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This luxury resort includes a safari-style wildlife reserve, writes Steve Meacham.

Abu Dhabi is a place where unashamedly wooden nose pegs over my nostrils, and prepare to drop below the warm Gulf waters in search of nature's most remarkable irritant. Natural pearl. Is any jewel its equal? Any that has inspired such great art and literature, decorated countless kings and queens, and provided a solace to so many martial disputes? But, before you answer, of course I'm wearing my long-sleeved, hooded cotton shirt worn traditionally by Arab pearl divers to protect themselves from jellyfish. And, that stinging not around my neck is where I'll place any gem-bearing stones I collect from the ocean floor below.

As I float, I see a large, fish-like, brown and black creature. Mustafa - holding the drop rope over the edge of the ship - instructs me to place one foot on the floor immediately above the heavy stone that will soon plunge rapidly downwards - dragging me with it. I take a handful of air and signal to Mustafa - I'm ready. Instantly I'm descending at disconcerting speed, the pressure building in my ears...

Oh, I am already at the bottom? (Yes, it's only three metres deep). So now I'm just a question of how long can I hold my breath while collecting so many oysters as possible. Arab men (never women) have been diving for pearls along this Gulf coast for at least 1000 years, often venturing as deep as 30 metres. They begin as nine-year-olds, learning the craft of oyster diving with a lethal sharp knife to search for the elusive pearls. At 15, they are old enough to dive, working from sunrise to sunset. They gather their breath for five minutes before they go, and the safety rope, allowing the rope man in the boat to haul them speedily back up. So far, I hardly lost a minute underwater before I signal Youssef, our dive captain, that I'm ready to surface. And I know I'm not going to be rich because I've collected only one oyster, and the odds of finding a pearl are well over 10,000 to one.

That's not enough to make the three-hour pearl diving experience at Sir Bani Yas Island - a three-hour drive and 25-minute ferry ride from the city of Abu Dhabi - worth the show. Each oyster finds a cultured pearl in one of the oysters, they bring to the surface (they have been kept alive before the dive by Youssef and his crew). Which is ironic because it was the cultured pearl that killed off pearl diving, and we have an Australian to thank for that. British-born marine biologist William Saville-Kent is credited with being the first to produce both blister and spherical pearls of commercial quality. That was in 1900 when he was experimenting on Thursday Island. But once he shared his techniques with the Japanese, pearl divers around the world soon went out of work. Still, it's fitting that the first Western nation of Sir Bani Yas - the biggest island in the Emirate of Abu Dhabi, itself the largest and wealthiest of the seven Emirates which make up the United Arab Emirates - came about because of its pearl divers.

In the 1980s, a Venetian jeweller named Giorgio Bucchi listed "Irishman" as a source of the world-class pearls. Today Sir Bani Yas is one of the great natural wonders of the United Arab Emirates - not only a royal retreat that is now a five-star luxury resort (managed by the internationally esteemed Thai-based, Islamic and Anantara group) but also Abu Dhabi's first safari-style wildlife reserve. The Arabian Wildlife Park owns the original of the late Sheikh Zayed Bin Sultan Al Nahyan, the founder of the UAE. One of the world's richest men (worth a reputed US$100 billion), he was president of the UAE for 28 years. And Sir Bani Yas was his personal retreat. The Abu Dhabi was also his home for generations; Bani Yas is the name of the Bani Yas tribe that were frequenting part of the island. The pearl divers to full-time rulers in 1956 was discovered in 1900 by Fawaz Al Attar.

In 1900, Sheikh Zayed built an island palace for himself. But, even more impressively, he built a massive, hotel-sized lodge for guests. Today that guest lodge is the centre point of Anantara Sir Bani Yas Island Resorts, spread over three contrasting but luxurious properties. The refurbished lodge, with the addition of Anantara's signature spa, is now the Arabian-themed Desert Island Resort. But guests can also stay at two more intimate, mini-resorts.

An island, within the wildlife reserve, has an African safari atmosphere with antelope and other herbivores grazing on the savannah and drinking from the pools. At Al Yume (where I stayed), the luxurious beachfront villas are based on the homes of the early fishermen who lived on the island. Each mini-resort is self-contained, with its own restaurant, bar and swimming pool, but guests are encouraged to visit the others for a change of scenery and a new perspective. The under-the-stars barbeque on the beach at Desert Islands, with traditional Arab meats, grilled meats and fish, desserts, coffee and hookah pipes served in sofas dotted around the sand.

All this luxury is a far cry from the life of the Nestorian monks who built their sparse monasteries on Sir Bani Yas around the time Muhammad was born. Undiscovered until 1952, it is the only known pre-Islamic Christian site in the UAE - and a key site on the guided history tours departing Desert Sands each day.

Sheik Zayed was passionately interested in conservation, particularly of endangered Arabian animals. So in 1977 he banned hunting on the island and began planting 2.8 million acacia and mangrove trees to provide the habitat for his private wildlife park. And, our guides on this late afternoon safari, explained the rest as we drove round the huge wildlife park that takes up half the island. Arabian cheetahs, smaller than the African species, are extinct in the wild. But four - descendants of exotic cats once kept as pets - now roam Sir Bani Yas (it was in an African import).

Sheik Zayed was passionately interested in conservation.

Our safari group spots three of these Arabian cheetahs. Gibbs and Gidding, brothers from the same litter, go next to each other in the sun, having just caught and devoured a sizable Barbary sheep (from Morocco's Atlas mountains). The third, the son of Gibbs and Rafael (the same female Arabian cheetah) - but has to be kept in a separate enclosure because his father and uncle have already tried to kill him (oh, how times have changed). Rafa tells us all four predators on Sir Bani Yas are protected by the Beneath the UAE's cultural heritage, and the coexistence of the region: Arabian cheetah, the nocturnal Arabian striped hyena, the golden jackal and equally elusive lynx like the Iberian.

The vegetation, on the other hand, has been imported from every corner of the world, from the mountains of Afghanistan to the vegetation of the Arabian desert. There are giraffes, ostrich and countless gazelles (African) and (Emirati) emu (Ornitho) and red deer (Europe). Yet the greatest sighting is another Asian native - the Arabian oryx, a national symbol of the UAE, a species declared extinct in the wild in 1972. So what's that we see before us? That large, white-almost albatross with the distinctive shoulder bump, the black-and-white face, and those immense, straight horns - Yep, that's an Arabian oryx. It's a site of national pride - and we spot them on our safari.

Sheik Zayed was passionate about nature and the environment, and we are fortunate to be able to experience it with our own eyes.