

Travel & Outdoors

WISH YOU WERE HERE



Lights, camera, holiday!

Spending all day indoors when there's a cloudless sky and sun beaming down outside sounds like a mistake. Not in Abu Dhabi, says **Christian Sylt**

Days don't get more blissful than this. I spent the morning walking the streets of Gotham City inside one of the world's most cutting-edge theme parks. This was followed up with some window shopping in a mega mall and lunch at stylish Italian eatery Carluccio's. In a moment I'm going to burn it off in a water park before heading back to my hotel for dinner. The most spellbinding part is that I haven't once needed to get in a car.

Having everything within walking distance sounds like the stuff of fairytales but this resort is only seven hours from the UK. It doesn't take long to see that convenience is a priority in Abu Dhabi. If you travel anywhere with kids in tow you'll know that the journey from the airport to the hotel can sometimes feel longer than the flight itself. There's no risk of that in Abu Dhabi as it takes just 15 minutes to drive from

the airport to Yas Island, the Middle East's answer to Disney World. It's no Mickey Mouse complex.

I'm staying in the Crowne Plaza, a glitzy hotel which wouldn't look out of place on the Cote d'Azur. The lobby is layered with shimmering marble while the rooms are more minimalist, with dark wooden cabinets and cream furniture. You soon feel at home with the UK television channels and plug sockets which are the norm here. The real fun is further afield.

Many hotels claim to be in the middle of the action but few live up to it. The Crowne Plaza is an exception. A 15-minute walk down palm tree-lined lanes takes you to a bustling marina with bars, restaurants and superyachts bobbing on the sparkling sea. Walking in the

The world's biggest indoor theme park, it feels far from claustrophobic



Join Green Lantern on an interstellar mission, above, then go wild in a water park, main

other direction you pass a secluded beach and picturesque golf course overlooking the ocean before you get to the main attraction.

Sunscreen is essential. Rain is almost unheard of in Abu Dhabi and spring temperatures soar to over 30. It doesn't take much time outside before a stream of sweat is running down my back and I'm craving air conditioning. Luckily it isn't far off.

Up ahead, a giant golden warehouse looks like it has risen from the sand in an oasis. The giveaway as to what lies inside is the tall water tower bearing

a famous golden logo with the letters "WB". This is Warner Brothers World, Abu Dhabi's newest attraction.

The world's biggest indoor theme park, it feels far from claustrophobic. The fun starts in a replica of a Hollywood square from the 1930s. There's an old-fashioned cinema with Art Deco arches, a fountain in front of it and classic advertising billboards above. Tunnels in the corners of the square lead to the five surrounding "lands". Instead of taking you behind the scenes of films, the park drops you in the worlds that cinema characters live in, using movie-making wizardry to pull the illusion off.

Rides based on Wonder Woman, Superman and their chums are on a street from Metropolis lined with such selfie magnets as a Daily Planet newsstand and phone box. Batman and arch nemesis the Joker have their own gloomy home in Gotham whilst cartoon characters have three lands.

These don't just appeal to kids but also adults of a certain age as the rides are based on Saturday morning cartoons from the Sixties and Seventies like *Scooby-Doo*, *The Flintstones* and *Tom and Jerry*. Many

of them make their theme park debut here – a welcome change if you're tired of seeing rides in other parks based on more familiar characters.

Being indoors doesn't just protect you from the heat, it immerses you in ways of which other parks can only dream. Just a third of the park is on show as you walk around, with the remainder being the rides themselves, which are hidden behind internal walls. The elaborate ride entrances are set into the walls, which has a magic touch – meaning you don't know what you're getting until you step inside. It makes them seem like portals to different worlds and the feeling is used to great effect in Cartoon Junction, where you find most of the animation-themed rides. The ride entrances there are actually the front doors of a row of brightly-coloured town houses.

Kids will go ga-ga at the characters but nostalgia is the lure for adults. Remember Acme and its wacky cartoony killing machines which injured Wile E Coyote but never his target, the Road Runner? There's a ride here where you work as a delivery man for it.

Many parks have rides which see you firing at a 3D screen whilst others are trackless and some allow riders to interact with the scenery. Ani-Mayhem does all that and stars favourites like Tweetie Pie and Sylvester, who help you hit parcels on 3D screens and in the physical sets with a gun in the shape of a barcode scanner.

The scenery is far more elaborate than you find in its outdoor counterparts as there is no danger of it getting damaged by wind or faded by the sun. In Gotham, bricks look weathered, there's graffiti on the walls and ornaments in the windows.

While no movies are made in the park, you often feel like you're in the middle of one. The highlight is a ride which starts out like a planetarium show but suddenly turns into a 3D adventure thanks to the seats being attached to a huge robot arm so that they appear to float in front of a giant domed screen. Themed to cosmic crime-fighting superhero Green Lantern, it is like being thrust into an Eighties sci-fi film as you soar over

psychedelically coloured planets and duel with fire-breathing dragons. It's an enchanting experience as you get blasted with air when creatures roar, while smells of pine are pumped in as you skim over alien forests.

Everything in the park is in English and all staff speak the language. It's the same across Abu Dhabi but that's just the start. The mall down the road from the park is even home to UK restaurants and stores like Boots, Debenhams and House of Fraser. It makes a change to other parks where you're usually stuck with what's on-site when you want a bite to eat or have left something at the hotel.

Minutes from the mall is the Ferrari World park, which is packed with rollercoasters, including the world's fastest (I chickened out). It adds to Yas Island's unbeatable mix. No other resort has a park from a major movie studio in walking distance from a mall, luxury hotels, a beach, marina, golf course and water park. That, too, is one of the most innovative in the world. If you think that water parks just involve tubes with water running through them, think again.

This one has a rollercoaster snaking through the middle and allows guests below to fire cunningly-placed water cannon at unsuspecting riders. With an Arabian Nights theme, it is home to forts, full-size wooden galleons and signs hanging on what appear to be Persian rugs. The burning sun above, palm tree-lined sandy paths and actual dunes visible in the distance add to the atmosphere. Few other parks can compete with that and it's another reason Abu Dhabi really is a whole new world. ■

Three nights in a superior city view room with breakfast at the Crowne Plaza Yas Island costs £490 per person including return flights with British Airways from Edinburgh via Heathrow. Book on britishairways.com or call 0344 493 0123. One day tickets to Warner Bros World Abu Dhabi cost from £62 per person or £99 per person with a Quick Pass for skip-the-line access on selected rides and attractions. Children under three go free. To book see attraction-tickets-direct.co.uk or call free on 0800 077 3290.



The Crowne Plaza offers a warm welcome – and much-needed air conditioning

STAYCATION



Lake life to the manor born

Rothay Manor by Windermere provides Martin Gray with a wonderfully relaxing break

It's Saturday morning and all around is the sound of contented birds, happy people and splashing water as we skim across Lake Windermere. We're on the NV Swan, a stately river boat built in 1938 in Barrow in Furness, brought to the Lake District in sections and reassembled. It's been serving visitors and locals ever since – sure, the craft has wifi so you can instantly put up those vital selfies, a state of the art coffee maker and other mod cons, but really, it's all about the surroundings.

It's when you stop looking through a smartphone lens that you truly appreciate the beauty of Cumbria's famed tourist area. The vast expanse of water – at around ten miles long, a mile wide and 220 feet down at its deepest point, this is England's largest natural lake – is as perfect in real life as on the postcards sold in the inviting shops on the banks of Windermere. We're surrounded by greenery – examples of every tree grown in the UK can be seen – with hotels and private homes studded on the shores, mostly sympathetically, sometimes a brash statement of wealth.

We boarded at Ambleside, we get off at Lakeside, where the destination is Lakeland Motor Museum, a cracking collection, 30,000 items strong, of cars, motorcycles and pushbikes, recording the history of transport in the 20th century. There's also a bijou hot air balloon and all

manner of memorabilia, from tiny Dinky toys to recreations of retail emporia. Exhibits include the oldest surviving TVR, and Donald Campbell Bluebirds aplenty, but my favourite is Al Capone's bulletproof ride – you wouldn't find that at Arnold Clark.

A shuttle bus takes you through lovely country roads back to Lakeside, where a cafe and gift shop offers snacks while you're waiting for the Swan or one of its sister boats, the Teal or Tern, to return to Ambleside, our home for the weekend.

We'd driven down from Edinburgh the previous day, a trip of less than three hours taking in the glorious Borders scenery and a fair few, admittedly, nondescript major roads. Hit the Lake District, though, and everywhere it's Views with a capital 'V'. Ambleside is a pretty town, mainly guest houses, restaurants and shops selling camping equipment and those drab fleeces favoured by keen walkers. We arrived on the first day of the tourist season and already it was buzzing, but not overcrowded.

Every walking party seems to come with its own mutt – massive Newfoundlands and Great Danes, built-for-speed whippets, even the occasional toy pooch, all enjoying the fresh air. It makes sense, then, for hotels to welcome dog owners.

Our accommodation, the grand, white-walled Rothay Manor, not only welcomes canines, it affords them

their own dining room – with the humans, of course. Dogs are welcome in the relaxed area behind the main restaurant, a rustic room – panelled walls, log fires... very welcoming if you don't mind the odd mounted beastie. We ate there after arrival on the Friday, opting for something from the bar menu – formidable chicken burgers – and a couple of extremely well-behaved pets made for easy icebreakers with our fellow diners.

On Saturday, though, it was fine dining in chef Daniel McGeorge's 3AA rosette restaurant, where a typical menu includes starters ranging from squab pigeon to skate and scallops, and mains such as suckling pig and Lavinton lamb. If you're not a meat eater, vegetarian alternatives include kohlrabi with shiso and seaweed, and

Dogs are welcome in the relaxed area behind the main restaurant

roots with swede, turnip, parsnip and sea buckthorn. As for dessert, how do the likes of peanut parfait and brittle with golden raisin and celery, and quince with cobnut, butternut, yogurt and coriander, sound? So far as wine goes, the menu has recommended pairings at very good prices.

For mains, Steve tried Arctic char with Jersey royals, spring onion and truffle, while I plumped for the veggie pastilla with goat's cheese, allium and wild garlic – all gorgeous, served up



Clockwise from main: the exterior of Rothay Manor; afternoon tea; one of the hotel's cosy lounges

by the charming waiting staff. Built in 1823 by a Liverpool merchant, and converted to a hotel in 1936, the 19-bedroom Rothay Manor retains its Regency features. Our Superior Plus room was the epitome of elegance, with massive bed, plush furniture, generous balcony with seats overlooking the well-tended grounds, along with the obligatory big TV, shower and Nespresso machine. "En suite" rather understates the size of the bathroom, which features stand-alone bath, wet room-style double shower, underfloor heating and, for those who can't bear to be away from the other half, side-by-side sinks surrounded by the poshest of toiletries.

It's a good job the outdoors is so enticing, otherwise we'd likely have spent the weekend flitting between bedroom, lounge bars and dining rooms. As it is, the combination of Rothay Manor and Lake Windermere made for a glorious weekend. ■

Rothay Manor, Ambleside, Cumbria (tel: 01539 433605, e-mail: hotel@rothaymanor.co.uk, Rothaymanor.co.uk) costs from £165 per night or £263 on a DB&B basis, maximum two guests per room. A combined Windermere Lake Cruises Boat and Motor Museum ticket costs £24.80 (adult), £13.55 (child), £68.50 (family), www.windermere-lakecruises.co.uk

48 HOURS IN

Myrtle Beach

Friday, midday
Check into the Residence Inn by Marriott (doubles from £152, www.marriott.com), which enjoys a prime spot right down by the famous sands.

1pm
Immerse yourself in South Carolina mall culture at Broadway at the Beach. Here a swathe of shops, bars and restaurants await. The burgers at the Grumpy Monk are legendary, and best enjoyed on their waterfront terrace.

3pm
After touring the shops, pop next door to Ripley's Aquarium, where the attractions range from elegant stringrays to hulking sharks.

5pm
Take a trip on the SkyWheel. From here you can appreciate just how vast the sandy beach is, stretching both north and south across a swathe of the Atlantic coast.

7pm
Settle in for a southern feast at the acclaimed Aspen Grill. Enjoy the likes of US Prime Angus beef. Or seared flounder with shrimp, both caught locally in the Atlantic Ocean.

Saturday, 10am
Wander south along the sands into the Myrtle Beach State Park. A virginial stretch of beach gives way to a network of trails that eke off into the thick forests. This wilderness is alive with soaring eagles and water snakes.

1pm
You can fish for your own lunch and cook it on the BBQS in the State Park.

BARGAIN BREAKS

Beautiful Barcelona
Prices start from £297pp for a three-night holiday in Barcelona with Travel Republic. This includes room-only accommodation at the three-star Catalonia Park Guell and return flights from Edinburgh departing on 6 August. Call 020 8974 7200 or see www.travelrepublic.co.uk

Game for adventure
Explore the wilds of Kenya and Tanzania. Prices start from £3904pp with Shearings Holidays for the 10-day trip, which will include game drives in the Maasai Mara, Serengeti and Tarangire, a hippo-spotting boat trip across



3pm
Ease back along the sands to your hotel enjoying a dip – choose a stretch manned with lifeguards as the ocean can be treacherous.

6pm
Enjoy an aperitif of Dirty Myrtle, a delicious local craft ale sold on draught in the hotel bar.

7.30pm
Head out to Lulu's at Barefoot Landing, a Restaurateur of the Year award winner. Here a dizzying array of fried treats await, with seafood the star of the show.

Sunday, 9am
Take it easy at the hotel by one of their pools, or enjoy a last lazy stroll along the sands that tempt right outside. ■ Robin McKelvie

British Airways (www.ba.com) fly direct to Charleston from London Heathrow with return flights from £547. Myrtle Beach is less than an hour from the airport, with car hire available from www.holidayautos.com. Lonely Planet's Georgia and the Carolinas book has plenty of handy information.

Lake Naivasha, a stay in luxury tented safari lodges and much more. Departs selected dates until November 2020 and includes return flights from Edinburgh or Glasgow, eight nights' accommodation with meals, excursions and tour guide. Call 0344 874 8220 or see www.shearings.com

Florida flit
Book with Ocean Florida and prices start from £744pp, based on six sharing, for seven-nights in Orlando. Includes return flights from Glasgow, leaving 15 February, and self-catering accommodation at The Enclave Hotel & Suites. Call 0207 939 7775 or see www.ocean-florida.co.uk