

A PEARLESCENT PAST

From months at sea to creatures of the deep, pearl divers in the Arabian Gulf had to withstand a world of challenges, and yet at its peak the industry employed thousands. Today it has all but disappeared. One Abu Dhabi group is trying to keep the heritage alive, a single sleepy boat trip at a time.



It's a hot Friday morning in Abu Dhabi, and I'm sitting on the bank of the Eastern Mangroves where a young tour guide is striving to keep the region's pearl fishing history alive.

Later he will tell me his name is Misjan Ahmed. But for now, as I move to step across the traditional wooden dhow boat and onto a stretch of carpet, he tells me to take off my shoes. I've booked myself a seat on the hour-long Abu Dhabi Pearl Journey, wanting to learn more about the heritage and history of the UAE. Save for two other guests, the boat is empty.

I settle atop a bench of cushions, stretching my legs in the sun. Ahmed offers dates and cardamom-flavoured Arabic tea. "Arabic hospitality," he smiles before nodding back at the boat's unobtrusive captain. With that, we're off. The dhow pulls away from the pier. It moves silently, stable and serene through the slow waters of the mangroves.

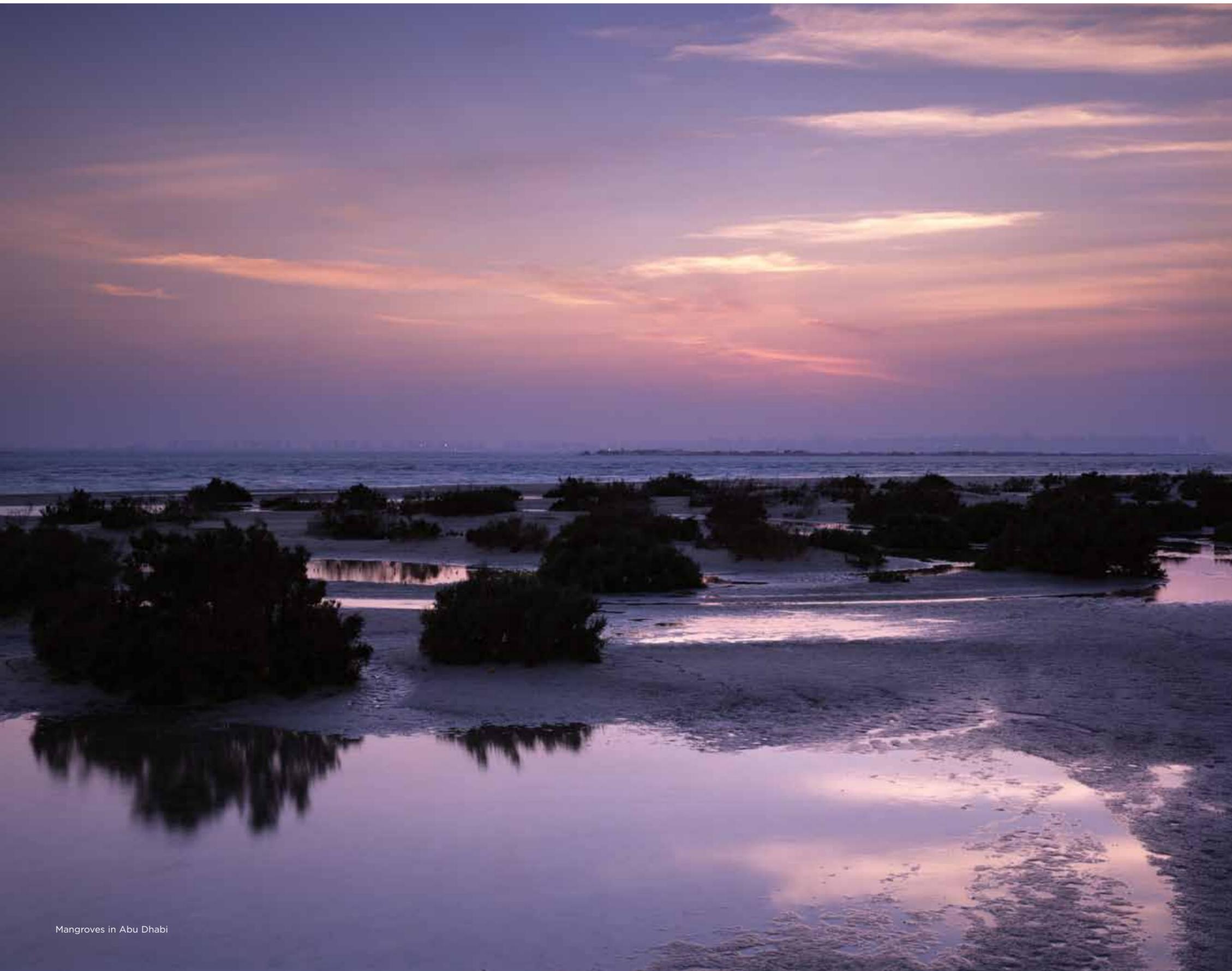
The journey has just begun — but for Ahmed's tale, it all starts by going back.



While the pearling industry in the region stretches back thousands of years ("virtually every ancient and early geographer or traveller writing about the Gulf mentioned pearls and Bahrain island," noted scholar and Saudi Arabia-based chemical engineer Richard LeBaron Bowen Jr in 1951), it peaked in the early 20th century. Then, scholars estimate, tens of thousands of men were involved — comprising, at one point, over a quarter of the total population of the Arabian littoral of the Gulf.

When the heart of the pearling season hit in the warm June to October months, these men would set sail with flags flying, the beat of Arabic drums filling the air. "It is a stirring sight to see these fleets of dhows manoeuvre with their sweeps and then set forth under huge spreads of lateen sails, with their freshly oiled, burnt-brown hulls glistening across the aquamarine water, like some ancient Phoenician or Roman fleet," wrote Bowen.

They went out in pursuit of pearls.



Mangroves in Abu Dhabi

The life these divers were sailing into wasn't an easy one, nor would it be one filled with glory. At the most basic level, the sheer physicality of pearl diving was draining and, in some cases, deadly. A diver would put his foot in a loop of rope tied to a weight or stone then jump into the sea. He'd carry a basket for the oysters, sometimes tied around his neck. His nose would be closed with a horn clip, his fingers lined with leather thimbles to help protect against coral and sharp edges. Reaching the bottom, the diver would frantically move along, propelled hand and foot, trying to collect as many oysters as possible. At the end of roughly a minute, the diver would tug at the rope, signalling someone on the boat to pull him up.

"Ten dives would consume about three-quarters of an hour, after which time the diver is dragged out of the water and huddles in some spot on the ship looking more dead than alive," wrote Bowen. "Ten dives are not difficult, nor are 50 excessive in one day for anyone experienced; but day after day and week after week the diving goes on – for four months."

Underwater, the diver would have to avoid the nearly translucent jellyfish, sharks and rays. A species of needle urchin with spines from one to two feet long, which caused slow-healing wounds, was particularly unpleasant. The saltwater itself could create open sores and rashes.

"When the season is over, the diver has weathered the impossible; he has probably completed over 3,000 dives in from 30 to 50 feet of water, and has spent over 50 hours under the surface of the Gulf – that is, over a full 40 hour week without air, valiantly striving to gather all the oysters he can see through his bloodshot and irritated eyes, which become less sensitive with each dive."

Oysters were then left out overnight to weaken or kill them before the pearls were harvested the next day.

At best, a diver would hit the end of a season with funds enough to sustain himself until the following year. At worse, the diver would end up physically disabled or in financial debt. The first is easy enough to understand; in addition to



the dangers of marine life, “suppuration of the eardrums and rheumatism [were] common. The divers may lose blood from surfacing too quickly or from staying under too long,” wrote Bowen. The limited diet of divers – kept to a sip of tea or dates to prevent nausea – resulted in “emaciated” bodies by the end of the season. “Sleep is the only energy builder divers have.”

In terms of finance, the pearling industry operated on borrowed capital, one where everyone from pearl divers to crew was given advances against potential future profits. “A bad season inevitably led to the debts being carried forward,” wrote academic Robert Carter.

Yet for all its difficulties, for all its many physical and financial challenges, pearling defined the region for years. The British empire couldn’t get enough of the beautiful oyster-created beads. In the early 20th century, New York followed suit, becoming the second largest market for Gulf pearls (Bombay was first). By 1951, Paris too was desperate for pearls. Even as the Gulf exported the gems, it imported foodstuffs and basic supplies.

British historian and colonial administrator John Gordon Lorimer succinctly captured the importance of pearling when he wrote: “Pearl fishing is the premier industry of the Gulf; it is... the principal or only source of wealth among the residents of the Arabian side. Were the supply of pearls to fail, the trade of Kuwait would be severely crippled, while that

of Bahrain might — it is estimated — be reduced to about one-fifth of its present dimensions, and the ports of Trucial Oman, which have no other resources, would practically cease to exist.”

Yet – and this may not come as a surprise to most readers who know of the Gulf region – the pearl industry did indeed dry up. This was due to several factors: the development of cultured pearl farming in Japan, the global economic downturn and eventually the discovery of oil.

“The industry lingered, much reduced, throughout the 20th century,” wrote Carter. “Its final demise being marked by the official closure of Kuwait’s pearl-oyster market in the year 2000, which brought to an end over 7,000 years of pearling in the region.”



Abu Dhabi’s Eastern Mangroves make for a scenic route, all small green shrubs and trees sprouting from the saltwater, dotted with herons and warblers on one side, and the modern architecture of Abu Dhabi on the other.

“Culture shouldn’t be captured in a museum,” said the company’s founder, Ali Al Saloom, to *The National* in 2013. “I spent the past seven years providing knowledge and content about Emirati culture and history. I tried many different ways to

bridge the cultural gap in very authentic and unique ways.” Enter the educational boat tour, a journey designed to bring to life the history of pearling.

On the boat, Ahmed tells a story: Al Saloom was given a box by his grandmother. “Go fill this with pearls,” she told him. “But why?” he asked. There were pearls in the shop, in the store. But no, his grandmother argued. It had to be done naturally. So Al Saloom went to sea, collecting thousands of oysters and thousands more. Not a single one contained pearls.

“It’s because of the pollution,” continues Ahmed. He speaks like one telling the tale of a well-practised script, a not-unpleasant element that makes everything as slick and smooth as the wood of the boat. “The pollution in the ocean makes oysters feel ill, so now we have a pearl farm in Ras Al Khaimah.”

Today, Ahmed won’t be diving. He has oysters from the farm in a bucket on the boat. At one point, after demonstrating how divers looped a weighted rope around their toes before plummeting into the sea and showing the tools used during the multiple-month journey, Ahmed gathers us all around. “Pick an oyster,” he suggests.

The sun is hot and the boat soothing. I choose one. Ahmed cuts it open with practised ease and when I push my thumb into the meat, spilling water and goo across my hand, a pearl is there. We tug it out, a tiny little white-and-pink ball that Ahmed drops into a canister of salt. He calls it a ‘mini shower’. The pearl goes into a red velvet pouch, as does the glimmering mother-of-pearl shell.

Next comes the meat. Ahmed finds the heart, the core, and has me try it raw. As the boat floats on, now nearly back at the original pier, I bite in. It tastes of salt and ocean and history. *Adpearljourney.info*. To learn more about booking a stay at Jumeirah at Etihad Towers in Abu Dhabi, visit jumeirah.com/jumeirahetihadtowers



Dhows and skyscrapers in Abu Dhabi

PEARLS BY MICHAEL CAINES

JUMEIRAH AT ETIHAD TOWERS, ABU DHABI

It’s when the dessert arrives – a white chocolate candle lined with rose petals and raspberries, accented with hints of popping candy – that I realise I must reach into a new inner reserve of strength, or at least find a second stomach.

I had heard about the cuisine at famous chef Michael Caines’ new restaurant. The dishes, I was told, were the sort that combine casual food with Michelin-star aplomb. But I wasn’t really anticipating just how tempting they would be. First there was crusty bread with olives baked inside. Then came a warm lobster salad, a deconstructed dish with mango stripes and caviar that was presented as pretty as a picture. After that, I had the salt-baked cod, something I planned to have a nibble of, but that compelled me, with its flaky white meat and subtly rich flavour, to eat it all, and then use some of the remaining bread to scoop up the lingering smoked paprika and red pepper foam sauce.

The end result is that by the time dessert arrives, I’m stuffed. Delightfully, contentedly stuffed. But who can say no to a dish so pretty? It’s all white chocolate and red accents, lit with an actual candle, and when you break the chocolate crust a soft mousse awaits inside. It presents like a party. It tastes like a chocolate dream. I manage one bite, dipping the chocolate into the chilled raspberry ice cream. Then another. Before I know it, the dessert, like the rest of the meal, has all but disappeared. I wouldn’t have it any other way. jumeirah.com/jumeirahetihadtowers