PACK LIGHTLY

THE HONEST EDITION

United Arab Emirates

What a day really costs in one of the priciest cities on earth, what quietly doubles it, and how to see Dubai, Abu Dhabi and the desert without the resort markup.



p. 23 Pick your trip: eight paths, from a stopover to two weeks

p. 30 What quietly doubles your day budget, in one table

p. 40 The 24 to 48 hour stopover, planned to the metro stop

48 PAGES USD PRICES VISA-FREE 30 DAYS EDITION 2026.07

photo: Wikimedia Commons / Francisco Anzola

Start here

the shape of a UAE trip, what it costs, what to sort first


DUBAI SKYLINE FROM THE WATER

The Emirates is two cities and a desert, wrapped in one of the most expensive travel destinations on the planet. Dubai is the icon machine: the tallest building on earth, an artificial palm island, a metro that runs like clockwork, and a low-rise old town on a working creek that most visitors never find. An hour and a half south, Abu Dhabi is the quieter capital, all white marble mosque, a branch of the Louvre, and a long seafront Corniche. This guide is built to keep the cost sane: where the money goes, what silently doubles a day, and how to spend a stopover or a full week without paying the resort premium. All of it offline, in your pocket.

The shape of a trip

Most trips split Dubai and Abu Dhabi over four to six days, with a desert night and a day trip to Sharjah or the Hatta mountains. It is a stopover country and a week country in equal measure.

What a day costs

Backpacking is possible near 70 USD a day, mid-range runs about 180, and the city rewards spending far past that. The full receipt, bed to karak tea, is on page 30.

Sort before you fly

Most nationalities get a free 30-day entry stamp, so there is no visa to buy. Book flights and the first nights, add insurance and an eSIM, and leave the rest for the ground. Page 32 lists the order.


DESERT SAFARI, THE RED DUNES


OLD DUBAI, AL FAHIDI LANES

HOW THE LINKS WORK

Some booking links earn Pack Lightly a commission, at no extra cost to you. Full disclosure is on the last page.

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QUICK JUMPS

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What doubles your day budget 30

The stopover playbook, 24 to 48h 40

Your trip on one page

4 to 8 days · 70 to 500 USD/day · best Nov to Mar

If you read nothing else, this page is the trip. Most visits run Dubai first, drop south to Abu Dhabi for the mosque and the Louvre, spend a night in the desert, and add a day trip to Sharjah or the Hatta mountains. Budget from the bars below, not from the rooftop-bar rack rates, because this is a place where the same day can cost 70 dollars or 500. There is no visa to buy for most passports, so the only real pre-trip jobs are the flight, the first nights, insurance and an eSIM.

THE ROUTE

Dubai day 1-3 — 1.5h drive — **Abu Dhabi** day 4-5 — desert night — **Liwa dunes** day 6 — day trip — **Sharjah** day 7 — 1.5h drive — **Hatta** day 8

BUDGET PER DAY

Backpacker	70 USD
Standard	180 USD
Luxury	500 USD

BOOK FIRST

01	International flights, 6 to 8 weeks out	Aviasales
02	First nights in Dubai, before you land	Booking.com
03	eSIM, install before departure	Saily

BEST MONTHS

Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec

best: warm, dry, comfortable · shoulder: hot but bearable · peak summer heat, avoid

The UAE at a glance

scores 0-100 · pack-lightly country-comparison data

SCORECARD

Cities	90
Safety	90
Food and drinks	75
Culture	60
Nature	35
Budget friendly	30

Budget travel	70 USD/day
Mid-range	180 USD/day
Luxury	500 USD/day

CITY · BEACH · NIGHTLIFE · COUPLES · LUXURY · FAMILIES

source: country-comparison tool, 2026-07 · Gulf region avg 68

SIX FRAMES OF THE TRIP













01

The country

What the Emirates is, what it is not, who goes, and the four regions you actually plan around before you pick dates.

IN THIS CHAPTER

Seven emirates, four you plan around 07

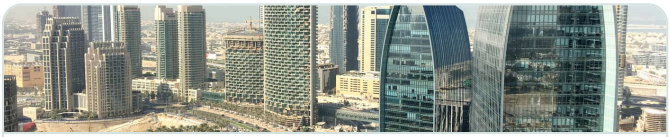
What the UAE is

~10M people · 7 emirates · a federation built in 50 years

A federation of seven emirates on the southern Gulf, formed in 1971, with about ten million residents of whom roughly one in ten is an Emirati citizen. Abu Dhabi is the capital and holds the oil; Dubai is the trade and tourism engine. This is the easy Middle East: safe, spotless, English everywhere, and a metro and highway network that make it one of the simplest countries in the region to travel. The trade-off is price and a thin layer of history. The headline sights are recent and engineered, the summer heat is genuinely dangerous, and a day can cost whatever you let it. This guide shows you the version that stays sane in 2026.

CAPITAL	POPULATION	CURRENCY	BEST MONTHS
Abu Dhabi	**~10M**	**AED**	**Nov-Mar**
Dubai is bigger	~90% expat	pegged, 1 USD = 3.67	avoid Jun-Aug

FOUR REGIONS, FOUR CHARACTERS



Dubai: the icon machine

hub · superlatives · a working creek

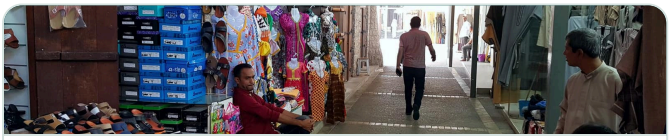
Where most trips start. The Burj Khalifa, the Palm, the Marina and the malls, plus an old town on Dubai Creek that the postcards skip.



Abu Dhabi: the calm capital

culture · marble · slower pace

The Sheikh Zayed Grand Mosque, the Louvre, a long Corniche, and the Liwa dunes running down to the Empty Quarter beyond.



Sharjah: the culture emirate

museums · heritage · dry

Twenty minutes from Dubai and a world away in tone: the best museums in the country, a restored old town, and no alcohol at all.



The mountains and east coast

Hatta · Jebel Jais · Fujairah reefs

The Hatta dam and hills, the country's highest peak at Jebel Jais, and the Fujairah and Khor Fakkan coast for diving on the Gulf of Oman.

WHO THIS GUIDE IS WRITTEN FOR

First-time visitor
5 to 7 days, Dubai and Abu Dhabi, a desert night and one day trip.

Stopover traveler
24 to 48 hours between flights on Emirates or Etihad, page 39.

Couple, mid to high
Icons by day, a rooftop and a dune dinner, cost managed on page 29.

Family
Theme parks on Yas Island, the aquarium, the beach, the metro.

02

Where to go

Two big cities, one old town most visitors miss, a mosque worth the drive, a museum under a floating dome, a desert night, and two day trips.

IN THIS CHAPTER

Dubai: the icons 09

Dubai: districts and the metro 10

Old Dubai and the Creek 11

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Hatta and the mountains 16

Dubai: the icons

the headline city · 2 to 3 nights · the superlatives



DUBAI SKYLINE AND THE BURJ

Dubai is a city built to be photographed, and the icons deliver exactly what they promise. The Burj Khalifa is the tallest building on earth at 828 metres, and the view from its observation decks over the desert-meets-sea sprawl is the one everyone books. Below it, the Dubai Fountain dances on the half-hour after dark, free, next to the mall that doubles as a small city with an aquarium and an indoor ski slope.

Offshore, the Palm Jumeirah is a man-made island in the shape of a palm tree, big enough to see from space, lined with hotels and topped by the Atlantis waterpark. The beach clubs of Jumeirah and the yacht-lined Marina are where the city relaxes. It is glossy, engineered and unapologetic, and it is best taken at face value: come for the spectacle, not the soul.

Book the Burj Khalifa online and off-peak. Prime sunset slots cost double the daytime ticket for the same view, page 29.

The Dubai Fountain show and the Marina walk are both free. Two of the best hours in the city cost nothing.

Burj Khalifa

The 828m tower. At the Top on level 124, or the pricier 148. Book ahead, off-peak.

The Palm and Atlantis

The palm-shaped island, the monorail, and the Aquaventure waterpark at the tip.

Downtown and the Fountain

Dubai Mall, the free fountain show after dark, and the tower lit above it all.

Dubai Marina

A canal of towers and yachts, a beach at JBR, and a dinner cruise if you want one.

GO DEEPER

The ranked picks in the Dubai city guide, the tower in the Burj Khalifa page, and the island in the Palm Jumeirah page.

Dubai: districts and the metro

where to base · how to move · the practical city



MARINA SKYLINE AT DUSK

Dubai is long and thin, strung along one coast road, and the district you sleep in shapes the trip more than the hotel does. Downtown puts the Burj and the mall on your doorstep. The Marina and JBR are the beach-and-nightlife end. Deira and Bur Dubai, the old quarters on the Creek, are cheaper, more characterful and where the budget beds hide. Pick by what you want to walk to, then let the metro do the rest.

The Dubai Metro is the traveller's secret weapon: driverless, spotless, air-conditioned, and cheap, with two lines that reach the airport, Downtown, the Marina and the Mall of the Emirates. A Nol card taps you onto the metro, trams and buses. It is the single best defence against the taxi bills that quietly wreck a Dubai budget.

Buy a red or silver Nol card at any metro station. The Gold cabin at the front of the train is worth the small premium at rush hour.

Careem and Uber both run in Dubai and beat street taxis on price certainty. The airport is 30 minutes from Downtown by metro for a couple of dollars.

Downtown

The Burj, the mall, the fountain. Central and pricey; everything on foot.

Marina and JBR

Beach, boardwalk and bars. The holiday end, well served by the tram and metro.

Deira and Bur Dubai

The old creek-side quarters: souks, cheaper rooms, and the real melting pot.

Jumeirah

Low-rise beach suburb, the public beaches, and the Burj Al Arab sail on the shore.

ON THE WEBSITE The beach end in the Dubai Marina guide, the centre in the Downtown Dubai guide, and the island link in the Palm Monorail page.

Old Dubai and the Creek

the city before the towers · half a day · almost free



DUBAI CREEK AND THE ABRAS



OLD DUBAI, AL FAHIDI LANES

The half of Dubai the skyline photos never show is the best-value morning in the city. Dubai grew up around the Creek, the saltwater inlet where pearl dhows once docked, and the old quarters on either bank still work as a low-rise, human-scale town. Cross the water on an abra, a wooden ferry, for about a quarter of a dollar, the cheapest ride in the Emirates and the most atmospheric.

On the Bur Dubai side, the Al Fahidi Historical Neighbourhood is a maze of restored coral-and-gypsum houses with wind towers, the region's original air-conditioning, now full of courtyard cafes and small museums. The gold and spice souks crowd the Deira bank across the water. It is the one part of the city that predates the oil, and it costs almost nothing to see.

Take the abra across the Creek for 1 dirham, then walk both souks. The whole morning costs less than a single coffee Downtown.

Al Fahidi (Bastakiya)

Wind-tower houses, courtyard cafes, and the coffee museum, best early before the heat.

The abra crossing

A wooden ferry over the Creek for 1 dirham. Sit at the back for the skyline shot.

Gold and spice souks

The Deira markets: window-shop the gold, haggle the spices, buy little, watch a lot.

READ ON The quieter side of the country in the off the beaten path guide, and how it ranks in the most beautiful places page.

photos: Wikimedia Commons

Abu Dhabi: mosque and Corniche

the capital · a day trip or 2 nights · calmer than Dubai


ABU DHABI, THE GRAND MOSQUE

Ninety minutes south of Dubai, Abu Dhabi trades spectacle for space and calm. The one unmissable sight is the Sheikh Zayed Grand Mosque, a vast white-marble building inlaid with flowers and gold, holding the world's largest hand-knotted carpet under 82 domes. It is free to enter, open to respectful visitors, and genuinely one of the most beautiful buildings in the modern world. Go late afternoon, when the marble turns warm and the crowds thin.

The rest of the capital rewards a slow day. The Corniche is an eight-kilometre seafront of parks, cycle paths and public beach. Qasr Al Watan, the working presidential palace, opens its gilded halls to visitors. It is the antidote to Dubai's intensity, and an easy day trip if you would rather not move hotels.

The Grand Mosque is free but strict: covered shoulders, knees and hair for women, long trousers for men. Robes are lent at the entrance.

The E101 bus runs Dubai to Abu Dhabi for a few dollars in about two hours. A rental car does it in ninety minutes.

Sheikh Zayed Mosque

82 domes, the world's largest carpet, free entry. The capital's one essential.

The Corniche

8km of seafront, cycle paths and a Blue Flag public beach. The best free afternoon.

Qasr Al Watan

The presidential palace opened to visitors: gilded domes and a state library.

Yas Island

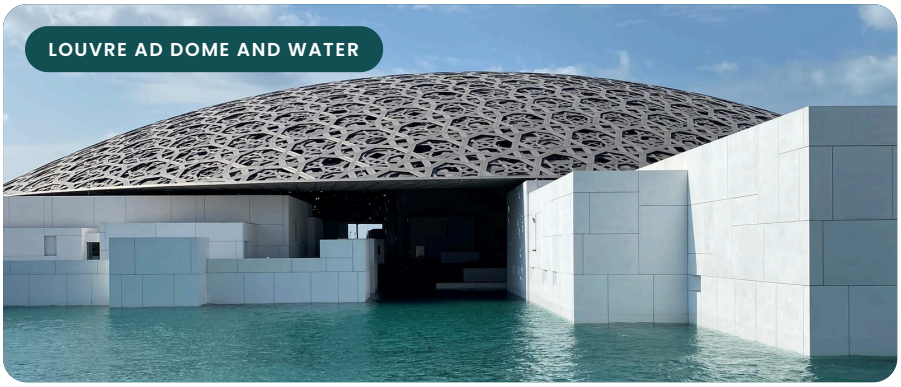
Ferrari World, the waterpark and the F1 circuit, for a family or a thrill day.

GO DEEPER

The full capital in the Abu Dhabi city guide, the mosque in the Grand Mosque page, the palace in the Qasr Al Watan page, and the parks in the Ferrari World page.

Louvre Abu Dhabi and the museums

Saadiyat Island · half a day · the culture district



On Saadiyat Island, the Louvre Abu Dhabi is the country's cultural statement and its best building. Jean Nouvel's silver dome, a 180-metre lattice of stars, filters the sun into a shifting rain of light over galleries that sit half in the sea. Inside, a genuinely global collection runs from ancient artefacts to modern masters, arranged by era rather than nation. It is the rare Emirati attraction that rewards a slow, thoughtful couple of hours.

Saadiyat is being built into a full museum quarter: the Zayed National Museum and a branch of the Guggenheim are rising alongside it, with the teamLab digital-art house already drawing crowds. Pair the Louvre with the island's quiet, protected beach, one of the best in the country, for a half-day that balances art and sea.

Give the Louvre at least two hours and go on a weekday morning. The dome light is best when the sun is high.

Saadiyat public beach is a protected turtle-nesting shore. Cleaner and calmer than the Dubai city beaches, and barely busy.

Louvre Abu Dhabi

The floating dome and a global collection by era. The one museum to prioritise.

teamLab Phenomena

An immersive digital-art house on the same island, a hit with families and phones.

Saadiyat beach

A protected, low-key shore next to the museums. The quiet counterweight to the art.

KEEP READING The museum in the Louvre Abu Dhabi page, the island in the Saadiyat Island guide, and the country's landmarks in the religious landmarks breakdown.

The desert safari

the dunes · an evening or an overnight · the one nature hit



DESERT SAFARI AT GOLDEN HOUR

Behind the glass towers, the real landscape is sand, and a desert evening is the trip's one genuine nature experience. The standard package collects you in a 4x4, bounces over the red dunes at golden hour, drops you for sandboarding and a camel photo, and lands at a camp for a barbecue, henna, and a show under the stars. It is packaged and a little theme-park, but the dunes at sunset are the real thing, and it is the memory most people take home.

Two upgrades are worth knowing. Skip the cheapest coach-and-crowd tours for a smaller-group operator; the ride and the camp are calmer. And for the actual desert, drive two hours to the Liwa oasis on the edge of the Empty Quarter, where the dunes tower 300 metres and the tour buses do not reach. An overnight there is the quiet version of the same night.

Book a small-group evening safari, not the cheapest coach tour. The difference is a calm dune drive versus a convoy and a queue.

Dune-bashing is bumpy. Skip a heavy meal beforehand, and travellers prone to motion sickness should ask for the front seat.

Evening dune safari

4x4 dune drive, sandboard, camel photo, and a camp barbecue. The classic half-day.

Overnight camp

Stay past the show for the stars and a still, cold dawn. Worth the extra night.

Liwa and the Empty Quarter

The real dunes, 300m high, two hours from Abu Dhabi and free of the crowds.

Al Marmoom

A conservation reserve near Dubai for a quieter dawn drive and desert wildlife.

READ ON The big dunes in the Liwa Dunes page, the wider oasis in the Liwa Oasis guide, and desert wildlife in the UAE wildlife breakdown.

Sharjah, the culture day trip

20 min from Dubai · half a day · the country's museums


SHARJAH, THE HEART OLD SOUQ

Twenty minutes north of Dubai, Sharjah is the emirate that kept the culture. Named a UNESCO cultural capital, it holds the best museums in the country and a restored old core, the Heart of Sharjah, where coral-walled lanes and a covered souk have been brought back rather than bulldozed. The Museum of Islamic Civilization, under a golden dome on the waterfront, is the standout, tracing science, faith and art across the Muslim world.

It is a different register from its neighbour: quieter, more conservative, and completely dry, with no alcohol sold or served anywhere in the emirate. That makes it a clear-headed half-day of galleries and heritage rather than a night out. Come for the museums and the old town, then head back to Dubai for dinner.

⚠

Sharjah is entirely alcohol-free and a touch more conservative on dress. Cover shoulders and knees, and plan a dry day.

Avoid the Dubai to Sharjah road at weekday rush hour; the border crawls. Mid-morning or a weekend is painless.

Museum of Islamic Civilization

The gold-domed waterfront museum, the best single collection in the UAE.

Heart of Sharjah

Restored coral lanes, the Blue Souk, and courtyard galleries. Walk it slowly.

Sharjah Art Museum

The largest art museum in the Gulf, strong on regional and Orientalist work.

MORE ON THE SITE

The picks in the Sharjah city guide, the gallery in the Sharjah Art Museum page, and the country's culture in the culture write-up.

Hatta and the mountains

90 min from Dubai · a day or overnight · the cool escape



HATTA MOUNTAINS AND THE DAM

When the coast is flat and hot, the Hajar Mountains are the antidote. Hatta, a Dubai exclave 90 minutes inland, sits among ochre peaks around a turquoise reservoir, and it is where locals go to hike, kayak and cool off. The dam and its bright-green water are the postcard; a kayak or pedal-boat out onto it is the easy highlight. A heritage village, mountain-bike trails and a via-ferrata round out an active day out of the city.

The bigger mountains sit further north. Jebel Jais in Ras Al Khaimah is the country's highest peak, home to a viewing road, a mountain coaster and the longest zipline in the world. Either makes a strong day trip or a cooler overnight, and both are a reminder that the Emirates is not all sand and glass.

Hatta is a Dubai enclave inside Oman's mountains, but the road stays inside the UAE. No border crossing and no Oman visa needed.

Go in a cooler month or early in the day. The kayaks and trails are miserable in the summer midday heat.

Hatta Dam

Turquoise reservoir, kayaks and pedal-boats. The photo and the highlight in one.

Hatta trails

Marked mountain-bike and hiking routes, a via-ferrata, and a restored heritage village.

Jebel Jais

The UAE's highest peak: a viewing road, a coaster, and the world's longest zipline.

East coast reefs

Fujairah and Khor Fakkan on the Gulf of Oman, for shore diving and a real beach.

THE FULL PICTURE

The hills in the Hatta guide, the trekking in the Hatta trekking page, the peak in the Jebel Jais zipline page, and the coast in the Fujairah guide.

03

What to do

How the days actually fill, the plates worth ordering, where to sleep in each city, and the tours that earn their price.

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What the UAE asks of your days 18

Food, the plates to order 19

Stay: Dubai and Abu Dhabi 20

Stay: the day-trip emirates 21

What the UAE asks you to do with your days

a city built for spectacle, sat next to a desert



PALM JUMEIRAH FROM ABOVE

The UAE is an indoor country half the year and an outdoor one the rest. From November to March the days run beach in the morning, sights in the afternoon, a rooftop or a dune dinner at night. From June to September the heat drives everything inside: the malls, the aquariums, the indoor ski slope, the museums. Plan the season and the trip plans itself.

The threshold experience that defines most visits is one of three. A desert safari, the one real nature hit. A day of icons, the Burj, the Palm and the fountain, spectacle taken at face value. Or a slower, cultural day in Abu Dhabi or old Dubai. The beaches are good but not the reason to come, and the diving off Fujairah is a bonus, not a headline. Pick one anchor and build around it.

⚠

In summer, midday outdoors is genuinely dangerous. Do the desert and the beach at dawn or dusk, and keep the middle of the day indoors.

The east coast at Fujairah has the only true shore-diving reefs. Pair it with a mountain day if you want a break from the cities.

A desert night

The dune drive, the camp dinner and the stars. The one experience nobody regrets.

A day of icons

Burj, Palm, fountain and mall. Spectacle without apology, best in one focused day.

Beaches and water

JBR and Jumeirah in Dubai, Saadiyat in Abu Dhabi. Warm sea, October to May.

Reefs and mountains

Shore diving off Fujairah, hiking and kayaks at Hatta and Jebel Jais.

KEEP READING The shore in the best beaches page, the reefs in the diving write-up, and the peaks in the UAE mountains page.

Food: the plates to order

mezze and machboos · every cuisine on earth · 3 to 22 USD a dish

Emirati food is a small, proud tradition inside one of the most international food cities on the planet. The local plates lean on rice, slow-cooked meat, dates and dried lime, shared from a communal platter. Around them sits everything else: Lebanese mezze, Indian and Pakistani canteens, Filipino and Iranian kitchens, and the fine-dining scene the towers are famous for. Eat cheap at the labour-camp canteens and karak stalls, splurge once on a rooftop, and order machboos at least once for the actual local dish. These six are the shortlist.



Machboos machboos

USD 10-22 · the national dish

Spiced rice slow-cooked with meat or fish, dried lime and a warm masala, the Emirati answer to biryani. Order it once from a proper local kitchen, ideally with a side of dates and gahwa coffee.

Shawarma

Shawarma shawarma

USD 3-7 · everywhere

Chicken or lamb shaved off the spit and rolled with garlic sauce and pickles. The cheapest good meal in the country and the late-night default across every neighbourhood.

Hummus

Hummus hummus

USD 4-10 · with any meal

The benchmark dip: chickpeas, tahini, lemon and olive oil, wiped up with warm bread. The anchor of any mezze table in the Lebanese spots that fill the city.

Mutabal

Mutabal mutabal

USD 4-10 · the smoky dip

Char-grilled aubergine blended with tahini and lemon, smokier and lighter than hummus. Order both and a stack of bread and you have a cheap, excellent meal for two.

Fattoush

Fattoush fattoush

USD 5-12 · the fresh one

A sharp Levantine salad of tomato, cucumber and herbs with crisp fried bread and a sumac tang. The plate that cuts through a table of rich dips and grilled meat.

Tabbouleh

Tabbouleh tabbouleh

USD 5-12 · herb salad

More parsley than grain: finely chopped herbs, bulgur, tomato and lemon. Light, green and everywhere, the standard side to any mezze spread or grill.

Finish with luqaimat, warm sweet dumplings in date syrup, and a cup of cardamom gahwa. The stalls in the old souks do them best.

Karak, sweet spiced milk tea, costs about a dirham at a roadside cafeteria. It is the real national drink and the best cheap ritual here.

ON THE WEBSITE

Dishes, drinks and where to eat them in the food and drinks guide, and the words to order them in the language page.

Where to stay: Dubai and Abu Dhabi

prices per night, double room · district beats stars

Two rules cover the cities. In Dubai, sleep on a metro line: Deira or Bur Dubai for budget and character, the Marina or Downtown if you want the beach or the icons on foot. In Abu Dhabi, most visitors stay near the Corniche or on Yas Island for the parks. Rates swing wildly by season and event, so pull live prices before you commit rather than trusting a printed number.

Dubai (Deira and the Creek)

hostel 18 USD **mid 75 USD** **comfort 200 USD**

The old creek-side quarters are the value play: cheaper rooms, real character, and the metro to everywhere. Compare Deira rooms on Stay22, or find a dorm on Hostelworld.

Abu Dhabi (Corniche)

hostel 20 USD **mid 80 USD** **comfort 220 USD**

Base near the Corniche for the beach, the mosque and the museums within easy reach. Check waterfront rooms on Stay22, or a budget bed on Hostelworld.

Hotels and apartments across both cities, with free cancellation while your dates are still moving.

Find Stays on Booking.com

TOURS WORTH PAYING FOR

Evening desert safari with live shows and BBQ

from 39 USD
5.0 (128 reviews)
6 hours

Burj Al Arab by jetski, Dubai coastline

from 64 USD
5.0 (293 reviews)
30 min

Abu Dhabi city tour, Grand Mosque and Emirates Palace

from 55 USD
5.0 (25 reviews)
5 hours

Live Viator tours, prices captured July 2026, ratings from verified bookings. Tap a card to book.

Where to stay: the day-trip emirates

prices per night, double room · a base beyond the two big cities

Most visitors sleep in Dubai or Abu Dhabi and treat the rest as day trips, which works well. If you want a slower base, three options stand out: Sharjah for museums and lower prices next door to Dubai, Ras Al Khaimah for the mountains and a quieter beach, and Fujairah on the east coast for the reefs. All three are cheaper than the headline cities and an easy drive from them.

Ras Al Khaimah (mountains and beach)

guesthouse 25 USD mid 70 USD resort 160 USD

The northern emirate pairs a real beach with the Jebel Jais mountains an hour inland, at resort prices well below Dubai. Compare rooms on Stay22, or a budget bed on Hostelworld.

Fujairah (the east coast reefs)

guesthouse 22 USD mid 65 USD resort 150 USD

The Gulf of Oman coast is the country's dive base, with warm water and shore reefs at Khor Fakkan. See coast rooms on Stay22, or a cheaper bed on Hostelworld.

Resorts and guesthouses across the northern and east-coast emirates, cancellable until a few days out.

Find Stays on Booking.com

TOURS WORTH PAYING FOR

The National Aquarium Abu Dhabi, admission ticket

from 35 USD

5.0 (23 reviews)

2 hours

Premium evening red-dune safari with BBQ dinner

from 45 USD

5.0 (20 reviews)

7 hours

Ras Al Khaimah banana boat ride

from 56 USD

5.0 (16 reviews)

10 min

Live Viator tours, prices captured July 2026, ratings from verified bookings. Tap a card to book.

04

Routes

Eight ways through the country, the week worth building around, a fuller loop with the desert and the coast, and the emirates drawn as a transit map.

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Pick your trip, 8 paths 23

5 days, day by day 24

10 days, days 1 to 5 25

10 days, days 6 to 10 26

The emirates as a transit map 27

Pick your trip

three dimensions, eight paths · find yours, jump to the matching itinerary

Who you travel with, how long you have, and what you spend per night decide the route before any list of sights does. Find your row below; the five-day plan on the next spread covers the two most common paths in full.

STOPOVER · 1-2D · FAST

Dubai in a layover

USD 220 · metro + one tour

- Downtown: Burj + fountain
- Old Dubai + the Creek
- A desert sunset safari

FIRST-TIMER · 5D · MID

The two-city classic

USD 900 · metro + buses

- Dubai 3: icons + old town
- Abu Dhabi 1: mosque + Louvre
- Desert 1: dune night

COUPLE · 5D · COMFORT

Icons, rooftops and a dome camp

USD 3,200 for 2 · driver

- Dubai 2: beach club + Burj
- Abu Dhabi 1: Louvre + Saadiyat
- Liwa dome 1 · rooftop 1

FAMILY · 6D · MID

Theme parks and the beach

USD 4,000 · family of 4

- Dubai 3: parks + aquarium
- Yas Island 2: Ferrari World
- Beach 1: JBR wind-down

CULTURE · 6D · MID

Old towns and museums

USD 1,200 · rental car

- Old Dubai + the Creek
- Sharjah museums 1
- Abu Dhabi: Louvre + mosque 2

ACTIVE · 7D · MID

Mountains, dunes and reefs

USD 1,500 · rental car

- Hatta + Jebel Jais 2
- Liwa desert overnight
- Fujairah dive coast 2

TWO WEEKS · 10D · MID

The full country

USD 2,200 · rental car

- Dubai + Sharjah 4
- Abu Dhabi + Liwa 3
- Hatta, RAK, Fujairah 3

BUDGET · 5D · BACKPACKER

Metro, buses and hostels

USD 350 · public transport

- Deira hostel + the abra
- E101 bus to Abu Dhabi
- One shared desert safari

READY-MADE ROUTES

The short version in the 3-day itinerary, the full week in the 7-day itinerary, and the grand loop in the 14-day itinerary.

5 days, the two-city classic

Dubai and Abu Dhabi · icons, culture, one desert night

The trip most first-timers should do, built on the metro and the intercity bus so you never touch a rental car. It covers both cities, the old town, the mosque, the Louvre and a desert night without rushing. The fuller version, with alternatives, is the 7-day itinerary on the site.

1	**Dubai: the icons** Downtown + fountain	Land, base in Deira or Downtown. The Burj Khalifa near sunset, then the free fountain show after dark.
2	**Old Dubai and the Palm** Creek + Marina	The abra and Al Fahidi in the morning, the Palm and the Marina beach in the afternoon and evening.
3	**Desert safari** dune drive + camp	A relaxed morning, then an afternoon dune safari, a camp barbecue, and stars over the sand.
4	**Abu Dhabi** mosque + Louvre	The E101 bus south. The Grand Mosque, the Louvre on Saadiyat, and a walk on the Corniche at dusk.
5	**Sharjah, then home** museums + fly out	A last museum morning in Sharjah or a Dubai mall run, then the airport by metro for the flight home.

No car needed. The Dubai Metro, the E101 to Abu Dhabi and taxis cover this whole loop for a fraction of a rental.

Add two days for Hatta and the mountains, or the Fujairah reefs, if you want a break from the cities.

10 days, the full country

days 1 to 5 · the two cities, Sharjah and the mountains

Five extra days turn the two-city trip into the whole federation: the real dunes at Liwa, the Hatta and Jebel Jais mountains, and the east-coast reefs at Fujairah. A rental car makes the northern and east-coast legs painless. It scales cleanly to the full 14-day itinerary if you have two weeks.

1	**Dubai: the icons** Burj + fountain	Arrive, base in Downtown or Deira, the tower at sunset and the fountain after dark.
2	**Old Dubai and the Palm** Creek + Marina	The abra and Al Fahidi, the souks, then the Palm and the Marina beach in the evening.
3	**Sharjah** museums + old town	A day trip north for the Islamic Civilization museum and the restored Heart of Sharjah.
4	**Hatta** dam + mountains	Drive inland for the turquoise dam, a kayak, and the mountain trails around the enclave.
5	**Abu Dhabi** mosque + Louvre	South to the capital: the Grand Mosque, the Louvre on Saadiyat, and the Corniche at dusk.

Do the first half on the metro and the E101 bus, then pick up a rental car on day 4 for Hatta and everything north.

Days 6 to 10 run the desert, the peaks and the east coast before the loop back to Dubai. They continue on the next page.

10 days, the full country

days 6 to 10 · the desert, the peaks and the east coast

The second half leaves the cities behind for the real dunes at Liwa, the Yas Island parks, the Jebel Jais peak above Ras Al Khaimah, and the Gulf of Oman reefs at Fujairah, before an easy drive back to Dubai for the flight home.

6	**Liwa desert** Empty Quarter dunes	Two hours to the giant Liwa dunes for a real desert night away from the tour crowds.
7	**Yas Island** parks or F1 circuit	Back via Yas for Ferrari World and the waterpark, or a slow beach day on Saadiyat.
8	**Ras Al Khaimah** Jebel Jais	North to the highest peak: the viewing road, the coaster, and the world's longest zipline.
9	**Fujairah coast** reefs + a real beach	Over to the Gulf of Oman for shore diving or snorkelling at Khor Fakkan.
10	**Dubai, then home** last mall + fly out	Back to Dubai for a last souk or mall run, then the airport by metro for the flight home.

☆ Liwa and Fujairah are the two legs most people skip and most regret skipping. They are where the country stops being a skyline.

Drop the car back in Dubai on day 10. Have two weeks instead: the full 14-day itinerary adds Al Ain and a slower coast.

The emirates as a transit map

one coast road, everything hangs off Dubai

The country is a coastal string with Dubai in the middle. Abu Dhabi sits to the southwest, Sharjah, Ras Al Khaimah and Fujairah run northeast up the coast, and Hatta hides inland in the mountains. A rental car reaches all of it in a relaxed week; intercity buses and the Dubai Metro cover the main legs cheaply. Do not fly domestically here, the distances are short and the airport time kills any saving.



rental car · intercity bus · Dubai Metro

Why not to fly domestically

WHAT EACH LEG COSTS

Dubai to Abu Dhabi E101 bus or car · 1.5h ~7 USD	**Dubai to Sharjah** bus or car · 45 min ~3 USD	**Dubai to Hatta** bus or car · 1.5h ~7 USD
Dubai to Ras Al Khaimah bus or car · 1.5h ~7 USD	**Dubai to Fujairah** bus or car · 2h ~7 USD	**Airport to Downtown** Dubai Metro · 30 min ~2 USD

fares: operator snapshot, 2026 · indicative one-way per person · a rental car runs 30 to 50 USD a day plus cheap fuel

05

Costs and when to go

A short comfortable season and a brutal summer, what quietly doubles a day in an expensive city, and the day itemised as a receipt.

IN THIS CHAPTER

Weather, crowds, price 29

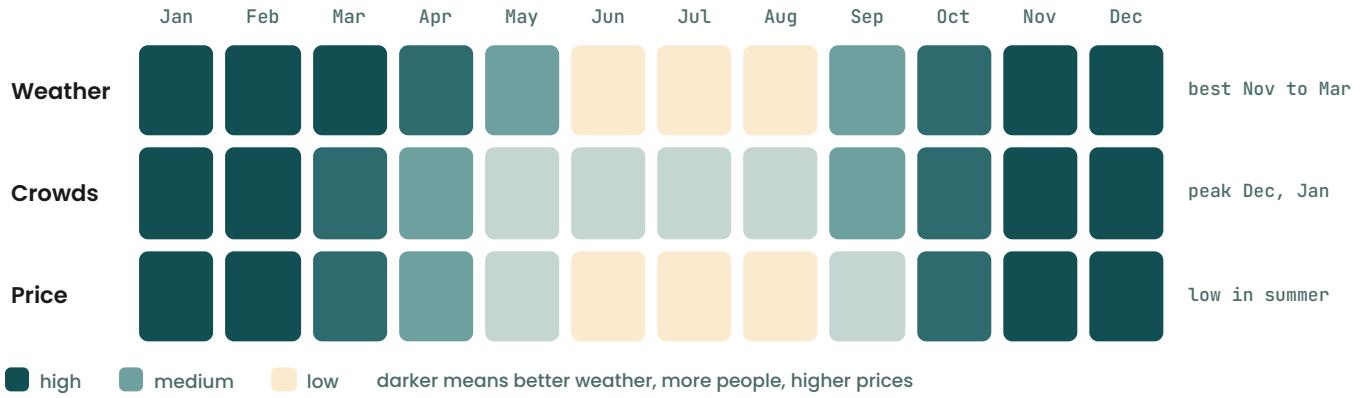
What doubles your day budget 30

What a day costs 31

Weather, crowds, price

12-month calendar · winter wins, summer is brutal

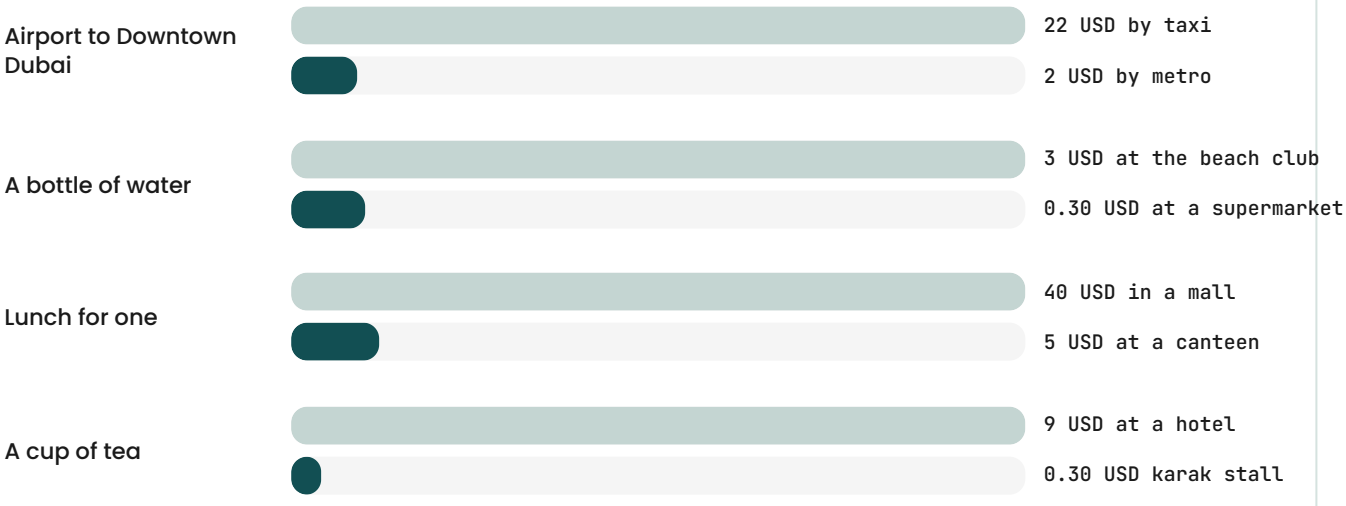
The UAE has one clear rule: come between November and March. Those months are warm, dry and comfortable, perfect for the beach and the desert, and they are also peak season and peak prices. The summer, June to September, is genuinely dangerous heat, over 45C with high humidity, and the country retreats indoors; the upside is that hotel rates crater. The shoulder weeks in April, May and October are the value play if you can take the heat.



source: best-travel-time dataset · captured 2026-05-17

WHAT THINGS COST: THE TOURIST TRAP VS THE LOCAL MOVE

SAMPLE DATA



pack-lightly.com

What doubles your day budget

the UAE is only expensive if you let it be · six traps, and what to skip

Nothing here is expensive by law. The country runs on cheap fuel, free beaches, a 2-dollar metro and 5-dollar canteens. What blows a budget is a short list of upgrades, each of which quietly doubles a day. Know them and you pick when to splurge instead of drifting into it.

THE MOVE	THE DEFAULT	WHAT IT DOES TO A 100 USD DAY
Drinking alcohol	a beach or free spot	+80 to 150 (dry-country markup)
Beach-club day pass	a free public beach	+70 to 200 per person
Taxis everywhere	the metro and Nol card	+40 to 60 a day
Private desert safari	a shared small-group tour	+60 to 120
Burj Khalifa prime hours	an off-peak daytime slot	+40 for the same view
Friday hotel brunch	a mezze dinner out	+70 to 130 per person

indicative USD, mid-2026 · the left column is the trap, the right column is the same day done cheaply

SKIP THESE, SPEND THE MONEY ELSEWHERE

01

The gold-souk investment

Window-shop the gold, but buying it as a bargain rarely is; the price tracks the daily rate plus a making charge.

Instead: enjoy the spectacle, keep the money for a desert night.

02

Indoor ski, just to say you did

A pricey novelty that eats a morning. Fun for kids, forgettable for most adults.

Instead: the free fountain show, or the old-town abra for a dirham.

03

The top-tier Burj ticket

Level 148 costs roughly double 124 for a marginally higher view and a lounge.

Instead: book 124 off-peak, or a rooftop bar with the tower in the shot.

04

The helicopter tour

Fifteen minutes for the price of two nights. The view is real, the value is not.

Instead: the Palm monorail or the Frame for a fraction of the cost.

Model your own dates, group size and style, and see where your day actually goes, in the free budget calculator.

Open the Budget Calculator

What a day costs

three travel styles · printed the way the day spends it

Daily budgets hide in averages, so here is the day itemized instead: a bed, three meals, getting around, one thing worth doing, and the tea at the end. Three real versions of the same Tuesday in the Emirates. The gap is almost entirely the room, the transport and the drinks, not the food.

A DAY IN THE UAE

* backpacker *

hostel dorm, Deira	18.00
canteen breakfast	3.00
shawarma lunch	4.00
mezze dinner	10.00
metro + Nol day	6.00
one free sight + abra	1.00
water + snacks	3.00
karak tea	0.50
TOTAL / DAY	**~70 USD**

country-comparison data · 2026-07

A DAY IN THE UAE

* standard *

3-star double	75.00
cafe breakfast	8.00
restaurant lunch	15.00
dinner with a drink	35.00
metro + a few taxis	18.00
one attraction	25.00
coffee + snacks	6.00
TOTAL / DAY	**~180 USD**

country-comparison data · 2026-07

A DAY IN THE UAE

* luxury *

5-star double	260.00
hotel breakfast	incl.
beach-club lunch	60.00
fine-dining dinner	90.00
taxis + valet	35.00
private safari or spa	40.00
rooftop drinks	45.00
TOTAL / DAY	**~500 USD**

country-comparison data · 2026-07

The jump from backpacker to standard is the room and the drinks. Eating well stays cheap at every tier if you eat where the residents do.

Cards work almost everywhere, but keep a little cash in dirhams for the abra, the karak stalls and the souk haggle.

06

Practical

Entry, money, getting around, eSIM, health, packing. The boring parts you read once. Done right, you never think about them again.

IN THIS CHAPTER

Book in this order 33

Money and getting around 34

Bed, bag, signal 35

Health and heat 36

Common questions 37

Book in this order

four things before you fly · everything else on the ground

The UAE is one of the easiest countries to arrange: no visa to buy for most passports, a free entry stamp on arrival, and everything else bookable last-minute. Four things genuinely pay to sort ahead, and they have a natural order. The flight is the one that moves most on price.

8 wk before

International flights

Fares to Dubai (DXB) or Abu Dhabi (AUH) bottom out six to eight weeks ahead. Both are major hubs, so shop the two airports and watch for the Emirates and Etihad stopover deals.

Compare fares on Aviasales

4 wk before

Insurance and entry check

Most passports get a free 30-day stamp on arrival, so there is no visa to buy; confirm your nationality's rule and that your passport has six months validity. Add travel insurance with medical cover, plus an activity clause if you plan to dive or dune-drive.

2 wk before

First nights, and a car if you want one

Book your first two nights in Dubai and, if you plan to reach Hatta or the east coast, reserve a rental car. The cities run fine on the metro and buses, so a car is optional.

Book the first nights on Booking.com

1 wk before

eSIM

Install before departure, activate on landing. A 5 GB plan covers a week; 10 GB covers two, plenty for maps, ride apps and uploads. Note that some calling apps are restricted on local networks.

Set up a Saily eSIM

Passport rule: six months validity beyond arrival. Check it now; renewals run slow in peak season.

Zero tolerance on drugs, including trace amounts and some prescription meds. Carry a doctor's note for anything controlled.

Money and getting around

card-first · the metro beats taxis every time

The dirham (AED) is pegged to the dollar at a steady 3.67, so the maths is easy and stable. This is a card economy: tap for almost everything, from the metro to the malls. Keep a little cash for the abra, karak stalls and souk haggling. Pull dirhams from a bank ATM rather than an exchange desk, and always pay in dirhams when a terminal offers your home currency, since the conversion adds a quiet few percent.

ITEM	BACKPACKER	MID	LUXURY
Bed, dorm / 3-star / 5-star	USD 18	USD 75	USD 260
Canteen meal / restaurant	USD 4	USD 15	USD 60
Karak / coffee out	USD 0.30	USD 4	USD 9
Desert safari, evening	USD 40	USD 70	USD 150
Metro day / taxi across town	USD 3	USD 12	USD 25

verified 2026-05 · indicative per-person USD · dirham pegged at 3.67 to the dollar

GETTING AROUND: WHAT BEATS WHAT

Inside Dubai, the metro wins outright: fast, cheap, air-conditioned, and immune to the traffic. Buy a Nol card, tap on and off, and it also covers the trams and buses. Careem and Uber are the app answer where the metro does not reach, and both beat flagging a street taxi on price certainty. Between cities, the intercity buses are excellent value, the E101 links Dubai and Abu Dhabi for a few dollars, and cheaper routes connect Sharjah and the northern emirates. A rental car only earns its keep for Hatta, the east coast and the desert; roads are superb and signposted in English, but city parking and traffic take a day to learn. Skip domestic flights entirely: the distances are too short to beat the drive once you count airport time.

THE FULL PICTURE

Notes and rates in the currency rundown, the road rules and permit in the driving page, and why not to fly in the domestic flights breakdown.

Bed, bag, signal

hotels · packing for heat and modesty · eSIM

BED

For hotels and apartments, Booking.com wins on free cancellation and depth across every emirate; for the handful of hostels in Deira and Bur Dubai, Hostelworld has the deeper review pool. Rates swing hard with the season and big events, so book refundable and watch the calendar.

BAG: THE ONE-WEEK LIST FOR HEAT AND MODESTY

- [ ] Light, loose clothes that cover shoulders and knees for the malls, mosques and Sharjah
- [ ] A scarf or shawl (women, for mosque visits and over-cool interiors)
- [ ] One light layer: the air-conditioning indoors is genuinely cold
- [ ] Swimwear for the beach and pool, plus a cover-up for walking to and from
- [ ] SPF 50, sunglasses and a hat: the sun is intense even in winter
- [ ] Comfortable trainers for the malls and the old town, sandals for the beach
- [ ] Reusable water bottle and electrolyte sachets for the heat
- [ ] Type G (UK-style) plug adapter and a power bank
- [ ] A card in two pockets, plus a little cash in dirhams
- [ ] Any prescription meds in their box, with a doctor's note

Signal. Buy the eSIM before you fly and activate on landing. A 5 GB plan covers a week (~8 USD); 10 GB covers two. Coverage is total across the cities and highways. Note that some voice and video calling apps are blocked on local networks, so a data eSIM with a calling workaround is worth having.

Set up an Airalo eSIM

06

GO DEEPER The full seasonal list in the packing list, what to wear where in the dress code page, and data plans compared in the eSIM write-up.

Health and heat

world-class care · the sun is the only real risk

The UAE is one of the easiest health destinations anywhere. There is no malaria, the tap water is desalinated and safe, and the hospitals are modern and English-speaking to the point that people fly in for treatment. The one genuine risk is the heat, which in summer is not a discomfort but a hazard. The list below is everything that actually needs doing, in order.

THE SHORT LIST

- [ ] **Six weeks before:** confirm routine vaccines (MMR, DPT, polio) are current. No special shots are required.
- [ ] **Recommended:** Hepatitis A for longer or street-food-heavy trips; otherwise nothing exotic.
- [ ] **Skip:** malaria pills. The UAE is malaria-free.
- [ ] **Heat plan:** two to three litres of water a day in summer, a hat, and shade at midday. Heat exhaustion is the number-one traveller problem here.
- [ ] **Meds:** bring prescriptions in their original box with a doctor's note; some common drugs are controlled.
- [ ] **Insurance:** medical cover with an activity clause if you dive Fujairah, dune-drive, or hike Jebel Jais.

IF SOMETHING GOES WRONG

Dial 999 for police, 998 for ambulance, or 112 from any mobile. Private hospitals in Dubai and Abu Dhabi are world-class and used to insurance paperwork; for anything serious, head there. Pharmacies are everywhere, many open 24 hours, and staff handle minor complaints over the counter. Care is excellent but expensive without insurance, so keep your policy details on you, and note the emergency card on page 41.

The tap water is safe but tastes of the desalination plant; most travellers drink filtered or bottled, and a refill bottle saves money and plastic.

In summer, do the outdoors at dawn or after dark and keep the middle of the day indoors. The heat is not to be tested.

READ ON The shot-by-shot detail in the vaccinations breakdown, hospital picks in the hospitals page, and cover compared in the travel insurance rundown.

Common questions

the eight most-asked, answered straight

Do I need a visa for the UAE?

Most nationalities, including the US, UK and EU, get a free 30-day entry stamp on arrival, extendable once. There is nothing to buy in advance; just make sure your passport has six months of validity.

How many days do I need?

Five days covers Dubai, Abu Dhabi and a desert night comfortably. Ten adds the mountains, the real desert at Liwa and the east-coast reefs. A one to two day stopover is enough for the highlights, page 39.

What should I wear?

Beachwear at the beach and pool, but cover shoulders and knees in malls, souks and public areas, and dress fully modestly at mosques. Dubai is relaxed; Sharjah and the smaller emirates are more conservative.

Is it safe?

Extremely. Crime against tourists is very rare and the streets are safe day and night. The risks are the heat, the traffic, and strict laws: zero tolerance on drugs, public affection and disorder, so read the etiquette page.

Is it expensive?

It can be, but it does not have to be. The metro, canteens and free beaches keep a careful day near 70 USD; alcohol, taxis, beach clubs and brunches are what double it. See what to skip on page 29.

Can I drink alcohol?

Yes, in licensed hotels, bars and restaurants in most emirates, where it is legal but heavily taxed. Sharjah is entirely dry. Public drunkenness is an offence, so keep it to the venues.

When is the best time to go?

November to March: warm, dry and comfortable, and peak season. Summer, June to September, is dangerously hot but cheap and quiet, with everything moved indoors. April and October are the value shoulder.

Do I need a car?

Not for the cities. The Dubai Metro and intercity buses cover Dubai, Abu Dhabi and Sharjah cheaply. Rent one only for Hatta, the mountains and the east coast, where public transport thins out.

06

MORE ANSWERS The safety picture in the safety breakdown, culture and etiquette in the culture page, and the calendar in the public holidays page.

07

Safe and smart

One of the safest countries on earth with a few soft hustles and some strict laws, a stopover planned to the metro stop, the etiquette that is load-bearing, and the words that help.

IN THIS CHAPTER

Safe, with a few soft hustles 39

The stopover playbook 40

Etiquette and the strict laws 41

Emergency numbers + phrases 42

Safe, with a few soft hustles

no real danger · a handful of tourist-zone hustles to shrug off

The UAE is genuinely one of the safest places you can travel. Violent crime against visitors is close to nonexistent, and the real risks are the heat and the strict laws, not people. What you will meet is a small set of soft hustles clustered around the tourist zones, none dangerous and all easy to sidestep once you know the shape of them.

01

The "meter is broken" taxi

At the airport or a tourist rank, a driver waves off the meter and names a flat fare two or three times the real price.

The fix: insist on the meter, or use Careem and Uber where the fare is fixed in the app before you ride.

02

The gold-souk "special rate"

A warm welcome and a first price on gold or a "genuine" watch that is wildly inflated, because you are expected to haggle.

The fix: gold is sold by weight at the daily rate plus a making charge; know it, open low, and walk if pushed.

03

The dynamic-currency card trick

A card terminal or ATM offers to charge you in your home currency at a quietly padded exchange rate.

The fix: always choose to pay in dirhams. Your own bank's rate beats the terminal's every time.

BONUS

The "free" desert-tour upsell

A cheap safari that turns into a stream of paid add-ons: quad bikes, photos, the good seats, a drink at the camp.

The fix: book a clear all-inclusive small-group tour up front and confirm what the price covers before you go.

07

MORE ON THE SITE

The full safety picture in the safety breakdown, and driving rules in the roads page.

The stopover playbook

24 to 48 hours between flights · Dubai is built for this

Emirates and Etihad turned Dubai and Abu Dhabi into the world's busiest transfer hubs, and a layover here is a chance, not a chore. Both airlines offer a free or cheap transit visa on qualifying tickets, and the metro runs from Dubai airport straight into the city. With a bag in left luggage and a Nol card, you can turn a long connection into a real day out. Here is the plan by the clock.

0h	**On landing** bag + Nol card	Clear the free transit stamp, drop the bag in airport left luggage, and buy a Nol card at the metro in arrivals.
1h	**Downtown** Burj + fountain	The red line to Burj Khalifa station. The tower, the mall, and the free fountain show if you are there after dark.
3h	**Old Dubai** the Creek + souks	Metro to Al Fahidi, the abra across the Creek for a dirham, and a wander through the gold and spice souks.
6h	**If 24 hours** desert or Marina	A late-afternoon desert safari, or the Marina and JBR beach for dinner, then back to the airport by metro.
24h	**If 48 hours** Abu Dhabi day	The E101 bus south for the Grand Mosque and the Louvre, an easy day trip that fits inside a two-night layover.

Left luggage is at both terminals, charged per bag per day. Travel light into the city; you will move faster on the metro without it.

Give yourself three clear hours back at the airport for security and the walk to a far gate. DXB is huge and the queues are real.

PLAN IT OUT The full short version in the 3-day itinerary, and the icons in the Dubai city guide.

Etiquette and the strict laws

first four are load-bearing · the laws here have real teeth

The UAE is welcoming and cosmopolitan, but it is a conservative Muslim country with laws that are enforced. Most visitors never have a problem because the rules are simple: dress with respect, keep affection private, and never touch drugs. Get these right and nothing else is a worry. The first four below are not etiquette, they are the law.

DO NOT

Touch drugs, even a trace

Zero tolerance, including residue and some prescription meds. Penalties are severe. Carry a doctor's note.

DO NOT

Show public affection

Hand-holding for married couples is tolerated; kissing and more in public is an offence. Keep it private.

DO

Dress modestly in public

Shoulders and knees covered in malls, souks and streets. Beachwear stays at the beach and pool.

DO NOT

Drink outside licensed venues

Alcohol is legal in hotels and bars, but public drinking or drunkenness is an offence. Sharjah is fully dry.

DO

Cover up fully at mosques

Women cover hair, arms and legs; men wear long trousers. The Grand Mosque lends robes at the door.

DO NOT

Photograph people or buildings freely

Ask before shooting portraits, especially of women, and never point a lens at government or military sites.

DO

Respect Ramadan hours

No eating, drinking or smoking in public in daylight during the fast. Hotels and screened cafes stay open.

DO NOT

Swear, gesture or vent online

Rude gestures, public rows and offensive social posts are all actionable offences here. Stay calm and polite.

A calm, polite manner goes a long way. Aggression or a raised voice in public can escalate into a formal complaint fast.

Tipping is welcome but modest: round up a taxi, 10 to 15 percent at restaurants that do not add service, a few dirhams for a guide.

07

KEEP READING Religion, customs and the fuller context in the culture write-up, and what to wear where in the dress code page.

Emergency numbers and eight phrases

save the numbers now · a little Arabic goes a long way

POLICE
999
or 112 from mobile

AMBULANCE
998
medical emergency

FIRE / CIVIL DEFENCE
997
nationwide

TOURIST POLICE (DUBAI)
901
non-emergency help

US EMBASSY ABU DHABI
+971 2 414 2200
citizen services

COASTGUARD
996
sea rescue

EIGHT PHRASES THAT CHANGE HOW LOCALS RESPOND

ENGLISH	ARABIC (PHONETIC)	NOTES
Hello	marhaba	the everyday greeting
Peace be upon you	as-salaamu alaykum	reply: wa alaykum as-salaam
Thank you	shukran	add "jazeelan" for very
Yes / No	na'am / la	"la, shukran" declines politely
How much?	bikam?	essential in every souk
Please	min fadlak / fadlik	fadlak to a man, fadlik to a woman
Where is the bathroom?	wayn al-hammam?	"hammam" is bathroom
God willing	inshallah	you will hear it constantly

Save 999 and your hotel's name and address in your phone before the first night out. Most staff will write it in Arabic for you.

These same phrases print as a wallet card on page 44; cut it out and keep it with your room key.

08

Tools and reference

The live tools this guide was built from, the cut-out cards for your wallet, and the sources behind every number.

IN THIS CHAPTER

Take the live tools with you 44

Print cards: cut, fold, take 45

Sources and methodology 46

Image credits 47

A note on the links 48

Take the live tools with you

scan to open · data updates after this PDF was printed

This guide is a snapshot; the tools behind it keep updating. Scan a code or type the short URL. Each one is preloaded with the same UAE data this guide was built from.

Trip Budget Calculator

UAE: 70 USD/day backpacker, 500 USD/day luxury.

pack-lightly.com/
tool/budget-calculator/

Country Map

UAE spots mapped, from the Creek to the Liwa dunes.

pack-lightly.com/
tool/country-map/

Best Time to Travel

Best: Nov to Mar. Month-by-month weather worldwide.

pack-lightly.com/
tool/best-travel-time-worldmap/

What to Eat and Drink

Machboos, shawarma, luqaimat and more, with prices.

pack-lightly.com/
tool/local-food-and-drinks/

Print cards: cut, fold, take

print at 100% scale · credit-card size, 85 x 54 mm

Print this page on A4 or US Letter at 100 percent (no fit-to-page), cut along the dashed lines, and the two cards live in your wallet for the trip. The form fields are interactive in Acrobat and iOS Preview if you would rather type than write.

ARABIC · ESSENTIALS

Hello	marhaba
Peace be upon you	as-salaamu alaykum
Thank you	shukran
Yes / No	na'am / la
How much?	bikam?
Please	min fadlak / fadlik
Where is bathroom?	wayn al-hammam?
God willing	inshallah

pack-lightly.com

EMERGENCY · UAE

Police	999 / 112
Ambulance	998
Fire	997
Tourist Police (Dubai)	901
US Embassy (Abu Dhabi)	+971 2 414 2200

My hotel: _____

Address: _____

Insurance #: _____

Left card front, right card back: print double-sided on the short edge and they fold into one.

Lost the guide, kept the card? The QR opens the live UAE hub with every page this guide links to, plus updates published after this edition went to print.

pack-lightly.com/united-arab-emirates/

Photograph both cards before you cut. A phone copy of the emergency card still works when the wallet is back at the hotel.

Ask reception to write your hotel name and address in Arabic on the back. Taxi drivers read it in one glance.

Sources and methodology

every number traces to a dated source



WRITTEN BY

Wouter van Kemenade

Founder of Pack Lightly. Twenty-plus countries on the ground, a performance-marketing background, and data-led travel writing. Every number in this guide is checked against a source listed below; if a price moves more than 15 percent, the next edition flags it.

SOURCES USED IN THIS EDITION

1. Hotel and hostel pricing: Booking and Hostelworld snapshot 2026-05, Dubai and Abu Dhabi.
2. Currency: the dirham is pegged to the US dollar at 3.67, central-bank rate, 2026-05.
3. Entry rules: the official ICP portal (icp.gov.ae), retrieved 2026-05-15.
4. Tour data and prices: Viator Partner API, captured July 2026.
5. Travel advisories: FCDO and US State Department, last update 2026-04-30.
6. Climate: best-travel-time dataset and Open-Meteo 10-year averages, captured 2026-05-17.
7. Pack Lightly UAE cluster pages, retrieved 2026-07: visa · budget · safety · best travel time · eSIM

Methodology. Pack Lightly's country scores aggregate eleven dimensions into the 0-100 scorecard on page 5, benchmarked against the Gulf regional average. Budget figures come from the country-comparison dataset, climate verdicts from the best-travel-time dataset, both stamped with their capture date where they appear.

What changed in edition 2026.07: first release on the v2 design standard. Next planned update: January 2027. Not covered here: the day-trip crossing to Oman, medical tourism, and the smaller emirates of Ajman and Umm Al Quwain.

Photo credits. Every photograph is sourced from Wikimedia Commons under a Creative Commons or public-domain license. The full per-image list, with each photographer and license, is on the next page. The cover shows the Dubai skyline and the Burj Khalifa. Tour data and prices come from the Viator Partner API, captured July 2026.

Image credits

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Tour data and prices: Viator Partner API, captured July 2026. Author portrait and brand marks: Pack Lightly.

A note on the links in this guide

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Questions, corrections, or a place you tested that belongs in the next edition: write to hello@pack-lightly.com.

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Links can outlive a print run. If one stops working, the live version of every page in this guide sits under pack-lightly.com/united-arab-emirates.

This file is versioned; the edition is on the cover. The next planned update lands January 2027 and replaces this file at the same download.