

When the pressures and pace of urban life pile up, it is possible to get away to a resort that manages to combine luxury with an ecological conscience. Amber Melville-Brown reports

# resort

## Green desert

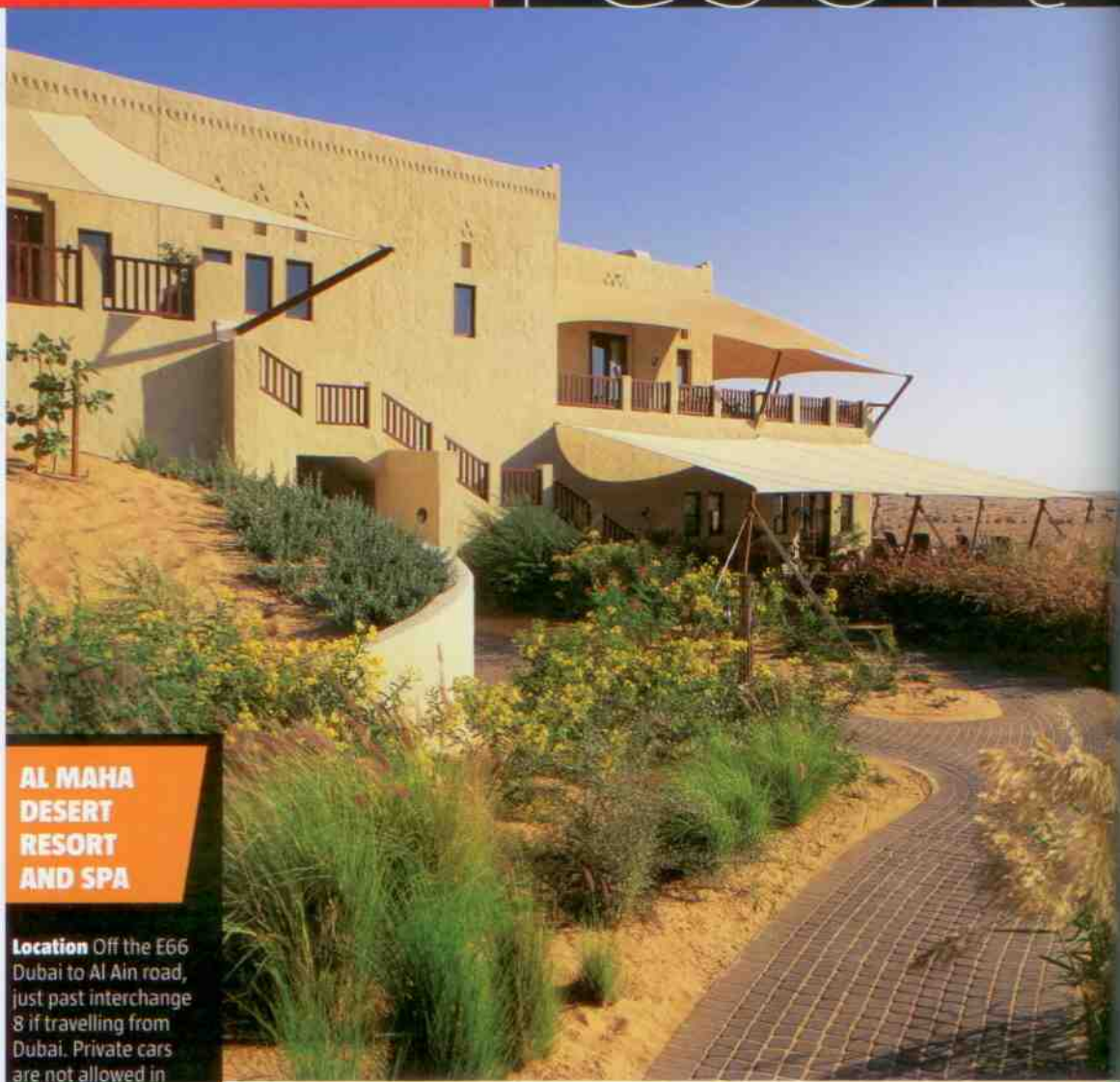
Continuing the theme of ecological issues – which were front row and centre in *The Brief* last month – for those who want to take their minds off polluted urban sprawl and travel to a place where environmental protection is put into practice, there is a project just outside Dubai City confines that claims to be making significant progress.

The 27-square-kilometre Al Maha Desert Resort and Spa is a hotel set in an impressive 225 square kilometres of pristine desert landscape. Three years ago it was launched as the Dubai Desert Conservation Reserve (DDCR) in a joint project by the Dubai government and the airline, Emirates.

At nearly five per cent of Dubai's land area, this is the largest piece of land in the emirate used for a sole purpose. And that purpose is conservation. According to Sheikh Ahmed Bin Saeed Al Maktoum, the chairman and chief executive of Emirates and group chairman of DDCR: "We are increasingly aware of the urgent need to take good care of our priceless natural heritage, all the more so as Dubai is expanding so fast. The reserve protects our last unspoilt desert and unique Arabian way of life for future generations to enjoy."

And enjoy it you can, at less than an hour's drive from Dubai on the road to Al Ain. The resort is designed to reflect a Bedouin encampment, each private villa surrounded by native ghafl trees and bristle grass giving them a secluded air.

Inside, the villas are wood and marble, the cushion-festooned double bed overlooking two luxurious chaise-lounge sofas. From there you can gaze through panoramic glass doors towards your private, mini-swimming pool into whose azure waters



### AL MAHA DESERT RESORT AND SPA

**Location** Off the E66 Dubai to Al Ain road, just past interchange 8 if travelling from Dubai. Private cars are not allowed in the conservation area, so motorists are advised to telephone on their approach so that transport can be sent to the main gate.

**Restaurant** Al Diwaan, Middle East and international cuisine.

**Facilities** Spa, conference and meeting rooms

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twittering birds dip. A large marble bathroom completes the romantic hideaway atmosphere.

However, you can eschew the comfort of a villa to have the soft wings of sleep brushed away by the swift wings of Al Maha's falcons. In the cool, early morning air, they will perform over the ochre dunes like feathered spitfires. Alternatively, there is a sunset, desert camel trek and the pleasures of the luxurious spa, where thoughts of the city can be massaged away, as wild oryx – which have spectacularly sprung back from extinction – nonchalantly stroll around the natural fossil water swimming pool.

Out in the unprotected desert there is a variety of wild species – threatened Arabian and sand gazelles, spiny tailed lizards, Arabian horned vipers and scores of native and migratory birds from the Little Green Bee-eater to the Spotted Flycatcher.

While Al Maha is a tourist resort, it is one with a difference, and one that perhaps can make a difference. "We have a definite role to play in Dubai," says conservation manager Gregory Simkins, discussing the base-line surveys of native wildlife his team is conducting. "The desert is what is unique to Dubai as a tourist destination. Conservation areas have



to be self-sustaining, they can't rely on handouts. If managed carefully, conservation and tourism can co-exist."

The 32-year-old South African is optimistic about the future.

"About four years ago, I assisted in conducting an impact report on the general area, which included what was going on in the desert. Our report included a proposal that Dubai set up a conservation area," he continues almost incredulously at his own good fortune: "In a matter of weeks, that report made its way to Sheikh Mohammed [Dubai's ruler] and within another two weeks, we got the go-ahead on the project. We are now applying for protection from United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation and the United Nations Environment Programme, which we hope to get within a year."

Someone else looking to make a difference is Al Maha's new chef, Marion Lovell. What made this 40-year-old ex-army chef from Bristol, in southwest England – who has cooked for the British royal family, achieved three rosettes and trained with Raymond Blanc – move to Dubai several months ago? "I thought this was somewhere I could make an impact," she says. As well as her culinary skills, Al Maha was impressed with her all-encompassing ideas for the kitchen and the restaurant, Al Diwaan, including greater use of recycling, composting, rainwater and solar energy – much needed in a country that must reduce its ecological footprint.

Lovell fell into cookery when she joined the army aged 18. But she fell in love with it years later, having taken time out to do an environmental science degree. She now incorporates that knowledge into her cooking. She aims to produce "good food with

a conscience", wherever possible sourcing herself what passes through the kitchen. She has already sourced local tea for the spa (from Abu Dhabi and Lebanon) and plans to tackle food snobbery that dictates, for example, that (air-freighted) New Zealand lamb should be preferred over local meat from farms right on the doorstep.

"Local farmers naturally don't force feed or battery-farm animals," she points out, hoping to increase the locally sourced produce Al Maha uses from the current one-third. "The first thing I did when I got here was to source local veg and herbs," which she describes as her "biggest passion". According to Lovell, there has been a "massive push" in the UK towards ethical eating; and she wants to spread that message in Dubai.

Lovell's longstanding plans to revamp the kitchen have already finally taken off under her charge, and she also aims to change the menu, adding more of an Arabic element. She is not afraid of hard work, or of pursuing a campaign through to its fruition. In the UK, Lovell was involved in a project to persuade food stores to give their out-of-date, but still perfectly edible, products to the hungry homeless.

But no one will go to bed hungry at Al Maha. The menu Lovell has inherited is a massive five courses that would test even the heartiest appetite. "The army is not about making beautiful food," she recalls, "it is about slopping it out on a plate." That certainly cannot be said of the meals at Al Maha, although the slightly corporate feel to the restaurant decor is disappointing in light of the romance of the remainder of the resort.

But, with the desert night air cooler than in the city, it is bearable, even



pleasant, to sit out and enjoy a meal overlooking the (man-made, spotlit) water hole. Having said that, the current menu with massive starter, creamy vegetable soup, sorbet and a steak the size of one's head, was too big and too rich for my taste for a hot desert evening.

Lovell seems alert to this. When her menus are adopted, diners will be offered meals that are still substantial – and as locally sourced as possible – but appear more subtle and sensual. They will start with an amuse bouche, which Lovell says is vital as it "tells diners what they can expect".

What you can expect at Al Maha is conservation and ethics coming together in beautiful surroundings. Guests can enjoy the natural beauty of the country, naturally beautiful local food and glorious pampering. The seriously environmentally conscious might raise an eyebrow. The service is such that towels are changed every day, leading to the use of an unnecessary amount of water, cleaning products and fuel. And individual soaps and shampoos in the villas could simply be replaced with refillable bottles.

But while the resort is contributing to protecting the local landscape and wildlife, it is perhaps churlish to niggle. Then again, if the owners are already doing so much, they may be open to improvements that will allow them to show off environmentally friendly credentials of which they can be even more proud.

And perhaps Gregory Simkins and Marion Lovell – whose enthusiasm for their respective missions is infectious – can make the difference they strive for, carrying management, government and guests on that tide of optimism. Meanwhile, Al Maha is about as close to a desert paradise as you can get. ●