

## TRAVEL / ABU DHABI

## CALL OF THE WILD

An Arabian island has become a breeding ground for rare animals with visitors very welcome as long as they remember that 'animals come first', writes **SUE WALLACE**.

IT is a magnificent sight watching Arabian oryx climb the hills and feed on the grasslands of Sir Bani Yas Island off the coast of Abu Dhabi.

These striking animals, once on the brink of extinction, are now thriving on the island, which is home to the world's largest herd thanks to the foresight of the late ruler Sheikh Zayed Bin Sultan Al Nahyan, the founding father of the United Arab Emirates.

Since 1971 this island has been transformed from a rugged salt dome to a wonderful breeding reserve for some of the rarest Arabian species as well as some introduced animals and thousands of birds — more than 170 species have been sighted.

There are 23 species of wildlife on the island including several cheetahs, striped hyenas, elands and barbary sheep and large numbers of dolphins, dugongs, sea turtles and exotic fish are found in the blue-green waters surrounding the island.

Most surprising of all are the 40 giraffes that seem quite at home on this island and, as the mist clears on our early morning game drive, these lofty animals head over to our vehicle to check us out and seem just as inquisitive as we are.

Nature guides take these game drives either early morning or late afternoon and have a wonderful knowledge of the delicate environment.

Under royal patronage and supervision, more than 2.5 million trees were planted as part of the Greening of the Desert program and each tree is watered by an enormous system.

Many animal species introduced to the island have thrived and are being reintroduced to the wild and sent to other areas involved in the animal breeding programs.

Sir Bani Yas Island is located 8km off the coast of Jabel Dhanna, a 250km drive from the city of Abu Dhabi. You can only get to the island, named after the Bani Yas tribe, the first tribe to populate Abu Dhabi, by boat or plane. It is the first in the Desert Islands group to develop nature-based tourism combined with animal welfare.

Today there are 1500 staff working to preserve and develop this nature sanctuary and there's a great emphasis on maintaining strict principles of ecological, social and economic sustainability.

As you drive around the 87sq km area of the island there's one rule — animals come first, and you often see some wandering across the road.

The game drives are just one of the many activities offered at the five-star Desert Islands Resort and Spa managed by boutique luxury Thai operator Anantara.

It is the island's first resort located adjacent to a lagoon on the northwest side of the island.

A stunning small resort with 64 rooms, it has six private lodges, free form infinity-edge swimming pool, top restaurants, a spa and health club.

It is the type of place that is hard to leave, a place where you can be as busy as you want or just chill out by the pool.

The opulent hotel decor reflects the Arabian mystique that Abu Dhabi is so well-known for.

For the energetic you can head out on one of the bike routes winding through the mangroves or dry wadis and experienced riders can opt for the steeper and hilly off-road routes.

There's an archery range and training and equipment for beginners is available with expert guidance.

The waters surrounding the island are a paradise for snorkellers with offshore reefs and a newly formed lagoon. Depending on the weather, there



are several snorkelling sites available providing a glimpse of abundant and colourful sealife.

If you are lucky you may spot dolphins, dugongs and turtles in the bay areas. Kayaking with a guide takes you through the mangroves and there's plenty of time for a quick dip.

You may also see resident flamingos, seagulls, cormorants, wild fowl, pintails, shovellers, black-winged stilts, teal, crab plovers, avocets and grey herons.

Guided walks over the rugged landscape visit different parts of the island, some have an emphasis on wildlife, others on birdlife or the environmental, historical and archeological highlights of the area.

Sir Bani Yas has a wonderful archaeological history with settlements dating back to the Bronze Age — and so far 36 archeological sites have been found on the island with excavations uncovering remains of a pre-Islamic monastery.

The late ruler also has a palace on the island which is visited throughout the year by his family.

The resort's restaurants provide an opportunity to enjoy tastes of Arabia and international cuisine.

Romantics can enjoy a candle-lit dinner under the stars listening to the gentle waves wash on the shore.

The Palm restaurant offers a breakfast buffet with loads of choices and international Middle

Eastern dishes and there is also an all-day a la carte menu.

Samak restaurant offers beachfront dining overlooking the Persian Gulf, while at Al Shams you can enjoy great food and cocktails.

For those who want to indulge in social shisha smoking, it offers one of the largest selections of tobacco blends in the Middle East.

There's a cosy library with interesting books and journals providing an insight into life in Arabia.

Rooms are spacious with great views of the sea or gardens and all modern amenities.

Just a short walk from the hotel is the Saffa Spa offering a wide variety of indulgent treatments including Thai massage, aromatherapy, ayurvedic therapies, rich facials and lavish body treatments all using the finest ingredients — as well as treatments based on the healing and beautifying properties of gemstones and precious metals.

Step into the spa and you immediately feel at ease as therapists provide treatments designed to rejuvenate the body, mind and soul.

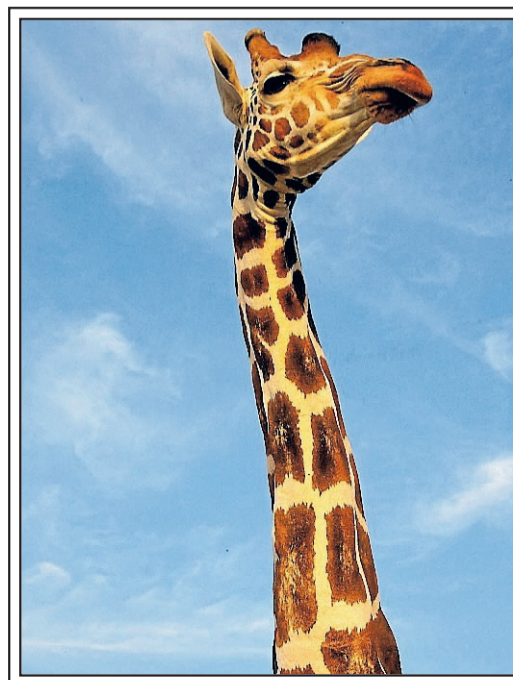
Sir Bani Yas Island can be combined with a great holiday in Abu Dhabi, where there is so much to see and experience.

You leave this wilderness sanctuary with a much greater appreciation of the heritage, wildlife and nature of these picturesque Arabian islands and a desire to return.

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## Travel notes

## ABU DHABI

■ The Emirate of Abu Dhabi is the largest of the seven emirates that make up the United Arab Emirates.

■ It covers 85 per cent of the country's total landmass including 700km of coastline and more than 200 natural islands.

■ It is the country's capital and seat of government.

■ Abu Dhabi means “father of the Gazelle” and is a country that can trace its history back to 5000BC.

■ Since the discovery of oil, Abu Dhabi known for its oryx and gazelles, pearl diving and date farming has developed into one of the world's fastest growing cities.

■ Desert Islands features eight islands including the nature reserve of Sir Bani Yas, the historical Dalma Island and the Discovery Islands.

## WHERE TO STAY:

■ Desert Islands Resort and Spa by Anantara.  
For bookings phone Small Luxury Hotels of the World reservations on 1800 251 958 or visit [www.slh.com](http://www.slh.com)



ABOVE: Mountain biking is just one of the exciting activities you can enjoy at Desert islands Resort and Spa.

ABOVE LEFT: The magnificent Desert Islands Resort and Spa by Anantara on Sir Bani Yas island off Abu Dhabi.

LEFT: There are more than 40 giraffes in the animal reserve on the island.

BELOW: Once on the brink of extinction the rare Arabian oryx is at home in the world's biggest herd.



## SHORT STAYS

## MELBOURNE



Mecure Melbourne is offering a package for tennis fans.

## Fans keep cool

IF you are heading to the tennis this summer, Mercure Melbourne is serving up a great deal for tennis fans.

Mercure's Sip, Slop, Slap package for \$299 provides all the essentials for a great day court-side.

The hotel is in Spring Street, just a short walk to Rod Laver Arena, home of the Australian Open tennis tournament in January.

The Mercure will equip guests with a cooler bag and two bottles of water to “sip” on, a bottle of sunscreen to “slop” on, and two Mercure caps to “slap” on as Melbourne heats up for a summer of tennis. Plus you can sip again on some wine when you return to the hotel's Lime Bar & Restaurant and enjoy a complimentary bottle of wine from the hotel's Grands Vins Victorian wine list when dining in the restaurant.

The package of \$299 per night is \$100 off full price in peak season.

Melbourne's luxury shopping outlets are just around the corner on Collins Street.

Book your Sip, Slop, Slap package, valid January 18 to 31, via [www.accorhotels.com](http://www.accorhotels.com) or phone the Mercure on (03) 9205 9999 or toll free on 1800 813 442.

## CAIRNS

## Make a splash

TAKING a holiday this summer?

Then head north for some great tropical packages. Special summer holiday packages have just been released for selected Tropical North Queensland Accor Hotels.

Take the family to Cairns by Candlelight at Cairns this year and stay at the award-winning Novotel Cairns Oasis Resort for \$320\* for a family of four for two nights, with breakfast included in the Mizuna Restaurant (minimum of two nights in a Pool View room).

Parents will receive a complimentary bottle of wine and children will be given a free gift on arrival, plus free dinner from the kids menu with every paying adult when dining in the Mizuna Restaurant.

Only 100m from the Esplanade and Cairns attractions, the deluxe Novotel Cairns Oasis Resort features a large lagoon pool.

For holidaymakers heading to Townsville, summer deals are available at Mercure Inn, Ibis Hotel and Grand Mercure Apartments.

The newly refurbished Mercure Inn Townsville, set amid 11 acres of lush tropical gardens, has a summer special of \$105 per room per night including breakfast plus kids stay and eat breakfast for free when sharing existing bedding with parents.

Ibis Hotel has deals starting at \$99 per room per night and the spacious Grand Mercure Apartment is offering rates from \$139 per room per night both including breakfast.

Phone 1300 65 65 65 or visit [www.accorhotels.com.au](http://www.accorhotels.com.au)

\*Cairns rates are valid to March 31, 2010 excluding December 31, 2009. Additional nights for family package are \$160 per room including breakfast.

Townsville rates are valid December 1 to February 15, 2010.



Relax at the deluxe Novotel Cairns Oasis Resort.