

EXPAT GUIDE: **ABU DHABI**

This expat guide offers information and advice if you are moving to Abu Dhabi.

Click on the different tabs to find out about anything from tax rules and banking to education and cultural highlights.



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Moving to Abu Dhabi

Abu Dhabi shines with its strong economy, abundant work opportunities and high-quality lifestyle.

Abu Dhabi is popular with expat families due to the good schools and opportunities for outdoor recreation. With much of its traditional Bedouin culture intact, Abu Dhabi offers an enriching cultural experience, as well as a financially rewarding one.

Shipping and removals

There is no shortage of shipping and relocation companies to meet the demands of people moving to Abu Dhabi. Sometimes the employer will have an in-house or preferred company. Relocation companies can be hired to assist with every aspect of the move, from furniture transportation to school enrolment.

The UAE has strict rules on what may and may not be brought into the country. No weapons, ammunition or narcotics will be admitted. The UAE has imposed bans on various medicines, including codeine. It is advisable to check what is allowed to bring into the country before travelling. Being caught with "banned" items can result in a jail term.

All music, books, CDs and DVDs will be subject to inspection/censorship at customs. Anything considered to be against the values, tradition and morality of the UAE will be banned. This would include anything with pornographic or anti-Muslim content.

Bringing pets to Abu Dhabi

You may ship pets to Abu Dhabi, but given the heat and the likelihood of living in an apartment. Large animals will not have a high quality of life. On the plus side, there are no quarantine laws.

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Working in Abu Dhabi

Below you will find information about:

- [Work permits](#)
- [Banking, money and taxes](#)
- [Working hours](#)
- [Employment contacts](#)
- [Sick leave](#)
- [Annual leave](#)
- [Public holidays](#)

The expat workforce in Abu Dhabi is one of the largest in the world. With 10% of the world's oil reserves, Abu Dhabi's wealth and its work opportunities are centred on the thriving oil and gas industry.

Despite some sectors being reserved exclusively for Emiratis, there are still many work opportunities for expats in Abu Dhabi, including the non-oil sectors of construction, media and healthcare. Work and residency visas are easy to get once you have a confirmed job offer. However, it is becoming increasingly difficult to find work in Abu Dhabi after arriving. The official policy of Emiratisation means that private companies are encouraged to hire locals for white collar jobs. The more specialised your skills, the better your chances to find work in Abu Dhabi.

Useful links:

- [Official job listing site](#)
- [General recruitment information](#)

Work permits

Your employer will typically complete this process on your behalf. Residency visas are issued for three years.

Note that the application must be supported by a Health Card issued by the Ministry of Health. Expats testing positive for HIV/Aids will not be granted a visa.

Banking, money and taxes

Banking in Abu Dhabi is simple and expats can open accounts with ease. Abu Dhabi's banking system is sophisticated. ATMs and credit cards are widely used.

To open a bank account an expat needs a residence permit (or proof that the permit has been applied for), a passport, a [No Objection Certificate](#) from the employer, and a minimum amount which varies according to the bank.

A huge advantage of working in Abu Dhabi is that there is no tax on expat income. Depending on your nationality you may be liable for tax in your home country, although the amount varies and relates to how long you spend outside of the country, and whether you qualify for non-resident tax status. It is a good idea to use a tax adviser specialising in your country's tax code.

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Working hours

The traditional office day is split into two parts: 8am to 1pm and 4pm to 7pm. This tradition stems from the days before air-conditioning when midday heat would dictate a siesta over lunch.

Employment contracts

The employment contracts in Abu Dhabi cover the basic terms and conditions which are set by the [UAE Labour Law](#) regardless of your profession. Bear in mind that it is the entitlement in your employment package that makes the difference.

The basic entitlement for any job offer in Abu Dhabi is typically:

- Accommodation: If accommodation is not provided by the company, your employment package typically comes with housing allowance
- Annual leave
- Air ticket
- Personal life and accident insurance
- Medical treatment
- Sick leave

The additional perks which vary from company to company are: relocation assistance, educational assistance, duty meals, transportation, laundry and telephone allowance.

Sick leave

You will not be entitled for paid sick leave during the probation period.

The maximum sick leave entitlement is 90 days which can either be taken continuously or intermittently. Paid sick leave always requires a medical certificate.

According to the UAE Labour Law, the first 15 days of sick leave is paid full, the next 30 days will be paid in half, then the next 45 days is without pay.

There will be no cash value at the end of employment and sickness caused by misconduct will not be paid either.

Annual leave

According to UAE Labour Law, employees are entitled an annual leave of 30 days. You earn 2.5 vacation days per month but this doesn't apply during the probation period.

Public holidays

	2011	2012
New Year's Day	1 Jan	1 Jan
Prophet Mohammed's Birthday	15 Feb	4 Feb
Leilat al-Meiraj (Ascension of the Prophet)	28 June	17 June
Start of Ramadan	1 Aug	20 July
Eid Al Fitr	30 Aug	19 Aug
Eid Al Adha	6 Nov	26 Oct
Al-Hijira	26 Nov	15 Nov
UAE National Day	2 Dec	2 Dec

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Living and culture

Below you will find information about:

- [Cost of living](#)
- [Language](#)
- [Accommodation](#)
- [Attractions](#)
- [Attractions for kids](#)
- [Restaurants and takeout](#)
- [Nightlife](#)
- [Shopping](#)
- [Travel opportunities](#)

Abu Dhabi is a Muslim country, as are all the Emirates. Consequently, alcohol is banned in public, with severe penalties for public consumption and drunkenness. Alcohol is for sale in hotels and can be consumed in expat compounds.

Dress and behaviour should be modest, particularly during the month of Ramadan when you should not smoke cigarettes, drink or eat in public between sunrise and sunset. In general, women's clothes must cover the tops of the arms and legs. Living together without being married, conducting adultery and homosexuality are illegal in the UAE.

In practice, Abu Dhabi is tolerant of its expat Westerners. Provided behaviour is discrete and conducted in private, the state will not intervene.

Business is conducted in a formal manner. However, punctuality is rare and meetings are frequently interrupted. One should greet local business people with the Arabic "Salaam Aleikum" as opposed to "Hello". Politeness and etiquette are essential in building relationships and developing empathy in business relationships. Shaking hands is common but men should only shake the hand of a woman if she offers it, otherwise a simple bow of the head will suffice.

Cost of living

Abu Dhabi is said to be one of the world's most expensive places to live. However, according to the Economist and Mercer, Abu Dhabi is more affordable than most expat destinations. The Economist placed Abu Dhabi as 82nd most expensive city in the world, while Mercer placed Abu Dhabi at 30th.

It is likely that the cost of living in Abu Dhabi will increase more over the coming years, the most likely factor being the high cost of accommodation. Rent will account for at least 50% of living costs.

Language

Arabic is the official language but English is the business language, and most signs and documents are printed in both. This means you can get by without speaking more than a few words of Arabic – however, there is no doubt you can make a real impact in business and social dealings by learning to speak conversational Arabic. So few expats make the effort to do so that it is the simplest and most effective way to stand out in a positive manner.

Accommodation

The vast majority of expats rent apartments in the city. Expats have only been allowed to purchase property since 2005 and only long-term expat residents will go through the complex and expensive process of doing so.

The most popular areas are Bateen, Karam and Khalidia for houses, and Corniche for apartments. Rental prices are

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expensive by any standards. Ensure you factor this cost into any package you are offered.

Renting an apartment is different in Abu Dhabi and the UAE from what most Westerners are used to. Rental is typically paid annually in advance, but you can ask your landlord to provide you with monthly rent cheques instead so the amount is deducted each month rather than in one lump sum. If you pay up front and have to move back home, you may lose the pre-paid rent. Tread cautiously and get things in writing.

Another option for those with families or sufficient resources is to live in a villa within a compound. These complexes normally include gym facilities, swimming pools, and the apartments are often fully furnished.

The best bet is to negotiate free or subsidised housing from the employer as part of your contract. That way you remain debt-free. It is very important to avoid financial obligations for your first couple of years.

Attractions

Abu Dhabi appeals more to working expats than sightseeing tourists, but it does have its share of things to see and do.

Al Hosn Palace (White Fort): Abu Dhabi's oldest building is known locally as the White Fort and was built in 1793 to house the former ruling family. After extensive renovation in 1983 it now houses the Cultural Foundation – make sure you don't miss the tile work over the entrance.

Heritage Village: This living museum is designed to showcase the skills and lifestyle of the Bedouin, original inhabitants of this region. The Heritage Village over the Abu Dhabi Corniche has tents, courtyard houses, a working ancient irrigation system, and various workshops.

Petroleum Exhibition: A permanent exhibition of images and artefacts designed to showcase the history and evolution of Abu Dhabi's "black gold" and its impact on the region.

Telephone: 626 9715

Al Ayn: The amazing oasis city of Al Ayn, 100 miles (160km) east of Abu Dhabi, dates from 3000 BC. It is very picturesque and surrounded by soaring sand dunes.

Liwa Oasis: Catch an organised day trip to famous Liwa Oasis. This verdant, lush agricultural land is at the edge of the Rub Al Khali ("Empty Quarter") desert and shows what billions of litres of water can do to seemingly lifeless sand.

Attractions for kids

Abu Dhabi has limited attractions to offer expat children, but there are some reliable things to see and do. Check out Marina Mall Fun City with its arcade games and rides. Don't miss the thrashing shark rollercoaster and the intimidating "Extreme Shock" machine. Another option is paintball or table tennis at the Armed Forces Officers' Club. The Olympic-size swimming pool is a big hit on the hot days.

For an icy day in the dessert try out Hili Fun City, nicknamed the "Disneyland of the Middle East" as it is the biggest theme park in the Gulf.

Restaurants and takeout

You will find a diverse range of restaurants at very reasonable prices: Pakistani, Indian, Lebanese, Nepalese, Vietnamese, Chinese, and Ethiopian are just a few of the cuisines on offer. Take-away food is also cheap; a network of drivers on motorcycles will rush to get the food to your home or office. Bear in mind that alcohol is only served in hotels.

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Nightlife

The nightlife in Abu Dhabi is surprisingly lively as the bars and clubs in the up-market hotels can serve alcohol under UAE law. The parties start late, from 11 pm, and dress codes are enforced at most clubs. Popular bars include Harvester's Pub at Sands Hotel, the Jazz Bar at Hemingway's and the Irish pub at the Abu Dhabi Grand. Look out for regular live music, happy hours, quiz nights and ladies nights to spice up the regular routine.

Local nightclubs have international DJs as well as traditional Arab singers and belly dancers – both on the same night if you're lucky. The top nightclubs include Le Meridien's Gauloises Club and the Tequilana Discotheque at the Hemingway's complex.

Shopping

There are plenty of markets and malls, and the airport duty-free shops offer real bargains on consumer goods thanks to low import duties. Shopping malls open from Saturday to Wednesday, 10am to 10pm, Thursdays from 10am to 11pm, and Fridays 2pm until late. Souks (markets) are where to go for oriental carpets, gold and antique jewellery, electronic gadgets, designer clothes, cosmetics, spices and souvenirs. Head to Al Nasr Street, Sheikh Hamdan, Sheikh Khalifa, Iranian and Al Meena souks for the best range and prices.

There are at least 15 shopping centres with familiar western outlets and cinemas. The two largest are the Marina and Abu Dhabi malls. The Abu Dhabi Shopping Festival, held in March each year, offers bargain prizes that bring visitors from all over the world.

Travel opportunities

Some of the most breathtaking and interesting locations in the world are less than a four-hour flight away: Addis Ababa, the capital of Ethiopia, destinations throughout the Middle East, much of India, Nepal and Sri Lanka: . People who live here take a lot of holidays, particularly during the hot summer months.

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Education and schools

The presence of an ever increasing expat community in Abu Dhabi has led to the creation of a number of international schools for children of all ages. The competition among these institutions has resulted in an elevated standard in education and a growing culture of progressive initiative.

Despite the proliferation of schools in the past decade there is a high demand for placement at schools catering to expat children. You should apply for a spot well in advance of your arrival – most schools have an application form available online. If you cannot place your child into the school of your choice immediately, it is worth being patient as the turnover of pupils is high and places become available throughout the year.

Sending two children to the same international school is also a good tactic for ascending the waiting list, and in some cases, qualifying for tuition deductions.

Documentation required for admission is often cumbersome, so make sure you have the following at hand:

- Completed school application form
- Completed health form
- Copies of student's passport photos (2-5)
- Copies of student's passport or resident visa
- Copies of mother/father's passport or resident visa
- Copy of original birth certificate
- Recent reports from previous school
- Certified transfer certificate from the UAE Education Zone

Class sizes seldom exceed 20 pupils per teacher, and extracurricular activities are encouraged – though not always included in tuition. School fees are expensive and can range up to AED 60,000 per year.

If possible try and negotiate this expense into your contract. Be aware that some companies only endorse certain schools or will only agree to cover partial fees.

The school week runs from Sunday through Thursday, and the school year is separated into either two or three terms depending on which school and which curriculum selected. School hours also vary depending on institution, but do not start earlier than 7.30am and do not run later than 2.45pm.

Arabic is a required course at all schools, though no subject testing will be completed in this language – merely achievement in basic proficiency is required.

Consult the Knowledge and Human Development Authority for more information: www.khda.gov.ae

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International schools

Abu Dhabi International School

Website: www.aisuae.com

Gender: Co-educational

Curriculum: American System

The Abu Dhabi International School offers an American system of education from kindergarten through to grade twelve. Following an interview the student will be placed in an appropriate grade.

American Academy Abu Dhabi

Website: www.gemsaa-abudhabi.com

Gender: Co-educational

Curriculum: American System / International Baccalaureate Program (Grade 5 and above, subject to acceptance)

Ages: 3 to 12

The American Academy Abu Dhabi runs from pre-kindergarten (3-year-olds) to grade 7 (12 year olds) and aspires to offer an American curriculum through to grade 12.

American International School

Website: www.aisa.sch.ae

Gender: Co-educational and girls only options

Curriculum: American and International Baccalaureate

The American International School has two sections, a co-educational section and a girls only section, and offers an American style of curriculum from pre-kindergarten to grade twelve.

The British School

Website: www.britishschool.sch.ae

Gender: Co-educational

Curriculum: British

Ages: 3 to 18

The British School was established in 1971 and offers students a British style of curriculum from the ages of 3 to 18.

The Cambridge High School

Website: www.tchs-auh.sch.ae/home.htm

Gender: Co-educational

Curriculum: British

The Cambridge High School provides students from kindergarten to grade 13 with a British style of curriculum.

Abu Dhabi Indian School

Website: www.adisuae.com

Gender: Co-educational with separate boys and girls blocks

Curriculum: Indian

Ages: 3 to 18

The Abu Indian School offers an Indian curriculum to students from kindergarten to grade 12. It aims to prepare pupils for the All India Secondary School Exam (grade 10) and the All India Senior Certificate Exam (grade 12).

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Useful information

Standard time zone: GMT + 4 hours.

Currency: The dirham (AED, د.) is the official currency of Abu Dhabi. It is divided into 100 fils. You can check the latest exchange rates here: <http://www.xe.com/>

Cash is still the UAE's preferred payment method, although credit and debit cards are widely accepted. There is some limitation on the import of currency into the country.

Communications: The international country dialling code is +971 for the UAE followed by 2 for Abu Dhabi. The outgoing code is 00, followed by the relevant country code (eg 001 for the United States). Though the provision of telecom and Internet services are essentially sandwiched in between two semi-government owned operators – Etisalat and Du – operations are efficient and consistent.

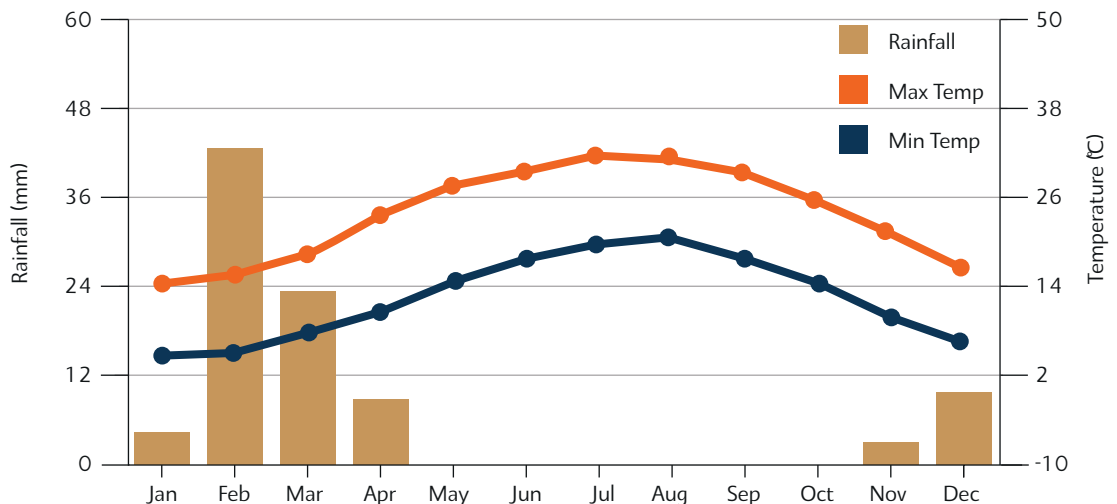
Internet censorship: Though the internet penetration rate in the UAE is 70 % and growing, the connectivity of the population is still regulated by the watchful eyes of the Telecommunications Regulatory Authority (TRA). Sites pinpointed as offensive in either a religious, cultural, or political context are blocked and rendered inaccessible.

Specifically, the TRA uses SmartFilter, a popular filtering program, to block gambling, pornography, illegal drug, and even religious conversion content. It's also been noted that sites related to Israel, the Bahai faith, western dating sites and those that advocate for gay and lesbian issues in the Middle East are often inaccessible.

Climate: Abu Dhabi has temperatures that range from very hot to extremely hot. Bright sunshine and blue skies are a fixture here, although between June and September it can be uncomfortably hot and humid for Westerners, who move from air-conditioned home to air-conditioned car to air-conditioned office and back again.

The mildest weather in Abu Dhabi is in January and February when it can be cool enough in the evening to wear a jumper. Don't bother packing a rain coat, rainfall is almost non-existent.

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Emergency Number: Police and ambulance: 998 or 999. Fire emergency: 997. Coast guard: 996.

Safety: Abu Dhabi is very safe when compared with other large international cities. Crime is rare and serious crimes virtually unheard of. However, the UK foreign office and US state department still deem there to be a threat of terrorism against Western interests and gathering points in Abu Dhabi, particularly entertainment venues. You should ensure that you are kept informed of developments and are vigilant when frequenting places where westerners typically gather. For the same reason, it is wise to avoid political gatherings and demonstrations in Abu Dhabi.

Useful links

Local shipping and removals agents include:

- Gulf Relocation: www.gulfrelocation.com
- Pickfords: <http://ae.alliedpickfords.com>

Accommodation in Abu Dhabi:

- Asteco Property Management: www.astecoproperty.com
- Silver Lake Property Management: www.silverlakeuae.com

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