

ABU DHABI OASIS

A handful of savvy visitors are discovering a quietly compelling Emirati attraction: the newly opened Al Wathba Wetland Reserve.

By Adam H. Graham Photography by Ferdz Bedaña



A CAPITAL STAY

*The new
Four Seasons
Hotel Abu Dhabi at
Al Maryah Island
stands in the heart of
the UAE's capital city.
Ideally situated on
the water, the Hotel
boasts bright open
spaces that embrace
expansive views of
the city skyline and
Arabian Gulf.*

ABU DHABI HAS ALWAYS been fond of starchitects. Saadiyat Island alone is home to a number of well-publicised new projects, such as the Jean Nouvel–designed Louvre Abu Dhabi museum, due to open later this year. Upcoming debuts also include Foster + Partners' Zayed National Museum, Zaha Hadid's Abu Dhabi Performing Arts Centre and Frank Gehry's Guggenheim Abu Dhabi. But the most surprising development to unfold in the Emirati capital is by that most humble of architects—Mother Nature.

The Emirate's master urban plan will greatly expand its capacity for green space and add several new wildlife reserves. These projects include biodiverse hot spots like Mangrove National Park, the first of five national parks in the UAE, and, now, the **Al Wathba Wetland Reserve**—Abu Dhabi's first wildlife reserve (above). The late Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan declared Al Wathba a protected area in 1998; it first opened to visitors last year. Located 40 kilometres (25 miles) east of central Abu Dhabi, the

5-square-kilometre (2-square-mile) reserve introduces guests to *sabkhas* (salt flats), fossilised dunes, several dragonfly species, spiny-tailed lizards and a rare breeding colony of greater flamingos.

Why are projects like Al Wathba worth supporting? The Arabian Peninsula is home to a variety of critical wildlife habitats—inland gravel outwash plains, the Musandam Peninsula's high mountains, coastal mangroves and wetlands, and acacia savannah plains, all in need of protection. The wetlands are home to more than 250 species, many of them migratory birds, and are a significant breeding site for endemics like the Kentish plover and the black-winged stilt. The area, once the territory of mammals such as the Arabian leopard (now extinct in the Emirates), will increasingly need sites like these to balance rapid development. Al Wathba is embracing its role as ambassador for the cause, inviting the public to birdwatching blinds and a network of walking trails.