

## **Abu Dhabi: Oldest Christian site discovered in UAE opens for public viewing**

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**Abu Dhabi:** A Christian site, that is believed to be oldest in UAE, was opened for public viewing by the government, on Thursday, June 14.

According to Gulf News, the site was discovered in the early nineties and dates back to seventh and eighth century AD. This consists of a church and monastery located on Sir Bani Yas Island on the eastern side of the Island.

Flint tools belonging to the Neolithic period and stone structure that belongs to the bronze age were also found on the same island around the same time when the Christian site was discovered.

Abu Dhabi's Department of Culture and Tourism (DCT-Abu Dhabi) has made lots of developments in the site to make the church ready for the visitors. According to the department, this site is the oldest evidence that is found in the emirates belonging to Christianity.

The site was opened by Shaikh Nahayan Mubarak Al Nahayan, minister of Tolerance, along with Mohammad Khalifa Al Mubarak, chairman of DCT - Abu Dhabi. Several priests and experts from the archaeological department also took part in the opening ceremony.

All the dignitaries were taken around the site, which includes dormitories and kitchen in the northern wing. A burial site and complex are located in the east wing. There is a retaining wall around the whole site.

Shaikh Nahyan said, "Founding father of UAE, late Shaikh Zayed Bin Sultan Al Nahyan took special interest in developing this site because of its significance and historic value of UAE."

"This church and monastery resembles the tolerant attitude of our fore fathers from time immemorial," added Shaikh Nahyan.

Shaikh Nahyan further said, "The site clearly indicates the welcome that was offered to other cultures in UAE. It is apt that this site is being opened this year, which is declared as the Year of Tolerance by the government of UAE. This year also had the visit of his Holiness Pope Francis, head of Catholic church to our country."

The efforts of the government of UAE in preserving the cultures of other religions was lauded by Paul Hinder, Catholic Bishop, who is a resident of Abu Dhabi and looks after the activities of all Catholic churches in Oman and the UAE.

"We did not have any knowledge that a church existed in UAE in ancient times. Definitely people would be interested to know more details of this. Acts of this nature broadens the outlook of people and improves inter-religious relations," said Bishop Paul Hinder.

The department of UAE government says that the church and the monastery is believed to be part of a Christian

network in the Arabian Gulf during the formation of Islamic history. Though this site was discovered in 1992, it took two years for the department to prove that this is indeed a church.

The site contains artefacts which confirm that the people of that time used sea and livestock for their survival. The presence of glass and ceramic says that they were also involved in trading.

A shelter was installed on the site in 2010 due to its importance during which time most of the monastery was buried. The conservation plan was completed between 2015 and 16 by the department. A new shelter, the design and implementation of which began last year by the department to ensure maximum protection to the heritage site from the threats of environment and also to give the visitor's a real time experience.

Sir Bani Yas Island is located 170 km southwest of Abu Dhabi, capital city of UAE. It lies nine km from the mainland tip of the Jebel Dhanna Peninsula near Al Ruwais. It is accessible by a ferry trip that takes 20 minutes from Jebel Dhanna. At present the ferry service leaves Jebel Dhanna at noon, 3 pm, 6pm and 11 pm. There is an extra trip on Fridays at 10.30 am. Another 15-20 minutes of bus ride takes the visitors to the location. Sir Bani Yas is the natural island of UAE which is 17.5 km in length and nine km wide.

In 1971, Shaikh Zayed made Sir Bani Yas Island as wild life reserve. Now this island is home to thousands of Oryx, Gazelle, Deer, Giraffes, Cheetahs and birds and a wide range of flora and fauna. In addition, Sir Bani Yas Island also has horse riding, marine diving and water sports.

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