

# OUT OF AFRICA

A luxury safari meets  
the wilds of Arabia  
on Sir Bani Yas  
Island, the UAE's  
best-kept secret

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at the herds of shy Arabian gazelle and oryx, and flocks of exotic birds (all well out of the cheetahs' sights) to appreciate Zayed's legacy—and its continued success. Indeed, just last month it was announced that the total wildlife population is now over 13,000 species, with the oryx officially relieved of its endangered species label.

While the bustling coastal cities of the UAE seem a world away, Sir Bani Yas isn't without its own icons. Driving back to our base at Al Sahel Villa Resort, we pass five of the island's own "Burj Khalifas": a group of towering giraffe eyeing us up as they munch on the topmost branches of acacia trees. Our own stomachs rumbling, we pull up at the drive to the resort (one of the three Anantara properties on the island) and take our breakfast out on the lush lobby lawn, where a few gazelle eye us carefully as they snack on the lush grass in front (there's clearly no need for lawn mowers here).

Of all the properties on Sir Bani Yas, Al Sahel is the only one situated within the fenced parameters of the Arabian Wildlife Park. As such, wildlife is never far away. This sight of gazelles galloping past your villa is nothing out of the ordinary, and, provided loud guinea fowl aren't causing a ruckus on your private balcony, they may come right up to the door. The safari feel extends to the 'glamping' ambience of the villa, with canvas shading the verandah, natural woods inside and out, and plenty of tribal art adorning the suite.

**T**here they are." Slowing the Sahara Jeep to a stop, safari guide Ted quietly addresses our group piled in the back — collectively holding our breath and with cameras at the ready — and points down to a spot in the foreground. Quickly whipping out his walkie-talkie, Ted alerts the other Jeep drivers pulling up behind us. "I've found the brothers." For a few moments, the sound of furious camera clicking fills the air. Against the still, silent landscape, the noise is deafening, but the two cheetahs sitting in front of us don't seem to mind.

Each cat is sprawled lazily on the savannah floor not ten minutes from our convoy, barely looking up to acknowledge our presence, preferring instead to bask with closed eyes in the warm glow of sunrise. I don't blame them — the gently undulating hills and soft grasslands are a postcard-perfect image of the wilds of Africa. The sight is extraordinary, not least for the

fact that we are actually some 7,000 kilometres from the Serengeti.

Sir Bani Yas Island sits 170 kilometres off the coast of Abu Dhabi, a sandy sanctuary of 87 square kilometres named for the original Bani Yas tribe who first inhabited Abu Dhabi some 250 years ago. For years it existed as the private island of the late Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan al Nayan, president and founder of the UAE, who began to develop the site in the seventies as a wildlife reserve, working to protect and ensure the survival of local and endangered flora and fauna.

For decades, various species flourished from near extinction and indigenous flora naturally spread across the island. In the 1990s, Sir Bani Yas Island was finally opened to weekend visitors. Fast-forward another twenty years and here we are, ambling around on a dawn safari drive after making just a 30-minute private jet flight from Abu Dhabi airport rather than a several-hour journey to Africa. You need only gaze in wonder

**Wild things**  
The incredible landscape of Sir Bani Yas is home to thriving herds of axis deer (*above*) and East African oryx (*right*)

(*previous page*)  
Glamping meets resort luxury at Anantara's Al Sahel Villa Resort, set within the Arabian Wildlife Park



## Sir Bani Yas



**Island luxe** (above and below) Beachside living awaits at Al Yamm Villa Resort, with open villas and plenty of spots on the sand to claim as your own



It feels refreshingly remote, but my personal butler is on hand to ensure any further creature comforts I need are never far away.

Of course, Sir Bani Yas was inhabited by humans long before discerning travellers started arriving by boats and private jets. Some 36 archaeological sites have been found on the islands, including a sixth-century Christian monastery that was abandoned in 750 AD when Islam was introduced to the area. It's perched on a hill towards the eastern side of the island, so we make a stop on the road below to begin the short hike uphill. The iron-rich soil flecked with quartz, limestone and salt sparkles underfoot as we ascend the small hill to the protected site, where archaeological digs are still underway. Even if history isn't your cup of tea, the panoramic views are breathtaking.

Preservation of indigenous wildlife is just one tier of Shiekh Zayed's conservation project. The other is an objective to 'green' the desert — something that becomes steadily more noticeable as we pass frankincense and acacia trees en route east to Al Yamm Villa Resort. The only thing that could possibly upstage the inviting sun loungers and 30 luxe villas lining the beautiful golden beach is the sparkling water of

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the adjacent mangrove lagoon. It is here where we are invited to contribute to the legacy of Sheikh Zayed by planting our own mangroves on the lake, which now includes the reintroduced, salt-tolerant red mangroves.

Visitors are welcome to explore the forest on kayak or admire it from afar at the on-site Olio restaurant, where fresh caprese salad, pizza, homemade pasta, succulent meatballs and tender sea bass steak work wonders for ravenous appetites. Burn off your meal with any of the on-site pursuits including mountain biking, archery or land sailing around the resort.



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## Sir Bani Yas

Despite the very heavy safari nature of Sir Bani Yas, it is also a place where visitors can still experience true Bedouin tradition. Falconry is a pastime long associated with this region — Sheikh Zayed was an avid falconer in his day — and it is on his favoured hill that we now sit, fragrant cups of coffee and sweet, chewy dates in hand, as we watch present-day falconers prepare their birds for flight. The bond between bird and man is evident, the falcons flying in precise, lightning-fast circles across the sky before coming back to rest on their masters' arms. The sun sinks lower in the sky and turns the surrounding savannah and sand landscape a hypercoloured orange, and it is in this moment when one can fully appreciate why Sheikh Zayed loved this island so much; it is surely one of the UAE's best-kept secrets. ■

### THE GOLDEN BOOK

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**Close to nature** An early-morning safari drive will get you up close to elusive Arabian gazelle, giraffe, and cheetah. (Previous page, top to bottom) a grey crowned crane stalks the island's grasslands; the mangrove lagoon on the island's eastern side is considered one of the most beautiful in the region



**Flights of fancy** A falconer prepares his bird for flight, in a traditional Bedouin practice that dates back centuries. On Sir Bani Yas, visitors are treated to a falconry show at sunset, giving them a rare chance to see these birds up close while enjoying spectacular views of the changing landscape

