



Weekend Wonders

This Eid Al Adha, there's no need to travel far for a memorable break. Whether you're a gourmand or a desert adventurer at heart, a staycation is the perfect way to escape reality—if only for a weekend...

By Hannah Bass and Yi-Hwa Hanna

THE RELAXING REFUGE

By the time we'd escaped Dubai's Thursday night rush hour at the end of a long week, my friend and I were in desperate need of relaxation. We drove an hour through the desert before entering Ras Al Khaimah. Unsure which road to take, I was about to check the map until I looked out towards the coast and my question was answered: Lit up like London's Harrods, the palatial Waldorf Astoria Ras Al Khaimah blazed against the black night sky above the sea.

Pulling up to the grand entrance, with its Syrian-made marble door and gargantuan Lebanese lanterns, we knew we were in for an opulent treat. The interior is as imposing as the original Waldorf Astoria in New York but, in true UAE style, takes luxury to the next level with glints of gold and cascading fountains. After the concierge showed us to our room, we tried—and failed—to resist rolling on the floor, giggling with glee at just how gorgeous it was. A gilded

bathroom bigger than my own bedroom, a walk-in closet that would have Carrie Bradshaw green with envy and, best of all, a panoramic view of the Persian Gulf that left us stunned.

We headed to dinner at contemporary Japanese restaurant UMI, one of the Waldorf Astoria RAK's ten bars and eateries. After a mouthwatering array of starters, our helpful waiter, Gary, brought us a selection of sushi and sashimi. Despite having tried sushi in at least four continents, this had to be some of the best I've ever tasted. To finish, juicy beef teppanyaki sizzled on the grill before our eyes, served with salad and a rich miso soup.

We woke on Friday morning to sunlight glistening on the sea and a view of the hotel's lush gardens and expansive pools. Breakfast was served at Qasr Al Baha, with more foods on offer than your average Dubai brunch. As we sipped fresh juices and looked out onto the gardens, my friend sighed and remarked that she hadn't felt so relaxed in months.



After breakfast we hit the pool, where quite literally our every whim was catered for—someone even rushed over to spritz our faces whenever we looked a little overheated. This is all part of the hotel's charm—if true luxury is, as I firmly believe, being able to relax in silence while a relative stranger takes care of your needs, then the Waldorf has it in spades; and no more so than in the cool hush of the underground spa. We opted for the Changing Tides massage—brisk body brushing, a scrub-down with

steaming towels followed by a full-body massage with an intensity I wouldn't have thought my petite therapist, Baby, capable of. I went into the gold-tiled spa to enjoy the sauna and steam room with my gym-battered muscles soothed.

We were only at the hotel for 24 hours but it felt as if we'd been away for a week. We drove back to Dubai fully rested and refreshed and ready to tell our friends all about this peaceful idyll just an hour away. After all, we all deserve to be utterly pampered once in a while!

THE ACTION-PAKED ESCAPE

After a particularly gruelling week, I was almost ready to cancel our getaway to Al Maha Desert Resort. I had heard only the highest praise for the idyllic hideaway, but the immense workload waiting for me upon my return had me stressed out. Yet adventure beckoned and to my delight, I discovered that not only was it a straight shot out of Dubai's main roads, it actually only took 40 minutes to get there. And boy was I glad we went—from the moment we parked at the gateside lot, I could already feel the mental burden lifting. After a warm welcome from our field guide—each guest is assigned their own guide to look after the activities throughout your stay—we set off in his 4x4 into the desert.

Sprawled across 225 square kilometres of land, Al Maha is tucked away within the Dubai Desert Conservation Reserve. Our guide, Laurence, was like a walking encyclopaedia, with impressive knowledge of not just the wildlife but of all of the active pursuits available there. The resort offers an exciting range of activities, from camel treks, nature walks and wildlife drives to dune-bashing, horse riding, archery and falconry. If you're the type who gets antsy simply lying by a pool, this is an ideal destination: two activities are included with each day of your stay, and you can opt for more for an extra Dhs200 each. Wildlife roam freely around the grounds, and seeing a gazelle or Arabian Oryx—an endangered species that's said to have inspired the mythical unicorn—around your private villa is a very likely possibility.

As we had arrived rather late in the afternoon, we decided to take it easy on our first day and just enjoy our villa. The interior was the ideal blend of tradition and modernity, boasting a shiny new Nespresso machine and rainfall shower juxtaposed against handcrafted Arabian furnishings. It took all of my willpower to resist jumping on

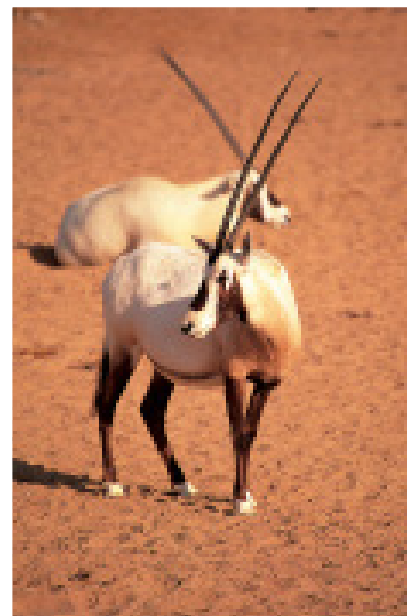
to the lavish bed—which had quite possibly the comfiest pillows I've ever tried—with pure glee. Outside, two private sunloungers and a large infinity pool looked out onto the dunes, where we could see a herd of oryx grazing in the distance.

The resort only has one restaurant, Al Diwaan, but happily, it's a good one. While they could easily get away with subpar fare (after all, it's not like you're spoilt for choice in the desert), instead the cuisine is fresh, organic, and delicious. Our menu proudly proclaimed their use of sustainable fish, and after a silky lobster ravioli and delicate beef tartare to start, my friend and I savoured the hearty lamb shank, which just fell off the bone. Dessert was a creamy mousse, which we enjoyed on the outdoor terrace, watching the animals drink from the nearby watering hole.

The next morning, we woke early for a 6 a.m. horse ride. It was still dark outside, but while the early start was tough, by the time we were saddled up with

our chaps on, we had forgotten about everything but the view. The sight of the sun's warm and fiery glow licking the dunes, a hot air balloon in the distance, was breathtaking as our horses steered us confidently across the slippery sands. By the time we were back, we were bright eyed and bushy-tailed, ready for our next activity: a thrill-inducing desert drive that would make the standard dune bashing experiences now so commonplace in the region look like child's play. Luckily, Laurence was such an expert at navigating his way across the terrain that I just enjoyed the drive as an exhilarating ride. My friend wasn't so lucky, and by the time we got back she was a little worse for the wear. After refuelling with some breakfast, stomachs settled and courage restored, it was time for our archery lesson. The one-on-one experience was hands-down my favourite of the trip, and within a mere 15 minutes I was channelling my inner Robin Hood and proudly hitting the

target with confidence. By the time we checked out—sadly just about 24 hours later—I felt like I had been there for days. Even without a trip to the spa, I felt completely restored, with renewed vigour for tackling the responsibilities waiting for me back in the city. The action-packed escape to this luxurious eco-conscious haven was just what the doctor ordered, and one I'd happily repeat anytime I need a mind-and-body break.





THE FOODIE GETAWAY

Jumeirah at Etihad Towers is a food lover's heaven. With more multi-award-winning restaurants to its name than your average small city—including Li Beirut, BiCE and Scott's—you could happily wile away a long weekend here just rolling from your luxurious bed down to the private beach before spending long evenings sampling some of the finest food in Abu Dhabi, if not the Middle East. But dinner at Quest—our restaurant of choice for our 24-hour stay—would alone be worth a trip to the capital.

If your mother ever told you not to play with your food, do not take your mother to eat at Quest. The brainchild of visionary award-winning chef Benjamin Whatt, the tasting menu at the contemporary pan-Asian restaurant had us laughing with surprise at each of its eight courses.

At Quest, nothing is as it seems—think of Whatt as the Heston Blumenthal of the UAE. Starting with an *amuse-bouche* that arrived in the form of two lollipops that turned out to be palate-cleansing marinated melon, we moved onto a starter of potato chip “leaves” that we were invited to break off from a

bonsai tree. The leaves were accompanied by a selection of delights that take nibbles to the next level, including a bowl of umami popcorn. Umami, the fifth taste sense named and celebrated by the Japanese (think soy sauce), was the order of the day at Quest—each dish balanced sweet and sour flavours with that lush, unmistakable savoury richness.

Our second course arrived in an enormous bento box containing even more tricks of the eye and tongue, the highlight being the “smoking salmon”—unctuous fish wrapped in a biting tart dried vine leaf and topped with

fluorescent salmon roe to look like a lit cigar. Everything had a sense of playfulness, of East meets West, from the mini cheeseburger deconstructed and reimagined as a maki roll to the “oyster”—a seashell filled with sesame sauce and topped by a “pearl” of crème fraîche frozen in liquid nitrogen.

We were encouraged to play with everything served—one memorable course was buttery foie gras served as a tiny book with plum reduction “ink” and an olive grissini “quill” with which to inscribe our dish before devouring it. But novelty did not come at the expense of quality—the beef steak that crowned our savoury courses had been cooked for three days until it practically melted the moment it hit the mouth.

Everything at Quest inspires a sense of wonder, right down—or up—to the setting. A lofty 63 floors atop the Jumeirah at Etihad Towers hotel, we had an astounding view over Abu Dhabi's glittering cornice. As we finished dessert—including a lit candle made of cake and black forest gâteau “tea” brewed by pouring on cherry consommé—we agreed it was a meal we'll never forget. ■