

Escape

EXPLORE THE LIWA DESERT BY CAMEL AT
THE QASR AL SARAB DESERT RESORT.

ANANTARA HOTELS & RESORTS

DESERT DREAMS

All that glitters is gold at these Middle East resorts **BY PAUL RUBIO**

Escape

CLOCKWISE FROM RIGHT:
CENTRAL COURTYARD,
SPA, VILLA TERRACE, AND
FREE-FORM POOL AT QASR
AL SARAB.



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QASR AL SARAB HONORS ITS ANCIENT SURROUNDS BY EMBRACING ARABIAN DECOR AND ARCHITECTURE.

During your stay, you'll have the choice of doing everything or nothing, marooned in the Liwa Desert, mesmerized by the swaying dunes that change colors with the rise and fall of the sun. For those desiring more active pursuits, daily activities in and around the resort include sand sledding, land sailing, falconry, archery, and trekking through the desert by camel or even by foot. For those looking to relax, the Anantara Spa houses a hammam and a hydrotherapy circuit for pre- or post-treatment detox. For more resort-style fun, the principal swimming pool is idyllic for lounging and socializing, cocktail in hand.



towering, rust-hued dunes in the southernmost reaches of Abu Dhabi. From camel treks to desert sailing to unapologetic pampering in and around your remote Middle Eastern palace, there's no shortage of fodder for personal travel dispatches at this surreal retreat.

The peregrination begins with a road trip through the United Arab Emirates, either 90 minutes from the Abu Dhabi International Airport or three hours from Dubai. Development and civilization cease long before Qasr Al Sarab appears on the horizon, adding to the Arabian high as you drive deeper into the Liwa Desert. Finally, a twinkle of light and the resort comes into view—a vast medieval enclave dotted with soaring date palms surrounded by sky-high pillows of red sand.

You'll soon be swept away to your personal swath of luxury as each of the 205 rooms, suites, and villas sports an Arabian-chic motif and faces the endless desert. But it's the expansive villas—with floor-to-ceiling windows, private swimming pools (chilled, no less), massive terraces, and consummate butler service—that lend to more private desert indulgences.



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Qasr Al Sarab

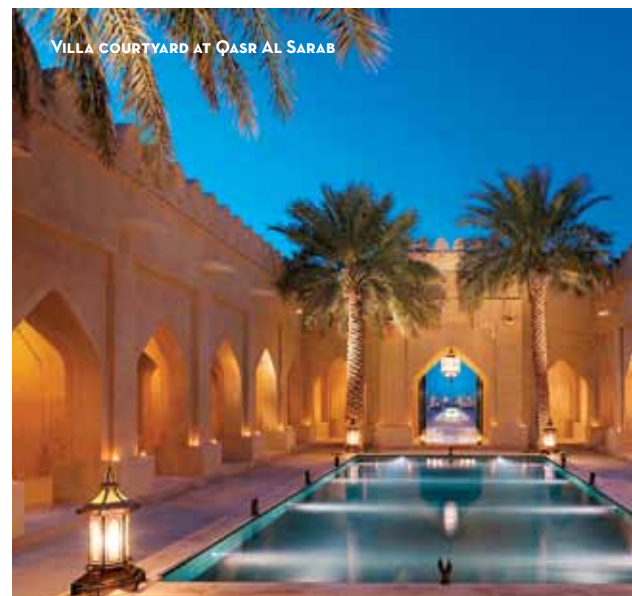
It's the kind of place where Princess Jasmine and Aladdin would live out their happily ever after. Smack in the middle of the Liwa Desert—the world's largest uninterrupted sand desert—sits a series of fortresses so breathtaking, so grand, so out of this world, it begs the question: Is this a Disney mirage or reality?

Answer: Reality. A reality called **Qasr Al Sarab Desert Resort by Anantara**, a five-star oasis of Arabian grandeur enveloped by



QASR AL SARAB'S LIBRARY HAS A COLLECTION OF MIDDLE EASTERN ARTIFACTS.

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VILLA COURTYARD AT QASR AL SARAB



PANORAMA FROM PRIVATE POOL (ABOVE) AND VILLA LOUNGE (RIGHT) AT QASR AL SARAB



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AL NAHHAM DECK AT THE BANANA ISLAND RESORT DOHA

Indoors, the resort's Spice Spoons program holds daily regional cooking classes. You'll leave the new king or queen of meze and Arabic cuisine after excellent hands-on instruction (and tastings) with two executive chefs. There are more chances to experience the prowess of the chefs and their team at the resort's five restaurants. One evening, be sure to book Dining by Design on the dunes so the team can privately cater your feast under the desert sky.

With vistas so surreal they brink on animation and experiences so theatrical they play out like reveries, you'll need to pinch yourself once or twice at Qasr Al Sarab to confirm this is indeed not an illusion. (*qasralsarab.anantara.com*)

Banana Island Resort Doha

Travel 40 minutes by ferry from the Qatari capital of Doha to discover a sleepy, uninhabited beach colony transformed into a modern paradise. **Banana Island Resort Doha** is a private-island escape that comprises a 96-room hotel and 34 beachfront villas, all of which exude a Maldivian-style vibe that sets it apart from Middle East competitors.

Annexed to Banana Island proper, 11 dreamy two- and three-bedroom overwater bungalows (measuring nearly 2,500 and 4,000 square feet, respectively) rise from the shallows of the Persian Gulf, exuding an aesthetic that's oh-so-Maldives on a gargantuan scale that's decidedly Middle Eastern. These floating palaces are decked out in elegant

Arabian design, strewn with intricate lattice-work and brass lanterns, and equipped with every modern amenity imaginable, including a sleek, cantilevered swimming pool.

At the resort, over-the-top amenities go beyond the typical ornate spa and gymnasium to include a bowling alley, a nine-hole putting course, a cinema, and a double-lane surf pool. An onsite dive center also facilitates daily trips to the nearby offshore reef.

Banana Island's cuisine spans multiple continents over eight outstanding restaurants. Savor the likes of succulent Lebanese delights, upscale Indian fare, and gourmet Italian meals, but don't expect to wash it down with fine wine or artisanal cocktails. Banana Island is a "dry" destination, which means this island rapture isn't for everyone. (*doha.anantara.com*)



SEA-VIEW VILLAS AT BANANA ISLAND RESORT DOHA INCLUDE PRIVATE POOLS AND A MILLION-DOLLAR VIEW.

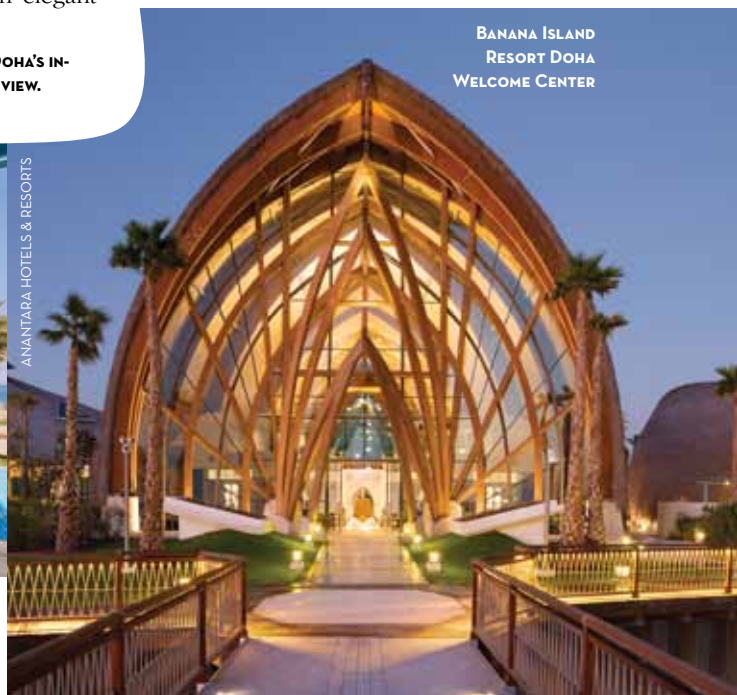
BANANA ISLAND RESORT DOHA WELCOME CENTER



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YOUR LOCAL EXPERT IN
THE GLOBAL ART MARKET



Top: a retro palladium, Burmese ruby and diamond ring, Tiffany & Co.; bottom: a fine platinum, emerald and diamond bracelet, Cartier

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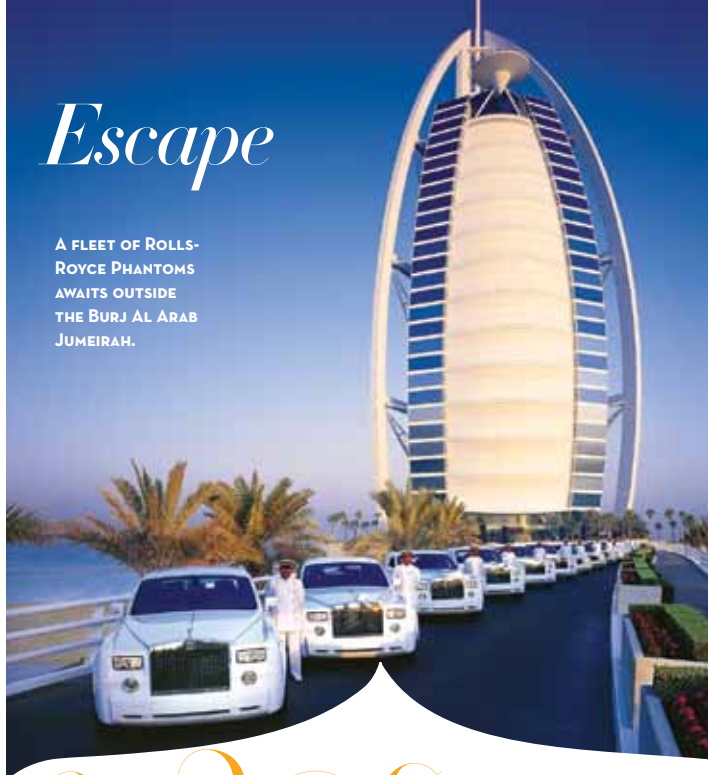
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Escape

A FLEET OF ROLLS-ROYCE PHANTOMS AWAITS OUTSIDE THE BURJ AL ARAB JUMEIRAH.



JUMEIRAH HOTELS & RESORTS

Burj Al Arab Jumeirah

If fabulous shopping, larger-than-life attractions, and the allure of a seven-star hotel make your heart skip a beat, then Dubai will not disappoint. The emirate electrifies with physics-defying skyscrapers (including the world's tallest building, Burj Khalifa), more than 100 shopping malls (such as The Dubai Mall, the world's biggest with 1,200 stores spread across 13 million square feet), and impossibly outrageous activities (like Ski Dubai, which offers indoor skiing, even in 125-degree heat).

In keeping with this extreme excess, the Tom Wright-designed **Burj Al Arab Jumeirah** embodies Dubai decadence. Each suite is a double-story, glass-encased masterpiece ranging from 1,820 to 8,400 square feet and arranged like puzzle pieces in a 56-story

building fashioned after the sail of a traditional *dhow*.

Though Dubai is world renowned for its glitzy offerings, several sights still capture the cultural heritage of the emirate and shouldn't be overlooked among the modern mayhem. Rub elbows with locals and barter with the best of them at the Gold Souk or the Deira Spice Souk. Admire the dramatic Islamic architecture around the city, and include a stop at the impressive Jumeirah Mosque. And if you don't plan on hitting the remote desert for a longer escape, spend the day traversing sand dunes on a desert safari, an exhilarating roller coaster-style adventure through Dubai's uninhabited terrain. (jumeirah.com)

BELOW: BAB AL YAM POOLSIDE RESTAURANT; LEFT: ROYAL SUITE.

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