UAE

Visas: no visas needed (despite what some travel books say), but passports are required (just thought I'd start out with the obvious).

Transportation: we used the hotel’s transportation service to go from the Dubai airport to our hotel, and we had a driver for most of our stay there. We booked our driver through a company called The Vision Destination Management (www.thevisionme.com). Anwar is the contact, and he can be reached at anwar@thevisionme.com.

Otherwise, cabs in the UAE are good. They are clean, and the cabbies generally speak excellent English and know their way around. (This is near miraculous for those of us accustomed to DC cabbies).

Guides: we did not use a guide, as a driver was sufficient. The level of English fluency in the UAE is excellent. And perhaps not surprising, given that is the lingua franca of the population there, which is a broad mix of Emeratis, Filipinos, Pakistanis, Malaysians, etc.

Hotels: We stayed at the Shangri-la and the Atlantis resort in Dubai and the Emirates Palace in Abu Dhabi. The Shangri-la is a well-known chain in Asia and the Middle East, with a deserved reputation for the quality of its service. The Dubai hotel is no exception (and the Shangri-la in Abu Dhabi might be even better). Additional discussion about the Emirates Palace and the Atlantis resort below.

Packing: the UAE is known throughout the Gulf as being one of the most tolerant and open-minded of all the Gulf states. While you will see many women wearing abayas (the all encompassing robe that covers a woman from head to toe), shorts, tank tops and dresses above the knee are also common. No specific dress code is required, although good sense and discretion are always helpful. We wore shorts and t-shirts and flip-flops throughout our stay without any issues whatsoever.

Things to see (in rough order of priority)

Note: there isn’t a plethora of cultural and historical sites, as the UAE wasn’t formed until 1971. But there are plenty of things to see.

Dubai National Museum: this is a great introduction to the history of Dubai and the UAE. The museum itself is located in an old fort near the mosque on the north side of the creek. For some reason, many guidebooks and maps have it located south of the creek, but that is incorrect. The museum will take you about an hour.

Burj Khalifa: the tallest building in the world. You can buy timed tickets to go up to the observation deck at <http://www.burjkhalifa.ae/en/ObservationDeck/TicketInformation.aspx>. The views are rather spectacular as is the building. (For amusement, check out the telescopes in the indoor observation deck. You can select a part of the Dubai skyline and see what it looked like historically, which, for every place you select, is a lovely black-and-white photo of sand.) There are some fascinating exhibits on how the building was built. My favorite exhibit explained how the spire was too tall for a tower crane to reach, so they had to install it using hydraulic pumps. This will take you about an hour.

Grand Mosque: this is the most popular tourist destination in Abu Dhabi and is stunning and lovely architecturally. The mosque can accommodate 40,000 worshippers, which makes it the 3rd largest mosque in the world (the two largest are in Mecca and Medina). This is a house of worship, but it is one of the most welcoming mosques that we’ve ever seen. But there are rules: women must be covered head to toe. Abayas are provided for the purpose. Men must have shorts below the knee. Kandoras (the white robes) are provided if needed. Tours are on the hour, starting at 10:00 am, and we highly recommend them. The tour guides speak excellent English, and the tours are informative and interesting. You can also walk through the mosque on your own, which we did as well before our tour started. Please be respectful and quiet. The folks staffing the mosque are polite and friendly but are insistent about ensuring that proper respect is paid in a house of worship. There was a group of Chinese tourists when we were there who mimicked praying at the mosque, and they were asked to delete those photos from their phones. But the staff is very welcoming and readily answer any questions you may have.

Emirates Palace Hotel: located in Abu Dhabi, this is technically a hotel, although it appears to be the second most popular tourist destination in Abu Dhabi. The hotel was built by the royal family, and there are several must-sees. First, there is gold leaf on all of the ceilings. Second, there is an ATM that actually dispenses gold in the form of coins, pendants or bars. It’s a popular ATM to visit, although we never saw anyone actually use it. And there are also cases and cases throughout the (very large) hotel of museum quality antiques from around the world, all of which are for sale. The pool is lovely, complete with a water slide and lazy river. There are also camels, which you can mount and pose for photos, as part of hotel experience. (Note: Arabian camels are one hump camels, and you ride behind the hump, which means you are a LONG ways back.) You can also have tea with the camel herders, who are very nice but who tend to have limited English. And don’t forget to at least dip a toe in the Indian Ocean, just to say you have.

Gold Souk: I’m a traditional enough Asian that I love gold, preferably the 22-24 karat kind, which is difficult to find in the United States. The gold souk in Dubai is heavenly. Located about 10 minutes away from the Dubai National Museum, it is home to most of the gold jewelers, many of whom are Indian and Pakistani. The workmanship on many of the pieces is exquisite, and bargaining is welcome. (In fact, one of our favorite phrases from the trip occurred during a bargaining session, when one of the jewelers said in response to a counteroffer that Jim gave, “I can give you a discount but not **that** price.” ☺)

It helps to know what the market price per gram of gold is before you go (Google is your friend in this). That way, you know what premium the shops are charging for the workmanship and can decide whether it’s worth it or not.

The industry is heavily regulated by the UAE government, so have confidence in the genuineness of the gold and the accuracy of the karat count as told you by the shops.

There is also a gold souk in Abu Dhabi, but the one in Dubai is much larger and nicer.

Perfume Souk: this is a small area just outside the Gold Souk, maybe a dozen stores in all. Middle eastern perfumes have large amounts of aoud (also spelled oud or oudh) in them, and the scent is a matter of personal preference. There are also many perfume oils (with rose being the most popular). These oils are difficult to find in the U.S. and can be bought for very reasonable prices in the perfume souk. Fancy (empty) perfume bottles can also be bought here for very reasonable prices.

Dubai Mall: the largest mall in the world. Of course, every mall needs a dinosaur skeleton, an aquarium, and a Sega Republic playland complete with rides and games. And, of course, a Shake Shack. This is absolutely worth walking through, just to say you have. Because the UAE is a tax free zone, some high end designers are surprisingly reasonable (such as Armani). Others are significantly more expensive than in the U.S. (like Tumi). We can’t explain it either. The Sega Republic is great for kids to run around riding roller coasters and playing various games. And the aquarium is excellent.

Mall of the Emirates: the highlight of this mall is Ski Dubai, an indoor snow wonderland where you can go skiing, sledding and tubing (among other things). As one of our friends said, “You have to do this as part of the narrative.” Narrative notwithstanding, the kids had a fabulous time playing here. No need to pack winter clothing—the resort (for the lack of a better word) provides boots, coats, and ski pants. (They even have full body puffer jackets for those wearing abayas.) You can buy hats and gloves there. Oh, and there’s some nice shopping here as well.

Camel Museum: the advantage of this museum is that it’s open at 8:00 am (unusual for many places in the UAE, which tends to be a late-to-late place). There’s not much to see, although there are some interesting exhibits on the role of the camel in the history of the Bedouin and some interesting videos about camel racing. Our favorite part of this museum was the security guard, who clearly did not get many visitors, and personally escorted us from exhibit to exhibit. (He was very endearing.) At the end, he even insisted on getting a photo of the four of us with his own camera. We assume it’s to prove to the government that the museum does get visitors and to persuade the powers that be to continue funding the museum.

Sheik Maktoum house: Sheik Maktoum was the father of the current sheik of Dubai, and the house is a lovely example of Arabian architecture with several exhibits about the sheik and the modernization of Dubai. It is tucked behind the Camel Museum and is definitely worth looking around for a good historical feel for Dubai and for some lovely views of the surrounding landscape. It will take you 30-45 minutes.

Saddiyat & Yas Islands: these are quick drives from Abu Dhabi. Saddiyat Island will ultimately house the UAE National Museum and the UAE branches of the Louvre and the Guggenheim (sometime in 2015, hopefully). Right now, there is an exhibit on what the island will ultimately look like. Yas Island holds Ferrari World--an amusement park--and a Formula 1 raceway.

Atlantis: this is almost an exact copy of the one found in the Bahamas, and is a water resort on steroids. We highly recommend springing for a suite—you get some extra privileges including access to the lounges (which have showers) after you check out—that make it worth the extra cost. The kids considered this their favorite experience in the UAE. The rides are fun, the staff is extremely friendly, and it’s a great way to start or end your experience in the UAE.

Currency: the UAE uses dirhams as its currency.

Food: contrary to our usual journeys, we don’t have many specific recommendations (other than Shake Shack). ☺ There is excellent food of all cuisines in the UAE from Chinese to Italian to Middle Eastern. The disadvantage of trying out local restaurants is that smoking is prevalent (both cigarettes and hookah, called “shisha” in Arabic). This can make it difficult to enjoy dining locally, if you are sensitive to smoke. The hotels do have smoking and non-smoking sections, so be sure to specify when making reservations. Alcohol is also available at hotel restaurants, despite the Islamic prohibition. There are no pork or pork products served, so bacon and hot dogs, for instance, will be made of veal or beef or turkey.

Some restaurants we do recommend are as follows:

Pierchic: located at the Madinat Jumeirah resort in Dubai, this is one of those rare restaurants that combine excellent food (seafood is its primary specialty) with beautiful views.

Eauzone: located at the Royal Mirage in Dubai, this is an excellent fusion Asian restaurant.

Nobu: located in the Palm Jumeirah in Dubai. Our Japanese friends do not regard any of the Nobu restaurants as proper Japanese food, and this restaurant is no exception. This is a fusion Japanese-Middle Eastern restaurant with all of Nobu’s trademark flair and creativity. Just don’t go anticipating a simple sushi meal.

Majlis al Bahar: located on the beach at the Burj Al Arab in Dubai. This restaurant serves Emirati cuisine on the beach front. The food is excellent, and the setting can’t be beat.

Shopping: Just about anything you want is available in the UAE from high end designer brands to local knickknacks. The souks are worth walking through for the experience, even if you don’t plan on buying anything. And remember, the Arab culture is a merchant culture. It’s always worth bargaining for what you want to buy.

Cell phones: your cell phones will work in the UAE. You can check e-mail on your cell phone, too, if you have an international data plan.

Electricity: most electronics will work with the voltage of 230 volts, but you should check your power units to make sure (our laptops and iPads/iPhones were fine). Most hotels have universal plugs in their rooms, but you can always ask to borrow adapters if they don’t.

Traffic: traffic can be horrendous so plan accordingly.