

Climbing into a cab on the pier of Abu Dhabi, the first call of my Arab Gulf cruise out of Dubai on the *MSC Lirica*, I was greeted by a female voice. “Welcome to Arabia taxi,” said the recording. “Please make sure the driver has turned on the meter.”

He had. I have become so accustomed to preparing for a battle of wits with foreign taxi drivers that I was momentarily struck silent. That a country would take steps to ensure visitors aren’t overcharged in a taxi underscores how safe and tourist-friendly the United Arab Emirates are.

Abu Dhabi and the other ports-of-call on MSC Cruises’ seven-day sojourn of the United Arab Emirates and Oman are among the safest places in the world. Crime is practically non-existent—not even a padded cab fare. Arab countries are known for their hospitality to strangers, and the infrastructure is first-class. For a first-time visit to the area, a cruise is ideal—mixing ultra-modern cities with raw desert, remote mountain landscapes, and cultural



The Grand Mosque in Abu Dhabi, the largest in the United Arab Emirates, can hold 40,000 worshippers and is said to have cost a billion dollars to build.

Glen Petrie

Sands Of Arabia

MSC Cruises’ smooth sailing through the Arab Gulf’s ancient and modern wonders

By Glen Petrie

insights. Visiting American citizens need only a passport valid for six months beyond their travel dates, and tourist visas are issued upon arrival, whether it’s by air or by sea. Cruise travel is big in the Arab Gulf these days. Dubai, homeport for MSC Cruises, has invested heavily in becoming the region’s cruise hub; Abu Dhabi also wants cruise-ship turnaround business; and other Arab ports

large and small vie for cruise-company favor. “I can’t go any faster; my speed is monitored,” my polite cab-driver apologized as we sped on a pristine highway to the suburbs of Abu Dhabi (www.visitabudhabi.ae) to visit one of the world’s most spectacular mosques. The 82 white marble domes of Sheikh Zayed Grand Mosque look like a mirage as they come into view, blindingly

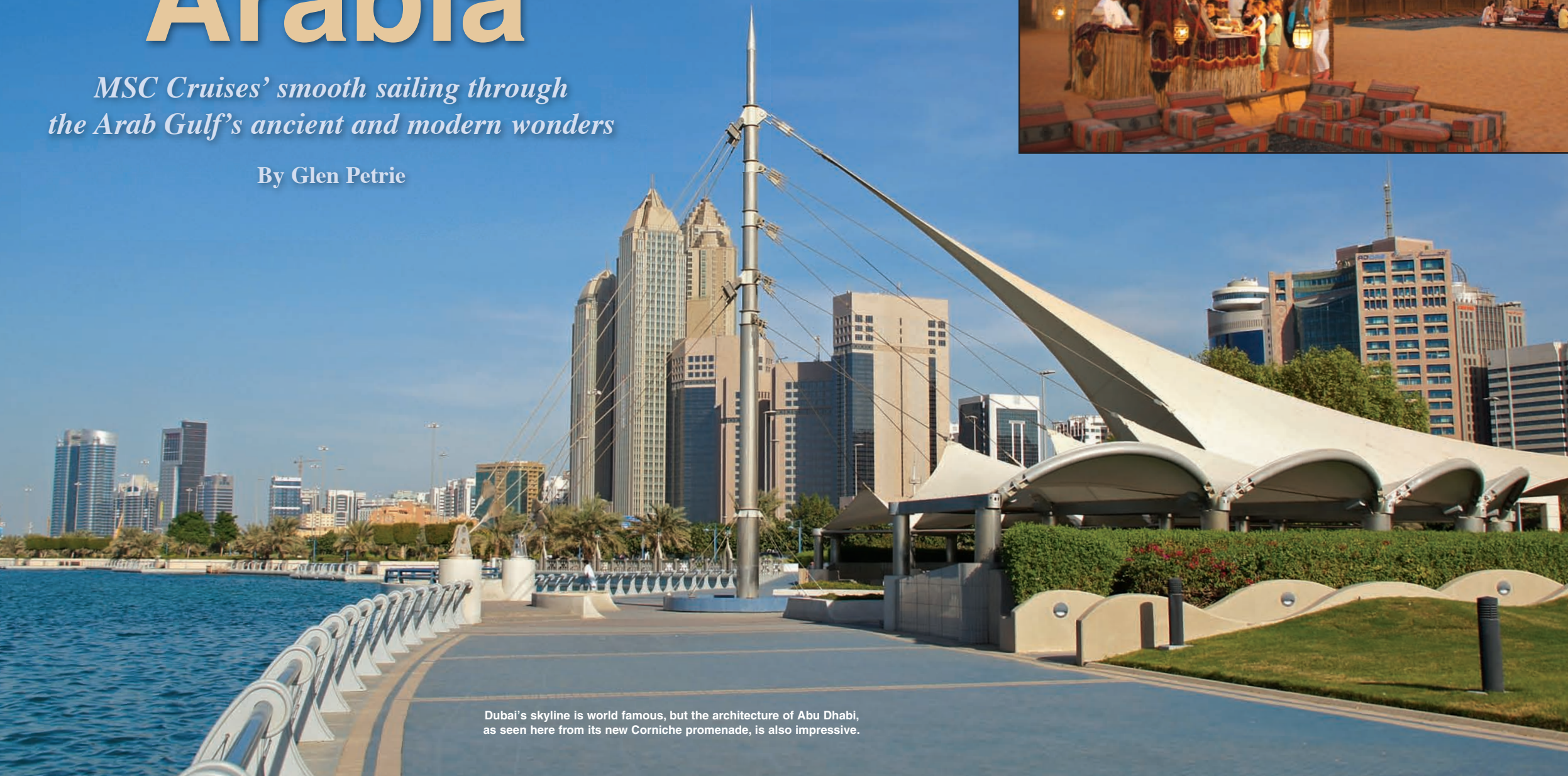
bright in the Arabian sun. Commonly known as the Grand Mosque, it took years and a rumored billion dollars to build, at the behest of late UAE president HH Sheikh Zayed Bin Sultan Al Nahyan. It’s the largest mosque in the UAE and eighth largest in the world; its first ceremony was the funeral of its creator, who is buried there.

The scale of the place is daunting. The



The popular Dune Drive Safari tour in Dubai includes rollicking rides over sand dunes and a traditional evening meal at a desert oasis.

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Dubai’s skyline is world famous, but the architecture of Abu Dhabi, as seen here from its new Corniche promenade, is also impressive.

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mosque can hold 40,000 worshippers, most in a sprawling marble courtyard. The main prayer hall can accommodate more than 7,000, but it’s open to non-Muslim visitors only in the morning, every day except Friday. (MSC calls at Abu Dhabi on Sundays.) It is well worth getting there in the morning to enter the breathtaking prayer hall, which has the world’s largest carpet (nothing is done in half measures in the UAE), measuring 60,000 square feet and weighing 35 tons. Crane your neck to admire the dizzying grandeur of the dome, adorned with the third-largest chandelier in the world, a gold-plated fixture that’s 33 feet wide and sparkles with millions of Swarovski crystals. Free one-hour tours of the Grand Mosque are offered at 10 a.m., 11 a.m., and 5 p.m. daily (except Friday). Male visitors should not wear shorts or sleeveless shirts. Female visitors must wear a headscarf or an *abaya* (a full-length outer garment worn by Arabs), which can be borrowed at the reception area. Tight or suggestive clothing is not allowed.

You can go from ablutions to adrenalin in one busy day by heading next to Yas Island (www.yasisland.ae). Abu Dhabi has long been the serious, conservative big brother to brash young Dubai, but recently the UAE

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capital has been adding some dazzle to its image, and Yas Island is a prime example—a massive entertainment and sports complex featuring the Yas Marina Formula 1 Circuit.

If you've ever dreamed of piloting a Formula 1 race car, this is your chance. You can

book your spot behind the wheel of an F1-style racer, an Aston Martin GT4, a Mercedes AMG, or a Chevy Camaro. You'll get a full briefing and familiarization before pushing the needle as far you dare—perhaps to 180 miles per hour. This ride is not offered as a tour onboard ship, so you'll have to set it up yourself.

If taking the wheel is not your speed, you can opt to ride as a passenger with a profes-

sional driver. Safer yet, head over to Ferrari World, a theme park dedicated to the iconic Italian race car, which boasts the world's fastest roller-coaster that hits speeds of 150 miles per hour. Fast thrills can also be had at Yas Waterworld, which features some of the most innovative roller-coasters and water-slides on the planet. It's a great spot for kids.

Those seeking something a little more sedate might want to stroll or ride a rental bike along the Corniche, a new waterfront promenade offering views of the city's futuristic skyline. For shopping, the Souk At Central Market in the heart of downtown is a modern mall designed by famed British architect Norman Foster to resemble an updated version of a traditional souk.

Or forgo modern bling altogether and find a taste of traditional Arabia at the desert oasis of Al Ain, just two hours away. Once an important stop on a caravan route, Al Ain is known as the Garden City for greenery made possible by a 3,000-year-old irrigation system; it's one of the oldest permanent settlements in the world as well as a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

After the rush of Abu Dhabi, the serenity aboard the *MSC Lirica* was welcome. Our route toward Oman, which included a passage through the strategic Strait Of Hormuz, offered passengers a day at sea to relax and enjoy the facilities of the modern, mid-sized (59,058-gross-ton) vessel. I had sailed on the *MSC Lirica* soon after she debuted in 2003 and on this trip found her to be virtually unchanged—in a good way. She still looks new, with a clean, Euro-style decor and cosmopolitan passenger mix that includes Americans, Canadians, Australians, Britons, Italians, and Germans.

At first MSC's famed Italian flavor felt a little incongruous in this part of the world, but it simply underscores the fact that we live in a global village. After all, the streets of Dubai and Abu Dhabi are full of expensive Italian fashions and Italian sports cars—not to mention, of course, Ferrari World.

I soon came to like returning from desert dunes and mosques to take salsa lessons followed by a Tango performance in the main showroom, or to ease aching muscles in the ship's Turkish steam bath, or to relax with



Oman's arid Musandam Peninsula features a dramatic landscape of fjords and deep canyons.

a Balinese massage in the MSC Aurea Spa (found throughout the fleet), graciously attended to by ladies who hail from that magical Indonesian isle.

Dining options have been expanded since my initial *MSC Lirica* cruise many years ago—though not as extensively as you would find on a megaliner. In addition to two dinner seatings in each of two formal dining rooms, La Bussola and L'Ippocampo (which also serve lunch), there are food offerings in various spots onboard at any time of the day or night, such as early morning coffee and afternoon pizza in the poolside La Pergola, as well as breakfast, lunch, or dinner in the bright and airy Le Bistrot buffet restaurant. Of course the 1,560-passenger *MSC Lirica* has a full range cruise-ship features including a Broadway-style showroom, a Las Vegas-style casino, numerous lounges and bars, a library, children's facilities, shops, and so on—as well as a wide selection of cabins.

In fact, the Arab Gulf itinerary has proven so popular that the line plans to use its larger 2,250-passenger *MSC Orchestra* on the route

for this winter's season of 10 weeklong roundtrips from Dubai, departing Saturdays, December 13, 2014, to February 21, 2015. Measuring 92,409-gt, the *MSC Orchestra* offers even more dining, entertainment, and accommodations options.

MSC's tour choices were extensive and intriguing. In the Oman capital of Muscat, however, I opted to simply walk. This Arab city is nothing like its flashy Emirati neighbors. Low-rise buildings of traditional Arabian design line an undulating coast. Looming behind the small city like a giant picket fence is a wall of barren, jagged peaks—though that's not why Muscat is called The Walled City. The old moniker comes from the assortment of forts that rise up along the waterfront, built by the Portuguese in their attempt to control the sea route to the Far East in the 1500s.

The distance from the dock to the Mutrah (Muscat's business district) is walkable, and here you'll find one of the most traditional souks in region. Just in time for Christmas

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Muscat, the capital of Oman, is a small port city surrounded by jagged mountain peaks (below); its low-rise buildings of traditional Arab design include the old market of Mutrah Souk (above).



Musandam Peninsula excursions on dhows offer sea-level looks at the fjords—and maybe dolphins.



MSC cruise liners such as the *MSC Lirica* homeport at the modern cruise terminal in Dubai.



MSC Cruises

Next season the *MSC Orchestra* sails the line's Arab Gulf program, offering more spacious accommodations like this balcony cabin.

a booze cruise—minus the booze. (Soft drinks, water, food, and coffee are supplied.) The dhows sail the dramatic coastline and stop in a fjord for swimming.

The *MSC Lirica* returned to her homeport of Dubai for an overnight stay, a smart itinerary decision because there's so much to see in the stunning city—in fact, many passengers opt for a pre- or post-cruise extension here. Bustling Dubai Creek and the historic Bastakia District reveal the Dubai of its trading and pearl-diving past. Don't miss the

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gift-giving, I was wisely able to purchase frankincense and myrrh (made from the resins of local trees, they're lit in incense burners for their aromatic scent).

The stroll along the tidy Corniche reveals traditional wooden Omani architecture with enclosed upper balconies. In the harbor sat the yacht *Al Said*, belonging to the ruler of Oman, Sultan Qaboos. At nearly 16,000 gt and 508 feet in length, she is the size of a small cruise ship and is known as the fourth largest yacht in the world. The much revered Sultan Qaboos came to power in 1970 by peacefully ousting his aging, isolationist father. At the time, Oman had no secondary schools and only six miles of paved roads. The only two hospitals were run by American missions. Today Oman is affluent and modern, politically stable, and boasts an extremely low crime rate. Yet the country still offers a charming, historical flavor, and its people are relaxed and friendly.

Getting to Old Muscat to see Al Alam Royal Palace means taking a taxi a few miles over a headland. Or catch the hop-on/hop-off Big Bus (www.bigbustours.com) at the Mutrah Souk, a good way to hit the highlights, such as the Old Quarter, the Royal Opera House, Parliament Building, Qurum Beach, and more.

Our second stop in Oman was on the remote and barren Musandam Peninsula, which stands guard over the Strait Of Hormuz. From the town of Khasab, I joined a Toyota Land Cruiser caravan for a dusty ride to Jebel Harim, the peninsula's tallest peak at 6,847 feet. Never have I seen a landscape so absolutely arid. The area has been called "The Norway Of Arabia" for the deep fjords that pierce the mountainous coast. These fjords, however, boast tropically green seas and white-sand beaches. We made several stops high above the fjords to take in the views, as well as to peer into Grand Canyon-like valleys.

Another route to the fjords is by boat. Wooden dhows sidle up to *MSC Lirica* to take passengers on the Oman equivalent of



MSC Cruises

Pizza ondeck in the Arab Gulf seemed odd at first but became part of the global experience.

Dubai Museum, housed in a fort dating back to 1787. The modern city is epitomized by the Burj Khalifa, the world's tallest building, and Dubai Mall, the world's biggest indoor shopping center. Other wonders include the sail-like Burj Al Arab Hotel; Mall Of The Emirates, with its indoor snow-skiing resort; and sprawling man-made islands in the shape of palm trees.

I can highly recommend the Dune Drive Safari, the most popular tour in Dubai, which combines four-wheel-drive dune-bashing with a visit to a desert oasis for a traditional meal under a desert night sky. You can watch a falconry demonstration, try sand surfing, smoke a shisha water-pipe, and ride a camel—the essential Arabian experiences in four hours.

For more information contact your travel agent or MSC Cruises (USA) Inc. (Cruise Travel Magazine), 6750 North Andrews Ave./Suite 100, Fort Lauderdale, FL 33309; log on to www.msccruisesusa.com; or call 877-665-4655. **CT**



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Bathing beauties on the soft sands of Dubai's Jumeirah Beach was another unexpected sight.