



Intelligent luxury under a hot blue sky

Rhodri Karim, an Abu Dhabi native, charts the city's rise and enjoys a symbol of its opulence

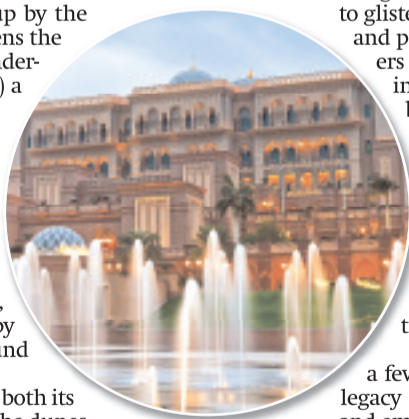
ABU Dhabi sounds like a heady jumble of car, construction and human. In the daytime, the air is thick with noise as it is thick with the pervading haze of dust blown in from the sandlands to the south and thrown up by the never-ending construction. It softens the otherwise relentless sunshine, rendering everything (including the sky) a sedate pastel shade.

In summer, one must wade through air sodden with 100 per cent humidity, scuttling from place to air-conditioned place or collapsing (with soaked t-shirt) into the back of a taxi. The ideal time to visit is somewhere between November and March, when temperatures drop to a nippy 20°C and a cool breeze can be found snaking through the backstreets.

Then one can explore the city in both its guises, day and night. Ramble on the dunes of the artificial Lulu Island opposite Abu Dhabi's 39-year-old skyline, or along its newly landscaped beach road, the Corniche, with its regimented leisure facilities, patchy grass and dreamy seaside strollers. Then at night, head indoors to one of the gargantuan shopping centres, gleaming hubs for the Armani-clad local youth, or play out on the plastic chairs of a pavement shisha café while dubbed Turkish soaps play out on a massive projection TV.

At least, once you could. The laws have the strange habit of rearranging themselves unannounced. Many of the seedier shisha joints have been ordered to move indoors, cooping up noisy young men, their mobiles and their perfumed smoke in clandestine nooks. Even street food is a rarity nowadays,

Above: Abu Dhabi's magnificent, sterile skyline. Below: the Emirates Palace.



with the bustling Lebanese restaurants serving shawarma (chicken, chips and pickles wrapped in pita bread - kebab of the gods) and falafel losing their chaotic outdoor serveries to the very Western spectre of health and safety.

It's this modernisation in law, architecture and indeed in vision that's eroded some of the city's frontier charm. Beaches are kept free of lecherous labourers and advertising has cropped up on every lamp-post and bus stop in the city. Glorious, crumbling 70s eyesores covered in eerie tiling and decades of grime have given way to glistening skyscrapers in metallic pinks and purples (pastel, of course). The workers who built them can be found staring from the clapped-out school buses that take them to and from the remote labour camps they've been confined to.

But with this renewal comes the subtle purr of refinement, the sound of a young city getting to grips with its own potential. Abu Dhabi is beginning to assert a greater presence on the world stage than its glitzy neighbour next door. New Dubai rose out of the desert in a few short years, leaving in its wake a legacy of traffic jams, property scandals and empty space. Abu Dhabi chose to wait. To learn from Dubai's mistakes, and to spend time crafting a master plan that is only just coming to fruition.

KING OF HOTELS: THE EMIRATES PALACE

THE city is dotted with swanky hotels, fully booked with international holidaymakers and businessmen (we are assured). Indeed, hotels have been a fixture of expatriate life in the Emirates for decades, perhaps because of their near-monopoly on the provision of alcohol. It's a lifestyle where five-star luxury becomes

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...and the hotel that says it all

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casual, where everyone is a member of a beach club and a regular salary can buy you drinks at the Hilton, dinner at the Sheraton, and the occasional champagne brunch. So far, so colonial. It would take a whole lot of hotel to impress this jaded populace.

So, at the head of the island, far from the grime and bustle of the centrum, lies almost a square kilometre of well-tended verdancy. Sat in the middle of it like Kubla Khan's wedding cake is the astounding Emirates Palace resort. It has no precedent in the chaos of the city, instead choosing to sprawl along the edge of the Gulf. Groundsmen pray towards Mecca in the midday sun, while behind them a monolith in pink granite commands a view of its own private highway approach, the city proper and the sea.

Inside, the blistering intensity of daylight gives way to muted shades of gold. The lighting is as in a dream: gentle, ubiquitous and without source. Tessellating Islamic motifs work their way into the detailing, every surface either marble or fine fabric. This is certainly the Emirates Palace, a far cry from the pleasant international interiors of the inner city hotels. I would even say the decor was understated if the ceiling wasn't covered in goldleaf.

After a straightforward check-in, I'm assigned a guide and we set off towards the room. Even the staff are exquisitely clad in gold and black. It's a long walk, past courtyards and gunsmiths, salons and musicians, down a spiral staircase with views of the turquoise Gulf, along corridors dotted with tiled fountains and information screens. We arrive at the room, and after a lengthy induction I'm left to explore.

The room itself is large and airy, continuing the themes of gold, fabric and marble. There are plenty of places to lounge, from the generous king-size bed to the soft ottomans and chaise-longue. The balcony opens onto courtyards studded with fountains and walls of bougainvillea, and beyond that the beach, and then the sea. The climate is exquisitely controlled, and a 52-inch TV dominates the wall opposite the bed, backed by hardwood panels. A single flaky touch-screen remote controls the room's electronics. Needless to say, the bathroom is palatial.

Going out for a stroll, I come across a pristine set of pools, jacuzzis and fountains, all surrounded by springy deckchairs draped with fresh towels. I've foolishly neg-

lected to bring my speedos along, but as I make my way across the kilometre of beach reserved for the hotel's guests (I meet just two others) I make good on an impulse to roll up my jeans and splash into the warm turquoise surf. It's only then that I notice the gentle clunking of cranes and construction wafting in from across the gulf.

Above: the Emirates Palace at night and one of the emirate's arteries. Right, Mezlai, the hotel's traditional Emirati restaurant.

NOW FOR DINNER: HAKKASAN

LATER on, I pick up my dinner guest and we head through the palace corridors until, tucked into an alcove between a tailor and the gift shop, we find the royal blue doors of Hakkasan. This is the latest outpost of the Michelin-starred haute Chinese, having made a successful foray into the American market with a Miami branch last year. It comes from the mind (and the rumbling gut) of Alan Yau, along with the vacuous, delicious and ubiquitous Wagamama.

Hakkasan couldn't be more different. Its rich electric blues and purples, dark hardwood and - in a decidedly local touch - marble cutouts of Islamic motifs render it the perfect place to plan a billion-dollar heist. It's monolithic, and imposing. We step up to the ludicrously well-stocked bar for a few cocktails before our meal.

Rippling projections dance slowly over a slate back wall, while the in-house DJ lays on some rather intense beats that wouldn't feel out of place at the Buddha Bar. Next to us, a couple of sharply dressed individuals smoke outrageously cheap cigarettes... indoors!

Deciding to try a couple of signature cocktails, she orders a Hakka and I a Chinese Mule. These are blended with sake (and other spirits), and are delicious. The Hakka is chock full of passion fruit pips and coconut cream, while my Mule bristles with ginger and coriander.

After ordering more outlandish drinks - the exceptionally named Bitter Fortune, featuring a hunk of fresh grapefruit, and a Kumquat Mojito - we head to the table with what remains of them. The dining room is criss-crossed with wooden lattices,



Five-star luxury is the norm, and everyone is a member of a beach club. It would take a lot to impress this jaded populace

allowing the steady hum of our fellow diners' conversation through. Each table is gently spot-lit, and the staff vanish into the netherzones between tables.

The crispy duck salad is astounding, with vibrant pomelo, pomegranate and shallot playing well off the sumptuous nutmeg overtones of the duck (this same dish excels in London). Our fried soft-shell crab is tender, hidden with a few curry leaves in a heap of delicious chilli moon-dust. The fried dim sum are simple, well-executed and full of flavour, my only criticism being reserved for the venison puff, which dims the quality of the meat with lashings of honey.

The mains arrive, and here Hakkasan becomes more of a dream Chinese restaurant than a whizz-bang fusion eatery. It is expertly cooked, hearty and (for the most part) flavoured to perfection. The stir-fry black pepper rib-eye beef more than lives up to its cut, the sauce rich and liberally applied. The gai lan fried in garlic and the morning glory in bean curd and ginger sauce provide crunchy and slurpy vegetable counterparts (respectively).

The only disappointment is the ham-mour (a local white fish) in black bean sauce, which while perfectly cooked plops the usually vibrant meat in a dull and stodgy sauce full of distracting mushrooms. A bowl each of fluffy steamed jasmine rice rounds the course off.

The DJ seems to sense our engorgement, and lays on a brace of the most stylish cosmic disco he can dig out. It gels perfectly with our delicate and delicious deserts, a light and natural pomelo and mango consommé, and a trio of fresh sorbets. After the heady rush of flavour that preceded it, dessert is a relaxing and refreshing affair. We risk one more set of cocktails, a soothing Lychee martini each, before I pack off my guest in a taxi and retire to the room.

A TASTE OF THE EMIRATES

IN the low light, and overwhelmed by the hospitality, I fall asleep quickly in the large, cool bed and wake up just in time for breakfast. I wind my way through the palace corridors (it really is quite a long way) to the Vendome brasserie, a slightly garish and ornate hotel restaurant. Here a grand spread is laid out, of pastries, cereals, fruits, meats, eggs and preserves.

Afterwards, while nibbling - poolside -

at a stick of melon, I contemplate this dry state. The Abu Dhabi branches of the Louvre and the Guggenheim have already had their foundations laid. I really do hope it all succeeds, but it begs the question: what part do the

Emirati artists, architects and visionaries play in all this?

In the tangential hope of finding some answers, I wangle an audience with the chef at Mezlai, the Emirates Palace's traditional Emirati restaurant. Despite having lived in Abu Dhabi for the best part of

two decades, I'd never been offered Emirati food (even when eating with my Emirati friends). It's billed as the first Emirati restaurant in the UAE, and it certainly looks the part, its airy lounges opening out onto the beach.

Chef Ali, star of his own cooking show on a national station, explains (in broken English) how Emirati food reflects the originally nomadic nature of the people. It draws on meals common throughout the Arab world, adapting them to the meats and distinctive spices indigenous to the region. There are no vegetables in Emirati cooking, he assures me, only dates and meat. Knowing this, I had to try it.

We head to the kitchen, where I get a forkful of some delicious slow-roasted lamb encrusted with local herbs, full of zing and earth. Apparently Kraft cheese is a staple food for the Emiratis, and I try a thin pancake stuffed with it, drizzled with an orange and saffron sauce. Then in savoury mode, khobz rigag, thin pita bread sandwiching Kraft, egg and a blend of herbs called zattar. To finish, a palate-cleansing glass of aseeda, a curious dessert of cardamom and saffron. It's fantastic, original and above all unique.

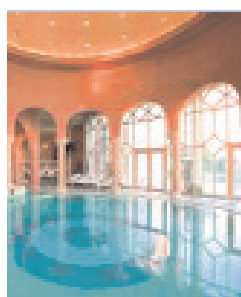
On checking out, the golden hum of the lobby is disrupted by a procession of diplomats. The Emirates Palace is a stately venue, for sure, but it's also one that offers comfort and a brace of sumptuous experiences, from eating at a world-class Chinese to lounging about on a kilometre-long beach. Perhaps the sea views aren't quite as stunning as Egypt's, or the dining as faultless as London's. But I would say it offers luxury at its most natural. Rooms from £330 per night incl breakfast. ITC Classics (www.itclasics.co.uk) offers 5 nights at Emirates Palace from £989pp. Includes daily half board, flights with Etihad from Heathrow and private transfers. Book by 15 March 2011 and save £545 per person. Valid for travel until 28th December 2011.



TRAVEL NOTES | by Zoe Strimpel

Dukan Diet's idyll

Let us hope the troubles in Tunisia are over soon. The year's must-do diet has launched a residential programme in Tunisia at the idyllic Residence Tunis. The three-part plan will see you drop pounds through reducing carbohydrate and fat, gorging on 28 different vegetables and eventually, resuming your normal diet. One for later this year, hopefully. From £2,370 for programme residents, excluding flights. 01244 202 000; www.seasons.co.uk.



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Mexican haven opens

Nestled in the mountains north of Mexico City in a town founded in 1542 by a Franciscan monk sits the new super elegant boutique Rosewood San Miguel de Allende. With just 67 rooms, five restaurants, an impressive spa and the option to go hiking and riding, the resort is a delicious mixture of fine dining, luxury, intimacy and activity. Colonial Rooms start at £189 including breakfast, a 25 per cent discount on spa treatments and valet parking.

