



Kayak the clear waters



Native sand gazelles



Desert Islands Resort

Where the wild things are

Paradise found. Liz Totton travels to fantastical Sir Bani Yas Island and discovers a menagerie of animals above and below sea level

Dying to meet a dugong or a bale of hawksbill sea turtles? Care to watch a flamboyance of flamingoes in flight at dawn? Would you relish the chance to ride horseback by the light of the full moon next to a tower of giraffes or explore craggy coral reefs with a school of angelfish? If communing with nature above and below sea level appeals to you, then Sir Bani Yas Island is for you. The beautiful island is a two-and-a-half hour drive south of the capital – and an even shorter flight – so why not

make this fantasy island your next family holiday staycation? Sir Bani Yas Island is the largest off the coast of Abu Dhabi and was the former private island of Sheikh Zayed, the late ruler of the UAE. Since his death in 2004, his wish to see Sir Bani Yas transformed into a wildlife reserve has been carried out and twice daily safaris are offered. The 87 sq km island has the feel of a borderless 'game park' and certain animals, such as the native sand gazelles, roam free

while others, such as cheetahs, are confined by expansive pens. To keep the free-range animals safe, there is a 50km island wide speed limit on the single lane road that connects all island destinations.

We get there by speed boat, arriving in the very small port town of Jebel Danna. Even the check in at the ferry station is the height of luxury as our bags are ushered away and we see them again only upon entering our room. We are handed a cool beverage and a freshly made espresso and then guided onto a waiting speed boat. The trip is scenic and no more than 15-20 minutes.

On arrival, we are whisked onto a bus and driven leisurely to the resort of our choice. The ride is therapeutic as clouds fill the cobalt blue sky, flocks of birds hover, peacocks parade around like they own the place, giraffe's head pop in and out of ghat trees and the mountainous landscape of salt domes serves as a backdrop to the wild animals that intermittently dot the landscape.

Desert Islands Resort & Spa by Anantara is just one of the hotel options on the island. There are three to suit every type of family or traveller. You can also choose Anantara Sir Bani Yas Island Al Yamm Villa Resort if you would enjoy waking up beside a beautiful white sandy beach with uninterrupted views of the Arabian Gulf and mangroves. Or you can stay at Anantara Sir Bani Yas Island Al Sahel Villa Resort where you'll get in touch with nature from the comfort of your private luxury villa with wildlife wandering in your own backyard.

We choose Desert Islands Resort as it allows us an island experience without having to sacrifice basic amenities. The resort was once the sheikh's palace and has 64 bedrooms decorated in Arabian and African style.

Where to stay

The hotel is well appointed with an eclectic mix of Arabian, Asian and African influences from the elegant lobby to our spacious room. Everyone is greeted with fresh towels to wipe away the grime of the city and the line of dotting and smiling staffers pop in and out of our visit like a cast of sincerely friendly characters committed to making our stay the best possible experience.

The lobby is peppered with antiques, art and Arabian lanterns and it has the feeling of an elegant living room with the bits and baubles that one might procure travelling the world.

The service is extravagant but somehow still casual. The staff as effortlessly engages in light conversation as they do implicit direction about how to make the most of your holiday on the island or how to find your room.

The top end accommodation is the royal villa but most guests are happy with the chic standard rooms; each has a breezy balcony overlooking the resort's infinity pool



Experience life on an island



Dine in luxury

and the turquoise sea. The soaking tubs are enormous and each room has a Nespresso machine, high-end bath products and luxury linens.

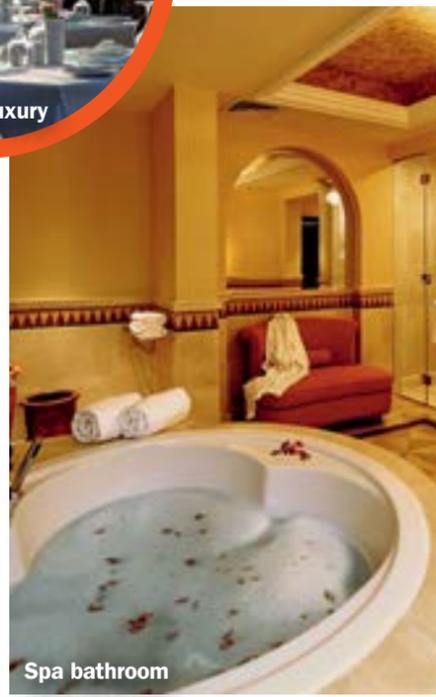
Safaa Spa

While this trip was more family oriented, the Safaa Spa at the resort is there if you need to have a moment away from the kids to indulge in an assortment of deeply invigorating, Arabian-inspired rituals and modern day spa treatments to kick start your relaxing stay.

What's cooking?

Some fear visiting remote islands because they believe their choices for dining and entertainment will be limited. Never fear. Sir Bani Yas Island has three separate resorts available to you with ample dining facilities, but we chose not to leave the comfort of the Desert Islands Resort.

There, we enjoy a huge breakfast buffet complete with made-to-order omelettes and espresso drinks at the Palm restaurant. You can also enjoy the Palm's international menu in the evening and you can grab lunch or midday snacks at the resort's poolside beach bar, Al Shams, which serves coffee, icy cold beverages and delicious food.



Spa bathroom

For dinner there are a few fine dining options, but we relish the opportunity to sit beachside in cosy, oversized chairs at the signature seafood restaurant Amwaj. The eatery serves up an abundance of seafood dishes such as lobster, prawns and a bevy of local fish on the terrace with such a relaxed vibe so you feel a world away from home.

At Amwaj, we try perhaps the most delicious steamed local sea bream we have ever tasted. Our server tells us that the venue does not serve endangered fish, such as hamour, for environmental reasons. He tells us that they avoid such fish because the hotel can't afford to ignore the daunting issues that face the very seas that surround them and we applaud their sustainable dining principles.

An itinerary is born

There is a host of nature-based activities to choose from. An affable activities director, Arnaud, walks us through the dizzying array of goings-on. He gives us a swift tour and some history of the island, hoping to assess our interests. He can see our youngest child loves birds so he brings us out to a lagoon in front of the hotel to show us the hotel's flamingoes.



Water sports centre

Getting there

By car: The resort is located just 8km off the Abu Dhabi western coastline and 250km from Abu Dhabi International Airport. Should you wish to drive, follow the E11 highway directly from Abu Dhabi or Dubai in the direction of Tarif and Mirfa. Continue straight until you pass Tarif, Mirfa and Baynoona. Take the exit marked Al Ruwais (Exit 142) and continue until you pass Al Ruwais, after which follow signs to the right for Jebel Dhana and then for Sir Bani Yas Island. Take the second U-turn on Jebel Dhana road and take the first right turn. At the end of the road there will be a roundabout. Follow the Sir Bani Yas/Desert Islands sign that will lead you to Jebel Dhana jetty. Park your car in a safe, covered area before boarding the water taxi to Sir Bani Yas Island. This boat ride is complimentary for guests of Desert Islands Resort & Spa by Anantara. In order to guarantee your seat on the water taxi, contact crome@anantara.com.

By plane: Travel to Sir Bani Yas Island is swift and seamless thanks to a choice of flight services from Abu Dhabi and Dubai. Choose from the luxury of a regional jet service from Al Bateen Executive Airport (rotanajet@anantara.info) or the spectacle of landing on the water with seaplane flights from Dubai (seawings@anantara.info).

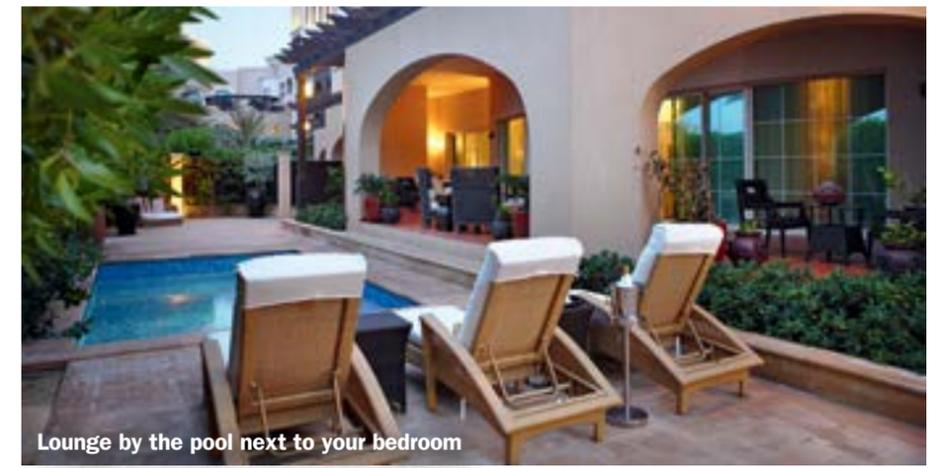
Meet the elephant's most unusual relatives

While you will not find an elephant on Sir Bani Yas yet, you will have a chance to get up and close and personal with two of the elephant's lesser known relatives. Not only are the hyrax and the dugong related to the elephant, they are its nearest living relatives. The three share a common, but distant, ancestor, which existed at least 60 million years ago. Since then, the hyrax and the elephant have diverged evolutionarily. You may have the chance to see both on your visit to the Island.

The hyrax is a little known creature that superficially resembles a large rodent. Often called a 'rock rabbit' or 'dussie' in its native Africa. Elephants and hyraxes share several surprising characteristics. The elephant's most distinctive features, its ever-growing tusks, are also present in the hyrax, but to a lesser degree. The tusks of these two animals are elongated incisors.



The dugong is a gentle creature. They are often referred to as 'sea cows' because, much like elephants and hyraxes, they 'graze' only on the green algae and sea grass that forms 'meadows' in sheltered coastal waters they call home. Despite the fact they are marine mammals, dugongs are grouped in the same suborder as elephants because of their similarities in teeth.



Lounge by the pool next to your bedroom



Discover the depths of the ocean

He can also see that we are particularly interested in watersports so he suggests an itinerary that consists of a sunset kayaking expedition through peaceful mangrove lagoons, a pre-dawn game drive where we pile into an open-air jeep and tour the island's game parks and finally a morning snorkelling tour in the clear and shallow waters to spot dugongs, sea turtles and tropical fish. We sign the dotted line and rest up for what sounds like a fun-filled 24 hours.

We are aware that we are missing out on the sunrise Wadi walk through the brightly coloured salt cones, mountain biking, dune-sailing, falconry and archery and horseback riding, but there's not enough time in a day.

Sunset kayaking

A knowledgeable guide, Marie, pulls our kayaks to the side of the lagoon. We have kayaked before so she skips the mechanics and cuts straight to what we will see and do in our session. Kayaking on Sir Bani Yas affords rowers the chance to see many species of wild birds that are indigenous to the region and several non-indigenous species, such as flamingoes, that have settled during migration and, finding the island so amenable, they make the island their permanent home – we wish we could do the same.

But, if you're lucky, you may also sight sea gulls, cormorants, black winged stilts, teals, crab plovers, avocets and grey herons. Marie informs us that we may not see them all in one go, but we will enjoy cooling off on the water



Meet the under water residents



Kayak around the island

The reserve the Sheikh built

His Highness Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan had a vision that included 'greening' the island in order for animals to live in a natural environment. Sheikh Zayed started in Al Ain and then he brought that concept over to Sir Bani Yas and started planting trees. Sheikh Zayed's vision also included the introduction of animals from across the world to the island. His paramount concern was the saving of the Arabian Oryx, which, at the time, was declared extinct with only a few in captivity. In the present day, the island is home to around 500 Arabian Oryx making it the island's greatest success story. At this stage the status of the Arabian Oryx went from critically endangered to vulnerable which shows that the effort in the UAE, which currently holds the biggest number of Arabian Oryx in the world, has been tremendously successful. So successful that the wildlife park has been slowly reintroducing Oryxes into the wild throughout the deserts of the Empty Quarter. The island is now home to over 10,000 different species that coexist harmoniously.

and being out on the sea as a family as the sun sets in the distance.

Pre-dawn safari

Yawning, we hop in our awaiting Jeep. Morning grogginess is swiftly replaced with elation at the sight of our first animal – the hyrax. Our guide, Kate, introduces the rabbit-like creature as the cousin of the elephant and with that, we are officially awake and ready to be surprised by other unusual and exciting animal sightings.

We see many species of birds and so many gazelle we stop taking their pictures. The sight of a row of reticulated giraffe, purposefully moving their impossibly long legs in rhythm is thrilling. They seem so at home in the island landscape and completely ignore us as we park up close to them while they are gathered in a group having their breakfast.

We see the formerly endangered – to the point of extinction – Arabian Oryx messing about with his mate and then have an encounter with an injured cheetah named Gibbs as another slinky cheetah prowls our jeep. Another



Prepping for snorkelling



Observe some oryx

young male cheetah rests on a hill and gazes out over the landscape. They are two of the five roaming the reserve. The others reside in a fenced off territory; their separation prevents over breeding and excessive fighting. The cheetah help keep the exploding population of gazelle – now far from extinct – in check as they hunt for their food.

Mid-morning snorkel

Post safari and Palms' buffet breakfast we check in with the Desert Island Watersport Centre operated by Al Mahara. It offers a range of activities including scuba diving, kayaking, stand up paddle boarding, snorkelling and more.

We choose a mid morning snorkel. We are geared up and tossed in a pool to be certain



Resident flamingoes

that all the parts fit – they do. Then we are led to south side of a jetty where we submerge.

We are not expecting much as it is the desert and the water is so warm but we are instead treated to an underwater world that is as teeming with life as the land above. We see angelfish,

eels, sailfish, groper seahorse, sea anemones, starfish and crustaceans. We hope to get a rare look at the endangered hawksbill turtle or one of the 2,500 elusive dugongs that call Sir Bani Yas their home but we were not so lucky.

Rooms at Anantara Desert Islands Resort & Spa start at Dhs1,600 per night. Check the website for discounts and packages www.desertislands.anantara.com. dirs@anantara.com (02 801 5400).

Among the ruins

Animals appear to be the earliest known life to appear on the Island. Human occupation was confirmed with the findings of pottery and tombs during the Neolithic age (5,500 BC). From 300 to 600 BC, settlers from nearby Dalma Island were involved in international trade with Mesopotamia and even some Mediterranean countries landed on Sir Bani Yas Island. The first signs of religion are of an early Christian Nestorian Monastery which reportedly dates back to around 600AD. The island as it exists today is due to the initiative of His Highness Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan, First President of the UAE and Ruler of Abu Dhabi, who initially chose this as his island retreat and later prohibited hunting and started greening the desert.



Cheetahs roam the island