

# A Desert Safa Adventures i

By Debi Lander



# Safari and Other in Abu Dhabi

**A** cres of rolling sand dunes stretched before me, as if to infinity and beyond. There's a beauty in nothingness, just endless repetitive waves of windswept earth.

Buckled into the front passenger seat of a four-by-four vehicle, my driver followed a string of others, zig-zagging across the desert. At times, everyone in the auto would fly a few inches out of their seats, causing stomachs to flip. Whoa; the ride felt like a roller coaster gone wild as the driver floored the gas pedal to scramble up and over mounds, turned rapidly and kicked up sand, then descended with a roar. We had no way of anticipating what direction we would go next.

Abu Dhabi sounds like a fictional place, but on a recent day, I found myself in that city; the capital of United Arab Emirates in the Middle East. Seven emirates or states make up the country governed by Sheik Khalifa bin Zayed Al Nahyan. Like nearby Dubai, immense wealth came when massive oil deposits were discovered in the 1960s and the two cities grew almost overnight.

I'd arrived in Abu Dhabi's Jumeriah Ethiad Towers the night before, sticking out like a daisy in a bouquet of roses. Single, blonde, Caucasian women don't usually check in at this five star luxury business hotel. But I'd entered the lobby lugging a heavy backpack, a camera slung around my neck and juggling a tripod. I certainly didn't look like

any of the local women dressed in black abayas, but at least I looked like I had work.

The swanky, elegant hotel lobby featured a wall of windows overlooking a shimmering body of water and huge circular chandeliers that hung from a vaulted ceiling. Hostesses wearing floor length gowns, somewhat similar to kimonos, were lined up, waiting to escort guests to their rooms. Mine was named Ming and when we entered the suite, she showed me how to work the control panel. "Press this button to close the draperies, push here to operate bedside lighting, floor lighting, or hallway lighting. If you wish to turn on music or the television use these knobs," she said. Goodness, the

array of switches seemed like something that should manage the entire hotel.

My 27th floor suite was overly spacious, with floor-to-ceiling glass windows overlooking islands that dotted the Gulf. My king size bed took up about a quarter of the floor space. A three-partitioned bathroom (separate toilet, shower and tub areas) gleamed from granite, creamy marble and gold accents and included a classy touch - a single fresh rose in a vase.

My luggage had been x-rayed before it was brought to my room. Security is high in Abu Dhabi, but always discreet. I didn't see the scanning machines; nor could I pick out any plain clothes guards. However, I



Bashing the Dunes

assure you, they are there- I heard it from, let's say, "someone official". Exhausted, I decided to take a bath and afterward slipped into the softest, smoothest sheets ever. The decadent chocolate truffle at my bedside grabbed my attention and, should I need a midnight snack, a fruit basket was waiting.

Down at the breakfast buffet, I was agog at the largest international smorgasbord I'd ever seen. No matter what your country of origin, this showcase had it and more: Asian, Indian, Arabic, Oriental, European, British, American and Scandinavian specialties. Of course, you could request eggs and other options to order.

### City Tour

I chose to take a morning city tour, returning to the Sheik Zayed Mosque, which I had photographed the previous afternoon and evening. This time, a tour guide would explain what I was looking at. One could visit this immense sanctuary ten times and never take in all its incredible details. (For photos and my complete article, please read: [luxebeatmag.com/abu-dhabis-beauty-sheik-zayed-grand-mosque-uae/](http://luxebeatmag.com/abu-dhabis-beauty-sheik-zayed-grand-mosque-uae/).)

After the Mosque tour, we headed to a handicrafts shop; the kind with very expensive, quality crafts. Alas, these were kinds that I cannot afford to buy, but the wall hangings, jewelry and scarves were lovely. We made a brief stop at a food market for dates and nuts, sampling as we went along. Dates are one of the few foods grown in this desert region. This dried fruit comes in many varieties and can be purchased plain, stuffed with nuts, apricots, seeds or dipped in chocolate. All fruit were naturally sweet and tasted delicious.

Then we were off again, down five miles on the Corniche Road. We passed the manicured waterfront, including children's play areas, cycle and pedestrian pathways, cafés and restaurants, and the popular Corniche Beach. I did not, however, see anyone swimming.

We arrived at Heritage Village, built so tourists can discover examples of Bedouin dwellings or what life was like on the desert before the city arose. You'll also find photos covering the amazing growth of the Emirate.

### Afternoon Desert Safari

Around 3:30, a four-wheeled Land Cruiser picked me up and we





Child runs down the dunes



Temporary Henna Tattoo

My 27th floor suite was overly spacious, with floor-to-ceiling glass windows overlooking islands that dotted the Gulf. My king size bed took up about a quarter of the floor space



Dune Bashing





passengers drove about an hour out of the city to a camel farm. A short amount of time was allotted for photos with camels.

The driver then pulled onto a dirt road and stopped to let air out of the tires. We drove to those endless sand dunes and began the madcap ride. By the time cars and drivers stopped for a break, I needed fresh air and a walk. Dune bashing is not a good choice for people who struggle with motion sickness. I recovered by trudging through deep granular crystals. Some kids on our tour ran up and down the dunes and I spied a camel and baby in the distance, roaming free.

**The Land Cruisers used for dune bashing**



We resumed dune bashing, skittering like spiders over golden sandscapes that looked like scenes in the movie Lawrence of Arabia. Eventually, we returned to the dirt road and then drove on to an Arabic campsite. Tour companies have built a lovely open-air dining area, covered with carpeting and low tables just a few inches off the ground. While barbeque meats were grilling, we had a chance to try on Arabic attire for photo ops. I put on an abaya and must say it felt very confining.

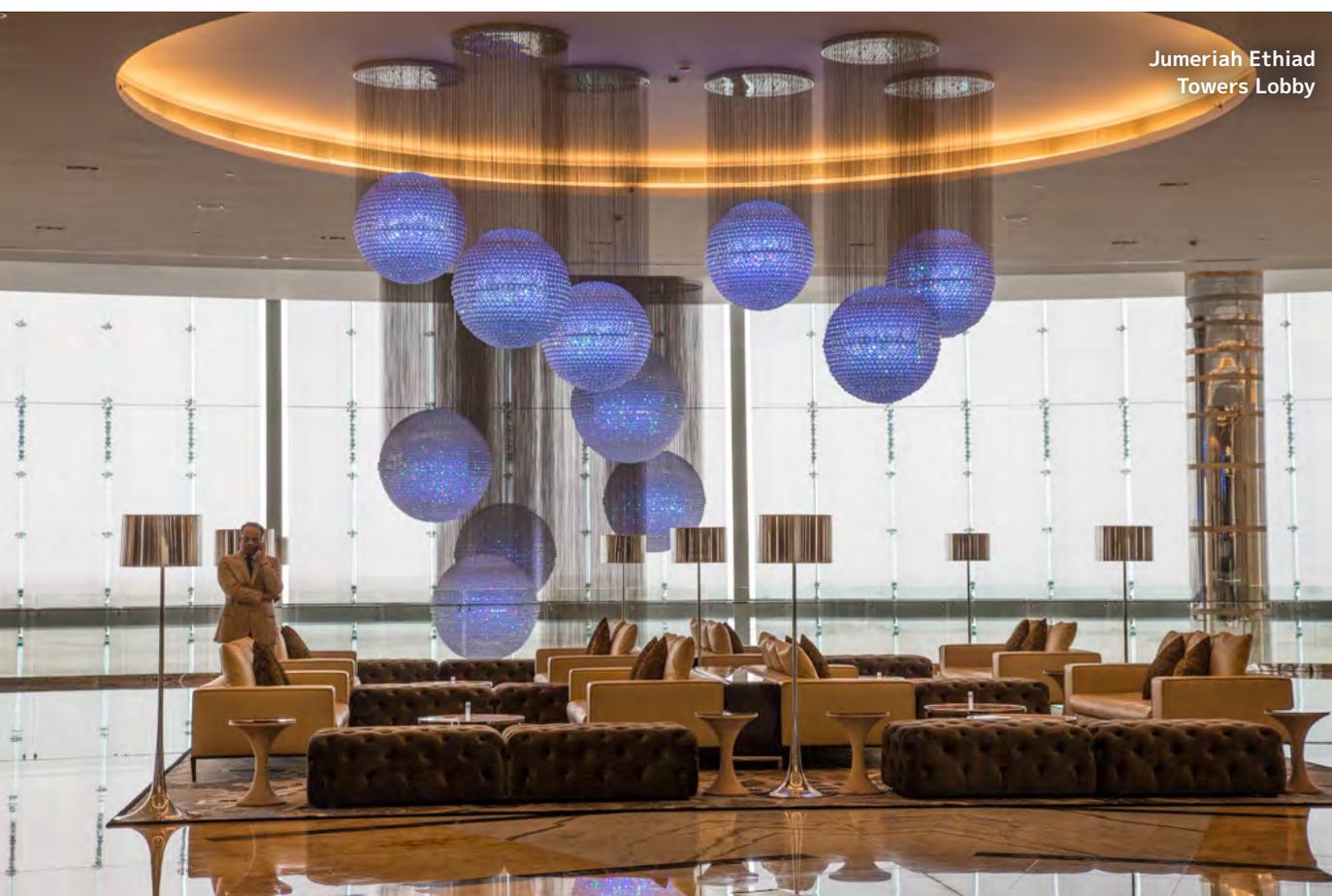
Other booths offered temporary henna tattoos, dates for sampling, camel rides, Shisha water pipes for smoking, and Arabic sweets and coffee.

Dinner was a lavish buffet, much better than expected, an array of mezze - Baba Ghanoush, hummus, tomatoes, pita and salads, plus skewers of chicken, fish, rice and other dishes. We ate as the sun set and a starry night sky appeared. Recorded music played and a belly dancer performed on the center stage. Again, the entertainment exceeded my expectations; her dancing was spectacular and afternoon and evening became one to remember.

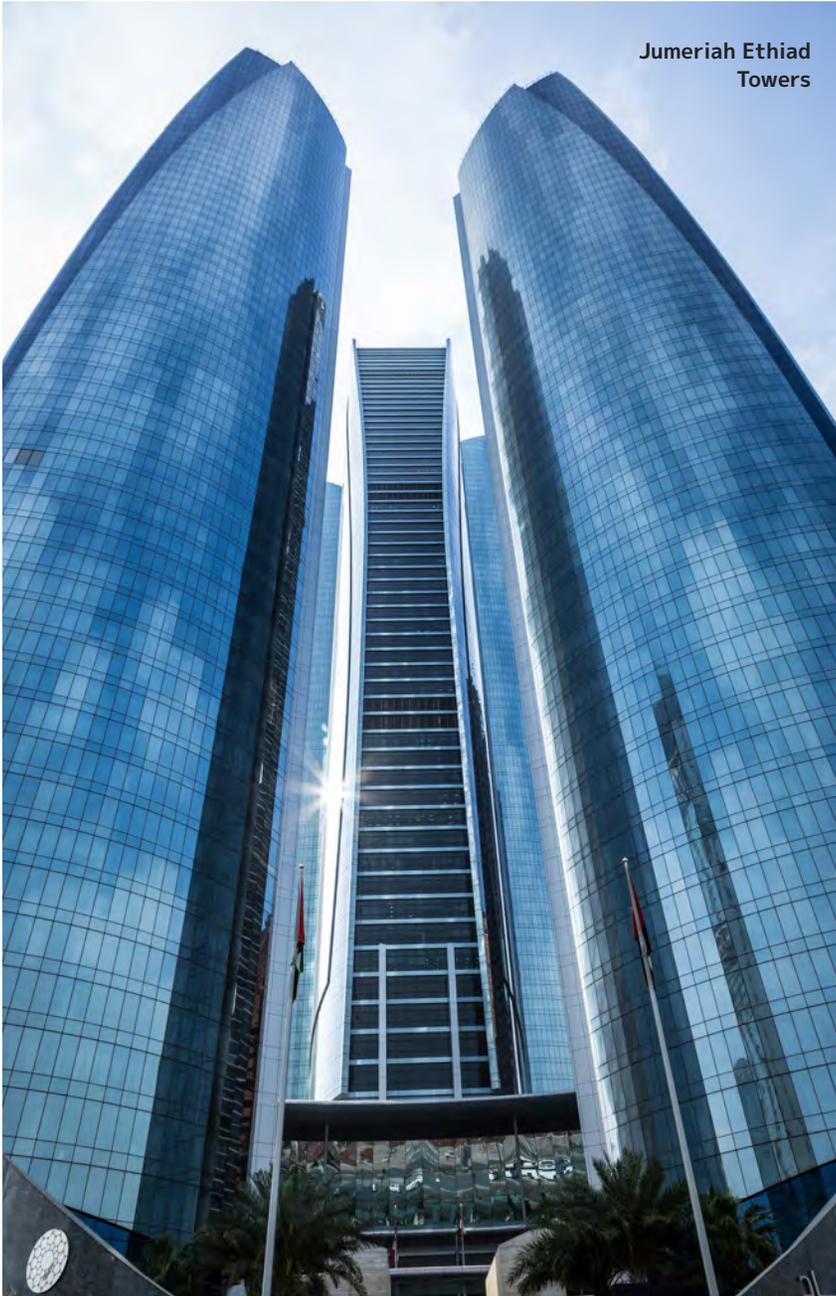
This safari tour is well worth the price and I highly recommend it. A visit to the Mosque is a must, but tourists can simply hire a cab to and from the site. Tours of the site are offered free of charge.

### **Last Day**

The next morning, I hopped across



**Jumeriah Ethiad Towers Lobby**



the street to peek in at the famous Emirates Palace Hotel. Fit for royalty, this is the choice for visiting dignitaries. The property flaunts hundreds of marble columns, crystal chandeliers, gold-leaf decoration and oil paintings. My favorite discovery was an ATM machine that dispensed gold trinkets or small gold coins. A digital screen provided up to the minute prices of an ounce.

I took a brief respite by the Jumeriah Hotel infinity pool and enjoyed lunch in Le Beirut, a swish Lebanese restaurant. I learned that hotels offer some of the best dining, as they are among the few to obtain liquor licenses. Hotels are popular for wedding receptions (men and women have separate parties in the Muslim religion) and as getaways for couples.

I was treated to a luxurious massage in the Jumeriah spa before I left for my long fifteen and half hour flight back to Atlanta. What a gift! The therapist gave me her all, even climbing up on the table and kneeling astride my back to apply perfect pressure. Thank you, Jumeriah Hotels.

If you go to the UAE, you really should stay in both Dubai and Abu Dhabi. The two cities are different, with Abu Dhabi more like a culturally refined and proud parent, and Dubai a somewhat reckless, flamboyant youth. Both are fascinating cities.

DISCLOSURE: MY TRIP TO THE UAE WAS SELF-FUNDED, HOWEVER I DO WANT TO THANK JUMERIAH HOTELS FOR PUTTING ME UP FOR TWO NIGHTS AND TAKING ME TO LUNCH AND THE SPA TREATMENT.