

DESERT RETREATS

An oryx is drinking from the swimming pool. I've just arrived at the Al Maha Desert Resort, 45 minutes from central Dubai, and I've been caught off-guard by a thirsty intruder inches from my sun lounger. I'd be happier had the golf-buggy driver who ferried me to my Arabian-style villa not told me that gazelles can be aggressive, and may try to "gore if provoked".

Fortunately, the oryx starts grazing, and that brief panic turns out to be the most stressful moment of my stay. Much of the rest of the time is spent either gazing at stars from the private infinity pool or watching the sunset from a dune, glass of fizz in hand.

Adding a desert jaunt to your Dubai itinerary offers the chance to escape the city's hyperactivity and tune into the soothing stillness of the sands. The service and facilities at the five-star Al Maha are just as slick as at its city counterparts, and if doing nothing is too much, two activities



a day are included in the villa rates, including falconry, archery, riding and game drives. If you don't have the budget for Al Maha – doubles start at £568 a night – Bab Al Shams, a desert hideaway with a shared pool, has doubles from £105 (meydanhoteles.com).

Slightly harder types may prefer to sleep in an actual tent in the desert. And in Dubai, there are plenty of ways you can do this without even having to hammer pegs into the ground. Arabian Adventures offers an overnight safari that includes a 4x4 dune drive through the city's Desert Conservation Reserve, a camel ride and falconry display, as well as a barbecue, breakfast, tent, sleeping bag and even a towel and showers (£145; arabian-adventures.com).

If time is an issue, there are dozens of safaris you can go on for just a few

hours. Tour companies, such as Sunflower Dubai, will pick you up from your hotel and drive you out to the desert. There you can indulge in some dune-bashing, a barbecue with a side of belly dancing (warning: they will try to get you to join

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in), shisha-smoking and henna tattoos. You'll be delivered back to your hotel lobby in one piece, albeit a slightly frazzled piece. The experience is fast-paced, but you'll still feel you've had a break from the city whirl, and all for

Just desert
Tranquillity awaits at the Al Maha Desert Resort, just 45 minutes from Dubai's bustling downtown

£47 (sunflowerdubai.com). If you want something greener than a 4x4, riding and camel treks are also available; from £57 for 1½ hours (jaresortshotels.com).

Only then, once you've settled into the groove of the desert, think of the explorer Wilfred Thesiger, doing the same thing a mere 70 years ago, and call to mind his line: "This cruel land can cast a spell." And keep an eye out for angry oryx.

• Emirates Holidays has three nights' full-board at Al Maha and four nights' B&B at the Address Downtown from £1,895pp (020 7590 1461, emiratesholidays.co.uk). Travelbag has two nights at Bab Al Shams Desert Resort and Spa, and five at the Jumeirah Zabeel Saray, from £939pp, B&B (0871 703 4698, travelbag.co.uk)



Becky Lucas

Brunch: the meal Dubai does best

The long, boozy breakfast/lunch on Friday afternoons is an expat tradition in Dubai, and in the course of my various brunches over the years, I have made a number of mistakes, some of which make me wince with shame. So, in the spirit of education, I have assembled a few tips to allow you to make the most of your Dubai brunch. Follow these and you may be assured of a satisfying brunch experience.

1 Brunch begins the night before

While this may seem counterintuitive, turning up for a brunch when you're hungover puts you in a much more favourable frame of mind. Speaking from experience, there's little worse than turning up bright-eyed and bushy-tailed, then attempting to get stuck in to rich food and free-flowing champers.

2 Pick your crowd

Never brunch as a couple. In fact, any party numbering fewer than six is asking for a dull time. Make sure your group is balanced internally, too – uneven gender splits are not



A Friday brunch dessert plate

necessarily a problem, but if you must include a boring person in your booking, make sure there's another Tedious Tim to keep them company.

3 Salads are for losers

Dubai brunches are where diets go to die – and if everyone isn't on board with this, you have a problem.

4 Lots of small plates

You can expect brunch to set you back £50, but at most places, there's no limit to the number of times you

can visit the buffet, so choose smaller selections and don't be afraid to go back. Some people advocate trying to max out on high-value dishes such as oysters or prime steak, but it's better simply to focus on what you enjoy.

5 Get strategic

When you get to your brunch, figure out if you're in this for the long haul or going for the sprint finish. This lets you set your rate of consumption. Balance is the key: Dubai brunch sessions can run to four hours or more, so adopt a steady pace of grazing and sipping if you want to stay the course.

6 Sweet-talk the staff

If you're feeling really ambitious, try tipping at the start of the meal. I always wanted to try this at the Double Decker brunch at the Al Murooj Rotana, where I got the feeling the staff were under instructions to go slow on the drinks for the sake of the profit margins.



Take your pick at Saffron restaurant, Atlantis, the Palm

Nicolas Dumont, Alamy

7 Expect things to get messy

There's good mess and there's bad mess, so take some precautions to optimise the ratio. I strongly suggest paying your bill at the start of the brunch, especially in a large group – this allows everyone to stagger to the end without consequence. Also, make sure you leave your passport and any essential items at home.

Some expats go so far as to buy a cheap phone just for brunching, such is the rate of loss. With that said, good luck – and happy brunching.

Brunch destinations

Waxy O'Connors at the Ascot Hotel (ascothoteldubai.com); Double Decker at the Al Murooj Rotana (rotana.com); Yalumba at Le Meridien (leroyalmeridien-dubai.com); Glasshouse at Hilton Dubai Creek (hilton.com); Saffron at Atlantis, the Palm Jumeirah (atlantisthepalm.com).

Eliot Beer

A longer version of this article appears in *Uncommon: Dubai*, available at Foyles, Daunt and Stanfords bookshops (Uncommon Guide Books £29)

