



Oasis

in the
Desert

The setting is spectacular. The rooms are equally magnificent. Oryx and deer drink from a pool, even as you watch. Everything is perfection and eating outside in the moonlight becomes a memory to be treasured

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What can one say about Al Maha, a tented luxury resort, sprinkled in the sands, like desert gold, seemingly so far away in time and space it could belong to another era, a different civilisation altogether. Or in an *Arabian Nights* fable, at best.

Yet it is just an hour's drive away from Dubai.

Such are the experiences you go through at this resort, you know you are in an extraordinary place. It could be the location, it could be the concept, it could be



architecture... It is in fact is all of these and more. The outstanding food, the superlative service and people who run it. And it is the simplicity and taste with which the whole idea has been put together that really steals the show.

Al Maha is indeed an exclusive and a beautiful retreat.

But it is not for everyone. It is for the discerning traveller, the one with a special bent of mind. It requires a consciousness which upholds subtlety, to appreciate what Al Maha stands for. And it requires that you don't weigh worth merely in terms of

money, for it is an expensive proposition to afford a few nights here.

Al Maha made me more contemplative than ever. Sitting on the porch of my tent, in the fading twilight, besides my private plunge pool, scanning the vast desert in front of me, the sand blowing gently in the evening wind, now and then, I thought about the abundance of the planet. There is so much that the earth offers us. And I felt blessed being able to do the things I do.

And this brown landscape ahead of me, with its rolling dunes evoked a sense of romance I had only read about. I started

to visualise a camel trail crossing the desert guided by stars at night, breaking journey by day at an oasis, a gypsy camp and belly dancing, coarse singing, beautiful veiled women and strong-featured, *kohl*-eyed men with compassionate hearts, the evocative call of the *muezzin* at the break of dawn.

Al Maha indeed arouses your senses. In a lingering manner. The place slows you down. The very purpose of a holiday to such a destination.

Therefore the dilemma; do you or do you not partake in all the activities the resort has in store for you?

Your time or rather activities are so planned that you could, if you choose to, end up going through two experiences a day. These could be a camel ride, (culminating in watching a sunset, as you sip champagne, eat some strawberries) a display of falconry, sand dune driving, archery, horse riding, a nature walk and of course divine treatments at the spa. You could do any, all, or none of these things and that would be fine too. Your time is yours, to do as you please. It's up to your mood, your fancy. The entire schedule is explained to you, more or less as soon as you come and are freshening up with a scented



Waiting for the guests for the champagne, strawberry and sunset ride



The Royal Suite

A bird's eye view of Al Maha





The Bedouin Suite



wet face towel and sipping at the most welcome, welcome drink. A Field Guide is assigned to you and it is his responsibility to be there for whatever you may need. These well-informed, well-versed guides are mostly South African daredevils, like some of their international cricketers, among other chores, driving the 4-wheel drive Land Cruisers in the vast sand dunes with the confidence of the lion-hearted! Whatever you don't do is fine, but an adrenaline rush in the desert is a must. You can't be at Al Maha and not go for a ride better than a best roller coaster.

The call is yours. Remember you have paid for everything in the all-inclusive tariff, even meals. So once you have checked in, you don't think finances. Like when you are on a cruise. That's a nice feeling actually. That everything is all found. Besides the very idea of signing checks, carrying credit cards, making sure your wallet is in the handbag is so city-like. And city happily is, and must be, far away from your mind! A shackle-free way of life even if for a few days is so relieving.

The resort comprises 42 tent rooms, all independent of each other and designed so that each is completely private. Called *Bedouin*, *Royal*, etc, these have a canopy overhead giving the illusion of a tent. The suites are tastefully and creatively conceptualised. The beds are huge, the linen exclusive. With the gazelle motif in subtle places; embroidered on the duvet cover, etched in glass on the French doors, on the luxurious towels. The bathroom takes your breath away. The toiletries are *Bulgari*.



At the spa



It's the little things that make a difference, everything has been already thought of, including binoculars for oryx watching. An easel placed in the room, with crayons and pencils, with drawing paper complete, got me sketching the scene outside, a hobby of mine in my school days! Kind of made me feel good.

Regulars at the resort know which tent they want and request that they be allotted their choice. My research threw the following; Number 18 is fantastic – you don't see any other suite from here. The camel trek does depart from opposite this suite but apart from that you never see anyone else – just the wildlife! Suites 28 and 29, offer great views over the desert and are close enough to walk to the main building. 6, 11, 15, 23 and 35 are also said to offer beautiful views, but if you ask me, there isn't a bad suite here! You simply cannot go wrong with any suite. But if you are particular you could specify if you prefer the morning or the afternoon sun. You do seem to get one or the other. Also I



The private plunge pool



On the dining terrace

would recommend being opposite an animal watering hole, if you like watching animals and the sight of an oryx right outside your glass door won't scare you.

The highlight for me was being in a reserve with gazelles and oryx roaming freely, drinking from your pool. Being one on one with nature and still having the luxury of a hotel is exquisite.

Food is the USP at the resort. But then you would expect that in a place like this and they certainly don't disappoint. Which is not the best way of putting it. Let me rephrase it then and tell you that the food at Al Maha is excellent. And it's not just the food, the high quality of ingredients, but the very manner the menu is put together every day. Sensible options, agreeable limited choices which don't leave you confused or in two minds! It's an intelligent, balanced menu, along with a chef's favourite, everyday.

What can you expect? Here is a sampler; *Wagyu Beef Fillet, Lobster Thermidor, Pan-Fried Gulf Sea Bream, Asian Duck Remoulade,*



Asian Duck Salad



Executive Chef David Miras

Argentinean Rib-eye Steak, New Zealand Lamb Chops, Porcini Mushroom Pansotto, Sweet Onion and Dijon Mustard Quiche, Mezze Platter; Sashimi Platter... The desserts are to die for; *Crème Brûlée made with Vanilla, Cardamon and Nutmeg, Baked Chocolate Torte with Orange Sorbet,* a rich *Um Ali,* Al Maha style with plenty of saffron and nuts.

Breakfast is served from 07:00 till 10:30, lunch from 12:30 till 14:30 and evening dinner was served from 19:30 till 22:00. And there is a dress code; Gentlemen – long trousers for dinner is required.

They also do 'picnic' dinners. Take you to the spot and leave you alone, after handing you a walkie-talkie. Sounds good, right? Honeymooners, are you listening?

The Executive Chef David Miras enjoys being in this remote outpost since it attracts gourmet guests from the world over. He informs me that there is nothing they would not do to indulge in the culinary taste buds of their guests. If there is a special request for a particular ingredient or food item from



Arabic Mezze Platter



The Graffiti Board inside the kitchen where guests post their comments

Junior Sous Chef Piotr Kamieniczny



Nikhil, Nancy and Arjun – thoughtful and unobtrusive service



Wagyu Beef Fillet



Seafood Paella



A herd of oryx lazing in the sands



Dune bashing



...sliding



'The sick tree'



'Better than the best' roller-coaster ride

anywhere in the world, they will have it flown in, within 24 hours, if possible. Also, very graciously he gives maximum credit to Junior Sous Chef, Piotr Kamieniczny who he says is the hands-on chef and responsible for much of the cooking. I was delighted to notice that the charming, young lads at the restaurant were boys from back home, Pondicherry.

Al Diwaan, the understated and elegant restaurant surprisingly does not directly overlook the desert all laid out outside, but the separating open terrace, does. Diners prefer the terrace and the night sky and black desert create an ambience which is ethereal. A unique feature which not a single guest seated there misses, is an idea so simple in thought yet so profound in its execution, that it is a masterstroke. Nothing to do with food and everything to do with the dining experience. Directly in line of vision from every table, there is a spotlight in the dark distance, about 200 metres away, powerfully shining on a cluster of shrubs, surrounding a small



Falconry: a display at dawn



Oscar, the desert owl



Rashida, the falcon



Luring the falcon with a food bait



watering hole where the animals of the desert come drink from. It's a real life tableau being recreated. Indeed if your eyesight is good you do spot a gazelle or two lounging around. Throughout the dinner I kept drinking in this sight, not surprised the wine tasted heavenly too.

Getting up at dawn, on a holiday may seem much, but if you have to catch the falconry show, you have to do just that. You meet the other guests in the lobby at 5.30 am and proceed down a dune to the flat sands where some benches are placed in a semicircle. Here in the softness of a new day you sit, watch and understand a sport hugely popular with Arabs.

Falcons as they go out to hunt. Except for the display, the Field Guides expertly make them fly around using a mock sling, with feathers and meat bits tied to one end. The falcon circles overhead and comes swooping down to grab this piece of food and succeeds after a few such swoops. The birds, Rashida, Safira and Jazeera are served 5 to 8% of their body weight, just once a day. The entire display is beautiful and Kurt, the guide, keeps offering interesting relevant information. Falconry done, it's the turn of Oscar the Owl. A desert eagle owl, Oscar weighs less than half a kg! Looking at him you

wouldn't say so. And no, his neck does not turn a full 360° – that's a myth. Owls turn their heads to a maximum of 270°.

Soon after this activity we get into the Land Cruisers and head outside the Conservation Area (Al Maha is situated inside and has pledged to look after the flora, fauna and wild life), driving out of the gated fenced area into where the serious desert rolls. The desert drive. Straight on, on the first bump, my co-passenger and I start to scream. Kurt, looks and says, "Hey, hey, hey, that was just a baby one. We haven't even got started!" He was right, it was wild. Completely mad. And such fun. Calls for one hell of a driving skill and all these drivers here are adept, well-trained.

Sliding is what gets your adrenaline pumping. It's when you kick up so much sand, it's all over the vehicle, roof, windshield, the side doors. One of a kind experience, for sure.

There are three options the guides choose each day. Big Dunes, closer to the resort, a simpler run; The Wall, a medium one and KGB, the real tough one. And if you get faint-hearted just before the boys rev up, they give you an option to step off at the 'the sick tree' and wait till they return, Obviously it's you who is sick, not the tree!

What can be better for riders?

