

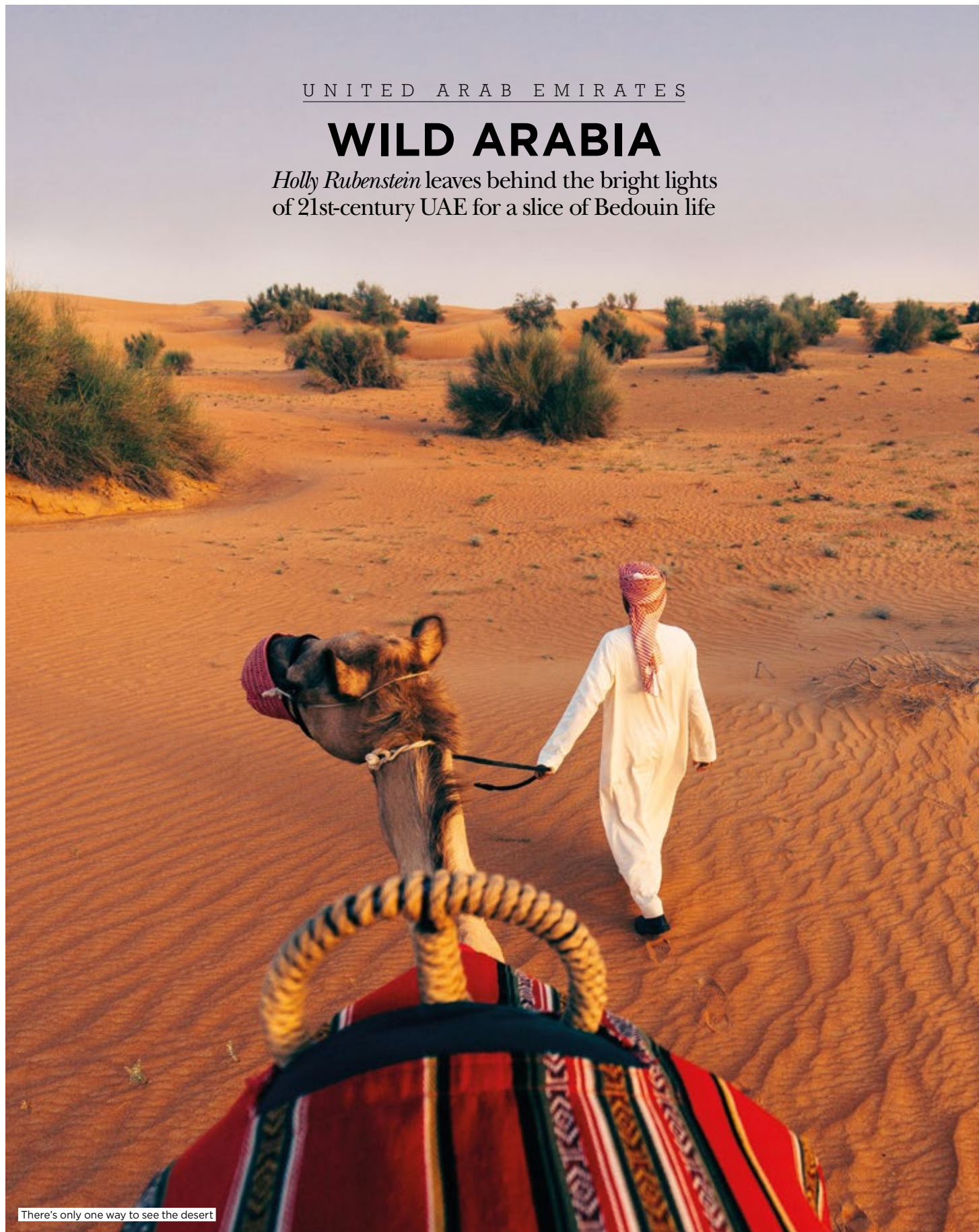
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FOOD & TRAVEL

UNITED ARAB EMIRATES

WILD ARABIA

Holly Rubenstein leaves behind the bright lights of 21st-century UAE for a slice of Bedouin life



There's only one way to see the desert

PHOTO: ©BEAUTIFUL DESTINATIONS



Bedouin pool suites at Al Maha provide a personal oasis in the desert

Tell a friend you're going on holiday to the UAE and a specific vision will inevitably be conjured in their mind: towering futuristic skyscrapers, shimmering in the haze of the desert smog; lavish resorts with fountains, pools and water slides; decadent Friday brunches and beach club parties; sprawling malls heaving with designer shops; theme parks, fast cars and guaranteed sunshine.

These, of course, can be the ingredients for a perfect holiday. But not everything is shiny and new here. Leaving the bright lights of the city behind, you discover a landscape rich with culture. If you head to the great outdoors, the natural wonders of wild Arabia are nearer than you'd think.

Just 45 minutes from the city, the Dubai Desert Conservation Reserve is the first national park of the UAE, set up to protect the delicate desert ecosystem and the fragile flora and fauna within it. Here, endless miles of sand dunes stretch in majestic waves, iridescent in dual tones of gold

and peach due to their unusual mineral makeup (iron and silica, to be exact). Hidden deep within it is Al Maha, a Luxury Collection Desert Resort & Spa. The only property here, it nestles among lush palm groves and feels a world away from the city. Forty-two tented suites, resembling an ancient Bedouin encampment, are lavishly decorated with exquisite handcrafted Arabian furnishings and Bedouin artefacts. All have their own private pools and verandas that survey the desert beyond.

The resort's mission is to bring the heritage and culture of the desert to a wider

audience, and we're given the chance to experience archery, falconry, guided nature walks, desert safaris and wildlife drives (two outings each are included in the two-person room rate). It's during one of the late afternoon 4x4 wildlife drives, as we twist and turn along the undulations of the dunes, that a herd of Arabian oryx congregates ahead.

What a privilege to see this rare breed of antelope – the national animal of the UAE – with its extraordinarily long horns and white fur that's luminous against the sand. Our conservationist guide explains they were hunted to the brink of extinction from the 1940s to 1960s. But after being bred in captivity in the USA they were reintroduced to the desert in the late 1990s and now about 600 oryx roam freely in the reserve. It's a sight to behold.

Owls, eagles and osprey fly above us, alongside colourful parakeets and doves, and at night the desert comes alive with wild foxes, hares, Ethiopian hedgehogs, lizards, geckos, sandfish and vipers. Back at the resort, native gazelles roam freely between the tents, and we watch them happily chomping on the vegetation by our pool as we laze in the sun. In fact, wherever you walk you're sure to be joined by these gentle, big-eared, doe-eyed creatures.

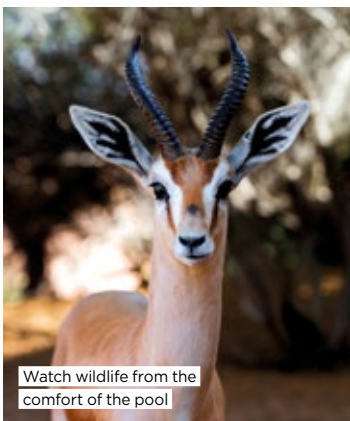
From here, we drive one of the Arabian Gulf's most spectacular routes, to the Musandam Peninsula – an enclave of Oman within the UAE. The peninsula occupies a spot on the Strait of Hormuz, a curve of water separating the UAE and Iran. It's one of the least visited but most beautiful areas of Oman. (Be aware, though, that it's more appropriate as an add-on to a trip to the UAE, rather than to Muscat).

The region is often dubbed the 'Norway of the Middle East' due to its staggering sawtooth cliffs that plunge 2,000

BOOK IT

Al Maha Bedouin suites from £1,427, per night, plus tax. al-maha.com

Six Senses Zighy Bay pool villa from £667 per night. sixsenses.com



Watch wildlife from the comfort of the pool



FROM TOP: Al Maha recreates a Bedouin encampment; paragliding is the best way into Six Senses Zighy Bay, which, with its cultural grounding and understated design, feels miles from flashy Dubai

THE REGION IS OFTEN DUBBED THE 'NORWAY OF THE MIDDLE EAST' DUE TO ITS STAGGERING SAWTOOTH CLIFFS THAT PLUNGE 2,000 METRES INTO AZURE FJORDS



metres into azure fjords. Of course, unlike Norway, the fjords here are balmy, only ever dropping to about 23 degrees. The landscape is rather more arid too, with majestic grey mountains so inhospitable that some villages are only accessible by sea and the best way to explore is from the water on a traditional wooden dhow boat.

Our journey to Musandam begins with miles of desolate terracotta-hued desert and gradually morphs into the harsh sandy crags of the El-Hajar mountains. As we ascend a hair-raising 300 metres over a rocky peak, a view of Six Senses Zighy Bay unfolds below. It's the only

luxury hotel in the area, sitting on a two-mile stretch of creamy shoreline, lapped by a vivid turquoise sea. With villas designed to resemble indigenous Omani houses, built largely from local materials, it feels a million miles from the flashier offerings of Dubai and Abu Dhabi.

Guests have two options for reaching the stretch of sand in front of the hotel below: while the sedate can zigzag down the mountain in a 4x4, the adventurous simply jump. That's right – arrival by paraglider is the preferred mode of transport here, weather permitting. The exhilarating flight down is a bucket list experience, swooping on the air thermals for the ultimate bird's eye panorama.

At the resort we charter a dhow and begin our cruise of the region's dramatic fjords, stopping at remote fishing villages that are so well camouflaged they're almost indistinguishable from the water. Most villagers are out on their own dhows, occasionally pattering past to attend to lobster pots and fishing nets. Our guide explains that the children on speedboats zipping past are actually on their way to school – the mountains where they

live are too inhospitable to build roads, so this is the only way to reach the nearby city of Dibba and receive an education.

The route along the jagged coastline is at times rather bleak, almost martian in nature. But turning into the fjords I'm most struck by the region's natural beauty. Sheltered by the cliffs, the waters become still and shimmer a rich aquamarine. The silence is only broken by the splash of seabirds plunging head first towards the shoals of mackerel. It's prime territory for snorkelling, with the chance to see bottlenose dolphins, sea turtles, eagle rays and reef sharks.

Back on dry land, a fish eagle is perched on one of the crumbling honey-hued cliffs that frame the resort; he presides majestically over the guests in his dominion. The eagle was here long before man, and his presence is a clue to the wealth of natural history that still pervades the area – you just need to know where to find it. ■