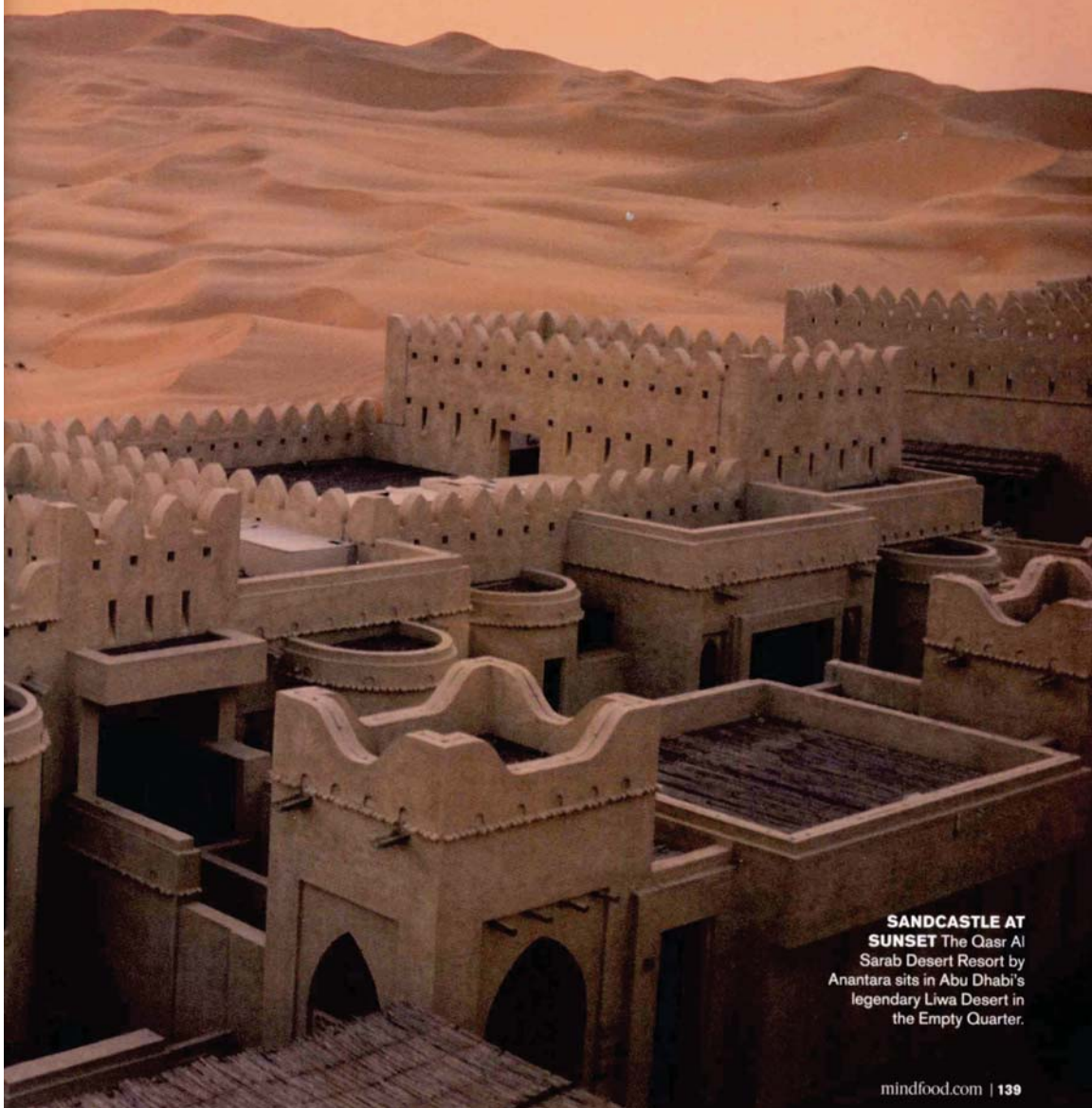


TRAVEL | ABU DHABI

ARABIAN NIGHTS

From hotels that appear like mirages in the desert and magic-carpetlike helicopter rides to camel beauty contests and pet falcons, *MINDFOOD*'s editor-in-chief Michael McHugh experiences the best Abu Dhabi has to offer.

Words & photography by **Michael McHugh**



**SANDCASTLE AT
SUNSET** The Qasr Al
Sarab Desert Resort by
Anantara sits in Abu Dhabi's
legendary Liwa Desert in
the Empty Quarter.

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“Hi honey, I’m home – and I’ve bought a camel!” Can you imagine? How’s that for a souvenir? Or, how about: “Look what I’ve bought, kids. A falcon (not the Ford kind), and it even comes with its own passport so it can go on holidays with us.”

While this may seem odd to us cat and dog owners, in Abu Dhabi owning a falcon is the norm. And just like your pets, these magnificent birds are considered one of the family. So much so that people even go on holidays with them. Etihad Airways will allow you to bring your falcon into the cabin and sit alongside you (hence the passport).

I just can’t imagine our cat Ash, a sleepy lazy moggy, sitting up in first class and ordering a saucer of milk. Or Pippi Kathleen, our Jack Russell-cross, making it through the whole flight without swiping someone’s meal from right under their nose.

NATIONAL BIRD OF PREY

On a visit to Abu Dhabi’s Falcon Hospital I learn just how much these birds are loved within the Arabian community. Falcons are the national emblem of the United Arab Emirates (UAE). The centuries-old tradition of falconry stems from the Bedouin (desert dwelling tribes), who used the majestic birds of prey to hunt and source food in the desert. To this day falcons remain a valuable part of the Arab culture.

The waiting room of the hospital is full of local men wearing *kandoras* (long white robes) and *ghutras* (white cloth head scarves), each holding a falcon on an outstretched arm. Other falcons perch on what looks like a row of church kneelers covered in AstroTurf. Most birds are there for their six-monthly check-up and grooming session during which the bird’s talons and beak are cut, shaved, and reshaped – much like a manicure. The room is so busy that I can’t help thinking it resembles a Saturday afternoon at a USA Nails and Foot Spa.

The hospital, which is the largest of its kind in the world, is run by Dr Margit Gabriele Muller. In addition to treating some 6000 birds a year, it also serves as a major tourist attraction within Abu Dhabi, and has won an array of awards – mostly for the work Muller has done in animal husbandry and tourism.

In the treatment rooms we watch veterinary assistants anaesthetise a falcon with gas. Using tools such as a drill, scissors, and Stanley knife (all bought from a local hardware shop) they cut away any build-up of material from the bird’s large sharp talons and then reshape its beak.

This demonstration is followed by a quick falcon anatomy lesson. Muller shows us the bird’s ears – small holes, hidden under feathers, on either





BIRD HOUSE
Some 6000 falcons are treated each year at Abu Dhabi's Falcon Hospital, mostly for check-ups and grooming sessions. Like a regular hospital, there is a waiting room where the birds sit on AstroTurf-covered perches until a vet is ready to see them. The director of the hospital, Dr Margit Gabriele Muller, demonstrates how the bird is anaesthetised before its talons and beak are clipped and shaped. Falcons are fitted with hoods to help keep them calm.





OLD-WORLD CHARM
The decor in the stunning library at the Qasr Al Sarab Desert Resort by Anantara includes ancient pieces, such as 500-year-old bags made from camel leather, which are seen here on top of the cabinet.



side of its relatively small head. She then draws our attention to the eyes. "When falcons blink or close their eyes, the eyelids come from the bottom rather than the top," explains Muller.

Plucked from the crowd, I am asked to put on a large glove and hold a dead quail firmly in my outstretched hand. The doctor then appears with an enormous falcon wearing a hood, which is used to keep the bird calm. Once the hood is removed, she proceeds to place the bird on my protected arm, where, with much excitement, the bird tugs and pulls away at the meat of the quail's body, bones and all.

The falcon is surprisingly strong and I have no doubt it could rip my hand off along with its early morning meal. Within minutes the quail is gone and the falcon and I look warily at each other. I quickly and carefully hand the falcon back, breathing a sigh of relief that all of my fingers are still attached.

We then continue on our tour, checking out the operating theatre, where a surgery is taking place, as well as the radiology and intensive-care rooms. In 2011, a falcon-breeding program was added to the facility, which is also well worth a visit.

A BOOMING HOLIDAY DESTINATION

Abu Dhabi is the capital and largest of the seven member emirates that comprise the United Arab Emirates. It occupies a massive 87 per cent (some 67,000 square kilometres) of the country's total area and is home to more than 620,000 people.

In 2007, the government released Plan Abu Dhabi 2030, an urban structure framework that was devised to ensure that the city's growth was developed in a planned and considered way. Since then, more than US\$100 billion has been invested on infrastructure projects, and it is tourism that's the key focus driving the region's future development.

New tourist attractions to the region will include the Guggenheim Abu Dhabi museum, Louvre Abu Dhabi (it will be the only Louvre outside of Paris), a maritime museum, and a Zaha Hadid-designed performing arts centre – all of which look impressive as models within the Emirates Palace showcase.

Abu Dhabi's economy grew 6.8 per cent in real terms in 2011 – almost double previous official forecasts, according to the Statistics Centre Abu Dhabi. The oil sector accounted for 52.4 per cent of Abu Dhabi's economy last year, which given the area is one of the world's largest oil producers, comes as no surprise.

Outside of oil, the fastest growth occurred in the transport, storage, and communications sector, which increased by 12.5 per cent, followed by restaurants and hotels at 11.4 per cent, and property with a rise of 10.9 per cent. ▶

In 2005, Abu Dhabi had 1.2 million visitors and by 2015 the government hopes to attract more than 3 million. This rapid development and focus on the tourist dollar is best played out at Yas Island, a small island not far from Abu Dhabi airport. The island is the official home of the UAE's only Formula 1 circuit, the Yas Marina Circuit, where visitors can rent a high-speed car and race around the track like a pro. Alternatively, you can drive a go-kart or once a week go for a walk, run, or cycle on the track. There's even a golf academy where you can practise your swing.

If you haven't had your fill of cars, you can then take a hop, skip, and jump over to nearby Ferrari World – the world's first Ferrari-branded theme park. The park features rides that appeal to children of all ages, including the grown-up kind, and is home to the world's fastest roller coaster – it reaches speeds of up to 240 kilometres.

The Viceroy on Yas Island is a modern hotel with a wraparound metallic coat that makes it look like a high tech jelly bean. With rooftop pools, it services not only conferences and the Formula 1 in November each year, but is marketed as the perfect sporty family holiday destination.

AN EXTREME LANDSCAPE

Located in the Arabian Peninsula, Abu Dhabi's landscape is extremely arid with low seasonal rainfall and extreme temperatures.

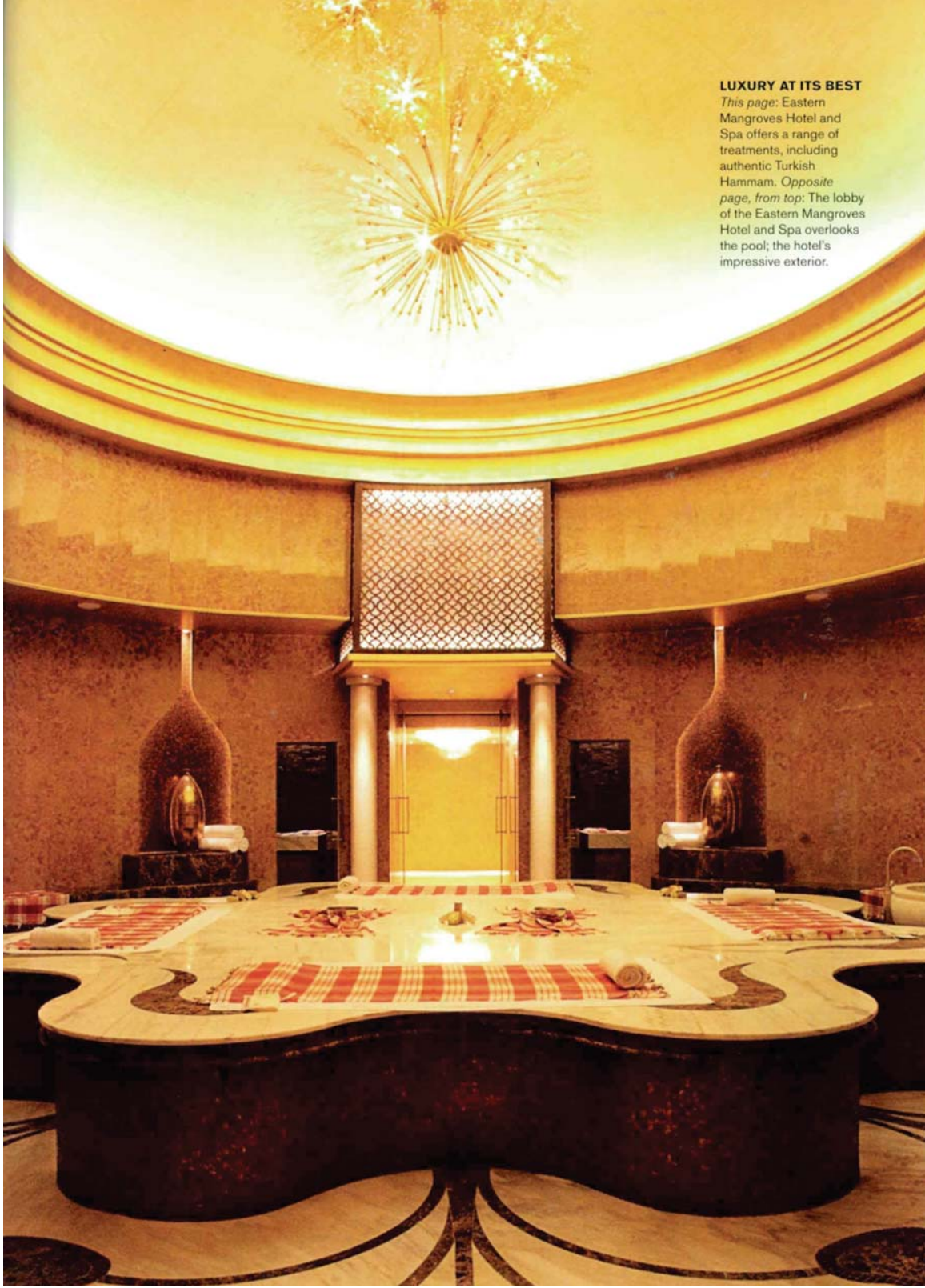
Surrounding the city is the so-called Empty Quarter (*Rub' al Khali*), the largest sand desert in the world. Spanning across four Arab nations (Saudi Arabia, Oman, the United Arab Emirates, and Yemen), this seemingly inhospitable area was a very different place millions of years ago.

Evidence of lakes, river beds, and the remains of ancient settlements indicate how much the climate of the area has changed over time. The desert features sand dunes up to 300 metres high, and as a result of their instability and progressive wind erosion, evidence about the life of the area's early inhabitants has gradually been uncovered. Human life in the region has, for the most part, been nomadic. The Bedouin tribes and their livestock would continually move from one grazing ground to another in an effort to avoid over-exploitation of scarce resources.

Abu Dhabi's sub-tropical, arid climate means that it's warm and sunny most of the year. During the summer season from May to October daytime temperatures can reach 45 degrees. November to April are the cooler months, with temperatures dropping to 24 degrees during the day, and four degrees or even lower at night. The bulk of the region's rainfall occurs during this period.

A growing population, changing economy, and the desire for a modern lifestyle are placing pressure on the region's fragile ecosystem. Former President of the UAE, the late Sheikh Zayed Bin





LUXURY AT ITS BEST

This page: Eastern Mangroves Hotel and Spa offers a range of treatments, including authentic Turkish Hammam. *Opposite page, from top:* The lobby of the Eastern Mangroves Hotel and Spa overlooks the pool; the hotel's impressive exterior.



ON THE ISLAND Yas Island is the site of numerous tourist attractions including Yas Marina Circuit Formula 1 track, Ferrari World, a golf range, Ikea store, hotels, and more. The Yas Viceroy Abu Dhabi hotel (pictured above) is the island's premier hotel and features a wraparound metallic coat that glows blue at nighttime, as well as rooftop pools, seven restaurants, and 499 luxury guest rooms and suites.

Sultan Al Nahyan, began a "Greening the Desert Program" in 2002 to complement and conserve the natural vegetation of inhabited areas, and to combat desertification.

Plans are in place to restore the Liwa Oasis – a perfect example of the UAE's attempts to produce, preserve, and protect local flora and fauna. The inland oasis with its artesian water wells and large tracts of irrigated desert is now attracting many species of insects, birds, and reptiles back into the area.

LIVING LIKE ROYALTY

On a visit to the Sheikh Zayed Palace Museum you won't find any large collections of wealth, but rather an honest reflection of life in the UAE. Built in 1937, the buildings had no air-conditioning, so were kept cool through the inclusion of broad verandahs that provided shade to the main rooms, along with perforated stone or wooden screens through which a breeze could pass.

The palace, where Sheikh Zayed resided between 1937 and 1966, also features separate women's quarters; meeting rooms; and even a room for coffee, where guests were served drinks, dates, and a meal, in accordance with Arab custom.

The Abu Dhabi locals are inquisitive, friendly, and generous. We meet Sultan bin Khalifa Al Nahyan, part of the royal family, while at lunch at the Rotana Hotel. The next day, he invites us to take one of his helicopters to travel to the Liwa Desert rather than travelling by road. The journey is spectacular – flying over the sea and desert landscapes I feel as though I am on a magic carpet ride. It's like something straight out of *Aladdin*.

In the Liwa Desert, we stay at the Qasr Al Sarab Desert Resort by Anantara, almost 200km from Abu Dhabi. Comprising 206 rooms, villas, and suites, the resort has a mirage-like feel to it. It's as

though a child's giant sandcastle has magically risen in the desert.

Inside indigenous fabrics, wooden tea chests, bronze carvings, and rich-coloured handcrafts that shimmer with gold decorate the rooms. Outside, pathways snake around courtyards featuring colourful mosaic fountains and luscious palm trees. Anantara resorts are renowned for their quality spa treatments and when combined with the view out across the desert, they are particularly conducive to relaxation.

The Al Waha restaurant is an all-day dining haven that features cooking stations showcasing Middle Eastern cuisine. Head there for breakfast, as the date syrup with saffron pancakes is an absolute must. Meanwhile, the rooftop Suhail restaurant has a great selection of meat cuts, including Blackmore beef imported from Australia and seafood flown in from all over the world.

It is perhaps the Dine by Design option that is the most indulgent and extraordinary dining experience. Sitting out on the sand dunes, I enjoy the individual signature dinners, and while watching the sun set, I see a line of camels walking by.

SHIPS OF THE DESERT

Camels have served the Bedouin tribes for centuries – as transporters of equipment, as well as sources of leather, meat, and milk. Dromedary, one-humped Arabian camels, have adapted to life in the desert. Their beautiful long eye lashes protect their eyes from sand and insects, and their humps store up to 36 kilograms of fat, which can be broken down into water and energy when required. Their large two-toed feet make moving over the dunes easy.

A visit to the local camel market is an experience not to be missed. There are camel beauty competitions, camel races, and ▶

ABU DHABI'S CAMEL MARKET

From top: Mhuana Albulosi is in the market for a camel; a potential beauty contest entrant; a group of camels for sale are put on show for prospective buyers; a market goer takes a break.



auctions. There are also camel fajitas, camel shakes, and camel and cheese sandwiches on offer.

Mhuana Albulosi, who is looking to buy a camel tells me, "The most beautiful and expensive camels come from Oman. A female camel is the best to buy for their milk, their babies, and for racing." I'm also told that three dates and a glass of camel milk is all you need to survive in the desert for a day.

Birgit Kempfues, a German expatriate in Al Ain, has created a line of shampoos and cleansers for camels. "If it's good for humans, why is it not good for camels?" she tells *The National* newspaper. Kempfues spent two years trialling ingredients before finalising the product. With the growth of camel beauty contests, Kempfues is no doubt onto a winner.

THE RICHES OF THE EMIRATES

Next I visit the Sheikh Zayed Grand Mosque. Named after Sheikh Zayed, this large place of worship can accommodate more than 30,000 people. The building itself is spectacular, with beautiful intricate marble work throughout.

I return to the Eastern Mangroves Hotel & Spa by Anantara, where I take part in an authentic Turkish *Hammam*, with lots of massage, slapping, and pouring of water. Stretched out on a slab of marble, I'm told it's the real thing and it certainly feels authentic.

The hotel's signature restaurant Pachaylen is one of the best Thai restaurants in Abu Dhabi. Meanwhile, the all-day dining restaurant, Ingredients, serves food from all around the globe and is the perfect spot for breakfast, lunch, or dinner.

No visit to Abu Dhabi would be complete without visiting the vast Emirates Palace. This iconic landmark building, that was originally built for the royal family, is now part of the Kempinski Group of Hotels. It is one kilometre-long from wing to wing, has a 1.3-kilometre private beach, 12 external fountains, eight indoor water features, 1002 chandeliers, and 8000 trees in the landscaped gardens.

The place is covered in gold. The eight escalators are gold, and there is even an ATM that dispenses gold nuggets. Five kilograms of edible gold is even used each year for decoration on food – mainly desserts.

Located on the lobby level of the Palace is the all-day Le Vendome Brasserie international buffet. Much like Abu Dhabi itself it overwhelms the senses, and leaves you wanting to come back for more.



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Visit us online for a gallery of images from Abu Dhabi.
KEYWORDS: ABU DHABI, GALLERY

How To Get There



Together, Etihad and Virgin Australia offer a comprehensive schedule between Australia to Abu Dhabi, providing customers with a range of different times and seamless connections across each of their respective networks.

- Virgin Australia operates services to Abu Dhabi three times per week ex Sydney on Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Saturdays departing mid-afternoon (3.15pm/4.15pm).

- Virgin Australia also codeshares on Etihad Airways flights to Abu Dhabi, which operates 21 services per week from Sydney, Melbourne, and Brisbane.

Virgin Australia's codeshare agreement with Etihad Airways enables customers to fly to more than 30 destinations in Europe and the Middle East with a one-stop service through Abu Dhabi. The alliance also provides Etihad customers with access to Virgin Australia's services throughout Australia and the Pacific.

Customers will also benefit from reciprocal Velocity Frequent Flyer and Etihad Guest programs, allowing members to earn status credits and frequent flyer points along with service benefits and lounge access for top tier members on each other's networks.

Guests enjoy complimentary access to Virgin Australia partner lounges for themselves and another person, dedicated check-in, an Express Path Card through customs and immigration on departure, and Priority Boarding and Priority Baggage release.

Virgin Australia aircraft feature designer cabins that include fully lie-flat seats and mood lighting to match the different phases of flight, as well as on-demand entertainment system with noise-cancelling headset. A laptop power port and USB port, Male and female amenity pack ranges, and in-flight dining menus designed by Australian chef Luke Mangan.

And if you want a quick drink, you can enjoy the boutique bar exclusive to Business Class guests. Virgin Australia has its own wine-tasting panel, which includes a number of chief winemakers from a variety of Australian wineries.

