

# Robb Report

September 2014

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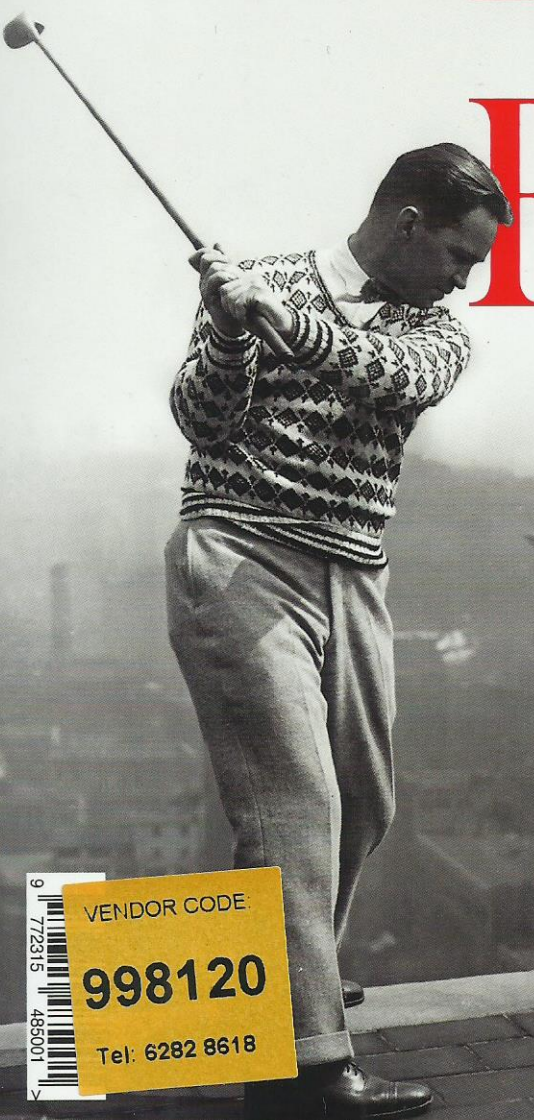
SINGAPORE

DOUBLE OR  
NOTHING: BMW'S  
NEW M3 AND M4

WHY GH MUMM'S  
TOAST IS TOPS

**PLUS**  
FERRAGAMO MUSEUM  
**PANERAI REGATTA**  
SINGAPORE'S NEW  
WINE VAULT  
**SRI LANKA**

## BEST OF THE BEST



THE SEASON'S  
BIGGEST FASHION  
TRENDS, DECODED

SAFARI AT SEA:  
SIR BANI YAS ISLAND

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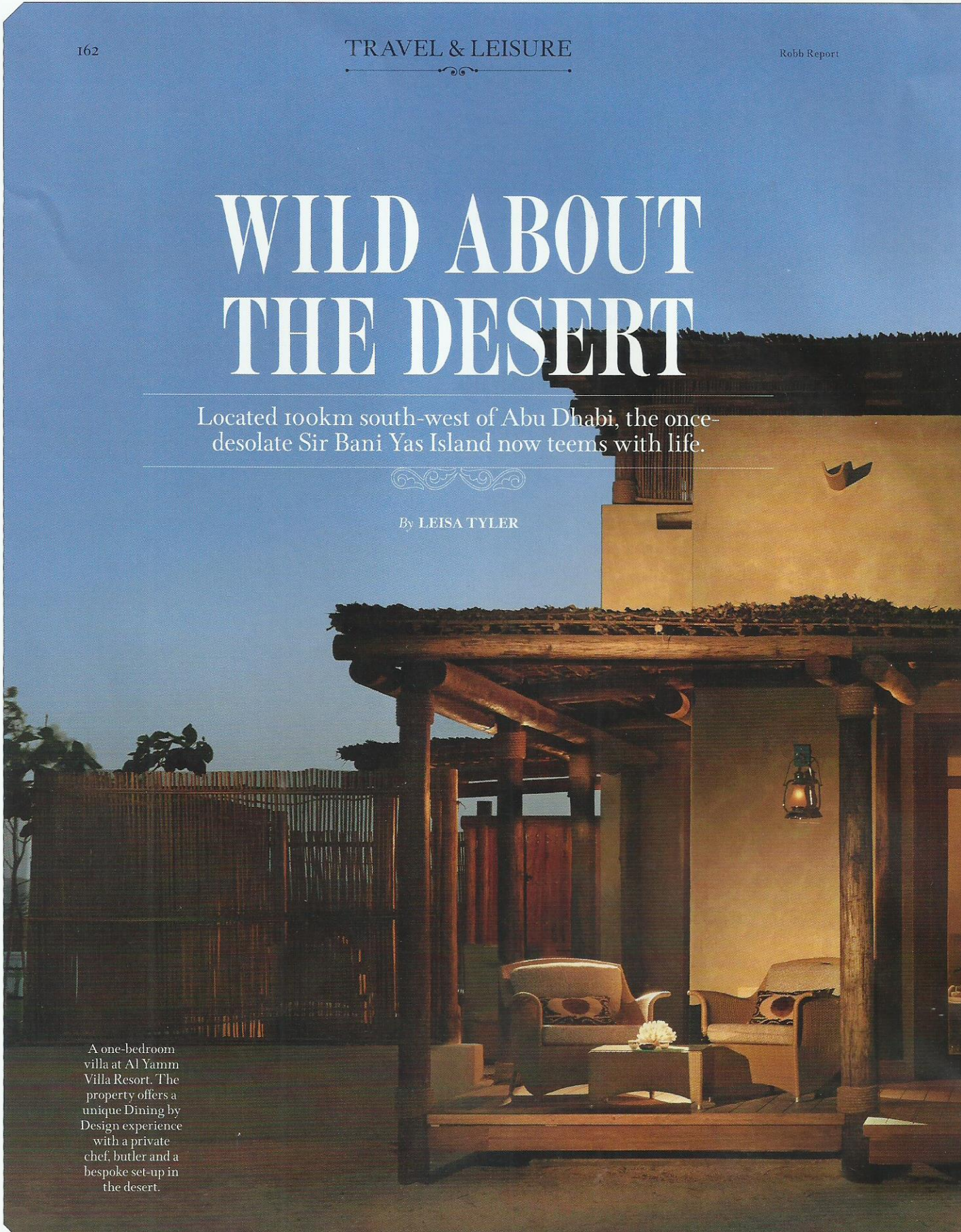
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# WILD ABOUT THE DESERT

Located 100km south-west of Abu Dhabi, the once-desolate Sir Bani Yas Island now teems with life.

By LEISA TYLER

A one-bedroom villa at Al Yamn Villa Resort. The property offers a unique Dining by Design experience with a private chef, butler and a bespoke set-up in the desert.



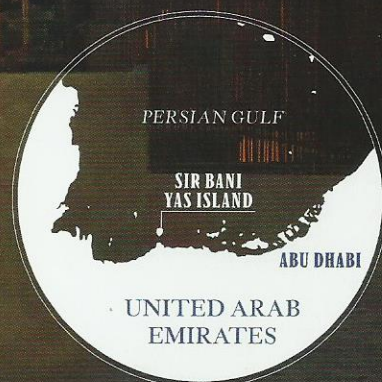
**A**t a glance, Sir Bani Yas looks like any other island peppering the Persian Gulf. Look a little longer however, and it becomes more than just another barren island in a shimmering sea.

Once the private retreat of the United Arab Emirates' (UAE) founder, the former sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan, the island has been planted

with millions of trees, stocked with wild animals and reinvented as the Arabian Wildlife Park.

The park's objectives are two-fold: to offer tourists and residents an opportunity to explore the great outdoors with safari, mountain biking, horse riding and kayaking excursions, and to breed animal species that are

Sir Bani Yas Island has been reinvented  
as the Arabian Wildlife Park.



endangered or near extinction. There are 30 animal species on the 87sqkm island, including the once-extinct Arabian oryx.

It's an honourable – yet odd – project for a desert island located in one of the world's hottest regions.

The park is the brainchild of the Abu Dhabi-based Tourism & Culture Authority (TCA) and Tourist Development & Investment Company (TDIC), which work under the direction of the sheikh's office. "The Emirates is well known for its oil, but not its conservation efforts," Steven Phillips,

general manager of Desert Islands Resort & Spa by Anantara, tells me. "(TCA and TDIC) wanted to do something positive and change the common perception of the Emirates".

The Bangkok-based Anantara group runs three resorts on the island. The first, Desert Islands, opened in one of the royal palace's former guest houses in 2008.

The 64-room property is set on its own peninsula, with a natural inlet filled with pink-bellied flamingos that stop here on their migratory path to fish in the sheltered bays.

The next property to open in September last year was Al Yamm, a 30-villa property overlooking a giant swathe of golden sand on the eastern shoreline. The villas fan out from the central reception building, with views of either the mangroves or beach. Each is spacious with polished concrete floors, rustic wooden furniture

and lovely big decks shaded by thatching.

The most recently opened resort was Al Sahel. Marked by thatch and rammed-earth cottages surrounded by scrubby savannah, the resort looks straight out of the African bush.

Sir Bani Yas was first established as a private nature reserve for Sheikh Zayed in 1971. Once a popular stopover for traders plying between Mesopotamia –

## Desert Islands' natural inlet is filled with pink-bellied flamingos that stop here on their migratory path to fish.

The five-star Anantara Sir Bani Yas Island Al Sahel Villa Resort comprises one- and two-bedroom cottages.

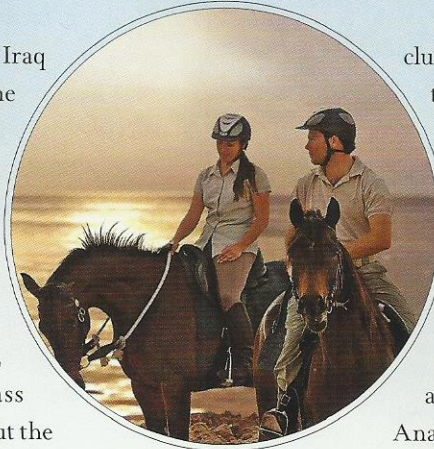


## Viewing or walking among the animals forms part of the excursions tourists come to experience.

an area in northern Syria and Iraq that is widely considered as the cradle of civilisation – and India and China, the island is the site of the UAE's oldest Christian monastery, which dates back to 600AD.

Fragments of the monastery were recently unearthed, alongside cooking pots, glass vessels and lamps from China, but the inhabitants are long gone, fleeing after the natural springs dried up.

Little more than a wind-blown desert island with a



clutch of rocky protrusions rising from the centre, the sheikh's first task was to try and make it habitable for wildlife. He ordered the planting of 2.5 million trees, including vast pineapple farms and orchards of citruses, olives and dates; the latter one of the highest quality known and only available for consumption at the Anantara resorts.

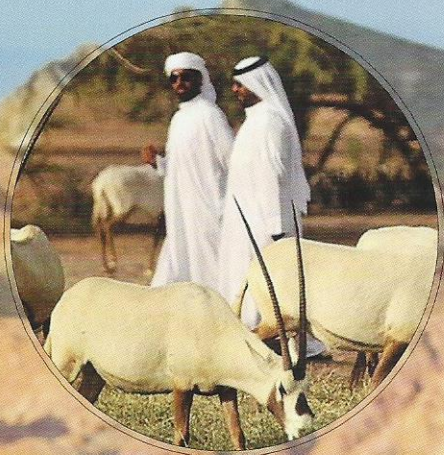
Animals were introduced. There were cheetahs and giraffes, Barbary sheep, gazelles and antelopes; together now numbering more than

Main image: the sand gazelle is the most common animal found on Sir Bani Yas Island.

Inset: Sir Bani Yas Stables at the Desert Islands resort offers riding packages for all levels of experience.



## That night at Al Yamm, staff prepare a special dinner, known as Dining by Design, on the sand dyke.



11,000. Most of these animals roam free and viewing them or walking among them forms part of the excursions tourists come to experience.

While there have been honourable conservation efforts made – the island hosts the first wind generator in the UAE and assists in both reef generation and sustainability education in schools – I can't help but feel that the park is a little gimmicky. The giraffes, leopards and other non-native species seem a bit out of place. Concerns aside, going for a walk in the park and seeing a group of giraffes trot through the savannah, their long elegant legs lunging forward and pretty eyes watching your every move through long black lashes, is very rewarding.

One afternoon Anantara's naturalist



Main image:  
two mountain  
biking routes take  
cyclists through  
the Arabian  
Wildlife Park,  
wadis, beaches  
and lagoons.  
Above:  
Wild Arabian  
oryx on Sir Bani  
Yas Island.

## Seeing a group of giraffes trot through the savannah, their pretty eyes watching your every move, is very rewarding.

Jacques, my husband and I go paddling through a stretch of mangrove forest.

Heading out on a crystal blue inlet, with a gentle breeze in our faces, we spot kingfishers and flamingos fishing for their dinner.

That night at Al Yamm, staff prepare a special dinner, known as Dining by Design, on the sand dyke with a wooden sala lit with candles.

As the sun sinks behind the craggy mountains, my husband and I are given a glass of crisp Pinot Gris and staff unroll a series of starters: stuffed peppers, pickled aubergine,

black olives and creamy hummus with flat bread.

Then a second starter - fluffy buffalo ricotta with semi-dried tomatoes. We are already full by the time a big bowl of pasta smothered in cheese arrives. Then there is more: a plate piled high with roasted vegetables, a lobster with half a dozen king prawns, two jacket potatoes and an aubergine gratin. And to top it all off, not just an oversized tiramisu but a panna cotta too.

It's excessive but worth it. Perhaps an analogy of the island and wildlife park itself. 🐾

Desert Islands Resort & Spa was originally the guesthouse of Sheikh Zayed.

