

Where the wild things are

Cheetahs, giraffes, ostriches, oryx and more roam free on Sir Bani Yas Island, a luxury resort and nature reserve a four-hour drive outside Abu Dhabi. *Rebecca Milford* grabs her camera for the safari of a lifetime

It's 6.45am on a muggy, sweaty Saturday morning. My rumbling stomach reminds me that I'm yet to eat breakfast, but there's little I can do: I'm locked in a staring contest with a cheetah who is happily devouring hers. She scrutinises me as she rips the hide from what was once a gazelle. I hold her gaze, but she soon tires of my game; with a haughty yawn she breaks eye contact, rises slowly to her feet and sashays off into the bush.

The feline I've just had the pleasure of meeting is Safira, one of five cheetahs currently residing on Sir Bani Yas Island, the UAE's largest nature reserve. Located off the coast of Abu Dhabi's western region, the 87 sq km park is the largest natural island in the UAE. It was established as a private nature reserve in 1971 by former UAE ruler HH Sheikh Zayed Bin Sultan Al Nahyan in order to safeguard the population of endangered animals in the region; today it's home to more than 30 species of free-roaming creatures including gazelles and Arabian oryx, as well as not-so-regional cheetahs, giraffes and ostriches. In 2008, luxury hotel chain Anantara opened the Desert Islands resort on the island, giving guests the chance to combine a high-end staycation with an authentic wildlife safari.

Each trip through the park begins with a warning that it's not always possible to spot all the animals (the standard caveat on any safari), yet on this particular morning we've hit the

jackpot less than half an hour into our tour. The cheetahs are notoriously shy, but it helps that my guides, South African Theo and Emirati Maryam, obviously know where to look – they're able to spot telltale rustling in the bushes as we amble along in our open-sided Jeep. Sure enough, hot on Safira's tail is a hungry hyena, who swoops in to devour the remains of the cheetah's breakfast.

As we drive, Theo explains more of the concept behind the park. It's obvious that the wildlife comes first: staff follow strict codes of conduct in order to preserve the sanctity of the island, with a maximum speed limit of 50kph to protect wild animals crossing

A hungry hyena swoops in to devour the remains of the cheetah's breakfast

the roads. (There are also hefty fines for anyone unlucky enough to hit one.) Almost half of the island – 4,100 hectares – is dedicated to breeding and rehabilitation of animals indigenous to the Arabian Peninsula, and already houses more than 10,000 animals.



With so many creatures roaming free around me, it's hard to know where to point my camera – the early-morning light casts long shadows and contributes to fantastic photos. As a mountain gazelle sprints past the Jeep, I fumble for the shutter button and miss; I'm told the gazelles can reach speeds of 75kph, so are no match for our lumbering vehicle.

Yet I'm soon gifted a spectacular photo opportunity. As the truck turns away from the sun's glare, we chance upon a group of giraffes with their young calves, idly chomping on trees at the side of the road. Amazed to be so close to these beautiful creatures, with their huge tongues and fluttering eyelashes, I'm surprised how unfazed they are by the presence of a group of gaping tourists. Tour guide Maryam explains there are 50 giraffes currently living on Sir Bani Yas, each with a life expectancy of 30 years – that's at least 10 years longer than they'd be likely to survive in the wild.

Much of the park is the domain of the Arabian oryx: everywhere I turn, the nimble creatures are marking out their turf, gambolling with their youngsters or squaring up to their rivals with a fierce locking of horns. They were originally brought to the island to protect them from poachers, who killed them for the keratin found in these impressive horns. Today the island is home to more than 500 oryx, making this one of the largest herds in the world. The aim is to breed the animals in the safety of Sir Bani Yas, then return them to the mainland to repopulate the wild.

Gazelles and oryx surround us for most of the trip, grazing on the lush cultivated grass, though they occasionally scatter as one of the feisty ostriches struts its way into their midst. The gangly birds seem

Getting there

Most guests travel to Sir Bani Yas Island by car, although the four-hour journey from Dubai can be arduous: the road follows the coast past Abu Dhabi into the eastern region, and there are few, if any, points of interest once you've passed the capital. Once you arrive at Jebel Dhanna, there's a 15-minute boat trip to the island, then a 20-minute bus transfer to the resort. Full directions can be found at www.desertislands.anantara.com. Don't fancy driving? Limo pick-up is available from Abu Dhabi (from Dhs650) and Dubai (from Dhs1,000). Alternatively, the resort offers flights from Abu Dhabi's Al Bateen Executive Airport direct to the island, from Dhs200 one way. Email rotanajet@anantara.info.

particularly interested in our Jeep: one saunters over to tap the wing mirror with its deceptively sharp beak, gazing at the occupants with its beady, inquisitive stare.

As our tour continues, we start to venture deeper into the heart of the island, towards the hills in the centre. Standing proudly above all the others is a grass-clad hill, otherwise known as the Green Mountain: it forms an eye-catching anomaly in the otherwise sandy landscape. Created as a gift for HH Sheikh Zayed, the hill is covered in 'sea porcelain', planted by 20 workers over a period of two months and irrigated by a complex network of 24 water lines. A green hill amid the desert? Only in the UAE.

Overlooking this impressive horticultural specimen is Sheikh Zayed's private majlis, one of just a handful of buildings on the island. These have been designed to be as eco-friendly as possible, with structures built in shady areas to minimise A/C use. The island's roads are constructed using existing and on-site materials. And in an effort to offset the environmental impact of

visitors, one mangrove seedling is planted for every guest that visits Anantara's resort. It's nice to think that a little memento of my trip will survive somewhere on the island.

It's hard to believe that such a serene oasis of wildlife exists just a couple of hours from the hubbub of the city. Yet the resort is proving increasingly popular, particularly among UAE residents: general manager Steven Phillips tells me that the bulk of guests are weekend staycationers from Abu Dhabi and Dubai. After all, it's not just the wildlife safaris that tempt people to escape the city – Desert Islands also offers archery, mountain biking, kayaking, falconry, sailing, nature walks and more, not to mention the new stables that opened earlier this year, housing 10 horses. A dive centre is also soon to launch, adding PADI certification and scuba trips to the resort's roster. With so many activities on offer, Steven explains that the resort is aiming to lure more overseas visitors, teaming up with Anantara's other UAE properties – Qasr Al Sarab in Liwa and the new Eastern Mangroves resort in Abu Dhabi – to offer multi-centre vacations.

As part of the push to attract foreign visitors to the island, construction of two new safari lodge-style resorts is under way. Al Yamm lodge, located by the water's edge, will offer views of the mangroves, complete with wading flamingos. Meanwhile, Al Sahel lodge will be one of the few places in the region where guests can view free-roaming wildlife from their accommodation in the middle of the park. Stay tuned for more news – both are expected to open next year.

After a leisurely drive back through the park, we eventually return to the resort at 8am, my memory card full and brain bursting with animal facts. Let's be honest: in Dubai I'm rarely out of bed before 9am at the weekend – here I've glimpsed some amazing wildlife, and I'm still back in time for breakfast.

Rooms at Desert Islands by Anantara start at Dhs1,500 per night, with wildlife safaris from Dhs150 per adult, Dhs75 for kids aged two to six (excluding service charge and tax). www.desertislands.anantara.com (02 801 5400).

