

WISH YOU WERE HERE



Photographs: Tom Dulat; Giuseppe Cacace/AFP/Getty Images; Karim Sahib

Picture of ambition

To Ferrari World and Yas Waterworld, Abu Dhabi has added an outpost of the Louvre as its latest attraction. It's extraordinary, finds **Laura Millar**

The building couldn't be any more different to the original one, in Paris. By the lush Tuileries gardens sits an elegant, sandstone, grey-roofed Renaissance palace, which stretches along several blocks on the bustling Rue de Rivoli. Situated here for several centuries, it first opened as an art museum in 1793. Currently, it's the biggest in the world, covering nearly 73,000 square metres, and containing around 38,000 objects, dating from prehistoric times to the 21st century. Its most significant nod to modernity is the famous glass Pyramid which sits in its main courtyard – and which serves as the main entrance – a then-controversial addition by Chinese-American architect, IM Pei, which dates from 1989.

In contrast, today I am staring at a series of angular, Grecian-style, bright white cubes, their walls dazzling me with reflected sunlight. Covering their contents is a gently curving, contact-lens shaped roof, made of dull, silver steel, its layered,

geometric design punctuated with eight-sided, star-shaped holes. Behind me are sand and palm trees; in front is the shimmering turquoise surface of the Persian Gulf, on which, in the distance, float oil tankers and container ships. On the far shore are clusters of steel and glass skyscrapers in the emirate's downtown district, looming above the beach.

This is the finished result of a project which has been ten years in the making. There's no question that this is a bold and audacious enterprise; making a museum on the site of a dusty, neglected corner of the UAE's biggest emirate, and hiring one of the world's most renowned architects to do it, at an estimated cost of \$1.3 billion, is not something undertaken lightly. But it's part of Abu Dhabi's move to be seen as a cultural destination, rather than just as an oil-rich state which, to date, is mainly

It will borrow works from some of France's most famous galleries



View of the Louvre Abu Dhabi with its steel, contact-lens shaped roof, main; visitors look at some of the exhibits, above

known for its annual Grand Prix and its impressive, and photogenic, Grand Mosque.

The idea was conceived in 2007, and a partnership with a conglomerate called Agence France-Museums was struck, whereby Abu Dhabi's desert outpost will borrow works from some of France's most famous galleries, including, obviously, its own Louvre, as well as the Pompidou Centre and the Musée d'Orsay. To that will be added works which the emirate owns itself, and it will contain 12 permanent galleries as well as space for temporary exhibitions.

Initial signs are unprepossessing. I reach the site from my hotel on Yas, one of Abu Dhabi's 200 islands, along wide, mostly empty, multi-lane highways. The car is king here; home to 1.5 million people, the emirate

covers 375 square miles, with the most concentrated area in downtown Abu Dhabi, studded with high rise hotels and towering office blocks. In between, however, there is a lot of space.

There is plenty of that on Saadiyat Island, which has been earmarked as the emirate's new Cultural District. The new Louvre is just the start of a plethora of ambitious building projects, including a branch of the Guggenheim museum, designed by Frank Gehry, the same architect who created its New York and Bilbao outposts, and a national museum named for the late Sheik, Bin Zayed, by Norman Foster. There will also be a performing arts centre, designed by Zaha Hadid, although none has actually been started yet.

Abu Dhabi's Louvre is the brainchild of French architect Jean Nouvel, whose other projects include an art museum in Shanghai and the National Museum of Qatar. From the outside it looks clean, and simple; inside is more complex, and clever. Grids on windows offer tantalising glimpses to the water outside which laps at the museum's sides, filtering out the harsh desert sunlight. There are also internal pools, which reflect the roof above them. Interconnected

galleries are broken up by relaxation areas, which offer views onto an outdoor terrace shaded by the layered steel dome. There, the grey slate floors are dappled with dancing rays of light which have broken through its gaps. It conveys a sense of space, and lightness; a thoroughly modern setting for the history it contains within.

This Louvre, however, is not laid out as many traditional galleries are. Works are not arranged by era, by artist, or by school; they are collected by theme. Works by Degas and Whistler share a room with carved wooden Polynesian totems; sculptures of semi-nude, muscled Greek youths jostle with 18th century portraits of the buttoned-up upper classes by British painters. The idea is to tell the story of humanity, in 12 'inspiring' chapters. But it does progress more or less chronologically, so that you start in Paleolithic times, and end in the 21st century.

At present, the museum only contains a few hundred works, and these are given plenty of room to breathe. As a result, walking around is fairly straightforward; seeing everything took me a little under two hours. There are few big showstoppers, but there are some works you definitely shouldn't miss. One of the first things you'll see, in 'The First Villages' gallery, is a two-headed Jordanian statue dating from around 6,500BC, one of the oldest known in our history and among the earliest large-scale representations of the human form. Then there's *Portrait of an Unknown Woman*, a fine Renaissance painting by Leonardo Da Vinci, of a wealthy, aristocratic lady thought to be a mistress of the Duke of Milan. Dating from the late 15th century, its dark, muted colours still glow, the woman's skintone porcelain-smooth, and the nap of her rich, ruby-red velvet gown eminently strokeable.

I also loved an 11th century Chinese large metal cat, which apparently used to feature a rubber tube up its bottom, which was then blown into and used to make some kind of musical noise at ceremonial events; a vivid mosaic of an intense-eyed, melancholy-looking young Roman

man; and a little bronze dragon with a beatific smile on its face, looking a bit like Puff, the Magic one. The final two galleries, titled 'Challenging Modernity' and 'A Global Stage', display 20th and 21st century art, with paintings and works by the likes of Picasso, Warhol, Matisse, Kandinsky and Man Ray. There is also a beautiful, crystal chandelier-like sculpture by Chinese artist Ai Weiwei, which was commissioned especially for the museum.

Abu Dhabi's other main draws include Ferrari World, a motorsport themed entertainment complex where you can experience the G-force of one of the world's fastest cars and ride on terrifying rollercoasters, and Yas Waterworld, a 12 acre waterpark with flumes and slides galore. You can also do desert safaris in a 4x4, visit a falcon hospital, and enjoy a view of the whole city from the 74th floor observation deck of the Jumeirah Hotel.

Similarly to most of the other six emirates in the UAE, Abu Dhabi social life revolves around shopping malls and upmarket hotel restaurants and bars. They are clearly expecting more visitors soon; a new 39-storey, 563-room Fairmont hotel is under construction in Marina Village, which is also home to the rather ramshackle, if charming, Emirates Heritage Club. They've made a stab at a living museum, designed to look like a traditional Arabic fortified village, featuring various displays of local crafts, such as carpentry and pottery, as well as examples of traditional boats, and Bedouin tents. You'll find a polished, 21st century version of a souk in the World Trade Centre (also designed by Norman Foster), where air-conditioned stalls sell spices, dates, scarves and stuffed toy camels. So yes, come for the camels – and the waterparks – but do stay for the culture. ■

Direct flights from Edinburgh to Abu Dhabi with Etihad Airways cost from around £429 return, etihad.com
Double rooms at the Yas Viceroy hotel start from £106; to book, visit viceroyhotelsandresorts.com; tickets to the Louvre Abu Dhabi cost AED60, or £12; for more information, visit louvreabudhabi.ae/



A visitor takes a photo of panels by American artist Cy Twombly

CITY BREAK



Reach for the stars

Toulouse, the centre of Europe's aerospace industry, is out of this world, finds Neil Geraghty

On a chilly autumn night in Toulouse, a harvest moon is rising over the city's terracotta roof tops and a crowd of families is standing in front of the neoclassical facade of the Jolimont Observatory. They've come for one of the regular open evenings during which students and retired astronomers introduce the general public to the delights of star gazing. The observatory was built in 1841 and in the gardens several cupolas with retractable roofs house enormous vintage telescopes that played an important role in mapping the stars during the 19th and early 20th centuries. Inside a cupola, a student dims the lights, swivels the telescope towards an aperture in the roof and invites guests to climb up onto a rickety wooden step ladder from which they can reach the eyepiece. A father picks up his son and lifts the boy's face to the eyepiece. The boy gasps as he catches a close-up view of the moon and the silver light, flooding through the eyepiece illuminates his astonished face.

Locals like to say that Toulouse is a city with its head in the skies. Home to both Airbus and the Cité de l'espace, Europe's premier space theme park, Toulouse's geeky credentials are second to none. And

this fascination with the heavens is nothing new. In Toulouse's most beautiful ecclesiastical monument, the St Sernin Basilica, a 13th century fresco depicts the then known planets circling around the earth surrounded by a halo of stars. Whoever painted it would have had an excellent view of the night sky from the bell tower which rises like a medieval rocket above the rooftops of Toulouse.

In the gardens of the Cite de l'espace, visitors can see the real thing, a 53 metre high Ariane rocket towering above the treetops. The gardens are filled with historic artefacts from the history of space exploration and pride of place goes to a training module of the Mir Space Station. Visitors are allowed to look around the space craft whose low tech control panel would look perfectly at home in a 1960s *Star Trek* episode. Fortunately technology has moved on apace since Mir was constructed in 1986 and at the theme park's IMAX cinema visitors can board the International Space Station which looks positively luxurious in comparison. The show takes you on a thrilling 45 minute virtual orbit of the earth and the zero gravity camera effects of the first five minutes make you feel decidedly queasy. However, once you've got used to the motion, the views of the earth are

spellbinding. During its voyage the ISS flies over aquamarine tropical lagoons, blood red deserts, night time cities sparkling with lights and best of all, green curtains of aurora borealis flickering over the North Pole.

Toulouse's role as the centre of France's aerospace industry dates back to the First World War when its distance from the Western Front was considered an asset by the French military when they were developing the fledgling technology. Nowadays, Toulouse's distance from the sea causes all sorts of logistical problems transporting the larger components of Airbuses, and the sight of giant Airbus wings, inching along the

Clockwise from main: view of Cité de l'espace; a training module of the Mir Space Station; Pont Neuf bridge

fine collection of legendary aircraft including the extraordinary Super Guppy, a giant cargo plane that resembles a flying beluga whale and two Concordes, one of which you're allowed to enter. Inside, I'm surprised at how claustrophobic the cabins were although the classic 1970s taupe decor looks surprisingly contemporary again after a 40 year break.

Back in the Jolimont Observatory it's my turn to climb the step ladder and take a close up view of the moon. At first I'm dazzled by the fierce white light pouring through the eyepiece but gradually my eyes adjust and focus on the hundreds of craters speckling the moon's surface. To the bottom left a range of mountains creates a serrated edge to the moon's disc, beautifully illuminated against the darkness of space. It's an awe-inspiring sight and for a moment I feel like a schoolboy again. ■

In Cité de l'espace a 53 metre Ariane rocket towers above the treetops

roads of Midi Pyrenees on the back of lorries has become quite an attraction in the region. The Airbus factory offers fascinating tours around its enormous Airbus 380 assembly hangars and is also home to the excellent Musée Aeroscopie which charts the history of civil and military aviation. Security in the factory is tight and you'll need to take a passport to enter the facility and keep cameras switched off at all times. The museum is home to a



48 HOURS IN

Alicante

Friday, midday

Check into a room with a balcony at the Melia Alicante, (double rooms from £81, www.melia.com) with both a view of Santa Barbara Castle and the beach. It's worth paying extra for 'The Level', with its dedicated lounge.

12:30pm

The Mercado Central is one of the largest covered markets in Spain. All sorts of foodie treats are on offer or just buy your own fish and ask one of the amenable local cafes to cook it.

2pm

Take the elevator or hike up to Santa Barbara Castle (www.castillodesantabarbara.com), one of Spain's largest medieval fortresses.

4pm

Head for Playa Postigueta, a wide sweep of clean sand fronting shallow waters. Enjoy a swim before a sundowner in a beachfront cafe.

7pm

Take it easy with dinner at Terra at the Melia, where paella dishes star. Try the fideua, which is similar to paella but with noodles rather than rice.

Saturday, 9am

Take a stroll along the Esplanada de Espana, a tiled, palm fringed promenade that eases along for a mile just back from the waterfront.

10am

Alicante held the Volvo Ocean Race for the third time in 2017 and an impressive museum (<http://museovolvoceanrace.esatur.com>) on the waterfront tells the tale of this arduous maritime challenge.

BARGAIN BREAKS

Love is in the air

Plan something romantic for Valentine's Day with the Love for Luxury offer at the five star Seaham Hall in Durham. From £278pp, it includes a glass of champagne on arrival, a sharing menu dinner in the restaurant, breakfast, an hour long couple's massage and use of the spa. Valid throughout February. **Call 0191-5161400 or see www.seaham-hall.co.uk**

Sunshine state of mind

Prices start from £829pp (was £1,009 each), based on a family of four, for a 14 night holiday in Orlando, Florida, with Ocean Florida. This



Midday

For old school tapas head to D'tablas (www.dtablas.es). Hulking legs of jamon, pungent cheese and ice cold beer await.

4pm

Alicante is famous for its deliciously sweet Turrón. Follow the locals and buy the best at Turrones Espi (www.turronesespi.com).

8pm

It's easy to see why La Taberna del Gourmet (<http://latabernadelgourmet.com>) has been named Spain's finest tapas bar. Enjoy a lip smacking feast of cured and air dried meats and cheeses, washed down with some of the seriously underrated Alicante wines.

Sunday, 9am

Playa San Juan is one of the best beaches in Spain so enjoy a few hours of glorious sunshine on this pristine 3km strip. ■

Robin McKelvie

EasyJet (www.easyjet.com) flies to Alicante from Edinburgh with returns from £46.51.

includes return flights from Glasgow departing on 20 June, self-catering accommodation at the Westgate Palace Resort, where all rooms are suites with kitchens, as well as attraction entry tickets to theme park Fun Spot. **Call 020 3816 0977 or see www.ocean-florida.co.uk**

Magic of Majorca

Enjoy some winter sun in Majorca, with prices starting from £326p for seven nights' B&B at the four star Amic Horizonte Hotel, Palma and return flights from Edinburgh departing 1 March. **Call 020 8974 7200 or see www.travelrepublic.co.uk**