

Grown-up glamour in the Gulf

Abu Dhabi is gliding on the the world stage. **Scott Armstrong** admires its style

If Heaven has a hotel then this is probably what the lobby looks like. As you walk into the sleek glass tower that climbs into the clear blue sky of Abu Dhabi your jaw drops. 'Wow' says it all, and yet seems far too small a word to pin on the visual overload.

As you pick your mouth up off the shining marble floors your eyes sweep up to take in the scene. Light floods the lobby of the Jumeirah Etihad Towers, reflecting off the ornamental pool (or should that be lake?) that shimmers beside the minimal reception desk.

Then you look out of a huge window onto the world, straight to the private beach and the Arabian Gulf beyond. You strain your neck as you examine the giant crystal orbs which serve as chandeliers but in fact look like glowing planets orbiting above you.

One of the smiling hotel staff glides over to you, dressed in a lilac frock coat, like an air stewardess from a futuristic paradise. She has to gently coax you to check in as you continue to take in all the architectural wonders.

While the hotel reflects sunlight on a grand scale, it also reflects something deeper about Abu Dhabi in the United Arab Emirates and its tourism ambitions.

This oil-rich emirate wants to modernise and attract the world to its shores, but it hasn't hurtled towards change as has, arguably, Dubai. Instead Abu Dhabi has taken its time to lovingly craft itself, and its developments like this hotel, retaining a sense of history, culture and charm.

Floating up the glass elevator to your room some 40 or 50 floors up, you take in the view below.

To your left are the domes, fountains and manicured lawns of the seven-star Emirates Palace; panning right, you take in Abu Dhabi's beachfront, or Corniche, as it is called.

This tree-lined colonnade runs parallel with the sea and sand with walkways, gardens, more fountains, cycle

paths and picnic spots. Beach-front cafes and restaurants punctuate the entire 6km length, with public beaches featuring volleyball nets, football goalposts and watersports. The brave take to the skies with parascending. There is also a dedicated family beach where single men are not allowed and where parents and couples rent waterside loungers.

Across the bay the man-made Lulu Island, dotted with palm trees, protects the swimmers from the open sea, while shoppers head across the road bridge to a second island that is home to a marina, and a mall of the same name (featuring many high-street names from the UK).

Jumeirah at Etihad Towers



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Abu Dhabi's Eastern Beach on the Corniche



The Grand Sheikh Zayed Mosque

The scene is inviting but it's time to drop the cases and check out your room. You walk past the smart bathroom with its black and grey granite units, white porcelain bath and walk-in monsoon shower, into a space that's once more filled with sunlight as the wall-to-ceiling windows offer a stunning view of the sea, broken only by golden sand bars rising out of the water.

The huge bed is big enough for three, the remote control literally lets you switch on anything with the touch of a button, including blackout blinds and curtains. A night light gently illuminates the room should you get out of bed.

By now the call of the sea and beach is growing, but one relaxed option is to check the hotel's three pools or private beach. In fact it almost seems silly once you relax on your cabana, taking a sip of your cocktail, to go to all the trouble of leaving the hotel... at least for now.

Increasingly, you'll notice the Jumeirah rule on service. Every member of staff is instructed to meet you with a smile before you have chance to say hello, and if they have met you once they will always remember your name. It is pretty impressive.

Dining and socialising is one thing Abu Dhabi does well and the Jumeirah Etihad Towers is no exception. The highlight (for this writer) has to be Quest, the Pan Asian restaurant on the 63rd floor offering spectacular views of this city by the sea. One floor down is Ray's Bar, a hotspot for the beautiful people in Abu Dhabi, and a floor beneath is the Club Executive lounge. If your room offers access to the lounge it is well worth it, it's like having your own five-star relaxation room featuring a never-ending supply of hors d'oeuvres and complimentary grape and grain-based beverages.

The hotel has quickly gained a reputation as a culinary centre, Li Beirut offers exquisite Arabic fusion fare if you fancy something local with a twist, while its new Tori No Su is the best Japanese in Abu Dhabi. Don't overlook Nahaam either; this casual but chic poolside restaurant really delivers some understated classics, including a great shawarma.

Any visit to Abu Dhabi will be memorable, the Jumeirah Etihad Hotel aims to make it unforgettable.



Scott Armstrong stayed courtesy of the Jumeirah Etihad Towers, for more information visit jumeirah.com



Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan Mosque

Out and about

Sheikh Zayed Mosque

Built in honour of the founder of the UAE, this breathtaking monument has 82 domes, the largest hand-woven Iranian carpet in the world and giant chandeliers made of millions of Swarovski crystals. Stunning by day or night, a taxi there should cost no more than Dh25/£5 each way.

Ferrariworld

The world's biggest indoor theme park featuring the world's fastest roller coaster, the Formula Rossi. Visit during the week and avoid evenings and weekends (Friday and Saturday in the UAE)

Saadiyat Island

If you are looking for a more natural beach then the white powder sands of this newly developed resort 10 minutes from the Corniche may appeal. It's secluded, however, and flagging down taxis won't be an option: 60053535 will be the number you need to summon one.

Eating

Abu Dhabi has a number of excellent five-star hotels each with their own bars and restaurants. Outside the Jumeirah Etihad Towers, highlights include Emirates Palace, worth a look inside anyway for a photo and the ATM dispensing gold, and its super-chic Chinese bar/restaurant Hakkasan. Vasco's at the Hiltonia beach club is a pleasant affair, and Cho Gao is a fantastic little Thai restaurant bar, with happy hour from 4 until 8 in the Crowne Plaza. Friday brunches are definitely fun though not good for the waistline.

Socialising

Almost every night of the week you can find a 'ladies night' where members of the fairer gender get free 'beverages' all night. The Yacht Club at the Intercontinental on Wednesdays is among the most popular. A little further out is the stunning Fairmont Hotel, its Pearls & Caviar outdoor bar is one of the cooler spots.

Island cruise

A fun way to see Abu Dhabi's coastline is to hop on a catamaran cruise. Some are available for private charter - at a price - but every Friday and Saturday Belevari Marine sets sail from the Emirates Palace on a four-hour cruise with DJ, light buffet and unlimited rose wine and Heineken. There's beach sports and snorkelling at the remote island you sail to, plus you get to captain the boat. Prices are around Dh400 per person and it is a great slice of the millionaire's lifestyle. Email info@belevari.com for more details.

Getting around

There is a perfectly good, cheap bus system and taxis are incredibly cheap. The silver taxis (avoid the old white and green ones) are metered and totally safe. Ensure the driver knows your destination before getting in and always carry small notes, or check if they have change, to avoid stress on arrival.

General

Abu Dhabi is safe, welcoming to Western tourists and cosmopolitan. Alcohol is widely available but locals take a dim view of staggering through the streets singing. Enjoy yourself, remain respectful and jump in a cab home. In bars and restaurants Western dress sensibilities are fine, bikinis are also no problem by the pools and beaches, however ladies are asked to cover shoulders and knees when walking in public. Holding hands out and about is fine but kissing in public will offend.

Throughout winter a series of artists perform at the Yas Arena and it's well worth checking out if there's someone on you like via www.thinkflash.ae.