

Sand and Serenity

It is said that the desert tells a different story each time one ventures out into it, and for Our Habitas Ras Abrouq – the company's second project in the region after their award-winning property in AlUla – this one is about to tell a unique tale of nature, culture, and adventure

WORDS YI-HWA HANNA

An hour outside of Qatar's bustling capital, Doha – on the edge of the UNESCO-protected Al Reem Biosphere Reserve – a new world has sprung up in the desert. The very first property of its kind in the country, Our Habitas Ras Abrouq is a sprawling 42-villa resort that peeks out onto the Arabian Gulf. It joins eight other properties in Our Habitas's existing portfolio of resorts, which includes three in the Americas (in Chile, Costa Rica, and Mexico), two in Africa (in Morocco and Namibia), two in Asia (in Bhutan and Indonesia), and its award-winning property in AlUla, Saudi Arabia.

The resort, which was actually created in partnership with Qatar Airways, the country's national airline, opened its doors to guests in mid-January this year, with 42 one-to four-bedroom tented villas, each with a private pool and generously-sized outdoor deck, along with a restaurant, infinity pool, beach club and bar, wellness centre, terrace lounge, gym complete with state-of-the-art equipment, and plenty of sporting facilities including padel tennis courts and a water sports adventure hub.

Our Habitas co-founder and chief executive, Oliver Ripley, explains that his company owns the design and decoration of the project, true to the Habitas ethos of focusing on social architecture, layout, local community sourcing, and collaboration, that flows from inspiration from the surrounding area's rich culture, nature, and heritage. He was inspired by the people, the place, and the immense local creative talent, as well as the region itself: its warm and innovative people, and the untouched landscapes.

"In Ras Abrouq, we found a very special place to create a home for creative expression and adventure," he says. The culture to be found in Ras Abrouq, and Qatar as a whole, was a key draw in what attracted him to open the project here.

"When I first came to Qatar, it was the people that made me fall in love with the country," he says. "The kindness, the Qatari hospitality, the warmth, and the humility. Qatar is going through an incredible transition, and it's the young people of Qatar that are changing the narrative in art, in music, in fashion, and it's an amazing thing to witness and also to discover, when visiting the country," he says.



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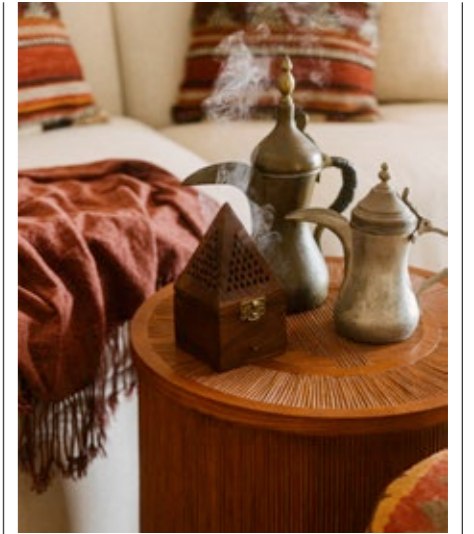
"The Middle East has arguably become one of the most dynamic places in the world for hospitality growth. The once-overlooked region continues to be a cradle for culture that is evolving with unbound potential and reminds us that travel plays an integral role in reframing how we understand the world. The breadth of places and experiences emerging appeals to the global tourist. The region is evolving at a rapid pace, and is at the forefront of new destinations being opened in an intentional way, with Our Habitas as a brand integral to shaping and driving sustainable and experiential travel growth within the Middle East," Ripley says.

He's right: Qatar's vision for a bolder future already won it the chance to host the 2022 FIFA World Cup, and it continues to rise with booming tourism numbers, strong economic growth, and plenty of dynamic

new empowerment programmes to inspire, educate, and provide opportunities for its enterprising youth. Now, Qatar's natural wonders, from sweeping dunes that "sing" under one's feet to mysterious caves, lush mangroves, and unique flora and fauna are the next star to shine.

"I was also lucky enough to travel across the country and witness quite how diverse this place is. It's a small country and yet so varied in its nature," Ripley says. "Ras Abrouq really stuck out to me as a UNESCO biosphere and all its natural beauty visually with its diverse fauna and flora, and both on land and in the sea. It's a very unique place with the most magical sunsets in the whole of Qatar," he adds.

When building the resort, they had to consider how to seamlessly harmonise their offering with the "region's awe-inspiring natural beauty, with an immersive experience that highlights Qatar as a leading hub of creative culture in the Middle East." Ripley explains that: "The UNESCO-protected Al-Reem Biosphere



Reserve is an integral part of our inspiration with its unique wildlife, including birdlife and a breeding centre for native gazelles and oryx – it has pioneered reintroduction programmes in the country. The site also creates opportunities for adventure, biking, hiking and visiting the East-West/West-East art installation by Richard Serra."

Nature is only half the appeal, however – it's the resort's deep focus on culture that makes it even more unique, with everything from pottery-making to calligraphy classes, Al Sadu weaving workshops, and more for guests to indulge in – not to mention film screenings and art exhibitions at the nearby museums. Our Habitas collaborates with Qatar Tourism, Qatar Museums, and other creative institutions to curate exclusive itineraries that can help guests easily discover Qatar's emerging cultural scene, while spotlighting local talent. The roots of the Our Habitas brand have been said to spring from the renowned art and music festival Burning Man, and the new resort will pay homage to this in its own way too. "Music is one of our core programming pillars and we are looking to expand these experiences in Ras Abrouq, providing a stage for local, regional, and international talent to inspire creation and perform as we further establish this property – watch this space," Ripley says.

When they've had their fill of culture, there's plenty for guests to do in terms of active and well-being pursuits, including inner journeys such as a recalibration frequency journey, vital energy awakening treatment, and desert meditation, and



bodywork such as vibroacoustic or tuning fork massages and zen garden compress massages. Ancient heritage also comes through in the form of a Pink Qatari Clay heritage ritual or a “fire and ice” desert journey, or one of numerous beauty treatments with a touch of local flavour such as a camel milk deep cell regeneration facial. When hungry, refuelling can be done at Qissa, a restaurant that blends the essence of local Qatari, Middle Eastern, and Mediterranean flavours.

“Our Habitas conducted extensive market research and worked with cultural creative partners – it is important that all homes are fully embedded with the local scene from design and artists through to the wider programming across the six pillars: Art and Culture, Wellness, Adventure, Learning, Food and Beverage, and Music,” Ripley says. He tells us that its villa furnishings, tapestries, and fabrics were sourced from local souqs and artisans, whom they learned stories from along the way – “for example, Sadu Weavers and Clay Pottery, which now are part of the on-site programming as workshops.”

“[We] partnered with Atlas Bookstore, founded by Qatari sisters Fatma Al Sehlawi and Reem Al Sehlawi on cultural advisory, who assigned Studio Imara (a sister

company, founded by Fatma Al Sehlawi and Nasser Al Emadi) to support specific design elements. This allowed Habitas to source pieces throughout the property from up and coming and established local artists. At the resort’s entrance is a sculpture by Khalid Shahin – the piece is stainless steel with a polished and matte finish. [We are] also working in collaboration with Qatar Museums on showcasing significant artworks; additional installations are joining the property in the coming months,” he says.

Sustainability is always at the heart of any Our Habitas project, and the company – which was awarded the Oceanic Champion Badge for adopting The Oceanic Standard – works to be kinder to the environment wherever possible, including by printing as little as possible (or using recycled paper and locally-sourced and crafted wooden signage when needed), and eliminating single-use plastic through all villas. The kind of customer the brand attracts certainly values these efforts, along with a desire for a truly experiential type of travel experience that feels like more than the average holiday. “Our Habitas attracts a global traveller who is curious, adventurous, seeking new experiences, and wants to understand new cultures and meet diverse people, while

creating lifelong memories and making new friends. Our team are referred to as family and welcome our guests as an extension of this, providing a home for human connection where kindness and genuine intent embraces a variety of cultures,” Ripley says.

“Travellers are constantly evolving in the kind of expectations they have from a destination. There is a desire amongst our community to enjoy a level of comfort, yet go beyond the superficial elements of a place and explore it more comprehensively. In the face of such an evolution, hoteliers are tasked with curating travel experiences that provide their customers with new, authentic ways to understand places better and provide unique experiences,” Ripley explains. “At Our Habitas we aim to create spaces where like-minded people can connect, grow, play and learn; we seek to change lives through deeper human connection. Our homes are intentionally located and designed places where strangers become friends and friends become family,” he adds.

It’s a sentiment that is paralleled by the brand’s partnership with Qatar Airways, which Ripley says is intended to allow travellers, on a larger scale of reach and accessibility, to seek out new destinations to discover the natural wonders of Qatar, creating authentic experiences that uncover its history and rich culture.

“With growth and expansion comes our ability to reach more people,” he says. “Ultimately, the Our Habitas community – the like-minded individuals who choose to participate in our experiences – is at the heart of our transformation over time. The unique perspective hospitality provides is often an ‘overlooked opportunity’ when inspiring change. Redefining the concept of traditional luxury in hotels, [our] mission is to change people’s lives by creating deeper human connections, and to make a lasting impact on local communities through education, employment, and the creation of sustainable micro-economies.” **BT**