

TAKE ME AWAY

SHIFTING

SANDS

Leave behind the bright city lights to discover the
natural wonders of the Arabian Peninsula.

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ell someone you're visiting the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and a specific vision will likely be conjured up. Futuristic skyscrapers, shimmering in the desert haze. Lavish resorts and beach club parties. Designer shops. Theme parks and fast cars. These, of course, can be the ingredients for a great vacation. But beyond the bright lights of the cities lies a landscape rich with culture and the natural wonders of wild Arabia.

An easy 45-minute drive from Dubai (or two hours from Abu Dhabi), the Dubai Desert Conservation Reserve is the first national park of the UAE, set up to protect the delicate desert ecosystem and the flora and fauna within it. Here, sand dunes stretch in waves, iridescent in tones of gold and peach.

Al Maha Desert Resort is hidden deep within the reserve among palm groves, with each of the 42 tented suites decorated with exquisite handcrafted furnishings and local artefacts and boasting private pools overlooking the desert beyond. The resort's mission is to share the heritage and culture of the desert, and activities include falconry, nature walks and wildlife drives.

It's during one of the late afternoon drives, twisting in a four-wheel drive along the undulating

golden dunes, that a herd of Arabian oryx appears ahead. This rare antelope - the national animal - has extraordinarily long horns and white hair that appears luminous against the sand. One of Al Maha's on-site conservationists explains that it was previously hunted to the brink of extinction. After captive breeding programs in the US and UK, it was reintroduced to the desert in the 1990s, and now about 600 oryx roam within the reserve.

A sunset camel trek at Al Maha is a must to see the sun glow like a giant red orb, lighting the sky in streaks of pink and purple. At the trek's conclusion guests watch with a glass of prosecco from a pop-up bar as it dips below the horizon. Owls, eagles and colourful parakeets can be spotted overhead, and at night the desert comes alive with foxes, hares, Ethiopian hedgehogs, lizards, geckos, sand fish and vipers.

Back at the resort, native gazelles wander freely between tents, happily chomping on vegetation and accompanying guests to dinner. In fact, wherever you walk, you're sure to be joined by the gentle big-eared, doe-eyed creatures.

From the reserve, it's a two-hour drive on one of the Arabian Gulf's most spectacular routes to



the Musandam Peninsula, an isolated enclave of Oman encircled by the UAE. The road travels first through terracotta desert, dotted with herds of camels and patches of scrubland, the landscape gradually morphing into the harsh sandy crags of the Hajar Mountains.

Musandam is one of the least visited but most beautiful areas of Oman. Sitting on the Strait of Hormuz, a bustling sea trade route, the region is often dubbed the 'Norway of the Middle East' due to its staggering sawtooth cliffs that plunge thousands of metres into turquoise fjords.

The far-flung Six Senses Zighy Bay sits sandwiched between mountains and Musandam's balmy seas on a 1.6km stretch of creamy shoreline. With villas designed to resemble indigenous Omani houses, built using local materials, it feels a million miles from Dubai.

Guests have two options to reach the beach in front of the hotel. You can zig zag in a four-wheel drive down the mountain - or more adventurous types can jump off it. Yes, arrival by paraglide is an option, weather permitting. The exhilarating descent takes about 15 minutes.

From the resort it's possible to charter a traditional wooden dhow boat and cruise the

Left from right Dhows ply the fjords of the 'Norway of the Middle East'; guests can explore villages near Zighy Bay; the private pools at Al Maha look out over the desert.

Previous page The Dubai Desert Conservation Reserve protects precious creatures such as the Arabian oryx.

region's dramatic fjords. The dhow stops at remote fishing villages mainly populated by Shihuh tribes, who make their living farming goats and fishing. Local villagers putter past on dhows to tend to their fishing nets and lobster pots, while goats clamber precariously up the craggy rocks, surveying life on the water below.

As the boat turns between lunar cliffs into the fjords, the rough seas become calm. The stillness is broken only by the splash of sea birds plunging headlong towards the shoals of parrot fish, butterfly fish and mackerel sheltering in the coral. It's a prime spot for snorkelling and diving coral undamaged by heavy industry, and for spotting playful bottlenose dolphins, sea turtles, eagle rays and reef sharks.

Back on dry land, a fish eagle is perched on a ledge high over Zighy Bay. It's yet another example of the natural beauty that still pervades this wild part of the Arabian Peninsula.


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