

Desert dreaming

STEP INTO SIR WILFRED THESIGER'S WORLD WITH A JOURNEY TO ANANTARA'S QASR AL SARAB DESERT RESORT IN ABU DHABI'S SPECTACULAR LIWA DESERT

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There are perhaps few more awe-inspiring sights in the UAE than the Liwa desert, which forms part of the Rub Al Khali [Empty Quarter] – the world’s largest uninterrupted body of sand, made famous through the adventures of the late British explorer, Sir Wilfred Thesiger. And it’s here, perched atop towering burnt-orange sand dunes that Anantara’s luxurious Qasr Al Sarab Desert Resort shimmers like a mirage.

Born out of the vision of Abu Dhabi’s leaders to celebrate the traditions and roots of the region, this Arabian bastion of grandeur was developed by Tourism Development & Investment Company – master developers of major tourism destinations in the Emirate. Drawing inspiration from ancient Bedouin fort structures found in the UAE capital and Al Ain, Qasr Al Sarab’s sand-coloured walls are reminiscent of the region’s traditional mud-brick architecture and original facades, design and massing were adjusted to a high degree of detail in order to ensure accuracy.

Forming a crescent shape to withstand harsh desert winds, this five-star retreat hovers over a majestic natural valley that unwinds in

front of me for several kilometres from east to west. Surrounded by undulating sand dunes that turn in colour from soft dusty pinks to orange and red with the movement of the sun, I’m mesmerised by this dreamlike landscape. It’s said that the dunes were formed more than 18,000 years ago, with freshwater mollusc shells, crocodile bones and ostrich eggshells all discovered under the sand during the three years it took to build the resort. What’s more, archaeological research has identified human habitation in the area surrounding Qasr Al Sarab dating back to 9,000 years ago.

A peek into history can be seen on the resort’s library walls, which are adorned with thousands of antiques, including traditional camel bags, Bedouin jewellery, an array of clay pots and tools, as well as ancient texts and artefacts, all procured first-hand throughout the Middle East and Africa.

Qasr Al Sarab is pure opulence, but it has been executed with such finesse and sensitivity, that any extravagance is portrayed as understated elegance. With its tranquil fountains, exquisite lanterns, sundials, thick rugs, rich fabrics and gargantuan beds piled

high with mountains of cushions, it epitomises untainted comfort.

Spacious rooms, suites and villas with giant floor-to-ceiling windows all offer panoramic views of the sprawling desert. And bathtubs the size of small swimming pools are the norm in all categories of abode. Suites and villas have additional spacious separate living and dining areas, private terraces, and butler and chef services, while all villas have their own entrances with aquamarine private plunge pools.

Dining at Qasr Al Sarab is, of course, a sumptuous affair. At Al Falaj, a relaxed Bedouin-style feast of the best local cuisine is served around a bonfire with tents. Ensnared on comfy cushions and entranced by the sounds of a harmonious *qanoun* [a large zither], I start with a lavish spread of delicious cold mezze, indulging in fattoush, hummus, moutabel, baba ghanoush and more. From the barbecue, I savour Jesh – a local meaty and succulent fish – Omani lobster, spicy shish taouk and lamb kofta while attentive waiters serve generous portions of grilled vegetables, Oriental rice and baked potato

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onto my plate. Dessert is simple but splendid: a fresh fruit platter and my favourite, *Um Ali* – a warm, creamy Egyptian version of bread pudding. Made with puff pastry and topped with a scattering of pistachios, it’s heavenly.

Fine fare at the uber-luxe Suhail is fit for a sultan. Offering the best cuts of beef from all over the globe, an award-winning wine list with 120 labels from a walk-in cellar, and sweeping views of the moonlit dunes, it conjures up a dining experience that’s written in the stars. The lobster bisque with brandy, brioche and cream is rich and sublime while the trilogy of lamb is even better. The chocolate soufflé is sheer decadence, but a fitting end to a royal feast.

From camel treks and sand sailing to taking an archery class, following in the footsteps of Liwa’s tribesmen, who took great pride in their hunting skills, Qasr Al Sarab’s bespoke selection of activities revolve around and celebrate the breathtaking desert backdrop as well as Bedouin culture.

Seated on the banks of an immense coral-hued dune at sunset watching a live show, I learn about the ancient traditional sports of

falconry and saluki hunting, both of which have been practised for hundreds of years in the UAE. While falcons have become a cultural symbol of the region, Arabian saluki dogs are renowned for their speed, intelligence, loyalty and stamina. Both magnificent creatures have made perfect hunting companions over the centuries. A slender saluki speeding across the *sabkha* leaving swirls of dust in its wake makes for a jaw-dropping sight, and the backdrop of soaring dunes enhances this spectacle.

The Bedouin people are renowned for their nomadic traditions and heartfelt hospitality. Drawing on these timeless values as well as Thai methods, Anantara’s luxurious spa offers an assortment of treatments using concoctions of exotic and natural ingredients indigenous to the region, to calm, soothe and relax the weariest of souls. While the in-house Thai therapists may be slight, they’re full of might. A 90-minute Anantara Signature Massage, which stimulates circulation and the flow of energy along meridian lines, ensures I depart from my desert dream, feeling deeply relaxed and restored. ☺

IMAGES: Anantara, Qasr Al Sarab Desert Resort & Tiffany Eslick

PREVIOUS PAGE: Qasr Al Sarab’s Royal Pavilion villas.

FROM FAR LEFT: The magnificent desert landscape can be admired from all rooms, suites and villas; set amidst towering dunes, Qasr Al Sarab is a dreamlike oasis; fine-dining delights at Suhail; salukis are known for their loyalty; falcons have become a cultural symbol for the region; watch and learn about the ancient sport of falconry during a live show at Qasr Al Sarab; drawing on the rich heritage of the UAE and strong Bedouin culture, Qasr Al Sarab is the epitome of Arabian hospitality and offers a true desert experience.