

Al Ain is a desert oasis that's just a bus ride away from Abu Dhabi. *Photo by Amilia Pradeep*



An Oasis for Everyone

An ideal day trip from Abu Dhabi, Al Ain will make sure you get your day's worth with its eclectic activities involving mountains, markets, museums, and the world's largest surf pool.

By **CHRISTINA FERNANDES**



Splashing fun at Green Mubazzarah park at the foot of Jebel Hafeet, the UAE's second highest mountain. *Photo by Christina Fernandes*

Driving through seemingly endless desert dunes towards the landlocked city of Al Ain, vegetation suddenly begins to increase. As you get closer, you can spot mountains covered in green. Eventually, you come across fully-fledged plantations and forested areas.

These are the polar opposites of the parched little trees and brushes that dot the desert dunes in other parts of the UAE. Instead, think luscious banana leaves, juicy grasses, and green palm trees. Given this natural richness, it is unsurprising that civilizations have made the city their home since around 4,000 BC. It is also a favorite weekend and

holiday spot for local residents from Abu Dhabi and Dubai, both of which are less than an hour and a half's drive away.

Of late, Al Ain has established itself as the go-to destination for adventure and outdoor enthusiasts who climb its mountains and flock to **Wadi Adventure**, a leisure park featuring the world's largest man-made white water channels. In addition to rafting, visitors can also make use of the world's largest surf pool, an aerial obstacle course, a family pool and a low ropes obstacle course. (Entrance Fee: adults \$13.5, kids \$6.75; additional costs apply for activities)



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Did you know ? The cartoon character Garfield frequently banished his nemesis, the kitten Nermal, to Abu Dhabi.



CLOCKWISE: *Al Ain's lush foliage.* Photo by Charles Roffry. *And various fauna.* Photo by Shankar. Check out the World's largest man-made white water channels at Wadi Adventure. Or the wildlife at Al Ain Zoo. Photo by Pelican

Don't Miss!

The Sheikh Zayed Grand Mosque, which holds three world records: the world's largest dome, the world's largest chandelier, and the world's largest carpet.

A stroll along Abu Dhabi's 6.4 km-long corniche, a great place to watch the sunset.



Another great outdoor spot is **Green Mubazzarah** park, at the foot of Jebel Hafeet, the UAE's second highest mountain. Natural hot springs flow out of its greenery, and on weekends and holidays their streams are filled with kids splashing water on each other. Hardier visitors even trek the 1,240 meters up to Jebel Hafeet's limestone peak from here. (Entrance is free)

If you are looking for wildlife, **Al Ain Zoo**, the largest in the UAE, is the place to go. It is home to more than 4,000 animals and offers various activities including giraffe feeding, a petting zoo, and camel rides. (Entrance fee: adults \$5.5, kids aged 3-12 - \$2.75, kids under 3 - free).

While you are free to visit any of the city's seven oases, its largest oasis and namesake, **Al**

Ain Oasis, is most convenient because of its central location. Its 1,200 hectare expanse is home to quiet walkways, a 3,000-year-old falaj irrigation system, several working plantations, as well as 147,000 palm trees of almost 100 varieties. (Entrance is free)

Right next to it is the **Al Ain National Museum**, where visitors can trace the city's history and heritage. (Entrance fee: adults - \$0.25, kids under 10 - \$0.8) The museum includes a number of artifacts from the Hili Archaeological Park, which is located 12km out of town. The remains of settlements and tombs dating back to 3,000 BC have been excavated here since the 1960s. (Entry Fee: \$0.25)

Those who want to blow off a bit of steam after a heavy dose of history can head to the adjacent **Hili Fun City**, a family park featuring

roller coasters and rides, picnic facilities, and the Al Ain Ice Rink. (Entrance Fee: \$15- Mon-Tue; \$16.5- Wed-Sat; free for children below a certain height).

If you're still interested in history, visit the **Sheikh Zayed Palace Museum** instead. This residence was built for the father of the UAE, HH Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan in 1937. It provides fascinating glimpses into the lives of the ruler and his family and there are several living quarters on display, including children's wards, several courtyards, and housing for guests. (Entrance is free)

More heritage can be enjoyed at **Souq Al Quattara**, located along the road linking Al Jimi and Al Quattara Oases. All visitors are welcomed with Arabic coffee and dates free of charge. This is a great spot to buy traditional

CLOCKWISE: *Al Ain's mountains.*
Photo by Amilia Paradeep. Livestock Market Photo by Charles Roffrey. Al Jahili Fort Photo by GordonTour



ICONIC FOOD

Harees is a porridge-like dish made of ground wheat and chicken cooked in a clay pot over an open fire for several hours.

SIDE TRIP

For complete relaxation and breathtaking desert dunes, head to Liwa Oasis, located two hours south of Abu Dhabi.



handicrafts, taste Emirati food, and watch local men perform the traditional Ayala dance (a kind of folk dance with sticks). Pony and sometimes camel rides are also on offer. (Entrance is free)

Al Ain is also home to a number of forts—**Al Jahili Fort** is the largest and most popular. It was built in the 19th century by Sheikh Zayed the First and is located in the center of the city. (Entrance is free for kids, adults - \$0.25)

Another must-see is the camel market, located within the **Al Ain Livestock Market**. It is one of the last of its kind in the UAE and visitors can observe traders and buyers discussing the prices and merits of the animals. (Entrance is free)

In Al Ain, ancient man-made structures and natural beauty go hand in hand. Whether you're a history buff, outdoor enthusiast or a culture lover, the UAE's fourth largest city serves up offerings for all tastes—and it does so with its quintessential, laid-back charm. ■

HOW TO GET TO AL AIN: *From Abu Dhabi by public transport, take Eastern Region Bus Service's express bus number X90 which operates from 4:30 a.m. until midnight and costs \$6.75 one way. From Dubai take the Al Ghazal bus, which takes one hour and 45 minutes, operates between 5:40 a.m. and 11 p.m. and costs \$5.5. A taxi from either Dubai or Abu Dhabi will take about one and a half hours and cost between \$95-109.*



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