

Escape to the Empty Quarter

Set among stunning waves of sand in the unparalleled beauty of the Liwa Desert, Qasr Al Sarab is a blissful, excitement-filled destination for a girly getaway or romantic journey alike, just a few hours drive from the bright lights of the city...

By Yi-Hwa Hanna







It's dark outside, and the world is still. So still, in fact, that I think you could quite literally hear a pin drop. Ahead of me, dunes spread out as far as the eye can see, waves in a sea of sand that gently ripple in a warm spectrum of colour, from caramel to copper. It's a blissful change of

pace from the hustle and bustle of the city, the rare true silence a peaceful respite from the white noise that's omnipresent in everyday life.

"I still can't believe you woke me up at 4am for this," my friend grumbled; but even as she muttered about the sand weighing down her beloved trainers after sneaking in through the seams, I could hear a smile creep into her voice. "It is just beautiful though, isn't it?" she said—and yes, it really was. We had, not without difficulty, dragged ourselves out of the plush comfort of our five-star hotel room (replete with a

luxurious nest of bedding that made it near impossible for us to crawl out of), just before the crack of dawn to head out for a desert walk at Qasr Al Sarab. It was our first time visiting the resort, a spot of pride and joy in the enticing portfolio of Anantara getaways in the UAE, and even though we were tired, it would have been remiss for us not to experience the very feature that made the property so incredibly captivating.

Set in the legendary Liwa Desert and embedded in one of the largest sand deserts in the world, the Empty Quarter (or as we call it locally, Rub' al Khali), Qasr Al Sarab is a true oasis mere hours from Dubai



and Abu Dhabi. We had set off from central Dubai just a few hours before and, within 45 minutes of passing Abu Dhabi proper, we already felt like long-lost explorers ready to head into the beyond, with nothing

but pure desert around us. The drive into the resort will have your jaw dropping from the moment you pass the gates. With nothing but the endless sea of sand stretching ahead of and around you, the levels of



After our guide took us up to a high peak for an excellent vantage point—and shaking off any residual sleepiness from our morning with refreshing yoga stretches out there on the sand—we settled atop a dune to watch the sun rise. If you’ve never seen it come up first thing in the morning, fat and golden, glowing with a rosy blush as it readies itself to shine bright and wake the world, over the sands of a serene desert, put it on your bucket list pronto.

It was an Instagram-ready #nofilter moment, without a doubt. Our guide told us that during the winter, we would have likely caught some desert hares, camels, and even some oryx—the resort is currently awaiting a new herd of the endangered creature (which is said to have inspired the myth of the unicorn) that’s coming courtesy of their sister resort at Sir Bani Yas Island. As we drove back to the resort afterwards, the heat already beginning to settle in with beads of sweat on our brow, a herd of young gazelle bounded past us, racing each other to a shady enclave where they’d spend the day.

Tired from our early rise, my



friend decided to head back to the room for a nap, but as I’d been aching from too many hours logged at the gym, I made my way to the spa. I often find myself torn when at a lush destination like this—when you’re only there for a limited time, it can be hard to decide whether you want to spend those precious hours at the spa, taking advantage of the range of activities, or simply lying by the pool, but in this case, to miss out on a pampering treatment would be an absolute shame. I’d gone in for the Anantara Signature Massage, a 90-minute treatment that kneaded and soothed my weary limbs into buttery submission with a deliciously rich blend of essential oils. The view, an unrestricted expanse of the desert with nothing else for miles, only reminded me of

how far I felt from home, and by the time I walked out, utterly relaxed from top to toe and delicately perfumed, I was ready to sink back into bed.

Fortunately, my friend was so ready to get the day started that instead, we made our way out to the pool. Despite the scorching heat, the super-attentive staff made sure we stayed hydrated by bringing us plenty of cold bottles of water, and the pool was set at such a refreshing temperature that we didn’t even notice how baking hot it was outside. Wide enough that we could hardly see the other end, the pool is split into several connected sections, so we were quite apart from the other guests—it was the perfect opportunity for some quality catch-up time, which was one of the key reasons for our girls’ getaway. Later that afternoon,

anticipation built up by the time you draw up to the actual resort’s grand gates are enough to have even the most long-dwelling expat (and tourist alike) gaping with awe. Despite having lived in the UAE for a grand total of more than 20 years of my life, I’d never seen anything quite like it, and it was, in a word, breathtaking.

And so we found ourselves in the desert the next morning, awake before dawn for a brisk walk. Since it was the height of summer during our visit, our walk wasn’t too extensive, and unfortunately the heat meant that many of the animals were tucked away in a sheltered, shady hideaway, even at 5am.



we headed out for a spot of archery. The resort has one of the most expansive and well-equipped archery ranges we've seen, with easily-slid goal posts that saw us challenge ourselves further than we ever had in our previous attempts. Our guide, also a qualified instructor, was clearly passionate about the sport and, as we let arrow after arrow fly towards the target with a valley of sand rising up around us, his handy tips made sure we improved with each shot. If archery isn't your calling, there's no shortage of activities here to keep you well and truly entertained—in fact, there's so much to do that you'd be hard-pressed to *not* try any activities. Thankfully, each reservation comes with two per guest, although we suspect you'll want to opt in for more, be it camel trekking, falconry, dune bashing, horse riding, fat biking, a tour of the Liwa Oasis, land sailing, tennis, board games in the library, cooking classes, desert yoga, and more. By the time we left the range,

with several bulls-eyes to each of our names, we felt ready to rival Katniss Everdeen.

Instead, seeing as it did work up a fair bit of appetite, we headed back to our room to prep for dinner. While there are villa options available, some with private pools—or, if you crave even more privacy, set away from the main resort in the Royal Pavilion—the hotel mainstay also has a number of standard rooms available. But these rooms are anything but standard—aside from the lush bedding, an ample balcony saw us spend plenty of time out there catching up on a good book with the odd bird flying by to say hello, and the bathroom boasted an enormous bath that positively begged for bubbles.

When you need sustenance, bring a hearty appetite—unlike some resorts that feel they can “get away” with average fare due to your lack of choices (unless you want to drive the two or so hours to the city, that is), Qasr Al Sarab takes real pride in its cuisine. During cool weather, Al Falaj is a must-visit, giving you the chance to dine on a Bedouin-style carpet under a canopy of stars, while Suhail's rooftop lounge is the ideal ambiance in which to wile away hours under the night sky. If you're after something a little more cosy, Al Liwan offers the chance to settle in with a bite and perhaps a backgammon board, or if it's an upscale yet intimate environment you're craving, Ghadeer serves up

exquisite dishes. Top tip: While the regular menu is deliciously high in quality (down to the ice creams, made in-house just for the resort), don't miss out on the daily specials. Whether it's a velvety truffled wild mushroom risotto, a juicy rib-eye or a light yet moreish pasta, the dishes here all burst with flavour and left us merrily satiated. For anyone on a romantic getaway, the chance to enjoy a BBQ from the comfort of your private villa—or better yet, sup on a dune via their “Dining By Design” option—is sure to rekindle a spark with memories that'll last for a lifetime.

Although we'd only gone for a few days, by the time my friend and I checked out and were on our way back to Dubai—chilled bottles of water placed into my car's cup-holders ready for our journey, thanks to the thoughtful valet—we felt as though we had been away for weeks rather than just a long weekend. In the midst of the enchanting Empty Quarter, life slows down, and the sense of tranquility that's so difficult to come by during our fast-paced city lifestyles is easy to savour.

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The multi-award winning Qasr Al Sarab is a 2-hour drive from Abu Dhabi City or a 3 hour drive from Dubai. Room rates start from Dhs850. Visit qasralsarab.anantara.com for details.