

Explore the MIDDLE EAST

Known for its stopover stays, but fast becoming a go-to destination, the United Arab Emirates could be your perfect place to honeymoon

A WHOLE NEW WORLD IN ABU DHABI

Acting features writer Rachel Avery jets in for a culture tour

My trip starts in style as I let out an excited squeal when I board the plane with a Business Class ticket. Before I know it, I'm suitably equipped with my in-flight essentials: magazines, a cold towel and a glass of champagne. With a lie-flat bed and a tasty menu to get through, it's the first time I've wanted a flight to last longer! If your honeymoon budget can allow for the upgrade, it's definitely worth it.

The first leg of this visit to Abu Dhabi starts at the stunning, five-star Eastern

Mangroves Hotel & Spa by Anantara. After a refreshing welcome drink, I'm shown to my huge suite, complete with private balcony overlooking the mangroves. I sit watching other guests heading out on kayaks to explore, and it's not long before I'm down on the jetty myself, keen to get in on the action.

"The mystical darkness and mesmerising sounds make a captivating experience"

As the sun beams down, I make my way through the tree-filled waters. Paddling further out, a skyline of skyscrapers comes into view and it's hard to imagine the hustle and bustle of the centre of Abu Dhabi, while I sit in a spot so peaceful and calm.

TIME TO EXPLORE

With a long list of sights to see, each day presents a whole new adventure. One of the most iconic landmarks here is the amazing

Sheikh Zayed Grand Mosque

Sheikh Zayed Grand Mosque, and a visit to the city wouldn't be complete without seeing it.

As I arrive, the sun goes down and the call to prayer begins.

The combination of the mystical darkness shrouding the building and the mesmerising sounds make this a truly captivating experience. Every inch of the mosque lives up to its grand name – the 24-carat gold-gilded chandeliers and crystal doors are truly something to behold.

The cultural tour continues with a trip to the Louvre – the world's second, with the first being in Paris, of course. While inside the beautifully designed space, filled with iconic art works from around the world,

A Deluxe Mangroves Balcony Room at Eastern Mangroves Hotel & Spa by Anantara

The pool at Eastern Mangroves Hotel & Spa by Anantara

I witness an impromptu performance of a traditional Emirati dance called the *Ayala*. As well as culture and arts, Abu Dhabi is also home to the world's fastest rollercoaster and a building that (intentionally) leans even further than the Leaning Tower of Pisa – Capital Gate is just waiting for you to have a photo taken while pretending to hold it up! After all of my sightseeing, I'm craving a little pampering, so the Anantara Spa back at the resort is the perfect place to relax. I opt for a traditional hammam for a true taste of the Middle East. After five-minute stints in both a steam and sauna room, the treatment begins. My skin is exfoliated,

"We spot the giraffes at feeding time and a cheetah basking in the sunshine"

then followed by a full-body mud mask, ending with a massage. Each step is rounded off with jugs of warm water poured all over me, which feels more therapeutic than it sounds! I'm asked if I'd like to finish the hammam in "the traditional way", with jugs of cold water poured over my head. Of course, I oblige – and it certainly wakes me up ready for dinner...

The hotel serves Thai, Indian, Mediterranean and other Western cuisines, and every single dish I sample here is utterly exquisite. My absolute favourite is the Arabic mezze, with endless amounts of

hummus, tabbouleh, falafel, fresh vegetables and Arabic bread. My only advice? Bring a pair of elasticated trousers for the plane journey home!

SAFARI STYLE

Just when I think this trip can't get any better, it's time to head off for an altogether different experience. Sir Bani Yas Island, reached via a short boat ride from the mainland, was established as a nature reserve in the 1970s, when Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan reintroduced animals that used to be native to the area. Arabian oryx, hyraxes (very cute hamster-like creatures), gazelles, cheetahs, hyenas and jackals all inhabit the island, which is now predominantly a wildlife park with a few exclusive hotels to base yourself at for a slice of adventure with a side of luxury.

Nestled in the heart of the nature park, Al Sahel at Anantara Sir Bani Yas Island Resorts is home for the next few days. As I'm shown around my new room, I'm already excited about what to do first.

Tempted to hop straight into the heated outdoor pool, I could also enjoy a soak in the freestanding copper tub in the bathroom. I'm also tempted to spend hours out on my private deck observing the friendly animals – if

I stay still for long enough, the wonderful peacocks just walk up to my sunlounger.

The huge villas have a relaxed, African vibe, and with only 30 of them in total, the resort always seems tranquil. Walking to

Al Sahel at Anantara Sir Bani Yas Island Resorts

Glorious getaways

breakfast in the morning, the only company I have are the peacocks and gazelles who stroll alongside me. Breakfast can be as saintly or indulgent as you like – but be warned, it is so difficult to resist the croissant and doughnut hybrid known as the 'cronut'. Luckily, there's a whole host of activities to work off any calorie-laden indulgences – you can sign up to mountain biking, walking tours, nature walks, horse riding and snorkeling at the hotel reception.

Wanting to see more of the wildlife, I opt for an early morning safari tour with other hotel guests. We alight our Land Rover ready for action, and thanks to the lack of windows, I bag a free blow-dry en route. Our best spots are the giraffes at feeding time and a cheetah

basking in the glorious sunshine. Many of the 17,000 animals here were gifted from other countries and royal houses – your gift list doesn't seem demanding now, does it?

I wasn't quite sure what to expect from Abu Dhabi before I arrived here, but my trip has revealed a special place with a unique mix of scenic landscapes, rich culture, and a whole lot of luxury. If you're looking for a honeymoon destination with a difference, then Abu Dhabi is the Middle Eastern gem that you are searching for.

GO THERE Stay at the Eastern Mangroves Hotel & Spa by Anantara from £118, abu-dhabi.anantara.com. Stay at Al Sahel at Anantara Sir Bani Yas Island Resorts, from £315, sir-bani-yas-island.anantara.com. A return fare to Abu Dhabi from London Heathrow with Etihad Airways from £385 Economy Class, and from £2,314 Business Class. Etihad Airways is the national carrier of the UAE and flies from London Heathrow, Manchester and Edinburgh to Abu Dhabi, etihad.com