



Arabian Opulence

Around 23 percent of Al Maha, A Luxury Collection Desert Resort & Spa's guests are repeat visitors, flying in from remote locations. This is a destination worth travelling for.

"Welcome to Al Maha", says Field Guide Darryn Janse Van Vuuren in a broad South African accent as he hoists our bags into the waiting Landcruiser. We have pulled into a remote car park 60 kilometres from central Dubai, where we will abandon our vehicle for the weekend. Darryn will be our guide and companion through the activities we select. He is a font of knowledge on all things Al Maha. "We train the guides for our specific activities, especially for driving in the dunes," explains PR and Marketing Executive Antonia Jenssen. Many of the guides come with prior experience such as Darryn, a qualified ranger, competent and knowledgeable.

Darryn hands us over to Myat Noe Khin at reception, who serves us a refreshing fruit punch and confirms the

details of our booking before loading us into a golf buggy to continue the journey. A couple of young gazelles gaze curiously after us as we trundle down the narrow path to our suite.

Al Maha is nestled in a verdant palm oasis deep within Dubai's dune and desert landscape. The secluded suites are all freestanding, discreetly separate, as they blend gently into the desert. We follow Myat past the Bedouin water jar next to the heavy wooden door and enter the spacious suite. "In our descriptions we call it a Bedouin encampment," explains Antonia, "...but of course on a luxurious level."

The suite is lavishly decorated with authentic handcrafted Arabian furnishings. Plump cushions crowd invitingly on the twin lounges, a low

coffee table separating them. On top waits a tray of Arabic sweets. Bulgari amenities lend a luxury air to the bathroom with its oversized tub and thick, fluffy towels. In the entryway a Nespresso machine offers its colour-coded coffee pods, neighbouring a selection of herbal teas. A decanter of sherry squats on a high shelf. It is the small, thoughtful touches that impress; binoculars placed casually on the writing desk, and an easel with a sketch pad and oil crayons should inspiration call.

All of this finery pales in comparison to the breathtaking view. A deck with sun loungers stretches out to meet a private pool, the clouds reflected in its impossibly blue surface. Beyond the infinity edge, the water meets the sands of the desert, stretching as far as the eye can see. Birds chirrup cheerfully in the shrubbery and in the distance more gazelles graze in pairs.

We tear ourselves away to freshen up for our afternoon wildlife drive. Darryn loads us into the Landcruiser and we



for a jousting match, showing bland disregard for the vehicles in their midst.

Far past the desert scrub the dunes grow higher and the sand softer. Here Darryn's driving skills are put to the test. "Hold on now", he warns us as he puts his foot down to urge the heavy cruiser over the lip of a particularly high sand dune. He carefully manoeuvres his cargo up, down and around the sandy hills until we reach a high vantage point. The wind is ruffling the top of the dunes, pushing grains from one sandy wave to another, silently explaining how the desert is shaped. In these shifting sand areas the vista changes by the minute. We are captivated, realising that never again will this part of the desert look exactly the same as it does today. This experience defines unique.

Coated in a light dusting of sand we bump back over the dunes and are left to our own devices until dinner. The night has cooled significantly by the time we wander along the lantern lit path to Al Diwaan restaurant. We

opt to dine indoors and are treated to a sumptuous menu selection, ranging from fusion fine dining to Arabic specialities. Herb coated lamb chops compete for attention with wagyu beef saltimbocca, freshly sliced sashimi, and sautéed monkfish. It is not long before we are seated, left with just enough room to share a small plate of chocolatey goodness in the form of a Royal Chocolate Hazelnut.

In the morning, after a generous breakfast, Darryn educates us on the finer points of archery. He patiently demonstrates the stance, the grip, and how to draw the arrow, before casually planting an arrow close to the centre of the target, which seems an impossibly long way away. We soon discover it is harder than it looks. Darryn looks only marginally horrified as our arrows fly wide, planting into the sand dune behind the target.

By the end of our one hour session we have tested Darryn's patience and found it unwavering. Our arrows have

set off across the sand into the Dubai Desert Conservation Reserve. This is the United Arab Emirates' first National Park, a protected haven for many of the animals and birds of Arabia. Darryn explains the resort's contribution to large scale habitat rehabilitation programmes, including the propagation of over 6,000 indigenous trees, shrubs and grasses.

We drive past more gazelles frolicking in the rippled sands before we see our first Arabian Oryx. These are the animals which give the resort its name and Al Maha has been instrumental in the re-introduction of the free-roaming herds here. With their long lance-like horns the Oryx look like knights ready





trimmed the palm trees on the periphery, nailed the sand dune, and skimmed along at ground level. We finally redeem our reputations by landing a few on the board.

We swing by the falconry centre on the way back. Darryn introduces us to his falcon, bringing her out for us to admire. She is a beauty, wearing a little red leather cap to keep her calm. She sits lightly on Darryn's arm, head cocked, listening to his descriptive discussion.

In the afternoon we make time for the Timeless Spa to work off some of our excesses in the gym and top up our tans by the large pool. As we float at the water's edge an Oryx ambles past, close enough for us to touch. It is a humbling experience to be near these magnificent animals in a natural setting. Determined to use all of the facilities, we take another dip in our own pool after a room service lunch, set up beautifully in our suite.

The sundowner activity to follow is undoubtedly the highlight of the weekend. We amble down the sandbank behind our suite and meet



Shahzab and Tahir, the resort's camel handlers. "In my country, in Pakistan, if I saw a camel I would run away", laughs Shahzab, "...but now I work with the camels every day." Despite not being a born handler, he shows a clear affection for the spindly-legged beasts of burden. Guests slowly file into the arena and we climb onto our designated steeds which pitch sharply forward, then awkwardly back as they push to their feet, groaning under the weight of their well-fed loads.

We choose the naughty camel, Zebyan, and are grateful for the ropes linking the camel train, as he immediately tries to overtake. As a group we trek into the desert, the camels maintaining a steady pace mindless of the undulating terrain. As the sun sinks, we reach our vantage point, where glasses of sparkling wine and date juice await. We disperse across the dunes to watch the sun slowly dip below the horizon, casting a golden glow over the sand.

At dinner, Executive Chef David Miras allows us to order from the new menu, updated weekly. The sea bass on a chorizo risotto is a winner; staving off stiff competition in the form of

Argentinean beef with cinnamon foam. The palate-cleansing raspberry and pineapple sorbet is so good that I ask for seconds.

Although the night is cool, we can not resist the lure of a starlit swim. We turn off the lights, leaving only the pool lights to illuminate the night, watery reflections shimmering in the dark. The sky is dotted with a million stars that capture our hearts as we lament our departure the next day.

We are up early for our final activity, the GhafTree walk. Darryn plies us with coffee and drives us across the desert to a cluster of hardy trees. For centuries the Ghaf has been an essential source of food, fuel, shelter and medicine, this small grove sustained by an underground water reservoir. Darryn points out fox tracks, noting the point at which the animal started to run. Lizards, gerbils, gazelles and birds have all left their marks in the sand.

When it comes time to check out, we reluctantly call the golf cart to collect us from our temporary home. We are sad to be leaving. Every aspect of our stay has been perfect, from the impeccable service at the restaurant to the far-stretching sandy vistas. This is a different world, a better world. It is a world of unsurpassed luxury worth every penny.



For more information see:
www.al-maha.com