

Dubai nature reserve is an oasis

From the ancient sport of falconry to modern sandboarding, this nature reserve teeming with wildlife is just a short drive from the artificial world of Dubai

BY JOHN BALLEM, FOR THE CALGARY HERALD NOVEMBER 19, 2008

Less than an hour's drive from Dubai, that city on steroids, is a magical oasis, where desert animals thrive and have no fear of man. Fittingly, the first creature we see as the gate closes behind us is the oryx, the antelope that gave the 225-square-kilometre Desert Conservation Reserve its Arab name. That 225 square kilometres is five per cent of the Dubai Emirate's total land area.

With its long, curved, spear-like horns, the oryx looks as if it has strayed out of some mythological legend. Its story shows what can be achieved by a dedicated conservation program.

Doomed to extinction in its native Arabian desert by uncontrolled hunting, a number of oryx were trapped and sent to Arizona which has a similar climate to Dubai. Under "protective custody," they prospered and bred. Now their descendants roam their ancestral desert.

Another kilometre along the paved two-lane road and we marvel at the delicate silhouettes of young Arabian gazelles. Oryx, and their more conventional looking antelope cousins, were to be seen in all directions: alone, in pairs, and small herds. How could they survive in this barren landscape?

The answer was to be found in the sparse vegetation dotting the desert -- mainly clumps of fireweed, and acacia trees. Yes, trees! Stunted, trunks spindly and twisted, but undeniably trees, with a canopy of green leaves for antelope and camels to graze upon.

Our reading informed us that a subterranean water supply underlay the reserve. Water, like oil, tends to migrate toward the surface and these scrawny trees put down deep roots to tap into the life-giving source.

The only tourist accommodation allowed in the reserve is the Al Maha Resort and Spa. The resort is relatively new, having welcomed its first guests in 1999. It is advertised as being designed to resemble a Bedouin encampment, and we had visions of sleeping under canvas.

The reality could not have been more different: the main lodge, while faithfully Arabian in every detail, was more like a palace than a nomad's camp. "Opulent" was the word that sprang to mind. Guests were accommodated in what were called "suites," but were actually

separate cottages, each with its own private swimming pool. The decor and furnishings were pure desert Bedouin; but the only canvas was the roof over the patio.

A familiar mournful sound made Grace and I pause in our unpacking and stare at each other. It was the unmistakable call of a dove, the sound that to us is the signature of one of our favourite vacation destinations, Lanai, the "pineapple island" of Hawaii.

The gray Francolin is one of the many birds that have been successfully introduced to the reserve. We were soon to learn that the reserve is a birdwatcher's paradise with close to 90 species, indigenous and imported, resident and migrant. Stepping out onto the wooden deck, we watched three oryx cropping the grass on the irrigated green lawn bordering the pool. In my imagination, the oryx was really a unicorn that for some reason had grown an extra horn.

In addition to its incomparable setting, the resort offers a wide range of activities, all geared to the desert: archery, falconry demonstrations, nature walks, horseback and camel rides.

I had ridden show jumpers for years, as well as elephants in the jungles of Nepal, even ostriches, but never camels. Now was the time to remedy that omission. With its great height and shambling gait, the camel is the ideal way to explore the desert. Getting on board the "ship of the desert" is very different from blithely springing onto the back of a horse. You hang on grimly as the kneeling camel lurches to its feet, jerking you backward, then throwing you forward. The ones we rode were "saddle broke" and muzzled to keep them from biting and spitting. Their wild brethren wandered free throughout the reserve, stretching long necks to feed on the leaves of salam (acacia) trees. The spectacular desert sunsets are at their best when viewed from the back of a camel. Then comes the ride back to the lodge, cooled by a soft evening breeze.

The next "activity" was in hair-raising contrast to the cool serenity of the previous evening's camel ride. Careening over sand dunes in four-wheel-drive vehicles seems completely at odds with the conservation mandate of the reserve. The answer lies in zoning. The reserve is divided into four zones, each with limits on the permitted amount of human activity; the strictest prohibits any human intervention whatsoever, except for research.

One zone, the one we were in, was set aside for recreational pursuits. The whole project is well thought out. The resort, with strict limits on the number of guests, and no day visitors, provides the revenue essential for the operation of the reserve, while preserving the freedom of the wildlife.

These thoughts were swept aside as the driver -- South African, as were all the guides, and a qualified conservationist -- shifted gears and charged straight at an impossibly steep dune.

Violently swaying from side to side we made it to the top, then "took air" as the bank dropped away.

Next, we grabbed for the handholds as the Toyota tilted precariously on the vertical side of another dune. The right-hand wheels sunk deep into the sand while those on the left spun uselessly. Miraculously, we didn't roll over, but went slamming down into a sandy ravine. Even the experienced drivers can't be sure of what to expect as desert winds move the shifting sands in ever-changing patterns. Tire tracks disappear almost as soon as they are laid down and you never know what lies beyond the next dune.

This is brought home as one of the vehicles -- there were four in our little convoy -- drives over the crest of a dune and plunges headfirst into a rift. That's a routine occurrence and the mired Land Cruiser is quickly freed from the embrace of the sand.

As we resume our exhilarating, gut-wrenching journey, I remark to my fellow passenger that Toyota should film the ride and make it into a television commercial to show how the Land Cruiser can negotiate this challenging terrain. Many guests take a pass on the notoriously rugged jaunt, but the resort's superbly equipped and staffed spa is there to ease strained and aching muscles.

In search of more dunes to conquer, our guide opens a gate in the 98 kilometres of fence that encircle the reserve and we drive into Sharjah -- like Dubai, one of the seven United Arab Emirates. More heart-stopping scrambles and plunges over the dunes, and we head back to the reserve.

On the way we pass a camel farm. Inside the wire enclosure a baby camel nurses from its mother.

Once we are well back inside the reserve, our little caravan comes to a halt and we unbuckle the safety harness and clamber out. We soon learn the truth of the expression "shifting sands" as the grains slip and slide under our feet.

Gaining the top of the tallest dune, we are rewarded with the magnificent panorama of a sea of sand stretching endlessly to the horizon, with the Hajar Mountains as a backdrop. From this distance the low-lying mountains look like so many giant dunes. While we admire the view, the drivers rummage around in the rear compartment of their vehicles and, grinning triumphantly, produce -- of all things, snowboards! And so we are introduced to a new sport - sandboarding.

There was nothing new about the next sport we were introduced to -- falconry, the ancient pastime of sheiks and Arabian princes. In the relative cool of late afternoon, we were once more deep in the desert, admiring five peregrine falcons, hooded to keep them from flying off their perches. Behind each one stood its handler, the same all-purpose guides who took care of all the nature tours and activities.

One by one, the falcons were transferred to their handler's gloved hand, hoods were removed, lures were swung, and the world's fastest bird put on a thrilling aerial display, swooping and diving -- at times almost parting our hair -- before finally capturing the lure and bearing it to the ground. Afterwards, I welcomed the chance to get acquainted with one of the feathered performers.

Having witnessed the favourite sport of Arabian royalty, why not enjoy their favourite entertainment? In the flickering light of torches we hunker down on low ottoman cushions to dine on exotic dishes, and applaud a curvaceous belly dancer shimmering and swaying on a carpet spread out on the desert floor.

An early morning nature walk with a knowledgeable guide is a chance to see the smaller dune dwellers, the ones that hide during the heat of the day. Among them is that oxymoron -- a "sand fish" -- a beautifully proportioned lizard with a long cylindrical body that does, in fact, look remarkably fish-like. Just as unexpected is a shrub with an unfortunate name -- Sodom's Apple -- and gorgeous flowers. This desert flower is the favourite food of the Arabian gazelle, but deadly poison for every other creature. We pause to watch a gazelle make its way along a widely-spaced row of the flowering shrubs, selecting a bloom here and there for breakfast. A well-trodden path showed this to be a daily event.

Off to the east, the awakening sun spotlighted a solitary oryx motionless on a sand dune. This was the image I would take with me, together with the fervent hope that this desert sanctuary and the wildlife it nourished and protected, would survive and prosper.

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