



DUBAI: RETURN TO THE WILD

FAR FROM BEING A BARREN WILDERNESS, THE ARABIAN DESERT IS FULL OF LIFE. WHAT'S MORE, THANKS TO THE DUBAI DESERT CONSERVATION RESERVE, VISITORS TO THE EMIRATE CAN EXPERIENCE IT FOR THEMSELVES. WORDS: LAURA HOLT

Night is falling in the Dubai desert. This golden landscape of slowly shifting sands feels a world away from the mega malls and high-rise hotels at the heart of this ever-expanding emirate. Yet, I find myself hankering for just a glimmer of that garish light, as I take my first driving lesson amid the forbidding desert darkness.

Behind the wheel of a sturdy Nissan Xterra, I wait at the bottom of a vast dune, ready to surmount it. The trick, I'm told, is to accelerate up fast, taking my foot off the pedal just before I reach the top, allowing the vehicle to glide over. But tonight, there'll be no gliding for me. I try it once, twice, three times... and get consummately stuck in the sand, forcing a hasty retreat back down. The convoy of 4x4s fares no better, so it's down to Greg Simkins, conservation manager of the Dubai Desert Conservation Reserve (DDCR), to show us how it's done. Slamming his foot down, he shoots the trucks up and over the dune with ease, whisking us back to camp just in time for dinner.

This is all in a day's work for Greg, who navigates this web of delicate trails on a daily basis, as part of his job managing the 87sq mile DDCR. Opened in 2003, the reserve was set up by two of the emirate's wealthiest men: the chairman of Emirates airline,

Sheikh Ahmed bin Saeed Al Maktoum and the current ruler of Dubai, Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum. Covering 5% of the state's total landmass, the reserve's aim is to protect the natural environment and encourage biodiversity through, among other things, the propagation and reintroduction of 'rare and endangered species'.

It all started with Al Maha Resort, a luxury desert hotel owned by Sheikh Ahmed's Emirates Group. Greg started work at the resort as a guide, taking guests on falconry excursions, dune experiences and camel trips, before hearing of an opening in the conservation side of the business. He switched roles and, in 2001, wrote a report on environmental conditions in the area, recommending it be designated a protected reserve.

The result was the DDCR and, over the next few years, small populations of Arabian oryx, two types of fox (red and sand), several feline species (caracal and Gordon's wildcats) and various gazelles (sand and Arabian) were steadily reintroduced into the reserve. These species were once native to the Arabian Peninsula, but many years of accelerated development in Dubai, which not so long ago was all pristine desert, saw animal numbers dwindle and disperse. In the case of the Arabian

oryx, it faced complete extinction in the wild by the 1970s, only to be saved by reserves such as this one.

More recently, the DDCR has entered a new phase, teaming up with wildlife conservation NGO, Biosphere Expeditions. Operating in 13 locations around the world, Biosphere invites laymen, such as myself, to assist scientists, such as Greg, in collecting data, while visiting a new destination and studying the local wildlife. Every trip has a so-called 'target species', from primates in Peru to snow leopards in Kyrgyzstan.

Biosphere was set up by Matthias Hammer, a no-nonsense, straight-talking German with a military background, who now spends his time travelling the world, often sporting bare feet and a brightly-coloured sarong. He joins me for my trip and is keen to get across Biosphere's anti-institutional approach. "You're 'participants', not tourists. We're an 'NGO', not a company. And this is an 'expedition', not a holiday," he says, unequivocally, as we gather on the first day.

This may sound a little joyless, but things perk up as we learn about the tasks ahead. The DDCR office is to be our base, Greg tells us. We'll be divided into groups, which can change daily depending on the area we'd like to see. We'll then be dispatched into different zones across the DDCR to carry

out surveys and activities. These fall into four distinct groups: setting camera traps to see if we can capture wildlife in its natural habitat; setting live traps by baiting cages with tins of sardines to obtain physiological data, such as the vital measurements of the animals; surveying new and old fox dens for signs of life; and finally, carrying out 'circular observations', by locating a central point in one of the reserve's 62 quadrants and noting down any wildlife and vegetation that's present there.

We'll achieve all this by heading out in our 4x4s — hence the crash-course in desert driving. But, first, we have to learn how to use the equipment, "because you won't always be with a member of staff in the field, so you need to know what you're doing," says Matthias.

Greg runs through the various data sheets we'll need to fill out, which include both paper forms and digital scientific apps. We are briefed on how to use the handheld GPS devices that'll get us within a few feet of previously recorded fox dens and mean we can log the locations of new cameras and live traps, so that other teams can check them throughout the week. We also are given some basic navigational tips on how to use a compass, in case our digital devices fail. It's then time to



DUBAI'S BIG FIVE

1. SNAKES

The many and varied reptiles in the reserve include: the Jayakars sand boa, which ranges from 12-26ins in size; the even-larger Arabian horned viper, with its fearsome-looking triangular-shaped head; and the Sindh saw-scaled viper, which leaves a 'side-winding' track in its wake.

2. FOXES

Of the two foxes in the reserve, the Arabian fox is most similar to our common red fox, though with larger ears and a smaller body. Smaller, white-coloured sand foxes are also present.

3. GAZELLES

The reserve's three gazelles include: the large, long-horned oryx, defined by its uniformly white body; the flank-striped Arabian gazelle; and the harder-to-spot sand gazelle, which is the only one to give birth to twins, typically in spring and autumn.

4. CATS

There are three felines present in the reserve: the domestic-sized Gordon's wildcat; the reddish-brown caracal; and the decidedly cute-faced sand cat, with its distinctive black leg markings. All are nocturnal and difficult to spot.

5. LIZARDS

Other scaly sightings include: the UAE's largest (and most aggressive) lizard, the desert monitor; the ruler-sized, yellow-spotted agama; and the Leptiens spiny-tailed lizard, which can live for up to 80 years.

release the pressure in our tyres so the wheels can cruise across the sandy terrain, before we head out into the dunes. It's definitely a lot to take in. But the Biosphere approach is that anyone can take part, providing they have a willingness to learn.

That said, my fellow participants do seem to be of a certain calibre. There's Jim, a wiry computer hardware designer from northern California; Albert, a softly spoken farmer with an MBA in agriculture; Ziggy, a legal assistant; and Yvonne, a biologist. Not exactly laymen, but ready to learn nonetheless. It's a mixed-aged ensemble too, hailing from all parts of the globe, including Britain, America and Germany. The unifying factor is a firm interest in conservation and the environment, especially animals.

Sufficiently bonded, our group slips into the daily routine of meeting at the DDCR office each morning to pick up equipment, get into teams and be assigned our tasks by Greg, before heading out to survey the sands, armed with a packed lunch.

A common perception is that deserts are a barren landscape, devoid of life and impervious to

change. But that couldn't be further from the truth, I discover. For one thing, the light shifts constantly, dark and ominous one minute, red and romantic the next, casting the dunes in a kaleidoscope of ever-changing shadows. The weather too, is unpredictable, ranging from still and warm one day, to fiercely windy the next, forcing us to use shirts, sunglasses and scarves to keep the sand from getting into our eyes, ears and noses. It doesn't work. Several showers follow. Still more sand.

The flora and fauna are a surprise, too. Gnarled trunks and windswept trees stand isolated against a backdrop of endless dunes, imbuing the landscape with a surreal, Dali-esque quality. During the establishment of the reserve, many of these trees and shrubs were planted to provide sustenance for the reintroduced wildlife. It's for this reason camels are kept out of the reserve, otherwise they'd make short work of all the vegetation.

Of all the sightings though, one of the best we witness is a pair of pharaoh eagle-owls, a male and female, that we spook while driving past, sending the predators flying out onto the slopes. We wait,

PREVIOUS PAGE: Camera trap photos of wildlife in the Dubai desert

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Arabian horned viper; Campsite of a Biosphere Expedition group; Collecting traps from the camera traps



IMAGE: ALAMY

patiently watching, as they sit and stare back at us, eyes like saucers.

Herd of oryx, with their muscular, horse-like haunches, are omnipresent, and we spy plenty of Arabian gazelles too — their springy, athletic strides make them easy to spot in the dunes. By coincidence, I'm here at the height of calving season, and it's a joy to see so many leggy youths gamboling around. Several sand gazelles also reveal themselves, distinguishable by their white faces. All these sightings we note down on a sheet of 'random observations', which helps Greg monitor the overall environment.

One of the biggest thrills, I discover, can be *not* seeing something, but getting a hint an animal had very recently been there: fox tracks trailing off through the dunes; the smell of fresh droppings outside a den. It's peculiar the things you get excited about after a week in the DDCR. One group is lucky enough to spot a Gordon's wildcat, whose low

numbers in the reserve are threatened by hybridisation with domestic cats. It's a rare and cherished sighting, which all of us delight in, however vicariously.

By night we return to camp, which in line with Biosphere's tread-lightly mandate, is a simple set-up of bring-your-own tents, located in a gorgeous glade of ghaf trees. There's a couple of bedouin mess tents for snacks and drinks, a central campfire for evening gatherings, and a set of basic showers and toilets for essential ablutions. Breakfast and dinner are served in the five-star surrounds of the Al Maha Resort, a short drive away. Dusty and field-worn as we are, we enter this luxury retreat via the back door, in order to feast on an array of curries in the staff canteen, from butter chicken to lentil daal.

Afterwards, we head to Al Maha's terrace bar, for cocktails and a chance to trade tales of the day's exploits. It's a nice contrast to the rough-and-ready reality of

the expedition; a chance to relax, content in the knowledge we've earned these luxuries.

The next chapter in the DDCR story is an intriguing one. The gazelle and oryx populations have now become so plentiful that Greg is considering reintroducing a natural predator to help manage their numbers. "We're looking at the Arabian wolf," he tells me. "But the problem with predatory reintroduction is it's seen as posing a threat to people and livestock. That's not necessarily the case, but that perception means we can't steamroll it through."

Another thrilling predator possibility is the Arabian leopard, which has been critically endangered since 1996, with fewer than 200 individuals left in the wild. If one or both of these species were reintroduced, it would make the DDCR experience an even more exciting one for participants. While the decision is being debated, we'll await with bated breath. □

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Correction: Tents are not bring-your-own. They are provided by Biosphere Expeditions.

HOW TO DO IT

Biosphere Expedition's eight-day Arabia itinerary costs £1,590 per person, excluding flights. The next expedition runs 20-27 January 2018. biosphere-expeditions.org Al Maha Resort has double rooms from AED2,816 (£615), including full-board and two desert activities. Five per cent of all profits go back into the reserve. al-maha.com.

MORE INFO

Dubai Desert Conservation Reserve. ddcr.org Biosphere Expeditions has an extensive blog and archive of expedition diaries, offering a real taste of what it's like to be a participant on the ground. biosphere-expeditions.org/diaries *Dubai & Abu Dhabi* (Lonely Planet, 2015). RRP: £14.99