

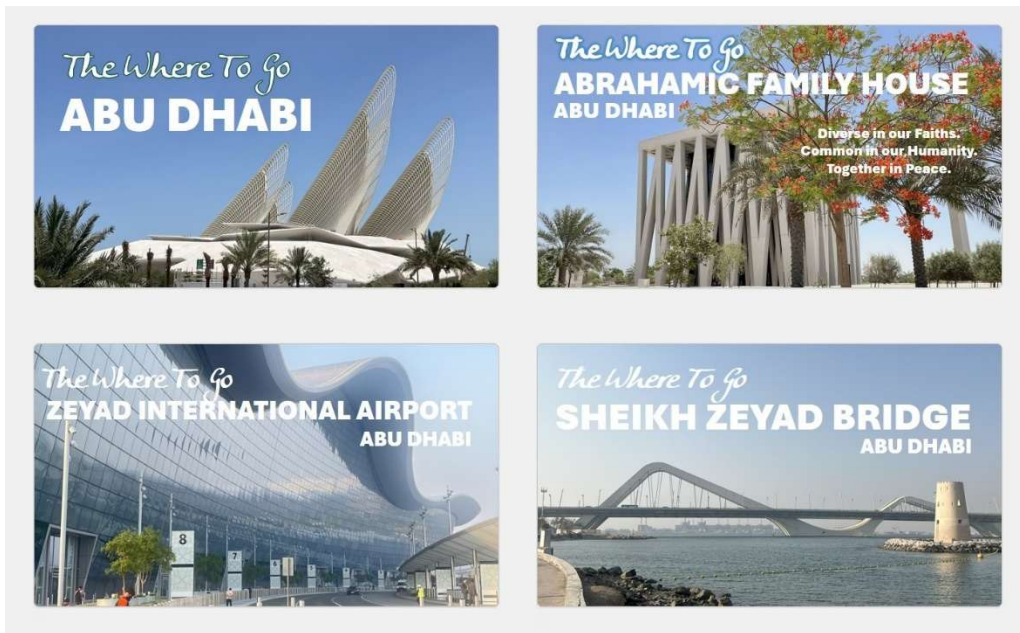
# ABU DHABI ENCOUNTERS



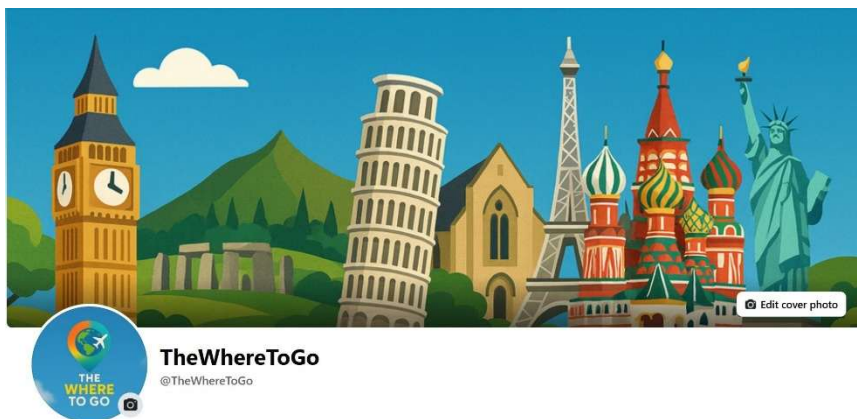
## The inside cover for your information.....



Abu Dhabi Encounters is just one of a series of documentary travel guides under 'The Where To Go' banner. You can also find curated videos of the different places visited in Abu Dhabi on my YouTube at [www.youtube.com/@thewheretogo](http://www.youtube.com/@thewheretogo). Please feel free to like and subscribe.



You will also find up to date information about my worldwide travels on my dedicated Facebook page at [www.facebook.com/TheWhereToGo](http://www.facebook.com/TheWhereToGo).



## **Introduction**

Abu Dhabi is the capital of the United Arab Emirates although I had to check that out because I thought it was Dubai. The story begins not with gleaming towers, but with the Bani Yas tribe who established a settlement around a precious freshwater source in the 1760s. For centuries, life revolved around pearl diving, fishing and modest trade along the shores of the Arabian Gulf.

The trajectory of Abu Dhabi, and indeed the entire UAE, changed irrevocably with the discovery of oil in 1958, followed by significant exports commencing in 1962. The late Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan ascended as Ruler of Abu Dhabi in 1966 and became the first President of the newly formed UAE in 1971. Recognizing the finite nature of oil wealth, Sheikh Zayed possessed extraordinary foresight.

He embarked on a monumental nation-building project, investing oil revenues into essential infrastructure, education, healthcare and social welfare, transforming the sparse coastal settlement into a burgeoning modern city. His vision was rooted not just in development, but in sustainability, pioneering initiatives like the establishment of protected reserves and large-scale greening projects in the desert.

Today, Abu Dhabi stands as a testament to that vision and the promise of even grander ambitions. While oil and gas remain vital economic pillars, the emirate is fiercely pursuing diversification through its comprehensive Abu Dhabi Economic Vision 2030. Key ambitions include positioning Abu Dhabi as a global hub for finance, industry, innovation, culture and world-class tourism.

The Saadiyat Cultural District which houses the Louvre Abu Dhabi and future homes to the Guggenheim Abu Dhabi and Zayed National Museum, represents a multi-billion investment in becoming a global centre for art and ideas. Meanwhile the city honours its Islamic heritage through memorials, monuments and landmarks such as the Sheikh Zayed Grand Mosque

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## Abu Dhabi Airport



Abu Dhabi International Airport (AUH) renamed as Zayed International Airport stands as a proud symbol of the emirate's global ambitions and rapid development. While commercial operations began in January 1982, its origins lie in the Al Bateen Executive Airport which was a British military airfield established in the late 1960s.

The airport has undergone massive expansion recently including the highly ambitious and long-awaited Midfield Terminal Building (MTB) and now known as Terminal A. The terminal design evokes the rolling sand dunes of the desert in the region. Construction began in 2012, and the terminal was eventually opened in October 2023.

The new terminal is one of the largest in the world and is capable of handling 45 million passengers per year and has the capacity to handle 79 aircraft simultaneously. The airport terminal has provision for biometric check-in and boarding, automated traveller registration and advanced facial recognition technology. It even managed to make an appearance in Mission: Impossible – Dead Reckoning Part One.



## Abu Dhabi Corniche



The Abu Dhabi Corniche is the city's glittering urban waterfront and runs along 5 miles (8 kilometres) of the city's seafront offering lush parklands shaded by palm trees, children's play areas, dedicated cycling and running paths and numerous fountains and sculptures along the way. Prior to its development, the coastline was largely undeveloped.

The monumental project, completed in 2004, involved reclaiming approximately 80% of its current land area from the Persian Gulf. The project also included imported sand for the beaches and sophisticated desalinated water irrigation systems maintaining the vibrant greenery against the arid climate.

The Corniche is a testament to the vision of creating world-class public spaces.

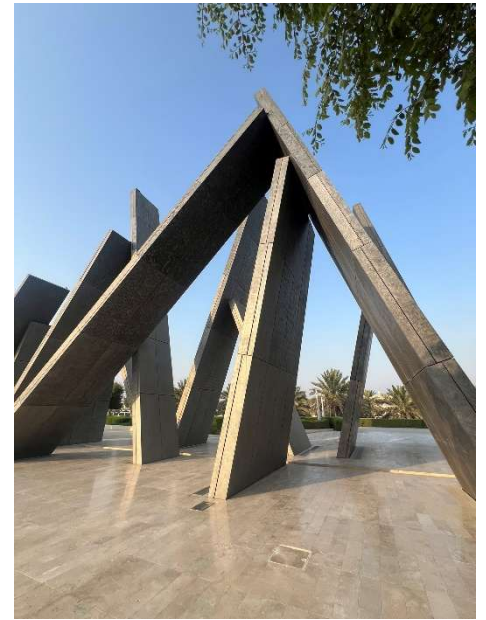
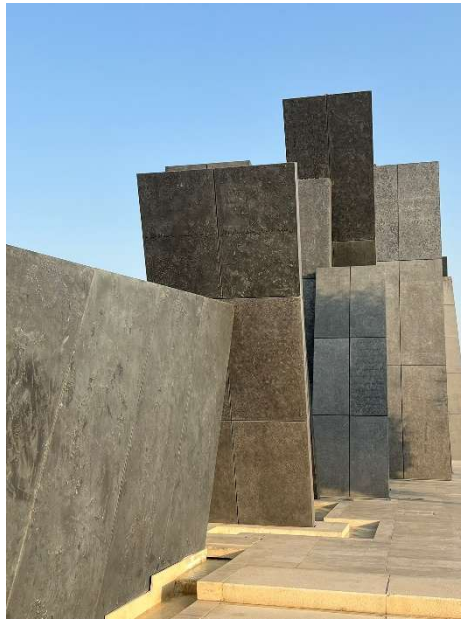


## Wahat Al Karama

Wahat Al Karama can be translated as Oasis of Dignity and is a war memorial and monument dedicated to Emiratis (including soldiers, police, fire, diplomats and civilians) who sacrificed their lives in service to the nation since the UAE was founded in 1971. The site is thoughtfully situated opposite Sheikh Zayed Grand Mosque and next door to the Ministry of Defence and the UAE Armed Forces General Headquarters.



The site was inaugurated in November 2016 and was designed by the British artist Idris Khan and won an award for its fusion of art and cultural symbolism.



The memorial comprises three key structures:

*The Leaning Pillars which comprise 31 aluminium-clad tablets leaning against each other to symbolize unity and mutual support between the UAE's leadership, citizens and armed forces. The tablets are engraved with poems and quotes by UAE leaders, including Sheikhs Zayed and Mohammed bin Rashid.*



*The Pavilion of Honour is a circular space with 2,800 aluminium plates reclaimed from military vehicles which are each inscribed with a martyr's name, rank and date of death. In the centre of the building there are seven glass panels to represent the emirates which are surrounded by a reflective water pool.*

*The Memorial Plaza is a stone plaza with a shallow pool mirroring the Grand Mosque and pillars in the distance. The area regularly hosts commemorative events and ceremonies including the Annual Commemoration Day on November 30 where leaders gather for ceremonies such as flag-lowering, wreath-laying, and military displays.*

This place is a beautiful memorial offering exceptional views across to the Grand Mosque and a fitting reminder that tolerance calls upon people to respect others across divisions of race, religion, nationality and geographical boundaries as well as strengthening the common bonds of shared humanity. The adjoining visitor centre offers further insight into the intention and purpose of the memorial.



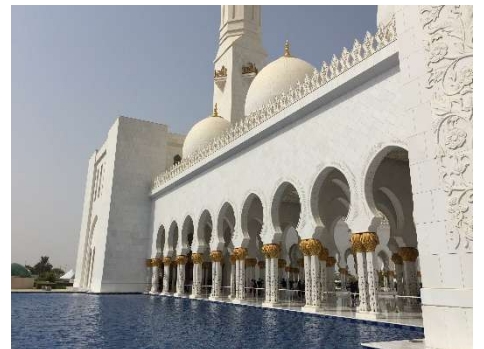
## Sheikh Zayed Grand Mosque



The Sheikh Zayed Grand Mosque is an awe-inspiring monument to faith, unity and breathtaking Islamic architecture, welcoming visitors of all beliefs. It was conceived by the UAE's Founding Father, Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan and its primary purpose was to establish a structure that culturally unites the Islamic world while embracing other civilisations.

Construction began in 1996 and involved thousands of workers and artisans from around the world with the project completed in 2007. The sheer scale of the mosque is staggering as it can accommodate over 40,000 worshippers and features 82 pristine white marble domes of varying sizes, over 1,000 columns inlaid with semi-precious stones and the largest hand-knotted carpet which took two years to finish.

The main prayer hall houses seven immense, gold-plated Swarovski crystal chandeliers with the largest weighing in at approximately 12 tons. Uniquely, the mosque incorporates architectural styles from different Muslim civilisations including Mamluk, Ottoman and Fatimid. Outside, the reflective pools surrounding the mosque add to the beauty and serenity of the building .... this is not to be missed.





## Sheikh Zayed Bridge

The Sheikh Zayed Bridge is a landmark architectural marvel in Abu Dhabi. The bridge connects Abu Dhabi Island to the mainland, spanning the Maqta Channel. The bridge was designed by the renowned Iraqi-British architect, Zaha Hadid.

The bridge is well known for its striking design mimicking a 'sinusoidal waveform' inspired by the undulating sand dunes of the UAE desert. The bridge is 2800 feet (840 metres) long and accommodates eight lanes handling an average of 16000 vehicles per hour ..... there is also a pedestrian walkway.

The bridge was started in 1997 after Zaha Hadid won the commission. However, the bridge faced significant delays due to the complexity of the design. It was not completed until 2008 and officially opened in November 2010 in the presence of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II



## The Abrahamic Family House



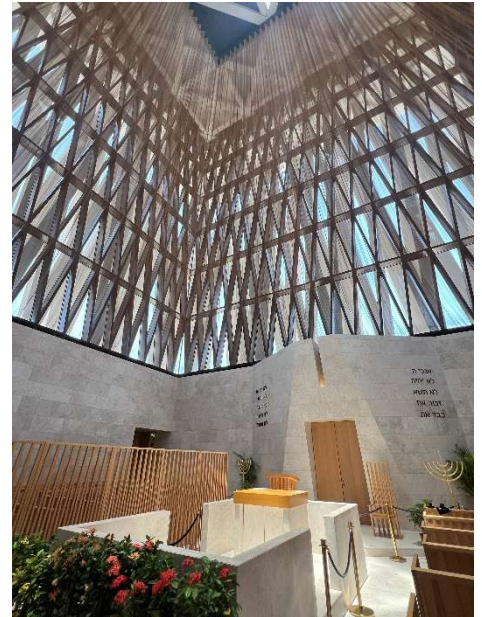
The Abrahamic Family House is a groundbreaking interfaith complex situated on the Saadiyat Island which is considered to be Abu Dhabi's new cultural centre and already houses the Louvre and (soon) the new UAE National Museum to be known as the Zayed National Museum. The site houses a mosque, a church and the UAE's first purpose-built, federally sanctioned synagogue in one unified architectural space.

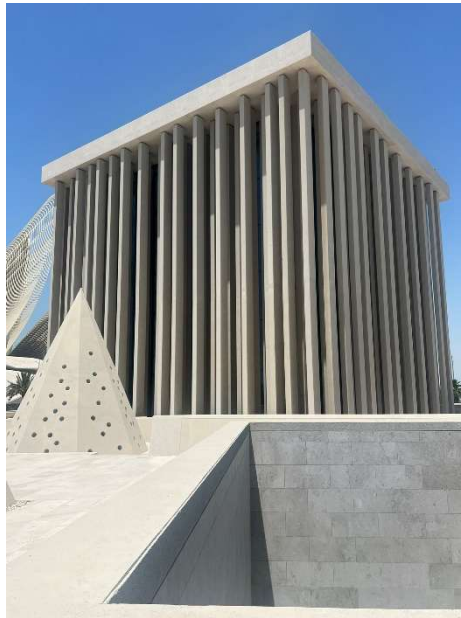
The Abrahamic Family House opened in 2023 and embodies the UAE's commitment to interfaith dialogue, peace and coexistence among Islam, Christianity, and Judaism. The site was inspired by the 2019 'Document on Human Fraternity' which was co-signed by Pope Francis and Grand Imam Ahmed El-Tayeb in Abu Dhabi with the intention of promoting global interfaith tolerance.



The design competition was won by the Ghanaian-British architect Sir David Adjaye and includes three 30m x 30m x 30m buildings representing the mosque, church, and synagogue. The whole site is arranged around a shared raised garden symbolising common ground. Downstairs is a shared underground space called the Forum which is used as an exhibition centre, education space and a forum for dialogue.

The purpose of the space is to support interfaith coexistence and foster mutual respect through a shared space while honouring distinct traditions. Entry is free but you need to book in advance. The dress code is modest and respectful attire. Combs are not allowed.... who would have thought that a comb might be considered as an offensive weapon?





## The Louvre

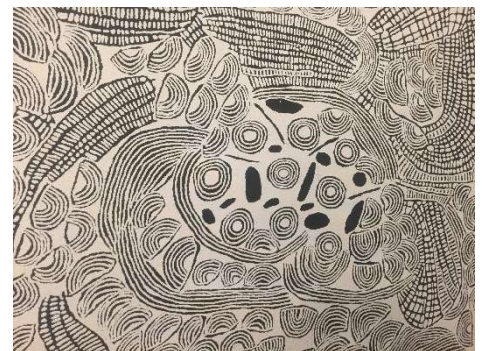
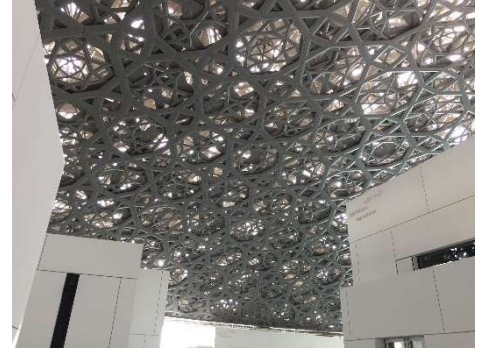


The Louvre Abu Dhabi is not just a branch of the Parisian institution but a revolutionary cultural beacon and the very first universal museum in the Arab World. The project arose from an unprecedented 30-year intergovernmental agreement which was signed in 2007. The Louvre officially opened on the Saadiyat Island in November 2017.

The Louvre's mission is to tell the story of humanity's shared artistic endeavour across cultures and civilisations confirming that we share more things that are common than different. The building was designed by Pritzker Prize winner Jean Nouvel who is a French architect who places great importance on designing a building harmonious with its surroundings.

One of the most iconic features of the Louvre is the vast, silvery dome which is composed of eight complex layers of 7850 unique stainless-steel stars. This creates a mesmerising 'Rain of Light' effect as sunlight filters through and looks like sunlight appearing through palm fronds in an oasis. The dome appears to float above the museum city which consists of a cluster of 55 white buildings inspired by traditional Arab medinas.

Inside, the collection spans millennia, from prehistoric artefacts to contemporary works, presented in thematically curated galleries rather than by geography or period. One of my favourite displays is the one showing a Virgin and Child painting alongside a Qur'anic manuscript. There is something to amaze and interest at every turn.





## The Saadiyat Cultural District

The Saadiyat Island's Cultural District is Abu Dhabi's most ambitious and visionary project, aiming to position the emirate as a global hub for arts, culture, and education. This is already the home of the Abrahamic Family House, the Louvre Abu Dhabi and TeamLab Phenomena which opened in April 2025 and describes itself as 'A Universe of Living Art' and features immersive art exhibitions.

This sprawling complex is built on reclaimed land and the district's masterplan includes other major institutions including the Guggenheim Abu Dhabi, designed by Frank Gehry focusing on global modern and contemporary art within a context of the Middle East as well as the Zayed National Museum, designed by Foster & Partners, dedicated to celebrating the history, culture and transformation of the UAE.

Building works continue unabated and, when finished, the district will also house the Natural History Museum, the Berklee Music College and the Manarat Al Saadiyat Community Centre as well as performing arts centres, galleries and educational facilities with a strong commitment to sustainability and environmental conservation.



## Emirates Palace Hotel



The Emirates Palace, now managed by Mandarin Oriental but retaining its iconic name, is the epitome of palatial luxury in Abu Dhabi. The hotel was commissioned by the Abu Dhabi government as a showcase of Arabian hospitality and grandeur. The hotel was designed by renowned architect John Elliott and opened in 2005 after an estimated construction cost exceeding £2 billion.

The hotel blends classical Arabian design with modern luxury on a staggering scale. The hotel stretches over one kilometre from wing to wing and boasts 1002 custom-made chandeliers, vast quantities of marble, mother-of-pearl inlays and significant quantities of 22-carat gold leaf used throughout the interior. It features 394 rooms and suites, pristine private beaches, landscaped gardens and its own helipad.

The only reason that I am mentioning this place is not because I could afford to stay for a night but because I was invited there for afternoon tea and encouraged (actually coerced) to try out one of their bespoke gold-flaked Palace Cappuccinos. If the thought of golden sprinkles on your coffee is not bad enough let me tell you that the taste was a lot worse.



## Summary

I must say that I have fully enjoyed my trips to Abu Dhabi and each time I visit I fall a little bit more in love with the place. I continue to be impressed with the speed with which this capital city is moving forward while maintaining its humble heritage. My most recent visit through Zayed International Airport (Terminal A) is testament to the pace of modernisation with its dune-inspired architecture and cutting-edge technology.

The city's beauty is fully evidenced along the reclaimed Corniche with its parks, beaches and pathways, and the inspiring Sheikh Zayed Grand Mosque with its white marble, intricate details and serene pools, as well as the very moving Wahat Al Karama memorial, honouring national sacrifice with its Pavilion of Honour and poignant leaning pillars.

Abu Dhabi's cultural ambitions can be seen on Saadiyat Island where the Louvre Abu Dhabi, crowned by its mesmerizing 'rain of light' dome, presents humanity's shared artistic story. Nearby, the groundbreaking Abrahamic Family House, housing a mosque, a church and a synagogue around a shared garden, embodies interfaith harmony.

Witnessing the ongoing development of the Saadiyat Cultural District, future home to the Guggenheim and Zayed National Museum, highlights the emirate's commitment and determination to becoming a global arts hub. The experience concluded with a touch of opulence at the Emirates Palace, where the sheer scale and lavish details (including a far-too memorable gold-flaked cappuccino!) offered a glimpse into legendary Arabian hospitality...at a price.

From its poignant memorials and majestic mosques to its avant-garde museums and ambitious urban projects, Abu Dhabi presented a compelling narrative of cultural dialogue and awe-inspiring transformation. On my most recent visit I flew from KSA to UK courtesy of Etihad Airways and took advantage of their Abu Dhabi stopover. If you get the chance to do the same, then I would highly recommend it to you.



## The outside cover if you enjoyed this guide.....



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