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A nighttime aerial photograph of Sharjah, United Arab Emirates. The image shows a dense urban skyline with numerous illuminated skyscrapers and buildings. In the foreground, a large, brightly lit mosque with a prominent dome and minarets is visible. The city is situated along a waterfront, with a large body of water reflecting the city lights. A multi-lane highway with light trails from traffic curves through the scene. The overall atmosphere is vibrant and modern.

A striking skyline is only the beginning of **Sharjah's** contemporary treasures

Stylish, lively and energetic, the emirate of Sharjah offers a fresh perspective on present day sophistication. Let Sharjah's innovative take on architecture, entertainment and modern city life captivate you.

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Sharjah

Guide to Sharjah



Condé Nast
Traveller
MIDDLE EAST

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Sharjah



Explore fascinating landscapes



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Welcome to Sharjah





Sharjah's Flag Island

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Desert

landscapes

DESERT DUNES MIGHT BE A HAVEN FOR CAMPERS, OFF-ROADERS AND THRILL-SEEKERS BUT, AS MICHELLE WRANIK-HICKS DISCOVERS, THERE'S ALSO A DEEPER LAYER TO ANCIENT MLEIHA IN SHARJAH'S CENTRAL REGION



The immense desert of Sharjah's Central Region has a cinematic beauty, undulating rust-red dunes offset by brilliant blue sky. We've been driving across the dunes – vast kilometres of them – in our Jeep for hours, and on previous occasions had spent many more zooming up and down one of the emirate's best known off-roading sites, **Big Red** (visitsharjah.com). The colossal sand dune, where you can hire everything from dune buggies to sandboards, has thrill-seekers arriving en masse each weekend. Many even stay overnight, camping in nearby dunes and star-gazing into the night before waking up to do it all over again the following day.

There's plenty of desert to enjoy across Sharjah but **Mleiha** (discovermleiha.ae), in particular, has a unique, unexpected beauty, with rocky mountains that rise from the sand like ancient statues on the horizon.

Mleiha has always held a special place in the hearts of Sharjah residents, but until just a few years ago no one knew that beneath the sands and ancient mountains, and between layers of rock, lay a link to one of civilisation's earliest human settlements. Archaeological digs in the region have revealed astonishing findings that alter much of what was known of early man's migration from Africa. Today, there's a visitor's centre, featuring a museum with interactive displays, and various ruins and burial sites to visit, along with a host of desert activities that make the most of the stunning landscape, from trekking and horse-riding to dune-buggy rides and desert cycling tours. You can stay overnight at a special glamping spot, enjoying a sunset lounge and dinner at a camp.

The sensitive development of the Mleiha Archaeological and Eco-Tourism project will continue, with plans for a boutique hotel and a wildlife reserve housing endemic animals such as oryx, gazelles and mountain deer. But meanwhile I'm taking the Mleiha Landscapes tour, which seems a good option if you want to experience a bit of everything. ▶

“Buried within the layers of earth were ancient stone tools from humans who crossed the shallow Bab al-Mandab strait to settle in the UAE”



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We set off in one of the centre's comfortable four-wheel-drives, toward **Fossil Rock**. This Mleiha landmark rises amid a sea of dunes, which many millions of years ago were not sand but rather a shallow inland sea. The landscape has changed dramatically since then, though fragments remain if you look closely, as our guide, education coordinator Anurag Shailesh Amin, demonstrates, unscrewing the cap off a bottle of water and pouring it out over the rock face. The moisture makes inconspicuous fossils stand out, the remains of little shell creatures and corals that were preserved in the sediment 65 million years ago.

Saddle Rock is another mountain that juts out from the dunes, named by locals for its saddle-shaped appearance. Here, we walk on foot to stand overlooking the desert and the village of Khadam. Residents here were offered land and houses closer to the city, but most declined the offer, preferring to stay and live amid the red sands at the foot of the mountain as their Bedouin ancestors have done for centuries. As I overlook the panorama, I can see why they wanted to stay. There's something magical about the Mleiha landscape, something special that has drawn people to the region for more than 100,000 years.

There's evidence of this also at **Faya Cave**, a sheltered rock face at the foot of Jebel Faya Mountain, where the results of a 1994 archaeological dig revealed evidence of settlements from the Palaeolithic era. Incredibly, the site was happened upon by chance – by a group of picnicking archaeologists, no less. Buried within layers of earth were ancient stone tools that date as far back as 125,000 years. The tools proved that humans migrated across from the African continent to Arabia some 65,000 years earlier than previously thought – crossing the shallow Bab al-Mandab strait between the Horn of Africa and Arabia, and journeying across Yemen and Oman before settling here in the UAE.

As I wonder aloud how archaeologists can date a tool to more than 100,000 years ago, Amin smiles and offers a rather clever modern analogy. "It's like looking at a phone," he says, pointing at the iPhone in my hand. "We generally know the timeframe of each new iPhone release. Just imagine, say 10,000 years in the future, if someone finds your phone – they will be able to tell exactly what time period it came from."



From left: Trekkers exploring Mleiha; Umm an-Nar tomb.
Opposite: The distinctive Fossil Rock

Another "found by accident" site is a series of burial tombs, just a short drive away. It's possible to venture inside one or two of them, descending down rough-hewn steps and through a tiny doorway that leads into a small chamber. Inside, it's cool and dark, though not as spooky as I imagined, and in the ground are two circular depressions. There's evidence of burials here as far back as 10,000 years ago. Excavations continue at the site with some 300 remains discovered so far, though sadly all the tombs were looted as the area was thought to be home to a prosperous village.

Mleiha's cleverly designed museum, built around the dramatic Bronze age Umm an-Nar tomb, features some wonderful interactive displays including a hand axe thought to have been made an astonishing half a million years ago and – one of the most intriguing features – a life-sized buried camel and horse. Known as *baliya*, this pre-Islamic practice saw animals dressed in full regalia buried with their owners. In one excavation, two horses and 12 camels were discovered, leading archaeologists to assume the owner must have been a high-ranking, important individual.

As the day comes to an end and we drive away, the Mleiha desert is looking even more majestic than usual. The dipping sun has painted an ember glow across the dunes and the colours of the rocky mountains are changing, too. Cars have stopped on either side of Sharjah-Kalba Road, with spectators striding up the dunes and setting up chairs and picnic blankets to take in the performance. In a few hours, campfires will flicker in the darkness. Dinners will be barbecued and conversations will carry on well into the night, before silence finally descends on this beautiful part of Sharjah. Just like the residents of Khadam, I don't want to leave. ■

Sharjah

Mangrove forests

THE DELICATE NATURAL ENVIRONMENT OF SHARJAH'S EAST COAST CASTS A SPELL ON MICHELLE WRANIK-HICKS, WHO KAYAKS THE PROTECTED AL QURM MANGROVE RESERVE AND GLAMPS IN STYLE AT KINGFISHER LODGE



The mangroves
of Khor Kalba



Clockwise from top left: Kalba's mangroves against a mountainous backdrop; Kingfisher Lodge and its glamping comforts



Sharjah



“The east coast of Sharjah has eco-tourism in spades and many of the experiences are active, such as kayaking expeditions through the mangroves”

The Arabian-collared kingfisher darts from the mangrove, slicing through the water with such speed there's scarcely a splash. In a flash, the bird is back in its hideaway. It all happened so fast I start to doubt whether I saw it at all.

There are various types of kingfisher birds around the world, but the one I'm watching at Khor Kalba, along Sharjah's east coast, is one of just 55 pairs. These rare birds, marked by brilliant blue-green plumes and a white collar around their neck, live in the **Al Qurm Nature Reserve** (visitsharjah.com). This 300-year-old grey mangrove forest, between the mountains and the coastal dunes, is thought to be the last remaining natural mangrove forest of its kind in the region. The wetland area is now protected by the Environment and Protected Areas Authority (EPAA).

I kayaked through these mangroves more than 10 years ago – a less conservation-friendly time when spearfishing, crab hunting and camping were popular activities. The impact on the delicate ecosystem was dramatic, and it was only when Al Qurm became part of a 23sqkm protected area in 2012 that the environmental degradation came to a stop. Today, there's a greater awareness about the importance of maintaining the reserve. There are plans to build a mangrove visitors' centre where tourists can learn about the rare and endangered species that live here, and a state-of-the-art turtle rehabilitation centre. At the heart of it all is a luxurious eco-lodge.

I'm on my way to camp overnight at **Kingfisher Lodge** (00971-9-201 1900, sharjahcollection.ae), though sleeping in a tent at this five-star retreat doesn't mean roughing it. This becomes evident from the moment I arrive at the welcome lounge – an elegant canvas tent that sits along the creek. Welcomed by a hostess in traditional dress, within moments I'm in a boat pattering along Khor Kalba, past weather-beaten fishing boats pulled up on the shoreline. There are 20 palatial canvas abodes at the lodge, including five family tents. Eighteen face the beach amid the undulating dunes, placed several metres apart so there's no compromised privacy, while two face the mountains. With tasteful interiors, an expansive bathroom and a king-sized four-poster bed, there's even a small infinity pool on the deck where I stand and take a moment to gaze out over the Gulf

Sharjah

of Oman. It's rare and special to look out over this beach, with low dunes and coastal shrubs bending in the breeze.

The east coast of Sharjah has eco-tourism in spades and many of the experiences are active. The mountains are an adventurer's playground, and guests can set off on three-hour hikes through nearby Wadi Al Helo, an off-road cycling trip or even a guided culture and cycling tour through Kalba, as well as one- to two-hour kayaking expeditions through the nearby mangroves.

Keen to explore the mangroves, I check in at **Absolute Adventure** (00971-4-392 6463, adventure.ae) for a briefing, after which my guide, Neil Franklin, drags our kayaks down to the banks and, with a grin, explains how to board gracefully. Soon we're off, paddling along as juvenile fish dart below. The mangroves act as nurseries for crabs, small fish and insects; the roots are critical to their survival, providing the protection they need to grow to adult size. The public cannot enter the narrow mangrove channels since the reserve became protected, but these conservation efforts have helped marine life thrive.

With a replenished number of fish and crabs to feast on and branches to nest in, the birdlife in Al Qurm is also making a comeback. We float past an Indian pond heron standing in silence beneath a gnarled mangrove branch, and numerous egrets and oystercatchers, instantly recognisable with their bright orange beaks. Along with the Arabian-collared kingfisher, Sykes's warbler is another rare species that lives in these mangroves.

Breeding turtles are also fond of their mangrove home, with an aerial survey taken by drone revealing dozens floating in the shallows. The turtles like to nibble on seagrass and, if undisturbed, may lay eggs once more, digging the nests they used to create in the dunes of Kalba beach. As we float past the banks of the outer forest, where the EPPA has planted grey mangrove seedlings on a small beach, the turtles poke their heads above the surface, craning their ancient necks to get a look at us before they disappear once more.



Clockwise from top: Visitors can kayak around the mangrove forests; a bathroom in a tent at Kingfisher Lodge; the mangroves' winding waterways



Kayaking can be tough on the arms and shoulders, but there's a cure for that: an afternoon spent at Kingfisher Lodge's Nine Degrees Spa. After a firm massage with amber-infused oil, both my body and mind are rekindled. Dusk is falling as I walk back to the tent and the sound of the call to prayer drifts across from nearby mosques, the voices of the muezzins swelling and mingling in a holy chorus. I wonder if I might see any of the endangered Damani gazelles later on the beach that night. As part of the eco-tourism project, several endangered gazelles were released into the reserve, and lucky guests have spotted them roaming along the beach after sunset.

That evening, the lodge has arranged a private barbecue dinner on the deck, with giant skewers of prawns and meat and whole, fresh-caught local fish prepared by the chef. Beneath a languid moon, I dine to a soundtrack of gentle waves sighing on the shore and the Isha call to prayer. Falling asleep as the wind gently flaps the canvas that night, I listen to the rolling of the tides and feel connected to the sea and the environment.

At dawn, there isn't another soul in sight on the beach. The mountains rise in the distance, and the sea is calm and luminescent. Pure white seashells are scattered on the sand and as I admire them I notice something else: hoof prints. I follow them between the shrubs and, finally, down to the water's edge. The gazelles are long gone, but it's something to imagine them trotting along the water's edge in the darkness, and disappearing before the break of dawn. ■

Sharjah

Rugged coastline

WITH COASTLINE ALONG BOTH THE ARABIAN GULF AND THE GULF OF OMAN, MICHELLE WRANIK-HICKS EXPLORES SHARJAH'S RICHES ABOVE AND BENEATH THE WATERS AT DIBBA AL-HISN AND KHORFAKKAN



The clear waters and rocky outcrops of Sharjah's eastern coast

Sharjah

I'm barefoot on the beach in Khorfakkan, ankle-deep in the clear waters of the Gulf of Oman. Along the corniche, children scamper around playgrounds as their mothers sit on the grass and gossip. A gentle offshore breeze rustles the palms and a jet-ski hums in the distance, but otherwise this tranquil stretch of coastline remains untouched and peaceful.

Framed by the rugged Hajar Mountains that plunge into the sea to form a harbour protected from the wind and rough ocean, it's easy to see why Khorfakkan, which translates to "creek of the two jaws", was such a highly-prized point along the ancient maritime route. With fertile land and sweet freshwater, this natural crescent beach on the east coast of the UAE was an ideal place to land between lengthy journeys at sea, and was conquered numerous times over the course of the 16th and 17th centuries and documented by passing explorers.

Some 350 years later, there's no need for forts in Khorfakkan, though the coastal town is as in-demand as ever. On weekends, beachgoers converge to sunbathe and swim, or picnic among the beautiful gardens of **Al Metalaa Park**, just across the road from the corniche. Holidaymakers at **Oceanic Khorfakkan Beach Resort & Spa** (00971-9238 5111, sharjahnationalhotel.com) have their own stretch of private beach to enjoy on the bay's northern end, whizzing about on jet-skis and stand-up paddleboards, while at the southern end, the Sharjah Investment and Development Authority (Shurooq) has already begun a project to transform the public beach by adding recreation facilities, sports courts, picnic areas and beachfront eateries. But for now, by and large, Khorfakkan remains a relaxed little place. There's a traditional feel that remains in the town's souks and food markets. Locals, too, are wonderfully warm. When I finish my coffee at a small beachfront eatery, a man and his wife in traditional dress insist on paying for it, waving away my protests with a friendly "Afwan". ▶



“Beachgoers converge to sunbathe and swim, or picnic among the beautiful gardens of Al Metalaa Park, while holidaymakers enjoy the bay’s northern end, whizzing about on jet-skis and stand-up paddleboards”



From far left: Calm beaches are ideal for families; tranquil Dibba Al-Hisn; camp on the beach



Clockwise from top:
The port at Dibba Al-Hisn; a fresh catch of local crabs; try your hand at fishing

Sharjah



Those looking for action, however, will certainly find it off the coast, beneath the waters of the Gulf. The ocean along the rugged east coast is famous, especially among keen anglers who travel across the country for deep-sea fishing expeditions, snaring colossal sailfish, dorado and tuna. Even closer to the shoreline, Khorfakkan's waters appear to teem with fish; watch fishermen with vintage FJ45 Land Cruisers haul in nets of sardines and anchovies, known locally as *barriyya*, directly from the beach.

To swim among, rather than catch, the east coast marine life, it's easy to negotiate a boat ride to nearby **Shark Island** to snorkel with harmless black-tip reef sharks that flit about the shallow corals. Just minutes away by boat, the rocky outcrop is a popular spot for divers, snorkelers and families alike, with narrow strips of sand to picnic upon in between swimming. But as a scuba diver, my heart is set on **Martini Rock**. This submerged coral rock, named for the martini-glass shape of the pinnacles below the surface, is renowned as one of the best dive sites on the east coast, and it's only minutes away from Khorfakkan, reached by cruising down the southern coastline beyond the port. Beneath the surface parrot fish, broomtail wrasse and triggerfish dart about; on occasion, sting rays and turtles glide past, too.

Resting on the ocean floor just a little further offshore, more adventurous divers will find it difficult to resist a wreck dive at **Inchcape 1**, the decommissioned ship sunk to create an artificial reef. The 20m vessel that once ferried crew and supplies between Dubai and Fujairah now lies at a depth of some 30m. Upright on its keel, the ship is studded with brilliant coral and is now home to a fabulously patterned family of honeycomb moray eels that peek through the portholes. **Inchcape 2** is another ship purposefully sunk by Inchcape Shipping in 2002, an even more spectacular dive site at a depth of 22m, with bright corals that are flush with fish.

Centuries ago, ancient war *dhow*s and 16th-century Portuguese galleons journeying along the maritime trade route headed north from Khorfakkan, travelling along the east coast of the UAE and around the bend of the Arabian Peninsula. It's along this route that you'll find another one of Sharjah's seaside towns, **Dibba Al-Hisn**. Nestled at the foot of some of the highest peaks of the Hajar Mountain range, the historic town is named after its fort (*hisn*), and has a beautiful bay.

Dotted with tall palm trees, and with fresh produce markets and a working harbour, it's a pleasant place to stroll, watching fishermen hauling in the day's catch. There's also plenty to see beyond the shoreline if you choose to charter a fishing boat or *dhow*. There are few views so scenic as when sailing away from the marina, overlooking the panorama of the town from the water, with the brilliant-white mosque and the national flag set against the backdrop of the dusty pink mountains.

From Dibba Al-Hisn, there's a world of secret coves and dive sites to explore. Just 30 minutes away by boat, the much-loved **Dibba Rock** is another excellent dive site, with vividly clear water and a host of marine life such as giant pufferfish and even guitar sharks and turtles.

As thrilling as it is beneath the surface, there's nothing wrong with staying dry on board, enjoying the view of the starkly beautiful, sun-bleached mountains, and the pods of dolphins that swim alongside the boat – all in all, just another memorable day out on Sharjah's spectacular coastline. ■

Nature

reserves

**MICHELLE WRANIK-HICKS HIKES
A TRAIL THROUGH SHARJAH'S
FERTILE SWEET VALLEY,
DISCOVERING WILDFLOWERS,
WATCHTOWERS AND THE RUINS OF
ANCIENT VILLAGES ON THE WAY**



Sharjah

Voices echo through the wadi, but it's impossible to tell from where. It's only when I glance upwards that I see a small group of hikers following the ridge of a mountain; their tiny silhouettes providing scale to the landscape of **Wadi Al Helo** (visitsharjah.com).

A region of rugged valleys and rocky mountains, Wadi Al Helo's remoteness once meant it was cut off from the rest of the country. Before the Sharjah-Kalba Road and the newer mountain-pass tunnel were constructed, it would take many days for villagers to reach the coastline, yet they were able to remain self-sufficient thanks to the sweet, free-flowing water bubbling up from underground. It is this water which gives the wadi its name: **Sweet Valley**. Water that to this day fills artesian wells and keeps the land lush and fertile, allowing farmers to grow exotic fruits and vegetables in abundance – everything from citrus fruits and pomegranate to fresh watermelon and sweetcorn.

Much like the rest of the east coast of the country, such prosperous land meant that Wadi Al Helo and its villagers once needed protection, and at the southern entrance the remains of a restored Islamic watchtower stand tall. It's one of three such structures that have inspired a three-hour hike that tour operator **Absolute Adventure** (0971-4-392 6463, adventure.ae) has named "All Along the Watchtowers".

There's no reason you can't set off to explore the region yourself, navigating a small circuit of the wadi and mountaintops. Taking a guide however, has advantages – especially when they're of the calibre of Absolute Adventures operations manager Dave



See remains of ancient villages in Sweet Valley. **Opposite:** One of the wadi's old forts

Wainwright, an adventurist training instructor for the British Ministry of Defence. After a short briefing, we're scrambling over sharp-edged rocks, making our first ascent up a steep mountain. Breathless, we reach the first watchtower. It's long unused but the view is stirring, with curved mountain ridges stretching in every direction. For a moment, I'm lost in thought, imagining a guard posted on this lonely mountaintop, keeping watch over the valley below. Today, there is no threat – simply a wonderful view over the wadi.

Amid the seemingly barren mountains, Wadi Al Helo has an improbably green landscape with farms thick with foliage and crops, and date-palm plantations edged with dry-stone walls. The wadi's sweet water may not be visible to the eye, but it's the lifeblood of this region, coursing beneath the surface of the ground and feeding water-intensive produce grown by the farms.

The Environment and Protected Areas Authority (EPA) declared the three-kilometre-square wadi a federally protected area in 2007. Thanks to its protected status, its biodiversity has flourished, with a rich array of birdlife, flora and fauna returning in recent years. According to John Pereira, an EPA conservation scientist, the wadi has some 220 plant species, including 29 rare plants, and an abundance of reptile species, some of which – like the blue-tailed lizard and the Oman carpet viper – are endemic to the UAE. There's even a new species still being classified.

As for animal species, while it is thought that some may have returned – such as the caracal and white-tailed mongoose – there may be a better chance of seeing these shy creatures at **Al Hefaiyah Mountain Conservation Centre** (epashj.ae) in Kalba. Set at the base ▶



Clockwise from top left: A verdant farm in Sweet Valley; a wooden ceiling and the stairs of an old home; donkeys run through village remains

Sharjah



“Wadi Al Helo has an improbably green landscape with farms thick with foliage and crops, and date-palm plantations edged with dry-stone walls”



of the mountain range, the centre is where some 30 species once found in Wadi Al Helo – including the Arabian leopard – now roam in as natural an environment as possible, with large landscaped enclosures and a spacious indoor nocturnal habitat.

Along with plants and animals, there are also brilliant colours in the smallest of rocks that lie on the ground. One is marbled with green streaks, indicating copper ore, which confirms that Wadi Al Helo was a copper smelting site during the Bronze Age. There is more evidence of a Bronze Age village a few minutes' walk away, and a second watchtower. Archaeologists have dated the base to the Umm an-Nar period and restored the structure to its original, white-washed rock appearance.

As though revealing more pieces of Wadi Al Helo's puzzle, smooth, grey rocks scattered on the ground, about the size of a grapefruit, feature two indentations on either side for the thumb and fingers, indicating the rocks are hammerstones – typical working tools. Tapping a hammerstone rhythmically on to a nearby rock, it resounds with a *clink*. The geological percussion echoes through the valley, just as it must have done centuries ago.

There are more signs of ancient life as we wind our way through the wadi, where a petroglyph depicting a horse was etched thousands of years ago on to the rock face, and the ruins of a noble house. From these ruins, the final watchtower stands sentinel on a mountain directly above. As we trudge along the ridge, I imagine how difficult it must have been to travel for days through the vastness of these mountain ranges in such extreme temperatures, and how wonderful it would be to return to a valley with sweet, fresh water to bathe in and cool fruits to eat.

It's time to descend, zigzagging our way into the cool shadow of the valley. On the way back to Kalba, we drive through the tunnel and reach the coast within half an hour – not days, like it once took the villagers. Later that evening, as I eat watermelon from a tray of local fruits, it's so refreshing and sweet I have to wonder whether it was grown in Wadi Al Helo. Sweet by name, sweet by nature. ■

Sharjah

Events & festivals

EXPERIENCE THRILLING
POWERBOATING,
ENLIGHTENING
PERFORMANCES AND
INTERNATIONAL ART
THROUGHOUT THE YEAR
IN CULTURAL SHARJAH





Sharjah Light Festival
colourfully illuminates
the emirate



Sharjah Biennial

Drawing contemporary art aficionados from around the world, Sharjah Biennial has grown from a regionally focused event to a global platform for artistic exchange and engagement – one that doesn't shy away from challenging themes. There's something for all ages, with a series of large-scale public installations, film screenings and performances taking place across the emirate. This year's event will once more invite some of the most prominent names in contemporary art to Sharjah to explore the shifting narrative of art in a world challenged by fictionalised reality. *March 7-June 10, 2019; sharjahart.org/biennial-14*



Sharjah Heritage Days

Held every April and primarily based in the Heart of Sharjah, this festival offers a hands-on way to learn more about the emirate's cultural heritage, with public events such as handicraft markets, workshops and demonstrations of ancestral traditions taking place at a variety of locations. As well as highlighting Sharjah's heritage, the festival celebrates global culture, with various countries invited to participate and share their own folklore, food and music. *April annually; visitsharjah.com*

Sharjah International Book Fair

Hosting some of the biggest names in publishing, Sharjah International Book Fair has evolved into one of the world's most prestigious literary festivals, attracting an impressive line-up of authors and more than two million visitors. With book signings, writing workshops, poetry readings and activities for bookworms of all ages,



Sharjah



the fair is a great chance to rub shoulders with literary luminaries from around the world, and snap up your next read at affordable prices. *October/November annually; sibf.com*

Sharjah Light Festival

Held in February, Sharjah Light Festival has that wow factor, drawing several hundred-thousand visitors to see the emirate's landmarks illuminated in spellbinding displays of light. The dazzling installations and laser shows transform civic buildings, mosques and other urban monuments with brilliant optical technology. Internationally renowned artists use light to explore themes of science, creativity, culture and heritage. *February annually; sharjahlightfestival.ae*

Sharjah World Music Festival

Presenting an eclectic array of musical genres, from Brazilian bossa nova to Khaleeji pop, the week-long Sharjah World Music Festival takes over the city with a programme of concerts and performances held at Al Majaz Amphitheatre, Al Majaz Waterfront, The Flag Island Amphitheatre and Al Qasba. Now in its sixth year, the event brings together an impressive calibre of performers, from solo singers to entire orchestras. Many of the public concerts are free, offering a rare and unmissable chance to enjoy music by talented performers from the Arab world and beyond. *February annually; sharjahworldmusicfestival.com*

Sharjah World Championship Week

There are few sporting events that offer such high-octane spectator action as Formula 1 powerboat racing, which thrills crowds with phenomenal speeds and risky manoeuvres that have to be seen to be believed. Now hosting this global event for 19 years, 2018 saw Sharjah host the final round of the international series on Khalid Lagoon, the fierce competition delighting fans from the many vantage points around Buhaira Corniche. *December 18-21, 2019; flh2o.com* ■

Clockwise from top left: See cultural performances at Sharjah Heritage Days; brilliant displays at Sharjah Light Festival; a wide selection of reads at the Sharjah International Book Fair; Sharjah Light Festival; a scene from the Sharjah Biennial



Sharjah

Where to stay

RELAX ON THE
BEACH OR STAY
AT THE CULTURAL
HEART – THERE'S A
HOTEL FOR EVERY
TYPE OF TRAVELLER
IN SHARJAH





The oceanfront infinity pool at The Sheraton Sharjah



From top: A cosy courtyard at Al Bait; a cabana at Kingfisher Lodge. **Opposite:** An Executive King Room in The Hilton Sharjah

Sharjah



72 Hotel

A modern property with a decidedly urban vibe, 72 Hotel is just moments on foot from the corniche promenade and Central Souq. Rooms are sleek and contemporary, with dark timber furniture, statement walls and ultra-modern bathrooms. Whether in town for a cultural weekender or with the family, there's a room to suit, including one-bedroom family suites and sizeable 95sqm two-bedroom suites. On-site facilities include the compact Ellipse Spa, a luxury steam room and sauna, a modern gym and an indoor pool. Quadrant Café offers quick caffeine fixes while the all-day dining at Equation Restaurant spans burgers and sandwiches to salads and international selections, with views over the lagoon and Al Noor mosque. 00971-6-507 9797, hotel72.com

The Act Hotel

The theatre theme means there's plenty of playfulness and drama in the design of this metropolitan hotel, from stage projector lights to contemporary artwork inspired by famous stage performances like *Macbeth* and *Romeo And Juliet*. All 180 rooms and suites have modish, minimalist furniture with purple accents and large bathrooms, with many enjoying panoramic views of Khalid Lagoon and the Sharjah skyline, while suites have the convenience of kitchenette facilities, ideal for longer stays. Along with The Oscars Restaurant and The Scene Café, there's plenty of nooks for lingering with armchairs and inspirational quotes on the walls, and it's easy to while away a day at Club 21 Spa. The health club has a spa with pampering treatments, a plunge pool, a sauna and steam rooms, along with a modern gym and an outdoor terrace pool with a whirlpool, sun loungers and illuminated tables that glow at night. Families are also well-catered to with a large kids' playroom stacked with books and toys. 00971-6-598 0000, theacthotel.com

Al Bait Sharjah

Set alongside Souk Al Shanasiyah within the historical restoration project known as Heart of Sharjah, no expense has been spared transforming a set of century-old traditional family houses into a boutique hotel that oozes a sense of heritage and sophistication. Each of the restored homes features the original owners' names, while guest rooms showcase Arabic design elements, such as *areesh* (palm) ceilings, hand-carved four-poster beds and intricate plaster cornices. Between the houses are tranquil courtyards, an outdoor pool and a discreet spa, along with two restaurants, an ice-creamery and a café. The cultural authenticity is only heightened by the hotel's on-site museum and a library where guests can thumb through books and historical archives. 00971-6-502 5555, ghmhotels.com

The Hilton Sharjah

Those who like to get out and explore the neighbourhood on foot during their travels will like the location of The Hilton Sharjah, which faces Khalid Lagoon and is just a short walk from both Al Qasba Canal and the Al Majaz Waterfront. All 259 guest rooms and suites have floor-to-ceiling windows, with upper-level suites enjoying access to the 17th-floor lounge, and throughout, the views of the lagoon or the Sharjah skyline are fantastic – especially from the outdoor lagoon terrace pool. With two restaurants and Al Dallah Lounge, which serves coffee and pastries, guests can work out at the hotel's Fitness by Precor gym, bash it out on a squash court and wind down in the steam room or sauna. 00971-6-519 2222, hilton.com

Kingfisher Lodge

At this five-star eco-lodge, positioned on the edge of Kalba's protected Al Qurm Nature Reserve, guests are whisked across a creek in a small wooden boat to enjoy an "in-tent" check-in. ▶

Opulent interiors at
The Sheraton Sharjah.
Opposite: Pools at
Radisson Blu



Sharjah



“A set of century-old traditional family houses has been transformed into a boutique hotel that oozes heritage and sophistication”

The lodge has 20 luxurious Bushtec safari tents, including five family tents, all with stunning views of the Gulf of Oman or the mountains. Guests want for nothing inside their glamping havens, the canvas structures fitted with ample air-conditioning units, espresso machines, elegant bathrooms with deep tubs and organic amenities, and a private deck and splash pool. When not dining, indulging in a massage at the petite tented spa or simply enjoying the natural setting from the deck, outdoor leisure activities abound such as kayaking through the mangrove reserve, bicycle rides or sunset strolls on the beach spotting the free-roaming Damani gazelles. 00971-9-201 1900, sharjahcollection.ae/kingfisher-lodge

Oceanic Khorfakkan Resort & Spa

Something of a local landmark, the hotel has a private stretch of sand, nestled into the northern end of Khorfakkan beach on Sharjah's east coast, protected from the elements and framed by the mountains. Guests can jet-ski to their heart's content, decompress at the spa, enjoy a gym workout and sauna-and-steam-room session, or set off on fishing trips and excursions to local beaches only accessible by boat. The hotel has 177 guest rooms and suites and it's worth the extra for a sea view, taking in the panorama of the hotel's outdoor pool, the three-kilometre beach and beyond. Book a meal at Al Murjan restaurant for the best ocean view in town, or Bab Al Bahr to feast on Gulf prawns, with plenty of other eateries just a few minutes' walk from the resort along the beach promenade. For families, there's play equipment dotted along the corniche, and a kids' playroom at the hotel. 00971-9-238 5111, sharjahnationalhotel.com/oceanic-khorfakkan-resort

Radisson Blu Resort, Sharjah

A classic beach resort, this 15-storey hotel faces the Gulf with a small private beach and five types of sea-facing rooms and suites, including ground-floor poolside cabanas adjacent to a pool. The resort grounds are ample and green, with four temperature-controlled pools and grassy areas leading down to the sand where guests can hire motorised and non-motorised water sports. Guests can have a hit on two flood-lit tennis courts, plus there are separate male and female gyms and saunas, and a children's fun zone. As for dining, a number of on-site restaurants means there's no need to head out if you don't want to, with Cantonese cuisine at Soya Chang Restaurant, al fresco lounge-style dining at The Terrace and poolside eats with a Gulf breeze at Calypso Pool Restaurant. Breakfast is taken in Café at The Falls, an indoor rainforest-style atrium restaurant with a waterfall and pond with fish (a hit with the kids), where guests dine beneath a canopy of trees. 00971-6-565 7777, radissonblu.com/resort-sharjah

The Sheraton Sharjah Beach Resort & Spa

With a sand-coloured façade and elegant archways and fountains, the Sheraton Sharjah Beach Resort & Spa faces the Arabian Gulf, just a few hundred metres from the Ajman border. The facilities are winningly family-friendly and include a private beach, three outdoor pools and 349 rooms and suites – and when the kids tire of sun-loving, they can retreat to a supervised club and games room chock-a-block with VR games, foosball, pool and table tennis. Foodies should make a beeline for Arjwan, the resort's upscale signature restaurant, or Al Qubtan (Arabic for “the captain”), serving seafood with unfettered sea views. 00971-6-563 0000, sheratonsharjah.com ■

Sharjah

Where to eat

FROM HIP COFFEE
SHOPS TO CAFÉS IN
CULTURAL CENTRES,
MAKE SURE YOU BRING
YOUR APPETITE WHEN
VISITING SHARJAH



Paper Fig Desserts
in University City.
Opposite: A selection
of dishes at Zaroob



“Sample camel-milk ice cream like the sticky, chewy and utterly scrumptuous Arabic mastic-style variety”



Sharjah

The Arabic Restaurant

With carved wood-beamed ceilings, richly textured fabrics and intricate metal work, design lovers will sigh over the Arabesque elegance of Al Bait Sharjah's signature restaurant, while foodies will appreciate the modern refinements to traditional Arabic staples like the biriyani-style machbous and *harees*, a cracked-wheat dish eaten at important family gatherings. Post-meal, take a stroll around the Heart of Sharjah and glimpse the famous circular wind tower. 00971-6-502 5555, ghmhotels.com

Arjwan Restaurant

Named after a delicate local desert flower, the signature restaurant at Sheraton Sharjah Beach Resort & Spa nods to local flavours, showcasing Emirati dishes in addition to Indian and Lebanese favourites. With indoor seating and a lovely outdoor terrace, the premium tender camel meat is a highlight and it's served in all forms, from Bedouin-spiced camel risotto to slow-braised camel strip-loin and even camel spring rolls. 00971-6-599 0088, arjwanrestaurant-sharjah.com

Bab Al Bahr

It's all about seafood with a sea breeze at Oceanic Khorfakkan Resort & Spa's beach-facing restaurant (note: check for opening hours before visiting). Expect plenty of hauls sold by the kilo, such as lobster and local crab, sea bass and sheri (emperor fish). À la carte signatures include lobster served with cheesy thermidor sauce, char-grilled prawns marinated in Arabic spices, Thai curries and Chinese-style wok stir fries. 00971-9-238 5111, oceanichotel.com/bab-al-bahar

Fen Café and Restaurant

With the serene architecture of the Sharjah Art Foundation as the backdrop, Fen might attract the art crowd, but you'll rub shoulders with foodies, too, thanks to the finesse given to the cuisine. Chia pots, kale salads and ube lattes (made from a type of yam that colours things a pretty purple) lend a decidedly hipster vibe to the café-style eats, while the entrées are exemplary. Scattered with micro-greens and accented with "foam", the locally sourced, wild-caught seafood is a highlight, best eaten with a side of parmesan-truffle fries. 00971-6-561 3029, facebook.com/fenrestaurant



Find sips and snacks at Mleiha Café. **Opposite, clockwise from top:** Zaroob overlooks the creek; seafood at Bab Al Bahar; a mocktail at Paper Fig

The Ice Cream Shop

There may be six deeply indulgent flavours of "traditional" cow's-milk ice cream served at Al Bait Sharjah's petite ice creamery, but before you agonise over choosing between roasted marshmallow and meringue crunch, why not sample the camel-milk variety? There are seven flavours including pistachio, date and peanut to choose from, along with a sticky, chewy and utterly scrumptious Arabic mastic-style ice cream. Take a seat to enjoy your sweet treat, or slurp it from a waffle cone as you explore the neighbourhood. 00971-6-502 5555, ghmhotels.com

Mleiha Café

Set within the Mleiha Archeological Centre, this café makes a handy and comfortable pit stop between trekking and tours, taking care of caffeine, breakfast, lunch and even a late bite. Peppered with tables, soft armchairs and a reading nook with well-stocked bookshelves, take a seat on the outdoor terrace for panoramic views over Fossil Rock in the distance. There's even a kids' corner with toys and games for parents bringing along their tots. 00971-50-210 3827; discovermleiha.ae

Sharjah



From top: Outside Fen restaurant; camel meat at Arjwan



Paper Fig Desserts

Conceptualised by husband-and-wife duo Nawal Alnuaimi and Ahmed Almazrouei, this University City eatery has garnered a loyal following for its casual ambience, outstanding breakfast menu (try the shakshuka) and delectable desserts. Take a seat in the cute, timber-clad interior and check the chalkboard for sweet treats like rooibos-tea *crème anglaise* and pistachio ice cream, with savoury dishes like burgers and roasted baby chicken offering reason enough to linger for lunch. 600-56 0601, paperfig.ae

Ratios Coffee

Founded by coffee connoisseur Khalid Faisal Al Qassemi, this popular coffee haunt overlooks the creek in the Heart of Sharjah, the outdoor tables fashioned from reclaimed wood sourced from an old *dhow*. With single-origin coffee and first-rate machinery – including a hand-built Synesso espresso machine – the coolness ante is upped with a coffee-delivery Mini (@mini_by_ratios). Most come solely for their v60 or Chemex cup of joe, but if you're hungry there's also a selection of pastries. 00971-6-555 0770, ratios.coffee

Sanobar Restaurant

Operating since 1983, this family-run Lebanese seafood restaurant is something of a local stalwart, serving up a simple, well-priced menu of grilled meats and biryanis, and seafood platters generously laden with shrimp, octopus and lobster. Wash it down with a fresh juice – there's one in nearly every colour of the rainbow. 00971-6-528 3501, sanobar-restaurant.com

Shababeek

Arrestingly chic interiors make this modern Mediterranean-Lebanese restaurant along Al Qasba canal an ideal spot for long lunches on sunny days. The cuisine by Beirut-based celebrity chef Maroun Chedid is just as dazzling, with zingy, fresh salads, halloumi and assorted manakeesh all ideal for sharing. If you're looking for comfort food, the simply named "Pot of Crumbled Baked Potato", a pie-style medley with kashkaval cheese, should do the trick. 00971-6-554 0444, shababeek.ae

Zaroorb

With views over Buhaira Corniche, colourfully kitsch décor, outdoor seating and easy-to-share plates, Zaroorb is a true crowd-pleaser, and better still, it fronts a grassy area for post-meal sun-lazing or for the kids to burn off some steam. The eastern-Mediterranean menu has something for everyone: hummus, falafel, a variety of manakeesh, or perhaps a crumbly Egyptian *fateer* pastry – whatever you choose, it's bound to be delicious. 00971-52-196 5642, zaroorb.com ■

Sharjah leads the way in adventure



Sharjah's majestic mountain landscape, ancient Bedouin culture and intriguing desert sands invite you to explore further.

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Enjoy timeless moments in serene Sharjah



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