

PRESS INFORMATION

General cultural information on Abu Dhabi and the United Arab Emirates Abu Dhabi International Book Fair 2 – 7 March 2010

Geography

The UAE is made up of seven emirates – Abu Dhabi, Dubai, Sharjah, Ras Al Khaimah, Fujairah, Ajman and Umm Al Quwain. This group of sheikhdoms is loosely divided along tribal lines, and occupies an area of over 80,000sqm, with Abu Dhabi comprising more than 85% of the total landmass. The UAE's landscape is extremely diverse. Although four-fifths of the UAE is desert, the landscape varies dramatically between deserts and oases, mountains and fertile plains, and the coasts are dotted with many offshore islands. Abu Dhabi itself – literally 'Father of the Gazelle' in Arabic – is the largest of the seven emirates. Its capital, also the capital of the UAE, takes the same name, and is located on a T-shaped island which juts into the Gulf, joined to the mainland by the Maqta and Musaffah Bridges.

History

The UAE has a strong tribal tradition and its early history is characterised by its nomadic herding and fishing communities. Parts of Abu Dhabi were settled as far back as the third millennium BC. Up until the mid-twentieth century, Abu Dhabi was sustained by its camel herding, the production of dates and vegetables and fishing and pearl diving. In 1892, the sheikhdoms and Gulf territories – the Trucial States – were brought under the protection of the British following a truce between Britain and several Arab sheikhs. While this allowed Britain to intervene and settle external disputes, the states were otherwise autonomous and followed a traditional form of Arab monarchy. Six of the individual sheikhdoms that now make up the UAE assembled following independence from Britain in 1971, with the seventh – Ras Al Khaimah – joining in 1972. After his death in 2004, Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan was succeeded by his son, Sheikh Khalifa bin Zayed Al Nahyan, the current president of the UAE.

Population

The UAE's population is one of the most diverse in the Middle East, with a large expatriate community of Asian but also Western nationals. The population of the UAE is concentrated in urban areas where maximum economic activity takes place. The two leading emirates – Abu Dhabi and Dubai – account for around 60% of the country's population. With the current trends in expansion and demand for expatriate labour, plus natural population growth, the UAE's population is likely to double in the next 10-15 years.

Culture and the Arts

Like its history, UAE culture is identified by its tribal traditions. A tribe's identity is strongly affected by the land it occupies and the economic activity in which it is

engaged. The traditions and social structure generated by this heritage are reinforced in the common religion – Islam. Although the UAE is very liberal, it is important to respect the traditional and conservative aspects of the country’s cultural heritage and Islamic belief system. The UAE also has a very strong oral tradition; since the days of widespread illiteracy and tribal tradition, the Emiratis have kept the memory of legends, stories and local poetry (nabati) alive through the spoken word. The government is committed to the preservation of traditional forms of art and culture, an example being the Abu Dhabi Cultural Foundation, which was established in 1981 to promote culture and fine arts and highlight national, Arab and Islamic cultural heritage. New developments around Abu Dhabi city include Saadiyat Island, Arabic for ‘isle of happiness’, where a £14.5 billion cultural and financial “upscale” district is being developed to include an outpost of the Guggenheim and Louvre museums.

Economy

With the 19th highest GDP per capita in the world, the open economy of the UAE attracts foreign companies and offers a stable base from which to operate in the region. Its wealth is based on oil and gas output, with reserves which should last for over 100 years.

Women

Historically, women have always played an important role within the tribal traditions of the UAE, running tribal affairs and their own communities. Oil-funded prosperity propelled the UAE into the twentieth century with improved healthcare, longer life expectancy and better education opportunities, and there was a danger that women would be left behind while men would take advantage of the opportunities provided by the country’s economic boom. However, UAE women have embraced education with fervour and outperform men on every educational level. This is reflected by the Social Status Law which, in 2005, granted the right for women to divorce their husbands under Shari’ah Law – heralded as a landmark for women in the Arab world. The UAE constitution guarantees the principles of social justice for all, in accordance with the precepts of Islam, and this includes the belief that women are entitled to take their place in society. The constitution rules that women enjoy the same legal status, claim to titles and right to practise the same professions as men. In terms of Labour Law, there can be no discrimination between men and women in terms of pay for equal work.

Literacy

The UAE Government has undertaken an adult literacy programme in cooperation with the General Women’s Union. In 1975, the rate of adult literacy was 54.2% amongst men and 30.9% amongst women. Now, the illiteracy rate in the country is around 20%, with the government providing free primary and secondary education for adults who missed out on education during childhood.

For further information:

Official UAE website: www.uaeinteract.com



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UAE embassy, London: www.uaeembassyuk.net

Abu Dhabi Authority for Cultural & Heritage: <http://www.adach.ae/index-en.php>