ 626 1441; www.europcar-dubai.com)

**Thrifty** (☎ 575 7400; www.hertz-uae.com)

## Minibus & Long-Distance Taxi

Long-distance taxis and minibuses also leave from the main bus terminal and long-distance taxi stand. There's little room for luggage in either so these are best for sight-seeing/shopping trips. From Abu Dhabi to Dubai, a seat in a shared taxi or minibus will cost Dh25. The taxi is slightly faster

(and the driving pretty terrible), but you could be stuck between two sweaty people without air-conditioning (unless you're a woman travelling alone and the driver will sit you up front). While the bus is more comfortable, it doesn't leave until it's full (so there could be a wait on a slow day), and it has to stay in the slow lane and so takes longer. If you decide to engage a cab for yourself, you'll pay around Dh200 in a regular long-distance taxi which, again, may not have air-conditioning. These can't be booked in advance and the fare is negotiable, so bargain hard.

The plush air-conditioned **Al Ghazal Taxis** (☎ 02-444 7787) provide an efficient and comfortable service from Abu Dhabi to Dubai (Dh275; Dubai to Abu Dhabi return trip Dh175); Abu Dhabi to Al-Ain (Dh275); and Al-Ain to Abu Dhabi (Dh175), and can be booked ahead. Less comfortable but still bookable are **National Taxis** (☎ 02-622 3300): Abu Dhabi to Dubai (Dh225) and Dubai to Abu Dhabi (Dh150); Abu Dhabi to Al-Ain (Dh225); and Al-Ain to Abu Dhabi (Dh150).

## GETTING AROUND To/From the Airport

Most airlines allow you to check in up to 24 hours before departure and get a boarding pass at the **City Terminal** (☎ 644 5599; opposite Beach Rotana Hotel; check-in Dh75, bus Dh38). Shuttle buses leave frequently, two hours before flights, and the trip takes 20 minutes. Local bus 901 (Dh3) runs from the main bus station to the airport around the clock, departing every 30 minutes. A taxi to the airport from the centre should cost around Dh50 if flagged from the street. Negotiate the fare before you get in. To book a taxi to the airport call **Al Ghazal** (☎ 444 7787; Dh75).

## Bus

You will notice large municipal buses throughout Abu Dhabi, run by **Abu Dhabi Transport** (☎ 443 1500). These are cheap but the routes aren't very useful to tourists and aimed more at locals going to hospitals, schools and the like.

## Taxi

Taxis in the city are metered, usually don't have seat belts, and sometimes don't have air-con. Fares rarely climb beyond Dh10.

# WEST OF ABU DHABI

## LIWA

ليوا

If you're looking for the real desert, not just the one you'll see on an afternoon desert safari with a tour operator, the Liwa Oasis is for you. Positioned on the edge of Saudi Arabia's Empty Quarter (Rub'al-Khali), it lives up to its name, with only the odd roaming camel or small verdant oasis magnifying just how spectacular the vista of incomparable apricot-coloured sand dunes really is. While this is explorer Wilfred Thesiger's Arabia, the area is most famous as the birthplace of the Maktoum and Al-Nahyan families, now the rulers of Dubai and Abu Dhabi respectively. The Liwa Oasis itself is actually a belt of villages and farms spread out over a 150km arc of land and once you visit, you'll understand why the Liwa has a special place in the hearts of locals who come here to get back to their roots, relax and just take in the vastness of the landscape.

The Liwa is best visited in your own vehicle, as the joy of travelling here is to be able to drive through the villages and stop spontaneously to photograph a lone camel on a sand dune or a spectacular 'desert rose' (flower-like crystallised gypsum). The only real 'sight' in the Liwa arc such is the 287m-high Moreeb Dune or *Tal Mireb* (the signs will say both). The drive there passes through the most sublime of sand dunes. To get to *Tal Mireb* head for Liwa Resthouse and at the roundabout outside the resthouse, take the fork right. Continue along this well-signposted road for about 20 minutes. The dune is where the road ends – you won't miss it! Also of interest is the restored fort-like Al Hamely tribe residence. Although it's not signposted and not open to the public, you won't miss it as it's the only elegant old building around here. If heading to *Tal Mireb* it's on the main road on your right, just before Liwa Resthouse.

Locals in 4WDs often camp in the Liwa area on weekends, stopping after the dreary drive from Abu Dhabi to refuel at Madinat Zayed, an artificially greened town that appears rather incongruously in the middle of arid and flat desert.

**Al Nafoora** (☎ 884 7400; Madinat Zayed; meals Dh20; ☎ 11am-3pm & 5pm-midnight) is popular with locals for its delicious Lebanese mezze, salads, grills and fresh juices. You'll identify Al Nafoora by its yellow-and-white stripes and pretty lanterns – its sign is in Arabic only. It's on the right-hand side of the highway in the first group of shops as you enter from Abu Dhabi.

There are ATMs and grocery stores on both sides of the highway as you enter town. Taxis are in the car park on the left of the highway on the way out of town. The town's bus station is further along on the same side, past the large coffeepot.

If you're travelling to Liwa from Abu Dhabi by bus you'll have to change at Tarif and Madinat Zayed, and from there you'll have to catch a connecting bus on to Liwa, and find a taxi to take you to the Liwa Resthouse or hotel. Once there, however, you're trapped! You're better off hiring a car and driving from Abu Dhabi. It also gives you the freedom to explore. If you catch the bus, the full trip will take around 3½ to four hours and cost Dh15 and a taxi from Madinat Zayed to the Liwa Hotel will cost Dh50. Returning to Abu Dhabi, buses leave Madinat Zayed daily from 6.30am to 10.30pm, running every 90 minutes or so. Two local irregular buses serve the oasis communities.

If driving, the most spectacular scenery can be seen on the route going east from Mezaira'a to the village of **Hameem**. The dunes here are like shifting mountain ranges of sand, with green farms providing an occasional and unexpected patchwork effect. The other route, 40km west to **Karima**, is flatter and more open. The scenery on the 248km sealed road from Hameem back to Abu Dhabi is stunning. There's a petrol station just before Hameem but it's the only one on this road.

Sitting at the top of a hill just outside Mezaira'a opposite the late Sheikh Zayed's palace (itself on a green sand dune!) the **Liwa Hotel** (☎ 882 2000; liwahtl@emirates.net.ae; Dh450; 🍷) is fairly comfortable, if outdated. The high-ceilinged rooms are spacious but unfortunately none have views of the spectacular sand dunes. The decent-sized swimming pool is surrounded by lawn and there's a good children's playground. The restaurant is very average but there are no other options, so take some snacks.

The only other accommodation option is the government-run, institutional **Liwa Resthouse** (☎ 882 2075; fax 882 9311; d Dh220). Rooms are clean although a little musty and there's a cafeteria-style restaurant serving three meals daily. You'll find the resthouse about 8km west of the bus station along the road to Arrada and Dhafir. It accepts cash only.

# EAST OF ABU DHABI

## AL-AIN

والعين

☎ 03 / pop 380,000

The green, tree-lined arrival to Al-Ain (the UAE's half of the Buraimi Oasis) is in stark contrast to the magnificent desert dunes you pass on the way there. Once a five-day camel trek from Abu Dhabi, and now around a two-hour easy drive, it's little wonder that its relatively cool, dry climate has always attracted those looking for respite from the harsh and hot conditions elsewhere in the emirate. The birthplace of Sheikh Zayed, Al-Ain has benefited from his patronage and passion for greening the desert, with its verdant streets and kitschy decorated roundabouts.

But the desert is never far from this capital of the eastern region of Abu Dhabi emirate. The winding road up to the Jebel Hafeet lookout offers a magnificent view of the Empty Quarter in Saudi Arabia, as well as a hotel perched on a precipice. With lively markets, myriad forts and museums to explore, and a famous date-palm oasis, Al-Ain is a breath of fresh air and worthy of a relaxing couple of days.

The oasis' other half, which has kept the original name of 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. The border between the two countries was agreed in 1966, after Al-Ain and Buraimi co-opted the assistance of the British to fend off Saudi Arabia, which had occupied the Buraimi area and laid claim to the entire oasis in 1953. It wasn't until 1974 that the Saudis renounced their claim.

## Orientation

The Al-Ain/Buraimi area can be confusing for the visitor to navigate. All of the streets in Al-Ain look pretty much the same, and the

presence of so many roundabouts can make getting from point A to point B a nightmare. Fortunately, the local authorities have erected signs throughout the town directing traffic to hotels and major tourist attractions. The main streets are Khalifa ibn Zayed St (known as Khalifa St) and Zayed ibn Sultan St (known as Main St). Most of the town's restaurants and large shops are located on these two thoroughfares. The main north-south cross streets are Abu Bakr al-Siddiq St, which extends into Buraimi and becomes its main street, and Al-Ain St. There is now a check-point here, which only citizens of Oman and the UAE can cross; other travellers need to use the Hilli Checkpoint.

## Information

### INTERNET ACCESS

**Golden Fork Restaurant** (Khalifa St; per hr Dh5; ☎ 10am-midnight)

**Grand Café** (☎ 766 0226; per hr Dh10; ☎ 10am-midnight)

### MEDICAL SERVICES

**Al-Ain Hospital** (☎ 763 5888) At Al Jimi; has an emergency department.

**Karim Pharmacy** (☎ 764 2725; Khalifa St; ☎ 8am-midnight)

### MONEY

There are banks with ATMs on Al-Ain St and the area around the Grand Mosque has several moneychangers. In Buraimi there are several banks on the main road. UAE currency is accepted in Buraimi, but you'll find that Omani currency is not as widely accepted in Al-Ain.

### POST

**Al-Ain Main Post Office** (cnr Al-Ain & Zayed ibn Sultan Sts; ☎ 8am-1pm & 4-7pm Sat-Wed, 8-11pm Thu) At the time of research, the post office was housed in a temporary space on the southeast corner while the main building opposite was being renovated.

### TELEPHONE

**Etisalat Office** (cnr Al-Ain & Khalid ibn Sultan Sts; ☎ 7am-3pm & 6.30-8.30pm Sat-Wed, 8am-1pm Thu)

### TOURIST INFORMATION

At the time of research there was no tourist office in Al-Ain, however, word on the street is that the Abu Dhabi Tourism Authority has plans to open one.

## Sights

### AL-AIN PALACE MUSEUM

This wonderful **museum** (☎ 764 1595; Zayed ibn Sultan St; admission Dh3; ☎ 8.30am-7.30pm Tue-Sun, 3-7.30pm Fri) is situated on the edge of the Al-Ain oasis, in the centre of town. The majestic fort was the birthplace of the UAE's late President, Sheikh Zayed, and is one of the best museums in the country, and a highlight of a visit to Al-Ain. 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.

### AL-AIN NATIONAL MUSEUM

The charmingly old-fashioned **Al-Ain National Museum** (☎ 764 1595; Zayed ibn Sultan St; admission Dh3; ☎ 8.30am-7.30pm Tue-Sun, 3-7.30pm Fri) is definitely worth an hour of your time. Highlights include impressive archaeological displays and artefacts from the 3rd-millennium BC tombs at Hilli 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, and traditional costumes. One of the more intriguing exhibits is the circumcision display, with blades and a goat-covered stool. The fort, built in 1910 and located in the same compound as the museum, was the birthplace of Sheikh Zayed. It's quite extraordinary to see these modest surrounds and consider the contrast between them and the life of unparalleled luxury that he was later able to enjoy.

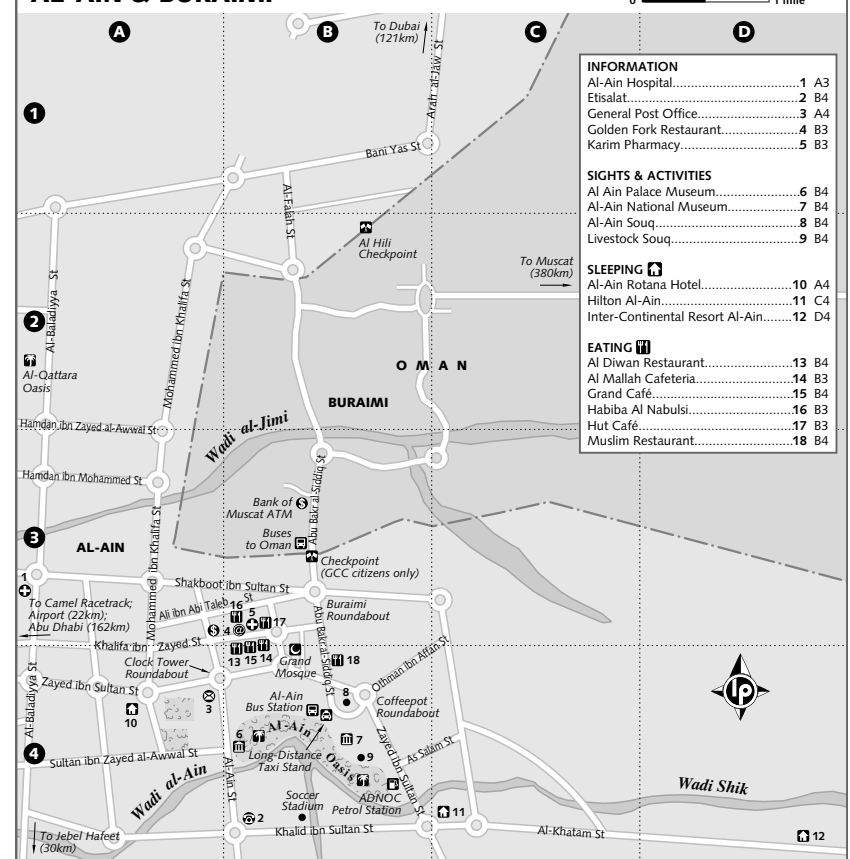
### LIVESTOCK SOUQ

Selling everything from Brahmin cows to Persian cats, this chaotic souq (next to the museum car park) attracts people from all over the UAE and northern Oman. Surrounding shops sell veterinary supplies – check out the neon signs of the camel suppliers! The best time to visit the souq is before 9am, when the trading is at its heaviest.

### AL-AIN SOUQ

In a series of white buildings next to the bus station and near the flyover, the city's bustling souqs sell amazingly fresh fruit, vegetables and herbs; delicious honey; dates,

## AL-AIN & BURAIMI



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date syrup, and date jam; and fresh fish and meat. The tiny shops surrounding it sell everything from textiles to electrical goods.

### AL-AIN OASIS

A wander through this atmospheric date-palm oasis is a highlight of a visit to Al-Ain. With its shady stands of date palms, labyrinthine paths and traditional *falaj* 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 tranquility 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.

### CAMEL MARKET

The colourful AL-Ain camel market near Al Hilli had just been levelled by bulldozers when we revisited it for research for this guide. It remains to be seen whether they will relocate the camel souq or build a new one. We hope so – this was the last one of its kind in the UAE and a visit here was a wonderful experience.

There is a **camel-racing track** to the west of the city, just off the road to Abu Dhabi, where races are held early on weekend mornings from October to March.

## Sleeping

### AL-AIN

The only choices in Al-Ain are five-star hotels, yet unlike Dubai and Abu Dhabi, they are reasonably priced. All have bars and restaurants.

**Al-Ain Rotana Hotel** (☎ 754 5111; alain.hotel@rotana.com; Zayed ibn Sultan St; d Dh400; ☎) The central Al-Ain Rotana, with its opulent lobby, is the best choice in town with plush, spacious rooms, equipped with all mod cons, and the city's best eateries, including the reliable Trader Vic's. While the swimming pool is pleasant, this place is not as family friendly as the other Al-Ain hotels.

**Hilton Al-Ain** (☎ 768 6666; alhilton@emirates.net.ae; Khalid ibn Sultan St; d Dh550; ☎) Though showing its age in parts, this popular hotel has large, comfortable rooms. Families love the Hiltonia leisure centre, which offers golf, snooker, table tennis, gym and the best kids' pool in town (wait for the squeals of delight when the kids see the water slide and pirate boat).

**InterContinental Resort Al-Ain** (☎ 768 6686; www.intercontinental.com/alain; Khalid ibn Sultan St; d Dh600; ☎) Sadly in need of renovation, this resort is set in spacious gardens with two wonderful swimming pools, including an Olympic-sized pool, a fitness centre, a kids club and several eateries. Rooms are large and comfy – ask for one with a balcony overlooking the pool.

## BURAIMI

Hotels at Buraimi, on the Omani side of the border, are cheaper than those in Al-Ain. Until border formalities were established in late 2006, it was possible to travel freely between the cities, so budget travellers would stay in Buraimi. At the time of research, however, new procedures were being established requiring travellers to purchase a visa at the border for Dh200.

As many Emiratis live in Buraimi (for the cheaper rents) and many Omanis work in Al-Ain (there are more employment opportunities), December 2006 and January 2007 saw daily border chaos and waits of several hours. The authorities are confident that once a new integrated electronic system is established (being trialled at the Hatta border post), problems will be resolved. However, the Dh200 visa makes

Buraimi a less attractive accommodation option if you are continuing to travel in the UAE.

## Eating

### AL-AIN

The main restaurant and cafeteria strip is on Khalifa St. While the five-star hotels have a number of eateries, many are disappointing. The main street eateries have a lot more character.

**Habiba Al Nabulsi** (☎ 766 9481; Ali ibn Ali Taleb St; pastries Dh5-10; ☎ 9am-midnight) Al-Ain's most-revered Arabic patisserie and café has enormous brass trays full of delicious Arabic sweets, such as honey-drenched *baklava*, and serves decent cappuccino (Dh6).

**Al Mallah Cafeteria** (☎ 764 4064, 766 9655; Khalifa St; ☎ 11am-3pm & 5pm-midnight) This simple, spotless eatery serves good reliable Lebanese staples, including tangy chicken *shwarmas* (Dh4) and a long list of mezze (Dh7 to Dh75). Try the tasty hummus with pine nuts (Dh17).

**Grand Café** (☎ 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).

**Hut Café** (☎ 751 6526; Khalifa St; mains Dh20; ☎ 8am-2am) Reminding us of something you'd stumble across in Switzerland rather than Al-Ain with its cosy chalet-style, wooden booths and lacy curtains, this comfortable coffee lounge sees regular Emiratis lingering over their newspapers while they sip the excellent coffee (Dh8) and enjoy the delicious home-cooked breakfasts (from Dh20).

**Al Diwan Restaurant** (☎ 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 (Dh17 to Dh25).

**Muslim Restaurant** (☎ 654 158; Al Ghaba St; meals Dh8; ☎ 8am-midnight) This cheap workers' cafeteria dishes up decent-enough dhal and curries, but its piping-hot naan bread is the

speciality. Women will not feel comfortable here though.

## Getting There & Away

### AIR

**Al-Ain Airport** (☎ 785 5555) is approximately 20km from the centre.

### BUS

The bus station is off the Al-Murabba (coffeepot) roundabout opposite the Lulu Centre. Large **Al Ghazal buses** (☎ 751 6565) run from Al-Ain to Abu Dhabi (Dh10, 2¼ hours) every 30 minutes from 6am to 10.30pm. Al Ghazal also runs minibuses to Dubai (Dh20, 1½ hours) every hour from 6.30am to 11.30pm.

Oman's bus company **ONTC** (☎ 708 522, 590 046) runs buses to and from the Ruwi station in Muscat (OR3.600, five hours) via Sohar. These leave Buraimi daily at 1pm and 5pm. On Wednesday and Saturday there's an extra service at 7am. There's also a daily service to Salalah at 5pm. The buses leave from the front of Saeed al-Shamsi Trading on the left-hand side of the main street in Buraimi, just over the Al-Ain border.

### LONG-DISTANCE TAXI

Al-Ain's long-distance taxi station is just down from the bus station, near the livestock souq. A seat in a shared taxi to Dubai will cost Dh20, and Dh25 to Abu Dhabi.

## Getting Around

### TO/FROM THE AIRPORT

An **Al Ghazal taxi** (☎ 751 6565) from the airport to the centre of town costs Dh40.

### BUS

All of Al-Ain's buses run roughly every 30 minutes from 6am to midnight. Most fares are Dh1.

### TAXI

The gold-and-white Al-Ain cabs are the best bets, as they are metered. Fares are cheap: Dh5 for a short trip.

## AROUND AL-AIN

### Jebel Hafeet

This majestic, jagged 1350m-high limestone mountain rears out of the plain south of Al-Ain. The views of Oman and the UAE from

the top and on the winding drive up are excellent. The summit is about 30km by road from the centre of Al-Ain with a car park and snack bar at the top of the mountain, often full of local families escaping from the heat closer to ground level.

The Green Mubazzarah park and holiday chalets at the foot of the mountain are popular with Arab families and the impressive new Mercure Grand Hotel is located near the top of the mountain.

To get to the mountain, head south from the clocktower roundabout and turn right at Khalid ibn Sultan St, then follow the signs. A taxi will cost Dh60 for the round trip.

Near the peak of Jebel Hafeet, the décor of the opulent **Mercure Grand Hotel** (☎ 783 8888; www.mercure-alain.com; d Dh350; ☎) is inspired by the 'Hanging Gardens of Babylon' theme, complete with an indoor garden. It has all of the facilities you could possibly want, including pools, minigolf, tennis, gym and business centre. Children love the outdoor play areas. The rooms are spacious and comfortable, but unfortunately have small balconies that don't really allow you to appreciate the spectacular views. For the price, this is extraordinarily good value. The foyer coffee shop serves good coffee, imported chocolates and Arabic sweets; for a full meal, the Belvedere Restaurant has reasonably priced themed buffets.

## THE EAST COAST

### FUJAIRAH

الفجيرة

☎ 09 / pop 126,000

While Fujairah is the regional centre for this picturesque part of the UAE, it's best to see it as a starting point for the popular domestic tourism spots that dot the east coast up to the Musandam Peninsula. Apart from a visit to Khor Kalba, with its open beaches, bird life and picnicking families, the town of Fujairah itself won't delay you long in heading north. Once past the polluted and unattractive Port of Fujairah, the dramatic mountain scenery delivers 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 coast. While lazing by the pool or on the beach is popular,





attractive low-rise resort on the beach is the best place to stay in town. The light, white rooms are decorated in a sleek contemporary style with balconies with sea views, and there are spacious family chalets. The palm-shaded hotel gardens and swimming pool are pleasant, and while the grey-sand beach isn't very inviting, there's a breezy bar overlooking the sea that's perfect for sunset drinks. The hotel offers airport transfers (Dubai Dh350) and tours along the east coast (half/full day Dh 350/600), to Dubai (Dh 500), Sharjah (Dh700) and Al-Ain (Dh 750).

## Eating

**Maharath Al Bahar Cafeteria** (☎ 222 6963; Hamad bin Abdullah Rd; ☎ 10am-2am) Popular with local Emirati guys who pull up in their 4WDs and honk their horns for service, this clean cafeteria is a great place for *shawarma* (Dh7), falafel (Dh5), toasted sandwiches (Dh8), wraps (Dh7), burgers (Dh7) and fresh juices (Dh5 to Dh10). Try the multi-coloured 'thabakath' cocktail with layers of avocado, mango and strawberry juice.

**Al-Meshwar** (☎ 222 1113; Hamad bin Abdullah Rd; mezze Dh6-45, mains Dh22-35; ☎ 10am-2am) Long the most popular eatery in town, this excellent restaurant (in a bizarre building that looks like a cross between a set from the *Flintstones* and a crusader castle) serves up the best Lebanese food outside of Lebanon. The appetiser plate is delicious (the spicy sausages are scrumptious!) and excellent value at Dh45. Add a *fattoosh* salad (Dh12) and baba ghanouj (Dh10) and it's enough to fill two. Make sure to try the fresh pomegranate juice (Dh10). If you're with a big group, phone ahead and order the house speciality *Ouzie* (a moist tender roast whole lamb with rice and pine nuts). Sit in the *sheesha* section downstairs – the people-watching possibilities alone make a visit worthwhile.

**Taj Mahal** (☎ 222 5225; Hamad bin Abdullah Rd; mains Dh11-22; ☎ noon-3pm & 6-11pm) Locals love the Taj, with its rustic Raj interior décor, and extensive Indian and Chinese menu – everything from lamb rogan josh (Dh18) to Manchurian lamb (Dh18).

**Sadaf Restaurant** (☎ 223 3400; Corniche Rd; mains Dh28; ☎ noon-3pm & 7pm-midnight) A branch of the popular Sadaf chain, this Persian eatery serves up deliciously moist grilled kebabs

and tasty Iranian rice in rather gaudy surroundings.

If you like the food at Taj Mahal, the owners also run the **Saffron Vegetarian Restaurant** (☎ 222 7752; Hamad bin Abdullah Rd; dishes Dh5-17; ☎ 10am-midnight) down the street.

## Drinking

The nicest place in town for a drink or a *sheesha* is Mediterranean-style **Fez Bar** (☎ 222 2411; Fujairah Hilton; ☎ 6pm-3am), but unfortunately its lovely alfresco terraces overlook the busy road. While there's no traffic noise inside, you'll be battling it out with a large-screen TV or bad Filipino band. The bar menu spans mezze (Dh12), to fish and chips (Dh18).

## Entertainment

**Dana Plaza Cinemas** (☎ 224 3100) are on Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Rd, showing Hollywood blockbusters and Bollywood movies.

## Getting There & Around

The Fujairah airport (☎ 222 6222) is on the southern edge of town.

The taxi station is on the edge of town on the road to Sharjah and Dubai. Shared taxis to Dubai or Sharjah charge Dh25. An engaged taxi to Khor Fakkan can cost up to Dh40, to Kalba Dh15, to Badiyah Dh50 and to Dibba Dh70.

Taxis within Fujairah cost around Dh5.

## KHOR FAKKAN

خورفكان

☎ 09

An enclave of Sharjah emirate, and the largest town on the east coast after Fujairah, Khor Fakkan (Creek of the Two Jaws) is 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 (Sharjah has a no alcohol policy) that makes it less appealing to international tourists.

The sweeping Corniche is bounded by the port and fish market at the southern end and Oceanic Hotel at the northern end, with a public beach and port in between. The fort that once dominated the coast is long gone. The Corniche itself features palm trees, lawns, and children's playgrounds and rides. There are refreshment

kiosks and lots of spots where you can lay out a picnic. The place is packed with visitors on Fridays.

There are a half-dozen ATMs in the semi-abandoned souq-like shopping centre across the road from the Corniche and at the Adnoc petrol station on the roundabout outside the Oceanic Hotel. There are a number of grocery stores and supermarkets on the busy main road of Sheikh Khalid bin Mohammed Al Qassimi St, which runs perpendicular to the Corniche.

## Sleeping & Eating

**Khor Fakkan Youth Hostel** (☎ 237 0886; www.uaeyha.org.ae; 78 Sheikh Khalid bin Mohammed Al Qassimi St; dm members/nonmembers Dh35/50) In an old, white villa on the busy main road (2km from the Corniche, near the Union National Bank), this clean and simple hostel with bunk-bed rooms only, sees a steady stream of students here for sport and recreation.

**Oceanic Hotel** (☎ 238 5111; www.oceanichotel.com; d Dh600; ☎) These old-fashioned 1970s digs may once have had a nautical theme (all rooms have round windows), but now they're just badly decorated, with cheap floral bedspreads and pale 'wood' furniture. The café and buffet restaurants overlooking the beach serve up prawn cocktails and mulligatawny soups. While it sees a steady flow of somewhat dazed-looking German and Russian package tourists ('if it's Saturday, we must be in Sharjah emirate...'), the emirate's 'no alcohol' policy ensures it has an equal measure of families from the GCC and subcontinent. The whole hotel permeates with cigarette smoke, but fortunately there's a pristine white-sand beach on the doorstep offering catamaranning, sailing and waterskiing. Snorkelling and diving are available at nearby Coral Island. A cosy cottage of a spa (☎ 238 7652) in the hotel gardens offers Ayurvedic treatments.

**Iranian Pars Restaurant** (☎ 238 5631; cnr Corniche Rd & Sheikh Khalid bin Mohammed Al Qassimi St; mains Dh30; ☎ 11am-midnight) Popular with locals for its generously sized Persian cuisine – try the tasty *chelo* kebab – served with enormous plates of delicious rice. Eat inside at tables covered with attractive plastic tablecloths or at plastic tables outside in cooler weather; it also delivers and does takeaway.

**Taj Khorfakkan Restaurant** (☎ 237 0040; off Corniche; mains Dh22; ☎ 11am-midnight) The only

proper restaurant in town apart from the Oceanic's, and sister to the Taj in Fujairah, this place gets busy on weekends with big families on outings from Sharjah and Dubai. Traditionally decorated in a Raj style, it 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 Safer Centre.

There are a number of *shawarma* stands on the Corniche and fast-food eateries on Sheikh Khalid bin Mohammed Al Qassimi St.

## BADIYAH

بادية

☎ 09

The small fishing village of Badiyah (also spelt Bidyah 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 where 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.

## Diving & Snorkelling

The reefs and waters around Badiyah offer the best diving and snorkelling in the UAE. There are nine acknowledged dive sites in the immediate area and six in Dibba, all 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 is the fact that it is

built in front of Snoopy Island (named after its resemblance to the cartoon character), a lovely, safe reef where guests can snorkel. The following places hire gear and organise dives. All are PADI accredited and offer diving courses.

**Sandy Beach Diving Centre** (☎ 244 5050; www.sandybm.com; Sandy Beach Hotel & Resort; ⏰ 8am-5pm) This PADI five-star dive centre, just a stone's throw from Snoopy Island, offers a full range of courses. Kitted out with custom-built dive boats, it offers a variety of dive trips and caters for 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. There's a long programme of PADI courses and diving packages, from a beginner's 'Discover Scuba Diving' including shore dives (Dh400) to Open Water PADI courses (Dh1750) one/two dives Dh250/350. Hire of snorkelling gear costs Dh60 per day and it offers full services for divers, including Nitrox. The centre can charter boats to Oman and organise full-day and overnight dives.

**Al Boom Diving** (☎ 244 9000; www.alboomdiving.com; Le Meridien Al Aqah Beach Resort; ⏰ 8am-8pm) This long-standing UAE operator offers dive trips leaving twice daily (9am and 2pm). Charters to Oman are available, and

there are snorkelling classes for children. Contact it for prices.

**Scuba 2000** (☎ 238 8477; scubaee@emirates.net.ae; ⏰ 9am-7pm) Caters mainly to experienced divers. Three trips are offered daily (9am, noon and 3pm) and full equipment hire is included in the dive price (one/two dives Dh160/230). Hire of snorkelling gear costs Dh40 per day and a snorkelling trip costs Dh50.

To get to Scuba 2000, look for the signs in the village and follow the unsealed track running along the beach.

### Sleeping & Eating

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

**Sandy Beach Hotel & Resort** (☎ 244 5555; www.sandybm.com; d Dh400, ocean view Dh550, 1-1/2-bedroom chalet Dh600/800; 📍) Located 6km north of Badiyah, near the village of Aqqa, 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 ground-floor rooms have a terrace while the upstairs room has a big window with view, and an indoor sitting area. The chalets are popular with families who put the private outdoor barbecues to good use in the evenings. There's a verdant garden and children's playground, but most people come for the cream-sand beach (beachcombers will love the seashells), the diving, and snorkelling around Snoopy Island.

The Lebanese chef at the casual brasserie-style restaurant (meals from Dh12 to Dh45) next to the pool serves some of the best Lebanese food we've ever tasted. The mixed grilled meat plate (Dh45) was piping hot, moist and tender while the fried *kibbeh* (Dh12) was simply divine. A new restaurant and bar was about to open at the time of research.

The hotel can organise mountain tours (Dh170), fishing trips (Dh170), and trips to the Musandam (Dh200). It also offers transfers from/to Dubai (Dh250 one way), Fujairah (Dh80 round trip) and Khor Fakkan (Dh50). Accommodation rates include breakfast. Ask about the 20% discount between June and September.

**Le Meridien Al Aqah Beach Resort** (☎ 244 9000; www.lemeridien-alaqah.com; d Dh700; 📍) This swanky hotel to the north of the village is a perfect place to spend an indulgent holiday. Its enormous rooms are lavishly furnished and all have balconies and views of the resort's extensive gardens, private beach and the ocean. From the efficient personalised check-in to the beautiful toiletries in the big rooms, this place is impressive all over. There's a wonderful big pool and myriad activities include diving, windsurfing, water-skiing and tennis. Children will love spending time at the Penguin Club, which has its own pool, playground and activities programme. The eateries are all very good but the highlight is the *sheesha* café near the water, a wonderful place to kick back on a balmy evening.

There are no real alternatives to the restaurants in the two hotels. Those self-catering can shop at the market on the main street, which sells fresh fish, and fruit and vegetables.

### DIBBA

☎ 09

The charming fishing village of Dibba, also known as Ras Dibba in the UAE, 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. The victory at Dibba in 633, a year after the Prophet's death, traditionally marks the end of the Muslim reconquest of Arabia.

Today, Dibba is unique in that it's the only town ruled by two sheikhs and a sultan, because Dibba is actually comprised of the three seaside villages, Dibba Muhallab (Fujairah), Dibba Hisn (Sharjah) and Dibba Bayah (Oman), and you can walk or drive freely across the Omani border. As in most other towns in the UAE there are construction sites everywhere, but the town still has a somewhat sleepy air. 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.

There are ATMs, several supermarkets, cafeterias and grocery shops sprinkled throughout town and on the main highway.

**Golden Tulip Resort Dibba** (☎ 968 26 730888; www.goldentulipdibba.com; d Dh385; 📍), a new resort at the foot of the mountains, was getting ready to open when we passed through. Stunningly situated at the foot of the mountains with a beautiful private beach, massive grounds, an attractive, round swimming pool, and spacious rooms with balconies overlooking the sea, it promises to be a wonderful east coast escape. It's located at the very end of town; follow the signs.

There is another popular camping spot on the beach north of the hotel.

## UAE DIRECTORY

### ACCOMMODATION

There are no commercial camp sites in the UAE, but camping in the desert is common, particularly around Liwa, and camping on the beach is very popular on the east coast. Though travellers sometimes camp on the beach at Jebel Ali in Dubai, this is illegal and offenders will be fined.

There are youth hostels in Dubai (p393), Sharjah (p408), Fujairah (p434) and Khor Fakkan (p437) run by the **UAE Youth Hostel Association** (☎ 04-298 8151; www.uaeyha.org.ae). There is no age limit. The association only sells memberships to people living in the UAE, so if you want to use these hostels and benefit from the members-only rate, join HI in your home country. Keep in mind that hostels in the UAE are conservative and do not allow alcohol – don't expect all-night parties! – and because they're often full of young GCC men on sporting trips, women may feel uncomfortable.

The UAE has plenty of decent midrange hotels and an extraordinary number of luxury five-star hotels.

In this chapter, we have defined budget hotels as being those which charge no more than Dh300 for a double room; midrange hotels as those that charge no more than Dh700 for a double room; and top-end hotels as being all those which charge more than Dh700 for a double room. All prices are based on high-season rack rates, including taxes. Hotels will charge rack rates during high season (November to April) but will drop prices – often radically – the rest of the year, by up to 50% over summer (July and August).

### EAST COAST 'DEVELOPMENT'

We used to thoroughly enjoy an east coast drive. An easy run from Dubai, the mountains and unspoilt beaches instantly reduced stress levels on arrival. As much as we loved Le Meridien Al Aqah resort when it opened, its incongruous profile always struck us as going against the 'feel' of this area of the UAE. Now, it's partnered by a lower-profile Rotana hotel (that oddly resembles a private school) on the same stretch, with a sea-view-blocking postmodern mash-up of a JAL hotel further along the coast, and still more to come... See the east coast while you can still actually see the coast, or just head to the magnificent Musandam instead.

Terry Carter & Lara Dunston

From November to April, accommodation in the UAE can be difficult to find. In Dubai and Abu Dhabi, the plethora of special events during this period means that every hotel in town can be booked out for weeks on end. Make sure you book as far in advance as possible.

## ACTIVITIES

Desert safaris and dhow cruises are two of the most popular activities for travellers on short stopovers. See the Abu Dhabi and Dubai chapters for details. Those here on longer trips might want to do as the locals/expats do: go diving (see p437), play a round of golf or head to a football match.

The UAE has become the world's number one golfing destination. Emirates Golf Club in Dubai hosts the prestigious 'Dubai Desert Classic' which, with its US\$1 million prize money, attracts top golfers from around the world and has become the opening event on the European golfing calendar. Golfing is the most popular activity among expats and most travellers to Dubai are keen to have a swing, even if it's just once. Green fees range enormously, but a round could set you back around Dh300.

Football (soccer) has increased in popularity the world over. If you're in the UAE during winter, head to the nearest stadium on a weeknight to watch a local game. Stadiums get packed with Emirati men (some matches see up to 10,000 spectators), enthusiastically barracking for their favourite teams. Attend a match once and you'll be hooked – the carnival atmosphere is electric! Fans are colour-coordinated and well organised, with a singer and drummers leading choreographed song and dance routines to motivate their team. Try and catch a match between Al Ahli, Sheikh Mohammed's red-and-white jersey team, and the purple-jerseyed Al-Ain. Tempers can flare post-match with riot police with dogs and police on horseback entering the stadium and letting off smoke bombs to restore order. Check *Emirates Today* newspaper or the official website of the **UAE Football Association** (☎ 316 0101; www.uaefootball.org/english) for details.

## BOOKS

For an in-depth look at the UAE's major city, check out Lonely Planet's *Dubai* city guide and *Best of Dubai* guide.

Local company Motivate Publishing produces a range of practical guides to the Emirates, including *On Course in the Gulf* and *Off-Road in the Emirates*. Explorer Publishing produces *UAE Off-Road Explorer*; *Underwater Explorer* (a guide to diving and snorkelling in the UAE); and *Family Explorer* (a 'family handbook' for expats in the UAE). *Sharjah – the Guide* includes information on just about everything there is to see and do in the city.

Frauke Heard-Bey's *From Trucial States to United Arab Emirates* is the most comprehensive history of the UAE. *Mother Without a Mask*, by Patricia Holton, is an engaging account of a British woman's relationship with an Al-Ain sheikh's family, while Emirati Mohammad Al Murr's short stories *Dubai Tales* provides a rare insight into Dubai society and culture.

There are some wonderful coffee-table books including *The Emirates by the First Photographers* by William Facey and Gillian Grant, which features extraordinary images taken over the last 60 years of the 20th century, telling a remarkable story of a nation that has grown from the sand. *A Vanished World*, by Wilfred Thesiger, features portraits of tribal people he took over decades of travel, five years of which he spent in Arabia from 1945 to 1950. Graeme Wilson's *Dubai, A Collection of Mid 20th Century Photographs* and Ronald Codra's *Dubai Life & Times: Through the Lens of Noor Ali Rashid* have wonderful photos showing the extraordinary changes that Dubai has been through.

See p23 for more information about books on the Arabian Peninsula.

## BUSINESS HOURS

The UAE weekend changed in 2006 from Thursday and Friday, to Friday and Saturday, but not all businesses had converted at the time of writing. The following information is a guide only. There are variations between each emirate and individual businesses, and there are shorter hours during Ramadan:

**Banks** 8am to 1pm and 4pm to 7pm Sunday to Thursday, 8am to noon on Friday.

**Government offices** 7.30am to 3pm Sunday to Thursday and Saturday mornings. Note that they close their doors at 1pm but you can generally find someone on the phone until 3pm.

**Private offices** 8am to 5pm Sunday to Thursday.

**Shopping malls** 10am to 10pm. Note that many still close for Friday prayers from 11.30am to 1.30pm, or all of Friday until 2pm or 4pm.

**Shops and souqs** 9am to 1pm and 4pm to 10pm Saturday to Thursday, 4pm to 9pm on Friday.

## CHILDREN

It's easy to travel through the UAE with children. Most top-end hotels pride themselves on the child-friendly facilities they provide, including kids clubs, pools and playgrounds. Every town has at least one public garden with playground equipment and all large shopping malls have some type of amusement centre suitable for children of all ages.

Formula is readily available in pharmacies, and disposable nappies at grocery stores and supermarkets. High chairs are available in restaurants and babysitting facilities are available in some midrange and all top-end hotels, as well as at some shopping malls. Cost is around Dh30 per hour.

See Dubai for Children (p393) and Abu Dhabi for Children (p424) for more information on entertainment for children.

## CUSTOMS

The duty-free allowances for tobacco are huge: 2000 cigarettes, 400 cigars or 2kg of loose tobacco. Non-Muslims are allowed to import 2L of wine and 2L of spirits, even in Sharjah, where alcohol is prohibited; duty-free prices on tobacco, alcohol and perfume purchased at all airports are extremely low. You're not allowed to bring in alcohol if you enter the country by land (nor are you officially allowed to take it over the borders between emirates).

## DANGERS & ANNOYANCES

As elsewhere on the Peninsula, the main danger is bad driving (see p556). Many drivers in the UAE don't seem to have a concept of other cars, and courtesy on the road simply does not exist. People will cut in front of you, turn without indicating, and race each other on freeways. Out of the cities, the inner lane is for speeding luxury vehicles only – block them at your own risk as speeds of up to 200km/h are not unusual. Drivers have a tendency to zoom into roundabouts at frightening speeds, and try to exit them from inside lanes. Pedes-

trian crossings are no guarantee that drivers will stop or even slow down. Watch out! As per other Peninsula countries, if you have an accident, even a small one, the car must remain *in situ* until the police arrive and make a report. The only exception to this rule is in Dubai, where the crazy traffic means that anything blocking a road constitutes a major hazard. If you have an accident here, pull over to the side of the road and wait for the police.

Although many of the beaches in the country look calm, they often have dangerous rips. If you are swimming at an unpatrolled beach (no public beaches are patrolled), be very careful. There are regular reports of people drowning, particularly at the beaches in Dubai.

## EMBASSIES & CONSULATES UAE Embassies & Consulates

**Australia** (☎ 02-6286 8802; 36 Culgoa Circuit, O'Malley ACT 2606)

**Canada** (☎ 613-565 8007; Ste 1800, World Exchange Plaza, 45 O'Connor St, Ottawa K1P-1A4)

**France** (☎ 01 45 53 94 04; 3 rue de Lota, 75116 Paris)

**Germany** (☎ 3051 6516; 18-20 Hiroshimast, D-10785, Berlin)

**UK** (☎ 020-7581 1281; 30 Princes Gate, London SW1)

**USA** (☎ 202-363 3009; 3522 International Court, NW, Washington DC 20008)

## Embassies & Consulates in the UAE

Opening hours are usually 9am to noon, Sunday to Wednesday. All are closed on Friday and some are also closed on Thursday or Saturday. Embassies tend to be in Abu Dhabi, while consulates are generally in Dubai. The phone book lists them all.

**Australia** (☎ 02-634 6100; www.austembuae.com; 14th fl, Al-Muhairy Centre, Zayed the First St, Abu Dhabi)

Doesn't process visa applications. For this, contact the consulate in Dubai on ☎ 04-331 3444.

**Bahrain** (☎ 02-665 7500; bahrain1@emirates.net.ae; Baynunah Rd, Abu Dhabi) Closed Tuesday.

**Canada** (☎ 02-407 1300; 26 St, Abu Dhabi) Near Bateen Palace.

**France** (☎ 02-443 5100; www.ambafrance.org.ae; cnr 13th & 26th Sts, Abu Dhabi) Near Bateen Palace.

**Germany** (☎ 02-443 5630; embgermemb@emirates.net.ae; An-Nahyan St, Abu Dhabi) Near Bateen Palace.

**Japan** (☎ 02-443 5696; embjpn@emirates.net.ae; An-Nahyan St, Abu Dhabi) Near Bateen Palace.

**Kuwait** (☎ 02-444 6888; fax 02-444 4109; Diplomatic Area, Airport Rd, Abu Dhabi) 10km south of the centre.

**Netherlands** (☎ 02-632 1920; dba@minbuza.nl; 6th fl, Al-Masoud Tower, Hamdan St, Abu Dhabi)

**New Zealand** There's no embassy in Abu Dhabi. Contact the consulate in Dubai ☎ 04-331 7500.

**Oman** (☎ 02-446 3333; omanemb@emirates.net.ae; 19 St, Abu Dhabi) Located behind Immigration Department about 8km south of the centre. For visa inquiries call Dubai ☎ 04 397 2299.

**Qatar** (☎ 02-449 3300; 02-fax 449 3311; Diplomatic Area, Airport Rd, Abu Dhabi)

**Saudi Arabia** (☎ 02-444 5700; ksaemba@emirates.net.ae; Diplomatic Area, Airport Rd, Abu Dhabi)

**Spain** (☎ 02-626 9544; embesbae@mail.mae.es; Union National Bank Bldg, Hamdan St, Abu Dhabi)

**UK** (☎ 02-610 1100; www.britain-uae.org; Khalid bin al-Walid St, Abu Dhabi)

**USA** (☎ 02-414 2200; www.usembassy.state.gov/uae; Diplomatic Area, Airport Rd, Abu Dhabi)

**Yemen** (☎ 02-444 8457; yemenemb@emirates.net.ae; Diplomatic Area, Airport Rd, Abu Dhabi)

## EMERGENCY

The following are countrywide numbers:

**Ambulance/Police** (☎ 998, 999)

**Fire Department** (☎ 997)

## FESTIVALS & EVENTS

Most of the UAE's festivals occur in Dubai. Headliners include:

**Dubai Desert Classic** (www.dubaidesertclassic.com) A fixture on the international golf calendar; held in February.

**Dubai International Film Festival** (DIFF; www.dubai filmfest.com) With a mission to bridge cultures and open minds, DIFF provides a wonderful opportunity to see quality films from around the Middle East, good world cinema, and fascinating Emirati short films; held in December.

**Dubai Rugby Sevens** (www.dubairugby7s.com) British rugby fans arrive en masse for lots of rugby and beers – great for them, scary for the rest of us – held in December.

**Dubai Shopping Festival** (DSF; www.mydsf.com) Held from December throughout January to early February, with significant discounts (up to 50%) offered in shops throughout the city and events galore, including a multicultural 'Global Village' featuring national pavilions and cultural events.

**Dubai Summer Surprises** (www.mydsf.com) DSF's more family-focused little sibling, held in July/August.

**Dubai Tennis Championships** (www.dubaitennis championships.com) The women's WTA is held the first week, followed by the men's ATP event; held in March.

**Dubai World Cup** (www.dubaiworldcup.com) Watch the gee-gees competing for cash prizes of up to US\$6 million per race; held in March.

The other emirates have pale imitations, which include Sharjah's Ramadan Shopping Festival and Al-Ain's spring Flower Festival. However, Abu Dhabi is set to compete in the events stakes, with the first UAE Formula One in 2009 (see p423).

## HOLIDAYS

As well as the major Islamic holidays (see p534), the UAE observes the following public holidays:

**New Year's Day** 1 January

**Accession Day** (of HH Sheikh Zayed) 6 August

**National Day** 2 December

When a member of the ruling family or a government head of state from a neighbouring country dies, there is often a three-day period of mourning when government offices, some businesses and state-run tourist attractions such as museums close. When the president or prime minister dies, the country can go into mourning for several weeks.

## INTERNET ACCESS

Internet connection is available through Etisalat, the national telecommunications carrier. Internet cafés can be found everywhere in the cities while five-star hotels usually offer internet access from rooms, from the TV with a keyboard, or a broadband plug or wireless. If you're toting a laptop and want to log on, look for an Etisalat 'i-zone' or similar wi-fi sign at cafés and hotel lobbies. You can generally buy a card from the café or get a free code if they're generous.

## INTERNET RESOURCES

The following are just a few of the useful websites available for travellers to the UAE:

**Abu Dhabi Net** (www.abudhabi.net) News and information on city events.

**Dubai City Guide** (www.dubaicityguide.com) Decent information on happenings in Dubai, plus tourist information.

**Dubai Map Site** (www.dubailocator.com) Useful map site.

**Gulf News** (www.gulfnews.com) Website of this English-language newspaper.

**Sharjah Online** (www.sharjah-welcome.com) Useful tourism information site on everything in Sharjah.

**Time Out** (www.timeoutdubai.com, www.timeoutabu dhabi.com) Comprehensive listings of restaurants, bars, clubs and cultural events for Dubai and Abu Dhabi.

**UAE Ministry of Information and Culture** (www.uaeinteract.com) An excellent website covering every aspect of life in the UAE.

## MEDIA Magazines

*Time Out Dubai* (Dh5; weekly) and *Time Out Abu Dhabi* (Dh10; monthly) have listings of hot restaurants, bars and clubs. *What's On* (Dh10) is another monthly catering to expats.

## Newspapers

*Emirates Today*, *7 Days* and *Gulf News* are the better three of the local English-language daily newspapers available in the UAE. Each costs Dh2. International news magazines and newspapers are readily available in Dubai and Abu Dhabi. Don't be surprised if your copy has the censor's thick black mark through articles and pictures that are considered inappropriate.

## Radio

There are a number of English-language radio stations. Emirates FM1, which caters to a young demographic, is at 99.3FM; Emirates 2FM, a news, music and current affairs station, is at 98.5FM. Dubai and Ajman also have English-language FM radio stations: Dubai FM is at 92FM, Free FM is at 96.7FM and Ajman's Channel 4 is at 104.8FM.

## TV

There are many English-language TV channels, including Abu Dhabi's Channel 48 and Dubai's Channel 33, and scores of English-language satellite channels.

See also p294 for information on Al-Jazeera TV, based in Qatar.

## MONEY

The official currency is the UAE dirham (Dh), which is fully convertible and pegged to the US dollar. One dirham is divided into 100 fils. Notes come in denominations of five, 10, 20, 50, 100, 200, 500 and 1000. Coins are Dh1, 50 fils, 25 fils, 10 fils and 5 fils.

Moneychangers sometimes offer better rates than banks. If they don't charge a commission, their rate is probably bad. Not all change travellers cheques, though currencies of neighbouring countries are all easily exchanged.

There are ATMs on major streets, in shopping centres and sometimes at hotels. All major credit cards are accepted.

In each emirate, a different level of municipal and service tax is charged against hotel and restaurant bills. This is somewhere between 5% and 20%. If a price is quoted 'net', this means that it includes all taxes and service charges.

## Exchange Rates

The rates below were current at the time of writing.

| Country      | Unit  |   | UAE dirham |
|--------------|-------|---|------------|
| Australia    | A\$1  | = | Dh2.78     |
| Canada       | C\$1  | = | Dh2.79     |
| euro zone    | €1    | = | Dh4.62     |
| Japan        | ¥100  | = | Dh3.00     |
| Kuwait       | KD1   | = | Dh12.53    |
| New Zealand  | NZ\$1 | = | Dh2.43     |
| Oman         | OR1   | = | Dh9.57     |
| Qatar        | QR1   | = | Dh1.01     |
| Saudi Arabia | SR1   | = | Dh0.98     |
| UK           | UK£1  | = | Dh6.87     |
| USA          | US\$1 | = | Dh3.67     |
| Yemen        | YR    | = | Dh0.02     |

## TELEPHONE

### Mobile Phones

The UAE's mobile-phone network uses the GSM 900 MHz and 1800 MHz standard, the same as Europe, Asia and Australia. Etisalat was the sole operator until Du came on the scene. Visitors can buy a prepaid wasel (sim) card for Dh165 from the airport and Etisalat offices, which can be recharged with a prepaid mobile charge card (in denominations of Dh25 and Dh40, available from most supermarkets and grocery stores). Etisalat also offers a special package called Ahlan for short-term visitors. It costs Dh90 for 90 days and includes 90 minutes of talk time, nine SMS messages, missed call notifications, call waiting, and your first overseas call for free. For more information call ☎ 400 4101 (international calls) or ☎ 101 (from within the UAE).

### Phone Codes

The country code for the UAE is 971, followed by the area code (minus the zero), then the subscriber number. In this chapter,

local area codes are given at the start of each city or town section. The international access code (to call abroad from the UAE) is 00. To call a local mobile number first dial the prefix 050. For directory inquiries call 181.

### Phonecards

The UAE has a splendid telecommunications system, and you can connect up with anywhere in the world, even from the most remote areas. The state telecom monopoly is Etisalat, recognisable in each city by the giant golf ball on top of its offices.

Coin phones have been almost completely superseded by card phones. Phonecards are available from grocery stores or Etisalat offices for amounts of Dh30 or more. Local calls (within the same area code) are free.

### VISAS

Officially, 60-day visit visas are available on arrival in the UAE at air, land and sea ports, to citizens of 34 developed countries, including passport holders of most Western European countries, plus Australia, Brunei, Canada, Hong Kong, Japan, Malaysia, New Zealand, Singapore and the USA. The visa is free of charge and can be extended for another 30 days for Dh500 at a **Department of Naturalisation & Residency office** (☎ Dubai 04-398 0000, Abu Dhabi 02-446 2244). Note that if you overstay your visa, you will be charged a hefty Dh100 per day. The 34 countries are currently under review, however, as they have not extended the same courtesy to UAE citizens. Check the situation before travelling.

Citizens of Gulf Cooperative Council (GCC) countries do not need visas to enter the UAE, and can stay as long as they want. For citizens of countries not included in the list above, a tourist visa must be arranged through a sponsor: a company or a resident of the UAE, or a hotel or travel agency. Charges vary. If you are in transit in the UAE, your airline can organise for you to be granted a free 96-hour transit visa.

Officially, if you have an Israeli stamp in your passport you are not allowed to enter the UAE and will not be given a visa.

See Border Crossings (p547) for information about re-entering the UAE from Oman.

## TRANSPORT IN THE UAE

### GETTING THERE & AWAY

#### Entering the UAE

If you are eligible to collect a visit or transit visa when you arrive, entering the country is simple. Proceed straight through the immigration desk or border post and get your passport stamped. If you are entering on a sponsored visa you'll need to go to the clearly marked visa collection counter at the airport when you arrive.

#### Air

Dubai and Abu Dhabi are the country's main international airports, though an increasing number of carriers serve Sharjah as well. There are also small international airports at Fujairah, Ras al-Khaimah and Al-Ain, primarily used by charter flights. There is no departure tax when leaving by air.

Contact details for all UAE airports can be found under Getting There & Away in each destination section in this chapter.

**Emirates Airlines** (www.emirates.com) is the Dubai carrier and **Ethiad Airways** (www.ethiadairways.com) is the UAE's national carrier. Both have an excellent reputation for service and safety, flying to destinations throughout the world. A 'no-frills' airline, **Air Arabia** (www.airarabia.com), was established in 2003 in Sharjah. It flies to Gulf, Middle Eastern and Asian destinations.

#### OTHER AIRLINES FLYING TO & FROM THE UAE

**Air France** (AF; www.airfrance.com/ae; Dubai ☎ 04-294 5960, Abu Dhabi ☎ 02-621 5818; hub Charles de Gaulle Airport, Paris)

**Air India** (AI; www.airindia.com; Dubai ☎ 04-227 8767, Abu Dhabi ☎ 02-632 2300; hub Chhatrabathi Sivaji International Airport, Mumbai)

**British Airways** (BA; www.ba.com; Dubai ☎ 04-307 5555, Abu Dhabi ☎ 02-622 4540; hub Heathrow Airport, London)

**Gulf Air** (GF; ☎ 800 2200; www.gulfairco.com; hub Bahrain International Airport)

**KLM** (KL; www.klm.ae; Dubai ☎ 04-335 5777, Abu Dhabi ☎ 02-632 3280; hub Amsterdam International Airport, Netherlands)

**Singapore Airlines** (SQ; www.singaporeairlines.com; Dubai ☎ 04-223 2300, Abu Dhabi ☎ 02-622 1110; hub Changi Airport, Singapore)

### Land

#### BORDER CROSSINGS

UAE border posts that are open to non-GCC citizens include those at Al Darah (at Tibat, for Musandam), Wajaja (Hatta), Khatmat Malahah (near Jebel Hafeet) and Al Hilli (Al-Ain-Buraimi) Passport Controls. During research, we were informed that only GCC citizens could cross at Ghewifat to Saudi (even if you're only transiting).

Officially, if you're eligible to receive a visit visa on arrival at airports, you should be able to at border posts. The best advice is to cross the border during business hours. If the posts are not staffed and you don't get a visit visa you will have to leave the UAE within 48 hours or be liable for a Dh100-per-day fine.

To travel to Oman, use Al Darah, Wajaja and Khatmat Malahah Passport Controls. At the UAE post, there is a Dh20 exit visa processing fee and a Dh60/OR6 visa fee at the Omani entry point. For reasons not adequately explained to us, at the new Al Hilli Passport Control (Al-Ain-Buraimi, where a border post has just been established and formalities introduced in early 2007), travellers are required to purchase a visa for Dh200. As many Emiratis live in Buraimi and many Omanis work in Al-Ain there is a lot of movement across this border and hence long delays. A new integrated electronic system is being established nationwide, being trialled at the Wajaja (Hatta) border post at the time of research, which authorities promise should speed up formalities everywhere.

See p547 for a summary of border crossings around the region.

#### BUS

Oman National Transport Company (ONTC) runs buses from Dubai via Hatta to Muscat and vice versa. Buses leave from the **ONTC office** (☎ 04-295 9920; DNATA Car Park, Deira; ☎ 9am-9pm), located near the Caravan Restaurant, two to three times daily. The schedule varies on demand, so call ahead. The trip takes approximately five hours and costs Dh60/100 one way/return. Buses have televisions and toilets on board. Note that this is the only bus company that non-GCC citizens can travel on. The others should not sell you tickets (they don't stop at the border for a start).

Dozens of bus companies have services to Jordan, Syria, Lebanon and Egypt via Saudi Arabia and Jordan, but officially, non-GCC citizens should not be travelling on these and the bus companies are not allowed to sell you tickets. Saudi transit visas are required and at the time of research these were not being given to non-Muslims.

#### CAR & MOTORCYCLE

If you hire a car in the UAE, you will need to take out extra insurance (usually Dh500 per week) if you plan to take it into Oman.

#### Sea

The Iranian shipping company Valfajre-8 has twice-weekly services (usually Sunday and Thursday at 9pm, but you'll need to be there at 4pm to go through the formalities) between Bandar-e Abba in Iran and Sharjah's Port Khalid (Dh160 economy, 10 to 12 hours). The local agent is the **Oasis Freight Agency** (☎ 06-559 6325; Kayed Ahli Bldg, Jamal Abdul Nasser Rd, Sharjah; ☎ 8am-1pm & 2-4.30pm).

### GETTING AROUND

#### Air

There are no internal flights in the UAE.

#### Bus & Minibus

Well-maintained Dubai Transport minibuses or buses serve all the emirates but the only route that takes passengers on the return trip is Sharjah. The rest of the buses go back to Dubai empty. Equally well-maintained Al Ghazal buses travel between Dubai and Abu Dhabi, and Dubai and Al-Ain, as well as within the Abu Dhabi emirate. There is now an excellent frequent inter-Emirate bus service between Dubai and Abu Dhabi. This is the most comfortable way to travel.

Keep in mind that bus journeys taken during Dubai's peak periods (from 7am to 10am, noon to 2pm and 4.30pm to 7pm approximately) can be delayed due to traffic congestion. Trips that might take half an hour outside of peak times or on a Friday could take double that time. And if there's an accident? Triple that time and postpone that dinner reservation!

See Getting There & Away in the relevant destination sections in this chapter for more details.

## Car

Driving is by far the best way to see the UAE, allowing you to get off the major highways and onto the more interesting back roads and giving you the freedom to stop as you please. Major roads in the UAE are excellent; multilane highways link the cities and have lighting along their entire length. See the Arabian Peninsula Transport chapter for more information on road rules and hazards (p555).

If you have a breakdown call the **Arabian Automobile Association** (☎ 800 4900).

## HIRE

Car rental starts at about Dh150 for one day (including insurance) for a small manual car such as a Toyota Echo. A Mazda 6 will be around Dh270. Rates fall to about Dh107/232 per day for a week, and even more for a month. If you rent a car for more than three days you will usually be given unlimited kilometres. Don't hesitate to negotiate with car rental agencies for dis-

counts. In our experience, Europcar gives the best reductions. It will also drop cars off at your hotel or home.

To hire a car, you'll need a credit card and an international driver's licence; you may also need two passport-sized photos. In some instances rental agencies will hire cars to travellers with only a driver's licence from their own country, but this is happening less often. There are dozens of agencies listed in the phone book; the smaller ones may offer slightly better rates but the more-established ones have bigger fleets and better emergency back up.

## Long-Distance Taxi

Shared taxis can be cramped but they are certainly cheap. The main problems are that, aside from the busy Abu Dhabi–Dubai route, they often fill up slowly, and the cars are sometimes not as roadworthy as one would like (ie don't have seat belts). You can take these taxis engaged (ie privately, not shared) if you are willing to pay for all of the seats.