

IN THE CITY OF THE MODERN BEDOUIN

Step into the luxurious bygone era of Abu Dhabi as we take you through some of the city's oldest and most revered spots that speak volumes of its culture and history.

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The skyscrapers jugged out of the gulf city. Sticking my face on the window of a car, I craned my neck slowly up, trying to count the number of floors. Our vehicle raced through the sun-scorched highways — lined by date palm trees — of the Emirates capital Abu Dhabi, in the holy month of Ramadan. When the car took a turn, I caught my first glimpse of the snow-white minarets of the Sheikh Zayed Grand Mosque and within seconds, the world's largest free-standing mosque dome revealed itself.



The mosque was envisioned by Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan, the founding father of the United Arab Emirates. The architecture of the 12-year-old mosque is heavily influenced by Mughal edifices, particularly the Taj Mahal. The 82 domes of seven different sizes are etched with detailed Moroccan artwork.

As I entered the mosque, the hypnotic beauty of the sprawling courtyard arrested me. "The hollow of the domes are inscribed with scripts from the Quran in different types of calligraphy. Thuluth calligraphy is the hardest of them all; only experts can decipher it," said the guide. The arched columns of the mosque are crowned by date palm leaves of gold. On the surface of the pure white marble floors, my shadow metamorphosed into a mirror reflection.

My mouth gaped open on stepping into the heart of the mosque with three

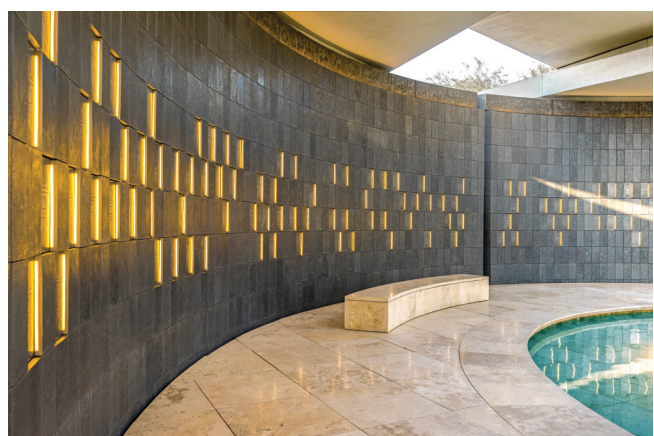
identical scintillating German chandeliers, imitating an inverted date palm, trickling streams of yellow, red and green light. The floor is graced with the world's largest hand-knotted carpet, manufactured by 1,200 Iranian women.

Veined with prayer lines, the design of the carpet is styled to imitate the reflection of the chandeliers above.

Next was Wahat Al Karama, a memorial erected in remembrance of all the men

and women who died while serving the UAE. The silence was soon pierced by the shrill call of azan — the memorial has been developed opposite the Sheikh Zayed Mosque so that the departed souls can hear the call to prayer forever.

I darted past the gold-crested domes of the mosque and arrived at World Trade Center Souk — a marketplace which was revamped, integrated and air-conditioned after its traditional outdoor





avatar caught fire in 2003. Inside the souk, a melange of fragrances hit my olfactory senses. It wafted out from the counters decked with sparkling containers full of *oud* (agarwood) — an expensive perfume intrinsic to every Emirati household. Tipped by a local, I entered a store, Tawadoh Nuts, in search of Lulu dates — the indigenous dates of Abu Dhabi.

Shoulders drooping with a bag full of dates and *oud*, I sauntered past the high-rises


of the city when a deafening noise froze my heartbeat and sent me reeling. A cannon had been fired. During Ramadan in Abu Dhabi, it is the traditional signal for the time of iftar. As the crescent moon announced its dominance in the evening sky, I travelled to the iftar tent at the Emirates Palace for the most extravagant experience of my life.

The palace, originally built to host a summit of the six Gulf Cooperation Council

nations, was later modified into a hotel. Inside the iftar tent, a lavish buffet dinner consisting of Middle Eastern, Indian, and Oriental cuisines awaited me. Later, I sank my feet into the sands of the private beach of the palace as I watched the city lights twinkle from across the shore.

Next morning, I headed to the Louvre Museum in Saadiyat Island, the upcoming museum hub of Abu Dhabi. The museum narrates the story of humanity through its 12 chapters. The first five chapters delve into Asian civilisations and the latter ones revolve around the Western world.

One of the oldest displays is the 'Monumental Statue with Two Heads' from Ayn Ghazal, Jordan. It is considered one of the first large-scale representations of man. All the museum rooms are equipped with tactile sensors to help the specially abled learn better. The collections of historic artefacts, relics and paintings from Asia, Africa, and Europe share space with contemporary art pieces. The eight-layered dome forms a meshwork of 7,850 stars. Inspired by Emirati elements, Jean Nouvel, the acclaimed French architect of the museum, recreated the 'rain of light' that occurs when one passes under the shade of a grove of palm trees.

I stood under a shaft of sunlight streaming in through a perforation of the dome. The cool breeze from the Persian Gulf ruffled my hair as I closed my eyes and promised to myself a second trip to Abu Dhabi soon. 

Department of Culture and Tourism Abu Dhabi