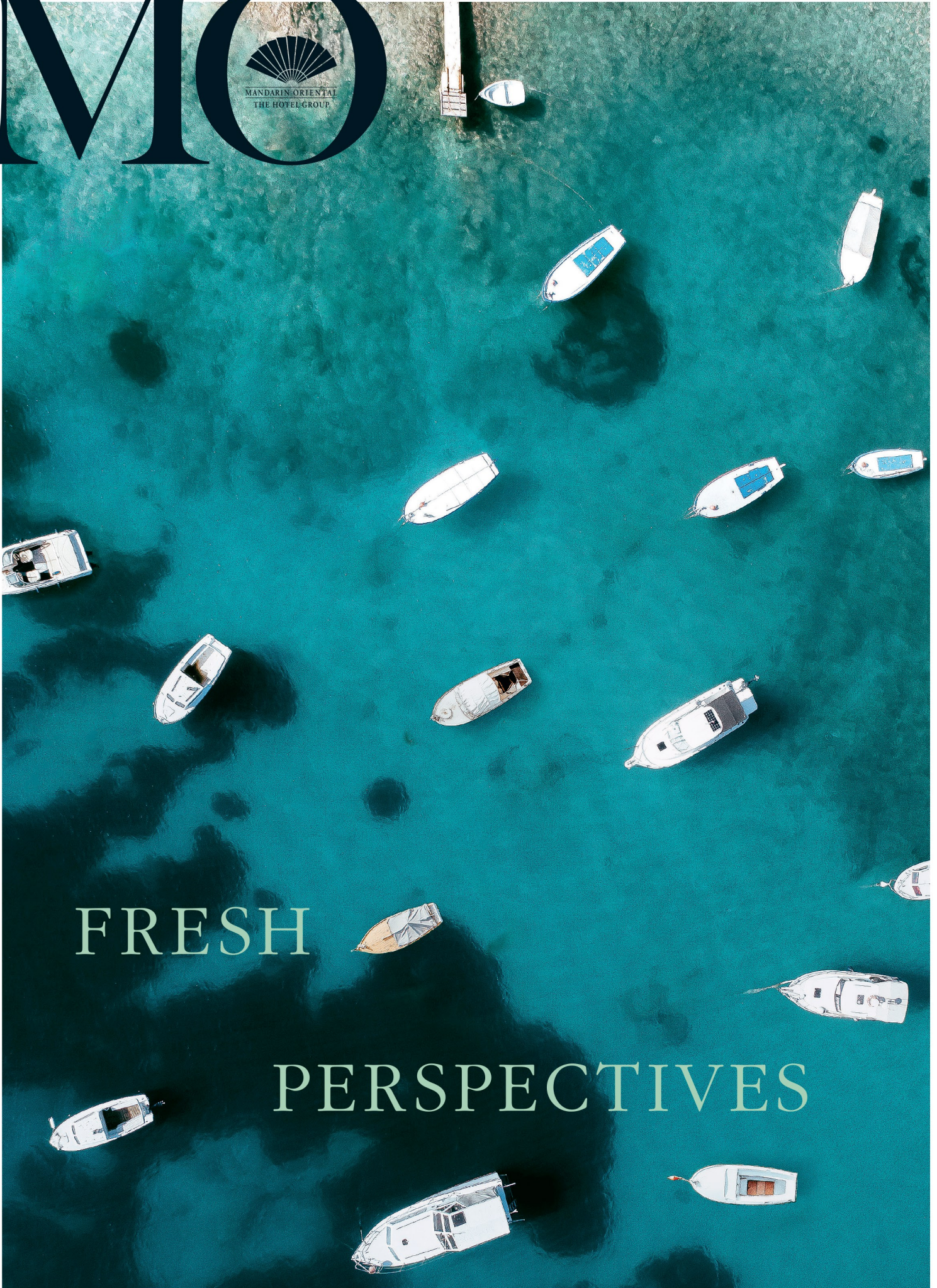


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THE SHAPE OF THINGS



Modern cultural architecture is evolving at great speed in the Middle East, and **Sarah Khan** finds that the secular spaces feel almost as moving and spiritual as the religious ones



Breathing space
 Left: lobby of the Museum of the Future, Dubai. Previous page: the Mosque at the Abrahamic Family House, Abu Dhabi; the Minaretein centre, Doha

To the untrained eye, it might seem as if the entire Gulf region is gridlocked in a never-ending race to construct the most audacious towers – steel and glass behemoths that loom higher and higher, as if all but a few storeys away from touching the stars. But alongside these skyscraping new landmarks are a host of stand-out contemporary structures rooted in traditional Arab and Islamic design, where the interiors are just as considered and awe-inducing as their silhouettes. And as the region becomes more known for the eye-catching swoops and peaks of these wonders, cutting-edge aesthetics are also finding their way into the inner sanctums of a new generation of contemporary mosques. From Qatar to Oman and across the United Arab Emirates, here are some of the Gulf’s most alluring modern monuments.

Dubai

It may not reach toward the heavens like the spindly spire of the nearby Burj Khalifa, the world’s tallest building, but the distinctive swirl of Dubai’s Museum of the Future is still impossible to miss. The unusual, ellipse-shaped structure, conceived by architect Shaun Killa, became an instant icon when it was unveiled in 2022, casting its shadow over the city’s busy main artery of Sheikh Zayed Road. Thousands of residents whizz past it each day, making the striking Arabic calligraphy by Emirati artist Mattar Bin Lahej chiselled into the silver exterior a fixture of a daily commute, but it’s well worth pulling over to examine the museum’s luminous white lobby as well. Here, Bin Lahej’s script – of poems by Dubai ruler Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum – continues to unfold within the undulating interiors, glowing with soft light across the walls and ceilings as spiral staircases spring towards upper levels and animal-shaped drones float by. The exhibits across seven floors contemplate space exploration, climate change, and the future of wellness, but they’re anchored in the UAE’s culture and past.

Further south in the Al Quoz district, not far from the galleries and cafés of Alserkal Avenue, stands the gleaming Mosque of the Light. In 2021, Sumaya Dabbagh became the first woman to design a mosque in the UAE when she paired traditional Islamic features with newer architectural aesthetics in this Cubist house of worship. The result is a minimalist white stone exterior etched with geometric patterns and Arabic calligraphy, crowned by a perforated dome and flanked by a slim, freestanding minaret. Inside, the

space is free of ornate distraction. Visitors walk below canopies shading the courtyard and into the inner hall, a vast prayer room clad in golden letters spelling out Quranic Surahs. In this restrained and minimal sanctuary, natural light takes precedence over gilded chandeliers, allowing worshippers to turn their focus inward as they pray.

Book a stay at the sleek, contemporary Mandarin Oriental Jumeira, Dubai for beachfront views and a Downtown backdrop. mandarinoriental.com/dubai

Abu Dhabi

When architect Jean Nouvel revealed his vision for the Louvre Abu Dhabi in 2017, the sweeping shell stretching over 23 galleries seemed to rise from the shores of the Arabian Gulf like a spaceship. But this seemingly otherworldly outline is very much rooted in the Islamic world, an inspired take on the traditional dome that's long been a fixture in the region and beyond. The 600ft latticed steel cupola may have added an imposing arc to the Emirati capital's skyline, but it's the softer touches inside the museum that

Look up

Below: visitors kayak under the Rain of Light dome at the Louvre Abu Dhabi. Right: the Mosque of Light in Dubai; roof of the central atrium at the M7 design centre in Doha



The seemingly otherworldly outline of the Louvre Abu Dhabi is very much rooted in the Islamic world



recast the story of the Middle East. Filigree stars in the roof evoke a common geometric motif, with natural light filtering through them to dapple the courtyards below. Fifty-five white cube buildings interlink in a way that's reminiscent of an ancient Arab medina. Quotes in Arabic and English dress the windows. Flowing water channels bring to mind age-old *falaj* irrigation canals.

Day-trippers from Dubai often visit the Louvre in tandem with Abu Dhabi's ornate Sheikh Zayed Grand Mosque – deservedly a national landmark. But they should also take in the serene Abrahamic Family House complex, which charts a new path for religious life in the UAE. Built by British-Ghanaian architect David Adjaye, the centre is not simply a singular place of worship. It houses the Eminence Ahmed El-Tayeb Mosque, St Francis Church and Moses Ben Maimon Synagogue across three buildings surrounded by gardens studded with olive and palm trees. From the outside, the trio of imposing limestone cubes are nearly identical, but the interiors are where the differences become apparent. The mosque, oriented towards the holy city of Makkah, has nine soaring vaults and latticework inspired by *masbrabiya* screens. The church faces east toward the rising sun, and a canopy of 13,000 timber beams evokes rays of light pouring in. The V-shaped colonnades of the synagogue, which is angled toward Jerusalem, bring to mind the crisscrossing palm fronds of a *sukkab*, while the skylight suggests a *chuppab*. With the building's location on Saadiyat island, just minutes away from the Louvre, it has already begun to forge a new cultural circuit for the city.

Book a stay at the majestic Emirates Palace Mandarin Oriental, whose architecture is as inspiring as the rest of the city skyline. mandarinoriental.com/abu-dhabi

Doha

In some ways, the regeneration of the Msheireb Downtown Doha district is the ultimate urban experiment, conceived to emulate what the future of city planning could look like with a view towards sustainable living. The result, which came to life in 2022, is a solar-powered neighbourhood of ivory buildings made with eco-friendly materials and heat-insulating glass – and it is now the hub of the city's thriving creative economy. While at first glance, Msheireb is an ultra-contemporary oasis in the heart of Doha, a closer look reveals that every element is armed with traditional Arab architectural references: lace-like walls and windows filter natural light inside the stately buildings, wind-catchers channel the flow of air to reduce heat indoors, the canopied Baharat square where people converge late into the night is cooled by pools of water even in the hottest months. Across the Baharat from Mandarin Oriental, Doha stands the M7 design centre, built by John McAslan + Partners to serve as an incubator for the region's creative talents. The imposing structure, which has hosted everything from a Christian Dior retrospective to the Design Doha biennial alongside workshops and ateliers for emerging furniture and fashion brands, is modelled after a traditional Qatari courtyard villa, with natural light from the latticed ceiling dancing over the alabaster steps and walls and cascading down to the ground-floor *majlis* seating area.

Countless things come to mind when you drive past the Minaratein complex in Doha's Education City, but a mosque is likely not one of them. Iraqi architect and calligrapher Taha Al-Hiti masterminded the avant-garde structure's bulbous, swooping silhouette, with two minarets jutting out at an angle and rising toward the sky. It is perhaps one of the most unusual houses of



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Brought to light

Left: the conical minaret of Bab Al Salam Mosque
Right, from top: Bab Al Salam Mosque's spiral staircase; its chandelier of 1,600 crystal balls

worship anywhere in the world. But once you step past the curved exterior walls etched with a geometric triangle pattern and descend the stairs to the inner courtyard, Islamic motifs become more and more vivid. The building is held aloft on five plinths representing the five pillars of Islam, each embellished with a different Surah from the Quran. Past them are ivory walls and vast glass panels that lead toward the Qur'anic botanic gardens and flowing streams (a nod to the four rivers of paradise). The prayer hall can hold as many as 1,800 worshippers under a ceiling that rises and falls like a cresting wave.

Book a stay at Mandarin Oriental, Doha in Msbeireb, which is the lifestyle and cultural heart of the city. mandarinoriental.com/doha

Muscat

Oman has a rich nautical history that has seen the nation absorbing influences from India to Africa and the Indian Ocean region for hundreds of years. The striking Oman Across the Ages Museum shines a light on this storied past in the ancient city of Nizwa, an hour west of Muscat. The angular façade was conceived by Australian firm Cox Architecture to harmonise with the craggy Al Hajar mountains nearby. A billowing panel recalls the sail of a dhow, a nod to the Sultanate's maritime history. Inside the museum, which opened in 2023, 800 million years of the country's evolution is documented in the 9,000sqm venue, which incorporates traditional Omani architecture and materials in unexpected ways. The triangular motif carries on into the pavilions, where cavernous halls clad in stone and wood house interactive exhibits and displays, geological formations have been reimaged via 3D printing, while ancient huts come to life with AR projections. The result is a dynamic experience that guides visitors through the nation's past and present and also contemplates the future.

Meanwhile, in the modern capital of Muscat, Omani architectural firm Altqadam took a forward-thinking approach to mosque design when it created the Bab Al Salam Mosque with a series of five cylindrical structures and a conical minaret. Inside, the curving lines continue in the form of spiral staircases, water features and semi-circular ablution halls with marble stools. In the main prayer hall, natural light filters in through a ring of skylights, while at night the soaring space is illuminated by a chandelier hung with 1,600 crystal balls that evoke the dome of a more traditional mosque.

Book a stay at just-opened Mandarin Oriental, Muscat, an ideal base for exploring architectural treasures. mandarinoriental.com/muscat

