

For those seeking a rich dose of art and culture, the cultural capital of the Arab world has plenty to offer

## Sharjah, artistically inclined

NEETA LAL

OVER 70 stunning art pieces — mirror-encrusted sculptures, vibrant paintings, jewelry, collages — by legendary Iranian artist Monir Shahroudy-Farmanfarmaian surround me at Al Hamriya Studios in Sharjah. The exhibition space, overlooking a shimmering expanse of the Persian Gulf, is a stone's throw from UAE's other emirates — Ajman, Umm Al Quwain and Ras Al Khaimah. The critically acclaimed retrospective — *Sunset Sunrise* — by the artist, who passed away recently, offers a unique amalgam of traditional Persian techniques with contemporary Western abstraction.

"The artist's works invoke the sky as a metaphor that separates as well as connects the East and the West. The exhibition is part of our autumn collection that also includes other renowned international artists like Akram Zaatari, Adam Henein, Bani Abidi, and Marwan Rechmaoui," informs Nawale Lacroix of Sharjah Art Foundation, an organisation credited with powering the Emirate's rise as an international art hub.

My appetite whetted for stirring art, I next visit what is arguably the Gulf's most talked about work of art — The



(Clockwise, top) Gulf's most talked about work of art — The Rain Room; the art-speckled Sharjah, and mixed media installations at the Sharjah Art Foundation. PHOTOS BY THE WRITER

Sultan bin Muhammad Al-Qasimi.

At the Sharjah Museum of Cultural Civilisation, housed in an old souk on the Majarra waterfront, I view another significant collection of Islamic art. Over 5,000 artefacts including precision-made astronomical instruments, calligraphy, jewelry, handwritten Koran, letters from Prophet Muhammad and rare collectibles from Mecca going centuries back.

Sometimes, one doesn't even have to visit museums to see art in Sharjah. At the Sharjah Art Foundation, the brainchild of the ruler's daughter Sheikhha Hoor Al-Qasimi, located in the heart of old Sharjah, there's a warren of early 19th century buildings made of coral bricks with art from across the globe. The venue bustles with seasonal exhibitions as well as works of renowned global artists.

Its future projects include expansion of more art spaces to house its substantial permanent collection, a new film festival that will start this December as well as the Sharjah Biennale, which is recognised as one of Middle East's most prestigious art events. Held every spring, and spread over several sites in and around the Emirati city as well as a few off-site venues like Kalba on the Gulf of Oman as well as Hamriyah, it draws top curators, gallerists and art connoisseurs from across the world.

### Many mosques

For a population of just 1.4 million, Sharjah boasts of 600 mosques, the most enthralling being Al Noor on Khalid Lagoon. *Noor* means light in Arabic and during evenings, the mosque lights up like a lighthouse, taking in its fold up to 2,200 people. "It was also the first mosque in Sharjah to allow the expatriate community in," the local guide informs me as I perambulate the shrine's premises, its floors so shiny I could eat off them.

From the mosque, I peregrinate to Khalid Lagoon, near Al Majaz Island to visit Al Noor Island. This is where art and nature coalesce to form an enchanting landscape. The man-made island has won top international accolades for its spectacular design and illumination. I marvel at its tropical biosphere filled with fluttering butterflies, a Literature Pavilion stocked with books and towering avantgarde sculptures by leading international artists.

A 3.5 km-long boardwalk snakes through its landscaped gardens, while light installations bring the whole island to life at night. I watch mesmerised as fluorescent pinks, blues and reds flicker to life one by one at dusk, lighting up the whole island like a star-speckled sky!



Rain Room. The installation that has wowed critics and masses alike invites me to walk through a downpour of continuous rain without getting wet! I navigate a darkened underground space, preventing rain from falling directly above me, as I tiptoe over a smooth floor. The site-specific installation — that has now turned into UAE's largest selfie-taking station — uses 2,500 litres of self-cleaning recycled water, controlled through a system of networked 3D tracking cameras. "It explores human condition in an increasingly mechanised world through emotional yet physically intense experiences," I'm informed.

Designated by UNESCO as the cultural capital of the Arab world, the city's focus on aesthetics is all-pervasive.



Instead of anodyne malls and OTT architecture that characterises its glamorous sibling Dubai, Sharjah's landscape is peppered with serene dun-colored buildings, verdant parks and mosques, accented by soaring spires and sweeping curves.

### City of museums

The third largest Emirate in the seven-member constellation of the UAE, Sharjah boasts of 20 museums, making it a compelling stop for those seeking a deep cultural immersion. There's the Sharjah Art Museum, Museum of Islamic Civilisation and Museum of Archaeology. But my favorite turned out to be The Art Museum — a capacious building near the dhow-speckled Corniche — that showcases one of the Gulf region's largest art exhibitions, many of the exhibits collected personally by ruler

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## Steeped in history, Santa Marta is visual delight

BINDU GOPAL RAO

SANTA MARTA, established in 1525 by the Spanish, is on the foot of Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta, the world's highest coastal mountain range. Naturally, the city has a distinctive Spanish flavour, and is hot and humid through most of the year. Santa Marta is a bustling city that wears its heritage proudly. And the one name that you will hear and see almost everywhere is that of Simon Bolivar, the person who was responsible for the freedom of the country.

### History beckons

The face of Santa Marta's freedom struggle, Simon Bolivar was the person who drew up the Bolivian constitution. At the Plaza de la Cathedral, a busy square, you can see a large statue of Simon. This square incidentally dates back to the end of the 18th century when the Santa Marta Cathedral Church was completed under Governor Antonio Sampers' administration. The square gained importance in the city's urban dynamics and became the setting for proclamations by the King, religious celebrations, public theatre, military parades, political speeches, etc. The buildings around the square are of Colonial and Republican architecture and hold great historical value. The Town Hall building now houses the district council. The Cathedral has a beautiful white facade and the inside is expansive with stained glass windows and marble and wooden structures. A small diversion ahead is the Museo Del Oro Tairona Casa De la Aduana or the Customs House, where the Gold Museum is located. The two-storey house has an open courtyard and tells you a lot about the pottery and gold jewellery from this region's indige-

One of the oldest cities in South America — it was founded in 1525 — this Colombian town charms you with its museums, sense of history and colonial architecture

One of the heritage buildings in Santa Marta; (below) a view of the famous Santa Marta Cathedral that dates back to 18th century PHOTOS BY THE WRITER



nous and colonial past. A bustling market opposite the building is the place where many of the local tribes display colourful handicrafts, too.

### Simon's trail

To know more about Simon and Santa Marta, stop at the historic Casa Quinta de San Pedro Alejandrino. This is where Simon lived towards the end of his life. The centennial collection here has a large number of trees that have existed for more than a century. The ornamental collection of plants here corresponds to a large group of plants that are grown and marketed for their

attractive botanical attributes, including flowers, foliage, size or aroma. If you are lucky, you can spot several iguanas here — both male and female. There is a large variety of birds on the premises, too. So if you are an avian fan, you are in for a treat. You can sight parrots, yellow hooded blackbirds and kingfishers aplenty.

The main building has a small chapel, Simon's bedroom, library, smoking room, dining room, kitchen, bakery and stable. The centennial room has several objects that were used on December 17, 1930, when Simon's death was commemorated. You can also see the sugar

mill, distilleries and cellar used to maintain and preserve the barrels of rum here. The premises also house the Bolivarian Museum of Contemporary Art. This is where you can see a display of art from the artists of Bolivarian countries like Venezuela, Columbia, Ecuador, Peru, Panama and Bolivia. Apart from 120 paintings, sculptures and engravings in three permanent rooms, exhibitions of current artists and music and art related events are also held here. The coastal Caribbean area of Santa Marta has many more secrets to uncover and it is for you to take that first step to find out for yourself.

### FACT FILE

**Reach:** A popular port of call for cruise ships, you can fly into Simon Bolivar airport (that connects destinations in Colombia) or take a bus from Cartagena that will take you about four hours

**Stay:** There are a variety of hotels across budgets but do look for a hotel in the historic quarter. You might be lucky to find a heritage hotel for yourself!

**Best time to visit:** It is quite hot in Santa Marta throughout the year. The best time to visit is between December and March

### SANTA MARTA CHECKLIST

- Take a Caribbean beach break at Tayrona National Park
- Trek to the Lost City Ciudad Perdida, an archaeological site
- Scuba dive in Taganga, a fishing village on the border of Tayrona National Park
- Chill at the restaurants in Playa Blanca
- Party by the beach at El Rodadero with live music and beach bars
- Sample street food at the ocean promenade Avenida Bastidas

