

GETAWAY

ADRIAN CAFFERY STAYS AT DUBAI'S FIRST ECO-TOURISM RESORT

DUBAI is a high-octane, futuristic city famous for having some of the glitziest and biggest hotels in the world.

But less than 60 minutes away, out in the desert, you can experience a complete change of pace at perhaps the most stunning hotel of them all.

The Al Maha Desert Resort and Spa is the only place you can stay within the 225 square kilometres of the Dubai Desert Conservation Reserve.

Access to the fenced-off reserve is carefully controlled and the seclusion this offers makes it the perfect place for the famous to escape the paparazzi.

George Clooney and Matt Damon stayed there while filming *Syriana*. Other A-list guests have included Robert De Niro and Naomi Campbell, as well as Dubai royalty.

But for me, Al Maha was about escaping my two young children for a couple of nights (no under-10s allowed), and reconnecting with two long lost friends – peace and quiet.

A tranquil oasis, guests are actually asked to set their mobiles to silent mode when in public areas of the hotel, and to take any calls in the privacy of their rooms.

Al Maha is not so much a hotel as a Beduin encampment of 40 individual 'tents' offering the most Arabian accommodation in Dubai, without any compromise on luxury.

These suites are spaced far apart and come with their own infinity pools.

The contrast between the cooling waters and the vast expanse of desert sands beyond is quite startling.

Decking wraps round the circular suites and the chairs and sunbeds are shaded from the baking sun by fabric canopies.

Inside, the suites are lavishly decorated with authentic and handcrafted Arabian furnishings, antiques and artefacts, showcasing the unique architecture of the Bedouins.

The super king-size bed is wonderfully comfy and the spacious bathroom features a walk-in shower, king-size bath and a 'his and hers' vanity area.

There are binoculars so you can watch the wildlife, and an easel and watercolour paints should you be talented enough to capture the vista.

The suites are the perfect romantic getaway, which is why Al Maha is a popular honeymoon destination, often as part of a longer break in Dubai city.

I'm sure, given the opportunity, I would have been quite happy to have lounged around my suite and in my pool for a week or two.

But Al Maha has plenty to keep those with a lower boredom threshold occupied, and I made three excursions into the desert in one day.

The first was a fascinating 4x4 tour with a field guide, who revealed all about the wildlife and how the hotel came to be built just before the millennium.

Dubai's first eco-tourism resort, Al Maha was gifted the land by His Highness Sheikh Ahmed bin Saeed Al Maktoum, a senior royal and chairman of the Emirates group.

DESERT DELIGHT



The bar in the desert

In return, the hotel is committed to the preservation and restoration of indigenous fauna, flora and wildlife, and 20 per cent of its income is ploughed into the reserve.

I witnessed how the reserve is successfully bringing the Arabian Oryx – a national symbol of the United Arab Emirates – back after it was hunted to the brink of extinction.

What there's certainly no shortage of is gazelles. These cute creatures appear to be long-stay guests at the hotel and are not afraid to sip from your pool.

My second drive into the desert was to toast the sunset and it was surreal to see a barman, all alone among the dunes, pouring our drinks as we pulled up next to him.

But my third desert excursion was the most magical: fine dining among the shifting sands under the Arabian night sky, a picnic on a very grand scale!

Lit by flame torches, our low-level table and cushions were perched on Persian carpets, creating a unique ambience and a memory to last

forever.

There's a host of other activities, including falconry, nature walks, camel treks, archery, horse-riding (experienced riders only) and thrilling four-wheel drives through the dunes.

Then there's the Timeless spa, which offers a wide range of wellness, rejuvenation and beauty therapies, with healing practices drawn from cultures around the world.

It has a massage room for couples, a private Rasul chamber (for a traditional Arabian cleansing ritual), a hydrotherapy bath, sauna, steam room, cold plunge pool, Jacuzzi and fitness centre.

There's the option of having a massage in your suite or even in a tent on the desert sands, if you wake early enough to avoid the high temperatures.

The spa's gorgeous infinity pool is like a larger version of the ones that come with the suites, but allows you to give your legs more of a stretch.

Al Maha's restaurant offers

international and indigenous delicacies for breakfast, lunch and dinner, which can be served on the veranda with its views of the reserve.

All the staff, including the general manager, live on site and the team spirit this generates is reflected in the outstanding customer service.

According to TripAdvisor's 2017 Travellers' Choice Awards it's one of

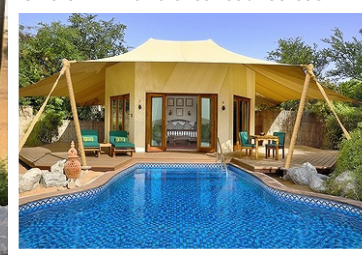
the best hotels in the Middle East and among the world's top 25 luxury hotels.

It's no wonder that more than 20 per cent of Al Maha's guests return to this piece of paradise, nestled in a verdant palm oasis.

Yes, you need deep pockets to keep coming back, but if you've got a special occasion to celebrate, it's worth saving up for.



One of Al Maha's 'tented' suites



A 4x4 drive to see the Arabian oryx



Romantic dining in the cool desert night



NEED TO KNOW

■ **ADRIAN CAFFERY** visited Al Maha as a guest of the owners. Stays at Al Maha, a Luxury Collection Desert Resort & Spa, start from £540, excluding taxes and service charge, per room per night, based on two sharing in a room on full-board basis. To book, visit al-maha.com or call 97148329900.

■ Emirates flies direct to Dubai from Birmingham, Manchester, Newcastle, London and Dublin. Visit emirates.com