

# ARABIAN

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standard, rising three to four stories and with terraces and large windows. Our rented villa has three floors made up of 15 rooms plus pantries and walk-in closets, and eight bathroom/toilets. It was one of several, each enclosed in its own walled space, within a walled, gated compound.

Our first night here, we dine at an Italian restaurant in the Rotana Beach Hotel. Our view across the water is of Sowwah Island, where work lights illuminate a massive construction project that includes high-rise office buildings, retail areas and the home of the Abu Dhabi Stock Exchange. Abu Dhabi is building, and the building is impressive, as is the Rotana Beach Hotel. Great spans of marble, large open areas, domed ceilings supported by massive columns; this is incredible oil wealth on parade.

As we leave the restaurant, a man and woman approach arm-in-arm. Although Abu Dhabi is somewhat more moderate in its policies, we are told that on the street, such public display of affection could lead to an arrest. Even here, inside this very worldly hotel, it is frowned upon.

We return to our villa for the evening and a glass of wine. (If one is driving, it is recommended not to consume alcohol out of the home. If you are involved in an auto accident, even if you are not at fault, just the whiff of alcohol on your breath is enough to get you locked up.) Because Islam prohibits the consumption of alcohol, only non-Muslims can buy wine, beer or spirits in the United Arab Emirates. Expatriates must have an alcoholic beverage permit, and each purchase, the amount and date are entered into the permit book. The amount of alcohol you're allowed to purchase is based on family size.

The "booze" store is part of, but not accessible from, the general grocery store, which is well stocked with Western foods, packaged goods and fresh produce. Meat also is available, but pork is offered only in a side room called the Pork Room. A sign over the door advises that Muslims are not allowed to enter. Most restaurants here, even those serving non-Muslims, offer only beef bacon or turkey bacon — no "bacon" bacon. Not here.

## SHOPPING: A UNIVERSAL PASTIME

Shopping is a major sport in Abu Dhabi. Immense malls sprinkled about the city host expensive, international brands — Versace, Tiffany, Armani — just like the fanciest American malls. We notice many women in beautiful, full-length black robes. Arab women wear these abayas either by choice or by family tradition. Their beauty is reflected in colorful, jewel-embroidered accents around the sleeves and seams. Accompanying scarves have matching embroidery.

Stylish shoes peek out from under the robes. An occasional flare of the robe reveals stunning, high-fashion garments underneath. Many shops in the mall offer such garments to be worn under abayas or in the privacy of the home.

Of course, not every woman is dressed so traditionally. Many expatriate and tourist women — they also habituate malls, I understand — are dressed in Western attire. This is a land of cultural contrasts.

The Marina Mall is at one end of the Corniche, a long, broad crescent drive that curves along a beautiful beach dotted with tent-like shade umbrellas, reminiscent of the Bedouin culture that has dominated this desert area for centuries. Benches to enjoy the Arabian Gulf waters are provided. Strangely, we don't see a single person for the length this inviting beach.



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Above: Zayed Memorial. Left: Abu Dhabi Skyline.

## DISCOVERING DUBAI

More famous than Abu Dhabi is its sister emirate, Dubai, known for its remarkable architecture and headlong development. We drive to Dubai on our way to a Gulf of Oman resort at Al Fujairah. Along the way, we pass speed cameras in the median every two kilometers. It seems drivers know the camera boxes are two kilometers apart. So, immediately after passing one of the cameras, cars speed up for 1½ kilometers.

The cameras are aimed to shoot pictures of the speeding car after it has passed. It was not always so. The cameras originally were aimed at oncoming lanes. The pictures often revealed front seat passengers, information some drivers didn't like publicized.

In Dubai, we are assaulted by construction on top of construction. The city is home to the iconic Burj hotel and the building that will soon become the world's tallest. Our interim destination is Emirates Mall, Dubai's response to the world's demand for more and more extravagant shopping venues. This one includes an indoor ski run. No kidding. A snow-ski run. Observers who don't want to stand in the cold can watch through glass walls as skiers and toboggan riders slide down a snow-covered slope. In the desert.

After lunch at Chili's — yes, the same Chili's chain we eat at in the U.S. (give us a break; we have a 4-year-old with us) — we head out toward our weekend on the Gulf of Oman shore. The route takes us through Sharjah, another emirate, less known than its higher profile neighbors. The UAE consists of seven emirates, each equivalent to a state or province, within a "united" government. Two hours later, we arrive at Fujairah and our destination, the gulf-front Miramar Resort.

Each room has a patio facing the water or opening onto the resort's center with its grand pool and beachfront lounges. A peninsular restaurant projects into the freeform pool.

The rooms are air-conditioned and spacious. "Superior" includes a queen bed, satellite television with a large selection of shows and video feeds and a mini-bar well stocked with reasonably priced items, including red and white wine miniatures. A single, barely noticeable arrow painted on the ceiling points in the direction of Mecca, so that Muslims

know which way to face when praying.

As throughout the Arab world, the local mosque calls Muslims to pray five times each day. In a strange way, the sonorous recitation of Quranic verses, which we hear only as sounds, not words, is very soothing. Like church bells in an American neighborhood, they are regular reminders that there are other things in life beyond the purely material.

Our son and his family occupy a "Deluxe" room right next door so that we can visit on each other's lanais. Their room is slightly larger and includes a separate ante-room, so that their 4-year-old son can sleep without disturbing them.

Hotel service is exemplary. We want for nothing. Room service is prompt and attentive. The Miramar also has a very good Kid's Club, an important consideration for adults traveling with children. Our grandson, who doesn't take quickly to strangers, or take direction well, was so excited that he didn't want to leave when the club closed for the day.

After a light dinner in the resort's outdoor lounge area, we also enjoyed a sheesha, also known as a waterpipe, the relaxation resource of preference for Arab men. A mild, aromatic tobacco infused with fruit is drawn through cooling water filters. The cooled "smoke" with a pleasantly sweet aftertaste is a nice substitute for dessert. And no calories.

The next day we watched with fascination as abaya-covered women sat at the surf's edge, playing with their children. Modesty also materialized itself in the instance of a young woman sitting with a glass of tea with her male escort. When she apparently feared that my camera was pointed in her direction, down over her face came her veil.

The drive back to Abu Dhabi was uneventful, but not dull, as we passed sweeping desert dunes, roaming wild camels and roadside souks, each with clusters of open storefronts, and village mosques of various sizes. It was an appropriate overture to our visit to the Grand Sheik Zayed Mosque the next day.

## A MAGNIFICENT MOSQUE

The Sheik Zayed Mosque is open for tours by non-Muslims on Sundays. Our guide tells us it is the third-largest mosque in the world, exceeded in size and importance only by those at Mecca and Medina in Saudi Arabia. Women are required to wear abayas and scarves completely covering the hair. These are provided to all non-Muslims by the mosque at no charge.

We move through a row of tall columns topped by glistening gold overlay, into a courtyard. Large slabs of Greek marble cover the floor. Each slab is pre-

cisely separated from the other by an open slit of one-quarter inch. The slit allows water from rain or washing to drain from the floor. An added benefit is that the water cools the slabs from below so that worshippers can kneel to pray without the discomfort of a hot floor. The slits are perfectly aligned to provide a guide for kneelers to assemble in straight lines.

Off the courtyard are walls with extraordinary inlay of rare stones gathered from the around the world. The floral patterns are almost mesmerizing. We are guided to a font encircled by stations for ablution or ritual washing required of men prior to worship.

Inside the main hall of the mosque, under soaring domes, we see walls with huge sweeps of inlaid mother-of-pearl, columns topped with gold ornamentation and a concave niche of gold, from which the Imam recites verses from the Quran. The floor is covered by wall-to-wall, hand-woven Persian carpet, created in sections in Iran and assembled with invisible seams. It is estimated to weigh 40 tons. Sixty feet overhead is a globular chandelier made from jewel-encrusted gold, each jewel illuminated by a fiber optic light.

Our guide explains many Islamic and related Emirati traditions. Men wear white robes in the summer for coolness but often vary the colors in cooler seasons. Arab women wear black as a matter of national choice, although it isn't hard to imagine that there is some coercion involved.

When we visit the Emirates Palace Hotel the next day, we see other Muslim women, visiting from Indonesia, wearing more colorful, patterned abayas.

## THE \$3 BILLION HOTEL

Sitting at one end of the Corniche, the Emirates Palace Hotel is self-described as a seven-star hotel and, at \$3 billion, is believed to be the most expensive hotel ever built. There are expanses of inlaid marble floors, walls and columns, under domed ceilings. The highest dome, above the Grand Atrium, is said to be higher than St. Peter's Basilica in Rome. The chandeliers are Swarovski crystal.

Its museum-like feeling is encouraged by display cases offering antiquities from the gallery Barakat, also of New York and Beverly Hills. Standard hotel rooms — there are 302 — start at \$400 per night. Suites, reserved for visiting heads of state and dignitaries, are said to go for as much as \$11,000 per night. An entire floor is reserved exclusively for Gulf Arab royalty.

The public areas offer 200 fountains, meeting halls, performance areas, terraces overlooking the sea and multiple restaurants. Lebanese, Italian, French/International and Arabic cuisines are offered. There are three lobby cafés, including a Caviar Café offering champagne and caviar dishes.

We order afternoon tea (restaurants don't open until 12:30) in a café adjacent to tempting cases of dessert sweets and baked goods. Our food is accompanied by an iced coffee (espresso, chocolate ice cream and ice topped with whipped cream) and a colorful fruit fusion beverage. While I'm not up for dessert — hey, I had the coffee-chocolate thing — my wife orders a lime-topped cheesecake brownie. Just to be cooperative, I help her eat it.

We have a flight departure scheduled for 2 a.m. Shortly after the call for evening prayers, a chauffeured car picks us up to take us to the airport. It is part of Business Class service on Etihad Airways, the airline of Abu Dhabi. It is one of those times when the higher cost of special service seems to be very reasonable. Another aspect of value is bed-like seats in Business Class that allow one to actually sleep during our 15-hour flight back to America.

Sweet dreams! ■