

Out of the shadow

Abu Dhabi's city fathers attempt to create a cultural environment to turn the tables on its hitherto glitzy northern neighbour. Amber Melville-Brown pays a visit

Aficionados of the 1985 film *Brazil* will recall that in the final scene its hero bursts out of the confines of the Dystopian city in which he does what passes for living among the grime and the crime. As he hurtles along the road to freedom, brightly-coloured roadside hoardings sarcastically advertise what life could be like while obscuring the dirt and despair behind them. Yes, his escape is in his mind, but we're rooting for him to make it nonetheless.

The exit from Dubai is not dissimilar. Driving out of the thick soup of the city's smog, you dodge the clutches of the jagged-toothed towers and avoid entanglement in the electricity pylons standing like giant guards at the city's extremities. Having escaped being enmeshed in their net of heavy metal wires, you flash past billboards promising the beautiful Mediterranean life of the future, which lose their confidence as you put your foot down until they eventually peter out, giving up all hope of convincing you that they can ever really supply what they offer.

Breathing a sigh of relief, despite desert on the left, desert on the right and a long, busy and dangerous road ahead, you realise that you are finally on your way to Abu Dhabi.

Depending on your adherence to speed limits, Abu Dhabi is slightly more than an hour's desperate drive away from Dubai. Overturned cars along the route are evidence of the tendency to (a) speed, (b) drive too close to the car in front, (c) undertake, (d) doze off and (e) according to one source, allow the car's air-conditioning to reach the parts that it normally doesn't, with locals driving with feet on dashboard and a cool breeze up the dishdasha.

Avoiding these perils, the emirate of Abu Dhabi welcomes you not with any obvious sign but with a gradual greening of the central reservation as a taster of the manicured pleasures

awaiting you in the city itself. Many domed mosques – like petrol stations in the UK catering for those on both sides of the motorway – appear on left and right until you hit the almost completed awe-inspiring Sheikh Zayed Bin Sultan Al Nahyan Mosque, a fantastic ice-white creation, which to the western eye, is a cross between a fairytale castle and the most fantastic wedding cake one could possibly design.

Finding a corniche

The Abu Dhabi visitor is immediately struck by the lower-rise, laid-back attitude of the city compared to Dubai. On first impression, it is like driving into Bournemouth in the UK, although that is not meant in an unkind way. The high rises of Abu Dhabi differ from those of Dubai in two ways – first they are not as ostentatious, and second they are for the most part, completed. The roads are clean and, instead of Dubai's building detritus are bordered with brightly coloured flower-beds, as is the Corniche, the verdant tree-lined coast road.

The lack of glitz and glamour in Abu Dhabi compared to its Las Vegas-style cousin is surprising given that statistics suggest that every one of Abu Dhabi's 420,000 citizens is – at least on paper – worth millions of dollars. The emirate has been slow to flaunt its wealth but there are signs that it may, perhaps in a more subtle way, invite others in to enjoy some of it. The gorgeous pink stone palace that is the Emirates Palace Hotel is a very good place to start.

According to its new marketing director, Janet Abrahams, the Kempinski operated hotel offers to those bored of Dubai and its construction, "a flavour of true Arabia". Housing 394 rooms and suites the hotel's marble floors, strewn with elegant sofas, decorated with exotic flower arrangements and lit by crystal chandeliers, seem to go on for ever.



Indeed, even when at capacity, guests can walk for what feels like miles without meeting another living soul.

Mark Fuller, London restaurateur and owner of London's Embassy Club, which has opened a branch of the swinging hot spot in the hotel, described it as not unlike the Overlook Hotel in the film *The Shining*. Luckily, there are no small children riding tricycles, no weird identical twin ghosts, and certainly no axe-wielding Jack Nicholson.

The launch of the Embassy Club, which will feature a restaurant during the day and evening and a nightclub



The entrance to the gorgeous pink stone palace

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is a collection of stilted platforms on interconnecting platforms on the sand. Here, diners can enjoy the a post-prandial hubble-bubble pipe without overly offending others as the sickly sweet smoke rises on the soft seaside air and away over the water.

They can also opt for an à-la-carte choice or be tempted to put the chef through his paces by ordering a grilled platters of meat or fish, or a combination of the two, with side dishes. A salad buffet starter should be approached with caution in light of the mammoth gastronomic journey ahead.

The meat platter is not a selection of tasters of the steak, lamb chops, grilled chicken and koftas; each perfectly grilled piece is almost as large as if it had not arrived as part of a group but had intended to impress you alone. The same can be said of the fish platter; huge prawns jostle for space alongside hunks of hammour, thick slices of salmon and tranches of tuna. The delicately spiced sides of rice hardly got a look in while the desert buffet, to our regret, should have been shunned but wasn't.

We asked our delightful Egyptian waiter whether Al Qasar was catering for Americans. With disarming naivety he asked: “Why, do they eat a lot too?” explaining, “this is for the Arab appetite.”

There are no doubt good historical reasons why gentlemen of the UAE wear the Kandura – known by the expats as the dishdasha – and Al Qasar is another reason to add to that list. The Kandura can hide a multitude of sins, and it will certainly need to, to disguise the burgeoning belly with which you will leave the waterside grill restaurant at Abu Dhabi's Emirates Palace. ●

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later, is part of a phase of development in the hotel aimed at reflecting what Fuller describes as Abu Dhabi's “forward-thinking” attitude, which he expects will mean that the destination is more than just the Las Vegas-style resort that Dubai has become.

Opera to pop

Abrahams agrees: “Last year, the hotel was host to the operas Carmen and Aida and next year we are intending to put on at least five musical extravaganzas, from opera to pop”. The year's events will start with a concert by pop legend Sir

Elton John, who, in addition to receiving a gong from the British monarch, has, according to Abrahams, also taken tea with Abu Dhabi's rulers.

Food and beverage director, Jean-Pierre Garat says there has been a demand from both inside and outside the hotel for new and different dining experiences. He was keen to complement the authentic Arabian atmosphere of the hotel with locally sourced food cooked in a traditional way. Kicking of this latest phase is the just opened BBQ Al Qasar.

Set against the backdrop of the floodlit rose stone of the magnificently-domed hotel, the “restaurant”