

*Welcome the latest addition to the weekenduae family of writers! Rhiannon Oliver works freelance out of both the UAE and the UK, and besides writing is a professional actor.*

If you're looking for a relaxing, sophisticated retreat from busy city life, look no further than the multi-award-winning desert resort and spa Bab Al Shams.



On arrival, we were met with a genuinely warm welcome and a cool refreshing drink – a warmth and hospitality that happily proved characteristic. Staff here are uniformly friendly, polite, and pleased to help.

The 5 star hotel, modelled on a traditional Arabic Fort, is well designed, creating a sense of space and openness even when its 115 rooms are at full capacity (as it was during our visit). Sand coloured buildings, serene water features, blooming flower-beds, and palm trees festooned with fairy lights, create a natural, unassuming sense of luxury.



This natural yet opulent vibe continued into our spacious and elegantly designed bedroom. Beautiful dark wood furniture creates a cosiness and sense of history, but the room has all mod cons too: there was excellent wifi, a mini bar, nespresso machine, large flat screen TV and, in the well sized bathroom, a plethora of fab goodies (including bath salts and conditioner that actually works!)



The room led onto a tranquil terrace with views of the desert - the perfect spot for a morning coffee. But the star attraction? One of the most comfortable and certainly the most enormous beds I've ever had the good fortune to sleep in.



Although for us, relaxation was the keynote, there are plenty of activities to keep the more energetic occupied. Guests can enjoy croquet, boules, mini golf, table tennis, volleyball, badminton and giant chess for free, and there are also complimentary camel rides and a falcon display at 5pm each day. If you want to venture outside of the resort, the hotel can also arrange desert tours by horse, camel or 4×4. Or, if you want to take your relaxation more seriously, pay a visit to the small but perfectly formed Satori Spa.



We couldn't visit without an early evening stop at Al Sarab rooftop lounge: as we were proudly informed at check-in, it's rated number 1 of 8527 restaurants in Dubai on tripadvisor. With wraparound desert views, warming heaters, and musical accompaniment from a traditional oud player, it's a very popular choice for sunset refreshments, but there were plenty of attentive staff and our drinks and tasty Arabic mezze came quickly.

Appetite piqued, we headed to dinner, wandering along walkways lined with scores of traditional lanterns that light up as the sun goes down. When it comes to food, Bab Al Shams is perhaps most well known for Al Hadeerah - the large scale Arabic buffet restaurant and traditional show (music, camels, falcons, dancers etc) but we did well to visit the smaller Indian restaurant Masala.



We dined in an atmospheric courtyard to the sound of an excellent live Indian band (sitar, tabla and harmonium) and the food was, without exception, excellent. Highlights included a moreish pot of 'deconstructed' Onion Bhaji, generously cheesy Palak Paneer, creamy Chicken Tikka Makhani and a kebab sampler with beefy prawns, spicy lamb and succulent tandoor chicken. Our lovely (and hugely knowledgeable) waiter Sarfaraz persuaded us to find space for cooling deserts of Kulfi Shah Pasand (ice cream made from saffron scented reduced milk) and Rasmali (a homemade cottage cheese dumpling poached in sweet and flavoured saffron milk). Both were great choices.



After a good night's sleep, I took a not so early morning swim to work up an appetite for breakfast, and to my delight, the pool was all mine. Even if I hadn't been so lucky, the large pool area means there is always room for everyone even when the hotel is full: no running down to earmark your sun lounger here.

I thought I might struggle to find room for breakfast after our delicious Indian feast but the sheer range of choice on display at Al Forsan restaurant won me over. Choose from numerous fresh and dried fruits, yoghurt and cereals (there are six different types of muesli), a wide variety of breads, cakes and pastries (including a vivid rainbow bread for a particularly bright start to the morning!), and the largest display of breakfast spreads I've ever seen - I counted 13 different types of honey! Cheeses, cold meats, smoked salmon and salads are also on offer alongside an omelette bar and a full range of cooked breakfast items. You won't go hungry.

After a nap by the pool we left rested, restored and determined to visit again.



In short, it's easy to see why Bab Al Shams won the 2015 World Travel Award for the World's leading Desert Resort. It's hugely recommended if you're looking to get away from it all for the weekend - especially if you like your food!