

RAS AL KHAIMAH - 7,000 YEARS OF CULTURE AND HERITAGE



Images

With a rich history that dates back to the Bronze Age, Ras Al Khaimah boasts an impressive heritage and rich cultural history. Its enticing combination of scenic mountains, pristine beaches, mangroves and desert landscapes have lured settlers for several centuries, making the Emirate one of the oldest continuously habited regions in the world for over 7,000 years.

Best known for its cultural and archaeological heritage, the Emirate is home to three Arabian tribal traditions spanning coast, mountain and desert, which can still be experienced today through guided tours of the ancient sites.

The Emirate's diverse natural landscape and abundance of easily accessible water allowed for the Emirate's continuous inhabitation from the Ubaid period spanning 5000 to 3800 BC, through to the 20th century leaving behind countless invaluable artefacts and historic sites to explore. These include well preserved forts, a national museum comprising historic treasures and cultural sites – Jazeera Al Hamra, Dhaya, Shimal and Julfar.

Heritage Sites:

Ras Al Khaimah boasts over 1,000 archaeological sites and antiquities including ruins and forts. It is also the only Emirate in the UAE to have four historical locations – **Julfar, Shimal, Al Jazeera Al Hamra** and **Dhayah** –in the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO)'s tentative list of Global Heritage Sites, an inventory of sites considered to hold outstanding value from a cultural and/or natural heritage standpoint.

Al Jazeera Al Hamra is the last-surviving pearl fishing village of its kind in the Arabian Gulf and to this day, remains mostly untouched, invoking feelings of taking a step back in time. It is an exceptional testimony to the architecture and settlement planning of the past and includes all traditional elements of a former Gulf town. The village includes all of the traditional elements expected in such a neighbourhood, including a fort and watchtowers, mosque, souq and extensive courtyard houses of various designs. There is a mix of dwelling styles – from small, simple houses, courtyard homes, two-storey buildings to a large courtyard residence that belonged to the wealthy pearl merchant. The village comprised approximately 500 houses and was occupied by the Al Zaabi tribe. The site has also been a favoured filming location for popular Hollywood movies, serving as a location for films starring actors of global fame such as Brad Pitt in *The War Machine* and Ryan Reynolds in *6 Underground*.

As part of the Emirate's Balanced Tourism strategy, the Ras Al Khaimah Tourism Development Authority has invested in a three-phased restoration programme at Al Jazeera Al Hamra, with an aim to preserve the history of the archaeological site while making it accessible to visitors to discover first-hand accounts of the local culture.

Second in the list of Ras Al Khaimah's historical sites is **Dhayah**, comprising the iconic **Dhayah Fort**. The fort encapsulates all the different systems of land- and sea-use, which were typical for the northern part of the Oman Peninsula in the past and is the only hilltop fort still in existence in the UAE. It dates



back to the Late Bronze Age (1600 – 1300 BC) when locals used it for settlement and fortification. The twin-peaked golden mud-brick fortress was built during the 19th century and restored in the late 1990s. It is an important historical monument where the 1819 battle between British troops and local Qawasim tribes took place. The fort has undergone restoration and reopened to the public with a new ticketing centre, information boards, and new illuminated wooden handrails installed for enhanced safety.

The surrounding Dhayah area has been settled for thousands of years, resulting in its immense local historical significance. It encompasses diverse landscapes, including a lagoon protected by a sandbar, with an early Islamic harbour settlement, palm gardens and fort, mountain villages, terraced field systems, hill fort, gravel plain and prehistoric tombs.

Another timeless historical site is **Shimal**, consisting of more than 100 prehistoric tombs, settlements, and a medieval palace. Its archaeological remains are outstanding for the Wadi Suq Period (2000-1600 BC), the Late Bronze Age Culture (1600-1300 BC) and the Middle Islamic Period (13th-16th century AD). Shimal comprises the largest prehistoric cemetery of megalithic tombs in Southeast Arabia. Its monumental burial structures of the Wadi Suq period are not only unique for their size, but also include a variety of architectural types that are not found outside of the Emirate of Ras Al Khaimah.

And lastly, **Julfar** is an old port city, situated beside the outwash wadi fans of Wadi Bih and Wadi Haqil. The trading town of Julfar represents one of the very few existing Islamic towns in the Gulf and Southeast Arabia, characterised by a continuous history throughout the entire Islamic period.

Culture enthusiasts can discover these archaeological sites via bespoke tours and dive headfirst into the Emirate's rich history. Operated by Safarak Tours, visitors can explore each of these key sites.

Open from Monday to Sunday from 8am to 7pm, culture vultures can find more about the UNESCO sites at visitrasalkhaimah.com or can stay updated via the Emirate's social platforms [Instagram](#), [YouTube](#) and [Facebook](#). The full RAK Culture Tour costs AED 300 per person and can be booked via Safarak Tours on bookings@safaraktours.com or by calling +971 56 400 9536 / +971 58 675 6315.

Culture and History:

Endowed with archaeological and ethnological artefacts and antiquities, the **National Museum of Ras Al Khaimah** houses a collection of documents, manuscripts and treaties as well as traditional weapons belonging to the ruling family. The museum building was once a former fort and palace of the Al Qasimi ruling family until 1964. Visitors can immerse themselves in the Emirate's cultural heritage through the museum's fascinating displays on architecture, pearl diving, date agriculture, farming, fishing and much more across its various galleries.

In the 'old' city, visitors can also explore the **Mohammad Bin Salem Mosque**, Ras Al Khaimah's oldest place of worship and the only mosque in the Emirate without a minaret. The mosque has a surviving 'prayer call platform' from which its imam would call Muslims of the nearby village to pray. After several restorations, the mosque is now open for visitors and tours can be arranged by most local operators and hotels.

Visitors can also explore the history of pearling in the region at the **Suwaidi Pearl Farm**, the only pearl farm in the UAE. Founded in 2005 by Abdulla Al Suwaidi at the foot of the expansive Al Hajar mountain range in the northern town of Al Rams, the farm was established with the aim to revive the country's proud tradition around pearl diving. Visitors can learn about the historic significance of pearling, and gain insight into the lives of pearl divers, pearl cultivation and the harvesting process, plus get an opportunity to experience the thrill of opening their own oyster and checking for pearls. The farm tour starts with visitors boarding a traditional pearling boat for a tranquil journey through verdant mangroves to reach the floating pearl farm.



To experience Ras Al Khaimah's unique terracotta desert, the **Al Wadi Desert** offers visitors the opportunity to connect with nature and culture within a 1,235-acre protected reserve. Home to a range of diverse wildlife living naturally around the desert, including the beautiful Arabian Oryx and Gazelles, guests can explore a host of authentic Arabian activities such as falconry, desert treks on camels, horseback riding and animal feeding.

Tours & Festivals of Tradition:

Festivals in Ras Al Khaimah, such as **Ramadan and Eid**, are specially celebrated with pomp. During the Holy Month, celebrations take place in grand tents where locals break their fast in the evenings and savour their last meal of the day before sunrise.

The date fruit and date palm hold a significant place in Emirati culture and are considered an integral part of the UAE's heritage and identity. The date fruit is grown all-around in Ras Al Khaimah, making it the home of some of the best date farms in the country. Private tours in date farms can be booked through [Unveil Arabia](#) to learn about the date cultivation and harvesting process, and sample some of Ras Al Khaimah's finest dates fresh from the farms.

Taking place at the historic Al Jazeera Al Hamra site, the annual **Ras Al Khaimah Fine Arts Festival** (RAKFAF), a non-profit community arts festival, showcases the work of local and emerging artists, photographers, and filmmakers. Celebrating its 11th anniversary this year, the festival was established to bring the community together through art, create opportunities for cultural exchange and support the creative and artistic sectors of the emirate. It is also an initiative of the Sheikh Saud bin Saqr Al Qasimi Foundation for Policy Research, and an integral part of the Foundation's mission is to contribute to the cultural development of Ras Al Khaimah.

The Tribes of Ras Al Khaimah:

In the northernmost region of the UAE, guests can still discover the customs of the country's early inhabitants and view what life was like in the Emirate a thousand of years ago.

Traversing the wilderness of the Arabian Peninsula on foot and by camel, the ancestors of these tribes arrived in Ras Al Khaimah as Bedouin nomads 500 to 1,400 years ago. They grouped themselves by their preferred terrain, exploring and inhabiting these three topographies to form the **Mountain, Sea and Desert Tribes**, each having several sub-tribes under their family names. Over time, each of these tribes have developed their own distinctive cultural nuances, including exclusive traditions and folklore.

Musical performances from the **Mountain Tribe** include **Al Wahabia**, which incorporates a drum that dictates the movements of two teams who sway and bend to its beat; and **Al Nadba**, a group performance led by a solo singer who begins the call of solace, with others repeating after him in a voice of masculinity and strength. Popular cultural activities for the **Sea Tribe** include **Al Ayala**, a folk dance where groups take turns to recite poetry while holding swords as they move to the sounds of tambourines and drums; and **Al Nahma**, a traditional form of singing that helped men keep in time to their work while they were diving. Amongst the **Desert Tribe**, **Al A'azi** is a performance sung to symbolise the end of an occasion, with the men demonstrating weaponry and shields as they quote poetry; while **Al Taqroda** is a chant led by a vocalist that is conducted as the tribe travels to new locations on camel or horseback.

Another differentiator between the various tribes is the **clothing styles** of both men and women. Headgear varies for men according to the tribe, while the women are identified by the fabric and colour of their clothes. Members of the Mountain Tribe opt for brighter tones during the summer and darker ones during the colder months to adapt to the changing weather, while members of the Sea Tribe tend to wear comfortable fabrics such as cotton throughout the year, with breathability being important an important factor to help make the strenuous fishing work they engage in easier to bear. Similarly, keeping the heat from the skin was essential for the Desert Tribe, especially when they were on the move and unable to find shade in the desert's vast expanses. For this reason, Bedouins opted for full



sleeves, head coverings and long hemlines – a combination that is still seen in the traditional Emirati dress of today.

Cuisine also distinguishes the different tribal communities, with the Mountain Tribes eating goat cheese, bread, and indigenous crops – the latter including fruits cultivated in the cooler climes of the Hajar mountain range which are up to 10 degrees lower than at sea level. These products are also sold at local markets and souks, along with prized mountain honey, which commands a premium price. As would be expected, the diet of the Sea Tribe comprises predominantly fresh fish and seafood, while camel meat and milk is a staple of the Desert Tribe who rely greatly on these 'ships of the desert' for food as well as for transport. Fresh and dried dates are readily eaten by all the tribes due to the prevalence of the date palm across the Emirate, typically paired with the traditional Arabic coffee or 'gahwa'.

While they may live in different habitats, a common thread that unites these tribes is a commitment to maintaining their respective cultures and customs. Ras Al Khaimah's tribes continue to uphold their age-old traditions and ways of living, promoting important social values such as respect for the communities' elders. Tribal interaction is encouraged and usually takes place during the trading of locally cultivated goods, with competitions including falconry and camel races that can, on occasion, also be witnessed by Ras Al Khaimah residents and visitors.

Find more at visitrasalkhaimah.com or stay updated via the Emirate's social platforms [Instagram](#), [YouTube](#) and [Facebook](#).

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[About Ras Al Khaimah Tourism Development Authority \(RAKTDA\)](#)

The Ras Al Khaimah Tourism Development Authority (RAKTDA) was established in May 2011 under the government of Ras Al Khaimah. RAKTDA aims to develop the Emirate's tourism infrastructure and establish Ras Al Khaimah as a world-class destination for leisure and business travel, creating sustainable investment opportunities and enhancing the quality of life for its residents. In order to achieve its goals, the Authority has a government mandate to license, regulate and monitor the Emirate's tourism and hospitality industry.

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