

Around the **MIDDLE EAST**



Sandy of time

Though much has changed in Dubai,
LAUREL MUNSHOWER finds that
it's still possible to get a taste of the
region's authentic Bedouin lifestyle

Photographed by AJITH NARENDRA

and trading – plying local crafts and goods. Taking care of the camp, the women make ropes, baskets and rugs from palm fronds, weave colourful *telli* embellishments to adorn robes during special occasions, and work with henna powder not only to stain intricate designs on women’s hands but also for medicinal use, to relieve headaches and create sunblock. More natural-healing items can be found at the camp’s pharmacy, including desert squash to help treat diabetes and *khef maryam*, a flower that can ease childbirth. Next to that, goods such as spices, coffee, dried cottage cheese, honey and cow ghee – which would have all been available at Bedouin camps – are neatly packaged for guests to purchase.

Convened around a small fire, I find Yussuf and a group of young men from Al Ain chatting, and I grab myself a spot in the shade as more coffee and warm, pleasantly savoury camel milk is passed around. Coffee has long been a part of the local culture and there are numerous rules and social cues to be drawn from this simple drink. Hold your cup out for a splash of a refill or shake it to indicate you’ve had enough; put your cup down if there’s something else you need from your host, and when the host fills up your cup the whole way, know that it’s time to leave.

Together we move into a *majlis* tent where a large spread of freshly prepared breakfast has been laid out on a woven mat: *balaleet* (sweetened and spiced vermicelli with egg), *chami* (cottage cheese), *luqaimat* (fried dough balls), dates and ultra-thin layers of fried bread soaked in milk and honey. As I sample the meal, the trio from Al Ain turn on music for a demonstration of folk dancing: the *yola*, or “stick dance”, with its synchronised head and hand movements; and *al razfa*, where wooden rifle replicas are flourished, spun and tossed into the air with panache.

As the late-morning heat begins to take hold, we prepare to relax and retreat, as the Bedouins would have, to cosy, cool abodes – and though there’s much to appreciate in the old traditions, the advent of modern air conditioning is a welcome one to all. ☕

Al Marmoom Bedouin Experiences from AED 495 per person; 00971-4-440 9827, platinum-heritage.com. Morning experiences available from October 1 to April 30 only; afternoon experiences available year round, and include a dinner of local dishes and an astronomy session

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keep a canine – and Bedouins had many – the creature is accepted as part of the family. In return for guarding the home and farm, hunting for rabbits and gazelles and flushing out prey for falcons, clever salukis were passed down through the family, lived among them and even ate the same food.

Unlike the salukis, falcons are not native to this region, and were traditionally caught in the autumn during their migration, baited with pigeons in nets. After a month or two of training, the raptors would be used for hunting in the winter and released back into the wild to return to cooler climes as the Arabian summer began to set in. With capturing wild falcons no longer allowed, the birds are now purchased from breeders for tens – if not hundreds – of thousands of dirhams, and used not just for hunting but challenges such as racing, beauty contests and their keen eyesight (try spotting a *habara*, or desert turkey, from three kilometres away yourself). Enticed with feathers from a *habara*, Yussuf’s falcon dances and dives in the air, slicing through it so cleanly I can hear a slick whistle as it speeds past, metres from my head. Catching the bait, sharp claws and beak pull at the feathers until the real prize of raw chicken is offered up.

It’s nearly time for my own breakfast, and I’m led to a nearby camp set up around a small artificial lake. Here I meet Dhoha, who greets me with dates and steaming *gahwah* – Arabic coffee. Though the source of water here is man-made, the setting rings true as she explains that Bedouins were ever on the lookout for signs of water – a colony of ants, salt on the sand – where they would then dig a well. Comprised of a handful of tents made simply from palm fronds, branches and animal skin, the camp hosts men and women – though mostly women, as men would traditionally be out hunting



Dune-bashing, belly-dancing and gut-busting buffets – it’s what many a visitor leaves the UAE thinking the desert experience is all about. And, no doubt, there’s a time and place for dune-bashing. But a newly launched experience curated by Dubai Tourism in partnership with Platinum

Heritage aims to share a more authentic look at a time when travelling Bedouin tribes frequented these parts. Taking place in the Al Marmoom Desert Conservation Reserve, the experience sheds light on the lifestyle and traditions of these desert nomads.

I start out my Bedouin experience at what feels like a true-to-life time – as dawn breaks. But instead of saddling up a camel (that comes later), I settle into one of Platinum Heritage’s comfortable SUVs and we depart for the desert reserve, about a 45-minute drive from most places in the city. Launched in early 2018 by HH Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum and making up 10 per cent of the emirate of Dubai, Al Marmoom is the first of its kind in the UAE: an unfenced desert conservation space, home to hundreds of species of native and migratory birds, oryx and some 30 artificial lakes (the “Love Lakes” have already gained fame on Instagram). After a brief off-road into the desert – sans dune-bashing – I’m dropped off alongside my next mode of transport, a small caravan of camels, whose occasional grumpy outbursts were just about the only thing to pierce the tranquillity of the desert morning. We amble between the dunes for 30 minutes, which I think is just about long enough, and though not uncomfortable, I’m glad that I did not have to make the entire journey this way, which, I’m told, would have taken about three days all those decades ago before Land Cruisers populated multi-lane highways.

At a spot nestled between low-rising dunes I meet Yussuf, who hails from the desert and trains falcons (and, he admits, the occasional big cat for Sheikh Mohammed). Behind him trails a delicate, lanky saluki named Halwa (meaning “sweet”), and on his arm, a Siberian falcon, all snowy-white and flecked with black. Greyhounds of the desert, salukis have long been members of the Bedouin household – and a cherished one at that, despite dogs typically being seen as “dirty” in Islam. So long as there is a reason to



Clockwise from top left: Traditional Emirati breakfast; the camel caravan; typical items found in a *majlis*; the writer holds a falcon and sets off into the desert on a camel; jugs at the camp contain liquids and goods; pouring a cup of *gahwah*. **Previous pages, from left:** Yussuf with his Siberian falcon and *habara*-feather bait; a woman weaves palm fronds

