

A Hop and A Skip

Is it possible to head overseas for just a long weekend (or heck, even a regular weekend!) with the aim of coming back not only refreshed, but with a take-home health benefit? We hopped on a plane and into a car to find out.

By Yi-Hwa Hanna



The room was a little stuffy, and I was so hot that the sweat was rolling down my forehead and dripping into my eyes. “Again! Come on now, strong!” he said, holding up the pad again. I was in the middle of a private Muay Thai lesson at Aleanta Phuket Resort & Spa.

Just 24 hours earlier, I’d been sitting in my office in Dubai, exhausted after yet another long week of nonstop errands, endless back-to-back meetings, and far too many nights of tumbling into bed far too late and getting up what felt like way too early. I felt a little like a zombie, with the need to set at least 11 different alarms, all staggered at strange timings, in order to get myself out of bed to hit the gym before work in the morning, where I’d shower as fast as I could after a workout before hoping I’d remembered to pack everything I needed into my bag the night before (“please, please don’t be the day that I’ve forgotten to pack my normal bra again!” I’d think), before tumbling into bed at night to repeat the grind all over again the next day. It’s a familiar situation for many, where the ever-busy schedules that come with the lifestyle of a driven individual chasing success, or simply trying to balance their career, family and health, can leave us feeling considerably burnt out. I was seeking a way to relax and recharge my batteries, while also being able to keep up with my fitness routine and really start enjoying my workouts again, hopefully in an environment that involved a beautiful setting, good food, and that wasn’t too far away—but I

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needed it to actually feel like a genuine escape. And that's exactly what I found at Aleenta, a boutique hotel owned by a Thai family, who have recently also opened another smaller and more affordable hotel with an in-house beach club just down the road from Aleenta, which has been open for around 10 years now.

It's a true hidden gem of Phuket, and for a place that's been open for so long, it's years ahead when it comes to design. The interiors and layout were a real catch for us, since they struck the perfect balance between a more minimalist contemporary style and the kind of setting that still felt comfortable enough to live in, that felt luxurious without ever being pretentious. Plenty of attention to small details—such as the yoga mats available in our villa's closet, alongside the beach bags and flip flops available for use during your stay, and the wooden frog that guests could place outside the room to indicate whether they wanted privacy or not—made this place feel extra special. And those villas? Absolutely spectacular. Each boasting their own private pool—and for once, when they say it's a private pool, they mean truly private where no upstairs or next-door neighbours can peek in—and a terrace area where you can sit, read, tan and just enjoy the space, as well as a large and extremely comfortable bed, a beautiful glass-walled bathroom (that boasts an outdoor bathtub to boot, though it does take a considerably long time to fill up!), and ample closet space. Most impressive was the amount of space guests are able to swan around in for



what is a surprisingly affordable price for somewhere that is so deeply committed to quality. In short, we were impressed, and that was just starting with the rooms. The hotel's dining options were another surprising delight: The chef, himself personally passionate about a healthy lifestyle, was eager to speak with us about his approach to food with wellness in mind, paying attention to details such as what types of oil he uses when he fries food to make it a little lighter, and how excited he was about being able to introduce new types of superfood-focused salads to the menu. He sources the resort's ice cream from the most sought-after Italian dealer in the area, which isn't an easy feat in Phuket, but with his background as a top chef in various high-end resorts all over the world, he insisted that only the best would do, and he'd always find a way—but that his absolute favourite way to maintain a high standard



when it comes to the dishes he creates is to take advantage of the local cuisine and markets, since the closer something is, and the more natural it is to a region, the more fresh and nutrient-packed it'll be. And that is evident in the menus, where guests are able to enjoy everything from Thai to Western food, but it's all created while making the best

possible use of the regional ingredients available to the team. From a meaty, Thai-style prawn salad to the lightest, crunchiest golden bags we'd ever tried, to a luscious steak, hot and spicy curry, silky and fragrant rice dishes and some creative desserts such as a durian-based cheesecake, each meal was a delight, and never one that left us feeling heavy or

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Getting There

Travelling to Phuket directly from Dubai is easy: Emirates offers a direct flight there, making it possible to get there within a roughly 6 to 7 hour trip. Once you've arrived in the Phuket airport, the Aleenta staff can arrange to have a car sent to pick you up and take you directly to the resort, which is a roughly 30-40 minute drive away. Alternatively, there are a number of airlines that fly from Dubai to Bangkok—now including FlyDubai, which recently introduced Thailand to their ever-growing portfolio of destinations at their usual affordable prices—and from there, it's fairly easy to book a connecting flight from Bangkok to Phuket on a local or Asian airline, though this will add a certain number of hours to your journey. So if you're going for a short trip, we'd suggest flying direct.

If you're flying to Al Bustan in Oman, FlyDubai also offers flights to Muscat, from which it's a short car ride, but driving there the whole way is possible. The drive takes roughly 4-5 hours from the UAE border (and after dark, the road lighting is very limited on the mountainous areas), so we'd only suggest driving if you're headed there for at least three days or longer. But it is absolutely possible and some of the views—particularly those on the route via Nizwa—are stunning. Whether you choose to take the beachside or mountainous route to and from Al Bustan Palace once you've entered Oman, however, it's important to plan your drive in advance, to ensure successful border crossing: Currently, UAE expats are not allowed to cross the E44 strip between Al Madam and Hatta.



Al Bustan Palace, Oman

as though we had been overly indulgent. Which was the ideal complement to our training programme: The hotel offers a huge variety of activities, from Muay Thai to various types of yoga and more, alongside an impressively-equipped gym. If culture is what you seek, they offer everything from batik painting to market, town and boat exploration trips around

the area. After all of that activity, the spa is a must-visit: A spacious and extremely peaceful area that reflects the same unique, refreshing design as the rest of the resort (our enormous room's leather-bedecked features were a delightful cross between a saloon in the Wild West and the dark wood-panelled, trickling water-feature fuelled

vibe of an Asian tranquility centre), the staff here do it all, from beauty treatments like mani-pedis to facials and more, and of course, massages. Soothing, muscle-melting and utterly relaxing, by the time I went back home—after a final glorious evening of a private dinner on the beach set on the sand, which we wrapped up by releasing fire-infused lanterns

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into the night sky and making a wish—I felt like a new person and was already planning my next trip back.

Find out more about Aleenta Phuket Resort and Spa at aleenta.com.

Most residents of the UAE are quite familiar with the craggy mountains of Oman, our more rugged and raw neighbour, but the Al Bustan area seems to be one that is, unfortunately, far too often overlooked. And what a pity that is, since in the area is an absolute gem of a location—one that is so grand that it's impossible to describe it as a hidden gem. It's simply far too big for that—it's a palace, after all, complete with its own resplendent, entirely gold-bedecked, sparkling and breathtaking high ceilings when you walk in. While the hotel is technically in Muscat, the Ritz Carlton Al Bustan Palace feels like its own little world tucked away on the edge of the sea, with a cove that overlooks its own waters, where guests can do everything from Stand Up Paddleboarding to Kayaking and more through their extensive watersports centre.

It's in their list of "things to do" that this hotel really shines: You see, this may be a Ritz Carlton, and a palace, but while everything they offer is of the luxurious standard you'd expect from a brand of that calibre, it's not just about kicking back and enjoying the glamour of it all. Sure, if that's what you're after, then that's absolutely possible—their infinity pool alone is reason enough to see why this spot is equally as popular with the locals and area residents as it is with those visiting for a stay, and the food here, particularly that in Al Khiran Terrace, is exceptionally good, from their breakfasts to dinners—but here, they take great pride in offering up not just plenty of things to do, but a unique set of them at that, not to mention a majority of them designed

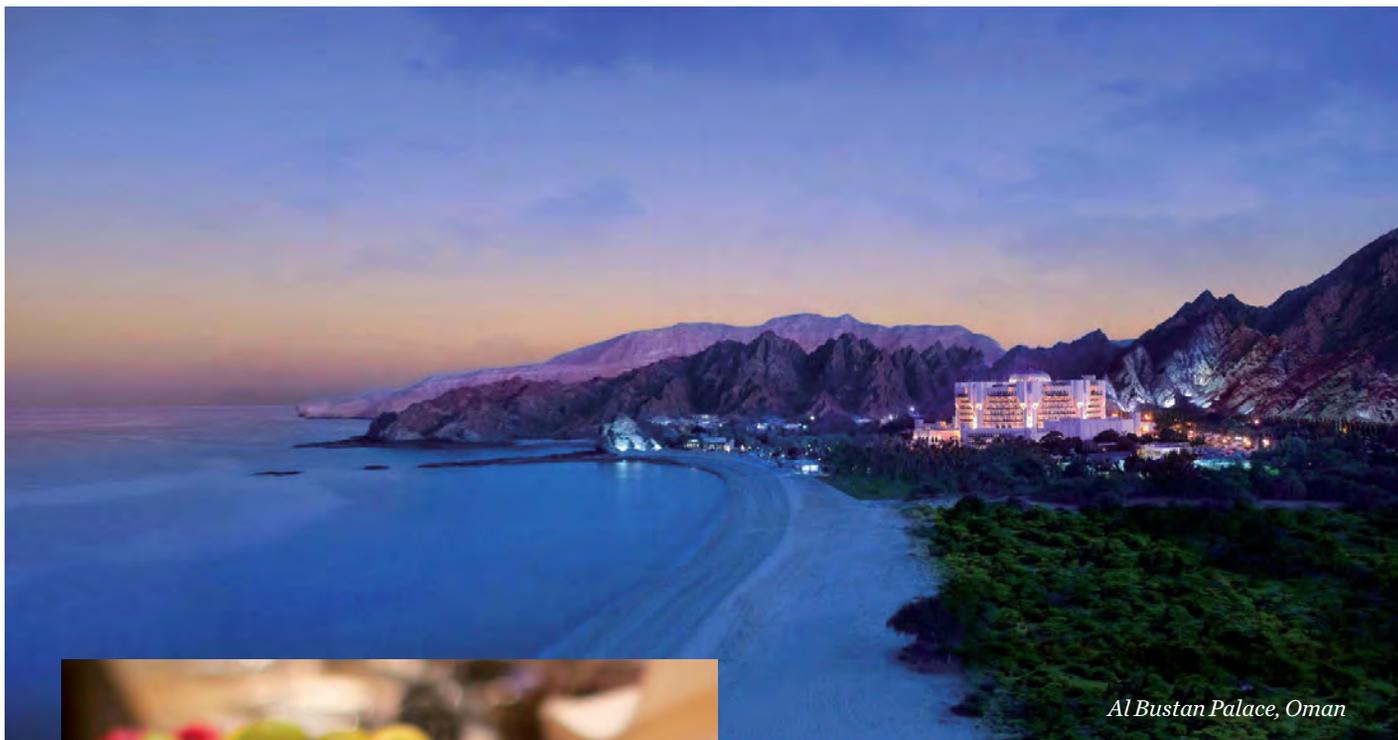


Al Bustan Palace, Oman

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with wellness in mind. In fact, this place is a veritable treasure trove of activities and facilities that are designed with your health and wellbeing in mind, from full moon yoga classes held on its garden terrace when the moon permits, to a well-equipped gym, and a dedicated sports and recreation area that even boasts its own tennis courts. And it would be a real shame not to take advantage of that: Although I was an absolute novice at the sport, I booked in





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take up the sport this year, and I wished I could stay longer to take a couple more lessons. But I had to rush off to the spa, since I was due for a wellness consultation, and it was definitely not something I'd want to miss.

The Six Senses Spa at the Al Bustan Palace is one of the most serene we've ever been to, and not just because it's so spacious and well-designed that it feels like a separate island of its own, with a maze of passages with a different place to rest around each corner. Here, they take their commitment to wellness from the inside out seriously, and while their massages are simply excellent—my deep tissue option soothed my desperate and weary muscles tremendously—it's actually in their wellness consultations, run by physiotherapists and other industry pros, that their most impressive feature lies. After a quick discussion about my lifestyle habits, during my consultation, I was hooked up to an EIS (Electro Interstitial Scanning) machine. The Spa has collaborated with doctors and neuroscientists to create a

programme designed for each individual, based on the results of their analyses and scans, which measure your vital positions, stress levels, internal environment, and more. These programmes are designed specifically for the Spa, and according to my consultant, a physiotherapist, they'd even worked with big names like Dr. Oz to come up with this offering. My test measured everything from my nutrition to my water levels, muscle tone and stress levels, and while as an individual who is extremely self-aware when it comes to both my health and my mental state, I am typically very well-versed in what is going on in my body, even I was a little taken aback by the results. I knew I was stressed, but the levels at which this was affecting not only my body composition but my overall health was eye-opening. I was never more glad that I'd taken the weekend for myself, so I could head home refreshed, invigorated, and armed with plenty of food for thought for a better lifestyle down the line. *Find out more at ritzcarlton.com/en/hotels/oman/al-bustan*

for a lesson with one of their experts. Their tennis services are provided by Peter Burwash International, the world's premier tennis management company, specialising in tennis activities and programme development for five-star resorts, hotels and tennis clubs worldwide. My instructor was encouraging

and broke it down into such clear and simple step-by-step instructions—which he had tailored to descriptions that would suit both my personality and my background in sport, after learning a little bit about me—that I made leaps and bounds on the court, and not just physically. By the time I left, I'd decided I wanted to