

Amber Melville-Brown gets involved in a bit of surf and turf action – seafood at The Dhow, followed by beef at The Exchange

# eat

## Romantic sailing

What happens to a dhow – the traditional Arab sailing vessel – when it has done its share of dhowing? One lucky specimen is living out its retirement as a charming, romantic seafood restaurant at Le Meridien Mina Seyahi Beach Resort and Marina hotel.

Moored at the end of a half-kilometre pier (a buggy will take you there and back if it's too hot, you're too lazy, or too full), from its upper deck you can sample a glass of wine or a cocktail, avoid the traffic and noise of Dubai and imagine you are looking back over the New York sky-line. Sadly too, you can also look over the building site that is the Palm Jumeirah.

Being the late summer, we could only manage one aperitif in the muggy heat on deck, before going below for our meal. Escorted past the sashimi chef's station, we were taken to the sharp end – the bow of the dhow – where we sat on a raised platform with four other tables overlooking the three-quarters full restaurant, which rang to the sound of happy chatter and the crooning of old favourite, Frank Sinatra.

My meal began with three reasonable-sized shrimp, perched on the rim of a cocktail glass filled with avocado ice cream, like bathers at the edge of a cold green swimming pool. Allowed to take a dip, however, they found the ice cream surprisingly sweet, although saved by the sharp, green wine seaweed that topped the ice cream ball. My companion's chilli squid outdid that, spicy – not overpowering – and crispy, it came in thick chunks and satisfied completely.

As still-life (literally and metaphorically) collections of various shellfish appeared on other tables to rapturous welcomes, we awaited our main courses. Greedily ordering two starter portions of salmon sashimi backfired, as the seven slices



per portion of pink heaven were thick and plentiful.

Opting for the chef's choice of cooking style (although you can risk his wrath and choose a number of others) my companion's pan-fried barramundi topped unusually roasted watermelon and thick, creamy pureed fennel. Of course, being a Brit he also ordered chips, some of which seemed to be battered and deep-fried.

Eschewing dessert, we lingered over our drinks to soak up the romance of this relatively unromantic city – fine food, a charming atmosphere and an unusual setting. Recommended. ●



### THE DHOW

**Location** Le Meridien Mina Seyahi Beach Resort and Marina Hotel, Al Sufouh Road, Dubai

**Cuisine** Seafood

**Timings** Open daily from 5pm to 12am

**Contact Tel** +971 4 399 3333



## THE EXCHANGE GRILL

**Location** The Exchange Grill is in the Fairmont Hotel, Sheikh Zayed Road, Dubai

**Cuisine** Traditional meat-oriented

**Timings** Open daily from 7pm to 12am

**Dress code** business/smart casual

**Reservations** booking is recommended and required for the private dining rooms

**Contact tel** +971 4 332 5555

## A meaty bill

But for the view out of the window – a stretch of the buzzing Sheikh Zayed Road and a building site with its ubiquitous Crane City apparatus – we could be in a steak house in London or New York. Well, apart from the fact that licensed restaurants in Dubai are in hotels, rather than warm and cosy hideaways of London streets or character-filled converted warehouses that one finds in New York.

Accordingly, despite the starched white table cloths and the deep, comfy, dark brown leather armchairs, the restaurant was somewhat lacking in atmosphere. So, we could be in a London or New York steak house, but for the location and the atmosphere.

What I mean is this: The Exchange Grill is the type of place that you go to in Dubai if you otherwise would have wanted to frequent an up-market

London or New York steakhouse. And you wanted to show off. It is, to put it bluntly, an expensive place for meat eating suits.

Shepherded to our window seat – there are not in fact many of these and when the building site is filled with a building, there will be very little view at all – we were somewhat surprised to see trundling towards us a 1970s Italian restaurant-style dessert trolley. Only this contained a barrel of ice and three bottles of champagne. All waiters are taught how to “sell up” and when ours politely asked, “A glass of champagne to start, madam?” I found it hard to refuse. I should have done. Three glasses – one each for my companion and me and one for luck – of Laurent Perrier Rose set us back AED630, half the entire bill for the meal. Perhaps that is why, when the

first two glasses contained not one bubble between them, our waiter was more than happy – once he had been asked, as he did not seem to notice – to pour us another two.

I opted to start with the beef carpaccio, fairly decent chilled wafer thin slices. My companion chose the Caesar salad, traditional steakhouse fare. But this was not any old Caesar. The long and crisp lettuce leaves stood proudly to attention in a toasted Parmesan cheese cylinder. Attractive to the eye, although not so easy on the eating as the fine soldiers had to be felled to the ground and their protective armouring smashed to smithereens.

After a Caesar, one has to have a large piece of meat. My companion chose the veal chop; pink not white, we were reliably informed by the waiter who had to scurry off to ask the chef as the diner refused to allow a crated animal on his plate.

The meat was beautifully cooked, tender yet with a crisp, dark brown exterior that oozed flavour. Broccoli gratin was al dente and creamy (in the right order) and the steamed asparagus was perfectly acceptable, though nothing to enthuse about.

My tiger prawn option – “a very good choice, madam, after the carpaccio,” according to the sycophantic staff – however, was not. The little fellows were cold, diminutive and quite frankly, dull. Had any one of them been a blind date, I would have left them long before the wine waiter had poured out an overly expensive glass of non-bubbly bubbly.

With a belly full of large veal chop soaking up expensive champagne, a man’s desire will turn to... a cigar. And a bulging suit doesn’t have far to waddle to the cigar bar next door to keep up appearances and to finish off the experience. ●