


The National ^(/) x

Abu Dhabi, UAE Monday 12 February 2018

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Seven activities to try during summer 2017

Try your hand at one of these cultural pursuits or potential new hobbies and give your mental health a boost.



Claire Malcolm

[\(/topics/Author/Claire%20Malcolm\)](#)

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The demands of everyday life, from long working hours and family commitments to the daily drudge of keeping the house tidy or the lure of slumping on the sofa with the latest Netflix series, has put the hobbyist tradition in jeopardy.

Hobbies and cultural pursuits add structure to our already full lives, allow us to foster new social connections, engage the brain, boost self-confidence, ignite that creative spark and even take us in a different professional direction. There are also physical health benefits such as increased flexibility, improved posture and lower blood pressure.

Mental health gets a boost too, and recent research by New Zealand's University of Otago suggests that everyday creative activity could potentially promote an upward spiral of increased well-being, with other research finding that doing something we love can even help with depression.

With that in mind, why not invest your time and efforts into one of these cultural pursuits – either in the UAE or another country – this summer?

Behind the lens

Dust off the digital SLR and take creative and technical control of your camera with a photography workshop at Dubai-based Gulf Photo Plus. Start with photography Level 1 and learn how to capture holiday memories without touching the auto setting, try your hand at editing with Adobe Photoshop 101, or keep it simple and discover the secret to taking good photographs on a mobile phone. If you are keen to go deeper, there are also short courses in food, motorsports, family and fashion photography, among others.

Workshops include photography Level 1, Dh731 (two four-hour sessions); Adobe Photoshop Level 1, Dh731 (two four-hour sessions); and introduction to studio lighting, Dh915 (5.5 hours). www.gulfphotoplus.com

Click to win: A picture says a thousand words, and social media sharing can equal thousands of likes. Sign up for the Hamdan bin Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum International Photography Award's (Hipa) Instagram Photo Contest for a chance to showcase your talent, with a new theme each month ranging from landscapes to siblings.

Insight into meditation

If switching off from the outside world and spending some time inside your head is long overdue, then a 10-day vipassana (insight) meditation retreat could be for you. This traditional meditation technique helps centre and balance the mind through sensory awareness and self-observation. Mobile phones, pen and paper, speaking and even direct eye contact are not permitted during the retreat, with the focus on breathing exercises and meditation practice, supported by nightly lectures.

A summer retreat will be held in Ras Al Khaimah from August 25 to September 5. Although it's run on a strictly voluntary basis and free to attend, participants are welcome to help fund a future student. www.ae.dhamma.org

Meditate on a different plane: Hop on a flight to any one of the 176 international locations offering the 10-day programme, from the spiritual home of vipassana in India, to Brazil, Mauritius and New Zealand (www.dhamma.org). For a less immersive experience, Inner Space Abu Dhabi (www.innerspaceabudhabi.org) and Illuminations in Dubai (www.illuminations.ae) both offer regular meditation workshops.

School of rock

Many people will remember being forced to pick up a recorder or twang away at a violin at school, but being able to play a musical instrument is a dopamine-inducing antidote to everyday work stress and also helps improve posture, flexibility and co-ordination. If you dream of playing like Phil Collins or Jimi Hendrix, Solid Rock Dubai has an expansive roster of classes and private lessons including drums, guitar, tabla, saxophone, violin and piano.

One-to-one drum tuition, Dh1,000 for eight classes; group guitar lessons, Dh720 for eight sessions.

www.solidrockdubai.com

The beat goes on: Get hands-on at events like the annual Drum Camp – The World Music Workshop Festival (www.drumcamp.co.uk), held every July in Suffolk, United Kingdom; or stay closer to home with a Full Moon Drumming experience (www.dubaidrums.com). Alternatively, find your musical inspiration at any one of dozens of international music festivals taking place this summer.

Work that body

Fitness training can be a personal passion or lead to a change in professional direction, and Impact British Training Solutions runs a selection of short courses for adults who want to be more informed about their favourite leisure activities, or for those considering a career move. The most popular course is the internationally recognised and UAE Register of Exercise Professionals-accredited Level 2 gym instructor programme, which despite its moniker is the first step on the road to becoming a personal trainer. Other Impact BTS courses include aqua fitness instructor, circuit boot camp instructor and group indoor cycling instructor.

Courses cost from Dh6,900 to Dh9,900 for two programmes, or Dh11,900 for three programmes.

www.impactbts.com

Fitness on the move: If you're not quite ready to make the time and financial investment, but still need some inspiration, factor a fitness event such as the Asia Fitness Conference & Expo in Bangkok (www.asiafitnessbkk.com) or Fitness Expo Dubai (www.fitnessexpo.ae) into your calendar. Wanderlust Festivals (www.wanderlust.com/festivals) also runs health and wellness events throughout the year.

Hola, marhaba, ni hao

Brush up your rusty high school Spanish, dip your toes into the world of Mandarin or finally commit to conversational Arabic to add a new skill to your CV, engage some grey matter or travel with confidence. Eton Institute offers courses in more than 160 languages with centres in Abu Dhabi and Dubai. Join an eight-week Chinese, Italian or Japanese group class or get to grips with Arabic in three weeks with Eton's summer express option. The Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (Tesol) certification programme is also available.

Regular group language classes Dh1,550; Summer Super Express Arabic course, Dh2,550; eight-week Tesol programme, Dh4,990. www.etoninstitute.com

Speak at leisure: Immersive language holidays are another opportunity to step outside the classroom with companies such as UK-based Responsible Travel (responsibletravel.com) offering the best of both worlds. Combine adventure and culture with on-the-go Spanish language lessons whether it is walking Spain's Camino de Santiago or trekking the Inca Trail in Peru.

Kitchen confidential

From the basics of knowing how to boil an egg to kitchen experimentation that would put Nigella to shame, there is something incredibly satisfying about serving up your own creations to a hungry audience. Cooking can also be a calming experience with following a recipe and repetitive actions like chopping and stirring imbuing a sense of calm – at least until it is time to take the soufflé out of the oven. Impress family and friends, and learn professional techniques with a two-day artisan bread or chocolate-making course at Dubai's International Centre for Culinary Arts.

Artisan chocolate making, Dh3,000 (four three-hour sessions); artisan bread making, Dh3,000 (six three-hour sessions). www.iccadubai.ae

Takeaway experience: Culinary holidays are a fantastic way to combine local culture with great food. Go light with a half-day experience in Bangkok (www.cookingwithpoo.com) or full-on with a week-long Tuscan residential course (www.tuscookany.com). If you simply prefer to feast your eyes and get some ideas for your next dinner party, add a local food festival or farmers' market to your itinerary.

Art therapy

Fire up your creativity with a foray into the art world. Art Central in Abu Dhabi has a full schedule of summer workshops including Arabic calligraphy, silk painting and jewellery making. De-stress with clay and enjoy the feeling of making something from scratch with a pottery class that covers basic hand and wheel techniques, or try a sculpture session. More than just a fun experience, hands-on self-expression is a great stress reliever, is used as practical therapy to treat depression.

Pottery and sculpture classes, Dh850 for four sessions. www.artcentral.ae

Pack up your paints: Get a different perspective with a painting holiday on a Greek island or deep in the heart of the French countryside (www.golearnto.com). Alternatively, find your muse with an art appreciation course (www.travel-quest.co.uk) from a Florentine art history tour to the baroque splendour of St Petersburg.

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EDITOR'S PICKS