

# Desert dreaming

In a small corner of the vast Arabian Desert is an unusual destination that's leading the way in desert conservation and ultra luxurious eco-tourism

✎ KERI HARVEY 📷 KERI HARVEY ©THINKSTOCK.COM



The skyscraper city of Dubai is just 40 minutes away along a slick highway, and yet the Dubai Desert Conservation Reserve feels a million miles from everywhere. It's 225km<sup>2</sup> of sand and with iconic Al Maha resort at its heart, this small corner of the vast Arabian Desert at first seems nothing but naked dunes.

Well, that's how it appears to the untrained eye, but in reality this desert is full of life perfectly adapted to living in harsh, arid conditions. The large dhab lizard is one of these unique creatures. Throughout its life it never drinks water, and only emerges at temperatures over 37°C. It's also a delicacy for Bedouins, who roast it over the fire for dinner.

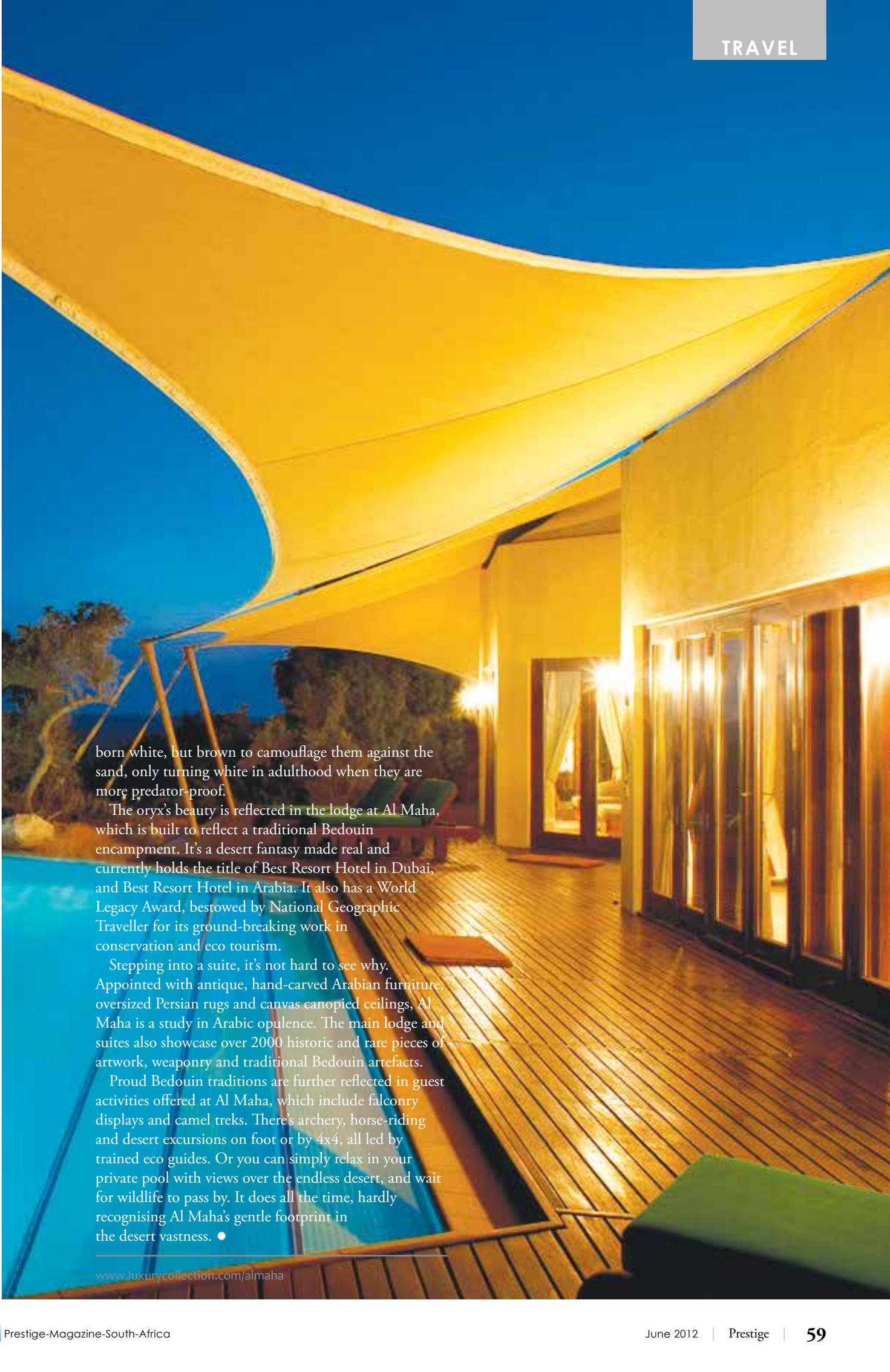
When it was proclaimed as the first wildlife and conservation area in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) in the late 1990s, the reserve was aggressively rehabilitated and over 6000 indigenous trees and shrubs were planted. Now well established, the plants support all the wildlife that naturally occurs in this desert and 38 mammal and reptile species native to the Arabian Peninsula live here, including the Arabian hare, sand fox, Arabian red fox, Gordon's wild cat, Arabian mountain gazelle and sand gazelle.

Just as at home are the ghaf trees, the national tree of the UAE, with root systems over 30m deep tapping into ground water.

But it is the regal, snow-white Arabian oryx for which Al Maha is renowned and named (Al Maha means "the oryx") and for good reason too, since this elegant antelope was virtually extinct in the 1970s. Now, due to Al Maha's focused conservation efforts there are more than 350 Arabian oryx on the reserve, back from the brink and doing well.

"They disperse to graze," says ranger Katherine Bacher as we watch a small group traverse the landscape. "Then they stand high on the sand dunes to spot each other in order to regroup and spend the night together." That's the purpose of the oryx's white colour, that and to keep them as cool as possible during the searing summer heat which reaches over 50°C. Bacher adds that they're not





born white, but brown to camouflage them against the sand, only turning white in adulthood when they are more predator-proof.

The oryx's beauty is reflected in the lodge at Al Maha, which is built to reflect a traditional Bedouin encampment. It's a desert fantasy made real and currently holds the title of Best Resort Hotel in Dubai, and Best Resort Hotel in Arabia. It also has a World Legacy Award, bestowed by National Geographic Traveller for its ground-breaking work in conservation and eco tourism.

Stepping into a suite, it's not hard to see why. Appointed with antique, hand-carved Arabian furniture, oversized Persian rugs and canvas canopied ceilings, Al Maha is a study in Arabic opulence. The main lodge and suites also showcase over 2000 historic and rare pieces of artwork, weaponry and traditional Bedouin artefacts.

Proud Bedouin traditions are further reflected in guest activities offered at Al Maha, which include falconry displays and camel treks. There's archery, horse-riding and desert excursions on foot or by 4x4, all led by trained eco guides. Or you can simply relax in your private pool with views over the endless desert, and wait for wildlife to pass by. It does all the time, hardly recognising Al Maha's gentle footprint in the desert vastness. ✨

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## An ancient and noble tradition

Falconry has been practised in the UAE for over 2000 years.

The nomadic Bedouin trained falcons to catch houbara bustards and hares, which made fine additions to a traditional meal. Today falconry is still popular, with the most expensive bird bought to date fetching \$350,000.

Traditionally, Bedouins trained their falcons by first catching a pigeon to which they strapped a date palm “back-pack” with a series of knots woven into it. They also removed some flight feathers and attached a rope to it so they could fly it like a kite. Between September and November, when falcons returned to the Arabian peninsula for winter, Bedouins flew their pigeons to attract them. As the falcon grabbed the pigeon its talons became entangled in the knots and the falcon was reeled in.

In the days before tailor-made leather hoods, Bedouins stitched the bird’s eyelids closed with a single stitch of camel hair. By removing sight, 80% of the bird’s senses were shut down. The falcon was placed in a tent with women and children to be exposed to the most noise and was not fed for a few days in order to establish the link between humans and food on which the relationship between falcon and owner is based.

After a few days the falcon was fed by rubbing meat on its feet, simultaneously the stitches keeping its eyes shut stretched and the bird could see again. Then food was placed on a leather glove and when the falcon jumped onto the glove to eat, it accepted the owner as a food source and most of its training was done.

Next the falcon was trained to hunt the lure, which was a small beanbag with a quail wing attached to it on a rope. If the falcon caught the beanbag, it got the quail wing as reward. Gradually the length of rope was increased, until the birds eventually attempted free flight.

It’s not unknown for birds to disappear back into the wild on their first free flight and some high priced falcons have done just that – but mostly they do come back. Peregrin, gyrfalcon and saker falcon are favoured for falconry, as they are extremely fast and efficient hunters.

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