

United Arab Emirates

Cruising Guide

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Navionics

Cruising Guide

Navigating the Oasis: Your Master Guide to

United Arab Emirates Clearance Formalities

A Professional Navigator's Briefing for Private Recreational Yachts *Updated for the 2026 Cruising Season*

Greetings, Captains and fellow navigators. Welcome to the United Arab Emirates. Situated at the strategic crossroads of the Gulf of Oman and the Arabian Gulf (Persian Gulf), the UAE represents a striking dichotomy: it is home to some of the most luxurious, technologically advanced

superyacht marinas on the planet, yet it borders one of the world's most heavily militarized and commercially congested choke points—the Strait of Hormuz.

Cruising to the UAE is not an impromptu adventure. It requires precision, deep pockets, and strict adherence to federal maritime security protocols. The authorities here are highly professional but entirely unbending regarding their laws. From navigating blinding sandstorms to threading your way through massive offshore oil fields,

the UAE demands your absolute navigational vigilance.

Here is your authoritative, step-by-step navigational briefing for successfully clearing into the United Arab Emirates.

1. The Pre-Arrival Ritual: Agents and Intelligence

Unlike the Caribbean or the South Pacific, the UAE is not a "DIY" clearance destination. The bureaucracy is highly digitized but strictly gated.

- **The Mandatory Agent:** You **must** appoint a registered local

yacht agent well before entering UAE territorial waters. The agent will interface with Immigration, Customs, and the Federal Coast Guard to secure your pre-arrival approvals. Attempting to arrive unannounced will result in you being held offshore, fined, or turned away. Consult for a list of reputable marine agents.

- **Security & UKMTO Registration:** If you are transiting the Gulf of Oman and the Strait of Hormuz to reach Dubai or Abu Dhabi, you are

navigating a High-Risk Area (HRA). You must register your transit with the UK Maritime Trade Operations (UKMTO) and maintain a strict communications watch.

- **The Drone Ban:** Be acutely aware that the UAE has extremely strict laws regarding drones (UAVs). Unless you have pre-approved permits from the General Civil Aviation Authority, drones will be confiscated by Customs upon arrival, and unauthorized flying

carries severe criminal penalties.

2. Choosing Your Port of Entry

The UAE consists of seven emirates, but maritime entry is generally concentrated in three strategic hubs.

- **Dubai (Mina Rashid & Dubai Harbour):** The epicenter of UAE yachting. Mina Rashid is a massive commercial port that houses an award-winning superyacht marina. The newer Dubai Harbour boasts the largest marina in the region.

The approach is busy; coordinate strictly with "Dubai Port Control" on VHF Ch 16/68.

- **Abu Dhabi (Yas Marina or Emirates Palace):** The capital emirate offers deep-water approaches and world-class facilities, notably Yas Marina (situated on the Formula 1 track). The approach channels are meticulously buoyed but surrounded by vast, shallow sandbanks.
- **Fujairah:** Located on the East Coast (Gulf of Oman), this is a vital strategic stop. If you do

not wish to transit the Strait of Hormuz, you can clear into the UAE here, berth your vessel, and travel overland to Dubai in under two hours.

3. The Arrival Dance: Step-by-Step Formalities

Upon crossing into the 12-nautical-mile limit, your agent should already have your paperwork in motion.

- **Coast Guard Interception:** It is highly common for the UAE Coast Guard to hail you on VHF Ch 16 or physically approach

your vessel as you near the coast. Be polite, maintain your course and speed unless directed otherwise, and state that you are proceeding to your designated marina under the care of your agent.

- **Hoist the Flags:** Fly your Yellow 'Q' (Quarantine) flag and the UAE courtesy flag (ensure it is clean and not frayed; disrespecting the national flag is a punishable offense).
- **The Customs Inspection (Zero Tolerance):** Once tied

up, Customs and Coast Guard officials will board. They are extremely thorough.

- *Alcohol:* Non-Muslims may carry alcohol for personal consumption onboard, but it must be declared and kept secured in port.
- *Medications:* The UAE has a strict list of banned substances (including over-the-counter medicines containing codeine). Cross-reference your medical kit with the Ministry of Health and

Prevention (MOHAP) guidelines.

- *Weapons:* Firearms and ammunition must be declared immediately. They will be heavily sealed or removed and stored in a shoreside armory until your departure.

4. Visas and Cruising Permits

- **Human Visas:** Citizens of many countries (US, UK, EU, Australia, Canada, New Zealand) receive a 30-day or 90-day visa on arrival. Other nationalities must arrange

e-Visas in advance through their agent.

- **The Cruising Permit (Navigation License):** Similar to the South American *Zarpe*, the UAE requires a Cruising Permit to move between the different Emirates (e.g., sailing from Dubai to Abu Dhabi). Your agent will procure this. The Coast Guard tracks all movements via AIS and radar; never move between emirates without this permit.

5. Weather, Oceanography, and The Shamal

The Gulf is an extreme marine environment.

- **The Heat and Humidity:** From June to September, temperatures regularly exceed 45°C (113°F) with crushing humidity. Air conditioning and robust raw water strainers are critical for survival.
- **The Shamal (The Navigator's Warning):** The primary weather threat is the *Shamal*, a violent northwesterly wind that blows

down the Gulf, predominantly in winter and early summer. It can rapidly build to 40 knots, kicking up steep, short-period waves (due to the shallow nature of the Gulf) and generating massive dust storms that reduce visibility to near zero. Always cross-reference Windy.com and the UAE National Center of Meteorology (NCM).

- **Tides & Shallows:** The Arabian Gulf is essentially a flooded basin. The average depth is only 35 meters, and

the coastline is fraught with shifting sandbanks and dredged channels. Trust your depth sounder, stay strictly within marked channels, and ignore outdated chartplotter data in areas of active land reclamation (like the Palm Jumeirah or The World Islands).

6. Local Rules of the Road

- **Exclusion Zones:** The Gulf is littered with offshore oil rigs, pipelines, and military installations. Keep a minimum clearance of 1.5 to 2 nautical

miles from all oil platforms. Do not enter royal palace exclusion zones (often marked by yellow buoys and heavily patrolled).

- **Cultural Respect:** The UAE is an Islamic country. While marinas like Dubai Harbour are cosmopolitan, you must respect local laws. Do not consume alcohol on your deck where it is visible to the public. Dress modestly when leaving the marina complex.
- **Commercial Traffic:** The approach to the UAE involves

crossing some of the densest commercial shipping lanes in the world. Enforce a strict radar and AIS watch, and never impede the passage of deep-draft supertankers constrained by their draft.

7. The Departure: Weighing Anchor

- **Outward Clearance:** Provide your agent with 48 hours' notice of your intended departure. They will arrange for the final Coast Guard inspection, return of any impounded items

(firearms/drones), and the issuance of your outward clearance documents.

- **Settling Bills:** Ensure all marina accounts are settled, as clearance will not be granted if there are outstanding local debts.
- **Departure Window:** Once clearance is granted, you must depart territorial waters without unnecessary delay or deviation from your filed float plan.

The Navigator's Final Word: The United Arab Emirates offers an

unparalleled standard of luxury and infrastructure for the visiting yacht, but it demands absolute professionalism in return. The environment—both political and meteorological—is unforgiving of careless seamanship. Utilize a highly-rated agent, keep your AIS transmitting, respect the exclusion zones, and secure your vessel thoroughly before a Shamal strikes.

Fair winds and following seas!

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Thanks.

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