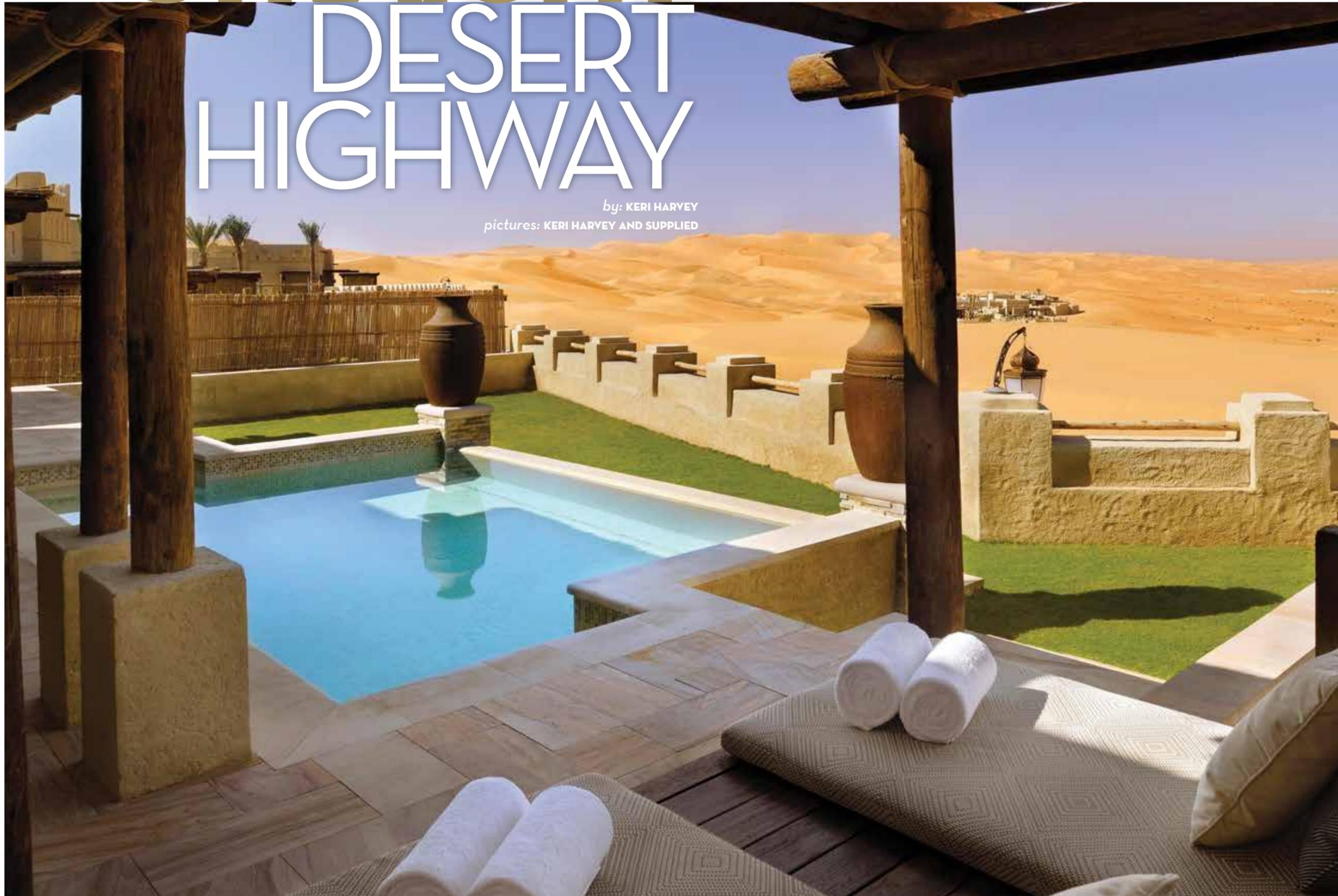


ON A STRAIGHT DESERT HIGHWAY

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THE ARABIAN DESERT IN THE UAE IS A TWO MILLION SQUARE KILOMETRE SEA OF SAND, STUDDED BY THE GLITTERING CITIES OF DUBAI AND ABU DHABI. BETWEEN THEM APPEARS TO BE LITTLE ELSE THAN SHIFTING SAND, UNTIL YOU TURN OFF THE HIGHWAY.



Dubai is where the sand is red, claim traditional nomadic Bedouins. They traversed the vast Arabian Desert

navigating by the sun and stars – and the colour of the sand. Today, we’re using a GPS, though the sand in Dubai is still red. In this city of ‘est’ we’ve been up the world’s highest building, ridden the longest metro, shopped in the biggest mall and now we’re heading across the emirate of Dubai to Abu Dhabi on an immaculate highway crossing an ocean of sand. It is here in the deep desert that you’ll find the soul of Arabia, rare Bedouin art, falcons, salukis and rare wildlife. It’s an enticing offering that can also be enjoyed in luxury and splendour.

A 40-minute drive from Dubai city and you’re in the 225km² Dubai Desert Conservation Reserve - the first conservation area to be proclaimed in the United Arab Emirates. It was set aside specifically to conserve the rare Arabian oryx – ‘al maha’ in Arabic - which came dangerously close to extinction. As we drive into the reserve, a white line atop a sand dune in the distance is actually a herd of Arabian oryx, which is an enchanting welcome to the desert.

There's only one eco tourism lodge in the vast reserve – called Al Maha – which affords visitors the chance to see the endangered Arabian oryx, sand gazelle and other unique desert wildlife, while enjoying luxury accommodation that also showcases the Bedouin traditions of the area. Al Maha houses the biggest collection of Bedouin art and antiquities on the Arabian Peninsula. Over 2 000 historic and rare pieces of art, weaponry and other artefacts adorn the main lodge area, as well as the opulent Bedouin-inspired suites with tented ceilings. Each suite also has its own private plunge pool overlooking the desertscape, all the way to the blue hued Hajar mountains in the distance.

To the trained eye, the desert is full of life. While the fine-stoned gravel plains strewn with fossilised coral in parts of this area offer proof that this desert once lay beneath the ocean, now it's a place for those well adapted to living in very hot conditions. The dhab lizard is one such creature and doesn't drink a drop of water in its entire life, and is only seen when temperatures top 37°C.

Proclaimed in the late 1990s and aggressively rehabilitated, the Dubai Desert Conservation Reserve is home to 38 mammal and reptile species native to the Arabian Peninsula. These include: Arabian hare, sand fox, Arabian red fox, Gordon's wild cat, Arabian mountain gazelle and sand gazelle. It's also home to the national tree of the UAE: the ghaf tree,



which has roots tapping ground water at 30m.

A big reason guests visit Al Maha is for the ice white Arabian oryx and the decadence of the lodge with the same name. Similar to a small, white gemsbok, this oryx was on the brink of extinction in the late seventies; now there are about 350 living happily on the reserve. A slow drive through the dunes, guided by ranger Katherine Bacher, feels other worldly. Endless sand in all directions, yet wildlife lives here. It's not long before we see Arabian gazelle browsing on firebushes and then iconic Arabian oryx standing in the crest of a dune.

Back at Al Maha, built to resemble an opulent Bedouin encampment, guest activities also reflect the Bedouin traditions. Falconry displays and camel treks are offered, along with archery, horse-riding and desert excursions on foot or by 4x4 – all led by highly trained eco guides. Relaxing in-suite and watching rare wildlife walk past is just as appealing when the sun is high and hot.

Next morning we're up early to drive a little further down the ribboning desert highway. Our destination is the fantastical Qasr al Sarab Desert Resort by Anantara, in the Empty Quarter of Abu Dhabi Emirate. En route we're stopping in at the Emirates National Auto Museum, affectionately known as 'the Rainbow Sheikh's car museum'. It's the private collection of Sheikh Hamdan. In all, there are 223 vehicles inside and 10 outside, along with a jumbo jet parked in deep sand behind the museum, plus a giant Jeep where the steering wheel is literally man sized, and a Mercedes on monster-truck wheels at the entrance. It's a theme park for boys and men.

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Back on the highway, where the speed limit of 120km/hour feels like crawling on the wide desert highway, we're headed to the Liwa Oases in the vast Empty Quarter. We turn off the highway about 200km from Abu Dhabi and head directly into the dunes which roll out voluptuously on either side of the road. This is a road trip par excellence for lovers of endless space. The vastness and surreal beauty have us wide eyed as we drive and there's no difficulty in believing that this is the largest uninterrupted sand sea on earth.

Through the entrance gate, Qasr Al Sarab Desert Resort by Anantara rises from the sand to resemble a majestic Kasbah city. It stands impressively, even in the vastness of the landscape. What lies within its wall is palatial luxury on a grand scale. Suites are magnificent, private and with endless desert views. Chauffeured golf carts transport you wherever you need to go in silence, be it to the spa or dinner in various enchanting locations - Bedouin tented restaurant surrounded by desert, or a decadent dinner around the pool. By day there are traditional desert-related activities to enjoy, or do nothing at all and laze alongside the pool. The Royal Pavilion



happening since 1971 and trees and grass are still irrigated with desalinated water. There are Arabian oryx, mountain gazelle and sand gazelle here, living alongside black buck from India, reticulated giraffe from Kenya and Barbary sheep from Morocco, not forgetting cheetah too. It's an unusual conservation project to create a 'united nations' of wildlife on a desert island, but it does offer a unique opportunity for local Emirati people to see African wildlife. Possibly more unexpected is a Christian monastery site on the island dated to 600AD, which

was only discovered in 2001. It's open to the public, to demonstrate respect and tolerance for other world religions.

A return boat transfer and a long drive through sand and past oil fields gets us into Abu Dhabi city by evening. It has been an auspicious road trip with unusual attractions and through an ever-changing landscape of undulating sand. The Arabian Desert is an open air theatre of light. And seeing its changing colours was enough reason to do the trip. Rare Bedouin artefacts, seeing salukis and falcons in action, and being privy to the Rainbow Sheikh's incredible car collection, not forgetting viewing endangered and exotic wildlife on desert islands in the Arabian Sea all makes for a bucket list road trip, although we didn't know this when we started. 🕌



collection of private villas each has their own pool and epitomise bespoke luxury.

As the late afternoon light dances across the dunes and colours them in honey hues, we head deeper into the desert to watch falcons and salukis in action. Falcons are the traditional hunting partners for the Bedouin and their speed and agility are breathtaking. Saluki dogs are the equivalent on land, the whippets of the Arab world with hunting instincts, and the oldest known breed of domesticated dog. Both creatures are deeply revered by the Bedouin.

From Qasr Al Sarab we retrace the road back to the highway, passing camel farms en route. The animals walk in single file across the sand, seemingly on their way somewhere or nowhere. Our direction is to Jebel Dhanna and then on to the desert island of Sir Bani Yas, one of over 200 islands off the coast of Abu Dhabi. Our vehicle remains on the mainland as we transfer to the island by boat. We make the last boat transfer for the day before high winds whip up the Gulf waters.

The vision of Sheikh Zayed Bin Sultan Al Nahyan, the late ruler and founder of the UAE, Sir Bani Yas island is dedicated to wildlife. Half the 42km² island is a wildlife reserve, populated with animals from around the world. Greening has been



Fine accommodation:
Al Maha - www.luxurycollection.com/almaha

Qasr Al Sarab Desert Resort by Anantara in The Empty Quarter; Desert Islands Resort and Spa by Anantara on Sir Bani Yas island
 - Tel: +971 2 656 1177; email: crome@anantara.com; see: www.anantara.com

Jumeirah at Etihad Towers - also has Abu Dhabi's highest vantage point - the Observation Deck at 300 - on floor 74 - Tel: +971 2 811 5555; email: reservations@jumeirah.com or see www.jumeirah.com

Other information:
 For general information see www.dubaitourism.ae; email: dtdcm_sa@dubaitourism.ae
 Abu Dhabi Tourism & Culture Authority - see www.tcaabudhabi.ae and www.visitabudhabi.ae