

# DESERT DREAMS

ESCAPE THE HUSTLE AND BUSTLE OF DUBAI'S CITIES AND HEAD INSTEAD FOR THE SERENE SANDS THE EMIRATE ALSO HAS TO OFFER

WORDS DEBOROAH CICUREL



Dubai may be best known for its superlatives. It's home to the tallest building in the world, the biggest mall in the world, the tallest hotel in the world... and the list goes on. In the short time it's been focusing on tourism, the emirate, one of seven in the United Arab Emirates, has smashed countless world records and keeps getting more ambitious, more luxurious and more exciting. It's a place that never stops, with its great weather, plethora of tourist-friendly activities and lack of income tax drawing people from all over the world to visit and live.

But sitting on a terrace in the middle of the desert, accompanied only by a dainty gazelle slurping water from my private pool, I couldn't help thinking of a new record: the most relaxing place in the world.

I was spending a couple of days at Al Maha Resort, an incredibly luxurious escape a 45-minute drive from the centre of Dubai, where all the hustle and bustle of the city is exchanged for endless space, world-class service and palatial accommodation in the form of luxe Bedouin tents.

These 'tents' are very far from camping, or even glamping: they're enormous, sumptuously-designed and very private. I had an elegant living area, a heavenly bed and a bath I could go swimming in. Best of all, I had my own secluded terrace with a pool and a view across the desert. And this was the entry level room: I could barely imagine the lavish Presidential Suite, which boasts three bedrooms, a private garden and separate staff quarters.

Located in the Dubai Desert Conservation Reserve, the UAE's first national park, the hotel benefits from the protected status of the precious desert. As Dubai continues to expand rapidly, this diminishing environment and its wildlife has been formally protected to avoid it, like so much of Dubai, being transformed into ambitious skyscrapers, mega hotels or tourist hotspots.

Thanks to this protection, Al Maha is guaranteed to be one of the emirate's quietest, most tranquil spots. One morning, I booked a spa treatment, and was driven past undulating sand dunes and grazing oryxes to enjoy a peaceful massage under a canopy. The hotel can organise everything from wildlife safaris, where you can learn more about the desert's formation



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and species, to dune driving, where you can get your adrenaline pumping in a 4x4. Perhaps most special of all was dune dining, a meal in the desert under the stars, with sharing dishes placed alongside a Persian carpet and cushions to sit on so you can dine in traditional Emirati style. You can opt for waiters to serve you, or be left alone to enjoy your meal in the most romantic of settings.

Before long, it was time to wave the silent desert goodbye and head into the vibrant desert city: the land of skyscrapers, bright lights and glittering attractions. This time, I stayed at Jumeirah Zabeel Saray, on the west crescent of Dubai's man-made, tree-shaped archipelago, Palm Jumeirah. Inspired by the lavish palaces of the Ottoman era, the decor is incredibly luxurious, with thick gold columns, gargantuan chandeliers and intricate murals waiting to impress before you've even checked into your room.

As Jumeirah Zabeel Saray is a popular resort with families, don't expect the same feelings of calm that you'll experience at Al Maha, but that's not to say there isn't any quiet time here. Among the many restaurants, pool areas and

crowds of chatting families, it's also home to one of the biggest spas in the Middle East, the Talise Ottoman Spa. It's easy to spend six hours in the sprawling sanctuary without knowing the time's gone by, once you've enjoyed a treatment in one of the 42 treatment rooms, enjoyed a burst of cold air in the snow room, marvelled at the decor of the Turkish Hammam and luxuriated in the many steam rooms, saunas and thalassotherapy pools.

If you can bear to drag yourself away from the spa, there's much to enjoy in the buzzing city itself – but make your first stop the sky. To understand Dubai's rapid growth from a unique perspective, book yourself aboard a scenic seaplane tour with Seawings ([seawings.ae](http://seawings.ae)). You'll take off and land on the water, and in between, be able to appreciate Dubai's architectural marvels and contrasts from the air, with world-famous skyscrapers and untouched wilderness standing side by side.

When you see the metropolis beside the desert, and consider how much it's been transformed, and how quickly, it's all rather intoxicating. Whether you adore the buzz of the city and its countless attractions, or are seduced by the silence of the desert, you'll want to come back. The sheer possibility of the place is utterly enthralling: who knows which record-breaking buildings could be here next time? ■

*It's easy to spend six hours in the sprawling sanctuary without knowing the time's gone by*



## THINGS TO DO IN DUBAI:

**For a meal:** Head to Pierchic ([pierchic.com](http://pierchic.com)) for a romantic dinner. Set at the end of a pier, the Mediterranean seafood overwater restaurant not only has beautifully-presented dishes and a creative cocktail menu, but also a wonderful setting, with twinkling lights and panoramic views across the Arabian Gulf. You'll be mesmerised by the changing colours of the Burj Al Arab, which claims to be one of the world's only seven star hotels.

**For entertainment:** Buy tickets to La Perle ([laperle.com](http://laperle.com)), a water-based theatrical show, with 65 artists performing death-defying acrobatics, aquatic feats and aerial stunts to the constant gasps of the audience.

**For social media shots:** To keep your grid looking great, head to Dubai's new beachfront area, La Mer ([lamerdubai.ae](http://lamerdubai.ae)). As well as cute restaurants and quirky boutiques, the pristine beach, playful signs and colourful cabanas make perfect Instagram fodder.

**For shopping:** If you want to take home a lasting souvenir, head to Dubai's Gold Souk ([visitdubai.com](http://visitdubai.com)) to haggle for jewels and see the world's heaviest gold ring, the Najmat Taiba.

**For questions:** Experience an Emirati breakfast or lunch at the Sheikh Mohammed Centre for Cultural Understanding ([cultures.ae](http://cultures.ae)), where you can eat traditional Emirati food, meet other visitors to Dubai and ask your friendly host questions about Emirati culture, customs and religion.

*Stays at Al Maha, a Luxury Collection Desert Resort & Spa start from £540 excluding taxes and service charge, per room per night, based on two sharing a room on a full-board basis. To book, visit [al-maha.com](http://al-maha.com) or call 97148329900. Stays at Jumeirah Zabeel Saray start from approximately £240 per room per night, based on two sharing on a bed and breakfast basis. To book, visit [jumeirah.com](http://jumeirah.com). To find out more about visiting Dubai, visit [visitdubai.com](http://visitdubai.com)*