

FEELING HIGH

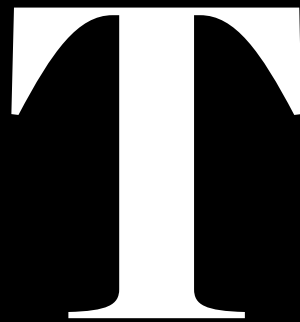
in

RAS AL KHAIMAH

BETTER KNOWN AS THE 'NATURE EMIRATE' OF THE UAE,
ITS RUGGED LANDSCAPE ENCOMPASSING THE DESERT,
MOUNTAINS AND SEA HAS BECOME A LAUNCHING PAD
FOR ADVENTURE SEEKERS

WORDS: Pallavi Pasricha





THE TOWERING, Hajar mountain range, the sand dune swept desert and the sea beckon me to explore an emirate stamped with its own distinct identity. As I arrive in UAE's fourth largest emirate, located in the north, I haven't come seeking Dubai's glam factor, skyscrapers and shopping, but to take a deep dive into the adventures it promises in the backdrop of its spectacular landscape. After all, Ras Al Khaimah, just a one-hour drive away from Dubai, is known as the 'nature emirate' of the UAE for a reason — where else do the sea, mountains and desert converge within kilometres of each other? Home to the highest mountain in the country, Jebel Jais (1934 meters), Ras Al Khaimah is a hotbed for adventure sports — ziplining, sledging and hot air ballooning — exhilarating experiences that I delve into over three days. The country's highest restaurant and campsite are all part of this lovely emirate.

THE WORLD'S LONGEST ZIPLINE — JAIS FLIGHT
ASIDON the equipment at the site office near Jais Adventure Park Centre, and then take a car to the take-off point to zipline for about 2.8 kilometres down the Hajar mountain range. I can't wait — after all it the longest zipline in the world.

But one glimpse and my heart nearly stops — the platform is at quite a height (1680 meters) and all I can see around is the brown, jagged range. The zip cable is so long that after a point it vanishes into the horizon. There are two parallel cables so that people can go in sets of two. A couple before me are already in position and the guy tells us jokingly, "Don't do it guys. Not worth it." He says "I love You" to his partner and off they go, screaming their lungs out and soon they become tiny specs till I can't see them anymore.

Anticipation builds up in me as I am next in line. When my instructor asks

me how I feel, I breezily tell him, "On top of the world." I don't know if I truly meant it, but I am literally on top of the mountain and all set to descend on just one wire.

He switches on my GoPro, asks me to take the push-up position, tells me to keep my hands at the back and quickly checks that my equipment is in place. Then I can hear him say, three, two one — GO. I scream, not because I am scared, but because I am thrilled. I want to move my head and take in the vistas but the wind is so strong that I cannot do that. All I see is boulders, rocks and a snaking road. Suddenly I start turning to my side, which I was told could happen due to the wind factor. I am in the air for about two minutes zipping at an incredible speed of nearly 150 kilometres per hour. After this lengthy leg is over, I stand on a platform in mid-air, feeling quite proud at having attempted something so bold and daring as I stare down into the depth of the

valley. Then a shorter zipline takes me back to firmer ground.

THE REGION'S LONGEST TOBOGGAN RIDE — JAIS SLEDDER

I HAVE ALWAYS loved going to theme parks and getting on to the craziest roller coaster rides. This time I am going down the region's longest toboggan (sled) ride called the Jais Sledder. I get seated and the instructor tells me how to operate the brake — this controls the speed so one can takes the twists and turns at a comfortable pace. The ride usually starts from the bottom, cruising up gently and then comes down as much as 1840 meters at speed. We however do the reverse, starting from the top and then coming down. I enjoy the 40 km speed per hour at which the sled takes the hairpin curves, giving that much needed adrenalin rush. Not using the speed control or the break is a good idea —

BEST LUXURY HOTELS *in* RAS AL KHAIMAH

THE RITZ-CARLTON RAS AL KHAIMAH, AL WADI DESERT
This sprawling 1235-acre hotel, with 100 luxury pool villas, is part of a private nature reserve. Here you can head out for desert treks on a camel or horse, enjoy a falcon show, take private archery lessons or just stargaze in the desert.
Address: Al Mazraa, Wadi Khadija, Ras al Khaimah, UAE
Call: +971 7206 7777
Wallet: ₹53,000 onwards

THE RITZ-CARLTON RAS AL KHAIMAH, AL HAMRA BEACH
The 32 private pool villas at this beachfront resort have direct access to the beach. There's a sea-facing spa and a seafood and grill restaurant.
Address: PO Box 4558, Vienna Street Ras Al Khaimah, UAE
Call: +971 7204 8888
Wallet: ₹60,000 onwards

WALDORF ASTORIA RAS AL KHAIMAH
Check in here and get lost in this massive hotel with more than 300 rooms. There's plenty to keep one busy — a spa with 12 treatment rooms, a private beach, an 18-hole golf course nearby, water sports and two temperature controlled pools. When it comes to eating and drinking, there are eight options to choose from.
Address: Vienna Street Ras Al Khaimah, UAE
Call: +971 7203 5555
Wallet: ₹31,000 onwards

HILTON RAS AL KHAIMAH BEACH RESORT
This resort will spoil you for choice when you want to take a dip in the pool or have a meal. There are seven swimming pools and nine dining options, varying from Lebanese, Latin to Caribbean. When you want to head to the beach, the white sands stretch across 1.5km.
Address: Al Maareedh Street, Ras Al Khaimah, UAE
Call: +971 7228 8844
Wallet: ₹15,999 onwards

INTERCONTINENTAL RAS AL KHAIMAH RESORT AND SPA
This 351-room beachfront resort on Hayat Island opened in March this year. Every room has a sea view and some villas come with a private pool. There are six dining options including a restaurant serving Turkish and Lebanese cuisine. The spa here has a hammam.
Address: Mina Al Arab, PO. Box 3001, Ras Al Khaimah, UAE
Call: +971 7202 6666
Wallet: ₹21,000 onwards

THE PLATFORM AT THE JEBEL JAIS FLIGHT, THE WORLD'S LONGEST ZIPLINE, IS AT 1680M AND ALL I CAN SEE AROUND IS THE BROWN, JAGGED RANGE. THE ZIP CABLE IS SO LONG THAT AFTER A POINT IT VANISHES INTO THE HORIZON



especially for a person like me who enjoys such rides.

THE HIGHEST RESTAURANT IN UAE — 1484 BY PURO

NO PRIZES FOR guessing that the restaurant is named after its height, and it overlooks the highest peak in the region. Famished after the ziplining and sledging, I order an ice tea, wasabi shrimps and halloumi fajitas for lunch. The portion sizes are generous and the flavours top notch — everything in this emirate so far has surpassed expectations. Sitting here, one can watch people go down the zipline wire looking like tiny dots.

The menu has a mix of all cuisines and a kids meals as well but remember that a reservation is mandatory. My mind wanders, imagining how stunning the alfresco seating would be at sunset when the deep orange rays transform the mountains.

ZIPLINING AT JAIS SKY TOUR

WITH JUST A TINY bar handle to hold and my feet dangling in the air, I zip down the Hajar mountain range — yet again. But this time it is different. It's not the longest zipline in the world but the Jais Sky Tour where I need to negotiate six ziplines.

We are a group of five but one person backs out after seeing that it looks a bit tough. I am second in line and told to cross my legs. As soon as my instructor releases me, I whizz across the first wire at a speed that allows me to admire the scene around me and still feel the thrill of the ride. I even spot mountain sheep along the slopes.

We have to negotiate five more ziplines covering a distance of about 5km to reach the end. They are of varying lengths, from 337 meters to more than a kilometre and each offers a somewhat different experience.



VISIT SUWAIDI PEARL FARM

Before riches flowed into the emirates from oil and gas, there were pearls. For centuries Arabian divers spent months at sea bringing in a haul of oysters which were then cut to see if a pearl was tucked inside. Take a 15 minute boat ride from Al Rams to the Suwaidi Pearl Farm to learn all about the history of this fascinating industry — the world's best pearls came from this region. One can even pick an oyster from their aquarium and watch how they open it to see if it holds a pearl. You can even purchase jewellery made of pearls from here.

Address: Al Rams, near Al Riga Fishing Materials store, Ras al Khaimah, UAE

Call: +971 50 773 6086

Web: www.suwaidipearls.ae

One ends close to a rockface, another one crosses a road, while yet another gives me a momentary shiver because when I bend, I spot a deep canyon below my feet. This one is certainly not for those who are afraid of heights. I am usually the first to go and then wait for my fellow travellers to come. Once I get stuck towards the end, but the instructor on the platform helpfully comes to my rescue, hauling me back to the platform. The two hours of swishing across leaves everyone all pumped up and exhilarated.

THE HIGHEST CAMPSITE IN UAE — CAMP 1770

AFTER A HECTIC day of the adventure sports, we make our way to Camp 1770, the highest campsite in the country after a five-minute walk from the road. By then it is sunset, which affords a beautiful view of the mountains bathed in an orange glow.

It's quite windy but Fadi welcomes us with some tea in a lovely Arabic set up with floor mattresses, a bonfire and lights blinking in the distance. We settle down, go around taking pictures and then tuck

into a hearty meal of Mandi, a chicken and rice dish that we are told is cooked by a mountain tribe. Interestingly, Ras Al Khaimah is home to several tribes in its varied landscape — some trace their roots to the desert, other to coastal areas and mountains as well. Yoga and meditation enthusiasts can spend some time in this spectacular setting honing their skills.

HOT AIR BALLOONING AT MANAR MALL — RAK AIRVENTURE

THERE IS perhaps nothing like wafting up

gently in a hot air balloon, and getting a bird's eye view of a place from mid-air. But it doesn't take place in the mountains. This tethered hot air balloon experience, which was launched about a month back, is at Manar Mall in the city.

For ten peaceful minutes, one can take in the beautiful sight of Ras Al Khaimah spread below from a height of about 30 meters. The mangroves look particularly stunning. It's open in the evening, the perfect time to soak in some stunning sunset vistas and click pictures. ♦