



MOROCCAN *Marvel*

Architect Guilhem Eustache tells us the link between architecture and cinema in his design of a contemporary Marrakech residence

PHOTOGRAPHER, JEAN-MARIE MONTHIERS

THE MAIN DWELLING IS PARADOXICALLY SIMPLE AND COMPLEX: A FOLIATION OF LONGITUDINAL SAILS BETWEEN WHICH THE HOUSE'S PROGRAM IS STAGED; TALL WINDOWS; SETS OF GEOMETRIC CUT-OUTS; FRAMINGS AND OPENINGS, ESPECIALLY FROM THE LIVING ROOM ACROSS THE POOL AND ITS STEPS THAT RISE TOWARD THE ATLAS MOUNTAINS

Morocco has such a cinematic quality that it brings to life great myths, stories and cultures from around the world. Its landscape lends itself to such famous historical films such as Lawrence of Arabia, the Kingdom of Heaven, Troy and Babel, to name a few. There's really something captivating about this exotic landscape.

Architect Guilhem Eustache is just one of those who has fallen under Morocco's spell.

"I have visited Morocco on many occasions over the years. The country immediately bewitched me," says Eustache. "The three Moroccan projects I've worked on has certainly been fed, to varying degrees, by all the images and impressions I've accumulated during my stays there."

Says Eustache of his design inspirations: "A detail of a Giorgio de Chirico painting, stumbling upon the Fes dye baths one early morning, a tracking shot in an Orson Welles' film, discovering the Jantar Mantar site in Jaipur might all be conscious or unconscious sources of inspiration for me. All of the impressions we carry around with us - some of them for a very long time - eventually slip into our work."

Ten kilometers south of Marrakech is a modest dwelling which visually occupies a five-acre parcel of flat land.

From a distance, the structure resembles a white square. As one moves closer, it becomes a cube, a white wall, then a tube until its openings become more evident. Another white rectangle turns out to be a flat wall and a small triangle, a pyramid.



A NIGHT VIEW FROM THE END OF THE POOL, LOOKING BACK TOWARD THE SUMMER LIVING ROOM, WHICH IS FLANKED BY THE MASTER BEDROOM AND BATH, AT LEFT, AND THE KITCHEN AND GUEST ROOM, AT RIGHT



It's an oasis of clean, white boxy figures against a stark desert landscape, a contrast of old and new.

This is the FOBE House, a contemporary private residence designed by architect Guilhem Eustache for a Belgian film producer and director.

"There is a fine link between architecture and cinema," claims Eustache. "Architecture is primarily perceived through movement. The eye moves, when the perspective opens, gradually revealing the various elements that constitute the house."

For the project, Eustache aimed to establish a close dialogue with the land, the vegetation and the Atlas Mountains on the horizon.

He stresses the importance of extensive analysis of the site on one's architectural choices. In particular, he took into account the site's orientation to the sun, size, shape, access and best points of view toward the horizon or neighboring homes.

"As we planned to build a small house, measuring 170 square meters, on a 2.5-hectare plot, we had to create a dynamic equilibrium, despite this difference in scale. We played with light and shadow to enhance and strengthen the volumes," he says.

"The main building was positioned in the center of the plot and the keeper's house and garage, on the edge closest to the road to Marrakesh. The orientation of each section of the house was determined according to several criteria directly induced by the site itself - the best views on the Atlas Mountains, the best orientations to protect the inhabitants from the sun or the wind."



ABOVE A VIEW FROM THE ROOF TERRACE TOWARD THE YARD'S MAIN ENTRANCE LOCATED NORTH. LEFT FROM THE YARD, AS SEEN FROM LEFT TO RIGHT, THE THREE STELAE THAT MARK THE ENTRANCE, THE TOTEMIC FIREPLACE, THE CARETAKER'S DWELLING AND FINALLY AT THE EXTREME RIGHT THE GARAGE WITH ITS VENTILATION BELOW. A NIGHT VIEW OF THE THREE PARALLEL SURFACES THAT MAKE UP THE FOBE HOUSE FACADE. AT RIGHT, FOUR FLOATING STEPS ARE CANTILEVERED OUT FROM A STAIRWAY THAT LEADS TO A ROOFTOP TERRACE. TO THE LEFT, A NARROW FOOTBRIDGE STRETCHES ACROSS A MOAT-LIKE POOL OF TURQUOISE WATER. BOTTOM LEFT ARCHITECT GUILHEM EUSTACHE (PORTRAIT BY IAN SCIGLIUZZI) OPPOSITE PAGE FROM THE GARAGE TOWARD THE CARETAKER'S DWELLING



The architect believes that each region and country deserves architectural answers that are "adapted to specific climate, cultural and economic conditions." Thus, his design philosophy maximizes existing resources.

"We used local materials and techniques such as clay, tadelack, "pierres de l'Ourika", etc. We preserved the wildness of the land even though we planted more than 500 trees. We doubled the walls to help deal with the climate, creating living spaces of important heights and sun protections."

Technical details adopted to cope with the weather, and the temperature. To combat the heat, the architect designed rooms with very high ceilings and double walls. They left an air pocket between two walls to make drafts possible, by increasing the openings to the outside. He also created separate a winter living space and a summer lounge.

"We positioned concrete sun breezes in front of most of the openings, which work best when the sun is at its highest position in the sky, during the hottest hours of the day and the warmest season of the year."

"Using light colors, placing a small pool of water by the entrance, and building a large swimming pool also afford the house a breath of coolness," he added.

The end result which grew out of the topology of the terrain, remains paradoxically simple and complex.

Aside from his projects in Marrakech, Eustache, who graduated in 1986 from the Architecture School of Paris (l'Ecole Spéciale d'Architecture de Paris), has done extensive projects in France and Brazil.

"Constant in my choices and orientations, my projects are inscribed in the continuity of a tradition that responds to the demands of both the environment and society. Respecting the local context without succumbing to folklore, a quest for lasting simplicity," he says. *SPACE*

For more information on the Guilhem Eustache and the FOBE house, visit guilhemseustache.com

travel & leisure



Join the club

Stretches of white sand come aplenty these days, but not in a one-stop-destination that will make traveling the world in 80 days an overstatement. In Balesin Island Club, you'll find not only tropical heat, it has all its eco-credentials intact. Sheryl Songsong calls it the traveler's ultimate beach place for mindless pleasures in the Philippines—and beyond

PHOTOGRAPHER, PAOLA ASERON

THE OCEAN VIEW FROM
THE BALE SIN SPA LOBBY



LEFT THE STABLES FAR LEFT THE CHAMPAGNE BAR AT THE BALESIN CLUBHOUSE CENTER, FROM LEFT OUTDOOR BAMBOO SHOWER; LIGHTING DETAIL IN BALI VILLAGE'S FLOATING VILLAS; HANNAH, ONE OF THE PRIVATE DINING ROOM IN BALESIN BOTTOM TKTKK ONE OF THE PRIVATE DINING AREAS IN THE BALI VILLAGE OPPOSITE PAGE AN ALLEY FROM THE GREEK TAVERNA

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A brand new Cessna Grand Caravan lands on-schedule at the new airstrip in Balesin Island, southeast of Polillo, Quezon Province. I disembark the private jet and gaze at the 1500m runway of this exotic island destination. The area is green and peaceful; I can't wait to be whisked off to the six famed hospitality villages that will take me to the most famous and exclusive international vacation spots, namely Mykonos, Costa Smeralda, St. Tropez, Phuket, Bali and of course, Balesin—the Philippines.

My adventure begins in the middle of the forest, with a *balete* tree in front of me, and I immediately realize that the main attraction of this island is this—the thick foliage barely touched by master planner EcoPlan. It is quite apparent that EcoPlan understands the importance of bringing out the best possible solutions for both Alphaland and the environment. In short, they pursue the highest level of ecological sensitivity possible in the Balesin Island to preserve its natural wonder. On-board a buggy, I am en route to the different villages, humming "In the Jungle, The Mighty Jungle" in my off-road journey deeper in the forest.

I arrive at my first stop where the staff is quick to greet you in Bahasa, Indonesia's native tongue, and this enhances the experience: I am indeed in Bali Village, which is nearing completion. Floating villas reach out from the powdery white sand onto the waters of Lamon Bay, where it is facing. This village is able to capture the look of Bali with its open space layout, water features, courtyard and wooden decks. I am in element as I leave and mouth *terima kasih* (thank you) to the hospitable staff.

The look of the Greek Islands and all its blue and white splendor has to be my favorite in the whole island.

I am now in Mykonos, as if right on cue for the movie *Sisterhood of Traveling Pants 2*. The Mykonos Village has a Cycladic cubic architecture with 40 villas built around the area. I enjoy staying and dining at the Greek taverna restaurant with its white washed walls, blue doors and windows. This area has a glorious view of the sunrise aglow in winding alleys, the grotto and rock bar.

You have to give it to the Balesin Village for being so convenient, with a location near the clubhouse, spa and aquatic sports center. Modern Philippine design is best shown in this village with crafts and indigenous accents mixed with a sophisticated room layout.





I stay in a villa measuring 100sqm and inside there is a spacious bedroom completely furnished with a king size bed, standard single-size daybed, writing desk behind the bed with an iPod dock, an espresso and tea maker with coffee and tea pods, a mini bar, and some books you can enjoy in-room. I enjoy taking my time in the bathroom, which has a spacious wardrobe and an outdoor shower (one of my best showers ever), twin lavatory sinks complete with male and female vanity kits, a hairdryer, a vanity and full length mirror. The sun is playing hide and seek with me; so whenever I catch a glimpse of it, I take advantage of my villa's private deck overlooking the ocean. It also has an outdoor bamboo shower, a whirlpool tub and a king size lounge and dining area.

There is definitely something for everyone here in Balesin. Outdoor activities and facilities are made available, such as The Stables (for *calesa* and island trail rides), Aquatic Sports Center (waterskiing, snorkeling, kayaking, windsurfing) and a Fully Covered Sports Center (three indoor badminton courts, tennis and basketball courts, archery range, zipline, golf driving range). The Spa is a landmark altogether; it contrasts the organic feel of the island. Still natural-looking, spa villas are enclosed in all-white box type rooms that dot the area. A saying goes, "a massage a day, keeps the stress fairies away." Even its lobby echoes the serenity of the place, and I am told it has the best view of the sunset.

For food enthusiasts like me, dining options are endless; a personal recommendation would have to be the Japanese Sakura restaurant in the clubhouse. Dishes are personalized and authentic. Please, do not forget to try their appetizers. Both the Greek and Indonesian restaurants are tied to a close second. The food at the Taverna is so refreshing, and portions are for sharing. It is a place to enjoy the company of friends, good food and music, and a spectacular view. Meanwhile, the Indonesian dining place is best for dinners—cozy, romantic, dimly lit. The view of sparkling water even if it's raining is so gorgeous and it goes well with every slurp of laksa.

RIGHT TYPICAL ROOM LAYOUT IN BALESIN ISLAND CLUB BELOW, FROM LEFT OUTDOOR SHOWER AREA; EACH VILLA HAS ITS OWN VIEWDECK



LEFT THE BLUE AND WHITE FACADE OF MYKONOS VILLAGE BELOW ONE OF THE TWO BRAND NEW CESSNA GRAND CARAVANS BOTTOM THE SALA IN BALI VILLAGE



Speaking of food, it's nice to know that the fresh catch of the day is served to you. Balesin Island Club even grows its own organic produce. The island is very conscious about keeping everything in its natural state that even rainwater from the concrete airstrip is harvested and purified to provide potable water. On the grounds, eco-friendly transportation gets you around via electric golf carts (I suggest to perhaps convert to solar powered ones in the future), mountain bikes and horses. The island has sewage treatments plants to provide filtration, so it does not go to the open sea. Unlike other developed islands, it is also interesting to know that there is a 30m development setback from the shoreline that allows trees to grow and act as a protective barrier. This makes perfect sense to observe the zero-waste program to prevent build-up of non-biodegradable waste. Moreover, community development programs enhance long-time Balesin residents.

It would have been a different story if Alphaland's Balesin Island Club did not rely on its world-class luxury and authentic sustainability formula. Perhaps, this is the reason why Balesin is a members-only island. This way, it strikes a balance in maintaining natural development.

Learning that the villages are named after favorite destinations of its owner Bobby Ongpin, it somehow brings out the jetsetter in you. You find homes away from home, and who wouldn't want to make sure their homes are taken care of? Jorge Yulo Architects, Casas+Architects and Enrico M. Sison are entrusted by Alphaland to build a sustainable island; and from what I'm witnessing, they are doing a very good job at marrying responsible and world-class design. Balesin Island Club is perfect that way, and I know I will not think of a beach club in the same way again. Would you? *SPACE*

La dolce Vita

Amante's simple beach club is an eloquent answer to the beauty and grace of Ibiza

text **SHARI QUIMBO AND SHERYL SONGSONG**

photos from **AMANTE GALLERY** special thanks to **DAVID PICCIONI**



The world is full of many tropical destinations, most of which offer picturesque scenes of powder white sand and plenty of beach attractions to keep tourists entertained. Ibiza, an island on the Mediterranean, is known for its lively parties and festivals as much as it is for its pristine shores. Although the bustling streets may be an instant come-on for those in search of a great party, some might be keener on a quiet and intimate getaway.

Ibiza's Amante Beach Club and Restaurant offers beach and party goers a rustic establishment nestled on a cliff along Sol D'en Serra Bay. Guests approach the structure through a rocky path flanked by lush greenery that opens up into a secluded patch of white sand. Amante's thatched roofing and white walls immediately induce a relaxed tropical vibe against the azure colors of the sea. The multi-level structure features a dramatic setting of stone facades and wooden accents, lending it a very casual feeling, although the plush furniture and minimal décor keep it from looking rugged.

The restaurant's viewing decks offer stunning and sweeping views of the ocean, which guests can enjoy from loungers and day beds. Colors are kept neutral, their muted shades serving to intensify the blues of the sea and sky. The result is a cool beach getaway whose very aesthetic already induces a serene feeling in even the most urban weary.

ABOVE OPT TO HAVE LUNCH OR SNACKS BY THE TERRAIN **LEFT** THIS OUTDOOR LOUNGE IS PERFECT FOR EVENINGS SPENT RELAXING **TOP** WHITE HOT! **OPPOSITE** FAMOUS PERSONALITIES SUCH AS KATE MOSS, LEONARDO DI CAPRIO AND (F1 DRIVER) HAVE BEEN SPOTTED HERE



ABOVE ENJOY HAPPY HOUR IN RELAXING DAYBEDS **LEFT** THE AZURE VIEW **FAR LEFT** THE DECK LOUNGERS ALLOW YOU TO GET THE BEST VIEW OF THE SEA **BELOW** KICK BACK AND RELAX IN EITHER THE GAZEBO OR LOUNGERS **OPPOSITE** LOUNGE AMIDST NATURE

Helmed by executive chef Mario Rubio Sanchez, the menu features a collection of modern Mediterranean dishes, with an array of simple recipes that make the most out of the finest and freshest ingredients. Complimenting the rustic cliff terrain view during lunch are aperitifs and a la carte dishes like the oven-baked stone fish and Spanish risotto with lobster that are sure to delight taste buds. A casual menu of cheeseburgers and fish fingers are available for younger diners.

Evenings are best spent cocooned in the moonlit cave den while enjoying the cool sea breeze and sipping martinis, long drinks or anything Amante's bar has to offer, from classics like the Bellini to more personalized cocktails like the Breakfast in Ibiza, a cocktail made of Hendricks gin, apricot brandy, apricot jam and apple. For truly special and romantic events, guests are encouraged to make reservations at the Laurent Perrier Amante Table. Those lucky enough to book the best table on the island are served with a complimentary bottle of the namesake champagne and a menu personalized by chef Mario. As an added luxury, the table comes with its own waiting service, always at hand to deliver anything the diners need.

Owner David Piccioni says, "Throughout my career in music, I've always had a special connection with Ibiza. I wanted to create a special place [where] one can capture the full essence [and] beauty of [the] island. At





Amante, nature blends with grace. The view is stunning and is complimented by fine cuisine and a really efficient service [staff]. It's the kind of place that you arrive at in the morning and simply don't want to leave."

With its pristine Spanish shores and infamous parties, Ibiza is a destination on many a traveler's bucket list. However, another side of the island beckons with a tranquil escape unlike any other. One can start the day with a yoga class as the sun rises, relax on the private beach and as the sun sets, experience beachside dining with chill out tunes and Balearic beats to match the idyllic setting. With food to satisfy any palette and ambience that calls for relaxation, Amante offers travelers a side of Ibiza to unwind and relax away from the crowds, at least until the partying mood kicks in.

Located in Calla Llonga, Santa Eularia, Ibiza, Amante Beach Club and Restaurant is open everyday in the months of June until October, from 12pm to 2am. For bookings and reservations, call (0034) 971 196 176 or email reservations@amanteibiza.com. Visit www.amanteibiza.com for more information. Ø



BELOW PROBABLY THE SIMPLEST OF ALL THE ROOMS, THE DELUXE ROOM BEDS ARE TRULY COMFORTABLE. RIGHT: THE COMIC PRINT BRINGS BACK CHILDHOOD MEMORIES. FAR RIGHT: THE LOBBY, FLAMBOYANT WITH DETAILS THAT CREATE A VISUAL FEAST.



UTTERLY *Surreal!*

Staying at *The Luxe Manor* is like living out an *Alice* moment—an adventure to remember!

WRITER, SHERYL SONGSONG PHOTOGRAPHER, KERWIN KAISER YU

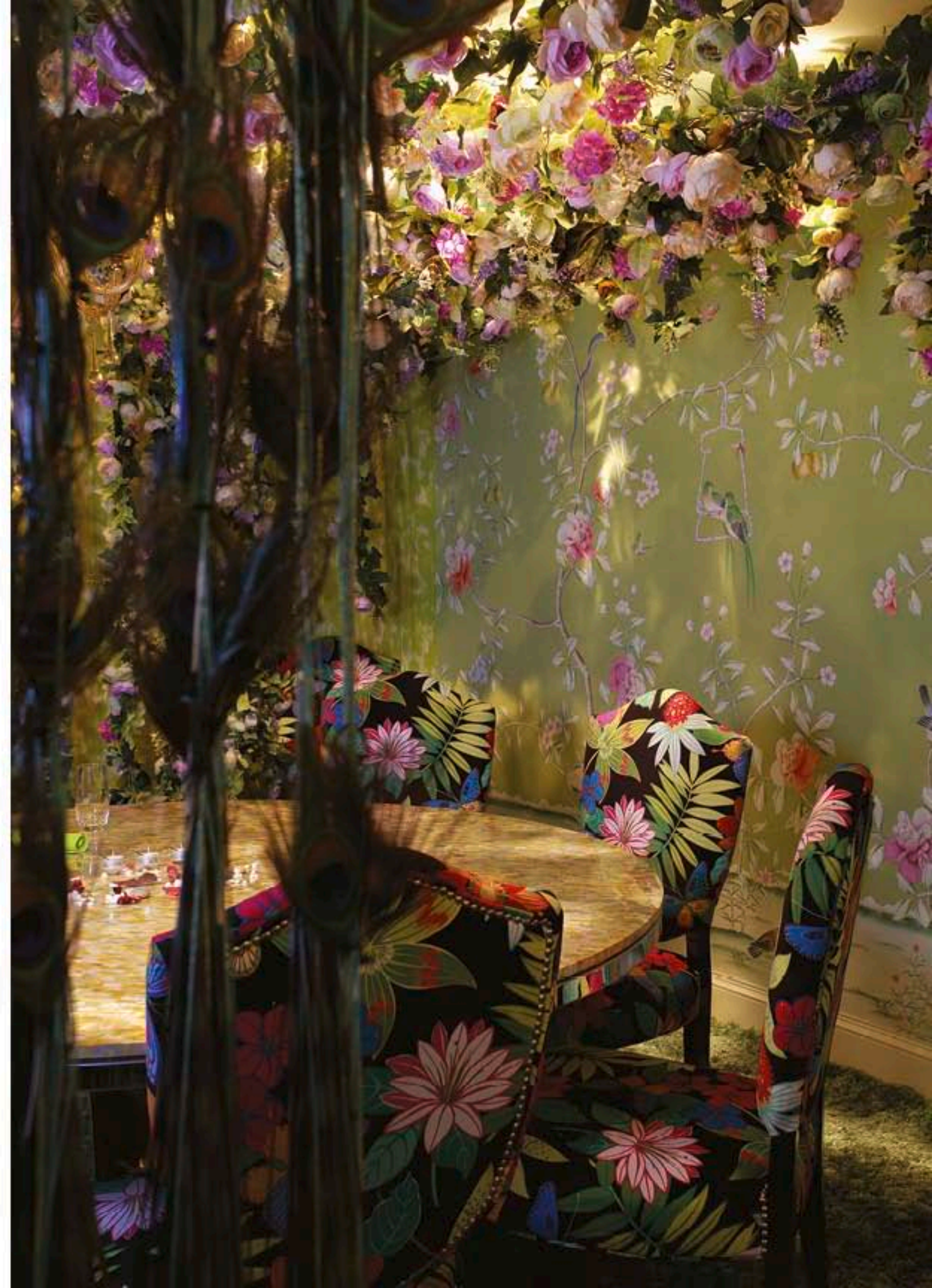
Over the top. Surreal. Elusive. The Luxe Manor (pronounced as 'deluxe manor') makes jaws drop upon entering its lobby through the unassuming facade fronting the busy Kimberley Road in Tsim Sha Tsui. Managed by GR8 Leisure Concept Ltd., a Hong Kong based hospitality group, this stylish, surrealism-inspired boutique hotel boasts of 153 guest rooms and six thematic (and mind blowing) suites; Dada, the property's bar and lounge; FINDS, the iconic Nordic restaurant; and GE Gastronomy Extra Ordinaire. Hotel guests, hold on tight. The story of The Luxe Manor's distinct accommodation, dining and drinking outlets is just unfolding.

Inspired by Spanish architect Antonio Gaudi, the lobby, with its copper and gold finishes, is entered through a door with bells installed in it (to make a sound when opened—something Feng Shui), a waterfall and crystal lighting. This symbolizes a gateway to the mystical world of surrealism. Unlike most hotels, this main entrance is found on the right side of the property; and as mentioned earlier, there is an alternate and understated entrance found on the main street to easily locate the hotel. Designed by kactusDESIGN, the flooring in the lobby is mosaic, patterned after a unicycle, large clock and compass, which represents a distortion of time and space. The custom-made 'Old Master Q Chair' is the center of attention, dedicated to the legacy of Joseph Wong's famous Old Master Q comic series. With its unique mix and match of accent pieces as well as dark tones of magenta, gold and black, the lobby is an interesting homage to the old and new.



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LEFT DOOR KNOCKERS ON THE 12TH FLOOR ARE PRETTY UNIQUE—HERE'S ONE OF THEM. ABOVE THE MOSAIC FLOORING ADVISES GUESTS TO 'GET LOST IN TIME' WHILE STAYING AT THE HOTEL. OPPOSITE PAGE LIVE OUT A THUMBELINA MOMENT IN THE GARDEN-INSPIRED MEETING/ EVENTS ROOM.



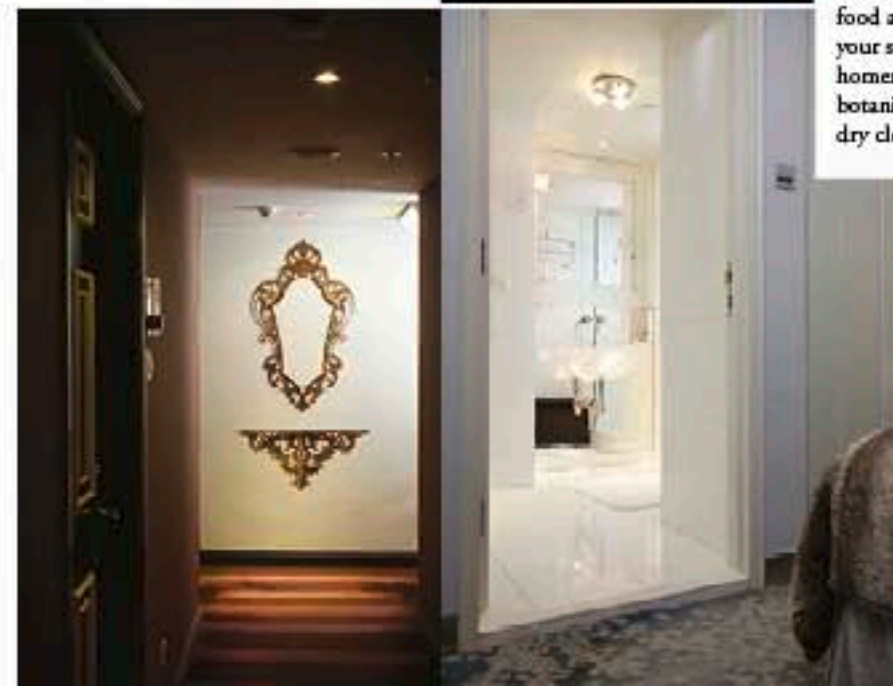


ABOVE COOL AND COMFY OVER AT THE MIRAGE RIGHT THE LOBBY'S HUGE ENTRANCE DOORS REFLECT A BIT OF TRADITIONAL CHINESE CULTURE BELOW, FROM LEFT THERE'S NOTHING DULL ABOUT THE HALLWAYS IN LUXE MANOR: THE SINK AT MIRAGE, WHICH IS REMINISCENT OF A GIGANTIC ICE CUBE; MORE COLOR AND DETAILS AT THE HALLWAYS OF THE LUXE MANOR OPPOSITE PAGE ARE YOU WONDERING IF THIS IS REAL HARRY BOOK THE ROOM TO FIND OUT



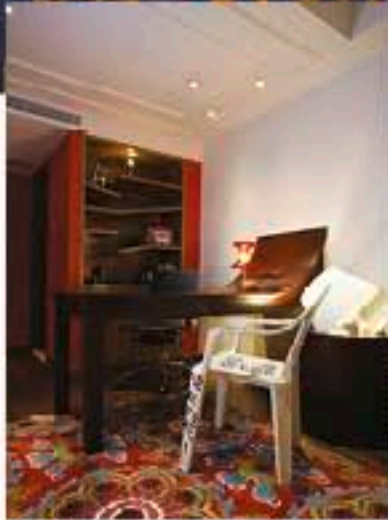
Ostentatious as it may seem, the thematic suites on the 12th floor give guests an experience like no other. Clever designs by David Buffery and Aedas Interiors truly give the wow factor, starting with 'Liaison.' A bespoke round bed (that would probably make some eyebrows raise) with Venetian-inspired furniture give off a romantic flair. "It's bound to put anyone in the mood," says the hotel staff. The 'Safari,' on the otherhand, receives a Middle Eastern luxury experience under the desert stars (yes, there are lights blinking on the ceiling), complete with a retractable tent and Turkish bath. Up for a glacial night? The 'Nordic' is decorated with ice-like furniture. Check out the uber cool bathroom sink (pun intended). The 'Mirage,' meanwhile is the icing on the cake as it brings surrealism to the next level. This suite has false doorknobs, *rompe l'oeil* walls and drapery, a clock that moves backward, faux finishes and furniture pieces and accessories that look like they're about to fall.what a sensory overload! It's such an interactive experience that guests should try at least once.

Meanwhile, the other guest rooms are as equally exciting (and beautiful) as the suites, but in a more subdued manner. The kitschy features continue in-room: there's a faux fireplace below the flat screen TV with a gilded frame on one wall, and this style continues above the bed, where you'll see handpainted picture frames that give an old-world feel. Although the deluxe room is a bit small, it's comfortable and equipped with a marble bathroom and rainshower. Exclusive privileges are also complimentary for deluxe room guests to enjoy: mini bar and buffet breakfast at FINDS; 15 to 50% discounts on beverages and food at Dada; a souvenir snap with framing taken anywhere in the hotel during your stay; intimate turndown amenities with a personalized card and delicate homemade pastry; deluxe Gilchrist & Soames collection of antioxidant-rich botanical bathroom amenities from the UK; and free shoe shining, pressing and dry cleaning for one suit or item. What a treat!

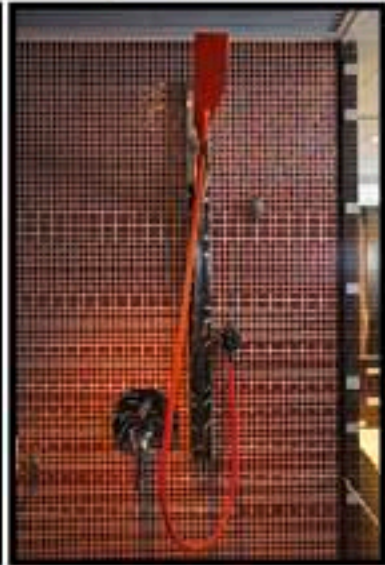
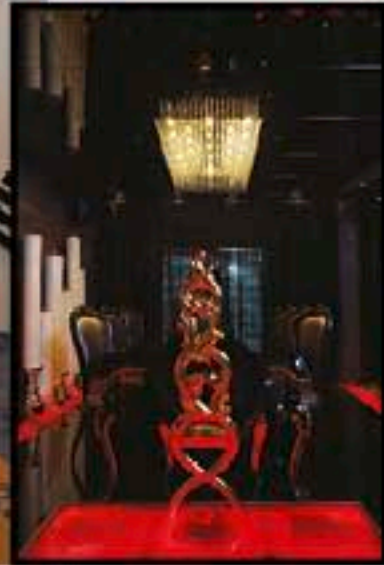




ABOVE ALL ABOARD! A DINING AREA THAT GIVES YOU THE ILLUSION OF BEING INSIDE A TRAIN. RIGHT NO, THE ROOM WAS NOT VANDERBILT. IT'S PART OF THE CHARM OF MIRAGE. BELOW FINDS IS DEFINITELY A MUST-TRY RESTAURANT! BOTTOM RIGHT THE MEN BAR AREA OF THE DELUXE ROOM OPPOSITE PAGE. THOSE AREN'T REAL CLOTHES HANGING; BUT IT'S PRETTY AWESOME THEY'RE THERE, RIGHT?



LEFT THE TURKISH BATH FOUND IN THE SAFARI. BELOW, FROM LEFT THE CHEF'S TABLE OVER THE DARK AND DEVILISH FUNCTION ROOM; A MERGER OF MATERIALS—STONE, METAL AND PLASTIC—IN THE SHOWER AREA OF MIRAGE.



It's common for hotels to have function rooms, but The Luxe Manor brings it to a whole new level by carrying the allure in the suites to its three private rooms. Each room is special in its own way: One is inspired from the heavens with lush white curtains resembling angel's wings. The ceiling offers the illusion that angels are stepping down from above. The second room contrasts the aforementioned, with its dark and devilish features reminiscent of a scene from the film 'The Devil's Advocate.' The fiery, lava-like flooring seems to broil when stepped on. This room is also considered the chef's table—with exclusive views of the open kitchen. The third and last room is dreamy and forest-like—its relaxing vibe is immaculate and fresh with foliage covering the walls and ceilings of the room. Aren't all these so theatrical?

Moving on to gastronomic delights, the cleverly named FINDS (an acronym for Finland, Iceland, Norway, Denmark and Sweden) is the only Nordic restaurant in the Pearl River Delta. Celebrity chef Jaakko Sorsa takes the helm in the kitchen and comes up with signature dishes such as Salmon in Six Ways, Nordic Seafood Platter and Daim Parfait Dessert, just to name a few. One of the desserts, the white chocolate cornflake clusters with muesli sprinkled with raspberry and yogurt ice cream on the side, is absolutely an amazing treat! Please do try it. The restaurant is green and sustainable, offering vegetarian dishes and a wide range of seafood options. Located on the first floor, the interiors of FINDS is fun and relaxed, resembling a colorful Nordic summer using Paul Smith and Missoni fabrics.

As if the eclecticism of this boutique hotel hasn't reached its quota, one may find himself at the whimsical Dada Bar + Lounge. It is inspired by the Dadaism art movement of the early 20th century—where nothing is quite it seems. The space is a visual extravaganza—oversized chairs, thrones, heart-shaped seats with wings, and a bar with silver horses and a lion "ready to jump out." They will keep you in good company in addition to the live band performing every Friday and Saturday night.

After all that's been said, do you think this hotel is another flight of fancy, or are you ready to capture your imagination? Pack your bags, book a night or two, and get ready for your "Alice in Wonderland" adventure. **SPACE**

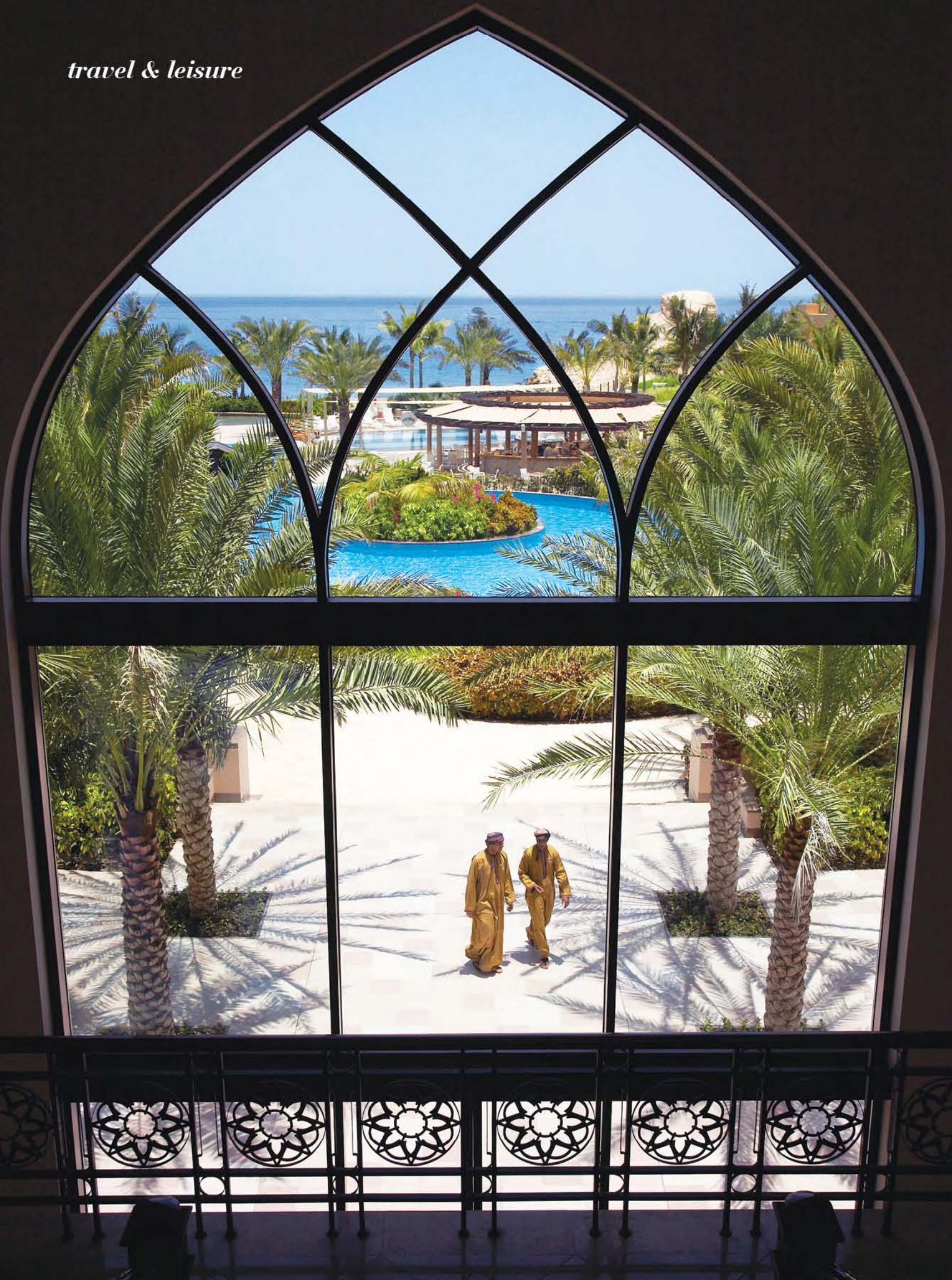


travel & leisure

CATCH the Wave

Often overlooked for its larger and better known neighbors, Oman is now one of the most sought after destinations with a distinct scenery where mountains, desert and sea meet. Ripe for discovery, editor in chief Sheryl Songsong shares her experience at Shangri-La Barr Al Jissah a resort for sunbathing and spas while in pursuit of Arabian nights





Growing up here, I've never been in this part of the Sultanate. Uphill, I drove past the Muttrah district, the old city of Muscat. I bear witness to a scenic view of limestone, mountains and Gulf of Oman and I am very much in awe. As I enter the Shangri-La Barr Al Jissah Resort and Spa, I've never seen such lovely textures and colors collide so beautifully. Seeing this rugged mountain backdrop and Oman coastline in front of me marks the beginning of my Moorish-inspired retreat.

The Shangri-La Barr Al Jissah is a three-hotel luxury resort, a first for both Shangri-La Hotels and Resorts and even for Oman, situated in 124 acres of land only 20 minutes away from Muttrah and 45 minutes away from the international airport. The property comprises the exclusive Al Husn (The Castle), Al Bandar (The Town) and the family-oriented Al Waha (The Oasis). All 640 rooms and suites overlook the Sea of Oman, providing guests with 500 meters of beach.

Night was falling when I check in at Al Husn, which offers highly personalized service. It feels like reliving a "Carrie moment," entering a scene from the movie *Sex and the City 2* as I step inside the high dome lobby with butlers and staff greeting me. To my left, I notice the concierge and reception areas, and to my right, a lounge area offers plush seating with free-flowing Omani coffee and dates. My first steps inside are so memorable; the architecture is inspired by historic Omani forts reflecting a fusion of Moorish design in the style of Alhambra, with Portuguese influence at the helm. Just before I hop inside the elevator, one of the main highlights of Al Husn's architecture, the central courtyard, winks at me. It has been deliberately left empty with only a fountain and lighted palm trees dotting the area. It serves as a simple reminder of what I can't wait to explore the moment the sun rises tomorrow.

A 56sqm deluxe sea view room with terrace is home until the following day. The bathroom is distinctively designed with sliding glass panels, which will allow me a good view of the sea while luxuriating in the bath. The hotel takes care of the warm, little details that promise a comfortable stay: a welcome note, some Frankincense, drinks and Omani sweets. I enjoy these treats as I watch the sun set while noticing how serene the whole property is. My visit coincides with the Holy Month of Ramadan, a time of spiritual reflection, fasting and worship for the Islam community. Even though I wasn't Muslim, this is indeed a special time for me to rest, reflect, reconnect and rejuvenate. And, there's no better place to do this than in Shangri-La.



LEFT AL HUSN HOTEL SUITE BALCONY VIEW **ABOVE** THE AL BANDAR BEACH **TOP LEFT** GUESTS OF THE AL HUSN HOTEL HAVE EXCLUSIVE ACCESS TO ITS COURTYARD **TOP RIGHT** THE AL BANDAR LOBBY AND CHANDELIER **OPPOSITE PAGE** THE AL WAHA HOTEL LOBBY VIEW



LEFT CHI, THE SPA PRODUCTS FAR LEFT SHAHRAZAD MOROCCAN RESTAURANT ENTRANCE BELOW CHILDREN AT THE OMANI HERITAGE VILLAGE



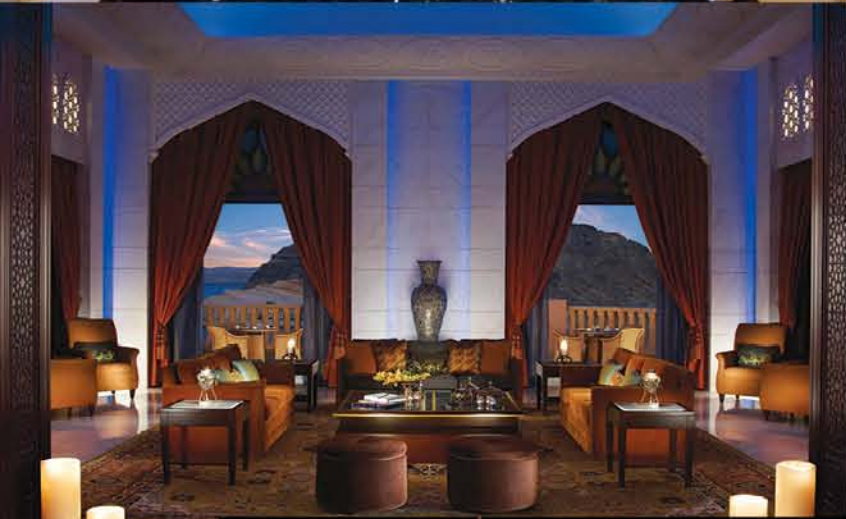
As the evening presses on, I learn that Shangri-La Barr Al Jissah has a total of 20 dining options, from poolside snacks to specialty and fine dining restaurants: Lebanese, Moroccan, Italian, Middle Eastern, Indian, Asian and South American. I am instantly mesmerized by the Shahrazad, an award-winning Moroccan restaurant that features authentic cuisine and nightly live entertainment. With so many options, I dine with my family at the Bait Al Bahr situated in between Al Waha and Al Bandar hotels. It serves a range of mouth-watering seafood dishes (my mother's favorite), cooked and grilled fresh as you order. For appetizers, we have king prawn tempura and cold teriyaki salmon noodles. Our main course included a plate of pan-fried sea bass, ravioli of goat cheese and braised kingfish, and for dessert, the dark chocolate and hazelnut fudge is most recommended. The staff is quick to offer a buggy ride back to Al Husn, but I prefer to walk on the pebble pathway with the soft sound of waves crashing keeping me company. It's quite a long walk back, but perhaps the most serene I've experienced in a long time. It is the perfect way to end the day and get ready for a good night's sleep.

My suite awaits. The cool temperature inside contrasts with the desert warmth outdoors, and I welcome this respite. I begin to unpack utilizing the spacious walk-in-closet and enjoy a quick shower using the L'occitane Verbena line conveniently provided by the hotel. The bed is definitely comfortable and all I remember is looking at the Moorish fretwork and bedside lamp above me as I doze off to sleep.

At 7:30am the following day, I am first to arrive at the Sultanah for breakfast. I find it so amusing that guests are truly on vacation mode and didn't bother coming down early for breakfast. Named after the first Omani ship to sail in America, Sultanah's architecture resembles this ship, meant to look like it was docked by the beach. There is an attractive water feature outside this restaurant, which creates the impression of being at sea. Marina, the server that morning, is so accommodating and quickly offers me a strawberry smoothie, lime and berry palette cleanser and cappuccino to begin my meal. Eggs Benedict, Turkey ham, and a bowl of mixed berries energize me for my morning tour, and while I thought the food couldn't get any better, I am offered some hot food from the kitchen, a small serving of steamed kingfish and eggplant. Being the sweet tooth that I am, I helped myself with a few pieces of Arabic sweets to cap off my breakfast. This is definitely a morning meal fit for a king (or queen), and I leave the restaurant with a very happy stomach.



LEFT PRIVATE MARINA ABOVE AL BANDAR SIDAB & QURAYAT FUNCTION ROOMS BELOW AL HUSN HOTEL MAIN ENTRANCE



RIGHT GUESTS CAN GO FOR A CAMEL RIDE AT THE BEACHFRONT ABOVE AL HUSN HOTEL LOBBY LOUNGE FAR RIGHT CHI SPA HAMMAM



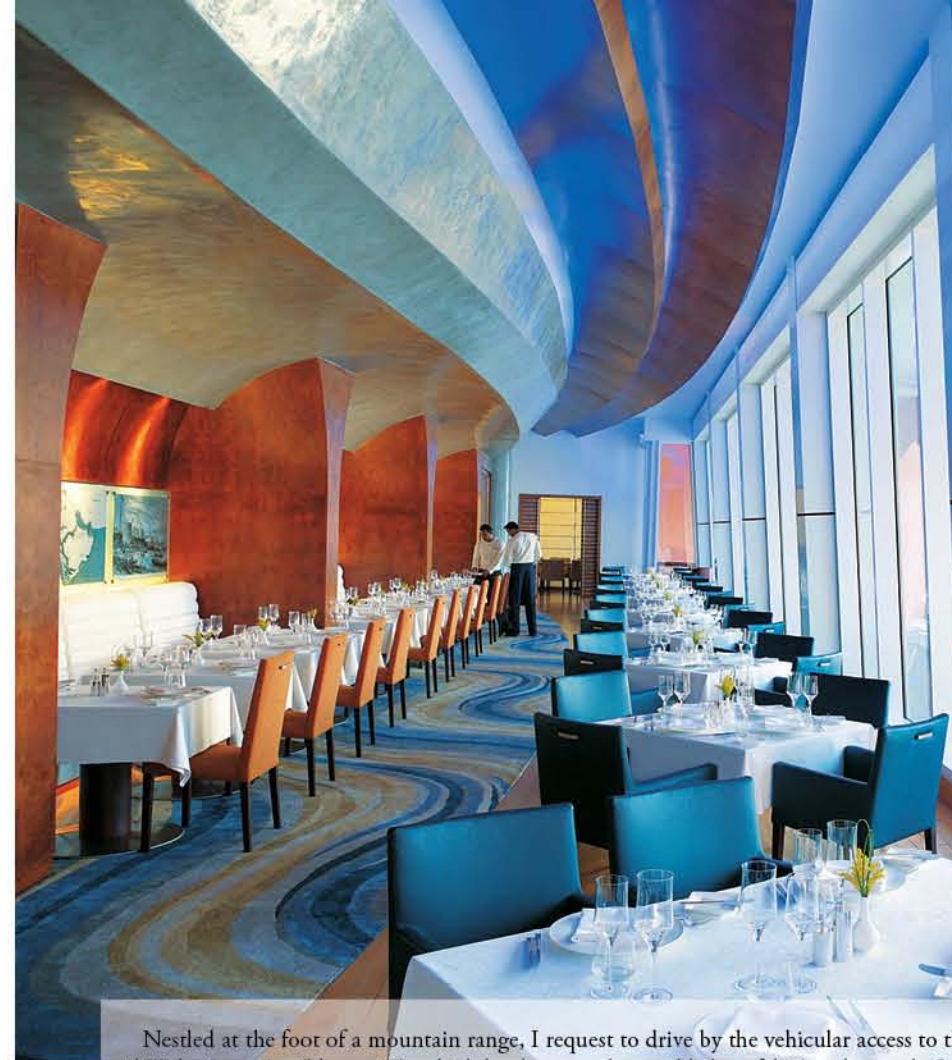
While guests staying at Al Husn are welcome to enjoy the facilities of the entire three-hotel resort, the services and facilities at Al Husn are for the exclusive use and enjoyment of guests staying in the hotel. With its spectacular setting and outstanding facilities created to the exacting specifications of Shangri-La Hotels and Resorts, Al Husn has set new standards of service in Oman. It's nice to know that guests of Al Husn can enjoy the exclusive use of a dedicated private gym offering state-of-the-art equipment, a private beach and bar, infinity pool, a library and a separate early check-in or late check-out lounge. All rooms are provided with butler service and all Al Husn guests are encouraged to take advantage of daily afternoon tea at the lobby lounge, complimentary iPod rental with personalized music selection and complimentary selected beverages from their in-room minibar.

My tour begins with Al Bandar, which means "The Town." The architecture is inspired by old Muscat, featuring buildings of varying heights and a variety of ornate balconies. The five-star deluxe property provides 198 guestrooms, each offering a minimum of 45 sqm of space and a balcony with views of the garden, sea or swimming pool. A true representation of its name, Al Bandar has a selection of food and beverage outlets that cater to all guests' dining preferences: Al Tanoor, an award-winning restaurant serving Middle Eastern and international cuisine buffet style with live cooking stations; The Capri Court is an elegant restaurant that offers traditional Italian cuisine; Tapas, located on the Sablah, features al fresco dining and serves Mediterranean and Asian tapas as well as Oriental meze; The Piano Lounge, a stylish cocktail bar with an outdoor terrace overlooks the Sablah. Circles, on the other hand, is a poolside café, which serves refreshing cocktails and mouth-watering pizzas, salads, pastas and other snacks. Lastly, the Long Bar, features an extensive wine list with indoor and outdoor seating. (Traveler's tip: Wine bars are covered up and closed during Ramadan in observance of the Holy Month of reflection and fasting).





LEFT ONE OF THE WATERSPORT ACTIVITIES, KAYAKING ABOVE THE ART OF HENNA TATTOO TOP A LITTLE BOY TINKERING WITH ONE OF THE SILVER PRODUCE AT THE OMANI HERITAGE VILLAGE BELOW BAIT AL BHAR



LEFT SULTANAH, THE RESTAURANT REMINISCENT OF THE FIRST OMANI SHIP BELOW, LEFT FABRIC LOOMS AT THE OMANI HERITAGE VILLAGE RIGHT OMANI DOORMEN WEARING THE KHANJAR, A TRADITIONAL DAGGER OF OMAN, WHICH IS A SYMBOLIC WEAPON WORN AS A CENTER BELT BY OMANI MEN



Nestled at the foot of a mountain range, I request to drive by the vehicular access to the Al Waha (meaning "the oasis"), which has been made possible by a fabricated tunnel. Its architecture is traditional Dhofari, from the southern region of Oman. Al Waha is regarded as the family hotel offering a wide range of facilities for families and children, such as a children's club, air-conditioned indoor and outdoor play area featuring an old Omani dhow, a toddler's pool with a rubber-cushioned flooring, a pool for older children in the shape of a water mushroom, and babysitting services.

I'm whisked off to my favorite area in the resort, Chi, The Spa at Shangri-La. Here, they introduce a blend of Chinese and Himalayan beauty and well-being rituals and for the first time at Chi, Omani and Middle Eastern healing practices and architectural features are incorporated into the spa experience. There are 12 luxurious private spa suites and villas in a secluded, village-like setting with lush gardens. Each has a private bathroom and vanity area, shower, bath and relaxation area, and an outdoor garden court complete with sunbeds and outdoor showers. In addition to signature Chi treatments, locally grown frankincense is incorporated in essential oils and clays providing a Middle Eastern sensory experience in the form of facials, body wraps, scrubs, bath oils and soap. The four-house signature Exotic Serenity Ritual is a must try. The treatment starts off with a fragrant bath enhanced with frankincense and a sandalwood scrub followed by a rose wrap, and finishes with a frankincense and rose petal bath, full-body massage and facial. To say that the experience is heavenly is an understatement. You will leave the spa toned, soft and relaxed, as if healing hands just brought you back to vitality.

I spend the rest of the afternoon lounging at the 100m private beach at Al Husn, walking around the property exploring on my own and skipping lunch altogether to feast on afternoon tea, which was served at 3:45 in the Sultanah Restaurant. Afterwards, I head to the Omani Heritage Village, where well-preserved local culture and architecture blend into a remarkable landscape. I see the *falaj*, a traditional water management system, and also view local artisans at work demonstrating traditional craftwork such as *khanjar* and silver making, henna tattoo decoration and pottery. Before sundown, I go for a camel ride at the beachfront and my last stop is at the Al Mazaar Souk and art gallery. It's nice to see modern works from local artists and photographers. I buy a kaftan as a remembrance of this souk and I look forward to wearing it back in Manila.

Night has come once again and I spend my last few minutes in the resort by the beach, feet up, trying to memorize the salty smell of the air. The butler signals my father's arrival, ready to drive me back to the city. I bring with me Shangri-La and memories of dramatic mountains, vast deserts, deep blue waters and imposing forts. I will never forget this place. When you come here, neither will you.

From Sinbad the Sailor to the Queen of Sheba, Oman embodies the true essence and mystique of Arabia.

As I drive back to the city, I'm already thinking about returning. I am counting the days... *SPACE*



OVERSIZED CHESS PIECES, WHICH YOU CAN PLAY WITH AT THE BEACHFRONT LEFT SEA TURTLES AT THE BEACH ABOVE AL HUSN HOTEL ARCHES OVERLOOKING THE INFINITY POOL BELOW SEA VIEW ROOM AT AL HUSN



ABOVE LEFT AL WAHA HOTEL BALCONY VIEW ABOVE RIGHT AL BANDAR SOUQ ORNAMENTS RIGHT AL BANDAR HOTEL PIANO LOUNGE

