



Atlas

December 2018

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*Into the Empty Quarter
via Abu Dhabi*

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ABU DHABI

Sands of time

Abu Dhabi offers a path to the so-called Empty Quarter, the largest and least-explored sand desert on Earth – and a bridge between old Arabia and the modern UAE. *Amar Grover* reports

Photography by Ben Roberts



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here's a well-known Arab proverb that goes "Trust in God, but tie up your camel" which came back to me on my first "dune bash". Poised in a 4WD at the top of a steep, sandy peak in a patch of desert around 200km from downtown Abu Dhabi, ready to hurtle down a near 1:1 slope of sliding, scorching sand, I took its lesson to heart. I put my trust in every available agency: God, Salim the driver – and, no camel being near enough to tie up, I buckled my seatbelt. We rolled over the brink and took the slope, bonnet swivelling and bucking, leaving swathes of rucked sand in our wake. Finally, we bottomed out alongside the sun-bleached bones of a camel.

Up until the early 1970s, Abu Dhabi had no paved roads so this experience might have felt slightly more usual than it did for me. In that era too there were no tall buildings. How times have changed. Today's skyline bristles with cutting-edge skyscrapers and one of the Middle East's most beautiful mosques. It's a city full of world-beating cultural institutions such as the Louvre Abu Dhabi and world-renowned events such as the season-ending Grand Prix, not to mention a bevy of world-class hotels.

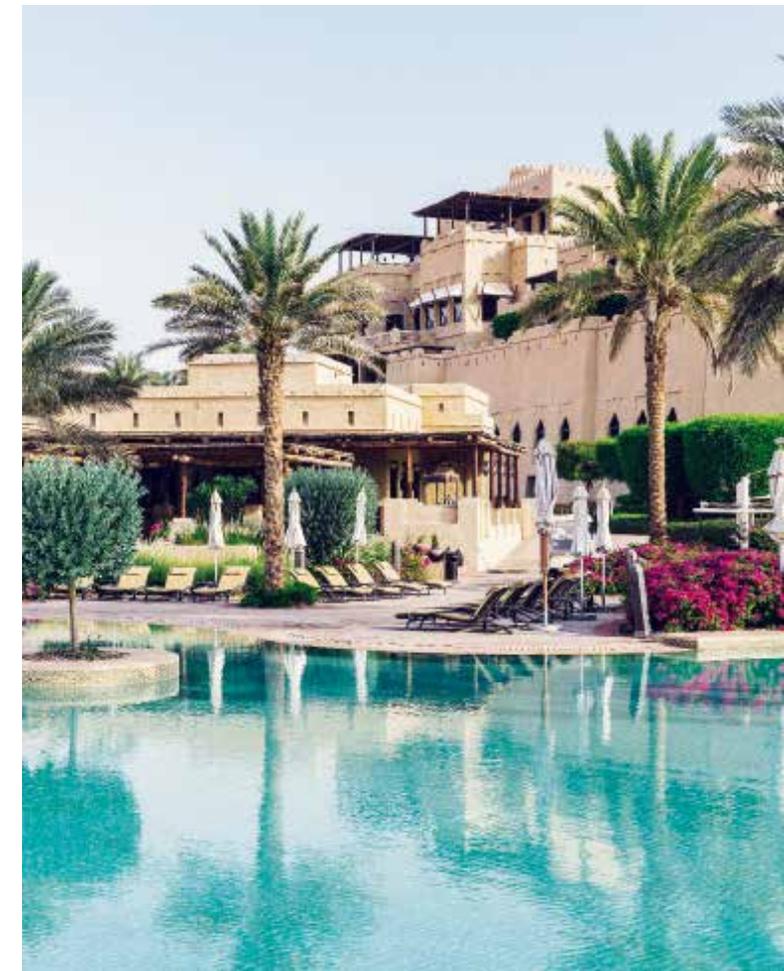
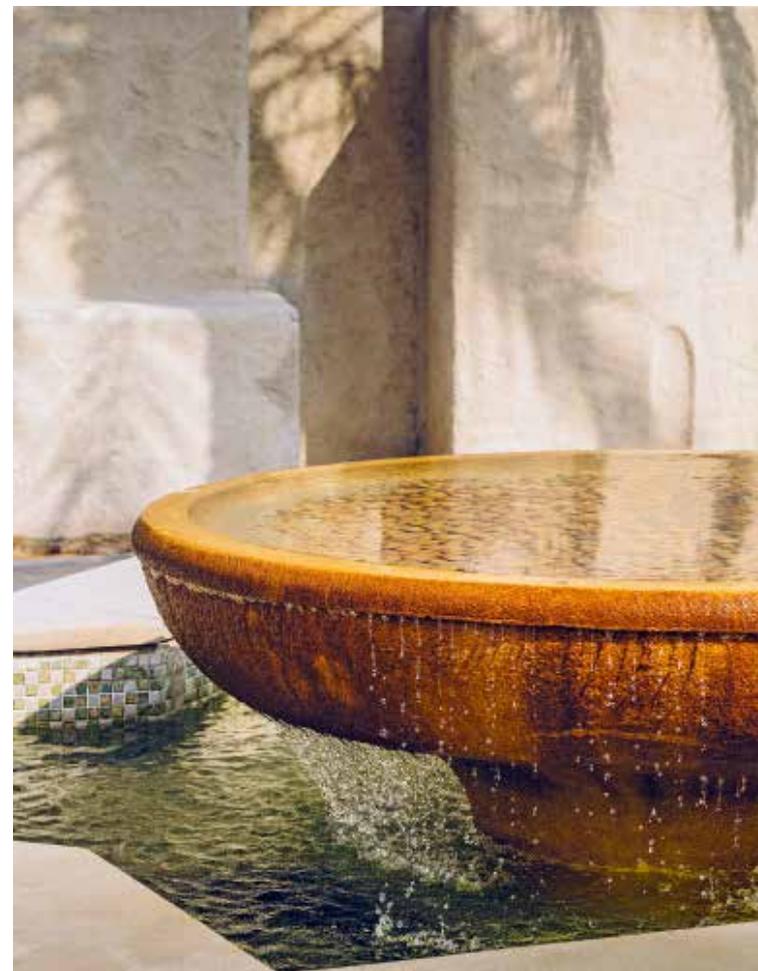
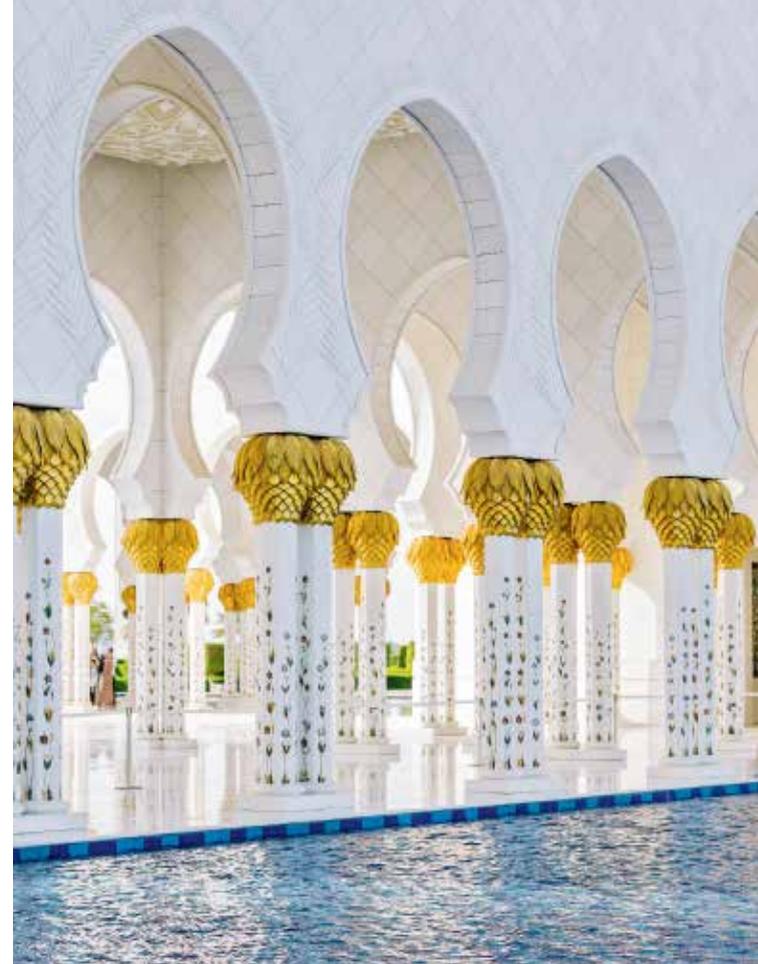
2018's Year of Zayed, which commemorates the birth centenary of the late Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan, founding father of the UAE, has given rise to celebration and reflection here at how so much has developed so quickly, and that's part of the reason that I embarked on this desert adventure. Wilfred Thesiger, the eccentric British explorer who travelled across Arabia in the late

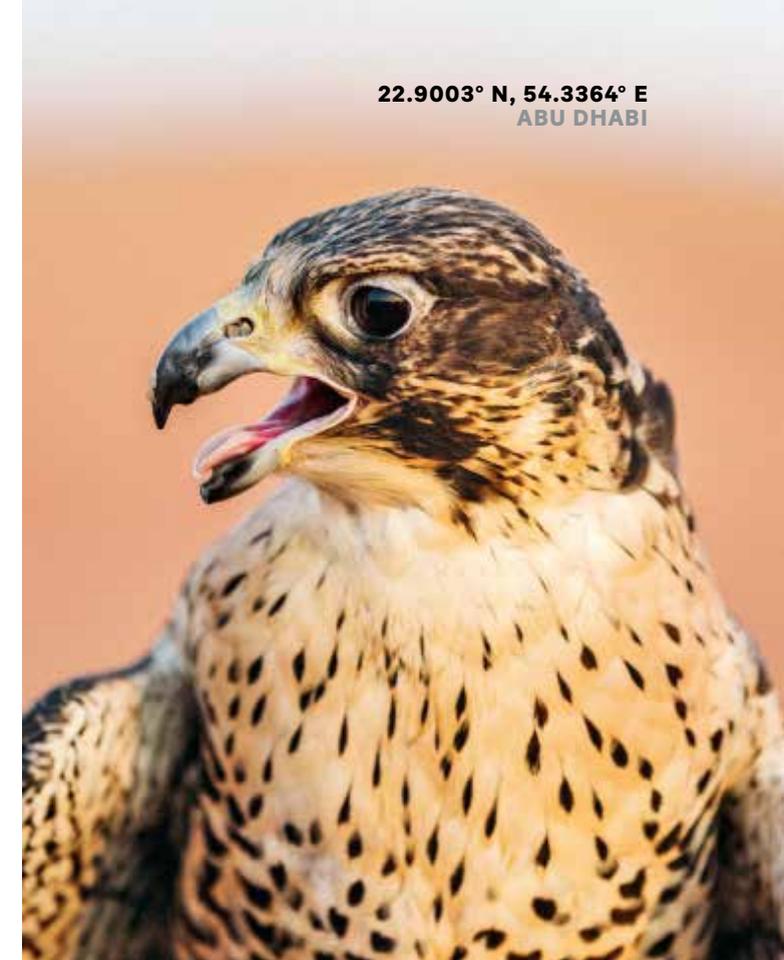
1940s with Bedu tribesmen – and met the young Sheikh Zayed – realised soon after his extraordinary journeys that the old days were numbered. "Here... the changes which occurred in the space of a decade or two were as great as those which occurred in Britain between the early Middle Ages and the present day," he wrote in *Arabian Sands* in 1959.

Out in the desert, however, modern travellers can still find glimpses of Thesiger's vanished world. Unlike in Thesiger's day, the water won't taste of goat (from goat-skin flasks) nor will you go short of food, endure bone-numbing cold or risk attack from marauding tribes.

Instead, Qasr al Sarab (or "Mirage Palace") gives you the desert experience in luxury, a meeting point of past and present versions of Abu Dhabi, you might say. Perched atop rolling dunes on the edge of the Empty Quarter, which is the world's biggest sand desert stretching from here to Saudi Arabia, this resort is as much fortified village as palace. Thirty gardeners tend over 2,500 trees and a quarter of a million shrubs. Four kilometres of paths link its 52 walled villas, 154 opulent rooms, leafy terraces and courtyards to a central hub of restaurants, a bar and library. Fountains, decorative channels, private plunge pools and a huge swimming pool affirm a simple truth: in the desert, water is the greatest luxury. But for all its helipad-equipped, celebrity-spotting potential, from Hollywood to Bollywood A-listers, Manchester City football coaches to South Korean presidents, virtually nothing can upstage the >

Previous pages, left and right The dunes around the Qasr al Sarab hotel; Mezair'ah Fort in Liwa
Left The private villas at Qasr al Sarab
Opposite, clockwise from top left The Grand Mosque in Abu Dhabi; Qasr al Sarab hotel is a network of towers, secluded gardens and walkways; the hotel's pool; one of its many water features





“Out in the desert, modern travellers can still find glimpses of a vanished world”

Opposite Sunset viewed through the main atrium of the Qasr Al Sarab hotel
Above left and right Desert guide Salim looks out over the dunes of the Empty Quarter; falconry is still a vibrant link between past and present in the UAE

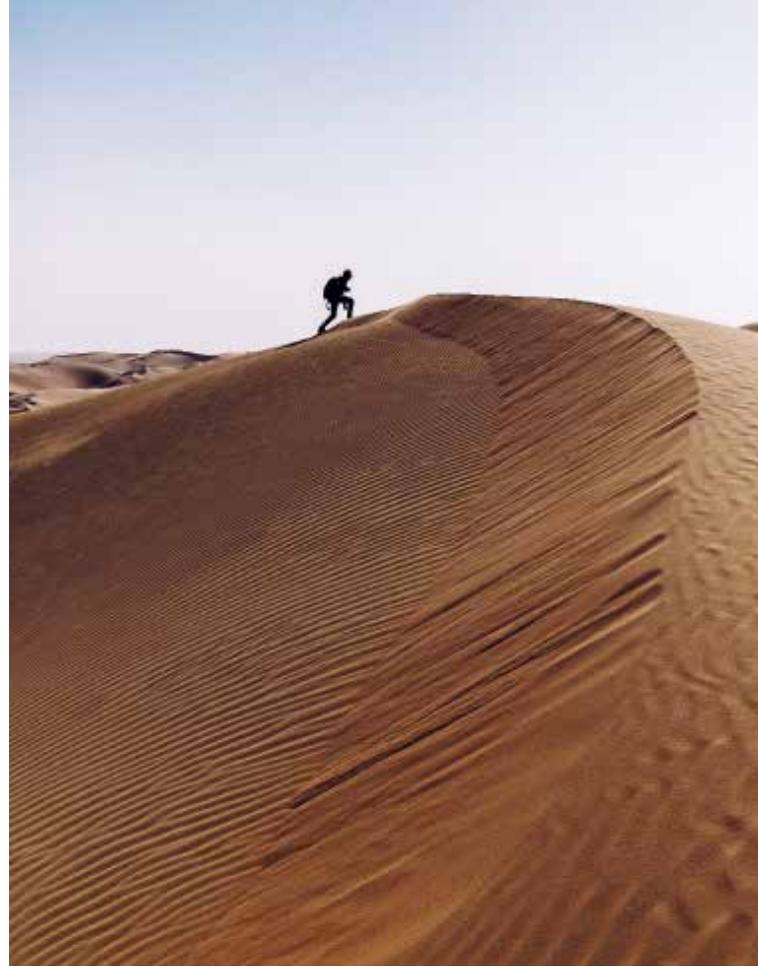
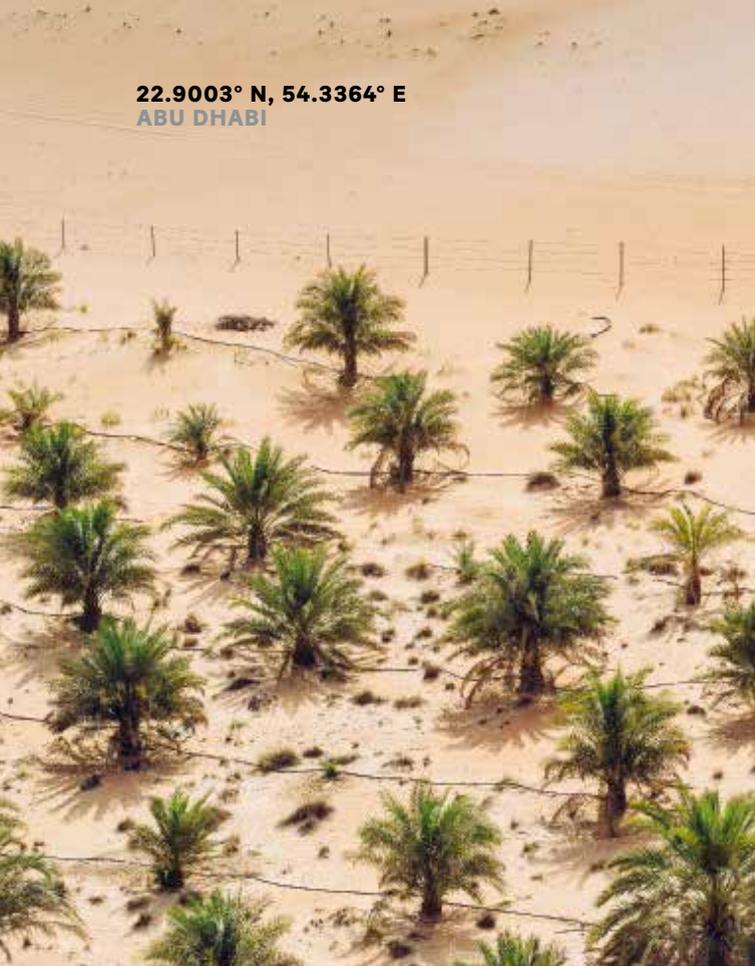
desert itself. Great, powdery dunes caress the skyline and lap Sarab's ivory-coloured walls like a sea. When whipped by wind, their fine grains of sand can penetrate every architectural (and indeed anatomical) crevice. This is a place where you can see, first-hand, what the region was like before the oil boom of the 20th century.

Falconry remains one sturdy bridge between the Arabia of old and the modern UAE, and displays are among the resort's most popular activities. One afternoon we drove out to a flattish valley nestled among the dunes to find four hooded falcons perched on low stands awaiting our arrival. “They must be hungry to hunt,” explained our falconer, donning his glove and misting a small peregrine with cooling water before passing it to a colleague. Then, brandishing a lure made of houbara feathers (this bustard is the classic prey in Arabian

falconry), he walked 50m and called shrilly. Off shot the peregrine flying low and fast, and just as it pounced, talons drawn, the lure was flicked away and the whole process repeated. After perhaps six or seven attempts, the peregrine was finally allowed to strike but the lure was promptly replaced with a skinned quail at which the bird tugged voraciously. Occasionally it paused, panting like a dog. After all four falcons had eaten, it was time to see the salukis. The resort keeps nearly a dozen of these Middle Eastern hunting dogs, which look like slinky greyhounds, in an air-conditioned kennel. Speed and endurance ensured their traditional role in hunting gazelles and hares, often in tandem with falcons, but here we simply watched them chasing a lure pulled by a motorised reel.

These days, the reasons that travellers are drawn to the desert are astonishingly varied, but one thing remains constant whether you're here for adrenaline thrills such as dune bashing or sand surfing or simply to escape the rush and crush of the real world: the sense of wonder you get from being in such an awe-inspiring landscape is unique. It's no surprise that sunrise or sunset excursions riding camels or horses are so popular, as are longer desert trips where you can sleep in Bedouin-style tents, enjoying the kind of comfort that Wilfred Thesiger would have envied.

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Abu Dhabi 2019 to-do list

See the story of the nation

Qasr Al Hosn, Abu Dhabi city's oldest and most significant heritage site, re-opens this month as a museum tracing the city's development from an 18th-century settlement reliant on fishing and pearling to a modern, global metropolis. alhosn.ae

Explore the region's history

Until 16 February 2019, the Roads to Arabia exhibition at the Louvre Abu Dhabi explores the history of the Arabian Peninsula through cultural and archaeological artefacts from Saudi Arabia and the UAE. louvrebudhabi.ae

Climb higher than before

Opening in 2019 on Yas Island, Abu Dhabi's leisure and entertainment destination, CLYMB hosts the world's widest flight chamber and tallest indoor climbing wall, reaching a height of 43m. miral.ae/en/destinations/clymb

Above Qasr al Sarab camel herder Hashim Khan leads his caravan through the dunes

How different that experience must have been became clear during a conversation with activities manager Amro Affar. "Come," he said to me, "I want to show you my zoo." In his office in a box lay several well-preserved scorpions and part of a huge camel spider (which, he was quick to point out, were found outside the resort). Though not strictly spiders, the latter's intimidating size and celebrated speed are fairly shudder-inducing. These are exactly the kind of creatures that Thesiger would have had to contend with – less so the modern desert explorer.

Setting off for a dawn dune walk next morning with Waris Khan, it was good to hear they haven't yet lost anyone to scorpions, snakes or even getting lost. Waris led us up a series of beautifully curving ridges just as the rising sun angled amber rays onto a vast wonderland of endlessly rippled sand. Flecked with reddish feldspar coated with iron oxide, in all but the harshest light these dunes glow with a beautiful salmon-pink hue. Soon he pointed out the tracks of a gerbil and a scorpion, and those of a desert fox. The most feared – but rarely encountered – snake was the sidewinder, a kind of horned viper. Solitary shrubs protruded from the sand seemingly at random: lifeless-looking dune grass here, surprisingly green bean capers there. "An oryx," said Waris, pausing to squeeze droplets of

brackish juice from the capers, "can survive for months just on these; in an emergency so could we, at least for a day or two." Stand on the highest dune overlooking Qasr al Sarab and the only conceivable oasis appears to be the resort itself. Yet the property stands just beyond the eastern arm of the famed Liwa Oasis, a bow-shaped line of around 50 villages and hamlets stretching around 100km just north of the Saudi border. It's the historic heartland of the Bani Yas tribe from which both Abu Dhabi's ruling Al Nahyan and Dubai's Al Maktoum families hail.

Fine metalled roads now link the entire oasis with the outside world; Abu Dhabi city is around 200km north. But why drive on the road when you can drive in the desert? Dune bashing is a thrilling way to experience the sands, and Qasr al Sarab lays on 4WD cars and drivers. Barely 15 minutes beyond Qasr al Sarab en route to Liwa, my driver, Salim, turned off the highway, deflated our tyres and headed into the bright glare of empty sands. A few small camel farms dotted the first few kilometres: small ragged pens of camels along with the odd truck, trailer and bales of feed. We paused at one apparently staffed by a sole Baloch man who seemed heartened by a few minutes of our company. Soon these faded away along with angular pylons and we trundled along a wondrous

Above left and right
A date plantation deep in the Empty Quarter; writer Amar Grover climbs a huge sand dune

landscape, muscular dunes stretching to the horizon. To my unaccustomed eyes there was nothing to distinguish any particular direction. Salim, however, knew where he was going. He gunned the engine hard as we tore up one dune, almost halted at its crest and swung down the other side, eyes scanning the near distance for soft white sand (to be avoided at all costs) and elusive sand gazelles. We skirted *sabkhas*, greyish salt flats where water might briefly collect after rain and turn treacherous, before pausing atop one particularly steep dune overlooking a small date plantation cradled in a sandy bowl. Then, after slithering down a 40° slope, Salim made for its shady glades where the sole caretaker welcomed us with tea and good humour that seemed in inverse proportion to his immediate discomforts. For 10 months each year his job is to maintain and fertilise these date palms.

Make no mistake: dates here are king. Liwa's wells and complex *aflaj*, or irrigation channels, may support crops of fruit, vegetables and even cereals, but it's this crop that is most favoured, helping to make the UAE one of the world's top producers. Abu Dhabi's oil and gas wealth has also changed Liwa beyond recognition. Gone are the mud-walled shacks with their palm-frond roofs. Thesiger, whose caravan passed through here exhausted, would no

doubt have an opinion about today's locals in their 4WDs weekendening in the oasis's mostly comfortable modern homes. Virtually the only original surviving buildings are several old and restored forts of which the one at Mezair'a (sometimes called Liwa City) is probably the most visited.

You can stroll through its high-walled courtyard, and internal ladders access the top floors of its round, tapering towers. Yet it's completely overwhelmed by a nearby hilltop palace screened by shrubbery. The most popular excursion is into the desert south of Mezair'ah on a perfect road where great, crescent-shaped "barchan" dunes dwarf anything I'd driven across earlier. At around 300m high, Tel Moreeb is reputedly the UAE's (and among the world's) highest dunes, and its steep 40° slipface – the leeward side – hosts crazy drag races during winter's Liwa Festival. Only fools and tourists, I concluded, climb these monsters on foot. Half way through my own effort, I grasped the full meaning of the term "slipface": one step forward and upwards meant half back and down. Here, the loveliest, softest sand, which feels neither solid nor liquid, thwarted every uphill stride. But summit Moreeb I did. In dwindling twilight, both dunes and sky melded into shades of dark mauve and inky violet, and I watched the emptiness fade into nothingness. ■