

# Off the beaten path

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Tired of heading to the same old places year after year? Want to avoid the crowds in the more common summer hotspots? With airlines serving the region offering routes to an increasingly wide range of destinations, it's simpler than ever for residents in the Middle East to explore somewhere along the road less travelled

**W**ith temperatures getting hotter and schools closing out for the season, summer is one of the best times for leisure travel no matter where you are in the world. Yet each region seems to have its go-to favourite destinations, usually linked to easy flight routes, a welcome change in weather and scenery, and the chance to enjoy a different culture. Recent data from dnata – which isn't just one of the UAE's longest-running travel operators, but is also one of the world's largest air services providers – the UK, the Maldives, Türkiye, the USA, and Thailand are among the most popular destinations for those jetting off from the emirates for the summer.

Meanwhile, according to a report from WEGO – one of the most popular travel apps and largest online travel marketplaces in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region – when it comes to summer getaways for travellers from the wider GCC, the UK, Germany, and Italy still top the list, at least when it comes to European destinations. Many people also tend to travel home to see loved ones, with Saudi Arabia, Egypt, India, Türkiye, Thailand, Kuwait, Indonesia, the Philippines, Jordan, and the UAE ranking among WEGO's most-searched destinations at this time of year.

With regionally-based airlines, or those serving the region, now offering more and more new flight routes, the list of summer holiday possibilities for the GCC traveller is now bigger than ever. They offer the chance to discover new hidden gems filled with authentic culture, food, and attractions that will make for an unforgettable escape. Here are some that we're putting on our list. →



**Penang, Malaysia**

Known as the Pearl of the Orient or Pearl Island, this beautiful island on the northwest coast of peninsular Malaysia is almost like two destinations in one: it's split into two parts, with Penang Island on one side, and Seberang Perai on the other (connected to the mainland), joined by the Penang Bridge and Second Penang Bridge. This February, flydubai commenced daily flights to Penang as well as nearby Langkawi Island, becoming the first airline to operate flights to these islands from the UAE. While the latter is known for its unspoiled white sand beaches and turquoise waters (not to mention a duty-free status that makes souvenir-shopping a dream), for gourmands, Penang has a unique draw: it's a foodie haven.



Thanks to the Chinese, Malay, Indian, and British influences in its colourful history, the street food offering in George Town – a UNESCO-listed site that is also renowned for its beautiful historic architecture – is a beautiful mishmash of flavours and textures. The hawker centres are a must-visit, as are

the night markets: famous names include the New Lane, New World, and Gurney Drive hawker centres, and the Macallum Street, Batu Ferringhi, Farlim, and Jelutong night markets. These are not fancy places – they're often humid, ultra-casual, no-frills spots in which to get some truly delicious food of all types. Items to try include the famous noodle dish char kway teow, ikan bakar (grilled fish), laksa (a fragrant spicy and sour broth-based soup), nasi lemak (coconut rice wrapped in pandan leaves, served with a spicy sambal) and satay (marinated, grilled skewers of meat) to lesser-known options such as apom pancake (crepe-like peanut pancake turnovers), seafood popiah (spring rolls in fresh wrapping), roti canai (gravy-dipped flaky bread), or ice cream shaped like cat faces; all washed down with drinks such as barley water, milk and herbal teas, chrystanthemum tea, or juices of any and every kind.

When you're not eating, there's plenty more to see and do. Adventure-seekers and families will love amusement park Escape Penang, while nature-lovers can hike up



Penang Hill, or explore Entopia butterfly farm or the Tropical Spice Garden. History and culture buffs can check out Kek Lok Si Temple, Cheong Fatt Tze – The Blue Mansion, Khoo Kongsi clanhouse, or pop by Chew Jetty's scenic harbour.



Whatever you choose, there is no shortage of things to discover in this vibrant cultural corner of Malaysia.

**flydubai flies to Penang International Airport daily from Dubai International Airport, with fares starting from Dhs2,700.**

**Valletta, Malta**

The capital of Malta, this tiny walled city will make you feel like you've stepped back in time, and possibly onto the set of *Game of Thrones*. In fact, some of the famous TV show was even filmed in the country – King's Landing was shot in Mdina, another city just a 20-25 minute drive from Valletta. From the Upper Barakka Gardens – a stunning public garden on the upper tier of Saints Peter and Paul Bastion, with a panoramic view of the Grand Harbour below – you can view the Red Keep's Dungeons in nearby town Birgu. Called Fort St. Angelo in real life, you can travel there from Valletta in 18-20 minutes by car, or 10 minutes by ferry.

This type of quick and convenient accessibility is one of the joys of Malta – it's only 316 sqm in total, making it the

tenth-smallest country by area and the smallest capital city in the European Union. Travelling from Malta International Airport to Valletta will take you 18-20 minutes, and a half-hour's drive will take you to the furthest locations in the country. Yet you don't actually need to leave Valletta for some amazing sights if you don't want to – there's enough there to keep you busy for days.

The city is renowned for its stunning Baroque architecture and its living, working port. For those who love history, art, culture, and discovering fantastic cuisine, it can make for a spectacular short summer break.

St. John's Co-Cathedral is a must-visit, with jaw-dropping frescoes and a marble

floor that houses the tombs of the Knights of the Order, as well as paintings by renowned Italian artist Caravaggio. At the Grand Master's Palace, you'll be able to see official historic state rooms and audience chambers – which modern Maltese presidents still welcome foreign guests to. In fact, the President of Malta Office is actually still based here. Weapons enthusiasts will love the armoury, with an impressive collection of authentic items used by the knights and Grand Masters of the Order of Malta.

When it's time for a souvenir and a bite, Republic Street and

Merchant Street will have you covered, with countless terrace-bedecked cafés and restaurants serving incredible food and drink, boutique and artisan shops, and a lively market. When done, you can continue your tour with visits to the Teatru Manoel, The Three Cities, Casa Rocca Piccola – a still-inhabited palace – or one of its many museums showcasing fine arts, archaeological treasures, war memorial items, and more.

**Turkish Airlines flies to Malta International Airport daily from Dubai International Airport, with fares starting from Dhs2,540.**

**Poznan, Poland**

One of the oldest cities in Poland, Poznan makes for a truly charming city break filled with plenty of history, impressive architecture, and an enchanting old town. In October 2023, flydubai became the first UAE national carrier to launch direct flights there with a thrice-weekly service, making it the airline's third destination in Poland after Krakow and Warsaw.

Considering Poznan used to be the capital of Poland – it was the ancient capital of the Greater Poland region, and is one of four historical capitals of medieval Poland – it's little surprise that the city is chock-full of grand historical landmarks. A visit to the Old Market Square makes for the perfect introduction to the architectural beauty of this city, with colourful and Renaissance-style buildings. The square has recently fully reopened after having undergone major renovations and reconstruction work in the past few years, with much to see around it including the Town Hall, Merchants Houses, Weighing House, the Guardhouse, Działyński and Mielżyński Palace, and the Punishment Post – a 16th-century means of punishing women who dressed themselves in ways considered inappropriate for their social standing. There are also a number of famous monuments, including fountains



of Apollo, Neptune, and Mars, and the Bamberka Fountain, depicting a Bamber woman holding two buckets of water and wine, erected in the 1900s for use by both humans and animals.

Thanks to the 130,000-odd students at Adam Mickiewicz University, the city boasts a bohemian spirit with plenty of ways to enjoy daily life, including lively nightlife and an awesome food scene, with tasty and authentic bites at affordable prices. Poznan is a very walkable place that can also be easily explored by bicycle or public transport, and there's

art everywhere, from street art to sprawling parks filled with interesting sculptures and exhibitions – you'll even find some at the Old Brewery, which is now a thriving commercial district. When you're done there, you can also visit Brovaria – Poland's very first brewery – which is still in operation and serves up fresh, unique hoppy beverages. Wherever you choose to dine, no visit to Poznan would be complete with a taste of one of Poland's most famous foods, the pierogi – moreish filled dumplings that can be sweet or savoury, and served baked, boiled or fried.

**flydubai flies to Poznań-Lawica Henryk Wieniawski Airport three times a week from Dubai International Airport, with fares starting from Dhs2,950.** →





national park, and boasts jaw-dropping rock formations in a spectrum of colours.

If city life is more your speed, then there's plenty to see in town too. A list of must-visit historic areas and grand monuments include the Golden Quarter, Republic Square – and the Golden Man warrior statue that honours the country's independence, the Voznesenskiy Ascension Cathedral with gold-flecked and art-filled interiors, and the Central State Museum and Almaty City Museum. By night, culture vultures can enjoy a visit to the Abay Opera and Ballet Theatre, or enjoy a delicious meal with live music in one of the city's many atmospheric restaurants. This is a city that truly loves music and art, so much so that since November 2017, it has been recognised as part of the UNESCO Creative Cities Network.

**Air Astana flies to Almaty International Airport daily from Dubai International Airport, with fares starting from Dhs1,660.**

### Almaty, Kazakhstan

For lovers of the great green outdoors, a visit to Kazakhstan's largest metropolis, Almaty, will make for an unforgettable trip. Located at the foot of the Trans-Ili Alatau mountains, you can enjoy beautiful mountain-backdrop views pretty much anywhere you go in this city, which used to be the country's capital.

A popular destination for residents and visitors alike, Kaindy and Kolsai lakes make for a memorable day trip best travelled to by car or shared taxi. The latter's blue waters are so clear that in the right conditions, you can see the surrounding peaks and forests reflected upon the water. Kaindy, meanwhile,

is often described as a natural wonder due to its unique makeup. It was formed after an earthquake that left the remaining trees preserved in the cold ice-blue waters. Dubbed the "sunken forest", the area's epic views can be enjoyed with hot, sweet tea and a barbecue in one of the nearby yurts or campsite observation decks.

For something less green, you can visit Charyn, described as the younger foreign brother of the Grand Canyon in the US's Arizona. The 154km canyon is part of a



### Da Nang, Vietnam

While Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City – two of the most-popular cities in Vietnam – both have a thrilling list of things to see, eat, and experience, this spot in the country's centre is a rapidly growing tourism destination. It's the biggest city in central Vietnam and the fourth largest in the country overall. Locals know it for its large port and strong fishing-related economy. For tourists, however, it's renowned for its gorgeous beaches and many seafront attractions.

Da Nang has a number of epic sculptures and monuments, starting with the Lady Buddha – the tallest Buddha statue in Vietnam with a height of 67m. On her hat, there's another small Buddha statue, and all around her is a courtyard with beautiful pagodas and small temples to see, as well as impressive views of the Marble Mountains, Son Tra Sea, and the rest of the island. The mountains themselves are another key sight in Da Nang: A cluster of five peaks made of limestone and marble, there are small paths and climbing trails, beautiful pagodas, statues and shrines, and mysterious caves to explore.

In the city itself, the 666m long Dragon Bridge not only runs six lanes for traffic, but it's literally shaped like a dragon, with the dragon sculpture atop it actually breathing



fire and water every Saturday and Sunday night at 9pm. It also happens to be the shortest route from Da Nang International Airport to the other main roads in the city. Not too far from Da Nang, the Golden Bridge in the Ba Na Hills Resort – a charming storybook-style French-inspired village that reminds visitors of the impact that French colonialism has left across Vietnam – the gold-hued bridge is held up by two giant hands made of fiberglass and wire mesh but that look like stone. It's a sight you definitely won't want to miss the opportunity to snap a photo with. You can also view it from the nearby Ba Na Cable Car.

Vietnam is known for its fresh and eclectic cuisine, and while in Da Nang, it would be a shame not to try Mì Quảng noodles – a local speciality made of rice noodles, served with broth, and infused with turmeric, as well as bánh xèo – a crispy stuffed rice pancake. You can also try curious items such as avocado ice cream and snails fried with tamarind juice, and with Vietnam increasingly being recognised as having some of the best coffee in the world, the country's famous iced coconut coffee is also well worth a try.

**Singapore Airlines flies to Da Nang International Airport five times a week from Dubai International Airport, with fares starting from Dhs6,090. [BT](#)**