

# A cultural journey, a lesson in luxury



Qasr Al Sarab Desert Resort emerges like something out of a fairytale, gently making itself known by stealthily rising out of the undulating dunes of the Liwa Desert, the world's largest uninterrupted sand desert

The design of the Anantara hotel had to pay homage to the historical and cultural significance of its location, and also to celebrate the natural beauty of its setting. The resort is subtle and at peace with its surroundings, and there is a tranquil transition from climbing the dunes in the car to walking through the hotel entrance.

"Qasr Al Sarab is to be a point of pride  
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for the Emirati people and the nation of Abu Dhabi. The Tourism Development & Investment Company [TDIC] brief was to develop and deliver a world-class design that respects the distinctive history of Abu Dhabi's interior architecture in every detail, from the patterns woven into textiles to the signature palm frond-woven barasti homes, to the Bedouin wind towers and artefacts from a culture dating back five millennia," said the hospitality design consultancy HBA – the specialists behind the development.

The library, which runs off of the main lobby, is a prime example of how the culture and history of the region have been carefully observed. The space is an eclectic mix of books, artefacts and knick-knacks covering the tables and walls. From specimens mounted behind glass to pencil-drawn pictures, camel statues and regional history books the comforting sense of the old and proven is all around. It's not stuffy old-world formal but more like a personal collection you can imagine being owned some bearded historian-cum-explorer.

## Discretion in the desert

"Qasr Al Sarab goes beyond creating a clear sense of place: it embodies a culture, a way of life, and the broad, romantic desert that shaped both. This careful reinterpretation of Abu Dhabi's historic architecture also



features every luxury that sophisticated travellers might expect of the world's top-tier resorts and carefully draw in every interior space," the designers continue.

In a magnificent setting such as the Al Rub' al Khali – better known as the Empty Quarter – the worst thing the hotel could do is appear as an obnoxious and out-of-place structure marring the fluidity of the desert horizon. Thankfully this is not a Nevada – Las Vegas relationship, the resort is subtle and tasteful. With luxury that speaks volumes, but in more of a gentle whisper with a posh accent than a Burj Al Arab-style holler.

The hotel lobby is a welcoming oasis, reaching through from the entrance and reception area to a little lounge, with a water feature in earthy glistening mosaics running through the centre.

The picturesque setting is displayed at its finest by floor-to-ceiling windows that offer some pretty special views. The iced tea is pretty good too. The room is kitted out with intricately carved wooden tables, and robust armchairs in heavy, textured upholstery and lots of studding detail. Studs and mosaic in one room and I'm like a dog with two tails.

The colour palette in the hotel interior

is understated nudes that mirror the outdoors. It's all about rich dark woods and leathers, warm earth-toned walls and floors covered with red carpets and metallic accents in lighting and accessories. There is none of the gaudiness you would, at times, expect when designers are tasked with creating an exclusive, high-end space.

The buildings boast the classic Arabic architectural style, like a desert palace. The public areas and passageways are all high-volume ceilings and you won't get far without encountering a traditional artwork or craft. The rooms are fitted with heavy,

dark wood beds with luscious white linen; the furniture is bulky and purposeful with intricate carving and stud detail. The cut-above amenities like the coffee machine are discreetly placed within a central wall unit that

houses the television and storage space, and such. Even the remote controls are tucked away in a leather-wrapped box while the obligatory fruit basket is transformed in to an embellished wooden treasure chest with organic dried fruit. They're good.

### Decidedly homegrown

The designers haven't tried to bring Paris or Tuscany to Liwa – it is definitive in its commitment to the traditions of the area and its respect for the culture for which the location is known. HBA supports the use of local materials and textiles in its interior design. The company supervised the furniture manufacturing at local factories; and employed regional artisans to cast custom patterns that reinforce the culture in every small detail.

The companies that specified for the project include Tarrab Trading, Brass Light, Sandeep, Townsend Leather, Brunschwig & Fils, Atmosphere, Maroc Décor, Tazi Furniture and Deniz Tunc & Interiors International.

The HBA team, along with the TDIC

“This collaboration between tradition and innovation was essential to accomplish a successful design that respects the natural environment”



design team, spent months researching the UAE's heritage, religion and arts, paying special attention to how people lived in ancient Abu Dhabi. Intense study of structures in Dubai's historical Bastakiya district, Al Ain Museum's famed Eastern Fort, as well as mosques souks and museums throughout the country resulted in an unprecedented level of accuracy and cultural continuity," says HBA.

"Given the historic and cultural significance of this property, we worked in close collaboration with TDIC and Emirati scholars to ensure the truthfulness of desert living. Fundamental to that truthfulness we design the romance and mystique of the past, while creating an experience of luxury, comfort and hospitality that is central to Emirati culture."

HBA explains that it understood the importance of the project and what TDIC tries to accomplish in its tourism developments. The design team wanted to keep the property as a pure cultural experience, and I would say they hit the





## Safir hotels and residences, Kuwait The newest member of Safir family

Safir Hotels & Resorts are pleased to introduce to the hospitality market the latest addition: Safir Hotels & Residences Kuwait, and welcome the guests to a new experience.

It is strategically located in Fintas, near the heart of Kuwait's oil and gas business district, with magnificent views of the Arabian Gulf. Each of the 150 spacious guest rooms, suites and apartment, have been carefully designed to offer great comfort and total convenience.

The hotel offers seven fully equipped, flexible banquet and meeting rooms with the latest audio-visual equipment, IT facilities and wireless connections that are set to suit all business needs.

The dining experience will suit all palates, from Al Roshinah Restaurant - an authentic Kuwaiti restaurant serving local delicacies and famous Arabic dishes. Other food and beverage offerings include Flavors Restaurant and Chit Chat Restaurant & Café.

The Design team headed by Safir Hotels & Resorts Technical Department transformed the development into a new 'experience hotel', offering its own unique new take on "luxury".

The collaboration with the developer through the design process established the mutual respective obligations to one another's efforts.

Guided by the goals and aspirations of the owner and the cultural context of the property and location, as well as the basic motto of any hotel to be a "home away from home" unique spaces were created, providing warm welcome and experience for the guests.

"When design and operation converge — we can feel we succeeded. We knew the hotel needed to be different from the other hotels, we wanted it to be eclectic, opulent, and uniquely contextual, but in the same time contemporary in order to satisfy guests from all ages" stated the Group Director of Design. The use of warm, bold colors, rich fabrics, home accessories, plants and the rich selection of contemporary artwork from Kuwaiti and Arab World artists enabled this unique look.

The team believes it has achieved the goal of creating an interior with a story to tell, which is starting a new era and new look for Safir Hotels and Resorts. ●



mark. Although the designers were clearly intent on keeping it real and sticking to the facts the place still has a fairytale or fantasy appeal, conjuring up a sense of romance and mystique.

Public relations manager Gesche Dimitriou explains that Arab style hotels tend to adopt a Moroccan feeling rather than being region specific, but Qasr Al Sarab has steered away from the generic version, rather opting for details like commissioning artworks for the hotel from local artists. "It's not just a five-star property, it's a landmark for Abu Dhabi," Gesche comments.

The designers took the best of international luxury and local relevance to create an authentic feel with a very considered attention to detail. She notes that in one instance the Barasti roofing was not done using the traditional technique and it ended up being re-done with the guidance of a specific consultant. Not something I'd imagine a visitor sipping their chilled beverage would be quick to point out. However, it's details like this that make Qasr Al Sarab a unique experience – unadulterated luxury, and culture without the gimmicks. **91**

## The details

**Qasr al Sarab** is located deep into Liwa Desert which is part of Al Rub' al Khali, more familiarly known as the Empty Quarter, the resort sits amid the world's largest uninterrupted sand desert. South Africa's Northpoint, the name behind the Green Valley Golf and Marina Resort in Mauritius and Portugal's Lisbon Centre, designed **Qasr Al Sarab's** concept architecture. The two-kilometre long property is composed of 14 buildings, rendered in the style of the ancient forts that dotted Abu Dhabi in its early days. **Qasr al Sarab** features 154 guestrooms, 42 public villas and ten royal villas forming the private Royal Pavilion. The resort includes a magnificent hamman, a traditional bathhouse but with all the luxury and serenity of the best spas worldwide.