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the United Arab Emirates

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Introduction

The United Arab Emirates, known most often by its abbreviated form “the UAE,” stands as one of the most remarkable stories of transformation in the modern world. Wedged between deserts and seas at the crossroads of Asia, Africa, and Europe, the UAE’s very position on the globe has shaped its fortunes. Less than a century ago, these lands were sparsely populated, defined by oases, fishing villages, and trading ports along the Gulf’s coastline. Today, the UAE is a symbol of audacious ambition, where spectacular skyscrapers rise out of sand and where world-class events, glimmering malls, cutting-edge technology, and ancient customs coexist in an ever-evolving tableau.

This book seeks to offer a nuanced portrait of the United Arab Emirates—its past, its people, the vibrant cultures, and the forces that have driven its astonishing journey. It is not just a history or a travelogue, but a broader lens through which to view the UAE’s geography, its traditions and aspirations, and the sometimes complex issues that arise in a young and rapidly modernizing nation. You will journey from the fossil-rich desert heartlands and the peaks of the Hajar Mountains to the futuristic skylines of Abu Dhabi and Dubai, following the story from the earliest civilizations, through the pearling era, the Trucial States period, and into today’s increasingly globalized society.

As a federation of seven unique emirates—each with its own rulers, history, and identity—the UAE encapsulates diversity not just in its demographics but in its very foundations. The blend of local Emirati culture with the flavors, languages, and traditions of people from around the world has created a society at once deeply rooted and strikingly cosmopolitan. Here, Islamic traditions are preserved and respected, even as global trends and influences shape everyday life, commerce, and culture.

The country’s blistering pace of growth, underpinned initially by oil wealth and now increasingly defined by innovation, tourism, finance, and renewable energy, has not been without its challenges. Questions of identity, sustainability, human rights, and the environment remain part of ongoing conversations both within and outside its borders. Yet—undeniably—the UAE has cultivated a model of stability and vision that has made it a leader in the region and an aspirational destination for millions.

For those looking to explore or understand the UAE—the visitor awed by the Burj Khalifa, the investor drawn to its markets, or the curious reader intrigued by its synthesis of old and new—this book aims to inform and inspire. Alongside detailed chapters on history and government, culture, religion, and economy, you will also find practical insight into life in the Emirates and what awaits the traveler or new resident.

Ultimately, the story of the United Arab Emirates is one of continual reinvention and bold dreams. As we look ahead to its ambitious Vision 2071 and beyond, the UAE stands not just as a portrait of a country, but as a testament to resilience, vision, and the enduring human desire to create, belong, and thrive.

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CHAPTER ONE: The Land and Geography of the UAE

The United Arab Emirates, a dynamic nation at the eastern edge of the Arabian Peninsula, occupies a strategic position in West Asia. It shares land borders with Oman to the east and northeast, and with Saudi Arabia to the southwest. Additionally, it has maritime borders in the Persian Gulf with Qatar and Iran, and with Oman in the Gulf of Oman. The UAE stretches for over 650 kilometers (400 miles) along the southern shore of the Persian Gulf, a vital transit point for crude oil. Fujairah, one of the seven emirates, uniquely faces the Gulf of Oman, without a coastline on the Persian Gulf.

The total area of the UAE is approximately 83,600 square kilometers (32,300 square miles). However, the country's exact size remains somewhat uncertain due to disputed claims over several islands in the Persian Gulf, a lack of precise information on the size of many islands, and largely undemarcated land boundaries, particularly with Saudi Arabia. Abu Dhabi, the capital and largest emirate, accounts for a substantial 87 percent of the UAE's total area, approximately 72,732 square kilometers (28,082 sq mi). In stark contrast, Ajman, the smallest emirate, covers a mere 259 square kilometers (100 sq mi).

The UAE's landscape is remarkably diverse, transitioning from low-lying desert plains and coastlines to rugged mountains. The dominant feature is the vast desert terrain, which makes up about 80% of the country's land area. This arid environment features expansive sand dunes, salt flats known as *sabkhas*, and rocky plateaus. The desert stretches from the southern coast of the Arabian Gulf into the uninhabited sands of the Rub' al Khali, also known as the Empty Quarter, which lies in the southern part of Abu Dhabi. Some of the world's largest sand dunes can be found in the Liwa Oasis, southeast of Abu Dhabi.

Despite the widespread arid conditions, the UAE has made significant strides in transforming dry areas into green spaces. This ambitious endeavor is a testament to the nation's commitment to sustainable development and modern infrastructure. Initiatives like large-scale landscaping projects have been pivotal in creating lush environments in urban centers, demonstrating how engineering and vision can reshape a challenging natural landscape.

The Hajar Mountains, or "Rocky Mountains" as their name translates from Arabic, introduce a dramatic and scenic element to the UAE's eastern geography. These mountains, one of the highest ranges on the Arabian Peninsula, are shared with northern Oman and span approximately 700 kilometers (430 miles). In the UAE, the Western Hajar Mountains rise in places to 2,500 meters (8,200 feet), separating the Gulf of Oman coast from the rest of the country. Jebel Jais, located near Ras Al

Khaimah, boasts the highest peak in the UAE, reaching 1,934 meters (6,345 feet). The mountains are characterized by rugged terrain, steep slopes, and dry riverbeds known as *wadis*, which can unexpectedly flourish with brooks and pools during the cooler, rainier months. The geology of the Hajar Mountains is complex, formed by plate tectonics over millions of years, with rocks that were once on the seafloor now pushed upward to form towering peaks.

The UAE's climate is predominantly subtropical-arid, characterized by exceptionally hot and humid summers and mild, pleasant winters. The hottest months are typically July and August, when average maximum temperatures on the coastal plain can soar above 45°C (113°F), sometimes even reaching 50°C (122°F) in southern areas. During the late summer, a humid southeastern wind, locally known as the *sharqi*, can make the coastal region particularly uncomfortable. In contrast, temperatures in the Hajar Mountains are considerably cooler due to the higher altitude. Winter months, from December to March, see average minimum temperatures ranging between 10°C and 14°C (50°F and 57°F).

Rainfall in the UAE is generally sparse and inconsistent, averaging between 140 and 200 mm per year across most of the country. However, some mountainous areas can receive significantly more, up to 350 mm annually. When rain does fall in coastal regions, it often occurs in short, torrential bursts, which can sometimes lead to flash floods in otherwise dry *wadis*. The region is also prone to occasional, violent dust storms, locally known as *shamal* winds, which can drastically reduce visibility. Snow is an extremely rare phenomenon, with the Jebel Jais mountain cluster in Ras Al Khaimah having experienced it only a handful of times since records began.

The UAE's coastlines are integral to its geography and history. The longer coastline, stretching over 700 kilometers (430 miles), faces the Arabian Gulf (also known as the Persian Gulf) to the north and northwest. Much of this coastline is low-lying, flat, and bordered by shallow waters, characterized by numerous inlets, or 'khors,' and islands. Abu Dhabi's coastal area, for instance, is dominated by tidal channels and *sabkhas*, with many natural islands like Saadiyat Island, Yas Island, and Sir Bani Yas Island. Dubai, in particular, is renowned for its ambitious human-made islands, such as the Palm Jumeirah and The World Islands, which have significantly extended the country's coastline.

The much shorter coastline, approximately 70 kilometers (43 miles) long, faces eastward into the Gulf of Oman. This coast is more rugged and prone to erosion, with a higher proportion of hard rock. Despite the natural lack of deepwater harbors along the Persian Gulf coast, extensive dredging and construction have created major ports in cities like Abu Dhabi, Dubai, Sharjah, and Ras Al Khaimah. In contrast, the Gulf of Oman coastline offers a few natural harbors, including Dibba, Khor Fakkan, and Kalba. These coastal areas, with their diverse habitats including rocky shores, mudflats, mangrove swamps, and coral reefs, support a rich variety of marine life, including fish,

marine mammals like dugongs, and various species of sea turtles. The Strait of Hormuz, a narrow waterway connecting the Persian Gulf to the Gulf of Oman, plays a critical role in global maritime trade, especially for crude oil.

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